

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF
DEATH
&
DARKNESS

MEGAN MONTERO



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&
DARKNESS



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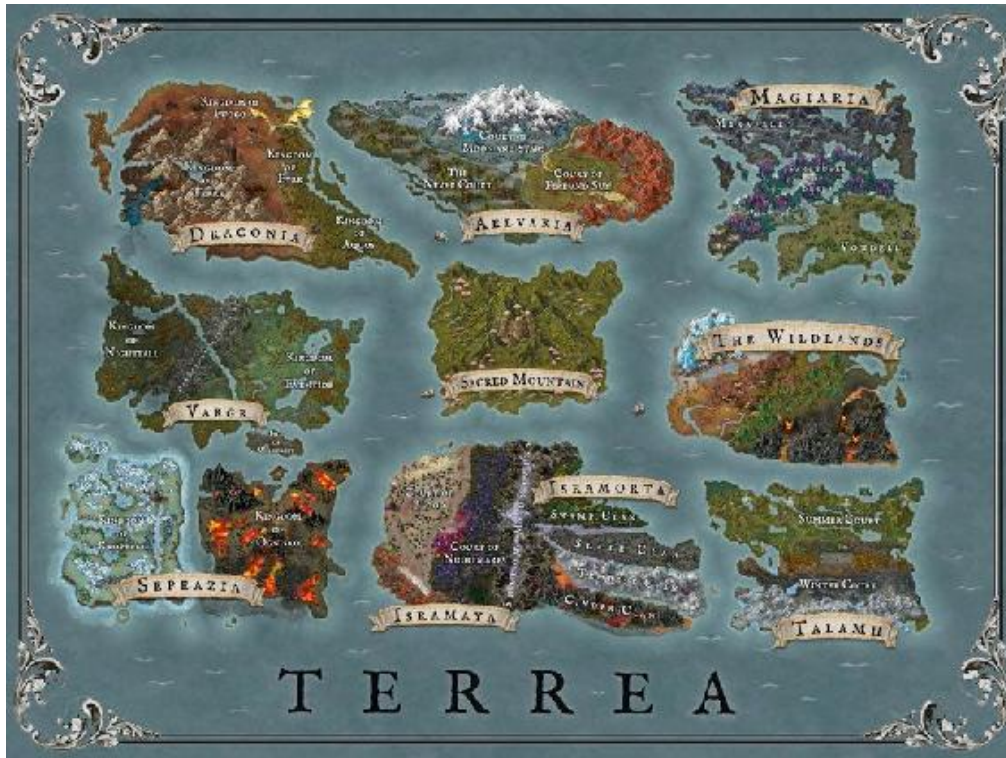
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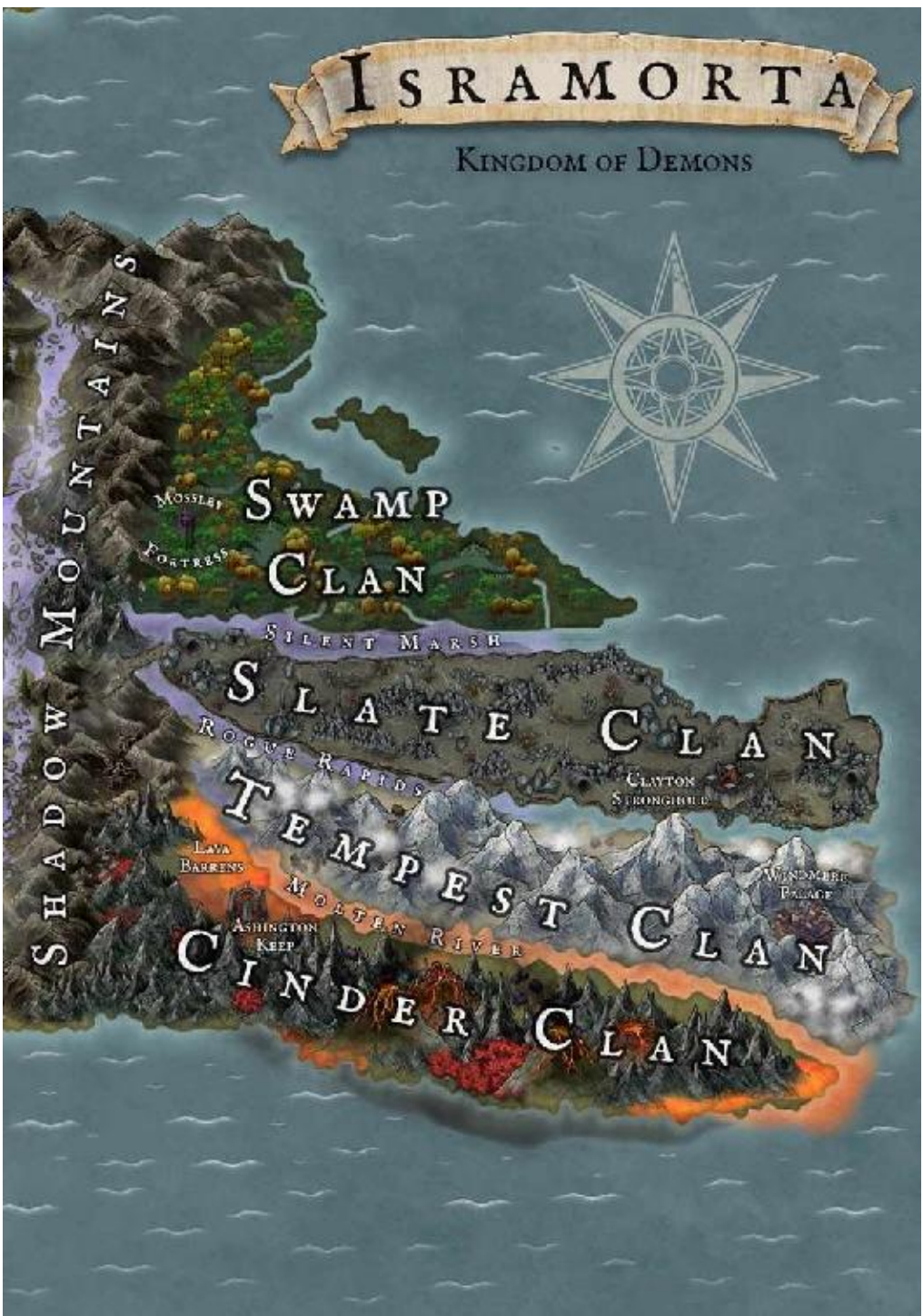
Introduction

Also by Megan Montero

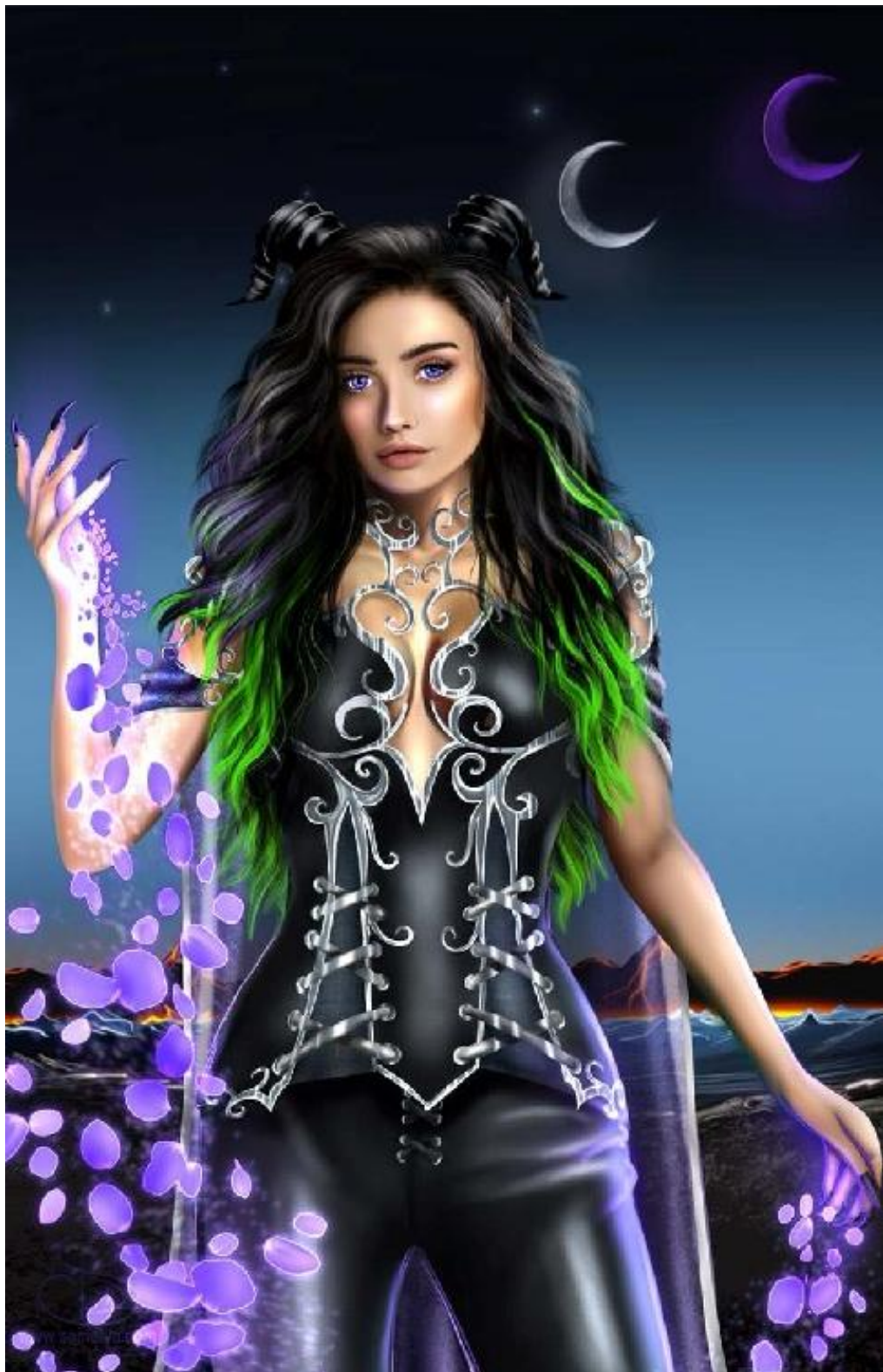


ISRAMORTA

KINGDOM OF DEMONS









INTRODUCTION

Forgotten Kingdoms Series

Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

Forgotten Kingdoms is a collection of full-length stand-alone fantasy romance novels with fated mates and a guaranteed happily ever after. With vampires, fae, shifters, and everything in between, each book features a unique heroine and her epic love story that can be read in any order. All relationship dynamics are strictly M/F.

Authors in this set include:

Chandelle LaVaun

G.K. DeRosa

Megan Montero

Jen L. Grey

Robin D. Mahle & Elle Madison

LJ Andrews

R.L. Caulder

M. Sinclair

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



TERREA

(WORLD NAME)

TER-AY-YUH

HAVESTIA

(FESTIVAL WHEN THE VEIL
BETWEEN WORLDS OPENS)

HAV-EST-EE-UH

AELVARIA

EMBER
HADEON

EL-VAHR-EE-UH

EM-BURR
HAY-DEE-ON

DRACONIA

SAPHIRA
RYKER

DRAH-CONE-EE-UH

SA-FEE-RUH
RYE-KURR

ISRAMAYA

RHODELIA
VARAN

IS-RUH-MY-UH

ROW-DEL-EE-UH
VAIR-EN

ISRAMORTA

MORGANA
AVALON

IS-RUH-MOR-TUH

MOR-GAHN-UH
AV-UII-LAHN

MAGIARIA

ADIRA
KAGE

MAYJ-AIR-EE-UH

AII-DEER-UH
KAYJ

SEPEAZIA

STELLA
BRANDT

SEH-PEE-ZEE-UH

STEL-UH
BRANT

TALAMH

ALINA
KIERAN

TAL-AHV

AH-LEEN-UH
KEER-AN

VARGR

EVERA
AXEL

VAR-GUR

EH-VEER-UH
AX-EL

CHAPTER ONE

MORGANA



“Come on! We’re gonna be late, and you know Saphira will start to worry.” I held the door to our hotel room open for my sister, Rhode.

“I’m coming. Just a second.” She stumbled from the bathroom and shoved another small Band-Aid into her clutch purse. Her pale blonde hair was pulled into a high ponytail that flailed about with each of her hurried movements.

“And everyone says *I* mother people. You’re the one with Band-Aids in your purse.” I chuckled as she spun in a circle looking around the room like she was forgetting something. It was a typical hotel room with two pristine white beds, a single TV, and our luggage sprawled out everywhere.

“Why are you laughing?” She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at me.

“Because your tits are pointing at me.” My sister had decided to go as Madonna to the world’s most notorious Halloween party in Vegas. It was pretty shocking we even got invited to The Portal Hotel and Casino, yet here we were: her with her huge cone boobs and me in my best Cher fishnet outfit, trying to turn back time.

She looked down at the golden cones, then did a little shimmy. “You know you like it.”

“I do.” And we both broke out into little shimmy dances for a moment.

“I still can’t believe so much of your ass is showing, but I’m kind of proud of you.” Rhode walked over to the dresser and grabbed a little packet of alcohol wipes and shoved them into her bag.

“It’s not that much.” My entire body was covered in a black fishnet bodysuit with some thick black strips of fabric over all the parts I didn’t want showing. “Besides, my jacket covers a lot.”

I did a half-turn, showing her where the jacket fell to my hips. Normally, my hair was dark and wavy, but tonight I teased and curled the hell out of it to get that huge eighties curl to top off my costume. We went big so we wouldn’t have to go home. Rhode and I were the same height at a towering 5’2”. Where she was slim and delicate, I was just a tiny bit curvier. Though we couldn’t remember our parents, I liked to think that our matching blue eyes might’ve come from our mother. I didn’t know why, but the thought comforted me.

I tossed my hair over my shoulder. “I’m here for our ladies of the eighties vibe.”

“Me too.” Rhode smiled, but there was a sharpness in her eyes that told me she wasn’t as relaxed as she looked. “Let’s get out of here. I need to shut my brain off.”

“I’m ready for a break.” As if on cue, my cell rang. I pulled it from my bag. “Hey, Janet, how’s it going?”

“Now who’s slowing us down?” Rhode teased as she sauntered past me with her giant cone boobs and bright-red

lipstick.

I let the hotel door fall shut behind me as Janet spoke. “Hey, I know you’re on vacation, but do we need anything else for Jason’s adoption hearing tomorrow?”

“No, we should be all good. I made sure all the paperwork was done on our end. The future parents signed off on everything, and Jason can’t wait to officially be part of the Rojas family. Literally all that needs to happen tomorrow is for the judge to sign off and for the family to celebrate.”

Janet let go of a happy sigh. “Man, I wish our jobs were always like this: good kid, good family. Match made in social services heaven.”

“If only.” As a social worker, I’d seen a lot of good things but also a lot of bad.

“I know it’s the first vacation you’ve taken in years, but honestly, Mo, you deserve it. Now, go have a good time and forget I called.”

As we walked down the hall toward the elevator, my spiked thigh-high boots sank into the carpet, giving me the traction I needed to get to the elevator faster. “Don’t worry about it. Text me tomorrow. Let me know how it goes.”

“Will do. But, Mo, HAVE FUN. You always take care of everyone else. It’s your turn to take care of you.”

My turn to take care of me. Was there such a thing? “I know. And don’t worry—what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

“You wish,” Rhode whispered. “If you do anything awesome, I’m going to video it as proof you know how to have a good time.”

“I’m with her.” Janet chuckled.

“And I’m going ... Byeeee. Good luck tomorrow.” I ended the call and slid my phone into the pocket of my leather jacket before Janet could respond to me.

We stopped in front of the bank of elevators, and Rhode hit the button. “I can’t believe we’re here. Like how did this actually happen?”

“I have no idea. I’m shocked we won these tickets.” I wagged my eyebrows. “But while we’re here ... we gonna do the damn thing.”

Rhode chuckled. “Oh, I love when this side of you comes out to play. It’s so rare.”

The elevator gave a ding and the golden doors slid open, and we stepped inside. Out of habit, I moved to the side and hit the button for the lobby. Rhode moved to the other side and stood across from me.

“Hold the elevator!” a woman called from down the hall. “We’re coming!”

My arm shot out and stopped the doors from closing. Three women dressed as the chipmunks piled into the elevator. They each wore an oversized sweatshirt, knee-high white socks, and little hats. The one dressed as Alvin looked me up and down. “Cher, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Love it.” The other, dressed as Simon, shoved her big fake glasses up her nose.

The doors started to slide shut once more when a guy called out, “Hold on!”

Again, my arm shot out, and Rhode narrowed her eyes at me. I didn't want to be packed in here anymore than the next person, but I couldn't help it. Two towering guys piled in. One wore one of those blow-up T-Rex suits and the other a blow-up shark. When they got into the elevator, I got smacked in the face with a blow-up fin. I leaned away from him, pushing the fin away from my face.

“Oh, my bad. Thing has a mind of its own.”

“It's cool.” I sidestepped my way to the back of the elevator as the doors slid closed and the elevator began to descend.

The T-Rex tried to turn to face the door but ended up smacking the Theodore chipmunk woman in the legs. She chuckled and danced to the side, bumping into her other friend. We were all standing there laughing when the elevator began to shake back and forth as if there was some kind of earthquake. The chipmunks began to scream and hold on to each other while our two blow-up guys rocked back and forth struggling to regain their balance. When I met Rhode's eyes, her face was a mirror of my own. Both of us stood there with the *oh shit, we're in trouble* faces. It sounded like wind whipped up the elevator shaft and then the elevator ground to a halt and everything stopped moving. Everyone felt silent for a moment before panic filled them all.

T-Rex shifted from one foot to the other. “Yo! What was that?”

“I can't be stuck in here, bro.” The guy in the blow-up shark suit sounded like he was talking through a bubble.

The girl with the Alvin sweatshirt began to whimper. “Now would be a really bad time to tell everyone that I have to pee *so bad*.”

“Oh my god!” Theodore exclaimed. “Me too! We have to get out of here.”

She shoved her way toward the panel of buttons, but she tripped over the T-Rex’s tail and fell headfirst into the doors. There was a loud *thunk*, and she dropped to the ground and pressed her hand to her head. “Shit! My head.”

“Oh, bro! She’s bleeding, bro!” Shark guy tried to hit his T-Rex friend.

“Rhode,” I called past the Simon and Theodore chipmunks as they hovered over Alvin.

“You see? I told you.” She started rummaging through her purse. “Take back your mockery.”

“Okay, everyone, let’s calm down for a second.” I bent down and pulled Alvin back toward the wall and let her sit on the ground. “Just give it a minute. My sister’s a nurse. She can help you.”

Rhode bet over and her cones got a little too close to Alvin’s face. “Hey, don’t poke her eye out.”

She chuckled. “I’m a pro, even with these things.”

“I can’t breathe. It’s too hot. It’s too small.” Shark boy started shifting back and forth on his feet. “I can’t be here, bro. I gotta be free.”

“Free? What are you talking about?” T-Rex turned toward him and smacked Rhode and the other two chipmunks with his tail.

“Okay, guys, this isn’t working.” I stepped behind them and quickly pulled at the zippers of their blow-up suits. Shark guy practically leapt out of it. He was at least six feet tall, rotund, and a ball of sweat.

T-Rex was just as tall and round, except he seemed disappointed to be out of his suit. “I liked that costume.”

“Relax, dino guy. It’s just until we figure out what’s going on.” I glanced down at my sister. “You good?”

“Yeah, it’s not too deep.” She pulled a small tube from her purse. “I’m about to save you like three hours in the ER. I don’t think you have a concussion, but no drinking tonight, and if you get even the tiniest bit dizzy or out of it, you gotta go to the hospital. Okay?”

Alvin looked up at her with wide eyes and nodded. “What are you gonna do?”

“This is surgical glue. I’m gonna glue this together and throw a Band-Aid over it. You’ll never know it was there.” She pulled the cap off.

Alvin smiled and angled her head toward Rhode. “Cool.”

“Glue is not cool, bro.” Shark boy’s eyes darted around the elevator. “I gotta be free!”

“What?” His friend’s brow furrowed as he looked him up and down. “What are you talking about?”

Suddenly, shark guy ripped his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground, revealing all of his rolls. His belly jiggled as he hooked his thumbs into his shorts.

“STOP!” I jumped around him and snapped my fingers in his face. “Hey, look at me.”

When his wide eyes met mine, I broke out my best *do what I say* voice. “Do not drop your shit in this elevator. No one wants to see that, dude.”

When he looked like he wasn’t going to listen to me, I snapped, “Hey.”

“Ohhh, you got mom-voiceeeeeedddd.” Rhode chuckled from her spot on the ground.

“His ass is about to be in your face. You want to keep teasing?” I pressed myself against the wall and slid around him toward the panel of buttons.

Rhode finished cleaning up Alvin with some antiseptic wipes, and it was like nothing had ever happened. She shrugged and eyed the guys. “I’ve seen worse.”

I shook my head. “Wise ass.”

“You still love me.”

I turned back to shark guy. “Okay, give me a minute, can you do that?”

He slowly unhooked his thumbs from his shorts and nodded.

I sucked in a deep breath and pressed the call button. It buzzed and a voice came over the intercom. “Yeah.”

“Um ... hi. We seem to be stuck.”

“Well, yeah.” The guy sounded like he was chewing on gum.

I tried for patience. “Do you think you could call someone to help get us out.”

“I don’t think so,” the voice crackled.

“Why not?”

“Because you all pushed the stop button. Hit it again and the elevator will go.” The intercom clicked again, and it sounded like he hung up a phone.

“Really?” I smacked my hand against the button and the elevator rocked to life.

The guy in the shark suit hooked his fingers back into the waistband of his shorts and smirked at me.

I jabbed my finger into his face. “Do it and you lose a fin.”

The doors slid open and shark guy and T-Rex tumbled out of the elevator in front of me. Across from us stood the most beautiful man I’d ever seen. He was so much taller than me, with long dark hair that was cut in jagged lines at the ends. His eyes were so blue they nearly glowed in the dim light. His lips pulled up in a cocky half-smirk, and I felt my heart do a little flip-flop. He wore a long leather coat that covered a leather breastplate and old worn-in leather pants. I had no idea what kind of costume it was. All I knew was it was sexy as hell.

“Free! We’re free!” Shark guy rolled on the floor at my feet.

His buddy jumped to stand and pulled him up. “Come on, man. Let’s go.”

The two of them stumbled away, and when I glanced up looking for the sexy as fuck guy, he was gone. I glanced over to Rhode. “Now I could really use a drink.”

CHAPTER TWO

MORGANA



“Come on. There’s no way you’re twenty-four.” The bouncer held my ID between his two fingers and gazed down at me with a smirk on his face. He was easily six foot four with large, bulky muscles. I felt sure they came in handy at a packed place like this, but his attention was in the wrong place. I was here just to have a good time, not cause any trouble.

I went up on my tiptoes and pinched it from his grasp. “We both know I am, and we both know that’s a real ID.”

He crossed his arms over his barrel-like chest and the sleeves of his T-shirt pulled tight over his hulking biceps. “Do we?”

I mimicked his pose but all that did was push my boobs up and test the ability of the straps of the fabric across my chest. His eyes drifted downward, and honestly, I couldn’t blame him. I felt eyes on me from all different directions. I snapped my fingers and pointed up toward my own eyes. “Eyes right here, buddy.”

A deep chuckle rumbled in his chest. “You’re kind of fearless.”

I'd been like that my whole life. After years of working and seeing the shit I had, fear was not something that ever held me back. My heart didn't even skip a beat in the elevator just now. It was why I got all the harder cases as a social worker and why when no one else would go in ... I would. I wouldn't call it a death wish, more like the lack of a fear of death. If it was my time to go, then it was my time to go.

I shrugged. "Maybe."

Rhode leaned in close to me, and one of her cone boobs brushed my arm. "Look, you've seen our IDs, can we go in now?"

He held his hand up and turned to the bouncer next to him to let him whisper in his ear. When he turned back to us, he shook his head. "You both look fine as hell, but you're gonna have to wait."

I rolled my eyes and turned to Rho. "Text Saphira and tell her we're going to another club. This is bullshit."

"Calm down, Cher," his deep voice rumbled. "We're clearing out a couple people, then you can go in. Gotta keep numbers manageable."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?" I tried not to sound too annoyed, but it didn't work.

He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Gotta keep the entrance packed to make it look like we're the best place to be in town."

I crooked my finger at him and made him bend even farther down and whispered close to his ear. "Open the rope."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled and shook his head, then he grabbed the rope and unhooked it and lifted so we could pass. "Seriously sweet ass. I like the attitude."

“I know.” I winked at him over my shoulder as I sauntered in.

“Did you mom-voice him? I bet you did.” She chuckled and filed in behind me as I led the way into the club.

“Not really ... well, kind of.” I shrugged. “Gotta do what you gotta do.”

Sin Forest Nightclub was exactly what I expected it to be. Thin trees were spread throughout the club, creating that forest atmosphere. Though purple and red lights flashed to the beat of the music, there were shadows and dark corners everywhere. Fog rolled across the floor, and if we hadn't been inside a club, I might've thought we were in haunted woods on some random mountaintop. Instead, it was a club that held a fun, sinister vibe. The air was warm and musky, causing a sheen of sweat to gather on my body. It was so packed we had to walk in a straight line. I tried to find Saphira, but I had no idea where she was or what direction to head in.

I paused and spun around. “Where is she?”

“I don't know.” Rhode pulled her cell from her pocket and the screen illuminated her face in the dark club. Her fingers flew over the screen, and as she typed a smile spread across her face.

“Why are you smiling?” I leaned over her shoulder and peeked at the screen. “Is that Saphira?”

“Yep. She's got round two ready and waiting for us.”

“Did she say where, exactly?” When Rhode frowned at me, I knew she hadn't heard me over the music.

Instead, she pointed to a wall of mirrors close to the bar. I was so ready for another drink after that elevator ride. I dragged her in the general direction of the mirrors until I

spotted Saphira's long blue hair. She was the second little sister I didn't know I needed but got anyways. It'd been too long since we'd seen her. Once Rhode and I had been adopted by a nice family, she went to school and came home with Saphira. Little did I know that they'd take her in too, and I all but adopted her as my youngest sister.

"Rhode! Morgana!" She jumped off the barstool, threw her arms around us, and crushed us to her. I was older, but she was so much taller that it was almost comical.

Rhode motioned to Saphira's costume. "Xena Warrior Princess! Absolutely epic."

We'd always loved that show as kids and now she looked amazing. I licked my finger and made a little sizzling sound. "Smokin' hot. You look fantastic."

Saphira looked down at herself and ran her hands over the pieces of her skirt. "I love that we all went retro tonight!"

"Are we really surprised?" I winked. I always loved how the three of us were obsessed with things of the past. From movies to music to TV, we loved anything retro. It was as if the present never appealed to us.

Saphira pointed to the row of shots lined up next to three neon-blue cocktails with little umbrellas on them. "Sit. Drink. Tell me how you got stuck in an elevator."

I shuddered at the thought of being trapped in that elevator. I knew at some point I'd look back and think it was hilarious, but right now the memory of naked shark guy's flesh was too fresh in my mind. "Shots first. Trauma second."

At the same time, we all reached for our shots and then tossed them back. Rhode's face wrinkled up in a scowl, and she shook her head. "Okay, no more shots."

“Until we hit the next bar, right?” Saphira swayed to the beat of the music and smiled to herself as if she’d already started her buzz for the night.

Rhode pulled a tall blue drink toward her, and her eyes widened with delight. “Sure—oh my God. Are these frozen margaritas?”

“Electric waves.” Saphira held up her drink toward the middle of the table. “Cheers to us finally being together again.”

“Cheers!” Rhode leaned in and also held her glass up.

“Cheers to that ... and not taking another elevator ever again.” This looked like a cup of hard hangover and possibly like I’d be praying to the porcelain gods. But ... when in Rome. I clinked my glass to theirs. “Because that was an ordeal.”

“I can’t wait to hear this. Something tells me this story has ... flavor.” Saphira chuckled and took a sip of her drink.

“Go ahead, Mo.” Rhode waved me on to tell the whole story. I moved a step closer to Saphira and tried to yell over the music as I explained the naked shark, the T-Rex tail smacking everyone and everything, Rhode’s epic nursing skills, and the girls dressed as Alvin and the chipmunks freaking out over needing to pee.

“I mean, the triage in the elevator was pretty impressive.”

Rho took another sip of her drink and gave her purse a pat. “And you judged me for my first aid kit. I warned you there’d be blood to clean up tonight.”

“You’re not making me want to go back out there.” Saphira sipped her drink, then hissed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Ugh, brain freeze.”

Rhode snapped my fingers, then pointed to her own lips. “Stick your tongue to the roof of your mouth.”

Saphira made a face and looked to the ceiling like she was trying it out, and after about three seconds, she beamed at Rho. “Nurse Rhode for the win.”

“Two for two.” She held two fingers up and stuck her tongue out at me. “Guys, I really needed this break from work. I’m so happy we’re finally here.”

“Yeah, let’s not go even half as long without seeing you, Saphira.” I missed my youngest sister. Ever since we all started working, it felt like we hadn’t had time for each other. But we were all each other had. This world could be lonely without family and these two were mine. “I won’t stand for it.”

Saphira grinned. “Yes, mom.”

Sometimes I felt like I should still be taking care of them, looking out for them the way I wish I’d been looked after. I always wanted to help and make people feel the things I never got to feel because I knew what it was like to not have it. And I would give them everything I could, no matter what. “I feel like Lady Tremaine sometimes with you two.”

Rhode frowned and glanced at Saphira. “Does that make us Anastasia and Drizella?”

Saphira snapped her fingers. “Which one wears green and blue?”

“Drizella,” Rhode and I said at the same time.

“Dibs.” Saphira giggled as she took another sip of her drink.

Rhode didn’t seem to care. She shrugged and took another sip. “I look good in pink and purple.”

“I need a pet to pet.” Pets were not a thing in the foster care system or with our adoptive parents, and I wanted one so bad. I would’ve settled for a spider at one point ... and I hated spiders.

“Get a lizard that can sit on your shoulder all day at work like in that TV show.” Rhode cupped her hands in front of her like she was holding something small.

Anything would do at this point. “That’s a great idea.”

“So, clearly our love lives are going great.” Rhode snickered and tapped Saphira’s arm while wagging her eyebrows. “Let’s hear who’s been in your bed?”

A man with sandy blonde hair and brown eyes slid into the space between Rhode and Saphira, resting his bony elbow on the table. “Are you looking for volunteers, Madonna?”

When a wide smile spread over Rhode’s face, I knew she was going to make him regret his arrogant ass. “Pull your lip over your head and swallow it. Thanks. Have the night you deserve.”

Whoomp, there it was. I knew I raised her right.

Saphira spit her drink onto the table in a fit of laughter. He lingered there for a moment longer, and I just stared at him with dead eyes, wondering if he would take the hint. When she arched her eyebrow at him and gave him her resting bitch face, I wondered how long it’d take for him to scurry away. Barely a second later he was gone. I’d perfected it years ago and it always served me well. Sometimes words just weren’t necessary.

“That was fun.” Rhode smirked.

“Now I see why you suspected we’d need to clean up blood tonight.”

“So, Saphira, are you dating anyone or is the field wide open and you’re just waiting to be caught.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right. LA is the land of vapid idiots in expensive sports cars.”

“I mean ... you’re not wrong.” But I didn’t think it was only LA, just guys around us in general. It was almost like they’d forgotten how to be human and treat others that way too. I turned to Rhode to confirm, but she was completely dazed, staring off into space.

These little episodes were happening to her more and more lately, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about her. She spent half her time in the ER dealing with all kinds of gnarly things and the other half stuck in her head in a dream she never wished she had. I wanted to help her, but I had no idea what to do. Deep down, I knew I had to figure it the hell out.

“Rhode?” I nudged her. “Dreaming again?”

I tried to keep my voice calm. We were out for a fun night. None of us wanted to deal with our own bullshit.

She pointed one finger at something over my shoulder. “Dibs.”

I glanced in the direction she pointed and froze. *Damnnnnnn*. I whistled under my breath. Saphira sighed. There was no doubt about it, the guy was gorgeous. He wore black pants and a loose cream blouse that made him look like a pirate. Rhode didn’t even hide her interest. Hell, I wouldn’t have either.

He stopped right in front of her and held out his hand. “Dance with me?”

I was about to shove her toward him when she took it and he led her out onto the floor. Saphira chuckled. “I thought we

were hanging out tonight, but even I would ditch us for *that*.”

I nodded. “We need a little of that ourselves.”

“Tell me about it.” She nodded to the beat of the music.

My mind went back to the gorgeous guy I’d seen in the hall. He was there one minute and gone the next, all because I’d been distracted by shark guy rolling around on the floor at my feet. I groaned. “I might have possibly seen the most beautiful guy ever just outside the elevator.”

She leaned in. “Tell me more.”

“It was only for a second, but he had dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He was there one minute and gone the next. If ever there was a guy to get my interest tonight ... it’d be him.”

She glanced around the club. “So, where is he?”

“I have no idea, but I’d love to find out.” I took a sip of my drink and chuckled.

Saphira smacked her empty glass on the table and grinned. “When I get back from the bathroom, the hunt begins.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” It was almost a rule to never go to the bathroom alone.

She shook her head. “Those damn lines are always too long. Keep an eye on Rhode with that potential stalker. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay, but if you’re not back in like ten minutes, I’m going in after you.”

She rolled her eyes and sauntered away. “Yes, mommmmm.”

I glanced out to the dance floor where I saw Rhode pressed up against Mr. Hottie and smirked. It was about time she had

some fun. I was about to take another sip when the guy from outside the elevator appeared right across from me. He rested his arms on the table and just stared. He was beautiful in a deadly kind of way, with his long midnight hair and piercing sapphire eyes. His face was all hard angles and smoldering good looks. I waited for him to say something, to invite me to dance or even buy me a drink.

When he said nothing, I sighed. “If you want the table, you’re gonna have to wait.”

He arched an eyebrow, and his lip curled in a cruel smirk. A chill ran down my spine, and I took a small step back, but he was around the table and in my face in seconds. He wrapped his hands around my wrist and yanked me toward him. My body slammed into his, and he held me there for a second, staring down at me.

My heart hammered in my chest. I jerked my arm back, but he didn’t budge. He towered over me, all big and menacing. The smell of ash and dust filled my senses, and I pulled back even harder, trying to free my hand. A humorless chuckle escaped his lips, and he turned toward the dark trees in the corner of the room. I grabbed my glass off the table and waited for my moment to use it as a weapon.

He dragged me away from the table and into the thick of the crowd. I turned trying to find Rhode but there were too many people between us now. He was too big, too strong. People packed in around each other. Even though I was surrounded I never felt so alone. I raised my glass up and slammed it into the bare skin of his forearm. Glass shattered in my hand and across his skin. I felt the skin across my palm slice, and warm blood trickled down my fingers. A deep cut marred his skin and his own blood dripped down, yet his grip

didn't loosen. Pins and needles pricked at my fingers with every passing second. His hand heated, and I felt my skin burn under his touch. When I glanced down again, the cut he had looked like it'd been burned shut. I closed my bloody hand into a fist and swung for his throat. He tipped his head back and caught my fist with his other hand. *Hot!* His grasp was so hot my skin it felt like I held it over a flame. I cried out, but the music was too loud and no one would hear me.

“Scream for me.” He let my hand loose and hissed in my ear.

I pressed my lips together even as my stomach rolled. *Scream for you?* I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. My eyes darted around the room, searching out Rhode or even Saphira, but I couldn't see them. He'd pulled me past the dance floor now and toward a dark back corner of the club where fake trees stood too close together. I fumbled for my cell, trying to hit either of their numbers in my pocket. He grabbed my arm, and my cell flew from my pocket. It tumbled toward the ground covered in the drops of blood from my hand. He waved his hand and a sharp gust of wind caught my phone and sent it flying out the entrance like a leaf in the wind.

How the hell did he do that!?

I kicked out, connecting with the side of his knee. He didn't even flinch. He yanked me hard, and I flew into the side of a table and smacked my ribs against the corner. I winced as pain shot up my side. Yet I looked like any other drunk partygoer tripping and dancing. He wrapped his hand around my upper arms and threw me into a thick batch of trees where not even the purple laser lights would touch. I threw my arms out and caught myself and tried to stumble out to the crowd. A

thick hand wound through my hair and around my curls and dragged me back even harder. Strands of my hair ripped from my head, and he shoved me toward the dark wall.

My cheek smacked it first, and I spun around trying to fight him off, but his hand caught around my throat and pinned me to the wall. He squeezed even harder, and the breath froze in my lungs. I felt him move in closer. Just when I thought he'd reach for my clothing and tear at it, he threw me toward the corner. I sucked in a ragged breath and waited for my face to hit the wall. Instead, I fell forward and felt myself being dragged through it. Dark-gray mist surrounded me as my stomach dropped and my head spun.

FALLING! I'M FALLING! My body spun feet over head, and I free-fell into oblivion for long moments. I slammed into the ground and skidded across what felt like tiny bladed rocks. I came to a halt and groaned as all kinds of aches covered me from head to toe. The temperature dropped, and everything felt wrong ... completely wrong.

“What the hell happened?”

I peeked my eyes open, and he stood over me—tall and terrible with that sneer on his perfect face. “Welcome to Isramorta.”

CHAPTER THREE

MORGANA



I glanced around and tried to sit up. My whole body ached, and I felt like I had road rash up and down my legs. The fishnet of my costume was torn, and my skin felt like it was on fire. If I hadn't been wearing the leather jacket, my arms would've been toast. I glared up at him and staggered to my feet and threw my hair from my face. I held my hands in fists and opened my stance. This time he wouldn't catch me off guard.

“What did you do?”

A cruel smile spread over his lips, and he glared at me. I took another step back before he could lunge for me. Green smoke flowed up from his feet and around his body. Two black horns peeked out from his mess of hair. They were straight, smooth spikes about six inches long that angled back from his face. That green smoke covered him and drifted up over his head. He lifted his hand and snapped his fingers. A small spark jumped from his fingertips, and fire exploded around him. Heat flickered over my skin, and I stumbled back from the flames consuming him. A moment later he was gone, and I was left standing there ... alone.

Nice magic trick, asshole.

I spun in a circle and sucked in a sharp breath. This had to be a different themed part of the hotel, maybe under construction ... Or I was tripping hard as hell from something slipped in my drink. Because there was no way this place was legit. It was too outrageous to be believable, and yet it felt so visceral, so here ... so real.

The ground was barren and made of long slabs of uneven slate stones. A thin layer of dust covered the land along with those tiny, jagged pebbles I'd scraped myself on. Wind whipped across flat plains and sent a deep chill down my spine. I wanted to think I was in one of those huge domes that was all interactive like a video game. The hard ground, the theatrical gray sky with sweeping cloud coverage, the way the wind blew ... it all felt so real, yet it was like no place I'd ever been before. But how could that be? How could I have gone from a Vegas nightclub to this?

Was I drugged and lost in my damn mind? I spun around once more, taking it all in. "Hello! Rhode! Sephira!"

Nothing.

Behind me stood a gathering of jagged slate stones that looked like swords jutting from the ground. They leaned against each other and pointed toward the sky. The air shimmered around them. In the distance toward the mountains, there were ruins high among the peaks. When I faced the other direction, another castle stood tall and imposing against the gray sky. The exterior was so dark it looked more like a sharp shadow from here. Multiple turrets pointed toward the sky, each one looking more jagged than the next. I pressed my hand to my head, hoping I wasn't in some kind of drugged-up stupor in a corner somewhere. But it all felt so real ... so familiar.

I didn't know where to go or what to do, but if I stayed here, I thought I might be trapped in this hell forever. I started walking toward the castle in the distance. I didn't know how far it was, but I was hoping to find some kind of construction worker or manager to help me out of here ... if they could. With every step I took, this place, this world, felt more tangible. Visceral. The way the gravel crunched under my heels, the smell of dry earth in my nose, and even the way the clouds moved across the dark sky ...

Everything hurt and when I glanced down, the tips of my hair had gone from pitch-black to emerald green. The tangy taste of blood filled my mouth, and when I ran my tongue over my teeth, they felt almost pointy. Even the tips of my fingers ached, and where my nails were flat and dull, they now looked like little black claws. *No*. I shook my head. This was all a bad dream, a bad trip. I would wake up at any moment and this would all be over, like when Rhode woke up from one of her episodes. I stumbled forward, yet the castle still felt so far away.

All the hair on the back of my neck stood on edge like I was being watched or followed. The sound of scraping footsteps echoed behind me, yet every time I glanced over my shoulder, there was nothing there.

“Look, this isn't funny anymore!” I yelled to whatever *things* followed me. “I don't belong here, and the faster I leave, the faster you can go bother someone else.”

The wind whipped around me, and my hair flew across my face, blocking out the world for a moment. Again, those eerie footsteps came from behind me, and I spun around ready to face off against the violent, hot stalker who brought me to this place. My feet ached from the spiked heels, and my ass was

chafed from the ripped costume and my abrupt landing in this hellish world.

“You don’t belong,” a deep, gravelly voice rumbled from behind me.

I spun around and faced two hulking men dressed like knights of the freaking roundtable, King Arthur style. They had on thick brown pants, breastplates that looked like they were carved of smooth brown stone, and loose, light brown shirts under the breastplates. They each wore a helmet that was tight to their head and came around to points that protected their jawlines. A thick metal strip ran down the middle of the helmet to protect their noses. They each held a sword at their hips and wore thick gloves.

“Um, where did you come from?” I wrapped my arms around myself.

They took a few slow steps toward me and spread out as though to tackle me from both sides. “Just stumbled upon you.”

I didn’t believe him. There was a glint of interest in his eye that I didn’t like, and the way they looked at each other with a smirk of interest made my stomach roll. My mind whirled and dizziness assailed me. Memories hit me, memories that weren’t my own.

A man in this exact uniform reached for me with that look of interest. My hand extended out toward him, and a few coins hit my palm. When my fingers closed around the cool coins, a part of me grew cold, like I was shutting my mind off and distancing myself from what was about to happen to my body. I felt myself go dead inside.

“Hey, service now,” the man demanded as he snapped his fingers at me.

When I didn't respond fast enough, his hand cracked across my cheek and I flew into the wall. Pain exploded across the side of my face and the warm trickle of blood flowed down my cheek and into my mouth. A coppery taste rolled over my tongue. I blinked my eyes, trying to see past the pain. Too weak to fight back, I felt the grip of death deep in my soul. My time was growing closer, but for my sister I would endure. For my sister, I would survive a bit longer. He shoved my face into the wall and held me there with my chest forced into the hard stone surface. I felt the press of his body against mine as he tore at my long skirts. The sound of ripping fabric filled my ears, yet I didn't fight back. I was property bought and paid for. I held my lips together to stop from whimpering. If I whimpered, he'd make it hurt more. I knew men like him well.

He shoved his knee between my legs and kicked them apart. The coins fell from my hand and clattered to the floor, and he snickered in my ear. “Whores should hold their coin tighter. I'll teach you.”

His dark snicker echoed in my ears, and the smell of his rancid breath stung my nose. I looked to the shitty room with a single bed, a dresser covered with perfumes and cosmetics to hide my impending death, and a night robe wrapped over the back of a chair. The second I felt cool air on my skin, I knew he'd shove himself in me and I'd have to hold back my tears of shame and pain until he left. I ground my teeth together, praying for a quick end ... Please let it be over ... Let it be over ... Let it be over ...

I shook my head, trying to force the memory that wasn't my own away. What the fuck was that? Yet when I faced these

two soldiers once more, it felt so real. Everything about this place did. The two of them took a step toward me as though this was a practiced dance they'd grown used to. I took a step back and held my hands up. "Hold on."

"For what, comely demon?" One snickered.

"I'll enjoy you," the other growled.

"Me first," the one with the cruel smile demanded.

"No, me," the other growly one argued.

He reached for my wrist, and I spun away from him. "No one is going to be first!"

Anger flared in my chest. It burned so hot I felt I could light their worlds on fire. Who the hell did they think they were? I didn't know what the memory was, but this was my life and I said *hell no*. No one was entitled to my body, and if I was going down, these two fucks were going down with me.

They both chuckled and dove toward me. I planted my feet and lifted my chin. "BACK OFF!"

Rage detonated within my chest and flowed down toward my hands. Purple flower petals exploded from the palms of my hands. My instincts took over, and I sucked in a deep breath and blew them toward the soldiers. The petals fluttered and danced as they drifted the distance between us and then brushed across their faces and down their arms like a gentle caress. At first, their faces looked confused, like they didn't know how or why these petals came from me. I was just as confused.

The color drained from their faces and purple lines ran over their skin like the roots of a tree. They crept over their arms and up toward their faces. Their lips turned black as they threw their heads back, screaming in agony. They fell to the

ground, their knees giving out as they scratched at their throats, trying to fight for breath. Those purple lines covered their cheeks and forked out over their eyes. The color leached from their eyes, turning them white. They flipped to their backs and convulsed violently. I pressed the back of my hand over my mouth and stumbled back, wanting to get away but unable to.

The breath left their bodies and the spasms stopped. I leaned toward them to take a peek at their bodies. Blood leaked from their eyes, noses, and mouths. It stuck to their faces in dried clumps. I gagged and I shook from head to toe. Tears pricked at my eyes. This wasn't an act or some kind of weird show, this was real ... this was terrifying ... and I just murdered two people ... I think.

“Fuck!” I turned and ran as fast as I could into a world I didn't know.

CHAPTER FOUR

AVALON



Time was supposed to heal all wounds ... I'd never heard something so laid with falsehoods. Time was nothing but a crutch people used to try to erase the wounds of the past. They let go of the damage done in an attempt to forget. But I could not forget—I would not. I stood on the balcony of Dacio's castle. It overlooked the slate lands and even farther beyond that. Once, it'd been beautiful here, with greenery as far as the eye could see. Now, it was desolate, with jagged rocks and dust expanding out toward the horizon. There were other clans within the demon kingdom, clans that I could easily blend into. And yet *here* was where I stayed in an attempt to make a life for myself. Years ago, there'd been an explosion of massive power. It was so massive that I'd lost the old life I knew and cherished and it'd been replaced by this new existence. Time would offer me no comfort, nor would it help me find forgiveness ... time only added fuel to my fire.

“Lord Avalon.” One of the soldiers from Dacio's arm marched to my side.

“What is it?”

“The patrol has not yet returned.” He stood straight with his shoulders back and his chin lifted.

I sighed but didn't take my eyes off the land. She was out there somewhere ... fighting for survival the way I had for so many years. It brought me a tinge of pleasure. "Send out two others to find them and drag them back from whatever brothel they've lost themselves in."

"Yes, my lord." He turned from me, and his heavy footfalls marched from my perch and down the hall.

A cool breeze blew across my skin. In the past, it would've chilled me, but now my own internal flames burned eternally. I opened my hand and flames danced in my palm. Slowly they took the shape of her ... Lily. I made the flames twist and move as though she danced in the palm of my hand. I'd had her at one time, and then she was nothing more back then and nothing that ever could be now.

My mind drifted back to a time when I was ... more. I'd spent much of my time ferrying tradable goods between the vampire courts. I traveled constantly, ensuring all of the courts had what they needed. I'd been young, ambitious, and found enjoyment where it was meant to be had. The memories assailed me as though they were yesterday and not a little over fifty years ago.

I roamed down the streets, enjoying the lively sights and senses of the vampire world. The smell of nectar lingered in the air, and everything buzzed with activity. I glanced up toward the open balconies and windows. Bright-purple shutters lined the building, and yet my eyes were only drawn toward one thing ... her. She sat in the window, perched there gazing out over the streets with a faraway look of broken dreams and sadness in her eyes. I couldn't say why but the sadness called me to her like a beacon in the night.

I found myself walking through the doors and drifting toward the stairs. The lobby was spacious and wide open, with prostitutes lounging about on plush furniture. Linen curtains hung over the windows and billowed with each breeze. Vampires walked about, admiring what all the prostitutes had to offer. But my eyes were not for them, they were for the beauty I'd seen sitting in the window. There were stairs off to the side, and I headed straight toward them, just wanting a single moment with her. I began walking up when a meaty hand wrapped around my bicep, stopping me from going any farther.

“Where do you think you're going?”

I glanced down at his hand, then back up at the aging vampire. His age showed in the gray streaks in his hair and wrinkles that fanned out around his eyes. Sweat beaded on his skin and stained his linen shirt. He had a thick cuff on each of his wrists.

“Unhand me.” I tugged my arm free and straightened my coat.

“Coin first.” The man held his other hand out. “Then you can go up.”

“Let him be.” A woman with long red hair piled up in curls on her head sauntered out from behind a curtain. A tight black corset seemed almost painted on and a loose, nearly see through skirt wrapped around her hips. She had a shrewd look in her eyes as she appraised me.

“No coin, no upstairs.” He growled out at her. His overly wide jaw jutted out as he spoke.

“Have you no idea who he is?” She elbowed him. “Forgive him, my lord. He knows not what he does.”

“There is no offense. I just wish to pass for a moment.”

She glanced down pointedly to my groin. “Hopefully longer than a moment, my lord.”

“Lord?” The man’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

She leaned in and whispered, “He is Lord of Shadows. Any goods or nectar comes through him. Isn’t that right, my lord?”

I nodded. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I saw a lady too fair to go unnoticed.”

“Ah yes, the treasured Lily. You’ll find her three doors down on the right.” They both stepped back, allowing me to head straight up the stairs. The sounds of physical pleasure echoed through the doors as I passed each one. I marched down the hallway to the third door and paused, debating if I should just walk in or knock. I held my hand up and knocked three quick raps on the door.

Her sweet voice drifted out to me. “Come in.”

My hand shook as I reached for the doorknob and pushed it open. When I strolled into the room, it was exactly as I expected: small with a large bed in the middle of it. The linens were laid flat and crispy, and she sat on a small chair near the window. A breeze ruffled her long blonde hair. A wig, no doubt, as blonde was not a color I’d seen on any vampire before. When she gazed at me with those bright sapphire eyes, I nearly lost my breath. Yet she seemed so unimpressed, almost resigned.

“Close the door please, sir.”

I hadn’t realized I’d stood there staring at her. “Of course.”

I let the door fall shut behind me with a light click. She rose to her feet and stood before me. She looked like a sad angel. Though she'd enhanced her delicate features with makeup, I could still see the dark smudges under her eyes, and she was thin. Too thin. She wore a long silky dress that hugged all her curves and a robe that hung low on her shoulders and nearly slouched to her elbows. She forced a light smile to her lips.

"What's your pleasure?"

"You." The word burst through my lips before I could think.

She snickered and motioned to a small table beside her where a golden bowl sat with coins in the bottom of it. "A donation then and we shall see what pleasures await you."

It was smart, a way to ensure payment before services. "What's your name?"

"What will you have it be?" she teased, and I found myself smiling.

"I'll have whatever you're called."

She glanced away. "They call me Lily."

"A suitable name for a delicate flower such as yourself."

She drifted over to the bed, leaving her coin bowl visible. I took the hint and reached into my satchel and dumped the contents into the bowl. Her eyebrows rose at the amount. "And what is it that you'd prefer?"

"Your time." It was the only answer I could give this delicate thing. I'd never seen a maid so lovely as she.

"You've got it." She leaned back on the bed and let her dress slide down her legs and pool at her hips, barely covering

the treasure between her legs.

“I will speak with you.” I moved to the side of the bed and dropped to my knees and leaned my elbows on the bed.

“Speak? To me? Why?” Her brow furrowed with confusion.

“Indeed. I will speak with you.” I motioned to the barren room. “What brought you to this life?”

I wanted to ask how someone so lovely could find herself in such a place. Who would trap her here? Why would she stay when she was blessed with such beauty? Instead, I went for a lighter approach.

“We all have our lives to live ... and responsibilities.” Her answer said so much yet so little at the same time.

“I would take you from here.” She didn’t belong here in this life. She belonged in a home with a garden to wander through in the night with the moon shining down on her. I could almost picture the moon shining down on her pale skin and the way it’d illuminate her sapphire eyes. I found myself curious to know what her real hair color would look like. Though the pale blonde suited her.

“Oh.” She leaned back into the pillows with a wistful smile. “Are you going to whisk me off and marry me someday?”

“You’ve seen I have the means.” I motioned to the coins.

She nodded. “A man of means could do more than a common whore.”

Her words almost repelled me. “A hundred lifetimes can be lived in but a moment ... tomorrow you could be someone else, somewhere else.”

“And what of promises of love?” She tilted her head to the side, watching me closely.

“Ah, my sweet Lily ... I would show you the love of ages.”

The *love of ages* I'd promised and given. Bitterness drew me from my memories. I ground my teeth together and felt my flames dance over my skin.

“My lord!” A guard rushed back toward the balcony. “You must come.”

I drew in a weary breath, trying to rid myself of the memories of a life that'd ended fifty years ago because of her. A life I had loved and lost along with the one I'd been foolish enough to also love and lose. “What's happened?”

“The missing patrol has been found.” His eyes were round with shock.

“And?”

“And ...” he swallowed, “... they're dead.”

CHAPTER FIVE

MORGANA



“*S*hit. Fuck.” I pumped my arms, running away as fast as I could. I didn’t know how long or how far I’d run, but it felt like my feet would carry me forever across this land. The more I panicked, the more purple petals spilled from my hands. This place, this world, was horrible in a way that made me feel like I would die here, like at any moment it would all end and Rhode would never know what happened to me. If it was my time to go, it was my time to go, but I wanted the closure for my sister.

I paused, catching my breath, and the more petals that hit the ground the darker the ground became around me. One by one they fell, and with each touch to the dirt, blackness forked out around me. Tears prickled within my eyes. *What the hell was happening to me?* There was no doubt those two soldiers were going to commit some non-consensual assault on me and they got what they deserved, but vigilante punisher was not on my resume. *Until my body took over and defended itself.* I sucked in a deep breath through my nose.

“Okay, Okay, don’t freak out,” I whimpered, hoping that if I spoke to myself, I might find a way to calm down. “Don’t freak out. You’re just trapped in another world with some

freaky shit happening. You can do this. Figure out how to get home to Rhode and Sephira.”

Thinking of my two younger sisters brought a sense of purpose to me. I could freak out about being here all day long, but to get back to them, I had to get myself together. I sucked in another breath and shoved my hair out of my face. I swiped the sleeves of my jacket under my eyes and across my nose. “Okay, think. I need a plan.”

I turned back toward the castle in the distance. I’d gotten farther away than I expected. The mountains seemed to loom closer than before. They were dark and barren, like shadows against the sky. I turned back toward the castle, which looked like my only option at this point, and I took a step toward it.

The ground cracked under my foot and the sound of rocks fracturing filled my ears. “Nooooo.”

I froze as though I was standing on a frozen lake and the ice was about to break beneath my feet. The cracks spread farther out and little puffs of dust shot up from the ground around me. *If I took off running again, would it hold my weight long enough to make progress? Or would it collapse where I stood?* There was only one way to find out. I squeezed my eyes shut and took a step. The ground exploded below me, and chunks of slate shot up into the air as I plummeted down. A scream shot from my lips, and my stomach went up into my throat.

I reached out, trying to grab onto something, anything, to stop this free fall. Rough edges scratched at my hands and legs as I plummeted into darkness. I hit the ground with a hard thump. The pain vibrated up from my feet into my legs. Both of the heels on my boots snapped under the pressure and my bodysuit was shredded. Blood streamed down my legs. if I

hadn't had my jacket on, my arms would also be cut to shit. I huddled there on the ground, just breathing for a moment. I felt like I'd been thrown into a blender, spun around, then shot out of it because someone forgot to put the top on. I wiggled my fingers and stretched my legs out. Aside from a few aches and pains, I didn't think I'd broken anything.

I leaned my head back against the wall and gazed up at the hole that I'd fallen through. It was at least thirty feet up. The walls were sharp and steep. There was no way I could climb back up and out. The cave around me was so dark I wouldn't know how to move in any direction. I curled my knees to my chest and held them there, trying not to lose my ever-loving mind. This was too much. It was all too much. Tears rolled down my cheeks. I didn't know how I was going to get back to Rhode or out of this fucked up world.

The sound of tiny scraping nails echoed down the tunnel and my heart leapt into my throat. I tried to press myself to the wall, hoping the next thing that came at me wasn't some kind of giant spider monster thing that wanted to eat me. I squeezed my eyes shut and held my breath. Death by digestion was not something I wanted to face. When I peeked up, a dark shadow moved in the distance, like some kind of animal moving on all fours. A dark cloud puffed out from it and drifted toward me.

As the cloud moved forward, the cave rumbled and dust rained down. When it came close to me, the cloud drifted around my sides as though it'd hit a dome over my head and rolled over it. Shards of rock tumbled toward me, but they too rolled away from me like they hit a wall. I glanced up, peering into the darkness of the caves. Reflective eyes peered back at me, and my stomach rolled. The hard-packed slate ground rolled toward me like a wave moving toward the shore. Just before it hit me again, it looked like it hit a bubble and fanned

out around me, then smacked into the wall behind me. A whimper escaped my lips, and I huddled tighter to myself.

Something that looked like a glowing string slithered toward me. Blue lights ran along its stomach and sides. When it scurried closer, I froze, praying it wouldn't bite me. I didn't know the animals in this world or what would attack me next. The lights got even closer, and when it stopped, it stood there under the thin beam of light coming through where I'd fallen. It was a tiny creature that looked like a mix of a ferret and lizard. Fur ran from the top of its head down its back and all around the fluffy tail. Its head was shaped like a ferret, with bright, curious eyes and cute little ears popping from the top of its fuzzy head. It had scales from its mouth and down the front of its neck. The fur was a mix of cream and red like a fox and felt sleek and smooth against my hand. Its forked tongue darted out, and that's when I noticed the scales running along its sides and down its stomach. Lines of neon scales glowed on its sides and across its neck. It was cute ... too cute.

“Are you, like, a venom ferret snake thing? Are you gonna try to kill me like the rest of the crap in this world?”

It made a little *cooing* sound that sounded like half purr and half chirp. It darted back and forth in front of me, moving with its tiny ferret-like legs. When its head bobbed up and down and it met my eye with its dark and curious eyes, the knots in my stomach eased just a fraction. “You don't look like you'd kill me.”

Again, it made that little *cooing* sound and ran its smooth furry body against my leg like a cat greeting its owner. I tentatively lifted my hand and let it run under my finger, lifting its head to meet my palm. It arched its back like a cat needing to be pet. This close, its body was long and sleek like a ferret

with the stealth of a lizard. It scurried up onto my legs and sat there on my knee just staring.

I tickled under its chin, and it lifted its head as though enjoying it. “But what do we call you? Ferris?”

It tilted its head, almost shaking it.

“Tanya?”

Again, the shake.

“Morris.”

It looked appalled ... if a ferret *could* look appalled.

“Okay, okay. I’ve got it. Monty!”

It gave me a little *coo* and rubbed on my legs. “Monty it is.”

I finally got a pet and Rho wasn’t here to see it, yet I found comfort in running my fingers over its soft fur and smooth scales. I didn’t know how long I sat there just petting Monty, but it was long enough for my heart to stop racing and for my thoughts to clear. My breathing slowed. This was the power of having some kind of pet around. People and pets were just meant to be together. I started to rise to my feet and my little friend climbed up my jacket to perch itself on my shoulder. I tossed my hair over my other shoulder to give him space.

“You there!” a voice growled and echoed down the cave, and I jumped.

Purple petals flew from my hands and rained down on the both of us. I tried to hold my hand over my little lizard friend, but more petals fell from my hands and drifted over the ferret-lizard. I almost screamed with fear that I’d killed it, but all my petals did were turn his fur purple and make the little neon lights running down his belly glow a brighter purple. He cooed

and snuggled in next to my neck. For some reason, my magic hadn't killed Monty. I sucked in a deep breath of relief and blew it out. When it came to the soldiers who were about to sexually assault me, I could easily justify *their* deaths in my mind. But if I killed my little friend, it'd weigh on my conscience for eternity. I reached up and patted the top of his head.

When the sound of tumbling rocks came from a few feet away, my eyes shot up toward the voice calling out to me, and I froze. There before me was another one of those soldiers that I'd run into before. His helmet covered most of his face, but his body was just as big as the others, and his mouth turned down into a sneer as he approached me.

"No! Stay back." I held my hands up and those petals fell from my palms to the ground around me. The dirt turned black at my feet with tiny cracks running through it.

"Here now. Come over here." He crooked his finger at me, and I shook my head.

"You don't want me to go over there."

"You'll listen to me or you'll regret it, little girl." He took another step toward me.

"No, little boy. If you want to keep your life, I'd suggest you stay over there. Or even better, turn around and show me the way out of this hellhole." I waved him away.

He glared at me and moved too close. He reached out and wrapped his hand around my forearm, pinching my skin. He pulled me from the wall of the cave and yanked me toward him, then farther into the cave. I yanked back on my arm, trying to free it, but his grip was like a vise around my arm.

"What clan do you belong with?" he barked out.

“Clan?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

He stopped and spun toward me. “Yes, clan. Where do you belong?”

“I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about.”

“We’ve got a court jester in our midst. It’s clear you’re a demon, but your intelligence has yet to be determined.” He growled and turned away again, dragging me deeper into the underground.

“I think you’re going the wrong way. I need to go up and out.”

“You need to do what I say you’ll do wench.” His grip tightened and my little ferret-lizard friend hissed in his direction.

“What are you doing with a ferinx?” He started to reach for my friend on my shoulder, and I batted his hand away with my free arm.

“It just appeared.” I leaned away from him and yanked at my arm. “Let go or lose the arm.”

“You dare threaten me?” He shook me and I kicked my leg out, connecting with the back of his knee. His leg gave out and he loosened his grip enough for me to jerk free. I staggered back a step as he recovered his balance.

“It’s not a threat, it’s a fact.” I didn’t want to hurt him ... but I would if I had to defend myself.

He reached for Monty, my little ferinx, and he hissed at him and gave a high-pitched growl. “Give it here.”

“He doesn’t want to go with you.” I ducked away when he reached for my Monty once again.

His arm shot out and he cracked me across my cheek with the back of his hand. Pain exploded across the side of my face as my head snapped around. I squeezed my eyes shut while I opened and closed my mouth, trying to work the pain from my jaw. I cupped my jaw and rubbed at my cheek.

“Mother fucker.”

I turned back toward him and threw my arm out and my fist connected with his throat. He tried to draw in a sharp breath but ended up choking. His hands curled into fists, and he hauled his arm back. Rocks flew from the ground and gathered around his hand. He threw his hand forward, ready to strike at my face. I tilted my head to the side, and it barely missed me. When his fist came too close to my cheek, those rocks fell to the ground and he ended up striking the cave wall right next to my face.

He pulled back and shook his hand out. “Wretch!”

He hovered over me about to strike out once more, and I threw my hands up. Petals exploded from my palms and shot right into his face. Purple lines forked out over his skin like thin plant roots. Like the others, his lips turned black and blood ran like tears from his eyes and nose. He dropped to his knees and fell forward onto his face. I backed away before he could touch my boots. His body convulsed at my feet and gurgling sounds came from deep in his throat.

The ferinx chirped at my side, like he was cheering for the soldier’s death. When he finally stopped twitching, I stepped over him and started walking farther into the cave. My hands shook as I walked, and I fought to keep my breaths steady and even. A panic attack was in order, but I didn’t have time to have one. The Ferinx rubbed against my cheek as though it sensed my tension. I kept walking trying to forget the trail of

bodies I'd left in my wake. My only hope was to get out of this world and pretend like it never happened, like this was some kind of bad dream I couldn't wake from.

Neon-blue lights glimmered in the distance, and I squinted my eyes, willing them to adjust to the darkness. They moved and fluttered with a delicate grace that reminded me of butterflies back home, except these were translucent like jellyfish. Glowing neon lights highlighted the shape of their wings and bodies. Long, glowing legs and antennas hung from them, yet with each beat of their wings, the neon lights moved. They flew around in little clusters that seemed to hover in the same place. The closer I got, the more they looked like they were held in tiny glass jars. When I reached them, they all sat on rocks that looked like shelves around the cave. I paused, staring at the blue, green, purple, and pink coloring.

“Hello there.”

I jumped and turned toward an older man standing in the corner. He held both his hands up as though to show me he meant no harm.

“I'm Linford,” he said.

He was about five foot eight with a head of white hair and a matching gray beard. His arms were on the thin side, but his stomach poked out just enough to make him have the perfect dad-bod. His eyes were glazed over like he had cataracts, and his retinas were the size of pinpoints. I was surprised he could see me at all.

“I'm Morgana.” I didn't move or take a step forward to meet him.

“Pleased to meet you.” He motioned to the soldier I'd left back in the tunnel. “An enemy of yours?”

When I said nothing, he motioned to my face. “He earned what he got, I see.”

“Can you see me?” I found it hard to believe this old man with milky eyes could see two feet in front of him.

He chuckled. “My vision never falters this deep underground.”

“Night vision.” My brow furrowed. “Why are you down here?”

“I live here.” He held up the glass lantern full of those illuminated butterflies.

“Where exactly is here?” This was the first person I’d met that spoke to me like I was a human being and not a piece of meat to be shoved around.

“You’re in Terrea, of course.”

“Of course,” I muttered. I tried not to panic or lose my mind. I was indeed in another world, and somehow that hot asshole from the hotel in Vegas had brought me here. I needed to get back. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I didn’t want to think this could be happening, but I couldn’t deny it now. I was lost. The only thing I could do now was try to get back.

“You’re in a bit of trouble,” he said, as if it was a fact.

“Yes.”

“Right, then follow me.” He turned and started to walk away.

Left with no other choice, I followed behind him in the hopes that somehow, someday this old man would be able to get me the hell out of here.

CHAPTER SIX

AVALON



I followed the guard down the winding stairs of the tower. The air was cool and moved through the slate castle like wind through a pipe. The rock did nothing to insulate the castle from the wind, the heat, or the cold. Living here was like living out in the elements with only a rock to hold overhead for protection. The stairs continued to wind downward for what felt like ages until I reached the bottom where it opened into the courtyard. Soldiers huddled in a large clump in the middle of the courtyard. Around the perimeter, they usually trained with weapons in different areas. But even the ones on patrol at the top of the walls surrounding the castle looked down into the center of where they all stood. They leaned into each other talking and milling around, staring at something that'd shaken them.

“Step aside. Let me pass,” I barked, and the soldiers all parted.

There in the center of all of them lay two of our own. Their faces were contorted into painful, silent screams, streaks of dried blood ran from their eyes and noses. Their skin held the blue tinge of poison, and it sent a chill down my spine. “What happened?”

“A woman was seen running from their bodies, my lord,” one of our watchguards answered.

Ice ran through my veins. “What woman?”

“One touched by death,” the guard muttered, and the others all nodded and mumbled in agreement. Whispers of *devil, witch, cursed*, and all other manner of things that would give children nightmares were going through the crowd.

“There is no such thing. Do not let your superstitions rule your minds. There is an explanation for this other than *a woman*.” It was too much of a coincidence for this not to be her.

“And what rebellious scum did this?” King Dacio sauntered into the courtyard in all his glory.

He was nearly as tall as me, with black eyes and long, straight blond hair that fell down to his elbows. The crown on his head had thick horns jutting up from it in all different directions. He wore thick metallic armor that looked like straps of metal had been braided together to fit him perfectly. It wove over his chest and down to his hips. His face was regal with high, sharp cheekbones and a long, straight nose. He stood over the bodies, studying them with interest in his eyes. The others all watched his every move with a loyal sort of reverence in their gazes. King Dacio ruled with an iron fist, but we all respected him for it. If it hadn't been for him, we wouldn't have survived the turning from vampire to demon after the explosion fifty years ago.

The guards all fell back into straight lines while bowing their heads to him. I motioned to the soldier who'd fetched me earlier. “Tell him.”

He cleared his throat. “A woman, Your Highness.”

The king lifted his hand and smokey brown magic drifted down from his fingers and into the ground below the bodies. When his magic emerged from his hand his cream-colored horns drifted back over the top of his head and blended in with his blond hair. His crown covered them and if I hadn't known him so well, I might not have seen them. The slate answered his demands and lifted the bodies up higher for him to get a better look. He tilted his head from one side to the other, looking at the bodies for long moments. "I see no stab wounds or injuries. Poison?"

"That's just it ... it looked like ... magic." The soldier's words were hesitant and almost awe struck.

The king waved him away, dismissing the soldier back to the ranks. "You're dismissed. Back to your duties, everyone."

The guards all fell back to their training, leaving me alone with Dacio. He opened his hand and the ground below the dead soldiers opened. He lowered down toward the tunnels running under the castle where their bodies would be held and eventually dealt with.

He crooked his finger at me, and I leaned in closer. "Did you retrieve what I asked for?"

I'd returned to Earth, to retrieve what he asked for. I still didn't know why he'd asked for a traitor like her, and yet I'd forced myself to be with her for as short a period of time as possible. I was aware of what he wanted, yet I'd served him well as I always did. "Yes."

The King narrowed his eyes at me. "Where is she then?"

I sighed and motioned to the imposing castle walls. "Acquainting herself with our land."

"Do you think those deaths were due to her presence?"

I shrugged. "It's a possibility." The happenstance was too strong for it not to be her.

His eyes bore into mine. "Such power ... Bring her to me. I want her for the selection. Do not fail this time."

I'd never failed him once before, and even this time, I had retrieved his coveted treasure ... Lily. A traitor to us all. But for my kingdom, I would do anything, including bringing her into our midst for my King. "Consider it done."

His lip pulled up into a sneer. "I thought I had last time."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MORGANA



We walked in silence for long moments, descending farther into the underground. The air was cool and damp against my skin. I wrapped my arms around myself, pulling my leather jacket in around my body. As my eyes adjusted, I noticed little things with each step I took. The cave that'd been rougher smoothed out, and a clear walking path was worn into the floor. Though the walls were still rough rock, they were hollowed out, making room for people to pass. Those glowing butterflies seemed to flutter up and down the caves of their own accord. They brightened the way just enough to make the path visible.

“Linford?”

“Yes?” He didn't stop walking.

“What is Terrea? Is it in Vegas? Is it on Earth?” I placed my hand on the wall to steady myself.

“I know not of this place called Vegas.” He glanced over his shoulder. “But Earth is a far-off world which we do not travel to.”

“Then ... then how did I get here?”

He shrugged. “I do not hold this knowledge.”

“Then where are we going?”

He paused and turned to face me. His face pulled up into a kind smile. “It appears to me that you’re in trouble, you need help, and you can be quite dangerous—”

“—I didn’t mean t—”

“— There are no accusations here, only help. The years have not been kind to demon folk. At least here we are what we are. Dangerous or not.” He eyed the single petal that fell from my hand.

I curled my fingers in toward my palms and little puffs of purple magic drifted up from my hands for a moment before fading away. “Demon folk?”

“You know, vampires turned demon. We aren’t well-liked. It’s been a tough few years, but we earth demons have adjusted well enough.”

He motioned to the opening at the end of the cave, and when I glanced up, my eyes widened. It opened into a huge cavern deep underground. I hesitated for a moment, taking it all in. Monty cooed on my shoulder and rubbed his head against my cheek. That one little motion brought me more comfort than I thought possible. I stepped forward into the huge, open cavern. Little huts were carved into the walls that towered over us. They were piled like apartments at least five stories high, and the cave still had room overhead for more apartments before it turned into the shape of a dome. Each one had an open door, but small porthole-like windows ran the length of each apartment. They were covered with thin slivers of crystals that looked like stained glass. Faint lights from behind that glass projected rainbow colors over the walls and roof of the cavern. It wasn’t bright or vibrant. The colors were light and barely glowing. It was beautiful in a dark, gothic

kind of way. Sharp stalactites dripped from the roof of the cavern and down the sides of the walls.

Those glowing butterflies seemed to be fluttering everywhere, giving just enough light to see, but still it was dim at best this far below ground. The air was so cold I could see my breath fog from my mouth. Ripped fishnet stockings were not going to cut it this deep within the earth. My body quaked, yet I kept on following Linford.

The people wore thick brown coats and pants with off-white peasant-looking shirts underneath. Their faces were smudged with dirt and grime. Yet this whole underground town seemed to be somewhat peaceful. As we walked farther, I noticed little vendor stands up and down a small pathway that looked like it might be considered the Main Street. I expected them to be made of wood, but instead it looked like they'd been carved out of stone to form perfect tables. One table held dishware that looked like handmade ceramic. Another had statues carved from crystals of different colors and shapes. Farther down, people gathered around one stand that had an alarmingly low supply of brightly colored fruits and vegetables. People clamored for every piece they could get.

When I got a closer view, I realized the people did look pale, hungry, and thin. "Linford, are all these people demons?"

He chuckled. "What other kind of folk live underground like this?"

"Dwarves? Like, Lord of the Ring style?" As we passed, they all turned to stare at me. I was just as dirty as the rest of them, but my clothing was far from their style and had no

function whatsoever in this world. I even hobbled along on my broken boots.

“Who is a ring lord?” He glanced back at me. “Never heard of him.”

I chuckled. “Yes, you might not have.”

Linford seemed like a no-nonsense kind of guy, like everything was black and white. He waved for me to keep following him, and we walked farther down Main Street. I passed demons using their power over earth to make all kinds of things from dishes to furniture to weapons. When my eyes locked on the long swords, the vendor waved this hand and a curtain of dust rose from the ground, covering him like he'd pulled the land over himself. Everything was so beautiful and smooth but also full of colors from crystals. Overhead, long stone bridges connected one level of homes to another. The demons all looked so normal ... until their powers showed, that is. Each of their powers had a hue of brown or gold that flowed from their hands like dust. Horns sprouted from their heads each time they used their magic. But the second they stopped using it, their horns disappeared. Their nails looked like tiny tan shell-colored claws.

I glanced down at my own hands, noting how my own nails looked like black claws. “Um, Linford ... am I a ... a demon too?”

He spun around and held his butterfly lantern higher so that it illuminated his face. “Well, of course you are ... What else would you be?”

“I don't know ... Human?”

His lips turned up into a full smile, and his belly shook as he chuckled. “Why would you want to be that?”

I didn't have a good reason. "I guess it's what I'm used to?"

He looked me up and down. "Best get used to this then."

But how could I? I'd been thrown here, attacked, and taken to an underground kingdom of earth demons ... *and now I find out that I too am a demon!*? I reached up and ran my hand over my ears and felt the delicate points at the top. They were so sensitive they nearly hurt. I wasn't sure I wanted to get used to this, or even how I could. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well, come along."

"Umm, where are we going?"

"To meet the missus." He turned and began walking once more. "She'll know what to do with you."

For long moments I followed him through pathways and around towering walls full of carved-out homes. Slowly, I began to notice the demons of the underground seemed to look at Linford with a kind of reverence. They all waved and offered quiet greetings with small bows of their heads, acknowledging him as they passed. He gave simple greetings in return, yet somehow I felt like they all looked to him as a leader in this community.

"Are you the leader here?"

He made a noncommittal sound in the back of his throat and shrugged. "I help where I can. But the demons have a leader."

Visions of the dark-haired vampire plagued my mind. He'd been cruel yet still so beautiful. Did he rule these people? What reason could he possibly have for bringing me here? "Who is he?"

Linford turned to the right and walked up three stairs and stopped in front of a solid wall. He glanced up at the wall and smiled. “He was once a duke, and now he’s made himself a king.”

Monty snuggled in closer to me every time I felt the least bit unsure. It was like he knew I needed him by me. When he gave a small *purr*, I felt it vibrate on my shoulder. I reached up and ran the tips of my claws through the fur on top of his head.

“That ferinx has taken a liking to you.”

“I’ve taken a liking to him.” I dropped my hand. “It’s nice to have a friend.”

“Well, you’ve got one for life. Once a ferinx bonds, it’s bonded for life. It’s a rare thing.” He turned away from me and waved his hand toward the wall. Dust sprinkled from his palm in a translucent cloud. The wall in front of us dented in and intricate carvings wound around each other like filigree until a door formed in front of us. It came to a point at the top and looked like it’d open up like French double doors. They drifted open and dust rained down before us. Linford said nothing. He simply walked into the dwelling as though he knew I would follow. I glanced over my shoulder to find a small group of demons had followed us through the town. They looked at me with open interest, yet I felt no hostility from them.

“Come along.”

I jumped at the sound of Linford’s voice and hurried into the small home. He waved to the demon’s watching me. “Be off with you then.”

They all scurried away, and Linford walked farther into the dwelling. The walls were smooth and a darker brown, and the

room was sparse at best, with simple furniture that rose from the ground and was carved into smooth stone. Thick woven blankets and tapestries were thrown over the furniture and draped on the walls. Glass lanterns full of the glowing butterflies were hung everywhere to try to bring some light to the darkness. Beyond the room I stood in, there were narrow paths that shot off deeper into the earth. They were too dark to see past the darkness.

Linford dropped his lantern on the center of a table, then sat down on a small stone stool. “Carlotta! Where are you?”

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” A tiny round woman hurried from one of the darker tunnels that was attached to the main room. She had wild black curls that stood out from her head with small streaks of gray running through them. Her skin was dark and smooth, with a light sheen covering her, as though she’d been digging around in the dirt as well. Her eyes were nearly as dark as her skin, and like Linford, she barely had retinas.

She stopped when she spotted me and ran her hands over the apron strapped to her front. “What have we here?”

“Found her in the caves. She killed a couple of the Duke King’s soldiers.” He leaned back and held his hand out to his wife.

She walked toward him and took it, then leaned into his side, running her hand over his shoulders as she stood next to him. “Is that so?”

“I didn’t mean to.” Monty peeked his head up, watching the two of them.

“No one said you did.” Linford shrugged. “These things happen.”

Carlotta shook her head. “Do they, Linford? Do they really?”

“For a new demon? Yes.” He turned his gaze toward me. “Is that right?”

She motioned to me. “She’s barely got clothing, she’s killed soldiers, and to top it off, there’s a ferinx wrapped around her neck.”

I reached up and patted my little friend on the head. “He’s harmless really.”

“You’re right. She does need help. A ferinx is never harmless.” Carlotta rolled her eyes and turned back toward one of the tunnels. “I’ll get her something to cover up.”

“Thank you!” I called after her, but all I got was the wave of a hand. I glanced at Linford. “I don’t want to make trouble for you.”

He motioned in the direction his wife went in. “Don’t fret about it. Today is a hard day for us all.”

“Why?” I sat down on the stool opposite him.

“Havestia is when we lost everything. Some in the other lands celebrate it, but for us it signals the end of the lives we knew.”

“And Havestia is today?”

He nodded. “Worst day for demon folk in history.”

His face fell and sadness was pain on his features. “I don’t mean to pry, but why?”

“Fifty years ago, an evil man sought more power over Terrea and wanted to invade your home ... Earth. He took a root from our sacred tree and brought it back to his land,

where he caused a huge magical explosion. We were once united with the vampires ... one land ... but the explosion divided us, turning the vampires on the west side of the island into demons.”

“I’m so sorry.” They’d been separated from their lives and turned into something they didn’t know or understand ... I could relate.

“Much like yourself.”

Observant demon. “Yes, I suppose that’s why you took pity on me?”

“Indeed. I know what it’s like to lose all that you’ve known.”

Carlotta sauntered back into the room with a stack of clothing in her hands and a small bowl with a rag and the tiniest bit of water. She dropped them down on the table in front of me. “These should suit you better. They were my daughter’s, and you are about the same size. Here’s a bit of water to clean yourself up with.”

I ran my hand over the soft fabrics. “Please thank her for me.”

They shared a look and both of them said nothing. I waited for long moments for them to say something more. If there was one thing I’d learned as a social worker, it was what grief looked like ... and this was it. “I’m sorry. Did I say something wrong?”

Carlotta shook her head. “No, we lost our daughter in the explosion. She was visiting friends in the north, and when the explosion happened ... we think she’s trapped there now, but it’s difficult to find lost family across the clan lines.”

“Why?”

Carlotta sighed and motioned to an empty spot next to me as though asking Linford for a place to sit. Linford waved his hand, and before the stool even appeared, she began to sit. By the time she was about to fall, the stool was there to catch her. “When the explosion happened, the magic mixed with the land and infected all the vampires in the area, and now because of it, we are essentially trapped to the land our demon powers originated from. There are four clans: Cinder, Swamp, Tempest, and Slate, where you are now.”

“And you can’t travel to any other clans? Or get messages back and forth?”

She shook her head. “If we do, we lose our demon power and start to sicken. For some it’s a slower process, for others it’s very quick. There’s no telling how long you have until you cross into another’s territory and the effects kick in. It’s very dangerous to every try to cross the land. Some have even died.”

“It’s like drowning.” Linford grumbled. “Slowly drowning.”

“I miss the warmth of fire, or the cool flavor of ice water ... even standing at the top of the mountains after a hike and feeling the breeze on my skin.” She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath as if remembering all those sensations. “Fire doesn’t keep this far underground, and our water supply is so limited we only use it for drinking.”

I felt awful using what little water she’d given me to clean up. But the dried blood on my legs was starting to cake and itch. I wouldn’t be rude and decline what was so clearly *needed* but also *offered* to me.

“Does that mean I’m an earth demon?” I held my hands out, looking down at them, almost waiting for a petal to

emerge.

Linford shook his head. “No, I’m not sure what you are.”

“What if I’m bound here? Has no one ever traveled between the clans?”

“Only the former Lord of Shadows.”

“And the Duke King,” Carlotta added.

“Duke King, bah.” Linford grumbled the words and waved his hand as though he couldn’t stand the man.

I made a mental note to find out as much as I could about this Lord of Shadows and the Duke King. “Why can they travel around?”

“Not quite sure, but the rumor is that they were closest to the blast when it happened. My theory is that the magic was mixed together at the blast point, and as it traveled over the land, it changed and adapted to the environment, which changed all of us.”

“How do we find out what I am? Or how far I can go?” I would travel back to the ends of this world to get home to my sisters. I wanted to go home now and forget this ever happened.

Linford shrugged. “Only one way to know ... try.”

“And hope you don’t die in the process.” Carlotta rolled her eyes.

If I left this place, I might die? Linford and Carlota were nice enough, but the thought of being trapped here forever sent a shiver down my spine. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to find some kind of comfort.

“You’re cold. Best get you dressed. It’ll be colder here the deeper we get into night.” Carlota nodded toward Linford, and he waved his hand and more of that dust flew from his palm. The table transformed from a flat surface to a curved wall that almost surrounded me completely, like a dressing curtain.

I leapt out of my seat and held my clothing close to my chest. I didn’t want to be rude to their hospitality. At some point I would figure out how to get back. All I had to do now was blend in. “Well, that’s ... handy.”

“Just let me know where you’re done, and I’ll take it down,” he said so simply, like this kind of magic wasn’t the coolest thing.

But the more I hung around Linford, the more I realized how powerful this demon really was. He could erect walls with the flick of his hand, yet he seemed so blasé about his powers and remained so steadfast. Most men with power like that would use it to their own ends. The more I knew, the more I found myself respecting Linford. Monty climbed down from my shoulder and curled into a little fuzzy ball at my feet. I let my jacket fall from my shoulders and onto the floor along with my broken boots. I peeled off what was left of my shredded Cher costume and dropped that there too. I used the water and small rag to clean up my scratches and wipe away the dirt and blood.

Once I was as clean as I could get, I quickly slid my legs into a pair of brown trousers that felt almost like suede against my skin. They hugged my hips and stretched across my back side. The front was lace up, and I tied them as tightly as I could, then I slid into one of those off-white peasant shirts and let it hang down to my hips. It was low-cut across my cleavage and baggy around my arms down to my wrists. I felt like my

breasts were flying to be free in a shirt like this, but Carlotta must've known because at the bottom of the pile was a brown leather vest that also laced up the front. I slid it over my head and pulled it tight around my body. When I pulled the laces tight, it suctioned me in almost like a corset ... It would do for the boob control. Last was a set of knee-high boots that also had lacing from the top of my foot all the way up. Even if they didn't fit my feet, they'd stay on and protect me.

I slid my foot in and pulled the laces tight around my legs. They were only slightly too big but would stay up comfortably. I sighed, feeling a bit relieved to be covered up. I pulled my jacket back on over the outfit and started to feel the cold leave my body. "I'm ready."

The wall dropped down into a pile of sand. It swirled around at my feet like a mini tornado then rose back up to become the hard table and chair once more. Linford gave me a small smile and motioned to the chair. "Now we have to find you a place to rest easy for a time, at least until the mess about the guards is forgotten."

I swallowed, and my heart started to race. Monty ran back up my leg and wound his way around my body until he was perched back on my shoulder once more. Was I on the run for murder? "For how long?"

Three loud bangs came from just outside the door. Linford rose to his feet and moved to stand in front of me. Carlota grabbed his arm, and he let her drag him back. "No, no fighting."

"Open up in the name of the King!" a voice called through the thick stone.

Linford pulled his arm free of his wife. "I'll not let them take her."

I refused to put these people in danger. “No, Linford. You barely know me. Don’t let me cause you any trouble.”

Three more loud bangs and a smooth calm voice. “Come now Linford, other measures will be taken.”

“Linford.” Carlotta grabbed his arm. “Please.”

Tension filled the room and the walls rumbled as Linford curled his hands into fists. “A self-appointed king is no king of mine.”

“Now is not the time!” Carlotta pressed her fingers into his arm, holding him tighter, pleading.

I didn’t want him or anyone else to get in trouble because of me. I had to deescalate the situation and not make it worse. “Linford, please, you’ve done so much for me. Don’t put yourself or anyone else in danger. I’ll go with them. Please ... I want to go.”

“You’d be walking into a den of poisonous snakes.”

“I grew up in L.A ... Same difference.”

His brow furrowed in confusion. “What?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. Just trust me and know that I’ll be okay.”

Carlota shook his arm harder. “Please, I can’t bear to lose you too.”

He groaned, and with a reluctant wave of his hand, the wall quaked and the two double doors began to part. Heavy dust rained down on the soldiers ... all but one. The man with the long black hair who’d thrown me into this world. Green smoke billowed around him, and when he snapped his fingers, sparks flew from his fingertips. The smoke caught fire and flames danced around him. The dust evaporated within the

flames and the man stepped through like something out of my nightmares.

The guards all hurried into the room to surround us. They all stood shoulder to shoulder, each one looking like the next in their thick breastplates and helmets. He stepped in front of them all and glared at me. “Surrender yourself now.”

“Okay. I surrender.” I shrugged. What else was I going to do? Kill an entire room of people I didn’t know just to run into a world I was unfamiliar with and couldn’t survive?

He clenched his teeth and the muscle in his jaw ticked. “Now.”

I took a step forward and the soldiers all stepped back. “Or you can take me back to where I came from now.”

“You have no room to make commands here.” Those glowing blue eyes bore into mine, and puffs of smoke drifted up from his hands.

“Lord of Shadows, Avalon.” Linford rose to his feet, and they all placed their hands on their swords. He ignored them and caught this Avalon’s eye. “She means no harm.”

“And yet three of my men are dead.” He curled his hand into a fist at his side and small sparks flew from his fingers.

“Listen, buddy, I don’t even know who the hell you are. Or why I’m here. But if you send me home, then I’ll be gone, and you can spread your hate of me to someone—”

“—Seize her now.”

I backed away, and my heart hammered in my chest. Purple smoke seeped from my hands, and Linford jumped in front of the encroaching guards. “Don’t startle her or you’ll die.”

One of the soldiers grabbed his shoulders and shoved him out of the way. “Is that a threat?”

Linford fell to the floor and rolled onto his side. Carlotta dropped down beside him. “It’s fact. Just ask her and she will go in peace.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and pressed my hands into my sides, trying not to let those petals form. “I’m thinking on it.”

Dark smoke covered Avalon from head to toe, he snapped his fingers and disappeared in a ball of flames. Not even a second later, a deep growl came from behind me. His hands wrapped around my arms and forced them behind my back. He wrapped my wrist in a death grip with one hand and my hands with the other, then held them in tight fists. His skin burned against mine, yet I refused to flinch. I ground my teeth together against the pain. He shoved me into the wall and held me there as another one of his soldiers wrapped my hands with some kind of binding that kept my hands in fists and my wrists stuck together.

Once I was secured, he yanked me back against his chest. “You aren’t worth my *hate*.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

AVALON



*L*ies leave my lips so easily. I did hate her, and she read it on my face so easily. Lily always was good at reading people. It was one of her gifts, and yet she seemed so different than she'd been before. Fifty years of hate was not enough. The burning in my soul was not enough. I never suspected I'd ever see her again. Not after what she'd done. Yet with her death, I did not find peace. Time did not heal all wounds, nor would I let it. I would remember the pain that could only come from brokenness—a fracture that she'd created with her betrayal.

She belonged behind these bars and in the dungeon. Jagged rocks pointed from the roof and floor. They met in the middle like teeth in a monster's mouth. It was our version of prison bars but would hold a demon as powerful as her. It was cold and damp down here with condensation building up on the slate walls, giving them a damp sheen. I felt the chill seep into my bones. Yet she slept like she hadn't rested in days. She curled in on her side, shivering as she slumbered. Our dungeons had no beds, only a simple rocky shelf sticking out from the wall. There were no blankets or pillows, and still she slumbered. Another shiver racked her body but she did not wake. That damn ferinx lay on top of her, puffing itself up to try to warm her. What would entice such a creature to be dedicated to one such as her? I snapped my fingers and my

magic sparked and jumped around me. Fire bloomed in a slow burn, warming my outsides. It illuminated the dank dungeon, bathing her pale skin in soft firelight. I didn't do it for her ... I did it for myself.

Do keep telling yourself that.

The tension in her muscles eased and her face smoothed as though she found comfort in my warmth. *Enough.* I extinguished my flames and backed into the shadows, watching her fitful sleep. Her eyes moved behind her lids, and her muscles twitched. She was so similar to the Lily I once knew ... and yet so different. She was harder, tougher ... mouthy even.

Two soldiers walked up to her cell. I'd gone unnoticed, hidden in the shadows. They stared at her for long moments. One elbowed the other. "Her beauty tempts."

The other nodded. "Deadly beautiful."

"I could do with a bit of that," the other teased.

"She looks like an angel."

Funny, I'd had that same thought when I watched her sleep years ago. But that was a life time ago and a memory that'd been burned into my mind. Lily had always been eye-catching to the masses. Her beauty was delicate, with a small pert nose, full lush lips, and bright cat-like eyes. Her body was curved in all the right places, and even now I felt a stirring for her. Memories of her were too strong to resist at this moment. I let them consume me so I would remember why I hated her and wouldn't fall for her delicate and sweet act again.

"Another visit, Lord of Shadows?" The madam of the brothel stood next to the stairs with her elbow propped on the railing.

I handed her a canteen full of nectar. "Indeed."

"See that she pleases you well." She sauntered away, letting her gauzy skirts flow out behind her.

I'd become too frequent here, and all I really wanted was a moment with her ... a few words. I walked down the hall to her door and gently turned the knob. Usually when I came to visit, she was sitting in her chair by the window, letting the breeze drift through her hair. Tonight, I found her lying in the bed with her head propped up on some pillows. She was curled on her side with her hand resting just in front of her. She was an angel ... my angel. I didn't care that she worked here or that other men knew her in a physical way. I knew her soul, and as long as she freely gave it to me, it would be enough.

She peeked her eyes open, and a light smile played on her lips. She whispered my name like a prayer. "Avalon."

I held another canteen up, this one bigger than the one I'd given the madam of this establishment. "Nectar. For you."

Her smile grew bigger. "You didn't have to."

"Come drink." I didn't like how pale she'd gotten lately. She'd lost weight. It wasn't so much that any other would notice, but I did.

"Later, love." She held her hand out toward me and I took it. "Have you come to speak with me once more?"

"I will always return to hear your words." I sat at the side of the bed and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand. She wrapped her fingers around mine and pulled me down to her. I leaned over her and she pressed her lips to mine. Her kisses were so sweet, so gentle. Our tongues wound together, and I found myself wanted her ... all of her.

I pulled back. "We don't have to."

“But I want to.” She reached up and pulled her blonde wig from her head and shook her hair out. It was a long, lush deep-red wine color, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “With the real me.”

She was so beautiful. At first my pale angel, and now an angel of darkness. I cupped her cheek and pulled her up toward me. The strap of her nightgown slipped down from her shoulder, and I let my fingers wander over her skin and pull the strap just a bit lower. She leaned into my touch, arching her back, inviting me to caress her full milky breasts.

“My lips have only ever been yours.” She crawled to her knees, then threw her leg over my hips to straddle me. She ground her hips down on me, and my body responded to hers. I couldn’t resist her beauty or the way she touched me. The connection between us was undeniable.

We’d spent weeks getting to know each other, weeks of conversations, and yet I felt I knew so little. She danced around words keeping her secrets. Secrets I wanted to share with her, to keep for her. “As I have only been yours.”

She pulled her dress up to her hips and let it fall over us. The top of her gown fell down and her breasts spilled out in front of me. “Show me.”

I cupped my hands over her and let my thumbs toy with her peaks. She arched her back and leaned into my touch. “Show me I’m yours and only yours.”

“Then all you need do is feel.” I wrapped my arm around her waist and twisted to lie her back on the bed. I fell down beside her and let my hands run over her thighs and up her body. I let her get used to my touch. I wanted her to feel my skin against hers, to know my touch would always be gentle.

The tension left her muscles, and she sighed as I played with her breasts and slid my hand over her hip and down her thigh. She curled into me, welcoming my every caress. Her knees fell open, and I slid my hand between her legs, feeling her warmth and spreading her wetness with my fingers.

“Wh-what’re you doing?” She glanced down where my hand was.

“Pleasure goes both ways love.” I leaned over and pressed my lips to her breast sucking her peak between my lips as I stroked her between her legs, drawing out those slow small circles I knew she’d love.

Her eyes fluttered shut, and her mouth dropped into a little O-shape. Her breaths started to draw into quick pants. Tiny moans escaped her lips, and when I pressed my mouth back to hers, I caught her sounds of pleasure on my tongue. As I quickened my pace, she reached for the laces at the front of my pants, making quick work of them.

“I need you. Please.” She set me free, and I fell into her delicate hands. She wrapped her fingers around me and stroked me up and down. Pleasure racked my body and we arched and moved into each other. She drew me close, so close to my own pleasure, but I wanted to give her more. I rolled between her legs, and she closed her eyes and turned her head to the side.

“No, love, look at me so you know it’s me ... so you know this is us ... together.” She turned back toward me, and I guided myself into her.

Her hips rose up to meet my thrusts, and I closed my eyes for a moment, lost in her pleasure. She placed both her hands on the sides of my face. “Don’t close your eyes.”

Pleasure racked my whole body, and I wanted to throw my head back and roar to the ceiling, yet I couldn't. She needed me here with her, to show her everything that she meant to me. Lily wasn't just a good time bought and paid for. She was the touch I dreamed of, the whisper of pleasure on my lips, and one thing I wanted to see each night. I thrust into her, and she met each of my moves with her own pleasure building.

"I never knew ..." her eyes widened with wonder as she took deep gasping breaths, *"... it could be like this."*

"Always with you and me." I pressed my lips to hers and forced myself to last long enough to bring her to her end. My thrusts grew hard and fast. The sound of our bodies mingling together filled the room. Her breaths caught in my ears, and her muscles quaked.

"Come on, love, come on."

She threw her head back and moaned my name as she found her pleasure beneath me. I felt her muscles tighten around me, and I could no longer fight the urge or hold back. Her eyes never left mine, and I found myself falling into the abyss of pleasure. Her hold on me was unbreakable. It was so much more than physical pleasure. It was a connection I felt deep in my soul. I wanted her, I needed her, and in that moment, I knew I would take her from this place to be with me ... always.

Always.

Anger flooded my body, and my flames wanted to explode from me. I shook myself, fighting for a calm I did not feel. I held my shadows around me, staying away from her cell and away from the soldiers leering at her.

“She looks like a pleasurable one.” He chuckled and the other one nodded in agreement.

Lily had always been the pleasurable one who tempted those around her. She was born that way ... bred to be as tempting as she was. Though her hair was no longer that deep red, nor was she the vampire I’d met those years ago, I still saw her for what she was ... a traitor.

I stepped from the darkness and let my shadows fall away. “And when she kills you as she did the others, will your pleasure be worth it then?”

The soldiers jumped at the sound of my voice and turned toward me. They hesitated for a moment, then one got the nerve to speak. “With a female so fair, it might be.”

I curled my hand into a fist at my side to hold back from throttling them. “Fools. You’re dismissed.”

I flicked my hand, and they hurried down the tunnel away from her cell. When I turned back to look at her, she still lay there in a fitful sleep. Lily had always been beautiful. But to me, she would always remain a beautiful nightmare.

CHAPTER NINE

MORGANA



*S*omeone is staring at me.

My eyes flashed wide open after only a few hours of fitful sleep. Wild dreams assailed me, and I had no idea what to make of them. Visions of nameless faces filled my mind, all grabbing at me, wanting things I'd never dream of doing now. My stomach tightened and rolled. So many faces all twisted with poisonous desire for me. I sat up straight and ran my hands over my arms, trying to warm myself. It wasn't the cold of the dungeon that sent a shiver down my spine, it was the chilling thought of those dreams. I turned my head, expecting to find those wanting eyes roaming over me, but it was the opposite. The former Lord of Shadows, Avalon, stared at me with so much anger in his eyes that I could feel it rolling off of him.

"Getting your kicks watching me sleep? Bit creepy, you know?" I kicked my legs over the edge of the slate shelf and rose to stand.

"First time I've seen you where you belong." He approached the jagged stones they'd used as bars to keep me in. They looked like shark teeth that would cut me into bits if I tried to get through.

“You don’t even know me.” I shook my head and felt my lips turn up in a smirk.

He returned my smirk with a snide smile of his own. “That’s only a matter of memory.”

I hated the way his long hair fell over his face and let his pointed ears just peek through giving me a glimpse of the sexy piercings in his ear. I hated the way his eyes glowed in the dark cell, and the way I felt drawn to him even though there was clearly nothing but dislike between us. He was so tall and too beautiful. I turned my back to him to try and break whatever hold he had on me.

“Go away.”

He growled behind me. “No one commands me. Least of all a traitor.”

I sighed and turned back to face him. “I still have no clue what the fuck you’re talking about. But you clearly hate me —”

“—Understatement.”

I walked up to the bars, getting closer to him. The smell of ash filled my senses. “Anyways, I’ll be happy to walk my happy ass right back out of your life—”

“—If I were so blessed.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’ve never personally known someone who could hate another just for existing, but assholes come in all forms, I suppose.” I met his eye and glared back at him.

He sucked in a deep breath and ground his teeth together. The muscle in his jaw ticked. “As do traitors.”

“Once again, from the top ... I am not a traitor to you or anyone else.”

“Not that you remember ... but you will.”

I threw my arms up and let them fall with a slap to my thighs. “My sins are my own. I don’t need anyone else’s laid at my feet.”

He chuckled and stepped closer to the bars. “You’ll see.”

“How about you just tell me, then send me packing. Whatever you have against me will be gone once I am.”

“Why is our guest locked in this cell?” A man dressed in armor that looked like it’d been braided piece by piece over his body stepped up beside Avalon. He was slightly shorter than Avalon, with long, straight, icy blond hair and eyes so dark they were nearly black. His face was all sharp plains and angles with high cheekbones, a long straight nose, and a cleft chin. He wore a dark silver crown with multiple thick horns jutting up from it.

Avalon was so different than the regal looking one next to him. He was grittier, more dangerous looking, and though his face was beautiful, his features weren’t as sharp. He turned to the man. “That’s where murderers belong.”

Those two pricks tried to force themselves on me. I cleared my throat, drawing their attention back to me. “Self-defense is not murder.”

Avalon interjected. “You mean ... Your Yighness.”

I looked him up and down. Avalon might be a lord, but he was no king. “No.”

The man next to Avalon chuckled. “I enjoy wit. But not him of course ... me.”

Avalon cleared his throat. “King Dacio of the demons, may I present Lily of no-one and nothing.”

Lily? Is that who he thought I was? I wasn't about to correct him. None of my personal shit needed to be known to either of these two. I just needed to get out of here and back to my sisters. This was one trip I would love to forget.

I sighed. “Okay, Your Highness, King Dacio, I want out of this crazy place. Send me back, and I'll never bother you again.”

His brow furrowed. “Send you back?”

“Yes, to where this asshole took me from, to Earth. I don't belong here. I don't want to be here. And it's clear he doesn't want me here either. The simple solution is to send me back.” I didn't know if I was grasping at straws, but if he could come and take me from my home, he could damn well bring me back.

He glanced to Avalon. “It seems our hospitality has been less than gracious. My apologies. We will have you moved to one of our rooms immediately. But, I'm sorry, it's too late to bring you back. The Veil is closed now.”

My heart started to hammer in my chest. “What does that mean?”

Avalon snickered. “It means the door to the other world is closed, and you are now stuck here.”

I swallowed, dreading the answer to my next question. “For how long?”

A wide smile spread across his face. “For the next fifty years.”

CHAPTER TEN

MORGANA



*M*y breath left me in a rush and my voice shook as I spoke, “Fifty ... years.”

“Indeed.” The King nodded. “Fifty more years until The Veil opens once more and we can travel to Earth. Until then, you shall make yourself comfortable here.”

He said it as if I was staying for a week on vacation and not the next fifty years. It was a lifetime. “I can’t stay here.”

He turned, and his black eyes bore into mine. “You can and you will.”

Purple smoke started to seep from my hands, and I felt the edge of panic run through my body. “I-I have a life to get back to. A job. Fam—”

“—I bet you do have a job.” Avalon looked me up and down with disgust plain on his face.

What the fuck? “Yeah, a job where I help people, not trap them in dungeons when they get assaulted by two assholes trying to have their way with me.”

Dacio’s face snapped to meet mine. “They did what?”

“Your men ... they attacked *me*. However I hurt them, whatever it was that happened ... it was in self-defense.”

“And we are supposed to believe her.” Avalon scoffed and shook his head. “Only fools fall to the words of liars.”

I lifted my chin. “I’ve never been a liar.”

“Says the liar.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Asshole.”

“Enough.” Dacio held his hand up and turned toward me. “Do you swear all your statements to be true?”

“I swear it.” I had the scrapes and bruises to prove it.

The King turned toward Avalon. “Well, then, there you have it. She speaks in truths. Avalon, you’ll see to her protection and that she doesn’t try to escape.”

His brow furrowed with annoyance. “Surely, as the commander of your legions, I could be of use elsewhere.”

“Yes, surely.” I tried to get rid of him.

The King’s face turned stone-cold. “As the commander of my legions, I can see no other assignment more important than what I deem necessary. Do you not agree?”

Avalon pressed his lips into a hard line. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“Very well then.” He looked Avalon up and down. “See to it.”

Avalon pressed his hand to his chest and gave a small bow of his head. “As you command.”

Dacio waved his hand and golden dust flew from his palms over the bars. The shark-like bars retracted into the ceiling and ground. I found myself standing face to face with Avalon. Dacio glanced my way as he strolled past Avalon and down the hall, leaving us alone.

“Taking orders like a champ.” I stepped out from the cell, and he glared.

Avalon turned on his heels and marched down the hall. With a heavy sigh, I followed behind him. If I was going to get myself out of here, then I had to wait for the perfect moment to escape, figure out where The Veil was, get myself back there, and get home. I didn’t believe for one second I couldn’t get back. I’d just met these two and I didn’t trust them as far as I could throw them. People lied for all kinds of reasons, and they were no different. But first I needed to learn how to survive here. He marched up a set of stairs and I followed behind him, making sure to keep my distance from him.

I tucked Monty’s tail deeper into my jacket pocket. I held him there and let my hand rest over his warm little body. I sucked in a deep breath and trudged behind Avalon. I took my time with each step. The stairs wound upward from the dungeon to the main floor. The hall was rough and uneven as I ran my fingers over the dark slat stone. There was no railing to hold on to. The stairs were firm with jagged, uneven fronts. When I got closer to the top, Avalon stood waiting in the archway that led outside. His eyes glowed in the dim light, and a low growl escaped his lips. When I reached the landing, he rolled his eyes and turned away from me.

As he stormed across the courtyard through the groups of soldiers, I couldn’t help but glance around at them all. In one corner of the courtyard, they trained with swords. In the other corner, there was a line of archers aiming at targets along the wall. Off to another side, they all stood in a line calling upon the powers in their hands. Dark-brown dust rained down as they all held their hands out and it fell to the ground. A chunk of earth rose up and the soldier kicked it, sending it flying across the courtyard like a cannon ball. It hit a boulder and left

a huge dent as it exploded into rubble. Then, one after the other, they all took their turns summoning the earth and shooting it across the courtyard.

I stepped out and tried to keep my head down to not draw attention to myself. But the attempt was done in vain, because once I was out into the open, I felt all eyes swing toward me. My steps faltered and I felt Monty vibrate under my hand with a tiny *coo* sound. I sucked in a deep breath and lifted my chin to follow Avalon across the courtyard. They might have all been staring, but I wasn't going to give them an ounce of the fear I felt being in this place. They began to whisper to each other as I passed, and I could only imagine what they thought knowing I'd killed three of their own without any explanation as to why or how. When I reached Avalon, he stood in a doorway to another set of stairs. I tilted my head back and looked up at the spire, wondering how many stairs I'd have to climb to get to whatever room they were going to trap me in.

The longer I stood there, the more I noticed about the castle. The walls were incredibly high, and there were two more towers that shot up toward the sky like jagged points. There was nothing soft or curvy about this castle. It was all hard plains, jagged rock, and dark slate. The temperature was cool but bearable this time of day. When I looked toward the sun, I thought it might be late afternoon, but there was no telling in a different world like this.

Avalon cleared his throat, drawing my attention to him. "We're not sight-seeing."

But I was seeing everything I could. I needed a way out, and I needed one as soon as possible. "Lead the way."

He sighed and turned toward another set of stairs. This time I followed more closely. "So, you're like second to the

King?”

“Second?”

“Yeah, you know, like president and vice president?” I started the long hall and up another flight of winding stairs.

“I have no idea of what you speak.” He walked up the stairs even faster.

I sped up. I refused to breathe hard like this climb was strenuous. It was one of those moments where I didn’t want to admit that a bit more cardio would help. “You’re like the backup.”

He groaned as though my very existence bothered him, but he said nothing.

“So, I’m stuck here for fifty years?” Why would I believe anything he said?

“Yes.”

“With you?”

“Unless I’m blessed enough to watch you die.” He glanced over his shoulder.

I kept my face impassive but ... *ouch*. “Yeah. Noted, vice.”

“vice?” He turned and kept on walking up the curve.

“Yeah, vice president. Means people know who you are but don’t give a shit. You’re the backup, second best ... You know, unimportant.”

“You may call me Lord Avalon.” I hated the way his hair moved with each of his steps and the way his pants hugged his muscular legs. In another world, this guy would’ve been my

cup of tea. In this one, he was the asshole who would rather see me die than breathe the air around him.

“Whatever you say ... vice.”

As we reached the landing, a low growl escaped his lips, and I fought to hold my smirk in. It felt so good to get under his skin. When he turned down a long hall, I followed. There were openings in the wall like windows, except they were covered in a thin layer of crystal like in the underground. I could barely see out, but what I could see in the distance were rocky lands stretching out toward the mountains. To the left and right there were other landmasses, but I couldn't make them out.

“Is all the land here in Terrea the same?”

“No.”

Helpful, super helpful. I pressed my lips together. If I was going to get information on this place, it definitely wasn't going to be from him. He stopped just in front of a door and shoved it wide open. He walked in as if he owned this castle.

“Your quarters.”

The room was dark like the rest of the castle, except there was a plush throw rug under a large four-poster bed made of thick, dark wood. The bed itself was covered in dark, emerald green woven quilts with a thick duvet and piles of pillows. If I didn't think I'd get murdered in my sleep, then I might've gone right to it, hoping that sleep would take me, and when I woke up, that I'd be back to the real world. Across from the bed stood a fireplace, but nothing burned within it, even though there was a chill in the air.

“No fire.”

“There is no fire in the Slate Lands.” He motioned to a dress that lay on the single chair in the room. “Put it on.”

There wasn't anything else fancy about this room, just a bed, chair, and empty fireplace. I didn't see a door for a closet. There was another door that stood open and showed a small wash basin and what looked like a toilet carved from stone. There was no shower or bathtub, and I was beginning to think that water was as scarce in the castle as it had been underground. I glanced at the dress and rolled my eyes.

“No thanks.”

“You will put it on,” he said through clenched teeth.

“I'm good like this, Vice.” I liked my vest and pants. They were warm and functional. They made me feel covered and protected in this uncertain world.

“You are to have dinner with the King. You will look appropriate.”

“Are you in the habit of ordering people around?” I put my hands on my hips.

“Yes.”

“And they listen?” I didn't know why I wanted to fight him, but everything in me wanted to ride my spiteful train all the way home.

“If they're smart.” He arched his eyebrows at me.

“Guess I'm not.” I shrugged and moved to sit on the foot of the bed.

Avalon stormed up to me and fisted the top of my vest and yanked me to a stand. He was so close to my face that all I could see was him. “You will dress or I will dress you ... your choice.”

My heart hammered in my chest, and my breaths mingled with his. When I said nothing, the muscles in his arms flexed like he was about to rip the vest right from my body. All I could think was how precious my vest and pants were to Linford and Carlotta. They'd given them to me out of sheer kindness for a stranger.

I placed my hands over his. "I'll do it."

He loosened his grip and shoved me away. I fell back on the bed, and he stood over me, glaring. When he made no move to leave, I rolled to the side and stepped around him. I walked over and grabbed the dress up. He turned to watch me. "Turn around."

"No."

"I'm not the exhibitionist type. If you want a show, go find someone else. I agreed to the dress. Nothing more." I wrapped my arms around it and held it close to my chest. He glared and I glared back. It was a test of wills.

We stood there for long moments before he made a sound of annoyance in the back of his throat and turned to give me his back.

I sighed. "You can leave."

"I was tasked with watching you. And watch you I shall." He didn't turn around, but I could imagine the anger on his chiseled face.

There was no way around this dress or getting ready. I won the test of wills against him watching me, but I knew he wouldn't leave the room. He'd turn around and dress me himself like a doll before he'd leave. I took off my coat and dropped it to the floor to make sure not to jostle Monty. Then I made quick work of the vest and let it fall to the floor. But

when I looked at the dress, I couldn't imagine just wearing that with nothing under it, so I pulled my blouse over my head and dropped that too. I stood there in my lace-up pants and boots. Though they provided me with soft-looking slippers, I wasn't about to wear those things. One good kick and my foot would be broken. If Avalon wasn't careful, he'd be the one I'd be kicking.

I loosened the laces on the back of the dress and stepped into it. The dress was a beautiful off the shoulder body-hugging type. It flared out at my knees and spread around me like a puddle. Black lace ran around my shoulders and down the front of the sweetheart neckline. Under the lace, the fabric started as a light-colored lavender and progressively got darker as it got to the bottom.

In the corner of the room was a golden-looking mirror, and I moved to stand in front of it. It was the first time I'd really gotten a good look at myself. I sucked in a sharp breath. I was me, but not. I looked stronger, more deadly. My hair had gotten longer, falling in dark and wild waves with emerald green tips. My lips were fuller and a deeper red, the tips of my pointed ears peeked out through my hair, and my little claws look almost talon-like. The dress was still loose at the back, and I pressed it to my chest to hold it up.

I didn't want to ask, but I had to. "Can you please get someone to help me with the laces?"

He growled.

"I can't reach them," I snapped.

Another growl.

My anger peaked and my mom voice came out. "Listen up, vice. I didn't ask to be here. I didn't ask to wear this. I didn't

even pick it. If I had, I'd pick something that required no help at all. But I am here because of you ... I'm wearing this because of you ... and I'm pretty sure someone like you picked this. So, either help or get someone who will."

He was behind me in a flash, and I felt the heat rolling off of him. His face was a mask of concentration as his fingers danced over the laces, pulling them tighter. He yanked at them roughly, pulling them in around my rib cage. "If I pass out, it's your fault."

He didn't pull quite so hard for the next few laces. Tension sizzled between us, and I hated how aware of him I was. This felt a bit too much like Beauty and the Beast, where Bell falls for the Beast even though he was a bit of a dick.

His eyes snapped up to meet mine, and he gazed at me in the mirror. "Done."

"Thank you." I didn't look away from him. "Is this what the King would like?"

"I couldn't say." He turned away from me and headed toward the door. "Come."

He called me like I was some kind of pet. I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to listen to him. I wanted to slam the door behind him and refuse to come out. But he'd only find another way in and force me to where the King commanded. Part of me wondered how deep Avalon's loyalty went and how far he would go for Dacio. Because deep down, the demon King gave me the creeps. Monty darted from my jacket pocket and ran under the layers of my dress. I felt him scurry up my leg and curl around the top of one of my boots. I tried not to giggle at his light tickling touches. When he was with me, it kind of felt like I wasn't alone, like I had an ally.

I sucked in a deep breath and headed right for the door.
“Right behind you, vice.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORGANA



The dress rustled as it dragged on the floor with each of my steps. It was pretty, to be sure, but it didn't feel like me. It was too prissy, too fluffy, too much. I much preferred my vest and pants over this.

Avalon stopped and spun around to face me. "Lift your dress."

"Pardon me?" I took a step back.

"Your skirts, lift them now." He crossed his arms and looked down at my feet.

"Umm, no. I'm not lifting anything on command, vice." I pressed my hands over the dress as if to hold it down.

He sighed and rolled his eyes. With the flick of his wrist, a gust of wind shot down the hallway and right up my legs. My dress blew up as though I were Marilyn Monroe standing on top of a subway grate. The dress flew up my legs, and I stopped it from going higher than my hips. Just as fast as the wind had come, it left. I shoved the stupid thing back into place.

Overbearing asshole. "Anyone ever tell you you're a dick?"

“Dirt covered boots, Lily? You were provided with fine slippers.”

“So?” I crossed my arms. “These are better.”

“We don’t have time for you to change.” He shook his head.

“I’m not gonna change.” I’d been pulled, pushed, and shoved from the moment I’d gotten here. Not one thing had been of my choosing, and now that I was learning, things were going to get much more difficult for Avalon and company. “How’d you know anyways?”

“Heels make a certain sound on the stone.” He turned away from me again, leading the way. At the end of the hall, we went down another set of stairs and more long hallways. There were so many doors I lost count. The place was like a maze of dark stone and no style. We went down another set of stairs, and I think we ended up on the other side of the castle, standing in front of two carved double doors.

Avalon turned to look me up and down. Seeming okay with what he saw, he waved his hand and wind whipped from behind us toward the doors. They were made of dark stone and looked incredibly heavy, yet his power just made them fly wide open. He motioned for me to enter. When I hesitated, he wrapped his hand around my upper arm and pulled me into the room. He pushed me out in front of him, and I felt all eyes swing toward me.

The room was huge, with high ceilings and windows that ran nearly the whole length of the walls. They too were covered in thin layers of crystal that looked like wavy glass. The sun had started to set outside, and it sent rays of light through the crystals, creating dark rainbows across the room. There was a long table in the center of the room, and King

Dacio sat at the head of it. The rest of the high-back chairs were taken by women of all different backgrounds. Each one was adorned in a ball gown that varied in all shapes and colors. There was one empty chair at the table, and deep down I knew it was for me. Yet I found myself frozen. What the hell was happening? Why was I here? And why did I get the feeling I really didn't want to know?

Avalon walked over to the lone chair and pulled it out. "Sit."

It was one word, said with all the authority and annoyance in the world. I arched my eyebrows at him and crossed my arms. "Ask me nicely, vice."

His head snapped up, and his eyes bore into mine. "Pardon."

"Ask. Me. Nicely." I enunciated each word and put my hands on my hips.

Avalon stood straight and ground his teeth together. Green smoke seeped from his body and swirled around him in a slow build. He narrowed his eyes at me, and his lips remained pressed into a hardline. The other occupants at the table all stared at the two of us in utter fascination. Some of the women fought not to smirk. Others sat there with their mouths open in shock. King Dacio grabbed a crystal goblet from in front of him and leaned back in his chair.

He swirled it around with a bemused look on his face, then raised the crystal goblet in my direction. "Won't you please join us, Lily?"

I wanted to correct him and tell him my name was Morgana, but when I left here, I didn't want them to ever find me again. I trusted nothing and no one in this place. But I

would play nice until it was my time to escape. “Thank you, Your Highness.”

I stepped forward and took the chair. Avalon stormed away, leaving me sitting at that table with Dacio and the ladies. There were seven of us total, and as I looked around, I realized that each of these women was strikingly beautiful. Across from me was a woman with dark, wild hair. It was braided tight to her head in perfect rows up to her crown, then the braids were loose to let her wild curls stand on end. Her skin was dark and smooth with silvery sparkles on her cheeks that looked like snowflakes. Her dress was long and white with a thick fur collar. She had perfect full lips and high cheekbones. She studied me closely with her dark eyes. I couldn't help but think there was something familiar about her.

Dacio cleared his throat, drawing my attention away from the girl and toward him. “As most of you know, you are all here for a very special occasion for Isramorta.”

I raised my hand. “Excuse me, what is Isramorta?”

Dacio sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to search for the patience to deal with my question. “Isramorta is what we call the demon lands. It is made up of four clans. It's our home now and yours.”

I nodded as though this made perfect sense to me. He glanced away from me to look at the others. “For the next two weeks, we will all get to know each other, and at the end of those two weeks, I will select the future queen of Isramorta.”

The reactions around the table were varied. Some of the women smiled and nodded at the prospect of being queen. Others seemed more resigned to the task at hand. My reaction was an immediate *hell no*. I wouldn't be marrying a stranger,

King or not. Dacio was handsome, powerful, and striking, but deep down there was something about him that I didn't like nor trust. I wouldn't be here in two weeks, so I didn't have to jump up and declare myself out of this little bachelorette show thing he had going on.

He took a sip of his drink and continued on, "That said, an heir will be expected promptly." He smiled to himself like he was talking about having kids with a life-long love. "I'd like a few, if I may be so bold."

The other women around the table all chuckled and gave light smiles. But he was sitting there straight up talking about picking the top baby maker. *EW. What was this? A competition to pick the best breeder?*

When he rose to his feet, everyone else jumped to theirs. I followed suit with the others. He lifted his glass as though to cheers us. "Let the games begin."

If any of us had a glass, I'm sure we'd have been expected to do the same. Instead, we all stood in silence, waiting for something. At the back of the room, a door leading to another much larger room flew open. Dacio motioned toward it. "Now, please feel free to mingle about and enjoy refreshments."

At the word *refreshments*, my stomach tightened and growled. The last refreshment I had was the drink at the nightclub in Vegas. My mouth was suddenly dry, and pain shot through my stomach. I glanced at the others, and when they started to move toward the other room, I tried to slow my steps to blend in with them and not dive straight for the food. Tables were spread around the room, each with different kinds of dishes on them. It reminded me of a cocktail hour at weddings where every table had a different themed menu. *Where was the pasta station when you needed one?* Guards were spread

throughout the room, standing next to each of the doors. I spotted Avalon among them. His eyes lingered over my every move.

I expected this to be some kind of ball where we got to meet more people from the Slate Clan, but it looked like only the contestants were invited to this little party, which made it kind of lame. One eligible bachelor and seven women vying for his attention. It was the worst kind of trashy TV show possible. I made my way over to what looked like a huge punch bowl with some kind of purple liquid in it. Three other contestants stood around it, holding half-full glasses.

When I approached, the one at the center spoke to me first. She was tall and slim with dark-blue hair and matching blue eyes. Tiny scales highlighted her cheeks and down the side of her neck. Her hair was loose around her shoulders and fell in damp curls. She wore a sarong type skirt that looked like long strips of seaweed carefully pieced together to make a long, alluring skirt with a high slit in the side. More of that green seaweed-like material gathered around her breasts like a tube top, leaving her arms and midriff bare. A puddle of water pooled under her bare feet and drops of water gathered on her arms and legs.

“I’m Tendreece of the Swamp Clan. And you are?”

“Lily ... of nowhere.” It felt like I was talking about a complete stranger. It was a name I wasn’t familiar with, and I had no ties here. If I said I was from Earth, would they all think me crazy? Would I stand out even more than I already had? Probably.

“I didn’t realize that was possible.” She snickered. “Are you sure you’re even demon?”

I gave a reluctant nod. “Far as I know.” Visions of those purple petals and the way they brought death to anyone who touched them flooded my mind.

“And no clan?” She wrinkled her nose. “That’s very ... odd.”

When I glanced down at the other two women next to her, they too had puddles around them and were dressed in revealing clothing much the same as she was. But when they moved, the puddles moved with them. Drops of water clung to their arms and legs. Tendreece motioned to the woman to her left. “This is Lizvita.”

Her hair was pulled into a tight, slick bun on the top of her head. Where Tendreece was tall and slim, she was a bit shorter and curvier. I nodded toward her. “Nice to meet you.”

She looked me up and down, then took a drink of her punch while glancing away without a word. *Nice. Very nice.* I didn’t want to be here, and I didn’t want to be in competition with these women for a guy I had zero interest in. Tendreece motioned to the woman to her right. “This is Norla.”

“Hi.” I gave her a wave. “Lily.”

“Hi, this is all kind of wild, right?” She was more animated than the other two. She had a round face, tan skin, and bright-brown eyes. Her hair was bright-red and pulled into two braids that fell down the sides of her face nearly to her hips. She too wore a sleek-looking dress made of shining material that looked like seaweed.

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s definitely that.”

Tendreece motioned to the glasses. “Would you like a drink?”

“I’d love some.” I grabbed a glass, and another girl moved in next to me. She gave me a little bump with her hip, pushing me out of her way.

“I’m parched.” She glared at me. “Excuse you.”

I stepped back and waited. I was surrounded by mean girls, which wasn’t new to me or something I’d shy away from. But I’d pick my battles wisely. “Oh yeah, excuse me.”

She was shorter than the other two and wrapped in a light blue dress that covered her from head to toe. Thick fur ran around the collar and around her wrists. Fog or clouds swirled around the bottom of her dress, and a cool, gentle breeze seemed to be moving around her, ruffling her blonde hair. She filled her glass, then flicked the serving spoon toward me. Purple liquid splashed up toward me and got a few drops over my dress. I glanced down, then back up toward her.

She gave a fake chuckle. “Oops.”

I chuckled. “I don’t give a shit about the dress, so it’s all good.”

“What’s *all good*?” Her brow furrowed.

The other woman who I spotted across the table from me walked up to the group with another woman by her side. “Penned, are you giving the ladies a difficult time?”

Penned shook her head, sending those blonde waves all around her face. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Sure you wouldn’t.” The woman was beautiful in a familiar way. Her face was soft. She had full lips and dark skin. Her clothing looked warm with fur around her neck and wrists. Cloudy puffs of fog floated around her feet and up her arms. The scent of cool spring air clung to her.

“I’m Malotte of the Tempest Clan.” She motioned to the woman standing next to her. “This is Kelda.”

She was tiny, smaller even than me, with short pixie-cut white-blond hair. She wore a thick white turtleneck type of dress that went all the way down to her knees and white fur boots that met the edge of her dress. I gave them both a little smile. “Nice to meet you both.”

There was something peaceful yet confident about Malotte, like she was so sure of who she was and where she was at. It wasn’t arrogant like Tendreece or Lizvita. Malotte motioned to the room around us. “This must be a bit weird for you?”

“I don’t really know what I’m doing here, if I’m being honest.” I glanced around the castle and soldiers all standing guard, watching my every move. “I didn’t really ask for this.”

Malotte glanced around, then leaned in close to me and lowered her voice. “It’s an opportunity like any other.”

I gave a small chuckle. “Yes, I suppose so. You’re like the only person who’s been halfway decent to me ... Well, you and Linford.”

Kelda’s eyes widened. “Linford?”

Penned arched her eyebrows. “Did you say Linford? Like of the Slate Clan?”

Malotte elbowed her, shutting her up. “Penned, I thought we’d have better manners than this.”

Tendreece gave a snide snicker and took a sip of her punch. “Tempest Clan *was* always lacking.”

Penned scoffed at her. “Says the one who lives with permanent swamp ass.” She motioned to me. “Besides, she got

in my way. I was thirsty.”

I filled my glass and raised it to her. “Here’s to you, Penned.”

We both took a drink, and the liquid burned on the way down like taking a shot of whiskey. I made a face and cleared my throat. “Wow, that was—”

Pened dropped her glass and the crystal shattered to pieces. She wrapped her hands around her throat and gasped for air. I took a step back and Avalon was behind me in a moment. His arm snaked around my hips, and he yanked me back toward him. “What’d you do?”

“Na-nothing.”

She fell to the floor, and an odd gurgling sound came from her mouth. I squirmed from his grip and dropped to my knees beside her. When I flipped her onto her back, her lips had turned a horrible shade of blue. “Hold on, Penned.”

I spread her dress off her chest and started compressions, then blew into her mouth, trying to give her air. But each time I blew, I felt my breath coming back at me. This wasn’t like how I’d killed the soldiers, it was different ... almost like poison. There was a weird flavor on her lips, like salt mixed with blood. Her body fell limp, yet I kept on going. Sweat covered my body, and I’d ripped the sleeves of my dress trying to do CPR. Demons gathered around me as I kept going, even though I didn’t feel her heartbeat any longer or see my breath move in her chest.

Avalon bent down next to me. “She’s gone.”

I shook my head. “No!”

He wrapped his arm around my hips and yanked me to my feet. “She. Is. Dead.”

“I didn’t do it. I swear.” There’d been no petals, no magic coming from my hands.

Tendreece snickered. “As if you could.”

I turned toward her, feeling complete disgust. “*You* did this? But why?”

She raised her glass toward King Dacio, who had meandered over and stood at the center of the crowd looking down impassively at Penned. “In the immortal words of our esteemed King, let the games begin.”

She winked at him, and I waited for him to show any sign of the repulsion I felt deep in the pit of my stomach. I went to take a step toward her, but Avalon stood there, holding me back. “You monster. How could you do such a thing?”

Everyone was silent, just staring at the two of us. Tendreece shrugged. “Only the strong survive here, Lily. You’d do well to remember that.”

“So would you.” I felt my power rise and purple smoke seeped from my palms. Avalon grabbed my arms and yanked them behind my back. Just one petal would do her in ... just one. He smothered my powers by forcing my hands to curl into fists and held me there.

“Still, I don’t know how you survived the waters of the Silent Marsh.” She looked me up and down. “Pity. But there’s always next time.”

“Is that a threat?” I struggled against his hold as he started to pull me back through the crowd.

“You’re too pretty to last, Lily.” She motioned to the rest of the women. “At least I’m up front about it.”

“And you’re just going to let this happen?” I yelled to Dacio.

His lips pulled up into a cruel smile. “Yes, I dare say I am. Only the strongest are fit to be my queen.”

Malotte dropped down next to Penned and held her hands over her body. Puffs of wind and clouds came from her and wrapped around Penned. She floated up off the floor, and Malotte guided her towards the door with a mixture of white puffy clouds around them both. “If you’ll excuse me.”

The crowd parted and she flew Penned’s body from the gathering. I turned back to Tendreece. “And now we all see you.”

“Good.” She shrugged, “That’ll make this so much easier.”

Avalon pulled me away from the crowd and guided me toward the door. “We’re leaving.”

I stumbled in front of him, and he pushed me again until he was all but shoving me out into the hallway. The doors shut behind us with an ominous groan. I scoffed at him. “And you stood there letting that happen.”

“Letting what happen?”

I turned around and planted my hands in his chest and shoved him back. “She killed her, and you stood there watching.”

“She didn’t pull a knife and stab her, Lily.”

I’m beginning to hate that name. “And what’s going to happen to her now? Will she go into the dungeon like I did? Will she be punished?”

He pressed his lips into a hard line. “Her fate is up to the King.”

I rolled my eyes and began to walk away from him. “Some King.”

“Hold your tongue.” He moved to walk beside me. “You know not of what you speak.”

“I know that he stood there and watched her die and there was no consequence for Tendreece. She was annoying, but that’s not worth killing for.” Anger and annoyance warred within my body. How could they all be so callous and unfeeling. A woman died tonight vying for a position to be queen. I’d killed those soldiers defending myself. What Tendreece did was straight up murder. No king was worth that, no seat at the royal table could possibly be worth that much. I wanted out of her and away from all of this.

“Debatable.” He stared at me pointedly.

“Whatever.” If ever there was a way of saying *fuck you* or *fuck off*, it was the use of the word *whatever*. He turned down a long hall and went toward a set of stairs. I followed beside him, silently making notes. I wanted out *tonight*.

At my door, he stopped and pulled it open. “Good night.”

“Oh, you’re sending me to my room now?” He said nothing. Rage filled my veins and I let my mouth get the better of me. “What a disappointment you must be to your people.”

His hand shot out and he wrapped his fingers around my upper arm and tugged me around to face him. “Hypocrite.”

“Hardly.” I pulled my arm free. “Because you, Avalon oh great Lord of Shadows or whatever your title is, are a fucking coward.”

He clenched his teeth. The muscles in his jaw ticked. Before he could answer me, I grabbed the edge of the door and slammed it shut in his face. I'd had enough of this night, of this place, and of him. I wanted out and home. Now. Tonight, I would sneak my way out and take my chances amidst the unknown landscape rather than these lunatics ... Tonight, I would be gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MORGANA



The sun had long since set and I lay there for hours afterwards waiting for the noises of the castle to calm down. Every five minutes the soldiers marched down the hallway. Apparently, my room had become a spectacle for them to stop and comment on. They joked about messing with death, and in the mood I was in, I'd be happy to bring it to them. Dacio sickened me with his twisted games, and no one here, not even Avalon, stood up to him. I couldn't figure it out. According to Linford, they were just as powerful as each other. So why would Avalon not go against Dacio? What did the King have on him?

Even though the bed was comfortable as hell and the floating butterflies gave the room the atmosphere to make it easy to sleep, I couldn't. The few hours of sleep I'd gotten last night weren't helping me now. I was running on pure adrenaline and fear. But I'd ditched the dress and gotten my vest back on along with my pants and boots. I used the peasant shirt as a bed for Monty at the foot of my bed. I'd laced up everything nice and tight just to keep myself awake. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and eased to a stand. When I still didn't hear soldiers outside, I crept closer to the door. When I pressed my ear to it, I heard nothing. I glanced back at the bed where Monty lay curled in a comfortable ball.

I patted the side of my leg and gave a light whistle. His head popped up and he stared at me, looking like he wondered why we'd ever get out of this comfy spot. I waved for him to come to me. "Now or never, buddy. I gotta get out of here."

He jumped from the bed and soundlessly ran across the floor toward me. I stuck my leg out and he leapt onto it, grabbing my pants with his little paws. He scurried up my body to settle himself on my shoulders. His little tail wrapped under my hair and around the back of my neck. His tiny body was so warm that it was like wearing a heating pad on my neck. He gave a small *coo* and rubbed the top of his head across my jawline.

"Okay, buddy, let's get our asses out of here." I pulled the door open. It gave a slight creak, yet no soldier came running in my direction. I stepped out into the hallway and looked both ways. I felt like a teenager sneaking out of my room, except this time I didn't have Rhode with me to keep a lookout.

I wasn't sure what direction I was going in, but I figured stairs down would be a good start. I tiptoed down the hall and felt my heart hammering in my chest. The thin crystal windows glowed with an odd blueish-purple light. I paused for a moment, making out two moons in the sky. One looked like the one I saw from Earth, and the other was a breathtaking purple orb. "Two moons."

They were so beautiful I could've stood there all night long just staring at them, but I didn't have time, and I needed out before the next set of soldiers strolled down the hall to patrol outside my door. I hurried farther down the hall and ran down the stairs, praying no one would come up the other side. When I hit the next hall, I hurried as fast as I could toward another set of stairs. Loud voices and carousing came from a

room down the hall. It was just before the next flight of stairs I needed to get down. I tiptoed closer, and the voices got louder. I peeked through the crack in the door at a group of soldiers in their break room. They all had their helmets off and were sitting there laughing and joking as they ate.

One held up a glass of dark-purple liquid. “Those Swamp Clan girls are vicious.”

“Yeah, but the seaweed dress ... easy on ... easy off.”

“Nah, I like the weird one ... that green and black hair ... like a beauty waiting to be unwrapped.”

EW.

“Yeah, and then ... you die.” Another from across the room threw a roll at him. He caught it and took a big bite.

“But what a way to go! She is a comely thing with all those curves.” The others all chuckled and waved his words away.

I wrinkled my nose and turned for the stairs, hurrying down as fast I could. I hadn't eaten in nearly two days and only had a swig of poisonous water that, luckily enough, hadn't killed me. Now I didn't know if the next drink I took would be my last. I ran down another set of stairs and stopped at the bottom, pausing to see if I heard anything. Again, there were voices coming from down the hall, but this time it was only two. Monty shivered on my shoulder, not from cold but in warning. I'd recognize those voices anywhere, Avalon and Dacio going back and forth.

“The selection of the queen must have some rules,” Avalon insisted.

“Why must it?” Dacio sounded bored with the conversation.

“Because there’s no reason they should be killing each other over something like this.”

“On the contrary, the right to be queen of our demons is a huge responsibility. I’ve reigned for fifty years, and in that time, I’ve had to endure hardships the demons cannot know. The vampire kingdom loathes us. At any moment they could rise over those mountains to finish us all off. A strong, cunning queen is needed. Should one of them not survive due to their lack of smarts, I see no fault in it on my end.”

Avalon made a sound in the back of his throat. “We must remember who we are. It was cold-blooded murder. We are lucky no one else died.”

Was he talking about me? I paused, waiting for him to say more and wondering why I cared. Avalon hated me, and I was getting very close to sharing his feelings. The King chuckled. “You mean, *she* should’ve died, yet she didn’t.”

“It is curious.” It was the first time I’d heard his voice being even remotely soft.

“That she didn’t die? Yes, I thought it curious as well.” Dacio seemed intrigued by this. “It should have killed her. Much to your failure.”

“My ... what?” Wind whipped through the room. “I do not fail.”

“And yet it was luck that she didn’t die.” Dacio chuckled. “Perhaps watch her more closely. She’s one I would hate to lose at this moment.”

At this moment? Did that mean he wouldn’t mind losing me in the future? What the hell kind of fucked-up world was this? Not one I wanted to stay in. I tiptoed past the door and headed for the stairs. The tiniest of creeks sounded and I froze.

The voices dropped to silence, and I squeezed my eyes shut tight. My breath caught in my throat. My heart hammered in my chest, and I decided to sprint toward the stairs.

Green smoke flew up in front of me, and suddenly Avalon was there. I slammed into his chest and stumbled back. The air left my lungs in a rush, and I fought to suck in a gasping breath. He stood before me tall and terrible and too sexy for my own good.

“What are you doing?”

Escaping. “Looking for something to eat.”

As if on cue, my stomach growled, and I pressed my hand over it. Avalon rolled his eyes and sighed. “Really?”

No, I want away from you and out of this place. “Really.”

“Very well.” Again, he grabbed my arm and yanked me closer.

“You’re getting a little too used to manhandling me.”

“I would think it’s an old habit for you by now.” His green smoke seeped around both of us, and my eyes widened.

“What are you doing?”

“This.” He snapped his fingers and flames burst around me. My body felt like it was being whipped through the air. My stomach twisted into knots, and if I had anything in it, I was sure I’d have thrown up on his boots.

Just as fast as it started, it stopped, and he dropped me in my room. I staggered toward my bed and placed my hands on the foot of it to stop the dizziness assailing me. Monty rolled down my arm and flopped onto the bed like a limp noodle. I sucked in a deep breath, trying to not heave on the floor. Sweat ran over my body, sending a cold chill down my spine, like at

any second I was going to pass out and then throw up on the floor. I swallowed around the dryness of my mouth. Avalon stood there smirking down at me.

Asshole. My magic rose in me, and purple petals fell from my hands onto the fluffy woven bedspread. He took a step back, and I stood up straight and squared my shoulders. I grabbed a handful of those petals and held them out in front of me. “The next time you touch me without my permission will be the last time you draw a breath.”

He lifted his chin. “You wouldn’t.”

“What makes you think I won’t?” I arched my eyebrows at him. I was so tempted to blow those petals in his direction, but he’d only been rude and rough with me ... hardly worth a death sentence.

“Am I worth killing?” He moved in closer to me, almost challenging me, like he wanted to see if I dared try it.

I dropped the petals back on the bed and tried to calm myself long enough until the purple stopped seeping from my palms. When it finally stopped, I turned toward him. “No, you’re not worth it.”

His face fell into a scowl. “The feeling is mutual.”

My hand snapped out of its own accord and cracked right across his cheek. “That was worth it.” His face snapped back toward me, and I smacked him again. “So was that.”

“Careful.” He caught my wrist and flicked my hand back.

“Oh good.” I stepped in closer to him. “Now you’ll remember I am not a piece of meat you can fling around.”

He growled and his flames erupted around him, and in the next second, he was gone. I sighed and sat back on my bed.

“There’ll be no escaping tonight, Monty.”

My stomach growled once more, and I groaned at how uncomfortable I felt. I was so hungry I was borderline nauseous. A second later, he flashed back into my room in a ball of flames. He held a plate piled high with food of all shapes and colors. He dropped the plate of food onto the small nightstand.

Some food rolled off and rested on the table beside the plate. He narrowed his eyes at me. “Eat.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but he cut me off. “No more escape attempts. I’ll be right outside your door all night.”

“How’d you know I wanted to escape?”

He gave a heavy sigh. “Unfortunately, I know you better than you know yourself ...”

Before I could ask another question, his smoke seeped around him and he was covered in flames, disappearing from my room and leaving only the food and smell of ash. I hurried over to the food, grabbed what looked like an apple, and took a bite.

I grabbed a grape and tossed it to Monty. He caught it and held it between his little paws like a raccoon and took a big bite. “We’ve only got one more night, buddy.”

Tomorrow, I’m out of here ...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MORGANA



If I wasn't trapped in this room, I might have enjoyed the bed and the way I just sank into it all warm and cozy. Yet I found myself falling into the oblivion of sleep that I couldn't avoid. My breaths grew deep and even and suddenly I was gone ... drawn into the world of dreams.

He took my hand and tugged me toward the edge of the cliffside. "Come along, love. I want you to see."

He was so beautiful, my Avalon, with his long hair and strong smile. I could gaze into his eyes for the next thousand years and never tire of him. His touch was light in ways I couldn't imagine, and yet he looked at me like I was something to be cherished, when so many others looked at me as property. He was a lord, but I was nothing. My life was devoted to taking care of my little sister ... the things I'd done ... the things I'd endured had been for her. But for stolen moments in time, I was Avalon's, and today I'd give him the only thing I had ... me.

"Lily." He gave my hand a little squeeze. "I want you to see all the world can offer."

We stepped out from the trees and into the open. I sucked in a sharp breath. High above the city, I could see everything. The sky went on forever, and below, the city looked so small—

like all my problems were just as little as the buildings. The rocky cliffside let us look out far enough that the white foaming waves of the sea line were visible. Here the world smelled fresh and clean, not filled with the odor of sweaty men that'd linger around me. If my mother had known such a place, such beauty, she might not have given herself so freely after the death of my father. But now I gave my body the same way she did for a bit of coins to give my sister the nectar she needed to survive. She was too young to live this life. I wouldn't let her.

"I wish my mother could've seen this." The wind brushed over my face, sending my hair flying back.

"I would give you this all the days through." Avalon took my hand and pulled me toward a blanket he'd laid on the ground. He arranged a picnic with all the trimmings, complete with a basket full of food. He reached down and pulled up a bouquet of flowers and handed them to me.

"I've never gotten flowers before." I held them close to my face and sucked in a deep breath of their sweet fragrance.

"Just a taste of what could come, Lily. Allow me to take you home with me to The Court of Shadows. You will be cared for there."

His words were like a light at the end of the tunnel, but there was no tunnel for me. He was a lord and I the whore who caught his attention for a time. Threads of exhaustion assailed me daily, and I found it more difficult to rise each morning. Pains racked my body, and deep down, I knew the life I'd chosen would claim me the same way it'd claimed my mother. But with him, I had my moment of love ... no matter how fleeting it was.

"Let's not talk of the future. Allow me to enjoy you now."

“Very well. But I speak honestly.”

He sat down on the blanket and offered me his hand. I took it and he guided me down to sit between his legs. I dropped down and let my back rest against his chest. He lifted his knee and tucked his arms around me. There in that moment, I felt safe from the world, like nothing could touch me. Not the men seeking their own pleasures, not my stepbrothers, not the pains of starvation. With Avalon, I was safe for a time. At least until he came to realize that I wasn't worth his adoration. I leaned back into him, feeling his warmth and the way I fit so perfectly against him. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the fresh air fill my lungs. The only sounds I heard were his steady breaths and the rustling of leaves through the trees.

“We could have a home of our own out there with views of mountains and the sea.” He pointed toward the Court of Shadows. “No one would know you there.”

“And what would you do? Leave me each time you are to do your runs?” With each time he left, he would find more comfort in being away from me. Soon he would learn I wasn't the excitement he thought I was.

He chuckled. “Who says I'd leave you?”

I never told him about my family or my sister or the things that weighed on my mind. He didn't even know my real name. It wasn't for him to fix because I didn't believe in being saved. No one saved my mother, no one would save me, but my sister would have a chance to survive. I'd built up my savings and made provisions for her. He laced his fingers through mine and brought my hand to his lips. He pressed a light kiss to my skin and warmth spread through my body. He always made me feel like I was the only one in the world to him, but how could that be? He was perfect, and I was ... so far from it.

When I didn't respond, he sighed. "Lily, love, do consider what I'm offering."

I'd dreamt of his offers on a daily basis. I saw our home in my dreams, the life we could lead, the way he could make me happy. But the world I came from meant that dreams were just that ... dreams. I loved Avalon with everything that I was, and his words, dreams of him, saw me through the darkest of times. When another breeze blew across us, this time more chilled, he held me tight, and there was nothing but the two of us overlooking a world that was so small but felt so big when I was trapped in it.

"I'll think on it."

"You know when you say that it means no." He grunted with frustration. "Yet I will keep trying."

I turned around in his arms to press my body against his. I leaned up and took his lips. Kissing was such an intimate thing. It was something I kept just for Avalon. He wound his fingers in my hair and toyed with the tips. Our tongues wound together, and I wound my hand into his coat, pulling him closer. I would take all the stolen moments with Avalon I could. I cherished his taste on my lips and the feel of his body against mine. He was everything I needed in a world that'd shown me no kindness. He twisted to the side, taking me with him and laying me on my back. His lips never left mine, and I relished the feel of hands running over my body and the way he felt my curves. He cherished me, wanted me, and I felt it in his every move and touch.

His lips were firm yet tender against mine. His tongue was gentle yet seeking. There wasn't anything I didn't adore about Avalon. I wanted him more than I wanted anything else in the world. But I didn't deserve him. For now, I would pretend. For

now, he was mine. For now, there was only us and only the love I felt for him. My heart ached each day I didn't see him, and when he came back again, I felt complete. With his lips on mine and the way we fit perfectly together, all was right with the world ... as long as I was with him. I sucked in a breath, trying to burn this moment into my memory. He set me free. He made me feel ... alive.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MORGANA



“A queen of the demons sometimes needs to make difficult decisions. While love is always necessary, so is a strong, firm hand. Because to rule is to rise above with an iron fist.” Dacio strolled back and forth in front of his *contestants*.

Once again he was in that armor that looked like it'd been braided over his body, and part of me wondered if he slept in it. His crown was firmly perched on his head with those thick metal horns pointing up in all different directions. Not a single hair on his head was out of place. Part of me felt like a soldier standing here in the line while he spoke to us, and the other part of me could only wonder what the fuck I was doing here. As he kept talking, I couldn't help but glance toward where Avalon stood just across from me.

I woke from a dream that felt so real, so vivid about him, and I still didn't know what to make of it. It was hard for me to reconcile the demon I knew with the one I dreamed of. There was no doubt Avalon was compelling, with his long, dark, jagged hair and glowing eyes. But the demon I knew was rough, rude, and merciless. The one in my dream was almost ... sweet. He stood there in total command of himself, like a warrior who knew he owned the space around him. With his every move, I noticed the soldiers around him gave him a wide

berth. There was a respect but also fear in their movements. Today he wore a black breastplate, black shirt, and black pants. To me he looked like darkness itself. Shadows clung to him even with the midday sun high overhead.

The walls around us felt so high, like there was no escape from this place. Either I was surrounded by soldiers, walls, or Avalon was there watching me. Tendreece stood beside me looking down her nose at me. She lowered her voice. “I see you survived the night.”

“Much to your dismay. I’m sure.”

“In time.” She lifted her chin and stuck her nose higher in the air. “I used to be a lady of the vampire court. My ascension to the demon throne is only natural.”

I rolled my eyes. “Have at it.”

“You should both keep quiet,” Malotte whispered under her breath from where she stood on my other side. “Pay attention.”

Dacio continued, “Obedience, calm, and control are all things I am looking for in a queen. But most of all ... loyalty. I want to know that my words will be trusted and followed, for we will be in this together for life.”

Obedience for life ... Count me out.

Dacio waved his hand, and off to the side a door formed in the solid slate wall. I’d only see one other demon with the power over earth like that: Linford. The doors opened wide and three people in red cloaks walked out. Their faces were hidden by large hoods that hung nearly to their shoulders, and the cloaks hung from their shoulders down to the ground, covering them completely. One by one, they turned to face

away from us and dropped to their knees. They were each about fifteen feet apart and all faced Dacio.

He lifted his chin and waved toward us. “Now, if you all would form three lines.”

Tendreece stood in the first line, and I just turned to fall in behind her with Malotte behind me. The other contestants got into the other lines. I had no idea why anyone would want to be a part of this. Well, of course Tendreece wanted the status. But I couldn’t see why Malotte or Kelda or even Norla would want to be here for this. A soldier stopped at each of the lines and handed the first in line a long whip. My stomach sank at the sight of them and the kneeling people in robes.

Dacio motioned to the kneeling figures. “These servants have been brought here for one reason. They have stolen from me and it’s punishable by lashes. Each of you will give them three lashes.”

Oh, hell no! I took a step back and bumped into Malotte. She caught my arm. “Are you alright?”

I shook my head and backed up a few steps and knocked into Tendreece. She stumbled forward, then turned on me and shoved me back. I bumped into Malotte and suddenly I felt like a ping pong ball between the two of them. I straightened my stance and glared at Tendreece. “It was an accident.”

She looked down her nose at me, then tried to flick a couple drops of water my way, but it hit some kind of barrier and just fell to the ground. She glared even harder. “Like I’m going to believe that.”

“It was!” Malotte piped up from just beside me.

Her arm shot out like she was trying to slap me. I arched my back and ducked away. I had two sisters growing up and a

wardrobe to protect. A little slap wasn't going to get me. My hand snapped out and connected with the side of her face with a snap. The palm of my hand stung, and when she turned back to face me my hand was imprinted on her face in an angry red welt. When she tried to swing at me again, I caught her wrists and held it there. Her blue horns emerged from her head. The puddle of water that'd been at her feet slithered up around her body and toward my arm. The moment it got close to my skin, it fell away from me like drops of rain.

Her eyes widened. "It can't be."

She stumbled back and raised the whip over her head, about to let it loose in my direction. She flicked it back. Suddenly, Avalon was there catching the tip of the whip. It wrapped around his wrist and down his forearm. He gave a decisive yank and Tendreece stumbled back, letting go of the whip. She swung around to face him. "How ... how dare you?"

"How dare I?" He wound the whip up as he walked toward her. "Careful. You do not dictate death here."

She sucked in a sharp breath. "And you do?"

"Care to find out?" He growled and she stumbled her way back toward the end of the line.

I squared my shoulders as he approached me. "She started it ... I was gonna finish it."

"I bet you were." He held the whip out toward me.

I shook my head. "No."

"Take it."

"I won't." I crossed my arms over my chest.

Dacio glanced toward us and called out, "Problem?"

“No,” Avalon called back. He tossed the whip at me, and my reflexes reacted and I caught it. “Do as you’re told.”

“If you think that’ll work, then you don’t know me at all.” I put my hands on my hips. There was no way in hell that I was going to hurt a defenseless person.

Avalon glanced over his shoulder at the people kneeling. “Just do it and all will be well.”

“How can you be so cruel?” I almost wished this version of Avalon was like the one I dreamed of. He’d be more reasonable, more feeling. I refused to hurt anyone. Who knew why these people were here or what they’d actually done? All I’d seen of most demons was cruelty and cutthroat actions. As soon as I got back to veil I would leap through it without hesitation.

He stepped in closer to me. “Just do it. Trust me.”

Is her for real? “I don’t trust you.”

“If you don’t, you’ll be back where all this started,” he whispered under his breath.

At the front of the line farthest from me, Dacio stood next to Lizvita. She smiled at him and batted her eyelashes in his direction. Her hair was still pulled into that high bun, and she held the whip out toward him. “I think I need a lesson.”

Ew. Is she flirting? Dacio smirked down at her. “Independence is essential. If you think you can’t ...”

“Oh, I can.” She beamed up at him as he stepped back. She lifted the whip and cracked it in the direction of the hooded servant. The servant arched their back in pain but didn’t cry out, but by the time Lizvita got to the third strike, the servant was trembling with pain. The red hood wavered with each move.

Dacio smirked at her, seeming pleased by her cruelty. She turned and handed the whip to Norla. “Your turn, Nor Nor.”

When I met Norla last night, she didn’t seem the type to embrace this kind of violence. She glanced around at the rest of us and shook her head. “I’m sorry, Your Highness. But I cannot.”

“You’re sure?” Dacio eyed her.

“My apologies, my lord, but I can’t.”

“Very well.” He motioned to the guards around the courtyard. “Seize her.”

The soldiers swarmed her all at once, easily restraining her within moments. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. “Please, no.”

Dacio waved her away. “Take her to the dungeons.”

Tears ran down her face, and she went limp as the guards dragged her away. My eyes widened, and Avalon wrapped his hand around mine, tightening it on the whip. “Just do it. Trust me. You don’t want the consequences.”

“But ... but I can’t hurt someone like this. They didn’t do anything to me.”

His eyes bore into mine. “Lily. Do. It. I swear to you all will be well.”

“Why are you doing this?” I held the whip tightly in my hand.

He didn’t answer me. He just turned and walked away without another word. Dacio wandered over to our little ground. “And what of you three? Do any of you have the ability to meet out justice?”

“I do.” Tendreece walked past me, yanking the whip from my hand.

She lifted her chin, pointing her snobby nose high into the air. Her long blue hair shimmered behind her. I could see Tendreece being an over-indulged, spoiled brat of a royal, but the poor country would suffer under her. With three quick flicks of her wrist, she beat the poor servant without so much as a hint of feeling or hesitation.

She bowed to Dacio. “Anything for my King.”

As she passed me, she gave a little *hmm* sound, and I tried and failed not to roll my eyes. I just couldn’t understand how no one beside Norla would refuse to go along with this. Malotte took the whip without hesitation. Last night she’d taken away Penned’s body with so much care, and now she cared nothing for the servant. She cracked the whip across its back and the servant shivered with pain. I flinched back from the sight of those red cloaks and the abuse. This wasn’t who I was or who I would be.

Dacio gave her a tiny applause as he wandered away from our line to look at the others. Malotte handed me the rope and spoke to me through thinned lips. “You might not trust Avalon, but I do. Do it.”

I ground my teeth together and held the whip loose at my side. I wanted to ask why she would trust him? What had he done to earn it? But I didn’t have the time I needed to get the answers I desired. Dacio spun around and his eyes were focused only on me. I felt them boring into me, and when I looked back to the other side of the courtyard, Avalon stood still as stone with his face looking like a chiseled mask of dangerous beauty. I was beginning to hate that face.

“We’re waiting.” Dacio motioned to the hooded figure.

I sucked in a deep breath and flicked my arm forward with as little effort as I could make. The whip snapped across the servants back, and I felt tears prick the back of my eyes. Vomit rose in my throat, and I did the other two lashes in quick succession, barely even touching the fabric on the servant's back.

Dacio sighed and shook his head. "That'll do."

I was the last one to go. I swayed on my feet. I'd never hated myself so much as I did in this moment. I trusted people who hadn't earned nor deserved it. Why? This world was beginning to twist my own reality. Dacio motioned to the servants and three soldiers came forward and ripped the cloaks from their bodies. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"What the fuck?" I hissed under my breath.

There before all of us were statues. Stone statues of people kneeling. My jaw dropped, and I glanced at the others and then to Avalon. His eyes met mine for barely a second, then he turned away. Dacio chuckled, and when he flexed his fingers, the statues rose to their feet and marched back toward the door they'd come through. My stomach rolled, and I wanted to run from this mind-fuck of a place.

Dacio snickered. "You can't think me that cruel."

Yes. Yes, I can.

"It was a test of your loyalty and obedience to me but also of how cruel and shrewd you are willing to be ... and the lengths you would go to for your own crown ... or to share mine." He paused, looking Tendreece up and down. "And it was telling."

As I looked around the courtyard, I realized I wasn't in some kind of bachelorette game. No, this was chess, and every

move was watched and analyzed. With each move we made, we were judged. We were either meant for Dacio or the dungeon. Everything about this place was lies and games. But I wasn't playing for the throne. I didn't want it and I didn't believe that there was no way back. I just had to get to the spot where Avalon dropped me. There had to have been a portal somewhere.

“What say you, Avalon? Shall we do another?” Dacio glanced over his shoulder toward Avalon.

“Later.”

“A man of few words, is he not?” He chuckled. “We will retire for a time for luncheon. You are dismissed to the dining hall. And, Tendreece—”

“Yes, Your Highness?” She smiled and preened.

“No more deaths by your hand or you will join Norla in the bowels of the castle, never to be seen again.”

Her smile faltered for a moment, and she bowed. “You have my word.”

He waved us away. “Until later then.”

My insides were a tangled mess of self-loathing and shock. I'd gone from feeling the lowest I ever had, to complete shock, and now somewhat numb to the cruelty, even if it was fake. We'd been shuffled around the castle and told what to do like the good little debutants we were meant to be. I felt like cattle being led to the slaughter as the soldiers closed in around us. Maybe I *was* heading for the slaughter. Within the walls of this castle, it certainly felt like it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MORGANA



*A*fter walking up about a million different sets of stairs, I found myself back in the ballroom from last night, except this time there was only a single round table in the center of the room. Five chairs were spread evenly around the table. Food and glasses were piled on it in an extravagant display. Though I was hungry, I couldn't help but think this was another test or trap. A group of soldiers all held the chairs out for us, and I took one. Tendreece sat across from me with drops of water running up and down her bare arms like she'd just gotten out of a pool. Her blue horns stuck straight back from her head like two spikes. Malotte and Kelda, the other girl from the Air Clan, sat next to her with clouds dancing between the two of them. Their horns were curved in twisting spirals back from their heads that looked like pearl colored seashells.

I pulled my chair in closer to the table, afraid to touch any of the food just in case Tendreece got to it first. The others all seemed to be of the same thinking because no one touched a thing. We are all going to sit here in silence. Tendreece cleared her throat, getting all our attention. "Really, what is Lily doing here?"

"Fuck if I know." I shrugged.

“Do you even want to be here?” She rested her elbow on the table and held her hand up. A stream of water ran around and between her fingers.

Malotte rolled her eyes and held her hand up and blew across her palm. A stream of freezing air flew from her palm toward the water. It froze into a twisted piece of ice around her hand. “You pry too much. We all know no one wants to be here as much as you, Tendreece.”

She shook her hand and began to whimper when the ice wouldn't dislodge. She slammed it on the table, and the ice shattered to pieces and scattered in all different directions. “You act like you know everything, Malotte.”

“I know enough.” She reached to the middle of the table, took an apple from the pile, and took a big bite out of it, making a point to look directly at Tendreece. “But we all know life outside this castle is challenging at best ... so an opportunity to ease some of that for our clans or ourselves isn't something any of us are going to pass up.”

The rest of us dove for the plate of apples like it was the last food in the world. I pulled one close to my chest and held it there for a moment. “You two know each other? From before you all turned into demons?”

Malotte sighed. “Unfortunately.”

“Couldn't agree more.” Tendreece sat back in her chair and flicked her long blue hair over her shoulder.

“Why are only the Swamp and Tempest Clans represented here?” This had been bothering me since this whole thing started. “Why not the Slate Clan or Cinder?”

They all glanced at each other and Malotte leaned closer to me. “Dacio already rules the Slate Clan. He needs ties in the

ones closest to him. We can be here because the castle is high enough from the ground that the magic doesn't kill us right away for not being in our lands. It's difficult for us to be here but not impossible. I can't walk out in the open on the Slate Lands, and neither can Tendreece. Even though she'd tell you she could. And, well, as for the Cinder Clan, we're just too far away. None of their people could survive here."

"None but Avalon," I pointed out. I'd seen him use fire time and again with no problems.

Lizvita smirked. "I heard the bottom of his feet are covered with slate. But It's just a rumor, not yet confirmed. Plus, we've all seen him use wind and air. The only places he can't go ... are the Swamp Lands." She said it as if it was something to be proud of.

Malotte nodded. "It is true. He is one of the strongest and most able to move. But I heard that the leader of the Cinder Clan was a bit offended that none of her demons were invited here."

"Why?" My brow furrowed in confusion.

"Because being invited here to make a tie with the King who rules us all is an honor, or more importantly, a benefit to whichever clan he chooses." Malotte sighed. "You know very little of our world, Lily, but the demons ... they need help. We're all just trying to take care of our clans."

Her words struck a chord with me. I knew something about taking care of people who needed help. It was what I did for a living and was more like a calling than anything else. "I can understand why you're here, why you'd want to do that."

Kelda reached across the table and grabbed another apple, then a pear, then a roll, and put them all on her plate. "I'm just

here for the food.”

I chuckled. “At least you’re honest about it.”

She shrugged and motioned to Tendreece and Malotte. “These two are more likely to get the King’s attention than I.”

“Do you want his attention?” Because I definitely didn’t want it.

“Not for me to say.” She took a bite of her roll. “But the food is good.”

It reminded me of how the demons in the underground of the Slate Lands looked to be thin and close to starving. “Is food a problem in all of your clans?”

They all fell silent, picking at their plates but not saying anything. I took a bite of a piece of bread and swallowed it down. “I’m going to take that as a yes.”

“We do not speak of such things within the walls of this castle.” Lizvita chided me and smoothed her hand over her puffy bun, then looked down her nose at me. “We are grateful to be here.”

“When I met Linford, he mentioned how difficult it was to get resources from one clan to the next. I wondered if you all felt the same way in the Tempest and Swamp Lands.” Again, my words were met with silence. “So, this is going well.”

Tendreece waved my words away but looked toward Malotte. “Everyone knows Linford is a fool.”

Malotte slammed her hand down on the table and the wind whipped around us like she couldn’t control her anger. “He is no fool. And your opinions don’t matter here.”

“Aww, did I strike a nerve.” Tendreece puffed her lip out in a pout. “Did I upset daddy’s little girl?”

Daddy's little girl? What?

“Enough!” Kelda snapped and the wind suddenly died. “You shut your mouth, or I’ll shut it for you. And I promise you the pain you deserve.”

Tendrece sat back, looking a little shaken. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.” Kelda picked up a knife from the table and licked the blade, looking half-deranged and half-teasing. “I’d love to play with you.”

“She’s stopping, Kelda. Okay? She’s stopping.” Lizvita elbowed Tendrece. “Aren’t you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m stopping.” She rolled her eyes. “You can put your psycho away.”

She lowered her voice but still spoke loud enough for all of us to hear. “I don’t know why she’s here anyways. No one wants a crazy wife.”

“They would if you were the most powerful of your kind ... as we all are. Or has that not occurred to you?” Malotte rested her hand over Kelda’s and made her put the knife down on the table. “Kelda, you’re fine.”

“Am I?” She glanced around at the rest of us. “Am I?”

What the hell did I miss about Kelda and why was everyone so afraid of her? I met her eyes. “Yes, you’re great. You know that, right?”

Her eyes went from distant to completely focused in a split-second. She leaned back and smiled. “Of course I am.”

They all collectively let go of a breath and fell into silence as we finished our food. The doors flew open, and Avalon sauntered into the room. He took in our silence and the way

we didn't look at each other. "You are summoned by his majesty the King."

Tendreece popped to her feet. "Lead the way, Lord Avalon."

I barely stifled my groan. This could not possibly get any worse ...

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MORGANA



... *I* t got so much worse.

The courtyard that'd been barren only an hour ago was completely transformed into an outdoor theatre. I swallowed my nerves down. I wasn't the *front and center show-off* type of person. On one side of the courtyard stood a stage made of stone that'd been summoned from the earth. Rows of stone benches were lined up before the stage as though every person in the castle was going to sit and watch some kind of performance. I'd hoped it was a play of some sort, perhaps a show to welcome us all here, but I'd been here long enough to know better.

"Ah, you've arrived. Wonderful." Dacio clapped his hands together as he approached our little group. He turned and motioned to the stage. "What do you think of our little setup?"

Lizvita stepped in front of me, blocking me from view. "I adore the theatre."

Dacio pinched her chin and held her face up toward the sun, turning it from one side to the other. "You do have the looks for it."

Her cheeks pinked and she batted her eyelashes at him. "You flatter me."

“Just an observation.” He dropped her chin and moved to Tendreece. “You also are pleasing to the eye.”

She gave a small bow, and when she popped back up, she beamed at him. “You’re welcome to look, Your Highness.”

I barely stopped myself from putting my finger in my mouth and making the gagging sound. Malotte glanced in my direction, and for a second, I was sure she had the same thought I did. At some point these two were going to have shit on their noses from being so far up Dacio’s ass. I was pretty sure they both already knew the flavor of his ball sweat. When Lizvita made no move to stop blocking me, I just folded my arms and waited.

Dacio glanced around her. “And what are your thoughts, Lily?”

Morgana, my name is Morgana. If I didn’t keep reminding myself of who I was, then I was going to start forgetting. “I enjoy the theatre.”

“Do you not like to be the center of attention?”

“Not on your life.” I jumped at my own candor. “I mean, I prefer the viewing, not to be the show.”

“Pity. You’d make a lovely show.” He plucked up a strand of my hair and let it curl between his fingers. He waved it back and forth, examining it. “You’re quite ... unique.”

“Thank you?” *Was unique a compliment or a nice way of saying I was the weirdo of the bunch?*

“You’re quite welcome.” He dropped my hair and began walking down the aisle toward the stage. He spread his arms wide. “Today, I demand a show ... a show of power.”

My stomach sank. He turned to face us. “*Your* power.”

Fuck. I'm screwed.

“It’s about time.” Tendreece smiled at the rest of us. “Good luck. I hope you fall off the stage.”

Malotte sighed. “I kinda hope you just ... die.”

“That can be arranged.” Kelda chuckled and a frosty breeze flew from her across our little group and over Lizvita and Tendreece.

The water froze on their skin and they both squealed with discomfort as they shook their arms and legs out. Tendreece glared in her direction. “Kelda, you shouldn’t even exist or be here.”

“Yeah, your seaweed doesn’t offer much protection, does it?” Kelda chuckled as their skin began to look like little snowflakes were gathered over it.

“Darlings, please.” Dacio’s voice yanked our attention. “A show of power is needed. If you’re to be my queen, then powerful you must be.”

Great. I'm out. I had no idea how to control my power ... or even what it was exactly. I just hoped my lack of show didn’t land me in a permanent stay in Dacio’s dungeon. Perhaps he’d let me go free if I couldn’t produce something strong enough. One could only hope. Dacio stood in the middle of the courtyard and opened his hands. The ground rumbled below us, and a pedestal rose under his feet, lifting him higher than the rest of us.

When it was ten feet higher than those of us standing in the courtyard, he addressed the soldiers. “Gentleman, please do take your seats for a show unlike any other.”

They marched like ants toward the rows of benches and started filling them in. There were more soldiers than I even

realized possible. They came from all corners of the castle, flooding in like a tide. When the benches were filled, they made their own lines behind them. My heart thundered in my chest. I did not want to do this. I didn't even want to attempt to do this. The power I'd used before was deadly. Though they had it coming, the bodies of those three dead soldiers were burned into my mind. This demon power I'd been cursed with would hurt anyone who came too close to it, and I could barely control it. My emotions summoned it, not my desire to use it.

In moments the entire courtyard was packed full of soldiers in their uniforms. It was worse than any high school play I was forced to attend. I was so done with this. I glanced around the courtyard that looked more like a concert arena now, trying to see if I could escape while they were all distracted. I spun around in a circle, and the chatter was almost deafening. When I met a pair of glowing blue eyes, I froze. While everyone else was looking in all different directions, Avalon was focused on only one thing ... me.

I didn't know why he'd helped me through the previous test. Perhaps a moment of sanity on his part? Or maybe he wanted to see me squirm. But when I didn't look away, tension sizzled between us and settled low in my stomach. He was beautiful on the outside but such an asshole on the inside, which would be most women's cup of tea, but definitely not mine. If only the dream Avalon were real, where he was beautiful inside and out. I couldn't say the same thing for the live version. Yet the more time I was here, the more it felt like there was something between us. Or I was losing my mind. Which was also a possibility.

"Do we have a volunteer to go first?" Dacio called over the hum of the crowd.

Tendreece raised her hand, then sauntered toward the stage. Malotte moved to stand next to me. “I know we’re all shocked by that one.”

“I’ve never seen more of a pathological need for attention than I have in that one. And I’ve seen some shit.”

Tendreece jumped up on stage and walked around like a pageant girl turning and waving. The men catcalled her while she flicked her seaweed looking dress in one direction or another. She tossed her blue hair over her shoulder while winking and smiling every few feet.

“Are you sure she’s never been to Earth? She does it better than the beauty queens.”

Malotte’s eyes widened. “You’re from Earth?”

I nodded. “I’m not sure if I’m supposed to make that public knowledge, but yes, that’s where I came from and somehow ended up here.”

“I’ve only heard stories about it. It seems so far off and different.” Malotte sighed.

I glanced around at this medieval chaos. “It is different.”

Tendreece walked to the middle of the stage and held her arms up. Drops of water rose off her body as though it were raining in reverse. She held her arms up and the water took shape over her head and turned into one of those glowing butterflies they had everywhere. It was so beautiful that I could hardly begrudge the fact that it was Tendreece making it. The water wavered and moved with beautiful tiny rips as the wings beat up and down. The crowd made impressed sounds as the butterfly disappeared and changed into a bigger creature. It looked like a giant water snake with two arms on each side of its body. The soldiers all leaned back with awed

looks on their faces. Though her magic couldn't make any sounds, she made the water creature open its mouth into a huge, silent roar. The soldiers seemed in complete awe of every move she made.

"I hate her." Lizvita moved to the other side of Malotte.

I didn't find it shocking that she hated Tendreece. There wasn't much to like. "I thought you were friends?"

"Tendreece doesn't have friends. She has people and things she uses." Lizvita gave me a sideways glance. "But you already knew that."

"I can't say I'm surprised."

Kelda chuckled. "Yeah, but watch this."

She sprinted toward the stage like she was running to war. Her white turtleneck dress clung to her body and wrapped around her legs. But she didn't let it stop her. She opened her hand. Light-blue smoke flew from her palms and two white curvy horns popped from her head. She sprang into the air and jumped into the middle of the fake water monster. Freezing wind whipped through the courtyard, and the water monster froze on the spot. It splintered and shattered into a million pieces. The crowd went wild with cheers.

Kelda landed a few feet from Tendreece and smirked at her. She curled her finger toward her in a *come get some* taunt. Tendreece's cheeks turned a bright red and she curled her hands into fists at her sides. Her blue horns poked from her head, and she charged toward Kelda. Kelda's face pulled up in an evil grin, like she was getting the exact reaction she'd been looking for. She sucked in a deep breath and her cheeks puffed out as she blew a long breath across her palm.

The wind lifted her up off the ground and sent her flying across the courtyard. The crowd jumped to their feet, watching as she headed straight for the wall. I almost closed my eyes trying to avoid watching the mess about to happen, like watching a bug about to collide with a windshield. Avalon appeared out of nowhere, his black horns protruding from his head as he lifted his hand high into the air and that green magic shot straight up in a huge gust. The wind whipped around Tendreece, catching her a moment before she splattered against the wall.

Her body twisted and turned in midair as Avalon lowered her to the ground. When she landed, her hair looked like she'd been in a wind tunnel and her dress was in tatters. She turned toward Avalon, seemingly about to yell at him, but ended up slamming her hand over her mouth and running for the stairs. Kelda threw her arms up like a wrestling champ and roared to the crowd. The soldiers all joined in, jumping to their feet and yelling. Even I couldn't help but think Tendreece deserved worse than that, but it was nice to see her get a bit of her own bad behavior back.

Malotte turned and grabbed my hand. She pressed her lips together like she was bursting to say something. She sucked in a breath and let it out. "You saw Linford. How is he?"

The change in subject startled me. "Yeah, he was ... good?"

"And ... and Carlotta? Was she ... I mean, was she okay?" Malotte's words were halted, almost like she'd been holding in this emotion for too long, hiding from what she'd like to actually say. I knew the feeling. I would give everything I had for a moment to talk to Rhode.

“She was lovely and ... generous.” I held my foot out, showing her the lace-up boots that they’d given me.

She looked down at my feet. “Oh my, those were ... mine.”

My eyes widened. “They told me these belonged to their daughter. *You’re* their daughter?”

“Yes.” Her eyes glistened and she sucked in a sharp breath and blinked hard to stop the tears from flowing.

“Oh, Malotte, I’m so sorry. I know what it’s like to be separated from family. Maybe not for fifty years, but it’s killing me to not be with her. Once I get out of here, I’m going back to Earth to get to her.”

Malotte sucked in a sharp breath. “Oh, Lily, I’m so sorry, but ... there is no way back. The Veil only opens every fifty years.”

My heart sank and I felt sick. I’d been holding on to the hope that Dacio and Avalon had lied. I didn’t realize how hard I was holding on to the hope that there was a way out and I would get back to my life. I dropped her hand and felt the air leave my lungs. My knees shook like they were about to give out. The cheers of the crowd were drowned out as my head swam and spots filled my vision. I was trapped here ... basically forever. Never to see Rhode or Sephira again. Though we were outside, I felt as though the walls were closing in on me.

I couldn’t breathe. My chest was too tight. My throat felt thick, and I couldn’t swallow past the lump that began to form. From the moment I’d arrived here, the only thing keeping me going was the hope that I’d get back to Rhode and back to my life. Malotte grabbed my shoulders. “Lily! Lily, breathe!”

Dacio rose to his feet and the soldiers fell silent just as quickly as they'd broken out into cheers. "And now the most delicate flower of all ... Lily."

No. No, I'm not Lily. I am Morgana, and I don't belong here.

"You can do this," Malotte whispered as she gently pushed me toward the stage.

I couldn't do anything.

All their eyes were on me, including his—the bastard who took me from my life and brought me here. Anger warred with sadness within me. How was I supposed to live without Rhode? I'd been holding on to the idea of seeing her again this whole time. And now I was stuck here on display for some kind of twisted contest I didn't want to be a part of. I turned around to walk back down the aisle. I had no power to display, no trick to impress anyone. Even if I did have that kind of power, I wouldn't use it to impress Dacio. Hell, or even Avalon.

"Guards, she seems a bit shy." Dacio pointed down at me from his pedestal high above us all.

Hands reached toward me, and I felt them on my arms and around my hips. It was too much. Everything was closing in on me. My heart hammered in my chest so hard I felt like it was going to explode. Malotte called out after me, but her voice was so far in the distance and I found myself hoisted up on the stage. I turned to face the crowd and stood there doing nothing.

"Come now," Dacio's voice boomed in my ears. "Show us."

I looked down at my hands and found that my frazzled nerves had that purple smoke seeping from my hands. Yet not a single petal came out. I curled my hands into fists and shoved them down at my sides. “I have nothing to show.”

Dacio leaned back in his throne with his arm resting across the arm of the chair. “We’ve all seen the consequences of your power. Let us see it in action.”

I shook my head. “I’ve nothing to give or show.”

The muscle in Dacio’s jaw ticked as if he was losing patience. “Are you refusing?”

Silence surrounded us and my body quaked with too much emotion. I’d lost everything. I glared up at him and let all my anger show. “Yes. I refuse.”

A collective gasp sounded, and everyone’s gaze swung back to see what Dacio would do next. The truth was, I didn’t give a shit what he wanted. I would never be his queen. Better for him to learn that now. He growled and the castle around us rumbled with his anger. Dust flew all around layering courtyard in a brown, hazy fog. He waved toward me.

“To the dungeon with her.”

No! I didn’t want to be trapped there again. I was tired of being at the whim of others, tired of being out of control, and tired of playing this game. They’d taken the life I’d built for myself. They’d taken my sister. Rage burned through my body, and I felt something inside me begin to unleash. Soldiers stormed the stage from both sides, ready to grab me and lock me up.

No. No. I won’t have that. They got so close. Their hands were reaching for me. I opened my palms. Purple petals exploded all around me. A scream ripped from my throat, and

they flew in all different directions, dancing on the breeze like fluttering snowflakes. The soldiers turned and started running off the stage, but it was too late for the ones closest to me. The moment the petals touched them, they fell to their knees in fits of convulsions. My hair flew out around me, and I felt power like I'd never known surge through my body.

Dacio shot to his feet and watched with awed interest. I turned toward him, about to raise my hand in his direction, when Avalon was suddenly in front of me. Flames danced over his body, and the wind whipped around the two of us. He locked eyes with me. "Stop this now."

"You took me from everything!" More petals poured from me. He dove forward with his green smoke swirling around him. He wrapped his arms around me, and I fought his hold. I wriggled in his grip. "Let me go!"

"Not until you calm!" His voice was gruff in my ear.

"I hate you." My power raged. All I wanted was for this to end.

"Calm. Now." He held me tighter, trapping my arms at my sides. His hands slid down to mine, and he wrapped his fingers around mine, curling them into fists. The petals stopped and he stayed there, holding me amidst a pile of carnage. At least ten soldiers lay in a circle around me on the stage. Silence settled around us as they all looked at me with expressions of shocked horror on their faces.

Avalon turned me to face Dacio. "Your Highness?"

Dacio smirked. "Now *that* is a show of power. She stays. Take her back to her room."

I whimpered at the thought of being trapped here any longer. Green smoke surrounded us, the wind swirled, and my

body went weightless. The only thing weighing me down was the feel of Avalon's arms around me. Within seconds, we were back in my room, and I had no idea how he'd gotten us there so fast. But it was too silent, too still in here. The walls felt like a jail cell. My breath puffed in and out of my chest and tears threatened to spill.

"Let go of me," I hissed.

He held on tighter. "Calm, Lily."

I AM MORGANA!

"Fuck off." I snapped my head back and it connected with his nose.

His arms dropped from me, and I darted away from him. I moved to the other side of the room and faced him. Blood trickled from his nose and down his face. Yet he didn't try to stem the flow or even hold his nose in pain. He just stood there staring at me.

"Leave." I spoke through thinned lips.

"No."

I met his eyes and glared. This was his fault. He brought me here and ruined my entire life. He was the reason I'd lost my sister ... forever. "I hate you."

"The feeling is mutual," he growled.

"You ruined my life." Those petals began to flow from my hands and fall in soft flutters.

"And now we are even." That green smoke flared around him, and his dark horns emerged from his head. He never turned away as he held my gaze and snapped his fingers. Flames burst around him and he was gone, leaving me alone in this hell.

All my life I'd always had people to take care of, my sisters at my side, and now that was over. For the first time in my life, I was utterly alone. I dropped to my knees and let the tears I'd been holding back begin to fall. I didn't know if they'd ever stop flowing. The loss I felt hit me deep in the pit of my stomach, and all I felt now was ... empty ... completely empty.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MORGANA



The pillow was damp beneath my head. I'd held my tears, my pain, my panic in for too long and now I could hardly stop. But I had to stop. Tears never got anyone anywhere. If I was stuck in this world, then I would figure out a way to make it bearable, and when I got back to Rhode in fifty years, well, then I'd have to explain it all to her. She'd have to live for the next fifty years and we'd both be old biddies together. I sniffled and swiped my hand under my nose and eyes. I sat up and began to pace back and forth. Monty sat at the foot of my bed. His head popped up as I rose to my feet and began to pace back and forth.

I needed a plan to get out of here. But at every turn, the castle was a fortress with soldiers patrolling the corridors. Escaping unnoticed would be nearly impossible now, and after my little show, I had no doubts Avalon was right outside my door waiting and watching my every move. Monty jumped up on the bed and darted toward the window. It was still dark and the sun would start to rise any moment. It was the time between sleep and awake when the world was just on the brink of life.

Monty darted back from the window and ran up my leg and straight onto my shoulder, but instead of curling up like a

scarf, he pressed his paws into my shoulder and held his head high and aimed at the window. His head bobbed up and down like he was studying the window. I glanced toward the thin layer of crystal and tried to look out. But it wasn't like looking through glass. Everything I saw was wavy and distorted.

“What do you see, boy?”

I was about to take a step closer to the window when there was a high-pitched whistling sound and then the window exploded inward. Pieces of crystal fired everywhere. I threw my arm up to cover my face. When I glanced up, Malotte was crouching on the windowsill. She wore a long white cloak, a white shirt, and thick white pants. Fur stuck out from the top of her cloak and the bottom of her pants. Two white horns poked out through her wild curls.

“Malotte, what—”

“—You know how to get to my father?” She flicked her wrist and wind whipped through the room, sending my furniture flying through the air to land in front of the door.

“What? Yes, I think so.” Confusion riddled my mind. “Why are you here?”

She jumped in and landed on the floor next to me. “If I give you a message and get you out of here, will you give it to him?”

“Of course I would, but he'd want to see you.” Banging came from behind the door and then shouts from the guards to let them in.

“I can't go there. I can only survive here in the castle high above everything else. If I do this, will you bring him a message from me?” Her eyes were wild with panic, and she glanced toward the door.

“Yes, I will.”

She grabbed my jacket off the bed and threw it at me.
“Then we have to go.”

“Out the window?” Adrenaline pumped through my veins as I shoved my arms into it.

“It’s the only way.” She grabbed my hand and dragged me toward it.

“Hold on, Monty.”

Malotte rolled her eyes. “Should’ve known you’d have a ferinx. Just tell it not to kill me while we fly.”

“Holy shit! You can fly?”

She hopped up on the windowsill and stepped out. Foggy white smoke poured from her body and she hovered there for a moment, just floating with that cloudy mist below her feet. She held her hand out toward me. “Come on!”

BOOM! There was a bang on the door like they were trying to break it down. I jumped up onto the windowsill. “Now what?”

“Now we’re about to get really close really fast.” She took my hand and yanked me toward her. I jumped out and she wrapped her arm around my hip and held me at her side while I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. Her power swirled around our legs like a foggy tornado, and I felt us flying up into the night sky.

Behind us shouts were still coming from the castle as she brought us higher. The air was cold around us, and I felt Monty’s body start to warm like a heating pad as he curled around my neck. He tucked his head into my neck and just kept heating me up. The air flew against my skin and tiny, icy

snowflakes formed over Malotte's cheeks, yet the cold didn't seem to bother her much.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm going to try to fly you as far as I can into the Slate Lands so you can get to my dad. He'll be able to help you from there. I'm hoping he can get you to the Swamp Lands. It's the only place where Avalon and Dacio can't go." She glanced down at the destitute ground. "I can't land there, but I'm hoping to get close enough to drop you."

"Drop me?" This was going to hurt, but I'd have done anything to get out of that castle.

"Yep. I can't touch down or I'll start to sicken. Even now I can feel my power fighting to continue." She pressed her lips into a hard line, looking determined to keep us afloat.

This high up I could see the different clans and how the land actually looked. Each clan was on a peninsula that stuck out from the island like fingers reaching into the water. To the north and at the top was the Swamp Clan, then below that was the Slate Clan. Below Slate was the Tempest Clan, and farthest to the south and at the bottom of the island was the Cinder Clan. Rivers ran between the lands and led from the mountains out toward the sea. It was actually more beautiful than I thought possible.

"Oh shit." Malotte's words drew me from looking at the clans.

"What?"

"Avalon." She hissed and glanced over her shoulder. "He's behind us."

My heart started racing as I looked back and saw his bright-green smoke gaining speed and getting closer. "He's

gaining!”

“Change of plan.” Malotte turned to the side and flew even higher but now toward the Tempest Clan.

“What are we doing?” The closer we got to the Tempest Clan, the faster she got. My hair flew back from my face and Monty’s tail grew longer and snaked around the front of my neck. He wrapped his paws around his tail, turning himself into a wraparound scarf.

“I’m going to take you to the Tempest Clan and try to see if we can make a run for it. At least I’m stronger there. Here I’m struggling.”

“Okay.” What else could be done? Avalon was hot on our heels, and if he caught me, he would drag me back no matter how much I fought.

We soared high above a river, and I could see where the water turned from rough purple-colored rapids to calm blue waters. The jagged peaks and snow-covered caps of mountains rose up in front of us. Clouds hung lower in the sky here, and the moment Malotte came close to them, she gained speed. It was like a power boost to her system. When I glanced back, Avalon was a small, glowing speck. She twisted to the side and we flew in close to one mountain. I could see roads that’d been carved into the sides of the mountains that wound up toward the tops.

She turned to the side once more and we drifted around another mountain. It was so different than the Slate Lands. Their buildings were cylindrical towers that were tucked closer to the sides of the mountains. There were winding paths between each one. The roofs of each of the buildings came to sharp points that let the snow slide right off them.

Malotte glanced over her shoulder. “I think we lost him for now.”

She dropped down lower and hovered just a few feet off the ground. “We’ll see if you can survive here. If not, I’ll try to fly you out somehow.”

“Okay.” I let go of my grip on her shoulder and slid down from her. She dropped me to the ground and hovered over me, waiting for something.

I took one step, then I took another. I spun around in a circle, waiting for something to happen, some kind of pain or trouble breathing or something that’d make me feel like I was dying. But there was no pain, only freezing temperatures. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself pulling my jacket in tight to my body. Malotte dove down and was about to grab me up, but I held my hand up. “I’m just cold.”

She dropped to the ground next to me. “That’s it? Just cold?”

“Well, yeah, it’s freezing here.” I blew out a breath and it looked like a foggy puff. Monty’s tail grew thicker and spread down my front all the way to my waist. Warmth spread all down my chest and stomach.

Malotte pulled the long white cloak from her shoulders and handed it to me. “Here. Take this so we can keep moving.”

“What about you?” I pulled her cloak around my shoulders, and instantly my back was warm down to my legs.

“I’m used to it.” She turned down one of the winding roads and started walking. “It’s always cold in the world of Tempest.”

We hurried down the path, and as we walked, I noticed the people huddled in on themselves. Their lips were chapped

with cold, and they held a pale blue tint to their skin. Snow fell in light flurries all around us, and from here the clouds seemed thicker in the sky. The sun had begun to rise, and we needed to move before Avalon spotted us. I pulled the hood up over my head to hide my wild emerald hair.

“You can’t have fire here either?”

Malotte shook her head as we walked. “We’ve tried to figure out a way to keep it burning over here, but we never can. It’s always cold and so dark.”

“Are you the leader here too? Like your dad is for the earth demons?”

She shook her head. “Nah, I didn’t even know he was the leader, if I’m being honest. Dacio keeps what little ways we have of communicating or sharing to a minimum. And what he doesn’t control, the way our powers are bound by the land does.”

“It sounds so confining.” I pulled the front of the cloak closed and Monty gave a little cooing sound.

“It is. I think we might be the worst off of any of the other clans. It’s difficult to get food this high in the mountains. Some of us can travel down to the valleys and find small animals to hunt or some vegetables to gather. But it’s few and far between. We’ve tried to grow things, but without water and warm sunlight, it’s difficult. At night it’s the worst, with only the wind to listen to.” Just then a bunch of wind chimes sounded and clinked together. Instead of sounding beautiful and fun, they sounded ghostly and spooky. She gave a humorless chuckle. “Well, except for those.”

“In the underground, they have glowing butterfly things.”

“I noticed those in Dacio’s castle. But they can’t survive here.” She motioned to the snow. “Too cold.”

The houses were tucked into the sides of the mountains, but I also noticed how snow was packed in tight around them, like it was the best kind of insulation they could possibly get. Demons huddled together as they passed us and mothers held their children within their clothing to use body heat. Demons couldn’t live like this. It was a miserable existence. Even the ones who could fly over here only did so for short periods.

“Is there any way to make it better? Does your leader even try or are they committed to Dacio?”

She stopped and pointed up high into the mountains toward a small round castle tucked on the side of a mountain and facing the Cinder Lands. It wasn’t extravagant or fancy in any way. In fact, I wouldn’t have noticed it there if Malotte hadn’t pointed it out. It consisted of four tall cylinders all built next to each other to form one building. Their heights varied, giving the structure some dimension. Each of the roofs came to a point that looked like fat raindrops that’d fallen on the roof and frozen there. Ice dripped down the sides of the cylinders, giving a beautiful shine that the sun glistened off of. There was a single balcony on the side, and a tall man stood on the balcony looking out over the river.

“That’s Herlandis. He’s our leader and a fairly good guy. He’d wanted Dacio to pick one of us from Tempest Clan in the hopes it might strengthen something and help the people. Penned was his best bet, but she died. I was a lost cause from the beginning because I hate the self-appointed Duke King as much as my father does.”

Herlandis was tall and broad with short blond hair and light-blue eyes. His face was as pale as the snow that fell

around him. Even from here I could see a sadness about him that made my heart ache. It was a sadness I saw in myself most times. “It must be difficult.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Dacio doesn’t make it any easier.”

There were empty baskets and stands every few feet, like no one had anything to trade. There was no food or water or goods to be had here—the things demons needed to survive—and Dacio didn’t give a shit about that. He wanted to make himself great no matter the cost to his people.

“He really doesn’t.”

She glanced up toward the sky. “I haven’t seen Avalon, but we have to move faster. There’s no telling where he is.”

I nodded. The last thing I wanted to do was run into him now. She wrapped her arm around my hips and held me close to her side and started to fly down the paths. We twisted and turned, and I was beginning to feel like I was on a rollercoaster the faster she moved. We dipped, turned, and twisted our way through the mountains. People and buildings flew by us so fast that everything looked like a blur and my stomach felt like a twisted mess. Just as I was about to ask her to stop, a ball of fire flew by us and smacked into the side of the mountain.

Malotte darted to the side to avoid the ball and twisted. There, high above us, was Avalon. His face was a mask of anger as he looked down at the two of us. Avalon held another ball of fire in his hand, ready to toss it our way. Malotte held her hand up and blew across it like Kelda had done to Tendreece yesterday. Avalon’s eyes widened and she hit him right in the chest with a shot of cold air. He flew off higher in the sky, giving us some space. She propelled us faster and I

could see us getting close to where the Tempest mountains ended.

“When I drop you, run. Run as fast as you can to the castle. You’ll find safety there, and Lundra will help you.”

I yelled over the sound of the whipping wind. “How do you know?”

“Because she hates Dacio and Avalon like no one else, which means she’ll like you.” She smirked and pointed to where the land grew flat and darker. A few hundred yards beyond I could see the bright orange glow of lava. “She’ll know a way to get you to the Swamp Lands and you’ll be untouchable.”

She dropped to the ground and sucked in a deep breath like the flight was exhausting. I knew we were too far out of her lands. “I can’t thank you enough, Malotte, for your help.”

“I have no idea who or what you are, but your power is something else, Lily. I know it. You can help us. I can’t tell you how or why, but deep down I feel it.”

I gave her a quick hug and pulled her cloak off and threw it over her shoulders. I didn’t know what to make of her words or if I even could help these demons, but if I could ... I would. “My real name is Morgana.”

She smirked. “You looked too sweet to be a Lily. Now run, Morgana, and don’t look back.”

I dropped our hug. “It’s good to hear my real name.”

“Go!”

I turned and pumped my arms, running as hard as I could across the land. I didn’t know why but I felt powerful and energized with every step I took. My hair streamed out behind

me, and I was sprinting toward a towering castle with rivers of lava running down its sides. When I glanced back, I didn't see Malotte, but there was a ball of bright green smoke hovering over the mountains and still looking for me. He hadn't spotted me yet, but I knew Avalon would be close by ... he was always close by. I pumped my arms and sprinted harder, praying I would get to that castle before he got to me.

“LILY!”

... not fast enough.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MORGANA



I'd gone from extreme cold to extreme heat in a matter of moments. My body didn't know whether to shiver or sweat. But I couldn't stop running. I pumped my arms harder and the ground went from hard-packed, frozen tundra to nearly black with veins of lava running through it. Steam rose up around me and tiny bubbles of lava burst as I passed. Up ahead volcanos rose as far as the eye could see. They were imposing with smoking plumes and rivers of lava flowing from them. The ground rumbled beneath my feet, yet I hopped and ran my way toward the castle ahead.

A towering rectangular pillar stood at each of the four corners of the castle. A river of lava ran down each of the walls between the pillars. Black smoke rose so thick it was difficult to see the sun from here. Ash rained down on me like snow. It clung to my hair and skin. Monty jumped down off my shoulder and ran along next to me. He jumped into the lava streams and out again as he pranced by my side. The lava rolled right off him. I would've stopped to study him if Avalon wasn't soaring right behind us. A dark, shadowy figure dropped down between me and the castle. I skidded to a halt. My foot stopped just before a stream of lava. My arms pinwheeled for a moment but I gained my balance.

Avalon stood before me in his dark armor and strands of his hair falling over his face and into his eyes. “You are not to roam free in these lands.”

“Oh, fuck off.” My power rose with my anger, and I opened my hands, embracing the feel of my smoke rising to the surface. “I don’t belong to you or anyone else.”

“You will return.” His hands were curled into fists at his sides, and the muscle in jaw ticked. Green smoke seeped around his body. It swirled and danced around his limbs.

“Wanna bet?” I held my hands out and let the first few petals fall to the ground. A pool of lava turned to hardened onyx at my feet. *Interesting.*

“You’re going to kill me?” He scoffed and shook his head.

“If I have to.” I didn’t want to kill anyone, but in this world, it seemed to become more necessary as the days went on.

He held his hand up and a ball of fire filled his palm. He tossed it up and caught it while staring straight at me. “I don’t want to hurt you, Lily.”

“You think you know me so well. The name is MORGANA, asshole!” I lifted my hand and blew across my palm the way I’d seen Malotte do. My petals shot toward him, and for the first time ever, I hoped they’d touch his skin.

His eyes widened and he leapt to the side and threw a stream of fire toward me like a flamethrower. My petals turned to ash under his power. *I’ll just have to try harder to kill the bastard.* I ran to the other side of him and shot my petals in his direction. Avalon spun to meet me, and fire rose up around him. He gathered a ball of flames in his hand and I gathered my petals. We blasted them at each other and they coiled

between us in a ball of flames and petals. Sweat beaded my body and I gritted my teeth. I'd never used power like this before, but anger and sorrow were the only fuel I needed.

The longer we fired at each other, the more our powers deflected around the area we were in. Flames spread and flickered over the ground while parts of it started to turn to shining onyx from my petals. He ran at me and threw a stream of fire in my direction. I didn't know what made me do it, but I stepped in front of it and held my hands up. The flames seemed to hit a wall and just go around me like I was untouchable by his power. He growled and threw a blast of wind at me, trying to knock me off my feet, yet it went around me once more, never even touching me.

"Sucks to be you, vice." I smirked.

We stood there for a moment with our chests heaving. He ran toward me and threw fireball after fireball. I held my arms up and his flames died before they even met my skin. He ran in a circle firing at me from all different directions and nothing touched me. The power of it pushed me back, and I felt my feet slide over the ground with each hit. Monty ran up my leg and jumped off my hand in front of me.

"Nooooo!"

Avalon fired at that exact moment and Monty opened his arms and legs like a flying squirrel. The fire hit him right in the stomach. He caught it and then expanded his arms and legs back out, throwing the fire at Avalon. Monty dropped back down to the ground in front of me and then hissed in Avalon's direction. Avalon lifted his hand and caught the fire in his palm, then threw it to the ground, shaking his hand out as though he himself had been burnt.

I chuckled. "Good boy."

Avalon charged for me, and I turned and started sprinting toward the castle. But he was too fast with the wind propelling him. He caught me around the waist with his arm and tackled me to the ground. We rolled, fighting for the upper hand, when he flipped over me and jerked me to a stand with both his hands wrapped around my wrists. He held them between us, close to his chest. His breaths fanned across my face and rage was plain on his face.

“You’re coming with me.”

“Never again.” I glanced down and jerked my arms back, forcing him to move with me. He swung around and stepped into one of the veins of lava running across the ground. I kept myself just on the edge.

He glanced down to where he stood and chuckled. “Nothing hurts me here.”

I opened both my hands and dozens of petals fell across his fingers and to the ground around us. When they brushed across his skin, I prayed they’d take him down with that one touch like they had the others. But they had no effect on him.

Avalon gave me that snide, cocky smirk. “You cannot bring death to me.”

The petals fell into the lava that was now up to his knees. One by one they touched the burning liquid, turning it to hard stone around his legs. I pulled my knee right up into his groin, connecting with his balls. He dropped my hands and I stumbled away from him. I chuckled as I turned and ran from him. I could hear his struggles as I left, and blasts of fire sparked at my back. But this was my chance. Hopefully I’d trapped him long enough to get away. I ran headlong toward that castle, thinking it’d be the answer to my problems. I didn’t

know if it was or not, but I needed to get there and away from Avalon once and for all.

As I got closer, I saw that the door stood at least thirty feet high. It was made of dark lava rock with strips of metal running across it. I didn't stop running, I was so close to finding sanctuary within those walls. I reached for the giant round knocker at the center of the door. A splash of lava dropped down from above and I leapt back from the door. When I glanced up, there was a woman peeking down at me over the wall of the castle. I could barely make out her face this far away.

“AND WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?”

“I'm in trouble and I was told you could help.”

She raised her face toward the horizon. “Yeah, I could see you are trouble from here.”

“Please ...” I checked over my shoulder, praying Avalon wouldn't be there. I thought of what Malotte told me about the leader of the Cinder Clan and how she felt about the leaders of the demons. “If you let me in, it'd really piss off Avalon ... and King Dacio.”

“Why didn't you say so?” She disappeared from the edge of the wall, and a moment later the door began to creak open. She stood there in all her glory, all statuesque and dark ebony skin. Her hair was twisted into dreadlocks and pulled into a thick ponytail on top of her head. Dark streaks of ash ran down her cheeks like warrior makeup. She wore a tight golden crop top and a long black skirt that was tight to her body and held in place by a thick, metallic-gold belt.

She held her arm to the side, giving me space to walk in.
“Welcome to Ashington Keep.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MORGANA



When the doors closed behind me, it was the first time I'd taken a breath since I'd gotten to Isramorta. The castle was so different than the Tempest or even Slate Lands. It was a big square room with extremely high ceilings. There were rectangular openings that would be windows on all the walls, but the thick flow of lava on the outside of the castle was the only view from each of the openings.

"I'm Morgana." I didn't know if I should offer her my hand or not, but it felt good to finally say my name to someone.

"Lundra." She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at me. I didn't know what to say but I found when I couldn't figure out what to say it was best to say nothing at all. "Well, are you going to tell me why you're here or not?"

I looked at the door. "First, are you sure Avalon won't come after me here?"

She smirked. "He wouldn't dare. He's powerful enough, but this is my castle and my clan. He's lucky to be accepted as part of it. He wouldn't jeopardize that."

I let go of a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Very well."

“So, again, what business do you have here?”

She was a stranger to me but the only people I knew of were Malotte, Linford, and Carlotta. And they'd helped me as much as they could. If this Amazon goddess of a woman was going to help me, then the only thing I could do was tell her the truth. “I was dragged into this world against my will by Avalon—that prick. And now I'm on the run from him and King Dacio. I need to get to the Swamp Lands and Malotte told me you could get me there to where no one could follow.”

“Before I decide to go against the King and help you, I have a few questions to see if it'll be worth it.”

“As long as it gets me away from them, then you can ask me whatever you'd like.”

“Were you part of the selection for his bride?” The glowing lava gave her dark skin a warm sunny glow.

“Not by choice. None of this was by choice. I've lost my family, my friends, my job. I don't belong here. I belong back on Earth, not here.”

She arched her eyebrows at me. “You're from Earth?”

“Yes.” I nodded, hoping she'd know what I was talking about. “I've seen this world and the way the people struggle here, the way they're bound to the clans and separated from each other ... It's cruel, and I want to go back.”

“There is no going back for one such as you.” Her eyes were nearly pitch-black, but when she looked at me, all I could see was the flow of lava reflecting back at me.

I knew I wasn't going back home but hearing it over and over didn't make the pain hurt any less. “One such as me?”

“This way.” She turned and sashayed away from me toward one of the lava-falls.

She opened her hand and red sparks flowed down toward the lava pooling just under the window. A smaller pool of it rose and hovered out between us. “Step on it.”

“You want me to step on lava?”

She shrugged. “If you are who I think you are, then yes.”

“And if I’m not?” I looked at the smoldering and swirling liquid, trying to decide if I was about to lose a foot or not.

“Then we will know you are not who I think you are.” Lundra was different than any demon I’d encountered so far. There was an inner strength about her that hadn’t been beaten out by the years of struggle for the demons of Istramorta. There was strength in her graceful movements and the confidence in the way she walked with her head held high.

I wanted to trust that she knew something about me that I didn’t know about myself. But in truth, I had nothing to lose by trying. *No other elements seem to have an effect on me, so why the hell not.* I lifted my leg and stepped on the lava. I expected it to catch my weight. Instead my foot started to go straight through it. Lundra let more sparks fly from her hand and the lava firmed under my foot enough that I could step up with the other.

She hopped on next to me and the lava began to steam beneath our feet. The hot air forced the lava to rise, and I found myself teetering as the lava moved higher. It rose to a small opening in a wall high above the room we stood in. She stepped off the lava, and before it disintegrated under my feet, I leapt off after her. We were standing in a long, dark black hall that led to a single balcony. The walls were made of

cooled lava rock, as were the floors. The building was sparse at best but still had a dark, fiery ambiance where the glow of the lava light illuminated everything.

Lundra didn't turn and look back at me. She just walked toward the opening and I followed. She pointed across the river toward the Air Lands and to the castle in the mountains. There stood Herlandis, the leader of the Tempest Clan, staring right at Ashington Castle. Lundra placed her hands on the half-wall of the balcony and leaned toward him.

“Every day I stand here at sunrise and sunset to see my husband. Never to touch or speak. Never to be with him. The heart ... it wants what it wants. Mine has longed for him for fifty years. Families have been torn to pieces and trapped with no word of each other. You now know of this hell. And what will you do about it?”

Herlandis watched her with pain coating his features. His eyebrows were drawn low over his eyes and his lips were pursed with the effort it took to hold himself there, like being away from her was the most pain a man could endure. It was the pain of a husband losing a wife. The torture of being so close yet so far.

“But what will *I* do?” If I could find a purpose here, something to make me feel somewhat whole and possibly piss off Avalon and Dacio in the process, I would do it.

“Come.”

She didn't wait for me, she just walked away. I tried to keep up with her long strides. She led me down one hall and then another. I only paid attention when she shoved open a set of doors and we stood in a room with no windows and a single pool of lava in the middle of it to illuminate the walls. On the wall across from the door was a huge tree depiction in a dark

carving. The branches extended up the wall and over the ceiling. Eight women held hands and surrounded the tree, each of them wearing a loose-fitting dress.

The dull hum of pain buzzed in my head, and I tried to shake it off. “What is this?”

“It is the sacrifice.”

Her words sounded so familiar, and the pain grew more intense. I pressed my hands to the sides of my head and hunched over. “Why? Why does it hurt?”

“Because you are holding back the memories.” She started to walk around me in a slow circle and words flowed from her mouth like a river.

“What memories?” My knees gave out and hit the floor.

“The eight were the ones to save us. They sacrificed themselves to save all of Tarrea. Let the memories flow over you. For if you know, then the future will grow brighter. Listen to me and hear my words.” She sucked in a deep breath. “By my blood, make thee whole. Sever the bonds, claim his soul.”

Her words didn’t make sense to me, but I heard them echoing through my mind. They grew louder until I couldn’t hear anything. The pain exploded and I was drawn into my mind so fast my body toppled over and I hit the ground. My mind raced with memories that dragged me under.

I took the chalice with both hands and spoke a vow I knew would bind me in this life and the next. “A gift returned in kind. My blood and soul, I will bind.”

I knew why I was here and what was about to happen. Through my whole life, I’d always known death to be beckoning me and now I would answer the call. My heart ached for the love I would leave behind. But Avalon had

always been for the people and put them first. My one regret is that I hadn't gotten to say goodbye to the one man who showed me what love really was. For that I would be grateful. For that I found the courage to end this war for us all ... for Terrea.

The Sacred Tree had been desecrated, the roots stolen out of an act of selfishness and a grab for power. The tree that brought life to this world was now a dark, grayish blue. They'd once been vibrant and colorful with pink and white flowers. It was time to right the wrongs of the past. We'd all drank from the chalice and taken our blades, and now as one we pointed them toward the tree where the bastard who'd done this to our world was trapped by the branches ... Valandrial

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE,” we chanted together. “SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

Violet mist coiled around Valandril's hands, filling his palms. I was once from his vampire court before I'd been turned demon, before the explosion that changed half the vampires of our world ... including me. I knew he was going to try to use his power over nightmares on us, but my sister was just as powerful. I squeezed her hand and she let her own magic flow over her arms. My faith in her would never waver. She'd tried to save me, and for a short time, she'd succeeded, only pausing death for a moment before it took me too.

I grinned and shook my head as we chanted together, “BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

All at once we brought our blades down to our right hands, then dragged the sharp tips across our palms. Pain coursed through my body, but I was used to pain and blood. I switched the blade to my other hand, and along with the other, dragged it over my skin. It burned down my arms and I felt my skin

part. The smell of blood filled my nose and the blade turned to ash in my hands. It fell like a drifting mist down the water, surrounding me. All that was left was a single gemstone in my palm. My blood coated it dimming the vibrant color.

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL,” we chanted a fourth time as the sacred pool rippled and pulsed with our power.

Burning. So much burning. It felt like fire spreading through me. I’d grown immune to the elements of the demons, but this was inside me, burning from the inside out. If I dared to scream or let the agony show, it’d make this unbearable. I grabbed onto Rhode’s hand and held it for dear life. In the past, when my pain grew unbearable, I forced my mind to think of the one thing that brought me joy ... Avalon.

The way he smiled.

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

My sister trembled beside me, and I held on tighter. Her pain was my mine her blood was mine. Forever we were in this world together or we would part it together. So much power flowed with us and over our bodies. Blood burst from between our grasped hands. It poured into the sacred pool beneath us. Crimson rivers sliced across the surface like oil on the water, together yet never mixing.

Magic flowed from each of the girls like the tree beckoned our power to use it for what happened next. There were streams of bright pink. Hydrangea blossomed across the water from the dragon kingdom. Shadows of wolves ran along the water and ice followed in their path. Blood sizzling like molten lava poured into the crystalline waters. Sky blue mist swirled in the air just like Rhode’s had. We all acted as one, calling on

our parts of the world for strength. Each of this power was a piece of us, the eight who would make the ultimate sacrifice.

My eyes roamed over each one of us, knowing the end was coming. Yet the excruciating pain hadn't stopped, and I felt my own petals want to rise and fly out over the rest of us. But if I let them go now for even a moment, they'd all die with just a single touch. I tried to hold back as much as I could. With this one act, we would save Terrea ...

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

Our blood hit the trunk of the tree and it swelled as though it took a deep breath. The branches swayed and stretched. Thick roots rose from the book and coiled around Valandril's body, squeezing him so tight. His arms were yanked backwards until his bones snapped. Valandril threw his head back and screamed. Narrow strips of roots slithered across his limbs and chest, digging bloody valleys into his skin.

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

One more time. Just one more time. One chant from each of us and this would end. We could do this. I knew we could. Our strength, together, was like nothing I'd ever felt or seen.

“BY MY BLOOD, MAKE THEE WHOLE. SEVER THE BONDS, CLAIM HIS SOUL.”

Roots shot up from the water and hammered through my skin. I threw my head back, closing my eyes and letting the pain rip through me as the roots wound their way up my arms, tearing away my flesh. Tears spilled over my cheeks, and I let them flow, silently waiting for this to end. I felt my sister at my side, her hand in mine, her blood in my veins. We'd always

been like one, and I would never leave her just as she would never leave me.

Determination coursed through my body just as more pain came. My back bowed and I tried to take myself someplace else in my mind, to my days and nights spent wrapped in Avalon's arms, I remembered what it felt like to be held by him, the way his taste lingered on my lips even after he'd gone. I'd give anything for just one more kiss from him before I left like this. I'd been selfish with him, taking his love and keeping it for my own. Now all I had was the memory of us to try to disassociate from my body being ripped apart by a thousand splinters.

"On the night The Veil shall open, nightmares claim thy sacred tokens," Abba chanted from behind me, her voice warm and singing with power in my ears. "But magic stolen comes with a cost. For by His hands blood will be lost. Bound in war, triumph is hopeless. Thy future lies in death and darkness."

Bright, golden light billowed from between our grasped palms, and I felt the sacred pool tighten around my ankles. Roots and branches slithered across me. They wound up and down my arms like ivy and connected us all. I could not see where my body ended and the others' began. Beneath them, my skin burned, and I couldn't stop it from happening. The roots crawled up my neck and over my head and I closed my eyes. Soil from the bottom of the pool claimed my feet. I couldn't move. I was being buried alive. Icy water rose up around my body. I prayed it'd stop the burning, but all it felt like was shards of glass against my muscles. All at once it crashed back down, and I couldn't find my breath, couldn't move. The end was near. Death was my life and it'd been chasing me for some time. I knew its call. Knew the feel of it deep within my bones.

“Yet on the Eve thy battle ends, eight fierce souls will make amends.” Abba’s voice grew louder, like she knew the pain would drown her words from our ears.

This was it now, and I felt it settle over me—its dark cloak ready to claim the air I breathed.

“Hand in hand, they shall unite. A pact in blood, heiress to fight.”

The trunk of the Sacred Tree trembled and roared like a dragon as it spread open in the middle. Thin roots slithered like snakes from within the trunk, then sank its jagged tips into Valandril. He screamed as his bones snapped and sliced through his skin. Just when I thought we would watch the tree rip him to shreds, the roots dragged him inside the opening in the trunk ... and then swallowed him whole, leaving behind an echo of a scream.

The tree was taking back what he stole, draining the life and magic from his soul.

Magic exploded out of the tree, shooting in every direction. It was a cloud that rolled like a wave in a stormy sea. The whole world trembled and roared as the Earth shook. Flashes of light in every color shot straight up into the sky. The trunk of the Sacred Tree turned a brown as rich and vibrant as the shades of red, pink, blue, and purple.

Satisfaction coursed through my body. I held on long enough.

“When gifted power pays sacrifice, Mother Terrea shall repay the price.” Abba grinned up to the stars and the flash of magic in the air. “Blessed be her soul reborn. Seek from where the Earth was torn. To bring peace to all lands that burn, in fifty years eight heiresses will return.” Abba’s voice was softer

now, farther away. “The lines of fate have been spoken, on the night The Veil shall reopen.”

Bright white light filled my eyes, and my last thought was, “Goodbye, my love. Thank you for showing me what love was.”

The last thing I pictured was his face as I held onto my sister one last time.

The world around me faded to black and I knew, I knew in that moment, I’d made death wait ... until now.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AVALON



*W*aiting ... always with the waiting.

Lily, or should I say Morgana, how could I have not known her real name?

I was waiting just outside Ashington Keep. The castle was a damn fortress, with its towering stone walls and flowing lava rivers. I could walk through them but then I'd be declaring war with the Cinder Clan, which would only trigger fallout with the Tempest Clan. The two clan leaders and their connection had always been a concern for Dacio. And now that I was standing outside of the lava castle waiting to gain entrance, I couldn't agree with him more. They were a major problem.

I paced back and forth, cursing that damn ferinx and the way it was attached to her. If it'd only known what she'd done to us all, it would change its allegiance in a heartbeat. I paced back and forth, stomping through veins of lava and letting it spray up toward me. But the heat never bothered me. It only took me moments to breathe free of the onyx she'd trapped me in. But it was the moments I'd wasted melting it back to lava that afforded her enough time to get away.

I should've killed her when I had the chance.

Before she could come back and betray us all once more. My love had made me blind once, but it would never again. Sitting here in the land of cinders and lava, it reminded me too much of the past and too much of what I'd witnessed. I hopped up on a boulder and sat there just staring at that castle, much like I'd stared after her before ...

Wedding celebrations were in full swing for the vampire kingdom. King Valandril had taken a bride. None other than his son's secret lover. No one had known about the love between Varan and Rhode, but it'd nearly destroyed Varan when he'd seen her walking down the aisle toward his father. No one else besides me would've known the devastation he felt. As his best friend, I knew the secrets no one else would, but I also knew what it was to love without thought or reason. Lily had captured my heart totally and completely. I'd wanted her to come to the Court of Nightmares to live with me, but she refused, and deep down I was beginning to think she had something to hide. But I could understand Varan and his turmoil.

Even now he rotted somewhere, nursing his broken heart, while Valandril asked for supplies. The level of extravagance knew no bounds. I hauled a crate of goods through the tunnels in the shadow mountains toward Brimstone Castle. The opening was just ahead, and I could barely make it out in the darkness. The moons were my guide through the Forest of Fears and toward the castle. Shadows surrounded me as I wound my way through the trees. I'd grown used to the rustle of the trees and the fog creeping over the ground.

There were hues of silver light and deep reds peeking through the branches and casting eerie shadows over the ground. The sound of trickling water hit my ears and I froze. There was a pool only a few yards ahead, but this time of night

there usually wasn't anyone in there. I slowed my pace and quieted my foot falls. The pool was a small distance away from the castle and surrounded by trees. If there was a couple looking for some privacy, this would be the place to do it. If Lily would agree to come home with me, I'd take her here and worship her body for the rest of eternity.

As if summoned from a dream, she appeared there just before me. I froze. Her hair was long and loose down her back in dark red waves. She wore a simple white peasant dress. I'd never seen her look so simple ... so pure, and with no makeup on her face. The pool held the reflection of the moon and the light glittered off her face. My heart soared. she'd come here for me ... finally. A smile spread across my face, and I was about to step out from the shadows.

"How is the temperature, my dear?" Valandril emerged from the trees closest to the castle in all his kingliness. He tossed his long dark hair over his shoulder and dropped his coat to the ground, then pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it too. His boots were next, and he headed to the water in only his pants.

NO! My mind screamed against the thought that he'd be with her, but I couldn't go away.

She murmured something in return, but I couldn't make it out. Valandril walked into the water and stood before her. She looked up at him and my stomach rolled. I didn't want to see this, didn't want to know what was about to happen. But I couldn't look away. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled something out. I squinted my eyes. It wasn't coin. It looked like a glowing branch or piece of root. He began to put the root into the water, and she reached for it, wrapping her hand around it as though helping him to place it in the water.

What the hell was it? What were they doing?

Blinding white light filled my vision and magic exploded out like a wave from the two of them in that pool of water.

I shook my head, trying to force her betrayal out of my mind, but I couldn't forget. She was there. She'd held his hand and helped him plant that root in his own pool. The explosion, the power, the change of all the vampires into demons ... it was her fault. The wars that came after and the deaths of thousands across the world could be laid at her feet. We'd all lost so much, and she was the reason why. She played me for a fool and had loyalty to him. Sure, she'd sacrificed herself, but there was no doubt in my mind she knew she was coming back. I swore to myself fifty years ago I'd be ready for when she came back and would stop her. We were stuck in this life because of her. And now she was back. I didn't believe for one minute she regretted her actions. I suspected she would come back and would continue to do Valandril's bidding or have her own ideas of how to gain power. Lily, or whatever she called herself, could not be trusted ... Not now ... not ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MORGANA



I peeked my eyes open and saw only two dots in the darkness. My body ached all over, and I was lying on something hard. I rocked back and forth, as though I was on something that was walking. I blinked against the pain behind my eyes and slowly it subsided. Lundra's face came into view, and she placed her hand on my shoulder, holding me down.

“Don't move.” Her voice was low and rhythmic. “You took a trip in your mind.”

I groaned and pressed my hand to my forehead. “I remembered ... everything.”

Sadness ran heavy through my veins, and I looked to the sky once more, watching the two moons of Isramorta glow in the darkness. How was I going to come to terms with my two lives, the things that'd happened, and the things I'd done in my past? I glanced up at the moons, trying to find reason within the world. One was silver and one purple. They'd be different all over Terrea, but for us the purple was almost peaceful, and I needed peace for a moment. Memories ran like movies in my mind. I knew it all. Everything. I never belonged on Earth. I'd always been destined for Isramorta.

“Yes.” She walked next to me, and two bright-red horns protruded through her thick dreadlocks.

“Where am I?” I lifted my head and looked around. Rivers and streams of lava surrounded us, and the Earth was dark and quiet. I lay on top of a pool of lava that only held its shape because Lundra deemed it so. But something was carrying it.

“You are in the Cinder Lands.” She looked back over her shoulder. “I will get you as close to the coast as I dare go. From there, you must take one of our boats to the Swamp Lands.”

“What? How will I get there?” I sat up and looked forward and gasped. “What the fuck?”

Monty was the size of an elephant with very, very short legs. The lava sat on his back, and he was the one walking me toward the coastal line. Lundra chuckled. “Did you think a ferinx was only a pocket pet?”

“Well, kind of, yeah.”

Monty tilted his head back and looked at me upside down. He gave a deep rumbling *coo* that sounded more like a growl than a cute chirp. Lundra patted his chin, and he turned back toward the path ahead. “Ferinx can change size and can walk through all elements. They are playful but aren’t easily tamed. They choose their owners, not the other way around.”

“This place just keeps getting weirder and weirder.” But I was starting to love things about it too. I loved the volcanos and the way it rained ash. I love the snowy peaks and the deep underground. The smell of ash filled my nose, and visions of Avalon and I together flooded my mind.

I rested my head in my hands and sighed. Lundra gave my shoulder a squeeze. “Who we are is in the now. Who we were should be left in the past.”

“I loved him,” I whispered, feeling hurt deep in my chest. “And he loved me.”

She pressed her lips into a tight line. “And now he is watching for you to leave my castle but we are far away. Shall I go back and get him?”

I shook my head. “I have all my memories, yet I can’t think of one that would make him hate me as he does.”

“Fifty years is a long time for love to survive.” She gave me a small, wistful smile. “I would know.”

The thought of her and Herlandis just watching for each other every morning and evening broke my heart. “I’m sorry.”

She lifted her chin. “Nothing to apologize for. But we bear the scars of our past, and now we hope for a better future.”

“I’d like nothing more than a better future, but everyone ...” I just had no idea how.

The sound of waves began to fill my ears, and Lundra came to a stop. “I can go no farther.”

I jumped off Monty’s back and stood next to her. In the distance was a black sand shoreline with rippling white, foamy waves. Steam rose in all directions where the lava met the water. At my back was the heat of the volcanos, and at my face was a cool breeze that came off the water. It was almost perfect. On the shoreline were abandoned boats scattered in all directions.

“Thank you, Lundra, for getting me this far and for the memories.” Having my memories back was like finding a part of me I didn’t know I was missing. This world needed me. I just had to figure out how and where.

Lundra motioned to Monty. “He’ll get you to where you need to be.”

I wanted to turn and hug her, but she didn’t give off hugger vibes. “I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“All will come to light soon enough.” The wind blew her hair back from her face. “You must go now. Avalon will not be able to follow you out into the water, nor will he be able to set foot on Swamp Land. Stay there until you’re ready to deal with *him*.”

The love of my lifetimes hated me, but I couldn’t find any hate for him. Rage, so much rage, lingered over what he’d done over these days. But memories of the way he loved me, the way he touched me, lingered as though it were yesterday. When I looked back once more, I knew he was still at that castle waiting. I almost felt him there. But I wouldn’t go to him. Something called me farther away, and he had his hatred to hold him over. Whatever had happened between Avalon and me would have to wait. There was something calling me away, and now with my memories restored, I could feel the world around me, as if the last barrier holding me back was gone.

“Come on, Monty.” I ran toward the boats and picked the one that looked like it would survive a trip to the Swamp Clan.

I jumped inside and sat on the single seat. It was a small rowboat made of thin wooden planks and held together by prayers. Monty ran toward the boat and pushed his head into the back of it. I nearly fell out as he shoved me from the shore into the water. The boat glided with ease past the gentle wake, and Monty leapt into the water and grabbed onto the back of the boat. I was about to lift an oar to row when Monty flicked his tail and we glided across the water like it was glass.

We were out on the water in no time. Monty easily steered the boat. I reached back and patted his head, and he smiled. The fluffy monster actually smiled. If he wasn't the one driving, I would've hugged him. We silently glided through the water. He didn't kick or splash, and I felt like a ghost moving through the night. We were far enough that we couldn't be spotted in the darkness but close enough that I could see the different clan lands as we passed. The glow of the Cinder Lands, the shadow of the Tempest mountains against the dark sky, and the bareness of the Slate Lands. In that castle was a King who didn't belong on the throne.

With my memories back, I knew exactly who and what he was. The demons were under the wrong impression. But most of all, Avalon was on the wrong side of history, and I wasn't sure how I would get him to see things my way. We moved so quickly I could see the Swamp Lands getting closer. Monty slowed his pace, and we slowly drifted toward the entrance to the swamp.

Unlike the intense dry heat of the Cinder Lands, this was hot and humid. Sticky sweat instantly gathered on my skin and my wavy hair had a mind of its own. There was an opening into the Swamp Lands where Monty steered the boat. The water rippled around us, but it wasn't coming from our boat. The Jaws theme song played in my mind, and I held on to the sides of the boat, feeling like I should be on high alert. There were no signs of demons among the moss-covered trees beyond the openings. But the water rippled again, and the boat jerked to the side as if it'd been smacked on the bottom. Monty hissed and we started to move even slower.

I turned back to him. "Get in, buddy."

There was no telling what was in the water, and I didn't want Monty to get hurt or bit. He quickly shrank down to size and hopped into the boat beside me. I gave him a little pat on the head. "Thank you for getting us this far, boy."

Just then the water rippled again, and the boat knocked to the side. We spun around and the water swirled into a funnel around us. We began to spin with the tide, and I pulled Monty into my lap. The boat rocked and tilted. Water sloshed over the edge, flooding the bottom of it and around my feet. A loud roar sounded, and a huge wave rose twenty feet over our heads. I thought it was going to crash down on us, but it rolled back and transformed into some kind of water monster.

Two arms emerged from the wave ... and then a face. The eyes and mouth were hollow and only made of rippling water. I could see completely through the monster. I had no idea how one battled a water monster, but I sure as shit hadn't come this far just to turn back. It roared again and looked down at me, pausing for something.

I rose to my feet, holding Monty in my arms. "We mean you no harm. I am here to seek the leader of the Swamp Clan."

It threw its head back and roared to the sky, then slammed its fist down into the water. A wave came right at the boat, sending us spinning and sloshing in all directions. Water came over the sides, and I didn't know how much more this crappy dingy could take. I held my hand out and summoned my petals. When I blew across my palm, my petals flew toward the monster and smacked into its hand, which instantly evaporated into steaming mist.

With another roar, it shot water in our direction, and I threw my petals at the thick stream. The water turned to vapor

again. We traded shots back and forth as I struggled to keep my balance. Monty wrapped himself around my leg like a tiny thigh garter. I threw my hands out and shot petals from both hands, smacking the monster in its midsection. Steam blasted out from it in all different directions like foggy tentacles. Its watery body rippled from top to bottom as it vibrated from the hit. More water rolled up its body and began to fill in the giant hole. The boat drifted even closer as the monster pulled the current toward itself to heal its midsection.

I toppled back in the boat, and for a minute my ass was soaked in the bottom of it while my feet were almost flipped over my head, water sloshing over my clothes and hair soaking me to the bone. The boat barely stayed afloat. I felt like at any moment this freaking thing was going to drown me. It belly-flopped back into the water, and the wave sent my boat flying. I was thrown off and into the icy depths.

I spun around, trying to find my bearings while I searched for the surface. My lungs burned for breath, and my eyes stung from the murky cold. I kicked out my legs and paddled my arms, but it felt like weights were wrapped around them. Monty dug his paws into my leg, piercing the skin. I had to swim, had to fight to keep on going for him. But his body blew up like a balloon, and suddenly I was being hauled to the surface. The water rushed by and when the flickering light of the moon came into view, we exploded through the surface.

Gasping breaths racked my chest and I searched for something to grab on to. There was a piece of the boat big enough for me to hold and stay afloat. Monty raced up my body and sat by my side. I let my head slump down on the rough wood. The current spun again, and the monster began to reform right before my eyes. It rolled up like a tidal wave. Monty leapt off my little raft and grew even larger. He floated

on his back like an otter. When the monster spotted Monty, it paused.

Monty let out a string of growls and squeaks, and the monster returned the noises in kind. I lifted my head and caught my breath. *Are they having a conversation?* Monty rose up on his tail and his noises grew louder ... almost bossy. The monster flinched back and turned away from us. Slowly, it seeped back into the water, melting into the surface and disappearing. I let go of a sigh and tried to scramble onto the wood, but Monty was already there. He dove under the surface and rose up beneath me so I was straddling his back as though riding a horse, even though the way he glided through the water was like a giant otter. I wound my hands into his fur and held on tight.

“Next time yell at the monster first before it kills us both, okay?” I leaned into him and trusted him to take me where I needed to be. He gave a little *coo* in answer, and I sucked in a breath.

I tossed my soaking hair over my shoulder and tried to figure out what the hell part of the Swamp Lands I was in. It reminded me of the Louisiana Bayou. Trees were spread as far as the eye could see. Moss covered their winding limbs and hung down low, touching the surface of the water. While there'd been very few signs of life in the other lands, this section was teeming with it. Giant lizard-looking things lay across the branches like iguanas. Snakes slithered up and down the tree trunks. Some even slithered across the surface of the water like dark danger noodles. Noises came from all around me. Rattling, hissing, and screeching all filled the air. Monty gave a rumbling growl, and the world grew silent.

As we drifted farther into the Swamp Lands, there were tiny huts built from driftwood. They lined the river on each side. All of them had a front porch and a sloping roof. They stood on thin stilts barely higher than the water's surface. The river became narrower, and Monty slowed his pace. A small child stood in the river beside his home. The water nearly came to his neck. He stared at me as we passed.

“Hello.” I tried to give him a smile and look friendly, but he said nothing.

More demons appeared on either side of the river. They were wrapped in shredded material, possibly giant leaves. They stood in the still waters just watching me like I was walking down an aisle to my own death. Their eyes were wide, but their faces looked drawn, almost exhausted looking. Sticks were tied to the branches and hung like homemade wind chimes. Those illuminated butterflies fluttered all around them, giving just enough light to make out the many faces watching me.

As I drifted farther, we came to stop just in front of the biggest house in the swamp. Though it was in the same state of disrepair as the others, with holes in the roof and uneven planks on the porch, it was clearly the center of their clan. Monty stopped just in front of it, and I gave him a pat on the back of his neck. Wooden cages hung from the rafters of the porch, and tiny creatures scurried back and forth within them, growing more and more excitable.

The door to the hut flew open and an older woman stood there. She was short and slightly hunched over. Moss hung from her shoulders like a shawl, and she wore a threadbare dress beneath it. Her salt and pepper hair was cut short and stood in all different spiky directions. She looked me over with

her dark eyes and smiled. Wrinkles fanned out from the corners of her eyes when her lips pulled up into a smile.

She stepped out into the moonlight and tiny lizards skittered up and down her mossy shawl. She held her arms open to me. “Welcome, Morgana. We’ve been waiting for you for some time now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

MORGANA



“*H*ow do you know my name?” Monty drifted closer to the end of the porch, and I hopped off to stand next to the strange older women.

“I have known your name since you drew breath.” She pressed her hand to her chest. “I am Padonya.”

Yeah, this isn't weird at all. I cleared my throat. “Um, have we met before?”

“No.” She smirked and motioned toward the door. “Please enter.”

I held my hand out toward Monty, and he leapt out of the water and shrank back down to his tiny pocket-size before he landed in my palm. I placed him on my shoulder, and he wound himself around the back of my neck. The demons that'd been standing in the river all drifted to stand in front of the hut. They remained silent but staring. It was hard for me to reconcile Tendreece and Lizvita with these demons. Those two somehow didn't belong here among the stillness.

Those glowing butterflies all seemed to huddle overhead and lingered around the hut. I turned toward the door and gently pushed it open. The door creaked and when I stepped inside, the sound of water lapping at the stilts beneath the hut

filled the air. It was even more humid inside and darkness made it almost impossible to see. As if reading my mind, the butterflies that'd been hovering outside all fluttered into the room, brightening it with those neon glowing wings. Hues of blues and purples filled the room, and for a moment I was mesmerized by their beauty and the way the lights seemed to linger in the air just a few seconds after each of their movements.

The room itself was very small, with a rickety table and single chair to one side. There were shelves on the other wall, and again those tiny wooden cages hung from the ceiling with all kinds of creatures in them. Some had bandages around their limbs while others looked like they were being nursed back to health. At the back of the room was a giant shadow that looked like a statue. I took a step closer and froze.

“Holy shit.” My eyes widened, and I stepped back.

“I’m impressed with the likeness myself.” She moved to stand before the statue.

“But ... but it’s me.” There I was—carved into stone and sitting in this building that looked like it was about to fall into the swamp.

The stone was light and smooth and captured me perfectly after I’d turned completely demon. The statue depicted me with my hands in front of me with my palms up and flower petals gathered in both of them. They even got my pointed ears peeking through my long wild hair. I sucked in a sharp breath and blew it out.

“How is this possible?” It was freaky to see a statue of myself.

She hobbled over to the chair and eased her way down with a groan. “Fifty years ago, I began my journey of contemplation and prayer, becoming a follower of Abba.”

“I remember her from before. She helped us save Terrea with the sacrifice.” Memories of Abba with her long purple hair and bright eyes filled my mind. She was beautiful and statuesque, with a commanding presence.

“We commune often. She told me you were coming and to take hope for Isramorta.”

“No pressure,” I muttered.

“You took a great deal on your shoulders fifty years ago, and for that the world should thank you.” She sighed. “But the world will always need the eight. The lands are in turmoil, unsettled. Now that you have returned, there can be hope.”

“I have no idea what I’m supposed to do to help.” I began to pace back and forth. “Or even what I really am ... what clan I belong to.”

“You are all clans.” Her voice was so smooth, so calm.

I felt anything but calm.

“That doesn’t make any sense?”

Padonya rose to her feet and moved closer to my statue. She held her hand up and blue glittering magic flowed from her hand and landed over me. A moment later it rose off my skin, taking every drop of water from my clothing, skin, and hair. The drops hung in the air.

“There have always been five elements in the world. Fire.” Some of the water gathered into a small bubble, and it turned a bright, glowing red.

“Water.” More of the water gathered together and she made a glowing blue ball.

“Earth.” She did it again. This time the bubble glowed green.

“Air.” The ball of water glowed a bright white. She made them hover with each other in a circle. “They all revolve in a delicate balance. Without one, there cannot be the others. You are the one who can unite them all.”

A chill went down my spine and my stomach tightened. “What do you mean?”

“Spirit.” She formed one more ball of water and made it glow bright-purple. She made the ball float into the middle of the others. “The one element to unite the others.”

I paused, looking at the glowing orbs as she made the four elements revolve around spirit the way the planets revolved around the sun. “I haven’t united anything though.”

“The powers flow around you.” She made them spin faster. “Or ... through you.”

She transformed the four other elements into long strings of water that flowed through the middle of the ball representing the elements. I shook my head. “I don’t even know what all this means.”

“It means you are the key to our freedom, to be united once more, for us to regain the family we all lost.” She turned toward me. “You are the spirit by which things flow, Morgana. It’s why none of our powers can hurt you, and why the land responds to you ... why your ferinx chose you.”

I took a step back and shook my head back. “Fifty years ago—”

“—Fifty years ago your sacrifice allowed your magic to join with others to become strong enough to stop Valandril and restore the tree. Thus, you saved us all. But this is not fifty years ago, and you are needed once more.” She grabbed my hands in hers. “You have returned, and we will rejoice in this.”

“But I haven’t done anything yet. The demons all need help, and I want to help.” It was true. I wanted to do all I could to unite them and give them better lives. I wasn’t saving one life at a time through social work. I would save them all. “But I don’t know how.”

She dropped my hands and took a step back. “Abba knows all.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Every year the tides come in and out, sometimes higher than others—sometimes unexpectedly, and when the water comes calling it will claim all in its path. But the dream to feel firm earth underfoot once more fills my every waking hour, as it does for many here. Questions of how to exist will always arise. Similar to the questions you have now.” She turned and dropped back down into the chair as though her bones ached with each of her movements.

I turned toward the statue that looked too much like me. “And what do you do in those times?”

“The same things you must do to find the answers you are looking for.”

I glanced back at her. “Which is?”

“Rest, contemplate ... and pray.”

“Pray?” I sighed. “Not all prayers go answered.”

She smirked. “And not all people reincarnate fifty years later, and yet here we are.”

“Fair point.” She was a wise old woman who clearly knew more about me than I knew about myself at this point. It was hard to believe that I was the spirit meant to link them all. I didn’t know how I was supposed to accomplish this. But there was one thing I was good at, and it was taking care of people. The moment my memories returned, so did the knowledge that these were now my people to take care of, and I would do whatever it took to free them from the lives they’d been trapped in against their will. I had no clue what the fuck the answer was to that, but something in my gut told me I would have to do something soon. Dacio couldn’t remain king and Isramorta couldn’t remain like this. *But how?*

“So, rest and pray?”

She gave me a single nod. “Abba awaits.”

“How do you know?”

Padonya rose to her feet and stiffly walked to the door. “Because I’m old as shit and I know things the young do not. We’re all granted a thousand years here, and I’m in my nine hundredth and something. I’ve seen men rise and fall. I’ve seen tragedy. I’ve seen love. I’ve seen hate. I’ve seen bonds strengthen and break. And I’ve seen what awaits. Pray.”

“Right ... yes ... pray.”

The weight of the entire demon world rested on a lone prayer ...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

AVALON



I would burn her to ash the next time I got my hands on her. I'd lost her in the Cinder Lands and now there was only one place left for her to go ... the swamp, the one place I could hardly step foot. That was one thing I'd always thought of Lily: she was brilliant. I would've done the same thing if I had been in her shoes. Except there were things on this island that she didn't know about—things that would help me get closer to her. The tunnels I'd used to move things from one court to the other in the Shadow Mountains were still mostly intact. I hadn't set foot in them since the night I'd caught her with Valandril in the pool, the night she helped ruin the world.

But now I was going to use them once more to get closer to her and either bring her to heel or lock her away forever. Either one. Didn't matter to me. The cave was just as I remembered it. It was a jagged, uneven ground made of gray slates with sharp rocks jutting up around them. Everything was covered in a thin layer of fog. A faint purple light swirled up ahead. I didn't remember seeing anything like that here. It reminded me of Lily's magic, and I slowed my approach, trying to figure out who or what could possibly have come this far into the tunnels.

I froze and pressed myself up against the wall. Voices came from around the corner. I didn't think anyone had been down here in decades, yet there were two distinct voices echoing in the cavern. Their conversation carried to me.

"I have not been here in fifty years," he snapped, sounding exasperated with the woman. "The explosion has altered it like it did the Court of Shadows."

"So this is in the Court of Shadows?" Her voice was light and smooth.

"No, that Court no longer exists. The demons own this now."

"Right. Demons. They used to be vampires and now they're something *else*. I still don't understand all of that, but I'll accept that as sufficient answer for now. Do they hate us now?"

"Some of us, perhaps."

I stepped out from around the corner to face them.

They were too small, too unimpressive to be venturing around here. He was a five-foot-five, skinny, freckled vampire with long, wavy red hair to his shoulder. His white shirt was pressed within an inch of its life and he looked perfectly ... plain. A small woman stood next to him with deep-red, wine-colored curls that bounced around her shoulders. She too wore a simple cotton gown. I shrugged and kept on talking as I studied them. "Depends on the demon, depends on the vampire."

The man's eyes widened like he'd seen a ghost, and his whole body went tense at the sight of me. "*Avalon*."

How could this vampire know me? I'd disappeared nearly fifty years ago. "You know my name, yet I have never seen

your face. Tell me, do they still talk about me?”

His skin grew paler, and he couldn't take his eyes off me. “You died.”

I smirked at the thought. Sometimes I wished I *had* died in that explosion rather than endure the pain afterward. “Not quite, unless the vampire King prefers to think of us all as dead.”

He flinched back. “Vampire King?”

I rolled my eyes. Was he purposely playing ignorant to throw me off? Was it true what Dacio said? That they all hated us? “Whoever he is, I'm sure Valandril and Varan were replaced after their deaths.”

I'd lost everything that night—my life, my love, and my best friend. I could almost taste the bitterness on my tongue. The vampire opened and closed his mouth like he didn't know what to say. But there was more here. He was hiding something. How could they hate us so? We used to be family. Even fifty years later, it still hurt to think about the losses I'd endured on that one fateful night. Something was amiss here. They were clearly here for no good reason. Dacio was right. They did hate us. They wanted us dead. But I'd be damned if I died on this night at the hands of these two.

The woman cleared her throat and stepped in closer to him. “There's been a misunderstanding—”

“Yes, there has.” My fire was my first choice, but I always carried a dagger with me. I opened the flap of my coat and pulled it from the sheath. I pointed it at them. “You're not supposed to be in here.”

The man made no move to protect himself or the woman beside him. He stood there frozen in shock, just staring at me.

I nearly lunged for him, but then he spoke. “Are you going to kill us just for being in here?”

“You’re not supposed to be in here—”

“Then put up a fucking sign at the entrance,” the woman snapped.

I fought not to smirk at her fury. Instead, I tossed the dagger into the air, then caught it again. “That would require I step foot in Isramaya ... and that is not allowed.”

The man cocked his head to the side. “Says who?”

I was getting sick of this game he was playing. I pointed the tip of my dagger in his face. I had places to be and a demon to find and lock up. “You play dumb well. I am not stupid enough to set foot in Isramaya, not when we’ve been told we are banned forever.”

“Again, says who?” The man’s face was stone serious. The way he spoke, the way he looked so taken aback ... something was ... familiar. Yet I didn’t have time to find out.

“I refuse to play your game. If you’ve nothing to hide, then tell me why you’ve come.” I motioned between them with my dagger. “Or shall we see who is faster?”

The man had the nerve to look surprised by my show. “Such animosity and vitriol. So, you have no affection for your former Court-mates?”

I gave a humorless chuckle and shook my head. “Not when my former Court-mates abandoned us right when we needed them. Pray tell me, what affection should I keep for them?”

The man seemed to be studying me as he spoke. “Were you not Prince Varan’s best friend?”

“Since I was born.” He was like a brother to me, and I’d lost him. The thought of him still pained me daily. “But one of *you* killed him before you all deserted us.”

“You have been misinformed—”

Enough of this! I knew my friend was gone just like my love was gone. There was nothing left for me. I jabbed my dagger in their direction. “Tell me why you’ve come.”

“I cannot do that while you hold a dagger in my face.”

“Then let’s put it elsewhere.” I couldn’t take this conversation any longer. Memories of loss were not where I cared to linger. I lunged forward.

The man leapt forward faster than I expected. Purple veins lit up his arms and then he changed into someone else, someone from my past ... *Varan*. My eyes widened and my jaw dropped. No, this couldn’t be ... The friend I’d lost ... But his vivid eyes were so family—his short dark hair and the sheer size of him.

“As I said,” Varan said in a low, rough voice, “you have been misinformed.”

I narrowed my eyes at him and clenched my teeth. This couldn’t be. “Remove your glamour.”

“This is no glamour, Avalon.”

NO. LIES. “Varan is *dead*.”

Varan sighed, and in that one sound, I thought I might’ve heard my old friend. “Figuratively, yes. Literally, I am quite alive. Though not by my own wishes.”

I wanted to believe it was him, *needed* to believe it was him. I lowered the dagger slightly. *No, there was no way.* I shook my head and held it back up. “You are not Varan.”

“I am—”

Anger flared through my body. “*PROVE IT.*”

Neon-purple flames shot out of the ground and swallowed Varan whole. He vanished from sight, then reappeared a split-second later *right* in front of me. “It is me, my friend.”

My one true friend is alive! I dropped the dagger and let it clang to the ground. I wanted to grab hold of him just to make sure he was real. “*Varan.*”

I couldn’t hold back. I threw myself at him and wrapped him up. At the same time, his arms crashed around me. I gave him hard pats on his back and shook him just to make sure he was real. I pulled back, looking him up and down. Not a mark on him. He was the same as the last time I saw him. I cleared my throat, reminding myself we were not alone. “And who is this?”

I smirked at Varan. “I never thought I’d see you with a female from the Court of Blood.”

Varan sighed. “About ... *her.*” Varan covered her in his purple smoke, and she flicked back. “Ow. Warning much?”

No fucking way. I couldn’t believe my eyes. “*Rhodelia.*”

She froze. “You know me?”

Oh, did I know her—Varan’s one true love who left him for his father. I didn’t know how to answer her, so I turned back to Varan. “She’s alive?”

“One of the eight,” Varan growled.

“And you’re ... you two are ...” I gestured between them, “... *together?*”

“*No,*” Varan said with a snarl, and he glared at her.

I knew the feeling well.

She threw my hands up. “I am so exhausted with your mood swings. First you tell me to die as quickly as possible, then you save my life, then you threaten my life, then you block a crazy demon with a knife from trying to skewer me, and now you regret not letting him. Pick. A. Fucking. Side.”

This was different for Rhode. I kind of liked this new her. “She’s mouthier than last time.”

Varan pinched the bridge of his nose.

But if she came back, then soon enough things would come out, and I didn’t know if he would love her or kill her. To me, love was a curse. “Did you ask—”

“She has no memory of *before*.”

Of course she didn’t. Just like Lily didn’t. “How convenient.”

She grabbed the dagger off the ground and pointed it at me. She wouldn’t get far with that between Varan and me, but I had to give her credit for trying. Her cheeks were pink with anger as she held it. “You have no reason to hate me—”

“That is not entirely accurate.” I shrugged. “He’s my best friend.”

“Ah, so this hatred of yours, Varan, is from my first life, just carried over.” She nodded and tossed the dagger back at me. “Fantastic. That seems fair. Tell me, demon twat, is this about his father? I would love a *little* reference for the animosity I’ve received.”

I easily caught and sheathed it. “She really does not remember.”

“No, I don’t. And trust me, it’s infuriating for me and completely overwhelming when an entire kingdom knows who I was and I don’t. So, either tell me what your problem is or spare me. It is unfair to drag me for what happened in a previous life.” She glared at Varan, then turned to look at me. “Tell me, Avalon, are you aware of this prophecy?”

“Of course—”

“Great, so where is your eighth?”

“His eighth?” Varan’s brow furrowed.

“*Yet on the Eve thy battle ends, eight fierce souls will make amends. Hand in hand they shall unite, a pact in blood, heiress to fight.*” She looked at us both like we would catch on. “*In fifty years, eight heiresses will return to bring peace to all lands that burn.* Do you not remember these lines?”

Varan’s face fell. “I had not thought about the demons having their own. I should have. Avalon, do you have her?”

“Yes, we have her,” Lily’s face ran through my mind, and I couldn’t stifle my own growl. “But I don’t know if she can be trusted.”

“*Trusted?*” Rhode scoffed. “Did you not hear the words of the prophecy I just said? *Make amends and bring peace?* How can you not trust her?”

I scoffed, remembering her in that pool with Valandril. “Big words for someone who does not remember what we went through. What we saw—”

“Ah, so you’re also holding a grudge from this poor girl’s past life.” She put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “I wonder how either of you would like such treatment.”

“Unlike you, she has her memory.” Her little trip to Ashington Keep would ensure that she did now. “So I have no shame for my judgment of what I saw.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Listen, I understand how this might be hard on you if you had conflict with someone in their past life but it’s still very much your current life. I don’t remember my life before, so even if I got him to open up about it, I’d have no way to defend whatever actions I made against him to cause such resentment. But if this girl has her memory from before, then you owe her the chance to explain her side.”

I scoffed. “You assume she has a side worth explaining, worth hearing.”

“From what I have been told, eight of us sacrificed our lives to kill Valandril and end the war, which is why we were blessed with a second chance at life, although with the added bonus pressure of helping to fix the remaining problems.” She threw her hands up. “Unless you think Mother Terrea chose to honor a monster.”

“Well, she—” A noise came from where I’d been. A noise that hadn’t been there before. I snapped to attention to look in the other direction. I flicked my wrist and let the shadows wrap around us. I put my finger to my lips. No one was supposed to be here, and yet they were.

A few seconds later, Dacio emerged from between two boulders. He was holding a piece of paper in his hands. He stopped and held it up. Varan’s hands balled into fists and a cold wave of energy rolled out of him. I frowned at him. Why would he have such a reaction to Dacio? We waited for a few moments in a stalemate of silence. Dacio scowled, then turned and walked back in the direction he’d come from.

I gestured for them to wait. After a few moments, I flicked my wrist and let the shadows drop. “Sorry, I just thought—”

“I thought he had died when my father did,” Varan said with more rage than I’d ever heard in his voice.

“Who was that?” Rhode peeked in the direction Dacio had gone in.

This didn’t make any sense. I frowned at Varan. “Why would you think that?”

Varan cracked his knuckles and snarled in the direction Dacio had gone in. “Because he was my father’s right hand.”

I gasped.

No, it couldn’t be. Dacio had done so much for the demons since the explosion. “What ... what are you saying?”

Varan caught my eye. “I’m saying he’s as vile and monstrous as my father, and you should kill him before he rips our world apart again.”

It was almost too shocking to believe. What? How? Why? So many questions raced through my mind. “How do you know that? Who told you that?”

“*He* did.” Varan clenched his teeth. Purple smoke coiled around his arms. “Dacio looked me right in the eye and said he’d helped my father kill my mother. That he’d killed you, killed everyone, and that I had nothing left, and then he left me for dead.”

Fifty years of my loyalty had gone to Dacio. Fifty years of service. Fifty years of being wrapped in lies ... and I believed. My stomach rolled. There was no way my best friend would lie, which led me to only one thing ... Dacio had.

“I’m going to guess *he* told you I was dead?” When I nodded, Varan continued, “I’m also going to guess he’s the one who informed the demons the vampires had abandoned them and that you were banned from Isramaya?”

This was too much. How could I have been so wrong? I believed him, believed the web of lies he’d spun. I was going to be sick. I could only manage a nod to his question.

“Well, if you still trust me, then you should know that Lord Cresswell and I have tried for fifty years to send aid to the demons. We have tried to get you to come home to Isramaya. We have begged King Marino to let us help in any way possible, for we had no interest in losing a third of our family, but we have been rejected at every word.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. There was no such person as King Marino. Dacio had lied to us all. I had no words. All this time my best friend had been reaching for me and I wasn’t there. They could’ve helped the people, helped get them things. The demons needed more than they were able to do on their own, and Dacio had tricked both sides. How could I have been so blind?

He put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “And as the King of Isramaya, my word is the only one you need.”

“You’re ...” My voice broke off in my throat and I had to clear it. “You’re King?”

Varan nodded.

I swayed on my feet. He would be a wonderful king. He would help his people. “I ... I ... I have no words right now.”

Varan nodded. “Well, when you do, call for me. Elden Palace is always open for you and yours. There isn’t a vampire

in either court who would not welcome you all home. I'll let you handle what you need to. Just know Isramaya stands by your side ready and waiting to provide any form of aid you require. And that is an open offer, without time limits or disclaimers."

"Thank you, my friend." I scrubbed a hand down my face and shook myself. I had to make this right somehow. "It is not safe in this tunnel for the King of Isramaya. Why have you come here, Varan?"

"The vault." He sighed. "I need my father's scroll."

My eyes widened. "Do you remember where it is and how to find it?"

Varan nodded.

"Go. Now and with haste. I would not be surprised if that's what Dacio is looking for in here." I needed to kill Dacio, but he couldn't see it coming. I would deceive him the way he'd done me for so long. Varan had all but signed his death warrant. I would kill Dacio and try to make things right. But they needed to get away from Dacio, and they needed to move now. We were surrounded by earth, and Dacio would be at his strongest. "I will keep the tunnel empty until you're out."

"How will you know when we're out?" Rhode asked.

"The same way I knew you were in." I smirked. "I felt your presence. I suppose I should have known it would be you, Varan. Had I known you were alive, I would have."

Varan pulled me in for another hug and whispered words of comfort in my ear. He was alive and he was here. I would forge the ties we needed with him. I pulled away from him, feeling like the weight of grief had been lifted, and I had a new purpose for myself and for my people.

I looked to Rhode and bowed my head. “Rhodelia.”

“Remember, talk to your girl. Your eighth.” She met my eye.

“Oh right, who is it?” Varan frowned. “Your eighth?”

I grimaced. “Lily.”

Varan’s eyes widened. “Lily? As in Lily from—”

“That’s the one.”

Varan whistled under his breath. “Best of luck, my friend.”

I looked at them, feeling confident I would see both of them soon. “You too.”

I had too much to do. Too many places to be. And a King to kill. But one thing at a time. First, Lily, or whatever she called herself these days. I pulled the shadows around me and took off in her direction. My eighth and I were going to have a conversation, and then her fate would be decided.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MORGANA



*M*onty grew to the size of a tiger and lay on the floor curled on his side. I glanced around the hut, looking for any kind of blanket or pillow or place to lie, but the room was sparse at best. I walked over to Monty and dropped to the floor and curled up next to him, using his stomach as a pillow. His tale whipped around and dropped over my body like a blanket. His body warmed, and for the first time since I'd gotten to Isramorta, I felt safe enough to let sleep take me. I closed my eyes and let my mind wander. Padonya told me to pray, and I had no idea how to do that, so I lay there for long moments trying to figure out how to start.

Dear Abba ...

Abba almighty ...

Yo, Abba girl ...

Priestess Abba ...

But none of them sounded or felt right. Praying wasn't something I did on a regular basis, so I was at a loss. Exhaustion took me closer to sleep, and I felt my body start to drift into the oblivion.

My body ached as I collected my things around the lone room I used at the brothel. I was going home to my sister

tonight. I'd waited to return to her for as long as I could. Avalon had been due back from one of his trade runs days ago. But he never showed up, and deep down it felt like this was the beginning of the end. I tried to make excuses in my mind for why he didn't come. Perhaps business took too long, perhaps he got stopped by the authorities, perhaps he needed more supplies. But the list of perhapses was overshadowed by the thought that someday he would leave me and that time had arrived. My heart ached at the thought of trying to live through that loss.

I held my satchel in one hand and shoved my coins into it along with anything else I could sell off to pay for nectar for Rhode. I fought against the tears that threatened to spill over. I wouldn't cry over Avalon. Tears over a man in a whorehouse was laughable. We all knew the score going in. Yet my stupid heart couldn't believe it. How could I have been so stupid to have fallen so far for him ...

Shouts came from below and then heavy footfalls rushed to my room. I jumped back against the wall and held my satchel behind my back. Who knew what kind of people would come here? The door flew open and banged against the wall. Avalon stormed into the room, taking up the whole space. His face was sharp and serious as he gazed at me with his sapphire-blue eyes. His nostrils flared, and he slammed the door behind him.

Dirt marred his face and he rushed towards me. I dropped my satchel and threw my arms around his neck. He took my lips in a hard kiss. It was so different than the gentleness I'd grown used to. When his lips parted and his tongue wound with mine, there was a desperateness to it, like he couldn't get close enough to me fast enough.

He pulled back for a second, taking in deep breaths. "I missed you."

"You were gone for longer than you said." He took my lips once more while stripping his jacket away and letting it fall to the ground.

"One of the pathways caved in." He backed me against the wall. "We had to go around."

"I thought you were through with me." I dug my fingers into the back of his neck, pulling him closer.

He gave me another kiss and pressed his entire body against mine. I could feel his hard length through his trousers and my dress. He pulled back once more and caught my eye. "I will never be through with you. I need you."

"Then take me." Desire flooded my body and heat pooled in my stomach.

His lips smashed into mine while we reached for each other. I made quick work of the ties on his trousers and freed him into my hand. As I ran my fingers over him, his hips bucked toward me. Avalon pulled my skirts up to my hips and ran his hands over me. I'd never known so much pleasure with a man before. He leaned down and hooked one of my legs around his hip.

"I can't wait." He reached between us and positioned himself just right. I sucked in a deep breath as he thrust forward and slammed into me.

Stretching, so much stretching. It was the thin line between pleasure and pain as he moved inside me. One hand dug into my thigh and the other dug into my hip as he pulled and pushed me to the rhythm he wanted. He pressed his forehead to mine and our breath mingled. It was too good, too close, too

much. Connection between us sizzled like lightning, and I couldn't stop if I wanted to.

Avalon's hand ran down behind my other thigh, and he lifted me off the ground, forcing my legs to wrap around his hips. My back slammed into the wall as he drove into me. I threw my head back and a moan escaped my lips. He pressed his lips to my neck, kissing and nipping at my skin. I loved the feel of his tongue against my skin and the way his scent lingered in my nose. His muscles were warm and firm under my grip. Any time I opened my eyes to watch him, he was always watching me. I tightened my legs around his hips and dug my nails into his shoulders, pulling him as close as I could.

Grunts of his pleasure sounded in my ears, and my body responded. "Fuck, Lily, you're so beautiful."

I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. Pleasure racked my body, and all I could feel was him. Avalon overwhelmed me on a regular basis, like there was nothing else in the world but him. He spun away from the wall and walked me over to the bed. With each step he took, I bounced on him. I thought he would throw me on the bed, but he turned and sat down, and I let my knees fall on either side of his hips. His fingers dug into my ass, and he closed his eyes for a moment and bit his lip.

"Do what you want."

"What?" The one word was breathless as it escaped my lips.

He leaned back and put his hands behind him and met my eyes. "Do what you want."

I straddled his hips and tentatively began to move over him. His head fell back, and he ground his teeth together.

“More.”

I leaned forward and let my body rub against his as I began to ride him harder. He pulled the straps of my dress down, letting my breasts spring free. He ducked his head, taking one into his mouth as I rubbed myself on him. I cried out, finding a pace that would bring us both pleasure. The sensations were unbelievable. The feel of his tongue on my breasts, the way his hands curled each time he held my hips, and how his hips moved in rhythm with mine was all so close to euphoria. Together, Avalon and I were perfection. Every moment with him chased away the emptiness I felt.

His hands dug into my hips and he pushed me to go faster and harder. The sound of our skin coming together filled the room and sweat soaked my skin. My dress pooled around my hips, hiding our connection like it was some kind of secret. I closed my eyes, feeling my ecstasy growing closer and closer.

“Come on, love. Come on.” He leaned forward and took my other breast into his mouth.

I arched my back and pleasure slammed into my body, rocking me from head to toe. I cried out, calling his name as I came around him. His pace quickened and he followed me, soaring toward his own pleasure. His body pulsed within mine and warmth spread between the two of us. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me closer. His chest heaved, and our breaths were almost in sync. He held me close to him as he twisted and pulled me down to lie next to him on the bed.

I lay curled on my side next to him with my head on his chest and my leg thrown over his. The sound of his heartbeat filled my ears, and my head rose and fell with each breath he took. He came back. He came back for me. He brushed his fingers through the tips of my hair as we lay there in silence.

“I will always come back for you,” he whispered. “Believe that.”

I wanted to believe it with all my heart, because Avalon had my heart completely. I’d shatter without him. I closed my eyes, relishing this moment. “I’ll try.”

“Where were you going when I got here?”

“Nowhere,” I lied. I didn’t want him to know about my family or the reasons why I did what I did. My secrets were my own, and I’d deal with them on my own. I just wanted a few more moments before I had to get to Rhode. Just a few more minutes and I would get to her.

... get to her.

... get to Rhode.

... get to her.

... get to Rhode.

My eyes shot wide open, and I sat up in a rush. I sucked in a deep sharp breath and ran my hand through my hair. “Fucking memories.”

It was too hot. The walls were too close. Memories of Avalon and Rhode swirled in my mind. I jumped to my feet, and Monty peeked his head up. “It’s okay, buddy, just stay there.”

I marched out onto the small wooden porch and placed my hands on the railing looking out over the swamp. A gray green haze filled the air and lingered over the water. Rhode was with me that night. The night of the sacrifice. We’d died together and came back together. I knew that now. I gazed toward the Shadow Mountains, knowing the vampires were just on the

other side of it. I tightened my grip on the wooden railing and whispered, "You better be there."

"DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU BETTER BE THERE!" I yelled at the top of my lungs toward the mountains.

She better be okay. New hope renewed in my chest. My sister was here, and I was going to get to her. I would help the demons gain their freedom, then I'd figure out how to make my way to the vampires. But first, I had the biggest thing to deal with ... Avalon.

I knew that now. To help the demons and find my sister, I needed him. I had my memories to follow, but he knew everything now. There was a thin line between love and hate, and that demon hated me with the fire of a thousand suns. So, love couldn't be far behind.

Now I just have to let him find me. It was time to surrender

...

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MORGANA



I sucked in a deep breath and tried to calm myself. I'd barely slept, and the sun was already beginning to rise. The color looked off from here. I squinted my eyes and looked toward the sky. There was a glowing ball heading right for us, and my heart hammered in my chest.

“What the hell?”

A moment before impact Avalon's eyes locked on mine and I knew he was going to take me down. He shot straight toward me, then his arm wrapped around my waist and we crashed through the corner of the hut. It exploded into shards of wood around us. We came through on the other side and skidded across the swampy waters. I smacked into the surface three times before we finally sank under. Pain exploded through my side and back. If I hadn't been wearing my jacket my skin would've been shredded. I shoved away from him and kicked toward the surface. When I came up for air, anger sprang in my chest.

“What the fuck, Avalon!?! Are you trying to kill us both?” I spun around, ready to face him, but he wasn't there. Water burned my eyes, and the taste of swampy muck filled my mouth. I ran my hand over my face trying to clear my vision.

I looked down and Avalon was unconscious, sinking lower into the dark, murky water. His hair flowed up and around his face as his arms drifted over his head. Bubbles trailed from his mouth, and he disappeared into the dark depths.

“I should let you die, you son of a bitch.” But I couldn’t. The memories and feelings from the past held me hostage. I had to save him. “MONTY! HELP!”

The rest of the hut exploded as a giant-sized Monty leapt into the water and dove down deep. Less than a moment later, he sprang to the surface with Avalon draped across his back. He hung there like a dead fish. His skin was pale and dark circles hung under his eyes. There was a blue tinge to his lips and skin. Strands of his hair covered the side of his face and stuck to him in wet tatters. Monty tilted his head to one side, then another, looking at me as if asking what we should do now.

“I have no fucking clue, dude.” I swam over to him and checked that Avalon was still breathing.

His breaths were shallow and labored. I never wanted to see what it would do to a demon to be out of their elemental clan, but I was seeing it at full force.

“He’ll die soon.” Padonya appeared on a tiny rowboat from out of nowhere.

“I know.” *I should let him die but I can’t.* The memories and feelings were too fresh in my mind. “What do I do?”

“He knows the way.” She motioned to Monty.

I rolled my eyes and climbed on his back behind Avalon. I shoved Avalon closer to Monty’s neck and held on. *Son of a bitch.* “Monty, get us out of here as fast as you can.”

Padonya waved at me and smiled like all was right with the world. “Don’t forget to pray.”

Yeah, I’m praying he doesn’t try to kill me when he wakes up. I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot. I’m that girl. The Stockholm one who takes care of the bad guy even though he doesn’t deserve it. Monty sprang from the water and took off into the air like a floating blimp.

“YOU CAN FLY?” I screeched over the wind whipping by us.

Monty gave a happy little hum and swung his legs as he floated along like a little kid kicking their legs while sitting at a chair that was too high for them. I held on for dear life with one arm wrapped around Avalon and the other holding on to the fur on Monty’s back. I shivered as the warm temperature of the Swamp Lands fell away and the air cooled around me. Goosebumps broke out over my skin, and the freezing air felt like it was going right through me. My clothes stuck to me like a sopping mess. I hated the feel of wet leather on my arms and legs. At any moment I was gonna get a case of chub rub and be walking around all bowlegged. Avalon groaned and his brow furrowed. When I peeked over Monty’s side, we were close enough to the mountains to land.

“Monty, let’s go down.” He gave a chirp and gently took us down to drop into a hidden little valley between mountains.

The moment his feet hit the ground, I leapt off of him and shoved Avalon over the other side. His great big body hit the ground with a *thud* and I backed away from him. Monty scampered around me with a little trot like he was proud of himself. We both stood away from Avalon as he began to come around. He drew in deeper breaths and began to move. Color came back into his face and his lips began to turn back

to their normal pink. He rolled onto his back with a groan, and his arms flopped to his sides.

I didn't know if I should stay to make sure he was okay or run. I knew we needed to have it out but was here really the right time and place? I tiptoed over to him and looked at his face. He really was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Beautiful ... but such an asshole. I threw my hand out and slapped him across the face. His eyes flashed wide open, and he leapt to his feet to face me. I jumped back, standing next to Monty.

He rubbed at his cheek. "You hit me."

"I should've let you die." I raised my chin even while a shiver overtook my body.

"Why didn't you?"

"I'm still questioning that." I wrapped my arms around myself.

A ball of fire gathered in his hand, and I held my hands up, ready to stop him from hitting me with it. Purple petals fell to the ground at my feet. He threw the ball between the two of us, and when he flicked his wrist, the flames grew higher, warming me.

He motioned to it. "You're cold."

"You're observant." I held my hands to the fire, and the damp of my clothing started to ease slightly.

His eyes glowed that vibrant blue as he watched me. His intense gaze made me squirm. Why did he have to look at me like I was this puzzle to figure out? Like I was the center of all his attention? I ground my teeth together. "What the hell were you doing in the Swamp Lands?"

“Looking for you.”

“You nearly killed me. Was that your goal?” I shuffled from one foot to the other.

The muscle in his jaw ticked. “No.”

“Then what was? I’m not going back to Dacio.” I’d fight him tooth and nail, with Monty by my side.

“I’m not asking you to.” He growled and turned away, then paced back and forth across from me.

“Then what did you want?” I crossed my arms over my chest. I had so many memories of him from the past that my feelings for him were so difficult to measure. I remembered him being loving and showing me that life could be beautiful. The Avalon I knew now made me feel like I was hated just for being existing.

“You! I wanted you!” He stomped even harder. “You have driven me insane for the last fifty years! The memory of you! What you’d done to me, to us, to this world! How could I not hate you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I remember everything about us Avalon. Everything. I have no idea who you are now, but I know who you were to me.” It was the first time we’d had even half a conversation, yet I felt the need to blurt out my every thought. How could he have done this to us?

He froze, seeming to hold his breath. “And what was I to you?”

I shrugged and gave him the truth. “My truest love.”

I tried to make it sound simple, but nothing between us was simple, not our past and certainly not our present. He gave

me a single nod. “There *was* that.”

Was being the key word. But I wasn’t going to throw myself at Avalon’s feet. Sure, we’d loved each other once upon a time. But fifty years was a long time. “*Was* is right.”

He ran his hand through his hair and yanked at the strands. They fell in damp tatters all around his face. “I need to know why.”

“And I’d like to know why you hate me so much. So why don’t you clarify your question and then we can go over what in the actual fuck your problem is with me. Because every single memory I have of us doesn’t give me a fucking clue what the hell your problem is. It is not adding up.” I threw my hands up. “Is it that I went and sacrificed myself without telling you? Because I can tell you right now there wasn’t time.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not that.”

I pointed to myself. “Not a mind reader.”

He sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes. “That night ... I saw you ... in the pool with Valandril.”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “And what is it that you think I was doing there? I know I used to sell myself, but let me tell you something, this body is a temple and that shit would never happen now.”

“I don’t care about that. I never did.” His words were sharp, angry. “He showed you the root and you held his hand while he planted it. You helped him ruin us all. And I just can’t figure out why you’d do it! Why would you help him?”

I blinked. *No. Way.* My voice grew deadly serious. Rhode would describe it as mom-voice. “Are you out of your mind? Help him? *Me?*”

“How can you deny it? I saw you.” Pain ran across his face, and he sucked in a sharp breath. “I couldn’t believe what I saw. What did he offer you to do that? And how can I trust you now?”

He actually believed me capable of such a thing. Did he even know me at all? “Okay, first of all, that’s offensive. Second of all, I was in that pool with him because I was dying.”

“Dying?” His eyes widened. “How? Why?”

“Avalon, I was starving. The reason I was in that brothel was to protect my little sister. Any money I had went to buying her nectar. I was too far gone. I was going to die, and my sister made a deal to marry Valandril in exchange for the ability to heal me in that pool. If she didn’t, then it would’ve been a matter of days.” I dropped down and sat in front of the fire. Monty lay behind me, curling his body around the back of mine as he cuddled up. “I let her do it because I wanted more time with you. I was going to go join you.”

As if the wind had been knocked from his lungs, he dropped down to his knees on the other side of the fire across from me. The sun had begun to rise but the rays had yet to touch the hidden valley we were in. It cast Avalon in dark shadows as the flames flickered over his face. “Rhode is your sister?”

I lifted my chin and nodded. “I saved her, and she was doing it to save me.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Fuck, Varan is going to shit himself. He’s misinformed.”

“Seems to be a theme with you men.” I rolled my eyes. “I wasn’t in the pool to help him. But when he showed me the

root from the Sacred Tree, I tried to get it away from him. I wasn't strong enough back then. I was too malnourished and weak to wrestle it from him. I tried, you have to believe I tried. He planted it and ... well ... I got caught in the blast."

He just sat there staring at me. He didn't breathe. Didn't speak. Didn't move. I wanted to tell him to stick that in his pipe and smoke it, but if there was anything this life *and my job* had taught me, it was to see things from the other person's perspective. I gave him a moment to take it all in.

"I get why you'd think that of me ... but, Avalon, I swear I tried to stop him."

"I shouldn't have," he whispered. "I'm such a fool."

"Shouldn't have what?"

"Thought that of you. Lily ..." he swallowed. "I'm sorry. *Morgana*. I should've known you'd never do something like that, but it seems there is so much I didn't know about you."

"I kept my secrets." There was no denying in my previous life I hadn't been honest with him. "I know it was me, but it was me from a different life, a different time. That girl is here inside, but I am who I am now. I will never be that. I will never be her again."

"You are perfect as you are." He met my eye.

"Yeah, right. You can see why I find it hard to believe that you think that way now—"

"—I've never lied to you. I won't start now," he cut me off. "At least I can claim that. I've made mistakes, been unkind, and done things that will haunt my every waking moment. But I've never lied nor will I."

"Okay then ..."

“Okay.”

More silence fell between us. It was all so complicated. I sighed. It was hard being with him and not being closer to him. In the past, I moved with such ease around him. Now, I didn't know what to do or how to be. “So, what happens now?”

“Now, I make amends. To you.” He motioned to the land beyond the mountains. “To them. I have so much to set right.”

And he just struck me in my soft spot ... taking care of others. There was so much that needed to be done for the demons. “And how are you going to do that?”

“I figured I'd start by killing Dacio and putting someone in his place who will actually help the demons.” He rested his hand on the dagger at his hip. I was surprised to hear this from him. Avalon was loyal to a fault and in this case a big fault. He'd given Dacio his loyalty and had served him well for fifty years. I didn't know what changed but I would take it.

“Ah, you figured out who he really is then?” Dacio had been Valandril's secret second in command. I vaguely remembered him lurking around in the shadows like a good little lapdog. This power grab was not a surprise to me.

“All this time I'd been thinking I was helping the demons by helping him. I'd been a fool. I've gotten so much wrong about the past. I believed he was a noble of the vampire court and got caught in the blast just as I had. He seemed to pull things together as best he could, but looking at it now, he made it so easy for us all to remain separate. I thought the clans cherished him. I thought he'd formed an army to protect us from the vampires invading. Now to learn the vampires never hated us, that they'd tried to reach out and he kept us all

trapped like this? I see everything in a new light.” He caught my eye. “I was a fool about so many things.”

He wasn’t wrong, but he wasn’t correct either. “People can only make decisions based on their personal experiences and things they’ve seen. You believe the lies to be true of Dacio and of me. It isn’t your fault—”

“—I should’ve been smarter. I should’ve known ...” He shook his head and a growl of frustration rumbled in his chest.

“There’s no way you could have.” I understood where he came from and why he thought what he did. It didn’t mean I was going to be a pushover about it, but I could give him some leeway. Besides, I tried to kill him too. “But I think you’ve been living in the past for too long.”

“It is time to move forward.”

“Yes.”

“How could you trust me again? How could the other demons trust me?” He shot to his feet and began pacing once more. Frustration rolled off him with every step he took.

“Well, for us, I think we’ll figure out where we stand over time.” I wanted to jump in with him and see if what I remembered was truly there, but the new me, the cautious me, wouldn’t allow that to happen. “And as for the demons, if you save Isramorta and free them, I’d say that’s a pretty good way of earning some trust back.”

“How?”

“I think we have to kill Dacio and then unite the lands.” It was a simple answer for a complicated situation.

“You want to go back?” He raised his eyebrows.

“We have no army. We have no way of battling him. If we’re going to take him out, it’s going to be from the inside. He still thinks you’re his loyal number two. It’d make sense for you to drag me back to him and put me back in the selection.”

He flinched and shook his head. “You’ll be in danger.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You mean like before?”

He paused and bit his lip. “Fair point. But this time I swear I’ll have your back, Lil ... Morgana.”

“I know you will.” I really did believe he would this time. I was going to walk into that castle in control of my fate this time. Dacio would never have a hold over me again.

“Are you sure you want to help *me*?” He held his breath, waiting for my answer.

I rose to my feet and brushed my hands off. “Death comes to us all, Avalon. It just so happens that I am death. And now it’s Dacio’s turn to die.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

MORGANA



“*A*re you sure you want to do this?” Avalon whispered from where he stood behind my back.

He was so close I could feel the heat coming off his skin, and the smell of ashes lingered in my nose. He had his hand wrapped around my wrists behind my back, but this time it was so different. His touch had been rough before. Now he took great care not to pinch or hurt me.

I chuckled. “I could’ve used this kind of treatment days ago.”

He groaned as his fingers caressed my skin. “Regrets are something I will live with forever. I will remain forever sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” I tilted my head back to meet his eye. “You’ll just have to make up for it later.”

Things had changed between us now. I was never the traitor he thought me to be, and he wasn’t quite the asshole I thought him to be. Was it perfect? No, far from it. But was it worth saving? Absolutely. I never dreamed I’d have a love affair that’d last for ages but at this point stranger things had happened to us both. A slight smirk tugged at his lips. “How can I do that?”

Multiple orgasms. “I’m sure we’ll figure it out as we go along.”

“I’m sure we will.” He gave my wrists a little playful squeeze. “Morgana, I can’t put you in this position if you’re not sure.”

I needed to help the demons. They deserved full, good lives. “On Earth, before you took me, I was a social worker—a person who helps others to improve their lives and living situations. Now that I think about it, I was probably always destined to be here and do this. I was just training for right now. So, yeah, I’m sure. I can’t tell you how many times I wished murder was an option every time I saw a kid get hurt by an adult.”

“So, it’s convenient that I took you.”

I turned around to face him and rested my hands on his chest. “Yes, making all my murderous dreams come true.”

He chuckled and I felt it under my fingertips. This close, he reminded me so much of how things used to be. I saw the young Avalon and all that he had to offer. It was hard for me to come back from hating him, but I could see why he’d acted the way he had. To be in love with someone and then to have them betray you so completely would be devastating. Even if it wasn’t actually what happened. So, it wasn’t starting over, but we would move forward from this. Together.

“Let me know what other dreams you have in mind.” He winked and wrapped his arms around me, pulling me close to his chest. “We should just arrive like this.”

I squirmed from his grip and spun back around. “Yeah, that’s not obvious we’re on the same side now.”

He pressed a light kiss to the back of my head and then burst into flames. “Show time.”

The wind whipped around us both, and my feet left the ground. Monty had shrunk back down to smaller than I’d ever seen before and tucked himself behind my ear. His little paws tickled my skin, and his fur was soft and cottony. He cuddled in and vibrated with glee. We flew through the air so quickly that everything passed by in a blur. I used to think he was teleporting only to realize now he was just flying that fast. It was less disturbing than the other brief times he’d flown me anywhere.

“Get ready,” his breath ticked the tip of my ear as he whispered to me. We dropped from the sky. My stomach went up in my throat and before I could swallow it back down, my feet hit the ground. His hand was pressed to me and I leaned back into him for balance.

The flames dissipated and we were back in the courtyard of Dacio’s castle. All eyes were on us, and Avalon gave me a little shove forward, though it wasn’t nearly hard enough, and I had to force myself to stagger forward and drop to my hands and knees for dramatic effect. My hair flew into my face as I landed. *Yeah, ham it up, Morgana.* I glanced over my shoulder and glared at him. His face was stony, but I could see in his eyes that he didn’t like seeing me on the ground at his feet.

“Ah, my most trusted advisor.” Dacio sat at a table covered in enough food to feed half the Swamp Clan. He grabbed up an apple and took a bite. “I had no doubt you’d find her.”

Avalon gave a light bow of his head. “Anything for my King.”

Bet that burned coming out of his mouth. I sat back on my heels and threw my hair over my shoulder. The courtyard had

been turned into some kind of wrestling arena. At the center of it was a wide-open square. Where I found myself kneeling now. On one side of the square was Dacio's table. The other three sides were surrounded by soldiers, who stood nearly shoulder to shoulder. Tendreece sat on his right and Lizvita on his left. Tendreece plucked a grape from the table and held it to Dacio's lips.

“What would you want with her?” Her lips sneered on the last word. Bitch, would be the word to describe her perfectly. In another world they would be perfect for each other. But in this world the only thing perfect for him was death.

Dacio's tongue darted from his mouth, and he let her pop the grape between his lips. *Ew.* Lizvita leaned onto his arm, letting her breast brush against him. “Yes, why should she stay?”

It was sickening to see the two working like his two wives hovering over him. Both were ambitious in their own ways, but Dacio knew the dynamic. It was obvious if he wanted them both they would both comply. But there was one more woman at his table who wouldn't put up with any of this shit... Kelda. She sat at the end of the table with her own plate of food. She had it pulled closer to her chest, and she hunched over it.

She glared at the two of them and laughed. “You two are afraid of her ... as you should be.”

“Surely she'd be a better addition to the army than to be your wife.” Tendreece sidled in closer to him. If she could have gotten into his lap she would have. Padonya would've been ashamed to see something like this from her clan. It occurred to me she may have sent these two here on purpose to get them out of the way, which seemed more likely.

“Why would your opinion even matter?” I snapped at her.

They all grew silent. Dacio sat forward with an amused look on his face. “You think you’re entitled to an opinion? You ran away in cowardice, and you feel that gives you the right to anything in this kingdom? In my kingdom?”

“It wasn’t cowardice, Your Highness.” I slowly rose to my feet and let my hips roll with my every move. My vest crept up, exposing my stomach, and I made a show of slightly bending over and showing the tops of my breasts.

Dacio’s eyes locked onto my skin, and I felt Avalon stiffen beside me, yet he said nothing. Dacio licked his lips and didn’t take his eyes off my body. “Then what was it?”

I pretended to be as sheepish as possible. I lowered my eyes and kicked at the ground in front of me. I let my voice drop to a whisper. “The wedding night, Your Highness.”

Tendreece burst out laughing. “What a load of shit,” she scoffed. “Wedding night.”

“Not all of us are as used up as you, Tendreece.” Kelda snickered and sat back in her chair. She ran her hand over her short blonde hair and kicked her foot up on the corner of the table. The bottom of her white boots were covered in black slate dust. “Some of us prefer not to bed hop.”

“I find the thought intriguing.” Dacio ran his fingers over his bottom lip and smirked in my direction. “Do you speak sincerely?”

“Of course,” I lied. He would be the kind of guy who’d find the virginal act intriguing. Typical.

“What are your thoughts, Avalon?”

“She was easily convinced to return once she learned of your greatness.” He shrugged. “She was willing enough.”

I couldn't look at him for fear of smiling at the way he danced around his words. Dacio glanced around and his eyes ran over my body once more. The way he looked at me reminded me of all the men in my past life. It made my skin crawl, but those memories made it easier to know how to handle situations just like this. He looked at me like I was some kind of possession to own and be treated however he liked. It made me feel dirty and used. I had to remind myself I wasn't her anymore. I was me, and there was no way he'd get to touch me that way. But if I could just get close enough to him, all it would take was one petal, one touch, and he'd be the one on the ground at my feet.

Dacio nodded. “We are still in the middle of the selections.”

“But last night—” Tendreece began, but Dacio cut her off with a sharp look.

I stifled a chuckle as I took a small bow. “I would be ever so grateful to Your Highness if he permitted me to return to his table.”

This seemed to please Dacio. “Thoughts, Avalon?”

Avalon waved his hand dismissively in my direction. “She came willingly enough. Whether she belongs with you or in a dungeon has yet to be seen.”

“Very well. You will stay.” He glanced from Avalon to me. “And we will see if you are fit enough to be my queen.”

I gave a small bow and took a step toward the table. I just had to get close enough to touch him one time and he would be dead and gone. The demons of Isramorta would be free.

Avalon and I could figure out how to free them from the boundaries of their land. Dacio held his hand up, stopping me. “Combat.”

I froze. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You will fight in hand-to-hand combat with the other potential matches. No powers— we’ve seen enough of that from you. But there is more to this world than demonic power, and I intend to see if you have it.”

Really? Was he going to throw Jello on us next? He gestured toward Tendreece. “Take your place.”

Her face turned five shades of red like she was pissed to even be asked to leave her fluffy cushioned seat to face me. She pressed her hand to her chest. “Me? Against her?”

Kelda chuckled and tossed another piece of a roll into her mouth. “A proper slap-down. Anyone want to take bets on Lily taking her down?”

I’d forgotten that these demons didn’t know me by my real name. I had to remind myself that I was playing apart in a bigger game. I was playing the role of Lily, and Lily would be wide eyed and nervous.

“I find we might not be suited.” Dacio glared at Kelda. “Your manners leave something to be desired.”

Kelda raised her glass to him. “Probably not, but I’m enjoying the food.” Just to punctuate her point, she held up the rest of her roll, then took a big bite of it.

From his hip, Dacio pulled a long dagger that looked more like a short sword and handed it to Tendreece. “I am counting on your success.”

Then he turned to Avalon and waved toward me. “Give her what she needs.”

I didn’t know what was happening, but it felt like something was off right now. This whole thing didn’t feel like Dacio. He liked to play games and toy with people. A straight-up fight wasn’t his style. He was a sneaky son of a bitch. We both knew this just based on his past actions. But I didn’t have time to question it. Avalon pulled his own long dagger, which also looked to me like a short sword, from his hip. He handed it to me hilt-first. He leaned in close and whispered, “She’s tall and fast. Dodge and strike as much as you can.”

I pressed my lips into a thin line and took the long dagger. I’d only had some limited self-defense classes on earth, and now I was expected to do this. Sword fighting? I was def going to get cut. But the first thing they taught us in that class was: in a knife fight just come to the realization that getting cut was going to happen and fight like hell anyway.

“I’ll try not to die.”

“Good. I can’t deal with it a second time around.” Avalon acted how he would have in the past, he didn’t look me in the eye. Instead, his eyes roamed over every inch of the castle.

The truth was I wasn’t going to get myself killed. I’d hit her with petals before I’d let that happen. I turned away from him and faced Tendreece. She bounced on the balls of her feet and swung the long dagger back and forth in front of her. She wasn’t in her typical seaweed-looking dress. This time she wore a calf-length skirt with a slit up the front, a black metal crop top, and lace-up boots.

“I like the upgrade to your wardrobe. Who’d you have to blow for that?” I glanced in Dacio’s direction. “Oh wait, don’t tell me. We all already know.”

She let loose a wild scream and lunged toward me, swinging her dagger downward. I turned to the side, dodging it. She swung again and I turned the other way. Again, she missed. She jabbed forward and I swung my sword in a circle. It hit hers, knocking the tip of her blade away. She stumbled back for a moment, and I held my sword up, pointed at her chest. We slowly circled each other as everyone watched. She sprinted toward me, swinging from side to side. I charged at her and ducked under her swing and wrapped my arms around her legs. I tugged her knees and threw my shoulder into her stomach. The sword clattered to the ground as she flopped down onto her back and the air whooshed from her lungs.

I took a step back. “Come on, Tendreece. Enough of this.”

She screamed again as she leapt for her sword and grabbed it up then ran across the area at me. She tried to stab her sword right into my stomach. I spun to the side, dodging her easily and catching her with my backhand across the side of her face. Her head snapped back, and she staggered away. The soldiers flinched back with a collective *Ohhhh*. I shook my hand, trying to get rid of the sting.

“That had to hurt.” I raised my sword and went on the attack. I swung for her, and she put her sword up. They clanged together with each hit. Tendreece was breathless and wild, while I tried to remain in control. If I lost my temper this would be over. I stepped back and let her hack away. Instead of swinging her sword side to side, she swung it like it was an axe, over and over again, trying to bash me down into the ground. I held my own sword up, deflecting her blows.

“Why won’t you just die already!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. Sweat beaded on her face and rolled down her neck. She leapt to the side, and I went to block the blow, but

she was too fast, and she sliced a line across the back of my forearm. Pain shot through my body, and a warm trickle of blood ran down my arm and dripped off my fingers.

“Fuck!” I jumped away and she stood there smirking at me with a wild cackle.

That was it. I wasn't playing anymore. I dove toward her with my sword in hand. I spun and swung for her midsection. She tried to leap back, but the tip of my blade ran across her side, slicing her skin. She let out a cry as blood ran down her hip. She pressed her hand over it and limped to the side, but then seemed to shake it off and charged at me. I swung my sword, knocking hers to the side. *Time to die!* I jabbed forward right for her neck.

A piece of rock flew between Tendreece's neck and my sword, stopping what would have been a killing blow. Dacio was there in a second, taking her sword and shoving her out of the way. She toppled to the side and fell to the ground a few feet away. She curled in a ball holding her injury.

He held up the sword, aiming at my chest. I froze, staring him in the eye. “No powers? Following your own rules, I see.”

“You think I would dare take you for my queen?” His lip curled in disgust. “You have no obedience in you.”

Tendreece crawled to her feet and staggered toward him. She clung to his arm with her blood covered fingers. Her face was contorted in pain and her breaths were labored as she spoke. “Yes, kill her.”

He shoved her away and she fell back to the ground. “Too weak to do it on your own.”

Dacio stepped in front of her to face me. “Still, she will do for my needs.”

“Ew.” I didn’t move, didn’t dare breathe. Avalon stood there, watching the two of us as green smoke seeped from his hands, and I gave him a slight shake of my head. I just had to get close enough. The most difficult part was that Dacio was covered from head to toe in armor. The only bare skin in sight was his face.

“You are difficult, wild, and dangerous. There is nothing about you that would make you worthy of being my queen. Your power intrigued me for a time, but even that can’t save you from your fate.”

“Which is?” I tightened my grip on my sword, and purple smoke seeped from my hands. The need to throw petals his way burned within my chest. But he was a better swordsman than Tendreece and I didn’t have enough experience to take him on. Even if I wanted to, he would beat me in a sword fight. I knew it and so did he.

“Death.”

“I am death, bitch.” I gripped the sword tighter.

“Now we’ll see if you survive it.” His muscles tensed, about to strike.

“No!” There was a blur of green smoke, and the sword was ripped from my hand just as Dacio lifted his own to strike at my neck.

Avalon was there in front of me blocking the blow with the sword he’d given me. The two swords smashed together, and sparks flew across the hard-packed ground. Avalon planted one foot and kicked out with the other. His foot connected with Dacio’s chest, sending him stumbling back. Avalon leapt

forward and sliced his sword right across Dacio's midsection. The braided armor seemed to move around the sword. White, icy smoke flew from his midsection, and the armor re-braided itself together. *What the hell? Magical protective armor? Of course Dacio has magic armor. Why wouldn't he?* I'd never seen anything like it.

Again, Avalon struck another blow to Dacio and again the armor protected him. It morphed and wove back over him each time. It didn't matter what angle Avalon tried nothing was getting through. Icy mist flew from each of the attempts pulled the piece of armor back together. I didn't know what kind of magic it was, all I knew was that it was a fucking problem. How did we kill someone who had armor like this?

Dacio hauled his arm back. "TRAITOR!"

He looked between Avalon and me as if trying to decide who he wanted to kill first. Dacio let his sword fly in my direction and time seemed to slow. Avalon turned toward me, and fire exploded around him. The sword headed straight for my chest, but I couldn't move. Avalon dove toward me and wrapped his arms around my waist, knocking me off my feet. The sword flew an inch from my face. Flames surrounded us and in less than a second, we were gone ...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

MORGANA



We crashed back into the valley between the mountains. Avalon had both hands on my shoulders, and he held me away from him, looking me up and down. “Fucking hell, Morgana. Are you okay?”

He held my arm out and pulled my leather jacket from my shoulders then tossed it to the ground. I tried to pull my arm back. “Heyyyy.”

But it didn’t stop him. Panic was plain on his face, his eyes were wide with worry, and he couldn’t stop his hands from roaming over my body. He patted me from head to toe, and when he got to my head, Monty scrambled down my body to the ground, where he hissed in Avalon’s direction.

Avalon hissed back. “And where were you when she was fighting?”

“I was calm the whole time. Until Dacio stepped in,” I sighed, “then, not so much.”

“Are you okay?” His hands were back at my shoulders.

“Yes, Avalon.” I held my arm out and showed him that the cut had already stopped bleeding. “I’m fine.”

He let go of a deep breath. “I thought I was going to lose you before I even got the chance to have you.”

“I’m here.” I tried to reassure him. But even I had to admit it’d been a little too close.

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me flush against his body. His mouth crashed over mine, and a million different emotions ran through me all at once, like a dam had been broken. I remembered what it felt like to be kissed by him, but this was so much more—the way his lips felt against mine, firm and commanding. He was so filled with need it made my toes curl. The flavor of his tongue against mine had me wanting so much more than just a kiss. We’d gone years without each other and now we were so close I wanted to stay like this eternally. It was a silent wish I had for myself to forever be close to him and to remain forever in his arms.

He pulled back too quickly and looked down at me. “I’m sorry, I just had to.”

“Don’t apologize for that ... ever.” I felt breathless and excitement each time our lips touched. I couldn’t not get enough of him.

“I just ...” His breath heaved. “I could’ve lost you.”

The blade had come way too close to me. I knew it and he knew it. “But you didn’t lose me.”

“I never will.” He curled his hands into fists and held them at his side. Green smoke seeped around his body as he vibrated with emotions. “We just need to figure out a way to kill Dacio. That first blow should’ve taken him down. And he shouldn’t have been able to walk away from the rest of my attack.”

“Yeah, what the hell was that with his armor? I’ve never seen anything like that before.” That white, icy smoke was

eerie as shit. “And then the armor wound itself back together. It’s like he can’t be touched.”

Avalon turned away from me and began to pace. “Because it is. He had to have made it with his own power mixed with something else.”

“That was not demon power. I’ve felt demon power. Hell, I *am* demon power. That was something else.”

He paused and his eyes widened. “It can’t be.”

“Share with the class.” I motioned to myself. Monty ran back up my leg and planted himself around my neck once more.

“That kind of magic can only come from one place, the fae Winter Court. And there is only one way to counteract it—to get something from the fae Summer Court.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

I wrinkled my nose at him. Knowledge of the other islands in Terrea was limited at best. I only knew there were eight other kingdoms but their inner workings were kind of a mystery at this point. “How do you even know that?”

“It’s been a long and strange fifty years. But I’ve had some run-ins with the fae, or should I say, unfortunate experiences. They don’t take well to people trespassing on their land, and they certainly don’t do favors for free.” He gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. “And we need a favor.”

Why did I get the feeling we were going to need to go somewhere and do something I really didn’t want to? “What kind of favor?”

“We’re going to need some kind of dirt or flower from the fae Summer Court. If it just touches his armor, it should deactivate the power from the Winter Court.”

“And that should make him vulnerable enough to kill him? I find that really hard to believe.”

He nodded. “In theory it should work. Those courts are opposites and one’s magic should be able to counteract the other’s... in theory.”

“You keep saying in theory and it doesn’t make me feel any better.” I sucked in a deep breath and blew it out in a sigh. “But we don’t have any other choice. One way or another Dacio has to go down. So it looks like we’re taking a trip to Talamh then. They do still call it that, right?”

He chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, they still call it that.”

“When should we leave?” I wouldn’t have minded having a moment alone with him. But I knew time was of the essence.

As if reading my mind, his face softened, and he moved in closer to me. “I would love nothing more than to take a moment with you. But I know Dacio, and he will come looking for us, and it won’t be long before he finds us.”

“How are we supposed to get there?” I’d seen what happened when he crossed out of his lands and into the Swamp Lands. He had nearly died. “I mean, can you even go?”

He pressed his lips into a hard line. “I have a theory.”

“Another theory? You’re really pulling those out of your ass right now.” This did not sound comforting.

“Yeah, but it’s all that we’ve got.”

He wasn’t wrong. “Okay tell me.”

“Your petals didn’t kill me, and my power had no effect on you. So, I think if you and Monty just stay close enough to me,

I might be able to, I don't know, somehow tap into your immunity to the magic of the land... So long as you stay close."

"That sounds insane and like it could get you killed." I crossed my arms over my chest. "Terrible idea."

"Have you got a better one? Because from where I'm standing desperate times call for desperate measures and we have hit desperate times. We can't give Dacio time to plan or regroup. Because he will be ready and waiting." He moved in closer and held his hand out toward mine. "Let's just try to see if it works."

I licked my lips and shifted from one foot to the other, trying to calm my nerves. Sure, I'd tried to kill him before, and he'd tried to kill me, all's fair in love and war, after all, but I definitely didn't want him dead now. I wanted him very much alive and with me. We were figuring our shit out, taking names, kicking ass, and planning to assassinate bad guys. "This feels like a bad way to, you know, test something like this out."

He held his hand out. "Come on, Morgana. Don't back out on me now."

I let my powers flow through my body and into my hands. Purple smoke seeped from my palms and two small petals formed there. I placed my hand over his and the petals turned to ash against him, and I sucked in a sigh of relief. "At least you didn't die."

"Look, all you have to do is let your power flow. As long as you're touching me, and it should work." He looked so confident, like this was his hold-my-beer moment, and I was not here for it.

“Should?” I pursed my lips. “I don’t just want to fly over the ocean on a whim. Or a maybe this might work or maybe it won’t. You’re too important to me.”

“If you can walk into this world without an ally and no knowledge of how it works, or how your powers work, and make all this happen then you can give me the chance to prove this theory and actually help you. We’ll fly over the swamp lands to test it. If I start to falter, then we turn back and find another way.”

I sighed knowing he was right, knowing there was no other answer. I had to admit defeat. “So now?”

He bent down and swept his arm under my legs and scooped me up close to his chest. “Now.”

Monty shrunk to his tiny size again and crawled behind my ear just as Avalon surrounded us with that green smoke and we took off flying as fast as he could. The world blurred around us, and the wind blew my hair from my face. I held my hand on his shoulder and let my magic flow. An almost invisible purple haze covered him, and he smirked down at me.

“We’re over the swamp lands.” He’s moved so fast I could hardly believe it. “And I’m good.”

“Cocky is not a good look on anyone.” I couldn’t help but smile back at him.

He flew so fast it was difficult to tell where we were, but as we approached the fae lands he slowed enough that I could make out the difference between the two sides of the island. One was like a permanent winter had fallen with snow and ice, and the other was bright and colorful with wild plants and warmth. Avalon turned and headed toward a canopy lower on the land. Vines grew over a dome-like structure hiding the fae

within. But I could see them moving around and hear the murmurs of their voices.

“You ready?”

No. “As I’ll ever be.”

He slowed down even more and allowed us to drift into what looked like a training area. There were green satin chairs spread all around and a circular area where two women stood. Vines and flowers grew in all different directions, winding around the canopy in an array of beautiful colors. I got a sinking feeling in my stomach, like we weren’t supposed to be here.

“Avalon.” I lowered my voice. “I don’t think they’re going to help us.”

“We have to try,” he whispered back just as we landed.

“Secure the palace!” a woman wearing golden armor covered in leaves and thorns bellowed. Her eyes were sharp as she watched us touch down. She was delicate-looking with long, dirty blonde hair twisted into sections, and pale skin.

She drew her sword, as did a man at her side. He was taller, perhaps a bit stocky, with thick hair and a rigid stature.

This welcome party is so fun.

Avalon let his smoke drop and let us appear to all around us. “Queen Orla, we mean you no harm. It’s Lord Avalon from the demon kingdom of Isramorta. Morgana and I have come to ask a favor of you. May we join you?”

The Queen stood there appearing almost bored as she looked us up and down with deep hazel eyes. She was beautiful, to be sure, with long, red wavy hair that flowed down her back. A golden vine crown circled her head. She

wore a dark red dress that was cut in a low V and embroidered with gold.

“A favor, you say.” The Queen chuckled. “Come. Join us, but at the first sign of a threat, we will kill you without remorse.”

I got the feeling killing without remorse was a way of life for them.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Avalon let me slide down his body and place my feet on the ground next to him, but I didn’t leave his side, trying to keep that invisible purple haze over him.

Orla stepped toward us. “What is it you need? We are about to leave for the Comortas.”

“This request won’t take long.” He licked his lips and moved to stand just an inch in front of me, almost like he was trying to protect me. “King Dacio stole some land at the corner of the Winter Court territory and has used his earth magic to create his own personal armor that isn’t permeable by any demon magic or weapon, so we aren’t able to injure him.”

The Queen looked as if she didn’t believe such a thing was possible, so he continued to explain.

“Frost sparks from it with every blow, but we believe that if we could obtain some soil from the Summer Court with its fire abilities and use it against him, we would be able to pierce his armor so we can defeat the king and bring peace to our lands. Instead of taking something that isn’t ours to take, as did the King, we came as a show of good faith and to get your permission.”

Even as he explained it all, it made my desire to kill Dacio that much stronger.

“And what do we get out of this?” Orla crossed her arms and arched a brow.

Avalon let his face settle into his deadly serious mask. His lips pursed and the muscle in his jaw ticked. “The satisfaction of knowing that an evil tyrant will be eliminated and not a threat to your lands any longer.”

Oral laughed. “As if he would be a threat to us. Unless you can give us something of equal value, the answer is no.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. They could’ve just taken the soil. They should now just because you’re being stubborn,” said a slender woman from the other side of the training area. She had strawberry blonde hair and forest green eyes, and I swear I knew her from somewhere before. Her face was so familiar.

“Alina,” warned the woman who’d drawn her sword.

Alina! This is the girl from the sacrifice! I knew I’d recognized her. I wanted to run to her, to ask what she’d been through, to find out how she was in fae. Did she find the world as disorienting as I did when I arrived? But I held still. There was so much riding on this one moment I didn’t dare ruin it with my own curiosity.

Orla snarled and glared at Alina. “You aren’t Queen, so keep your mouth shut.”

Avalon scooped me into his arms, waiting just a moment longer. I rested my hands on his shoulders.

“Fine.” Alina threw her hands up and strolled over to the weeping willow tree and leaned against it. But Orla had already turned her attention back to me and Avalon.

“Like I said, the answer is no. This sounds like a Winter Court problem.” Orla expanded her wings, making her status

known. “And my people will watch you leave to ensure that you don’t take anything with you.”

“I told you,” I whispered to Avalon. The fae were not known to help unless there was more in it for them.

“Now, we must get ready.” Orla pointed at Alina. “You should go to your room. You have a big afternoon ahead of you.”

She pushed off the tree and stumbled right into Avalon and me. “Oh, excuse me,”

She put her hand on top of mine and slipped some leaves between my fingers. She staggered away. “I’ve been training hard and must have overextended myself there.”

I tried not to hug her. Instead, I could only mouth the words *Thank you* as one of the other fae marched her away. I whispered just for Avalon, “Go. Now.”

“We shall take our leave.” Avalon burst into flames and took us shooting toward the sky. Once we were far enough away, he glanced down at me. “What was that?”

“She gave me what we needed.” I closed my fist tighter around the leaves, making sure we didn’t lose them over the water.

A wide smile spread across his lips. “Thank fuck for that. Now what?”

“Now ... we pray.”

His brows furrowed. “What?”

I chuckled and held him tighter. “You’ll see.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

MORGANA



A valon stood just behind me as I bent down and knelt over the dirt on the side of the riverbed. Mountains rose up around us and the sound of running water came from the river that divided the vampires from the demons. The water had run purple long ago and trickled down into Isramorta. Long strands of his hair blew across his face as he gazed over the mountains toward where the vampire's temple stood. His eyes glowed in the dim late afternoon light. The mountains cast shadows over us, and a cool wind whipped around. From here I could smell the salty sea air mixing with the warm steamy air of the Swamp Lands.

“I don't think I'm getting what you're saying.” His voice was gentle beside me as he watched what I was doing.

“I didn't get it at first either.” I drew a circle in the sand. “But I get it now.”

“You're not making any sense, love.” He dropped down to his knees next to me.

“When Padonya said I had to pray to Abba, I was thinking about it too much in terms of like how people on Earth pray to whichever God they choose. But Abba is here, in the now.”

He nodded. “Yes, she's everywhere.”

I drew a picture of a tree within a circle. “Years ago, when Rhode and I went to the temple, there was a gorgeous white tree there, and I feel like if we can just make something like that, then maybe we can get her attention and ask for some help.”

“I’m not sure she can just give us the answers to these things.”

I sat back on my heels and stared down at my little drawing. “Yes, but I don’t have a better idea. I get that if we touch Dacio with the Summer Court leaves, it should counteract the Winter Court magic in his armor, which will help us kill him, but what about after that? What next? How do we free our demons from the restraints on their clans?”

He rubbed his hand over my back. “Perhaps the answer isn’t going to happen now? Perhaps it will have to reveal itself in time?”

“But we have to try now, right?”

“Absolutely we do.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Green smoke seeped around him, and his face smoothed out.

I opened my hands and my purple magic drifted up from my palms. Tiny petals drifted and spun around the two of us. The cool breeze ruffled my hair, and for the first time since I got here, serenity overcame me. I tried to put everything out of my mind and only focus on the things around me: the smell of the mountains and sea, the sound of the trickling water as it moved over the riverbed, the feel of the shadows on my skin ... and I thought only one thing.

Abba.

A bright white light shined and I blinked open my eyes. There stood Abba in all her glory. She was beyond beautiful, with long, wild purple hair and bright lavender eyes. She wore a long white dress that reminded me of something a Greek goddess would wear. The breeze ruffled her dress and sent her long hair drifting to the side.

A light smile played on her lips. "Hello, demons."

I bowed my head lower. "Abba, thank you for answering our prayers."

Avalon too bowed his head. "Thank you, Abba."

"Why have you asked for me?" She folded her hands in front of her.

"We need to ask you, how can we free the demons so they can move unrestricted among the clans? Padonya told me I was the spirit who unites them all, but I have no idea what that means. Or how to make that happen."

"Hmm." She sauntered past us and walked into the river.

"I always find a dip in a pool sets me right, like the one that used to be behind the castle. There's something special about it. It feels ... cleansing, resting my soul to where it's supposed to be. Back where everything started." She turned and pointedly looked over her shoulder, then back at me. "Can't you feel it, Morgana? Doesn't it feel like all your problems float away in the pool?"

"I ..." I frowned and then glanced to Avalon who was scowling at her. "The pool? I haven't been in the pool since I came back to Terrea."

"Oh." Abba bent down and scooped up a handful of water. "Perhaps you should return to the pool and ... take a dip."

“Abba, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying just what I said.” She bent down again and swirled her hand in the water, making a circle. I could’ve sworn she was just playing, but everything she said and did felt like a message. “I’ve also always said that whenever you feel stuck on a problem, it’s important to take a step back to where the problem started.”

Return to the pool. To where it all started. The blast point was where it all started. I arched one eyebrow at her. *Is that what you’re telling me, Abba?*

She smirked and gave me a single nod, a nod so subtle no one else would have noticed it. “Fresh eyes. Fresh magic.”

Avalon’s brow furrowed so low it looked painful.

I held my hands up and summoned my purple petals to my palms. “Fresh magic. I didn’t have this the last time I was in that pool.”

“And what magic it is.” She looked over to Avalon. “Same goes for you too. You have new magic now as well.”

“I’m not sure what this has to do with anything?” Avalon tried to sound respectful, but he seemed to be confused by her behavior and words.

“Oh, magic has to do with *everything*.” Abba looked toward the Swamp Clan, then swept her gaze all the way over to the Cinder Clan, like she could see all of Isramorta. “Four types of magic and a very special fifth. Actually, the two of you together have three out of the five elements.”

“Yeah, too bad we don’t have all five together, then we might actually beat Dacio.”

“Yes.” Abba walked through the water, her dress floating behind her as she came toward me. “I wonder what would happen if you had all five.”

Avalon scoffed. “I’m pretty sure that’s what Valandril was attempting with the root he tried to plant in that pool. And look how that turned out.”

“Ah, but he was one man trying to take it all for himself.” She met my stare and held it. With purpose. “That is not who you are or what you would ever do.”

“I wish we could give the damn magic back.”

Abba chuckled and scooped water into her hands, then she pointedly tossed the water back into the river *five times*. “Just scoop it off the ground and throw it back to where it belongs.”

I gasped.

Avalon shook his head. “If only it were that easy.”

“I know what he did was wrong and awful, but if you think about it, what the magic did to the land was kind of incredible.” She walked out of the water and stopped right beside me, but her eyes were watching the mountains around us, then she wiped her hands off on her dress. “Well, you’ve got your hands full, so I will get out of your way.”

“Wait, Abba, our question—”

“Thank you for the temple drawing you made, Morgana. It allowed me to actually answer your prayer.” She let out a deep sigh. “Make a real temple and maybe the rest of the demons can pray too.”

I smiled. My brain was moving far too fast. She’d given me a clue, now I just needed to sort it out. “I’ll do that.”

Abba held her hand up. A small pouch, a few pieces of parchment, and a piece of charcoal appeared in her hand. She strolled out of the water and dropped them on the ground. “I must be going.”

“Thank you for taking the time for us.” I gave her a small bow.

She winked at me. “Good luck.”

Then, before either of us could say another word, she was gone in a bright flash of light.

Avalon cursed. “Well, that was helpful.”

“Yes, it was.”

“Did you hear different words than I did?”

“Only if you weren’t listening and reading between the lines.”

“So you have some idea what the hell she was talking about?”

“I think I do. We have to return to where it all started, to the pool where Valandril planted the root and the blast happened.”

Avalon nodded. “But what else has to be done? It can’t just be as easy as that.”

“It’s not. I think we need something from each of the elements to bring with us to put in the pool, a piece of earth from each clan.” I ran over to the parchment and picked up the chunk of coal.

“Why earth?”

“Because it is the magic of the land that is keeping the demons bound, and it will be the magic of the land that will

free them.” I held the parchment close to my chest and walked around the waterside searching.

“What are you doing?” Avalon stood over me as I made my way to the smoothest rock I could find.

“It’s time to call in the troops. I’m going to send word to Lundra, Padonya, and Malotte. They can ready their demons for battle.” I knelt down and laid the paper out on the rock.

“But how can they battle when they’re trapped in their clans? That’s why there’s never been an uprising.”

I glanced up at him. “That’s why we have to free them first. I’m hoping that somehow we’ll be able to distract Dacio long enough to get to the pool and break the magic holding the demons in their clans.”

His lips pulled up in a full smile and he reached for a piece of parchment and broke off a piece of coal. “I know some allies who would love to help us with that.”

I paused in my writing. “Who?”

“The vampires.” He chuckled. “Varan and Rhode will come.”

My heart leapt at the thought of finally getting to see my sister. There were too many emotions swirling through me when it came to my sister: worry, sadness, excitement ... They all ripped through me too fast. “Rhode, I ... I need to see her.”

“I have no doubts she’ll be here,” Avalon scribbled across the page, “because Varan will be here for us. How are you planning on getting these across the lands?”

“With my very best friend who I trust more than anything.” I reached behind my ear and gathered Monty in the

palm of my hand. He unfurled and yawned, stretching his arms and legs out like a starfish. “I need a favor, my friend.”

He leapt off my hand and grew to the size of a small dog. He shook himself out and his fur puffed out in all directions before he spun in a circle and smoothed himself out. He sat there looking up at me with wide, eager eyes. I tied the pouch around his neck and shoved my three letters in. Avalon handed me the one for the vampires, and I tucked that in there too.

“Can you get these to the leaders?”

Monty gave me a little chirp, and I petted the top of his head. “You ready?”

He gave me a little nod and took off flying out of sight faster than I could track. Avalon knelt down next to me. “I think you missed one.”

We had to go gather a piece of earth from each clan, but there was one clan I needed to go to myself. “There’s one I need to deliver in person.”

I rose to my feet and Avalon stood up next to me. He threw his arm around my shoulder and pulled me closer to him. “What a fool I was. How could I ever make amends with you for the way I behaved.”

“You thought I was just as bad as Dacio actually is.” I shrugged. “I’d say we’re working our way well past amends.”

He pressed a kiss to the side of my head and held me close. “Not yet, but I’ll spend a lifetime trying to.”

“Good, then let’s start with tomorrow. Today, we have a war to win.”

“We do indeed.” He burst into flames all around me, and we took off to collect our pieces of Isramorta to free it once

and for all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MORGANA



*I*t'd been easy enough to gather moss from the Swamp Lands, a lava rock from the Cinder Lands, and snow from the Tempest Lands. But there was a promise I wanted to keep and a visit I needed to make. Avalon walked by my side through the underground of the Slate Lands.

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nodded. “More than sure.”

It felt like a lifetime ago that Linford had taken me to his home and helped me. I'd never known such kindness, and now I wanted to return it. We'd made our way through the tunnels and into the underground city where Linford lived among other earth demons. The moment Avalon set foot on the little main market street, the demons disappeared. He pressed his lips into a hard line and kept on walking with his head held high, but I could tell their mistrust took its toll on him by the hard set of his lips and how his eyes softened with a touch of sadness. I reached down and wound my fingers with his, holding his hand, and led him toward Linford's home. Shadows moved behind the crystal windows as if they all were watching where we were going. Those iridescent butterflies fluttered overhead illuminating the way.

When we reached the three steps, I smiled at the flat wall. Avalon walked up the steps and knocked on the wall. Linford's voice came from just inside. "Be off with you now. We're not receiving at this time."

Avalon opened his mouth to say something, but I gave his hand a little squeeze and he stopped. I moved closer to the wall and called out, "Linford, it's me, Morgana."

The wall instantly began to transform into an intricate door with filigree carved into it. Dust rained down but it moved around me as all the powers here did. The door groaned as it slid open, and there was Linford standing on the other side. I'd forgotten how kind his face was and the way he carried himself. His gray beard held a sprinkling of dirt as he stood there staring at us.

"Didn't know you were bringing company with you." He glared at Avalon, then motioned for us to enter his tiny home.

I stepped in and Avalon stood quietly at my side. The moment we were through the doorway, Linford waved his hand and the door sealed shut. Two chairs rose from the floor behind us, and I dropped Avalon's hand and sat across from Linford, who seemed to be in a *who's gonna sit first* standoff with Avalon. I rolled my eyes. "Both of you sit."

Linford waved his hand once more and the earth rose behind him to form a chair. He dropped down into it and his belly did a little jiggle as he got comfortable. He motioned for Avalon to sit. "Rude to stand."

Avalon dropped down into the chair and they both glared. Carlotta wandered into the room with a bowl broken into pieces in her hands. "Linford, can you mend this ..."

Her words trailed off when she spotted the two of us. “Nevermind.”

She spun around to go back down the hall, and I called out, “Carlotta wait, I’ve seen Malotte.”

She froze and the broken plate she’d been holding crashed to the ground. When she turned around her eyes glistened. She hurried back into the room and stumbled to Linford’s side, clutching her chest. “M-my Malotte? Is she well?”

I nodded. “She is well, and she is strong. She’s wish like you, Linford. And so beautiful like you, Carlotta.”

Linford’s lip quivered, and he looked away for a moment, blinking hard. “How did this come to be?”

I glanced at Avalon, and he gave me a nod, encouraging me to tell Linford everything. I swallowed. “When I was taken from here, I was brought back to the castle where Dacio was. He was holding a selection to find his queen.”

Carlotta pressed her hand over her mouth, and she sucked in a sharp breath and shook her head. “Not there. No.”

Tears spilled over her cheeks, and she leaned into Linford’s side. He pressed his hand over hers and gave it a pat. His face was bright red and he had yet to look me in the eyes. He sucked in deep breaths to control his emotions. I sat forward and waved my hands. I didn’t want them to see this as a sad thing. Malotte saved me, she was strong, smart, and brilliant. I needed to make them understand. “No, you don’t understand. She was brilliant. Malotte was there looking for a way to help the demons in the Tempest Clan.”

Linford’s cheeks puffed out as he let go of a deep breath and tried to contain his emotions. “Of course she did. My girl would.”

“She was amazing, Linford. And when I needed to get away most,” Avalon stiffened beside me but said nothing, and I continued on, “she helped me escape. She risked everything and flew me right out of the castle.”

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Carlotta. “You heard that. She helps demon folk.”

“Linford, she asked me to give you her love and to tell you she misses you.”

Carlotta let out a small weeping sound and turned away. “My darling child.”

Linford pursed his lips and eyed Avalon. “What’s brought you here then? Come looking for her to bring her back? You know she can’t come to the underground.”

“I have no intention of bringing her or anyone else to Dacio ever again,” Avalon growled.

“What’s this then? Finally came to your senses?” Linford looked him up and down.

I glanced between him and Avalon. I didn’t think they’d hit it off, but I wanted Linford to see Avalon for who and what he was. He was here to try and save them all and it was important for Linford to know that. “We are here to collect a bit of slate.”

“Why?”

I didn’t want to get his hopes up, but Linford had always been honest with me. “Linford, I’m going to try to free the demons and unite them all.”

He gave a stoic nod. “You wouldn’t be the first to give it a go.”

“No, but I intend to be the last.” We shared a look like he was staring me down to see if I was being honest with him. After a few moments Linford gave me a single nod as though the decision to trust me had been made.

He held his hand up and a large splinter of slate flew from the floor and right into his hand. The sides were jagged and dark with a dozen different cuts to it. He handed it over to me. “Take this and bring my daughter home to me.”

His words were halted as he spoke, and I knew what the separation of family felt like but I couldn’t imagine it for fifty years. “I will.”

“And what about you?” He looked toward Avalon. “You’ve come to your senses?”

“Took me long enough,” Avalon groaned.

Linford shook his finger at him. “It’s not the time it takes, it’s that one gets there eventually. And what of Dacio?”

I started to answer. “We’re going to—”

“—Not you. Him.” Linford pointed toward Avalon.

Avalon scoffed, then gave him a deadly smile. “It’s time for death to come to him.”

All eyes swung toward me, and I nodded. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“It’ll be a fight. You know that? But the demon folk will come when called.”

I rose to my feet and handed the shard to Avalon to be placed in his pocket. “We know, and we were hoping for your support.”

He opened his mouth to speak when the walls around us began to rumble. Dust and rock rained down around us, and Linford reached for Carlotta and pulled her close. “It’s already begun!”

The rumbling grew more intense and the walls began to crack. The whole world shook, and all I could think was *EARTHQUAKE!* Linford opened his arms and that dusty magic poured from his hands. He bellowed and the ceiling opened above our heads. Light poured in and the ground cracked beneath our feet. Linford raised his arms and the ground shot straight up. My knees nearly gave out under the force and speed that the floor rose. We shot from the ground like a rocket and Avalon wrapped his arms around me and burst into flames. A second later, we landed, and Linford used the ground to form a slide which he used to surf down with Carlotta in his arms. He slid to a stop right next to us. We all stood there with our backs to the mountains facing into the Slate Lands. In the distance, the walls to the castle opened and Dacio’s army began to emerge. From here they looked like ants, but it was only a matter of time before they reached us.

Linford glared in Dacio’s direction. “We go to war.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

MORGANA



Holes opened in the ground all around us and more slate demons shot from the ground to join Linford. The holes closed the moment they came to the surface of the Slate Lands. My eyes widened. “Linford ...”

“I have prepared them well.” He held his hands out at his sides and his dusty magic flowed freely down to the ground.

Carlotta stood behind him with her own magic flowing. The other clans began to emerge at the borders of their lands. They were still trapped but stood at the ready. Carlotta grabbed Linford’s arm and squeezed. Her lip quivered and tears gathered in her eyes. “It’s Malotte. It’s our daughter.”

They were so far away, but even I could see her wild hair blowing in the wind. “I’m going to bring her back to you both.”

“Best get to it then.” Linford didn’t take his eyes off of Dacio’s slow approach. “Demon folk have waited far too long.”

I wasn’t about to leave only Linford and his handful of demons to rise against Dacio’s massive army. Dacio could stay in the Slate Lands and massacre Linford and the other clans wouldn’t only be able to watch. I squinted my eyes, trying to

see how many soldiers he had. “I don’t remember him having that many soldiers.”

“They’re stone soldiers under Dacio’s command.” Avalon growled. “Like the servants in the red cloaks.”

There were so many it looked like the ground was moving like a swarm of ants. “We can’t leave Linford alone to deal with this.”

“He won’t be.” Avalon turned to look back toward the mountains.

I spun around to follow his gaze and my heart went up into my throat. “Rhode.”

There my sister was looking like a Queen badass. Her hair was long and silver, hanging down past her waist. She wore a long silver dress that dipped low in the front and back. Her crown was perched perfectly on her head, and I almost cried at the sight of her. She was here, alive, and thriving. I turned and ran for her.

“Morgana!” She hurried toward me, and we slammed into each other, wrapping each other in a tight hug.

“I thought I lost you forever,” I whispered as I held her close to me.

“Me too.”

She pulled back and swiped at a tear. She beamed at me. “So, demon, huh?”

I held up my little claws. “I know, right? So, vampire?”

She gave me a fangy smile. “Queen vampire, thank you very much.”

Avalon strolled up to my side and put his arm around my hips. Rhode's eyes widened and she smirked. "Glad to see things are working out."

"I don't know how well." I motioned to Dacio's encroaching army.

"He as bad as Varan says?" Her face went cold and a tall vampire with long dark hair and piercing eyes moved to her side. He was beautiful and strong in a way that matched my sister. He too wore a tall, imposing crown, and they seemed fitting together. The King and Queen of the vampires.

"Worse." Dacio was the full-on scum of the earth topped with a shit load of *ick*.

"Morgana, this is my closest friend, Varan." Avalon introduced us as he clapped him on the back.

I shook his hand and smiled. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for coming to help."

He gave me a nod. "Of course. Now, where do you need us?"

"Here," Avalon and I said at the same time.

"We need to get back to the blast point and we need you to hold Dacio long enough for us to do that."

Rhode nodded. "Time to correct what Valandril did?"

"It's time to free my demons." I moved in closer to Avalon. "For good."

"Once they're free, they can take their revenge however they see fit." Avalon let his magic seep around him, and we were both covered in green smoke.

Varan turned to face Dacio. “Finally. It’ll be my greatest pleasure to assist in his demise.”

“I’m sorry to leave so fast.” I wanted to spend more time with my sister, but the demons had to come first. “But they need me.”

“You must go. Now.” She motioned toward the mountains. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

I blew her a kiss and Avalon erupted into flames and we took off into the air. My body jerked with the speed with which he moved, but we had to hurry to get this done and then pray it worked. We came to a stop, and Avalon held me close to him for a moment. The area looked so different from the last time I’d been here yet so familiar. The mountains around us looked as though they’d been blasted away from the site. Ruins of the castle still remained embedded into the sides of the mountain. It was so gray and barren, with only the pool at the center of it.

I began to climb toward the pool, stepping over large boulders and some remains of the castle. Avalon silently moved beside me. When we got to the edge, I stopped and watched the shining water ripple and move. “The last time I was here, I was trying so desperately not to die. I only wanted a little longer.”

He gave a painful groan. “If only I’d known ...”

“How could you have? I didn’t even tell you about my sister.” I let the tip of my boot touch the edge of the water.

His hand shot out and he stopped me from entering the pool. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“It’s not about being ready. It’s about helping others in need. But most of all, I need to help them, Avalon. It’s who I

am.”

He pulled me in closer and held me close to him. “We don’t know what this will do to you, but I understand. Know this, where you go I will follow ... even into the afterlife.”

I nodded against his chest. “Into this life or the next.”

I stood up on my toes and threw my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me. Strands of his hair tickled my cheeks as he leaned forward. His lips met mine with the gentlest of touches. His ashy scent filled my nose, and I sucked in a deep breath. He cupped my cheeks and held me there for a moment before pulling back. “I’ve loved you for a lifetime, and I want lifetimes more with you.”

“You’ll have them.” I stepped back and held my hand out.

He pulled the slate shard, the lava rock, the bit of moss, and snow from the pouch in his pocket and laid them in my hands. I turned from him and took a step into the pool. The water rippled around my feet and sent little waves outward. It grew brighter, shimmering at my presence. Warmth spread through my limbs, and for a second, I paused, remembering what it’d been like to step into the Sacred Pool to sacrifice myself. Would this be as painful? Would I die? I wanted to give Avalon the lifetimes he wanted, and I wanted them with him too.

“Are you okay?” Avalon called from the edge of the pool.

I sucked in a breath and took another step, hoping the life wouldn’t be drained from me and that I could free the demons. When I got to the center of the pool, the water was up to my waist and the tips of my hair drifted over the surface. It was warm and welcoming, like I could drift here for a few hours. The night that Valandril had planted the root had been the first

time I'd felt hope for my future. I thought I'd be healed and would have time to spend with Avalon, a vision I hardly let myself have. But standing here, I knew I had a future with him. I knew we could be something great. And I had to do this.

I bent down, let my hand drift below the surface of the water, and dropped the lava rock in first. The water rippled and turned a deep red. Sparks leapt across the surface and touched my skin. Avalon's eyes widened and his flames sprang to life. "I didn't do that."

"No, it's the power of the earth." Warmth spread through my body and the scent of the Cinder Lands filled my nose.

I turned to the side and dropped the snow into the water and the surface froze over. Snowflakes the size of my hand spread out over the water and a cold breeze flew through the air around the pool. The water turned from red to a pale blue. A chill ran over my skin and the clean scent of snow filled my senses. I couldn't move my legs because the ice ran up to my thighs. My breath fogged as the wind whipped around me, sending my hair flying.

"Morgana!" Avalon was about to step into the pool, but I held my hand up.

"No. It must be." A chill ran over my body, and I shivered. It wasn't any more painful than being in the Tempest Lands.

I twisted my body as much as I could and dropped the moss of the Swamp Lands over the icy surface. The moment it hit, the ice began to defrost and the moss fell below the surface of the water. Fog formed on the surface of the water and spread out from the pool to cover the surrounding area. It rolled up between Avalon and me, forming a cloudy wall. The

temperature shot up and heat filled the air, causing beads of sweat to cover my skin.

“Morgana?” Concern had seeped into Avalon’s voice.

“I’m here.” The air was sultry around the both of us, and when the fog began to lower, I could only see the outline of Avalon. “One more piece.”

I turned again and held the piece of slate that Linford gave me over the pool. I didn’t know what would happen next, but butterflies filled my stomach. *Now or never, Morgana.* I opened my fingers and let the piece of slate drop into the water. The ground around me rumbled, and the water sloshed up and down. Dust rose from the ground around the pool and settled in a sand cloud over the surface. The tiny, sharp pieces of slate prickled at my skin and made the water glow a dark brown. It was so turbulent that I staggered back and forth trying to keep my balance.

Avalon looked like he was fighting the urge to charge in after me. “Now what?”

“Now the last element ... me.” I opened my hand, summoned my powers to my palm, and let my purple petals fall on the turbulent water.

The waves instantly smoothed out and became eerily calm. The water glowed a faint purple at first, then progressively got brighter. The light became so bright I had to close my eyes. Power surged through my body and burned through my skin. Pain exploded behind my eyes, and my body rose out of the water. My arms shot out. My petals flowed from me of their own accord. The pool held me there in the spotlight of its power.

The wind whipped around me, and my hair flew up from my head. Flashes of the moment I'd died the first time ripped through my mind, making it hard to even breathe. The world shook and rumbled, and the sound of crumbling rock filled my ears. My body vibrated as the power built within me. My insides rolled and I felt like I was going to burst wide open. My blood boiled. A scream ripped from my throat. Avalon's bellow echoed back at me.

The power grew to the point where I couldn't hold it in any longer and I let myself go. I released everything I had, giving it over to the magic of the land. It exploded out of me in waves that rolled out in a bright purple tide. One after another they came from me, and the world rumbled along with it. When I let go of every last bit I had left in me, I dropped back to the pool. My legs gave out and I went under the surface. My muscles burned and felt like useless jelly. Before I could even try to come up for air, Avalon was there.

He scooped me up in his arms and carried me out of the pool, then lowered me onto the shore and dropped down to the ground, holding me there. "Morgana, are you okay? Speak to me."

"Ouchhhhh." My body was exhausted but bouncing back faster than I expected.

He sucked in a sharp breath just as the sky opened up and rain poured down on us. "I thought it was going to kill you."

"Yeah, so did I." I groaned and sat up in his lap, looking around for any hint that what we'd done had worked.

"But you're okay?" He helped me to my feet, and I stood there for a moment moving my arms and legs around, testing them out.

He froze. “What the hell is that?”

He pointed toward my chest and when I looked down there was an image in the shape of a triangle pointing downward on my skin. The thick black lines swirled around each other like vines. Purple petals showed up around them mixed with green smoke. I ran my hand over it, but it was smooth to the touch like a tattoo. “I have no clue.”

His eyes widened and he pulled at his armor yanking it down just far enough that I could make out the same image across his chest. A wide smile spread on his face. “Holy shit.”

“What? Tell me?” I didn’t know if I could take one more thing going wrong.

“There was once a vampire legend that soulmates existed, but the mark would show up on their backs. I’m guessing this is the demon version of that.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Are you saying that we’re soulmates?”

He pulled me in for a hug and held me so tight. “That’s what I’m saying. Is that so hard to believe?”

“No.” This was all too much. “But how?”

“I have no idea.” He placed me back on my feet. “Maybe the blast unlocked it?”

“There’s so much we don’t know about the demons.” I wanted to know how or why this would happen. But it would take time we just didn’t have right now.

He cupped my cheeks. “Yeah, but if this works, we will have all the time in the world to figure it out... together.”

I nodded feeling completely shell shocked by the whole thing, shell shocked, but thrilled. Avalon and I were truly

meant to be and now fate had made it so. My heart soared.
“Just wow.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” His face fell into a scowl of concern.

“I’m okay.” My power felt stronger, like I could do anything. “More than okay, actually.”

He gave a sigh of relief. “Thank fuck.”

“Do you think it worked?” From here there was no telling if it did or not.

“I think it worked. If you hadn’t unlocked the demon magic then I doubt our soulmate marks would’ve shown up at all.” He pointed to the mark on his chest. Then he scooped me up in his arms and held me close to his chest, taking time to breathe me in. “But there’s only one way to find out.”

I smirked and my purple magic swirled around my fingertips. With him by my side I felt like I could do anything. “Let’s go kick some ass.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

MORGANA



A valon had us back to where we'd left Rhode and Varan in moments, but I was not prepared for what I saw. Bodies lay sprawled across the ground, knocked unconscious. Dust drifted over them as the wind whipped over the dark, jagged Slate Lands. Every single demon lay on the ground unmoving like they'd suddenly passed out. Their arms and legs fell at odd angles like one moment they'd been standing there and they were down in the next. No one moved, only the vampires. We landed between Varan and Rhode, who stood surrounded by knocked-out slate demons. They spun in slow circles with wide eyes. The other vampires were spread around the area all looking as shocked as I felt.

“What happened?” My heart raced in my chest as I took it all in. They were too still, it was too quiet like death had descended on them all. Panic overtook me. *Did I kill them all?*

“My God, Morgana. You're okay!” Rhode ran to me and pulled me in for a hard hug, nearly squeezing the air from my lungs.

My jaw dropped, bodies as far as I could see littered the ground. “What happened?”

“You happened. Or at least I think it was you.”

Monty leapt and bound over the demons as he tilted his head from side to side, checking them all. I held my hand out to him. “Come on, buddy.”

As he leapt up into the air, his body shrank down to smaller than my palm and I placed him right behind my ear where he liked to be. Rhode’s eyes widened, but she said nothing about my little pet. Varan strolled over to us. “It was exactly as my father had done. A purple wave of magic flowed over the mountains and spread into the land on this side of the mountains. The moment it touched the demons they went down and haven’t gotten back up.”

My eyes widened and panic flooded my body. “Did I ... are they breathing?”

“They are all breathing.” Rhode nodded. “We checked them as soon as they went down.”

The other vampires walked through the bodies bending down and checking for pulses. Was Abba wrong? Or did I misunderstand her directions? Had I hurt them when I intended only to help? I spun around looking for Linford. If anything happened to him, I would never forgive myself. My hands shook as I hurried over to where Linford lay with Carlotta.

The second I hunched over him, his eyes flew wide open and a hard cough puffed from his chest. He rolled to his side and sat up with his legs stretched out in front of him. He shook his head and his white puffy hair frizzed out from his head. He climbed to his feet and dusted his hands off. “Your power certainly packs a punch.”

The other demons around me began to rise, all shaking their heads and staggering to their feet like they’d been knocked for a loop. They shook themselves and seemed to be

coming around to the situation. I looked across the way toward the Tempest Clan. Malotte stuck her foot out closer to where she'd start to lose her powers. She held her hand up and white puffy clouds came from her hand, and she leapt off the ground and the wind whipped around her as she floated through the air and landed right between Carlotta and Linford.

Carlotta froze for a second with tears streaming down her face, then she threw her arms around Malotte. Linford stood to the side, giving them a moment, but then Malotte took a step toward him. "Oh, Dad."

She threw her arms around him and pulled him in close. Across the land, demons from every clan embraced and found each other. Lundra and Herlandis wrapped each other up so tight I didn't know where one started and the other began. Rhode patted me on the shoulder. "You did good, Mo."

I nodded. "Yeah, *WE* did good."

Dacio's slate army began to rouse just as the other demons had. When I looked out over his legion he too staggered to his feet. The moment we locked eyes he straightened his shoulders and faced our direction. "Well, isn't this all touching!"

Dacio lifted his hands and his army of stone soldiers began to reform. The demons on his side had already gotten to their feet and began to form ranks across from us. We weren't entirely organized, but we were a group of demons ready to fight to the death to take back our lives. We would have time for the reunions later. Later we would laugh. Later we would cry. And later we would figure out how to right this land once and for all. Linford threw his arms up and the ground rolled out like a blanket being shook in front of him. All at once we charged forward, moving as one.

Rhode and Varan guided their vampires to attack alongside the rest of us. Their purple nightmare magic exploded in different directions, taking down the soldiers left and right. Rhode waved for me to go on without her. “Go! You’ve got this!”

Avalon and I charged forward, ducking and leaping over anything in our way. If we were going to stop the poison, we had to cut off the head of the snake. But Dacio had moved himself to the back of the troops and farther away. Avalon ran beside me shooting balls of fire in all different directions. Gusts of wind shot from him, knocking down one soldier after another. Rocks flew like bullets all around us and boulders hurled through the sky.

I blew petals across my hand, and they fanned out over the soldiers closest to me. One by one, they dropped to the ground convulsing at my feet. All around us chaos reigned. Tornados guided by demons dressed like it was winter ripped across the Slate Lands. At the same time, balls of water rose up off the ground like huge spheres. Soldiers got trapped within them, struggling to get out but ultimately drowning.

Avalon threw his arm out, stopping me from running just as a line of flames flew in front of us to take out at least ten more soldiers. Giant crevices forked across the ground, forcing the armies to scatter and break off before they fell in. Some of them fell in, their screams echoing as they plummeted.

Lundra leapt in front of us with Herlandis at her side. “You gave me my life back. Let me clear a path for you.”

I sucked in a deep breath as my chest heaved from all the running and dodging. “That’d be helpful.”

They faced each other and Herlandis wrapped her tightly in his arms and closed his eyes. A smile of bliss spread across

his face as the wind kicked up so hard that a tornado formed at his feet. It crept up his body to his shoulders, and she opened her hand and fire mixed in with the wind. Heat licked at my skin, and I took a step back. Avalon wrapped his hand around mine and tugged me behind him. The fire tornado grew to a towering height and then began to shoot forward.

Soldiers bellowed and dove out of the way. It ripped the stone warriors to dust with ease as they made a direct path for Dacio. Avalon wrapped his arm around my waist and dragged me close to his body. My feet lifted off the ground as he flew behind the fire tornado. Dacio took one look at the two of us and opened a hole in the ground.

“You’ll never find me.”

Before he could step into it, it slammed back shut. Malotte and Linford landed a moment later and Linford chuckled. “The underground is mine oh great Duke King!”

Dacio turned and ran for the castle. The doors flew open, and the second he ran through them, they slammed shut behind him. Avalon smirked, “Run, run, as fast as you can.”

He reached into his pocket and handed me the petals we’d gotten from the fae court. “It’s time.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” I reached behind my ear and handed the leaves toward Monty and whispered, “For safekeeping.”

Monty grew and circled around the back of my neck. He scooped the leaves up, tucked them close to his body, and pressed his tail over them like a little pocket. I patted his head. *That’ll do boy.*

Linford gave Avalon a pat on the back. “I’ll see to it that he doesn’t go into my underground.”

Malotte gave us a nod. “Give him my regards.”

Avalon swooped his hands under my legs and scooped me up in his arms. Flames burst all around us and he leapt up into the air. We were over the wall in seconds and standing in the middle of the courtyard.

Dacio sat at the center of it all in his throne of slate. Tendreece stood to his one side and Lizvita stood on her other. Avalon let my feet touch the ground and we stood ready to do battle. Tendreece sauntered toward me with a sword in hand. She lifted her chin and tossed her blue hair over her shoulder. “Finally.”

Avalon drew a dagger from behind his back and tossed it my way. I easily caught it and held it by my side. I was so sick of her shit, and there was only so much a person could take. She lifted her sword and started to swing. I dodged it easily and held my hand up, blowing my petals in her face. The moment they touched her skin, those dark lines that looked like roots spread over her cheeks. Her lips turned black, and blood trickled from her nose, eyes, and ears.

I paused, looking down at her. “Finally.”

I didn’t wait for the convulsions to stop. I simply stepped over her and faced Lizvita. “You next?”

She glanced toward Dacio, then back toward me. She turned on her heels and ran back into the castle to hide from us. I couldn’t wait until Padonya got her hands on that one.

Dacio rose to his feet and sighed. “You think to unseat me?”

“No,” Avalon growled as his glowing eyes tracked Dacio’s every move. “I think to kill you.”

“I will tear you down to nothing.” He pulled a sword from his hip and held it at his side. His body was covered from head to toe in that armor, but all I needed was the perfect moment. A single petal and a single piece of skin would be his end... I would be his end.

“You can try.” Avalon drew his sword.

“You will learn, and I will be your teacher.” He took a step to the side, and we started to circle each other.

All at once we leapt into action. Avalon and Dacio’s swords clanged together. I took a step to get closer, but he swung around, and I held my sword up blocking the blow before he hit my stomach. Sparks flew from our clanging swords as we swung at each other. Avalon moved so quickly he was almost a blur, but Dacio moved just as fast, like he was built for fighting. He moved from one side of the courtyard to the other with ease. I needed just one second one moment to make my powers work.

I reached behind my neck and Monty shoved the leaves into my hand. He ran down my arm and leapt from my fingers. “No!”

He landed on Dacio’s face and scratched at his skin. Dacio staggered back and raised his sword to swing at Monty. My heart stopped and my powers surged. I took the leaves and let them mix with my own petals as I blew them at Dacio. Monty leapt off Dacio just as my power ran over his armor. He spread his arms and soared back toward me and landing perfectly on my shoulder.

Dacio threw his head back and cackled to the air. “Your pretty flowers have no effect on me.”

Red sparks flared from his armor and smoke drifted toward the sky. The braids of his armor began to unwind and snap off into pieces. As they dropped to the ground, they turned to ash at his feet. He held his hands up, examining his armor as it disintegrated off his body.

“No! Nooooo!” His face fell into shocked anger. “It can’t be.”

“Death comes to us all, Dacio.” I blew my petals toward him, and they touched his face and bare skin. He dropped to his knees before me and those black lines forked out over his face.

“Not ... happening.” He choked out the words as he coughed and blood sprayed from his lips.

Avalon strolled to my side and bent down low, catching Dacio’s eye. “She is death.”

Dacio collapsed to the ground and convulsed violently. His crown fell off his head and I grabbed it off the ground and held it at my side. I stood there watching as the life drained from his eyes and the last of his blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. Avalon reached for my hand. Without a word, he guided me toward the doors. I walked right past Tendreece, not bothering to look. “They deserved each other.”

“And now they can rest together.”

Outside, shouts came from the other side of the wall and the huge slate doors flew open. I marched out with Avalon at my side. I raised Dacio’s crown high over my head and cheers broke out across the land. One by one his army dropped to their knees surrendering to us. His stone soldiers would’ve disappeared to dust the moment he drew his last breath. I smiled and felt victory course through my veins.

Linford marched up to me with the other clan leaders by his side. “Is it done then?”

I nodded. “It is done.”

More cheers erupted all around us. Rhode stood off to the side with Varan, watching the two of us. Linford pulled Malotte and Carlotta under each of his arms and beamed at us. “Thank you, thank you for giving me back my family.”

Lundra was tucked tight under Herlandis’ arm. “What do we do now?”

Avalon cleared his throat. “Now, we pick a new king and queen to rule us and hopefully make Isramorta a better place.”

“But you already have.” Lundra beamed at the two of us.

“Then you’ve got your answer, haven’t you? Took him long enough to come around.” He winked at Avalon.

Avalon cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. “Let’s just give it some time.”

“Aye then, we’ll give the demon folk some time ...”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

MORGANA



6 Months Later

“*I* can’t believe they chose us,” Avalon muttered from my side.

“Oh, love, you’ve spent the last six months tirelessly building up Isramorta. The homes, buildings, and infrastructure alone have been amazing.”

“But in this outfit? I don’t know why I can’t wear my old armor.” He pulled at his collar, then tugged at his sleeves. I thought he looked hot as hell in his black shirt and pants. His boots were polished to a bright shine and a long black cloak hung from his shoulders, held there by a thick silver chain.

“You look amazing.”

“I’m the one who’s supposed to be saying that to you.” He pressed a light kiss to my lips. “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I straightened out my own cloak and the silver clasps that held it on my shoulders. I wore a formfitting corseted top and tight pants. My boots were still the ones that Linford had given me when I first arrived. It almost felt like they were a touch just to remind me of who I was and who I would always be.

He took my hand and together we walked down a path that'd been worn through the mountainside from the work that'd commenced. When we got to the wide-open area, all our demons stood waiting for the two of us. Varan and Rhode were in the front row waiting for us. We walked hand in hand up the steps to the foundation of what would be our sacred temple. Avalon had already gotten the stones laid for the floor, and all that was left was to build the rest of it.

When we got to the center of the structure, a bright white light appeared. When it dissipated, Abba stood before us. Her long purple hair hung down past her shoulders, and she wore that beautiful white toga-like dress. Her lavender eyes lingered over Avalon and me.

“Good to see you’ve taken my advice on building a temple.”

I smiled. I loved having all the demons here united together and able to gather in one place. No more were they hungry or in need of shelter. They were thriving with the help of each other and the vampires. “It is a good place to start.”

“No, this is.” Abba opened her hands and two crowns appeared there, hovering in the air.

One, this one more delicate-looking than the other, hovered over my head. It had five thick, dark gray metal horns that curved inward. Petals covered it, as did five stones, one representing each of the elements. They were fiery red, earthy green, delicate blue, dusty brown, and glowing purple. The other more masculine one had thick points standing straight. Tiny spikes wound around each of the spikes, and he too had stones to match my own.

“It is not easy to stand in the light when one prefers the dark. It is not easy to find love where there has been loss. It is

not easy to step against what is known and stand for what is right. But time allows for one to walk in the light. Time will let love grow. Time always reveals what is right. And in this age and in this hour, the demons have spoken, and you have been chosen to rule in your strength and wisdom.”

She let the crowns drop down on our heads, and they all broke out into cheers and claps. I’d lost the life I thought I was meant for only to find the one I was born to live. Here with Avalon by my side and my sister just over the mountain, I found my life, my love, and my forever. A sense of completion overcame me, and peace settled deep in my soul.

“I now crown you King and Queen of Isramorta!”



WE HOPE you are loving our shared world Forgotten Kingdoms! To continue the fun check out this amazing art and first chapter for “Of Shadows & Fae” by Jen L. Grey! COVER REVEAL TO COME! Keep going for a sneak peek at chapter one!

Click the link below to pre-order Of Shadows & Fae Now!

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Of Shadows & Fae

Chapter 1

Jen L. Grey

DESPITE THE HOT DESERT TEMPERATURE, a chill ran down my spine. The hairs on the nape of my neck rose. It'd been that way since I left my room at the Horseshoe Las Vegas hotel. Someone in the congested crowd on Las Vegas Boulevard this Halloween night was watching me. I scanned the Strip, the bright lights damn near blinding as I searched for the culprit, the sensation reconfirming what I'd already known.

I never should've come here.

Stan, my mentor and the closest thing I'd ever had to a father, always told me to trust my instincts. That if more people did, they'd avoid a lot of the bad shit that happened to them.

I hated being around this many people. Sweat pooled in my armpits, and every fiber of my being urged me to run away. I'd much rather be alone, or wrestling with Stan, or punching a damn beanbag instead of being out *here* in *this*.

A woman stumbled into me and spilled beer on the pig onesie costume I'd selected for the party. The liquid darkened the pink belly section, drenching me down to my underwear.

Lovely. Now I was going to smell like sweat and stale yeast. This night was already a disaster, and I hadn't even made it to the hotel yet. Instead, I was caught in a cement hell, with lights that were too harsh to be comforting and people who reeked of body odor and alcohol bumping into me. My head screamed at me to get away.

Everywhere I looked, I sensed danger, an impending doom that threatened to swallow me whole. The sensation had started as an inkling, when I'd received a random golden ticket to a casino Halloween party in the mail. The invitation had been sent to me with Stan's community gym as my address, which was correct...but no one except Stan and me *knew* that.

To add even more pieces to the ever-growing puzzle, my friend Ember, who worked out at the gym, had received one too. She brought her best friend, Isa, along since they were inseparable. If it weren't for their harassment, I wouldn't have agreed to come. But they'd gotten Stan on me, informing him of what we'd received. He'd encouraged me to go, saying, *This might be the only opportunity you have to get out of Nashville for a few days. And hell, Ivy, it's an all-expenses paid trip.*

I'd caught a later flight than Ember and Isa and decided I wouldn't stay at the hotel room at the casino, expense paid or not, much to my friends' displeasure. I'd learned growing up,

if something sounded too good to be true, it was. This was no exception.

Something inside me had screamed at me not to go, while another part of me couldn't wait. The couldn't-wait part scared me. Being rash and doing things out of the ordinary was how people got in trouble. And trouble was one thing I always avoided. I'd rather stay at the gym and teach kids how to defend themselves so they'd never get into trouble like I had.

The glistening gold doors of the Portal Resort and Casino caught my attention just as my phone dinged a special tone. I didn't have to look to know who it was. Hell, she was the one who'd programmed her number and selected her ringtone when she'd pushed me to come.

Ember: Ho, were r u? Isa left me alone and drink. At farty bar.

My stomach clenched. A fucking *farty* bar? Not only was I somewhere I didn't feel comfortable, but now I had to deal with a drunk Ember and stench. That was going to be fun.

Not bothering to answer, since she probably wouldn't be able to read the text anyway, I put the phone back in my pocket and removed my golden ticket, then forced myself to move forward. The hotel seemed almost familiar, though I couldn't have said why.

Taking a deep breath, I clutched the door handle...and that prickly sensation of being watched washed over me again. The sort of sensation I used to get when I'd lived in foster homes, right before something went horribly wrong.

My phone dinged with the same tone, and my heartbeat quickened. What if Ember was in trouble, and this was her way of calling me for help?

Exhaling, I opened the door and stepped into the lobby. And stopped in my tracks. I'd never been in a place so beautiful. The high ceiling was covered with metallic golden tiles that reflected the twinkling lights and dazzled my senses. The lobby was packed, everyone in costumes, laughing with drinks in hand.

I searched for someone to show my ticket it to, but no one was there. Everyone was laughing and having a good time, and people walked in from behind me without pause. Maybe the ticket was for the food and room here, and not the actual party? Either way, I was in, so now I needed to find Ember and Isa.

I homed in on the woman behind the hotel reception desk, trying to ignore the gorgeous stained-glass pyramid behind her that separated us from the casino. If Ember was in trouble, I needed to find her now.

As I approached, the young woman lifted a brow and smirked before hiding her reaction. She cleared her throat. "How can I help you?" There was a little bit of humor woven into her tone

If she thought I looked funny in a beer-stained pig onesie, I couldn't wait to see her reaction to my question. Lifting my chin high to at least try to appear confident, I said, "I'm looking for the farty bar." I waved my ticket in front of her face, wanting this interaction over as quickly as possible.

"Excuse me?" She blinked and coughed, trying to cover up her laughter. She hadn't even blinked at my ticket.

Clearly there was no farty bar. At least that made the chance of this night not being a complete disaster marginally better. "My friend is drunk and sent me a text." I showed her the message.

“Oh.” She mashed her lips together. “She must mean the Fairy Bar. That’s the closest thing to it. It’s to the left, past the elevators. Go outside and follow the stone path.”

“Thanks.”

A few people glanced in my direction as I walked beneath an archway lined with glowing pink lights and past the elevators. A tall, stocky guy stood rigidly beside one elevator. His black suit, pressed and starched, made him look young. He was so still that I would’ve believed he was a wax statue if not for his warm cognac-brown eyes and thick hair the rich color of tree bark.

When our gazes locked, a frigid chill of warning ran through me, and my legs almost gave out. His stare had my heart racing and jumping against my ribs, the way a predator gleams at its pray. Something was familiar about him, but somehow, that added to the creepiness to him.

Either this place was dangerous, or I was letting my paranoia get the best of me.

Facing forward, I tried to ignore the urge to run. If I needed to protect myself, I had a knife strapped to my thigh.

To the left, past the elevators, a glass door led outside to a stone walkway, as the receptionist had promised. Lights lined the cobblestones, and plants and trees arched over the path. More lights hung from the trees, beckoning me through the darkness.

When I stepped onto the pathway, the fresh scents of dirt and trees loosened my shoulders. I was alone out here, and finally I could breathe. About ten yards away, I saw an archway of lights and headed toward it.

As I strolled under the calming lights, that damn shiver coursed through me once more. I picked up my pace and glanced over my shoulder, only to see no one behind me.

I couldn't shake the sensation of being watched. I needed to hurry and find Ember and Isa.

When I heard the thudding bass and the laughter, I knew I was close. My legs moved faster and faster until I was jogging, and then a silver glistening dome-like structure appeared. The top was all glass, so you could probably see the skyline from within, and large arched windows offered more views from each angle of the building. It was gorgeous, but what was in front had me stumbling to a halt. Numerous pink roses lined the pathway, and a pool of water glimmered right in front, splitting the path into two. This place would have brought me peace...if I didn't still feel I was in danger.

I sucked in a breath, enjoying the scent of roses, then continued down one side of the path until I stepped into the bar, the loud music blaring "Low" by Flo Rida. A group of women including Isa were dancing in the center of the massive open floor, and others sat at tables around the edges. To the right was a wooden bar that almost blended into the background. I might not have seen it if not for the long-ass line of people waiting to get drinks.

And once more, no one asked for my ticket. Strange.

I scanned the area for Ember, fighting the urge to run back outside to the roses. I found her in a dark corner with a red drink in hand, staring at two mirrors hanging on the wall. As I approached, I realized they were actually framed paintings.

Ember swirled her drink with a small, red straw and tapped her black boots against the smooth, tile floor. I beamed when I

reached her side, but she was leaning toward one picture, oblivious that I'd arrived.

“Not drinking whiskey, huh?” I tilted my head, watching her face.

Her head snapped in my direction, and her eyes bulged. She bent down, no doubt going for the knife she kept in her boot, and damn near toppled over.

A rare snort escaped me as I grabbed her arm, steadying her.

“You *bish*,” she gasped, attempting to clutch her chest but snagging her boob instead. “You scarred me.”

Yeah, she was drunk. “Well, you did tell me to come join you at the farty bar, so you know, shit happens.” I was never going to let her live that one down.

“Ew.” She wrinkled her nose. “No waay. I sid Fary Bar.” She straightened and took a wobbly step back. “Wut’s that smeel... and wut are you weawing?”

“A costume. Unlike you.” I gestured to her flattering little black dress that covered just enough to make her even more mysterious and alluring.

“Don’t celerberate.” She shoved her glass into my hand and continued, “You know dat. I’m gonna ‘et a drunk. Be rit back.”

Before I could tell her that she still had half a glass, she swayed off, bumping into people on her way to the bar.

I took a sip of the fruity drink and downed more than I intended, enjoying the sweet taste as I watched her join the long line.

She'd be there for a while, and I was in the perfect spot—a somewhat dark corner with no one close by. The only annoyance was the blaring music.

Not wanting to watch people dance, I examined the mirror paintings. There were two, side by side, both equally beautiful in different ways.

The one Ember had been staring at was an image of the night sky with glowing trees underneath. I wasn't surprised, because Ember had always had an affinity for the sky, just like I did the sun. Being in darkness never felt natural to me, unless I was trying to hide from a crowd.

When I moved to the next one, my lungs seized. The painting was exquisite. The sky was a bright blue with a few fluffy white clouds hovering over a thick field of wildflowers in an open section of the woods. I'd give almost anything to be there, lying in the flowers, glancing at the sun.

With my free hand, I reached out to touch the painting, but when my fingers should've touched the canvas, they disappeared inside the artwork.

I jerked my hand back. Damn. How strong was this drink? It hadn't tasted strong, maybe because it was full of sugar and fruit.

My body tensed just as someone ran into me, *hard*.

I stumbled, trying to use the wall to catch my balance, and a strong arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me against a chest that could've been a damn brick wall.

“What the fuck!” I exclaimed, trying to wriggle out of the stranger's arms, but his hold was too damn strong. When I glanced up at his face, I froze.

It was the man I'd sensed watching me as I passed him in the lobby.

This couldn't be a coincidence.

A scream lodged in my throat, but it was as if I'd forgotten how to make a noise.

The corners of his mouth tipped upward, as if he was enjoying my fear. With his other hand, he brushed my arm, and then took my drink and released me. "Careful. You're going to spill your beverage."

I didn't like anyone I didn't know and trust touching me or my drink. I reached for it, and he countered my move, waving a hand along my front and taking a sip.

I wanted to punch him, but that might have been his intention, so I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When I opened them, he was adjusting his jacket with his free hand.

"Interesting outfit." He tilted his head, a cocky smirk locking in place. Somehow, it made him even more handsome, despite the unease slamming through me.

Placing my hands on my hips, I leaned back on the heels of my sneakers. "At least I attempted to dress up. What are you supposed to be?"

"You call that dressing up?" He grinned and took another sip. "I think we have completely different definitions of the concept."

I didn't want his germs all over my glass, so I grabbed for it once again. This time, he released it, and I clutched it to my chest.

I stepped away from him, needing distance. I'd leave, but I didn't want Ember coming back to this creep.

“Is that all you wanted?” I managed to keep my voice steady. There was something both familiar and odd about him. Like he didn’t quite belong here, and that was why he was focusing on me. “To insult my pig onesie?”

His brows furrowed. “Pig? That’s what it’s called?”

I rolled my eyes. He was pompous and a prick. “It’s a fucking onesie, made to fit an adult.” I pulled up my hood, so he could see the embroidered face and pink ears, cheeks, and nose. “You can tell this way.”

“Interesting.” He snickered.

If he didn’t walk away, I’d stab him. And then I’d get thrown in jail, and then Stan would have to drive all the way here from Nashville to bail me out. “Great conversation, but I need to find my friend who’s waiting on me.” Technically, it wasn’t a lie, and even if it was, it didn’t matter. I needed to get away from him, and the sooner the better.

He leaned forward, and the scent of fresh-cut grass swirled around me. “I’ll see you soon, Alina.”

“You have me mistaken for someone else.” I spun around, unable to fight the urge to get away anymore.

I expected him to follow, but when I looked over my shoulder, he remained in front of the painting I’d been looking at before he ran into me. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was on purpose.

I had to get Ember and Isa so I could talk them into moving to a different section of the casino, if not leaving all together.

Throat parched, I put the glass to my lips and tilted my head back, the liquid soothing my raw throat, though it tasted

slightly bitter. I placed the empty glass on a vacant table and strolled toward Ember once more.

After a few steps, the world spun, and I had to slow my pace.

That drink *was* strong. No wonder Ember was plastered.

I reached out and ran my hand along the smooth wall, needing it for balance.

Darkness blurred my vision.

My brain fogged, but one clear thought rang in my head. *I've been drugged.*

I never should've come here.

As my eyes closed, strong arms circled my waist. I wanted to punch or scream, but I couldn't move or make a sound. All this time, I'd made sure that I never lost control... I always stayed aware and knew what was happening to me, unlike so many of my friends, but all that slipped away like water through fingers.

The strange man whispered in my ear, "It's time to take you home."



IF YOU WANT FREE SCENES, more content, or just to chat about all things wicked come join my FB group Megan Montero's Wicked Readers.

[Click here to join the Wicked Readers](#)



DON'T MISS OUT ON THIS FREE BOOK!



THIS POWER CHOSE *ME*...

Within the supernatural world of Evermore everyone prays their child will be born with the Mark of the Guardian for they have unparalleled strength, intelligence, and *power*...but they have no idea what it's actually like. I didn't wish for this *gift* and I definitely don't want it. I was born a prince, I already had it all. This Mark on my neck stole all of it from me and forced me into a dangerous life I'd gladly trade away if I could...

But now the Witch Queens have ascended and it's time to try and defeat the evil King once and for all. For over a thousand years his cruelty has spared no one as his torturous power grows stronger. He must be stopped now, before his reign destroys everything and anything in his way. So I must push aside my dreams of returning home to the family that cast me out. I must step up and claim the power that chose me. I *must* enter the Trials and become a Knight in the Witch's Court.

There's only one way to prevent the tyrannical king from destroying everything I love...I must become the one thing he can't beat.

[Click here to get your FREE book now!](#)





IN CASE YOU MISSED the first season of The Royals: Witch Court check it out now!

[CLICK HERE TO GET YOUR WITCH COURT BOXSET](#)

It's time to claim my power...

ALL MY LIFE I've lived under lock and key, always following the strict rules my mother set for me. A week before my sixteenth birthday I sneak out of my house and discover why. Turns out I am not just a normal teenager. I'm a witch blessed with a gift someone wants to steal from me.

And not just anyone...the evil King Alataris.

For a thousand years the people of Evermore have suffered under his tyranny. The Mark on my shoulder says I am the Siphon Witch, one of five Witch Queens fated to come

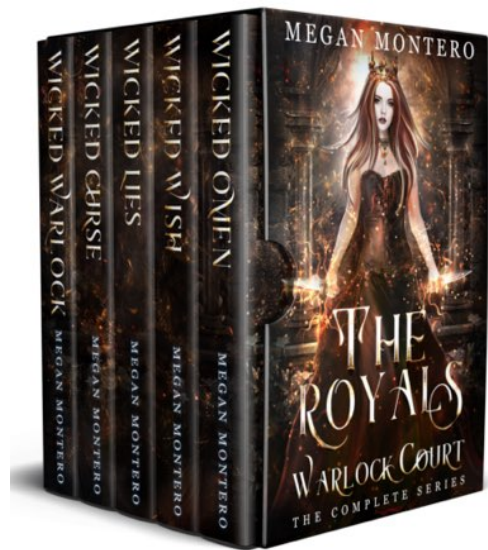
together and finally destroy him. The only thing keeping Evermore safe is the Stone that shields the witch kingdoms from Alataris's magic...and now he's found a way to steal it. Suddenly, I'm sent on a quest to find the ancient spell to protect the Stone. My only hope for surviving is through my strikingly beautiful and immensely powerful Guardian, Tucker. The laws of Evermore state that love between us is strictly forbidden, and it appears I'm the only one willing to give in to the attraction...

When the quest turns more dangerous than expected I realize I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. I was raised human. But I have to learn my magic fast because If King Alataris gets his hands on me he'll steal my magic and my life...but if he gets his hands on that Stone we all die.



THE MAGIC CONTINUES in the second season of The Royals: Warlock Court Now in this completely set!

[CLICK HERE TO GET WARLOCK COURT](#)



THERE'S no such thing as magical powers...

All my life the only kind of magic I'd ever seen was the sparkling jewels on fifth avenue. On the night of my sixteenth birthday all hell breaks loose, and by hell I mean me! I never felt power like this, so dark, so tempting, so out of my control! No one is safe around me. And now I'm being thrown into Warwick Academy.

An academy for the darker side of magic...the warlock side.

My captor, my savior, and the bane of my existence, Beckett Dust insists on keeping me here even though we can't stand each other. I don't care how drop dead gorgeous he is or that he rules the school like he owns it, I need to stay as far away from him as I can. His deepest desire is to turn me into a weapon in the great war to come. My deepest desire is ... him.

There's a thin line between love and hate and right now I'm walking it.



IF YOU'RE all caught up on The Royals don't worry there's more to come. In the mean time check out The Night Realm: Magic Marked my awesome co-written series with Chandelle LaVaun.

[CLICK HERE TO GET MAGIC MARKED](#)



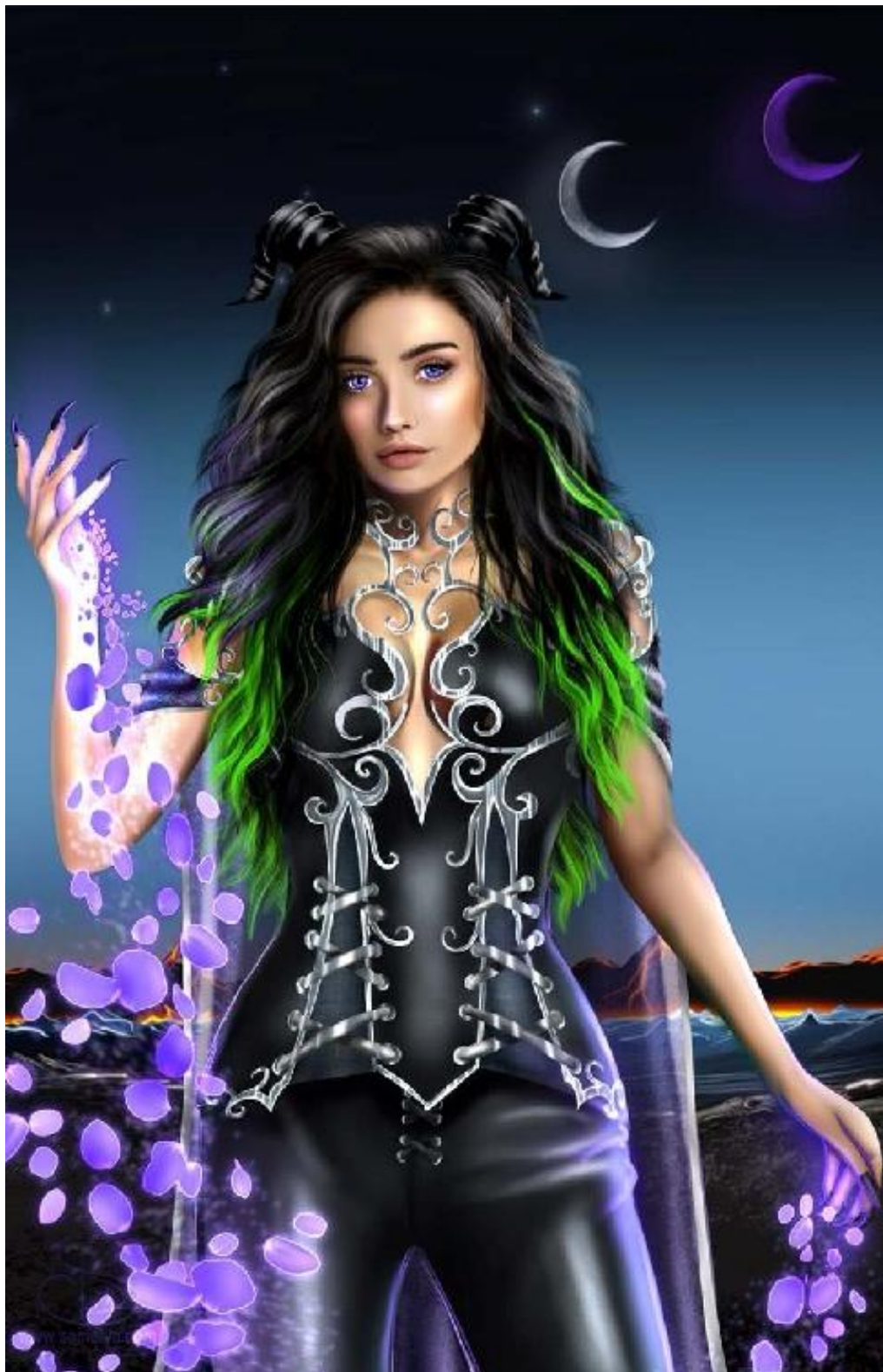
He put a spell on me...

Or at least he *must* have, because none of this makes any sense. None of this can be *real*. I'm not a mage with magical powers...I'm just *me*. Ellie Sutton. Your average, everyday seventeen-year-old high school *human* student. My biggest concerns are bullies, failed exams, and missing the express subway twice in one day.

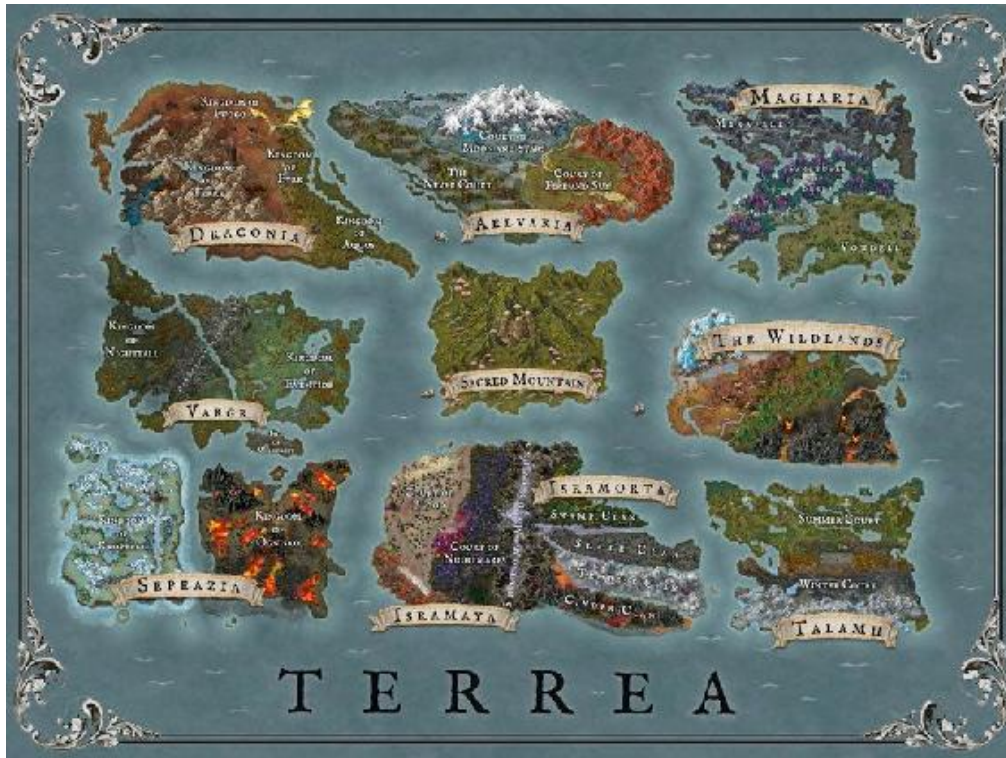
Magic is something I read about in comic books, it's not real. People don't move things with their minds or summon lightning with their hands. I don't care what Stellan

Wentworth says. It doesn't matter that he's breathtakingly beautiful or that his eyes sparkled when I challenge him. He's the kind of hero found in romance novels, not my real life. I'm dreaming, I have to be.

Because if I'm not, then what he's telling me is true. This gorgeous, terrifying world is in turmoil...and if I don't learn how to use my magic overnight...they'll all die.







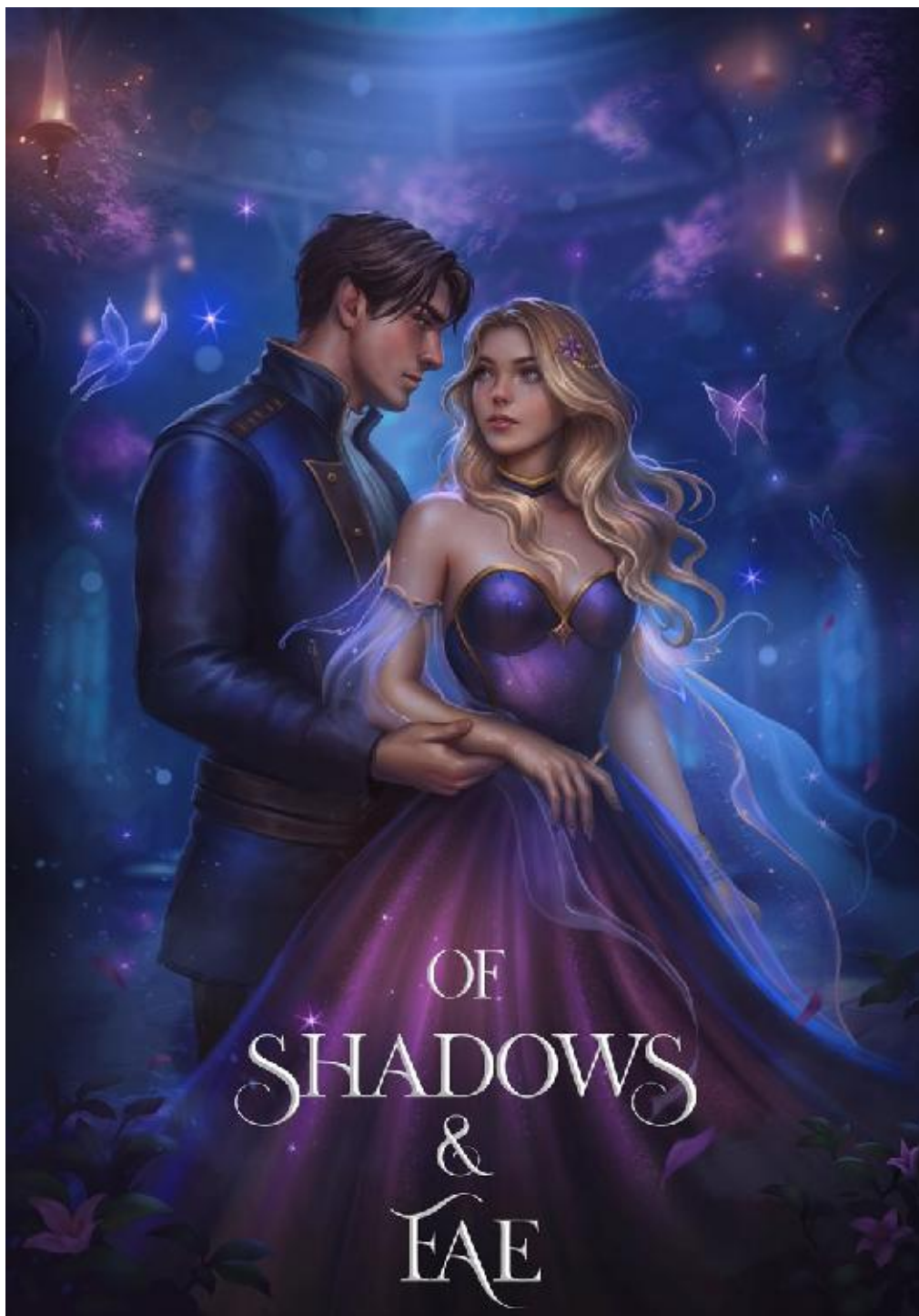


FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF DEATH & DARKNESS



MEGAN MONTERO



INTRODUCTION

Forgotten Kingdoms Series

Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

Forgotten Kingdoms is a collection of full-length stand-alone fantasy romance novels with fated mates and a guaranteed happily ever after. With vampires, fae, shifters, and everything in between, each book features a unique heroine and her epic love story that can be read in any order. All relationship dynamics are strictly M/F.

Authors in this set include:

Chandelle LaVaun

G.K. DeRosa

Megan Montero

Jen L. Grey

Robin D. Mahle & Elle Madison

LJ Andrews

R.L. Caulder

M. Sinclair

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



TERREA

(WORLD NAME)

TER-AY-YUH

HAVESTIA

(FESTIVAL WHEN THE VEIL
BETWEEN WORLDS OPENS)

HAV-EST-EE-UH

AELVARIA

EMBER
HADEON

EL-VAHR-EE-UH

EM-BURR
HAY-DEE-ON

DRACONIA

SAPHIRA
RYKER

DRAH-CONE-EE-UH

SA-FEE-RUH
RYE-KURR

ISRAMAYA

RHODELIA
VARAN

IS-RUH-MY-UH

ROW-DEL-EE-UH
VAIR-EN

ISRAMORTA

MORGANA
AVALON

IS-RUH-MOR-TUH

MOR-GAHN-UH
AV-UII-LAHN

MAGIARIA

ADIRA
KAGE

MAYJ-AIR-EE-UH

AH-DEER-UH
KAYJ

SEPEAZIA

STELLA
BRANDT

SEH-PEE-ZEE-UH

STEL-UH
BRANT

TALAMH

ALINA
KIERAN

TAL-AHV

AH-LEEN-UH
KEER-AN

VARGR

EVERA
AXEL

VAR-GUR

EH-VEER-UH
AX-EL

For all my FK Buddies! Thank you letting me join you on this wild ride. Here's to the memories and friends we've made.

"Cheers!"

If you know then you know. Xoxo- Megan

ALSO BY MEGAN MONTERO

The Royals: Witch Court

Wicked Witch

Wicked Magic

Wicked Hex

Wicked Potion

Wicked Queen

The Royals: Witch Court Boxset

The Royals: Warlock Court

Wicked Omen

Wicked Wish

Wicked Hunt (A Warlock Court Novella: Ophelia)

Wicked Lies

Wicked Curse

Wicked Warlock

Wicked Ties

The Royals: Vampire Court

Wicked Bite

Wicked Vampire

Wicked Thirst (Coming Soon)

The Night Realm (Co-Write With Chandelle LaVaun)

Magic Marked

Midnight Mage

Marvel Mage

Master Mage

Court Marked

Fatal Fae

Fiery Fae

Final Fae (Coming Soon)

Christmas Marked

Bite Me, Santa

Jingle My Bells

Trim My Tree

Ride My Sleigh

Stuff My Stocking

Of Death & Darkness

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