

CHRONICLES
OF THE
STONE VEIL

THE
RUIN
OF
GODS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

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About the Author

CHAPTER 1

ZORA

AS THE GOD of Life, and therefore Death, it's not out of the ordinary for me to travel to the Underworld. It's the domain where all souls are judged and those worthy are given my gift of reincarnation. Thus, I belong here as much as I do anywhere.

It's just... when I appear on the Bridge of Judgment, I feel like a stranger despite the fact I was raised here for the first twenty-eight years of my life. It's empty right now, all souls for the day apparently having been adjudicated.

To my left is the city of Otaxis, made beautiful by magical tweaks from the current king of the Underworld, Amell. The buildings are whitewashed, the streets clean and lit with glowing lanterns, and overhead a midnight sky full to bursting with sparkling stars. Under the bridge flows the Crimson River—red, orange, and yellow swirling—and directly ahead of me is the obsidian castle that rises so high I can't quite see the top.

I should leave, but I'm restless and I don't know what's wrong. I'm an introvert—loner by nature—yet here I am, feeling the need for connection.

I chose to come to Amell rather than my sister, Finley, because I've known him longer. While Finley is my identical twin, I've only known her for a year.

I've known Amell for close to twenty-nine.

Really, since the day I was born.

It doesn't mean that Amell is more trusted than Finley. In fact, he was instrumental in the plot to hold me captive in the Underworld to help Kymaris, then queen of the Underworld,

breach the veil that separated her world from the mortal one so she could wreak havoc and subjugate.

And yet... he's my friend.

It's completely dysfunctional, but I've learned over this last year that the world is dysfunctional.

No, really... the entirety of the universe is batshit crazy.

I tug on the long braid hanging over my left shoulder, a nervous habit indeed. My curly hair is snow white, hypothesized to be this color from the terrible magics I absorbed for years and years. Finley's is fiery red, and I suppose mine would be the same had I not been stolen at birth and brought to Hell.

Dropping the braid, I chastise myself. "You can't be nervous. You're the freaking god of Life and Death. You're one of five gods who rule the universe, and every being in this realm could be reduced to ash if you merely wished it so."

Temporarily buoyed by my personal pep talk, I walk across the bridge and into the castle where Amell resides with his bride, Nyssa.

The minute I enter through the double doors that stand two stories high, I realize I have no idea where to go. I normally materialize right into Amell's rooms, but with him being newly married, I don't want to be intrusive.

A bustle of creatures moves about the great hall. Numerous Dark Fae, those fallen angels who God expelled from heaven for their treasonous plans to overthrow him, and daemons—the offspring of Light and Dark Fae mating. Not as populous, but still, many choose to live here. There are even some humans in servitude, having volunteered their time in exchange for something they needed, or having been sacrificed.

"Excuse me," I say to a woman in brown burlap passing by with a tray of empty wooden cups.

She turns my way, needing no more than half a second to recognize me for the deity I am, and shrieks. The tray falls with a loud clatter, cups rolling askew, and the woman drops to her knees, going prostrate before me. That attracts the attention of everyone in the hall, and in a massive wave, everyone follows suit.

Down to their knees, arms stretched before them, and noses pressed to the floor so as not to gaze upon me.

It's utterly ridiculous, as I don't require such acknowledgment, although I'm guessing my predecessor did.

"Stand up," I snap irritably, and without meaning to, my voice booms through the hall as if speakers surround us. I learned about the miracle of surround sound from Finley's husband, Carrick, and he helped me outfit my own home entertainment system with it.

Everyone scrambles to their feet, but the poor woman before me looks like she's about to pass out.

I glance around, trying to find someone who appears brave enough to look me in the eye, and I'm lucky when a Dark Fae walks my way. He doesn't cower or lower his gaze, and in fact looks supremely confident as he approaches.

He's beautiful in an evil, Underworld sort of way. Bluish-tinted skin bulging with muscles, silver hair, and shimmering azure eyes that look like faceted jewels. I know him well—he's Amell's best friend.

"Truett," I say with an incline of my head. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you as well," he says, bending at the waist. "If you're looking for Amell, he's not here."

I cock an eyebrow because Amell has been banished to the Underworld and prohibited from leaving. He previously disobeyed the gods' command not to interfere in a matter and this is his punishment.

“He’s not here in the castle,” Truett clarifies. “He and Nyssa have traveled to Kasdeya for the day. I could go there now and fetch him for you.”

Kasdeya is one of a few large cities in the Underworld and Amell rules over all of them. It’s not unusual for him to visit, but my timing is disappointing.

I manage a smile. “No, I don’t want to interrupt. This is an informal visit and of no importance. I’ll come back later.”

“Are you sure I can’t—”

I hold up a hand. “No. It’s good. Just tell him I came by.”

“As you wish,” he says, another bend at the waist, but then he fades away as I travel through the veil that separates the Underworld from the First Dimension.

I appear on the front porch of Finley and Carrick’s cliff-side home overlooking the Pacific Ocean outside of Malibu. They recently moved here, having left behind their lives in Seattle.

It was a necessity since technically, Finley is dead to the world. She died of an aneurysm unforeseen by me or any of my brethren gods, but I managed to snag her soul before it left her body. With power I didn’t even fully understand, having only been a god myself for a few weeks, I was able to reform her.

It wasn’t a reincarnation, but a creation. She’s the same Finley, complete with all her memories intact, and she even bears the same scars accumulated in her mortal life. After I breathed new life into her, my brother and sister gods, Cato, Veda, Circe, and Onyx, all channeled enough power into her to grant her the same immortality as her husband, Carrick. However, given she was dead and then brought back to life after the announcement to the world she had died, it was necessary for them to start over with new identities.

My hand reaches out to the doorbell, but I hesitate. Finley is probably the person I should have come to first, but I didn’t because I knew I wouldn’t like her answers. As my sister, she

has unconditional love for me and with that comes unconditional truth.

I'm not ready for it.

My hand starts to fall, but to my surprise, the door swings open and Carrick is standing there. I can't help but jump with a tiny yelp which is totally unbecoming of a god.

"Sorry," he says with a roguish smile, and I know he's not sorry at all. "Saw you standing out here in all your indecisive glory and decided to take matters into my own hands. Come on in."

He steps back, inviting me over the threshold. With no choice now, I enter the house and shoot him a sour look. "I could smite you, you know."

"You love me, so no, you couldn't."

I don't affirm or deny that statement. I don't know if I love him or not. It's one of the reasons why I'm so out of sorts. I'm trying to balance twenty-eight years of mortal life weighed against a year of godly existence. The more time that passes as an Almighty the more removed I feel from emotion, and it's bothering me. I mean, I wasn't the warmest and fuzziest person to begin with, but that's what happens when you're raised by Dark Fae in the Underworld.

I'm having a hard time reconciling that sometimes I feel deeply while other times I'm numb. I can't ask my fellow gods because they've never been human. They've always been as they are, since the dawn of time. They can't tell me what it feels like to be different, just as I'm sure they can't tell me if I'll completely ice over.

Finley can't tell me that either, but she might have words of wisdom.

She'll definitely have support and love.

The question is, do I have the guts to straight-up ask her?

"She's in the kitchen," Carrick says, and I follow him through the sprawling open-design floor plan. The western-

facing side is nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows that look out over the ocean. The views are gorgeous, but they don't rival the ones from my home.

At least in my humble opinion.

"Zora," Finley exclaims when she sees me. She drops her sandwich, wiping her hands on her pants, and rushes around the kitchen island to hug me.

I'm relieved by the flood of warmth and tenderness as her arms encircle me. I love her, I'm sure of it. I told her as much right before she plunged a knife into my heart—literally, not figuratively—and killed me.

It was this whole thing to save the world from the evil queen of the Underworld, and it seems like it was eons ago. But so much has happened since then.

"Come sit. I'll open a bottle of wine. Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich, or hell... you could use your power to whip us up a five-course meal if you want. I've got fancy china I can pull out."

Laughing, I shake my head. "Not hungry. But I won't say no to a glass of wine."

Carrick moves to Finley and kisses her temple with a hand around the back of her neck. "I'm going to be in my office so you two can have sister time."

I watch carefully as Finley gazes at her husband. There's a mixture of regret that he'll be leaving her presence, utter adoration that he'd be so thoughtful, and a hint of pure gratitude to belong to him. In fact, it's not just her expression that tells me all that.

I can feel the vibe from her and it's so intense, I wonder what it would be like to feel that way for someone. While I have tenderness and care within me, my formative years were warped. I was never given unconditional love, so I don't know if I'm capable of giving it myself.

Another question to ask Finley in the long list I'm mentally compiling.

Carrick kisses her again, and she sighs. Her exhale says, "If I died right now, that would be okay."

But it wouldn't be okay with me or Carrick, so that's not happening.

Shooting me a wink, Carrick heads out of the kitchen, grabbing an apple from a bowl on the island. Finley stares after him until he's out of sight and then turns her besotted gaze on me.

"You're pathetic," I mutter.

She gives me a dopey grin. "Can't help it. He's perfection."

I roll my eyes, prepared to point out that he's a little egotistical, but there's a huge bang from behind me.

Finley gasps and I spin fast on the kitchen stool, ready to launch power at whatever is threatening us. It bubbles hot, ready to erupt, and then fizzles when I see Maddox standing there.

And I'm sorry, but no demigod has a right to look as good as he does. I've thought that from the very first time I gazed upon him when he helped liberate me from the Underworld. His long hair is dark blond, and while Finley and I have been told repetitively we have the most beautiful eyes in the world, Maddox gives us both a run for our money. His are a shimmering green, the color of Irish rolling hills. Tattoos cover his arms, which are thick and muscled, as is the rest of his body. He's shaved his beard. The last time I saw him, it was full but well-trimmed.

I turn my back on him, indicating he's not worth my attention, but I didn't miss the dirt and blood covering his arms, chest, and face, or the fact he holds a battle-ax in his hand.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Finley yells at Maddox as she grabs a towel and a bottle of cleaner from under the sink. “You’re dripping entrails on my kitchen floor.”

She hustles his way as he mutters, “Sorry.”

I can’t help but glance over my shoulder. The ax is gone—presumably Maddox sent it somewhere that’s not here—and Finley is wiping up the floor.

Those green irises land on me, and something glimmers within. I get a trademark Maddox smirk as he moves past me to the cabinets.

“Don’t,” Finley snarls as she rushes toward him. “Your hands are nasty. Don’t touch anything.”

He gives her a grin that would disarm mortals. “Can I bother my sister-in-law for a glass of water? War is hard work.”

“Yes,” she says, her expression softening somewhat. “But don’t move. Just stand there and don’t touch anything.”

As Finley gets him a drink, I ask, “Where did Onyx have you this time?”

Onyx is my sister god, and she reigns over Conflict, which encompasses war and peace. The demigods were created to serve at the whim of the gods and given that Maddox looks like he stepped off the battlefield, I assume it’s at her behest.

He gives a careless wave of his hand. “Some dimension on the verge of political collapse. Apparently, one side has offered up major sacrifices to Onyx, so she sent me there to turn the tide.”

Some dimension, he says, as if this is normal talk, and I suppose it is for him. But this new world of magic and alternate realms is still a shock to my senses.

Finley hands him a glass filled with ice water. He downs it in several long swallows. I watch the way his throat rhythmically moves, making a tattoo of a snake that climbs up the side of his neck writhe from the motion.

“I’ll make you something to eat,” Finley says, moving to the refrigerator.

The minute the fridge is open and she’s rooting through it, Maddox turns his attention to me although he speaks to my sister. “I’m going to take a shower.”

“Okay,” Finley says as she grabs ingredients. “I put fresh towels in the downstairs guest bathroom this morning. When you’re done, put them right in the laundry room.”

“Sure thing,” he voices out loud to her, but then mouths silent words to me as he jerks his chin, his eyes turning dark green with desire. “*Join me.*”

My gaze snaps over to Finley as my body flushes with heat, but my sister isn’t paying attention. I look back to Maddox, who looks like he’d eat me whole if we were alone. I shake my head furiously, glaring at him. It’s a completely timid human move, the insecure woman in me not knowing how to handle someone so alpha and domineering. It’s been that way from nearly the beginning and hasn’t abated in the year we’ve been sleeping together.

If I were truly a god, I’d snap him into another dimension for his temerity, but instead, all I can do is bear the weight of his smirk.

His hand reaches out, a silent demand for me to come with him. I can imagine, with utter clarity, all the things he might do to me in a hot shower, and it’s not because I have a good imagination. I’ve had my fair share of hot showers with this demigod.

But that’s done in private and not under the potential view of my sister.

It’s my secret. No one knows what I have with Maddox.

He steps toward me, and I lurch up from my stool. “I’ve got to go,” I blurt out, tearing my eyes from him and looking over at Finley as she pops out from behind the refrigerator door.

She stares at me in surprise. “But why? You just got here.”

I throw a thumb over my shoulder, not at anything in particular. “I forgot I didn’t let Uorsin and Mattia out.”

Finley frowns but doesn’t question me. “Um... okay. Why don’t you do that and come back? I’ll have this big oaf gone by then.”

I don’t dare look at said big oaf. His smirk will have intensified with satisfaction for having discombobulated me, a god. I should turn him into a lizard or something, but I keep my cool.

“Maybe,” is all I offer to my sister and steel myself against the disappointment on her face. I don’t come by often enough to see her. “If not today, then tomorrow. I promise.”

At least tomorrow, Maddox will most likely be gone. He doesn’t have a home that I know of and roams the realms, staying wherever he chooses and for however long he wants. Much of the time, though, he stays here in a guest room.

Finley deposits the food items she pulled out onto the counter and moves around it toward me. I brace as she puts her arms around me and pulls me in for a hug.

“I love you,” she says.

I respond by squeezing her. It’s too hard for me to say those words out loud, but she knows how I feel. I gladly gave up my life for her once and I’d do it again in a heartbeat.

She hasn’t even fully released me when I bend distance from her home to mine in Switzerland. I appear in the living room of what is an entirely too modest chalet for a deity, but I love it. My windows have an amazing view of the Bernese Alps capped with snow, and the Lauterbrunnen Valley spreads below me in various shades of patchwork green.

Uorsin and Mattia come barreling out of the kitchen where they’d most likely been sleeping on the cool tile floor. Their nails scrabble on the hardwood as they race to me, fluffy black tails tipped in white wagging furiously.

I crouch and accept their warm tongues on my face as I wrap my arms around their thick-furred bodies. I love them with all my might, and I wonder why it's so easy to admit that about dogs but not people.

CHAPTER 2

MADDOX

“WE’LL TAKE TWO more.” I motion to the bartender between my empty beer mug and the empty wineglass of the woman sitting next to me.

“Thank you,” she says, touching my arm and licking her bottom lip.

“Sure thing,” I reply, my gaze going back to the television screen mounted on the wall behind the bar. There’s a hockey game on and it’s a sport I very much enjoy in this modern world. My favorite team by far is the Pittsburgh Titans. They said “Fuck you” to the Fates when their plane crashed and they had to rebuild from nothing.

“So, what do you like to do for fun?” she asks, trying to start a conversation. We’ve exchanged some words as we sit beside each other drinking, and she’s been a nice diversion.

“Slaughter demons,” I say without a second thought.

And fuck.

I like that more than slaughtering demons but I keep that to myself.

She thinks I’m joking, of course, and she’s more than a little drunk. As a mortal human, she could never hope to comprehend all the dark and scary things that exist in this same dimension with her. “Ooooh, demons! Tell me more.”

I let my gaze slide to my drinking companion. She’s very pretty and I could easily have her. But I decide to tell her about my world instead. “Truly, there aren’t many demons that walk in the First Dimension—your mortal realm—but there are plenty of evil Dark Fae.”

“And you kill them?” she asks, feigning true belief.

“I do. And other nasty creatures.”

“Are you like... a superhero?”

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes because Batman and Iron Man are pure fiction. “A demigod, created to serve at the whim of the gods.”

“There’s more than one?”

“Five. Gods of Life, Fate, Conflict, Humanity, and Nature.”

She frowns, tipping her head. “But I thought there was one God?”

I shrug. “I suppose there is. Never met him or her, but there are rumors that God expelled a slew of angels from the heavens for plotting a rebellion. Some fell to Hell and became Dark Fae. Some fell to this mortal realm and became Light Fae.”

Resting her chin on the palm of her hand, she smiles. “Do they have powers or something?”

“Some do.” I pick up my refreshed mug of beer and take a sip. “Most magic comes from a meteor that crashed to Earth a long time ago. It was chipped away and those who possess it can do amazing things.”

She runs her finger around the edge of her wineglass, fully invested in what she believes is a fictional story. “And do you have part of it?”

“The meteor?” I ask. She nods with doe eyes. “Don’t need it. The gods have given me immeasurable power and immortality, along with powers to conjure and bend distance.”

“Bend distance?”

“Pulling one physical place to me so I can step into it.” Her brow furrows in confusion. “It’s kind of like teleporting.”

A grin breaks out on her face, and she nods in understanding. “Like... beam me up, Scotty.”

Not like that at all, but I smile. “Exactly.”

Her expression turns coy for a moment, then determined. Her hand comes to my arm and she walks two fingers up it. “How about we get out of here, and you can show me what a demigod could do to a mere mortal woman like me?”

My eyes warm with empathy for her. It’s a come-on most men in here would jump at, but I’m not a man at all. Taking her hand from my arm and giving it a squeeze, I shake my head. “I’m sorry, love. But there’s only one woman I want.”

I get a pout in return. “Then why aren’t you with her?”

Why indeed? There’s absolutely no good reason I’m sitting here and not with Zora.

“It was a pleasure,” I say, standing from my stool and throwing a hundred-dollar bill on the bar. “Have some more drinks on me.”

“Wait,” she calls out as I walk away, but I don’t look back.

Outside the bar, I turn down the nearest alley and bend distance straight into Zora’s house in Switzerland.



I COULD BE well-mannered and bring myself to her front door where I’d ring the doorbell politely.

But I’m not a polite being most of the time, so I opt to appear inside her dwelling because if I give her the choice of whether or not to let me in, there’s a chance she’ll deny me. Zora is completely unpredictable in that way.

By coming right inside I have a bit of a chance she’ll let me stay.

I manifest in her living room by the door that leads out onto the deck. It’s night when I arrive but house lights twinkle down in the valley, so it’s not overly late. The living room is

dim, lit only by a healthy fire in the hearth and a small table lamp at one end of the couch.

Zora is there, curled up reading. She's got her knees drawn in with a book resting there. I quickly take in Mattia, one of her two Bernese Mountain Dogs, curled at her feet. I don't see Uorsin anywhere.

I stand perfectly still, using this unfettered opportunity to watch her. I met her a year ago when we weren't sure if the world was going to end. She was a mere human when we first fucked and still a human when I started losing my heart to her.

Back then she was so closed off and wary of everyone. She'd lived in Hell for her entire life and didn't understand the brightness and complexities of the First Dimension.

She most certainly didn't understand relationships. Even basic friendship was a conundrum to her.

Zora did understand sex though. She'd had plenty of it with Amell, once she was old enough, a fact that causes rage to burn within me. I hate that motherfucker for having her first and for still having a piece of her heart, whether she admits it or not.

The woman is a complete mystery, but she doesn't try to be. She's someone who's been shot through dimensions like a pinball slamming against bumpers, having her life turned upside down over and over again. Zora's been a god for a year now, gifted that status in recognition of her sacrifice, and she's like a lamb just learning to walk.

The ironic thing is, if she truly had confidence in herself, she could easily make me crawl.

A loud woof sounds behind me, and Uorsin comes barreling out of the kitchen and heads straight my way. Zora's head pops up, going first to her dog, then to me with narrowed.

I don't have time to see much more as I turn to face the hundred-and-twenty-pound beast flying at me. I brace, open my arms, and the dog jumps up. He's a big boy, but his paws and head still only reach chest level as I'm nearly six-foot-six.

“There’s my boy,” I say, using my hands to rub his neck and ears vigorously while his tongue lolls out the side of his mouth. I don’t have to look at Zora to know she’s irritated.

She can’t stand that her dogs love me, and they only love me because over the last year she has let me into her life... her home, her bed, her body.

I wait to see what she’ll do now.

With a sigh, she closes her book, and I shove Uorsin off. Mattia jumps down from the couch, stretches, and pads over to me for an ear scratch.

“What are you doing?” Zora asks with a tired sigh.

She’s absolutely magnificent in the warm firelight. Her hair, the color of frosted snowcaps, is loose and curls around her face, pouring down her back and over her shoulders. It’s too dark to see much more than the shimmer in her irises from the fire, but could I see them, I’d be dazzled by the rings of gold, green, and blue.

Zora’s wearing a heavy sweater and leggings, her feet warmed by thick socks.

I step toward her, out of the shadows and into the ambient light spilling from the fireplace. “You know what I’m doing.”

“I’m not in the mood,” she says, pushing off the couch. She picks up an empty glass and attempts to move past me toward the kitchen.

My hand shoots out, grabs her upper arm. “Little liar.”

This is the point where the rest of the evening will be decided. As a god, Zora could wish me out of existence, and I would simply be no more. She’s that powerful.

She’s also my deity, the one I worship and to whom I’m bound to follow every order she gives. I shouldn’t even be touching her without permission.

But I know something about Zora that no one else has figured out, and I’m not about to tell her.

She might act like she doesn't want my advances, but the truth is, she likes it when I take control. I think it's the only time in her fucked-up, spinning, swirling, tilting life that she feels grounded. When she can allow someone else to make the decisions and call the shots.

It doesn't mean she submits to me every time because sometimes I catch her when she's too cranky to give it up to me.

I can see the acquiescence in her eyes before I feel it in the laxity of her arm within my grasp. I could pick her up right now and carry her to her bedroom, and she'd merely wrap her arms around my neck in capitulation.

But Zora gives me so little outside of the bed I'm going to take some more for myself. I pull her in closer and her head tips back to stare up at me. "I need you to tell me you want it."

Her lips part, and a tiny whiff of breath escapes. I hold her tight, my gaze lasered onto hers, and wait her out.

Finally, she whispers, "You know I do."

It's not the exact words I demanded, but they're good enough. I crush my mouth onto hers as my hands go under her ass to lift her up. The glass falls from her hand, but before it can shatter, she makes it disappear. At least I don't hear a crash, but it's forgotten as I walk to her bedroom. I could bend distance, get us there faster, but she feels too good wrapped around me.

Zora's body is slight, her skin pale, and that's from living twenty-eight years without good food or sunlight. While she's got the power inside her to destroy a planet, she always seems frail when she first submits to me.

Our kiss turns ravenous once I set her down, both of us tearing at each other's clothes. Either one of us could magic away the garments, but we like the buildup.

I can't recall the number of times I've fucked Zora since we met, but every time has been better than the last. It's a total annihilation of all our sensibilities, giving in to lust and

passion and dirty words. Zora may have been inexperienced in the ways of the world, but she's a quick learner when it comes to sex. Sure, she knew enough from Amell, but there are things I do to her that I know he never did by the shocked sounds I can elicit.

My fingers sift into her long curls, and I grip them tight at the back of her head. I pull her away from me, my gaze roaming her face. Her lips are swollen, eyes glazed, and her skin flushed.

She's a fucking goddess, and I've never wanted anything more in my life.

"Maddox?" she murmurs hesitantly, her expression clearing to watch me warily.

Heart slamming in my chest, unable to decide which of a hundred ways I could have her, I grip her hair tighter. "Get on your knees for me, Zora. Want your mouth on me."

Heat flashes in her eyes, and it's not of the offended variety. It's hunger, and she willingly kneels before me. My cock aches, and my demigod strength is called into question when she takes me deep into her wet mouth.

"Fuck," I groan, my head falling back as she works me in a way she knows drives me so crazy I doubt what's happening is even real.

I drop my head forward, stare down at her through the fog of lust. I push her hair away from her face so I can get a better view of her bobbing before me, and when those blue-green-gold orbs lift up to stare at me, I latch onto that connection. I don't get it often from her, but I feel it now.

Feel it a little too well as my balls start to tingle.

"That's enough," I say gruffly, hating to break the tether between us but unable to control the voracious need I have for her.

I toss her on the bed, not all that gently, and come down on her hard. Zora's legs spread, knees press into my sides, and I

drive into her.

I don't know what Heaven feels like, but I imagine it can't feel as good as this.

Nothing can.

I withdraw slowly, then press back into her with restraint.

Zora growls low in her throat and digs her nails into my shoulders hard enough to draw blood. "More," she says, a plea and not a command. "I need more, Maddox."

Mmmm. The way she says my name, as if she'll die without it.

Without me.

I have no choice but to give it to her.

Time ceases. Our bodies spin out of control as we fuck like animals, and yet, I feel almost human when I'm inside her. Like I could easily be destroyed by this creature.

Not physically, but thoroughly, and in all ways.

"Maddox," Zora gasps as I drive into her. "Please."

I squeeze my eyes shut. It trips my fucking heart that she needs something from me.

"I've got you," I promise, and gather her in close. My hips slam against hers, and she thrashes in my embrace.

When she comes, she calls out my name as she scores my back. My own orgasm breaks free, and I swear it must transport me to another dimension, because I almost black out.

When my vision clears, I find myself staring at Zora and she looks desperate, as if I know some secret she's trying to figure out. Her hands cup my cheeks, her jeweled eyes flicking back and forth between mine. They eventually darken with frustration because I have no answer to an unasked question.

"You okay?" I ask.

She nods, and the curiosity in her gaze fizzles. I can still feel the aftershocks of pleasure causing her muscles to quiver

around me, and another shudder rips up my spine.

“Mmm.” I lean my head into one of her palms still cupping my cheek as a cat might demand to be petted.

To my surprise, she sifts her fingers into my hair while her other hand strokes my cheek. “You shaved.”

“You like?”

“You’re handsome either way,” she replies dismissively, which makes me laugh.

I roll us to our sides, hauling her leg over my hip so we remain connected with our torsos pressed against each other. I slide a hand down to her ass so she can’t wiggle away, and I revel in the softness of her body. She’s loose and utterly pliant which is something I treasure. I’m surprised when her hands slide up my shoulders to wrap around me.

Leaning in, I nuzzle my face against her neck. “I can’t prickle you with my beard anymore.”

She doesn’t say anything but gives me a squeeze, and within that embrace, I feel as if she might want to say something.

I lift my head so I can look into her eyes because that’s where truth resides. For one brief moment, yes... I can see she wants to say something, and I wait for it. I watch war rage in the colorful depths as indecision battles courage, but to my frustration, her expression goes blank.

With her hands to my chest, she gives me a push. “You should get going.”

I don’t budge an inch. “Don’t feel like it.” I bend down, brush my lips over hers. “Want to fuck you again, and you want it too.”

I want so much more than that, but that’s all I have a reasonable chance of getting right now. There are times when Zora will begrudge me more time in her bed, not just for sex, but for casual talk. When she’s in the mood, we’ve had many a great conversation and even shared some laughs.

And there are times when she goes dark and doesn't want anything from me but the pleasure I dole out.

She hesitates, but then pushes again. "I said you need to go."

Rearing back, I take one of her hands and hold it between us. "What is this? Why do you always push me away?"

"Because I'm a god, and you're a lowly—"

My hand covers her mouth, shutting off the words, and her eyes go round as saucers. Rage simmers, and I half expect her to bite me, so I say my piece as quickly as possible. "Come on, Zora. I've been sharing your bed for a year now, and I've gotten to know all your little quirks. Why do you keep me at a distance? Why can't we lie here and talk? Why can't you tell me what's on your mind? I saw it on your face... you want to know something, so ask. I'll tell you anything you want to know."

I slide my hand away as her own gaze cuts left, refusing to meet mine. Grabbing her jaw, I force her attention back on me, which is a move that would get me killed by any other god should I try it with them.

"You know I'm your most devoted servant. I'll do anything you ask. You just have to ask it. It's okay to seek help."

Once again, I see a glimmer, maybe of hope, that what I say is true. Or maybe I want to believe that because it's gone before I can ponder it anymore.

"I command you to do something for me," she says softly.

And while her tone suggests I could talk her out of it, the minute she says she's commanding me it means I have to obey. A demigod must obey his creator.

"What?" I snarl.

"I want you to go see Amell. Help ensure his domain is protected from the recent uprising. There are rumors that others are plotting against him."

Fury pulses within me, not for her refusal to open up and admit we have something more than orgasms, but for making me work with Amell. The last time we saw each other, we nearly tore apart the mountain her chalet sits upon.

But I can't disobey. "Is that all?" I grit out.

Her gaze locks with mine, and her chin lifts. "That is all."

I roll off her body, moving about her room to pick up my clothes. I dress as she rolls to her side and watches me with shuttered eyes.

When I'm clothed, I head out of her bedroom. I could bend distance out of here and straight into the Underworld, but I want to say goodbye to Uorsin and Mattia. I love those fucking dogs as much as I love their owner, and at least they love me back.

"Maddox," Zora says, halting me. I turn back to look at her, tamping down hopefulness. She leans up in the bed, one elbow into the mattress, clutching the sheets to her chest. "I'm sorry I can't be what you want."

"You're a god," I say with censure. "You can do whatever the fuck you want."

Her eyes drop away and it's as it's always been. She's gone.

With a sigh, I leave the dogs alone and bend distance to the Underworld. It's actually preferable to staying here, no matter how much I hate Amell.

CHAPTER 3

ZORA

AS GODS, WE can exist and live wherever we want. If I wanted to float in outer space and live among the stars, I could. I'm beyond immortal.

But I happen to be low-key, so my small mountain home in Switzerland does me just fine. I have no clue where my brethren live. We don't socialize. We don't see each other outside of our Council meetings unless it's to discuss business.

I'm still trying to figure out exactly what our business is. I'm an absolute baby—not even an adolescent in my understanding of what it means to be a god. It's so confusing, and I struggle to make sense of everything. Sometimes I feel like I'm on a merry-go-round that keeps spinning faster and faster, and I'm trying to see things but they're whizzing by so fast I can't comprehend the flashes. I hold on to my bobbing carousel horse, heart feeling like it's going to explode out of my chest. The pressure is immense—I need to perform, govern, protect, and rule—and all of it is like a colossal boulder pressing me down.

There are days where I sometimes envy the solitude of my life back in the Underworld. I had no love, no guidance, and I was used in a painful way to channel dark magic, and yet, sometimes it feels like that was easier.

Today I must meet with my sibling gods so I merely step from my house, Uorsin and Mattia watching me with tilted heads, and straight onto a dais where my brethren wait.

I don't know what this place is, but I know to come to it when we have to meet and discuss matters. Just like I know if I thought of anyone in particular who was not a god and wished them dead, they would be so.

The thought of so much power actually scares me.

I've been here many times, and the scenery still takes my breath away. I know we're not anywhere in the First Dimension, or Earth realm as some call it, as everything is too perfect. The sky is too blue, the sunshine too luminescent, and the clouds too symmetrically fluffy. The green grass spread over rolling hills shimmers, and the air is perfumed with jasmine and gardenia. I have no clue where it comes from, but I can hear a harp playing distantly—a calming melody that seems right in this place.

The dais is set under a sprawling gazebo complete with thick Grecian columns of silver- and blue-veined marble. Spread around are chaise lounges and sumptuously squishy pillows you can sink down into for relaxation and gossip.

Except as gods, we don't do that. Instead, we sit at a round table with no head seat, as all five of us are equal.

Well, except I'm not exactly equal because I have no clue what the hell I'm supposed to be or what I'm doing.

“Greetings,” Veda says as she moves to me. Her hands come to my elbows, and she leans in for an air kiss on each cheek.

“Hello,” I say, still suffering a severe case of impostor syndrome next to the beautiful woman with pale skin and black-to-silver ombre hair. The god of Humanity looks younger than me, but she's as old as time.

When the gods are feeling officious, we dress in Grecian-style robes with red capes, but on most occasions, we wear what we want. Today Veda is in a pair of slouchy, faded jeans that sit low on her hips, a halter top of brown suede with beads sewn in tribal patterns, and her feet are bare. Very hippie, and I'm most comfortable with her.

“Come sit with us,” she says, and whether she meant it to, that statement still suggests I'm an outsider trying to fit in.

At the table, Onyx sits ramrod straight and no one would need to guess she's the god of Conflict. I've never seen her in

anything but battledress of bronzed breastplates with shoulder and shin guards. Her skin and irises are as black as a raven's wings. She's the fiercest thing I've ever seen—and I've seen some stuff in the Underworld. The only thing that makes her somewhat approachable is her modern-day hairstyle of a vivid pink mohawk. She gives me a nod of greeting.

To her left sits Cato, the god of Nature. At almost seven feet tall, he's the largest of the gods and commands lightning bolts with a mere wiggle of his fingers. He, too, is dark skinned, but it's more caramel colored, and his eyes are molten gold. He's almost too beautiful to behold with his sculpted cheekbones and patrician nose. Despite his physical perfection, Cato is usually down-to-earth, and next to Veda, he's the nicest. Cato loves contemporary clothing, especially if it's bespoke. I don't know much about fine clothing but I'm betting the dark charcoal suit he's wearing cost a mortal fortune.

"Hello, Zora," he says with an incline of his head. "I had hoped you would bring your dogs with you today."

"My apologies. I didn't think of it," I say, but it actually had crossed my mind and I chose not to. I'm clinging to mortal parts of my life and want to keep them separate.

The look Cato gives me is gracious, but I can tell he doubts my words. They all know I've got my struggles.

"I much prefer cats," Circe says in her breathy voice, the last of our Council. The god of Fate is a mystery I'm not sure I'll ever figure out. At times she appears flighty, and at others, wickedly dangerous. As always, she's in full dress and makeup, her platinum-blond curls styled à la Marilyn Monroe. Her lips bear ruby-red stain and her complexion is flawless. Today she's wearing a retro dress of white silk with red strawberries embroidered all over. It has a fitted bodice, capped sleeves, and a swishy skirt.

I've got nothing to counter her comment about cats. I like them fine, but I do prefer dogs.

“Sit,” Veda says with a hand at my back, and I take the chair between her and Circe.

“Let’s begin,” Onyx says and launches into a summary of the major conflicts across dimensions, realms, and the universe. The scope of the gods’ rule is so vast that I can’t quite understand how we keep track of it all.

I try to pay attention, I really do, but some of it bores me. The only time I perk up is when Onyx mentions Maddox and his great prowess on the battlefield in some dimension called Rashtaharaman. He gave Onyx the outcome she wanted and earned immense favor with her, but Maddox was created to be a warrior. He, along with his brothers Carrick and Lucien, have served the gods in thousands of wars and battles over time.

However, as modern times brought forth more peace than conflict, the value of demigods on the killing fields has lessened. Carrick is fully retired from having to do such things, but he earned that respite when he helped Finley avert the apocalypse against Kymaris, queen of the Underworld. Maybe Maddox will be able to stop one day as well.

As for Lucien, well... he’s dead, and it doesn’t matter anymore. He was a casualty of the apocalypse, thrown into the Crimson River where his soul is being tortured for eternity. It’s something that sits horribly with me since I reign over said river, which originates in the Underworld.

I could bring him back, I’m sure of it. I mean, it’s never been done, but all I’ve been taught since becoming a god is that our power is without end, limited only by imagination.

Regardless, it makes no difference because it has been decreed that Lucien shall not be reincarnated. That was an edict passed among the Council before I ever became a god and there is nothing I can do.

When Onyx is done, Cato tells us of a dying planet in a distant galaxy on the verge of extinction because of pollution

and overpopulation. He wants to extend a mercy and obliterate it with a redirected meteor.

Cato calls for a vote. “In favor?”

Veda, Circe, and Onyx all raise their hands.

I don't want to obliterate anything, but my hand goes up too. I'm not confident enough to stand against them, not only because I'm the newest member, but because I don't understand the greater good that supposedly comes with the gods controlling all things.

The meeting goes on and on. Humanitarian rewards are doled out, Circe appropriately meddles in the fates, and Onyx continues to bemoan that there's too much peace, which tips the scales of balance too far in one direction.

Cato's gaze swings my way, and those golden orbs of his are nearly hypnotizing. “And what say you of the Underworld, Zora?”

I blink rapidly and take a calming breath. I don't like being on the spot. It's hard enough trying to figure out my role in this complex new life of mine but for the other gods to look to me is unsettling.

My biggest challenge has been keeping the Underworld in check, which has faced some chaos since Kymaris was dethroned. Asking Amell to rule was the best decision I could have made.

“All is well,” I say, lending my most confident and authoritative tone to the words. “Amell has quelled an uprising and I've sent Maddox to help him fortify the veil.”

“Yes, there were rumors of breaches between the Underworld and Faere,” Onyx murmurs. “I sense a current between the two worlds, and it feels like war.” Her black eyes shimmer with excitement. “Of course, my allegiance would go to Faere,” she says, leveling me with a hard stare.

I incline my head. “And mine to the Underworld, although I wouldn't condone an unprovoked attack by any means.

Regardless, I'm confident Amell has things well in hand."

As long as he and Maddox don't kill each other.

I should never have sent Maddox there, for I know how much those two immortal creatures hate each other.

Their abhorrence is deeply rooted in their mutual care for me and is muddied by jealousy. I gave my virginity to Amell and we were lovers for many years in the Underworld. While Amell was my captor, he was also my protector, and eventually he stood in my corner when we fought against Kymaris. I'll always care for him.

But Maddox is my lover now, and while a god could take many lovers, he's the only one I want.

With nothing else to report or decide, our meeting is adjourned. One by one, we disappear from the meeting place, and I walk away with no more clarity on what my purpose is or why I even matter to the grand scheme of things.

Rather than return home, visit Finley, or even head to the Underworld to see if Maddox and Amell have destroyed it trying to kill each other, I think I'll visit the former god of Life.

The prison constructed to hold Rune was created with powers I supposedly possess but have no clue how to wield. My four brethren gods locked him away before I'd even sacrificed my life and I had no part in its making.

But I can feel the energy pulsing from it as I approach. Rune is cross-legged inside a sphere only large enough for him to sit or lie down. His sole possession, besides the clothes he wears, is a bucket for him to relieve himself.

The enclosure itself is made of glowing orange-white striations of molten power that resemble intersecting sprays of lightning bolts. It's a network of magnetic vibrations that cause my curls to pull straight and float away from my head if I walk too near, and it hums with menace if anyone gets too close. It sits in an empty room of gray concrete walls and floor

with a single door that allows a demigod to come in and deliver food and collect Rune's waste.

I don't know what Rune looked like before he was stripped of power and made mortal, but he looks like a wasted shell of a man right now. His hair is long, matted, and filthy. His beard is shot through with gray, and his eyes are sunken. He's slowly dying, and no one cares.

I know I certainly don't, because while he didn't play a part in the apocalypse, he is responsible for killing my sister repeatedly.

Finley told me the story. In the eighth century, Carrick had been ordered by the gods into service of the High King of Ireland to help defeat the Vikings. It was there he fell in love with a mortal woman named Eireann, and they married. Carrick despaired as he knew he'd continue an immortal life while she withered and died, so he stole a magical potion from Rune that would grant immortality. There was only enough for one dose, and Rune had planned on using it on a mortal woman he purportedly loved.

A fight ensued and the vial was broken, spilling the potion in the dust so neither woman could use it. Rune was so enraged, he killed Eireann in retribution, but that wasn't enough to appease his anger. With his power over life and death, he cursed Eireann to be repeatedly reincarnated and meddled with fate to have her continually put in Carrick's path so he would fall in love with her over and over again. He recognized her each time and was crushed with every instance of her death.

Finley is Eireann, and she was again reunited with Carrick, although this time, there was a prophecy she was fated to stop with his help. Rune hated Carrick so much, he tampered with the prophecy and tried to kill Finley before she could fulfill her duty. It was for this and other perfidies that the gods stripped him of his power, rendered him mortal, and locked him in this prison.

Carrick was offered the choice to kill Rune, but he declined. He knew a long, slow death would be so much more fitting.

“If it isn’t the new god of Life come to visit,” Rune drawls as he watches me approach. It’s not my first time here and probably won’t be my last.

In my endless search to figure out what I am and who I’m supposed to be, I’ve sometimes turned to the original in the hopes of gleaning something valuable.

This man, after all, ruled over life and death since the dawn of time and assuredly has nuggets that might be helpful.

Of course, I can’t come right out and ask him for help because that would seem desperate and weak. Instead, I have to goad him for information, but I know he doesn’t mind my visits. I’m the only creature who has talked to him in a year.

He’s thirsty for companionship but I never forget he’s evil.

“I saw Finley the other day,” I say as I draw closer. Rune’s expression suffuses with hatred. “She and Carrick are living quite the idyllic life in Malibu.”

“Neither deserving of such a life,” he hisses.

“I get why you hate Carrick,” I muse. “He killed your chance at eternal love, but I don’t get why you hate my sister.”

Rune shrugs and turns his head away, appearing disinterested. “She was a means to an end.”

“Did you mourn for your love when she died?” I ask, really getting to the heart of the reason I’m here.

Head snapping back my way, Rune narrows his eyes. “Why do you want to know?”

I hum low in my throat as if I’m not quite sure. “Just making conversation.”

Rune leans forward, baring his teeth. “When she died, I envisioned killing your precious sister over and over again. Every time she died, I laughed and laughed until my belly

ached. And every tear that Carrick shed for her was a balm to my broken heart.”

That’s what I wanted to know. I had to hear it from him, but can I trust it?

“I don’t believe you have the ability to have a broken heart,” I say with a dismissive wave of my hand.

Rune slouches backward, strokes his beard. “You don’t believe a god can love?”

“I don’t know... you tell me.”

Please tell me the truth. Do I have the ability to truly love or will I lose what little humanity I might have?

“I was going to make her immortal, wasn’t I?” he demands.

I don’t answer but instead ask, “After the potion was destroyed, did you spend the rest of her days with her?”

Rune blinks at me in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Were you like Carrick, utterly devoted to a mortal woman even though she would die? Because Carrick was going to stay with Eireann—Finley—until she took her last breath.”

“That’s beside the point,” Rune mutters. “It’s enough I would give her immortality.”

My heart sinks. He didn’t love his woman.

“What was her name?” I ask softly.

Rune scoffs. “Who can remember things that long ago?”

I stare at him, willing him to give me one tiny glimpse of hope. He’s the only god out of the five that I know claimed to love someone.

Instead, his gaze drops away and he starts to pick at what might be a bit of food on his pants.

With a sigh, I prepare to leave, longing for the comfort of my small house in the Swiss Alps and the weight of furry dogs

on my lap.

“You’ve got more things to worry about than love,” Rune says.

“Excuse me?” I step closer to the sphere, and the smelted streaks of power that contain him glow brighter. It causes his eyes to glitter with what looks to be madness.

“Big things on the horizon, sweet Zora.” His tone is secretive and taunting but sounds so assured. “Big things.”

“You’re going to get a new waste bucket?” I taunt.

“I’m going to kill all of you who have offended me,” he sneers, leaning forward again. He’s brought up short by the power of the sphere, and a line of spittle falls from his mouth. “Going to kill you all.”

I force myself to stand still, a mask of bland indifference on my face. He watches eagerly, wanting to know if he got to me.

“I imagine with all this time on your hands, you’ve built up quite the imagination. Good story, though.”

I don’t give him a chance to reply, flinging myself back through dimensions and distance to my home. I feel immediately better in my safe space, but my hands shake like leaves in a storm.

CHAPTER 4

MADDOX

INHALING DEEPLY, I have to admit I'm impressed by the lack of decay and sulfur here in the Underworld. The last time I was here was with Carrick and Finley to mount a rescue operation for Zora, and the place was depressing.

Dark, dank, and it smelled of tortured souls.

I look around the streets of Otaxis, the capital city that sits across the Crimson River from the castle, and admittedly, the Dark Fae turned king has made some major improvements to this place.

When Kymaris ruled, it was all dim caverns and slithering demons in back alleys while the fires of the Crimson River belched poisonous fumes. Now Otaxis is clean, the buildings in full repair and whitewashed, the streets cobbled and dotted with glowing lampposts. While the Crimson River still flows deadly as ever, it doesn't smell.

Most interesting of all is the overhead sky, which is set to perpetual evening. It's like black velvet with crushed diamonds scattered across and in the distance, a simulated glow of sunrise. There's so much ambient light from the magical new day dawning on the horizon, the city lights, and the molten river, it almost seems inviting. Moreover, the residents who walk the streets—which, granted, are mostly evil beings—look happy and content.

I know Zora gave Amell more power than what he'd normally have as an original fallen angel turned Dark Fae, and it appears he put that power to good use in making this place habitable. The power to do this is immense, and I felt it when he and I fought at her home. We were crushing trees and boulders in our zeal to kill one another, and Amell is only the

second creature I've come up against in my thousands of years of existence who was not a god or demigod who had that type of strength.

Sadly, I won't be able to kill him, not because he's indestructible but because Zora doesn't wish it to be. Quite the opposite. She'd be hurt if Amell died so I unfortunately can't rip off his head like I've dreamed of doing since I learned he had a relationship with her.

Not in any rush to meet my nemesis, I wander the streets of Otaxis, taking in the various open vendor stalls and shops. I wander into a bar, have a few drinks, quell a few Dark Fae interested in taking me on. Once they realize I'm a demigod, it's all apologies for assuming I don't belong.

When I can't put it off any longer, I bend distance to the end of the Bridge of Judgment, which leads directly into the castle's main doors. Having never actually been in the castle, I don't have the requisite knowledge to pull myself to a particular place inside through the magic of bending distance, so the bridge is as close as I can get.

I head through the enormous double doors that are propped open. I don't think the castle is a singular private abode for Amell, but more of a commerce center where people visit and meet to carry on business. I have no clue where Amell might be in this monstrosity, so I stop the first creature I come across—a Dark Fae ravager, judging by his leather battle clothes and necklace of what look to be rib bones.

I grab his arm. "Hey... you."

The fae snarls and attempts to jerk free, but I'm stronger, a fact he immediately understands as he stills. "I'm here for Amell. Where is he?"

"His living quarters, I'd imagine?" He grunts and nods toward a hallway.

"Preesh," I say, releasing him.

I expect the dude to move on, but I guess I dented his ravager ego card, and he pulls his sword. Swinging it once in a

circle above him, he attempts to bring it straight across my neck to relieve me of my head. My hand shoots out, grabs the sharp blade without even a slice to my skin, and stops his momentum as if he hit a brick wall. My other hand comes out, base of my palm driving into his sternum, and he flies thirty feet across the hall, knocking over other creatures milling about. He's down for the count—not dead, but his chest pulverized. It will take him awhile to regenerate.

Turning toward the hallway where he pointed, I find a wall of ravager fae with their swords drawn, prepared to come at me for knocking one of their own to the ground.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, and while I love a good old-fashioned brawl any day, I don’t have the patience for it today.

I start to draw power inward, prepared to obliterate them all to dust when Amell appears between me and his subjects, his black wings spread out as a threat. “Touch a hair on one of their heads and I’m going to toss your ass into the Crimson River.”

I scoff but let the power die, and his wings settle against his back. “As if you could ever.”

“Go about your business,” Amell booms to the crowd watching this unfold. He glances over his shoulder at the ravagers. “Be at peace.”

They grumble but disperse, a few moving over to grab their unconscious friend to carry him from the great hall.

Amell brings his attention back to me. “You better have a good reason for attacking my people.”

“They started it,” I say in an exaggeratedly petulant voice.

The king of the Underworld isn’t amused. “What are you doing here?”

“Zora sent me to help you.”

“Help me what?”

I shrug. “She said something about you having an uprising, and that she didn’t have faith in you to quell it. She wants me to step in and make sure the job gets done right.”

“Get over yourself,” Amell drawls. “Zora would never say such a thing and I’m not petty enough to squabble with you.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Not petty enough? Says the dipshit who sent a poltergeist to my house to turn the lights on and off throughout the night while I was trying to sleep.”

There’s no reaction except the tiniest of lip twitches, but he denies it. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t, so why don’t you tell me what’s going on, let me give you some yada yada advice, and I can go back to Zora and say I’ve done my job.”

“I don’t need your advice,” he snaps.

“And yet I’ve been ordered here to help, so let’s get it over with.”

There’s a commotion at the far end of the hall, several Dark Fae and demons converging in on someone with an excited chatter in the air. Amell’s head turns that way, his gaze softening and the tightness in his jaw relaxing.

The crowd peels away and heading toward us is a hot-as-hell woman in head-to-toe black leather and stiletto boots. Put a whip in her hand and she’d be a dominatrix.

I might be brash, stubborn, and hot-tempered, but I’m not stupid. This must be Amell’s new wife, Nyssa. Zora told me all about her.

The asshole in me would try to hit on her to get a rise out of Amell, but I honest to fuck can’t bring myself to do it as I take in the adoring look he gives her.

She doesn’t spare me a glance but walks up to the mighty king, pressing her palm over his heart. His wings rustle in response, and his hand moves to her hip.

“Making friends or enemies today?” he asks.

“Always friends.” She laughs, going on tiptoes to brush a kiss against his jaw. Turning to me, I get a brief once-over. “Who are you?”

“Maddox.”

“Oh,” she says with an understanding nod and then looks up at her husband. “The besotted fool who doubles as Zora’s lapdog?”

I grit my teeth as Amell snickers. Clearly, he’s had a thing or two to say about me.

“I’m Nyssa,” she says with a brilliant smile and then sticks out her hand. “And I’m kidding. I know all about you from Zora. She speaks highly of you.”

Amell rolls his eyes, but now I’m charmed by the human turned queen of the Underworld. I bring her hand to my mouth and kiss the back of it, earning a growl from her husband. “It’s my absolute pleasure.”

Nyssa’s laugh tinkles as she tugs her hand back, and I shoot her a wink. She touches Amell’s arm, squeezing. “I’ll be in the kitchens if you need me. Rhynda’s received some kalamata olives and is completely perplexed with what to do with them.”

Amell slides his hand behind his wife’s neck, pulls her to him for a scorching kiss, and she melts. Something tugs at my heartstrings, followed by a wave of green jealousy.

It’s what I want, but the woman I want it with is most likely not capable.

Nyssa walks away and Amell watches her for a minute. When he turns back to me, he jerks his chin toward the hallway—presumably where his quarters are located—and we head in that direction.

“You’re clearly in love with your wife. I guess we’ve got no reason to fight over Zora anymore.”

Amell glares over his shoulder at me. “I was never fighting you over Zora. I was protecting her from you.”

As if I'd ever hurt her. "If it makes you feel better to say that out loud, be my guest. But it's moot."

Amell stops, tips his head. "Why is it moot?"

I give him a hard look. "You know Zora better than anyone. She's not relationship material."

Frowning, he gives a confused shake of his head. "Are you saying you want a relationship with her?" he asks incredulously.

What a dumbass. "Why the fuck did you think I was with her?"

"For sex," he says.

"Well, that was part of it, but do you think I'd chase someone for a year if it was just sex? Do you know how many millions of available women there are to get my rocks off with?"

"You care about her?" he asks, as if he can't fathom such a thing.

"Gods, you're thick," I grumble. "Yes, I care about Zora. But I also think it's a waste of my time."

"Typical," Amell mutters and walks away from me.

I rush to catch up. "What's typical?"

"Spoiled demigod. Doesn't get his way and gives up on things."

"I'm not giving up, asshole. I'm being realistic."

Amell stops again and faces me with a harsh glare. "While I'm happily married to Nyssa and love her more than anything in this world, I still care for Zora and if you hurt her—"

"She can't be hurt, Amell. Her walls are so tall and thick, nothing gets through."

"And you don't think loneliness hurts?" he asks. His words carry such a powerful punch they cause me to take a step back.

Scrubbing his hand over his head, Amell sighs. “I’ve known her the longest. She’s been alone from the start. There was no one to care for her here except me and that was complicated by the fact I also abused her when I helped Kymaris and her lackeys funnel dark magic her way. She got tossed into a new world without a clue as to what it means to love and when she was had almost figured it out with her sister, she died and became a god. Now she’s in a very cold, harsh group of creatures who have little empathy for the individual because they only care about the whole. Zora has no idea what world she belongs in or how to care about anyone. She was never taught it, so maybe you need to cut her a little slack.”

Well... fuck.

I don’t know what to say, but Amell’s not done. “I don’t know if you’re the one for Zora. I don’t know if you deserve her. But if you’re serious about a relationship, then you might need to give her some grace. You also might need to push her out of her comfort zone a bit. If you don’t have the ability to handle her correctly, you need to fucking walk.”

“Yeah,” I murmur as my head spins. “I hear you.”

Amell stops again, turning to face me. “Do you have a plan?”

Admittedly, I don’t. “She’s not the easiest to figure out.”

He holds up a hand as if to caution me. “Please know, I don’t want intimate details between you two but what exactly do you have going on with her?”

I sigh with frustration, running a hand over my jaw. “Some days I have everything with her. Conversation, laughs, moments where she lets go, and I can see the true Zora. Other days I only have... well, you know, the thing you don’t want details on. She’s closed up tight and after we’re... um... together... she sends me on my way. Which is why I’m really here.”

I wouldn't believe it if I didn't observe it myself, but Amell's expression softens, and he appears empathetic. "You have to keep at it. Zora needs to feel safe and secure to crack the door open and let you in. The best way to do that is with patience and understanding."

I nod. "I've got eternity, and there's no one else I want."

"Good," he says and pivots on his heel. "Because if there were, I'd have to kill you. Now, let's talk business so you can report back to Zora that you were a good little lackey. Has she told you about the uprising?"

"One of your Dark Fae subjects was going to try to finish Kymaris's work by kidnapping Nyssa to force you to open the veil between the First Dimension and the Underworld. You called forth some badass fire dragon from the Crimson River and turned the usurpers to ash."

"Pretty much," Amell says as we reach his apartments. "Since then, there have been some breaches in the veil between here and Faere, but I've managed to seal them up. I've got teams checking them every day. I assume it's Dark Fae attempting to escape en masse and the veil is being tested for weaknesses."

The veil is what separates dimensions from one another. Some are easy to traverse, others near impenetrable. It depends on what stone magic was used to create the dimension in the first place.

"Any other concerns?" I ask as I'm invited in. Amell goes to a sideboard and pours me a drink.

"One. An immortal human priest who was closely tied to Kymaris. I couldn't pin him to this uprising but I know he's up to something."

"Want me to kill him?" I volunteer.

Amell chuckles. "No. I've got people watching him, but if I do find out he's plotting something, my river dragon is at the ready."

“Fair enough. How about you take me out and show me where the breaches were in the veil, and then I can report back to Zora I did my part to help you out?”

“What?” Amell says, his mouth curving upward. “No words of advice?”

I flash a dark smile. “Yeah... kill the immortal priest before he does something.”

Amell laughs, and it’s actually genuine. I can’t help but grin in return.

“You know,” he muses as he pours himself a drink, “if I didn’t hate you so much, I might actually like you.”

“Ditto,” I reply.

CHAPTER 5

MADDOX

SPOTTING CARRICK, I walk across the grass to the gazebo. On the dais, the gods are talking and a handful of demigods mill about.

“I thought you earned permanent retirement?” I ask.

Carrick smirks. “Finley is hanging out with her friends today and I had nothing better to do.”

I elbow him in the ribs. “Married life that boring, huh?”

“On the contrary, it’s fucking fantastic.”

Everybody’s married and life is fucking fantastic.

My eyes slide to Zora, standing placidly with her hands clasped. Because this is a formal meeting, the gods are in white tunics, red capes with gold braided belts, and epaulets. Zora is the smallest of the deities, but not by much. Veda and Circe only have her by an inch or two. Onyx is almost as tall as I am, but Cato makes everyone look diminutive next to his seven-foot frame.

From thin air, Amell appears on the far side of the gazebo and right next to him is Deandra, the queen of the Light Fae. I’m shocked—I’ve never seen a fae allowed in this realm. I’ve been here countless times to meet with one god or another, but I’ve never seen anyone other than demigods. I don’t know what dimension we’re in or if we’re even in a dimension. If I need to have a formal meeting with the gods, I use an ancient incantation to arrive in this place. If they summon me, I will arrive here.

Whatever this place is, it’s always beautiful with perfectly warm weather accompanied by a scented breeze, rolling hills, towering mountains, and fruit trees all around. The gods don’t

live here, but this is where we always meet in official capacities. The Council provides time like this to their most devoted servants—the demigods, for that is why we were created—to bring tidings of quests they are on or to make requests.

It's why I'm here today.

For a request.

Amell walks toward me and Carrick, Deandra following. She's a stunning fae beauty with raven hair and ice-blue eyes. Her outfit is outrageously sexy, a frothing pale blue gown with crystals along a bodice cut so low, it reaches her navel. The skirt is open panels that show her long legs when she walks. Deandra is a temptress but she's also powerful—and dangerous. Lucky for us, she fought on our side in the apocalypse.

Carrick shakes Amell's hand and kisses Deandra's cheek. I give Amell a nod but then Deandra steps into me, pressing her lips to mine in a lingering kiss.

“Mmmm... you taste good, Maddox.” Her hands press into my chest as she pouts. “How come you don't visit me in Faere?”

I hate myself for doing it, but I let my regard move past Deandra to the dais where, sure enough, Zora is watching. Her face flames red that I caught her, but I don't miss the daggers she shoots at me before turning away.

Just great.

I take Deandra by the upper arms and gently push her back. “I've been busy.”

“Well, make time,” she insists, waving her hand in Carrick's and Amell's direction. “These two succumbed to matrimony and are off the market, so...” Something seems to strike her, and she cuts a hard look to them. “You are both off the market, right? I mean, I don't care if you're married, but you might care.”

“Totally off the market,” Carrick says.

“Off the market,” Amell agrees quickly.

Deandra’s glittering eyes come back to me. “After this is over, come play with me in Faere. We can stay naked in my bed for a week.”

“As tempting as that sounds, I’m going to have to pass,” I reply, forcing myself not to look at Zora.

I know I shouldn’t give a fuck what she would think of Deandra coming on to me, but I do. After talking to Amell and having him put together the timeline of Zora’s crazy existence, I’ve got a clearer picture of why she holds herself so far in reserve and what I might need to do to breach it.

“Interesting you didn’t say you’d take a rain check,” Deandra muses, tapping a finger against her chin, then sliding her finger down her throat and chest in a vain attempt to draw not only my attention but Amell’s and Carrick’s as well.

When no one bites, she shrugs and glances back at the gods. “So, what’s with the summoning? I’ve never been invited here.”

“Me either,” Amell says in a gruff voice.

Amell, the most elite Dark Fae and king of the Underworld, and Deandra, the most elite Light Fae and queen of Faere, should rightfully hate each other. But the apocalypse changed all that. Kymaris, who ruled the Underworld, and Nimeyah, who ruled Faere, were both killed, and with those deaths went most of the eons-long grudges.

It doesn’t mean that Light and Dark Fae are ready to play nice, but at least the two rulers aren’t wanting to wage war against the opposite.

“Let’s begin,” a voice booms out. Cato, god of Nature, rolls a little thunder into it.

The gods move to the edge of the dais, and the demigods, along with Amell and Deandra, move in close to listen.

Cato makes a lowering motion with his hands and everyone falls silent. “Welcome all. The gods eagerly await to hear your matters of import. We’d like to welcome officially, for the first time, King Amell, steward of the Underworld, and Queen Deandra, ruler of Faere. We’ve summoned them today to discuss the current state of affairs between their two realms. After which, we’ll...”

“Cato has got to be hung like a racehorse as big as he is,” Deandra murmurs from my right.

I glance at her and can see she’s mentally undressing the god. Her words were no more than a low whisper to me, but Cato turns his golden regard to her as he continues to talk. She doesn’t look away, but what do I know? Maybe there’s a love match there.

I doubt it. Deandra only loves herself.

“Amell,” Cato says, looking his way, then back to Deandra. “Your realms are separated by a veil that has been breached before, allowing entry of Dark Fae into Faere. Those tears have been repaired, but one uprising in the Underworld has already been quelled. It’s entirely possible some type of assault is being planned on Faere. The purpose of calling you both here is to let you know that the gods will take no part in this potential war.”

Interest rumbles through the small crowd. Amell and Deandra exchange a glance.

It’s not that the gods don’t interfere.

They fucking meddle all the time. Hell, they create prophecies when they get bored only to jazz up their infinite lives.

But it’s definitely unusual for them to declare a hands-off policy before even knowing if there’s something to worry about.

“It’s our suggestion,” Circe says, and all attention moves to her, “that the two of you work closely together to share information and monitor the veil that separates your domains.”

“It’s a strong suggestion,” Onyx adds. “We will be displeased if the First Dimension is threatened again so soon after it’s regained its peaceful foothold in this universe. War between your lands puts the mortal realm in jeopardy.”

“It’s time for unity,” Veda says. “All the old grudges died with Kymaris and Nimeyah. It’s time to become allies.”

My regard turns to Zora. Each of the gods has spoken, but she remains silent. I’ve often thought the gods speak because they like the sound of their own voices. Zora isn’t like that which is why she could be holding her tongue. More than likely, she’s unsure whether she has the right to say anything, even though she’s as powerful as her siblings. To her credit, she keeps her beautiful eyes on the crowd, although she doesn’t look at me once.

It should hurt my ego, but I expect she’s pissed Deandra kissed me. I’m going to have to make sure she admits that she saw me *not* kiss her back and even push her away.

Silly god.

Circe spreads her arms. “Are there any of our beloved demigods with urgent matters to report?”

I take my shot and step forward. “I would like to make a request.”

That gets Zora’s attention, and her head snaps my way.

Circe inclines her head. “What say you, Maddox?”

“I would like to make a formal request to our most benevolent deities to bring back my brother Lucien from the torment of the Crimson River. He’s suffered long enough.”

It’s a long shot. Since Amell won’t help me, and I won’t ask Zora—because you don’t ask such things of the woman you’re sleeping with—I figured I’d put the idea to the Council as a whole.

I glance at Carrick, and he’s shocked. I had not told him ahead of time that I was going to ask for our brother to be resurrected. It’s not that the request is forbidden, but it’s a

huge ask and if granted will come not as a boon but as a favor that must be repaid.

Which is why I'm stunned when Carrick steps beside me and says, "I join in the request. I would hope after our dedicated service to you, as well as Lucien's, you would be open to consideration."

"As you know," Cato says in a low voice, "such things are not taken lightly. It must also be by unanimous decision of the Council. I am personally against it. What say my sisters, yay or nay?"

Right down the line, the answers come.

"Nay," says Circe.

Onyx lifts her chin. "Nay."

Veda's demeanor screams sympathy, but she shakes her head. "Nay."

My eyes land on Zora, but she doesn't look at me, instead choosing to cast a detached gaze out over the crowd. "Nay."

"Son of a bitch," I whisper and glance at Carrick. He merely shrugs. "Aren't you pissed? That's Finley's sister, and she didn't even stand up for your brother."

"The Council was never going to do it, anyway," he says in a low voice.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because they would have already done it by now."

I grudgingly admit that actually crossed my mind when I decided to appeal to them. I figured they had some insider reasoning for not doing it which I know they'd never share with us.

"May I ask why not?" I call out, the longest shot by far.

Veda turns her attention my way. "Lucien had his time, and now it's ended. We have plenty of other demigods to fill his shoes. He is not needed."

I can tell this saddens Zora by the downward trend of her mouth, but I'm not surprised by Veda's harsh words. The gods don't care about any of us personally. At least not in my opinion.

"Who else has something to bring forward?" Veda calls out, effectively ending my inquiry.

A demigod steps forward, a fairly new one named Anton—I believe he's only been around a few hundred years. He gives a slight bow of deference to the gods. "I have news from Calandria."

Veda steps closer, her expression worried. "Tell us."

Anton makes a circular motion in the air before him, and a large portal opens up so everyone can look through at what I'm guessing is an alternate dimension.

"It's beyond destitute," Anton says gravely. "Maybe a few more years of life, but the inhabitants are dying off quickly due to starvation. They are not procreating because they're not healthy enough. Food and water resources are almost gone, and they refuse my help."

The desertlike world we're viewing is not much more than large hills of sand. There's a small pond, more like a mud hole, where people are gathering the filthy water into jugs. Everyone is emaciated, and the children cry from hunger.

The picture changes to a dim cave where men dressed in rags kneel before a stone altar littered with bones and bowls of what look to be blood. They chant in a language I don't recognize.

"It's a lost cause," Circe says in disgust. "Stupid people. Burn it to the ground and put them out of their misery."

"Wait!" Zora exclaims, turning to Circe. "What does that mean? Who are these people, and why is this happening to them?"

Veda turns to Zora. "Calandria is a dimension formed by priests long ago using stone magic, except they didn't do a

very good job providing resources. And rather than evolve, they just kept praying to the gods and making sacrifices, believing the tide would turn in their favor. We've sent demigods to teach them ways to flourish, but they won't listen. They're too mired in their own religion to believe there's any other way."

"So you're going to destroy them?" Zora asks, her fingers interlaced so tight, her knuckles are white. I can hear the distress in her voice and I curl my hands into fists. My inclination is to go to her, take her in my arms, but she'd probably turn me into a toad.

"It's what we do," Circe says, not unkindly but so matter-of-factly that Zora blanches. "It's a kindness to end it now. There's no saving them, and they'll only suffer worse. You've voted in favor of just such an extinction before."

"Yes, I know but we're gods," Zora says, turning to appeal to Veda—she's the one with the softest heart. "We can do whatever we like. We have the power to help them. If they can't do it for themselves, then put them in another dimension so they can at least survive."

"That knocks things out of balance," Cato says. "Some worlds are meant to survive. Others are not."

"There's always give and take. One realm flourishes while another dies."

Zora looks back at the window showing the pathetic dimension and points at it. "There are children. You can't mean to kill them."

"They're going to die, anyway," Veda says. "Probably in a very slow, painful manner."

"I'll purge the land with a firestorm," Cato announces. "All in favor?"

"No, wait," Zora says, stepping toward Cato but then halting. She looks to the women. "Please, don't."

"All in favor," Cato says again.

Circe doesn't hesitate. "Aye. A firestorm."

Onyx nods. "Aye."

Casting an apologetic look to Zora, Veda murmurs, "Aye."

Everyone looks at the god of Life. Her chest heaves as she stares piteously at the barren, dying world.

"Aye," she whispers, squeezing her eyes shut.

Cato throws a hand at the portal, and fire shoots from it into the alternate dimension. It rolls over the land in a massive wave, and people scream in terror and pain before they burn to ash.

Zora averts her gaze by turning her head, unwilling to witness the destruction.

And then... she's gone.

Bending distance to somewhere that's not here without a word to anyone.

"I gotta go," I mutter to Carrick and envision Zora's chalet.

I pull it to me, locking in on her living room, and step from the realm of the gods onto the hardwood floors of her home.

Zora stands facing the windows that overlook the snow-covered Alps, hands again clenched into tight fists, and she lets out a scream so piercing that for a moment, the entire chalet shakes before the glass bursts outward and away from her. Mattia and Uorsin bolt down the hallway toward the master bedroom, tails tucked, and snow-flecked wind surges through the chalet, whipping Zora's hair around her face.

Long after the glass has tumbled down the mountain, Zora is still releasing her singularly aching scream of torment.

I move fast, coming up behind her and wrapping her in an embrace. One arm across her chest, the other over her belly, and I pull her into me.

I don't tell her to stop screaming. I just hold her until she's finished.

CHAPTER 6

ZORA

THE SCREAM WON'T end. It continues on one long note of agony as I envision all those people burning to death simply because their world wasn't thriving to the gods' satisfaction.

I'm vaguely aware of Maddox's arms around me but am more in tune with the fact he's not trying to stop me. He's giving me stability to purge, validation to keep going as long as I want.

I let the sound die, not because I'm tired but because it's doing nothing but hurting my ears. I'm still filled with so much rage and helplessness that my entire body vibrates with power. Head bowed, I suck in a lungful of stinging mountain air as snow and ice pelt my face. My hands clench, release, clench, release. The need to unleash more destruction builds inside me, and electricity snaps from my fingertips. I want to blow apart this chalet and send us cascading down the mountain in a pile of debris, which would be far less painful than what those poor souls just experienced.

Maddox gives me a gentle squeeze, puts his mouth by my ear, and murmurs, "You need to calm down for Uorsin and Mattia. They're frightened."

Oh God.

Or is it *gods*?

Immediately, I relax in Maddox's hold, my head falling back to his chest. "The dogs..."

"They're fine," he says in that deep, rumbling voice that instantly settles me. "Took off running for your bedroom. If you send this chalet down the mountain, you and I will be fine, but they won't."

I shudder at the thought. “I wouldn’t hurt them.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” he croons.

Normally, I’d jerk away from such intimacy—not the embrace, but the comfort I take from his words. It’s just... I don’t have the strength to let go.

Melting back into Maddox, I close my eyes and can still see the fire rolling over those unsuspecting people.

The children.

“They didn’t have to do that. Those people could’ve been helped.”

“I know. But that’s not how the gods work.”

“But it’s how I work. At least I think it’s how I work. I don’t even know who or what I am, but I would have helped those people. That was my inclination.”

“Because you’re more human than god. You may have the same powers, but you are not like them, Zora. And I don’t think you ever will be.”

I turn in Maddox’s arms to face him. “Fine. I’m different. Then why in the hell did I vote with them? Why did I cast the final vote that would send those people to their deaths?”

He brushes back a wet lock of hair from my face, but I don’t feel the cold. Only the warmth of his fingertips as he gives me an empathetic smile. “Because you’re trying to figure out how to survive. You’re immortal, and you’ll have to work with them as a unit for eons. It’s politics, and you’ve barely dipped your toe in it. You’re doing the best you can.”

I shake my head. “I should stand up to them.”

“In time, you will.”

Giving myself continued grace to allow Maddox’s gift of comfort, I drop my forehead to his chest. “They’re so cold and uncaring, and I think I need to be that way too. I’m trying, and sometimes it works, but I’m numb all the time. I don’t like it. I want to feel, but then it hurts so much when I do.”

Maddox nestles his hand against the back of my neck and holds me to him. I snuggle into his strength and warmth as snow whips around us. His lips press to the top of my head, and I feel it everywhere. It's so strong that my heart expands and contracts almost painfully.

This thing between us... it is so intense.

Pulling back, I look up at him. "I want to feel. I don't want to be numb to it all. Even if it hurts, like watching what Cato did, I need to be able to feel, Maddox." My hands go to his cheeks, still warm despite the swirling snow. "Make me feel, okay?"

Maddox's green eyes—formerly soft and tender with understanding—go nuclear as he processes my request. His hands come to my cheeks, and we stare at each other. "You know I can make you feel good, Zora. But if you want it to last, you've got to open up a little."

I nod, closing my eyes briefly against the stark reminder of how hard it is to drop the shields. "I know. I'll try."

"That's all you have to do."

Maddox kisses me, and everything spins. I can't feel the snow or cold, only the heat of his mouth, and all the ugly feelings evaporate.

My hands move to his shirt, and I claw at the material, needing to feel more of his skin against mine. Maddox drags my robes up, baring one leg so he can slide his hand to my ass and cup it.

He lifts his mouth enough to mutter against my lips, "Look at you, being all modest and wearing panties under your god robes."

I bite his lip, and he curses. I smile against him, lick the pain away. "They're silk, if it makes a difference."

"Easier to tear," he growls and then proceeds to shred them like they're tissue paper. He drops the fragile material, and it

gets sucked away in a vortex of snow. “Let’s go to your room.”

“No,” I say, hands now working at his pants. “Right here.”

Maddox is bigger and physically stronger than I am, but I somehow manage to drag him right to the hardwood floor. I push him to his back and quickly straddle his lap.

I grab the robes and try to pull them up my body, but they’re tangled with the cape. After growling in frustration, I magic them away.

Maddox’s hands rest on my thighs as he stares at me. “Fuck... look at you,” he says as his gaze roves all over my body. “Perfectly naked, wind and snow whipping all around you. You look like an ice goddess.”

My head turns, and I look at the blown-out windows. I should reverse what I did, call the glass shards back into place, but for now I like the wild tempest swirling around us. It’s like I’m out of control—nervous, excited, and terrified all at once. It’s a tidal wave of emotions swarming me, and it’s the most I’ve felt I think in my entire life.

I scuttle back, rip his pants open, and then his cock is in my hand. I stroke him, velvet over hard steel. A rumble sounds deep in his chest, and his fingers grip my thighs.

We make eye contact—his emerald orbs blazing with fever—and he starts to rear up, wanting to take control.

I put my free hand to his chest. “Let me.”

There’s a war lasting only a second or two, and just when I think he might roll me under him, he slowly lowers himself back to the cold floor. He doesn’t loosen his hold on my thighs, and he’s wound tight as I move my hand up and down his shaft.

Huffing out a breath, he mutters, “You’ve got to do something more than that, Zora. I’m dying here.”

Those words, so thick with lust, needing something only I can give.

I'm overcome with a clawing need to have Maddox inside me. I need that special connection I feel when we're joined.

Those beautiful intervals of time when I let go, open myself, and feel every single thing he gives me.

I rise over him, my eyes locked on his. And despite that I'm the one in control right now, I'm the immortal god with infinite magic, and I'm the one lowering my body onto his straining cock, Maddox is the one with all the power over me.

He hisses through his teeth when I'm fully seated. I take his hands, thread my fingers through his, and squeeze.

Holding them for leverage, I start to rock. The slide of his flesh against mine, the way he fills me, I get lost. I watch as snowflakes land on our skin, immediately melting because of the heat we're generating.

I move faster, squeezing Maddox's hands. His breathing becomes ragged, a sure sign he's close to tumbling. For myself, I felt an orgasm hovering in the background the instant I took him into my body, but I held it back.

Willed it to stay away until he was ready so we could go together.

Maddox rips his hands free of mine, and they go to my hips. His muscles bulge as he forces me to move faster, helping to lift me only to slam me back down on him again. His teeth dig into his lip, the expression on his face almost tortured.

Is he waiting for me?

I press a hand to his chest, and his gaze lifts to meet mine. "If you come, I'll come too," I whisper.

Maddox jackknives upward, wraps his arms around me, and presses his face into my neck. He holds me down on him as his body jerks and shakes.

"Fuck," he groans, and that's all it takes for my orgasm to scream through my body.

I cry out, my arms going around his neck as pleasure rips me apart so thoroughly, I don't know how I'll rebuild.

Or maybe I shouldn't. Isn't that the point Maddox was trying to make? That I should open up?

My body trembles as the pleasure wanes and the snow flurries dust our cooling bodies. Maddox slips his hand into my hair and tugs me away from him.

His expression is dark, troubled. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not leaving," he says, challenge flickering across his expression.

"I've not asked you to."

His face relaxes, and he nuzzles his cheek against mine. "Good. Fix your windows."

With a careless wave of my hand, the glass reforms in a rewinding of shards flying back up and slipping into perfect place. Then I'm spinning as Maddox uses his demigod powers to bend distance, pulling us right into my bed. We appear in the middle of the mattress, under the covers, sending both of my dogs scurrying again.

"Oh," I croon to them. "Uorsin, Mattia... come here, goofballs."

It only takes the sound of my voice and they're dashing back to the bed where they jump on top of us.

Maddox sits back against the padded headboard, and I'm half lying on him. The dogs plop down on us with huffs of satisfaction. It makes me laugh.

"I'd give anything to have a phone in my hand so I could record you right now," Maddox says.

I rub at Mattia's neck. "Why's that?"

"Your laughter... it's so free and unencumbered by the weight of the universe on your shoulders."

That touches me more than it should. My hand goes into Uorsin's fur, and he wiggles in between me and Maddox, belly up for scratches. My fingers move through his silky fur, and I revel in the peace surrounding me right now.

Maddox pushes a lock of hair from my face, and he tilts his head to look at me. He's so beautiful, sometimes he takes my breath away.

"Deandra kissed you," I muse, my gaze dropping back to Uorsin's chest.

"Yeah... she doesn't have many boundaries."

"You pushed her away," I say.

"I'm not interested in her."

I have the courage to lift my gaze to him. "She has intimate knowledge of you."

He blinks at the frost in my voice, but he doesn't deny the allegation. "There's been an experience or two over the millennia."

Rage pulses through me, and I want to find the Light Fae queen and do very bad things to her. "If she touches you again, I'll burn her to dust."

Maddox grins in delight over my display of jealousy. "Next time I see her, I'll tell her that. Although, killing the queen of the Light Fae would throw that realm into turmoil, so you should try to show some restraint."

I huff in annoyance and rise up, leaning on my hip and pressing my hand down into the mattress to face Maddox. I make no effort to hide my nakedness, and his eyes rake over me briefly before coming back to meet my gaze.

It's a bold connection.

"I'm sorry I couldn't vote against the other four to get Lucien back," I say.

He nods but doesn't say anything, his hand deep in Mattia's fur.

“I knew they wouldn’t do it. I’d already asked them.”

Maddox’s eyebrows shoot up in shock. “You did?”

My smile is sad. “A few months ago. After you asked Amell to help you and he refused. I’m not even sure Amell can do anything, and while I assume I can bring him back the same way I did Finley, I was told after I did that to her that I can’t do it again. They gave me a pass on Finley because of how bravely she fought to thwart Kymaris. I can only perform reincarnations of human souls sent to the Underworld.”

A reincarnation is only done for those souls who end up in the Underworld who have the potential for a better life.

A second chance, so to speak.

They are given a shot at a new life, but they have no memories of their past lives. That’s not what Maddox is asking for Lucien. He wants him back the same way he was—assholish tendencies and all—using the same magic I used to bring Finley back.

My fellow gods won’t allow it. Amell refused Maddox when he asked, and then they tried to kill each other. I’m not positive Amell has the ability to do it, but I suspect he might. He has access to the Book of Shadows, which contains the history of all Dark Fae power since they were expelled from Heaven and had to recreate themselves with stone magic. It’s the one book in all the universe that could reverse death—something only the gods can do.

“You need to see Amell again,” I say.

Maddox chuckles and gives a slight push to Mattia. “Off the bed, mutts.”

They ignore him, which I find amusing. Maddox is a clever demigod, though, powerful enough that two stubborn dogs are no match. He enshrines them gently in a magical bubble and bends distance so they’re placed on their side-by-side dog beds near the windows.

They're both so shocked to be cuddled up with us one second and on the floor the next, they leap to their feet and bark. Uorsin makes to jump back up, but Maddox levels him with a stern look. "No. Stay."

Mattia's butt hits the ground, but he's generally the more obedient.

Uorsin takes a tentative step toward the bed. "I'm warning you," Maddox says in a low voice. "I'll transfer you outside."

A giggle escapes me, and Maddox's head turns slowly my way. He's as stunned as I am that I produced such a sound. With everything I've been through, I don't giggle.

But I just did, and Maddox is so charmed, he rolls over on top of me. "Do it again," he commands.

Smiling, I shake my head. "I can't do it on command. And it's likely never to happen again."

From the corner of my eye, Uorsin takes another step toward us, and Maddox throws up a protective magical barrier over the bed. The dog is intuitive and knows he can't come closer, so with a heavy sigh, he slumps to the floor.

Maddox turns his gaze back to me. "Now, I believe I told you I wasn't going anywhere, so don't even think about sending me on another mission—especially to Amell—only because you might be feeling awkward with me now."

"No. It's not like that. I want you to go to Amell and ask him again to help bring Lucien back. I can't because the gods have made their decision, and me asking Amell will cross a line. I'm sure of it. But you can ask him again."

A frown creasing his forehead, Maddox asks, "And what makes you think it would turn out any different? All you're doing is ensuring we'll tear the Underworld apart."

"Because you didn't tear each other apart during your last visit. In fact, you two played nice."

"And you know this how?" he asks, one eyebrow cocked.

“I’m a god. Why wouldn’t I know?” I retort, trying to keep a straight face.

“You probably asked Amell,” he mutters before suspicion clouds his expression. “Did you send me there merely to get us to talk?”

“I refuse to answer that, and as your deity and supreme ruler, I’m offended you’d ask.”

A smile breaks across Maddox’s face. “You set us up. To be friends. Well, more like frenemies.”

“Maybe allies,” I propose. “I think you could be very good allies to each other.”

Leaning down, Maddox brushes his lips across mine. “Fine. I’ll go see him, but not now.”

He adjusts his body, pushes between my legs, and settles in. His warm hand covers my breast as his mouth grazes along my neck.

“Tomorrow’s soon enough,” I moan.

“Not leaving tomorrow either,” he whispers against my skin. “Maybe next week.”

His fingers pinch my nipple, hard enough I gasp from the pain. It’s a bold move to hurt a god, but rather than rush to anger, I melt.

Next week will be fine.

CHAPTER 7

MADDOX

THE SCREAMS OF a woman falling into the Crimson River are chilling, and even this immortal demigod gets a shiver up his spine at the terror within it. Falling into the Crimson River means your soul is eternally tortured.

It's where all bad people go unless Amell decides to give them a shot at reincarnation.

Lucien wasn't *bad people* and didn't deserve the Crimson River, and yet that's where he landed. It didn't happen from this bridge in the Underworld where Amell is currently judging the souls brought before him. Rather, it happened in a barren dimension through which the river flowed. There Lucien and Carrick battled a terrible and powerful Dark Fae named Micah who tossed my demigod brother into the river.

I'm not even sure if it killed him. Souls go into the river of molten lava, not immortal demigods. While the river would crisp a fragile mortal, it stands to reason Lucien would have survived it, except he's not been seen or heard from since.

Being a demigod doesn't mean we can't be killed. Drop a nuclear warhead on top of me and I'll be incinerated. Shoot a hundred rounds from a heavy machine gun and I'll be torn to minuscule shreds. Catch me while I'm sleeping and swing a sharp sword at my head with enough force, decapitation will do the trick.

But those things just don't happen, and even if they did, the gods could bring us back. That power is simple for them.

They won't, however, and per Zora's request, I'm back here in the Underworld to appeal to Amell for help.

I most definitely wasn't pushed out of her bed like she normally does but spent a luxurious four days at her chalet with her. We acted like mortal humans—read books, cooked meals, talked, laughed, and fucked. With every day that passed, Zora seemed to come more out of her shell. But even with the advances she made, that look in her eyes—hinting she could bolt at any moment—never disappeared.

It was enough for me, for now. I'm bolstered by the progress, and after she was summoned to meet with the other gods, I pulled up my big-boy demigod pants and came to the Underworld.

Amell sits on a throne made of rough-cut obsidian, Nyssa at his side. His raven-black wings hang over the back of his chair as he slouches in it, his chin resting in his palm, as if this task is as boring as it seems.

I appear on the end of the bridge nearest the castle doors, behind Amell and Nyssa. I watch as fae guards bring forth another recently departed soul, who appears in the human form they had when they died.

I'm too far away to hear what's being said, but the wretched mortal seems to be pleading with Amell. Clearly, he's not made a compelling argument as Amell flicks his hand and the human flies over the edge of the bridge, shrieking on the way to the river to be brutally punished for eternity.

On the banks of the river from the city side, Otaxis residents watch the judging with a party-like atmosphere. Every soul that drowns in torment earns raucous applause and cheers from those watching.

Eventually, the last soul goes overboard, and Amell stands from his throne. He and Nyssa wave down at their subjects and turn my way, their hands clasped.

Amell's eyebrows shoot up when he sees me. He leans down toward Nyssa, says something clearly not meant for me to hear, and she gives him a chastising look and an elbow to his ribs.

“What brings you here, Maddox?” Amell asks when they reach me.

I ignore the question, my gaze moving to Nyssa as I give her a tiny bow. “Your Majesty... looking as beautiful as ever.”

Nyssa grins and pats her husband’s arm when he growls low in his chest. “It’s good to see you, and welcome. I’m going to the kitchens, and I’ll have refreshments sent to our apartment. It appears you two might need to talk in private.”

“There’s no need—” Amell starts.

I cut him off. “That would be wonderful. Thank you.”

Nyssa goes to her tiptoes, curls her hand around Amell’s neck, and pulls him down to accept her kiss on his cheek. “Be nice,” she admonishes.

After she walks away, I echo her last words. “Yeah... be nice. I come in peace.”

Amell merely cocks his eyebrow but then sighs, heading into the castle. “Come on.”

We don’t talk as I follow him back to his living quarters, although I see the fae ravager I tangled with the last time I was here. He gives me a wide berth as we pass each other.

Once inside their apartment, Amell leads me onto the balcony that overlooks Otaxis and moves to the edge where he leans his elbows on the railing. His gaze on the city, he asks, “What does Zora want us to do together now?”

I could drop her name big-time, infer her desire is for Amell to help me, but that’s not quite true. She’s staying out of it, and I don’t want her implicated in any way if I’m able to get Lucien back.

“I’m here on my own. I want to talk to you again about Lucien.”

Amell’s head snaps my way. “I believe that discussion has already been laid to rest.”

“With all due respect,” I say as I lean my hip against the rail and cross my arms over my chest, “we didn’t have a discussion. We obliterated trees and boulders.”

The fight was epic and ended far too soon, in my opinion. I would’ve liked to pound on him some more, and I’m sure he felt the same, but Zora used her infinitely stronger powers to separate us like we were little brats duking it out on the playground.

Amell doesn’t say anything but turns his attention back over the glowing city.

“I’ll owe you a huge favor,” I offer to sweeten the pot. “Anything you want.”

That gets his attention. I don’t like the glitter of satisfaction in his expression when he asks, “Anything?”

It’s do-or-die time. How bad do I want my brother back?

“Anything,” I affirm.

“Leave Zora alone and I’ll do what I can for you,” Amell says as he straightens and turns my way. “Agree to never see her again unless it’s to perform a formal task she requests.”

“You are unfuckingbelievable,” I snarl at him. “You’re married, supposedly to a woman you love, and you still want to keep a piece of Zora for yourself. You can’t stand that we have something.”

Amell doesn’t even flinch. “Lucien or Zora. Take your pick.”

“Fuck you,” I snap at him. “I pick Zora any day, every day.”

I prepare to bend distance, but I can’t think where to go. In that moment of hesitation, Amell’s face breaks into a toothy grin. “Excellent.”

That’s startling and... confusing. “Excellent? You’re glad I chose Zora?”

Chuckling now, Amell walks back into the main living area and I follow. Food and wine have been laid out on a buffet stand near the wall. “You were right and wrong. I do love Nyssa more than any creature could love another, but you’re wrong I want to keep a piece of Zora for myself. I have her friendship, and that’s enough.” He pours a glass of wine and hands it to me before preparing one of his own. “I merely wanted to see how serious you were about her. The fact you’re choosing her over the one thing I know you want more than anything speaks volumes.”

Amell turns and holds his glass up to me in salute. “You have my assistance.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, feeling like I’m walking into some sort of trap. “You’ll bring Lucien back?”

“I’ll assist you in trying,” he says flatly. “I don’t even know if I can do it, but there’s a book that might show me how.”

“A book?”

“The Book of Shadows. Kymaris started it when we first populated the Underworld, and as she received more stone magic, she cooked up all kinds of spells with it.”

“A spell book? A simple spell book will work?” It’s unfathomable to me that it could be so easy.

“It’s anything but a simple spell book. It’s alive with magic that’s strengthened and evolved over the ages. Some even say it’s sentient. It’s dangerous but powerful and used in the right way can probably accomplish anything.”

Hope surges and my chest swells with the thought I could potentially have Lucien back by dinnertime.

“But I don’t have the book,” Amell says.

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Of course it can’t be simple.”

“It is simple,” Amell says with a smile. “My daughter, Thalia, has it but I’m not allowed out of the Underworld.

You'll have to travel to Vyronas to get it from her.”



AFTER THE ORIGINAL meteor struck the Egyptian desert, it was found to contain magical properties. Pharoah Khufu built a pyramid over it and named it Giza. Inside, he tried to hide this most important treasure all for himself. Unfortunately, the pyramid was ransacked and the huge stone was obliterated into smaller pieces anywhere from the size of a basketball to a pea. Obviously, the larger stones contained more power and the Light Fae were lucky enough to get a piece that enabled them to create their own dimension, called Faere.

Other dimensions were created, and now hundreds exist. One such dimension was just burned to ash by Cato because it failed to thrive, but others are important magical meccas.

One of these is Vyronas, and I was here not long ago bringing tidings to a man named Bastien Dunne. He was leading an army against an evil sorceress to reclaim the throne for a princess named Thalia. After the war was won, she became queen and married Bastien.

Also... she's Amell's one and only offspring.

Amell explained to me that she called upon him to help her tap into the dark magic she had inside of her blood by virtue of being his daughter. While she became stronger, she wasn't a match for the sorceress. Amell gave her the Book of Shadows to help in her quest and had never bothered to retrieve it.

I arrive outside the castle gates in the capital city of Kestevayne. It's guarded by two men dressed in black battle leathers, spears in hand.

“State your business,” one of them says as I approach.

I hand over a scroll Amell gave me, a simple missive directing I be taken to Thalia at once.

The guard reads it and jumps to action. “Follow me, please.”

I don't know if he knows who or what I am. I wasn't privy to what Amell wrote but it caused the guard to walk with such haste I practically have to jog to keep step with him.

We enter through huge wooden double doors and walk along stone corridors lined with silk carpets and oil paintings. Up a staircase, down two more halls, and to an antechamber where an older man with frizzy white hair stands with his hands clasped before him. He's dressed formally in a velvet coat with gold buttons and tailored pants.

The guard hands over the scroll, pivots and leaves.

The old man reads the document, frowning briefly before turning a polite smile as he hands it back to me. "Please stay here while I announce your presence."

He knocks once and slips in through a door—the throne room, I assume—and I wait patiently for him to return.

It takes no more than a minute before the door opens again and I'm beckoned inside.

Not to a throne room but into a living room filled with plush furniture, thick rugs, and fresh flowers on the tables.

The queen's quarters?

The elder gentleman, who I assume is a butler, says, "Someone will be with you right away."

He leaves without a backward glance, but he's barely out the door when Bastien Dunne enters from another doorway. He's the commandant of the royal army and the last time I saw him was on his wedding day to Queen Thalia. I'd been sent by Zora to collect Amell to answer for his crimes of interfering with the conflict here in Vyronas. It was almost adorable because Bastien and his brother, Kieran, were thinking to protect Amell from me but bloodshed was averted when the king of the Underworld came without struggle.

As I knew he would.

Bastien frowns as he approaches. "Are you here at the behest of the gods?" he asks, and I can't say I expected a

warmer welcome.

I hold out the scroll. “I was sent by Amell to collect the Book of Shadows.”

Bastien reads it, rubbing his jaw. “Is Amell okay?”

“Fine, and still banished to the Underworld. Thus the reason for my visit.”

“And he needs the book for what?”

I could lie or be vague, but I have nothing to hide. “He’s going to try to use it to get my brother back.”

“Back from where?” Bastien asks.

“Eternal damnation,” I reply.

He opens his mouth, most assuredly to ask what that means, but closes it just as quickly. Instead, he sighs and jerks his head toward the door. “Follow me. We need to find Thalia as she’s the only one who can access the vault where it’s kept.”

“Some type of blood magic keyed only to her?” I guess.

“Actually, it’s in the royal vault that houses all the Clairmont riches. It’s guarded and if anyone tries to get in, orders are to kill with no questions asked.”

That’s sounds like a bright-line rule if I ever heard one. “Even against you?”

Bastien shrugs. “No clue. Never wanted access to it so never asked. But I’m not about to hand the book over. That has to be her decision regardless of that scroll you have asking for it.”

My teeth grind because I hadn’t anticipated Thalia might deny me. Her father was clear in his request for the book but I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it. If necessary, I’ll take the damn thing and worry about the fallout later. It’s true that Thalia knows how to wield blood magic and has Amell’s powers within her, but she’s no match for a demigod.

No one here is.

We move through the castle to the grounds out back, finding Thalia sitting in the garden reading a book.

Not the book I want though.

Her head lifts as we approach, regard first going to her husband and immediately filled with joy at seeing him. I wonder if Zora will ever look at me that way.

Attention then lands on me as she rises from her chair. Thalia Clairmont Dunne is a stunning woman. She has dark chestnut-colored hair that she wears in a high ponytail and fern-green eyes. It would be hard to peg her as a royal as she's wearing clothes that are clearly from the First Dimension—jeans, a plaid shirt, and cowboy boots. I know she lived some years in Wyoming while in hiding and apparently likes the fashion.

We were not formally introduced when I was here last time to collect Amell, but there's no doubt in my mind she knows who I am.

Inclining her head, she's polite. "Greetings."

Bastien hands her Amell's letter. "He's here at Amell's behest."

She unfurls it, scanning quickly before she rolls it back up. Thalia doesn't question me why her father wants the book the way her husband did.

Instead, she asks, "How is my father?"

"He's very well. Quite happy following his nuptials to Nyssa."

Thalia's smile is tight. "Yes, she's wonderful and it makes me happy beyond measure that she has him. He'd be happier yet if he were allowed to visit his only daughter."

I tip my head. "You make it sound as if it's my fault he's stuck in the Underworld. That was his punishment for defying a god's orders."

“And yet I can’t help but feel that you take pleasure in his penance,” she says, accusation clear in her tone. “I know all about your complicated triangle between my father and the god of Life.”

I swivel my jaw in agitation. It’s really beneath me to engage in this as I’m getting that book one way or the other. But I decide to ease her mind, despite the fact I rarely give benevolence. “Your father and I have made peace, Thalia. The gods hold him hostage there, not me.”

She lets out a heavy sigh, and for some reason, I feel a little bad that father and daughter are being kept apart. Sure, Thalia can come visit him, but what happens when she has children? They’re not going to bring her baby into the Underworld for Amell to see.

“I’ll speak to Zora about rescinding the restriction on him, or maybe making some travel allowances.”

Thalia blinks in surprise. “You would?”

“You have my word. But I have no sway with her so I’m not sure it will be much help.”

“Oh, you have sway,” Thalia says knowingly, and that tells me Amell has confided in his daughter the entire history both of us share with the god of Life. Thalia motions with her hand. “It is what it is. Come, let’s go get the book for you.”

Bastien and Thalia walk side by side, hands clasped. I follow them out of the gardens and again through a maze of corridors through the great stone castle until we come to a set of doors of solid wood behind a grate of steel bars. Two guards fully armed with spears and swords stand at the ready. They don’t move a muscle as Thalia approaches, and it’s not until she says, “At ease, gentlemen” that they step to the side.

Thalia reaches into a pocket in her jeans and pulls out a set of keys. She thumbs through them before finding the one that opens the steel-barred doors. They swing outward and then another key opens the wooden doors.

They creak open and I'm shocked that this is the only protection offered—two guards and two doors.

But I'm reminded appearances aren't always what they seem as a glistening mist appears in the open doorway. At first, I think it's sunlight filtering through dust, and I reach my hand toward it.

"I wouldn't do that," Thalia warns, and I draw back. "It will melt human flesh. While it wouldn't kill a demigod, I'd hate for you to have to regrow that hand."

With a wave, Thalia magically makes the lethal mist disappear. "An added precaution. Not many people will risk tangling with the guards, both members of my elite force, trained not only in physical combat but magical as well."

We enter through the doors behind Thalia. Glowing sconces hang along the walls, powered by magic, not fire. They illuminate the large room nicely. Rows of shelves hold various objects made of gold and silver, encrusted with gems. Goblets, crowns, scepters, and religious symbols. Along the walls are chests that I'm sure hold coins and probably expensive fabrics. I smell spices in the air—most likely the rarest from other dimensions, and which would be very valuable. One whole wall is covered in various paintings that must be of considerable worth.

Thalia ignores it all, walking to the third row of shelving and cutting left. Bastien and I wait, but when Thalia gives a cry of distress, we bolt that way.

Bastien reaches his wife first where she stares blankly at an empty shelf.

She turns to look at me with horror etched all over her face. "The Book of Shadows is gone."

CHAPTER 8

ZORA

THE SMELL OF death and sickness shouldn't bother me.

Yet, as I walk among the cots of diseased humans, some staring with blank eyes and others crying out in pain, my stomach rolls with nausea. It's not a malady a god should feel, but right now, I could vomit at any time.

An old woman blinks through a haze of pain as I walk by and reaches a shaking hand out to me. I'm compelled to stop and watch her for a long time as I soak in her suffering.

Looking left, then right—noting the overworked nurses aren't paying me any attention—I move to her bedside.

Her hand is dry and cracked as I take it in my own. She speaks in a language I wouldn't have known when I was human but now understand clearly.

“Please... end it for me. I can't take it anymore.”

I squeeze her hand gently, using my other palm to caress her forehead. I speak back to her in her own language. “Would you be healed if you could?”

She shakes her head weakly. “I have nothing left. My family has already died.”

Of course they have. There have been thousands of deaths in a very short time. Doctors and nurses can only treat symptoms, and people either survive or they don't.

Most don't.

The overwhelming sickness called to me as the god of Life. To bear witness to the extreme amount of death.

I bend over the woman and press my lips to her forehead. It's not a move a god would make, and I'd probably be

mocked if the others saw me. “Rest well, Mother,” I whisper to the woman.

When I pull back, she’s dead, and I feel peace with that decision.

I place her hand over her chest and look around. This tent alone has over fifty cots. The landscape outside is dotted with dozens more units just like this.

But there’s one that calls to me the most.

The children.

When I enter their tent, the crushing weight of their misery hits me ten times harder. I don’t have a lot of experience with young ones. When I lived in the Underworld, there weren’t a lot of offspring since procreation is very rare within the same race of fae.

Regardless, the empathy I’ve developed despite the horror of my upbringing is increased to a painful level as I look around. Helpless babies screaming, children moaning for relief and nurses sobbing over cots where death occurs.

It’s the natural order of things, for populations to be culled and cleaned this way. A man named Darwin explained it all.

I should let it be but the one small perk of my new life as a god is that I have power. Just as I gave death to the old woman, I’m going to give life to these kids.

Some of them, anyway.

The ones who can realistically recover so what I do here today doesn’t hit the news as some sort of religious miracle.

Moving up and down the rows, I lay my hands on certain kids with quick efficiency. I’m glamoured to look like a nurse, wearing the same drab dress, filthy with tears, snot, and vomit. No one pays me any mind but every child I touch will get better.

It’s not much, but when I’m done it’s the most accomplished I’ve ever felt in my new role.

I step out of the tent, inhaling the hot, arid air, and stretch my back. Despite being immortal and impossible to kill, my neck and back ache.

Remnants of my human self?

Perhaps.

More likely I'm projecting human traits onto myself and the stress of this day is cramping me up.

“Those were some snazzy miracles you were handing out.”

I whirl around to find Veda standing there. She's dressed in a simple white linen maxi dress, her feet bare and unbothered by the blazing desert heat.

No one can see her. Though she's in ordinary human dress, no human could look upon her without being dazzled by her omnipotence. She's invisible to them, but not to me.

I drop my human glamour, returning to my natural appearance and hide myself from human eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I ask Veda as I turn to walk among the tents. I'm not done yet and will continue my work when she's gone.

She falls into step beside me. “Bored. Thought I'd come see you.”

I don't believe that for a minute. “I could think of a million more interesting places to be.”

Veda is silent as we walk among the makeshift hospital although I can feel sadness pouring off her in powerful waves. She's the god of Humanity, so mortals suffering for any reason affects her. However, she's very good at hiding it and that's never truer than right now when she points out, “What you're doing is futile. You're saving children who have no homes to go to because their parents are already dead. They'll die of homelessness or malnourishment. They might make it into shelters where they'll be mistreated and possibly adopted out to abusers.”

I stop and turn to Veda who looks at me expectantly. “Or, they could return to homes with healthy parents, flourish, and thrive. They deserve the chance.”

Veda shrugs. “It’s not of any importance one way or the other.”

“It’s important to me. It makes me feel good.”

“Did it make you feel good to send that old woman to her death?” Veda inquires.

“I sent her to peace,” I counter. “So, yes, it felt good.”

She smiles—it’s brief and serene. “I hope that means you’re learning that you can use your powers for things that bring *you* joy.”

I’m so stunned by this statement, my jaw drops. How did she even know I was struggling with trying to find my foothold?

As if she could read my mind—which she can of mere mortals but not gods—she says, “I’m the god of Humanity. I know more than anyone—even better than yourself—what you’re going through. You were a human far longer than you’ve been a god.”

A million questions pop into my head. I move to speak but there are too many curiosities vying for attention, so my mouth snaps shut again.

She patiently waits me out and I order the racing thoughts to quell. I take in a breath and make a statement, not a question. “I don’t know how to acclimate. I don’t know who I am.”

Veda tips her head back and laughs. “My sweet sister... you are a human turned immortal god. You are unique and there is no one to tell you how to navigate this new life. So I’m just going to tell you to be you.”

“That’s all well and good but it’s painful... this new life. It hurts to see suffering I can’t help, and some of the decisions we have to make as gods are abhorrent to me. What we

decided to do to Calandria... the way Cato destroyed it... I don't want to be a part of that."

"So then don't vote for it if you feel that strongly," she says, as if that's the simplest answer in the world.

"But can I do that?" I'm angry that she thinks I should be clear on the rules. "I've been thrown into a new life with no guidance. I've been handed infinite power, and I could use it for something good, but I don't know if I'm allowed. And how can I vote against the four of you when I don't even understand the way the universe works? I could prevent you from doing something that could be calamitous if it doesn't occur, then that would be on my conscience. And for that matter, am I supposed to have a conscience?"

"The four of you are so cold and aloof sometimes. You watch entire civilizations destroyed without batting an eye. When does that happen to me? How many years, centuries, millennia, before I lose my humanity so that I can be comfortable with those decisions? And once I lose the part of me that makes me human, will I be able to love my sister? I struggle right now with my ability to love her by virtue of my upbringing. Will I become so callous that I'll no longer want to help dying children? Will I stand by and watch them suffer because that's the 'natural order of things'?"

"And most importantly... the thing that bothers me the most is that I feel it's probably best for me to cut off personal ties, because having love and care for others makes me weak. In order to be strong to do my job as a god I have to excise those things that enervate me."

I suck in a gasping breath, having vomited my words without any pause.

Veda's gaze remains impassive which I take to mean unmoved. Will I be like that one day? Should I be like that now and save myself a world of hurt by wanting to feel things?

But to my surprise, Veda puts her hands on my shoulders and steps in close. She presses her lips to my cheek and when she pulls back, I see understanding on her countenance. “Sister... you have much to figure out and I don’t have the answers for you. I can only tell you, once again, to be you. You are one of a kind, and maybe what this Council needs is a bit of human soul in the mix. Maybe we’re the ones who need to learn something. Regardless, you don’t have to decide your entire life or existence today. You can still fumble along and learn as you go. I promise, at the least, I’ll be patient with you. Okay?”

Not exactly the easy answer I want, but it offers some validation. I nod.

“Now,” Veda says as she hooks an elbow with mine and we stroll along. The world goes hazy for a minute, swirls, and then when it comes back into focus, we’re walking through sweet green grass toward the Council’s gazebo. “Last thing we need to discuss... Maddox.”

I jerk away from her, face flaming. “What about Maddox?”

Veda’s chin pulls in, and she gives me a censoring look. “I know what you do with that demigod, so don’t try to deny it.”

I keep my mouth firmly shut because it’s no one’s business.

Veda shakes her head with amusement. “If you think you’re the first god to dally with a demigod, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“Have you and Maddox?” I blurt out, a surge of jealousy hitting me hard.

“No,” she says with a grin. “I can’t speak for Onyx or Circe, though.”

I grit my teeth because I’m not about to ask them. I only asked Veda because it was heat of the moment. I backpedal.

“It’s nothing,” I insist as I continue to walk, and she follows beside me. “We’re nothing.”

“If you say so,” she says, and I can tell by her tone she doesn’t believe me.

“I’m a god. He’s a demigod.”

“There are no rules or prohibitions against that,” Veda reminds me.

I huff out my annoyance. “He infuriates me. He’s bossy and high-handed. Likes to control me.”

Veda hums in approval. “Those are the best types.” My head whips her way, and she shrugs. “I’m just saying... when you’re female and you have all this power, having a man who isn’t intimidated by that is a huge turn-on. There aren’t many like them. Not all demigods have Maddox’s confidence.”

She’s paving the way for me to have no reservations about growing something with Maddox, but she can’t make me feel good about the last reason.

“I don’t know how to care for another individual,” I say.

Veda frowns. “Contrary to all the kids you just saved.”

“Kids. A group of them. I spent minutes among them and I doled out power. I’m talking about caring for a singular person.”

“You can’t do that?” Veda asks in confusion.

“I don’t know how. I was raised without love and learned only to depend on myself. I was abused, beaten, made to feel less than. Even though Amell cared for me as best he could, he was still loyal to Kymaris and followed her orders to fill me with dark magics. I never had a single soul to depend on and conversely don’t know how to give care to others. It’s foreign and doesn’t feel right.”

“And yet we know it can be done,” Veda says. “Look at Amell himself. Evil Dark Fae who rules the Underworld and yet he managed to fall in love.”

“That’s different,” I mutter.

“It always is when it’s not something we’re brave enough to try.”

Damn... that was harsh but probably accurate. Regardless, I haven’t heard from Maddox in four days. Not since I sent him to Amell for help. I have no clue if he even went. I’ve resisted going to Amell to find out and have been impatiently waiting for news.

“You should go to him,” Veda says, and her tone gives me pause.

“Why?” I ask suspiciously.

“Because he’s upset and brooding.”

I hold up a hand, close my eyes and shake my head in disbelief. When I open them, I demand, “You know he’s upset? How?”

“Because I’m nosy.”

“But how do you know where he is?”

Veda shakes her head in amusement. “Honestly, Zora, do you even know the extent of your own powers?”

I know I can kill or heal and I can blow out windows.

“Open yourself up to Maddox and you can be taken to wherever he is. Don’t you ever go visit him?”

“No,” I reply sullenly. “Because I don’t want or need him. It’s fine when he comes to me, but—”

“Fine.” Veda holds up her hands and I snap my mouth shut. “You have my advice. It’s up to you what you want to do with it.”

Before I can respond, she disappears and I’m left with more doubts and uncertainties than I had when she appeared.

Breathing out my annoyance, I consider what to do next. My choices are unlimited because I have no obligations. I can go home and be with my dogs or I can go visit Finley.

Or... I could go find Maddox. See what's bothering him.

I conjure his image in my mind... beautiful man with flowing hair and jeweled eyes. I open myself up to his essence, and his dark, sour mood hits me hard. He's angry, frustrated, and... reckless feeling.

I don't like that combination at all.

I allow myself to be pulled to wherever he is. I have no clue if he has a home of his own or even what dimension he's in.

As the landscape begins to clarify—aqua water and white sand beaches—I know I'm in the First Dimension.

Before me is a large pool surrounded by tropical trees, lounge chairs, and waterfalls. Beyond that is a beach studded with umbrellas and vacationers.

I glance over my shoulder and see a towering resort.

Apparently, Maddox decided to go on a tropical vacation and before I fully materialize, I change my wardrobe to a black bikini with a sarong around my waist to blend in.

I step from a shadowy corner and look around for the demigod.

It's not him I see first, but rather a group of giggling women at a bar built inside the pool. One of those types you can swim right up to, sit on a submerged stool, and have a drink while cool water laps over you.

Maddox is in the middle of five—yes, fucking five—women who are fawning all over him. He's sitting on a stool, water up to his stomach, and they're all standing around with their big boobs, tanned skin, and minuscule tops.

What little I can see of him through the crowd, I get the allure. He's got the top half of his long hair pulled back, which only serves to highlight the perfect angles of his face with full, lush lips. His facial hair is growing back, but it's nothing more than a five o'clock shadow. He's laughing right along with the

women, his hand curled around a fruity concoction with an umbrella in it.

One woman has her hand on his shoulder, the other touching his knee. I should remove those hands right now, but that would cause a bit of panic what with all the blood that would result from such a move.

And he doesn't seem to be upset. Or brooding. Or even angry. None of those emotions that Veda said he was feeling and I certainly felt when I opened myself to him.

I guess he found the cure to his malady.

Women.

Frail, simple-minded, mortal women who could never hope to please him the way—

He senses me.

I see his body tighten and then Maddox's eyes move past the group and land right on me without even needing to look around. His laughter dies, but a smile remains on his face as he does a lazy perusal of my body. I flush hot and it has nothing to do with the tropical sun beating down on me.

It's because he looks like he could eat me up.

"If you'll excuse me," Maddox says, rising from his perch and pushing past the women. "My woman is here."

My woman?

His drink is still in his hand as he wades through the waist-deep water. I move to the side of the pool to meet him.

When he reaches the edge, I glance back at the female gaggle. They're all looking at Maddox with longing. A few of them glare at me.

Maddox's hand wraps around my ankle and slides up my calf. I glance down and he's even more beautiful as his head tips back to look at me, the sunshine hitting him full in the face and making his green eyes lighten to peridot.

“In all the months we’ve been fucking, you’ve never once sought me out,” he says, his voice sounding languid... almost slurred.

I frown. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” he says with a careless wave of his drink, spilling some into the pool water. He brings the straw to his lips, takes a long sip, and grins at me. “More than fine.”

“Are you drunk?” I ask in disbelief.

His hand slides higher up my leg, and I ignore the tingles it causes. “Don’t be ridiculous. Immortals can’t get drunk.”

“Then what’s wrong with you?” I ask suspiciously.

He reaches into his swim trunks and pulls out a tiny glass vial. “I’m extremely buzzed.”

I grimace as I bend over and snatch it from him. I hold it up to the light and squint at the amber-colored liquid inside. “What is this?”

“No clue. Got it off a Dark Fae down some dark alley. Said it was guaranteed to take my mind off my troubles, and it seemed to be working. But then you showed up and you are always trouble. But the good kind.”

I glance back at the bar, the women still watching with hope. “Looks like you had your mind off your troubles just fine,” I mutter.

Maddox glances over his shoulder at them and grins. When his attention comes back to me, his hand squeezes my calf. “Them? They’re no one. Diversions.”

“Do you fuck diversions?” I demand, feeling the snap of electricity in my fingertips.

He might be slightly inebriated, but Maddox’s gaze turns hard, his voice low and clear. “I only fuck you, Zora.”

There’s no describing the sweet relief and gratitude that sweeps through me, especially since I can’t quite give Maddox what he really wants.

A piece of my heart.

“You got a room here?” I ask, and I swear, flames leap in his eyes.

“Yeah. Is that where you want to go?”

I nod, and that’s all Maddox needs. He sets his drink on the edge, puts his hands on the hot concrete, and pushes up out of the pool. His bronzed skin coated in water drops makes him look every inch the demigod he is.

His hand comes to the back of my neck, and he pulls me to my tiptoes to lay a scorching kiss on my mouth. The public display of affection catches me off guard but it’s so damn good, I can’t help but submit.

When he pulls back, he flashes a playful grin. “Needed to do that. Had to dash all those ladies’ hopes quickly.”

I’m laughing as he brushes his lips over mine again before biting my lower lip. I gasp but then he has me by the hand, leading me around the pool and into the resort.

It seems silly, taking the old-fashioned way of walking rather than bending distance, but it appeals to my human side. Working for things rather than waving my hand to make them happen.

I opt to take Veda’s advice and try to be myself, to tap into that part of me that still acts human and tell myself it’s okay to feel.

At least for today.

CHAPTER 9

ZORA

MADDOX HAS HIS mouth between my legs. I look down my body and thread my fingers into his blond hair as he feasts. The man seriously loves to make me climax this way, and it brings back a flood of memories.

I first met Maddox when I was still living in the Underworld as a human. Finley had come to rescue me, along with Carrick, Maddox, and another Dark Fae named Boral. I was stunned to learn I had a twin sister, and when I was offered a life in the First Dimension, Amell said I had to take it. That day was a blur, but I still remember the first time I took in the big, blond demigod. My heart thudded because I was so entranced by his beauty and magnetism.

I must have appealed to him, too, because from then on, he engaged in ludicrous flirtations with me. At least, that's what Finley called them. I had no clue what that behavior meant as I'd never seen it before. I'd had sex before—with Amell, and many times after I pressed myself on him so I could learn—and it was good.

Really, really good.

But the attraction I had to Maddox was intense, and when he finally made his move, I invited him into my bed without hesitation. It was a whole new world for me, and I wanted to learn all I could about it.

The first time we were together, he did as he's doing now. Stripped me naked and kissed my entire body, ending up with his mouth on my most private part. I'd never felt anything like it, and I had the most intense orgasm of my life. I was still shaking when he surged up my body, slammed into me, and

drove me to an even more blistering climax. My mortal self was fractured every single time I was with him.

You'd think once I became a god I'd acclimate to his lovemaking prowess, but on the contrary, I am more sensitive than ever. He has this insane ability to tap into my most fragile, vulnerable self and I'm at my most human when he's making me fly high.

Like right now... I break apart, back arching off the bed, my hands pulling hard at his hair to get him off me. He growls, licks at me harder, and I start to come again.

"Mmm," he hums against me, and then I find myself on my stomach. He hauls me to my hands and knees, and then he's inside me.

My head drops, my fingers claw at the soft duvet, and I hang on for the ride.

It's the third orgasm that does me in because Maddox takes the fall with me. We drop into a gasping, sweaty mess, and I have that moment—always a mere second or two—where I feel the perfection of my life because of the demigod who makes me feel so much.

Possibly too much for my sanity.

Maddox rolls off me and flops to his back. I stay on my stomach, turning my head toward him and resting it on my folded arms.

I feel serene and mellow. He looks wound tight, and I remember why I sought him out in the first place. Because Veda said he was brooding and clearly that interlude we just had didn't help.

I turn my body to him and curl my arm under my head. "What was the deal with the pool, half-naked women and getting drunk?"

He doesn't seem inebriated anymore. That stuff must not last.

His head rolls my way. "I told you... diversions."

Grimacing, I grumble, “I suppose beautiful, half-naked women would be considered diversions.”

Maddox finds that amusing as he rolls to his side to face me, propping his head on his hand. He drags a finger down my arm. “Someone’s jealous.”

“Hardly.” I try to shrug his hand off, but he merely reaches and laces his fingers with mine. And why does that feel so good? “But seriously... why did you need a diversion? Did something bad happen?”

He doesn’t reply, merely drops his gaze to where our hands are connected.

“Did Amell deny you help?” I venture a guess.

Maddox smiles wanly. “No. He agreed to help. He sent me to Vyronas to get something called the Book of Shadows, but when his daughter went into the vault to retrieve it, she discovered it had been stolen.”

I nod at the revelation. I thought Amell could use the book that Kymaris created when she was first expelled from Heaven. Over millennia, she congregated information on every piece of dark magic that came her way.

“Amell thinks that book will help get Lucien back?” I ask.

“He’s not sure but said he was willing to look into it.” Affection for Amell rushes through me, for him looking past his issues with Maddox. “And you need to lift his punishment.”

I’m so surprised by the change of subject and Maddox lobbying on Amell’s behalf, my hand jerks in his. He holds tight and squeezes.

“Lift his punishment?” I ask.

“Yeah... it’s ridiculous to lock him up for doing nothing more than defending his daughter.”

“He was ordered not to interfere,” I say, my voice sounding robotic. It’s the party line.

“Yes, I know. Onyx likes her conflicts to play out a certain way, and punishing Amell lets all your subjects know you can’t be questioned, yada, yada, yada.”

“I’d be careful about the way you talk about the gods,” I warn.

He smiles at me. “Why? Are you going to destroy me?”

“Of course not,” I snap in irritation. “But Onyx might.”

Maddox lets my hand go and brings his palm to my chest. He pushes me on my back and slides close to hover over me. “You know it’s wrong to keep him there, especially because he has a mortal daughter. His time with her is nothing but the blink of an eye to an immortal, and every day without the privilege of seeing her is a colossal waste.”

He’s not telling me anything I don’t know. “I don’t disagree with you. But what am I supposed to do?”

“Convince your brethren to lift the punishment. I know you’ve got a backbone, Zora. Use it.”

Stand up to them. That’s what he’s telling me to do. Fear of inadequacy, because I have no clue what my role is or where I stand among them, floods through me.

But Veda told me to vote my conscience. She told me I needed to find my own way through this new life, and I know the only way to do that is to poke at boundaries and learn how far I can go.

The real fear is failure, particularly in this instance. Failure to help Amell would crush me, so it’s almost easier not to try. It’s also another reason why personal connections are too dangerous. I wouldn’t be afraid of the failure if I didn’t care for him so much.

But Maddox is asking me to try, and really... I should have already. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Maddox blinks at me. “Really?”

I glare at him. “You don’t think I can do it?”

His answer is a hard kiss, and when he pulls back, his expression is dark. “You’re the most powerful of all the gods, Zora. You can do anything you set your mind to.”

I lean back from him, pushing against his chest because that confuses me greatly. “The most powerful. No... I’m the newest. A babe, really.”

“You are utterly and completely different from them. You willingly sacrificed your life for the better of mankind. It’s something none of them would have ever done. It shows a courage that humbles them. It’s why they gave you a new life. It gives you power over them, at least as far as governance goes.” Maddox taps a finger to my temple. “Use that brain of yours and figure out how to convince them the error of their ways. I’m quite confident you can free Amell.”

I nod in understanding, relaxing my arm so I’m not pushing away from him. “And maybe I can convince them to bring back Lucien.”

Maddox smiles and pulls me in close, kisses the top of my head. “Sorry to burst your new bravery bubble but that’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?” I ask, settling into his embrace.

“Because they’re not bringing him back for a reason. A very specific reason.”

Once again, I’m pushing away so I can make eye contact. “What do you mean? How can you possibly know that because they’ve not said anything to me?”

Maddox slides a hand behind my neck, curls his fingers, and squeezes gently so my attention stays riveted on him. “I know the gods far better than you can hope to. They love their machinations and plots. They love to meddle. They’re refusing to bring back Lucien for a reason they’re not divulging, and I know this because they’ve not ordered anyone else to stand down. They might not want you bringing him back, but they’re happy to let me or someone else try to figure out a way.”

“But what could that reason be?”

“I have no clue, but I assume it will be revealed. It’s what gives me hope. That they’re letting this play out. I take that to mean there must be a way.”

I shrug off his hand and sit halfway up. “Which means that book is very important.”

“Amell and Thalia are working on it. Her brother-in-law, Kieran, is off looking right now. They supposedly know someone in the First Dimension who can help.”

“And you can help,” I say, feeling a rush of excitement that Maddox might get his brother back.

His jaw tightens. “No. I’ve been ordered to oversee the safety of Faere from the breaches that keep appearing in the veil between it and the Underworld.”

“By whom? I haven’t heard of this.”

“Onyx. She says a war is coming.”

“Why are you here, then, looking for a diversion?”

“Because you weren’t at your house. You’re the diversion I prefer.”

Of course, Maddox wouldn’t sit back if there was a book out there that might free Lucien from the Crimson River. I can’t help but think there’s a subplot going on that I’ve been left out of.

It pisses me off that they’re making things so difficult and my sense of righteousness has me rolling away from Maddox.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To see the Council and get some answers.”

With a sigh, he rises from the bed. “I guess it’s back to business.”

I’m momentarily sidetracked by the vision he presents with the sunlight coming in from the balcony doors, the blue

ocean behind him. His naked form is too beautiful to behold, and I avert my gaze.

“It’s off to Faere I go,” he says, and my head jerks up. “I’ve got to meet with Deandra.”

“No,” I growl. “I forbid it.”

Maddox’s eyebrows rise. “I’ve been ordered by Onyx to help defend Faere. I can’t do that from here.”

“I don’t want you near that woman,” I say, feeling like I have no control over my tongue. Words are coming out that I don’t intend.

Lips curving upward, Maddox’s eyes gleam with understanding as he walks around the bed toward me. His hand moves to my face and forces my head back to look at him. “You can’t seriously be jealous of Deandra?”

I should deny it but I find more truths dripping from my tongue. “I don’t like her touching what’s mine.”

“I’m yours?” he teases.

I’m embarrassed to have admitted that and I’m pissed he finds me amusing. “For now.”

“Hmm,” he murmurs before bending to kiss me. “I like being yours.”

I push him away, trying to regain some control and summon forth an outfit. I’m heading to the Council, so I choose clothing that speaks to my power as the god of Life and Death.

Black leather, metal studs and chains, spiky boots, and dark, dramatic makeup.

“Whoa,” Maddox says, taking a slight step back and running his gaze up and down my body. “You are smoking hot in that. Don’t go. Let’s do some role-play.”

I roll my eyes at him as I conjure forth a key. It’s heavy, old fashioned and tarnished. I hold it out in the palm of my hand.

He takes it and studies the etchings on the metal. “To your house?”

“When have you ever needed a key to my house?” she grumbles. “You always just appear inside.”

“Then what is it?”

“A key to my location, wherever I am. If you need me—for a diversion or otherwise—this will bring you to me.”

The gravity of such a gift dawns on him and his expression darkens with something I cannot identify. It surpasses lust and makes my body tremble.

“Thank you,” he says in a low, rumbling voice, but within those two words are more meaning than mere gratitude. He’s saying he understands that I’m trying to open myself to him, and this is my first step, so he’ll cherish it.

“And you tell Deandra, if she touches you she loses her head.”

Maddox grins but then he fades away as I envision the Council gazebo and transport myself there.

CHAPTER 10

MADDOX

STEPPING FROM FAERE right on to Carrick and Finley's front porch, I rub my hand over the back of my aching neck.

I'm a fucking demigod with the strength of a hundred men. A single female shouldn't frustrate me so much that my body rebels from the tension, but trying to dodge Deandra's advances is exhausting.

Irritable as hell, I bang on the door rather than ring the bell. I'm at least being polite by not appearing right in their house. While I've got an absolute open-door policy from my brother and sister-in-law, it was suggested the last time I appeared in their kitchen that perhaps I could use the front door.

How was I to know they'd be having sex on the counter?

Finley opens the door and smiles brightly. "There's the second-hottest man in the universe."

I step across the threshold and kiss her cheek. "I'm first and you know it, but I get you don't want to admit that. Might hurt Carrick's feelings."

She backhands me in the stomach, and I hunch over dramatically, even though she's like a fly swatting at me. "Ouch."

"Don't insult my husband," she warns.

"Duly noted." I follow Finley into the kitchen. "Where is said husband?"

"On the deck." She reaches into the fridge and pulls out two bottles of beer, handing them over. "Need some alone time with him?"

“I’d like you to join us,” I reply. She somehow knows I’m here for a serious talk, not to hang. Nodding, she grabs a third beer for herself.

We step onto the deck from the kitchen. It runs the entire length of their house, which sits high on a bluff over the ocean. Carrick is at a table with a large umbrella unfurled to shield him from the sun. He’s working on a crossword puzzle and looks the epitome of domestication.

Lifting his head, he notes the beers and pushes the paper to the side. I grab the seat to his left, and Finley moves behind him to take the one on his right. She reaches her hand out and glides it along his shoulders in a simple touch of affection. I imagine if I did that to Zora she might snarl and hiss at me. The only time she accepts nonsexual touching is right after I fuck her brains out and they’re too scrambled to object. Then she’s all cuddly and soft and I like her that way very much.

I like her snarling and hissing too.

“What’s up?” Carrick asks, twisting the cap off his bottle, then pulling Finley’s beer from her hand to do the same. He hands it back to her with a smile.

I open mine and take a sip, looking out over the ocean. I have to squint against the brightness. “Been in Faere the past few days. There are tears opening between it and the Underworld. I’ve been assigned to ensure the veil doesn’t completely breach.”

Finley wrinkles her nose. “I hate Faere.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” I say, lifting my bottle in acknowledgment.

“It’s all too bright and colorful. So fake.”

“Yeah, well... add to that I have to put up with Deandra, and it’s not been a pleasant experience.”

“Just bang her a few times, and she’ll leave you alone,” Carrick says.

Finley gasps and smacks him on the arm before turning her attention to me. “Don’t you dare bang Deandra.”

I frown at the vehemence in her voice. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

She lasers her eyes onto me. “Good.”

And whoa, wait... does she know something’s going on with me and Zora? Sure, she knew that we’d had sex a few times, back when she was still mortal, but I’ve never said a word since then. The few times I’ve happened to be around Carrick, Finley, and Zora, I pretty much ignore her because I know she doesn’t want anyone to know about us.

Carrick’s head twists left and right, looking between us. “What’s with the serious faces?”

“Nothing,” Finley says. “It’s just... Deandra’s bad news.”

“Yes,” Carrick drawls. “We’re all aware of how you feel about Deandra but let’s not forget she did help us save the world.”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like her,” Finley says sullenly.

Carrick sighs, reaching over to squeeze his wife’s knee. “No, I suppose you don’t.” He then looks at me. “What’s with the dire look?”

“Not dire,” I correct, taking another sip of beer. “More... antsy.”

Carrick and Finley stare at me, waiting. A lot of things are stressing me out. The most immediate—being in Faere these last few days, fending off Deandra’s advances. I didn’t tell her Zora would kill her because I know Zora didn’t really want me to. She wants to keep this thing between us secret.

And then there’s Zora. I’ve missed her like crazy but I’ve refused to use the key to go to her or visit her at her home. She has her stuff to do and as far as I know she’s off campaigning and trading favors with the gods to get them to lift Amell’s punishment.

Then... there's Lucien.

That's where I need to start.

"Amell has agreed to help us try to get Lucien back." Carrick sits up straighter, and Finley claps her hand over her mouth in shock. "He's not sure he can do anything, but there's a tome of spells Kymaris created that might have strong enough magic to do it. It's called the Book of Shadows."

"Kymaris created the Crimson River," Finley muses. "She would know if there was a way to rescue a soul from it."

"Maybe," I say, taking another long pull from my beer. "Unfortunately, the book has been stolen."

"Fuck," Carrick mutters.

I tell them about Amell loaning it to Thalia and that she had it secured in a vault, but that it's missing.

"What's Amell going to do?" Finley asks.

I shrug. "Not much he can do being stuck in the Underworld. But Thalia's got her brother-in-law, Kieran, on the hunt."

"So until the book is located, we're right where we started... no chance of getting Lucien back," Carrick says.

"We're getting him back." I sound so assured, both Carrick and Finley frown at me in disbelief. "Think about it. The gods refuse to do it but they didn't prohibit us from trying. There's a way to do it, but they want us to figure it out."

"What about the Blood Stone?" Finley asks. The Blood Stone is a legendary magical jewel with such tremendous power Kymaris was able to use it in a ritual to bring down the veil between the Underworld and the First Dimension. It's been under lock and key with Carrick since her defeat. "Its powers were amplified by being dipped in the Crimson River. Maybe it's a key somehow."

"That's not a bad thought but we have no idea how to use it," Carrick says. "So we're right back to needing the spell

book.”

“What’s the deal with the veil tearing between Faere and the Underworld?” Finley asks, changing subjects.

I shake my head. “I’m not sure. It started during an uprising led by a Dark Fae named Jago who wanted to carry out Kymaris’s plan to release all the dark creatures from hell. Amell originally thought it was an alternate route through which they wanted to escape, but he’s not so sure anymore.”

“Why not?” Carrick asks.

“It just feels... diversionary, if that makes sense. The rips are small, barely big enough for one or two to get through at a time. Repair one, and another opens up somewhere else. It’s enough of a worry that Deandra and Amell must have constant vigilance, but it seems... almost petty.”

“And we know what that means,” Carrick says, leaning forward and crossing his arms on the table. “Something bigger is brewing.”

“Yeah,” I mutter. But then again that always seems to be the case.

The doorbell rings and Finley pops up. “I’ll get it.”

Carrick’s eyes follow her and when she’s through the door and out of sight, he turns on me. “What was that exchange between you two?”

I play dumb. “What exchange?”

“The one where she was threatening to cut your balls off with just her tone of voice if you banged Deandra.”

Rubbing at the back of my neck as it tenses up again, I lay it out as quickly as I can. “I’m seeing Zora. I think Finley knows, and she’s warning me to not cheat on her sister, as if I’d ever—”

“You’re seeing Zora?” Carrick barks.

“Well, yeah.”

“Since when?” he grits out.

“Since always,” I snarl.

He leans back in his chair, looking at me in disbelief. “I thought that was just a few times before she...”

“Died?” I finish, and he nods. “It’s continued. I didn’t think anyone knew. I definitely didn’t think Finley knew about it, but maybe Zora told her.”

“If she did and asked her to keep it a secret, she wouldn’t have told me. Finley’s loyal to a fault.” He pauses, glances at the deck door, and then back to me. “Is it serious?”

A laugh escapes me and within it, Carrick must hear my confusion and frustration. “Hell if I know. We fuck like champions. I’d like more, but she’s very closed off and prickly. You know that.”

My brother shakes his head and laughs. “Oh gods... this is priceless.”

I have to restrain myself not to punch him. “What’s priceless?”

“The fact that you went and fell for a god. It only took a few thousand years, but hey... go big or go home.”

“I didn’t—” I start to say, but my mouth snaps shut when the sliding glass door hisses in the track and Finley steps out.

And right behind her... Zora.

I’m stunned to see her here, not because it would be unusual for her to visit her sister. She visits Finley all the time.

But because we were just talking about her, and I showed up here frustrated from being away from her, and having my brother throw it in my face that I’m essentially screwed for having feelings.

It’s been three days since we were together and she’s wearing an outfit of scarlet-red leather pants, a black turtleneck, and a long, black leather duster. I have no clue

where she's been, but if she's been with the Council, I'm guessing leather is her new battle armor.

Her eyes lock with mine, and I'm sure Carrick is watching us like hawks. I can't control what my expression says, but within it, she should know I'm happy to see her. I think I see a flash of the same but it could be the sunlight.

It's broken when Finley taps her on the shoulder. "I forgot... do you want a beer?"

The spell is broken between us, and Zora shakes her head. "No. I'm good. In fact, I remembered something I need to do."

"Come sit down and relax," Finley says as she grabs Zora's arm. "Hang for a bit."

"No, really," Zora says, and her voice has a low boom to it that causes Finley to release her.

Not in fear—because she could never be afraid of her twin, the woman who gave her life for the world—merely in surprise, and I can see Zora's surprise too. Her expression gentles, and she pulls Finley into a hug. When she steps back, she says, "Truly... I have to go do something. I'll catch you later."

And before anyone can object, she vanishes.

Finley whirls on me and glares. "This is because of you. What did you do to her?"

Gods, what haven't I done to her? But that's private between me and Zora.

"Babe," Carrick says in warning, subtly telling her to lower the temperature.

"No," she snaps at her husband, turning back to me. "You have her tied up in knots—"

"Me?" I say as I explode out of my chair. "Your sister is the knot-tier. I have given her everything she's wanted and needed and haven't asked for a fucking thing in return, other

than for her to open up to me. So get off your high horse, Finley.”

Carrick rises from his chair, prepared to intervene, but Finley backpedals. Holding up her hands, she huffs out a breath. “I’m sorry. She’s under a lot of stress—”

“I probably know that better than you.” It sounds petty, but it’s true. I spend intimate time with Zora and catch glimpses of her pain and uncertainty, far more than I know she shares with her sister.

“Then what are you waiting for?” Finley asks. “Go after her.”

I look to Carrick, who shrugs, and then looks back to his wife. “Go after her?” I ask.

“You obviously care for her, so, yeah.” She shoos me with her hands. “Go away.”

I grin at my sister-in-law but don’t bother with a glance at Carrick. Wrapping my hand around the key that’s always in my pocket, I ask it to take me to Zora and vanish.

CHAPTER 11

ZORA

TESTING OUT MY powers and how infinite they truly are, I imagine a deserted island with a sandy beach and aqua waters lapping the shore. I have no clue if I'm even in a real place or merely a quick dimension I created with the power of my imagination.

Regardless, I ditch the leather and conjure a sundress. Because my little island has a nice breeze and I want to feel it on my neck, I use magic to bind my hair. It floats up and outward, winds, and coils on top of my head where pins materialize to hold it in place. I command the sun not to burn my pale skin and I walk along the shore.

I can't believe I ran like that. While I went to Finley's to see her, to spend time with my sister, part of me hoped Maddox would be visiting.

He was.

And I ran.

Because the sight of him causes a cyclone of emotions to twist within me, and I was so knocked off-balance by his presence, I panicked.

So here I am.

"You should never have given me that key."

I whip around to find Maddox striding my way. As he comes closer, his clothes disappear, replaced by a pair of swim trunks.

Glancing around, he nods in approval. "Nice use of your magic."

“I don’t even know where I am,” I say as I follow his gaze to the tropical trees a hundred yards back from the beach.

“Does it matter?” he asks, coming toe to toe with me.

He’s so damn tall. So powerfully built.

I feel minuscule as I tip my head back to look at him. His hands reach into my hair, find the pins, and pull them free. My locks tumble, and he runs his fingers through it.

“Love your hair down,” he murmurs, and the timbre of his voice is like distant thunder rolling in. It makes me shiver under the hot sun.

I’m at that point with Maddox where so much of me wants to step into him, but the bigger part tells me to stay aloof. It’s a constant war within, and both of us are casualties.

He senses my uncertainty. I see it in his eyes and because he cares for me, he makes it easy.

Taking my hand, he says, “Come on... let’s walk.”

The need to pull from his grasp is as strong as the desire to step in closer, but I fall into step beside him. He doesn’t say a word, content to be in the silence with nothing but the sound of the waves and a distant seagull crying.

“Amell’s punishment has been lifted,” I say, and his head whips to the side. I see surprise and delight as well as questions. “I went to the Council and made the request.”

“How hard did they make it on you? Gods give nothing for free.”

“They unanimously denied me but I kept talking. I reminded them that he’s not only kept the Underworld in a state of peace, and thus kept other dimensions safe, but he also helped in the battle against Kymaris.”

It’s true. While Amell’s loyalties were with his dark queen, he also cared for me a great deal. In the end, he told me where the ritual was going to take place so that we could stop it, and for that reason alone his punishment should have been lifted.

“And they eventually gave in?” Maddox asks.

“No. They actually kept denying me. When I asked why, I got no real answers. I was starting to feel like there’s a subplot I was being kept out of.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. As much as they try to present a united front, they also work very independently of one another and each have their own machinations.”

“Yeah... that’s starting to become clear.”

I recount to him the troubling meeting that I have a feeling has sealed my fate as a god.

Circe took the forefront of godsplaining to me. “Amell was given strict orders not to interfere in the conflict in Vyronas. He was playing with fire the minute he decided to answer his daughter’s summons. Teaching her shadow magic was enough to land him in hot water, but killing Ferylith’s demons took it too far and that cannot go unpunished.”

I was so frustrated. “What does it matter? Thalia defeated the sorceress and freed her people.”

“True,” Circe replied with a coy smile. “But she would have done that even if the demons had slaughtered her rescuers.”

Thalia’s husband and his forces had stormed the castle where Ferylith held the princess hostage. They were confronted by a small army of demons Ferylith had summoned with blood magic and they outnumbered the mortals three to one. There was no way they’d win.

But Amell appeared and in one powerful sweep of magic disintegrated the conjured beasts, saving Thalia’s future husband and many others.

And then it dawned on me. “You wanted Bastien Dunne to die.”

Circe smiled at me while the other gods watched with impassive faces.

“But why? What did it serve?” A dozen thoughts ran through my mind, but I was betting she wanted Thalia to marry someone else for some reason. I got no response, and it pissed me off. “So you can just twist fate and meddle in people’s lives and you don’t need our agreement?”

“Of course she said yes,” Maddox says with a mirthless laugh. “Because that’s what gods do.”

“It’s when I realized not everything needs a unanimous decision. I also realized there are no set rules, so I made my own. I told them I was lifting Amell’s banishment myself and that anyone who interfered would incur my wrath.”

Maddox is so stunned by this display of courage in the face of uncertainty, he stops and pulls his hand free.

Turning to me, his face lined with worry, he asks hesitantly, “And what did they say?”

“They said nothing. Not even Circe, who merely inclined her head at me in acknowledgment.”

Maddox’s expression deepens with concern. “She might retaliate.”

“I know.” I figured it a possibility before I made the decision regarding Amell. “But I can’t live in fear of that.”

Maddox nods as he scrubs a hand along his jaw. I can see his mind whirling with all the ways I might be in danger but he hasn’t figured out yet that I don’t give a damn about what they will do to me.

If any of the gods want to come after me because I’m not falling into line, they’re going to hurt me through others.

Veda knows I have feelings for Maddox and he’s the one who’s in danger. They won’t go after Finley because they’re in her debt for the sacrifices she made to stop Kymaris from destroying this realm.

I’m confident it will be Maddox and if Veda knows how I feel about him, the others do too.

It's time to cut him loose so he doesn't get hurt.

"We need to end things," I say.

Maddox's expression morphs from worry to rage. "Like fuck we do."

It's the perfect time for me to tell him that we have to end it because I care for him, and the gods will use him against me. But the minute I admit the feelings I know he's been wanting to hear from me, it will only encourage him to try harder.

Maddox moves fast, jerking me into his body, and kisses me hard. I submit for only a moment, just enough to feel him and memorize his touch and taste before I push him away with a punch of power that sends him stumbling backward several feet before he regains his footing.

I could tell him I'm not attracted to him anymore. I could tell him that I want to take other lovers. All things that would be meant to hurt and drive him away. But he'd never believe it, so instead I offer him the clearest truth.

"You make me weak, Maddox. This new life I've been granted is harsh and unforgiving. I cannot afford to care for you because it will make my life difficult. I'm not doing this for you, I'm doing this for me."

His face is a mask of anger, but it twists my heart into a knot when I see a flicker of hurt in his green eyes.

Jaw locked tight, he grits out, "You don't mean that."

"I do," I assure him, offering him the biggest lie I've ever told. "Now... I'm ordering you back to Faere. Perhaps you can find comfort in the arms of Deandra."

That last jab was exceptionally cruel, not only to him but to me as the thought of him experiencing pleasure with her, or anyone else, is repulsive.

We stare at each other. His jaw ticks as he struggles to disobey my order. My own pulse pounds as I fight the overwhelming urge to fling myself at him and recant everything I said.

But then he gives the barest of nods, an acknowledgment he accepts my edict, and disappears.

A wave of grief drives me to my knees. My hands claw at the damp sand as I suck in air, trying to push the sorrow away.

It doesn't work, so I lift my head to the artificially created sky and scream so loud the birds flying overhead die and plummet into the sea. A few fall on the sand, their eyes staring at me blankly.

I wonder if I have enough power within me to end my existence. It's not one I would have ever chosen for myself knowing what I know now. It's too harsh and while I'm a god, I'm still too human to not be hurt by the reality of my world.

The moment is fleeting and I eventually stand. I replace my clothing with my prior leather ensemble and pull the Underworld to me, stepping out onto the Bridge of Judgment where I catch Amell tossing a recently departed over the edge and into the Crimson River. The citizens of Otaxis who came out to watch cheer.

The king blinks at me in surprise, and Nyssa, who stands to the left of his throne, smiles in welcome. I glance over my shoulder at the long line of humans who will be brought forth for their reckoning and decide I don't have time to wait for him to evaluate each one. With my power, I'm able to take in the entire lot and judge immediately if any are redeemable.

Not a single one, so I flick my wrist and they all tumble into the river, effectively ending the judgment.

There's brief, shocked silence but then the dark creatures on the opposite bank below the bridge let up a deafening roar of approval. Because I rule death, I'm their primary deity, and my appearance is important to them. I hate to be revered for such a thing, but it's definitely nice to feel appreciated.

My attention comes back to Amell. "We need to talk."

When we arrive in his private living space, I decline food and wine, getting right to the matter. "Your punishment has

been lifted. You are free to move about the dimensions at your discretion.”

Amell’s eyebrows shoot high, but it’s Nyssa who shouts in delight. I’m stunned when she flings her arms around my neck and hugs me close. “Oh, thank you, Zora. You don’t know what it means to him to be able to see Thalia more.”

Spontaneous acts of affection are like shocks of electricity. Uncomfortable at first, but with a pleasant tingle left behind. I hesitate before returning her hug. Nyssa holds a special place in my heart because she’s a lot like me. Most of her existence has been spent in a mortal body, and she’s now trying to navigate life as an immortal.

When we release, Amell offers a slight bow of gratitude. “Thank you.”

I give a curt smile. “Will you go after the Book of Shadows?”

He shakes his head as Nyssa steps next to him, slipping her arm around his back. It makes me almost cry that I never had the opportunity to bestow that type of gesture on Maddox. “I trust Kieran to find it. If he needs my aid, I’ll give it, but I’m hesitant to leave the Underworld right now.”

His tone sets me on edge. “Why is that?”

“There are rumblings and rumors,” he says in a grave tone. “Something big is brewing.”

“Like what?”

Amell shrugs, not in a blasé manner but to indicate he’s frustrated by the unknown. “We’ve been ferreting out hidden supporters of Jago, and one recently divulged that there were rumors that Rune is going to be freed from his prison and restored to his god status.”

My knees actually go weak. “And you trust this information?”

“I trust the torturer who got the information. His specialty is in peeling strips of skin from his subject and cauterizing the

wounds with fire.”

I grimace and my stomach rolls. I’m a god with a queasy stomach. “But how would that even be possible?”

“He didn’t know, only that it’s being bandied about by Jago’s remaining supporters. It could be nothing but a false claim to keep their movement strong. The prospect of escaping the Underworld is a powerful way to hold them together. The promise of a god who would let them all out would be inspiring.”

“I’ll convene the Council and let them know,” I say, not sure what else I can do. “Is there any other information?”

“I’ve been watching Ariman. He was close to Jago, but I couldn’t tie him to the uprising. He still rules over the city of Llandam and attends all my meetings. If he’s doing anything to aid in this rumor, I have not yet uncovered his involvement.”

“But he’s wicked and crafty,” Nyssa adds. “Our gut says if there’s any plot against Amell, the Underworld, or to free Rune, Ariman’s hands are in it.”

“He bears too great a magic,” Amell says. “Give me leave to destroy him, and that worry will be put to rest.”

I’m no stranger to Ariman. He’s the dark priest who helped funnel black magic into me at Kymaris’s command. I never had any direct interaction with him, as I was only a vessel and not worth his time to converse with.

I shake my head, unwilling to mar Amell’s benevolent rule. “It’s better to keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I only want you to watch him.”

“At your command,” Amell acknowledges.

My smile is wan. “Well, I wanted to tell you that you’re free to leave the Underworld at your whim.”

Amell pulls away from Nyssa, his expression darkening. “What’s wrong?”

I blink at him in surprise. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“You’re lying,” he replies in a dulcet tone. My eyes flare with affront. “I’ve known you longer than anyone by a long shot, and I know you’re lying, and I know something’s wrong.”

That’s all truth. Amell oversaw my entire upbringing in the Underworld, protected me from harm, and eventually became my lover. While I never fully opened up to him because I was always aware of his danger, I know he’s far too perceptive for me to argue with him.

“It’s nothing.” I lift my chin, a silent gesture that I’m not discussing it.

Amell’s face reddens with anger. “If that asshole hurt you, I will rip him to pieces.”

Nyssa moves, putting her hand on Amell’s arm. She looks concerned, not for him, but for me.

“He didn’t hurt me. It’s the other way around.”

Amell blinks, his face going slack. “Oh... well...” He looks at his wife helplessly, then back to me again. “I don’t... I mean...”

Nyssa steps forward, nudging Amell back from us. “Do you need to talk about it with someone?”

I shake my head, giving her a grateful smile. “I appreciate it, but no. It’s done and now I’m off to the Council to tell them about the rumors regarding Rune.”

Nyssa gives me a quick hug, followed by a squeeze to my shoulder from Amell, and I return to our godly realm.

Appearing on the gazebo-covered dais, I wait for the others to appear.

CHAPTER 12

MADDOX

FAERE IS THE fucking pits. It's so disingenuous as a land that I find it hard to tolerate. There's nothing natural about it.

Faere was created through the power of stone magic by Nimeyah, one of the original fallen angels cast out from Heaven. Perhaps feeling the keen loss of her prior home, she set out to make a realm far more beautiful than where she'd come from.

In my opinion, she didn't succeed. First, she raised her massive castle of crystal which sits on the horizon amid rolling hills and a lazy river of teal blue. The green of the grass is bright, all the blades of perfect height and symmetry, and they sparkle as if coated in diamond dust. The trees are identical without character and produce no fruit to enjoy.

It's the sky I hate the most. It's a champagne color, devoid of sun or clouds. Just an endless golden glow that makes the entire environment shimmer to the point everything looks distorted.

I thought Deandra might change things up when she became queen, but apparently, she has the same lack of taste her mother did.

Truett and I are working together at Amell's order. We inspect the new rip in the veil found this morning by one of the Light Fae who lives close to it. A farmer who raises livestock was out shepherding when one of his sheep disappeared into thin air. Upon closer examination, he discovered the tear but dared not go into whatever realm it disappeared into.

Word was sent to the castle, the castle sent word to Amell in the Underworld, and here I am with Amell's best friend who I happen to like a lot.

We confirmed pretty quickly that the tear connected Faere to the Underworld, same as the others, and the poor sheep met its demise by a band of hungry fae.

I turn to Rebsha, a huge Light Fae and Deandra's most trusted advisor, who has been awaiting word. "Let the queen know it leads to the Underworld."

Rebsha nods and disappears, bending distance to the crystal castle on the horizon where Deandra is supposedly in residence.

"There's no rhyme or reason to these tears," Truett says as he studies the opening. It's only about five feet high and maybe three feet wide. Big enough for a sheep to slip through to the other side but also big enough for Dark Fae to squeeze into Faere.

Veils are tricky phenomena. It's a term that means nothing more than the separation between dimensions, but there are no defined boundaries between such. I can open a veil right here to go into the Underworld, take one step to the right, and open another veil to go to the First Dimension. It's all about intent on your destination.

Whoever is opening these passageways is doing it by design—someone from the Underworld wants into Faere.

"Why leave the openings?" Truett ponders as he studies it. "I mean, why not cover your tracks?"

I shrug as I stand beside him. "Unless someone is coming in for a quick in and out. Hell, maybe they just wanted sheep for dinner?"

Truett snorts. It's a possibility, but both of us know this is more sinister. Travel out of the Underworld isn't prohibited as long as Amell approves it. Light and Dark Fae do associate with one another. They sure don't mind fucking and some even have lasting relationships and produce offspring called daemons.

These mysterious openings—done in secret and occurring at random times—lend to the credibility that there's a plan

behind it.

“Weren’t you given my missive to attend to me in the castle?” Truett and I turn to Deandra’s voice, but her eyes are on me.

“I attend to no one,” I say, my tone light to soften the rebuke.

The new queen of Faere isn’t flighty like her mother was and isn’t easy to offend. She hums as if she doesn’t believe my proclamation.

Deandra is dressed to seduce, and I’d like to say it’s only for me, but this is how she dresses all the time. Her sexual appetites are well known and she loves to inflame men’s passions.

Today she’s wearing a white gossamer gown that’s so transparent she might as well be naked. Her pebbled nipples poke against the thin fabric that covers her from neck to toe but does nothing to hide her body. It’s so diaphanous, Truett and I can tell that Deandra likes to wax, and well... we both look.

Who wouldn’t?

It’s also what Deandra wanted as she preens under our attention. Snapping her fingers, a large white tent without walls appears behind her with an enormous bed in the center that looks like it was built just for an orgy. She jerks her head that way and looks between the two of us. “Want to join me there to discuss things?”

“I’d be glad to discuss things there,” Truett says as he steps in that direction.

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t. Here’s just fine.”

Deandra pouts. “Party pooper.”

Not sure when I got so conservative and boring, but I say, “There are more important things than sex.”

Tipping her head back, Deandra laughs. She winks at Truett, then wags her finger at me. “That’s simply not true. But tell me what you’ve found so I can be done with this and take your stud of a Dark Fae friend to bed.”

Though in the same breath she wants to discuss business and fuck Truett, the expression on her face is hard and calculating. She’s a queen first looking to protect her land.

Deandra was the only daughter of Nimeyah and Callidan, angels expelled from heaven when they betrayed God. She had a brother, Pyke, but she killed him.

No tears were shed because he deserved it. Pyke was in collusion with Kymariss, and he helped capture and kill his own mother, Nimeyah. It was a ritual sacrifice to bolster the power of the Blood Stone and it would bring down the entire veil between Hell and the mortal Earth.

With apocalypse averted, Zora died to bring about Kymariss’s end, and Deandra ascended the throne. Or rather, she took it. There was an argument to be made that Callidan should inherit, but he’s too much of a spineless pushover. He was happy to let his daughter rule, and he’s living a quiet life in the country, or so I’ve heard.

“I’m not happy this continues to occur,” Deandra says as she walks closer to examine the tear. “Amell isn’t keeping his subjects in line.”

“King Amell has more important things to do than worry about sheep wandering into the Underworld,” Truett says in defense of his friend.

Of course, he just said that to the queen of the Light Fae, and anger flashes in her eyes. I’m sure she’s going to make him pay for that in bed.

“It’s more than *just* sheep,” she grits out, and then shockingly, I see sorrow feather across her face. “An entire family was murdered three days ago. One was a baby. All of them had been nailed to iron crosses with iron spikes through their brains to finish them off.”

Iron is fatal to the fae.

“Were they nobility or lower class?” I ask, and it’s an important question because only the nobility have any significant magical power.

“Lower class,” she says, and I can hear the menace in her tone. No matter how outlandish Deandra can be, the one thing she does far better than her mother is govern the poor. Nimeyah didn’t care about them at all, but clearly her daughter does.

Admittedly, that warms me slightly to her.

“So they were defenseless,” Truett growls.

Deandra waves her hand over the tear in the veil and it seals. She spins on me. “Amell has to stop this. I demand he deploy guards to patrol and catch whoever it is.”

“You know that’s not feasible,” I say as I rub the back of my neck.

“Make it feasible,” she snaps in irritation. “He better deploy every ally he has to catch whoever is doing this, or I’m going to march my forces into his dark little world and decimate the entire Dark Fae race.”

Some might think that’s an overreaction or that the silly woman doesn’t know what she’s talking about.

But Deandra has always been a vicious warrior and I watched her kill her brother for his perfidy without a single hesitation. She’d go to war with the Underworld.

“We’ll bring your concerns to Amell,” Truett says with a slight bow.

“I want more than a discussion of my concerns,” Deandra warns.

Truett glances at me and I give him a slight nod. He and I both know that if Amell were to use his forces to patrol around his realm, hoping to catch someone making a breach, it would leave the cities defenseless. However, the threat of Deandra

marching on the Underworld is of equal concern, so Amell needs to decide what to do.

With his chances of getting laid by the Light Fae queen ground to a halt, Truett offers her a slight but longing bow and opens up the veil to return to the Underworld.

The minute he's gone, Deandra takes my arm and coos, "All's not lost. You and I can still—"

I pull away from her. "Not interested, Deandra."

My chest constricts painfully with the knowledge that the only one I'm interested in isn't interested in me anymore.

Glancing at the bed, I do wonder why I'm denying myself. Deandra is a beast in the sack, and I'd get my rocks off in a very nice way. Zora has disinvited me to her bed, and I owe her no loyalty.

"I can see you're considering it," Deandra says with a delighted clap.

I sigh with fatigue. "Yeah... I considered it, but I'm going to pass."

"Oooh," she teases in a singsong voice. "Maddox is in love."

Not sure that's true, but I am all kinds of fucked up in the head. Still, the only thing I want to do right now is figure out how to keep Faere safe.

"What exactly are you contributing to fix this issue?" I ask the queen.

Deandra shrugs and examines her fingernails, as if she doesn't care about her people. I know this is untrue though.

"I've got my own patrols moving about the realm, but they're concentrated most heavily among the lower class since they can't protect themselves as well."

Another point for Deandra. She has once again shown some semblance of a heart.

“I saw the Scryer,” she continues. “But he had no valuable information. You know those voyeur types—”

“Wait... there’s a Scryer? I thought she died... by your brother’s hand.”

“She did, but when she died, another took her place. It’s like that television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I watched all seven seasons when I was living in the First Dimension, and when a slayer dies—”

“For fuck’s sake, Deandra, focus. Where does this Scryer live?”

She frowns. “I’ve already had someone go see him. He has nothing to offer.”

“Maybe they didn’t ask the right questions,” I posit, although my excitement for the Scryer has nothing to do with helping to defend Faere. I’ve got questions of my own. “Now, where is he?”

“The southlands. On the outskirts of the Geyrale settlement. Ask anyone there and they’ll point you in the right direction.”

I nod. “I’ll go there now, then I’m going to see Amell. I’ll be back in Faere after that.”

“Come eat dinner with me at the castle when you return,” she orders.

I don’t accept or decline. My days are going to be taken minute by minute at this point.

I make ready to bend distance to Geyrale, but before I disappear, I can’t help but say, “You used the word *voyeur* as someone who sees the future. That’s not what it is.”

She blinks at me in surprise. “What is it, then?”

I can’t help but grin. “Someone who gets sexual gratification from watching people have sex.”

No way Deandra would ever blush, and instead, she laughs. “Oh, that describes *me*, then.”

“Not surprised,” I mutter before leaving her presence and stepping into the Geyrale settlement.

CHAPTER 13

MADDOX

THE LIGHT FAE developed a hierarchy of status when they created the dimension of Faere. Nimeyah used a large piece of stone magic to make the overly bright and synthetic world and declared her other original fallen angels as nobility. She parceled out magic to them in greater quantities than others and over time and with evolution the nobility and gentry increased their power while the lower class had almost no abilities.

While the nobility and gentry could travel by bending distance, the lower class had to walk or ride animals. The upper class could conjure a ten-course meal while the poor had to grow their own food and cook it.

It doesn't mean they are totally without means. For example, the poor are still immortal and have incredible strength. They can produce a glamour to hide their true nature but past that they've got no special abilities.

Even so, they are, in general, a happy lot content to live simple lives.

Nimeyah cared nothing for the less fortunate, and they tended to settle in areas away from her castle, making do with what the land provided.

In contrast, the Dark Fae weren't as organized in their caste system. The original fallen angels had the most power that evolved over time with stone magic and those loyal followers were blessed and granted magical boons. The danger in Dark Fae is underestimating their abilities because you never know where they stand historically. Evolution in the Underworld tended to produce some pretty twisted creatures—both physically and emotionally. While Dark Fae could be

every bit as beautiful as Light Fae, some were hideous because their magic was insidiously more evil.

Which is why whoever is tearing holes in the veil and coming over to commit murder can only be assumed to be the darkest of creatures. Light Fae can be cruel and vicious, but Hell has a way of producing the worst. I'm confident Deandra and the citizens of Faere are the victims here.

Geyrale is a small community on the very edge of an expansive forest with trees as big as the California redwoods, except these trees have pale, lavender-colored bark and dark purple leaves in a fluffy crown at the top. The town itself is mostly one- to two-story buildings of wood and stone with a few cross streets in between for wagons and horses to traverse. More homes are built up around the edges and extend into the forest where the climate is cooler and the shadows darker as there is no sun to penetrate the canopy.

I appear on the outskirts and make my way through the city center. I immediately find my best source of information, a small bar with a wooden sign hanging on the eave that reads *The Pub*.

Doing nothing more than stepping into the doorway, I make eye contact with the bartender. No one would ever mistake me for a fae or a mortal, so it's often assumed I'm more by my height, size, confidence, and the magical aura about me.

I get no pushback when I ask, "Where's the Scryer live?"

"Follow the road north out of town and into the forest. There's a small bridge you'll cross and to the left of that is his house."

I give a nod of thanks and after a nice five-minute walk, I'm standing outside a small stone house with a rough wooden door and cloth covering the windows.

I'm poised to knock when I hear someone walk up behind me. I turn and see a man of indeterminate years (since fae are immortal) who appears in his thirties, as most do. He's got

vivid red hair, cropped short, a trim beard, and electric-blue eyes.

In his hand are three dead rabbits tied to a wire.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come,” he says as he moves past me and around to the side of his house.

Not surprising. He sees the future. I follow him to a long table with two stools. He tosses the animals on the surface and pulls out a knife.

“Sit,” he says, nodding toward a stool. “We can talk while I dress my dinner.”

I was created mostly to fight wars for the gods, so blood and gore have been a part of my life for thousands of years. But while I can cut off a man’s head without a second thought, cutting an animal isn’t my thing.

“I’ll stand,” I say, leaning against the house. “So, you know why I’m here?”

“No,” the man says. “Only that a demigod would visit. You’re Maddox. And I’m Faush.”

“How is it you know I was coming and my name, but you don’t know why? Are you shortsighted?”

Faush chuckles as he unstrings. “I’m not shortsighted at all and see as well as I ever have. I just chose not to look into the why of your visit. I like a little surprise and mystery. However, if you’re here about the tears in the veil and the recent murders, I’m afraid I don’t have any clear visions.”

I frown. “That implies you have murky visions? Deandra said you had nothing of value.”

“I only answer the questions posed to me. I was asked who was opening the veil. I couldn’t give an answer. I was never asked why.”

“Fucking unbelievable,” I mutter. My own personal questions are going to have to wait. “I’m not going to ask specific questions to start. Just tell me all that might be related

to the tears in the veil, no matter how trivial you think it might be or how cloudy. Even impressions are helpful.”

Faush smiles, respect in his gaze that someone understands that his gift is often clouded in nothing more than feelings.

He starts skinning the rabbits one by one. “There is no motive to hurt Faere. There is a bigger purpose to the tears.”

“Distraction,” I guess. That was my first hunch.

His nod is hesitant. “It feels that way. It also feels... catastrophic. Like, whatever is happening will change everything.”

“So, it goes beyond the Underworld?”

“Perhaps. Or maybe whatever will happen in the Underworld will send shock waves to other dimensions. But the thing I dream about the most is someone rising, someone of great importance, and that creature will have more power than all the gods.”

“Impossible.” I push off the wall, stunned by that revelation. No one is more powerful than the gods.

Faush shakes his head as if flummoxed, hands covered in blood. “I’ve tried to see who it is. I’ve tried to see how it happens, and all I get is that time is of the essence.”

“Time is of the essence? What does that mean?”

“It can mean many things. It’s not for me to decipher, only to give you the clues.”

“What else?” I demand, my mind whirring. Are we on the verge of something happening right now? Do I need to leave?

Is Zora safe?

I hate that she is one of my main concerns, but there you have it.

“Nothing else,” he says as he lines up the three skinned rabbits and moves to gut them. “At least not regarding the

tears in the veil. But I know you have other questions. Questions that are more important.”

I nod and move closer to the table. “My brother, Lucien—”

“A demigod thrown into the Crimson River,” he says, letting me know he doesn’t need the background.

“Will he return? Do we have the power to bring him back?”

Faush lifts his gaze from his work. “I can’t see him in the future, but that doesn’t mean he won’t appear. As of right now, I cannot see him. However, I can tell you there are means to get him back.”

“The Book of Shadows?” I ask.

Faush shrugs. “I’m not sure. I know great power will be required, but I guess that’s a given, right? The Crimson River is eternal.”

I’m at least hopeful we can save Lucien, and I haven’t felt that yet. “Anything else?”

Eyebrows drawing inward as if concentrating, Faush gives a slight shake of his head. “I’m not sure what it means, but I’m getting the same feeling as with the veil... time is of the essence. And before you ask, I don’t know what it means. I don’t know if you need to act quickly now or at some point in the future. But it feels the same. Time is important.”

I tuck that away. It’s not helpful now, but hopefully, all will be revealed.

“I thank you for your advice.” Reaching into my pocket, I pull out gold coins that weren’t there a second ago and lay them on the table. They’re enough to put him in much nicer living accommodations, but I get the feeling he won’t use them for such.

“But you haven’t asked all your questions,” he says.

I try to play stupid. “I assure you... I have.”

Which I haven't. I want him to tell me what my future holds in regard to Zora, but I'm also afraid of the answer. I know the woman and her stubbornness. Her decision has been made, and if I were a gambling demigod, I'd bet nothing will change her mind. She's trying to live her life as a god as best she can, and she's convinced that she needs to be hard and closed off to do it. It's difficult to convince someone otherwise when they've known nothing of love and have lived their life behind walls.

"I feel the yearning of your heart," Faush says as his attention goes back to the rabbits. I refuse to engage him, but I steel myself because I have a feeling he's going to say what's on his future-seeing mind.

And yet, he remains silent on the matter.

His gaze lifts to mine. "I'm sorry. I can't see the gods or what they will or won't do. That's always a blank for me."

Completely unhelpful, but it's a little freaky he knows my issue is with a god and not another immortal or even a human.

"But I can see that your heart will be healed one day. Not sure when or how it will happen, but I do know you'll need to let go."

"I've already done that," I say. Because Zora pushed me away, and I didn't fight it.

"Then there is nothing more for you to do. I suggest you concentrate on saving the world."

I thank him again for his time. When I leave, I don't head back to the town or travel through the veil to the Underworld to report to Amell. Instead, I move deeper into the forest keenly searching.

Though I find no discernible path, the trees are widely spaced and easy to move between. There's no thick undergrowth, only a pristine carpet of ferny moss. Up ahead, a tree comes into view. It's at least fifteen feet in diameter, perfectly constructed so the lavender bark is uniformly

positioned in straight lines down the trunk. But the closer I get, the more imperfect they become.

Moving, writhing, and reforming until a dark knot in the center grows bigger and bigger.

It darkens even more and stretches into a large oval until it's wide and tall enough to accommodate me.

As I pass through it, I walk not into the center of the tree but out onto a grassy knoll, the Council's gazebo in the distance. The minute I step foot into their realm, it ensures they will congregate to greet me, for demigods do not come unless invited. Showing up without petition will indicate to them that I have something serious to report.

It used to be more difficult to reach the gods when Rune was a part of the Council. But given his transgressions and the danger it put the world in, the gods loosened their boundaries.

As I get closer to the gazebo, the gods appear one by one. Zora is the last, and yeah, my fucking heart lurches when I see her.

Those prismatic orbs lock onto me but there's not an ounce of feeling within her expression.

Cold, aloof and guarded. She's now a god, through and through.

I push my disappointment aside, and when I'm at the edge of the dais, I offer a slight bow of deference. "Thank you for seeing me."

"You have news to report from Faere?" Zora asks.

I'm surprised she'd even deign to speak to me. The hopeful part of me wonders if she wants to know what I've been doing because she misses me, but the realistic part says she's cutting to the chase.

"Yes. The tears in the veil are still occurring and a Light Fae family has been murdered. Deandra has demanded Amell use all his forces to patrol and we are arranging that now."

“These are trivial matters to bring before the gods,” Cato says.

“That’s not why I’m here.” I turn my attention to him, making one last search of Zora’s eyes for something to hold on to. They’re blank. “I met with the Scryer. He has had visions that cause me concern.”

None of the gods flinch. They’ve seen a thousand apocalypses throughout the universe, so one lowly visionary won’t pique their interest.

“He said the tears in the veil are not based in motive to bring harm to Faere, but rather are a distraction. He said someone or something is rising to power and will eventually have more power than all the gods.”

Circe scoffs. “That’s ridiculous.”

I ignore her brush-off. It’s not my job to tell them how to act in the face of this news, only to relay it. “He also said whatever is coming will be catastrophic.”

“There is nothing more powerful than the five beings before you,” Onyx says with confidence.

“Maybe,” I say with a respectful tone. “Maybe not. I’m reporting what he told me. He also said time is of the essence. He had no context for that, merely a feeling. If you have any inkling what this could be, I urge you not to ignore it.”

Veda steps forward. “Do you have an idea of what it could be?”

“No,” I reply. “But I would look to those who have the potential to want that type of power.”

“Amell,” Circe says confidently. “Zora gave him too much power, and now he wants more.”

Zora gasps and whirls on Circe. “He wouldn’t. He didn’t want the power I gave him or the rule of the Underworld.”

“But he commands all the Dark Fae,” Onyx muses. “And they are full of evil intent.”

“And he reigns over the Crimson River,” Cato adds. “That’s a weapon in and of itself.”

“It’s not Amell,” Zora snaps.

“What about a coup by the demigods?” Veda suggests.

They argue, Onyx and Circe convinced Amell is making a power move, Zora heatedly defending him, and Veda and Cato trying to interject reasoning.

“What about Rune?” I ask. I don’t yell it, but the power of my words causes them all to turn to me, shock on their faces.

“Rune?” Circe asks with a disbelieving laugh. “What could he possibly do?”

“He’s mortal,” Veda points out.

“And imprisoned,” Circe adds.

“He said big things are coming,” Zora whispers, and my head whips her way. Her gaze is clouded, as if lost in a memory. “I went to see him not long ago, and he said he’d kill us all and that big things were on the horizon.” She focuses on Cato, who has become the de facto leader, mainly because he’s the most vocal. “He also has supporters in every dimension.”

Not just supporters. He has priests, fae, and demigods who were extremely loyal to him and his brand of ruling. The worst of the worst.

The vilest, most evil, and most power hungry.

“Perhaps you should check on Rune—”

I’m cut off with a sharp rebuke by Onyx. “Thank you for the information, Maddox. You are done here.”

My mouth snaps shut, and I turn to leave.

“Wait,” Zora says and trots down the steps. She’s dressed in leather again, all black and unforgiving.

She reaches me and then walks past, a silent indication she’d like some privacy. I walk with her a ways from the others, wondering what they think of her wanting a few words.

When she stops, she glances over her shoulder at the gods and then back to me. “Did the Scryer say anything about Lucien?”

I’m touched she’d be concerned about him. “Only that we have the ability to bring him back. He couldn’t see any future with Lucien, though. And he also said that time is of the essence.”

“So, we have to move quickly?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

She chews on her lower lip in concentration and starts to turn away. I latch on to her wrist, not caring if the other gods are watching. “Zora.”

Her expression is bland when she looks back at me.

“Let me come home with you,” I ask.

There’s a flash of uncertainty, but she quashes it quickly. “No. I can’t go there anymore with you.”

I don’t try to reel her in closer to me because I don’t want to embarrass her in front of her brethren. If they knew how easily I could get her to submit with the right words or touch, it would lessen her in their esteem, and I’ll never do that to her.

So I try with words alone. “It doesn’t have to be anything more than a fuck. You know I’ll give you what you need.”

Her eyes soften a bit. “I know you could do that for me. But I couldn’t give you what you want in return, and that’s not fair to you.”

“Bullshit,” I hiss, and this time I do pull her closer. Not to touch or kiss her, but to glare at her. “Quit being a fucking coward, Zora.”

And right there... that gets a reaction. Not a softening in her gaze, but rather fear. “It won’t work,” she insists.

“Why not?” I demand.

“Do you love me?”

I’m so caught off guard by her question, I release my hold of her wrist and take a step back.

“Do you?” she demands and steps closer. “I need to know if you love me.”

It all comes down to this: a confession of feelings, and Zora wants the security of knowing if she falls, she won’t be alone. She’s unsure, and I understand that. I’ve personally never felt that level of care toward anyone, so it’s scary to give in to that admission.

But I want her more than anything, and I care for her more than anyone, so I have to be truthful. “Yes. I love you.”

I expect to see relief, followed by joy and possibly in the greatest of worlds, she’d leap into my arms and kiss me before proclaiming the same.

Instead, she shakes her head sadly. “That’s the problem. I don’t love you and I never will.”

In all my millennia of living, nothing has ever hurt me. War injuries, near death more times than I can count, and the loss of Lucien. All things that pinched but never hurt because I’m an immortal who has become immune to sorrow.

But fuck if that doesn’t hit right beneath my breastbone and knock the godsdamn breath out of me. It’s not merely the words—the denial of feeling the way for me that I do for her—but it’s the tone. It’s the absolute certainty in her voice and the way her eyes refuse to look away from mine that makes me believe her.

Rage sizzles in my veins, and I have the urge to destroy something. I think I might go pick a fight with a horde of demons so I can take out my wrath on them.

But before I leave, I make sure I have the last word. “Fuck you, Zora. I’m done.”

I bend distance straight into a dimension founded by ravager Dark Fae where lawlessness is the name of the game.

I'll be able to slake my bloodlust and maybe another type of lust, too, and I can forget all about the god who has chosen to live her life without a heart.

CHAPTER 14

ZORA

IT'S NOT THE words that hurt, it's his expression that does me in. It was devastation I saw before he blinked away and I feel Maddox's pain so deep in my soul, my lungs compress in on themselves.

I can't breathe.

Which is ridiculous because I could swim to the bottom of the ocean if I wanted to.

Panic seizes me, and I don't bother looking back at my brethren as they continue to discuss the message from the Scryer. I bend distance through dimensions to my home in Switzerland where I once again face the windows that overlook the north side of the Bernese Alps across from the Swiss plateau.

Only a few days ago, I was screaming out my pain and anger when Cato destroyed that dimension. Maddox was here to get me through it.

Now I can't breathe, thus I can't scream. I also don't have the strength to want to breathe, or stand, or even live like this. I fall to my knees, hands pressed against the hardwood, and try to ride out the despondency created by my rejection of Maddox.

The look on his face when I told him I didn't love him.

A burst of agony through my chest reinflates my lungs and I moan against it. It hurts so fucking bad to have done that to him. It is a million times more torturous knowing that I gave up the best thing that could ever happen to me in this life.

But I had to do it.

I can't survive in this harsh new world without tamping out my humanity. The only way to do that is to disconnect from those emotional ties because being hard, calculating and ruthless gives me the strength to make hard decisions and to stand up to the other four gods.

I'm sure it's the only way.

In fact, it has to be the only way because what I just did to Maddox means he'll never look at me again. Not with care or tenderness.

Not with love.

I'm vaguely aware of wet noses and warm tongues giving me snuffly kisses.

Uorsin and Mattia read my emotions and snuggle into me as I roll to my side on the floor. After several minutes of petting their fur and responding to the tentative nudges of their heads against me I realize I'm actually breathing again.

My chest still aches—a dull throb that keeps the same cadence of my heartbeat. I push myself up from the floor and consider finding Maddox. I should apologize and let him know the reasons why I can't love him.

It would be more lies though, because I love him terribly. If I didn't, nothing would ever hurt this bad.

"Time," I whisper to myself. All I need is time, and the memory of him and what we had—what we could have had—will fade away.

I rub each dog's head and ask, "You two hungry?"

They know what that means and start prancing with excitement. I turn toward the kitchen and come to a dead halt as I take in the large man standing there in black robes with the hood pulled low to hide the top portion of his face.

For a split second, when I first notice the man, I think it's Maddox, but the robes disabuse me of that quickly. Not his style, plus... I told him I didn't love him.

He wouldn't come.

In fact, he won't ever come to me again.

It's not this cloaked stranger's unwelcome appearance in my house that has me immediately on edge but the fact that he wears a piece of jewelry suspended by a thick chain around his neck. A mammoth gemstone of deep red hangs from a thick bevel, so dark it's almost black except where a thin ray of light streaming through the windows hits it.

The Blood Stone.

But that's impossible. Carrick has it.

Mattia growls low in his throat and takes a slow step toward the intruder who turns his head toward the threat.

Instinct kicks in to protect not myself but my dogs. With nothing more than a brief thought—a wish to make something happen—I immediately send them away, transporting distance to drop them safely in Carrick and Finley's home. It not only ensures their safety but sends a message that I'm in danger.

That split moment I spend sending my dogs away costs me. Before I can pull on my power, a wave of energy from the robed man slams into my body.

It doesn't knock me over though, merely wrapping my entire being in some type of numbing blanket that renders me weak as a baby. I search deep for my power and locate it, calling it to rise and break my prison. I feel strength returning and sparks crackle at my fingertips.

But then I am hit square in my chest and it feels like something is being pulled out of me. Whatever is happening is painful and I shriek against the invasion. I glance down and see a red glow emanating from my sternum, getting bigger... hotter.

Am I going to explode?

I look up at the man in the robe whose hands twist at something in the air. It mimics the twisting feeling in my chest and I gasp from the intrusion.

Is he pulling out my heart?

Will I die?

“Look at all that humanity within you,” the man murmurs seductively, and as his fingers claw in the air I feel them moving inside me, as if he’s feeling out all the parts that make me *me*.

Fear strengthens me, and I summon enough energy to blast this mountain apart, but shaking off his hold is enough. I start to push it outward, but I’m stunned when the robed figure cocks an arm, as if he’s going to throw something at me. His hand is empty, but when he makes the motion as if to hurl something my way, a glowing apparition appears. It sails through the air, like a thick rope at least four feet long.

Slapping me in the chest, it wraps around me twice, and as one end floats in front of my face, I’m horrified to see the head of a snake. It’s white with blue eyes and glows with golden luminescence.

Its head sways as if trying to hypnotize me. I attempt to blast it off with my power but it seems stuck. I can feel it bottled up with nowhere to go.

And then the snake opens its mouth, revealing two fangs dripping with pearly venom. I don’t even have time to scream before it strikes, landing a bite on that tender area where my neck meets my shoulder. The poison burns as it enters me and the snake doesn’t let go.

My head swims and I’m not sure if I’m feeling faint from the venom or the horror of what’s happening. It feels like someone’s stuffing my head full of cotton and my thoughts start to slow. It becomes difficult to form a coherent idea. I know I should be doing something to stop what’s going on but I’m not sure I care to. Too much effort.

The robed figure lifts his head but not enough for me to see his face, just his mouth as it curves into a leering smile. A low thrum of terror flows through me but quickly fades. I simply don’t care about being scared.

Or fighting, really.

Some god I am.

Or am I a god?

Perhaps I'm only a person after all.

“Good night,” the hooded man rasps, and then everything goes black.



WHEN CONSCIOUSNESS PRICKS at me, it's dread I feel first. I'm not sure why because as I poke at my memory I can't remember much.

I don't know why I should feel scared but I do.

My eyes flutter open and things are blurry. It's dim and I'm lying on a hard surface that's icy to the touch and slightly damp. Shivering, I push up with one hand and try to blink the fuzziness away.

“It took you long enough to awaken.”

I scramble to my feet at the sound behind me and almost topple over as I'm still dizzy. I reach out to steady myself against a wall, rough like rock, cold and wet with slime. There's no one there, so I turn slowly around.

“I imagine you're feeling... a bit out of sorts.” The words seem to echo, as if they're coming from all around me.

“Who's there?” I demand, noting that my words also have a certain reverberation.

Am I in a cave?

There's no answer, but light streams across the ground and I move toward it. An exit, I'm assuming.

It gets brighter the closer I get, but then I'm stumbling back as the man in the robes comes through the glow. I'm not sure if he stepped in from another dimension or if he's entering what appears to be a cave. The walls and floor are made of black stone.

“Who are you?” I demand. “And where am I?”

More importantly, although I don’t ask, is what did he do to me? I’m aware I have no power within. I feel fragile.

Human.

“Oh, I’ve missed you, little vessel,” the stranger croons as he lifts his hands to pull back the hood of the robe.

A handsome man with wavy brown hair down to his shoulders and dark blue eyes.

I gasp as he’s revealed to me. “Ariman.”

The dark immortal priest—Kymaris’s most devoted follower—smiles as he undoes a clasp at his throat and lets the robes fall to the ground. Underneath he’s dressed in fashion typical of the Underworld—brown denim breeches and tunic with leather belt and boots. Things are simple down there.

What is not simple is the Blood Stone that he still wears on a chain around his neck.

“How did you get that?” I ask, and I hate how shaky my voice sounds.

His head dips and he stares at the gem that almost gave Kymaris and the Underworld victory over the First Dimension. Since her defeat, it’s been locked up with Carrick and Finley.

Or so I thought.

Ariman lifts a hand and hovers it over the jewel. It was originally a chunk of the meteor, fashioned into a gem and dipped into the Crimson River to increase its powers. There’s no telling what it can actually do.

He doesn’t touch it. Out of fear or respect, I’m not sure. Without looking up at me, he says, “It was my greatest piece of magic... stealing this beauty.”

Greatest piece of magic? I thought that would have been him pulling off a changeling ritual that funneled dark magic into me for twenty-eight years so Kymaris could travel to the

First Dimension where she'd enact an apocalypse and take over the mortal realm.

But then again, that failed.

"How did you steal it?" I ask.

His gaze lifts to meet mine. "It's all about timing. Making the most of it, really."

Time is of the essence. That's what the Scryer had said.

"Stop being cryptic and tell me how you did it!" I demand.

Ariman's hand shoots out, and he grabs me by the front of my shirt, jerking me toward him. He lifts me to my toes and bends his head to sneer at me. "That's not the question you should be worrying about, Zorasha. You should be fretting over what this stone can do now that I have it."

My hands claw at his to loosen his grip, and I kick out with my booted feet. I'm as weak as a kitten, though, and he drops me to the ground, laughing.

"What did you do to me?" I gasp as I crab walk away from him. My back comes up against a stone wall, and my hand goes to the side of my neck where I can feel the puncture wounds. "What was that thing that bit me?"

"Do you know nothing of the history of the gods?"

I shake my head. "They've not told me anything. Just that they've always existed."

"They don't remember," he sneers. "They're so old and full of themselves, their origins are a mystery. They've forgotten more of their existence than they remember."

"But you know?"

"I know more than anyone. I've studied all the old tomes and texts, used magics to delve into the past. I saw it all... they were created from the same energy that formed the universes. Gatekeepers as oversight. But as their egos got bigger, their minds have weakened and they're shortsighted. Now they're nothing but pitiful shells."

“You’ve done something to them?”

“They got a little snake bite, same as you.” He laughs.

“What is that thing?”

“I call it Valshour, originally a heavenly creature that the angels used to subdue their one true God so they could oust Him.”

“It took away His powers?”

“Muted them. They thought it was for a long enough period they could enact their rebellion but He was mightier than they thought. When Kymaris was tossed out of Heaven and landed in the Underworld, she took one thing with her.”

“The snake,” I guess.

Ariman nods, smiling with triumph. “Valshour’s been in my care for thousands of years, waiting for the right moment.”

If the venom will wear off all I have to do is wait him out. Let my powers fire back up and incinerate him.

“Of course,” he drawls, as if he can read my mind, “I was able to strengthen Valshour with the Blood Stone. I learned from the mistakes the angels made. Your powers won’t be returning anytime soon as I now control them through this.” Ariman lovingly hovers his hand over the jewel.

“Impossible,” I gasp.

Ariman flicks his wrist, and a surge of magic floods me, right there for me to make use of. I don’t hesitate, drawing it in to unleash, but before I can launch it, with another wave of his hand, it’s gone.

He smiles maniacally. “It’s as I told you. I now command your power.”

“But why? What’s the end game?”

“I’m the end game.” I whirl, recognizing that voice, to find Rune behind me, and I’m so startled I bolt for the cave

opening. Except I forget about Ariman and run right into him. I bounce off his powerful body but catch myself from falling.

Rune watches me with amusement. “Surprised to see me?”

I shake my head, trying to slough off the residual fuzziness. Perhaps I’m dreaming, but no... Rune is still there.

He looks nothing like how he did when I visited him in prison. He’s clean, his long beard shaved, and he’s dressed in fine leather. He’s not a god anymore... that’s impossible... but he looks powerful.

And he looks confident, as if he’s ready to take over the world.

CHAPTER 15

MADDOX

THE IRON BAR catches me in the side of my face, hard enough that I spin toward the razor wire-covered chains that border this makeshift fighting pit. I stumble into them and they make a hundred slices across my chest and abdomen, blood flowing freely.

I shake my head, clear out the fuzziness that blow created, and swivel my jaw, which crunches at the joints. That actually fucking hurt.

I point at the ravager fae with my left hand, my right having been tied behind my back. “You’re going to pay for that.”

The patrons surrounding the ring from a ledge above cheer over my taunt, and I see money being exchanged as bets are increased.

I don’t scare the ravager. He is the cruelest, most vicious type of Dark Fae in existence. They were bred and evolved into fearless killing machines and once he committed to fight me, he knew it would be to the death.

Of course, I had to agree to have one hand tied behind my back because I’m a demigod and no fae can match my strength. I also had to agree that I would use no weapons and the fae could use whatever implement he wanted. Still, he’s at a disadvantage.

My jaw fractures are knit by the time I start across the dirt floor toward my opponent. He hisses at me while twirling the iron bar, waiting for me to get within striking distance.

When I’m five feet away, he circles the bar over his head and swings like he’s aiming for a home run and my head is the

baseball. I bend backward, the bar whizzing so close to my nose I feel a puff of air from it. The fae stops his momentum and brings the bar in a backhanded swipe, but I grab his forearm. With a hard twist, I snap both the bones above his wrist. He howls in pain and the bar falls to the ground. His fractures will heal but not as quickly as mine do.

I shove him away from me, unwilling to end the fight. I kick the weapon toward him and nod. "Pick it up. Let's go."

More raucous cheers and the ravager doesn't disappoint. With his broken arm dangling, he ignores the bar and moves to a wooden wall where other weapons hang. He chooses a long broadsword, which is smart.

It's heavy and with the right strike, he could cleave my head from my body. About the only thing in this ring that could guarantee him a victory and I can't say the thought of such a thing bothers me all that bad.

Yeah... I've been in the pissiest mood since Zora made me admit I loved her only to tell me she didn't feel the same. It was inherently cruel, but it hurt because I heard the truth in her tone. Now I'm questioning my own sanity because I can't understand what I ever saw in her to begin with that could lead me to believe it was more than just an amazing fuck. I only know I can't expel all the torment she's caused, so I'm concentrating on other types of pain.

The fae swings the broadsword and I'm so lost in my ire against Zora I barely react in time. I twist to the left and the tip of the weapon slices right down my triceps.

"Fuck," I roar in fury, mostly at myself for not paying attention.

Before my opponent can lift the sword, I backhand him across the face and teeth spray from his mouth. The force is sufficient to drive him down to one knee.

He uses the hilt of the sword to try to pull himself up but I launch a hard kick with my booted foot under his chin. The force of the impact snaps his head backward with such

propulsion, I hear his spine crack and his body thuds to the dirt.

He's not dead, though. That injury will heal in time, but this contest isn't over until one of us is dead. I grab the broadsword, heft it up, and bring it down on the ravager's neck. His head rolls a few feet away, staring at me with sightless eyes before his body starts to turn black.

As is the way with all Dark Fae, he burns up in a matter of seconds, turning to a pile of ash, which eventually disintegrates completely.

The spectators roar their approval, and more money exchanges hands. I toss the sword away and reach behind my back to undo the leather that had been holding my other arm hostage. Twisting my neck, I take in the large slice down my arm and grimace that I can actually see bone.

I roll my shoulders and walk out of the pit. Someone tosses me a towel, and I wipe as much blood off my chest as possible before I pull my shirt back over my head. It's a modern T-shirt from the First Dimension, pale blue and made of soft cotton. Blood from my wounds immediately soaks through it.

Oh well.

Outside the pit sits a large bar where I order a beer. It tastes like horse piss, but the Dark Fae in this dimension know how to make alcohol that will actually get me shit-faced. I inhale the first mug and slam it on the scarred wooden top, demanding another.

Glancing around, I notice a female ravager a few seats down. She's hot in a "I'll cut your balls off if you offend me" kind of way. Her hair is in war braids, but she's got a great pair of tits plumped up in a tight leather vest.

She appraises me, her teeth sunk into her lower lip, before nodding at the empty stool beside her. I'm ready for that type of invitation. I grab the newly poured beer and turn to move but come to a dead stop when I see Carrick standing there.

His gaze moves over me, his lip curling in disgust. “What in the fuck have you been doing?”

“Fighting,” I reply, and then nod over his shoulder. He turns to see the ravager watching us both. “Going to be fucking soon.”

Carrick glances at the fae and then back to me. “I think Zora might be in trouble.”

My stomach tightens upon hearing her name, but I ignore it. Pushing past my brother, I say, “Don’t give two fucks.”

His hand latches onto my arm—the one with the cut—and I wince against the pain. But I don’t pull loose because something in his eyes causes me to go still.

“Her dogs appeared in our house,” he says, his hand falling away.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, they just appeared. One minute, not there, the next, there.”

“Are they okay?” It’s not that my concern is only for the dogs, but their condition will determine my next questions.

“They seem fine. Freaked out, but fine. I immediately went to Zora’s house, and she’s not there.”

Unease prickles my skin, but there could be an easy explanation. “She probably had to do something and merely wanted you to watch them.”

Carrick cocks an eyebrow at me, and yeah... that’s stupid. Zora would never do that without explanation.

“I thought she might be with you,” Carrick says, watching me carefully for my reaction.

“I can assure you she’s not, nor will she ever be, so don’t make me the first one you come to when you’re worried about Zora.”

He blinks in surprise at my bitterness before his face hardens. “Seriously?”

I stare back at him resolutely.

“Fine,” Carrick snarls. “Finley and I will find her ourselves.”

My brother vanishes and I’m left with a blessed moment of no hard feelings. He’s gone. Zora’s gone. I vanquished my opponent and I’m going to get laid very soon.

But then fear creeps in that something bad has happened to Zora. She’d have never dumped her dogs with someone if it weren’t dire.

And if Zora dies, so goes the god who governs life and death. It could throw the universe into chaos. I should probably help Carrick and Finley... for the safety of the world.

“Fuck,” I mutter, my eyes cutting only briefly to the ravager who licks her lips. I don’t even offer her an apologetic look, sliding my beer onto the bar top and bending distance to the California cliff-side house.

When I arrive, I find Carrick and Finley, their heads bent toward each other in serious discussion. They turn my way, but I’m knocked aside as Uorsin and Mattia charge at me. Their nails clack on the hardwood floors and their barks sound relieved. Next to Zora, I’m their favorite, and it’s clear they’re distressed.

I squat, bringing both of the mutts into me.

“Eww.” Finley grimaces in disdain. “You’re getting blood all over my floor and the dogs, Maddox.”

My arm is still freely bleeding, and sure enough, the white patches on the dogs are smeared with red. While I prefer hot showers to clean up, I pull on my magic instead, knitting wounds closed, cleaning up my blood from me, the dogs, and the floor, and changing clothes.

“When did they arrive?” I ask as I resume stroking them.

Carrick looks to Finley for clarification. “Fifteen, twenty minutes ago?”

“About that,” she replies, pacing back and forth with a fretful expression.

“Nothing amiss at her house?”

Carrick shakes his head. “I went to see the Council after. They didn’t appear.”

Dread fills me. “What?”

“They weren’t there.”

“But... they’re always there.” I rise from my squat position and stare blankly out the window. The gods always appear at the gazebo when a demigod approaches. Scrubbing at the back of my neck, I turn to Carrick. “I’m going to see Amell. Maybe he knows something.”

“We’re going with you,” Finley says, and I don’t bother arguing with her. It’s faster if we just go.

We appear on the Bridge of Judgment but thankfully don’t have to search long for Amell. We’re led by a Dark Fae straight to his room where he’s in a meeting with the leaders of the Underworld cities.

He stands from his chair, his posture bracing for potential bad news, likely based on the expression on my face.

“Zora’s missing,” I say.

Amell curses and sweeps a hand to the table where the other fae sit. “Ariman’s gone. We were just discussing it.”

Finley makes a sound low in her throat—clear distress. As Zora’s sister, she knows all too well the pain Zora went through at Ariman’s hands. The priest tortured her for years, and while he did it at Kymaris’s behest, Zora told me once that he enjoyed inflicting the pain.

The thought of what he might do to her—

But no. Zora is a god, and Ariman is the weaker of the two.

Still... nothing here sits right.

“I know you’ve been watching Ariman for some time,” Carrick says to Amell. “Any idea where he’s gone?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Amell grits out. “I should have killed him, but Zora wouldn’t let me. She didn’t want to cause further unrest as he has his own supporters.”

And she didn’t want it to seem like petty payback for what he did, I think to myself. This was also something she told me as we discussed life while lying in bed together.

Yearning hits me hard but I push it away. That’s never happening again.

Carrick fills Amell in on everything, including the baffling absence of the other gods. My mind races, trying to figure out the next logical step.

And it comes to me like a fucking angelic revelation.

The key she gave me.

I conjure it to appear in my hand. Wrapping my fingers tightly around it, I envision Zora. *Take me to her.*

Nothing happens.

Realization sinks in that when Zora cut things off with me, she really cut things off. She must have removed whatever charm she had on the key for me to find her. It’s a message that validates we’re truly over.

A surge of anger overwhelms me and I want to abandon the effort to find her. She’s a god. She’ll be fine. There’s no need for concern.

Except those fucking dogs. She would have only sent them away if she was faced with grave danger. She would have protected them at all costs and to have sent them away tells me she didn’t think she could keep them safe.

“Maddox?”

I startle and turn toward Amell. “What?”

“I asked if you have any ideas where she could be.”

I shake my head. “No.” But then renewed inspiration strikes. “But I know someone who might.”

Everyone looks at me with hope.

“I’m going to see the Scryer in Faere. Carrick, you and Finley should go to the Council and wait for them to appear.”

“I’ll start gathering Ariman’s supporters,” Amell says with the promise of retribution in his tone. “A little torture should loosen tongues.”

I give him a curt nod and without waiting to see if Carrick agrees with my plan, I cross through the veil into Faere, coming out right at the Scryer’s cottage.

It’s nighttime in this realm, and while Nimeyah created a world without a sun, she was enamored of moonlight, so there’s always a large full one in the sky. Still, its rays don’t penetrate the forest canopy well enough for me to see clearly. Fortunately, Faush has lit sconces on poles lining the path to his home as well as others attached to his cottage. They glow not with fire but with a magical light conjured from energy alone.

The front door of his home opens, and the Scryer steps out. “Greetings, Maddox.”

“You foresaw me coming?” I ask.

He shakes his head, holding up a long curved pipe. “No... merely stepping out to smoke.”

“Zora is missing. So are the other gods, for that matter. We suspect a dark immortal priest, Ariman, has something to do with it. We have nothing to go on.”

“And you want to know what I can see?”

“Yeah, no matter how cryptic. I’ll take anything.”

Faush nods and pauses to strike a match to light his pipe. After he puffs on it a few times, he blows out a perfect smoke ring. “Come with me.”

I follow Faush around to the back of his cottage. He has a small stone patio with glowing torches all around that provide a cozy ambiance. A firepit in the center is surrounded by four wooden chairs. There’s no wood, coal, or other fuel source, but with a wave of his hand, flames leap up from the center. Faush takes a chair, but I remain standing.

Reaching into a satchel at his waist, he pulls something out and tosses it onto the fire. The flames turn purple and hiss angrily.

With his pipe clamped between his teeth, he leans forward and stares into the dancing licks of heat.

I wonder what he sees—or perhaps he hears something as he cocks his head to one side. Then he doesn’t move for what seems an eternity before waving his hand to extinguish the fire. It dies out immediately without any residual smoke.

Standing from the chair, he pulls the pipe from his mouth and faces me. I prepare for vague visions and nonsensical suggestions.

Instead, he gives it to me straight. “The Blood Stone is in play.”

“The fuck it is,” I growl. “It’s under my brother’s protection.”

“It’s not,” Faush says with such certainty, ice runs through my veins. “Ariman has it.”

“You’re wrong,” I insist. The last time that thing was in the wrong hands, Zora died. I refuse to believe we have to battle it again.

Faush is calm, unruffled by my denials. “I could be wrong, but it’s what I saw in the flames.”

Putting the Blood Stone aside, I demand, “Where’s Zora? Does Ariman have her?”

“I do not know,” he says, regret in his voice. “But she’s near the Crimson River. I heard the cry of the tortured souls within it.”

I shake my head. “No. Ariman would never take her to the Underworld. Amell would find her and tear him to pieces.”

“I’m sorry.” Faush puts the pipe in his mouth, puffs on it twice. “But that is all I saw.”

Rubbing my jaw, I consider my next move. Back to the Underworld to talk to Amell?

Or perhaps to the Council to see if the other gods have appeared?

“Time is of the essence,” Faush says thoughtfully.

“You’ve said that before. But isn’t that a given at this point?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I’m not sure it means to rush. But remember when I told you a great power is rising?”

I nod, because the gods felt it was ridiculous such a threat could be real. However, I can see Faush isn’t sugarcoating this.

“I get the feeling the timing will provide answers as well as spur hope for the future.”

“That makes no sense,” I mutter.

“Much of what comes out of my mouth doesn’t at first. You can only hope you receive other clues to help you reason it out.”

“And the power rising... is it Ariman?”

“He’s powerful, but not the only danger.”

I nod and give a slight incline of my head in thanks.

“I would not take these predictions lightly,” Faush warns. “I can see it’s going to have repercussions across time and dimensions if it becomes reality.”

CHAPTER 16

ZORA

RUNE LEERS AT me. “I suppose you’ve got some questions.”

Hundreds of them. But I’m too stunned at seeing him standing before me, looking nothing like the prisoner he was. While jailed, his dark hair was long and greasy. His beard was matted, his eyes dull.

The man before me now has electric-blue hair cut into a wide mohawk, and his irises—the same color and as bright as his hair—are glittering with vitality. Rune has a thin, black goatee surrounding his mouth and looks utterly nefarious by the cruel smirk he wears.

I have no clue if this is what he looked like before he was stripped of his title as I’d never seen him. While battle raged against Kymaris, Rune tried to kill Finley, in opposition to his brethren’s wishes, and he was immediately imprisoned. Of course, I died not long after that—a horrid affair whereby Finley had to drive a knife into my heart—and when I woke up, I was the god of Life and Rune was paltry a mortal.

I keep back from the former god, moving an equal distance between him and Ariman. “Would you truthfully answer my questions?” I ask.

I don’t trust him to do anything truthfully, but I’m stalling for time so I can figure out a plan. I try to call on my powers again, but I’m completely dead inside.

“I’ll absolutely tell you the truth.” I cock my eyebrow at him, scoffing with skepticism. “My quarrel isn’t with you, Zora. You’ve done nothing to wrong me. It’s your brethren I seek to destroy for stripping me of my powers. You didn’t ask for it.”

“No, I didn’t,” I murmur.

I would never have chosen this life for myself because it’s far lonelier than when I lived in the Underworld. Even having a sister in this dimension, the immense responsibility on me makes me feel removed from not only those I care about, but from myself as well.

Rune clasps his hands behind his back. “I can see you don’t want it. I saw the humanity inside you when you visited, warring with your new immortal nature. It’s a weakness, Zora. It’s why you didn’t strike out at Ariman when he appeared. You saved those wretched dogs before yourself and now look where you are.”

I hate that he’s proving my long-held suspicions: love is weakness.

“And you want that power back,” I say, not a guess but a flat-out statement of fact.

“Smart lady.”

I want to tell him such a thing is impossible. Only the gods have the power to strip another of their power or grant it to a mortal. But here Rune stands, freed from his prison and confidently telling me he wants to be the god of Life again. It’s nothing more than a potent reminder that I truly know nothing of this world. It means there are endless possibilities and I cannot doubt that Rune has the ability to do as he desires.

My gaze cuts to Ariman, who wields the Blood Stone. Why does he have it and not Rune?

“How did you get it?” I ask, the question not pointed to either in particular.

Rune nods to Ariman. “My most trusted and devoted follower. His loyalty is only surpassed by his knowledge and the power he acquired through stone magic when he was made immortal. It really was a spectacular feat.”

I look to Ariman. His chest puffs out under Rune’s praise.

“How did you do it?” I demand.

Ariman moves to stand before me. “I used time to my benefit.”

“Stop talking in riddles,” I snap savagely. “Spell it out.”

Ariman slowly walks around me, and I follow him by twisting my neck. “I used magic to rewind time. I went backward and stole the Blood Stone.”

“Time travel?”

“Time manipulation,” he clarifies as he comes back around to face me. “I revisited the moment when Carrick opened his vault to place the gem in it for safekeeping. I waited, suspended between the past and present where I could not be seen. The second he placed the stone in the vault but before he could close the door, I stopped time.”

“Stopped time? You mean, you froze him?”

“No,” he says with condescension, as if I can’t fathom his greatness. “Time stopped where nothing advanced or retreated except for me. It’s far more complex than simply freezing those in my immediate vicinity. I stopped the universe from advancing for a few seconds.”

My mind races as I consider the repercussions of that claim. If he did, in fact, stop everything from moving, the gods would have felt it. They would have known something had happened and investigated.

Wouldn’t they?

“I don’t buy it. The gods would have felt it. They would have stopped you.”

Ariman tips his head back and laughs, a hand going to his stomach. “Foolish girl.” I should be offended he calls me a girl and not a god, but I’m reduced to nothing more than a young woman with no confidence or ability to help herself. “This only proves you know nothing of the gods. In their vanity and some would argue, laziness, they don’t bother themselves with much at all.”

That's not true. They're constantly appraising the worlds over which they govern. Otherwise, Cato wouldn't have destroyed Calandria.

Unless... that was no more than alleviating boredom.

I feel sick to my stomach and more alone than ever. I have no one I can depend on to get me out of this situation, for the gods are the only ones powerful enough to have an inkling of how to help me.

Maddox flashes through my mind. He loved me once and would've moved mountains to save me, but that bond has been broken through my own fault, my misguided notion that I had to cut myself off from such things. I'm sure Finley was beside herself with worry when Uorsin and Mattia appeared, but she and Carrick will struggle to figure out what's going on.

And if the gods are indisposed as Ariman claims... then I truly am alone.

My gaze moves from Rune to Ariman. "What happened after you stopped time?"

Not that I really care, but I don't want to see what happens to me after they're done gloating about their achievements.

Ariman lifts his chin and smiles with pride. "I stepped from the present into the past and grabbed the Blood Stone from under Carrick's nose. I left a replica and retreated to my own present. I restarted time and Carrick closed the door on the fake gem, none the wiser he'd been duped."

"Unbelievable," I whisper.

Ariman seals the rest of his story. "I used the stone to bust Rune out of prison, juice up Valshour to take you and the other gods prisoner, and here we are."

I shake my head, something not making sense. "The Blood Stone shouldn't be strong enough to take down a god. It wasn't strong enough for Kymaris to bring down the veil without sacrifices being made."

Ariman and Rune exchange a knowing look, but it's Ariman who explains. "The Blood Stone is far more powerful now than what it was. Every god should fear it."

"What? How?" I exclaim because he's not exaggerating. He believes it.

"While Kymaris sacrificed other lives to power up the stone, you and Finley made the ultimate sacrifice. When you decided to die to end Kymaris, and Finley plunged the knife into your heart, whereby giving up her long-lost twin sister, that was the ultimate power move in ending the apocalypse. Your death destroyed Kymaris who was wearing the stone, and all that love, nobility and selflessness went into an object already teeming with dark power. It combined the light and the dark, making the Blood Stone—and he who claims it—virtually invincible."

My heart sinks upon hearing this. If Rune is able to take all the gods' powers and has the Blood Stone, the universe will be plunged into chaos. Say what you want about the gods being egoists with little regard for their own responsibilities, at least they were a checks-and-balances system.

They at least have some semblance of a moral code.

Rune does not and with unlimited power in his hands, I fear it will be the downfall for all mortal beings.

"You know," Rune muses as he taps a finger against his chin and in a complete change of subject, says, "It's a testament to how upstanding that demigod is. Carrick never once opened that vault again. I thought for sure he might use it for himself, but he always was an idiot. I look forward to settling some scores with him."

I whirl on Rune in a fit of rage and despair and slam my hands into his chest, attempting to push him back. He's caught off guard and rocks slightly, looking down at me in surprise.

"You go near Carrick or Finley, and I'll reduce you to dust," I snarl.

Rune chuckles with amusement. “It’s beyond precious that you think you can stop me.” He then taps the end of my nose with his finger. “Your powers are mine to control.”

“You mean, Ariman’s to control,” I say, casting a sly glance at the priest. “He has the Blood Stone. I’m assuming he’s the one with the knowledge to restore you to a god. I’m curious why he doesn’t just give those things to himself.”

Rune blinks at me, as if what I said is the most preposterous thing he’s ever heard. “Because he’s devoted. He would never.”

I turn fully to Ariman. “Why are you his lackey? You’re the one with all the power right now.”

It’s all I’ve got... try to sow seeds of dissension.

Ariman seems to consider my words, and for a long moment, he stares at me. But then he crushes any hope I might have of turning those two on each other when he says, “Much like you, Zora, I have no desire for that type of responsibility. I like to dabble in my magics and be the right hand of the one on the throne. The power behind the power, so to speak.”

“So, what exactly is the evil plan?” I ask because I can’t stand another minute more without knowing my fate. At this point, I’ve got no way to save myself and no one knows what happened to me.

Rune steps before me, his hands palming my cheeks. I’m repulsed but I refrain from pulling away as I don’t want to show weakness.

Bending his head close to mine, I’m terrified he’ll kiss me but instead he stares at me intently. “I’m going to take your powers and it will be easy, because you’re still quite human at your core. It practically shines from within you and that makes you weak and easy to plunder.”

Everything I did to try to strengthen myself... cutting Maddox out of my life... all for naught.

There's no stopping the slight quaver in my voice. "And once you have my power?"

Rune lifts his mouth, presses it to my forehead, and releases me. "You'll die, little one. I'm sorry to say."

"What about the others?"

"Once I have your power, theirs will be easy to tap. I'll take them one at a time and when nothing is left of them but dried husks of their former selves, I'll be the only deity who matters."

"Lame," I murmur, and he blinks at me in surprise, his hands falling away. "You didn't even insert an evil laugh at the end."

Rune's hand flies out and he grabs me by my throat. I'm so shocked I suck in air, except his grip is so tight my lungs remain empty. He reels me in closer, vibrating with fury, as if he might kill me, but his voice is surprisingly gentle. "I like your naivete and sass. You're like strawberries and hot peppers." He bends closer, sniffs along my neck. "I bet you'll taste good when I'm sucking you dry."

I tear free of his grasp only because he chooses to let me go, not because I have the ability to compete. We're both former gods without our powers, but he's still bigger and stronger than I am.

"Come," he orders, motioning with his hand. "Let me show you something."

Rune turns and moves through a crack in one of the walls, and I have no choice but to follow. Ariman brings up the rear.

I'm led through a dark tunnel made of the black stone, and it's reminiscent of the caverns in the Underworld, but I can sense that's not where we are.

The path we're on is narrow, winding, and inclines upward. The black stone walls are barely wide enough to fit us walking single file. The ceiling of stone arches only about a foot over Rune's head.

The path steepens and my calves burn as we climb, and it's not my imagination, but it's actually getting warmer.

Then suddenly, we come out into a large, round cavern cut from the obsidian. It's enormous, at least a hundred yards in diameter. To the left is a large opening and the stench of sulfur wafts in on a subtle, humid breeze. It's dark outside, except for a warm glow off to the right of the cave opening. Perhaps a large fire?

My attention is riveted across the cavern on what looks like four large, gilded cages. The bars are thin and delicate, decorated with scrolled vines and flowers. Inside each is a god.

It appears they're unconscious and a cry of distress escapes me. I push past Rune and he doesn't stop me as I run to the first cage that holds Circe. She's on her side, eyes closed, mouth slightly ajar.

Without regard for myself, I grab a hold of one of the bars, my intent to reach through and touch her, but the minute my skin touches the gold, I'm repelled backward with a painful shock that feels like a direct funnel of electricity. My body is thrust into a stone wall, slamming into it hard enough I should have several broken bones. The fact that I don't tells me that while I might not have my powers, my body is still very much immortal.

I manage to keep my balance but my entire body tingles with aftershocks and nausea wells in my stomach.

"Should have mentioned not to touch the cages." Rune laughs. I lift my head to see him walk up to Cato's cage. The large man barely fits, his body twisted at odd angles.

"Are they alive?" I ask, pushing up on one arm to watch.

Rune studies Cato quietly before answering, "For now."

"Valshour has rendered them incapable of anything but a deep sleep," Ariman says as he steps into view. The glowing snake is now wrapped around his shoulders, its head hovering in midair while its tongue flicks in and out. My shoulder

tingles with the memory of its sharp fangs. “Should they start to awaken, they’ll get another bite.”

I watch as Rune walks along the cages. He pauses at each one and observes the god inside as he or she slumbers.

I glance around, ever aware of Ariman and the snake.

Curiosity gets the better of me and I walk slowly toward the cave opening. I glance back and find Rune watching me, a placid smile on his face. He knows I’m not going to escape because as I reach the mouth of the cave, I see we are sitting high above the ground inside of a mountain. The drop is a good thirty feet and not one I’ll make willingly.

I inch out onto the ledge to get a better look. As far as the eye can see, flat ground covered by what looks to be black sand. Large boulders jut in an uneven pattern, and to the right bubbles the Crimson River. I gasp.

The river flows from the horizon, which looks to be many miles away, widening the closer it gets to the cave. It’s what provides the red glow, a tumbling mass of molten lava that slithers right up to the base of the mountain where it defies gravity and travels upward. I hold on to a rocky outcropping and lean out a bit more. I twist my neck to see the river rise up the stone face and disappear through a gap between another mountain.

Turning back, I ask, “Where are we?”

“I thought surely you’d know,” Rune says as he joins me. His hand sweeps outward toward the barren wasteland. “That used to be a fertile ocean of blue, and this beach was once white sand. A tropical paradise created by—”

“Micah,” I say with sudden realization. I heard the story from Finley. Micah was a Dark Fae who fell in love with a Light Fae named Charmaine. They were two of the earliest immortals to get a piece of the magical meteor, and it was quite large.

They fashioned the stone into items to hide the true nature of the powerful magic they possessed. From the meteor they

formed an ordinary chalice and box, but Micah created a beautiful black-faceted gemstone. He set it in gold and hung it on a chain around Charmaine's neck as a symbol of his love.

Being that they were from different races—Light and Dark Fae—they created a dimension all their own to live in for eternity. They invited others to join them where peace and harmony reigned in a beautifully formed paradise.

Except their story turned tragic when Charmaine fell in love with someone else. Filled with rage and betrayal, Micah used the box to destroy their dimension, blasting away all the beauty and leaving nothing but black sand and craggy mountains to match his feelings. He then called forth the Crimson River from the Underworld, pulling on it with mighty power so it flowed into his land and up the mountain where it cracked in half and the river disappeared.

In a rage, Micah trapped Charmaine inside the gemstone he had given her in love, then dipped the jewel in the Crimson River where it turned dark ruby. The magic of the river, coupled with the power of the stone, made escape impossible for Charmaine.

Micah attached the stone to his chalice and cried into the cup every night. He would drink his own tears, which made the darkness inside him insidious. Over time, such malignancy turned him into a cloven-hoofed monster who wandered his barren land, refusing to release Charmaine from the ruby stone.

All of that came to a head when Carrick and Finley traveled to Micah's realm to steal the chalice and stone. It was their best plan of attack to stop Kymaris from tearing the veil and releasing the wrath of the Underworld.

They battled Micah with the help of family and friends, eventually wresting control of the chalice and stone from him.

During the war for control of the magical items, three notable things happened:

Charmeine was released from the stone and reunited with the one she'd fallen in love with—Carrick's demigod brother, Lucien. They had but moments with each other before Micah killed her.

Lucien, driven insane by rage and grief, engaged Micah in battle. The demigod and Dark Fae shook the earth as they fought, but in the end, Micah threw Lucien into the Crimson River where he went under and was never seen again.

Micah was ultimately defeated, and the chalice and stone went into Carrick's possession, albeit for a short time, until Kymaris gained control of it. Lucien, however, was the greatest loss, and my heart hurts to remember how driven Maddox has been to get him back.

No matter what happens to me, it's my greatest hope that he can be pulled from the river and restored to his family.

"If you listen closely enough," Rune says, jarring me out of my recollection, "you can hear the crying souls in the river."

This I know as I've been near it many times while visiting the Underworld, which is its source.

"Can you hear Lucien?" Rune taunts. "I'm thinking I'll toss Carrick and Maddox in as well so they can join him."

I choke down my hatred because to engage him is to encourage more of the same. The best I can do is keep my wits about me and look for an opening that could save me and the gods... and the world.

CHAPTER 17

MADDOX

THE GODS' REALM is as it ever is with its harmonious scenery, but the minute I step into it I can tell it's empty of anything godlike.

Up ahead, I see Carrick and Finley at the gazebo. Finley paces the marbled floor with obvious worry and Carrick watches her with even more concern.

My sister-in-law spots me first and runs down the steps. "Did you learn anything?"

"Yeah... quite a bit," I say as I meet her at the base of the steps where Carrick joins us. "I assume the gods haven't shown themselves?"

Carrick shakes his head, his arm going around Finley's waist to pull her in. She looks like she's about to cry and not because the gods are missing.

Her only concern is Zora.

"The Scryer says the Blood Stone is in play, and Ariman has it."

"Ridiculous," Finley says dismissively. "It's locked up tight, right where it was when we took possession of it."

"We'll need to check. More importantly, he said Zora is near the Crimson River."

"So we'll search the Underworld," Carrick says.

"She's not there," I say with confidence. "Assuming Ariman has her, he'd never keep her there."

"But how does he have her?" Finley asks with frustration. "She's a god. He's not."

“The Blood Stone,” Carrick says.

“He doesn’t have the Blood Stone,” Finley snaps and then immediately softens. “I’m sorry... it’s just, I can’t believe it because that would be too horrific. And... you know what he did to her all those years while in the Underworld. He tortured her, abused her...”

Finley lets out a tiny sob, and my gut twists thinking about what he could be doing to Zora right now. Assuming he has her, but if Ariman has the Blood Stone, he probably does have her—and possibly the other gods too.

Carrick pulls Finley into his arms.

I scrub my hand over my jaw. “The Scryer said a power was rising that’s very dangerous. Someone other than Ariman.”

Carrick locks eyes with me, and an unspoken message passes between us.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I say, and then bend distance to the prison holding Rune. It takes only a brief glance to see it’s empty, and I return to the gazebo. “He’s gone.”

“Fuck,” Carrick mutters, and Finley pulls back to look up at him in question. “Rune,” he explains.

Okay... think. Put it all together, Maddox.

I muse out loud. “If Ariman has the Blood Stone, which we can confirm with a quick trip to your vault, then he’s done something to it to make it more powerful. It could be strong enough to free Rune from prison but not to take down five gods.”

“Or maybe it is strong enough,” Carrick says. “We never did understand the full nature of its power. Kymaris tried to use it to pull down the veil, but really... what do we even know about it? It was a myth until we found one obscure reference to it.”

“So, what do we do?” Finley asks. “Because every second we sit here and hypothesize is wasting time. And I cannot lose

Zora again.”

Having most recently lost Zora myself, I understand Finley more than she’ll ever know.

“You two go to the vault and verify the Blood Stone is, in fact, gone,” I instruct them. “I’ve got to do something, but we’ll need Amell, so meet me at his castle.”

“What are you going to do?” Finley asks.

“I’m going to get some weapons,” I reply, shooting Carrick a look. He knows exactly where I’m going.

“You could incur the gods’ wrath,” Carrick warns.

“Well, they’re not here to stop me now, are they?” I quip as I turn away from them.

“Wait,” Finley exclaims, lunging for my arm. “Where are you going?” She looks to her husband, then to me again. “Why would you incur the gods’ wrath?”

“Because I’m going to steal their weapons. We need all the help we can get.”

“No,” Finley says, pulling hard on me. She knows stealing from the gods could mean instantaneous death. “I’m not letting you do that for Zora.”

“I’m not doing it for Zora, I’m doing it for you,” I say.

Finley’s lips press together, and she gives me a chastising look. “Liar. I don’t know what happened between you two, but —”

“Nothing happened. I’m going to help you get her and the other gods back, and then everything will be fine. They’ll even forgive me for taking their weapons.”

“But—”

“No buts.” I look over Finley’s head to Carrick. My message is clear.

Get your woman and get out of here. We’re wasting time.

Carrick takes Finley's hand and they disappear, assuredly bending distance back to his house to look in the vault.

I head to the grotto, knowing that the minute I step inside, I could be enacting my own death sentence.

I walk past the gazebo, over a grassy knoll, and along a winding path that opens to a seaside cliff where a set of stairs carved into the stone lead downward. I've only been here one other time when Onyx loaned me a weapon to aid in ending the Peloponnesian War. The Spartans were far more generous in their devotions to her than the Athenians, so I was sent to help guide Lysander and his forces to victory. The weapon seemed benign but was powerful, a magical sextant that helped the Spartan naval fleet deliver a crushing blow to the opponent.

But I don't want the sextant now.

I know the gods have far more formidable weapons in the grotto.

The stairs wind down the front of the cliff face to a stone shelf that sits twenty feet above the rolling waves. It opens in an inverted V shape, just large enough for a man to fit through. I skirt along the slippery edge as ocean water flows inward and sloshes against my pant legs.

About ten yards in, it opens into an underground grotto with a pool of clear water dappled in rays of sunlight reflecting from the ocean outside.

Along the stone wall sits shelves with various weapons created by the gods. They are given out to the demigods to assist in whatever battles the gods have a vested interest in, and I see the sextant there.

I'm not interested in those, however.

What I want is at the bottom of the pool—five weapons that belong to the gods themselves, and no one may touch them. They've never once been loaned to a demigod.

Long ago—many more eons than anyone can count—the gods fought alongside their followers in battles. Not that there was much of a fight since their magical powers were enough to obliterate an army, but they had symbolic weapons they carried and sometimes bloodied. But as the universe expanded and dimensions grew, the gods grew tired of getting their hands dirty and created the demigods.

Those five supernatural weapons have been in this pool for longer than I've been alive, and they don't look like they'd be worth the risk. Crusted in barnacles and sea fungus that wave back and forth in the current, to the casual observer they look like they might disintegrate upon touch.

Cato uses a lightning bolt, Onyx a battle-ax, Veda a spear, Circe a bow and arrow, and Rune used a mace. It's purported that the weapons never miss their target and I wonder if Zora will have her own weapon at some point.

Assuming she makes it out alive.

It will be me, Amell, and Carrick who will storm in to find Zora and the gods, assuming we can figure out where they are. But I'll need a fourth weapon for Finley, as I know she will not sit back and wait. I expect she and Carrick are already arguing about it.

I study the water, wondering if there are any magical protections in place. Perhaps there's a vicious sea monster in one of the shadowed recesses waiting to tear me up when I dive in.

Neither of these options—if true—would stop me. I do choose the easiest route first, though, and attempt to bend distance to the bottom of the pool. Keeping my focus on the weapons, I force the spot I'm standing on and the sandy ocean floor to pull together.

Nothing happens.

“Well, fuck,” I mutter, assuming there's some distortion in how deep that pool actually is, or perhaps it's protected by a

spell placed by the gods. Not sure why they'd bother because they know no demigod would ever steal from them.

And yet... here I am doing that very thing.

I quickly remove my clothes so I'm not weighed down, take a deep breath, and dive into the water.

The first thing I realize once I breach the surface is that it's not as shallow as I had thought. I dive, down and down and down, but I don't seem to get any closer to the weapons. My arms pull at the water, my legs kicking hard. I might be an immortal demigod, but I still breathe oxygen, same as humans.

Finally, I get closer to my treasure, but as I'm reaching out for the battle-ax, something grabs my ankle. I'm so startled that a rush of air expels from my lungs, and I turn to see a tentacle tightening around my entire leg. It pulls me backward, and I curl in, using my hands to try to pry it loose.

Another tentacle appears through the swirl of bubbles that's been created and goes for my hand. I bat it away and decide to make a harder push for a weapon. I pull hard with my hands, kicking my free leg and calling on every bit of my super strength to get me there.

I'm relieved when my fingers close around the handle of the battle-ax, ignoring the barnacles that slice into my palm. I twist on my captor and bring the blade down on the appendage. It slices through cleanly, and a jet of blood swirls before me in the water.

I wait for it to come back, but whatever the creature is, it seems to have retreated.

My lungs burn, and I'm starting to see stars. I make a renewed push to the bottom and grab the lightning bolt, the spear, and the mace. The bow and arrows I leave behind because those aren't good for close-quarter fighting.

Loaded down with the crusted weapons, I plant my feet on the bottom and look up to the edge of the pool. I squat, gather my resolve and my strength, and I push up hard from the sand.

I'm propelled through the water so fast that I shoot out and onto the rocky ledge, rolling several feet with a clatter of metal weapons as they fall from my hands.

When I stop, I'm surprised to see that now free of the ocean, the weapons are completely clean and shining, as if brand new. Perhaps it was all an illusion, although I distinctly remember the barnacles slicing my skin.

Regardless, I'm out of the pool and armed with what I hope is enough power that two demigods, a Dark Fae, and an immortal with some magical skills can take on Ariman, Rune, and the Blood Stone.



AMELL, NYSSA, CARRICK, and Finley await me not on the Bridge of Judgment but on the banks of the Crimson River, which forms at the base of the obsidian castle. It was here where Amell pulled forth a dragon made of lava and fire, incinerating his enemies when they tried to rise against him. Zora told me the story after it happened, and that was at the time I hated her talking about Amell in any form or fashion. But deep down, I admired the move.

Carrick looks at the weapons I'm carrying. "How hard was it to get them?"

"Not hard at all. Just a small tangle with a tentacle or two." In ordinary circumstances, that might have produced a laugh. Everyone looks grim as hell. "Obviously, no gods showed up to stop me."

Amell steps forward without invitation and takes the mace. Finley reaches for the spear, but I shake my head. "The lightning bolt. Pretty sure it shoots electricity, and you're not getting close to a battle. You need to stay at a distance."

"But—"

"No buts," Carrick growls and takes the bolt to examine it. He points it toward the river, and a stream of neon-blue light streaks forth. When it hits the flowing lava, shrieks of torment echo around us, and a wave of molten heat rises up to

intercept. It explodes into sparks and hisses before settling back into a normal flow. Carrick lifts his eyebrows in surprise before handing it to Finley. “Point and shoot.”

Carrick takes the battle-ax, which leaves me the spear. I’m good with that. The way I feel right now, I could rip off Rune’s head with my bare hands. Although with him having the Blood Stone, I might be better off with a shield of some sort.

“What about me?” Nyssa asks.

Amell turns to her, shaking his head. “You can’t come.”

“Why not?”

He puts his hands to her face and pulls her in to kiss her forehead. “Because you’re too precious for me to ever put in danger. Besides... I need someone to maintain the peace here, and the citizens of the Underworld like you better.”

Amell kisses her mouth, and she nods with disappointed understanding.

“Now what do we do?” Finley asks.

“Zora’s not here in the Underworld,” Amell says confidently. “The Scryer said she was near the Crimson River, but I’ve had my fae search every square inch.”

“Then the Scryer is wrong?” Nyssa asks.

Finley shakes her head. “Not necessarily. The Underworld isn’t the only place the Crimson River exists.”

I blink in surprise that I hadn’t thought of it before. “Micah’s realm.”

She nods. “It’s completely uninhabited... desolate. The perfect place to stash some gods as hostages, assuming they haven’t already...”

Her words trail off because she doesn’t want to voice the one possibility none of us will accept. That they’re dead already. I have no clue if the Crimson River could destroy a god, but I’m not willing to entertain the thought.

“So, we go to Micah’s realm,” I say, ready to march through the veil right now.

“Would help if we had a plan first,” Carrick points out. “If we go in there, we have to follow the river toward the mountain caves, which is where they’ll likely be. They’ll see us coming.”

“Then we should enter where we went in the first time—the western side of the mountains,” Finley says. That was when they went in to steal the Blood Stone and lost Lucien in the Crimson River. “Boulders will shield us from sight.”

“And there’s a path upward into the cave mouth, assuming that’s where they are,” Carrick adds, kneeling onto the sandy bank and drawing a crude diagram.

Amell and I weren’t there when they went in. I’d been called away by Circe and Onyx to help them meddle in the fates in an alternate dimension that would most likely precipitate a civil war. Amell was still thoroughly on Kymaris’s side at that time and would have killed any one of us, not helped us.

For the next hour, we discuss how to enter the realm and the best way to attack. The main problem is, we have no clue how powerful the Blood Stone is or how it could be used against us. Rune was a mortal man while imprisoned, but he has to be juiced up by the stone. He could be as strong and indestructible as we are. Pitting him, Ariman, and the stone against me, Carrick, Amell, and Finley is still weighed heavily against us. At this point, we can’t rely on the gods being in the mix. We have to assume they’re incapacitated, if not dead.

I push down my feelings of grief at the thought Zora could be no more.

The stone—and all the unknown that comes with it—is the game changer. We don’t know what we’re walking into, and despite our immortal natures, there’s a good chance we won’t walk back out again.

CHAPTER 18

ZORA

“COME,” RUNE SAYS, taking my wrist and pulling me from the ledge. My instinct is to resist and so I do, jerking hard to escape his grip.

If I’m a god still with my strength and he’s but a mortal man, I should be able to free myself. But his hand clamps so tight, I feel the pressure in my bones, and that tells me he’s not a mere human anymore.

He’s clearly been gifted with something from the Blood Stone, but to what extent, I don’t know.

I struggle the entire way back into the cavern where Ariman awaits. He seems so placid and accepting of his lesser role, despite the fact he has a snake that can render a god temporarily useless and the Blood Stone around his neck. Part of me wants to slap him—tell him to wake up and realize that it would be foolish to hand that power over to Rune.

Then again, better than anyone, I know how evil Ariman is. Not sure he’s the better of the two.

Still, if I could get them to turn on each other...

Rune slings me forward and I stumble. I can’t catch myself and my knees crack hard against the stone floor. Rolling to my side, I see my pants are ripped and my skin is scraped raw, although it doesn’t hurt. Before my eyes, the wounds heal in a matter of seconds.

Yes, I’m still a god, but a weak one. No internal powers, my strength no match for Rune’s, but I still have the ability to heal. I still feel indestructible, at least physically.

“Let’s begin the ritual,” Rune says to Ariman, who nods and strides toward me. I try to scramble away as he’s got the

snake still draped around his neck and I don't want it to bite me.

Ariman grabs my upper arm and hauls me to my feet. The snake seems placidly content with its head tucked under the priest's neck.

I'm dragged the length of the cave, past the gilded cages holding the gods.

Circe, Veda, Cato...

"Zora." I'm shocked to see Cato lift his head, eyes bleary. "What's... going... on?"

Every word is an effort to get past his lips.

Ariman mutters a curse, stopping before the cage. Without lessening his hold on me, he takes the snake in his other hand and gently lowers it to the floor of Cato's prison. It slithers in, and Cato doesn't have the strength—or maybe even the understanding of danger—to fend it off. The snake's mouth splits widely, fangs gleaming, and they sink into Cato's neck. He doesn't make a sound, eyes simply rolling into the back of his head as it thuds to the floor.

Holding his hand out to the cage, Valshour obediently returns to Ariman and crawls upward to drape around his neck again. I shrink backward as far as I can, causing Ariman to laugh.

"Don't worry, little one. He won't bite you again."

"Excuse me if I don't trust you," I snap as he resumes dragging me toward a slab of stone at the far end of the cave. I hadn't noticed it before.

"It's true," he insists. "In fact, I'm going to need your powers to return."

Hope surges within me, and I glance over my shoulder at Rune who remains near the cave mouth. Is Ariman going to stage a coup?

I'm on the verge of asking when Ariman pushes me down onto the stone slab that looks eerily like an altar.

I rebel against such an idea and start to scramble off the other side. Ariman tightens his hold and my arm flies backward with no regard that I might hit the snake. I catch the priest in the chest with my fist and it's hard enough—and still with enough of my god strength—that he rears back.

I'm free.

My feet hit the cave floor, my hands pressed to the stone as I square off against the priest across the altar. His eyes flash with the promise of retribution, but if I'm going to make a stand, it might as well be now. I learned something important from him and for whatever reason, he needs my powers to return.

Which means he won't kill me just yet. Perhaps I can escape the cave and hide out until the snake's venom wears off. And then it's only a matter of avoiding the serpent and hoping the Blood Stone isn't more powerful than I am.

All hope is dashed when the stone at his chest starts to glow, a light inside turning it from reddish black to a bright crimson. Ariman doesn't move a muscle but it feels like hands are on me. Dozens of them, and I'm lifted off the ground, flipped on my back, and slammed onto the surface of the shrine. My head cracks painfully and the breath is knocked out of me. A clanking sound echoes in the cavernous chamber and I lift my head to see thick chains wrapping around my wrists and ankles before pulling tight.

It takes no more than a few seconds before I'm completely incapacitated, spread-eagle on the altar. I test the bonds by pulling on the chains and they don't budge an inch. I can tell I still have my strength because if I pull hard enough, I bet I could dislocate a shoulder joint. This tells me that the Blood Stone is stronger than me at this point since I'm sure it is solely responsible for my current positioning.

Satisfied I'm going nowhere, Ariman turns to Rune. I roll my head so I can see them both.

"I need to perform another empowerment with Valshour. He's getting depleted and the gods are waking."

Rune shakes his head as he walks to us. "No. I want to start the ritual for me."

"But if the gods regain their power while—"

Cocking an eyebrow at Ariman, Rune says, "You'd question me on this?"

"I'm merely pointing out—"

"Once you merge me with the Blood Stone, it won't matter if the gods wake up or not."

Merge him with the Blood Stone? Fear slices through me at what that could mean.

"Don't do it, Ariman," I exclaim, drawing their attention. "Don't give him that power. You have the stone. Send him to hell with it."

There's something that flickers across Ariman's face and I think he might be considering something, but then Rune barks at him, "The ritual. Begin it. Now!"

Ariman makes a deferential bow of his head. "As you wish."

I huff out my frustration, dropping my head back on the stone slab. I try a few calming breaths but when Ariman approaches Rune I twist my neck to look their way. I need to watch everything in case there's a lapse.

A weakness I can exploit.

My gaze cuts to the cages, but I can only see the farthest two holding Circe and Veda. Neither god is moving but it doesn't mean they won't at any time.

Rune shrugs out of his leather overcoat and unbuttons a leather vest underneath, dropping it to the ground. Ariman has

obviously given him some power from the stone as Rune is healthy looking. Well-muscled body, skin glowing with vitality, and a confidence in his bearing that increases my despair. His hands are loose at his sides, his bare chest puffed as if he's trying to replicate his bearing as a god.

Ariman positions himself before Rune, facing him. The snake is still curled around Ariman's neck and with a flourish of his hands, a glowing orb the size of a softball appears in his open palm.

A wind flows around us, ruffling Ariman's long hair. He holds the glowing orb up high and chants in Aramaic. It gets brighter, its glow starting to cover Ariman's body. With his other hand, he palms the dark red jewel, and with a sharp yank pulls it free from the chain. Rune's eyes are pinned on the gemstone, glittering with anticipation.

Ariman continues chanting, the words so low I can't hear them. I can't think of anything related to the Blood Stone other than what I already knew, that it's been strengthened by the sacrifices Finley and I made. Now holding light and dark power mixed with the infinite power of the Crimson River in which it was dipped, there's no telling what it can do.

At this very moment, despite being chained to this altar and my powers depleted, I've never felt more inept because I can't even call forth knowledge from which I might glean some important help.

My attention is drawn to the stone, which now glows a bright crimson. The gold filigree edging, as well as the bail, fade away until there's nothing left but the faceted jewel itself.

Ariman holds it up, rays of scarlet light shooting from the facets and playing across Rune's bare chest. I gasp when Ariman suddenly thrusts both the glowing orb and the Blood Stone toward Rune... actually slams them right into the center of his chest. A bright light flashes and the orb is gone but I can still see the red gem pulsing under Ariman's fingers.

Rune's head falls back and he groans as if in great pain, his fists clenching tight. The stone glows impossibly brighter, more light streams shooting out of each facet and coloring the walls of the dark cave.

Rune's face contorts in agony and Ariman screams, reeling backward. He holds his hand, now scalded red with blistering skin.

My eyes slide to Rune's chest and I'm stunned to see that the Blood Stone is stuck there. No, more like recessed in with pink puckered skin around its edges.

It's become a part of him.

The rays of light draw back into the gem and it pulses... turning dark, then light, then dark again.

Like a heartbeat.

Rune sucks in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, his fists unclenching. His head raises, gaze pinned on Ariman, and a smile breaks slowly across his face. "It worked."

Ariman doesn't seem surprised and inclines his head as if to say, "You're welcome."

Rune claps his hands together and rubs them with a gleeful smirk. "Now, let's get to the real fun."

His eyes come to me and I struggle against my bonds, even though I know it's hopeless. While Ariman moves to the end of the stone slab where my head rests—that foul snake watching me with hunger—Rune comes to the side. My attention flicks back and forth between the two of them, knowing I'll scream if one of them touches me.

"The timing is critical," Rune says.

"I'm well aware," Ariman replies, irritation in his voice.

Rune's eyes blaze with unholy power. "Then what are you waiting for?"

Ariman nods and moves closer to me. He bends and places his hands on the sides of my head.

I thrash, trying to dislodge his touch. “What are you doing? Don’t touch me.”

His hands clamp hard, preventing me from moving. He bends over me so when I look up, his face hovers close. As he stares at me, he directs Rune. “Get on top of her.”

Those words make me fight with all my might. “No!” I scream, thrashing as Rune climbs on top of the altar and straddles my thighs. “Get off me.”

“Relax, Zora,” Rune murmurs as he places his hands on the stone at my shoulders and bends over me. “I’m not going to take what you think I’m going to take. At least not right now.”

I buck hard, catching him by surprise, and almost dislodge his body, but he doubles down by sitting upright. All his weight goes on my thighs and I’m pinned flat. His own hands hang loose at his sides as he stares down at me.

There’s no lust or desire for my body and I’m grateful. Rather, there’s an unholy light in his blue eyes making him seem a bit unhinged.

Except he’s not. He’s rational and confident in his course. The glow of the Blood Stone dims and brightens, dims and brightens, as if he’s hungering for something.

I’m startled when one of Ariman’s hands moves from the side of my head, fingers trailing down my neck until they press over where the snake bit me. The puncture wounds have long healed, but the minute he touches that spot, my skin burns.

Ariman lifts his gaze to Rune. “Are you ready?”

Panicked, I demand, “Ready for what?”

I’m ignored, and Rune nods. The gem in the center of his chest glows more intensely, no longer dull in its rhythmic beat. It gets so bright I can’t look at it directly.

That’s okay because I’m sidetracked by a sensation within my body. It feels like an awakening and at first, I don’t

recognize what it is.

But then, it slowly clicks into place.

My powers are returning and Ariman must be doing something to reverse the effects of Valshour's venom. I don't know if he knows that's what's happening, but I'm not going to worry about what-ifs. I'll be ready to launch whatever I can as soon as it's available to me.

I was with Finley once—back when I was human—and she stopped at a gas station. I stood outside with her while she filled up the tank, explaining to me how such things worked, given I'd lived my entire life without ever seeing a single car. I remember watching the numbers tick upward in price and gallons as the gas siphoned from the pump into her tank. That's how it feels to me now—that inevitable waiting to get maximum achievement before I'm willing to turn the key to ignite my powers.

“Now,” Ariman says, and I think he's talking to me.

But no, his gaze is on Rune and the unthinkable happens. As my powers flare to life within my body, an incandescent beam of light the color of the Crimson River shoots from the Blood Stone and into the center of my chest. It feels as if someone has driven a spike into my sternum and my back arches in pain.

And then I feel my powers slowly rippling through my body, congregating in my core and expelling through my chest. A thin stream of smoky white light travels up the red beam, moving from me into Rune.

“Yes,” Rune whispers as he tips his head back in ecstasy. His mouth slackens as the first wave of my godly powers enters his body.

“No!” I scream, the piercing word ripping out of my throat with such violence, it feels like I swallowed razor blades. I thrash against Rune, but he's too heavy.

My eyes roll back to look at Ariman, who wears a victorious smile. He senses my stare and returns it with

triumph. “Remember when I used to funnel dark magic into you?” he taunts softly, his fingertips gently rubbing at my neck. “Now I’m taking it away from you and I’m not sure which feels better to me.”

A tear slips out of my eye, running over my temple and disappearing into my hair. When I was a child and Ariman performed his rituals, I would sob my heart out because it hurt so much. As I got older, I learned to control my emotions because I knew how he relished hurting me.

I blink hard, refusing to let another tear slip. I’ll not give him that pleasure.

If I die, I’ll do it bravely.

CHAPTER 19

MADDOX

CARRICK AND FINLEY have to lead Amell and me through the veil into Micah's realm. They've been here before... that fateful trip where Lucien lost his life in the Crimson River but Carrick came away with the Blood Stone.

Now he's here again and the Blood Stone is in play once more. It's the single-most threatening opponent we've ever faced.

I look around the barren wasteland of this alternate dimension, not surprised we don't see Ariman, Rune, or Zora. Carrick said there was a cave Micah lived in and if they're here, we assume that's where they'll be. It's dark, cold and without color, nothing but endless black sand that Carrick said used to be an ocean but now extends to the horizon, punctuated with large boulders dotted over the landscape, some the size of buses.

In the distance, the Crimson River flows from the farthest point, over the dead sand sea and right up the side of a craggy stone mountain, in defiance of physics, where it disappears into a crevice.

"That's where it happened?" I ask, nodding at the molten lava ambling slowly up the mountainside.

Where our brother died?

Carrick lifts a finger and points away from the mountain, at least a hundred yards. "Over there. We fought Micah on the beach."

I know the finer details and don't need them repeated. It's enough that I can see where it happened, trying to imagine

where Lucien went under the frothing waves of fire and where his tortured soul might even be now, wailing in agony.

“What’s the plan?” Amell says, rotating his wrist to twirl the spiked mace. I can tell he’s eager to lodge it in either Ariman’s or Rune’s brain, although he’d get more pleasure if it was the priest’s.

“About half a mile down, there’s a cave,” Carrick says. Through the gloom and with only the dull illumination from the glowing river, I can’t make out anything but the shadowy outline of the jagged base of the mountain. “That’s where Micah lived. We didn’t go inside though, as Lucien and I climbed above and dropped down after he was lured out. It wasn’t a big area, so I’m not sure if that’s where they’ll be.”

“If they’re even here,” Amell points out.

“She’s here.” We all turn to face Finley, who grips Cato’s lightning bolt. “I can feel her.”

“Is that a twin thing?” I ask.

“More than a twin thing,” she murmurs, attention fixated down the beach where the cave would be. “When you stick a knife in your sister’s heart—literally and not figuratively—because she begs you to, it creates an even deeper bond. Add in the fact that she breathed new life into me after she became a god and I can tell you... she’s here, and she’s terrified.”

Her last words trigger a feeling inside me that I’ve never felt before. I’m not sure what it is, but if I had to put a name to it, I might call it panic. As a demigod, fear is impossible. I don’t have the capacity to be scared of anything, and yet now I feel like the clock is ticking faster and we’re losing control.

Gripping the spear, I say, “Let’s just fucking go... bend distance to that slight outcropping past the boulder that looks like a camel’s hump.”

Carrick nods. “Surprise attack is going to be the best. Maddox, Amell, and I will go in together. Finley, you stay back and—”

“Not staying back,” she growls.

“At least stay behind us,” he replies, his tone harsh and unyielding. “We cannot assume it’s only Ariman and Rune. They have not only legions of Dark Fae supporters, but Ariman can twist damned souls into demons.”

Finley tosses Cato’s lightning bolt in the air where it flips twice before she easily catches it. It glows bright in her hand and I’m impressed. “I’ll blast them all back to hell,” she says defiantly.

Carrick sighs and wraps a hand around the back of Finley’s neck before pulling her in to kiss her forehead. “Don’t you get killed.”

“I’m immortal,” she murmurs. “It’s fine.”

“We’re all immortal, but it doesn’t mean we can’t be destroyed. Please, be careful.”

“You be careful,” she says back and then goes on tiptoes for a brush of her mouth against his.

There was a time, only a few days ago, that watching their affection left me yearning for the same, but I don’t feel it now. While I very much want to save Zora, and the other gods if we can, I know she and I don’t have a future together. She made that quite clear, so after we get her the hell out of here, I’ll move on with my immortal life without another thought for her.

“Let’s go,” Amell says, and he disappears.

I bend distance to the designated point, appearing right before Carrick and Finley do. Without discussion or hesitation, we hug as tight to the rocks as we can, rounding our way into the cave mouth. I lead the group, peering around the edge to look inside.

Luckily, the Crimson River casts enough light that I can see it’s empty. There’s nothing but a large table with a chair turned on its side. That’s where Micah was reported to have

cried into the Blood Stone chalice each night as he stared out at the desolate landscape.

I growl in frustration as I walk around the table. The others follow me in, pacing the perimeter of the chamber.

“Here,” Amell says, and I whirl his way. “There’s an opening. I feel a draft.”

Sure enough, there’s a narrow tunnel between two sheets of rock. Looks innocuous at first glance, but as my eyes adjust to the dim, I see a glow beyond it. It’s a tight fit, but I turn sideways to scuttle through and thankfully end up in a wider tunnel. In the lead, I cautiously follow the path that curves and winds with periodic sconces attached to the rock walls, lit with magical energy.

It’s the first real sign that someone is, in fact, here, and I’m heartened. Behind me comes Amell, Carrick and then Finley. I know Carrick will stay last because no matter how much he wants to save Zora, his primary goal will always be to protect his wife.

The path seems to go on forever and inclines upward, leading us from the belly into the heart of the mountain. I pick up the pace, frustrated with not knowing what lies before us, but then it starts to lighten up ahead indicating perhaps another opening in the mountain.

A scream pierces the air, laden with fear and pain. It echoes down the tunnel, washing over me and prickling my skin with goose bumps.

Zora.

I take off running toward the sound of her voice, the thunderous beat of footsteps pounding behind me.

Without warning, I round a corner and the tunnel opens into a massive cavern. I take in a wide opening to my left, the reddish glow indicating we’re in the part of the mountain where the Crimson River flows outside. I spot four gold cages before zeroing in on what is no doubt a sacrificial altar.

There's no time to analyze the blinding rage that sweeps through me when I see Zora lying on it with Rune atop her. I don't even slow my pace, sprinting toward them... three, four, five more strides... and I launch my spear at Rune, continuing to run at them.

It slices through the air so fast, it projects a whistling, which unfortunately gets Rune's attention. The javelin was on track to catch him in the temple, hopefully obliterating his brain, but he throws up his arm at the last second so the eight-inch steel tip buries deep in his biceps.

The force is enough to knock him off Zora and it's only then that I notice the beam of red light connecting his chest to hers with a stream of misty white in the center. I have no clue what it is but the connection holds physical hostage over her body so when Rune flies off, her body arches toward him as if being pulled by the red light.

She screams again in pain and I see that her arms and legs are shackled. The pull on her muscles and bones must be excruciating.

A bolt of lightning whizzes by me, so close and powerful that my hair lifts. Finley has let loose the power of Cato's weapon and I think it's to hit Rune, now standing, but instead it slices through the stream of light connecting his body to Zora's.

The tether breaks and Rune roars with fury as he pulls the spear from his arm and tosses it aside. The wound heals up so quickly and thoroughly, I'm stunned beyond measure. Even the blood disappears, but that's not what seizes my attention.

It's the pulsing red gemstone lodged in the center of his chest, right where the light connected to Zora emanated from. Was he using that to kill her?

Or rather... take her powers back into himself? Did he succeed?

Rune pins his murderous gaze on Finley, overcome by rage that she broke his link to Zora. He conjures up a swirling mass

of writhing light in his palm and doesn't even need to cock his arm to launch it. It flies at her faster than any bullet, catching her square in the chest. She's lifted from the ground and thrown backward across the cavern where she skids to a halt mere feet from the cave opening. It's her lifeless body that has Carrick sprinting past me toward Rune, bellowing curses. Rune's attention turns to the one living being he hates the most in this world and shoots the same orbs of energy at him.

Carrick uses the battle-ax to swat each one away as he hurtles toward the former god of Life. Every time Rune's magic hits the weapon, it explodes into a million sparks. Given that, and the fact that Cato's bolt fractured the energy of the Blood Stone, tells me the gods' weapons can at least stand up to this new power Rune has.

I glance at Finley, intent on checking on her, but Zora yells, "Maddox, watch out!"

I don't turn toward her voice but instead rely on my instinct to turn toward the other threat in the cave—Ariman. But my attention is taken by something flying toward me. It's long, sinuous and glowing white. I think it's a thick rope meant to ensnare me, but to my disgust, I quickly realize it's a serpent. I'm barely able to turn sideways, bending backward so the creature sails past me where it thuds against the wall. Right behind its trajectory, a thousand daggers fly at me.

Though not enough to kill, they'll incapacitate. I start to throw up a shield of inverse magnetic energy, but there's already one there.

It's Amell, standing at my side, his palms out. The knives stop inches from the shield where they vibrate in the air as their trajectory is defeated. Glancing behind us, Amell takes in the snake slithering our way, then over to the altar.

"Free Zora," he shouts as he turns his attention to Ariman. The knives spin several times in the air, their points now facing the priest. Amell sends them flying, but I'm already sprinting toward the altar without waiting to see if they meet their mark.

I'm vaguely aware of Carrick defending himself against Rune who is hurtling powerful streaks of energy at him. Carrick's ax slices so fast through the air, it's a blur as he deflects them all.

I reach the altar to find Zora gasping with wide eyes. "It's back. It's back."

"What's back?" I ask as my hands go to the shackles around one wrist. I feel the magic within them and it's beyond strong. Ordinarily, I'd be able to crush such an obstacle, but they're not budging.

"My power... it's back," Zora says, her voice stronger. "He was taking it... and now... it's back."

And just like that, the shackles disintegrate into silky charcoal sand.

I help Zora sit up, a hand to her back. While her skills removed her chains, she still seems frail. She rubs at her wrists. "You came for me."

"We all did," I say tersely, even as I'm overwhelmed with relief she's okay.

"Maddox," Carrick yells, and I spin toward him. He doesn't say another word as he fiercely battles Rune, but the way his attention keeps cutting to the other side of the cave tells me his attention is split.

Rune hurls a ball of energy at Carrick and at the same time makes a slicing motion with his other hand. Carrick deflects the magic but in needing to look at Finley again—willing her to be okay—he doesn't defend against the large gash that opens across his chest.

Not a killing blow, but it knocks my brother backward.

I spring into action, running toward them. I throw my own blast of power at Rune, just enough to distract. Carrick tosses me the ax as I pass him. It's barely in my hand before he disappears, bending distance to the other side of the cave to Finley.

Teeth gleaming in a malicious smile, Rune motions with his hands for me to take him on. He's confident in his power and abilities, although Carrick was holding his own. Granted, he was mostly defending, but I intend to go on the offensive and end his miserable life.

CHAPTER 20

ZORA

CHAOS IS ALL around and I'm frozen in place as I take it all in. Moments ago, Rune began pulling my powers from me. Somehow Ariman reversed the venom, stoked my magic, and Rune started siphoning in a well-choreographed thievery. I was powerless to stop it.

And now... I'm free, and my closest friends in the world are here to save me.

My first concern is Finley, who took what would be a lethal hit from Rune if she were a mere human. I'm relieved to see Carrick helping her sit up. She looks shaky but is pushing him away, a gesture for him to rejoin the fight.

My oldest friend, Amell, battles Ariman. While the priest is one to always rely on his dark magics, Amell is going after him with a mace. I know his preference would be to pummel him to death, and if given the option, that's what he'll do.

And Maddox is engaging Rune... the most dangerous one here. I never thought he would come to rescue me after the way I cast him aside so cruelly. Different from Carrick, Maddox has conjured a golden shield made of pure magic—not metal—by which to refract spells Rune casts at him, all while inching closer to slice at him with the battle-ax. I recognize the weapons of the gods and have no clue how they came to have them, but I'm grateful.

But there's something I know that none of them do, and it's only because I felt it inside my body when Rune was on top of me.

The Blood Stone is far more powerful than they could imagine, having grown in intensity and breadth. They've not

seen what Rune can do with it yet and I'm afraid of what's yet to come.

I, however, am at full charge, whatever power Rune had pulled from me snapping back into my soul the minute Finley severed the connection. It's no contest where my efforts will go, for Rune is the biggest danger.

I search around and locate Valshour wriggling across the stone floor toward where Amell and Ariman are fighting. There's no doubt in my mind, it intends to defend the dark priest.

Focusing on the creature, I lift it in the air. Writhing violently from the unexpected confinement, it hisses so loud the sound rises above the magical blasts and weapons clanking. My gaze whips to Rune as I sling the reptile at him. My aim is on the mark, its jaws opened wide and prepared to sink into Rune's face.

But the former god is too quick, able to keep his focus solely on Maddox but somehow hold up a hand to stop the snake in mid-flight. He makes a squeezing motion and the snake falls limp before dropping to the ground in a useless coil. The blue eyes go milky with death.

Maddox swings the battle-ax in an arc at Rune's head, who manages to stop it inches from his face with a hard grip on the middle shaft. For a moment, they're locked tight, the ax not moving an inch either way. Their muscles strain as they glare at each other over the edge of the blade.

And then it becomes clear that Rune has indeed been holding back all along. As if waiting for the perfect time to showcase his might, he laughs maniacally.

The Blood Stone in his chest starts glowing, brighter and brighter—from crimson to salmon to pale pink and finally white. It shines so intensely his entire body seems to erupt in light.

Impossibly, his frame gets bigger, muscles swelling and bones lengthening. The ax starts to move with Rune twisting it

inch by inch so the blade angles toward Maddox's head.

Jaw locked and straining, Maddox lends his other hand on the grip in an effort to stop its momentum.

I don't want to see the outcome of this battle of wills and immortal strength. I bend distance to Maddox's side and with both palms facing Rune, I slam as much power into him as I can. I'm heartsick to see that while it knocks him backward, it doesn't do so by more than a foot. The ax is wrenched free from Maddox, now clenched in Rune's hands. He arches it over his shoulder, prepared to swing.

I pull on my magic to launch it at him again, but I'm stunned when Maddox slams his shoulder into mine, knocking me aside. He faces Rune, his intent to take him on without my interference.

He's protecting me.

Rune laughs as if Maddox is a sentimental fool, shaking his head. "And here I thought Zora was the only one with a soft heart."

Maddox grimaces, as if the idea of having any care for me is abhorrent, but Rune doesn't see it. His eyes flick to something beyond my shoulder, and Carrick and Finley are running toward us. I spy Amell, who has Ariman pressed to the stone wall, the handle of the mace against his throat.

Rune looks back to me. "I guess I need to even up these odds a bit, don't I?"

I don't like the delight in his tone nor the nefarious grin on his face. I'm startled when Rune makes a fist and slams it downward, as if he's striking something into the ground.

The mountain rumbles so violently I stumble sideways and a crack opens in the black stone. It separates me, Maddox, and Rune from the others and then widens. I scramble backward as large chunks fall into a dark abyss, and then my skin prickles when I hear low growls echoing from below.

I glance at Finley, gripping Cato's lightning bolt with white knuckles, and then look back to the fissure.

It's with horror that I see hundreds of oily black creatures crawling over the edge. Demons of every nature you could conceive, twisted straight from the dark souls stranded in the Crimson River that runs up the mountainside.

Misshapen bodies, fangs leaking poison that hisses when it hits the shale floor, and claws so sharp, they could eviscerate a grown man.

I'm stunned to inaction, but Finley lets loose power from the bolt. She sweeps it left to right, mowing down the first swarm so they explode first into sparks and then black ash. It jolts me out of my stupor and I fire up my own power, but a loud grunt catches my attention.

Rune and Maddox going at it again—Rune swinging the ax repetitively and Maddox narrowly dodging the sharp blade.

There's no hesitation. I rush to help Maddox and have to trust that Carrick, Finley and Amell can handle the demons. I flash right into the thick of things, appearing between Maddox and Rune and deflecting a jolt of energy from the gemstone. I refract it back to Rune, and he doubles down, focusing his ire at me. He conjures throwing stars, more than I can count, spinning so fast they blur. He launches them with such stunning speed, I barely have time to react.

But then I'm knocked out of the way, Maddox shoving me hard with his hand. Several of the stars slice into his skin, embedding into muscle. He grunts with pain but then uses his power to turn the mini weapons to dust. His wounds start to knit, but it takes precious seconds of his attention. Rune launches another attack of energy from the Blood Stone. I attempt to jump in front of Maddox, and once again, he knocks me aside while throwing a hand up to repel the force.

“For fuck's sake, Zora!” Maddox yells while straining to keep up the shield. “Stay back. I can't worry about you and take him on at the same time.”

Worry about me?

“Go help Carrick and Finley,” he orders, and he sounds so assured... as if Rune is nothing but a fly for him to swat at.

I glance back across the crevice, and I’m horrified to see the horde of demons still flowing out.

Carrick conjures two double-bladed swords and slices through them like butter. They’re not smart or overly strong, but they are in multitudes with no end in sight.

Finley uses the lightning bolt to mow them down, keeping them off Amell who is so focused on battling Ariman he doesn’t even see them coming.

But Finley and Carrick won’t be able to hold all of them off. There are simply too many.

I can’t hesitate. I do as Maddox asks and bend distance to the opposite side of the crevice to help stem the flow of evil pouring from the rock. I settle in closer to Finley because even though the gods gifted her with immortality and she has some magical abilities, she’s the most vulnerable of our group. While she wields the bolt, it can only destroy, not protect. I throw power out alongside her, destroying demons as soon as they crawl over the crevice edge. Carrick slices and dices those that make it past us.

And then an idea strikes. I blast a swath through a new group of creatures emerging and then take the few seconds of respite to look around the upper edges of the cave.

There... a ledge. Perfect.

I turn to my twin, grip her hand tight, and bend distance with her to the ledge.

“Hey,” she yells in irritation as we land on the narrow outcropping of rock. “What are you doing?”

I don’t dare tell her I’m keeping her safe or potentially saving her life. Those are primary, but my secondary reason is nearly as important. “You’ve got the most powerful weapon. I need you at a high vantage point where you can see

everything. You blast the demons if they get too close to any of us.”

She nods, doing exactly as I ask by blasting a group of demons slinking toward Amell.

I prepare to bend distance back down into the fray, but hesitate, turning to her. “And if you get a clear shot at Rune... take it.”

“Got it,” she replies, and that’s all I need to hear. I’m gone in an instant, appearing behind Amell. He’s swinging the mace at Ariman but the priest keeps blocking it with his spells. His magic is ancient and powerful, and I know the king of the Underworld well. He’d rather tear Ariman apart, not only for facilitating this entire thing but as payback for what he did to me for twenty-eight years.

I reach an imaginary hand inside of Ariman and quickly locate the deep well of magic he’s accumulated over millennia of practicing the dark arts. It pulses angrily at my touch, and his eyes widen with horror from my invasion.

Now you know how it feels, bastard.

I give a hard yank, one forceful rip, and it explodes from his body in a swirling mass of insidious power I hold in my palm.

Ariman shrieks and stumbles back from Amell, who frowns at his opponent, before glancing at me. I close my hand, snuffing out the ancient power as if squishing a bug.

“No!” Ariman screams in agony.

I turn to Amell. “Now you can do as you wish with him.”

Stepping back, I enclose the two immortals in a shielded dome so Amell can mete out justice in his own slow, torturous way. I can’t feel bad for the priest, though. He had it coming.

From above on her ledge, Finley points the bolt at the crevice and lays down a swath of fire that incinerates the creatures before they climb out. They shriek in fury as their cries evaporate into hisses of death. My sister is brilliant.

Carrick is easily dispatching the remaining demons, and I dare not look at Rune and Maddox yet. There's one more thing I have to do now that my powers are back.

Though the distance isn't but about thirty feet, I don't waste time running, instead bending distance to the cages where the gods are being held. I hold my palms out close to the glowing edges and feel the tingle of the Blood Stone magic holding them in. I push closer, and it burns.

Fuck, that's strong.

I shore up my resolve, push aside all doubts circulating around my ability to be a powerful deity, and I blast the cages with everything I have. It's not easy like quashing Ariman's power was, but I feel it tremble before me. I strain from the effort and remind myself the Blood Stone is indeed powerful, but I'm a god. More important, some of that power the gem holds is due to my sacrifice, which means it's only strong because of my grace.

That last realization suffuses me with the confidence I need and I almost cry as I see the glow start to dissipate until it's completely snuffed. There's no magic left binding the gods, only the delicate scrolled bars of gold, which any one of them could easily break.

Onyx moves first, rolling to her side and groaning. I don't waste time aiding her. She's going to have to figure things out quickly because Rune needs to die.

I search for the demigod and former god across the crevice, smoky from the melted demon bodies. Every once in a while, one crawls to the top, and Finley blasts it. Through the haze, I blarily make out Rune and Maddox locked together, but no details. I'm relieved Maddox is still alive and battling, but I'm well aware that the Blood Stone gives Rune an edge.

Softly blowing out my mouth, I send a gust of air to clear the smoke and I give an involuntary cry of fear for what I see.

The battle-ax is lodged deep in Maddox's back, his face contorted in pain. Rune's hands are clamped on his shoulders,

and the red beam of light that was shooting from the Blood Stone into me is now boring into Maddox's chest. There's no mist of white going in the opposite direction.

No give-and-take the way Rune did to me.

I survey Maddox's condition, and while a battle-ax in the back won't kill him, whatever Rune is doing with the Blood Stone is draining his life. His skin is pale as snow, cheeks caving inward before my very eyes. His legs buckle, but the energy from the Blood Stone keeps Maddox upright as Rune destroys him from the inside out.

"No," I whimper in anguish as I watch Maddox's long blond hair turn gray, his eyes fading to a dull, muddy green as they sink into his head. His body gets thinner... wasting away until his clothes hang off him.

Despair holds me for only a second before white-hot rage explodes inside me. I lift my face to Finley up on the ledge. She's curbed most of the demons coming out, but some still escape. My attention flicks over to the protective dome I put around Amell, and I'm not even shocked to see he's torn Ariman to pieces. He's drenched in the priest's blood and looking satisfied. Carrick continues to slice through the remaining demons oozing from the crevice.

I lift my hand high in the air and summon the bolt from Finley.

CHAPTER 21

ZORA

FINLEY CRIES OUT in surprise as Cato's bolt flies from her hand, rockets through the cavern, and lands in my grip. I whirl a quarter of a turn, aim it at Rune, and give him a blast.

And not just any blast. I'm not only throwing the power of the weapon at him but loading it with all my godly fury.

No, not just my godly fury. Every bit of the humanity left within me—all my feelings for Maddox—and the strength of courage I had when I sacrificed my life for the world. I hurl my sheer will, demanding that the universe back me in my quest to destroy this monster, because I'm the only one who can do it.

My aim is true as the full force of my rage hits Rune so hard the connection between him and Maddox is shredded. The god goes flying, corkscrew twisting in the air until he slams against a stone wall so hard rocks crumble and fall.

Maddox slumps to the ground, unmoving.

There's no part of me that believes it will ever be that easy and I bend distance to Rune, pulling his position to me so violently, the crevice that expelled the demons slams shut with a low rumble.

Rune pushes up, rising to face me as I step from my previous point to come toe to toe with him.

"You've got some teeth, little god," he growls. "I'm going to enjoy knocking them out."

The gemstone in his chest glows, and tiny invisible fingers probe at me.

But my powers are fully in control, not dampened by some hell snake and he's unable to latch on to them.

Rune draws his arm across his chest and launches a backhand at me. I've never felt stronger as I brace for the impact, and when it comes, my teeth stay in place and my head barely rocks.

And it's a beauty to behold the confusion on Rune's face.

"Impossible," he hisses. "I took your powers."

I have no clue why he thinks that. I felt them snap back into me when Finley severed the connection, but perhaps he didn't. Or maybe he's so pumped on the power of the Blood Stone he's mistaking its strength. The year he spent as a mortal may have caused him to forget what it felt like to be a god.

"You took nothing from me," I say, slapping my palm on the jewel. I dig my fingers into the flesh knitted around the edges. Rune screams as I yank the Blood Stone from his chest, leaving a gaping wound over his exposed sternum. He drops to his knees, moaning in pain with his hand pressed to stop the blood flowing from his chest. I squeeze the stone, the pulsing crimson glow showing between my fingers. It's an immensely powerful object, and yet I easily crush it as if it's finely spun glass. My hand compresses so tightly, I grind the gem to dust and toss it away unceremoniously.

Carrick is beside me, and I don't think twice. I shove Cato's lightning bolt at him. "Finish the bastard."

I'm vaguely aware of Amell and Finley appearing. Carrick strides with purpose toward Rune, now screaming profanities. More than anyone, Carrick has the right to strike Rune dead for all the ways he tortured him for hundreds upon hundreds of years. The gods who imprisoned Rune before I was created wanted him to suffer the length of a mortal life behind bars, and they might disapprove of me condoning his death.

But none of that matters now.

I rush to Maddox, lying on his side next to the stone altar where I was supposed to die. My heart stutters when I get a

good look at him, dropping to my knees at his side. I pull the ax from his back and toss it far from us, gently moving him.

If a hard death had a picture, it would look like this. Maddox's skin is dry, leathery, and gray. His hair is almost pure white and so brittle that when I rest my hand along the side of his head, it breaks off. His eyes are closed, sunken into his skull, and his body looks to be but a skeleton—skin stretched taut over bone.

What did Rune do to him?

I encircle his wrist with my shaking hand, but it's so thin and bony, I'm afraid it might break. I search for a pulse... that beat of a heart even immortals have to indicate the truth of their existence.

Nothing... I feel absolutely nothing.

Tears wet my cheeks, the first time I've ever cried. Not even when my twin had to plunge a knife into my heart to save the world did I shed a tear. And yet the prospect of a world with no Maddox is too painful to consider. I had thought I'd expelled the last of my humanity when I called upon its strength to pull the Blood Stone free of Rune's chest.

If that's the case, how come my heart feels like it's breaking?

I slide my palm against Maddox's, gently lace my fingers with his skeletal ones, and dare not squeeze. I glance over to Rune, lifeless on the cavern floor with the lightning bolt lodged deep in his chest. Carrick stares down at him grimly before turning his head slowly my way.

For the first time, he takes in his brother lying on the ground, and his expression morphs from the satisfaction of putting Rune down to shock.

He bends distance to me, appearing in a flash. Amell and Finley walk slowly, perhaps to give us privacy—the two people who cared for Maddox the most.

“What happened to him?” Carrick asks softly.

“Rune.” That’s what happened to him. “He was protecting me. Told me to go help you and Finley. I shouldn’t have listened to him.”

“He loved you. Of course he was going to protect you.”

Loved. Past tense. “I know,” I admit with shame.

And I was too proud to admit it back to him.

“The question is,” Carrick drawls as he stares at his brother’s lifeless form, “what are you going to do about it?”

“Do about it?”

He nods at Maddox. “Fix it.”

“But...” I can’t.

Can I? My gaze roams over Maddox and the scraped-out husk of a demigod. I felt no pulse, no life.

“You’re a god,” Carrick says harshly. “You just crushed the Blood Stone as if it were nothing more than a gnat. Save my brother.”

My hand tightens reflexively. I have the power to do it. The gods brought me back. Plucked me from a mortal death and created a god. I, in turn, resurrected Finley.

I’m the fucking god of Life. I have the power to make anything grow and thrive.

I can do this.

I start to bend forward but a slurred voice stops me. “Do not.”

Glancing up, I see Onyx standing there. She doesn’t look good, but she managed to awaken from the sleep of Valshour. She blinks slowly, as if she’s still in a partial trance.

“You need consensus. What’s done is done.”

The rules I don’t understand. The vague proclamations that some things must be unanimous while the gods can freely meddle in anyone’s life they want.

It's simply not fair, although I'm well aware that the first rule I learned was nothing is fair in the game of gods.

"Fuck your consensus," I snarl, and without hesitation, I place my hands on Maddox's chest and press my mouth to his.

His lips are cold and dry, but I'm not repulsed.

Rather, I'm determined.

I blow warm breath into him laced with my power, and I dare say, a bit of love to go with it. I feel it deep in my gut, and it's what gives me the courage to face down Onyx.

My eyes are closed, but I feel the flare of light that I know is radiating from Maddox's body as I breathe new life into him.

I sense the changes before seeing them as I keep my eyes closed. His lips soften, become warm, and fill out. His bony chest and ribs disappear as muscle bulks out his form.

And the most beautiful thing I feel... his heartbeat under my hand.

Maddox jolts, a clear awakening from death, and I push back to see him blinking. His eyes are clear again, ferny green and sparkling with vitality. His face is flushed, skin warm, and his hair...

"Oh," I breathe out in awe and a little worry. "Did I do that?"

Maddox's hair is silver-white. Not the dull, brittle stuff that was as dry as winter grass, but as long and luxurious as before, though no longer golden.

It's an otherworldly color... much like my own.

I glance up at Carrick, and he shrugs.

Maddox sits up, drawing my attention back to him. I keep my hands on his chest, relishing too much in the thick muscles that still can't hide the beating of his heart.

His eyes come to mine, bore into me not with gratitude but... with nothing.

They're blank.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Fine," he replies tersely, rolling to his side and pushing off the ground, which effectively breaks contact with me.

I scramble up, watch him warily as he takes in the scene. Rune dead, Ariman torn to pieces, and piles of sooty ash where Finley and Carrick eradicated all the demons.

Maddox turns to his brother. "All good?"

Carrick frowns. "Yeah."

He doesn't spare me a glance. Merely nods back, then Maddox disappears, bending distance to who knows where.

Finley's arm comes around my shoulders, and it startles me. I hadn't realized she'd moved in so close. I look at her. "Is he mad at me?"

"I think he feels the same as he did before all this happened," she replies gently, giving me a squeeze.

My shoulders sag in defeat. It's not that I expected him to forgive my callous treatment in exchange for bringing him back to life, but I think a thank-you was in order.

Or at least he could've looked *at* me and not *through* me.

"Come on," Finley says, her hand slipping down to take hold of mine. "Come home with me and Carrick. We can sit out on the deck and drink mimosas."

I shake my head. "Not right now."

Finley wants to argue. I can see it written all over her face, but it's her husband who has my back. He takes Finley's other hand and tugs her away from me. "Let's go. Zora can visit when she wants."

She's unsure, my sister. We've only known each other a year, but we've been through a lot together. I silently beseech

her to give me time, and finally, she offers an accepting smile. "Visit soon," she demands.

"I will."

Carrick and Finley bend distance, presumably to their home in California, and my regard shifts to Rune's corpse. I have no satisfaction seeing him dead, only delight that it was Carrick who landed the final strike.

"What are you going to do with them?" Amell asks.

I hadn't forgotten he was still here, merely waiting for him to talk. I'm low on words but I know he won't leave my side until he makes sure I'm okay.

Or as well as can be expected.

I follow his gaze to Onyx at the cages, working to wake up and release the other gods. How dare she tell me not to save Maddox.

How dare she or the others try to make me feel less than an equal fifth of the Council, simply because I'm new.

I learned today as I crushed the Blood Stone, I'm as powerful as they are. I had thought myself weaker because of my lingering humanity, but it's what makes me stronger than the other four.

"There's nothing to be done," I say to Amell, turning my back on the gods to face him. "I am who I am and I do what I want. Circe can take that and shove it in her book of fates."

Amell chuckles, pure pride emanating from his expression. "You were magnificent today. You are finally everything you're supposed to be."

"Maybe," I hedge. Maddox's rebuke still stings.

"Want me to kill him?" Amell asks, clearly referencing his new frenemy.

"And undo all that work I did to bring him back?" I say with a mirthless laugh. "No way."

Amell smiles in understanding. “This would ordinarily be the part where I tell you he’ll come around, but immortals aren’t like humans. A mortal life is but a second to us. Love can last an eternity, and grudges can last even longer. If you had the capacity to hurt a demigod you can be sure it’s of significant force to be infinite.”

“So you’re saying... I don’t have a chance with him?”

Amell shrugs. “I’m saying he won’t get over it easily. But I also just watched you flex some serious determination muscles, so what do I know? If you want him it’s going to take work.”

A bit of anger hits me. “Who says I want him?”

“I do,” Amell replies with certainty. “But that’s for another day. If you don’t need me, I’m going home to Nyssa.”

Reaching out, I place a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you for helping.”

“I should be thanking you,” he replies, covering my hand with his own. “I’ve been wanting to destroy that bug Ariman for centuries. I’m a happy king right now.”

Without waiting for a reply, Amell bends distance back to the Underworld.

Turning toward the cages, I see Onyx is helping Veda out of hers. Circe and Cato are still unconscious. Heaving a sigh, I head their way, knowing that at least one of my duties is to help my brethren.

And, I’m sure, answering for my temerity in bringing Maddox back from the dead.

CHAPTER 22

MADDOX

THE JUNGLE IS thick and I could easily use my powers to blast away the dense undergrowth. But expelling physical energy has been the only thing keeping me from insanity.

I'm currently in Honduras at my request to be sent somewhere to fight. I asked Onyx, the god of War, but she denied me. So I went to Veda.

Many would think the god of Humanity would be all about love and not violence, but in truth, she likes to meddle in violent conflicts as much as Onyx does.

Veda comes at it from a place of care for the human race and she threw me down in Honduras to help protect the refugees fleeing drug lords. It's the dead of night and I'm trying to find a circuitous way around a dangerous camp of gun-toting assholes who would rape the women and force the children into their gang.

Because ever since Zora brought me back to life, I seem to have more power and pent-up energy than before. So I find engaging in vigorous endeavors to be the best way to release the nastiness inside me.

It's been a week since we battled Rune and he almost destroyed me with the Blood Stone. I'm not sure the specifics of what went down but I know I couldn't match his power when he aimed that jewel at me. He latched hold of my life force and started sucking it out and I was completely impotent to stop it. While he was not a god, he had the power of one, and one of the last things I remember was an innate sorrow that everyone there with me was going to die too.

And then... I wasn't dead and Zora was hovering over me with such relief in her eyes, I actually recoiled. All my

bitterness came roaring back, stronger than ever. It was so vile that I needed to put distance between us and I got the hell out of there.

Since then, I've come to understand that I came back different. Whatever Zora did to me, it didn't only change the color of my hair.

It changed me. I'm stronger, more powerful, and I feel like I could conquer the world.

I also feel things more acutely, so the rancor I had toward her because of her rejection has increased. This should be a good thing, meaning I don't pine for her anymore, but fuck if that emotion isn't still there and more potent than ever.

I'd hoped it would diminish over time, but it seems to want to share equal footing with my enmity.

My arm swings back and forth, cutting thick fronds and vines. It would take a mortal man ten slices with a sharp machete to cut one branch when I can cut a two-foot section with only my palm as I make the swiping motions. I'll work through the night since I don't need sleep and then I'll lead my little band of refugee humans, who think I'm nothing but an eccentric missionary here to guide them to the promised land.

Whatever it takes to get them to follow me.

The dark jungle is amazingly quiet, given the variety of animals that thrive here. Every once in a while, I hear the rumble of a jaguar in the distance, but otherwise it's only the steady thwack of my arm knocking down foliage. My eyes have immense power and I see as well in the dark as in the light. I can also hear the softest of sounds, which is why I turn quickly when I hear the singular crack of a dried frond behind me.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Carrick, my tone flat with displeasure.

Granted, I expected the visit sooner or later, but I'm not ready for it now. Still way too much shit swirling inside me.

“I like what you’ve done with your hair,” Carrick says, the hint of amusement annoying me.

He’s referring to the dark mud I’ve used to make dreadlocks because the infernal silvery-white hair Zora left me with is like a fucking beacon. And no matter how I’ve tried to change the color, my powers won’t reverse it. “It’s camouflage,” I grumble.

“You could shave it off,” Carrick suggests as I continue to cut at the undergrowth.

Yeah, I know I could.

Not sure why I haven’t.

It’s a reminder I certainly don’t need or want.

“Again... what are you doing here?” I ask, refusing to acknowledge his more than sensible solution although it would eventually grow back the same silvery white, I’m sure.

“Why does any brother visit another?” he asks, more cryptically than necessary.

I stop my weed whacking and spin on him. “Why indeed?”

Carrick shrugs. “Finley and I are worried about you.”

“What’s to worry about?” I demand. “I’m alive, healthy and doing what demigods do best... serve the gods.”

“You jetted out of Micah’s realm pretty quickly.”

“Should I have stayed? Were you going to do a celebratory barbecue or something?”

“No,” Carrick drawls, tucking his hands in his pockets. I notice he’s wearing dress pants and a dress shirt. “But you could’ve talked to Zora. Find out why she did what she did to you.”

I scoff at the absurdity. “I know why she did it. She felt guilty so she brought me back. Big fucking deal.”

“It’s probably a bit deeper than that.” His tone is chastising and it’s clear he’s disappointed in me.

I don't care because I don't answer to him. The only one I answer to right now is Veda since she's given me a job to do. And once I bring these people to safety, I'll seek another job from one of the other gods.

Well, one of the other gods who's not Zora. I'll be keeping my distance from her unless she specifically commands me to do something.

"There're a few things I thought you'd like to know," Carrick continues as I turn back to my job.

"What's that?"

"The Council is in turmoil."

"So," I reply. Not my business or concern.

"They're not happy Zora brought you back."

"Let me guess," I say dryly. "No consensus?"

"I think Zora's exact words were *Fuck your consensus* when Onyx told her not to do it. She hasn't joined them since."

Don't ask, Maddox. Don't ask.

Fuck, I'm weak. "Where is she?"

"Her house. She comes to visit me and Finley. Disappears to do other things. But she's clearly thumbing her nose at her brethren."

"Well, hasn't she become the little rule breaker?"

"I think you should go see her," Carrick says.

"I think you should mind your own business."

"Just a suggestion," he says breezily. "Will you come visit me and Finley sometime? You know you're always welcome. We always want to see you."

A twinge of guilt hits me square in the chest. "Yeah... sure. When I'm done with this."

He doesn't reply, and he's so quiet I turn, expecting to see he's left. He hasn't, still there with hands casually tucked in his pockets. I see in his eyes he's going to try one more time with regard to Zora.

"You should give her a bit of grace, Maddox. She's a confused young woman between spending her formative years in Hell and then becoming a deity."

I step toward my brother, anger bubbling. "I was with her for a year in case you forgot. A year when I gave her patience and care. I'm more aware than even her twin sister of just how confused she is. But there came a time when I needed her to give back. There was a time when I told her my feelings and she clearly didn't return them. Her words, not mine. There's no more grace to give. I'm done with her and moving on with my life. I certainly hope she does the same."

Carrick considers my words, his silence uncomfortable.

Finally, he inclines his head. "I see your point and I agree with you."

I blink at him, then become suspicious. "You do?"

"Yeah... some things aren't meant to be. You did all you could."

Fuck if that doesn't rankle and I turn away to whack at the dense forest again. Part of me expects—maybe even wants—him to continue to argue with me about it. Perhaps show me some wisdom I hadn't considered.

But Carrick doesn't see anything there between me and Zora and it confirms what I already knew.

I'm doing the right thing by moving on.

I turn back to tell him so, that he needs to let it be because I'm going to do the same.

Except he's gone, and that irritates me even further.

CHAPTER 23

ZORA

ANOTHER SUMMONS COMES, stronger than the last. It's Cato's power I feel particularly, almost as if I'm getting zapped with his lightning bolt. It's full of exasperation, which I suppose is preferable to his ire.

Since the big calamity—when Rune escaped prison, stole the Blood Stone, and used it in an attempt to return to power, followed by my subsequent destruction of said stone (with a minor shout-out to Carrick for killing Rune)—things have been strained with the other gods.

They all woke up from their venom-induced comas and once we were back in our godly realm with warm breezes and fluffy clouds, I told them the entire story. The only thing they remember is Ariman appearing in that realm—shocking them so thoroughly he was able to stun them with the Blood Stone. They each remember with vivid detail the snake sinking fangs into their flesh, delivering a venom that completely incapacitated.

Simply put, they were embarrassed.

They're also scared, because it was the first time in their eons upon eons of memories that such a thing has occurred. The gods simply have never been opposed and now they wonder if future threats will come about.

I find it amusing, seeing them so bent out of shape about it. I guess as someone who was raised in Hell, I let things roll off my back a bit better.

I receive another jolt, an intense summoning, and with a sigh, I answer it. I've all but ignored them the last few weeks while I've taken time to ponder my life. I've spent a lot of

time hiking around my home in Switzerland with my dogs and joining Carrick and Finley for meals here and there.

Mostly, I've wondered about Maddox and why it seemed he hated me when he awoke from his death slumber. I refuse to ask Carrick and Finley their thoughts because they won't be afraid to tell me brutal truths. And I'm not ready to hear them yet.

Finley did broach it with me a few days ago. "Have you heard from Maddox?"

I was terse. "No. And I don't care to."

She mumbled "stubborn" under her breath, but then she tried to poke at me a bit more. "Carrick just saw him."

I almost blurted out, "How was he? Why is he so angry at me? Will he forgive me?"

But instead, I changed the subject and asked how she had cooked the carrots served with the Cornish hen. They were buttery and sweet and I'd like to make them myself.

Envisioning the Council gazebo, I leave my chalet and appear on the dais. Cato, Circe, Veda and Onyx await me.

"It's about time." Circe sniffs haughtily.

"You're lucky I came at all."

Her face flushes but it's Veda who steps into the conversation. Always the peacemaker, she says, "Thank you for coming. We're worried about things and would like to discuss it as a whole."

"What's to worry about?" I ask sweetly. "Rune, Ariman and the Blood Stone have all been destroyed."

"And you did an admirable job of accomplishing all that," Cato says in his deep baritone.

"Well, Carrick killed Rune, and Amell killed Ariman, and Finley killed hundreds of demons that would have feasted on your bodies had they reached you, so it was a team effort."

“Of course.” Cato inclines his head in gratitude. “Perhaps if we could understand the why of things, we could be better prepared.”

It’s not in my nature to lie, and I understand these gods are symbolically my brothers and sisters, but the truth is... I don’t trust them. “I don’t know what more you want me to tell you. I got hit by Valshour same as you. It incapacitated me. Ariman said the snake came from Heaven and he powered it up with the Blood Stone. Then he helped Rune escape.”

“But how did he get the Blood Stone?” Veda asks.

“I have no idea,” I say with a straight face, despite it being an absolute lie. I sweeten the sting with a bit of truth. “What I do know is that its power had been magnified from the sacrifice of my life. At least that’s what they told me and why it was strong enough to try to transfer my powers into Rune. Once he had me tapped, his goal was to take each of your powers while you slumbered.”

Circe shudders at the thought, Veda chews at her nail nervously in a distinctly human move and Cato exchanges a grim look with Onyx.

“Where would they get such knowledge?” Veda ponders out loud.

“Ariman probably knew more about magic and dark arts than any creature alive,” I remind them.

That starts a discussion, the gods wondering if Ariman knew such things, could others? Again, I sense their fear and disorientation as they try to reassure one another. I remain silent on the issue because I don’t care. My life as a god is so new I’m not afraid of it being taken away.

Not the way they are.

I use their uncertainty to broach another subject. “I’d like to reincarnate Lucien, and I’m asking for consensus.”

They all turn to look at me with blank faces. It’s Onyx who replies. “We’ve had this discussion already, and we’ve told

you that we don't agree."

I expected that, and I'm ready to test my newfound independence. "Yes, so you say. But I brought Finley back after she died. I brought Maddox back to life. Those are okay, but not Lucien? It makes no sense."

Cato steps toward me. "Finley sacrificed you to save the world. You sacrificed yourself to save the world. That was a boon we gave."

"And Maddox?" I ask, pinning my eyes on Onyx. "You told me not to do it, and I disobeyed you."

Onyx inclines her head. "I told you not to do it as I didn't understand what was going on or what led you to that place. We consider that another boon... after the fact, so to speak."

"So why not Lucien?" I look to each god, one after the other. "You're talking about boons. He was a faithful servant to you for thousands of years. My understanding is he did your bloodiest and most violent work. To leave him in the Crimson River—"

"He died by his own stupidity," Circe says. "He played roulette with the fates and lost."

"So what?" I snap at her. "Everyone makes mistakes. That cannot outweigh all the good he's done for you."

"It matters not," Veda says softly, and I face her. "The Crimson River is utter destruction, not just of the body, but of the soul. It's violently twisted and tormented and would never be suitable to place it back in a vessel. You can't reincarnate that."

"That's bullshit," I reply angrily. "I'm thinking I've got a lot more leeway to do things than you're letting on and I have a better understanding of my powers now. I think I can do it."

"And yet you won't because we're not giving consensus," Onyx reminds me.

"Let's say I did," I propose hypothetically. "Are you going to strike me down? Punish me? You punished Rune for

meddling in Finley's fate. Imprisoned him. Is that what you'd do to me?"

"No," Veda says, an edge to her voice that's not normally there. "Of course, we wouldn't."

"But there could be retaliation," Circe says.

"Retaliation?" I grit out.

"We have our games." Circe looks almost proud of herself. "Our pet projects. It's boring being eternal, so you may need to consider that Lucien's death in the Crimson River is playing out exactly how one of us wants. If you stand against us, we may stand against you."

Veda looks uncomfortable that Circe put it so bluntly, but Onyx and Cato nod in unison.

My hackles rise. "I'm telling you now, if you mess with my loved ones, I will unleash hell on this council."

Veda gasps, but Circe merely smiles. "And who are your loved ones? Just so I know who to steer clear of."

"You know damn well who I'm talking about. Finley, Carrick, Amell, and Nyssa."

"All else is fair game?" Circe simpers.

"And Maddox," I snap, although he clearly doesn't feel the same. I just know I can't bear for him to be dead.

None of them reply, and I'm not sure that's an agreement to leave my family alone. There's no doubt they are doing that intentionally to take back some control as I know this newfound confidence, and the ways in which I'm willing to wield it, is disconcerting.

"I did learn something else from Ariman," I say quietly.

"What's that?" Cato asks. The other three stare at me intently.

"He said you all forgot your purpose." They exchange glances of confusion. "He said you were so old and so set in

your ways that it made you weak. I'm thinking he might have been right."

Circe's eyes flash with indignation, Onyx growls, and I hear thunder rolling in the distance. Only Veda remains placid, as is her normal bearing.

"Just so I understand the rules," I continue, "I am prohibited from reincarnating Lucien."

"That is correct," Onyx says with a grave nod.

"As long as I follow your wishes on that, you'll leave my loved ones alone."

Circe points at me, a true smart-ass. "Bingo."

"So be it," I say in defeat. "I won't reincarnate Lucien. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

I don't finish my sentence or wait for them to hold me for more conversation. I bend distance and leave them behind.

Right back to Micah's realm where I stand on the beach where Carrick described the fight that took place between Micah and Lucien.

I might not be able to reincarnate him, but I'm not prohibited from doing anything else. At least that's the way I interpreted what the gods said.

I can't reincarnate Lucien, but perhaps I can do something to prevent his destruction.

Watching the flow of the molten river, I consider what I know about it. The truly depraved sinners end here. Their souls reside in an infinite inferno of torture. It's a violent twisting of your spirit, endless pain and eternal insanity.

Suffering without end as punishment for evil misdeeds.

Veda might have had a great point... Lucien could be so deranged a reincarnation might end badly. It's a risk I'm still willing to take though, because I believe I can restore his soul.

However, that's all moot since I promised I wouldn't.

But what if Lucien were protected somehow before he went into the river? That idea has been rattling around in my brain ever since I learned how the Blood Stone was stolen, plus there's no way of knowing if the Book of Shadows will ever be found. If it is, there's still no telling if it contains the solutions we need.

I've got a fix and I can implement it right now.

Ariman figured out how to go back in time, to hover between dimensions unseen to all. He moved effortlessly between past and present, and he was very careful not to change events, which I would assume could have catastrophic results for the future.

A quick in-and-out so none would be the wiser.

Why can't I do that? He had the Blood Stone and imagination.

I have more power than the Blood Stone ever did, and I'm not afraid to build on Ariman's idea. I might not be able to bring Lucien back for fear of reprisal but I can damn sure give him some protection before he goes into that river.

I can help ensure he has a fighting chance to get out on his own. I simply have to go back in time to that moment before Lucien went in.

Glancing around the area, I consider positioning myself behind a boulder. I definitely can't be seen by the others—even my appearance could wreak havoc on the future. But Ariman didn't need to hide. He stayed in one dimension while looking into another and then stopped all time. Froze everything to make a quick move before restarting it again. I don't need much time for what I'm going to do so I decide to stand my ground. I'm close to where Lucien went into the Crimson River and I only need him to be in my line of sight to help him.

Taking a deep breath, I give myself a quick pep talk. "You've got this. You destroyed the Blood Stone and stopped Rune. You can do anything you want."

Without knowing how Ariman traveled through time, I can only envision it. I know where it happened and I'm in the right place. I know roughly the date it happened, but that's still a guess, so I first have to find that place in time when Micah and Lucien battled.

I take another breath, release it slowly, and then command time to turn backward for me and only me. At first, nothing changes much except the ebb and flow of the river, which now moves in reverse, a slight lightening and darkening of the sky and gusts of wind that pull my hair free of my braid.

Then I hear noise... weapons clashing and demons screaming. I turn and look up to the mouth of the mountain cave where we were not that long ago fighting Ariman and Rune. That must be going on right now.

Amazing.

Those sounds eventually fade away and again, nothing much happens within the landscape before me. If Ariman and Rune were checking this realm prior to my capture, they did so not from this riverbank but somewhere else.

I push time to speed faster and the river rushes toward the horizon, not the mountain, so quickly it looks like streaks of light.

And then there are people moving backward from the horizon along the riverbank toward me.

I slow time and my jaw drops. It's not just any people reversing in time but my sister Finley, Carrick, the Dark Fae Boral—who I only knew briefly before he died the same evening I did—and Maddox.

My heart skitters looking at Maddox as he says something to the group, which causes Finley to laugh. I'd forgotten they traveled this realm after the battle with Micah. This was the day they tried to sneak into the Underworld to rescue me and they chose to enter through the veil that separated the source of the Crimson River from Micah's land.

In order to test my abilities and ensure I can actually pull this off, I command time to stop. Not for too long, but long enough that I allow myself to study Maddox. Handsome as sin but with that easygoing smile on his face. The demigod who is always quick to laugh and even quicker to have your back.

Gods, I miss him, but I don't dally. I allow time to reverse again so as to not cause any disturbance to Finley and her crew, satisfied with the knowledge that I have everything it takes to help Lucien.

More rewinding of time with nothing of interest happening until I catch a glimpse of Lucien flying backward out of the Crimson River and coming to land near the bank. Carrick stands there, holding the chalice with the Blood Stone attached to it and Micah staggers to his feet.

He was a Dark Fae at one time, allegedly quite handsome, but an eternity of bitterness and evil magic turned him into a monster. An enormous creature with fur covering every bit of his muscular body, his lower half resembling a goat with reversed knee joints and cloven feet. He has a whiplike tail above his buttocks that flicks back and forth, but it's his face that's truly monstrous. Black matted fur covers most of it with bits of skin showing around his eyes and nose. His lower jaw juts forward with sharp fangs curving upward at the corners. Horns sprout from Micah's head behind his temple, flaring out before curving downward toward his jaw.

I command time to stop and then fast-forward it again minutely. I can't change anything about Lucien that might alert Micah or Carrick that I'm here. It's Micah who last touched Lucien, so any protection I put on him has to come after last contact.

I let time tick forward at a snail's pace, watching in slow motion as Micah lands a powerful uppercut to Lucien's jaw that carries so much force he's lifted off his feet. He flies up and toward the river and as I watch the expression on his face, I'm shocked to see acceptance.

Maybe even relief.

Is that because his one true love died only minutes before?
Was he unable to bear to live with her dead?

I stop time and hold it there as my mind races.

Maybe he was ready to die and that makes me hesitate.

Am I in any way doing a disservice to Lucien? Maddox was always bothered by his brother's death in that it shouldn't have happened. While Micah was powerful, Lucien was a demigod.

Maybe his fate was to die in that river and it might even be because he wanted it.

But no... he would not have wanted to suffer for eternity. No one could want that, and I don't hesitate further lest I make Micah or Carrick suspicious. I concentrate on Lucien's body poised just above the frothing waves of the turbulent lava river.

I cast my power toward him, letting it wrap around his whole body in a clear barrier of protection that will keep the Crimson River from touching him. I gift part of my essence as not only a god but the one who commands the Underworld. I assert my will and dominance within the blanket of safety I've just bestowed and I seal it up tight.

Lucien should be able to withstand the destructive nature of the river, but where he'll go and how he'll get out, I do not know.

I only know I've done all I can.

I speed time back up and only hang around long enough to see him disappear into the lava flow, which moves toward the mountain and up its craggy surface. I spare a short glance to see the devastation on Carrick's face and then I return to the present.

Appearing on Carrick and Finley's doorstep, I ring the doorbell and wait for them to answer. I want to let them know what I've done so they can search for Lucien.

CHAPTER 24

MADDOX

DESPITE THE FACT that I'm physically stronger than I've ever been in my immortal life—thank you, Zora, for whatever the hell you breathed into me—I'm exhausted.

After completing my mission in Honduras, getting all the people to safety and cutting down a number of drug lords in the process, I asked for another assignment.

One that would be more complex.

I definitely asked for something more violent and Onyx came through for me. I requested audience with the Council, appearing at the base of their dais.

Only four of them were present, and I couldn't help the first question out of my mouth. "Where's Zora?"

I'd assumed she was back with her brethren, doing godly things and living her life.

Veda answered. "She doesn't attend to us unless we demand it."

"She's in a snit," Circe huffed.

"Zora doesn't snit," I snapped, causing Circe to growl with irritation before I returned my attention to Veda. "What does that mean?"

Veda offered a thin smile. "It means we don't see her unless we summon her, and even then, sometimes she doesn't respond."

"Is she okay?" I demanded, incredulous that they didn't seem to care.

"She seems to be," Veda replied, and that's all she offered.

I was too proud to ask for more information about Zora so I asked for myself. “I’d like another conflict. Something far more difficult than where you just sent me. Long-lasting, bloody and against all odds would be fine.”

Veda appraised me with a knowing look as Circe turned her back on me. She was miffed I’d defend Zora, and frankly, I was pissed at myself too.

Onyx stepped forward and offered me the dream: a dimension named A’buston, in the throes of a brutal civil war. It was created with the barest amount of stone magic possible and its evolution progressed without the aid of further magic. They’re barely in what the First Dimension would consider the Middle Ages, so the fighting is basic with swords, lances, crossbows and the like.

I’ve only been here a week, but it’s been nonstop brutality as I help the legions Onyx assigned me to. I came to them as a revered general and completely withheld every bit of magic, and most of my strength, while fighting alongside the troops. The soldiers here consider me the bravest they’ve ever seen, since I’ll charge into battle before any of them, and the most skilled in the land. I’m so fast and accomplished, I can strike down ten men with only a few moves. Sure, I let myself take hits so as not to seem too magnificent, and every slice into skin and muscle I bear gratefully. When I’m in the thick of battle and my own blood wets the dusty ground, it’s bliss because I don’t have time to think of Zora.

It’s why, although I’m exhausted as I enter my tent after a long day of death and brutality, I’m already yearning for the next day. Starting now, without the clanging of weapons and the screams of pain, it’s Zora who I’ll think of all night. I don’t even have any immortal-strength liquor to dull my senses, although I could easily pop into another dimension for some.

I choose not to because I’m a glutton for punishment.

A servant opens the flap to my tent and gives a low bow. “General... would you like your bath first or a meal?”

“Bath,” I say, moving to a chest sitting beside a pile of rugs and furs that serves as my bed. I remove my thick cloak and drape it over a chair. A’buston is in the midst of a strong winter and while the snow and sleet don’t bother me, I have to appear as if it does.

As servant after servant comes in, each carrying a bucket of hot water to fill the copper tub in one corner of the tent, I remove the rest of my clothes. Frowning, I notice a slice through the leather of my vest that reached my skin. The blood is crusted and the wound will be healed by the end of my bath. Fully naked now, I pour a metal tankard of ale to quench my thirst and turn around as the last of the hot water is dumped into the tub.

The woman standing there holding the empty bucket is beautiful—a camp whore who has offered herself to me on more than one occasion.

“Would you like anything else, General?” Her eyes roam over my body, right down to my cock, which has a mind of its own. It doesn’t mind her attention and starts to thicken under her bold appraisal.

She’s fucking ripe for the taking, and gods know I’d feel better if I took her, but I find myself shaking my head. “Not tonight.”

A pout makes her even prettier and I almost reconsider, but then images of Zora flood my mind and I know I can’t do it. My hand squeezes the tankard, crushing the metal easily.

Fuck Zora for making my life miserable.

“That will be all,” I say, dropping the lump of pewter and moving to the tub. The woman leaves silently and I settle into the hot water with a sigh. I waste no time in washing, using a fancy bar soap left by my attendants on my skin and hair. Within the privacy of my tent, I use my magic to drain the tub and refill it with clean water so hot, it would melt the skin off most. I lean my head back on the edge of the tub, close my eyes and consider my dilemma. I figure in about a thousand

years I might be able to put the frustrating god of Life out of my mind.

It more than chafes that she's fucked up my head, especially since I was very happy living a non-monogamous lifestyle for a few millennia. It's also a ding to my pride that I was hurt by her rejection of my feelings. I'm a fucking demigod and nothing should hurt me.

A cold breeze wafts over me along with a brightening of my tent, and I open my eyes to see who has opened the flap to enter. I'd assumed possibly the camp whore to attempt another seduction, but there's no one there.

I sit up slightly, look around my tent, and my heart stops when I see Zora standing near the maps table.

She's dressed as a camp follower in cheaply woven material with a long cloak over her shoulders. It's a disguise so she can walk freely among people and observe, but there's no hiding the fact she's not a normal person. Not with that white hair and those magical multicolored eyes.

Zora doesn't look at me but studies the maps. I settle back down into the water and wait for her to say something. I feel her nervousness. I know she's here for conversation but I also know that such things are difficult for her. She's always bottled up tight.

Finally, she turns my way, holding her hands before her. "How goes your war?"

I cock an eyebrow at her. "Is that really what you want to know?"

She lifts her chin, looking down at me with slight irritation. "Yes. I might have something I want you to do for me."

"Ahh," I say with a knowing nod. "You're here in an official capacity. Well, I'll be involved in this war for several more weeks. Perhaps you should try another demigod."

“I don’t want another demigod,” she says, and I can’t tell if there’s any innuendo in those words.

The fact that there could be—that she’s insinuating she wants me not for work, but in an intimate way—stirs my cock again, and this time not in half-hearted interest.

It’s gone full mast.

I decide to test her and rise up out of the bathtub. Water sluices down my skin, my wounds already healed. I step out of the vessel, noting with complete satisfaction that Zora cannot help her gaze dropping to my erection.

I grab one of the towels left on a stool, grateful that in these medieval times, they are very small. I make a production of drying myself off as I keep my eyes pinned on the beautiful god.

She returns my stare boldly and it’s only making me harder. If I don’t get her gaze off me I might just throw her down and have my way with her, but fuck if I’m going to give in to something as base as lust where she’s concerned.

I toss the towel away and pick up a robe. It’s made of heavy velvet with fur lining, something worthy of a general. It’s too confining for my tastes, but it does the job. I shrug it on and as my body is covered, her eyes snap up to mine.

“Sorry,” I say with a smirk, referencing that part of my body she was just ogling. “That’s off-limits to you.”

Zora flushes with embarrassment, which is what I intended, but it doesn’t make me feel as good as I thought it would. That makes me irritable and I take it out on her. “Why are you really here, Zora? Be honest with me just once.”

I see real pain in her expression and I harden myself against it. Her angst isn’t my problem.

She clears her throat. “I want to know why you left so suddenly after...”

Her words trail off so I fill them in. “After Rune sucked the life out of me and you breathed it right back in?”

She nods hesitantly. “I thought... that perhaps...”

Again, she flounders, and her gaze drops to the floor. So fucking ungodlike.

Once more I fill in the blanks, and this time I don't tamp down my anger. “You thought what? That perhaps since you saved my life I'd be eternally grateful to you? I'd climb back in your bed and be your little puppet again?”

Zora shakes her head vigorously. “No. I'd never think that.”

I take two steps, bringing me inches from her. She has to tip her head back to look up at me. “Well, let me fill you in on a few things. You made your feelings—or rather, lack thereof—quite clear the last time we had a discussion. I really have nothing else to say to you. That's why I left right after you brought me back to life, because there's nothing to say.” I suck in a breath, because that was a mouthful, and then remember one other thing. “Oh yeah... thanks for the hair. Love it.”

The sarcasm in my voice is heavy enough that she knows I do not, in fact, love it because it's a daily reminder of her. Zora's eyes widen, and she holds up a hand. “I can fix it.”

“No,” I growl, grabbing her wrist. “I don't want anything else from you other than to be left alone.”

I'm not prepared for the tears that form because... Zora doesn't cry. Hell, she doesn't have much emotion at all.

She twists away and it's so sudden she's a few steps from me before I realize she's not in my grasp anymore. Despite me telling her to leave me alone, the loss of her skin against mine creates a desolate feeling.

Zora blinks hard, chasing the tears away, and nods with a soft smile. “I understand. I'll go.” I want to scream for her not to but I clench my fists hard and restrain myself. Her expression changes, dispelling what I took to be hurt and replacing it with determination. “But not before I do this.”

I'm not ready for “this.”

This is way too much, way too fast, and I'm lost.

Zora steps into me, pulling open my robe with swift efficiency. Her hands come to my chest and fuck my weak self... I groan from the contact. She slides her hands up, over my shoulders, and links her fingers behind my neck. Pressing her body into mine, she pulls my head down and I'm powerless to deny her. Our lips meet, and my entire body comes alive, just as it always has when she touches me.

She moans into my mouth but it's overshadowed by the hungry growl that erupts from my chest.

"Goddamn you," I mutter against her mouth before deepening the kiss into a soul-sucking adventure.

My arms band around her, one hand going to her ass to pull her in tighter to me. Somehow—maybe with magic—she snakes a hand in between us and wraps those magical fingers around my cock.

Zora's not fucking around and she's not giving me a second of reprieve where I might rethink the stupidity of my actions. I tighten my arm around her back and lift her higher so my hand on her ass can drop lower.

And slide right in between her legs from behind where I find her drenched for me.

The knowledge gleaned from one singular hot kiss reminds me simply how combustible we are together. I whip around to my left, take two steps to the sturdy table, and lay her down upon my war maps of A'buston.

There's a slight moment where I consider flipping her to her stomach to make sure she understands this is impersonal.

It's only a fuck.

But I can't do it. I want to look into her eyes to see what other truths might be hidden in those fractal depths.

I magic our clothes away, pull her legs apart, and drive in deep.

“Maddox,” she screams, and there’s no doubt people outside my tent heard that.

No matter. No one would dare come in to check out such an obvious noise.

I restrain myself as I acclimate to the pleasure that’s making me dizzy. I plant my hands on the desk as she wraps her legs behind my back, and we stare at each other.

My gaze roams over her face, focusing on the softness of her mouth. She stares at me boldly, as if trying to convey a message.

Her palm comes to my cheek and that’s way too much intimacy for me. I take her by the wrist and force her hand between our bodies. I make her touch herself as I plant my other hand on the desk and thrust hard.

Zora’s eyes glaze over, immediately lost to the pleasure. Her fingers remain lax against herself, perhaps a subtle act of disobedience, perhaps a challenge for me to get her off all on my own.

That’s never been a problem for me and I find myself eager to see her come apart. I lower my torso over her, grip the far side of the thick table with both hands for leverage, and I fuck the god of Life like I’m not sure I’ve ever fucked her before.

Zora’s arms wrap around my neck and she pulls herself up to get closer to me. Only her ass remains on the table, her arms and legs wrapped around me tight, and she presses her cheek to mine. It’s the same intimacy I shunned minutes ago but now I can’t push her away. I’m too lost in the throes of how goddamn good she feels and how much I’ve missed this with her.

We have nothing else between us, and yet this is better than anything I’ve ever had.

The magic of the moment is obliterated when Zora’s body tenses, a sign I recognize as one of impending orgasm. I slam hard into her and she splinters with a hoarse cry of pleasure.

You'd think that would be my own undoing but it's not. It's when she whispers in my ear, even as her body quakes with the remains of her orgasm, "Thank you."

She's not offering gratitude for making her feel good. She's overwhelmed I gave her anything of myself at all.

My own orgasm shreds me so viciously, the wood table crushes and then splinters under the strength of my grip. "F-u-c-k," I groan in relief as my hips grind against her.

Fuck you, Zora, for making it so damn good.

I huff out a breath—relief that it's over as much as it is grief—and pull away from her.

She lets me go easily, our intimate joining at an end. I turn for my robe, which had landed on the floor, and by the time I have it on and turn around she's fully dressed.

I don't have it in me to tell her to leave, say goodbye, or even wish her well. I know in my heart that this is the end.

"There's one thing I did want to tell you," she says softly. A mixture of emotions hits me hard—a yearning for her to admit feelings for me and dread that what she'll say will be even worse than what she's said already. "I think I found a way to save Lucien."

I jerk with astonishment because nothing could've prepared me for that. "I thought the gods were clear... they weren't going to give you consensus for a reincarnation."

She nods grimly. "They won't budge, but I found another way. I think. I'm not sure if it worked."

Every bit of enmity is forgotten as I step in closer to her. "Tell me."

"I pulled an Ariman," she says, and my puzzled expression has her continuing. "Did Carrick and Finley tell you how he got the Blood Stone?"

I shake my head. "We haven't really seen each other since then." I don't tell her about Carrick's visit in Honduras.

Zora launches into an incredible story of time travel and then time stoppage, allowing Ariman to pluck the Blood Stone out from under Carrick's nose and leave a fake.

"I did the same thing for Lucien," she murmurs, as if she's almost too shy to tell me. "I went back to that moment just before he fell into the river. I couldn't save him because that would have been no different from reincarnating him and plus... I wasn't sure if that would affect the future in any way and I wasn't about to risk how we saved the world. But I put protection on him. I gave him a good deal of my power, wrapped it around him, and I'm confident he's safe in the river. But he was swept with the current up the mountain and I have no idea where he is."

"When was this?"

"Not long ago. I went to Carrick and Finley first to tell them. Carrick has gone to Micah's realm to search but I wanted to come here to tell you."

I can't help but look away from Zora because I don't want her to know that touches me. She didn't reincarnate him or pluck him from the river, but what she did still has implications that could be detrimental to her if Lucien is saved. The other gods, for some reason, do not want him back, and they might be pissed enough for retribution against Zora.

My gaze snaps back to her. Knowing the risks... the wrath that might come down on her, I can't help but ask, "Why? Why would you do such a thing?"

"Because it was important."

Important for whom? Her? Me? Carrick, because he's her brother-in-law?

Zora sucks in a deep breath, and when she lets it out, she whispers, "It was the only way for me to show you how I feel about you." The ground tilts for a second, I'm so off-kilter from her admission. Her face contorts with anguish. "I know you think my feelings are always lacking, but they're not. I'm in pain when you're in pain, but I think I'm very good at

hiding it. I thought if I could ease your suffering a little by giving you back your brother, then you'd understand how I feel. I'm a jumbled mess inside and it's so confusing. I know I'm not explaining this right and I clearly don't understand it myself. I just—”

I step into Zora and cover her mouth with my hand to get her to stop talking. This is probably a dumb move, given how she's revealed more of herself to me in the last ten seconds than she has since I've known her, but I also know she's struggling for clarity.

And I have it.

“The fact that you feel my pain is love, Zora.”

Gods, but my chest aches sweetly by the look of surprised delight on her face. As if I revealed a secret that changed her entire world—and perhaps it has.

“Really?” she asks, so much hope in her voice. “Because most of the time, I don't know what I am. I don't know who I am. Am I a woman? A god? Why do I feel so human sometimes while at others, I feel dead? But never when I'm with you. When we're together, even if it's standing inches apart, it's when I feel the most alive. It's both thrilling and terrifying but mostly it's confusing, and that's why I pushed you away. It was so easy for you to tell me you loved me, and yet I struggle so hard to get the words out.”

“All evidence to the contrary,” I muse with a smile, both my hands going to her face to hold her attention captive. “You just used a lot of words to tell me you love me.”

“But see, I didn't. I said a lot of things but not the three words you want.”

“I'm feeling good about what you've said so far.” I dip my head to brush my lips across hers.

“But I want you to feel more than good,” she insists, and I can tell she's getting distressed over her perceived failures. “I want to give you exactly what you need because what you give

me... what you make me feel is... I can't even put it into words because I have no real comparison."

There's no describing emotions right now. The utter completeness she brings to my life. She's wrong—I don't need those three words because now I'm clear how she feels.

But she needs to say it and I'm going to help her. I'm always going to help her.

"Repeat after me," I instruct, hands still at her cheeks. "I."

"I," she says.

"Love."

"Love."

"You."

Zora sucks in a breath and I think she might balk, but then she lets it out in a rush. "I love you."

I grin before kissing her hard. "See? That wasn't so tough, was it?"

She shakes her head and smiles. "I love you."

"Even smoother," I tease. "You're a professional now."

I expect Zora to laugh, but instead she throws herself at me, wrapping her arms around my waist and pressing her cheek to my chest. "Do you still love me too?" she asks timidly.

I return her embrace, holding her tight. "For eternity," I assure her.

"You'll do eternity with me?" I still hear the doubt in her voice.

I push her back slightly so I can look her in the eye. "I'll do everything with you, Zora. And if you falter and aren't quite sure what you're doing—as a god, as a woman, as a human, because you're still very much human in your soul—I'll be there to help right you. You're it for me."

Her voice is shaky. “This is very surreal. In all my life, I never thought I could have something so good.”

“I feel the same,” I assure her, and the kiss between us is different from any before. So sweet, so new.

So perfect.

She pulls away and looks reluctant at having done so. “We need to look for Lucien.”

I love my brother and I’m more than excited at the prospect of having him back. But fuck if I don’t want to stay here a little longer in this cocoon of happiness. “Onyx will be pissed if I leave.”

“I’ll get someone to replace you,” Zora says, and it’s with such aplomb, I don’t doubt her ability to do so nor her confidence that Onyx will be okay with it.

It seems my little god has found her footing among the Council.

“Okay, then,” I say, claiming her lips one more time. “Let’s go get my brother, then we can start our life together.”

Zora smiles and it’s in a way I’ve never seen before. It lights up the interior of the tent and my heart swells.

Her hand slides into mine and she says, “That’s the most perfect plan I’ve ever heard.”

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New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

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