



A KING AND COVEN NOVELLA

TO SWAY A DEMON HEART

MADELEINE ELIOT

To Sway a Demon Heart

Madeleine Eliot



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To the broken – you are worthy of love.

*This is the night when the gateway between
our world and the spirit world is thinnest.
Tonight is a night to call out those who came
before.
Tonight I honor my ancestors.
Spirits of my fathers and mothers, I call to you,
and welcome you to join me for this night.
You watch over me always,
protecting and guiding me,
and tonight I thank you.
Your blood runs in my veins,
your spirit is in my heart,
your memories are in my soul.
With the gift of remembrance.
I remember all of you.
You are dead but never forgotten,
and you live on within me,
and within those who are yet to come.*

Samhain Ancestral Prayer



Pronunciation Guide

Akela: Ah-KEE-lah

Carnon: KAR-non

Cerridwen: KARE-uh-dwen

Demon: DEE-mon

Daemon: DAY-mon

Elara: Ehh-LAR-uhh

Herne: HURN

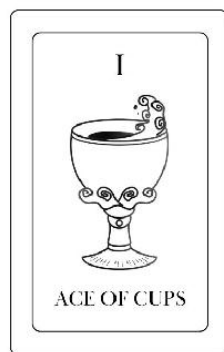
Oneiros: Oh-NEE-rowz

Samhain: SAH-when

Tarot Guide

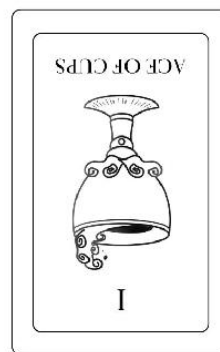
Tarot cards are used in this book to signify the important themes or emotions of each chapter. Tarot cards have different meanings when viewed upright or in reverse, which changes the meaning of the card. A full list of meanings of the cards found in this book can be accessed at Labrynthos.co

UPRIGHT



LOVE, NEW FEELINGS,
EMOTIONAL AWAKENING,
CREATIVITY, SPIRITUALITY,
INTUITION

REVERSED



COLDNESS, EMPTINESS,
EMOTIONAL LOSS, BLOCKED
CREATIVITY, FEELING
UNLOVED, GLOOMINESS



Prologue

Two Months Prior

“I can’t,” Tyr said, breaking away from me and taking a step back from where he had me pinned to the wall.

For one long, glorious moment, our lips had found each other, his tongue sweeping over mine in a feral kiss that shattered my senses.

“What?” I asked, feeling a little dazed and not fully understanding his hesitation. I was breathing heavily, the Pull begging me to close the distance between us as he created it.

For days, we had been drawn to each other, both of us resisting the force dragging us together. We had barely spoken on the journey to Mithloria, hoping to ignore what I now realized was the mating Pull. He felt it too, because he had confessed as much before he had kissed me, the blood still staining his hands from his earlier questioning of the shadow casters.

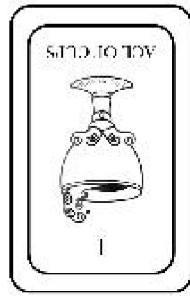
His green eyes dimmed, his words full of self-loathing. “I don’t deserve you,” he rasped, taking another step away from

me until he was backed against my bed. The tiny inn in Mithloria had two rooms, but I had brought Tyr to mine to clean the blood from his hands. The interrogation of the shadow demons sent to attack our own casters at the border was brutal, and he had seemed so broken that everything in me wanted to fix him.

Tyr held up his hands now, and they shook as he gave me a pained look. “I am a monster, and you are everything bright and good and whole, Brigid. I can’t do this. You don’t want this.”

I shook my head, stunned that he would reject me. That my *mate* would reject me, even though the gods themselves declared us made for each other. That he would presume to tell me what I deserved. What I wanted.

Before I could argue, he left the room, fleeing for his own as the memory of his lips against mine faded into nothing.



Chapter 1

The Court of Shadows was a horrible place.

I didn't think of myself as a judgmental person, and the Goddess knew I tried to see the good in everyone and everything. But the dark stone hallways and oppressive atmosphere were so miserably bleak compared to the Court of Sun, or even Oneiros, that it was hard not to judge.

I sighed, tapping into my flame to continue my purging of the spider webs from the hallways. Tyr said it was a useless chore, but I felt that removing the evidence of Scathanna's presence would help lift the gloom and ease the transition to a new Daemon Lord of Shadow.

A Daemon Lord that we still hadn't discovered.

Tyr and I had been at the Court of Shadows for almost a month trying to wade through a litany of presumed heirs to the title. Scathanna had no natural heirs, and four hundred years of her rule had left her people broken and fighting for any scrap of power they could find.

“Just let them fight it out,” Tyr had suggested in frustration after our first week when no clear lord emerged. The title was usually hereditary, but without heirs the whole matter fell to who was the most powerful, and of course every demon with an ounce of power believed it to be their natural right to claim the position. “Or let Carnon and Elara appoint someone.”

“If you’re not willing to help, you can leave,” I had said acerbically, scowling at the Daemon Lord of Blood.

My relationship with Tyr was strained at best, especially after he had refused our mating bond. I knew Elara had asked me to join him on this mission in hopes that we might bridge the gap between us again, and a foolish part of me had hoped for the same. But so far nothing had come of it aside from catching Tyr giving me the occasional longing look.

I grimaced, returning to work as I imagined my king and queen walking through these halls in two days. Carnon had wanted to return to his old practice of rotating between courts for holidays, and Shadow was the traditional host of Samhain.

In demon tradition, Samhain marked the end of one year and the beginning of another, the transition from day to night, life to death, and autumn to winter. It was said to be the day the veils between worlds were at their thinnest, and most courts took the time to remember and honor those who had passed during the year, believing the dead might hear the celebration. The whole affair seemed to fit the darkness exuding from Shadow much more than any other court.

I knew that they were also coming to try to solve the problem of succession, since Tyr and I hadn't managed it yet. I hated to disappoint my friends.

"My lady," came a smooth, baritone voice that broke me from my thoughts and made my fire stutter. I felt the now familiar Pull deep in my gut, begging me to close the distance and go to my mate.

The mate who didn't think I wanted him.

"Lord Tyr," I said, trying to sound polite.

Cerridwen had suggested seducing Tyr, and Elara had tried to get me to talk to him and work out our differences. But Tyr's rejection hurt. Deeply. I had only known such a pain when I'd lost my father, but this felt somehow more acute. More cutting. It had taken me the last two months to stitch my broken heart back together, and it felt like something vital and fragile had shattered in me.

To protect my heart, I had decided to adopt a kind but distantly polite demeanor toward him. I didn't want us to hate each other, but I was too terrified of another rejection to pursue him anymore. Maybe we could just be colleagues again, the way we were before either of us recognized the Pull.

Unbidden, my body reacted with a physical jolt when I beheld him. He was a touch paler than his usual bronze tan, not unexpected as we had been stuck underground so long in Shadow. But his form was athletic and strong, his broad shoulders slimming to a tapered waist. His dark auburn hair

was almost blood red down here, and his eyes flashed a bright green as he took me in, too.

I flushed, my cheeks burning as I snapped myself out of my trance and tried to give him a gentle, polite smile.

Colleagues would never be possible.

Tyr coughed, raising a hand to rub the back of his neck.

“The reception halls and guest rooms are all done,” he said, sounding uncomfortable as he tried to avoid my eyes. “And the council is ready for us.”

“Good,” I said lightly, stepping down from the chair I had been standing on to reach a particularly stubborn patch of cobwebs. I grabbed my cloak from the floor where I had tossed it when I’d begun using the fire magic. The caverns were much colder than the Court of Sun, and I was wearing a dress more suited for summer at the sea than autumn in the mountains. “Please lead on.”

“Brigid...” Tyr began, stopping me with a gentle hand to my arm. I stiffened, feeling an electric need flood me, followed by the icy sting of rejection. Tyr must have sensed my shift, because he dropped his hand quickly. “Sorry. I...” He swallowed, squaring his shoulders. “We need to make sure we are on the same page. Before we go in there.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling as if nothing had happened. “What are your thoughts?”

“I’m inclined to agree with them,” Tyr said, shortening his usually long stride to walk next to me as we headed toward the

council chambers. We had formed the council from the heads of noble families to try to solve the succession issue, but they were becoming more of a pain than a help, especially with their latest scheme.

“It’s completely barbaric,” I protested, giving Tyr a sidelong glance. I tried and failed not to study his strong jaw, a faint shadow of red stubble smattered across it.

“It is,” Tyr agreed, speaking quietly lest we be overheard. Scathanna might be gone but the spiders were still everywhere. Their next master could easily be listening. “But they’ve agreed to nothing else. I think we have to allow it.”

“Carnon and Elara will never agree,” I sighed. “This is against Elara’s whole goal of becoming more enlightened. She vowed she wouldn’t allow this sort of thing after ending Scathanna, remember?”

“We have offered a hundred different diplomatic solutions,” Tyr argued, frowning at me. “This is the only plan the council have agreed to. It’s bloodthirsty, but change will take time.”

“I don’t know how I’ll be able to watch,” I shuddered.

“Do you want to leave?” Tyr asked, stopping me again with a hand as he turned to me. The same spark shot through me, and I tried to ignore the prickling sensation I felt in all of my most intimate places. “You could leave with Elara and Carnon. You don’t *have* to stay to watch the whole horror show after that.”

I sighed. Since everything that had happened—or not happened, I supposed—Tyr had adopted a quiet concern on my behalf. It was a little charming and a lot annoying. In front of everyone else, he maintained the veneer of swaggering indifference and indolent charisma that had managed to quell the darker impulses of his court for decades.

But with me, he was tender. Gentle. At least if he were a prick, it would be easier to let him go.

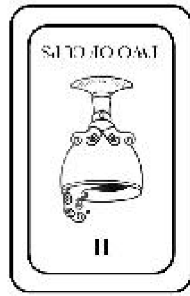
“I’m fine,” I said, opting for a smile despite the macabre topic. “I want to see this through for Elara. It doesn’t mean I have to enjoy it.”

Tyr nodded, squeezing once gently before letting me go. Curse this male, and his cursed hands, and his beautiful, perfect, cursed jaw.

We didn’t say anything else as we proceeded down the shadowy hallway, one of hundreds in this horrible court. I couldn’t wait to be back in Sun, and I intended never to go underground again.

We reached the councilroom doors, both of us bracing ourselves for whatever battle would come next. Tyr looked down at me again, a question in his eyes, and I nodded. He pushed open the door, donning his mask of swaggering, sarcastic lord.

“Tell us more, then,” he said, speaking to the assembled lords as he held the door open for me, “about this plan in which you murder each other.”



Chapter 2

I pursed my lips, trying not to look more disapproving at Tyr's choice of words. He shrugged with an obvious grin and a wink, playing our parts for the council.

“Lord Tyr,” drawled one of the oldest, crustiest demon males on the council. He looked just as put out with Tyr's choice of wording, but I understood his desire to irritate the council. They seemed to delight in irritating us. “A tournament to decide the next Daemon Lord of Shadow is not murder.”

“It sounds like murder,” Tyr said, letting amusement and irreverence fill his tone. “I believe you said ‘duel to the death,’ Lord Tenebris. Am I wrong?”

Lord Tenebris scowled, but another council member cut in. “There is precedence,” the other lord said, peering at Tyr over a pair of spectacles that were almost certainly a fashion choice rather than a necessity. “Three millennia ago—”

“Yes, yes,” Tyr said, interrupting expertly and waving an impatient hand. “You've told us. The line of succession was

broken, and the Tournament of Shadows decided the next Daemon Lord.”

“The King and Queen will be here in two days for Samhain,” I cut in, preventing the lord from rebuking Tyr. “You will need to convince them to agree to this, not us.”

Tyr raised a single red brow at me, but didn’t argue in front of the council.

“The king would not dare to question our traditions,” Lord Tenebris cut in, scowling at me as if I had insulted his heritage. “*When* he agrees, the tournament must occur in a neutral territory. It can’t be held in Shadow, lest it grant an advantage to an opponent.”

“Where would you propose we hold it then, Lord Tenebris?” I asked politely, trying to stop myself from lighting the male on fire in my irritation at his presumptions. I was supposed to be sweet and kind and non-threatening. Gain the lords’ trust and let them underestimate my power. Incinerating one of them would not uphold my veneer of innocence.

I wasn’t exactly sure how Tyr and I had fallen into our respective roles here. I knew he had a gentle side, and he knew I had a fierce one. We had fought together in Mithloria and Oneiros, despite our differences. But the roles just sort of fit when we arrived, and my reputation as the softest Daemon Lord, aided by my close friendships with Elara and Cerridwen, made others drop their guards around me.

They didn’t realize that soft didn’t mean safe.

“Oneiros would be the best choice,” a third noble, Lord Tenebris’ son, chimed in. I could never remember the blasted male’s name. He was handsome in the way of all demon males, with dark skin and curling brown horns that contrasted sharply with very white teeth. He also seemed to be somewhat the opposite of his father, much more soft-spoken and even-tempered.

I smiled at him apologetically. “That is not possible, I’m afraid,” I said, holding out my hands placatingly. “The King and Queen are still rebuilding parts of the city. They won’t wish to risk any more destruction.”

“The tournament can be held in Blood,” Tyr said, giving me a quick glance. I nodded imperceptibly. Pushing the tournament to the Court of Blood meant that rebuilding could continue in the damaged portions of Oneiros and Sun, and it would keep the conniving lords away from the sacred grottos in the Court of Beast. Blood was remote enough in the mountains to the north that any damage would be contained, and the demons of that court were bloodthirsty enough to keep the nobles from Shadow in check.

“That is irregular,” chimed in a female noble, the only member of the council I actually liked. Lady Shyama was similar in coloring to Lord Tenebris’ son, but her disposition seemed firmer, and her intelligence was obvious. While not exactly kind in demeanor, she was polite and efficient, and there were no scandalous stories or worrying rumors about her like so many of the other nobles. She was relatively young, a

little older perhaps than Tyr, and if it were up to me, we would have already given her the title.

The males were the problem.

“Irregular, but not against any of your rules,” Tyr pointed out, grinning proudly as if he had been the one to comb through ancient records for hours the day before to double-check every single rule and regulation. “What say you?”

“Fine,” said Lord Tenebris, standing from his seat at the table in clear annoyance. “How do you propose we transport the contestants?”

“The Queen has already sent enchanted mirrors to all the courts, including this one,” I pointed out, frowning at the lord. “We can travel directly into Blood via witch magic.”

Tenebris sneered, clearly disgusted by this idea, but Tyr rose and cut in to prevent disagreement. “The King and Queen will be here on Samhain for the feast. You have until then to figure out how to convince them to go along with this scheme.”

He offered me an arm expectantly, and I stiffened. I still felt the stab of rejection whenever we touched.

I took his arm, pasting a bland smile on my face as I nodded to the assembled lords and let Tyr lead me from the chamber.

“That went well,” Tyr murmured once we were out of earshot of the door. He was still holding my arm, and though I knew I should, I didn’t have it in me to pull away. “Comparatively.”

“Compared to an all-out revolution, yes,” I agreed. “What exactly will this tournament look like? You’re not planning on replicating the traditional contests, are you?”

I had been the one to research how Shadow held this competition, and it was utterly barbaric. Usually, there were feats of strength or skill or intelligence that ended with an all-out massacre, in which the last champion standing was named Daemon Lord.

“First of all, I think *we* have to,” he corrected, glancing down at me. His gaze leapt to where he was still holding my arm, and he dropped it immediately, turning to face me fully. “As long as Carnon agrees—which I have no doubt that he *will*, despite Elara’s protests—the lords will demand we start immediately and follow tradition. Secondly, we tried to do this peacefully, and they refused. Why should you care if they want to murder each other to choose a lord?”

“Why wouldn’t I care?” I replied incredulously. “We are trying to change the Darklands, to be more enlightened. More accepting and tolerant. If we continue the same gory old traditions, nothing will change.”

“Believe me, I’m well aware,” Tyr said stiffly, his mouth a tight line. I swallowed, remembering Tyr’s truths that had been forced out of him that night in Oneiros. How he had killed his own father to spare Carnon, and played games of lies and deceit in his court to protect the weak. “Just because you *want* things to be different doesn’t mean that they are.”

“Tyr, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” he cut in, interrupting my apology. Without realizing, I had put my hand on his chest, and he looked down at it now with such agonizing longing that, for a second, I thought he might take it.

Instead, he stepped away, forcing me to drop it. The Pull rebelled at the move, urging me to close the distance, but I stood my ground.

“Not everyone is inherently good like you are, Brigid,” Tyr said, his face still agonized and mouth a thin line of pain. “Some of us are wicked to our very bones, and have to fight that evil inside us every fucking day.”

“You’re not—”

“I am,” he interrupted again. “And the sooner you realize that, the better.”

Tyr strode away down the dark hallway without me, fisting his hands in his pockets as if to fight temptation like I was. The Pull begged me to go to him, to tell him he was good and kind, to comfort him.

Instead, I turned and walked back to my room, silent tears running down my cheeks the whole way.



Chapter 3

As predicted, Elara was not pleased with the plan. We had contacted her and Carnon via mirror the evening after the council meeting to explain the situation, hoping we could be on the same page before the council bombarded them.

To my annoyance, Carnon agreed with Tyr that change would take time and that this could be the end of the violent history of Shadow. In the end, the council got their way, as males always annoyingly seemed to when they stuck together.

Elara insisted on several conditions, though. Only volunteers older than twenty-five, the year a demon reached maturity, would be allowed to enter. All would need to be made aware of the risks and cautioned before entering. And only a small number of guests would be permitted to watch the trials, the council included. She hoped that containing the cruelty to a small number would help contain it. Tyr agreed to take the conditions to the council, and he took care of all the particulars.

The Lord of Blood and I managed to avoid each other the whole next day and well into the afternoon of Samhain. The holiday would be celebrated in Shadow with a feast and a ball.

Elara had wrinkled her nose at this plan as well, her experience of Samhain in the Witchlands as a much more pious affair, focused primarily on the turning between life and death. For the most part, demons celebrated the holiday similarly, with prayers of remembrance and a small offering to the dead, praying that they would guide us into the next year and through the darkest months safely.

But the people of Shadow were a bit darker than the rest of us.

I was beyond excited to see Elara again. She and Cerridwen, mate of the Lord of Beasts, had become close friends, and they knew all about the situation with Tyr. Although we had been apart for most of the last month, we had spoken often via mirror, sometimes both of them together in Oneiros, and other times with Elara setting up an additional mirror when Cerridwen was in the Sacred City.

I wished Cerridwen could come too. She and Herne had to lead services in Beasts, where Samhain was treated more reverently. I hoped my people would be fine without me in Sun, but I knew my advisors and priestesses would take care of everything.

I wondered briefly if Tyr worried about his own people in Blood, while I smoothed my gown and checked my appearance in the mirror one last time.

Black was the traditional color of Samhain, and in accordance with that tradition, I had procured a gown of black flowing chiffon held up by a band of gold around my throat. I added some additional gold jewelry to my ears and arms to brighten up the gown as a nod to my own court. I would always prefer bright colors to black, but I thought I looked rather lovely as I braided my golden hair atop my head.

For a second, I allowed myself the fantasy of letting Tyr run his strong fingers through the braids, dislodging the pins as he pressed me against the wall and...

A knock at my door startled me from the daydream, which had left my heart racing and my face uncomfortably warm. I hurried to the door, expecting to find one of the servants or lords to let me know that Elara had arrived, but stopped short when I opened the door to find the subject of my daydream.

Tyr was made for a life amid the darkness of this court. The black jacket, accented with touches of red as homage to his own court, showed off his form and made him look like darkness and temptation incarnate. His dark red hair was almost the same color as the thread in his jacket, and my face warmed even more as he looked at me with just as much frank appraisal.

“Gods, you look—” he cut himself off as if realizing that whatever he was about to say was not going to be something an uninterested colleague might say. The heat in his gaze told me that the Pull was riding him just as strongly as it was me, and as much as I wanted to shake some sense into him and

demand he take me here and now, I managed to get a hold of myself.

“Appropriate?” I asked, trying to suggest a word that could not be misconstrued as romantic. “I know black is customary for Samhain, but it’s not my favorite color.”

“No. I mean, yes,” Tyr agreed, clearing his throat a little. He swallowed as his eyes swept my form again, getting a little bit caught at the swell of the gown over my breasts. “But I was going to say beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to beat back the Pull as it celebrated this tiny victory of approval. “You look beautiful as well.”

He raised a brow at me, a small smirk playing at his lips, and my heart lurched a little as he held out an arm for me. He must have read my momentary hesitation over taking it as confusion.

“I thought we could greet Carnon and Elara together,” he said by way of explanation. “If you want.”

“Of course,” I agreed, quickly checking that I had the key to the room in the concealed pocket in my gown. Elara had converted me to the practicality of pockets, and I had begun to have all of my dresses altered to include them.

I took Tyr’s arm and let him escort me down the hall. The witch mirror for travel in the Court of Shadow had been placed in what used to be Scathanna’s reception hall. She had clearly designed it to be more like a throne room, and we had gutted

most of the decor to make the place less foreboding. I had taken great pleasure in burning Scathanna's "throne" to cinders, and tonight the room would serve as a ballroom for the Samhain festivities.

Tables of food and drink were being prepared against one wall as we arrived. The people of Shadow were still prone to choosing dark colors for all decor, but we had cleaned out the cobwebs, and I had insisted on having at least a hundred candles burning to light the room. A fireplace warmed the space, and the decorations of weaponry and caged creatures under Scathanna's reign had been replaced with tapestries and garlands of autumn leaves and berries, and a few orange pumpkins I had shipped in from Sun.

Shadow was designed differently from the other courts in the Darklands. Whereas all of the other courts had villages or cities, as well as a lordly residence and maybe a temple or two, Shadow was a network of underground caverns carved into the inhospitable southern mountains. It was like a city underground but without the privacy of separate dwellings. All the residents of Shadow were either some level of nobility with apartments in the cavernous city adjoining Scathanna's court, or servants and artisans who worked for the various noble families. They had smaller rooms or family apartments in the deeper, less desirable sections of the mountain.

Everyone, it seemed, had a strict role and set of expectations, and there was very little freedom of mobility from the station into which one was born.

On our first day in Shadow, I had made it clear to the demons in lower castes that none would be forced to remain. We had offered them safe passage to Oneiros or beyond if they wanted to leave, and we had extended the offer to the nobility as well. Few chose to abandon their court, and I suppose it would be hard, spending your life in darkness, to embrace a different sort of unknown existence.

Nevertheless, we could make things better for the people here, and that came down to choosing a Daemon Lord who would uphold the values of Carnon's court.

"It looks almost festive," Tyr commented as we entered the hall after a mostly silent trek through the shadowy hallways between our guest quarters and the reception hall. It had taken me two full weeks to navigate without getting lost, and I was convinced that it was part of the reason Tyr offered to escort me.

"Thank you," I said dryly, smiling faintly at the weak compliment. I had spent the entire morning helping prepare the room to set a welcoming and cheerful tone for Elara and Carnon, rather than one that felt so ominously of death. "I still don't understand the idea of Samhain as a celebration. In Sun, it's quite a somber affair."

"It's more like this in Blood," Tyr said, gesturing to the musicians in the corner who were tuning instruments, and the long tables of food and wine that spoke somewhat of excess. "I try to think of it as a celebration for those we loved, rather than a memorial for the lost."

“I suppose I can see that,” I agreed with a thoughtful nod. “Does it not involve blood drinking and debauchery?” I added with a little teasing smile.

Tyr didn’t return the smile as he frowned down at me. “Everything in my court involves blood drinking and debauchery.”

“Oh,” I said, letting my teasing smile fall away. This male was so difficult to read nowadays. One minute he was chatting openly, and the next, he completely shut down. It was exhausting, and my poor heart couldn’t take much more of the emotional tug-of-war. “I’m sorry.”

Tyr gave me a pained look, somewhere between exasperation and shame. “I—”

A screech interrupted whatever he was about to say. One of the servants had flung a tray of hors d’oeuvres in shock as the full-length mirror at the end of the hall rippled, and a tall male form stepped out. The Demon King of the Darklands emerged from the mirror, a smirk playing across his lips as he took in the terrified servant, who clutched the tray in front of himself like a shield.

Carnon held out a hand, and a female figure emerged from the mirror flanked by the form of a huge brown wolf. The Witch Queen stood by the Demon King’s side, both regal and a little terrifying in their black finery and matching crowns, and smiled warmly at me.

“Elara!” I cried, dropping Tyr’s arm and running over to hug my friend. A hoot announced Artemis’ arrival behind the King

and Queen, and the mirror closed behind the last of the royal entourage.

Elara hugged me back as Tyr and Carnon shook hands, entering a conversation about fencing techniques that must be a continuation of some earlier debate. Artemis, Carnon's bonded strix with the body of an owl and wings of a bat, flapped over and started pecking at the fallen hors d'oeuvres. Akela, the wolf who seemed to be bonded somehow to both monarchs, padded over in a most stately fashion to help the strix with the meal.

"Any progress?" Elara asked, shooting a glance to her mate and Tyr before looking at me hopefully. I knew she wasn't asking about the hunt for a new Lord of Shadow, and I shook my head a little. Her face fell and she hugged me again. "Have you tried Cerridwen's plan?"

I laughed, the sound somewhat muffled by Elara's embrace. "No, and I already told you I won't be," I said, pulling back and trying to look stern. "I'm holding out for groveling, remember?"

"Well, I can't fault you for that," Elara said, giving her mate a bemused little smile. He raised a brow at her over Tyr's shoulder as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "Groveling can be extra fun."



Chapter 4

The Samhain celebration was an odd mix of formal observance and revelry. Carnon opened with the Charge of the Horned God and the traditional blessings of Samhain, and then the musicians began to play an eerie overture while lords and ladies invited partners to dance.

I was content to sit with Elara and chat about the tournament details, but a polite cough at my shoulder told me I had company instead.

“Lady Brigid,” came a smooth voice from above me. I turned, a little surprised to see Lord Tenebris’ son, whose name I still couldn’t remember, standing above me with a hand out expectantly. “Would you do me the honor?”

“Oh,” I said, catching Elara’s eye. She raised her own brows and gave a little shrug.

“A dance, my love?” Carnon said, reappearing at the same moment to offer a hand to Elara.

“Your Majesty,” said Tenebris’ son, bowing low and respectfully to Carnon. “My Queen,” he added, giving the same bow to Elara. “My apologies. I did not see you there.”

“No apologies needed, Lord...?” Elara trailed off, creating an opening for me to make introductions.

The younger lord saved me from the embarrassment of having to ask his name. “Draven,” he said smoothly, offering my friends another bow. “My father is Lord Tenebris.”

Carnon’s face went stony at this introduction, but he shook the male’s hand regardless. I tried to catch Elara’s eye to ask for clarification, but she hadn’t noticed Carnon’s change in demeanor.

“My lady,” Draven said, turning back to me. “A dance?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, frowning at Carnon who was still giving Draven a hard look as he guided me away. I made a mental note to ask Elara about the exchange later. Perhaps Carnon had dealings with Draven’s father in the past.

Lord Draven was a perfect gentleman as he led me to the dance floor, taking one of my hands in his and putting the other around my waist. I flinched a little at the touch, the Pull rebelling at a male other than my mate being this close to me when our bond was still unfulfilled, but if Draven noticed he was too polite to mention it.

“You look lovely, Lady Brigid,” he said quietly, his voice a deep rumble as he began to move us around the floor. “Blessed Samhain to you.”

“And to you,” I responded as was customary. “Are you enjoying the celebration?”

“I am,” he said, smiling warmly at me. It was so strange to be the object of a warm, open smile for a change that I couldn’t help but return it. “It is a final pleasure before we face our fates in the tournament. I presume we will begin tomorrow?”

“Yes,” I said, a little surprised at these words. “Are you planning to enter then, my lord?”

“Draven is fine, Lady Brigid,” he corrected warmly. “And yes. My father is determined that I will take the seat, as he is too old himself to compete.”

“I see,” I said, frowning a little. “And do you want to be Lord of Shadow?”

“Who would not?” he said, a broad smile curving his full lips. Based on the muscle I felt beneath my hands, he would be a competitive opponent. “The chance to lead Shadow, to improve the Court and guide its people, would be a true honor.”

I smiled, feeling perhaps Draven, unlike his father, shared a bit of our vision for the future. “Change is not as easy as all that,” I pointed out, gasping a little as the male spun me more quickly than I had expected.

He chuckled apologetically. “True,” he agreed, squeezing my waist a little tighter to steady me. “You would be in a position

to know after suffering through the council for weeks, my lady.”

“Brigid,” I corrected, trying to decide if the smile I gave him was genuine or part of the act I had adopted in Shadow. It was honestly difficult to tell. “If you insist on abandoning the formalities.”

“I do,” Draven said, giving me a piercing look. His warm, brown eyes were looking at me intently, almost as Tyr’s had done earlier, and the look was not entirely devoid of desire. “I confess I have been hoping for some time to converse with you properly. I’ve been quite taken with you in the council meetings.”

“With me?” I asked, laughing lightly at the compliment. “I don’t believe I’ve done much to earn your admiration.”

“On the contrary,” he disagreed, looking at me seriously. “You are poised and passionate. I’ve seen you working in the halls and receiving rooms day in and day out. Most nobles in this court wouldn’t stoop to dirtying their hands. You seem eager to dive in and burn it all to the ground.” His smile had returned, and this statement was made with a tone of appreciative amusement, rather than criticism.

“I believe in the King and Queen’s vision for the Darklands,” I replied with a shrug, feeling myself blush under Draven’s steady gaze.

“As do I,” he said, giving me that same heavy stare. I felt my heart thump as the Pull balked, reminding me I had a mate.

As if drawn by that same feeling, Tyr appeared at Draven's shoulder as the song ended, looking icily at the shadow demon.

"Lady Brigid," he said, a wide grin splashed across his face as he held out a glass of bloodberry wine to me. "May I steal you for a moment?" He was clearly in his swaggering lord persona, and I gave him a tight smile as I curtsied to Draven.

"Thank you for the dance," I said, offering him a genuine smile and taking the glass Tyr held out to me.

"It was my pleasure," Draven replied, bowing and placing a light kiss on the back of my free hand. "I hope to do it often."

He bowed politely to Tyr, then strode off, shoving his hands in his pockets. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed at the interruption, but Tyr dragged my attention back to him before I could study the departing lord.

"What was that?" he asked, sipping his own wine and raising a brow at me expectantly. I took a swig of the bubbly red liquid, which in concentrated doses resulted in uninhibited truth-telling. Tyr had been dosed by Carnon's head of staff when we were unsure of his loyalties, and I was surprised he could still drink the stuff.

"What was what?" I replied innocently, mirroring Tyr's expression. He still wore his indolent grin, but I knew him well enough by now to read the hidden fury beneath the smile. "Lord Draven asked me to dance."

“And then talked your ear off,” Tyr pointed out. “He’s trying to get you to support his claim to Shadow.”

“You knew he was entering the tournament?” I asked, trying to decide how indignant I should feel about Tyr’s accusation. I knew I *should* be offended that he was implying that Draven wasn’t really interested in me. But the damn Pull *liked* that he seemed jealous.

Tyr took my glass, placing both on a nearby table, then offered me his hand. “Dance with me.” It was a command, not a request, one that I should have refused on principle alone. But my broken heart thumped again wildly, wanting desperately for this male to make me his.

“We can talk outside,” I argued, trying to control my rampaging need and keep my brain in control of my body. Tyr had rejected the bond. We were forced to work together now. He didn’t want any of this.

“But I’d like to dance,” he replied, stepping closer so that his scent, something spicy and sweet like cinnamon, wrapped around me. “Please, Brigid?” The request was softer, almost pleading, as if the Pull was riding him so hard after seeing me dance with another that he needed to do something to quell it. My soul ached to be near him in the same way, so I let myself give in and took his hand.

The hand around my waist was warm and firm, similar to Draven’s but somehow more *right*. His other clasped mine gently, his thumb tracing circles on the back of mine as he began to move to the eerie music.

“Draven can’t be trusted,” Tyr said, pulling me closer to speak low in my ear. My body thrilled in our nearness, and I had to remind myself that this wasn’t about anything more than work. “His father was one of Scathanna’s most loyal cronies.”

“Just because his father is bad, doesn’t mean he is,” I replied, giving Tyr a pointed look. His own father had been a hateful male, but I knew Tyr was different, even if he pretended to the world that he was every bit the same monster as his sire.

Tyr pressed his lips tightly, clearly understanding my meaning. “In this case, it would be wise to be cautious,” he said, spinning us with the rest of the dancers so that my skirts flared out around us. “I’ve heard rumors.”

“Rumors don’t mean anything,” I protested, again thinking of Tyr’s own reputation. And Carnon’s. He was known by many as a fearsome, merciless Demon King, especially in Shadow and Blood, but the stories were mostly a smokescreen to keep those courts in check. “What is the real reason you dislike him, Tyr? Is it that he danced with me?”

A muscle ticked in Tyr’s jaw, and I knew I had hit the mark. “I don’t need another reason to distrust him,” he said, pulling me a little closer, “but yes.”

Anger and joy warred in me at his words, the Pull celebrating this victory. I let the anger come to the surface when I spoke next. “You walked away, Tyr,” I reminded him, letting my voice grow cold. “I offered you everything. You don’t get to be jealous now.”

“I walked away *for* you,” he hissed, anger rising in his voice and cheeks as he glared down at me.

“You walked away for *you*,” I pushed back, feeling his hand tighten around mine almost painfully. “You’re the one with wounds you won’t let me see. Won’t let me help.”

“You can’t help,” Tyr growled, as the song came to an end, swearing as the couples around us applauded and began to move away.

“Good night, Tyr,” I said coldly, feeling that icy pain in my heart return. I pulled my hand from his and stalked away, determined to go to my rooms and have a little cry and then complain to Elara about the stupidity of males.

Tyr followed, catching me around the waist as I turned the corner into the hallway outside the reception hall. “Brigid,” he cursed, pushing me back against the wall so our bodies were flush. My heart pounded again, the icy pain and fiery anger forming a pressure in my chest that would explode any second if he didn’t get off me. “Gods damn it, just listen.”

“No, you listen,” I snarled, grabbing his lapels as much to hold him to me as to anchor myself in the moment. “You tell me you are broken, that I don’t want you. That I deserve better. Then you become jealous and territorial when another male perhaps *does* want to give me his heart. You can’t have it both ways, Tyr. Either you have me, or you let me go.”

“I will want you no matter what for the rest of our lives,” Tyr growled, pressing himself against me. I felt the evidence of that desire hard against my stomach, and heat flooded me as

the Pull begged me to make him mine. “I’m not fucking jealous because another male wants you. Of course another male wants you. A hundred males probably want you, Brigid. They’d be fucking fools not to.”

He tilted his head down, so close to mine I thought he might give in and brush his lips against me. “I’m jealous because they can have you, and I can’t,” he added, his voice low and pained as he pressed his forehead to mine.

“You *can* have me,” I protested, giving into the Pull and tilting my head so that my lips just barely brushed his. A sweet ache was building in me, and I wanted nothing more than to close the distance between our bodies and satisfy it.

He groaned, pounding a fist against the stone wall next to me in frustration. It should have scared me a little, but it had quite the opposite effect, and I felt my heart racing in anticipation as he loomed over me.

“I can’t,” he whispered, his breath skating over my lips as he breathed out a sigh of resignation. “I can’t. You deserve more. You don’t want me, Brigid. I promise, you don’t.”

It was strange, feeling my heart breaking all over again as if I hadn’t spent any time at all trying to protect it from exactly this. The cold pain that usually followed was gone though, replaced by incandescent rage. I let my fire burn inside me, simmering toward the surface of my skin as hurt fueled the power within me.

Tyr yelped, jumping back as my skin grew hot and fire burst around us, making the stone hallway flicker and smoke as I

lost control of the magic. I cursed, spooling it back into me before anyone could see.

Tyr looked at me in shock, his eyes wide and jaw slack. I gritted my teeth, determined not to cry until I was far away from him.

“Perhaps it’s time for you to stop telling me what *I* want, Lord Tyr,” I spat, “and to start accepting what we both do.”

I walked away, leaving him surrounded by the ashes of my anger as the tears began to fall.



Chapter 5

Freezing wind whipped around me as I stepped out of the mirror and into a courtyard surrounded by stone towers.

Tyr had come alone last night to prepare his court to host the tournament, and twenty demons emerged behind me, striding through the mirror in varying attitudes of suspicion or interest in the witch magic.

I had missed the official opening of the tournament the previous night after storming away from Tyr. Twenty candidates from Shadow had submitted themselves for consideration, including Draven and Shyama. The rules, which Carnon had announced for everyone, were simple: the last person standing after all other contestants had either died or forfeited would be the new Lord of Shadow.

Elara and Carnon had returned to Oneiros, but Elara caught me in the morning before they left to ask about my absence the night before.

“Males can be idiots when it comes to what they want,” she sighed, after I explained what had happened. “I know it hurts. But don’t give up.”

She had squeezed me in comfort, wrapping me in a hug that tried to reassure as well as commiserate. I had missed my friend fiercely for the month we had been apart, and it occurred to me that I had truly been blessed by the Goddess when Carnon found his mate in the Bloodwood.

“When *do* I give up?” I asked, feeling defeated despite her reassurance. “I can’t do this forever, Elara. It will make everything warm and bright in me die.”

“I don’t know,” Elara sighed heavily, taking my hands in hers. “Carnon had promised to let me go, if I really wished it. Maybe your heart will know what is right, and when.”

“Listening to my heart hasn’t exactly produced clear answers,” I sighed, trying to force a smile and lighten the mood. “Let’s ask the cards. Show me what you’ve learned.”

“Are you sure?” Elara asked, pulling out the deck of gilded tarot cards I had gifted her for Mabon from her pocket. I nodded, and she shuffled, expertly cutting the deck. I had taught Elara most of what she knew about tarot, and I watched a little proudly as she dealt the deck, laying out six cards at a time for me to choose. “Past,” she reminded me, moving the card I selected to one side and dealing six more at random. “Present,” she added as I selected the second. She dealt the final six and I chose my last. “Future.”

She lay the three chosen cards out between us on the bed where we had been talking, her hand hovering over the first card as if waiting for permission.

“Go ahead,” I said, giving her an encouraging smile.

“Past,” she said, flipping the card so that an image of two golden goblets was displayed. “Two of cups in reverse. Imbalance. Tensions.”

“Broken communication,” I agreed, giving her a wry smile. “That sounds correct.”

“Present,” she continued, flipping the second card over to show two swords this time. “Two of swords. So, indecision, or perhaps a stalemate.”

Stalemate indeed, I thought as I remembered my conversation with Tyr last night. I nodded, tapping the final card. “And the future?”

Elara flipped the card, showing five arrows crossed in the shape of a pentagram. She frowned, then looked up at me in confusion. “Five of wands?”

I pursed my lips, uncertain about the card as well. “This usually means rivalry or conflict. I suppose it could refer to the tournament.”

“So something to do with the tournament will decide your fate with Tyr?” she asked, looking torn between confusion and hopefulness.

“Tarot is not an exact science,” I reminded her gently. “It could mean any number of things. The problem with

divination is that the signs often don't make sense until they've already come to pass."

"My lady," came a deep voice as a warm hand fell on my shoulder, effectively pulling me from my thoughts of the morning. Lord Draven was looking down at me, his smile falling as he met my eyes. I must have let all of my emotions show, because he asked quietly, "are you quite alright?"

"Yes, fine," I said, looking up at him. I tried to smile politely, although I was sure it came out as something more like a grimace. "Just lost in thought for a moment."

"The witch magic is rather remarkable," he commented, looking back at the mirror that was still rippling faintly as the surrounding demons poked at it. I closed the spell as Elara had shown me, and the glass became smooth and hard once more.

Draven raised a brow in surprise, giving me an impressed look. "A useful skill."

"Very," I agreed, trying to maintain my smile.

Draven must have sensed that the expression was false because his concern didn't lift. "Are you quite well, Brigid?" he asked in a low voice so that those around us couldn't hear. He moved his hand from my shoulder to my lower back, but it felt foreign and unwelcome, rather than comforting. Something froze in me when I remembered that this male was about to enter what amounted to a fight to the death.

"Yes," I said, stepping away from the warmth of his hand. "Just worried for you all."

Draven smiled a crooked sort of smile, one that appeared to be genuinely amused. “My lady, you have nothing to fear. At least, not for me,” he added, taking a step closer. He looked over my shoulder and frowned. I turned to see Tyr approaching us from one of the stone towers. Draven gently put a finger to my chin, directing my attention back to him. “But your concern is touching.”

I smiled again, taking a step back as Tyr drew closer, his frown thunderous as he looked at Draven’s lowering hand like he wished to sever it from the male’s wrist.

“Lord Tyr,” Draven said with a small, polite bow. The rest of the assembled shadow demons murmured their own respectful greetings, but Tyr’s eyes held mine as he closed the distance.

“Welcome to Blood,” he said by way of greeting, gesturing to the looming spires and arches of stone behind us. “This is my home and court, and you are welcome guests. Please follow my attendants. The first trial will be held tonight.”

Tyr snapped his fingers and servants appeared to collect the mirror and escort the contestants to their chambers for the duration of the tournament. Though his words were spoken to the assembled demons, his eyes remained on me as the other demons headed off around us.

Draven bowed once more, giving me another dazzling smile as he turned to follow a timid-looking servant into the stone towers.

Lady Shyama glanced our way, and I shot her an encouraging smile as she departed. She frowned, looking

between me and Draven, but left without a word.

I made to follow, but Tyr caught me around the elbow. “A moment, Lady Brigid, if you please,” he said, loud enough for the departing contestants to hear. In a quieter voice, he spoke to me alone. “Are you well?”

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes. It was like males knew that this question made females go a bit weak in the knees, and after last night I couldn’t believe Tyr’s gall in asking me.

“What do you think?” I snapped, scowling at him. I decided not to throw at him the fact that I was about to facilitate a battle to the death in a court with the mate who rejected me, hoping that my discomfort was clear in my tone.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his frown darkening into a scowl, “about last night. I was—”

“It’s fine,” I said, not wanting to rehash the argument or reveal the depths of my misery about it. “I *finally* understand that this,” I gestured between us, “will never happen. I can be professional about it.”

“Brigid,” Tyr said, a resigned sigh in his voice that made my gut lurch uncomfortably. I didn’t want to hear his excuses or reasons again. I just needed to get through the three contests of the tournament and get back to Sun.

“Let’s discuss the details,” I said, beginning to walk toward the towers with purpose. Tyr was forced to follow me, and I started to run through the details of the tournament. “The first

contest is tonight. The Trial of Blood. I presume everything is in place for it?”

“It is,” Tyr said tightly, his long legs eating up the distance between us until he was guiding me into the stone tower, a hand holding the old wooden door open for me.

The tower was somewhat cramped, mostly just a spiral staircase with doors to unknown rooms punctuating landings every so often, and I assumed it must be primarily used by servants. Tyr gestured up the stairs and I began to climb.

“Then tomorrow is the Trial of Shadow,” I continued, running through the plans we had made in the days prior to the Samhain feast. “That will be the bloodiest.”

“Almost certainly,” Tyr agreed, continuing to climb a step behind me. He had adopted a businesslike tone with me, and it irritated me, despite the fact that I had done the same. “And then the Trial of Fire on the third day. You are prepared for that?”

“I suppose I will be,” I sighed, not entirely sure I would ever be ready. I would have to use my fire magic for at least one of the trials, and I cringed at the idea of using it for something so barbaric. “Three trials over three days, each symbolic of life, death, or rebirth as the Goddess and the Horned God dictate. I think we’ve done the thing justice in the planning.”

“Credit goes to you for that,” Tyr replied seriously, stopping me with a hand as I began to climb past the next door. “With all of your research to accommodate and honor the traditions of Shadow.”

“Oh,” I said, flushing at the unexpected compliment. “Thank you.”

Tyr nodded, saying nothing as he gestured for me to walk through the wooden door. The hallway we entered was much wider than the winding stair passage, made of old gray stones and lined with intricate sconces filled with burning candles. Arched stained glass windows of varying shades of red and clear glass let some morning light into the hall, but it felt much darker than early morning should feel. The floor was carpeted with plush red rugs, the same color as the blood red of Tyr’s jacket, and tapestries with intricate drawings and embroidery lined the walls, making it feel cozier than the outside of the castle had seemed.

“Here,” Tyr said, stopping at a black, wooden door and drawing a silver key from his breast pocket. He unlocked the door, then pressed the key into my hands. “This is yours. Mine is the only other room on this floor. The contestants are all in the guest wing.”

“Thank you,” I said again, feeling conflicted as Tyr pushed the door open. I was both thrilled and a little disappointed to share a floor with him, as it meant there would be no easy way to keep my distance over the next few days.

“Continue down this hall to the foyer, and you’ll find your way to the dining hall,” Tyr continued, holding the door open for me. “You have a private bathing chamber here, and there is also a library if you need a distraction.”

I gaped as I took in the room, so different from my own chambers in Sun and yet equally elegant. The rooms were darker than mine back home, everything stone and dark wood and deep plush, red furnishing, like an eerie copy of the moonstone palace in Oneiros. More stained glass greeted me, these windows larger and overlooking twisted grounds and a distant graveyard.

Blood was like a dark mirror to Sun, which was unexpected. I thought Shadow would be the darkest of the courts, but there was something festering here that felt wicked and unsettling.

Tyr watched me with a raised brow as I examined the furnishings, poking my head into the small but elegant bathing chamber, and skimming a hand over the silken sheets. “It’s not as grand as Sun,” he said, somewhat self-consciously, “but I hope it will suffice.”

“It’s lovely,” I said, looking up at the ceiling, which was inlaid with dark, wooden panels carved with all manner of beasts and plants.

“It’s a miserable place,” Tyr argued with a wry laugh, his mouth twisting in a grim smile. “You don’t need to be polite.”

“It’s not,” I argued, genuinely concerned that he thought I hated it. “It feels a little lonely, perhaps. But it’s not miserable. It has a dark beauty to it.” I looked at him and felt that he fit here, more than any other place I had seen him.

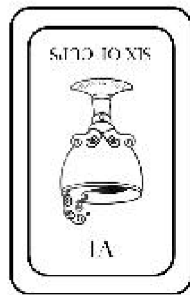
“It was a miserable place to grow up,” Tyr replied with an indifferent shrug. I frowned, studying this male, my mate, who

felt like he didn't deserve me. Who fit in this eerie, lonely place. "But I hope you'll be comfortable enough."

"Tyr," I began, taking a step toward him. There was something tortured in his eyes as he took in the room, and whatever he saw in my face, the compassion or concern there, put him on edge.

He took a step back. "Please let me know if you need anything, Lady Brigid," he said curtly, bowing stiffly to me. "The castle is yours."

Tyr left before I had a chance to say anything else or to ask about his childhood and life here. The darkness of the castle felt like it seeped into my bones as I stood in the strangely beautiful room, and wondered what my dark, tortured mate might have endured here.



Chapter 6

I passed the day wandering the castle, trying to imagine Tyr's life here among the scheming and machinations of the Court of Blood. Aside from a few servants, I didn't run into any contestants or other members of Tyr's court. Either everyone was keeping to their rooms to prepare, or the castle was big enough that it was hard to bump into people.

The castle appeared to be on the top of a rocky cliff overlooking several smaller towns below from the side of the castle farthest from my room. All were made of the same dark stone, with black roofs and twisting roads, and autumn already stripping the trees bare. The gardens that my windows looked out of were on the opposite side of the grounds and backed against a densely wooded area that looked like it would be home to wolves and bats and other feral creatures as night fell.

The court was surrounded by mountains similar to Oneiros, but without the bright, sparkling charm of that city. Perhaps it was just the season, or the passing of Samhain, or the grisly

business we undertook here, but the Court of Blood felt like it was rotting from the inside, taking its lord with it.

No wonder Tyr's childhood had been miserable.

I knew he'd lived here with his father. He had told all of us, under the influence of bloodberry and truth magic, that he had killed his father and worked to curb the evil of the nobles in this court. I wondered if a mother had ever been in the picture, or any other family who could protect him from the wicked ways of his father. Someone must have taught him the wrongs of his father's ways.

He said she was just a mortal. That I could dally with another. That they were all the same.

The words came back to me as a memory of that dinner, of Tyr's confession about why he had murdered his father. Clearly, there had been someone he loved here, someone who had taught him goodness, and his father had killed her.

The jealousy I felt at the thought was silly, a byproduct of the Pull. Of course there had been other females before me. There were other males before Tyr, after all.

But that his father could kill someone he loved...that thought filled me with rage and sadness. To be betrayed in such a way by your family. It was no wonder that Tyr was reluctant to let himself find happiness.

I ended up in the library, which was modest but beautiful like the rest of the castle. The tomes were bound in dark leather in varying stages of repair, the dark shelves dusty and

unloved. These poor books needed some love and care, and I briefly considered asking Tyr to let me send him one of my librarians before I dismissed the idea.

I chose a book at random and spent the morning in solitude reading about the history of these lands and of the inner workings of the Court of Blood. It was a court that seemed to thrive in chaos and bloodshed, each ruling family taking over by force or deception, with a long bloody trail of bodies in its wake.

I knew enough about blood magic to know what the first trial would look like, and a shudder went through me as I thought about what Tyr would have to do.

“My lady,” came a deep voice from the doorway. I looked up from my book to see Draven, dressed as if prepared for battle in scarred leathers and adorned with weapons, leaning on the doorframe.

“Lord Draven,” I said, sitting up and trying for a polite smile. I wondered if fate was toying with me that he seemed to constantly cross my path.

“You are like a burning candle in the darkness,” he said, grinning at me curled up on one of the couches. He strode into the library, looking around at the dark shelves. “I didn’t think a place could be darker than Shadow, but Blood is giving it a run for its money.”

“It’s a different sort of darkness here,” I agreed, putting my book down and gesturing to the seat next to me. Draven waved his hand, choosing instead to perch across from me. “More

melancholy, whereas Shadow embraces its darkness with a wicked glee.”

“Indeed,” Draven laughed, the sound rich in the quiet of the empty library. “Are you not hungry? There is lunch laid out in the dining hall.”

“I’ll get something in a bit. Trying to keep my mind off why I’m here,” I replied, indicating my book.

Draven frowned. “You know that we all *chose* to compete, yes?” he asked, looking at me skeptically. “None of us are here against our will. It is an honor to battle for the seat.”

“It still feels barbaric to me,” I admitted with a grimace. “Not to insult your traditions, but it’s not something that would happen in Sun. Or in Beasts, I think.”

“Here though,” Draven pointed out, gesturing to the bleak castle around us. “These halls feel soaked with blood. Haunted.”

“They do,” I agreed, looking out the windows of the library onto the gray afternoon of the grounds. The graveyard was visible in the distance, and I suppressed another shudder. “But maybe that can change.”

Draven raised his brow but didn’t have a chance to respond as Tyr chose that moment to appear in the doorway, a silver platter in his hand.

“Lord Draven,” Tyr said irritably, glancing between us sitting across from each other. I refused to feel abashed, as I

had done nothing wrong, but something in his stare was accusing. “I wasn’t aware you were much of a reader.”

“No greater than you, I think,” Draven replied, sliding a finger across one of the books I had stacked on my little table and showing Tyr the dust gathered there. I frowned, trying to decide if it was worth it to break up the male posturing or if I should let the two of them have it out and get it over with.

Tyr placed the silver tray on the table, face stony as he looked at me with a raised brow. I kept my face blank. Let him feel jealous. Maybe it would help him come to his senses faster. To realize that he wanted me and couldn’t force himself to forget that.

“I’ll not interrupt,” Tyr said, bowing formally and turning to leave. “The first trial begins in three hours, Draven. At the edge of the grounds.”

“I’ve not forgotten,” Draven replied, waving a casual hand at Tyr as if to dismiss him. Tyr glowered once more before shutting the library doors, and Draven turned back to me with a grin. “He doesn’t like me.”

“I don’t think he likes many people,” I pointed out, feeling my stomach rumble suddenly, the smells wafting out from the cover of the platter making my mouth water. I lifted the tray to see steaming vegetables and meat, a simple but filling meal.

“He likes you,” Draven corrected, nodding to the tray. “He doesn’t deserve your kindness though.”

“You flatter me,” I blushed, trying not to encourage this male unduly. He might have an interest in me, but I knew I couldn’t ever pursue anything with anyone, at least not while Tyr was near. “And everyone deserves kindness.”

“Hmm,” Draven chuckled. “I’m not sure I agree, but your heart does you credit. It’s no wonder he’s in love with you.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, blood draining from my face as I looked up from the meal. “What do you mean?”

Draven shrugged, sitting back on the little couch which seemed far too small for such a large male. He was broader and more muscular than Tyr, whose form was more one of athletic, feline elegance. Draven, with his armor and weapons and huge presence, seemed more and more out of place in this library the longer he stayed.

“It’s clear to me, at least,” Draven clarified, giving me an arch look. “But it’s also clear that he hasn’t done anything about it.”

“Lord Draven,” I said, trying to inject stern reprimand into my tone. “This is not really any of your business.”

“My apologies,” Draven said, leaning forward and grinning wholly unapologetically. “I meant no offense, my lady. Only to say that, if a male were interested in you, as Lord Tyr appears to be, then I can’t see why they wouldn’t act on it.”

His smile was downright wicked as he added, “And if you are open to such attention, I can name at least one male who would grant them.”

I looked at him wide-eyed as he all but confessed his interest in me. His gaze was deep and intense, a thousand promises of passion swirling in his dark eyes. I found I wanted none of them.

“Lord Draven—”

“Don’t answer yet,” he said, standing and stretching in a way that made his leather creak and muscular shoulders bulge. “It can wait until the tournament is over.” He winked, striding out of the room and leaving me in stunned silence.



Chapter 7

“He what?” Elara said in the mirror when I contacted her before the first trial began.

“He propositioned me,” I repeated, throwing my hands up in exasperation as I explained again what Draven had said. “At least, I think that’s what he was doing.”

“He was definitely propositioning,” Cerridwen shouted, her voice more distant through two mirrors than the one between me and Elara.

I had contacted Elara to ask for advice on Draven’s advances, and she had insisted on looping Cerridwen into the conversation through a second mirror. It was an awkward way to communicate, but much faster than waiting to meet in person or writing letters.

“Maybe you should consider it,” Cerridwen added with a sly smile. “He sounds handsome.”

“She can’t do that,” Elara admonished, sounding scandalized. “She’s in love with Tyr.”

“And he’s being a fool,” Cerridwen pointed out, giving Elara an impatient look through the glass. “Jealousy might knock the idiocy out of him.”

“I’m not doing anything with anyone,” I said resolutely, feeling a headache grow between my brows. I loved my friends and valued their opinions, but sometimes their advice was more confusing than my own instincts. “I just need to know what to do about Draven.”

“Maybe telling Tyr would be enough to spur him into action,” Cerridwen suggested, looking thoughtfully at me through the mirrors. “As it is, you don’t really need to do anything.”

“I can’t let him think I’m interested,” I protested, looking to Elara for support. “I have a mate, even if he wants nothing to do with me because of his own...” I trailed off, unsure how to finish the thought. Tyr had been hurt, had lost someone dear to him. I wasn’t sure how to convey that he was too hurt to let his heart trust another again.

Elara pursed her lips, looking to Cerridwen, who raised a brow in an enigmatic but silent conference. “Maybe Cerridwen has a point,” she said, making me drop my jaw in shock while Cerridwen cheered in victory. “Jealousy can be a powerful motivator. It worked for Carnon with me.”

“That would have been my next step with Herne,” Cerridwen agreed, grinning wickedly. “If simple seduction hadn’t worked.”

“You’re both terrible,” I said, frowning at them. “Why did I bother asking you two again?”

“Because you love us,” Cerridwen beamed.

Elara nodded in agreement. “And because you know we’re right.”

I rolled my eyes, waving before closing the spell for the mirror before they could give me any more terrible advice. The first trial of the tournament would be taking place shortly, and I had to get to the edge of the ground to help facilitate, even though Tyr would be the primary party responsible for this trial.

Nobility from both the Court of Blood and Shadows had been invited to attend the tournament to watch its progress, and several stands had been erected outside the gnarled woods on the edge of Tyr’s grounds for spectators.

Carnon and Elara would not be there, both by tradition and choice. Matters of succession were considered internal court affairs, and from the records I’d read, the Demon King was usually only present at the final trial to officially recognize the winner and new Lord of Shadow. Elara and Carnon had been happy to miss it, occupied as they were with rebuilding Oneiros and the business of merging our kingdom with the Witchlands.

“Ah, Lady Brigid,” came a cold, elderly voice as I made my way to the front of the stands to oversee the contest with Tyr. I had pulled a thick wool cloak around myself to fight back the

autumn chill, and was forced to lower my hood to see who was speaking to me. “Here to watch my son win?”

“Lord Tenebris,” I said politely, nodding my head. “There are three trials, as you know. Lord Draven will have to beat them all.”

“Oh, he will,” Tenebris said, giving me a smug smile. “Victory is in his blood.”

I made no reply, trying to keep my polite facade in place as I left the lord to go and find Tyr. Lord Tenebris made me uneasy, somehow more now that he was out of Shadow and lurking around the trials in Blood. He had too much to gain from them, and I didn’t like it.

Tyr was standing before the woods, a golden bowl and knife set out on a small altar before him, and the contestants milling about as they awaited instructions.

“Are you ready?” I asked, resting a gentle hand on his upper arm.

He didn’t look down at me, his focus solely on studying the woods ahead. “As I’ll ever be,” he replied, glancing down at the golden knife and bowl. “You don’t need to watch this.”

“I’m not going to make you do it alone,” I said, looking out at the wood before us. The trees were mostly bare, their limbs and trunks twisted and gnarled. It was a bit like the Bloodwood, which I had only seen during our brief stay in Mithloria to shore up the border, although without the red light. “What if you need someone to pull you back?”

Tyr tilted his head, finally looking down at me with a skeptical tilt to his brow. “You don’t think I can stop myself?” he asked, eyes flicking to where my hand still rested on his arm.

I removed it and pursed my lips. “I don’t think you should have to,” I corrected, crossing my arms. “We were tasked with doing this together. I won’t abandon you.”

“It won’t be pleasant,” Tyr warned, his green eyes flashing with something wary as he studied me. “Are you sure?”

I knew what he didn’t want me to see. We had chosen the tasks based on the powers we held and the precedents in Shadow’s records, but this trial would be particularly unpleasant. Tyr would be using blood magic against the competitors, forcing them to move and act against their wills. It was a crime in every court, allowed now only by royal dispensation and because the competitors agreed willingly.

“I know you’re not a monster,” I said quietly, squeezing his hand once. I held his eyes for a moment, and something in them stuttered as if light were flaring to life and immediately being snuffed out.

I broke the gaze first, turning to face the crowd. Draven shot me a smile from the front of the group, where he was testing the sharpness of his blade against an errant branch.

“It is time,” Tyr announced, glancing up at the sky which was now almost wholly dark. “The sun has set, and the Trial of Blood commences. Contestants will have one hour to enter the woods, find and claim a flag with the crest of Shadow, and

return.” The contestants nodded as if none of this were unexpected. Tyr cleared his throat and continued, “But you will also have to fight the manipulation of your blood as you compete. I will be attempting to lead you astray. Only those with the strongest will shall succeed.”

I swallowed. The contest sounded so much more barbaric when explained this way. What Tyr didn’t need to say was that competitors who failed to return would likely die, either at the hands of other contestants or the creatures of the wood.

“All those who wish to compete must give their blood freely,” Tyr added, holding out the knife and bowl. “A weakening of your lives as you prepare them for service to the gods. A minute’s worth will do.”

“Our good king allowed this use of blood magic?” Shyama asked, her silken voice unreadable as she studied the bowl.

“He did,” Tyr said with a nod. “Your blood must be freely given. None will be forced.”

Draven was the first to give his blood, pushing Shyama gently out of his way as he strode forward to take the knife from Tyr. He sliced his palm in a swift, deep cut and let the ruby drops fall as he kept his eyes on me. They hit the bottom of the bowl noiselessly, forming a tiny pool of blood. After a minute, he clenched his hand, slowing the blood and bowing to Tyr and me as he turned back to the other competitors.

Shyama was next, and then every other demon who had come to battle for the title. Tyr watched them give their blood

without emotion until the bowl was almost full with the blood of twenty competitors.

“You will not know when your thoughts and actions are your own at first,” Tyr reminded the competitors, lifting the bowl from the altar. “And beware. Leshy, wolves, and other foul creatures roam these woods. None of you will be rescued if you run afoul of them.”

Without another word, Tyr lifted the bowl to his lips and began to drink, his throat bobbing as he took in the lifeblood of the competitors and prepared to manipulate them. His eyes were closed in a grimace as he drank. When he opened them, they had turned wholly blood red.

The competitors charged, some heading directly for the woods and others clashing to eliminate the competition. Two died before even making it to the woods, the remaining eighteen swallowed by the darkness as Tyr looked on with dark, red eyes.

“Goddess above,” I whispered, looking on in horror as the crowd behind us cheered. “The gods cannot approve of this.”

“The gods aren’t always watching,” Tyr said darkly, his hands fisting as he leaned against the altar. “Sometimes even they cannot bear the darkness.”

“Are you alright?” I asked hesitantly, reaching out for his hand again.

He crushed it in his, our first mutually voluntary contact since Samhain, and the Pull in me looked up with eager

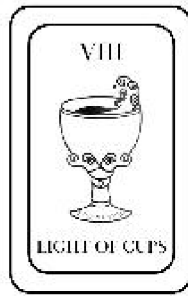
interest at the touch. He nodded darkly, looking pained. “It burns when there are so many competing bloods,” he gritted out, eyes flashing a brighter red, then dimming. I recognized his strain as one of controlling blood magic, and I realized he had already begun to manipulate the contestants. “Just don’t let me kill anyone.”

“Is there a risk of that?” I asked in a panic. “How will I know if that’s about to happen?”

Tyr looked down at me, his face pale in the darkness. One long fang flashed white, and he grinned more wickedly than I had ever seen. “You’ll know.”

I should be terrified of this male, of the forbidden power he was wielding against—well, not innocent victims exactly. But still, the power I felt emanating from him was foreign, otherworldly. Terrifying, and somehow alluring. It was as if the sky and wind around us had hushed to let him work this magic, and the gnarled woods held their breath for the pain he would inflict.

The first scream shattered the still night, and the bloodthirsty crowd behind us cheered.



Chapter 8

Draven was the first to emerge victorious, followed closely by Shyama. The two seemed to have formed some sort of uneasy alliance, as they nodded to each other in understanding when they presented their flags.

Ten more emerged victorious, until Tyr, clutching the altar with a white-knuckled grasp, shook his head, his eyes turning from red back to their normal emerald green.

“They’re gone,” he panted, sweat beading his brow with the strain of manipulating so many. “I can’t feel them anymore, although their blood is still in me.”

“Only twelve remaining,” I breathed, horrified at the death the first night had seen. “That’s almost half.”

“They agreed to this, Brigid,” Tyr said darkly, releasing my hand which he had been holding the whole time. My fingers ached, but I didn’t mind. Tyr may have not believed he needed me in this trial, but he clearly had, and it made something in me preen victoriously. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” I said, shaking out my fingers, the rapid demon healing in my blood already working to soothe them. “You didn’t kill anyone?”

Tyr shook his head, frowning at the remaining contestants, who were being greeted and congratulated by the crowd that had surged toward them at the close of the trial. “I didn’t need to. They were brutal.”

“I don’t think I want to know,” I said, shuddering at the thought. Tyr must have felt each death, his control disappearing as he lost his connection to them one by one.

“You don’t,” Tyr agreed. It was subtle, the shift he made from Tyr to the uncaring and irreverent Lord of Shadow, in that moment as he announced the end of the trial. He grinned widely, his fangs glinting as his own court cheered.

“There will be a feast for the winners,” he announced, holding his arms up as if he enjoyed the admiration of his bloody court. “All are welcome to celebrate the end of the first trial.”

Another cheer answered this announcement, and Tyr held an arm out to me, clearly expecting me to take it. I donned my own mask, that of the softhearted Lady of Sun. It wasn’t much of a mask after what I had seen.

Most of those in attendance of the trial joined us for dinner in Tyr’s palace, several long tables having been set to accommodate all of the competitors and guests. There was cheering and laughter and general merriment, all tainted by the knowledge that the celebration was at the cost of eight lives. It

felt wrong, and I could barely stand Tyr's smiling, jovial facade as he put on a show for his nobles.

"You seem unhappy, Lady of Sun, to be witness to this tournament," one of his nobles pointed out to me, leering at me from across the table.

"The traditions in Sun are less brutal," I agreed, reminding myself to be soft and innocent. It was natural to be joyful and sweet in Sun, but so difficult here when I wanted to rage and burn at the injustice I saw.

"I hear you have just as much a violent streak as our lord," another noble said, nodding toward Tyr, who stiffened imperceptibly. "Lord Tyr told us of your fight in Oneiros. That you burned Scathanna's guards to ash with nothing more than a thought. That it took five of them and a broken leg to subdue you."

I glanced at Tyr, uncertain how to respond. It wasn't untrue, and I had certainly wielded my fire unrestrained against Scathanna's brutes when she had taken the palace in Oneiros. Tyr had been held at knifepoint, and something protective and fierce in me had snapped. I didn't like to think about it, and I wasn't proud of the deaths I had caused. They had been a necessity to protect my mate.

Tyr met my eyes, his gaze somehow both proud and apologetic. The Pull gave a little purring roll in my chest, and I swallowed at the need I suddenly felt there.

"Lord Tyr exaggerated my involvement, I'm sure," I said, attempting to diminish the attention on me and giving the

noble a sweet smile. “I merely did what I could to defend our capital.” I glanced back up at Tyr, whose expression was unreadable.

“And what of the border?” another noble cut in. “Lord Tyr cannot have lied to us with stories of the fire-wielding lady who burned the Shadow casters to nothing?”

I ground my teeth, cursing Tyr and his stories. Again, they weren’t untrue, but they were very different from the persona I had cultivated in Shadow. I noticed Draven and Tenebris looking on and listening with interest as they moved toward us. Shyama wasn’t far behind them.

“Again, Lord Tyr has exaggerated my abilities and involvement,” I said dismissively. “No doubt to embarrass me in front of all of you.”

The nobility laughed, as I hoped they would, and Tyr grinned wickedly as he played along, lifting his glass in a mock salute. His eyes were sad though, and I knew his praise of me had been genuine. It warmed me again, dulling the edge of shame I felt at my use of violence.

“I wonder, my lady,” said another noble who held my eyes with a lecherous stare, “if your blood tastes like fire.”

The nobles from Blood laughed again, several licking their sharpened fangs as if offering to taste. Tyr’s face had gone stony, a mask of rage as he began to bare his own fangs in reply.

“No one will be tasting the lady’s blood,” Tyr growled, his voice one of menacing promise. The nobles around the table stopped laughing, looking nervously at their lord.

I sighed, wondering how best to remind Tyr that I could and would look after myself

A choking noise pulled my attention from Tyr and his territorial nonsense, as the room turned to see one of the contestants from Shadow fall to his knees. Draven cursed, lunging to catch the male, and Tyr rose hurriedly, shouting at his staff to fetch a healer.

I rose and rushed to Draven’s side. The demon was purple, his jaw slack and eyes rolled back and unseeing. Draven shook his head. The male was already gone.



“It could have been any number of poisons,” Elara said as we spoke through the mirror later that night.

Tyr had cleared the castle after all of the guests and contestants had been questioned using blood magic. None admitted to poisoning the contestant, and Tyr had insisted the remaining contestants stay in their rooms until the next trial, with all meals being brought to them by his staff.

“It must have been someone not present at the dinner then,” I said thoughtfully, frowning as I toyed with the ribbon on my robe.

“Blood magic then?” Elara asked, looking serious. “Any member of Tyr’s court could have used it against the

contestant.”

I shook my head. “They were questioned about that too. And what reason would Tyr’s court have to influence the choice of lord in another?”

“Maybe someone who wants my position,” a voice from the door announced as Tyr entered my room. I frowned at his entry. I had assumed I had the only key to this room, but, of course, Tyr would have one, too. “Good evening, Elara. I presume Brigid has caught you up to speed?”

“She has,” Elara said, giving me a quizzical look as Tyr came to stand over my shoulder.

“I didn’t invite him here,” I said, recognizing her look as one of suspicious hopefulness.

“No, I’m intruding,” Tyr agreed, looking down at our friend and Queen in the mirror. “I needed to check that Brigid’s room wasn’t compromised.”

“I’ll leave you to it then,” Elara said, clearly torn between her worry for me and her hope that Tyr and I could reconcile. “Let me know if you find anything out. Do you need us to come?”

“We’ll manage,” I said, waving her off. “I know you’re busy with the clinic. We will see you for the third trial.”

Elara nodded, smiling tightly as I closed the spell for the mirror. I turned in annoyance to Tyr, who was still fully dressed in his fine clothes, although somewhat untucked and disheveled. “You couldn’t knock?”

“I did knock,” he replied tiredly, perching on the back of a small settee as he regarded me. “You didn’t answer.”

“Because I was busy,” I said, gesturing to the mirror.

Tyr shrugged. “I was worried.”

“I thought I could burn all of my enemies to ash?” I retorted, giving him an irritated scowl. “Why would you tell all of that to your nobility? It’s impossible to appear harmless if you tell everyone I’m not.”

Tyr laughed. “You are not harmless. And you’re annoyed at my praise?” He raised a brow at me and crossed his arms.

I pursed my lips. Now wasn’t the time to get into this. “Why are you here, Lord Tyr?” I asked, trying to quell the fire he fanned in me, both from irritation and desire. The Pull was eager for me to act on that fire, and I was working very hard to stamp it out.

Tyr sighed, looking up at the ceiling in what appeared to be a prayer for patience. Or maybe strength. He looked back at me, his red hair framing his face, still pale after the events of the evening. “Someone in this castle killed that demon and was able to lie about it.”

“Yes,” I agreed, frowning at the Lord of Blood. “What of it?”

“If we don’t know who it was, then they could be targeting anyone,” Tyr continued, clearly trying to get me to arrive at his reason without him saying it. He looked at me pointedly.

“And?” I asked, still not understanding why he was in my room.

“Gods help me,” Tyr murmured, scrubbing a hand over his face. “It’s not safe here, for either of us. I think we should stay together until this tournament is over and a new Lord of Shadow has been named.”

“Together,” I repeated, frowning. Realization struck, and the Pull inside me leapt for joy at the opportunity before me. I batted it back down. “You want to stay here.”

“Or you can stay with me,” Tyr agreed, throat working as if he were pushing down his own rogue mating pull. Maybe he was. “I know it’s complicated, but—”

“You can stay,” I said, trying not to sound too eager or breathless. Nothing was going to happen. I knew that. But the Pull was a needy creature, and it had its own plans. “On the sofa.”

“Of course,” Tyr agreed, sounding both relieved and worried about this plan. “This changes nothing between us, Brigid.”

“I know,” I said calmly, trying not to show the flinch of pain as his words struck my heart. “You’ve made yourself very clear.”

“This is purely for safety,” he added.

I gave him a sardonic look. “Who are you trying to convince, Lord Tyr?”

“Me, clearly,” he murmured, nearly unintelligibly as he scrubbed his face again. “Perhaps this was a bad idea.”

“We are adults, Tyr,” I said, rising from the vanity where I had been sitting and going to the bed. I undid the sash on my robe and climbed beneath the covers, not daring to look at Tyr’s reaction to the white silken nightgown I had chosen. “You can stay on that side of the room, and both of us can behave ourselves.”

Tyr nodded tightly, removing his jacket and folding it neatly across the back of the settee. He undid his waistcoat next, and I tried to ignore the flutter in my chest as it joined his coat.

“I’ll sleep like this,” he said, a little awkwardly, indicating the clothes that still covered him completely. The Pull growled in annoyance, but I nodded, throwing him a pillow, which he caught neatly with a reflexive grin. “Much obliged.”

I blew out the candles and turned over without another word, listening in the darkness as Tyr settled onto the couch.

“What was it like?” I asked quietly, listening to the wind howling outside the stained glass windows as the whole castle seemed to moan with the movement. “Growing up here?”

“Lonely,” Tyr replied. “Like you said. This place is more mausoleum than home.”

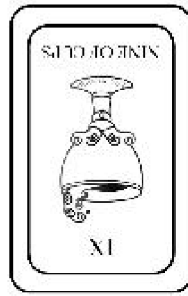
“Was it just you and your father?” I asked, wondering if he would answer. Tyr rarely volunteered information about his past, so I knew I was pressing my luck.

He sighed, a sound of resigned despair. “I had a mother,” he said. “For a time.”

When he didn't elaborate, I knew what must have happened to her. Perhaps she too was a victim of Tyr's power-hungry father. Maybe her death was one of the many reasons Tyr eventually turned on his father.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, not sure what else I could say to offer comfort. I had known the unconditional love of two parents. I couldn't fathom losing one, let alone being the one to end their life.

"Me too," Tyr said quietly. Neither of us spoke again, the howling wind forming an eerie lullaby. Something about his nearness soothed me, and despite my worry and fear and discomfort with this tournament, I fell into an easy sleep.



Chapter 9

The second trial, the Trial of Shadow, would blessedly require neither of us to expend our magic. Instead, the remaining contestants would be tasked with meeting each other in battle and encouraged to use their shadow magic to defeat their foes. There would be no external magical interference, and the last contestants standing after one hour would proceed to the final trial.

It was going to be a bloodbath.

Tyr and I spent much of the next day questioning all the staff, trying to ascertain who might have had access to the food or drink of the male who had been poisoned. It felt familiar to be working with him again, despite the grim circumstances of our partnership, and the day passed quickly if unhelpfully. None of the staff knew or had seen anything, and by the time the second trial was upon us, Tyr was in a foul mood.

“I refuse to be blamed for this,” he raged as we walked out to the graveyard where the next trial would be held. Buttery

sunlight had broken through the overcast, and this trial was scheduled to take place at sunset when the shadows would be at their longest. “If the nobles in Shadow try to accuse my staff of meddling in their tournament—”

“No one will accuse you of that,” I said patiently, struggling to keep up with his long stride. I was not a short female, but Tyr was exceptionally tall. He slowed for me, letting me finally catch up. “I’ll vouch for you if it comes to that.”

“Why?” Tyr asked, whirling on me so fast that I stumbled, and he shot out an arm to catch me. “Why are you so damned kind to me Brigid? Why won’t you leave me to my fate?”

“Is this a serious question?” I asked, looking up at him in surprise. His face was intense and strained, and he certainly looked serious.

“I rejected you,” he reminded me, lowering his voice. “I know I hurt you. Why are you determined to still be kind?”

I swallowed, uncertain how to answer in a way that wouldn’t make me seem weak or foolish. I sighed, accepting that maybe I was both. “Because you still deserve kindness,” I said, looking into his green eyes. “You hurting me doesn’t mean I have the right to hurt you back. That’s not who I am.”

Tyr looked at me disbelieving. “Do you not hear how good you are?” he asked, taking my hands in his. The move made the Pull strain in my chest, and I had to wrestle it back into submission. “Do you not see how little I deserve your kindness?”

“Whether you deserve it or not, Tyr,” I said, gently removing my hands from his, “you still have it. My kindness is not conditional with you.”

Tyr looked at me with that pained expression again, opening his mouth as if to reply. He closed it again, the words unspoken, and the tiny bubble of hope in my chest deflated.

“My lord and lady,” came a deep voice from the path below us. As one we looked to Draven, who was leaning against a headstone as if it weren’t a marker for the dead. I frowned, but he seemed not to notice. “We are ready to begin, when you are.”

Draven shot me an inquiring look, and I nodded. “We will be there shortly.” He nodded in response, casting me one last look as he turned back toward the center of the graveyard.

“Do you have something with him?” Tyr asked, turning to look at me sharply. “An understanding? If you do, I won’t get in your way.”

“Gods above, Tyr,” I said, letting my frustration escape more than I meant it to. “You are a Goddess-damned fool.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, clearly torn between anger and amusement at my uncharacteristic outburst. “I think this is the first time you’ve ever cursed at me.”

“I have no interest in Draven,” I snapped. “And if you took a second to actually consider *my* feelings on anything, you’d know that.”

I made to turn, but he caught my arm gently, pulling me back to look at him. “I’m trying to protect you, Brigid,” he said, looking anguished. “You don’t want—”

“Stop telling me what I do and don’t want,” I growled, throwing caution to the wind and claspng his face in my hands. I pressed my lips to his, the kiss inelegant and bruising and unsatisfying, but hopefully emphatic enough to get my point across. “I know what I want,” I said, pulling away sharply and trying not to dwell on his hands pressing into my hips, or the slightly dazed look in his eye. “It’s you who needs to accept it.”

He let me go this time, and I strode toward the gathered contestants, who were milling about within the gated perimeter of the graveyard. Only a few nobles from Shadow had been permitted to attend this trial and none of the nobles from Blood. Tyr was taking no risks that his court could be accused of foul play.

“Finally, we can begin,” Tenebris said, his voice grating my already strained nerves. “Let us get this farce over with.”

“You can leave, Lord Tenebris, if you see this as nothing more than farce,” I snapped, taking my place in the hastily erected stands. “Your presence here is a privilege, not a right.”

Tenebris bristled, but he respected my rank enough not to argue, especially when Tyr stormed up looking furious. I may have pushed him a smidge too far.

“It’s time,” he announced unceremoniously. “You have one hour, no restrictions on magic use. The Trial of Shadow

represents the final death before the Goddess and the Horned God, the end of your lives as you have known them. The last contestants standing will proceed to the final round.” Tyr glanced at me, and I kept my expression stony as he added, “Begin.”

There was no warning as the graveyard was plunged into shadows so thick, it was as if night had fallen prematurely. Great creatures of shadows writhed in the darkness, and screams and cries were muffled by the blanket of shadow. A chill ran through me, as a feminine scream rent the air, followed by eerie silence.

Tyr sat next to me, still and stoic as a statue while we watched the writhing shadows. It was impossible to know what was happening within, and who would be victorious. Tenebris was chatting unconcernedly and animatedly with the nobles around him, clearly confident that his son would emerge alive.

It was hard to tell how much time passed, but the sun was almost fully set when an explosion rocked the ground within the shadows, sending mud and stone flying in every direction.

“Shit,” Tyr said, knocking me to the side as a chunk of rock nearly hit us. “What the—”

A roar from the shadows erupted as something undefinable rose, its huge shadowy form lumbering toward us out of the graveyard.

“Stop this!” Tenebris cried as the shadow beast moved toward us, its unseeing eyes somehow finding us in the dark.

“Whoever is casting that thing, stop it!”

“That is not just shadow magic,” Tyr growled, rising to his feet and staggering toward the beast and around the periphery of the graveyard. “It’s blood magic.”

“Tyr!” I shouted, picking myself up and running after him. “What do you mean?”

“Someone has lost control of that creature,” he replied, pulling something from his jacket pocket and putting it to his lips. A vial of blood, I realized. “Shadows can be moved by the will of a caster, but none here have this kind of power. Scathanna barely had this kind of power. Not without blood magic animating the shadows.”

“What do you need me to do?” I asked, watching the blood red of the magic flash across Tyr’s eyes as he tried to take control of the beast.

“I need light,” he gritted out, bracing his feet in the dirt and holding out his hands toward the beast.

I obliged, igniting a ring of fire around the graveyard, illuminating the darkness and the combatants within in flashes and flickers of orange light. The shadow beast was being attacked by the contestants within the ring, some magic running amok as Tyr had said.

As if it sensed our invading magic, the beast turned its attention toward us, letting out an explosive roar as it lumbered toward us. I saw Draven and Shyama fall away,

tossed aside like rag dolls as they tried to subdue the shadow beast that had turned its attention wholly on Tyr.

“Tyr,” I said, pushing more fire into the space to try to light up the beast and reveal the caster behind it. “Do you have this?”

“I need a minute,” he gritted out, clearly wrestling for control with the beast. He was mouthing words too swiftly to make them out, casting furiously as he tried to take control of the blood magic at work. The beast was nearing us, the ground shaking with each step of its shadowy form.

“You don’t have a minute!” I shouted, pulling my fire back to wrap around the beast. I cocooned it in flame, trapping it amidst the light where it couldn’t exist. “Now, Tyr!”

Tyr roared, and a pulse went out that seemed to shatter the night. He slumped to the ground, and the shadow beast bellowed one last time as I let my fire consume it.

I fell to my hands and knees, spent from the use of magic, Tyr panting beside me flat on his back.

“Brigid,” a voice called. It wasn’t Tyr’s voice, and his eyes were holding mine with something like awe and wonder. I didn’t look up as Draven knelt beside me. “Lady Brigid, are you alright?”

“We are fine,” Tyr groaned, rolling to his hands and knees and pushing himself up. “Thank you for your tender concern, Lord Draven. Please tell me who in the name of the gods was responsible for that *thing*.”

“Not sure,” Draven said, still steadying me around my shoulders. My eyes were still locked on Tyr, and he raised a brow as Draven added, “Possibly one of the dead. Magic spun out of control.”

“That must be it,” Tyr agreed, offering me a hand as he rose. I took it, narrowing my eyes at the lie. What was he playing at? “How many are left?”

“Five of us,” Draven said, rising with us. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“She’s fine,” Tyr said possessively, pulling me to his side out of Draven’s arms. The Pull hummed happily at the contact, but I felt too dazed to really understand why. “Return to your rooms. The final trial will be at sunset tomorrow. You’re all to stay confined until then.”

Draven nodded, frowning as his father and the other nobles from Shadow appeared behind us, eager to see the carnage and the victors of the trial.

I didn’t hear anything they said or the terse words Tyr exchanged with the nobles as he guided me back to the tower. My body and mind were wholly focused on the arm of my mate around me as his scent and warmth finally engulfed me.



Chapter 10

“I’m truly fine,” I said for the fifth time as Tyr propelled me up the steps of the tower.

“Neither of us is fine,” Tyr replied patiently as he had already done several times. “Stop lying and let me help you.”

I remained silent as Tyr led me to my room, fumbling in his pocket for the key and unlocking the door one-handed while keeping his other arm firmly around me.

He said nothing as he guided me inside, locking the door behind us and turning me to face him. He looked down at me, his eyes somehow filled with both anxiety and resolution as he pursed his lips.

“I’m fi—”

My protest was cut off by Tyr’s mouth crashing into me, his tongue sliding against mine as he pulled me flush against him. I felt the Pull explode in me, begging me to get closer, to be nearer, to let this male have all of me.

The sensible, thinking portion of my brain interceded before animal instinct took over, and I pushed the Lord of Blood away.

“What are you doing?” I gasped, taking a step back and pressing my fingers to my lips. They were tender, and they wanted Tyr’s back on them with a desperate ache.

“I’m tired, Brigid,” Tyr growled, closing the distance between us again and putting his hands around my waist. “I’m tired of fighting the Pull and I’m tired of denying myself. It may damn me for eternity, but I’m tired of trying to be the better male.” He leaned down as if to kiss me again, and I put my hand against his mouth.

“Oh no you don’t,” I said, beating back the Pull, which was raging at me to stop arguing and just take what Tyr was offering. An ache was building in me, begging for release, but I stood firm. “You don’t get to reject me and deny me for months, and then suddenly change your mind because you’re tired. You have to do better than that.”

“I...what?” he asked, looking a bit stunned. “I thought you wanted—”

“I *do* want,” I interrupted again, pulling his body close to mine. My heart was pounding in tandem with his, and I could feel exactly what he wanted pressed against my stomach, but he would not get any of it until he admitted it aloud. “I have never hidden that I want you, not after Mithloria.” He flinched, but I stood my ground. “You tell me what you want, or you get

nothing. Don't tell me that you're tired of fighting it, or that you're selfish. You own what you want, or you don't get it."

"You are a maddening creature," Tyr said between clenched teeth. "I'm trying to give you what you want, and you're making demands of me."

"You made demands of me for months," I argued, emphasizing the words with a tug on his shirt that drew him even closer to me. "You demanded that I not feel for you, not want you. You—" I broke off, the words suddenly clogging my throat.

Tyr's face softened, a hand rising to cup my cheek. He swept a thumb across my cheekbone, his eyes sorrowful. "I hurt you," he supplied. I nodded, the pain of his rejection still sharp despite our closeness. "I was a fucking fool."

"You still are, if you walk away now," I choked out, feeling my eyes burn as the weight of his rejection seared me, threatening to overtake me if he changed his mind again.

"I don't want to walk away," he murmured, his mouth hovering just over mine, barely a breath away from my lips. "I didn't want to walk away then either, Brigid. I just couldn't believe that someone so perfect, so fucking divine, could really want me. I didn't want to curse you with me."

"Tell me what *you* want," I begged, my breath coming in shallow gasps as he held me tightly to him. I wouldn't survive this time if he walked away, and I wanted to so desperately heal whatever he thought was broken within him that I ached

for him to close the distance between us. The distance he put there with his rejection.

“I want you,” he breathed, his nose barely brushing mine as he exhaled. “I want your love and your kind heart and your friendship. I want you in my mouth and around my cock and coming apart around me. I want you in every way there is to want another, and I’m selfish enough that if you offer it to me now, I will take everything you’ll give me.”

“Then take it,” I said, letting his mouth crash into mine again. This time he met no resistance, the barrier between us finally dispelled with his acceptance that we both wanted this. I felt his brokenness and his doubt in that kiss, and I tried to push all of my firmness and acceptance back at him.

We were a tangle of limbs, messy and uncoordinated, as we stumbled toward the bed, with Tyr pulling at the ties of my gown while I tugged at the buttons of his coat and shirt.

Part of me wanted to savor this. To admire every inch of this male and to force him to admire me. But the needier part of me had waited too long for patience to be an option now, and I scrabbled at him with frantic fingers as we tore at each other.

His coat came off, the shirt with it, but the longing to wrap my arms around him was stopped short by what I saw.

“Goddess above,” I breathed, reaching out a hand to touch the scars that covered his torso. Every inch of his chest and upper arms, every beautiful inch of tan skin, was marred with thick scars that raised and crossed and interlaced. He grabbed

my hand before I could touch them, and rage filled me. “Who did this to you?”

I had seen him before without a shirt when he and Carnon and Herne removed them during training. There had been no scars on his perfectly sculpted chest only weeks ago in the capital city.

But these scars weren't new. They were old, overlapping, and long healed over. Some appeared to have been reopened and healed over again and again. The sight of them turned my stomach, not in revulsion, but in rage.

“It doesn't matter,” Tyr rumbled, his mouth finding mine again as he held my hands away from his skin. “Not right now.”

“Tyr,” I protested, trying to escape his grasp.

“Leave it, Brigid,” Tyr commanded, his voice firm and face stern as he held me away from him. “I will tell you everything you want to know, but not until after I've been inside you.”

His words made something in me go molten, and I nodded as I relaxed my hands, letting him pin me to the bed beneath him. He kissed me again, shifting us so that I was fully under him, his mouth moving to my neck and my collarbone as he pulled the fabric of my dress away. He scraped his sharp fangs over the bud of one peaked nipple, smoothing over the hurt with his tongue as the sensation sent lightning shooting through me. I arched off the bed, and Tyr chuckled darkly, doing it again.

“I want to learn what you like,” he murmured, turning his attention to my other breast and repeating the motion. More lighting rippled through me, and I moaned his name as his lips moved lower. “I want to learn what makes you scream and writhe with pleasure. And then I want to make you scream my name until no one can doubt that you’re mine. I want to devour you.”

“So much for not being able to tell me what you want,” I quipped, gasping as his teeth scraped gently over my stomach toward my lower belly. He chuckled darkly, his hands pinning my wrists on either side of me as he kissed a slow, sensual line down my body.

“You’ve convinced me of my foolishness,” he agreed, lifting himself so he could pull the rest of my dress away, exposing me to him fully.

He bent his head, tearing at the delicate fabric of my undergarments with his teeth. The protest over the destruction of my clothes died in my throat at the first swipe of his tongue, a moan of pleasure building there instead.

“Gods above,” I gasped, weaving the fingers of one hand into his hair as he released my wrists to gain a better grip on my hips. I clutched at the sheets with my other hand as his tongue made another slow pass through my center.

Tyr didn’t reply, his attention focused solely on me as he fulfilled his promise to devour me. Each press of his tongue and scrape of his fangs was a brand, a claiming of its own that marked me as his irrevocably. There would be no returning

from this for me, and I felt like I could perhaps die fulfilled with his mouth on me as it was.

“Tyr,” I cried, my hands moving from his hair to knead at my own breasts as release built in me. “Please.”

He knew what I was asking for, perhaps because we were mates or perhaps because he was a skilled lover. Whatever the reason, the finger he slid into me toppled me over the edge as a wave of pleasure shattered through me. All of the tension and the misery and the pain of his rejection seemed to fade with that release, and when he brought his lips back to mine to capture my cries, I welcomed them.

I fumbled at his trousers, eager to learn and discover for myself what brought Tyr pleasure as he had done for me. He stilled me with a hand, his eyes wary.

“There are more scars,” he confessed, holding my hand in place as if I might not wish to look upon them. “There are few parts of my body that are unmarked.”

“Who?” I repeated, cupping his face with my hands as I pushed myself up to sit before him.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, catching my hand and kissing my wrist. “I just wanted to warn you. In case—”

“Every inch of you is perfect,” I declared, climbing into his lap so I was straddling his thighs. “I want every inch, and every scar, and you can tell me whenever you are ready.” I ran my hands lightly over the scars on his chest, the firm curve of every muscle marred by welts and divots. “Do they hurt?”

“No,” Tyr said, sliding a hand beneath me to cup my rear and pulling me closer until I could feel the hard press of his length against my center. He groaned a little, and I nipped his lip playfully. “No, they don’t hurt.”

“Then let me see,” I begged, determined to accept all of Tyr without hesitation. I found the laces of his trousers again, waiting for him to give me permission. His jaw was tight, but he nodded, his green eyes fixed on mine.

Tyr’s body was beautiful and tragic, his form one of strength and athleticism and terrible pain. Scars ran the length of his thighs, down his calves, across his stomach and back and buttocks. I wanted to rage and weep for what had been done to my tortured mate, and I couldn’t help the tears that welled as I met his eyes.

“It was a long time ago,” he reassured me, brushing a tear from my cheek with the pad of his thumb. “You won’t hurt me.”

“I will hurt whoever did this to you,” I declared, feeling the righteous fire of vengeance rise in me. “I will make them bleed as they have made you bleed.”

“You can’t, Brigid,” Tyr said, cupping my face and brushing away another tear. “He’s long dead.”

“Your father?” I asked, putting my hands on his shoulders as I studied his face. His slight nod spoke volumes, and I vowed that the memory of that wretched male would not haunt my mate in this moment.

I kissed him, wrapping myself around his scarred body until there was no part of me separated from him. He pulled me to him eagerly, his tongue sweeping over mine as if he could devour me again and make me a part of him.

I lowered myself onto him, his length stretching and filling me with delicious fullness and just the barest edge of pain. One hand went to my hips as the other wrapped around my waist, bracing me.

“Are you alright?” he asked, looking anxiously into my eyes. The single candle that had been lit when we had entered my room had long burned low, but I could make out the lines of his face clearly in the moonlight through the stained glass window.

I nodded, kissing him again. “Better than alright,” I whispered, letting the words hover between us as I lifted myself slightly. We groaned in unison as I lowered again, the move torturously slow and sensual. “I’m home.”

The words broke the spell of his restraint, and Tyr finally allowed himself to come undone beneath me. Our hips met in a frenzied rhythm, nothing graceful about the frantic need that rose between us as we chased release. He pulled me closer, thrusting in harder each time until I thought I might split in half from the pleasure and the fullness.

One hand cupped my breast, playing with the tender nipple there as the other kneaded my backside, and suddenly I was coming apart around him just as he had desired. Tyr barked out a startled cry, his release finding him sooner than he had

anticipated, and we fell back together in a tangle of sweaty sheets and slick limbs.

Words failed us both as our hearts beat in tandem, a steady thump that repeated the words: I'm home.



Chapter 11

“Will you tell me now?” I asked, my head resting on Tyr’s scarred chest as he toyed with my hair.

We had made love twice more, the Pull riding both of us hard as it pushed us to finalize the mating bond between us. I wasn’t sure how things were done in the Court of Blood, but there were traditions in Sun that would have to be followed before anything would be official, and the Pull seemed to know that it wasn’t done yet.

“I’ll tell you anything you ask of me,” Tyr replied, his voice rough and deep with the lateness of the hour and the strain of our passions. I enjoyed the rumbling of his voice against my cheek as I lay against him, my own hands exploring the many ridges of his scars across the strong planes of his chest.

We were in my bed, the sheets a mess around us and his scarred legs pinning mine in a way that the Pull liked very much.

The scars were oddly beautiful, a map of his torment and a testament to his strength. Demons were hard to scar, as our magic worked to heal us quickly. Scars like Tyr's would have to have been repeated injuries, or irritated in some way to force them to scar.

"You don't have to," I said, tilting my face to try to see his in the darkness. "You hid them before. In Oneiros." I stroked a gentle finger over one particularly deep gash, and Tyr sighed.

"A glamour," he said, running the hand that wasn't pinned beneath my body down my arm. "I—" he cleared his throat, as if trying to force the words out. "You're the first to see them. Like this, I mean."

"As a lover?" I asked, feeling my cheeks heat unbidden. Ridiculous, considering we were mates.

Tyr nodded, frowning down at me. "I don't want you to pity me," he said, a little hesitantly. "I've already had my revenge. I don't want to be a victim again."

"Why show me now?" I asked, still tracing the ridges across his tanned chest. It wasn't pity I was feeling, but rage. "Why not continue glamouring them?"

"You're my mate," he said simply, as if that were answer enough. He kissed the tips of my fingers as he settled back into the pillows. "My father was a cruel male. A harsh male," he said. "It started when I was very young. Too young to really understand why he was hurting me, except to know that I had displeased him."

I bit my lip, determined to not interrupt despite my desire to comfort my mate.

“He believed that pain and fear were the only ways to win obedience,” Tyr continued, voice steady despite the difficulty he must have in explaining. “And he made sure that the marks were a permanent reminder. He would salt the wounds, or grind glass into them to keep them from healing.”

“I hate him,” I seethed, feeling pure fury writhe through me in response to this story. I looked up to meet his eyes, which were soft despite the pain. “How did he not twist you into a monster?”

Tyr scoffed, but there was little humor in the sound. He looked away toward the ceiling above us. “Many would say he did, Brigid.”

“Many are wrong,” I asserted, lifting a hand to turn his face back to mine. “You are *good*, Tyr. You are not like your father.”

Tyr swallowed, looking both pained and relieved. “My mother sheltered me from him as much as she could,” he went on, his voice weaving melancholy into his tale as surely as the howling wind outside. “They were mates, but I think she hated him in the end, for what he did to me.”

Tyr sighed, and I stroked my hand over his chest again. “You don’t have to tell me any more,” I said gently, realizing that the scars on his body were likely far more superficial than the ones I was asking him to bare in his soul.

He shook his head, kissing the top of mine. “I will tell you anything, mate. Everything.” Hearing him call me mate, claim our bond for what it was, soothed a ragged edge in me I hadn’t realized was still there.

“She had an affair,” Tyr continued. “With a mortal man. He found out and he killed her. He ripped out her throat in front of me. I was eight.”

“Goddess above,” I said, remembering that he didn’t want pity. “However your father died, it wasn’t slow or painful enough.”

“Believe me, it was,” Tyr said darkly, something cold sliding into his tone that chilled me a little. There was a darkness in my mate, one I had sensed throughout the Court of Blood, and one that I hoped my own brightness would be able to someday banish. “Anyway, he killed the man my mother had taken up with as well. I felt responsible for the man’s family. For years I snuck them food or money, anything I thought might help. One of his children and I became...close.”

Tyr’s words from the dinner in Oneiros came back to me again.

He killed her. He said she was just a mortal. That I could dally with another. That they were all the same.

“Your father killed her too,” I said gently, laying my palm flat on his scarred chest.

Tyr nodded, and I heard him swallow as if the memory were too difficult for him to verbalize. “That was when I knew that I

would kill him,” Tyr said. “It was years later that I finally did it, when he suggested killing another child.”

“Carnon,” I said, remembering his truth.

He nodded. “I knew then that he couldn’t be redeemed. That he had lived too long and lost too much of his soul to continue existing. I was a coward for waiting so long to end him.”

“No,” I argued, sitting up and gazing down at him. The sight of his bare flesh ignited another fire in me, and I willed it to cool until later. We would have plenty of time for all of that. “It’s not cowardice to hope that someone can change. To want to wait until you have no other choice.”

“There were other victims,” Tyr argued. “People I could have saved if I had only done what was needed sooner.”

“You can’t know that,” I argued, putting a hand on his cheek. “You can’t carry the weight of all the world’s fate on your shoulders. You are not your father. His crimes are not yours to pay for.” Tyr looked away, and I leaned down, pressing my lips to his as I snuggled back into his warmth. “Is this why you pushed me away?”

Tyr barked a laugh, looking at me incredulously. “This, and about a thousand other reasons. The Lady of Sun deserved better than someone with so much blood on his hands.”

“The Lady of Sun doesn’t *want* anyone else,” I reminded him, dropping a kiss on his straight nose. “She *deserves* to be with her mate. As do you.”

“It is an honor I am not worthy of,” Tyr said gruffly, his voice still choked with emotion.

“You’ll just have to take my word that you are,” I said lightly, kissing him again and trying to pour my love for him into the kiss.

That’s what this was, I realized, the notion crashing into my head mid-kiss. Love. I tried to ignore the bubble of panic that rose in me as I realized that neither of us had said it, and I had no idea how to bring it up. Mates fell in love. It was totally natural. But perhaps I would wait for him to say it first.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, sensing my momentary distraction. He cupped my cheek, looking at me like he couldn’t quite believe I was there.

That I was his.

“Nothing,” I said with a small sigh as I looked down at him. I leaned down to kiss a spot beneath his jaw, enjoying the scent of him that was spicy and male and now altogether mine. “What made you change your mind?”

“It wasn’t a matter of changing my mind, Brigid,” Tyr said, smoothing a strong hand over my back and sending goosebumps over my flesh. “I never wanted to push you away.”

“Then what made you stop running?” I asked, flicking his pointed ear. He chuckled, capturing my hand and pressing kisses to the knuckles. “Did my inexpert kiss before the second trial finally sway you?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Tyr said, raising a brow at me. “Part of it was probably that.” I smirked and he flicked my nose, which I scrunched at him in protest. “Part of it was seeing Draven be so brazen with his interest.”

“Jealousy is a powerful motivator,” I recalled, remembering Elara’s words.

“But I think it was seeing you here and having you not bat an eye,” he said, gazing at me thoughtfully. “I had convinced myself that the moment you saw my court, interacted with it, and realized who I truly was, you would run.” He swept my hair over my shoulder, admiring the golden strands. “But then you didn’t. You accepted it. Called it beautiful. Held your own with my nobles. And still somehow wanted me.”

“You had too little faith in me,” I admonished, trying to look a little smug at this admission.

“Guilty as charged,” Tyr admitted, his firm lips curving into a smile that showed the glint of fangs. “I also...”

He trailed off, smile darkening to a frown. “What?” I pushed. “Tell me.”

He sighed, looking pained again. “I’m afraid that I will do to you what my father did to my mother. That you will come to hate me as she hated him.”

“Tyr,” I soothed, stroking comforting lines across the bridge of his nose and down his cheek. His face was the only part of him that was wholly unscarred, and I realized it was because it would have been too hard for his father to explain away

injuries there. I hated the male even more. “Would you ever hurt me like your father hurt you? Hurt our child, or any child, that way?”

“Never,” Tyr vowed, shaking his head to emphasize. “Gods, Brigid, I would never. I swear it.”

“I know,” I said, trying to calm his rising panic with another kiss. “I know. Which is how I know that what happened between your parents won’t happen to us.”

“If I were ever to raise a hand to you, or to our—” He cut himself off, swallowing as he contemplated the horror of it. “Or to our child,” he finally said.

I had a momentary flash of that child, with red hair and blue eyes, or maybe golden-haired and green-eyed, carried on Tyr’s shoulders and cradled tenderly in his arms. I banished the image. Only mated couples could have children, and they were a rare blessing, but we had time for all of that.

“I would want you to burn it off,” he finished, looking resolute. “To leave me and take our child, as my mother should have done. But I would never, Brigid,” he added, looking so fierce I wanted to kiss him. “Never again. Forgive me for the hurt I already inflicted.”

“It’s forgiven,” I said, caving to my desire to kiss him. I wound my arms around him, embracing his scars and every broken part of him, and pressed my head to his chest once more. He folded me into him, wrapping his arms around me so that we were too entwined for anything other than the gods themselves to separate us.

“Although,” I added, feeling like it might be time to lighten the mood and glancing up with a little smirk, “Elara has told me that prolonged groveling can be extremely satisfying for a female.”

“Hmm,” Tyr hummed, the sound rumbling deep in his chest. “I’m not opposed to doing some groveling. But are you even up for another round tonight? It’s very late.”

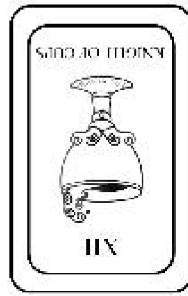
“I just remembered,” I said, sitting up and making Tyr grunt as I accidentally elbowed him in the ribs. “Draven.”

“Why are you speaking another male’s name right now?” Tyr growled, sitting up to meet me and distracting me with a kiss to my throat. He trailed his fangs over my pulse, and I shuddered at the idea of him sinking them into me. Something to explore another night.

“You lied to him,” I said, a little breathless as Tyr attempted to distract me further. “You told me the shadow beast was made with blood magic, but you told him it was shadow magic run awry.”

“I did,” Tyr agreed, groaning a bit as he flicked a thumb over my pebbled nipple. Heat rose in me, a cooling warmth that demanded satiating. “Do you really want to talk about that right now?”

I didn’t, and Tyr made it too difficult to talk for the rest of the night anyway.



Chapter 12

“Now explain the lie,” I demanded over breakfast.

I had woken to an empty bed, Tyr’s side rumpled and cold in the gray morning light. My momentary panic had been stilled by him clattering through the door, a steaming tray in his arms and a rose clenched between his teeth. It was the most adorable thing I had ever seen, and breakfast had to wait until I had thoroughly expressed my admiration.

We were sitting across from each other now, cross-legged atop the sheets. I wore Tyr’s shirt from the night before, and he kept shooting me heated looks as if he was restraining himself from ripping it right off me.

“I thought it was rather obvious,” Tyr replied, taking a bite of burned toast and frowning at it. He had made the breakfast himself, and it was too sweet a gesture for me to complain about the burnt edges. “I think it was him.”

“Draven?” I asked, raising my eyebrows in surprise. “You think he can command blood magic?”

“We never figured out who was working with Scathanna,” Tyr pointed out, a hard look flashing across his face. “It must have been someone from Blood to help her control her casters, but I thoroughly questioned my court. It was none of them.”

I remembered Tyr’s version of thorough questioning from Mithloria, no doubt learned from his father. I suppressed a shudder, both of disgust and terror for the boy that Tyr was, taught how to use violence to break or bend someone’s will. He had been driven to do terrible things to protect his court and the Darklands.

There would be no more terrible things as long as I was around.

“So you think Draven somehow learned blood magic?” I asked, still frowning over this assumption.

“I think he’s part blood demon,” Tyr announced as if this were obvious. “Draven was the first to throw off my control in the Trial of Blood. It took him minutes. That’s unheard of, Brigid, for anyone other than a blood demon. He was also with the male who died at the feast, and the first to emerge from the shadows yesterday.”

“You think it was blood magic that killed that male?” I asked, thinking through the details.

Tyr shook his head agitatedly. “I don’t think. I *know*,” he replied. “We didn’t ask the shadow demons if they had used blood magic. Only poison. It wouldn’t even have been a lie that Draven would have to spin. And I have seen many deaths caused by blood magic. This was no poison.”

“Why would Draven risk it, knowing that you would recognize it?” I asked, seeing the merit to Tyr’s argument, but not quite feeling that it fit Draven’s character. “He seems more enlightened than the other shadow demons, except maybe Shyama.”

“Maybe he’s an arrogant ass who thinks he can get away with it,” Tyr suggested dismissively, earning a scowl from me. He chuckled, leaning forward to kiss me. “You like the bastard.”

“Not as much as I like you,” I protested, “but yes. He seems genuine.”

“Genuinely interested in getting under your skirts,” Tyr murmured. I threw a piece of toast at him.

“He has good taste,” I pointed out, gesturing to myself somewhat ostentatiously.

Tyr grinned, putting aside the breakfast tray and prowling toward me over the bed. “I cannot fault you there,” he purred, nuzzling into the space between my neck and shoulder and beginning to pull at the ties of the shirt I had thrown on. Need flooded me at the suggestive noises and touches he was making, and it took all of my willpower to finish our conversation.

“What should we do about Draven?” I gasped as Tyr nipped at my earlobe, sliding his tongue up the column of my throat.

“I’ll handle him,” Tyr growled, sliding a warm hand up under the shirt to cup my bare breast.

“But how—”

“Stop talking, Brigid,” he commanded, pinching my nipple gently, but hard enough to send a shock of pleasure through me. He captured my lips, and it became very, very difficult to do anything other than fall under the spell of his body and scent and mouth as he lavished his approval on me, rewarding each little gasp and moan with another lick or pinch or kiss.

“When this is all over,” Tyr purred, pushing me back on the sheets and sliding the shirt up so he could graze his teeth across my stomach, “I would very much like to claim you in the tradition of the Court of Blood.”

“How is that?” I asked, a little breathless as he worked his way down my abdomen, kissing and nipping as he went. We hadn’t discussed making the claiming official, and the Pull would continue to chafe until we did, but every court had different traditions for how it was done.

“Exchanging blood,” Tyr said, looking up from where he hovered, right above the place that my need was growing with each second he lingered. “I want to sink my fangs into your throat and let you feel me inside you, both body and blood.”

“Gods,” I gasped, the thought alone sending shivers of pleasure through me that were surprising, considering the violence of the idea. “Only if I can claim you as well.”

“Naturally,” Tyr grinned, lowering himself so that his torso rested between my legs. I wore nothing below the shirt, and Tyr’s growl of approval, as he pushed my legs apart, told me it had been the right move. “How is claiming done in Sun?”

It was hard to focus on the question as he began to worship me, first kissing and licking his way up one inner thigh, then down the other before settling between them.

“With fire,” I gasped, shuddering as his tongue swept through me in a languid stroke. “With a branding.”

“Hmm,” Tyr rumbled, the sound sending lightning through my core. “I think I like the idea of being branded by you.”

“Stop talking, Tyr,” I commanded, weaving my fingers into his long hair and raising my hips to meet his mouth.

He chuckled, but obeyed, sending pleasure spiraling through me with every lick and touch and taste until I was sure I would burst into flames if he didn’t let me finish.

“Tyr,” I begged, arching toward him, needy for more. To be filled and to feel him inside me.

“Greedy,” Tyr mumbled, teasing my entrance with a finger before sliding two inside me and pumping gently.

I didn’t realize my pleasure could increase beyond where it already was, but Tyr’s fingers took me to a new apex of pleasure, pumping gently as release barreled through me.

He didn’t give me long to whimper with need, sliding into me in a single long stroke that felt like it was always meant to be. “I love you,” Tyr growled, breath hot in my ear as he thrust into me, one hand cupping my backside as the other pinned my wrists to the bed. “For months now, I’ve been so sick in love with you that I thought I would die if I didn’t take you like this.”

“Gods,” I cried, release finding me a second time as he confessed his truth like I was his salvation. I clutched him tightly, crying out as he found his own pleasure, thrusting in to the hilt. “I love you too.”

We lay there for a moment, too spent or full of emotion to speak. Slowly, he pushed himself up to look at me, his green eyes bright with something I hadn't seen in his face since our first kiss in Mithloria. I thought it might be hope.

“Tonight,” Tyr panted, his gaze going a little feral as he looked down at my heaving breasts, still bare before him. I felt him harden against me and blessed the Goddess for the tender mercy of a virile mate. “I will claim you tonight, if you'll have me.”

“Yes,” I said, pushing up to kiss him and letting him take me over the edge again and again.



Tyr was reluctant to leave the bed, convincing me more than once to lie back down in a number of creative and pleasurable ways.

Eventually, I insisted I bathe, lest I smell of nothing but sex and sweat at the final trial.

“I don't really see how that's a problem,” Tyr grinned, his head resting on one bent arm as he surveyed me from the bed, still completely naked. His scars were both tragic and beautiful, and fully on display like this, he was like a fallen god brought to earth to tempt me.

I couldn't resist kissing him once more, and he scooped me up in his arms so that we could bathe together.

It was after this, while we lazed away the late afternoon awaiting the final trial, that I sat shuffling my tarot cards on the little settee. Tyr was reclined with his head in my lap, his damp hair leaving a wet patch on my leg that I didn't care about in the slightest. A fire in the hearth made the dark and dreary room feel almost cheerful.

"How do they work?" Tyr asked, reaching up to tap the deck as I shuffled.

"I can show you if you like," I offered, smiling down between the curtain of golden hair I had left down to dry from the bath.

"Hmm," Tyr said, smirking up at me with mischief in his expression. "I could think of other things I'd like you to show me instead."

"No more of that," I hissed, batting away his hands which were attempting to snake their way under my robe. "You can have me *after* the final trial."

"Cruel female," Tyr pouted, putting on a show of great patience as he forced himself to sit up. "Fine then, show me this magic."

"It's less magic and more interpretation," I said, ignoring his teasing as I became engrossed in the craft. "Divination is not an exact science. One needs to feel out the meaning of the cards to have any idea what they foretell, and it's often hard to

know what they mean until after what they foretell has already come to pass.”

“You’re very sexy when you lecture, you know,” Tyr mused, brushing my hair away from my shoulder. I gave him an exasperated look, and he lifted his hands in surrender with a laugh. “Alright, no touching. Tell me my future, then.”

“I think you rather know your future,” I said, trying to summon a coy smile and blushing at my own daring.

Tyr looked utterly delighted. “Brigid, my innocent dove, did you just make a suggestive innuendo?”

“Hush,” I said, flicking his hand away where it had strayed again to my hair. “Now concentrate. You must select one card from each of three deals. The first represents your past, the second your present, and the third your future. If you don’t focus, you’ll choose incorrectly.”

“I’m very focused,” Tyr said, looking at me in a way that told me he was the opposite of focused. “Deal my hand.”

I rolled my eyes and placed six cards face down on the table before us, gesturing that Tyr should choose. He gave me a quizzical sort of smile, then tapped one of the cards.

“The past,” I intoned, collecting the cards and setting his chosen card to the side. I shuffled again, laying out six cards. He tapped another. “The present,” I said, trying to stay completely serious as Tyr smirked at me and chose his final card. “The future.”

I put the remaining cards away and laid the three chosen cards out before us, inexplicably nervous about what they might show.

I bit my lip, and Tyr's hand came to rest gently on mine. "We don't have to look." I looked up at him, and his eyes were soft again in that way I realized was reserved only for me. "Regardless of what the cards say, I know my future."

I smiled, feeling the warm buzz of the Pull settle my anxiety. I flipped over the first card.

"Ten of cups in reverse," I said, frowning at the first card and the image of ten cups stacked in an upside-down pyramid. "Upright, this means happiness and fulfillment, but reversed it symbolizes broken dreams. Disharmony." I looked up at him, worried that we should stop.

"That's my past," Tyr pointed out, tapping the card lightly. "Let's see the present."

"Seven of swords," I said, feeling my gut sink with panic over the meaning of the seven crossed weapons on the card. "Someone is deceiving you. Lying to you to get what they want."

"We also knew that," Tyr pointed out, catching my hand and pressing a comforting kiss to the palm. "And we will deal with it shortly. What's the future?"

I bit my lip, hovering over the card before finally forcing myself to flip it and examine the image. My heart soared in

relief at what I saw, and Tyr clearly didn't need much of an explanation to understand its meaning.

“I believe this may be my favorite card,” he teased, picking up the image of two bodies intertwined. “The lovers.”

“The meaning could be symbolic,” I teased, pretending to squirm away as Tyr closed the distance between us and caught my waist in a firm grip. “Not literal.”

“Oh, it's literal,” Tyr purred, catching me in a kiss that I didn't try very hard to resist. “And if it's not, then I intend to change the future tonight.”



Chapter 13

The final trial of the tournament to choose the new Lord of Shadow would be held in the open grounds of Tyr's estate, and it felt almost like stepping out of a dream to stand before the cold, windy grounds to witness the duel to the death.

Elara and Carnon would be arriving any second, and Tyr had moved the witch mirror from the courtyard to my room to make sure they arrived securely. We would all proceed to the trial, and hopefully end this once and for all.

"You still haven't told me what you plan to do about Draven," I pointed out, fidgeting as Tyr and I stood before the mirror with clasped hands. We planned to tell Carnon and Elara immediately, as there would be no way to hide our new relationship from my shrewd and rather nosy friend, and Tyr seemed remarkably relaxed about the whole thing.

"I have a plan. And I don't see why you're nervous," he commented as I fiddled with the ties on my loose gown, the style my preferred one from Sun. "Elara likes me. She's rooting for us."

“You are overconfident,” I pointed out, letting him pull me into a quick embrace to help soothe the anxious energy inside me. “What if Carnon decides that two lords can’t be mated?”

We hadn’t discussed the dynamic of each of us leading a court. It wasn’t a problem I had a ready solution to, but Tyr shrugged, looking totally unconcerned.

“If it’s a problem, then I’ll abdicate my seat,” he said, as if this were as simple a decision as choosing which color of shirt to wear.

I gaped, my jaw dropping at this declaration. “You would?”

Tyr shrugged again, looking amused. “Of course, my love. I would give up a thousand titles to be with you, and this moldering court can find another lord if it would stop us from being together.”

My heart gave a painful sort of thump, and I threw myself at my mate with a strangled sort of cry. Tyr chuckled fondly, kissing the top of my head. “You are the better Daemon Lord anyway,” he pointed out. “Maybe Carnon can put you in charge of both courts.”

“Blood needs you,” I argued, looking up into the planes of his angular face. “Blood needs us. The hard and the soft. The dark and the light. We can lead both courts together.”

Tyr didn’t have a chance to reply as the glass in the mirror rippled and Carnon and Elara stepped through, both dressed in glittering black. Carnon’s horns looked wickedly sharp in the dim light, and I worried for a moment that he might try to

disembowel Tyr when he realized we were together. Protectively, of course.

I made to move toward my friend to greet her with a hug, but I had forgotten that Tyr was holding my hand. He held it fast, and Elara stopped short, eyes widening at our intertwined fingers.

“Goddess be praised,” she exclaimed, throwing her arms around me in a bruising hug. “Jealousy worked!”

Tyr let out a stifled laugh as Carnon raised an enigmatic brow at her. “You meddled. Again.”

“I did no such thing,” Elara protested, taking a step back and beaming at both of us. “This was fate.”

“Why are we fussing?” came a sweet, high voice from the mirror as Cerridwen stepped through, followed by Herne. The Lord of Beasts seemed far too big for the room, and he glowered as if his presence had been required against his will.

“Cerridwen!” I cried in surprise, hugging my other friend. “I had not thought you would be here.”

“We wanted to surprise you,” she chirped happily, elbowing her mate in the ribs. His agreement was a forced grunt, and I hugged him too, despite his gruffness. He was blushing faintly when Tyr pulled me away with a quiet growl of jealousy.

“I see the Pull is still riding you,” Carnon quipped, clapping Tyr on the shoulder in a typically male gesture of affection. “If you hurt her, I give her permission to burn you alive.”

“Believe me, we’ve already discussed it,” Tyr said, raising a brow at the King with a shadow of his usually indolent mask. “I trust that Lady Brigid will keep me well in line. She is rather terrifying when she wants to be.”

Carnon raised a brow at me, and I smiled innocently, making Elara laugh loudly at her mate’s surprise. “As much as I’m enjoying this, we should probably finish this blasted tournament,” she said, taking my arm and Cerridwen’s and directing us toward the door. “And I want details,” she hissed, loud enough only for us to hear as we headed down to the grounds.

I filled Elara and Cerridwen in as we walked. Tyr’s scars were a secret I kept to myself, something private to treasure until he decided to let our friends see him for who he truly was. But I told them most of the rest, which resulted in far more giggling than was strictly appropriate for the occasion.

I had completely forgotten about Draven, and Tyr’s suspicions about him, until we almost ran into him at the base of the tower as we descended the stairs.

“My ladies, my Queen,” Draven said, bowing politely as he took a step away from us. His armor was more scarred and damaged than it had been before the second trial, and he looked a little frantic as he ran a hand through his dark hair.

“Is something the matter, Lord Draven?” I asked, glancing back at Tyr, who quickly came to my side. Carnon and Herne sidled up behind him, and Draven seemed to visibly pale in the presence of the Demon King and both Daemon Lords.

“I...” he cut himself off, looking frantically between the six of us before settling his eyes back on me. “I would speak to you alone, Lady Brigid.”

“Whatever you have to tell me can be said before our King and Queen,” I said, frowning at the shadow demon.

Draven pursed his lips, looking accusingly at Tyr. “Very well. In that case I believe Lord Tyr to be manipulating the results of the tournament with blood magic.”

Tyr laughed incredulously, and Carnon glowered, looking so darkly at Draven that there must be some sort of history there. I remembered his stony greeting on Samhain and frowned at the King. Elara put a soothing hand on his arm, and I turned to address Draven.

“The Lord of Blood has made similar accusations of you,” I said, trying to read the fear and panic in Draven’s face as he took in my mate and Elara’s.

Draven shook his head as if genuinely horrified. “I have never used blood magic,” he protested, “nor do I believe I possess the ability for it. You can question me under bloodberry, and I will swear to it.”

I looked at Tyr, who shared a skeptical glance with me. Carnon was still tight-lipped and practically trembling with rage. “Lord Tyr is not manipulating the trials, beyond what he was tasked to do in the Trial of Blood.”

“But—”

“I am confident,” Elara interjected, a soothing hand still on her mate’s arm, “that it will be a non-issue in this final trial.” I frowned, looking to my friend for clarification. She knew enough blood magic to defeat the Crone, and she had studied with Tyr. Her brows lifted as she regarded my mate, who nodded almost imperceptibly. “Let the trial proceed as planned.”

Draven’s expression was dour and his face was tight as he bowed, giving me a final pleading look before returning to the other contestants. Only five remained, but Draven strode straight to Shyama, bowing his head toward hers in rushed conversation.

“Will one of you please share your secrets with the rest of us?” Cerridwen drawled, looking between her brother and her friend in annoyance.

Elara and Tyr exchanged another look, but Elara’s only reply was a phrase I had heard her use once before.

“Fire destroys and also creates.”



The Trial of Fire was the final test in the tournament, a trial designed to represent rebirth for the contestants, as only one would emerge from the ashes victorious.

This trial required my magic, and when Tyr had originally suggested it for the final trial I thought he was completely mad.

As we began, I thought he still might be a bit mad.

I pushed my magic into a dome of flame, large enough to encompass the courtyard and the five remaining contestants within. They had limited time to both overpower each other and emerge from the flames unscathed, and I was very conscious of the fact that I could be responsible for several deaths if I didn't keep a tight leash on the flame.

Tenebris and the other members of the council were present, as well as some of the nobility from Blood. Cerridwen, Herne, Elara, and Carnon stood behind Tyr and me as we presided over the trial, looking on with expressions that ranged from mild interest—Herne—to outright horror—Cerridwen.

“Are you sure about this?” I gritted out, trying to focus on keeping the dome in place while also trying to sense if any of the contestants were in serious distress.

Tyr placed a comforting hand on my hip, the other bracing my shoulder as he lent me his strength. “Trust me. There's a reason I thought this trial should be last.”

“This is ridiculous!” Tenebris shouted, voice sounding a little more frantic and less confident now that his heir was engulfed in flames. “You must end this.”

“You agreed to this, Lord Tenebris,” Tyr reminded the lord, growling the words over his shoulder without releasing me. “Be still and wait.”

My power had begun to wane when something finally appeared to shift inside the ball of flame. A flicker of darkness, as if something were trying to break free of the fire. The new Lord of Shadow would have to escape the flame

using their own magic as part of the ritual, and I concentrated my power to keep the dome closed, feeling sweat run down my brow as I expended all of my magic.

Finally, a ball of shadow emerged, a cocoon of darkness that floated out from the flames and resulted in a roar from the gathered crowd. I dropped the fire, sagging a bit against Tyr as the new Lord of Shadow emerged victorious.

Except it wasn't one Lord.

Shyama dropped the cocoon of darkness she had spun around herself and the male, who sagged to his knees as she pulled him from the fire. She dropped next to him, bracing herself on the ground as Tenebris roared in protest.

Draven was alive, but barely. Shyama had won.

“This is not possible!” Tenebris shouted, amidst the murmuring and hushed conversation of the council. “We agreed it would be Draven.”

I frowned, looking up at Tyr who was still supporting my weight, but had a brow raised at Tenebris. “The trials choose the new Lord, not the council,” he pointed out. “Lady Shyama is the new Lord of Shadow by rights.”

“She cheated,” Tenebris seethed, looking daggers at Shyama, who was too busy helping Draven cough up smoke to notice the elder lord's vitriol. “There is no way she could have beaten my son otherwise.”

“*You* cheated,” came a hoarse rasp from the courtyard, as all eyes turned to the defeated shadow demon still braced on the

stone floor with Shyama's arm around him.

Draven raised himself up with Shyama's help, and I noticed that the other three contestants behind them were coughing and spluttering, but miraculously alive. Elara sprung into action, offering her Goddess healing to the injured contestants. There would be no more needless death for this tournament with my Queen in attendance.

Carnon had gone still and pale.

"You used blood magic," Draven wheezed, looking accusingly at his father. "You killed that male, and created that creature. It was you who sold *her* out to Scathanna, wasn't it?"

Carnon stood, his hands in his pockets and his eyes intent on Tenebris as Draven hurled the accusation at him.

"Sold who out?" I asked, feeling a little lost. Tyr held me a bit tighter as Carnon answered my query.

"Keaira," he replied, whispering her name like a prayer. I paled, remembering Elara's concern over Carnon's former lover, and the tragic circumstances of that lover's death. She had betrayed Carnon, her mind warped by blood magic, and Carnon had been forced to kill her himself to spare her a far more gruesome and painful death.

"You were the one who twisted her mind," Draven rasped, clearly more capable of words even in his state than Carnon. Elara made it over to him, and I saw the white pulse of healing magic sweep through him. His voice was steadier when he next spoke. "You swore to me that it wasn't you. That you

would never use your blood magic to hurt your own family. But you invaded mine in the first trial. You lying piece of shit!”

“She was your daughter,” Carnon growled, his presence seeming to grow and stretch as the air around him filled with static and darkness. “And you let her die for that monster.”

“This is all conjecture,” Tenebris hissed, backing away from the approaching King, who looked far more demonic with revenge so near. “I have no blood magic.”

“It was you who freed Draven from my control in the first trial,” Tyr accused, glancing at the shadow demon, who looked far healthier after Elara’s ministrations. Shyama was standing now, her sword in hand as she glared at Tenebris. “It was you I felt controlling the shadows with blood magic in the second trial. I believed it was Draven.”

“I didn’t inherit his gifts,” Draven spat, looking like he would tear his father’s head from his body himself if Carnon were not intent on doing it first. “A source of great disappointment to my highly gifted sire.”

“You assisted Scathanna in warping the minds of her casters,” Carnon accused, his voice resonating eerily. The other demons scrambled away from Tenebris as Carnon approached, all of the air and light seeming to vanish in his presence. “You sacrificed your daughter to try to get rid of me. You would have let Scathanna rip her to shreds.”

“You have no evidence,” Tenebris said weakly, cowering from Carnon as if this could save him. “No evidence.”

The words seemed to strike something in Carnon, who frowned and took a step away from his prey, the vortex of malice that had been swirling around him dissipating so suddenly it felt like all of the air had been let out of the world.

“You’re right,” Carnon said, looking grimly at Shyama. “And your crimes are not within my jurisdiction.”

Shyama nodded, throwing out her hand to bind Tenebris in shadow. He squawked in protest, struggling against the bonds that Draven added to, until the male was immobilized in darkness.

Elara went to Carnon’s side, putting a hand on his arm again. “You are a good king,” she murmured. “And there will be justice for what was done to her.”

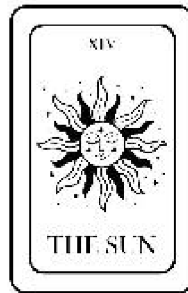
He nodded once, as if some understanding passed between them with that reminder, and spoke again. “Lady Shyama, you will try this male in your court as follows our traditions,” he said, nodding his head politely to the new Lady of Shadows. “If you find him guilty, you will bring him to me.”

“It shall be done, my King,” Shyama intoned, her voice smooth like velvet as she bowed, accepting her new position. “I pledge my fealty to you in the name of the Horned God, master of death and resurrection. My Queen,” she added, turning her dark eyes toward Elara, “I pledge my fealty to you in the name of the Triple Goddess, mistress of life and death and mother of all.”

I looked at Draven, who fell to a knee and made the same pledge, clearly accepting Shyama as the new Lord of Shadow

and pledging his fealty as much to her as to Carnon. I wondered what had happened between them in the trials to create such loyalty, but I had a strong suspicion it was a force beyond their control, possibly the same one that had brought me and Tyr together. Draven looked up at Shyama like she was the Goddess herself, and I felt certain that he would not be pursuing my affections any longer.

“In that case,” Carnon said, taking a deep breath and blowing it out as if exhausted by the drama of the whole affair. “I declare the tournament ended. Lady Shyama, Lord of Shadow, we accept your fealty in the name of the Goddess and her Consort. May we serve and protect with their fairness and honor.”



Chapter 14

“Admit that you had no idea it was Tenebris,” I said, watching Tyr undress after all of the bureaucracy and legalities had finally been settled and we were all permitted to retire.

Shyama and Draven had escorted Tenebris and the rest of the council back to Shadow, vowing to keep the lord under lock and key until the truth could be established. Draven had given me a slight nod of understanding, glancing at my hands clasped with Tyr’s, and bowed his head in farewell before stepping through the mirror after his lady.

Carnon and Elara had returned to Oneiros, and Cerridwen and Herne to Beasts, but all had insisted that Tyr and I make ourselves present in the Capital within the week.

“Officially, we need to figure out how Blood and Sun will function with mated Lords, and meet with Shyama to sort out the mess in Shadow,” Elara had explained, squeezing my hands in support and delight. “But unofficially we need to celebrate.” She kissed my cheek as she left, reminding me to tell her *everything* by mirror as soon as I could. Cerridwen has

been no less enthusiastic, giving me a suggestive wink as she departed with Herne.

“I admit, I was certain it was Draven,” Tyr confessed, grinning at me across the bed as he removed his coat and shirt, revealing the planes of scars and muscle. “I blame you for that, just so you know.”

“I don’t see how that’s my fault,” I replied, trying to sound haughty as I unlaced my gown and pretended to ignore Tyr’s hungry gaze.

“You distracted me with jealousy,” Tyr pointed out, giving up the battle for restraint and prowling around the bed like a jungle cat. “If you hadn’t flirted with him so terribly at Samhain, I might have realized it was his father who was the treacherous snake.”

“Dancing is not flirting,” I pointed out, letting Tyr assist me with the gown and feeling goosebumps trail down my arms in the wake of his calloused hands. “I had no idea that Tenebris and Draven were Keaira’s family.”

“I knew,” Tyr said darkly, studying me in the candlelight. “Carnon told me at Samhain. It was one of the reasons I didn’t trust Draven.”

“And you didn’t think to maybe mention that?” I asked, letting myself caress the scars on his broad chest and map their lines. I intended to learn their topography, to memorize every welt and divot and kiss each one until the memory of how they were received was wiped from my mate’s brain. “Or to mention that Tenebris was a blood demon?”

“Only half,” Tyr shrugged. “And I wasn’t sure until the morning of the second trial when I went through the records in the library and found his family tree. You would be proud of my research skills, I think.”

“You knew before the second trial and didn’t think to warn me?” I asked, poking him in the chest indignantly.

He caught my finger with a chuckle, holding it fast. “I was planning to, but I became rather busy, if you recall.”

I blushed, remembering exactly what he had been busy with all night. And the next day.

“How did you and Elara know that blood magic wouldn’t work in the third trial?” I asked, trying to get through all of my questions before Tyr thoroughly distracted me.

Tyr smirked as if he knew he was making thinking very difficult, raising my finger to his lips and nipping the tip with his sharp fangs. “Fire destroys and also creates,” he intoned, quoting Elara. “Fire magic negates blood magic. Elara figured it out when she was researching blood magic to destroy the Bloodwood, and we tested the theory a few times back in Oneiros.”

“I see,” I said, letting Tyr push me onto the bed and begin kissing his way across my ribs. “So you’re saying I’m more powerful than you?”

“That was never in question, my love,” Tyr purred, looking up at me with a wicked, emerald gleam. “Now if you’re satisfied with all of my answers, I believe we have a rather

important task to complete tonight.” He flicked his tongue over my navel, making heat coil in my gut.

The heat froze as I realized something.

“Tyr,” I said, sitting up and cupping his face between my palms. My throat went tight and my eyes burned, but the truth of what I had realized couldn’t be denied. “I can’t claim you.”

“What?” he asked, looking startled and a little furious. “Why the fuck not?”

I swallowed, placing my hand over the scars that hid his heart. “In Sun, we claim through fire. Burning. I would have to scar you.”

Tyr relaxed at my words, blowing out a breath of relief. “You realize that my bite will scar you as well,” he pointed out, eyes flicking to my throat.

“But I can’t do that to you,” I lamented, gesturing to his scarred, beautiful body. “I can’t hurt you. Not more than you have already been hurt.”

“Brigid,” Tyr said, dropping his forehead to mine so our noses were touching, our breaths intermingling. “Yours is a scar I will bear with pride. It is a scar that will heal my broken soul, not hurt. I welcome it. I welcome everything about this bond with you.”

I swallowed, eyes still burning. “Are you sure?”

Tyr pressed his own hand against mine, flat over his heart, and looked into my eyes. “I claim you, Brigid, in the name of

the Goddess and the Horned God. I am yours as much as you are mine. I beg you to claim me in return.”

He pressed his lips to mine, a gentle command, and I pulled on my fire, just the tiniest bit, to make the claim. “I claim you,” I whispered, letting the smallest lick of fire I could summon burn into the scarred flesh beneath my palm. Tyr didn’t flinch or hiss as he held my hand to his heart, looking at me intently and commanding me with his gaze. “In the name of the Goddess and the Horned God, you are mine.”

I pulled my hand away to reveal my claiming mark, a tiny burn in the shape of a sun above Tyr’s heart. He smirked, a little wickedness bleeding through the expression as the light glinted off one fang. “My turn.”

His mouth was on me so fast I didn’t even feel the pinch of his fangs puncturing the skin of my throat until the first delicious pull against my neck. I moaned, the pleasure of Tyr’s fangs drawing out my blood an experience I hadn’t quite expected. It was like he lit a fire in my very blood, the feeling of him flooding me as he positioned himself between my thighs.

“Gods,” I cried out, feeling the hard press of him against my entrance, already slick with desire and eager to claim all of this male. “Claim me, Tyr.”

He obliged, growling against my throat as he pulled in another mouthful of blood and entered me with one deep thrust. It was almost too much, the pleasure and pain of it mingling until I was unraveling.

I whimpered a tiny protest as he lifted his mouth, his tongue licking over the tiny puncture that I knew now marked me as his. “You are a fucking dream,” he rasped, his lips moving to capture mine in a kiss that tasted of spice and blood. “And you are all mine.”

There was so much still to figure out, how our courts would manage, how my mother and sisters would react to my mate with his dark reputation, how we would move our courts forward in healing and light and banish the darkness from Tyr’s past.

And there would be time for all of it later.

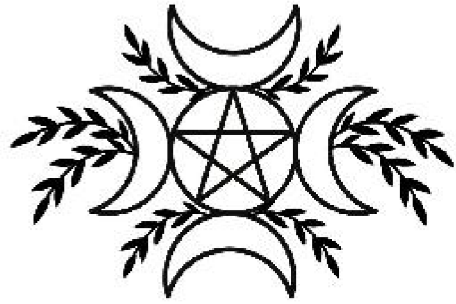
I let my mate love me, gently and tenderly, and then roughly and thoroughly, our cries of pleasure a prayer to the Goddess for this blessing of each other. For this chance at love and forgiveness and pleasure.

“I love you,” Tyr rumbled, release barreling through us in tandem as we spilled ourselves out and became something new and whole together. “Gods, I will never stop loving you.”

I sighed contentedly, feeling rather boneless but still alight with need as the Pull tugged, wanting more from this mate who was now mine.

I smiled up at him as he stroked my cheek, letting a little of my fire burn at the surface as I replied.

“Show me.”



Bonus Chapter

Elara, the night of Samhain

“I swear to the Goddess, if Tyr doesn’t figure out his nonsense, I will lock him in a room with Brigid and let the Pull do its work,” I raged, pulling off my jewels and the golden pins from my hair in a whirlwind of festive annoyance.

“You’re meddling, my love,” Carnon drawled, coming up behind me and placing a kiss on my neck beneath a pointed ear. I shivered at the pleasant touch, but my irritation at Tyr’s refusal to accept my friend as his mate still chafed at me.

I could see the devastation on her face with every longing look, every touch of Tyr’s hand as they’d danced. She was too sweet and caring and lovely to be treated this way, whatever Tyr’s past.

“What’s the point of being Queen if I can’t get people to do what I want?” I grumbled, earning another chuckle as Carnon’s lips trailed down my neck.

“I’m afraid being royalty means *rarely* getting what you want, Red,” Carnon rumbled, his teeth grazing gently over my

bare shoulder. I felt his hands tugging at the laces of the black gown I'd worn for Samhain as his lips continued their exploration of the crook of my neck.

“Why are you in such a good mood?” I asked, breath hitching as he gave a particularly hard tug on the gown and nipped my shoulder at the same time. “We just agreed to allow a battle to the death, and your Daemon Lords have drama.”

“Hmmm,” Carnon murmured, loosening the last of the laces and sliding the gown down my hips. “So much drama. But I'm afraid my mind is more pleasantly occupied.”

“I wonder with what,” I quipped, gasping a little as his hands went to my breasts and gently teased my nipples.

It felt so good to be touched by my mate without the threat of disaster looming over us for a change. The knowledge that we might live peacefully from then on should have felt a little dull, but I reveled in the idea of a lifetime of lazy touches and languorous lovemaking.

“If you must know,” Carnon said, smiling against my neck as he played, “I was thinking about our deal.”

“What deal?” I asked, breathing a little unsteadily as one of his hands skated down my abdomen and across my stomach. Thinking was difficult with his hands on me, and my traitorous body wanted more touching and less thinking.

Carnon turned me in his arms, my breasts bare between us as he looked down at me with his serpentine green gaze and a

wicked smirk. He lifted my hand, kissing my palm where the scar of our blood bargain had once been.

“The deal where you promised to stay with me until Samhain,” he said, trailing kisses down my wrist and forearm. “I was thinking that I’ve managed to thoroughly entrap you beyond that deadline.”

I laughed, the memory of the bargain a little bittersweet. I had asked to be allowed to leave with Mama after staying with the Demon King for six months, not realizing that he was my mate and that leaving him was never really an option.

I pushed the thoughts of Mama aside, saying a little prayer to the Goddess that she was happy wherever souls ended up when they left this place. I knew she was with my father, and I hoped they got the forever they had sacrificed so much for.

“I could still leave, you know,” I joked. Carnon’s eyes had gone a little softer, now fixed on mine as if he knew where my thoughts had strayed.

“You wouldn’t dare,” he replied, licking a line up my forearm with his devilish forked tongue.

“You’re disgusting,” I lied, trying to look horrified and not intrigued at his licking. I made a show of trying to pull from his grasp, making him haul me tightly against him. “Let me go, you overgrown snake.”

“Never,” Carnon purred, his mouth capturing mine in a searing kiss, his hands trailing down my back to cup my rear. “But just in case you’re not convinced...”

I yelped as he hoisted me up, the dress falling away as he carried me to the bed, completely bare but for my undergarments.

“Allow me to remind you why you should stay,” he finished, his lips curving into a wicked smile.

“Carnon,” I said, gripping his shoulders to stop him from putting me down. “You know that you’re stuck with me, don’t you?” I kissed him, nipping at his lower lip and earning a growl. “Forever.”

“I know, Red,” he replied, his voice husky and edged with need. “But let me show you anyway.”

With another yelp, he threw me back on the bed, almost completely bare before him as he pulled off his jacket and shirt. I watched, propped up on my elbows to admire the curve of his muscular arms and chest as he removed his clothes, the intricate tattoos that marked him as the Demon King stark against his golden chest.

I said a little prayer of thanks to the Goddess for making this male mine. My mate, with his unearthly beauty and dangerous charm. He grinned down at me, his pointed fangs catching the light as he crawled over me, hooking the edge of my lacy undergarments between his teeth and sliding them down my legs.

“Goddess,” I breathed, the sight of him making heat flood me and warmth curl in my core. “What did I do to deserve this?”

“Merely exist, my love,” Carnon said, trailing kisses up my leg and inner thigh as he settled between my legs. His eyes met mine, the feral gleam in them making me ache for him to touch me. “You are exquisite, did you know that?”

My stomach lurched with something more than passion. It was a sweet burn that curled from deep within me and wrapped around my heart, squeezing it as if the serpents of flame and light and darkness within me were trying to escape through my che

I sat up, taking his face in my hands and kissing him again, my love for this male, my king and mate, too powerful to properly put into words. My necklace, the symbol of our mating, thrummed gently and steadily against my chest, and Carnon smiled, no doubt feeling his mating ring match the necklace’s pulse.

“I know,” he murmured, as if I had said the words anyway. He kissed me again, nipping my lip hard enough to draw blood. A flicker of healing magic swept over the small hurt before it even really registered, and he gave me a feral and wholly male smirk. “Now let me worship you.”

Carnon dropped his mouth to me, and the first sweep of his tongue made me tremble with delight and anticipation as I sank back into the silken pillows. I had admittedly very little experience with skilled lovers. Carnon had been my first, and as my mate, he would be my only. But as I fisted the sheets and let out a gasp, Carnon’s tongue languidly exploring my

most intimate parts, it occurred to me that experience may be overrated.

“I can hear you thinking,” he chastised, nipping my inner thigh teasingly as I looked up to meet his eyes. “Relax, Red.”

“I’m thinking about you,” I protested, my breath hitching again as he returned to feast on me, his strong fingers digging into my hips as he pulled me against him.

“Hmm,” Carnon hummed, mouth too engaged to form proper words as he swept his wicked tongue inside me. I moaned at the sensation, and he chuckled darkly as I fisted my hands around his smooth, black horns.

“I love it when you let me take you for a ride,” he murmured, interrupting the steady rhythm he had been creating to tease me.

I gripped his horns tighter, feeling a lick of satisfaction as he hissed. His horns were rather sensitive, and I knew that desire must be riding him hard too as he worked me into a frenzy.

I gasped again as he resumed his pace, the steady rhythm of his tongue augmented as he reached up to tease my nipples between his fingers. He took me to the edge of pain, just enough to sweeten the pleasure when release unexpectedly barreled through me. I whimpered against him as he continued to lick and tease, his pace unrelenting.

“Carnon,” I moaned, the tension spiraling in me a second time as he studiously focused on my pleasure. “Oh gods.”

He made a rumbling noise of approval against me, the vibration nearly tipping me over the edge again.

Rather than letting me go, he shifted, flipping us so that I was sitting above him, his head between my thighs.

I rode him shamelessly, letting him take my weight as he moved his tongue in torturous circles, his hands sliding back to grip my rear and pull me even closer.

I came then, the intensity of his attention too much for me to last as I fell back, his hands gently guiding me to his hardened length.

“And now, my Queen,” he rumbled, arching his hips and thrusting into me with gentle deliberation, “it’s my turn.”

He pulled me flush against him, his hips meeting mine in a steady, pounding beat as he captured my lips in a deep, sensual kiss. It drove me a little wild to taste myself on him, the remains of his shameless feast, and I cried out as he pounded into me.

“Gods,” he groaned, his teeth sinking into my neck as he came, the sensation a delicious pull on my skin that sent me over the edge with him.

He licked the wound, his own healing magic rising to seal the puncture marks where he had bitten me as I panted against him, my body limp and boneless as he shifted me into the crook of his elbow.

“That was...” I sighed, the remnants of pleasure pulsing between my legs and at my neck. “Different.”

“I thought you might like it,” he chuckled, his own breathing a bit ragged, his chest slick with sweat and my hair sticking to him wildly. He scooped it up, smoothing the copper strands behind me and kissing my forehead. “I may have taken some advice from Tyr on that front.”

“Really?” I asked, a little surprised that my mate and the Lord of Blood were friendly enough to discuss intimate strategies of seduction.

“We were very drunk,” Carnon explained, laughing at the surprise on my face. “And he was explaining in *graphic* detail what he wished to do to Brigid.”

I sighed again, the plight of my friend returning to my mind as I contemplated this revelation. “She’ll be very lucky, if he ever works up the courage to act on his feelings,” I remarked dryly.

“Have patience, my love,” Carnon said, his lips pressed to my brow as he held me tightly. “I have a strong suspicion that you and Cerridwen are right.”

“Right about what?” I asked, tilting my head to look up at him in the dim candlelight.

He grinned, bending to kiss my nose and grazing it lightly with a sharp fang. “Jealousy can be a powerful motivator.”

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Madeleine Eliot loves to read and write spicy romantasy with all of the best tropes. Dubbed the “Queen of Cozy” by her readers, Madeleine enjoys writing romantasy that is all vibes and spice, with a dash of adventure and world-building. She is always working on her next

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