

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF
BLOOD
&
NIGHTMARES

CHANDELLE LAVAUIN



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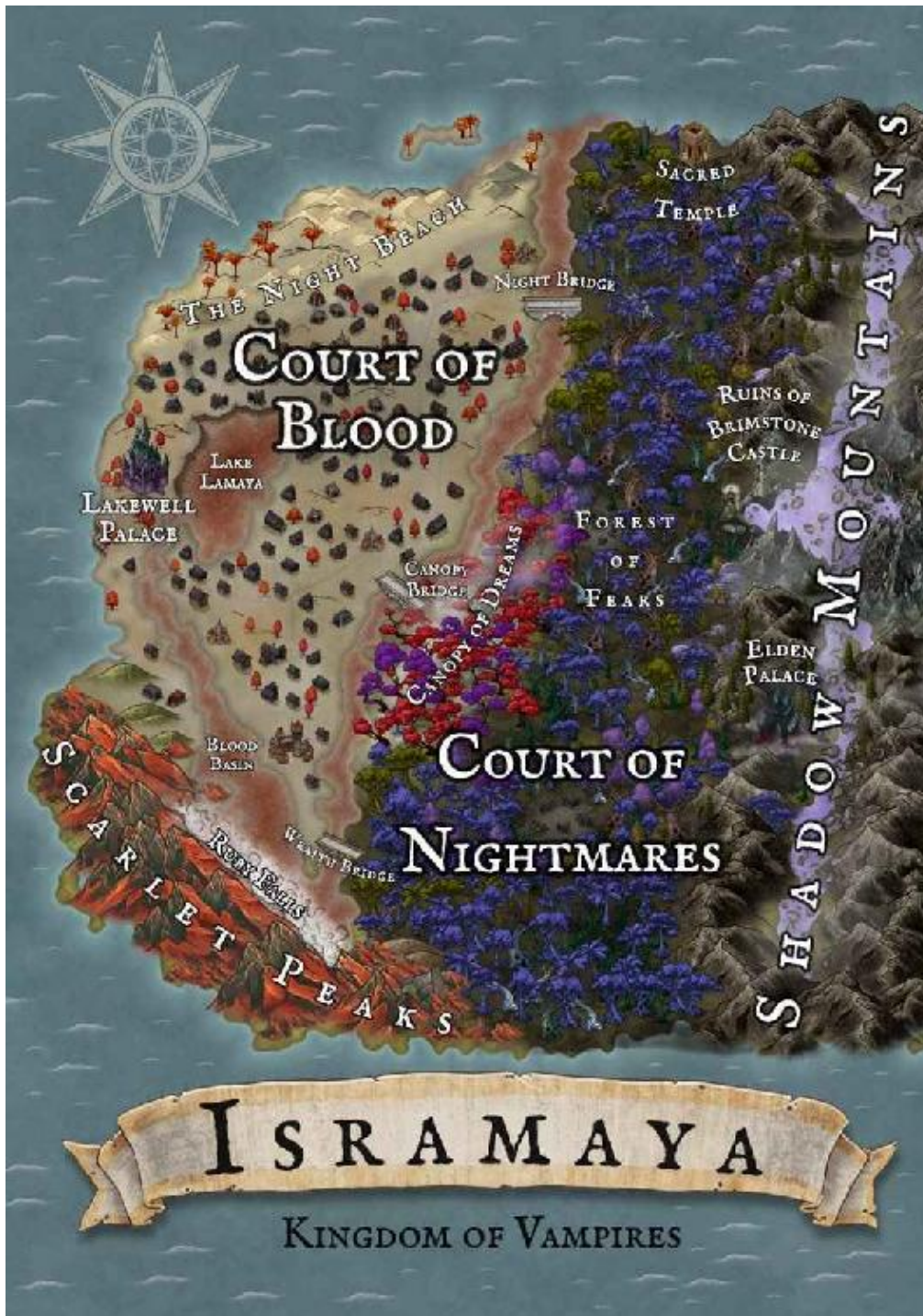
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THE NIGHT BEACH

COURT OF BLOOD

LAKEWELL PALACE

LAKE LAMATA

NIGHT BRIDGE

SACRED TEMPLE

RUINS OF BRIMSTONE CASTLE

FOREST OF FEAKS

CANOPY OF DREAMS

COURT OF NIGHTMARES

BLOOD BASIN

ELDEN PALACE

SCARLET PEAKS

REAR BEACH

WEAVER BRIDGE

SHADOW MOUNTAINS

ISRAMAYA

KINGDOM OF VAMPIRES







Introduction

Forgotten Kingdoms Series

Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

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

Authors in this set include:

Chandelle LaVaun

G.K. DeRosa

Megan Montero

Jen L. Grey

Robin D. Mahle & Elle Madison

LJ Andrews

R.L. Caulder

M. Sinclair

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



TERREA

(WORLD NAME)

TER-AY-UH

HAVESTIA

(FESTIVAL WHEN THE VEIL
BETWEEN WORLDS OPENS)

HAV-EST-EE-UH

AELVARIA

EMBER
HADEON

EL-VAHR-EE-YA

EM-BURR
HAY-DEE-ON

DRACONIA

SAPHIRA
RYKER

DRUH-CONE-EE-UH

SA-FEE-RUII
RYE-KURR

ISRAMAYA

RHODELIA
VARAN

IS-RUH-MY-UH

ROW-DELL-YA
VAIR-EN

ISRAMORTA

MORGANA
AVALON

IS-RUH-MORE-TUH

MORE-GONE-UH
AV-UH-LAWN

MAGIARIA

ADIRA
KAGE

MAYJ-AIR-EE-UH

AH-DEER-UH
KAY-J

SEPEAZIA

STELLA
BRANDT

SEH-PEA-ZI-UH

STELL-UH
BRAN-T

TALAMH

ALINA
KIERAN

TAL-OV

AH-LEEN-UH
KEER-AN

VARGR

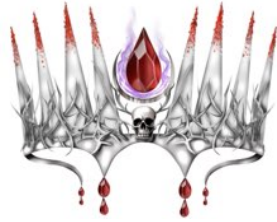
EVERA

VAR-GURR

FH-VEER-UH

One

RHODELIA



There were worse reasons to get married.

Any moment the black wooden door in front of me would open and there would be no turning back. I would have to marry him. It was already too late ... if I was being honest with myself. I'd said yes. I'd let them dress me in this silvery lace gown. For all that really mattered, we were already married. I merely had to say the words out loud in front of a crowd.

Even through the closed doors, I heard their whispers.

They had opinions on my worth and value, and they weren't high regards.

My stomach tightened into knots. I looked down at my bouquet, at the cluster of violet flowers that shimmered beneath the candlelight. Their name escaped me. We didn't have these where I lived. They were a symbol for him and his home—my soon to be new husband. Only one red rose sat in the middle, the only representation of me and mine. But then again, who I *was* no longer mattered. I was his now. His shiny jewel that was to be seen and never heard unless he allowed me to speak.

Bile shot up my throat. I exhaled and pressed my hand to my stomach to steady myself. If I could turn back time, I

might have thought about this decision a little longer ... might have looked for another option. But in the deepest part of my heart, I knew this was the only answer. I had to do this, and it was for a good reason.

The doors opened, swinging away from me.

The whispers stopped.

Even with my gaze locked on my bouquet, I felt their eyes on me like tiny flames along my body. My hands trembled. I took a deep breath and the silvery jewels sewn onto the lace of my wedding gown dug into my skin.

It's time to forget who I thought I was and become who I have to be.

I raised my chin high, pushed my shoulders back, and then opened my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. I had not yet seen this room. It was daunting and imposing. The far wall a mere fifty feet straight across from me stood towering into the sky. It was made of glass and white stone columns, and some of the glass sections had been painted red to make the shape of a *V* in the wall, as though someone might forget to whom this room belonged.

This Royal Ceremonial Room was filled to the brim. Even the three levels of balconies were lined with people all leaning over the side to get a better look.

The Kingdom of Isramaya had come to watch.

But I did not meet their expectant eyes. Instead I kept my gaze locked on the altar at the far end of the room. It stood like a carved block of ice beside my betrothed. He stood with his back to me, which was a relief. Had I seen his eyes, I might have fled out of fear and cowardice. Yet I took a step forward, my bare feet touching the bitterly cold stone floor. The

moonlight streamed in through the glass in just a way to shine a spotlight on the aisle ... that was painted bloodred.

The golden candlelight flickered from every crevice, casting everyone in a warm golden haze. It was no use. The room was still as cold as a winter's night. I steeled my spine and began my last march as a free woman. No one had told me why I was not permitted shoes. It was probably to remind me of my place with him. As I walked, the melodic tune of the instrumentalists sang a haunting sound, yet I barely heard the sound over the heavy pounding of my heart in my ears.

As I marched, the rows of people dressed in floor-length gowns dropped to bow at my feet. I cringed inside. On the outside I kept my expressions locked in place. There would be no benefit to letting anyone see my fear now. I tried not to notice them, but with every step I realized the courts had been split. On my left, the *Court of Blood* residents had hair in shades of red. They wore gowns of white and ivory. On my right, those from the *Court of Nightmares* stood in dark contrast with their black attire and hair in shades of purple. In the balconies, as if peering over the very Shadow Mountains that parted their court from the others, the *Court of Shadows* had hair in shades of blue and wardrobes made of grays and navy blues.

None of this was new to me. I knew the three courts all looked different. We all knew this. But I'd never seen them so ... isolated from each other. My heart hurt as it sank in my chest. Our kingdom should have been blended together, not separated by court. Perhaps this was my ignorance showing its hand.

When I approached the altar, I discovered my betrothed wore a black coat with a large hood pulled over his head. It

must have been some form of ceremonial robe. I stopped in front of the altar as I'd been instructed, then dropped into a low curtsy. His feet turned to face me, so I lifted to stand straight, and our eyes met.

“*RHODE!*”

I gasped. My whole body flinched. I swung my arms out—

“*Don't hit me!*” Mo yelled and swatted my arms down.

I blinked and looked around, my heart hammering in my chest. I stood at the fancy marble vanity in the bathroom of our Las Vegas hotel with my sister Morgana and *not* at an altar for a wedding. I pressed my hand to my chest and exhaled. It was that damn dream again. For my entire life, as far back as I could remember into my childhood, I had the same recurring nightmare where I got married. It was always the same. It never changed. Sometimes the dream would start at different points, but the details remained the same. It was such a visceral moment. It felt so real every time. I felt the cold floor, heard the whispers and the music, smelled the flowers and the candles ... It was like I was there.

And it was all a dream. Not a single therapist I'd ever spoken to knew what to make of this. Sure, they had theories that revolved around the trauma of losing my parents as an infant and almost losing my sister, but I never felt that was right. That dream was trying to tell me something, and I was missing the memo every damn time.

Morgana gripped my elbow and shook me. “Rho, are you serious?”

I sighed and rested my hands on the cold marble vanity, then closed my eyes and nodded. “I'm here. I'm fine.”

“You're having that dream *awake* now?”

I groaned. “As of today, yes. I don’t know why, but it’s like I just keep zoning out and going into the dream.”

For my whole twenty-two years of life, I’d only ever seen that wedding when I was asleep. Yet since I woke up that morning, I kept having the dream while awake. It was like a trance that sucked me in for a minute and then shoved me back out. If not for my older sister watching my back, I might have walked into traffic.

“It’s like you’re sleepwalking,” Mo said with an edge to her voice. It was the worried *mom-voice* she always gave me despite being only two years older. Though, for once, I was thankful to have that helicopter hovering around me. “Your eyes are open but you’re just ... gone.”

I grabbed my hair-tie and flipped my head over so I could easily tie my long pale-blond hair into a high ponytail to fit my chosen costume. Tension tugged on my temples, instantly giving me a headache. I cursed as I stood up straight and reached for my bottle of ibuprofen sitting on the vanity.

“I already texted Dorothy,” Mo said with zero remorse or shame as I swallowed four pain relievers. “Don’t think we’re not going to talk about this.”

I rolled my eyes and swallowed a few more sips of water, then sat my glass down. “Mo, my therapist is well aware that my head is fucked. She actually warned me that I might have additional anxiety problems while here ... since, ya know, we’re workaholics who never take time off and don’t even have hobbies?”

She threw her hands up and arched both black eyebrows at me. “Hey, shots fired. I’m not the one having dreams while awake.” She smirked at me, then turned to face the mirror so she could watch herself curl her hair around the curling iron.

“You are the one whose phone battery already died because she was using it for work too much.”

She curled a strand of black around the iron and arched one eyebrow at me. “I said I was gonna stop once we went out tonight.”

“Okay. Sure thing, Mo.” I pursed my lips and nodded.

As her fingers narrowly missed the heated barrel of the iron, I grabbed my purse and started loading it up. Las Vegas was a wild place, and if the crowd we saw when we checked in a few hours ago was anything to go on, tonight was going to be madness. Halloween was always a busy night in the ER. Even though I was hundreds of miles from my job, I knew it was inevitable someone would get hurt around me tonight. So, I started refilling my first aid kit that I’d dismantled for the plane ride.

“Shouldn’t you put *money* in there? Ya know, something you may actually need?”

“Why do I need to carry money when you’ve got ten different credit cards and several hundred in cash in your purse?” I looked up into the mirror and met her blue eyes. “And don’t act like you don’t have euros in there despite never having been to Europe.”

She scoffed. “I like to be prepared.”

“You do that your way. I’ll do it my way.” I shoved the last stack of Band-Aids into my little bag. “Occupational hazard, Mo. Do you know how many people get hurt at events like this? I do, so I’ll be prepared just in case.”

“My God, woman. What all are you putting in there? Will your phone even fit?”

“Rookie. I put my phone in first to make sure.” I held the small purse open to show her my stash. “Just the basics: Benadryl cream, ibuprofen packets, Band-Aids, gauze, triple antibiotic ointment, non-adherent gauze, Coban, cotton tipped applicators, tape, small scissors, tweezers, hand sanitizer, alcohol swabs, normal saline, iodine, steri-strips, and a tube of Dermabond.”

She shook her head, making her mane of black curls bounce. “I ... I just ... wait, *Dermabond?*”

“Medical superglue in case anyone gets sliced open and I need to close a wound.”

She pointed the curling iron at me. “You need this vacation.”

I rolled my eyes and zipped my purse shut. “So do you, miss *you have to return all eighty-seven different text messages the second our flight here landed.*”

She sighed. “We suck at not working.”

I laughed. “But we’re great at costumes.”

She threw her hands up and shimmied. The last few years for Halloween we were too exhausted from work—if we weren’t actually working—to put much effort into our costumes. It was usually a night of giving out candy while watching *Hocus Pocus* and *Practical Magic*. But this year we were going all out *and* out of town. Los Angeles was like four hundred miles away and needed to stay out of my head for the next week.

And Morgana looked insanely good. She had the body to rock the costume she’d picked, whereas I was built more like a prepubescent girl. Where Morgana had curves like an hourglass, I was barely a slope—kind of like when you can’t

quite tell if the poster you hung on the wall was level or not. That was me and my body shape. That and her black hair were really the only differences in our appearances. We were both five-foot-two, with dark eyebrows that had a natural intense arch, super high and sharp cheekbones, and jawlines that could cut glass. The black eyeliner made our light-blue eyes sparkle like diamonds. Our heart-shaped lips were painted a bold red, making the sharpness of the cupid's bow more exaggerated. We looked fierce, and honestly, entirely unapproachable.

We hadn't decided if that was a good or bad thing.

Though with the costume Morgana chose, I knew she'd be getting attention. She was rocking Cher's Iconic *If I Could Turn Back Time* look, complete with leather jacket, full body fishnet, and delicately placed black strips of fabric to cover all the parts the law frowned upon us showing. Cher would definitely approve.

"What? Is it bad?" She looked down at herself and frowned. "Is it too much?"

I snorted. "You're practically naked, Mo. It's impossible to be too much. And no, it's perfect."

"Good. Can't let you completely outdo me in that."

"So competitive." I grinned and looked down at my forearms where tattoos were inked into my skin. "Do you think I need to cover these up? Madonna doesn't have them?"

"She'd approve. Stop it." She gestured to me, then picked up her hair spray. "Look at you for God's sake."

I turned to the mirror and looked at myself. My corset one-piece with the cone bra wasn't nearly as high-quality as Madonna's, but it was a damn vibe. Technically, from what I found in pictures online, I was supposed to have on wide-

legged black trousers, but I wore my skinny black leggings for comfort instead, especially since I'd put on thigh-high black-heeled boots. My feet already hurt.

As I stood there looking at myself in the mirror, the world around me began to change. I felt myself slipping into the dream again, but I couldn't stop it. I took a deep breath and threw my hand out. "*Mo—*"

I stood in front of the ornate silver mirror that towered over me by at least a foot, no doubt designed for a taller female. The purple flames of the torch flickered on the stone castle wall behind me. My hands trembled at my sides. I was the picture of elegant beauty in this shimmering lace gown that flared at my waist. Small silver jewels were sewn onto every inch of the lace, so I sparkled like the stars in the night sky. With my silver eyes, I might as well have been a star. The only color on me was the deep bloodred shade of my hair that hung straight down my back.

"*Rho.*" Morgana shook me again. "You're freaking me out with this."

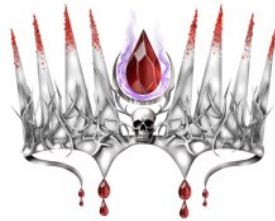
I blinked and looked to the mirror—but I was *me* again ... back in the hotel bathroom in my Madonna costume. I shivered and goosebumps covered my arms. "I'm freaking *me* out with this."

Mo shoved my purse into my stomach. "We need a drink."

"A frozen one, preferably."

Two

RHODELIA



“Rhodelia, *wait.*”

I froze mid-step. “What?”

Mo waved me back toward where she’d stopped next to a slot machine with neon flashing lights. “I don’t think we can go into the club with these.”

“Oh. Right.” I tossed the drink back, swallowing the remainder in one fell swoop without even tasting it, then I licked my lips and nodded. “Let’s do it.”

“You make me so proud.” Mo laughed, then began chugging the rest of her drink.

My phone buzzed in my hand. When I looked down, I wasn’t at all surprised to find a text from Saphira. ‘*Where are you guys?*’

We were late to meet her. Between Mo’s hair taking forever to curl with that shitty curling iron she brought, my brain insisting on taking field trips, and that damn elevator, we were not moving fast. But Saphira didn’t need to know all that, so I typed back, ‘*Just walking into the club. We just got stuck in the elevator.*’

Three bubbles popped up instantly. ‘*OMG no way.*’

‘*Way. Tell you about it when we get there,*’ I sent back.

‘Well, I got us drinks and a table to the right of the bar, next to that wall of mirrors.’

I grinned. *‘That’s my girl. We need those drinks right about now. Be there in a second.’*

“Why are you smiling?” Mo leaned over my shoulder. “Is that Saphira?”

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

“She’s good like that.” She drank the last sip of her drink, then sat her empty glass on a cocktail waitress’s tray as she walked by. “All right, let’s go find her.”

It took about five minutes to convince the bouncers we were actually the age we claimed, and it about ruined the whole mood. If it wasn’t for Saphira waiting inside to celebrate her twenty-first birthday, I might have ditched the club all together. *Sin Forest* nightclub was supposed to be one of the hottest in Vegas, but so far I wasn’t feeling it.

Mo tugged on my arm and said something, but the heavy bass of the music blaring from the speakers made it hard to hear a damn thing. I yelled back but she just frowned, so I pointed toward the wall of mirrors. She gave me a thumbs-up, then hooked her arm around mine so we wouldn’t get lost.

Sin Forest Nightclub was exactly what it sounded like: a nightclub with a forest theme and an overall lack of proper lighting. The club was all darkness and shadows, with sporadic flashing red and purple lights. The music moving through the trees and crowd was haunting and intriguing. There were so many people that we had to walk single file to the back, my bare shoulders hitting other people. The feel of the sticky, sweaty skin of strangers made me gag. I never understood why there wasn’t better air-conditioning or at least huge ass fans on

the ceiling instead of the laser light show that only made it harder to see.

Fortunately, Saphira was tall and had long blue hair that always stood out in a crowd, so it only took us a few minutes to spot her sitting at a table right where she said she would be. The moment I spotted her, my overstimulated senses and anxiety faded a little. I grinned and pointed her out for Mo. Saphira was special to us, the closest thing we had to family. After our parents died when we were little, we'd only spent a few months in the orphanage before a lovely older couple adopted us. When I'd met Saphira in high school and learned she was bouncing around in the system, I'd convinced our adoptive parents to foster her. For two years the three of us lived as sisters in that old house, and it had been awesome.

In all the ways that mattered, she was family, our third sister. The three of us just never really seemed to click with other people as well as we did with each other. But life had a way of separating people. It'd been nearly a year since we'd last seen Saphira, and we were going to celebrate big for her birthday.

She glanced in our direction as we hurried toward her. Those big blue eyes widened. "Rhode! Morgana!" She jumped off the barstool and wrapped us in a hug.

I pulled back and gestured to her costume. "Xena Warrior Princess! Absolutely epic."

Mo licked her fingertip, then pretended to tap the air and make it sizzle. "Smokin' hot. You look fantastic."

She grinned and ran her hands over the brown leather pleats of her skirt. "I love that we all went retro tonight!"

"Are we really surprised?" Mo winked.

Saphira tapped on the table, pointing to the row of neon-green shots lined up next to three cocktails with little umbrellas in them. “Sit. Drink. Tell me how you got stuck in an elevator.”

Mo shuddered. “Shots first. Trauma second.”

At the same time, we all reached for our shots and then tossed them back. I made a mental note to pace myself a little. I hadn’t had a lot to drink in a long while. “Okay, no more shots.”

“Until we hit the next bar, right?” Saphira wagged her eyebrows to the beat of the music.

I snorted and reached for my drink. “Sure—*oh my God*. Are these frozen margaritas?”

She held hers up. “Cheers to us finally being together again.”

“Cheers!” I clinked my glass with hers.

“Cheers to that ... and not taking another elevator ever again.” Mo clinked our glasses with hers, then took a sip. “Because that was an ordeal.”

“I can’t wait to hear this. Something tells me this story has ... flavor.” Saphira chuckled.

“Go ahead, Mo.” I exhaled in a rush and sipped my frozen margarita. The chill of the drink was just what the doctor ordered in a sticky nightclub like this. I listened as Mo told Saphira all about *the incident* with the shark and T-Rex, then I held my little black purse up and shook it. “And you judged me for my first aid kit. I warned you there’d be blood to clean up tonight.”

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

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

She scowled, but I knew by the tension in her jaw she’d listened. After a few seconds she shuddered and shook her arms out. “Nurse Rhode for the win.”

“Two for two.” I held two fingers up and stuck my tongue out to my sister playfully. “Guys, I really needed this break from work. I’m so happy we’re finally here.”

“Yeah, let’s not go even half as long without seeing you, Saphira.” Mo arched one dark eyebrow at her. “I won’t stand for it.”

Saphira grinned. “Yes, mom.”

Morgana was only two years older than me, three more than Saphira, yet she acted older. Seemed older. Our adoptive parents said she had an old soul and was more of an old lady than they were.

She cocked her head to the side. “I feel like Lady Tremaine sometimes with you two.”

I frowned. “Does that make us Anastasia and Drizella?”

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

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

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

I shrugged. “I look good in pink and purple. I can be Anastasia.”

Mo cradled her arms like she was holding a cat. “I need a pet to pet.”

Saphira tapped her own shoulder. “Get a lizard that can sit on your shoulder all day at work like in that TV show.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s a great idea.”

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

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

I gave him a wide grin and leaned forward like I was going to accept his offer. It was best to lure men like him in with sugar, *then* go for the kill. “Pull your lip over your head and swallow it. Thanks. Have the night you deserve.”

Saphira spit her margarita onto the table in a fit of laughter. Mo just shook her head and made uncomfortable eye contact with the creeper. He spun on his heel and sprinted out of sight like he couldn’t get away from us fast enough.

“That was fun.”

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

As Morgana prompted Saphira to dish on her romantic endeavors, I meant to listen but my eyes wandered to the dark corner of the club behind her. A man stepped out from the shadows, and my eyes widened. My cheeks flushed with heat. The man sauntered straight for us. He was tall with broad

shoulders and hair as dark as night, with one curl dangling over his forehead. He watched me with eyes that burned an otherworldly amber glow. They were almost red but that was probably just the lights reflecting from the club's lasers.

“Rhode?” My sister nudged me. “Dreaming again?”

Her voice was playful, but I heard the concern, so I shook my head. I casually pointed one finger at the guy headed right for us. “*Dibs.*”

In my peripheral vision, I saw them both glance in his direction, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. The light in his eyes flickered like there was a fire burning inside of them. His face was harsh. Cold. Gorgeous. I was a moth to his flame. I batted my eyelashes and licked my bottom lip.

Mo whistled under her breath. Saphira sighed. I wasn't breathing properly. Mystery man was a sight to behold. He wore black pants and a loose creamy blouse that gave pirate vibes. I smiled at him. I wasn't playing coy tonight. Not in Vegas. Not on my first vacation in forever.

He stopped right in front of me and held out his pale hand. A mischievous grin spread across his gorgeous face. “Dance with me?”

Words were not working, so I just put my hand in his and let him lead me away from the table and onto the dance floor. We stopped in the middle of the crowd with their half-naked sweaty bodies. He gripped my waist with his other hand and dragged me against his body. His skin was cold, and it made me want to crawl into his chest and stay there. Butterflies bounced in my stomach as we moved together in the sultry shadows of the dance floor.

He looked down at me with amber eyes that glowed and took my breath away. I couldn't remember a single time a man had had this kind of effect on me. It was like my entire brain had shut down and my body had switched to its backup generator: my body. We danced, our bodies swaying to the beat of the music, his hand on my waist with his other holding mine. Our eyes were locked on each other. It was like that moment in *Pride and Prejudice* when the rest of the people disappeared, and it was just us.

I wanted him to speak, to say his name and ask for mine. I was suddenly overwhelmed by the need to know everything about him. When he leaned forward, I held my breath. His lips grazed the side of my face and moved down my jaw. I glanced to the table to see just how much judgment was on my sister's face—but she wasn't there.

I frowned and pulled away from Mr. Gorgeous to get a different angle of the table. Yet it stood there empty with only the remnants of our drinks and shots. Saphira and my sister were nowhere in sight. I glanced left and right and back again. Still nothing. All of my lust and infatuation for the guy vanished.

“I'm sorry—I have to go.” I didn't wait for his response. I just ran for our table. It was as empty as before. Neither of their purses were there either. The girls at the table next to ours glanced over at me, so I leaned forward and yelled. “Have you seen my friends?”

They pointed over my shoulder. “Bathroom,” one of them yelled.

“Thanks!”

I scowled. That was unlike my sister. We had a code. Hell, even Saphira knew and followed the code. You always told

your whole group where you were going, not just one of them. The whole group. It would've taken them two seconds to get my attention and say they were headed for the bathroom. Morgana would never have just left me. Hot guy be damned. We stuck together. Always.

My pulse skipped beats and it hurt, but I couldn't think about that. I bulldozed my way through the crowd until I found the line for the bathroom, which had to be fifty people long. I checked every single face, the ones standing by the stalls *and* the ones who came out. They weren't there.

This is not right. I raced out of the bathroom, but instead of going for our table, I headed for the front entrance where the floor was a little raised from the rest of the club. I figured I'd get a better vantage point.

The bouncer who'd tested us with our ID's still stood at the door, so I hurried over to him. "Excuse me, do you remember me?"

He smirked. "Of course I do, baby doll."

I wanted to cringe but resisted. "Okay, do you remember my sister?"

"Double trouble rocking that Cher costume?"

I nodded. "YES! Have you seen her since we came in?"

He licked his lips and eyed my body, then nodded. "Yeah, she just left the club right here a few minutes ago."

"Thank you!" I dove around him and into the aisles of the casino. I looked left and right and back, eyeing every person with black hair, yet none of them were my sister. I didn't see a single person with blue hair either. "C'mon, Mo and Saphira, where'd you go? If this is some kind of joke, it's not funny."

I moved like a lioness on the hunt, prowling the aisles until I crashed into a girl standing near a card table whose height put Saphira's to shame. And she was rocking heels. She spun and steadied me as my legs tried to give out.

I cursed. "Sorry, sorry—"

"Are you okay?" She ducked down so her hazel eyes were level with mine. "You don't look so good. Talk to me. I'm Adira. What's your name?"

"I'm Rhode. And I can't find my sister." I ran my hands over my ponytail. "Did you see a girl my height dressed as Cher?"

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Have you called her?"

I cursed again and pulled my cellphone out of my purse, then dialed her number. "Right. Call."

Mo's Stevie Nicks ringtone played from behind Adira. She grimaced and reached into her bag. "I thought so. I saw her run toward the lobby, but she dropped this."

I looked at this girl with new eyes. She had long auburn hair that seemed to lean more red than brown. Both of her ears were lined with gold earrings. The scar on her throat was gnarly, but I didn't have it in me to ask what happened. Instead, I focused on the black cat ears and her little black dress.

And then she pulled out Morgana's cellphone.

My eyes widened. I took it from her and flipped it over to the back to confirm it was hers. She had a sticker of a corgi on the back. I sighed and started to lower the phone when I spotted a smudge of red liquid. I lifted the phone to my nose and sniffed.

My heart stopped.

It was blood. I was an ER nurse. I'd recognize the metallic scent of blood anywhere. *Oh my God. There's blood on her phone. She dropped her phone. Something's wrong, Rhode. Figure it out. Find her.*

Adira's hand squeezed my shoulder. "She went into the lobby. Go see if she went that way. If not, then get hotel security to help you out."

I nodded numbly. "Thank you." Then I turned and hightailed across the casino to the lobby.

I'd just crashed into Adira, so I should have known better than running through the lobby, because as expected, I slammed nearly full speed into someone else. My body hit theirs with a thud and a crunch, then I crashed to my knees on the marble floor. "Oh, fuck all. That's my bad!"

A girl groaned and wobbled on her feet. "Are you serious? How does no one see a damn pig standing here?"

"What?" But then I looked up and found a pretty girl dressed in a black pig onesie with pink on the ears and snout... and a beer stain on her pink belly. My jaw dropped. "I'm so sorry, that was my fault I was looking the other way."

"What're you running through a hotel for?" She asked, grabbing my elbow and helping me upright. Her pale green eyes were as sharp as the lasers as she scanned the area behind me. "Is someone bothering you?"

"Oh, no. I can't find my sister. So I'm kind of panicking. Someone saw her come this way." I glanced around us to the lobby where I registered nothing but hair color. "Have you seen a girl my height dressed as Cher? Like black sexy body suit style?"

Something buzzed, and the girl groaned. “Hold on. I swear, this is not my night.” She dove inside her costume and pulled a cellphone out of her bra. She tapped on her screen then held the phone up to her mouth. “Ember, hold on. I’m coming.”

“I’m sorry to bother you, go ahead-”

“I have not seen a Cher - well, not a short female dressed as a Cher, anyway.” She tucked her phone back into her bra then adjusted her costume. From beneath the hood I saw strawberry blonde hair that nearly matched the pink on the onesie. “This place is crazy tonight, so just be careful. I wouldn’t waste time reporting her missing. Talk to security.”

“That’s where I was headed. Thank you. Sorry for the tackle.”

She waved me off and shook her head. “No one died. Good luck.”

I smiled and then spun on my toes and raced for the reception counter. There was a big crowd lined up to check in and speak with the receptionists, but I refused to wait in that line when my sister was in trouble. Just as I approached the counter, a girl who couldn’t have been much older than me with wild purple hair stepped out from behind a doorway.

She smiled and waved me forward. “Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Not really,” I eyed her name tag, “Abba. My sisters disappeared from inside the club, and I found her phone in the casino, and there’s blood on it.”

Abba’s lavender eyes widened. They were insanely pretty and definitely contacts. But this was Halloween so that tracked. She picked up a walkie talkie and held it to her mouth

as she pressed a button. It beeped. “Security is needed at the front desk immediately.”

My pulse flipped like a fish out of water flapping against the ground. I held on to the counter for support. “Do you have cameras everywhere? Maybe we can locate her that way?”

Abba smiled softly. Her eyes were kind and warm. “We do, and we’ll get them working on locating her, but I’ve called a member of our security team to come out—and there he is now. This is Douglas.”

I turned to follow her stare, then did a double take. Douglas had to be nearly seven feet tall and pushing four hundred pounds of solid muscle. His shoulders were as wide as my armspan. I briefly wondered where the hell he found a store that sold him his light-gray suit. His brown eyes were as serious as the earpiece clipped onto his ear like he was Secret Service for the President.

“What seems to be the problem?”

“I’m Rhodelia Hastings. My sister and my foster sister went missing inside Sin Forest nightclub. I found her cellphone with blood on it in the casino.” I held the bloodied phone up as proof. “She would never, ever, ever leave without me. We have strict rules with each other about this. Something is wrong. A girl in the casino said she saw her come this way, but I don’t see her anywhere.”

“All right, and what is your sister wearing tonight?” He looked pointedly at my cone bra costume.

“Cher. The black bodysuit and leather jacket.” I held my hand up to the top of my head. “She’s my height, a little curvier. Blue eyes. Her name is Mo—”

“Come again, Ronald?” Douglas pressed his earpiece closer to his ear. He listened for a moment, then nodded. “A girl matching your sister’s description was just spotted on camera out back by the garden.”

I gasped and rolled to the balls of my feet. “Where’s that? Can you take me?”

He pressed his earpiece again. “I’m going to escort the sister out to the garden to look. Keep looking for her in the other cameras.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Douglas gestured ahead of me. “After you, ma’am.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I started forward, then glanced over my shoulder to the receptionist. “Thanks, Abba.”

She smiled. “Good luck!”

By the time we got outside, I was about to puke my brains out in one of the bushes. I didn’t, but It was close. My mind and heart were a mess. I’d dialed Saphira’s phone number about a dozen times, but each call went straight to voicemail without even ringing. I tried the *Find My iPhone* feature but hers was disconnected.

That Ronald guy in Douglas’ earpiece had said she’d been spotted out in this garden, but as my gaze swept left and right and back again, I only saw one person, and she was without a doubt *not* my sister. First of all, my sister never just stared at the stars like that with such abandon. And this girl’s hair looked like flames flickering in the breeze. It was dark-red at the root, then faded to a pale, golden color. It was one hell of a dye job, and if my sister wasn’t missing, I would have stopped to get this girl’s hairdresser’s information. But also, she was definitely not dressed as Cher. She wore a black minidress and

black combat boots with what looked like a hilt of a dagger poking out the top of one. Her hands hung down by her sides, a pair of black cat ears dangling between her fingers as she stared up at the sky.

“Negative, Ronald. The sister is not out here. I repeat, not in the garden.” Douglas stepped away from me to the other side of the aisle between flowery bushes. “Did you check all the cameras?”

My stomach turned. I leapt forward, running up to this poor unsuspecting girl from behind with my heart lodged in my throat. “Excuse me—”

The girl gasped and spun on me, swinging her arms.

I jumped back, throwing my hands up. “White flag, white flag!”

“Sorry, you scared me—whoa! Are you okay?” Her blue eyes softened as she took in what had to be an expression of utter terror on my face. “Talk to me, Madonna. Are you in trouble?”

I blinked and shook my head. “No, but my sister might be. I lost her.”

She sighed. “Must be the theme of the night. What’s your sister look like? I’ve been standing here a good minute. Maybe I saw her.”

“My height, dressed as Cher.” I held up my phone to show her the one picture Mo and I had taken in the mirror when we waited for that damn elevator. “She was with a girl who had blue hair.”

Ms. Star Gazer frowned. Her blue eyes darkened. “Sorry, no. And I’ve been doing quite a bit of people-watching looking for my friend Ivy.”

“EMBER!” another girl hollered as she ran up to us. She was short like me with long dark wavy hair and curves to her frame that put Mo’s to shame. I knew she was talking to the girl in front of me because they were in similar outfits: little black dress and black cat ear headband. But this girl’s were sparkly and on her head. “Ember, put your ears on! I told Ivy you were dressed as a cat.”

“Right, because without them I’m just the unrecognizable Clark Kent.” Ember slid her headband on and rolled her eyes. “Happy, Isa?”

“I’d be happy if you’d let me put whiskers on you, but *nooo*, Ember can’t be bothered with that.”

But then her name clicked in my mind. I’d heard it before. “Wait, your name is Ember? Is your friend dressed in a black pig onesie?”

They looked back to me and nodded.

I pointed toward the hotel. “I just crashed into her in the lobby. Literally.”

“Thank you! That’s very helpful information.” Ember gave me a small smile, then she turned to her friend. “Isa, have you seen a Cher? Like your height in the sexy outfit?”

Isa grimaced. “I saw someone with big black curly hair by the pool just now, but I can’t say what costume it was. I saw her from behind.”

“OH! Thank you!” Hope flared in my chest. I spun on my toes and raced across the garden to where Douglas stood in his suit surveying the crowd. “Douglas! She thinks she saw her by the pool!”

“Ronald, we’re heading to the pool here,” Douglas said into his earpiece. Then he turned his dark eyes to me. “He’s

checking the cameras by the pool, but let's head that way.”

Luckily for my sanity, the pool was just over a bridge. There were people *everywhere*. I didn't see anyone that fit my sister's description. I groaned and pulled out my phone to the picture of her, then began making my way through the crowd, asking everyone I passed if they'd seen her. I was three-quarters of the way to the bar when I spotted a person with wild curly black hair. Their arms and calves were too thick to be my sister's, but that didn't stop me from yanking them around to face me.

“*Hey—*”

“*Sorry, sorry, sorry! Wrong person!*” I yelled, then hurried away from him. It wasn't my sister, just a guy dressed as Alice Cooper.

When I got to the bar, the first person to make eye contact with me was a girl in an adorable Red Riding Hood costume. This girl had shiny brown hair, golden skin, and dark-green eyes that were full of warmth and friendliness.

I took a deep breath, then marched over to her. “Excuse me, have you seen this girl?”

The girl leaned down and pursed her lips.

“*Evera! What do you want?*” a blonde girl yelled from the bar, half-turning to face us.

Evera didn't look away from my phone, she just waved to the other. “Whatever you're having, Stella!”

“God, a Stella sounds good right now.”

“You're not wrong.” Evera grinned up at me but pointed to my screen. “I take it you've lost her out here somewhere?”

“My sister, yeah.” I pointed to Douglas who was scanning the crowd from a few feet away. “Hotel security is helping me search.”

“Oof. That’s serious. Let’s ask Stella.” She gently took my hand and led me over to the bar and tapped on her blonde friend’s shoulder. “Hey, look at this picture. Have you seen this lost girl?”

Stella fully turned to face us, and I almost gasped. I’d never met anyone with blue eyes as light as mine. Stella took my phone and held it up closer to her face, frowning at the picture. “Definitely not. Let me ask the bartender.”

I waited as she took my phone and held it out for the bartender to see. So far, every single person I’d stopped to ask if they’d seen Mo had taken it seriously, not one scoffed at it. This was girl power in action. We all knew how quickly something horrible could happen and how important it was to act fast.

“Thanks, Carlos!” Stella turned away from the bar and handed me my phone. It was at that moment I realized she was dressed half as an angel and half as a devil. “He says she hasn’t been to this bar tonight. They’d remember an iconic costume like that.”

My heart sank. Another strikeout. I held my phone to my chest, right over the pounding of my pulse against my sternum. “Thank you for asking.”

“Rhodelia?”

I jumped and spun around to find Douglas right behind me. There was a new sparkle in his eyes that sent butterflies to my stomach. “Did you find her?”

He pointed over my shoulder and grimaced. “Your sister and your other friend were spotted by the lazy river entrance fighting some guy off—”

“*OH MY GOD!*” I didn’t wait for him. I just sprinted in the direction he’d pointed.

I knew it. I fucking knew something was wrong. My lungs protested at the lack of air I was giving them, but I was falling apart from fear and anxiety. Each step I took in these heels as I sprinted sent sharp pain up my shins and into my knees. The sidewalk led me away from the crowds at the pool and down a cobblestone pathway lit only by tiki torches. The lazy river ran around the entire property like a moat. We’d seen it from our room’s window. When we checked in, they’d drawn out on the map where all the entrances to the river were, so I was fairly sure I was heading in the right direction even though no one else was around. Douglas jogged quietly behind me. Knowing he was there gave me a confidence boost I had no right having.

When the pathway dipped down a small hill and the beach of the lazy river came into view, I yelled, “MO!”

Silence.

I slid to a stop, sand flying up all around me. There was no one here. Neon-orange tubes floated down the river, but for every few with people on them, there had to be a dozen or more empty. To my right, there was a tall stack of tubes for people to grab to get in. Douglas was already over there, checking behind the stack. But he shook his head and shined his flashlight into the rows of trees between the river and the pathway that ran alongside it. To my left, it was just more of the trees.

“MO!” I yelled as loud as I could. “SAPH?”

More silence.

“This can’t be happening.” I cringed and let out a little moan as I ran to the edge of the tree line to look. “I don’t see them anywhere. How did Ronald *just* see them here but they’re already gone? Douglas, do you see them?”

He walked up and stopped beside me. “Oh, they were never over here.”

“*What?*” I spun to look up into his dark eyes. “But Ronald said—”

“Ronald isn’t a real person.” He grinned like we were talking about a puppy. Then he took out his earpiece and held it out to me. It was a piece of rubber. “This isn’t real either.”

My heart stopped. I took a step back from him. “*What?*”

“Well, I had to get you over here somehow. My first plan was foiled, but your sister going missing really was an unexpected aid tonight.”

My body went ice-cold. I glanced around me for a way out of this situation, but Douglas had tricked me. I was only a few feet from the river with nowhere to go. The receptionist’s voice when I checked in replayed in my mind, *the lazy river is only four feet deep so our guests can ride safely*. That meant Douglas would only be in the water up to his waist whereas I’d be in up to my chin. Water was never the ideal escape route anyway. I needed to make a run for it to try to get around him and back to the pool.

“The hotel is going to know you did this.”

“The hotel? You still think I work for them?” He threw his head back and laughed.

I ran, pushing my legs as fast as I could, but the sand made my feet sink and slowed my pace. Douglas leapt to the side and blocked my path. I dove to the right, yet there he was. I pushed off the sand and sprinted for the trees on the other side of the stack of tubes. The second I stepped beneath the branches, Douglas appeared right in front of me.

“NO!” I turned and bolted the other direction, but *there he was again*. I slid to a stop and screamed, “HOW?”

He held his hands out and shrugged with a shit-eating grin on his face. “Sweetheart, you cannot outrun me. I’d save your strength.”

I started to back away.

He took a step forward. His skin shimmered bright-purple like someone had just dumped glitter on him. His body shrank down a few inches, and he was suddenly much slimmer. The light-gray suit jacket changed into a white pirate-style shirt tucked into black pants. His short buzz-cut gray hair was now as black as night, with one piece curling onto his forehead. He eyed me with glowing amber eyes.

I gasped.

It was *him*. The guy I danced with at the club. In the blink of an eye, Douglas went from being nearly seven feet tall and built like a truck to a young guy roughly six feet in height with a slender form like a panther.

“No, no, no, no, no.” I stumbled backwards. “That’s not possible.”

“For you? I would agree. But for *me*?” He shrugged and then he was that squirmy little blond guy I’d told off at the club. I must’ve made a face because he laughed and changed

back into the gorgeous one. “Perhaps I should have stayed like *this*. We’d be gone by now. You liked this face a lot.”

I spun and sprinted, screaming as loud as I could. Something slammed into my back and shoved me headfirst into the sand. I landed with a thud, my mouth filling with sand. My head rattled and screamed. A firm hand gripped my ankle and dragged me backwards through the sand. I threw my hands up and grabbed the wooden tower with the tubes, but it came away in my hand. My fingers were wrapped around a narrow wooden oar—my eyes widened. *A weapon!*

He dropped my ankle, then his shadow slid over me. I flipped over, swinging the wooden oar as hard as I could into the side of his knee. He bellowed as his left leg buckled. I scrambled onto my feet, then jammed the handle end of the oar into his ribcage. Then I ran, but I only made it a few feet before he yanked on the oar and jerked me backwards.

A wild rage filled my veins. Instead of trying to overpower his strength to get the oar back, I swung my arm at his face and slammed the back of my hand into his cheekbone. Sharp pain shot up my palm, into my wrist, and down my fingers, *but he hissed*. With tingly fingers I gripped his hair and yanked his head down at the same time as I thrust my knee up and right into his nose. He screeched as his blood dripped onto the snow. I sank my sharp stiletto-pointed nails into his hand until he released the oar.

Then I ran *with* my weapon. Those self-defense classes Mo and I had taken were paying off, and as soon as I got out of here and found her, we’d be registering for more of them. My pulse was flying. Most of me trembled, but I had to get to safety.

Cold air hit my back a split-second before he wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me off the ground. But instead of fighting him, I went limp in his arms, making myself as heavy and difficult to carry as possible. He cursed and stumbled forward, my body sliding out of his arms until my knees crashed in the sand. I swung the oar back and smacked him in the head. He fell to the sand with a grunt.

I took off. Again. My lungs and legs were burning. These stupid heels were sinking in the sand. But the cobblestone pathway was only three feet away. I was almost there, then I'd be able to run easier.

He cursed behind me—and reappeared right in front of me. I gasped and tried to stop, but I'd been moving too fast, so I crashed into his chest with the oar.

He gripped the oar and snapped it in half like it was a twig. “You will not win this—”

I slammed both jagged edges of the oar he'd broken into his stomach. “Then I'll take you with me.”

These jabs and smacks weren't taking him out. I needed more power, so I pulled my arms back to get a good swing when purple smoke coiled in his palms. He snarled and threw them in my face before I could blink.

I tried to cover my mouth and not breathe the smoke in, but it washed over me like fog. The air glittered purple all around me, falling from the stars onto the sand of the river beach. My eyes burned. My arms and legs grew heavy. I couldn't keep my grip on the broken oar, so it slipped onto the now purple sand.

“*RHODELIA!*” Morgana screamed from behind me.

“MO!” I spun and staggered in the sand, searching for her.
“*Where are you?*”

“*Rho—*” her cry cut off with a ragged breath.

“*Where are you?*” I cried out just as I spotted a river of thick red blood moving across the sand from within the line of trees. “MO!”

I didn’t think, I just ran to the edge of the trees—and screamed, “NO!”

My sister lay on the dirt between two trees, her skin ashy pale. Her blue eyes were wide and staring into space. A pool of blood surrounded her, pouring into the sand. Thick wooden spikes protruded from her stomach and chest. Her hands trembled as she reached out for me. I threw the oars down and dove for her hands while trying to ignore the nurse brain telling me just how bad this was.

I reached for her hands, but my fingers passed right through them. I swung out again and again, yet each time my hands found only air. “*Morgana!*”

She gasped for air, her blood spilling from her mouth.
“*Rho-d-d-deli-a!*”

“Mo—”

She vanished as if she’d never been there at all, leaving only a shimmer of purple glitter.

A cold chill ran down my spine. I couldn’t move. My body had locked down.

“Didn’t like the show?” His breath swept over the side of my face. He gripped both of my arms and lifted me off the ground. “It was some of my best work.”

“Wh-wh-where’s my s-s-s-ister?”

“I have never laid eyes upon your sister. She’s probably still in that forsaken club looking for *you*.”

I shook my head. “No, no. She was gone. I ... I have her phone.”

“*Are you sure?*” he whispered against my ear.

I shivered and reached into my cone bra where I’d stashed Mo’s phone, but when I pulled it out ... it was *my* phone. A broken sob left my mouth. It was my phone. There was no blood on it. No corgi on the case. No, it was *mine*, with the sticker of the black-winged cat and two crescent moons. Tears stung my eyes. Morgana had never left the club. They’d probably gone to a different bathroom than the one I checked. Those other women had said they’d gone to the bathroom. Maybe Morgana had told them to tell me? It still made no sense and was entirely out of character ... but it was easier to wrap my mind around than ... *this*.

“What is happening to me?”

He sighed. “I am so glad you asked.”

Bright neon-purple light flashed in front of me, just a couple feet away. My heart stopped. Tree roots shot up out of the ground and into the sky. In the blink of an eye, there was a massive tree with a trunk that had to be four feet wide. Built into the trunk was a brown wooden door with intricate carvings on the front.

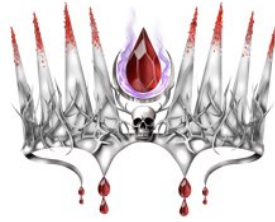
The door swung open on its own and more of that purple light slammed into me. It was so bright I couldn’t see anything on the other side of it. I cringed and shielded my eyes with my hand.

And then he threw me like I weighed nothing more than a pillow.

I soared into a neon-purple cloud. I screamed and threw my hands out to catch my fall, but I never landed. My body just kept flying forward into nothingness. I glanced over my shoulder, but the door was gone. All I saw was *darkness*.

Three

RHODELIA



My knees hit cold hard ground and pain shot into my hips and spine. I tried to catch myself, but my palms slid across damp grass, making me face-plant in the dirt. My head slammed into a tree root. I knew I needed to move, to get myself to safety, but the world was spinning. My whole body screamed in pain. My bones felt frozen. I lay there for a moment trying to catch my breath.

Douglas, or whatever his name was, crouched down beside me and tapped on my phone screen. It lit up and the picture of me and Mo made me whimper. He didn't notice. He cocked his head to the side, his amber eyes flashing in a way that was not humanly possible. "One minute to spare. That was too close."

Purple light flashed in my peripheral vision. I flinched and looked toward it and gasped. The door stood open, the beach next to the lazy river was in perfect view. I scrambled to my feet and sprinted for the door only for it to slam shut in my face. I grabbed the handle and wiggled it, but it turned to purple glitter in my hands. It was like that moment in Avengers Infinity War when Thanos did the snap and everything turned to dust.

“*NO. No, no, no,*” I breathed. I swatted at the door, but it was gone, fading into nothingness. The tree was gone too. “Where’d it go? Where’s the door?”

“The Veil closed at midnight.” He sighed. “The way back is gone.”

“WHAT? NO!” I swung my arms through the air in front of me where that door had been, but I found nothing but *me* there. “No, no. It has to be here. Where’s the door?”

I jumped forward, but the heel of my boot sank into soft dirt. When I looked down, I found a narrow, dark cobblestone path that was similar to the one in Vegas. I tried to follow it, but it only went a few feet before it met grass and large stepping stones beneath a stone archway. The air on the other side of the archway was thick like smoke and glowed a vibrant turquoise. It smelled like dawn on a rainy morning in the mountains.

A cold, firm hand gripped my elbow and pulled. “*Rhodelia.*”

I spun on my toes and slammed my fist into his throat. “*Get away from me!*”

He coughed and choked. That smiling face vanished. His one lone black curl bounced across his forehead. The veins on the insides of his pale forearms glowed purple and then *Mr. Gorgeous* was gone. He was back in front of me as the near seven-foot-tall hotel security guy in the gray suit. I took a few steps back until I slammed into a tree trunk. He cocked his head to the side and changed again, but this time into that blond guy I’d rejected. He pressed his palm to his chest and wagged his eyebrows. The purple veins flashed again, then he changed into a dude with long purple hair down to his elbows and hazel eyes.

What the fuck? No. NO. I turned and ran. I had no idea what was happening or how I was seeing what I was seeing, but there was no chance I was just going to sit there and take it without a fight. My lungs burned like I'd swallowed lava. My jaw and mouth hurt from hitting the ground, and I tasted blood, so I knew I'd bit my lip really badly. My senses were on overdrive. My vision was clear and focused, not a thing out of focus. The smell of the damp forest stung my nose. Twigs and branches crunched beneath each of my steps. I heard my own pulse in my ears.

My body screamed in protest to stop running, but I had to keep going. Whatever drug he'd given me wasn't going to wear off fast enough. I needed to get back into the resort. I needed to get back to people. Even if they looked weird to my eyes or I couldn't see them at all, they would see *me*. I just needed help. Someone in a crowd of people was going to notice I was not okay. One of those girls by the pool, Stella or Evera, had to be around here somewhere.

"HELP!" I screamed.

The forest around me was silent. Eerily silent. My voice didn't even echo.

A trail appeared from within the fog. I gasped. *This is it! This has to be it!* I leapt to the right, taking this new trail in hopes it would lead me back to the hotel. It was darker and creepier. Dark, purple trees lined each side of the trail and then stretched up and over to make a sort of tunnel, but the branches looked like the tentacles of an octopus. *Oh God. I'm falling deeper.*

I glanced over my shoulder to see if he'd followed me, but I saw no one. Only trees, fog, and turquoise light. *Think,*

Rhode, think. People don't look for the word help. Training kicked into place. "FIRE!" I screamed as loud as I could.

Bright purple flames shot out of the ground right in front of me. I gasped and slid to a stop, but my heels sank in the dirt and sent me crashing back to my knees. The neon-purple flames swirled and formed into the shape of a person ... with short black hair that curled over his forehead and amber eyes. It was *him*.

"NO!"

Mr. Gorgeous Imposter growled, and the ground trembled.

I grabbed a rock off the ground and chucked it at him. But he flicked his hand and purple flames swallowed the rock whole. I cursed and lunged back in the other direction—*and there he was in front of me*.

My pulse skipped. He moved faster than he had before. I dove into the brush and yanked a piece of a branch off to use as a weapon. I tightened my grip on the branch that was about the size of my forearm and charged for him. I swung at him, but he caught the branch and crushed it into dust with one hand. I lunged in the other direction, but he threw his arm out and caught me by the throat.

I gasped and a high-pitched squeal left my mouth.

His long pale fingers were warm on my bare throat. He lifted me off the ground by my neck and slammed my back into the tree behind me. Pain lanced up and down my spine. I hissed and tried to swing my legs, but his eyes glowed red and then tree roots coiled around my ankles and held me down.

He had me pinned against the tree.

His grip on my throat was so tight I had to focus entirely on breathing. Talking would've been too difficult. My breaths

were short and ragged. He glared down at me with wild amber eyes that shined like the Sun. Heat radiated off of him in waves, matching each of his growls.

I'd been no match for him this time. *Did he let me hit him before? Was it all part of his game?*

He snarled, his upper lip curling up on one side—and I saw it. His *fangs*. They weren't as big and dramatic as they were in movies, but those canines were definitely sharply pointed. They were just barely longer than his other teeth. He hadn't had those in Vegas. He turned his head to the side and made hissing sounds between clenched teeth. His ears were pointed.

When he turned his heated amber gaze back to me, I gasped. My pulse fluttered. I didn't know how but this was *not* the same person I met in Vegas. Sure, he had the same face, but actually, no he didn't. The lines of his jaw and cheekbones were sharper. His hair was longer and curled more over his forehead, which gave hardcore Elvis vibes. Before, he was cold to the touch, but *this* guy was warm. He smelled divine, like full-bodied red wine with hints of spice. The other version of him hadn't smelled like anything at all. The amber color of his eyes were more golden than before and I could see the flicker of light in them. He narrowed them and a red glow seemed to shine from within him.

Something moved behind him, but he didn't flinch. Didn't take his glare off me.

I glanced over his shoulder and spotted the imposter running toward us, his long purple hair flying behind him like a cape. His eyes widened. He stumbled up to us, then stopped. "Prince Varan."

Prince Varan, as the imposter called him, barely turned his head to the side to growl at the imposter.

Wait ... did he say prince?

The imposter bowed deeply. “*Your Highness*, I apologize. She got away from me.”

Your Highness. Prince. What the fuck is going on?

The imposter did not stand upright. He remained bowed.

Men dressed in all black rushed in from every direction. They all had different shades of purple hair that was braided down the middle like a mohawk, revealing pointed ears. I couldn't turn my head because Prince Varan still had me tight in his grip, but I saw enough of them to notice they wore the same sort of black coats with intricate embroidery on them. They all had swords strapped to their backs and purple smoke coiling around their hands. They all stared at me with unreadable expressions.

My stomach turned. The imposter hadn't looked up yet. I had no one else to look to for guidance except this Prince Varan. But when my gaze met his, I flinched. The hate and rage rolling off of him was palpable. He snarled and threw me to the ground. My knees slammed into the cold black dirt.

All at once, the men with the swords surrounding us all dropped to one knee and *bowed*. The imposter looked to them and then up at me. He gave me a small smile, then sank into a bow like the others.

“Welcome back to Isramaya, Dowager Queen Rhodelia,” Prince Varan all but growled. “Ambrose, escort her to Lakewell Palace in the Court of Blood.”

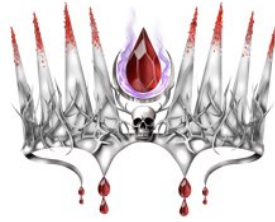
“At once, Your Highness,” *Ambrose*, also known as the imposter, said with reverence.

“Get her off my land.”

And then Prince Varan was *gone*.

Four

RHODELIA



Dowager Queen Rhodelia?

Dowager Queen.

QUEEN.

Those were the words they said. Or at least what I'd heard. *God, have I lost my mind?* It all felt too real, but I was struggling to grasp reality. He'd said my name. Prince Varan had said my name. He'd called me *Rhodelia* without anyone telling him. I had no idea what *Dowager Queen* meant though. I'd never even heard the word *dowager*. *So how is this a dream? Unless it's gibberish made up by my brain?*

The Prince vanished, gone in a flame of purple fire and smoke. Here one second, gone the next, because that was normal. The men who circled me all stood and moved to stand in a row along the tree line. None of them spoke. If not for their varying eye color and height, I might have thought them clones of each other.

I eyed the imposter. "Did you tell him my name?"

"No, Your Majesty, he told me yours."

Sharp pain lanced through my temples, so I pressed my fingertips into them. "Who is he?"

He arched one purple eyebrow. “Prince Varan, heir to the throne and Lord of the Court of Nightmares.”

This isn't real. This isn't happening.

“‘Tis time to get in the carriage, Your Majesty.”

I pushed to my feet, but the movement sent throbbing pain into my knees. “Ambrose, is it?”

He nodded. “That is my name, yes.”

“NO.” I backed away slowly. “I have to go home. Now.”

Without waiting for his response, I spun on my toes and leapt into a sprint. I only made it five feet before those men surrounded me again, this time with their swords gripped in their hands.

“Knights, stand down,” Ambrose yelled from behind me.

The Knights slid their swords back into their holsters and walked away. I turned with them, watching them just do exactly as Ambrose instructed. “If that was a Prince and they’re knights, then what does that make you? The jester?”

“Commander of the Knights.” Ambrose whistled a series of notes to them, then returned his focus on me. A golden carriage rolled into view behind him. “You cannot return to Earth, Rhodelia. The Veil has closed and shall not reopen for another fifty years. You may sit here and wait, or you may get in the carriage and allow Lord Cresswell to answer all your questions.”

I didn’t move. I didn’t want this to be real, and I was really afraid that if I got in that carriage, I’d never wake up from this nightmare. That carriage was something straight out of Cinderella, and I did not want to turn into a pumpkin at the end of the night. But I also had no idea who *Lord Cresswell*

was or where they wanted to take me. My self-defense class taught us to never let ourselves get taken to a second location. I backed away again, shaking my head. I needed to stay where I was and find that door again.

Ambrose whistled. I flinched. The knights charged for me. I tried to dodge and outrun them, but they grabbed hold of me without hesitation. My feet were lifted off the ground. They carried me as if I weighed nothing. The carriage was fifteen feet away, and yet they were stuffing me inside the door in seconds. My ass barely touched the bench seat inside when Ambrose slammed the door closed in my face. The sound of the lock being flipped echoed around me. My heart sank into my stomach like I was on Splash Mountain at Disneyland, sending nausea rolling through me in waves.

I grabbed the handle and yanked on it, but it didn't budge. The carriage jerked into motion, sending me toppling over onto the bench at a weird angle. I cursed and scrambled to get back upright. I needed to watch the path the carriage took so I could find my way back to search for the door. But when I sat up, my breath left me in a rush. Everything was black. I saw only flashes of purple and turquoise as the carriage flew through the forest. I was riding blind.

My breath hitched. *What the hell just happened? This can't be real. Unless I was drugged? He could have slipped something into my drink while I was telling him off. I could just be hallucinating. Wait. Is this another dream?* My mind was spiraling into madness. I was grasping for something tangible to hang on to. Logic was insisting I'd been drugged, however in my gut I knew that wasn't likely. I'd drugged myself when I was in high school because I wanted to know what it felt like so that if I suddenly felt that way without knowingly taking anything, I'd know to get help before it was

too late. And I felt fine physically, aside from the panic attack sliding in.

If it wasn't drugs though, then it was either a dream ... or real.

But it couldn't have been a dream. I'd felt pain. I never felt pain in my wedding dream. My knees ached from slamming into the ground a few times. There was a splitting, sharp pain in my temples and a burning pain down my neck and spine. My muscles were one tumble away from a spasm. And my mouth was throbbing, mostly in my upper teeth and bottom lip. I lifted my fingers to my lips, but I didn't feel a wound. I licked my lips and frowned. I still tasted blood. *Wait, what's that?* I licked my lips again and felt the same pressure in my lips and tongue, so I ran my tongue over my teeth—and gasped.

No, no, no. Hold on. Nope.

With shaking hands, I reached up and touched my teeth with my fingers. A strangled cry left my mouth when I found my two canine teeth were twice as long as the rest of my teeth ... *and pointed.*

“Oh my God,” I groaned as my whole body got hot and sticky. My stomach rolled, shooting bile into my throat. “I have fangs.”

I bent over and put my head between my knees so I wouldn't vomit on myself. My whole body began to tremble. My muscles locked up and burned. I had fangs. *Fangs.* I forced myself to take slow, steady breaths until my stomach wasn't threatening to empty itself. Then I sat up and put my elbows on my knees, not trusting myself to be fully upright yet. *I have fangs. This can't be real.* I reached up again to prove to myself I hadn't imagined it, and there they were,

sharp as fuck against my skin. When I lowered my hand, there was a drop of blood on my fingertip.

I started to lift my hand to touch the other fang when I actually *saw* my hand. Back home I was always pretty pale because I spent all my days inside the hospital and not getting a tan, but my skin always had a slight pink undertone. But now my hand was a soft white. I looked like some damn sculpture from Ancient Greece or something. My skin didn't glitter or shimmer like one of Twilight's vampires, but I suddenly had a whole new understanding of why that author wrote them that way, because if I held my hand at *just* the right angle it almost had a shine to it.

Dear God. I'm losing it.

My pulse did weird things in my chest that was already tight and hot. *Don't panic. Don't cry. Just breathe.* I was between breath numbers ten and eleven when I realized my ponytail had slid onto my arm and was tucked in the crease of my elbow. Except it couldn't have been mine. My hair was blonde and this hair was *silver* like moonlight. I gripped the thick end of my ponytail and ran my hands up until I reached the hair tie I'd used to pin it up. It was definitely my hair. My hair was silver. *SILVER*. I took a shaky breath, then scrubbed my face with my hands. I bent back over to rest my elbows on my knees again, but when I slid my hands over my hair to smooth it back, my fingers landed on the pointed tips of my ears.

Pointed.

Ears.

I froze. I wasn't even breathing. All I could do was hold the newly pointed tips of my ears. *I have pointed ears. I have*

fangs. I felt pain. I can TASTE the blood. This can't be happening.

Purple light flashed in my peripheral vision. I gasped and jumped back, throwing my hands out—and choked on a scream. My eyes widened. The purple light was coming from *ME*. I gasped for air in short quick breaths. The insides of my forearms, beneath the black ink of my tattoos, my veins were glowing neon-purple. It moved into my palms. I couldn't move. All I could do was stare as purple mist billowed in my hands and swirled around my fingers.

It was *cold*.

But, like, refreshingly cold.

I saw the purple mist reflect on the windows of the carriage, so I leaned toward the glass to see my face because I needed a visual for all of this. As I moved, candles inside the carriage suddenly lit. My reflection shined down at me. I saw myself like I was looking in a mirror. But it didn't feel like *me*. My face looked like I'd lost ten pounds. My jaw was sharper and my cheekbones too. Hell, even my neck looked tighter. I ran my fingertips over my face, shocked to find my skin was smoother.

But then I saw my eyes. They were silver, like liquid silver. And they glowed.

My jaw dropped.

The carriage stopped short. I dove for the handle, but it was still locked. Ambrose, the imposter, stood on the other side, his sinister smile looking nauseatingly friendly. He unlatched the lock with a thunk. I shoved the door open right into his face, making him stumble over his own feet as he hurried to get out of my way. I climbed out of the carriage and

onto the little steps that came out when I opened the door. Ambrose reached out and took my hand.

“Don’t touch me,” I snarled and yanked my hand away.

“Your Majesty—”

“I held a jugular vein closed with my bare hands yesterday.” I glared up at him. “Touch me again and I’ll rip yours out.”

His eyes widened.

I took a step closer. “I can make you bleed to death faster than your fancy tricks.”

His face paled.

“I don’t trust you.” I took a step back. “Try not to breathe in my vicinity.”

He had the good grace to bow his head slightly and back away until I could no longer see him. I took a deep breath, then exhaled and climbed off the bottom step to the ground. I glanced around and felt my heart skip beats. I was in some kind of city or town, with houses built out of stone and marble. It reminded me of paintings of Ancient Rome. Part of me wanted to look around and inspect every detail, but the other part of me was too afraid that would make this moment real.

A woman with long red-wine-colored hair and big brown eyes came down the stone staircase in front of me and gave me a warm, friendly smile. She was dressed in all white and was barefoot, which I thought was a strange thing to see. She bowed super low. “Your Majesty, we are thrilled to have you home. ‘Tis been too long.”

“Umm ...” I frowned. I was so confused. These people seemed to think I was someone. “Who are you?”

“I am Viera,” she said in a gentle yet strong voice. She was quite beautiful, like a supermodel from Brazil. “Your lady’s maid, Your Majesty.”

Another woman who looked just as young as Viera and I bounced down the steps toward us. She had beautiful brown skin and tight curls in a lovely shade of red that fell to her shoulders but had more volume than I’d ever managed.

When she got to me, she sank to both knees to bow at my feet. “Dowager Queen Rhodelia.”

This was making me hella uncomfortable. I wasn’t a queen, let alone a *dowager* queen, whatever that meant. They knew my name and that made me stupid confused. They acted like they knew me.

I cleared my throat. “Please stand.”

The girl stood with a wide grin and beautifully painted full red lips. “Welcome home, Your Majesty.”

Um okay. “What’s your name?”

“I am Arlene. I’m also one of your lady’s maids.” She moved to the side so that I stood perfectly between her and Viera. “We are to be with you always.”

“We are here for any purpose you should need, Your Majesty.” Viera gave me a small smile. I got the impression she wasn’t an overly smiley kind of gal. “Just ask it of us, and we shall see it done.”

I nodded and wrung my hands together. At least the glowing purple part had disappeared. “What’s going on? I am confused ... and freaking out.”

Arlene cocked her head to the side. “Freaking out ... this is unfamiliar to me.”

“Freaking out ... like ... losing my mind? Scared? Confused? Emotional?”

“Oh.” Arlene nodded and stepped closer to me. She held her elbow out. “Take my elbow, Your Majesty. Let us escort you to someone who can help you not ... *freak out.*”

I took her elbow, then looked to Viera, and for some reason seeing her standing there with her arm out for me just made me super emotional. I was definitely losing it. But Viera and Arlene held my hands that were holding on tight as they led me up the stone stairs and inside the building. I didn't turn around to survey the town or anything. I barely noticed what was happening around me. But I couldn't help notice the building they were headed toward was a castle made of marble and limestone with stained-glass windows of red roses that matched the big, bushy red rose trees on either side of the building.

“What is this place?”

“Lakewell Palace,” Arlene said with a chipper voice.

Viera gestured around us to the places I was refusing to *look* at yet. “This is the Court of Blood.”

Court of Blood. Court of Nightmares. Right, right. Because this is the vampire kingdom of blood and nightmares. This is a dream. It has to be. Nothing else makes sense!

I kept my eyes on the bloodred carpet on the stone floor. My name was whispered a few times with the word *dowager*, and I saw people bow in my peripheral vision. It was too much. I was confused and honestly terrified. I needed answers, then an express ticket home.

When we stopped, I looked up and my heart fluttered. We stood in front of a dark-brown, wooden set of double doors.

There was nothing special about them except that they reminded me of my nightmare. It was something in the shape of the carvings on the front that triggered my mind to see a black door.

A black door waiting to be opened.

I looked down at my bouquet, at the cluster of violet flowers that shimmered beneath the candlelight. Their name escaped me. We didn't have these where I lived. They were a symbol for him and his home. My soon to be new husband. Only one red rose sat in the middle, the only representation of me and mine. But then again, who I was no longer mattered. I was his now. His shiny jewel that was to be seen and never heard unless he allowed me to speak.

Bile shot up my throat. I exhaled and pressed my hand to my stomach to steady myself. If I could turn back time, I might have thought about this decision a little longer ... might have looked for another option. But in the deepest part of my heart, I knew this was the only answer. I had to do this, and it was for a good reason.

The doors opened, swinging away from me.

For the first time, I was lucid in this dream experience. I knew I was seeing my dream even while we entered an entirely different room. My mind kept taking me back there, sucking me in for a few seconds and then spitting me back out like a wrinkled dollar in a hospital vending machine.

My hands trembled. I took a deep breath, and the silvery jewels sewn onto the lace of my wedding gown dug into my skin. I raised my chin high, pushed my shoulders back, then opened my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. I had not yet seen this room. It was daunting and imposing. The far wall a mere fifty feet straight across from me stood towering into the

sky, made of glass and white stone columns. Some of the glass sections had been painted red to make the shape of a V in the wall, as though someone might forget to whom this room belonged.

This Royal Ceremonial Room was filled to the brim. Even the three levels of balconies were lined with people all leaning over the side to get a better look.

The Kingdom of Isramaya had come to watch.

My pulse skipped. Kingdom of Isramaya. That was what Prince Varan had said to me before. I tried to stay present in my body by looking for new details that made this different than the dream. This room was much smaller, with rows of wooden benches that ran alongside the floor-to-ceiling stained-glass windows that were clear enough to see bushy red rose trees outside. *Red rose trees? Is that a real thing?* I looked back to the ground and found it was made of alternating red tiles of marble and stone, both in the shape of a diamond. But running up the middle and under my feet was a rich red carpet just like in my dream.

I kept my gaze locked on the altar at the far end of the room. It stood like a carved block of ice beside my betrothed. He stood with his back to me, which was a relief. Had I seen his eyes, I might have fled out of fear and cowardice. Yet I took a step forward, my bare feet touching the bitterly cold stone floor. The moonlight streamed in through the glass in just a way to shine a spotlight on the aisle ... that was painted bloodred.

The golden candlelight flickered from every crevice, casting everyone in a warm golden haze. It was no use. The room was still as cold as a winter's night. I steeled my spine and began my last march as a free woman. No one had told me

why I was not permitted shoes. It was probably to remind me of my place with him. As I walked, the melodic tune of the instrumentalists sang a haunting sound, yet I barely heard the sound over the heavy pounding of my heart in my ears.

As I marched, the rows of people dressed in floor-length gowns dropped to bow at my feet. I cringed inside. On the outside I kept my expressions locked in place. There would be no benefit to letting anyone see my fear now. I tried not to notice them, but with every step I realized the courts had been split. On my left, the Court of Blood residents had hair in shades of red. They wore gowns of white and ivory. On my right, those from the Court of Nightmares stood in dark contrast with their black attire and hair in shades of purple. In the balconies, as if peering over the very Shadow Mountains that parted their court from the others, the Court of Shadows had hair in shades of blue and wardrobes made of grays and navy blues.

None of this was new to me. I knew the three courts all looked different. We all knew this. But I'd never seen them so ... isolated from each other. My heart hurt as it sank in my chest. Our kingdom should have been blended together, not separated by court. Perhaps this was my ignorance showing its hand.

When I approached the altar, I discovered my betrothed wore a black coat with a large hood pulled over his head. It must have been some form of ceremonial robe. I stopped in front of the altar as I'd been instructed, then dropped into a low curtsy. His feet turned to face me, so I lifted to stand straight, and our eyes met.

His amber eyes widened, and his jaw dropped.

"Your Majesty?" Arlene whispered in my ear.

I jumped. Luckily for me, Viera and Arlene were still holding on to me, otherwise I might have fallen. I closed my eyes and shook my head. That last part was brand-new. I'd never seen his face. Every time when he turned around, I'd see a flash of eyes and then I'd wake up. But just now I saw his face perfectly clear, and yet it only confused me more.

Because that face ... was Prince Varan.

Viera tapped my arm softly. "Dowager Queen Rhodelia?"

I flinched and looked up—and gasped. Straight ahead of me about ten feet or so sat a large throne made of white marble. It was beautiful, with intricate roses carved out of marble draped over the arms and across the back and even more clustered at the feet. It was soft yet intense and sharp. It was a piece of art.

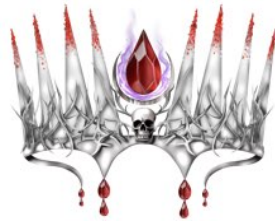
And it was not empty.

A man sat on it with one knee crossed over the other and both hands resting on the arm rests. He had short red hair in that lovable ginger shade of the Weasley family, with the matching scruff on his jaw to go with it. His yellow eyes brightened like the midday Sun when I finally looked at him.

Viera cleared her throat and curtsied, then whispered to me, "Your Majesty, I introduce to you ... Lord Cresswell."

Five

RHODELIA



“So ...” Lord Cresswell narrowed his yellow eyes on me. “I hear you threatened Ambrose.”

It wasn't a question, so I just shrugged. “I don't appreciate the way he treated me. He needed to know where he stood.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You could have attacked him instead of merely threatening? To properly teach him a lesson.”

“Well, as they say, fuck around and find out.” I pushed my shoulders back and held my chin high. “I was trained to never make the first strike.”

His red eyebrows rose. “And yet you did not strike Prince Varan. I'm told he was quite aggressive with you.”

Just thinking about the Prince made my skin remember the feel of his hot fingers wrapped around my throat. His face flashed in my mind, and my body warmed. “The night isn't over yet.”

Lord Cresswell threw his head back and laughed. He clapped his hands together, then leapt to his feet too quickly for my eyes to track. One second he was sitting, the next he was standing in front of me. “I like you. I had a feeling we'd make good friends.”

I blinked. “I ... *what?*”

He grinned and pressed his palm to his chest. “It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I am Cresswell, Lord of the Court of Blood.”

I held my hand out to shake, but he took my fingers and kissed my knuckles as he bowed. “Oh. Um ...”

He chuckled, dropped my hand, then stepped to the side. “Viera and Arlene, please seek my wife and inform her the Dowager Queen has returned. Help her prepare, then take a rest until we are ready.”

Both redheads curtsied, then looked to me and bowed. With smiles they turned and left me alone in this fancy throne room with Lord Cresswell. I watched as the short trains of their white gowns trailed behind them.

“I picked them for you myself.” He pointed to the door they’d just gone through. “I thought they would be the best suited for you.”

“Oh, thank you.” I frowned and shook my head. “Wait, what? What is happening here? I was told you’d answer my questions.”

His smile faded to a normal yet still friendly smile. “Your Majesty—”

“Please don’t call me that,” I said in a rush. I pressed my fingers to my temples. “I am not a queen. I don’t even know what *dowager* means. I have no idea what’s going on, and I’m still not sure this is even real.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. His yellow gaze carefully looked me up and down. “That is fair. What would you like me to call you?”

I gasped a little. I hadn't expected my request to go over so well. I licked my lips. "Rhode, please. Everyone calls me Rhode."

"Rhode it is then." His smile returned, and I found it actually comforting. He was the first person who had treated me like a normal person. He gestured to the wooden benches to my left. "Why don't we sit? We have a lot to discuss, and I'm sure it'll be easier to process sitting."

I wanted to say no, to insist we remained standing, but I was exhausted and overstimulated. So, with a nod, I crossed the few feet to the benches and sat down. My feet were throbbing. All I wanted was a hot bath. Once I was seated, he moved to sit on the bench in front of me but left one empty bench between us. That small gesture meant more than I had words for.

He cleared his throat and crossed his leg over the other. "How are you feeling? Ambrose isn't the most gentle of the Knights. I tried to tell Prince Varan to send someone else—"

"*He* sent that animal to Vegas? To get me?"

Cresswell grimaced. "Indeed."

"Asshole. I bet they're the best of friends."

Cresswell snorted. He hung his head and laughed. "I cannot tell you how refreshing it is to hear someone speak negatively about our Prince."

"I'm not going to be killed for talking shit about him?"

"Talking shit?" His red eyebrows rose. He smirked. "I believe that is a new turn of phrase for me."

I grimaced. "Oh ... um ... well, *shit* is a slang word for ... well ... *poop*."

“OH.” His cheeks flushed pink. He let out a chuckle. “I understand the phrase now. Thank you.”

I nodded. “So, is it a punishable crime?”

“*Mother Terrea*, no.” He laughed. “Though no one has dared to speak against him in such a way. Quite refreshing indeed. I needed that laugh.”

“Everyone likes him?”

He pursed his lips and stared at the bushy red rose tree outside the window. “That is not an easy answer to give.”

“Well, on the topic of answers, I’d really love to know what the hell is going on here because I’m one more surprise away from hyperventilating.” I rubbed my hands together and tried not to think about the glowing purple veins I saw in the carriage. “Please just be straight with me. Put yourself in my shoes and ask yourself how you’d feel right now.”

He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. “I would be terrified.”

I sagged with relief. “I am. Extremely. So, let’s just pretend that I believe this is all actually happening and not a dream ... What’s going on? My hair is silver and kind of glowing? My skin tone lost all its color. I look like I lost fifteen pounds, I mean, what are these cheekbones? My ears are suddenly pointed. And don’t get me started on the fangs.”

“Fangs?” He frowned and leaned closer. “May I see?”

I opened my mouth.

He gasped. “Look at those. We all have those, but I’ve never seen them so long.”

A cold chill slid down my spine. “*What?*”

“I am afraid I do not know the answer to that question—the fangs—but I promise we will figure it out. As for the other stuff ...” He rubbed his hands together. “But you asked me to put myself in your shoes, and that makes me think I should start at the beginning of the who, what, where, and why before we approach the *how* of your story.”

I wrapped my arms around my waist and nodded.

“You are in Isramaya, the kingdom of vampires.”

I nodded again. “And where is Isramaya?”

“In the Realm of Terrea.”

I scowled and shook my head. “Realm. The Realm of Terrea. What do you mean *realm*? Terrea is not on Earth?”

“We used to live on Earth.” I must have made a face because he held his hands up and smiled. “The Realm of Terrea is connected to Earth by The Veil but kept separate entirely, save for a portal one day every fifty years. Within Terrea there are nine continents. One is Sacred Mountain, one is The Wild Lands, and the others are kingdoms of different species—”

“I’m sorry, *other species*?” When he nodded, I let out a little whimper. “Like what?”

“There’s *Sepeazia*, kingdom of serpents. *Vargyr*, kingdom of wolves. The dragons live in *Draconia*. Elves are in *Aelvaria*. There’s *Magaria*, kingdom of mages, and *Talamh*, kingdom of the fae. And the last kingdom is *Isramorta* ... the demons.”

“*DEMONS?*”

His face fell. “We will get to them later. For now, understand that these continents used to be on Earth with the

humans. But five thousand years ago, *our* kingdoms were dragged from the Realm of Earth to a new realm named Terrea under our Goddess—*Mother Terrea*.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

“I want you to fully understand what’s happening and why, and what your part in it is, therefore I feel you must know our true past. What happened before the realms were separated is irrelevant, but it was war. Once we were moved to our own realm, where we were free to live how we needed, there was peace. For five thousand years we had peace. Perhaps a few minor scuffles here and there, but no wars ... until fifty years ago, to this day.”

“Like to this exact day? Halloween?”

He nodded. “The Veil opens on the night of Havestia every fifty years. Humans refer to this night as Halloween. It’s the one night we can return to Earth through the portal, but if we are not back through before midnight, we are stuck there for fifty years.”

“The door. The door Ambrose threw me into with all the purple light and smoke?”

“Yes. That was the portal.”

I jumped to my feet and began to pace the length of the window. “And when Ambrose said we’d made it by one minute, it was only one minute prior to midnight—”

“The door closes at midnight, vanishing from sight and reach until it is ready to open again.”

My stomach tightened into knots. I pressed my hands over my belly button and tried to breathe. “So ... I can’t go back. Ever?”

“Well, how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-two. In fifty years, I’ll be seventy-two. I’ll be an old lady.”

He smirked. “Every life born of Terrea can live up to a thousand years, regardless of species. That is the limit of our lifespans. So, I assure you, in fifty years you shall look as you do now.”

But Morgana won’t. Saphira won’t. I turned away from Cresswell so he wouldn’t see the tears pooling in my eyes. I chewed on my thumbnail and nodded. I sniffled. “Is there a way to get a message through this Veil? My sister ... I need to tell her to not look for me.”

I heard him sigh, and it was a pained sound. “I am sorry. Prince Varan is the only one who may have an answer for that at this time and that is if it’s even possible.”

I cringed and pressed my forehead to the cold glass window. My fingertips grazed over my throat where the Prince had held me off the ground. My heart could not bear to think about Morgana. I would shatter irrevocably into little pieces. I had to keep my mind focused on something else.

“What ...” I cleared my throat. “What happened fifty years ago?”

He walked to the window beside me, then pointed. “You cannot see it well from here in the dark, but Sacred Mountain is straight that way. Within you’ll find the Sacred Temple that holds the Sacred Tree of Power. This tree gives us all our magic and life. Well, fifty years ago, King Valandril, Vampire King of Isramaya, decided to steal a piece of the root from said tree. His plan was to return to Isramaya with it and grow his

own sacred tree, so that in fifty years time, he would have an army of his own making to take over Earth.”

I looked at his profile with my jaw hanging open. “Take over Earth?”

“Control and enslave the humans. He saw them as inferior.” He looked over his shoulder at me. “Unite both realms under his rule.”

I shuddered.

“When he attempted to plant the root, it caused an explosion of magic that was felt around Terrea. Valandril had some followers, and together they started a war. Two weeks into the war, eight women, one from each kingdom, were summoned to the Sacred Temple.” His voice grew quiet as he spoke almost reverently. “None us truly know what transpired in the temple, or what beckoned them there, but we do know they sacrificed their lives to kill Valandril. And when he died, all of the monsters his magic had created died with him ... and the war was over.”

Sharp pain shot through my hands, up my arms, and into my spine. I hissed through clenched teeth and rubbed my arms to shake it off. There were sure to be a ton of bruises after what I’d been through tonight. I turned away from the window. “How do you know they sacrificed themselves? Were there witnesses that survived?”

“Only Abba, Mother Terrea’s sole Priestess.” He gestured for me to follow him across the room to the opposite wall with windows that were all matching stained-glass except for the pane in the middle. That one was clear glass, but it had words etched into it and stained red. “Abba informed all of the kingdoms what these eight women had done, but she also delivered the prophecy.”

“Those words are a prophecy?” I ran my fingers over the etchings and a chill slid down my spine.

“*On the night The Veil shall open, Nightmares claim thy sacred tokens,*” he chanted softly.

“Nightmares?”

“Court of Nightmares.” He gave me a ghost of a smile. “The royal bloodline is only born of Nightmares.”

“Ah.” I frowned and looked up to the top row of words. “So that’s referring to Valandril stealing the root?”

“Well done.” He stood on the other end of the window frame from me and stared up at the prophecy etched into the glass, yet his eyes were not reading. He knew what they said. “*But magic stolen comes with a cost, for by His hands blood will be lost. Bound in war, triumph is hopeless, thy future lies in death and darkness.*”

My hands warmed. Pressure wrapped around my ankles as if someone was holding me in place. That sharp pain returned, piercing through my hands. Cold air slithered across my body like snakes. Images rushed through my mind, consuming all of my thoughts and robbing my senses from me until all I saw were them.

The roots crawled up my neck and over my head. Soil from the bottom of the pool claimed my feet. I couldn’t move. I was locked in place. And then streams of water began to rise around our bodies. It was colder than ice in the deepest nights of winter. It rose until it reached our necks, then snapped back and crashed back to the surface of the pool. Yet the tightness remained. I could not take a deep breath for my chest could not rise within the walls around me. My heart raced as flickers of panic and fear crept into my mind.

I snarled and a growl slipped through my clenched teeth. I felt like I was being cooked and melted from the inside while freezing to death from the outside ... yet I was not going to miss this. Through the sweat stinging my eyes and the taste of my own blood in my mouth, I focused my eyes on him.

“Yet on the Eve thy battle ends, eight fierce souls will make amends. Hand in hand they shall unite, a pact in blood, heiress to fight,” Cresswell chanted, his voice warm and strong.

I gasped and my whole body flinched. I was back in the throne room with him. Those images in my head were gone.

“When gifted power pays sacrifice, Mother Terrea shall repay the price.” He turned to face me, then pointedly pointed to the next line without taking his yellow gaze off of me. *“Blessed be her soul reborn, seek from where the Earth was torn.”*

Through the throbbing in my ears, I heard his words but did not know what they meant. *Reborn? Does he mean reincarnation? Is that what I’m hearing?*

Cresswell arched one eyebrow. *“In fifty years, eight heiresses will return to bring peace to all lands that burn. The lines of fate have been spoken, on the night The Veil shall reopen.”*

Bright white light filled my vision, so I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed them with my hands. “What are you telling me, Cresswell?”

“These eight gave their last breaths to save us, yet Mother Terrea chose to bring them back to life. All eight were reborn in seemingly human forms on Earth and raised there, waiting for the night of Havestia—*Halloween*—when they could all be returned to Terrea.”

My jaw dropped. The pieces were clicking, but I needed to hear him say it. Because I wasn't stupid enough to miss the parallels ... to see how my body had changed. "Cresswell, are you about to tell me what I think you are?"

He grinned. "Rhodelia, of the Court of Blood, *you* were the woman chosen from Isramaya. *You* answered the call and gave your life for us."

My breath left me in a rush and my knees buckled. I stumbled backwards uncontrollably until Cresswell caught me and sat me on one of the wooden benches. I gripped my knees with my hands. I shook my head. *No, no, no.* "Cresswell."

"Rhode."

"*Cresswell.*"

He grinned. "I imagine this is difficult news to process, but yes, you were reincarnated. The life you lived on Earth these last twenty-two years was temporary, until Havestia when The Veil opened and you could be returned home here ... to us."

I jumped to my feet and began pacing the red carpeting while alternating which thumbnail I chewed on. Those images I'd just seen. I shuddered. "So, you're telling me I was part of the eight that died to kill him, and I was reborn?"

"Indeed."

That pain in my hands had dulled to an echo. I held my hands out in front of me, but they looked normal. This was absolutely wild. The logical side of my mind begged me to resist the temptation to believe it all. Yet that other side of me felt things clicking into place. "So is this why everyone is calling me Dowager Queen?"

"No, it is not." He gave me a small smile. "They call you that because you were our Queen."

I spun on him so fast my balance wobbled. “*What does that mean?* I was married to the monster?”

“King Valandril had been married once before, thus providing him with an heir in Prince Varan—”

I gasped. “Prince Varan is King Valandril’s son?”

He nodded. “In hindsight, we should have all seen Valandril’s motives sooner. Prince Varan openly hated his father, hated the crown he was born to serve, then Varan’s mother died tragically. Another warning we all missed. On the night of Havestia, King Valandril married again, marking another female as Queen.”

My eyes widened. I froze in place. “I married him?”

“Yes, and one day when your memories return, many of us would love to hear the story of this and how it came to pass because you were nothing like *him*. He went straight from your nuptial ceremony to the tree.” He walked over to an end table where he poured himself a glass of red wine, then he drank. “When he died, you became *Dowager Queen* because such is the meaning of the word *dowager*. Had you not died along with him, you would have led our people.”

My legs trembled so I sank down onto one of the wooden benches. “Why me? Why not Prince Varan? The King, however evil he was, was his father. That makes Varan the rightful heir to the throne. Why is he not King?”

“Per normal standards, yes. But this is not normal.” He grimaced. “Mother Terrea, our Goddess, sent her Priestess Abba to hold the throne for the last fifty years as we have been on probation since King Valandril’s reign of terror. Soon, she will announce the new rulers of our kingdom.”

I scrubbed my face with my hands. “I don’t know how you expect me to believe all of this.”

He whistled. Within seconds about six women in soft cream gowns hurried into the room. They bowed at me, then curtsied to Cresswell. He stood and gave them a big smile. “Ladies, I need you all to do me a favor. All I need you to do is sit on my throne.”

One by one, without hesitation, all six of them marched up to his throne. Each of them had red hair, in varying shades, and wore matching cream gowns. And they were barefoot. I had no idea why he’d ordered this, but I could not peel my eyes away. They formed a line. The first female sat on the seat and hissed as smoke billowed all around her. She leapt off as quickly as she sat. I watched in horror and amazement as they each sat and let themselves be burned.

I stood. “No, why are you doing this? Don’t hurt them—”

“It is not terribly painful, but it is a way to prove who you are.” Cresswell gestured to the throne but looked to me. “This throne belongs to Lakewell Palace, to the Lord and Lady who reside in the Court of Blood. Any titled royal or blood royal would be immune to the danger. However, it shall burn the skin of anyone who dares sit in it without royal blood or title.”

The fifth female sat on the throne and yelped. The last woman sat down and her eyes twitched and her hair grew puffy. She stood and then joined the other five in a silent row.

“Your turn.”

I jumped. “Me?”

He gestured to the throne. “Prove me wrong. If you sit and you burn, then you are not a royal and none of this is true.”

Oh, dammit to hell. Yet my feet carried me toward the throne. I had no interest in being a ruler, and I wasn't even sure any of this was real yet. But I had to take his little test. I stepped up on the dais and braced myself. Then I turned ... and sat down.

Nothing happened.

No pain, no smoke, nothing at all.

All six women dropped into a deep bow and stayed there. Cresswell just grinned up at me. I squirmed in the seat, cringing at all the attention and the bowing. The bowing was weird.

The double brown doors swung open.

I sat up straight and turned my attention to the lone female walking up the red carpet. She had long curly red hair a few shades darker than Cresswell's. Her pale skin was covered in gorgeous red freckles. She marched toward us in an off-the-shoulder white lace gown with her chin held high.

Cresswell's whole body relaxed. "*Hollyn.*"

She grinned up at him, then kissed each cheek. With a little bounce in her step, she spun to face me *and bowed*. "Your Majesty, it is an honor to have you home."

"Uhh ..."

"Rhode, I'd like you to meet my wife, Lady Hollyn."

"OH." I smiled and held my hand out to her. "It's nice to meet you. Please, call me Rhode."

She shook my one hand with both of hers. "Welcome home."

"Uh, thank you?"

Cresswell chuckled. “Hollyn, please take Rhode to her chambers and help prepare her for the ball.”

“*The ball?*” I cringed.

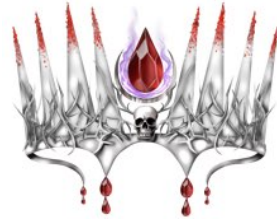
“Abba is to name our new king tonight at the ball.”

My stomach dropped for no good reason. “Abba is naming them already?”

“This night.” He nodded and gestured to his wife. “I suggest you prepare thyself.”

Six

RHODELIA



“I suggest you prepare thyself? What does that mean?” My stomach tightened into knots. “Does a ball not mean the same thing here as it does on Earth?”

Lady Hollyn smiled as she led me out of the throne room and into the hallway. “I cannot say, as I have never been to Earth. However, here in Isramaya, a ball is an event where everyone puts on their best dress and we gather in the moon room and socialize. There’s music we can dance to if we feel enticed. Lots of food and drinks to be had.”

“Oh. That’s exactly what balls are like on Earth.”

“Also, last Havestia when The Veil opened, some of the Knights went through the portal and that is when we discovered the humans had begun an annual celebration of their own called Halloween. Does everyone truly disguise themselves as other people?”

“Well, not like the way Ambrose takes on disguises—”

“Oh no, that is called a glamour.” She waved me off. “Quite different. We were told you wore different attire to pretend to be something else.”

“Yes, that we do for sure. At least in America—which I guess is synonymous for kingdom here?” I frowned but she

smiled and nodded like I'd made sense. "But yeah, Americans are obsessed with Halloween. Most people dress up as all kinds of things, we call them costumes, and celebrate. For children, they go door to door to houses and collect free candy."

She gasped and stopped short. "*Free?*"

"Yeah, as in no payment for it?"

Her jaw dropped. "Nothing is free in Isramaya."

"Actually, that might be one of the only truly free things we do there, which is probably why it's just for children. Adults go to parties, or balls, and just have fun."

She smiled. "Does not sound too different from Havestia. Though I have yet to see a clear description of what these *costumes* look like."

I chuckled and gestured to my body. "This. This is a costume."

"Truly?" She cocked her head to the side. "This is not how you dress normally?"

"God, no." I laughed and squeezed the cones on my corset. "This outfit was worn by one person and one person only. Her name is Madonna. She's a famous singer. And this is one of her most iconic outfits."

To my surprise, she laughed. Her cheeks flushed. "I am quite relieved to hear that. These ... are strange."

We both laughed.

"Come, we have no time to waste." She hooked her arm around mine and pulled me into a walk again. "Our *costumes* are a little different. Did I say that properly? Costumes?"

I grinned. “You did. What do you all wear? And does everyone in Terrea celebrate?”

She pursed her lips. “Terrea is a large realm. Despite being Lady of the Court of Blood, I must admit I’m only thirty years old, which means I was born two decades after Valandril’s war. When I was a child, I heard of stories where all of Terrea was open for travel and visitation, but since the war—”

“It’s illegal?”

“No.” She grimaced. “I think residents of Isramaya feel as though the rest of the realm holds animosity towards us for what Valandril did, so no one has asked for permission to travel. Though between us, the other kingdoms are in as much disarray as we are.”

“I understand that. When major wars break out on Earth, it takes a long time for countries—*kingdoms*—to find their footing again.”

“Well, all of this to say I do not know how the rest of Terrea celebrates Havestia. It is the day we honor Mother Terrea and her Priestess Abba. We have feasts and celebrations on the street before ending the night with the ball. We swap clothing with a neighbor and wear something we would not otherwise wear. Can be fun.”

“Oh, that’s cool—OH MY GOD!”

“By the Blood, look what I’ve done,” Lady Hollyn said with a groan. “I apologize. I was so caught up with your Halloween that I allowed my mind to slip for a moment. I had meant to warn you about ... this.”

This being a twenty-foot-tall mural on the wall ... of *me*.

I was frozen in place, my jaw hanging open and my eyes wide. It was me. There was no mistaking that face for anyone

else. In the painting, I sat on a throne wearing a glittering silver dress with my long glowing silver hair draped over my shoulders. A delicate silver crown sat on my head while a giant ruby hung from a necklace. My lips were painted wine-red.

“Your Majesty?”

“Are my eyes actually that silver?” I heard myself say. “I thought it was the light in the carriage.”

“All of the stories insist your eyes were silver.”

I nodded. *Cool, cool, cool. This isn't weird at all.* It took me a moment to be able to speak, and when I did, I said, “Please, Lady Hollyn, call me Rhode.”

“Rhode.” She nodded in my peripheral vision, bringing my gaze to her. She looked at me with warm hunter-green eyes. “It suits you well.”

“Thank you.”

“And please call me Hollyn. My title is not needed between friends.”

I smiled and nodded.

She grinned and pulled me to a pair of metallic silver doors. “Come, your chamber lies within these doors.”

“My chamber? Why do I have a chamber?”

“Because you were our Queen—”

“But I'm not anymore.” *God, I can't believe I'm actually believing all of this.*

“Rhode, I do not say this to be cruel or harsh but to help you.” She squeezed my hand. “The people of this kingdom hold you in the greatest honor. They love you. For those two

weeks when we were at war, you were right there in the thick of it with a sword in hand and blood staining your gown. You fought alongside your people as Queen and then you died for them. There is not much this kingdom would not do for you, which is what my husband was referring to when he warned you to prepare thyself. The sooner you accept the truth of your past, the more comfortable you will be in your new present.”

I swallowed through a hot lump in my throat.

Her smile softened. “Second chances at life are not given. You have a blessing unlike any other. Right now it may feel like a burden because your memories have not yet returned, so you will have to trust us to hold you safe until they do.”

I tried to smile, but it came out wobbly. “Patience has never been a skill of mine.”

“Mine either.” She chuckled. “Which is why I’ve spent the last decade preparing this chamber for your return.”

No pressure or anything. The part of all of this that made me suspect it was actually happening—and not a dream—was how much they seemed to love me. My therapist wouldn’t have been so hard on me if I had that much self-love and self-esteem. There was no way my brain would conjure up a fake life where I was some beloved Queen and savior of the world. My fantasies and dreams consisted of me and Morgana living in the Pacific Northwest up in the mountains right on the coast, where it was misty and cold but the ocean comforted us. Where there were towns we could drive to but not be forced to be near other people all the time.

None of that screamed *make me Queen and paint murals of my face on castle walls.*

Mo's face flashed in my mind. My heart hurt so bad it choked me. I pressed my hands to my chest and took ragged breaths. *Morgana*. My poor sister was probably threatening the lives of everyone in Vegas right now looking for me. In the back of my mind, I registered that we'd walked into a small room made of white marble with shiny silver accents. I knew there were vases overflowing with giant red roses too. Yet in my mind, all I saw was Morgana living the rest of her life never knowing what happened to me. I knew she would never rest, just as I knew I wouldn't either. The idea that I would never see her again was so overwhelmingly painful I had to distract my thoughts. I couldn't let myself think about it or I'd never survive.

And I had to survive.

I had to ask Prince Varan if he could get a message through The Veil. At least then she would not be tortured with the unknown. I'd lie and say witness protection or something. She'd never understand but it was the least I could do, and then in fifty years when that door opened again, I'd go find her. And if there was any way that portal would open before, then I'd find the way.

"Rhode?" Hollyn appeared in my line of view. Her hands squeezed my arms. "Are you ill?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Sorry, I was ... I was thinking about my sister I left on Earth."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I'm so sorry. What is her name?"

"Mo." I sniffled and wiped my eyes.

All I could do was pray that she and Saphira would hold on tighter to each other.

Hollyn pulled me in for a hug.

I let her hold me for a few seconds before I pulled away. I groaned and wiped under my eyes, the black of my eyeliner coming off on my fingertips. “I’m sorry. I’m trying to keep myself together. I promise.”

“You are safe to feel your emotions with me, Rhode.” She took my hands and squeezed them. “I cannot fathom how this feels for you.”

“This still feels like a dream.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” She walked over to the ledge, where a vase full of red roses sat, and lifted something. “I’ve been waiting to give this to you.”

She held out a massive white crystal half the size of my palm and cut in the shape of a teardrop. It glistened like a disco ball with all the facets. Then I noticed the thick silver chain it dangled from.

“This is beautiful.” I took it from her hands and held it up to eye level, letting it dangle from the chain. “Wait, it’s for me? Why? Whose is it?”

“This amulet belonged to *you*. In your previous life.”

I almost dropped it. “What?”

“Before you refuse it, allow me to explain?” Once I nodded, she smiled and pulled out a delicate bronze chain that was tucked beneath her dress. When she lifted it up, I saw the quarter-sized ruby hanging from it. “These are amulets.”

I frowned. “What’s an amulet?”

“Magical tools. Long ago, one of our kings went to the mages in Magaria and sought a potion to treat crystals with so they could help us.” She lifted the chain off of her neck, then held her pendant out, but the crystal was now white like me.

“These crystals come from the Shadow Mountains, and in their natural state they look like this. But after the potion, it now serves as a tool. Watch when I put it back on.”

I did watch. Carefully. Because the moment the chain was around her neck again, the crystal turned bright-red. She let it fall against her chest. I opened my mouth, then shut it.

She smiled. “It’s a long story, but the residents of the Court of Nightmares have a way of making other people slip into a dream-state even while awake. These amulets serve to tell us whether the wearer is awake or lost in the cycles of their sleep.”

My breath left me in a rush. My thoughts went instantly to that horrible vision I’d had of Morgana lying in a pool of her own blood. “So ...”

“So, if the crystal is red, you are awake. If it is purple, you are dreaming.” She took mine from my hand, then slipped around me to hook the clasp behind my neck. “If you see someone walking around and their amulet is purple, then you must help them come out of it.”

“Hollyn, that’s stupid unsettling.”

She snorted. “I know. But it’s all true and the amulets work.”

I looked down as the massive crystal hit my bare chest. The crystal was red, which meant I was awake, assuming I believed any of this was real in the first place.

“I imagine it might feel strange to wear things from your first life, but when it comes to the amulet, I highly recommend you use yours.”

I ran my fingers over the cold jewel. “I will trust you.”

“Thank you. And on that note, please come in and see your chambers.” She opened another metallic shiny silver door, then stepped aside and gestured for me to enter.

I stepped inside and my breath left me in a rush. It was *gorgeous*. The room was wide and open. On the left side there was a sitting area with fancy couches and tables. There was even a grand piano in the corner, which made me wonder if I knew how to play in my past life. The walls, floor, and ceiling were made of a pale stone that wasn't as rough as limestone yet not as smooth as marble, and the floors were partially covered by red rugs that were just fluffy enough to look like rose petals from a distance. All around the room there were shiny silver accents, and I belatedly realized it was a symbol of the Queen.

On the right side of the room, the entire wall—well, it wasn't actually a wall ... Floor-to-ceiling French windows stretched from one end of the room to the other. Moonlight streamed in through the glass, spilling across the floor almost all the way to the sitting area. It was breathtaking. Through the windows I saw what looked like a railing.

“Is there a balcony?”

“Yes, good eye. Those are all doors that open onto the balcony. Most of us leave the doors open all the time, but I thought perhaps you would feel more secure with them closed, since you're new here.”

I smiled. “You are so thoughtful, Hollyn. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

“But what about when the Sun rises?”

She grinned and let out a happy sigh. “Oh, wait until you see the Sun streaming in—”

“Wait, what do you mean? The Sun doesn’t hurt us?” I scowled. “Most vampire lore has a consistent issue with the Sun.”

“I do not know what *lore* means.” She cocked her head to the side and frowned. “Are there vampires on Earth?”

“Well, I don’t know about real ones, but we have movies —”

“What is a movie? What is lore?”

“Lore is like knowledge about a specific thing that is passed on through time. So like ... the story of what happened that separated the realms would be considered lore? I think?”

“Ohhh.”

“Movies are stories that are told in moving pictures. Do you have books here?”

“Books, yes! We love books. There are so many libraries in our Court.” She bounced on her toes. “Some books are not real stories, just the thoughts of the writer, while some tell of things that truly happened.”

I’d never given myself time to be an avid reader, but it had always been a goal. Somehow knowing they had books here made me happy. “We call those fiction and non-fiction. But movies are like books but with pictures that move.”

“That sounds lovely.”

“And in our fiction books, the made-up ones, vampires are hurt by the Sun, or sometimes killed.”

Her mouth made that *O* shape. “*By the Blood*, I apologize. No, we here in the Court of Blood are creatures of the Sun. Some of us like to be outside in it, working in it, while others

prefer to sleep under the rays of the Sun. Our Court never truly sleeps, there are always people awake and living.”

A silver door on the far wall opened and Viera stepped through. She bowed quickly. “My Lady, Her Majesty’s bath is ready.”

“Thank you, Viera.” Hollyn took my hand and led me toward the doorway beside Viera. “All eyes will be on you this night, Rhode. You’ll prefer to be fresh, I think.”

My entire body was coated in sand from that beach by the lazy river where Ambrose attacked me. A bath sounded divine. I was picturing that heavenly jacuzzi tub in our hotel bathroom and yearning for it. But when I walked through the doorway, my feet froze. Arlene stood ten feet inside ... next to a pool with red roses floating on the surface. The walkway we stood on was only about six feet wide with stone walls on the left and fancy columns between me and the pool. Another wall of French windows stood opposite us, flush against the pool edge. The pool itself was clear to the bottom, and with the moonlight streaming in through the wall of windows, it actually looked almost silver.

Hollyn crossed the room to where Arlene stood. She gestured to the windows. “Those are also doors, *and* they curve to cover the bath so you can open it all the way up if you’d like. The balcony is on the other side of the bath as well.”

I nodded but my mind was stuck on one key word. “Bath? This pool is the bath?”

Her face fell. “Baths are not like this on Earth?”

I sighed and closed the distance between us until I stood at the steps into the pool. “I suppose they are similar, and in

centuries past they were more like this. So, I just ... get in? Is there soap?"

"Through the door behind you there is a private bath, much, much smaller than this one, where you'll bathe when soiled. For nights when you just need a freshening up, this bath is treated with crystals."

"Is it ... cold?"

Arlene shook her head. "We warmed it for you, Your Majesty."

"But if Her Majesty would prefer to bathe with the cleansing suds, I'd be happy to prepare the other—"

"No, no. Thank you, Viera. This will do for now." I smiled and tucked my hair behind my ears. My *pointed* ears. "And please, ladies, call me Rhode?"

Both Viera and Arlene turned to Hollyn with wide, panicked eyes.

Hollyn chuckled. "If she requests you call her Rhode, then you may call her Rhode."

Viera cleared her throat pointedly. Her brown eyes focused on me. "May I speak freely?"

"I want you to think of me as your friend, Viera. And Arlene. You too, Hollyn. I am not your Queen, so the title makes me uncomfortable. So yes, you always have permission to speak freely with me."

Viera nodded. "It is only, we do not wish for our peers to think us improper."

"How about you call me Rhodelia instead?"

Arlene looked to Viera, her black eyes pleading. “We could try it?”

“That’s fair.”

Viera smiled. “Thank you, Rhodelia.”

“You’re welcome. Now, bath time—”

“Let me pin your hair up.” Viera reached out and quickly wrapped my ponytail around the knot and pinned it in place. “You are ready now.”

Viera and Arlene sank into crouches and unzipped my boots. Before I could even get words out of my mouth, they had my boots and socks off. But when they reached for my corset, I threw my hands up. They flinched.

“Sorry, sorry. Um, I realize this is part of your job, but, um ... can we just let me undress myself for now? Until I get used to it?”

They smiled and nodded, then stood behind me and turned to face the wall. Hollyn was also facing the wall. I sighed with relief. I was a nurse in an ER in Los Angeles, I was used to getting changed in front of other women. I was confident enough in my body, but these women were strangers to me. I wasn’t ready for that. I was too freaked out by everything else. So I just made quick work of stripping out of my Madonna costume, then stepped into the pool.

The water was refreshingly cool yet still warm. I closed my eyes and just stood there, letting the water relax my muscles. My breaths evened out. The tension in my head eased.

I stood in the warm waters of the bath staring up at the scarlet Crescent Moon hanging in the sky directly above me. I’d already counted the stars. Only nine-hundred-seventy in

sight this night. The six lady's maids he'd assigned to me upon my arrival had undressed me to my bare skin and then walked me into this bath and proceeded to scrub every inch of my body and hair with herb-infused cloths. I'd never been bathed as a grown person. They were not gentle nor kind in their movements, insisting my body had to be thoroughly cleansed for the King.

Only one of them had shown me glimpses of kindness. I had not yet learned her name, though it started with a V. She'd handed me a fresh cloth and allowed me the decency to scrub the more private areas of my body. I had not dared ask. Her offer had been out of the kindness of her heart. Once I was married, I would keep only her as my lady's maid. The others would find new purposes within Brimstone Castle.

“Rhodelia?”

I gasped and my whole body jerked. My pulse skipped beats. “That was a new one. That's two new ones in one day.”

“Rhodelia?”

I spun around to find all three of them watching me with concerned expressions. I held my hands up. “I am fine. I can get out now?”

Viera and Arlene both held up towels, or something similar at least. They closed their eyes, including Hollyn. I smiled and hurried out of the pool to the open towels.

I grabbed one and quickly tied it around my body. “You may open now.”

Viera took the towel she still held and dropped into a crouch. She began to pat my legs dry. Arlene lifted a new towel, this one smaller in size, and started to dry my arms.

Hollyn narrowed her eyes on me. “What has just happened to you? In the bath?”

I grimaced. “My whole life I’ve had this one recurring dream when I sleep. A nightmare really. Except today I started having this dream while entirely awake. Then when Cresswell was explaining the prophecy, I had new images in my mind ... and just now I saw another new dream. This one had Viera in it—*wait a second.*”

Hollyn gave me a small smile. “Those are not dreams, Rhodelia. Those are your memories trying to return to you.”

I nodded. They were dreams. My mind was trying to call out to me.

“Do not fight them. Just breathe and let them through.”

“Time for your dress.” Arlene led the way to the far side of the room to another silver door.

The noise that came out of me when I saw the bedroom was not human or vampire. It was far too high-pitched. But the room was incredible. Three of the four walls were made of stained-glass in the design of tiny red roses. Red candles with golden flames flickered from where they hung on the wall and in the wooden chandelier in the center of the room. The bed was to my left, with its frame made of white marble and the blankets a thick red velvet. I wanted to dive in and sleep until this weird dream wore off.

Viera carried out a sparkling lace gown with silver crystals adorned to every inch of it. “Your dress. Please step into it.”

My jaw dropped. My body was acting on muscle memory. It was the dress from my dream. I stepped into the garment, then pulled it up over my naked body. “This was my wedding dress, wasn’t it?”

Viera smiled. “Yes. I thought full circle for you and this dress.”

“You let me bathe myself last time. That is what I just saw out there.” I shuddered and held my arms out so they could work on all the buttons. “It was the night I got married. I was being bathed for him.”

All three of them shuddered.

“Did I ... did we ever—”

“No,” Viera said sternly. “Luckily for you, he went straight to Sacred Temple.”

I sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

“What is the memory you’ve seen your whole life?” Hollyn untied my hair and let the long silver strands bounce free.

“I’m standing there with my bouquet outside the door, just terrified of what I’m about to do, then the doors open and I walk down the aisle to him.” This reminded me of one minor detail. “In my dream I had red hair. Like deep, dark, vibrant red hair.”

Hollyn nodded. “Yes, you did. I wasn’t alive back then, but I’ve heard.”

Arlene began applying makeup to my eyes. “I worked in Brimstone Castle. I remember the day you arrived to marry him ... with your red hair. It was darker than Viera’s.”

I looked to Viera. “So why is my hair silver? Why is it silver in that painting?”

Viera smiled wide. “It is the mark of the Queen.”

I frowned. “I don’t follow.”

Hollyn was braiding a few sections of my hair on the top layer to help pin it all into place. “The Courts have different hair colors. It’s a byproduct of the magic we hold. Those from Court of Blood are born with red hair. Court of Nightmares have purple hair. But the males of royal blood are born with black hair because they are not like the rest of us.”

“What about the female royals? What are they born with?”

Viera shook her head. “Those do not exist.”

Hollyn lifted a thick black choker to my neck and clasped it in place. “Legend says the royals used to birth females, but there hasn’t been one on record since the realms were split.”

The fuck? “So each Queen only gives birth to sons?”

They all nodded.

“That’s sad.”

They nodded again.

“When a female is chosen to be Queen, she must marry the King and then her crown is placed on her head.” Hollyn lifted an intricate silver chain, then began to clip it onto my dress at my waist. “At that moment, her hair turns silver and remains until she dies.”

Arlene ran her fingers through my now silver hair. “I remember when your hair changed. I was a little sad. It was so beautiful.”

“But the silver suits you.” Viera winked playfully. “It matches your eyes.”

I smiled. “Thank you for being so patient with me. I am trying to catch up to who I’m supposed to be.”

Hollyn held her hand out to me. “The ball already started, so we must go.”

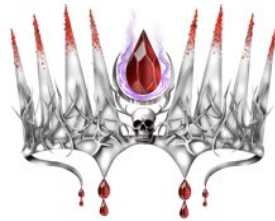
“Arlene and Viera are coming, right?”

They both grinned and nodded.

I took Hollyn’s hand. “Lead the way.”

Seven

RHODELIA



“By the Blood, Rhode, you look stunning.”

I grinned and stopped in front of Cresswell. He was dressed in an elaborate white vintage-style tuxedo with embroidered edges. It made the red of his hair really vibrant. “Not so bad yourself, Cresswell.”

Hollyn pushed up on her toes and pressed her lips to her husband’s. “I am sorry you had to arrive on your own.”

“Do not be. I am glad Rhode had support.” He looked longingly into her eyes as he tucked her long red curls behind her ears, which I realized were not nearly as long as mine. Neither of theirs were.

When he looked back to me, I tapped on my forehead. “I like your ... is it called a diadem?”

He reached up and ran his fingers over the bronze metal band that sat on his forehead, just below his hairline. It was about half an inch wide with intricate etchings carved into it. “It’s a circlet, and thank you.”

I’d seen Hollyn’s already when she put it on right before we left my chamber. It was also bronze in color and sat on her forehead, but where her husband’s was solid metal, hers was

two strips of metal braided loosely all the way around. And it had a small ruby right in the middle.

“So, you don’t wear crowns?”

Cresswell shook his head. “Lords and ladies of the courts wear circlets. They signify a level of power but are not to be confused with King and Queen.”

“So Prince Varan will wear a crown?”

Hollyn chuckled.

Cresswell playfully pinched her side, which made her giggle more. He shrugged. “Prince Varan is a Lord and a Prince. He may wear whichever he pleases.”

“Valandril used to force him to wear the crown,” Viera added softly from my right side. “He prefers the circlet.”

Arlene scoffed. “He prefers nothing at all.”

Cresswell grinned. “Shall we make a wager?”

“*Cress*,” Hollyn smacked him playfully in the stomach. She rolled her green eyes, but she was smiling. “‘Tis not the night for your wager games. Come, let us get in there so she may make her entrance.”

“Wait, I have to go in by myself?”

Hollyn reached out and squeezed my shoulder. “We shall be but a few feet in front of you.”

Cresswell leaned forward and whispered, “*Give them their moment to fawn over you, and the evening will calm after.*”

“Just do what we do.” Hollyn gave me an encouraging smile.

I nodded even though I was not sure I agreed, but they knew their court and kingdom. I was new here. Cresswell

winked and then took Hollyn's hand and walked through the brown wooden doors.

"Viera? Arlene?"

"Yes?" they said at the same time.

"What should I expect when I go in there?" I wrung my hands together. "I don't know if I can take any more surprises."

Viera stepped up closer on my right. "The ball is two floors below this one. The rest of the kingdom entered through the grand entrance on the street. The Lord and Lady, and any other royals in house, enter through *this* door. Just inside there is a small platform between two curved staircases. You will take the right side. *We* take the left. We meet at the bottom."

I nodded. "Okay. Okay. Thanks. That's good to know."

"When you get to the bottom of the stairs you will see Lord and Lady walking across the ball. Just keep your eyes on them and follow." Arlene ran her fingers through my hair so it hung nice. "There's a rule at these balls, especially on Havestia. They are not to approach you unless you sit in a certain section."

"It is easier to explain once we are inside." Viera fixed my dress so it laid right. "All you have to do is go down the stairs. We will be there at the bottom, and we will not let you get lost."

I reached out and squeezed both of their hands. "All right. Let's get this over with."

We walked to the doors, and they swung open on their own. Golden light poured into the hall. My heart was pounding. Music filled my ears. Voices carried up the stairs with laughter. *It's just a party, Rhode. This Priestess is going*

to announce the new King and then all of the attention won't be on you. Just walk out there and smile and follow Hollyn.

Viera and Arlene stood *just* behind me on either side. My own little entourage. It surprised me just how much I needed them there. But the doors were open now. I couldn't stall anymore, so I pushed my shoulders back and held my chin high as I marched through the doors and onto the landing. I walked to the stone railing and looked down.

The entire ballroom gasped.

The music stopped.

Hundreds of people's gazes snapped up in my direction. Their eyes were wide, and their jaws hung open. No one spoke. No one moved. I wasn't sure anyone was breathing. My hands gripped the railing, but Viera softly cleared her throat behind me.

I uncurled my hands from the railing, then turned to my right and started my descent down the red carpeted staircase. This moment was worse than the time I went shopping on Rodeo Drive in my scrubs that had a few blood stains on them. Their gazes watched my every step in a way that put those stuffy salesclerks to shame.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I found Viera and Arlene already waiting for me at the start of a red carpet. Actually, it wasn't a carpet but a red light streaming in through the red glass ceiling. I'd seen that before. In my dream. Those red glass panels had formed a walkway with their reflection. My stomach tightened into knots. I walked to my lady's maids, then turned to face the crowd. Still, no one made a sound.

Cresswell stood at the opposite end of the red walkway with a shit-eating grin on his face. He waved me on. Hollyn

was beside him with her arms hooked around his. She waved me forward too.

I took a deep breath, then started forward.

The first row of people dropped to one knee and bowed. I gasped but kept walking. Row by row they sank into bows. It was like watching the wave go around a football stadium but worse. I glanced left and right. Some people were praying. Others were *crying*. It was the weirdest moment of my life.

I was halfway down the ballroom when my mind tried to slip back into my dream. The one from my wedding. I tried to shake it off, but my mind was mixing reality with memory. Instead of this gorgeous white ballroom with stained-glass and moonlight, I kept seeing dark shadows on stone walls.

Cresswell and Hollyn were waiting for me. The moment I caught up to them, they flanked my side like bodyguards and hurried me around the orchestra pit to where another set of spiral grand staircases sat. These were as grand as the one I'd walked down on the opposite side of the massive ballroom, except these were half the height. If there was a door up there, I could not see it from where I stood. It seemed to be just a flat platform. A cluster of bronze chairs were tucked between the two staircases, separate from the rest of the ball but not out of reach.

That was where they led us. They had me sit in the middle at the front, then sat on each side of me. Viera and Arlene took the chairs directly behind me.

“Tonight, we celebrate Havestia and the safe return of our beloved Dowager Queen Rhodelia.” Cresswell gestured to the orchestra. “Play. Dance. Stare at her from a distance, please.”

The whole ballroom laughed as the band picked up their instruments and began to play again. For a moment, I just watched everyone dance. It was like I'd stepped back in time. It was beautiful though. And haunting because it reminded me of my dream. The courts were separated. Everyone with red hair was on the left while all the purple-haired were on the right. I didn't understand it.

“What consumes your mind?” Cresswell asked with a twinkle in his yellow eyes.

“Well ...” I gestured to the crowd. “Why don't they mix?”

“Lack of leadership,” Arlene mumbled.

Cresswell's eyebrows rose. He half-turned in his chair to look at her.

Her cheeks flushed. “I meant a unified leader. A King to unite the courts.”

“We never mixed under Valandril's reign. I cannot remember a time when we did.” Viera shook her head. “‘Tis a shame.”

“Is it a power thing? Is it a ... hate thing?”

Hollyn sighed and it was the first time I'd heard real stress in her voice. “They are afraid of each other, to a degree. They don't understand each other. Ignorance breeds fear and aggression.”

“Amen to that.”

“There's also a numbers issue. Of the kingdom's entire population, Court of Nightmares is only a small portion.”

I frowned. “That's sad.”

Cresswell stood. "I think I shall collect some drinks for us while I let you four talk." He winked and then disappeared into the crowd.

Hollyn laughed and shook her head. "He ought to return with cookies or I shall be quite upset with him."

We all laughed.

I glanced behind me. "Ladies, I can't handle you sitting behind me. Please move up."

They moved without hesitation. Viera took the seat Cresswell had vacated while Arlene took the one beside Hollyn.

I smiled. "That's better. Now we can talk easier. Who wants to fill me in?"

Arlene cocked her head to the side. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, what's the difference in the Courts?"

"The Courts are powered by different magic." Hollyn gestured to the section of people with all red hair. "The Court of Blood can withstand sunlight. And we also have heightened senses and physical strength."

"Which is how we've built all of this." Arlene pointed to the stained-glass windowpanes above our head.

"The Court of Nightmares are creatures of the night," Hollyn said softly. "Sunlight hurts them, but the Forest of Fears blessed them with gifts."

"Nightmares?"

They all nodded.

"How does that work?"

Viera scowled. “They are a secretive group, especially about their magic.”

“Oh.”

“And you’ve already witnessed their glamours.” Hollyn rolled her eyes. “I cannot believe he sent *Ambrose* to find you.”

“So, in my dream that I’d been having my whole life ...” I paused to pick my words right. “There were balconies filled with people who all had blue hair. Who were they?”

Hollyn’s face fell.

Arlene shivered.

It was Viera who answered me. “That was the Court of Shadows, the third vampire court of Isramaya.”

I frowned. “What happened to them? I don’t see them.”

“They mostly died,” Hollyn whispered. “There aren’t many left.”

“And they are no longer vampires—”

“The demons.”

They nodded.

“Before Valandril’s war, Court of Shadows was a lovely place. Wide open land of every climate. They were a fun group. They had the wilderness edge of the Nightmares but the hardworking traits of Blood.” Viera’s eyes darkened. “They were good people.”

“When the explosion happened ... We’re not really sure how it happened or even what it did exactly ...” Hollyn’s legs bounced like she was nervous to discuss it. “The magic poured

over the Shadow Mountains and into their court. It changed them or killed them.”

“Prince Varan’s best friend since childhood, Avalon, had been the Lord of the Court of Shadows.” Viera grimaced. “He died.”

Hollyn took a deep breath. “Hopefully our new King can go over to Isramorta and offer aid and friendship. They used to be our family. We cannot just abandon them.”

“Has anyone done anything to help them? Do they need help?”

“Prince Varan and I have tried.”

We all jumped at Cresswell’s voice. He shook his head, then took the seat beside Viera with a tray of glass goblets each filled with red wine. Or I prayed it was red wine. I picked up the glass and sniffed it, but the scent was unlike any wine I’d ever smelled. My stomach rolled and my mouth watered. *Vampires. We’re vampires. God, is this blood? Do I have to drink blood now?*

The others all happily drank theirs without question or pause. I was enough of an outsider already. I did not want to make a fool of myself by asking if this was blood. But I could not bring myself to try it. I was afraid I would throw it right back up and mortify myself.

Hollyn stood and held her hand out. “Lord Cresswell, I do believe this is our song.”

He jumped to his feet and took her hand. Together, they moved into the crowd on the dance floor and blended in. I watched them all for a few moments.

“Ladies ...” I looked at each of them. “Do you have husbands? Lovers?”

At that, Viera's face turned bright-pink. "In a way."

I wagged my eyebrows. "What does that mean? Who is it?"

Arlene grinned. "*Me.*"

I gasped. "You two are a couple?"

Viera nodded. "We found each other after the war."

"*Guys.* You should have told me!" I clapped my hands excitedly. "Wait, is that allowed here?"

Arlene cocked her head to the side. "Why wouldn't it be?"

My eyes widened. "There are no laws prohibiting you from being together?"

"Not one. Though we try to keep it quiet because of work."

I scoffed. "Not anymore. You work for me now." I jumped to my feet, then grabbed their hands and hoisted them up. "Go dance together and be happy. It's Havestia! Shouldn't you celebrate?"

It took me dragging them onto the dance floor for them to actually embrace each other and dance. I smiled and swayed to the music. People were staring at me, yet no one had approached me, so that was nice.

My stress and anxiety had just begun to calm down when bright neon-purple flames erupted in the middle of the dance floor. People dove out of the way and hissed. I frowned but did not move. The flames swirled and blazed for longer than they did earlier before they finally formed into the shape of a person. My pulse quickened. I knew who that person was going to be.

Yet when Prince Varan emerged from within the purple flames, my heart stopped. This man had been cruel to me when he'd pinned me to the tree by my throat, but logic was not working with me. For the first time in my life, I saw the red flags and just pushed them aside. Maybe it was that lone renegade black curl that dangled over his forehead. Maybe it was the aura that radiated out of him so strong each member of the orchestra messed up their song. Or maybe it was that stupid dance in that nightclub when I'd almost let him kiss me.

And that hadn't even been *him*. That had been Ambrose in disguise. But it was like my brain didn't care. It linked the faces as matching and refused to see otherwise. And I knew it was because he was so damned beautiful. All I could do was stare at him. I was swooning and I hadn't known that was a real thing outside of romance novels. My skin got all warm and tingly, my breaths tighter.

I wanted to talk to him but there was absolutely nothing approachable about this man. I'd always been told I had *resting bitch face*, but Prince Varan had *resting murder face*. It was intimidating. It was hot as hell. I hated that I felt this kind of attraction toward him. He hadn't deserved it, yet there I was gawking and drooling over him like every other female in attendance. But he looked good. Real good. He wore the same black pants and shirt as before but now he wore a black coat over top. Around his neck he wore a small silver vial almost like a potion bottle.

I was so caught up in my infatuation and lust for him that I did not register his approach until he was a few feet in front of me. His amber eyes narrowed on me. His upper lip snarled. That red glow shined from within him. I was right in his path so he either had to stop or throw me aside, and I was helpless to stop either. To my surprise, he stopped right in front of me.

My heart and brain screamed like a ten-year-old girl at her first Taylor Swift concert.

I straight up panicked ... and bowed.

He growled. “So *now* you bow at my feet.”

“I am sorry, Your Highness. I did not know who you were,” I said in a rush without moving. “He betrayed me and set me up.”

“Why should I care, pray tell?” He started to walk around me.

I stood up. “Because he wore your face when he did it.”

He froze. Those amber eyes shot to me, and I saw the flicker of rage in them. “*What did you say?*”

“Did I stutter?”

He fully turned back to face me. We stood mere inches apart from each other. “I asked you a question.”

“Disrespect me again and you won’t get an answer.”

He growled and the floor trembled. People were watching us like this was the Superbowl. “You have some nerve.”

I ran my fingertips over my throat. His eyes tracked the movement and that snarl returned. He knew what I was saying. “I apologized already. It’s your turn.”

His eyes flared. A red glow shined from his eyes.

“Rhodelia, there you are,” Hollyn said in such a high-pitched voice that I knew she was just trying to stop this bomb from detonating. “Prince Varan, nice to see you.”

“How do we even know if it’s him and not the imposter?”

“I beg your pardon—”

“I haven’t seen any begging,” I snapped. This guy really just set me off. “Your own commander of your Knights is running around glamouring himself as *you*.”

His eyes widened. *Ah, he didn’t know*. He backed off slightly, but his eyes still aimed lasers at my face. “Those were not his orders.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Bad leadership then.”

He opened his mouth to speak but Cresswell cleared his throat. “Prince Varan, Rhodelia doesn’t remember anything.”

“Or so she claims,” he growled in disgust, looking down over his dark lashes at me.

“I only have one memory. But you were there. I walk down the aisle to my wedding and it’s *you* at the end.” *Dear God, why did I just admit that to him?*

His eyes flashed with rage. His nostrils flared. The fangs in his mouth grew a little longer. “You married my father, *not me*.”

“I know that, but you were there in my dream memory—”

“I do not care what you dream of,” he snapped. Those purple flames shot up from the ground and swallowed him whole.

My breath left me in a rush so fast I swayed on my feet.

Cresswell hung his head and laughed. “That was the highlight of my evening.”

“My, my, my.” Hollyn shook her head. “I have never seen him behave in such a way. He never speaks to people like that.”

“I have a knack for infuriating men.” I shrugged. “Even when I started with an apology.”

Cresswell nodded. “We’ll talk to him ... smooth things over for you.”

Light flashed from the stairs’ platform on my right, just above where we’d been sitting. This light was golden, like an orb of pure sunshine appeared. When it faded, a woman stepped out of it and stopped at the edge of the rail. She grinned down at everyone. My eye twitched. My breathing slowed. My vision grew dark. I glanced down and spotted that the massive crystal hanging around my neck was purple.

I was dreaming. But that was all the warning I had before my mind slipped away.

The glow radiating from the sacred pool through the opening in the temple cast Abba’s violet curls in a bluish light. Her lavender eyes sparkled as she held her chin high. She stepped back, then gestured to the stone floor beneath her bare feet.

Abba waved her arm over the circular stone in the middle of the floor. The golden mark of Mother Terrea’s sacred tree glowed on the bare skin of her upper arm. The stone rose from the floor until it formed a pedestal that stood as tall as my waist. Abba lifted her hand, yet this time she held a grand, golden chalice, like she’d pulled it from within the folds of her long white gown. My eyes widened on the chalice. It sat on the pedestal, glistening with a golden shine from within. The base was adorned with varying colors of gemstones.

A cold, gentle hand pressed to my back. I gasped and shook myself. I blinked and looked around. No one else was looking at me. I glanced over my shoulder to Hollyn with wide eyes.

She rubbed my back. “*It’s okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you,*” she whispered.

I nodded and licked my lips. Then I nodded to the purple-haired woman on the stairs’ platform. “Who is that?”

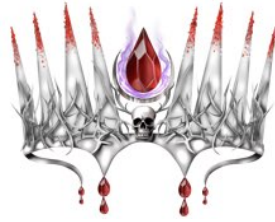
Hollyn smiled wide. “*That* is Mother Terrea’s Priestess, Abba.”

My heart stopped. I’d thought the name *Abba* in my mind just a second ago. I glanced down and found my pendant was red again. When I looked back up, I found her watching me with sharp lavender eyes. Her purple hair was wildly curly and almost looked like a lion’s mane.

Abba raised her left arm in the air, the one with the golden tattoo of the tree. Her lavender eyes sparkled in the moonlight. “I shall now announce your new King or Queen.”

Eight

RHODELIA



The air in the room was so tight I thought the glass windows were going to shatter. There was no music. No talking. No moving. Everyone stood right where they were and stared at her. I was fairly certain they'd all held their breaths.

The anticipation was going to kill them if she didn't start talking.

Abba lowered her hands to the railing and smiled. "Fifty years ago, a horrible tragedy fell on Terrea, one that began here in Isramaya with your King."

In perfect unison, the entire ballroom looked to their right with wide eyes.

I followed their stares ... and found Prince Varan standing in the shadows against the column, his arms crossed over his chest. His amber eyes glowed like a predator's in the dark. That red shine filled the darkness around him. Neon-purple flames traced the sides of his arms. His upper lip snarled, and a low growl rumbled through the entire ballroom.

To my surprise, everyone smiled and turned back to face Abba. They weren't scared or upset that their Prince had just growled at them. But then I remembered Hollyn saying he never spoke to people the way he spoke to me.

Viera leaned into my side and whispered in my ear, “*He hated him more than any of us ever did ... and for longer.*”

Arlene slid up on my other side and nodded. “*Most people say it’s our own fault for not seeing that as warning.*”

I nodded. Hindsight was always a bitch.

“Those of you here tonight who survived the war and saw the other side of the darkness are innocent of his crimes. Mother Terrea does not harbor any ill will or anger with you,” Abba continued, her voice calm and melodic. “The probationary period was not to punish you but to give you room to heal. To feel safe. With me as acting Queen, you knew I would never hurt you, would never betray you the way he did. She wanted to see which of you would rise to the occasion and show the traits a genuine ruler needs.”

Everyone looked around like they were trying to guess who it would be.

“Mother Terrea did not make this choice lightly. She thought it through carefully. She has decided to name a King *and* Queen.” Abba smiled and her eyes twinkled. “These two were chosen for their unyielding hearts and determination. They have proven themselves as fighters for your kingdom, for peace and fairness. They will be strong for you, strong *with* you. And most importantly, they have no desire for power.”

I glanced over to Prince Varan, unable to stop myself. He hadn’t moved at all but while everyone else was watching Abba *he* was surveying the crowd like he dared whoever the new king was to be a traitor like his father had been. His gaze swept over the crowd—*and then landed on me*. I inhaled sharply. He narrowed those amber eyes on me like he was considering my death by his own hands.

“Mother Terrea and I are confident that your new King and Queen will lead your kingdom back to healthy and happy days.” She raised both arms up. Light flashed behind her. When it faded, two thrones sat on the platform on either side of her. One was gold and the other silver. “For now, these thrones will serve as their seat of power. Once they settle in, we will have a proper coronation ceremony. Please welcome ... King Varan and Queen Rhodelia.”

The crowd cheered.

I gasped. My eyes widened. My heart *stopped*. There was no way I’d just heard that right. Golden light washed over me. It was warm and tingled. Viera and Arlene stepped back—and then all I saw was golden light. For a moment, I was lost.

Then the light faded, and I found myself standing on the platform behind Abba, right in front of the silver throne. I glanced to Varan, but he was staring at the crowd with wide eyes and a pale face. He stood tall and rigid, his expression unreadable in his *resting murder face*. His hands were in fists at his sides. The glowing purple flames looked more like smoke as it coiled around his hands. *And his hands were trembling.*

Maybe he’s not the cruel prick I thought.

And then I looked out to the crowd and remembered what had just happened. She’d named *me* as Queen. Me. I was in shock. My body was numb and cold. Any second now my mind would reconnect with my body and snap me out of this, and I’d lose my shit. For now my thoughts were sluggish and distant like I wasn’t *in* my own body.

I looked over to Abba, and she winked. The tattoo on her bicep of the giant tree glowed bright-gold. There was a flash of gold from my body again, but when I glanced down at it, I

found the red crystal pendant had a faint golden halo around it. I frowned, then realized what had happened. *She'd* put me in a state of calm.

Probably because she didn't want me to lose my shit in front of everyone right after she named me Queen. The people needed strong rulers, so Abba was faking it. I wasn't sure how I felt about that because I couldn't *feel* anything.

I looked over the rail to the crowd down below. My eyes widened. There were *hundreds* of people on the dance floor, filling the space from this staircase to the one at the far back of the room. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder with grins on their faces. From up here, I discovered the windows were actually doors that led to open terraces—all filled with people. When I'd first arrived, the two courts had been split down the middle, but as everyone had rushed in to hear the announcement, they had mixed together. The room was a sea of purple and red hair in every shade mixed together like a field of wildflowers.

It was beautiful, even if I knew it was fleeting.

Someone was going to have to do something about that separation. Do something to get them to mix with each other and make friends. But this was a good sign that it was possible. All of them stared up at us with glassy eyes and flushed cheeks. They jumped up and down and waved their arms. Some of them even appeared to be getting emotional.

Abba held her hands up. "I present, your King and Queen."

They all dropped to one knee and bowed.

Abba turned to face us. "Sit. Claim your throne."

I sank into the silver throne. The moment my ass hit the cold metal, that golden halo around my pendant vanished. My

pulse skyrocketed. My hands trembled, and my legs bounced uncontrollably. Goosebumps spread across my bare skin, yet heat billowed out of me. Beads of sweat rolled down my spine. I shivered. *There it is.* I exhaled a shaky breath, then held it. When I inhaled slowly through my mouth, a soft whistle sound left my mouth.

Abba bowed her head. “Your Majesties.” Then she turned back to the crowd.

A little whimper escaped from me. I gripped the armrests of the throne and focused on taking deep breaths. Everyone was still watching us. I couldn’t freak out in front of them. I heard Cameron Diaz’s voice in my head from that one movie saying *cry on the inside like a winner.*

Oh my God. Mother Terrea, what were you thinking? Please, I don’t understand. This can’t be right. I can’t be the best option for the crown.

A wave of bitter, ice-cold energy slammed into my right side. The air pulsed with electricity. I glanced over to Varan and wanted to scream. He was almost slouched in the throne, leaning on one elbow and tapping his fingers on the other arm rest. He was the picture of ease and comfort. His amber eyes were unreadable—*and glaring at me.*

I gasped. “Is this for real?”

“Yes,” he said with a growl.

“But, like, that really just happened?”

He looked away from me. “Did. I. Stutter?”

I pulled my hands into my lap and wrung them together and turned my attention back to the crowd. My gaze landed right on Cresswell and Hollyn. They grinned and waved at me, their eyes shimmering with unshed tears of joy. *Why didn’t you*

just pick them? Look at them. Lord and Lady of the Court and yet they're happy for me, a complete stranger. "We haven't been coronated yet. Maybe there's a way out of this before it's finalized?"

"Stop," he snarled. "No one believes this feigned innocence."

My breath was knocked from my lungs. "*Excuse you? I didn't ask to be made Queen, hence why I'm asking you how to get out of this.*"

Those amber eyes slid over to me, blazing with rage and fire. He leaned onto his left elbow. "*Die.*"

I gasped.

He turned back to the crowd.

Asshole. I wanted to scream and punch him in the face. I wished I had that wooden oar from the beach so I could beat him with it. *Die. What an answer. What a twat.* I would have thought he'd love hearing I wanted out of this, but no, that somehow annoyed him as well. I'd never done a damn thing to this male and he treated me like I'd murdered his whole family.

Forget about him, Rhode. He's a dick. Abba and the Goddess chose you to be Queen. They did this for a reason. All we have to do is figure out this reason and maybe use it to get out of this. I glanced to Hollyn and Cresswell again. She had her head resting on his shoulder as she beamed up at us. He ran his fingers through her hair and absently kissed her forehead. They would've made a lovely King and Queen. But I wondered if they'd wanted Varan as King all along. After all, the crowd had all smiled when he growled at them. Maybe I was just the easiest option to be Queen since, apparently, I'd

already been one. And if that was the case, then maybe I only needed to find my replacement. Or beg to be set free. I'd do either.

Abba was still talking to the people, but my brain could not process anything she was saying.

I licked my lips and took a deep breath before I spoke to him again. "Do you pray here?"

"No," he growled.

I rolled my eyes. "Not *you*, the people. Does Isramaya pray to Mother Terrea?"

"Yes."

Okayyyy. I nodded. "Is there a place of worship?"

He clenched his teeth, and his jaw flexed. "Yes."

"Where is it?"

"*Get a map and make yourself useful*," he snapped.

My chest tightened. *Ignore it. Ignore it. Ignore it.* I held my chin high. "Your people seem to like you."

"Yes."

"Do you live in the palace here?"

"No."

"Do you visit Court of Blood often?"

He let out an exasperated sigh. "No."

I eyed my throne, then his. "Is there a reason the Queen is represented by silver but the King is gold?"

He gripped the armrests of his throne. Purple smoke billowed from between his fingers. Yet he said nothing.

When I glanced back over at him, my gaze landed on the silver vial hanging from his necklace. “What does your necklace mean?”

He growled loud enough to make my throne tremble. “*Have you not the ability to remain silent for more than three seconds?*”

I let out my own growl. “I’m *trying* to make polite conversation because I’m freaking out, and you’re biting my head off.”

He snarled, his top lip curling up to reveal his fang.

“I shall leave you now,” Abba called out to the crowd. “Enjoy the rest of your Havestia.”

I sat forward thinking she’d turn and speak to us, but all she did was smile and then vanish into a flash of golden light. Varan jumped to his feet and ran off the platform, except he didn’t run down the stairs. He barreled through a hidden door in the wall behind our thrones. I cursed and chased after him before I could think twice about it.

The door led to a grand indoor kind of terrace covered in a deep-red carpet. I glanced left and right, but I did not see him. About twenty feet across there was a railing so I raced over to it and looked down only to find more of the ball down there. Across from the railing, about thirty feet over, was a glass wall that stretched all the way down to the ground below. But straight across from me was a street level. I looked out and spotted him just as he walked through a door.

With a curse, I hiked my dress up and sprinted after him. When I finally caught up to him strolling down the hill, I yelled, “Varan.”

He ignored me, but his shoulders tightened.

I sprinted up and got in his path. “What is your problem?”

“*You*,” he snarled in my face.

“Me? You don’t even know me? You just met me—”

“I’ve seen enough.” He tried to step around me, but I got more in his face.

“I don’t want to be Queen,” I yelled and threw my hands up. “I don’t know what I’m even supposed to be doing here, so I need your help.”

“I think I helped you enough last time,” he barked through clenched teeth.

Those neon-purple flames shot up from the ground and swallowed him whole.

“Well, you could *at least* tell me what I did last time, jackass,” I yelled to no one.

I looked around and discovered this street made of stone was lined with carriages and their coachmen. When I turned to head back inside, I spotted the only carriage out there with painted gold edges. I raced over and then slid to a stop in front of the two coachmen. One had long straight plum-purple hair while the other had long curly lavender hair. “Is this Varan’s carriage?”

“*Your Majesty*,” they both bowed, tipping their heads forward as they crouched so their long purple hair grazed the stone floor.

I flinched, then realized I couldn’t fight the title anymore, not after what just happened inside. I cleared my throat. “Please stand.” When they stood, I pointed to the carriage behind them. “Is this Varan’s carriage?”

They looked to each other, then nodded.

“Okay, great.” I pushed my hair out of my face. “Do you know where he lives?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Mr. Plum said quickly.

Mr. Lavender nodded with a kind smile. “Elden Palace, Your Majesty.”

“Perfect. Please take me there.”

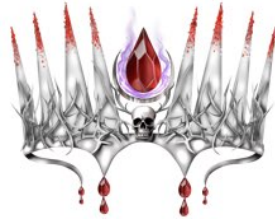
Mr. Lavender blushed. “Um, well ... we’re not supposed to ... Prince—pardon me—*King Varan*—”

“He has rules for his carriage—”

“I am your Queen,” I proclaimed, and it felt weird as hell. Pulling rank on a rank I didn’t want was icky, but in this moment I was left with no choice. “If there is blame to be placed on anyone, I promise his wrath will be mine. Take me to Elden Palace please. Now.”

Nine

RHODELIA



Varan's carriage was nothing like the other one I'd taken.

The first one was smooth and quick, but it was impossible to see outside because of the glass windows fully trapping a person inside. It was like a bubble or my foster parents' sedan. Varan's carriage was a sports car convertible driving down the Pacific Coast Highway at night. Having the windows open was huge for me. I didn't feel so claustrophobic.

I'd spent the ride so far sitting sideways on the bench with my head out the window in the front, right between Mr. Plum and Mr. Lavender. My thoughts bounced back and forth between what I was going to say to Varan when I found him and what the hell these horse-like creatures pulling the carriage were. Until I got to watch them run, I'd assumed they were just regular black horses.

Now I saw otherwise. While their bodies were black as night when standing still, they turned into these smoky beings when they were running. The left one had neon-purple lines streaked down the spine like lightning flashing in the sky. The right one had little speckles of neon-purple across its back. Both of them had legs that were wisps of smoke and darkness, defying the laws of physics and gravity.

“They are raiths, Your Majesty,” Mr. Lavender said suddenly.

I jumped and looked up to him. “What are they? A kind of horse?”

A ghost of a smile spread across his face. “I have not seen a horse in centuries.”

“How old are you?”

“Eight hundred.” He grinned down at me. “Another century before I start to show my age.”

My eyes widened.

“Raiths are a species similar to a horse but not quite so tied to the realm the way others are.” He pointed to them. “They are born within the Forest of Fears and nurtured by the night. When they move, they become one with darkness.”

“Do they have names?”

“Sparks has the lightning bolts on her back.” He pointed to the other. “This one with all the stars on her back is Starling.”

“Pretty.” I smiled and rested my chin on my arm. “What’s *your* name?”

His cheeks flushed even in the dark. “I am Thuso.”

“Nice to meet you, Thuso.”

Turquoise light filled the air to our right. I gasped and leaned forward. “I know that light. The portal is over there, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Thuso said grimly.

“Take me there.” I reached out the window and touched his forearm. “Please, Thuso. It’s important to me.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” He whistled and pulled on the reins. Mr. Plum barked at him, but Thuso shook him off. “Our Queen has made a request.”

I smiled and crawled back inside the carriage to look out the side windows. The raiths led us straight toward that turquoise glow. I had no idea what it was, but so far it was the only section of this forest that looked like that. The carriage slowed to a stop about fifteen feet away from the light. I frowned.

Mr. Plum snapped at my new friend Thuso.

Thuso’s face then appeared in the front open window. “Your Majesty, this is where we must stop.”

I did not argue, I simply shoved the door open and leapt out. My feet sank a little in the soft soil. Everything was dark except for where that glow reached.

“We are not permitted to stop here, Your Majesty,” Mr. Plum shouted in a clipped tone. When I turned to face him, he just shook his head. “The magic causes problems for the carriage. King Varan does not allow it.”

I frowned and hurried back to their side. “Are you lying to me?”

Thuso sighed. “Your Majesty, the light is the magical remnants of Valandril’s explosion.”

My jaw dropped.

“For safety, Your Majesty,” Mr. Plum grumbled “We need to continue our journey to Elden Palace.”

“I just need a moment—”

“King Varan does not allow it. The carriage—”

“It is the raiths, Your Majesty.” Thuso waved Mr. Plum off. He kept his green eyes on me. “The magic is not natural for them, and exposure to it makes them sick.”

My heart sank. I looked to Sparks and Starling and found them fidgeting nervously. I scowled. “What is your name?” I turned to Mr. Plum.

“I am Paseka.”

“I believe Thuso to be telling me the truth, but it is not what you said.”

Paseka’s face hardened. “We do not announce the weaknesses of our beloved, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you for trusting me with the truth.” I glanced to the light behind me, then back to them. “I do not wish to make them sick. Please leave me here and get them to safety.”

“*Your Majesty*,” they both began to argue.

I held my hands up. “I’m staying here. I have to try something. If I fail, then I will walk to Elden Palace.”

Thuso bowed. “We will watch for you. Should you not arrive with haste, I will come looking.”

“Thank you.”

He climbed up on the bench and took the reins.

Paseka marched up to me, grabbed me by the hand, then dragged me a few feet over to the base of a tree. He crouched down and pushed some branches aside to reveal a skull sitting on the ground. “These are your markers for the pathway to Elden Palace. Please look closer. What do you see?”

I crouched down and stared at it. The skull looked human. It definitely did not have fangs. There had to have been some

kind of symbol or writing on it for people to use as a guide. And then I realized the hollowed eye sockets were green. I pointed to them. “The eyes.”

He nodded. “The eyes are two different shades of green. The darker one is showing which way to head for Elden Palace. The lighter green points toward the temple. If you find skulls with red eyes, it means you have reached the Canopy of Dreams near the bridges into Court of Blood. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I do. Thank you.”

“Be careful, Your Majesty.” He stood upright. “And quick.”

I smiled as I stood. “Get Sparks and Starling to safety. I’ll be right behind you.”

He spun on his toes and raced to the carriage. In the blink of an eye, he was seated beside Thuso and they were speeding off. I watched the carriage for a moment, then turned and sprinted into the turquoise light.

I knew what everyone said, that the portal was closed for fifty years, but I could not stop myself from wondering if it was a lie. Or if maybe the magic of The Veil might work differently on a night like this, just hours after it closed. It was probably wishful thinking, but for Morgana I had to try.

That stone archway came into view right in front of me, so I dug my heels in and sprinted to it. *Please, please, please. Just be there. Be there.* I ran through the archway, then made a sharp turn, retracing my steps from before across the cobblestone pathway until my feet hit dirt again. It smelled like dawn on a rainy morning in the mountains. I stopped and

looked down to find craters in the dirt from where I'd crashed on the ground.

“Okay, okay. He threw me through the door, and I landed right here facing that way,” I said to myself. “So if I turn around, then the door should be right ... there.”

Nothing. I saw nothing but forest and turquoise light.

“Shit.”

I leapt forward, sliding through what should have been the portal, yet it was just air. My heart sank. I cried out and swung my arms around. With my heart pounding in my throat, I backed up a few feet. I felt like a bull charging the matador only for him to move the flag at the last second. Each time I ran through the spot the portal should have been, I was met by only the forest.

My legs were tired and sore, my feet burning from at least one blister. My steps were growing sluggish and slow until I crashed into a tree and bounced off of it. Neon-purple flames burst from the ground. Before I had time to react to his arrival, a hand gripped my elbow and threw me. I flew into a tree with a thud, then crashed to the ground.

Varan towered over me, purple flames and smoke swirling all around him and up his arms. He growled, making all the trees around us shake and sway. “*STOP.*”

I gasped and sat up straight. “*What?*”

“Every time you walk through where the portal rests, *I can feel it,*” he shouted. His cheeks were flushed. “So STOP—”

“NO!” I jumped to my feet, then leapt into the opening between the trees where the door had been.

Varan cringed and snarled. “*GET OUT.*”

“OPEN IT!”

“*GET. OUT.*”

“OPEN IT AND I WILL!”

“I can’t—”

“I just want—”

He flicked his wrist and purple magic slammed into my stomach, pushing me backwards. “*I do not care what you want.*”

“Home!” I rolled my shoulder. “I want to go home.”

He stomped closer to me until we were a foot away from each other, close enough to feel his breath on my face. “As much as I’d love to send you back to Earth and never have to see your face again, you are stuck here. This is your home.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes. “Doesn’t it open every few years?”

“Every fifty years. The Veil opens on the night of Havestia. And in fifty years, I will escort you here myself so you can return to earth.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice, “And then because you are no longer human and cannot survive their climate, you’ll die. And I’ll celebrate.”

I flinched.

He snarled and those purple flames of his burst from the ground at his feet.

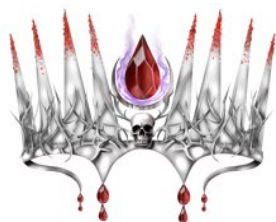
“Wait, are you just going to leave me here alone like this?”

He looked me up and down and smirked. “You brought yourself here. Get yourself out.” I gasped. “Maybe you’ll do me a favor and get yourself killed now so I don’t have to wait the fifty years to finish the job myself.”

I opened my mouth to scream at him when he vanished into a cloud of purple flames.

Ten

RHODELIA



I crouched down at the base of a tree and pushed the branches aside—and my breath left me in a rush like I’d been kicked in the diaphragm. I sank to my knees. The cold, black dirt was for sure going to ruin this silver lace gown with little diamonds all over it. I’d been walking through this forest for what felt like years. Paseka’s trick for using the skulls’ eyes as a guide was great, but as I looked at the skull in front of me, I knew I was in trouble.

Because right on the forehead of this skull was a bright-red lipstick stain.

I’d kissed this damn skull a while ago when I first suspected I’d been walking in circles. The fact that it’d taken me so long to get back to *this* skull meant my loop was bigger than I realized. I wasn’t sure if that made it better or worse. *Dammit, Rhode. Look what you’ve done now.* Me and my big mouth had run away with my pride—among many other emotions I wasn’t acknowledging right now—and got myself lost in the woods at night. I hadn’t run into a single other person. Then again, they were probably at the ball wondering where their new Queen had run off to.

The Forest of Fears was not the place to be lost alone. As strong as I was, I was terrified. It was *so* dark. If there was a

town where people lived, I sure as hell had not stumbled upon it yet. And there were zero signs it existed. I looked up to the sky and wanted to cry. Silvery moonlight lit the tops of the trees yet not an ounce of that light made it down to the ground. The only light I had to work with was this strange shimmer from my hair, which I was fairly certain was making it harder for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

But there were also glowing plants. The trees themselves were a vibrant violet that shined just enough for me to not walk right into them face-first. On the ground, the plants looked like they belonged in a coral reef in the ocean. None of these plants were native to Earth. We just didn't have this shit there. I was trying not to touch anything because something this pretty in nature was usually poisonous as fuck. And they were *beautiful*.

There were these fern-like bushy plants that stood at least two feet tall. Each branch was a turquoise-green up the middle on the stem but then faded into a plum-purple at the ends. There were dozens of different types of flowers around me, but you couldn't see them until you got up to them. It was as if the shadows of the trees were hiding them. When you got up close, they glowed in shades of green, teal, or purple.

There was only one flower that was the opposite. I knew these other flowers weren't lilies but that was the closest name I could find for them. From a distance, they were neon-purple like Varan's magic, just floating in a sea of darkness. But up close, the petals themselves were a soft grayish color and only the veins of the flower glowed purple. It was a wild optical illusion.

It might've been my fascination with the plants that got me lost. But each skull I found I'd look for the dark green eye

socket and then head in that direction. I didn't understand how I was messing this up. The worst part was I was *not* a rookie hiker. Our foster parents used to take us on trips to the mountains since we were kids. We'd hiked in most of the United States and southwest Canada. But this forest was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

It was *silent*.

Not a sound. Nothing moved. The forest was totally and entirely still.

My foster parents had been from the Appalachian Mountains. They trained me well. If the forest went still, you went home. But this forest never made a sound. Despite there being no breeze, I kept feeling air brush along the bare skin of my arms. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my waist. My eyes hurt from strain. For the millionth time, I glanced down at my pendant to make sure I was still awake. I was. It was red.

I couldn't just sit here in the dirt with a skull I'd kissed. Varan wasn't going to come looking for me. And unless I found my way back to the portal, I had no hope of summoning him—*annoying* him—enough to come find me. Death didn't sound so bad if it meant not asking him for help. Even if I wanted to go that route, that turquoise glow was nowhere to be seen. This forest was a damned nightmare, and now I understood why they were called that.

Okay. New plan time. So far I'd been doing the same thing over and over—following the dark-green eye socket. But clearly there was something I was missing, which meant it was time to try something new. He said the light-green would lead to the temple, which I assumed from context was the opposite direction of Varan's palace. I hadn't yet seen a red eye socket,

so I hadn't gone near the bridges. That meant the palace was somewhere to my left. I just needed a new trail.

I stood up and brushed the dirt off my knees, then I leaned around the tree. Time to be creative. I squared my shoulders and stepped *into* the bushes. The ground was squishier off the trail, almost bouncy. I took about three steps and then my left foot slid across the dirt and my legs were swept out from under me. I slammed into the ground and cursed so loud I heard it echo. Pain shot up my tailbone and into my spine. My legs tingled and went numb. I rolled onto my stomach, then tried to push myself up on all fours. But then the ground began to *move* beneath me. It was a dry mudslide, and I was helpless. It moved like a river rapid, carrying me across the bushes, around another tree, then *down a hill*.

I sucked in a breath as my stomach shot straight up into my throat. The hill flattened out on a trail, but I was moving too fast. The landslide fired me off the side of a cliff and I was airborne. It was pitch black so I couldn't tell how far the ground was. I pulled my arms and legs into fetal position and covered my head with my hands to try and protect myself a split-second before I plummeted to the ground. My shoulder and hip slammed full speed and pain exploded inside of me. Momentum sent me flying up in the air again, flipping over, then crashing back down on my other shoulder and hip. I slid across the dirt for a good ten feet before gravity let me go.

My whole body screamed. I flopped onto my back and just gasped for air like an upside-down starfish. It took me a good minute before I managed to summon enough strength to climb back onto my feet. The world spun a little, and I wondered if I was going to have a concussion just like that chick dressed as Alvin from the Chipmunks from the hotel. I stumbled over to a

tree and braced myself on the trunk until the world stopped moving.

“Well, guess I’ll need another bath,” I mumbled to myself.

A cold chill slid down my spine like someone was watching me.

I stood up straight and then slowly, casually, glanced over my shoulder. My heart skipped beats. Fear bubbled in my gut. Everything behind me was *gray*. The trees were black shadows in a vision of gray. It was like every ounce of color had been drained from the world, like I’d put a filter on a picture I’d taken to look more artsy.

But there was no one there.

I turned back to face forward, toward the forest that still held color, only to feel that chill again. I spun around as fast as I could and gasped. The trees had little glowing white eyes ... and they were all watching *me*.

Without a second of hesitation, I spun and ran. The pathway I was on slid between two huge boulders and then around a cluster of trees. I kept running until the dirt turned into sparkling gravel. I slid to a stop, then crouched down to run my fingers through the gravel. Except it was crystals. Little chunks of raw crystal with rough edges and specks of random colors. I’d never seen a stone quite like this, but it reminded me of a mystic fire topaz with how it looked like different colors depending on the angle.

I smiled and dropped the crystals back to the path and then looked up—and choked on a scream. My body went rigid and locked in place. A giant face stared down at me in terror. My pulse thundered through my veins so hard my fingers trembled. The face was on a tree, a damned tree. The trunk

was probably six feet wide and forty feet tall. There were three massive holes in the side of it and in the dark, when I was already terrified, those holes made the shape of a skull's face screaming in terror.

Just when I started to calm my racing heart, the tree began to grow. It got taller and wider. The branches seemed much farther away. I looked down at the bushes and they too had grown. They were now taller than me. I lifted my hand and a purple light flashed across my tattoo. My eyes widened.

My amulet.

I looked down and gasped. The crystal was *purple*. I reached for it but my hands were tiny and childlike—

I crouched behind the big-faced tree. She wouldn't see me if I came from this side because she couldn't fit where I could. I was so much smaller. And I knew places no one else did. I crawled into the mouth hole on the tree's face. Mother was going to be upset. These crystals tore up another one of my dresses. Father told her not to worry, little girls were meant to play.

When I got inside the trunk of the tree, I crawled to where the hole was on the backside. Nobody else knew about this hole. It was my secret. I peeked out the hole and had to cover my mouth so she didn't hear me giggle. There she was, crouched low beneath the bushes. In the dark, she was almost impossible to see. But I knew her hiding spots. She watched through the flowers, waiting to pounce on me. Her purple-tipped tail swished back and forth. She loved this game as much as I did.

I twirled my wrists, and the purple veins began to glow. I had to hurry before I laughed and ruined my surprise. All I had to do was throw my magic to the other side of the trail and

she'd think I was over there. I summoned a little purple smoke ball in my palm, then I threw it.

Disa's head popped up. Her purr was a soft rumble. Her tail flicked back and forth. She was ready to ambush. I grinned and carefully crawled out of the hole right behind her. I waited until I was fully out of the tree ... then I tackled her.

She roared and jumped into the air.

I giggled and wrapped my arms around her neck, squeezing her tight. "I love you, Disa!"

She purred so loud it rumbled against my chest.

"Let us rescue, Nesim!" I whispered in her ears.

She let out a little roar, then we dove for the bushes. Nesim belonged to the palace. He was in training for a special job. But he was just a baby like me and Disa and he wanted to play, so we liked to rescue him. And Disa always knew right where to find him.

We soared between two trees, under a low branch, then pounced on Nesim.

He screeched and jumped into the air.

I laughed and threw my hand out to pet him—a large pale hand wrapped around my fingers and dragged me across the gravel.

I screamed and threw my hands up. Neon-purple smoke shot out of my palms and slammed into the person's chest. The grip on my hand vanished. I scrambled backwards just as a man started shrieking. My whole body was trembling like a leaf in a hurricane. I grabbed my pendant and lifted it up—red. Pulsing, bold red, but there were swirls of purple smoke coiling around it.

The man dropped to his knees and tugged on his hair. In the light coming off the purple smoke, I realized it was a Knight by the pale-golden embroidery on his coat. He rocked side to side, thrashing against the purple smoke.

I looked down at my hands and gagged. I'd done that. The veins in my forearms were still glowing purple. The smoke still clung to my hands. The man was hurting because of me. I hurried over to him and tried to swat at the smoke, but it only made it stronger.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I cried. "*What is this?*"

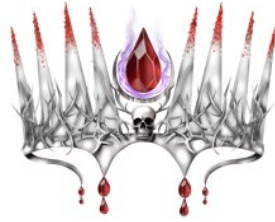
"Thuso told us you'd gone on a midnight hike."

I froze. I knew that voice. My stomach tightened into knots. I spun around and found Ambrose standing behind me with that smug smile on his face and a handful of Knights at his side.

"Release Jaako," Ambrose barked. Then he turned those hazel eyes on me. "Blind her and escort her to Elden Palace."

Eleven

RHODELIA



I flinched and threw my hands up. “Blind me? What do you —”

A strip of black fabric was wrapped around my eyes before I could get all of my question out. I cursed and tried to yank it off, but someone grabbed my hands and lowered them.

“*Easy, Your Majesty,*” an unfamiliar male voice said gently. “I am not going to hurt you.”

My pulse was flying. “Who are you?”

“I am Conray, one of King Varan’s Knights—”

“Remove the blindfold right now—”

“I cannot, Your Majesty. For *your* safety.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You’ve been out here too long, Your Majesty,” his voice was warm and soft. It gave cozy *blanket by a fireplace* vibes. He gently pulled me into a walk. “The King would not be pleased if we let the forest consume you any more this evening.”

There was a lot to process in that statement. But my mind focused on the one part. “Varan does not care what happens to me.”

Conray sighed, and I sensed a little frustration in the sound. “You do not yet remember him. Hold your judgment until you do.”

I wanted to say more, to assure him the man loathed my existence and wanted me dead, but I had no idea who was listening or who any of these people were. Except for Ambrose, who I did not trust at all. And these Knights were going to get me out of this forest, so I decided to trust them.

“Your Majesty?”

I flinched. “Yes, Conray?”

“Where are your shoes?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it. With a wiggle of my toes, I discovered cold soil squishing between my toes. “I ... I don’t know. I ... I had them on—”

“The forest.” He cleared his throat. “Your toes are turning blue, my lady. May I carry you to Elden Palace? We do not have a carriage for you—”

“Why? Are Sparks and Starling all right?”

He chuckled. “Thuso warned me you would worry for them. They are resting. So, may I carry you?”

Now that he mentioned it, my bones were cold. Which meant I’d been lost in here for a long time. I nodded. “Yes, thank you. And I appreciate you asking.”

There was a pause and then I felt his warm arm scoop under my knees and lift me off the ground. Warm, cozy heat billowed off of his body. Unable to stop myself, I nestled in closer to his chest. That was when I realized I was shivering. When I yawned, I got a little worried. My nurse brain was kicking into gear.

“You smell like oranges,” I said to keep myself awake. “Do you have oranges here in Isramaya?”

He chuckled. “No, we do not. But I went to Earth last Havestia, and by coincidence, I did try an orange. They are delicious. So, I will take that as a compliment.”

I laughed. But then my thoughts went to his comment about the raiths, and my heart grew heavy. “Conray, are there only two raiths? No wait, I saw two pulling my carriage to Lakewell Palace earlier. They did not glow like Sparks and Starling—”

“Those were different raiths, elder raiths who are near retirement and want a job to do but one that is not so harsh on their bodies. Lady Hollyn and Lord Cresswell spoil them.”

“They retire?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. The younglings serve here where they are born, where they are more equipped for the forest.” He lifted me a little higher. “Only within the Court of Nightmares would you see their true forms.”

“Oh. So why don’t you have another carriage aside from Sparks and Starling?”

“The King does not allow the other raiths to be out on Havestia. *Those* two are his. Whenever he attends balls in the Court of Blood, he tries to ... blend with them by arriving by carriage.”

Until I pissed him off so he vanished.

“Wait, why not out on Havestia?”

His voice dropped low, “The Veil is too thin for them this night. King Varan fears they may be lost to places they could

not survive, so he keeps them inside his palace, happy and safe.”

My jaw dropped. “That is a nice thing to do.”

“He is a good man.”

I almost scoffed. I had every right to scoff. He’d been an absolute asshole to me in every interaction. But it was hard to ignore the love this kingdom had for him. After all, his father almost killed everyone and yet they trust Varan. That said something.

It was just too bad *he* said things too. Nasty son of a bitch that he was.

“Are you well, Your Majesty?”

“Rhodelia, please call me Rhodelia.” I shivered. “I ... am struggling with the title.”

“As you wish, Rhodelia.” Then he stopped walking. “We are here. I am going to put you down now.”

I nodded. And then my bare feet hit cold stone. I wrapped my arms around my waist. Conray’s fingers pulled at my blindfold for a moment before it fell away. I blinked about a hundred times before my vision cleared.

Then my jaw dropped. Standing before me was a gothic-looking castle made of dark-gray stones and sharply pointed spires. The windows on the front seemed to be covered with some kind of black iron gates, like they were blocking the sunlight. The front doors were nestled beneath three archways that towered at least twenty feet high. Green vines hung over the ledge of the level above the archways, giving the castle a nearly abandoned look. No doubt the intention of this castle was to scare everyone away.

“This is Elden Palace, home of the Lord of Nightmares, King Varan,” Conray said with reverence in his voice. “I shall collect him.”

I looked over at my new friend and smiled. He was nothing like I thought he looked and that made me happy. His hair was dark-plum at the roots and faded into an almost blond pale-lavender around his jawline. His eyes were light, light-green and those eyelashes were so thick and dark it looked like he had on eyeliner and mascara.

“Conray?” When he turned to me with his eyebrows raised, I smiled. “Thank you.”

He blushed and nodded his head. “Please go right inside the doors where it is warm. I will send King Varan to you.”

I nodded just so Conray wouldn't feel uncomfortable. A quick glance behind me showed a line of Knights were standing between the palace and the forest. I wasn't sure what that was all about. They were all watching me. I took a deep breath, then marched up the steps, under the archways, and up to the massive wooden doors that swung open for me as soon as I got in range.

It wasn't until I stepped over the threshold and the doors began to close behind me that I realized Conray was going to get Varan. To bring him to me. That man had just begged me to get myself killed so he wouldn't have to wait and then he'd left me in that forest. The last thing I wanted was to be standing inside his palace looking every bit the damsel in distress. I wasn't going to just stand here and wait for him.

The doors closed behind me. I blinked as my eyes were still adjusting from the blindfold. Right inside the doors the floor was made of rough gray stone. But ten feet in, up the two steps, there were two fire pits, the fancy kind that looked like

marble pedestals. The orange flames danced atop crystal shards that looked exactly like the ones I'd just seen in the forest. I walked to the steps to get closer to the heat. My skin was burning as it began to thaw out.

Elden Palace had one hell of a grand foyer. The vaulted ceiling had to be three stories high. A second-floor balcony ran along three of the four walls, including the front wall behind me, which I assumed led to the terrace I'd seen from outside. The walls on the left and right sides were made of glass. Running down the center of the dark, stoned floor from where I stood between the fire puts to the base of a grand staircase at the other side that was carved into a black wall. There was a landing straight up that staircase that forked left and right with more stairs. Everywhere I looked there were red candles with little flames flickering.

I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want to be here at all. I'd chased him here with every intention of confronting him for the way he treated me ... only for him to treat me worse out in that forest. Mother Terrea either had a sense of humor or she was punishing us, because this arrangement made no sense. I didn't know how I was supposed to live as Queen to his King for centuries. Not like *this*. Something had to give between us. We needed to find a truce and some peace, but nothing was going to come of it when emotions were running this hot.

We needed space first.

I walked down those two steps and was headed back for the doors when I spotted an archway to my right filled with big red roses. Inside the archway was just an alcove with a domed ceiling. Every inch of the walls were covered in roses. The floor was littered with red petals. From what I'd learned

in my short time here—and in my wedding dream—roses belonged to the Court of Blood. I hadn't seen a single rose since I'd crossed the bridge ... until now. And only that archway.

Unable to curb my curiosity, I walked over to the archway and stepped inside. That heady scent of roses filled my lungs and chipped away at the stress ever so slightly. There were no doors or windows in this alcove, so I looked up to the domed ceiling to see if there was something special about this spot. Suddenly, the floor began to move. I jumped and looked down. The floor was lowering like an elevator. I had no idea where this was going to take me.

“Uh oh ...”

When it stopped there was still just the one opening and it had a cluster of red candles at varying degrees of burning. I took a step out with a scowl. It was super dim down here, not an ounce of natural light. It was one giant square space with dark stone floors and walls painted black. Four rows of candles lined the entire room on shelves on the walls, but those shelves were at least fifteen feet off the ground.

I walked along the sidewall and the candlelight grew brighter, filling the room with more light as if I triggered it. I walked around a column then froze in my tracks. For a moment I could only stare, unsure of what I was looking at. There were people sitting cross-legged on the floor. *People*. Rows and rows of people. In every direction I looked I found more of the same. The only way I noticed just how many people were just sitting down here in the dark was based on the purple glow of their amulet pendants.

It was something out of a science fiction movie. This was rows and rows of people sitting on the ground in a dark room.

This was creepy and terrifying. I shivered because the room gave me the heebie-jeebies.

I walked up to the closest woman to the edge. She sat with her legs crossed and tucked beneath her and her hands on her knees. Dark hair hung straight and loose from her head. Her skin was ashy pale. I glanced around and found they all looked like this. It was like a group field trip to meditation. No one spoke. No one moved. No one registered my presence whatsoever. Each of their faces were cast in shadows so I crouched down to get a better look—and choked on a scream. I slammed my hands over my mouth.

It wasn't shadows, it was *them*.

The whites of their eyes were solid black. Instead of pupils and an iris it was a miniature purple whirlpool. Black lines like lightning bolts streaked across their faces from their eyes in every direction. Just black and purple, that was it. I waved my hand in front of her face, but there was no flinch or anything.

I lowered my hand and sighed. “What happened to you?” I whispered.

“Must you be *everywhere* I look?”

I cursed and jumped to my feet, spinning around until I found him standing there. He looked beautiful in the dim candlelight. I was attracted to him, and way more than a little, but I had to shake it. I couldn't let him know what his presence did to me, for good or bad.

“This.” I pointed to the woman closest to me. “What the hell is *this*?”

“*It is time for you to leave—*”

“What's wrong with them?” I screamed.

“These are *my* people, not yours. Return to the Court of Blood where you belong and leave my land.”

I scoffed. “I am Queen, isn’t this my land too?”

He grabbed me by the elbow and dragged me back to that stone alcove.

“You can’t just manhandle me because you want to,” I snapped.

“I am King. I can do as I please,” he growled.

The floor had started its ascent already, so we were trapped inside that alcove together. I felt the heat radiating off his skin. I felt his breath sweep across my face. I couldn’t talk, couldn’t breathe. For a few excruciatingly long seconds, all I could do was stare up into his eyes and smell his deep red wine scent. He didn’t speak to me, he just glared at me, his gaze holding mine with a fiery intensity that took my breath away.

“What’s wrong with those people?” I asked again. I needed to distract my mind from the unsafe feelings rolling through me. “How do we help them?”

His nostrils flared. “There is no *we*. There is me and *my* people.”

“Why are you such an asshole?” I yelled through clenched teeth. “I can’t even know what’s wrong with them?”

“What do you really expect to be able to do for them, Rhodelia? What can a Queen as useless as you can do for them, pray tell?”

I balled my hands into fists. “I am *not* useless.”

“Three hours and forty-seven minutes, Rhodelia.” He cocked his head to the side. “That is how long you were stuck in the forest.”

“If you loathe me so much, then why were you counting?”

“Why weren’t *you*, Rhodelia? How much longer until your limbs froze off?” He arched one eyebrow and shook his head, making that one curl bounce across his forehead. “Yes, let me rush to get *your* aid for my people.”

“I am an emergency nurse. I’m good at helping people—”

“You’re good at walking in circles, *Rhodelia*.”

“Why are you saying my name like that?”

He leaned forward so his face was mere inches from mine. “Because you loathe it.”

The floor clicked into place on the upper level with all the red roses and the open doorway.

I exhaled through my nose to try and steady my runaway pulse. “You’re a cruel son of a bitch, you know that? I guess the monster didn’t fall far from the tree.”

He gave me a cocky sideways grin. “Yet which one of us *chose* him?”

My eyes widened.

He grabbed my elbow and hurried me out the front door. The second we crossed the threshold, he yelled, “Conray!”

Conray appeared out of nowhere. “I am here, Your Majesty.”

He dropped his hand like I burned him. “Get her back to Lakewell Palace where she belongs.”

I roared and spun on him. I was so furious my vision began to tunnel. “*You are not MY King.*”

“*No, your King died,*” he snarled. “Now you’ll deal with me.”

“You don’t get to talk to me like that—”

“*Who’s going to stop me? I am King now.*” He spun away from me and threw his hand up. “I want her *gone.*”

I chased after him. “Say that one more time and I will move in here and paint the walls pink—”

My words cut off.

My vision sparkled like stars, then everything went dark.

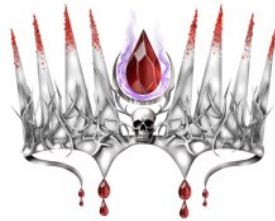
I gasped and opened my eyes, my whole body jerked. Warmth surrounded me. Heat pressed to my back. I looked up and found Varan’s face hovering over mine. My pulse quickened. I tried to move but my arms and legs wouldn’t move. My body was ice-cold everywhere Varan wasn’t touching me.

Wait. He’s touching me. I’d been closer to him than Conray when I fainted, but he’d been far enough away that he could have let me hit the ground and let it not be his problem. But he’d caught me instead, and then held me until I woke back up.

He leaned over me and snarled. “Dammit, you have not fed. Conray, get her into a room upstairs and get her nectar. Now.”

Twelve

RHODELIA



When I opened my eyes, I knew I was in trouble. Morgana was going to freak out. She was going to fly us back home to Los Angeles first thing and get me in front of a shrink. Because it wasn't just that dream anymore, it wasn't just the wedding scene, now it was more. She already warned me if these dreams didn't stop happening while I was awake, she'd call my therapist on Zoom from the casino.

The room was *freezing*. I pulled the blankets around me tighter, but the silky material did nothing to provide heat. *Wait. Silky? Since when do hotels have silk sheets?* I looked down at the sheets and gasped. *NO*. I bolted upright and cried. I wasn't in my bougie hotel room in Las Vegas with my sister.

Something cold hit my chest so I gripped it in my hand. It was the pendant. I glanced down at it ... red.

"Fuck, this is real."

I scrubbed my face with my hands, then looked around. *Where am I? What happened? Think, Rhode, what's the last thing you remember?* I closed my eyes and tried to remember.

Then I saw him. Varan. I'd fainted and he'd caught me. Then he'd held me until I woke again. I saw it happen in my mind all over again. He'd leaned over me and snarled.

“Dammit, you have not fed. Conray, get her into a room upstairs and get her nectar. Now.”

Get her upstairs. The memory clicked. Upstairs inside Elden Palace. My pulse skipped. *I’m in Elden Palace.* I looked around with new eyes. The room was so dark it was impossible for me to even know how big it was. I was in a bed with black silk sheets, and despite being freezing, the bed was comfortable. The only part of the room I could see was the wall to my right. The wall itself was black. There was a bright-red velvet sofa sitting in front of a massive gothic-style window. Out the window I saw sharp peaks of a mountain range towering into the cloudy sky and smoke clinging to the valleys.

I climbed out of bed but my bare feet hitting the cold floor made me hiss. With my arms wrapped as tightly around me as physically possible, I walked over to the sofa only to find the wall lined with bookshelves. Hundreds of books. That made me smile. I glanced to the right, meaning to inspect a few book spines with metallic gold foiling but instead spotted a door to a balcony. There was no one in here to tell me I couldn’t, so I waddled over and out the door.

The air was sharply cold, which made my goosebumps feel like daggers. The sky was beginning to lighten but still clung to the dark shades of navy-blue and plum. The stars sparkled through the thin layers of clouds. I walked to the wrought iron black railing that had gold tips and sighed. Those same mountains I’d seen from inside were out here, but now I could feel the fog all around me.

This was real.

It was time to stop playing, to stop acting like this was a wild lucid dream I’d eventually snap out of. This was actually

happening. Dread formed as a knot in my stomach and in my shoulders. I had no interest in being Queen, especially not when the male who is supposed to reign beside me is a menace.

“Your Majesty?”

I frowned at the sound of an unfamiliar woman’s voice. “Yes?”

A second later a girl who had to be about my age leaned in the doorway with her dark, almost black, purple hair swaying in the breeze. If we were still on Earth, I would have guessed her to be from India. Her skin just held that gorgeous deep tan I always wished I had. She gave me a wild, wide grin that sparkled in her light, golden eyes. “The dawn brings the freeze, Your Majesty. Come in. I have some things for you.”

Then she disappeared inside the room.

She’d successfully piqued my curiosity. I had to know, so I followed her inside, shutting the balcony door behind me. I rubbed my arms and shivered. She skipped over to the bed and lifted a thick white coat off it. It had metallic silver embroidery and hardware all over it, but the inside looked sherpa-lined—which I knew was unlikely here, but it *looked* like it.

“He does not feel the cold. King Varan, I mean.” She carried the coat over to me, then held it out so I could stick my arms in. “Kings cannot feel cold. It can weaken us if they are unable to always be out—oh look at that! Perfect fit!”

I moaned at the feel of the fuzzy lining. It was so warm my eyes actually teared up.

The girl gasped, then ushered me over to sit on the red velvet sofa. “Sit.”

Before I even knew what was happening, she'd returned with a pair of white boots that were lined with the same material as the coat. I had opened my mouth to ask her to help me because my fingers were frozen when she sank into a crouch in front of me. With quick, sure movements, she had both boots on my feet and was standing back up.

"Better?" She grinned.

I nodded. "So much better. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Your Majesty." She spun and skipped over to the nightstand next to the bed and grabbed a glass pitcher filled with pale-red liquid and a single wine glass. The wine glass was handed to me immediately, then she began to pour. "The Forest of Fears is a dangerous place to be on Havestia. He actually forbade it years ago because too many people were getting lost for hours."

"That's ... lovely." I glanced to my left as she sat the pitcher down and nodded. "So ... um ... who are you?"

"I am Kahsi." She grinned. "I am the only female who works here in the palace."

I sighed. That shouldn't have been a relief for me. I hated him. "Why is that?"

"Prince—I mean, King, oh, that's going to take some getting used to!" She giggled and I liked the way it made her eyes twinkle. "King Varan is unmarried and has been unattached since before the war. He may bring in females to keep him company from time to time, but he does not trust them. He trusts very few people."

"But he has males who live and work in his palace?"

She gave me a sideways grin as she poured the pale-red liquid into a wine glass. "The males are not trying to marry

him.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it. *Right. Duh.*

“But he keeps me around because I do not fawn over him. If he needs to be reprimanded, then I will do so.” She held the wine glass out to me. “And I cook better than his chef.”

That made me chuckle. I took the glass and held it up to my nose. It smelled sweet like sangria. “Is this blood?”

“*Blood?*” She shook her head. “*Dearest Canopy*, no. We do not drink blood—”

“What?” My jaw dropped. “At all? Ever?”

“No, Your Majesty. Though Ambrose did tell me of Earth’s vampire stories, so I am not confused as to your question.” She pushed the glass up to my mouth. “This is nectar. This is what we need to survive. Food and drink are supplemental. Your body was thrust back into its vampire form, yet you have not given it the sustenance it needs, and that is why your teeth are making music together.”

“Good to know.” I tossed the drink back and chugged it without even really tasting it. I licked my lips.

Kahsi’s eyes widened. She refilled my glass, then nodded.

So I chugged it again.

She giggled. “Your Majesty, you impress me. Have another but this time taste it.”

“Only if you stop calling me that title.”

She cocked her head to the side. “What name would you prefer?”

“Rhode. Please.” I held my glass up.

This time I drank it like a normal person.

Kahsi pointed to the window. “Those are the Shadow Mountains. They are what separates us from the demon kingdom of Isramorta. My mother used to tell me stories about the Court of Shadows vampires. They seemed a rather kind group. No one speaks of them much anymore.”

“Why not?” I asked between sips.

She sighed and shrugged one shoulder. Her black sweater dress looked much more comfortable than the lace one I wore. “King Varan lost his best friend, Lord Avalon. It haunts him to this day.”

No, don't feel sorry for him. Stop that. He's a twat. A beautiful, gorgeous twat.

My thoughts and feelings with Varan were super conflicting and growing worse with every interaction ... or more specifically, with every story I heard about him. *His* actions toward me made my growing need to punch him in the throat that much stronger. But a person did not gain any level of loyalty and kindness that way.

I finished the last sip of my drink, then handed the glass back to her. “Thank you.”

“How do you feel?”

“Sloshy.”

Kahsi snorted, then covered her face with her hand and laughed until she had tears in her eyes. It was contagious, so I laughed with her until the heaviness in my heart lightened a little.

“Dearest Canopy, that is by far the best thing I have ever heard.” She wiped her eyes. “I cannot wait to use it on King Varan. *Apologies, Your Majesty, I cannot run to the village tonight. I am rather sloshy.*”

We laughed again.

“So there is a village in this court?”

“Oh yes, but we keep it hidden. It is called Canopy of Dreams, and it’s just before the three bridges into the Court of Blood.” I must have made a face because she winked. “Return another night and I shall give you a tour.”

I smiled but it faded as soon as it started. “Kahsi, I am terrified.”

She sat on the sofa beside me. “Because Abba named you Queen?”

“Yes. Or at least that’s the biggest fear that I cannot figure out how to process let alone navigate. I just don’t know what to do.” I cringed and ran my hands through my hair. “Were you here during the war?”

“I am only twenty-five, so no, I did not know you then.” She eyed me carefully for a long moment. “You are a legend among our people though.”

I groaned. “That’s part of the problem. This person I was in my past life, which I’m still trying to wrap my head around being reincarnated but I digress, that person was so much *more* than me. I am not this Queen that I was then.”

“On the contrary, Rhode. You are exactly the Queen you were then.” She reached over and squeezed my hand. “You were not a titled woman when King Valandril selected you to be his bride.”

I frowned. “I wasn’t?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. You were a commoner ... and that is why you are a legend. Because you were *like us*. The King needed a new wife to bear him heirs who would

accept the crown Prince Varan rejected. He chose you for your beauty and your perseverance. The stories say he saw an inner strength in you that he wanted for his future sons. And when the war raged on, you lifted a sword and marched into the middle of the battle in your gown and fought for us.”

I did not know what to say, so I just stared at her.

“Do not sit here and worry yourself over the expectations of the titled crowd. They are few and far between. Put on your boots and go to the people. They are the ones in need of a Queen.” She stood and then waved her hand toward the wall. “Allow King Varan to deal with the privileged. He knows how to speak their language.”

Tears pooled in my eyes. I jumped up and tackled her in a hug. She was a couple inches taller than me and the exact same height as my foster mother, so this hug was quite comforting.

I pulled back sniffing and wiping my eyes. “Thank you. What was most helpful.”

“I am happy to hear that. You have a friend in me, Rhode. Do not hesitate to ask me for anything.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Can you get me out of here? I want to get back to Lakewell Palace. Lord Cresswell and Lady Hollyn must be worried sick. And I just ... I need to get away from *him*.”

“Some space will serve both your best interests until things settle.” She picked up the pitcher, poured half a glass, then smiled at me. “Get a bit more sloshy, then meet me outside the front doors. I shall have a carriage drawn for you.”

“How do I get to the front door?”

“Take a right outside this door, then watch for the grand staircase and take that down. This will become one staircase all the way down to the red carpet in the grand foyer.”

“Thank you very much.”

She pushed my glass toward my mouth and then nodded. “Finish this. I’ll see you shortly.”

Without another word, Kahsi turned and danced right out the door she’d come in from. I took a deep breath, chugged the rest of my drink, then sat the glass on the nightstand. With my chin held high, I marched out the door and toward the right, then straight until I hit the staircase. But as I was coming down that final stretch of stairs, right in direct view of the front doors, I saw a flash of purple in my peripheral vision.

I paused with my hand on the rail. Curiosity made me want to go investigate. There was no way Kahsi had gotten the carriage ready that fast. The purple magic flashed like lightning across the sky, sneaking out through a door that was slightly ajar. I moved closer, just wanting to take a peak, but as I got to it, I got a whiff of that scent again—that full-bodied red wine with hints of spice smell of his.

Varan was in that room doing something with magic.

I wanted to see. I *needed* to see.

So I took a deep breath, then pulled the door open wider and slipped inside. At first all I found was darkness. And then the room exploded into a neon-purple cloud. Bolts of violet lightning streaked across the ceiling. The air cracked and rumbled like thunder. Lavender mist billowed from the ground like fog on a lake.

And then I saw him.

My heart stopped.

Varan hovered six feet off the ground in the center of the room with his arms stretched wide. Tendrils of purple smoke and flame poured from each of his fingertips. Lightning flashed above him, and I realized he was shirtless. The cut of his muscles were sharp as fuck as his body strained. His skin glowed red and caused flashes of crimson across the darkness. His head was thrown back so I couldn't see his eyes, but the streaks of amber light matched his eye color.

My pulse was flying high. I didn't belong in here, not when he was using this much magic. It was dangerous. He also hated me, so I didn't need the assistance in the *hate Rhode game*. But I just couldn't get my feet to move.

All of a sudden, those amber eyes snapped to attention ... and landed right on me.

His expression was unreadable as he landed and started his march toward me. Purple and red flashed all around him. Lightning struck the ground in his wake. I scrambled to get out of the room, but my back slammed into a wall. For the first time since I'd actually met him, I was worried he was going to kill me.

He balled his hands into fists and magic slid up his arms. My pulse skipped. Knots formed in my stomach. Beads of sweat rolled down my spine and across my forehead. He growled and the whole world shook.

Then he lunged for me.

On total instinct alone, I threw my hands up and purple smoke shot out of my hands and slammed right into his face. The cloud faded and wrapped around his head. It did absolutely nothing.

“Your pathetic magic won’t work on me—*wait*.” He stopped short and scowled. His amber gaze shot down to my arms, then back to my face. The hate in his eyes faded ever so slightly but was replaced with genuine confusion, and if I dared to think it, perhaps a little bit of concern. “You should not be able to do that.”

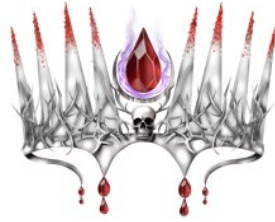
“I don’t even know what I did.”

Varan reached out and grabbed my arm, then shoved my sleeve up to reveal glowing purple veins. His brow furrowed. “You’re Court of Blood, that is not a gift bestowed upon you.”

“Um ... I don’t ... I didn’t ... I don’t know!” I didn’t wait for any kind of response. I simply turned and sprinted out of the room and across the red carpet to the front door. Outside, Kahsi stood beside Thuso and Paseka and Varan’s golden convertible carriage. “Take me to Lakewell Palace. Now. I can’t be here.”

Thirteen

RHODELIA



Put on your boots and go to the people. They are the ones in need of a Queen. I hadn't stopped thinking of Kahsi's words, even in my sleep they'd hunted me. I could not remember how I got from the carriage to the bed last night nor what I ate for breakfast, but I could remember her wise words.

Once we'd eaten a massive breakfast, I'd informed them of where I wanted to spend my day. We'd gotten in the carriage led by two raiths who appeared no different than a horse here.

We'd been walking since we got out of the carriage. But it was a glorious day. The sky was blue and bright. The Sun was warm. My fangs had slid back into my gums just enough that I wasn't biting my bottom lip at all times. Thuso had sent me a message that the raiths were well and resting after delivering me home. Things were a lot less gloom and doom this morning.

It wasn't until I stepped out into the sunlight today that I realized how much I would've been crushed if I'd lost that part of me too. Morgana only slipped into my thoughts every five minutes instead of every minute, so that was progress. I still needed to ask Varan if messages through The Veil were possible. And if he said no, then I'd sail over to the mage

kingdom and ask them. Or the fae, they were known on Earth to be tricky, and that legend had to come from somewhere.

But I was trying to push those thoughts away for now. This was my first venture into the Court of Blood and I wanted to soak it all in. I couldn't believe how much *stone* the city had. It gave me Ancient Rome vibes and that was cool. It was so completely different than the Court of Nightmares.

Some time ago I'd had Cresswell stop the carriage so we could walk. I loved to walk. I loved to immerse myself in the town and see it from their perspective. Everyone had been so nice and welcoming.

"Way down the road there's a red roof. That is City Hall. That's where you can go to hire a servant, maid, professors, tutors—things of that nature." Cresswell was pointing things out for me. "Across the street is where you'll find the bookshop and the bank. The tall glass windows belong to the library, and the printing press is right next door."

"And the flowers?"

He chuckled. "The florist. The gardener's shop is behind it.

As we crossed a street, I noticed a lot of store windows but a lot less foot traffic. "What are those?"

"If you need something made for a function not fashion, you walk that way." He held up his hands and started using his fingers to count as he named off places. "Armory, blacksmith, papermaker, stone mason, weavers, glaziers, carpenters, and really anything similar."

"There was one place we rode by in the carriage with purple shutters on the windows—"

"Yes, Cresswell, do explain that one." Hollyn giggled.

Cresswell's face turned bright-red. "It has been a long time, my love."

"*It's a brothel,*" Hollyn whispered, then burst into laughter.

I gasped. "You have brothels here?"

"Just the one!" Cresswell's face was almost purple it was so red. "I was young!"

Hollyn cackled and clapped her hands. She skipped forward so he chased after her.

Viera shook her head. "He is so preoccupied by her speaking of him being inside the brothel that he forgets she only saw him in there because *she* was inside."

"I have so many questions."

"Me too, Arlene. Me too." I laughed.

This area was beautiful. We'd passed the section with breweries, bakeries, butcher shops, and taverns. We saw all the artisan shops with breathtaking paintings on canvas, or their version of canvas. Everyone who went by smiled and bowed. They laughed and talked to each other, thriving in their chic outfits, even though all the women wore long gowns.

It reminded me of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Especially with the bright cloudless blue sky and birds flying overhead. Sure, there were no palm trees but these tall red bushy oaks—that was what I was now calling them—were stunning. It was like catching the perfect moment of autumn and keeping it year-round. The rose bushes were *everywhere*, so the air smelled deliciously sweet, fresh, and clean. If I just looked up at the tops of the buildings, I could pretend I was still home in California. The warm Sun shining down on my skin was a sweet relief after last night. I still felt chills.

A group of four women in silky white dresses and black wide-brimmed hats walked by us giggling with each other. Each of them was decked out in jewels on their hands and wrists. Their amulets were full-on works of art. Sure, my stone was four times the size, but it was just a pendant. Theirs had pea-sized stones braided into layered bronze chains, giving their best Chanel inspired look—even if they didn't know who Chanel was.

Across the cobblestone street, another group of women dressed to the nines walked out of a dressmaker's shop carrying three shopping bags each. They made a right turn, then went straight into the cobbler's place.

“Your Majesty?”

I flinched and turned toward Hollyn to ask why she'd reverted back to calling me that when I realized there were people within earshot. She and Cresswell had insisted that, at least for now, when in public I needed to be addressed appropriately. Cresswell said the kingdom needed to feel like I had everything under control. I could feel chaos inside but not show it. Strength for them.

So I smiled. “Yes, Lady Hollyn?”

She pointed to her right. “The others have continued without us.”

“What?” I looked over and discovered she was right. Cresswell, Viera, and Arlene were all at the next street corner. “I got distracted again, didn't I?”

Hollyn laughed as we started after the others. “Yes, and we let you. It's important for you to reconnect with your home.”

I nodded but didn't say anything. My chest had grown tight at the word *reconnect*. I still had not fully wrapped my

head around the idea that I'd been reincarnated. That I'd had a whole-ass life before this. Well, not a whole-ass life. Apparently, I'd died young. But still. It made me very uncomfortable. I'd finally just decided to go with it, to just accept that this was actually real and not a dream. But it would be nice if the memories would hurry the fuck up. I'd prefer to feel less crazy.

When we caught up with the others, they were standing on the corner. A carriage had rolled to a stop beside them, and a man was hanging out the window talking to Cresswell. Hollyn went over and joined. Arlene and Viera were playing with each other's hair and it was adorable. I was enjoying watching them be happy and cute together when my mind forced me to see Varan's face with that one black curl hanging over his forehead. My stomach turned. I looked away and my gaze landed on an outdoor cafe. People sat at tables with their goblets of wine and fancy salads.

Actually, wait. This IS exactly like Rodeo Drive. Same vibe. Then it hit me. These were all the wealthy people. They had money to afford all the nicest things, yet they weren't working. The street was clean. All of the shops were bright and airy and smelled nice.

"Your Majesty?" Cresswell ducked his head to get in my line of view. "Are you well?"

"I want to see the other areas of town," I blurted before I could stop myself.

Cresswell grinned and gestured in front of us. "Plenty more ahead of us."

Hollyn frowned and glanced to me. "I do not think she intends to see more of *this* area, my love."

“Oh. Right, well there’s lots to choose from if we go on carriage.” Cresswell rubbed his hands together, his yellow eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “The Basin, Lakeside, Canopy Bridge—”

“Cress, no.” Hollyn shook her head. “Those are all very lovely but not what she had in mind.”

I turned to Viera and Arlene standing behind us. They were holding hands and eyeing a white wedding dress in a shop window. I smiled and cleared my throat. When they looked to me with their eyebrows raised, I whispered, “Where do the ... *people* live?”

“Night Beach,” Arlene answered immediately. “Or along the river.”

Viera cocked her head to the side. “Yes, those. But I think she’d like to see the Night Bridge area.”

“*Ohh*,” Cresswell, Hollyn, and Arlene said at the same time.

My heart sank. “Yes. That area. Where they do not see *this*.”

Cresswell’s face fell. “I did not want to overwhelm you on your first day.”

“Your intentions were innocent, my love, we know.” Hollyn squeezed his hand. Her green eyes were sad. “Come, you need to see.”

I followed them closely, with Viera and Arlene behind me, for a few minutes as we turned corners here and there. With every few blocks, their auras grew darker and more tense like they were worried. No one spoke. But I understood why. I’d asked to see the less fortunate parts of the kingdom and they were answering. It *was* only my first day here. I’d only been

named Queen last night. Hell, I hadn't even been coronated yet. And while I did not want to be Queen, I didn't think I had any choice. I needed to see everything. I didn't want to be blindsided any more than I already was.

As we walked, the stones of the street and buildings grew dirtier like they needed a real good pressure cleaning. Windows were boarded up or broken. Every other store window was empty with a *FOR SALE* sign. It wasn't until we got over here that I realized there were no trees. No rose bushes. It was their version of the concrete jungle. I was no stranger to this. I grew up on the darker streets of Los Angeles.

Finally, we rounded a corner with a towering stone building and came around to a grand courtyard that was probably a gorgeous location normally. But right now, there were tents propped up and covering the whole thing. I stopped short, causing Viera and Arlene to crash into me. The image in front of me was so familiar I wanted to cry. Then I wanted to throw my scrubs on and get in there.

“*Rhode?*” Arlene asked softly. “We can go back—”

“No.” I licked my lips, my eyes locked on the people huddled beneath the tents. “This is overflow from the hospital, isn't it?”

“We call them infirmaries here,” Viera said with a nod. She pointed to the building we'd just walked around. “This is the new infirmary.”

“We just moved it here.” Cresswell sighed. “It used to be on Lake Lamaya, close to the nectar, but they just needed more room, so we moved them here where we had empty buildings.”

My eyebrows rose. “This huge building was empty? Why? What was it?”

“The Inns.” Arlene grimaced and twirled her red curls around her fingers.

Viera let out a pained sigh. “Before the war, the other kingdoms used to travel here. The Court of Shadows used to stay here when we hosted balls or if they wanted to enjoy the arts of the city. But no one travels here anymore and the Shadows ... well, we lost them.”

Hollyn’s eyes were glassy. “We are sad the space was empty but thankful we had it available for the infirmary ... and then even it was not enough.”

Cresswell eyed me oddly. “How did you know?”

“I am—*was*—a nurse in the emergency room. And this ...” I gestured to the overflow of patients, “... is what happens when there’s a natural disaster or a pandemic or something. When you have too many sick and injured to treat within the hospital so you must get creative in outdoor spaces and do your best to treat them.”

“Mother Terrea has blessed us with a Queen who can save us.”

My cheeks flushed. “No pressure, Cresswell. No pressure.”

He winked. “I have faith in you.”

“Well, let’s go see if we can help—”

“Rhode, no.” Hollyn threw her hand out in front of me to stop me. “It is not safe.”

“Why?”

“There is a ... sickness that has grown worse and worse over the years.” Cresswell shuddered. “We know not yet how to eradicate it. You are our Queen. We cannot risk your health.”

“I am your Queen. I cannot help heal them if I don’t know what is wrong.”

All four of them exchanged nervous glances.

“How long has this been going on?” My stomach turned.

“A long while.” Hollyn’s face fell. “But it has become difficult to fight.”

“It is contagious,” Arlene whispered.

“We do not know that yet,” Viera said in a rush like she was trying to calm her down.

I opened my mouth to insist I was going in there when neon-purple flames burst from a crack between the cobblestones. Varan stepped out of his magic and our gazes met. Those amber eyes in the sunlight looked like honey. They were as stupid pretty as the rest of him. He wore the same black outfit, but his hair was a tad more disheveled and wild. He had no right looking at good as he did.

“King Varan,” Viera said in a rush. She dropped into a deep bow.

By the time I looked down, Arlene and Hollyn had dropped into the same. Only Cresswell remained standing with me. He just nodded his head in a bow. When those amber eyes shot to me again, I tipped my head as much as I could muster.

Varan adjusted his shirt sleeves. “I need to speak with Rhodelia. In private.”

My eyes widened. That was the single nicest comment he'd made to me so far.

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Hollyn bowed again before standing and dragging Cresswell and Viera down the sidewalk with her. "Come now, Arlene."

But Varan did not wait. He walked forward, grabbed me by the elbow, and dragged me beneath a balcony with a row of columns and bushy red plants hanging everywhere. He yanked his hand back and stopped, letting me scramble away from him.

"To what do I owe the honor, Your Majesty?"

He arched one eyebrow.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "What do you want, Varan? Spit it out. I was in the middle of something—"

"You're a half-breed." He leaned one shoulder into a marble column, looking like the picture of ease while his eyes aimed daggers at my face. "I looked into your birth. Your mother belonged to this court, but your father was in mine."

"That's what you came here to tell me?" I rolled my eyes, spun around, and walked away. "Thanks for the ancestry update. It was very important information I needed right now."

"Jaako thought it important."

I froze. *Jaako*. That was the Knight from the forest last night, the one who'd started screaming because of *me*. My breath hitched.

"Ah, so you *do* remember him," Varan purred.

I spun back around and pointed my finger at him. "*That was an accident.*"

He slid his hands into the pockets of his black pants and strolled towards me. When he stopped in front of me, the toes of his boots hit mine. He leaned down so his mouth was only a couple inches from my face. *“Is it important now?”*

I clenched my teeth together and exhaled through my nose. Rage filled my veins. My hands were fists at my sides. I glared up at him. Words were not coming. All I had was fury in my bones that I wanted to unleash on him, but I was not about to strike the King, so I had to settle with using my eyes.

He said nothing more. He just stared into my eyes like he wanted to melt me with his gaze.

“I have no time for your cruel mind games,” I said with a growl before I turned and stomped away.

Neon-purple flames burst from the ground *right* in front of me. Varan emerged from his magic faster than I could get my body to stop moving. I crashed into his chest and the heat radiating off of him made me furious. *How dare you be so warm and let me freeze. How dare you toy with my emotions. How dare you smell that good.* His hands gripped my shoulders, then *shoved me*. I flew backwards and crashed into a column.

“What is your proble—”

Suddenly he was right in front of me with a snarl. He grabbed my wrist and yanked it up between us. I wanted him to kiss my hand like Cresswell had. And then I wanted to slap him with that same hand. But he didn’t. He pushed my dress sleeve up to my elbow to reveal glowing purple veins.

I gasped.

“Is it important now?”

Fuck. I narrowed my eyes at him. “You are insufferable.”

He gripped my hand in his, his fingers wrapping all the way around my hand. Then he pressed his other hand on the inside of my forearm from wrist to almost elbow. His skin was so warm I actually leaned into his hold. It was mortifying, yet I could not pull away. There was tension and tightness in my muscles I had not even registered until the heat of his touch had chased them away.

To my horror, I leaned forward—he dropped my hand. I wobbled but caught myself before my face hit his chest. My pulse was flying high.

And then he grabbed my other hand and put his hands on me in the same way. Heat filled my body like a heated blanket. It was such a relief my eyes closed on their own accord. I bit my bottom lip.

He lowered my hand. *“You are a blister on my kingdom.”*

My eyes flew open. I gasped and shoved him with both hands. “I’ll give you a blister to complain about. Try me.”

He laughed deep in his throat, and it sent a chill down my spine but butterflies in my stomach. “I’d like to see *you* try.”

“You—”

“Especially now.”

“What does that mean?” I narrowed my eyes. His gaze flicked to my hands, so I looked down. The purple veins had gone back to normal. “What did you do to me?”

“Your father was from the Court of Nightmares—”

“I said, what did you do to me?”

“I made you inoperative.”

“You stole my magic?”

“That you did not know you had? Yes. As is my right as King.” He growled and pointed to my hands. “Unless you would prefer to hurt innocent people *by accident?*”

“I don’t even know how I did that—”

“Therein lies the whole problem, *Rhodelia.*”

Heat bloomed inside of me at the sound of my name on his lips. *Shut up, traitorous body. We hate this beautiful nightmare.* “The problem, Your Majesty, is that no one will teach me what I need to learn. I cannot learn if you steal it from me—”

“The people need not know their Queen is not in control of herself,” he snapped, then glanced around. “*Rhodelia*, what would you do if last night happened again, pray tell? What would you have done last night for Jaako if Ambrose and Conray had not arrived? Other than stand there and scream.”

I clenched my teeth together and groaned.

“Your magic is blocked to ensure you do not kill anyone until you can be taught.” He shoved his hands back into his pockets. “Which brings me to my other reason for being here today. To ensure safety, I have sent someone from Elden Palace to keep an eye on you in the evening—”

“As if I believe you care about my safety.”

“I never said it was *for* you. It is to protect my people *from* you.”

“Who is this stranger you’re forcing me to be around—”

“Kahsi.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh*. What happened, *Rhodelia*, do you like who I have suggested?” He laughed but it was not playful. “Kahsi is concealing herself from the Sun as we speak within Lakewell Palace. She is to be near you during all evening hours. This is not up for discussion—”

“Fine.”

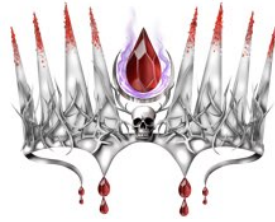
He narrowed his eyes. “Fine.”

“Is that all?”

He nodded so I took off away from him. It was unfair that I could not step into the Sun’s rays and be protected from him. I stormed away from him, back to where I’d left my actual friends. But I was so caught up in the rageful aftermath that I did not notice all of the commotion until a young man fainted in front of me. I dove forward and caught him in my arms. I gasped and looked up ... and found bodies lying on the stone.

Fourteen

RHODELIA



The weight of him surprised me, and my legs gave out. Apparently, vampire strength was not a trait I'd inherited. His long orange-ish red hair had draped over his face, so I brushed it back—and gasped.

His body was sunburnt, like third-degree sunburnt.

I went to press my fingers to his throat when my ears picked up the beat of his pulse. It was low and weak, but it was there. “What’s happening? Why is his skin burnt?”

Varan slid in front of me, then carefully lifted the young man out of my arms without touching his skin. “Check the others,” he barked, then leapt halfway across the courtyard.

I scrambled across the cobblestone to the first body—a woman in an ivory lace gown. When I got to her, I found the same problem, her skin red as an apple. But she had more of her body covered so it was easier for me to scoop her up. To my surprise, my new strength must have kicked in because I'd never carried a full-grown woman like this. But by the time I got her under the tent to where healers and nurses were scrambling, Varan had collected all of the other bodies that had fallen.

Healers and nurses ran back and forth with panicked expressions. People were being laid in a bed next to another

person. A man with a thick red mustache stood there staring at his own arms as they turned red by the second.

“Your Majesty, we need to get you out of here—”

“Like hell you do.” I waved Viera off. “Talk to me—”

“*Mama!*” a little kid screamed as she ran into the tent, but her steps faltered and she crashed into my leg.

I bent down to steady her—and choked on a gasp. This was a small child, no more than eight or nine years old, yet her hair was gray. Her skin was ashy pale and wrinkled. She looked like an old lady. She looked like she could barely stand.

“*Where’s Mama?*” she cried, and it broke my heart.

I scooped her up on my hip. “Do you see her?”

The girl rested her head on my shoulder. She lifted her wrinkled graying hand up and pointed across the tent. “Blue ... dress ...”

There was only one person in a blue dress, so I hugged the girl tight to my body and hurried her over to her mother. She cried out and dove out of my arms, landing on a woman who looked damn near mummified. She was barely more than skin and bones. It was like someone had taken a good piece of fruit and dehydrated it.

As mom and daughter clung to each other I looked up and spotted Hollyn and Cresswell in the thick of it. They’d rolled up their sleeves and got to work. But no one seemed to know what to do. Even the healers and nurses were in a panic.

People were screaming because their skin burned.

Others groaned and whined.

I knew both sounds too well. They were of people in pain. People suffering.

I raced over to Hollyn and Cresswell. “What’s happening?”

“We don’t know!” Cresswell shouted. “It just keeps coming in waves.”

“Luetta, what can we do?” Hollyn focused on a woman with her hair in braids. “You’re the lead healer. Tell us what you need.”

“We need more supplies,” Luetta yelled over the panic. “We’ve already worked through our supply today.”

Cresswell rubbed his hands together. “I know where you keep things. Tell me what to grab and I will grab it.”

“Creams and oils,” I heard myself say.

Luetta’s head snapped up in my direction. “Your Majesty, you should not be in here—”

“I’m a nurse. This is what I do—”

“Not anymore, Your Majesty.” Luetta snapped her fingers and gestured for me to leave. “Lady Hollyn, take what cream we have left and rub it on anyone blistering. It helps with the pain. Albertha! Go with Lord Cresswell to the apothecary. Bring everything.”

Hollyn ran away with a bowl in hand. She yelled to another woman across the tent, “Ethel, the others need oil. Hydrate their skin. Mix nectar in it!”

“*Your Majesty!*”

I jumped back but Luetta was in my face. “I want to help.”

Luetta's face went rigid. "Then discover what is killing us. There is no one else who can."

My heart broke. These people were suffering. Dozens of them. The nurse in me wanted to dive in and treat them but I was in way over my head here. I hadn't even been here twenty-four hours. I didn't understand this realm or this kingdom enough to actually help. I'd never felt so helpless, and I hated it.

I glanced around, hoping to find something helpful I could do when I spotted Varan standing a few feet over with his hands on his head and his amber eyes wide. I ran over to him. "What can we do for them?"

He shook his head. His eyes were haunted and broken.

I put my hand on his arm. "I'm new here. Why aren't we doing anything?"

"They will not allow us to help them. We are royalty," he said with a growl through clenched teeth.

"They won't allow you? You're their *King*. Why do you obey?"

He glanced down at my hand on his arm, then turned his eyes on mine. "If I knew how to cure them, I would. My hate lies only with *you*, not them."

Ouch. He DOES hate me. Great confirmation. I pulled my hand off of him but refused to let him see how much his words stung. "So, you are just a shit King."

"I never asked to be King," he whispered, his eyes locked on something in the distance.

Just then Cresswell came sprinting back to the tent carrying a woman who looked well over a hundred years old.

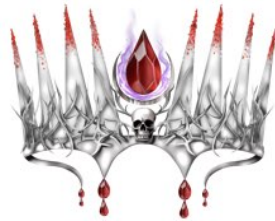
“Maybe *he* should be then.”

“Abba didn’t ask my permission to crown me, *Rhodelia*.”

“Then let’s ask her to change her mind.” I put my hands on my hips. “What do we have to lose?”

Fifteen

RHODELIA



Prince Varan whistled twice.

The people of Isramaya deserved a better Queen.

A real Queen.

Someone who knew how to lead people. Someone who knew how to make big picture decisions. Someone who could actually find resolutions to problems, not just acknowledge that there was a big one. They needed the doctor, not the nurse. That was the whole reason I never wanted to go to medical school, I did not want that responsibility or the pressure. I didn't want to diagnose and decide plans. I wanted to hold the patients' hands and help them get through it. I liked being on the front line, doing the dirty work. I wanted to help them be as comfortable as possible, to help see them through it.

That wasn't a King or Queen's job.

Two brown horses came flying around the corner with a topless carriage strapped to them. Dust kicked up behind them as they beelined straight for Varan. They slid to a stop right in front of him, their tails swishing excitedly. He reached out and pet them both at the same time, a horse per hand. They neighed and licked his hands as he spoke softly to them in a language I did not know.

I walked up and the horses looked to me excitedly. I smiled and held my hands out. “Are they raiths?”

“Yes. Let’s go.” He climbed inside the carriage and sat down. “Now, *Rhodelia*.”

Twat. I pet the raiths once more, then hurried to get in the carriage. To my horror, there was only one bench, which meant I had to sit next to him. But I had to pretend like he didn’t bother me at all or he won, so I just sat down and crossed my arms over my chest. He whistled again and the raiths took off like rockets. My hair whipped back behind my head, but the breeze felt nice. What didn’t feel nice was his leg pushing against mine.

The heat coming off of him was like my own personal heater that I wasn’t allowed to use or it would burn me. All I wanted was to curl up next to it. This attraction to him needed to die a painful death. He needed to be so much more of an asshole to me that my body got the memo. The carriage hit a bump that sent me sliding against his leg. The intense electricity that shot up and down my body made me shiver.

His eyes tracked my shiver, then he snarled and looked away from me.

I rolled my eyes and turned to watch the city go by. It was like the second he was out of my sight my brain and body functioned normally again. And then the guilt slid firmly into place. “I hate that we left them,” I heard myself mumble.

He didn’t respond. That was fine. I wasn’t even really talking to him. We rode past people huddling under shop stoops and awnings to get some shade, their skin bright red. As we went by, people stopped and waved at us with big smiles like they weren’t sick at all. We crossed a street, then made a sharp left turn followed by a sharp right turn and then we were

on another street lined with shops. It wasn't anything like vampire-Rodeo Drive, this felt more like Main Street in small town, USA. The walls were made of smaller stones that needed a little more care than they were getting but nothing was boarded up over here. Each side of the street had the red bushy oak trees and benches for people to sit on beneath them.

People moved in and out of the shops, wearing fancy turtleneck coats that covered them from jaw to wrist like they were hiding from the Sun. They wore wide brimmed hats, carried fancy umbrellas, or held whatever they had in their hands over their faces to provide shade for themselves. Everyone seemed to be either hugging the walls to stay in the shade or running in the Sun. Clearly, they also were suffering but weren't doing as bad as the people by the infirmary.

My stomach tightened into knots. *"I hate that we left them."*

"If you say that one more time, I will throw you out of this carriage."

"I only said it twice."

"Twice too many."

Part of me wanted to say it again just to piss him off. The bigger part of me wasn't sure he wouldn't throw me out of the carriage while it was moving. My stomach was in knots. Just then an entire family, parents and three children, walked out of a shop and they all looked like senior citizens. Graying hair. Wrinkled, dried out skin.

"I don't understand what's happening."

"No one does," he growled.

I pointed to the family as we passed. "Thuso said he'd start showing his age at nine hundred years old. Those *children* are

not nine hundred—”

“They are dying,” he whispered in the softest voice I’d ever heard from him.

I whimpered. “Children are dying from unknown causes, and instead of helping them I’m running off to beg the Priestess to name someone else Queen. So selfish.”

He sighed *hard*. “Do you want to be Queen, Rhodelia?”

“No—”

“Are you qualified to be Queen of a kingdom you’ve lived in for less than twenty-four hours? One you did not know existed?”

“No, of course not—”

“Do you understand the workings of vampire health enough to break down the cause of this mystery illness?”

“No, I don’t—”

“Then stop. In the name of Mother Terrea, just stop.” He growled and balled his hands into fists in his lap. “I have not your need to condemn myself for knowing I am not what they need and wanting to put someone else in the throne who *is*.”

The raiths made a right turn and headed straight for a wall of red and purple.

“What’s that?” I pointed.

There was a long silence, like he was considering not answering me. “That’s the Canopy of Dreams.”

I leaned forward as the carriage moved closer. The wall was actually a forest of bushy trees with a million leaves on them. Some of the trees were a deep magenta while others were a bright fuchsia color. The Forest of Fears wrapped

around it, but I only knew that because of the purple trees. It was like my old *Lisa Frank* school supplies had come to life.

When the carriage made a left turn and headed *away* from the Canopy of Dreams, I frowned. I wanted to see inside the village. With colors like those and a name like that, it had to be spectacular. But I'd go another time with someone *else*. He'd said Kahsi was going to be my lady's maid. I would ask her to give me a tour.

Guilt poked its ugly head back out. There I was thinking about getting a tour of a village when the village was probably suffering. I glanced over my shoulder at the city getting farther and farther away. When I'd suggested going to the temple to ask Abba to name someone else as Queen, I'd meant it. I didn't want to be Queen. Power was never something I craved or desired. It just made sense in my head to get someone else named as rulers so someone could make big decisions. And fast.

"I feel like we've abandoned them in their time of need."

"How very empathetic of you."

"Only a monster ridicules a person for being compassionate," I said through clenched teeth, my eyes narrowed on him. "Only a monster sees what we just saw and feels *nothing*."

He growled.

I arched one eyebrow. "I know you felt something back there. I saw your face—"

"Are you finished?"

"Are you starting?"

“You know nothing of this kingdom or the people within it, yet you attack me for not weeping in the face of yet another red wave.” He shook his head in disgust. “As much as I cherish every reason to hate you, I do not ridicule your compassion. Whether Queen or commoner, you’ll need to harden those emotions of yours or you’ll never survive here.”

“I just don’t understand how they just kicked us out like that. We could’ve helped.” I rubbed my face with my hands. “I know I am new here, but you are their King!”

“Since last night.”

“You were born their prince—”

“Against my will.”

“How very entitled of you—”

“How very judgmental of you,” he snarled and spun to face me for the first time since we got in the carriage. His eyes were blazing like embers in a fireplace. “How dare you insist none of this is real yet behave as though you know better? How dare you try to kill yourself in a desperate attempt to escape Terrea mere hours after arriving while simultaneously judging those of us born here for how we cope with our trauma and lives?”

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

“You sneer at me as though I laugh and spit on their suffering simply because I am not running around in a panic like Cresswell,” he said.

“Of course he was panicked! He was trying to help—”

“Help comes in various images, *Rhodelia*.” His fangs elongated, biting into his bottom lip and dragging all my attention to his mouth when it had no right to go there. Ever. “I

am not discrediting Cresswell and Hollyn and their efforts to save our people. They are doing the best they can, but they are not King and Queen. They are Lord and Lady, and it is their job to get their hands dirty to treat them. As King—or Prince—it is my job to find out WHY they are sick in the first place. And while you're eager to jump in and aid the dying, you are overlooking the great offense you put on your people by not respecting the customs of *their* kingdom.”

“You're right.”

His eyes were wild. “Excuse me?”

“*I said* you're right. I did not know it was offensive—”

“Because you do not know Isramaya nor Terrea—”

“Hence why I should never have been made Queen.”

“You have no need to convince me.” He gripped that silver vial on his necklace and held it.

I swatted his leg and hissed. “Can you not man-spread right now? There are two people in this carriage.”

He growled.

I clenched my teeth and looked away from him. I had no idea why I thought I could get anywhere with him. He was an asshole at best. There was no logical reason for him to hate me so much. I had no idea what I'd done to warrant such vitriol.

When we turned onto a stone bridge, I almost asked which one it was but then I remembered reading the map over breakfast. If *Canopy of Dreams* was to my right, then this was the Night Bridge. The bridge itself was made of stone like the rest of the court and it truly amazed me how they were able to build without technology. We passed beneath an archway so

covered in moss and purple flowers that I had no idea what it was made of.

I leaned over to look down at the river and gasped. “It’s red.”

Varan sighed.

“The river is red.” I leaned back and glanced over at him. “Why is the river red?”

“It’s nectar.”

“And it’s *red*?”

He rolled his eyes. “*By the Blood*. Did you not see the river last night? Did you not look out the window in your chamber to Lake Lamaya?”

“*It was dark outside!*” I crossed my arms over my chest and started to sit back when I spotted a building propped up on a small mountain. It was hard to see through the trees, but it sat by itself. “What’s that?”

“The temple.”

We crossed under another mossy, flower-covered archway and into the land of purple trees. I wasn’t sure if this was also the Forest of Fears, but I wasn’t going to ask. He’d just answered two questions back-to-back, so I had to tread carefully. The road grew rougher, turning from solid stone to small cobblestones. The purple trees formed a sort of tunnel, forcing everyone who entered from The Night Bridge onto a narrow road.

Despite the Sun sitting high in the sky, it was actually dark beneath the trees. The street was so narrow there wouldn’t be room for two carriages at the same time. Buildings lined both sides, but they were nothing like Court of Blood. While they

were made of stone, it seemed like the forest had claimed them. Trees grew up, over, and through the buildings. Lanterns hung from the branches that stretched over the cobblestone road. Each had little golden light inside as if they'd captured bits of the Sun. Vibrant green vines covered the first floor of each building, leaving one or two floors above them. Something about the entire combination reminded me of brownstone townhouses in Manhattan.

“Where are the people?”

When he didn't respond, didn't even growl or sigh, I turned to look at him. He just arched that one black eyebrow beneath the lone curl in his face and waited. Behind him I saw streaks of golden light streaming in through the branches.

“Oh. The Sun, right.”

He rolled his eyes.

“*Insufferable.*” I huffed and spun back to face forward.

I focused my attention on the raiths. When they'd picked us up, they'd been beautiful brown horses. But now, they were dark gray-ish color with legs that were wisps of smoke and darkness. One of them had pale-pink spots like a Dalmatian while the other had bigger spots like a cow.

“What are their names?”

He took a deep breath, then sighed. “We are here.”

I looked up—and gasped. There it was, the same temple I'd seen a few minutes ago. It stood out amidst the sea of purple trees but would've fit in perfectly with the Court of Blood's vibe. *Aka: total Ancient Rome vibes.* From the outside it didn't look anything special, just a raised stone platform in a square shape with three fancy columns on each side. There was some kind of structure inside the center of it—

“*Rhodelia*,” Varan growl-yelled.

I cursed and scrambled to get out of the carriage. When I hurried to the front to say bye, they let me nuzzle their faces. “You are so pretty, guys.”

Varan sighed. “Stronic and Roesemin.”

“Oh, what pretty names—”

“*Rhodelia. Now.*”

I let out a growl of my own and climbed out of the carriage. “We can’t all vanish into flames. Back off, *asshat*.”

“*Asshat?*”

“Yes, *asshat*.” I stomped up to him and stopped so there were a mere two inches between our bodies. “As in, you wear your ass like a hat.”

Without waiting for him, I spun on my toes and raced to the temple. I hurried up the two steps, slipping between two of the columns until I got to the wall inside with massive archways cut out. Every part of me wanted to power through on my own, but his words about being ignorant to the culture here made me stop.

He gave me a dirty look that I instantly wanted to punch. For this, I let him lead the way through the archway and inside. I walked close enough behind him that he sensed my presence. Every time he glanced over his shoulder with a snarl, my smile got wider. It was immature but I was taking my little victories whenever I could.

He reached back and gripped my upper arm, dragging me up beside him. I gasped. Heat rushed through my body and filled my cheeks. Electricity pulsed up my arm and down into my fingers.

“Rhodelia.”

I hated the way he said my name because I loved the way he said it. There was something very, very wrong with me. But all I could do was blink up at him through my dark eyelashes and bite my bottom lip. “Yes?”

His gaze dropped to my mouth, then he snarled and shoved me away from him. “I want to get this over with so I never have to see your face again, got it?”

It was like he’d dumped a bucket of ice water over my head. I nodded. “The feeling is mutual.” *God, I wish that was true.* Yes, he was mean to me, but so far that was only verbally. He was so loved by everyone else that the only logical answer was that my existence disgusted him.

Nothing I could do about that.

Varan sank to his knees at the base of a white marble staircase. I glanced up, then did a double take. I’d been so caught up and obsessed with watching *him* that I hadn’t taken a moment to look at my surroundings. I did now though. This inner chamber of the temple was made of white marble and stone and there was only one thing inside: a white marble tree. I watched as Varan closed his eyes.

I followed his lead and sank to my knees beside him. *Okay, I need to pray here. I need to know what to say first.* I stared up at the white tree trying to collect my thoughts. We had to have legitimate reasons to tell Abba. We couldn’t just behave like spoiled teenagers. I had my emotions and my logic yet saying them out loud felt wrong.

How can I rule the people if I don’t know the people? I don’t know how they live, how they make money, what their customs are. Nothing. I know nothing. These are things a

person should know before they become Queen. I would need an insane amount of help and guidance. The Queen is supposed to be the one guiding, not the other way around. I know nothing about politics and monarchies. I don't know how to be a Queen, and these people need someone who does.

Varan knows, but he's useless. Refuses to be helpful to spite me. Refuses to be King because he's ... well, I don't know why. But I assume it's because of his father being a monster.

Wait, is that why I was selected? Am I to produce heirs to the throne? I glanced up at Varan beside me and heat rushed my body. Butterflies danced in my stomach. *Quit that, body. We're focusing. He's an asshole. Just stop.*

All of a sudden, the white marble tree turned glistening gold.

“Mother Terrea said you'd be here within twenty-four hours.”

I gasped and spun around to find Abba standing behind us, leaning on the archway. The sunlight shining in from behind her gave her wild, curly purple hair a halo effect and made her lavender eyes sparkle.

I bowed. “*Priestess.*”

Varan stood and then bowed his head. “Abba.”

“*I said you'd be here before nightfall.*” She grinned as she pushed off the wall and strolled around us, the long train of her ivory gown trailing behind her. She started up the steps that surrounded the white marble tree but stopped in front of Varan and arched one eyebrow. “No sassy retort? Hmm, this *must* be serious.”

I glanced back and forth between them. Of course the Prince of Isramaya had a friendship with the Priestess. That

did not surprise or bother me. It was the playful tone in her voice that surprised *and* bothered me. It was one more person he was nice to while being a dick to me.

Varan sighed. “I do hope I earned you enough on that wager for some shoes.”

“That’s better.” Abba grinned. Then she turned her gaze to me. “Ah, Rhode, you’ve had a rough start here, haven’t you?”

I frowned. “You called me *Rhode*.”

She cocked her head to the side. “That is what you prefer to be called.”

“Yes, but ... I didn’t tell you that.”

She shrugged and climbed to the top step, then sat down. “It’s in my job description to know things.”

That wasn’t surprising either, but it did answer the question I was really asking. I licked my lips nervously. “So, then, do you know why we’re here?”

“She knows,” Varan growled.

“I asked *HER*,” I snapped back.

Abba chuckled and leaned back against the now golden tree. “This has been fun already, hasn’t it?”

Varan glared down at me before looking back to her. “You know why we’ve come—”

“And *you* know the rules, *King* Varan.” Abba waved her hand at him. “Your Queen does not yet know how this goes, so lead by example.”

“You know what we want to ask but we still have to ask it out loud?”

Abba’s eyes brightened. “I like you. You’re quick.”

Varan sank down to one knee and pressed his hand to his chest, so I quickly copied. He spoke with a gentle voice, one I'd never heard before. "Sacred Princess and Mother Terrea, we come to you in desperation and request. While we are honored by the gift of the throne, we wish to be replaced as candidates for King and Queen of Isramaya."

Abba looked to me, then back to him. "Mother Terrea heard both of your pleas when you entered her temple here. She knows what lies in your hearts and the reasons you both claim make you unfit to rule. She sent me here with her decision ..."

I held my breath.

Varan's entire body tensed.

"Should you choose to reject the blessing Mother Terrea has bestowed upon you, you simply must discover why your people are dying and cure them."

That breath I'd held burst out of me with a string of coughs.

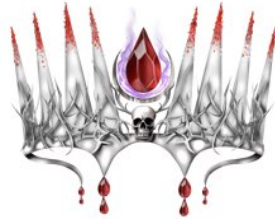
Varan sank onto both knees and hung his head.

"Oh, and you must also cure the Sacred Tree for it is succumbing to sickness since your father stole some of her roots. The glamour I've had on her for fifty years won't last much longer." Abba grinned and got to her feet. "Those are the conditions you must meet in order to be released from your responsibility. The choice is in your hands now."

And then she was gone.

Sixteen

RHODELIA



I have to think for a minute.

That was what Varan had said to me when he loaded me in the carriage with Stronic and Roesemin. He'd told them to deliver me to Lakewell Palace and then he'd vanished into his purple flames.

Three hours ago.

I'd changed my clothes into a more practical dress without as much bling, then went right back to the infirmary to see if I could help Cresswell and Hollyn. That was where I'd been since. The Sun setting ten minutes ago was the only way I'd realized how long Varan had been gone. We needed to talk. We needed a plan. Our plan didn't work quite the way either of us hoped it would. We went to Abba with the best of intentions. Neither of us were giving up on the people, we both *wanted* to help, we just genuinely thought there were better people for the job. And as I spent the last three hours watching Cresswell and Hollyn be incredible leaders, I knew we were right.

My goal now was to deep-dive into this problem and find out why the vampires were dying. I was a nurse. I had experience in medicine and treating people. That *had* to count for something. It had to. With every passing minute, I was more and more grateful my human life had taken me to

nursing. In my heart, I knew that wasn't a coincidence. Mother Terrea gave me a second chance at life, to do things right. I had no idea what led me to marry the evil King, but I did know I'd done my part to end him. Reincarnation still freaked me out to think about, but I knew in my gut there was a reason I was a nurse. Something told me Mother Terrea put me on a path to arm me with the information and experience needed to save my people. And that had to be the same reason She chose me to be Queen.

I still had no desire to be Queen. Hollyn needed to be. She knew this kingdom in and out. They adored her. I was going to make her their next Queen. I just had to figure out why they were dying. But I was too new here. I had no memories of my past life. That probably would have helped a lot. So, this meant I needed Varan.

“Queen Rhodelia?” A little eight-year-old girl, with cherry red ringlets whose skin was almost as red as her hair, tugged on my skirt. “Can you read another one?”

“Yeah, can you?” This one was a little five-year-old whose skin had burned in splotches.

There was a chorus of *yeah* all around me. I grinned and closed the book I'd been reading to the small herd of children sitting around me. When I'd shown back up, the healers hadn't wanted me to help with the medical treatment, and I'd been trying my hardest to hear what Varan had said about their culture and what would offend them. But it was killing me. So the moment a little boy asked me to read a book to him and the other kids, I saw my way to help.

“All right, little ones.” Hollyn reached out and took my hand, lifting me to my feet. She was pulling me out of the

circle. “Queen Rhodelia needs to check on a few things, but she can come back later.”

Cresswell slid in beside me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Let’s all thank Queen Rhodelia for reading for us.”

“Thank you!” another chorus of shouts.

I blew them air kisses. “Thank you for letting me!”

Cresswell crouched down and wagged his eyebrows. “Would you like me to read for you for a while?”

“YEAH!”

He grinned up at me. “Get out of here.”

I winked at him, then let Hollyn lead me away from the kids. She hooked her arm through mine. “I like helping.” My voice was a little raw from reading books out loud for three hours.

She bumped her shoulder into mine as we walked. “I know you do. I also understand the desire to do more but not being allowed to. I was a commoner when Cresswell found me. It took me years to grasp the concept.”

“Yet you’re allowed to help now.”

“Because I am not their Queen,” she said softly with a smile. “I am Lady Hollyn of the Court. I’m sort of their mother in a way. They learned they could come to me for anything.”

“Shouldn’t the Queen be that for them?”

She pursed her lips. “I believe in my heart you could be. But right now they are terrified and they need you and King

Varan to save them. So, if you are helping tend to their illness as I am, then you are not finding the cause.”

My stomach turned like a sea storm with forty-foot waves.

“They have not had a Queen or King for fifty years, not since Valandril. They need you two now more than ever.”

“Hasn’t Varan been helping at all since the war?”

“Oh yes, immensely.” She waved at someone but kept us walking. “But now he is King, so they expect more from him. They expect him to save them from what his father did. From all of this. That is why they don’t want you to help. It may not make sense in your mind, but there’s a reason.”

“Trauma does wild things to the brain.” I sighed. “It’s probably for the better, human medicine and what you have here are quite different. I just need to help *somehow*.”

“Trust me, watching and listening to these sick children laugh and giggle is benefiting everyone.” She gave a wistful sigh. “There’s just something about it that cheers a soul.”

“And yet you dragged me away—”

“*Can you hear your voice?*” We laughed. She shrugged one shoulder. “I made the right call.”

“Thank you.” I frowned and looked around. “Where are Viera and Arlene?”

Hollyn pulled me to a stop, then pointed to the right. “They’re tending to other adults.”

I spotted the two of them side-by-side tending to some elderly-looking patients who were probably very young. The burned skin was interesting. The fact that no one had turned up burned since the Sun went down had to be a clue. I suspected their ability to withstand sunlight was fading, severed

somehow. Part of me wanted to tell Varan to force them all to stay indoors, but I had a bad feeling that would create mass panic.

But the elderly thing ... that was unnerving. Last night at the ball I'd seen a man with dark, almost black, red hair that fell in perfect waves to his elbows. I remembered because his hair was fabulous. An hour later that same man showed up to the infirmary hunched over with his hair gray like ash and falling out. One of the nurses I'd seen this morning was now in a bed looking anorexic and hollowed out. It didn't make sense.

My thoughts kept wondering about the Court of Nightmares. I hadn't seen them since the ball, and now that I realized only the wealthy members of Court of Blood had been present, that perhaps it was the same for the Nightmares. I hadn't seen anyone out and about earlier. Granted, the Sun was out. My mind kept flashing back to those people in the basement of Elden Palace. Hundreds of them sitting like statues with their black and purple whirlpool eyes and black lines on their faces. Varan had rushed me out, but now I needed to ask.

“Rhode?”

I jumped and found Hollyn standing in front of me with her red brow furrowed. Her emerald-green eyes were sad and watching me. “You need to take a break. Get some air. You’ve put too much pressure on yourself.”

I need Varan to show up. Maybe I should go look for him—No, that hasn't gone well so far. He already hates me. I need him to not hate me more. Whatever reason he had to hate me needed to not matter right now. If I wanted to get my freedom back, then I needed his help.

“Oh, perfect timing! Kahsi is here!”

I spun around and spotted Kahsi hurrying toward us. In the dark, her deep plum-colored hair looked as black as her dress. But those light, golden eyes sparkled like candlelight. She grinned as she bounced over to me, then lowered into a curtsy. “Your Majesty.”

“Kahsi!” When she stood, I tackled her with a hug. I’d only met her briefly, but I thought we’d bonded. Or maybe it was my need for connection after losing my sister and Saphira—and Varan hating me. So when Kahsi squeezed me back, it almost made me cry. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“I’m happy to be here.” She stepped back with a grin, then looked to Hollyn and bowed her head. “Lady Hollyn, it’s nice to see you.”

Hollyn grinned and squeezed her hand. “It has been too long, Kahsi.”

“I know. Prince Varan has kept me busy of late.” She grimaced. “I meant *King* Varan. I’m still working on that habit.”

We all laughed.

“Well, Kahsi, your timing is perfect. Rhode needs a break —”

“I’m highly trained in this department. Pri—*King* Varan usually must be forced to do things like sleep and eat.” She hooked her arm around my elbow. “Come, let us take a walk to Lake Lamaya so you can breathe.”

“Thank you, Kahsi. Rhode, you know where to find us.”

“Thanks, Hollyn. Holler if you need anything-”

“Holler?” Hollyn cocked her head to the side. “What does *holler* mean?”

“Oh.” I frowned. “Sorry, um, holler is like a yell? Like, yell out for me.”

“*OH.*” She giggled. “I thought it was something to do with my name.”

I snorted. “Holler Hollyn is now your nickname.”

She laughed and waved us off. “Go. Ease your mind. I’m going to check on Cresswell with the children.”

Kahsi may not have been a resident of this court, but she knew her way around the city. I let her lead me around the corner while my thoughts drifted back to Varan. It seemed the moment my mind was unoccupied it went to thinking about him. I told myself it was not a crush. I told myself that while I was attracted to him, it did not mean I had any feelings for him whatsoever.

Though he sure did have feelings for me. And not good ones. I just didn’t understand what I’d done to deserve it. From the very moment he saw me, he was nasty. Sure, I’d attacked him, but there was no way he could hate me over *that*. First of all, I’d been literally zero threat to him. He held me in the air by my throat without restricting airflow. Even when I’d used the purple smoke on him by accident, it had just rolled over him. I was no physical threat to him. Secondly, and most importantly, I’d explained that Ambrose had disguised himself as Varan in Vegas and attacked me, so it was natural to not realize they were different people.

Yet he hated me. Loathed me. The only explanation I had was that it happened in my first life. But none of my new companions knew me then. Hollyn and Kahsi weren’t alive yet. Cresswell was five. Viera and Arlene worked in the palace for the previous Lord and Lady, so they’d never known me—they only met me when I became Queen. Thuso hadn’t known

me personally either. Conray was Varan's good friend. Even if he'd known me, I would not get information out of him.

We stopped walking to stand at a stone railing overlooking Lake Lamaya, the massive lake in the center of the court. Straight across from us, Lakewell Palace towered into the night. A stone railing like the one in front of me surrounded the lake with poles that held lanterns every ten feet or so. I still had not figured out how those candles remained lit, nor how the flames never went out. But I had bigger fish to fry, so I just shrugged it off as *magic*. Just like the whole concept of nectar. I knew we had to drink it to survive, I knew it tasted good and super sweet, but I did not know where it came from or why it was red.

I wonder if there used to be nectar on Earth? Homer writes in The Odyssey that the ocean was the color of wine. I wonder if it actually was, because Lake Lamaya looks like I'd be swimming in wine.

"You seem in a darker mood than last I saw you."

I flinched and my pulse skipped beats. I pressed one hand to my chest. "Sorry, my mind is a mess."

She rested her hand on mine on the railing. "What burdens you, my friend?"

My friend. Those two words sent tears stinging the backs of my eyes. I blinked and swallowed through a hot lump in my throat. "It's just ... been a lot to cope with since I got here. I know I belong here and this is my real home, but I miss my home. I miss Earth. I feel like a visitor here, like I'm on vacation but will go back any day now. I can't even let myself think about my sister or I will crumble into pieces and never recover. Most people have been really great here, like you and Viera and Arlene. And Cresswell and Hollyn. But ... but ..."

“Varan?”

I exhaled a deep breath. “*Varan.*”

“I feared so. He’s been pacing Elden Palace for hours.”

“After he told me he just needed to think for a minute.”

“The more upset he is, the longer he takes to think.” She glanced around, then slid closer. “I am aware he has been ... unkind to you. But do not back down or give up. Thuso gave me the same advice years ago. He does not trust easily, so you have to prove it.”

“Do you know why?”

She grimaced. “Conray says what his father became nearly destroyed him.”

“I suppose that should’ve been obvious. I just don’t know how to get through to him.”

“Just be you and he’ll see.”

“Are you close with Conray?”

“Yes, we’ve become close. He is Varan’s closest friend.”

“That makes sense.” I nodded. “You called him Varan.”

She grimaced. “He hates when I use a title with him. I call him Varan at home, but when I’m out I have to use his title.”

“You’re safe with me.” I shrugged. “I’ve called him much worse.”

She snort-laughed so loud it sounded like she’d been injured. Down below us, on the courtyard beside the lake, a bunch of people ran out from under us and looked up. I’d been so distracted by my own thoughts I hadn’t realized there had to be a hundred people down there huddled together on blankets

in the stone courtyard. There were Knights standing by the rail around the lake with their eyes on the crowd.

“What are they all doing down there? Doesn’t seem like an infirmary overflow—”

“That’s the homeless shelter Varan opened last year.”

“*They’re homeless?*”

Kahsi grimaced. “The numbers are growing, so I’ve heard from Varan.”

“What has he done about it?”

“Well Abba has been in charge. She has not changed much. However, last week Varan had enough and demanded Abba let him drop the price of nectar.”

“*Price?* They charge for it?” Though as soon as I said it, I realized how dumb it was. On Earth we had to pay for food and water, so it was no different. Yet it felt different.

“Yes, it is taxed heavily normally. Very expensive.” She gestured to all the people down below. “That’s why a lot of people are homeless. Or they share small one- or two-bedroom homes and fill them with as many people as they can to afford the cost.”

“That’s awful.” I eyed them with new focus. They were frail and exhausted looking. And cold. They looked freezing. “You said he asked to drop the price. Did they?”

She grinned, pride shining in her eyes. “Yes.”

“By how much? How much cheaper is it now?”

“Oh, it’s free now.” She pointed to the Knights around the lake. “That is why so many are guarding it. People got a little

panicked when it became free and some fights broke out. They feared it would be taxed again.”

“That’s understandable.”

“It’s a shame it made no difference. The new red wave has rolled in stronger than before.” She shuddered. “Every time it is worse.”

“Take me down there?”

“Of course.” She hooked her arm around my elbow again and led me to the right to where a staircase curved down to the lower courtyard. “I shall have to address you by title down there.”

“Okay, but I prefer Queen Rhodelia to *Your Majesty*.” I cringed playfully and bumped my shoulder into her. They all must have been watching me because the moment I stepped off the stairs they all turned to look at me. I smiled and waved. “Hello, everyone.”

I glanced back and forth as they all began to bow and wave at me. Their voices were soft and weak, but I heard them. The people closest to me were huddled together and using the wall to lean against, but they scrambled to their feet to greet me. In the flash of twenty feet, I shook more hands than I ever had in my life.

“What is happening? What is the commotion? Move aside please,” a man grumbled from somewhere in this crowd. Suddenly, they listened and parted just enough for a man with short red hair and a huge forehead to get through. His brown eyes widened when he saw me. “*Queen Rhodelia*.”

I smiled and held my hand out. “Good evening.”

“Your Majesty, it is an honor to have you here.” He took my hand but dropped to one knee and kissed my knuckles.

Then he stood and released my hand. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“Well, Matthew, is there anything Kahsi and I could do to help you all?” I glanced around. “Everyone looks rather cold. Can I get more blankets or warm food?”

His cheeks flushed. “Linus, our cook, is in the kitchen cooking. But ... well ... we washed some blankets earlier today. They are hanging in the back to dry. I have not had time to check if they’re dry—”

“We shall do that and hand out the dry ones. You carry on with your tasks.”

He blinked a million times, then glanced around to the crowd watching me in shock. “Are you ... sure, Your Majesty? A Queen does not do laundry—”

“Matthew.” I put my hand on his shoulder. “A Queen helps her people in whatever they need. Just point me in the direction of the blankets.”

His eyes teared up. He cleared his throat and half-turned to point to the back corner. “Back there. But you will need this.” He pulled a silver chain off his neck with a single key hanging from it.

I took it. “You lock the blankets away?”

His face fell. “We only have so many, Your Majesty. ‘Tis not usually so cold on Havestia, nor do we usually have so many ... guests. We thought we had more time to collect but ... well, we are trying to be fair.”

“I understand. Do you have a carriage here? With a driver?”

“That is me, Your Majesty,” a teenager said from right behind Matthew. “I’m his son, Terry. Do you need a ride?”

“Hi, Terry. No, I don’t.” I looked to Matthew. “Do you mind if I send him to Lakewell Palace to get more blankets?”

His face fell. He shook his head.

“Excellent. Terry, do you know who Arlene—”

“Your Lady’s Maid?”

I nodded. “Yes. She’s at the infirmary in the overflow tents. Please ride over there and tell her I sent you. Have her go with you to Lakewell Palace and collect any blankets and pillows and anything else we have to spare that might help you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I will.” He turned to his father, and I realized they had the same noses and brown eyes. “I shall return shortly, Father.”

He nodded to his son who immediately spun and sprinted away. Then he looked back to me. “Queen Rhodelia, I have no words.”

“Words are not necessary. We’re all in this together.” I smiled and held the key up. “Kahsi and I shall address the blankets we have here and start handing them out.”

The crowd parted wide for us, so Kahsi and I beelined for the back. As soon as we got under the terrace, I saw the fenced-off section. For a moment, I forgot this wasn’t Earth, where there’d be washing machines and dryers. Instead, I saw a few big tubs with soapy, bubbly water. To the left there were drying racks overflowing with blankets and a pile of them on the floor.

“I’ll check these. You make sure there are more being washed?”

“On it.” Kahsi skipped over to the tubs.

I went to the unfolded pile of blankets first and lifted them onto the empty table. They were dry and a quick inspection with my nose found they smelled clean, so I started folding them.

“All the tubs are full. The girls over there said they need to be in for another hour, then they switch them to the rinsing tubs.” Kahsi lifted the folded stack of blankets. “Shall I start handing these out?”

“Yes, make sure everyone has *one* before giving seconds. Please.”

“On it.” She grinned and then took off with the stack.

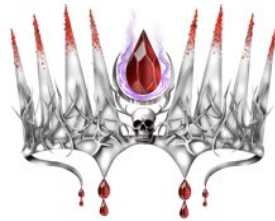
I’d only folded about five more blankets when I heard the crowd gasp *loud*. People standing scurried backwards. The people who’d been sitting or lying down scrambled to get to their feet. I saw slacked jaws and wide gazes. Everyone on the left dropped down to one knee to bow.

And then I saw him.

Varan.

Seventeen

RHODELIA



His amber eyes met mine over the crowd. My pulse quickened, pushing heat through my veins. My cheeks warmed, and judging by the way his gaze lowered a little, I knew I was blushing. He looked to his left but then his gaze shot right back to me and sent butterflies dancing in my stomach.

I gripped the blanket in my hand and sighed hard. “*Dammit,*” I whispered under my breath.

Kahsi chuckled from suddenly right beside me.

I flinched and turned to her. “What?”

“So, it’s not that you hate him ...” she yanked the blanket out of my grip and leaned forward to whisper, “... it’s that you don’t hate him at all.”

If possible, the heat in my cheeks got hotter. I clenched my teeth and tried to think of an acceptable response that justified why I cursed and backed up my hatred of him. But when I opened my mouth, I heard myself whisper back, “*He has no right to be that pretty and that mean to me. Do you know how confusing that is?*”

She buried her face in the blanket and laughed, her shoulders shaking.

I glanced up to see where he was, and a groan slipped out of my mouth. He stalked his way across the courtyard like a jungle cat on the hunt. “Such an ass.”

Kahsi was still laughing, but she lifted her head and spoke through the giggles, “Conray says when you came through the portal, he pinned you to a tree by the throat. Is that true?”

My mind replayed that moment in vivid color, and to my horror, I shivered.

She threw her head back and laughed.

I grabbed a blanket off the rack and threw it at her. “*You could at least find out why he hates me,*” I whispered.

She wiped the tears out of her eyes. “I asked Conray about an hour ago. He was hoping I knew. I can try to find out ... Unless you’d prefer I didn’t?”

I arched one eyebrow at her.

But before I could respond, Varan slowed to a stop right in front of us.

“Your Majesty.” Kahsi curtsied. Then she stood and grabbed a new stack. “I shall deliver more blankets.”

I stared up at him, trying to shake the conversation I’d just had now that he was right in front of me where I could easily embarrass myself.

Those amber eyes looked me up and down. “Nice dress.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Where have you been?”

“I was thinking.”

I scoffed and grabbed a blanket off the rack to distract myself. “Well, think out loud. With me. Please.”

“How is that helpful? None of it will mean anything to you,” he said in a low, rough voice.

I slammed the folded blanket into his stomach. “Listen, I don’t know why you loathe me so much, and frankly, I don’t give a fuck. That’s your prerogative. But this isn’t just about you.”

“It’s about the people”

“It’s about *us*, Varan.” I leaned forward so my voice wouldn’t carry too far. “So I need you to be a big boy and take all that hate and animosity and set it aside. Because we either work together as a team right now and save this kingdom so we can get our freedom back, or we’re sticking as a team until we die. So, you need to decide which it’ll be before they demand I produce you an heir to this throne that neither of us wants.”

“She’s right.” Kahsi said from behind me, where she grabbed several blankets off the rack. “Do you need a blanket here or are you hot?”

“I am never cold, you know this.” He nodded to Kahsi, who then walked away with a grin on her face. “You’re right.”

I flinched. “Say that again. I don’t think I heard you.”

He turned those amber eyes back on me and little flecks of red light flashed within them. “I said you are right. I apologize for keeping you waiting. I assure you it was not a product of my personal feelings toward you.”

I nodded. “Then what was it?”

He clenched his jaw.

I sighed. “We don’t have to like each other to have respect and trust. We either run a kingdom temporarily or for however

many centuries we're forced to endure together. Either way, I need you to be honest with me."

He licked his lips and began folding the blankets I'd taken off the rack. "You were a nurse, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then I assume you understand the effects trauma can have on a person and how when triggered we have to cope the best way we know how."

My heart sank. "I do understand. But in the future, tell me you need space to cope so I am not left in the wind."

He bowed his head. "Fair."

"So, where does that leave us now?"

"*Your Majesties!*" Matthew rushed up to us in a panic. "It is Linus. He has fallen to the red wave."

A door flew open to our left. We all looked over just as three other men came waddling out carrying another.

"We must get him to the infirmary—"

"No." I held my finger up, then turned to look for my fiery lady's maid. When I spotted her across the way talking to another woman, I yelled out her name. "Kahsi!"

Her head snapped up. Light-golden eyes focused on me in an instant. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Please go with them to the infirmary. Get Linus help. But tell Cresswell and Hollyn we need supplies brought over here. They are inundated as it is. We don't need to be sending patients we can tend to here."

"Yes, Your Majesty." She spun and ordered the three men to follow her.

“Matthew,” Varan’s deep voice rumbled, “what else do you need tonight? What was Linus handling?”

Matthew let out a whimper that broke my heart. He pulled a rag off his belt and wiped the beads of sweat off his forehead. “Linus was cooking. For everyone. No one here tonight has eaten—”

“Breathe, Matthew,” Varan said softly. He ducked down to get on his eye level. “Do we have supplies needed to cook?”

Matthew nodded.

Varan smiled as he reached over and rested his hand on the nape of my neck. “Rhodelia and I will cook for you.”

I felt the goosebumps spread across my entire body. Heat burned a trail from each of his five fingers pressing into my skin. I fisted the blanket in my hands so no one would see my fingers suddenly trembling. Matthew and I both stared at Varan with wide eyes but for very different reasons. I was trying to keep myself together, but the electricity sizzling through my body from his touch had my thoughts faltering. Varan was talking to Matthew, but with every second his warm hand touched my bare skin, my body was short circuiting.

Everyone was watching us, so I had to keep my cool.

“Right this way, Your Majesties.” Matthew gestured for us to follow.

Varan’s hand slid down my spine to land on the small of my back. “After you, *Rhodelia*.”

I followed Matthew but Varan stayed with me the whole time, his hand on the small of my back. He had to be playing some new form of this torture game where he melted me from the inside out. I didn’t know how he knew this would work. *I* didn’t know him touching me would have this effect. I was in

such a confused haze that I didn't snap out of it until Varan's fingers squeezed my waist.

I gasped.

His amber gaze shot down to me.

"Everything you should need is here—"

"Thank you, Matthew. We'll handle it. Go back out and help them." The moment we were alone, Varan yanked his hand back. "Tell me you know how to cook."

I spun on him. "What was all the touching?"

He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. "They will be more at ease if they think we are together. I was sending a quick message."

I opened my mouth, then shut it. He had a good point with the quick message. I nodded. "So we pretend to be a happy couple to keep the peace while we figure out why they're all dying?"

He nodded and then gestured around us. "Now, tell me you know how to cook."

"Yes, of course I—wait, *do you?*"

He stared at me, just blinking.

I rolled my eyes and sighed. "Have you ever been permitted in a kitchen?"

"Kahsi has been teaching me."

"Okay, okay, let me see what we've got. Does it matter what we cook?" I spun away from him and start surveying the kitchen. When he shook his head, I nodded. "Right. So, I see ... a hearth."

The only reason this kitchen didn't freak me out was because of movies. They didn't have electricity and technology, so their kitchens consisted of stone walls, a table, and a massive hearth with a fire already flickering within. Actually, there was a pot hanging over the flames, so I went over and peeked inside. It was soup.

I lifted the wooden spoon off the hook, then stirred the soup. Once it was mixed, I scooped up a spoonful. "Come here."

He moved to stand in front of me. "Matthew said the soup was not finished. There's a recipe behind you on that paper."

I held the spoon up and blew on it, then lifted it to his mouth. "Taste it."

His eyes locked on mine as he lowered his lips to the spoon. I tipped it back and let the soup slide into his mouth. I'd never wished I was a spoon before. He swallowed and then licked his lips. And because I was watching, I had to lick my own lips. His eyes flashed.

I spun away, hanging the wooden spoon on the hook by the pot. *Don't look at him. Move on.* I grabbed the recipe behind me and started reading. I smirked. "I like Linus. He'd been marking off what he did already. Perfect. So, he already put in the vegetable stock, hot pepper herbs, salt and pepper, paprika, and the water."

"Why are you frowning?"

"This asks for a lot of seafood."

"Ah, it's the only meat we have." I must've made a face because he shrugged sadly. "Court of Shadows were our farmers, where all the livestock lived. When we lost them, we lost the food too. But the sea has fish aplenty."

“That’s sad.” I glanced to the pot and spotted a saucepan that was boiling. “Okay, grab that saucepan off the hearth, then take the clams out and get the meat out.”

As he turned for the hearth, I grabbed the bucket of green onions and the knife, then started chopping them. “So what’s our plan, Varan? What do we do first?”

“We start digging.” He sat the saucepan on the stone table and began working on the clams. “The first day of a red wave is always the worst. We need to look for potential causes, and full disclosure, I’ve been looking for years.”

“I think it would really help me if I knew what we’re dealing with.” I took the chopped green onions over and dumped them into the pot, then stirred it. “In the Court of Blood, we have people who have instant third degree sunburns.”

“And we have the sudden elderly.” He pointed to the plate of clam meat. “In the pot?”

I nodded. “The sudden elderly is the most perplexing. Have you noticed a trend in how fast that takes to set in?”

“It was chaos after the war ended. It took us years to calm things down, to even realize we had problems that were not caused by the war. At first, I thought there was a correlation in symptoms, but now I know there does not seem to be a pattern. At least not one I’ve been able to find.” His eyes darkened, that red glow radiating off his skin. “Am I to cut up the crabmeat or the shrimp?”

“Put the saucepan back over the hearth so we can get it back to a boil. Peel the shrimp, then dump them into the boiling saucepan.” I grabbed a head of garlic and peeled off a single clove. “And just to clarify, the Court of Shadows is no

longer part of our kingdom and therefore not included in our task?”

His face fell. But he kept peeling the shrimp. “Correct. They are Isramorta now. These are shockingly slimy. Look at my hands.”

That made me smile. His fingers were covered in shrimp meat. “Man, vampire speed makes cooking much easier. Go ahead and put the shrimp meat in the boiling water over there.”

Varan cursed and then bright orange flames shot up. I spun just as Varan shouted and leapt back with flames clinging to his black shirt. He tried to swat it out, but the fire was spreading across his back. He groaned and held his shrimp-meat-covered hands up. “*Rhodelia.*”

I leapt across the kitchen, gripped the hem of his shirt, then yanked the pieces in opposite directions. Buttons ricochet off the walls. I wasn’t really thinking about what I was doing, I just ripped the rest of his shirt off of him and tossed it on the floor. The flames still danced along the material, so I stomped on it until they died. Once the fire was out, I turned back to check on Varan and my breath left me in a rush.

He was shirtless. His gaze was preoccupied trying to inspect himself for wounds, which gave me a moment to appreciate the chiseled cut of muscles in his stomach. I bit my bottom lip and sighed. He was beautiful. I liked the way the muscles in his shoulders were cut—lean but strong. And then I noticed burn wounds on his waist.

I cursed and reached for a rag and the pitcher of water. “Come here.”

He came over still holding his fishy fingers in the air. I ripped the rag in half, then soaked the pieces in water. After a few seconds, I pressed the wet rags onto his burn marks on the side of his stomach. He hissed and it made his abs flex. I counted to thirty, then pulled the rags off and re-soaked them before repeating the same steps on his back burns.

“Do we need the same creams—”

“No. I have something to put on yours.” I sat the wet rags aside and picked up my purse with my first aid kit. I’d grabbed it from my chamber when I changed my dress. “I don’t have a lot of this, and I’d hate to introduce it here when you don’t make it ... but it’s just you and you know of Earth, so I will use it.”

“What is it?” His voice was raw like he’d swallowed ash from the fire.

“This is called *Neosporin*. It’s an antibiotic and pain-relieving ointment. This particular one was designed for burns.” I squeezed the clear ointment onto my fingertips. “The burn on your waist is raw. I don’t want you to get an infection.”

He lifted his right arm so I could slide against his body. I was a nurse. A professional. I worked in the emergency room. I’d even treated many stupidly attractive male models and actors before. Yet as I lifted my hands, my fingers were trembling enough to see. I stole a peak at his face, but he was looking at the ceiling. The moment my fingertips grazed his skin, bolts of electricity shot up my hands and into my arms. My pulse quickened.

“So ...” I needed to distract myself from the butterflies in my stomach. His skin was too soft, and he smelled way too damn good.

He cleared his throat, but it made his abs tighten. “So?”

My face was on fire at this point. “Now is the time to tell me about what I saw in your basement.”

He looked down at me and our eyes met. “You shouldn’t have been down there.”

I stood upright, bringing our eyes closer to each other. He wasn’t wrong. “You shouldn’t have done a lot of things you’ve done since I’ve gotten here. Shall I list them for you?”

He growled and peeled his gaze away.

I shook my head and moved around to his back. “This agreement of ours only works if we pretend we don’t hate each other.”

Silence.

“There was something wrong with them, Varan. I have no doubts they’re included in this. So start talking or we might as well call this arrangement off.”

“There’s magic in the mist of the Forest of Fears. That magic is what gives us the glowing purple veins—”

“But what *is* it?”

He held one hand out and his palm instantly filled with swirling purple smoke. “This is a nightmare bomb. If I throw this at someone, it forces them to slip into a sleepwalking state and they see a nightmare.”

My eyes widened. “Jaako?”

He nodded.

I cursed.

“Only those born in the Court of Nightmares have this magic. Most of the Court was killed in the war. Those left ...”

“The basement?”

He shuddered. “Yes. They’re alive ... just stuck. I don’t know what’s causing it either.”

I rubbed ointment on the last burn spot, then rested my palm on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

He flinched and pulled away from my touch. “For what?”

“Everything you’ve been through?”

He didn’t look at me, just nodded and pointed to the recipe on the counter. “What’s left?”

“Chop up those potatoes in that satchel and put them in the pot.” *Way to make it weird, Rhode.* He was finally being somewhat nice, and you opened your mouth.

As he handled the potatoes, I grabbed the mushrooms and tossed them into the pot and then the crab meat. The last item on the recipe was nectar, so I slid the glass pitcher with the red liquid over and then frowned. *Nectar goes in the soup.* That shouldn’t have felt strange. Yet it did. There was something about this nectar business that was odd, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Why are you scowling?”

“Everyone is sick in some way shape or form—”

“Not everyone. You and I are not—”

“No, no. I mean, each court has illnesses that have made the majority of its residents sick.” I looked up at him. “Right?”

He nodded.

“Abba has tasked us with the job to resolve it—”

“Mother Terrea has—”

“Right, right, through Abba. But I mean, if they expect us to fix it, then it must be fixable.” I tapped my fingernails on the counter. The clicking noise echoed around the kitchen. “Nightmare residents have nightmare magic and now they’re stuck in their nightmares. Blood residents have strength and can withstand sunlight but suddenly they’re being burned by the Sun and they’re falling weak.”

“Your point?” He cocked his head to the side and scowled. “Are you suggesting their magic is killing them?”

“Maybe? Or maybe not so literally.” I eyed the nectar pitcher. “What’s the only thing that both courts have? The nectar.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying ... could it be the nectar?”

He shook his head. “We’ve always drunk the nectar.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.” I tapped my fingers some more. “Listen, back on Earth, there are so many movies that start this way ... with the drinking water being contaminated. It makes logical sense.”

“I don’t know what a movie is.”

“Oh. Well, it’s basically a book. A story. But it has also happened in real life to an extent.” I snapped my fingers. “There was this pandemic called *Cholera* where thousands of people died, and in the end, they discovered their drinking water had been contaminated. So, what if the nectar is contaminated and *everyone* is drinking it?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it.

“Kahsi told me you made nectar free for everyone.”

“Yes, so?”

“So, you just made it free, giving every member of your kingdom free access to it for the first time ever.”

His face fell. “You think it’s the nectar, and by giving it away for free, they’ve all fallen to a new red wave.”

I grimaced. “The timing is suspicious.”

He scratched his jaw and began pacing the kitchen, “How would the nectar get contaminated? It comes from a pool at the top of Scarlet Peaks, where the magic of the mountain created this life source.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“When I was a kid, yeah.” He held his hands up. “But it’s sealed off and tricky to get to, so how would someone even get up there?”

My eyes widened. “Oh, you’re right. It could’ve been a *someone*.”

“You weren’t thinking that?”

I shrugged. “Could be something in nature? Like a friend of mine has a koi pond, and if one of the koi fish dies in the pond, it releases toxins that could kill the other koi fish. There are certain frogs that release toxins into the water and can kill fish, so it could be something natural that happened, and this is an unfortunate side effect. Doesn’t have to indicate foul play ... but it could be.”

“We cannot cause panic among the people on just an idea.”

“No way. We have to go up there and check it out first.” I watched him glare at the wall. “Look, I could be wrong. We don’t have any other ideas, so why not at least rule it out?”

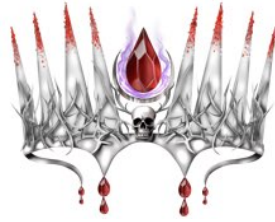
Varan leaned with his hands on the counter. He sighed and hung his head. “The idea that the nectar could be causing this

makes me ill. But as you say, we need to start there and find out.”

Hope bloomed in my chest. We were doing it, working together without biting each other’s heads off. I’d even managed to ignore his shirtless body for a bit. Maybe I was getting through that wall of his finally.

Eighteen

RHODELIA



Just do it. He's asleep. It's not fair anyway. The King gets to be immune to the cold but not the Queen? That's some bullshit. I shivered and it sounded like shaking a glass of ice with how cold my bones were. We were sitting in the carriage he'd borrowed yesterday, with no top to it and no driver, just the raiths, Stronic and Roesemin. I was freezing. Before we'd left Lakewell Palace earlier, I'd bundled up in layers with a thick, heavy coat.

But I was *freezing*. I had been for too long. Varan said the entry to the nectar pool only made itself visible right at dawn, so after helping at the infirmary and homeless shelter all night, we'd just headed to the mountains. We only stopped at the palace long enough for me to grab a proper coat. Varan's shirt was still in pieces in the garbage bin. The only reason he had on a coat right now was because Lord Cresswell felt weird allowing his King to leave his palace so undressed.

Varan had fallen asleep a little while ago. All I wanted was to cuddle up to him and get a reprieve from this tundra. My body hurt from how cold I was. My fingers were raw and starting to crack. Meanwhile, Varan was stretched out with his legs propped up and his head resting against the back of the carriage.

Screw it. I just need warmth. I carefully slid across the bench until my legs were pressed to his. His arms were lying on his stomach but that was okay. I didn't need to be in a cocoon. I just needed a little heat lamp. I leaned my face against his shoulder, and the instant wave of warmth that rolled over me took my breath away. I squeezed my eyes shut, curled my arms in, and just soaked it in. That full-bodied red wine scent of his combined with his warmth to make me feel like I was lying in front of a fireplace with my favorite glass of wine and a cozy blanket.

He took a deep breath, then slid his hand across my hip with his hand landing on my leg, burning a path along my skin even with the material between us. I stayed perfectly still. I knew he was asleep, knew he hadn't had some sudden change of heart about me. My muscles relaxed, and I felt myself sliding to sleep.

The golden candlelight flickered from every crevice, casting everyone in a warm golden haze. It was no use. The room was still as cold as a winter's night. I steeled my spine and began my last march as a free woman. No one had told me why I was not permitted shoes. It was probably to remind me of my place with him. As I walked, the melodic tune of the instrumentalists echoed a haunting sound, yet I barely heard the sound over the heavy pounding of my heart in my ears.

When I approached the altar, I discovered my betrothed wore a black coat with a large hood pulled over his head. It must have been some form of ceremonial robe. I stopped in front of the altar as I'd been instructed, then dropped into a low curtsy. His feet turned to face me, so I lifted to stand straight and our eyes met.

His amber eyes widened, and his jaw dropped.

Neon-purple light flashed all around us.

“Rhodelia? What are you do—” His amber eyes widened.

He bellowed in pain. The sharp tip of a silver sword burst through his chest from the inside. It was coated in his blood as rivers of it gushed from his chest. I screamed and dove for him, throwing my bouquet aside. His legs gave out, and he crashed to his knees on the floor. He opened his mouth and blood poured like an ocean.

Standing behind him in his black royal ceremonial coat and silver crown. His long black hair hung straight down. In his right hand, he gripped the hilt of his sword. He pulled his arm back, yanking the long blade of his sword out of his son’s severed body. I dove forward and caught him in my arms before his body hit the ground.

“RHODELIA!”

I gasped and jumped up, my heart pounding in my chest. I pushed my hair back out of my face and looked around. I was back in the carriage, sitting in the cold dark night surrounded by nothing. “Just the dream. Just the dream,” I mumbled to myself and leaned my head down on the bench.

The bench moved beneath me, then a loud growl rumbled through the bench and into my forehead. I frowned and lifted my head—and gasped. It was not the bench. It was Varan ... and I was somehow draped across his body. One of my hands had slipped beneath his open coat and was resting on his stomach. My face was mere inches above his. I swallowed roughly.

Varan’s amber eyes were blazing with rage. That strange red glow of his shined into my face. He reached up and gripped both my biceps. His neon-purple smoke coiled around

his arms. “*What. Are. You. Doing?*” He growled through clenched teeth.

I licked my lips. “I ... I fell asleep?”

“*I was not aware being your pillow was part of our arrangement.*”

“I didn’t fall asleep on your chest.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “Did you nightmare bomb me?”

“It was a natural reaction,” he snapped.

“So is letting go of me.” I thrashed against his grip.

He snarled and threw me so I landed on the bench beside him. There was a blur of light and movement and then he was standing in the snow outside the carriage. Those amber eyes aimed lasers at me. “We agreed to work together to solve the issue so we don’t have to be tied to each other forever. Lest you forget and think there may be anything romantic—”

“Oh, eat a dick, princess.”

He gasped, his eyes widening. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“Let me make something clear, princess.” I jumped to my feet so I was taller than him. “As much as I don’t want to be Queen, if you don’t stop setting me up for failure just so you can attack me for it, then I will gladly take the throne just to make your life miserable for however many centuries we have left.”

His growl was so loud it shook the branches on the tree behind him and snow dropped to the ground. He gripped the edge of the carriage. “Pray tell me how I set you up for failure, *Rhodelia?*”

“It’s called hypothermia, asshole.” I gestured around us. “Notice the cold white fluffy stuff? That’s called snow. It’s fucking freezing up here, yet you had us take an open-air carriage with zero barrier from the weather only to arrive here stupid early. Just because you can’t feel the cold does not mean you get to forget about other people. You were asleep, and I could feel my bones rattling, so I leaned against your shoulder for warmth so I wouldn’t freeze to death before dawn. I’m so sorry my body cannot withstand the cold like yours. I’m so sorry I was trying not to die—after all, you’ve made it abundantly clear you lack any concern about my life.”

He stared at me with his chest rising and falling.

I sat on the bench and wrapped my arms around myself to try and warm up. “Was that enough of an example? Or should I start from the beginning?”

He just glared at me, so I looked away.

The carriage jostled like he’d gotten in. I couldn’t help myself, I glanced over just as Varan slid his thick black coat off, leaving him shirtless. My pulse fluttered. I had to not look at his body if I wanted to remain angry with him.

And then his coat lowered onto my shoulders.

The heat was such a relief I actually whimpered out loud. I gripped the lapels and hugged them tight to me. My breath left me in a shaky rush. “Thank you.”

He nodded once. “I did not know you were that cold. It was not intentional. It won’t happen again.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes. “Thank you.”

He sat on the bench beside me, still shirtless, so I looked to the sky—and gasped. “There are two moons. Are there always two moons?”

“Yes.”

I hadn't actually been asking him, since I was angry with him, but my curiosity got the better of me. “Why?”

“The silver moon is the same as Earth's moon, but the other is for Terrea only.” He cleared his throat. “Terrea's moon can only be seen from Terrea, and it takes on different colors on each continent.”

The one was in fact the same moon as I saw on Earth but the other—*Terrea's moon*—was bright red and hanging just behind the other. “What a view.”

He sighed so hard it made me look. But he braced his elbows and his knees and hung his head. I wanted to hate him. I wanted to dislike him so much that I would feel no empathy for him. I wanted sympathy to be a stretch. I just wanted to hate him. Instead, it was taking every ounce of self-control not to wrap my arms around his shoulders and just hold him. I knew he was hurting. I knew this was about more than just not liking me. It was too visceral of a reaction for it to simply be he didn't *like* me. I wish I knew what it was. I wish I could help ease his suffering. Perhaps it was the nurse in me. It would've been easier on my heart to just hate him.

By the Blood, why can't I just hate him?

By the Blood! Listen to me. With every hour that passed I was forgetting more and more of my life back in LA. I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. Forgetting the life and plans that I could never ever return, to not feel that sadness, would be a relief. But if that meant forgetting Morgana ... then I wouldn't take it. I'd hold on to every memory of LA just to keep her in whatever way I could. Even if I knew forgetting her would make life hurt a little less.

Maybe after a few centuries, that pain would dull. I wasn't even sure if I hoped for it.

This arrangement of ours needed to succeed. I had to get him out of my life. Someone else would be King and Queen. He would return as Lord of Nightmares, and I could be a commoner again. According to Kahsi, that was where I belonged anyway. Maybe I could be a healer here, work in the infirmary. *Or the brothel. That could be a fun change.* I chuckled at my own joke in my head.

“Why are you laughing?” Varan snapped.

I laughed harder.

“*Rhodelia.*”

“I was thinking about what I'd do with my nine centuries left of life once I was free.” I giggled. “Then I remembered I saw a brothel in town, and I thought, hell, that might be fun.”

He growled. “Do you even know what a brothel *is*?”

I rolled my eyes. “Earth has brothels. But prostitution isn't legal everywhere, and even where it is ... the women are disgraced and shamed among society.”

“And you assume it's not the same here?”

I arched one eyebrow at him. “*Is it?*”

He snarled and shook his head. “It's not just women—”

I gasped very dramatically and jumped to my feet, just to ruffle his feathers. “There are *male* prostitutes? Stronic, Roesemin, take me back—”

“*Rhodelia.*” My name was barely more than a growl.

“Relax.” I sat back down and crossed one knee over the other. “I'll save my money for after I hand over the crown. Ya

know, give myself a proper celebration.”

He shook his head and looked away from me.

But I couldn't stop. “Do they have specific operating hours or is it an open twenty-four hours a day kind of thing? And is there a time limit for ... services? I worked in the hospital for years doing minimum of twelve-hour days, so my body can take a beating for a *long*—”

“*Rhodelia*.”

“What?” I smiled innocently. “Before I work there, I need to get my fill in as a customer. Gotta keep the client-provider boundary a clean line.”

“You would seriously go from being *Queen of Isramaya* to a prostitute?”

“I mean, same industry, no? Both serve to fulfill the needs of people.”

His jaw dropped.

I giggled and did a little shimmy with my non-impressive chest. “Question though: if I'm no longer Queen and someone else *is*, will my hair remain silver? Or, like, will it go back to red? I need to work on my stage name and identity so I'm ready. I think silver hair could work for me. I could use *The Dowager* as my stage name—”

“*Rhodelia*,” he whisper-shouted in horror.

I shrugged. “It's got a nice ring to it. I bet I'd get a lot of clients who wanna work out their royalty kinks.”

“So that's your goal? Work as a prostitute instead of a healer? Get paid for male companionship instead of a relationship? A husband?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Are you suggesting I can’t be a prostitute who then gets married? Because Cresswell was a client at the brothel and yet Hollyn married him.”

“He was a *client*, not a prostitute—”

“Oh, so it *is* disgraceful here?”

“No. It’s more of a disappointment. None of them want to be working there—”

“Are you sure? Have you asked? Maybe they’re pretending they hate it because it helps get clients?”

The look of disgusted horror on his face made me far too happy. “Why would that *help*?”

“Because most men have a hero complex and love a damsel in distress?”

His face hardened. “So, that’s your angle. Pretend to be a helpless, pretty little thing to get what you want? Easier than using your heart—”

“Everything is easier than using your heart, Varan. Why should I give my heart so freely when that love always hurts me in the end one way or another? I mean, my parents died—apparently in both lives.” I pointed to the city down below us. “Clearly, since no one has stepped forward to say they’re my parents. I have no family here. My only friends work for the palaces. And I was forced to permanently abandon both my sisters on Earth without being given a choice or a chance to say goodbye. So, *pray tell me* why I should make all my life choices based on the *what ifs* of a romance?”

His expression was unreadable. “Right. Just sell your body for money instead. I’m sure that would be fulfilling.”

“Well, if they use their equipment right—”

“Rhodelia.”

“Yeah, I’ll have to get a stage name. That one is a bit of a mouthful to be saying—”

“Rhodelia.”

“See? Too many syllables. I need a shorter name, one more innocent sounding like Emma or Katie. Don’t make that face at me. An attitude like that will never get you in as one of my clients—”

He groaned in disgust and leapt out of the carriage.

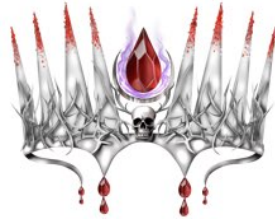
I grinned. “That’s too bad, I’ve heard hate-sex is a real blast.”

He vanished into a wall of purple flames.

I snort-laughed so hard both raiths jumped. He’d be back. My guess was he was still around. Until then, I enjoyed the hell out of that discussion.

Nineteen

RHODELIA



I was still laughing when a single beam of sunshine peeked over the Shadow Mountains in the distance and shined a spotlight onto the snowy wall at the base of Scarlet Peaks in front of us. At first, all I saw was a sea of red. I hadn't given much thought to the name *Scarlet Peaks* but now it made sense. The entire mountain range was a vibrant red. There may have been snow on the ground and on the branches, but it was like magic kept snow from sticking to the leaves.

It was breathtaking.

The Shadow Mountains lined the far eastern border of the kingdom, so the first light of the day slammed right into the peaks of this range. Every time I turned around, the realm of Terrea just stunned me stupid with how gorgeous it was. It was living life in colors I'd never seen.

In my peripheral vision, I saw that familiar flash of neon-purple flames, so I knew Varan had returned. Just as I knew he would. But I didn't look at him. For once, there was something prettier to look at in his presence. Plus, I was trying to find what we were looking for. Varan explained that the Scarlet Peaks—or at least the highest level of the mountains—were closed to everyone but royals. Even the Knights could not enter. Not that he explained why. However, I was just rolling

with it. All I knew was there was an entrance here somewhere that was only visible at first light of the day.

And I couldn't see shit.

“*RHODELIA*,” Varan growled.

I jumped up and looked toward the sound of his voice—and gasped. He stood at the base of a huge white tree, the trunk had to be five feet wide and there was a good twenty feet before the branches started. I frowned. I had not seen that tree before. The whole damn tree hadn't been visible. I shook my head. The craziest part was the intricate white wooden door in the trunk of the tree. *Magic is fucking wild.*

“Care to move your feet or are you too lost in your prostitution plans?”

I hurried out of the carriage and over to where he stood, which was about ten feet from the door in the tree. His coat was so big on me it dragged on the snow behind me. The collar stood so tall it almost covered my entire ears. I could've wrapped the coat all the way around me and still closed it. I was gloriously warm ... but it smelled like him—that spicy wine scent that hijacked my brain. It was a horrible combination with him standing there shirtless.

He arched one eyebrow at me.

I stopped *just* in front of him so I could feel his breath on my face. Then I smiled. “I saw a perfect little spot in the Canopy of Dreams for a brand-new brothel. We could name it *Naughty Nightmares*—”

He growled, gripped my bicep, and dragged me to the door in the tree.

Perhaps it was a result of being near frostbitten, but I couldn't stop myself from saying, “Fine, fine, we can put it in

the forest and call it *Forest of Fuck*.”

Silence. He didn't growl or snarl or even look at me. He just yanked the door open and pulled me through it. The air was colder and sharper on the other side. It almost seemed to glitter in the sunlight.

“Or we could put it near your place and call it *Pleasure Palace*—”

He stopped, spun around, and gripped my face in one of his hands. “*Rhodelia*.”

My pulse quickened. A wave of heat like I'd never felt rushed through me.

“*Are. You. Finished?*” he said through clenched teeth.

“If you have to ask that, you can't work at the brothel.”

He groaned and threw me backwards. I landed on my ass in the snow with a crunch. I giggled and scrambled back to my feet so I could hurry to catch up with him. As much as I wanted to continue to ruffle his feathers, when I caught up, I looked up and saw the stairway to Heaven. That was how tall the flight of stairs looked. I couldn't even see the top where it ended. It was a lone wooden staircase wide enough for only one person at a time. The forest on each side was so thick and dense I couldn't see a single trunk or branch. It was all just red leaves as far as the eye could see. There was no snow on the steps or in the trees. It was just *red*.

Varan looked down at me and sighed.

“What?”

“Do you want to walk up these? Or do you want me to carry you so I can run up them fast?”

I eyed the stairs, then looked back at him. “Like ... *fast* fast?”

He nodded.

“I want the record to show I *can* walk up those steps.” I held his stare for a second. “But if you can do it hella fast, then yes, carry me.”

Without further warning, he bent over and threw me over his shoulder. I had expected to be carried in the cradle of his arms, not like a towel on the way to the shower. But it was too late. I was already hanging here. I saw his feet move and then the world blurred silver and red. My hair hung all the way down to his calves when I was flipped over like this.

Just as fast as he picked me up, he sat me back on my feet. I spit my own hair out of my mouth and tried to tame it back down. Then I pointed my finger in his face and said, “In the future, that’ll cost you.”

His eyes widened.

I spun away from him, flicking my hair so it smacked him in the chest. In front of us the forest looked more like it had before the magical door. The ground was covered in a foot or two of fluffy white snow. The trees around us had all lost their leaves so they were just branches with a few inches of snow sitting on them, except for two lone trees that had no snow and a whole bushel of red leaves. They were the same red bushy oak trees they had all over the Court of Blood.

And they sat on either side of a gray stone archway. I marched towards it, needing to put some space between my eyes and his half-naked body. But I felt him stomping behind me. When I walked through the archway, I stopped too fast, so he slammed into me from behind. I flew forward but his hands

caught me by the waist, stopping me from face-planting onto the stone courtyard.

“Rhodelia—”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

His fingers lingered on my waist for another few seconds before he let me go. He sighed. “Why did you stop?”

I stepped aside and looked up at him. “I don’t know ... it just looked ... sacred? Like the temple? And I had a moment of doubt if I was allowed to walk through.”

He stared at me with an unreadable expression for a moment. “First of all, you are Queen now. There is nowhere you are not permitted to walk—”

“Except your basement—”

“You weren’t Queen then,” he snapped.

I rolled my eyes. “Secondly?”

He shook his head but pointed ahead. “Five thousand years ago, when Isramaya was part of Earth, this was our temple for Mother Terrea. Or at least that’s the answer my father gave me when I came here with him as a child.”

“Oh. Wow.” I nodded and glanced around. “Where is this nectar pool?”

“Follow me.”

It very much looked like a temple from Ancient Rome or Greece without the statue in the middle of the God. Columns lined the entire perimeter of the stone courtyard. In the middle, there was a circular dais with three steps leading up to it. The temple we met Abba in had the same kind of dais but there

was a white marble tree in the middle. It made the *this used to be a temple* story seem legit.

But Varan didn't look around. He marched straight for the archway at the far end of the courtyard. It matched the other archway. We walked through, then paused on the top step ... In front of us sat a small pool with water that looked like a glass of rosé. It was *pink*.

“Um. Why is it pink? Is this the right spot?”

“This is it, the pool of nectar,” he said softly, but his brow was furrowed. “This is the pool he brought me to.”

I pursed my lips. “Does it look like it did before?”

He nodded. “I was young. This was back when I idolized my father. He hadn't wanted me to come with him, but I begged him. It was before I thought he killed my mother.”

I gasped. “*Did he?*”

“Yes. She was a kind, compassionate woman who wanted to help the people and be a mother and wife. He wanted a silent figurehead to bear his children and never question him, never demand his time.” His face fell, his eyes far away. “That's why I hated him, even if I could never prove it.”

“I'm sorry, Varan.”

He just stared at the nectar, like he was lost in his painful memories.

I wrapped my arms around myself and hissed when my amulet touched the bare skin of my chest. I reached beneath my coats to fix my dress to protect my skin from the cold and a red glow reflected on my arm. “Varan?”

He arched one eyebrow and glanced sideways at me.

“Do you wear an amulet?”

He shook his head.

“Okay ...” I pursed my lips as an idea tried to form in my head. “Where are the rapids?”

He pointed straight ahead. “Just around that curve, this pool goes over a small waterfall that turns into the river that leads to Ruby Falls. Why? Those two questions are not apparently related, so why?”

“Well, the nectar down the mountain is red. *Red* red. This here is pink. So how do you get from pink to red?” I tapped on my amulet. “What if your father put up a glamour, making you see this pool as red so you wouldn’t question it?”

He closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and cursed. “The whole way up the stairs he made me practice my glammers. Then again in the ruins of the temple, he told me to make it whole again.”

“So, he tricked you into thinking the pink nectar was a glamour.”

He nodded.

“What a vile piece of shit.”

He glanced over at me with a sharpness in his eyes I did not like. It was the *I hate you* eyes I got often.

I cleared my throat and gestured to the nectar. “If you were going to contaminate the nectar with the intention of making your kingdom weak and sick, you wouldn’t want to drink it yourself—”

His face fell. “*Dearest Canopy.*”

“What? What’s wrong?”

He scrubbed his face with his hands, then sighed and stepped off the stairs, his feet sinking a few inches into untouched snow. He crouched down to the surface of the nectar and scooped a handful, then brought it to his mouth to drink. With a frown, he licked his lips and cursed. “Right before my mother died, we had sat down for dinner, just her and I, because father had been called away for something in The Wildlands. The Fae King of Talamh had needed his assistance. So, in his absence, one of the servants brought over the nectar he’d just returned from Lakewell Palace with. It was in a black bottle so I couldn’t see the color, but I remember drinking it straight from the bottle and commenting that it tasted strange. It tasted *just like that did*. Mother had not tasted it yet, but she poured it into a glass and it was *pink—by the Blood!*”

I stepped off the stairs onto the snow beside him. “Varan?”

He bent over and put his hands on his knees like he was going to be sick. He squeezed his eyes shut. “They argued that night. They argued every night from then until she died ... I bet ... I bet ...”

“She suspected something with the nectar so he—”

“Killed her.” He swayed.

“I am so sorry, Varan.”

“*Fuck*. You were right, weren’t you? Why did I never think of it?”

“Hey, don’t do that.” I put my hand on his bare shoulder. “Hindsight is always obvious. Let’s focus on how we can save the people we have left. Put yourself in his shoes and ask yourself how he would’ve done this. See if we can trace his steps.”

He stood upright and nodded. “He would’ve left this pool alone, left the nectar in its proper form, then contaminated it before it went over Ruby Falls. Which means ...”

Without another word, he stomped off through the snow around the pool. I followed right behind him. It took us a minute to get all the way around the pool because the snow was thick and soft and the branches were low. When we finally made it to the other side, there was a narrow ten-foot-wide little waterfall that poured into a long, narrow *red* river that sliced between the forest. After about ten feet, that red river kicked into a raging river rapid. It gave me flashbacks to that trip Morgana, Saphira, and I took with our foster parents to the Smoky Mountains where we went white water river rafting. I’d hated it. I shuddered.

He leapt over the ten-foot waterfall with ease and landed on the other side. Then he crouched down across from me. “The question is how do we get from here,” he gestured to the pink pool, then gestured to the red river rapids, “to this?”

“There has to be something in the water.” I reached down and stuck my hand in the water that was flowing into the river rapid. It was pink. “This means it’s contaminated once it gets down there.”

Varan glanced back and forth between the two bodies of water, then jumped into the red river. The water level was all the way up to his chest, yet he didn’t look concerned. His amber gaze narrowed on the nectar around him. “I’m going under to see if it’s on the riverbed.”

He didn’t wait for me to approve of this idea. He just submerged beneath the surface. I counted the seconds he was under. When I got to thirty seconds, my nerves got the best of me. I trudged into the water, hissing and cursing as the chill

seeped into my bones immediately. But I stood right on the slates that carried the water from pool to river, so it only went as high as my shins. I walked to the middle, then peered over the edge.

It was too dark to see through.

Like a lake of horror.

I started counting again but my pulse was pounding against my sternum. When I got to twenty, I reached down to the floor of the pool and picked up a rock. It was smooth and about the size of my palm. I chucked it into the river right where he'd gone under.

Bubbles danced along the river surface and then his dark head burst through the water. I sighed with relief. He arched one eyebrow and held the rock I'd thrown. "Why?"

"Because I needed proof of life!"

"I can hold my breath for a long—OH. *What's that?*" He darted forward, reaching beneath the waterfall. His eyes widened. "By the Blood, there are potion vials under here."

I gasped. "*WHAT?* What do they look like?"

"The vials themselves are dark, narrow glass vials that are pointed at the ends. They're tied onto some ... *by the Blood*, I think those are bones with runes carved into them—" His jaw dropped. His eyes widened. "These are from *Magaria*. From the mages."

My eyes widened. "That's it. Magic potion bottles. That's how the nectar is being contaminated."

"There's four of them. One is entirely empty." He grimaced. "The bottom of the vials appear to have twist closures—"

“Like *righty tighty, lefty loosey?*”

He arched both eyebrows at me and held for a moment. “That is not a thing you really say?”

“Every time. Helpful little way to remember.” I grinned. “Go ahead, *righty tighty* them.”

He shook his head as he twisted. Just as he moved to the last vial, bright white light flashed between us. A sharp, high-pitched whistle pierced my ear drums. The water rippled and splashed. The ground trembled beneath my feet for a moment and then the whole world exploded. Raw, pulsing, *hot* energy slammed into the bottoms of my feet and sent me flying into the air.

I caught a flash of red just in time to suck in a deep breath before I plummeted into the river like an asteroid crashing to earth. Once beneath the nectar, it was impossible to tell which way was up. My body got rolled like I was caught in a wave on the beach trying to surf. The current whipped me back and forth. My lungs were screaming for air. I kicked my legs and pumped my arms as hard as I could until my face broke the surface of the water.

I gasped for air, then I was yanked back under. A second later I broke the surface again. I threw my hand out and a little cloud of purple smoke shot up in the air. “VARAN!”

The current was too strong. I was pretty tough, but I was not known for my physical strength. I was only five-foot-two and barely more than a hundred pounds—on a good day. The rapids were a monster, and I was its prey. The roar of the waterfall grew louder and louder by the inch.

A tree screeched and then the trunk snapped in half and part of it crashed into the river to my right. I swam as hard as I

could to the branch and almost cried when my fingers felt its rough texture. I gripped it with both hands, but the river was still pulling my legs out from under me.

Varan dove out of the water like he was Air Jaws. His large hand grabbed a hold of another broken tree branch. “*RHODELIA!*” he yelled over the roar of the falls far too close to me.

“We have to get out!” I screamed back.

“You firs—”

The mountain rumbled. Snow came rolling down from the tip of the peaks like a tsunami. I glanced around and my eyes widened. The nectar river was *pink. Not red.* My jaw dropped. “Varan!”

He nodded. “*Avalanche!*”

“IT’S PINK!” I yelled.

He shook his head and pointed in the direction we’d come. “Path is blocked!”

“WHAT?” The avalanche was only about twenty feet away and picking up speed as it barreled toward us. “What do we do now?”

“WE JUMP!”

“WHAT?” I peeked over my shoulder and spotted the white caps on the pink river. I saw the mist billowing from where the water crashed several hundred feet down. “THE FALLS?”

“It’s the only way! We have to go over!” Varan shouted. “ON THREE, LET GO!”

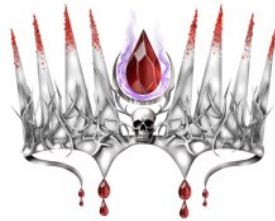
I whimpered but nodded. “OKAY!”

“THREE! ... TWO! ... ONE!”

I let go and let the river of nectar throw me over the edge of the falls until all I felt was air rushing by me.

Twenty

RHODELIA



People used to tell me that one day I'd fall head over heels.

This was not the way I thought they meant that.

The force of the rapids and avalanche had thrown me off the cliff far around that I wasn't in the water. I flipped sideways, my hair tangled around my chest and waist. My arms pinwheeled. For a split-second, I hung there in the air before gravity claimed me. It was like the world had slipped into slow-motion. As my body began falling, I looked to the edge of the water and spotted Varan soaring off the mountain like a rocket. My hair whipped up and around my face, blinding me.

Something huge slammed right into me, knocking my breath from my lungs. Yet still I fell. I tried to see what it was but I couldn't get my hair out of my eyes. And then I felt fingers grip my waist. My body was tugged forward, and I crashed into a wet, warm surface. The scent of full-bodied red wine and hints of spice hit my nose and I gasped. *VARAN*.

That heat was *him*. I felt his arms wrap around my body, pinning me against his chest. Together, we flipped over so we were falling feet-first. His legs wrapped around mine, my feet only reaching his shins. I hooked my arms up and dug my fingernails into his back.

This man hated me, yet there he was shielding my body with his.

Hitting the water felt like jumping off a building onto concrete. Pain shot up my legs. I sucked in a gulp of air—and then we were under water. Again. Varan’s arms tightened around me. We flipped and rolled and flipped and rolled. When cold air finally hit my face, I choked on my gasp of air. Oxygen burned a path down my throat. My heart was pounding. Varan’s hot breath on the side of my face was the only thing letting me know I hadn’t just died. I coughed and rested my forehead on his bare shoulder.

“*Dearest Canopy,*” Varan breathed.

We were floating. There was a current carrying us along. I knew we’d landed in *Blood Basin*, but I also knew it fed either over to Lake Lamaya or down the river between the courts.

Without lifting my head off of him, I opened my eyes and looked around. “*River?*” I asked with a raw, gravelly voice that hurt to use.

Varan nodded just as we floated beneath *Wraith Bridge*. I glanced up at the bridge and gasped. There were people *everywhere*. The entire bridge was lined shoulder-to-shoulder with red-haired vampires. I looked to the right, toward Court of Blood, and found hundreds of people rushing to the shore in panic. This made me lift my head to look toward Court of Nightmares. My jaw dropped. It was daylight already, yet there had to be nearly a hundred people huddled in the shade of the trees watching us.

“*Rhodelia,*” Varan whispered as he pulled me so I was side-by-side with him. He pointed up ahead. “Brace yourself!”

It took me a second to realize he wasn't referring to the entire kingdom having poured out of their homes to watch us nearly die ... He meant the three men who were running toward the riverbank carrying a massive slab of stone.

“What are they—”

“Bridge.” He coughed and pointed again. “That spot up there ... is only like ten feet across ... It's the only narrow spot on the river ... They're giving us an out.”

That stone slab had to be fifteen feet long and yet only a handful of men were carrying it. *Vampire strength. Right.* I groaned and climbed onto Varan's back. There was no way I had the strength to pull myself up on that slab. My muscles felt like Jell-O. But to my surprise, a few people jumped into the river right in front of us, then dove for us. They grabbed hold of our arms and acted as floatation devices. It was like they were afraid we'd get hurt when we hit the slab.

When we got to the slab, I looked up and spotted Viera, Arlene, and Hollyn all rushing for me with their arms stretched out. I felt hands on me and then I was being lifted out of the river. They stretched me out on my back, then hovered over me. I knew they were talking to me, but their voices were muffled and far.

I cringed and rolled to my side. “Varan?”

“I'm here,” he croaked as Cresswell helped him out of the river. He landed on all fours, then hung his head. “I'm here.”

I nodded. “Want your coat back?”

His head snapped toward me and to my utter shock ... he laughed.

I grinned and flopped onto my back. That was one hell of a victory in itself. Viera and Arlene pulled me into a seated

position, then wrapped blankets around me. “Thank you.”

Hollyn put her hands to her face and shook her head. “Your Majesties, what just happened?”

Cresswell raised his hand. “And why is the nectar pink?”

Someone handed Varan a towel, so he wiped his face off and then jumped to his feet. I wasn't sure which was worse for my sanity: the wet skin or wet trousers clinging to his body. This man was giving me whiplash, and I wasn't strong enough for that. I closed my eyes and buried myself in a blanket.

Cresswell cleared his throat. “We felt the earthquake so we ran outside only to discover everyone else had done the same. We watched the avalanche but none of us expected to see our King and Queen launched off the side of the waterfall.”

“What were you doing up in Scarlet Peaks?” Hollyn asked in her sweet voice.

“Rhodelia had a theory that perhaps the nectar was causing everyone to be sick and weak, so we went at dawn to investigate ...”

I listened as Varan filled the people in on what we'd just discovered. For some reason, I hadn't expected him to tell everyone the truth. Yet he had. All of it, unfiltered and honest. It was a good thing I had a blanket over my head to hide the stupid smile on my face and blush in my cheeks.

“So, what now, Your Majesty?” Cresswell asked softly.

I pulled the blanket off my face. This part I needed to see.

Varan smiled. “Drink. Everyone. Let us see if nectar in its true form helps us.”

There was a moment of pause like no one wanted to be first, but then a group of people with sunburnt, crispy red skin

all dove for the nectar at once. It was a little sloppy. No one had a cup on them, so they were just using their hands or clothes to scoop it up. We all watched, everyone in the kingdom who'd come out to witness just watched these handful of people.

With every sip, their sunburnt skin healed until it was fully gone.

The crowd gasped.

Tears filled my eyes. I looked up to Varan and found a glassy shimmer in his own amber eyes. "Lady Hollyn?"

She spun to me with wide green eyes.

I grinned. "Get the memo to the infirmary."

A guy who looked to be nearly a hundred in Earth years waddled his way to the river. "Someone get me some?"

The woman beside him filled her hat with nectar, then handed it to him. I felt the entire crowd hold their breath. But as he drank, nothing happened. He drank until the little white hat was empty. It was like the whole crowd had stopped to see if it would work.

"It's okay," he whispered.

"Your Majesty?"

"Go ahead," Varan said and gestured to the nectar. "But please, take it easy. Don't overdo it."

All at once, about twenty purple-haired Nightmares residents rushed the river in their hooded cloaks with long sleeves. They scooped the now pink nectar into their hands and drank.

All at once, all twenty gasped. The whites of their eyes turned jet-black and little purple whirlpools filled in where their irises should've been. They collapsed to their knees.

“NO!” Varan bellowed. He lunged forward and caught the few in the front so they didn't face-plant into the river. “*NIGHTMARES DON'T DRINK!*”

But it was too late. They were dropping like flies. One second they were alive and drinking the nectar, the next they were comatose on the sand. The rest of the Nightmares froze in place, fear pouring out of them.

A woman with pale skin and the tiniest purple ringlets screamed, “*Bring them to my Inn!*”

Varan scooped the people he'd caught up and started for the Canopy of Dreams. But then he spun to face me. “Rhodelia —”

“Get them safe. Meet me at Lakewell after.”

He nodded and then began barking out orders in that language I did not know. I wanted to get up and go with them, but one of us needed to remain with the Court of Blood. Once Varan and the Nightmares were out of sight, I let Hollyn lift me to my feet.

I held my hands up to stop the questions in their eyes. “We don't have a lot of answers right now. King Varan and I are in a little bit of shock over what just happened. Go ahead and drink the nectar. Then go home and rest. If for any reason you don't feel well, then let Lord Cresswell and Lady Hollyn know so we can address it.”

There was a really good chance I fell asleep at that point, because the next thing I knew, I was sitting at a chair at a massive dinner table. I gasped and my whole body jumped.

My pulse skipped beats. My eyelids felt like they'd been glued together. I had no recollection of leaving the river or of getting back to Lakewell Palace. And I definitely did not recall changing my clothes into something dry and warm.

“Are you all right, Rhode?” Kahsi ducked down into my line of view. She frowned. “Rhode, can you hear me?”

I nodded but everything went dark. The last thing I heard was her curse.

“*RHODE—*”

I gasped and sat up, but the world spun. Warmth spread through my arms. I tried to stay with it, but my eyes kept rolling. Something hot touched my face, but I just couldn't see. My pulse was flying. Violent tremors ripped through my body.

Kahsi's golden eyes widened. “*VARAN!*”

I frowned. I tried to ask when he'd gotten there, but my mouth wasn't moving. The skin around my eyes tingled and burned. My body swayed. The world spun. I couldn't tell if I was sitting up or lying down. I had no idea where I was.

Darkness sucked me in again.

“*Rhodelia—*”

I gasped and threw my arms out, but everything was still dark. My whole body shook violently. “*V-Var-Varan-*”

“I'm here,” he growled, but at least it didn't sound angry. “*Breathe, Rhodelia. Breathe.*”

Then I felt the warmth of his hands cup my face—and my vision came flashing back. The world had stopped moving. We were in the dining room of Lakewell palace. I was sitting on the floor beside a chair that had been kicked out of the way.

The stone walls were bright with sunlight streaming in through the stained-glass windows. Those big bushy roses lined the wall. I took a deep breath to smell them, but all I got was that spicy red wine scent of Varan.

“*Rhodelia*,” he snarled.

I jumped and blinked around until his face came into view right in front of me. He was fully dressed in dry clothes. Even his hair looked dry. I wanted to curl my finger around that one strand hanging over his forehead. I frowned. “You’re dressed.”

He arched one eyebrow. “As are you.”

“I’m dry,” I heard myself say. I looked down and found myself dressed in a glittery silver gown. The amulet hanging over my chest was red. “How’d I get here? What happened?”

Varan scowled. “What do you remember last?”

“You left the river ...” I frowned. “I said stuff to people? Did I tell them to go home?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Hollyn? Where are you?”

She slid into my line of view, her green eyes dark with worry. “I’m here. King Varan asked me to stay back.”

I turned my narrowed eyes on him. “Why? What happened to me?”

He gripped my wrists and gave a squeeze. Those neon-purple veins glowed through the long sleeves of my dress. Varan sighed. “I had to unlock these again to allow you to remain conscious, so you’ll need to be careful until we can teach you how to control it.”

“Why? What happened?”

He shook his head. “You’re a half-breed, Rhodelia. We don’t have a lot of those, so the laws of vampire nature as we know it don’t apply in the same way for you. It’s a learning curve.”

“And?” I pursed my lips. “What else? Just spit it out.”

“And you ingested a lot of nectar.”

“So did you?”

“I have been drinking nectar for seventy-eight years. Even though it was contaminated, it still held some of the properties. My body was accustomed to it, and therefore I did not take in too much—”

“And he’s King, so I’m pretty sure he’s immune to like everything,” Kahsi said and rolled her eyes.

“So, because I’ve only had nectar—contaminated or not—one time, I just overdosed on it? That what you’re saying?”

He nodded. “Yes, but also ... whatever the nectar did to the Nightmares just now did the same to you. But you have Court of Blood in your veins as well, so that saved you from unconsciousness.”

Hollyn gnawed on her bottom lip. “I did not know you were a half-breed, Rhode.”

“And no one else should,” Varan said with that growl of his. “Not until we figure things out. Understood?”

Hollyn and Kahsi nodded.

“I’m going to lift you now, Rhodelia.”

“Okay.”

He took my hands and easily hoisted me back upright. “Sit.” He pointed to the chair.

“Bossy,” I mumbled as I sat down in the chair at the head of the table.

Varan took the seat to the right, diagonal to me. “Where is Cresswell?”

“I am here.” Cresswell strolled into the room with a smile on his face. He went up to his wife and kissed her temple. “What a week.”

Kahsi sat a glass of red wine in front of me. “Wine. Drink.” She winked and then sat in the seat on the other side of Varan, who was eyeing me oddly.

Hollyn took the seat to my left directly across from Varan. “What made you go up there today?”

Varan just stared at me with that unreadable expression.

So *I* answered. “We’re trying to figure out what’s happening to everyone. To save them.”

Viera and Arlene emerged from a side door carrying two plates each. Viera sat a plate of fruit in front of me and Varan, while Arlene gave us each a plate with crackers, bread, and what looked like butter. They smiled and gave a little bow before moving to sit next to Kahsi.

My stomach growled. “Thank you.” I shoved an entire cracker in my mouth.

Varan arched one eyebrow.

I shrugged.

Cresswell sighed and sat beside his wife. “So, I ask along the lines of Hollyn ... What did we figure out? And what’s next?”

“It is clear the pure nectar healed the burned—”

“Did we bring some to the infirmary yet?”

Hollyn reached over and squeezed my hand. “That was almost two hours ago.”

“WHAT?”

Hollyn’s face flushed. “I ... I was not here.”

Viera looked like she was going to be sick. “I thought you were merely tired, so I let you rest while we got you out of those wet clothes.”

“It wasn’t until we woke you that we realized you had not just been sleeping.” Arlene tucked her hair behind her ears. “The others had not returned, but Kahsi had just woken up.”

Kahsi grimaced. “I called for King Varan as soon as I saw you.”

I turned to him. “You just got here?”

He shrugged one shoulder.

“The Nightmares who ... fell?”

His eyes darkened. “Like the others you saw at Elden Palace.”

My stomach turned. “*That’s* how that happened?”

“No, *that* happened over time. This is much more concerning as it was instant.” He scratched his jaw. “Conray is watching over things while I am here.”

“We need to figure out what’s causing that.” I ripped a chunk of bread off the loaf and bit it.

“I administered the pure nectar to everyone at the infirmary, overflow tents, *and* to the homeless shelter.” Hollyn shook her head. “For those who were oddly weak or burned, the nectar healed them instantly.”

Cresswell's face fell. "But those cursed with sudden old age saw no change."

I grabbed the butter-looking cream and stabbed it with my bread. "So we figure that out too." I bit off the piece with the cream and was pleasantly surprised to find it *was* butter.

"Are you always so violent with your food?"

I threw my bread at his face as hard as I could.

He caught it, naturally. "Interesting."

"Everything can be a weapon, princess."

Kahsi snorted.

The others all looked shocked that I'd just called their King *princess*.

I shrugged. "I'm a nurse. I've seen people do all kinds of stuff with objects in creative ways."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "So, I am thinking the Court of Nightmares is not supposed to drink the nectar."

"At all."

He nodded.

"I agree. That was far too instant to be a coincidence." I popped a grape into my mouth. "He just let them think they were supposed to drink the nectar this whole time. I don't understand that."

"My father turned out to be even more of a monster than I ever realized. The nectar must have been contaminated before I was born."

"What makes you say that?"

“Because there were paintings in Brimstone Castle of me as a young child, of my parents’ wedding, of my father as a child—all of them showed the nectar as red.”

Viera nodded. “It was red when I was a little girl two centuries ago.”

“Every painting I have ever seen has shown the nectar red,” Arlene added.

Hollyn frowned. “Did he make everyone drink this contaminated nectar for money?”

“And what was the point of contaminating it? To what end to they get with it?”

Varan stared into the distance.

“And are we sure we’re not supposed to be feeding from each other?” When the others jumped and looked to me with wide eyes, I got my answer. “As in blood.”

Cresswell scowled. “We have never consumed blood.”

“Do we know that though?” Hollyn narrowed her eyes on me and tapped on her own teeth. “Because she has big fangs for a reason. The rest of us have these tiny pointed fangs that don’t do anything. Yet hers are big. That can’t be coincidence.”

“She did not have those fangs in her last life.”

I shivered. “Viera, last life talk needs a warning before you say it. I’m not ready.”

Arlene giggled. “Nevertheless, she is right.”

“Listen, I don’t know. I don’t remember my past life. And vampire legends on Earth don’t mean anything for the rules *here*. It just surprised me.” I looked beside me. “Varan?”

“If anyone knew about the consumption of blood question, it was my father, and he would have kept it in his scrolls.”

“Okay, so we find the scrolls. That sounds like a solid plan.”

“Those were lost, I thought?” Cresswell scowled. “All of Brimstone Castle was destroyed.”

“I thought so too.”

“What is Brimstone Castle?”

“That was the King’s castle,” Hollyn said with a smile. “Lord and Lady of the Court of Blood resided in Lakewell Palace. Lord and Lady of Court of Nightmares resided in Elden Palace. King and Queen had Brimstone.”

Viera’s eyes turned sad. “And then it blew to pieces fifty years ago.”

Cresswell leaned his elbows on the table. “So, how are we supposed to find these scrolls?”

“They must be hidden.”

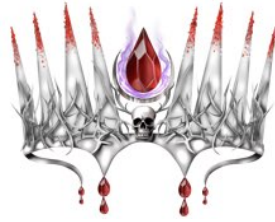
“They are,” Varan said softly. “But I know where they are.”

“Let’s go now?”

“Eat. Rest. I cannot have you passing out. The road we take is too dangerous.” Varan stood and tossed my chunk of bread back at me. “Kahsi, use your discretion. When she is strong enough, escort her to Elden Palace.”

Twenty-One

RHODELIA



“This is what’s left of your father’s castle?”

He nodded but he would not look at me. He hadn’t looked at me since he left me at Lakewell Palace. He’d barely spoken either. Every time I thought we made progress, he’d snap right back to the cold, brooding, *please die* version of Varan. I’d gotten a laugh out of him earlier, and now every word I spoke, he acted like it was hurting him. I should have stopped trying so hard, but each singular moment I caught glimpses of the other side of his steel wall made me want to blast the wall down all together.

I stared up at the ruins of the castle, just two small stone towers that’d been blown apart. There was just enough of it left to see what it was before, but the same could not be said for the rest of it. All I saw were the peaks of the Shadow Mountains towering above us.

“Was I here before? In my last life?”

A cold blast of energy rolled off of him and slammed into my face. I shivered.

“You married my father here,” he snarled, then spun around and stormed away from me.

Then it clicked. “Is that why you hate me?”

But he'd already stormed off. I cursed and chased after him through the rubble. "Varan, is that it? Is that why you hate me so much?" I reached for his arm to stop him, but he swatted me away.

"Can we focus?" he snapped, his eyes blazing with the fire of the sun. "I have to find the secret tunnel through the mountains to where the scroll was hidden—"

"You said you knew where it was—"

"I do." He threw his arm out and gestured around us. "I have not been up here in fifty years since my father blew up this mountain. It does not look the same, so I merely need to concentrate, but I cannot do that with you in my ear wanting to talk about our feelings."

I slammed my mouth shut. There were so many things to say to that, yet none at the same time. So, instead, I just took a step back and gestured for him to walk away. The problem was my feelings for him were alarming, so if I knew why he hated me, then I might be able to sort out my own foolish heart. Because if I was being honest with myself, my biggest problem with Abba's declaration of me being Queen ... was *him*.

I could not spend the rest of my life like this.

So I let him walk off without me. I took a deep breath to calm myself, because being nasty back at him so far had not gotten us very far. I spotted a faint lavender haze up ahead, so I went toward it. Brimstone Castle was nestled deep in the *Forest of Fears* right against the edge of Shadow Mountains so a strange-colored light kind of tracked. But when I got to it, I discovered it was actually the glow of a lake.

I walked to the edge of the lake and looked around. The mountains surrounded it like a cradle almost, keeping it safe all tucked within them. Huge boulders sat in the water like they'd been dropped from the sky. The water was *lavender*. And it glowed. As I stood there staring at this unusual body of water, images flashed through my brain like a slideshow. I looked down at my amulet and my eyes widened.

It was *purple*.

I was dreaming.

That was all the warning I got. For when I looked up, I saw things that weren't there anymore.

Shadow Mountains cut a sharp wall between us and the Court of Shadows. It was gorgeous to see the clouds roll over the jagged peaks of the mountains. Behind me, Brimstone Castle stood strong and impressive, but all of my attention was on him.

He stood with his back to me, waist deep in the water. He'd foregone his coat. I'd seen it draped over a rock a few feet back. I was running late today. My sister had had a rough morning. I'd been so worried he wasn't going to be here waiting for me. I knew he was busy. But there he was, in our pool waiting. We liked this spot, our own little oasis tucked beneath rows and rows of trees.

The season was changing, giving way to the cooler temperatures of autumn. For the first time in my life, I was dreading it. Autumn had always been my favorite time of year, yet now it could hold the end of my time with him. Summer had allowed for secret rendezvous beneath the stars or in the Sun's rays on the water. I stepped into the pool with my bare feet and cringed as the chilled temperature sent goosebumps across my body.

He did not turn but I knew he felt my presence. He always did. I pressed my hands to the small of his back, then kissed the spot between his shoulder blades. He sighed and spun to face me. His hands gripped my waist and dragged me against his chest. I slid my hands up into his dark-purple hair, tangling my fingers in the silky strands.

“I am sorry to have delayed you.”

“You are here now. Let us not worry of anything else.” He smiled and it made his amber eyes sparkle. He ducked his head and pressed his lips to my throat, kissing a path up to my ear. “You are worth the wait, Rhodelia.”

Neon-purple light flashed all around me.

“RHODELIA.”

I gasped and shook myself. I was knee-deep in the lavender lake. *What the hell?* I held my amulet up just in time to watch it fade from purple to red. My breath left me in a rush. I’d been dreaming. Except, I knew it wasn’t just a dream. That was a memory. *Was that the King?* I had no memory of what King Valandril looked like, and no one had kept their paintings of him on display.

“Rhodelia,” Varan yelled with a growl.

I spun around but my face was on fire, so I knew I was blushing. “Yes?”

“Can we carry on with our task or shall you be daydreaming all day?”

“Sorry, it was ...” I shook myself and hurried out of the water toward him. “I just had a memory. Or at least I think so. I’ve never had a dream like that before. I saw myself in this pool, but it looked a little different. And I was with someone, must have been Valandril. What did he look like?”

“I do not care about your fantasies,” he snarled. “Let us go.”

I sighed. For a moment, I’d forgotten Cinderella had turned back into a pumpkin. He hadn’t waited for me. Granted, he also hadn’t sped off without me, which we both knew was possible, so I tried to pick my battles with him. I followed him around the end of one of the cliffs only to find a staircase had been carved into the stone. At the bottom it was a black hole.

Except it wasn’t the bottom. The stairs kept descending. I could not see a thing.

“So, did your father have amber eyes like you?” I heard myself ask, anything to keep my thoughts off the darkness swallowing us.

“Did you not inherit your traits from your parents?” he growled, and it echoed off the walls.

“My parents are dead here and on Earth, so I wouldn’t know.” I stepped forward and slammed into his back. “Sorry, sorry.”

He growled again, but then his arm wrapped around my waist and lifted me off my feet. My body was pressed against his side. Cold air rushed over me, blowing my hair back behind me. It was like the stairs at Scarlet Peaks, at least this time I wasn’t thrown over his shoulder.

Darkness gave way to a soft blueish light. When he sat me back on my feet, I wanted to pout, but that wasn’t going to win me any points with him, so I spun away to avoid him seeing my face. We were in some kind of cave. It was a jagged uneven ground made of gray slates with sharp rocks jutting up around them. Everything seemed to be covered with a thin

layer of fog and that blue light didn't look to have a source at all.

Neon-purple smoke swirled around Varan's hands, but before I could ask what he was doing, he'd changed his appearance. Faster than Ambrose had changed, Varan turned into a five-foot-five, skinny, freckled dude with long wavy red hair to his shoulder. His black clothes were now neatly pressed white cotton that looked like if he sat down, they'd wrinkle. He turned to face me, and his now brown eyes looked me up and down. With a flick of his wrist, purple light flashed in my eyes, but it faded in two seconds.

“What was that?”

He looked me up and down again and nodded. “A precaution.”

I frowned and held my hands out in front of me. My eyes widened. *Those are not my hands.* My hands were as petite as the rest of me. These hands had long, elegant fingers with pretty red-rounded nails. My long, glittery silver dress was ivory cotton, but when I ran my fingers over the sleeves, I still felt the rough material of the lace dress. I still felt my long hair swinging by my hips, but I couldn't see it. The only hairs I saw were the deep, red-wine colored curls that bounced around my shoulders.

“Why? Is it dangerous down here for us?”

“Let's go.” He ignored my question, which was not shocking.

A cold gust of wind ripped around a massive, jagged boulder and I hissed. Learning the different climates of each court was confusing. I hadn't nailed it down yet. If I had my car, it'd be fine. I'd just keep a variety of jackets and coats in

the trunk, but I didn't even have my own carriage here yet. I tugged on the long sleeves of my dress, then crossed my arms over my chest.

“What is this place?” I shivered. “I should've brought my coat.”

“This used to be the mountain pass between Brimstone Castle and the Court of Shadow's palace, used only by kings and lords and their families.”

“Why? How is this safer than just being on the mountain?”

He sighed and kept walking. “I don't know.”

“You don't know or don't want to answer my questions?”

He looked over his shoulder with narrowed eyes and snarled. “This way.”

I smirked. “So you just continue to use it—”

“I have not been here in fifty years,” he snapped. “The explosion has altered it like it did the Court of Shadows.”

“So this is in the Court of Shadows?”

“No, that Court no longer exists.” He gestured around us. “The demons own this now.”

“Right. Demons. They used to be vampires and now they're something *else*. I still don't understand all of that, but I'll accept that as sufficient answer for now.” I glanced around at the general gloom and doom of this cavern. “Do they hate us?”

“Some of us, perhaps.” A man emerged from within the shadows between two jagged boulders. He was tall, probably near Varan's real height, with long black hair and blue eyes

that seemed to glow. “Depends on the demon, depends on the vampire.”

Varan gasped, and his whole body went rigid. His currently brown eyes were wide and staring at this man like he’d seen a ghost. “*Avalon.*”

He arched one dark eyebrow. “You know my name, yet I have never seen your face. Tell me, do they still talk about me?”

Varan’s face had paled. I’d never seen this expression on his face, even if it was *his* face. It was just so vulnerable. “You died.”

He gave us a cocky half-smirk. “Not quite, unless the vampire King prefers to think of us all as dead.”

Varan flinched. “Vampire King?”

Avalon rolled his eyes. “Whoever he is, I’m sure Valandril and Varan were replaced after their deaths.”

The demons think Varan is dead. That feels significant and I don’t know why.

Varan opened his mouth, then closed it. He seemed to be locked in a state of shock. And then I remembered Kahsi telling me that Varan’s best friend Avalon was the Lord of Shadows and had been killed in the war. My eyes widened. My heart did weird little flutters. This was Varan’s best friend whom he thought to be dead for fifty years ... and he’d been here the whole time. That was the shock and vulnerability in Varan right now.

Except Avalon sneered at us like we were his enemies.

I cleared my throat and stepped up beside Varan. “There’s been a misunderstanding—”

“Yes, there has.” Avalon opened his long leather trench coat and pulled a nasty looking silver dagger from the inside pocket. He pointed it at us. “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

Varan made no move to defend us or protect me, which tracked with his requests for me to die, but I had thought we’d made at least enough progress where he did not actively wish me dead. I would’ve jumped behind him if I thought that wouldn’t trigger the fight to start. Back home, I wouldn’t have felt so weak. But here, I was nothing. My body hadn’t seemed to fully adjust to vampire-mode yet. And I had no idea what kind of demon Avalon was.

Varan was a statue beside me. I understood this had to be a shock for him, but he was taking a long time to snap out of it.

“Are you going to kill us just for being in here?”

“You’re not supposed to be in here—”

“Then put up a fucking sign at the entrance,” I snapped.

Avalon blinked in surprise. He flipped the dagger into the air, then caught it again. “That would require I step foot in Isramaya ... and that is not allowed.”

Varan cocked his head to the side. “Says who?”

Avalon chuckled and pointed the dagger at Varan’s face. “You play dumb well. I am not stupid enough to set foot in Isramaya, not when we’ve been told we are banned forever.”

The demons are banned from Isramaya?

“Again, says who?”

“I refuse to play your game. If you’ve nothing to hide, then tell me why you’ve come.” He gestured between us with his dagger. “Or shall we see who is faster?”

I looked to Varan beside me for guidance.

Varan's fake-brown eyes glanced between the blade of the dagger to Avalon's face. "Such animosity and vitriol, so you have no affection for your former court-mates?"

Avalon chuckled darkly, and not in humor. "Not when my former court-mates abandoned us right when we needed them. Pray tell me, what affection should I keep for them?"

Pray tell me. Varan says that a lot.

Hurt flashed across Varan's face. "Were you not Prince Varan's best friend?"

"Since I was born." Avalon narrowed his eyes, and I knew there was raw pain in there. "But one of *you* killed him before you all deserted us."

"You have been misinformed—"

"Tell me why you've come," Avalon shouted and pointed his dagger right at Varan.

"I cannot do that while you hold a dagger in my face."

"Then let's put it elsewhere." Avalon lunged for me with the dagger.

Varan leapt in front of me faster than I'd ever seen him move. Purple veins lit up his arms and then he was *him* again. I peeked around Varan's wide shoulders in time to see Avalon's face turn snow-white. His eyes widened, and his jaw dropped.

"As I said," Varan said in a low, rough voice, "you have been misinformed."

Avalon narrowed his blue eyes in rage and clenched his teeth. "Remove your glamour."

“This is no glamour, Avalon.”

“Varan is *dead*.”

He sighed and I heard the pain in his emotions. “Figuratively, yes. Literally, I am quite alive. Though not by my own wishes.”

I flinched.

Avalon blinked and lowered his dagger slightly, then shook his head and held it back up. “You are not Varan.”

“I am—”

“*PROVE IT.*”

Neon-purple flames shot out of the ground and swallowed Varan whole. He vanished from sight, then reappeared a split-second later *right* in front of Avalon. “It is me, my friend.”

Avalon’s eyes shimmered with emotion. He dropped the dagger and it crashed to the slate ground with a clank. “*Varan.*”

I did not know who reached for who first, but suddenly they were gripped in a tight hug. I looked away to give them privacy. I could not imagine the relief they must have felt. Kahsi had told me how Varan hurt for his friend even all these years later.

Avalon cleared his throat. “And who is this?”

I looked up and found Avalon watching me, his entire demeanor and expression changed.

Avalon smirked up at Varan. “I never thought I’d see you with a female from the Court of Blood.”

Varan sighed. “About ... *her.*”

I opened my mouth to snap back at the attitude in the word *her* when purple light flashed in my eyes again. I cringed as pain shot through my temples. “Ow. Warning much?”

Avalon gasped. “*Rhodelia.*”

I froze. “You know me?”

But he did not answer. He turned his pale-blue eyes to Varan. “She’s alive?”

“One of the eight,” Varan growled.

“And you’re ... you two are ...” Avalon gestured between us. “*Together?*”

“*No,*” Varan said with a snarl and a glare in my direction.

I rolled my eyes and threw my hands up. “I am so exhausted with your mood swings. First you tell me to die as quickly as possible, then you save my life, then you threaten my life, then you block a crazy demon with a knife from trying to skewer me, and now you regret not letting him. Pick. A. Fucking. Side.”

Avalon’s eyebrows rose to the sky. “She’s mouthier than last time.”

Varan pinched the bridge of his nose.

Avalon eyed him carefully. “Did you ask—”

“She has no memory of *before.*”

“How convenient.”

I grabbed Avalon’s dagger off the ground, then pointed it at Avalon. “You have no reason to hate me.”

“That is not entirely accurate.” Avalon shrugged. “He’s my best friend.”

“Ah, so this hatred of yours, Varan, is from my first life just carried over.” I nodded and threw Avalon’s dagger back at him, which he caught with no problem. “Fantastic. That seems fair. Tell me, demon twat, is this about his father? I would love a *little* reference for the animosity I’ve received.”

“She really does not remember.”

“No, I don’t. And trust me, it’s infuriating for me and completely overwhelming when an entire kingdom knows who I was and I don’t. So, either tell me what your problem is or spare me. It is unfair to drag me for what happened in a previous life.” I glared at Varan, then turned to look at Avalon. “Tell me, Avalon, are you aware of this prophecy?”

“Of course—”

“Great, so where is your eighth?”

“His eighth?”

“*Yet on the Eve thy battle ends, eight fierce souls will make amends. Hand in hand they shall unite, a pact in blood, heiress to fight.*” I arched one eyebrow at them. “*In fifty years, eight heiresses will return, to bring peace to all lands that burn.* Do you not remember these lines?”

Varan’s face fell. “I had not thought about the demons having their own. I should have. Avalon, do you have her?”

“Yes, we have her,” he said with a growl. “But I don’t know if she can be trusted.”

“*Trusted?*” I scoffed. “Did you not hear the words of the prophecy I just said? *Make amends and bring peace?* How can you not trust her?”

“Big words for someone who does not remember what we went through. What we saw—”

“Ah, so you’re also holding a grudge from this poor girl’s past life.” I put my hands on my hips and shook my head. “I wonder how either of you would like such treatment.”

“Unlike you, she has her memory.” His brow furrowed. “So, I have no shame for my judgment of what I saw.”

I sighed and shook my head. “Listen, I understand how this might be hard on you if you had conflict with someone in their past life, but it’s still very much your current life. I don’t remember my life before, so even if I got him to open up about it, I’d have no way to defend whatever actions I made against him to cause such resentment. But if this girl has her memory from before, then you owe her the chance to explain her side.”

Avalon scoffed. “You assume she has a side worth explaining, worth hearing.”

“From what I have been told, eight of us sacrificed our lives to kill Valandril and end the war, which is why we were blessed with a second chance at life, although with the added bonus pressure of helping to fix the remaining problems.” I threw my hands up. “Unless you think Mother Terrea chose to honor a monster.”

“Well, she—” His face snapped in the other direction, his eyes wide. He flicked his wrists and a dark haze wrapped around us. He put his finger to his lips.

A few seconds later, a man emerged from between two boulders holding a piece of paper in his hands. He stopped and held it up. Varan’s hands balled into fists, and a cold wave of energy rolled out of him. Avalon frowned at his best friend. I returned my attention to this new man to see what caused such a reaction out of Varan. He had white-blond hair that fell straight down past his shoulders, sharp angles in his face, and eyes that were nearly solid black. The most interesting part

was the crown perched on his head with thick horns coming up in all directions.

The man scowled, then turned and walked back in the direction he'd come from.

Avalon held his finger up to us, gesturing to wait. After a few moments, he flicked his wrist and the dark haze vanished. "Sorry, I just thought—"

"I thought he had died when my father did," Varan said with more rage than I'd ever heard in his voice.

"Who was that?"

Avalon frowned at Varan. "Why would you think that?"

Varan cracked his knuckles and snarled in the direction the man had gone in. "Because he was my father's right hand."

I gasped.

Avalon paled. "What ... what are you saying?"

Varan looked his best friend in the eyes. "I'm saying he's as vile and monstrous as my father, and you should kill him before he rips our world apart again."

Avalon blinked. "How do you know that? Who told you that?"

"*He* did." Varan clenched his teeth. Purple smoke coiled around his arms. "Dacio looked me right in the eye and said he'd helped my father kill my mother. That he'd killed you, killed everyone, and that I had nothing left, and then he left me for dead."

Avalon's face fell.

"I'm going to guess *he* told you I was dead?" When Avalon nodded, Varan continued, "I'm also going to guess he's

the one who informed the demons the vampires had abandoned them and that you were banned from Isramaya?”

Avalon nodded again.

“Well, if you still trust me, then you should know that Lord Cresswell and I have tried for fifty years to send aid to the demons. We have tried to get you to come home to Isramaya. We have begged *King Marino* to let us help in any way possible, for we had no interest in losing a third of our family. But we have been rejected at every word.”

Avalon opened his mouth, then shut it. He looked absolutely wrecked.

Varan put his hand on Avalon’s shoulder and squeezed. “And as the King of Isramaya, my word is the only one you need.”

“You’re ...” Avalon’s voice broke. He cleared his throat. “You’re King?”

Varan nodded.

For now. But I did not say that. I understood that Varan was giving his old friend strength because it sounded like the demon kingdom was in trouble. And I didn’t need to give Varan another reason to hate me.

Avalon swayed on his feet. “I ... I ... I have no words right now.”

Varan nodded. “Well when you do, call for me. Elden Palace is always open for you and yours. There isn’t a vampire in either court who would not welcome you all home. I’ll let you handle what you need to, just know Isramaya stands by your side ready and waiting to provide any form of aid you require. And that is an open offer, without time limits or disclaimers.”

“Thank you, my friend.” Avalon scrubbed his face roughly with his hands. He looked torn apart. He looked like he just found out the person he trusted was the enemy. Then he shook himself. “It is not safe in this tunnel for the King of Isramaya. Why have you come here, Varan?”

“The vault.” He sighed. “I need my father’s scroll.”

Avalon’s eyes widened. “Do you remember where it is and how to find it?”

Varan nodded.

“Go. Now and with haste. I would not be surprised if that’s what Dacio is looking for in here.” Avalon glanced over his shoulder. “I will keep the tunnel empty until you’re out.”

“How will you know when we’re out?” I asked.

“The same way I knew you were in.” Avalon smirked. “I felt your presence. Suppose I should have known it would be you, Varan. Had I known you were alive, I would have.”

Varan pulled his friend in for another hug and whispered words in another language. Avalon nodded and spoke it back. Part of me wondered if they’d just said something about *me*, but I couldn’t tell if that was paranoia or social anxiety speaking.

Finally, Avalon looked to me and bowed his head slightly. “Rhodelia.”

“Remember, talk to your girl. Your eighth.”

“Oh, right, who is it?” Varan frowned. “Your eighth?”

Avalon grimaced. “Lily.”

Varan’s eyes widened. “Lily? As in Lily from—”

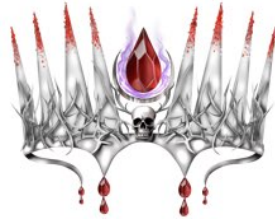
“That’s the one.”

Varan whistled under his breath. “Best of luck, my friend.”

Avalon looked to me, then back to Varan. “You too.” And then he vanished into the shadows.

Twenty-Two

RHODELIA



A few minutes later, Varan and I stood before a towering slate wall.

I looked up at the profile of his face. “Is ... is this it?”

He nodded.

Interesting. It was just a stone wall that blended in with the rest of the cavern and jagged boulders. That faint blue light clung to the air here, too. The only difference was a slight shimmer of golden light that glittered the air. But I could not see where it was coming from. Possibly a hole up above that let sunlight stream inside.

“You cannot see what I see,” he said softly.

“Why not?”

“You are not King.”

“I’m Queen.”

His lips quirked like he wanted to smirk but didn’t. “Not officially, at least not in this life.”

“My hair is silver—”

“I was not expecting you to return looking so much ...” his amber eyes shot down to me, “like you.”

“You did not know me with silver hair, did you?”

“I was there when you were crowned and the red gave way to silver.”

I had so many questions about that. About why he hated me yet had moments of affection. I was fairly certain I’d done something to hurt him, and I desperately wanted to know what it was. I wanted my memory back so I could maybe fix it ... or fix what was left. And there was a chance, given this moment of softness in his mood, that he might answer me.

But there was something I needed to ask more.

“Are you okay? After seeing Avalon?”

His face fell. He stared back at the wall where he saw something I didn’t.

“Kahsi told me you hurt for Avalon still.”

“I loved him like a brother and then he was gone, robbed from me,” he said so softly I almost couldn’t hear him. “You do not ever truly heal from those kinds of wounds.”

“I had sisters on Earth.”

His gaze snapped back to me. He frowned. “Plural?”

I nodded. “Well, one was a foster sister, but she was a sister in my heart. And then there was my actual sister. Our parents died when we were little. She’s been my whole world my whole life, and now I’ll never see her again. She’ll spend the rest of her short human life never knowing what happened to me and thinking it was her fault. So, I understand that pain, even if mine just started.”

He stared at me for a long moment before turning back to the wall. “I did not know about the foster sister—”

“Did you know about my real sister?”

He shook his head. “Ambrose informed me after you came through The Veil. He told me what he made you see so he could get you to the portal.”

“While pretending to be you.”

He nodded. “Well, at the ball, Cresswell and Hollyn informed me how devastated you were about your sister, so I ... I sent a message to her.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

“I don’t know if she received it. I meant to ask Abba if it worked, but then she went and distracted me with her announcement.”

“*But you hate me,*” I heard myself whisper.

He closed his eyes and hung his head. “When Avalon went missing when the war began, I was inconsolable. The unknown was a torture I do not wish on anyone. Being told he was dead allowed me to grieve and attempt to move on. Regardless of my ... feelings for you ... I do not wish that form of torture on anyone. So, I did it for her, not for you.”

Tears burst from my eyes, and I did not try to stop them. He’d sent a message. Even though he hated me from my past life, for whatever awful thing I did to him, and yet he still sent the message. For Morgana. So she wouldn’t kill herself trying to find me.

I gripped his shirt and pulled him down so I could kiss his cheek, then I pulled back. “There is nothing that will heal the hurt I feel from losing her. So, *for her*; thank you.”

His cheeks flushed pink. He nodded and looked away.

I cleared my throat. “Now. This vault. You see it?”

“Only a royal can see it. Since you’ve been named Queen—and you were already Queen—I think you should be able to see a faint golden light?”

“Yes! I can!”

He nodded. “There’s a glowing symbol on the outside of the vault. If you were already crowned in this life, you’d be able to see it.”

“That actually makes sense. So how do you get inside?”

He sighed and put his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “There is a trigger to start the unlocking process. I am standing on said trigger. I’m waiting for it to complete. The light is moving along the marking.”

“OH. So that’s why we’re just standing here.”

He smirked and nodded.

That smirk and his overall tenderness right here in this dark cavern was far too dangerous for my heart. I needed to distract myself or piss him off. Either would work. “So, that Dacio guy ... Who was he before?”

“The Duke. In our kingdom, there was always the king and queen, a lord and lady of each court, and then the duke who acted for the throne as a go-between with the courts. That was Dacio. My father’s right hand.” The softness in his face turned sharp and menacing. “I’ve loathed him since I was a child, long before I ever realized my father was a monster. When the truth came out, I knew Dacio was with him.”

“And you thought he died?”

“I’m sure that was by design by Dacio. He has clearly made himself King of Isramorta and given himself a new name so that none of *us* would know it was him.”

“Sounds nefarious.”

He sighed. “That’s such a great word. Yes, he is nefarious.”

I smiled because he’d complimented me. That shouldn’t have made me so happy. “Do you think he was looking for the vault?”

“I would not be surprised. I’m sure he would love to get his hands on my father’s scroll.”

“Why? What’s on the scroll?”

“It’s the Kings’ Scroll. Every king of Isramaya has used it, written in it.”

“Ah, so no big deal—”

“There, it’s open,” he said in a rush. He started forward, then stopped. “It might not be safe. My father loved setting traps, and since he hated me, he may have a nasty surprise waiting for me.”

“*Dear God.*” I shuddered and waved him on. “I’ll wait here. Go ahead. But be careful.”

He nodded and then vanished into purple flames. A moment later, he reappeared up ahead at the base of the wall with the glowing golden symbols I could not see. It was about thirty feet away, so close enough I could keep an eye on him but far enough to most likely miss any traps set by Valandril.

And since he hated me. My heart hurt for him. What kind of parent hated their child just for being a kind person? I wondered how anyone missed *that* red flag. Varan crouched down and pressed his palm to the wall. I kept my eyes on him. He may have hated me, but I did not hate him, much as I wish

I did. Purple smoke exploded from the wall. It slammed into his chest and sent him flying into the air.

I choked on a gasp. “VARAN!”

His back hit the ground hard with a nasty crunch that echoed around the cavern. The force of it made him flip and roll several times. The mountain trembled wildly. It reminded me of that earthquake in Scarlet Peaks before. Rocks bigger than my whole body dropped from the cavern ceiling left and right.

Varan wasn't moving.

“VARAN!”

I cursed and lunged for him, but the ground shot up right in front of me and a jagged edge of slate slammed into the bottom of my chin, throwing me up and back. Pain exploded through my head, neck, and down my spine. The last thing I saw was my blood splattering across the boulder right before it hit me in the face and everything went dark.

Twenty-Three

VARAN



All I kept hearing was the sound of her voice screaming my name.

The single sound that would haunt the rest of my existence.

Every ounce of pain, rage, and hate I felt in my heart for her vanished in that moment. I'd known my father would've left a trap for me in his vault. He was that much of a monster. That was why I had her stay back. But as I ran as fast as I could through the tunnel with her draped in my arms, I was beating myself up for taking her with me there at all.

I should have left her at the ruins.

I should have left her at Elden Palace.

I should have left her at Lakewell Palace, safe with Cresswell and Hollyn.

I should have gone and returned with the scroll myself.

I should have done a lot of things differently.

There was blood everywhere. So much blood. I couldn't even tell where it all was coming from. There was barely an inch of her body not drenched in it. I'd just scooped her up and started running before I even realized how bad it was. But I had to keep going. There was no help for her in the tunnel. I'd

never run so fast in my life. I had to get her to the infirmary. Once I got up, I'd call for Sparks and Starling and they'd have us to the healers in minutes.

But as I emerged from the darkness of the tunnel into the light of day, I looked down at her and my heart skipped. My feet stopped short. A sinking cold dread filled my bones. That slate that shot up from the ground had sliced the bottom of her chin open, it looked more like she'd been mauled by an animal. My knees buckled and I hit the cold, hard dirt. I reached up and pulled her blood-soaked hair off of her face.

A broken sob ripped up my throat.

Half of her face had been broken.

I'd never seen blood that dark. There was no healer that could save her now. *Wait. The pool. THE POOL.* I leapt to my feet and raced as fast as I could to the *Pool of Mortamaya* in the shadows of Brimstone Castle's ruins. The pool had a little healing magic in it. That was why my father used it in the first place. It was ten times the size since the explosion, so I prayed that meant it was ten times as powerful because she needed a miracle.

The now lavender water splashed all over me as I trudged to the middle of the pool. If I had time, I would have taken her to the Sacred Temple to bathe in the healing waters of Sacred Pools. But we didn't have that time. Her skin was turning gray. Her whole body convulsed, her eyes twitched and rolled.

Her pulse was slowing down while mine was flying.

She was dying.

"*No, no, no, come on,*" I cried and submerged her beneath the water, leaving just her nose and mouth out. "*Please, please stay with me. Just stay with me. Come on.*"

Inch by inch, her blood turned the water a dark reddish purple, like her favorite glass of wine. The bleeding was slowing down but only because she'd lost so much she was probably running out. It was caked in my fingernails and staining my skin. My heart was pounding so hard it was going to break my sternum. *Fine, break it. Just let me keep her.* I wrapped my arms around her, holding her against my chest with my fingers in her hair.

Just let me keep her.

My hands trembled. My knees buckled under our weight. Tears stung my eyes. I gasped for air between the sobs burning a path in my throat. A violent tremor tore down my spine. The cuts and bruises on my skin from being thrown by that explosion were healing in the pool. The smaller slices on her body were closing as I watched but the big wounds were still torn open.

Mother Terrea, don't do this to me. Please let me keep her.

I can't do this again.

I'd barely survived her last death, and I'd known she was coming back. There was no prophecy this time around. If she died, it would be for the last time. My breath hitched. My entire chest was on fire. I couldn't lose her. Not again. My pulse was so fast my body was shaking. My vision began to tunnel. I gasped for air.

I hated this woman so much because I loved her down to the fiery depths of my soul, with every ounce of my being. She'd betrayed me in the worst possible way. She'd broken my heart into irreparable pieces. It was like she'd reached into my body and ripped my still-beating heart from my chest with her bare hands. Yet even then, with my soul fractured and broken, I still loved her.

She'd claimed my heart fifty years ago, that first night I caught her sneaking into this very pool with her red hair glowing in the moonlight. She'd smiled up at me and I was done. She'd said my name *once* and I was forever hers.

Even with my heart shattered, I had counted the days until her return, until I could see her face again. For fifty years, I'd convinced myself I was okay, that she would return and explain her side of the story that I'd never been given a chance to hear. I told myself there had to be a reason for her betrayal, that I couldn't have been that blind. That surely being chosen by Mother Terrea to be reborn meant she wasn't the monster my father was. I told myself if Mother Terrea could give her a second chance, that I could too.

And then she'd returned, and I wasn't strong enough. I'd failed her and now I was going to lose her because of that.

Her eyes flew open, and she gasped.

I cupped her face in my hands. "Look at me. *Look at me.*"

She looked at me. I knew she saw me. I saw the recognition in those silver eyes and a plea for help. "*Varan—*"

"*Yes? I'm here. I've got you. Stay with me,*" I cried and brushed her cheeks with my fingers.

Her pulse kicked up a few notches. "*Varan—*"

"I'm here."

Her eyes widened, and her body trembled. "*I'm—*"

"*I love you. Just stay with me. Just hang on,*" I screamed through the hot lump in my throat, my voice raw already. Tears pooled in my eyes. "*Fight it. Let the pool heal you.*"

"—*Sorry—*" she gasped for air and then her heart stopped. Those beautiful silver eyes rolled back and stared unseeing at

the sky.

“NOOO!”

A broken sob ripped up my throat. Her body went limp in my arms. I collapsed against her, screaming my pain into her cold skin. Her blood dripped into my mouth. I felt a sharp almost-pain and then my fangs elongated until I could no longer close my mouth.

From tasting her blood.

My chest was rising and falling so fast, my pulse running away from me.

Blood. We need blood. That had to be what that meant. She had to have been right. I didn't waste time pondering it, I sank my fangs into my own wrist and punctured my veins. Blood gushed like the river rapids on Ruby Falls. This was either going to save her or I was going to die with her. As I pressed my wrist to her open mouth and my blood poured onto her lips and tongue, I knew I'd be fine with either outcome.

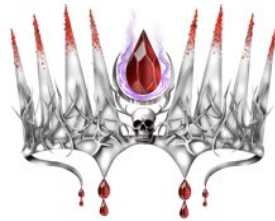
I'd live with her or die with her. There was no longer another choice.

“Don't you dare die on me again. Not like this,” I cried. “He doesn't get to take you from me again. Drink, Rhodelia, *drink*. It's yours, just take it.”

I felt her pulse beat against my chest.

Twenty-Four

RHODELIA



I tasted chocolate.

My other senses were not yet working, but I tasted chocolate. And not the cheap drugstore kind, but the rich dark chocolate you got from the expensive chocolatier. The kind you had to eat slowly so you could savor every last ounce of Heaven.

With every drop of this chocolate nectar, the rest of me began to wake.

My body was first. I felt heavy, like I was being weighed down by cement blocks. I tried to move my arms and legs, but they weren't budging. It felt like I was trapped inside someone else's body. *Wait. Am I paralyzed? What happened to me? Where am I?*

It was like I'd been idle too long and went to the screensaver, but then someone tapped the screen and my brain kicked into gear. *Okay, think back. What do you remember, Rhode?* I saw Varan in my mind instantly. There was a faint blue glow on his face as he looked down at me with the raw emotions seeing Avalon had given him. *AVALON! We were in the cavern at the vault!* It all came rushing back. Varan telling me to stay back. The vault exploding when he opened it. Varan being thrown across the cavern.

Me screaming for him as I ran to save him.

The slate. The boulder. The pain.

I tried to open my eyes, but they wouldn't budge. My pulse was growing stronger. I gasped for air and got a mouthful of smooth, warm chocolate. I moaned. It tasted divine. But then it started to move away from my mouth. *NO! Not yet.* My arms flew up and grabbed whatever it was, dragging it back down to my mouth. Whatever it was, it was soft and warm beneath my cold fingers. I slid my hands up until I felt ridges of—*knuckles? THIS IS A HAND.*

“*Rhodelia,*” Varan’s voice broke.

VARAN.

“*Come back to me, Rhodelia,*” Varan whispered.

The rest of my senses clicked into place. I felt water surrounding my body like I was in a pool. Varan’s body was hot and pressed against me. I felt his fingers on the back of my head, tangling in my hair. His warm breath brushed over my face. He smelled like blood. That metallic scent was overwhelming.

My eyes finally opened.

Varan let out a broken sob, his face mere inches from mine. His amber eyes were dark and red with emotion. He pulled me closer to his chest. “*Stay with me.*”

I tried to speak, then realized there was something pressed against my open mouth. I pulled away and looked down—I gasped and sat up straight. It was his wrist against my mouth. His wrist with two puncture holes *from fangs*. Dark-red blood bubbled to the surface of his skin. I licked my lips. Chocolate. It tasted like chocolate. *No, that can't be.* My mind was a little fuzzy still, so I lifted his wrist back to my mouth and licked

the wounds. That rich dark chocolate flavor danced on my tongue.

I pulled back, licking my lips.

The puncture holes in his wrist *healed* before my eyes. Gone as if they were never there at all. Not even a mark or scar. I licked my lips again, waiting for the horror of what had just happened to sink in ... that I'd drunk blood. But it never came.

"Rhodelia," Varan whispered, *"say something. I need to know you're okay."*

I looked up into his beautiful face and tried to find words to say but nothing came out. There was too much I felt, yet words did not feel adequate. He'd fed me blood. We didn't even know if we were supposed to or not, or what it would do to us, but I'd been dying in his arms so he took a chance.

He reached up with the hand I wasn't holding and brushed my hair out of my face. A strangled cry slipped through his clenched teeth as he ran his fingertips over my forehead, across my cheekbone, and along my jaw. His amber gaze tracked his movement. My stomach turned. I did not want to know why he was inspecting my face like that, like he was in shock. He slid his fingertips to the underside of my chin and tipped my head back.

We stared into each other's eyes for a moment and then all of that animosity between us just snapped. I gripped his shirt and dragged him down to me just as he pulled my mouth to his. Our lips crashed together. He tasted like chocolate, blood, and a hint of the candy-like sweetness of nectar. My pulse fluttered. Butterflies danced in my stomach. I sighed in relief against his lips, and he *growled*.

His tongue slid over mine, and it was like I'd been electrocuted. Every inch of my body tingled. Beneath his palm on my back, I felt goosebumps cover my body. I arched my back, pressing myself tighter to him. He groaned and his fingers dug into my skin. His hand fisted my hair and yanked my head back so he could deepen our kiss. I wrapped my arms around his waist, then dug my nails into his back, dragging them down his wet shirt. His body trembled, his muscles flexing everywhere I touched him.

The heat radiating off his body was burning me up in the most delicious way. I moaned and rolled my body against his. He growled with his tongue on mine, and my body shook in his arms. Desire like I'd never known bloomed inside of me. But he wasn't close enough. I needed more. I fisted his shirt in my hands and dragged him down with every ounce of my body weight. My feet slipped on the mud, and we stumbled backwards. I didn't care, I just needed more of him. All of him. Right now. I reached up and tangled my hands in his hair. He wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me up. I hooked my leg around his hip.

He took a step—then broke our kiss to look down at the water. “What is that?”

“Nothing.” I took his face in my hands and pressed my lips to his again.

He sighed and sank into our kiss before pulling away to stare at the water. With a scowl, he unwrapped my body from around his, then bent down into the water. He struggled a few seconds before he yanked his hand up and a tree root made of solid gold lifted out of the water. My jaw dropped. A cold, unwelcome chill slid down my spine. The gold faded to a brown color like it'd never been gold at all.

Varan frowned. “This was never there before.”

“How do you know for sure?”

“You think I don’t know the pool behind the castle I grew up in?”

I flinched. “I just meant ... the explosion ... maybe from a tree nearby—”

“*It was gold, Rhodelia,*” he growled and held it up for me to see. “This is the root my father stole from the Sacred Tree. It did not just put itself here.”

My pulse skipped. The root. *The* root. The one Abba had said was stolen. This could’ve been the answer for how to save the Sacred Tree, but I was afraid to hope too fast. “How do you know it wasn’t already here?”

“Because this is not the first time I have held you in this pool.” He turned away from me and headed for the edge of the pool.

“*What?*” I dove forward and grabbed his arm to stop him, but he swatted me away. That cold wall between us had dropped back into place. “What does that mean, Varan? Held me? Wait, the memory I had earlier in this very pool ... That man was *you?*”

He spun around so fast he was suddenly in my face, his amber eyes blazing with rage. “*Yes, that was me.* Is that what you want to hear? Do you feel better knowing the truth, that you were *mine?*”

I gasped.

“Is it, Rhodelia? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

“I hate you because that night when I turned around at that altar to greet my father’s bride-to-be, I found *my* girl’s face in front of me ... in a wedding gown.” He stepped closer, filling the space between us with the fury and heat coming out of him. “I hate you because you tricked me into thinking your heart was mine and then you married my father. You betrayed me. You used me to get that crown on your head and you couldn’t even be bothered to tell me before we stood on opposite ends of that altar. *I* had to say the words, Rhodelia. Do you know what that feels like? To have to be the one to officiate the wedding of your lover to your own father and have zero warning it was coming?”

My jaw dropped. Tears filled my eyes. I shook my head.

“That memory you have of your wedding when you get to the end of the aisle and it’s *me* who turns to greet you ...” His eyes were bloodshot and screaming with pain. “That’s the moment you broke me into irreparable pieces.”

I shook my head and felt tears splash onto my cheeks. “I didn’t know. I don’t remember—”

“*Well, I do,*” he shouted, but his voice cracked. His cheeks flushed pink. “I have tried for fifty years to forget how much I loved you, to pick up the shattered pieces of my heart that you tore up, but every time I look at you it’s like that night at the altar all over again ... and I’m back to picking up the pieces of what you broke.”

My breath was knocked from my lungs.

He spun away and stormed out of the water. I staggered back a few feet before I caught my balance. My heart pounded against my chest. That story. It didn’t feel right. It did not feel like something I would ever do. But I knew that kind of pain in his eyes was not one that could be faked.

My mind went back to that dream, the only one I ever had before Halloween. I'd had that same dream over and over my entire life, for as long as I could remember. Every time that memory forced its way back into my dreams, it ended the same exact way—the moment the guy turned around. I'd never seen his face until I got to Terrea. It was always blurry and shaded. But every time I saw him it jolted me so hard it woke me from my sleep, gasping and scrambling for air. It'd never been the wedding that shook me. It'd been the guy I saw at the end.

Now I knew why.

Because on that night, I had not expected Varan to be at the altar.

I knew in the depths of my soul there was more to that story, that I was as shocked by the revelation of Varan's presence at the wedding, but I didn't remember. I couldn't explain myself to me or him. I didn't know the story I knew had to be there. I couldn't fix his heart until I understood how I broke it. There had to be a good reason for why I married my boyfriend's father. Perhaps I was forced to in the same way I was forced to become Queen two days ago. That had to be it.

But I had my answer now of why he hated me so much.

His behavior made perfect sense. The animosity. The rage. The impatience. The moments of kindness that slipped through the cracks. Because beneath that tough, icy exterior was a heart that loved me, and he refused to give in.

I had to get my memories back. For him. He deserved the truth.

I looked up, then did a double take. He stood on the shore, his clothes dripping wet. But in his hands, he held a rolled-up

parchment. *The Kings' Scroll*. I cursed and trudged my way through the glowing lavender water, then stomped onto the shore. My body felt heavy and weighed down. I glanced at myself, and my eyes widened. My silver dress was *red*. Every inch of it had been stained with blood.

Varan let out a strangled gasp. When I looked up, I found his face pale. The scroll trembled in his shaking hands. Rage filled his eyes. "We're supposed to drink from the vein. They lied to us. *Blood* is what sustains us. Blood and only blood. Nectar is only to give *them* a magic. Only the Court of Blood is supposed to drink the nectar. It says right here that the Court of Nightmares cannot drink the nectar because of the Forest's magic, that it would slowly kill them. They all knew this and lied to us. All of our kings, my ancestors. Liars."

I gently took the scroll from his hands before he ripped it to pieces in anger. And in his rage, he let me take it from him. His emotions were frayed and frail already, but this was sending him over the edge. He tugged on his hair and paced back and forth, mumbling words laced with violence and fury.

I looked down at the scroll and my heart sank. Right there, written in an elegant red script were the words, '*Make them forget blood. Tell them they need nectar to survive, ALL of them. And then tax it heavily.*'

My stomach rolled like I was going to be sick.

Varan whistled and I knew it was for the raiths. I looked up at him, but he was staring at nothing, just seething. His hands were in fists and trembling. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to talk to him. But there were no words. I didn't know what to say ... about his heart or the secrets in the scroll.

When Sparks and Starling came flying around the corner with Thuso at the reins, I felt the pressure to say *something* to

him. I couldn't let what happened here leave off where it did.

I stepped closer to him. "Varan—"

He spun away, shaking his head and cringing.

"I'm sorry."

Thuso pulled the carriage to a stop right in front of us. He smiled at Varan, then looked to me and his expression turned to horror. He stood. "Queen Rhodelia, is that *blood*? Are you hurt?"

You have no idea.

I cleared my throat. "I was but King Varan saved my life. I am lucky."

Varan yanked the carriage door open and growled, "*Get in.*"

I didn't argue this time. I didn't give him shit for his attitude or mood swings. I understood the pain he felt now and my role in that, so I hurried and jumped into the carriage while trying to find words to say to him on the ride.

But then he slammed the carriage door closed. "Elden Palace. Now."

He vanished into purple flame and smoke. I shouldn't have been surprised.

The ride to Elden Palace was ice-cold, and it had nothing to do with the temperature outside. My heart was overwhelmed. I held my hands out in front of me and cringed. My own blood was caked in my nails and on my amulet. Every other inch of me was stained red with it. I could not believe this turn of events.

No wonder Avalon hated me. He was Varan's best friend who was just as shocked to find Varan's girlfriend marrying his father. I had to support that level of best friendship. I hated every single person who ever mistreated my sister.

I was pretty sure I died a few moments ago. Literal death. There was no way this much blood was on me and I survived that naturally. Varan had saved me with his own blood. He'd taken a chance on the idea I'd had and went with it. Even after how much I'd hurt him, he'd saved me. That had to mean there was hope for his heart still.

When we stopped outside of Elden Palace, I hopped out and then stopped short. Varan stood there shifting his weight around and twitching. His eyes snapped over to me, then looked me up and down like he was searching for danger. He nodded once, snatched the scroll from my hands, then marched into his house.

I hurried after him, still determined to talk to him, but slid to a stop when I heard Kahsi gasp followed by Conray's violent curse. Both of them rushed to their King with their arms held out like they could do something. Something moved in my peripheral vision. When I looked, it was Ambrose coming up from the basement.

Kahsi shook her head wildly. "Sir, that's too much blood!"

"*Varan*—" Conray swayed on his feet.

Ambrose cringed. "Whose blood is that?"

"It's not mine," he growled and slowed his pace.

Kahsi gasped and then turned wide, horrified eyes on me. "Rhode—"

"Get changed, Rhodelia. I cannot look at you with all that blood on you," he snarled and stormed off.

“Where are you going?” But he didn’t answer or stop. My pulse skipped. “*VARAN.*”

He froze.

“Where are you going?”

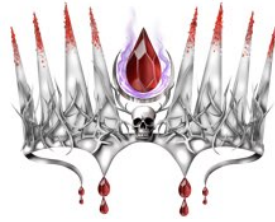
He glanced over his shoulder with a glare in those red-rimmed amber eyes. “To rid myself of the scent of your death.”

I gasped.

“Thuso, we leave in ten for the harbor. We sail to Sacred Mountain now. Conray and Kahsi, you come with.” He handed the scroll to Ambrose. “Get that to Lord Cresswell. Tell him we drink from the vein.”

Twenty-Five

RHODELIA



Varan did not ride in the carriage to the harbor.

But, thankfully, I was not alone. I was shaken up, literally and figuratively. My hands trembled in my lap. Kahsi reached over and put her hand over mine. In the darkness of the carriage, her hair looked almost black. Her yellow eyes were bright and watching me carefully. Sitting on the bench facing us was Conray, who was wringing his hands together. I had a momentary sense of jealousy over his purple-to-lilac ombre hair color.

“Rhode, what happened?” Kahsi squeezed my hand. “You can tell us.”

So I did. I told them everything that happened from when we left Elden Palace before. Well, I skipped over our little spicy moment in the pool and meeting Avalon. They didn’t need to know the steamy details, and I wasn’t sure if Avalon’s existence was meant to be public knowledge or not.

They were silent a moment.

Conray leaned his elbows on his knees. “So, we’re supposed to drink each other’s blood? Feed from the vein?”

I nodded.

He whistled and shook his head. “That’s going to be strange to try.”

“What else?” Kahsi leaned forward to get in my line of view. “I know there’s something else.”

“I discovered why Varan hates me.”

Conray’s eyes snapped right to me. “He told you?”

I sighed. “You knew?”

He shrugged. “I was there.”

Kahsi frowned. “What are we talking about? You were where? Why does he hate you?”

“Fifty years ago.” I licked my lips as nausea bubbled up my throat. “Apparently, I was in a relationship ... with Varan.”

Kahsi gasped dramatically. “You and Varan were a couple?”

I nodded.

“You married his father.”

I cringed but nodded.

“Were you and Varan serious?”

“We were in love.”

Conray arched one eyebrow. “Well, we don’t yet know that. You have no memory.”

“No. I may not have my memory to confirm, but I know what I feel in my heart, and it is not *new*.”

We were silent for another few moments until I realized we’d crossed into the little *Canopy of Dreams* town. But the raiths ran so fast, I barely caught sight of the colorful trees

before we were cutting across the stone city of the Court of Blood.

I frowned. “Where is the harbor?”

“Between Lakewell Palace and the base of Scarlet Peaks.” Conray grimaced. “We had a gorgeous harbor in Court of Shadows but that no longer belongs to us. The southern coast is lined with mountains. The northern coast sits along the ring of Sacred Mountain, and typically that was too busy to have a harbor. So, the western coast was chosen.”

I blinked and nodded. But my thoughts were a million miles away. Varan’s words replayed in my mind over and over.

When the carriage rolled to a stop, Conray jumped up out of the carriage before I could blink. I finally climbed out and spotted our ship. It looked like a pirate ship with fancy windows and huge sails. A wooden ramp connected the ship to the dock. There were no other ships in sight. Conray hurried up the ramp and out of sight.

Kahsi gripped my wrist and pulled me to a stop. “We won’t be allowed on the island with you, but make sure you go to the Sacred Pools for some healing.”

I scowled. “What do you mean?”

“The Sacred Pools on Sacred Mountain have healing power.” Kahsi squeezed my hand. “So any remaining aches can be healed. Might as well check it out while you’re there.”

“Will do.”

“Good—”

“*Ladies,*” Varan shouted. “Today?”

I spent my whole walk onto the ship cursing him out in my head. Kahsi got on but made a quick turn and headed down the

service hallway. As soon as I stepped onto the ship, Varan barked orders to the crew.

I was surprised by just how many staff members were on this ship with us. Conray was with two other Knights who all stood at the helm. Kahsi had gone down the stairs with a red-haired woman in pigtail braids. At the wheel was a rotund man with buzzed red hair and a mustache.

Varan stood at the back end of the ship, leaning on the wooden railing with both hands and his back to me.

I marched over to him with my heart in my throat. “You cannot just drop a bomb like that and then walk away!”

He spun around with wide, enraged amber eyes. “You have some nerve saying that to me—”

“*You* have some nerve condemning me for something I did in a *past* life!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry you have to deal with the consequences of your actions.”

“Because I don’t believe it!” I shouted. “How could I have given myself to you and then married your father? It does not match with my heart. It doesn’t sound like me.”

“Your memories will remind you soon enough,” he snarled in my face. Then he leaned down so his breath swept over my forehead. “I hate to spoil the surprise.”

I gasped. He stormed off so I chased after him. We went down a set of stairs that led to some kind of dining room with a wooden table and chairs. But Varan just made a sharp turn and marched toward the back of the ship. I followed him. This conversation was not over, but it didn’t need to be public, and even though there were only a handful of staff on this ship, they were still an audience. As I rounded the stairs, I noticed

there was yet another level below us, and I heard Kahsi's voice travel up.

This level seemed to be off-limits as no one else was here. Our footsteps echoed as we moved. Outside the windows, the sea glistened and sparkled in the moonlight as we sailed. I barely felt the rock of the ship or the roll of the waves.

"*Why are you following me?*" he snapped over his shoulder without stopping.

"Because this conversation isn't over!"

Varan marched up to a set of double wooden doors at the far end of the ship and pushed through. "There's nothing left to say!"

"Bullshit!" I was hot on his heels, sliding through the open doorway. "There has to be more to the story—"

He spun around so fast I didn't see him move. He took two steps forward, pushing me back against the door until it slammed shut behind me. His cheeks flushed pink, and his eyes flashed. "*I didn't get the rest of the story!*"

With two hands, I shoved him in the chest, forcing him to stagger back enough for me to slip out from under him. I marched a few feet away, then turned and shouted, "So you didn't ask?"

"Yes, I stopped *your* wedding with the entire kingdom present and watching to cry and ask why you were marrying my father. My pride be damned!" He grabbed the door handle and yanked it open. "Now get out!"

I grabbed the first thing my hand touched and threw it at the door, slamming it shut in his face. "I may not remember it, but I know damn well I died *two weeks* after the wedding. TWO WEEKS, VARAN. Why didn't you ask then?"

He spun away from me and stomped across the room, lit only by a single candle flame and the moonlight streaming in from the windows. He stopped and faced me, throwing his arms out wide. “We were at war, *Rhodelia*. Was I supposed to stop trying to save the people so I could ask the obvious question?”

“*Obvious? Obvious?*” I crossed the room to where he stood at the foot of a bed. “It’s *obvious* there was more to the story! People don’t just marry their lover’s parent without reason!”

“You got the crown!” he shouted, his face flushed. “It doesn’t take a magic spell to understand that!”

“If you loved me at all, you would’ve gotten the truth!” There were pillows stacked at the foot of the bed, so I grabbed one and threw it at him.

He caught the pillow then swung his arm and smacked me back with it. “If *you* loved me, you would’ve told *me*—”

“Oh right, ‘cause clearly you’re the most receptive person when you’re angry!” I grabbed a second pillow and smacked him in the side with it.

“Or maybe you’re just a coward!” He yanked the pillow out of my hands, then threw it across the room. Then he took two steps forward so we were only an arm’s length apart. He lowered his voice and snarled, “*You could have given me a sign.*”

“Here’s your sign!” I grabbed his shirt and dragged his mouth down to mine.

Twenty-Six

VARAN



“Varan?” Rhodelia said softly from the bed.

I raced over to grab clothes from the closet. “Don’t.”

“Don’t *what*?”

I slid a fresh pair of black trousers on. “Don’t think this changes anything. We had a deal. We fake this until we can break it.”

She let out a pained, strangled sort of laugh. “So that was fake? Part of your show?”

“As fake as all the other nights you let me hold you. I see no reason it should hurt you this time.” I shoved my feet back into my boots, then bent down to tie them.

“You’re going to regret acting like this,” she whispered.

I scoffed and stood up straight. “When might that be?”

“When my memory comes back and you hear my side of the story.” She sat up and it took everything in me to ignore her bare skin and stay out of that bed. “You’re going to wish you weren’t so cruel to me.”

I reached into the closet to where a single black slip dress hung, left behind by one of my father’s whores. I pulled it off

the hanger, then tossed it into her lap. “If your memory comes back, you’re going to know just what you did to me.”

“Whose is this?” She frowned as she picked up the dress off the bed.

“For all I know, it’s yours.” I gave her a sinister smile. “After all, who knows how long you were bedding my father.”

She glared at me. “It’s not my size, asshole.”

I shrugged. “Then it’s one of his many other mistresses. But then again, I suppose that makes it just as much yours.”

I waited for her to snap back at me. This was what we did. I lashed out because it was easier than feeling so destroyed all the time and she handed my ass back to me. Rhodelia needed no help telling a man off or putting him in his place. And thank Mother Terrea for it or we never would’ve gotten this far.

But she just stared at me for a long moment.

And then her pretty silver eyes filled with tears. “Okay.”

I flinched. My heart screamed at the sight of her tears, especially knowing I caused them. “Okay *what?*” I asked with a rough voice.

“I’m done fighting with you, Varan. My heart can’t take it. These feelings I have for you are too strong to keep pretending I hate you.” She sniffled and shook her head. “I hurt you. I get it. You hated your father—he killed your mother and then he stole your girl. I’m not even mad that you blame me. I can’t say I wouldn’t blame me too. But I died, Varan. I was reborn. I grew up and lived a whole different life. And I’m here now. And I know I’m not alone in these feelings. You can’t fake *this*. So, what I want to know is ... is ...”

“Is what?” I heard myself whisper.

“Is why not give us a second chance? Why not let yourself love me now? We aren’t the same people we were fifty years ago. This isn’t the same world. Life is not the same. Valandril is dead but we are here.” She threw her hands up. “You can walk out that door and go back to being a twat. I just want to know why you’re holding on to this grudge that’s breaking your heart every time you’re nasty to me. Just tell me why?”

I stared at her with my heart in my throat.

“I think I have the right to know that one answer.”

A hot lump formed in my throat. I couldn’t look at her, so I stared out the window at the moonlight on the ocean. Her question wasn’t out of line. Despite all my anger and hate, I’d fallen in love with her all over again. I’d been pretending I hadn’t, lying to myself, until she’d died in my arms and the truth of my heart came out. And, apparently, she knew it too.

“There’s a part of me that wants to forget the past and let myself be with you now, to give you that second chance.”

“What’s stopping you?” she whispered.

“You were the only person in my entire life that did not treat me as a Prince. You never even called me Varan. You never used my title. With you, I was seen. I was me. We were *us*, and that’s all that mattered. All of our plans for the future were far from any palace or throne.” I took a deep breath, then let it out. Then I turned to meet her teary gaze. “I want to believe you, Rhodelia. I do. More than you know. And perhaps if you had married any other person, this would be easier to forgive and forget. But it was *him*. And until your memory returns and fills in the missing pieces—assuming you weren’t

a traitorous monster like him—then I just can't give you access to my heart.”

Tears filled her eyes, but she nodded.

“There are some wounds that just won't heal themselves. I've never wanted to be wrong more. I want you to tell me a story that justifies what you did. I do.” I shook my head and shrugged. “But my heart never recovered from last time. If you were to break me again, I would not survive it ... and I fear the monster that would be unleashed in me.”

“You are *not* your father, Varan.”

“I used to think that too. And then you broke my heart and all I wanted was to make the world burn for it.” When her eyes widened, I continued. “And when you returned on Havestia and I saw you standing in the Forest of Fears, I was terrified by how much I wanted you to hurt, to feel a fraction of what I did. Every time I snapped at you and you flinched, I celebrated inside. It was like taking pieces of my heart back.”

“That's different—”

“Is it?” I shook my head. “I don't know. When my mother died, when I held her in my arms as her life ended, she told me that every villain was the hero of their own story—that my father had a reason for why he was a monster. She warned me not to let my hatred of him be how my villain story started.”

She exhaled like she'd been punched in the gut. “Varan, it's not that black and white.”

I nodded. “It feels like it.”

“Varan—”

“You asked why and that's my reason.” I backed away toward the door. “I can't be like *this* with you, not until we

learn the truth.”

Then I spun for the door.

“Kahsi says there are healing pools in the temple.”

I paused and turned back. “Yes, that’s true.”

She was facing away from me, sitting sideways on the bed with her feet on the floor. She glanced over her shoulder at me. “Once we return the root, I will go to the pools. I will lie there and heal until my memories return. But I promise you, it won’t be what you think it was.”

I sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

Her shoulders fell as she looked away from me, giving me the reprieve I needed to flee from this room of heartbreak. I was about to run when she pulled her hair over her shoulders to cover her bare chest and my heart stopped.

My breath caught in my throat.

WHAT?

There down the middle of her back was a mark that had not been there before. My vision narrowed on it and it alone. The mark was a red vine with thick red leaves that ran the entire length of her spine. Purple smoke swirled in and out of the red vine. I blinked and stumbled back a step. She hadn’t looked back up yet, which was good because I was on the verge of falling apart.

Because that on her back was a soulmate mark.

There hadn’t been marked soulmates in Isramaya in forever. The scroll said it was because we stopped drinking blood. But *we* had drunk each other’s blood. Those were the rules I’d just read about, though we all knew the old legends. Two vampires had to bite each other and drink the blood *and*

consummate the relationship. Those were the triggers. I'd given her my blood when she died, but then we both fed from each other in this room as we made love. All three triggers had been met.

And if there was any doubt whose soulmate she was, all I had to do was look at the glowing gold tips of the red leaves on her back.

The mark of the King.

Rhodelia was my soulmate.

My breath left me in a rush. I staggered back and crashed into the doorframe. The door to the washroom was right beside me, so I raced inside to stand in front of the mirror and inspect my bare back. There it was on my back. The world spun. I had to get some fresh air. I had to breathe. I had to think. I grabbed the shirt I'd pulled from the closet and threw it on as I left the room.

I ran up the stairs to the deck and into the night air. I gripped the wooden railing and gasped for a deep breath. The world felt like it was closing in all around me. My chest and lungs were on fire. I couldn't catch a breath. My vision started to tunnel. I sank into a crouch and rested my forehead on a wooden rail.

My soulmate had betrayed me.

My soulmate had married my father.

I was starting to really fall apart when I heard a soft whimper. My head snapped in that direction instantly. I listened for it again, then sprinted toward the sound after the second whine. The sound came from the other side of the ship. When I got over there, I choked on a scream.

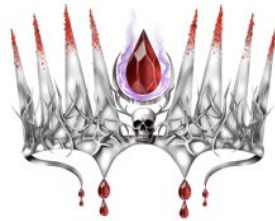
Kahsi was lying face-down on the wooden deck in a pool of her own blood.

I didn't hesitate. I'd seen what blood did to us. I dove for her, flipping her onto her back as I bit my wrist and held my blood to her mouth. Her body twitched. I needed to read the scroll and see if there was a limit to how much blood a single vampire could give at one time because I'd given a lot since Rhodelia died in that canyon. I leaned down to try and hear her pulse over mine when bright orange flames shot up through the deck into the sky.

And the world exploded.

Twenty-Seven

RHODELIA



One second I was slipping into the black silk dress Varan had pulled from the closet, the next I was submerged in the ocean. It all happened too fast. I hadn't even seen the fire before the shock wave slammed into me. Waves rolled me over and over, pushing and pulling my body in different directions. By the time I stopped rolling, my lungs were burning with the need for oxygen. I kicked my legs in a panic and clawed my way through the water to the surface.

I coughed and choked on the air I so desperately needed.

Flames shot into the sky. Smoke billowed on the water. There was a ringing in my ears so loud I couldn't hear my own thoughts. My mind felt fuzzy and slow. I kicked my arms and legs under the water to stay afloat as I glanced around for the others. But it was dark out and nearly impossible to see.

“Varan!” I screamed. “VARAN!”

Silence.

My heart skipped. My stomach tightened into knots. *No, no, no. Where are you?*

“VARAN!”

A huge wave rolled up to me, so I sucked in a deep breath and dove under it like they taught surfers to do. And then I

spotted him sinking below the surface. *VARAN!* I swam for him, kicking my legs faster and harder than I ever had in my life. Somehow my body obeyed, and I cut across the water at a blinding speed. I reached out and wrapped my arm around him, then pushed up. The rise to the surface was a lot slower with him in tow but we made it. I gasped for air and rolled him to the side so the water in his mouth fell out.

His pulse was beating slowly, but it was beating. He was alive, just unconscious.

I glanced around yet still all I saw was fire and smoke. Small planks of wood floated by so I grabbed one and used it to help me hold Varan's body out of the water. I looked at Varan, inspecting him for wounds, but it was hard to see out here in the middle of the ocean at night. Even with a nearly full Moon, it was impossible. There had to be some on both of us. But I didn't like how sickly pale he was. His skin looked ashy. His pulse was low. I wrapped my hands around his arm and tried to gauge his blood pressure, but I was praying I did it wrong because otherwise it was dangerously low. It was giving me flashbacks to that patient I had last week who'd died from internal bleeding and looked exactly like this.

Don't think like that! Just get him out of here!

The little wooden plank we were using as a floatation device wasn't big enough, so we were getting thrown around by the waves the explosion caused. There was blood swirling around us, and with every kick of my legs and push of my free arm, more billowed. I knew I had some wounds because the salt water stung in certain places, but I didn't feel anything major, which meant it was coming from *him*.

But if I didn't get us out of the water *soon*, none of our injuries were going to matter.

We were out here alone in the water, our ship blown to pieces, and I didn't see a single other one of our crewmates.

“KAHSI? CONRAY!” I screamed. “THUSO?!”

I shouted their names until my voice was raw. No response.

But I couldn't think about them or my heart wouldn't know how to handle it. I needed to get Varan to help. I needed to get us both out of here. It was so damn dark. I'd never learned how to chart the skies with the stars. Sure, I saw them up there, but they meant nothing to me. Even the Moon only served as a spotlight. I eyed the horizon in every direction, but it was all the same: black. I couldn't differentiate between sky and continent.

And then something moved in the water. The game changed.

It stalked us, slicing through the waves and currents like they were nothing but a gentle breeze.

My heart stopped. I tightened my grip on Varan's shirt and dragged him flush against my chest. I kicked my legs harder to keep us afloat. There were other bigger planks from the ship, but the waves swept them away faster than I could swim to. Not that it would have mattered. Whatever *it* was, no piece of wood was going to prevent us from becoming dinner. I watched Shark Week. I knew the rules. And this thing knew damn well we were here. It circled us, creating an almost-whirlpool around us. Every few feet, a fin would pop out of the water and glisten in the moonlight. It was either a giant shark or a few of them. I wasn't sure which would be worse.

Little chunks of ice floated up to the surface, making a ring around us.

My pulse thundered through my body. I tapped his chest. “Varan? Varan, I need you to wake up. Right now, please.”

He groaned and his head rolled on his shoulders. His heartbeat was too slow. I bit my wrist, then pressed it to his mouth, letting my blood drip down his throat. My grip on his shirt slipped, and I sank beneath the water. I started to kick when something solid hit my feet and pushed me back up. My face broke the surface. I gasped for air and looked around, but I saw nothing. Just more and more darkness. The Moon’s reflection was only playing tricks on my eyes.

And then the water went perfectly, eerily still.

No currents. No waves. Just a glass-like surface.

But I knew better than to think we were alone. I felt a presence I couldn’t put my finger on. I started kicking my legs again, trying to push us in a direction I prayed was toward land. Any land. It was hard enough to swim with only one arm, but carrying someone as large as Varan made it nearly impossible to get anywhere fast.

We’d only made it a few feet when I saw movement up ahead in the distance. A dark shape emerged from the water, and for a brief moment I thought it was a person’s head, like maybe one of our crew had survived after all. And then it *moved*, and I knew that was no person. A chill slid down my spine. I couldn’t see its body, just part of its head, but I saw the ripples on the water as it swam toward us.

“*What the fuck is that?*”

“*Serpeazia*,” Varan whispered against my wrist.

I gasped and pulled my arm back. “*Varan?* What did you say?”

“Serpent,” he breathed just barely loud enough for me to hear.

My eyes widened. *Serpent? Wait, I’ve heard these words before. From Cresswell.* My brain was slowly providing the memories I needed to put it together, but I did recall Cresswell telling me something about serpents.

“Serpeazia? Is that one of the other kingdoms?” I tried to picture the map of Terrea on the wall of Lakewell Palace. There was a kingdom just to the west of us and I was pretty sure that was the name of it. “Varan, are they the ones next to us?”

“Mmhhmmm.”

The water rippled and the dark object began to rise from the water.

My stomach tightened and turned. I gripped Varan with both hands, digging my nails into him. “Varan, are they ... friendly? Do they hate us?”

He just groaned.

The serpent lifted its head out of the water until it towered over us. Water dripped from its scales and the long tendrils that hung like ropes from its face. In the dark, its scales looked gray, but as it moved in the moonlight, I saw those scales were varying shades of teal. My breath caught in my throat. Two massive silver eyes sparkled down at me. It had a head kind of like a dragon but its long neck looked more like a snake or those dinosaurs people thought were the Loch Ness monster. It was beautiful. I just wasn’t sure if I needed to be afraid, because I was definitely trying not to freak out.

I twirled my wrist like I’d seen the other Nightmares do and pictured my magic. Without hesitation, my veins on the

inside of my wrist glowed neon-purple and little purple smoke swirled in my palm. The serpent pulled its head back and narrowed those silver eyes that I had to admit weren't that different from my own. It stared at the smoke in my hand. A long, narrow tail flicked out of the water behind it.

Slowly, I lowered my hand to Varan's chest and pushed my magic out. A purple cloud billowed up and over his head. I knew it wouldn't hurt him. Varan was royal by blood. He was King. No magic overpowered his. I'd learned that the hard way already. That was fine. I just needed him to wake up.

"*Varan,*" I whispered with a hiss. "I need you. Come back."

He gasped and jerked in my arms. I angled him back so I could see his face as his eyes opened. He blinked slowly. "Ah, *Kropelki.*"

"What does that mean?" When he started to fade again, I hit him with my magic. "Stay with me, Varan. Are they friendly?"

The serpent puffed.

I flinched. My eyes widened. "*Varan, do the serpents understand English?*"

A small little smile pulled at his lips as his eyes closed. "Not ... animal ... person ... *shift* ..."

My jaw dropped. I met the serpent's gaze. "You're a shifter? You take form like us?"

The serpent lowered in the water so it was a little closer. It nodded.

"*Friend ... ly,*" Varan whispered.

I wasn't so sure, but the serpent blinked and nodded its head again. Tears burned the backs of my eyes. I swallowed through a hot lump in my throat, then sighed.

Varan groaned deep in his throat. "*Young ... serpent ...*"

I smiled what I prayed was a friendly smile. "Hello. We're from Isramaya. I'm Rhodelia. *This* is King Varan."

The serpents' eyes widened at the word *King*.

"Please, can you help us?" I tapped on Varan's chest. "I think he's dying. I need to get him help."

"*No.*" Varan's head rolled on his shoulders. "*Not ... allowed ...*"

He went limp in my arms. His pulse stopped. I gasped and shook him. "*VARAN!* No, no, no. Stay with me!" I bit my wrist again and held it to his mouth.

The serpent's tail swished back and forth nervously. It glanced around us like it too was hoping there was some answer waiting nearby. But there wasn't. It was just the three of us out here with the Moon.

"Please, I just need to get him to Sacred Mountain for the healing pools." I sniffled through the tears I could no longer keep in. "Please? I need to save him. I'll owe you a huge favor. Anything. Just bring us to Sacred Mountain."

Those pretty silver eyes stared at us for a few seconds. Then he glanced behind him. When he turned back, he looked back and forth between whatever was behind me and to the right of me. He was weighing the decision. I felt horrible for asking after Varan said it wasn't allowed, but I wasn't going to just let him die without trying. Not when he'd nearly killed himself to save me. I owed this to him. For this life *and* whatever I did to him in my past life.

Finally, the serpent huffed and sank into the water until its eyes were level with mine. It stared at me for a moment, then dipped its snout down and nudged my hand. I frowned just as it angled its head back so its tendrils stuck out.

What—OH. “Hold those?”

It nodded, so I reached out and grabbed hold of one. It was firm but soft in texture. It flicked its tail a few times, so I tightened my grip on Varan. And then we were soaring through the water. Little waves were hitting me in the face. I turned with Varan so it hit the backs of our heads. I didn’t miss the fact that we were swimming in the direction I hadn’t been going in. And if my memory of that Terrea map was any good, that meant Isramaya had been behind us while the serpent kingdom had been in front. I’d been unknowingly swimming toward the serpents.

We moved swiftly through the water. It reminded me of riding with the raiths, where the world blew by in a blur yet the ride was gentle and smooth. I watched the ripples in the water in our wake. Small chunks of ice floated behind us. They were glassy and glistened in the moonlight. I knew nothing about serpents, but if we lived through all of this, we were going to owe this one the world.

It was nearly impossible to tell how much time passed, but it had to be like ten minutes later before the serpent slowed down. I craned my neck to see where we were. We’d stopped right at a wooden dock. There were no boats parked there, but there *was* a ladder. I sighed in relief and let go of the serpent’s tendril so I could grab hold of the wooden ladder. With my other hand, I squeezed my arm around Varan and gripped his side. This was going to be interesting. The guy was twice my size.

But then the serpent ducked down and used the top of his head to push Varan up and onto the dock.

Tears pooled in my eyes. I turned to face my new friend and smiled. “Thank you. The throne of Isramaya is in your debt. *Thank you.*”

It blinked its pretty silver eyes and nodded—then sank beneath the glassy dark water and vanished entirely.

I spun and dove for Varan. His pulse was still beating, albeit barely. His skin looked even paler than before, even after I’d given him blood. My heart sank. It had to be internal bleeding. I’d seen it enough times, and my gut was screaming at me. Kahsi and Varan had confirmed there were healing pools on this mountain. I just had to find them. But first, I had to carry Varan.

“Come on, Rhode. You can do this. You’ve carried heavy people at work.” I stretched my arms and shook out my legs. “He needs you.”

I grabbed a good hold on his wrists, took a deep breath, then pulled. His body flew up so fast we stumbled backwards a few feet. I gasped. *What the fuck?* I bent down and lifted him onto my shoulder like he’d done to me, and it worked. Easily. I stood there with a man twice my size hanging on my shoulder.

The blood. I drank blood. My vampire strength had finally entered the chat.

That made me smile a little. I staggered down the dock toward the mountain and my heart sank. It towered into the night sky. I had no idea where I was going or how to get there.

And then I saw it, a red light shooting high into the sky.

It wasn’t really there right now. It was from fifty years ago. It was a memory. But I saw it clear as day. With every step I

took toward Sacred Mountain, images rushed to my mind. I saw it there clear as day. I saw myself running up this very path in a blood-splattered gown. I saw the entire path in an instant.

So I ran.

I paid no mind to anything but the path in my memory. When I got to a ring made of stone, my breath caught in my throat. Memories hit me one after another. I saw myself standing there with a circle of women around me. In the middle of this ring was a pedestal that held a golden chalice with eight colored gemstones at the base of it. I saw myself drink from the chalice, then walk up and around a corner. So, I pushed my shoulders back and charged forward, trying to ignore the rush of memories from the last time I was here because I knew that was what I was seeing. The night I died.

I rounded the corner and looked up—my breath was sucked right from my chest. It wasn't really happening now, but I saw it as if it was. I was right there.

There he was, strapped to the trunk of the tree by its roots and branches. His black tunic had been ripped apart across his chest, revealing the pulsing red glow of the King's marks. His black hair was wet and hanging over his face. He snarled and thrashed against what pinned him in place, but it held strong. I had no idea how I'd missed the monster lurking in those red eyes.

King Valandril.

My husband.

I shook myself out of the memory and looked around. But it was too strong and sucked me back in.

I growled and balled my hands into fists at my sides. I joined the other seven ladies lined up at the edge of the pool with their backs to me. I took the open spot in the middle. To my left was Morgana, with Stella and Evera beside her. Saphira stood on my right with Ember, Alina, and Adira.

No one spoke a word. Their gazes were fixed on one spot. We were a force to be reckoned with, standing in a line in front of him. We were a nightmare of his making. I walked forward until the cold stone beneath my bare feet turned to warm soil that squished between my toes. The others joined me, but instead of standing in a line, they moved around the pool until we formed a circle with the Sacred Tree of Power in the middle.

I looked up at the tree and wanted to scream. What were always vibrant green leaves and little pink and white flowers were now a dark, grayish blue, like life had been drained from it entirely. The red glow I'd seen in the night sky lingered in the air, hovering over the branches and leaves at the top ... A ghost of the magic once thriving in this tree.

I gasped and I was back in the Sacred Pool in the present. I looked up at the Sacred Tree, and it looked perfectly normal and pretty with all its vibrant colors. I looked at the tree as I lowered Varan into the pool. "I'm so sorry. I just need to heal him."

Varan's body sank beneath the glowing blue pool, but I kept his face above. *Heal him. Please, just heal him.*

I looked up at the tree again and my mind slipped back into the past.

Valandril gasped. His skin turned sickly pale. His wide eyes glanced left and right. I felt him trying to find his way out of this. I felt him searching for a weapon. His eyes grew

panicked and desperate. He thrashed against his confinement to no avail. The tree had him, and she was not going to set him free. Violet mist coiled around Valandril's hands, filling his palms.

The Court of Nightmares had their tricks, but the King had never asked his bride from which court she was birthed. I called on the magic in my soul, the one that lay dormant from underuse, yet it answered without hesitation. The purple swirl of my magic coiled all the way up my arms. Valandril's eyes widened, his gaze following the rise of my magic. His breath caught in his throat.

I closed my eyes and forced myself out of that memory. Varan needed me in the present. I had to fight the images away. His skin was already looking less ashy and pale. His pulse was beating stronger. But I wasn't taking any chances. I bit my wrist and held it to his mouth. The tree and I were going to save him together.

Twenty-Eight

VARAN



I tasted chocolate. The sweetest chocolate I'd ever had. *Rhodelia*. I'd know the taste of her blood anywhere now. I breathed in through my nose, expecting to smell roses because she always smelled like roses, like sticking your nose in a rose bush and being surrounded by it. Instead, I smelled salt and smoke.

Then it all came rushing back.

The soulmate mark.

Finding Kahsi.

The explosion.

I gasped and opened my eyes.

“Easy, love. Easy,” Rhodelia spoke with a calm, strong voice. “You’re safe.”

I frowned. She sounded like her but different, a familiar different. *By the Blood, is her memory back?*

She smiled and it was *her* smile, the one I'd seen that very first night we met in the pool behind my father's castle. It was a different smile than the ones *Rhode* made in this life. It was calmer, wiser, with a gentle, confident strength to it.

“We’re in the Sacred Pool healing you from the explosion. I’m going to remove my wrist now, okay?”

I licked her skin to seal the wounds closed, then nodded.

“How do you feel?”

Confused. Scared to hope you remember. “Alive.”

She grinned and ran her fingers through my hair. “Good. Please stay that way.” She was definitely acting different. Calmer. More collected, resigned almost.

I was too afraid to hope. I needed a minute to recover and think, so I licked my lips and nodded toward my left foot. “The root. It’s in my boot.”

She snorted and a little chuckle came out. “That rhymed.”

Okay, THAT was Rhode. It was strange to be able to see subtle differences in their expressions. But it didn’t answer if her memory was back or if she only had snippets or maybe it was in the process of returning. I watched her carefully as she reached down into my left boot and quickly removed the golden root I’d shoved in there when we got on the ship—luckily, or we might have lost it in the explosion.

I gasped.

Her silver eyes sharpened and shot to me. “What’s wrong? Where does it hurt?”

I sat up and glanced around. We were alone. “The others ... on the ship ...?”

Her face fell. “I only saw us out there in the water. But I pray someone saw the explosion and went looking for survivors.”

My heart sank. I nodded. “I’m sure they did.” I wasn’t sure, but the logic was there.

She nodded, then let out a ragged sigh. “I hope so. I can’t even think about it.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to replant the root now.” She pushed my hair back off my forehead in a gentle caress. “Please don’t die while I’m gone.”

I smiled. “I think we’re safe of that now. Go ahead.”

She kissed my forehead, then stood up with the gold root in her hand and walked through the Sacred Pool. I let out a breath I’d been holding, but my chest was still tight. I watched her walk right up to the tree and then look up. She spoke to it, but I did not let myself listen. She had been through a lot with the tree. She deserved a moment of privacy to try and heal each other.

But as I watched her digging beneath the water, I realized what an absolute menace I’d been since her return. That last conversation before the ship exploded burned my brain. I was such a fool. Just as she had told Avalon that his anger for Lily made no sense given she’d been chosen for this great honor by Mother Terrea ... that same logic held true for Rhodelia.

I didn’t know if it was the near-death experiences coming back-to-back, or finding out we were soulmates, *or* seeing a statted, vine-covered version of her from the moment she died, but my anger with her seemed to have vanished with my ship. My emotions were overwhelming me. Choking me. I could not handle seeing the statues of the eight. It was too tragic, too heartbreaking, too much.

She had her back to me while she worked to repair what my father stole.

I stood and looked up at the bright colors of the tree. *I'm sorry for what my father did to you, and I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to fix it.*

I hadn't realized how much I needed to say that, if even only in my mind. With a final glance at my soulmate, I turned and walked out of the temple. I didn't know where I was going, I felt sort of numb, but realizing you'd tortured yourself for so long for no reason was going to leave a mark. I walked to a stone wall that was only as tall as my hips. Trees towered over me with beautiful pink flowers. Up above, the Moon seemed happier here. Earth's moon was a bright white, while Terrea's moon was lavender. Just like Abba's eyes.

Without warning, Conray and Kahsi's faces flashed in my mind. I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed through the nausea rolling through me. *They're okay. They have to be okay. Mother Terrea, please let them be okay.*

"My sister was dying."

I froze. My heart skipped beats. I glanced over my shoulder and found her staring back toward the temple with a brokenness in her eyes that I had not seen since she returned to Terrea. "What did you say?"

"My sister was dying." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Do you remember her? My sister?"

"I never met your sister in this life, the one from Earth."

"Yes, you did."

I frowned. "I was not there to reclaim you. When could I have met her?"

“At my wedding ...” she looked up at me and a single tear slid down her cheek, “... to your father.”

My breath left me in a rush. A million memories raced through my mind in an instant. She remembered. She knew. That was what the brokenness in her eyes meant. She knew the truth. She remembered how she’d betrayed me and married my own vile father after she’d professed her undying love to *me*.

I cleared my throat. “You remember now.”

She nodded.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me. I forgive you.”

Her eyes filled with tears and her bottom lip trembled. “Thank you. But yes, I do have to tell you.”

“I was cruel—”

“Trauma will do that to a person.” She looked back toward the temple and sighed. “I’m not going to tell you because you demanded it earlier, nor am I telling you because you’ve just forgiven me without it, I’m going to tell you because it changes *everything*.”

I swallowed through the hot lump in my throat. My stomach was a tangled knot of nerves. “I’m listening.”

“I had a sister, here in Isramaya, her name was Morgana. And she was *dying*—” she choked on a broken sob, then closed her mouth and shook her head. “The night we met, do you remember where you found me that night?”

“The Pool of Mortamaya.”

She nodded. “Do you remember what I told you for why I was there bathing in the pool beneath the castle’s shadow?”

I licked my lips. My heart was pounding through my bones. “You said you dreamt of it, that Abba had sent you visions to come bathe in the moonlight of Mortamaya. You said it would solve your problems, yet you would not speak of them to me.”

“I was too enchanted by you at first. My heart wanted to believe you were the answer.”

I cringed. “Are you about to tell me that my father was the answer?”

“Yes, he was, but not for the reason you think.” She took a deep breath, and I noticed her arms trembled. Her pulse raced as fast as mine, like this was as painful for her as it was for me. “When my father died, my mother discovered she was the mistress. All those trips he took were merely to return back to his wife in the Court of Blood at Lakewell Palace. His wife hated children and refused to have any, so he created an alias for himself in the Court of Nightmares with my mother as a civilian. We lived just beyond the edge of the *Canopy of Dreams* in the *Forest of Fears*. When she discovered *she* was the dirty secret we were forsaken, He hadn’t allowed mother to work in fear someone would discover his secret. But we were at his funeral. Mother refused to skip it, said his daughters needed to grieve for him. Except three-year-old me looked like a carbon copy of him and whispers went around, so his wife decided to save her reputation and introduced us to everyone as my father’s cousins from the Court of Nightmares who had graciously accepted her invitation to attend the funeral.”

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

“His wife made my mother a deal she could not turn down.”

“Money for her silence.”

“Yes ... and no.” She grimaced. “We were moved to the Court of Blood because his wife’s three brothers wanted her as their whore. In exchange, we were supported financially.”

I cursed. My breath left me in a rush, and I staggered back into the wall.

“When my mother died a few years later, they wanted Morgana to take Mother’s place. She was fourteen. I don’t know if she ever did ... please them ... She never spoke of it, and I didn’t want to ask. But Morgana went to the wife and threatened to expose everything. Blackmailed her to save us. We were given the wife’s cottage to live in with money to survive, to eat and feed. But as time went on, the money was less and less, and when Morgana turned eighteen, she cut the supplements in half, saying Morgana could work for money. She did but we were barely surviving. Morgana kept getting sick, and every time it was worse than the last until she was so weak she could barely walk. She was dying, and we both knew it. Healers had told me as much. My sister was the only thing I had in this world, and I was losing her.”

“Because she wasn’t feeding. Because we didn’t know we needed blood.” I scrubbed my face with my hands. “Was she not drinking nectar?”

“I thought she was, but I was young. At the end, when I was eighteen, I discovered we couldn’t afford nectar regularly for both of us, so she skipped and let me have it while lying and saying she’d already had hers.” Her face scrunched up in pain. “I did not know until it was too late, until the healers said she was too close to death to save. So, I prayed and prayed, begged for an answer, promised I’d do *anything* to save Morgana who had sacrificed everything for me. I owed it to her. Then finally I had the dreams of the pool. I was desperate,

so I went. I snuck into the King's castle and dipped in the magic pool with empty vials that I would fill and bring back to Morgana. I was convinced it was going to heal her if she just got enough. Otherwise, what was the point of Abba's vision? And then I found *you*."

"And I told you the rumors of the pool's healing properties were false—started by the King to give himself more power among our kingdom." I closed my eyes. "That wasn't a lie. It has some healing power, but she would've been too far gone."

"That had nearly killed me to hear." She tore her gaze away from mine, like she couldn't bear hold it a second longer. "I fell in love with the male I met at the Pool of Mortamaya. The groundskeeper of Elden Palace with haunted eyes who told me his name was Rev. *That* male was the love of my life. I wanted to spend every moment I had with him. I wanted to run away with him and never look back—"

"Yet you did not," I heard myself say softly.

She cocked her head to the side. "You told me your name was Rev. You had purple hair. You *lied* to me. I think before I tell you my story, you answer me this one question: why lie about who you were? I had never met Prince Varan. I had no idea what he looked like, only that his hair was as black as midnight, like the King's. If I had known who you were, none of this would have happened."

"You're saying this is all my fault?"

"I'm saying perhaps we both made decisions for innocent reasons and they had horrific outcomes." She cocked her head to the side. "So, why?"

I cracked my knuckles. "I lied about who I was because I hated who I was. My father was a monster in every way and

hated that I inherited all my mother's kindness and heart, so he killed her for it. Killed her for having the audacity to birth him an heir who was selfless and compassionate, who had no desire for power. He had not called me Varan since the day my mother died, the day I told him I would never be his heir. Since then, he only referred to me as *The Revenant*—the ghost who returns only to haunt him. To spite him, I used the name Rev openly. Avalon, Conray, Thuso, they all called me Rev because they were loyal to me. I did not lie per se, but I told you the version of myself I wanted to be. Not Prince Varan, unwanted heir of the throne, but Rev, the groundskeeper who took care of his own people. I had a plan for us, for our future, that meant I'd never have to be Varan again."

She smiled sadly. "I wanted that future, Rev. I did."

"Then what happened?"

"The King caught me sneaking off the property just before dawn one morning. He was furious and said he'd seen me with Rev. He ridiculed me for choosing such a waste of a male when my beauty was meant for more. I swore to him that I loved you and money was no desire of mine, but he called my bluff, said he'd seen me sneaking in and demanded to know why, and when I lied, he threatened to kill you in front of me if I lied again. So, *for you*, I told him the truth."

I ground my teeth together and balled my hands into fists.

"That's the morning everything changed." Her voice was soft like the words hurt to speak. Her eyes were distant, lost in the memories of her mind. "He told me he could save my sister. That the pool Abba had shown me in my dreams was not the Pool of Mortamaya but the Sacred Pool on Sacred Mountain. He told me only those who wore the crowns of the kingdoms were allowed to step foot on the mountain, that its

magic kept everyone else out. But if I married him and became his Queen, that would make my sister a Princess ... and then we could save her.”

I gasped.

“I told him I was in love with Rev, that I could not give my heart to another. I suggested he marry Morgana. She was beautiful and would make a glorious queen, but he refused. He said she was too weak to be queen. It would make him and the kingdom look weak. But also, he said Morgana would never be able to bear children.” She shuddered. “Because that was what he wanted in exchange. He said his first wife had failed to provide him with an heir, that his only son, Prince Varan, was a disgrace—Well, he said a lot of heinous things about you. Had I known who you really were in that moment, I would have seen through his lies because I knew *you*. But I didn’t.”

I tried to speak, to say *something*, but a strangled growl kind of noise was all that came out of my mouth.

“He made me a deal I could not turn down, not if I wanted my sister to live. Though I loved you with all my heart, she was all I had. You had not made me any promises, had not even given me your full name despite my asking. I knew you were hiding something, and I was afraid to put my trust in you. Morgana had given everything for me, right down to her life, and I would not have been able to live with myself had I chosen you over her, especially when the King promised me I could keep you.”

I gasped. “*What?*”

“*I am not asking for your heart, Rhodelia, he said. In fact, I do not want it. I have no interest in remaining faithful in my new marriage. I have been unwed too long to keep only one*

female in my bed every night. I asked him why he wanted a wife at all then and he said *because my Kingdom needs a Queen ... and they need an heir. I have scoured the kingdom for a Queen fit for my throne yet never have I seen a beauty as yours. Your resilience, tenacity, and compassion will make a formidable Queen.* That's when he laid out his deal. If I married him, I would be given all of Elden Palace to keep as my own, and I could keep my groundskeeper there as my lover for all my life if I wanted. He did not care. All I would have to do was perform my duties as Queen for the people and give him at least one viable heir.”

My stomach turned and bile shot up my throat.

“And in return, he would save Morgana.”

My breath left me in a rush. I stumbled backwards, crashing into one of the columns and landing on my ass. Even in death, that male wrecked me. My eyes burned with rage and agony.

She shook her head. “He promised me Morgana and *you*, Varan.”

I just stared at her, feeling my whole world fall apart all over again.

“Yes, I would have to publicly be his wife. His Queen. And I would've had to be intimate with him to give him an heir, but it was a business arrangement. I give him what he needs, and he gives me what I need—Morgana and you.”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. *That sick, twisted, evil fuck.* He'd chosen her just to destroy me. Just to hurt me in the most treacherous way. To make my mate my stepmother.

“He gave me until sunset to decide. Had his coachmen drive me home to Morgana and said at sunset the coachmen would return for my answer, and if I turned his offer down, I would not get another chance to say yes. It was now or never. Morgana and I discussed it in detail. She told me I needed to get word to you to make sure you were okay with it, but I told her no. That if you could not understand why I had to say yes—to save the only family I had left—then you were not meant for me. When his coachmen returned, Morgana and I went with him.” She licked her lips and swallowed like these words were choking her. “I had thought being on the property that I’d get a chance to sneak away and tell you in person, but the King took one look at Morgana and said she would not survive Havestia. She had to be in that pool by Havestia’s end or her life would end.”

I peeled my hands off my face and stared at her in horror because I knew already what his plan had been ... because he’d nearly succeeded.

“It was hectic from that moment on. I tried to find you, but you were nowhere to be found.” She closed her eyes and tears ran down her face. “I wrote to you to explain my side of the story, to explain *why* so you would understand that it wasn’t what it looked like, not entirely. I wrote it all out in a letter and sealed it with my blood—the way you taught me—then I gave it to the lady’s maid that’d been appointed to me upon my arrival at Brimstone Castle. I had no idea what becoming the Queen entailed. I did not know I would be trapped and surrounded by servants. This maid, I told her to bring the letter to the groundskeeper named Rev and that he was a good friend of mine. Her name was Mielle.”

“My father’s whore,” I growled. A new memory came fluttering to the front of my father’s wedding day of Mielle

snickering at me. My stomach turned. “She hated me. She hated *you*. She wanted to be Queen. I never got that letter.”

To my surprise, she chuckled. “Yes, your hatred of me since my return has made that abundantly clear.”

I groaned.

“I poured my heart out in that letter so you’d know where my heart was. Mielle promised to give it to you. I’d told her it was a thank you note for helping me—No need to have everyone knowing the details of my arrangement with the King before we were even wed.” She fisted her dress in her palms. “Mielle came to me hours later saying she’d given you the note. I thought we were okay. And then I got to the end of that aisle and found *you* standing there. My heart broke in a million pieces. I couldn’t even tell you a word that was said the entire nuptials because I was dying inside for you.”

That moment of watching the love of my life walking down the aisle to marry my father had been the single worst of my life. It’d taken every ounce of self-control to not vomit on the spot. The moment it was over, I’d fled the scene and drowned myself in liquor as quickly as possible.

That night was burned into my memory.

But for two reasons.

It was also the night my father almost destroyed the world.

“He’d been planning it. I think he’d been looking for any woman with a need like mine to marry to give him an excuse to go to Sacred Mountain without anyone being alarmed.” She gripped the stone edge of the wall and squeezed her eyes shut. “We came here, right here to this very spot. My sister was fading fast—I suspect he’d been poisoning her to help his case—and when she put her feet in the pool, he excused himself.

He'd said this was a sacred moment between sisters who would do anything for each other. Unconditional love and all that. I was so furious and heartbroken about you, about him letting me think you were some random servant to the crown, that I'd been grateful for his departure. It was too late. I'd said the words and married him. All I could do now was save Morgana so it would all be worth it."

"Did it heal her?"

She turned to me and smiled. "Yes. And for nothing. We didn't live long enough to enjoy it, if you recall."

I growled and tugged on my hair. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to bring my father back from the dead so I could kill him again.

She reached out and pulled my hands down, then took my face in her palms. "I love you, Rev. My heart has been yours and only yours from the moment I laid eyes on you."

I groaned and gripped her wrists. "I love you, Rho."

She grinned. "*Rho*. I forgot you called me that."

"*Rho*." I pulled her into my lap, then reached up and tucked her hair behind her ears. "You're my soulmate, Rho."

She blushed.

"No, I'm actually serious."

Her eyes widened. "But that's just a legend?"

"Because we stopped drinking blood. I read it in the scroll before I sent it to Cresswell. In order to trigger the marking, both must drink the other's blood and then consummate the relationship."

Her cheeks flushed bright-red. “I think we covered all that on the ship.”

I laughed and pulled her against my chest. “You’re my soulmate, Rhodelia.”

“We didn’t need the mark to know that,” she grinned and leaned in, then whispered against my lips, “*but I’ll take it.*”

Twenty-Nine

VARAN



“So, I guess you ought to go home and get a ship, then return for me.”

“No.”

“Rev—”

“*No.*” I took her face in my hands and swallowed down the hot lump of emotion in my throat. “My heart cannot withstand another blow for you. I will not survive it.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into me. “Oh, Rev.”

“Even with what I thought was your betrayal, your death nearly destroyed me.” I rubbed my thumbs over her cheekbones. “When you chased death’s door in my arms, I was ready to throw myself into the nearest blade.”

Those bright-silver eyes looked up at me with unshed tears glistening along her eyelashes. “I know the feeling. When the ship went down—”

“Exactly, Rho, *exactly.*” I sighed and tipped her chin up so she met my stare. “I do not yet have the strength to be so parted from you.”

“I don’t wish that either, but I do not know how else we will get home.”

I opened my mouth and then frowned. “How did we get here after the explosion? What happened to everyone else?”

“A serpent gave us a ride. Don’t you remember?”

“No, I don’t.” I shuddered. *Sepeazia* kingdom had rules against that. “That is strictly forbidden.”

“But he did it.” Rho tugged on my shirt. “You said he was young.”

I exhaled in a rush. “We shall have to travel there and thank him once this is over. Ensure he did not get punished.”

“He did not shift out of his serpent form, but I did tell him you were King Varan, so perhaps that is why he broke his own laws?”

“Even more reason to visit and give my thanks.”

She grinned. “Now that you’re staying King.”

I pressed my lips to hers, then pulled back just slightly. “Only if you stay my Queen.”

She pushed up on her toes to kiss me, which was just adorable because it only gained her about three more inches and still she barely reached my shoulders. I took her face in my hands and leaned down to kiss her. I did not yet know how to handle these happy emotions. I had not felt them in fifty years. My heart just kept fluttering to match the dance of the butterflies in my stomach.

I pulled back before we got a little too carried away in a Sacred Temple. “We need to get you some taller heels.”

“At the very least a portable stool.”

I threw my head back and laughed. I couldn’t remember the last time I truly felt this at peace. Sure, knowing what my

father did to us hurt, but in the end we won. As messy and awful as it was, we still defeated him. Our happily ever after was right in front of us. I pulled her into my chest and wrapped my arms around her, reveling in the warm and fuzzies I felt just holding her.

“You know ...” I kissed her forehead, “the hate-sex was great, but this is better.”

She gasped playfully, shoving away from me and swatting at my hands when I reached for her. “Does this mean I can’t work at the brothel?”

“I tell you what, we can open a second brothel in the Court of Nightmares that you can run but not participate in. That fair?”

“Brilliant.” She giggled. “But while you’re on a roll of ideas, we’re going to need another brilliant idea to get us home.”

“Oh, right.” I frowned and stepped back, taking her hands in mine. “Let us walk to the coast. I should be able to get a signal to Ambrose if he knows we came here.”

We started to walk away when a golden light flashed from the top of the stone wall beside us. Rho hurried toward it just as a folded piece of parchment appeared on top. She picked it up and turned to face me with a grin, holding the parchment for me to see ‘*Your Majesties*’ written in Abba’s elegant scroll.

“Abba left us a message?” I frowned. “What does it say?”

Rho snort-laughed, then turned the note around for me to read. ‘*DID YOU REALLY THINK WE DID NOT KNOW YOU WERE SOULMATES?*’

I threw my hands up. “Could they not have just told us this?”

Golden light flashed from the parchment in Rho's hands. I frowned. "What was that?"

She smirked and shook her head. "Abba being Abba. The note has changed."

"To say what?"

"By the way, as a thank you for all you've done, I've called in a favor from someone who is going to deliver you home to Isramaya."

I scowled. "Why does that feel ominous?"

The golden light flashed again. "It says *look up*."

We both frowned and then looked up to the sky just as a dark object cut across the clouds. Large dragon wings were spread wide but then they tucked into the dragon's side and nose-dived right towards us. I knew it was a dragon. I knew Isramaya had always had friendly relationships with the kingdom of *Draconia*. But as the dragon approached, I grabbed Rho's hand and dragged her behind me.

She giggled and leaned against my back. "You're lucky I'm so busy being relieved you don't hate me for me to not harass you for that."

"You died on me twice. I think I deserve a little wiggle room."

"You're cute when you wiggle." She wrapped her arms around my waist, and my heart soared higher than the dragon in the sky. "Even though of the two of us, I'm the one who's been to *Draconia* more than you."

I sighed and hung my head. "I'm already starting to regret the return of your memory."

She pinched my side and giggled. “Do you know any dragons these days? You knew about the serpents.”

“I know of them, sure. I’ve kept tabs on the the well-being of the other kingdoms since the war, since my father. Abba likes to keep secrets.”

“As we’ve learned tonight.”

We both laughed. The dragon finally dipped low enough for us to see the shimmer of silver scales. It appeared he had a passenger with him, someone with hair nearly as long as Rho’s but bright-blue.

“I believe that is Prince Ryker of the *Kingdom of Fuoco*.” I narrowed my eyes to try and see the girl. “No idea who she is though.”

The dragon, who I was assuming was Ryker, landed about ten feet in front of us. I held my breath. Even though Abba claimed to have sent him to help us get home, my nerves had not yet gotten used to seeing residents of the other kingdoms since my father nearly killed them all. I wanted to be liked by the other kingdoms, but more so, I wanted to be trusted. I was not my father, and I needed everyone to know that.

The girl on the back of the dragon jumped off and landed on her feet. She was tall and slender, with long bright-blue hair that fell in waves to her elbows. Her left arm had an ivy branch inked into her skin. She wore a fancy white dress with these sort of armor pads across her shoulders made of gold and designed to look like dragon scales.

Rho gasped. Her silver eyes went wide. Her cheeks flushed a rosy pink. She gripped my arm with both hands and squeezed, swaying on her feet. “*Saphira?*”

The blue-haired girl stopped short. Her eyes went wide, and her jaw dropped. “*RHODE?!?*”

Both girls stared at each other for another half a second before they let out high-pitched squeals and charged forward. They collided full speed and wrapped their arms around each other, rocking back and forth. They held on to each other and cried like one of them had just come back from the dead.

Saphira pulled back first. She sniffled and wiped at the tears in her eyes. “I can’t believe you’re here. I thought I’d lost you forever. I figured I’d go back to Earth in fifty years and—best case scenario—find you a little old lady.”

Rho chuckled and shook her head. “You know, like half an hour ago I would have said the exact same thing to you. It was killing me to think I’d lost you. But my memory just came back.”

Saphira scowled. “Your memory was gone too?”

“Yes, but now I remember everything from our first lives.” Rho was absolutely beaming. “Saph, we knew each other before.”

Saphira gasped. “*We did? How?*”

“That’s a long story. Soon you’ll remember, but we met as kids and stayed friends. We saw each other fairly often—Granted, it wasn’t binge watching Netflix with a feast of five different fast foods from DoorDash.”

Netflix? DoorDash? Binge watch? I had no idea what these words meant, but Saphira laughed like she did. I looked to the silver dragon. “Ryker?”

He nodded.

“You know who I am?”

He nodded again.

“You hate me?”

Ryker snorted and little flames burst from his snout. But he shook his head.

I smiled. “Excellent.”

Part of me was offended he didn't shift into his human form, but I suspected that had little to do with me or Rho and everything to do with this blue-haired Saphira. He kept glancing at her sideways, then looking away and huffing. I remembered a short time ago when looking at Rhodelia hurt to do. Or maybe he loathed her existence. Could've gone either way, and I was far too happy with my own life for a change to let myself be upset by someone else's pain.

“I can't believe you're here. In Terrea!” Saphira pressed her fingers to her temples. “This is so wild.”

Rho laughed. “How are you? Are you good?”

Saphira's lips twisted into a frown. “Let's just say it's complicated ... but damn, I just can't believe you're here.”

“And I can't believe we found each other on Earth. Of all the cities you could have lived in, you were in mine. Or vice versa. It's like we were always meant to have each other.”

Saphira tackled her in another hug. “So you're one of the eight girls from the different continents? You were part of the sacrifice?”

“Yes, I was one of the eight who came here to kill my husband—whom I was tricked into marrying, by the way.” Rho frowned. She looked to me. “I think I need to send out a memo to all the other girls so they understand.”

“Give me the tea—”

“Not yet.” Rho shuddered. “It’s still really raw. I just remembered myself. When your memory comes back, we’ll have a tea sesh.”

Saphira’s face fell. “You’re not going to tell me anything until my memory comes back, are you?”

Rho reached out and squeezed her hands. “I was just in your shoes. I know how overwhelming and frustrating it is, but I think your memory will return when it’s supposed to. And I don’t want to make this any harder for you than it already is. Just know I’m good *now*. And I’m sure you will be too.”

“*Are we?*” I arched one eyebrow. “Still have some things to sort out.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. But she held her hand out for me and when I took it, she pulled me close. “Remember when I told you I had a foster sister back on Earth? *This* is her. This is Saphira.”

“Ohhh.” I held my hand out to her. “Nice to meet you.”

Saphira shook my hand. “Likewise, whoever you are.”

Rho grinned up at me. “Saph, this is the love of my life, Varan.”

The full body butterflies I got when she said that took my breath away. I looked down at her, but she just winked. Her face flushed pink.

“You’re the guy from Vegas.”

I scowled. “Excuse me?”

“In Vegas. We were at that club, and you came up to ask her to dance.”

And then I remembered Rho telling me about this, but we had not spoken of it again. Granted, I was too angry to care at that time. “You really saw my face?”

“I told you I saw you,” she answered softly. “Ambrose used you as a weapon.”

Saphira raised her hand, though I did not understand why. “Um, what? It wasn’t him? I totally saw his face. You were practically drooling all over him?”

“I am not sure how to feel about that.”

Rho shoved my shoulder playfully. She looked back to Saphira. “There are some vampires who can use glamours and change their appearance. So while it looked like him, it was very much *not* him.”

“Oh, shit. That’s really freaky.” She cocked her head to the side and eyed me with those blue eyes that matched her hair. “Why did this Ambrose guy disguise himself as you?”

“Varan is my soulmate,” Rho said with a wide grin. But then she frowned. “Do you think Ambrose knew that?”

“Impossible. The markings of soulmates have been blocked for ages. You and I are the first to show again, so I don’t know why he would go to such lengths.

“Well, you *are* significantly prettier. But you’re also the King-”

“Prince, I was the Prince at that time.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, the sole heir to the vampire throne who was loved and respected by his entire kingdom. I’m sure no one saw your coronation coming.”

Saphira’s eyes widened. “You’re the King of vampires?”

Ryker bowed his head. I smiled at him and bowed mine in return.

“Wait. Your soulmate is the King ...”

“I am the Queen.” She shuddered. “It’s weird as fuck. I’m still not used to it. But that’s why my hair is silver. It’s a vampire queen thing. I’m telling you this so that when your memory returns and you recall me from our previous life with red hair, you’ll know why.”

“Right. That’ll be my first thought.” She smiled. “Wait, I remember you were on the dance floor with the fake version of him, so I went to pee. That’s when I got snatched. How did you—”

Both girls gasped at the same exact time.

“MORGANA!”

“MORGANA?”

They both yelled the same name in perfect horrified unison.

Rho spun to me with terror in her eyes. “Rev ... *Rev* ... Avalon has Morgana!”

I opened my mouth then shut it. “I ... um ... what? Your sister? The one you just told me about who was dying?”

“YES! She was one of the eight!”

“How? It was only one per—*oh no*.” It was all clicking into place. “She was turned into a demon, wasn’t she?”

Rho nodded. Her hands began to tremble. “When he took off with the root from the Sacred Tree, Morgana chased after him. She was always tougher than me. She said she was going

to try and stop him. I went looking for *you*. That's how we got separated. *OH MY GOD*. That's what Avalon saw!"

My jaw dropped.

"Rev, Morgana is Lily." She put her hands on her head. I could hear her hectic pulse from here. "Morgana is Lily. Avalon said she was there, and he didn't trust her. What if she's in trouble? We need to go help—"

"Whoa, whoa. Breathe. *Breathe*." I took her face in my hands. "Avalon is as much my brother as Saphira is your sister. He would not hurt her. And more importantly, you and I cleared things up for him. Remember?"

She nodded.

Saphira's eyes bounced back and forth between us as she gnawed on her bottom lip. "Is Morgana in danger?"

I sighed. "I'm sure she is. But we cannot go in there after her. You don't know their current King like I do. That will only put her in more danger. I will get a message to Avalon and let him know Lily is your sister Morgana and to trust her."

"You can do that? Get a message to him?"

"Yes, it's not like the message I tried to send to Earth. This is just the other side of the mountains. I promise—to both of you—I will get word to him."

"Okay, but when you hear that Morgana's safe, you'll send message to *me* too, right?"

I smiled. "Of course, Saphira. You have my word."

They both sighed and nodded.

Rho reached for Saphira's hand. "I won't pry into your journey right now, or why your dragon friend didn't shift but is

acting shifty—”

Ryker puffed flames again.

Saphira gave her a small smile and a shrug. “It’s a whole thing—”

“I know. I get it. Trust me, if anyone in this realm gets it ... it’s me. But that’s why I won’t ask more now.” She tugged on Saphira’s hand. “Promise me when things settle for you that you’ll send for me. I long to see *Draconia* again.”

She nodded. “I will.”

“And if you need anything at all, you’ll call for me.” Rho gestured between us. “Because you’re about to do us a huge favor, so we’re gonna owe you one. Expiration not included.”

Saphira’s eyes sparkled. “Oh. You’re the reason Abba called us here?”

“She called *you*?”

Ryker snorted.

“Well, she summoned Ryker.” Saphira pointed to him. “But the message said to bring me. She needed a favor. I didn’t get to ask questions because she sent a little magical note like something out of Harry Potter.”

“Harry Potter?”

“I’ll explain later, Rev. But yeah, we got one of those too.” Rho grimaced. “We didn’t know she called for you until right before you arrived. We need a ride home. Our ship blew up on the way here.”

Ryker flapped his wings like he was ready.

Saphira pushed her shoulders back. “Let’s get you home then. Come on, climb on.”

I looked to Ryker. “You okay with us climbing on your back?”

He nodded and lowered down so he was nearly flat on the ground.

It only took us a minute or so to get settled on his back, his silver scales a lot smoother than I was expecting. I’d never ridden a dragon before, hadn’t ever considered it either. I was actually somewhat nervous because there was nothing to hang on to except each other. Saphira was up at the front, right behind Ryker’s head. I put Rho in the middle so I could keep my eyes on her.

She was not feeling any concerns whatsoever, apparently. She and Saphira were talking faster than I’d ever heard Rho speak. They giggled a lot. It made me happy to see my soulmate happy. She’d been devastated to learn she’d lost her sisters. She’d gotten one back, but I was determined to deliver Morgana to her myself. The second we landed, I was getting note to Avalon.

I was so lost in thought about my best friend, all the demons, and Dacio that I hadn’t noticed how close we’d gotten to Isramaya until flames burst into the sky. We all gasped and leaned over Ryker’s wing.

My heart stopped.

Isramaya was in chaos. Purple smoke exploded left and right, like it was being fired from different sides of the kingdom. Flames burst into the sky. All of Scarlet Peaks was on fire. My heart was pounding. Rho gripped my arms and squeezed. It didn’t make any sense. Everything was fine when we left, and now my kingdom was at war.

“Ryker ...” I cleared my throat. “Ryker, drop us at the edge of Shadow Mountains but do *not* land.”

Saphira gasped and spun back to look at me. “Drop you? You’re going to jump down?”

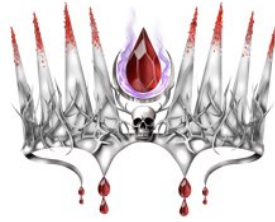
“Yes. Get as low as you can. I won’t risk another kingdom’s Prince when I don’t know what’s going on.”

Rhodelia spun and climbed into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. “I may have my memories, but I never knew how to land a jump like this.”

I slid my hand beneath her knees. “I’ve got you. Ryker, just get as low as you can.”

Thirty

RHODELIA



I wasn't a coward, but I definitely closed my eyes and buried my face in the crook of Varan's neck the second he jumped off Ryker's back. Cold air rushed over me, sending my hair whipping up and over my head.

Varan chuckled. "We need to braid that."

"Shut it, Rev." I giggled and playfully nibbled on his neck.

I knew things were serious. I knew we were yet again running into battle for our kingdom, but for this brief moment, I let myself feel happy. My memories had returned finally. Not only did I get to ease Varan's pain so he understood what really happened with his father and me, but I also knew my sister was not lost. By whatever luck of fate Mother Terrea had granted us, we got to keep each other in both of our lives. I knew Rev was going to tell Avalon to protect Morgana, but I also knew my sister was a force to be reckoned with. And the moment she found out I was just on the other side of the mountains, she would line the valley with bodies to get to me.

We were on the cusp of happily ever after. It was so close. Now that my memory was back, I knew I'd seen the other five women who were in that sacrifice with me, Morgana, and Saphira. Somewhere in Terrea at that exact moment, those women were facing struggles like me: kingdoms in peril.

“Landing in three ... two ... one—” Varan landing felt like jumping off a tailgate at a football game. There was a thud and a little jolt, but that was it. He stood at his full height and looked down at me with a cocky grin. “How was that?”

“Impressive.”

He sat me on my feet, kissed my temple, then whistled *loud*.

My stomach turned and tightened into knots as reality set in. From up here in Shadow Mountains, even on the lowest ridge, I still had a clear shot of the fires burning tracks across our kingdom. Purple nightmare bombs exploded left and right. It didn't make sense.

“We have to get in there.”

“We are,” his voice was rough. “They're here.”

I turned to see what he saw just as I spotted his raiths, Sparks and Starling, speeding around a cliffside. But they weren't pulling a carriage. They were running wild and free and *fast*.

As they stopped in front of us, we spotted a familiar face with them.

I gasped. “CONRAY!”

I ran and tackled him in a hug. He squeezed me back, then pulled away to hug Varan, like actually hug him. When he stepped back, he had glassy eyes and flushed cheeks. He ran his hand through his purple and lavender hair.

“How'd you get back? What happened out there? I looked and yelled for you, but I didn't see anyone! I thought you drowned—”

“No. I did not drown,” Conray interrupted me with a grimace.

Rev scowled. “What happened?”

“I never went.”

“WHAT?”

“What does that mean?” Rev scowled. “You never went *where?*”

“On the ship. I was never on the ship.” Conray gestured to Varan. “You said Kahsi and I were to go with you. Kahsi went to help Rhode get clean, so I went outside to wait. Next thing I know, the carriage is gone and I’m standing in the forest alone.”

A cold chill slid down my spine. “You never got in the carriage?”

He shook his head. “I just assumed something happened and you had to leave. It wasn’t until they got back that I realized something was wrong. The look on Thuso’s face still haunts me. He says I was on the ship the whole time, that I was there with them when they got rescued. But I wasn’t.”

My stomach turned. “You were in the carriage with me and Kahsi. We had a whole conversation—”

“Wasn’t me.”

“Do you know who it was?” Varan’s voice was sharp like razors.

“Ambrose.” When they both scowled, I shrugged. “He’s already proven his willingness to impersonate Varan. Why would he stop with anyone else?”

“You might be right, but we need to keep open the possibility it’s someone else.” Varan scrubbed his face with his hands. “Okay, first: Conray, what about the rest of the crew from the ship?”

“Everyone made it back, but Thuso has broken legs.” Conray’s face fell. “Kahsi has fallen to her mind.”

I clutched my chest. “The basement?”

He nodded.

Varan cursed and pointed to the kingdom down below. “What’s going on?”

“We’re under attack.”

“*By whom?*” Varan growled.

“The basement,” Conray said softly and slowly. He shuddered. “I’ve never seen anything like it, Varan. They’re just attacking us, but it’s like they’re sleepwalking. I saw Pio stab his own son, and when he screamed, Pio didn’t react at all. Pio would *never* hurt his son.”

“Is he okay?”

“Physically, he’ll heal.”

I turned to my soulmate. “Rev?”

Conray gasped. “Did you just call him Rev?”

I grinned. “My memory is back.”

Conray sighed with relief. “I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

“Someone is controlling them,” Varan growled. He glared down at the war. “I need to go down there and get the scroll —”

“Oh, another thing ...” Conray grimaced. “Everyone thinks you two are dead.”

My jaw dropped.

Varan cracked his knuckles. “And who told them that?”

“I don’t know. No one seems to know which specific person told them, but they all know.” He pointed. “They’re in a free fall without you.”

Varan twirled his wrists and his veins glowed neon-purple. Faster than I’d seen Ambrose put on a glamour, Varan was suddenly a frail female about my height with brownish-red hair and hazel eyes and wearing a white long-sleeved dress. He nodded his head. “Someone wants us dead. We need to find out who and why, and we won’t do that if they know I’m alive.”

I nodded. “We go in. I’ll rally them with Conray. Give Cresswell and Hollyn an extra two hands. You go find that damn scroll. Someone waited for the moment we left to try and kill us *and* get the scroll.”

Varan glared at the fight, but it wasn’t as intimidating anymore. “Find the scroll and we find the culprit.”

“Let’s do it.”

Varan pointed at Conray, then to me. “Stay with her.”

“I will.”

Varan-ette, as I was calling him in this female form, whistled again. Sparks and Starling rushed to his side, seemingly unfazed by his glamour. “Rho, you’ll ride with me on Sparks. Conray, take Starling.”

Conray was up and on Starling’s purple star-dusted back before I blinked. I paused beside Sparks. I’d never ridden a

raith bareback. And unlike a horse, I wasn't sure which body parts stayed tangible and not smoke. A tan, thin arm snaked around my waist and then lifted me off the ground. Varan-ette settled me on Sparks' back in front of him, then he wrapped his arms around my waist and whistled.

“*Close your eyes,*” Varan-ette whispered in my ear.

I listened without question. And because I was nervous, I started counting the seconds. Twenty-eight seconds later, Sparks stopped on a dime. I opened my eyes and gasped. We were on a sand dune on Night Beach overlooking Court of Blood. It was full-blown *war*. My stomach turned.

Varan-ette slipped off Sparks' back. “You two take them and get in there—”

“*Where are you going? You said—*”

“I know, but we don't have a choice. I won't be far.” Varan-ette took my chin between his fingers. “I'll be at Lakewell Palace. It's the best place to start looking. If you need me, *whistle*.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he vanished into his purple flames.

Conray cleared his throat. “Are you two a couple?”

“He's my soulmate.”

Conray's eyes widened. He smiled and nodded. “Then let's give your soulmate a little distraction so our enemy won't see him snooping.”

“To Cresswell and Hollyn?”

“I followed you into battle last war. I'll do it again this time.”

I whistled and the raiths lunged into the air. Up ahead, it was like the battle of Helm's Deep in Lord of the Rings after the Orcs had gotten through the wall. They were attacking from every angle.

The people from the basement moved slowly, like they weren't in any rush whatsoever. They barely moved, just their hands flicking left and right and back again. They threw purple magic bombs at people who then dropped and screamed in terror. There was no mistaking them for the other purple-haired Nightmares residents because the whites of their eyes were solid black. Their irises and pupils were gone, replaced by neon-purple whirlpools. Black lines stretched out from their eyes as if there was poison in their bodies trying to spread.

I spotted Cresswell and Hollyn in an instant. Their matching orangish-red hair stuck out like a beacon despite being surrounded. "THERE!"

Sparks neighed and took off into a full-speed sprint until we got to Cresswell and Hollyn. I threw my leg over and jumped off.

The crowd gasped.

There was a beat of silence and then they were screaming my name and rushing toward me.

Hollyn tackled me in a hug for a second, then pulled back and wiped tears out of her eyes. "Don't you dare die on me again!"

I grinned. "Don't you start."

Cresswell lit something huge on fire and threw it into the basement-zombies like he was bowling. He spun on me with a wide smile and big yellow eyes. "You ever been in a fight, Rhode?"

A basement-zombie lunged for me, but I easily dodged the swing and then reached up and gripped the poor unknown girl's neck. I'd learned in foster care how to put someone to sleep this way. As the girl dropped to the ground, I bent over and plucked an abandoned dagger off the stone ground. "Only one. Fifty years ago."

"BLOCK!" Conray yelled.

People threw up boulders and slates to block the purple nightmare bombs from hitting them. I glanced around, the Nightmares and Blood courts were mixed together, but no one was working together. Every magic bomb deflected either hit other people or crashed into a building and exploded.

I cursed.

"PULL BACK! PULL BACK! TO THE PALACE!" I raised my dagger in the air and pointed to Lakewell Palace. "TOGETHER!"

Conray threw nightmare bombs in rapid fire at the basement-zombies. It wasn't taking them down or stopping them, but it did give us a break on the bombs coming our way.

"GO!" Conray yelled. "I'll hold the line! HURRY!"

I sprinted forward, running with the people around Lake Lamaya toward Lakewell Palace. We needed to not be attacked from all angles. We had a better chance if we were a united front. Every single person I saw was bloodied and bruised.

"TOGETHER! BACKS TO THE PALACE! BLOODS IN THE FRONT! NIGHTMARES IN THE BACK!" I spun around to give the palace my back. "BLOODS, GRAB YOUR BLOCKERS! DEFLECT TO THE LEFT!"

The redheads jumped to action, each of them grabbing whatever makeshift object they found to use as a blocker—doors, stone walls, boulders, anything big they could use.

The purple-headed Nightmares suddenly found themselves being guarded by the Bloods. They all looked to me with wide eyes.

“INCOMING!” Conray bellowed.

“NIGHTMARES, ATTACK!”

“What? That’s my dad!”

“That’s my sister!”

“That’s my husband!”

They didn’t want to fight their loved ones, even if it meant dying as a result. I didn’t blame them, but they had to do something or this war was going to be a bloodbath ... and soon.

“BLOCK!” Conray yelled, his voice getting closer.

The Nightmares all dropped to the ground while the Bloods threw up their blockers. Just like I told them, they deflected the nightmare bombs to the left where they crashed harmlessly into the sand dunes. I twirled my wrists and summoned my magic without hesitation. It sang through my veins like it was damn glad I was back. Rhode the nurse didn’t know shit about this magic, but Rhodelia did. I threw nightmare bombs in rapid fire.

When they hit, the basement-zombie gasped and stopped short.

“*HOW’D YOU DO THAT?*” one of the Nightmares asked.

Conray cackled. “DARKNESS! GIVE THEM DARKNESS!”

He remembered the last war. He and I had fought side by side for two weeks when the enemy was actually trying to kill us.

“NIGHTMARES, GET BEHIND THE BLOODS!” I yelled. “BE A TEAM!”

Cresswell ripped a stone slab right off the courtyard and held it up. He ran to the right where a dozen small children were huddled and trembling. Two Nightmares raced after him to fire back.

“KAHSI, NO!” Conray bellowed and tackled Kahsi to the ground. He shook her and yelled, “FIGHT IT!”

But there was no *fighting it*. She was one of the basement-zombies with the terrifying eyes. She flopped under Conray like a fish out of water. Conray was going to get himself killed trying to protect her.

“Let her go!” I yelled to him. “No one’s gonna hurt her, just cover yourself!”

“RHODE!”

I spun toward the sound of my name and spotted Hollyn twenty feet away at the edge of the river that connected Lake Lamaya to Blood Basin. She tossed her dagger to the ground and reached into the river where one of the Nightmares had fallen in and was drowning.

She looked to me with panic in her eyes. “THERE’S MORE!”

I looked to the river just as the Nightmare whose hand she was holding to pull them out of the river looked up with

swirling purple whirlpool eyes set against black. Time slipped into slow-motion. I threw a nightmare bomb at the basement-zombie in her arms and screamed, but the basement-zombie lifted its other hand and a sword the size of my arm glistened in the moonlight.

It happened too fast.

The blade of that sword sliced up the center of her body, gouging a valley into her skin. Blood gushed in every direction. She gasped and dropped to her knees. The basement-zombie showed no emotion or reaction as he swung the sword through her neck.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!” Cresswell shrieked as her head hit the ground and rolled into the river.

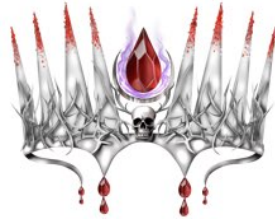
Everyone screeched in horror.

Hollyn was dead.

My breath caught in my lungs. My magic burned in my veins until all I saw was purple light in my eyes. I screamed and pushed out with every ounce of magic I had, and the world exploded.

Thirty-One

RHODELIA



I woke with a scream.

“Easy!”

“It’s okay!”

I gasped and opened my eyes to find Arlene and Viera standing over me. We were inside Lakewell Palace’s ballroom. I heard screams in the distance. I smelled blood in the air. But I was *inside*.

I tried to sit up, but Viera pushed me back down. “How’d I get inside?”

“We carried you, Rhode,” Arlene said softly as she tried to place a cold rag over my forehead. “It was too much magic. You started to seize.”

“Where’s Varan? I need him—”

They both choked on tears.

“Rhode, he *died*,” Arlene cried.

Fuck. That’s right. I wanted to tell them the truth, but I refused to blow my soulmate’s cover when he could be in a dangerous situation. We needed that scroll back.

“Rhode?” Viera touched my cheek. “You remember he died, right?”

I took a deep breath and nodded. I did remember the story, so it wasn't a flat-out lie. "What happened? Outside before I seized?"

Viera looked flustered. "You stunned all the basement-zombies, as Conray called them. You screamed and your magic exploded and—"

"Dearest Canopy, did I hurt them?"

"No, no!" Viera shook her head and tried to keep me lying down. "You just stopped them—"

"Stopped them how? What happened?"

"Their bombs aren't working anymore, Rhode." Arlene smacked Viera's arm away, then pulled me upright. She pointed out the glass windows. "Their magic stopped working. Now they're fighting with weapons. Look."

"Oh no."

"It's a good thing," Viera said in a rush. "Nightmares aren't used to weapons, so this puts us at an advantage."

And then I remembered what set my magic off. *Hollyn*. My chest tightened. Tears poured down my cheeks. I shook my head and screamed, then jumped to my feet. "Where's Cresswell?"

Arlene shook her head, her face paler than I'd ever seen it. "They dragged him inside but—"

"WHERE IS HE?"

Viera held her chin high. "His throne room—"

I sprinted out of the ballroom, down the hall, and around to the throne room. I crashed through the door and found a few red-haired Bloods huddled around a familiar head of orange-

red sitting on one of the wooden benches. They jumped and looked up as I burst through the door. They gripped his shoulders and held on as he sobbed hysterically.

Cresswell. My heart broke. I'd almost lost Varan a few hours ago. I only knew a fraction of what he felt, and that would haunt me forever.

“Cresswell!” I cried and sprinted for him. The others jumped out of my way. “*Get back out there!*”

I knew this battle was still going and I needed to get out there, but after what just happened with my magic, I needed to find Varan first. I didn't know how I did it or what it meant, I just knew I needed to not be in the fight unless he was by my side.

So I slid onto the bench and wrapped my arms around my friend. He sobbed and trembled from head to toe. He was inconsolable. And there was nothing we could do for him now. No amount of blood was going to save Hollyn. Tears filled my eyes and slid down my cheeks. I sniffled and held on to him as we rocked back and forth.

The side door flew open and Varan-ette slid inside with wide eyes.

I gasped and mouthed, *I'm okay.*

He shook his head. But I saw the moment he put the pieces together. His face fell. *No. Hollyn?*

I nodded and a new set of tears burst free.

Varan-ette pushed his hands into his long red hair and cringed. But ever the King that he was, he knew he couldn't linger in our emotions right now. Not when people were in danger outside. He looked to me with those hazel eyes and nodded. *Scroll?* Then gestured around the throne room.

I shrugged.

He nodded and started searching every nook and cranny. As soon as he finished checking this room, I was going to send Cresswell with Arlene and Viera somewhere more private to grieve. Varan and I had business to tend to.

Varan was all the way at the front of the room behind the throne inspecting every drawer and shelf when I heard a strange noise outside. I looked toward the twenty-foot-tall stained-glass windows but my gaze landed on something else.

Something tucked into Cresswell's boot and under his pant leg.

I reached down and plucked it from his boot. It was the King's Scroll. I sighed with relief. "*By the Blood*, you have it. Thank *Mother Terrea*. We were so worried."

Cresswell reached down to fix his pant leg. Faster than I could track, he pulled a small dagger from his boot and slammed the blade into my rib cage.

I screamed and tried to jump away from him, but the pain was too much and I crashed to my knees, collapsing against the wooden bench in front of me. My vision tunneled and little white lines danced across my eyes. I pressed my hand to the wound to apply pressure and felt my blood pouring out of me.

The room exploded around me.

The stained-glass windows shattered to dust.

I gasped and looked up, expecting it to be me again only to find Cresswell soaring through the air and out of the palace. Varan-ette stalked after him. *Oh no. REV!* I dragged myself up and stumbled through the broken window and onto the balcony. But a huge chunk of the balcony was missing. I

looked over the edge just as Cresswell landed on the courtyard in the middle of the fight and slid thirty feet across.

Everyone stopped to look.

Even the basement-zombies.

“SHE’S GONE MAD!” Cresswell shouted, pointing back at Varan-ette. “KILL HER!”

The basement-zombies turned toward the *her* in question and charged. But *she* twirled her wrists and neon-purple magic coiled around his arms. Between one step and the next, *Varan-ette* turned into Varan.

The entire courtyard screamed and cried in joy.

“Varan ... no ... no, you died!” Cresswell dove for his coat pocket and pulled out a vial of sand, then dumped it onto himself. It hit his skin like glitter.

Varan charged for him, throwing nightmare bombs faster than my eyes could track. Cresswell bellowed and twitched, but he wasn’t staying down. Varan pulled a dagger from his boot and threw it right at Cresswell’s chest. It sank into his body, but no blood came out.

Cresswell grinned and pulled the dagger out. “Oops?”

What the fuck?

“KILL THEM!” Cresswell screamed.

The basement-zombies attacked the residents with swords, daggers, and knives. Their magic was still blocked from whatever I’d done, but this fight went straight back to basics.

“RHO!” Varan yelled as he parried with Cresswell in a dagger fight. “It’s in the scroll. He bound himself to them. Sever the bond and he can die.”

I gasped and pulled the scroll out, but I had to keep the pressure on my wound. The scroll kept rolling back on itself. I growled—and hands slid into my view. Viera swatted my hand away from my wound and pressed her own to it. I hissed as pain burst through my body.

“I’ve got it open!” Arlene shouted. “RHODE!”

I bent over and scanned the scroll. “Look for anything about severing bonds!”

All of a sudden there were a dozen people surrounding me, all of us scrambling to read the scroll to find the antidote for the bond. There were so many notes, it was hard to read.

“THERE!” A woman with lilac hair pointed at a line down below. “This is it!”

We all slid down to look at where she pointed. But I didn’t see an obvious answer.

“That’s not it?”

“Yes, it is!” she yelled again. “Look right there! It says *to sever the bond*—”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t say *HOW!*”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said under my breath. I was starting to get light-headed. My vision blurred to where I couldn’t distinguish letters. “There’s a symbol there. I can’t *see*. What’s the symbol?”

“It’s just a random doodle. It doesn’t match the rest of the handwriting!”

“I think the answer is in some kind of code next to it.”

“The symbol is just doodle.”

“What’s the symbol?” I shouted.

“It’s a diamond,” Arlene yelled.

“Wait.” Viera leaned in closer. “Diamond with an *X* at the bottom.”

This sounded familiar. I’d seen this somewhere.

“Is that a picture of a bone—”

I gasped. “THAT’S IT!” I scrambled to my feet with the scroll in my hand.

The group followed behind me to the edge of the balcony.

“VARAN!” His amber eyes shot right to me. Conray slid in front of him to block him from Cresswell. I pointed to my throat. “YOUR VIAL!”

He frowned.

I hadn’t gotten a good look at that vial in this new life of mine, but fifty years ago I inspected every inch of it. That was the vial his mother left for him. He assumed it was just a random, sentimental inexpensive necklace she wore and left for him. But it wasn’t. She knew Valandril was a sick son of a bitch, and she made sure to leave the answer for her son to find.

“Get me down there!”

I didn’t know who grabbed me or what happened, but all of a sudden I was on the courtyard behind Varan. “VIAL!”

He vanished into purple flames and reappeared at my side. Without asking, he yanked his vial off his neck and handed it to me. I yanked the top off and glittery pink smoke burst into the air.

“NO!” Cresswell bellowed.

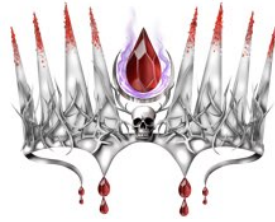
Varan pushed his magic out, throwing it right into the pink smoke. When the two collided, explosion-like fireworks lit up the sky.

The basement-zombies dropped back into their meditation poses on the ground like they'd never left the basement at all.

Varan vanished into purple flames, then reappeared beside Cresswell. Without missing a beat, he slammed his dagger into Cresswell's throat.

Thirty-Two

RHODELIA



Without missing a beat, he slammed his dagger into Cresswell's throat.

Cresswell gasped but choked on his own blood that gushed out of him. And then purple smoke billowed from his body like flames on a log. Varan crouched down with a frown.

"You were Nightmares this whole time?" Conray bellowed.

Cresswell's body convulsed. He gasped for air three times and then his heart stopped. His yellow eyes stared at nothing above him. The purple smoke swirled over his face, and his short orangish-red hair changed to long purple hair. Those unseeing eyes changed to hazel. His face changed ... but I knew it instantly.

Ambrose.

The whole kingdom gasped.

Cresswell was Ambrose. *Cresswell was Ambrose.* The whole time. From the start, Cresswell was Ambrose. I just kept repeating that in my head. I couldn't believe it. I'd adored Cresswell. Everyone had. He was kind and funny and loved his people.

And it was all a lie.

Varan sighed and shook his head.

I made a strangled kind of cry and then Varan was on his knees in front of me. He bit his wrist and pressed it to my mouth. I moaned and sagged into his chest, letting the smooth taste of chocolate heal my wound.

Conray gasped. “*By the Blood! SHE’S HEALING!*”

Varan nodded. “It’s all in the scroll. They’ve been lying to us for thousands of years. We’re supposed to feed from the vein. The nectar is *only* for Court of Blood to sustain their magic, just as the Forest of Fears is only for Court of Nightmares. It’s the blood we need. That’s why everyone is dying. We’re literally starving.”

Conray lunged away from us and sprinted right for Kahsi, who sat with her legs crossed and her hands on her knees. He bit his wrist just like Varan had and shoved it against Kahsi’s mouth.

We all watched and waited with bated breath for what felt like an hour but was only a few seconds. Then Kahsi *blinked*. She flinched and those creepy eyes turned back to her pretty light-golden eyes.

“No, no. It’s okay. Drink. I promise.” Conray rubbed her back soothingly. “We’ll explain later. Just drink.”

“*Dearest Canopy,*” Viera breathed. She leapt to her feet and raced to the nearest basement-zombie and gave them her blood.

Arlene was right behind her doing just the same. “Come on, everyone! Feed them!”

There was a beat of silence and then everyone jumped to their feet and ran to their nearest basement-zombie. One by one, they woke like a fog had been lifted. People cheered and cried.

I licked Varan's wound closed, then collapsed in his chest.
"We did it."

He laughed and wrapped his arms around me. "I cannot believe we did it."

For the next twenty minutes or so, we just watched as the kingdom came to their neighbor's aid. They didn't worry about which court they belonged to, they just went to someone in need and helped. We weren't going to heal all the sick and dying at once, but we knew how now, and it was enough to buy us time to feed everyone back to health.

A golden light dropped from the sky.

Everyone stopped and turned toward it.

When the light hit the courtyard in front of us, it wasn't a light at all but a pretty woman with wild curly purple hair and lavender eyes.

Abba.

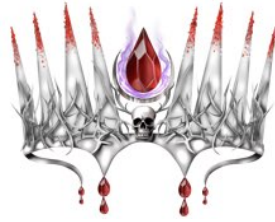
Abba grinned. "Congratulations, Varan and Rhodelia. You have fulfilled your oaths. You may now decide if you will be Isramaya's new King and Queen or if we will be choosing another."

Everyone gasped and turned to us with wide eyes.

Abba arched one eyebrow. "So, what have you decided?"

Thirty-Three

RHODELIA



There weren't better reasons to get married.

Any moment the black wooden door in front of me would open and there would be no turning back. I would get to marry him. It was already too late, if I was being honest with myself. I'd said yes. I'd given my heart to him. I'd let Kahsi, Arlene, and Viera dress me in this silvery lace gown. For all that really mattered, we were already married. I merely had to say the words out loud in front of a crowd.

Even through the closed doors, I heard their whispers.

They had opinions on my worth and value, and they were much higher than I thought I deserved.

My stomach tightened into knots. I looked down at my bouquet, at the cluster of violet and red flowers that shimmered beneath the candlelight. They were a symbol for us. A combination of both of our courts and our entire kingdom. My soon to be new husband. Our new King. Only one blue rose sat in the middle, to represent the Court of Shadows. The court we lost because of a monster. Valandril no longer mattered. I was *Varan's* now.

I exhaled and pressed my hand to my stomach to steady myself. The excitement was about to eat me alive. If I could've turned back time, I might have proposed to this man

a long time ago ... We might have been working on anniversary number fifty by now. But in the deepest part of my heart, I knew this was the only answer. It had to happen like this. However treacherous and painful, we had to let fate play its role.

The doors opened, swinging away from me.

The whispers stopped.

Even with my gaze locked on my bouquet, I felt their eyes on me like tiny flames along my body. My hands trembled. I took a deep breath and the silvery jewels sewn onto the lace of my wedding gown dug into my skin. I grinned.

It's time to forget the nurse from Earth and become the vampire Queen of Isramaya.

I raised my chin high, pushed my shoulders back, then opened my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. I had not yet seen this room. It was daunting and imposing. It was *so Varan*. The far wall a mere fifty feet straight across from me stood towering into the sky. It was made of glass and a black wooden frame. Some of the glass sections had been painted red to make the shape of a rose in the wall, while others were painted a purple flame.

The Royal Ceremonial Room in Elden Palace was filled to the brim. There were no balconies though. Everyone got the good seats because we'd opened the side glass walls for everyone to join. Everyone was dying to get a look.

The Kingdom of Isramaya had come to watch.

But I did not meet their expectant eyes. Instead, I kept my gaze locked on the altar that stood like a carved block of crystal at the far end of the room beside my betrothed. He stood with his back to me, which was a relief. Had I seen his

eyes, I might have sprinted down the aisle to his waiting arms. I took a step forward, my bare feet touching the soft, warm red carpet. Being barefoot was part of the Queen's ceremony, but *this* King made sure my feet would never be cold. The moonlight streamed in through the glass in just a way to make the air look like it glittered.

The golden candlelight flickered from every crevice, casting everyone in a warm golden haze. I straightened my spine and began my last march as a single woman. Tonight, I would forevermore be Varan's wife. As I walked, the melodic tune of the instrumentalists echoed a dreamy sound, yet I barely heard the sound over the heavy pounding of my heart in my ears.

As I marched, the rows of people dressed in floor-length gowns dropped to bow at my feet. I grinned. As I glanced up and down the rows, I was filled to the brim with joy. The courts had mixed. Reds and purples mingled and sat together as one. No more were we a kingdom with two courts, we were just a family with different interests.

Our kingdom should have always been blended together, not separated by court.

But they would never be parted again.

When I approached the altar, I discovered my betrothed wore a black coat with a large hood pulled over his head. It was the King's ceremonial robe. I stopped in front of the altar as I'd been instructed, then dropped into a low curtsy. His feet turned to face me, so I lifted to stand straight, and our eyes met.

"*Rho.*" His amber eyes glistened like candlelight. His grin was so wide it dimpled his cheeks.

I beamed up at him. “*Rev.*”

Abba appeared behind him. “It’s time we do this right.”

Varan stepped to the side and took my hand in his. Together, we faced Abba.

She raised her hand and golden light flashed. When it faded, there were two thrones sitting side by side. Both dark red, but one with gold accents and the other with silver. On the seats, sitting on velvety cushions, were two brand-new crowns.

“Rhodelia, do you take this kingdom as yours to cherish and protect for as long as you live?”

“I do.”

She lifted the crown and walked to me. It was stunning and made of shiny silver. In the middle sat the same red stone as my amulet but purple smoke swirled around it. On either side of the crystal stood silver spikes with little bloodred crystals on the tips. It was as if they were dripping blood. Below the band in the front and back were teardrop red crystals hanging from pointed silver fangs.

I knelt and she sat the crown on my head.

I grinned but stayed on my knees. I knew my instructions.

Abba turned to my soulmate. “Varan, do you take this kingdom as yours to cherish and protect for as long as you live?”

He chuckled. “I do.”

His crown was *so* him. It was made of gold spikes with gold thorns wrapped around them. A large red crystal sat in the middle, but this one had a golden glow in the middle of it. Around the stone, purple smoke swirled, lest we ever forget about our nightmares.

Varan knelt beside me and closed his eyes.

Abba grinned and sat the crown on his head. Golden light swirled around his body like a snake. I watched in amazement. When it faded, I gasped. Somehow in all of this, I'd forgotten what happened to a royal male when he was crowned King. Gone was his short black hair. Now he had long black waves down to his elbows. On the center of his chest, the King's mark was a picture identical to his crown.

By the Blood, he'd never looked more handsome.

Our hands were still holding each other, so we stood together and turned so we were facing our kingdom.

"I announce to Isramaya," Abba said with reverence, "your new King and Queen."



I just want to say THANK YOU to all of you who read this book. It's a little different than The Coven series so it means the world to me that you read it! I hope you loved Rhode & Varan!! If you did and you'd love to see their epilogue then [CLICK HERE](#) to join my Facebook Group where it will be posted in the Files section. OR join my newsletter [HERE](#) where it will be also shared.

IF YOU LOVED THE REALM OF TERREA THEN MAKE SURE TO CHECK OUT BOOK #2 IN THE SERIES “**OF DRAGONS & DESIRE**” by **GK DeRosa!**

[CLICK HERE](#) to pre-order it NOW!

Keep flipping the pages to see her teaser cover AND READ CHAPTER 1 NOW!

And don't forget to pre-order ALL 8 books in the Forgotten Kingdoms Series - [CLICK HERE](#) to see them ALL!

* * *

If you liked my writing and you've never read any of my books then HELLO! NICE TO MEET YOU! Check out some links below to get you started.

Become a Chandwitch and connect with me and other fans of The Coven! We're totally weird and crazy in there, but it's a whole lot of fun! Just [CLICK HERE](#) to join my Facebook group!

* * *

Most of The Coven is Saga prior to now is fairly clean, but it's growing up and growing with the characters and who they are. So expect the spice to continue if it fits the story. **BUT DO YOU WANT MORE SPICY BOOKS RIGHT NOW? Because I've got TWO within The Coven Saga. *The Rose Witch* and *The Wolf Witch*, both of these are standalone stories about new characters in the Coven universe that you can read right now without reading any of the rest of the saga!**

Read below to find out just how wild those stories are!



His magic lurks in the shadows...

I feel his eyes on my back with every step I take. He's following me. Chasing me. There's nowhere for me to go, nowhere to hide that he won't find me. He moves in smoke and shadows. He *is* the darkness. He tracks my every move

like a predator with gold glowing eyes in the night. I know he's going to catch me, the only question is...why do I want him to?

I have no idea who he is or what he wants. I know I should be terrified...but I'm not.

There are things happening to me...things I can't control or explain...things that only I can see. Magic pours from me like a scarlet river and this locket around my neck pulses with dark, electric energy. I think it's what *he* wants...but he isn't the only thing on the hunt for it. Demons hide around every corner, they attack mercilessly and relentlessly - the only thing they seem to be afraid of is *him*.

That should be a warning, except there's something inside me that begs to be near him. I feel it like a magnet, drawing me closer and I'm running out of reasons to fight it.

He is the Prince of Hell...and he's either my savior or my damnation...

***The Rose Witch* is a novel set in *The Coven* saga but is designed to be read as a stand-alone.**

[CLICK HERE](#) to read **The Rose Witch now!**



Sometimes magic throws a curveball...

I thought I had everything figured out. I'd gone to the academy for witches and mastered my magic. I'd opened my own witchy occult store, just as I always wanted. And my family was as close as ever. Everything was going according to plan.

Until the wolves showed up and dragged me back to their land. It was all a misunderstanding. They had the wrong girl, the wrong idea. I was just a witch.

And then I *shifted*.

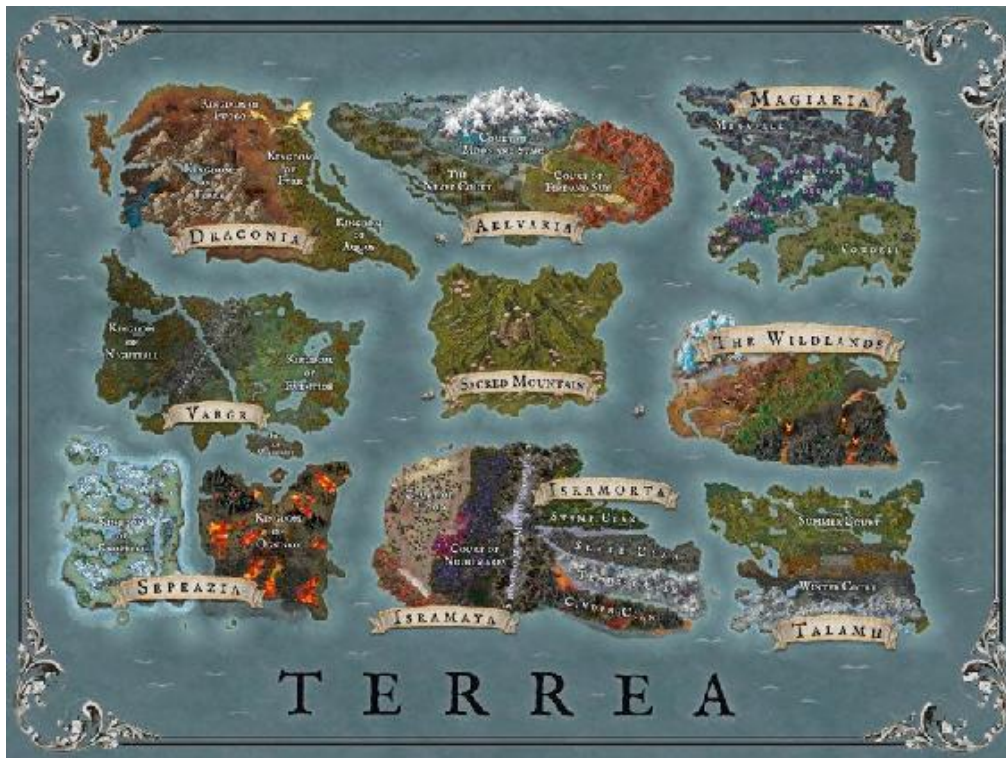
But nothing is as it appears...and now my life is in danger.

****This is a stand-alone story with an HEA and no cliffhanger! You don't have to have read the rest of The Coven Saga!***

[CLICK HERE TO READ THE WOLF WITCH NOW!](#)









FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF
BLOOD
&
NIGHTMARES

CHANDELLE LAVAUN



FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

OF
DRAGONS
&
DESIRE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GK DE ROSA

Of Dragons & Desire



CHAPTER 1

Kingdom of Fuoco, Isle of Draconia, Terrea

Saphira

My boots hit the hard-packed sand, and my knees wobbled for an instant before my body hurtled forward. My arms shot out in a desperate attempt to brace myself for the fall, but my head spun so badly, I had no idea which direction was up or down.

Welcome home, Saphira. That familiar voice swam through my mind.

An iron band laced around my waist, suspending me in mid-air when I wavered. My shoulder blades smacked into a firm block of muscle, the heat radiating from his form my only clue it belonged to a man and not the side of the jagged cliff of the mountains surrounding us.

“Breathe slowly. The dizziness should wear off in a moment.” Warm breath blazed across the shell of my ear, and a shudder surged down my spine.

Ignoring the freakish sensation, I cocked my head at my captor. “What in the hell just happened? Where are we?” I

wrapped my fingers around his massive, tattooed forearm and tried to pry myself free from his hold. Like last time, I accomplished nothing but extreme irritation. On both our parts.

“If I let you go, you’ll fall, princess.”

“Then let me fall!” I speared my elbow into his stomach and bit out a squeal. Mother Terrea, that hurt.

Mother Terrea? Where the goddess had that come from?

Goddess?

Nausea roiled around in my gut, and I leaned back against the stranger. I was losing my mind. No, it was that drink! I’d been drugged. That would explain the incomprehensible lusty sensations toward this mountain of a man holding me captive.

“If you hurt me, I’ll hunt you down and stab you with my dagger,” I muttered. Was I slurring? The arid sand beneath my feet shot up over my head. The endless blue blurred, and I squeezed my eyes closed. “Oh, no, I think I’m going to be sick.” I hunched over and blue liquid spewed from my lips, and all over my captor’s leather boots.

A growl of irritation rumbled low in his chest, vibrating my entire backside. He never let go though. His firm hold held me up as I spilled the contents of my belly all over the dry, cracked earth. Strong fingers banded around my hair, keeping the loose strands out of my face.

When I had nothing left, I spat out the foul taste in my mouth and wiped the saliva from my chin. Damn you, Rhode and Morgana... I never should’ve had those shots.

“Better?” he whispered.

I blinked quickly and forced my eyes to focus on the foreign land sprawling around me. This was definitely not Las Vegas. Although the arid landscape did share a slight resemblance to the desert. But just beyond the flat stretch of land, lay a monstrous mountain range dotted with pools of bright orange and crimson molten lava. Toto, we're definitely not in Kansas anymore. "My stomach yes, the rest of me, no."

He loosened his death grip, and I sank onto the hardpacked earth. To my surprise, he crouched down beside me, piercing silver eyes scrutinizing. I kept my eyes down, pinned to the splatter of blue alcohol across his leather boots. He couldn't be happy about that.

"Will you just tell me where we are? And who the hell you are for that matter? And also, why am I speaking funny?"

His head cocked to the side, dark tangles of hair settling on his forehead. "You don't know?"

"Um, no. How the hell would I?"

"All in due time I suppose, princess." He eyed me again, as if he were assessing something, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out what. My sanity, maybe? Because I was fairly certain I'd lost it on that rollercoaster ride of lights. He snuck a hand beneath his leather breastplate and revealed what looked like a flask from like cave man times. Uncorking it, he handed it to me. "Take small sips. We must move soon."

The hell no sat poised on my lips, but truthfully, I was parched. I was also about a second away from ripping off this costume. The fake pleather corset was digging into my ribs and sweat pooled between my boobs, the thick fabric and my skin. My fingers wrapped around the suede pouch, and I gulped down a long chug.

“I said small sips,” he growled.

“I’m thirsty, okay? Time travel or whatever the hell just happened takes its toll on a girl.”

The hint of a smile twitched at the corner of his lips. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t vomit all over my shoes again.”

“Sorry,” I murmured around the tip of the kidney-shaped container.

“Finish up so we can go. We must reach Flintguard Fortress before nightfall.”

“Or what? A big bad monster is going to eat us?”

“No, the desert raukids prefer to consume your soul and leave the husk of your body intact for the bralicans to devour. It’s a symbiotic relationship, if you will.”

I was fairly certain my eyes were about to pop out of my head. “You’re screwing with me, right?”

“I do not screw with women. I fuck them well and thoroughly.” A glint of mischief lit up the somber gray of his irises until they smoldered a fiery silver.

I swallowed hard to moisten my once again parched throat.

“Are you quite finished with my waterskin?”

I glanced down at the leathery flask clutched between my fingers. I took another long pull before handing it back to him.

Once he sheathed it beneath his breastplate, he rose and offered me a hand. “It’s time to go, princess.”

I would’ve refused him, but my head still spun, and I wasn’t entirely certain I’d be able to stand without his assistance. Closing my hand around his beastly palm, I gave my wobbly legs a try. He hauled me up before I could get my

feet out from under me, and I stumbled right into that unyielding chest again.

“Oomph,” I muttered, my mouth pressed to the soft leathers.

“Will you be able to walk, or must I carry you?”

“I’m perfectly capable of walking.” Pressing my palms to his rigid torso, I extricated myself from his hold. Bracing my knees, I somehow managed to remain upright. Thank, Mother Terrea. “Who is Mother Terrea?” I blurted.

My sullen companion was already a few steps in front of me, leading us deeper into the wasteland and in the opposite direction of the towering mountain range. At least, our trek would be a flat one.

“And how long exactly do we have to walk?”

“So many questions.” Though I couldn’t see his face as he marched in front of me, I could practically feel the eye roll.

I lengthened my strides in an attempt to catch up with his ridiculously long ones. “At least tell me your name.”

He blew out a breath, and wisps of smoke swirled in the air. What the...? I squeezed my eyes shut, then rubbed them until they hurt. How long had I been awake for? Sleep deprivation, that must be it. It had been almost midnight in Vegas and here, the sun still sat full over the horizon.

“I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“Why not? Are you like a faery king and if I know your real name I’ll have some crazy power over you?”

A full-on laugh tumbled from his lips, shaking his barrel chest. The unexpected warm sound was like a heated caress. It

was so startling my stomach clenched. “Is that the nonsense they teach you in the human world?”

“The human world?” I blurted.

“Yes, princess, the hell hole I just rescued you from.” His eyes lanced into mine.

“Rescued? So you’re like my knight in shining armor? I hate to break it to you, buddy, but you’re about twenty-one years too late. Had I known all of this awaited me,” – I threw my hands into the air, palms up and twirled around dramatically – “I would’ve run away a long time ago, like when I was eleven and Mr. Smith thought it would be fun to use my arm to put out his cigarettes, or at thirteen with Mr. Chandler who got his rocks off by watching me sleep at night.”

Darkness curtained his brilliant eyes, and the clench of his jaw sharpened. A tendon fluttered beneath the scruffy surface but not a single syllable came out.

Mother T, what was wrong with me spilling all my dark secrets to a stranger?

I gritted my teeth and quickened my pace, so I moved a few strides ahead of him. Great plan, Saphira. You have no idea where you’re going. That voice was much too clear this time. I clapped my hands over my ears. Shut up, I shot back.

“I didn’t say anything.” Big, tall, and broody behind me grumbled.

Shift, did I say that out loud?

Shift?

What in all the worlds was happening to me?

“How much longer?” I asked again. The plastic daggers were digging into my thighs, and I was scared if I made one wrong move, I’d impale my precious baby-making organ. Not that I particularly wanted kids, but I’d at least like the option.

“It’s about half a day’s trek to the fortress.”

Well, that sounded foreboding. “And whose fortress is this exactly?”

“The king’s.”

“Of course, it is.” My eyes rolled so far back I was certain only the whites showed. “And why are you taking me there again?”

“To deliver you to the king’s son, your betrothed.”

* * *

If you can’t wait to read Saphira’s story then make sure to pre-order it now! Releases November 14th! [CLICK HERE TO PRE-ORDER](#)

Introduction

Forgotten Kingdoms Series

Eight women.

One sacrifice to save their kingdoms.

A chance to reclaim the love they lost.

Collection notes:

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

Authors in this set include:

Chandelle LaVaun

G.K. DeRosa

Megan Montero

Jen L. Grey

Robin D. Mahle & Elle Madison

LJ Andrews

R.L. Caulder

M. Sinclair

FORGOTTEN KINGDOMS

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE



TERREA

(WORLD NAME)

TER-AY-UH

HAVESTIA

(FESTIVAL WHEN THE VEIL
BETWEEN WORLDS OPENS)

HAV-EST-EE-UH

AELVARIA

EMBER
HADEON

EL-VAHR-EE-YA

EM-BURR
HAY-DEE-ON

DRACONIA

SAPHIRA
RYKER

DRUH-CONE-EE-UH

SA-FEE-RUII
RYE-KURR

ISRAMAYA

RHODELIA
VARAN

IS-RUH-MY-UH

ROW-DELL-YA
VAIR-EN

ISRAMORTA

MORGANA
AVALON

IS-RUH-MORE-TUH

MORE-GONE-UH
AV-UH-LAWN

MAGIARIA

ADIRA
KAGE

MAYJ-AIR-EE-UH

AH-DEER-UH
KAY-J

SEPEAZIA

STELLA
BRANDT

SEH-PEA-ZI-UH

STELL-UH
BRAN-T

TALAMH

ALINA
KIERAN

TAL-OV

AH-LEEN-UH
KEER-AN

VARGR

EVERA

VAR-GURR

FH-VEER-UH

This book goes out to my fellow authors in this series. My FK Buddies. This was one hell of a daunting project but working with y'all and becoming such great friends has made it all the better!

<3

Chandelle

#Feelings

The Coven Reading Order

CHANDELLE LAVAUN'S COVEN SAGA

THE CHOSEN WITCH

THE LOST WITCH

THE BRAVE WITCH

THE REBEL WITCH

THE BROKEN WITCH

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THE AETHER WITCH

THE FIRE WITCH

THE HIDDEN WITCH

THE FALLEN WITCH

THE CITY WITCH

THE WILD WITCH

THE FROZEN WITCH

THE SECRET WITCH

THE UPTOWN WITCH

THE EMPIRE WITCH

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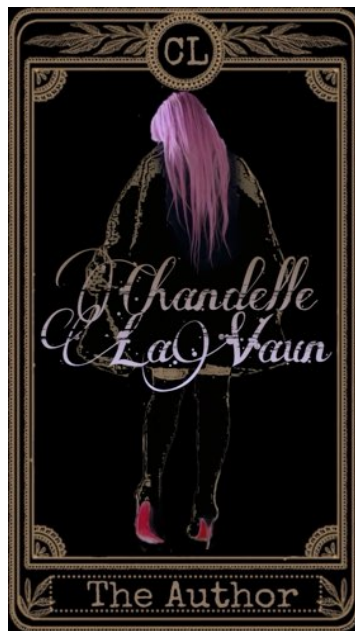
[Fiery Fae](#)

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About the Author

Chandelle was born and raised in South Florida. She is the ultimate fangirl. Her love of Twilight, Harry Potter, and The Mortal Instruments inspired her to write her own books. When she's not writing she's on the beach soaking up the sun with a book in her hand. Her favorite things in life are dogs, pizza, slurpees, and anything that sparkles. She suffers from wanderlust and hopes to travel to every country in the world one day.



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