



RAVEN FLANAGAN

UNTAMED & ECLIPSE

Untamed Eclipse

A Song of Sun & Shadow: Book 2

Raven Flanagan

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Cover design by: Faera Lane

For my dedicated DM, Justin, who helped inspire the spark and characters of this story.

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Untamed Eclipse



One



You never forget the day you die. It leaves a stain on the soul that never truly goes away. Perhaps I was wrong to leave home two years ago when visions drew me to the river of red that took my life.

Hidden deep in the Ellrend forest during a bleak midwinter, wind howled through my ears like the wailing of a deranged beast. A cold bite stung my bare feet as I padded through a thick blanket of shimmering snow. The frigid air kissed my naked skin when it breezed through the gnarled limbs of the ancient woods.

That cold didn't compare to the harsh winters I'd experienced in my youth. If I managed the northern freeze in Gwathendor, I'd survive this sharp chill, and nothing beat the wretched winters of the Thanaten kingdom I'd been born into.

The Mithran magic running through my veins aided in keeping me warm. Though that sun magic was at odds with my Thanaten half's shadow magic, I'd wielded both without strain since my birth.

Years ago, when my feet touched ground on the mystical Ellrend island, the lost coven of witches who'd made these forgotten woods their home sensed the untamed power roiling within me. Their Matriarch offered to teach me how to control my magic, and I grasped the opportunity, even if it meant leaving my world behind.

Along with the coven's daughters, I learned to command the raw magic that burdened me. I contained both sun and shadow magic, but also something greater that the divided elves lost a millennium ago when the gods vanished from the world. In time, I advanced easily through the witch's teachings until they determined I was worthy of joining their daughter's coming-of-age ritual.

Six witch daughters walked with me in near silence. Their mothers and the Matriarch trekked ahead of us, guiding the way along the path that they once walked themselves. Light struggled to penetrate the thick branches overhead, but generations of witches

making the journey to their sacred river wore the path through the overgrown forest.

The witches held this river sacred above all others because they claimed that the petrified heart of the goddess of magic rested at the headwaters. And that was our destination.

Their legends told that thousands of years ago, before the god-war that caused the Rift in my homeland, when the gods still walked as titans amongst their people, the goddess favored the Ellrend witches. Allegedly, her heart found its resting place here upon her demise, and a new river sprang forth.

The witches bathed in the flowing river to heighten their power and earn the right to become a matron in the coven. Not all of us would emerge again, they'd warned. God-heart or no, my power outweighed theirs and I didn't fear a dip in the frigid waters.

In my time on the island, I'd never traveled this far from where they'd offered their knowledge. As the silence stretched, I noted a lack of life the further we walked from the village. Here, no birds sang in the sky, and no creatures chattered from the underbrush.

A feeling of pins pricked down the length of my spine, and the tips of my pointed ears twitched.

Through a break in the trees, the rippling music of running water stole my attention. A few steps later, our procession followed the trail of a swiftly flowing river, gradually widening the further we went upstream.

The calming waters soothed my mind prior to noticing a subtle pink tint in the sapphire waters. The longer we trudged over the crunching snow and squishy mud, the faster the water darkened, until the smooth riverbed stones vanished under a stream of surging, bubbling crimson. And the darker it became, the stronger the scent of rust grew on the wind.

Shafts of sunlight winked out as the forest became impenetrable. A wispy breath passed my lips in that split second of pitch darkness. Gradually, the fauna and undergrowth cast a luminescent glow over the surrounding woods, and my eyes widened to absorb the mystical sight.

The coven Matriarch's raspy voice cleaved through the silence. "Here she comes, daughters. Brace yourselves to witness what remains of our great goddess, whose magic has strengthened our power and blessed our coven over the centuries."

Her fingers tightened on her staff as she forced her aged bones to carry her around the bend. She led us through the last cluster of trees where a sudden gust of warm air breezed over our skin, feeling like the hot kiss of a summer day.

As we broke through the dense forest and proceeded toward the edge of the river, a break in the overhead branches revealed a brilliant moon hanging low in the darkened sky, so close I imagined reaching out and brushing my finger along the bottom. The moonlight shone on the steam rising from the rippling red waters and divulged the river as the source of unusual heat.

Ignoring the coven's gasps of awe, my eyes went round, and my lips parted at the massive, hill-sized stone rising from the water. Orifices and cracks around the structure oozed with thick red fluid that dripped down the sides of the rotund, dark stone and seeped into the water.

The ground trembled beneath my feet, like thunder deep in the earth, when the petrified muscles of the misshapen heart pumped again. Scarlet gushed from the crevices and fresh waves splashed in the river, causing the water level to surge and lap at the shore, staining the rocks and dirt with varying shades of red.

I held my breath, frozen to the ground as an uncanny power oscillated through the air and provoked an involuntary shudder through my limbs. But the gleaming trees, lush grass, and flowers surrounding the river shivered in response to the rippling waves of blood, as though the sight excited the plants.

"We bring a new generation of daughters to you, Hestra!" The old crone and the Matrons raised their arms in worship of the steadily thumping stone heart of the goddess, and the daughters followed their example.

As the witches bowed their heads, I remained stunned. Something about the heart enthralled me, robbing me of the ability to move or speak. The last trace of power from a long dead god encased within the stone captivated me beyond reason.

The aged Matriarch turned her eyes, lined with decades of wisdom to me, and something dark glinted in their watery depths. Something that made the hair rise on the back of my neck.

It was an honor the coven allowed me to witness this ritual, and even greater that they allowed me to take part, but I second guessed my decisions now.

“We pray to you, Hestra, Goddess of Magic, Lady of the Moon, and Mother of Night,” the crone’s gaze lingered on me as she intoned to the undead heart of a god.

Throughout the crone’s prayers, the Matrons rubbed oils infused with herbs and crushed flower petals over our bare bodies. A pebble of envy gnawed within my ribs and my lips pressed into a thin line as mothers adorned their daughters for a dangerous coming-of-age ritual.

When my turn came, I closed my eyes to the Matriarch and envisioned my mother standing beside me. Behind my eyes, her red wild red hair rustled in the wind and her emerald eyes looked upon me with an adoring gaze.

A thin blade twisted between my ribs to think of her.

Mother, so queenly and gentle, wouldn’t approve of this ceremony. Neither would Father, but perhaps with his warrior’s spirit, he’d understand. And the blood would disgust Solara until she shied away.

Thinking of them worsened my bristling nerves. I forced myself to shake them from my mind and focus on the ritual once again.

At the end of the line, the oldest matron lifted her hand from within the folds of her dark robe. With her palm facing up, she splayed her fingers. A skittering aura of magic pulsed in the air, and a silver chalice studded with black gems materialized in her hand with a subtle pop.

She crouched to her knees on the riverbank with her graying auburn hair falling over her face. Intently, she dipped the ritual chalice into the gods’ blood river, filling it to the brim with the dark fluid. Ruby droplets glinted on the metal when she lifted the goblet under the moonlight.

Drinking blood from a river didn’t unsettle me as much as it should have. Unsure of what that said about me, I swallowed the thought and strengthened my conviction.

I came here to learn how to harness and tame the magic I was born with. It wasn’t the first time I’d imbibed something strange with the coven for the sake of a ritual.

“Blood from the goddess, freely given.” The Matriarch accepted the chalice, then leaned heavily on her cane as she limped down the line, pressing the chalice to willing lips.

Each of the daughters took a sip of the liquid within. A metallic yet sweet flavor washed over my tongue, and an odd taste of spice burned the back of my throat.

A warm sensation coursed through me, from my lips down to the pit of my stomach, where that heat settled into the core of my being. Goosebumps flashed over my limbs despite the heat seeping into the marrow of my bones.

From somewhere far away yet all too near, a woman's voice, ethereal and thin, whispered in the back of my mind.

The Matriarch's voice snapped me out of the growing haze as she cried, "Hestra, we offer our daughters into your service until your return to us. Take them into your blood, wash them clean in your magical embrace, and return them renewed!"

My heart skipped a beat, and time slowed around me as the witches undulated in unison. They raised their arms high and swayed naked under the brilliant light of the full moon.

Crimson water rushed at my face without warning as the mothers shoved their daughters into the water. When the Matriarch pushed me, all the air lodged in my lungs, and I flung my arms in front of my face to brace for the impact.

At first, the endeavor of traveling to a faraway land and tackling my unusual mystical abilities seemed worth the heartbreak of leaving my family, my home, and my kingdom behind. Yet uncertainty gripped me by the spine and dread fisted around my heart as the scalding red water submerged my head.

No sound passed my lips as the burning liquid dragged me down into its depths. The crimson water surged with life, wrapping around my limbs, and forcing me under, deeper and deeper. Each time I opened my lips to scream, I swallowed more bittersweet blood that choked my throat.

"Nevar. Come to me and become one." Her voice cloyed in the crevices of my mind like honey. The divine sound of it flowed within the scarlet essence, drowning me.

Something within the well of my being drew me here to this land, to this god consuming me. Despite the chilled fingers of death curling around my limbs, all I wanted was to follow that voice.

My limbs flailed as my body instinctively fought to return to the surface. My muscles ached and every time my lips parted, I swallowed more of the goddess's lifeblood. The water was so heavy,

and I could feel each wave beating me deeper until my vision turned black.

I'd never been afraid of the dark, not when it was a part of who I was. But here, in this fathomless river of my death, I felt the owner of that ever-alluring voice pulling me as though I were in a drunken stupor. And I had no bravery or strength to deny her.

“You’re mine now, Nevar. You’re destined to be with me. From the moment the Rift split the earth to the moment that you were born until your bones rest in the earth’s embrace. You are mine. Come to me, daughter of the sun and shadows. You must come to me, Nevar Solen-Mor’gen. Come and be mine.”

The depths of the river wrung the last vestiges of struggle from my body until I floated lifelessly with the drifting waves. Yet I found the strength to nod my head at the goddess’s request, accepting Hestra inside myself without understanding everything that came with that covenant.

Instantly following my unspoken agreement, an outside force propelled my body through the river. Burning water gave way to frigid air, and I inhaled crisp air into my lungs. My breath punched through my lips as I landed roughly on the ground.

With the last of my strength, I dug my fingers into the damp earth. I clawed myself from the crimson water with debris jabbing into my stomach and arms. Grass and dirt clung to the sticky red fluid painting my skin.

Questions rife with regret ricocheted within my skull as I coughed up the last traces of Hestra’s ichor.

What happened to me? Had that truly been the voice of a god? What in the Nine Hells had I agreed to?

I was the last to resurface.

Blinking the blood from my eyes, I cast my vision to the matrons crowding around their daughters and draping robes over their shoulders. All six daughters had returned from the water and, based on the open-mouthed stares riveted on me, they hadn’t imagined I’d return.

Except the Matriarch, who stood over me, with both hands clasped serenely on the top of her staff. Her eyes gleamed, and a haunting smile split her lips.

“Welcome back,” she said.

“Thank you—” a sharp twisting in my insides cut me off.

“And welcome home, Hestra,” the Matriarch crooned.

Words faded on my tongue, warping into a blood-curdling shriek. Within the confines of my flesh and sinew, my bones shattered, sending me reeling with agony. Every ounce of blood in my veins boiled while my body morphed with appalling renewal.

Onyx scales and feathers ruptured through the pores on my arms where the god’s crimson ichor soaked into my skin. Horrified, I scratched at the growths, clawing at my face, neck, and arms, wailing until my throat stung and words were impossible to render.

I splintered into a million pieces, doubting if my voyage to Ellrend was worth that never-ending pain.

What cruel twist of magic and fate led me here to die?

Bare feet padded over the lush grass, reaching my ears through the buzzing in my mind. My eyes burned and my vision blurred over the shape of the Matriarch.

She crouched down, head angling to the side to witness my grueling transformation. Her eyes were alight with devotion as she delivered a warning that hooked into my intestines. “Magic comes with a price. You will pay yours with blood. But you will pay for the greatest gift of all.”

Another scream wrenched itself from my lips, and the other witches jerked away as the sound changed from my voice into something spine-chilling.

The old crone rose to her feet, turning her back on my body as I convulsed on the riverbed. Her shoulders rose and fell as she inhaled deeply and spread her arms to the moon again. “Hestra has graced us tonight. Our elven sister is a witch, a daughter of the night, and a creature of the darkness.”

“Witch! Daughter! Creature!” the witches chanted.

All the while I writhed in pain, suffering through the agony of my bones breaking, of my skin stretching and splitting.

Claws as long and as sharp as daggers grew from the tips of my fingers. Fangs rivaling meat hooks lengthened from my teeth, painfully pushing free from my gums. Membranous wings from my arms stretched from my shoulder blades. Feathers darker than night, containing the distant twinkle of stars in an endless void spread wide.

Under the darkness of Hestra's heart and warped by her influence, I'd transformed into something horrifying the mortal realm hadn't seen in a thousand years. Held together by magic and living shadow, in one hefty beat of fluttering feathers and shining scales, I hurled myself into the midnight sky, lured away by the call of the moon's silvery light.

Far below me, surrounded by celebrating witches, the heart of the goddess ceased pumping into the river. Never again would Hestra's lifeblood flow into that river, because now it coursed through me.

Two



The setting sun struggled to breach the overcast sky blanketing the horizon. From my vantage point on the swaying boat, the rippling black water of the bay blended seamlessly with the dark clouds rolling in from the sea.

A gust of air carrying the scent of imminent rain swept under the hood of my cloak and kissed my cheeks. I felt the promise of the storm against my skin and in my bones. The darkness of the incoming storm thankfully hid the rising moon from view.

As a dockworker secured the vessel, I cast my gaze over the brick and wood framed buildings of the city of Bellmead. The city began as a human settlement several generations ago and had gradually transformed into one of the largest and most prolific trade ports in the realm.

So far, the only prolific thing was the smell of fish.

Closer to the docks, I noted merchant stalls and fishmongers closing business for the end of the day. Further out, cresting up the rolling hill of the city, I saw town halls, market centers, storefronts, residential homes, and curving stone bridges. Manor houses dotted the highest point of the city that I strained to see from the boat.

As grand as the city appeared, a pang for the splendor of Gwathendor twisted in my chest. This place paled compared to my homeland.

I paused those thoughts and clutched the front of my cloak. Six years had passed since I left home, and several weeks since escaping Ellrend, I needed to focus.

The instant my boots thudded onto the groaning wood of the dock, I inhaled deeply, then stretched the knots from my joints and muscles.

Sailing on the cramped ship for three weeks almost pushed me over the limit of my restraint. As much as I ached to unleash the

binds that I kept tightly wound around myself, the captain and his crew didn't deserve to suffer the consequences.

In this unfamiliar land, I kept my hood raised over my head, hiding the tips of my ears from view. While the elves' thousand-year civil war ended two decades ago, and they'd begun exploring and trading more widely since, I was unsure of this land's disposition to my kind.

Irritation sparked along the nape of my neck as a man reeking of stale ale stumbled across my path. I bit down on the snarl threatening to breach my lips and smothered the energy in my veins, scratching to break free.

At the end of the dock, I stopped near an elderly man, hunched over and dumping questionable contents from a barrel into the murky water. He appeared human and local enough to point me in the right direction.

"Sir, can you tell me where one might find lodging nearby?" I asked.

His brow wrinkled until his bushy white eyebrows nearly swallowed his squinted eyes. The old fishmonger spent several seconds assessing me while straightening upright and using his sleeve to swipe sweat from his bald scalp.

"Aye. You'll find a room at The Maiden if you need a place to stay." He passively gestured down a busy cobbled street. "You can't miss her."

"Thank you. Enjoy your night, sir." I nodded, then pulled my hood further over my face when his eyes narrowed further.

Most of the covered stalls had muted colors and years of wear stained the brick buildings. The lack of vibrancy provoked thoughts of home again, where bright crystals of every color lit the streets and paths along the canals each night.

Watching the magical colored lights flicker to life from the palace each night was a lovely memory I held close.

Eyes of the citizens followed me along the streets. My hand swept out and lifted a layer of shadows from the dimly lit roads. The added darkness covered me until the city folk averted their eyes as if they saw nothing at all.

My path led me through the designated shopping district of Bellmead. I slowed, taking time to familiarize myself with the retail

establishments facing the street and the pedestrians milling around the area.

At first glance, I noticed the average stores, boutiques, and services. Mostly human owned and operated, but that wasn't surprising given the city's establishment.

Closer inspection revealed the extent of diversity here and eased an ounce of my tension.

A short, stocky dwarven blacksmith continued working at his forge as I passed the smithy. He lifted a thick arm, hefting a massive hammer as if it were as light as air, and swiped sweat from his head. Another dwarf with a forked beard studded with gems and golden beads locked the front door to the nearby jewelry store.

Further down, a halfling woman with a mop of golden ringlets bouncing around her arched ears sold the last of her roses to a human couple outside of a florist's. It was the best smelling corner of the city so far.

Behind the counter of the butcher shop, I saw a towering orcish man with subtle green skin cleaning up for the day. He wore a golden band on his left tusk that matched the wedding ring of the human woman sweeping outside their front door.

The elves lost decades of commerce but were gradually working towards this level of unity. This coexistence is what my mother dreamed of when she married my father. I bet she'd love to visit the human continent if given the chance to see the possibilities for herself.

In my youth, my parents opened trade negotiations with other kingdoms. I wondered how frequently elven trade ships made their way through the Bellmead harbor.

By the time I drifted away from the market district, the sun vanished entirely, and night rose over the city. The scent of nightfall here was strikingly acidic, and the sewer covers leaked a slight smell of old eggs that stood apart from the overwhelming stink of fish and ocean.

At the corner of two streets and towering five stories high, the tavern was as obvious as the man at the docks described. The building flaunted reddish brick with a painted black trim. Candle flames inside the yellow-tinted textured glass, reflecting light on the slick cobble streets.

When someone staggered through the front door, drunken voices and off-key music drifted outward. The wobbling man leaned on the signpost, causing me to look up.

In gold paint on a white background, I read ‘*The Maiden’s Legs: Always Open.*’ I rolled my eyes but elbowed my way through the door.

Warm air from a fire blazing in the hearth greeted me, along with the near overwhelming scent of mead and meat from the kitchen. The lights were low, rousing shadows to whisper along my skin as I entered.

Even when I sat at the crowded bar top, the shadows writhed viciously around me. The urgency of them stung like a warning, forcing me to take a breath and will them into the corners of the tavern.

Patrons guffawing and chatting crowded most of the round wooden tables. I saw sailors gambling with cards, and half-dressed women in their laps, giggling as if everything the man said was interesting. And a halfling woman picked the pocket of the oblivious fisherman she smiled at.

Merchants and their companions talked of their sales, and others offered trade. An orcish fisherwoman spread her arms, bragging triumphantly about her largest catch of the day.

Only a few here appeared to be drinking on their own.

As I turned my attention to the booths along the back wall, the hairs on the back of my neck rose on end, and goosebumps spread along my arms. The sense of warning elicited my heart rate to spike wildly.

Someone slamming a sloshing tankard of ale on the countertop snapped my attention back into place. My gaze flicked up to a barrel-chested man with a handlebar mustache staring at me quizzically from behind the bar.

“Ain’t seen you around these parts before,” he said, leaning onto the counter as though sizing me up.

“I arrived tonight, and I need a place to stay,” I replied, coolly meeting his gaze without pulling away.

His brown eyes scanned the exposed lower half of my face under my hood and stopped on the strands of my hair that had

slipped free. “Ain’t seen a young thing with white hair before, either.”

I repeated myself. “Just one room. If you don’t have any, I can go elsewhere.”

“Aye, we have rooms for those with coins.” He leaned an elbow on the counter, then pushed the full tankard in my direction. “A cloak as fine as yours, and I’d bet you do,” he added.

Glancing around and ensuring no one watched me, I reached into the interior pockets of my cloak and slipped a few coins free of my hidden pouch. Unspeaking, I slid them across the counter and accepted the ale.

“I’ll get you a key. We’ve got a room on the top floor open,” the barkeep chuckled, and the coins clinked in his hand.

I didn’t look twice at him as I chugged the burning beverage down to quench my thirst. Although the contents were stale, I finished the drink in seconds.

A strange tickle at the back of my neck beckoned me to turn and expect the room again, but I brushed it away. I ignored it to address the barkeep. “Thank you, sir.”

He pulled a drawer of keys from under the counter and slid one across the wooden surface toward me. Then he said, “Names Oliff. Own this place with my missus.” He nodded to a table behind me.

I twisted in my seat and found a short, plump woman wearing a bodice that lifted her bosom into her chin, inciting the rowdiest table into more drinks. She balanced a precarious tray full of ales on her wide shoulders. Her sly smile encouraged patrons to give up their coins for the drinks on her arm.

Oliff smiled as he observed her working through the early night chaos. Until chairs scraping on the floor and yelling distracted him. He shouted across the crowded room, “Hey, none of that in here. The Maiden is respectable these days!”

Before I knew it, Oliff swept around the bar and marched toward the impending brawl.

I picked up my refilled tankard and continued drinking as he dealt with his business. As foul as their drinks were, I welcomed the effect of booze after my voyage.

Then again, an electrical tickle buzzed over my nape, causing me to bristle with awareness. An instinct in my stomach advised me

not to keep my back turned on something here. Nothing in human civilization should disturb my instincts in such a manner.

I pushed the drink away with the back of my hand before glancing over my shoulder. Oliff and his wife were wrestling a drunk and disorderly man yelling in the center of the tavern. Other men were pointing and laughing while others dove out of the way.

A table hidden in the darkest back corner came into view. At first, they were nothing special, simply three shrouded figures sitting relaxed and talking calmly amongst themselves.

Until the air surrounding one of them shivered. If not for the magic in my blood, I wouldn't have noticed. Then the air lodged in the back of my throat when heart-stopping silver eyes locked onto mine. Through the darkness, the otherworldly glow of that intent gaze stood apart from the rest.

Whirling back to the bar, I clutched my ale to my chest. Pinpricks flared across my arms and an unbidden shiver spider-walked down the length of my spine.

The heat in the room must have intensified because a flush coursed up my neck and over my cheeks. My instincts droned against a presence to my left, carrying a warmth that spread over my body as though I'd walked under the sun during the summer.

I cast my eyes up and clenched my jaw to clamp down on a gasp in my throat. My heart tossed itself against the cage of my ribs, near painfully.

No longer hiding in the tavern's corner, a shameless silver stare filled my vision. Black hair fell in luscious waves around a tanned face that was sharp and strong in all the right ways.

The stranger wore all-black clothing that fit his tall, muscular form. Except around the shoulders and biceps, where the fabric strained with his movements. The undone top button revealed a hint of golden skin stretched over a chiseled chest.

Admittedly, my eyes wandered down to the black leather trousers encasing his thick, impressively long legs. I noted the dagger strapped to his hip during my quick assessment.

From under my hood, I bared my teeth and glared. Despite my open disdain, a half-smile kicked up the corner of his sensual lips where a dimple made itself known in his cheek.

At first glance, he appeared human, but the unseen shimmer of the air surrounding him made me question that. Even more so when a dark and sharp course of energy brushed along my senses, attempting to gauge me.

“Darling, you look devastatingly malicious.” His deep, alluring voice paired well with the dimple from his smirk. It made my stomach dip in a way I didn’t want it to. “May I buy you a drink?”

A wave of warmth coursed through my fluttering heart and landed at the apex of my thighs.

Everything within me urged me to strike now, and strike fast. Attack before he did. I doubted if those feelings were mine with how pervasively they clawed at the back of my mind, scratching at the inside of my skull. My skin itched and my blood writhed under my skin like snakes trying to break the surface of the water.

I curled my fingers over my room key until my nails dug into my palms to settle the power stirring in my blood. A scoff breached my lips. “I’d rather choke on this swill by myself, thank you.”

“Oh, she sounds as irate as she looks.” He leaned in closer, and the scent of honey and spice pervaded my nose.

“Do not provoke me,” I gritted each word through my teeth. Every inch of my skin became flushed with the boiling of my blood, and the shadows in the tavern became impossibly darker.

“I’d like to do a lot more than provoke you, darling.” His salacious tone cut off the raging in my mind, forcing me to focus on something else.

As insane as it was, his vexing suggestion helped me rein myself in.

Peeking up from my hood, my lips twitched when I met his eyes again. They swirled like liquid silver around his pitch-black pupils. Unusual, but mesmerizing.

Overwhelming heat from his body invaded my space as if he brushed against my side. Warnings flickered in my thoughts again, but I focused on the imperceptible aura wavering around his body.

The devious stranger and I assessed one another like wild wolves circling each other in the woods, and I always yearned to bare my fangs and fight.

A slamming door and a gust of wind snapped me out of the trance. My head swiveled toward the front door as two men

vanished into the night. Through the textured window, I noticed the taller, burly man nudge the shoulder of his shifty-eyed halfling companion before they slunk into an adjacent alley.

No matter how irrational or wild my urges were, I always followed them. The voice in my mind told me to follow them without delay.

Without another word, I moved automatically. I slipped the room key into my pocket and pushed away from the bar.

“Leaving so soon?” The stranger’s suave voice hooked me, and it was almost enough to reel me in. If I took the bait, I’d stay here with him all night.

I walked away without answering and easily shoved through the increasingly excited tavern crowd. As the drinks continued flowing, they wouldn’t notice who came or went until dawn.

In the brief time I’d spent inside, the storm rolling toward Bellmead delivered a chill. When the wind picked up again, I caught the two men’s scent leading me down the alley where they’d vanished.

Using a simple trick my father taught me, a wave of my hand summoned shadows from the walls that I draped over myself. Now invisible to the untrained eye, I moved with silent steps down narrow back alleys.

“Give us all your coins, boy,” a grating voice demanded from around a corner.

“Aye. What does a little lad like you need with all that money?” That one sounded like the halfling.

My body froze, and a sharp lump caught in my throat.

A child’s voice replied, “Please, I can’t. It’s all my family has.”

“I’ll gut you like a fish.” The threat and a solid kick followed the child’s pitiful remark.

I swept around the corner in time to witness the larger man’s foot connect with the boy’s stomach again.

The pouch fell from the child’s small hands, and gold coins clinked on the damp cobblestones as he grunted.

My vision blurred dangerously, and every inch of my skin pricked from beneath the surface. Inside my chest, my heart pounded like a drum that echoed in my ears.

Of its own accord, my body stepped deeper into the alley. In a single breath, I released the shadows disguising my presence, and the wind whisked them away before the air surged.

At the sudden gust of wind, the two men jerked their heads up, temporarily forgetting about the child. For a second, their eyes widened when they noticed a black shrouded figure having caught them. Until they assessed me under the faint light of the city, and cruel smiles spread on their grim mouths.

“Just a woman,” the halfling said. Then he addressed the child. “You’ve got an audience now, boy. Hand over the money or the lady watches you bleed.”

I took another step as magic sparked over my skin. The power broke the wavering surface of my control to jump and writhe over my flesh. That electric sensation warmed my blood, worsened by the rage rising within me.

“Get away from him,” I commanded.

Hideous laughter barked from the would-be muggers. Their shoulders trembled and their bellies shook with the strength of it. The larger man even swiped an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye.

But my sight cast down to the little boy crumpled on the stone. Blood dripped from his split lip.

The leash on my power snapped from my grasp.

All around us, the wind in the alley whistled, blowing faster and stronger. Trash and bits of debris scattered under the intense breeze that forced the halfling to step back.

A hiss full of venomous promise dripped off my tongue. “For harming a child, I will kill you.”

The bigger thug’s condescending laugh incited me further off the edge. “I’d like to see you try,” he mocked.

Sizzling black flames flew from the tips of my fingers. My power encased the large human in a cocoon of roaring, twisting darkness. The inky fire licked at his clothing and singed his thinning hair. His flesh scorched into ash and his face blistered as his blood boiled him alive from within.

The flesh melted off his fingers as he clawed at the flames. He collapsed to his knees as a scream died on his charred lips.

And the light of his demise danced in the reflection of my eyes.

In the corner of my eye, I caught the halfling falling over a stack of abandoned crates. He froze in disbelief and horror as his companion smoldered into rotten smelling ash before his fear-stricken gaze.

Relief allowed me to breathe when the little boy collected his coins. In the fire's light, he caught my eyes and nodded in silent thanks. Then he turned and ran without looking back.

Sweating profusely and stuck in the pile of broken crates, the halfling thug begged, "Oh gods, help me!"

A wicked smile curled my lips, revealing the overly sharp teeth growing behind my lips. I lifted my hand as I strolled toward him. Flickers of black fire danced between my fingers and my dark-tinted nails lengthened into claws.

As my hand rose higher over the whimpering man, my sleeve fell. Points of onyx pricked through from under my skin, fighting to break free. I sucked in a sharp breath to restrain the scales and feathers.

"Even if the gods were alive, they wouldn't listen to scum like you," I spat.

Dark claws flashed through the air as I lashed out at him, cleaving deep red lashes across his face, Blood seeping from the wounds and down his cheeks, soaking into his collar.

He wailed and screamed each time I struck, praying to long gone deities. "Please, oh gods, save me. Please, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

I snatched the front of his shirt and hauled him to his feet. The halfling sniveled and sobbed through his butchered face.

"Pray that the gods have mercy on your soul when you meet them in the heavenly plane, because you'll have none from me." As those words passed my lips, the magic in my hand struck his body, encasing him in the shadowy fire.

Both men burned steadily into cinders and bones. The sight of their remains abated the worst of the grating rage blurring my vision, but a wave of an outside force sent me stumbling into the nearest brick wall.

"Nevar. Nevar. Nevar. Let me out. Let me out. Let us free," she crooned in the recesses of my mind, awakened by the scent of blood.

“No!” I groaned over teeth too sharp for my mouth. When I braced my palm on the wall, I saw the darkness dotting my forearm and rising higher.

A sharp sensation of ice struck me like frozen lightning from head to toe. I sucked in a gasp as a wave of odd heat followed the warning.

“Bloody Nine Hells.” The alluring voice from the tavern shouldn’t be here right now.

My head snapped up to find the stranger, leaning in the alley’s mouth with his hands in his pockets. His silver eyes were wide and glowing, illuminating the grin on his lips.

“Now that, darling, was a show to die for,” he mused.

Either I was insane, or he sounded impressed. If so, that made him the insane one.

But somehow his appearance and the deep rasp of his voice snuffed out the one struggling for dominance in my head. And before the instincts she incited forced me to strike him, I called for the shadows to sweep me away.

The handsome stranger staggered back, but the fiendish smile on his lips never wavered. As the black flames simmered down, they glimmered in the depths of his eyes that seemed to follow me out of the alley.

Three



The shifting edge around my vision informed me that I walked through a dream. Inky fog swirled around my feet, parting in wisps as I tread over a stone paved road. A steady dripping further down the street echoed over the vast expanse of my dreamscape.

I stepped into a puddle, and my head turned down before I willed it to do so. Hands in delicate lace gloves pulled at a skirt of fine red silk. An indignant scoff followed a glance at heeled slippers now caked in grime.

It's not a dream.

Upon the realization, I snapped out of the woman's point of view. First, I noted the surroundings. This place vaguely matched what I'd seen of Bellmead, but nonetheless exuded the hazy quality that accompanied visions.

Then I noted the woman ahead with her back facing me. She wore an elegant gown while walking down the dark streets, and she carried the scent of wine as though returning home from a party.

She dropped her skirts, raising her hands as her body tensed. Through the muffled dream, I heard the end of an ear-splitting scream.

A darkness rose over her unlike anything I'd ever seen before. This was more than a shadow. This thing was a void, an abyss. It was there, and it wasn't.

Something, or someone, that didn't want to be seen.

I flexed my muscles, intent on charging into action. I needed to help this woman get away from the terrifying aura creeping closer. My body didn't move an inch.

A splash of crimson exploded from her stomach. She buckled to her knees, vomiting red onto the stone street. Blood and wine.

Two smells wove through the damp city air - one, the sweet, coppery tang of blood, and the other a rotten scent that clogged the back of the throat.

Even as the woman fell limp and cold on the empty street, her attacker remained shrouded from my vision. Only magic was powerful

enough to hide something from me.

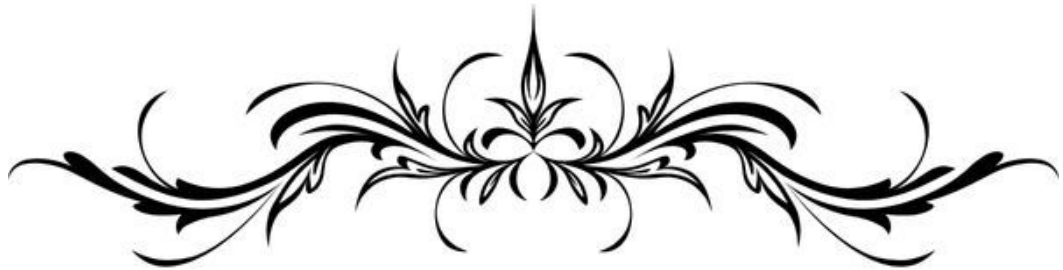
If I could get my hands on that darkness, I had the power to rip away the magic concealing it. But I remained frozen in the dream as nothing more than a struggling observer.

In a blink, the attacker encased the woman. She disappeared inch by inch into an abysmal darkness with blood on her lips and tears staining her frightened face.

An enraged roar flew past my lips, but died in the silent wind.

Something glinted in the light, diverting my attention. I looked closer, and standing out in stark contrast to the pool of bright blood was a lonely ring of intricately woven silver lodged between the stones where the woman had fallen.

The vision wavered around me as the first drops of rain fell from the gloomy sky. Tears from above melted the surrounding world, plunging me into the inky pit of darkness beneath my feet.



Sleep kept hold of me until the sun set the next day. Weeks of struggling, weeks of sailing, weeks of being overwhelmed and fighting caught up with me the second my head hit the pillow. My first vision in months had worsened my exhaustion until I'd lost a night and a day to recovering.

I woke up with a start, heart racing and blood pounding in my ears. Murky light from the setting sun streamed in through a single dusty window. I blinked the sleep from my eyes and stared groggily at the slanted ceiling overhead.

A few moments of practiced deep breathing eased the last vestiges of the nightmare from my mind, and my erratic heart calmed. The writhing, overexcited shadows along the wooden walls slunk back into the crevices and cracks of the room.

I lifted my hands in front of my face and groaned at the black-stained points of my nails and the flaking red viscera underneath them. They'd remained dark claws since Ellrend. They were barely my hands at all anymore.

Once, my hands were nearly identical to my sisters, but she would never stain hers as gruesomely as mine. My twin likely had her nails as neatly manicured now as they'd been the day I left.

If I closed my eyes, I almost felt the warmth of her palm in mine.

A heavy sigh breached my lips as I shoved off the narrow excuse for a bed. I inhaled the stale air and listened to the distant clamor of the growing tavern crowd. As I trudged toward the compact washtub in the corner, I stripped off the layers of the clothing I'd collapsed in.

I'd folded my black cloak and leather corset on the tiny, crooked table at the foot of the bed. They were a few of the remaining items I had from home and heeded their care more than that of the basic black trousers and long-sleeved undershirt I dropped carelessly on the icy floor beneath my feet.

Thin copper pipes along the wall carried running water to the small tub and wash bowl. I twisted the knob, and the pipes groaned in complaint. Thankfully, water bubbled into the tub a second later.

While I was grateful for any type of bath, the water that came from the pipes was just short of freezing. As it was, I dipped my finger into the meager bath and summoned heat without effort.

Steam gently rose from the surface by the time I'd squeezed myself into the cramped tub. The size didn't bother me as long as the water was clean and hot enough to wash away the dried blood smeared on my skin.

Like an annoying gnat zipping around my head, the silver eyes of a man who'd seen too much bothered my conscience. The stranger witnessed me do something unspeakable, and yet he'd stood there smiling at the sight.

Something about him unnerved me, though I couldn't say what. If we ran into one another again, it'd serve me to monitor him. I didn't need distractions like strange men getting in my way.

After reheating my water for a third time and ensuring that I'd scrubbed my skin raw, I stepped from the tub. I was wrapping a thin towel around my chest when a small mirror on the table caught my reflection.

Pointed ears poked through the long white hair that cascaded down over my breasts. My movement slowed in real time while my reflection stepped closer to the glass.

Darkness consumed the green iris, and the reflection's lips parted to reveal grotesquely large teeth. My face morphed and contorted into a creature of scales and feathers—and divine rage.

I jerked back, flinging the towel over the glass. The back of my legs hit the bed and my sweaty palm rubbed over my racing heart as I sank

onto the mattress.

There were a few days until the full moon. I had time.

To distract myself from my thoughts, I rinsed my clothing in the tub. I knelt, naked and cold on the floor without feeling the chill or the hardwood on my knees. Getting lost in a menial task was easier than dwelling on things I held no control over.

A touch of magic pulled from the air dried my clothes, while all traces of blood from last night spun endlessly in circles down the drain until the water ran clear. I dressed without looking back, then pulled my hood over my head once more.

Outside, the sun vanished, yet the orange and yellow glow of city lights kept Bellmead alive. Stairs groaned under my boots, and the tavern noise echoed off the walls. If not for my protesting stomach, I might have gone back to sleep.

This close to the bay, The Maiden's Legs seemed like a popular destination for seafarers. They carried the saltwater scent of the ocean, and it mingled with the aroma of roasting meat from the kitchen.

Oliff caught me descending the stairs along the back wall and dipped his head. A few minutes after I had hid myself in a shadowy corner, the barkeeper found me, bringing with him a tray bearing meat stew, a crusty loaf of bread, and a fresh ale.

"First time seeing you out today. I almost forgot you were staying." He set the tray down and said, "But I'm betting you're hungry."

"Yes, thank you." My fingers curled around the spoon and aimed toward the heartily filled bowl.

Oliff cleared his throat, diverting my attention from the food. "A word of advice, if you'd listen."

I tipped my head back, staring at him from under my hood.

He glanced over his shoulder before continuing. "That man who approached you last night, watch out for him and his friends."

My brow arched up. "Is he dangerous?"

"As for that, I can't really say. But I can tell you they're mighty foolish. Strange things are happening in Bellmead these days, and they want to get involved," he confided.

"How so?" I stirred the spoon idly through chunks of meat and potatoes.

"People are going missing without a trace, and since you sound like a proper lady, I thought someone should warn you." He twisted the ends of his mustache when he finished speaking.

“I appreciate the concern,” I said.

Oliff nodded, pleased that I’d listened. He returned to the rowdy patrons under his roof without a second thought. With ale to wash it down, I devoured the stew as soon as he turned his back.

How had he noticed the stranger approaching me while dealing with a brawl last night?

A good barkeeper was a perceptive one. And I’d needed the information he provided. Dreams brought me here, and that was my first clue why.

No one in the tavern seemed afraid of anything outside the walls. Outside the windows, darkness painted the streets, but locals came and went as if the disappearances weren’t a concern. Or they’d yet to notice, as Oliff had.

What had he meant about the stranger who followed me getting involved in the alarming city affairs? Had he unsettled me because he was potentially responsible?

The front doors swung open, carrying a gust of wind into the comfortably warm tavern. A shiver snuck down the length of my spine and caution tickled the back of my neck.

I cast my eyes to the newcomers waltzing through the door and froze under the swirling silver gaze that instantly locked onto me. My blood moved sluggishly in my veins, but I narrowed my stare at him.

He tossed his head back to his companions, and soft waves of raven black hair swished over his shoulder. To my dismay, his friends took his cue and headed toward my secluded table.

Behind my swaggering silver-eyed stranger, his first friend’s wavy copper locks nearly brushed against the lower rafters of the ceiling. Under the flickering candlelight, I noticed a green tint to his skin and the small tusks poking out from his bottom lip.

His lumbering steps thudded on the wooden floor, and in a silent room I might have felt them in my bones. He carried a confidence that only came from someone large, who knew how to use that size and strength to their advantage.

The beautifully crafted battle-axe strapped across his broad shoulders told me I assumed correctly of the half-orc.

Yet it was the woman following them that held my focus. When I sensed the shadows in the room reacting to her presence, my skin tightened and my chest twinged.

Comfortable black leathers adorned her well-built frame. She had her honey hair cropped short with the sides of her head shaved, blatantly

revealing the long delicate points of her ears.

A Thanaten, like my father's people. Judging by the obsidian blade at her hip, she was a former soldier of the shadow kingdom. Softly but decisively, her hand rested atop the hilt.

Her russet brown eyes studied me as they approached. She narrowed her gaze with suspicion, so I bit down on my flicker of excitement at seeing another elf for the first time in years.

Silver-eyes maneuvered through the roiling sea of tavern patrons ahead of his companions. Before his friends reached the table, he'd already slid onto the bench beside me.

I bit my tongue while internally admitting that his agility impressed me.

He draped his arm over the back of the bench and leaned in. The warmth he emitted washed over me, accompanied by his dizzying honeyed spice scent.

The shiver in the air surrounding him warned me to remain alert despite his frustrating allure.

His lips parted in a sensuous smile, giving rise to the dimple in his cheek. "I had a nightmare about you last night, darling. It was marvelous."

Those words shouldn't have caused heat to flicker in my belly as they did.

"Would you like to make your dreams a reality?" I hissed through my teeth.

"Nine Hells, I certainly would," he replied. When he blinked, silver flames danced in the depths of his eyes. His wide grin caused my heart to skip a beat, and I wanted to run a knife through him for it.

His companions joined us a second later, and he pulled away a fraction, giving me the space to breathe again.

The half-orc took the seat across from me, and his knees bumped the underside of the table as he did. His steel-gray eyes assessed me with a once over before he addressed the man at my side.

"You're right. She looks angry." His guttural voice reminded me of boulders falling down a mountainside. Then he asked the elven woman settling into the seat beside him, "Doesn't she look properly pissed?"

Even if the other tavern patrons didn't side-eye her as an elf, she would pay attention to me. But like called to like, and she might have already sensed the shadows whispering in my presence.

“She does, but we need help. Perhaps she’s mad enough to join us,” she said, voice tight and expression pinched.

“Can you two let me ask her first before you blabber? Why did I even bring you along?” Silver-eyes swiped his hand down his face to erase his exasperation.

“What is it you want?” I asked in a clipped tone.

Three pairs of eyes turned on me again. My hackles raised and my skin bristled like a cornered feral cat.

“I’m glad you’re willing to hear us out. First, let me introduce my friends. The gigantic fellow is Raaz Cossain, and the shadow elf is Bellefy Alvynna.” Facing me, he placed a hand over his chest. “And I’m Deimos Drystaxus, at your service.”

My response breezed past my lips. “I certainly don’t need your service.”

The corner of his mouth briefly twitched up. He pressed onward, asking, “Will you tell me your name, darling?”

Giving my last name would reveal my identity to Bellefy, and I’d prefer keeping my origins to myself as long as possible. After a beat of silence, I relented. “Nevar.”

He gasped, “That’s harsh. You know my name now.” Undertones of laughter wove through his words.

I shook my head at him before rolling my eyes. “Gods, no. Nevar is my name.” Then I crossed my arms and leaned back before adding, “Now, what do you want from me?”

Deimos glanced around the tavern, ensuring no one eavesdropped. The sight of his tongue darting over his plump bottom lip drew my gaze. Then he peered at me from underneath dark lashes that stressed the abnormal shine in his eyes.

“Bellmead is in danger. Something dark is happening in this city.” His thin whisper provoked goosebumps along the back of my arms.

“Indeed.” I already knew that much.

Deimos pressed closer until his thigh brushed against mine under the table and his warm breath tickled the side of my face under my hood.

He whispered out of earshot from his friends, “Listen, I’ve seen what you can do, and I think our goals align.”

My skin itched under the invisible shield surrounding him. A voice in my head raged at me to throw myself at him.

“You know nothing about me or why I’m here,” I argued.

“If you hadn’t stepped in, who knows what might have happened to that little boy in the alley? You saved him. I think that’s the reason you’re here.” He surmised correctly, and it irritated me.

Visions of encroaching darkness lured me to Bellmead, and these three wanted to do something about the disappearances. Although something about Deimos unsettled the voice in my head, perhaps we’d be better off working together.

“We need your help, and I’d be exceptionally pleased if you joined us on our little hunt.”

His last word evoked a wild excitement within me. Electricity sparked over my skin and my nerves tingled at the prospect of a chase. A familiar ache formed in the pit of my stomach, like a hunger to dive into the thrill of the kill.

“I’ll come with you,” I replied.

Our eyes locked, and a force of charged energy crackled in the air between us. An unbidden urge encouraged me to close the distance, and my lips quivered with my restraint.

Deimos glanced at my lips and smiled. “My dreams are becoming a reality, darling. Starting with you.”

Four



The heat of his body reawakened a forgotten warmth low in my belly. I shifted my legs against the tight coiling within me and angled away from him on the bench.

“How do you plan on hunting the problem?” I asked, needing a distraction from the quivering inside my core.

“My method is difficult to manage, and not as accurate as I’d like,” Deimos ruefully chuckled. The low, sensual sound sent a wave of chills down my backside.

“Magic?” I breathed. Deimos appeared human on the outside, but my instincts nagged at me.

“Something like that.” Deimos didn’t elaborate further.

When a trickle of power whispered along my skin, my breathing slowed. Reality wavered around him, mirroring ripples in a disturbed pool of water.

An impulse guided my hand on the notion that if I reached out and grasped at the air surrounding Deimos, I’d rip away whatever mystical mask shielded him.

A tight grip encircled my wrist and jerked my hand under the table. I hadn’t noticed myself reaching for him.

My eyes flicked up to Deimos and the molten silver swirling in his iris. The wildness in his gaze made the power under my skin purr in response. It seemed like ages passed before he peered down at his impossibly warm holding mine.

Deimos traced his thumb over the erratic pulse on my wrist. His chest shuddered as he expelled the breath he’d been holding.

Heat crept over my neck and stained my cheeks. Wordlessly, I snatched my hand away.

Our corner of the tavern darkened as the shadows answered my mood. Tendrils of black swirled over the wall, attempting to rise and

reach for me. I gritted my teeth and willed them away.

A weighty stare pricking the side of my face caused me to look up. I found myself under Bellefy's watchful eye. No doubt she'd sensed the shadows movement.

I had to be more careful around her.

Deimos cleared his throat, drawing me back to the matter at hand. "People go missing at night. The disappearances began with beggars and common folk, so the city guards paid no mind to their loss. However, affluent members of society are going missing now."

"We rescued one," Raaz rumbled out, then snapped his fingers. "Lord Teddy."

Deimos lifted a shoulder and waved his hand. "Yes, Lord Theodrin Emalstan. He had enough sword training to fight off his attacker until we arrived. It vanished before we got a good look, then we returned Lord Emalstan to his home."

"One of many," Bellefy divulged.

Raaz ran a hand through his hair, and the firelight highlighted the green tones of his skin again. "It's already past dark, Deimos. I'm bored and itching for a brawl."

Biting down on my chuckle, I maintained a soft tone. "What do you need me for when you have that enormous fellow?"

"Raaz might be sizable, but strength alone isn't enough. I know we need you on our side, darling." Then Deimos murmured under his breath as his eyes traced over the exposed side of my face. "Though I'd like to have you on all sides."

"You'll end up with a blade where the sun doesn't shine if you aren't careful," I warned.

A salacious grin split his lips, and wicked mirth danced in his eyes, sweeping away his jovial demeanor. "Do you promise?"

The brittle tension between our bodies shattered.

I sharply inhaled through my nose and lurched back with my eyes rounded. If I didn't get away from him, chaos would break out, and I didn't know what kind.

"I'll meet you outside then." Without another word, I pushed away from the table, leaving my empty bowl and half-finished ale behind.

A wave of light from within the tavern shone on the wet cobbled street when I shoved through the door. The drunken laughter from within faded, as did the oppressive heat on my skin. I closed my eyes and took in the distant scent of the ocean drifting in on the brisk night breeze.

The needed moment of fresh air and silence returned an ounce of my sanity.

Deimos was unlike any man I'd ever met before. His presence alone evoked powerful reactions from the magic that coursed through me. I wasn't sure if that's what pulled me to him or what made me wary.

After a few moments of blissful silence, the door to The Maiden's Legs creaked open. The air warbled around me, alerting me to his approach before I looked up.

Deimos swaggered towards me, hands casually in his pockets, resembling a rogue out for a leisurely night stroll. Silvery moonlight cast a glow around the gentle waves of his dark head and enhanced the innate glow of his eyes. The dimple appeared again as he grinned at me, as though he didn't have a care in the world.

"This way, darling," he hummed, continuing deeper into the city.

I openly rolled my eyes before falling into step with him. Bellefy and Raaz kept pace behind us. Our group wound through several side streets, roaming until foot traffic slowed and sound evaporated.

Once Deimos guided us into an abandoned lane squished between two stores, he halted. He dropped into a squat while yanking a small blade from his back pocket.

I stepped to the side, pressing my back against the brick wall while studying his actions.

Deimos sliced across his wrist with a brief grunt. He grimaced at the fresh wound and dark blood welled to the surface. The oddly sweet, metallic scent rolled into the wind, and the creature under my skin rolled forward.

Unconsciously, I stole a step closer, eyes riveted on the crimson droplets trickling into the dark stone beneath our feet. Beads of red sizzled into steam seconds after his blood painted the ground. Then the invisible shield around Deimos trembled. The echoes of

whatever power he called on vibrated against the magic undulating through me.

My brows arched at the odd, arcane sight.

Bellefy and Raaz waited, unspeaking, as Deimos worked. They must have seen Deimos do unusual things before. Raaz scratched the short layer of scruff on his chin, and Bellefy used a dagger formed of shadow to pick at her nails.

Deimos opened his palm and collected the rising steam from his blood. He pulled his clenched fist to his lips and whispered something unintelligible into his hand. When he stood to his full height once more, he released a condensed round cloud of crimson.

He whistled and the mystical blood-cloud darted away from his palm and flew down the street.

Bellefy leapt into action first, moving swiftly along with the locator spell. Raaz inhaled a deep breath before pushing himself into a trot, heavy steps thumping on the stone.

Deimos cast his eyes up and noted my gaze on his bleeding wrist. He tugged his sleeve over the wound and winked at me. "Hunts on, darling."

Excitement dipped bright and heavy in my stomach before curling upward and wrapping around my heart. That energy flushed through my blood and carried me after Deimos and his friends as we flit through the city on the trail of magic.

With all the magic I'd witnessed and experienced in my lifetime, using blood to locate was unheard of. Magic came at a price to the wielder, and blood often paid for it. But not like that.

There was more to Deimos than met the eye, and I'd say the same of Bellmead. Why was there a song in the wind and an urge in my blood to come here? What part did Deimos and his friends play in this?

Deeper into the city, the streets widened, seemingly newer and much cleaner. Homes and shops grew taller and opulent, and the smell of saltwater thinned on the wind.

Cool night air breezed over my skin as I ran, and each breath in filled my lungs and carried me further. My heart pounded steadily from the effort of running, but I was a long way from feeling the strain of sprinting.

When I stole a peek at Deimos, I observed his effortless movement. The dark locks of his hair blew out like raven wings flowing in the wind. His clothing clung to his well-toned form, moving with the dangerous grace of an experienced predator in the night.

The blood cloud whizzed around a corner, leading us into a back alley behind a line of shops. I turned the corner after the others and a sinister chill grazed the back of my neck when I recognized the alleyway.

I'd never set foot here before, yet I knew the brick walls and the stack of empty crates to the left.

Deimos and the others focused on his locator spell as the cloud fizzed out over a round grate set into the stone.

"Seems it's led us to the sewers," he noted.

"Disgusting," Bellefy groaned. "Though it makes sense that something would hide down there."

"But the sewer of all places?" Raaz's shoulders dropped, and his nose scrunched up.

"A filthy place for a filthy beast, I'd say." Deimos swung his head to where I'd paused in the alley.

A sparkle under the moon's light held me captive. Crouching onto one knee, I reached out with trembling fingers and plucked out a woven ring of silver wedged between the uneven cobblestones.

My breath lodged in my throat, and my heart ceased beating. Fresh memories of a nightmarish vision flashed behind my eyes, and the woman's haunting screams echoed inside my skull.

I rose to my feet again, blankly staring at the ground. In my mind I saw the woman clearly, as if she were still there in the moments before her attacker dragged her corpse into the shadows.

The ring burned in the center of my palm, and I fought against crumpling under the weight of it.

"What have you found?" Deimos's voice trickled into my ear and brushed away the chill on my skin.

"Nothing." I curled my fingers around the ring and discretely shoved it into my pocket.

The recent rain had washed all evidence of blood into the sewer. An acrid aroma of death lingered in the air, along with a

creeping vicious energy that made my skin crawl.

“Whatever we seek is down there,” I muttered.

“Of course it is,” Deimos assured with a swaggering grin.

Bellefy turned her suspicious gaze on me. “How do you know?”

Deimos interjected. “First, I led us here. That alone tells you we’re in the right place.”

“Fine,” she ground through her teeth before pulling her eyes away from me.

“You all talk too much,” Raaz rumbled.

In a blink, he squatted low and hooked his fingers in the grate. A low grunt of effort vibrated through his chest as the metal groaned and warped in his hands. Seconds later, the grate snapped away from the stone.

A moment of silence passed as everyone stared at Raaz. I understood why Deimos kept him around.

Bellefy broke the quiet barrier. “I can see through the shadows, so maybe I should go first.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to hide an unwanted smile.

Deimos side-eyed me for a second, gaze shining with the knowledge I’d have no trouble with the darkness after what he’d seen me do.

To Bellefy he said, “After you, then.”

She dipped her head, then braced her arms around her chest. With one small jump, she dropped into the void. Water splashed, followed by a string of curses.

Raaz peered into the hole, brows pinched, and lips curved down in a thin line. He whispered into the awaiting darkness. “Bellefy?”

“I’m alright,” she hollered back. “It stinks worse than the Nine Hells down here, but the jump isn’t far.”

Deimos chuckled, and as if to himself, mumbled, “Oh, it doesn’t stink that bad in the Nine Hells.”

I almost hadn’t heard him, but the offhand statement provoked my curiosity. He became weirder with each passing moment, and it called forth the leashed voice in the crevices of my mind.

“*Nevar.*” The low hum of her ethereal whisper tickled the inside of my ear.

My body tensed as I lurched back a step. Electric tension sparked within my muscles and my racing heart kindled flames under my skin. Internally, I slammed down a wall between my thoughts and hers.

Raaz vanishing into the ground swept me away from the chaos encroaching on my sanity. I poured every ounce of my attention on his loud splash and the subsequent grunt that punched past his lips.

“Easy big fella,” Bellefy cautioned.

Swallowing my inner turmoil, I neared the hole. A hint of the sewage stink drifted upward into my face, and I stifled a gag at the wet stench.

Deimos brushed his hand against me, and my head whipped up. His gravelly voice came out tight. “This is your last chance to abandon us and go back.”

Our eyes met, and the moonlight reflected in his gaze entranced me. A hidden darkness swirled in the depths of the silver—a darkness that called to me.

“We both know we’re about to see something we won’t like.” His voice broke the fragile tension in the surrounding air.

“I already have,” I taunted, then plunged over the edge.

Deimos stood back, drawing his bottom lip between his teeth as he watched me plummet through the air. His intense stare followed me the entire way down.

Five



A cocoon of shadow shielded me from the brunt of my landing and the backslash of water. When I caught my balance, I dispelled the dark barrier while grimacing at the murky sludge lapping at my boots.

I briefly evaluated the arched ceiling overhead and the shallow runoff rippling around my calves. I wouldn't call what we stood in water.

Deimos hurled himself down a moment later, sloshing noisily behind me. "Oh, you were right about the smell. That's bad."

"It stinks and I can't see a gods-damn thing," Raaz grumbled.

Readily, I willed the light in my blood to the surface. The power rose in my palm, growing and spiraling into an orb of golden sunlight. I released the orb into the air, watching it spark and flare.

The white-hot light floated higher until it hovered below the dome of the ceiling. Once the magic stopped swelling, the illumination in our current bend of the tunnel rivaled the light of day.

Bellefy's sharp inhale snagged my attention. Daggers shot from her eyes as they narrowed at me. She hissed, "Sun magic?"

Deimos strode forward and faced Bellefy. "Don't start that," he warned.

The elven civil war ended over two decades ago, and she didn't appear old enough to have witnessed it firsthand. Perhaps her family harbored bad blood against sun elves.

I wouldn't blame her if she did.

Her hand curved over the hilt of her blade. Liquid sloshed around her boots as she trudged forward. "I don't trust her, and now we're in the tunnels with a stranger and a monster," she seethed.

The subtle threat of her hand on her weapon ignited the hunger within me. My skin pricked from under the surface, and I swallowed an unbidden growl rising in my throat. I grappled the divine beast inside the cage of my being before it emerged.

But I lost control of my tongue, and words dripping with venom slithered free. “There is more than one monster in these tunnels, and you will silence yourself before I do it for you.”

Orange light from the orb overhead flickered with agitation, yet the air caressing my skin turned frigid. Shadows licked along the slick stone walls as if they were alive despite the brilliant glow chasing them back.

Bellefy hissed, and her blade sang when she unsheathed it. The blood rolled under my skin, preparing to surge forward and meet her attack.

“Enough.” Deimos charged between us at the last second. His palm braced against my chest, halting me from closing the distance. He addressed Bellefy when he said, “I’m sure there are many unsavory creatures down here. Fighting amongst ourselves will only draw their attention.”

Bellefy’s eyes never wavered from me as she sheathed her blade. “Sorry, Deimos,” she grudgingly replied.

In Gwathendor, guards would have locked her away for life if anyone had witnessed her threat. Since we were half a world from home, she had the freedom to challenge me. Even if it would cost her life.

Once the sizzling edges of my anger settled, I nodded at my fellow elf. I respected her tenacity. Few beings commanded the courage to advance on me, and fewer lived to tell the tale.

Deimos pivoted to me and quirked a brow.

I half-heartedly shrugged in return. If he wanted an apology, he wouldn’t get one.

Indecent hunger flickered through his eyes as he glanced at my face. Vexation and longing mingled in the silver depths. As warmth coursed through my blood, heat returned to the tunnels.

“Let’s continue before we’re too late. I’d hate to miss our chance because we squabbled amid filth.” A command wove through his words, and something in me caved to the indirect order.

“We’re a team now, and we’ve got to work together when there’s bigger fish to fry,” Raaz claimed, bobbing his head.

I offered him a meager smile. He enthusiastically returned the gesture, showing off his petite lower tusks.

“Now that we’ve settled that, let’s get moving.” Deimos peeled his eyes off me and waved a hand as though dissipating the remaining tension. He took the first step onward, cleaving through the sewage around our feet.

Bellefy and Raaz stuck to Deimos, keeping their eyes forward. I gave myself another second to cool the beast inside before wading after them toward gods knew what.

Each step through the tunnel led us closer to the city center. We trudged through a current of the nastiest liquid I’d ever seen as it flowed toward the bay, where it likely spilled out into the ocean. It would explain the muddy color of the sea water and slight stench surrounding the docks.

Apprehension weighed heavily in the air, tainting every breath I took into my lungs. A knot tightened within my intestines as each second stretched into minutes. Before I knew it, a half hour of wading through filth had passed.

The longer we sloshed through filth, the heavier the silence became. I felt a barrier between me and the other three; the sense of being an outsider among a group of established friends.

Not that it bothered me. I sought to end the visions plaguing me and return home as soon as the opportunity presented itself. I was only here to play my part, and these three were a means to an end.

I’d witnessed a trace of the thing we hunted in a dream and what it did to that unfortunate woman whose remains might be in these tunnels. That thought made her ring in my pocket ten times heavier.

The light on the slick walls shuddered, and my eyes snapped up to the rippling golden orb. Cold air passed my lips when I exhaled, and a chill spider-walked to the base of my spine.

Deimos halted, sensing the same thing I had. He angled around and our eyes met. In that fleeting second, we shared a silent awareness of something coming around the bend.

Ahead, the tunnel split into two paths. The tunnel on the left continued curving toward the other side of Bellmead while the path

on the right dipped deeper into the ground.

An oppressive heat wave blasted up from the right-hand tunnel, sweeping away the underground chill. The burst of hot air echoed off the walls and bowled over us as if the depths of the earth had suddenly exhaled.

Deimos lowered his arm from shielding his eyes and approached the drop-off. He craned his head to peer down into the darkness, and promptly grimaced as another breath of abnormally hot air swept up from underground.

“We’re going down there, aren’t we?” Raaz pointed at the water rushing over the edge of the incline and the corner of his lips turned down comically far.

Deimos brushed a hand through his hair, holding it away from his face as he tipped his head back and flared his nostrils in the air. Then he answered, “We certainly are.”

He’d sniffed the air.

I strode through the current and lifted my head. A deep pull of air filled my nose and lungs with putrid smells. I choked down on the dry heave clawing at the back of my throat.

Mingled with the overwhelming sewage were the underlying scents of blood, sulfur, and something unfamiliar - something I’d only describe as the absence of smell. The void of an aroma laced through everything else, like the memory of an odor.

Deimos waited for no one. Wordlessly, he tossed himself over the edge and vanished down the incline.

“Shit.” Bellefy threw herself after him.

Raaz swung his head in my direction. His shoulders dropped as he sighed heavily.

“Ready?” I asked in a rush while bracing myself to jump.

“Always have to be ready with these two,” he shrugged out. After a final huff, he sent himself after his friends.

I soared after him, bending my knees and riding the incline to the bottom. Waves of soiled water splattered along the walls in our wake. The magical ball of light zipped ahead of me and illuminated my destination.

A rounded pool at the bottom of the incline collected the overflow. The neatly built tunnels under Bellmead were behind us. I

looked up at a cavernous dome riddled with moist stalactites that hung like precarious daggers overhead. Stalagmites thrust up from the darkened cave corners, surrounding us on all sides like a forest of dark stone spires.

The steady drip of water echoing through the cavern broke through my panting breath. Another beat of noxious warmth billowed in from the darkest recess and blasted over the exposed half of my face.

“Oh, by the gods.” Bellefy lurched over, covering her mouth to stop from retching up the contents of her stomach.

Raaz buried his nose in the crook of his elbow and smoothed his other hand over Bellefy’s spine as she heaved.

Crimson ichor muddled with sewage water blanketed the ground surrounding the runoff pool. A nearby mound came into view under my light, revealing mangled flesh, twisted intestines, and shards of bone.

Near to the edge of the water, a flayed skull with bits of tattered flesh and singed hair clinging to bone faced us. Empty sockets stared through me, but it was the missing woman’s eyes I saw in my mind.

Her attacker had killed her—consumed her. I’d dreamt of the woman only the night before. What sort of abomination was capable of such vile carnage?

The bite of her terror permeated the scorching air. Her palpable anguish persisting in this space caused my gut to drop to the floor, and my heart shuddered painfully.

Deimos bounded onto the ledge around the pool and whisked his blade from its sheath. In the blink of an eye, he eased into a stance prepared for battle. “Guards up. It’s here,” he ordered.

When my sphere of light ascended higher, brushing against the vault of the cavern, the sweeping glow chased away the last fingers of shadows clinging to the craggy stone surfaces. All except for a remaining mass of darkness writhing along the back left corner.

The inky mass heaving itself away from the wall emitted a sharp hiss, mirroring the release of high-pressure steam. I tentatively reached out with magic, searching for an inclination of what the creature might be. It seemed almost made of living shadows, but I knew on an innate level that it wasn’t.

Slinking from the darkness, the creature gradually unfurled its limbs. The shape mimicked a starfish horrifically fused with an octopus. Too many snake-like limbs flared wildly as it surged nearer.

I propelled myself from the water and onto the ledge, carefully avoiding the mauled corpse. At Deimos's side I snapped, "What the fuck is that?"

"This is worse than I imagined," Bellefy interrupted.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Raaz giving Bellefy a hand to rise from the water. Despite her disgust, she pulled on the mask of a soldier and braced herself for battle.

At her side, Raaz lifted his axe from over his shoulder. His chest heaved steadily, and his knuckles turned bone-white on his weapon.

Deimos ignored my question as he stared wide-eyed and mouth gaping at the twitching creature. "I didn't expect this," he admitted under his breath.

I opened my mouth to repeat my question until a raucous, warbling screech ricocheted off the walls and assaulted my ears. The goosebumps rising on my arms rapidly progressed into pin pricks.

The scent of sulfur intensified as the creature wriggled forward. A gurgling, wet voice boomed around us. "I musst feed."

Slivers of white opened along the creature's abyssal body. One large orb at the center rolled forward until a slitted pupil set within a yellow iris locked onto us, then dozens more blinked along the thrashing arms.

A snarl ripped from my lips when I snatched the front of Deimos's shirt. His head snapped to me, and his eyes rounded.

"Do you know what that thing is?" I demanded harshly. The remaining shadows in the cave undulated, and the ball of light wavered in response to my rousing power.

"Perhaps." His eyes darted from me to the creature, then he shrugged. "More or less."

A serpentine arm with too many eyes swung through the air. The damn creature was massive and quickly filled the space when it crept forward.

I released Deimos, allowing us both to dodge the first attack. Sulfur tainted heat grazed my skin when the arm sailed overhead.

A squelching snarl erupted from the beast. "I feel you. Tainted by hellfire. We are the sssame!"

My heart stumbled over a beat, and a violent shiver rocked through my body.

What did it mean by hellfire?

"We are not the same," Deimos raged in return, bristling with untapped fury.

Bellefy sucked in a gasp, but I didn't dare glance back at her or Raaz. Instead, my eyes narrowed on Deimos upon realizing the beast addressed him.

"You are nothing more than an overgrown hell-spawn from the lowest level imaginable," Deimos shouted. Silver sparks crackled from the corners of his eyes.

"What the fuck is it?" I ground out each word.

Without meeting my glare, he replied tersely, "It's a lesser demon. One far larger than their ilk should be capable of growing."

"We are the sssame!" The monster insisted, and a dozen eyes rotated to Deimos.

His arm rose, and he pointed the tip of his blade at the lesser demon. Animosity and something else I couldn't discern laced his words. "If you know what I am, then I command you to cease!"

The horror of this monstrosity outweighed the shadow beasts that prowled through the lands of Gwathendor. If I wanted to get out of this situation alive, I'd have to pack away my burning questions for later.

A sickly wet laughter left the demon. "Who are you to command me in the pressence of a deity?"

An unholy chill seized me, despite the sweltering heat. The erratic pounding of my heart echoed in my ears like the drums of war, heralding death.

Deimos dropped his arm, head flinching back at the beast's declaration. His voice grated through him. "What?"

"A god? The gods are long gone." Raaz inched closer, looking at Deimos for an answer.

"They've been dead for a millennium," Bellefy affirmed, nodding to herself.

More gross laughter gurgled from the aberration. The lesser demon's mad eyes rolled in their sockets and its twisting tentacles flailed. One by one, its unnerving eyes swiveled to me.

Deimos's eyes burned into the side of my face, but I'd frozen into a half-living statue.

My breath punched past my lips, and each pound of my heart pulsed through my blood and sinew. The entity under my skin crawled to the surface, scraping and clawing at my flesh like rats chewing through a barrier. A sensation of needles pricked along my arms as it nudged my conscience.

"No matter who you are, no matter what you are... I musst feed!" It shrieked again before hurling its storm of wriggling arms in our direction.

Six



An unhinged voice yowled in the back of my mind like a wildcat desperate to be released. *“Nevar, let me free. We must scorch this beast out of existence!”*

An inky, flailing tendril shot between me and Deimos. Everyone jumped back as additional slithering arms shot forward.

Silver steel blurred in the air as Deimos brought his sword down on a tentacle. Blackened blood, as thick as sludge, sprayed from the severed limb. The lesser demon screeched and reacted with a chaotic frenzy of movement.

Stinging pain flared over my skin, nearly forcing me to my knees. Again, the unearthly voice pounded at the back of my skull. I grabbed the sides of my head, bowing over as I struggled against her lure. “Oh, fuck off,” I seethed through my teeth.

Distracted by my outburst, Deimos’s gaze snapped to me. A tentacle flung out and knocked into his shoulder. He stole the momentum from the hit, rolling to the ground and effectively dodging another attack.

Bellefy summoned wisps of shadows around her frame. Each individual puff of darkness warped into daggers in mid-air. She tossed them one after the other into the demon’s rotating eyes.

The creature hissed, throwing its massive body against the cavern wall. Chunks of rock and debris clattered around us, and the ground shuddered beneath our feet.

In the pandemonium, worsened by the searing pain on my skin, I didn’t notice Deimos landing in a crouch at my side. His palm settling on my shoulder snatched me from my torment.

Instinctively, I flinched back from him. The divine voice in my head purred with pride at my reaction.

“Shut up and fuck off,” I growled at that sickeningly sweet voice.

She retaliated, magnifying the itching, burning pain pricking under my skin. I gripped my forearm through my cloak, willing her to settle down and leave me alone. If she didn't go away, I'd rip apart at the seams.

"Nevar, darling, now is not the time to fall apart," Deimos shouted. He outstretched his hand to me. His palm shone like a beacon under the flares of magical sunlight overhead. "We need you."

Lurching forward, I accepted his hand. Once his fingers curled around mine, I yanked him forward and hissed. "Get your friends and get the fuck out of here."

"Language," Deimos chided, silver eyes glittering. He tightened his grip on my hand, then tugged me until we were chest to chest. "I'm not leaving you."

His imposing build towered over me, and the heat from his skin penetrated through my cloak alongside the sweltering air in the cavern. He was so close I saw inflamed sparks in the silver abyss of his eyes.

Another shiver rolled through me, that time from the unwavering heat in his stare and not from the withering entity fighting me for control. Somehow, the fire in his eyes softened the strain. Not silent, but mild enough to brush to the sidelines.

Returned instincts rolled to the front of my newly quiet mind. Without glancing up, I sensed the air shifting with the demon's incoming attack seconds before it appeared in my line of sight.

My initial shock, and the unwanted voice, faded away as serenity cascaded through my mind and body. One final exhale slipped through my lips as the memory of battle settled into my muscles. With a flawless twist, I angled toward the lesser.

Deimos struck faster than lightning. His blade sang as it sailed through the air, cleaving through the beast's arm in a chorus of squelching flesh and agony. The appendage smacked into the slick floor, writhing like a dying snake.

My vision tunneled, time slowed, and my palm faced the demon. The edge of my cloak slipped from my wrist, revealing porcelain skin free of deformities in the newfound clarity.

Fire as dark as shadows in the night burst from my hand. The flame sucked the light from the cave like a devouring void, greedy

for luminescence. Billowing flashes of dark fire enveloped the twitching demon's mass.

I advanced another step, stabilizing my stance against the force emitted from my hand. The aberration hissed and squirmed around on the glossy crimson floor as I set it ablaze.

Deimos's eyes flared, and the hint of a smile curled his lips.

Rage at the demon for the disappearance of innocent lives ignited within me, provoking my flames to roar higher until even the gore on the cave floor sizzled from the heat. The weight of despair for lives lost gnawed inside my chest, and the fire fanned out, completely converging on the creature.

Shadows in the cave gorged themselves on my power, growing increasingly darker and absconding with my magical sunlight. Shades swept into the cavern, curling towards me, and pitching us into near blinding darkness.

The tortured cries of a dying beast echoed through the cavern and rose through every twist and turn of the tunnels. Through the shadows and black flame, I reveled in the sight of the damned creature floundering for its life.

I went to take another step forward, but a sweeping tentacle caught the side of my leg. The hard, wet surface knocked the wind from my lungs as I slammed into the ground.

The flames on my hand died as I fell. Even without my constant stream of black fire, the lesser demon wailed, smoldering away as my power took root and scorched its putrid flesh.

"I can't see. What's happening?" Raaz broke up the whistling hum of energy in my ears.

Glancing back, I saw him in the runoff pool, completely drenched and blindly reaching for the edge.

"Don't move. I'll come to you," Bellefy responded. She tossed a final shadow dagger at the thrashing demon before pivoting on her heel. When she dipped into a crouch and reached for Raaz, an enraged roar diverted my awareness.

I narrowed my gaze on Deimos, lunging toward the lesser demon despite the darkness. In one proficient slice, he plunged his blade into the heart of the frenzied beast.

Every fiber of the demon's being stretched as if it were being split apart from within. In a spray of black blood, viscera, and shards

of bone, the creature burst, splattering the walls and showering us in the gore.

At the last second, Deimos threw himself over my body, shielding me from the brunt of the explosion. His arms, thickly corded with muscle, cradled my head from the stone, and his intensely warm body flattened me into the ground.

So tightly pressed together, I felt the wild fluttering of his heart pounding into my chest. I focused on that instead of the length of his toned frame settled between my legs.

Deimos gasped, and I trembled from his hot breath fanning the side of my neck. His lips were so close, I easily imagined the feel of them on my skin.

My heart rate kicked into overdrive as my lips parted. A hot coil wound tightly in my core, and I smothered the urge to move against him.

My chest rose and fell steadily under the crushing weight of him. Regardless of the darkness, I saw his face clearly when he lifted to meet my gaze. Those strange silver eyes swirled with inner light as he studied every exposed inch of my face.

He inspected me further, carefully regarding the sides of my face. And that's when I noticed my hood flew off in the blast.

Deimos's lips curled up as he saw the arched tips of my ears for the first time. His smoky voice made my toes curl in my boots. "You're beautiful."

Shards of ice chilled my molten blood, and my muscles flexed into stone. I hissed under my breath, "Get off of me before I kill you."

Biting the scathing remark on the tip of my tongue, I shoved Deimos off. He grunted from the force and rolled away into the fresh layer of carnage on the ground.

I leapt to my feet, hearing the squelch of fresh blood under my boots. A noise of disgust breached my lips, and I yanked my hood back into place.

Nearby, Bellefy helped Raaz to his feet, both slipping on the saturated stone underfoot. When she sensed my gaze, Bellefy's head whipped up.

Her expression dropped as she realized I too saw clearly in the darkness. Then her eyes narrowed, pointed like her shadow daggers,

aimed at me.

Brushing aside the shadow elf's glare, I faced the mouth of the tunnel we descended from. I snapped my fingers, generating a spark from the friction, and a new orb of light sprung into existence. Golden light floated overhead, brightening our repulsive surroundings.

"Is everyone alright?" Deimos breached the silence.

"We're fine over here, but that was scary" Raaz sighed, tone gruff and tired. He wiped his wet hands on his damp pants as if it might clean the grime on his skin.

"Can't argue with that," Bellefy shrugged out, still side-eyeing me. "Hopefully, things calm down now that the beast is dead."

"Yes, let's hope," Deimos muttered. He tugged at the crimson drenched fabric clinging to his sculpted body, and my face flushed as I watched.

I cast my sight to the bits of lesser demon scattered on every surface as Deimos sheathed his sword in his scabbard. Now I knew what the monstrosity was at its core, but his reaction to the beast led me to believe something was wrong with it.

If we killed an abnormal lesser demon, I needed to study it.

Deimos spoke again, and I passively listened. "Anyone else ready for a drink, then? Let's open a bottle of good wine tonight."

Reaching into one of the many pockets sewn into my cloak, I slipped my hand into a hidden pocket and removed a thin, empty vial. Crouching down, I scooped lumps of scorched flesh into the glass. My nose crinkled at the persistent smell of rotten eggs.

"By the gods, what's she doing?" Bellefy's exasperation made my ear twitch.

I closed the vial and held it up to the light. The thickness of the demon tissue was too dark for the renewed magical glow to penetrate the membrane.

The clump of inky black twitched under the light. Still very dead, but inherently reacting to the magical illumination. It happened so fast. If I'd blinked, I would have missed it.

"Deimos, you seem to know about demons," I stated, angling toward him.

Under my gaze, he schooled his features and crossed his arms. “Perhaps I do, darling. What of it?”

“Do demons react to sunlight?” My fingers curled over the vial, and I slipped into one of my pockets.

He paused a second, and his eyes flickered with thought before answering. “I don’t believe they should. While their eyes might be sensitive to the light, it wouldn’t adversely affect them.”

“And magical sunlight?” The orb overhead imitated the sun’s light, but the glow’s nature was inherently magical.

Deimos exhaled and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. His silver eyes danced like stars in a night sky as he observed the golden ball overhead. Then he shrugged dismissively. “No, it would feel like any other light to a normal demon.”

I nodded with silent thanks for his cooperation. Gears whirred in my mind as odd puzzle pieces fell into place.

“The thing is dead now. We can move on and get out of here,” Bellefy grumbled, scraping a hunk of burnt demon from the bottom of her boot.

A smile threaded through Raaz’s voice as he chimed in, “Right, I’m ready for a drink now. Especially if Deimos opens the cranberry wine you made.”

Mention of cranberry wine made my mouth water. That beverage was a Thanaten specialty and mainly found in the shadow kingdom.

I hadn’t had access to cranberry wine for years.

“Let’s get out of here,” Deimos said.

Eager as we were to abandon the filthy tunnels, I pivoted toward the slope, thinking of a way out. The slope wasn’t terribly steep, but the flowing drain off would lead to an arduous climb up.

Stepping to the edge of the drainage pool, I cleared my mind and dug into the well of power within. With a singular deep breath, I summoned palpable magic into the air.

The oppressive heat dissipated, and a chill kissed the air. Shimmering ice burst through the stinking water. Waves of drainage froze, overlapping and warping into icy steps.

Bellefy’s breath hitched.

“Wow,” Raaz intoned, wide eyed and jaw slack.

Although he said nothing, I felt Deimos standing close and intently watching.

Right away, I lifted my boot and stepped from the edge of the pool onto the ice. After climbing a few more, I noticed the cavern remained silent. I glanced over my shoulder, finding the other three still acutely watching me.

“Are you staying here for the rest of the night?” I quipped.

My question set them into motion. One by one, they carefully followed me up the muddy colored frozen steps.

Their eyes lingered on me as we returned to the tunnels. The oppressive sensation of being assessed provoked an itching need to lash out. Perhaps clawing their eyes out would stop them from staring so damn hard.

Aside from the gently trickling water, we walked in silence, guided by my mystical light. Fatigue caught up to me during that time, dragging my legs and adding weight to my limbs. Exhaustion manifested as a heavy tension that wove through the surrounding air, trailing the four of us.

With nothing left to hunt, we stopped at the first iron ladder leading to the surface. Raaz went up first to lift the grate, and Bellefy followed close beneath him.

Deimos purposefully stayed behind with me. His haunting silver eyes hadn't abated, nearly burning a hole through the side of my face.

The instant I grabbed an iron bar to begin the climb, he spoke up.

“You should come back with us,” he offered.

“Why? I helped you kill the beast slaying innocents.” Annoyance threaded my tone.

I wanted to go home, back to my family, my people, my kingdom. The admission clogged the back of my throat, and I held it down.

Deimos curled his hand around the other end of iron and leaned closer until his inherent honey-spiced scent invaded my nose. “Something in the air whispers of more to come. Tell me you can't feel that this is only the beginning,” he said.

I looked away, passed his intensely bright eyes to the darkness of the tunnel. I'd tried to ignore the pebble of doubt in my gut, but Deimos was right.

"I feel it," I admitted.

"You see?" He reared back. "Come back to my home in the city. You're covered in blood and filth. You'll draw too much attention at the tavern."

Again, he was right, and it annoyed me. I wouldn't avoid any lingering stares in my current condition.

Deimos tipped his head back, peering at the awaiting sky. Pale moonlight filled his eyes like pools of dancing stars.

"Tell me you have a bath," I breathed out.

A victorious smirk stretched his mouth, showing off the dimple in his cheek. "Not only do I have a home with hot-water pipes, but I have a tub big enough for two."

A scoff breached my lips. My elbow connected with Deimos's abdomen, and a grunt escaped him. As he gasped for air, I pulled myself up the iron ladder.

Back on the streets, in the gently flowing fresh air, I inhaled as deeply as my lungs allowed. I was grateful for the crisp breeze sweeping away the residual stink of sulfur and sewage I'd endured all night.

Once Deimos's dark head popped up from the sewer hole, a fleeting thought to kick him back down there flitted through my head. I took several steps away to avoid his bewitching scent, otherwise I might have followed through on the idea.

Deimos maintained the lead through the sleeping city, and I fell to the back. With my magical light dispelled, we traipsed through dark streets under the cover of moonlight.

Nerves gnawed at my insides, and my heart sank to the bottom of my chest. Bristling under my skin warned that we didn't know what awaited us, and that kept me on edge through the rest of the night.

Seven



A warm hum on my cheeks alerted me to the encroaching dawn. The first streaks of fiery orange crept under the blanket of midnight blue adorning the sky. I hoped to be asleep by the time the sun crested over Bellmead.

Deimos led us through the upper end of the city. I hadn't expected him to live this far from the tavern. Again, I wondered who this silver eyed stranger was and how he'd found me.

We approached a waist-high decorative wrought-iron fence backed by trimmed hedges. A three-story red brick manor with white trim and black shutters loomed at the end of the short foot path. Overgrown green and yellow ivy crept through the brick crevices and wound around the arched windows.

I followed Deimos and his friends between the white front porch columns then through the oversized cherry wood front door. Inside, dimly lit oil lanterns on the walls illuminated red mahogany paneling, extensive woven tapestries, and ornate paintings.

In the spacious front foyer, I noticed the double glass doors to the left and what appeared to be a billiard room. On the left, I saw more double glass doors open to a comfortably arranged lounge.

Across from the front door, an embellished staircase split in two and curved toward separate sides of the second floor. A hallway under one side of the staircase led deeper into the house, likely toward a kitchen, pantry, and dining room.

Raaz bypassed everyone, drifting toward the lounge doors on the left. "I'll take that drink now," he called over his shoulder.

"Second that." Bellefy accompanied him. "A full drink, then a thorough wash. After that, I'll sleep for the entire day."

"I'll fetch the wine," Deimos stated. He tossed me a wink before disappearing down the hall under the stairs.

Bellefy and Raaz entered the lounge, and I drifted slowly after them. Every detail of the house was at odds with Deimos. It didn't seem fitting for a man like him.

Between the two windows that faced the front yard, Bellefy lit the fireplace. Across from her, Raaz settled into a long tufted red velvet couch and thumped his grimy boots onto the low center table.

Raaz patted the cushion, gripping my attention. "You know you can sit down. I don't bite," he rumbled playfully.

"I can't say the same for myself," I replied. Regardless of the filth staining my clothes, I joined him on the couch.

A head taller than me even while seated, Raaz peered down at the top of my covered head. Curiosity darted through his eyes. "Why keep your hood up?"

Bellefy circled around, crossing her arms. Suspicion glinted in her gaze, targeting me. "Very good question," she remarked.

"Why does it matter?" I retorted.

Raaz nodded, pleased and unbothered. He cast his eyes to Bellefy again.

Her features scrunched with plain irritation, and she parted her lips to retaliate. However, Deimos swept through the doors, carrying a tray with four glasses and two bottles of wine, effectively cutting her off for the moment.

Deimos kicked Raaz's boots off the short table and set down the tray. This close, I noticed his sleeves now rolled up over toned and beautifully tanned forearms. His long, powerful fingers used surprising gentleness on the delicate glasses.

Chalking the flush in my cheeks up to my exhaustion, I steered my eyes toward the translucent red wine sloshing in the first glass.

Meanwhile, Deimos turned a blind eye to the charged tension in the room as he divided the wine. "Everyone, drink up. Gods know we all deserve it after the night we've had."

"Fill mine up all the way. I'd like to sleep as soundly as a swaddled baby." Raaz's chuckle was almost infectious.

"That's not a bad idea," Deimos agreed, smirking. The overwhelming scent of cranberries hit my nose when he poured up to the rim of Raaz's glass.

“Smells better than the sewage, that’s for sure.” Bellefy pressed her lips to her glass and chugged the contents within seconds.

“Well, of course you’d say that. You made it,” Raaz exclaimed. Though his eyes remained on his drink, and he licked his lips.

A former soldier of Gwathendor making cranberry wine in Bellmead. More questions about Bellefy arose in the back of my mind.

What was she doing here? How did she wind up with these two? Why had she left home?

I didn’t suspect she’d answer if I asked.

Her gaze darkened at the wine in her hand. Even surrounded by her companions, her eyes were distant and dreamy. “It’s not as good as my father’s,” she said thinly.

Deimos snatched me from my musing when he pushed a glass toward me. “Bellefy is a shadow elf from the kingdom of Gwathendor. Her family are vintners, so she makes wine in her spare time,” he answered my unasked question.

“Quiet, Deimos,” she snapped at him.

Grumpier than a sleeping bear, that one.

Raaz jumped in, ignoring her sour mood. “Bellefy complains cranberries aren’t as good here, but this is the best wine I’ve ever had.”

“Gwathendor has the best wine.” The words slipped off my tongue before I could bite them back. “Or, so I’ve heard,” I rushed out.

Shrugging off the feeling of three pairs of eyes, I brought the red liquid to my lips. The sweet tang of cranberry wine flooded my tongue. A soft hum rose in my throat, and I swallowed it down with another sip.

I wanted to weep at the delightfully familiar taste of home. Bellefy’s cranberry wine tasted just like what I remembered of cold winters with mulled wine, sitting around a fire with my family.

“You know,” Deimos turned to me, “you seem like someone who would know a thing or two about the elves.” His statement harshly reminded me he’d seen my ears in the cave.

My muscles turned to stone, and my fingers tightened on the glass stem. I didn’t think he’d say anything, but perhaps I’d been

wrong. We were still only strangers, after all.

I narrowed my eyes in a silent challenge, daring him to say more.

“I suppose she seems like the adventuring type,” Raaz rumbled out, unaware of the pressure in the room. Already on his second glass of wine, he was only half invested in the conversation and gradually sinking lower on the couch.

“What would she know of Gwathendor? She used sun magic in the tunnels. If she knows anything at all, it’s about those gods-damn Mithrans.” Bellefy’s tone rose with indignation.

I didn’t entirely fault Bellefy’s disdain of Mithrans. While the elven civil war ended around the time of my birth, the elves of Laernear remained misogynistic and bigoted. Better now than before, but slow to adapt to the new world.

Nevertheless, Bellefy’s sharp words cut deep at a time when I missed my home continent and the family I’d left behind. Sun and shadow mingled equally in my blood, and I’d do my family a disservice by not reciprocating.

If my twin were here, she’d have something smart and lovely to say. But the gentle sister wasn’t half a world away in the Bellmead, and I wasn’t Solara.

No, they had the misfortune of the wild mixed-blood twin.

Setting my glass on the table, a crooked smile split my lips as I peered up at Bellefy. “Oh yes, I know of the shadow kingdom. I know of the Shadow King and his precious Sun Queen. We can’t forget about their half-breed brats either.”

A tingle of chaos danced over my skin. My heart slowed to a dangerous, steady beat.

Rage flared across Bellefy’s features, and she chomped down, gritting her teeth. Shadows in the corners reacted to her mood, rising over the walls, and reaching toward her along the floorboards.

“How dare you speak of them in such a manner,” Bellefy spat.

“Bellefy,” Deimos warned, low and abruptly.

She blatantly ignored him, stealing another step toward the table.

Deimos had set this in motion with his comment, and now I’d make him watch the events play out. Besides, Bellefy’s reactions

would reveal if she was trustworthy.

“Right, what would my mother think if she heard me talking like this?” I purred viciously. A half-mad bark of laughter escaped my lips in an open mockery of Bellefy meant to send her over the line she longed to cross.

“They ended a thousand years of war between the elves!” she surged a step forward, balancing on the edge of lashing out.

Her statement informed me that while she might not have a fondness for sun elves, Bellefy still respected the royal family of Gwathendor. That mattered to me.

“So what?” I shot back. “Two elves fucked, spat out some half-breeds, and that was enough to end a millennium of fighting born from the aftermath of the god-war?”

“Queen Adora brought peace to two races bent on wiping each other out of existence. Without her union to the king, the war would still rage on and the last two decades of peace wouldn’t have existed. You don’t get to sit there and talk about them when you obviously know nothing of the elves’ regrettable history.”

The room dimmed despite the light from the fireplace and oil lamps on the walls as shadows answered her silent call. Seeing and feeling her palpable rage thrilled me.

Her passion for the peace between the elves informed me I could trust Bellefy. If I had her as an ally, I’d risk trusting Deimos and Raaz.

Slowly, as if confronting a wild animal, I rose from the couch. Just a little further and the boiling pot would erupt. Exhaustion, wine, and tumultuous magic ran through my blood, emboldening me.

“Perhaps the elves should have wiped each other out. They kept to themselves and ignored the rest of the war throughout the course of their futile war. And now that they have their tentative peace, they think the rest of the world wants anything to do with them?”

Bellefy’s lips curled in a snarl as she retorted, seething. “The royal family of Gwathendor has done a marvelous job making connections with the rest of the world. I wouldn’t be here now if I doubted the alliances they’ve made.”

Shadows drifted around her head, sharpening into points, automatically directed at me.

“Bellefy, stop.” Deimos’s voice grated through him, but in the current tide, it might as well have been a fly buzzing on the wall.

“Like I give a shit,” I chortled. Then I sealed the deal. “Fuck the elves.”

Time ground to a halt as Bellefy snarled, raising her hands. The pointed shadows split off, morphing into a dozen smaller daggers mimicking the smooth, clear shine of an obsidian blade, and focused on me.

She willed the blades forward, and they sliced through the air.

“Bellefy, no!” Raaz dropped his wine, splattering it across his chest as he leapt from the couch.

Deimos lunged toward me, one hand reaching out, intending to grab me and yank me out of the path of daggers. His fingers grasped just shy of the edge of my cloak.

The room stilled as everyone held their breath, waiting for my inevitable scream of pain and the subsequent splatter of blood.

Raaz thumped back onto the couch with a grunt of disbelief. Relief and confusion warred for center stage in his eyes.

A gasp strangled Bellefy, and she fell back a step. Her eyes widened into saucers as the color drained from her face.

I held my hand up, palm facing outward, and the daggers hovered, frozen in the air, inches away from my body. A pulse of magic moved through me as I handled the shadows with the ease of a child’s toy.

When I curled my fist, the daggers obeyed my movement. The darkness combined into a singular inky ball. Then I splayed my fingers, and the shadows morphed into the shape of a bird.

The shadow bird landed on my offered palm, flapped its wispy wings of shadowy feathers, and hopped from my palm to my fingers. After tilting its head and looking around the room, the umbral bird took off toward the ceiling.

No one moved. No one dared inhale as they watched the bird fling itself into the rafters and explode into a puff of smoke tendrils. Then the shadows dissipated, returning to the dark crevices in the silent lounge.

“How?” Bellefy’s trembling voice brought everyone back to the strain saturating the room.

In one swift motion, I yanked my hood away. Long strands of snow-white hair tumbled freely over my shoulders and my green eyes glimmered under the light. Mithran and Thanaten traits that were impossibly combined.

Bellefy noticed the long, pointed tips of my ears poking through my hair. She inhaled sharply, clutching at her chest.

“The shadows will always obey my commands over others. My heritage grants me that,” I stated.

She swallowed hard, lips trembling as she searched for words. “Nevar.” Now the Thanaten realized why my name seemed familiar when she first heard it.

“Yes,” I dipped my head briefly. “I am Nevar Solen-Mor’gen, Crown Princess and Heir Apparent to the throne of Gwathendor.”

In her next breath, Bellefy threw herself to her knees. She dropped hard and fast, crossing her arms over her chest, bowing into herself. “Please forgive me, Your Highness. Had I known, I never would have raised a hand against you,” she repented.

“Holy shit.” Raaz swiped a large hand over his face, then picked up his own jaw.

“Bellefy, please rise.” I softened my voice for her. “We’re all exhausted and pushed one another over the edge. It’s alright.”

Her head tipped up, and her glistening eyes blinked at me as if seeing me in an entirely new light. Upon reading the sincerity in my gaze, she stood up from the floor.

Raaz sputtered out, “She’s a bloody princess!” He ran his hands through his copper curls, tugging the ends.

“Well, Nine Hells, this is exciting, isn’t it?” Deimos’s exceedingly arrogant, yet deceptively calm voice spiked my irritation. “I knew you were an elf, but the princess of Gwathendor?” He sucked his teeth, eyes roaming over my features. “My luck doesn’t seem to run out.”

He’d engineered that entire situation, leading me into revealing myself. That had been his intention all along.

“Fuck you,” I burst out.

“How rude, darling,” he drawled out, signature smirk showing off his infuriating dimple. His silver eyes were alight with mirth, but I saw something darker beneath it.

Drifting forward, I curled my fingers over his, holding his glass. They were warm, and I almost faltered from my racing heart. His eyes flared a fraction wider as I pulled the drink to my lips.

“I hope the gods shit in your dinner, Deimos.” Then I spat directly into his cranberry wine.

To my utter dismay, his smirk split into a full, beaming smile. He tightened his grip on the glass, swirling the contents within until they combined. Those damning silver eyes remained locked with mine as he brought the glass to his sensual lips and drank every drop.

Eight



Tension charged the air throughout the ensuing silence. Only the gently crackling fire broke through the deafening pressure. The low flames caused animated shadows to flicker on the walls, dancing as if fighting to overcome one another.

Bellefy avoided eye contact, and a heartbeat later excused herself for the night. A fraction of the shadows lessened, allowing more firelight to break through as if her absence pacified the darkness.

After seeing Deimos drink the wine I'd spit in, he refused to leave my thoughts. I needed as much distance between me and the silver-eyed scoundrel as possible.

Raaz offered to guide me to the guest quarters, and I gladly followed. He showed me to a comfortably large corner room on the second floor that had a wide bay window overlooking the back garden and rising sun.

My room had a four-poster bed with rich blue bedding. A narrow blue couch sat at the end of the bed, facing a fireplace. With a wave of my hand, a fire roared to life, casting an orange glow over the spacious room.

In the corner between the bed and wall hosting the window, I examined an untouched vanity. My fingers idly traced the bristles of a brush, and I avoided looking into the mirror before moving on.

Since my clothes were filthy, I sifted through the heavy-set dresser nestled on the other side of the window. I found an assortment of random clothing left for guests to borrow. With that in mind, I shrugged off my cloak and tossed it over the vanity mirror.

Remembering the new sample in my pocket, I paused. Reaching into the interior of the cloak, I pulled out the glass vial before marching toward the fireplace. I held the vial up to the fire's light, holding my breath in anticipation.

Several seconds passed, and the demonic tissue remained unmoving and lifeless. Satisfied, I set the vial on the mantle.

My next steps carried me to a door on the other side of the fireplace. Deimos promised a bath with hot water, and I wouldn't rest until I'd found a tub.

Seeing through the darkness, I found an oil lamp near the door and turned it up. A porcelain claw-foot tub came into view under the lamp's glow.

"Oh, thank the—" I clamped my lips down, cutting myself off.

Thanking the gods, even saying it when I didn't mean it, was a hard habit to break. But I'd never thank a god again.

The water pipes were easy enough to figure out. Although I could boil the water if I needed to, this made life a touch easier. As exhaustion weighed down my limbs, I preferred the easy method.

The blood and grime from the tunnels glued my clothing to my skin. As scalding water filled the bath, I peeled each article away, dropping them one by one unceremoniously into a stinking, damp pile. Streaks of red and mud swirled on my skin where the filth had seeped through.

Gratefully, I sank into the steaming water, feeling my muscles relax almost instantly. I scrubbed my skin raw, wishing I could wash under my skin, into my muscles and between my aching joints.

More than that, I wanted to wash the inside of my brain and scrub out the silver eyes haunting me. Deimos ran wild through my thoughts as if he'd found a home there.

Who is he? Better yet, what is he?

Magic threaded through the shimmering air that consistently shielded him. I'd witnessed him cast magic with his blood, but humans lost access to magic when the gods died a thousand years ago.

When my water ran cold, I rinsed and drew another bath. This time, I leaned against the edge of the tub, soaking myself in soapy water like potatoes in a stew.

I watched wisps of steam rise from the surface of the sudsy water, envisioning silver eyes staring back at me. My pointed nails clicked impatiently on the porcelain rim, aggravated by Deimos's persistent presence in my mind.

Deimos had an air of confidence that leaned on arrogance. And he was more attractive than he had any right to be. Wickedly dangerous thoughts of him got the best of my fatigued mind.

While lost in thoughts of hungry silver eyes, my hand slipped under the clear, bubbly water, inching toward my thighs. A wave of heat flushed through me, pooling in the pit of my stomach.

I pictured his steady gaze and the soft waves of his ebony hair. Uninvited thoughts of what it might feel like to run my fingers through his hair assailed me next. His full lips and that taunting smirk flashed behind my eyes, and my breath hitched.

How would his hand feel drifting toward the apex of my thighs? What reaction would his hot mouth on my neck elicit in my body?

Memory of his body crushing mine into the ground provoked an indecent shudder down my spine. I pressed my knees together, fighting the urge to go further.

The burning under my skin and coiling in my core overpowered my will. I hadn't felt this yearning that Deimos roused within me in years, and I lost the fight against that sudden hot and heavy urge.

Wandering lower, my hand slipped over my vulva. My breath hitched the moment my fingers slipped over my slick sex. I swirled my fingers over my clit, arching through the water as bliss rocked through me.

Deimos towered over me, and in my fantasies, he loomed behind me, casting me in his dominant shadow. He grabbed me, and I imagined his powerful hands that masterfully wielded a sword would gently caress my skin, roaming delicately over my hips to my chest as he explored the full swell of my breasts.

A moan rose in the back of my throat, and I bit my tongue to keep it down. My pelvis tipped forward, rocking into my hand as I circled my clit to thoughts of Deimos. Although my daydreams vexed me, I knew deep down I wished he was here touching me.

The pressure in my core rose like a trembling flame. My breath picked up, and my fingers moved faster under the rippling water. I balanced on the verge of release, pushing myself to fall—

An abrupt thump on the wood compelled me upright, sending a minor wave of water surging onto the tile floor. The sound startled

my heart into rocking against my ribs. My eyes flared open, and I snatched my hand from the water to grip the edge of the tub.

Again, a soft tapping on the bedroom door floated into the washroom.

“Nine Hells,” I hissed under my breath as my heart galloped away in my chest.

Lacking the desire to rise from the water, I reluctantly forced my limbs into action. I rose from the water and wrapped myself in one of the white fluffy towels within reach. Tiny soap bubbles clung to my legs as I stomped out.

Halfway across the bedroom, another bout of knocking echoed through the room

“Who is it?” I called out.

“It’s me.” Deimos’s voice kicked my heart into the bottom of my gut.

Gods-damn, I was just pleasuring myself to thoughts of him.

Placing one hand on the cool wood, I took a steadying breath. “What do you want?” I asked.

Deimos remained silent for a moment, and the door nearly muffled a sigh. “To talk and apologize. But to be honest, I’d say anything to get into your room.”

He couldn’t seem to help himself. I rolled my eyes, picturing the likely curved corner of his mouth.

“I don’t think I should allow you in.” I wanted to.

“Darling, I promise I’m here to apologize,” he assured. “Can you give me a chance?”

Giving Deimos any number of chances felt foolish, yet I caved to my secret wishes. I pushed away from the door, huffing, “One moment.”

With recent lewd dreams of Deimos burdening my thoughts, I frantically clawed through the dresser in search of something to conceal my bare skin. A thin towel wasn’t enough of a barrier in my current state of mind.

In the bottom drawer, I latched onto a deep green garment. The fabric unfurled onto the floor, revealing an oversized robe. I shrugged it on and quickly tied the belt around my waist.

I ran my fingers through my hair, brushing the damp strands behind my arched ears. Then I masked my features, praying he didn't notice the flush in my cheeks.

Cautiously, overly aware of who waited on the other side, I twisted the knob and eased the door open. My skin tightened and my blood heated at the sight of Deimos leaning imposingly in the doorway.

His freshly washed honey-spice scent invaded my nose, making me falter back a step. The undone strings at the neck of his dark, billowy shirt revealed a hint of his toned chest, drawing my gaze to his neck and over his wide shoulders.

The fever under my cheeks spread to my chest and into my stomach, following the path of silver eyes devouring every inch of the robe clinging to the curves of my damp skin. I swallowed hard over the dryness in my throat.

Deimos's next exhale shuddered through him, chest rising heavy and slow. He drew his bottom lip between his teeth while his stare seared holes through me.

My buzzing clit pulsed with renewed need, and tingles flashed over my skin. The erratic pace of my heart made me regret opening the door.

"You wanted to talk?" I blurted, the words nearly fumbling on my tongue.

"That is what I came here for, yes." His darkly rich voice drew me in despite my better judgment.

I released the door and stepped aside, gesturing for him to enter the room.

Deimos blinked slowly, almost stunned that I'd agreed. His eyes flicked over my face, studying my expression a moment longer. Then he pushed off the doorframe and strolled past me.

After shutting the door, I circled around to face the man weighing heavily on my mind. Under my scrutiny, he swiped a hand over the back of his neck and cleared his throat.

"I truly am here to apologize. It wasn't right of me to provoke you and Bellefy. Gods, I didn't know things would escalate as they did." He dropped his eyes to the swaying flames and braced a hand on the mantle.

Crossing my arms, ensuring the robe remained closed, I settled onto the couch and crossed my legs. “At least you’re a big enough man to admit you were in the wrong,” I remarked.

Deimos pivoted away from the fireplace and glanced down at me, settled on the pale blue cushion. His eyes inevitably traveled to my exposed leg, peeking through the front of the robe.

A slight tremor rolled through his body, and he tensed his shoulders as if refraining himself from any movement. His next breath sawed out of him. “Do you forgive me, then?”

“I rarely forgive anyone for anything,” I shrugged out.

“You forgave Bellefy,” Deimos countered.

“Indeed.” I briefly chewed the inside of my cheek before releasing it. “I can also admit that I might have antagonized her a bit.”

“Justifiable, given the situation.” Deimos flowed forward, moving as fluidly as a coursing river. The cushion dipped beside me as he sat down and slung his arm over the back of the couch.

“Perhaps.” I forced my eyes away from him, his heat, and his tempting scent. Instead, I focused on the red-orange flames leaping in the fireplace.

“You needed to know if you could trust her with your identity,” he added.

“Yes.” My shoulders lifted and dropped dismissively.

“You’re going to be her queen someday.” He carefully probed now, meaning to draw out the information he sought.

“No.” The unbidden word breached my lips, disclosing my thoughts without permission.

Deimos hummed in thought.

“I don’t want the throne,” I admitted thinly, as if I didn’t want the world to hear. “Royal laws decree I’m the heir as the first-born twin, but I won’t accept it.”

“A twin? And you don’t want to be queen?” His surprise snapped up my attention.

“Why do you care?” I demanded, attempting to rebuild my defenses.

Deimos stopped my next breath short when his hand reached over the back of the couch. I tensed, facing him again as his fingers traced feather-light over the side of my neck.

“I’m inexplicably drawn to you, darling, and I’d like to know more about you. You’re more beautiful than snow,” he marveled, twisting a strand of white hair around his finger, “but just as cold.”

“Does this curiosity come from what you saw in the alley?” We needed to change topics before I swung my leg over his lap.

The corner of his lip twitched. “I was drawn to you from the moment you entered the tavern.”

“You couldn’t even see the entirety of my face that night,” I challenged.

He shifted closer, and his warmth waved over me. “I didn’t need to. But I’m glad that I approached you. I’ve never seen anyone with the power you have, and you used it to decimate those bastards.”

I stiffened. “Those men deserved it for what they were doing.”

Deimos spread his other hand over his chest, and the one on my neck dropped to my shoulder. “You don’t need to defend yourself. Not to me. In fact, I heartily applaud you for it. I’d love to see you in all your glory, slaughtering every corrupt snake in this city.”

“All my glory? You don’t even know what I am,” I scoffed breathlessly.

“An elf. A princess.” He shrugged. “A wild, untamable force. Whatever you are doesn’t matter to me. It’s who you are that holds my interest.” His thigh inched closer, pressing into the side of my leg.

I hardened my gaze at him. “But what are you?”

Even now, the air resonated around him, almost distracting me from his well-muscled frame, angling closer. A glimmer in his eyes stressed his sensual smile but failed to hide the latent darkness underneath.

A darkness that called to my own.

“I’m just a man, admiring a woman who could probably kill him, and yet still wants to kiss her desperately.” His hand curled behind my neck, holding me in place when I reeled back.

Deimos hadn't answered honestly. He wasn't just a man, and I wasn't just an elf.

And maybe right now that didn't matter.

He imprisoned me in his massive, heated palm. The dormant power in his lean fingers held me confined until he towed my face nearer to his. So close that our breaths mingled in the air between our lips.

"There's something wrong with you." My hands flew up to stop him, yet my fingers betrayed me, curling in the front of his shirt and pulling him closer.

His hand on my neck was so large that the strength and heat of it turned my bones into melting butter. Despite myself, I allowed the distance to close. A shiver wracked my spine and the inferno between my legs surged into my chest.

Those silver eyes locked onto my mouth, boring into me like a starving beast on the verge of consuming his prey. His breath brushed my lips when he said, "Many things, yes. My biggest problem is that I don't know what you taste like."

My next breath caught in my throat. I licked my bottom lip, longing for the incoming feeling of his. However, there was another presence in my mind warning me against this.

"You're right that I could kill you if I wanted to. There is some part of me that does," I sighed, and he inhaled my breath.

"So, what would you do if I kissed you now?" His voice was low and wanting.

The fire light danced over the attractive planes of his face, orange and yellow over his golden skin, his sharp jaw, the voluptuous curve of his lips, his strong nose and those deeply moving eyes that glittered like stars.

He would kiss me, and I would let him.

Deimos tightened his grip on the back of my neck, and my heart lurched into my throat. My lashes fluttered as my eyes closed, anticipating his mouth crashing against mine.

Thumping on the bedroom door forced us apart.

Deimos cursed under his breath before withdrawing. Losing his body heat disoriented me, and I struggled to fill my lungs in the aftermath.

Through the ringing in my ears, I thought I imagined it. I tipped my head toward the door, straining to listen.

Another unwanted visitor in the hall tapped on my door.

Nine



Shadows undulated against my senses, alerting me to the presence on the other side of the door. Emotions caused powers to become unstable, and the darkness increased with the instability.

Twisting back to Deimos, we shared a brief glance before I sprang from the couch. “You need to hide,” I whispered.

His expression grew wide and incredulous. “What for?”

“Bellefy is at the door, and I don’t want her to see you in here,” I rushed back.

Deimos rose deliberately, slow. His eyes narrowed on the door, annoyed by the interruption. “It’s not like we were doing anything.” Silver flashed to me, glinting in the light. “Not yet anyway.”

Pink bloomed on my cheeks. Blinking away the distraction, I pointed at the bathroom door. “Go in there.”

He advanced one step back, then halted. His voice breezed through me, wicked and promising. “I’ll hide for now, but you’ll owe me, darling.”

“Go!” I bit out.

Deimos held his hands up in surrender but wandered backward to the door. He didn’t break eye contact until the moment he vanished into the bathroom. The door remained ajar, but if he stayed out of sight, I didn’t mind.

Only my first night in the house, and things were escalating beyond belief. I didn’t need to add being found in a compromising position on the growing list.

She’d have questions, and I already had enough of them for myself.

Tightening the robe, I strolled toward the bedroom door. I shook my head as if it would shake out my thoughts before curling my fingers around the handle.

Bellefy stood tall, yet tightly wound. She cast her russet eyes on a spot on the wall over my door, and her arms were behind her back. Unsettled shadows twisted in the corners of the long hallway, as on edge as she was.

“Hello again, Bellefy.” I broke the thin silence first.

In the next beat, she dropped her head and crossed a fist over her chest. As if rehearsed, she rushed out, “Your Highness, my name is Bellephine Alvynna, and I humbly submit myself into your service.”

A silent sigh escaped my lips, and my stomach twisted as I stared at the elf, attempting to supplicate herself to me. The image brought unwanted memories of my last year with the witches on Ellrend and how they begged me not to leave.

Reaching out, I grasped her shoulder and squeezed. “No, let’s not do that. Please, there’s no need.”

Her head snapped up. “Princess?”

Rearing back, I waved both hands as if swiping the title out of the air. “Don’t call me that either, please.”

She briskly nodded, but finally met my gaze. “May I come in?”

Part of me wanted to deny the request since Deimos hid in the bathroom. However, Bellefy seemed as if she needed to have this conversation with me. If we were going to keep working together, it would be beneficial.

“Come in, have a seat,” I offered, nodding to the couch.

When she passed me and scanned the room, I hoped she couldn’t tell someone else was here before her.

“If I had any tea, I would offer you some,” I claimed.

She sat as straight and stiff as a stick on the edge of the couch cushion. “Oh, I’m alright.”

I plopped onto the opposite end of the couch, examining Bellefy’s profile. After seeing how fierce she was earlier, this new disposition displeased me.

“Had I known you’d react this way, I wouldn’t have revealed myself.”

Bellefy bristled and whirled to face me. “I’m sorry. I’ve never been in the presence of the Royal Family before.”

Based on her accent, Bellefy wasn't from the capital city of Umbra, where subjects were used to seeing my family in the streets. Being from a family of winemakers meant she was from a further, smaller city.

"I understand, but I enjoyed it when you showed me your tenacity. No one should have to hide who they are, Bellefy. Just be your authentic self around me." When I took her hand, she froze, but held her ground and met my gaze.

"You were hiding who you were," she countered.

My lip twitched, and a chuckle left me. "You're right, I did."

Releasing her hand, I leaned back on the couch. I regarded the fireplace, watching a burning log crumble into ash. She patiently waited the few seconds I gathered my thoughts.

"When I arrived in Bellmead, I didn't know how diverse the city was, or how they'd react to an elf. It was safer to remain hidden until I gauged their reactions. People not used to royalty often react overzealously to my presence. But I'm here for a reason, and I don't want a trivial title getting in my way."

"They react a bit like I did," Bellefy replied sheepishly. Then her ears perked up. "Is your sister in the city as well?"

"Solara." My sister's name passed my lips like a fresh breath of air on a spring day.

I hadn't said her name aloud in months, maybe years. As I did, a shaft of golden sunlight broke through the curtains, bringing memories of my sister along with the ache of knowing she was halfway across the world.

"No, she's home in Gwathendor. Though it will be winter soon. I imagine she'll make the journey to Laernear with our parents in the coming months," I mused absently.

"Right, your family traveled to Laernear every other winter." In her growing interest, Bellefy relaxed deeper into the couch.

"It's been five years since I've been home. My family still makes the trip, I imagine." I added, "It's good for my mother."

"Gwathendor doesn't get much sunlight in winter," Bellefy agreed. "I bet it's good for her to recharge in the sun elf capital."

"That and we have a large family in Laernear. Four aunts, their husbands, and more cousins than I can count. They visit Umbra

every other summer. It's good for politics and relations, especially with my aunt Willow as Queen Regent of Laernear." I cut myself off then, realizing I was rambling. Bellefy likely knew some of this. "So, no. Solara wouldn't be here."

"That's too bad. I've heard Solara is very kind, and it would have been nice to meet her too."

I laughed, but it came out sorrowful. "Yes, she is. Solara is as pure as sunlight."

"Growing up, I heard rumors of you and your sister. Is it true you wield both sun and shadow?" Bellefy's interest heartened me.

If answering her questions made her comfortable around me, then I'd gladly answer them.

"Indeed. We were born with our mother's sun magic and the shadows from our father. But my sister is the sun personified." My words were thin and wistful while a hole in my chest cracked open.

Bellefy's voice pulled me from my sinking grief. "You must miss her dearly. I'm sorry. I don't have siblings, but I miss my parents."

Solara would have had something sweet to comfort Bellefy. I didn't have those words to share.

"How did a Thanaten from a family of vintners wind up in Bellmead?" I changed the subject before I lost myself in heartache.

"Since my shadows take the form of daggers, they were a tad dangerous growing up. Useful sometimes, but not always. I wanted to learn how to use them, because I believe the gods give us our abilities for a reason. So, I became a soldier."

The gods are full of shit.

I bit my tongue, keeping that statement from leaping past my lips.

"They taught me to use my powers, and they taught me to fight. But since the war ended when I was a baby, there's not much of a life for soldiers these days. My superiors allowed me to retire, but instead of going home, I got on a boat with a tradesman and wound up in Bellmead. Deimos and Raaz found me when I began looking for work, and they took me in without question."

I reached for her hand again, noticing the hint of pink on her cheeks at the contact. "It sounds like you were searching for a

greater purpose. For adventure.” Then I asked, “Are you happy here?”

“Deimos and Raaz are like the brothers I never had.” Her face blanched and her brows shot up. “Please, don’t tell them I said that. They’ll never shut up about it.”

My bottom lip quivered with the need to giggle. Deimos hid in the bathroom, surely listening to every word of this conversation. Though I imagined Bellefy would injure him if he brought this up.

“I’m not sure what it says about Deimos that he makes a habit of collecting strangers to hunt monsters.” I hope he heard that.

“I’ll admit that when he came home dancing on the air about a beautiful woman who wanted to hurt him, I thought he was mad. But he said you might help us, and we needed it. I’m only sorry for how I treated you in the beginning.”

“Oh, don’t. I understand caution,” I waved off the apology.

“No. When I saw you using sun magic. My father was a soldier too. He returned to the family wine business after being injured in the war. He admired the royal family, but since a Mithran caused his injury, he held some lasting prejudice that I grew up listening to. It wasn’t right of me to judge you for it.” Bellefy pulled away, wringing her hands in her lap, and staring at them.

“Bellefy, I’ve traveled through both kingdoms. Both Laernear and Gwathendor hold on to bias sometimes. The war is still fresh for those who lived through it. Our elders aren’t likely to forget it, but neither should we.”

“I will keep trying to do better for you.” Bellefy straightened up, beaming, and smacked her palm over her heart.

“Don’t do better for me. We strive to do better because it’s the right thing to do.” I’d learn that lesson myself someday.

“You’re right, and I’ll try not to treat you any differently from now on. Though I still feel honor bound to you if you ever have need of me,” she promised.

Awe twinkled in her eyes as she watched me. The intensity of her admiration choked me up.

I offered my hand to Bellefy. It hung in the air between us as she warily watched it, mouth set in a lopsided line. When I nodded in encouragement, she accepted, clutching my fingers.

Then I stood, pulling her up with me. I placed my other hand on her shoulder, leaning in. “We might very well be the only elves in this city, Bellefy. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the only kin I’ve got here. Can we start over?”

Bellefy eagerly nodded, shaking my hand with equal vigor. “Of course we can!”

“Friends then.” My eyes flicked to the increasing light through the curtains. “It’s morning now, and we’re both exhausted. But later I’d love to hear more.”

“Of course. We need sleep.” She broke away, drifting toward the door. Shadows darkened beneath her feet, curling toward me as if she didn’t wish to leave.

“Sleep well, Bellefy.” I shared a warm smile with her, one she kindly returned. Lingered within the doorway, I waited to shut the door until she disappeared around the corner.

Now I had another obstacle to overcome.



When the bedroom door clicked shut, I leaned my forehead on the cool surface, wishing for the wood to absorb me so I could sleep for the next five years undisturbed. That moment of silent breathing settled a fraction of the storm brewing in my tumultuous mind.

The surrounding temperature increased, alerting me to the aura shift in the room. Every muscle in my body jerked me away from the door, and overwhelming heat washed over my skin. I whipped around, and my face stopped inches from Deimos’s chest.

My head snapped back, meeting the gray and silver storm raging in his eyes. Both his arms rose over me, and he braced his palms on either side of my head, caging me against the door.

His hips tipped forward, and the heat and pressure of his body melding into mine pulled a gasp from my lips. Every hot, hard inch

of him crushing me into the door turned my legs into jelly. His thigh settled intimately between my legs as I flattened my hands on his chest.

Tight pressure dipped in my lower stomach, coiling at the apex of my thighs. Lightning crackled through me from my head to my toes, and all my thoughts raced through my mind, tripping over one another.

Deimos lowered one hand, and I stopped breathing as it passed my face. He maintained eye contact while reaching into his pocket and pulling out the vial. “What are you going to do with this?”

When had he taken it from the mantle?

He shook the glass in front of my face, causing the lesser demon sample to slide back and forth within the vial. The action snapped me from my lust fueled haze.

Snapping forward, I snatched the glass from his hand. I held my breath as I drove myself past him and away from the cage of his body, holding me back.

Keeping my back to Deimos, I replied, “I’m going to study it.”

His heavy steps thudded across the room. “And what do you hope to find?”

I shuddered from the waves of hot power brushing against my backside.

“I’m not sure yet. I don’t have experience with demons, but you stated something was wrong with this one. If something else is coming, then we need to know what we’re up against.” Lifting the vial to my face, the orange glow of the fire’s light shone through the vial. The sample seemed like nothing more than thick ink.

“I applaud the idea,” he said, stopping directly behind me.

If I closed my eyes, his warmth gave the impression that he’d pressed into my backside. I stomped down the urge to lean into his alluring body heat.

“Bellefy uses the cellar to make her wine, but you have the pick of any room in the house to study your vermin sample.” The pressure of his hand passed too close to my hip.

“Thank you for the offer.” Fatigue stole the words to argue that I hadn’t planned on staying.

When I turned to face Deimos, his hand dropped to his side. His fist curled, restraining himself from whatever he'd wanted to do.

I pulled my arms to my chest, holding the glass vial between us like a barrier. "Can you tell me more about demons?"

His jaw flexed so briefly I nearly missed it. He covered it with a slow, captivating smile. "Only if you tell me more about elves," he bargained.

"Perhaps I will," I said, licking my bottom lip. He paid attention to that.

Deimos's entire frame vaguely trembled with the strain of remaining frozen in place. His palpable, delirious need to touch me made my heart skip a beat.

"You owe me for asking me to hide in the bathroom, after all." Then his restraint shattered, and my throat turned dry as his hand reached up. His long fingers trailed over my cheek before brushing a strand of hair behind my ear. But his hand lingered too long, and he delicately caressed the long point of my ear.

A rush of sensation cascaded from my ear to my chest and down into the pit of my belly. My face heated, my skin tightened, and an embarrassing moan flew out of me. I jerked away from his hand and bit my lip to prevent any further noises from escaping.

His brows arched upward, and a devious, knowing smile widened his wicked mouth. Now he knew my ears were overly sensitive.

I wanted to throw something sharp at him.

"Goodnight, Deimos." My voice trembled out of me, lacking the bite I intended.

Deimos leaned forward, diverting my focus to the ocean of hunger swirling in the depths of molten silver. I knew, and he knew, that if he truly wanted, he could pull me into that sea of desire right alongside him.

The unseen shield around his body shivered in the early glow of a new day, sneaking through the curtains. Whatever that power was, it fully enveloped him, glittered like falling flecks of snow only visible on a winter morning.

"Dream of me, darling. I know I'll be dreaming of you." Deimos inched closer, towering imposingly over me. The heat of his shadow wrapped me in the hug of a yearning lover.

All the ways I knew to stop or maim him, yet I froze into stone under that covetous gaze and his husky voice.

“I certainly will not dream of you,” I rasped back. I didn’t even believe in my conviction. More so as my chin tipped up when his lips neared mine.

“I’m already inside of your pretty head, darling, and your body is certainly next.” The growl laced through his salacious promise sparked a deep, consuming fire within my core.

My nipples tightened, tingling against the robe on my skin, and a wanton pulse awakened in my sex. His nostrils flared, inhaling my scent as if he knew the effect he had on my body.

Deimos gruffly exhaled, shoulders shuddering as he leashed himself back. Before I knew it, he’d turned away. With each step toward the door, my insides continued burning for him.

My eyes stayed glued to the impressive span of his backside and his broad shoulders. Air returned to my lungs only when he dipped through the door, and the scalding pressure of his presence faded.

With shaking hands, I locked the door, barring any further unwanted visitors from withholding my much-needed rest. I’d collapse on the floor if I didn’t succumb to sleep soon.

Birds chirped with their morning song outside the window. Streaks of red and orange cleaved through the lightening blue sky, bringing to life the expanse of the green in the back garden.

I allowed myself one clarifying moment to feel that light and clear my thoughts before securely shutting the thick drapes and blanketing the room in darkness. Shadows enveloped me like the arms of an old friend as I blocked out the rising dawn, and they followed me when I dragged myself into the plush bed.

Dreams of unseen monsters and demons morphing into the shape of a man with glowing, silver eyes plagued my sleep despite my best effort not to think of him or the creature in the tunnels. Those dreams were so vivid, so warm, so close, that when he embraced me in the dark, I didn’t know if it was merely a dream, or another vision.

Ten



Steel sang as blades swept through the air, and metal clashed with metal. Fighters grunted viciously with the strain of pushing past their limits to hit their mark. The cacophony reverberated through the window, piercing through my ears, and startling me awake.

I clawed through the field of visions and dreams, hauling myself into the waking world. Pushing myself upright, I shoved wild hair away from my face and exhaled. For several prolonged moments, my ears rang, and the edges of my sight remained blurred as I squinted over the darkened room.

Gradually, the spiraling room settled, and the reality of my situation returned to me as my dreams faded. Flashes of memories played behind my eyes; a demon exploding in a shower of blood, wading through stinking tunnels, and a deep voice whispering wicked promises.

What a strange night. Though with the way my life headed, it wasn't the most abnormal one I'd faced.

I tugged the curtains open, first taking in the fading light of another sunset in Bellmead. Past the city limits, I spotted open farmland and a distant mountain range fading into the encroaching darkness of night. Then the clangor of weapons below my window redirected my focus to the back garden.

The home boasted a large rectangular garden surrounded by a tall brick fence topped with wrought iron embellishments. Hedges lined the base of the red brick fence, and sporadic flowers broke up the expanse of greenery.

A massive, flourishing willow tree in the back corner sheltered a wooden bench in a cool shade. That's where I spotted Raaz reclined with one arm slung over his face, a sword over his knees, and mouth agape as he regained his breath.

In the center of the garden, Deimos and Bellefy sparred, trampling over the once green grass. Bellefy lunged, aiming her

obsidian blade at her opponent. Deimos twisted his sword, parrying her blow. The force of his counterattack sent her stumbling over her feet until she tripped.

Bellefy scowled up at Deimos from the ground, pinching her face so she wouldn't smile. His overly infectious laugh got the better of her, and she chuckled when he offered a hand to help her up.

Striking silver eyes snapped up, locking onto me, hiding behind the curtain. A shiver wracked my spine, and I reactively jerked the drapes shut once more.

After our encounter last night and the dreams that I'd suffered, I needed a moment to collect myself before facing Deimos again.

I listened to the rag-tag group sparring as I washed my clothes in the bathtub. A little magic went a long way in heating the water, sanitizing the fabric, and carefully drying it.

As I worked, I turned over my thoughts to the three people in the yard. They were more than simple companions, as I originally surmised. Everything I'd seen of them last night informed me they were a close-knit group of friends.

I wouldn't intrude on their lives for long. Returning to some sense of normalcy would be better for all of us in the end. Once things settled enough for me to return home, they'd never have to worry about me again.

On my way out of the room, I stopped at the fireplace. From the corner of my eye, I regarded the small glass vial and the black contents within. Sometimes later I'd need to study the tissue sample but wouldn't concern myself for now.

I coasted through the manor house, wondering how a man as odd as Deimos came to be here. This certainly wasn't his family home, and I didn't know enough about him to make further assumptions.

A secret voice in the back of my mind doubted if he was even human. The divine entity living within me encouraged those doubts.

Eventually, I found my way into the kitchen, where a massive hearth housed a cauldron simmering with stew. An island in the center drew my attention to a bowl of assorted fruit and a tray of cinnamon scones.

Another round of practice fighting kicked off in the back garden. I plucked a scone off the counter on my way to the bay

windows overlooking the yard.

To the right of the windows, two glass paneled doors led outside. I stopped at the doors, nibbling on the cinnamon scone while earnestly observing Deimos and his friends engaged in practice.

Bellefy advanced as fast as lightning, using smooth and elegant Thanaten fighting techniques that allowed her to flow as if she danced with the air.

Raaz retaliated slower because of his size, but he didn't lack strength. With each of his forceful blows, he roared with the controlled aggression of a newly tamed beast.

Then there was Deimos, and he was something else entirely.

Each calculated strike mirrored that of a coiled, venomous viper. He sparred with a primal instinct that he'd carefully honed, ensuring he always hit his mark.

My eyes followed the lines of his sculpted body, taut and powerful under the constraint of his tight-fitting black clothes. He had his dark hair half tied up, showing off the attractive planes of his face and the thin sheen of perspiration on his golden, flexing skin.

Admittedly, he was beautiful.

A craving for friendly sparring and a concealed desire for companionship compelled me outside.

Blades whistled through the pleasantly cool air when I stepped outside. The scent of recently rained on grass filled my nose, a welcome respite from last night's stink in the sewage tunnels.

"Ah, there she is. I was wondering when you'd join us, darling," Deimos grunted out, shielding himself from Bellefy's many strikes.

Bellefy reared back when she caught sight of me. She tossed her dagger in the air, eyes locked on me as it rotated. Without looking away, she caught the hilt backhanded, then slipped into the sheath on her thigh.

"I hope you slept well," she breathed out, panting from the rigorous training.

"I did," I lied. "Thank you for asking." My eyes flicked to the culprit of my poor sleep.

Deimos flourished his sword, shooting a knowing wink in my direction as a smirk graced his lips. My skin prickled pleasantly under that gaze.

“Good morning, princess,” Raaz rumbled. After a half-second of thought, he snorted. “Well, suppose I should say afternoon now, huh?”

I waved dismissively, glancing at all three of them. “Please don’t call me by my title. We killed a demon together. I think we’re well past formalities.”

“You’re right.” Raaz shrugged his sword over his shoulder and placed his other hand on his hip. “You know, I never thought I’d meet a royal. Especially one that knows how to fight like you do.”

In jest, I replied, “No one can fight like me.”

Raaz’s thick brow tweaked up, and a wide smile showed off the short tusks jutting up from his bottom lip.

“Yes, we’ve seen you use magic.” Deimos slipped back into the conversation, his tone light and teasing. “But how are you with hand-held weapons?”

Bellefy’s sudden bark of laughter snagged his attention. “Her father is the King of Shadows. He was born on the battlefield.” She laughed harder at Deimos. “Literally. Queen Mortala birthed him in the middle of a battle. You think a man like that wouldn’t teach his daughter how to fight?”

“So, do you know how to wield a sword?” Deimos refocused on me.

My lips split in a feral smile. “If you want me to kick your ass, all you need to do is ask,” I replied, tone saccharine yet challenging.

“Well, let’s see it, darling.” Deimos angled toward Bellefy, addressing her. “Would you like to take the shadow princess on, then?”

Her head vigorously shook, backing away with hands raised. “No, thank you.”

Deimos pointed his sword at Bellefy. “Really? You’ll fight anyone.”

“I’d like to keep my head attached to my shoulders.” She grabbed Raaz’s elbow on her path toward the back doors. “And we

need to get to the markets before they close for the day. The new city Warden lowered taxes, and I need some supplies.”

“Well, let’s see it, darling,” Deimos pivoted on his heel toward me, wagging his brows. The air surrounding him shimmered, giving rise to a chaotic writhing in my blood under the surface of my skin.

“Remember, there are bandages in the house. Try not to blood all over the grass,” she shouted over her shoulder.

Deimos released an offended scoff. “I’m not going to hurt her,” he called out.

Bellefy paused with a hand on the door. She glanced back at us, raising her brows at Deimos. “Oh, I’m not worried about her.”

“Aw, I wanted to stay and watch,” Raaz complained, trudging through the doors into the kitchen after Bellefy.



A shift in the wind flowing through the willow branches rustled the leaves, sending nearby birds rocketing into the sky. A dense pressure settled heavily in the surrounding air, crackling with the excitable tension between us. Deimos and I stood unspeaking, motionless, yet utterly stiff, as if waiting to be sure we were well and truly alone.

Deimos remained rigid, facing the back doors with bated breath. The nearly imperceptible distortion surrounding him fluctuated, and the resounding hum flickered over my skin.

“I can feel you staring at me, darling.” Finally, he circled around. His brows arched up, as did the corners of his mouth. “I think I like it.”

“You’re quite full of yourself, aren’t you?” I mused.

Before giving him a chance to reply, I spread my hands in front of me, pulling shadows from thin air. A pommel formed in my right hand, and as my left palm swept out, a dark blade rolled into

existence. Once the sword took shape, the spun darkness solidified into a material that mirrored sharp obsidian.

I twisted it around in a flurry, adjusting to the weight and feel of the weapon. The blade carved through the air as a perfect extension of me.

“And you certainly know how to put on a show,” Deimos exclaimed.

Holding my tongue against his smart remarks, I flowed into a first position fighting stance.

“Are we still doing this, darling? After all, we’re alone now.” His suggestive tone made my core clench, but I stayed motionless and ready. He lifted his sword, dropping into position while his eyes raked over my body and posture.

“I know you want to,” I replied, voice low as energy rolled through me.

Deimos’s tone dropped to match mine, becoming husky and piercing. “You just can’t hide the hunger in your eyes when violence is an option, can you? Something tells me you crave bloodshed.”

The other presence within me rolled forward, awakening in the presence of a threat. Primal, magical power coursed through my blood and my bones.

“When I crave blood,” I licked my lengthening canine, showing off my sharpening fangs, “you’ll know it.”

When he blinked, I lunged, cutting through the air.

Deimos’s sword rose at the last second, blocking my attack. Blades quivered between our faces; inches apart yet so close his next breath brushed against my lips.

“And I hope you crave mine, darling.” His sensual voice drew my eyes to his smirking mouth.

“Perhaps I do.” Some part of me did.

I flicked my wrist, pushing his blade upward. The force sent him reeling back a few steps, but he glanced up with a chaotic light brightening his attractive features.

Deimos charged next, striking fast and hard. I pivoted on my heel, blocking his blade behind my head. Each spin and lunge between our clashing blades echoed through the garden.

We moved in sync, flowing with one another as if practicing a dance with swords. The grace of sparring melted as frenzied energy charged the air.

Time ceased existing as we battled, and the golden sun drifted beneath the horizon. Shrouded in the early night, nothing but the city light and rising moon shone illuminated our exchanged blows.

Growing shadows curled around the edges of the garden as the entity within me awakened. At the first sign of her presence, I threw up a mental wall between us. However, the moon was nearly full, empowering her ancient will, far greater than my own.

“Nevar. Nevar,” Hestra purred, viciously sweet in my mind. The sensation of claws pricked the back of my neck as she seized control of me.

Deimos crashed into me, knocking the sword from my hand. His arm wrapped around me, caging my arms against my chest. His chest pressed into my back, and his pounding heart thumbed through my ribs into me.

“Yield, darling. I have you.” He panted, breath blasting against the tip of my ear. The edge of his blade kissed my throat, provoking a wicked tingle through my core.

“I don’t think you do.” My voice passed my lips, but they weren’t my words.

An explosion of darkness erupted outward in waves, centered on me. The strength of the magic shoved Deimos several feet away, forcing him to release me.

“Magic? That should count as cheating,” Deimos accused, lighthearted, and still wrapped up in friendly combat.

My arm sailed up before my body flung toward him. His eyes widened, noting the sharp blade aimed at his throat.

His sword arched through the air, blocking the attack. But my arm dropped and slashed upward at a new angle. A spray of unusually dark blood splattered across the grass, more dripped from his bicep, and stained his shirt sleeve.

The edges of my vision turned red, and my mouth watered at the sight of blood. Goosebumps rose into pinpricks at the entity under my skin writhed, coiling to be set free. My blood heated dangerously, and my skin itched to peel back and make room for the scales and feathers of a beast.

As Hestra's possession took hold, I lost control of my bodily autonomy. From behind my eyes, I witnessed myself reforming the shadow sword and whirling back around.

The goddess's rage flooded through me, as did her vitriol toward the silver-eyed man. Inside her jumbled, primordial thoughts, I couldn't untangle why she hated him so much. In her mind, her anger was righteous and well-deserved.

With startling clarity, I realized she meant to kill Deimos.

Powerless against the will of an angry god, and trapped inside my flesh, I watched helplessly as the sword flew forward.

In an unprecedented move, Deimos dropped his sword into the grass. His unburned arm shot upward, catching my hand in a blur of movement. He curled his fingers around mine, then twisted my wrist.

The shadow sword spun from my hand, evaporating into smoky wisps in mid-air. A gasp leapt past my lips as my momentum and speed carried me further until I crashed into the solid wall of Deimos's body.

He yielded to the collision, enveloping me in a tight embrace. With his arms around my frame, we rolled through the grass, landing under the extensive limbs of the willow tree.

A growl escaped my lips, and I jerked against him, attempting to break free of his grasp. The terrible impulses of the goddess remained in control, pushing me to spill more blood—*to spill it, to bite, to drink it, to consume him, and make him disappear...*

"Nevar?" Deimos rolled on top of me, grabbing my wrists. The length of his heavy body pinned me to the grass. His gaze pierced through me, into my soul. "Come on, darling, come back to me."

In the pool of his silver eyes, glowing from within, I saw my reflection staring back. I saw the black depths sweeping over my green iris and taking over, erasing everything that made me who I was.

Without warning, without thinking of doing so, Deimos dropped one hand to my face, gripping my chin. In the next breath, he lowered his face and slammed his mouth into mine.

All at once, the rage and untamable power rolling through my blood slowed as shards of ice took hold. The primordial craving for

blood eased into blissful silence as my conscience snapped back into control.

My entire being softened beneath the chiseled, hot planes of Deimos's body as his kiss wholly disarmed me.

A low moan rose to the back of my throat, and he greedily inhaled the sound. My lips parted, longing to deepen the kiss. He followed suit, slipping his tongue into my mouth and massaging it over mine.

The ache of my desire throbbed between my thighs where his weight settled. Warmth bloomed in my belly, spreading through my limbs as I squirmed beneath him.

His fist on my wrist moved over my hand until our fingers entwined. The hand on my chin tightened, squeezing my face and eliciting a groan from me. His teeth caught my bottom lip, pinching on the verge of pain as he pulled it.

"You tried to kill me." His chest vibrated against mine as his voice grated through him.

Blinking up, utterly breathless and burning up, I replied, "Only a little."

His gaze narrowed, features twisted. Angry or hungry, I couldn't tell. Maybe both.

Deimos snarled, sounding inhuman and wild. His lips melded into mine again, soft but firm and exquisitely skilled. This moment, these feelings, his heat, all stole the center of my attention until he was the only thing my foggy mind held onto.

I rocked my pelvis into his groin, creating delicious friction between us. He groaned loudly, meeting my movement by pushing his hips down and grinding against my softest spot. Through the restrictive fabric of our clothes, his erection bumped against my sex, driving me wild.

Somewhere between increasingly wild, open-mouthed kisses, our frantic hands pawed at one another. I reveled in the feeling of his overly hot skin and firm muscles beneath my fingers as I stripped him of his clothes. His chest rumbled as he growled while unlacing my corset, then tearing away my pants.

Deimos reared back on his knees, and I curled my legs around his waist, causing an erotic spark to jolt between our bodies. Flames

danced in his eyes as he stared down at me, naked, willing, and wanting.

I noted the red gash on his arm from the sword, but he seemed untroubled by it. The tensing lines of his luscious, muscled body drew my eyes. From his wide chest to his flexing abs, down to the sculpted V at his hips. Then lower to his impressively thick cock, dripping with pre-cum as it hovered over my quivering sex.

“Nevar.” The longing in his voice, and self-control trembling through him, caused me to purr with unrestrained, wanton need.

I lifted my hips, rubbing my dripping pussy along his shaft. Bliss coiled through my belly when the head of his length bumped into my swollen, buzzing clit.

“Nine Hells, darling, you’re already so wet.” Deimos grabbed the base of his cock, urging it through my slick folds intentionally. “Does violence turn you on?”

“Gods-fuck, Deimos,” I gasped, arching off the grass.

His body bowed over mine, caging me to the ground. I locked my legs around his waist, trapping him in place against me. He ground his cock into my clit with each teasing and tantalizing rock of his hips. The wet friction pulled abrupt whimpers from my lips.

He bent his head to my breasts, capturing a taut nipple between his teeth. A vicious shudder wracked my body, and more arousal gushed from my pussy onto his heavy cock, rubbing through my slit. Then his tongue laved over the pebbled bud as he licked a wet path to my other breast. A deep groan of pleasure echoed through him as he savored the taste of my skin.

When he bit my nipple, a shock of electric tension shot through me from my breast to my core, provoking me to spasm beneath him.

“I want you so bad. You have no idea,” he huffed against my throat, blasting my skin with his scalding breath.

“Then shut up and fuck me,” I challenged, curving one of my hands over the back of his neck.

“Is this what you want, darling?” He teased, releasing a deep chuckle in response to my demand. Another stroke of his cock on my clit sent me reeling, and a pink flush crept over my cheeks.

Deimos might have calmed the magical turmoil of a god’s possession for now, but he awakened a primal carnal hunger in its

place. Either way, I craved him; his blood, his cum, his heat, and the comfort his body provided.

“Yes—Ah!” My answer turned into a sharp gasp when he sank inside me.

Deimos groaned through his clenched jaw, body shuddering as he plunged deeper, inch by inch, stretching me out. My hand on his neck yanked his face back to mine, where I caught his lips again, moaning into each other’s mouths.

Locks of his raven hair framed my face as he kissed me. My palm drifted from his neck and into his hair. I tangled my hand at the back of his head, enjoying the sensation of silken, dark locks between my fingers.

My walls clenched around his length as if pulling him impossibly deeper. We simultaneously stilled the instant Deimos sheathed his entire cock inside me. When he felt my body melt beneath him, he withdrew torturously slowly, then rammed into me again.

Deimos gradually picked up the pace, rocking against me in a manner that ensured each pump of his cock hit all the sensitive places inside my cunt. My nails scraped over his scalp and down his spine, leaving red welts in their wake. I held him tight against me, whimpering into his mouth with each searing thrust.

Nothing outside of the two of us writhing together in blazing passion mattered. Not the gently swaying limbs of the willow tree brushing against the grass. Not the stars watching from the heavens, winking through nighttime clouds. And certainly not the nearly full moon, heavy in the sky with silvery-white light.

“Fuck, you feel so good for me, darling,” he rasped. His words and the salacious tone of his voice ignited the burning in my core into a blazing inferno.

Pressure built in the pit of my stomach, then snapped without warning, releasing the fire inside of me. Intense waves of pleasure cascaded through my core and into my limbs, sweeping me away. My entire body spasmed and quaked with the force of my abrupt orgasm.

“So fucking good,” Deimos reaffirmed, deeper and more gravelly than before. This time, he licked up the side of my neck and caught the tip of my ear between his teeth.

My legs trembled, and another golden wave rolled through me from the added stimulation. As my cunt fluttered on his cock, milking him of his pleasure, his hips jerked.

A beastly groan tore from his lips, rumbling so deep I felt it in my bones. “Nine Hells, yes!” He released inside me, filling me with delirious warmth.

For several long moments, we remained locked together, chests heaving for air and skin coated in a thin sheen. I almost didn’t let go when he rolled off me.

Warm afterglow coursed through me, and a smile curled the corner of my lips. My entire body hummed as I came down from the high of pleasure I’d shared with Deimos.

Those fleeting seconds were the most comfortable silence I’d experienced in a long time, and I wished they would have lasted longer.

Eleven



Silence never lasts when you want it to. I wished there weren't things keeping me from lying under the willow canopy at his side all night.

Deimos rolled onto his side, gazing down at me. The movement diverted my attention to the wound weeping red on his arm.

"Here," I sighed, sitting up and reaching for his arm.

That silver stare burned holes in the side of my face as I ran a finger gingerly along the sizeable cut. "You were going to kill me."

It wasn't a question.

"Don't move." I flattened my palm over the middle of the gash. Internally, I reached for the well of sun magic at the center of my being. The gentle, flaring light rose to meet my summons, and wove through his skin.

Deimos tipped forward, watching closely as the sunlight knit his flesh back together, closing the wound without leaving a scar. I swiped my hand over his bicep, wiping away the last traces of blood.

"What was that?" He asked, awed and wide-eyed as he inspected his unblemished, tanned skin.

I leaned back, bracing my hands in the grass. "A rare ability with sun magic. That was my mother's talent."

"A rare ability, yet you can wield it?" His head snapped up to me.

"I can use all magic," I shrugged out. With one hand, I trailed the tip of my dark nail over his healed arm, ogling his veins and muscles.

"Not just elf magic?" Deimos probed. "You're a force to be reckoned with." His fingers encircled my wrist, halting my

wandering hand.

Whatever he made me feel under the willow tree loosened my lips. In my relaxed, foggy minded state, words slipped free. “Everything the witches taught me.”

I bit my tongue, almost hard enough to draw blood.

Deimos removed his hand from my wrist. “Witches? There are no more witches.”

Absently, I fiddled with a blade of grass, pressing the green blade between my fingers. Rueful and annoyed with myself, I admitted, “There are. Only it’s impossible to find them unless the magic calls to you.”

That power might never call another being to Ellrend ever again now that she lived within me.

“Is that what happened to you?” he cautiously pressed, attentive to my reaction.

“It started as dreams. Simple visions in the beginning. Only they got worse, increasing each night until the witches and the ancient voices of the forest screamed at me, stealing my ability to rest. I couldn’t sleep until I left home with dreams guiding me to their island.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.” His gaze seared the side of my face, but I couldn’t look him in the eyes.

No one had ever shown sympathy for what I’d endured, and my time with the witches was only the tip of the iceberg. What would Deimos say if he knew the whole truth?

“And thank you for healing me, even though you were going to kill me.” When he reached out, cupping my cheek in his heated palm, I flinched but remained in his hand. Our eyes locked, and his gaze swirled with darkness despite his lighthearted tone. “But I don’t think you truly wanted to.”

My heart hammered in my chest, vaguely reminding me of racing beasts in a stampede. His touch was so delicate and soothing. Part of me wanted to spill my guts and tell him about every horrible thing that ever happened in my life.

Careening back, I pulled my face from his hand and cast my eyes to the nearby wooden bench. “I can’t explain it to you.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Deimos boldly challenged.

“I don’t know if I can trust you.”

A bark of laughter breached his lips. “Darling, even after what we’ve been through? And mere moments ago, I was inside of you.”

Heat colored my cheeks, a mix of embarrassment and irritation. “Killing a demon together and fucking aren’t enough of a reason for me to trust you blindly.”

Truthfully, I longed to trust him. After so long, I’d found someone captivating and inviting that I wanted to speak with. Gods, I wanted to tell him everything.

But an unknown force of magic shielded him, and the god living inside of me wanted him dead.

Deimos caught my hand again, squeezing so hard I had no choice but to meet his stare. “You are fighting against something I’ve never seen before. Please, darling, I want to help you.”

I snatched my hand back. “But you’re hiding something as well, aren’t you?”

He huffed loudly, a dramatic show of his exasperation. The corners of his mouth turned down as he rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. “Well, at least I don’t try to kill my friends.”

I rocked onto my knees, causing white hair to fall over my shoulders and cover my breasts. Deimos noted the movement before forcing his sight to my face.

“Trust goes both ways,” I retorted, and his frown deepened. Without another word, I leapt from the ground.

Deimos followed, rising to his full height. In passing silence, we dressed, brushing grass and dirt from ourselves. Though I stole several peeks at his glorious backside until he pulled his pants over his hips.

“We should go inside.” Deimos ended the silence first.

I needed to study the demonic tissue, so I nodded in agreement.

Deimos stuck his arm through the willow branches, lifting them out of my way. I bit down an unwanted smile as I passed under his arm, feeling his body heat once more.

“Will you finally have a drink with me?” Deimos asked once we reached the house. He twisted the handle, opening the back door for me. As I passed him, he said, “We’re out of cranberry wine, but what I have is better than the swill at The Maiden’s Legs.”

“I don’t think that’s hard to accomplish,” I giggled easily.

Halfway to a kitchen cabinet, he paused. He glanced at me over his shoulder, genuinely smiling. “Hm, I like the sound of your laughter.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, and tingling with nerves, I remained silent.

Deimos retrieved two glasses and a bottle of a local red wine. I leaned on the island counter, observing him pop the cork before pouring our drinks. The ease of quietness between us surprised me more than I’d like to admit.

He slid a glass toward me, grin splitting wider. “So, tell me more about elves. Bellefy never goes into detail. I’m afraid I don’t know as much as I’d like.”

“Few people do,” I admitted. “Until the war ended, elves were rather reclusive. Only when my parents married, and Thanatens and Mithrans made peace, did elves expand and begin trading with the rest of the world.”

“Thanatens are of the shadows, and Mithrans are the sun?” he clarified. When I nodded, he continued, “Yet, you’re somehow both?”

“Indeed. My twin and I are the first and only known mixed-blood elves in existence. After the Rift split our continent a thousand years ago, the ensuing separation seemed permanent. Most believed it was impossible for sun and shadow to mix at all.”

Deimos sputtered over his sip of wine and set the glass down. “Yeah, so how did that happen?”

I laughed, lifting my shoulders. “No one is sure, honestly. My mother was a Mithran princess, and my father was the King of Shadows. Enemies turned lovers who combined the bloodlines for the first time in a millennium.”

“A miracle.”

“Or magic,” I mused, staring at the swirling red liquid in my glass.

Everything regarding magic happened for a reason. Fate or something else, I didn’t know, and right now I didn’t care.

“Can your twin wield magic as you can?” Deimos pulled me from my thoughts.

I closed my eyes, exhaling slowly. “Solara.” My head shook. “She can use sun and shadow, but not all magic as I can.”

“And you’re the Heir Apparent who doesn’t want the throne. Not sure I’ve ever met someone who didn’t want to rule when given the chance.” He sipped his drink, eyeing me.

What sort of people had he known to covet leadership?

“Solara is a true princess, elegant and kind. Even her magic, when she uses it, is as beautiful as she is. She makes flowers grow with our mother, and the people of Umbra adore her.” My tone became wistful.

“You miss her,” Deimos stated.

“Always. Solara was the calm to my storm.” Fiddling with the stem of wine glass, I distracted myself from a flood of unwanted emotions. “I’m only glad the magic didn’t call her to Ellrend alongside me. I never would have forgiven myself if she’d suffered the same fate.”

Deimos sensed the turmoil, and his face paled. He reached across the counter, aiming for my hand. “What happened to you out there?”

Though his voice was soft and genuine as it whispered through me, I yanked my hand away before he reached me.

“I changed,” I spat bitterly. That’s as much as I’d admit, though my tongue yearned to tell him more. His presence lulled me into a false sense of comfort, and if I didn’t shake it off, I’d divulge far too much. I swallowed those feelings down and blanketed them in darkness.

Disclosing more information about the petrified god heart and the river of blood might bring danger. Fools seeking that power might wind up dead at the witches’ feet if they searched for the island.

Although I didn’t believe Deimos had any desire to seek that power for himself, others might. Madmen, or creatures like the lesser demon we faced the night before.

“Tell me about demons,” I implored, needing a change of topic.

Deimos’s head snapped back, and his eyes widened. “You expect me to move past what you just said, as if you said nothing at all?”

“Indeed, I do.”

“Not a chance, darling.” Deimos rounded the island, filling my space and catching me off guard. “I’m interested in you. I want to know you, and I mean everything about you.”

“You shouldn’t.” She stayed silent now, but Hestra innately hated Deimos for an unknown reason.

He placed a hand on my arm, pulling me closer and stealing my next breath. “Everyone has a light around them, but not you. Darkness surrounds you, and it calls to me.” His other hand threaded through his hair, tugging at the ends. “Bloody Nine Hells, I’m so inexplicably drawn to you, it’s likely to drive me mad.”

His admission seemed to come as a surprise, even to him.

“I am the darkness. The shadows in my blood are darker than any nightmare you’ll ever have.” I ground out through my teeth, resisting the conflict rising inside of me.

One side wanted to tear Deimos to shreds and bathe in his blood. The other wanted to sink into his embrace until the sun rose in the sky.

Hearing how desperately he wanted to know me and get closer to me caused my heart to flutter.

“Even nightmares about you would be pure bliss, and I’d like to never wake from them.” Deimos surged forward, grasping my face as his lips fell on mine.

“Will you try to kill me again?” he asked against my lips.

“Probably,” I exhaled.

Then his tongue flicked against my bottom lip, requesting entry. I allowed him into my mouth, savoring the taste of the wine on his tongue. His honey and spice aroma clouded my nose and carried me away.

That moment of passion was so soft, just so unbearably tender. Deimos’s authentic desire tasted sweet on my lips, despite the bitterness of my innate violence against him.

If I tried to kill Deimos again, he might smile and thank me.

There was something wrong with him. But I liked him, and that meant something was wrong with me.

Deimos broke the kiss, and I almost leaned in for more. He pulled my face closer, this time gently pressing his forehead to mine.

His rough, uneven breath frayed out of him. “Whatever you’re struggling against, please let me help you.”

Allowing him to help me would mean certain death. I wouldn’t allow Hestra to awaken and take his life when I could prevent that outcome.

“You can’t help me, Deimos.” I loathed the vulnerability and weakness in my voice. Needing distance, I flattened my hands on his chest, heart running wild within, and pushed him back. “I’ll be gone in a few nights, anyway.”

Tension spread through the space between us when he inhaled. “I thought you were going to stay and help us with whatever monster came next.” His words rushed off his tongue.

The next monster might be me if I don’t leave in time.

“When I say I changed, I mean literally, Deimos. You saw me in the alley. After I killed those men without mercy or remorse, you saw what was happening to me.” Tension spread along the back of my skull, as if mentioning her brought her forward.

Deimos shook his head incredulously. After a half second, he sighed, dropping his defenses as if pleading with me. “Please stay. After all, we’re all hiding our own monsters, aren’t we?”

Then he took a step, reaching out as if meaning to embrace me. My body trembled, wanting to be enveloped in his unnatural heat.

The slamming of the front door through the foyer drove us apart. Startled, I instinctively shoved Deimos further away and out of arm’s reach.

“We’re back!” Raaz’s voice thundered down the halls.

The heat between us shattered like brittle glass. I placed a hand over my chest, willing my erratic heart to calm. Red stained my flushed cheeks despite myself.

Bellefy and Raaz’s footsteps echoed in the hall as they tramped toward the kitchen. Deimos swiped a hand over his face, shuddering with his exhale.

In our last moments alone, I faced him. Voice thin, I asked, “What monsters are you hiding, Deimos?”

Twelve



Bellefy and Raaz's return interrupted my chance to ask Deimos about his knowledge of demons. A needed distraction to dispel the endless, carnal tension that plagued me in his presence.

I held limited knowledge of the Nine Hells after the gods died off. In the following centuries, the mortal plane forgot the names of half the gods, and the demons had long settled back into their hellish plane.

After deciding to study the lesser demon, I returned to my room and collected the sample. Although I suppose I could have studied it in the guest room, Deimos had offered whatever room in the house would fit my needs.

Many guest rooms, lounges, offices, and libraries filled the spacious house. Nothing that stood out as a suitable place to examine a demonic entity at first. Now until I found my way into the attic through a thin, hidden doorway on the third floor.

At the top of the rickety stairs, the scent of dust, stale air, molding crates, and moth-eaten fabrics permeated the vaulted room. The floorboards creaked with each tentative step deeper, as if the house were groaning under my feet.

A singular stained-glass window permitted a shaft of moonlight entrance into the darkened room, shining from above a stack of precariously balanced totes of long forgotten belongings. I didn't need light to see, but summoned an extra orb of sunlight that cast a buttery yellow glow for my assessment.

Delicate cobwebs clung to every corner of the arched ceiling. I was sure that dozens of little critters were hiding up here with the lost relics of the house.

A twirl of my fingers created a whispering breeze that I directed throughout the attic, lifting dust and debris out of my way. Once cleared, I turned my focus on a table with a half-finished

miniature wooden ship. Someone's lost and abandoned project, left here to rot.

How had Deimos come into ownership of this place? Nothing in the halls, endless rooms, or attic held any trace of him or relatives.

I shook that from my head. I wasn't here to ponder over the wickedly charming silver-eyed man.

As I sorted through the cluttered table, I noticed old research papers on plants. This must have been a workbench at one point. Someone had studied here, writing out detailed documents on local vegetation.

It reminded me of my mother and Aunt Kla'ris, the royal healer, back home, studying herbs and their medicinal uses as I grew up. They sparked my curiosity from a young age. I enjoyed learning everything possible on new subjects to this day.

Back on Ellrend, the witches had recognized the hunger for knowledge rooted within me. With them, I spent years learning about magic the elves had lost with the death of the gods.

That drive to study, to learn, to understand never left me. As much as I despised how things ended on Ellrend, I was truly grateful for the control I learned.

I set the glass vial on the table, forming ideas about how to test it.

Deimos mentioned that something was wrong with this one. The creature shouldn't have been on the mortal plane. Crossing over was nearly impossible after the gods' demise. Demons usually weren't powerful enough to escape the hellfire of their home realm.

This beast hadn't only escaped the Nine Hells, but had grown in excess. Deimos stated lesser demons shouldn't be able to get as large as this one had.

Had the growth stemmed from devouring people, and fattening up in secret under the city?

Recalling how the creature reacted to my magic, I called forth my orb of sunlight. As expected, the sample quivered within the vial. It reacted similarly when I gathered shadows from around the room.

If normal sunlight and shadows shouldn't affect demons, then why did mine?

A haunting voice sang sugary sweet in my mind. *“Why does silver-eyes know about demons?”*

“Why do you care what anybody knows?” I snapped back aloud. Luckily, no one was around to see me talking to myself. “And what if he does? Books exist, you know?”

“Vile demons, scum of existence. There shouldn’t be any books on them at all. I should have exterminated them like the vermin they are when I had the chance,” Hestra replied, venomous and frothing with hatred.

“Uh, huh.” I vented out a sigh. “So, you hate Deimos because he knows about demons? Most people have basic knowledge. At least of their existence.”

“His is more than knowledge.” An ominous chill crept down my spine as her words faded away. After that, she remained silent.

No more lingering thoughts of him, I vowed. Easier said than done when I felt the ache of him between my thighs with each step I took. The ghost of his touch caressed my skin, and the taste of his mouth persisted on my tongue.

But I put my foot down, slamming a mental wall around myself to shut down erotic thoughts and godly voices.

Focused once more, I shook the inky blob of flesh onto a porcelain plate I’d found. “Are all demons horrid creatures like you?” I asked the nonresponsive tissue. “A lesser demon. What does that mean?”

Pointing a finger at the tissue, I brought forth a mix of gold and black, threading around one another into a ball. Instantly, the demonic sample writhed over the plate as if trying to inch away from the magic. When I pulled my finger back, the flesh settled, becoming inanimate once again.

My experiments continued through the rest of the night. I used various forms of magic on the lesser demon, then wrote my findings with paper and pen found in the attic.

The thrill of examination, experiments, dissection, and discovery consumed my every thought. What was this creature, and why was it different? Better yet, why was it here?

What else would come to Bellmead? Something darker, and far more vicious than this abhorrent beast?”

Caught up and swept away in the tide of questions, I lost sight of the world outside. When the sun crested over the horizon and yellow light invaded the stained-glass window, shining across the table, my head snapped up.

I shifted away from the table, stretching and uncurling my hunched over form. My muscles were painfully stiff and weary from hours bowed over in research. A pang of hunger gnawed relentlessly in my stomach to match.

More times than I could count, my mother had found me in the palace library asleep, surrounded by piles of books. Though normal for Thanatens to live by night, her scolding stemmed from my lack of eating or drinking every time the heat of reading seized me.

I rubbed my weary eyes and deflated on an exhale. Before leaving the attic, I collected the demonic sample back into the glass vial and left it on the table.

My findings would interest Deimos, but after our last interaction, I hesitated on the idea of approaching him. Would he rip my clothes off, or would I try to kill him again?

A new day dawned, yet nothing and no one stirred in the quiet house. I suspected the others lived nocturnally. Especially if they were hunting monsters in the night.

In the kitchen, I found leftover herb roast with seasoned vegetables, and a fresh loaf of bread. Once I'd filled my belly, I returned to my guest room.

A scalding bath eased the ache in my muscles from sparring, and the strain on my joints from hours hunched over in the attic. But the water wasn't hot enough to wash Deimos's smirk or the way it felt to have him inside of me from my memory.

I hadn't had a lover since I was still back in Gwathendor. In one tryst in the garden, he'd certainly made up for the lack of pleasure all those years.

Sleep seemed like the best way to distract myself from this newly awakened craving. Apart from that, I needed the rest.

I braided my long tresses of white hair, keeping it out of my way as I crawled into the bed. Naked and exhausted, I drifted into darkness when sleep blanketed my conscience.



I became aware of my dream the moment it began. Though at first, there were no visible clues on my whereabouts—or if this was a vision.

Years ago, haunting visions of magic and witches lured me to Ellrend and my untimely fate. Then dreams of screaming shadows in Bellmead gave me the needed push to disappear from Ellrend. Most recently, the woman the demon pulled under the city.

Half the dreams I'd experienced in my life, more than I cared to remember, had been a herald or omen of sorts.

My dream for the night began with the lesser demon. Still alive and screaming, screeching with rage fueled bloodlust. The beast's hunger echoed through me as if it were my own. That blinding, primal urge to feast and consume astounded me.

Something else caught my notice.

By now, I knew the feeling of an outside voice urging me into actions that were not my own. A similar sensation had affected the lesser demon. An outside will had driven the creature's actions.

Someone—or something—had guided the demon. A feeling over the city, the tensing of something malicious on the verge of awakening, spread further on the disturbed wind over Bellmead.

My dream darkened, fading from the savage, hungry demon. Yet I found no comfort at the bottom of that darkness.

When my feet settled on an unseen ground, heat blasted over my skin. My head snapped back as two red slits parted into giant eyes floating overhead.

Hot power washed over me, prickling my skin. The ground trembled under my feet, and the putrid stench of necrotic blood and rotten eggs wafted through my nose.

Another heavy, ancient power rose in waves behind it, crashing into me. A magic that changed lives the day it split the ground

asunder. One that called to me on a deeply instinctual level and stimulated tingles over my skin.

The Rift.

This was the power that surged from that potent chasm the day the last gods died and again on the day of my birth. I knew that power in the pit of my stomach, in the core of my heart, and in my blood, writhing under my taut flesh.

Those otherworldly red eyes, the unusual demon, and that power from the Rift was half a world away. How were they connected?

The massive red eyes in the black sky blinked out of existence. However, the itching under my skin, between my muscles, diverted my gaze.

I glanced down at my naked body covered in goosebumps. Horror flared through me as feather tips poked through, breaching my flesh, and making way for ebony scales.

“No!” I flayed the scales from my skin and tore the feathers from my arms.

Dread crawled up my spine, taking hold of the back of my throat and throttling me. Assaulted by pain and fear, I collapsed to my knees onto the black, glassy ground. On the reflective surface under my knees, I saw my shredded skin and morphing body.

A full moon, heavy with magic and silver light, loomed in the background.

“No, it’s not time yet. This is a dream. Only a dream.”

Warm liquid trickled over my legs as vibrant crimson pooled beneath me. I lifted my hands, finding them stained red in the lines of my fingers and under my dark, pointed nails.

An agonized scream wrenched past my lips, echoing endlessly through the void of my dream until my pained cry morphed into the monstrous snarls of a creature once lost to the world.

An unexpected gust of wind bowled me over, causing my hands to slip in the rising tide of blood flowing around my legs. Cool air breezed over my skin, as pleasant as a spring morning back home in the northern mountains.

Pale hints of blue swept over the surrounding darkness, chasing it away. The blood beneath me soaked into the ground, vanishing

under a sudden growth of luscious green grass.

I closed my eyes, breathing in the newfound peace brought on by a floral fragrance.

Gentle hands fluttered over my face, bringing warmth back to the chill in my bones.

“Nevar?” A heavenly, heartbreakingly familiar voice danced in the wind.

I opened my eyes to the light, and there she was. Brighter than a summer day, with more love in her eyes than any person should be capable of.

My other half, my sister, my twin.

“Solara,” I called her name through a mouth full of too large, too sharp teeth. Searing tears burned rivers into my cheeks, and her melancholy smile wrenched a sob from my chest.

“When are you coming home? I miss you.” Solara’s golden, sunshine eyes didn’t blink twice at the monstrous state of me. Her eyes locked on mine, staring into my soul—at *me*.

“I can’t come home, sister. Do you see the monster I’ve become? It isn’t safe.” My head dropped against my sister’s legs.

Her fingers brushed over my hair, and lilting laughter passed her lips, swallowed by the wind. “No. You are not a monster, Nevar.”

The gentle feeling of her hand patting my head vanished. At the loss of her, my head jerked back.

Solara’s fiery red curls billowed in the wind, and her pink lips split into an affectionate smile. Her hand stretched out for me, but her essence thinned, fading from our shared dream.

“Solara!” I cried out for her, lurching to my feet. My clawed hand passed through hers as I shouted, “Don’t go!”

“You are not a monster, Nevar.” She repeated, voice growing faint, barely more than a whisper. “You are not.”

The next beat of my heart brought an ache so deep it penetrated to the center of my being.

“I miss you too,” I lamented, but she’d already vanished into the wind.

Alone again, I wailed with the profound anguish tearing me apart from within. My sister, my parents, my family, and my home were all out of reach as long as I remained tarnished by gods-blood.

All around me, pink roses swayed in the breeze, keeping my sister's scent alive. Reaching out with a trembling hand, I carefully plucked a rose.

In my palm, the pink petals wilted, gradually withering into ash. A powerful gust blew over me, stealing away the decayed flower from my touch.

The harrowing void that had surrounded me remained, now seeping inside of me, filling my body with agony. A deep well of unfathomable power stirred to life, pleased by the silence. Though my tears continued falling, racing down my face and dripping off my chin, each breath came a little easier than the last.

Thirteen



A slamming door rattled on its hinges, snatching me from my tumultuous dreams. I bolted upright, heart racing and eyes wide as Deimos bolted into the room. Those lean legs swiftly carried him to the side of the bed.

“Darling, are you alright?” His features twisted with concern and distress. Those silver eyes struck me with the force of his anxiety.

Rain pelted the window, and the drawn curtains hid the night storm. Outside, distant thunder rumbled through the clouds, promising a lasting storm.

“I’m fine. What’s wrong?” I rubbed the last traces of sleep from my eyes before blinking up at him.

Deimos ran his hands through his hair, breathing hard. “The house—the whole fucking house shuddered.”

“Because of the storm?” My eyes flicked to the window and back.

“No. Because of magic.” His brows pinched as he watched me, searching within me.

My dream danced behind my eyes, teasing me with images of monsters and missing loved ones. If my sister and I had joined consciousness, then the dream truly was a vision.

A little scoffing sound leaves me. “I’m sorry. I think it was my fault.”

“Was it a nightmare?” Deimos stepped closer, staring at me with a primitive yearning to soothe me. “Don’t apologize for that.”

“A nightmare,” I repeated to him. “Yes, and no.”

I took in the dark gray sleeping pants he wore, hugging his toned waist and hanging onto his muscled thighs. I couldn’t resist

biting the inside of my cheek at the shirtless state of him and the delectable V vanishing below his waistband.

He made an incredulous sound, then braced one hand on his hip as the other gestured at me. “Your dreams are powerful enough to shake the very world around us?”

Gods, he is so handsome.

Tearing my eyes from his body, I flopped back onto the bed to halt my wandering carnal thoughts. But those thoughts were better than the dreams, nightmares, and visions.

The bed dipped beside me as he sat on the edge of the mattress.

I swallowed over a lump in my throat, but rolled over onto my side, peering up at him.

“You want me to share the inner workings of my dreams with you?” I extended my hand, tracing my nail carefully over his thickly muscled thigh.

His throat bobbed, and I noticed his chest still as he stopped breathing.

“You know I do, darling. I want to hear everything you have to say.” His silver eyes remained on my hand, trailing higher over his thigh, ever so slowly.

“Would you listen to me prattle on about the horrid visions I have at night when I’m alone?” My palm flattened on his thigh, near his hip and dangerously close to his groin.

He sucked in a soft breath. His loose sleepwear didn’t hide the outline of his cock hardening in response to my touch.

I continued. “Do you want to hear that my sister visited me in my dream and asked me to come home?”

“Did she?” he pushed the words over his tongue, almost fully distracted by my hand now.

“Indeed. We often share dreams, though not as frequently in these past few years.” Teasing him now, I skimmed the tips of my nails down his thigh, back to his knee.

“That’s—” he bodily shivered, swallowing again, “—impressive, truly. Though I hate hearing about the nightmares.”

“Those aren’t going anywhere soon. I’ve mostly come to terms with them.” Withdrawing my hand, I flattened onto my back, and his

gaze followed. “I’ll admit that I don’t want to sit here and talk about dreams with you.”

“What do you want from me, darling?” Deimos bowed over me, bracing a hand near my hip.

“A diversion, perhaps.” My heartbeat kicked up, racing with growing excitement.

“It would please me greatly to divert your attention. I’d prefer it if your focus was on me.” Deimos hooked his fingers in the blanket covering me. Our eyes locked as he slipped the cover away, exposing my bare body to the heat of his stare.

“You have my attention, then.” Thrilled tremors course through me, bolting into my core. My breath hitched at the way his silver eyes raked over every inch of my body.

“Beautiful, like a goddess,” he breathed reverently. When he leaned closer, his scent rushed into my nostrils—the honey sweet aroma from his skin mingled with the natural spice of his arousal.

“What?” I froze despite the frenzied energy rolling through me.

Why would he say that? What did he know?

His heavy, warm hand smoothing over my quivering flesh squashed those questions into the ground. He palmed the soft swell of my breast, traced the lines of my ribs, all the while inclining further over me.

“You’re the loveliest creature I’ve ever laid my eyes on. It is an honor to see you like this, darling.”

“Naked?”

He laughed, coolly. Wisps of dark hair swayed around his face as his head shook. “Vulnerable.”

Dazzling eyes took their time devouring my body, and his greedy hands followed—flowing over every curve from my ribs, the slope of my waist, to my hips. His palms smoothed over my flat, tensing stomach and up to my breasts. The size and heaviness of them fitting perfectly in his palms elicited a masculine groan from his chest.

His thumbs brushed over my nipples, pebbled from the cool air. My entire body shivered from the sparks his hands provoked.

Deimos inched higher, sitting beside my hip. His eyes were on me as his middle finger drew a line down the center of my stomach

and past my navel. Fire followed, pooling in the pit of my belly. That tension wound tighter when his fingers skimmed over the inside of my thigh.

I laid there on the bed, spreading my legs further, allowing him to look to his heart's content. The air between us grows thick with a cloudy desire so potent I taste it on the tip of my tongue.

His long, shapely fingers dipped toward my sex. My breath sighed past my lips and my blood buzzed under my tight skin.

Deimos hummed in encouragement, and my thighs opened further, giving him a full view of my pussy and the slick, delicate folds between my thighs. I could hardly bear the torturous seconds, waiting for him to touch me.

His middle finger traced over the wet lips, pulling a sharp breath from me. He smirked wickedly at the sound, enjoying the torture far too much. The noise motivated him to glide his fingers through the glistening folds until he'd coated his fingers in sticky arousal.

Each touch was bliss—his strangely hot skin, and the expert caresses turned me into a panting, wanton creature.

Finally, his thumb pressed into my clit, and the resounding shock made my head arch back into the pillow. He flicked the digit over the swollen, pulsing bud several times, stealing breathy pants from my lips.

My noises turned into a long groan of pleasure when he pushed two fingers inside my eager cunt.

“I'm going to enjoy those little noises even more when you come.” He punctuated the statement by rapidly curling his fingers. The motion hit something inside of me that made me feel full and delirious.

His other hand grabbed my wrist, and my eyes flared open. He tugged my hand, clawing at the sheet, then placed it over my clit.

“Show me how you touch yourself.” Deimos's voice turned hard, verging on a command.

I permitted myself the freedom to release my mind, my will, my stress into his open hands, and obey.

Deimos withdrew his fingers as I circled over my clit. I continued the motion, skin heating under his stimulating stare, feasting on my actions.

While I touched myself at his behest, he climbed higher onto the bed, lying flat on his stomach between my spread legs.

I enjoyed the view of the muscles in his arms flexing as he moved. Every inch of his body screamed of strength and power, like an elegant yet feral warrior.

“Your scent drives me wild.” He inhaled heavily, then his hot breath fanned out over my dripping pussy when he exhaled. “I’ve wanted to do this since I first saw you.”

Without warning, he snatched my hand away from my sex. His fist curled around my wrist so completely, his fingers overlapped, holding my arm down on the bed.

Then his mouth converged on me, and his tongue delved into my center. He lapped and every sensitive part of my damp folds, swallowing every drop of my arousal.

My world erupted when he targeted my clit.

“Ah!” I lost control of my volume as a glittering light tore through me.

“You taste so gods-damn good,” he growled against my pussy, flicking my clit with his thumb as he spoke. “I could eat you all night long and never come up for air again.”

“Deimos!” I whined from the force of building pressure.

No other words came to me. Nothing except his name, and that’s all I wanted to think about. Not the dreams or visions—just the man sucking the life out of my clit.

Without notice, Deimos hooked his hands under my thighs and spread my legs further apart. His unbelievable tongue slipped from my clit, and he shoved it into the sucking heat of my body fluttering around him.

As he devoted himself to my pleasure, devouring me within an inch of my breath, he groaned and rocked his hips against the mattress. With the erection in his pants, he sought any friction to ease his straining desire.

Knowing that eating me out turned him on so wildly thrilled the lustful creature living inside me.

“Oh, by the gods!” My eyes crossed and my toes curled.

If I’d looked down at him, I would have seen the swirling fire in his eyes, watching my body writhe on the bed as he tongue-

fucked me.

He looped an arm under my thigh, then reached over to place his large palm over my lower abdomen. His thumb rubbed circles over my clit as his tongue filled my pussy, gorging himself on me like a starving man with his last meal.

I lifted my pelvis, rocking my hips against his mouth from the pleasure.

His opposite hand released my wrist as his tongue proceeded over my clit again. Keeping one hand splayed on my stomach, the other dropped between my legs, where he shoved two fingers within me.

Deimos touched me expertly, as though he knew every desire hidden in my body and where to touch me. The line tethering me to this world shattered. Stars erupted in my vision as the rising tide of fiery bliss within my core burst into a million dazzling pieces. A tidal wave of satisfaction flooded through my body as a volatile orgasm tore me apart.

“Deimos. Deimos!” I cried his name to get his attention. His mouth continued licking and sucking at my overstimulated nerves despite my release. “Stop. It’s too much!”

“I’m not finished,” he snarled at me before diving back in.

My legs shook as another wave of pleasure hurtled through me. Broken gasps wrenched from my lips as Deimos continued indulging himself.

The wuthering storm beat against the window and near freezing rain pelted the glass. The surrounding room darkened. Undulating shadows rose from the corners, flailing along the walls. Items on the mantle and tables rattled from an unseen force sweeping through the air.

When he shoved a third finger inside my cunt, I shuddered on the bed. His fingers curled against a spot in my quivering walls. The stars I saw behind my fluttering eyes exploded into life, floating as fizzing golden orbs fighting against the shadows in the bedroom.

My vision blurred as my environment came alive with the uncontrollable magic escaping me.

I fisted the sheets as if they would keep me grounded in the extraordinary moment when another cord of rapturous release snapped in my core. “Deimos!”

My legs trembled until he withdrew his fingers. After a few final, gentle strokes of his tongue, the villainous man finally lifted his head. Despite my better judgment, I glanced down. The sight of his glistening mouth and chin coating my arousal snatched the last ounce of air from my lungs.

Deimos licked his lips salaciously. He knew I was enrapt with the sight, even as he sucked his drenched fingers into his mouth. My heart fluttered as he cleaned my juices from his hand.

As my breathing evened out, the shadows returned to the corners and the balls of light fizzled out of existence. The objects in the room stilled, leaving only the rain and my drumming heart to break up the charged silence.

“You should let me distract you more often, darling. I’d be glad to have the taste of you on my tongue all day.” Deimos crawled between my thighs and over my body. He dipped his head, randomly kissing and biting at my flesh as he rose over me.

“Do shut up,” I mumbled.

He dipped in for a kiss, but I turned my face to the side.

That didn’t deter him.

Deimos gripped my chin, forcing me to look up at him. “No, you don’t get away that easily. You’ll taste yourself on my lips. Then, after I’ve stolen all the air from your lungs, we’ll go downstairs for something to eat. I’ve had my fill, but I imagine you’re starving by now.”

Instead of letting me answer, Deimos captured my mouth. I closed my eyes, letting myself enjoy his smoldering kiss.

His tongue danced over my bottom lip, and I opened my mouth. He drove his tongue in, and I tasted my release. The kiss deepened, and I curled my arms around his neck as he settled his weight on top of me.

True to his word, Deimos kissed me until I could no longer breathe.

I let him.

The taste and feel of him stomped out the last traces of the watchful eyes from my dream. I’d need to face those red eyes later, but for now, I melted into the comfort of Deimos and the distraction he willingly provided.

Fourteen



Deimos and I descended the stairs together, lured out of bed by the mouthwatering scent of roasted chicken and potatoes. Along the way, he advised that a small house staff cooked and cleaned during the day, and that we wouldn't see them often, if at all. I was too hungry to care.

Leaned over the kitchen counter, Bellefy and Raaz were passively picking at the last scraps on their plates in between bits of a heated discussion. Their engrossed conversation distracted them from noticing our late entrance.

Behind them, through the garden windows, the storm wavered. Dark gray clouds bowled over one another, leaving thunder in its wake.

"Daggers in close combat are superior to brute strength. In a true fight, I'd destroy you." Bellefy's braided her hair down the middle of her head, showing off the shaved sides—and the angry red flush in her cheeks.

Raaz's low, rumbling laughter reminded me of boulders tumbling down the side of a mountain. The sound made Bellefy's face twist deeper.

Picking up a chicken bone, he glanced up, then shook his head. "Your little shadow magic is cute, but I'm too strong to be felled by such a meager blade. You'd never get close enough to use them."

Her fists banged on the counter, resulting in glasses and silver clinking together. Then she shot to her feet. "Let's go outside right now and I'll show you how close I can get!"

I had the feeling this was a normal occurrence for them.

"Children please," Deimos drawled, glancing between his companions.

Their heads jerked to the kitchen entrance at the interruption.

“There are advantages to brute strength and close combat, especially when you’re fast,” he continued.

Bellefy ignored them, preferring to address me. “Good afternoon, Nevar.”

I pleasantly smiled back. “Good morning, Bellefy.”

“Food’s getting cold. Glad you two came down when you did. I was just about to eat the rest.” Raaz shoved two plates to the end of the counter.

Deimos waved his arm for me to help myself first. I tore into a chunk of brown bread and salted butter for anything else.

“Apologies for being late,” Deimos replied while rolling up the sleeves of his black shirt and showing off his sinewy forearms. “Nevar and I had some things to discuss.” The mischievous glint in his eyes made the tips of my ears heat.

“About the lesser demon?” Bellefy probed.

When Deimos opened his mouth, I jumped in to reply first. “Yes. I believe someone corrupted the demon using power from the Rift.”

Half that assumption was based on my experiments, and the sample’s reaction to my magic. The other half stemmed from what I’d seen in my vision.

“The Rift?” Bellefy’s face turned ashen, and she shuddered at the thought. “That’s across the world from us.”

“And as we were discussing,” he lied, peering at me. We’d discussed nothing while in bed together. “How is that possible?”

“What’s the Rift?” Raaz’s innocent question abated some of the anxiety in the kitchen. When three sets of eyes turned on him, he nervously rubbed the side of his neck. “I mean, I know what it is. But maybe you should explain it just in case someone here doesn’t.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve talked about the Rift before,” Bellefy mumbled, crossing her arms.

“But were we drinking at the time?” Raaz returned.

“In context, perhaps we should go into further detail,” Deimos offered. “No one knows the Rift better than the elves do. After all, you’re from the continent it divided.”

Another explosion of thunder rattled the house. All four heads turned briefly to the storms slamming against the window as white,

sharp lightning struck the sky.

Perhaps unintentionally, Deimos placed his hand on my lower back. “Darling, would mind enlightening us?”

My entire body stiffened, wholly aware of the heat radiating from his palm. Sensing my flinch, he dropped his hand and cleared his throat.

“Royal tutors and scholars drilled elven history into me before I could walk. I’d be glad to share the history of the Rift, and how the gods died.”

“How did they die? Some folks still worship them, but it doesn’t go much beyond that,” Raaz went on.

The conversation transported my mind back to my childhood, studying over ancient history with my sister. After I’d bit our third teacher, my aunt Kla’ris had to take over our education.

“Over a thousand years ago, gods walked the mortal plane alongside us. Based on the surviving depictions and gods’ bones across the world, we know they were the size of titans. When the gods fought, the ground trembled beneath their feet. Their hearts alone were the size of a small mountain.” The last statement stemmed from my personal experience, though I kept that to myself.

“Much of elven history, dating back to the original elves before the Rift, was lost to time. Historians aren’t sure what exactly started the god-war. Thanks to a surviving, ancient mural in the throne room in Galad, we know that the god of war and the sun, Aristan, and the goddess of the moon and magic, Hestra, fought so brutally against one another that their battle ultimately tore the ground apart.”

Calling forth the mental image of the mural I’d seen had triggered memories of what else danced on the walls of the throne room. My time away from Galad and the throne room diminished what I remembered.

“Now that I think about it again, I remember dark creatures fighting alongside Aristan. They didn’t look quite like the lesser demon, but now I’m wondering if there’s a connection,” I stated.

The painting on the throne room ceiling showed the sun god, and a summoned an army of dark humanoid creatures. They weren’t animalistic, like the one we’d killed.

I wouldn’t dwell on the black-winged beasts that fought alongside Hestra. I knew those well enough.

“Anyway, those two larger than life opposing forces ripped the mortal plane open when they clashed. Their commingled godly powers, threaded with the essence of death, created the Rift.”

Bellefy leapt in for the next portion. “Unfortunately, their war ended on the elven continent. The surge of power from the newly created Rift transformed the original elves of the land into the sun and shadow elves we have today.”

Deimos stroked his chin in thought. “So, from Aristan’s power, you’ve got sun elves who became known as Mithrans. Then shadow elves from Hestra’s power, now Thanatens. They split into warring kingdoms; Laernear for the sun, and Gwathendor for the shadows?”

“Yes.” Bellefy and I answered at the same time.

“But how did the rest of the gods die out?” Raaz scratched the back of his head, ruffling his copper hair.

“They perished either during the war or after the swell of power from the Rift. It’s assumed the awakening powers somehow poisoned them. The gods couldn’t survive in the world they destroyed. That fresh energy from the Rift warped the land and the creatures who inhabited it. Tainting an entire continent and starting the centuries of war between the elves.” With my hand in the air, shadows writhed around my fingers before flickering with brief sparks of light.

Combined sun and shadow.

“The war that your parents ended,” Bellefy sighed wistfully. Her eyes glimmered with unabashed wonder.

For a former Thanaten soldier with a habit of getting into fights, Bellefy had a dreamy quality every so often she didn’t bother shying away from.

“I’ve heard that love conquers all,” Deimos chortled. His gaze switched from Bellefy to me. “What does this have to do with a lesser demon? How could the Rift, again across the world, have corrupted a creature from the Nine Hells?”

Drawing a breath, I passively shrugged. “I can’t be sure how the beast made it to the mortal plane. Everything known about demons is that they shouldn’t be able to leave. Now I’m thinking that a type of demon fought alongside Aristan in the god-war.”

“But that was a thousand years ago. Why would they be back?” Bellefy wondered.

“I theorize that someone with unsavory intentions somehow siphoned power from the Rift and altered the demon in the same manner the initial surge of power changed the elves and created creatures like ghoulcats.” The inside of my head throbbed, and I held myself still instead of flinching at the pain.

“If your theory is correct, this person will do it again. Maybe they already have,” Deimos rushed out, breathing faster.

His feelings of anticipating something worse in Bellmead were becoming a reality.

As if indifferent, he added, “I think I recall something about demons fighting alongside Aristan in the god-war. That sounds correct in my limited knowledge. In the past thousand years since then, it’s become incredibly difficult and rare for demons to cross over. What I can’t fathom is why someone would summon a lesser demon to corrupt. In Bellmead, of all places.”

“I can’t imagine anyone summoning such an atrocious pawn. It only seemed to kill aimlessly.” Bellefy gnawed on her thumbnail before adding, “Why summon a vassal from the Nine Hells and corrupt it, only to set it loose on random innocents?”

One of her words sparked my interest.

“Random,” I repeated, glancing between the three staring at me. My hands moved with animation as words spewed from my lips. “Are the attacks random? Perhaps there’s a connection between the victims.”

Deimos smacked the side of his fist into his opposite palm. “You don’t toil through bringing minions forth and tampering with them for the fun of it. That’s a venture you undertake with intent.”

“What can you tell me about the man you saved?” I commanded his attention.

Raaz snapped his fingers. “Lord Teddy!”

“Lord Emalstan is a noble in the city. He gifted us this house after the rescue.” Deimos restlessly tapped his foot as he turned over his thoughts. The aura surrounding him matched the raging storm outside.

But that slip of information settled my curiosity about why the house didn’t fit Deimos. Giving a spare house in gratitude for his life would be an effortless trade for a lord.

“And the other victims?” I recalled the woman in my dream, dragged into the sewer by a ravenous fiend, and the corpse we’d found in its lair.

“It started as missing beggars. Lately, they’ve been minor nobles or rich merchants. The lower rungs of Bellmead’s high society.” Bellefy locked eyes with me before adding the next part. “In the market yesterday, we overheard that the wife of an influential silk merchant went missing.”

Unwittingly, my hand slipped into my pocket, and my fingers curled around the band of silver. I didn’t know why I always kept the ring with me, but I couldn’t seem to leave it alone.

Noticing my distracted state, Deimos continued the conversation. “So, it appears we have a madman in the city using infected vermin from the Nine Hells to kill off aristocrats. How delightful.”

“What are we supposed to do about all this?” Raaz rubbed his hands over his face and slouched, still towering over everyone else in the kitchen.

Shakily, I pulled the ring from my pocket. In the light, it appeared well made. A suitable wedding band for the wife of a silk merchant.

“Bellefy, can you give this to the silk merchant? His wife was the one we saw that night.” I handed the ring out for her.

Her fingers curled around the band, accepting the task without question. “Of course, I know where his shop is.”

The weight of Deimos’s hand fell upon my shoulder. A shiver danced over my skin at his touch.

“Why not give the merchant the ring yourself, darling?” he gently pried.

I pulled my shoulder away from his hand. “I’ve studied the lesser demon tissue, and I’ve told you what I can. It’s time for me to leave.”

With the full moon coming, staying risked the safety of the entire city.

The room grew colder, and tension rippled through the air as everyone went silent.

Displeasure filled his eyes, and the weight of it wriggled into my chest and pulled me down. “Even knowing this is only the beginning? You’d still leave us to face this alone?”

Pressure from the invisible shield around him undulated against my senses, provoking the magic in my blood.

“Our prior conversation stands. I told you I would be gone before the full moon came. This doesn’t change that.”

“You can’t leave. We need you!” Bellefy burst out. Her palpable distress softened my bristling edges.

“I am sorry, but I must.” They couldn’t grasp the severity of what awaited me.

“Let me come with you, then!” She grabbed my hand, and the dejection in her eyes struck me. “I can be your guard.”

Raaz shot forward, grasping her upper arm. “No, Bellefy. We need you here. You belong with us.”

Though the two of them argued, their sibling-like bond was apparent. Perhaps that made them more like family.

One I didn’t belong to.

I placed my hand over hers and imitated one of my sister’s gentle smiles. “Bellefy, please deliver the ring to the merchant for me. He deserves to know that she won’t be coming home to him. You’re the only one that I trust with this.”

“I understand she’s important to you, and your homeland. But we can’t force her to stay, Bellephine. You and I still have business here.” Raaz urged Bellefy back a step. “We’re going to take the ring to the merchant, yeah?”

Bellefy continued, pleading with her eyes for me to stay. She reminded me of home, and I loathed leaving her behind.

Oscillating magical pressure nagged against the base of my skull. On instinct, my eyes snapped to Deimos. He stood unmoving, nearly glowering at me. With what emotions I couldn’t say, but I knew he didn’t want me to go.

Deimos might have hidden monsters of his own, but I couldn’t wait around to face mine. My personal beast of burden would come with the moon. I’d be a fool if I remained here and endangered their lives.

Overhead, I sensed the storm passing. The thunder rumbled further away while the rain eased into a drizzle instead of a violent downpour.

Before we knew it, the storm would end, and it'd be time for me to depart.

Truth be told, I didn't want to leave this mismatched group or abandon their mission. However, I wouldn't stay and stain my hands with their blood because sentiment got the better of me.

"I should gather my things to leave, then." Crossing my arms over my chest didn't ease the goosebumps rising along my arms.

I nodded at Raaz, who had his arm slung over Bellefy's shoulder.

His head dipped in response, and a remorseful grin tugged at the corner of his mouth but failed. He couldn't fake the smile, and I appreciated that about him.

Deimos didn't move or speak, simply standing as still as a statue. His stare gave rise to the force in my soul, peering to the surface as if ready to meet a threat.

Hardening my resolve and locking away my softer emotions, I circled toward the hall and walked away from them.

Fifteen



A nearly full moon mocked me through the bedroom window, sending an unpleasant rush of power over my nerves. The storm clouds rolled toward the distant mountain range, leaving Bellmead drenched and chilly under a midnight blue sky full of blinking stars.

Remembering the demon sample in the attic, I grabbed my cloak, then headed upstairs. At the door, darkness flanked my senses, warning me of the volatile presence lingering on the other side.

Undeterred, I advanced through the door. My breath puffed, seeing Deimos leaning on the table. “Were you waiting for me?”

He didn’t turn his head, instead keeping his focus on the little glass vial between his fingers.

I used the moment to admire the soft waves of his hair and the dark strands gently curling against the sharp angles of his cheeks.

Feeling my gaze, Deimos exhaled slowly. He lifted his head, studying me with those molten silver eyes. When he pushed away from the table, his body moved as lithe as a predator with hidden strength in every lean muscle.

He set the glass down, clinking it hard on the solid wood. “I couldn’t let you leave without trying to convince you to stay.”

An inflamed whirlwind rushed to the surface of my skin under his wanting stare. I wanted to ignore the knot forming low in my belly, but it kept me rooted in place.

“When the full moon comes, I can’t control what will happen to me. I’d rather not have everyone’s blood on my hands.” Not theirs and not the innocents of Bellmead.

I closed the distance, making a grab for the vial.

Deimos snatched my hand out of the air with blinding speed. Strong fingers curled around mine like a vise, and my skin tingled at

the contact.

Towering over me, he pressed nearer until his breath fanned my cheek. “Stay and let us help you.” His ferocious yet grave tone incited chaos within me.

I narrowed my eyes in a wild glare and hissed back, “You can’t fucking help me with this, Deimos.”

I tugged my arm, but Deimos swiftly pulled me closer until our bodies flushed together, chest to chest. The shimmering air surrounding him flared, as if reacting to the awakening magic inside of me.

The charged air pressed against my skin as if the forces of the world were urging Deimos and me together. His natural scent wafting up from his skin invaded my nose as I drowned in the depths of his shifting metallic eyes.

“Raise your voice at me again,” he challenged in a snarl, tightening his grip near painfully on my wrist, “raise it again, princess, and I’ll give you a reason to scream.”

Violent desire shivered through my body, from my head to my toes. Part of me wanted to sink my aching teeth into his flesh and tear out his throat—to devour and consume him. The other half wanted him to mount me and pound me against the table while my claws tore into his skin.

One of those instincts reared stronger and louder than the other, quickly winning the internal battle of how this interaction would go.

“You wouldn’t dare.” Our breaths mingled in the shrinking gap between his lips and mine.

The growing power under my skin itched to flare up and take over. Increasing sharpness from my teeth forced my lips to part. Deimos’s eyes riveted on my mouth.

A gasp slipped free when his hand curled over my chin, yanking my face closer. His bottom lip deliberately skimmed across mine in a silent promise of more.

“Darling, what sharp teeth you have,” he remarked. The sensual gravity in his voice worsened, the heated coil tensing in my core. My muscles strained from the flaring pressure.

“The better to tear you apart with,” I responded, out of breath with our lips a hair’s breadth from meeting.

Unaware of my actions, my hands splayed across his warm chest. My fingers curled in the black fabric, claws on the verge of ripping it from his body in my unbidden need to draw him closer.

“Oh, when you say such savage things, I want to make you scream that much more.” His fingers dug into my cheeks from the force of his grip. “You’re positively malicious, darling.”

The volatile tension exploded over my skin, and stars erupted behind my eyes when Deimos slammed his mouth into mine. His hand moved from my chin to my throat, keeping me in place but not cutting off my air.

His opposite hand rose to the back of my head, tangling in the snow-white tresses. When he tugged, I moaned at the sweet tension spreading along my scalp.

He pressed into me, easily commanding my body with his powerful frame, urging me back until my legs hit the table.

Our lustful needs were obvious as he unfastened my cloak and my hands dropped to the front of his pants. We simultaneously moved in a carnal frenzy, unable to wait another second.

The malevolent force in the back of my mind screamed at me to rip him apart, and the slick glide of his tongue against mine silenced her completely.

Before getting his pants undone, Deimos yanked mine past my hips. In his rush, I tipped back onto the table, giving him the chance to peel my pants off my legs.

Deimos dropped to one knee, and I leaned back, bracing my elbows on the wood, frozen as his hand curled around my ankle. His mesmerizing eyes raked up the length of my bare leg. Restless, insatiable, he pressed his hot lips to the inside of my leg. My breath caught in my throat, and my heart raced, thumping faster at the wicked sensation.

A yelp breached my lips when he bit the inside of my thigh. He followed the sting from his teeth with a sensual lick over the red mark. His hands trembled with restraint as they gradually progressed along my legs to my hips.

“If you’re going to raise your voice, I hope it’s always those sweet sounds.” He pressed another kiss higher, nearing the apex of my thighs. “Hearing you gasp, completely at my mercy, is gratifying.”

He'd already devoured me today, but that didn't seem like it would prevent him from doing so again. His personal drive to taste me, to pleasure me, astounded me past my wits.

"Is this your attempt at convincing me to stay?" I asked, shivering through the sublime feeling of his tongue snaking higher.

"No," Deimos rumbled back. He rolled to his feet again and stood between my thighs. His arms encircled my body before sweeping me off the table.

The attic spun around me as we fell. My back crashed into the solid hardwood flooring, knocking a grunt from my chest. Deimos's heavy frame landed on top of me, caging me to the floor.

In a greedy flurry, he pawed off the rest of my clothing. I clawed away his clothes, exposing his lightly bronzed skin and rippling abdominal muscles.

Deimos settled himself between my thighs, and his heated body captivated my attention. "Nothing I say can convince you to stay here. But perhaps you'll allow me to accompany you and bring you back afterward."

The entrancing weight of his body and the erotic air between us seized my ability to think. My legs widened to accommodate his bulk, and his erect cock nudged my sex.

Brilliant sparks shuddered through me, and I nearly caved to his demand right then.

"And why would I do that?"

It would be dangerous, but I wouldn't be alone.

"Because you know we need you here." His face dropped to the side of my neck where he whispered huskily, "And this will ensure that your body remembers me—needs me. No matter where you go or how far you get, you'll never forget my name."

One sure rock of his hips and Deimos filled me, sinking deeply into my dripping cunt. My walls quivered around his cock, pulling him further. Burning and icy magic skittered over my skin in tandem with the friction between our bodies.

"Deimos!" I vented his name when my head fell back.

"That's right, darling. Scream my name and never forget I'm the one who made your delicious body quiver this way." Caught between him and the floor, I couldn't escape. Not from the thrusting

of his hips, driving me into oblivion, or the unholy flames in his silver eyes.

By the gods, I'd never forget Deimos. No one had ever stoked this passion inside of me the way he did. Nothing compared to our shared blend of violent physical craving and intoxicating hunger.

He nibbled on a tender spot of flesh beneath my ear. I shivered, locking my legs around his waist, forcing him to pound harder and deeper. At this angle, he had to brace his forearms on the table while his mouth traveled lower.

Deimos's hot mouth peppered open-mouthed kisses and gentle bites down the side of my neck and along my collarbone. He wound his way down my chest, digging his fingers into my hips.

When he arrived at my breasts, his mouth swooped in as he swirled the tip of his tongue over my erect nipples. More noises of bliss leapt from my lips as he teased one sensitive peak, then the next.

He startled me when he hooked an arm under my waist and surged backward. I straddled his lap as he sat back on his knees, holding me to his chest with one arm around my ribs and the other on my hip.

In that position, I rocked against his gyrating hips, panting at the delicious glide of his cock slipping into me repeatedly. Each stroke tightened the coil in my core.

I folded my arms behind his neck, binding him close to my fevered body. One of his hands smoothed over my ass at the same moment that I snuck a hand into his soft, wavy locks.

I claimed his mouth, at a loss for anything else I could have done as kissing him pervaded my thoughts. My tongue flicked between his lips, probing for entry until he met me halfway. We shared urgent moans and careless kisses, swapping saliva as our tongues tangled.

He grabbed my ass, spreading me further apart. The noise of our wet, slapping bodies grew louder—as did my stuttered moans.

My hand in his hair slipped, dropping to his shoulder. One of the razor-sharp points of my nails scratched the side of his neck. A grunt of surprise slipped from his mouth into mine.

Deimos toppled to the floor, taking me with him. He fell on his back, digging his fingers into my ribs, anchoring my body atop his.

My breasts squished to his chest when I lowered myself onto his throbbing, magnificent cock again.

Those molten eyes darted between our bodies, and a lewd darkness glinted in his gaze, watching my dripping pussy swallow his dick with each rise and fall of my hips.

“Nevar,” Deimos rasped. The erotic sound of my name on his lips cleared enough of the haze in my mind to meet his stare. When our eyes locked, he cupped my cheek. “Agree to my company on your journey.”

His hips slowed, and I whined, upset at the loss of my approaching release.

“Nevar, darling,” he growled, in a clear warning. “Don’t refuse my request.”

My movement stuttered, and I shook my head. “No, it’s... it’s too dangerous.”

Fuck, I couldn’t focus with him inside of me.

Deimos rolled our entwined bodies, careful not to withdraw from my pussy as he did so. My head arched back as he slammed into me at an angle deep enough to rearrange my insides.

The rumble through his chest alerted me to the threat in the air. A charge of his hidden, dormant power washed over me.

He halted, buried forcefully against my womb. A strangled gasp lodged in my throat when his hand circled my neck. He twisted the other hand in my hair, forcing me to meet the glaring irritation in his stormy eyes.

“You will agree, or I’ll keep you on edge until you have no choice but to say yes.” Deimos stressed his point by ramming into me, wrenching a scream from my lungs. He withdrew halfway, frozen and leaving me squirming for more.

“Deimos—” I mewled his name before he cut me off.

“I’m going with you, or you don’t come.” As outrageous as his demand seemed, it worked on me. The ultimatum infuriated me, but not more than his edging torture did.

“You’re a menace!” I spat in return.

A devilish grin kicked up his lips, accentuated by that gorgeous dimple. He knew he won me over, and I wanted to hate him for it.

“Yes! You may—*fuck!*”

The instant that I caved to his cruel torment, his cock drove me over the precipice. The cord of tension in my core imploded within me. An amazed moan echoed from me as my body quaked with a staggering orgasm.

A victorious smile lit up Deimos's face. Heavy grunts breached his lips as he joined me in glowing satisfaction. He only stopped thrusting into me, fucking his cum deeper, when my limbs stopped sporadically shivering.

My eyes closed, and my head dropped as I absorbed the glowing aftermath.

Rolling off me, Deimos chuckled to himself. I sensed his eyes on my face, watching me as I regulated my breathing.

Peeking through one eye, I caught him biting his lip, ogling my naked body. He seemed perfectly content to languish and enjoy his view.

"You're a villain. Did you know that?" I complained.

"I suppose I am to some." The audacity of his smile sparked my annoyance but made my heart flutter. "I'll secure us some horses for our journey."

I shot upright. "Horses? Whatever for?"

"Far outside of the city, deep within the mountains. There's someplace I think you should see. If it'll help, I can't say. But my intuition tells me that's where we need to go while the moon is full. Is that acceptable?" He dropped the grin, showing me his sincerity.

My chest heaved with my exhale. "Are there people there?"

"No, there are not." He pushed off the floor, sitting up to my eye level. "Completely abandoned. It would be the two of us alone, and I assure you I can handle whatever comes next, darling."

Deimos believed he could handle whatever came next for me. After seeing his prowess battling against the overgrown lesser demon, part of my resolve caved to his confidence.

"Indeed," I yielded, rolling my eyes. "Monsters shall be revealed soon, like it or not."

Though I referred to my personal inner monster tied to Hestra, an unnerving gleam settled in the dark pits of Deimos's eyes before he looked away.

Sixteen



Through the front door, I listened to the light drizzle of the fading storm pattering on the stone walkway. I lingered in the doorway, borderline regretting agreeing to demands while in the throes of passion.

It wasn't too late for me to walk through the door on my own.

Voices drifted from the lounge where Deimos was saying his goodbyes, and my ears perked up.

"So, you'll be coming back soon?" Bellefy asked.

"No more than three days. You and Raaz will have to monitor the city and listen for news of further strange events in our absence." Deimos gathered his friends to explain the turn of events almost as soon as I'd agreed.

I strained to hear Bellefy's whispered question. "You sure you should be the one going with her?"

"Well, why wouldn't I?" Deimos chuckled back. He hadn't stopped grinning since we left the attic, and I heard it in his tone now.

Bellefy scoffed, "She looks at you like she wants to eat your beating heart."

"Oh, she does," Deimos agreed in a salacious purr. "And I'm sure one day she will."

A moment of stunned silence followed his statement. My heart leapt into my throat, choking me with a feeling I didn't recognize.

As swift as shadows, I appeared in the doorway, and three sets of eyes whipped up to me. "Are you ready to go?"

Deimos wore a black cloak and had a pack full of supplies slung over one shoulder. He clasped a hand on Raaz's shoulder in a final farewell gesture before nodding to Bellefy. "At this rate, it'll be

dawn by the time we reach the edge of the city. So, we better be moving.”

Knowing I’d see Bellefy and Raaz again eased the ache of leaving them behind. A bond had snapped into place in the short time since we’d met. Not quite friendship, but a connection that came from facing death and surviving together.

“Good luck on your mysterious journey!” Raaz called out.

“Goodbye,” Bellefy tossed out.

Deimos’s lip twitched when he angled away from them. He called back over his shoulder, “Goodbye for now.”

The moment Deimos opened the front door, I bolted through it, eager for the frigid bite of air after a heavy storm. Mist hung like a shroud over the darkened streets. I pulled up my hood against the leftover moisture descending from the black sky.

Our footsteps echoed on the cobblestones, and under the cover of night, we seamlessly blended into the shadows. Without trying to be stealthy, my presence always encouraged the darkness to reach for me.

Since Deimos knew the city better than I did, I allowed him to lead the way. The main street of the city paved a clear path outside of Bellmead. Though we still had so much to talk about, I couldn’t find the words to break the content quiet as we walked.

While we were barely more than strangers to one another, something about Deimos soothed the chaos constantly on the verge of erupting under my skin. Even when he was the cause, his touch and voice settled my blood.

Perhaps it was only his hidden darkness calling out to mine, but Deimos eased the lasting wound from the isolation I’d suffered.

Our shared physical connection heightened his allure, but those thoughts were a luxury I couldn’t afford. The incoming night would bring a long-forgotten horror of the world to life, and a demonic conspiracy awaited our return.

Regardless of the danger, I was glad to have his company.

The first rays of morning light cleaved through the dispersing storm clouds when we reached the edge of Bellmead. Paved streets became well-worn dirt paths muddied from the night of rain. With the city behind us, Deimos and I faced sprawling farmland as we journeyed onward.

Dawn brushed the sky with streaks of bronze, yellow, and orange through the morning haze. Birds trilled their early calls as they flit overhead. Fields of wheat and corn glittered with dew, swaying in the breeze.

Deimos broke the silence first. "If we'd left at sunrise, we might've gotten a horse in the city. For now, we'll have to borrow a horse from a farm if one is available."

"The faster we get away from the city, the better," I huffed.

Deimos didn't miss the sound. "What's troubling you, darling?"

"What isn't?" I dropped my head back, soaking in the bare morning light as I trudged alongside him.

"Monsters and mayhem abound in the human city, yet here we are going on your strange adventure." He nudged his shoulder into mine. "Before you showed up, my only concern was finding the creatures killing in the night. When you arrived, I almost thought you were the beast I hunted."

A laugh burst past my lips. "I very well might be."

His brow kicked up, amused yet. "You can't entirely blame me, darling. I felt your power the moment you entered the tavern. And I saw what you did to those men in the alley."

My laughter stopped. "Indeed."

"But you did that to save a life. You weren't a monster killing innocents, you were a hero," he continued insistently.

"No, I'm not," I replied flatly. He'd find out about the burden I carried soon enough.

The wind carried the scent of the recent rain and the growing things surrounding us. I looked over fields of crops and small dispersed farmhouses while the overpowering aroma of the sea and the city faded away.

A booming voice in a nearby field distracted me from the shaft of buttery sunlight breaching the clouds. Glancing to the right, I found a burly man deep in a field of wheat hollering and waving at a trio of children.

"They have a stable. Perhaps they have a horse we can borrow for a few nights." Deimos gestured at a structure coming into view behind the small farmhouse.

"A little gold can go far." And I didn't mind giving it away.

“Excuse me, sir!” Deimos cupped a hand near his mouth to shout at the man in the wheat.

When the farmer noticed, his entire body swiveled around. Deimos took the man’s kindly wave as an invitation and trod in that direction.

I double checked my hood covering my ears before following.

“Coming from the city, are you?” The farmer questioned Deimos.

As they spoke, I studied the man. Hours and years of working under a blistering sun stained his skin red. The crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes and the lines on his forehead showed a kind man hardened by years of rough work.

“I am, yes.” Deimos quietly cleared his throat before passively gesturing at me. “My companion and I are going hunting for a few days out in the forest. However, we’ve no horses. I’d hoped you might have one we can borrow for the journey.”

“Aye, a horse you need.” The farmer stroked his fingers over his shaggy black and white beard. He sucked his teeth before peering over his shoulder at the stable.

“I can pay, of course, to compensate for the time,” Deimos assured.

The man tilted his head back toward us and clear remorse rose in his eyes. “Well, I hate to say it, son, but my horse got injured. Otherwise, I wouldn’t mind lending him for a short while. We aren’t sure the old boy will work the fields again.”

“Ah, that’s alright then. I thank you for your time.”

“May I see the horse?” I interrupted Deimos. Both men turned to look at me.

The farmer scratched the thinning hair on his forehead, eyes widened with a hint of surprise. “Whatever for?”

“I’d like to examine the horse for you. Perhaps I can help the injury,” I offered.

The man’s eyes squinted as he observed me. After all, who could heal a badly injured horse in this part of the world?

I didn’t blame his skepticism.

“You’d be doing us a favor by letting the lady look at the horse. I’ve seen her do things beyond your wildest imagination, sir.” I

imagined the natural charisma Deimos exuded got him anything he wanted.

It worked on me.

He sighed, shrugging in agreement. “What could it hurt?” He turned toward the farmhouse and the giggling group of children. “I’m Bronn, and those runts over there are mine. Pay them no mind.”

Deimos and I followed Bronn out of the wheat field, watching the three rowdy children wrestling in the dirt. One of them stood apart from the rest, vaguely familiar, though I couldn’t explain why.

Chickens ran underfoot and goats bleated in the distant field. A woman with a bonnet on her head poked her head out the back door when we came into view of her kitchen window. Unbothered by our appearance, the door slammed shut as she returned inside.

Bronn heaved open the door to the stable. Morning light filtered in through the cracks in the wood, illuminating the lone horse in the back corner.

A beautiful gray Percheron draft horse stood alone in the stable. Easily nineteen hands tall, well-muscled, with braids in its mane. Though the way the creature kept its back leg perched off the ground that held my attention.

“What happened to him?” Without a second thought, I pushed through Bronn and Deimos to get nearer to the magnificent creature.

“Stepped in a hole while working the field a few days ago. Hasn’t walked much on that back leg since.” Bronn explained as he trailed after me.

Deimos crossed his arms over his chest and leaned on a post, perfectly content to watch.

“What’s his name?” I asked, reaching my hand out. The horse watched my hand, chuffing for attention. My hand landed on his nose before gliding up to scratch between his ears.

“Attitude.” Bronn’s swift answer made me snort.

When I looked over my shoulder at the farmer, he had his thumbs hitched in his belt loop, grinning at my reaction.

“That’s a good name for a horse,” I said, rubbing my hands over the beast’s flank. “I had a horse when I was a little girl that looked similar. Perhaps a tad darker.”

“Why am I not surprised you had a horse, darling? How many did you have?” Deimos implored, eager to snatch up more information about me.

“One. A large, dark horse named Howl. Abaddon, my father’s horse, sired him.” Memories of the massive beast that ran faster than shadows sprang to mind, and a melancholy mood chased them.

“Why am I not surprised you rode a war horse in your youth?” Deimos scoffed incredulously. The sound brought a half smile to my lips.

Instead of answering Deimos, I ran my hands over the horse’s flank, down to the back leg. Dropping to my knee, I summoned the power of sun magic in my blood.

“Yes, I can fix this.” As my hands lit up, sending healing magic into Attitude’s injured leg, I recalled how my mother would sing when healing my scrapes as a child. She didn’t need to, but it made my sister and I feel better when she did.

Bronn gasped, bracing a hand on his chest. “How are you doing that?”

“A bit of magic, my friend.” Deimos carefully patted the man on the shoulder.

After a deep breath, I stood up from the ground. Watching the horse put his weight on his back leg and nicker in excitement thrilled me.

“Gods be good. I didn’t know anyone could still do magic.” Pulling away from Deimos, Bronn dropped into the dry hay at my side. His meaty hands skimmed over the horse’s leg carefully.

Abruptly, Bronn grasped my shoulders. Barks of boisterous laughter exploded from his chest as he twirled me around. “You did it! Aye, ye fixed up my horse!”

As Bronn swept me around in circles, his infectious laughter gave rise to the corner of my lips.

The elated energy attracted attention, and seconds after Bronn’s outburst, three children barged into the stable. Their little legs carried them as swift as the wind, nearly barreling over Deimos in their rush to join their father.

“Papa, what’s all the noise?” the oldest boy asked. His wide, innocent eyes flicked from his father to the horse.

“These travelers healed Attitude. They’re going to take him into the woods for a few days to go hunting.” Bronn ruffled the mop of brown curls on his son’s head. “Free of charge, of course.”

“Oh no, please, I insist,” Deimos started, reaching for his coins.

“For what you’ve done, I can’t possibly accept. We thought we’d lose the horse for good. Borrowing him for a few days is nothing compared to the work we can continue when he’s back home,” Bronn insisted.

Bronn and Deimos went back and forth while I got stuck on the child, who stared at me from under his father’s arm. His eyes widened after a stretched moment when he finally recognized me.

He was the boy I’d helped my first night in Bellmead.

However, when he tugged the front of his father’s shirt, pointing at me to share his discovery, I shook my head. I placed a finger over my smiling lips, showing to remain silent.

No lasting bruises marred his skin, and for that I was glad. Seeing him here, healthy, and happy with his family felt like fate, giving me a chance to know that the boy made it home.

“We should be on the way, then.” Deimos pulled me back into the conversation as Bronn saddled the horse for our journey.

“Indeed.”

Peeking at the young boy again, I leaned down. His body tensed, eyes flaring as my finger curved over the shell of his ear.

Bronn escorted the horse from the stable, followed by two shrieking boys. Deimos lingered behind, watching as I materialized a gold coin from the child’s ear.

“How did you do that?” the boy exclaimed, trembling with delight.

“Magic,” I giggled, then pressed the coin into his palm.

He remained stock still, gaping at the gold resting in his hand as if it might do something else magical. I tore myself away from the wholesome sight, trailing after Deimos and Bronn.

It hadn’t occurred to me I’d be stuck in the saddle with Deimos until he leapt up behind me. When his chest pressed into my backside, I stopped breathing, yet I didn’t mind his warmth sweeping down my spine.

Bronn and his family waved us off. Despite what I'd face tonight, seeing the boy again and meeting his family lifted my spirit.

Even the horse sensed the elated mood, taking off into a gallop down the path. His speed and the gentle wind blew down my hood, and long strands of my hair lifted around my face.

"Gods, you never cease to amaze me." Deimos tightened an arm around my waist, whispering so close to my ear that his heat elicited a shiver in my body.

The sun rose over the nearing forest, and I dropped my head back onto his shoulder, smiling up at the golden light spreading in the sky. A peculiar enthusiasm flooded through me, and as if my sanity depended on it, I held tight to that feeling.

Seventeen



The day brightened around us while traveling through the farmlands. Time passed and the mountain range expanded before my eyes. This far from the city, the gusty wind bowled over the rolling fields. Gusts silenced everything in the world, leaving nothing more than the song of the breeze.

I said nothing in those peaceful hours, and neither did Deimos. We merely appreciated one another's company on the back of the trotting Percheron.

The rocking motion made it impossible to ignore the warmth pressed into my backside, or the powerful arms wrapped around my waist. Yet, no words broke up the comfortable tension.

As the sun passed over the sky, trees sprung up from the ground, clusters increasing as we arrived at the edge of the woods. Thicker trees, branches heavy with leaves, dripped from the recent rain. Eventually, the branches overhead converged on the road. Less sunlight filtered into the forest the deeper we went.

Leftover droplets of rain sparkled like diamonds on the greenery. Buttery streams of sunlight penetrated breaks in the forest canopy. Crows cawed in annoyance at one another while doves cooed. Chipmunks chattered, scampering from branch to branch, watching warily as we passed. The cover of trees silenced the wind.

Deimos's voice, close to my ear, startled me out of my daydreaming. My mind dropped back into my body, flushed wholly against his in the saddle. A coil of warmth flushed through me from his deep, raspy tone.

"That little boy at the farm," he started, "you seemed to know him."

"Yes. He was the child in the alley those thugs attempted to rob," I replied.

“Ah, I see. I’m sure he’ll never forget you for what you did for him and his family.”

The quiet returned when I didn’t answer. Without looking at him, I sensed Deimos was about to speak again. He seemed in the mood to talk after hours of riding in silence.

“Do you like children?” he blurted out.

My face twisted, utterly confused by the direction of the conversation.

“I do. Children are our future.” My answer came out dismissively. While I loved the innocence of childhood and the joy of little ones, I didn’t persist in thinking about them regarding my personal life.

“I feel I should let you know I drink a tea that renders me unable to have them.” Hearing his statement made my eyes flare with surprise.

That wasn’t what I thought he’d say, and this topic was the furthest from my mind. I became increasingly aware of his groin pressed against my ass.

Recent memories of our indecent encounters flashed like explosions in my mind’s eye.

“That’s alright. I’m barren, anyway.” If we continued our current path, he deserved to know.

Abruptly, his arms tightened around my waist. His chest pressed so tight against my back that his heart thumped through me. “I’m sorry to hear that. I’m not sure what to say now.”

He didn’t need to say anything. His embrace was distracting enough.

“A body that’s died can’t bring new life into the world. That’s simply the way it is.” Angling my head around, I peered at him from the corner of my eye. “It doesn’t bother me.”

“You say the strangest things sometimes. *A body that’s died*. What does that even mean, Nevar?” The tickle of his breath on my ear prompted a shiver down my spine.

“I suppose I should prepare you for the full moon tonight by telling you what happened. Though I’m not sure how much you’ll believe.” Twisting back to the front, I kept my eyes on the worn path through the forest.

“Darling, we’ve fought an overgrown demon from the lowest level of the Nine Hells in human sewage. I’ve seen you do things with magic I’ve never dreamed of. There’s nothing you can tell me I wouldn’t believe,” Deimos urged, his tone supportive and encouraging.

He had a point that we’d already seen the unthinkable together. This man had his own secrets and magic, after all. Would my story be so unbelievable to a man like him?

“Alright, I’ll tell you the truth, then. The entire story of what happened to me on Ellrend, and what will happen tonight.” Yet I held my tongue, biting it between my teeth.

The voice in the back of my head writhed, fighting against the cage of my skull in protest.

When a warm hand caressed my hip, I released a breath I didn’t notice I held. That simple soothing motion evoked a serene calm within me in the next second.

“Go on, darling. I’m listening.” His voice motivated me to continue.

“Five years ago, I followed my visions to Ellrend, the lost island of witches. Ever since the goddess Hestra presumably died in battle with Aristan, most magic was assumed lost. While elves and a few other races kept vestiges of magic, it was nothing compared to what we lost when the gods vanished. Somehow, the witches never forfeited that power. The witches could do so much more, and they felt my potential.”

Branches overhead rustled as crows flung themselves into the air, shrieking and cawing as our passage disturbed them. My heart leapt into my throat, racing from the sudden disruption.

Deimos waited patiently with his fingers grasping my side. His gentle contact brought my heart rate down.

“I spent years learning ancient magic with them. Over time, they trusted me with their deepest secrets. In one of my last years with them, they allowed me to not only witness, but partake in the coming-of-age ceremony with their daughters.” My voice strayed as a river of blood filled my vision, distorting my trail of thought.

“Nevar?” he softly prompted, carefully tugging me out of the memory.

“The other night when I said the gods were giants, I meant it. Hestra’s heart was massive. For generations, the witches had possession of her heart. Each slow-moving pump of her stone heart filled a river with gods’ blood. A river where they bathed to keep their connection to magic strong.” Closing my eyes, goosebumps pricked my skin as a shudder crept down my body. “I drowned in that river, Deimos.”

“A body that’s died,” he repeated, half stunned. His arm snuck further around my waist, hugging me earnestly now as his face nuzzled into my hair. “I’m sorry that happened to you, darling. I’m glad you made it out of there.”

“No,” I disagreed, void of emotion. “No, I should have stayed dead. My body should have decomposed at the bottom of that river. It’s not worth it.”

Deimos yanked the reins of the draft horse, trotting over the path. Attitude nickered, pawing at the dirt beneath his hooves at the sudden stop. Then two firm hands grabbed my arms, twisting me around almost uncomfortably in the saddle.

Forced face to face with the depths of his molten eyes, holding an unknown fire that I couldn’t escape. His brows furrowed with his glare and his gaze blazed with unrivaled anger. He pursed his lips into a twisted line, swallowing down his outrage.

“I never want to hear you talking like that again. Don’t say it in my presence. Don’t even think about it. You are alive, as you should be,” he gritted out through a clenched jaw.

“You haven’t even heard the worst of it, so you’ve no right to demand that of me!” Shrugging forcefully out of his grip, I swung my leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground.

My blood simmered with fury, mirroring his in that moment of passion. I had to take several steps away from the horse to clear the tumultuous ache building in my head.

As I whirled around, Deimos’s boots thumped on the ground behind me. He tossed down the reins before surging forward. His long legs brought him in front of me in one swift stride.

“What could be so terrible that you’d prefer to be dead in the bottom of a river?” he challenged, seething with untold emotion.

“The goddess wasn’t fully dead, Deimos. Hestra’s spirit remained in her beating heart. It’s how her blood continued to spill in that river and the witches had access to the old magic.” My voice

turned into a beastly snarl as I snapped at him. “When I died in that river, Hestra stole into my body. I am a vessel for her now. My life is a constant struggle against her will.”

Deimos stepped back as the revelation slapped him across the face. His jaw slackened, dumbfounded as he turned this information over in his head. His chest didn’t rise as he stopped breathing.

“Hestra is the Goddess of Magic, Lady of the Moon, and the Mother of Night. And what so many don’t know, legends lost to time, is that the gods had other forms that they changed into. They were both gods and monsters.” Shoulders dropping, I fought the urge to crumble into myself.

Taking a stuttered breath, I forced myself to continue. “When the moon is full, I cannot fight against the change. She tells me in a sickly-sweet voice that my chaos called us together. It’s always a struggle, but the power of the moon makes it impossible to deny her. And she is a savage god. Brutal and hungry.”

The hot sensation of a tear spilling over my cheek struck me into silence. On its own, my hand rose to my face, swiping at the tear. I looked at the droplet on my fingertip, too lost in my turmoil to fathom what I held.

“That night in the tunnels,” his voice made my head jerk up, “the lesser demon divulged we were in the presence of a god. At first, I thought it was the unhinged rambling of a deranged beast. But it was true.”

“It was. It is.” Crossing my arms, I held myself to contain the rising swell of primordial power rearing up within my chest.

“You’re mine now, Nevar. You’re destined to be with me. From the moment the Rift split the earth to the moment that you were born until your bones rest in the earth’s embrace. You are mine. Come to me, daughter of the sun and shadows. You must come to me, Nevar Solen-Mor’gen. Come and be mine.”

The unreadable stare from his eyes unsettled me.

Deimos gazed upon me as though it were his first time seeing me. But this time, he well and truly saw me.

“You are mine. You are mine. She repeats day and night like I could ever forget. Hestra’s voice is ever-present in my head. Screaming. Shrieking.” My nails dug into my arms. “So, now you know why I had to leave. Tonight, I will transform into Hestra’s monster.”

The ground might have dropped away under my feet, yet I wouldn't have gone anywhere. Deimos moved as swiftly as the wind. In one rushed step, he crushed me against his chest. A soft grunt pushed past my lips as he enclosed me in his arms.

"You are not a monster. You are more than a vessel for a god. Whatever happened before, whatever comes tonight, we shall face it together. No matter what, I will not leave your side." Deimos cradled my face with gentle hands. The determination in his eyes weakened my knees. He brushed stray wisps of snow-white hair away from my face. "I promised to help you through this, and I'm not going back on my word."

"She wants to kill you," I warned. "Hestra says she can see through you. She sees what you really are. She will try to kill you. You must take me to this place in the mountains and leave me there until I am myself again."

"Kill me, my malicious goddess, and still, I will worship you. Kill me if you must, but know that I will haunt you always." The kiss he pressed to my lips unraveled my devastated heart.

His tender intimacy breached the havoc in my soul, settling it like the calm on the sea after a storm.

"How do you disarm me so thoroughly?" I whispered, breathless against his heated lips.

"You could never be so simply disarmed, darling. Even now, in my arms, I am at *your* mercy." Deimos leaned his forehead into mine, eyes closed as he held me. "This place in the mountains is in an abandoned temple for the gods. I think it's exactly what you need."

"Oh, how fitting," I chortled. "The cruel coincidence of fate isn't lost on me."

"Try not to concern yourself with what comes tonight. I'll be there with you the entire time, doing everything I can to aid you through this change." His arms encircled my head as he held me to his chest, and his pounding heart echoed in my ear. "Please, no more talk of your death. I cannot stand to mourn you now that I know you."

"I'll agree with that." I inhaled his fire and spice scent in the brief moments we remained entangled.

Deimos knew the truth, and not only did he believe me, but he intended to stick with me through the misery of tonight. He made

fighting against the blooming feelings in my chest a challenge.

“Come, darling. Let me help you back on the horse and we’ll be on our way. We must get you sequestered in the temple before the sun goes down.” Deimos nudged my lower back toward the horse while glancing between the tree branches. “We’ll be losing daylight soon enough.”

“I can’t express what it means to me to have you with me for this, Deimos. At first, I was skeptical about you. Then when you insisted on accompanying me, I worried you were insane. Now you know the truth, and I see you are.”

“Maybe I am,” he shrugged out, eyes twinkling with mischief.

I couldn’t help it when I laughed. It felt good to do so.

“Still, I am glad to have you with me. I don’t think it could have been anyone else.” Angling back, I placed my hand on his cheek. He instantly pressed his face into my palm.

“Who better to tame a goddess than me?” His roguish smirk lifted from the corner of his mouth as he wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

I opened my mouth to reply, perhaps to say something clever or scintillating. Instead, all the hairs on the back of my neck rose on end and my senses went on high alert.

Deimos froze with his hand on my wrist. Those silver eyes met mine as we shared a silent awareness of an incoming hostility.

I took a single breath, and Deimos dropped my hand.

In the nearby underbrush, a branch snapped. The splintering wood echoed in the eerily silent forest around us.

We were no longer alone.

Eighteen



“Well, well, well. What do we have here?” a harsh bass voice drawled from within the thicket of trees to the right of the road.

Branches swayed as a stocky barrel-chested man breached the greenery. Bits of grass and leaves clung to his messy black mohawk and long tangled beard. Charcoal paint smudged around his eyes enhanced the nasty glare in his assessing gaze.

“Looks like we’ve crossed paths with some lost travelers, Wicket. Poor things don’t know what lies in these woods, I think.” A petite woman in dirty leather slunk out of the trees on the left side of the road, closing in on us with her companion. Her shaved head showed off the poorly stitched scars curling over her scalp and down her scrawny neck, disappearing under her dirt-stained collar.

I closed my fist, causing the shadows on the uneven forest floor to gather toward me. The two bandits didn’t notice the writhing black under their feet with their entire focus on me and Deimos. This section of the woods darkened with each second that they talked.

“They’ve a horse. We could use one of those.” Shadows whispered to me of the third bandit before he emerged. A tall, leggy man with long shaggy blond hair pushed through the underbrush to join the woman. He didn’t bother hiding the dagger clutched in his fist.

Feeling his stare, I side-eyed Deimos. We shared a glance, speaking without words in silent regard. A flicker of silver told me he caught the shifting shadows, and he nodded his head a fraction. Then his attention turned back to the bandits as a kindly smile split his lips.

“Hello friends,” Deimos spread his arms wide while taking a step forward. “Lovely day for a hunt, isn’t it?”

Deimos knew that word provoked a shiver of delight under my skin.

Hunt.

I tasted the building chaos and the darkness swelling higher. My heart jumped in my chest, ready for the worst outcome.

“We’re no friends to you, pretty boy,” the blond man spat. He pointed his dagger at Deimos while closing the distance. That man met the eyes of the shorter fellow before uttering his demand. “We’ll be taking your horse and all of your valuables.”

Deimos stopped inches from the outstretched dagger. He sucked his teeth, crossing his arms. While stroking his chin in thought, Deimos said, “I don’t think that I will. You see, the horse is on loan. It’s not mine to give away.”

During his interaction, I willed the shadows higher. Snakes of inky darkness rose from the ground, slithering around the bandit’s ankles. I tightened my fist, and the shadows tethered them to the ground.

The next one to move would be the first to realize it.

“You hear that, Reed? The horse is on loan. So, they can’t give it to us.” The woman snickered at the blond man. Her skeletal frame shifted as she reached for the pocketknife dangling from her hip.

“I heard that, Veera.” The blond-haired man, Reed, flipped his dagger in his palm. Putting on a show of intimidation. “Too bad for them, we didn’t ask. You’re outnumbered.”

“And you’re outmatched,” I growled back, baring my teeth.

Reed’s eyes widened a fraction as he assessed my white hair and the points of my ears sticking out.

Unaware of the exchange, Wicket, the shorter, rotund man, lifted his leg as he snarled at me and Deimos. “We are taking that horse. Now you can give it to us and keep your lives or try to stop us and bleed.”

His feet stayed rooted to the ground with my shadows. The unstoppable momentum of his body carried him forward, careening through the air.

A guttural groan vented out of his mouth when his hefty weight slammed into the dirt. Pitch black branches of shadow flared up from the ground, curling around Wicket and sealing to his skin.

I twisted my fist sideways, and the darkness squashed him into the dirt path. “If you want blood, you can have it.”

The two standing bandits jerked their heads from the man being compressed by twisting darkness to me. The sour stench of fear permeated the sparking tension.

Lifting my hand, I splayed my fingers, lifting the shadows higher. In the blink of an eye, I dropped my hand. The shadow spider-webbing around Wicket constricted his body further.

“Help me!” he screamed as black squirming lines cut into his exposed flesh. Binds increased second by second until his flesh rendered and droplets of red wept from the gashes.

“It’s her. A bleeding elf.” Reed jabbed in my direction with the dagger. “She’s doing this. Get her!”

Before he could follow through on his attempt to move, Veera lunged. Poised like a cat ready to pounce on a mouse. Her close-set eyes latched onto me as her target, then she dove.

And found her feet never left the ground. Darkness inched higher up her legs as she collapsed. Her body thumped on the ground, followed by a pained grunt from the force of suddenly landing in the uneven dirt.

“Burn.” It wasn’t my voice when the word breached my lips.

Inky flames engulfed Veera’s body. The surge of fire exploded, covering her screams. She writhed on the path, clawing at the dark fire, licking at her flesh as she gradually turned to ash.

Wicket’s dying breath slipped into the wind, vanishing as though he’d never existed at all. All the while Veera burned and screamed, and in the back of my mind Hestra moaned with delight at the chaos. She drank in the death and destruction of others.

“She’s killing them!” Reed attempted to move, reaching for his companions, but he crumbled to his knees because of the shadows tugging him down. The smug scrutiny in his eyes fell away to horror as he cried out, pleading with tears brimming in his eyes. “Stop her, please!”

“I couldn’t, even if I wanted to.” Gravel and debris crunched under Deimos’s boots. He didn’t spare a glance for Wicket and Veera perishing under my influence. Instead, he paused in front of Reed, who dug his nails into the dirt as though he could crawl away from my power.

Deimos shot his hand out, snatching up the line of Reed’s hair. “Look at her.” Crouching low, bracing his elbows on his knees, he

mockingly chuckled at Reed sniveling in the middle of the path. He forced the man to look away from his dying companions. “I said look at her! See her and know that this is the true mercy of a god. Look at her and know that she has blessed you with a glorious death.”

“How many innocents in these woods have you accosted?” My voice rang out with an ethereal undertone that lifted it higher. “How many travelers did you threaten and kill? You’ve stolen their belongings and their lives. And for what? What did it bring you in the end?”

Deimos dropped the man’s head. Reed’s face bounced off the ground, breaking his nose in a spray of blood.

My shadows enveloped his body. Steam rose as I elevated the temperature with a twist of my wrist. The bandit bellowed at the top of his lungs as burning, inky blackness boiled his blood from within.

Pinpricks waved along my arm. A gasp wrenched from me at the sensation, and I jerked my sleeve up. Sharp, jagged scales rose from my skin, spreading up my arm toward my elbow.

“Shit.”

Another spirit within me contorted my body. The curling, uncontrollable power distorted my insides, spreading outward in a wave of emerging scales and feather tips.

I attempted to catch myself when my knees gave out.

Powerful arms caught me, swooping me up in an instant. The force of his sudden embrace knocked loose the entity trying to possess me.

Deimos steadied my feet while holding my face tight against his chest, where I allowed his scent, burning at first but soothing in the end like a shot of aged whisky, to settle my nerves.

“I’ve got you, darling. Don’t worry.” His thumbs on my back rubbed in circles, meant to settle the monster under my skin. While Hestra’s voice in my head raged against his presence, he lulled the incoming beast from emerging too soon.

Come nightfall, it would take over. But for now, I could breathe with his help.

“Thanks.” I meant to push him away, to step out of his arms. Instead, my fingers clutched the front of his shirt, holding him in place as if I needed him to stand.

Unable to peel myself away from Deimos, we stayed in place, merely listening to the black-flame dissolve what remained of the bandits. His hands continued stroking along my back while the subtle noises of wildlife returned to the surrounding woods.

Birds chirped at each other, and small critters rustled the leaves as they jumped from branch to branch. And my darkness receded from the path, leaving blackened ash that blew away with the slightest breeze.

Deimos broke the silence first. His low voice pulled me from the umbral haze clouding my thoughts. “You did a good thing here, Nevar. There’s no telling how many people those bandits hurt, or how many more they would have.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

Perhaps he saw my silence as regret for my actions. That wasn’t the case. My quiet mood stemmed from the encroaching release of Hestra’s monster tonight.

My bones already ached within my flesh, as if they didn’t fit inside of my frame.

“Let’s get back on our way. We’ve still got a lot of road to cover if we’re to make it to the temple by sundown.” Without asking, Deimos lifted me off my feet. A gasp lurched from my throat and my arms gripped his shoulders. He chuckled deep in his chest, and I enjoyed the feeling of it rumbling against my body.

Turning away from the spot of ash blowing away, Deimos strode back to the horse and lifted me into the saddle with ease.

As I grasped the pommel between my thighs, our gazes met. Those molten silver orbs influenced my heart, beating faster with the alluring tension between us.

The corner of his lips lifted into a brief smirk, and I swallowed hard at the sight.

Breaking the trance that he pulled me under, Deimos swiftly leapt up onto the saddle behind me. With one nudge of his boot, the horse set off again.

Attitude’s hooves trotted through whatever remained of Wicket, Reed, and Veera. The kicked-up dirt dispelled any traces of spilled blood or lingering shadows.

“Will we make it to the temple by midnight?” I asked, peering through the overhead branches at the decreasing light in the sky.

Weakened shafts of afternoon sunlight penetrated the waving leaves, casting undulating shadows as we passed.

“Certainly. As long as more ruffians or vagabonds don’t accost us.” His arm wrapped over my midsection, and my body tensed reflectively. “Are you alright?”

Turning my head to the side, I briefly met his assessing stare.

Deimos’s brows pinched as he looked over my profile. His lips curved down while reading my expression. “You’re not.”

This strange man saw into my eyes in a way no one else ever could. No one except my sister could truly see the thoughts hidden in my mind. It didn’t matter that I tried wearing a mask.

He saw right through me.

“No. The closer I get to losing myself in the transformation, the more uncomfortable I become within my body.” Lifting my hand, I showed him the scales, refusing to fade. “Magic comes at a price, and this is mine. It feels as though my bones aren’t where they’re supposed to be, and my skin becomes too tight. Like a malformed snake that needs to shed.”

His warm hand snatched mine from the air, and my breath caught in my throat. Something deep in his eyes held me in place as he entwined our fingers before curling his arm around my waist.

Even with sharp talons and jagged scales, Deimos held my hand. “You’ll get through this tonight, my darling viper. I promise.”

If I had the tears to cry at that moment, I would have wept for his sincerity striking through me.

What sort of man saw the evidence of a monster and the things I did without flinching away? How could Deimos look me in the eye after I enacted the grim benevolence of a god with—*adoration*?

Before shifting forward, I detected the shimmer in the air around Deimos, like distorted glass in a window, only showing me what I needed to see.

Indeed, what sort of man was he?

Nineteen



Deimos maintained a gallop for as long as the horse could sustain it. Eventually, we slowed as the path thinned, becoming wilder and less traveled the deeper into the woods we veered. The elevation increased as our journey took us into the mountain range and further away from the sea and human civilization.

My stomach became a twisted knot of anxiety as the time passed. Possibilities of what could go wrong flitted behind my eyes.

“You’re sure there aren’t any people living near the temple?” I asked.

“I am. You’ll know why when you see the mountain.” His chest pressed into my back as he sighed. “Humans are incredibly superstitious. And fairly so. They don’t have magic and they still believe the gods are floating about answering their prayers. They wouldn’t survive the monsters hiding in some parts of the world.”

His words made me swivel around in the saddle with one brow arched as I stared at him. Deimos leaned back a fraction but met my gaze head on.

“Sometimes you speak as though you aren’t one of them.” Thinking back to our night hunting the lesser demon, I added, “And I’ve seen you do magic.”

Deimos gnawed on the inside of his cheek, and the light in his eyes faded. He stared darkly out at the endless expanse of trees before us.

“I’m human enough.”

“A human who can do magic and fight a demon without flinching. A human that can see an elven princess, the vessel for a dead god’s soul, and still follow her into the unknown.” An accusatory undertone wove through my words.

As human as he appeared, I wouldn’t let go of the suspicion that he was something else.

“What does human enough mean?”

Deimos pursed his lips, features twisting dismally at my questions. His fists tightened on the horse’s reins, turning white against his golden skin. The surrounding air stiffened, making snakes of unease slither into my chest.

He usually smiled even at the worst times, and I didn’t enjoy the sense of a wall coming down between us.

“You can’t go quiet on me now, Deimos. You know my truth, and I doubt anything you’re hiding could be worse.” After everything I’d shared with him, it didn’t seem fair that he’d remain closed off. “Now that I think of it, you know more of me than I know of you. I’m not sure I know you at all.”

“You’re right,” he admitted, peering into my eyes for a second. “I won’t talk about myself if I can help it.”

“What are you hiding, Deimos?” I carefully pressed. A gentle wind lifted the ends of my hair and seconds passed as the horse’s heavy steps clopped over the rocky ground.

Deimos seemed to melt, silently agonizing over the thoughts weighing him down. His shoulders dropped when he relented. “I shall tell you more if we make it through tonight.”

“Why? So, you can die and get out of it?” I scoffed and spun forward in the saddle again.

A short laugh burst from his lips, chest vibrating as he ruefully shook his head. It forced me to stiffen my spine to get away from the feeling of his body shaking against my back.

“Are you so sure I’ll die if I stay with you tonight?” he asked lowly, shifting forward to follow me. His breath tickled the tip of my ear.

I was glad he couldn’t see the pink staining my cheeks.

“Hestra wants to kill you. Though I don’t know why. She won’t say.” I shrugged dismissively, pretending as if his death wouldn’t bother me.

“Will it impress you if I survive?” Deimos questioned, closer to my ear this time. His hard chest melded against me until his thumping heart pounded against my back, beating within my chest.

I closed my eyes and released a slow breath, suddenly aware of Deimos’s heated frame flush against me. In the tight saddle, there

was nowhere to escape him. I could no longer ignore the steady trotting of the horse bouncing us together.

“Why do you want to impress me?” I returned, voice too breathy for my liking.

“To impress a princess is one thing, but a goddess?” He clicked his teeth before continuing, “How many men can say they’ve done both?”

A shiver descended my spine as my stomach tightened.

No one could mistake his deep, suggestive tone on the second question. I noticed his thighs, thick and heavily corded with muscle, bracing me in the saddle. If I shifted my hips, I’d feel his groin pressed into my behind.

“Harboring the soul of one doesn’t make me a god, Deimos.” Unaware of my actions, I leaned back against him.

He picked up the intention of my body language. Releasing the reins with one hand, he skimmed his fingers lightly over the scales on my knuckles.

My jaw clenched, and my heart leapt. My sight latched onto his long, masculine fingers, carefully touching the jet-black ridges growing from my pale flesh.

“You are to me, Nevar. A malicious viper of a goddess, but a god all the same,” he insisted in a gruff voice. His cheek pressed to mine, and my breath hitched at the charged tension coiling around us.

Deimos traced his hand over my arm and up to my chest. His palm cupped my breast, and I stopped breathing.

My stomach dipped as a pulsing heat came to life between my thighs. He rolled his hips against my backside, not bothering to disguise his growing hardness. When Deimos rubbed his thumb over my nipple through the dark fabric, I bit my bottom lip to silence a whimper threatening to escape.

“You’re trying to distract me,” I accused, while my head fell back against his shoulder.

“I’m helping you relax,” he countered.

Deimos trailed his lips down until his lecherous smile pressed into the side of my throat. His teeth nipping at the sensitive place where my neck met my shoulder followed.

Back arching, I moaned at his torturous mouth as it explored my tender skin. His hand quickly slipped down the front of my top, pressing his warmed palm against my soft breast. He rolled my nipple with a finger until it peaked with the increasing stimulation.

“Deimos.” His name sounded like a plea, pitiful and wanting.

“Yes, darling?” He laved his tongue up my neck to my jaw. When he pulled the pointed tip of my ear between his teeth, an atrocious gasp lurched out of me. His grip on my breast tightened as he braced me in place with his arm.

“You will tell me everything about yourself if you survive,” I gave him a non-negotiable command.

Deimos pulled his hand from my shirt. I briefly glanced at him from the side, only to witness him sucking his middle finger into his mouth. Freezing, I watched him remove the digit from his full lips.

He met my stare, lips curving into a wicked grin as he shoved his hand into my top again. That wet, firm finger rolled over my pebbled nipple. My eyes clenched shut and my thighs tensed as I rocked my hips in the saddle.

“You can’t demand that of me like I’m one of your subjects back home,” he teased. His slick finger didn’t pause as he continued stroking my breast.

“You will,” I asserted.

“Alright,” he pulled his hand away, “fine. I’ll tell you every gruesome detail of my poor life. I will lay bare every nasty secret that makes me who I am for you, my darling.”

I snapped upright at the loss of his distracting hand. “After what I’ve told you, I think you’re being dramatic.”

“Maybe I am.” Deimos placed his hand on my stomach, causing my abdomen to flex under his splayed palm. That mischievous hand drifted lower as he spoke again. “Today and tonight aren’t about me. Can you forgive me if I don’t want to speak about my past while we have something greater awaiting us?”

“You could die tonight, and I’ll have never truly known you.” I turned enough to meet his roguish stare. “The mysterious man with silver eyes.”

Unexpectedly, Deimos grabbed the front laces of my pants. An undignified yelp slipped past my lips when he pulled the leather

upward. The seam of my pants pressed abruptly against my slit, rubbing me in a way I couldn't have prepared for.

Taking hold of the pommel, I doubled over. My legs attempted to close as if to stop him, but the saddle got in the way. He snuck his hand into my leather trousers, fingers massaging me through my underwear.

Wanton heat bolted through me, making my back arch away from him.

"And if I die tonight, I'll die having known you, having been inside of you. Gods, that's all I ever needed in life." His teeth scraped the side of my neck while he located my clit, rubbing it in delicious circles over the cotton material of my undergarments.

"Deimos," I lamented.

"Yes, darling?" he purred wickedly, breath caressing my neck.

Whatever beasts and secrets Deimos hid, he certainly had a way of distracting me. His skills with his hands deftly stole away any pressing thoughts on my mind as my entire being heated.

He was simultaneously everywhere around me except where I needed him most. My hips undulated with growing need against his hand.

"More. I need more." Holding onto the pommel saved my head from floating into the clouds.

"Oh, no, I can't do that." Deimos flicked his tongue over my jaw as he increased the pressure from his hand. "If I feel how wet you are, I'll need to be inside of you. And if I filled you right now, we wouldn't make it to the temple."

The distant sound of a tweeting bird and the horse's hooves trotting over the uneven road broke up the heavy, erotic silence that followed. We fell into a rhythm, my hips tilting and Deimos languorously massaging me with his fingers.

I was barely aware of my high-pitched breathy gasps as he sent me toward the precipice of release.

"You're incorrigible," I sharply inhaled as Deimos increased the pressure and speed of his hand.

"Tell me to stop, and I will. Though I believe you're enjoying yourself," he remarked.

Surrounded by his thickly, sculpted arms and bewildering body heat, I sank into the part of my mind that savored Deimos and his improper *distractions*.

“Shut up. I’m... I’m going to—”

“Oh, darling, are you going to come already?” Deimos sounded teasing, yet increasingly pleased with himself at the same time. He chuckled darkly, “Come on, then. Let me feel you shake.”

One of my hands flew from the pommel, gripping the flexing tendons of his wrist. He picked up the speed as I groaned. I relished the growing fever of surging pleasure.

A heavy warmth settled low in my belly, spreading throughout my core and into my limbs. My blood sang under my skin as he sent me reeling with the delicious sensations tingling throughout my nerves. Euphoric release flowed through me as a river of sweet heat caressed my insides.

“Yes. Fuck yes. I do so enjoy making you come. If only we had more time, I’d have you screaming through the night.” Deimos removed his hand from the front of my trousers.

My head flopped back onto his shoulder, and he lazily tightened the laces of my pants.

“I’ll certainly be screaming. Though you won’t have the pleasure of taking responsibility for them.” Picking my head up, I refocused my eyes on the world swaying around us.

After a steadying breath, my erratic heart gradually returned to normal.

“Not this time, no. But soon enough, I’ll have you again.” A wicked promise, yet one he meant to keep.

“So sure of yourself.” I shook my head, glad he couldn’t see the satisfied smile on my lips. “Though I still don’t know if you’ll survive me tonight.”

Twenty



The long-forgotten temple was further than I expected, but a greater distance was for the best. I couldn't remain near civilization where Hestra's monster would cause untold damage. The innocents of Bellmead didn't deserve her wrath.

While there were vermin in these lands, it didn't justify me willingly sticking around and allowing the goddess to overcome me and enact her acts of rage.

A goddess with an appetite greater than I could control would trample the wrong person who crossed her path, using me as the sword to execute her will. Even now, she whispered in my mind, her voice growing louder as the moon ascended in the darkening sky.

By the time the sun fell behind the horizon and the sky became a painting of stars in a midnight sea, her howling demands would be the only noise in my head. The Mother of Night would be reborn in a twisted manner, tearing me apart to free the only form she had left—a wicked, wild monster with a taste for blood and fire.

Like nails trailing over my skin, the magical touch of her presence reared to the surface of my body. My entire being buzzed with the lightning in my blood, rising higher as the light of the sun faded away into the distance.

My internal thoughts shrank within the recesses of my mind.

I breathed in the comfortable silence between me and Deimos. It took conscious effort to steady each breath. In and out, slow and shaking.

As my lungs expanded, I imagined myself pulling in the calm stillness of the surrounding forest. With every exhale, I envisioned pushing out the swelling darkness of another presence in my body that didn't belong there.

Breathing techniques my soldier father and warrior uncle taught me throughout my life would only assist me so far. A time

would come when the moon would rise to the center of the black sky, allowing the other soul I contained to escape the cage of my being.

But it helped for now.

Deep breath. In and out.

And again, in and out.

Deimos had helped me relax with his distraction. The lasting warmth cascaded through my blood, resisting the cold power in my bones. His perfectly sculpted frame at my back diverted my attention from continuously glancing at the black scales on my hand.

As at ease as either of us could be under the circumstances, we rode on, watching the greens and browns of the forest blur in our hurry.

Light broke through the thinning leaves, turning into an orange dusky haze.

Panic flared in my chest, yet still, I breathed.

In and out.

It was all I could do.

Lady of the Moon was a beautiful title for Hestra. It brought forth an idea of silver light and a gentle smile. I suppose, sometimes, that might be an apt description for the goddess.

She was not always rage incarnate, screaming obscenities in my head.

For centuries, her continuously beating stone heart pumped into a river. Worshiped and used by a dwindling race of witches clinging onto the old magic and their ancient way of life.

That was all she'd had to sustain her.

It occurred to me that falling in battle at the hands of one of her fellow gods might have fueled the flames of her lasting rage. Whatever strange, primordial magic the goddess held in her core kept her alive to simmer in darkness and vengeance.

Or perhaps that's who she was as the Mother of Night. As long as the sun set every day, some part of her would remain for all eternity.

Her death and the ensuing Rift also warped half the elves into the race of Thanatens my father descended from. Some pebble of

Hestra and her power would always live on within the shadow elves, I believed.

That had to be why she called for me, insisting that I belonged to her. The ripple of power from the Rift that day my sister and I entered the mortal realm called to her. Cries from a newborn babe, a child of both sun and shadow, awakened the part of a goddess that roared and clawed to be free once again.

And I thanked fate every morning, noon, and night that they had spared Solara this horrid sentence. Knowing that my kind-hearted, lovely sister thrived across the world gave me strength to live on.

Although each month I wondered if death would stop this torment. Yet I could never bring myself to do it—to take matters into my own hands and put an end to whatever grotesque symbiotic relationship I shared with Hestra.

If she stole into my body the first time I died, where would she go if it happened again? If she needed a child of sun and shadow, then Solara would become her next vessel, and that was something I'd never allow.

As if hearing my trailing thoughts, her presence rose in the back of my mind. She whispered in a saccharine voice that made my stomach lurch in a mixture of longing and hatred. *“You will not die, my sweet. I will not let you. You are my chosen and you alone. Blame it on me if you like, but I know you revel in the taste of blood on your teeth. You are mine. Mine. Mine! MINE—”*

“We’re almost there. Just around this upcoming bend, you’ll see it.” Deimos wrenched me out of my head so suddenly my breath lodged in my throat.

The reverberations of Hestra’s voice bounced around my skull. Blinking several times, I stiffened in the rocking saddle. He sensed my body tense as I pushed away.

“Are you alright?” he asked for what felt like the hundredth time since the sun rose.

After silently clearing my throat, I answered, “Simply lost in thought.”

“Don’t get too lost, darling. Any moment now, you’ll see the mountain range. Perhaps when you do, you can tell me their name.”

“Whose name?” The odd statement snared my attention.

The tree line broke apart like green velvet curtains, parting to reveal what lay ahead when we crested over a hill. Shades of burnt orange, blood red and deep purple painted the dome of the horizon ahead, highlighting the jagged mountain reaching up to the faint stars blinking to life in the dimming sky.

A view that under normal circumstances would have delighted me. It should have been a sight to behold.

Long ago, it might have been.

Frigid wind from the snow-capped peaks of the mountain range kissed the horizon as we drifted over the hill. My entire body shivered, but it wasn't the breeze that chilled me to the bone. Then my stomach knotted itself at the frightening sight of what waited for me.

Draped, discarded for centuries on the side of the mountain, were the skeletal remains of a god. So gargantuan, the pale, weathered bones made the mountain look like an anthill. Jagged ribs jut forth from the earth trying to claim them, and a slack jawed skull stared forever vacant at the sky above.

Protruding from the gods' remains, sticking out from between the ribs, extending high at an odd angle to the mountain face jutted an immense great sword. Mammoth, with no comparison to any weapon wielded by any being in the past few centuries.

For a moment, the setting sun glinted off the dented sword, reflecting ruby red light.

A vision plagued me for several seconds as I saw the sword the day it felled that god. Dripping with crimson rivulets of blood that soaked into the earth, staining this land forever with their tragedy.

All around us, the wind howled. A blustering breath from the land as if the spirit of this long-forgotten god gasped for air and blew it out in one terrible gust.

Attitude reared back, braying and pawing at the dirt. No doubt the animal sensed the unusual magic in the wind here. I smelled the beast's anxiety as its head swayed from side to side. His wide eyes stared at the land ahead and his hooves carved deep grooves in the ground with his urge to turn back and flee.

Deimos jerked at the reins. I shrank into myself as his arms caged me in while he fought for control of the horse. A curse slipped from his lips in the struggle.

Though I desired to help him soothe the agitated horse, I seemed unable to control my body. My limbs froze, and I lacked air.

Strange feelings that weren't my own flooded my chest and mind. Snakes of someone else's emotions writhed inside of me like burning flames, licking away at my autonomy.

Hestra gazed through my eyes at the slain god claimed by the mountain and that tremendous sword. Even as she wailed within me, clawing at the inside of my mind, I couldn't move.

I no longer felt the biting chill of the blustering wind, the swaying horse beneath me, or Deimos's inexplicable heat at my back. All I felt now were the heavy, searing tears spilling from my burning eyes.

Not my tears, but I shed them for her. For Hestra, and the grief that she'd carried for thousands of years.

"*Raella*," Hestra cried through me, wailing into the wind. My voice echoed over the land, rippling across the forest, the mountain range, and the valleys beyond.

A flock of blackbirds exploded off the mountain face, spearing into the sky and cawing out. Hundreds and hundreds of them dotted the skyline, blocking out the golden orb of the setting sun. Their squawking cries nearly pierced my ears, even at the vast distance that separated us.

Without explanation, the wind died. Vanishing as everything halted to a sudden, disturbing chill. Leaves stopped rustling, and the alarmed woodland animals calmed from the unnatural disturbance.

The fraught magic of the gods' powers, now foreign to the world, only mystified and confused those still living. No creature could understand the depth of grieving from the goddess within me for the unnerving remains I faced. It flowed through me, pouring into my chest like an anguished, rapid river of icy darkness.

My teeth set on edge, my blood singing, I lurched to settle that monstrous power inside of me. Hestra's strength and her command over me increased as the full, pale moon advanced into the sky. To ease the wriggling darkness surging within my being, I tossed out a mental leash on her spirit.

The pitch-dark scales on the back of my hand and around my wrist crept higher. Piercing through my flesh to crest up my forearm and past my elbow. My increasingly monstrous arm trembled

uncontrollably with the vicious effort of containing the Mother of Night and her great darkness.

My eyes closed, blocking out the view of Raella's bones surrendering to the land. Each breath was a struggle with my throat raw from Hestra's wailing. All I could do was hold tight to that unseen leash within me, pulling Hestra down and wishing for her to ease up on the roaring rage and agony she poisoned me with.

Salty tears fell into the corner of my lips, coating my tongue when I licked them. Each breath came easier than the one before it, as tranquility crested over Hestra's presence, rippling over her essence, and suffocating it.

Silence stilled her unbearable outrage at last.

The Percheron eventually composed himself, panting and settling down while the surrounding environment returned to its usual lulled state. Nature hushed as the magic quelled, recovering from the turmoil that had erupted from the distressed, powerful soul taking up residence inside of me.

Finally, I exhaled, taking in the utter, soothing silence of the forest at dusk.

"Nevar?" Deimos tentatively reached out, his hand hovering over my ghastly arm. He noticed the drying tears on my cheeks when I turned around. "What happened? Who is Raella?"

My lips quivered, as if holding onto the new information swirling around inside my head. As I deeply inhaled, my shoulders rose and fell with the effort of breathing normally again.

Several quiet moments passed as Deimos patiently waited for me to untangle the web of thoughts sticking in my head.

"Do you see the cross guard of the sword jutting out from her chest?" I turned my vacant gaze to the remains. In the distance, the golden symbol of the sun glinted in my eyes.

"It appears to be designed with a sun," Deimos said. Without another word, he urged the horse onward once again.

A shaky sigh vented from my lips before I spoke again.

"Hestra is always in my head, whispering like a serpent in my ears. But the Goddess of the Moon is stingy about sharing her wisdom. On rare occasions, I'll get glimpses of the past through her eyes, visions of the god's history. Sometimes she deigns to teach me what she sees fit for me to know."

“And she showed you something when you saw the god’s bones,” he responded, disgruntled.

“Yes,” I answered in a breath. “I now know why the gods fell into the war that caused the Rift.”

Deimos stilled behind me as my admission hit him like a blow to the gut. His brows jerked up into his hairline, silver eyes glimmering with unveiled shock as he stared at me, waiting for me to divulge what I’d gleaned.

“Raella. She was the goddess of the hunt and wisdom. Known for her awe-inspiring beauty, many of the gods sought after her. One of the gods who coveted her for his wife was Aristan.”

Hestra’s memories shoved blurred faces behind my eyes.

“If those are the bones of Raella and the sword had a sun on it,” Deimos trailed off, choked by the same realization of what transpired centuries ago.

“Raella wouldn’t have Aristan. She refused him repeatedly. The Goddess of the Hunt was in love with someone else.” A mix of emotions ignited inside of me, none of them stayed in place long enough for me to understand them.

They weren’t my feelings to disentangle.

“Hestra and Raella were lovers,” I continued, “and when Aristan found out, he killed Raella in a fit of primordial jealousy.”

“His act of jealousy ignited the war between the gods.” The unexpected discovery stunned Deimos.

“Hestra has been angry and grieving ever since. I suppose she got her revenge on Aristan in the end. Their bones are both ashes, blown away and forever lost to time now.” I turned my thoughts inward, speaking more to the goddess buried inside of me than the man at my back. “Perhaps her grief and the exploding surge of power from the Rift’s creation kept her soul alive, and kept her fallen heart beating in the lost forest of the witches. Even lost and alone, Hestra wanted to remember her lover.”

A beat passed before Deimos murmured, “The goddess made herself stay alive to continue worshiping Raella, even in death. I can’t say I blame her for that. A great love like theirs could make someone do absurd things.”

“And in her undeath, she plagues me. Her anger infects me, and now I am the right hand of a goddess who should have stayed dead.

A wrathful, terrible bitch of a goddess,” I spat, unable to contain my vitriol for Hestra and what she did to me—what she continued to do.

Her malicious presence reared like a cobra, wishing to strike at my words.

“I hate seeing you suffer for what the gods caused. Their own hubris led to a war that brought their demise and changed the world and the elves. You don’t deserve to suffer for their actions.” His words melted some hardened pebble of darkness in my chest.

I needed to hear them more than I realized.

“Thank you,” I said, swallowing over a dry tongue.

Despite his words, I knew the truth, and so did Hestra. For all that I was, part of me believed I deserved this fate of becoming her monster and enacting her vengeful will.

Because Hestra was right, I enjoyed the taste of blood on my teeth.

Twenty-One



We ascended a long unused path winding upward from the base of the mountain. Rich green foliage and vibrant flora in a myriad of colors grew rampant, slowing our journey as the Percheron weaved through the thick vegetation.

Deep grooves in the earth and rocky outcroppings jutted in all directions. Layers of gray, black, and various shades of red pigmented the walls of the stony mountain, as a testament to the ages this land has seen, and the lasting evidence of a battle between the gods.

The sun sank lower, stretching the forest shadows until they blanketed the woods. My power rose to meet them, swirling like inky smoke on the ground. As the light of day abandoned us, the increasing darkness grew oppressive and thick.

A rustling of wings erupted over the treetops. Deimos and I both jerked back, searching between the thinning trees at a great flock of bats taking off, flying high and circling around like a cyclone of black specks.

Trickling water caused my ear to twitch. Moments later, Attitude crested over a ridge that revealed a shallow, clear, flowing stream. The water bubbled over smooth gray rocks, drifting in the opposite direction we traveled.

Aside from the bats, there were no further signs of life. No small critters chittering, no bears rooting for berries, no lurking wild cats, and no warbling birds. I believed the death on the mountain stole life from this part of the land, and it never returned.

Only plants were brave enough to thrive here. Thick with no animals to keep it from overgrowing, branches drooped from the weight of their leaves, and bushes grew in unmanageable tangles. The pink, yellow, purple, and white wildflowers grew to an astounding size, larger than the extravagant dinner plates I ate off of growing up in a palace.

Hundreds of years ago, a goddess died here, and her blood bathed the land. I thought back to the colors in the layers of the earth cleaved open by Raella's fight with Aristan. Crimson in the top layers where her godly ichor stained the rock and altered the nature in these woods forever.

The plants here would be spectacular in spells, potions, or salves. If Deimos and I had more time, I might have asked to stop and forage. How potent would a plant be after growing in gods-blood soaked soil for thousands of years?

Having witnessed the witches submerging into a flowing river of Hestra's fresh blood for their coming-of-age ceremony, I knew the potential power in the vegetation here would amaze the world if used properly. Instead, it grew here, undiscovered, and willingly abandoned to time.

With the cloying darkness came an unseen weight on my chest as we approached Raella's remains. I got a sense that something didn't want us here. Like Deimos and I didn't belong.

No wonder humans deserted this inhospitable place.

Our path took us along the winding stream and under the protruding skeletal legs of the dead giant. Though I stopped admiring her bones soon after first seeing them. It might have been because of Hestra, but I couldn't bring myself to look.

Soon I faced the wall of the mountain and the forsaken temple to the gods carved within.

Remnants of once glorious towering pillars lined the stream. Most now broken, chunks of the aged marble littered the stream beds and surrounding land where they'd crumbled. Few trees here allowed the rising moonlight to illuminate the smooth stones immaculately positioned within the stream as the pathway into the temple.

The whispering stream and stone path vanished under a gap beneath two massive doors of stone shaped into an arch. Ancient worshippers had engraved a massive tree surrounded by stars into the smooth gray doors. Spreading out on either side of the doors, carved into the mountainside, I noticed intricately chiseled pilasters covered in creeping green ivy and overgrown vines.

Gouges in the stars and leaves advised me there were once gems here stolen ages ago.

“We’ll have to leave the horse here overnight. He won’t make it over those stones into the temple.” Deimos plucked me from my wonder at the ancient sight.

I nodded in response.

He urged the Percheron to halt under a crooked tree, bowed by its mass of oversized leaves. After dismounting in silence, he brought Attitude to the water to drink as I surveyed the temple entrance, imagining what it must have been in its formative years.

Who worshiped the gods here in those days? Local humans? Or were there priests and priestesses once dedicated to this place?

I wondered if they abandoned this temple when it became Raella’s ultimate resting place.

Inhaling the crisp night air, I let those thoughts go. They didn’t matter when I had more pressing concerns.

I stepped onto the first stone of the stream path. My boot met the slick surface, arms briefly flailing as I corrected my balance.

“Careful, darling,” Deimos tossed out.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Deimos hiding his bag of supplies in the nearby underbrush. An easy grin graced his lips.

Ignoring his remark, I turned my attention back to the temple doors. “How do we get inside?” Carefully, I calculated each step on the wet path, wary of the gently flowing water underneath my feet.

“There’s a lever, if I’m remembering correctly.” The thud of his heavy step on a stone behind me made me pause. Deimos followed close behind when I continued forward.

One of the swirling branches from the tree at the center of the doors rose from the stone, mirroring another lever on the other side. Carefully disguised handles designed to blend into the sculpted temple doors.

At my approach, I reached my hand out. My fingers curled over the air, grasping at nothing.

Grating stone on stone rumbled through the mountain. Water from within the temple gushed into the stream as the doors opened of their own volition. Frigid air from inside the depths of the earth blew over my face as though the mountain released a long-bated breath.

A gentle voice whispered through me. Not Hestra and not my inner thoughts.

Someone else, careful and feminine, brushed over my senses. Intimate warmth brushed on my skin and a unique floral scent curled around me, inviting me deeper into the opening darkness of the abandoned temple.

I breached the entrance after stepping over the last stone. The caress of an affectionate voice smoothed through my head when my boots met solid ground.

“You’re here,” she seemed to say. *“I’ve been waiting for you for so long, my beloved.”*

The weight on my chest that made me feel as if I didn’t belong on the mountain dissipated, like I’d just taken my first breath in decades. A serene weightlessness carried me forward with each step as I entered the welcoming embrace of that unfamiliar presence.

Mingled powers within me simmered up to the surface, rousing goosebumps over my limbs. It coiled tight around my bones and flowed freely through my blood.

Streams of golden fire and blackened ice danced together inside me, elated at the awakening, primal power of this place. Deep in the mountain’s heart, I laid my eye on the cavernous temple of the gods for the first time.

Somehow, it didn’t feel like it. Some part of me seemed to know this place—the feel of the damp air and the scent of the rich earth and clean, icy water.

I knew it all.

At the top of the craggy dome shaped cavern, a single breach allowed the night’s light to shine down. Water from melting snow atop the mountain peak flowed through the gap, developing into a waterfall pouring over a gargantuan three-tiered fountain. The overflow spilled into the start of the stream that flowed under the stone doors and out into the forest.

Carved into the walls, faces of the gods larger than an average house stared blankly from where they rested. I saw dozens of them, weathered and green with water and moss, yet holding onto the unique features and details that set them apart.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that those vacant marble eyes watched me. In a way that I didn’t entirely comprehend, I knew they

did.

“There is no true death in the Beyond,” Hestra whispered, rousing from her silence. *“They are gone, but they know we’re here. She knows we’re here.”*

My entire body shuddered, not from the chill of being so deep in the ground.

Shimmering silver moonlight crested over the mountain’s peak, nearing the gap overhead. That shifting light glinted off something large and metallic wedged through the right side of the inner temple.

Blinking rapidly, I reared back at the realization it was the blade—Aristan’s blade.

Taller than an old tree, the tip of the blade speared through the marble tiles, making up the now uneven floor. Rust coated the metal after centuries of exposure to the spray from the waterfall draining into the grand fountain.

Casting my gaze down, I noticed the faded crimson painted across half the temple floor. The hairs on the back of my neck rose on end when it registered that it wasn’t paint; it was Raella’s blood. Every drop that had dripped down Aristan’s blade and seeped through the mountain had stained the marble I carefully tread over.

Hestra’s memories of when she learned of Raella’s murder exploded violently in my mind. A strangled sob tore itself free of my throat.

Flashes of roiling balls of sunlight appeared and burst overhead while wriggling snakes of pitch-black shadows rose higher over the cavern walls.

“Nevar?” In a whirl of motion, Deimos reached me. His brawny arms wrapped around me, pulling me into the center of his chest. He merely held me, allowing me to overcome the unwanted emotions threatening to take over.

My grasp on Hestra slipped more and more with each second that passed. No doubt she’d break free of me the moment the full moon aligned with the circular gap at the top of the cave temple.

For the moment, she settled, stewing in her agony.

“I’m alright,” I murmured.

“Are you sure?” Deimos pressed, curling one hand over my cheek in a devastating caress.

“For now. These aren’t my tears yet.” I swiped at my wet cheeks.

He nodded in understanding. Hestra mourned her lover and the strength of her grief moved through me as her vessel.

“When I remembered this place and mentioned it to you, I didn’t know you’d wind up having this connection to it.” His shoulder dropped as he sighed. “I thought it would help, and it seems it’s making things worse.”

“No,” I pressed, “No. This place will help. After the transformation, I won’t be able to escape. I’ll be trapped here until dawn, leaving everyone in the nearest human settlements safe. Hestra will despise it, but this is for the best.”

Either by a gust of wind or an unseen force, the heavy doors of the temple slammed shut behind us. Deimos and I spun around, surveying the inner temple for any signs of another presence. Yet we remained alone in the dark.

“How did you know of this place? If it’s past all recollection and avoided, why do you know this temple exists?” I voiced the thought that burned a hole through me.

Deimos tensed, face puckering like he’d eaten a lemon. Obviously, he didn’t want to talk about it. And I realized he wouldn’t.

“Hm,” he mused, “add it to the list of truths I’ll tell you in the morning. For now, dance with me.” Deimos stepped back, breaking apart our brief embrace.

With an exaggerated flair, he bowed deeply, waving his hand. Mirth glinted in his shining silver eyes.

The corner of my lips tugged up with a smile I couldn’t contain.

“You’re trying to distract me again, aren’t you?” Still, I accepted his hand.

“No, but dance with me anyway.”

With my hand in his and one arm around my waist, Deimos pulled our bodies flush together, moving as one entity even without music. We had nothing more than the rushing waterfall, ripples in the fountain, and misty spray. Our steps clicked and thumped off the uneven, red-stained marble.

He was light on his feet, sweeping me around as if we danced in the air. Pressed together like this, I noted his impressive height, a head taller than me, then the hardness of his muscled frame and how it felt against me.

His grip on my hand was careful, and the arm around my waist was firm. Regardless of the advancing power within me, a shroud of comfort enveloped us.

Twirling and smiling, he met me step by step. His movement held a practiced grace, showing signs of someone taught to dance from a young age. Curiosity about this mysterious man plagued me, even when my skin crawled as if thousands of ants squirmed underneath.

Hestra hissed in my mind as she watched Deimos through my eyes. Her hatred for him only fueled the erotic pressure within me.

My gaze strayed to his full, sinfully curved lips.

With Deimos, I forgot about the scales on my hand spreading up my arm and the talon sharp claws holding onto his shoulders. I didn't focus on the gnawing, vicious darkness of the night and the moon amplifying from deep in my stomach.

Hestra wanted him dead with her untold hatred of him, but he made me feel... *something*.

Only a few nights had passed since he first approached me at the tavern. How was it he disarmed my carefully crafted guard and made me feel more at ease than I'd been in years?

We danced circles around the fountain and our eyes remained locked the entire time. Some unreadable emotion in his eyes ensnared me. The heat between us warmed me to my aching bones, causing my heart rate to accelerate.

Catching me unaware, Deimos swiftly twirled me around. Next thing I knew, he cradled me in his arms, dipping me low with a roguish grin alighting his face. I gasped, breath hitching in the back of my throat.

The silver light from above became dazzling. Despite the horror that came with the moon, my smile grew.

Slivers of magic rolled through me, sweeping up from my core to the center of my chest. It poured out of me like rivers of my power cascading out from my soul.

Laughter bubbled up past my lips and my chest soared with the unexpected indulgence of this night. When a fresh tear slipped from the corner of my eye, it was my own.

Deimos opened his mouth to speak, brow creased at the sight. At the last second, something in the air stole his attention. “What in the Nine Hells is happening?”

Wide-eyed and mouth agape, he stepped back. His stunned silence held my attention, and my eyes followed his gaze. Then my jaw dropped, joining his on the ground.

Surrounding us in every direction within the immense cavern, droplets of water from the waterfall floated in the air. Glittering and rotating under the gleaming moonlight like thousands of drifting diamonds.

The suspended water beads circulated in the temple’s drafty breeze, spinning and twisting in circles. Illuminated by moonlight, the droplets cast flickering rainbows into the fountain, over the jagged stone walls, and across the carved faces of gods.

“Nine hells, darling. Are you doing this?” Deimos spun under the dancing water droplets, staring up in awe.

Lifting my hand into the air, heavy rippling globes of water flew closer as if attracted to me. I pushed out, and they churned through the air. The water circulated faster while I giddily spun in circles until the spray of water swept over the inner temple.

In my distraction, I paid no attention to the man at my side. With my guard down, I didn’t see his eyes on me and the spark of fire in the depths of the molten silver.

When Deimos captured me mid twirl, I yelped, and my heart lurched against my ribs.

“Your laughter is beautiful, Nevar.” His tone dropped, not going unnoticed. I sucked in a soft sigh when his thumb brushed over my cheek. “You’re beautiful.”

Our eyes drifted shut, and the distance between our faces closed. His breath mingled with mine and I gladly inhaled his air. Tingles fluttered down my spine like butterfly wings over my skin.

Deimos held me as close as physically possible. I wanted every intrinsic part of him inside of me, and I didn’t care what I had to do for more. My skin tightened and flames roared in my belly—

A pained, guttural moan exploded from my chest. My knees buckled at the same time. Every muscle in my body went as limp as jelly.

Knives of dark power twisted into my gut. Icy tendrils of primordial power bit into my skin, tearing me apart down to the deepest visceral parts of me.

Convulsing, my body twisted away from Deimos. Jerking in frantic spasms, my body thrashed on the stone. Blood-tinged spittle seeped from the corner of my gasping mouth.

“Nevar!” Deimos shouted, frantically reaching out as if he could help me.

My hand flailed out in my best attempt to shove him away. “Run!” The words hissed from a mouth full of too large, too sharp teeth.

At the last second, before the darkness creeping into the edges of my vision overcame me, I pulled at the clothing containing my shifting body. Bound within the turmoil, I didn’t notice Deimos helping me, nor the touch of his hands peeling the fabric from my fevered skin.

Naked on the cold, slick stone, my body trembled from the force of something within attempting to break out. My back arched off the ground and a scream split my lips, nearly hiding the crunching of my deforming bones, and my breaking spine.

The pinch of scales spreading further over my flesh ate away at me, bite by bite. Hestra awakened as her dark monster devoured me whole.

Hestra’s power skirted over me, wrapping around me in wisps of darkness. Her overbearing presence plunged my thoughts into the darkest depths of my mind as she reared to the surface.

My eyes landed on the full moon in the sky through the gap, pregnant with her increasing power. As she ripped me away, stripping me of my morality and compassion, she turned me into her other form—her monster.

Blinded by white-hot pain, a beast with unfurling scales of obsidian and onyx feathers exploded from within my skin. I screamed until my throat burned, wishing I’d never risen from that river of blood.

Twenty-Two



|Deimos|

Nothing could have prepared me for the massive creature believed lost to the ages that the elven princess transformed into. I supposed it had remained dead with the gods until the moon goddess inserted herself into Nevar. Now the creature was reborn during each full moon.

“Drakewraith.”

Did Nevar know the name of the beast she transformed into? Did Hestra or the witches ever share that information with her?

Maybe the witches hadn’t known either. Most of the information on the gods vanished, yet they’d worshiped an unspeaking, undead goddess for hundreds of years.

The witches couldn’t teach Nevar what they didn’t know. All they could have done was attempt to manage her transformations while she remained on their island. With what she told me, the witches would have kept her with them forever to worship the princess as their new deity.

She would deny it, but Nevar was undeniably a god.

I sensed her otherworldly power the moment she stepped foot in Bellmead. Stronger than anything any of the lesser demons running rampant could ever hope to possess. More potent than anything I’d encountered in all my life.

When I’d first picked up on the undulating waves of her magic, I’d tracked her destination. Arriving at the tavern mere moments before her had been the simple part.

Waiting in the darkened corners, peering through the drunken patrons, and watching for whatever creature would appear had set

my teeth on edge. The fire in my blood raged like an inferno when she opened the door.

In the tavern, deep-seated, ancient instincts to run and hide against a being greater than myself reared up, screaming at me to get far away from her. I knew she wasn't a demon in that instant, but I couldn't have guessed in a thousand years what she truly was.

During our first meeting, one glimpse of her face hidden under her hood, and my world turned upside down. Despite the shadows clinging to her, and her cold aura inspiring thoughts of a tundra lost in an endless night, her features struck me.

A split second of snow-white hair, porcelain skin, and the most dazzling green eyes rendered me a brain-dead fool.

"Darling, you look devastatingly malicious. May I buy you a drink?" Had she heard the tremor in my voice or seen my shaking hands? With all her power, had she heard the erratic rate of my heart when I'd approached her?

She'd turned to me, slow and calculated, like a viper readying to strike. Those emerald eyes pierced right into me, and I'd sensed her power assessing me.

I feared little after the trials and tribulations of my life, but for a gut-wrenching moment, I'd believed that the vicious and gorgeous creature saw through my carefully crafted disguise.

As powerful as she was, I knew she noticed the shimmer of the glamor protecting me. She'd reached for it, as if she'd simply brush it away into thin air.

Nevar saw me as a threat in the same way I'd seen her power. Even if she didn't see through the glamor, she recognized I differed from a normal human. If we'd had more time together before tonight, she would have figured it out on her own.

But I promised to tell her the truth after she laid herself bare to me.

The elven princess, heir to the Thanaten throne, had died in a river of blood and come back to life reborn as a god. Cursed to undergo the grisly transformation I witnessed now. To become the ancient beast of Hestra that my kind knew to fear.

"You don't want to provoke me," she'd warned.

Damn the gods, I wanted to do so much more than that.

Following her into the alley and seeing the horrific beauty of her mercy on those men only solidified my unseemly craving. She'd killed those men without flinching and saved the innocent farm boy.

Regardless of the god inside of her wanting to kill me, the elvish princess had me enthralled from the start.

As much as I loathed letting her go as the agonizing transformation took over, there wasn't a damn thing I could do for her. That helplessness tore me apart.

A beast of claws, and fangs, black scales, and downy feathers erupted from her ivory skin. The monster tore her to shreds, bursting out of her insides in a sight that would have nauseated a normal man. No mortal could have beheld this show of horror and remained sane after.

The black scales erupting from under her skin minced her flesh upon its release. Mangled strips of pale skin and sticky blood tumbled from her increasing dark form. The withering bits of shredded tissue decayed and rotted in seconds, sizzling into ash and vaporized in the air, rising with the increasing temperature of the cavern temple.

Nevar's distressing screams of agony warped into monstrous groans. I heard her vocal cords corrupting with her heart wrenching cries. Those shrieks distorted into ear-splitting screeches from between rows of long, sharp fangs.

Her writhing frame on the stone cracked and twisted at gruesome angles. The noise of her bones snapping echoed off the jagged stone walls, accompanied by her monstrous bellowing as her body contorted to fit her new beastly shape.

An enormous form rose higher and higher from the princess, warping into a misshapen shadow of armor-like black scales and delicate ebony feathers. Her neck became long and serpentine. Ridges as long and sharp as swords protruded down the length of her spine to the tip of her slithering tail.

After bending, breaking, and contorting, Nevar's arms morphed into massive wings, mirroring the shape of a bat. Downy feathers coated the membranous skin between the wing bones that were once her fingers. Dangerous claws as sharp and curved as meat-hooks protruded from the ends, scraping the walls and floor as she moved.

The memory of Nevar fighting off black scales on her arm several nights ago in the alley flit behind my eyes. This monster, the

drakewraith, the other half of Hestra, lurked under her skin at all times.

Even with my own monsters, I'd never understand the extent of pain she faced fighting off that prowling force within her body and mind.

Her words from hours ago, wishing she'd remained dead, haunted me still. While I finally understood why she said it, I couldn't stand the thought of her ceasing to exist now that I knew her.

In all my life, I'd never experienced such a profound well of desire for another being. I needed to live through tonight so that one day I might tell her that.

The drakewraith rose like a creeping shadow into the heights of the cavernous temple. Her head flailed and stretched into its new shape as the last traces of Nevar vanished.

The entire mountain seemed to tremble under the weight of her mighty form. Water in the fountain rippled into waves, splashing out onto the ground. A surge of water spilled over my boots, but I paid no mind to the increasingly slippery surface.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from Hestra's monster reborn in front of me until the drakewraith's head swiveled downward. The beast's black eyes locked onto me at once, and the creature's lips peeled away from glistening fangs.

A bone-chilling snarl erupted from its maw. The sound landed in my chest like a well-placed punch.

"Fiend of the Nine Hells," she hissed at me as steam rose from her nostrils and corners of her maw. It wasn't Nevar's voice that greeted me now. This was the voice of Hestra that sometimes escaped her, mixed with the growling tone of the monster.

"Hestra." On instinct, my body tensed into an offensive fighting stance. My features twisted with my building rage. "I assume you see me for what I am."

"I see everything. I see you tainting my vessel. With every touch of your grimy hands, you poison her!" she bellowed, and sparks of flame lit up the back of her throat.

"Nevar enjoys my touch. Quite a bit, actually," I boasted, while my hand drifted to the sword on my hip.

My taunt only increased Hestra's hatred toward me. She growled, "Show yourself for what you really are, you insect from hell!"

Even drawing the sword from the sheath, nothing could block the streams of orange and red fire spewing from her wide-open mouth. My blade sliced up to intercept her attack, but the swirling fire engulfed me wholly.

Each lick of the drakewraith's magical fire singed away at the glamor protecting me. Calling on the power of hellfire in my blood wasn't enough to stop Hestra's flame from blowing away my disguise, burning it into nothing. The shimmering film ripped away into ashes around me.

The fire didn't burn me, but it left me exposed.

Hestra's monstrous laughter followed as she gazed upon my true form, and the authentic version of me that Hestra had seen through Nevar's eyes at our first meeting.

Crimson horns curled from my temples. The veins visible under my skin were as black as ink, a stark contrast to my tanned skin. The whites around my eyes turned black, surrounding the molten silver iris. A prick of the fangs in my mouth pressed on the sides of my tongue.

"She sees you now as I do, Archdemon," Hestra hurled the statement at me.

The admission landed roughly as a slap to my face. Caged within the beast, Nevar saw me through the drakewraith's endless black eyes for what I truly was — a creature I didn't want her to see.

A hypocritical thought, I realized.

The godly monster that lurked under Nevar's skin prowled before me. That was certainly worse than the secret I'd hidden from her.

"Archdemon?" I laughed at the beast, tightening my grip on the handle of my sword. "No, you're thinking of my father. It appears you've lost your touch, Hestra."

One massive paw swiped at me, and I ducked onto the damp floor. Uneven tiles jammed into my shoulder and back as I rolled under her claws. An involuntary grunt burst from my chest as my back hit the side of the fountain.

Smoke tinged the air as the drakewraith built up another breath of fire. Hestra's increasing snarls frightened a hidden away part of me that recalled the stories I'd heard as a young boy.

Even the mountain shuddered around us.

"I'll not suffer a demon to live!"

Pushing off the ground, I jumped to my feet. Sword in hand, although I couldn't strike a killing blow without putting Nevar at risk.

Instead of attacking, I taunted, "You'll suffer me alright. Because it is what the princess desires."

"You know nothing of her desires, fiend!" Her long tail swished like that of an agitated cat. Flames flickered between her teeth.

"What? And you do?" I scoffed, obnoxiously rolling my eyes. "You torment her. That's easy enough to see. You should have remained dead with the other gods. You should leave Nevar alone."

"She's mine!" The drakewraith's massive head lurched forward. Its gaping maw split open, dripping saliva, and showing off terrifying rows of sharp teeth.

A stream of fire exploded around me. If not for the hellfire in my blood, it would have turned me into a smoldering pile of ashes. Only the magic essence within her flames stung my flesh, but not enough to keep me down for long.

The sword in my hand clashed against claws when she swiped again. Vibrating metal sung through the air against the force of her blow. Her head came down again and again, forcing me to parry her dagger-like teeth.

The drakewraith's tail swept low over the stone. A curse slipped from me as I leapt high out of the way of the sharp spikes and the tip.

Hestra relentlessly struck again and again.

The thought of finding safety swayed my mind, and I contemplated escaping through the temple doors any chance I had more than a few seconds to glance in their direction. There was nowhere to hide from the massive beast of darkness and flame determined to squash me like a pesky roach underfoot.

No matter what blows Hestra made, striving to kill me, I couldn't bring myself to leave. Not while knowing that Nevar

remained buried in the drakewraith.

This monster wanted to see me snuffed from existence, yet I'd never be able to live with myself if I abandoned her here. Not even for a few hours to await sunrise.

Rivulets of sweat poured down my face. An exhausted ache burned through my muscles. The sword in my hand grew heavier with each swing as I defended myself. My legs wobbled and slipped on the moist ground with increasing frequency.

I won't leave you, Nevar. I'm staying right here. Even if it takes all night. Even if it kills me.

Hestra came close a few times. Her flames and claws struck swift and hard. While I couldn't burn in her fire, the drakewraith's fangs could tear my skin. Every tear in my flesh wept black blood, and each fresh wound stung.

I persisted enough to remain in the temple and keep myself alive. If I survived for years in the Nine Hells, then I could last on the offense against a drakewraith for a handful of hours.

I needed to live long enough to see Nevar safe once dawn arrived. For her, I would fight until my heart stopped beating, or until I took my last breath.

Twenty-Three



At the very center of my being, I sensed dawn's approach. When the first rays of morning light crested over the far-away horizon, that warmth, so seemingly out of reach, seeped into the depths of my bones. A golden light gradually expanded from my chest through my limbs.

With the strength of the sun, I found the willpower to return to my mind once again. I peered down from the eyes of a monster, and what I awakened to find sent a bolt of terror streaking through my chest and knotting in my gut.

I'd pinned Deimos to the stone floor beneath my claws. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Perspiration and dirt coated his skin in all the places he wasn't bleeding from gaping gashes. His hands strained with the effort of keeping the claw from crushing him like an insect.

At once I tossed out a mental tether on the roiling power pressing tight on my skin. Inhaling a deep breath, I sucked it all back, drawing every ounce of fury within myself.

The monstrous hand on Deimos fell limp. The body encasing mine lost tension in every muscle. As the beastly form of Hestra perished around me, limbs and wings all went crashing down onto the stone floor.

The ground rumbled as that horrendous beast landed in an unceremonious heap of twisted arms and jagged wings jutting out at odd angles.

Everything faded to black as I lost my sight and shrank into myself within the beast. Remembering what would come next, I fought the heavy paralysis in my limbs. I needed to move, and I needed to move now.

Wriggling against the slimy innards of Hestra's monster, I slowly found my strength returning. First, my fingers twitched, and

then my arm jerked. My eyes flared open, but everything remained dark.

Every innate part of my mind and body had reformed within the monster's chest. Now I needed to break free.

As I had so many times since the night I died in the river, I called up the power of the sun and the shadows to escape. If I didn't burst free soon, the body would wither away with me inside of it.

My hand pressed against flesh, pushing and clawing at the weakening tissue. Right as I gathered enough power to blow through the meat of the monster, light exploded into my eyes.

One heavy swing of a sword tore open the guts of Hestra's monster. Strong hands curled around my arms, carefully yanking me from the tangled insides clinging to my body. Hot, heavy entrails released me from their repulsive hold. Strings of slimy gore and viscera kept us connected until those powerful arms pulled me further away from the decaying corpse of an abhorrent creature of scales and feathers.

I tried blinking away the haze from my vision. Before I saw my surroundings, I heard the panting breath and wildly beating heart of the man cradling me. With my ear to his chest, I caught every manic beat of his heart.

My sense of smell returned before my eyesight. A honey and spice scent enveloped me like a warm embrace. It grounded me into my being so effortlessly that the world cleared when I blinked.

Behind us, I noticed the monster's corpse collapsing into itself, exposed ribs pointing high, and the slashed open stomach leaking vital organs. With each second that passed, the rotting corpse vaporized into ash and shadows, dissolving into nothing more than pools of steaming blood on the stone.

Deimos stole my attention when he stepped into the gods' fountain. Ripples splashed against his boots, soaking into his clothes with each step. Water sloshed around us as he lowered me into the pool, near the lip where the overflow spilled out.

He said nothing, and a heavy silence sank between us. Not an uncomfortable one, merely strained with something I couldn't place my finger on.

I didn't pay attention as he stripped off the dirtied layers of his clothing. My eyes stayed on the lines of crimson swirling away from

my body into the gently flowing waters. A layer of gore coated my skin and hair as the only remaining evidence of the monster.

As I lifted a shaking hand to wipe away a chunk of black flesh on my arm, a large palm caught my wrist. My eyes darted to Deimos, now completely bare and stepping closer. The water parted around his waist, and my gaze almost dropped below the waves.

The deep gouges in his golden skin distracted me.

His blood was as black as ink.

That's when I finally observed the dark veins contrasting his light brown flesh. My eyes roamed over the delicious sight of Deimos naked in the faint early morning light that penetrated the temple, up to the darkness around his shimmering silver eyes, and the crimson horns curving from his temples.

Deimos's body was as savage and unrelenting as the Hellfire that forged him. His glorious frame was carved with muscle and honed to survive the flames of the Nine Hells. This vision of him was the predator I'd instinctively known lurked behind that glowing shield.

Frightening and beautiful.

When he caught my gaze, I picked up on the question in his eyes. Worried about my reaction to his true form and concerned for my overall wellbeing, he held my arms in the ghost of a touch, waiting for me to do or say anything.

My throat was too raw to speak.

Tentatively, my hand rose between us, and I traced my fingers over his jaw. Deimos closed his eyes, leaning into my palm as it advanced over his cheek. The breath he held vented past his lips when my fingers curled over one of his horns.

A shudder wracked his entire body, forcing us closer together. I welcomed the intense heat he produced.

Pressed chest to chest, I explored the length of his horns. They reminded me of bones stained with darkened blood. Ridged layers told a story of his life I couldn't comprehend. Utterly demonic, and yet I no longer heard the voice of instinct screaming to attack.

Deimos allowed me to explore.

Silently, we sank lower into the cooling water. His large hands caressed over my body, washing away the last traces of proof I'd

ever been a beast. Each careful stroke of his hands cleaning blood from me in the temple fountain brought us closer until no space separated our bodies.

Outside of the mountain, the sun ascended the sky as the rest of the world awakened and began their day without ever knowing of the horror that occurred in the temple. The swelling light breached the mountain, drifting down with the waterfall and chasing away the lingering shadows.

The icy waters filling the fountain elicited goosebumps on my skin. Or maybe they arose from Deimos's astounding warmth wandering over my skin, down my breasts and over my hips.

Every drop of red washed away from his fingers in my hair, down to my legs. The intimacy of this moment didn't escape me. It awoke a blossoming heat inside of my core.

As tired as I was, I was powerless to the desire tying me to Deimos.

I traced my nails over the black veins spreading over his toned arms, running the black points delicately over his wrists and up to his biceps. He shivered at the touch, drawing in a sharp breath. When I pressed my hips forward, rolling my body against his growing erection, his muscles tensed.

This wanting carried a sweet pain with it. A deep-seated ache like an itch only Deimos could scratch. His hands tightened on my hips, echoing the hunger spreading through my limbs.

When I looked into his eyes, alive with raging silver flames, I saw magic. Dirty, dark, hellish magic.

His mouth swiftly captured mine. There was nothing tame or sweet about the kiss that followed. It was every bit as vulgar and atrocious as we deserved. A kiss fitting of two monsters finding a semblance of tenderness.

Gnashing teeth, bruising lips, and clawed fingers tore at one another as if we needed to merge into one horrid beast of passion. Deimos and I crashed through the water, pawing at one another. We morphed into a tangle of limbs in the frigid water, slipping and grinding together.

Uninhibited in our desire, Deimos and I fell from the fountain. Water splashed over the tiles where we crash landed. His back hit hard on the stone, forcing a grunt from him. I collapsed on his chest

and felt the quickening of his heart beneath my palms. And his thick, throbbing erection nestled between my thighs.

Straddling Deimos, I didn't allow either of us a moment to think. I lowered myself onto his cock, drawing his entire length within me. A groan of pleasure pulled from my chest as my head rolled back. Instantly full, the luscious stretching sent me reeling.

Deimos dug his fingers into my hips, a wordless command to move. A growl erupted from him, drawing my attention. When I looked down at his face, twisted with feral desire, I noticed the fangs in his mouth.

Despite the weariness of my recent transformation, that monster skulking in the back of my skull reared its head. My gums ached, and my tongue swept over the growing fangs in my mouth.

He watched them lengthen, snarling and gripping me harder.

I braced my knees on the stone and lifted my hips. His entire body trembled, nails pricking at my sides with the intensity of his grip. The reverence and worship in his dark eyes beneath me gave me more power than any god ever could.

My sex swallowed his length again. Looking from his horns to his hellish eyes and the inky veins spider-webbing over his body, I rocked my hips over him repeatedly.

Deimos writhed on the stone, panting with the effort to lie still as I rode him at my leisure.

An unholy craving filled me. My sight landed on the pulsing vein in his neck. Unknowingly, I licked my lips.

I fell on him, grinding myself over his length as my mouth met his throat.

My fangs punctured his flesh, and black blood gushed over my tongue. The intoxicating taste of blood, magic, and hellfire invaded my mind; hot and sweet, reminiscent of toasted spices and honey.

Sparks of heat danced around my frame, crackling over my flesh like lightning. The tension between our writhing bodies heightened as something deeper roused to life, tying us beyond our physical connection.

Deimos growled with predatory ecstasy. His arms curled over my ribs, crushing my body to his and stealing my breath.

I released my hold on his neck and black droplets dripped from my lips, splattering on his chest.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Deimos braced his feet on the ground and pounded into me. I bounced on him, moaning from the force of his cock slamming against my womb. The unrelenting pleasure elicited increasing lewd noises from my lips.

Deimos used his new leverage to roll over. My back met the cool kiss of damp stone, strands of white hair splayed around my head like an unholy halo.

I stopped breathing at the delightfully brutal sight of him towering over me and caging me to the ground as he settled between my thighs.

Although his dark blood stained my lips, he stole my mouth again. His tongue tangled with mine, slipping between my lips with ease. He purred at the taste of his blood on my tongue as if he enjoyed knowing I'd tasted his life essence.

His cock filled me again with ease, slipping into my dripping sex and rubbing on those delicious places deep inside of me. A humming warmth flowed from between my legs and out from my core, tightening into a knot in my stomach.

Unflinching in his rhythmic thrusts, Deimos shoved my knees higher. His cock hit deeper than before, wrenching a scream of euphoria from me. He moved his lips down to my jaw, peppering my cheeks and chin with light kisses.

Then over my throat, where my breath lurched at the soft prick of his fangs. Not enough to pierce my skin, but enough of a threat to know they were there. My cunt clenched tighter around his cock as his fangs scraped delicately over my flesh. Shivers flashed over my body as I quivered under him.

My palms skimmed over his stomach, halting on his abs, flexing with each powerful thrust into me. When his lips converged on my breast, my eyes nearly rolled into the back of my head.

Soft mewls passed my lips as he licked and sucked my nipple. Pulling it carefully between his teeth until it pebbled from his affections before moving onto the other to show it as much pleasure as the first.

Glancing down, I froze as Deimos locked onto me with his silver eyes. I held my breath as his tongue rolled over my stiff nipple

inside of his mouth. The heat of enjoyment rose inside of my core, sending me racing toward the arms of release.

Deimos parted his lips, revealing the dangerous pointed tips of his demonic fangs. A bolt of primal thrill jolted through me. Then he sunk his fangs into my breast, laving his tongue over my nipple as he did.

A wild scream tore from my lips. The sting on my breast only heightened the releasing cord within me. My hips bucked up to meet his pounding motions as I exploded on his cock. Waves of burning satisfaction assaulted my senses, sending my mind staggering into a realm of hazy passion.

Deimos tossed his head back, groaning as my climaxing walls fluttered on his length. He sounded both like a monster and a man with the ruby color of my blood painting his lips.

He drilled into me faster, rocking me on the ground. My breasts bounced and the corner of his lips kicked up as he watched. One of his hands grabbed my hip before he crushed his chest to mine.

His kiss drew all the breath from my lungs. His blood on my lips mingled with my blood on his. Deimos matched my bloodthirsty impulses in kind.

Instead of cowering before me, he stayed when others would have fled, and I felt *something* because of that.

A goddess tormented me, yet Deimos gripped me tight and hauled me free from the slaving jaws of her withering monster.

I came again, whimpering into his mouth where he inhaled every sound. Trembling beneath him, my pussy gushed around his pumping cock from the overwhelming pleasure.

His rhythm broke, erratically slamming into me. His throbbing cock released spurts of cum inside my tight heat, and he groaned through his clenched jaw, pressing his lips harder into mine as he climaxed.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and held him in place, riding out our bliss together.

Deimos and I crumpled in an entwined heap of satiated flesh, breathing hard, burning from within, and holding tight to one another. It didn't matter if we lay on stone or the finest mattress in the realm. In those long moments of relieved silence, all we needed was the knowledge that he and I were together and alive.



I drifted in and out after collapsing. Several times, I awoke to the sound of a heart beating against my ear. Deimos didn't speak, merely allowing me to sleep in the moments that the rest came to me.

Hours passed before the sun aligned with the peak of the mountain. A brilliant beam of golden light drifted through the temple interior, flooding my cells with the power of the sun. The radiance eased the thrumming pain in my skull and chased away the ache in my bones.

I sat up, leaning on my elbow, and Deimos angled his head to stare at my face. One of his hands idly traced swirls over my spine as we watched each other.

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

His lips twitched in the hint of a grin, though his eyes gleamed with agony. He grabbed my wrist to pull my hand over his chest, then his heart skipped a beat beneath my palm.

Ignoring my question, his eyes glimmered as they danced over my face. "You're beautiful. I wish for the blood on your lips to always be mine, darling."

"Deimos—"

"You're violently unhinged, undoubtedly responsible for countless acts of cruelty. A danger to yourself, and others," he released my wrist to cup my face, "and I utterly adore you."

I sucked in a gasp, abruptly pulling away.

"Shut up." I ignored his sudden bark of laughter in favor of inspecting his wounds.

Deimos winced when I prodded a gash on his ribs, but that finally silenced him.

Golden light flowed from my palms as I summoned healing magic. Questions burned on the tip of my tongue as I worked on repairing the wounds left from his fight with Hestra's monster.

"So," he breached the topic first, "you see me for what I am now. Are you not bothered? We hunted a demon under the city. I expected a harsher reaction."

"I think some part of me already knew. A shining veil enveloped you, and something in me put the pieces together before I came to terms with it."

"Yes, I figured you saw a hint of my glamor," Deimos sighed. He ran his palms over his face while I mended another slice on his ribs.

"Hestra called you an Archdemon." I bit my tongue after saying her name. The nights where she had control of me always left a sour taste in my mouth.

"No, I'm," Deimos cut himself off, hesitating with the weight of what he wanted to say. "I'm a cambion. A sort of half-demon. My father is an Archdemon, and my mother was a human enslaved in the Nine Hells."

My lips remained sealed as I sensed the information building in Deimos about to spill out. He was ready to share his truth with me, so I maintained my focus on healing while he opened himself to me.

"Archdemons are very high on the hierarchy of the Nine Hells. We classify anything there as a demon, like the lesser beast we killed in the tunnels. But my kin are different, higher in power and intelligence. They rule over the inhabitants of the hells. Each layer has their own family of Archdemons as its rulers. It's been so long now I couldn't tell you which level I came from. Only that, as my mother's last act alive, she traded herself to get me into the mortal realm."

I gnawed on the inside of my cheek, trying to focus on mending the scratches on his bare thighs.

"All I ever received from my father was disapproval and lashings. He has a hoard of children, but as a half-human, they deemed me the weakest. I stayed in the slave quarters with my mother, and she did her best to care for me. But even humans in the Nine Hells have a warped sense of love."

My chest twisted to hear his story. It broke some part of me that wanted to love him for all the tenderness he never received.

He went on without breaking. “Using the magic I learned in the Nine Hells, I glamoured myself to match the appearance of humans. I knew that my true self wouldn’t fit in with them. It frightened them. So, I hid. It took years of hard work to make a name for myself. But it was a better life than what I had before. It got better when I found Raaz, and again when we found Bellefy. I had a purpose to help the other wandering misfits.”

“A year ago, something drew me to Bellmead. Bellefy and Raaz followed without question. It quickly occurred to me I sensed something demonic growing within the darkness of the city. People disappeared, but we only found the first demon a few months ago.”

“When you saved Lord Emalstan?” I interrupted.

“Yes.” Deimos chuckled, though it wasn’t as lighthearted as he wanted it to sound.

“The lesser demon we faced with you was different. Corrupted unlike anything I’d ever seen in the Nine Hells. A lesser demon is usually a mindless, small fiend. More of an annoyance than a genuine threat. Knowing what we do now, thanks to your visions and research, I’m concerned about what comes next.” He switched from his origins to the problem in Bellmead; a mix of not wanting to linger on his past and looking to the future.

I didn’t give in to the topic change. Instead, I leaned over Deimos to press a soft kiss to his cheek.

He blinked rapidly, drawn from his darker thoughts to me.

“Thank you for telling me about yourself.” I carefully traced my bite mark on his neck.

Deimos snatched my hand away, stopping me. “Don’t heal that one.” He licked his bottom lip suggestively before adding, “I’d rather like to keep it.”

My cheeks flushed furiously at the suggestion. “Alright.”

Deimos sat up, facing me directly. The silver orbs of his eyes surrounded by a sea of black reminded me of the full moon on a starless night. Silver flames flickering in the depths drew me in like a moth to the light.

That time, I kissed him, climbing into his lap as he wrapped his arms around my waist. We shared a single breath, savoring the taste of our uniquely bloody kisses.

His cock throbbed to life anew between my thighs.

“Come back to Bellmead. Please. Don’t let our journey end here.” He grabbed my face suddenly, holding me with a fierce intensity. “You know we need you.”

“Do you?” I retorted, already knowing I’d relent to his request.

“We do.” Deimos kissed me again. “*I do.*”

As simple as that, my ribcage split open. My heart fell out and shattered on the floor.

Deimos was there to pick up the pieces of me and weld them together with his fiery touches.

“I will go back with you, Deimos,” I sighed against his lips.

He filled me once more, and I sharply exhaled at the sudden fullness of our joining. A smile curved my lips, and I closed my eyes while my hands grabbed the base of his horns.

Wanting nothing more than this transcendent moment with Deimos, I held on tight to ride him until the sun faded from the sky once again.

Twenty-Four



In the night, Deimos slipped out of the temple to hunt. The scent of roasting rabbit roused me from sleep. Under the pale light in the temple, we forced down the lean meat to fill our bellies. A meal was much appreciated after the full moon conflict.

Then we fucked. Again, and again.

In the fountain. Against the gods' statues. Rolling over the ground. From behind. With me on top. Tangled in a frenzy of crazed passion time and time again.

Alone save for the ever-present gaze of the dead gods bound to that ancient place, Deimos and I found comfort and understanding in one another's arms.

He looked my true monstrous self in the eyes and smiled at me. I looked past his demonic features, unafraid of him, or what he might be capable of.

After the full moon, I didn't know what I feared anymore. What could I be afraid of if I was the most terrifying thing in the mortal realm?

I'd never deny that the lesser demons in Bellmead were atrocious. Yet I didn't fear them. Simply, I hated them for whatever purpose they were being summoned for.

And I didn't fear innocents being hurt—it angered me, drove me into a rage that only vengeance and blood on my tongue could satisfy.

None of it was fear.

Deimos saw that within me, and he understood it more than anyone else in my life ever could. More than my father even, who was a mighty king that once led armies into the war he was born into.

Father had a generational rage that dissipated when he met my mother. It would never compare to the claws of fury constantly raking over my skin and against the inside of my skull.

When the sun rose on the second day, Deimos reapplied his glamor and saddled the horse. With one last glance at the closed temple doors, we turned back toward human civilization.

A hefty presence followed us. The thought that something might have gone wrong in our time away pressed on my stomach like a stone shoved into my gut. Perhaps the feeling was a warning to expect the worst upon our return.

“At the house, you said you had limited knowledge of demons. Now that we know the truth about each other, will you tell me everything you can?” I started the needed conversation.

“Of course, darling.” From behind me in the saddle, I heard the smile in his voice. Strained, but genuine. “What do you want to know?”

I wanted to know everything about the Nine Hells and the creatures who called it home. A love of learning encouraged my imagination to run wild. Focusing on one train of thought proved difficult.

“Has anyone summoned and corrupted demons before?”

Deimos made a speculative noise as he dug through his memories. “From what I can remember, they’ve been summoned occasionally. Hestra despises me because Aristan summoned an army of Archdemons to help him in his war against the Moon Goddess. He nearly decimated her drakewraith army in the battle thanks to the sheer numbers Aristan had.”

“Drakewraith?” I asked, brows pinching together.

“Ah, it’s the creature Hestra turned into. The one *you* turn into now. Demons tell stories of drakewraiths to their children. Never thought they still existed... Or that I’d face one.” He blew out a slow breath.

“So, it has a name,” I chuckled ruefully. The knowledge clicked into place in my brain. After the past few years suffering through the transformations, I finally knew what to call the beast.

“And it’s bloody horrifying,” Deimos laughed, strained with the weight of childhood terror. “Imagine the monster your mother told you lived under your bed was real.”

“The monsters my father said were under my bed were real. Gwathendor is filled with beasties warped from the Rift. My mother would never say such a thing to me or Solara, but Father couldn’t help himself.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised, darling.” Deimos shrugged. “Demons were summoned to the mortal plane in the past. As for corruption, nothing comes to mind.” His hand on the reins tightened while he kept his other arm leisurely around my waist.

“This might be the first instance in the history of demons being changed by the power from the Rift then. If they’re affected over time, like the beasts of Gwathendor, then we might see monsters beyond belief in the next few years.” Another stone sank into my gut while imagining that future.

“That’s why I believe we need to find the source. Find whoever is summoning the demons and stop them. No matter their reason for doing it, they can’t be allowed to continue.”

“I agree.” The emergence of fiends from the Nine Hells and their hidden master had called forth my presence from halfway across the world to Bellmead.

“Summoning lesser demons and infecting them to kill off influential people must be a power play. It wouldn’t be the first time in history someone used murder to climb the ranks,” Deimos stated.

“Yes, but what I can’t comprehend is why a demon would listen to human command. Or how someone figured out a way to bring these vermin from hell.”

“Good point, darling,” Deimos purred. “Humans haven’t had magic since the gods vanished. The chance of one finding the knowledge in Bellmead is slim to none. And summoned demons don’t follow the summoner with blind subservience. It usually takes an Archdemon to control them.”

“You tried to command the lesser demon in the sewer because your father is an Archdemon. That’s why the creature said you were the same. Tainted by hellfire and sulfur.”

“Certainly, but I do *not* smell of sulfur,” he insisted. “My human half saves me that fate.”

I giggled despite the weight of our conversation. Deimos gave me a lighthearted sensation in my chest that I hadn’t experienced in years.

“Is that a common demon trait? I smelled sulfur in the sewer before we entered the cavern.” That would be something to monitor back in the city.

“It is. Lesser demon to Archdemon. They all carry that hellish stink.” His tone made me laugh again.

Joy never lasted in my life, and I needed that laughter more than I realized.

Our journey back to Bellmead went slower. Without the pressing force of an incoming transformation, Deimos and I rode at a steady pace through the forest, stopping Attitude for frequent breaks.

We fucked against a tree so hard I still felt the ache of Deimos between my thighs for hours once back in the saddle. He made me crave such salacious things I’d never known to ask for before.

With him, I became an insatiable creature of desire.

I wanted his bones, his flesh, his blood. I wanted his hellfire body heat and the wicked soul within him. And—*gods*—I wanted the bite marks he left on my skin when he had me pinned down.

If I didn’t release those thoughts, we’d never make it back to town.

The sun set hours before Attitude emerged from the edge of the forest. After breaking through the trees, I caught sight of the endless expanse of starry sky overhead.

For a moment, I allowed myself the serenity that came with closing one’s eyes and soaking up the silver light.

Until Deimos and I crested over the ridge separating the woods from the Bellmead farmland, and a bolt of horror invaded the center of my chest. An overflowing river of rage coursed through my blood and cascaded over my limbs.

Through the dark shroud of night, I saw what remained of the smoking valley before us.

Smoldering crops billowed away as specks of ash on the wind. A few dying fires sputtered across the rolling hills that were lush farmland only days ago. Streaks of flickering orange and red rose from the blackened ground.

Every inch of the city’s farmland had burned—was still burning.

A careless breeze lifted the ends of my hair, carrying a scent that made Deimos tense into stone behind me.

I swallowed over a dry throat upon recognizing the lingering stink of sulfur.

Tainted emotions shuddered through me, and my stomach sank as nausea twisted my insides. Hidden in the smoldering remains of the burning fields, I spotted the crumbling bones of a farmhouse.

A sickening shiver crawled over my limbs.

“The boy.”

Deimos kicked the horse into a mad gallop at once. Attitude’s hooves thundered over the charred earth in our mad dash to the home of his owners, racing harder and faster than on our journey to the temple as if he too sensed the urgency swelling through me.

Before coming to a full stop, I hurled myself from the saddle. Smoke continued rising from the crooked beams of what was once a home. The front door laid on its side in the ashen ground, now a gaping wound in the farmhouse.

“Nevar, wait!” Deimos called after me. He tossed the reins and jumped from the horse.

Attitude whinnied and stomped at the burned grass beneath his hooves.

My feet carried me through the entrance. Passing through the door frame, I held my breath as if concerned I might smell what I already knew to be true.

I didn’t want to smell the sulfur and blood and—

Death.

The power in my chest unfurled, skittering across my skin like acidic insects. An overpowering darkness rose from within the empty chasm of my chest.

Bronn, or what remained of him, lay scattered over the blood-stained wooden slats of the floor. A heavy layer of burnt blood covered every inch.

Shredded flesh clung to what survived of his skull, revealing that something had chewed his face to the bone. Dark holes stared up at me from what used to be his eyes.

The monsters had minced massive chunks of his muscle and sinew from his frame. One of his arms was missing entirely. His

mouth gaped open from the scream he died with.

“Oh, by the gods.” Deimos gagged, stopping short in the entryway. He slapped a hand over his mouth, then glanced up to the absent ceiling, now open to the midnight sky.

On their own, my legs pulled me forward. I stepped over Bronn, avoiding the bone jutting from his broken, chewed up leg.

Another body curled in the corner caught my attention.

His wife’s back was flayed to the point it barely resembled flesh. She paralleled a poorly butchered carcass with the tattered fabric of a blue dress embedded in the remains of her spine.

I found the boy with her—bundled in the arms of his mother under a layer of cinders.

His mop of brown curls remained intact despite the fire that swept through the land. Thanks to his mother’s last embrace, the boy seemed almost as if he merely slept soundly.

“No.” I dropped to my knees.

Unaware of my movement, my hands lifted. Reaching over his mother’s corpse, my palms pressed into his soft curls.

“He was alive.” My eyes closed as my fingers ran through the warm, soft strands of his hair.

The image of his frightened face that night I saved him in the alley flared in my mind, and the memory of him running away to safety crushed the recently renewed spirit in my chest.

“He was alive!” The shriek vented from my lips stung my throat. Thunder accompanied my wail, roaring to life in the distance.

Hot tears ran in fat rivulets down my cheeks, and a drop of rain from a clear sky splattered in the blood on the ground.

In the corner of my blurred vision, I noticed the gold coin I’d pretended to pull from behind the boy’s ear on the floor—Smearred with crimson.

A sob choked me.

“Nevar, darling, we can’t stay here.” Deimos reached out to place a hand on my shoulder.

Unable to stop myself, I pulled the boy, still and rigid, into my arms. Sniffling and shaking, my trembling fingers brushed an unruly

curl away from his face.

Sticky blood met my fingertips as I swiped his cheek.

A wail wrenched itself from deep within my gut, tearing free from my lips, and soared high into the sky. I screamed until my throat burned, until all sound stilled in my ears, left only by an eerie ringing.

I lamented to the heavens and the hells and every realm in between.

“Nevar,” Deimos called.

I couldn’t hear him.

The ground rumbled beneath us. All around us, the scorched frame of the farmhouse rattled from an outside force.

A surging wind howled over the seared farmlands, lifting clouds of writhing black smoke into the night sky. Bulky gray clouds blew in, sweeping over the sky and wiping out the glow of the moon.

Again, the earth trembled, quaking under the might of my grief.

More tears poured down my cheeks as I sobbed, and a curtain of rain exploded from the ominous clouds rolling over the land.

“He was alive!” I wept over and over, rocking with the boy in my arms.

I didn’t notice when my vision went dark. When inky flames of burning shadow licked at the darkest recesses of the fallen home, I didn’t see them.

Incapable of keeping the magic in my grasp contained, I unintentionally unleashed the well of frightening power in my chest.

Twenty-Five



|Deimos|

With her agonized, feral stare, hair as pure as snow, and lips as cool as ice, Nevar was beautiful in the way winter was beautiful.

Cold and deadly.

A shiver of warning spider-walked down the length of my spine at the sight of Nevar falling apart. Her unraveling power affected the very nature of the world in her anguish, and her tears summoned the storm growing above our heads.

The unimaginable rage and primordial magic princess carried could be a breathtaking thing to witness. Some new urge inside of me yearned to protect her at all costs. But I'd be a fool if I didn't admit that her power slightly unnerved me.

A death-touched goddess with sharp, lovely eyes. She could cut a man's heart out in front of me, and I'd champion her to take the hearts of every man in her path.

But a person doesn't get to die and be reborn the same.

No, there were consequences. You'd come back wrong, and that's simply the price to pay.

Nevar had crossed the veil and returned, touched by the essence of pure darkness and the chaos that came with it.

The very earth we stood on quaked under the might of her grief, and the heavens above spilled frigid rain with her tears.

Something inside of me froze in utter bone-chilled fear at the sight of her.

Nevar clutched the body of the boy she saved her first night in Bellmead, now another victim to the demonic touch plaguing these lands.

His blood coated her shaking hands. Every inch of her body shivered from the force of her tormented heartache. The sounds of her harrowing cries split my eardrums and rattled the inside of my skull.

Time slowed as her body angled to face me, quivering like an unholy creature. The contents of my stomach lurched at the sight.

Tears as black as my blood and as dark as ink smudged her cheeks. Onyx rivers streaked from the corners of her eyes and mouth.

Her once bright emerald eyes became darker than any terrifying void. The rising black flames stressed her frown in the remnants of the farmhouse.

“He was alive!” Nevar’s lips split open to reveal sharp teeth, far too large for her delicate mouth.

“I know, darling. I know.” As I reached for her, I cursed my shaking hand.

The violent, unbidden display of power petrified me more than anything in the Nine Hells ever had.

Taming a goddess was all fun and games to joke about until the daunting moment came to soothe her dismaying power. Faced with a disconsolate god, I realized I felt more mortal now than I had under the talons of the drakewraith.

“Nevar.” My hand landed on her shoulder.

I felt frigid cold under her skin for a passing second before a burning shadow knocked me away from her. Landing roughly in the corner, like a tossed bag of rocks, I groaned from a blossoming pain in my shoulder.

Her black fire wasn’t like the flames of the Nine Hells, nor the sun-fire of a Mithran or the shadows from a Thanaten. It was something different altogether.

It burned impossibly hot, tainted with death magic.

Those dark, unholy flames were a gift from Hestra.

I should have recognized the night-fire from the start, but the princess had ensnared my attention.

As much as I could boast about my ability to walk through mortal flames all day long, the terrible fire she possessed... it could kill me.

Despite that, I refused to leave her here.

In the short time that I'd come to know her, I longed to protect her—to worship her. If I could get on my knees and pray to the gods to save her, I would have.

But she was the god who needed saving, and I was all she had.

An onslaught of torrential rain blasted my face. It did nothing to temper the night-fire, roiling and waving like black snakes, reaching ever higher.

That overwhelming heat refused to be contained.

Pushing back to my feet, I tossed my arm over my face, covering my nose and trudging forward.

One of the remaining beams from the roof shattered and slammed onto the floor.

A wall of dark flame surged up between us.

Gritting my teeth and solidifying my resolve, I jumped through it. Nothing had burned me before, but I was helpless against her fire. I tamped down a groan and braced my feet on the quaking floor.

“Nevar!” I shouted over the pouring rain and booming fire.

Her void eyes stared through me as if Hestra stared back at me instead of the princess.

My skin blistered from the might of her night-fire. The death-touched flames singed every inch of me as I pressed onward. Each step closer to Nevar encouraged me to take another and another.

An eternity passed before I dragged myself over corpses and through a rippling black-fire that burned me.

When I finally reached her, I wanted to fall to my knees and slip through the floor back into the layers of hell.

“Please, Nevar. You promised to come back with me. Don't leave me now. Not like this.” My reddened, burned hand gripped her upper arm.

“Deimos.” Nevar's voice, raw and filled to the brim with despair, but entirely *hers*, spoke my name.

The darkness faded from her vision in a sudden moment of clarity. At last, she saw me again with her spellbinding green eyes.

“Oh, by the gods. Deimos.” Nevar looked from me to the boy, lifeless in her arms.

Unable to remain upright, I fell to my knees. Yet my fingers stayed firmly clasped on her arm—my last anchor to her.

She sniffled before gasping sharply. Her wild eyes flickered around the scene of destruction; the farmhouse blazing around us and the storm surging dangerously in the sky.

One last time, her hand passed through those rich brown curls on the boy's head. One last time, she traced her fingers over the young features of his face. Still and frozen as if carved of marble.

When Nevar took a deep, deceptively calm breath, the night-fire vanished into the air like it never existed.

The chilly drops of rain pouring from the sky stomped out the roaring embers of the home. Even as hard as it fell, it soothed my burned skin and smeared the black tears on her face.

Nevar rose unsteadily while helping me to my feet. I didn't notice the golden glow from her hands until my burns disappeared.

When my strength returned, I leapt forward without hesitation, pulling Nevar into my arms, crushing her against my chest. The warmth returned to her soft, elegant frame and her heart fluttered like a hummingbird's wing.

"It's alright, darling. We'll bury them. I'll make sure they're taken care of. Don't worry about it," I informed her, attempting to soothe her pain.

I carefully guided her from the house before it fell apart on top of us. Her sobs continued to flow freely, soaking my shirt, but I didn't care.

Under her magically summoned rain in the middle of a dark night, I held my beautiful, vicious goddess in my arms, and allowed her the pain of her grief until the well of her tears ran dry.



Nevar and I buried Bronn and his family.

A void lingered in the princess's eyes as the young boy and his siblings vanished under the earth. Her melancholy followed us through the farmlands, growing worse with each home we found decimated and charred.

Through a field of muddled grays and browns, ominous streaks of red flowed through the storm's runoff. Rain fell until the sun rose and chased the clouds away. Attitude cantered through the wet ashes and mud left behind, hooves squelching in the muck.

I was deaf to the rising clamor of the city when we passed the gate, riding over wet cobblestones reflecting the morning sunrise and through an increasingly wild crowd.

With their farmlands burned, the citizens fell into the grasp of unbridled frenzy. Since the rain passed and the sun brought light, they gathered en masse to assess the damage of their fields.

Nevar remained silent the entire time. Even as we escaped the disorderly, panicked townspeople and approached the house, she said nothing.

I watched her disappear inside, leaving me to figure out what to do with the horse. Without a stable, I let the Percheron free in the back garden moments before the house staff arrived.

The two middle-aged women blushed when they saw me leaving the kitchen. A usual reaction from human women.

If they saw the truth, they'd run screaming from me.

I nodded at them to acknowledge their presence, then moved on to the stairs.

My legs carried me up the stairs and down the first hallway. I welcomed the sight of the rich brown of the wood-paneled walls and the red with gold trim rugs.

The house was the closest thing to a home I'd ever truly known in the short time I'd lived in Bellmead.

I was grateful it wasn't hellfire and brimstone. It was warm and comforting in a way I couldn't put into words. As an added advantage, Bellefy and Raaz made it feel like an odd sort of family occupied this space.

With the way they bickered, they were almost siblings.

My legs began carrying me toward Nevar's guest room as I instinctively followed the line of her scent in the air. Her

intoxicating perfume made my blood hum under my skin.

An uninhibited eagerness to bury my nose in her neck and hold her until she felt ready to rise again transported me in her direction.

A door clicked open to my right.

I cursed under my breath, but halted in my path.

Bellefy poked her head out of her room. Her eyes widened when she found me standing in the hallway.

“You’re back.” She stepped into the hall before shutting the door behind her.

“I am.”

After a brief glance at my appearance, her brows shot up. “What happened?”

I glanced longingly down the hallway toward Nevar’s room. An aching pit opened in my chest.

I didn’t want her to be alone after what we went through. But what if she preferred solitude?

“Get Raaz and meet me in the study,” I breathed out, deflated. “I’ll tell you both everything I can.”

“Alright.” Bellefy’s eyes studied me closely when she hesitated. “Are you okay? You appear as if something dragged you through the mud and back.”

“Oh, you don’t know half of it.” Dirt lingered under my nails and mud caked my boots. “Just grab Raaz, and we’ll talk.”

I only made it a few steps before her hopeful question tumbled free. “Did the princess come back with you?”

“Yes.” I wanted to be with her.

Before Bellefy asked another question, I strode away.

After a quick wash and change of clothes, I met Bellefy and Raaz in the study.

They settled in the red velvet chairs across from the desk positioned against a wall of windows. Early light filtered in, highlighting the dust motes drifting through the air around the surrounding ceiling high walls of books.

The two had their heads bent, whispering low as I entered.

At the sound of steps, Bellefy's sprung back, eyes darting around the door. Her expression fell when she realized it was only me.

"Where's Nevar?"

"She's asleep and needs her rest. It's best to leave her alone for now." It took an insurmountable effort not to go climb into the bed with her.

"Alright," Bellefy grumbled, crossing her arms as she settled into the chair.

"How did your mysterious adventure go, then?" Raaz got straight to the point.

I took my seat behind the desk, then shook my head and shrugged. How would I explain what happened during the full moon?

"Tell me about the city first," I said. "We found the farmland burning and every farming family murdered by demons last night. I assume it's getting worse."

"Oh, gods," Bellefy gasped, covering her mouth.

Raaz's jaw dropped, his face draining of color at the news.

"It's been mostly quiet in the city. Until last night, I suppose," Raaz replied. He ran a hand through his copper hair, blowing out a solemn breath. "We gave the merchant his wife's ring. Poor bloke broke down, but eventually thanked us for it."

"It won't be quiet in the city when news of the farmland spreads." I rubbed my fingers into my temples.

"It is getting worse, then. But the princess came back with you. Do we have hope of her helping us again?" Bellefy leaned forward.

"Gods' help us. We need all that we can get." Concern glinted in Raaz's eyes.

Our problem with the demons stopped being a fun adventure or a puzzle to solve. The issue was greater than we could have expected.

"Why bother the gods when we can handle this ourselves?" I chortled, trying to keep the mood light.

Bellefy rolled her eyes.

“I’m serious,” I insisted. “We have a god on our side. Anything is possible.”

“The gods are gone,” Raaz remarked.

“Not entirely.”

I told them what happened on the mountain while glossing over the intimate and personal details. Bellefy and Raaz didn’t need to know everything.

By noon, I’d told them of Nevar’s transformation into the drakewraith and her godhood. We discussed the demons and what the princess and I speculated about what came next. At the end, Bellefy and Raaz stared at me as though I’d grown a second head.

“So, she knows what you really are now?” Raaz vocalized the thought.

“Nevar is smart enough to figure it out, god or not,” I added.

Bellefy’s stare burned holes in my face, forcing my gaze.

She worried about our fate in the city and this revelation of her princess. While she respected the royal family of Gwathendor, the former soldier admired Nevar more than she would ever admit.

Finding out a princess of your homeland had become a god and transformed into a forgotten beast would never be easy to absorb.

Raaz accepted the information effortlessly. He didn’t have the same stake in the Mor’gen royal family or the shadow elf kingdom.

To him, it was simply a fact of life that there were demons running amuck in the city, and he currently lived under the same roof as a princess turned god.

The very definition of going with the flow.

Raaz perked up, ready to change the subject. “When are we going hunting again?”

“I haven’t slept in over a day. I’ve been ridden... I mean we’ve been riding horseback for so long.” Clearing my throat, I swiped away the lewd memories from the trip. Easier said than done when the breathy noises Nevar made before each climax would haunt my dreams forever.

Raaz didn’t notice the slip up in my words. However, Bellefy’s eyes narrowed quizzically.

I avoided eye contact before continuing.

“Nevar needs to rest after what happened between the temple and the farm. I do too.” And it was a rotten feeling to know I couldn’t go out there and avenge Bronn and his family right this moment.

“Bellefy and I will keep patrolling the city then. I’ll stay on days and Bellefy can stick to nights while you both rest. We’ll report anything new.”

“Better grab lunch and get out there then,” Bellefy stated. “House staff is roasting chickens. You’ll need the energy. I suspect we’re about to become very busy.”

“Roast chicken?” Raaz hummed, licking his lips. “I’m on my way out, then. I’ll report any news when I return at dusk.”

The door clicked shut when he exited the study.

Bellefy left the study after an hour of planning. As soon as I’d rested and returned to full strength, we would use my blood to hunt more demons. Until then, Bellefy and Raaz would keep their ears to the ground and listen to any gossip that might provide new insight.

The memories of every sweet moment alone with Nevar entangled in an erotic embrace flooded my mind during my following seclusion. More than that, I recalled the moments caring for her and each minute I’d gone mad with the desire to protect her.

I wanted to satisfy Nevar’s body and soul.

Despite longing to sneak into Nevar’s room and crawl into her bed, I kept my distance. We shared a tumultuous couple of days together, but I needed to respect her space.

She would have spoken to me on the way inside the house if she wanted me to accompany her to bed.

At nightfall, Raaz returned, Bellefy left when the house staff finished cleaning for the day, and I retired to my usual room. While sinking into the familiar mattress again was comfortable enough, I despised the lack of Nevar’s presence in my arms.

Twenty-Six



I tossed and turned, tangled in the sheets clinging to my limbs. My rest developed from nightmares into visions. The faces of the dead mocked me during my fitful slumber.

Bronn, his wife, and their three children. I remembered them smiling with one another the morning Deimos and I crossed their farm. And I'd never forget the face of the boy the night I saved him from thugs in the city.

And I'd never forget the blood.

So much godsforsaken blood.

My dreams transported me back to the river where Hestra took me. I relived the moment where I died in the crimson waters before climbing to shore. There the witches chanted, as I began my first excruciating transformation into the drakewraith.

As the dreams morphed into visions, the witches in my memory turned into demons. Malformed, vile creatures that hissed and snarled within their writhing horde. Surrounded by reddish hellfire, they roared out with their insatiable need to feed on flesh.

I ran on legs made of jelly. No matter where I turned, it was never far enough, and my powers were of no help. I had no hope of escaping the grotesque roars of lesser demons, or the eyes of their master that followed.

When I made my stand, turning to face down the shadowed form of their master, the face appeared warped by darkness. Those shadows didn't answer me because they weren't real.

But he was.

Those visions tormented me with glimpses of a darker future; A future where this madman and his hell beasts took over Bellmead, then the entire human kingdom.

Once he'd made his way through the human continent, he'd take his corrupted fiends to all the others.

My dreams forced me to watch scene after scene of the man shrouded in darkness and fire descending upon the lands. He'd go after my parents and sister in Gwathendor, then my Mithran family in Laernear. I could do nothing but weep as I witnessed him burning down the elves and my home.

Each new vision, tinged red with my family's blood, showed me what this madman would become capable of as his strength and influence grew. An abomination of wickedness that would violate every kingdom he swept across.

His baseless savagery would tear apart the mortal realm.



The image of my family suffering stayed in my mind the longest. My sister, a shining star in the darkness, mangled and defiled under the villain's reach. A bone-chilling weight of dread exploded through my chest and stomach at the offensive images.

"Nevar!" From far away, an urgent voice echoed in my ears. Like someone shouting at me across a vast empty valley of cold, swirling mists. Shadows shrieked and raged around every surface of the bedroom. The mattress shook as the floors and walls trembled.

"Darling, wake up! You need to wake up now!"

His powerful fingers on my arms shook me. When I hit the pillow again, my eyes snapped open. A warm, silver gaze hovered over my face, taking up my entire field of vision. The serenity that came with his appearance squashed the thrashing shadows at once.

The raging flames in the fireplace stilled into a gentle smolder.

"Deimos?" I rasped over a dry, scratchy throat.

"I'm here, darling." He eased on the bed before pulling me into his arms.

“I saw him, Deimos. The silhouette of the man summoning the demons.” My nails twisted in his shirt as I tightened my hold on Deimos’s shoulders. His palm rubbed over my spine, easing my quickening heart rate.

“A vision?”

“Yes.” I licked my dry lips. Burying my face into Deimos’s shoulder, I steeled myself to bring up every horrid thing I recalled from those nightmares.

“It’s alright now. You’re safe here, Nevar. You’re safe,” he insisted. As if knowing I needed to hear that. That I needed the reassurance I wasn’t in those visions any longer.

“If we don’t stop him in Bellmead, that asshole is going to spread across the mortal plane. His power will grow, and he’ll keep picking off nobles until he’s the sole ruler of every creature in the realm.”

“That’s slightly terrifying to think about. The demons in the Nine Hells are bad enough. If he seized all power and corrupted an army of demons, the mortals would never recover.” Deimos tensed. A shaky breath escaped his lips, blowing over the tip of my ear.

I shivered against his chest.

“After the temple,” I started, almost unsure of what I wanted to say, “I had this thought that nothing scared me. That I feared nothing anymore because I was the most frightening thing there was.”

“Nevar—”

“In my visions, I saw the deaths of my family. I am still afraid, Deimos. Afraid of losing those I care for.” A wayward tear escaped the corner of my eye.

His large palm cupped my cheek. Deimos tipped my head back. He wiped away the stray tear with the pad of his thumb. Those mesmerizing silver eyes danced between mine as if he could see my soul within.

“Fear, love, and hatred are all natural emotions. Though different for everyone, we all express them. Even a goddess can be afraid, darling.” He carefully pushed his fingers through my tangled hair. Each stroke over my scalp chased away the last traces of anxiety vibrating through my bones.

“I am experiencing an emptiness that I cannot fathom the depths of. A wretched darkness that I’ll never ascend from.” And the

voice in my head that worsened it tenfold.

“Oh, darling.” Deimos cradled my head and held my face against his chest. His heart pounded against my ear, slow and strong. “You have the capacity to commit great atrocities. Only your empathy for the innocent keeps you from taking over the world. Your love for your family and your empathy prove that you are not as empty as you believe. There is a well of light inside you as well.”

Deimos hugged me on the bed, allowing me the silence to ruminate on his words. Enough time passed that the visions and last claws of sleep evaporated. Once fully awake and soothed by his attentive touches, I’d found a sliver of that light he mentioned.

The link to my sister, my mother, and the sun barely hung by a thread. But still there inside of me, intact and bright. It mirrored the waning sunlight outside my windows. Weakened by the approaching nightfall, but persistently lingering in the dazzling sky.

“How do you feel?”

He seemed to make a habit of breaking the silence first.

“My stomach is attempting to devour me from within.” I tried to chuckle, but it fell short.

“Here, let me prepare a hot bath for you. Take your time, and I’ll bring up something for you to eat.” His fingers threaded in my hair once more before releasing me.

I nodded as Deimos stood from the bed. He accepted that silent answer and turned for the adjoining washroom.

Once the tub was near to overflowing with hot water and floral scented soaps, Deimos left me alone to fetch a meal. In the bathroom mirror, I grimaced at the wretched state of me. I’d fallen asleep, collapsing in my traveling clothes with smudges of dirt on my face and hair.

I smelled like a bag of rotten onions.

In the bath, I relaxed into the scalding water. I watched swirls of steam dance around me and inhaled the lovely scents of soap and essential oils. Then I scrubbed my skin and hair as if I could peel away the layer of filth from everything that had happened those last few days.

From the transformation to the burning farmlands and my nightmarish visions, I rubbed my flesh nearly raw from the force of wanting to claw that pain from my chest.

After dragging myself out of the water, I found the robe inside the dresser. Without eating for so long, I couldn't muster the energy to rifle through the clothes Deimos provided. I didn't mind sticking to the silken black robe that kissed my skin like a delightful breeze on an autumn morning.

Right as I tied the silk robe around my waist, the door clicked as the knob twisted. I turned to face Deimos, entering the room with a tray in his hands. He kicked the door shut with his boot before angling his head up.

Deimos stopped in his path when he noticed me sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace. Molten silver eyes raked over every inch of black silk, hugging my frame. His throat bobbed slowly.

"The staff made stew and fresh bread. I grabbed some of Bellefy's new wine on the way up to wash it all down."

"Thank you." I accepted the tray a bit eagerly. My stomach grumbled in protest until I inhaled my first bite.

He settled on the other end of the couch as I dug into the savory stew. Hearty and flavorsome with large chunks of meat and potatoes that made my eyes roll back into my head. His attention went to the flickering fire across from us, drumming his fingers absently on the back of the couch. The orange and red light flickered across his features, highlighting the stark angles of his jaw and cheekbones.

The last throbbing ache in my skull faded and the gnawing pain in my stomach vanished with each bite of warm, buttered bread and delicious stew. Deimos seemed content to join me in silence as I sated my hunger. I enjoyed the company, and that fact surprised me.

What happened on the island of witches made me wary to trust strangers. The anxiety of hurting someone by accident also pressed on my consciousness.

With Deimos, I didn't need to worry about that any longer. All the latent hellish power within his muscular frame managed the formidable magic in me.

On my last bite of bread, Deimos poured me a glass of wine. I traced my finger over his knuckles before taking the glass from his hand.

I willfully ignored the quickening pulse in his throat as I swallowed the sweet, tangy cranberry wine.

“You really are beautiful, you know.” The dip in his tone didn’t go unnoticed.

Knowing he watched, I slowly licked a drop of wine from my lips. I swirled the contents of the glass as if mulling over his compliment. After taking another gulp, I set the glass and empty tray on the low table before the fireplace.

“It seems like a sin to find beauty in the darkness, Deimos.” I could warn him away night and day. He wouldn’t listen.

His hand on the back of the couch brushed over my shoulder. Lightly gliding his fingers across my collarbone, he curled his hand over the back of my neck under the curtain of my snowy hair.

Deimos’s large palm held the back of my head, suddenly forcing my head to the side.

Our eyes locked. The tension in the room skittered over my skin. Flames in the fireplace sparked higher as shadows leapt across the walls.

“Beautiful things hide in the dark, darling. It would be a sin to neglect them.” The delicate tracing of his thumb over the side of my neck elicited a hitched breath from me.

“Is that why you hide behind your glamor?” I shifted on the couch.

Deimos loosened his commanding grip on the back of my neck, allowing me to move closer. He chuckled darkly. “Are you calling me a beautiful thing?”

His hand stayed on my neck as I climbed into his lap. I braced my hands on his chest, absorbing the thrilling heat under his skin. The beating of his heart against my palm awakened an erotic pulse between my thighs.

“You laugh, but you are.” Raising one hand, I traced the tip of my black, pointed nail along his temple where I knew his horn protruded. “I want to see you again. The real you.”

He sighed heavily before dropping his hand from my neck. I held my breath, briefly worried I might have offended him by making the request.

Deimos grabbed my hips, and my heart lurched. Without warning, he pulled my hips lower to grind against his groin instead of hovering over his lap. The breath I held flew past my lips as his hardening cock met my pussy.

Deimos raised a hand, pointing a finger at the neckline of the robe. His digit slipped under the silk, skimming against my skin to provoke a shiver down my spine. "Let me see you then, darling. All of you in return for all of me."

Wordlessly, I leaned back in his lap. My trembling fingers grasped for the silk belt. My heart sped up as I pulled open the robe. The slip of black silk fell to the floor in a whisper of material.

I found his glamor stripped away when I looked up again. There I found his raw, untamed hellfire eyes alive with liquid silver surrounded by a sea of black darker than any moonless night. At the sight of his horns, my heart skipped a beat and my pussy fluttered with wanton heat.

Exposed in his lap, I lifted my chin and permitted Deimos to witness every bit of me he wished to see. He watched the faltering rise and fall of my chest as I tried and failed to steady my breath. His keen eye noticed my erratic pulse and pressed his thumb over the vein in my throat. When his opposite hand firmly cupped my breast, my head arched back.

Deimos bucked his hips, pushing his hardness into me. The leather of his pants slipped against the increasing wetness dripping from my pussy. His hand kneaded my breast, forcing a lewd gasp from me.

"All of you," I breathed, clumsily pawing at the front of his shirt. "I want to see all of you."

"You will," he said. "Let me enjoy the sight of you first."

Deimos tangled his fingers in the back of my hair, guiding my head closer to catch my throat with his teeth. The press of fangs on my skin shook me to my core.

"Let me touch you, my darling viper." His lips danced over my throat, bringing whimpers from me. A hand dropped from my breast, trailing over my abdomen as light as a feather. My stomach muscles tensed under the tickling sensation of such a gentle caress.

The dominating hand yanked my head back, controlling where I looked. Deimos didn't give me a chance to breathe before catching my lips with his. He used the distraction to cup my pussy in the palm of his hand.

Growling in the back of his throat through unrelenting kisses, he spread my slickness over his hand. My hips rocked, pressing my

clit against his palm. The fingers in my hair twisted into a fist, which caused delicious tension to spread over my scalp.

I quivered from head to toe against his solid body. He smirked against my lips while easing one digit inside of me. His tongue flicked over my bottom lip, reeling me back in.

My hands dug into the front of his shirt, finding purchase to remain steady. Deimos curled his finger inside me, pressing on a sensitive spot. His palm ground against my clit with each roll of my hips.

The taste of his mouth on mine and the strength of his fist in my hair made my skin feel tight. All the astounding tension in my core rose higher. Yet I needed more.

“Deimos, please.”

“Tell me what you want, darling. Anything you want.” The salacious tone of his voice and his breath on my lips scattered my thoughts.

“You. Gods, I want you.” My hands traveled down his body and found the strings at the front of his pants.

Deimos snickered, increasing the pace of his pumping digit and hindering my efforts to undo his pants. When I hissed in complaint, he only laughed cruelly.

“You want my cock inside of you? Hm, is that it?” The question came out incredibly demeaning. A mocking tone that woke the foul power inside of me.

He had no warning as one of my hands flew up between us. My fingers snuck around his throat, claws pressing into his flesh. “I do, and you’re going to give it to me.”

Deimos released the back of my hair, and his finger in my pussy stilled. The corners of his lips curled up into a devious smile.

“I’m yours, darling.” He withdrew his finger to circle it over my clit. Sticky fluid coated his finger as he continued teasing me.

Mine.

The thought flooded my brain. It echoed over and over. Like Hestra, when she screamed for me. However, this aching urge of possession wasn’t razor sharp like hers. It was soft and warm, like a ball of light in my chest that cascaded through my core to my limbs.

I softened for him. I wanted him.

“Say it again.” My suddenly calm hands unlaced his pants easily. My fingers dipped under the waist. When I curled my fingers over his warm, throbbing shaft, Deimos moaned deep in his chest.

“I’m yours, darling.”

“You’re mine.” He didn’t see my rising shadows until it was too late.

Slithering black snakes of darkness crept over the arms and back of the couch. In the blink of an eye, they wrapped around his wrists. More curled up to hook around his throat.

Deimos grunted under the sudden pressure on his skin. His head jerked back, eyes widening in shock. I clenched my fist, and the shadows answered by pulling his arms to the side.

His chest rose heavily. Deimos stared up at me with eyes full of carnal hunger. When he realized he was wholly at my mercy, his cock twitched against my palm.

“You touched me. Now I take what I want.”

I ripped open his shirt. Deimos held onto the air in his lungs as I revealed his tan skin and the black veins beneath. He released that breath in a tortured hiss when my nails skirted over his skin.

“Take all of me, Nevar. Every part of me you can sink your pretty fangs into. Every inch that you can get your claws on. If you want it, you can have it.” His tantalizing lips parted when I gripped his cock.

“I am going to take and take and take.” My hips lifted.

Deimos and I both held our breath. Our locked gazes never wavered as I positioned him against my glistening slit.

Utterly in sync, a drawn-out moan escaped us at the moment we joined. His cock stretched me as I sunk down, and my tight heat gripped every stunning inch of him.

When he filled me completely, it felt like taking a breath for the first time. Like coming home after years away.

“Shit, darling,” Deimos groaned, tugging at the shadow restraints on his wrists. “Let me hold you while you ride me.”

“No,” I purred. “I want you like this. All mine, and at my mercy.”

“Nevar.” His voice took on a demanding edge.

As if he could command me to release him.

Instead, I tightened the magical, dark bonds on his wrists and neck.

Deimos choked, then a snarl tore free, yet he couldn't resist bucking his pelvis up to meet mine.

"Don't come until I've orgasmed three times. Only then will I let you beg to touch me again." I grabbed his horns, using them as handles to bounce on his girthy, hot length.

Deimos gritted his teeth, chest vibrating with a groan. His eyes clenched shut as my slick pussy rocked over him, moving at the speed and at the exact angle I needed to find release.

"Fuck." His knuckles turned white with the force of his straining fists.

I devoured the display of his flexing biceps and tensing forearms. The definition of his contracting abs drove me wild with each panting breath he took.

Watching him struggle against my power, seeing this hell forged demonic warrior strive to free himself from my magic utterly delighted the monstrous thing inside me. I untethered the salacious creature prowling in my mind and body, letting her explode to the front of my actions. She gave me the freedom to release the leash on myself that held me back from what I wanted.

My first climax swiftly washed through me, building like a wave on the ocean, cresting higher and higher until finally sweeping me off my feet. My fingers latched onto his horns, holding on tight as I rode out the surging hurricane of satisfaction in my core.

"Nevar! Nine Hells. Please," he started.

"Not yet. Not yet," I panted against his chest, catching my breath before moving again.

Once my thighs ceased trembling, I rose on his length again. Creamy arousal from my first orgasm coated his cock.

Deimos snarled with excitement at the sight of my climax on his length. "Shit, I could watch that forever."

His eyes rolled into the back of his head when I dropped myself. I grabbed his chin, pressing my nails into him, hinting at pain.

“Then watch.” My fingers caught the front of his dark, luscious hair. After expelling the shadows around his throat, I yanked his head down, forcing him to watch as I rode his cock.

“You see how wet I am for you? Do you see what you do to me, Deimos?” Keeping one hand in his hair, the other drifted low. I pressed my fingers into my clit, rubbing fast circles as I rode him.

“Fucking Nine Hells. You feel so good on my cock, darling. So tight and wet.” His voice took on a reverberating, demonic rumble. It sent goosebumps flashing over my arms as a sensual shiver flew down my spine.

“Let me watch you come, Nevar. Come on my cock. Please let me watch you come again.”

“Oh, gods!” Something about his ragged, wanting begging sent me hurtling over the edge again. The wall holding back my orgasm crumbled into a million pieces, tearing through me like a force of nature and flooding my veins with molten lava.

I fell off his lap as the quaking in my limbs overcame me. His slick, pulsing cock twitched against my overstimulated pussy, and his tip wept with precum.

“You said three,” he mocked.

“Shut up.” I snatched his left horn and yanked his head down. “Start begging and I might let you go.”

“Please let me touch you, Nevar. Let me hold you in my arms and feel your soft skin against my palms. Please let me feel you. I want to touch you.”

“You do?” I rubbed my dripping sex over his shaft.

“Yes, fuck. Please. Gods-damn. Please let me fucking touch you. Let me fuck you. Let me fill you until you’re bursting at the seams from me. Please, let me pound you and taste you. Please, let me touch—”

The shadows evaporated in a sudden breath.

Deimos lunged before I had time to react.

The world spun. My face slammed into the velvet couch cushion. All the air raced from my lungs. Forceful hands lifted my hips, digging roughly into my flesh as he easily compelled me onto my hands and knees.

He kept me down, pressing one hand into the back of my head. Deimos shoved a knee between my legs and shoved them apart. The fist on my hip applied more pressure—the only warning I had before he impaled me.

“Ah! Deimos!” The couch muffled my screams.

He pulled out and brutally slammed into me again. Each time he did, more lewd screams tried to escape me.

More of my sticky arousal gushed around his forceful thrusts. My hands flailed on the couch, unable to move thanks to his intense weight and strength, keeping me pinned.

As he dominated me, my mind slipped into a void where nothing except Deimos and world-shattering pleasure existed; A realm all our own where we belonged to one another without question.

“Are you going to come again, darling?” He sounded like a monster, not a man, and, gods, I loved it.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” I must have repeated it a hundred times. I couldn’t tell.

“Then come.” His unbending command unleashed my orgasm.

“*Fuuuck,*” I whined. Hips writhing, body shivering, I came harder than ever before.

The fire across from us burst into maddening flames, sending embers into the air and smoke flying from the chimney over the house. Light exploded over our eyes from all around the room.

“Good girl, Nevar. You come so prettily for me.” Deimos fell over me then. His chest pressed against my back, making his heart echo through me as if we shared one heartbeat.

He caught the arch of my ear in his teeth and tugged it between his lips. His tongue flicked over the excruciatingly sensitive tip. Nothing in the world could stop my fourth climax from crashing through me.

With a long groan, Deimos spilled himself inside of me. He joined me during my transcendent climax, reaching his bliss at the same time I did. His mind-blowing thrusts didn’t stop until I ceased shaking and his cock stopped pumping me full of him.

Deimos collapsed with me on the couch. In the staggering afterglow, I barely realized when he tossed an arm over my waist. I

merely sunk into his delicious heat, willingly melting against his toned chest.

His fingers brushed my hair behind my ears. My eyes fluttered, but I gave up on opening them. After several long, calm breaths, he must have assumed I fell asleep.

He nuzzled his face against my neck, deeply inhaling my scent. His fingers flexed against my skin as he shuddered.

I pretended to sleep, enjoying the tender affections.

Until he whispered in a frighteningly unwavering tone against my throat. "I would do so many horrible things for you."

Twenty-Seven



Deimos sat behind the desk in the study with the silvery light of the moon drifting down from a midnight sky overhead. The light gleamed in his lustrous black hair and mirrored the innate glow of his eyes.

Bellefy and Raaz waltzed through the door seconds after I settled into the seat across from the desk. Raaz took up the chair beside me, smiling widely. Bellefy leaned against the window, half hidden beneath the curtain's shadows.

She wasted no time providing an update. "The city has been in chaos since the farmlands burned. Theft is rising while citizens buy whatever remaining goods they can."

"But?" Deimos angled his head to the side, and Bellefy pushed off the wall.

"But by some miracle, the crops are already growing back. The new city warden and the council said that the rain following the fire encouraged regrowth. They're asking anyone with knowledge of farming to help assess the situation."

Deimos arched a brow at me, silently communicating his inner thoughts. The rain appeared as a side effect of my flaring power.

Had magical rain stimulated the crop's return?

"What of the demons responsible?" I gnashed my teeth at the bitter taste of resentment and grief.

"No sign of them so far," Raaz answered.

"It's been hard to find traces of them, with humans going wild. The rain also washed away any evidence that might have lingered within city limits," Bellefy shrugged out.

"So, it's time to hunt again?" Raaz sat up straighter, bristling with excitement.

"A hunt it is," Deimos agreed.

In the long hours during our journey, Deimos had explained that he used the unique signature of hellfire in his blood to track traces of it throughout the city. He'd done so the first night he suspected creatures from the Nine Hells haunted Bellmead.

"This demon won't be like the others," he stated gravely.

"The corruption from the Rift seems to affect each lesser fiend differently," I said.

"Yes." Deimos pinched the bridge of his nose. "That first one was abnormally fast. The one in the sewers grew to an enormous size with a ravenous appetite for flesh. There's no telling how drastically this new one has changed, thanks to the power of the Rift."

Bellefy's arms flailed as she huffed aggressively. "I still can't believe someone is summoning demons and using power from the Rift. It's half the world away!"

"I know it seems unlikely," I started, "but there are powers in the mortal realm we no longer understand because the elves spent more time fighting one another than researching the Rift or preserving our ancient history. We simply don't know what's possible."

"Or who might be capable of such a thing?" Deimos followed up.

"I see a man in my visions. A powerful man."

"You don't see a face? That'd help a ton." Raaz's features scrunched up.

"Unfortunately, not. But if Deimos is a cambion and these lesser fiends won't bend to his command, I wonder what we're up against."

"Useless demon." Hestra rose in the back of my mind. Her seething laughter bounced off the inside of my skull. *"Let me out again, my sweet. Let me out and I'll devour them for you. Together, we have teeth and claws. The demons don't stand a chance. None of them can compare..."*

Perspiration rose along my hairline as I suffered her hissing voice. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms, on the verge of drawing blood as I fought her back.

My eyes flicked down, and I noticed black ridges rising over the back of my wrist and along my arm. I lowered my shaking hand

into my lap and sucked in a deep, cleansing breath of air.

Stamping down the writhing dark well of burning magic in my being, I willed the scales to vanish. I squeezed my wrist, holding my hand away from the others as though it might awaken with a mind of its own and strike them down.

Pulled by a sympathetic stare, I glanced up at Deimos, watching me carefully. His brows knitted together, and concern glinted in his eyes.

I shot out of the chair. “Well, let’s get to it before the bastards burn down the city.”

“I’m with her,” Raaz followed suit, standing to his full imposing height. “I haven’t had a good fight in a while.”

Bellefy rolled her eyes. “You were in a brawl at The Maiden’s Legs last night.”

His shoulders drooped, and his tusks poked out further with his exaggerated frown. “It’s not as fun when it’s easy.”

Deimos stood from the desk, breaking up the conversation as the chair legs scraped over the hardwood. “Alright, let’s get to it then.”

Half an hour later, all four of us dressed for combat, strapped with weapons, and followed a tracking orb of blood through the city streets. My shadows enveloped us, hiding our group from curious eyes peeking out from alleyways.

Deimos took the lead, and his blood led us toward the ocean. As we neared the bay, a blanket of thick fog crept over our feet. With each step, it rose higher over our legs until it obscured the docks and boats gently floating on the water completely.

A low vibrational warbling infiltrated my ears as the tracking blood dissipated. That was our only warning before a stack of crates, hidden in the misty white shroud, clattered nearby.

Deimos halted, raising a fist in a signal to halt. Bellefy summoned shadow daggers into her palms, and Raaz reached over his shoulder for his ax.

A guttural, wet growl drifted through the fog.

Deimos tensed, turning back to face us until a second unique sound followed and froze him.

Chittering noises alerted us to another demon clicking madly at the first monster.

“Two?” Bellefy inhaled a soft gasp.

Heated blood coursed through my veins, energizing me and my unholy desire to rip and tear something apart. Taking my rage out on the beasts who burned the farmlands might mend the knife of grief wedged between my ribs.

Deimos took two steps back, pressing closer to mutter. “Since we can’t see them, we’ll need to devise a plan to draw them from the fog.”

“But that would take them back into the city. Shouldn’t we try to keep them on the wharf?” Bellefy countered.

I raised my hand between them and whispered, “Brace yourselves.”

Inhaling deeply, magic sparked over my skin. Then I pursed my lips, blowing out toward the sea.

A silent gust of wind picked up the dense fog, carrying away the swirling cloud of hazy white hindering our vision. In a matter of seconds, the wind swept away the fog, pushing it further away and back into the clutches of the black waves in the distance,

The fog peeled away like stage curtains, revealing two nightmarish fiends, each rivaling the size of a draft horse.

Feral delirium washed over me, and my pupils dilated when I scented blood in the air.

The demons mimicked scorpions in overall body shape, with red wriggling tentacles between their insectoid legs. Bulbous stingers full of demonic venom gleamed under the pale moonlight.

Their heads mirrored a humanoid skull with spider eyes and pin needle teeth. Their pinching, meaty claws shredded the flesh of a sailor caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Raaz didn’t wait for a signal from Deimos to attack. He lifted his axe high, bellowing as he rushed forward.

“Shit!” Bellefy hissed through her teeth. In the next second, she propelled herself after her companion.

The lesser demon on the left jerked its grotesque head up at the sound of an incoming attack. It belted out a wet, squelching roar that made my skin crawl.

Bellefy tossed two shadow daggers. One struck the roof of the creature's maw with a sickening crunch. The other landed in the center of one of the monster's many eyes.

The demon reared back, shrieking, before bashing its face into the ground. It writhed from side to side, attempting to dislodge the daggers from its horrid skull.

The second demon crawled over the sailor's corpse, hovering over the body as if protecting its meal. It hissed at Bellefy, leaving it distracted from Raaz running directly at the fiend with his axe raised high.

Raaz's axe dropped in one powerful swoop. The finely honed blade cleaved into the demon's back in a revolting crunch, causing a gurgling howl to escape the monster.

He laughed triumphantly before yanking his weapon from the creature's wound, oozing with bubbling black blood. With his eyes on his victorious strike, he failed to heed the demon's tail, arching forward in defense.

"Raaz!" Deimos flung himself forward, withdrawing his sword faster than a blink.

He heaved his sword upward to block the blow from the lesser demon's stinger. The force of his parry sliced the venomous bulb off in a spray of inky blood.

"Thanks," Raaz tossed out, keeping his eyes on the demon's claws.

Deimos turned his head away. "Don't mention it. Just watch out ___"

One of the second demon's tentacles bolted out, hitting Deimos in the ribs. The blunt force knocked him back, sending him sprawling on the damp ground.

"Are you alright?" I landed at his side, unsure of when I'd moved. Instinctively, my hands reached for his side.

He caught my wrist, pulling it away from the thin fabric of his black shirt. "I'll be fine. Let's focus on these vermin for now," he replied raggedly.

Deimos accepted my hand, and I pulled him to his feet.

Bellefy dropped and rolled over the ground, dodging the first demon's stinger. She rapidly tossed out three more daggers when she

popped back up, and each one hit their mark.

Raaz continued madly swinging at the second, beating the creature back with brute force and fury. With each successful blow, he butchered the creature beyond recognition.

Orange light exploded, brightening this side of the long wharf. The temperature rose as billowing fire spewed from the first demon's gaping maw.

My gut sank like a stone in water as images of the burning farm flashed behind my eyes.

Those demons ravaged the farmland and burned those who cared for it. The actions of the heinous vermin killed the boy, and he hadn't deserved that fate.

Bellefy screamed as flames erupted in her direction. She flung her arms up to protect herself, but a single lick from that hellfire would leave lasting damage.

I flung my arm out, fingers splayed wide. A shining golden barrier sprung up between Bellefy, and the fire rippled over the shield. Magic and hellfire crackled, sputtering in opposition.

As I stepped forward, I lifted my other arm. Shadows brushed over the cobblestone, crates, fishing nets, massive boats as they rocked on the water, and down from the nearby buildings.

I threw out every shadow that answered my call. When I clenched my fist and yanked my arm down, each writhing snake of darkness lashed out against the demon.

Pain lanced through the creature as it roared, and fire ceased spewing. Inky black ropes flared out and clamped the monster's jaw shut.

Black rage rose from within my chest, expanding throughout every cell in my body and spurring me on. Possessed by an unwavering hunger for revenge, I marched closer to the lesser demon, scrambling against the shadows, caging the horrendous body down.

In the corner of my eye, I registered Deimos and Raaz hacking the second demon to pieces. Sickly black blood splattered from their vicious butchering, followed by the sound of cutting and slicing. They cut the head off before it expelled hellfire and worked to dismember the grossly writhing tentacles and pinching claws.

Luminous light from the sun shields highlighted Bellefy's high cheekbones and pointed ears. The fear dissipated in her eyes when she noted my approach.

With the first demon's mouth secured and the flames dispersed, I dropped the shield.

Bellefy staggered back, shoulders shaking as she inhaled rapidly. The shadow dagger between her fingers dropped, dematerializing as black vapor before hitting the ground.

I stopped in front of the lesser demon, fastened to the ground with my shadows. Goosebumps flashed over my arms, instantly followed by the pricks of rising scales. And I didn't rein in the rising power this time.

A nasty snarl tore from my lips as my restraint slipped away.

Until a voice traveled through the creature, forcing me to halt my next blow.

"I... see... you..." Grating and low, the rasping voice of a man came from the demon's skull; a sound the beast couldn't make on its own. An ancient intelligence filled the once void eyes as someone inhabited the creature's conscience.

Despite never speaking in my visions, I knew that voice. It belonged to the villain summoning and corrupting demons to plague Bellmead.

Deimos froze at the vile whispering over the wind. I didn't see him when he turned from the second demon and found me face to face with the bound creature at my feet.

All my focus remained on the demon and the male speaking through it.

"I... know... you," he croaked. Each of its eight eyes blinked independently, zeroed in on me alone. The demon's body twitched, contorting oddly against the shadows that held it down. "You know... false gods are worshiped in song and wine... True gods require blood."

The energy under my skin ran cold, and I went rigid. Yet my warning sneer remained in place.

"Your wrath... is dark." A broken, wheezing laughter choked out of the demon.

I lifted my chin, towering over the demon. He wouldn't get the satisfaction of seeing me flinch at his words.

"Night Goddess of Death... won't you drink their blood with me?" The uneven tune grated on my ears and the words churned the contents of my stomach.

"I am the shadows, and I am the flame. I am the moon, and I am the sun. And I will be your death." Hestra's thunderous voice echoed through me as we spoke as one to the man hiding behind the demon.

"You?" he laughed again. "You are a prison... Inside a god is waiting... Only so much flesh can hold her before her divinity... shreds you apart... The vessel of death... only this and nothing more."

Deimos tensed as if he wanted to run to me, but had no control over his body. Raaz gaped, panting hard with his gore-stained axe between his hands. Bellefy stood in the middle halfway between me and Deimos like she was stuck, unable to look away.

"And who are you?" I hissed back through the growing fangs in my mouth. "A coward who summons demons to do his bidding. A nobody who hides behind the eyes of a fiend and kills innocents."

"I am the flame... that will block out the sun... After I rise... you'll want to join me... The Night Goddess... should sit on a throne beside... me..."

"Fuck. You." I ground the venomous words out.

When I locked onto the two largest bulging eyes in the center of the skull, I traveled through the distance separating me from the man, or creature, in hiding behind the lesser demon.

A vision flashed like broken shards of glass before me. Shattered images of blonde hair, light brown skin, and unholy crimson eyes came to light.

An unbidden gasp breached my lips, and I took an unsteady step back. My mind slammed back into place, jerking free from that unnerving connection.

"Are you... afraid?" The man asked, chuckling through the lesser demon.

His chattering laughter sparked a fresh wave of anger under my skin. The magical well of dark power spilled out of me, surging like

a hot and unstoppable volcano. That seeping power escaped, dancing over my skin as sparks of onyx lightning.

“You can’t frighten a nightmare.” And I unleashed that dark abyss of magic.

My power flooded outward as arms of burning shadows. Black flames of darkness scorched anything and everything they encountered.

Night-fire blasted the lesser demon apart. Ear-splitting shrieks filled the air in its futile attempt to flee.

My shadows held him down, screaming and thrashing as he died. Every disgusting fiber of the demon burned to ash, and cinders evaporated into the air, floating away into nothing more than unsavory memories.

Twenty-Eight



After disposing of the demon corpses, Raaz and Bellefy headed to the tavern for a drink. They encouraged Deimos to join them at The Wench's Legs. However, he seemed determined to follow me back to the house.

I smelled ash on my clothes and something vaguely sulfuric. All I wanted was to get my filthy clothes off and scrub away the evidence of those hellish vermin.

If I could scrub that bastard's words from my brain, I would have done that too.

Deimos slammed the door shut behind us as we entered the house. His fast steps pounded on the floorboards after me, barely muffled by the hallway rug.

A firm hand wrapped around my arm, stopping me mid step. He wrenched open a door to the left and a second after, pulled me into the darkness. The door shut, followed by the click of the lock.

My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and, with a thought, I magically willed the candles in the room to life. Light exploded over the room and a moment later, the hearth burst to life with a gentle orange and yellow fire, showing me the surrounding details.

This room was larger than my guest room, but most of the details remained the same. Wallpapered walls covered in ornate tapestries and framed photos, dark wood furniture with luxurious detailing, a crushed red velvet on the couch across the fireplace and hand-painted gold lines on the dressers and four-poster bed frame.

But the honey-spice scent clinging to the air was familiar.

Deimos had pulled me into his room.

"I don't do this," he started, capturing my attention. Anxiety lined his face as though this conversation stressed him out.

"Do what?"

Deimos dropped his head into his hands, rubbing his face. His palms stifled a brooding groan. “Never in my life have I felt this way for someone. I’ve had women come and go throughout my life. None of them has ever made me feel as though I’m going insane. I’m in agony.”

Deimos rolled forward, stopping in front of me, hardly an inch from touching. My breath hitched as his warmth cascaded over me.

“You are a storm. Devastatingly violent, powerful. And in every way, you are utterly magnificent. You swept into my life so suddenly, I couldn’t have prepared myself.”

“Deimos—”

“You’re foreboding, off-putting, strange, and wholly terrifying. Sometimes I wonder if you’ve put a spell on me because of the warmth I feel in my chest when I see you. When I think of you, it makes me want to burn down the world.” His voice was strained, barely more than a whisper. “It should terrify me. The things I would do for you. It should concern me that I’d light everything on fire just to see you smile.”

Our eyes didn’t waver as he made his admission. I couldn’t look anywhere else as his words washed over me.

“Hurting you will forever be the last thing I want to do. I’d promise to never open my stupid mouth again unless I had your permission to speak.”

Whatever we were, whatever it was we were doing together, it was new. And his speech changed things.

My body moved on its own, inherently seeking his presence. My arms reached for him, and our faces met in the middle. His lips closed over mine, sending a warm chaos through my chest.

Deimos groaned, sounding half pleased and half in pain.

Something sticky met my fingers.

I broke the kiss and lifted my hand to my face. Fresh, warm blood coated my fingers.

“You idiot,” I said before taking a step back. I lifted my bloodied fingers into his face. “Was this from when the demon struck you?”

Deimos’s eyes flicked sheepishly from the blood to my annoyed expression. He ruefully shrugged, mouth opening and

closing as he blinked at me.

Closing my eyes, I inhaled to calm my irritation. I lifted my hand and pointed at the adjacent door I assumed went to the bathroom.

“Go.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Deimos nodded.

I listened to his footsteps as he disappeared through the bathroom door. Shaking my head, I eventually followed him.

I walked in on Deimos, lifting his black shirt away from his body. If not for the deep gash on his ribs and the blood smeared across his skin, his abs might have stolen my full attention.

The way his muscles flexed when he tossed his shirt into the corner made my racing thoughts catch on fire.

“Sit.” I pointed to the edge of his oversized porcelain tub and peeled my eyes from his body.

Snapping my fingers and focusing my power turned the faucet on. In seconds, scalding water poured out. The splashing water filled the silence as steam rose in the air.

Deimos sat on the edge of the bath, watching me intently the entire time.

I didn’t speak while moving my fingers over his wound, focusing on the injury instead of the warm pressure from his gaze.

Golden light from my fingers met his injury. Strings of sunlight knitted his flesh back together, melding it until not even a scar remained.

Deimos inhaled once the gash vanished. The color returned to his cheeks, now flushed as steam permeated the room.

Unthinking, I pressed my palm to the now unblemished skin. I relished the potent heat radiating from his body.

His fingers wrapped over my wrist, then pulled my hand from his side. We both glanced down at his blood on my hand.

Deimos pulled my finger between his lips, wrapping them around the base of my digit. And he sucked his blood from my skin.

My lungs stopped working.

He loves me. He completely and wholly loves me, I thought.

I don't know when it happened or how. Gods, I couldn't even wrap my brain around the *why* of it all. But I knew, deeply and with every fiber of my being, that Deimos loved me.

There were no words exchanged between us.

One moment we stared at each other, lost in an endless sea of roaring, all-encompassing desire. Next, we crashed together. Hands frantically tearing at clothes and mouths fighting for dominance.

It seemed like we weren't close enough, no matter what we did.

I wanted to be under his skin and in his bones. I wanted his blood to flow through me and mine through him. If we could have merged into one being, we would have.

Deimos didn't say the words out loud.

I'm glad he didn't.

I couldn't have said them back. Not yet.

These feelings I had for him were raw and unstable. But they were hot and burned me from within more than any fire ever would.

Deimos unfastened the Thanaten leather corset I wore before pulling off the black satin shirt underneath. His hands passed over my skin as reverently as a man worshiping a work of art.

Dropping to his knees, Deimos pressed fervent kisses to my stomach and hips. His fingers dipped into the waist of my pants before pushing them down my legs. That sensual mouth followed, kissing my thighs.

Those wicked molten silver eyes watched my every move as I stepped into the bathtub. He remained suspended, admiring the water licking at my body while I sank under the surface.

I lifted a hand, curling my finger as I beckoned him to join me.

Only then did Deimos move. Rising from his knees where I left him to his full impressive height. When he dropped his pants, my core flushed with heat at the sight of his straining cock.

Deimos climbed in on the opposite end of the bath, unmoved by the extreme temperature of the bath water. A cambion raised in hellfire wouldn't flinch at mortal fire.

But I could bring him to his knees with the heat between my thighs. I smiled like a mischievous feline at the thought.

When he noticed my grin, Deimos met me with one of his own. A dimple appeared in his cheek, and I caught a flash of fang between his lips.

Water rippled as Deimos languidly moved closer. Wordlessly, I spread my legs under the surface.

His burning body, slippery from water droplets, pressed to mine. Chest to chest, he sealed his mouth on my neck, causing my head to arch back.

Delicious shivers raced over my skin. My breathing quickened thanks to his exciting kisses dancing over my neck and chest, lower and lower, until he caught one pert nipple between his teeth over the water level.

His gentle bite and tongue licking over my breasts evoked breathy moans from my lips. Then my thighs flexed when a finger met my sex.

Deimos rubbed the digit over my slit, carefully probing before adding another finger. He spread me open, rubbing over my folds while avoiding my clit.

Needing him to touch me where I buzzed with desire, my hips rolled to meet his fingers.

Instead of obliging my needs, he chuckled against my breast.

“Deimos. Please.” I curled my hand over the back of his head, panting hard. My blood vibrated under my skin with my pressing urge to have this man inside of me.

“Please what, darling?” His silver eyes flashed at me.

The evil smile on his lips drove me wild.

As if to drive home the point that he was in charge right now, he flicked his tongue slowly over my pebbled nipple.

“Ah!” My hips jerked against his hand.

A cruel bark of laughter burst from his lips. Then he shoved a finger inside of me.

“Tell me what you want from me.” He bit my nipple again and my pussy clenched on his unmoving finger. “I’d be more than happy to oblige your requests.”

Make love to me.

“Fuck me. Please.”

“Hm. Have I ever mentioned how gratifying it is to hear a princess beg for me?” he mused, hot breath brushing over my sensitive flesh.

“Shut up.”

Deimos added another finger inside of me, yet kept them both unmoving, simply stretching me. He wanted me to feel his presence within me and know that this moment belonged to him.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head. I tangled my fingers in his hair, scraping my clawed nails over his scalp. He growled low in the back of his throat at the sensation.

“I’d tell you to be nice, darling, but I’m not entirely sure you’re capable of it.” Wicked mirth danced in the depths of his eyes.

“Shut up,” I repeated while rocking my hips against his hand to give myself what I wanted.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Deimos withdrew his fingers entirely, and I groaned in protest. “Beg for me, princess. Beg for my cock to stretch and fill that pretty, tight pussy. Maybe I’ll give you what you want, then.”

“I thought you would do anything for me.” My breathless argument fell short.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear please and thank you every once in a while.” Deimos palmed my pussy, enough for a wave of pleasure to rush through my core. “It’s nice to know you appreciate me and my cock.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed.

“I know you want to,” he countered effortlessly.

One more pass of his hand over my clit elicited a bolt of lightning through me.

“Please, please, fuck me. Deimos, please. I want you. I want your cock. Please, I need you inside of me. Now.” Every ounce of my pride evaporated into the steamy air surrounding us as I gave up the pretense of playing a game and willingly caved to his demands.

Both of my hands curled in his hair, and I pulled his face to mine. I held him close, whimpering at the presence of his thick cock nestled against my pussy. “Please. Please. Please.”

“Fuck, darling. How can I deny you when you beg so prettily for me?” Deimos exhaled slowly, nostrils flaring. His cock twitched

against me as he savored my begging, and he absorbed the unabashed lust etched in my expression.

Without warning, my breath lodged in my throat as he slipped his cock inside of me. Simultaneously, we sighed with relief at our joining.

Deimos held my face, passing his thumb over my bottom lip. His eyes riveted on my mouth. "Show me those dangerous little fangs, Nevar."

Allowing a fraction of the transformation through, my canines grew longer.

Deimos pressed his thumb to the tip of a pointed tooth, pricking his thumb. He then smeared drops of his blood over my lips and smiled with animalistic savagery before slamming his mouth into mine.

I threaded my fingers through his dark, wavy hair and his arms wrapped around me, fingers digging deliciously into my skin. He pulled back and thrust into me so deeply stars burst behind my closed eyes. He buried his face against my neck and grazed his teeth over my collarbone.

His mouth converged on my neck where my throat and shoulder met, and his elongated fangs sank into my skin. The remarkable euphoria that flooded through my limbs, expanding from my core, opened my eyes.

An instantaneous and jarring orgasm ripping through my core caught me off guard. It was a blood warming, jaw dropping, bone shuddering, toe curling all-encompassing climax that sent my very soul flying from my physical body.

My mind floated through a sparkling abyss of colors and otherworldly pleasurable sensations. It exploded from between my thighs, sending my consciousness soaring through a void where nothing but Deimos and what he made me feel existed. He was everywhere around me and everything I felt.

His tongue licking the blood off my neck brought me back down. My legs wrapped around his waist as my arms tightened around his shoulders.

Deimos continued pounding into me, sending water sloshing over the edge of the tub and splashing onto the hardwood floor.

"Nine Hells!" he roared.

I felt the hot release of his cum spilling into me. Broken whimpers passed my lips as he marked me in the most intimate way, filling me with his essence when I'd allowed no one else that privilege before.

Deimos peppered reassuring kisses over my cheek and neck while my fingers idly ran through his hair. His cock remained settled within me as we basked in the afterglow. Our bodies remained entwined under the pleasant water, and I almost didn't want to let him go.

In comfortable silence, Deimos pulled out. We shared content smiles before he pulled me around into his lap.

I didn't think I could blush after all we'd done. Yet when he lathered soap onto my head and washed my hair, my cheeks burned pink. Shutting my eyes, I leaned into his massaging hands.

Eventually, I broke the silence. "What now?"

"Well, if you give me a few minutes, I'm sure I can go again."

"Deimos." I laughed despite myself.

Once he rinsed the soap from my hair, I spun around in the water. Placing my hands on his chest, I drew invisible patterns on his golden skin. He placed his hands on my hips, his smile faltering.

"We're no closer to finding him. Whoever he is, he knows about you now. He knows you're here in Bellmead and that we're coming for him. I suspect he'll summon more demons."

Deimos lifted his hand from my waist and out of the water. He cupped my cheeks and pulled my face closer to his. A shuddered breath, a sign of his internal conflict, left him when he pressed his forehead into mine.

"I worry that he'll stop going after aristocrats and will try to hunt you down."

"Even if he found me, I don't think he could hurt me. Hestra wouldn't allow anything to happen to me. I'm sure he'll keep targeting citizens to whatever nefarious end he has." I pressed a reassuring kiss to his lips.

"If you're certain of it." He kept his hold on my face as if he needed to hold me, to take in my scent and ensure I remained with him in the present moment.

That I was safe.

“So, we keep hunting corrupted demons and following whatever clues we can. Until we find him and stop him.”

“It’s as much as we can do.” Deimos released my face. Sighing, he leaned back against the tub. His hands landed on my thighs under the water, thumbs lazily caressing my skin.

I gnawed on my bottom lip. Another thought weighed on my mind, and I almost wished he were still fucking me senseless to avoid it.

“What’s bothering you, darling?” Deimos picked up on my shift in mood instantly. He caught my chin with a finger, lifting my face to meet his eyes.

“What do we do on the next full moon, Deimos?” I voiced my pressing concern. “Am I to vanish to the temple each full moon until we find him? Things are only going to get worse, and I don’t want to vanish for a few nights and miss something. Not again.”

Pressing his curled fist against his chin, Deimos turned his mind inward. His silver eyes danced as he jumped through the ideas bouncing around his skull.

I waited patiently for Deimos to come back and speak his thoughts. It gave me time to admire the beautiful lines of his face during his concentration.

“I have some old demon texts.” Deimos broke my admiration of his glorious muscles, his words diverting my attention.

“Really?” I’d love to get my hands on those.

“Since arriving in the mortal realm, I’ve devoted a great deal of time to finding everything mortals knew of demons and the Nine Hells. Before I met Raaz, and Bellefy, I already had a small collection of books left behind by Archdemons or mortals who’d studied creatures from the Nine Hells. Books and texts from hundreds of years ago.”

“You think there’s something in them that can help me with —?” I hesitated to say her name, as if it might summon her consciousness.

“Perhaps. Most of the texts are in the ancient language of the demons. Very difficult to read,” he winced.

“Even for a cambion?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “If I remember correctly, there might be a binding spell in one of my books. And I’m also remembering it being a gruesome process.”

“A binding spell.” My eyes flew open, and my heart rate spiked again.

“Please, darling, I don’t want to get your hopes up. I might be wrong. Or it’s simply too dangerous. They originally made binding spells to control demon spirits inhabiting mortal bodies. I don’t know if it would work on a god.”

Water splashed as I pressed my body flush with his. Deimos inhaled sharply, feeling my chest against his and my thrumming heart within.

“But, if there’s a chance?” Elation swelled inside of me. A bright hope that made me choke back tears.

“You want to take it.”

“Yes.” If I ever wanted to be free again, I had to.

“Alright. We keep hunting demons until we find that evil bastard. And I’ll go through my demon texts to find the binding spell.” Deimos relented.

I knew he would.

“Thank you. Gods, thank you.” I kissed him again. Without warning. Without thinking about it. I simply had to.

For the first time since my death, I hoped with all the remaining optimism I had in me that if this worked, if Deimos could help me bind Hestra, then someday I could return home to my kingdom, to my parents, and my sister.

Only when I fulfilled my purpose here, and only if I could keep my family safe from me... only then could I go home.

Twenty-Nine



“Oh, fucking Nine Hells. Darling, you’re so good at that.” Deimos tightened his fist in my hair as my head bobbed on his length. I relished the sound of his moans in my ears.

His hard cock pulsed in my mouth as I caressed my tongue over his hot skin, enjoying the heady taste of him. He yanked back the blanket with his free hand and my eyes snapped up, meeting his intoxicated stare.

The thick length pulsed as I swallowed him down my throat.

“Nine Hells, Nevar,” Deimos groaned from the wet sensation of my mouth on his erection. He couldn’t look away from the sight of my lips wrapped around his girth, slipping up and down.

When I pressed my palm into his balls and massaged them, his thighs tensed around me. He grabbed my head with both hands, urging my mouth faster over his cock. His pelvis tipped forward, forcing his length to the back of my throat repeatedly.

The force of his thrusts made me brace my hands on his thighs. My eyes rolled back, and I relented my control as he relentlessly pounded my throat.

His thighs flexed under my hands, and I loved the latent feeling of the power in his body, from his strength to the hellfire heating his skin.

Deimos fucked my face, breathing hard and roaring with his pleasure. My arousal dripped from my pussy, coating the inside of my thighs while erotic heat flooded my veins.

This wasn’t the first time we’d woken up clawing at one another.

In the past two weeks since the night on the wharf, much had changed in my life. Starting with my relationship with Deimos and the routine we found.

We spent nights hunting lesser demons. Since killing the two fiends near the bay, six more had appeared.

The bastard summoning them didn't speak again or provide further clues about his identity. We hunted demons blindly, but that wouldn't stop us.

Raaz and Bellefy knew the truth about me now. All of it. I'd sat them down one night over several bottles of wine and told them my truth. Much to Bellefy's absolute horror and her drunken tears by the end.

But it helped bridge the gap in our group. After two weeks of hunting demons together, living together, sharing meals and trips to the market, I felt welcomed into their tight-knit misfit family.

Most of us slept at odd hours. Deimos and I fucked and shared a bed each night. Without uttering a word, he'd somehow moved me into his room.

I certainly didn't mind. Not when he mapped each curve and dip of my body with his mouth until he intimately knew every inch of me.

But it also meant our friends were aware of our *relationship* now.

Right as Deimos picked up the pace, grunting and breathing fast with his incoming release, someone banged on the door.

"Fuck off!" Deimos bellowed.

"Nevar!" Bellefy pounded on Deimos's bedroom door again. "You'll want to hear this."

"She's not here. Go away!" He stared down at me, and despite his complaints, he loosened his grip.

"Shut up, Deimos! I know you've got the princess in there." Bellefy slammed her fist on his door once more. "Come down to the lounge, Nevar. I have something about home that you'll want to hear."

My mouth instantly popped off his cock, and strings of saliva kept us connected.

"News of home?" I called back, twisting from the bed to face the door.

"Better hurry and get dressed," Bellefy replied, then her steps faded down the hall.

I whipped around to Deimos again. Confusion lined my face as I stared down at him. “What does she mean?”

“Darling, I just woke up to you sucking my cock. I have absolutely no idea what she’s talking about.” He dropped his head back onto his pillow with a defeated sigh. “But you better go find out what it is. I can feel you shaking with excitement.”

I leapt from the bed before he finished his sentence.

I’d been thinking of home ever since Deimos told me of the binding spell. He’d spent all his free time in his study flipping through old texts in search of it. If I could read the demon language, I would have helped him in every waking moment we weren’t demon hunting.

Deimos slid off the bed while I slipped a long-sleeved, backless dress over my head. The soft fabric melded to my toned limbs and soft curves well enough.

I’d stocked up my wardrobe with some of my remaining gold on a trip to the market with Bellefy. She’d agreed with me that human craftsmanship couldn’t compare to the elven weaver back in Gwathendor, and I enjoyed having that in common with her. It gave us a bond I couldn’t have with the others.

I was glad she got over her urge to glorify me as a member of the royal family. After weeks of killing demons together and coming home at dawn covered in blood, we were simply friends on even ground. It surprised me how much I needed that after all my years away from home.

As soon as I’d slipped on a pair of dark leather boots made for combat, I was out the door. I brushed my fingers through the tangles in my hair while racing down the stairs.

Bellefy sat at the table in the lounge, chewing on her thumbnail. She jumped to her feet as soon as I appeared in the doorway.

“What news? Good or bad?” Lights in the room flickered and shadows writhed in the corners as I didn’t bother containing my power.

“Well, it’s not news of the kingdom.” Bellefy crossed the space and grabbed one of my hands. “I spotted a Thanaten ship approaching the bay.”

“A ship?” My brows rose halfway up my forehead as I gawked at her.

“Yes! A Thanaten trading ship is coming.”

“Oh gods. This is wonderful!” A massive grin split my lips.

“I figured we have some time before it docks. But if you want to write a letter to your family, now’s the time. I’m going to write one for my parents. There hasn’t been a Thanaten trading ship in Bellmead for almost a year. We might also find some goods from home to purchase.” The hopeful twinkle in Bellefy’s rich chestnut eyes matched my growing excitement.

“I’m sure your parents will be ecstatic to hear from you. I’ll write a letter and we can go into town,” I told her.

She released my hands suddenly, clearing her throat. Her eyes went to the door as she took a step back. I looked up to find Deimos smiling at us, fully dressed and ready to start his day.

“A Thanaten ship?” he asked, stepping into the room. He placed a hand on my shoulder, which forced me to contain the shiver his touch provoked.

“Yes. We’re going to ask them to deliver letters back home. Would you like to accompany us?” Bellefy offered. Her eyes drifted to the wall of windows overlooking the garden and the midday sunlight.

“I suppose I can put off demon research for a few hours.” Deimos looked from Bellefy to me. “Would it make you happy, my darling?”

Deimos had seen the monster lurking under my skin and suffered through my wrath, yet he seemed devoted to my happiness. He granted me the filthiest and most vicious desires of my heart.

That look in his eyes when he gazed at me—*oh gods*—it made my heart flutter madly. This half-man, half-demon would kill for me, maybe even die for me.

He adores me.

“Absolutely. I want to send a letter home.” Biting back tears, I replaced my unsteady emotions with cool reserve. “I only ever see my sister in dreams. Those are wild and unpredictable. I need to write for her, and my... my parents...”

“I understand. Use the ink and paper in my study. Write everything you can think of.” He let go of my hands, freeing me to go write.

Deimos addressed Bellefy again. “We can leave as soon as you’ve both got your letters ready.”

I was too excited to linger. Without knowing when the ship would dock or how long it would remain in Bellmead, I had to hurry.

The anticipation of writing a letter to my family made my nerves jittery. My limbs trembled and my hands shook unsteadily with a pen in my fingers.

I hoped Mother, Father, and Solara could read my feverish handwriting. Unfortunately, it almost looked like a chicken’s scratching instead of the carefully trained penmanship of a princess.

They wouldn’t care, I knew. So, I focused on pouring all the words I could onto paper.

Raaz returned to the house from gathering whatever intelligence he could in the city. Aside from rumors and idle gossip, he had nothing new to share. Bellefy asked him to join us, but he declined. Preferring to sleep after spending all day in the city.

I wrote individual letters for my family, keeping them as short, sweet, and concise as possible. Not only for my parents and sister, but letters to my aunt Kla’ris, uncle La’ran, and his daughter, my cousin Dumara.

Time passed in the blink of an eye. Once Bellefy and I had our letters addressed and sorted into envelopes, we were ready to leave.

Deimos joined us, holding the front door open and bowing with a dramatic flourish as we departed.

The streets bustled with busy citizens going about their day. After my rain in the farmlands, their crops were already growing back with unprecedented speed. You’d never know that people were going missing, and monsters lurked in the shadows.

Maybe the citizens of Bellmead pretended nothing was wrong. If it gave them peace of mind, I suppose I couldn’t blame them. What could they do when they learned of someone going missing under bloody circumstances?

Children ran screaming and laughing underfoot. Horses and carts rumbled over the stone streets. Women dressed in colorful

finery giggled as they traveled from store to store.

I'd stopped wearing my cloak to hide my ears. Naturally, it brought stares. People couldn't keep their eyes to themselves any time Bellefy and I went into the city. They seemed to think elves were something worth openly staring at.

A unique commodity compared to the other well-known races.

It never bothered me.

Growing up as a princess, my entire life was subject to stares. My unique Mithran and Thanaten features made me stand out.

In Gwathendor, the shadow elves could tell me apart from my green eyes. In Laernear, sun elves knew my white hair made me unlike them.

One foot in both worlds, but always different wherever I went.

With his glamor, Deimos fit in perfectly. He taught me the spell, but I didn't want to use it.

The early afternoon sky was picturesque, bright blue and dotted with sparse, white, fluffy clouds. A cacophonous squawking of seagulls told us we were near the sea before the heavy scent of saltwater filled our noses.

Fishwives selling their husbands catch of the day giggled at Deimos on our way to the wharf. A few of the women fanned themselves as he walked by.

Like a true wicked rogue, he shared a charming smile and politely nodded.

One woman blushed and turned away as Bellefy passed. Bellephine's proud smirk didn't go unnoticed. She was more of a scoundrel than Deimos.

At once, my eyes and ears perked up when the ocean came into view.

Magic bristled over my skin as my underlying connection to the shadows rose to the front. A deep breath expanded my lungs and the stone of anxiety sitting on my chest vanished.

Black sails billowed in the gentle wind coming from the sea. A touch of shadows lingered in the making of the entire vessel, from the hull to the deck, from the ropes to the sails. A massive ship of darkness sat imposingly among smaller vessels.

Ominous to the citizens of Bellmead, who warily side-eyed the ship, but for me and Bellefy, this was a taste of home.

Thirty



Dozens of ships filled the bay, returning from their time at sea. The Dockmaster met all the trading ships at the front of the wharf, going over their stock and ensuring everything was in order before allowing them to unload their goods. Passengers wandered off the boats, warily heading through the crowd toward the city.

It reminded me of the night I landed in Bellmead, and the first time I'd met Deimos.

As if sensing my thoughts about him, he caught my eye. A reassuring smile graced his lips as we approached the Thanaten ship. The back of his hand briefly caressed mine.

Bellefy strained her head, peering over the crowd exiting the dock. She plowed through the people congesting the dock, uncaring of their disgruntled faces and curses. She gripped her envelope so tightly I'm surprised it didn't rip in half.

"Captain!" she shouted, waving her arms. "Where's the captain?"

The billowing black sails and dark hull of the Thanaten vessel blocked out the sky as we approached. Sailors called at one another as they hoisted the sails, while others prepared to unload their cargo. It was a large, impressive ship that hummed with the power of shadows.

A black tricorne hat turned in Bellefy's direction. As the crowd parted for us, the man under the hat came into view.

The captain was tall and well-muscled, with dark gray skin. He'd shaved his silvery moonlight hair on the sides with a thick, long braid down his back. He had one hazel eye with the other covered by an eye patch.

Like the rest of his crew, he wore dark colors and black Thanaten leathers. A grimace set in his expression and his body

remained tense with the stress of dealing with the Dockmaster and judging onlookers.

He caught sight of Bellefy first, taking her in from head to toe as she rushed forward.

“A Thanaten out this far?” The captain’s voice was grating from years of barking orders at his crew. “How can I help you?”

Panting and smiling widely, Bellefy presented her envelope.

The captain’s brow rose into his hat. Some of the unpleasantness on his face vanished when he sighed.

“Mail delivery?” His rough hand rubbed over the back of his neck. “I’m not sure we’re equipped for that.”

Bellefy’s face fell before she uttered a single word. Her hands dropped a fraction, lowering the envelope she clutched fervently.

My jaw clenched, and my eyes flared at the disregard from the captain. Anger shot through my tensing muscles.

“What about a letter to the palace?” My voice projected over half the dock.

Thanaten sailors unloading cargo stopped in their tracks. The captain’s eyes snapped up as he peered around Bellefy.

He bodily shuddered at the sight of me.

I lifted my chin, peering down my nose at him even though he stood half a head taller than me. When I stopped next to Bellefy, the captain’s throat bobbed as he swallowed hard.

His pupils dilated, and the hint of a smile jerked his lips.

Every Thanaten sailor, including the captain, dropped, heads bowed low and knees thumping on the solid planks of the docks. It drew attention as everyone in the vicinity brazenly stared at the spectacle.

“Princess Nevar, I am honored to be in your presence.” The captain sprung up again. He swiftly caught my hand, taking me aback.

With a lascivious grin, he pressed his lips to the back of my hand.

A wave of heat spread through the air from Deimos’s direction, and the warmth of hellfire tickled the back of my neck. Though I felt him pressing closer, I chose not to look back at him.

“And you are?” I drawled, slipping my hand from the captain’s grasp.

The captain pulled his hat off, bowing again with a flourish before proclaiming, “I’m Captain Wayne Blackeye of the Crow’s Wing.” He gestured with his hat to the ship.

“Impressive,” I mock purred. “It would please me greatly if you would see our letters safely escorted back to Gwathendor.”

Captain Blackeye grinned like a fat cat with a mouse in its paw. He barked at his sailors kneeling before me. “Get up, you lot. Back to work! You want to dazzle our princess, don’t you?”

Each one of them nearly fumbled, racing to be seen hard at work. For their benefit, I nodded and smiled at their effort, acting with all the decorum my mother instilled in me.

“For you, princess,” Captain Blackeye wagged his brow suggestively, “it would be my most sacred mission. I’d do anything to *please* you.”

Deimos stepped forward and my hand lifted from my side, subtly blocking him from getting any closer.

Without breaking eye contact with the captain, I said, “I appreciate your efforts, Captain Blackeye. Can I entrust you with getting my letters to Umbra?”

“Certainly, your highness—”

“Her letter too,” I interrupted him, nodding at Bellefy.

His one good eye briefly flicked to Bellefy again. His smile almost faltered before he turned his full attention to me once more. “Of course. Anything the royal family asks of me is my duty to handle with care.”

Taking Bellefy’s letter from her hand, I maintained a reserved expression while handing them over to Captain Blackeye. I snatched my fingers back before he curled his over mine.

“Your highness, would you honor me and my men by joining us for dinner on the ship tonight? We have delicacies and wines imported from the capital.”

Deimos pressed into my back, flush against me like an imposing shadow. I didn’t know what came over him, as he placed a possessive hand on my hip. Even from behind, I sensed his burning eyes on the captain.

I opened my lips to respond, but never had the chance to answer.

A short, paunchy human with sparse white hair on his head stepped forward. His reddened cheeks took in the captain before completely ignoring him to beam up at me. His brown eyes glinted behind his golden monocle, and his red and gold finery told me he was a local member of the city's aristocracy.

"Pardon the intrusion. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation. Are you truly a princess?" He nervously glanced around at the elves surrounding him. Licking his lips, he faced me, eyeing the pointed tips of my ears. "An elven princess?"

"She is." Deimos spoke up, increasing his grip on my hip.

Internally, I rolled my eyes at him.

The energy rising from Deimos truly baffled me. He knew I didn't need his help. Not with monsters or men.

Without drawing attention, I nudged my elbow into his abdomen for him to take the protective aura down a notch.

"Yes," Captain Blackeye agreed, reinserting himself into the conversation. "You are in the presence of a true jewel from the kingdom of Gwathendor. Born in our capital city of Umbra, you, my good sire, have the luck of witnessing our Crown Princess and heir to the throne."

"A princess." The man sighed with awe as he took a long second to admire me.

I felt like an object for a show in an exhibition of rarities.

"This is our stunning, jaw-dropping, beautiful majesty, Her Royal Highness, Princess Nevar Solen-Mor'gen of Gwathendor!" Blackeye proclaimed, tossing his arms wide.

Irritation rose into my mind from the base of my spine like claws running up my back and over my scalp. Vicious instincts to hiss and bare my teeth at the men on the verge of pawing at me with their feigning worship reared to the surface.

If Captain Blackeye spoke another word, I'd rip his head off with my bare teeth and shred his flesh from his bones.

"Nevar." Deimos's imperceptible whisper flooded my veins with soothing heat. The writhing tendrils of power in my chest settled down as I absorbed the warmth at my back.

At once, every flexing muscle in my body preparing to attack eased. I took a deep breath in before reaffirming the smile on my face.

“It’s getting late, and we have prior arrangements to see to. Perhaps next time, Captain Blackeye. We appreciate your effort towards the crown. I’m sure my father, the king, will appreciate you for getting this into his hands.”

“Yes, of course, but—”

“If I may,” the human pushed back into the situation. All eyes landed on the red-faced man, smiling with giddy excitement. “Your highness, I’d like to invite you to a ball on behalf of the Warden of Bellmead.”

An invisible shimmer of magic danced over my skin. My ears perked up as ideas sparked in my mind.

“Well, as I was saying, sir—?”

“Lord Hayden Fredericks!” He spat his name out as one running word.

“Lord Fredericks,” I reiterated, “we have prior arrangements to meet.”

“Oh, no! The ball isn’t tonight!” His head shook as he inserted himself between me and Captain Blackeye.

“The city Warden is having this ball in two weeks. Let me extend an invitation on behalf of his lordship, Silas Devora.” Lord Fredericks splayed a hand on his chest and dipped into a brief bow.

Deimos dropped his hand from my waist. Our eyes met, sharing the same thought when he stepped around me.

He put his hand out for the much shorter human lord. “Actually, the princess might have time for the event. You can send the invitation to her current place of residence.”

Lord Fredericks shimmied with delight as he accepted the address Deimos shared.

Streaks of pink and purple spread over the horizon as the sun sank below the ocean. The golden orb appeared to dip into the water of the bay as the dome of the sky darkened.

Before I knew it, Lord Fredericks kissed the back of my hand and waddled with a pep in his step down the docks. I’m sure in no time he would spread word that I was here in the city. Not only

would the Warden know I was here, but the rest of their nobility as well.

Captain Blackeye inhaled, preparing to sidle up to me at the first chance he could.

Deimos blocked him at once, firmly inserting himself between me and the slinking captain.

“If you’ll excuse us, Captain, I must escort the princess to her next engagement.” Deimos wrapped an arm around my shoulder. He shared a glance with Bellefy, silently giving a command.

“Thanks again for accepting our letters, Captain Blackeye. Here’s some gold for the trouble.” Her voice faded away as Deimos ushered me from the docks.

I held my tongue, though I bristled with something scathing to say. I didn’t appreciate him injecting himself so arrogantly into my conversation with the Thanaten captain or the human lord.

Of all people, Deimos knew I didn’t need his help.

In a blur of movement, he turned us down an isolated alleyway. My lips parted to complain until he pulled me around another corner.

I realized that we’d left Bellefy behind at the bustling wharf. We were completely alone in a darkened alley away from the commotion of the bay.

Unexpectedly, Deimos pressed his hard body into me, trapping me against the alley wall. He wedged a leg between my thighs, rubbing it against my soft center.

When I gasped at the sudden friction, his mouth captured mine.

His kiss was hot and fervent, urgently moving against my lips as if he needed to meld into me. When his tongue flicked over my bottom lip, I promptly parted my mouth for him. He slid his tongue over mine, drawing a soft groan from the back of my throat.

I pulled away, moaning when he ground his thigh against me. My hands flew up, grasping at his shoulders to brace myself.

“What’s that about?” I panted. The raging fire in his eyes evoked wanton heat in my blood.

“Those filthy bastards were practically drooling all over you. That disgusting captain and the little human lord don’t know just how glorious you are. They don’t deserve to be in your presence,”

Deimos growled against my neck. His teeth nipped at the tender skin, causing my hips to spasm from spreading pleasure.

“My, my,” I crooned at him while curling my fingers into his hair. “Deimos, are you jealous?”

He scoffed, and the hot air from his breath danced over my throat. Though he didn’t stop trailing his lips in a delicious pattern to my shoulder. There was nothing subtle about the hardness in the front of his pants jutting against my stomach.

“I saw you smiling at those fishwives, if anyone should be jealous—”

“I’m not jealous.” His head snapped up as he snarled. The vicious sound had an erotic shiver dancing along my spine.

Beastly and dangerous.

Deimos reached for my hip. My breath hitched as he furiously pulled up the skirt of my dress. The material gathered around my waist and a cool breeze brushed over my bare legs.

His palm cupped my pussy, sending his breath hissing between his teeth from what he felt there.

“So wet already, darling.” Without another word, Deimos slipped a finger inside of me.

“Ah, fuck!” My thighs tensed, and my head fell back into the brick wall.

I clawed at his shoulders while my hips rocked on his hand. His finger curled wickedly inside of me while he massaged my clit with his palm.

“See, what’s there to be jealous of? I know who this—” he added another finger to my slick pussy, making me cry out, “—belongs to. You’re wet for me, and only me. Those fools could never please a god. Not like I can.”

“Oh, shut up.” I grabbed his face, then used my mouth to silence him.

His tongue tangled with mine, sharing saliva, and stealing each other’s breath. The taste of his mouth on mine drove me wild.

Deimos sucked my tongue into his mouth, carefully scraping his teeth over it. Those sloppy, rushed kisses paired with the coiling fire in my core sent my mind into paradise.

He broke the kiss, entirely out of breath. My head spun, but so did the rest of the world.

He withdrew his fingers from between my legs, then grabbed my hips to spin me around. One of his hands kept my dress bunched around my waist as the other rapidly unfastened the front of his pants.

He used one knee to shove my legs further apart, and I braced my palms on the wall. My stomach tensed and my lashes fluttered shut in anticipation.

I sucked in a breath to calm my racing heart as Deimos positioned his cock against my slit, sticky and wet with my arousal.

One skilled thrust slammed me against the wall. His cock roused the flames inside of me, kindling the carnal heat that roused the electric tension between us. My entire being smoldered from his expert grinding and the enticing friction of our frenzied movement.

He might deny it, but I knew he was staking his claim over me. Perhaps it wasn't entirely jealousy, but something closer to possession.

Deimos felt the need to take me, roughly and passionately, in a secluded, filthy alley. My shadows would keep us hidden from anyone who might stumble onto our ardent tryst in the streets, but he wouldn't have cared if anyone saw.

Deimos voraciously desired me in every way, and he'd thoroughly seduced me. I didn't care where we were or how he took me. As long as he was inside of me, fucking me senseless, I was in bliss.

"Keep quiet, *your highness*. Or else someone will hear those sweet moans as I fuck you," he rasped against the side of my neck. When he pulled the tip of my ear into his teeth, my pussy quivered on his cock.

"It's so adorable to me when you act like a haughty princess. But we both know when my cock is inside of you, you can't think of anything at all, can you?" Deimos trailed his tongue over the side of my face.

Unable to speak, mortifying whimpers burst rapidly from my lips as my only response.

"This is how you worship a god. Make the temple of her body tremble with bliss." Deimos snuck his hand around my body,

between my thighs. His scandalous fingers rapidly massaged my clit in time with his thrusting hips. “Take this pleasure as my offering, darling. All I ask for in return is having the satisfaction of your orgasm on my cock.”

I took one hand from the wall and curled it over the back of his neck, keeping his face pressed against my neck as my nails clawed over his scalp. Increasing moans left me as I crested the peak of enthralling heat in my core.

“Ah! Deimos!” His name was the only word I remembered, and it was the only thing I said as the taut coil inside of my body snapped. The shattered pieces expanded throughout my being.

Ecstasy carried me through intense highs and lows as I reeled from my climax.

“That’s good, my darling. You come for me!” Deimos ground out through gritted teeth, huffing like an unhinged beast.

My legs quivered, nearly giving out after my orgasm. Only his maddening, increased pounding kept my body against the wall. Each aftershock of my release squeezed his cock again and again.

Deimos slammed into me a final time, moaning as he spilled his cum into me, filling me so much that it gushed out, dripping down the base of his cock and spreading on the inside of my thighs. His face remained against my throat, breathing fast as he left evidence of his claim on my body.

Glowing and sated, I relaxed thanks to the humming in my veins.

Deimos pulled out, and more of his cum spilled out. Though I didn’t mind the lewd reminder. Paired with the delightful throbbing in my pussy, I brimmed with untamable energy.

He fixed my dress, smoothing it over my legs before closing the front of his trousers. I watched him with a knowing smile.

Feeling my gaze, he looked up. “I’d do anything to *please* you, your highness,” Deimos said.

“You were jealous!” I laughed at him.

Deimos shrugged with an alluring smile that pulled up his sensual lips. He grabbed my hips and tugged me against his body again. His brows rose higher, staring smugly down at me.

“So? Tell me whose cum is dripping down your legs.”

Scoundrel, I thought, blushing profusely.

He grabbed my chin suddenly, forcing me to meet his molten silver eyes. “That captain could never fuck you like I can.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I drawled, blinking up at Deimos with feigned innocence. “There’s still time for me to go back to his ship and join him for dinner.”

“You are an evil little goddess,” Deimos mock gasped, and wagged a finger in my face.

I snatched his hand out of the air.

Deimos’s mouth snapped shut and his eyes went round as I placed his palm on my breast.

Sighing with lewd intent, I rubbed his hand down my body. “Take me back home and show me how you’d worship me then.”

“Nine Hells.” Deimos swallowed hard. “As you wish, darling.”

The power of the gods and all the energy in the world couldn’t satiate the burning need I had for Deimos. Whatever called me to him and him to me refused to be silenced.

He took me back to the house and showed me the definition of worship.

In the early hours of the morning while I slept, new visions came to me. Horrifying dreams came again, showing the one thing I feared most; the ones I loved dying in gruesome ways that I should have had the power to prevent.

That night, Deimos was among those dreams.

Thirty-One



|Deimos|

My fingers drummed on the edge of my desk, increasingly agitated as Raaz paced around my study. Open books littered every surface, from the desk to the couch to the floors. If he wasn't careful, an oversized boot would kick one across the room.

Beams of buttery morning light streamed in from the windows at my back. My weary eyes focused on the miniscule dust motes floating through the air.

If not for Raaz bursting through the door, I might have fallen asleep on my current stack of demonic texts.

"Why go to a ball when we have demons to hunt? Can I bring my axe?"

"No, Raaz, you cannot take your axe to a ball," I sighed, forcing my head upright.

He stopped in his tracks, inches from stepping on a book. My fist clenched reflexively, ready to leap over the desk and clobber him if he took another step.

"We've spent these past few weeks hunting demons with no further clues about who is summoning them. I know we entertained the idea that it was a lowborn civilian killing aristocrats to move up within the class system, but we can't disregard the rest of high society. It's not outside of the realm of possibility that some local lord found an ancient book of demon summoning. Look at all the books I've collected over the years as an example." I waved a hand at the books all over the floor.

Raaz glanced down and seemed surprised they were there.

"So, we're not going to party?" he asked.

"Finally, on the same page, are we?" I teased him.

Give the man a weapon and he becomes a berserker in a fight. Strategy, on the other hand? Not his area of expertise.

“We’re going to spy on the nobles!” Raaz clapped. His abrupt laughter echoed through the room. “Oh, that’s brilliant, Deimos. Truly.”

“We wouldn’t have had this opportunity without Nevar. I might hold the title to a lord’s house, but that doesn’t make me one of them. I’m starting to think anyone in the city could be our demon summoner.”

Last night Nevar and I spoke at length about our course of action. Instead of tracking demons already in the city, we needed to focus on finding the source.

That meant taking this invitation to the ball as our opportunity to expand our search. Thanks to her, we now had the chance to infiltrate high society.

It didn’t ease the bundle of dread knotting up my insides or the heavy burden sitting on my chest. If anything, it made it worse, keeping me awake through the night after our conversation.

Leaving Nevar asleep in my bed made me ache. I yearned to go back to her, to pull her against my skin, to fall asleep to the sound of her soft breathing and the beating of her heart against my chest.

However, the full moon was coming, and she still couldn’t control her transformation. I’d stay up all day and all night flipping through each dusty book in this room if it meant finding that damn binding spell for her. Even if I loathed the process, Nevar wanted it —*needed* it.

It didn’t matter to Nevar that the spell might cause suffering or harm to herself. After sharing each damaging detail I recalled, she couldn’t care less.

For all my concerns, I’d seen why this meant so much to her.

I’d witnessed her terrifying transformation into the drakewraith and the destruction that came with it. With Hestra in control as that monster, it made her more dangerous than the bastard summoning demons.

Going to the temple each full moon and sequestering Nevar as she experienced that exhausting brutality felt like a nightmare that I held the power to end.

Raaz picked up a book on the opposite end of my desk. His uninterested expression and general disdain for books came through as he flipped through it upside down for dramatic effect.

“Well, don’t spend too long up here. You owe me another sparring session.” The heavy leather-bound tome thumped onto the wood.

“Careful with that! Some of these books are hundreds of years old. I should kick your ass right now just for that alone. Really, Raaz, your utter disrespect for reading is—”

“—Is why I’m a better fighter than you. Stay up here and read all you like, pretty boy. I’m going to scout through the city. If I find a fight or a woman, don’t expect me back until sundown.”

Raaz halfheartedly shrugged before turning around. He nearly stumbled over a haphazard stack of books near the door.

“Watch the books on your way out, you big jackass!”

After catching himself, he turned his head over his shoulder to shoot me a wink.

I slumped into my chair as soon as the door shut behind him.

Ten years ago, when I found a teenage Raaz brawling in a tavern across the continent, I never imagined such a future.

I’d found Raaz in a tavern flirting with a merchant’s wife. While every man in there had decades of life on him, that young man easily grappled his way through all of them without drawing the shabby sword on his hip once.

Thoroughly impressed with his skill, I’d offered him a drink. That night started my first genuine friendship on the mortal plane. Even if it was a couple of years before I told Raaz the truth about myself, he hadn’t cared that I was a cambion from the Nine Hells.

We fought and chased women together until Bellefy burst into our lives—quite literally.

She’d exploded from a house into the streets in the dead of night, stumbling into our path as an angry father chased after Bellefy for sleeping with his daughter.

One glance at her pointed ears and shadow daggers, and I knew our family had a third member. Lots of drinking and general scoundrel behavior followed. The three of us were utter menaces to any town we passed through.

Things calmed down with time. Raaz, Bellefy, and I found jobs and a home. Each of us worked hard while indulging in frivolities in our spare time. Raaz got into fights. Bellefy made her wine. I collected demonic books.

Then the first demon came that drew us to Bellmead.

When the demons showed up, their presence sobered me up for the first time in years. It forced me to face my past again with the truth of who and what I was glaring directly in my face. Like an omen of what I could never truly escape from.

You can take the demon out of the Nine Hells, but you can't take the hellfire out of the demon.

Making the decision to hunt the summoned demons came easily. They were no kin of mine.

Raaz was simply eager to get into any fight he could. Bellefy was a former soldier who had her own sense of duty to stop the hellish fiends.

And Nevar was something else entirely.

In all my years blindly chasing women in the mortal realm, I'd never once had a long-lasting relationship with any of them. My flings and one-night stands went no further than secret trysts in the night.

My first glimpse of her face, hidden under her hood in the tavern, I knew I wanted her. Even as vicious as she appeared. Like she wanted to rip my throat out for having the audacity to approach her.

It must have been the Archdemon blood in my veins that made my heart stop working when I saw her splattered with blood, burning those men with night-fire in the alley that night. To witness such an astounding act of brutality for the sake of saving a child, and yet be overcome with an unbearable longing the likes of which I would never recover from.

She made me feel not like a monster disguised as a hero, but like a man with a heart that beat for the first time since escaping the Nine Hells. Only the princess of sun and shadow could do that to me. Only the goddess of the moon, and monsters and the night, could awaken my heart to the flames of love.

I was sure love couldn't be like this for everyone. So full of visceral yearning and inflamed passion. Otherwise, everyone in the

mortal realm would be utterly insane the first time their heart fluttered for the sake of another.

Was it just me, or was it Nevar that made the difference?

Perhaps together, Nevar and I made a savage creature of bloodthirsty devotion that would either fuse or burn down the world. Either way, she turned my life upside down from the moment I sensed her power in the city.

I wouldn't want it any other way.

One day, when the time was right, I'd tell her of my feelings. Though I suspected she already knew.

A devastating viper of a goddess, and the one who owned my heart all the same.

If thoughts of her were prayers, they must summon her. Not a moment after thinking about my irrevocable feelings for Nevar, she quietly opened the door to the study.

I dropped the book I'd been idly flipping through, utterly forgotten.

Heat spread across my cheeks as I took in the sight of her. And gods, she was a sight to behold.

Her disheveled hair fell in snowy waves around her shoulders and down her back. Her emerald eyes glimmered as the last traces of sleep left her. The black silken robe I gifted her draped her frame.

Though it was the loosely tied front and glimpse of her pale skin that held my attention.

My heart thudded so powerfully against my ribs that I rubbed my hand over my chest as if that could ease the erratic beating the sight of her aroused. It wasn't the only aroused part of me, either.

Nevar rubbed her eye with the back of her hand. Her graceful steps easily carried her around the disorderly books scattered about the room. The sway of her hips with each step only increased the tightness in my pants.

"How long have you been in here?" Her husky morning voice had me clenching my fists and shifting in my chair.

"That depends on the time." I aimlessly looked around the room to distract myself.

That's when I noticed how far the beam of sunlight had moved across the study. Hours had passed since Raaz left, and I hadn't

noticed.

“It’s almost noon. Have you eaten?” Nevar asked as she passed the edge of the desk.

“Not yet.”

As I expected, Nevar moved around the desk and plopped herself into my lap. My hands instantly went to her waist, catching her and holding her firmly in place against me. Her natural lavender and rosemary perfume ignited lustful thoughts in my brain.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, while placing her arms over my shoulders.

Lifting one hand, I slipped a finger in the front of her robe. I held my breath as I pushed open the thin fabric with no complaints. The tantalizing view of her full breasts and perky pink nipples brought forth a massive grin on my face.

“I could eat.”

Gentle, musical laughter shook her body in my lap. The vibrations of her giggles only stressed her curves against me. Her softness melded to every hard inch of me, and with her ass firmly placed in my lap over my hardening cock—

“Oh, my. You’re hungry for something alright.” Nevar wiggled her hips, grinding her round ass against me.

My breath caught in my throat, and I clenched my jaw to stifle a groan as my head fell back. She rocked over my erection, restrained in my pants, and my breath burst from me.

“Oh, fuck.” *If she kisses me, it’s over.*

Nothing would exist beyond our passion if she closed the gap.

As if I knew exactly what Nevar would do next, she leaned in. Her arms crossed behind my neck as her sharp nails tangled into my hair. When her delicate, sweet lips met with mine, I ignited into an uncontrollable whirlwind of desire.

How do you kiss a goddess without burning up in the process? Is there a way to love her and come out unscathed by her flames in the end?

I didn’t care either way if there was.

Let her burn me and burn with me. If I was to set fire to everything around me, it would be because Nevar was in my arms, kindling the flames.

Before I could plan for it, before I knew what was happening, our bodies moved in a frantic whirlwind. I pushed the robe from her shoulders, exposing the expanse of her porcelain skin. My mouth fell on one pert breast, her nipple immediately went taut between my lips.

Her head arched back as a gloriously breathy exhale fell from her lips. She rocked her hips in my lap, pressing on my cock. I savored the taste of her skin on my tongue as if imprinting every delicious inch of her body to memory for the rest of my days.

I moved in an urgent frenzy, pushing up from the chair and causing Nevar to fall from my lap. Hastily, with wild abandon, I peeled the robe entirely from her body, and it drifted to the floor when I grabbed her hips and turned her around.

Nevar fell over the desk, face down, and her perfect ass arched up. I barely managed to appreciate the view before my hand shot out, smacking one cheek.

“Ah!” Nevar cried out, but didn’t protest. Nevar rocked over the desk as her hips undulated.

Again, I slapped my hand over her ass, watching the ripple of her perfectly toned, round ass. The red print from my hand appeared, and my head soared into the clouds.

“Fucking hells, darling. You’re right, I am hungry.” One hand stayed on her hips and the other went to the front of my pants.

Nevar peeked back over her shoulder at me with wild anticipation in her eyes.

“Now spread your fucking legs.”

She shifted her thighs further apart, giving me full access to admire the glistening arousal coating her folds. And I couldn’t contain myself any longer. Not with that view of the heavens where I wanted to ascend.

Gripping the base of my cock, I aligned myself with her entrance. The head slipped over her pussy as I teased her.

She sharply drew in a breath as I stroked the length of my cock over her clit, and her hips rocked back against me, eager for more.

The noises of her wanton panting and my cock sliding through her sticky arousal filled the room. Her floral scent mingled with the intoxicating pheromones of her desire.

Some terrible instinct buried within me roared and bellowed like a primal beast to fill her and stain her from within with my claim. To mark her in every possible way with proof that Nevar was *mine*.

Enthralled by her, unable to tease her further, I filled my goddess in one abrupt thrust. Her tight heat clenched around my cock, keeping me locked in place behind her.

A breath of relief left her at the sudden sensation of me stretching her, and a groan of pleasure echoed from me.

I ran my hands over her spine, caressing out the tension straining her muscles. Her pussy squeezed tighter, even as her body relaxed.

As it did, I pulled out to the tip. Then paused, watching her writhe, breath quickening with her want for me to fill her again.

So, I obliged her unspoken desires, slamming back into her so roughly she fell against the desk. A couple of books tipped over the edge, thumping to the floor from her scrabbling hands. My harsh pounding forced her to splay her palms on the wood to brace herself.

My fingers dug into Nevar's hips, holding her in place as I rammed into her repeatedly. The slapping of our skin with each thrust and her increasingly high-pitched moans brought out the beast in me.

I wanted her to scream and cry and beg and come undone. To feel her exploding apart at the seams as I spilled my seed within her. For her to come and forget anything she ever knew except my name.

"Deimos!" The voice of a goddess, ragged and breathless, screamed for me. Her glorious body shuddered atop the desk and her deadly claws scraped grooves into the polished wood.

With her intense climax rushing through her, the tight, slippery grip on my cock milked me of every drop I could provide for her. I let go of my restraint and pounded into her until my release spilled out, leaking from her pretty pussy and coating my cock in our combined cum.

This was as close to godhood as I could get, and I loved every moment of it and every moment with her. Because I loved her.

Locking an arm around Nevar's waist, I collapsed back into my chair. My cock remained fully sheathed inside of her as we landed

on the seat. A soft grunt burst from her, and she wriggled her hips, adjusting to my length at this new angle.

However, I didn't move. Instead, I encouraged Nevar to lie back against me. I felt the rapid beating of her heart through her back against my chest. I loved knowing that it beat so erratically with me.

Nevar's heart could remain calm in the face of a murderous, corrupted lesser demon. Yet with me, her heart fluttered within her ribs like a bird trapped in a cage.

She remained in my arms for some time, merely listening to one another breath as time passed around us. It was nice to pretend for a while that we could simply exist in those tender moments. That there weren't monsters waiting for us when the sun went down.

Eventually, all good things came to an end. Nevar slipped off my lap, and I experienced a strange sense of cold without her in my arms.

Though I had a marvelous view of my cum on her thighs when she bent over to pick up her robe on the floor.

"I'm sorry I knocked some books over. I know these are old." Nevar stepped around the desk to collect the books.

I rose to my feet, readjusting myself and tying the front of my pants. She flipped through pages while I finished fixing my disturbed clothing. At first, I didn't pay attention to the book in her hands.

"What's this?" she blurted. Something in her rushed tone raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

My head snapped up almost fast enough to break my neck.

Nevar held open an old tome. A heavy beast of aged, yellow paper wrapped in blackened, worn leather. Part of me believed it wasn't made with animal skin, but something else entirely.

Yet it was the pages she held up that made claws of searing anxiety grip my intestines. I only needed a second to read the page and confirm my worst fears.

"How did I miss that?"

Runes, and spell instructions.

"I can't read demonic. Is this the spell?" She angled the book back to her face. Her glowing eyes flickered over the page as if

trying to make sense of the demonic texts.

“Yes.” My tongue went dry, and the words struggled to come out.

“Oh gods, we found the binding spell!”

The excitement in her eyes made me ache with a twisting pain I couldn't place.

Such a deep level of worry for another being I'd never experienced in my life before. Being born in the Nine Hells, I didn't know I could *feel* like this for anyone.

I didn't want to have this conversation, even with how desperately she needed the binding. “Darling, the spell says we must brand the runes into your skin.”

Thirty-Two



Deimos held such misery in his silver eyes. With everything he and I had been through together, his hesitation didn't surprise me.

He didn't want to brand demonic runes into my body and mutilate my skin for the rest of my life. Although he loathed the idea of hurting or damaging me, the binding would have a lasting effect on me if it worked.

I survived my transformations into the drakewraith. I could endure a few brands on my back.

Nothing was too drastic if it meant binding away Hestra and her fury. More so now that the vengeful goddess stirred. Through me she witnessed our plans and her incessant screaming in my mind brought an incessant ringing.

Whispered words that the spell would fail followed. Yet I held onto the waiver in her voice and the rage fueled screams.

If Hestra was worried, I had hope. I'd hold on to that small flickering flame of faith that this wild plan would work. If it didn't, I might never have enough control over myself to return home.

Deimos and Raaz had removed the tables, chairs, and couches from the lounge earlier. A low fire warmed the room, casting a faint orange glow across the dark wooden floorboards. Sigils drawn in white chalk covered every inch of the floor.

Deimos blocked the doorway with his wide frame. "Demon blood magic is dangerous and unpredictable at the best of times. This spell was made to bind demons to beings in the mortal realm. Getting it to work on the soul of a god inside of a vessel will take an epic amount of concentration."

"But I want to help." Bellefy crossed her arms in the lounge doorway as she glowered up at Deimos.

He met her glare head on. "I can't maintain my concentration on altering the spell with you and Raaz in here gawking the entire

time.”

“We could be useful!” Bellefy stomped.

I angled away from the writhing arms of shadows that were placing white candles in a circle around the floor. My power continued working as I turned my focus to the conversation.

In the hours since finding the instructions, Deimos had caved to my request to complete the spell tonight. The closer we came to the next full moon, the harder it might be to bind Hestra.

It had to be done when I knew we had a chance of the spell working.

So, he told me the items needed, and I got to work ensuring every aspect of the spell was perfect with the spell work I’d learned from the witches.

The usual clear mind that came with the idle work of preparing a spell escaped me as Hestra screamed in my skull and Bellefy begged to help.

Deimos stepped aside when I placed a hand on his back.

“Bellefy.” In the doorway, I grasped her hands. “If anything goes wrong, I don’t want you or Raaz involved. We can’t take the chance of either of you getting caught in the middle of this.”

“I know things are different now. We might be friends, but you are still my princess.” Clear distress lined Bellefy’s expression. “What if something goes wrong and I could have helped?”

“Nothing will go wrong,” I reaffirmed as gently as possible.

The last snaking shadow placed the final candle into place on the floor. Releasing Bellefy’s hands, I swept my arm out to gesture at the room. Candles of mismatched lengths made up a circle at the center of the otherwise empty lounge.

“I’ve drawn protection sigils all over the place. Deimos and I have taken every precaution imaginable for this. It will be contained.” *And Hestra will be bound before the sun rises.*

“You don’t have to leave the house. Raaz is in the back garden feeding the horse apples. If anything, you can wait around with him. Stay close on the off chance we need you,” Deimos offered.

“Fine!” Bellefy seethed, burning enough for steam to rise from her pointed ears. “But I’ll stay close.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” Deimos drawled. He swung the lounge door shut before Bellefy could toss a retort at his face.

Turning to face me, he placed his hands on his hips and let out a quick sigh. “I will not be calling them for help, no matter what happens.”

A timid smile curled one corner of my lips. I placed my hands on his chest as I stepped closer. “You don’t want to risk your friends’ lives.”

“Our friends.” He caught my eyes. “I don’t want to put anyone at risk.”

Despite the situation, a smile lit up my face.

“Our friends,” I repeated.

“Are you ready?” Deimos cupped my face. Then he pressed his forehead to mine, holding me close and taking a few moments to prepare mentally for what he’d resigned himself to do.

“Are you?” I shot back.

He exhaled while glancing over my shoulder at the sigils mapped out over the floor and the circle of candles. Stoic acceptance steeled his expression.

A muscle in his jaw ticked before he nodded.

“Then let’s get this over with.” I peeled the black robe off my shoulders. Without bothering to fold it, I tossed the slip of fabric unceremoniously into the corner of the room.

My resolve to undergo the binding spell never wavered. Even when Deimos went into detail about the excruciating branding process. The potential pain meant nothing to me. Not when my future, and possibly my sanity, were at stake. Maybe even my life.

One twirl of my hand lit the candles. The flames went up in a rapid whoosh around me, and dozens of small dancing flames illuminated the darkest corners of the lounge. Though even they couldn’t chase away the shadows cast by my presence.

“This is going to hurt, darling. And I’m so sorry.” His toneless, quiet voice and the frown set on his face twisted my heart.

“You’ve seen me go through worse. I can handle this.” And whatever came after.

In the center of the flickering candles, I lowered myself onto my hands and knees. Deimos kneeled behind me on the other side of the candles. His careful fingers brushed my hair over my shoulder, revealing my naked backside. He mapped out my spine with those mysterious silver eyes I loved so much, mentally marking where each of the five runes would go.

Without warning, his hand pressed into the middle of my spine. I sucked in a breath from the sudden contact.

“Nevar, I... I wanted to tell you—”

“No. Not now.” Looking over my shoulder, I let him see the frigid determination in my eyes. “I know. I already know.”

He must not say it now. If he said those three everlasting words, it meant he thought he’d never get the chance again. I needed him to hold those words close and cherish them until the pain had passed. Only then would I accept the admission.

Deimos’s eyes flared so quickly I almost missed it. Masking his emotions, he set his lips in a thin line while his eyes narrowed on my back. “Then let’s begin.”

I cast my gaze to the floor, immersing my mind in the patterns of the sigils and not the incoming pain.

Deimos carved the first rune with hellfire midair. The fusion of smoldering air and demon magic sizzled as the jagged symbol floated inches away.

My breath went still as the radiant heat kissed my spine. Even my heart stopped beating, and the blood in my veins hummed, reacting to the ambient power.

“*Stop,*” Hestra whispered like a hissing snake in my ears. “*Don’t do this to us.*”

Deimos delicately urged the blazing rune closer and closer to my flesh. The heat spread over my skin, pleasant at first.

Until suddenly it wasn’t.

Blistering hellfire scorched my flesh as Deimos pressed the first rune into my spine, directly in the center of my shoulder blades. Every muscle in my body flexed under the profound searing pain. A groan rose in the back of my throat, but I swallowed it down.

“*STOP THIS AT ONCE!*” Hestra screeched in my head. The high-pitched echoing split my eardrums.

Another rune singed my skin. Another wave of hellish pain washed over me, spreading over my limbs and hooking into my bones. Magic and hellfire wrestled inside of me like two mighty beasts fighting for dominance.

The third rune stung when it settled into the flesh at the middle of my spine. Fiery torment poisoned me. Hot tears sprung to the corners of my eyes as I choked down a sob.

“You don’t know what you’re doing to us!” Her voice reverberated around me. Not only in my mind, but around the entire room. Each high and low echo of her demands bounced off the walls and assaulted my ears.

Sweat formed on my brow as my muscles strained to hold myself together. The exertion of keeping Hestra’s power leashed while Deimos pressed burning runes into my back took immense effort. Grinding my teeth and trembling from the pain, I spared no ounce of my willpower.

When the fourth rune branded my skin, a strangled whimper escaped me. Tears fell down my cheeks, merging with the rivers of sweat dripping down my body. My entire frame spasmed from the stabbing, torrid pain.

“You are mine! You are mine! You can’t escape me!”

Black scales sprung from my arms. Talons grew from my fingers, gouging deep grooves into the floorboards. Possessed by her sweltering power, my limbs moved of their own accord, preparing to stand.

“Nevar?” Deimos paused, with the last rune incomplete, sizzling black and orange in the air between us.

“Don’t stop!” I croaked in a hoarse voice, aching from the labor of containing my screams.

Hestra gripped my essence from within. My limbs jerked at odd angles, joints cracking. Ghosts of her cold, dead hands held my heart in a sign of her control over me—A threat.

“Ungrateful, spoiled bitch!” Hestra spat, squeezing my essence. *“I offer you all the power of the gods and you would throw it all away!”*

My fist slammed on the floor, and I screamed at the top of my lungs. At the deepest level of my being, I unleashed my power against the goddess. Sun and shadow combined, surging against the

godly power of magic and the moon. The two elements that made up my being against the very essence of death.

“I am Nevar Mor’gen. I command the light and the dark.”

Every light in the room died when an unseen force sucked the air out. Oppressive shadows converged on the center of the room, wriggling madly against the sigils, keeping them at bay.

“You’ll never get rid of me. You. Are. MINE!”

“No!” I roared back at her. My voice boomed through the room, shaking the foundation of the house beneath us. “I am the sun, like my mother. I am the shadows, like my father. And I won’t bow to a dead god.”

Deimos slammed the last rune into the base of my spine.

White-hot pain soared throughout my body. A bloodcurdling scream wretched itself from my chest. A never-ending stream of tears flowed from my red-rimmed eyes.

An agitated fire erupted from the hearth. Unbearable waves of heat flooded the room as blinding light exploded around us. The candles melted into puddles of wax while the chalk sigils evaporated. Flames scorched the wooden floorboards as the acrid aroma of ash and smoke filled the air.

“Shit!” Deimos threw up his arms, blocking the light.

Unharmd by the fire, he lunged forward in the next breath. His arms encircled me, tugging me up from where my body slumped onto the floor.

The stinging runes on my back were the only thing I felt as Deimos picked me up off the ground. Rushing through the fire and ash, he kicked down the door to the lounge with me catatonic in his arms.

My consciousness disappeared somewhere deep inside of my mind. Even though my eyes were open, and I witnessed everything that followed, I wasn’t truly there living in the moment.

Bellefy materialized in the hallway with sheer panic writ across her features after hearing my screams. Then she saw the smoke following Deimos.

Raaz followed, hot on her heels with his copper hair mussed up from hurrying after. His jaw dropped at the sight of me unresponsive in Deimos’s arms.

“Raaz, put out the last of the fire in the lounge. Bellefy, can you start a bath for her?” Deimos jumped into the role of a leader in crises. The authoritative tone of his voice made the others bolt to follow his orders.

Raaz rushed down the hall to the lounge. The flames in the hearth were already dwindling, but he got to work stomping out smaller fires throughout the room, from the incinerated curtains to the smoking planks on the floor.

Bellefy raced ahead of Deimos to his room. She reached the bathroom first to turn on the cold water.

Meanwhile, Deimos carried me with trembling arms up the stairs. Moving slowly, careful of the inflamed, raw brands along my back.

In my head, I faced a dark, wrathful storm. Turbulent and extreme, with haunting gray clouds rumbling with severe lightning. Excessive waves rose high, boiling and rampaging into the sky, casting shadows over my face.

For the first time in years, since the night I stepped foot into a river of blood, I faced that storm with open eyes and a calm heart.

I didn't feel the pain of the demonic runes on my back, nor the tears continuously streaming from my unblinking eyes.

When I took a deep breath in that place inside my mind, that terrible storm calmed. Utter silence followed and the surface of the water stilled as the clouds dispersed.

While the sky remained dark and the waters black, I found my first hint of peace in years.



|Deimos|

Halfway through the cold bath, her eyes had closed, and they hadn't opened since. Only when I'd applied a healing salve to her skin did her tears stop flowing. An hour after bathing Nevar and tending to the brands on her back, I placed her in bed on her stomach.

Her slow breathing told me she'd fallen asleep. With what I'd witnessed tonight, the brutal exertion of the demonic binding spell and whatever mental battle she had with Hestra, she needed the rest.

But I had no clue if the spell worked. After the final brand, Nevar went silent. She'd stared through me as I bathed her and hadn't uttered a single noise while I'd cared for her burns.

Seeing her like that unsettled me to my core.

When I'd pulled the blanket over her shoulders, a soft sigh passed her lips. My fingers moved through her damp hair, pushing it behind her ear as I admired the elegant planes of her face.

Early morning sunlight filtered in through a slit between the drawn curtains, casting golden light over her hair, glittering like freshly fallen snow on a winter morning.

What if she never wakes up? What if I messed up the spell and she never comes back to me?

Someone knocked on the bedroom door, abruptly interrupting my worsening thoughts. My hand stilled in Nevar's hair, and I glanced up as Bellefy pushed the door open.

"Is she alright?"

"She's asleep," I answered. There wasn't anything else I could tell her.

Bellefy moved further into the room. Her eyes shifted between me and Nevar.

A princess sleeping in the bed of a demon.

I almost laughed.

"Um, a letter was just delivered. I thought you'd want to see it." Her tone pricked at my curiosity.

Noticing the opened envelope in her hands, I begrudgingly rose from the side of the bed. I kept Nevar's sleeping form in the corner of my eye as I approached Bellefy.

Quickly scanning the fancy paper and shimmering ink on the invitation, my eyes went round.

“You are cordially invited to a ball... yadda yadda...” I read the invitation until the date stopped me. “This is during the next full moon.”

“Yes, I thought that’s why you should see it now.” Bellefy side eyed Nevar in the bed.

A strange smell tickled my nose. Puzzled, I lifted the paper to my face and inhaled.

“This smells like—”

“Like Raaz after he eats a dozen eggs. I thought it was odd,” Bellefy said.

I repeatedly scanned the signature of Lord Silas Devora, the Warden of Bellmead.

My blood froze under my skin. Dread fisted the inside of my guts, clawing up to wrap around my throat. I caught Bellefy’s stare, swallowing as a thousand theories ricocheted inside my head.

“It smells like sulfur.”

Thirty-Three



While the goddess remained lurking within me, I woke up, knowing she was bound. Her once screaming voice dwindled into nothing more than a minor itch against my skull. The demon binding spell had successfully contained Hestra within me.

Hestra remained quiet inside my mind while her creature prowled under my skin. They never left, but I had a newfound sense of peace and silence.

My eyes opened to a dark room. Despite the drawn curtains, I knew the sun's placement in the sky, yet couldn't tell what day it was.

Disoriented and physically drained, I shoved myself up from the plush pillow in my face. A twinge of pain struck my back as I moved off the bed. An echo of the hellfire that branded my skin, but I managed the pain.

Stumbling on weak legs, I crashed against the bathroom door. My fumbling hand twisted the handle. I waved and the light magically followed, illuminating my reflection in the mirror.

Twisting uncomfortably, I tore the blood-stained white bandages from my midsection. The disregarded gauze piled around my feet as I stared at the black markings down my spine.

Five demon runes made of jagged lines and odd slashes marred my flesh. They didn't match up exactly with their original counterparts from the books since Deimos had to alter the runes, adapting them to ensure they'd successfully bind a god's soul.

The harsh brand marks on my porcelain skin should have upset me, I thought. Those demonic runes disfigured my back, tarnishing my once unblemished skin.

Instead, I viewed them as an improvement.

With the calm seas in my mind and the fading pain, I didn't think of the brands as flaws. They might appear as a grisly

deformation to some, but to me, they were scars of victory.

The door to the bedroom slammed, followed by a panicked voice. “Darling?”

“In here,” I responded, surprised by the croak of my dry throat.

“What are you doing?” The partially open door burst open.

Deimos briefly froze as he assessed the room and my condition. Sorrow glinted in his eyes when he caught the healing brands on my back. “Are you alright?”

“Once my strength returns, I’ll be marvelous.” Turning away from the mirror, I took an unsteady step in his direction.

Deimos caught me against his chest, fully supporting me. His hands on my sides were careful not to touch my back.

“How do you feel? They’re healing impossibly fast.”

“I’m tired, but I’m delighted. Hestra is finally quiet.” Grabbing his face, I forced him to see the genuine happiness in my eyes.

I didn’t want Deimos to feel regret for branding me.

“For the first time since my death, all my thoughts are my own.”

The gnawing urge to strike and maim Deimos no longer plagued me. With Hestra’s hatred for demons and their kin snuffed out, I experienced a lightness in my chest.

His intense demonic warmth soothed me more than it ever had before. I could allow myself the tranquility of simply existing in his arms without an internal battle of wills.

“It worked?” Deimos sounded surprised. Perhaps some part of him doubted that binding spell. Or he’d doubted his abilities.

“I don’t want to kill you anymore.” I nuzzled my face against his chest with light laughter flowing from me.

Deimos breathed out a quick chuckle. He buried his face in my hair before carefully digging his fingers into my hips. “Not even a little?”

“Why do you sound disappointed?” Wrapping my arms around his neck, I held him closer while giggling.

One of his hands threaded through my hair, cradling my head against his chest. We remained in that content silence, enjoying one

another's embrace. There was no feeling like the comforting touch of a cherished lover.

"It's like my mind was a turbulent storm over the ocean and the seas of my thoughts are finally calm. The waters are as still as glass. That serenity is almost overwhelming." My eyes closed as words spilled over my tongue. "I've worn a mask and kept Hestra leashed for so long, I'd almost forgotten who I was. I remember being an untamable child, but her essence inside of me made my impulses so chaotic."

"You do seem brighter. At ease, I suppose. I won't feel as bad about branding you if the binding eases your burden." His hand carefully ran alongside the runes on my spine.

Placing my hand flat on his chest, his heart thumped against my palm. Slow and unsteady as his thoughts lingered on my scarred back.

"I don't want you to feel bad for something I asked you to do, Deimos. The branding was nothing compared to my suffering before. You've given me a peace of mind that nothing and no one else could. For that, I thank you. I might spend the rest of my life thanking you for this."

He held me tighter, saying nothing. Only his slowed breathing gave away the restraint of his silence.

"If I can control the drakewraith transformation on the full moon, then maybe I can go home when all of this is over."

Deimos stiffened. Confused by his reaction, I pulled back to read his expression.

He had bad news written all over his face.

"What is it?" I probed.

Deimos stepped back, rubbing a hand over his face. He rolled his neck and shoulders with a slight groan.

"Speaking of the full moon," he eased the words out, "we received our invitation to the Warden's ball."

"Oh, gods. Don't tell me."

"It's the night of the full moon," Deimos said. "But that's not all."

"How could there be more?" I sighed with exasperation.

“The invitation from Lord Silas Devora clearly smelled of sulfur. As much as I want to believe it’s some strange coincidence, I can’t.” He stroked his chin pensively and watched for my reaction.

“I loathe to say I’m not surprised. While it’s unfortunate to think that the supposed protector of the city—the Warden—might be our demon summoner, it’s not unbelievable. It’s eye-opening. The Warden has power. Demons, for the most part, seem power hungry.” I snapped my fingers as a dozen thoughts ricocheted in my mind.

“But why corrupt them with power from the Rift? Outside of the energy it takes to summon a demon from the Nine Hells, who could manipulate that magic?” Deimos ran his hands through his hair.

“Could you have done it?”

Hearing my whispered words, his head snapped up. His face twisted in confusion.

Clarifying, I said, “If a cambion had the right materials, would they be strong enough to manipulate magic and perform a summoning?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure if a cambion would have that type of power. But I don’t think a human could either. Since the death of the gods, they’re barely able to use magic when they stumble upon it.”

“My visions led me to Bellmead to deal with this.” I reached out and caught his hands. “On the wharf, I saw a glimpse of the summoner through the eyes of the lesser demon. Regardless of everything else, I must go to the Warden’s ball and see for myself. Perhaps it’s not him but someone in his court responsible. Either way, I’m sure that’s where we’ll find our answers.”

In the deepest part of me, I knew it to be true. Maybe that certainty came from instinct or some power I didn’t understand. Either way, I had no doubts in my mind that I was right. There were too many coincidences to overlook.

“You’re willing to risk the full moon transformation for this? Are you sure?” He fervently grasped my shoulders. “Without knowing the extent of the binding, isn’t that too great a risk?”

“At least one of us is confident in your spell work. I wholly trust that the binding did more than silence Hestra.” I patted his chest and Deimos’s grip eased on my shoulders.

“I am in control of myself now. I’m sure of it.” Though my voice wavered with an ounce of uncertainty.



With only a few days between the night Deimos bound Hestra within me and the Warden’s ball, it didn’t feel like enough time to prepare.

Before the binding spell, I would have gone to the temple again on the full moon. Instead, Deimos encouraged me to heal from the trauma of the spell while the household devised a plan.

It didn’t matter to him that the brands had fully healed after a day. He insisted I remain at the house while they did reconnaissance around the city, learning what they could about the Warden while keeping an eye out for demon appearances.

I stayed at the house, but refused to lie in bed, knowing that my powers during the full moon might still be unpredictable. So, I spent hours meditating to familiarize myself with the renewed silence in my mind.

With that time alone, I cast out my senses to grasp an understanding of the powers within me.

Hestra was silent, but she was still inside of me. Did that mean I could access her magic without interference? Could I use her godly power without fear of the drakewraith attempting to escape?

While Deimos, Bellefy, and Raaz spied in the city at all hours, I absorbed my new reality.

Using meditation, I reacquainted myself with the serenity of the magic born to me. The light of the sun continued to run through my blood along with the darkness of shadows. They were as easy to

wield as breathing. Those magics came to me without a second thought.

At first, I hesitated to reach out for the night-fire and other unusual, primordial magics that came from Hestra. Almost as though I feared using her power might break the seals keeping her bound.

In my meditation, I realized the doubt stemmed from within myself. If I was going to infiltrate the Warden's ball with the others, then I couldn't latch onto my personal reservations.

"I am in control." Sitting cross-legged in the garden under the star speckled dome of the midnight sky, I repeated my new mantra. Over and over again until I believed myself.

Deep breath in. Long exhale out.

Pulling in the calm, beautiful night, I pushed out my reservations. Surrounded by the gentle wind rustling the leaves and the chirping of crickets, my mind wandered.

I searched within myself for that overbearing well of power that came from the Goddess of night, magic, and monsters. A goddess of darkness and death that allowed herself to be consumed by vengeance after the death of her lover.

Would Raella continue loving the warped monstrosity Hestra became? Would the goddess of the hunt and wisdom see past Hestra's innate darkness to love her if they had both survived the war?

If Deimos could still love me despite my chaos, I didn't imagine it differed for gods.

Although Deimos wasn't fully a man. He contained hellfire and lived through the brutality of being born in the Nine Hells. He would never see me in the same light as a male born in the mortal realm.

Deimos saw me for who I was before I did.

Rising unsteadily to my feet, I repeated, "I am in control."

It took nothing more than a simple thought for the black potent flames of night-fire to flicker to life around my fingers. I held my breath, waiting for the beast under my skin to attempt an escape.

The fire in my hand grew, swirling into a ball of searing magic.

No scales emerged.

“I am in control!” A joyous laughter burst from me. Twirling around in the back garden as grass tickled my bare feet. Jubilant and victorious as I celebrated.

“Having a good time, darling?”

Immediately upon hearing that arrogant, sensuous voice, my twirling halted. I noticed Deimos leaning in the doorway from the kitchen to the garden.

The controlled night-fire in my hands reflected dangerously in his liquid silver eyes.

Shaking my hands instantly extinguished the flames dancing on my skin. I ran across the grass before tossing myself into his arms. Swept up in my joy, I pressed my lips to his.

Regardless of my sudden attack, Deimos welcomed the affection. His soft, full lips matched my ardor with ease. Our lips locked together, perfectly in sync. His tongue tentatively flicked against my lips, and I welcomed him into my mouth.

Deimos dug his fingers into my hips, pulling me against his muscled frame. I moaned into his mouth as the heat of him awakened a wanton flush of desire throughout my body.

At some point, my fingers snuck into his hair, holding him closer as our mouths wrestled for dominance.

“Your heart is beating so fast. Are you that excited to see me?” he asked, out of breath against my lips.

“I’m overjoyed to see you.” I stole another swift kiss. “I’m also feeling very determined about tomorrow. Has anyone learned anything new?”

“Not much, unfortunately. It feels like there’s only enough information about the Warden to stave off suspicion. According to what I’ve learned, Silas Devora is an alleged distant relative to the previous Warden. He died about a year ago under mysterious circumstances.”

“What circumstances?” I asked while we made our way back into the house.

With a knowing nod of his head, he stated, “The previous Warden died by a sudden house fire. Reportedly, the flames were contained to his bedroom and miraculously didn’t spread through the rest of the manor.”

“Mysterious circumstances, indeed. Death by fire and then the distant relative swoops in and assumes control of the city. Were you able to glimpse him?”

“Regrettably not. The Warden is presently too busy with the ball to leave the manor. Bellefy snuck in with the house staff this morning, and even she couldn’t spot him. According to the rest of the staff, Silas is quite reclusive.” His shoulders drooped as he sighed.

Deimos shook his head, staring at the dying kindling in the kitchen hearth.

“It would have been nice to have more time. But here we are.” Standing behind Deimos, I wrapped my arms around his waist. I pressed my face into his toned back, soaking up his warmth into my cheek.

“Yes, here we are. Tomorrow, we face the full moon and possibly the bastard we’ve been looking for. Are we ready for this?”

Are *you* ready for this?

“The brands have healed, and I’m in control of my powers. Nothing could go wrong.” I truly believed that at the time.

Deimos turned to face me. His massive palms grasped my shoulders and gave an encouraging squeeze. “In that case, I have a gift for you.”

My brows lifted, and curiosity danced in my eyes. “A surprise?”

“I brought it home with me. It’s on the bed.” Something devilish shined in his eyes.

My curiosity got the best of me. I smirked at him before rushing from the kitchen.

Deimos was hot on my heels as I tossed open the bedroom door.

A long red box waited at the edge of the bed, wrapped in an intricate golden ribbon.

My hands trembled as I carefully opened the box. At the sight of the luxurious gift within, my jaw dropped.

Deimos pressed into my back. His fingers brushed my hair behind my ear as he leaned closer to whisper, “I couldn’t let you go to a ball without a dress fit for a princess, could I?”

Thirty-Four



|Deimos|

Night swiftly swept over Bellmead the day of the Warden's ball. Though not even the darkness hid the splendor of the manor, located high on a hill at the heart of the city.

I'm sure it gave the residents a wonderful view of the bay and the expanse of the ocean on clear sunny days.

Brilliant lanterns lined the long curving road leading to the front of the five-story red brick manor. Polished carriages of nobles and wealthy aristocrats from all over Bellmead lined up as servants dressed to perfection helped them down. Lords and ladies in striking clothing glittered under the lantern light.

All pretentious smiles and pompous laughter.

Raaz and I followed the crowd of nobles, blending in with wide fake smiles, as if the splendor equally impressed us. Although Raaz kept tugging at his collar and grimacing any chance he got.

We followed the mass through grand halls with marble floors, where elaborate tapestries and gilded portraits watched us from the high walls.

Two house staff members in black and white tailored uniforms waited at the doors to the ballroom. They announced names of the guests to everyone in attendance.

On the left side, Bellefy waited in a borrowed suit. A touch of a glamouring spell hid the points of her ears, allowing her to blend in with the humans.

"Sir Deimos Drystaxus and Sir Raaz Cossain!" she announced the moment we passed through the doors.

I exchanged a brief nod with her before Raaz and I immersed ourselves in the crowd.

“Keep your eyes peeled, Raaz. Nevar said the man in her vision had blond hair and red eyes. And if you smell sulfur, come find me,” I ordered under my breath.

He clasped a hand on my shoulder in a friendly gesture before moving in closer. “I think a few local assholes are about to get into trouble.”

“And they’re going to do it anyway,” I tossed back.

Raaz vented a short laugh. He slapped me on the shoulder before vanishing into the mass of glittering dresses and stiff finery. His coppery hair stood out as he towered over everyone in attendance.

He drew the attention of single ladies who couldn’t resist a tall young man. And his height ensured I wouldn’t lose him in the crowd.

As nobles streamed into the ballroom, I made a note of every single person who entered. I kept my head down and eyes open as I maneuvered through the denizens, scenting for signs of sulfur and assessing any males with blond hair who fit the profile.

Bellefy remained at the door, posing as house staff to inspect each aristocrat as they entered. As the early minutes ticked by and the horde congested the too bright ballroom, I caught no trace of a demonic presence.

The impressive white walls with gold detailing reflected the illumination from the massive crystal chandeliers. Hundreds of candles burned brilliantly, casting dazzling light around the opulent ballroom.

Arched windows lined the top half of the walls. Outside, stars twinkled in the early nighttime sky. The moon had yet to breach a cluster of clouds it hid behind, but I knew it was full and glowing with silvery light.

Nerves twisted in my stomach at the thought.

An ensemble of musicians on a low stage played light orchestral music. Merely a warmup to greet the guests before they dove into the fantastical fanfare of the night. Soon, they would play melodic tunes as lords and ladies called on one another to dance.

Along the back wall of the ballroom, a white marble staircase led to a throne of red crushed velvet and gold trim. The seat was

reserved for the Warden of Bellmead to watch his citizens enjoy the festivities.

My gaze continued to drift in that direction, keeping an eye open for Lord Silas Devora.

On another pass through the room, I spotted Raaz in the middle of a group of young ladies. They giggled and fluttered their lashes at everything he said, hoping to get a dance from him.

He'd dance with each of them if given the time.

I only hoped none of them felt the short sword hidden in the back of his coat. Or any of the other weapons concealed under his clothes.

"Hello again, sir!" A human man inserted himself suddenly into my path. Ruddy cheeks and a smile too large for his face brought back memories.

"Ah, Lord Fredericks, was it?" I asked.

When he stuck out his hand, I accepted the greeting.

"Yes, yes, that's me!" Lord Fredericks enthusiastically shook my hand. As soon as he released me, his eyes wandered around the room.

I blinked to hide my eye roll at his obvious search.

"But where's the lovely princess you accompanied on the wharf?" He tapped his fingers together, impatiently awaiting my answer. His eyes continued wandering the ballroom.

"Oh, she's coming. Don't you worry about that." She intended to make an entrance, and I wholly encouraged it.

If the demon summoner was here, and if it was Lord Devora, he wouldn't be able to resist her.

"But might I ask, when will the Warden arrive? After all, it is his ball." I passively gestured to the unoccupied throne.

"Should be any minute now since it appears most of the guests have arrived—" Musical fanfare interrupted Lord Fredericks.

Loud trilling meant to delight the senses notified of the Warden's arrival.

"That should be him now. What luck!" the lord grasped my hand, shaking it again. "I look forward to seeing the princess again. Enjoy the party!"

I paid no heed to the man as he scuttled off. My vision narrowed on the man ascending the marble stairs to the throne. Short blond hair topped his head, but he faced away, obscuring my view of his eyes.

Not that he needed to turn around. Not with the almost undetectable scent that trailed after him and permeated the room. Not with the nearly invisible shimmer enveloping his frame.

Everything else blurred as my eyes narrowed on the man standing before the throne. He smiled and waved at everyone in the ballroom cheering back. From here, his eyes didn't appear red.

The music trailed off as a servant at the base of the stairs announced his arrival. "Warden of the city, Lord Silas Devora, welcomes you to his Full Moon Ball! Dance and feast, drink and be merry—"

Abruptly cutting off the servant, the ballroom doors burst open.

The jovial smile on the Warden's lips fell. Every head in the room jerked around to take stock of the late arrival with the audacity to enter during the Warden's welcome.

Candles flickered one by one before every light in the ballroom snuffed out. All the air whooshed out of the spacious room, leaving a frigid, alarming aura in its wake. Shadows rose like writhing beasts up the walls, warning of her approach.

The orchestra stopped playing. All voices went silent while heads careened to catch a glimpse of her. Heels boldly clicked on the marble floors as the most powerful presence I'd ever encountered strolled into the darkened room.

"Introducing the Heir Apparent and Princess of Gwathendor, Her Highness Nevar Mortala Solen-Mor'gen!" Her name rang through the silent room. A foreboding and terrifying name that sent shivers down the spines of all who heard it.

The black dress fit her every curve to perfection. She wore off the shoulder sleeves of dark lace on her arms and a deep, plunging neckline to her navel that barely contained her full breasts. All black fabric melded to her body as if the garment were made of the very shadows she commanded.

The sides of her snow-white hair were braided back to show off her pointed elven ears, and the rest fell down her spine in styled

waves. And my last gift to her last night, a crown of black diamonds, adorning her elegantly poised head.

However, it was the swathe of shadowy night-fire overlaying her body that stole everyone's breath away. With each careful step she took, the flames flared and quivered. A trail of shuddering fire lined the floor in her wake.

Nevar was the only light in the room. A dark, terrifying light. The embodiment of night and magic enveloped in onyx flames.

Brutal in her darkness, yet glorious in her radiance.

The elven princess bared her teeth in a fierce grin, and feral delight gleamed in her emerald eyes.

Goosebumps rippled across my skin at the sight. An involuntary shudder raced down the length of my spine.

Her terror inducing night-fire was a palpable warning to any demonic creature in the room. The weight of her stare on the Warden was a tangible threat, like the dagger strapped to my back.

At that moment, she was the predator, and he was her prey.

Pure malicious intent had never looked so gods damned beautiful until her.

Nevar's arm rose into the air and with a flare of her wrist, the dozen opulent chandeliers flared once more. By the grace of her will, blinding light returned to the ballroom.

The crowd murmured in a mix of nervous fear and delight. In one titular moment, she'd both captivated and bewitched the nobility of the city.

Lord Silas Devora stepped down from his throne. Wholly ensnared by the trap Nevar set, his body descended the stairs as if reeled in by her darkly alluring presence. His wickedly shining eyes never wavered from her astounding figure.

The sea of nobles parted for the Warden, clearing a path to the princess. His indecent smile, for her sake, evoked an inkling of something bitter on my tongue. My fists clenched, shaking at my sides as he approached her.

"Allow me the pleasure of welcoming a most honored guest to our humble city!" Lord Devora's voice projected over the amassed crowd. His arms spread wide, but his eyes never left the elven princess. Even as he gestured for the musicians to play.

“Will her highness accept a dance?”

I stopped breathing as my lungs turned to stone.

“I’d be honored, Warden.” Nevar placed her hand in his.

Red exploded behind my eyes. Fire roared in my blood as music arose throughout the ballroom. Fraught with tension, I remained rigid in place, like an ancient oak frozen in the middle of a haunted forest.

The Warden placed his hands on her, touching her.

My teeth ground together as I clenched my jaw.

She smiled at him as he twirled her around to the trilling music.

My breath punched out of me as I fought to control my hellfire rearing its ugly head.

No one moved. No one spoke. Every person in the room remained frozen in place to watch the captivating foreign princess in her dance with Lord Devora.

Tantalizing music caressed the senses, but it was the grace and flow of Nevar’s body that enticed the onlookers. She moved with deadly precision and fascinating elegance. Everything about her screamed of magnetic temptation.

It wasn’t long before their spectacular show persuaded the others to join the dance. One couple at a time until I lost her in the sea of nobility. I caught brief glimpses of her, perfectly in sync with the music at every step.

An ache formed in my chest to watch her with him. To see her with that man, smiling. Throwing her head back with laughter, as if enjoying the devious things that he whispered in her ears.

I sulked around the ballroom, disgruntled by watching the farce.

I knew the plan. I knew it was a game. Yet it aggrieved me to see Nevar smiling at him.

Some indignant beast of jealousy trailed claws along my scalp, over my arms, and down my spine. It gripped my heart and twisted it with a fist of selfish control. An unholy possession took over me, and a growl threatened to spill past my lips as the smell of sulfur hit me.

Before I knew it was happening, I pushed through the crowd. My feet moved me forward without my consent, stalking closer to the princess and the bastard who dared lay his hands on her.

“Allow me to cut in, your highness?” I didn’t recognize the sharp edge in my voice.

At once, Nevar and Lord Silas halted in the center of the ballroom. The last notes of the first song trailed away.

She pulled away from the Warden with a smile he didn’t deserve to experience on her lovely lips.

“Of course.” Continuing to put on an act for the Lord, she purred in a seductive voice, “Thank you for the dance, Warden. I look forward to speaking with you again.”

“It was my pleasure, your highness.” When he kissed the back of her hand, I stomped down a possessive snarl.

He pulled away from Nevar, and for a split second, I caught a red glint hiding behind the dull brown of his eyes. The air shimmered between us with an electric spark. Charged magic roiled around him along with the unmistakable stink of the Nine Hells.

Thirty-Five



From the corner of my eye, I noticed the full moon through the arched ballroom windows, looming heavy and silver in the sky. My skin itched from within. An almost unbearable prickle that started at the base of my spine and spider-crawled up to the back of my skull.

The jaws of the beast leashed within me snapped. I swallowed hard, keeping it down with every ounce of my strength. Only the runes branded along my spine kept it contained.

Hestra desperately wanted out. She wanted to be free to sink her teeth in every person here. The drakewraith roared in my mind as it slithered under my flesh and constricted my bones. Yet I held onto my new control of that monster and that dark power with every bit of my willpower.

I flashed my teeth in a smile. A laugh bubbled past my lips in response to whatever it was Lord Silas said. I could barely focus on the words. My vision narrowed in on him as an urge to devour and shred provoked my mouth to water.

On the outside, it appeared to be a well-rehearsed, elegant dance. Lord Silas led us effortlessly over the floor as the music came to a crescendo around the ballroom. The noise of the tune echoed off the walls in a barrage against my ears.

This wasn't a beautiful dance. I was taking him in, absorbing every aspect of my prey. Circling him like a vicious predator preparing to strike. A viper in the grass locking onto her target.

Since the moment I laid eyes on the Warden, I knew him to be the man from my vision. The man I saw through the eyes of the lesser demon on the wharf. He matched the narrow, sharp face and blond hair. Despite the almost imperceptible glamor hiding his true features, I couldn't miss the hint of red peeking through the false brown of his eyes.

"You're exquisite," he admitted as we spun with the increased pace of the song.

“Thank you, Warden.”

I wanted to hiss and snap and flash my fangs. I wanted to sink my teeth into his throat and tear his flesh from his bones.

“Are you perhaps in the market for a husband?” he mused, with a devious smile on his face. My skin crawled and my stomach revolted from the hellfire of his touch.

“A princess doesn’t need to seek a husband.” Silver eyes came to mind.

“Certainly not.” His grip on my waist increased, drawing my body closer during a spin.

The heat of his eyes raking down my neck to my chest awakened a savage rage inside of me. Images of the Warden prone beneath my claws with his skin flayed and blood splattered played behind my eyes. Like a daydream, I desperately wanted to come true. A vision of the future where I drank his blood and reveled in the gore of his demise.

“I’m sure where you’re from, males fell to your feet hoping to worship you. Those men have nothing on me. I have power, and soon I’ll have a kingdom of my own.”

That statement pulled me back into the conversation. It was a slip of information that sent my thoughts spiraling.

“Is that so?” I feigned interest, gliding over the floor in his arms.

“Yes. And with your power, those lovely black flames, we could be unstoppable together.” His breath came close to my face. The overwhelming scent of sulfur clogged up my nose.

The Warden knew exactly who he spoke to. Lord Devora knew it had been me on the other side of the lesser demon.

He’d truly meant it. Every word of his offer.

I laughed. My head fell back with mirth, and the sound flew from my lips.

A wave of enraged warmth rushed over my side. I turned my head to see Deimos barging from the mass of dancers surrounding us. Dark delight fluttered through my chest.

“Allow me to cut in, your highness?” His voice was a knife that cleaved between me and Lord Silas, freeing me from his vile embrace.

The song faded away, and I peeled myself from the Warden.

“Of course.” I wanted to fall into Deimos’s arms and merge with him.

With one last glance at Lord Silas, I offered, “Thank you for the dance, Warden. I look forward to speaking with you again.”

He caught my hand before I could get away. The Warden pressed a kiss to the back of my hand that stung like acid. “It was my pleasure, your highness.”

Deimos swiftly curled an arm around my waist. In the tense seconds of silence before he stole me away, a charged spark of hellfire sizzled in the air between him and the Warden, sparking along the glamours that hid their true appearances.

Lord Silas Devora came from the Nine Hells.

Before I had a moment to think, another song drifted through the room. Without a second to waste, Deimos lifted me off my feet to spin me over the marble floor. It stole the air from my lungs when his powerful arms hugged me tight against his chest.

Dancing couples closed in on us as we melded into the music. They moved around us like crashing waves. Yet I remained steady and focused inside the eye of the storm with Deimos. Within our bubble of calm, where our eyes locked and the pressure to go feral subsided.

“You know I’m supposed to be getting information,” I whispered.

His fingers tensed on my hip.

“We know enough.” The rough edge to his voice caused me to smile knowingly.

“He’s wearing a glamor.”

“So, the Warden is our summoner?” Deimos asked in a hushed voice, covered by the loud climax of the song.

“I believe so.” As I answered, Deimos dipped me low to the ground. My breath hitched when he swiftly pulled me upright against his chest again.

A flush spread across my face. Despite the severity of the situation, he carried me away with the thrill of dancing. Out of all the parties and balls I’d lived through as a young princess, this dance right here with him meant something.

His glimmering silver eyes bore into mine. It was a gaze that trapped me, locking me into place against him. With his hand securely on mine and the other hand possessively on my hip, I almost swooned at Deimos.

A pebble of disappointment rolled around in my stomach when the song ended. If we'd had all night to dance, I would have stayed there with Deimos until my feet bled.

"Bellefy should be done gathering intelligence around the manor by now. Can you hide us from view to get out of here?" Deimos rushed out as we moved to the edge of the dance floor. He glared at any man who turned their head in my direction, making everyone promptly look away.

"If you can see through my shadows, won't Silas?"

My eyes moved over the crowd in search of the Warden. I found him sitting atop his throne.

While there were four women and a lord talking emphatically in his direction, it struck me to find his red eyes following me through the ballroom.

"Don't worry. We only need a moment for him to look away," Deimos said over his shoulder. He pulled me through the throng of bodies as I silently willed the shadows underfoot to rise.

A tall frame and red hair came into view.

Deimos imperceptibly nudged Raaz in the back. "You're up."

We continued heading toward the doors, leaving Raaz behind us.

In the silence before another song sprang to life, a dramatic crash of bodies and glasses shattering on the floor drew a crowd. Looking back, I saw Raaz helping a servant off the floor with wine and broken glass around their feet.

"Oh, gods! I am so sorry about that! How clumsy of me," Raaz commented loudly for his new audience. Part of me wanted to laugh at the tone of his voice.

I spied Silas taking his eyes away from me and Deimos. In the instant he turned his attention to the dramatic spill among his guests, I snatched the shadows out of the air.

Enveloped in darkness, Deimos and I became invisible to the eye.

Taking advantage of Raaz's distraction, we slipped through the doors to the ballroom. Cloaked in shadows, he led me through dimly lit halls. With the busy work of the ball, there weren't any members of the house staff passing through the corridors.

Sneaking around the west wing, on the opposite side of the manor to the ballroom, we eventually found an abandoned library. Deimos shut the library door and flipped down a latch, ensuring we remained alone.

Slightly out of breath from running, I asked, "Do you sense anything demonic?"

I turned my back on Deimos to absorb the details of the manor library. Massive walls of books loomed overhead in every direction I looked. One wall of windows to the right gave a magnificent view of the black sea in the distance, glittering with the reflected light of the night stars and full moon.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

That was my only warning before sturdy hands grabbed me from behind. One hand grasped my breast while the other pulled my hips back. My breath lodged in my throat when Deimos set his teeth to the side of my neck. An illicit shiver flashed over my limbs as his tongue flicked out to trace a wet path down to my shoulder.

"Deimos?" I breathed out. My eyes fluttered shut while my body melted in his hold. Sensual heat swirled through my body, centered on my core.

"Fuck," he groaned against my neck, "I need to get his scent off you. You smell like that bastard, and I can't stand his stink."

"Is this your way of marking your territory?" I chuckled through my panting breaths.

Until Deimos spun me around without notice, cutting me off. His molten silver eyes burned through me.

"I already know you're mine, darling. Never doubt my affections for you."

He'd look at me even if I was the sun. Even if his eyes burned and he lost his sight.

I didn't doubt an ounce of his feelings.

His lips fell on mine while his hands roamed over my body. The soft, searing heat of his mouth drove me wild. I burned up with

untamed desire everywhere he touched me.

Deimos inhaled my gasped breath when his tongue slid over mine. “I want to hold you close with your skin pressed tight against mine,” he growled into my lips.

I devoured his every word as he used his body to steer me backwards. The back of my legs hit one of the couches at the center of the library.

“The way your breathing changes when I touch you drives me absolutely feral.”

It wasn't the time or the place, but it felt so right. Hearing the longing in his ragged voice and experiencing the desperation of his powerful hands as he pulled my dress down made my thoughts haze over. A fog of desire rolled through my mind and body. Cool air kissed my skin as the black dress pooled around my ankles.

Deimos had a possessive side, and I relented to it. A deeply visceral part of me belonged to him, and always would. He held power over me in a way no god or man ever could.

I pressed my palm against the stiffness in his pants. A grunt of surprise passed his lips. My hand rubbed over the thick length of his cock, separated by the infuriating material of his pants.

I licked my lips when his erection twitched against my palm. “Do you want me, Deimos?”

“I've already got you.” The unhinged demonic frenzy in his snarl almost made me quiver with fright.

However, evidence of my arousal dripped from my pussy in response to his aggressive claim.

He almost appeared monstrous. His lips curled up in animalistic delight, knowing he would have me undone in his embrace.

Bracing his hand between my breasts, Deimos shoved me onto the couch behind my legs. I fell with a grunt, interrupted by his hard body crashing onto mine. In a frenzy, I reached between us and tore open the front of his pants to release his cock.

He rocked his hips the moment he was free, gliding the hard, pulsing length over my slippery folds. Involuntary noises came from me, erratic cries as the head of his cock bumped into my clit repeatedly. Flashes of delirious warmth spread through me each time.

“Oh, gods,” I moaned, toes curling as my head spun.

His sudden grip on my chin pulled my thoughts from the clouds. He dug his fingers into my skin almost painfully. At the same time, he aligned his cock with my entrance.

“No, no, darling. Don’t speak of gods now. When I fuck you, you scream my name, remember?” As if to punctuate his statement, Deimos eased his cock within me. Glorious inch by inch until he fully seated himself in me, and we shared the same breath.

“Ah! Deimos!” I quickly adjusted to his size inside of me and his solid weight over me. Searing pleasure rocketed through me from head to toe.

My head fell back into the cushion at the overwhelming sensation of his cock stretching me. The tiara pinned to my hair slipped off, and I couldn’t care less.

He drew out and slid back in, moaning low in the back of his throat. With one hand, he gathered the hair at the base of my head, gripping tightly as he cradled my face to his chest. His spice and honey scent overpowered me as his hips pumped against me.

“That’s it, darling. Take it all. Take every inch of me.” He breathed hard against the side of my head, tickling the sensitive tips of my arched ears.

Mewling whimpers flew past my lips as he roughly thrust into me, and my entire body shuddered underneath him. I curled one arm around his neck and wrapped the other around his waist. Both of my hands clawed at him, greedy for the pressure of his body rocking over mine.

The perfect alignment of his cock driving into me brought a wealth of heat into my core. All the delicious waves of euphoria pressed into a taut thread within me based at the apex of my thighs. It increased the spontaneous noises bursting from my lips and pulled the thread like the string of a bow.

“Oh, fuck, yes!” The arrow of my release loosed into an explosion of bliss. It swarmed around me, rolling swiftly through me. My body quivered erratically, and my pussy clenched with each new wave of my orgasm.

Reinforcing my hold on Deimos’s neck, I pulled him closer. My tongue slipped over his throat, purring as I tasted the masculine flavor of his skin.

I nuzzled my face against him, crooning as my hips rose to meet his frenzied thrusts. “Are you going to fill me, Deimos? Will you spill your seed and claim me for your own?”

A hand snapped around my throat, almost enough to cut off my air. His fingers in my hair clenched tighter, eliciting a pleasant tension over my scalp. He growled from deep within his chest and sparks of hellfire flared in his eyes.

“Come inside me, Deimos. Please. I want you to fill me. Claim me.” His hand on my throat wholly cut off my air. My eyes rolled back in my head. “Please. Please. Please.” The words barely squeaked past my lips.

He roared as his climax crashed into him.

I joined him in another orgasm so abruptly that my back arched off the couch. Stars exploded in my otherwise dark vision. The sweet heat of his breath caressed my face while his pulsing cock filled me to the brim.

Deimos eased the pressure on my throat.

I inhaled a deep, gratifying breath into my lungs. Random shudders shook my body because of Deimos continuously pumping into me, fucking his claim deeper within my pussy.

His scent completely enveloped me now, and I hoped it eased his demonic instincts for all the realm to know that I belonged to him.

With the full moon glowering ominously through the wall of windows, casting a pale light over our joined bodies and the foreboding threat awaiting us in the manor, we both knew that we didn’t have time for this moment.

Yet Deimos and I shared an intrinsic understanding that it was necessary to touch and taste and claim. To love one another while we still had the chance to do so.

The grim understanding that we had a dangerous creature from the Nine Hells to face hung over our heads like the blade of an eager executioner. Something sinister sulked in the manor. Something wrong and powerful waited for us—for me.

Thirty-Six



Bellefy found us after no time at all, thrusting us back into reality. If not for the satisfied ache between my legs, our quick moment in the library might have been nothing more than a delicious dream.

Bellefy gave us the pack of clothes she'd snuck into the servants' quarters. Dressed in more appropriate clothing for snooping around the manor, I moved easily, with the shadows curling around us. No one would look twice in our direction with the dark shield protecting us.

Using the shadows inhabiting the castle, I sent a message to Raaz. One tendril of darkness found him in the ballroom and whispered over the back of his neck. If he paid attention, he'd come find us.

"There's been a demonic presence here recently. It doesn't appear that this is the Warden's private quarters, though." Deimos stated in a hushed tone as the three of us explored another section of the first floor.

"This is near the servants' quarters," Bellefy realized. I looked back at her as she scrunched her face in speculation.

"Is there anything else around this part of the house? I can't imagine Silas is summoning demons amid his staff," I asked.

A beat of silence passed as Bellefy thought over the manor's layout. Though she'd had little time to infiltrate the staff, her soldiers' training would have prepared her for a mission of this nature. It didn't take her more than a few seconds to list off anything of suspicion.

"The kitchen and a cellar." She caught my eyes. "They don't allow the house staff in the cellar."

"Take us there."

More house staff crowded the corridors in that part of the manor. With the Warden's ball in full swing, there was no end in sight to servants with trays of drinks and bottles of wine.

Minutes later, Bellefy pointed us to an old wooden door at the end of a lonely hall adjacent to the kitchen.

To maintain the effect of merging with the darkness, all three of us slunk along the wall perfectly silent until we passed the bustling kitchen. I took a deep breath when we reached the desolate hall to the cellar.

And regretted it instantly.

"Gods, it smells of the Nine Hells here," Deimos spoke my thoughts aloud. He pressed his palms to the aged wooden planks of the cellar door. His fingers passed over each line and splinter as if searching for something.

Bellefy kept her eyes behind us, watching our backs for any sign of Raaz. With any luck, he'd find us soon.

I remained in communication with the shadows, absorbing the information they passed to me. Through the inky darkness in every crevice and corner of the manor, I knew where the guests gathered.

"We need to get down there. Where is Raaz?" Deimos angled away from the door, staring down the empty corridor behind us. Only the distinct chatter and clanging noise of the kitchen filled the quiet.

Around a corner, the shadows felt the heavy steps of a man of abnormal height. I recognized the pattern of Raaz's footsteps. Solid and surprisingly agile.

"He's coming," I said.

"We need to open the door and get down there. Our dubious Warden won't stay at the ball for long. Not after realizing Nevar slipped out. He'll want to find you." Something uneasy glinted in Deimos's eyes that I couldn't make out.

"There's Raaz," Bellefy blurted.

Our heads turned as an orange mop of hair peeked around the corner from the kitchen. I dropped the cover of shadows and his eyes flickered with recognition. He nodded before rushing to avoid anyone spotting him.

"Move. I'll open it." I nudged Deimos out of my way.

Placing a palm on the door, I silently commanded the shadows to infiltrate the locking mechanism. The coiling darkness writhed around the wood, slipping into the locks with a whisper.

After a few seconds, Raaz joined us at the end of the hall, and the lock clicked open.

“Impressive,” Raaz complimented. He stared over my shoulder as I nudged the door open.

“It was this or burn the whole thing down,” I remarked with a sly smile.

“That would have been fun to watch,” he complained, with no lack of disappointment.

A partial chuckle slipped past my lips before turning my focus to the cellar.

“You’ve caused enough of a scene for today, don’t you think?” Deimos slapped Raaz on the shoulder before inserting himself as the first person to enter the darkness.

I summoned a small orb that swelled to life within my palm, sparking and roiling with flares of sunlight. When I released the fiery light, it floated into the air over our heads.

Deimos paused with his foot on the first step, unmoving, as the orb of sunlight hovered ahead of him, illuminating the way down.

Bellefy took one last glance over her shoulder, keeping watch as we entered the stairway one by one: Deimos in front, me behind him, and Raaz at my back. Once it seemed clear, Bellefy followed, closing the door behind us.

Magical light brightened the worn stone under our feet. With each step lower, the scent of aged wood and damp air surrounded us. The temperature dropped a fraction as we made our way underground, beneath the manor.

My magical ball of light lifted higher into the ceiling when we reached the end. For all intents and purposes, it looked like an average cellar. Barrels and bottles of wine lined the towering shelves, casting dancing shadows along the walls under the flickering ball of light.

“It’s just a cellar,” Bellefy groaned. She twisted around in all directions, glaring into every corner.

Raaz scratched his chin, nodding his head as though he knew what he was looking for.

“No, there’s more here. I’m sure of it,” Deimos insisted. He surged forward, lifting his chin as he inhaled the moldering scent of the cellar. The smell of sulfur lingered here, and he’d find the source like a bloodhound following fallen prey.

“We’re missing something.” Bellefy closed her eyes. Shadows quivered in response to her calling on her powers.

Leaving the orb of light floating in the center of the ceiling, I focused on the shadows. I urged traces of darkness to map out the shape of the room in my mind’s eye. Each nook and cranny. Every crevice and hidden place along the shelves and carved stone walls.

I listened to the air and the shadows, following them and the places they would go.

“There.” My eyes remained closed as I lifted my hand, pointing at the back left corner.

“That’s a barrel,” Raaz stated flatly. His eyes widened as he approached the barrel. “Are there demons in the barrels?”

“What?” Bellefy sharply twisted around to gape at him.

“Wine demons.”

“You’re an idiot,” she hissed.

I wanted to laugh. Under different circumstances, I might have.

Deimos nudged Raaz out of the way and grabbed the enormous face of the barrel. His hands ran over the wood and the metal hoop at the end. The tension in his features increased and his breathing slowed.

“It’s not real.” The air shimmered under his fingers. He turned his head back, meeting my eyes.

“A glamor.” When I stepped closer, Raaz and Bellefy moved to the side, impatiently waiting for our next move.

“Yes, but I can’t break another’s glamor. Only my own,” Deimos advised. He removed his hands from the barrel to look down at me.

Silent encouragement filled his silver eyes.

There was a time when we first met that I’d caught glances of his glamor with an instinct to tear it from the air. With my control of

magic, part of me knew that if I wanted to pull the magic away from this stack of barrels, I'd have no trouble doing so.

Magic came at a cost. However, I believed I could pay the price now.

I am in control.

Hestra's voice stayed silent, locked away in a box in the back of my mind. The runes on my back thrummed with the force of containing her as I reached for the well of power that came from the goddess of magic.

Electric tingles skipped along my spine. I shivered as my hand rose into the air.

My fingers met an invisible wall. Like solid air that threatened to give away when I applied pressure. Pushing my clawed nails into the shield of the glamor, sparks crackled around the stack of barrels.

When my hand pierced the veil, the glamor shattered apart. Air fizzled out and a whoosh of dry, hot air blasted out over the cellar.

Once I opened my eyes again, I looked down the entrance of a crudely carved narrow passageway. It only took a thought for the orb of sunlight to sink from the ceiling and float ahead of me.

The light revealed a path roughly carved away into the stone under the foundation of the Warden's manor, sloping down deeper into the abyss below. Heated sulfuric air blew up from the depths and infiltrated my nose.

I shared a silent glance with the other three as we absorbed what we saw. This time, as our troop pushed on, I took the lead.

Deimos stuck close behind me with his hand reaching out as if to grab me at the first sign of trouble. Over the erratic pounding of my heart, his nearness reassured me.

A thousand thoughts tumbled through my brain as I wondered what we might find hidden under the manor. If Lord Devora was summoning lesser demons, and corrupting them here, we might stumble into anything.

Fraught with tension in the balmy heat of the passageway, we braced ourselves for the worst.

The little orb of golden light flitted onwards until it whooshed upward and vanished out of view. I held my breath as the light shone over a massive expanse of a cavernous room ahead.

I stepped into an unnatural cave slashed from the earth below the manor's foundation. The jagged dome of the ceiling towered high overhead, and random columns whittled from stone braced the structure.

Something sticky squelched underfoot with each step further into the rudely shaped cave. Looking up, I willed the ball of light to increase in size and luminosity. A wave of sunlight spread further, uncovering the vast space of the cavern.

A gasp punched out of me as I took in the gruesome details surrounding us.

Shades of red painted the walls in random splashes. Blackened scorch marks layered every surface. Broken bones and lumps of tissue and rotting flesh littered the floor.

All the horror centered on the middle of the cave, as if people—*creatures*—were torn apart from the epicenter of the cavern. Shredded and scattered in every direction with such force, blood and flesh wedged itself into the distant walls and ceiling, impossibly high over our heads.

Bellefy gagged, covering her mouth as the stench of sulfur and decay swarmed us. "Oh, by the gods."

"Why bother the other gods? We can handle this." Deimos smirked at me, and I rolled my eyes.

Other gods, indeed, I thought.

Not watching where he walked, Raaz kicked a pile of bones. His arms flailed as he regained his balance over the sticky uneven stone beneath our feet. The bones clattered, rolling away on the ground, and the sound echoed off the craggy walls.

Raaz's eyes shifted nervously, and he tugged at his collar. "Hotter than the Nine Hells in here, isn't it?"

"It's not, actually," Deimos answered. The weight of that knowledge stressed his handsome features into something harsh.

"Right," Raaz mumbled.

Advancing into the gore coated cave, we each searched for clues. Despite the oppressive heat, Deimos and I remained unbothered. Sweat coated Bellefy's brow and Raaz continued tugging at his clothing.

It took one simple breath from me to exhale cool air and spread magic, bringing the temperature of the cave down drastically. Even so, the rotten stink remained. Penetrating our senses with the heavy essence of death and whatever disturbing rituals happened in this cursed place.

A tickle on the back of my neck forced me to turn to the back of the cave. I followed that instinct and the shadows whispering in my ears. Turning around a column, I stopped as a new feature came into view.

“I found something.” In the silence, my voice carried effortlessly to the others.

An altar of uneven, slashed obsidian stuck out of the ground as though it had burst from the stone. Six crooked steps led to the dais the altar sprouted from.

My lungs refused to take in air as an uneasy energy settled into my bones. An inkling of something dark and unearthly brushed over my senses like a revolting caress.

A horrid wound in the mortal realm, the result of the gods’ last ruthless war, caused by revenge and savage wrath, the unsparing fracture in the elven continent that tore them apart was across the world from here, and yet... I felt it.

Power from the Rift tainted this unholy place.

Unconscious of my actions, my feet carried me to the altar. Trapped within my sudden tunnel vision, unaware of the world around me, something pulled me forward. Magnetic and unwavering, I couldn’t stop myself as I placed my hand on the flat surface of the blood-stained obsidian.

Light burst from hidden torches on the back wall of the cavern the instant my palm met the scorching stone. Blazing hellfire exploded over the obscene altar. Orange and yellow light flickered over the moist skulls on the steps, showing off the bits of flesh and hair clinging to the bone.

Impossible sight from their empty eye sockets watched my every move.

I didn’t hear myself cry out or feel my body drop as I fell to my knees.

“Nevar!” Deimos shouted. He watched me collapse on his way to my corner of the cave.

Bellefy was closer and leapt into a sprint to reach my side.

Images of another time flooded my thoughts. Each one burned the back of my eyes, searing into my brain. Invading flashes of visions burdened my mind so abruptly that throbbing pain deluged my entire body. Starting in my head and spreading in stomach churning, nauseating waves through my shuddering frame.

I saw Silas Devora in this place. But it was him and not at the same time.

That version of the lord wore crimson skin flaunting black markings that marred every inch of his flesh. Three sets of heavy, black spiraling horns crowned his head and long strands of wavy blond hair fell around his shoulders and down his back.

Hellfire had flared around his body in a flourish of dark power. He'd stood at the altar, chanting in the guttural and hellish language of demons. It grated on my ears like knives stabbing into my eardrums.

As he raised his hand in my vision, demons sprung forth from a dripping pile of bones and flesh seeping into the crevices on the altar. The grisly amalgamation jerked together, bones snapped into place and flesh sewed itself together.

Wisps of darkness weaved through the macabre mingling of unsettling sinew. That darkness stitching together malformed beasts of mangled and mismatched parts held no inkling of light and appeared darker than any void imaginable.

I'd witnessed Lord Devora's true form and a vision of how he managed his string of terror on Bellmead. He'd first summoned demons before warping them into unsightly creatures using mystical vapors from the Rift.

Something fractured within me. A leash that held something primordial and forceful back slipped from my grasp. The shield protecting me, and my thoughts splintered.

A small crack at first. Easy enough to ignore at the moment.

Powerful, supportive arms lifted me against a solid chest. A hammering heart echoed in my ear.

Deimos's panting breaths blew over my face as he carefully brushed away my hair. Tender fingers caressed and probed, ensuring I wasn't hurt.

“Never? Darling, are you alright?” His warm palm cupped my face.

My lungs allowed me to inhale again.

I grasped the front of his shirt. As the last traces of the horrid vision faded from my sight, I attempted to focus on the concern on his face.

After licking my parched lips, I found the words I needed to get out. They needed to know our assumption was correct all along.

“He’s a demon. Silas... He’s an Archdemon.”

A beat of silence passed.

“Fuck,” Raaz blurted. He placed his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “Not sure if my axe is big enough for an Archdemon.”

Bellefy narrowed a disappointed yet unsurprised gaze on him and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Never mind that. Are you alright?” Deimos asked again. His hand on my face forced me to meet his eyes, alive with flares of hellfire within the silver depths.

“I think so. That vision caught me off my guard.”

“What did you see?” When Deimos offered a hand to help me up, I gratefully accepted. His hand around mine remained firmly in place, even when I stood on my own.

“His true demonic form. The method he used to summon lesser demons. And how he siphoned power from the Rift to warp them into greater monsters than they were before...” Another fissure cleaved throughout the core of my being, cutting me off mid-thought.

Midnight struck, and a full moon of silvery light settled into the center of the sky. All aspects of time slowed to a near halt around me.

My breathing halted entirely as I sensed the magic of night and the moon clawing over my scalp and down my spine.

“You are mine. You belong to me.”

Hestra’s words were a warning. It was too late to avoid her and the savage beast that came with her essence.

I choked on air, gagging around nothing. My limbs trembled as an ancient power undulated against my skin from within.

“Nevar?” Instantly picking up on the change in my demeanor, Deimos squeezed my shaking hand.

My head jerked to the side, glaring at him as black took over the whites of my eyes. I returned a harsh squeeze to his hand and lengthened claws dug into his knuckles.

Deimos took a sudden step back, nearly losing his footing on the uneven dais. Black blood coated the back of his hand where my claws sliced his skin. His gaze narrowed on the black scales emerging around my wrists.

“You’re in control, darling. Remember that. Remember that it’s your power now!” Deimos urged, rushing the words out before he lost me to the change. He took another step down the dais, hands facing out in a defensive gesture.

“You think demonic runes—magic from hell—can contain the goddess of magic?” Hestra’s resounding voice boomed from between my lips. She scoffed, and the ground trembled beneath us.

Slowly angling toward my friends and my lover, I turned my back on the altar. With my hands facing forward, rising to my sides, I felt the scales rising to the surface. They raced up my neck as I rolled my head, as if allowing the transformation to spread further.

The runes along my spine sizzled, burning as they fought to contain the life essence of the god within me. Overloaded with the harassing presence of Hestra’s magic, my conscience relented to her control. That dam holding her back cracked under the oppressive strength of her willpower.

Condescending laughter bubbled past my lips as I stared them down from atop the dais. *“Fools. I am more than magic. I am eternal night, and I am a god. You can’t contain me!”*

Thirty-Seven



A river of primeval rage flowed through me from the pure, unaltered fury of a goddess left to simmer in her grief and anger for a thousand years.

Believing in the power of the demonic runes seemed a naïve dream now. My body was mortal, and I had no hope of containing her.

From behind my eyes, I watched as my friends backed away from me, watching in abject horror as the goddess stole control of my body. Reflected in their eyes, I witnessed the dark scales sweeping over my limbs and the flaring flames around the cavern.

And there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

I'd become trapped within myself as I did every full moon when the drakewraith transformation approached. Lost in a chasm of darkness that not even I could arise from. A will greater than my own had the reins, and I was powerless to fight it.

Behind Hestra, trapped within myself, I suffocated under the pressure. Futile attempts to regain control meant nothing as she took a step down the dais.

Internally, I wanted to weep as Deimos tensed. The conflict in his eyes hit me like a punch to the chest.

My lips opened as Hestra prepared to speak again. I writhed against her control, fighting to get past the inevitable change.

Until a new presence waved over our senses.

A chill crept over the back of our neck that crept along our spine. My stomach churned with aggressive tendrils of instinctive hatred. A rotten stink filled our nose, diverting our attention to the cavern entrance.

His shoes smacked on the stone, echoing in the tense silence. Each step he took meant to grab our attention. He wanted us to focus

on him during his approach.

My shadows crept closer as a heatwave blasted across the room.

“You all do not belong here. I think you might have stumbled upon the wrong room.” His red eyes found me at the dais, passing over the others with no ounce of interest, like they were nothing more than ants in his path.

“What do we have here?” Silas’s voice held an edge it didn’t have before, deeper and scratchy at the back of his throat. A voice that would have sent chills up the spine of a lesser being.

Not Hestra.

“Your death, Archdemon,” she replied, raising her chin.

Deimos hesitated to turn his back on me. Even when he finally faced Silas Devora, his body remained at an angle, watching me from the corner of his eye.

Bellefy and Raaz drew their weapons and braced themselves for battle within seconds of hearing the Warden. Raaz’s knuckles were nearly white from his grip on his axe. Shadow daggers materialized between each of Bellefy’s fingers, with wisps of darkness still clinging to the black blades.

“My death?” Silas threw his head back and ugly laughter burst from his lips. The sound grated against our ears.

Hestra clenched our jaw, grinding our sharp teeth as a low growl rose in the back of our throat.

“You can’t get away with what you’ve done in the mortal realm,” Deimos spoke up, installing himself between me and the Archdemon. “Your reign of terror on Bellmead ends here. It ends tonight.”

“Well, look at you. The little cambion who could. Do you weaklings really think you can stop me?” Silas barked out. His head jerked to the side as he assessed Deimos from head to toe.

Then his red eyes sidled back to me.

“Honestly, I could use the two of you. A cambion making a name for himself in the city and a Thanaten princess—” he waved his hand passively at the scales rising on my throat and over my chest, “—regardless of whatever you have going on.”

Deimos mockingly chuckled at the offer, holding his stomach and doubling over with false mirth. The raucous laughter touched on something inside of me like a light shining through a crack in the wall.

“You laugh but think about it. Truly stop and think for a moment.” Silas took a few more steps into the cavern. His boots squelched on the gore coating the ground. “These pathetic humans need a firm hand to rule them. Once my takeover of Bellmead is complete, I can move to the capital city. Then the entire kingdom of Dorgaelun.”

A demon from the Nine Hells wanted to seize the human continent. Thinking of the innocent lives that would suffer from his rule made the contents of my stomach churn to the back of my throat.

Hestra saw that future as well.

With our combined vision, she saw flickers of what Silas’s command of Dorgaelun would bring. Blurry images flashed through our eyes of enslavement and a world on fire. Untold misery and gruesome destruction would befall the continent.

Silas wouldn’t stop there.

We saw it all in the span of seconds. The future where Silas won and conquered the mortal realm. He’d move over all other races, repressing freedom and massacring entire kingdoms.

Silas would demolish the world with hellfire and raise an army of corrupted lesser demons.

In time, he would find his way to my home. Across the world from here, Silas would land on the shores of the elven continent. First, he would destroy Gwathendor with a rain of hellfire. Then he’d march to the Rift and siphon that power for himself and increase the mass of his unholy army.

After that, Laernear wouldn’t stand a chance against him. The sun and shadow elves would attempt to unite under the rule of the Shadow King, but in the end, my family and all the elves would perish.

My sweet, darling sister wouldn’t have the strength to wield her powers in a fight of this magnitude. Solara would be one of the first to—

No. I wouldn’t permit that to happen.

Was that Hestra's thought, or mine? I couldn't be sure anymore.

Our thoughts and ideas flowed together as one in those heavy moments. Rife tension rolled through the cavern and my skin prickled with something more than the scales breaking the surface of my flesh.

"You won't stop there." The words left my lips.

"No, I wouldn't." He stepped forward again.

Everyone else remained as still as stone.

"After the battle between Aristan and Hestra, the demons had no love for the gods. Aristan led so many of us archdemons to our death. It wiped out our numbers. When the gods became nothing more than memories, they left us to rot in the Nine Hells, disorganized and fighting for power. Nothing has changed there. Here in the mortal realm, I have a chance to create something new. Something mine."

Silas paused, flashing his teeth in a threatening smile at Deimos. "Silver eyes. You must be a bastard of Archlord Drystaxus. I'd flee to the mortal world if I were one of his sons, too. Your father is cruel, even by a demon's standards." He held out a hand. Almost a sincere gesture. "If you join me, I will treat you better than he ever did. I'd make you a general of the new world. A lord or a king if you wished it. I could give you anything you want."

"You can't give me anything." Deimos readjusted the grip on his sword. It was so fast I almost missed his glance back in my direction. "I already have everything I could ever want."

Another flare of white, brilliant light shot through me. It washed over me like a second wave of energy, shoving back the blinding darkness that held me hostage in my own body.

When my heart thumped again, I felt the physical reaction to Deimos. Proof of his breathtaking effect on my heart and soul.

Silas shrugged, wholly unbothered by the refusal. A bored sigh flowed from him at the same instant he rose a hand into the air. "Unfortunate then. If you won't join me, you don't need to remain alive."

The layer of wet and black sludge glued to the cavern floor quivered. Ripples rose in the thick layer of viscera. Chunks of flesh and tissue shivered. Broken bits of bone rattled together, vibrating as

some wicked power agitated the garish muck of leftover butchery and demon magic.

An inkling of power from the Rift flowed over my senses, causing chills to flare over my limbs. Barely a whisper of sickening darkness, but that trace amount could cause untold destruction if left unchecked.

Hestra flashed our fangs at the realization.

“He’s summoning demons!” Deimos shouted, clasp ing his sword in both hands. His head swept around the writhing masses in the cavern, taking in the mounds of disfigured blood, flesh, and bone rising higher with magic from the Rift, knitting the monstrosities together.

Everyone watched in stunned horror as repulsive, deformed lesser demons took shape from the rotting remains littering the underground chamber. The hellfire burned hotter, and the revolting scent of decomposition and sulfur clogged our nostrils.

They came together in an instant. One blink and I might have missed the rebirth of these fiends, torn from their home in the Nine Hells and forcibly inserted into the spoiled amalgamation of carcasses from the innocents Silas had butchered beneath the unsuspecting city.

This was the evidence of the affluent nobles that the false Warden murdered. Any aristocrat that didn’t blindly follow Silas in his grab for power wound up here. All the bits leftover from the lesser demons’ ravenous hunger found its way here to become another twisted monster under Silas’s control.

I thought of the woman and her silver ring from my vision my first night in this cursed city. Had her remains come back as one of these vulgar creatures? Had she found peace in her afterlife despite the circumstances of her death?

How many innocents had we saved in our time hunting the monsters? Was it enough to make a difference?

While questions burned inside my head, demons continued forming. Five. Ten. Twenty. They didn’t stop rising from the blood and bone. Increased hissing and broken growls filled the chamber with each corrupted demon reborn.

“What do we do?” Bellefy rushed out, panting with increased panic. Nothing in her training would have prepared her for the rising horde of bastardized, mindless aberrations.

Raaz twirled his axe with one hand in a mighty show of strength. Facing down death and ready to go down swinging, overly courageous bravado filled his voice. “Easy. We fucking kill the nasty shits!”

“The power from the Rift holding them together is tainted. Nevar’s magic could hold them back as a start.” Deimos glanced at me, searching for *me* through the eyes of the goddess staring back at him. His chest rose and fell rapidly as lesser demons with limbs at crooked angles and weeping sores on their grotesque flesh converged on the dais.

My body had become a prison thanks to Hestra’s takeover. I’d become frozen within myself, screaming and fighting for my control to return.

The corner of his lips curled up at me. A silent plea—a wish—for me to return to myself and join them. To join him.

Another tear in Hestra’s domination flared through my essence. Despite the full moon crossing the expanse of dark sky far away from us, I felt the binds holding me back loosen.

The runes on my back burned with scalding pain. I latched onto that feeling, using it to pull myself out of the dark pit Hestra tossed me into. With claws and fangs and stubborn will, I climbed.

Hestra ignored Deimos completely. My head rose as she narrowed her vision on Silas who focused on funneling power into summoning the demons as they came alive, turning toward the dais while he chanted under his breath.

An inhuman growl rose from the back of my throat as the beastly sound of Hestra’s drakewraith form, preparing to render my flesh and erupt into being. The monstrous instincts of that great beast pressed on the back of my skull as the well of magic waiting inside of my body spilled open.

Magic flowed over my skin in a tingling, warm caress. A sigh left my lips, following the growl at the euphoric feeling of that primordial power.

Silas couldn’t ignore the sound of the growls. His head whipped up from the lesser demons shambling across the stone. He took one look at the morphing scales on my skin and the glowing god’s power in my eyes. A long enough distraction that he faltered in his summoning.

No further corrupted demons rose to life, but the ones here didn't stop approaching.

"You should join me, your highness!" Silas shouted over the daunting noises from his fiends.

"I would die a thousand deaths before siding with an Archdemon!" Hestra spat back at him. Clawed nails dug into my palms, nearly drawing blood.

"I can kill these rats without blinking an eye," he gestured at my friends, "but I hesitate to kill you. Your power and royal blood make you valuable."

The false Warden didn't realize he spoke to a god. The god who hated Archdemons for their part in her war against Aristan. She'd never stand to let a demon live while she had control of me.

"Gods willing, I'll have conquered the mortal realm by this time next year. The rest of the world will be nothing after the human kingdom falls. By then, I'll have an army greater than anything this realm has ever witnessed. At my side, you could be more than a princess or a queen. I can make you an empress of the mortal realm!"

"Gods willing?" Hestra laughed. I felt the hearty shaking in my chest as she tossed our head back, openly mocking him and what she thought of his ideas.

"Of course. Their bodies are gone, but their spirits aren't. A new ruler needs to take over where they left off. I'm sure this is what the gods want for me, and for the world."

His misplaced confidence made Hestra laugh again, loud barking from deep in the stomach that echoed off the stony walls. Each burst drove a knife deeper into Silas, increasing his outrage.

Shaking his head, Silas snarled, "You won't be laughing for long!" Punctuating his statement, he snatched away the shimmering wall of his glamor.

Deimos hissed through his teeth at Silas Devora's true form. A massive Archdemon with blood red flesh and a crown of horns growing two feet in height.

The strength of Silas's power when he pulled away his own glamor also stole Deimos's. He glared back at the Archdemon with his crimson horns and black veins out for all to see.

Bellefy took a step back. She had a half second to notice Silas explode into his demonic form before the first wave of lesser demons fell upon her.

Raaz didn't perceive the Warden's transformation. Instead, his full attention went to fighting back the monsters the moment they lurched to attack.

Raaz swung his heavy axe, arching in every direction as he hacked off slimy red bits and pieces of the surrounding monsters. Bellefy tossed daggers of shadow that were lighter than air. Yet each one landed in its mark with a sickening thud.

Not once falling into the pit of their fear, they slipped easily into the first wave of battle.

Deimos had one moment that spanned an eternity to glance back at me. Through the god blocking me and the hellfire in his eyes, he reached out through that gaze.

Time slowed and somewhere in that length of time my hand pressed forward, breaching the cage that held me down. Through the dark and into the light, I found the fire, and I found the sun.

And in the next instant, Deimos flung himself into the fight, sword swinging and blood splattering. Limbs of mangled demons flew and their gurgling, dying screams fell deaf in my ears.

They made quick work of the first wave. Five smaller demons of wriggling tentacles and beaked mouths like the first one we tracked and killed in the sewers together.

"It's not too late to join me, princess! I can give you anything you desire! Join my side, and together we can live forever."

Silas put a clawed hand out, making his last offer over the battle that separated us.

I saw the last vestiges of hope in his eyes. He wanted me for my power, and he wanted me as his partner.

"If the gods had wanted you to live, they wouldn't have led me here." My voice came out harsh and commanding, but *mine*.

From between the tears in Hestra's control, I fought and struggled until the building light within me ruptured freely.

Upon hearing my voice on my lips again, Deimos slashed through the last demon from the first wave. He spun around, eyes wide and brimming with hope as he gazed at me on the dais.

The glimmering adoration in his eyes brought another surge of strength into my grasp.

“So be it!” Silas sneered, flashing a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. He flung his arm out in an unspoken command to his horde.

His action stole my attention. Only for a moment, but the next attack was too fast. From the corner of my eye, below the dais, I turned too late as a lesser demon of spindly arms and slicing mandibles fell on Deimos.

Flesh tore, and black blood splattered on the ground. It knocked a grunt of pain from Deimos’s lips. He froze, and his sword clattered on the stone. Then he fell, and a swarm of demons swallowed him into their abyss.

Bellefy screeched like a hunting falcon when it dove through the air. She shoved out her hands and dozens of black blades burst outward, and a wall of floating shadow daggers exploded from her. Each one caught a demon and took them down.

Raaz huffed like a bull in a fighting pit. His eyes zeroed in on the monsters falling over one another, over Deimos, and racing at him. He bellowed, rising his axe over his head, and rushed forward with the spirit of an unstoppable berserker.

Hestra realized that I’d regained control yet continued laughing. The irritating sound of it ricocheted inside of my head. She saw Deimos go down and rejoiced in knowing he wasn’t coming back up.

“*See, you are mine. I told you,*” Hestra cooed, purring with triumphant satisfaction.

An agonized scream tore free of me. I latched onto that rising fire, that sunlight, and yanked myself from the confines of her darkness.

The well of godly magic inside of my chest ruptured. When I unleashed that visceral magic, it fully belonged to me, swelling and surging with untapped potential, merely waiting for me to give a command.

Black whirling streams glowing with silver light connected everything. Shimmering particles of magic danced through the air, from my friends to the demons. Even to the trees, grass, animals, and citizens overhead, I saw a connection between all living things sharing a trace of magic—they all shared life.

I sucked in a breath at the sight.

Holding fast to that power flowing through my fists, rushing through every visceral ounce of my essence, I chained Hestra down. With cords of magic connected to my soul and a power greater than anything I'd ever felt before, I enclosed the goddess.

Then I stole that power from her, down to the last ounce of it.

I took the moon, the night, and all the magic back, making it irrefutably mine.

When my eyes opened again to find Silas staring at my friends fighting for their lives, and my fallen lover, missing beneath the thrashing wave of demons, I unleashed a new monster—a new god.

Thirty-Eight



Bright and dark power blossomed within me, changing me, as Hestra raged from her withering cage. She shrieked like a maddened creature as I rose ever higher above her, claiming my body and this new power as mine and mine alone.

The onyx scales ceased spreading over my skin, halting over the backs of my arms and shoulders. They dotted the sides of my neck and down my back, scattered around the demonic runes. Talon shaped claws as sharp as any forged dagger tipped my hands, and a set of sharp fangs pressed on my tongue.

I located the thread of shimmering magic connected to the life of the drakewraith, swirling in the air around me and thrumming with ancient power. It took no effort at all to hook a single claw delicately around the thread, then sever it.

A single snap, like plucking a cord or snipping a thread with scissors. As easily as breathing, I extinguished the fiery life of the drakewraith pushing to emerge. In the confines of my mind, its haunting roar faded as the glowing thread fizzled away.

“No. No. NO!” Hestra tried to escape while her monstrous form disintegrated. Futile, she endeavored to break through the wall securely in place between her thoughts and mine. She scratched and scraped at a barrier that refused to budge.

The rage and aggression of a wild animal lessened within me. No longer would I suffer the primeval instincts of a godly monster.

Now they were mine. My rage. My aggression.

Though I faltered upon seeing that dark scales and claws remained as leftover vestiges of a now extinct creature clinging to my body.

Paying them no mind, I breathed in at the release of pressure on my skull.

No more transformations during the full moon. No more fear of harming those I loved any time I used magic. Something I'd wished for since the night I emerged from the river of Hestra's blood and changed for the first time.

Magic comes at a price. One that I'd paid and would continue to pay. Yet I'd never become the drakewraith again unless I chose to transform. If I was to be a monster, it would be one of my making.

In that minor span of time, I remained aware of Bellefy and Raaz hacking and slashing their way through a hundred lesser demons of varying grotesque shapes and sizes. Sweat coated their brows, and somehow, I felt the strain in their tensing muscles from the effort of battle. And I felt the magic from Bellefy and her shadow daggers.

Power from the Rift, unlike Hestra's magic, moved against my senses like the comforting caress of familiar silk on my skin. It was the Rift magic that affected these demons who'd surfaced the mortal realm and held them together.

But it could be their undoing as well.

Even from across the world, I remained connected to the Rift. Its power surged over the elven continent the day my sister and I were born, and I felt it now. Something in my mind pointed me toward it like a compass, magnetically compelled to that power.

A demon broke from the horde.

Raaz lashed out with his axe, but the slippery creature crouched and skittered below the sharpened blade coated in demonic lifeblood.

It leapt at Raaz, jaw parted and teeth glistening.

"No more!" The forceful command thundered outward from me, shaking the entire chamber.

Raaz's eyes flared when he noticed the lesser demon flying toward him. His chest rose as he inhaled, bracing himself for the moment the fiends' claws would slice through his skin.

"*Burn.*" My voice was ethereal, and latent with compelling power. Musical and dominating, that word alone latched onto the glowing life threads of every demon in my immediate vicinity.

Magic undulated through the cavern in a titillating wave. Half the entire horde, floundering mashed together flesh and bone, eviscerated into ash before the word fully left my lips.

I could have breathed in their direction with nothing more than intent, and it would have done the same. I wanted them to burn, so they did.

Night-fire bloomed inside of the demons' bodies while tendrils of darkness and light ripped them apart. Godly destruction from within and elven magic to finish the job.

They *burned*, and they burned beautifully. Orange and red light danced in my eyes as I watched, grinning wickedly at Silas as half of his creatures disintegrated into fading embers.

Staring at me through the floating cinders in the air, his red eyes flickered with recognition for the night-fire. The smile lifting the corners of his lips dropped as his victorious expression faltered.

"You are the being I saw through the demon on the wharf." Silas shook his head in disbelief. "The Night Goddess of Death. How has the divinity within your flesh not shredded you apart?"

"You called yourself the flame that would block out the sun that night," I recalled. "You asked me if I was afraid, but what is a spider to a god?"

"How dare you compare an Archdemon to a bug!"

"Even a spider will crawl from its web when exposed to fire." My fangs glistened as if coated in venom when I maliciously smiled at him.

Silas took an abrupt step back.

"I don't see demons. Only prey." Raising my hand, I called upon the night-fire. It erupted over my arms, eagerly dancing in anticipation to burn and burn and burn—

"*My sweet,*" Hestra's sickeningly lovely voice whispered in my head. "*Let me devour them. We are stronger together. They wouldn't stand a chance against us if we were one.*"

The mental wall between us slammed down in time to focus on the archdemon's snarling voice when he opened his slavering maw once again.

Silas laughed with a sound full of cruelty. The remaining half of his demon horde waited along the walls for the command to fall back into battle.

His red hellfire eyes dipped below the dais as he pointed one sharp finger at a figure splayed out under the settling ashes. "You

can't stop me. Even the little cambion couldn't fight against his own kind. You're no match for me and all the years I've prepared for this."

My heart fell hard, hitting the ground and blasting through it. An emotion I'd never felt before slammed through my chest in the absence of my heart, becoming a void unlike anything I could comprehend.

Deimos lay unmoving in a pool of black blood, with dark streaks smeared on his lips. With his eyes closed and ashen skin, he appeared more than half a corpse. Only the flames illuminating the cavern gave him any semblance of remaining life.

In my life, I'd known fear and weakness, but nothing compared to the misery of the horrid, paralyzing darkness creeping into my body now. Claws of anguish and shame tore me apart from the inside, fastening around my bones and freezing my blood into ice.

My vision tunneled on Deimos and his weakening life thread sputtering out over him. I had no awareness of my legs moving until I collapsed onto his chest, violently shaking as I tried to hold myself together.

I pressed my palms into his chest, searching for any trace of a beating heart.

Trying not to shatter apart, I grabbed his face. His eyes appeared sunken with dark circles underneath them. But when I cradled his head, those once mysterious eyes I loved fluttered open, striking and rimmed red.

The flickering fire within their depths had dimmed.

I couldn't breathe through the million pieces of my fractured heart choking me.

The first tear fell, rolling down my cheek, leaving a searing path in its wake. It landed on his face near the corner of his mouth.

Deimos parted his lips as his cloudy eyes recognized my face inches from his. Shuddering, forcing himself to move despite his waning strength, he lifted a hand. His icy finger swiped at my damp cheek, and a rattling sound accompanied his uneasy breath.

When I tried to hold him closer, Deimos cupped my cheek with a trembling hand. He shook his head to discourage my tears.

"See? You are nothing more than another obstacle for me to overcome!" Silas's low, hissing voice slithered over my senses as he

barked an order. "Attack!"

The remaining horde of corrupted demons pressed forward.

Bellefy wiped away tears with her sleeve before setting her teeth on edge. Screaming and lunging, she poured every aching ounce of her anguish into dark violence.

Raaz followed close behind. Each savage swing of his axe broke apart the surging waves of demons fighting to get to me and Deimos on the ground.

"Go, my darling, you must stop him." Deimos's low, whispered words made me choke on a sob. "My viper, my vicious goddess, you must go now."

With a swarm of demons coming, I curled over him on instinct to shield his body with my own. "No. No. You don't get to die. You don't get to leave me like this. Not now. I forbid it!"

Choking on blood, his features twisted from the pain. Rivulets of black blood spilled from Deimos's mouth, yet that roguish smirk kicked up at the corner of his blood smeared lips.

"Why do you weep, darling? Did you think demons were immortal?"

The glimmer of hellfire in his eyes dwindled, decreasing until the molten silver disappeared. Empty gray eyes stared up at me, through me, at nothing at all. His last smile faded, and his hand dropped from my face.

Quaking with barely contained despair, I pressed my forehead to his. Inhaling his dissipating spice and honey scent, I pressed a kiss to his cold mouth.

I tasted his blood on my lips, my teeth, as rivers of tears rushed down my face. Broken and sick with heartache, I crumbled apart from within.

But I was fury, and rage, and death incarnate.

And I would get revenge for having my heart stolen.

Panting, shivering with piercing wrath, I rose to my feet. Surprisingly steady, I willed the tears to stop as I became a cold, unforgiving stone.

I told myself that I'd grieve later when I had time. After saving my new little family and the unsuspecting innocents of the city.

After killing Silas and crushing his heart under my foot. Then and only then would I allow the sorrow in.

Swallowing it all down, I pieced together enough of myself to face the bastard responsible for it all. The lost lives in Bellmead, the burning of the farmland and the little boy, and all the destruction that came with his control as Warden.

“You’re too late, princess. There’s nothing you can do now. Either join me, or die with your friends,” Silas challenged.

Bellefy cried out as a demon slashed at her shoulder, slicing open her arm in a spray of ruby droplets.

My jaw clenched and my breath vented out of me as hot air when she stumbled to her knees.

Raaz released a brutal war cry as he lopped off the head of a lesser demon. Another one leapt on him from behind and stabbed its pinching claws into his back.

A gust filled the cavern. The fire brightening the space sputtered from the gale force winds billowing around the underground chamber, howling louder than the sniveling growls of the insignificant monsters below.

I rose higher and higher into the air without realizing it, lifted by wings of darkness sprouting from my back. Shadows converged on me, filling me, until I became nothing more than an abyssal silhouette wreathed in heavenly white-gold flame.

Silas’s jaw dropped open. His head tilted upward as he gaped at me with some mix of fear and amazement. Under the sight of the otherworldly being that I’d become, he shrank into himself.

“I am Nevar Mortala Solen-Mor’gen.” My voice breached my lips, but it was new. It was divine, with substantial allure and unbending dominance. “I am more than the light of the sun, and I am more than the shadows of the moon.”

The Archdemon, my target, my prey, shrank back. His bravado faltered, staring frozen as I transformed before his eyes into inflamed darkness in the shape of a goddess, towering over him and the paltry horde beneath my feet.

I rose higher into the cavern, walking on air where no sound accompanied my steps, moving steadily in his direction. One deadly claw pointed at him in a silent oath—a warning.

Everything in my life leading up to this moment sung from the center of my soul, roaring at me. I pulled it out and settled into the power, knowing with certainty that I had control, and my actions were my own.

From deep within, I knew *who* I was, and I knew *what* I was.

When a heavenly body moves into the shadow of another, an astronomical event occurs. Surrounded by hellfire and death, that very event occurred here in the cavern. I became something new, something greater.

As I tapped into Hestra's primordial power, bleeding it from her essence and imbuing it into mine, I became the embodiment of the moon perfectly aligned with the sun to cast a shadow on the mortal realm.

Simultaneously, the light and the dark.

All at once, I was the sun, and I was the moon, and I was the darkness that came with their coexistence.

"I am the Goddess of the Eclipse." My voice thundered out, shaking the foundation of the entire city overhead. "And as promised, I will be your death."

Silas swallowed hard, his throat bobbing from the effort.

Pebbles and chunks of rock crumbled from the ceiling of the chamber, falling and clattering all around. Demons squawked and shrieked as stones bashed them, squishing a portion of their numbers.

Silas took another step back, nearly stumbling in his rush to escape from falling gravel.

"Nevar!" Bellefy screamed, seeming at once so far away and right behind me. Her cry was so full of concern and worry, despite the encroaching fiends that would soon overwhelm her and Raaz if they weren't stopped.

Without breaking eye contact with Silas, I raised my arm into the air. Quickly, it swept downward, where I balled my hand into a tight fist. Sharp electric magic skittered over my body in wild flares before erupting outward over the chamber.

"Burn."

Night-fire, darker than any night the mortal realm had ever seen and hotter than any fire in existence, detonated through the lesser

demons. They burst apart in a rapid session, sputtering and yelping as they experienced their death come from within. The demons popped like blisters of blood and bone before blazing into blackened cinders.

Stillness settled into my chest, my mind, calming my grief and even my rage.

I looked upon the lonely archdemon. He seemed like nothing more than an insignificant blip when the massive beast of crimson flesh and horns would have made me hesitate a month ago.

A vein pulsed erratically in Silas's throat, and his brows snapped together. Every muscle in his body flexed, rife with tension as he froze, watching me approach through the air while his swarm of demons evaporated into the rancid air.

The heat of hellfire in the chamber wouldn't affect a demon of his stature, but seeing the sweat forming on his brow from the night-fire lifted my lips in a lethal grin.

Dropping from the air, I descended on him, poised to attack.

At the last second, Silas yanked a knife from his back pocket, pointing the blade toward me.

The ground quaked when I landed.

Staring directly at the knife in his hands at my eye level, I stepped up. Reflected in the blade, I caught my body of shadow highlighted in silver and gold fire, and my eyes glowing like pools of white flame.

I speared my gaze up to Silas, peering into his red eyes, through him and the beast he was.

The knife in his hand wavered.

Reaching up, I curled my hand around the blade of the knife. I didn't feel the sharp edge against my palm, nor the chill of the metal. But I heard the sizzle as the iron melted away, dripping down my wrist and falling as molten splatters on his boots.

The archdemon's breath hitched when I pulled my hand away, leaving nothing more than an intricate handle of carved white marble in his palm. His shaking hand dropped the handle to the ground, where it clanged away on the uneven, rocky ground.

Each breath vented through his parted lips as broken bursts of sulfuric air. His red eyes flicked between mine, desperately

searching for something he'd never find—mercy.

“Pray to the other gods that they will have clemency for my enemies.” Night-fire sparked along my fingers, reaching for his face. “I never will.”

Dragging a single claw along his cheek, I watched Silas roughly swallow. A black line of scorched skin trailed behind the sharp point of my nail.

He hissed, barely resisting the instinct to flinch back. “We could be a team. I'd make the world bend to their knees and worship you.”

My claws stopped over his chest, hovering over the heart racing beneath his ribs. Words left me in a near whisper, full of the heartache I wouldn't allow myself to feel yet. “I had someone to worship me, and you took him from me.”

“You don't have to do this,” Silas begged in a feeble whimper as he realized his fate. The towering archdemon shrank back as if he might bolt away.

“You're scared. How pathetic.” My poisonous words wrapped around him, constricting his hellish spirit, and crushing his demonic pride. “Then again,” I purred, piercing my burning claws into his chest, “who could blame you?”

A stifled gasp obstructed Silas's throat as I shoved my fist through his ribcage. His head angled down, and dark blood dripped from his mouth. A suffocated wheeze escaped him as he stared at my arm plunged into his body.

His heart pumped in my hand, and I dug my claws into the hot, pulsing organ. The shimmering line of the archdemon's lifeline flickered, thinning with each second that I increased my grip.

I caught his eye and locked him there, drowning him in my primordial stare. Flexing my fingers, I used the heart faltering in my hand to pull him closer.

Silas wheezed, knees trembling while the hellfire in his red eyes died out. The stench of sulfur and burning flesh commingled in the air between us.

“Don't... Don't,” Silas gasped. He tried and failed to grab my arm jutting from his chest, but he couldn't withstand holding my form without burning himself. Both of his arms dropped uselessly to his sides.

When the massive demon fell to his knees, my other hand came up and twisted in the back of his short, blond hair. The metallic tang of blood lingered on my tongue, and I flashed my fangs at the bastard forcibly kneeling before me.

“*Burn.*” All my hollow emptiness, my weakness, my grief and my tortured suffering strengthened that word.

The never ending, deep well of frightening, dark magic inside of me poured outward, cascading over my body in delicious waves. Undulating power sang with the strength of avenging magic.

The false Warden of Bellmead would pay for the destruction he wrought on this city, and for the innocent blood he’d spilled. With his still-beating heart in my hand, Silas Devora would know death.

A death he deserved, and I’d happily be the executioner.

Magic and visions led me here to this moment, to end his reign of terror. Everything culminated to this night under the full moon.

The night-fire encased Silas’s heart, jumping from my claws to the organs inside his chest. His heart stopped beating, and a second later, the meager thing dissolved into ash in my palm.

Withdrawing my sticky, blood-coated hand from his chest, I stood motionless. I observed the glorious show of black and silver fire spreading from the gaping hole in his chest.

Silas emitted one final faint noise as his skin melted, face frozen with dying fear. Crimson flesh peeled from the bone, sluicing off and evaporating before hitting the ground. His visible twitching muscles and tissue burned from the dark fire encasing his frame.

My lips pulled up in a smile when his scorched bones disintegrated into a tumbling pile of sulfuric ashes. The noxious smell of the Nine Hells and demons lingered in the putrid, hot air, but the monsters were gone.

While watching embers of what remained of Silas flutter away over the ground, I felt the eyes of others on my back.

A pit opened in my stomach when I turned around.

The last traces of blood on my fingers sizzled away. Yet I still tasted blood on my lips. *His* blood.

Bellefy leaned over Deimos, gritting her teeth as tears freely fell down her face. Gashes covered her entire body, divulging the

extent of her struggle in the fight. Raaz kneeled near Deimos's head. Not bleeding nearly as much, but tense and bruised.

Both of their heads turned up, exhaling heavily at the sight of the humanoid eclipse both illuminating and darkening the chamber. Bellefy's lips trembled as a soundless sob punched from her chest. Raaz didn't blink through his tears, merely nodding at me instead.

They weren't afraid.

In an instant, my body moved through the space between us. The night-fire extinguished as I slumped to my knees over his too cold body.

Deimos shouldn't be cold. It was wrong. All wrong.

The demons that had swarmed over him trampled and scratched at every visible inch of his skin. His left leg was missing below the knee. A massive hole in his ribs, near the heart, glistened with his dark blood.

"Deimos." I ran my dark, glowing hands over his chest. Finding no trace of a beating heart, I reached for his face. "Deimos. Deimos!"

"Nevar!" Bellefy grabbed me when I began shaking him. "Shit!" she jerked back when the godly power of my current form zapped her skin.

"He's gone. Nevar, he's gone."

"Deimos, please." Ignoring her, I fell over his chest, clinging to his frigid, lifeless frame.

"There's nothing more we can do." Raaz looked around the desolate cavern with red-rimmed eyes, unable to view the state of his closest friend. His chest shuddered, and he struggled to breathe steadily.

"Give him back," I wept, speaking to the presence lurking in the back of my mind.

Hestra's essence rose, held back by the cage I'd banished her to. Through my eyes, she peered at the unmoving body clutched in my arms. She felt the affliction of my grief. A feeling she knew intimately.

"Hestra, give him back. You give him back to me from the bowels of the Nine Hells!" I pleaded with her, voice rasping and frail. Tears spilled from my eyes, burning into vapor on my cheeks.

Like Raella's spirit, waiting a thousand years on the mountain for Hestra to return to her, I promised to stay there with Deimos forever. I'd hold him for eternity until there was no more pain and suffering. Until my suffering vanished, and nothing would ever wound us again. Until the day his body decomposed into the ground and mine finally went with him, embraced in the soil together.

"You are the god now," Hestra said after what felt like an eternity. *"You've taken my power. I am only a spirit within you. But if you release me, perhaps I could do something."*

"Why would I trust you now?" I spoke aloud.

Bellefy and Raaz looked up, startled at the outburst.

"Your sadness wounds me. The grief you feel for him mirrors what I felt so many years ago. I've tormented you, and I regret how I've spent my afterlife. Free me from these binds, and after I help you, I will move on."

Hestra would leave her revenge behind and finally join Raella in the afterlife. With the other departed gods in the heavenly plane, she'd move on and be at peace. She would reunite with her lover and accept her demise.

Too desperate to disagree, I shoved at the wall between our minds, breaking it down. I reared back, keeping my hands on Deimos, needing to feel him.

Hestra's essence unfurled within my skull the same way it always did when her presence awoke to cause havoc. Yet this time, I felt the calm, the change in the god's soul and her returned sense of empathy.

The two lifelines rippling and circulating around my body suddenly shuddered. My muscles flexed as the two agitated coils of black and silver thread disentangled before my eyes. They flowed sharply from my chest, like someone tugged thorny vines from my heart and into the open.

One lifeline billowed higher. This one appeared thicker, older, and strong with all the years accumulated within it. I knew at once that was Hestra.

"Take the line in your hand."

With unrestrained urgency, I grasped hold of the lifeline flowing around me. Magic sparked around my hand, bouncing along my arm. "Now what?"

“Nevar,” Bellefy started, “what are you doing?”

“Leave her be! Don’t interfere with the work of gods,” Raaz insisted.

Swiftly, he tugged her into his arms, soothing her. Curled around her and easing his own fears with her companionship.

Bellefy held his forearm around her waist, unable to tear her eyes from me, and the visible electric magic manifesting around my eclipsed form.

“Feed the line through his lips. Then ease it through his body.”

With shaking hands, I obeyed Hestra’s instruction. I grasped the essence of her life and moved it through Deimos’s unmoving body, starting by slipping the end of the shining thread through his ice-cold lips.

A sob punched through me from the unnerving chill of his skin.

I ran my hands over his throat, massaging the thread through his body. With each inch that disappeared into him, the pressure of Hestra decreased in my mind. My head became lighter, and my heart returned to my chest.

“Be free, daughter of sun and shadow.” Hestra breathed one last time as the last bit of her life thread vanished down his throat.

Then she was gone, and the part of me where she’d cleaved out a place for herself was empty.

Under my hands, the glow from Hestra’s thread increased in his chest. Her soul returned to the other gods in the heavenly realm, but the essence of her life that had kept her heart beating for over a century and brought me back to life when I drowned in the river thrummed through his body now.

Bowing over Deimos, I pressed my chest to his, encouraging his heart to beat in time with mine once more. My hands held him tight, willing the thread to curl around his heart and enable him to breathe again. I poured my heart, my warmth, my love, my strength, my everything into him.

I howled with my grief, hoping that if he heard me on his way to the Nine Hells that he would turn back around and come home to me.

I pressed my lips to his, colder than ice and as firm as stone, and my heart slowed.

If he didn't return, I'd go with him. Down to the depths of every layer of the Nine Hells to find him. He'd be mine in every realm, if that's what it took.

A spark danced across my lips. Soft and gentle, something fluttered under my hands. Like a small bird in a cage flying around, the beating increased.

The silvery line of thread exploded from his chest and ruptured through mine. Our lifelines tied together again, intrinsically bound forever.

Resurrecting Deimos's soul from a hellish place to be mine was my ultimate act of godhood.

Two firm hands snaked around my ribs.

The glow of an eclipse faded from my body as another heart pounding against my chest. Shimmering, golden darkness dwindled as it swept me up in the growing heat against me.

Gently at first, he kissed me. Warmth returned to his lips, sliding over mine with easy familiarity. He pulled my lower lip between his teeth, slightly drawing on it.

I gasped into his mouth, the sound half a fractured sob.

Those powerful hands held my cheeks, keeping me close as his warm breath fanned my face. The scent of spices and honey eased the painful tension in my muscles.

Opening my lashes, I melted to see bright molten silver eyes gazing adoringly up at me.

Finally, the alluring voice I'd waited all my life to hear whispered, "Hello, darling."

Thirty-Nine



A brisk wind lifted the ends of my hair, and the white strands billowed behind me. Under the mild warmth of the afternoon sun, I tipped my head back, soaking up the light. I deeply inhaled the scent of freshly cut straw, newly grown crops, and recently churned soil.

The city noise faded that far out in the farmland. In the month since the ball, I often roamed the thriving fields despite the busywork that came with the Warden's death.

Following that night, I'd gone to the Bellmead council and city guard. Bellefy and I revealed the demonic activity and fate of the false Warden. Raaz showed them to the cavern under the manor. With approval from the council, we'd destroyed the chamber.

Lord Hayden Fredericks and Lord Theodrin Emalstan insisted on honoring us as heroes of Bellmead. We remained in the city during the election to find a worthy Warden for the people and waited for the return of the full moon.

It came and went, and nothing happened.

I could finally return home.

The heat of a new presence sweeping over me interrupted that thought. My heart fluttered, and I pivoted around, following the shimmering tangled life threads.

The sight of Deimos and his handsome smile made me melt.

"Enjoying the view, darling?" He strode through the waving strands of wheat, passively relying on a cane as he adjusted to his new leg.

Although he'd returned to me that fateful night, I didn't have the power to regrow his lost limb. Instead, I applied my powers towards forming an entirely new leg of living shadow and magic. It was as dark as obsidian and stronger than any forged iron.

My heart leapt for him, and I couldn't tell if my feet touched the ground in my eagerness to reach him. I floated on air every time we were together.

"It's even better now." Mindful of his new leg, I curled my arms around his ribs and melded myself against him.

Deimos was alive, and he was here with me. That was what mattered the most.

The past month, we'd offered our aid to the city in their time of need, and Deimos spent hours mastering the use of that magically formed limb. In no time at all, he'd returned to training lessons with Bellefy and sparring with Raaz.

At night, Deimos and I made use of our time alone. Tangled in passion, we listened to one another breathe, and the beating of our hearts, reassuring ourselves that we were alive and safe in each other's arms. With careful, tender caresses, he'd explored my body as if needing to relearn every inch of me.

As I thought of his touch, he idly traced a finger over the smooth onyx scales on my shoulders. The sleeveless black halter dress I wore exposed the remaining dark scales gathered on my shoulders that tapered off down my arms.

I might have glamoured them away, as Deimos did with his demonic features, but I found the scales didn't bother me. They were an important reminder of that night and the change I'd undergone. The runes and scales were part of who I was as Nevar Solen-Mor'gen, goddess of the Eclipse.

A god of light and dark, of life and death.

Deimos placed a soft kiss on my temple. Together we gazed out over the renewed farmland glowing golden under the orange haze of the encroaching sunset.

Somewhere in Bellmead, three loud bells had rung simultaneously, interrupting our silence.

"Seems they've finally elected their new Warden," Deimos stated.

"Finally." I lifted my head from his chest. "Do you think they'll leave us alone now?"

"Darling, they'll never leave you alone. You saved the city, and you're an unwed foreign royal within their borders." He sucked his teeth while idly rubbing a hand along my spine.

“Helping them get back to normalcy this past month is one thing, but staying long term is another I won’t consider.”

“I know you dream of returning home.” He kept his arms around my shoulders while looking back at the city. “You may go anywhere you wish. I only hope you take me with you.”

I twirled my fingers through our twinkling, connected life threads. “I’ll never part from you. We’re bound for life, you and I.”

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Deimos abruptly caught my chin with his fingers, urging my face closer to his. “You are a wretched and beautiful goddess, and no one but you could ever hold my heart.”

“I love you.” His kiss stole the admission from my lips.

Deimos moved his mouth with mine, slowly exploring at first. Until he dropped the cane into the dirt and smoothed his hands over my waist. His fingers dug into my hips and his lips became demanding.

His impressive body bowed over me, maneuvering me without breaking the kiss. My backside hit an abandoned cart hidden among the swaying pale yellow grains.

My heart rate spiked with the wanton heat rising in my blood.

His tongue darted over my bottom lip in an unspoken request. I opened my mouth, greedy for his tongue to slide over mine, and our breaths mingled into one.

During clumsy, open-mouthed kisses, Deimos hastily peeled the gown from my body. The fabric pooled around my feet, and before I could step out of it, he’d grabbed my hips and lifted me onto the back of the cart.

“I love you, Nevar. I will worship you until the Nine Hells reclaim my unworthy soul.” His lips trailed along my jaw and down to my neck. That hot mouth on my sensitive skin provoked a fluttering behind my ribs that coursed through my blood.

“Your soul belongs to me.” I buried my fingers in the feather soft strands of his black hair while his mouth trailed toward my breasts. Ever so lightly, I scraped my clawed nails over his scalp, eliciting delightful shivers from his body between my thighs.

“Then I will love you forever.” That rasping promise almost made me come undone, and he’d barely touched me.

Deimos caught one perked nipple gently between his teeth, and my breath hitched. My head flew back when he flicked his tongue over the taut bud. His other hand slipped between our flush bodies to unfasten his trousers.

“You were already going to,” I breathlessly teased.

“I was,” Deimos mumbled through a smirk, keeping his mouth sealed to my skin. A chuckle rumbled from deep in the back of his throat and the vibrations moved through me.

A provocative tingling sensation shot from my breasts to the apex of my thighs. Reaching between us, I nudged his hand away from his pants, racing to free his cock and yearning to feel him.

He groaned against my chest the moment my fingers wrapped around his cock. The hot, heavy length twitched against my palm, reactive to my touch.

His mouth popped away from my breast, and he cast his wicked silver eyes up to mine. He cupped my sex, and I gasped when his middle finger slipped through my pussy.

“Mm, wet for me already, darling?” Deimos purred.

I would have rolled my eyes at him if I could have. But his finger slipped easily into my slick core and caressed a sensitive spot that drove me wild.

“Yes!” I stroked his cock, breathing fast with anticipation.

“Turn around,” he demanded in a heavy voice against my ear. “I know how my goddess likes to be worshiped.”

I gladly obliged, rolling myself against his toned abdomen as I did.

Deimos bit his bottom lip, holding himself back in the seconds it took me to turn around and brace my arms.

With one hand, Deimos rubbed his heated palm reverently over my spine, feeling the uneven black runes branded into my skin and the smooth, obsidian-colored scales surrounding them. The trembling praise in his touch brought a swarm of butterflies through my insides.

Deimos loved me for who and what I was, as I loved him. From the moment we locked eyes in the tavern, and his power had rolled across mine, intoxicating me with vicious seduction, I'd been his.

Destined to find one another and souls forever intertwined.

He aligned his cock with my quivering hole and rubbed his erection over my slick folds. Each pass over my pussy increased the rate of my already racing heart.

My breath lurched in my throat and sparks flew over my skin when he latched onto my hips and slammed himself inside me.

“I love you, Nevar.” He withdrew at an agonizing pace, leaving my legs quivering. “You’re mine.” He thrust deep against me. “You will always be mine. And I am yours.” Then again.

Deimos curled his arms around my ribs, pressing his chest flush with my back. He held me as close as physically possible while inside of me. When he snagged the tip of my ear between his teeth, my pussy flexed on his cock because of the pleasure that erupted through me.

“Ah, gods!” Deimos grunted, losing his self-control as he pounded into me harder and faster.

“No, my love, I’m the god you scream for.” I curled an arm over the back of his neck and tangled my fingers in his hair. As I pulled his face to mine, he licked his tongue over the side of my face.

“Yes, my goddess.” Deimos ran a hand up my stomach and between my breasts. The heat of his skin burned every inch of my flesh in the most delicious way.

He grabbed the base of my throat, holding me so tight it almost cut off my air flow.

“Nevar, come with me.” His teeth grazed along my jaw. “Come for me, darling.”

His arousing command made my toes curl. With his amorous movement and the perfect rhythm of his hips, he didn’t need to tell me again. The carnal inferno in my core expanded outward in sensual waves, rolling through me from the apex of my legs to my chest and out to my limbs.

Deimos followed me into the abyss of erotic euphoria, climaxing at the same time. His muscular arms held my quivering body in place while he pumped his release deep within me.

The energy of our simultaneous orgasms filled the air, and stars flashed behind my closed eyes.

“I love you so much.” I couldn’t seem to stop telling him these days. Any time we were together, those words passed my lips more

than a dozen times.

In the morning. At dinner. During meetings.

With the pleasant afterglow coursing through my blood, I wanted to dance in the air.

After he pulled out, I turned around and pressed myself into the toned planes of his chest. His heart hammered against my ear, and I had no words to express the joy that sound brought me.

He hugged me in return, wrapping his thickly corded arms around my head. His lips fell on my head in a tender kiss before he said, "And I love you, my darling."

"If we could stay out here all night watching the sun set over the horizon, I would," I sighed into his chest.

"I know, but the council will want you to meet the new Warden of Bellmead, I'm sure." He released me, chuckling ruefully. "Though it means we'll be home for dinner. In my bed."

"That eager for another round, are you?" I winked at him before picking up my dress. "Is your leg alright?"

"It doesn't hurt," he shrugged. "Regardless, I wouldn't need two legs to please you."

Once dressed, I wrapped my arms around his waist and pressed my lips to the back of his neck. "No, you can lie there and look pretty. I'll simply ride you like a warhorse into battle."

He blew out a slow, amused exhale. "Have I told you how much I love you?"

"Yes, but you can tell me more."

Six years of darkness had followed me.

Not the darkness of shadows, but the type that caused an oppressive weight on your chest and turned your bones hollow. The type that kept you up at night with tears blinding your vision, clutching at your chest as you sobbed, wondering what had gone wrong.

All those years on Ellrend with the witches, I'd chased some fate I'd never found. That time became a stepping stone to my next journey, to the part of my life where the brutal darkness was chased away.

The pain of Hestra and her avenging grief were behind me. I'd finally returned to some semblance of light, but not without help.

Looking at Deimos, I felt warmth kissing my cheeks like the welcome dawn of the first day of summer. Seeing him was like seeing the light I'd longed for, and he'd guided me to peace and love.

No force in the world had the power to take him from me again. I'd shower Deimos in the consuming love only a god was capable of, having faith that it would never end.

Forty



In the night, I opened my eyes to the fuzzy world of visions. Peering through the fog, I noticed shades of green and yellow in vaguely familiar shapes. The perfume of flowers diffused through the air, and wild ringlets of fiery red hair waved in the corner of my eye.

With one blink, the haze of the dream cleared, revealing my surroundings.

I took in the golden palaces and opulent gardens with vibrant flowers of every color imaginable in the Mithran kingdom of Laernear. The land of the sun elves and our mother's people where I remembered spending balmy, snowless winters.

Across from me, Solara angled around. My beautiful sister. My twin. The sun to my shadows. Her wide eyes of glimmering gold peered in my direction, yet she saw through me.

"Solara," I vented her name, and the sound fell through the air.

She didn't turn her gaze to me or acknowledge my presence, advising me it wasn't a shared dream. Regardless, I knew it was a vision.

Some force of fate brought me here to witness something revolving around my sister.

Solara smiled at something behind me, and I whirled around to find the source. We remained alone in the garden. Regardless, she lifted her hand for something or someone.

A light glinted in the heavenly depths of her eyes seconds before a deep, animalistic growl echoed over the garden.

Songbirds exploded from the hedges and colorful bushes, fleeing to the safety of the sky. Another growl shook the stone path beneath my feet, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose as I turned in frantic circles.

Despite the hidden threat, Solara didn't move. She stood firmly in place, smiling with utter happiness.

I tossed my arm out to grab my sister and move her out of harm's way. But I didn't make it in time.

A massive beast leapt over the towering wall that surrounded the palace gardens. Hefty paws thumped on the ground, and sharp claws scraped over the stone as if they were made of sand. Golden fur radiated under the intense rays of the Laernear sunshine.

Before my eyes, a larger-than-life gilded lion prowled toward Solara. Still, she didn't flee. Instead, she gazed at the beast without an inkling of the danger the beast posed to her.

My twin had every power of sun and shadow she needed to defend herself. That monstrous golden lion shouldn't be a threat to her, yet I knew she wouldn't raise her hand against it since she was the timid princess.

Then the beast lunged through the air, launching itself with perfect precision, claws outstretched and aimed at my sister.

I tossed my hand out, calling for my magic. But this was a vision and nothing more. In this waking dream, I wielded no power to stop the gilded beast from crushing my sister or tearing her to shreds.

"Solara!" I screamed at the top of my lungs as an aching pit opened in my chest, so deep and vast it threatened to swallow me whole.

As if controlled by another source from within, her head shifted. Finally, with agonizing slowness, she turned to me as the golden lion hurtled at her.

The smile on her lips dropped as recognition flared in her eyes.

"Nevar?" A second after my name passed her lips, the claws closed the distance.

All the world around me erupted into a hazy cloud of gold and gray as Solara broke apart into the fog, entirely vanishing along with the rest of Laernear and the golden lion. Darkness descended upon me, but I remained standing, frozen with shock at what the vision meant.

The entire time I lingered in the black void of my dreams, another presence lurked in the unseen recesses.

A prowling beast, waiting on the sidelines for the perfect time to strike. It growled again, a low vibration that warned me of the animal and its urge to kill.

The golden lion stalked from the darkness, lying in wait.

A new predator was on the hunt for prey.



For a week, I continued experiencing that dream. The same thing night after night; a golden lion hunting my sister.

Several times Deimos had shaken me awake as shadows tore apart the bedroom and the fire in the hearth raged, blasting heat. My claws had shredded the bedding and my fangs ached while searing tears scorched my cheeks.

He soothed me through the nightmare vision each time.

More and more each day, I dreamed of returning home.

Bellmead had their new Warden. The people of the city had mostly recovered, and their crops thrived, growing back in full.

Local lords, ladies, and nobility showed up every day, knocking on the door for various reasons. Showing appreciation for saving the city. Bringing gifts or tributes. All to meet their champions or glimpse the mysterious elven princess.

As I thought about it, a banging on the front door diverted my attention from the book in my hand. I groaned at the interruption, snapping the book shut. Shadows darkened in the corners of the lounge, matching my annoyance.

Deimos picked his head off my lap, and a mischievous grin kicked up the corner of his lips as the banging continued.

One hand dropped my book, and the other stopped running my fingers through his hair. I glowered down at him. "What have you done?"

“I might have locked Bellefy out of the house.” He shot up when I grimaced at him. “Darling, to be fair, we were ruining the furniture earlier. Can’t have everyone watching that, can we?”

Rolling my eyes at Deimos, I pushed off the couch and smoothed out my skirt. “You know she doesn’t carry a key with the odd hours we keep in this house. Always coming and going.”

Deimos hopped up after me, using his new leg with ease. He continued wagging his brows and grinning like a devil.

More pounding on the door almost shook the walls of the front entry.

“If that’s another lord inviting me to dinner, I’m going to the temple in the mountains to get away for a month,” I complained.

The humming sense of shadows on the other side of the door confirmed Bellefy’s presence. I relaxed the tension in my shoulders and reached for the lock.

She burst through the door as soon as my fingers clasped the doorknob. Face flushed and eyes wild, each breath punched from her as if she’d been running. A smile lit up her features as she lifted a stack of envelopes between our faces.

“Told you it was her,” Deimos lightly chuckled, from where he leaned on the wall behind me.

I nudged my elbow into his gut, and a grunt followed.

“The ship returned. Look what it brought!” Bellefy waved the envelopes enthusiastically.

The official royal seal of Gwathendor glared me in the face.

My blood writhed under my skin, chilling my bones. Goosebumps spread along my arms and around my scales. Each beat of my heart pounded dramatically through my ears as my vision tunneled and everything else faded away.

“It feels like years have passed since I wrote to them. They might not have liked what I sent.” I accepted the envelope with shaking hands.

Deimos kicked off the wall and braced his palm on my shoulder. “What did you tell them, darling?”

With all the chaos when the Thanaten ship last docked, I hadn’t had a moment to tell him what I’d written to my family. In fact, I’d nearly forgotten that I’d sent letters at all.

Or perhaps I didn't want to think of what my family might send back.

Bellefy looked between us, picking up on the tension in my face. Her grip on her letters crinkled the envelope. "I'll be in the lounge," she excused herself.

With a steadying breath, I licked my dry lips and faced Deimos. "I told my parents I was alive and well."

"That seems like a good thing."

I slowly nodded, hugging the royal seal to my chest. My mind darted back in time to that day, hunched over, furiously writing out all the words I could spare.

Deimos hooked his fingers around my elbow, tugging me into his embrace.

"And," I drew out the word, delaying my response, "I officially stepped down as heir to the throne."

"Forgive my ignorance of your family dynamic. I can't speak on your parents' behalf, but I'd think they would understand. I haven't known you as long as they have, but it seemed obvious you didn't want the throne. Wouldn't they have seen that?" He cradled my face in his hands, forcing me to look into his insanely gorgeous silver eyes.

"Mother and Father were incredibly understanding growing up. I'm sure part of them always knew. Considering my parent's unorthodox relationship, they pressed freedom of choice upon me and my sister. That's why they allowed me to leave at all." Memory of that day needled painfully in my heart.

Deimos increased his grip on my face, squishing my cheeks. "Nevar, you are a goddess. You can do anything you want. Be anything you want. Your family won't be disappointed in your choices."

He always knew my exact thoughts and feelings. It didn't shock me he'd rooted out my concern so quickly. He read me like an open book written in his own handwriting.

"You are the most powerful, heavenly being in existence. Read the letter, darling."

"How do you make it sound so easy?" I grumbled.

“It’s a skill,” he breathed against my lips before pressing a reassuring kiss to my lips.

I tore the envelope open the instant he released my face.

Tense silence pressed on the surrounding air as my eyes skimmed over the letters in the envelope. Unconsciously, I held my breath the entire time, absorbing the words as if they sustained me.

My muscles relaxed with each letter I read, and there were several.

Mother and Father each wrote a letter, and I smiled at the mental image of them writing these in the room together. My aunt Kla’ris and her life partner signed one, and another came from my uncle La’ran and his wife, Lethe. Their daughter Dumara, my dear friend and cousin, sent one of her own.

Solara wrote me an intensely long letter, nearly a novel in length. Although we’d shared dreams over the years, I poured over every detail of her life since my departure.

By the end of the letter’s tears dripped down my cheeks, plopping onto the pages. Even as I sobbed with the joy and relief that arose from the heartfelt notes, a weight on my chest and the shadow of a new vision tormented me.

After allowing my emotions to bowl over me, I’d made a decision.

I glanced up at Deimos, who gazed at me with adoring eyes, reading over the thoughts in my head as if they were his own. He nodded with acceptance. “You need to go home.”

Sniffling, I wiped my face with the back of my sleeve. “Indeed. I must.”

“Well, my darling, you’re welcome to do so at any time. You’re free.”

Free from Hestra, screaming in my head. Free from the unwilling transformations as a monster burst from my skin every full moon. Free to love and return home.

While I wasn’t the same girl that they’d watched leave six years ago, the letters reaffirmed my family’s devotion, adoration, and unending acceptance.

The letters affirmed my decision to return to my kingdom, and home to my twin, who would need me against the incoming threats.

“And what did your royal parents say?” Deimos pressed.

My throat bobbed as I swallowed. “My parents accepted my abdication from the throne. Following my decision, they’ve named Solara as Heir Apparent.”

“There’s more.” He read it in my eyes.

“The elven kingdoms are to be reunited,” I said.

As if she’d sensed important information, Bellefy rounded the corner from the lounge. Her brows knitted together, and her jaw popped open. “United? How?”

“My father and mother are assuming command of both Gwathendor and Laernear. The elves will be one again. Since I have rejected the throne, my sister will one day be queen of this new kingdom.”

Deimos ran a hand through his hair, venting a rueful breath. “You wouldn’t have stepped down if you’d known.”

“No. Even with all the power Solara wields, she is delicate, like a spring flower. While I might have had faith in the people of Gwathendor under her rule, Laernear is different.”

“Shadow elves are open-minded. Sun elves are set in the old ways,” Bellefy added.

Deimos crossed his arms. “You think Mithrans would be a problem for your sister’s rule? But the elves have had peace for over twenty years.”

Bellefy shrugged. “It’s always been a tentative peace.”

“My mother told us stories about growing up in the Mithran capital. Galad is a beautiful place of sunshine and gold, but they treat women as objects. Seen and not heard. After my Mithran grandfather made my aunt Willow his heir, many groups threatened to rise against them,” I shared. “I was six or seven years old before things calmed down enough for our first visit. But Mithrans nearly went to war again, having a queen heading their kingdom and not a king. If my sister takes the throne... Nine Hells, I fear what might happen.”

Each heavy thump of my heart pounded like a drum on the field of battle.

Flashes of a prowling golden beast mocked me.

Deimos rubbed a hand over his chin in speculation for a moment. Eventually, he clapped his hands as a determined sigh breached his lips. “Alright, then it’s time to pack.”

“Pack?” Bellefy perked up as if she’d missed something.

The back door to the kitchen slammed. All three of us snapped our heads toward the hall as Raaz’s lumbering steps echoed through the floors.

He stepped out with half a roast chicken and a whole loaf of fresh bread in his arms. “Where are we going?”

Deimos scowled at Raaz. “Were you sneaking off with my dinner again?”

“No,” Raaz drawled out, gaze flicking from the chicken to Deimos. Then he turned his attention to me. “I might have heard a few things while I passed the kitchen, though.”

Deimos rolled his eyes. “The Thanaten trading ship won’t stay docked in Bellmead forever. Best get on while we can.”

“Another adventure?” Raaz exclaimed, eyes twinkling with delight.

Without warning, Bellefy grabbed Raaz’s arm. Laughing and smiling brightly, she exclaimed, “We’re going home.”

Deimos smirked. “Looks like another adventure, then. Who’s up to see the elven continent?”

Raaz bounced on the balls of his feet, cheering uproariously. Bellefy snatched the plate from his hand before he sent a roast chicken flying. And before I knew it, he’d snatched me off my feet, spinning in circles. Bellefy joined, chuckling and jumping with her fists in the air.

As soon as my feet landed on solid hardwood, Raaz and Bellefy vanished to pack their belongings.

Deimos and I locked eyes once we were alone once more. Without words, he crossed the distance and placed his hands on my hips.

I flattened my palms on his chest, and through his beating heart, so much love filled me that I nearly stopped breathing.

“This is what you want?” he asked.

“I’ve been wanting to go home for years,” I replied.

Sucking in a breath, he closed his eyes. “No, I mean *this*.” He pulled me closer until we were chest to chest, and nothing could pass between us.

I pressed a hand to his cheek. “More than anything. And I’m so grateful you want to accompany me.”

His handsome face lit up, and I internally swooned at the dimples in his cheeks. “I’ve always known you’d want to return home. This is important for you, and nothing can keep me from going with you, darling. I love you.”

Death couldn’t keep us apart, and neither would this. It was merely another journey, another chapter in the story of our lives that we would write together.

“You are a violent viper of a goddess. But you are also so full of light and love. If you want to be there for your twin to protect her from the threat in the nightmares you’ve been having, I’ll be right there with you.”

“Someday my sister will be queen. I am going home, and I am taking my violence with me.” Hearing my vow, Deimos brushed his thumb over my bottom lip, smiling with feral delight. “Solara will need me. I will be her strength. Her weapon.”

“You can do whatever you want, and I’ll follow you to the ends of the world. But if we’re going to the land of elves, I might stand out a bit, wouldn’t I?” Deimos sounded as mischievous as he appeared.

My brow arched as he stole a step back.

Deimos closed his eyes and rubbed his fingers over the shell of his ears. A warm flare of demonic magic tickled the edge of my senses. He dropped his hands, showing off the shimmering change in his glamor.

My breath hitched, and I closed the gap. I reached out without pause and swept my finger over the new pointed arch of his ear, mimicking mine.

“I know it’s not real, but—”

“You like it?” he teased knowingly.

A pink tint spread over my cheeks. I pursed my lips, snatching my hand away. “Maybe.”

“I think we should head to the bedroom.” An erotic promise danced with the hellfire of his eyes. “After all, we have so much *packing* to do before the ship leaves.”

With the whirlwind of emotions raging inside of me, I wouldn't turn down an excuse to relieve the pent-up tension in my body. Not when the love of my life made such an irresistible offer.

“Indeed. We better hurry.” I accepted when he outstretched his hand.

In our rush up the stairs, Deimos remarked, “A queen protected by a goddess. It sounds like something one might read in a poem.”

I tossed my head back, laughing at the statement. “Are you a poet now? And what would you call this poem, my love?”

Deimos halted the laughter on my lips when his body slammed mine into the bedroom door. We barely made it up the stairs, pawing at one another in our race to the bed.

Between passionate kisses, he hummed against my lips. “Hm, let me think.”

He poured more love into his gaze than I could physically contain. I needed him to fill me just to comprehend it all.

“Take your time.” I giggled while stripping off his shirt. “It's not like we have a ship off the continent to catch.”

“If I were a poet, I would call the tale A Song of Sun and Shadow.” His words held me in place.

Deimos caught my stunned stare and brushed a strand of white hair behind my ear. Then his palm skimmed over the dark scales on my shoulder.

“That sounds right, actually,” I finally said.

Someday, when I'd look back on this adventure and all the discoveries that came with it, I'd miss Bellmead. The city meant something to me, and the others. Nothing would change what we shared.

New visions led me on my next journey. Only this time, I wouldn't be alone. I'd return to my family with new friends and a partner who loved me more than the night sky loved the stars and the moon.

As I fell on the bed with Deimos between my legs, he showed me his undying devotion with every kiss, touch, and thrust, bringing

me to satisfaction.

With peace in my mind, I accepted the unknown of my future. With love in my heart after allowing loneliness to break me, I welcomed the warmth of Deimos and the powerful connection we shared.

Together, we'd depart for Gwathendor.

Though I wouldn't return as queen, I'd take my place at Solara's side. My twin would be the queen of the elves, and I would be the goddess who protected her. From the golden lion, or whatever she might face.

In the end, an eclipse was only one part of the story in A Song of Sun and Shadow.

End Book 2



Solara's Dawn Preview

Chapter One



Winter approached rapidly. Glittering white blanketed the land in every direction and the trees bowed under the weight of the ice coating their limbs. The first snow fell on the Kingdom of Shadows before I'd packed my belongings for our journey south.

The early winter winds weren't strong enough to breach the moderate warmth of the carriage. A heavy fur-lined cloak covered my shoulders and delicate gloves protected my fingers. The cold never truly bothered me, but the garments made the uncomfortable ride cozy in a way.

Within the enclosed carriage, I maintained my focus on the needlework in my lap. The jostling as wheels bumped over holes in the road made it essential that I didn't lose my concentration.

One wrong move and I'd prick my hand. I'd hate to bleed on the flowers I'd spent hours stitching.

"Shit," a swift curse across from me stole my attention. I glanced up at my childhood friend, sucking the tip of her finger into her mouth. Her rose-colored eyes narrow on the crude embroidery.

"Poke yourself again, Duma?" I chuckled at her expense.

She groaned before tossing the needlework on the carriage floor. It clattered between our feet where she stomped on the pale fabric.

I bit my tongue, fighting a giggle.

“This isn’t the poking I want.” Dumara lifted her hand, showing the droplet of red welling on her dark skin.

Blushing at her meaning, I enclosed her fingers in mine.

“We’ll cross the border into Laernear soon. Once we reach the capital, you’ll have your pick of lads eager to please a lady,” I said.

After a breath, I dug into the well of latent warm power within the center of my being. Searching deep, I called on the magic I inherited from my mother.

Faint glowing passed through my fingers and glimmering sunlight kissed the wound.

When I pulled my gloved hand away, Dumara’s skin was unblemished once more.

She rubbed her fingers together and nodded in thanks. This was nothing impressive for her. She’d grown accustomed to healing magic long ago.

We shared more than our fair share of scraped knees and elbows playing with my sister in our youth. My twin entered the world as a wild thing and running the castle halls with her was asking for trouble. As a result, Mother taught us to heal early on.

Though I doubted my powers would ever compare to Mother’s. It didn’t seem to matter that I carried a wide range of abilities when the Queen could heal soldiers on the cusp of death or villages weakened by sickness.

“I need a body in my bed the night we arrive. Someone tall and strong enough to chase away the chill of a Gwathendor winter.” Dumara wrapped her arms around her shoulders and shimmied. Her eyes closed as she imagined the hypothetical man warming her bed.

“We’re not spending winter in the sun elf capital to avoid the winter back home and engage in depravity,” I teased.

Duma rolled her eyes and dropped her arms. “I know. This visit to your royal Mithran family is enormously important.” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “But those sun elf men excel at depravity.”

“That’s the only reason you wanted to join us, isn’t it?” I knew the answer but enjoyed teasing her.

Duma loved freely and often. She wouldn’t shy away from an opportunity to travel and experience her bliss.

Duma mock gasped and placed a hand over her heart. “I came because I love my king and my country. With a tour this important, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.” Her eyes darted around the dark carriage interior as if preparing to share a secret. “Plus, Uncle and Auntie will be wrapped up in the announcement, not monitoring our activities.”

“Our?” I gaped at her like a fish out of water.

I jolted back when she lurched forward. Duma latched onto my hands, grinning from ear to ear. The glint in her eyes made my stomach twist into knots. “Yes. You’re twenty-five now, Solara. I’d like you to accompany me in my revels this year. It’s about time you experience the delight of what you call a lad eager to please a lady.”

“I can’t. Once Mother and Father depart from the capital for the royal tour, I’m supposed to remain with my Aunt Willow. She’s the current Queen Regent of Laernear and my parents expect me to learn from her now that—”

The words on my tongue hit a barrier. My shaky inhale did nothing to ease the unsettled beat of my heart. A sickening unease crawled over my skin each time the subject arose.

“Now that Nevar abdicated the throne,” Duma finished after a beat of silence. She squeezed my hands reassuringly before releasing them, giving me the chance to slump into the stiff cushion.

“Solara,” Duma started, her voice low but determined, “if you ask me, that’s more reason to enjoy what we can of this trip. The Mithran kingdom of Laernear and the Thanaten kingdom of Gwathendor are uniting. For the first time in centuries, the elves will be one unified people again.”

She nudged my boot, forcing my gaze up.

“That’s why I must learn what I can from Aunt Willow while Mother and Father tour the kingdom. Mithran lords will

pledge fealty to their new rulers, and I'm responsible for learning about Laernear's politics."

"You are the heir now. That doesn't mean you can't have fun," Duma huffed. The black and red beads decorating the ends of her long silver braids clacked against one another as she shook her head.

My fists clenched in my lap over the forgotten lace and threads. "I am the heir to two kingdoms. My parents worked tirelessly for two and a half decades to end the war and now it's my turn to do my part, Duma. I don't have the same freedom as you to engage in frivolities."

The carriage abruptly rocked around us. Dumara bounced off her seat and landed harshly on her knees.

I swayed forward from the sudden motion and reached for her shoulders. As I grabbed her to haul her upright, the carriage pitched wildly.

Outside in the darkness, the bone-chilling crash of another carriage reached me. Horses whinnied in panic and the wood groaned as it cracked apart. My chest tightened uncomfortably at the alarming sounds, and my blood became sluggish in my veins.

The muffled shouting of soldiers on horseback surrounded us. I lowered onto the wooden floor, trembling and clutching at Dumara. Chilling thoughts seized my imagination in the frozen seconds that followed.

An instinct guided my hand, charged by fear for my parent's wellbeing in their carriage ahead of us. Unconsciously, I cracked open the door and the biting chill of the night nipped at my nose.

Deafening shouting and the clamorous clang of steel-on-steel rushed in.

"Can you see?" Dumara whispered, maintaining her hold of me.

The glowing crystals outside the carriages flickered. Purple light glinted off the soldier's black armor. Flashes of

gold darted through the surrounding woods, causing my stomach to drop.

A horse and rider charged in front of the door, blocking my view.

“Close the door and remain inside, your highness,” the soldier barked. His steel sang when he unsheathed his blade.

“What’s the meaning of this?” I replied.

The soldier angled in the saddle, staring down at me and Dumara through the crack in the door. A prominent frown stressed the lines in his expression as he warred with whether he should answer.

“What of my parents?” I pressed.

“Bandits,” he answered gruffly. Groans of pain and ringing metal reverberated in the night. The soldier glanced up, watching something out of my view. “The king is fighting.”

A thud from the carriage roof vibrated through the wood.

Dumara yelped in my ears, crushing me in her arms.

The soldier reared back, slashing at someone overhead.

I slammed the door shut once again.

“Bandits?” Dumara shrieked. “They must be Mithran this close to the border.”

I stole a breath when she released me. Her dress rustled behind me with her rapid movement.

I shifted around in time to find Dumara lifting the skirt of her black dress. The dim light reflected the silver of the dagger strapped to her leg.

“Duma, no.” She pulled the weapon free, and I latched onto her arm. “My father and the guards will handle the bandits. We should remain here where it’s safe.”

Her fingers tightened on the smooth obsidian handle. Lips parted, she hissed, “I am the general’s daughter. I will fight.”

I shrank back as she kicked open the opposite door. It swung wide, smacking against the carriage exterior. The crystal

lights weren't powerful enough to illuminate the surrounding forest. Only shifting shadows revealed the outline of the struggle outside.

Dumara scooted to the edge, preparing to jump out. At the last second, she peered at me over her shoulder, rose eyes filled with stone-cold resolve. "Nevar would fight."

"I am not my sister." The delayed retort evaporated unheard into the air as Dumara leapt from the carriage and vanished into the chaos of the ambush.

Shivering, I curled into the corner and hugged my knees to my chest. I closed my eyes against the unwanted tears pricking at the corners.

Bodies slammed against the exterior. Cries of pain echoed through strained groans. Metallic singing from clashing blades filled the former dead silence of the night.

The dreadful weight of guilt brimmed like stones stacked tall in my belly. With each passing second, with each new shout of anguish or cry of rage, another pound of shame pinned me down.

The sickening squelch of a weapon rendering flesh and a soldier's dying gurgle brought up the contents of my stomach.

Acidic bile clawed at the back of my throat. I surged forward, leaning outside in time for my dinner to reappear and splatter on the dirt instead of the carriage interior. I swiped at my bottom lip, and spittle soiled my glove.

Dumara had stated the truth, and it gnawed heavily on my conscience. While she charged into battle with my father and the soldiers, I cowered in the shadows.

My twin wouldn't hide from the fight if she were here.

But Nevar wasn't here. She was across the world fighting something greater than I'd ever imagine. A monster from without and within.

Despite her struggle, a flicker of resentment reared in my head. It shouldn't be me here, heading to the capital and trapped in an ambush. It should be Nevar.

She would have ended the attack by now.

A chilling scream cleaved through my shameful thoughts. Ice sliced across my skin and my heart faltered.

My head snapped up, staring into the darkness.

Red-orange light flared through the trees. A thunderous boom followed the explosion. A gust of searing air rocked the carriage and blasted my face.

Dying men howled in agony as flames seeped under their armor and licked at their flesh.

“Mother? Duma?” I weakly called. Every muscle in my body tensed with a heavy moment of hesitation. Another second passed and the fire in the forest raged higher, splintering the trees.

My stomach heaved again. This time I bit it back, swallowing the sickness. Drifting forward, I climbed from the carriage. My shaking legs wobbled like a newborn deer when they squished in the dirt.

I glanced down, expecting to find a puddle. A gasp tore from me, and I slapped a hand over my lips at the crimson soaking the earth beneath my feet.

A soldier in Thanaten armor collapsed lifelessly at my feet. His glazed over eyes stared blankly at the star laden sky above. The scream rising to my lips dissolved as a menacing figure emerged from the fire.

Even in the fire’s light, the stranger’s billowing cloak kept him swathed in darkness. The mountainous figure lifted a brilliantly flaming sword and pointed it directly at me in a silent vow.

I had no time for idle contemplation. As much as I despised fighting, my family encouraged the knowledge. Instinct took hold of me as years of sparring lessons kicked into gear.

If it came to it, I’d defend myself. First, I would run.

I flung myself into a sprint. The internal need to hide from danger summoned instinctive magic to the surface. Writhing

shadows swept from the darkness, rising into an inky wall between me and the bandit.

If I couldn't reach the bulk of the battle on the other side of the carriage, I might find safety in numbers. I needed my family and our soldiers.

Burning fire singed my shadow barricade when the fire-blade arched through the air. It hissed into wisps of darkness, vanishing into the smoky air with each swipe of the hacking sword.

Instant fear ate away at me. My mind darted through the diverse magic under my influence. Yet nothing tangible rose to the surface. Of all the abilities I wielded, knowledge of them fled my mind.

Each breath punched out of me as I scrambled away. My blood coursed thick, and heavy in my veins. The pounding of my heart echoed deafeningly in my ears, effectively muting the triumphant roar of the bandit when he pounced.

Crushing weight knocked the air from my lungs as two powerful arms encircled me. The musclebound frame slammed into me, and the inertia sent me spiraling down. His body squashed mine as we rolled in the dirt, further away from the carriage and nearer to the flaming trees. Oppressive strength flattened my backside into the earth.

I writhed and thrashed with all my might. Pathetic grunts slipped past my lips as I struggled to break free.

The bandit chuckled wickedly. He grabbed my flailing wrists in one hand with ease, pinning them above my head.

His weight and strength effortlessly overpowered me. The pressure of his body compressing me into the cool dirt brought a fresh wave of tears flowing from the corners of my eyes. I blinked through them, tipping my head up to the brute holding me down.

Under the cloak I found a bandit in a gilded mask. Flickering light danced off the dips and grooves of the mask, sculpted to mimic the roaring visage of a lion. Curling edges of the mane swirled around his face. Pointed fangs of the beast's

mask covered his full upper lip. Only his square jaw and bottom lip were exposed.

Everything stretched and distorted around me. The forest fire blurred into an orange haze, and the sounds of battle faded into an unnerving whisper. Only the pulsing of my heart anchored me in that petrifying moment.

He lifted the burning sword over my head, using the flame to illuminate my face. Each heaving breath he took passed over my damp cheek. The fire whisked out without warning, but I didn't have a second of relief.

Frigid steel pressed to my throat, stealing my ability to breathe. The blade to my neck trembled, balancing on the verge of slicing flesh and stealing my life. Only darkness met my gaze from behind the black eyes of the mask, too dark at this angle to see the soul of the man hesitating to kill me.

His pause gave me an opening to think clearly again. I'd experienced positions in training such as this. If I called on the light in my blood, I knew it would come.

A voice broke the fragile tension, surprised, and ragged as he gasped, "Gods, you're beautiful."

The bright spark of shock that flared through me ignited a surge of my power. It called the sunlight from deep within me and it exploded outward from my hands.

Blinding golden rays blasted against his chest. The force of which sent him flying far away into the darkness. I didn't see where he landed and couldn't afford to wonder.

Without his weight on me, I inhaled again. My lungs filled with the smoky air floating from the burning woods. Dry coughs wracked my shoulders as I rolled over.

On hands and knees, I crawled toward the carriage. At the back wheel, I gripped the wood and hauled myself upright. Someone rushed around the corner, halting at the sight of me.

"My darling. Oh, my daughter." Mother's blazing green eyes softened as she approached. Her hands fluttered over me, checking for injuries.

“Mother.” I collapsed into her arms, readily seeking her comfort.

“We’re alright, darling. We’re alright,” she reassured. Her hand smoothed through the red waves of my hair, hushing my sniffles as I clung to her.

“Fall back,” someone commanded from the opposite side of the road. Mother’s arms tightened for a moment as we listened to the retreating footsteps of our attackers.

“No one escapes.” Father’s formidable growl lifted in the wind.

Our soldiers hollered after him. They rushed past the remaining carriage, hunting the fleeing bandits.

Mother grabbed my face, catching my eyes. “Solara, we must tend the wounded. Are you up to the task?”

I nodded soundlessly, choking back the sob threatening to breach my lips. A princess must tend to her people before herself. From that moment on, I trusted the frenzy in my blood to carry me through the rest of the night.

Books In This Series

A Song of Sun & Shadow

[Captured Sunlight](#)

[Untamed Eclipse](#)

Solara's Dawn - coming August 29th, 2023

About The Author

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