

G. BAILEY



THE LOST
RUNES

THE

LOST

RUNES


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*FOR WILLIAM. I HOPE YOU NEVER STOP LOOKING UP AT THE
MOON AND PROMISING ME YOU WILL FLY PAST IT ON YOUR WAY TO
THE STARS.*



DESCRIPTION

**Two years at the academy. Four alpha jerks. One badass
thieving assassin stuck in the middle of them all. A
forgotten and deadly curse.**

Daesyn Heartlocke wanted nothing more than to finish her latest assassin-for-hire job, get her boss off her back, and get back to hanging out with her talking monkey.

But when the job goes wrong, Daesyn finds herself being dragged into her father's world of the reapers. The world she ran away from, the world that offers nothing more than darkness.

What's worse? To stay free and, most importantly, alive, Daesyn has to swap places with a student who is due to go to a crazy academy.

Royal Reaper Academy is a two year test, and only one student comes out alive.

If you can make it to the end, you are given the throne of the reapers.

No pressure?

Daesyn has no choice but to win. Luckily for her, surviving is what she does best. Even if the other students are trying to kill her.

Outside the realm of the reapers, another world awaits Daesyn, and it calls home all those who escaped.

But Daesyn can't escape what's in her blood. Or the curse that is destined for her that has just been awoken.

Fans of epic urban fantasy romance will love this four-book series by USA Today Bestselling Author G. Bailey. This is a reverse harem romance meaning the main character will have more than one love interest.

This series is a crossover of the series, A Demon's Fall, but can be read on its own.



LAW

*BY LAW, IN THE NAME OF THE QUEEN OF THE REAPERS AND THE
SEELIE FAE KING,*

ALL UNSEELIE FAE ARE TO BE ENSLAVED.

*THOSE CAUGHT TRYING TO ESCAPE, HELPING UNSEELIE FAE, OR
USING UNSEELIE MAGIC WILL BE KILLED.*

THIS IS THE ROYAL LAW; BREAK IT, AND DEATH WILL FIND YOU.



PROLOGUE

THE OTHERWORLD

*The fae are as cold as a frosty night.
In the twilight, they steal your heart.
In the morning, they tear you apart.
Never trust a fae, my dear.
They will only wreck you and depart.*

“**Y**ou have to go. Now!” My uncle’s fevered voice, littered with panic and fear, shouts from right behind me. I stop singing my song, the one my mum *always* sings to me before I go to sleep, and turn around. He stands in the middle of my small room, his eyes wide with worry as he looks down at me. My uncle is never worried. Mother always said she was the worrier and my uncle was the laid back one. His sweaty hand clamps onto mine as he drags me out of our small house and into the high grass field outside. The straw and grass snag in my pink dress, and stones cut my feet as I run faster, struggling to keep up with him and wanting my shoes. *Why can’t we stop for my shoes?* My uncle suddenly comes to a halt, and I smack into his back, hurting my nose and crying out.

But he doesn’t move to check on me as tears burn my eyes. His whole body shakes.

I peek around him to see the fields in front of us are on fire, an unnatural blue fire that spreads faster than should be possible. Right in the middle is the shadow of a man, and

before I can really see him, my uncle spins around and kneels down in front of me. He leans closer and kisses my forehead.

“Is my mother coming back soon? Are we going to get her now?” I ask in a rush, my heart beating so fast that I can hear it in my ears. “Who is that man? Is that fae magic that you said was banned?”

“Shit, you’re just eight. This isn’t fair!” he breathlessly tells me, placing something cold in the middle of my hand. I look down to see my mother’s necklace, a silver pendant with a purple stone in the centre and a strange symbol on the front of it. “Daesyn, I need you to run into the woods and find the yellow portal. You can’t miss it. I’ve opened it for you, and it will close soon.”

“But—”

“Daesyn, listen to me,” he all but shouts, looking over his shoulder once more as I slip the necklace into the pocket of my dress. The fire is getting closer, and I can feel the heat of it now, making me feel warm in the cold night. His green eyes lock down on me, and he looks so sad. His hands shake as he cups my face once more. “Don’t stop running. Don’t stop training to fight, and *never* trust anyone. Your mother is dead and I will be next, but I *will* make sure you escape here. Don’t ever come back to the Otherworld! Be brave, like we taught you, and kind like your mother.” He cups my cheek, his cold sweaty hand shaking. “Survive, Daesyn, and this is all worth it a thousand times over.”

“No, no, no,” I cry, and he shoves me back, shaking his head and turning around to face a man walking through the fire in the distance.

With one final look over his shoulder, his forest green eyes lock onto me as they turn from green to black. “Run, Daesyn, and remember: Don’t *ever* come back.”

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I take off through the tall grass, pushing it away with my hands as my uncle’s warning repeats in my mind over and over again. The fire nips and flickers at me as I run as fast as I can, wondering if the fire

will get me before I get out of the grass and into the tall trees of the forest I've never been allowed to go into before.

My mother can't be dead. I don't believe my uncle. It's always been my mother, my uncle and me since before I can remember. We have always lived here, alone, with only the fae creatures for company. Mother told me we are safe here, but only if we don't leave the field, and we never did.

Until three days ago when my mother kissed my cheek and promised she would come back for me. *She promised.*

My mother never, *ever* breaks her promises. A small cry catches my ears, and I come to a halt, breathing heavily as I look down at a tiny blue monkey-like creature trapped under a rock. It struggles, wailing as it tries to pull its foot from the rock with no luck. It's big yellow eyes look up at me with so much fear, the flames behind me reflecting in its eyes. I glance back at the fire, only seeing it just above the tall grass and making a quick choice. *I can't leave it. Mum would tell me that all creatures in need are worth saving.* Anyone hopeless needs a little help sometimes. I rush to the rock, digging my fingers into the mud and gasping as I pick the heavy rock up enough for the monkey to pull its silvery grey and blue furry leg out before passing out in the mud. Without waiting, I pick the monkey up, tucking it under my arm and rushing into the forest, my footsteps slapping across the muddy ground. I don't look back as I head towards the yellow light that spins in a circle, sucking in leaves and twigs as it spirals. Every second, it gets smaller, and soon it won't be there at all.

Magic.

Forbidden fae magic.

I've only ever seen my mother use this kind of magic, and she told me I would get powers one day. *One day the Otherworld will grant you a gift, and that gift will be decided on your twenty-first birthday.* My mother's softly spoken promise whispers in my ear like she is right next to me as I get to the shimmering yellow light. On the other side is a beach, the gentle water lapping against the shore, but it's covered with a yellow haze. I look back as blue and yellow fire blasts

into the air, and I hear my uncle scream as the floor shakes under my feet. Terror chokes me as I turn around and do what I was told, jumping head first into the magic and hearing my mum's voice sing to me like she is right here. I fall into another world with only a monkey in my arms and my mother's necklace in my pocket, hearing a song my mum will never sing to me again.

“The fae are cold and dance in delight,

To see them is to love their sight.

Never trust a fae, my dear,

And never trust your heart.

In the presence of a fae, your heart is naught but a part.”



CHAPTER 1

TWELVE YEARS LATER...

I'm going to kill the queen.

With a fae monkey's help... Easy. *Hopefully.*

I watch the half angel, half Protector queen, who stands not too far away from me, much like every single supernatural and human in this room does as well. The beautiful queen has long blue hair and eyes like azure diamonds that cut down anyone who even dares to approach her. I'm pretty certain her large ass tiger, who sits at her side, could eat me with one bite. I'm not sure which is more intimidating, the tiger or the queen.

The room is full of supes of every kind, and the magic in this room is suffocating, pressing against every inch of the magic I use to protect myself. Glamour magic costs a pretty penny, and the glamour I currently have on, which is making me look like one of the invited guests (who "accidentally" got herself thrown off a boat), is slowly waning under the pressure. Dammit, my plans have gone to shit. Typical for me, and now I have to rely on my old favourite, plan B: sheer damn luck. I move around the crowd, careful to dodge anyone who tries to talk to me, and I focus on who else is in the room. Protectors are easy to spot, they stand taller, like they have a stick up their arses. The demon's stand out thanks to their brightly coloured hair or skin, and the witches have a certain glow to them. A few shifters are dotted around, and I spot at least one reaper, which makes me want to get out of here as quickly as possible once my job is done.

Back to my target.

Queen Evelina of the Protectors, demons and frankly the whole damn world, according to her. She is a hero, loved and admired by so many, but unluckily for her, there is one person who isn't a fan.

And that's my boss.

I don't want to kill her, but my boss is the only reason I have air in my lungs, even though I figure he would prefer me dead most days. He found me on the streets, a few days away from starving to death, and saved me. I still remember that day, seeing his ugly ass demon face hovering over me as I clung to a dumpster for warmth. It wasn't my finest moment.

He told me I had potential. And he was damn right.

Thankfully, I'm the best damn thief and assassin that he has now, and that means he can't get rid of me just yet. *Yet.* I clutch the champagne glass tighter in my hand as I wait for the perfect moment to make my play, to do my damn job.

To kill the queen before my glamour fades and everyone figures out I'm not a guest.

Personally, I have nothing against the beautiful queen. If anything, I admire the stories told of her. She had nothing, grew up an orphan on the streets much like me and was a good thief, if rumours are true. At some point, she became an assassin, again like me, and was feared throughout the supe community.

But that's where our stories change. Evelina became a queen, and I am still a lowly assassin who lives in a shitty apartment and has enemies bigger than all the people in this damn demon and Protector city put together. Turns out, killing and stealing from bad guys gets you on the enemies list. *Go figure.* Tonight that is all going to change though. I'm going to be free and rich the second I finish my task, even when it sucks that it has to be me that does this. I glance up at the corner of the room, seeing Mossy, my weird sidekick, taking out the cameras. My sidekick is a monkey. A fae monkey to be exact, and he knows more curse words than a drunken pirate. Being a tiny ass monkey with a big attitude and flipping awesome tech skills has been helpful over the years, but first

and foremost he is my family. At the end of the day, it's been Mossy and me since I came to this world, and we have got each other's backs.

The queen finally leaves the ballroom, and I follow her down the corridor she heads into, making sure my footsteps are silent even in stupid high heels. I softly pull out my sword from the back of my silver dress, and I almost smile when she turns back, her eyes narrowing on me. My glamour fades at the perfect moment, and I almost sigh. It feels like that moment you take your bra off after a long day and wipe off the makeup so you finally feel free. Her gaze flickers to my sword, and in the blink of an eye, she pulls out a glistening purple sword from one of the slits in her gown. The midnight blue dress she has on is stunning, looking like she is wrapped in a million stars. It only makes me hate her more.

I hate her because I have no choice to be here.

This is *her* debt, and I'm paying it by killing her sorry ass. The queen needs to keep her enemies in check.

"Seems we have similar hiding places. These dresses are a bitch to wear but great for hiding shit," I remark, taking a step closer. I've heard the queen is a brilliant fighter, at least back in her day. It's been ten years since the war, and I'm hoping she is a little less quick on her feet now.

Her laugh fills the corridor. "You're going to make my night interesting, aren't you?"

"I'm going to make your night final, Queen Evelina. This isn't personal for me, so I'm sorry," I reply, and before she can talk again, I charge at her. She meets my sword with an expert block, and with incredible strength, she knocks me into the wall. I kick at her feet, and she almost falls but gives me enough time to slam my sword into her arm. She hisses as I cut her, and she hits me with a blast of blue energy. *Wow, the queen plays dirty. I like it.* I hold in a shriek as I fly down the corridor, rolling out into the ballroom, which is soon filled with screams. I shoot to my feet in the circle of people, and a man I recognise as one of the kings steps forward with fury on his face. Damn, I didn't want to fight this many and especially

not them. Thankfully, the demon overlord king isn't here tonight, or I would be dead already. I'm not that fucking stupid. Evelina walks right in front of him, not looking away from my eyes as she speaks.

“Don't even think about helping me. This is the best fight I've had in ages, so back the fuck up, babe.”

Ah shit. She thinks like me.

Evelina runs at me with a crazy smile on her face, and I block each of her moves. Our swords clash against each other with every single hit, and I grit my teeth as her sword catches my shoulder. Sweat creeps down my neck as she cuts my dress, and I make the mistake of stepping back. The air is suddenly knocked out of my lungs after I trip and my back hits the floor. In seconds, her sword is at my neck, and she leans over me. Dammit.

I knew fighting in a dress against a trained assassin queen was going to be the death of me. I blame the dress. *I hate dresses.*

Cocking her head to the side, the cold metal tip presses deeper against my neck, hard enough to make me bleed a tiny bit if she wanted, but she doesn't push it. “Why were you sent here to kill me?”

“Revenge,” I angrily growl. She laughs as she presses the sword further into my neck, catching me slightly, and I start to bleed. Her three kings stand behind her in a line, like a wall she can fall on if she ever needs it. I hate that she has them. She has family. I have a monkey who has deserted me. *Figures.*

“Who sent you?” one of the kings demands. “And, Evie, let her up. She is just a kid.”

“But I'm having fun, and she has to be at least eighteen. That's not a kid, old man,” Queen Evelina says as she pouts, and it pisses me off. I'm twenty, thank you very much. I slam my hand into her sword, knocking it out of her hands, and she jumps back as I crawl to my feet. Panic starts to set in as I realise I can't win against them all without a weapon.

“She smells like a reaper and something I don’t know,” one of the kings states from Evelina’s side.

“Then she belongs to us.” A man steps out of the crowd, and I don’t know him, but I sure as hell recognise my own kind when I see them. Reapers. I might be from fae, but my father sure as shit wasn’t. It took me all of a year to bump into a reaper in this world, and they told me the truth about who I was and something my mother never mentioned. As fucked up as it is, it gives me some connection to this world even when I crave another. I’ve hid from my own kind my entire life after I soon figured out they are crazy, and I have no interest in being in their world for longer than I need to be. I tug a dagger out of my dress and hold it to my own throat, making the man pause.

The packed ballroom goes silent. No one makes a move.

My plan C sucks. But so does life right about now.

Queen Evelina steps closer as silent tears fall down my cheeks. Screw her. Screw the world. All it’s ever done is hurt me, and my boss told me to kill myself if I ever get caught rather than come back empty-handed. He will kill me, and it won’t be pretty. I have to do this. I will get to see my mother and uncle again. I try to make myself, but my hand shakes, and I feel like I can’t breathe. “Whatever is going on, death won’t let you escape it. Someone fucked you over, sending you to kill me when they knew it was impossible. Let me help you. I vow to help you. I vow on my throne to protect you...but don’t do this. You. Are. Worth. More.”

“Why would you do that for me?” I anxiously ask her, wanting to believe her, but it seems too good to be true. She cautiously steps in front of me. Her hand curls around mine on the dagger.

“Because I know desperation when I see it. I know worthlessness. I know because I’ve been there and I’ve got the T-shirt.” She lowers her voice so only I can hear as I keep my eyes on hers. “Don’t let your inner demons win. They will only drag you to Hell, and I promise I will raise you up. Let me help.”

I let go of the dagger, and so quickly I hardly see the movement, she takes it and slams the hilt into the side of my head. I barely get a chance to scream before I pass out.



CHAPTER 2

“W akey, wakey,” Evelina’s voice comes to me, and I blink my eyes open on the chair I’m sat on, and I quickly realise my hands are tied to the chair arms with thick rope that feels like magic. Not a problem, I can escape anything like this easily. I learnt that shit before I was even a teenager. The crunching sound of someone eating makes me sharply turn to the left, my wavy black hair falling around my face from where it escaped the hair grips. The queen has ditched her dress, now in leather pants and a grey T-shirt. She sits on a glass table, eating a bowl of...bacon.

“Did you drug me, or are you really eating bacon right now?” I question, and she just laughs.

“I like you, have I said that?” she replies with a big grin. “The others said we should just kill you, but I think you have guts and spunk. Rare in this world. Plus, I promised to keep you safe.”

“You should kill me. They were right,” I deadpan.

“You don’t mean that, kid,” a reaper I only know from legends states in a low grumble as he storms into the room, the door smacking against the wall behind him. Ah shit. I recognise him from my brief time in *his* world, and the fact he is here is *not* good. This reaper is one of the Cherished Five, the council to the queen of the reapers, and extremely trusted in the reaper city. His dark hair is tied back in a braid that hangs down his back and over his thick black cloak that covers his tux. On the wall, I spot his scythe, the weapon of choice for most reapers, and they also use them to travel. This is so not good. *Where the fuck is Mossy?* “And Queen Evie, for

god's sake, don't eat bacon when we need to ask her some questions."

"You might be Connor's dad's friend and my ear into the reaper world, but you don't get to tell me what to do with my bacon," she warns him, and I think she is deadly serious.

I feel the same way about coffee. I could really use a cup of one right about now. Or five.

"I did warn you. Bacon is the sixth person in our relationship. And I'm certain her love of bacon is above us guys at times," one of the kings jokes, patting the reaper's shoulder as he enters from the other door to the room. This must be Connor, if I'm guessing right from my research. This one has blond hair and a playful smile that confuses me.

Evie only grins at her mate as he comes to her side, kissing her cheek. "Have you asked her anything?"

"Nope, sleepyhead just woke up," she replies, biting into another piece of bacon.

"Then we will begin. What is your name?" the reaper demands as his power surrounds me, smothering me like a blanket of darkness as it tries to figure out a way past my barriers and into my mind. I hate reaper shadow magic. My power instantly reacts, spreading across every inch of my skin in a wave, and the reaper smartly steps back with a confused expression. I cool my powers so I don't blow up the room as he crosses his arms, shocked I managed to ward off his powers so easily.

I only smile. A creepy smile just to fuck with him.

"Why don't you two leave us alone?" Evie asks, sliding off the table, sensing something just happened. "We need a girl to girl talk, as clearly your cock power show isn't working."

"Will you speak to her about where she came from?" the reaper apprehensively asks, still staring at me, and it is getting weird at this point as I can't figure out what he is thinking. His eyes almost look like they see an opportunity. I don't say a word.

“She tried to kill you, Evie,” Connor quietly whispers to Evie, but I hear it. “And we can’t lose you. Neither can the children, and I don’t think you should be alone with her.”

“I will be careful to remember how we met,” she replies, and they kiss as the reaper stares me down before Connor leaves. After a long pause and neither of us breaking eye contact, the reaper walks out of the room, and I finally breathe as I’m left alone with the queen.

“Name?” Evie asks, moving to sit back on her table.

“Daesyn Heartlocke,” I honestly answer, since knowing my name won’t mean anything to her.

“Daesyn, why did you try to kill me? Who paid you?” she asks, picking up another piece of bacon and nibbling on it. “Are you an assassin? Do you work for some group?”

“I can’t answer those questions,” I tell her, and an invisible magical mark on my elbow starts burning even at the thought of telling her.

“Can’t or won’t?” she enquires.

I grit my teeth, feeling the magic pushing against my soul. Against my magic. “Can’t.”

The queen eyes me and clicks her tongue. “Fair enough. I will find out myself either way.” The room is filled with an awkward pause as she no doubt tries to think of a question she can ask me. “You’re a reaper, right?”

“Yes and no,” I answer.

“What is the no?”

“My father was a reaper, and my mother was what reapers hunt, lock up, turn into slaves and never tell a soul about. Don’t you know the answer, Queen Evelina?”

Of course she doesn’t have a clue. The rest of the world has no clue what the reapers hide in their world and why no one is allowed to go there.

“Careful, kid,” Evelina replies around a smirk when it’s clear she has no idea what I’m talking about. So her ear into

the reaper world isn't telling her shit. "I'm on your side, believe it or not. I made my mind up, and I like you. You remind me of myself at your age. Full of questions, lies and anger."

"I'm not like you," I snap, and she only laughs.

"Look, you don't have to tell me anything, Daesyn," she says as she slides off the table and crosses her arms. She walks to the doorway and pauses, looking back. "I don't have any power over the reapers, and I owe them a debt for the war. They helped me and asked for nothing in return. Now they want me to look the other way and let them take you. Give me a reason to say no."

I want to tell her a reason, I really do, but my secrets stick on my tongue like gum on my shoe. "I can't."

"Then good luck. They promised me they won't hurt or kill you," she softly tells me. "And I *will* be checking in on you. When you fuck up, which you will, my door is open as long as you don't have a knife in your hand."

"It's not personal. They have—" I gasp as pain shoots through my core, and I grit my teeth through the pain. The magic bond is so strong, so powerful, I couldn't fight it even if I wanted to. The queen leaves the room as annoying tears fall down my cheeks and I try to pretend I'm not scared.

It's bullshit though. I'm terrified.



CHAPTER 3

It takes me roughly ten minutes—I know from watching the clock on the wall—to escape the magical rope and map out the small room. It's magically protected, a fancy prison in some sense, but it's nothing against my power. The gold painted walls and literal silver floors shine brightly from the glaring sun outside the high-rise building. I walk to the window, staring down at the city of demons and Protectors. Ten high-rise buildings surround the one we are in, the royal house, and outside of that are fields full of houses and streets. The city was once just home to the Protectors, but in the war, it was destroyed and then rebuilt under Queen Evelina's rule. Demons, who once were nothing but the scum of the magic world, are now equals to Protectors. They even marry, have half breed children, and live happy lives in this city.

Good for them.

It's a far cry from the place I was brought up in or the place my mother came from. I remember her stories and songs. The ones she was allowed to tell me as a kid. I remember her telling me about the world outside of our little farm. She told me about how the reaper lands are connected to all over the world, running on the ley lines of the world.

The ley lines are pure magic, the magic the world runs on without realising, and the reapers literally feed off it. I'm sure this whole city lies on one. I could tell if I were closer to the ground and dug my hands into the soil.

I miss my mother's stories, I miss *her*.

I sense his energy, his magic presence, before he steps into the room and moves to stand near the other wall. “Your power is strong, incredible really. Do you want to explain how a kid like you has that kind of power?”

“Not especially,” I mutter.

“I figured as much,” he sourly replies, and I tighten my control on my magic as he walks across the room and stops at my side. “My name is Alun Riverlite, and I am here to help you.”

“You’re a leader. One of the Reaper Clan leaders called the Cherished Five, who work directly with the queen of the reapers,” I say, knowing I’m right without him needing to tell me. I was warned about these reapers, the most powerful of my kind and the most evil. They look kind, almost normal, but what they do in their cities, who they enslave and feed off, means their souls are as dead as my parents.”

“I was, but not anymore,” he replies, and that makes me pause. “I chose my mate and my children instead of my clan leadership. These days, I travel the world making alliances for the reapers and caring for my family. I never expected to see someone like you, here of all places.”

“A runaway, you mean?” I enquire, but he keeps his face blank.

“Who did you run away from?” he asks instead of answering.

“Everyone,” I reply somewhat truthfully. “And what I found was worse. Salt looks like sugar to a kid. And I was a hungry kid who would take whatever I could.”

“Tell me your story. I vow to help you, Daesyn,” he tells me, and I arch an eyebrow. What does he want? “In exchange for a favour. I could give you a new identity, a new life in the Reaper Realm. We could make a deal that works for us both, and no one would ever have to know you are still alive.”

“So you *have* researched my family name already, it seems,” I reply with a cold laugh.

“Yes.” He pauses, and I finally look at his face in the glass reflection. Sadness and pity reflect in his eyes, and I almost, *almost*, want to ask for his help.

But I won't do that. I look after myself. I don't let anyone else in but a certain monkey. “The Heartlocke family ran the Heartlocke clan for thousands of years, until just under nineteen years ago. They were all murdered, all of them, by an unknown. Did you survive? How old are you? Who was your mother?”

“My mother and I survived. We lived with humans for a long time. Are you happy now?” I lie. I can't tell him who my mother was or where I actually lived for all those years. If I do, he might just kill me now and feed on my power.

“Who was your father?” he asks me. “I know there were two adult sons. I am guessing Kriffin Heartlocke just purely because the other son was said to be a recluse.”

“Just because you guessed my father, doesn't mean you get to ask me for more answers,” I snap.

“Fair enough. I cannot expect you to trust me this early on,” he replies. “For now, you will return with me. I have a small house and land outside the city where no one would see you, and I will explain the deal we will make at the house with my mate and daughters present. And a guest.”

“I'm not going with you,” I tell him. “And if you try to make me, I will kill you and escape.”

“You tried to kill the Queen of the Protectors and demons. Publicly,” he reminds me of my failed attempt. “Evie is a beloved queen, and half the city, if not all of it, are calling for your head. You cannot leave here unless you come with me, and this world will not be safe for you.”

“I can look after myself,” I growl.

“It's clear you can,” he muses, agreeing with a calculating look in his eyes. “But being away from your kind is a punishment worse than death. Your powers are incredible, but I sense you are not using even an inch of your true abilities. The way your power attacks everyone near you tells me you

don't have control, and one day you will lose what power you have if you do not use it regularly and train. With what I have planned, you will have a chance to learn your powers as you train. With my plan, you will be free and safe in the Reaper Realm for the rest of your life."

For a second, I smile, thinking about going to the reaper world and being a normal person for a moment. Then my boss's face flashes into my mind, reminding me that it's not possible.

I'm never going to be normal. I'm never going to be free. Before Alun can say another word, I slam enough energy into his chest to knock out an elephant, and he goes flying through the glass, smashing it into pieces as my magic takes out the magical barrier at the same time. Well, that worked *much* better than I thought. My power flickers around my skin, looking like a purple shadow of energy that is out of control.

He was right about that. And in some ways, it is. But I *like* being out of control.

I walk to the edge of the building just as a small monkey lands on my shoulder, curling his tail around my neck, and I turn my head to glare at him. My magic never hurts Mossy, and I don't know exactly why, but I'm glad of it.

"I could have used some help back there," I point out.

Mossy grins. "I was busy. They have good food here. Did you see?"

"You're such an asshole for a monkey, you know that?"

"You're going to make me cry. A tiny, cute monkey like myself crying would be so horrible," he overdramatically replies as the door slams open behind us.

"You're an asshole, and you only cry when you watch *Game of Thrones* because you love the dragons," I mutter as the room fills with people. "Spoiler alert—"

"Not fair, you know my weakness," he whines, cutting me off.

“Did you just throw him out of the window?” Evie asks around a laugh from close by. I step forward to the gap in the window, calculating how much this is going to hurt when I jump as the wind blows my waist-length black hair around my shoulders. “And where did you get a monkey from? And why is he blue?”

“Don’t worry, reapers can use shadows to catch themselves,” Connor replies with a wave of his hand as I glance back.

Yes, but it still hurts like a bitch to land in a shadow.

“She is as crazy as you,” another man replies in astonishment, like his mate is the only crazy woman in the world.

I don’t listen for a moment longer, and I jump, the wind catching my breath as I slide down the glass, the scraping noise of my dress against the glass hurting my ears as I head for the greenhouse at the bottom of the building. I reach my hands out, changing power into them and getting ready to make a ball of shadow magic to land on just as someone catches me, knocking the air out of my lungs with the force as we stumble to a stop in the middle of the sky.

I gasp as I take in what caught me. A man, no, not a man exactly. He looks like an over-six-foot dark god sent here to seduce every woman in his path. I would guess he is an angel because of the bright golden wings stretched out behind him that seem like they are made of gold dust shaped into tiny feathers to make brilliant large wings. They are so enchanting it is hard to look away to see the rest of him. He has beautiful light blond hair that is braided back at the sides, and it really suits his face. I thought angel wings were white, at least the angels I have seen before. *What is this dude?* He slowly flies us down, his wings just make me want to reach out to touch them.

He is ridiculously hot. Dimples and all. His eyes meet mine, and I just stare. His eyes are the colour of honey. A pretty hazel colour that has so many different depths that it makes him quite pretty. But I quickly read him as a demanding

asshole type, and I love those kind of men. The kind of men that can rock your world in the bedroom and almost break your heart in the morning, but in the end, you wouldn't care because it would be worth it for that one night of pleasure. If he wasn't a supe, he might be a good one-night stand I'd never call again. Supes are too possessive, and they ask too many questions.

"Let me go," I demand, pushing against his hard chest, but it's like fighting a rock. Poor Mossy is clinging to my back like a...well, literal monkey, and the man's hands are holding my waist so tightly that it almost hurts.

"That is a funny way to say thank you," the angel replies with a smirk, his deep sexy accent unfamiliar to me. But honestly? I have no idea where angels are from; I didn't know they still existed until now, so maybe this is normal for them. "But fine. Your wish is my command, Daesyn Heartlocke."

I scream as he literally drops me, his smirk staying in my mind as I plunge into freezing cold water within seconds. I barely noticed we moved closer to the ground or near a pool for that matter. I gasp, sucking in cold water as I swim to the surface, the damn dress making it hard to move my legs quickly.

If this dress drowns me, I'm becoming a ghost and haunting all dresses for the rest of time. Eventually I break the surface of the pool, the dress feeling heavy with all the water it has soaked up as I suck in deep breaths of cold air.

"The angel man is a fucker. Angel fucker is his name forever now," Mossy shrieks as he climbs onto my neck, coughing out water. Mossy hates water.

"Serves you right for abandoning me for food earlier," I breathlessly mutter to him. "But I agree with the name."

As I look at the angel dude at the edge of the pool, Alun walks to his side. Both of them look like night and day. Talk about being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

I'm in so much trouble.



CHAPTER 4

“Do you need a hand?” Alun softly asks, trying not to smile but majorly failing as he stares down at me. The angel asshole isn’t holding back, he can’t help but laugh as I climb out of the pool on my own. Which, in a soaking wet dress, is not as easy as it sounds.

Nor remotely graceful.

Who am I kidding? I’ve *never* been graceful.

“Who the fuck are you?!” I demand, glaring at the angel. His wings disappear into gold smoke that the wind blows away, and I just stare. His magic feels different and strong. Addictive. *What the hell is he?*

He steps closer, crossing his thick arms against his chest. “Torfinn White.”

“Torfinn, I think it is best you accompany us to my house instead of travelling back alone. Daesyn might try to jump off another high building,” Alun asks him, like I’m not even here. “Or she might do something reckless. I’m inclined to believe she is wild.”

“As you wish, my friend,” Torfinn replies, never taking his eyes off me. Like a dusty storm in a desert, his eyes force me not to look away. He is challenging me, daring me to say something.

“Angel fucker,” Mossy randomly mutters in disgust, and Torfinn narrows his eyes at me.

“What did you just call me?”

“You heard,” I snap, just begging him to start a fight even when it wasn’t me who said a word. I’m so done with today and this soaking wet dress.

“That’s enough,” Alun demands, and we both look at him as he holds his hand in the air. A scythe, the one from earlier, appears in his grasp from nothing but shadows. “Daesyn, can you travel through shadows?”

“No,” I truthfully answer, feeling Torfinn’s eyes on me. Alun nods at Torfinn. “Well, I did it once as a kid, but it was driven by fear.”

Alun smacks the end of his scythe on the stone ground, and a black shadow wall appears out of nowhere.

“If you want a new life and a chance at staying alive, I would suggest following me. I will understand if you do not, but the offer will not come again,” Alun tells me before he walks through the darkness and never looks back, his body disappearing into shadows.

Silence fills the space around me and Torfinn, and I stare at the shadows. My uncle told me never to come back to the Otherworld, but the Reaper Realm he never once mentioned. Maybe I would be safer there, and it sure beats dying here. I highly doubt my boss could get into the Reaper Realm...so I might actually be free.

“What would you do in my shoes?” I ask the not-so-angel.

He looks down at me, his next words rocking me to my core. “The question you should ask yourself is if you wish to live. I suspect you know the answer, and you do not need me to give it to you.”

I nod and take a deep breath. Fuck it. *An adventure in sucky Reaper-ville, it is then.*

“You must hold my hand then,” Torfinn explains, reading my expression like he has known my decision a lot longer than he actually has. He offers me his outstretched hand. “I will guide you through the shadows, and I will not let you go.”

Talk about trusting a stranger.

I glance at Mossy, who nods once, though I can feel his nerves just like my own. “Fine,” I reply and take Torfinn’s hand. A strange warm feeling shoots through my hand, like an electric shock, but it’s gone so quickly I assume it’s just the nerves. Torfinn guides me into the darkness, and it smothers me the second I am inside of it.

Walking through the shadows is something I have always feared. To be lost in it is said to be a fate worse than death.

And here I am, trusting an angel and a reaper to guide me in the shadows.

Torfinn’s hand never leaves mine, gently coaxing me through the darkness until we tumble into a field of flowers, and my monkey passes out on my shoulder. Fae magic and reaper magic are a bad mix, and poor Mossy can’t deal with it. I pick him off my shoulder, holding him in my arms as I look up at the sky. The eternal night of the Reaper Realm. It is dark, like I heard it always is here, and I stare up at the stars above my head for a moment. The stars here are like nothing I have ever seen, even in the Otherworld or on Earth. The stars make patterns, looking like someone actually painted the sky with stars to make these images. They say the stars above in the Eternal Night are actually the homes of the gods.

Who knows if that is true, though.

“Welcome to Messorum, the city of reapers,” Torfinn states as I let go of his hand, tugging mine harshly to my side like it burns. Messorum, Latin for reapers, is a place of nightmares for me. The city of the reapers looks so beautiful in the distance, and I can see it all from the hill we are on. Tall buildings made of pure white stone smother the outskirts of the city, and magic shimmers between each building, making a barrier around the whole city. At the back of the city is a large cliff, and right at the top is a portal that is always open, a portal to the Otherworld. It’s said to be the only one in the reaper world, but I know that is a lie. I know exactly where there is a smaller portal. The portal here is the size of five houses at least and as tall as a tree. The yellow magic shimmers in the night, a stark reminder of the portal I dropped through when I left the Otherworld. At the front of the city are

two massive white statues of cloaked beings holding scythes that meet in the middle to make an X shape. Above where the *x* is, is the only light other than the stars in this place. A giant sphere spins constantly, filled with enough magic to end all the living beings on Earth and turn everything to dust.

And it's not reaper magic in that thing. I grit my teeth with anger and pull my eyes from the city.

"Why does the city make you angry, Daesyn?" Alun asks me, running his eyes over my face. "Are you not happy to be back in a place your parents were from?"

"I am angry because it was made with blood and stolen magic," I bluntly answer. Alun's eyebrows bunch together, and Torfinn stares down at me. "You could never understand as you are part of the lie. I'm freezing, where is your house?"

No one answers me for a long time, even as snow starts to fall from the sky, marking my bare skin and drenching my dress.

"This way," Alun finally answers. Feeling Torfinn's eyes on my back, I follow Alun over the hill of glowing white moonflowers and down a bridge to a house hidden by the hills around it. The house is small, almost Earth-like with its brick walls and white-framed glass windows. It can't be more than two or three bedrooms at most. At the side of the house is a stable with a row of stalls facing out, and I can hear the clip-clop of horseshoes on the stone floors. Alun places his hand on the door and pushes it open.

"I'm home and we have two guests!" Alun shouts through the house as I step inside the small entrance hall, which only feels more cramped as Torfinn steps in after me, shutting the door. It's warm in here, and it smells like roast dinners and coffee. I already like it.

"I thought it was only—" An older woman stops mid-sentence in the middle of the stairs right in front of us as she sees us all. The woman has an apron on over a simple grey dress, and her black hair is pulled up into a messy bun. Her eyes are kind as they fall on me, and she smiles softly before looking to Torfinn.

Now, her eyes look fearful for a moment before she finishes her descent down the stairs. She hugs Alun, and he kisses the top of her head. “I think introductions are in order?”

“This is Daesyn Heartlocke, and you know Torfinn from my stories,” Alun comments and then looks at me. “This is my mate, Velia.”

Velia looks a little confused, but she hides it well. “I’m glad to meet you both. I’m afraid my twin daughters are out with the horses, but they will be back within a few hours. The only issue is we have one spare room and only one spare bed.”

“I will take a sofa, and Daesyn may have the bed,” Torfinn suggests, and I glare at him.

“Considering I’m an unexpected guest, I should take the sofa. I don’t want any favours from you,” I growl.

Torfinn smirks. A dangerous smirk. “Take the bed. It’s not a favour.”

“It is,” I snap.

“Is there food?” Mossy wakes up, grumbling. Everyone’s eyes, including mine, fall on the monkey in my arms.

“What is that?” Alun asks, frowning at it. “And how does it talk?”

“This is Mossy,” I say. I’m not telling them he is fae kind. Not considering what they do to fae here.

“How about I take you to your room, Daesyn,” Velia kindly suggests, not thrown at all by the talking monkey. “And then I will start dinner.”

As Velia makes her way to the stairs, Torfinn leaves through one of the doors.

“I want to know why you have me here first. What do you want, Alun?” I question. Velia pauses on the stairs, looking back between us.

“If you don’t leave, you will find out” is Alun’s only answer before he walks through the same door Torfinn left out of. Velia smiles softly at me and nods her head up the stairs.

Knowing I don't have a choice and I could really use a shower, and new clothes, I follow her up.

“Why did you look at Torfinn in fear?” I ask Velia when we get to the top of the stairs. She looks back at me.

“I was taught as a child to fear the gods, and you should too,” she quietly answers. “It's not often a demi-god is sent to our world.”



CHAPTER 5

Combing my damp black hair, I leave it down as I go back into the bedroom Velia led me to, shivering from the coldness of the corridor and missing the steamy bathroom. The bedroom Velia has given me is a small box room with a single bed, a square white-panelled window looking over the back of the house, and a small cabinet under the window with four empty drawers. Resting on the cabinet is a pile of dark clothes and even some worn-down boots. I pull the long-sleeved black top on over my bra, enjoying the soft fabric, and slide into the tight black trousers that were clearly made for a taller person than I am. I roll the bottoms of the trousers up to my ankles before sliding on the socks and boots, which again are a little big, but it's liveable. I've sure as hell lived in worse clothing than this.

"When are we leaving, short stuff?" Mossy asks me, jumping onto the bed from the window. The blue and silver monkey looks right at home on the white sheets of the bed, and I hope I can be as relaxed as him at some point. I'm still not sure this whole house and offer isn't a trap.

I groan. "Drop the nickname, Moss, and we aren't leaving until I find out what they want. That failed job means boss man will kill my ass if we go back to Earth."

"I *told* you taking that job was going to get us in trouble," Mossy singsongs. I roll my eyes at him and walk to the window, crossing my arms and looking out over the hills and forests in the distance.

"There wasn't a choice," I gently remind him. "And you know this. Now go and figure out a way to escape this place if

I need it, and don't disappear this time because you find food!"

"Grumpy short stuff," Mossy mutters with a little snicker. He opens the window and slides outside. The cold breeze instantly fills the room, and I close the window shut behind him. He has a fur coat on after all.

"Daesyn! Dinner is ready for everyone!" Alun's voice fills the house like a damn echo. With the thin walls and creaky floors, I bet no one got away with anything in this house. Leaving the bedroom, I head out into the empty corridor. There are three other doors, one of which I know goes to the Jack and Jill bathroom I used, and I'm guessing they are bedrooms. I hear light chatter as I make my way down the stairs and follow the noise through the left door. The kitchen and dining room are one room, with the kitchen cabinets taking up all the walls and a six-seater table in the middle of it. The table has candle tealights floating in water inside the jars, giving the room a little more light in this always-night place.

Everyone is already seated, including the new people who I don't know, but since they look half fearful and half amazed, I'm sure they have been updated on who I am. Two women, I would guess near the same age as I am, sit on one side together. Their features are similar, both of them are pretty in a classical way, and they both have long black hair in matching braids. One of them has brown eyes and the other has vivid green eyes. I take the seat next to Torfinn, who watches me like a wolf watches his prey. I resist the urge to wink at him and wind him up further. Alun sits at the head of the table, and Velia on the other side opposite him.

And no one talks even as a Buttery sprite appears over the cooker. I stare at the tiny little fae creature in shock, with a distant memory snapping into my head of my mother and uncle in the kitchen. Buttery sprite used to love to help my mother cook dinner, and she loved them dearly, even making little cloaks for them to wear. The Buttery sprite has yellow skin and looks like a doll, but she is no bigger than my hand. Her long yellow hair is pure glitter and is wrapped around her body, and her green wings flicker so fast they almost don't

seem to be there. I glance around, expecting Alun or Velia to be disgusted by the fae creature in their house, but that doesn't happen.

Velia smiles at the Buttery sprite. "Thank you for your help. You best hide now, Caliphe." Caliphe looks over at me, her little eyes going wide, and I softly shake my head, hoping she gets it. When she disappears in a puff of yellow glitter, I finally let out the breath I was holding. *That was too close.* Velia gets up and brings over two hot pots with something nice smelling inside, most likely chicken stew if my nose is right. Alun grabs plates of bread, and once they have placed them in the middle of the table between the candles, I can't take the silence anymore.

"Who are you two then?" I question, waving a hand at the twins.

The one on the left with the green eyes gives me a funny look before lifting her head in an "I'm so much better than you" sort of way. "My name is Laelia, and this is my sister, Persephone."

"Call me Poppy," the other sister cuts in, smiling at me. Ah, she is the less bitchy twin.

"Right," I draw out the word and turn my gaze to Alun. "What do you want?"

He clears his throat, moving his eyes from me to Laelia. Poppy looks down at her empty plate like it could swallow her up while Laelia seems delighted in a petty way that bitchy girls always are. "Have you heard of Royal Reaper Academy, Daesyn?"

"No," I reply, crossing my arms and leaning back in my seat. Sounds like a shitty pompous school for rich kids.

"May I explain?" Torfinn asks, and Alun nods. The angel fucker turns his eyes on me, and even though he is enchanting to look at, I make sure not to give him eye contact as he speaks, in case he sees right through me. "The Royal Reaper Academy is only ever open to new students once every one thousand years. The academy is a test, a two-year evaluation

of all of its students to look for a new queen or king to rule. Only one student makes it to the end of the academy, all other students will have either died or been injured enough to be taken out.”

“Sounds brutal,” I say with wide eyes. I knew the reapers were a fucked up race, but this shit takes the cake. “Who the fuck would go to that academy?”

“You,” Alun bluntly answers, and I cough on thin air before laughing.

“Very funny,” I laugh, but when I look around and see no one else is laughing, a nervous feeling enters my stomach. “Are you actually not fucking around with me?”

“We are not fucking around,” Alun mimics me, while Torfinn looks highly amused. “The one hundred students, aged between nineteen and twenty-one, for Royal Reaper Academy are randomly chosen by the current queen. My twin daughters were both picked.”

“And how is that my problem?” I ask, even though I’m starting to get an idea of where this conversation is headed.

“Laelia is not gifted in fighting or in her powers. I am certain she would die instantly at the academy, and I will not let my firstborn die in there. I cannot simply take her away, as Poppy and our entire family would be killed if found,” Alun firmly states. “I want you to take Laelia’s place and protect Poppy in the academy. Within the first year, Poppy and I have a plan to make it seem like she cannot fight, and she will be excused. Then you will get yourself excused, however you wish, and take my daughter’s identity. Laelia is going to live on Earth, and you will be free.”

I glance between Poppy and Laelia. I don’t believe for one second either of these two have a clue how to fight or that they are very good with their powers. They would both be dead from the get-go at the academy, and I’m sure their parents know it. They just picked their favourite to save.

I sigh. “This is insane. They would know I’m not her twin sister.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Alun counters. “No one has ever met my daughters, and you look alike enough to pass. Same dark hair and height. Twins don’t always look similar, and you can put your unusual eye colour down to distant Seelie fae blood in our line. Purple eyes like yours are a marker in our world of mixed fae blood, and it is not strange per se. Many fae and reapers mated in the times before the war, and that blood has trickled down. They will judge and hate you for the colour, but I assume that is where it came from in the first place.”

It’s not, but fuck am I admitting to that right now.

When Alun seems to realise I’m not going to confirm anything, he then adds, “You must not use fae magic, for it is banned.”

The room falls into silence as they all look at me, still waiting for an answer. I’m surprised it’s Velia who speaks first. “If you had stayed in this world, grown up in it, I have no doubt your name would have been picked for the academy. Your grandfather went to the academy, and heirs are always chosen.”

“He didn’t win, though, did he?” I question, and she shakes her head.

“He was one of the five who were excused,” she answers.

Five in one hundred does not sound like good odds.

“Don’t you want to search for more about who you are? The academy trains you with extreme tests that are designed to bring out your true nature,” Alun suggests. “It is the only way for you to be free.”

“I know who I am and what I want. Both of which don’t include being murdered for a throne,” I growl.

Torfinn laughs. “You don’t have a clue about yourself or anything, Dae.”

“I’m not doing this,” I snap, pushing out of the chair, and Torfinn’s hand clamps down on my arm.

“If you don’t, Queen Evie has asked me to bring you back to her world. You will be locked up for your own safety as

Evie does not want you killed...or herself to be killed,” he warns me, giving me a pointed look. “And then whoever is after you will find a way to kill you in that prison; we are both aware of that. Evie’s protection only stretches so far, and she is not all-seeing. Do you want that?”

Gritting my teeth, I pull my arm from his grip. I slide back into the seat, crossing my arms and letting out a long breath. Death at the academy where I would stand a chance, or death by my boss who sucks people’s souls from their bodies for fun?

It really isn’t a hard choice. “I’m good at killing, and this academy sounds like they are cool with that. I’m in.”

Alun seems to sag in relief, while Laelia just looks too fucking happy. “I don’t have to tell everyone my name is fucking Laelia, do I? It sounds like a virus of some kind.”

Poppy bursts into laughter with Torfinn, while Laelia looks like she wants to murder me. Fair enough, most people look at me that way. “No and yes. You can tell people your middle name is Daesyn and you prefer to be called it. When anyone questions it, you can comment on how mistakes in paperwork must have been made.”

“Thank fuck,” I mutter and pick up my fork. “Now I’m hungry, let’s eat.”

“Did someone say food?” Mossy asks from above me, and I look up as he swings off the light shade and lands on my shoulder. “Murder and food. This is an interesting fucking night.”

“Your monkey speaks mostly foul language,” Alun points out in disgust.

I proudly grin. “He gets it from me.”



CHAPTER 6

“Hey, I brought you an extra blanket. It gets cold in here,” Poppy utters, standing in the open doorway to my box room and looking very nervous as she bites on her bottom lip. I sit up in bed, looking over her from head to toe. Poppy’s round-shaped face and heart-shaped lips make her look like a doll, and her big brown eyes don’t help matters. Her black hair is naturally straighter than mine could ever get, and it stops just over her shoulders. She has a light yellow dress on with a sweetheart neckline. I don’t see much defined muscle, and she doesn’t hold herself in the way a trained fighter naturally does.

“Can you fight, or was what your dad said just pure bullshit?” I question. Her cheeks go red, and I know my answer.

“My magic is strong, and I’m a quick learner,” she defends herself as she steps into the room and places the folded pink blanket at the end of my bed. “I won’t let you down.”

She goes to walk out, and that tiny part of me that has a conscience wakes up. “I will try to keep you alive and teach you what I can. It won’t be easy, and you might hate me by the end.”

She turns back, her eyes widening, and what I think is joy shines in them. Just ugh. “Thank you! My dad said you were the best fighter he has seen in years. Almost as good as the Protector queen.”

“She did beat me though,” I add in, even though it pisses me off. It was that damn dress’s fault.

Poppy shrugs. "I still can't wait for you to teach me. See you in the morning, Daesyn. You might want to sleep, it will be a long ride to the city."

"Riding what?" I question.

"What do you think is in the stable?" she says with a small smile.

"No one said anything about horses!" I shout at her back, hearing her laugh as she shuts the door behind her. I collapse back on the bed, stretching my arms out and staring at the white ceiling.

"I think you made a friend," Mossy says, pushing the window open and coming in. He jumps on the bed and lies his head on the pillow, pulling the blanket up to his shoulders. "Are we leaving that lot now or in the morning? I need a nap."

"We are leaving for Royal Reaper Academy in the morning," I answer his question. His bright eyes stare up at me.

"You can't go. They don't know what you are," Mossy whispers but almost hisses.

"Maybe that's a good thing," I shrug. "It beats going back to the Protector city and being killed outright."

"Demon shitface did say he would cook me if you failed," Mossy agrees around a yawn. "I will help you keep Poppy alive and watch your back."

"What would I do without you?" I question with a small smile as Mossy drifts off to sleep. I tuck the blanket in around him, brushing a finger down his small arm. Mossy is all I have that reminds me of home now. The necklace I had when I fell into this world was lost to the sea I fell into, and I was lucky to be washed up alive on the shore at all. I wish I had it with me; that small necklace was a connection to my mother. Pushing back the dire feeling of being lost, I climb onto the cabinet and out of the window onto the roof. The cold air blows my hair around me as I jump off the roof, making sure to call shadows to make steps to land on. I jump off two shadows before hitting the ground and sucking back in the power I let out.

“Impressive,” a male voice states. I freeze, turning around to face the fields behind the house and the guy standing in front of them.

Every inch of him looks like danger wrapped up in sexy packaging.

Thick black locks of hair cover his head and match his dark blue eyes. Even though we are a little distance away, the starlight shines down on his sharp jawline and high cheekbones. His face is picture-perfect, right down to the kissable lips that hold an amused smile. Standing at least six foot, he looks like a model and a reaper had a kid and it grew up to be him. Magic and a perfect body. Deadly combination.

“Who are you?” I question, taking a step forward towards the stranger.

He mimics my step forward. “A secret. Our secret.”

“Interesting name,” I tease the stranger. “But we are nothing to each other. We have never met before. Have we?”

“Have you heard of the song called ‘The Curse of the Fae’?” the guy asks, tilting his head to the side. “Did your mother sing you the song as a child?”

My heart pounds in my chest. Something about him makes me nervous and excited all at the same time. I don’t like it. “My mother sang many songs to me about the fae.”

“We will see each other soon, Daesyn,” he chuckles, turning away. “I have a feeling we are heading to the same place.”

“How did you know my mother sang me songs?” I call out to his back. He looks back, and his eyes glow an unnatural red.

“All fae sing to their young.”

I stumble back as he disappears into red smoke, leaving nothing of him at all, not a trace of magic that I can sense anyway. Snow starts to fall as I stare at the space the guy was in, a sinking feeling I’m going to have to stab him to find out what he knows. Oh well.

“Daesyn, why are you outside?” Alun asks, and I turn around to see him at the door, searching the space around me.

“It’s snowing. I wanted to see it once more before I went to sleep,” I explain, and he nods with suspicious eyes, leaving me to it.

I’m the suspicious assassin who loves snow and seductive, wild boys with dark secrets whispered from their lips.



CHAPTER 7

“What do we sing when the Evertree grows, Daesyn?” my mum asks, her soft voice making me feel sleepy as I lie down on the slightly damp grass. The Evertree is right above us, the only tree within the border of our land. The brown branches hang low, the wind moves them softly and gently, and the yellow leaves fall off in the wind. I used to get sad that all the leaves turn from a brilliant green to a faded yellow as they die, but now I know the leaves will always come back. Nothing dies forever in the Otherworld Forest.

“That the Otherworld is watching and waiting,” I reply around a yawn. My mum chuckles and runs her fingers through my hair.

“You are growing up so quickly, Daesyn. I feel like I have blinked and you have grown from a newborn to a child,” she tells me. I roll over to face her, looking at my mum’s big tanzanite eyes. They are the same as mine, and my uncle says we’d look like twins if it weren’t for my mum’s red hair.

“Mum...why can’t we leave here? What is outside here?”

Her features tighten, and she closes her eyes for a moment. When she opens them, she parts her mouth to say something, but she pauses. Her eyes flicker over me. “Do you remember the fairy tale I sing to you every week on a Sunday?”

“The one with the fae and the curse?” I ask, feeling confused.

“Yes,” she answers and pulls me in for an embrace. As she kisses the top of my head, she whispers ever so softly. “Fairy

tales are real sometimes, Daesyn, and sometimes the evil in them is worse than a song could ever really describe. Remember my songs, my sweet girl, they will guide you in the Otherworld."

I SHOOT UP IN BED, my hands gripping the sheets tightly as the dream of my mum disappears, like most of my memories of her. I feel like every time I try to remember her songs, remember her, the memory is impossible to catch, like oil in water. I can't remember the fairy tale she used to sing to me or what she smelt like or even how she really looked. It's all a distant blur, something my mind just can't quite latch onto anymore. That damn guy in the fields has left my head full of questions and out of focus, which is something I can't afford to have happen right now.

I have an academy to head to. An academy where what's in my blood has to stay a secret and I have to keep my ass alive. Looking at the window, I expect to see sunlight, but then it hits me where I am. There is never sunlight, only darkness, only moon and stars for light. I flick on the lamp Poppy brought into the room for me last night and sit up in bed, rubbing my face.

"I have a present for you!" Mossy announces, climbing in from the window and kicking it shut behind him. A smile graces my lips when I look at Mossy, seeing a shiny dagger in his hands.

"Have I ever told you how much I love you?" I enquire as I take the dagger and hold it under the light.

"You only say that when I bring you things to stab other people with," Mossy replies. "You're a very strange person, did you know that?"

"Everyone wants to stab someone, Mossy, but most people can't get away with it like I can," I answer with a grin. He snickers in his monkey way as I admire my new dagger. The hilt is made with shiny silver metal wrapped in thick leather, and the metal itself has a brilliant balance to it. Down the blade are markings, strange ones that I have never seen before.

The markings remind me of Old Latin, but it's not like any Latin I have ever seen. They almost look like Protector runes...but why would they be on a dagger?

Either way, I'm keeping it. I get dressed and hide the dagger on my back, using my bra to hold it up. It's not a classy way to hide it, but it damn well works. I just have to be careful not to cut my bra open when I get it out. I don't want to repeat what happened that one time in Scotland. I shudder and push the door open as Mossy jumps on my shoulder.

"Hear anything juicy on your travels?" I ask Mossy as we head down the stairs.

He snickers again. "That Laelia girl tried to hit on the angel fucker. It was funny when he said no."

I snort and stop when I look down the stairs to see Torfinn at the bottom of them, his arms crossed tightly across his chest and looking all sexy alpha with his cold gaze.

"Will you tell your monkey to stop calling me angel fucker?" Torfinn demands—his deep voice is nice in the morning. It's almost better than coffee.

Almost.

Mossy answers. "Sure. Done. Angel fucker."

Torfinn looks one step away from murdering my monkey as I step around him, holding in my laugh, but Mossy is snickering away nonetheless. I might need to have a discussion with him about not pissing off a demi-god with untold power. I smell the coffee like a siren smells desperate men on a ship. It lures me deep into the kitchen where Laelia is pouring herself a big cup of coffee. I walk over and grab the cup the second she stops filling it.

"What the hell! Give it back!" she demands.

"How very kind of you to make me a coffee on the morning I'm going to risk my life pretending to be you," I sarcastically reply. If steam could come out of her ears, it would be right now. I smirk and move to the table, sitting down in the seat I was in last night. I take a long sip of the

coffee, not giving a shit if it burns a little on the way down my throat.

“Oh yeah, this is good stuff,” I mumble as Poppy and Alun come into the room, followed by Velia, who looks like she hasn’t slept a wink. Poppy looks pale as fuck, and Alun just seems stressed. I guess this is what a normal family looks like when they are about to send one of their kids to a death academy.

“We must be leaving. The academy suggests no one eats before going through the gate,” Alun announces.

“Why?” I question, sipping on my drink. “And what is the gate?”

“The gate to the academy is made of pure original magic. It’s the oldest part of the city, and it marks everyone who enters through it,” Alun explains. “It also tests your magic, gives the academy teachers a fair judgment on you.”

“That’s not a great idea,” I mutter, knowing this is going to go wrong. “In fact, a magical test on me is a *very* bad fucking idea.”

“Language,” Alun scolds and sighs after. “I don’t know what your secrets are, Daesyn, but I’m sure nothing within you will damage a four-thousand-year-old magical gateway.”

I try not to snort.

“Now the ridiculous parts of the morning are over, can we get moving?” Torfinn asks, and I turn my eyes to see him leaning against the doorway. “I do not want to be late.”

“Of course,” Velia is quick to mumble, and I go to take one more sip of my coffee when she snatches the mug from my hands and then starts shooing us all outside the back door. I glance up at Mossy, who is observing everything around us as we head to the stable. I follow them all in to see six black horses. They are huge, towering over me as I look up at the first one. Its long black mane is plaited in several places, and its eyes seem even darker than its black fur.

“This is my horse and the one you will be riding,” Laelia tells me, moving to my side.

“What’s her name?” I question.

“His name is Stormfire,” she tells me and opens up the stable door. “He saved my mum when he was just a young foal from a fire caused by a storm.”

“I like the name. It sounds as fierce as he looks,” I reply, following her to Stormfire’s side. Laelia’s hand reaches out and grabs my arm, trying to pull me closer but with no luck.

Curious, I let her speak rather than reacting. “My sister means a lot to me. If you come out of this alive and she doesn’t, I’m going to drag you back to wherever my dad got you from.”

I smile before easily grabbing her arm and flipping her over my shoulder. She flies out of the stable, crying as she lands on her side.

“What is going on!” Alun roars, rushing to her side. I ignore them both and look at the saddle. I jump up and grab the top of the saddle to bring myself all the way onto his back. After sliding my feet into the stirrups, I pick up the reins. Finally, I look down at Alun, who is hugging Laelia, and Velia is in the middle of them now, cupping her daughter’s face. A normal family. But as I glance down the stable, seeing Poppy on her horse nearby, I figure not everyone in their family is doing good. Her jaw is tightened, and her eyes are burning with something I think is longing.

“Hey, Poppy,” I call to her, the soft part of me wanting to distract her. “What is your horse called?”

“Mistress,” she calls back, humour lacing her tone, and she looks grateful for the distraction. “She is quite stuck-up for a horse.”

I laugh with Poppy until Torfinn interrupts, walking past with his horse. Dammit, he looks super sexy on that horse. His thick and toned thighs spread nicely around the black horse that seems the same size as mine. The way he holds himself just makes him look good. Like a snack I wouldn’t mind eating in bed.

“Nope. Not angel fucker,” Mossy whispers to me. Torfinn narrows his eyes at Mossy and then uses his legs to nudge the side of his horse, directing him out. Stormfire moves without my command, following Torfinn out of the stable and stopping at his side. My leg brushes against Torfinn’s as Poppy comes out next, followed by Alun. Alun leads the way, with Poppy and Torfinn following. I go last, mainly as my horse doesn’t move until he wants to. I look back to see Velia and Laelia holding each other. A mother comforting a daughter.

The way it’s meant to be for normal people. Just not me.



CHAPTER 8

Four hours later, my thighs are constantly reminding me this was a bad idea. Stormfire moves quickly down the winding paths in the middle of hills covered with trees and surprisingly, more trees. Let's not forget the rock I saw an hour ago. That was the highlight of the day. Alun made four spheres of light that float alongside each of us, so it's not completely pitch black out here, but the shadows still hide everything. The darkness looms quite easily around here.

"We are nearly there," Poppy quietly tells me after slowing down her horse so we are next to each other. Despite riding all day, she looks pretty put together and refreshed. Maybe it's just fear for what is coming up that is giving her energy. "Have you shadow jumped with a dark kelpie before?"

"I never even knew these were kelpie. Like the water horses from myths?" I ask her, looking down at Stormfire in a new light. I just assumed he was a normal horse, like the ones the humans have, just a lot bigger.

"Yes and no. The myth the humans have suggests the kelpie live in water and come out of their depths to drown humans. Actually, their homes are in the shadows, and usually, the bottom of a lake or river is quite dark," Poppy explains, patting the side of her kelpie. "The humans misunderstood them, that's all. They aren't murderous unless they are hungry."

"Sounds like me as a teenager," I joke. Poppy laughs along with me. I'm starting to like this girl, and that's weird for me. I've never had a friend who is a girl—or a real friend at all. Getting close to people was always a big risk, one I never

thought was worth it except for that one time. And I *don't* think about him anymore. I have a bad feeling Poppy is going to attach herself to my side and not let go.

“Back to the topic I started with. The only entrance to the city now is through kelpies after the queen locked all the gates and pathways about ten years ago,” Poppy tells me. “So Stormfire will take you through the shadows and bring you out in the city.”

“I hate travelling through shadows,” I groan, and Poppy nods her head in agreement.

“Same. It's easy to be seduced by the darkness and get lost,” she replies. “But don't worry, Stormfire is your kelpie now and will come when you need him.”

“The shadows don't call to me,” I tell her, and Mossy hits my ear with his hand, reminding me to shut up, when her brow furrows in confusion. I tap my legs against Stormfire's sides, and he moves forward, stopping at Torfinn's side. He doesn't look my way, though his body tenses up when I'm close.

“Why are you here, demi-god?” I say. “Did you just fancy hanging out with us reapers? Do you like the dark side, Finn?”

He turns and looks down at me, his eyes full of questions. “What I do, and who I am, has nothing to do with someone like you.”

“You're a bad-tempered demi-god, aren't you?” I reply around a laugh. His eyes narrow, and I let out a sigh. “I think we got off on the wrong foot. Want to say sorry?”

“Fuck no,” he replies.

“Language!” Alun shouts back to us, clearly eavesdropping, and I grin.

“Yeah, Finn. Your language is just fucking terrible,” I say, holding in a laugh. I swear I see Finn's lips tilt up, but I might be imagining it.

I look forward, seeing a pit of darkness right in front of us just as I hear the sound of drums. Torfinn stops his horse, as do

Alun and Poppy, and Stormfire just slams to a halt, jolting my whole body, and I nearly fall off his back.

“Get them out of here, Alun!” Torfinn commands, and his wings appear out of nowhere, in a puff of gold dust just as dozens of people smother the path’s exit, and I look behind to see more. Their shiny weapons reflect the moonlight, as do the sheer number of them. We are trapped. Poppy looks at me with frightened eyes as Torfinn flies right into the men behind us, with two axes that I didn’t see on him before. Where did he hide those? He is ruthless, cutting down the people like they aren’t even real. No one gets close, he is like a machine. Within seconds, all I can see is blood.

I pull the dagger out of my bra and jump off the horse. Alun jumps off and runs alongside me with his scythe. He looks my way and nods, an understanding forming between us. Kill or be killed is the new game. I slam into two of the men at the front, stabbing one in the chest with the dagger and he falls. He groans as I jump on the other and punch him hard in the face. He kicks my thigh, the force pushing me off him and onto the dusty ground. I grit my teeth and stand up quickly. Two more men appear behind me, and a fourth steps over his fallen friend to completely surround me.

“Come on, boys. Stop staring, I’m getting bored,” I say, waving the biggest of the bunch over. His size makes him the clear alpha of the group, and even though I can’t see his face through the black mask, I suspect he is an ugly asshole. He lifts a beefy fist surprisingly fast, and I duck, narrowly missing the hit. He grabs my hair as I drop, and I headbutt him hard in his stomach to distract him. Eyeing the silver whip tied to his hip, I grab it as I roll out of his grip and flick it out in my hand.

“Oh my. This is just what I’ve been looking for,” I say, tightening my hand on the handle of the whip before I jump and smack it hard into the face of one of the other men. He roars, falling to the ground, and his friend makes the mistake of looking his way. I rush and jump on him, landing a solid punch to his throat that makes him gasp for air and struggle as he falls. Two down, two to go. I turn around just in time to see Torfinn effortlessly grab the arms of the two remaining men,

and they scream. Gold light blasts through their blood, making them look like the sun, before they explode into nothing but dust and blood, splattering all over Finn and me.

“You did well,” Torfinn sarcastically comments and holds his hands out at his side. Two axes swing through the air and land in his hands before disappearing into dust once again.

Hot damn, that was sexy.

“You aren’t exactly playing fair with that power,” I mutter, wiping blood off my cheek. I look around and see the remaining men that are left are either passed out or dead, and Alun is cleaning his blood-covered scythe on one of the men’s clothing. Poppy is crying and shaking on her horse. Crap, it’s going to be hard to keep her alive. Just like that pet fish I got and forgot it existed. Mossy has only survived because he can feed himself when I forget.

“Is it safe now?” Mossy asks, peeking his head out from Stormfire’s dark mane of hair.

“Yes,” I shout back. I step over some of the bodies and make my way to my dagger. I pull it out of the man’s chest and lift it, but someone takes it from my hand.

“You stole my dagger?” Torfinn growls in my ear, his whole body pressed into my back. It should scare me, but if anything, it’s actually ~~a turn on~~ it totally doesn’t.

“*Technically* I didn’t,” I answer. I turn around, and he glares down at me. “Mossy got me a present.”

“I hate that damn monkey,” Torfinn growls and storms off back to his horse. Mossy is well and truly hiding as I walk to Stormfire and pull myself back on. Poppy rides to my side as I grab the reins, and I meet her eyes.

“You can’t crawl into a ball and hide from the world every time you’re in danger. If you plan to always do that, you will die,” I tell her firmly. “Fear is in your head, push past it.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, and that strange place where feelings are plays up in my chest.

“Don’t be sorry. I used to freeze like that, and I did it one time...and let’s just say I was very badly injured. I just don’t want you to do the same thing I did,” I softly tell her and don’t mention that I was a kid. “I wish I had run, that way I would have had a chance. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I get it. Thank you for explaining,” Poppy says, a small smile appearing on her lips. She looks at me like a friend. Dammit.

“Now who is going to explain who just attacked us?” I ask as Stormfire steps over the bodies, even as some of them groan and plead for help. He makes his way to the pit of darkness with us following.

“Rogue Unseelie fae from the old Unseelie court,” Alun answers me. I gulp and look back at them, guilt churning inside my stomach. “Do not worry, their numbers are few. The Unseelie court will eventually be nothing more than a fairy tale.”

I don’t say anything. I don’t scream the words burning in my throat. I just stay silent, like a coward, as we get to the pit. Even as I hear their cries, their pleas for help. Even as they beg behind me. Alun’s and Torfinn’s horses jump into the pit, followed by Poppy, and I halt, stopping Stormfire from following. He whines a little as I turn him around and look at all the bodies.

Closing my eyes, I focus on the power I never use because it’s not safe. Healing. Green waves of energy leave my body and slam into the ground. The ground shakes and rocks, making Stormfire neigh loudly as vines shoot out of the ground and wrap around the Unseelie fae. Those alive will heal, even if it drains me to do that, but I can’t leave them begging for help. My soul won’t let me. Tired already, I turn Stormfire around and whisper to him.

“Let’s go. That was our little secret.”

Stormfire neighs loudly before jumping into the darkness, and I can only cling tightly as everything is lost in shadows.

* * *

EVENTUALLY, the shadows become less dark, and more light seems to pour in from the nearby distance. Stormfire picks up speed, charging towards the exit. My whole body itches to get out of here, and I can only hold on as Stormfire jumps through the light and we land on a grey cobblestone street.

“There she is!” Poppy exclaims, and I blink my eyes a few times from the bright light of the city around me, the noise of it, how everything is just so different from the darkness I was just smothered in. High streetlights with fires within orbs line the streets, making it almost seem like it’s day, even though it never is here. I guess this is their way of coping. I take a few seconds to really look at the city I’ve been running away from for so many years. We are right next to the high rock walls of one part of the city. The magical barrier burns right behind Stormfire, and I stare at it for a second, sensing the magic inside. Poppy might be drawn to the shadows, but me? I’m drawn to the magic inside this barrier. It takes effort to pull my eyes from the wall and look around the city I’ve avoided my entire life.

The cobblestone streets are lined with raised beds of moonflowers, and behind them are market stalls with dozens of reapers walking around. The flowers make the air smell almost sweet, but the food in the stalls adds a spicy scent to the city. Many of the people wear cloaks, and I don’t spot any children at all, which is odd, but perhaps they are at some kind of school.

The tall stone buildings are high and much bigger than I expected them to be, and up close they seem almost worn down. They have thin windows around the top, but the rest is just pure stone, looking like dominos that need to fall one day. From rumours I’ve heard over the years, the city aboveground is only a front, and much of the real life of the city is actually underground in the many tunnels and caverns. I look down an alleyway between the houses, seeing a much busier street of reapers on the other side.

“The academy gate is in the middle of the city,” Poppy explains as she pulls her horse to my side. “I haven’t been here myself. It’s astounding, right?”

This girl needs to get out more.

I smile. “It’s interesting, but I prefer Earth simply for the beaches and sunlight.”

She laughs. “One day you can take me to your Earth.” She sighs, and her eyes take everything in. “You will be able to see the royal castle as the gate is right in front of it, and it houses the academy students within the lands of the castle.”

I don’t know why she is excited to see a castle. If you go to Earth, they have dozens of them, and they usually smell like dust. I tightly smile, though Poppy grins back before clucking her horse forward. Stormfire follows Poppy’s horse, and I look down, shaking Mossy’s shoulder to wake him up. Damn reaper magic knocked him out again. Mossy doesn’t wake up until we are out of the market area and passing through small white stone houses with black doors and black-framed windows. These are decorated with small hanging crystals and flowers that catch the moonlight, and others have a range of flowers growing in their gardens. They look after their houses here, that’s for sure. A few faces fill the windows as we pass, but I don’t catch many people’s actual faces.

“You need to hide and follow from a distance. Make sure no one sees you,” I whisper to Mossy when we get to the bigger houses of the lot. He looks up at me with worried eyes before jumping off Stormfire and onto a windowsill of a house. Knowing Mossy, he won’t be far behind me, and I trust he can sneak himself into anywhere.

I pull my gaze back to see we are coming up to a walled part of the city with a big archway that everyone is heading through. The archway is made of pure blue crystal, and I gulp as we get closer. No one seems to look twice at the archway, even though I am aware that it is from the Otherworld, and a strange feeling ripples over my skin as we go through it. Torfinn looks back at me, and he narrows his eyes like he is feeling the same thing that I am. Who knows, he *might* be. He

is a demi-god, and I don't have a clue what his powers stretch to.

On the other side of the wall, the houses are bigger, and each has their own gates and gardens hidden behind them. The cobblestone looks cleaner, almost white here, and there are fewer reapers walking around than before and pretty parks with children running around inside them. It takes us at least half an hour to get to the end of the rows of pretty gated houses and to another walled area. This one is different than before. Instead of an archway, there is a huge golden gate. The gate is made of winding metal formed into the shapes of the strange rune symbols I saw on Torfinn's dagger. The gate is slightly open, a gap big enough for one person at a time to walk through, and it shimmers silver, making it look like it would be impossible to walk through at all. I can't see what is on the other side of the gate because the walls are too high, but I can see the crowds of reapers behind a roped pathway up to the gate.

Torfinn and Alun lead their kelpies to the side where a row of similar looking kelpies are tied up. Poppy and I follow them over, and I steer Stormfire into the space next to Mistress and slide off her back. I tie her reins around the wooden pole in front of us like Poppy does, though my knot isn't as well-skilled as hers.

"I cannot walk with you, you must go alone, my child," Alun tells Poppy, holding her close to him. I avoid them as I go around Stormfire, but Alun calls for me before I can actually escape.

"Come here, Daesyn."

I groan and walk to Poppy's side, feeling more than a little awkward. I'm the assassin he picked up from Earth and swapped with his daughter. I'm the girl he is happily letting possibly die. I'm just the stupid one who is going through with this plan. Alun smiles at me and pulls out two daggers from his cloak. The daggers are gold at the end, drifting up into silver, and the leather is blue. They are pretty, I will give him that.

“These are cursed daggers, said to be made from elves,” he tells me.

I snort. “Elves aren’t real. They are just horror stories.”

Alun levels his gaze on mine. “Do not be so quick to push away what is said in stories as not real, and I can assure you, elves are very alive and very skilled with weapons.”

“Fine. What’s so special about these cursed daggers?” I ask. This is the second time I’ve heard about curses, and it’s getting annoying now.

“If someone stabs you with these, you can die and come back. These are the only weapons in the world that can do this,” he tells us and hands us them. Poppy looks terrified as she takes hers, and I sigh.

“You want us to stab ourselves, don’t you?” I question. I’m not doing that. Not only is this a coward’s way out, it would hurt. I like stabbing *other* people. Not myself.

He nods. “If there is no other way, then yes.”

Poppy slides the dagger into her bag and then wraps her arms around Alun. “Thanks, father. Tell mother that I love her.”

I walk away from them as Alun speaks softly to his daughter, and nearly bump into Torfinn’s chest. Not that it would be bad to touch his rock hard chest. He holds a small bag up for me.

“Velia packed you a bag of clothes,” he tells me, and I accept the bag. “See you around, Dae.”

I step back as his wings appear at his sides, and I itch to touch them, to see what they feel like. Torfinn’s eyes stay on mine as he jumps into the air and flies off into the sky.

“Are you ready?” Alun asks me, making me snap out of searching the clouds in the night sky. I quickly slip the dagger into the bag and nod, gripping the handle of the blue fabric bag tight in my hand.

“We will walk together,” Poppy firmly states, holding her head up high. Whatever her father said to her has made her

more accepting of our fate. I walk ahead, forcing Poppy to jog to catch up with me. We head down the pathway, ignoring the people behind the rope who go silent when we walk up, and I resist the urge to look at any of them. Two reapers stand in front of the gap in the gate, thick black cloaks completely hiding their appearance, and in their hands are silver scythes with black tips.

An echoing voice speaks from one of them, but I haven't a clue which one actually spoke. "Welcome to The Royal Reaper Academy. Speak your name to the gate and enter."

"I will go first," Poppy tells me, and I eye her before nodding once. She walks to the gate, a small girl with a cream bag in her hands, who is shaking the whole time. I feel for her, this isn't a choice I would make in her shoes. No throne on any world is worth fighting to the death for. Poppy stops right in front of the shimmering silver magic, and she looks right up into it, a confidence entering her voice I didn't know she had. "My name is Persephone Riverlite, and I accept my fate. I wish to accept the test for the throne. May the gods judge me."

Poppy disappears into the silver magic a moment later, and I blink, surprised at how quick she was gone. The gates shake a little bit before they go still, and I gulp. *Fuck, what name do I say?* The pretend one is what I'm going with because I can't say my real name out here.

"Go next," one of the reapers commands. I steel my back and walk right up to the magic. I do as Poppy did and lift my head, looking up. I can only see silver magic shimmering and bouncing around like it's alive.

In a way, it really is.

"My name is Laelia Riverlite, and I accept my fate. I wish to accept the test for the throne. May the gods judge me." The second I say it, the silver magic wraps around me like a wave of water. My feet leave the ground, and my right wrist starts to burn.

"You lieeeeeee," a voice that sounds neither female nor male screams inside of my head. I immediately react, pushing out my magic to defend myself, but it feels impossible to fight

this. I fall out of the gate, smacking my back onto the grass, and look up to see the whole gate shaking harshly. Magic splutters and spits out, and the walls at the side of the gate crack harshly. Eventually, it stops, and I finally breathe now I know the gate isn't going to fall onto me. I lift my wrist and there, cut into my skin, is a glowing rune. It's a semicircle with two triangle corners filled in. Then a swirl starts in the middle of the semicircle, going out and flickering off. It glows gold before fading into just a gold mark, with my blood pouring down from my wrist.

A middle-aged man in a silver cloak moves to stand over me, eyeing me with caution. He has no hair, bushy white eyebrows, brown eyes, and a strange expression on his face. He offers me his hand as I look at the pin on his cloak, a stag crown with a sword within. The royal crest of the reapers, if I remember right. I've killed reapers in the past for work, and I've seen this on their clothes, learnt that the stag stands for a god they believed made this realm, and the sword is for the royal who is always meant to lead their people. My people, I guess.

“Welcome to The Royal Reaper Academy. You made quite an entrance. I haven't seen the gate shake and break the walls in a *very* long time.”

I push myself to my feet, ignoring his outstretched hand. He lowers his hand, smiling softly. “I am Professor Artic, and I am one of the teachers you will meet and one of the Cherished Five. We're waiting for the last student, so please join the others, Laelia Riverlite.”

“It's Daesyn. It's my middle name, and I much prefer being called it,” I tell him.

He looks watchful, but he seems to get over it quickly. “I will correct your records to reflect the name, Daesyn.”

I warily watch him walk away just before Poppy is in my face, looking concerned at what happened with the gate. I look around her to see a crowd of people, all of them just like us, all of them needing to die so they don't kill me first. I never like killing innocents, but in my book, everyone that walked into

this academy signed their own death warrant. My eyes stop when I see a familiar face in the crowd. The guy from the fields with the red eyes stands at the side in a black cloak, and he is talking to Torfinn. They stand close, suggesting they know each other well, and I wonder what game the demi-god is playing with me. They both are so deep in conversation I'm startled when they both turn my way at the same time.

I turn my eyes away, knowing that finding out who that guy is can wait until later.

I'm marked for the academy now, and surviving is everything.



CHAPTER 9

My first real look at the royal castle comes seconds after the last student falls through the gate. While everyone takes a look at the new girl, I choose to focus on the castle in the distance, the only thing not moving in the heavy wind that blows around us. The castle is surrounded by thick green and blue trees, making it seem like the only light in the whole of the forest. The castle itself is imposing, towering over the trees and into the skies. Of the many towers—I count at least fifteen—only one of them is painted black, and it is dead in the centre. Gold windows line the building’s many levels, and a giant set of black steel doors are closed, with at least thirty reapers standing in front of it, their scythes held tightly in their hands.

Professor Artic helps one of the new students, a beefy looking dude, to his feet before clapping his hands to gain all of our attention.

“The academy welcomes you all, and we thank you for the sacrifice you are making by attending here. My name is Professor Artic, for all those who did not catch it before.” He pauses as some chatter fills the crowd. I hear a girl behind me softly speak.

“He is the great warrior from the war. I heard he is the queen’s ear to the outside world.”

So he is more than he looks.

The professor carries on talking. “The first day at the academy is one of celebration. The true test will begin tomorrow, so sleep well.”

My brow furrows as Torfinn walks to Professor Artic's side, and the crowd drops into silence once more. "This is Professor White, and he will be one of your teachers for the year. We have been very lucky to have him here."

The chatter around the group gets much louder, the constant word *demi-god* spluttered around. So he is famous. *Great*. Finn's eyes find mine in the crowd, and a cocky smirk fills his lips. He murmurs something to Professor Artic before walking away.

And damn, am I not the only girl who watches his firm ass the entire time.

"I didn't know he was teaching here," Poppy mutters. "He must think I'm a coward."

I shrug. "Better he think that than hate you like he does me."

"I don't think he hates you," Poppy replies with a coy smile. "He looks your way a lot."

"Likely to make sure I don't stab him," I snort. "And I have thought about it a few times, so he would be right."

"You're a very strange person, Daesyn," Poppy replies with a small laugh. *A bit of an understatement.*

"Everyone step into one of the many shadows, and it will take you to your room," Professor Artic interrupts, and I turn to see four spinning shadows hovering just above the ground in front of him. One by one, the students step into the shadows and sink into them. Poppy and I join the queues until we get to the front. I glance at Poppy, seeing how nervous she is, but she steps into the shadow all the same and sinks right down. Keeping my eyes down, I step in next, and like someone has grabbed my ankles, I'm pulled into dark shadows.

Seconds later I crash onto a bed, bouncing a few times as I stare at the white ceiling above me. I sit up and glance around, digging my fingers into the white bedsheets. The room is small with white painted stone walls and real wood floors in a chestnut colour. There are three doors in the room and one big window opposite my bed, which looks over the trees.

Branches wind around the window on the outside, and I quickly realise we are in treehouses. Leaving my bag on my bed, I walk to the window and look down to see a bunch of students, all girls, following a guy with dark blond hair. The guy never looks back at the girls, who are wearing little more than short dresses and knee-high boots. The guy is muscular and built in a sexy “I work out hard” sort of way that can make girls’ panties drop like sweets at a fair.

“Hey! I’m so glad we are roommates,” Poppy says behind me, coming through one of the doors behind me. She walks to my side, following my line of sight.

“Oh, it’s the prince,” Poppy comments with a little sigh. I eye her with confusion, and she snaps out of it, remembering I know shit about this world.

“That’s Prince Sebastian Husk, and he is the only heir. Last time the academy happened, there were seven heirs in here. Usually, they are the ones that win, and I don’t doubt it will be different this time,” she admits, biting on her lip and looking away. “He is nicknamed The Dark Prince, and he is a big ladies’ man.”

“Aren’t most princes?” I suggest. “Or at least from what I’ve heard. The wolf prince back on Earth is a big player.”

“Yup,” she nods in agreement. “Wanna look around?”

I grin at her, actually curious about our new digs. I find out the double doors in the room are a big ass closet with several pieces of plain blue activewear and black leather boots in my size, plus a bunch of other clothes. Poppy doesn’t let me look long, dragging me out into the main sitting area. In the centre of the room is the kitchen island in a circle shape with a tree literally in the middle of it. The tree goes up through the roof and is just bark in here, no branches. Two dark blue sofas are facing the only window in the room, which is long and big, with crazy amazing views over the forest and castle in the distance. Poppy shows me her room, which is exactly the same as mine, and then the shared bathroom we have. It’s a simple bathroom with a big shower and corner bathtub, along with a

toilet, sink and washing machine and tumble dryer. I come to a halt when I see a Bwbachod sitting on top of the tumble dryer.

Poppy comes to a halt at my side, both of us looking between each other.

“Are fae creatures usually allowed to just be here?” I question. “I know the reapers hunt Unseelie fae, but how do they feel about creatures from the Otherworld?”

“They are banned and hunted. We hide the ones around our house because my mother has a kind heart, and my father could never tell her no. I’m just as shocked as you to see a creature here other than your monkey,” she admits, biting on her lip. “The queen would have our heads for hiding a fae creature.”

I almost laugh at the irony of that, considering who I am. The Bwbachod, who looks a little like a troll and is the size of an apple, just stares blankly at us.

“I care for you,” the Bwbachod tells us. “I was sent, and I honour my task. Do you wish for food?”

Who the hell sent him here?

“Erm, I think you should get out of here. You will be killed if you’re caught,” I gently tell him, leaning down to look in his glowing green eyes. His green skin reminds me of fresh apples, and he smells like bleach, which is a little off-putting this close-up. “Don’t you know fae creatures are hunted and killed here for sport?”

“Then why are you here?” he retorts. I still a little as Poppy laughs.

“Silly fae creature. Daesyn is in the academy, and reapers are always allowed here even when they have some fae blood in them. Like Daesyn has because of her eyes, but she isn’t a fae,” Poppy replies for me, and I softly shake my head at the Bwbachod. I will be cooking him for dinner if he gives my secret away.

“My name is Sword, and I will care for you. To be sent home in disgrace is worse than death,” he proudly states. “And I know how to hide from your kind. I will not be seen.”

“What do you think?” I ask Poppy. I want to keep him here, but this is her risk as much as mine. I’m not sure how Mossy will take me adopting a second fae creature very well.

“I mean, he has stayed hidden all this time. I don’t think we should just kick him out,” Poppy suggests. “And I am hungry. I would cook, but I’m terrible at it.”

“Same,” I mutter. Unless burnt baked beans is considered good food, because I’m ace at that.

“At your service, madam Poppy,” Sword says, and he runs out of the room faster than my eyes can track, leaving only a trail of green dust in his wake. I head back to my room, not that surprised to see Mossy sitting on the bed, his head on my pillow.

“I like it here,” he points out, “but they have shit security. It was too easy to get in, and it will be easy to get out. I’ve already hacked their cameras and system. No one looks in here anymore, and if they do, they just see the same image on rerun.”

I laugh. “Sometimes I wonder who is smarter: me or a monkey?”

“Definitely a monkey like me,” Mossy replies, and I hear his tiny stomach rumble. “Food?”

“There is a Bwbachod called Sword who has apparently moved in with us. Do you remember those creatures?” I question. I don’t remember them well, but I do remember a book on fae creatures that my uncle gave me, and they were on the first page. Bwbachods are creatures who live to clean and organise, and they feed off the pleasure they get when a room is tidy. But, if you piss them off, they can explode like a bomb and be extremely deadly.

That’s why I remember them. I always thought my mum was a little like a Bwbachod when she had cleaned the house and then I made a big mess.

“Mossy is back!” Poppy says as she steps into the room. “I was getting worried about him.”

“He was making sure we have an escape plan if shit goes wrong,” I tell her.

“Like what?” she questions. *Wow, this girl has a lot to learn.* The smell of cooking fills my nose, and my stomach rumbles. When I smell coffee, my legs are moving towards the kitchen. Sword has a big cup of coffee on the counter where the stools are, and I wrap my hands around it, looking for the Bwbachod, but he is moving too quickly to really see.

“Thank you!” I tell him, hoping he can hear.

Poppy laughs as she sits next to me in the stool. “You totally didn’t answer me.”

“Coffee is a priority I can’t ignore,” I tell her and sigh when she looks at me for a real answer. “I’m not all reaper, and when everyone finds out, which they might, they will try to kill me rather than let me finish the academy. Trust me, they’d be horrified to let me sit on the throne.”

Poppy looks in my eyes. “The magic of the gate let you in, therefore it decided you are a contender for the throne. Plus, you can’t be killed now by anyone outside the academy. Not even the queen herself could kill you, in fear of the gods’ wrath. This test is one tradition that must be upheld. Anyway, there are far too many reapers with Seelie blood in their system for them to kill them all. So don’t worry.”

“You really believe in this test and the academy, don’t you?”

“Nah, but I think you might just win it and screw what anyone thinks. You’d be queen,” she replies, and I chuckle. Poppy Riverlite might be the first real friend I’ve had in years, and I’m going to keep her alive, even if she hates me in the end, because only one of us can win the throne.



CHAPTER 10

The steady hum of music starts as soon as the sun sets, and I stare out the window at the party in the distance, the flames from a bonfire they have lighting up the trees around it in deep shadows. I crumple up the invite in my hands, the one that magically appeared when I was in the shower. Talk about bad timing.

“Are you ready?” Poppy shouts from the other side of the door after knocking a few times. Mossy is snuggled up in bed, tired from a long ass day, and I would like to be doing the same thing, but Poppy insisted on us socialising. Yuck. But she has a point. We can’t be outsiders in this academy, and to survive, we need to fit in with the pack long enough to steal their strengths as our own and murder their alphas. Pulling the door open, I step out into the living area where Poppy is waiting. She has the same black cloak on as I do—found in the amazing wardrobe full of cool shit—but under her cloak, she is wearing a cute pale pink dress and flat shoes. I look worlds away from her in black activewear leggings and a tight tank top, oh, and my black boots.

“Did you want to borrow a dress?” she asks me with wide eyes. “I mean, I know we won’t get our princess-in-training fitting for dresses until we survive the first week, but—”

“Hold on.” I stop her and hold a hand up. “We have to wear dresses?”

Her cheeks brighten as I lower my hand. “Y-yes. Part of the academy training is learning to mix with the different supernaturals and make deals with them. The castle has a very

strict dress code, and we will be attending at least five balls in the first year. More if needed.”

Blowing out a long breath, I grumble, “I hate dresses. They make me lose fights.”

“I don’t think it’s optional,” she replies with a tiny laugh. I roll my eyes, sliding one of the new daggers I found in my closet off the side into a clip on my clothes near my hip.

“Where are your weapons?” I question her as we walk to a lift door. I know she has the same daggers as I do in her wardrobe, I’ve already searched this place top to bottom. And there’s a friggin’ lift that goes to all the levels of the treehouse and to the floor, as we soon figured out. *Cool as fuck.*

She looks at me in confusion. “It’s a party, and we will be safe.”

“Oh Poppy,” I mutter as the doors slide open, and I step inside the dark wood and white tiled lift. “You’re not safe anywhere here, but I will be watching your back. Sleep with your dagger tonight, you never know. Okay?”

“Okay.” She nods and presses the button for the ground floor. Seeing as the glowing button is on floor five, that must be us, and there isn’t a level above. We stand in silence as the lift goes down and opens on the ground floor. We both head in the direction of the fire, the smell of it filling my nose as well as the brittle cold air burning my eyes. I wrap my arms in my cloak, pulling it around me and tugging the hood up as we get closer to the fire and all the students around it. Poppy stays close to my side as I spot the drinks on a table. I pour myself a large vodka before downing it in one and pouring myself another.

“Isn’t that a lot?” Poppy whispers in horror. “We can’t get drunk.”

I want to tell her that it’s impossible to get fae drunk on mortal drinks, it just makes us lighten up if we drink a hell of a lot of it, but I swallow down my answer. “Not for me.”

“Oh, okay,” she nods. After two more shots, I relax a little bit and make my way to a place empty of students. I sit with

my back to a tree, and Poppy stands next to me.

“You should go and mingle. You’re the talkative one of us both,” I suggest when she just stands there, looking awkward.

“Okay!” she cheerily replies. I swear if she is this cheery in the morning before I have had my coffee, I might throw her out of the treehouse. I don’t do happy, happy people. Poppy heads off into the crowd, and I keep my eye on her as she starts talking to a big group of girls. By the way they are all giggling together and shit within a few minutes, I figure Poppy has made herself some friends already.

“Go and refill the drinks, you piece of shit. I didn’t give you permission to just stand there!” a reaper student snaps from my right. I turn in their direction as I stand up to see who he was talking to. The reaper has red hair, an extremely bright colour really, but he is skinny and lanky as fuck. His cloak swallows him as he leans over an Unseelie fae on his knees. I don’t need to be close or even talk to the man to know he is my kind. I feel it, like a sixth sense, and the dirty grey clothing he wears only makes me want to help. Several scars line his neck and face, and I would guess him to be only a teenager at best. The fae is bald, his hair shaved off and a rune marked on his forehead.

A mark of slavery. I swallow the fear and guilt in my throat as the Unseelie fae stumbles with his bare feet to get up. I hoped I wouldn’t have to see any Unseelie fae slaves, having heard most of them have been drained of all their magic years ago, and the few who survived are held as prisoners. Whoever the reaper is, he must be from a well-off family to have an Unseelie fae slave these days. The reaper lashes out, slapping him hard across the face, and he falls back down onto the dirt. A few other students laugh in the distance, but I’m frozen, watching as the man gets up again and walks in my direction. As he passes me, he pauses, no doubt sensing me the same way I can sense him. He looks up, his dark brown eyes meeting mine.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he harshly whispers. “No one with Unseelie fae blood is safe.”

“Shh,” I quickly whisper. “I know what I’m doing, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

He shakes his head. “We fae will rise in their darkness and, with it, take back what is ours.”

“I hope so,” I reply, but he is already walking away. A branch snaps behind me, and I twirl around as a man steps out from behind the tree. His dark blond hair is short and tidy, and I would guess he is the same age as I am. With a sexy smirk on his lips and his tanzanite eyes like mine, he is hard to look away from.

I’ve never seen anyone with eyes like mine. I stare at him for far too long until it becomes almost awkward to say anything. Turns out there is more than one fae in the academy.

“Nice eyes,” he comments, his voice deep and strangely nice at the same time. “I know your secret now.”

“Do you?” I comment with fake innocence. “You must have been hearing things, Prince Sebastian.”

He chuckles. “I’m glad you know who I am.” For whatever reason, I let him back me into the tree and place his hands near my head on the bark. He leans down, the muscles in his arms clenching. “Because if you dare to cross me, my name is the last thing you will beg before I kill you.”

“Try,” I say, tilting my head to the side. “I will say your name when you try to kill me and fail, Sebby.”

“Sebastian, your mother wants you.” Finn’s dark and grouchy sounding voice snaps nearby, and I look over Sebastian’s shoulder to see Finn staring at us. Though his eyes are more on me. All sorts of possessive vibes blast off him, and I swear I can feel them attack me, claiming me. Or that might be wishful hope on my part. He might look like that at people he wants to kill. Sebastian moves his hands away and straightens up.

“Finn, next time you see me with Daesyn, fuck off,” Sebastian not so kindly suggests. How the fuck does he know my name, and why does he think there will be a next time?

“It would be amusing to see you try and make me,” Finn replies, crossing his arms against his chest. They both stare each other down for a long ass time. Sebastian is the one who moves first, swearing under his breath and storming off into the forest towards the castle.

Finn doesn't say a word, just settling his dark gaze on me like always.

“Is this the point where you try to warn me not to fuck with that guy?”

Finn mutters something and looks up at the sky for a moment like he is looking for the gods' advice on how to deal with me before meeting my gaze. A single word utters from his lips, and it almost feels real with the power behind it. I feel the word roll over my body. “*Intrepide.*”

He walks away, his body tense, and I repeat the word once before shouting to him. “What does that mean?”

Finn never answers me, but someone whispers in my ear long after he is gone. Someone that sounds a lot like a woman, and she is no one I've heard before, but her angelic voice answers my question:

Fearless.



CHAPTER 11

“How is your time with the mortals coming along?” My mother’s divine voice fills the room, her presence blinding to anyone that is not me. I stare at the Unseelie fae woman she is possessing, a blonde woman with blue eyes. Someone who looks similar to my mother.

“They are more interesting than I thought,” I reply. “And I have chosen one mortal for my mission.”

“Good. I would not like to see you fail, son,” she replies. “We will welcome you home soon.”

The Unseelie fae drops to the floor like a plank, my mother’s soul leaving her body. I lean down and press my fingers to the woman’s neck, not feeling a heartbeat. Gods can be so cruel to mortals.

My very existence is a mystery to me. Mostly.

Sebastian walks into my apartment, a bottle of fae wine in his hand, and he pauses, looking at the woman. Dead Unseelie fae are nothing new here.

It just feels different because of one certain dark-haired raven.

“What happened?” Sebastian asks, placing his bottle down and walking to the fae. He leans down and checks if she is breathing like I did before rising. I see the pity in his eyes for a second.

“My mother. She...simply used her for a time, and her body could not handle a goddess’s presence,” I explain. Seb runs his thumb against his lip.

“I will bury her,” he replies and picks his bottle back up.

I lean down and pick the woman’s body up in my arms. “I shall help, this was my fault.”

Sebastian doesn’t agree with me out loud, but I sense his judgment all the same. We head out of my apartment, and no one looks our way as we head outside and into the forest.

“You should stay away from Daesyn. The new girl,” I warn Sebastian. “She is like fire, and you are an explosive. Together, the world wouldn’t survive.”

He laughs. “I bet I’d enjoy burning the world down with her though.”

I narrow my eyes at his back. “Just back off.”

“Tell me the real reason why you want me to, and I will think about it,” he counters. The cocky shit.

“Because I will kick your ass five ways to Sunday if you don’t,” I growl.

Sebastian whistles. “Maybe you should be checking on our friend Ryker. He hasn’t been this focused on a woman in a *long* time.”

Fuck.

“Maybe she won’t like him,” I reason out loud.

“Because so many girls hate the hellhound and never drag him to their beds,” he coolly replies. “Does it matter anyway? She is mortal, and you are—”

“I’m well aware of the rules,” I reply. “It isn’t like that. She is...watched by the gods. That’s all I can say.”

“Am I watched?” he asks me, looking back.

“The gods love their secrets, Sebastian, and I will not whisper another to you,” I finally reply.

He grins. “That means yes. Fuck yes.”

Reminding myself that this asshole is my best friend and like a brother to me, I storm ahead of him to the place we bury the Unseelie. “Don’t say it.”

Of course he doesn't. "I've waited years to see a girl catch your attention and lure you to the dark side. I'm so fucking happy it's happened."

I stop and turn back to him. "The last time a god fell for a mortal, I was born and hundreds died for it, as you well know. Do not wish for something so forbidden, Sebastian, I am happy as I am."

"With your mission?" He raises an eyebrow. "I overheard my mother speak of it. I believe it's a fucked up decision, and you should say no."

"Then my mother dies and I will be killed...or worse," I tell him. His dark purple eyes find mine.

"Shit luck, mate," he replies, walking past me. "I think you should be warning yourself to stay away from Daesyn. Not me."

Muttering under my breath, I look up at the stars. "I tell myself that every day since I met her, and so far, it's not worked. I will have to try harder."

Gods help me...staying away from Daesyn Heartlocke is not going to be easy.



CHAPTER 12

Laying my whip across my bed, I decide to leave it here for the first day and let it be a surprise on the second. I clip my dagger onto my hip just as Poppy comes out of the bathroom, looking paler than she was before she went in there. The never-changing night sky makes the stars so much brighter, and it's still weird that it is morning without the sun to greet us.

"I won't let you die, so stop overthinking," I suggest to her. Mossy nods along with me, stuffing his face with waffles and strawberries just like I am. "Come and eat."

"I will just throw it up," she admits, rubbing her arms. I sigh, hoping she isn't going to pass out on our first day, before finishing my food. I eye Mossy as I pull my cloak over my shoulders.

"You'll have to stay here," I warn him. "You're fae, and they don't like you here."

Mossy sticks his tongue out at me before jumping up the tree and sliding out of the gap at the top. The leaves must protect this place from rain and snow getting in.

"I've never known a fae creature to look so big and normal. I almost thought he was from Earth," Poppy comments, staring at the space Mossy was just sitting in.

"If it's an odd colour and talks with attitude, it's fae," I tell her, pressing the lift button. "And Mossy is as fae as it gets."

She smiles at me as the lift opens, and we both step inside. I press the button for the ground floor before she asks, "Are

there a lot of fae on Earth?”

My smile disappears as the lift moves down. “No, they never made it past this realm. Past the war the queen of the reapers started with the fae and the deal the Seelie king made with her.”

“Dad said before the fae war, there used to be peace. The reaper city was full of fae, and the Otherworld was a holiday place for reapers to go,” she whispers to me, knowing as well as I do that talking of how it was over a thousand years ago will just get us in trouble if someone hears. “I wonder if we will ever stop hunting them for a crime committed by their ancestors?”

““The two most powerful warriors are patience and time,”” I say, quoting one of my favourite authors, Leo Tolstoy. “A human wrote that, and they might not be powerful in the sense that supernaturals are, but they have a certain incredible power with words.”

Poppy nods with a small smile as the lift swings open, and we step out. On the floor in front of us is a circle shadow, and I want to groan. What happened to simply walking where we need to be?

“You go first,” I suggest to Poppy, mainly because I’m worried she is going to run away if I don’t watch her go in. Poppy holds her head high, but her hands shake, and she steps into the shadow. She sinks into it and after a minute, I step in next, letting the shadow pull me down, and I come out on the other side in a place I never expected to see again. A place I could never forget or willingly come back to.

Hell.

The sandy plains of Hell spin around in the distance as I pick myself up out of the sand, seeing we are inside a big protective bubble of reaper magic. This is the second level, one hard to get into and impossible to portal to, so I’m intrigued how we got here, but not that interested over staying alive. The second layer of Hell used to be free of spirits, but it’s not anymore, it’s just as bad as the first level. That’s why hardly any demons live here anymore. Only the ones who are

banished. More students fall out of nowhere as I walk to Poppy, who is frozen in shock like a lot of the one hundred students around us.

“I bet she will die first,” a girl laughs with her friend nearby us. I eye the brunette girl in a black cloak and a bow and arrows on her for weapons. She raises her perfect brown eyebrows, and I smile. She might be pretty and clearly skilled, but she just guaranteed I’m going to kill her.

“I bet *you* will,” I reply with a creepy grin. If the dead souls down here don’t kill her, I’m going to. I don’t like bullies, and there is no real need for them in the world. I place my hand on Poppy’s arm, shaking her a little, and she finally snaps out of it.

“Is this Hell?” she whispers to me.

I nod. “Let’s move to the front and find out what the plan is. Okay?”

“Okay,” she replies, much like a zombie still in shock, and follows me through the crowd until we get to the front. Torfinn and an old lady are standing with their arms behind their backs in front of the crowd. Both of them have white cloaks covering their bodies and a silver clip on the collar of the cloak that looks like the marking rune on my wrist. The old woman has long silver hair that is in one braid down her back, much like how I have braided my hair today. Her blue eyes sharply cut through the crowd, silently judging everyone here. Torfinn looks my way for a moment, but the look is gone so quickly I couldn’t read his expression.

“The last student is here,” Finn tells the woman. She nods and steps forward.

“Welcome to the first day at The Royal Reaper Academy, my name is Professor Kate. As you must be aware, we are no longer in Messorum, and we have brought you to Hell for your first test. The test is simple.” She pauses and points in the far distance at a mountain. “At the top of the smallest mountain in Hell is a portal back to Messorum. You have to get to it, and you have eight hours.”

“May the gods be with you,” Finn states, his eyes staring into mine as he speaks. My heart pounds a little bit, the betrayer, and I strangely wonder if that blessing was just for me. Professor Kate opens a portal, and they both step into it, disappearing into the shadows. The bubble of magic starts shaking, and I grab Poppy’s hand, running right at it and dragging her along. She keeps up, eventually running at my side, and as the bubble disappears, we just make it out. I eye the dusty desert for any shelter, spotting a bunch of rocks in the distance just as I hear the souls make an awful noise.

“Don’t let them bite you or touch you,” I shout to warn Poppy, her hand slipping from mine as I grab my dagger. “Get to the rocks, and I have a plan.”

“To the rocks, got it!” she shouts back. I’m slightly proud of her, that is until she sees the souls and nearly falls over. The souls are disgusting and stink, so I don’t blame her. What is left of their humanity is gone and rotting, so now there is not much left but a shell of glowing green muck that looks almost humanlike. Their eyes glow yellow, and they move as a pack, keeping close together. If they manage to get us, they will feed off our souls, and we will become like them within moments. Not a way I want to end, thank you very much.

I mutter a string of curse words under my breath as I dive into the group of souls in front of us, hearing the screams of reapers in the group behind who are no doubt getting butchered. A big group in a place like this is a bad idea. We need to be further away from them. My dagger cuts through the first two souls with no problem, making them burst into dust that smothers my cloak. Calling my power, I gather up some shadows and smack them into the larger part of the group. They fly across the sand, and I gasp as I suck the magic back in. One last soul charges at me, and I kick it when it’s close, knocking it to the ground. I jump down, stabbing it in the head, and it screams as it disappears into dust.

Poppy is running full speed towards the rocks, and I have to give her credit, she did listen to me about running instead of just freezing. I run after her, keeping an eye out for any new souls, but with the screaming and cries of the reaper group

behind me, I'm certain most of the souls are heading straight in their direction. I get to the rocks and use a shadow to make a step, jumping on it and flinging myself onto the highest rock. Poppy helps me climb the last bit, and I sit down, looking at the group of reapers. Several, if not a good twenty of them, are dead and being eaten.

Bile fills my throat as I turn away and look behind us at the mountain. The smart thing to do, which everyone else is going to do, is to run there and climb from the base up. But the base of the mountain looks seriously steep, and without good climbing gear, it would be hard to get up there. There is no way we would make it within eight hours. I eye the mountain closer and make out a pathway at the back of the mountain. The only issue is the back of the mountain is just a fast-flowing river made of blood—gross—and I don't particularly want to swim in that. Rubbing my eyes, I track the river and grin when I see a row of tiny boats made of bones, by the looks of it.

"I know what we have to do," I mutter.

"Climb the mountain, the professor told us," Poppy replies, and I shake my head.

"No, we need to ride the river and jump off onto the back of the mountain. It's going to be tricky, but I think we can do it," I tell her, pointing at the boats and the pathway. "Let's go."

"I-I...the souls..." she drifts off, rubbing her arms again.

"Look, I'm going to need your help at the ball and social shit, and you need my help here. Trust me, and I will trust you, okay?" I suggest. She takes a deep breath and lets it out before nodding. I search the rocks around us, not seeing any souls, and I use shadows to jump down. Poppy copies me, and I grin at her.

"You're learning," I say. "Now pull your dagger out and let's go."

She does as I ask, and we run for it. After running as fast as I can make my legs go for an hour, we stop at a dip in the sand. Breathless, we both lie back and blink at the hot light

blasting down at us from the centre of hell. It's not a sun, it's a giant ball of flames, and it never really stops turning.

"I wish we had water," Poppy gasps, and I agree with her.

"We can drink a bath-full when we are back in the city," I remind her. "You know, alive."

Begrudgingly, I climb to my feet and hold out a hand for Poppy. She frowns at me like I'm the devil but takes my hand, and I pull her up. We both start off in a jog, heading right for the river in the far distance. A whining noise gets my attention, and I freeze. Poppy comes to a stop next to me, and I place my finger on my lips, telling her to be quiet. Gripping my dagger tightly in my hand, I slowly walk a few steps closer and stare down at the big group of souls. I immediately drop to the sand and wave Poppy down at my side. She slides down but lands funny on her hand, crying out in pain.

And that's all it takes. "Fuck's sake, Poppy."

The souls all run at us, a big group of at least twenty, and I brace myself for what is coming next. To my surprise, the red-eyed guy from the field runs out of nowhere and jumps into the middle of the group of souls, bursting into flames and changing right in front of my eyes into a giant wolf-like creature. But he is on fire. Flames flicker around his black fur, and the souls catch on fire as they get close to him. Two of them get to me anyway, and I dive under them, running my dagger through one of their stomachs. I kick the legs of the other and jump to my feet, slamming my dagger into his neck. As he disappears into dust, I turn around and see the wolf right in front of me.

"That's a hellhound!" Poppy exclaims in fear, and I don't look back as the flames surrounding the hellhound get bigger until it's impossible to look anymore. I cover my eyes, and when the heat is gone, I look up and see a very naked man on his knees in front of me.

"You're missing your clothes," I point out, trying not to look down there. *At that.*

“Ryker Maddock, at your service,” he says, offering his hand and finally telling me his name. I haven’t forgotten this hellhound reaper dude knows I’m half Unseelie fae. I don’t like it when strangers know my secrets. It’s bad enough my eyes give away I have fae blood.

“You’re not a full reaper,” I point out the obvious to him as Poppy comes to my side. I give her the stink eye for nearly getting us killed, and she looks down at the ground. Turning back to Ryker, I can’t help but admire his body. Rippling muscles define his chest and waist, and on his hip is a tattoo of flames that drift all the way up to his ribs. His wrists have matching tattoos of daggers that spread from his elbow to wrist. He is too hot for his own good. “And you’re still naked.”

Ryker clicks his fingers, and black clothes appear over his body in flames, finished with a long black cloak.

“Better?”

Well... “Yep. Why did you save us?”

“That’s another secret. If we start trading secrets, Daesyn Heartlocke, you wouldn’t be able to get rid of me,” he murmurs. Someone calls for him in the distance, a man, but I can’t hear who it is from here. Ryker runs a hand through his hair. “We both know a secret about each other now. I suggest you keep it, and I will keep yours.”

Ryker winks at me before jogging off and disappearing over one of the sandy hills. Poppy clears her throat. “What secret does he know about you?”

“The worst one,” I admit and turn my eyes on her. I want to tell her off, but I know she didn’t mean it. This is a fucked up test for day one. I can’t even imagine how much worse this might get. “Let’s just go.”

Poppy nods and starts jogging with me. We don’t see anyone else, or any other souls, on our way to the river, and it takes us at least another two hours to get there. I wish I had a watch on me to tell exactly how long we have left.

“One of the boats is already gone. The big one in the middle,” Poppy points out, and she is right. I remember there was a line of boats, and now the middle one is gone.

“Ryker must be ahead of us with whoever he is teamed up with,” I say.

“He is close friends with the prince and Torfinn. I heard that from the girls at the bonfire,” she tells me as I grab the blood-covered rope attached to the side of the river and start pulling one of the boats to me. Poppy surprises me by grabbing the rope with me, and together we pull it onto the shore.

“Get in, I’ll push it out,” I tell her.

“This is seriously disgusting,” she mutters as she climbs in the boat made of skulls and bones. I don’t disagree. I try not to vomit as I walk into the blood river, the hot sticky blood attaching itself to my clothes with every step. I pull myself into the boat when it’s out enough, and Poppy hands me a bone paddle.

“How do a reaper prince, a demi-god and a hellhound hybrid become good friends?” I question Poppy as we make our way down the river. The river is quick-moving, soon making our paddling just pointless.

“I don’t know. It is weird they are friends,” she agrees.

“How is your dad friends with a demi-god anyway?”

She shrugs. “My dad is old, like old enough that he was around when the fae war happened. He simply told me he met Torfinn in the fae wars.”

“Fuck, Finn is old as shit,” I mutter. I’m totally crushing on an old man that looks hotter than any guy I’ve ever seen. What is wrong with me?

“He isn’t that old, I don’t think. Time works differently in the worlds of the gods and that Torfinn appeared there for a short while before disappearing. I believe the gods sent him there to do something and then he left. Time travel is apparently a power the gods hold,” she explains to me. “Father

said they only send a demi-god to our worlds when great change is upon us.”

“I wonder if Torfinn knows what great change is coming,”
I ponder, “and if we are all going to be alive at the end of it.”



CHAPTER 13

The river seems to go on forever, and the whole time, both Poppy and I are on edge, watching for anything that might snap out of the blood river and try to eat us. This *is* Hell after all.

“You seem to know Hell. Have you been here before?” Poppy asks me, never taking her eyes off the blood river. My hands instantly shake, remembering that time when I was in this place. The fear. The sweat pouring down my back from how fast I ran. The soul who bit my leg, where the scar has never left.

“Back on Earth, I worked for an assassin guild of sorts. The training they gave us was brutal, but the punishments for trying to leave were much harsher,” I start explaining, clearing my throat. “I was a favourite of my boss, a powerful demon, and I still was left in Hell for five days on my own when I was twelve.”

“Daesyn...that’s horrible,” she whispers, shaking her head and finally pulling her eyes off the blood river to me. I see the same look of pity and horror in her eyes that I expected, and I turn away.

“It was a long time ago, and it doesn’t even rate in the top ten nightmares that keep me up at night,” I tell her.

“We have lived very different lives up until this point,” she comments, smiling sadly at me. “I used to hate that my parents kept me sheltered, but now I can see they did it for a reason. To hide me from the world.”

“My mother tried to hide me, but it just didn’t work,” I admit.

“When did she die? Or is she alive? I just assumed...,” Poppy drifts off, her cheeks going red.

“My uncle told me he thought she died...but I don’t know. I guess a part of me wants her to be alive so badly I can’t admit anything else,” I explain.

“Where is your uncle now?” she asks. “And your father?”

“I think the friend bonding is all done for today,” I say, avoiding the question. “Our stop-off is coming up.”

“That’s a big gap,” Poppy nervously mumbles, looking over at the gap we will have to jump off and hopefully land on the cliff at the bottom of the mountain. I was right, there is a path leading to the top of the mountain, with at least a million steps. My thighs are going to burn by the time we get to the top. I seriously need to work on my cardio.

“Are you ready for this?” I ask Poppy. There is only going to be one chance, and if she doesn’t jump, saving her ass from the river is going to be a nightmare.

Poppy looks at me and nods once.

“On the count of three,” I tell her, bracing myself. “One. Two. Three.” I push off my feet, jumping as high as I can and slamming into the cliff. I dig my hands into the edge, the rough stone scraping off my skin as I hold on. I glance to the side to see Poppy has jumped, and she is clinging to the cliff near me. Using all my strength, I manage to pull myself up over the edge and roll onto the ground. I give myself a moment to catch my breath before crawling over to Poppy and grabbing her arms. She slips a few times but eventually gets her knee on the ground and tugs herself all the way up. We both breathlessly lie on the ground, looking up at the bleeding orange dust clouds floating around the ball of flames in the middle of the sky.

“I did it!” Poppy cheers, and I grin at her.

“You did,” I agree. We both get up at the same time, dusting our clothes off as we look at the steps. Poppy is still on

cloud nine, and she doesn't see the creature peel itself out of the cavern at the side of the steps, but fuck I do. I harshly push her out of the way when a fireball flies at us, and duck as it goes over my head. Poppy forgotten for now, I run at the creature, slipping my dagger out of the clip and into my hand. The creature looks like a monkey and a whale had a kid, and it's an ugly ass thing. Its huge body is smooth and round, and its tiny head sits like a ball on top of it. A big fluffy brown tail flips around at its back, and it has dozens of spikes. No doubt poisonous spikes.

It's beady eyes track my movements, and it breathes out another fireball. This one misses me by an inch, burning my arm, and I grit my teeth through the pain as I keep running. I jump at the last second, landing on its big stomach and digging my knife into its belly. It fights me off as I struggle to hold on, as the knife isn't enough to kill it. Pulling my power from deep within me, purple energy smothers my body and flickers around the knife. I scream, pushing all my power into the knife, and everything goes bright, the light so enchanting it's hard to do anything but stare, and then the creature explodes. I slam into the ground, chunks of the creature and green goo covering me from head to toe.

"Oh my god," I cough from the smell. It smells like rotting dead things, and I'm covered in it. "Poppy?" I call out, wiping the goo from my eyes.

I climb over a big piece of the creature, my hands sticking to it, and I shiver from how disgusting this all is. Poppy is passed out, and I rush to her side, turning her over to see she has a small cut on the front of her head. I think this was my fault, I must have pushed her out of the way a little too hard. I take a deep breath and place my hands on the floor, pulling shadows to me until I can make a flat line of them. I push them under Poppy, and they lift her up. Her long black hair is the only part of her that falls through the shadows, and I look up at the steps, knowing my magic can only last so long doing this. I'm going to be so sore, in *so* many places by the end of this.

I grab hold of the shadows at the end and start walking to the steps and heading up, knowing I can pull the shadows

along with me. Every step seems to hurt more than the last, and by the time I'm halfway up, I'm covered in sweat and still covered in creature goo. My sweat and the goo make a paste that drips into my eyes. I fucking hate Hell. I'm a hundred percent sure no one at the academy is going to recognize me in the state I am in. Groaning, I focus on each step, knowing one of them will be the last if I just keep going. Clueless about how much time has passed, I finally get to the top of the steps and see the portal of shadows waiting for me. I all but throw Poppy into the shadows, knowing they will be safe because they are made by the academy, before standing over it, looking at Hell before me.

The most cursed place in all the worlds, and it still could be considered beautiful. It gives me hope that one day, when everyone knows who I really am and what is in my blood, they might not see me as a monster that should not have been created. They might just see *me*.

I jump into the shadows, thankful when they pull me into their depths and as far from Hell as I can get.



CHAPTER 14

Sinking into the lavender and rose-scented bath, I let out a long sigh. The bubble bath does wonders for the burns on my arm that are already healing and the many, many cuts littering my body. I've showered two times to get the creature's green goo out of my hair and off my body, but a bath is just perfect for relaxing.

I nearly scream when flames burst into the room from nowhere, making the shape of a man before disappearing and leaving Ryker in the room. He keeps his eyes on my face and sits down on the toilet, crossing his arms.

Are my nipples showing?

Oh my god, they must be. I glance down briefly and sigh when I see the bubbles are hiding most of my good parts.

"Poppy is good. Thought you'd wanna know how your sis was doing," he tells me, a teasing note to his voice. He knows that I'm half fae and there is no way Poppy is my real sister. But I am happy she is doing well. The healer told me as much an hour ago when I left her with them. Turns out we were third and fourth place coming through the portal behind Prince Sebastian and Ryker.

"What the fuck are you doing here? I'm in the bath!" I snap at him. He grins, leaning back.

"Being naked isn't a big deal to my kind or fae, if I remember right. In fact, there is a whole city in the Otherworld where no one wears clothes," he tells me, and I keep my face passive, not to show him how that is new information to me.

“Ryker, I don’t know if you think helping me with those souls earns you the right to see me naked or some shit, but it doesn’t. Get the fuck out,” I growl.

He holds his hands up. “Don’t you want to know how I know you’re fae? How I know so much about fae in general?”

I pause. The bubbles completely hide my body anyway, and he is right, I do want to know. Ryker knows he has me because he looks smug.

“You have no respect for boundaries, do you?” I answer.

“Usually girls want me around when they’re naked. You’re the first to tell me to get out,” he says, and I don’t doubt for a second he is being honest. He looks like a porn model.

“How do you know about fae?” I question.

“My mother is a reaper, and my father is a hellhound, the alpha of the biggest pack in Hell,” he starts to tell me, and he pauses for a moment. “No one knows I exist; my mother made damn well sure of that, and my father killed anyone who found out. They both want the throne, and I’m the tool to get them there. My mother was in the academy once, but she was badly injured in one of the tests.”

I don’t say anything, unsure why he is telling me his whole life story. “The best way for my mother to keep me safe was to send me somewhere no one would look for a half reaper and half hellhound shifter. She placed me in the care of her dear friend, the royal housekeeper at the castle.”

Knowing the castle is full to the rim with Unseelie fae slaves, I’m gathering where he is going with this. “You made friends with the Unseelie fae in the castle?”

“I was one that looked after the prisoners from time to time. Did you know there are four thousand Unseelie fae here in the dungeons?” he asks me, watching me so closely for my response. I try not to flinch, but I fail, unable to hide the horror in my eyes at learning that number. So many of them are still alive, still trapped.

“What do you think of that?” I question, sliding my hands into fists under the water. I dig my own nails into my hand to

control the anger burning through my body.

“What do you think?” he questions. “I grew up watching the suffering and the near genocide of the Unseelie fae, but then again, I never saw the fae war. I never saw the brutality and cruelty that they supposedly caused.”

“There are always two sides to every war,” I remind him.

“Perhaps,” he agrees, watching me closely. “But say, if all those fae were freed. What do you think would happen? Do you think they would go back to their ruined and burned-down lands? Or would they take the Seelie lands? Kill the Seelie king and declare war on the reapers? How long do you think it would take before they killed us all and then set their eyes on Earth?”

“Who are we to make that decision? No one short of a god could make that choice,” I murmur.

“Isn’t it strange that a demi-god has been sent to us, no?” he replies with a calculating gaze.

I clear my throat, looking away. If Torfinn has been sent down here to decide the fate of the Unseelie, then I am doomed. I saw how quickly he killed the Unseelie rebels that attacked us.

“I have a clue for you. For tomorrow,” he says into the silence. I turn my eyes to his, the sharp blueness of them reminding me of the cold ice of winter.

“Why would you help me? Only one of us can win this,” I question.

He smirks. “It doesn’t matter to me who wins this.”

I frown. “So you want to die?”

I’m more confused when he laughs and stands up. He stretches his arms up and clicks his fingers. Flames start appearing above him in a swirl and slowly touching his fingers. “When you’re alone, look for the mirror that shows you nothing but the truth.”

The flames smother his body quickly, and then he is gone, leaving nothing but smoke in the room. The smoke drifts to

the ceiling as I rest back in the bath, finding it's not as relaxing as it was before. I pull myself out of the warm water and drain the bath before drying myself. I change into the pyjamas Velia packed for me, a simple white cotton T-shirt and checkered cotton trousers.

"Were you talking to yourself in the bath?" Mossy asks, sitting on the counter with a homemade cookie in his small hand. I chuckle and pat my shoulder.

"It's complicated. How was your day?" I question, heading for my bedroom.

"I hacked the castle security and made several alarms go off," he snickers, and I shake my head at him. "The guards spent all day running from one side of the castle to the fucking other. So funny."

I can't help but laugh. "You're going to get caught."

"Never," he gasps like I've insulted him. "I am smarter than them all, and we both know it."

"Eat your cookie and get into bed. I'm shattered," I instruct around a yawn.

"Bossy," he mutters but does as he is told. I snuggle into the bed, pulling the quilt around me, and Mossy makes himself comfy at the end of the bed on a pillow I found for him. The second my eyes shut, I feel myself drifting to sleep, hoping my dreams are of anything other than Hell.

Opening my eyes, fully aware I'm dreaming, I feel myself floating in water, staring up at a cloud of blue smoke that fills the space around me. This doesn't feel like a dream, it feels all wrong, and I can taste magic on my mouth, in the air, and feel the sting of it across my body. I try to move my hands, but they won't move. I wiggle, but nothing else will move, and I start to panic, my breaths coming out fast and harsh as I struggle to move at all. A shadow looms over me, and I look up, seeing a man hidden in a cloak. The cloak is a dark blue colour, and the hood falls so low I can't see under it. I'm guessing a man by the big bulky nature of his body and his wide shoulders.

When he starts to sing, my body goes still and I'm sucked into a weird trance.

“When the fae had begun,
the world was done.
The song was sung
of the cursed one.
Bearing the runes,
she will bring about doom.
The fae curse is smothered in blood,
so mighty, the beloved.”

THE MAN STOPS SINGING the haunting song and lowers himself down to his knees at my side.

“Daesyynnnn,” he hisses as he climbs on top of me. I try to scream, try to move, but nothing changes except the fear that creeps into my body. He wraps his large hands around my throat. His hands tighten so hard, and the world seems to darken ever so slightly every moment, even as he sings one last sentence to me, the thick magic of his song lulling me into a deeper trance.

“THE FORBIDDEN CHILD will bring about doom. The forbidden child holds the cursed rune.”



CHAPTER 15

Rubbing my sore throat, I stare at myself in the mirror. My skin is paler than I have ever seen it, and my magic feels like it's been drained, but the thing that freaks me the hell out? The bruises on my neck. Thick bruises litter my neck in all different colours as my body tries to heal, and it's very clear the dream I had wasn't just a dream at all. I don't remember all of the songs the man was singing, but one sentence is embedded in my mind.

The forbidden child holds the cursed rune.

I've heard it before, I know I have, but I just can't remember where exactly I have heard it. Maybe my mother told me of it. I know one person who mentioned a song about the fae curse. *Ryker*. Lowering my hands from my neck, I wash my face and make sure my black wavy hair covers most of the marks before heading out into the living area, looking for the coffee I can smell. Sword has a massive cup of coffee right in front of where I usually sit, and I grin at him as he disappears. I've figured out Sword doesn't like to be thanked for cooking or cleaning. He even washes all our clothes and bedding. I'm going to have to figure out a way to say thank you without embarrassing him.

"Where have you been my entire life?" I wistfully sigh, skipping over to my seat and wrapping my hands around the hot cup. I breathe in the steam, which smells better than anything on Earth, before taking a long sip. I welcome the burn as the coffee is just so damn good. It's not the cheap stuff that I usually have to buy in my shitty apartment back on Earth, oh no, this stuff is good. Sword has made breakfast for

kings with everything from toast to pancakes, and even waffles. I'm spoilt for choice, and I end up picking a few waffles with some fruit just as Poppy comes out of her room, with Mossy on her shoulder. A little surprised to see Mossy so close to anyone else, I smile at her.

"How are you feeling?"

"Thankful. They said you nearly drained yourself of shadow magic to carry me up a mountain, and you fought off a creature of hell that had killed twenty-five other students. You know, in the past. The teachers are mad because you made it easy for everyone else," she says, staring at me in wonder. "I owe you my life."

"I said I would protect you, and I keep my promises," I say, shrugging a shoulder. Mossy jumps off her and onto the table, picking up a pancake and literally pressing his face into it. Poppy giggles as she sits on the stool next to me and starts picking at her food.

"I'm going to pay you back. I don't care what you promised me, you went above and beyond it in Hell," she sternly replies. Well, well, well, my Poppy is finally growing a backbone.

Before I can reply, the lift makes a beeping noise that it always does before sliding open, and a woman steps out into our apartment. She has soft brown hair, wide lens glasses resting on her nose, and a white suit dress on that fits her to perfection with her narrow hips and thin waist. She's topped off with high heels and not a speck of dirt on her. Mossy slides under the counter, hiding near the tree and out of sight for now.

That was too close.

Words blurt out of my mouth before I've thought about it. "Who the hell are you?"

She starts to laugh, a melodic laugh, before answering me. "I'm not from Hell, my dearie. My name is Professor Nordvik, and I am the head royal stylist and dressmaker."

“Not dresses,” I groan, turning back to my food while Poppy practically jumps on the spot.

“Oh! I’ve heard so much about you! I adored the dress our queen wore to the Mayday celebrations earlier this year,” Poppy gushes. In the corner of my eye, I see Professor Nordvik bow her head slightly.

“I am beyond excited to make so many dresses for all the lovely ladies in the academy,” she replies with a slight laugh. “Who wants to go first? I will simply take your measurements and then design and make you the perfect dress for each occasion.”

“I will!” Poppy exclaims. I finish my food as Professor Nordvik uses her magic, and it’s quite interesting to watch. The professor stands very still as lines of shadows escape her hands at her sides and wrap around Poppy from her neck to her waist before disappearing.

“All done. With your complexion, I have a perfect idea in mind,” the professor claims, and Poppy looks so happy as she runs to her seat. After drinking the rest of my coffee, I take Poppy’s space, and the professor does the same to measure me.

She hums to herself, her eyes making clear calculations. “You are quite beautiful and elegant for your height. I am excited to see a dress on you.”

“Thanks,” I manage to sarcastically mutter, and Poppy glares at me.

“My sister isn’t a fan of dressing up like I am,” Poppy explains. “But I personally think she would look pretty in dresses.”

“Dresses are hard to fight in and get in the way, that’s my issue,” I tell them both.

“We all have our likes and dislikes,” the professor agrees. “Now, I must take my leave, and I have a message for you both. The second test begins at midnight tonight, and to enter, you simply have to go to the top floor of the lift. One at a time. Until then, you are not allowed to leave your room.”

“A little cryptic, huh?” I ask, even when I feel Poppy’s eyes on me about the whole going on our own, and the professor smiles.

“There are seventy-two students, and the queen does not want more than fifty left by the end of the first week,” she tells me. “I do hope you two survive until the end.”

“So do we,” Poppy sourly replies but calms herself somehow. “Thank you so much.”

“Anytime,” Professor Nordvik replies with a little sadness in her eyes and heads back to the lift. I wait until she has stepped in and the door closes before relaxing a little bit.

“I have a clue about the next test,” I explain to her. “When you’re alone, look for the mirror that shows you nothing but the truth.”

“Where did you hear that?” she questions, and I don’t answer her, pushing my stool back in. I go to pick up my empty plate, but it is gone, and I look over to see Sword is already running the tap over it and filling the washing bowl up with soapy water.

“We might be stuck in here, but we aren’t wasting the day. Get ready, and in half an hour, we are training you how to fight, as it seems the next test we are doing alone.”

“Awesome!” she replies, and I try not to smile in a creepy way at her. She is so fucked if she thinks anything about training is awesome. I’m going to kick this girl into fighting shape and make sure she can handle herself like her father should have done. If I ever have kids, they are going to know how to defend themselves. I wish my mother and uncle had taught me how to fight rather than filling my head with fae songs and hiding me for eight years with no explanation as to why. I remember my uncle and mother arguing about training me to fight, and my mother would have none of it, wanting to keep me innocent. My uncle tried to teach me a few times how to defend myself, but it was hard to sneak away from my mother.

Swallowing down the grief, I get to work pushing the sofas out of the way and making room. When I look back, Mossy is grinning at Poppy and making a funny face with two oranges. Maybe I might have found a little family, and I'm going to make sure she doesn't die.

* * *

"IF I DON'T MAKE it back from this," Poppy states, waiting for the lift to come up with me, "I want you to tell my family it wasn't their fault. Tell them to look after you as you need family, Dae."

"I've had family, and they are gone now," I tell her, clearing my throat as the doors slide open to the empty lift. "Get your butt in there and be the badass I know you can be, Poppy."

She nervously smiles at me, most likely for my benefit, and steps into the lift. The doors swing shut, and it goes up.

"Poppy has powerful magic, I can sense it. She doesn't use it because she fears it," Mossy tells me from his spot on the couch.

"And mine is out of control most of the time. We are an interesting bunch, huh?" I reply.

"I heard the angel fucker talking with the prince. This is the last test for a few months," he tells me, and I try not to smile at his nickname. "You can finally learn to control half of your powers."

"And continually hide the other half of me," I reply. "Story of my life. Be good, Mossy."

"Always," he replies, but I don't believe him for a second. That monkey is nothing but a troublemaker, and I love him. I press the lift button, and the lift slides down, the doors opening up. I go inside, and there is a new glowing black button on the wall above the normal floors. I press it and place my hand on the handle of my whip that is clipped to my hip, watching as the doors shut. The lift starts going up slowly, then it rapidly

speeds up until I'm left groping the sides of the walls for anything to grab. The lift goes so fast, and I try not to scream as I cling to the wall, dizziness and nausea filling my throat. Suddenly the lift comes to a halt, slamming my body up off the floor and back down in one smooth movement.

"Ouch," I mutter, climbing to my feet and watching as the doors swing open and make that stupid *bing* noise. Outside the doors is a forest full of thick trees and a dusty old pathway covered in roots and leaves in the middle. Magic is thick in the air as I step out of the lift. I turn around, but the lift is gone, leaving nothing but forest for as far as I can see, which isn't too far in the dark. Birds tweet and make the leaves scuffle as they move around, and my eyes strain to see what might be hidden in the trees as I walk down the path, presuming I have to follow it.

Oddly, I don't think I'm far from the city of the reapers or even that we have left the city at all, I think this is a shadow illusion. I've heard that the reapers torture their own, the ones who dare try to escape or kill. This place is made up of a serious amount of magic, usually by at least fifty reapers combined, and I have no clue how to get out of it without giving up all my secrets. That's what this world is meant for. It's a way of finding out who you are when everything is wrong and if you will fight when the world has gone to shit.

I run my fingers across the trees as I pass them, keeping myself as alert for danger as I can, but there really isn't anything but a nice forest at the moment. The pathway gets narrower with every few steps until I get to an archway of vines with no end in sight. I peer down into it, feeling the magic is stronger down here than behind me.

"I hate magic sometimes," I mutter as I lower myself to my knees and start crawling through the vines archway. The vines catch and snag in my hair as I crawl, teasing me to stop. The vines turn and change into sharp thorns as I crawl further. The thorns cut into my arms and hips, and I bite through the pain as I see a light at the end. One thorn slowly cuts across my neck as I get to the end and pull myself out into a clearing. Right in the middle of the clearing are seven mirrors in a line.

The mirrors are framed with black metal, and each one has a different animal above it. Everything from a hawk to a wolf and even a dragon. Before I can get close to them, a low growling noise makes all the hairs on my neck stick up. I flick the whip out of the clip, letting the leather slap onto the ground as I turn around. In the thick bushes and trees are at least seven pairs of glowing gold eyes. Very slowly one of them steps out of the bushes, and I get a good look at the horrific creature.

It looks like a polar bear in some ways, but some of its fur is black, and big chunks are missing, just leaving rotting skin. It raises itself up on its back legs and lets out a long roar that shakes the very ground under my feet. Shit. I turn and run as fast as I can to the mirrors, but the bear is quicker than I am. Something hard hits me right in the middle of my back, and I fly forward, smacking my chin against the stone path on the ground. The sharp tang of blood fills my mouth as I roll onto my back as the bear lands on top of me. Instinctively, I pull my magic to me, purple shadows flickering around my body, and I scream. The shadows blast out of me in waves, crashing into the bear and bursting him to pieces. Blood pours down on me as I rise up, my feet leaving the ground, my power completely in control. I see nothing but blood as I raise the whip in my hand and laugh as five more bears run out of the bushes. The purple shadows spread down the whip, lighting it up as it becomes like an extension of myself.

I raise my hand and harshly whip the first bear. My power makes the whip cut through the bear like he is nothing. Two other bears get closer, and waves of my power leave me, smothering them and raising them into the air as they thrash about in my grip. They explode within moments, and when I look down, only one bear is left. He growls at me, and I move my hand to him, ready to kill him if I need to, but he surprises me. The bear slowly lowers its head and bows before walking backwards until I can't see him anymore.

“Time to go back in the box,” I plead with my power, even as it resists, pushing me to just destroy everything around me. I grit my teeth, pulling back the shadows to me and gasping as the magic finally snaps back into my body, and I fall straight onto a pile of bear guts.

“Oh fuck no,” I mutter, rolling onto the flat stone and looking away from the dead shit all around me. After wiping the blood from my hand, I push back some of the loose locks of my hair and stare up at the mirrors. For some reason, the mirrors themselves scare me a lot more than the bears ever could do. I pick up my whip handle and drag it across the stone as I walk to the mirrors. I walk past each one, seeing nothing but my reflection until I come to the middle mirror. In this one is a woman that makes me fall to my knees.

My mother stands in the mirror, her body see-through like she isn't real. But it is her alright. A longing I didn't know I had fills my chest, making it hard to breathe as tears fall down my cheeks. This is my mother's soul, and I don't want to see it. Seeing her dead like this means she can't be alive, she can't be out there waiting for me to come and find her.

The truth hurts more.

Ryker's clue comes back to me, like he is whispering it in my ear. “When you're alone, look for the mirror that shows you nothing but the truth.”

And god damn it, this is the truth.

I stand up and place my hand on the glass mirror, wishing I could talk to her but knowing she is somewhere at peace now. I won't ever find her, but I hope she is with me now. I hope she is watching me, guiding me somehow. I take three steps back, running my eyes over my mother's soul one more time like I can imprint the memory of her before lifting my hand. I crash the whip into the glass, and instantly the glass shatters and so does the world around me until I'm standing in the lift alone.

And the doors open to a room which is just a plain room with glass walls all around and one scary ass, hot as fuck demi-god stood in the middle with his arms tightly crossed against his chest. I'm sure I see relief in his eyes when he sees me, but he quickly cools his expression. I'm sure he is just relieved I am still alive to save Poppy, if Poppy made it on her own.

“Congratulations, Daesyn,” he tells me. “You may go back to your rooms and enjoy your night off.”

“I’m going to sleep, thanks,” I say around a yawn. His lips twitch in amusement as I press the lift button and watch him.

“Is Poppy back yet?” I question.

“Yes, she survived,” he answers, and I sigh in relief. I step into the lift the second the doors open, and press the button for my floor.

“Tell Mossy to stop sneaking into my room and fucking with the shower settings, will you? I want a warm shower one time this week,” Finn demands of me. I just laugh as the doors close, and surprisingly I see him smile at me before the lift takes me away.



CHAPTER 16

“Poppy, out with it,” I state, looking at her over my steaming cup of coffee. The coffee is so good here I’m actually thinking about winning this damn academy and becoming queen so I can have this coffee for the rest of my long ass life. You know, if I wasn’t half Unseelie fae and they wouldn’t try to murder/enslave me. Always problems that get in the way of me and my coffee. Poppy lifts her eyes from her uneaten plate of pancakes and shakes her head. Since I got back last night, she hasn’t left her bedroom other than to use the bathroom, and she now looks like a zombie. I thought she would be happy that she survived a test on her own.

“What happened in your test?” she asks me.

“I’ll tell you if you eat,” I reply and add, “and you tell me what happened in yours.”

“Fine,” she grumbles and cuts her pancakes.

“I fought off a pack of bears that stunk. Then there were mirrors in a forest...and I had to destroy one,” I tell her, avoiding who I saw in the mirror. It wasn’t real. That’s what I’m telling myself anyway. “What about you?”

“It was a forest, and I heard my parents screaming. I heard my sister screaming for her life. I battled a giant bird, who picked me up and threw me into a tree. I used shadow magic to hide me in the trees and climbed through them...but there were just mirrors,” her voice slowly drifts off. “And in one of the mirrors, my family were all dead, and in another I saw

myself, wandering around lost, calling for help and crying. I broke that mirror as it's the truth. I am lost and I am helpless."

"Poppy, no you're not," I tell her. "And I don't believe the mirror showed us the truth, and if it did, it showed only what we think is the truth in our souls. It mirrors us...that's what strong magic does."

"You think so?" she slowly asks.

"That illusion was so strong, it felt so real, and I felt drained afterwards. I believe the professors used our magic to set the real test," I say, meaning every word. "Therefore the mirrors were a test against what our worst fear is. Yours is being weak, and mine is..."

"What is yours?" she asks me, but I avoid the question, looking down.

"Have you seen Mossy this morning?" I ask. He was in here when I came back yesterday, but this morning he has been missing. Sword appears right by my cup of coffee, appearing out of nowhere.

"Master Mossy has been leaving dog treats on Ryker's pillows after I explained he joined you in the bath the other day and you were not happy," Sword tells us. I chuckle. Dog treats? God damn, that monkey is funny.

"You had a bath with Ryker? The hellhound?" Poppy blurts out. "Is that why he helped us in Hell?"

"No, he came into my bathroom after Hell when I was in the bath, for a chat. *Uninvited.*" I clear that bit up. "And I have no clue why he helped us in Hell. He apparently is happy if we win."

"That doesn't make sense. Maybe he just wants to sleep with you," Poppy says, her cheeks going red again.

"Do you have a boyfriend or had one?" I question.

She shakes her head. "Father was strict, but Laelia used to sneak out all the time. I know about guys. What about you?"

"I dated one guy for a bit. Well, he wasn't just a guy. He was a succubus demon, and let me tell you, he was great in

bed but shit at being in a relationship,” I tell her. “That was two years ago, and I’m desperately in need of a good—”

The lift doors slide open, making that binging noise, and Finn steps out. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Poppy squeaks, and I chuckle.

“How was your shower this morning?” I question, knowing full well Mossy would have been messing with his shit. Finn glares at me before he searches the room with his eyes.

“Where is your little friend?” he nicely asks.

“I honestly don’t know,” I sweetly reply. “Is that why you’re here?”

“I’m here to tell you to be downstairs in five minutes. The fifty-one remaining students have been split between the teachers for the next six months. I will be personally training you and preparing you for any tests that do arise,” he answers and fixes his gaze on me. “Do not make me regret choosing you. I’m speaking directly to you, Daesyn.”

“Never,” I say with a wink that only serves to piss him off more.

“Five minutes,” he growls, and in seconds, gold dust smothers his body and he is gone.

“If he could just do that, why did he use the lift?” Poppy asks, going back to her food.

“Maybe it’s considered rude in godtown to just pop in,” I suggest.

Poppy snorts. “Godtown. I love it.”

I laugh with her, feeling a tiny bit more relaxed than I did this morning when I woke up. I didn’t have a weird ass, nearly-killed dream again, so I am taking that as a win. Maybe it was just a one-time thing. Either way, I’m pushing it to the back of my head as another one of the many things I hide back there that are shit scary. After I finish my coffee and grab my cloak, Poppy is ready to go, and we head down in the lift.

Stepping out of the small entrance hall at the bottom of the tree, I nearly bump headfirst into a girl I recognise from Hell.

The bitchy one.

“You’re not dead yet. I’m not sure if I should be happy I get to kick your ass before you die or not,” I say, humming to myself.

She sneers down at me. “When I’m queen, I’m going to lock you up for just talking to me.”

I chuckle, the very thought that this girl could beat me at anything is just hilarious. Poppy drags me away, and we stop at the front of the group of ten. I eye Sebastian and Ryker in the middle of the group, and they both look my way. I turn my gaze back as Torfinn commands the space, stopping a few feet away and slowly looking at us.

“You are aware of who I am,” he starts off, the self-entitled asshole that he is. “But you are not aware of why I chose you for my group. I picked each one of you for unique qualities I have seen in the tests, and I plan to push you to your limits to bring out those qualities. What makes you different will make you succeed as a student at this academy. Are we understood?”

“Yes,” rings out from the crowd. I cross my arms, knowing Poppy is shouting yes for the both of us, and I’m not shouting that loud. He is a frigging demi-god, it’s not like he needs hearing aids.

“Follow me and keep up. If I see anyone”—he pauses and looks at me—“being a disappointment, they will be sent to the queen for judgment and most likely killed.”

Ouch.

So much for us being friends.

Finn starts jogging away, wait, running, and the group moves right after him. Poppy and I stay near the back, keeping close as we run. I’m surprised when Sebastian and Ryker slow down until they’re right in front of us, and Ryker looks back at me.

“Looking beautiful today, ladies,” he says.

Poppy giggles, and I shake my head at her. She seriously needs to spend more time around guys.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“You need to work on your charm, brother,” Sebastian casually comments.

Ryker laughs, and it’s a sexy laugh that does have an effect on me, but like hell am I telling him that. “Dae just needs to stare at my body a little more. It will charm her all on its own.”

Sebastian laughs while Poppy looks so red-cheeked I’m surprised she hasn’t turned into a tomato.

“All guys brag they have something big to look at, but turns out that’s usually not the case,” I tell Poppy. Her eyes widen.

Sebastian can’t stop laughing, and Ryker spins around, running backwards, and waves his hands down his very, very nice body. “Dae, you only have to ask and you can see how big I am.”

I know I shouldn’t, but I laugh, and Ryker’s smug grin makes me shake my head. We all keep running for a good half an hour before getting to a large concrete clearing that is the size of a football field. We all circle around Finn in the middle, and after everyone is still, he speaks.

“Today, I want to see your individual combat skills,” he tells us. “No magic or weapons are allowed, and first one to draw blood wins. Avoid killing your partner if at all possible.”

Poppy looks at me, and I swear I see the fear in her eyes like dancing penguins. “You got this. Remember what I’ve been teaching you.”

“O-okay,” she mumbles, but from her tone alone, I know she is freaking out.

“Sebastian and Daesyn, you’re up first,” Torfinn announces. “Everyone else waits at the sides. Both of you, start when I blow the whistle.”

“Good luck,” Poppy whispers to me and rushes off. Sebastian cracks his knuckles as we both stand apart in the middle of the clearing while we wait for everyone to move.

“You look worried, little vixen,” he taunts.

“I hate nicknames,” I warn him, and he smirks, spreading his arms wide.

“Come and tell me off then, vixen. I want to see how you play,” he counters with an amused tilt to his lips. I’ve beaten plenty of pretty boys who think they are everything before; a prince will be a new conquest. Finn blows the whistle, and Seb, the cocky prince that he is, doesn’t move as I run at him. The urge to use my powers is high, but I play by the rules and swing my fist at his neck. Seb catches my fist mid-air and swings me over his shoulder. I slide across the concrete, wincing at the pain that little trick caused as I roll into a crouch. Fuck, he is strong. Knowing that attacking him head-on isn’t going to work, I pause for a moment as he waves me over with a smirk on his lips. The second time I run at him, I don’t lift my hands even as I get close. He tries to grab my shoulders, and I duck, elbowing him hard between his legs. I spin around his back as he groans, and I kick him hard, knocking him onto the ground. He rolls over and jumps up, looking pissed off.

“Naughty little vixen. Can’t you play fair?” he asks.

“As if you’ve played fair in your life, cocky prince,” I counter. I don’t wait for his response as I run and jump at the last second. He dodges my kick to his face, grabbing my ankle and pulling me down on top of him. As we fall, I grab the collar of his shirt and headbutt his face as hard as I can. It hurts me too, and we both fall as he groans and my head spins a little.

But the sound of Finn’s whistle makes me smile as I sit up.

“Daesyn wins,” Torfinn shouts over the crowd as they all clap. I look over at Seb, who is sitting up and wiping blood from his nose.

“That looks broken, *cocky* prince,” I tell him with a big smile.

“You’re the first girl to ever beat me in combat,” he replies with respect and wonder in his voice.

“You should never underestimate women,” I tell him, climbing to my feet with him.

He stares down at me. “Maybe I shouldn’t have underestimated one vixen in particular.”

That’s for damn sure.

“Poppy and Catherine, you’re up next,” Finn states as I walk back to Poppy. I look to see who Catherine is and find out it’s the bitchy brunette girl from earlier. Figures.

“Kill her for me, please, Poppy,” I ask her, and she shakes her head at me, smiling only a little bit. As she walks past, I reach out and catch her arm. “She is taller and stronger than you, but you are quick. Use that speed how I taught you, and when you get close, hit her as hard as you can.”

“Okay,” she nervously replies, but she doesn’t sound confident enough to win this fight, and we both know it. I let her go as Torfinn walks back and stands right next to me. His presence is somewhat distracting.

“You fought well,” he states into the silence. Catherine says something to Poppy that makes her go pale, and I bite down the urge to fight this battle for her.

“Was that a compliment, Finn?” I ask, and he looks down at me.

“No,” he answers, his eyes finding mine. For a stuck-up demi-god, he really has pretty eyes. The gold has amber flecks in them that shine from any light nearby, and yet there is a darkness I can see when I look closely. Guys shouldn’t be allowed to have pretty eyes when they are as powerful and good looking as he is. It just isn’t fair.

I laugh. “Are demi-gods allowed to lie?”

“All supernaturals can lie. You should know that well, Miss Riverlite,” he replies. Touché. He blows the whistle, and

I watch as Poppy moves quickly to avoid Catherine's hits. The first three hits she dodges, but then Catherine grabs her hair, making her trip, and that's all it takes. Catherine smacks Poppy hard across the face, and I can almost feel the hit as she collapses to the floor. I take a step forward, and Finn's hand clamps down on my wrist, stopping me as Poppy rolls over and picks herself up.

They start circling each other once more, but Poppy's movements are slower now. Finn lowers his voice as he leans down a little bit. "You can't fight for her."

"I know that," I counter, never taking my eyes off Poppy and Catherine but feeling Finn's hand on my wrist far more than I should. His hand is warm, like the sun, and somehow soothes me. Feeling eyes on me, I turn my gaze for a second to see Ryker and Sebastian nearby, and they are both staring at Finn's hand on my wrist, confusion in their eyes.

And something else I'm not sure I like. Possessiveness.

"*Eunoia*," Torfinn whispers, another word I do not know, as he lets my wrist go. I frown at him for only a moment before turning my gaze back to Poppy and Catherine. Catherine grabs Poppy's shoulder, and Poppy smacks her hard in the shoulder, literally doing no damage. Dammit, she should have gone for the throat. Catherine headbutts Poppy hard, and this time Poppy collapses for good, completely out of it with blood all over her face. I rush to her, passing a laughing Catherine and kneeling at Poppy's side. I pick up her head and brush her hair from her face.

"Let me carry her to the healers," Ryker suggests, standing over us. I nod and stand back as Ryker easily picks her up, and I walk at his side as we leave the group.

"Thank you," I tell Ryker. He waits until we're halfway through the forest before whispering his reply.

"You need to teach her to fight better. Other students are questioning why you can fight so well and Poppy is so bad," he warns me. I nod, gritting my teeth.

"Understood," I whisper back.

Ryker surprises me with a deep chuckle. “You beat the prince, and the shithead is never beaten by anyone but me on occasion. Well done.”

I laugh with him. “He is a good fighter, but I’m better.”

“Yes, you are,” Ryker replies, looking at me in a strange way. If I didn’t know better, I would think the hellhound likes me.

And I know better than to like a dangerous man like him.



CHAPTER 17

“Catherine hits with her left fist first and steps with her left as well, leaving her right side open,” I tell Poppy as we sit under the tree in the forest. This place is empty, perfect for us to practice fighting and talk about our options for the training tomorrow. Poppy was given the morning off to recover, but reapers heal quickly, and I can hardly see her black eye or cut cheek anymore. “Ryker and Sebastian fight similarly, suggesting they were trained together. They are fast, tight with their movements, and they observe their opponents. I’m not going to tell you how to beat them as I’m still studying.” Poppy nods along. “Today I fought against a girl called Galeria—”

“Is that the blonde one who wears little to no top?” Poppy asks.

“Yup,” I reply, crossing my legs in front of me. “Anyways, she is smarter than she looks. She is flexible and can dodge nearly every hit, as I quickly found out. But the trick with her is to stand your ground and draw her to you. She has weak muscles, and that means her hits won’t hurt like Catherine’s will. I let Galeria close, and when she hit my cheek, I took her down with one sharp hit to the chest.”

“Wow, you’re really good at this,” Poppy comments in wonder. “I’m never going to be able to beat you at this academy, am I?”

“Do you want to?” I question, actually interested. “I mean, do you want to be queen of the reapers? Have all that responsibility for a world you have only watched from your house and never been in?”

She looks up at the night sky above us. “I may have just watched, but I fell in love all the same. I know where my home is, Daesyn, but do you?”

A longing pounds into my chest. “Yes, but I can never go back. Not ever, Poppy.”

“Why?” she questions.

“That’s enough training today. We should be heading back to get ready for this god damn awful ball today,” I mutter, climbing to my feet.

“Of course,” Poppy replies as she climbs up. She gently touches my shoulder. “Your secrets are safe with me. I just want you to know that. I’m your friend and pretend sister after all.”

“I’ve never really had a friend before,” I truthfully state. *Except him who will not be named, but he betrayed me.*

“Then I’m honoured to be your first,” she replies, and I laugh.

“You may regret that choice, Pops,” I tell her, and she grins.

“You gave me a nickname, that means we are friends for life,” she tells me, her voice dripping with overexcitement. “Now we have cleared that up—”

“Daesyn Heartlocke, we need to talk.” A man’s voice makes me come to a halt. I slowly turn around to see the man, and I try not to show any fear on my face as I stare at one of only two overlord demons left in the worlds.

Overlord demons are not to be messed with, everyone knows that. They were created to destroy the world, and one is currently a king.

The other is right in front of me, and it’s not the first time that we have met—and I want to punch him.

“Seth,” I coldly reply. “What is an overlord demon doing in the Reaper Realm?”

“I was invited, darling,” he replies, crossing his muscular arms as he leans on the tree. His eyes slowly roll down my body, making me shiver.

“A-an ov-er-erlord demon?” Poppy sputters out. Shit, I forgot she was here.

“Poppy, go back to our room,” I softly tell her, never taking my eyes off Seth. Dressed in an expensive suit, he looks out of place here in the forest. Seth’s white hair is cut shorter than the last time I saw him, but his red eyes are still as haunting as the first time I met him. He is the very definition of a beautiful man.

But a fuck boy nonetheless, which reminds why I don’t like him, and the circumstances of how we met enter my mind, forcing me to remember it all again.

“TELL me where the fuck he is,” I demand, pressing my dagger deeper into his chest with my foot. I wish I had brought Mossy with me to help me search for his brother, but bringing a fae monkey is a bad idea around this place. I need to fit in, not stick out like a sore thumb. “It’s snowing and I want to get home to watch some Netflix and chill after chasing your sorry ass halfway across a demon compound.”

“Fuck off, you stupid reaper,” he shouts at me.

“I will if you tell me where your brother is. See, my boss wants to know, and I want to get paid,” I remind him. We had this conversation already, but damn, this demon is stupid.

“Blood is stronger than anything you can do to me,” he roars as I press the dagger deeper. I watch him curiously, not really understanding why he would give up his life for his deadbeat brother.

“Your brother killed five human girls, and one of them was half-demon. My boss’s half bastard kid,” I tell him, and his eyes widen in fear. “He sent me to find your brother, and I will do it with or without your help. So tell me where he is.”

“Club Ame,” he splutters. “Now let me go!”

“Nah, I will get a bonus for killing you,” I counter and lift my gun from my side. He screams as I shoot him in the head, a fair and easy death considering how much he has pissed me off tonight. I pull my dagger out of his chest and skip my way back into the street full of demons. I know the club he spoke about, and it won’t be hard to get in.

Ten minutes later, I’m inside the club, and they didn’t even look my way twice or ask how old I am. I’m certain if they knew I’m just sixteen, there is no way they would have let me in. Being confident is sometimes the best way to appear older.

I eye the crowds of people as I make my way to an empty booth and slide into the seat.

“You don’t belong in my club, little one,” a demon with long white hair and glowing red eyes states as he takes the seat next to me. He’s wearing a suit that no doubt costs more than my entire apartment building put together. “You’re wrapped in trouble and smell like magic I’ve not seen in a long time.”

“Look the other way then. I have a demon I’m here to capture and take back to my boss,” I warn him.

The demon smirks. “My name is Seth. I like you already. What is your name?”

“Daesyn Heartlocke,” I answer.

“Syn...well, tell me who it is you are here for, and I will help you,” he replies, spreading his arms and making up a nickname.

“I accept help from no one. It never comes without a price,” I retort.

“This time, it does,” he replies, and against my better judgment, I don’t run away.

I should have.

“YOU’VE GROWN up a lot since we last met, my darling Syn,” he comments. “Maybe I should have found you sooner.”

“I’m not sixteen and stupid anymore. Your charms won’t work. What do you want?” I demand. I lied to Poppy before, I did have a friend before her. But in my mind, he was never just a friend, he was a man I was in love with when I was just a silly girl. He never once thought of me like that, and he made that very, very clear on my seventeenth birthday. In fact, it’s still one of the most embarrassing memories I have.

“You don’t look happy to see me, Syn,” he seductively murmurs, and it does things to me that I wish it didn’t. “If that is the case, you will not like the fact I’m sticking around for the academy test.”

“Don’t you have overlord demon shit to do?” I ask, my heart pounding in my chest.

“No,” he replies with a smirk. “See you around, Syn.”

He disappears into flames, his glowing red eyes the last thing I see before he is gone.

* * *

“I STILL DON’T GET how you knew an overlord demon?” Poppy questions as we both stand in front of the mirror in our dresses. Poppy’s dress is a deep pink colour and fitted to perfection underneath a lacy petal cover, and it really suits her. Her hair is up in a bun with soft strands falling out around her face, and it is finished off with a pretty diamond necklace. I have to admit, the dress that the professor made for me is unique and stunning. Almost like a fairy tale dress, the silk comes in tight with a corset at the top and flows out into a long skirt at the bottom. The whole dress is covered in stunning embroidery and beading to make it look like a sword is going down the middle of my chest and stopping at the bottom of my stomach, with lots of lace to look like vines spreading up into a V shape on my chest. My hair is down and curled in big locks, with two braids on each side of my head with tiny little purple crystal butterfly clips holding them up. With Poppy and I having a slight amount of makeup on, we really do look the part of queens in training. Professor Nordvik left ten minutes

ago after helping us into our dresses and magically doing our makeup and hair. I have to learn how she does that.

“You know I was an assassin. One of my jobs was in his club, and he took a liking to me. He helped me find the demon I was looking for, and then he just stuck around. He helped me on dozens of my jobs for about a year...” I drift off because it still hurts to think of when he left and never came back. I replace the hurt with anger, my usual and totally unhealthy coping mechanism. “Anyway, I haven’t seen him in just over three years.”

“You’re not telling me everything, and that’s cool,” she replies, but she sounds a little hurt.

“It’s not that...I just don’t like talking about Seth. He was the only guy I let hurt me,” I admit, biting on my lip. “I was looking for a connection to anything other than Mossy, and Seth was right there and kind to me. It was my fault I pushed him away by having feelings for him that he did not return.”

“Maybe he left because you were too young and he felt the same way?” Poppy softly asks. I laugh and shake my head.

“He has a new woman every night in his club, if not more than one. He has no feelings for anything other than himself, his cock and his daughter,” I reply and steel my back. “We should head to this ball so we can get it over and done with.”

“He has a daughter?” Poppy questions in shock. “How old is she? How old is Seth?”

“Erm, I think she is twenty-three now, and Seth is very old. Very, very old,” I mutter. “And thinks he knows everything because of that fact.”

“Don’t most men think they know everything?” Poppy questions. “My mum told me that once.”

I laugh and bump my shoulder into Poppy’s. “See, you do know something about the opposite sex.”

“Did someone say sex?” Mossy questions, jumping onto my shoulder as we walk to the lift.

“Maybe. What’re your plans for tonight, my little monkey friend?”

“After pouring green dye into Catherine’s shampoo bottle, I’m tired,” he says so normally that I don’t clock onto what he actually said until Poppy bursts into laughter.

“Oh my god. You are the best, Mossy!” Poppy says as we both laugh. I can’t wait to go to the ball now and see Catherine’s green hair.

Mossy stands up proudly on my shoulder. “I am the king of petty revenge.”

I grab Mossy and pop a kiss on the top of his head. “Yes, you are. Have fun with Sword.”

“By the way, you both look pretty,” Mossy tells us. “No sex though. We don’t need men around.”

“Great,” I mutter as I press the lift key. “A monkey is in charge of my sex life, and I literally can’t even argue with him as he is right. We don’t need anyone getting close to us right about now.”

“Unless they already know our secret like Finn or Sebastian,” Poppy comments. Or Ryker and Seth, but I haven’t mentioned that one to her yet. “Do you think the gods know our secret because Finn does?”

“I don’t know. This game was created by them, and they must know who plays in it,” I say, shrugging a shoulder as the lift opens. We both step in, and the interior starts glowing as the doors close. The whole lift goes super warm for a moment, but it doesn’t move, and then the doors *bing* before opening up.

Instead of our apartment, it’s a ballroom. Every wall of the room is a mirror with large silver arrows in the corners of the room that stretch all the way to the ceiling. The ceiling itself is a giant mural of angels, wolves, reapers, dragons, witches and so much more painted across it, all of them fighting a battle with a gold antler crown right in the centre of the painting. The ballroom has silver floors that are so shiny they reflect the many, many colours of the dresses the women wear inside the

room. The men stand out with their black tuxes, but there are so many people in this ballroom, so many that I'm not sure where to look first.

I step out into the room with Poppy, both of us silent in shock and wonder of the magic it would have taken to make that lift work and the sheer number of guests in this room. There must be a thousand people here, easy, and not one of them is human, I suspect. Demons. This is a demon ball. I glance behind me to see a wall of lift doors that are magically appearing and disappearing as people walk out. Nifty magic, that is right there.

"This place is *so* dreamlike," Poppy sighs, her eyes lapping up the room like a kid in a candy store. I look around and see the Cherished Five in the corner, nodding at anyone who comes near them, the queen nowhere to be seen. The Cherished Five, known as the Queen's Knights to other races, are meant to protect the realm no matter what. They will die for the queen if she asks it of them, and it is unheard of to walk away. I'm almost interested why Alun walked away and why the queen allowed it.

"I'm going to the bar. Have fun," I say, shooing her away, but it doesn't take much. She sees someone in the distance, and then she is off like a shot. Chuckling to myself, I find the bar on the other side of the room and sit down, waiting for the bartender to come out of the back. The bartender steps out of the door behind the bar, and I try not to flinch. It's an Unseelie fae. Who knows what her age is, the Unseelie being as close to immortal as they are, but she looks about twenty. Her bright blue eyes find mine, and she pauses for a second before walking to me. Silver bracelets dig into her wrists, but other than that, you wouldn't think she was a prisoner. Her dress is white and simple, matching the many other servants I've seen in the crowd. But none of them are Unseelie fae like she is.

"Do you wish for a beverage?" she asks me.

There is so much I want to say to her, so many questions on the tip of my tongue, but before I can say anything, Seth slides into the seat next to me.

“Syn here will have a dirty martini, and leave a bottle of whiskey on the side for me,” he instructs. The fae woman nods, stumbling back, and I pull my eyes to Seth.

“You remembered my favourite human drink,” I comment, but he doesn’t meet my eyes for a long time. Instead, his eyes run down my body ever so slowly, worse than before because it’s no longer a passing interest; he looks like a wolf hunting his prey when he finally meets my eyes.

“I’ve never seen you in a dress before,” he murmurs, leaning closer. “How exceptional and sensual you look.”

“Don’t get used to it. Won’t you be leaving tonight when this is all over?” I question as the fae places my drink in front of me and a bottle of expensive whiskey in front of Seth with a tumbler. He pours his own drink as the fae girl serves someone else.

“No,” he simply answers. “My brother and sister-in-law have sent me here, and I will not be leaving until the academy is over unless they call.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I try not to react to that news. “By the way, your fight with Evie was impressive and sexy. My brother showed me the footage. Now tell me how you got in that predicament in the first place.”

“Blood magic,” I tell him.

“Why the fuck would you make that deal, Syn?” he questions, stepping into my space and grabbing my arm. “You could have said no and come to me.”

I humourlessly laugh. “Things have changed in the years you left me. You know nothing about me, Seth, and don’t pretend for a moment our year together was a real glimpse into my life, as it was not.”

“Your favourite colour is purple, you sing as you cook, and the songs are enchanting if not banned here. Your hair always smells like coconut, and you cry when someone loses a parent in a film you’ve watched or a book you’ve read. Your favourite drink is coffee, and you can’t stand a day without a cup, and when you eat, you eat the things you dislike the most

and leave the best thing to have last. I *know* you, Syn,” he whispers to me, and I glare at him as I tug my arm from his hand. “*I know you*, and I’m not leaving this time.”

“Sorry if I don’t believe you, Seth,” I snap, and I walk away before I say anything else I might regret. Someone breaking your trust is like a sour taste in your mouth you can’t get rid of, and the taste comes back every time you try to trust that person just one more time. I’m so lost in my thoughts I don’t look up until I realise the music is louder and I’ve somehow walked right to the edge of the dozens of dancers. I turn around, and Finn is right in front of me. Wordlessly he picks up my hand and places it on his shoulder, his other hand settling on the middle of my back, and then he moves us into the crowd.

“I’m not a good dancer,” I warn him, and he smiles at me.

“With this, you only need to let go and let me lead you,” he smoothly suggests. “Relax, Daesyn.”

And I do.

Finn effortlessly moves us in circles, our bodies moving to the deep notes of the music until I can only relax, and I almost forget that it’s Finn I’m dancing with. I almost forget where exactly I am.

Finn’s thumb presses into my academy rune on my wrist, and I feel a jolt spreading through my body. “What was that?”

“These runes are markings of the gods, as are all runes,” he softly explains to me. “The Protectors believe their runes are a result of angels and demons, but this is not true. See, the gods made all supernaturals, and runes are their creation after all.”

“So a god gave me this rune when I got here?” I question.

“In some way, yes,” he answers. “Many objects in the worlds are bursting with the magic of the gods, and that makes them alive in a sense I could not explain. The gate is one of these objects.”

“What’s it like in godland anyway?” I ask.

“Godland?” he asks with a choked laugh. His eyes look down at me in amusement, and I think that’s the first time I’ve heard him laugh. “My home is called Olympus, the home of the gods, and it is a place of pure magic. To be there is to understand it, and no human words could ever describe such a place.”

“Why are you dancing with me, Finn?” I question next.

He spins me around, bringing me closer to him this time. My body brushes against his hard chest just a little, and I look up at his over-six-foot-tall form. “Is it not my turn to ask a question, Daesyn?”

“What would you like to ask?” I say.

“How do you know the demon overlord?” he questions.

“You’ve been watching me,” I reply. His eyes narrow, and I know I’ve ticked him off now.

“Answer the question, Miss Riverlite,” he replies, his tone nothing short of a warning. I glare right back as the song ends, and I bow my head in the most sarcastic and overdramatic way I can.

“Thank you for this dance, oh high and impressive demi-god sir,” I say with a grin, and I look behind me at the line of women watching Finn with nothing short of desire in their eyes. I don’t know why I actually don’t like that, even as I plan to use them anyway. I raise my voice, just to make sure they hear me. “Torfinn, I must take my leave, but I’m sure one of these girls would happily dance the night away with you!”

“Daesyn—” Finn says, but it’s too late, the girls flock around him, and I make my escape through the crowd. I pause and grab the bottle of whiskey Seth has left on the bar and find a door out into a silent corridor. I walk down it before finding an empty balcony with a few chairs, and I plunk my ass down in one of them, taking a long sip. I keep drinking and lift my head back, looking up at the many stars above me and pausing when I see a pair of tiny legs hanging over the edge of the roof. I jump to my feet and turn around to see a little girl, maybe no older than six or seven, sitting on the edge of the

roof. She has pretty blonde hair that is super curly and bright green eyes, and she is only wearing a thin nightdress against the coldness of the night.

“I like your dress,” the girl softly comments. I glance at the whiskey, wondering if somehow this is fae wine and I’m bladdered or if this girl really exists. Eventually I come to the conclusion I’m not seeing things.

“Thank you. What are you doing up there?” I question.

The girl shrugs and points at a nearby attic window that is open. “That’s my room, and I couldn’t sleep.”

“You live here?” I ask, and she nods.

“Do you have a coat, you must be cold,” I softly reply. “It’s not good for you to be alone out here at night.”

“I’m not cold, and I’m not alone. The spirits call to you, but you do not hear them, do you?” she randomly states, and I go very still. Creepy ass kid talking about spirits is not cool. This shit reminds me of human horror movies, and this is the point where said kid kills the pretty blonde woman.

Lucky I’m not blonde.

“I cannot see the spirits like most reapers. It’s not that I don’t wish to see them,” I reply, and she laughs, a sweet but a little creepy laugh, considering we are talking about dead spirits. Spirits aren’t the same as souls; they aren’t people and they have never been. Spirits are beings created by elements, and they live in this world all the same as us. Some reapers cannot only see them, but they can control them, bend them to their will. It’s said the queen is one of those reapers, and that is how she won her academy test. I remember hearing some guys talk about it in a bar about three years ago.

“They wish to talk to you,” she singsongs. “They promise so many things for you. So many mean things.”

“Mean things?” I question, and she nods before sharply turning her head to the left, staring at what appears to be nothing. “I am sorry. Yes, I will tell her.”

“Tell me what?” I demand, and suddenly cold wind whips around my dress, turning the cold night almost freezing, and my breaths come out in cold puffs. The girl stands up, tucking strands of her hair behind her ears.

“They say you will do unendurable things and pay an unbearable cost. One will forget, one will die, one will suffer and one will never, ever rule. All of this will happen soon, as the cursed rune is held by you.”

“What the hell is the cursed rune? Why do I keep hearing about it?” I question, but the girl disappears in front of my eyes, shadows leaving a mark of magic when my eyes can only see smoke.

I always thought Earth was bonkers, turns out all the worlds are.



CHAPTER 18

*A*wareness in a dream is an odd thing. It feels like you're awake, even when you are fully aware you can't be, and sometimes the dream feels like a memory more than a dream. This one does as I dance around in circles on my own. It reminds me of the demon ball a week ago where I danced with Torfinn, but I'm alone now in the ballroom. The crowds of people have left, leaving only myself as I dance.

But I can't stop. My feet move to the rhythm of the music like I've been trained to dance my whole life, and nothing I do stops me. Then I instantaneously can't move; I'm paralysed with nothing but mind-numbing fear as I'm suddenly not alone anymore. The man from my last fucked up dream walks across the ballroom, his dark cloak hood hiding his face as always. The vivid memory of him nearly choking me to death makes me panic, and I try to fight whatever hold he has on me, closing my eyes and concentrating on waking the fuck up.

"You cannot hide from me, my dear sweet Daesyn, for I want you as my queen," he sings to me, his gravelly deep voice making all the hairs on my body rise up. "Oh, the one who holds the cursed rune is so sweet, as will be the power the Otherworld gives her as a treat. Destruction and power are a desperate pair, and in her hands, everyone will despair."

"Stop with the fucking riddle-like songs and let me go!" I scream, and the man just stands still as my feet move themselves without my permission to right in front of him. His hands whip out of his cloak, grabbing my shoulders tightly. It doesn't hurt at first, and then his touch slowly starts to burn. I scream as I can't move, and the pain becomes so extreme that

dots flicker in front of my eyes. I feel it inside my body, burning me.

“Oh dreams are a window into the soul, as a great man once said, but for fae...they are the key to everything we try to hide. I will find you, Daesyn Heartlocke. I will find you...”

GASPING, I wake up with my heart racing out of my chest and thick tears falling down my cheeks. I slowly take in my bedroom, how my dress is hung on the back of the door, how Mossy is sleeping at the end of the bed tucked under a yellow blanket he stole from somewhere. I grip the sheets tighter, slowing my breathing and lying back down on the bed. I stare up at the ceiling, wondering what the ever-loving fuck these dreams are about, and I flinch, feeling pain on both my shoulders. I slowly climb out of bed and tiptoe out of my room and down to the bathroom. After closing the door behind me, I turn on the light and pull my shirt over my head. I can hardly believe it as I stare at myself in the mirror, seeing two hand marks burnt into my shoulders. I touch the burn, flinching from the very real and not dreamlike pain of it.

How is this even possible?

“Fuck,” I mutter, rubbing my cheeks. After having a slightly painful shower, I cover the burns in a healing cream and change into some news clothes. I kiss Mossy on his tiny little forehead before clipping my dagger to my belt and pulling on my cloak. I pour myself a big coffee and hardly wait for it to cool down before drinking it, and somehow it makes me feel a tiny bit more alive. My hair is still damp as I call the lift and head down to the bottom floor. I’m not really sure where I’m going at this point, but sleeping isn’t happening, and I can’t stand to be in that room any longer than I need to be. How did my life get so fucked up in such a short amount of time? There I was, making enough money for a crappy apartment for me and Mossy, but still could afford the important things like Netflix and snacks. Now I can’t even sleep without something or someone trying to kill me. It’s bad enough that fifty-odd students do that on a daily basis. The leaves crack under my boots as I walk through the trees, trying

to push the dreams to the back of my head even as my shoulders ache from the burns.

“Told you she was close by, brother,” Ryker’s voice fills my ears seconds before he appears out of the shadows in front of me, Sebastian right next to him. They both cross their arms, looking like they want to start a boy band in their black clothes, and I try not to smirk.

“Sneaking around in the night, whatever will people say, Prince Sebastian?” I tease.

“Call him Seb,” Ryker suggests, grinning at me. “His friends do that.”

“She isn’t my friend,” Seb warns.

I laugh. “That’s right, Sebby. You have to be nice to make friends.”

“Sebby?” Seb asks, his purple eyes flashing with anger, and they glow slightly, even as the purple bleeds into something darker. I wonder if my eyes do that.

“Are you deaf?” I ask, cocking my head to the side.

“Come on, you two,” Ryker groans, stepping closer to me. “Play nice.”

“What are you doing out here?” I ask, pulling my eyes from Seb to Ryker, considering he is up in my space and too close to me to avoid.

“Sneaking out to a club. There is a big celebration tonight, and it will be fun. Lots of alcohol,” Ryker tells me, selling me on this with his final comment. “Even fae wine. Come with us.”

Curious about how they sneak out, I play along. “Let’s go then.”

Ryker grins like he just won the lottery, and Seb looks as grumpy as always as he steps closer. Ryker places his hand on my upper arm and Seb’s, and we all disappear in flames. Travelling like this is weird, as all I see for a long time is fire, but it doesn’t hurt me at all. When we reappear, we are next to a wall of magic, and right in the middle of it is a small gap.

“All magic walls have a weak point,” Ryker explains as we step out of the trees, “and this is the only one this magical ward has.”

“Tell the secretive assassin, who we know jack shit about, all our secrets, why don’t you, brother?” Sebastian sarcastically comments, walking ahead of us. How exactly does he know I’m an assassin?

“Has he always got a stick up his arse?” I question Ryker.

I expect him to laugh, but he doesn’t and looks down to meet my gaze. “Have you ever met a person who hides who they really are under dark humour and being a total asshole to everyone?”

“Maybe,” I counter.

“Seb is not what he seems, and if he lets you close, you will see what he is really like. He is my brother in every sense other than blood, and he is a good man, one of the best I know. Don’t be so hasty in judging him,” Ryker suggests to me. “Even though he is a prince, it does not mean he has had an easy life.”

Seeing as I don’t have a good and not snarky reply to Ryker, I stay quiet as we get to the gap in the ward and slide through it one by one.

“Are you two the only ones that know of this gap?” I question. “And why hasn’t the queen ordered it fixed?”

“The Unseelie fae built the wards, and it is powered by their magic,” Seb answers. “My mother cannot fix magic she cannot control or understand. One day this whole ward will fall, and my father will be the one to put up a new ward with Seelie magic.”

Seb doesn’t wait for me to reply as he carries on walking, and we follow, even as my eyes drift back to the ward. I could fix it.

But there is no way in hell I would do that for that bitch on the throne. I pull my hood up when we get closer to the city, as do the guys, and they both somehow move to my sides, almost like they are protecting me. I almost laugh. It’s they who need

protection from me, not the other way around. We soon mix into the crowds of reapers on the street lit up with lamps and glowing spheres of light that float around above our heads. Ryker takes a sharp turn down an alleyway, and I stay close as he stops in front of a brick wall. Knowing things aren't as they seem, I wait as Ryker places both his hands on the wall.

“Copy me,” he suggests and winks just before he falls through the wall. I glance back at Seb, who nods once with a slight smirk.

“Not worried we are trying to kill you off, are you, vixen?”

“How many people do you want to hate you before you die, Sebby?” I question, and his eyes narrow as I place both my hands on the wall. Instantly I feel magic building up under my hands, and as I fall through the wall, I'm sure I hear Seb reply.

“Everyone.”

I stumble into a dark room, heavy beating music filling my ears and the intense heat of the place wrapping tightly around me. Flashing lights flicker across my eyes, and Ryker's hand finds mine as he stands next to me. I'm tempted to pull my hand from his, but he tugs me along, down a pathway and into a massive room. Flickering white lights skirt across the dancers spread around the room, and in the middle of them are lit up stages with beams surrounding men and women who dance. Spheres of all different lights move around the ceiling, past the many different levels, and bars line the walls.

“You be yourself here. Everyone is free,” Ryker whispers to me. I don't look back to see if Seb's following us as Ryker leads me to the bar and pushes his way through the people waiting. The bartender, a young woman wearing a tiny skirt and little less than a strap of white material around her huge tits jumps several times when she sees Ryker.

“You're here! I've missed you!” she tells Ryker. Her eyes flicker to me for a brief moment, and then she pretends like I don't exist. Bitch. “The pack are excited to see if you win this academy test, and drinks are on the house for you and the prince.”

“And our friend, Daesyn. Daesyn, this is Willow,” he introduces us, and we both give each other a fake smile.

“The usual drinks?” she asks Ryker. “And I finish work in an hour. We can meet up at the top room—”

“Not tonight, and give us fae wine. Two bottles, three glasses, Willow,” Ryker requests. Her cheeks go a little pink, and she nods, turning away.

“She is going to hex our drinks,” Seb murmurs with a smirk. “I told you not to stick your dick in that one. She has clingy written all over her.”

Ryker looks like he wants to strangle Seb, who apparently couldn't give a fuck. Eventually Willow comes back with our drinks and makes sure not to give me eye contact as the guys say goodbye to her. Ryker grabs the silver wine bottles, and I pick up the glasses, following them both over to a booth where a couple are so lost in each other they don't notice the guys until they are standing over them.

“Get out,” Ryker demands.

The guy chuckles into the neck of the red-haired woman and slowly lifts his eyes from her. “Why don't you fuck of—”

He pauses, his eyes going wide, and in seconds both of them stumble out of the booth, blurting out apologies.

“We could have sat in any of the empty booths,” I say, taking a seat.

Ryker pulls the cork off the wine bottle and shrugs. “I like this booth.”

I roll my eyes and lean back as he pours the thick pink wine into the glasses. The wine moves around in circles inside the glasses, sparkling under the light of the spheres of magic. Ryker holds his glass up.

“Happy birthday to my brother and best friend, Sebastian. Twenty-one years younger and all that shit.”

“It's your birthday?” I question Seb, and he nods before taking a long ass sip of his drink. I drink mine next, the magical wine tasting like pure heaven as it goes down my

throat. I don't know how long we sit and drink for, but soon Ryker is stumbling out of his seat to get more wine, and I'm laughing at a story Seb is telling me.

"So he was butt ass naked and stuck on the roof of the castle," Seb says, and I can't stop laughing, just imagining Ryker like that. "All I saw was his ass flying in the air as he fell off the side of the castle. That was the last time he snuck out of a married woman's window. We were stupid idiots at sixteen."

"At least you had fun!" I counter.

"One of us did," Seb replies, meeting my eyes. "Come and dance with me, vixen."

"Why?" I question, even as my body leans into his a little bit. Seb picks up my hand and pulls me out of the booth, never answering with anything other than actions. We are both more than a little bit tipsy as we sink into the dancers, their bodies brushing and pressing against mine until we come to a stop. Seb's hands find my hips, and he pulls my back to his front, our bodies perfectly lined up as he moves my hips to the movement. I sink my head back, looking up at the lights above us, feeling the music and Seb's body, and focusing on nothing else.

"It's hard to hate you, vixen," Seb whispers into my ear. "And how sweet it would be to hate you."

"Hate is a wasted emotion between two strangers," I reply, knowing he can hear me. "You should try and be my friend first, Sebby."

"What if I can't and never will be able to see you as a friend?" he questions and spins me around. His arms wrap around my waist so tightly, and I stare up at his eyes, the same eyes that I have, but I see so much more in his eyes than I have ever seen in my own. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a man on the second level, and I watch in horror as he lifts a whip, crashing it down on something on the floor that screams. The scream is almost lost over the sound of the music, but still, no one looks their way. The man lifts his whip in the air, taking a minute to pause and drink his beer, but I'm already pushing

away from Seb and scrambling through the crowd. I spot the stairs in the corner of the room and rush to them, taking them two at a time and dashing around the corner just in time to see a drunk man and innocent fae woman who is bleeding out on the floor. I run over, the fat reaper man's eyes looking confused as I grab the whip from his hand and, in one motion, wrap it around his throat. He roars, trying to push me off him as I knee his back, and he collapses to the floor. His shadows start to attack my magic instantly, and it feels like nothing more than a light tap on the shoulder.

“Dae!” Ryker shouts and rushes to me. He cups my face and forces me to look away from the reaper I'm nearly killing. “You can't kill him for this. Let him go, or you will be sent before the queen, and she will know.”

“He hurt her!” I whisper. “Look at that woman!”

“I know,” Ryker replies, and I suddenly realise my magic isn't attacking him. It let him get close to me, and I've never seen anyone be able to do that. The shock makes me let go of the whip, and Ryker picks me up off the man. Seb is kneeling next to the Unseelie fae woman. Her face is unrecognisable from whip marks, and her blood is spreading like a wave all across the tiled floor. Seb stands up and shakes his head at me.

“You killed her, you piece of shit!” I shout at the reaper, who is on his knees, still coughing. Ryker mutters something before picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder. His arm is like a vise grip on my legs, forcing me to stay still as we both disappear in flames and reappear outside the gap in the wall. I kick him hard in the chest, and he drops me, grunting as I straighten up.

“He deserved to die for that! She was powerless and weak, and he brutally and publicly killed her like a dog,” I growl out.

Ryker's eyes flash red for a moment. “Fae are less than dogs to reapers, Daesyn. You haven't lived here your whole life, this is normal, and yes, it is brutal. Yes, it is unfair, but killing that one reaper wouldn't have changed anything for anyone!”

“I know that!” I snap.

“Then think bigger. The throne is at the end of the academy tests, and if you really want to make changes, that should be your focus,” he replies, cooling down a little bit. Seb appears in smoke, holding the body of the fae girl.

“I paid him to let me take the body and forget this ever happened. We will bury her together,” Seb coldly states and walks past us. The prince with so many secrets is kinder than I thought.

And he feels the fae’s pain like I do.

Maybe we are friends after all.



CHAPTER 19

“Coffee,” Seth greets me as I step out of the lift with Poppy. Poppy’s eyes widen as I stare at the Starbucks cup, knowing he would have gotten the pumpkin spiced latte that I adore in winter. I wrinkle my nose, inhaling the pumpkin spice scent, as I wrap my hand around the cup. Seth smirks like he just won something.

My hand itches to throw the drink in his too pretty face, but it’s coffee, and I’ve only had one cup upstairs thanks to the mild hangover I’m sporting this morning. Seth’s eyes drift to Poppy, and he offers her his hand to shake. “Persephone Riverlite, I presume.”

“Everyone calls me Poppy.” She takes his hand, no clue that she is shaking hands with the literal devil. After they let go, Seth looks back to me.

“May I walk with you to training?”

“It’s not going to be worth the effort to stop you,” I mutter. I quickly walk away, and he easily keeps up with me with his long ass legs, while poor Poppy jogs a little until she altogether gives up and walks a little behind us.

“I see the coffee has not won you over,” Seth states, and I turn my gaze on him as I sip the coffee.

“If you think gifts are the way to get back in my good graces, you are crazy,” I say.

He sighs. “Very well, I will up my game. Tonight I am coming over to yours and taking you to my apartment for the evening. Do wear something nice.”

He disappears in flames, the heat of the flames warming my skin, and I slow down for Poppy.

“What did he want?”

“Dinner,” I comment. “And not like a date. I don’t know why he is really here, but Seth is a trickster, and everything he does can’t be trusted. I will find out tonight the real reason he is here.”

“I still think he is here because he likes you.”

“Do you know what happened to his brothers?” I quietly question her, and she shakes her head.

“I know a little about overlord demons from my books and what my dad told me,” she admits.

“There are two overlord demons left because one of their brothers went mad, stole an incredible and dangerous power, and then tried to destroy the world. Queen Evie and her mates were the only reason there is an Earth left.”

“And you tried to kill her,” Poppy eventually murmurs.

I meet her eyes. “Life doesn’t play fair, Pops.”

“It did though. You lost that battle,” she replies. I smile at her.

“Truth be told, I never wanted to win. I had kinda given up hope when I took the job, let alone when I was doing it,” I admit to her. That’s not something I’ve ever said out loud to anyone before. “I was lonely and tired, and I had a shot of getting paid a lot of money, but I knew the odds were slim. I guess I wanted a way out, and this was a better way than I expected.”

Poppy wraps her arm around my shoulder, and I flinch a little when she rests her head on my arm. “You’re not lonely anymore.”

I smile, a big smile, and it feels weird on my lips to be happy about having a friend. We come into the training area, and we are the last ones here, which Finn looks mighty pleased about as I place my Starbucks empty coffee cup down by a tree and remind myself to pick it up later. Or ask Ryker to

burn it into nothing. The latter is a better idea. We join the group, and Finn makes a point of waiting until everyone is silent before speaking.

“We are changing things up today,” Finn proclaims, spreading his hands wide. “I have seen all your combat skills, and now I wish to see your power. You will be paired up, and you must defend yourself against the shadows of the other until one of you can invade the mind of the other.”

Fuck, I don't use this magic. I only know how to defend, not to attack with it.

Finn, of course, doesn't give me a second to think on it. “Pair up.”

Poppy looks at me, and I'm about to suggest we work together when Finn shouts. “Daesyn, come here.”

I pass Ryker and Seb, and of course Seb pretends like we don't know each other, but Ryker winks at me. My not-so-friendly demi-god is standing with his legs apart, his arms crossed, and he narrows his eyes at me as I stop in front of him.

“You will be working with me today. It is unfair to place you against any of the other students when you are... powerful,” he chooses the last word carefully.

“Do you think you can handle me, sir?” I question, quirking an eyebrow.

He looks down at me, a slight bit of amusement in his eyes. “We will find out, won't we?”

Finn nods his head to the left, and I glance back, seeing that Poppy is paired with a guy from our group. I haven't a clue what his name is, but he is a shit fighter. I think Poppy might actually win one of these tests. More than a little bit of me is happy about that. I follow Finn out of the clearing and down a small winding path through the trees until we come to a small gap in the trees. Finn sits down and waves in front of him.

“Can you even use shadow magic?” I question him as I sit down opposite him. Moonlight glimmers down through the

branches above us, shining onto his face, making his skin take on a gold tinge. His blond hair even seems to glow against the light of the moon.

Finn might be from the gods, but the moonlight looks like his home.

Just like it has always been mine. Some people belong in the night, looking to the moon to show them the way.

“Yes. I can use shadow magic, light magic, dark magic and the gods’ magic,” he tells me. “The only magic I cannot tap into is that of the spirits. But I am yet to see anyone who can, even the gods can only mimic their power.”

“Can you see the spirits? Talk to them?” I question, curious if it’s only that girl on the roof who can do that.

He crosses his arms as I dig my hands into the soil at my side. He looks away from me, staring up at the sky for a second, enough to make me think he is lying. “No one has that power, but the queen can briefly control them and use them in battle. It is unheard of to communicate with them and use their powers for more than a parlour trick.”

“You’re a crap liar,” I point out. He doesn’t answer me with words, instead he simply calls his shadow magic to the surface, and it attacks my magic with the force of a strong wave in the sea. I gasp, my body jolting back a little bit, and I instantly close my eyes. His magic is dark and moody, swimming around my body, looking for any weakness. It takes me a second to push my magic out of my body to protect myself, and instantly my legs leave the ground, my body hovering as I remain still. Finn’s magic pushes harder, and I grit my teeth, resisting against it, but it’s like swimming against the tide. My body aches, and it hurts with every second that bleeds into minutes.

Time becomes nothing more than the fight to push Finn’s magic away from me. From fighting the raw power of a demi-god.

And I’m not giving in.

With every bit of energy I have, I stretch my arms out as I build up my power. I open my eyes, seeing that we are hovering above the trees. Finn looks like he is sitting in the stars themselves, and he is glowing with shadows and darkness. I'm sure both of us are.

He smirks just before pushing more power into his magic, and I have the feeling he is going easy on me. A small cry leaves my lips as I am forced to let go of the magic I have built up, and it explodes around me. The trees break and snap as I scream, and then my mind is no longer my own, and instead, I'm forced into a memory.

"WHAT'S YOUR NAME, SWEETHEART?" the woman, who smells like cherries and has pretty red hair like my mother has, asks me. She leans down, her eyes running over my dirty clothes and the monkey sitting on my head. I don't know how I got here from the beach, but I'm cold and tired. I don't know when I last ate anything, and this village is the only thing around here. I don't even know where I am in the mortal world.

"I'm lost. I need help," I say. Mother always said if I got lost in the mortal world to find an adult. They would help a lost child.

"Are you human?" she asks, looking at my eyes in the dark night.

"No...I'm a reaper and I'm fae," I answer proudly, though I'm sure my purple eyes would give me away the moment she got close to me with a light on. Her eyes widen, and she stumbles back, shaking her head, prayers to some god whispered harshly under her breath.

"Get away from here, you monster! Go away!" she screams at me, and I jump backwards. Earth is not like the Otherworld. The humans aren't full of compassion and kindness like my uncle and mother said, they are mean.

I turn and run...and I never stop.

THE MEMORY DISAPPEARS as Finn gets out of my head, stopping me from reliving the memory he wanted to find out. As I open my eyes, I become aware that I'm in Finn's arms, and he is slowly flying us down to the ground.

"How dare you!" I grit out. Honestly, I'm embarrassed. I was a stupid kid, and I knew nothing about humans nor their hate for supes. I ran for a full day until I passed out, and a passing demon woman took pity on me, giving me some food and water. Five days after that, my demon boss found me, and it was somewhat easier to stay alive after that.

Alive but not happy. Not free anymore.

His piercing eyes search mine, seeing far more than I wish them to. "I will give you one of my memories in return."

"Why?" I question.

"Because I believe you need to see how alike we truly are," he comments as we land on the ground. He lets me stand before surprising me by placing his hands on my face. His magic washes over me, a mixture of dark and light magic, and his memory plays in my mind.

"WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?" a woman demands, standing over a little boy who I instantly know is Finn. He can't be more than five, his blond hair is short here, and his big gold eyes are filled with tears. Finn's clothes are torn and old, littered with food and oil stains. I glance around the old farmhouse we are in, the broken sink and dirty sides. This place is falling apart, and it stinks of damp. The woman is human, I suspect, with large hips and curly blonde hair. "I don't know why I took you in. You are nothing but a nuisance to me. Get outside and feed the chickens, and don't come back for a long time."

Young Finn cries as he runs outside, and I jog after him as the memory fades. I don't see a demi-god when I stare at the little boy standing in the middle of a stone courtyard.

I just see a lonely boy. A lonely boy, when I was a lonely child too.

THE MEMORY FADES, and I open my eyes, seeing Finn staring right down at me. Remembering what Poppy said to me earlier, the words leave my lips. “You’re not alone anymore.”

“My adoptive aunt said I was born to be alone, and I am yet to see that is not true,” he counters, leaning a little closer. I quickly become aware his hands are still cupping my face, his minty breath is blowing against my lips, and I can smell him, how he smells like everything masculine with a hint of coconut. He smells amazing. Holy all things god. “Being alone is not a cruelty when it teaches you so much about other people’s pain.”

“I’m sorry, Finn,” I whisper. He pulls away instantly, putting space between us as his face turns to that impassive cold man he pretends to be. His wings disappear into dust as I glance at the dozens of broken trees, the piles of leaves still falling around us in the wind and the tense silence that has drifted over us all.

“I do not wish for your pity,” he replies, pulling my attention back to him. “You failed today’s testing, and you can leave. You are not needed here.”

I glare at him as he walks away from me. When he is a good distance away, I look up at the sky, wondering if whoever his god parent is, is watching. “Your son is an ass, and my stupid face seems to like him. Can you send some kind of god-like message that I shouldn’t give up on him?”

Nothing happens, not that I expected it to. As I walk back to my room, an angelic female laugh fills my ears, sounding like the woman who spoke the word *fearless* to me that once. The laugh slowly changes to one word.

Forgiveness.

* * *

AT EXACTLY SEVEN O’CLOCK, a burning portal appears in the middle of my bedroom. So much for coming to get me. Mossy

jumps onto my shoulder, and I tuck my long hair behind my ear as I walk through the portal into Seth's apartment. I can tell we are in the castle from the views out of the large windows right in front of me. All I can see is the forest and the gate shining in the distance.

The warmth of the portal burns away, and I turn around to see Seth leaning against the counter in a small kitchen with white cabinets and wooden countertops. Other than two brown sofas and a roaring fire inside a fireplace, there isn't much to the room.

But it feels like him. His presence. Seth owns every room he is in without even trying.

"Demon shitbag, why are you here?" Mossy demands, standing up on my shoulder. Seth's lips twitch.

"I believe you are angry at me, my little monkey friend," he smoothly replies and steps to the side. "I predicted Daesyn would bring you along tonight, and I bought you some of your favourite foods. Everything with honey and peanut butter that I could find."

Mossy leaves my shoulder and runs across the floor before jumping up onto the counter. I walk over and see the counter is full of different cakes and sweets, everything that Mossy loves.

Mossy looks up at Seth, who somehow has moved himself to my side. His arm brushes mine, and I shiver from the tiny contact. "If you hurt my Daesyn again, I will kill you."

"I don't doubt it," Seth replies in a serious tone even when we all know Mossy wouldn't stand a chance against an overlord demon. Strangely, the fact Seth has always treated Mossy like a person and never seen him as an annoying monkey made me like him even more.

"Now you've successfully bribed my monkey. What's for dinner?" I question, because I am actually starving. I forced myself not to eat all the food Sword made up for us earlier this evening as I knew I would be eating here. Seth nods his head

to the side, and I follow him to the sofas where there are two boxes of pizzas and several fizzy pops on the coffee table.

“They aren’t from Mario’s, are they?” I say with shock. I adore Mario’s pizza, a small pizza place just down the road from my apartment.

“Yes,” he answers and sits down.

“Wait a second.” I hold a hand up. “How could you possibly have known I like that place? I only found it two years ago when I moved into my apartment.”

“I have simply been around, keeping an eye on you,” he comments. “After all, I did once promise you would be safe with me. I am not one to break promises, darling.”

I sink down onto the sofa and cross my legs, eyeing Seth with suspicion. “So you’ve always been there?”

“Not always, no, but when you were about to get in trouble, yes,” he confirms, his eyes flashing red. “And yes, I have seen your choice of men. First the succubus, then the two wolf shifters, and finally the witch.”

“You’re jealous,” I point out.

“You’re mine,” he replies.

I laugh and lean back on the sofa. “I belong to no one, and I never will. My life is my own, my heart is locked away, and my soul is not up for sale. Every one of those men knew that the second they met me. You should know the same.”

Seth smirks and shakes his head. “Oh Daesyn. You can’t lock your heart away from me. Don’t you know by now it’s too late? They say the devil can sneak into any place. We both know I’m buried deep in your heart and you can’t claw me out.”

I narrow my eyes. “Just stop talking.”

He laughs as I pick the pizza box up and open it. A fresh pepperoni and sweetcorn pizza sits waiting for me, and even though I’m pissed off he knows my favourite pizza, I still can’t resist eating it. We eat in silence, not an uncomfortable one, until Seth speaks.

“How is the academy treating you?” he questions.

“Fine. We haven’t had a test for a while, but training is interesting. Many of the students are well trained,” I say. “Poppy is getting better, and I have high hopes she won’t die anytime soon.”

“You always were too kindhearted,” Seth replies.

“How is the great Seth? How is your daughter?” I question.

He stretches his one arm across the seat behind me, his fingers grazing my hair. “Cheri is busy running a demon training centre in the city, but she is happy and well protected. I recently set up my fortieth supernatural club in the human world, well, thirty-nine if you don’t count the one they blew up two months ago.”

“I heard about that in the news. Many supes died, didn’t they?” I question. “I didn’t know you owned all the clubs.”

“I am quite determined to make humans accept that supernaturals are not going anywhere,” he replies, his eyes rolling over me. “No more of my clubs will be destroyed. I made sure of it.”

His dark grin promises me he murdered at least half of the town to make a point. I read about that in the news too.

“Things are better than they were when I was a kid,” I reply. “Queen Evie has made brilliant adoption and fostering buildings where anyone can drop off a child and be paid for the child if they are found to be homeless.”

“Talking of Earth,” he starts off, his fingers sinking into my hair. I don’t know why I don’t push him away. “Say the word and I will take you away from here. It is not safe for you. Not if they figure out who you really are.”

“Earth is not safe for me,” I counter, my breath hitching as Seth’s fingers graze the back of my neck.

“No one will dare touch you back on Earth. I will make sure of that,” he breathes out the threat.

“I’ve pissed off the whole world, Seth. You can’t protect me from everyone,” I softly reply.

His eyes turn fully black now, his demon coming out to play, his voice dark and deeper than before. “No one will take you from me.”

I suck in a breath, remembering that Seth told me to run if his demon ever appeared. I stare at his black eyes, and I stay very still as he shoves the pizza boxes out of the way. They crash to the floor as he pushes me back on the sofa and climbs over me. Red energy flickers around his body, nipping my skin as he looks down at me. Seth, well, his demon side, leans down and places his lips close to my neck. He takes a deep breath...like he is sniffing me.

“Mine.”

“Can I have Seth back?” I whisper to him. I close my eyes as Seth’s lips gently press on the skin of my neck, and my body comes alive under his touch. But I don’t want this, not right now, not when everything he did to my heart when he left is still so raw. I hook my legs around his waist, and I quickly flip him over. He crashes into the coffee table as I climb to my feet and carefully watch him rise.

“Mine.” He repeats. I hold up my hand.

“Seth, rein him in before I knock you the fuck out,” I warn, taking another step back. Seth looks like he struggles for a moment before the red energy around him disappears and his red eyes reappear.

“I understand, and I will wait. The words are not needed to be spoken,” Seth says into the silence. He effortlessly jumps over the sofa with one hand and lands in front of me. Gently he leans closer and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I never truly left you, because I could not. I was always there, even when you did not see me.”

“And somehow I was always alone,” I whisper back. “I was lonely.” I clear my throat and step away from him. Regret shines in his eyes, but he knows better than to say anything. “Mossy, we are leaving.”

Mossy's little head appears over the counter, his face dirty with chocolate and peanut butter. "Okay!"

A few seconds later, Mossy jumps off the counter with a hand full of food and lands in my arms. "You shall carry me today."

Seth laughs with me as I turn back to him. "See you around, Seth."

"You always will," he replies. My confused heart pitter-patters away in my chest as I head to the door and let myself out into a corridor with a lift at the end of it. There are several other doors, and I figure this must be the guest accommodation part of the castle. I'm halfway down the corridor when a door opens and Finn steps out. He looks confused to see me here, and I'm even more confused when Catherine steps out of the room after him. As usual, she has nothing but skin-tight leather pants and a small crop top on that literally shows everything.

Burning anger fills my chest, and I have the urge to smack her in her makeup-filled face.

"Thank you, Torfinn," she suggestively sighs and places her hand on his upper arm. She follows Finn's gaze to me, a smirk appearing on her bright red lips. "Oh Daesyn! What are you doing up here?"

"I could ask the same of you," I counter, but her eyes drop to Mossy in my arms.

"What is that?" she asks.

"A monkey from Earth," I quickly reply, turning my eyes up to Finn. I was angry at him before, but now? I'm furious. I hate that I'm jealous, and it's a pointless jealousy as Finn is not mine and he likely never could be. I can't be possessive over him. *Get a grip, Dae.* "We have to go. Have a good night, you two."

Storming down the corridor, I hear Catherine's fake laugh behind me and Finn's deep voice as he replies to her, but I can't make out what they said. Either way, I'm so done with guys. All they bring is trouble.



CHAPTER 20

“**G**od damn dress feels like it’s trying to crush my ribs,” I whisper to Poppy as we wait for our drinks at the bar. Poppy looks like a pink princess tonight in a pretty two-piece dress, and her black hair is down tonight, like mine, and curly in waves. My own dress is a dark blue corset at the top and made of silk as is the blue skirt that flows from my waist down to the floor. Not only is this thing uncomfortable as hell, I keep sliding off seats when I sit down as it’s so silky. I want to burn it.

“You look beautiful though,” Poppy gently says. “Even with a bruise on your cheek.”

I glower at her, not wanting to be reminded of the training yesterday. It’s been two months since we came to the academy now, and the other students in our group are getting better, and faster, at what they do. So when I fought Catherine, my new sworn enemy for reasons I don’t want to think about, she had been tracking my usual movements and managed to land a hit that nearly knocked me out. I broke her arm after it though, so I feel a little better. Her screams were funny.

Until Finn picked her up like a doll and carried her to the healers.

“Who is this ball for anyway? Everyone is either reapers or humans,” I reply, eyeing the ballroom full of people. This second ball is much like the first, and I am yet to see the queen anywhere or Seb for that matter. Maybe the balls aren’t so much for them but for us. Either way, it seems like a hell of a lot of effort for everyone to just stand around and chat. Doesn’t anyone have a phone in this realm?

“I don’t know any more than you do on the subject of who this ball belongs to,” she replies. “But the magic in here isn’t all reaper. There is—”

“My people’s magic as well,” a man comments, stopping at our side. I turn to look at him, surprised to see he is much taller than we are. Towering at over six foot, the man has extremely pale skin, and he is extremely doll-like in his masculine beauty. With long black hair and narrow blue eyes, he stands out in the crowds of people. His hair hides most of his ears, but the tips stick out, giving me a slight clue who his race is. “My name is Cornaith Daegwyn, and I am the high leader of the elven race.”

“Elves?” Poppy gasps, her hand letting go of her glass of wine. Cornaith swoops down and catches it mid-air before straightening up.

“Yes, my lady. Here.” He offers her the wine glasses, and her eyes are wide, like a deer caught in headlights.

“I wasn’t aware elves even existed anymore,” I say, somewhat justifying Poppy’s reaction. “My name is Daesyn, and this is Persephone, but we call her Poppy.”

“It is a high honour to meet you two beautiful ladies.” Cornaith bows his head and keeps eye contact with Poppy. “I am sorry if I scared you.”

“Shocked, not scared,” she blurts out and takes a deep breath before she speaks again. She holds her hand out. “Nice to meet you.”

“I am sorry, I will not touch you. See, an elf’s power lies in touch,” he explains, and she lowers her hand.

“I did not know,” she replies. “What happens when you touch someone then?”

“I can see their future, be it good or bad. To see the future is to see their soul and put into place a series of unchangeable events,” he softly explains to us. “I can do much more, but that is the power I wish to not use on you.”

Spotting Seb in the corner of the room, I use him as a way of escaping this conversation. “I see a friend I need to speak

to. Excuse me.”

“Daesyn Heartlocke,” Cornaith says my name, and I pause, turning around. I never told him my last name, so how does he know it? “I do hope you win this academy.”

Something about the way he says it makes me think he is lying. I give him a tight smile before turning away and dodging people until I get to Seb. His eyes are slowly running down my dress, and whatever he sees, he clearly likes.

I try to ignore how he looks like a snack I wanna ~~lick-up~~ ~~and-down~~ talk to in his tux.

“Get me out of here, please,” I ask him. He sighs and leans up off the wall. Without a word, he offers me his hand.

I take it without a second thought, and he leads me to a door behind an archway. The door leads to a small corridor with nothing but wooden walls at the side and no other door. I’m surprised when we get to the end and Seb pushes the wooden wall, and it turns. The floor actually moves in a circle, and we step off in the other room as it keeps on spinning until a grey stone wall that matches this room returns.

“Showing me another secret, Seb?” I question.

“It has occurred to me that hiding secrets from you is like stopping the wind from blowing in a storm,” he replies. I chuckle as I take a good look at the new room we are in.

The throne room, and it is every bit as impressive as the stories of it indicate. A thousand, if not more, giant swords are standing up in the room, and the floor is one large foggy mirror. The fog moves like smoke inside the mirror, and it’s creepy to look at. At the top of the enormous room are thousands of tiny light spheres floating around, bumping into each other, and they are all shining white. The tips of the swords press into the mirrored floor, and the mirror reflects the lights above. There is a path right in the centre of the room that looks like a runway of blood, but it’s just a red rug that leads to the throne at the end. The throne itself is just a simple high back chair with thick red fabric and gold-lined edges. The chair’s arms are two scythes, and the curves of the blades

make the armrests. Right behind the throne is a star made of millions, if not more, diamonds of every colour. The diamonds catch the light, and it seems like it is glowing with its own magic.

“Impressed?” Seb asks, sounding curious.

“A throne is just a chair. It is only important because of who sits on it,” I answer truthfully. Seb laughs and starts walking down the path in the middle.

“Do you know the story of this throne room?” he asks me. “The gods and the swords.”

“No, tell me,” I suggest. He stops in the middle of the throne room and places his hand on one of the swords nearby.

“This realm was once nothing more than dust. Dust and moonlight, an empty realm. The god Ares came here, and in his wisdom, he decided it would be a great city that would respect the dark and his love of being a warrior. So, on the day he bled magic into this world, he made the first reaper from a mortal and asked him what he wanted,” he continues, stepping closer to me. “The mortal wished for the weapons of the gods, and Ares made a thousand and one swords fall from the sky and dig into the ground, killing all of the family the mortal-turned-reaper had. The city floor ran red with blood that slowly changed into the reflective floor you see now. In payment for the lost blood and swords, Ares decreed that every thousand years, a new king or queen may take the throne. They simply had to enter through the gate to the realm and battle a hundred reapers to win. That blood and honour will always be part of this realm he has created.”

“You are forgetting the best part of this old story, my son,” a woman comments in a soft voice. We both turn to see a woman in a long yellow gown walking down the steps from the throne. Her hair is blonde and curly, clipped up into a bun at the back of her head, and she is thin, almost petite, in her build. Her hands stay behind her back as she walks to us and slowly walks in a circle around us before she stops. The final piece of the puzzle of who she is comes as her crown slowly appears out of nowhere. The white crown, a magical object all

by itself, looks like two antler horns have wound themselves around to make the crown shape and meet in the middle, holding three large diamonds.

Seb takes a step closer to me and wraps his arm around my waist, holding me to his side. I resist the urge to smack him for it, knowing there must be a reason. “Ares had attracted so much attention for building this world that his sisters came to see what he had done. Eris, the goddess of chaos, wanted there to be another world to conquer this one, so she forced her sister, Eileithyia, to give birth to a new race. Twin fae were born that day, and the courts of the Seelie and Unseelie were created to give them space in the new world named the Otherworld. Before the gods left, Eris created the portals you see today. One to the Otherworld and one to Earth. It is said there were other portals created by Ares in his joy of the pain and destruction the worlds would come to face. What do you think of this story, young girl?”

“My name is Daesyn,” I curtly reply. The queen moves into my face in an instant, and her hand lashes out, grabbing my chin.

“Bow to your queen, Miss Riverlite. I know who you are, and why I may tolerate your filthy Seelie blood, don’t test me,” she commands. Doubt it or I’d be dead. When I don’t move, Seb pulls me from his mother’s grip and pushes me behind him.

“We have been drinking, and she is clueless about the world. Alun has kept them hidden in a field her whole life with his insane paranoia that something would happen to his children,” he explains, making up an excuse for me.

“The unsociable man has made an unsociable child. I shall speak with him,” she eventually replies. Her eyes find mine as she walks past, and I swear time pauses for a second. I see nothing but a queen who doesn’t want to leave her throne, and I hope she doesn’t see who I really am. Seb and I stay silent as the queen walks to the hidden door and pauses, looking back. “Please do not stay long. This room is for those who belong on the throne, and neither of you are welcome.”

Seb is still as a rock as his mother leaves.

“She is sort of a bitch,” I blurt out, and surprisingly, Seb bursts into laughter. I end up chuckling with him for a long time until both of us pause and smile at each other.

“Want to get drunk?” Seb asks.

“That’s the best idea you’ve had in ages,” I say. He nods his head towards the throne, and I follow him over. I’m highly amused when he finds two bottles of fae wine behind the throne, hidden in an underground space. We both sit with our backs resting against the throne’s chair legs as Seb opens one of the bottles and takes a long drink. He hands it to me next, and I sigh as I taste the liquid on my tongue.

“Tell me something funny. Anything to distract me,” I ask of Seb. “This place is gloomy, and your mother has freaked me out.”

I hand the bottle back to him, and for a second, I really look at the handsome prince. Under all his beauty, there is a rugged sort of darkness to him. He turns and meets my gaze, his half fae eyes finding mine. “Alright.” He pauses, thinking on it. “I met Torfinn when my mother called the gods for guidance, and they sent him instead. He was fifteen when he came here and moved in. My mother is quite obsessed with him, and he just wanted to escape, to finish his task here and meet his mother in her home.”

“Obsessed?” I question, and he nods.

“Let me explain. Ryker was, for a while, almost adopted by my mother. He was strong and won so many fights as a boy, and it attracted my mother’s attention. But Ryker and I are not the ideal sons for her, we never were. I’m not cruel enough despite her attempts to make me so, and Ryker is too loyal, too playful and too kind for her mind games. Ry likes the fae too much, and my mother soon hated him for that. Torfinn is cold, strong, and he was dripping in darkness from the second he came here,” Seb tells me. This isn’t funny.

“He isn’t like that,” I sharply reply.

Seb frowns. “I’ve known him for years. I see the real him, and you will too.”

“This isn’t funny,” I tell him.

His knowing eyes keep on me. “I know. I’m out of funny jokes.”

“So all three of you grew up together as teenagers. The girls around here must not have stood a chance,” I say, needing to lighten the subject.

He laughs a little bit. “Ryker is the player. I choose my partners carefully as many cannot handle me, and Torfinn is a virgin until he meets his mate. The girls love him, as does my mother, but he is untouchable.”

My eyes widen. “He is a virgin? Seriously?”

“Something about demi-god mate magic. That’s why he is an asshole twenty-four seven,” Seb replies around a laugh and hands me the drink back. I take a deep sip.

“Maybe if he got laid, he would lighten up,” I reply.

Seb laughs, and I join in. “I’ve said that to him once or twice, vixen. You would not believe the replies he has given me.”

“Let me guess, he told you to go and fuck yourself?” I say.

We both laugh together, and I don’t need him to answer that question. “I like you, vixen. If I didn’t have to kill you to get the throne, I might actually keep you around.”

I snort. “You’re too confident. That shit will get you killed. Likely by a dark-haired vixen who likes you too.”

He laughs with me before I take another long drink, fully aware this dark prince is crawling his way into my heart. And he is going to kill me quicker than any blade could do.



CHAPTER 21

TORFINN

“There isn’t enough whiskey to deal with these lame events,” Ryker mutters, pulling at his bowtie to loosen it. Downing my own shot of whiskey, I place the tumbler back on the bar.

“Agreed,” I reply, and as usual, I look for her. Daesyn Heartlocke, the woman I caught in the middle of the sky who has since been sneaking into every single one of my thoughts. The woman confuses me to no end and turns me on with just one single look in my direction with her sharp violent eyes.

My dick doesn’t worry about the consequences of fancying a reaper woman, but I sure as fuck do.

“She isn’t here,” Ryker cuts into my search of all the people in the room. “She left with Seb an hour ago.”

“Why?” I sharply ask, forgetting that Ryker is my friend and I trust him with my life. He and Seb are my brothers, the only family, bar my mother, who has ever given a shit about me. We might not be related by blood or by species, but they always have my back. Ryker looks pissed off as he looks away.

“I don’t want to fucking know, mate,” he says. Without a reply, I storm off through the crowds and to the back of the room, using the secret wall to get into the throne room. Seb always goes here when he wants to escape the world around him, but I’ve never known him to bring a girl back to this place. I’m sure Ryker has once or twice. I hear Daesyn’s laugh, followed by the sound of Seb talking as the wall spins. Neither of them notices me as I step behind a sword, watching

them both lying on the steps up the throne. Daesyn's perfect and curvy body is on show in her dark blue dress, and the urge to kiss every bit of her exposed tanned skin is all I can think of for a moment. Her black hair, which looks soft and silky, is falling around her shoulders in waves, and I want to know how her hair would feel in my hands. I want to know what it would be like to kiss her, to own her body and soul.

"Mortals can be enchanting, can they not?" Queen Annalee Husk softly whispers right behind me. Appearing out of the shadows, she walks to my side. Seb and Daesyn are too busy drinking and laughing to notice us, and we are too far away for them to hear our conversation.

The queen touches my arm, and I resist the urge to flinch away from her touch. I don't have to look down at her to see how she looks at me, the desire building in her eyes. If I wanted to, I could have her in my bed in two seconds flat.

But I'd rather chop my own dick off with an axe.

"Some are, yes," I counter, keeping my expression neutral. No one can suspect how I feel for Daesyn, it would ruin many of the plans my mother and I have put together so I can stay here and not in Olympus.

"I am surprised to see affection in your eyes for this reaper girl," Annalee comments, watching Dae with me. Daesyn's laugh is as enchanting as she is, but that is not the main reason I like her. It's her bravery, it's how fearless she is in the face of everything. It's the shadows I see in the corner of her eyes that she never lets win.

It's how she reminds me of myself, and yet I feel myself losing control when I am around her. The memory of showing her my past comes to mind. That was a stupid fucking move. Since when do I ever show anyone my real past or even think of it myself?

I felt pity for her past, the flashback she showed me of herself, a little girl lost in the mortal world.

Annalee keeps on talking when I don't reply. "Affection is not something I ever thought I'd see from you. Ever since you

were sent here, you've been cold and distant from the mortal world. You longed for the gods."

"Perhaps," I reply. She isn't wrong. When I was here as a teenager, all I wanted was to turn eighteen and find out who my parents really were and go home. Only adults can enter Olympus, a cold rule of the gods, and now that I've been up there, I never want to go back.

"She has no god blood in her soul, it would be apparent if she did, like my bloodline. Therefore she cannot be a mate to you," Annalee dryly comments, a vindictive snip to her voice.

I turn and look at her for the first time since she came in here. Annalee might be beautiful by some people's standards, but to me, she will always be a cruel monster who treats her son like shit under her shoe. "Some people are more beautiful and enchanting than the gods could ever be. Why do you think demi-gods exist?"

Her face tightens, and I turn away as she replies, "It still stands that you will bring that girl nothing but heartbreak, and it seems my son is already quite closer to her than you are."

She is right, he is.

And it's for the best. I tighten my hands into fists as I walk away, hearing Daesyn's laugh following me and begging me to come back. To tell her I'm here, to fight for her.

But for the sake of her and myself, I keep walking.

Falling for a mortal would be a sin against the gods...and they have other plans for me nevertheless.



CHAPTER 22

My breath catches as I stand on top of a cliff, looking over an impressive ocean in front of me. The ocean is calm, and the sun is setting in the distance, bursting bright oranges and dark reds across the sky. The colours are reflected in the sea, and I suck in a deep breath, loving the millions of little waves and the smell of the saltwater in the air. I feel free for a brief second, until I realise I cannot move, and the panic sets in.

I've never been the one to be scared, but right at this moment, I'm nothing short of terrified.

Fear cripples me as I hear his voice and feel him standing right behind me.

“Such pretty black hair,

To fall through the air.

Will you die, little faeling?

Or will you survive, to be my forever living bride?”

I grit my teeth as I start walking to the edge of the cliff, my feet once again moving of their own accord.

“When I find you in the real world, whoever you are, I'm going to have fun stabbing you a million times!” I manage to scream, even though the words feel like an empty promise. How can I find the person doing this if I can't see him to know who he is?

My feet eventually find the end of the cliff, and small pebbles fall over the edge, yet I'm powerless to do anything but watch as they fall into the sea below.

“This, my dear, is naught but a warning.

Figure out the cursed rune, or you will be wanting.”

I scream as I step off the cliff, the rushing air whistling past my ears blocks out all the sound, and I gasp, sucking in the salty air like this dream is real. My leg slams hard into the sea first, and I cry out from pain only to suck in a deep gulp of freezing cold water.

Then the world turns to darkness, and I thank it.

I wake with a cry, reaching straight for my leg and pulling back the sheets. My leg hurts like a bitch, and as I push my pyjamas down, I see the long red mark all down my leg, and my knee is really swollen.

“How did that happen?” Mossy asks me, his voice all groggy. I pull my pyjamas up and slide to the edge of the bed.

“Training this morning. It’s nothing, Mossy,” I gently tell him. He doesn’t believe me, I can see it in his eyes, and I’m so freaked out by these dreams that I know I’m being a shitty liar.

“Tell me the truth, and I will go and get Sword to make you a big cup of coffee,” Mossy demands, watching me with those big intelligent eyes.

“I’m having bad dreams, and in the dreams, there is a guy, and he hurts me. I think he gets off on seeing me in pain,” I start off. “But when I wake up, the things he did to me are real. Like this on my leg, it was when he forced me to walk off a cliff and fall into the sea.”

“Forced you?” Mossy asks. “The fucker needs his balls chopped off.”

I smile and pick Mossy up. He wraps his little arms around my neck. “Someone is fucking with me in my dreams, and he will mess up. I can’t see who he is, but I will find him. I know how he sounds, and that’s a start.”

“And I will chop off his balls,” Mossy firmly states, and I try not to chuckle at that image. “You get dressed, and I will get coffee.”

“Doesn’t Sword sleep at all?” I question as Mossy jumps off my shoulder and onto the door handle. The door swings open, and he holds it with his back to stop it shutting.

“No. The anal weirdo is always awake,” Mossy tells me before leaving the room. I take my time getting into my clothes and seeing that it’s five in the morning, way too early for a weekend. Knowing Poppy will be sleeping in until at least nine, I quietly make my way out of the room. Mossy yawns as I sit down in front of the steaming cup of coffee, Sword nowhere in sight.

“Thanks, Sword,” I say quietly, hoping he can hear me. Mossy yawns one more time, and I sigh.

“Go and sleep. I’m going to head outside and have a walk around. I need some fresh air,” I tell him. Mossy looks unsure for a moment before giving in.

“I didn’t have time to nap yesterday as I was busy with getting revenge,” he claims, standing proudly.

“Revenge?” I nervously question.

“Let’s just say Seth should not drink anything in his room. There may or may not be poo in the drinks,” he suggests, and my eyes widen.

“One day, you’re going to get caught,” I point out.

“But that’s not today,” he replies.

“Smartass,” I reply as he jumps off the counter and makes his way to our room, snickering along the way. After finishing my ah-mazing cup of coffee, I use the lift and go outside. Snow has littered the ground overnight, making the forest look like a winter wonderland. It’s pretty but damn cold as I start walking, having no clue where I’m actually heading. After five minutes, I pause, hearing someone nearby. I spin around as Finn comes into view in the distance, walking straight towards me. Wearing a dark navy, fitted suit, he looks way too sexy and perfect for my liking. I pick up a ball of snow, and when he is close, I throw it. It hits him square in the chest, melting against his white shirt, and Finn stops, a look of pure shock on his pretty face.

“Are you a child?”

I laugh, leaning down and rolling up another ball. As I stand to throw it, a snowball hits me in my shoulder, and I glance at Finn in surprise. He shrugs but with the biggest smile on his face, and then there is chaos. I lose track of how many snowballs we throw at each other before giving up and sitting down on a fallen log.

“This suit is drenched and cost a fortune,” Finn tells me, not to brag or because he cares about the suit, just putting it out there.

“If it helps, it looks better wet,” I murmur, my eyes tracing his defined chest through the wet and nearly see-through shirt. I clear my throat and look away.

“Your leg is injured, I saw you limping before I came over,” he says into the silence. “When were you hurt?”

“I fell down the stairs,” I lie.

“There are no stairs in your apartment tree,” he replies, his eyes searching my face. “But if someone has hurt you, you only need to tell me their name. They will be dealt with.”

“This whole test is here to hurt me, and I do not need anyone’s protection,” I reply. “Though, thank you for the offer. Aren’t I lucky to have a demi-god want to protect me?”

“I will protect everyone in my class,” he counters, but I don’t believe him. He doesn’t even look like he believed himself.

“Are we friends enough that I can ask a personal question?”

“Yes,” he answers, and I’m a little surprised. I expected him to say hell no and walk away. Maybe not hell no, but that’s how I pictured him saying it in my head.

“Who were your parents then? Who was the woman I saw in that memory?”

He leans back, crossing his arms and watching the treetops as he tells me. “The woman you saw in the memory was my aunt, and she brought me up from the ages of two to fourteen.

My aunt didn't want me, or any kids for that matter, but my father left her me in his will, and only if she looked after me did she get the mansion and money that he also left. So she dragged me up, making sure I knew daily how much she didn't want me there. When I was fourteen, I noticed I was different from other humans, and the first time I used my powers, I accidentally killed my aunt in a fit of anger. She blew up into gold dust."

"Shit," I whisper, hearing the pain in his voice and in the story of his past. "That must have been so difficult for you."

He humourlessly laughs. "After all that time, you would have thought I hated her, but she was the only mother I knew, and I thought I was a monster for what I did. That night, my real mother came to me, and I met her. Finding out your mother is the goddess Artemis shocked me silent."

"I bet," I whisper. Tentatively I place my hand on his, and he stares down at it.

"My mother brought me here after a year with her in Olympus. She was allowed that time with me in exchange for something she never told me. My mother then made a deal with the queen. I could not leave for a few years to be with the gods," he explains. "So this place became my home."

"I can see why you would like being the son of the goddess of wisdom and moonlight," I reply.

"So you know your Greek gods?" he questions.

"My uncle was obsessed with them. I remember his stories and paintings in his study," I reply with a small smile. "My mother loved music and songs, and my uncle was a Greek god history nut. Together they mostly brought me up, well, until I was eight."

"Then what happened?" he questions.

I meet his gaze. "Earth happened. You saw me as an eight-year-old and how lost I was. No one would help me, and eventually I found help in the form of a powerful demon. He taught me to fight, to steal, to kill. He turned me from a poor, helpless little girl into an assassin."

“I’m sorry you were alone, Daesyn. That is not a fate I would wish on anyone as a child. I know it too well,” he gently tells me.

“For the record, Catherine is a shithead, and you couldn’t have worse taste in women,” I blurt out, needing to end the tense moment.

Finn laughs, a deep laugh that makes me shiver. Gods, I could hear him laugh all day. “Catherine and I are not an item. When you saw her in my rooms, I had just come back and found her naked on my bed. I asked her to leave and kindly suggested she was not my type. She then asked for private lessons, and I promised to find time, publicly, to help her train.”

I smile and look down. “I’m glad she isn’t your type.”

“No, I seem to have a thing for sassy and dangerous assassins,” he softly mutters under his breath. My head shoots up, and I lock my eyes with his. I’m speechless, and I don’t know what to say as he stands up, his expression going cold and all of his body looking tense. I don’t think he meant to say that out loud. “I must leave. See you in class, Daesyn.”

He walks away, and I stand up, my leg hurting a little, but my healing is kicking in. “I was jealous of Catherine, by the way. I’ve never been jealous of anyone because they had someone I want before. You’re a shock to me too, Finn.”

He pauses, just briefly, his hands in tight fists at his side. “*Déesse.*”

Again he walks away, and I haven’t a clue what word he just used. This time, no woman whispers it in my ear because there, in the snow on the ground, a word writes itself.

Goddess.



CHAPTER 23

“Poppy, I believe in you,” I tell her. She finishes pulling her hair up into a high ponytail and surprises me when she quickly wraps her arms around me in a tight hug.

“I’m going to kick her ass,” Poppy claims.

“You’ve got a fighter’s spirit, Pops,” I tell her as she lets go. Catherine is walking into the middle of the clearing, and Poppy walks over. I watch her as Ryker comes to my side.

“Wanna make a bet on who will win?” Ryker asks, his shoulder brushing mine. Over the last few months, Poppy, Ryker, Seb and I have been always around each other, and slowly it’s become natural to have them around. Seb never speaks to me in public, the asshole that he is, but behind closed doors, he is funny and charming. Not to mention good looking. Ryker is always at my side, eating lunch with us, training, and overall being the sexy flirt he always is. I don’t think he means it seriously though. Seb moves to Ryker’s side.

“Are we making a bet then?”

“I’m not betting on my sister,” I add in. It still feels weird to call Poppy my sister.

“Two bottles of royal fae wine says she loses,” Seb says as I watch Poppy. Catherine is saying something to her, likely trying to rile her up so she isn’t thinking straight.

“I bet she wins. If I win, I want the wine, and if I lose, I’ll cook for you for a week,” Ryker replies.

“Done deal,” Seb answers.

“Are you a good cook?” I ask Ryker just as Finn blows the whistle.

“The best. Let me come over and show you,” he quietly whispers to me, his voice full of sexual promises. It’s not just his cooking he wants to show me, that’s for sure. I shake my head, not giving him an answer to that as I watch my friend. Poppy moves quicker than she ever has before, dodging Catherine’s moves like she was born to do so. Taking my advice, all she does is avoid and dodge, slowly wearing Catherine out. I grin when I see Catherine is getting out of breath and a layer of sweat covers her skin. Her movements become a little slower, and Poppy goes in for the kill. Dodging Catherine’s punch, she swoops under her arm and punches Catherine hard in the stomach. Swinging around, she throws herself onto Catherine, knocking her face forward onto the ground, and a crackling smack of her face hitting the ground fills the air. I hold my breath as Poppy stands up, and Catherine rolls over and sits up, blood pouring down from her nose. Finn blows the whistle, and Poppy jumps in the air before running back to me.

“Fuck,” Seb mutters out while Ryker looks happy as fuck. Poppy jumps at me, hugging me so tightly as she jumps with joy.

“I can’t believe it!” she squeals.

“Well done, Poppy,” Ryker says next to us.

“I’m so proud!” I say, feeling so happy for her as she lets me go.

“Sebastian, Daesyn, you’re up next!” Finn calls out.

“Don’t break him, will you, babe?” Ryker jokes, and Seb punches him hard on his arm as he walks past. I chuckle and walk behind Seb to the middle of the clearing.

“I’m not going easy on you this time, vixen,” he states.

“I don’t expect it, Sebby,” I reply, and his eyes burn with the joy of the competition. Finn walks closer to us, his arms crossed tightly.

“As everyone here is now quite well trained in combat, I want us to move onto the next part of our training. Shadow magic,” he shouts so everyone can hear. “There are no limits to what you can do, and the first one to be knocked out, loses.”

“About time,” Seb mutters with a grin.

I wink at him. “This will be fun.”

Finn shakes his head at us, walking back to the edge of the clearing and blowing the whistle. I immediately call all the shadows to me, creating a bubble-like barrier around my body, just in time for Seb to throw a bunch of shadow magic my way. I stumble a little from the sheer force, but my magic holds, though my control on it slips a little bit.

Do not lose control right this moment, Dae. Not in front of them all.

I stretch my hands out to my sides and slam them forward, making a shockwave of shadow magic blast out of me. Seb isn't quick enough to block it, and it sends him flying backwards, crashing into a tree. I don't give him a second as I stretch my hands out, wrapping shadows around two trees nearby. I lift my hands, the shadows ripping the trees from the roots, and I throw them at him. Seb tries to escape, but the trees crash down on him, boxing him in, and I grin when nothing happens for a second.

Then the ground starts to shake. I struggle to stand as the trees blast away from Seb in a swirl of purple and black magic. Surrounding Seb is a shield of shadow and Seelie magic, and Seb is lost in the power. Purple and black veins of magic cover his arms and face, and his eyes glow a bright purple colour just like mine do when I use fae magic.

“Enough!” Finn roars, running to us, but Seb is already running at me, magic spitting and flickering purple embers in his path. Seb crashes into me like a bulldozer, and I gasp, flying backwards across the clearing and rolling to a stop. My magic roars to life, and this time I struggle to do anything to stop it coming out, stop myself from losing control. No one can see my fae magic and shadow magic together, they would

know what I am. I close my eyes, pushing down my power even as every part of me wants to fight.

“I give up!” I say, placing my hands in the air and gritting my teeth.

“It’s a draw. Fae magic is banned, and I did not allow the usage of it,” Finn replies to me. I open my eyes to see Seb and Finn staring each other down, the tension thick in the air.

“Am I interrupting?” Seth’s voice fills the silent air. I turn to see him standing near a very scared looking Poppy and a curious Ryker.

“Why are you here, Seth?” Finn answers, turning away from Seb. Seb walks off into the trees, punching one as he passes it. My moody, angry and fucked up prince.

“To borrow one of your students. Daesyn, to be exact,” Seth smoothly replies. Everyone looks between Seth and me as I climb to my feet. Finn and Ryker, in particular, stare me down as I walk to Seth.

“I didn’t say you could leave, Miss Riverlite,” Finn coldly barks at my back.

“You didn’t say Seb could either, but here we are.” I spin around, walking backwards for a second as I reply. A tic in Finn’s jaw pulses, but eventually he nods and turns his gaze from me.

“Claude and Ryker, you are both up next,” Finn shouts as I get to Seth’s side. He places his hand on my shoulder and uses his magic to make us disappear in flames and reappear right outside a burnt-out house on an empty road. There isn’t much left of the house, just a broken gate and a burnt skeleton of a building in the middle of trees. There isn’t much property to see that nature hasn’t tried to take back.

“Where are we?” I question Seth.

“Your father’s home. The house your family owned for generations,” he gently tells me. I turn away from his red eyes to the ruined house, my eyes going wide, a strange feeling entering my chest. I’ve wanted to see this place for so many years. To know where I was born. To think, I came into this

world in this very house, if my mum's stories were true. "Four years after the family was murdered and all thought to be dead"—he pauses and gives me a slightly amused expression as I'm clearly not so dead—"a fire burnt the house down. The land is untouched, but it does belong to you now."

"Why did you bring me to see this?" I question. It hurts to look at this house, to know what I could have had if my family wasn't murdered. If I hadn't lost everything.

"You never told me much about your father's side, only about your mother and uncle," he replies, looking at the house. "I wanted to search *for* you, to find answers."

"Unless you know who killed them, there isn't much to find," I coarsely reply.

"After bribing some of the other houses down this long road, I've found out Kriffin Heartlocke was very close to the queen. It was even said she wanted them to marry. He chose another, a girl that came out of nowhere and had no family, bar a brother who she apparently left. She claimed she was from Earth, but everyone suspected she was far more than human," Seth tells me, moving close to the gate and placing his hand on the metal. I can't touch it, and even being here feels wrong somehow. "The girl never left the house, and Kriffin stayed with her. In the last year of their lives, the Heartlocke family were scarcely seen."

"We both know the girl wasn't human. She was Unseelie fae," I mutter.

"There is nothing wrong with being Unseelie fae like this city and the queen here believes. Not everything that is dark is wrong, and not everything that is light is right," he replies to me. "I believe you came here for a reason, Syn, and that reason has to do with what is in your blood."

"I came here to escape my fate on Earth. Nothing more," I reply, turning my eyes on him as he moves around me, making me step back. "Talking of Earth, I'm surprised you haven't gone back yet."

“You keep expecting that I will run,” he counters, stepping closer to me. I step back again until my back hits the metal gate, and Seth boxes me in with his body, gripping the gate bars near my head with his hands. I’m overwhelmed by how good he smells, citrus and earthy, and all things delicious. His silence forces me to look up, to get trapped in his gaze. Most people are scared of him, scared of the power of the demon overlords, but for me...it was never that simple. His power frightens me, but everything else simply does not.

“You have a track record of leaving me when I need you, Seth,” I counter.

His eyes trace my face, like he wants to remember every little thing about me. I used to do the same with him. “You were too young for me. Too lost and too scared of the world. It would never have worked between us back then, and I convinced myself walking away was for the best. Until I saw you again and knew nothing I did would get you out of my head.”

“I should run the fuck away from you,” I tell him.

He smirks, leaning closer and cupping the back of my head, pulling me to him. His lips trace mine ever so softly, and I feel like my heart near enough stops beating. “I would chase you forever, Syn.”

Then he kisses me.

A kiss I’ve wanted for five long years, and it does not disappoint. I sink my hands into his suit jacket as his tongue sinks into my mouth, battling with my own. Seth kisses me with expertise, and every touch is almost desperate. It’s addictive.

I gasp as he breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine, our bodies pressed tightly together. “Do you trust me now when I say I’m not leaving you?”

“Yes,” I whisper against my better judgment. “Because if you do, Seth, not even hell could hide you from my vengeance.”

He grins. "I would expect nothing less, Syn. Nothing less at all."



CHAPTER 24

The darkness of the room bleeds away, a gleaming light burning the empty room into existence, and I can only stare, wondering where I am, knowing that this isn't a normal dream. I don't think I am even allowed them anymore; they seem like a distant memory. Now it's nothing but these nightmares that never seem to go away. Slowly, water starts to trickle down the walls of the room, pouring onto the floor at my feet, and I try to move, try to do anything, but I can only stand still as the room slowly begins to fill with water.

Can I drown in a dream?

When the water is up to my knees, he appears in the room, stepping out of the wall like it's not really a wall at all. The water doesn't touch him, it simply parts as he walks in, leaving a gap around his legs. His face still remains hidden in the hood of his cloak.

"Oh to see your struggle,

How I wish to see you buckle under me—"

I cut him off. "Will you just fuck off with the songs? What is wrong with you?"

"Daesyn Heartlocke, your days are trickling to an end," he answers. This time he doesn't sing it, and I'm surprised he actually listens to me. The rising water hits my stomach, and I swallow down the panic I'm starting to feel.

"Who are you?" I ask. It's the only question I want—no, need—to know.

His laugh echoes around the room. “You will find out soon. I will find you in the real world long before you find me in your dreams.”

He starts to walk away, and I grit my teeth from the feeling of the cold water rising. “Find me quick, and I promise to end your sorry excuse for a life.”

He laughs as he steps through the wall, disappearing and leaving me with only the rising water. I struggle and fight against the magic I can feel holding me still, forcing me to its will, but nothing works. I try to call my powers, and eventually I just scream even as the water rises to my neck. The lights start to flicker out just as the water covers my mouth, and I hold my breath for as long as I can. Seconds bleed into minutes underwater, where I can see nothing but darkness, and eventually I have to gasp, sucking in the cold water. I struggle for air, coughing and gasping on the water even as everything disappears around me.

I WAKE UP WITH A SCREAM, gasping and coughing on thin air. I fall out of my bed, coughing out water from my lungs that spreads across the floor. The door flies open, and Ryker runs in, followed by Poppy. Both of them stare at me in shock as I finish coughing up a swimming pool amount of water on the floor.

“What the fuck?” Ryker exclaims, leaning down and picking me up into his arms. I wrap my arms around his neck, feeling too weak to tell him to piss off and put me down.

“I will get towels!” Poppy mutters, sounding completely confused and worried all at the same time.

“What happened?” Ryker softly asks me, picking up my blanket and wrapping it around my shoulders. Mossy comes jumping into the room, landing on my lap and staring up at me.

“Have you been swimming?” Mossy asks, looking at the floor. It takes a lot of effort to shake my head. Poppy comes

back into the room with several towels and places them on the floor, and only then do I notice the scythe in her hand.

“Where did you get that?” I question.

“They magically appeared an hour ago by the door. There is one for you,” she explains, using her feet to wipe the floor with the towels. “That’s why Ryker came up here. The Unseelie rebels are attacking the gates, and some have even gotten through. Ryker came to protect us just before the doors were locked for the night, according to the note on the scythe.”

“A lot happened while I was sleeping, huh?” I croak out and clear my throat a few times. It still feels sore, but my body is healing itself quickly as usual.

“Wanna explain the water?” she asks.

“I had a bottle of water and drank too much,” I blatantly lie. Poppy, Ryker and Mossy look at me, waiting for a better lie, but I just close my eyes. I don’t climb out of Ryker’s lap like I should do, and neither does Mossy move.

“I’m going to stay in the living room, keep watch and all,” Poppy says. “Wanna keep me company, Mossy?”

“I can be your snack bitch,” Mossy replies. I choke out a laugh, and Ryker can’t help but laugh with us. Poppy looks horrified.

“That’s not a saying, Mossy,” Poppy exclaims as Mossy jumps on her shoulder. “You really need to stop listening to Dae’s terrible language.”

“Nope,” Mossy snickers, and Poppy just chuckles as she leaves the room. Ryker keeps his arms around me over the blanket, and he feels incredibly warm.

“You feel hot, are you sick?” I question. “Can half hellhound, half reapers even get sick?”

“My body is reacting to yours, making me warm so you are not cold,” he softly explains. “It’s just something that happens with m—”

He stops himself, and I frown at him. “Happens with what?”

“Nothing for you to worry about,” he counters. “I’m worried about you.”

“Is that why you came here when you heard about the attack?” I question. “You didn’t need to do that. I can defend myself.”

“I’m well aware you can,” he replies with a smirk. “But my hellhound wanted to be here, and he is a stubborn bastard.”

I snort. “Like you, you mean.”

“Possibly. I’m stubborn when there is something I want,” he replies, his eyes drifting down to my lips. The room suddenly becomes thick with tension.

“Thank you for coming. I’m sure you made Poppy feel safer,” I say, needing to change the subject. He nods, looking away from my face. I trace my eyes over the hellhound, his thick wavy black locks of hair that always look different every day but somehow suit him to a T. His jaw is perfect, better than any artist could sculpt, and everything from his neat eyebrows to the dimples that appear when he smiles is addictive to look at. Ryker Maddock is a truly handsome shifter. His blue eyes, which remind me of deep dark waters, lock onto mine. For the first time, I wonder what he sees when he looks at me. I’m more curious why I care what he thinks when he sees me, but I do. My heart seems to beat that much faster when he is close to me like this. Our friendship is so natural, it feels like it’s so easy to be around Ryker, and it’s never been easy for me to be around anyone before.

“I didn’t come here for Poppy, Dae,” he gently tells me. “Don’t you know that by now?”

“I do,” I admit, biting down on my lip. “Ryker, it’s—”

“Don’t say that or give up on the idea just yet. You don’t know me well enough,” he gently interrupts. “I’m well aware I’m not the only man in your life, and I’m a possessive son of a bitch, so this is going to be so complicated. But for now, let me be your friend.”

“Friend?” I question.

“Yes, you do seem to have two. A monkey and a pretend sister. Why not add a possessive and totally crushing on you hellhound to the mix?” he asks, and I can’t help but smile at him, which somehow ends up with us both chuckling.

“Okay, friend,” I draw out the word. “Tell me something about yourself.”

“How about a few things?” he suggests, and I nod, placing my hand on his chest over his shirt. “I love the smell of your hair, it reminds me of sugared strawberries and cream on a sunny day. I used to fucking love those as a kid. Sometimes you smell like coffee, which I am always a fan of.”

“While we are on the subject,” I say. “You smell like a mixture of lemon and earthy scents. It’s really nice.”

“Good to know I smell nice,” he chuckles. Somehow he pulls us both down onto the slightly damp bed, covering us with the blanket. I end up snuggled into his side, his arm around my waist as I lie my head on his chest. It feels good not to be alone for once. “What’s your favourite song?”

“‘Chasing Cars’ by Snow Patrol,” I tell him. It’s not my favourite song in the world, because one of the fae songs my mother used to sing is. One about how the fae are heartless and cruel. The song of the Seelie. He surprises me by singing some of the lyrics to the song I mentioned, and his deep voice really suits the song.

“It can be our song,” he eventually says. “Seeing as I’m lying here with you.”

“But our world is too fucked up to forget,” I murmur. His grip tightens on me.

“Daesyn, every world is fucked up. It’s who you have stood at your side, battling through it with you, that matters. And trust me, Dae, you’re not alone anymore,” he gently tells me.

“What’s your favourite song?” I question.

“I have many,” he admits.

“Ryker...how did you know I was fae? What is ‘The Curse of the Fae’ song?” I question.

“One day I will tell you how I know you’re fae, Unseelie fae to be exact, and why I promised to protect you from the first moment we met,” he gently tells me. “But not tonight. You’re not ready to hear it.”

“Okay,” I whisper. Strangely, I trust that he’s right.

“And the song of the cursed rune is one all the fae slaves sing in the castle. I’ve heard it a million times, but I would never sing it out loud,” he tells me, his voice sounding almost fearful. “I am not fae, and some songs must only be sung by them.”

“I wish I could remember it,” I admit.

“So do I,” I hear him whisper so quietly, I know he didn’t want me to hear. My eyes close at some point, and I drift off to sleep, knowing the nightmares won’t come when I am in his arms.

Who would want to fight a hellhound?



CHAPTER 25

I wake up the next morning feeling warm and toasty, such an unusual feeling that when I blink my eyes open, I'm surprised to see I'm lying on a naked chest. What the fuck happened last night? Everything comes back to me in a rush, the nearly drowning dream and Ryker comforting me. We must have fallen asleep together, and somehow his shirt disappeared overnight. I take a second to look over him as he sleeps, his head resting on his bent arm, making the muscles in his arms stretch. His flat stomach ripples with a six-pack, and right above his chest is a strange red tattoo. It's a load of runes in a circle, none of which I've seen before, and in the centre is half of a rune. The other part is empty. I stroke my hand down his chest to the tattoo, running my fingers over the raised skin.

"If you keep doing that, being your friend is going to be impossible," Ryker grumbles in a groggy, sleep-filled voice, and it's super sexy. I grin and move my hand away as he sits up, smiling down at me.

"What is that tattoo for?" I question as he runs a hand through his messy hair.

"Every hellhound belongs to a pack, and that is my pack mark," he explains as I climb out of bed, standing on the damp towels on the floor. "We are given it when we turn eighteen."

"That's—" I pause, going speechless as Ryker climbs out of bed, and his boxers are tenting an impressive erection. Holy shit, he is big. Ryker grins at me and picks up his trousers off the floor.

"Impressive?" he questions.

“Yep,” I mutter like a girl who has never seen the outline of a cock before. Wanting to slap myself silly, I start picking up the towels off the floor as a distraction. “When did you get changed last night?”

“My clothes were damp from the water, and so were yours. I figured I’d hang mine out to dry, and you could use my body heat to dry yourself up,” he replies.

“Thanks for staying last night,” I say, placing the towels on the side.

He meets my gaze. “Anytime you need me, Dae, just call. I can hear you.”

“You’re quite the charmer in the mornings, aren’t you?” I question as he pulls his shirt on. “I need coffee to come up with a decent reply.”

“Let’s get you some coffee then,” he suggests, opening my bedroom door and coming to a halt. I walk over to see Sword standing in the doorway, his little hands on his hips, glaring up at us.

“I must clean,” Sword exclaims.

“Good morning to you too,” I say as Ryker steps aside and Sword rushes into the room, muttering something about messy adults in his home.

“Is that a Bwbachod?” Ryker questions, looking over his shoulder. I yawn and stumble into the living area, coming to a halt when quite a few pairs of eyes are looking at me and Ryker.

Poppy and Mossy are sitting on the stools, holding drinks, and next to Poppy is Seb, who is glaring at Ryker over my head.

Finn is the most surprising of all, and I really didn’t expect to see him in here. He leans against the counter, his eyes burning with possessive anger. There is way, way too much testosterone in this room this early in the morning.

Finn opens his pretty mouth to say something that’s no doubt judgy as hell, and I hold a hand up. They all watch me

as I slip next to Seb, sitting on my regular stool and wrapping my hands around the coffee cup.

“It’s so, so good to see you this morning,” I lovingly tell my drink, taking a sip right after. I sigh.

“Now Daesyn has found her one true love, coffee, can you explain what happened last night?” Seb growls at Ryker.

“Why, jealous your boy wasn’t at home with you?” I tease.

Seb’s eyes narrow on me, anger burning right through his gaze. If he could set my ass on fire, I bet he would right about now. “No, the castle was attacked, and dumbass over here is on the missing list. Everyone is searching for him.”

“Oh shit,” Ryker grumbles. “Hey, are those pancakes?” He is quick to get distracted, leaving the conversation for the food. Mossy gives him the stink eye as he digs into his favourite breakfast choice.

“Okay, so Seb is here to check on his bestie, and why are you here?” I point a finger at Finn.

He still looks pretty pissed, but he swallows it down and answers somewhat calmly. Even if his version of calm is fucking terrifying. “I came to escort you and Poppy to a surprise test. I was planning to pick Sebastian and Ryker up on the way, but it seems I am *lucky* enough to find you all in the same place.”

“Lucky you,” I say, clearing my throat. Finn smiles, and it’s like a fox smiling at a rabbit, before standing up.

“You slept in. Do get dressed, we must leave,” he coldly tells me before heading towards the lift. He presses the button, and I stare at his tense back, feeling strangely guilty. Nothing even happened with Ryker and me, and neither has it with Finn...but I’ve felt more than something for them both.

Fuck, this is a mess. Hopefully one or two of my crushes somehow becomes super undesirable overnight.

But there is more chance of Sword becoming king of the reapers and winning the academy.

“Do you want to stay for breakfast?” I call out to Finn.

He turns his head back, his glowing gold eyes making me a little fearful of his mood. “No.”

The lift opens, and he steps inside, practically slamming his fist into the buttons, and the doors slide shut.

“Well, that wasn’t awkward,” Mossy declares, you know, making it more awkward than before. Grabbing a piece of toast, I rush my ass back into my room and shut my door to get changed. After quickly braiding my hair and changing into plain black high-waisted leggings, a tank top, and finally my boots, I head back into the living room. Poppy is ready, and Seb is talking quietly by the lift with Ryker. Both of them look up as I walk in, before turning back to each other in what seems like a heated discussion.

“Ready for another test?” I question Poppy. She grins and nods.

“I’ve tucked Mossy into my bed. He stayed up all night in case ‘the dog tried to eat you.’ His words, not mine,” she explains to me.

The hellhound eating me in the right way could be a *very* good night indeed. Shame it would come with complications like feelings.

Pulling myself out of my dirty thoughts, I ask, “Got your dagger on you?”

“Yes, and where did you get that other dagger from?” she asks me, eyeing the new dagger on my left hip. Now that I have three daggers and my whip, I’m practically building up my collection. Though I still have my eyes on Finn’s dagger. That pretty thing calls for my stabby hands all over it.

“It’s Catherine’s. Mossy got me it,” I tell her, and she chuckles, shaking her head.

“You’re making an enemy for us both there,” she says and looks over her shoulder, lowering her voice. “But I’m secretly super happy you dislike her as much as I do.”

“Dislike is putting it mildly,” I reply, just as the lift opens and Finn walks back in. Silently he waves his hand in a circle,

and a portal opens on the ground, looking like a big black hole.

“After you,” Poppy gently suggests. Ryker and Seb walk to Finn’s side, just as Finn meets my eyes.

Fuck, he looks mad.

“Fae wine is great for relaxing,” I say as I step to the edge of the hole. “For your information.”

“Jump, Daesyn,” he impassively demands. Rolling my eyes, I step off into the shadow and fall straight down. Shadows whip around my body, and I feel like I can’t breathe for a second before I fall out of the darkness and right onto a concrete road, right above the white line in the middle with cat’s eyes either side. I quickly step out of the way, looking around at the very human town we seem to be in. It’s a high street with a big shopping centre waiting in the distance and dozens of town terrace houses surrounding it, all crammed into one small area. Humans don’t look at me as they walk down the paths leading to the shopping centre, and I realise I must be magically cloaked.

I need that shit, because if my old boss sensed me here, I’d see his ugly face right about now.

Seb jumps through next, and I turn to watch him as he straightens up, glancing around us. His voice drips with disgust. “Humans.”

“I’m sure they would say the same about you,” I reply. “Supes are disgusting here.”

“How did you grow up around them?” he questions. I don’t answer, and eventually, Ryker followed by Poppy jump through the portal before it disappears.

“Wow, this is Earth!” Poppy exclaims, her eyes taking in everything from the tiny cafe to the screaming baby in a woman’s arms as she passes right by us.

Suddenly the earth begins to shake, harsh tremors that make all of us fall to our feet and the street to descend into chaos. The screaming starts to irritate me straight away, making it difficult to see what is going on. The tremors stop,

and I climb to my feet quickly, my gaze filling with the growing sphere of flames stretching right above us and boxing us in a dome shape.

“What the actual fuck?” Ryker shouts, helping Poppy to her feet. We all freeze as a voice speaks, and I recognise it as the royal stuck-up queen herself.

“Placing one’s people before themselves is a true test of royalty. This test is simple. Each of you has been placed in groups of four, and the task ahead is this. Save as many humans as you can. The group who saves the least will never leave Earth alive. Begin.”

“Crap,” I mutter, watching the dome and noticing that it’s starting to shrink.

“How do we stop them getting burnt? Our magic combined would struggle to push that back!” Poppy shouts in horror. “It’s going to kill us!”

“Grab as many people as you can, and I will find something. Meet here in ten minutes!” I tell them all. Ryker and Seb look between each other, and Poppy immediately runs to a group of people.

“I think we should—”

“Look, I’m not being bossy, but you guys don’t know Earth like I do. Trust me,” I plead with them. Not wasting any more time, I leave them as I turn and head for the shopping centre. I rush inside and dodge people as I get to the electronic map in the middle of the centre. The touch screen map is flickering in and out as I search the centre’s map for what I’m looking for. Eventually, I find it and memorise the directions before running back outside to see Poppy, Seb and Ryker waiting with a big group of at least a hundred humans, everyone from women, men, children and a few babies.

“This way!” I shout to them, waving a hand.

“Follow us, and I promise we will save you from the fire!” Poppy shouts. I don’t look back as I head inside until I come across a little girl hiding behind a sign. I rush to her, and without saying a word, I pick her up, and she wraps her small

body around me, crying in my ear. My heart pounds in my chest as we get to the staircase, and I kick the doors open and hold them as they catch up with me.

“What’s the plan?” Poppy asks.

“There is a big swimming pool down here, on the right, you won’t miss the signs. Get everyone in the water and get ready for us to work together to make a shadow shield around them under the water,” I explain. I glance up, seeing the fire dome inches away from the glass roof of the building.

“Fucking brilliant!” Ryker shouts. “Right, everyone follow the handsome one!” I chuckle as the humans do just that, and Poppy goes with them, Seb following a little later.

I wait until the last person is in and glance across the shopping centre.

“Don’t let me die,” the little girl in my arms begs. Just as the glass cracks, I run through the doors, cradling the little girl to me.

“Never,” I tell her, truly sincere. Thick black smoke fills the top of the stairwell as I get to the bottom and rush through the doors. I find the sign for the aqua world and run as fast as I can past the reception, jumping over the broken glass doors to the changing rooms. I rush through the changing rooms and out into the pool, where Poppy is helping some of the children down.

“We don’t have much time!” I warn my team, sitting down on the edge as I shout. I eye a woman on her own in front of me in the deep water. “Can you hold her?”

“Of course,” she nods, picking her off me. Swimming to the middle of the pool, Ryker and Seb are avoiding the humans. Poppy joins us last, and I breathe in deeply.

“Ready?” I ask them.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Poppy nervously asks. “I’m not as powerful as you guys.”

“Yes, you are, you just don’t know it,” I remind her. Her cheeks go red as she takes my hand, and Seb takes my other.

Ryker finishes the circle, and they all close their eyes.

“Everyone don’t freak out and please try to stay still!” I shout, and then I close my own eyes and feel the magic hit me like a brick, our combined power flowing through us in waves.

“Now!” Ryker demands, and I let the power go, willing the shadows to make a shield. I open my eyes as the shadows spread out of us in our own dome shape, swallowing the humans in the water and pulling them down with us as we sink under the water. The humans look shit scared, staring at the water surrounding the whole dome of shadows we have made to protect us all. I look up as the ceiling collapses in, bits of the ceiling crashing into the water below and the flames and smoke smothering the space above them.

“Everyone okay?” I ask, even as I start to feel the pressure of holding this magic so long. My body aches and sweat trickles down the sides of my forehead.

“I can do this,” Poppy tells herself and me. Ryker is concentrating, but Seb, his magic so much like mine, meets my gaze. His eyes glow purple, glowing like I know mine are right now.

“There is something dangerous about being born of darkness and fae,” he tells me.

“And something so impressive all at the same time,” I counter. He smirks and lifts his eyes, his thick black eyelashes making him look so handsome.

The queen’s voice fills the space around us. “Congratulations, you have passed the test.”

As soon as she stops speaking, a portal appears under each of our feet, and I scream as I fall through it, my magic snapping back into my body. I slam face-first onto a wooden floor, and I roll over, watching as the portal disappears, only one drop of water dripping onto my face. The others all slam out of their portals as I climb to my feet, finding Finn sitting on my stool, drinking from my favourite coffee mug.

“The humans, are they going to survive?” I demand, placing my hands on my hips.

“Yes. Each of them was portaled outside to safety, and their minds have been wiped of recent memories,” he tells me, picking up my cup and taking a deep sip. His smug and quite amused face tells me he did that on purpose.

“Did we win?” Seb asks the second most important question.

“Yes, you saved the most humans and far more than any other team did. Four students have been lost, including Claude,” Finn tells me. I want to feel bad, but that fucker was an asshole. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, man. It was all Daesyn’s idea,” Ryker replies, stretching his arms above his head.

“That doesn’t surprise me at all,” Finn comments and stands up. “In celebration, there is fae wine in the fridge. I’m sure Sword can help you.”

“Won’t you stay?” I ask when he tries to walk away. “I mean, drink with us. You trained us after all.”

“No, I did not,” he counters. “And it is best I leave. My place is not with mortals anymore, and I cannot keep pretending it will be when this test is over. My time with mortals will be over.”

“We won’t tell if you don’t,” Ryker suggests. Finn doesn’t reply to any of us, and he simply walks to the lift to leave, like he doesn’t belong here. “And you can walk away from us all you want, Finn, but you know as well as I do your home isn’t with the gods. Blood doesn’t always make family, mate.”

But he still walks away.



CHAPTER 26

Soft music fills my ears as I open my eyes and see that I'm lying on a floor, staring up at a glass ceiling, seeing nothing but stars above that. The stars are unusual, not the same as Earth or the Reaper Realm; these stars remind me of another home.

The Otherworld.

"A clue for a truth,

A lie for a rune,

Sweet Daesyn,

oh, how I love to sin."

He sings to me as I sense his presence nearby, even before he is standing over me.

"Take off your cloak hood!" I demand, wishing I could move, wishing I could punch this motherfucker.

"You still aren't looking for the answers, Daesyn. You can't find me without them," he coaxes, kneeling down at my side. I try to scream, but no sound comes out, and I try to move, but it's pointless as he strokes his fingers down my cheek. His fingers drift down my jaw, slowly past my neck, and he stops right above my breasts. If this asshole feels me up, I'm going to never sleep again. Then how can he have me?

"One day soon, I will finally have you, and you will be mine."

hand shakes my shoulder as I wake up and open my eyes to stare into gold ones leaning over me. Finn's eyes are full of

concern, his expression darker than ever.

A “What are you doing here?” I question, noticing I’m on the sofa and remembering that I fell asleep here at some point last night. Training for the last few weeks has been nothing short of brutal thanks to Finn’s bad mood, and my body aches. I want to hope Finn is training us all hard because he knows we will need to be fitter and stronger than ever for future tests.

And not just because a certain green-eyed monster has taken over. Finn looks almost normal in blue jeans and a white T-shirt, his cloak resting on a nearby stool. I don’t know what to make of this laid-back version of Finn.

“I sensed something...different when I passed here on my walk.” His brow furrows, and he straightens as I sit up. He sits on the sofa next to me, his whole side pressed against mine. It isn’t an unwelcome closeness. “But I found nothing here. It was gone by the time I came up in the lift.”

So my nightmare man leaves when Finn is near?
Interesting.

“Thanks for checking in on me,” I reply, meaning it. He might just have saved me from another near-death dream experience.

His eyes narrow. “What are you not telling me, Daesyn?”

“Nothing,” I quickly reply. I clear my throat and look away. “Why are you up so late?”

“I need very little sleep,” he explains. “Two to three hours is enough to sate me.”

“Lucky you,” I say, leaning back on the sofa. “Are you still mad at me?”

He rests his head in his hands, his elbows leaning on his knees. “I was never angry at you, Daesyn, but at myself.”

“That doesn’t make much sense to me, Finn,” I gently reply.

He turns and looks at me. His stare is too much, too intense, too full of something I don’t think I’ve seen much

before. “Gods are not allowed to love mortals.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “But your mother...”

“I am a forbidden child and born from a love that came at a high price. Why do you think my human father is dead and my mother could not be around me for most of my childhood?” he rhetorically questions.

“Finn,” I gently breathe out his name and place my hand on his upper arm. He tenses at my touch, but he doesn’t move away. He doesn’t look away from me, the tension in the room becoming so high it’s hard to breathe. But neither of us move, neither one of us tries to make this easier for ourselves.

I can see why mortals fall for gods now. Falling is the easy part, loving them is what makes it completely worth it.

“I told you once I would guide you through the darkness, Dae,” he gently tells me. “But I think you’re the one that needs to show me how to escape the dark. Every thought I have about you is dark. It’s forbidden and dangerous. Tell me how to escape this.”

“You don’t,” I whisper as I lean forward and press my lips to his. Fuck the gods. Fuck their rules. I will worry about them later. Finn freezes for a second, but that’s all the time he resists before he kisses me back. His hand cups my cheek as his lips softly brush against mine, like he is memorizing every inch of my lips. I deepen the kiss, and he groans, pulling me onto his lap. My legs spread around his large thighs as he sinks his hands into my hair.

“Not the angel fucker!” Mossy cries out, and like a bucket of ice-cold water is thrown over us, we both freeze and Finn breaks away from me. I climb off his lap, glaring at Mossy, who is sitting on the kitchen counter. “You have bad choices in men. First, you kiss the demon overlord, then you spend the night with the dog, and now you’re kissing the angel fucker. I’m judging you.”

“Says the monkey who sleeps with a tiny stuffed bear, who you hide under my bed in the morning. I know you love that thing as more than a friend! I’m judging you right back,

buddy!” I counter, placing my hands on my hips as I stare him down. If monkeys could blush, Mossy is as he jumps off the counter and walks himself back to our room. Turning to Finn, I start talking even before I see his angry eyes. “Sorry about him...”

“You have a relationship with the demon overlord?” Finn sharply asks.

I lower my hands to my sides. “Yes, he is my friend and has saved my ass a lot of times before I came here. Yes, we kissed, but he hasn’t talked to me since, so I wouldn’t worry too much about him. As for Ryker, nothing happened. I had a bad dream, and he stayed to keep me safe. As for us? One kiss doesn’t give you the right to judge me. I know as well as you do that you’re going to walk out that door and leave me alone. Right?”

“Daesyn...,” he whispers my name, the anger and jealousy fading from his eyes. “If things were—”

“Different? Or you wanted to fight for me?” I humourlessly laugh, walking to the lift and pressing the button for him. “I’m very used to being the only one who fights for me. It’s been that way since I was eight. You can leave.”

Finn looks like he is about to say something, and my heart pounds...almost begging him to. But he doesn’t say a word, walking into the lift and pressing the button for it to go down. I don’t look back as the doors close, and I head to my room, tears falling down my cheeks. I wipe them away, reminding myself who I actually am as I climb into bed. Mossy silently climbs onto my chest and wraps his arms around my neck.

“They don’t deserve you,” Mossy whispers. I lie looking up at the ceiling above me, knowing sleep is not going to come easily.

Mossy is right, they don’t, but it doesn’t make my heart feel any better, that’s for sure.



CHAPTER 27

“**W**hat’s that?” I question Poppy as I walk into the living room and sit on my stool, wrapping my hands around my coffee that is waiting for me.

“A letter from my parents. They are happy to hear we are both still alive after four months here at the academy. Father hints about the whole two months left,” she says, folding up the letter and setting it down. “Is it mad that I’m considering just fighting to the end?”

“No, it’s not mad,” I say. “The queen may have chosen your name, but the gods are said to be puppet masters behind everyone that comes into this place. You are feeling like you should honour the test set before you. I get it.”

“Because you feel the same way?” she questions.

“I’m half Unseelie fae,” I tell her, just ripping off the secret like a Band-Aid. “Ryker knows, and I suspect Sebastian does. I’m not sure about Finn. And of course, Seth and Mossy know. Welcome to the deepest darkest part of Daesyn Secret-ville.”

“Why in the world would you agree to come here with me? My father must not have known, or he would be so mad!” she asks, mostly rambling to herself. “They kill Unseelie here or worse, enslave them. They hate your kind with a passion that I’ve never understood.”

“Correction: they hate half of who I am,” I reply. “And a lot more people on Earth want me dead than here in some respects. At least I’m not openly hunted here.”

“Oh Daesyn,” she sighs. “You’re a bit of a troublemaker wherever you go, aren’t you?”

“That’s what makes me the fun friend you’ve always needed,” I reply with a grin. She laughs and shakes her head.

“Can you show me Unseelie magic?” she asks with wide, excited eyes.

“Not in the city, it’s not safe. Who knows how they control the enslaved Unseelie here. They could sense my magic,” I reply. “But when we are away from here, yes. Though I’m not twenty-one yet, so I don’t have a unique power.”

“How long until you’re twenty-one?” she questions.

“In a month,” I reply with a sigh. “I think to get my power, I need to be in the Otherworld before I turn twenty-one, and I can’t go there. So it’s likely I will never find out what I was meant to have.”

“Why can’t you go to the Otherworld?” she asks. “I mean, you might have to sneak in, but reapers do it all the time to go to fae parties and gatherings.”

“The last thing my uncle told me was to never come back to the Otherworld. He is most likely dead, and he saved me,” I admit, biting on my lip.

“So you grew up in the Otherworld?” she asks. I nod but don’t reply, not wanting to go into the most painful memories of my life. Picking up on my silence, Poppy reaches across and places her hand on my shoulder.

“You might not be my real sister, but you are my dearest friend. I will take your secret to my grave and even beyond that. Thank you for telling me,” she promises, and I smile softly at her, feeling good about my decision to trust her.

“I think your kindness is rubbing off on me, Pops. I’m feeling the need to hug you,” I admit. She laughs and wraps her arms around me, and I hug her back.

“As long as your ‘stab first and ask questions later’ attitude doesn’t wear off on me, I’m happy,” she tells me, letting me go. We both finish off our breakfast before getting

changed, and I briefly wonder where Mossy has gotten himself to before heading into the lift with Poppy.

“Seen Mossy today?”

“Not since he snuck out last night, no,” she replies. “I’m sure he’s just hiding low somewhere.”

“Or one of the many people he has been pranking has finally caught him,” I counter, feeling a tad worried. Nevertheless, I can’t be late to training, especially when we haven’t had a test in a few weeks now. The lift opens, and we step out onto the dead leaves littering the ground. “Do you know how many of us there are left in the academy?”

“Forty-five, by my last count,” she tells me. “We lost four in the human test, and the rest were accidents in training. I heard Professor Artic chopped the head off one of the guys because he directly challenged him. I’m thankful we have Finn as our teacher.”

“This place is crazy,” I mutter, shaking my head. I pause, nearly tripping up a step when I see a familiar face walking through the trees towards me. Seth looks like he owns the forest and everything in it with each step, and he steps right into my space and leans to kiss me. I dodge out of the way and glare at him. “Are you out of your demon mind?”

“Nice to see you as well, Syn,” he replies with a sexy smirk.

Refusing to play his demon games, I turn around and walk quicker to the training area. Poppy hurries to catch up to my side, and Seth’s laugh fills my ears. Suddenly flames burst into the space in front of me as he portals and reappears. I cross my arms and narrow my eyes.

“What do you want?”

“Why are you mad?” he questions.

“Can’t you figure it out?” I reply. “You know, in the whole month you’ve disappeared on me!”

He steps into my space. “You must focus on this test and this place. I have many responsibilities back on Earth I cannot

always ignore. I was only a call away.”

“I don’t have your number or a phone here, for that matter,” I snap.

“I don’t mean that. You call for me, Syn, and I will be at your side no matter what,” he softly explains, gently placing his hands on my upper arms. “I am sorry for the inexcusable absence. My daughter found herself in trouble, and Queen Evie’s children were almost hurt in a series of assassination attempts.”

“Seems my boss is hellbent on finishing my failed job,” I mutter. He is an idiot. If I couldn’t kill Evie, then no one in his employment has a shot.

“I will find your old boss and destroy him.” He smiles, and it’s pretty scary to see the look of sheer joy at the thought of killing on his face. “If my brother and his mate don’t rip him to pieces first.”

“Good luck,” I say, actually meaning it. “Now I need to get to training.”

“I will walk with you,” Seth says and steps to my side. “How has it been here?”

“Brutal but enlightening,” I answer. “I’ve made some interesting friends.”

“They must be special for you to consider them interesting,” he replies, looking down at me. His eyes glow for a brief second. “Should I be jealous?”

“If you had a claim over me, perhaps,” I reply as we get to the edge of the clearing. Everyone, including Finn, Ryker and Seb look our way as Seth pulls me into his arms and kisses me. The kiss is passionate and filled with a possessive claim I’m powerless to deny. When he breaks the kiss, I’m a little breathless.

“I’ve still not forgiven you for leaving,” I tell him.

He brushes his lips against mine one more time. “I will always come back, Syn. Always.”

Seth lets me go and, without a goodbye, portals himself away in flames. If that overlord wasn't so fucking sexy, I might actually be able to keep my brain turned on when he is around. Not just the rest of my body.

"You are late," Finn growls at me as I walk to the group, and I don't bother replying to his grouchy mood. I damn well know what caused it this time. Ryker and Seb are nowhere to be seen as I stop by Poppy.

She lowers her voice. "Ryker was pretty mad and stormed off. Sebastian went after him. Maybe don't kiss other guys in front of guys who have crushes on you."

"I will take your advice into careful consideration," I reply, and she chuckles.

"No, you won't," she replies.

"See, you know me so well," I counter with a smile just for her. Finn walks in front of all of us with his hands behind his back and stops, staring right ahead. I run my eyes over his wide shoulders, the way his tight white shirt fits him to perfection and his tight black trousers don't hide much, that's for sure. Gods...why couldn't you make him ugly and less fuckable?

That would make it so much easier to be annoyed at him and not stare like a lovesick puppy.

"Today we have a special class." He waves a hand, and fifteen or more urns appear on the floor in the clearing. With another click of his hand, a silver scythe appears out of the shadows in his hand. "Communing with the dead through the spirits is an essential part of being a reaper. Each of you will call a link to the spirit realm through a spirit and ask their permission to speak with the soul inside the urn. You won't see the spirit or hear them, that is impossible, but that is part of being a reaper. Trusting the unseen and unknown in the darkness. The soul knows one word, and you must get the word from them to pass. Everyone who fails this test will not leave this clearing."

"I've never done this," I admit to Poppy.

She shrugs her shoulders. “Me neither. I’ve heard it’s easy to call a spirit but harder to actually speak to a soul through them. My dad told me he has done it several times.”

“First time for everything,” I mutter just before Finn raises his hand and we all go silent.

“Poppy, Daesyn, Catherine and Elliot, come forward and stand behind one of the urns of your choice,” he instructs, never once looking my way. He hasn’t so much as glanced at me since I asked him to leave after that kiss.

Though I’m not surprised. He looks like someone that always, always follows the rules. I choose a blue urn at the back of the rows, and Poppy picks a silver one three away from me. Catherine and Elliot, a boy I didn’t actually remember the name of until now, choose urns from the front. Finn walks to Elliot first and hands him the scythe, then makes another appear in his other hand, which he gives to Catherine. After handing one to Poppy, he comes to me and offers me a silver scythe, finally meeting my eyes.

“You are to call the earth spirit,” he instructs. I nod, feeling the pressure of his gaze and not wanting to say a word as I take the scythe. I immediately feel the magic inside the weapon, and it’s like drinking four espressos in one hour—which I might have done once. The little girl from the roof of the castle comes to mind, and how she told me the spirits weren’t happy with me. Shit, I hope they have gotten over it by now. Watching the others, they place their scythes on top of the urns and wrap their hands around the blade, literally cutting their skin.

I copy their movement, flinching as I tighten my hands around the scythe and close my eyes, feeling my hot blood dripping through my fingers.

“I call the earth spirit to me. Let me see this soul... please?”

The second I mutter the word *please*, the ground violently shakes at my feet, knocking the urn over and smashing it to pieces. Wind shapes itself into a tornado around me, and suddenly a cloud appears above us, and heavy rain falls down.

I fall to my knees, the pressure of the lack of air, mixed in with the earthquake making it impossible to stand. Flames burst out of the ground in spinning cyclones that quickly add themselves to the tornado, turning the air into a mixture of fire. I cry out as several flames touch my skin, embers flickering at me from every direction.

All four of the spirits are here...but why? I didn't call them.

"We waittttted for youuuu," a voice screams into my head. I grab my head and cry out from the invasion, the pain of every single word the voice says. "Give it back to ussssss!"

"What?" I scream out, sobs leaving my lips. I grit my teeth and look up, my soaking wet hair and clothes sticking to my body, but I don't feel cold. I feel like I'm burning, and it hurts. Fuck, it hurts.

"The runeeeeee," the voice replies, screaming in my head once more, each word like a dagger to my head. Suddenly I see a shadow of a man walking through the tornado, the magic attacking him every second. I start gasping for air, finding there isn't enough of it around me, and I fall to my side, wondering if this is really the end for me. Death by spirits who think I have some rune of theirs.

I hope that's not on my tombstone.

"Daesyn!" Finn roars, and I painfully lift my head to see him breaking his way through the storm, nearly getting to the middle. His magic is powerful, a mixture of light, dark and shadow magic, which pulsates out of his body, pushing back the spirits. He still looks like he is struggling even as he breaks through the tornado and runs to the middle, grabbing the scythe. He slams it down on the ground, and instantly the spirits scream in my head, making it impossible to fight the oncoming darkness that wipes me out.



CHAPTER 28

TORFINN

I pace outside of her room, wearing down the wooden floor with every step I take. Seeing Daesyn fighting the spirits, all four of them at the same time, is not something you see every day. Daesyn with her soaking wet black hair, big purple eyes and looking helpless on the ground as magic that is extremely powerful pounded down on her. I've never heard of spirits hurting someone. Not ever.

But that's not what is the most fucked up thing.

It's fucked up that I almost lost her and, in the same breath, I realised I don't want that. I can't let that happen.

I'm addicted to the mortal woman, and every day, it seems to get worse, so I broke the rules of this academy and stepped in to save her. I'm sure I'm going to pay for it later.

But Daesyn is worth breaking every single stupid fucking rule.

"What the fuck happened?" Ryker all but roars as he storms in from the lift and heads for Daesyn's room. I step in front of him, ignoring his burning red eyes.

"She is with a healer. You know better than to interrupt, but I believe she will be fine," I explain.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Who hurt her? Who do I have to kill?"

"You do realise she is in a test designed to hurt her?" I counter.

He grits his teeth. “I’m well aware. Tell me exactly what happened.”

I give him a quick rundown, everything from how she somehow summoned all four spirits, a task even the strongest reaper in the realm would struggle to do, to how they attacked her. Near enough tried to kill her.

“You saved her?” he asks twice, like he can’t believe it. “Fuck, I never thought I’d see the day you would break the rules for a woman.”

“Daesyn isn’t just any woman,” I counter.

He tensely smiles at me. “I am aware, brother.”

Thankfully, the healer opens Daesyn’s door and comes out. The healer is a small woman with cherry red hair and bright brown eyes with a hint of purple in them. Fae blood for sure. I don’t know this one’s name, as she is new to the castle and lands.

“Daesyn will recover by morning. Her body has exceptional healing abilities, but I am going to suggest someone stays by her side until she wakes up.”

“I will,” I say at the same time as Ryker. We both give each other an understanding look before I show the healer out. The second the lift doors shut, Poppy and Mossy come out her room.

“How is she, angel fucker?” Mossy demands. I may not like the little shit, but I know Daesyn loves him, and for that reason only I answer.

“Daesyn will recover, but Ryker and I are going to stay by her side until she awakes. I would suggest you stay with Poppy,” I reply.

“But—” Mossy starts.

“Let them care for her. Angel f—I mean *Finn*—saved Daesyn’s life today. You can trust him and Ryker,” Poppy gently suggests, stopping Mossy from jumping away. I leave her to it and join Ryker in Daesyn’s bedroom. Ryker is sitting on the end of her bed, his hand on her ankle over the bedsheet

covering her. Daesyn looks tiny and helpless in bed, her skin very pale compared to normal, and her black hair is messily lying across the pillow behind her as she sleeps. By the gods, she is beautiful.

I make myself comfy on the floor, leaning against the bed and resting my head back, prepared to sit here forever if that's what she needs.

"Do you think a god is fucking with her?" Ryker says quietly so as not to wake Daesyn up, just in case, even though I think she is out cold.

The thought has crossed my mind a few times, but I don't know a god or goddess that can control the spirits. The spirits are pure elements with little social skills, and they are uncontrollable. Only reapers and gods have the gift to speak with them, but control them? That's another matter altogether. Ryker keeps on talking. "When I was over here, she woke up from a nightmare where she was drowning."

"Everyone has nightmares, Ry," I say.

"No, you don't understand," he quietly replies. "She was literally drowning and coughing up actual water in here. The water came from her dreams. Dae wouldn't speak about it, but that isn't normal."

"It does sound like something a god would do. Fuck with dreams," I tensely agree. "But I sense no gods' magic here, and gods always leave their mark."

I pause. "A while back, I sensed something here in this apartment. Not god magic, not reaper or fae. In fact, with all my time around supes, I have never felt power like that. It was...evil."

"If anyone knows anything about evil, it would be that demon overlord she is friends with," he suggests. "Perhaps we find that asshole and have a chat with him?"

"No need to look for me," the demon himself replies to us, and I turn to see him standing in the doorway. His power is like a house on fire, spitting and flickering flames as it burns itself out. He doesn't look at us, his eyes on Daesyn. I resist

the urge to punch the dickhead, who seems to think he has some claim on Daesyn because he knew her before us, as he walks into the room and leans down, touching Daesyn's cheek with his fingertips.

"I just heard what happened," Seth coldly states, and he turns to me. "I believe I have you to thank for saving her, demi-god."

"Don't thank me," I grit out. "Something is messing with her, and I intend to find out. If you have—"

"Don't question my loyalty to her," he snaps, red magic flickering around his body in flames. "I have lived over a thousand years, and I have only ever promised my loyalty to one person. *Her.*"

"Then you will help us when she wakes," I counter, still not trusting the demon. Demons are from Hell, and he is the worst of the bunch, as far as the rumours go.

Ryker is silent, watching us both, and finally he speaks. "I will contact my father, ask if anything has escaped Hell. Perhaps it is from there."

"Hellhound," Seth states, almost in an accusing way before he cools his expression. "Perhaps you should, but I doubt it. I would sense that magic, and I sense nothing more than Daesyn's magic."

"What about fae magic? Unseelie to be exact?" Ryker asks. "Unseelie fae are given a gift, and what if an Unseelie has a gift to invade her dreams? Control the spirits?"

"We have many options to look at," I finally say. "But for now, I suggest we all sit and wait for her to wake."

"Then we shall wait for her," Seth agrees. Heavens alive. A demon and a demi-god are on the same side.

My mother will be horrified.

The thought makes me smirk. I do like pissing her off.



CHAPTER 29

“I have searched every book and talked to every librarian in the castle, and no one knows why the spirits would attack you or why they claim you have some kind of rune!” Finn all but growls out. I cup my coffee, a little surprised at his outburst, considering he just walked in here. Not that having him around isn’t normal, it actually is now since he saved my ass from the spirits. I woke up with a demi-god, a hellhound and an overlord demon in my small room, a little confused about what happened. I don’t remember much from the moment I called the spirit, but I do remember the pain.

“Most people say hello when they walk into someone’s home,” I suggest. “Sometimes they add ‘how are you?’ or ‘what are you up to?’”

He shakes his head and slides into the stool next to me. I place my hand on his arm, and he practically jumps out of my way, standing up again.

I swallow the sharp pain that causes.

“I am sorry. Hello, Daesyn. I see you are ready for the common people’s ball tonight,” Finn replies, and he finally takes a second to look at me. I see the way his eyes widen, how he pauses with his mouth slightly open.

My dress is slutty. There is literally no other word to describe it. It’s an off-white dress that fits my body perfectly, with a low-cut neckline that shows off my decent boobs, and a long slit stops on my upper thigh. Above the slit, the dress is see-through up my sides. Everyone has to wear white tonight,

and Poppy looks adorable in a cute knee-length dress with long sleeves.

I don't know why the professor decided slutty was the way forward for me tonight, but with the way Finn is now looking at me, I'm very thankful.

"My eyes are up here," I joke, my smile drifting off when Finn looks up and meets my gaze. I can feel his burning desire for me through one look, and my body is totally on board.

"Intemporel."

The word brushes over me, a certain power in it I don't know, but I like how it feels.

"Tell me what that means, Finn," I softly ask.

"Your beauty is timeless," he breathes out. "Timeless."

Every inch of me wishes he would kiss me, wishes we could give us a try, because this is just painful. Being around him and not being able to touch, to tell him how I am feeling, is a slow form of torture.

Falling for a god is painful, and yet, I see why mortals wrote so many songs about loving them. You have to bleed the emotions out somehow.

Of course, he doesn't kiss me, he closes his eyes, pain etched across his face before he turns away from me one more time. This time seems to hurt more than the last.

"Hey, Torfinn!" Poppy says, coming out of her room. She smiles at me, completely oblivious to the tension.

"How are you, Poppy?" he asks. I ignore their small talk and walk to the lift, pressing the button. The quicker I get to this ball, the quicker I can find fae wine and drink until I don't recognise Finn's name. Poppy and Finn come onto the lift after me, and I keep my eyes on the ground as the lift does its magic thing, and the doors reopen to the ballroom. As usual, it's jam-packed with people, but this time it's flooded with white. White tuxes, white dresses, sparkling crystals and gems reflecting off the lights. It's all too white, too perfect, too lacking the flaws of our kind.

The darkness of the reapers.

“Dae!” Poppy calls after me as I leave her and Finn behind, disappearing into the crowds of reapers. Their laughter and joy get on my nerves pretty quickly, as do the many who try to catch my attention as I get to the bar. Which is, of course, jam-packed with people. It’s going to take me ages to get a drink from there.

Remembering the fae wine hidden behind the throne, I quickly come up with my plan B. I spin around and come face-to-face with Professor Artic.

“How is your training coming along, Miss Riverlite?” he questions with a gleaming smile. “It has been a while since we have spoken.”

“Well,” I say.

“I heard the recent training with spirits did not go to plan,” he questions. Ah, here is the real reason we are talking. “I heard a more disturbing rumour that Professor White intervened and saved your life.”

“Someone is telling you a lie, sir,” I say, smiling sweetly. “It wouldn’t have been Catherine, by any chance? She can be quite jealous of anyone better than her.”

“Catherine is my daughter,” he coldly tells me.

Whoops.

“I didn’t see the resemblance,” I reply with a smile. “Nice to chat with you.”

I walk past him, and he catches my arm tightly, bringing me to a halt. He leans closer, still smiling as he speaks. “If you break any of my daughter’s bones again, I will find a way to end you.”

“Careful now, sir.” I narrow my eyes on him as I calmly speak. “I never saw any rules that suggested I can’t kill the professors. If anything, I might get bonus points.”

I roughly tug my arm from his grip, signing a new enemy to my ever-growing list as I walk away through the crowds. I

sneak behind the pillar and push the wall, letting it spin in a circle, and I step off in the throne room, but it's not empty.

In front of the steps, the little girl from the roof is dancing and spinning around in a white dress, and sitting on the steps is Seb. He is playing the guitar, his usual stern expression gone and replaced with a light-heartedness I've only seen when he is drunk. The girl laughs as Seb actually sings a playful, melodic song about cats dancing with shadows. It's not a song I've heard before, but it's certainly a children's song.

At the same time as the wall clicks back into place, Seb pauses mid-song and the girl spins around to face me.

"Hello, Daesyn," the little girl says, her voice carrying across the throne room. Seb frowns, placing the guitar down and walking to the girl's side. I walk over to them both, carefully taking in how Seb stands so close to the girl, protective over her.

"How do you know my little sister, vixen?" he demands, a tic appearing in his jaw.

"Sister?" I murmur to myself, pulling my eyes to the girl. "We met on the roof, kinda. I don't even know her name."

"Her name is Eira," he tells me. "And she should be getting back to bed."

"But—" She angrily stomps her foot. Seb picks her up and hugs her tightly.

"But nothing. I will come to you later, but no more songs if you're not asleep soon," he softly tells her. She pouts as he places her down, and she walks right to my side, looking up at me with her bright eyes.

"The spirits said if you gave them back what was taken, they will cease the hunt," she tells me...in a super creepy way with a big smile on her lips.

"I've told you to stop speaking to those spirits, Eira. They are dangerous!" Seb spits out, walking and stopping right in front of me, leaning down and placing his hands on her shoulders. "Your connection to them isn't normal."

She looks down and pulls away from Seb. “I know.”

Eira leaves without another word, disappearing into the swords, and I hear a door open and close in the distance.

I turn back to Seb just as he grabs me and slams my back onto one of the swords that acts as a wall as he pushes his body against mine. I let him grab my hands, hold them above my head.

His eyes are nothing but threatening, a promise of alluring darkness in them. And I like it. “You will tell no one about my sister’s...unusual friends.”

“I’m no fan of the spirits, Seb,” I reply, enjoying his body pressed against mine. He feels good in all the right places. “And how exactly do you plan to force me to keep silent?”

He leans in close, his lips inches from mine. The seductively dark prince smells forbidden with an almost clean, earthy under scent that I suspect is all him. I could breathe him in all day long. I bet every girl in the academy, bar Poppy, would die to be in my position right now.

“I have my ways, vixen,” he growls. “Promise me.”

Seeing how serious he is and being that I have a thing against hurting kids in any way, shape, or form, I sigh. “Of course I promise. I would never hurt her, and I doubt telling everyone she talks to spirits is going to do anything other than hurt her in the end.”

He changes his grip so one of his hands holds my arms up and his other hand falls to my neck.

My body reacts in an unexpected way, liking the pressure. Liking how close he is to me.

“I bet you taste as forbidden as you look.”

“Try me,” I whisper, taunting him, and he gives in. His lips fall on mine, his tongue parting my lips within seconds and kissing me with an expertness that only comes from practice. I feel myself sinking into his grip, not caring that he is in complete control of me.

Suddenly he stops and leans back.

He watches me closely, and then he lets me go, stepping back, and I miss his touch. “I protect Eira. Only me, and I’m shit at it, but I will never let the world find out her secrets.”

I guess we are pretending that life-shattering kiss didn’t happen then.

“I don’t sense she is half fae,” I say. “Being that I know one secret, can I ask for another?”

He rubs his chin and nods once. “Eira is my half-sister, and her father is unknown to me. My mother refuses to acknowledge Eira’s existence, and I could not leave her to grow up alone in this castle as I mostly did until Ryker came.”

“The more I hear about your mother, the more I dislike her,” I reply with a small smile that matches his.

“My mother is ruthless and killed many for her throne. Her children are simply mistakes,” he replies. “She tells us that repeatedly.”

“She is wrong,” I say truthfully. “So wrong.”

He shakes his head, running his thumb across his bottom lip. “I was right. You do taste good, Daesyn. Addictive, even for a man like me.”

With that, he walks away, taking a small piece of my soul with him. The men at this academy don’t play fair.



CHAPTER 30

“**Y**ou always take it easy on me, Ry,” I say, dodging his fist. I use his waist to propel myself around him, going vertical to plant my hands on the ground. As he rolls over, I jump on him and pin him down using my legs to hold his and my hands to grab his arms. He doesn’t even try to swing me off him, but judging from the lump I feel underneath me, he is happy to have me on top of him. “It gets boring if you won’t actually fight me.”

“I don’t know, Dae,” he replies, grinning up at me. “I find our training extremely interesting.”

“That’s enough,” Finn shouts to us all. I climb up off Ryker and offer him my hand to pull himself up. When he is on his feet, he doesn’t let go of my hand, and I let him link our fingers as we walk to the gathering of students. I find Poppy at the back, her small cut on her cheek and her chin looks bruised.

“You okay?” I quietly ask her, not wanting anyone else to hear.

“Yes,” she shakily answers. “I wish Torfinn would stop pitting me against Catherine. She hits like a rock.”

Professor Artic appears out of a shadow portal at the side of the clearing and walks to Finn, telling him something quietly before he walks away, catching my eyes for a moment, and I see nothing but hostility in them.

“Everyone, the training is dismissed for today. There is a last-minute change to this week’s plan, and tonight at midnight, you are due to attend a ball,” Finn calls out to us all.

“This ball is unlike the others as there is a special guest. The Seelie Fae King will be attending, along with most of the higher class Seelie fae. I need not warn you, but they can be seen as cruel to their servants and anyone who stands in their way. I suggest everyone is extremely polite and does as they are told.”

I snort, and everyone turns to stare at me. Finn sighs. “I do mean you, Daesyn.”

“Got it, sir,” I reply, noticing how his eyes briefly flicker to where Ryker is holding my hand. I search the group, not seeing Seb anywhere to be found, as Finn starts going on about Seelie fae customs and what to expect for the ball tonight.

“Where is Seb?” I whisper to Ryker.

He leans closer to my ear. “It’s complicated and not my secret to tell. But he will be present at the ball.”

I turn back to Finn, hearing the end of his speech. “Everyone is to wear green, and anything made of iron is banned due to its effects on Seelie fae. Now, I believe Professor Nordvik is working hard on your clothes, and everyone is to remain in their apartments until tonight.”

With that statement, Finn turns and walks away into the forest.

“Be right back!” I tell Ryker and Poppy before pushing through the others and heading into the forest. “Finn! Wait up!”

Finn stops a good distance away, as his large legs make him move quicker than I could walk, and looks back.

“What can I help you with, Miss Riverlite?” he asks, acting all professional. So...we are playing that game outside?

“I’m sure she wants you to save her again,” Catherine sneers behind me. I spin around just as she comes to halt right in my face. “Does sucking the professor’s cock give you a free pass to survive the year? If you fuck all of the professors, you might even get the throne!”

“Fuck off,” I sneer, not bothering to defend myself against those claims. “At least I’m not being protected by my daddy. Did you know he threatened me?” I laugh a little, annoying her even more as her cheeks brighten. “Seems like even your dad knows you can’t win this test. He knows you will lose.”

I expect it when she lifts her hand and tries to punch me, and I catch her fist mid-air, surprising her even as that hit my hand. I twist her arm and kick her hard between her legs.

She might not be a guy, but I know that fucking hurts either way. She screams and falls to her knees and then looks up as I let her arm go. Her whole body starts to pull in shadows around her.

“Daesyn, enough,” Finn gently suggests right behind me, and he wraps his arm around my waist. I don’t have time to wonder what he is doing before we are falling through a shadow portal, and he holds me up as we land in an apartment I don’t know.

“What was that?” I question, pulling his arm off me and spinning around. “You need to let me fight my own battles once in a while, Finn!”

He doesn’t agree or disagree with me, ignoring my outburst and walking to a small kitchen on the other side of the room. This room mimics Seth’s, and I realise it must be Finn’s. I glance around and pause when I notice a line of big white crystals in a circle in front of the bed. “Would you like a drink?”

“Sure,” I reply, pulling my eyes from the crystals, the willingness to fight with Finn about Catherine leaving me. I sit down on the sofa, pulling my legs under me. “The fae king turning up is a surprise, I assume?”

“Yes. It has been ten years since the fae king came through the Otherworld portal,” he explains to me, and I’m interested to learn this, considering he was one of the leaders that took down my own race. “And I think you should avoid the ball, considering what you are. So far the queen of the reapers and everyone else simply believe you have distant Seelie blood in

your system, but the king might be able to sense your power as I can.”

He comes over to the sofa, sitting near me and handing me a wine glass filled with fae wine by the smell of it. He has a beer and takes a long sip.

“Thank you for the advice and drink,” I say. “Out of curiosity, can you get drunk?”

“Yes,” he replies with a smile. “It takes about five bottles of whiskey. Maybe more, I do not remember much after the fifth bottle.”

“I would like to see you drunk, Finn,” I admit.

His eyes trace my face. “I think it would be quite dangerous for us both, in all honesty.”

I smile and look away, taking a deep drink of the fae wine. It’s not as nice as the royal fae wine Seb showed me, but fae wine is always nice in its own way.

“What are the crystals?” I question. “Please don’t say they are some kinky bedroom shit gods like to do.”

Finn laughs and it makes the room seem warmer. Safer. A feeling of being home, something I’ve not particularly felt since I was a kid. “No, that was simply a clean space to place them. They are a form of poetry, of stories that only gods can hear and understand.”

“Oh,” I whisper. “Do you like stories and poetry then?”

“Mortals write such sweet and sad poems, it is hard not to be enchanted by them,” he replies. “You must think I am odd, being that my aunt was human and I grew up with her, but I did not experience the human world much. I was never sent to school, and I never left the house other than the gardens. My whole life was created from when I was here in this castle and then with the gods.”

“I don’t think you’re odd at all,” I tell him. “I mean, I’m a half Unseelie fae fighting for the throne of a race which has murdered or enslaved my entire race. You must think I’m odd for being here.”

“The gods chose this path for you,” he replies, and I look up to meet his gaze. “You may not understand the hand you’ve been given, but they do. Everything is set on its own path, as my mother would say.”

“And what is your path, Finn?” I question.

He thinks about it for a long time. “My mother’s redemption. I simply wish to find happiness in what I must do here with the mortals. My task is not easy.”

“Tell me about it,” I ask.

His expression changes, drifting cold once more. “I think it is best you leave to get ready, Daesyn. I do hope to see you tonight for a brief time.”

He waves his hand, and a shadow portal appears on the floor right in front of me. I only have to stand. I down the rest of my drink and brace myself for the fall.

“You don’t have to do that,” I tell Finn. “With me. I can see through the shield you’ve just put up. I can see you.”

“And one day you will wish you couldn’t,” he replies and swings his hand. A shadow gently hits me in the back, pushing me off the sofa, and I fall into the portal of shadows. Within seconds, I land on my bed, bouncing from the impact.

“Oh, where did you go?” Poppy asks from the doorway, a folded letter in her hand. I sit up, rubbing my face a little bit.

“I was at Finn’s,” I tell her. She looks divided, and I cock my head to the side. “What’s up, Pops?”

“It can wait,” she finally breathes out. Before I can question her on it, Mossy runs into the room and jumps on the bed.

And I burst into laughter with Poppy. Mossy is pink, head to toe, and covered in glitter. His eyes are the only thing on him that isn’t a luminous pink.

“What the hell happened to you?” I question.

“The dog set a trap, but there will be payback!” Mossy huffs and jumps off the bed, walking out of the room, leaving

a trail of glitter in his wake.

Life would be pretty boring without my monkey bestie,
that's for sure.



CHAPTER 31

I look like a tree. Well, maybe that's a little dramatic, but my green dress looks like millions of leaves have made a tornado around my body and stuck to me. The leaves are all different shades of green and fit tightly on the upper half of my body, and flow out into a skirt that falls to the floor. My hair is twisted up into a knot, half of it falling down my neck in curls, and a leaf tiara is clipped into my hair.

"I love the theme of this ball," Poppy exclaims, and I turn to see her twirl around in her deep green satin dress that has flowers at the base of the skirt. It looks like she is sitting in a meadow. Poppy's hair mimics mine tonight, down to a similar tiara, but hers has silver flowers instead of leaves. She pauses and smooths her dress down a few times. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I answer, crossing my arms and looking to the lift as it clicks itself open.

"Erm...how do you get a guy to like you?" she cautiously asks. "I mean, I don't know—"

"Poppy, you're stunning, and any guy would be lucky to have you. Who are you interested in?" I ask.

Her cheeks light up. "Eric."

It takes me a moment to wonder who she is talking about, but then I remember the blond guy in our group who always loses to Poppy. He is lanky but fast on his feet, and under his mop of blond hair, I think he is cute. "My relationships with guys are messy, and I'm pretty useless at any of it, but my advice would be to just ask him to dance with you, Pops. If he

agrees quickly, dropping everything he is doing, then you know he likes you.”

“Thank you!” she grins. We both head to the lift, and I’m surprised to see a familiar demon waiting for me, looking like sin in a dark green tux.

“Would you allow me to escort you both?” Seth asks, but I highly doubt we are being given a choice.

“That would be great,” Poppy says, finding a little confidence being around Seth, even though I can tell she is still scared of who is under his nice guy act. I personally like when his demon comes out to play. The normal side of Seth is sweet, but his demon? He is all sin and darkness wrapped in a sexy package.

“Why are you here tonight, Seth?” I ask. “I didn’t have you down as the type to like balls and all the pretend shit that goes with them.”

“I much prefer seedy nightclubs, yes,” he answers. “But none of them have a damsel who might be in distress. I am here to be a distraction for the king.”

“You’re here to protect me, you mean,” I say.

“Simply put, yes,” he answers.

“You might need to join the club,” I reply.

His laugh is nothing short of menacing. “I am aware I am not your only admirer, Syn. But I will win, there is no doubt about that.”

“Cocky demon,” I mutter, glaring at him.

“Stubborn reaper,” he counters right back with his own narrowed eyes. Gods, I want to kiss him. Poppy looks like she wants the corner of the lift she is hiding in to eat her up, and as she clears her throat, I remember that she is here. The lift doors open, and Seth stays close by my side as I walk out into the ballroom, which has changed. The pillars now have dark green ivy climbing up them, smothering the walls, and light green petals fall from the ceiling all around us.

And fae are everywhere. The feel of their magic is strong, and it hits my magical barriers with the force of a truck. It takes a lot to hold my ground and make sure no one gets past my magic to see what I am hiding under the shadows of my reaper magic.

“I can take us away. Say the word,” Seth whispers to me, picking up on my discomfort.

“No, just do what you came here for. I will survive,” I tightly reply, refusing to leave right away. Poppy walks into the crowd, so full of confidence that a few fae and reapers turn to look at her as she passes them.

Oddly, I feel proud of her. Proud of how far she has come in a few months. Turns out her parents were right to send her here; she is certainly strong enough.

Sebastian comes out of the crowd, his eyes searching everyone here as I take in his light green tux, the way he has taken off his tie and undone his top buttons. His jacket is in his hands, and his sleeves are rolled up, showing off his impressive forearms. The suit makes his thighs look larger and stronger. Total ~~high-porn~~ normal sexy thighs for someone who is my friend.

Sometimes.

Seb’s purple eyes lock onto me, and he walks over, never once giving Seth the time of day. “We should leave. He will sense you, and I can hide you.”

“The king, you mean?” Seth answers for me. Sebastian finally looks to him and gives him a quick nod. Seth’s eyes fall to me. “Another admirer of yours, I presume?”

“A friend,” I correct. “But Seb’s right, I should get out of here.”

“Go, I will cover for you,” Seth instructs, understanding flashing in his eyes. Seb nods his head to the lift, and we go back inside. While Seb does something to the buttons, I see a man in the middle of the crowd, which parts for a moment, giving me a full view of him. Tall with long black hair in braids that fall to his middle back, littered with green bands

within the braids. His green tux spreads across his wide shoulders and large muscular body. I look up and see a crown on his head.

The Otherworld crown.

It is enchanting to look at, and it is really like no other crown I have ever seen. Intricate pieces of silver and gold vines wrap in a circle, and several piercing points hold green crystals of some kind that glow with their own magic. In the middle of the spikes, purple fae magic spins and spirals in a wave, floating there in its own controlled way. Just as the lift doors begin to shut, the Seelie king, the man responsible for so much murder, turns his gaze my way. His cold, empty, purple eyes find mine just before the door slams shut.

I step back, and Seb's hand steadies me, settling on the middle of my back. I sharply turn to him at my side. I wish I knew more about him. Everything about him, if I'm being honest with myself. Learning new things about Seb is addictive. "Tell me your secrets, prince."

"Pay me for them, vixen," he counters right back. The lift doors open, breaking our stare, and I wonder what exactly he wants me to pay with. I doubt a kiss or even more would pay for many of his secrets. Seb wants my soul, I can see it. I can feel it. And what's worse? It's slowly slipping into his deadly hands, betraying my body, falling where I won't be able to get it back. Seb smirks as he walks out of the lift, and my eyes fall to his ass in his tight green trousers. Damn, that's a nice ass.

Following him out of the lift, I take in the black painted room we are in. One entire wall is full of windows with window seats underneath them and bookcases between, filled to the brim with books. A large black wooden bed with white sheets fills most of the room, with a leather lounge chair at the side, next to a bedside unit. Moonlight and two floor lamps make the room cosy, just borderline dark, and I like it. I spot Seb's guitar resting by the lounge, and as I walk in, I see a small bar on the one wall, littered with empty bottles and half-drunk glasses.

“How often do you drink, Sebby?” I question, picking up a bottle off the side and sniffing the fae wine inside. I take a long drink as Seb sits on one of the window seats, a bottle in his own hands. I make myself comfy on the window seat next to his, only a small bookcase in the middle of us. The moonlight illuminates strands of his blond hair, and I notice how utterly beautiful he is for a man. I never thought men could be beautiful, not really anyway. But this place is proving me wrong.

“When you live in this castle, you need something,” he tells me, leaning back against the side of the wall. “The fae king is my father.”

I raise my eyebrows, a little surprised. “Well, shit. That’s...”

“Nothing,” he fills my sentence in, just not the way I would have. “He doesn’t acknowledge my presence, and he is here to speak with my mother for her help, nothing more or less.”

“You’re his son, why would he ignore you?”

“Being ignored is something my family seem to enjoy doing to others,” he replies. “I should know, I tried to ignore you.”

“Clearly you failed, and I’m glad for it,” I reply.

“You might not be if you knew everything, vixen,” he replies before taking another long drink. “My father will be gone soon, back in his home.”

“Why does he need your mother’s help?”

“The Unseelie rebels that have been attacking here are also causing major issues in the Otherworld,” he explains. My heart pounds in my chest. “Recently they have more numbers than ever before, they are sneaky and winning battles they never could in the past. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“I wish I did,” I honestly answer.

Seb smiles and lets out a laugh. “Your people are ruthless and dangerous, and yet you wish you knew their plans.”

“What happened all those years ago? Why did your mother join with the fae king and attack the Unseelie?” I question.

“That’s the thing many ask, and no one is ever answered. The reason is unknown,” he tells me, and it’s what I suspected. If there was a reason, a reason they wouldn’t mind anyone knowing, the world would know by now. “But I heard my parents once. They spoke of a rune and a curse.”

I freeze at his words. “Maybe that caused it so many years ago.”

Seb looks over at me, tilting his head to the side, the light catching his eyes. “I should have never kissed you that day in the throne room, vixen. You’re in my head now.”

“You’re in mine too.”

He doesn’t reply, not that I expect him to, and he takes a long sip of his drink. I drink mine, happy to join the prince in a night of forgetting who we are, because this conversation has made me certain of one thing.

I need to find these rebel Unseelie and ask them if they want a new member. For my mother, I have to try and help free and save her people.

“If you were queen, you could free them,” Seb comments, his voice dark and almost expressionless. “You could change everything.”

“If you were king, so could you,” I counter, raising an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t that piss your father off? To free the fae who used to rule half his world?”

Seb darkly laughs and smiles at me. It’s a venomous smile at best. “I will drink to that.”

I lift my bottle and so does he before we take a long drink.

Being friends with the prince does have its bonuses after all, and one way or another, I’m going to help my people.

For my mum.



CHAPTER 32

“**W**hy do you want to find Unseelie rebels?” Mossy asks, his questions from my shoulder where he is perched. “You can’t exactly help them fight in the Otherworld.”

“I want to ask them some things,” I briefly tell him, keeping my eyes on the shadows of the forest as I make my way to the gap in the gate. “You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.”

“I followed you into that troll den that one time.” He shudders, and I hear the disgust in his voice. “And they stunk and wanted to eat me.”

“To be fair, they wanted to eat me too,” I say, remembering the forty or so trolls in that clan I had to kill for a job. They deserved it though, they had kidnapped and killed four human teenagers for nothing more than amusement.

“Things are changing,” Mossy says as we get closer to the gate. “It was always just us. Now there is Poppy, the angel fucker, the dog, and the prince. And the demon from Hell.”

“You’ll always be my family, Mossy,” I tell him. I duck and climb through the gap, pulling my hood up to hide Mossy and my face. “That won’t ever change.”

Mossy doesn’t reply, and I sigh, knowing he has never been good with change. The streets are quiet as I make my way through them, eventually finding some busy taverns with drunk reapers on the streets and leaning against the doors. Picking the busiest tavern I can find, I head inside and dodge my way around tiny tables to get to the bar. The bartender is

an Unseelie fae slave, simple to recognize from the glowing green bars around her wrists and neck, how thin she looks, and the drained expression on her face. She might have been pretty once, in the ways fae always are, but life has seriously gotten her down. I slide into a seat, eyeing the green metal bands that are thick with magic radiating from them. I haven't seen any slave with those on before, but clearly they must stop her powers.

“What do you want?” the bartender asks, stopping in front of me. I eye the two hooded strangers nearby me.

“A private word,” I answer. She cocks her head to the side, and I lower my hood, enough that she can see my eyes.

“Seelie fae are welcome here, if that is your problem,” she replies. “My owner invites everyone.”

“That's not my issue. Meet me around back in the alleyway,” I tell her and start to leave the tavern. The two strangers at my sides stand up with me, and I turn around to see six hooded men at my back.

“Seelie fae are not welcome here,” the one at the side speaks up. “Fae are nothing but scum, and you walked into the wrong place.”

I place my hands on my daggers under my cloak. “Mossy, check the place for cameras and break them.”

“Got it,” he whispers in my ear before climbing down my back. I push my hood back, and several of them do the same. All reapers, that's for sure, and older men too.

“She's pretty. I bet she would feel great around my cock,” the reaper in the middle claims and grabs his junk. Men are disgusting at times. Before he can blink, I whip my dagger out and slam it into his hand over his junk. Blood splatters across my face as I pull the dagger out, his cry and scream blasting off the walls.

Then it's chaos. The reapers slam shadows into me, trying to hold me down with their magic, and I grin as I push their magic away like it's nothing more than dust.

“You’re going to have to do much better than that,” I comment. They briefly look scared, as they should be, before I attack right back. Purple shadows smother the space around me, and I point my dagger at one of them, lifting them up in the air by their throat. He struggles as his friend tries to kick me, only to hit my magic and be thrown half away across the room. “I can beat you all by using only one hand. You should run.”

One of them makes a quick escape, smart man, but at least ten more men come through the door. Maybe I will need two hands after all.

“Now this is a party,” Ryker’s voice drifts in behind me. I turn to see my hellhound friend walking around the bar, a bottle of whiskey in his hands. He meets my eyes as his burn to red. “Shall we?”

I smirk and then attack the reapers, jumping into their group. I lose count of how many I punch, and kick, and throw away with shadows. I glance behind me at one point, seeing Ryker covered in blood, smacking the shit out of one of the reapers. Ouch. Someone grabs my hair and slams me backwards, my back harshly hitting the floor.

That’s going to bruise. I groan as he jumps on me, his hands wrapping around my throat. Before I can do anything, a hand shoots through his chest, and the reaper’s still-beating heart is in my face. The reaper looks shell-shocked as the hand moves back, and I glance up at Ryker as he drops the heart on the floor, flames flickering around his body.

Anyone left in the room still alive or awake makes a quick exit as Ryker offers me his hand. I grip his blood-soaked hand and pull myself to my feet, looking around at the broken tavern. The Unseelie fae stands still at the bar, not caring one bit about the mess or blood.

“I guess we are in a quiet place to talk now,” she comments. “Want a drink?”

“Two fae wines,” Ryker grumbles, pulling out a stool and sitting down. I push a literal arm off a stool, set the seat upright, and then sit on it.

“Did you follow me?” I question.

He shrugs. “I was in the area and saw you walk past. Then I followed you. You can thank me later.”

“I could have handled it myself,” I say and let out a sigh. “But thank you for helping, it did make the situation less messy for me.”

The Unseelie woman slides two glasses in front of us and looks me dead in the eye. “Why are you here? Everyone knows you are both part of the academy test, and no one likes that fae blood of any kind is in the academy test. They don’t want fae blood near the throne.”

“Then they are shit out of luck,” I comment, hearing someone groan in pain in the room. “I want to speak to the Unseelie rebels. Tonight.”

Her eyes widen, and she steps back. “I know nothing.”

“That’s a lie, and we both know it,” I counter, taking another long sip. Her eyes flicker to Ryker.

Ryker leans back, crossing his arms. “I’m not leaving without her, and she won’t leave without your truth. Just tell her, she clearly means you no harm.”

“I want to help,” I clarify. “I am not what I appear to be, and I can’t watch the Unseelie fae be so cruelly treated for much longer.”

“I cannot help you,” she gently tells me, leaning closer. “But they are watching you. Just you, Daesyn Riverlite. Your name is whispered a lot in here by those I suspect are involved with the Unseelie rebels.”

I finish my drink and lower my magic, just enough for her to sense it. “Thank you.”

“You’re Unseelie fae,” she breathes out, something strange burning in her eyes. She reaches forward and grips my hands tightly. “An Unseelie fae is close to the throne for the first time in thousands of years. You must win the academy and set us all free. You must.”

I see it now. Hope. She is hoping I can win.

“We need to leave, Dae,” Ryker gently tells me, taking a long gulp of his drink and placing the empty glass down.

“Go out the back, this way,” the woman tells me, pointing at the back door and letting my hands go.

“What’s your name?”

“I have no name, like so many of the Unseelie born here. Our owners refused to let our mothers or fathers name us,” she softly replies. “But I like Regina.”

“Then that is your name,” I suggest, making my way to the door. “Are you going to be alright?”

She picks up a bottle off the side and takes a long drink. “Yes, just go. We will meet again, the Otherworld is waiting.”

“Be safe,” I tell her, turning around and running to the door, which Ryker is holding open. Mossy jumps on my shoulder, and I look back as Regina whacks herself on the side of her head with the bottle, her body crumbling to the floor. Smart girl. They can’t question someone who tried to fight.

Ryker takes my hand and pulls me out into the alleyway behind the tavern, and I tug up my cloak hood. We get to the end of the alleyway, seeing more than forty reapers marching to the tavern with scythes in their hands, the royal crest in gold on their cloaks.

“The royal army have been called,” Ryker mutters, and he wraps his arms around me. “Hold on.”

Flames burst around us, and I rest my head on his shoulder as he portals us away. We come out on top of a hill, overlooking the city but within the walls. The magic of the wall hums nearby, and I glance out over the city, still staying close to Ryker.

“You’re mad at me,” I figure. Mossy jumps off my shoulder and climbs up a tree, sitting at the top. He has always liked the pretty views.

Ryker groans and presses his lips onto my forehead. “You don’t have to do everything alone, Dae.”

“I didn’t expect to get in a bar fight tonight,” I counter. “If I did, I might have asked you to come with me.”

“There lies the problem,” he replies. “You wouldn’t have even if you were walking into a war. Which, if you had found an Unseelie rebel, you would have done.”

“It’s as much their war as it is mine,” I reply. “It breaks me to see the Unseelie here. They are my people, my family, my blood. And they are close to extinction if this world keeps killing them!”

“I get it,” he soothes. “I’m not saying you are wrong to want to help. I’m saying I’m in this with you.”

“Why the hell would you do that for me?” I question, looking up at him. He cups my cheek, and I freeze.

“Why do you think?” he questions, and he kisses me. Ryker’s lips are like a branding iron, owning and taking every little bit of me he can with each punishing kiss. My body reacts immediately, coming alive with his touch, and I kiss him back with just as much passion as he kisses me with. He picks me and spins us around, pressing my back into the tree and arching his pelvis into mine. I gasp when I feel his hard cock straining against his trousers, and my nipples rub against his chest with every movement. He suddenly lets me go, stepping back, his eyes burning red with power.

“My hellhound wants to claim you, Dae,” he warns, holding a hand up and looking physically pained to stand back. I breathlessly stare at him, a little bit of my mind wondering what it would be like to be claimed by a hellhound. I imagine he is hot as fuck in bed. “And you aren’t ready for me.”

Suddenly more than a bit of guilt sinks into my chest. I’ve kissed his two best friends, men he sees as brothers, and I’m falling for all of them. Including a demon overlord who is dangerous to fall for but impossible to forget. I’m sowing chaos and destruction into their friendship, and I don’t want to ruin that. They needed each other, each for different reasons, but it’s clear they were all lost before finding their friendship.

And Seth? He would kill them for touching me. His demon would never take it well.

“Ry...,” I drift off, not knowing what to say.

“I know, that was a shitty friend move,” he laughs out. “But I don’t regret it, and I will never forget it.”

“Neither will I,” I admit, biting down on my lip. Ryker tracks the movement, desire flickering over his eyes before he turns away. He sits down on the hill and pats the space next to him. I sit down and rest my head on his shoulder.

We don’t have to say anything, as we both know this is complicated, and the fact of the matter is someone is going to be hurt in the end.

And I know it’s not just going to be me.



CHAPTER 33

“Today’s lesson will be a slight bit different,” Finn announces when everyone has gathered around in a group. I stand at the side with Poppy, and I glance behind me where Ryker and Sebastian are standing, both looking at me. I turn back as Finn speaks. “I am personally testing your skills. Today you will battle against me and my shadow magic.”

“So, to be clear, you won’t use your other magic?” I ask. Finn’s gold eyes find mine, and for a moment, it’s like no one else is here at all.

“Yes, that is right, Miss Riverlite,” he replies. “Why don’t we go first and show the class?”

Bugger. I was hoping he would fight someone else first so I could study his technique and find a weakness. Ah well, there is nothing like getting your ass beaten by a demi-god. Finn walks through the group, who part out of the way, all of them looking nervous. Poppy looks near terrified as I squeeze her arm and leave her behind.

Seb steps in my way. “Good luck.”

“Thanks, Sebby,” I reply with a grin.

“Sebby?” Ryker asks and beats out a laugh. Sebastian doesn’t look impressed as I go around him and walk to Finn in the middle of the clearing. I just get to his side when an explosion goes off in the distance. The force of it blows us all over, and some of the trees crack, falling with a slam nearby. I glance up to see smoke above the trees where the castle is.

“Eira!” I hear Seb shout, and he makes a shadow portal, jumping into it. I climb to my feet, ignoring Finn calling for me, and I jump into the portal Seb made up. I crash into a pile of rubble, something sharp cutting into my arm. Climbing to my feet, I cough from the thick smoke around me, and suddenly alarms start ringing out. Ignoring the pain in my arm, I step over more fallen debris from the blast and get to a parting, taking a left. The doors are all pushed open in this corridor, and I quickly come to another one, which looks the same, but the end of the corridor is gone, nothing but broken brick and stone litter the floor. I’m taken back when one of the doors opens and two people step out, blue cloaks hiding their faces from me. They pause, and I remember I don’t have any weapons on me.

Fuck.

Calling shadows, I make sure I’m protected as we both stay very still. I lift my hand to defend myself when one of them pushes back the hood of his cloak and stares. His eyes are like mine, purple, but other than that, we are worlds apart. His hair is grey and short, and two scars like Xs are drawn onto his forehead. He is a beefy man who doesn’t look old per se, but his eyes make me think he is a lot older than he appears. The other hooded person lowers their hood, and it’s a woman with blonde hair and the same purple eyes.

“I knew a woman once, an Unseelie woman who lived in the Heartlocke clan house,” the man states, never moving. “She was a brilliant woman with red hair and a fiery soul, and to know her was to respect her, but she lied to everyone about who she was. Claiming to be nothing but a mortal.”

I don’t say anything, scared to even breathe. “One day, she told me she was pregnant and she feared for the child. She asked me to be its godparent, to protect the child if anything were to go wrong, and it did go so, so wrong.”

Explosions go off in the distance, rocking the floor we are standing on, but his story rocks me to my very core. “This woman disappeared before the child was born, and the child’s father, and his entire family, were killed by the queen. The queen of this very place we both stand in.”

I suck in a deep breath, cautious as he steps forward. “When a certain bartender told me there was an Unseelie fae in the academy test with bright purple eyes and black hair like the night, I knew in my soul it was you. I knew when I heard reports of an Unseelie healing dozens of my men. You are the child so many of us have searched for.”

“So what if I am?” I question. “I’m sure there are plenty of reaper and Unseelie children out there.”

“Yes, there are, but none with your blood. Not with what your mother must have given to you,” he tells me, a hint of desperation in his tone. “Do you have the cursed rune still?”

“What the hell is the cursed rune?” I demand. “Why do you think I have it?”

He gives me a confused look, and someone else’s voice joins our group that makes my blood go cold. “Unseelie fae are down here! Guards!”

I spin around just as Catherine punches me, and I don’t get out of the way quick enough to block the hit, and it catches the edge of my jaw. I groan in pain from the shock, and narrow my eyes. I grab her shirt, making her stumble to me.

“This is how you punch someone!” I scream at her and punch her dead bang in the middle of her face, hearing the satisfying noise of her nose breaking before she collapses.

“We must leave!” the Unseelie man shouts, but I don’t think it’s for me. “Someone grab Daesyn, we need her, or this is for nothing!”

Catherine is screaming on her knees as I look up and see dozens of reapers stepping out of the shadows, their silver scythes looking like the only light in the darkness. They run at us, passing me altogether, and I turn to see the group of Unseelie by a portal. The portal is made of shadows, meaning some reapers must be helping them. The Unseelie man who claims to know my mother is the last to step through, and his eyes meet mine.

I can tell he doesn’t want to leave me here, but there is no way I’m following him, not when he seems to want this cursed

rune far more than he wants to help me. Why does everyone want this cursed rune?

The reapers all turn back to me, and I stand up straight, expecting to be given a chance to make up a reason why I was talking with the Unseelie when something hard hits me in the back of my head, and I drop like a rock into darkness.



CHAPTER 34

My arms are stinging as fingers dig into them, forcing my sore body to sit up onto my knees, which press into cold stone. I feel like someone has punched and kicked me at least a dozen times, and I bet it was Catherine. The bitch. I taste my own blood in my mouth as I open my eyes, recognizing the throne room steps right in front of me, reminding me of my time with Seb on them, but the room isn't full of laughter and alcohol anymore.

The still and cold tension is so thick I can almost taste it too as I lift my head and meet the queen's angry stare. She sits on her throne in a white dress that doesn't make her look a tiny bit innocent, and her fake nails tap repeatedly in a rhythm on the arms of the throne. At her side is Sebastian, still as a plank of wood, and he doesn't look at me.

That on its own tells me something is fucking wrong.

"You dare to come into my realm and pretend to be pure?" the queen sneers at me, her beautiful face turning uglier than I thought possible. "Your blood is a disgrace, and your lies have been found out. If it wasn't for Catherine overhearing your conversation and making the smart move to knock you out, you might have gotten away with it."

A cold feeling passes through me. "I acted alone."

Her laugh makes me nervous. I don't mind dying, I've accepted that death is a possibility a long time ago, but now I have people I care about. I don't want Poppy or my guys to be dragged down with me, as strange as that thought is to me.

“You did no such thing,” the queen laughs and clicks her fingers. A body is dragged into the room, and I swallow down the scream when Poppy is dropped in front of me, looking dead and covered in blood and bruises. When I see her chest rise and fall, I let out the breath I was holding and anger burns through me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” I scream at the queen...and Seb. Seeing him standing there, doing nothing, cuts deeper than any knife could do.

“The Riverlite family have deceived me, and they will pay with a slow death for each of them,” she replies with a careless wave of her hand. “As for you two, the ones who betrayed my son and me, someone else has claimed the right to punish you.”

“Who?” I ask, my voice quiet.

“Mother, we agreed—” Seb tries to say something, and she turns her gaze on him.

“Remember your choice, Sebastian,” she coldly warns him. Seb’s eyes drift to me, and I see nothing but sorrow in them before he looks down.

“You’re a coward, prince,” I sneer, pushing down my feelings for him, and I look to the queen. “And you are a monster.”

“Then what does that make me?” A voice of nightmares speaks behind me, and I feel like I can’t move, I can’t breathe. The man from my nightmares, that voice, just spoke. Part of me still wishes he wasn’t real, and I don’t dare look back as I hear his footsteps. I suck in a breath as a hand grabs the back of my neck and pulls my head back.

The Seelie Fae King himself looms over me, a sneer on his lips and clear joy of getting what he wants in his eyes.

The Seelie Fae King has been the one trying to kill me in my dreams?

“Why the fuck have you been messing with me?” I demand, and he roughly lets my neck go, no doubt leaving bruises with how hard he held me. The king walks around to

stop in front of me. I cry out when he suddenly slams a knife into my stomach. I scream, hearing Seb's shout in the distance, and the pain makes me nearly fall. The king somehow holds me upright with magic, even as my knees give out, and the pain disappears into nothing more than a numb feeling. As my blood drips onto the floor in the middle of us and I start to feel dizzy, the fae king whispers a word.

“*Lāsts.*”

Suddenly my skin lights up with dozens of runes, the glowing symbols are wrapped around my arms and every part of skin I can see. The runes are all the same, the same symbol again and again, and they glow purple. They are beautiful and enchanting. The whole room is silent.

I've seen it before.

On my mother's necklace.

Expecting to die, I move my eyes from my body to see Seb is gone, and the queen is on her throne, a curious look in her eyes. She doesn't know what the runes are either.

“All those dreams. Did you ever wonder why I was killing you?” he asks, and then he pulls the knife out of my stomach. I scream, the pain making the room dot in and out of focus. God, I hate being stabbed. Turns out it's not as fun to be on the receiving end of a knife in your gut. *Who knew?*

“You never k-killed me,” I manage to get out. “B-bad luck, I woke up.”

His laugh fills the room. “You died first underneath me with my hands around your throat, and then so many times after that. It was all my own little test to see if you had the cursed rune. See, the one that holds the rune can never die.”

“W-what?” I croak out, shock ringing through me. *I can't die?* I died all those times, and I never knew?

The fae king roughly grabs my chin. “You are what your mother stole from me, my promised immortal bride, and I shall have you back. Sleep, Daesyn, my beloved. We are going home.”

I scream as his magic smacks into me, destroying my protective magic like it was nothing and smothering me within seconds. The last thing I see is the fae king's eyes, so empty of compassion before I'm out cold.

In the darkness, I hear a song, one I thought I could not remember, and it's my mother's voice who sings it to me.

*“The girl who was promised
Stole a rune that can only demolish.
In her haste, she spoke a single curse.
A trade will be made
For a child held with a blade.
This is a song of disaster and the four who will follow.
A man from Hell, a fallen god, a fire alpha, and a dark prince.
When the curse is done,
One world will be gone.
The cursed rune is a song all fae sing,
Because the destruction it promises will beloved.
In the night, the Unseelie will rise,
and in blood...they will take what was ruined in lies.”*



EPILOGUE

With a flick of my hand, the fifty or more reaper guards in front of Daesyn's apartment fly out of the way, and I use my magic to portal directly into her room. The apartment has been turned over, and the sinking feeling in my gut gets worse.

I knew something was wrong.

I hear a small cry from under a broken cabinet door, and I lean down, picking up the door to see Mossy. The monkey is in quite the predicament. A piece of sharp wood is stuck in his leg, and blood is pouring from the wound. Not that I like the little fucker, but I know he means a lot to Daesyn. I growl and lean down, picking him up and putting him into my cloak pocket to deal with later. He won't die from that injury; he is fae, and all fae can self-heal to an extent. I close my eyes and portal myself to the throne room, where I'm sure the queen must have Daesyn.

When I get there, only the queen, two of her Cherished Five, and Ryker are around. Ryker is being held down by the two men. Anger fills me as I storm down the middle of the throne room and each of them look to me. I click my fingers, and the two Cherished Five disappear into dust.

The queen screams as Ryker stands up, and I step over a pile of dust to stop in front of the heartless woman.

"Where is Daesyn and Poppy?" I demand.

She stands up, shadows smothering her. "How dare you come in here and kill two of my people!"

I coldly watch her. “Where is she?”

“The fae king took her. I got here too late,” Ryker tells me. Blood pours down his cheek, and magical cuffs are wrapped around his wrists, preventing him from using his powers. I wave a hand over them, and they disappear, allowing Ryker to immediately shift into his hellhound. The creature is huge, on fire, and downright evil looking. I know one bite from him would burn you from the inside out. I turn my gaze back to the queen, who finally seems to have realised her mistake as she looks between us.

“I was sent to Messorem to make sure this test is uninterrupted,” I say, crossing my arms. “Now you’ve messed up the gods’ plans. Do you think they will show you and your people mercy?”

“Torfinn—”

“Do you think *I* will?” I ask. I wonder how much this cold woman thinks she can control me. “Stop the test until I am back with Daesyn and Poppy. If you harm a hair on their family’s heads, I will make it my personal mission to destroy this world and force you to watch. Do you understand?”

The ground shakes from my power, and the swords in the room glow, recognising the magic that created them. The queen stumbles back to her throne and nods her head, her eyes wide.

“I will not stand in your way.”

I turn around and walk out, hearing Ryker close behind me. I stop at the sight of an angry overlord demon, smothered head to toe in blood, in the door of the throne room.

“Where is she?” Seth angrily snaps. “I need to find Daesyn. There is a problem on Earth, and she is needed by Queen Evelina.”

“The Seelie Fae King has taken her as his prisoner. We are going there now.” I take a moment to explain before opening my own shadow portal, one they can follow. I step through the shadows and out to right in front of the Otherworld portal. A

hundred reaper guards wait in a line in front of it, and they all turn to us.

I raise my hand with a mixture of magic swirling around it, and Ryker growls next to me. When Seth comes to my other side, the guards seem to make a unanimous decision and run for it in all different directions, leaving the portal behind. I take a step and stop when I see Sebastian in front of the portal, just before he walks into it.

“If the king has harmed one hair on her head, nothing you can do will stop me from raising hell in that world,” Seth warns.

My eyes glow with untapped power. “Don’t worry, demon. Hell will be the least of their worries. They would have to fight a god, and there will be nothing left when I’m done.”

Wait for us, Daesyn, you’re not alone anymore.

You never were.

The end for now...

Order book two now by following this link to Amazon.



DESCRIPTION OF THE FORSAKEN RUNE

The cursed rune is real, and it's going to destroy everything.

Being killed dozens of times wasn't exactly the plan when Daesyn signed up for the academy, nor was being kidnapped by the insane Seelie Fae King. Four runes exist in the worlds, and the Seelie Fae King wants them all.

Only issue?

To get the cursed rune, Daesyn has to die. For good this time. And she has no interest in that happening. Weeks away from her twenty-first birthday, Daesyn needs to escape her captor and get back to the Reaper Realm before the Otherworld gives her a power predicted to destroy the worlds.

Luckily, a demi-god, an alpha shifter, a reaper prince, overlord demon and a fae monkey are not leaving the Otherworld without her. But in the Otherworld, another war is brewing, and the Unseelie rebels will not let Daesyn leave this world without a fight.

While the worlds fight, the gods watch. Always.

Fans of epic urban fantasy romance will love this five-book series by USA Today Bestselling Author G. Bailey. This is a reverse harem romance, meaning the main character will have more than one love interest.

This series is a crossover of the series, A Demon's Fall, but can be read on its own.



PREDICTION...

“They say you will do unendurable things and pay an unbearable cost.

One will forget,

one will die,

one will suffer

and one will never, ever rule.

All of this will happen soon as the cursed rune is held by you.”



CHAPTER 35

I might not be able to die, but being stabbed sure hurts like a bitch.

“Why was I kidnapped? I have nothing to do with you or your dirty Unseelie blood!” Poppy’s sister, the woman I wish I could kill, asks for the millionth time. My bare foot pushes against a tiny rock, and it bounces across the rocky floor towards Poppy, who stares dully at it. The rock has been our only source of fun for a few days. I woke up here, bleeding out, with Poppy trying to save me and Laelia crying in the corner. My tank top and leggings are torn and dirty, much like Poppy’s dress, and the only one that has some defence against the cold is Laelia with her thick cloak.

Figures she isn’t interested in sharing it.

I might not be bleeding out anymore, thankfully, but Laelia is still crying like a tiny infant human. I’m surprised she has any tears left due to the little amount of water we have been given by the guards. The stale bread was not much better, and I really miss coffee more than ever.

Slowly, my eyes drift to where Laelia is cuddled up with Poppy on the floor, her head resting on Poppy’s shoulder. Poppy shakes her head of black hair, and I try to bite my tongue...try.

If we are trapped in this room for another night, I’m fairly certain one of us is not going to be leaving.

And that someone is Poppy’s sister.

“I mean, you two are the ones who lied! I just went along with it, and I certainly have nothing to do with her being half Unseelie fae!” Laelia whines, shaking her hands with the same brown cuffs holding them together that we all have on. They are no doubt the things stopping our magic as well. There isn’t much to them, just brown metal that has been clawed at more than once, judging by the long scratch marks in them. My own cuffs cut into my wrists, pressing against my skin, and none of my powers work at all since we woke, so I’m guessing this is because of them. “If I had known—”

“If I had a knife, I would literally cut you right now to stop your constant yapping,” I growl, climbing to my feet, holding my palm against my stomach wound when it hurts from the movement. Turns out the cursed rune I apparently have in my body, which can keep me from dying from anything, doesn’t help much with healing. A big part of me loves the idea I can’t die, but the cost seems to be a lot. And I never signed up for this. All I know is the necklace I lost had the same rune on it, and it was purple, but it didn’t glow and my mother never took it off. Nor did I ever hear her talk about the cursed rune or any of this.

If that wasn’t enough to worry about, being trapped here with the insane Seelie king as my captor is enough to make me freak out altogether. A jolt of pain slams into me as I straighten up, and I wonder how long this wound is going to take to heal. My reaper and Unseelie blood can only do so much, and I can’t even sleep well enough to heal this. A part of me knows the dagger the king used must have been blessed with magic, fae magic, to give me a wound like this that is taking so long to heal up. At least I know I won’t die from infection down in this shitty dungeon. Laelia is still going on and on, repeating the same thing about Unseelie blood, and I can’t drown her out anymore. “I’m literally bleeding from a hole in my stomach, and I still don’t complain as much as you have done! Shut the hell up!”

Laelia turns away with red cheeks, looking at the brick wall, and I walk to the gate, sliding down onto my ass next to the bars, groaning from the pain it causes. I can’t see anything outside of the cell, and only the moonlight trickling down

through a tiny gap in the ceiling gives me a view of Poppy and Laelia.

Poppy looks as terrified as she always has since we both woke up in here, as she meets my gaze.

“I always wanted to come to the Otherworld. To see what it is like,” Poppy replies with an almost amused lilt to her voice. “I’m guessing you’ve been here before and didn’t mention it to me?”

“Mentioning it would be admitting I grew up here until I was eight,” I honestly reply. “And I don’t like to think of that time or how it all ended, because it was the best and the worst time of my life. And I ended up losing everything and everyone. I ended up alone.”

Poppy’s eyes shine with pity as I look away, spotting a tiny stem of a plant growing up between the cracks of the rocks, the unnatural green glow of it making it certain in my mind where I am. The Otherworld. My first home and a place I have always wanted to come back to. The Otherworld always made me feel that way if I remember right, even if the memory of this place seems like a lost memory I’ve pushed to the back of my mind.

The air is cold and damp, much like the room we are in, and overall I feel miserable even without thinking about everything that has happened. Lifting my torn top a little, I flinch at the sight of the nasty stomach wound that is slowly closing but is no doubt going to leave a scar. The cut rips across my lower stomach, and even though it doesn’t look infected, it isn’t closing up like I would expect by now.

“Are you okay?” Poppy asks me, and I push my shirt down before looking her way as she crawls over to me, ignoring Laelia as she complains about being cold. Poppy sits by my side and looks down at the floor. Her black hair is braided on the one side, although as messy as my own hair, and dirt smothers her skin.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel guilty. Who I am got her dumped in this mess with me, and I should never have accepted the deal her father offered me. I should have run

as fast as I could in the opposite direction. Even if I never would have met my best friend, a woman I see as a sister, or the men in my life that I'm utterly addicted to. Even if I am aware that at some point, it would have all gone wrong.

If not this, then it would have been the fact I'm falling for a demi-god who can't date mortals like me. Or an alpha hellhound shifter who no doubt has a mate out there somewhere that he will leave me for when he goes to rule hell. All shifters have mates. I'm not even going to think about my demon overlord and how his demon might kill me if I were to mate with the hellhound, and then there is Sebastian.

The prince who stood and watched as I was captured.

The prince who didn't step in when I needed him the most.

"Been better," I finally answer. And even that is a sort of lie. I want to tell her I'm falling apart inside and there is nothing she can do to help me.

I want to tell her I'm so fucking sorry she is dragged into this mess with me.

But I bet she knows all this from one look at me. Poppy knows me, much like I know her.

"You haven't spoken much since you woke up mostly because you've been in and out of it but also because you won't talk. I don't blame you, but we need to make a plan now. I need some hope. Or something. Anything. What exactly happened?" she softly asks me. "Where are we?"

"What do you remember?" I question, wanting to understand her side of the story. I almost feel bad for being a zombie in this cell for a while. I should have snapped out of it sooner.

She folds her arms and looks up at the cracks of light shining in through the stone ceiling. "Nothing important. I woke up hearing smashing in the living area and Mossy shouting." She pauses as I feel like daggers cut into my chest. Mossy? "And some sort of magic hit me before I could get to the door, and knocked me out cold."

Seelie magic no doubt.

If anyone, including this damn Seelie king has hurt Mossy, I'm going to kill them. Slowly.

“The queen found out what I am, and the Seelie Fae King was there...,” I drift off. “The Seelie king has been visiting my dreams, and in each one, he killed me. The dreams started when I came to the academy, but I suspect he just managed to sense me as I was closer to the Otherworld than ever before. He wants the cursed rune, and apparently I have it. It also means I can't die, but he will probably figure out a way soon. I just have to kill him first, and I'm going to, Poppy. One way or another, he is dying soon.”

“What is the cursed rune?” she asks me with wide eyes. Laelia is silent, staring at me in confusion as I try to remember the word the Seelie king used to make the runes appear.

“Lāsts.”

The runes burst to life all over my skin like a wave of water touching every part of me. The runes shine purple, lighting up the room, and I stare at the one on my hand as I lift it in the air, turning my hand over once. The rune is beautiful in its design, but not knowing how I ended up with it or why I am suddenly immortal because of it is another matter.

The runes slowly fade away, and I'm left in the silence of a million questions that I don't have the answers for.

I've been running from the magic of this world for so many years only to find out the worst of the magic was within me the entire time.

“The Seelie king said my mother was promised to him and stole the rune. He suggested I am going to be his bride.” I snort out a laugh. “Little does he know I'd be the most stabby bride ever. I would spend our entire marriage figuring out how to kill him, and considering I'm immortal, I wouldn't even care if he tried to kill me back.”

“Daesyn, this is serious,” Poppy sternly tells me. Like I don't know that. “The Seelie king is known as a cruel and evil person. He might not be able to kill you, but why do you think he has us here?”

I grit my teeth. “Because he knows I will protect *you*.” I pause and look at her sister. “But my loyalty doesn’t stretch that far. He got it half wrong.”

“Maybe he didn’t,” Poppy softly replies. A long pause drifts between us. “Why didn’t Sebastian stop his mother?”

I’ve thought about this for a long time down here, the betrayal not far from my mind. Near enough every time I fall asleep, I think of Seb and his actions. I close my eyes for a second. “His sister. Seb told me once he would always protect her, and I got the impression their mother doesn’t care for her much. Or he just hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Poppy delicately replies.

“I for one could see how someone could hate you,” Laelia interrupts. *Whoa, she never turns off her bitch switch.*

I don’t even glance at her. “Your sister just wants to be punched, doesn’t she?”

“It is looking like it,” Poppy grimly replies, and Laelia starts crying. I roll my eyes and focus back on the outside of our cell.

“I hope Ryker, Seth or even Finn have found Mossy,” I reply, watching the shadows dance around. “He must be so worried.”

“They will come for you,” Poppy whispers back. “I get the impression there is little that would stop them.”

“Yes, Torfinn will come for me and my sister. He would do that for us,” Laelia whines around a sob. I shake my head and rest back, wishing that she was in another cell. The shadows of the corridor start to burn away into the light, and then I hear footsteps. Heavy boots slam against the ground, three pairs if my hearing is any good. Slowly two men in brown armour with silver helmets covering their faces come into view, and right behind them is none other than the nightmare king. The Seelie king’s black cloak brushes against the stone floor with every step, and he slowly comes to a stop outside of our cell. The guards move to his side in perfect formation, and I take in the king of the fae. His greying blond hair falls to his

shoulders, parts tucked behind his ears, and his eyes glow a strange purple colour that seems so pale it could almost be silver. His black clothes are filled out by his muscular form, and everything about him screams control and power.

He is intimidating.

But I've been intimidated by ugly ass demons, terrifying monster creatures, undead souls in hell, and even an alpha werewolf shifter before and survived it.

The Seelie Fae King will not scare me.

He looks down at me with a confident smile, as if he is expecting me to be in tears like Laelia currently is. Part of me sees the likeness to Sebastian, but not by much. The Seelie king is nowhere near as good-looking as his son.

No wonder the king doesn't like him.

"I can see why they sent this one to the academy with you and not her." He points at the sisters. "But I do wish we had found their parents for their punishment. They have so far eluded me."

I see Poppy and Laelia's instant relief, and oddly, I feel the same way. They are good people, even if they are a little messed up letting Poppy go to the academy and saving the bitchy twin instead.

But for Poppy, it was a good thing. She has changed a lot and for the best, in my opinion. It's a shame she won't be doing the rest of the academy test.

Poppy would make a brilliant reaper queen.

"What makes you think you will ever find them?" I ask as I pull myself to my feet, forcing myself not to react to the pain in my stomach. The very knife he stabbed me with is clipped to his belt, alongside two other blue blades. I'm going to steal all of those and stab him right back with them. "In fact, what makes you think you will get anything you want?"

"Daesyn Heartlocke, I always get what I want," he states with a smugness only a fae king could have. "Now you're going to come with me, listen to what I have to tell you, and

not fight back. If you try to hurt me or any of my guards, I will chop various parts off your friends and force you to watch. Do you understand?"

"It's crystal clear," I bite back. He only laughs as he points to one of the guards and the door. The guard rushes over and unlocks it, and I step out. The second I am close, the Seelie Fae King grabs my upper arm and starts forcibly walking me down the corridor.

"My name is Einar NightHold, and welcome back to the Otherworld."

Einar doesn't give me a break in his large paces, even as I feel my wound pouring more blood into my top and leggings with every step. My clothes are dirty and soaked with blood anyway, but the more he pulls me along, the harder it is to stay conscious from blood loss. The corridor opens up to a grey stone staircase that goes up five floors before giving out to a large room. Two more guards are waiting in front of the door, and they bow instantly when they see Einar, and I see first-hand the loyalty the guards have towards him. I wish I did more research into the king of the fae.

But then again, this shit was not planned.

Einar drags me to the other side of the empty room where two wooden chairs are facing a window with thick blue curtains hiding the view. The room has no smell, not even of dust or damp or anything, and a part of me misses the cell because all I can think of is that this room has been cleaned one too many times and might be the room he uses to kill people in. After he shoves me into a seat, which I can't do much more than sit in my current situation, he sits down in the other chair.

Then he lifts his hands, and blue fire bursts out in the shape of a dragon. The flame dragon sweeps across my head, the fire so close I feel it against my hair, and I have to check I'm not burnt as it suddenly flies headfirst into the curtains. They burn up quickly, disappearing into magical embers on the floor.

But the sight they were hiding is nothing short of a phenomenal view.

The Otherworld is stretched out in front me, the fifteen islands floating in the middle of the air with currents of water spinning around them. On the water are so many ships, riding the currents effortlessly with their different coloured sails floating in the wind. Each island is different, with some like deserts and others thick with forests. Off the sides of the main fifteen islands are hundreds of little islands, but none of them looks like they have much on them.

Below the islands is just endless, beautiful, dazzling green sea.

“On this land,
The sea may rise into the sky,
and the islands can follow.
For the Otherworld was made
in the image of the angels.
And all angels ascend.”

I don't look at Einar as he speaks, not until he is finished, as it is silent for a while—and not the comfortable kind. My mum told me that once, well, sung it to me like a lullaby. Like she did with so many songs, some that I barely remember anymore, and I wish I did. When I do turn his way, I make sure he can see all of the hate and disgust I have for him. “If the gods don't kill you for messing with their test, then I am going to. I am going to kill you, make certain of that, Einar. You will die, and not even the gods will be able to save your soul from me.”

And I mean every single word.

I vow it.

“Many have promised the same thing.” He waves his hand and looks away, waving off my threat because he doesn't know who I am. He has no clue what I've gone through and how serious I am in this moment.

“But none are me. I’m Daesyn Heartlocke, and I want vengeance. Unluckily for you, my vengeance has your name on it.”

And I will never stop. Never. One way or another, his blood is going to be on my hands and his throne destroyed into dust.



CHAPTER 36

If it wasn't for my training, for my lessons as a kid in learning how to never relax around an evil creature no matter how silent they get, I might actually sit back and rest in the strange calmness that has drifted over us. I'm sure the Seelie fae have a certain power about them, a way of making you feel comfortable even when you know you are not like them. The Unseelie were always more known for being less friendly. I wonder if that was part of the reason why this man sitting next to me declared a war on my kind, ripping apart my world and so many others so easily. There was always a big difference between the Unseelie and Seelie fae.

But this man? He is nothing but pure evil. Through and through.

The Seelie Fae King is quite happily chilling in his chair next to me, acting like he didn't kill me a dozen times just to test a theory out. Like he can't invade my dreams, keeping me a prisoner even when I do escape this place.

"What do you want?" I finally ask. "What does a king want with an assassin? An Unseelie assassin?"

He folds his hands on his lap, his fingers ever so close to the dagger that I have my eye on. I'm sure the movement was done to piss me off. "Your mother was my closest friend as a child and my intended bride. The agreement was made between my parents and hers, your grandparents, who were highly respected in the fae court. Back then, it was simply the fae court, and our races were at peace in some respect."

Colour me clueless, I never knew the Seelie and Unseelie got along. “Our marriage was going to unite the Seelie and Unseelie lines,” he starts to explain, shocking me into silence. “When Ingrid turned eighteen, she was given the cursed rune pendant to protect, like every woman in your family, and she wore it proudly. It was a great honour that made your family almost like royalty to the Unseelie, to be a keeper of one of the four godless runes.”

Godless runes? Four of them?

Knowing he won’t answer me about that quite yet, I bench the thought to learn more about my mother. A part of me needs to know what she went through, how she ended up with the reapers and so far away from the Otherworld.

And how she ended up coming back here with me...

“What happened?” I bluntly ask the obvious question as this story doesn’t end happily for him or me.

His lips drop into a sour line. “She left. Simply and easily, she walked away and left me just a note. Ingrid claimed she wanted a life away from the court of Seelie, and she wanted nothing to do with me because the rune sensed I wanted it. She also claimed she did not love me, and being mated to someone you don’t love is something she never coveted.”

I don’t reply, because I hear the distaste in his voice, how he clearly thinks she was insane, but I respect my mum so much more for her choice. She was so brave.

I already knew that, but this story just makes it clearer to me.

“I loved your mother very much, and *I* would have kept her safe. That’s a lot more than her reaper mate ever did, because in the end, he caused her death,” he remarks, and I bristle. I know my mum loved my father right until the end, I saw it in her eyes, I heard it in her voice.

She loved him, and my mum told me he was brave like her, that he did everything he could for her.

“My mother left us, me and my uncle, and then never came back. How do you know if she is dead?” I question, feeling my

heart pounding in my chest like it's beating its own drum.

He briefly smiles like he is enjoying a new memory. "Because her body was given to me by your grandmother and grandfather. Her parents killed her when she went to them for help...help with you."

"What?" I whisper as my body starts to shake, and I curl my hands into fists.

"They told me she broke the vow your family had promised the gods to keep. The vow was simple...never use the cursed rune, only ever protect it, and Ingrid used it on you. You died as a baby when you were born, and Ingrid could not bear to lose you, so she forced the magic out of the pendant and into your tiny body. You came back to life, and the rune was impossible to remove from your soul without killing you," he claims, leaning closer. "Only one of your bloodline could take the magic, but when I figure out a way to kill you, which I will, I will have the power I want. You don't deserve it."

I climb up off the seat, taking a few steps back, feeling the world closing in on me a bit. "What happened to my grandparents?"

His smile is vicious. "I ripped them to pieces."

And it feels like the world is knocked away and I'm floating for a second. Having a feeling my mum is dead is one thing, knowing it is another. Refusing to deal with the desperate clawing emotions in my chest, I focus on the anger—the only thing I'm willing to show this man.

"If I didn't hate you, I would thank you for that," I growl out.

He shrugs his shoulders and crosses his leg over the other as he stretches out. "I enjoyed killing them, but it was not enough. I made it enough by making a deal with the reaper queen to destroy your race. The Unseelie screams, the deaths, the amount of suffering helped me deal with the loss of Ingrid. One day, no one will remember your grandparents."

"I'm not Ingrid, and I can't replace her. You do know that, right?" I question.

He stands up and walks over to me, catching my chin with his hand. “You look like your mother, but your hair is your father’s. Your stupidity is your father’s as well.”

“My father was clearly not that stupid. He got my mother when you failed to,” I reply, and I start to laugh. His eyes burn with hate before he slaps me hard across the face, and I fall to the floor. I don’t stop laughing as I climb up and meet his cold gaze.

I did deserve that.

“I’ve been hit much harder. If you wanna make an impression, you will have to do better than that,” I suggest, well and truly pissing him off. I can see why my mum didn’t like this asshole. “And for a man who says he loved my mother, trying to kill her daughter one minute and suggesting she will be his bride the next isn’t a way to honour her memory.”

“If I can’t have her, I will have you,” he counters. “You will enjoy my company in time, and we will have an heir before I kill you.”

I’d rather die.

“I highly doubt your plan is going to work unless it involves me stabbing you until you bleed out over your throne?” I sarcastically ask. “A throne I’m going to destroy. A throne I’m going to get rid of so this world can be free from you.”

He looks so angry for a second and something else? It isn’t fear, but it’s almost acceptance, before he cools his features and steps back. “Why didn’t you ask about the four runes? Aren’t you curious?”

I brush off the sudden change of subject, even though I am interested in his strange reaction.

“Yes, but I figure one rune is more trouble than it’s worth. I don’t need to know about the others,” I reply.

“But you do,” he replies and clicks his fingers at the guards before turning back to me. “They involve you.”

“How?” I question, taking a step back. “Being honest with you, I want to get the hell out of the Otherworld and back to my apartment on Earth. Everything has been insane since I joined that damn academy.”

“I’m sorry to tell you that no matter what you did or didn’t do, this was always your fate,” he counters with a smug smile. “Your very existence was written by the gods, and they created the godless runes to stop you.”

“Stop me?” I ask, almost wanting to laugh. “The gods don’t think they can’t beat me on their own?”

I mean, I’m confident about my badass skills, but fighting a god is another matter.

“On your twenty-first birthday, the Otherworld will give you a gift,” he replies, stepping closer, and I move back. “The first child who takes the cursed rune will be blessed with the greatest power in all the worlds. She will be blessed with pure destruction.”

“Destruction sounds like a shitty gift,” I mutter, needing to lighten the tone even when I’m freaking the hell out inside.

“You will destroy everything and everyone in your path. You will destroy worlds. It is predicted, it is seen by so many, and the deaths you will cause will never be forgotten. The only way to stop you will be with the runes. The divine rune, the forsaken rune and the forgotten rune. They can take the cursed rune from you, to join them, and make you weak enough to kill.”

“You can have the damn rune! I don’t want it or this gift!” I ask just as the door opens and a man I never thought I’d see again stumbles into the room. “Holy shit.”

My whisper catches his attention, and my uncle sharply turns my way, his eyes widening when he knows who I am. I guess I do look different than I was so many years ago when he saved my life. My uncle looks thin, worn down and grubby, but I still see past it all. I see the uncle who told me fairy tales, who taught me about flowers in the garden and climbed under my bed to prove there was no monster under it when I was

scared in the night. I'm running to him before I've thought about it, and he catches me in his grip, holding me close to his chest like he used to. He smells worse than shit, but I never want to let go.

"I prayed to the gods every day that you were safe," he whispers. "It seems I have failed now you are here."

"Nothing matters but the fact you're alive," I whisper back. I'm not alone anymore.

"As touching as this is..." The dickhead behind me has to interrupt. "Arthur, do tell your niece how you knew about the cursed rune. How you let her mother walk to her death. How you spent years pining after her only to let her die."

Uncle Arthur pulls me behind him, and I try not to swear from the movement and the pain it causes my stomach. "I told Ingrid not to go, but, Daesyn...well, she wasn't right. She glowed when she slept, she accidentally killed animals that came near the house, and she kept repeating strange things in a trance."

"I did?" I whisper. Arthur looks down at me, his eyes soft.

"Yes, but I believed it was the Otherworld and its connection to the cursed rune. The runes were all made here, and the magic is so strong. I bet things were better on Earth?" he asks.

Well, except for the demon babysitter...and all the assassin training.

"Kinda."

"Good. We knew the mortal realm was the best chance, and I was meant to come with you. But that didn't happen," he sadly replies before turning his gaze back to Einar. "We both failed Ingrid, it seems."

Einar roars, and a blast of fire explodes out of his body, hitting us both hard in the chest. With no way to protect myself or my uncle, I fly across the room and hit the door hard. Embers and smoke surround me as I cough, rolling onto my side, the room spinning as I hold in a scream from the pain.

Black dots swim in my vision as I open my eyes, seeing big boots walking up to me before Einar leans down and grabs my chin, lifting my head. Before I can stop him, he pushes his lips against mine, and I bite his lip as hard as I can. He almost screams, and punches me hard in the side of my head.

This time, I'm thankful when I pass out.



CHAPTER 37

“Daesyn!” my mum shouts, and I giggle, running faster through the long grass. I hear my mum’s laugh behind me, and I turn back to see the grass wiggling at the top not far away. I’m really bad at hide and seek.

Crouching down, I hold my breath for as long as I can just before my mum jumps out of the grass and rushes to me, picking me up and swinging me around as I laugh.

“How do you always find me, mummy?” I ask around giggles. Mum sits us both down on the ground and wraps her arms around me.

Her bright eyes look down at me. “You know how I’ve told you the Otherworld will give you a gift when you turn twenty-one?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Well, my gift is to track anyone and anything. I can sense them without even opening my eyes or hearing a single thing,” she tells me. “One day you will get a power, and I promise you it will be meant for you. The Otherworld is made of pure magic, and it always delivers what we need.”

“And you needed to find someone?” I reply.

A little smile makes her lips turn up. “Yes. I was looking for happiness and love, and I found your father. And then you.”

“I wish I knew him, mummy.”

She holds me that much tighter, but I don’t mind. “I wish you did too.”

“I don’t know why you are helping her. You know she will get us all killed with her lies,” Laelia’s voice sharply wakes me up just as something cool rests against my cheek, and I realise it’s a hand.

“I help her because Daesyn is a sister to me, and she would risk her life to save mine. I would do the same for her, and that’s what people do. Laelia, I love you, but you need to grow up and cut the jealousy crap,” Poppy snaps back.

“When did you turn into such a bitch?!” Laelia all but shouts.

“I grew up at the academy I was forced to go to so that you could be free!” Poppy shouts. “Not all of us are mum and dad’s favourite little princess. They would be so disappointed to hear what you are going on about, Laelia! They would tell you not to be a monster!”

“Don’t mean to interrupt,” I croak out before clearing my throat. The tension and awkwardness in the room is enough to make me want to start digging through the stones with just my nails. My cheek throbs as Poppy helps me sit up against the wall, and this time I can feel how soaked my top is with my blood. I lift it, and I almost wish I didn’t, because the little healing I had done is all gone now, the cut ripped open once more, and my stomach looks like it’s been kicked a damn few times.

I must have really pissed the Seelie Fae King off.

For some demented reason, that makes me smile. We are alone again in the cell, and there is one important person missing. “Where is my uncle?”

“I thought you didn’t have family,” Poppy replies, frowning her brow.

“My uncle is alive here. I didn’t know until recently,” I reply, trying to explain. “And I’m not leaving without him. He is all the family I have left.”

“Who said we are leaving at all?” Laelia interrupts. “No one has come to our rescue, and it’s been days.”

“I get that you’re the kind of girl who needs a man to save her,” I reply. “But I’m not. I will save my goddamn ass all on my own. For bonus points, I’m going to save you two and my uncle.”

“This isn’t a game,” Laelia bites back.

“Good thing too, or you’d be dead. They always kill the pretty airheads first.”

Poppy coughs to conceal a laugh, and Laelia goes bright red, opening her stupid mouth to say something idiotic I’m sure, when we hear footsteps. Poppy stands up in the middle of the cell in front of me, and I’m instantly proud of how far she has come since we met.

And weirded out that she is protecting me at all.

It’s usually the other way around.

Slowly light fills the corridor, and a guard holding a torch comes into view. He drops the huge flashlight onto the ground where it clatters, and pulls off his helmet. The guard is older than I would have expected, considering he looks so well in shape, but Seelie fae nonetheless. His grey hair and dark eyes search the cell before he finds me.

“Daesyn Heartlocke, I come with a message from the Unseelie rebels,” he quietly explains. “We don’t have a lot of time before someone will realise I’m missing. I’ve been working undercover here for a long time and will continue to until the king falls.”

“I would get up, but I don’t think I can,” I admit back to him. I’m bloody useless right now. I need a healer and a good bottle of whiskey. “But I’m glad you’re here if you have something that can help me.”

“This will help your injuries,” the guard states and pulls out a pouch from under his armour. He pushes the small leather pouch through the bars and holds it there. “And this will undo every door in the castle. It’s made with old magic and hard to find. The Unseelie rebels have found it for you.”

He uses his other hand to pull out a glowing blue key on a silver chain and pushes it through the bars.

Poppy looks down at me, and I nod, giving her permission with a small but tense smile. I don't trust this stranger, he is Seelie after all. Poppy takes the pouch and key and steps back quickly. "Why are you helping the Unseelie rebels? You're Seelie."

"My mate was Unseelie and murdered on the first day of the war. Not all Seelie want this, and they never have done. This war was bred and created because of your mother's actions. The Unseelie rebels are asking—no, demanding—that you come to them and help fix your family's actions."

"Demanding?" I reply with an arched eyebrow. "I don't let anyone demand anything of me. I've met the Unseelie rebels, and because of them, I am here. Meeting with them will just get me in more trouble, and I'm so done with it all."

"War is coming, with or without your help, Daesyn. But I am suggesting you simply hear the rebels out. That's all I ask of you in exchange for the healing medicine and the key. I will also tell you that the handcuffs are magically tied to this castle. The second you leave here, they will disappear and you will be free."

I grit my teeth. I don't like making deals, but I am an honourable person at times, like when it's life and death. I might not be able to die, but my uncle, Poppy and her shitty sister can. I don't think I could live with two of them dying. The third...well... "Where do I find them?"

"Graywood island. They will find you there," he replies. "Steal the blue ship, trust me on that, it's untraceable, and onboard are maps. Leave in the next few hours, it will be less busy, but you will need weapons." He pulls out two long daggers from sleeves on his upper arms and pushes them under the bars and across the floor. "Good luck, Daesyn."

The guard, who never once told us his name, picks up his flashlight and helmet, popping it back onto his head and looking like any other guard.

“Wait,” I call out when he moves. “Where is my uncle? I’m not leaving here without him.”

“There are a few male prisoners down this way and one reaper. Doubt he will make it long, he isn’t in good shape.”

With that unsettling news, the guard walks away, and I hear Poppy whisper thank you before she rushes over to me. “Lie down.”

“I’m usually the bossy one in our friendship,” I try to joke, and it makes Poppy grin as I lie down, every bit of movement hurting me. I lift my top up to my ribs, and Poppy pulls out a wet gooeey liquid and rubs it across my cut. I expect it to sting, but instantly I feel nothing at all. It numbs me to the point I can’t feel the cut.

“Does it help?”

“Yep,” I reply, sitting up with much more ease. I feel a little dizzy, but hell, I’m ready to fight my way out of here.

Laelia picks up the daggers, and Poppy holds her hand out. “Daesyn and I will have those.”

My badass Poppy. I’m literally so proud.

Laelia grumbles, but she hands them to Poppy, and she offers me one. “Fighting with our hands tied to escape a Seelie fae castle. This is a new kind of test.”

“There has been more than one situation where I’ve needed to fight with my hands tied. This is just back to old times for me,” I reply, and Poppy rolls her eyes. “Now pop the door open. We need to get my uncle and get the hell out of here.”



CHAPTER 38

Breaking out of a lunatic's home reminds me of my teenage years as a thief, but this time, I think I'm the prize I'm stealing from right under his feet instead of priceless jewels or money. Poppy and Laelia are right behind me as I jog down the corridor, searching the empty cells and a few cells that have skeletons in them.

And a bad smell.

The movies never tell you about that part. But dead things smell like shit.

Eventually, I pass a cell with someone in and come to a halt, looking closer. The man picks himself up off the floor and limps over, his long black hair so knotted and long it's hard to make out many features. He is tall but nimble, and I spot purple eyes under the locks of hair and dirt. But I sense that he is Unseelie. "Want to get out of here?"

"Yes," he croakily replies. Alright then. I shove the key in the lock, and it snaps open.

"Where is the reaper prisoner?" I demand, spinning my dagger in my hand.

The man bows his head at me. "I will show you."

I step back as he passes me, limping his way down the corridor. We pass a few more men, who barely even look our way, or they are dead, before he stops. I look in, and my heart nearly drops in my chest when I see my uncle on the ground, blood pooling around him and his face beaten in. Rushing, I undo the gate and run in, falling to my knees at his side and

touching my fingers to his neck. When I feel a pulse, I sigh and look back at Laelia and Poppy and the new dude.

“Can one of you help me carry him?”

“I will do this for you,” the new dude answers as he limps into the room. With strength he didn’t look like he had, he gently picks my uncle up over his shoulder and nods to me when he straightens up. “I am in your debt and at your service. Allow me to carry your friend from this place.”

“Keep close and we will defend you,” I reply, not touching on the whole “in your debt” thing. If I remember right, some fae take oaths like that really seriously.

“We should go,” Poppy states. “Come on, I will take the back, and you go in front of them both, Dae.”

“Got it.” I make my way out of the cell, clutching my dagger tightly in my hand as we all walk towards the door. There are no guards on this side as I sneak out the door and to the stairs. Every step echoes as we head towards the top, and I place my hand up when I hear voices.

Two shadows of guards step into the staircase, and before they even look down, I grab one of them by the helmet and pull him over the bannister. He screams as he falls, and I jump onto the next guard, slamming my dagger into his neck as we both land.

“There goes our element of surprise,” I say, roughly pulling the dagger from the guard’s neck and checking him for more weapons. He only has a sword, a heavy one at that, and I leave it on him, sneaking to the door. I pop my head out, searching the empty room where my blood and my uncle’s mark the floor, and the chair I sat on is nothing but ash. “Let’s go.”

I run across the room to the double doors and slowly pull one open, looking in at another much wider corridor. This one has shiny blue tile floors with gold lines making squares, and the walls are all white, making it bright. I count five doors and one staircase at the bottom of the corridor, with what looks like a servant’s hidden door next to it. I slip out the door,

holding it for the others to come out before softly letting it shut. We all jog down the corridor, and just as we get to the stairs, a metal arrow flies past my head and imbeds itself in the wall.

“That was rude,” I chuckle, spinning around. Three guards stand in a line, each with a loaded bow and arrow.

“Don’t move,” one of them shouts.

I smile. Lowering my voice, I glance at Laelia. “Get to the blue boat with my uncle. Poppy and I will meet you there.”

“We’ve got this,” Poppy whispers, very slowly moving to my side. “How do you want to play this, Dae?”

“I’m going to run right at them. Just follow by the walls,” I reply, and then I run. Immediately they aim their arrows at me and fire, like total idiots. I watch the arrows closely and duck to my knees, missing the first two. The third is a second later, and I roll to the right, missing it altogether. The guards are still fumbling with the next arrows when I am right in front of them. I crash into them hard, knocking two of them to the ground and slamming my dagger into one of their arms. One of the guards punches me in the stomach with an impressive hit, sending me rolling across the floor off him in pain. He jumps on my back, wrapping his hands around my throat and pushing magic into me. Shadows drag in all around me, skirting their way across the floor as I buck under him, trying to push him off me.

I hear Poppy grunting and the crashing sound of metal in the distance just as I lift my leg and flip the guard off my back. I roll with the flip and punch him in his neck, making his magic disappear in shock and him gasp for air. I reach over, picking up a fallen arrow, and wrap my hands around it before slamming it into his chest with both my hands. Hot blood splatters my clothes before I stand up and turn around. Poppy has knocked out one of the guards, her cheek is cut and bleeding, but as she climbs to her feet, she looks steady. The other guard that I stabbed in the arm isn’t here, and that is concerning.

“He is going to raise the alarm. Run!” I shout at Poppy. We both hightail it down the corridor towards the door, just as a ship crashes into the side of the building. All I see is a silver fairy with large wings slamming through the brick before I dive out of the way. Poppy slams into my back, both of us rolling into the wall, and I look up to see Seb holding the ship wheel. Laelia is right behind him, and he looks down.

“Get the fuck on. We have a minute to get out of here,” Seb shouts. Despite everything, I drag Poppy to her feet and run to the side of the boat where three ropes lie hanging. I grab one, and Poppy gets the other as Seb pulls the ship out of the castle slowly. Alarm bells, an awful screeching noise, fill the air as I get to the top and over the edge. I stand up and help Poppy over, right before we both collapse on the edge of the ship wall.

“He rescued us, don’t kill him right away,” Poppy breathlessly comments. “But make him pay.”

“Good plan, my friend,” I reply, looking up at Seb behind the wheel, feeling my heart pound with a mixture of good and bad feelings.

He might have saved me here...but he watched me suffer, and I want to know exactly why.



CHAPTER 39

“Hold on to something, vixen!” Seb shouts as the ship breaks free of the castle, and several bricks fly across the deck, narrowly missing us all. Poppy and Laelia grab hold of the mast, and as I climb to my feet, I see the prisoner tying my uncle to the side of the captain’s room with rope and securing himself. I run as fast as I can down the main deck, knocking barrels out of my way as Seb turns the ship around. Just as I get to the steps, something blasts in the distance, and then Seb drops the ship.

I cling to the stair railing as the entire vessel falls, the whistling of the air and the sounds of Laelia’s screams blocking out any other noise. All the air leaves my lungs as my stomach feels like there are a million butterflies in it, dancing around. The ship crashes harshly into the sea, water spraying up over the sides, and Seb has us all moving impossibly quick seconds later. Feeling dizzy, I shake it off and climb up the steps and stumble to the bannister in front of the wheel, right next to Seb.

“What’s the plan?” I ask him.

Seb doesn’t answer, and I turn to him, seeing him looking right at me. I can see his guilt as plain as day in his eyes. “Seb, we will discuss that later. What is the plan?”

He clears his throat and looks away. “See that water tunnel? It’s mostly unused because it’s dangerous.”

“So no one in their right mind will follow us?” I question as I look over at the swirling tunnel of seawater that is one of the currents. It’s dark inside the centre of it, exactly where we

are heading, but I doubt we have much of a choice. Lifting myself onto my tiptoes, I search the sky around us and see a dark cloud in the distance.

“That’s the plan,” he states. “We can jump out of it after a little while and mix in with every other ship in the Otherworld. This ship is hard to trace and looks like so many others. My father can’t check every ship.”

“What dangers should we expect in this tunnel?” I question next, the unsaid question.

Seb pulls the ship closer and closer with every second, the spray of water from the tunnel now grazing my skin. “Creatures lurk in there.”

“Well, that’s not good,” I mutter, holding my hand on my stomach as it stings. I lift my hand to see it’s coated in blood, and Seb snatches it from me.

“How have you not healed?” he asks me, never taking his eyes from where we are going, but all I am hyper-focused on is his hand clamped around my wrist. His skin touching mine. How much I wish he hadn’t betrayed me.

“Why did you betray me?” I ask just as we get to the tunnel. Seb looks down at me as it slowly goes dark around us, the sunlight dimming away.

“My mother warned me that if I interrupted or tried to stop the justice, she would kill my sister, vixen,” he replies, and I feel the shocking truth in every word. “I’ve protected her since she was two and showed her first signs of talking to the spirits. My mother became jealous, as no one but her could control them, and she has never been able to speak to them like Eira. Not only could my sister speak to them, but the spirits also protect and help her without any consequence.”

“Jealousy makes people crueller than they ever want to be,” I sympathize.

He gulps and grits his teeth. “There are cruel people, and there is my mother. She is beyond that now, and I would take Eira away, but she would never let me. So when she took you,

she held a knife to Eira's throat and told me her plan. I made another one even as I agreed to her terms, vixen. I'm sorry."

Lights on the edges of the ship start automatically turning themselves on as the tunnel sucks all other light away. The bursts of light shine down on us, and I still don't look away from Seb. "I planned to get you out the second she locked you up for a trial. I had no idea about my father's involvement, and when he stabbed you... I stood up to run to you, but my mother used the air spirit to send me flying out of the room and knocked me out. The moment I woke up, I hid my sister in the village and came here to get you."

"You care about me," I say.

Seb holds his hand out to me. "Like no one else, vixen. I should have never let it go that far, and for that, I am sorry."

"You didn't stab me, Seb, but I forgive you for everything you didn't do," I reply, taking his hand, knowing he needs me to say this. Seb was protecting his sister and trying to save me at the same time, how could I be mad at him for that? He came here, risking his entire life, to break me out of a castle. I slip the dagger tip under his neck as I step forward, still holding his hand. "But next time things go wrong, we deal with it together and fight for each other right down to the end. I don't do things in halves, and I need the same from you. If you haven't figured it out yet, blood doesn't make family."

"Family is who you fight for," he replies, wrapping his other hand around mine, and he softly pushes the tip of the dagger into his neck, cutting him softly. Drops of blood drip out from the cut as he pushes my hand and the dagger down. "Family is who you bleed for, vixen."

I run my finger over the cut on his neck, wiping the blood away before stepping closer to him. My body presses against his as sea water rains down on us. Seb doesn't notice it any more than I do as he cups the back of my neck and kisses me. I've never been one for romance, but I feel more than a little warm in this moment, I feel it all. Seb's lips move against mine in a soft and possessive nature, coaxing me deeper into the kiss like a promised story.

Someone clears their throat. I ignore it the first time but not the second as Seb pulls away. I'm not surprised when I turn around to see Laelia with her hands on her hips, soaking wet. "Poppy wants a chat. She is in the captain's room."

"Go," Seb suggests. I kiss his cheek, leaving him at the wheel and jogging past Laelia, down the steps and through the wooden door to the captain's room. It's empty in here other than a desk and a small cabin bed, nothing else. A wide window does nothing to make the room less dark, but there are two wall lamps that are on, making it better. Poppy is talking quietly with the prisoner (got to learn his name), and my uncle is resting on the bed.

"Oh, Dae," Poppy says, noticing me. "We have been so lucky. This is Toth Zalan, and he used to be the royal healer. He says he can treat you both."

"I will help however I am needed," Toth agrees. "Persephone tells me you are injured on your stomach."

Poppy blushes and I frown, wondering what is going on here exactly. No one calls Poppy by her full name except for her parents and occasionally Laelia when she is mad, according to Poppy.

"Yes," I answer, deciding to trust Poppy on this one.

Toth waves at the desk. "Will you lie down and let me see?"

I hesitate for a second, and Poppy walks over, touching my upper arm. "I trust him."

"We don't know him, Pops," I whisper back.

"I know, but sometimes you have to trust your gut feeling on someone," she replies. "Like how you trust me and I trust you."

I sigh, knowing she is right, and walk to the desk. I lie down and pull up my shirt to just under my bra, and Toth comes over.

He frowns, which I don't take as a good thing. "This is a magical wound, one that will never close."

“Never?” I whisper.

“Well, there are cures for such with Unseelie magic. The weapon that did this is made by Unseelie and can be undone by them. I am surprised you are alive,” he replies. “The weapon I suspect that did this has never left anyone alive.”

“I can’t die, but I also can’t fight well or sort anything out with a never-closing wound on my stomach,” I reply, slowly sitting up. “I think the Unseelie rebels knew this and knew I would have to come to them for help.”

“Going there is dangerous,” Poppy points out.

“But for Daesyn and her Uncle Arthur, we need help. He is sick, and I need much more advanced medicines and magic than I have here,” Toth explains to us. “I am afraid your uncle might not make it another day without healing, and I am Seelie fae; healing is not a gift of mine.”

“But I can do it,” I reply. “I’m half Unseelie fae.” It feels strange admitting that without fear of being hated for it. “Enough to save him. I usually need earth to heal, but I can use the water.”

“You are not strong enough,” Poppy tells me as I slide off the desk.

“He is my uncle. End of discussion, Pops,” I counter, walking over to my uncle. I kneel down and place my hands on his chest, feeling his slow heartbeat under my palms. “Don’t move, anyone, I’m not well practised at this.”

I close my eyes, feeling the rush of my magic wash over me before I tap into my fae side. The Unseelie magic is strong and allows me to feel all of the elements nearby. I can sense the water of the sea, the barrels of clean water below deck, and boxes of food. I sense every living person on this ship, down to the snails attached to the base. Then, I sense my uncle and how close he is to passing away. Toth wasn’t wrong. Using the sea, I pull it to me as fast as I can. Water pours into the room in streams, through every crack and hole it can find. Hundreds of streams of water pour through me and into my uncle, covering all of his body except for his mouth and nose.

Instantly I feel my uncle healing under the water and my own body struggling to hold the magic in my condition. Seconds tick on, and my uncle's heartbeat slowly starts to feel better, just as I feel myself drifting off into sleep.

And this time, my fae magic catches me in an embrace filled with water before letting me crash to the floor and darkness take over.



CHAPTER 40

“The plant is doing its magic, Prince Sebastian. You need not worry.”

Voices drift all around me, weaving in and out of my consciousness as I struggle to wake myself up. I’m wrapped up in warmth, surrounded by it, and it settles into my bones even as I dream of nothing. My mum doesn’t turn up in a memory, or my uncle for that matter. There is just peaceful silence. I stretch my fingers down my bare stomach, feeling something sticky covering the dagger wound, but it feels like it’s healing. I’ve been changed into black tight trousers and a boob tube black top that hides very little, but I’m clean. There isn’t a bit of dirt or blood on me, and I reach for my hair, feeling that someone has washed it and brushed it.

“Hey, kid,” my uncle’s voice fills the room. I crack open my eyes, seeing glowing green vines completely surrounding me. “I know you’re still sleeping in there and recovering, but I half want to tell you off for healing me and half glad you did. I want to know everything that happened to you since you left the Otherworld. I’m aware I can’t fix any of it, and it wouldn’t have been easy, but I want to help fix what is going on now. I’m not going anywhere, kid.”

Tears fill my eyes as I stare up at the vines, knowing his words were exactly what I’ve longed for.

A big part of me just needed one of my family around, someone on my side, no questions asked.

“Uncle Arthur?” I ask, pushing at the vines. I hear a chair scraping across the floor, and then the vines are ripped apart,

the glow instantly disappearing, and I feel warm straight away. The smell of my uncle mixes with the odd dried orange smell that fills the room as he reaches in and helps me sit up. I'm on a strange bed that is covered with those vines all the way to the floor where they have grown through. The vines are slowly disappearing back into the gaps in the floor as I watch them before slowly climbing out of the bed.

"How are you feeling?" he asks me as he carefully helps me down. The room is quaint with wooden walls and deck flooring and a few lights on the walls. There are no windows in here but one door, which is propped open, and light pours in from the other side, as does the sound of people moving around out there.

Doing a quick check, I'm surprised at my honest answer. "Better. I feel tired but not drained or anything anymore. What the heck did you do? Where are we?"

"I did nothing but bring you here with that prince. To the Unseelie rebels," he explains to me. "Well, Prince Sebastian technically bought us here, and they saved you after you saved me."

"Where are Seb and Poppy?" I ask next.

"We take it in turns sitting with you so someone is always resting or eating. I think Seb is sleeping as he was awake all night and all the previous day steering the ship. Poppy is at the lunch hall," he tells me and waves at the now-empty bed. The vines are all gone. "Let's sit down and talk."

"We do have a lot to talk about," I reply, watching him sit on the bed. I cross my arms and stand. "Like, for instance, everything that happened with my mother and the cursed rune. Tell me everything. And right now. No more secrets."

"Our family, my brothers, my parents, my sister and their partners were all murdered by the reaper queen in a fit of jealousy. I remember the day so vividly like it was just moments ago. Kriffin was a good man and a brilliant reaper. Your father, I mean. Strong, bold and overall, the best of us. I was the brother who ran from responsibility and only came

home for Christmas if the family was lucky. I was selfish and thought only of myself.”

“How did it happen?” I ask. A hitch in my throat is the only sign I give him of how desperate I am to learn the truth about the past.

“I met your mother at Christmas when she was already pregnant with you. I will be honest and tell you I loved her from the second we spoke. She was enchanting, kind and brave. I’d never met a woman like her.” He pauses. “Ingrid loved your father with all of her heart.”

For a second, I feel sorry for him. Loving someone you can’t have is the worst torture of all. I felt it with Seth, and it hurt every damn day when I had to accept he wasn’t going to be in my life. That he didn’t feel the same way.

I’ve still not processed the truth on that subject. On Seth’s real feelings.

“Ingrid was four months pregnant when Kriffin turned up with her on my doorstep and begged me to take Ingrid to the Otherworld and protect you both.”

“Why didn’t he come with us?” I whisper.

“He was badly injured, and we all knew it was impossible to save him. To make sure no one ever looked for us, he decided to die in the house with the rest of our family. To cover up our escape,” he gently tells me. “Ingrid and I left, and we both never got over losing him. Then you were born, and seconds after, you died.”

All the air leaves my body in a woosh. “Your heart stopped, and I will never forget Ingrid’s screams as I tried to save you. Just when I was going to give up, Ingrid broke the pendant in her hand and pushed the cursed rune magic into your tiny body. You glowed purple, every bit of you, and then you breathed.”

“You both saved me then,” I reply, clearing my throat. “One way or another. My mum with the rune and you by not only getting my mum to the Otherworld, but by holding off the king so I could escape through the portal.”

“Tell me what happened on Earth,” he commands.

“Are you sure you want to know?” I softly ask. “It isn’t a good story, and you can see who I’ve turned into. I’m an assassin, who pretended to be someone else to save her own ass and enter the academy. I’ve spent years killing, thieving and in general being everything you and my mum would have despised.”

My uncle frowns and climbs off the bed. He walks to me, cupping my cheeks. “You did what you needed to so you could survive. I am proud of you. Your parents are watching over you, and I know in my soul, they would be too.”

Tears fall out of my eyes, dropping onto his hand. “I’m so glad you’re here and I’m not alone anymore, Uncle Arthur.”

“Oddly, I don’t think you have ever been alone. You certainly seem to have two very good friends,” he tells me, dropping his hands. “I’m not sure about the spoilt one. Do you get along with her?”

I laugh. “Sit down, uncle. I’m going to explain everything that’s happened since I fell through the portal and how we don’t like the spoilt wanna be princess.”

* * *

BY THE END of the conversation, my uncle looks a mixture of proud and angry as he wraps his arms around me and hugs me tightly. I’ve never been a hugger, but after missing him for so long, it’s nice. “I never did thank you for always being there when I was a kid, so I am now.”

“You never need to thank me for that time. It was an honour,” he whispers back. “An honour to be in your life, kid.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Poppy says, the door creaking as she steps in. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and I grin. “Thank the gods you’re awake!”

“I would suggest thanking me instead, young reaper.” An older woman’s strict voice cuts into our reunion before Poppy

steps aside and lets her in. Instantly I feel her power, her pure Unseelie magic, hit me like a rock, and I push it back as it tries to invade my senses. Feel out who I am. The woman arches a thin white eyebrow at me and folds her hands in front of her, dressed in a black cloak and black trousers. Her white hair is a big contrast to her clothes and makes her stand out more. Her eyes glow purple, like my own, and three purple lines are drawn down her face, only broken by the space around her eyes. “The gods will not be happy when they find out Daesyn is the bearer of the cursed rune.”

“At least we both know they can’t kill me,” I reply, crossing my arms and standing up.

“Death is not what you should worry about. The gods could turn this world to dust, and every other world until you have nothing. You are nothing to them but a small threat they will wish to get rid of,” she coldly replies. “The cursed rune is a curse. And you have been cursed, Daesyn Heartlocke, and you should not be happy about it.”

The room drifts into an uncomfortable silence as we stare at each other. “Leave us. I must talk with Daesyn alone.”

“Daesyn?” my uncle questions. I nod. Despite how hostile she is, she helped me, and she wouldn’t have done that if she wanted me dead. My uncle and Poppy leave the room, and I walk up to the clear leader of the Unseelie rebels. “Who am I talking to?”

“Morgania MacCailein.” Her reply is curt as she pulls the door open. “Let’s walk as we talk.”

“I am not here to help you raise an army to fight back against the Seelie king and the reaper queen,” I warn her as I step outside, the warmth of the air brushing against my skin. My long hair flows around me in the warm breeze as I stare up at the dozens of palm trees with yellow glowing leaves and odd fruit hanging off them. Sand brushes into the deck area outside the cabin, and I hear the sound of waves nearby. Unseelie fae and some Seelie fae are walking around, talking and laughing, some carrying boxes or holding babies in their arms. I sense some reapers in the crowd, and not my uncle,

either. No one looks our way as we head down the wooden path towards a cluster of buildings in the distance.

“I am aware of your opinion from our guard,” she curtly replies. “But you are wrong. Your mother would have fought for us, for her own kind, and you know she would have done.”

“Did you know her?” I question.

“Yes, I was a cook at the castle, and I liked your mother. She was kind to everyone and fought for the weak with a passion I hoped to see in your eyes,” she replies. “But I suspect you are not your mother’s daughter.”

“I am, but I also know when the odds are not in our favour,” I angrily reply back to her, not liking the label she is sticking on me. “You want war, war against two massive supernatural armies with unlimited supplies when most of our race has been locked up or killed.”

“I want freedom for Unseelie fae and not extinction,” she replies. “And with help, we could win.”

“A battle on two fronts?” I reply. “Maybe, and just maybe, you could win against the Seelie Fae King, but not the reapers on our own. The reaper queen would send help right away if you tried anything.”

“You have clearly thought this through more than once,” she replies, looking pleased. She comes to a stop on the edge of the path, right in front of a huge stone building. People walk in and out of the doors, some looking our way but most going on with their lives on the island. I can see the beach behind the stone building where the waves brush against the shore softly, and then beyond that is more land. The sky is bright and sunny, and I look up as the sun shines through one of the channels of water, casting moving little beams of light around us.

It’s stunning here.

“I have spent my whole life, since I was eight years old, running from reapers and fae but longing to come back here. The Otherworld is magical, and nothing compares to it. It is my home, even if I am hunted here,” I softly reply. “And if I

could see a way of helping my race, I would. I would fight to the end to save them, but I cannot.”

“I see it now,” she replies, stepping closer. “Your mother’s bravery. You might not be as kind as she was, but you are as brave.”

“No one is as kind as my mother was,” I sadly reply, even if I wonder if Poppy is as kind as she was. “And being brave won’t be enough to help you win this.”

She smiles. “My council don’t trust you, but I do. I trust you simply because I know your bloodline, your mother and the prediction placed on you. If you are the destroyer of worlds, I would rather have you on my side. That being said, I feel finding the other runes is key to making sure you survive.”

“I don’t want anything to do with the runes,” I reply. “The spirits want the rune back, and they will want the others. Have you tried fighting their magic? I couldn’t.”

“The spirits gave the gods their powers, and the runes were what they made to stop the gods if they got out of control,” she tells me. “Not many know this, but it is true. The gods were once mortal.”

“Do you think the spirits would kill them if I gave them the runes?” I suggest, my mind wandering to Torfinn.

“Yes. The spirits are locked away in their element form because of the gods’ actions. They used to have physical forms,” she replies. “But it would be a war that no one would escape unhurt.”

“I will think about finding the runes,” I reply. “But I don’t think they will solve your problems.”

“But you can,” she replies. “Your lover, the overlord demon, can talk to his brother on your behalf and convince the Protector queen to help us with her army.”

The last time I met Evie, I tried to kill her, so...doubtful she is going to give me an army. “I don’t think that will work.”

“Ask and find out in exchange for healing you. You do owe me,” she replies. “And your uncle will stay here until I have your answer.”

Glaring, I lean closer. “You mean as a hostage.”

“Only if you wish to look at it that way,” she replies. I’ve underestimated her, she is a calculating cow. “I see it as a safe place for your uncle to hide and recover. He needs to build up his strength, and we have many good healers.”

“I don’t like being blackmailed.”

“In war, we don’t have much choice,” she states. “You may leave tomorrow at dawn when it is safest to travel off the island.”

The Unseelie rebel leader starts to walk away. “Wait. Is there someone here with Xs drawn into his forehead, and he has grey hair. I am looking for him.”

My apparent godfather.

“His name is Faolan, and he is the leader of our force in the Reaper Realm. I’m sure when you return there, he will find you. May the spirits be with you, Daesyn Heartlocke.”

I watch her slowly walk away, a sinking feeling in my gut that this is only the beginning of the war she is going to bring down on the worlds, with me right in the middle of it all.



CHAPTER 41

Poppy's giggles guide me over to where she is sitting alone with a man I don't recognise but I sense is Seelie.

His black hair is curly and recently cut short by the looks of it, and his jaw is shaven. When he turns my way, I recognise his bright eyes and face a little better, but he looks like a different person from the healer we rescued from the dungeons. Toth Zalan has cleaned himself up. I can now see he is younger than I thought; he can't be much older than I am. Surprisingly, he is really good-looking under all that hair and dirt.

Judging by how close Poppy is sitting to him, I think she might have noticed.

"Dae!" Poppy shouts when she sees me, jumping to her feet at the next moment and jogging over. Toth stands up and walks over much more slowly. "How did the chat go?"

"As well as you might suspect. I've made a deal with her," I say. "Well, she blackmailed me into a deal. Either way, we need to get back to the Reaper Realm and then back to Earth for me."

"I am glad to see you have recovered, Daesyn," Toth claims, bowing his head. "Are you in need of any service?"

"Nope. I'm going to look for Seb and tell him what happened. Maybe you can keep Poppy company," I suggest, and when he looks her way, I wink at her. Her cheeks go bright red, and I try not to chuckle. "Where is Seb anyway?"

"Upstairs in the cabin you were in," Poppy tells me. "I can ___"

Poppy is cut off by the blaring noise of sirens, followed by people running in every direction. Toth pushes Poppy behind him, and I stand close, watching all around us as the ground starts to shake harshly. A burst of flames appears in front of us, almost looking like they are struggling to fight through blue magic to get here. The fight doesn't last long as the fire portal rips open, and Ryker jumps through.

His eyes find me immediately, and a mixture of feelings slam into my chest as I run over to him. As I get closer, Torfinn jumps through the portal next, followed by Seth last, which closes the portal.

An alpha hellhound.

An overlord demon.

And a demi-god working together. That isn't something I ever thought I'd see. Before I get a good look at Torfinn and Seth, Ryker has picked me up and holds me tightly to his chest. I breathe in his scent almost to calm myself, and I realise straight away how much I pushed aside the feelings in my chest of how much I missed them.

How much I've started to rely on them. How I started this year with only Mossy that I cared about and how I ended up with so many, is insane.

But it's the truth.

"Fuck, am I hurting you?" Ryker finally speaks, putting me down. "I know you were stabbed, Dae."

"Turns out I can't die, and the Unseelie rebels have healed me," I tell him, lowering my voice to add, "I missed you."

"Perhaps I should find someone to explain we are in no danger," Toth interrupts.

"Who the fuck are you?" Seth possessively growls, stomping right up to Toth but is stopped when Poppy jumps in the middle of them. He looks a million times out of place in a designer black suit and blood red tie. Not that any of us really would fit in here usually, except for me in my strange lack of clothes.

Poppy, the girl who was so frightened of her own shadow, places her hands on her hips and stares down an overlord demon. “He helped save Dae’s life and her uncle. Toth is on our side, and perhaps you should speak with Dae first before trying to hurt him.”

“Come on, Persephone. We should leave them to catch up,” Toth suggests, curling his hand around her waist and carefully moving her away.

“You’ve made that girl into a mini you,” Torfinn states, walking right up to me. He places his finger under my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. “Did you know you had that rune?”

“No,” I swear. Torfinn searches my eyes, and I search his right back, seeing so much worry and longing in them that he will never give into. He lowers his hand. “I didn’t realise any of it until it was too late.”

“The gods are not happy, I can feel it. We must get you back to the Reaper Realm to finish the test with Poppy before they come down to see what is wrong. Once they come in their real forms, they will sense the cursed rune and try to kill you to stop the power you will get. Everyone up there has heard the rumours of the cursed rune bearer,” Torfinn suggests, a tic in his jaw pulsing, and I nearly laugh.

“Back to the realm where the Seelie Fae King can find me and try to kidnap me again?” I question. “Or the reaper queen will chop my head off in my sleep?”

“That won’t be repeated,” Seth states, moving to Torfinn’s side. The pair of them look like night and day, and Ryker is somewhere in the middle. If I were a weaker woman, I would be intimidated by the sight of all three of them staring me down, trying to get me to do what they want.

Not me though. “He can invade my dreams, kill me in them. He did it many times when I was at the academy, but he can’t reach me on Earth. I have to go there.”

Finally, I notice the fact Seth is covered in blood. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Hell exactly,” Seth growls. “Your boss has opened five hundred hell portals around the Protector and demon city, causing havoc. He claims he will shut them when you pay him a visit. Evie needs your help.”

“And the academy test must continue, or the gods will come. None of us wants that to happen,” Torfinn warns.

I look at Ryker. “Do you have any other bad, possibly life-threatening, news to drop?”

“Nah, I’m just here to look pretty,” he replies, and I can’t help but chuckle. Trust Ryker to make things seem a little bit better.

“Pretty boy did find you though,” Seth adds. “How exactly did you do that?”

“That is a discussion for Dae and me to have another time,” Ryker all but growls back, sending shivers down my spine.

“Save me from this horrid bag. It smells like dirty socks!” Mossy cuts in, and I zero in on Ryker’s bag. He opens the zip and pulls out Mossy, who has a bandage around his tiny arm and a cut on his head.

“Mossy!” I all but screech, pulling him into my arms. He snuggles up against me as I breathe in relief. “What happened to you?”

“The guards came and fucked things up. That’s what,” Mossy claims, looking up at me with his big eyes. “One second I was thrown across the room, and then I woke up in angel fucker’s hands. Then the dog looked after me, and the demon got me food. They are lousy babysitters, they never got me any sweets or peanut butter.”

Some of the guys cough to hide their laugh, and I chuckle. “That might be something to do with us being in the Otherworld.”

“Thought it didn’t look like Earth,” he grumbles, looking around. “I prefer Earth and peanut butter.”

“Will you ever stop calling me angel fucker?” Torfinn demands, looking half pissed off and half amused. “I have never fucked an angel.”

“Or anyone,” Ryker coughs out, and Torfinn glares at him.

“Virgin angel fucker. I like that name more,” Mossy declares, and this time the demi-god looks seconds away from exploding.

“What do monkeys know about being virgins?” Seth questions.

“I will have you know—” I clamp his little lips shut before he traumatises me with whatever he knows on that subject.

I clear my throat to get their attention. “We can leave in the morning, and I know where there is a portal to Earth. We can get out of here and then portal to the Reaper Realm. It still doesn’t solve the issue of the Seelie king or the reaper queen. She will never let me have the throne if I win that test, and the test is pointless as I can’t die.”

“Not all tests end in death,” Torfinn replies, the “virgin angel fucker” conversation sidelined for a second. “Things will be changed to take in your *unique* abilities.”

“That doesn’t sound like something I want to do,” I reply. “I’d rather stay and chill here on the beach.”

“I hope you’re joking,” Torfinn replies, narrowing his eyes at me. I love when he gets mad.

“Maybe.”

He huffs and turns away, but I see his lips twitch in a smile before he does.

“A private word, Syn,” Seth commands and starts walking away towards a cabin. I smile at Ryker and Torfinn, who don’t look impressed, before jogging after Seth. Outside the door, I place Mossy on the bench.

“Give us a few minutes, and we will go for food,” I tell him. Mossy pouts, but he doesn’t move. Seth walks right into the cabin and stands by the side of the door. The second I walk in, he slams it shut and grabs me, pulling my body against his

and slamming his lips on mine. His lips smother mine like molten lava, and I enjoy every second of it as he presses my back into the door, my legs parting around his waist. He grinds against me as he kisses me, devouring my lips with every second that passes.

Between his kisses, he brands my lips with words. “So.” *Kiss*. “Fucking.” *Kiss*. “Scared.” *Kiss*. “Of losing.” *More kisses*. “You.”

“Seth,” I whisper against his lips. He groans, a masculine groan that sends shivers through me, before he kisses me deeper this time, the kiss quickly turning into something else. I pull back, sighing as I rest my head against his. “I’m sorry you were worried.”

“The Seelie Fae King is going to pay. You on my side for that plan?” he asks, stroking his fingers down my neck. “How many times did he try to kill you?”

“A lot,” I reply.

“Then he is going to suffer many times when I get my hands on him,” Seth vows. A vow from an overlord demon isn’t something to be ignored.

“I’m on your side, Seth,” I tell him. “About the Seelie king and everything else. When I thought I might die, you were in my thoughts.”

“Just me?” he asks, his eyes turning black, his hand curling around my neck, his thumb pressing down on my pulse. “Does your heart beat just for me?”

“Demons can share. Your brother does.”

He smirks, leaning closer. “I’m not as nice as my brother.”

“You don’t get me unless you play fair, demon,” I reply as his hand tightens. Seth I know wouldn’t hurt me. His demon? Well, I’m not sure. I’m not his mate.

“You’re mine, little half breed. Seth will not stop our mating for long,” he promises, letting go of his hold as Seth steps back, his red eyes returning to normal. “I struggle to control him around you. Only you.”

“I take it as a compliment,” I reply, and my stomach growls in the silence. “I need to eat. You coming?”

“What do they eat in the Otherworld?” he asks me, wriggling his nose. “This world smells too nice, like expensive perfume. I expect their food will be sweeter, less McDonald’s cheeseburger.”

“I could do with a cheeseburger right about now,” I say, sliding my hand into his, linking our fingers. The distant alarms have finally been silenced, and I hear Seb moving about upstairs. “And a coffee. A big ass coffee.”

“Soon, my Syn. Soon.”

I wonder if he is talking about more than getting me a cup of coffee.

“I could eat,” Seb says, walking down the stairs, his hair freshly washed. He must have been in the shower through the alarms. He smiles at me, walking closer, and Seth steps in his way.

“Tell me one reason I shouldn’t burn you into ash for betraying Syn,” Seth questions, his voice like ice.

“I fucked up,” Seb replies, holding his hands up. “If Dae wanted me dead, she would have killed me by now. We both know it.”

“Why haven’t you killed him?” Seth asks, looking over his shoulder at me. “Are you saving his death for a special occasion?”

“No,” I all but cough out as the door swings open behind me and Torfinn storms in. He is in front of Seb in seconds, grabbing his throat and punching him hard in the face. I move to stop this, but Ryker clamps his arms around me, holding me back. Torfinn punches Seb again and again, knocking him to the ground, and he doesn’t stop him.

“Fight back, you fucking coward!” Torfinn roars, picking Seb up by the collar of his black shirt. “You fucking stood there with Dae on her knees and hurt. You knew your insane mother would kill her!”

“Stop!” I shout, elbowing Ryker hard in the stomach. He groans, and I twist his arm, escaping his grip and rushing to them. Seth sighs and leans against the wall as Mossy jumps on his shoulder, and I slide in the middle of Seb and Torfinn. Torfinn glares at me as I wrap my hands around his arm and shake my head.

“He never intended to let me get hurt. He only wanted to save his sister,” I softly tell Torfinn, seeing nothing but pure rage in his glowing eyes. “Trust me, I don’t need you to get revenge for me. If I thought for a second Sebastian wasn’t sorry for his mistake, I would kill him myself, but he is sorry. None of us can judge him for trying to save an innocent young child. I wish more people tried to save me when I was his sister’s age.”

The rage leaves Torfinn’s eyes instantly when I know I’ve struck home. He was a young kid with no one to defend him either at some point.

He knows exactly where I am coming from.

Finn lifts his eyes over my head and looks directly at Sebastian. “Fuck up again and I will kill you. Hurt her? And death will be a mercy.”

“Same can be said to you. Do you think loving Dae is going to do anything but make the gods destroy her?” Sebastian replies, making my heart pound.

“Wow, tension in here is real uncomfortable, and I’m still hungry,” Mossy cuts in. “Can we save the drama for another time? Dae and I need to bond over carbs.”

Finn lets Sebastian go and storms out the door, and I close my eyes for a second. Mossy jumps onto my shoulder, curling his tail around my neck. “Have I said the outfit you’re wearing is cute?”

Sebastian and Seth walk out, leaving me looking at Ryker. He sighs and offers me his hand, no questions asked. No judgment or jealousy.

Ryker is always there for me.

“I think you’ve said a little too much, buddy,” I reply, walking to the door. “But let’s eat. Everyone will come around.”

“They will,” Ryker tells me. “Dae, you’re too addictive not to be around.”

“I like the dog more now,” Mossy comments as we get outside. “I might leave chocolate instead of dog treats for you next time.”

“That was you?” Ryker replies, looking a mixture of pissed off and trying not to laugh. I can’t help it, I chuckle, which only gets me a glare from Ryker.

“Wait, you’re a dog, does chocolate make you sick?”

“I’m a hellhound, not a dog, for one. And two? I bet fried monkey would make me sick. Leave my goddamn pillow alone!” he playfully warns Mossy.

Mossy snickers in my ear. “I just had the best idea. Bone-shaped chocolate treats.”

“Oh Mossy,” I laugh, stroking his little arm. “How would I survive without you?”

He almost cuddles me, resting his head on top of mine. Ryker’s eyes meet mine, and I sigh. Even if we do escape the Otherworld, we have a whole lot of other issues of the heart to sort out before any of us will rest.



CHAPTER 42

“**B**e careful,” my uncle warns, holding my shoulders with his hands. “I see so much of your mother in you, and she was brave. So damn brave, and it got her killed in the end. I don’t want to see the same thing happen to you. Do something Ingrid never did and let other people help you.”

“I will come back soon, I promise,” I tell him, meaning every single word. I glance up at the rising sun. “You said the portal opens with one word. You never told me what it is.”

“Heartlocke. The Heartlocke clan’s secret is that portal, and that’s why only a few live now to use it,” he tells me. I smile and turn around, heading over to our big group. My guys are all stood around each other, with Seth looking over at me. Poppy, Laelia and Toth are nearer the trees, talking quietly.

“Ready, Ryker?” I ask, knowing we need him to do the portal for us. Apparently, he can sense where I’ve been in any world (he won’t tell me how) and knows how to get to the island I lived on with my mother and uncle. Ryker turns around, running a hand through his soft hair, making his black shirt pull tensely across his muscular chest. I stare for a second too long, and Ryker’s smirk tells me he noticed and that conversation is going to come up later.

Mossy taps me on the cheek and snickers. I shake my head and pick him up, putting him in Ryker’s bag I have strapped across my chest. Mossy grumbles but does settle down in the bag after I turn it around onto my back. Travelling through any portal is risky, and Mossy is safer in the bag.

“Always,” he replies, cracking his knuckles and harshly clapping his hands, fire blasting out of them in a straight line. Ryker grabs hold of the fire and pulls it apart, making a person-sized portal right in front of him. Without waiting, he jumps through, and I pull out one of the daggers given to me and jump in next, stumbling out into high yellow grass that almost catches my eye.

Ryker holds his hand up and sniffs the air. Lowering his voice, he moves closer to me. “There is someone here. In the house. I’m going to shift and search; don’t move, and tell the others.”

“Got it,” I whisper back. “Don’t get too close on your own.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dae,” he chuckles and shifts in seconds into a massive hellhound, his clothes ripped into shreds. The hellhound-Ryker looks at me with his big flame-filled eyes, and I reach out, but he rushes away through the grass.

“Why has he shifted?” Seth asks, coming through next, followed by Finn, Seb and Laelia. Poppy and Toth are the last ones out before the portal snaps itself shut.

“Shh,” I tell them, placing a finger on my lips. “There is someone here. Ryker is hunting them and will come back.”

“I sense Seelie magic. A lot of it,” Finn claims. “It surrounds us. I believe we are trapped.”

“Oh my god!” Laelia screeches, and we all turn to glare at her.

“Shh!” I snap, shaking my head. “Everyone, let’s wait for —” A wolf-like cry vibrates through the air, and I am running before anyone can stop me. Ryker. I push the grass out of the way, jumping over a few fallen logs and rocks before coming out into the clearing around my old house. Ryker is on the ground, his body bent at a strange angle and blood pouring out from dozens of little cuts.

“Ryker!” I scream, running across the clearing and pausing when a big boot lands on the injured hellhound. The world

seems to freeze as the Seelie king appears in the burnt-out doorframe, his cloak draping around his feet, his crown glittering in the sunlight.

“Did your little hellhound not know his fire magic is mute in this world?” The Seelie king’s amused voice fills the air as he kicks Ryker and rolls him across the ground a little. My chest hurts as I can’t risk attacking the king with Ryker so close. He will kill him, I’m sure of it. The rest of my group appears behind me, and then they each run into a force field. The purple glowing force field bounces each of them back in a wave, and Finn is the first one to his feet. His eyes glow gold as his dust wings appear, and his axes slide out of his hands from the tattoos on his arms. They glow with god magic as he slams them down on the force field, and nothing happens. He hits the force field, again and again, each time it seems to fade just a tiny bit. “Ingrid was smarter than I gave her credit for. This island has five force fields that can protect anyone, even from gods.”

“How did she get someone to do that?” I question.

He smirks as he stares at me. “The gods were always very interested in your mother and you. Maybe someone up there wanted to give you a chance to live.”

“What do you want?” I ask, changing the subject on purpose. I don’t want to discuss my mum with him anymore.

“You can leave this island, call it a goddess’s blessing, and go about your business, but one of your group stays with me as a guest,” he suggests. What is with the fae and blackmailing? It doesn’t seem to matter whose side I’m on, both are trying to screw me over. “Or I can kill this wolf and then all your friends.”

I glance behind me, seeing massive cracks in the shield. Finn is like an animal, hitting again and again with his blades. Seth is pouring fire into the gaps, and Seb is pushing shadows around the fire. The mix of all the power is going to pull the shield down. “And don’t think about delaying your answer. The house has its own shield, and I only have to drag your wolf inside before putting it up. I will have plenty of time to

torture him and open a portal for my army to come here to help with you lot.”

“You’ve planned all this out,” I grit out. “All of this.”

“I knew about the spare portal out of this world, have done since you escaped me, but I didn’t know the word to open it so I could follow you. Shame,” he states. “Now make your choice.”

“You have to swear not to hurt them,” I counter.

His grin is pure evil. “I promise, and I want one of the twins. The men are too unstable to keep in my home, but the twins are beauties indeed. Much like you.”

“Not a chance,” I bite out. The force field smashes to pieces behind me, and the Seelie king uses his magic to drag Ryker into the house as I run at them, only to crash into another force field. For fuck’s sake, mum.

“Make your choice.”

“What choice?” Poppy is the first to ask.

“He wants me to leave you or Laelia with him. If we do, then he will let us go and wait until I come back. He won’t kill Ryker, and he promised whoever stays won’t be hurt,” I say.

“I’m not going,” Laelia straight away shouts out.

“You have to. Poppy must come back to the Reaper Realm for the test,” Finn demands. “There is no other way unless you want to see Ryker killed.”

“I don’t care about the dog!” she snaps. I step towards her, fully prepared to knock her out and leave her here, but Poppy stops me.

“Dae and I will come back for you. The test is near the end, and you will be safe enough with him. Just don’t cause any drama,” Poppy tells her. Laelia looks at Poppy like she just betrayed her and then turns her glare to me.

“Congratulations on your new sister, Daesyn. I hope you don’t have to kill her to win a test. Oh wait, you do!” she sarcastically replies. “And Poppy...you’re going to learn the

hard way who is on your side. It won't be Daesyn. It will never be her." Before we can stop her, she walks to the shield and it lets her past. Einar holds his hand out and opens a portal before guiding her into it. He looks back at me one more time.

"Don't be too long, my bride, or I might just corrupt your friend."

The second he steps into the portal, it disappears and so does the shield. I run straight to Ryker, kneeling at his side and calling my fae magic. Vines shoot out of the ground, wrapping themselves around Ryker's body and glowing green as I start to heal him. His heartbeat blasts away in my ears, matching with mine after a short while. Eventually, I pull back and open my eyes, seeing his cuts are closed up and his back doesn't look broken anymore. The vines sink back into the ground, and I breathe out in relief.

"He will be okay. He needs rest and a healer back in the Reaper Realm," I say, feeling through my magic that he is okay. I don't know much about hellhound healing, but I can sense when someone is close to death, and he isn't now.

Seb sighs in relief and leans down, picking his best friend up his arms. "That was incredible, Dae."

"Let's get to the portal," Finn suggests, but I see his relief as well. I wipe off some of the blood I've knelt in and stand up.

Poppy grabs my arm, leaning in close. "We can't let her die. I know you don't like her, but she is my twin. Promise me you will come back here."

"I vow on my life I will save your twin, Pops. Not for her, but for you," I gently reply. Her eyes fill with tears, and she nods, walking back to the door. Toth bows his head my way and follows after her.

I look up at the charcoaled remains of my old home, a place I once loved so much, a place filled with so many good memories that it hurts to see it like this. One tear falls down my cheek before I walk out, and I don't let myself look back.



CHAPTER 43

“I’m surprised no one is going to stop us,” Seth comments, close to my side as we walk up to the portal to the Reaper Realm. Once Laelia had gone with the Seelie king, all of us realised there is no reason for us to use the portal to Earth and then cast another one to the Reaper Realm when we could simply go through the portal here. No guards wait on this side of the giant yellow portal, the power from it flickering against my skin as I get closer.

“We will go straight to the queen and make sure she understands Daesyn and Poppy are not to be harmed. The test will continue with all four of you,” Finn comments, his eyes flickering between me and Seth with nothing short of possessiveness. I swallow the itch to move away from Seth to make Finn not glare at me, but thankfully he keeps speaking. “Sebastian, you will come with us. Poppy, Toth, Seth and Ryker should go and make sure your apartment is in one piece.”

“Good idea,” Poppy quickly agrees, getting out of seeing the queen and leaving us stuck with that task. I huff and cross my arms, looking back at the portal, itching to walk away and stay in the Otherworld. But with my twenty-first birthday fast approaching, I want to get the hell out of here before I get powers I don’t want.

Being the destroyer of worlds and immortal sounds like a recipe for disaster.

I have to finish this test, find Evie and get her help, and trade back my uncle. Then I just need to kill the Seelie king and take Laelia back.

Sounds easy enough. Not.

“Ready?” Seth questions. “Once you see this queen, Earth needs you.”

“Tomorrow, we will go see my boss and stop the attack. I promise,” I tell him. He nods, understanding I need to sort out what is going on in the Reaper Realm first before I can deal with my past on Earth. Tracking down my soul-stealing boss isn’t a task I am looking forward to either, but at the end of the day, Seth will be with me. My boss is no match for an overlord demon. But he will give a hell of a fight, and I’m not one hundred percent better yet from this stomach wound.

We all head to the portal, and Finn stomps through first, looking like he has a giant stick stuck up his arse, and I follow behind him, hearing Mossy grumbling in my bag about portal magic making him pass out before he goes silent. The magic of the portal wraps around me like water, touching all of my skin in a cool embrace before it suddenly snaps away and I’m on the hill, overlooking the reaper city in front of me. The glistening city of stars and lights. The rings of the city look like a delicate pattern up here, the lights inside it making lines and circles of their own within their design.

“You’re the most beautiful when your eyes are lit up by stars.”

I turn to Finn, my heart pounding in my chest as he looks down at me. He never needs to say much, but when he does, he nearly knocks me off my feet.

“Oh good, it’s night,” Ryker comments, having no clue he just interrupted a moment as he walks right into the middle of Finn and me. Finn turns away as I look up at Ryker, wondering what he meant. He is looking over the city, and I can tell he does love the Reaper Realm like I love the Otherworld and some parts of Earth. “It will really piss off the queen to wake her up.”

“I couldn’t care less,” Finn deadpans. He really, really doesn’t like her, and I’m on the same team in every sense of the word. Once the queen loses her crown to someone in the

test, preferably not me, she will be fair game to challenge and kill. I have a funny feeling I will be joining a queue.

Poppy and Toth come through next, followed by Seth and Sebastian last. Sebastian comes over to us and waves his hand, creating two shadow portals. “This one leads to their apartment, and this one is to my mother’s apartment.”

With that, he walks into the one to his mother’s apartment. Seth walks up to me, cups my face and kisses me softly. “I will be back tomorrow morning for you.”

“Promises, promises,” I whisper back with a smile as he lets me go. Seth bursts into flames and leaves us here a second later. Ryker looks tense as I walk up to him, and he waves his hand at the shadow portal.

“Are you okay?” I ask even though I damn well know what has pissed him off. He doesn’t answer, just crossing his arms. “We need to talk, I think.”

“Yes, we do,” he answers before nodding at the portal. “Get in, Dae.”

Bracing myself for anything, I head through the portal and step out onto thick cream carpet, hearing shouting nearby. I turn around the corridor I’m in to find the queen shouting at Sebastian while Finn watches close by.

“What kind of son wanders off into the Otherworld when his family needs him?” she is saying. “Did you take your sister there? Honestly, you are a terrible son.”

“Eira is safe and so am I. Shouldn’t that be your only concern?” Sebastian replies, his voice blank. She narrows her eyes at him. “If my son wasn’t such a completely useless—”

“Enough!” I shout, storming over to them. The queen’s eyes widen, and she almost stumbles a step back before stopping herself.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t call the spirits right this second to kill you,” she asks.

“Because I would kill you, destroy this castle and burn this world down if you dared try,” Finn coldly warns. The queen

tensely looks between us and behind me once, no doubt seeing Ryker there. I can feel him close to my back.

“Fine, I will allow the test to continue because it is an agreement I swore to when I took the crown, but there will not be an Unseelie queen on this throne. Or in this world when this is over, do you understand?”

“How exactly do you plan on getting rid of me?” I ask.

Her eyes burn with pure hatred. “I’ve killed so many of your kind, you will be no different. Do not test me.”

“I will do when that crown is no longer on your head and you are nothing to anyone,” I challenge.

“I will always be his mother,” she replies with a satisfied grin, “and if you kill me, you will always be the woman who killed his mother to Sebastian. It will ruin whatever pretend love story you have going on.”

“You overestimate my opinion of you, mother,” Sebastian replies. “Now vow to let Daesyn, Poppy, Ryker and me finish this test while the gods are watching. When there is a winner, we will decide what happens next.”

“You best win because, I’m telling you now, that thing you have feelings for is a sinking ship, and she will take you down with her. She will take this entire world down with her!” the queen all but screeches.

We all watch her as she calms herself down. “But I vow to let the test continue with you four. May the gods judge my word.”

“Good, because they will be watching,” Finn comments.

“Does the Seelie king know you’re here?” she asks the second I turn away. “I bet he doesn’t.”

I look over my shoulder, a smirk lining my lips. “Yes, he does, and he sent me here. Seems you two aren’t as close as you think, your majesty.”

A short, frustrated scream leaves her lips as I hear her storming away, her shoes ticking across the floor. Sebastian leads us down the corridor and into an empty room with one

door on the other side. He doesn't look back as he walks across to the door and then finally turns to face me. "I will see you tomorrow."

"Are you okay?" I ask, taking a step closer. Sebastian's eyes scream no as he nods and walks out of the door. I take another step to follow him when Ryker catches my arm.

"Let him go. He needs to see his sister and relax a little. There is nothing you can do, and you need rest for tomorrow," Ryker warns me, curling his arm around my waist. He looks over my head. "Finn, I'm taking her home. I'm certain you have a shit load of things to do for the test."

"Yes, I do," Finn comments, his eyes searching mine as I stare at him. "Be safe. I am only a shout away."

"Thank you for coming after me," I softly tell him. Finn nods and disappears instantly in gold dust. Ryker uses fire to jump us back to the apartment, and we crash into the middle of the room, nearly falling over the sofa.

"Something is hot!" Mossy cries out, and I crawl to my feet to see Ryker's bag is on fire. Ryker thinks quick, snatching the bag from me and running to the bathroom. All I hear is Mossy screaming about water, mixed with Ryker's growl at Mossy to not bite him seconds later.

I shake my head with a smile that stays as I look at our apartment, which is spotless. It doesn't look like anyone broke in here and trashed it, and there are even freshly cooked pizzas and fries on the counter. "You have returned."

I nearly jump as I look down at the tiny Bwbachod standing at my feet, its tiny arms on its hips. "Sword, it's good to see you are okay."

"I hear the monkey has come back with you," Sword comments. "I am pleased to see all three of you alive."

"We are, but we might have some guests staying," I tell him. "Do you know if there are any spare mattresses or bedding around?"

"I will make up beds in here for the Seelie fae and the hellhound," Sword says, bowing his head. "Be careful. This

realm is not safe for you.”

“I know that, it’s why the guys are staying,” I explain to him.

He nods. “I will protect you.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Sword,” I gently tell him, walking around him to Poppy’s room. The door is open, and Toth is sitting on the chair by the desk while Poppy is digging in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe. They both look up at me.

“Just checking to say things are sorted with the queen, and Sword is making beds up,” I tell him.

Toth nods. “You need rest, Daesyn. I can sense it.”

Swallowing a yawn, I nod. “Yup, that’s my next plan.”

“Go, we are okay,” Poppy tells me with a small smile before I turn away and head out into the corridor, shutting the door behind me. Mossy runs past, soaking wet, and Ryker comes out of the bathroom, his shirt soaking wet with water and a towel in his hands.

“Why doesn’t Mossy like water?” he asks. “He isn’t a damn cat, but he sure acts like one.”

I sigh, taking the towel from him. “I’ll tell you in a second. Grab some pizza, and I’ll meet you on the sofa.”

“Yes, boss,” he teases, and I roll my eyes as I follow the trail of water towards my bedroom. Mossy is sitting on the desk, looking like a drowned rat. He grumbles as I pick him up in the towel and start drying him off.

“The dog tried to drown me! Me!” Mossy complains. “My vengeance will be swift.”

“Mossy, he was putting the fire out,” I gently tell him. “Ryker was being nice, and he didn’t know.”

“You like the dog,” Mossy comments. “In a mushy way.”

“Ryker,” I draw the word out as I put Mossy on my bed and tuck him into the sheets. “Is a good man. Not a dog.”

“Maybe,” Mossy mutters, drifting off to sleep already. I shake my head before leaning down and popping a kiss on his forehead. I leave him in the bedroom and head to the sofa where Ryker hands me a slice of pizza. After having eaten weird fruit, purple glowing meat and tough bread in the Otherworld, pizza tastes like heaven. I silently eat a few pieces with Ryker, both of us comfortable in the dimly lit room with only the views of the tree leaves blowing in the breeze outside, the pitter-patter of rain on the wooden shell of the building soothing to hear. I breathe in Ryker’s earthy masculine scent, enjoying being this close to him even if it brings a lot of complications.

“Mossy was little more than a baby when he fell out of a tree and got lost in the forest by where I lived. Somehow he got into the field by my house and got his foot caught under a rock.” I pause to wipe my hands on some napkins and dab my mouth. “I found him when I was running from the Seelie king towards the portal to Earth when I was eight. The portal dropped Mossy and me right in the ocean near Devon, and a current caught us. I never knew how we survived after I let go of Mossy, but I do now. The cursed rune kept me alive, and Mossy was pushed to shore. I woke up a day or so later on the coast where Mossy found me. I know I was underwater a long time, but until recently, I told myself I must have imagined it.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” he gently whispers, resting his arm on the back of the sofa behind me. “And I’m gathering Mossy hates water because of that?”

“Yes. It scares him,” I explain. “Back in my apartment, I have a baby bath that I fill with a tiny amount of water for him to wash. He won’t go in showers or anything like that willingly. It’s also why he hates Finn. When Finn and I met, he dropped me and Mossy in a pool.”

Ryker sighs. “Mossy doesn’t catch a break, does he?”

I gently whack his chest, laughing. “Hey, I don’t either. I have been seriously unlucky.”

“I don’t see it like that,” he replies with a smile that turns almost serious. “You are just special, and special people never

have it easy.”

“I never asked to be special,” I reply. “I have never wanted that.”

He shrugs. “We don’t get a choice. No one does, Dae.”

Without thinking too much on it, I lean over and press my lips to his. A manly growl of satisfaction comes from his chest as he sinks his hands into my hair and kisses me back with so much passion it’s hard to breathe. Ryker kisses me desperately, like he expects I will disappear any second, and I feel every bit of him as he embraces me. As he claims my soul.

Suddenly he pulls back, and I frown, wondering what happened. Breathlessly, he cups my cheek with one of his hands, and I lean into it. “I have to tell you something. I’m not sure how you will take it.”

“Tell me.”

“You’re my mate, Daesyn Heartlocke. It’s how I found you when you came to this world. It’s how I can sense you in every world you go to. It’s why I have fallen in love with you.”

The world seems to tip a little on its axis as I stare at Ryker, completely speechless. Of all the things I expected him to say, it wasn’t that. I open my lips to say something, and he presses a finger against them for a second. “Don’t tell me anything. You need to think about it and get some sleep.”

I stand up and stare down at Ryker for a long second. “Are you sure?”

He laughs and rests back. “I’ve never been as certain about anything in my life.”

Ryker is my mate. My mate. The man I am destined to be with, according to magic, and a part of me knew it. It’s how I know when he is close, how I’ve trusted him so quickly, and how I always feel safe near him. When Ryker is around, I feel at home.

The problem lies in the fact it isn’t just him that this happens with. Taking Ryker’s advice, I stop staring and walk to my room. I’m at the door when he calls out to me.

“I don’t mind sharing you, Daesyn Heartlocke. I’m well aware I am not the only man who wants to be in your life.”

Looking over my shoulder, I meet the eyes of my hellhound mate. I’m not talking about that subject. “Goodnight, Ryker.”

“Good night, my intended mate,” he replies as I shut the door and rest my head against it. If things weren’t complicated enough, my love life just got sent straight to hell.



CHAPTER 44

“Did you really believe I would let you escape me?” the Seelie king’s voice drones as I open my eyes to see bright sunlight shining down on me. Dozens of voices fill the air in the distance, making a light humming noise, and gold dust lightly falls from the sky around me. Sitting up, I glance at the purple dress I’m wearing. The same one from one of the balls at the castle.

“I liked you in this dress.”

“How did you see it?” I question, turning around to face him. He looks down at me and takes a step forward. I step back instantly. “Every ball at the castle is recorded, and I have watched you in every one. The demi-god is very attached to you, isn’t he?”

“We are friends,” I reply. “Unlike you and I. Now get the fuck out of my dreams.”

“But you haven’t seen your mother yet,” he counters and lifts his hand, pointing at something in the distance. I follow to where he is pointing, seeing a girl of about seven with curly red hair, in the middle of two other adults. The adults are speaking, both of them have red hair like the girl and glowing almost pink eyes.

My mother is the girl. Even when she’s this young, I recognise her.

“This was the first time I looked at Ingrid and loved her. Before, we were always friends, but something changed on this

day,” he tells me, moving closer. “We danced for hours, laughing and messing about. She always loved me.”

In his delusional way, I think he actually believes that. Staring at my mother, I see how desperate she was to escape even now. A boy walks up to her, a boy I think is Einar with thick blond hair and a bright smile. They talk for a second before they walk off together towards us. My mother comes so close, like I can just reach out and touch her, but she walks past me like I’m not here.

And I’m not, this is just a memory.

“Let me leave,” I demand. “Why bring me here to see this?”

“To torture you. You might not be able to die, my soon-to-be bride, but you can enjoy our nightmares.”

I wake up with a start, feeling someone shaking my shoulders, and instantly I whack out my hand, only to have it caught by Ryker.

“Narrowly missed my pretty face there, Dae,” Ryker jokes, his blue eyes looking down at me, tints of red on the edges showing how close he is to losing it. “Was the Seelie king in your dreams again?”

“Yes,” I breathe out as Ryker lets my hand go and straightens up. “Although this time, he didn’t try to kill me, so small bonus points.”

“I’m going to find Finn. Maybe he has some god way of protecting you when you sleep,” he states before staring at me. The fact he is my mate, and our conversation from last night, makes the silence almost awkward between us. He smiles and leans down, kissing my forehead softly. “Be safe on Earth. Seth is here, eating breakfast with Mossy.”

“What time is it?” I ask, looking at the clock on the wall. It’s only early, just gone seven in the morning, so Seth must be eager to get back to Earth. “Never mind. Thanks for waking me up.”

“I will always be near from now on to wake you up,” Ryker replies. “No more dealing with this on your own.”

“That’s not something I’m used to doing,” I reply as he walks to the door.

He turns slightly to look back at me, running a hand through his black locks of hair. “No time like the present to learn.”

I chuckle as he leaves my room and shuts the door behind him. Slipping out of my blue pyjamas, I change into black leggings, a dark blue tunic top and clip on a weapon belt, sliding the straps around my thighs to hold daggers. There are five daggers in my wardrobe waiting for me, and I clip three of them on before picking up the whip I was saving for a special occasion.

Seeing my old boss and removing his head is the perfect excuse to use it. I hook it onto my hip before brushing my hair and braiding it until the plait falls perfectly in a line down my back. Lastly, I pull my socks and boots on and head out. Seth, Mossy and Toth are sitting around talking, and they don’t see me as I sneak past to the bathroom, only to bump right into Poppy as she comes out.

“Hey, you okay?” she asks with a bright smile. I pause in the doorframe.

“I’m about to go and fight a soul-stealing higher demon with a big attitude problem. Aka, my old boss and the demon that raised me since I was eight,” I reply, making her eyes go wide. “But I’m actually looking forward to the challenge.”

“Can you kill him?” she asks. “I mean, without losing your soul?”

I bite on my lip. “I don’t know. I’m going to see Queen Evelina first, and she has a library full of records on demons. Maybe she has found a weakness I can use. If not, chopping off his head will work.”

“Sounds difficult,” she replies and steps closer. “You will be careful and not do anything reckless, right?”

“Define reckless?” I counter. She smiles and pulls me in for a hug. “I’ve never been a hugger.”

“Tough luck, as I am,” she tells me but does let me go. “See you later.”

“You will do,” I say before slipping into the bathroom. After I use the toilet, I brush my teeth and wash my face before going back to the living room. Sword pushes a massive cup of steaming coffee with a plate of fruit and waffles over to me before I’ve sat down, and bows, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

“Where did you get Sword from?” Seth asks as I slide into the seat. “Better yet, do you think he would come back to my house?”

“I doubt it,” I reply, breathing in the coffee fumes before taking a hot sip. Damn, I missed coffee. “He is loyal.”

“So...good morning, my Syn,” Seth says, looking over at me, putting his own cup of coffee down. “You look especially beautiful today.”

“You just like me in weapons,” I reply before sipping more coffee. “And tight clothes.”

Seth laughs, brushing his leg against mine, and I shiver. “I prefer you without anything on, if you want me to be honest.”

“You’ve never seen me with nothing on.”

“But I will, darling,” he replies, and I chuckle, shaking my head.

“It’s like I’m not even here,” Mossy dramatically protests. “Just an invisible monkey.”

“Considering you never stop talking, it would be hard to miss you in a room, Mossy,” Seth counters.

Mossy pouts and crosses his tiny little blue arms, standing up on his hind legs. “I could take you down, demon.”

Seth grins. “Want to bet?”

Before either of them says anything else, I grab a waffle and stand up. “Time to go and hunt some demons.”

“Evie is waiting on us. She wants to come with us on this,” Seth tells me. “Therefore we must meet her at your apartment.”

“Why there?” I ask.

“Why not?” Seth counters, and I shrug, trying to imagine the Protector and demon queen inside my tiny bedsit.

“Never mind, let’s go,” I reply, patting my shoulder. Mossy jumps on my shoulder, and Seth waves his hand, making a portal burn into existence in the middle of the room. “I’ve got to learn how to do portals.”

“You need a reaper to train you,” Seth suggests. “The prince would be a suitable tutor, being he is half fae and half reaper like yourself.”

“I will think about it,” I reply, walking to the portal. I pick Mossy off my shoulder, holding him tightly in my arms before jumping through the portal. For a few seconds, I feel burning hot, like I’m on fire, and then I crash into the street, landing on hard gravel.

The familiar smells of the street I’ve lived on for years come rushing back to me in a jolt, as does the noise of cars shooting past me on the main road nearby. Thankfully, my street is empty, like usual, and the tiny row of terraced houses is well hidden. It’s exactly why I chose this place and the fact the rent is cheap for the ground floor flat. Mossy is passed out in my arms as I slip one of my daggers out and head to the front door, feeling Seth right behind me.

“It’s good to have you back on Earth,” Seth tells me as I get to my front door. The door is slightly open, the locks all broken, and the magical witch spell I had on the building is now gone, leaving only traces of magic in the air.

“I will say the same if we manage to kill my boss,” I reply, pushing the door open to see Evie sitting on my couch, eating a packet of bacon crisps. Seth’s brother, Azi, stands behind her, his hands resting by her shoulders on the back of the couch. Evie and I are dressed for a fight in tight clothes and

kitted with weapons, but the overlord demons look more fitted for a business meeting in their expensive suits.

“Is the monkey your familiar?” Evie asks me as I walk closer, seeing my flat has been trashed. Every bit of it is burnt or cut up, even the toaster lies in ruins by the sofa. The sofa itself is burnt in a few places but seems to have withstood the bulk of whatever storm crashed into this place. “And why is he passed out?”

“Fae magic and demon magic are a bad mix, and I don’t think reapers or fae have familiars,” I reply, gently putting Mossy down on the sofa near her. I notice my messenger bag is still hanging by the door, so I grab that before I slip my dagger back into my holder. Evie traces the movement before she eats more of her crisps, making the room stink of bacon.

“Brother,” Azi nods at Seth, and I see him return the greeting. Men.

Evie raises her eyebrows and stands up, wiping her hands of the bacon and leaving the packet next to Mossy. “I’m surprised to see you are still alive. Many want you dead.”

“Didn’t just as many want you dead once?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. “Everyone has heard the stories.”

“Well, I’m good at killing those who come after my family, just like your boss did. Now where the fuck can we find him?” she asks, turning swiftly from nice to the badass queen everyone talks about.

Damn, she is life goals.

“His name is Dagthoch, and he is the last of his kind, a soul stealer,” I tell her and Azi and, well, Seth. “I cannot hurt him on my own—I am blood bound—but I know where he lives. I can kill all of his henchmen and guards, paving the way for you. I can hurt Dagthoch but not strike a death blow.”

“The demon is mine to kill,” Seth breathes out in fury. “He will not survive this day.”

“The problem is, I’ve seen him burnt, stabbed, cut and everything in between, but he recovers. Unless you two know a way to kill him, I’m thinking his head needs to be removed

and thrown in the ocean,” I say. “Also Dagthoch’s three henchmen are higher demons called Vozzorths.”

“I’ve heard of those.” Evie grimaces. “They are made of pure rot, and they can be killed by ripping their hearts out.”

“Yes, and they are twice the size of a normal human, which means taking them out will be a task,” I add.

“We will team up, you and I.” Evie points between me and her. “Seth and Azi should head for Dagthoch, and we will catch up.”

Girl team for the win. Azi looks to me before asking Evie, “Do you trust this reaper?”

“Seth does, and I trust him,” Evie replies. “Plus, I see myself in her. I doubt Daesyn would double-cross me.”

“I want to kill my boss and get the hell off Earth. That is my plan,” I tell them both.

Seth nods and places his hand on my lower back. “We should leave. Where is it we need to go?”

“We can walk from here,” I tell them just as Mossy wakes up. He sits up and shakes his head, glancing around and focusing on Evie for a second.

“You smell like bacon,” he says, pointing out the obvious.

“You get used to it,” Azi replies, almost a joke from the scary ass overlord demon. Mossy jumps off the sofa and lands on my shoulder as I walk out of my apartment and down the street, knowing they will follow.

“Never had you down to settle,” Evie quietly whispers behind me to Seth no doubt.

He doesn’t reply for a few minutes as we head down the empty street and into an alleyway that has a portal at the end. “Before Syn, I would have said the same thing. Then she was there.”

“And the rest is history,” Azi quietly agrees, his words almost hard to hear over the noise of the portal. “How does your demon fare with a relationship?”

I miss Seth's reply as I place Mossy in my bag and step through the portal, coming out into a changing room inside a shop in London. I unlock the changing room door and walk out, catching the attention of all the women in here, more so when Seth, Azi and Evie come out next. Everyone watches us with more than a little interest, some of them bringing out their phones to record us.

"We are attracting a little too much attention," I say quietly, stepping through a crowd.

"Don't worry, I will smooth it over with the prime minister," Azi coolly replies, like hanging with the prime minister is a normal thing to do. Evie rolls her eyes with a smirk on her face when I glance her way. Heading down to the bridge, I walk to the edge when we get to the middle and then climb over the safety bars.

"What the hell are you doing?" Seth demands, climbing up after me. Evie and Azi start to look at me like they are just realising I might be insane. Seth catches my arm as I pick one of my daggers out, and meets my gaze. "Talk to me."

"Do you trust me?" I ask him.

He searches my eyes. "Yes. With my life, Syn."

Slowly he lets my arm go, and I smile, picking out the dagger and gripping it tightly in my hand. I edge towards the tip of the bridge panelling and look down at the Thames River below me, the fast currents and deadly water clear. Thank god I'm not scared of heights. "They best not have moved this place. Hang on, Mossy."

I jump, moving myself around in the air and calling shadows to surround me as I fall through the air, straight towards the water. The whistling air blocks out any noise, even when I think I hear Seth shout, and I reach my dagger forward, wrapping shadow magic around it. I slam into the water hard, my body sinking deep within the dark depths as I close my eyes on instinct. My dagger tip crashes into the magical shield, cutting it like candy, and I'm sucked into the portal, falling through air once again and this time crashing into rocky sand. I cough, rearranging my bag and rolling onto my back as I see

Seth diving into the water above the magical bubble, his hands burning red with power as he hits the shield. He breaks a big enough hole for him to fall through, and seconds later, he slams into the sand next to me.

“You’re completely and utterly insane,” Seth breathlessly tells me. “But, fuck, do I love it.”

I turn to him, my eyes wide. “What did you just say?”

A foot crunches into the rocky sand by my head, followed by the awful smell of rot. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t the orphan reaper back home after all this time...”



CHAPTER 45

Turning my gaze up, I meet my old boss's henchman's stare as he stands over me, towering so high I can just about see his ugly face. I jump to my feet, swinging my dagger out as I take in the man who is made of pure rot from head to toe. He is over nine feet, with long sharp yellow fingernails and yellow spikes of hair. Every inch of him is literal crap mixed with more crap until it made a man's shape. Add on some creepy white eyes and a line for a mouth, you have yourself a pretty stinky demon.

Seth more casually climbs to his feet, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch as he pulls off his wet suit blazer and drops it in the sand. Slowly, he rolls up his damp sleeves, and I admire the sexiness of it all, including the way his wet clothes cling to his body and every muscle there. My fingers itch to run my hands over every inch of him.

If there wasn't this bad smell around us...

"Are you back to say how sorry you are that you failed?" he asks, cracking his fingers. "Boss is angry at you. It's why he sent us all to attack the city and kill those women."

What women?

"Didn't see you taking the job for Dagthoch," I counter, refusing to call him boss anymore. I've escaped this place now. I can ask Evie about the women later, because I've missed some part of this story. "Or any job other than stinking up his house."

He grunts and pulls out an axe from his back—literally rips the weapon out of his skin—and clenches it in his thick

hand. “Boss wants you dead.”

“So do a lot of people.” I slip my hand over the clip on my whip and let it fall to the ground, the handle tightly held in my palm. “But tough shit, I’m not going anywhere.”

Glancing at Seth, I watch his eyes turn black and his arms light up with fire before he gestures to the repulsive giant. “Ladies first.”

I grin and lash my whip out, catching the Vozzorth on this arm and almost knocking the axe from it. He swings his arm up, just like I wanted him to, pulling me through the air towards him. His thick hand swings a punch, hitting my leg as I crash into his chest and slam my dagger into his neck. My foot slips, and I lose my grip for a second, but then the whip lights up green, and I feel the power from it as it vibrates. The Vozzorth starts to scream as the whip shakes, and I fall to his feet, watching as the whip cuts right through his arm like paper, and the arm drops onto the ground next to me.

“So gross and cool,” I mutter.

Seth pats me on the shoulder as he passes me. “You’ve had your fun, darling, but it is my turn.”

Well, I’m just going to watch the show.

Seth is a total badass as he effortlessly starts to hover, fire building around him and glowing in natural red light. He moves quickly, in front of the Vozzorth in seconds, and he grabs his throat tightly. The Vozzorth tries to grab Seth but can’t get past the fire around him, only burning himself as Seth slowly squeezes the Vozzorth’s neck until it explodes. Rot flies everywhere as I duck, feeling hot chunks of it landing on me. Eventually, it goes silent, and I lift my head, brushing off chunks of rot, to see Seth standing still, wiping some orange blood off his white shirt.

“This is an eleven-thousand-pound suit,” Seth dryly comments.

“You’re the one that came to a battle dressed in an expensive suit,” I point out. “And where the hell are Evie and Azi?”

Just as the words leave my mouth, I hear the portal crack and look up to see Azi holding Evie close to his body, diving down with a blast of red energy in front of him. He effortlessly crashes through the portal, and they both land right where I did, with a crash that vibrates the ground and sends sand spitting everywhere.

“What took you two so long?” Seth questions.

“Humans. There was a stampede of people when they saw you both jump,” Evie replies, brushing her wet blue hair out of her face and climbing up. She pauses, looking around at the piles of rot and chunks stuck to us. “Did you two wrestle a bin or something?”

“One of the Vozzorths is gone,” I explain. “Only two left.”

I stop talking when I realise they aren’t listening, all three of them are looking around in amazement at the ruins under the Thames, cased inside a bubble. There are about five acres down here, filled with old shells of houses and sandy ground.

And hundreds of demons that need to hide. This place brings back so many memories, all the way back to the first time I came here as a scared eight-year-old with the boss. He showed me around, gave me a room, and was nice for the first day. The second day, not so much. He never took in a kid before, and to this day, I don’t know why he chose me, but he made my life a living hell of fear.

And so many of my memories belong in this place. It’s where most of them happened.

“The magic in this place is extremely strong. Did Dagthoch make this?” Azi asks, crossing his arms. “It’s old magic.”

“No. It’s been here for a long time and was claimed by Dagthoch over two hundred years ago in a small demon war,” I explain as I pull out chunks of rot from my plait. I pick open my bag, unclipping the buttons, and Mossy lifts his head out, somehow only a little bit wet.

His groggy eyes meet mine. “The smell woke me up.”

“Good timing. I need you to pop into that vent near here and turn off all the cameras. Make sure they can’t see us coming,” I tell him.

“I want peanut butter cups after this. I’m not going back to the Reaper Realm without them,” Mossy counters.

“Deal,” I say. He mutters something about being hungry enough to starve before jumping off my shoulder and running off through the sand to our left. There are vents everywhere under this sand, but nothing short of a monkey could climb through it.

“How does your monkey—Mossy, is it?—know how to turn cameras off?” Evie asks, coming to my side, a longbow in her hand and arrows clipped to her back. She pulls one out and holds it in her other hand.

“I trained to be an assassin, and Mossy was always left to hide while I couldn’t protect him. He started watching all the cameras, the systems, and trained himself,” I explain, seeing Azi and Seth talking nearby. “I bet your tiger couldn’t do that.”

“No, but he can eat people, so...,” she drifts off, and I chuckle. “Where are we off to then?”

“If the guys head right to the entrance, the Vozzorths won’t be far away. Mossy needs ten minutes, and then we can head around back, climb through my old bedroom window and straight to Dagthoch’s room. It’s near.”

I carefully jog to the edge of a stone building that has no roof or doors, and peel my gaze around the corner, seeing the main building right ahead. It’s like a castle in some ways, made of thick dark green stone, with four towers, one in each corner of the square-shaped layout. But the middle of it is better restored with white brick, and the new door is pure steel. Cameras line every inch of the outside, and four lower demons patrol the outer edge of the property. They should be easy to get rid of.

Azi, Seth and Evie move next to me on the wall as I watch the cameras, the time ticking by softly. Every second I’m on

edge, knowing there is a small chance someone will see us or the dead Vozzorth. We were lucky no one heard his death. Thankfully, London is noisy and mixes with the sound of the river even in the bubble, so we are hidden well. The cameras each drop, one by one, turning off, and I sigh.

“Time to go. Azi and Seth, you need to make a big distraction at the front gate to attract the Vozzorths’ attention, and we will go from behind to get Dagthoch,” I tell them.

“For someone who isn’t a queen, she is bossy like you are,” Azi points out, and Evie winks at me.

“Isn’t *yet*,” Evie corrects him.

Not ever if I have my way. I would be a shit queen, and I never want that or all the responsibility that comes with ruling and looking after so many people. I wasn’t born to rule, that was never meant for me like it clearly was for Evie. She was a princess by birth, an heir to the throne, and I am a nobody assassin with dead parents and an evil king after me.

Seth meets my eyes. “Dae, be careful.”

“Always am.”

“No, you’re bloody well not,” he mutters back, starting to walk away. Suddenly he stops and walks right back up to me in big strides. He cups my face and kisses me like the world is about to end and he has to kiss me one more time. I melt into his arms for a second, allowing myself this, before he lets go and leaves with his brother.

Evie does an almost sarcastic whistle as I nod to the side, clearing my throat. We kneel down behind the house as the guys make their way across. Evie gets her bow and arrow ready, following them with her eyes, and aims.

“Azi tells me you are half fae and things have not gone well for you in your world,” she carefully brings up the subject. “What are fae?”

“The fae are two creatures. Seelie fae, who follow the light, and Unseelie who live in the dark. But not literally,” I add in. “Reapers and fae didn’t get along for a long time; there were constant wars, and the reapers killed the fae, stole their

magic, and placed it in an orb to light up their city. The fae were losing, by a lot, and they made a deal of peace. It was all fine until my mother rejected the Seelie king, mated with a reaper, had me and then was killed by my grandparents. The Seelie king is now on a mission, and has been for my entire life, to kill all Unseelie.”

“Shit,” Evie murmurs.

“Oh, and the reaper queen, a psychopath by the way, is in on this deal. She has thousands of my people locked away in her dungeons,” I tell her. “So as much as I am happy to help you here, which I still haven’t found out what Dagthoch did, I do need to get back to the Reaper Realm and finish this test for the throne.”

“I will forever be grateful for your help here, Daesyn and I will tell you the story of what Dagthoch did when it is not so raw to talk about. Losing my people...hasn’t been easy,” Evie tells me. “And do you want the throne?”

“No,” I tell her truthfully. “There are more qualified people in the test that would rule much better than I would. I am a nobody, and after this, I will go back to being that.”

“When we first met, you were ready to die rather than be killed,” she starts off. “I felt like that often, but I had someone to protect, so I fought for her. It took me a long time to realise that I deserve whatever I put my mind to. I don’t make friends easily, or like people in general, but I felt a relatable spark when I met you. If I hadn’t, I would have killed you.”

“I was surprised you didn’t,” I reply.

“I surprised myself. I usually like to kill first and ask questions later. Either way, I don’t think you are a no one. That’s my point,” she finishes. “You are special.”

“I’m cursed,” I reply. “That’s the truth of it.”

Her eyes meet mine for a brief second and then swiftly turn back. She shoots an arrow through the air, and I watch as it imbeds itself into a lower demon right about to jump out on Azi and Seth. Azi looks back and lifts his hand before facing the steel door. The brothers nod at each other, and then they

lift their hands. Pure red fire blasts out of their hands, slamming into the door and burning it. The power radiates and shakes the ground as the door starts to melt down.

“Let’s go,” I tell Evie. She lowers her bow and nods, following after me across the sand. We run fast, jumping over stones and hearing the sound of roars in the distance, followed by fire shooting into the air. I know Seth will be okay, but my body still itches to run over and check. I keep my head down and follow in the direction of the back of the castle and see my window right above. Thankfully, there is no one about. Evie is at my back as I feel around the wall for the gaps and start to climb up. My arms ache as I get halfway up the wall, every step pulls on my entire body with a lot of effort to get up there. Eventually, I get to the window sill and pull myself up, sitting on the edge. Evie is halfway up the wall as I undo the glass panel lock and slide into my old room, too many memories hitting me like a brick. My room looks exactly the same as it did years ago, the same white-sheet bedding on a rock hard mattress, the same old chest of drawers with several bullet holes, and the same peeling flower wallpaper.

Hopefully, everything is still the same.

I kneel down and feel around the floorboards by my bed until I find the right one, and it gives way. I lift it up as Evie climbs into the room, her movements like mine, silent and well trained. Reaching into the gap, I grab two guns out and clip one into my holder before offering one to Evie. She shrugs and takes it, turning it over.

“Guns?”

“Magic guns I stole. The bullets kill anything supernatural or human with one shot, doesn’t matter where you hit. And they never run out of bullets,” I explain to her. “I suspect they don’t work on Dagthoch or higher-level beings, but worth a shot. Or a dozen.”

“You keep gifting me wicked weapons, we will be best friends,” she quietly warns me with a smile, and then she heads over to the door, pressing her ear against it. I follow her over, keeping my dagger in my hand and listening with her.

There is the distant noise of explosions, most likely caused by Seth and Azi, but no one is nearby. Evie nods at me before opening the door, and we both head out onto a wooden decking of the upper floor. There are three floors of this decking, and only one staircase to go down. But knowing Dagthoch, he will be in his room, watching the fight.

Coward that he is.

I turn off down the decking and around a stone corridor to a wooden door, which is slightly open. As suspected, Dagthoch is leaning against the window, watching the fight happening below. His large belly hangs over the frame of the window, his greasy long green hair matches his pale green slimy skin, and two fangs protrude from his mouth onto his chin. His human clothes don't fit him, the shirt and tie almost look like they could strangle him at any second, but he doesn't seem to care. He just laughs at the fight, not noticing me and Evie for a second until Evie kicks the door shut behind us, and his black eyes snap our way.

He looks at Evie for a brief second before settling on me. "The little bird returned to her cage."

"Hello, Dagthoch," I reply, crossing my arms. "Long time no see."

His bushy eyebrows rise. "I miss you terribly. No one is as good as you are at killing, my bird. Where did you fly off to?"

"Home," I flatly respond. "And now I'm here to clean up the mess I left behind. I.e., you."

His laugh grates on my ears. "I am your home. I rescued you off the streets, a poor, nearly dying from starvation, little bird. I trained you, I fed you, and you betray me by siding with the queen I sent you to kill?"

"Who sent you after me?" Evie asks. "Or was it you that came up with that brilliant plan?"

Dagthoch finally looks her way, taking his eyes off me. "The dreaded Protector queen. What an honour it is to have you here."

"Enough with the bullshit," I snap.

“You might as well tell me. I’m here to kill you, and I will make it quick if you give me a name,” Evie replies, pulling out her bow. She loads an arrow and aims it. “Or I can make this very painful for you. After what you did to my people, I am pissed.”

Dagthoch no doubt sees the anger in Evie’s eyes, as for a second he looks worried, and then he narrows his eyes. He lifts his hands and slams his power into the room, into us, hard enough to knock us both into the wall. His power is like a hurricane, the pressure of it holding us flat against the wall as he walks through it like it’s not there. Closing my eyes, I focus on my shadow magic and pull bits of it to me, enough to make a shadow blade in my hand. The problem is, I can’t lift my hand from the pressure. Dagthoch stops right in front of me as Evie screams a mixture of curses and death threats.

“I’ve wanted to kill you a long time. I scented your soul the first day we met, how enchanting it was. The magic inside of you is old and powerful,” he tells me, his disgusting breath blowing all over me. “I’m going to taste your soul now, and no one is going to be able to stop me. Especially not you.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I reply, and then I let go. Fae and shadow magic blast out of me in a wave, knocking Dagthoch’s magic away like it’s nothing, and it smothers me in a purple glow. I swing my hand, picking up Dagthoch in a swirl of my power and holding him the air as my own feet float off the ground.

I wish I could say I am in control, but the magic feels like it’s controlling me.

Consuming me.

“Evie, you need to finish this,” I tell her, knowing she is close by.

“With pleasure. See I did my research and found out there is only one thing on this earth that can kill you. Angel blood and funny enough, my arrows are coated it,” Evie replies, and an arrow flies past me and spins through the air, landing directly in the middle of Dagthoch’s chest, right where his heart is. His big eyes widen, and I hold him in place as I float

close. The walls start cracking, and the floor shakes underneath us just before it all breaks away into tiny pieces of stone that float in the air. My power spreads, taking over everything.

“Daesyn! You’re losing control!” I hear Evie scream at me, but all I can see is the demon who stole my childhood. Who made me kill and steal and become a monster. Who took everything good in me and spoiled it.

“Killing me won’t let you escape,” Dagthoch spits out. “I am immortal in your mind, Daesyn Heartlocke. I’m in your nightmares. I own you.”

“I belong to no one,” I reply right back. “And do you really think you ever owned me? That you ever could?”

His eyes widen as he looks around me, seeing my magic spreading to every inch of the shield that holds this place together. I’m taking this entire place down with me, one way or another.

My magic attacks the shield in waves, and I feel like I’m absorbing the power as it starts to disappear, layer by magical layer. Just before it disappears, I meet Dagthoch’s eyes.

“Thank you for teaching me how to kill, but you were wrong. You only made the very thing that is currently destroying you, better.”

The river water slams into me, washing me away in its cold embrace, and I let the darkness take me.



CHAPTER 46

The hot shower is a blessing as I rest underneath it, my forehead pressed against the tiles as I try to forget everything that happened today except for the fact Dagthoch is gone, dead, and I can go back to Earth any time I want.

“I heard Seth pulled you out of the Thames after you nearly killed them all.” Finn’s voice makes me jump, and I glance around the shower curtain, seeing him standing at the door. Thankfully, the shower curtain hides me completely, but he is still in here. “You could have waited outside the bathroom to avoid scaring me.”

“Did you or did you not almost fucking kill yourself again today, Daesyn?”

His demand makes me shiver.

“I can’t die, remember?” I reply, going back into the shower. I flip the switch to turn the shower off. “And close your eyes. I’m coming out.”

I peek around the shower curtain to see his eyes are shut before stepping out and grabbing a towel. I wrap it around myself as he starts talking. “Being immortal as you are is a curse, Daesyn. You could have been trapped at the bottom of the river, dying over and over again for a long time. Do you want that?”

“You can open your eyes now,” I say, watching as he does. His eyes fall on me with so much anger and frustration.

He steps forward, leaving no space between us, and stares down at me. “I don’t want to see you in pain.”

“I thought you made it pretty clear there can be nothing between us, Finn,” I respond. Despite my whole being soaking wet, my mouth feels dry as I look up at him, wanting a reply I know I can’t get. We both can’t say it. The unspoken thing that is building between us since we kissed. Hell, since we met. “If I could exchange my immortality for making my own choices in life, I would in a heartbeat. But I am my mother’s only son, and she will not let me go. Anyone in her way, anyone she thinks threatens to take me away from her, she will kill. And even you, cursed as you are, would be destroyed by the gods.”

I lift my hand and cup the side of his face, and he closes his eyes, slightly leaning into my hand. “I wish things were different.”

“Wishing to gods will not help us, Daesyn. We must walk away.”

“Then leave,” I reply.

“I’m trying. I try *every* fucking day, and it doesn’t work,” he breathes out the words, opening his eyes. “I keep coming back to you. I keep thinking about you.”

I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him, pouring everything I want to say to him into each kiss against his soft lips. He doesn’t kiss me back for a second, and I pull away, only for him to grab my hips and pull me back to him, kissing me with so much passion I can feel it all over my body.

“Everything alright in there?” Poppy shouts through, knocking on the door a few times. Finn moves his lips to my neck.

“I’m fine!” I shout back, more than a little breathlessly as I feel Finn smiling against my neck. He lowers his lips to my collarbone, finding a spot I really like, and I moan a little bit.

“Okay...dinner is ready. I’m going out with Toth to show him the town. We will be careful,” Poppy calls back.

“Have fun!” I reply, trying not to laugh. Finn leans up and smiles at me, kissing me softly on the lips.

“I should go.”

“I know,” I reply, sighing. He kisses my forehead, breathing in deeply before stepping back and disappearing, leaving only gold dust floating around in the air as any proof he was here to begin with.

Something in my chest hurts all the same for him leaving. I brush my hair before getting dressed in my shorts and plain blue T-shirt. I head into the living area, surprised to see Mossy and Sebastian sitting together, talking quietly. Mossy glares at me when he sees me and jumps off the counter, walking right to Poppy’s room and slamming the door behind him.

“You’ve well and truly pissed him off,” Sebastian says. “Something about drowning him in the London river?”

“He shouldn’t take it so personally. I drowned dozens of bad demons at the same time!” I say loudly enough for Mossy to hear me, even if I am sorry he had to be rescued with Seth holding onto him as he swam out. Sebastian smiles and pats the stool next to him.

“I’m staying here tonight. Tomorrow is Finn and then Seth. And finally back to Ryker,” Sebastian explains. “We aren’t all talking, but we agreed someone needs to be close every night to wake you up if the Seelie king is in your head.”

“I don’t need babysitters,” I deadpan as I climb onto the stool. Sword has made four different types of pizzas, bowls of sweet potato chips, and fresh salad bowls.

“Good thing I only babysit my sister, isn’t it?”

“How is she?” I question, picking up a slice of pizza. I could argue with him about staying here until the cows come home, but a part of me actually agrees with him. I need someone to wake me up and get me out of those dreams. Plus, having Sebastian in my bed doesn’t sound like a bad plan at all...

“Back in her room at the palace and talking to the spirits. They claim no one will hurt her, especially not our mother, and they simply want you,” he tells me. “Not creepy at all.”

“Nope, not at all,” I reply with a small smile that slowly drops. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Sebastian. I almost fucked things up today by losing control of my powers.”

“Let me teach you,” he suggests. “We can start with portals.”

“What’s in it for you?”

He crosses his arms. “You owe me something. Something I will claim in your room later on tonight.”

I raise my eyebrows. “That sounds interesting.”

His smirk says it all. “It will be.”

I shake my head and eat some more food before standing up. “Come on then, teacher. Show me how to cast a portal.”

He wipes his hands with a napkin before climbing off his seat. He comes over to me and picks up my hand, making it flat and holding it over his hand. “Close your eyes and tell me what you feel with your hand. I’m going to make a portal, and I want you to feel the magic.”

Trusting Sebastian, I close my eyes and focus on my hand. I feel the shadow magic instantly, like it is pulled from the ground and into Sebastian’s hand, covering it. “When the magic is called, then I have to think about where I want to go. You can’t go where you haven’t seen, but you can tap into someone’s memories to see it from their eyes.”

He pulls his hand away, and I open my eyes. “Your turn.”

“What if I make a portal to some random place?”

“You won’t. You have to trust the magic,” he tells me. “Like you do every time you use it.”

“Easier said than done,” I mutter, but I do what he asks and close my eyes. Pulling shadow magic into my hand, I feel the power building around my palm in seconds. I picture my bedroom, right above my bed, and slowly release the power. When I open my eyes, there is a shadow portal swirling around on the floor in the middle of Seth and me.

“Ready to see if this works?” Seth asks, holding out his hand for me.

Nervously smiling, I take his warm hand and let him pull me into the portal. We both fall through, and to my relief, we crash onto my bed in my dark room, my whole body resting on top of Sebastian’s.

“I did it!” I say, breathing out in relief as I rest my legs either side of Sebastian’s hips. His hands gently run up my thighs as the portal disappears above us, leaving only the little bit of dim light under the doorframe to let me see the change in him.

“Time for my part of the deal,” he tells me, effortlessly flipping us over on the bed and covering my body with his. I grin as he leans down and kisses me, running his hands down my chest in the same breath. His hands brush against my hard nipples, making me moan into his mouth. He leans back and pulls his shirt off, and I do the same, leaving me in only tiny shorts below him.

“Trust me?” he asks, hooking his fingers in my shorts.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t,” I reply, desperate for him to take this further, needing to be with him and just lose myself. I haven’t let myself trust anyone in a long time, always thinking I could do this on my own, but right now I just need him.

And I think Seb needs me too. We both have our demons to escape.

He slowly pulls my shorts down and off before kissing my inner thigh. My eyes roll back as he kisses up my thigh, his large hands cupping my ass as he suddenly dives between my legs with his hot tongue. I moan, throwing my head back and my back arching as he flicks and licks at my clit in a way that is experienced, because damn it feels so good. Just before I’m about to come, he slides two fingers into me, and I crash hard into an orgasm. I barely feel him remove his fingers or undo his trousers before the tip of his cock is at my entrance and his lips are on mine. He groans as he pushes into me, inch by thick inch, until he is fully inside of me and stretching me.

“God, you’re big,” I moan against his lips.

He slides out and then slams back into me. “You’re tight and fucking delicious, Dae, fuck.”

Then he slams into me hard, again and again, like he wants the mattress and the entire world to know I am his. And part of me wants the same. His cock hits just the right spot as his tongue fills my mouth, a masculine groan coming from his chest as he gets faster.

“Oh god,” I moan as I come again, waves of pleasure crashing into me. Sebastian kisses me harder, swallowing my moans as his cock thrusts in and out of me, hard and fast, feeling me tighten around him right before he finds his release, filling me with his come.

We both breathlessly lie back on my bed, and I curl up on his side, wrapping my arm around him. I know we didn’t talk about it, which is bad, but passion has a way of sidelining all rational thoughts, and I’m glad I have a magical witch potion I take once a year to stop pregnancy.

“I’m protected, just so you know,” I whisper, drawing circles on his chest.

“Good, because I’m not done with you yet,” he tells me, rolling back on top of me and kissing me like he didn’t just fill me with his come, his cock feeling hard once again pressed against my thigh.

I don’t think I could ever be done with Sebastian. We are both messed up and addicted to each other.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.



CHAPTER 47

“Mossy, I made you your favourite breakfast. Peanut butter pancakes,” I tease, pushing my way into Poppy’s bedroom and looking at my little monkey friend lying on the bed, his head on her pillow and his big eyes looking at me.

“You didn’t care if I died or not,” he tells me. “I’m your family and you are mine.”

“No, I saw you with Seth...but I am sorry,” I tell him, walking into the room and putting the pancakes down on the counter. I look down at the floor, kicking a loose sock out of the way. “I lost all control, and I was reckless. I don’t know what happened, but I wasn’t in control anymore...it was like something else was, and it did scare me. If I had lost you, or Seth, or anyone else, I don’t know how I could have coped. You are my family, Mossy. I’m sorry I didn’t protect you like I should have done.”

He stares right back at me, his eyes turning glass-like before he jumps out the sheets and onto my chest, wrapping his little arms around my neck. “I forgive you.”

“Good, because you’re my best friend.”

“I thought I had that title,” Poppy interrupts, leaning against the doorframe, her high ponytail of black hair flicking around. We both are wearing the same clothes, black leggings and dark purple academy tops with the royal logo over our hearts. But Poppy has trainers and two daggers strapped to her thighs. I have four daggers around my thighs, my whip around my waist as a belt, and my heavy leather boots on. My hair is

in two French braids that end in a waterfall pattern I picked up off YouTube years ago and never forgot.

She still looks like my twin. Minus the eyes.

“You’re not cool enough to be me, Pops,” Mossy replies.

Poppy laughs and moves her gaze to me. “There is a portal waiting for us in the living room. We best go to wherever it takes us.”

“Are you prepared for a test?”

She nods, breathing in deeply but keeping my gaze. “Yes.”

“Someone is nearly as badass as you,” Mossy states. “Practically twins.”

This time I laugh with Poppy, feeling relieved Mossy has forgiven me, before following her out of the room. Toth is nowhere to be seen, as he left early with Sebastian, and even thinking of the prince makes me shiver all over. Poppy jumps in the portal first, and I head in after her, crashing into hard ice when I land, reminding me of the first time we had a test. I stand up, looking around at the square of ice Poppy and I are standing on alone, deep fog covering up everything around us. There is a tiny walkway of ice off the one side of the square and a circle portal in the corner.

“What do we do?” Poppy asks me, shivering a little. I shrug and look around, not seeing anything other than thick fog. I call my powers, shocked to realise I don’t have any here.

“Use your powers, Pops,” I demand. She holds her hands out, and the same realisation comes to her within seconds.

“It’s like they aren’t there.”

“I don’t know of any place, on hell or Earth, that can block power,” I tell her. “What about you?”

“The gods chará,” Poppy whispers, and I give her a confused look. “It’s a place the gods created where it is powerless and endless. Basically they came here to be as human as they wanted.”

“Great,” I mutter, rubbing my arms. “Why is it always freezing?”

Poppy laughs, but it’s cut off by an echoing voice I recognise as Professor Artic. “Welcome to the Royal Reaper Academy tests. There are thirty-eight of you left, and only ten can leave this realm. To leave, one of you must enter the portal nearby and be guided by your partner through a maze. In the middle of the maze is the exit. But beware, in the shadows below and above, the gods’ creatures lurk. Use any force and any means to escape this realm, or may the gods be with you in your death.”

“Fuck,” I breathe out, looking at the portal.

“I will go, I don’t mind the dark, and you are a good guide,” Poppy suggests. “We don’t have time to discuss it as there are only ten places. We need to hurry.”

“Get your daggers out and stab anything that comes close to you,” I tell her. “I will guide us.”

Poppy looks scared, but she bravely holds her head high and jumps into the portal. The second she does, the floor ice clears to reveal a room with a small passageway where the thin bit of ice is for me to walk on and Poppy reappears in the middle of the room.

“Go right ahead,” I shout to her, just about seeing her outline. Shouting is going to be dangerous here, but without our powers, there isn’t a better way I can think of. Finn was right, they have changed the academy test in ways that actually threaten me.

Like being trapped in this realm forever.

Or Poppy, Seb or Ryker being trapped down here. I have to push them to the back of my mind for now and focus on the path ahead. I slip on the ice pathway a little as I make my way across it, seeing Poppy below me in the tunnel. The next part is a large cross with three different ways to go. “Stay near the entrance, and I will come back. I need to check which way!”

“Okay!” she shouts back. I skid across the ice to the one side, seeing a path for me to go across, but the part for Poppy

is flooded with water. I move to the next bit, which is unpassable, and go to the other exit. This one has a large shape in the middle of Poppy's path, and it moves as I look down at it. I'm betting it's not going to be an easy fight for her, judging by the size of that thing.

Gritting my teeth, I go back to Poppy and lean down. "One way has a monster for you to fight and the other is underwater. Your choice, but the monster looks big."

"Swimming is good," she answers quickly. "Even in the cold."

"Okay, swimming it is," I reply. "Walk ten steps forward and then turn right until you hit water. The tunnel goes forward and sharply turns to the left."

"Got it," she replies and starts moving. I make it halfway across the square before I hear a noise above me. I barely get to look up before something sharp digs into my shoulder, and my feet leave the ground. Sliding out a dagger, I grab hold of a fluffy talon digging into my shoulder and stab my dagger into its leg. It squeals and squawks, throwing me around and digging its talons deeper into my shoulder. I scream and grab the dagger, pushing it further into the bird's leg. It suddenly drops me, and I woosh through the air so quickly, and in the blink of an eye, I fall into freezing cold water that takes all the air out of my lungs. I gasp, sucking in water, and swim to the top, struggling with the movement when pain shoots through my body, hurting me badly from my shoulder. I suck in cold air when I break free of the water and spin around, finding a block of ice nearby.

Fuck, where is Poppy?

Swimming slowly, unable to go much faster, I finally get to the ice and slip out a dagger, slamming it into the ice top and using it as a lever to pull myself onto the ice and out of the water. I roll on my back and look at my shoulder, seeing two massive cuts pouring hot blood down my chest and arm. I rip the bottom of my shirt off with all the effort I can and tie it around my shoulder to stop the bleeding before grabbing my dagger and standing up. The triangle ice block I'm on doesn't

look familiar, and I search the tunnels below it, not seeing Poppy anywhere. I find another ice block at the tip of the triangle and lean back. I run fast, jumping off the tip and landing on the other block, sliding to a stop. I climb up and search this shape, a circle this time and still nothing.

Dammit.

I pause, knowing there is one person who could find her, and he is here. Apparently, he can always find me.

Ryker.

I look around and then close my eyes and scream his name at the top of my lungs. "RYKER!"

I shout his name a few more times, knowing damn well I'm going to be attracting a lot of attention from everyone else and whatever creatures are nearby, but I can't leave Poppy down here, and searching the maze will take too long.

Jumping off the circle, I find a long pathway in the middle of the sea and start heading across it, searching around me as I go. The path is hard to stand on, and my foot slips off a few times, but I manage to hold myself up with every step. The path suddenly shakes, throwing me right off my feet, and I slam onto the ice path, clutching at it with my fingers. Two glowing eyes appear in the water, and then an eel the size of a car jumps over me on the ice, its slimy body glowing blue and vibrating with electricity.

Fuck no. I wait a second before I run for my life down the path, not even caring that I might slip in at this point. I hear screams in the distance and names being shouted, but none of them are mine, and I don't recognise them as Ryker. Finally I crash onto the star-shaped ice block, nearly tripping, and look back to see the eel just as he jumps out of the water right at me, opening its mouth full of millions of sharp yellow teeth. I lift my dagger in the air, crossing my arms over my face to defend myself. Just as it is about to hit me, a black figure slams into its side, and the eel makes a horrid high-pitched screaming noise. The eel flies back into the sea, and I glance back to see a hellhound on the ice, blood pouring from its mouth.

“Ryker!” I say, relieved as hell. He runs over to me, and even though I know it’s Ryker and he won’t hurt me, I almost run away from the giant wolf-like creature. He sniffs my shoulder and whines. “I’m okay. I swear, but I lost Poppy. Can you smell her? Is Sebastian okay?”

Ryker’s hellhound nods, so I take that as a yes, and backs away. He howls and runs off, leaving me no choice but to follow him. We jump from one ice block to another to another before Ryker stops, and I hear her.

“Dae!”

“I’m here!” I shout back, rushing to the edge of the ice block that is shaped like a castle.

“You left! I didn’t know what to do, so I just stayed,” she cries out, sounding like she has had an emotional breakdown, and I don’t even blame her.

“A bird of some sorts attacked me, and I got lost. Then there was an eel,” I tell her. “Never mind, Ryker is here, and he will lead us out. We got this.”

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“When we get out of here, yes,” I reply, wanting to leave this realm right now. Ryker whines and claws at the ice, and when I look his way, he nods towards the path ahead. “Walk right ahead, Pops.”

I see her following under my feet as we head off the castle and through two more passageways and across a diamond-shaped ice block. I think Ryker is keeping us clear of enemies, which I’m thankful for. I hear Sebastian before I see him in a chamber under the ice.

“Ryker, get your hairy ass back here!” Seb shouts.

“He had a detour!” I reply, seeing Poppy getting to the room Sebastian is in, a room full of bars.

“Thank fuck you’re here,” Seb replies. “The next part doesn’t look easy.”

“What next part—” I cut off when I walk to the edge of the block and the fog fades away, revealing a smaller part of the

maze. This one isn't icy at all; it's full of thick spaces and dead ends of bushy green maze and magic shields blocking our two layers. Right in the middle is a big glowing purple portal, the magic crackling all around it.

"Ready?" I ask them all.

"Yes," Sebastian and Poppy reply, and I take a deep breath. We all step out together onto the maze, and then it suddenly lights on fire behind us, and a massive flaming ball drops out of the sky into the space behind Poppy and Seb. They both stumble back, and the ball starts to roll right towards them, the thing big enough to not only set them on fire but squash them like bugs.

"Run!" I scream, heading down the path to see the next part. "Ryker, go ahead, find the next part!"

He growls and runs faster than me as I get to the first fork in the path, seeing the left way is a dead end. "Go right!"

They both turn right, and the ball bounces once before spinning and following right after them. That's some fucked up magic right there. Ryker howls to the right for the next part, and I go faster, finding the next part they need to go straight ahead. This goes on for a while, tiring us all out, but I look up to see we are getting closer to the portal in the middle.

"Go right!" I shout to them at the last turning, relief filling me. We are going to make it. All of us. Seconds before Poppy and Seb are meant to turn right, Poppy goes left, and I scream, "NO!"

Poppy runs and runs, and I turn, chasing after her over the burnt ledge. "Dae, get back!" I ignore Seb's shout and run to where Poppy is cornered in, the ball of flames coming right towards her from the end of the path.

With everything I have, I slam my hands down on the magical shield again and again, begging anyone or anything to help me.

"Please! No!"

Poppy looks up at me and shakes her head, her eyes seeming almost at peace with everything.

“I love you, my adopted sister. You will make a good queen if you only saw yourself how everyone else does.”

“Don’t you fucking dare say goodbye to me!” I scream at her, slamming my hands on the shelf again and again, feeling the maze bushes under my knees burning through my leggings and skin. “You should be on the throne, not me! You cannot die!”

She smiles and shakes her head, but I see the pure fear in her eyes. “Get Laelia back, and tell my parents I love them.”

“Fuck no!” I scream, and then a voice I haven’t heard in a while fills my ears, and the world seems to go slow. The ball of fire barely moves, and Poppy is frozen still as blue light fills the space around me.

“I admire true sisterhood, a friendship born in sacrifice and love. I admire love over everything else, as it is my true calling. I am your goddess, and I watch over you, dear Daesyn,” the female voice whispers so softly.

“You told me the meanings of the strange words Finn said,” I whisper back. “Who are you?”

“Many call me Aphrodite, and you have my blessing. This, however, is a gift in the name of love,” she breathes out as I come to terms with the fact I’ve been speaking to a goddess and I have her blessing. “I will be back, Daesyn Heartlocke. Very soon, in fact...”

The shield instantly disappears, and I reach down, grabbing Poppy’s shoulders and pulling her out just as the fireball slams into the space where she was. The shield snaps back into place, and we both run off the fire, straight to Ryker and Seb, who look shocked. Without pausing, we all jump into the portal, wanting to get the hell out of this place, and reappear in my room, crashing onto the floor.

I lift my head, my body aching from head to toe, my shoulder killing me, to see Poppy staring at me. To see Ryker’s wolf and Sebastian staring too. “You glowed pink, and then you pulled me out like the gods’ magic shield was nothing, in a world with no magic. How did you do that?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Sebastian breathes out. “I felt like I couldn’t stop looking at you.”

Then I realise. The goddess was in my body, possessing me, and she could do that because I can’t die. The cursed rune protected me from even a goddess as powerful as she is.

“Let’s just say the gods helped,” I reply, feeling more of my blood trickling down my arm. “But I could use a healer.”

“I owe you my life once again,” Poppy says, helping me stand up. She brushes her wet hair from her eyes. “I meant what I said. There is only one winner of this test.”

“So did I,” I reply, arching an eyebrow. “I knew from the second I saw you, there was something special, and I think this was what you were born for. You were named after a queen.”

“What are you two talking about?” Sebastian asks me, rubbing the back of his neck. “Actually, never mind. I’m going to find that Seelie fae Toth and get him to heal you.”

Ryker rubs his head against my hip, and I rest against the counter just as Finn appears in the room.

He nods once at each of us before locking eyes with me. “The final ten have come through the portal. Congratulations.”

The academy is getting much smaller, and I suspect deadlier. Fingers crossed one of us wins this test. Anyone that isn’t me.



CHAPTER 48

“The room smells of dog,” Mossy states as I walk back into the bedroom after my shower, which does not smell of dog one tiny bit, but this is Mossy’s way of saying he doesn’t like Ryker staying overnight in his hellhound form. Ryker didn’t transform back, which was odd for him, but I was thankful for the company nonetheless and the fact no Seelie king was in my peaceful dreams. I rub my sore shoulder, noting that it feels even better than it did a few hours ago.

“It usually smells of monkey and peanut butter. I’m not sure which is worse,” I reply, tugging on my leather jacket. Picking up my coffee, I drink the rest of it. Mossy jumps on my other shoulder, hooking his tail around the back of my neck. “My coffee is always getting out smelled by you.”

Mossy sticks his tongue out at me, and I chuckle as I walk out to find an overlord demon waiting in the middle of the room, a big blue portal glowing behind him.

“Didn’t know you could make blue portals,” I say by way of greeting. “Pretty cool though.”

“Evie opened it,” Seth explains. “I’m stealing you for the day to research the runes and a date.”

“A date?” I question, surprised.

He offers me his hand, and Mossy tugs on my hair. “Nope, no dates with the demon.”

“He literally saved your life recently and bought you lots of snacks. Come on, give him a chance,” I whisper back,

seeing Seth's mouth twitch in amusement. I try not to laugh, but I have to cough to hide it.

"I still don't like him," Mossy grumbles.

"I believe you don't like anyone you think might try to take Syn away from you. I can guarantee that despite wanting her in my life all the fucking time, I won't cut you out. I know you're family to Syn, and I respect that. I also quite like you, my monkey friend. You do make me laugh," Seth states, making my heart pound in my chest as I look up at him, his red eyes watching us closely. "So you can continue to hate me if you like, but I will keep trying to be your friend because of how much you mean to Syn."

"The big bad overlord demon has a heart," I tease him.

"I have many big things, my darling Syn," he counters, and I grin. Dirty demon. I like it.

"Dae, are we—" Poppy stops as she comes out of her room and sees the portal and the demon in our apartment. "I'm guessing you're skipping training today?"

"Yep," I reply, walking to Seth. "Can you tell Finn where I am?"

"Why does the demi-god care?" Seth questions, a bit of hostility in his voice.

"Because he is my teacher today," I reply, ignoring Seth's blatant real question.

"Good, because everyone knows playing with gods ends very badly, Daesyn," Seth warns, using my full name to get his point across.

I chuckle. "I was told the same thing about overlord demons, but here we are."

Before he can reply, I walk through the portal and right out into a library with dozens of books floating around in the air, and I watch one slide back into the gap in the bookcases on the walls. There are no windows, but the roof is a cone shape and made of blue glass with runes etched into the glass, shining blue light down onto the room.

“Did you choose the blue glass to match your hair?” I ask Evie as she walks over to me from the other side of the room, one of her mates right at her back. I briefly saw this one, a Protector if I’m guessing right, in the ballroom, but I can’t remember his name from my research. I feel Seth right at my back as Evie and her mate stop in front of me, her eyes flickering to Mossy and back to me.

“Yes. I’ve changed a lot, but this room is my favourite in the place because it’s been magically spelled by my ward.”

“The witch...Hali?” I question, wondering if I remembered that name right.

“Yes, the new queen of the witches. She is very interested in meeting you at some point,” Evie replies. “Oh, and this is my mate, Connor. As he is half reaper, we thought you might be interested in meeting.”

“I wondered why you seemed familiar. It’s your reaper blood,” I reply. “My name is Daesyn.”

“Oh I know,” he almost laughs. “The entire city is talking about you.”

“I hope good things.”

“Mostly,” he vaguely replies. Ah, shit, trying to kill the queen thing. “Evie filled me in on this cursed rune of yours, and we have been researching non-stop to find out more information. But we finally found something.”

“What did you find?” Seth asks, and Connor nods his head over to a table. We all sit down, Connor and Evie opposite us, and Mossy stays on my shoulder.

“How many men do you collect to keep?” Mossy asks Evie before anyone can say anything. Connor chokes on a laugh, whereas Seth just laughs. “Because this one”—he points at my head—“has too many. I wondered if I could convince her to drop a few of them.”

Evie chuckles and widens her eyes. “I see why you keep the monkey around. He is funny.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Mossy persists.

“Maybe Syn should make the subject clearer by answering,” Seth suggests.

I glare at him before turning my eyes away. “Mossy is just pissed because he has never seen a female fae monkey and therefore can’t have company. Normal monkeys don’t like him.”

“I’m an acquired taste,” Mossy snuffles.

I shake my head as everyone laughs. “Brother, I see the discussion on the runes has not started,” Azi says, joining us.

“Mossy was amusing us all,” Evie tells him as he walks over and kisses her on the forehead before pulling out a chair and dropping a book on the table that makes a cloud of dust puff up. “The funny monkey that he is.”

“Back to business,” Azi sternly replies, looking right at me. “The godless runes are an incredible power, and to hear you have one of them is very concerning. Not only for you but for the worlds.”

“Tell me what you know,” I demand.

He opens the book and spins it to face me. Four runes glow on the page in front of me, each of them encased in a necklace just like the one my mother wore. “The godless runes were created to stop a destroyer of worlds and to be a force against the gods in case they ever went too far. They were given to four families. One of the fae, one of the demons, one of the angels and one who isn’t named.”

“Demons?” I question. “I know the cursed rune was given to my mother’s fae line, and I’m the last one alive.”

“You’re with the last two overlord demons alive, whose family were given the forsaken rune,” Azi says, looking at Seth.

Seth crosses his arms, rubbing his chin. “Mother would have hidden it in our old home.”

“I believe so,” Azi replies, casually talking about the third layer of hell, which is damn hard, if not impossible, to get into.

“The divine rune is with the angels, and I have asked an angel friend of mine to come here to speak with you about it,” Evie interjects. “But she won’t be here until tonight. Will you stay?”

“I am taking Syn out for the day. We will return at nightfall,” Seth answers, pushing up off the table. “Syn?”

“Mummy?” a small voice cuts in. I turn to see a toddler has appeared in the middle of the room with embers flickering around on the ground at her feet, her eyes red for a second before they bleed back to blue. The toddler can’t be more than two years old with long dark brown hair in pigtails and big blue eyes that look at Evie. She has a onesie on with monkeys all over it in different colours, and she is holding a monkey teddy bear.

“Amelia!” Evie all but shouts, jumping off her chair and running over to the toddler. Amelia cuddles up to Evie, but then she sees Mossy. Her eyes widen, turning red, and she disappears in smoke, reappearing in my arms, looking up at Mossy as I put out the embers flickering around my clothes.

“Erm...,” I mutter, having no clue what to do with a kid.

“A mo-nnkey!” Amelia cries out in joy, staring up at Mossy with so much love in her eyes. Mossy looks plain terrified as he stares right back.

“Sorry about my daughter, she loves monkeys,” Azi explains, picking Amelia up off my lap, her tiny arms reaching for Mossy. The second Azi carries her, she bursts into tears and starts crying her little heart out.

“Maybe you should stay and keep Amelia company?” I whisper to Mossy. “Come on, you can’t let her cry.”

“She could bite me,” Mossy nervously replies. “Toddlers bite.”

“Amelia is sweet and doesn’t bite,” Evie interrupts. “But she is obsessed with monkeys and teleporting all over the building.”

“She gets that from her dad.”

Seth coughs. “Her favourite uncle, you mean.”

“You’re her only uncle!” Connor laughs, shaking his head. Mossy jumps off my shoulder and onto Azi’s, looking down at the toddler, who instantly stops crying.

“Want to hang out, kid?”

“Yes!” she says, grabbing Mossy and cuddling him to her chest, then they both disappear in a cloud of smoke.

“Your monkey is well-behaved, right?” Evie asks, looking a little worried.

“He would protect her with his life while teaching her bad habits like how to steal food. Overall, I’d give him a seven out of ten for babysitting,” I reply, climbing out of my seat. “See you later with the angel.”

“Have fun!” Evie winks as I walk over to Seth, who tugs me into his arms.

“That was sweet of you,” Seth whispers in my ear. “Didn’t know you could be sweet, Syn.”

We disappear in flames, and we come out onto a field with something like stones in the distance. “Where are we?”

“Stonehenge. It’s the only portal to somewhere I want to show you,” Seth tells me, linking his fingers through mine. “Syn...this place is special to me because my mother showed me it once. It was her gift to me, she knew I wanted to escape the life I had been born into. That I wasn’t as cruel or lost as my brothers were.”

“Why did you and Azi turn out okay...and your brothers just insane? Insane enough to try to end the world?” I ask as we get closer to the large stones in a circle. There are human blockades meant to stop us, but Seth waves his hands and they burn away into nothing, not blocking our path at all. I see a few humans in the distance, but they won’t be able to get close in time to stop us.

“I was close to losing it, Syn. I was close to falling into the dark side of our magic, of our power. We are born of hell, fed with the pure power of hell, and linked to it in ways no human

words could explain. It is seductive, and a weaker man would give in. But I met you, and Evie was Azi's redemption," he tells me, meeting my gaze. "You are my redemption, my light in the darkness, my way out of hell. Because it was hell before you, Syn. I just didn't know it."

"I was lonely and lost before I met you... When you left... Well, I didn't know it would hurt so much because I felt a real connection to you. And for me, that was rare. I didn't have a connection with anyone or anything like I did with you," I explain to him. "When you came back into my life, it was like the candle I blew out was just relit, and all those feelings came back, mixed with the same fear you were going to ghost on me again."

"I won't," he firmly replies as we get to the middle of the Stonehenge ruins. He makes a fireball in his hand, catching dozens of people's attention at the same time.

"You're not allowed in there!" a guard shouts, running as fast as his short legs can take him. Seth winks at me and throws the fireball at the ground. A portal immediately appears, and I almost scream as we both fall straight down, spinning through the air as I try to breathe.

Thanks for the warning, Seth, my dear.

My whole body painfully halts to a stop in the air before whatever magic that stopped my fall lets me go, and I bounce onto soft grass.

Seth is standing, smoothing down his suit like nothing happened as I sit up and look around at the paradise we have just landed in. Every wall is a waterfall of gold sparkling water that pours into the pool surrounding the island we are on that has dozens of green trees, bushes, soft grass, and gold poppy-like flowers around the edges in bunches, moving softly in the warm breeze. In the centre of the island is a white blanket and various baskets on top of it. Small lanterns hang in the trees, casting a bright golden glow around the space.

I'm not a romance kind of girl. But hell, even I'm impressed as shit.

“You’re too much for me sometimes, Seth. You almost make me want to be a normal girl,” I tell him as he lifts my hand, pressing a kiss against my knuckles.

“I love that you aren’t normal, Syn,” he tells me, stepping closer, and my breath hitches. I slowly run my hands up his muscular arms to rest on his large shoulders. “And I want to ask you something.”

“What exactly?” I ask, having a good idea what he might say.

“I want to claim you as my mate,” he tells me, cupping the back of my neck, pulling my lips close to his. “I want us to last forever, for you to be sure I’m never leaving again. I want every inch of you to be mine.”

“Seth, I want the same,” I admit. “And before the academy, I would have said yes with no hesitating, but now things are complicated. Very complicated.”

“I see that,” he tersely replies. “What are you asking of me?” Seth locks eyes with me.

“I don’t know yet. I just know making big life decisions like mating isn’t a good idea right now. I need to figure out some other things,” I gently tell him. “I need to work out who is going to be in my life for a long time, because right now... it’s impossible for me to know.”

Seth closes his eyes for a moment while he takes a deep breath before nodding once. When he opens his eyes, his face looks a little softer. “We don’t need to mate for me to enjoy you,” Seth comments, and then he kisses me, making it clear we aren’t talking about this anymore, not when he clearly has different ideas in mind. Seth picks me up in his arms, carrying me to the blanket and lying me down. He kneels over me and places his hand on his chest. Flames burst out of his hand, setting his clothes on fire in a wave until there is nothing left, but he isn’t burnt even a little bit.

I stare in pure shock.

Seth is spectacular. Breathtakingly so.

Deep V-shaped stomach with a light trail of hair leading down to his large and very hard cock standing to attention. I look up his body, over his perfect chest to the dragon tattoo on his pecs that spreads over his shoulder. He is beautiful.

Like the gods themselves crafted him in hell to be delicious and forbidden.

“Do that to me,” I instruct him. I don’t even care if we don’t have any other clothes, I just care that I want him to see me the same way I am looking at him.

With raw need.

With a passion that has been building up between us for a long time.

Seth places his hand on my ankle, and instantly I feel the fire even as I close my eyes. The heat travels up my body, burning away my clothes into nothing but embers, which don’t hurt me as they brush against my skin.

When I open my eyes, Seth is leaning over me, holding himself by his arms, his body not touching mine.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

I believe him, even before he kisses me with a passion I wasn’t quite ready for. But I don’t think I will ever be ready for the passion and darkness that Seth brings with him. Either way, I am here for it, and I won’t ever walk away from what he is offering to me. I gasp as I feel his hard cock pressing against my clit, his chest rubbing against my hard nipples as he kisses me. I feel ready to burst even as Seth holds my neck and turns my head to the side before kissing my neck, sucking and biting in a way I know will leave a mark. The mix of pain and pleasure is startling as he moves down my body, leaving a trail of marks against my skin. His teeth graze across my right nipple before his hot tongue flicks out, and I moan, my whole body bursting to life. He doesn’t waste time, moving down my stomach, his large hands sliding down my back to my ass and squeezing once before he is in the middle of my legs, his head hovering over my core.

“If you cry out, call my name. It’s fucking hot to hear my name on your lips, Syn.”

Then he dives between my legs and licks my clit, making me shake with pleasure. His touch is like fire, his tongue moving in ways that torture me with so much pleasure I can’t think straight.

“Seth!” I moan, throwing my head back. “Seth!” I pant his name like a prayer as he makes me come hard, the pleasure spreading across my body so hard I feel lost. Seth looks at me, titling his head to the side, his red eyes on mine.

“We can do more, if you want,” I suggest. Seth shakes his head, his eyes bleeding to black for a second.

“Not without making you my mate, we cannot,” he promises, a dark promise. A small part of me, which is ignoring how the rest of me isn’t ready for such a big choice, wants to cry out yes and fuck him crazy. But the rational side of me makes me sit up and crawl in front of him. I stroke my hand up his cock, making him jolt.

“Syn...” His warning only makes me want to do this more. I lower my head and take him in my mouth, deep and fast, tasting his precum on my tongue. He lets out a masculine groan as I start moving up and down, going as deep as I can.

“Syn, fuck, Syn.” He chants my name over and over as he digs his hands into my hair and starts fucking my mouth hard until he stills, filling my mouth with his come. I swallow it all before raising my head, and he shakes his head at me.

“You’re going to be the death of me, Syn.”

“Possibly,” I reply, standing up. I run and dive into the water that is soft and warm as I sink deep. I open my eyes underwater just as Seth dives in after me, swimming to me in the water and wrapping his arms around me.

He kisses me under the water, wrapping his body around mine, and I let myself fall for him a little more, trusting that he will never walk away again.

* * *

“I’M NOT WEARING this all day, kid,” Mossy dramatically states as I step through the portal into the library to see him wearing a pink princess dress and several bows stuck to his forehead. I raise my eyebrows as Amelia and another kid, a little boy, put more glitter on his head until he is drowning in it.

“Time for dinner. Let’s go,” Connor says, picking Amelia up. “Say goodbye to Mossy.”

“Bye, Mossy. Come back!” she says. The little boy takes Connor’s hand, shyly looking at me, and I smile at him as they walk away. Evie and Azi sit back down at the table just as a bright light fills the room for a moment, and left behind is an angel.

With bright white wings and long blonde hair, the woman is extremely beautiful and elegant looking. She runs to Evie and cuddles her in her chair. “It’s been so long, dear friend of mine.”

“Too long,” Evie agrees. “I’m sorry to have to call you for help.”

“You can always call on your race for help. You are always half angel, Evie,” she tells her firmly, then looks around the room. She bows to everyone, including me.

“I’m not royalty,” I tell her, walking closer and holding my hand out. “My name is—”

“Daesyn Heartlocke. And I wouldn’t be so sure of your future,” she replies with a secretive smile. “You have a question to ask me.”

“Shouldn’t I know your name first?”

“No, angels do not give their names away so easily. It must be earned, or you must be one of us, like Evie. To have our name means you can call for us,” she explains to me. “Do not take offense.”

“We all have our secrets,” I reply. “No offense taken.”

She smiles brightly and places her hands on my cheeks. I pause, unsure of what to do. “I see it so clearly now. You really are the carrier of the runes.”

“Only one rune. I don’t want the rest, but I do want information on them,” I say, and she drops her hands.

“Every rune is linked with your future, and they are coming. The cursed rune has already claimed you, and next...,” she drifts off. “Well, you called me to ask about the divine rune.”

“I did,” I reply.

“What do you know of it?” Seth asks, and the angel turns to him, looking him up and down, something passing over her face that is almost like fear, before she looks at me again. “The divine rune is hidden with an angel here on Earth. He has not been seen in many years, and looking for him will gain you nothing. Your future is with the runes, they will find you.”

“I don’t want to find them, I want to learn about them. What does the divine rune actually do?”

She smiles and folds her hands in front of her. “The power is a secret only the one who holds the runes can know.”

“The cursed rune isn’t so secret,” I reply. “Nor is what it does.”

“That rune was never meant to be used. Your life is on borrowed time, Daesyn Heartlocke,” she softly tells me. “I know the choice was not yours, you were but a little baby, but nonetheless, all magic has a price, and the price for that choice...it will be dear to you. I am sorry for what happens next.”

Then she disappears, bright light filling the space where she was, and then it’s gone. I grit my teeth, knowing nothing she said is going to help me. It only made me more nervous for the future. I’ve lost so much already; anything else, it would crush me. Mossy jumps on my shoulder, keeping close to me, no doubt sensing my worry.

“I won’t let anything hurt you,” Seth promises, and I nod at him. I suspect nothing he can do will stop the future that is clearly set for me.

“Queen Evelina, I have one more favour,” I turn to Evie. She kicks her legs up on the table, crossing them and shrugging once.

“My angel friend didn’t help much, but I feel I owe you still for dealing with the demon who killed many of my people. I didn’t tell you earlier but he killed fourteen women in their beds and their children. Very young children,” she replies, pain etching her voice. “What do you need?”

“To win a war,” I reply, and this time she drops her legs and sits up.

“What war?” she carefully asks.

“My people, the Unseelie fae have been hunted for years and locked up. Or killed. So many of them are slaves to reapers in the Reaper Realm or in the prisons under the castle. The Seelie king rules the Otherworld, and there is an army of Unseelie ready to attack him. But the second they do, the reaper queen will send help to the Otherworld. I need an army to stop her and take both the worlds back. For the thousands of Unseelie in those prisons, for the Otherworld that is suffering, and because my family started this, I need to end it, and I will do, whatever it costs.”

“The reapers are a formidable army. I cannot agree to this without a long discussion with my council and my family. This would be a huge risk for us.”

“But you are the queen that freed her people. I’m asking you to free many in pain and break the laws that have them captured and killed for nothing more than what is in their blood,” I reply. “In return, I will spend a year helping you take down every illegal demon hunter den and everyone in the human world doing illegal shit to demons and Protectors. There is a lot you don’t know about, Evie.”

Her eyes sharpen. “If it was just me, I would say yes. But I have a young family and a city to protect. Many lives depend

on me, but I am not saying no. This is a maybe, and we will get back to you.”

Seth takes my hand. “Thank you for your help, sister-in-law.”

“Be here at midnight,” Azi states to Seth, and I frown, wondering what they will be getting up to.

“Where are you going at midnight?” I ask Seth as he makes a portal right in front of us. He looks down at me and smiles. “Home. My old home.”

Back to hell, it is.



CHAPTER 49

“I have to admit I love Professor Nordvik’s gowns. She makes them seem flawless,” I tell Poppy, smoothing down the light yellow dress I have on. This one is insane, somehow making it look like I am inside a rose, with petals making the corset of the dress and shaping around my legs. I don’t like the colour yellow, too bright and happy for me, but this is beautiful, and there are no other words for it. Plus, it is so perfectly made and feels amazing on, which most dresses do not. Poppy is in a light green dress that mimics mine, hers has petals more like a poppy, fading from dark green to light at the top. Her hair is up in a bun with little wisps shaping her face.

Mine is curly, mad, and falling all down my back just the way I like it.

“Do you think Toth will come tonight?” she carefully asks. My lips twitch.

“What’s going on with you and the sexy Seelie healer we rescued?” I ask. She shrugs, her cheeks burning red as she walks away from the mirror and to the lift. I walk to her side and nudge her with my elbow.

“I have kissed way too many guys recently. Does that make you feel better?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “Toth hasn’t kissed me or made any kind of move. We just talk all the time, and I love that. We could talk for hours, and it would feel like seconds.”

“So you’re hoping he is at the ball so you can dance with him?”

“Maybe yes. I don’t know,” she says as the lift opens. “He wouldn’t ask me to dance, so I don’t know what I’m hoping for. I just can’t get him out of my head.”

“I know the feeling, Pops,” I reply with a sigh. I hook my arm through hers as we go into the lift, and the doors start to close as we turn around. “I’m heading to the bar right away. What about you?”

“I’m going to wander around and talk to people. The usual thing you do at social conventions,” she tells me with a little sarcasm as the doors slide open to the ballroom. Once again, it is crammed with people, and I instantly want to hide in a corner with a bottle of fae wine, but I force myself to stay next to Poppy until we get closer to the middle of the room. She says goodbye before going through the crowd while I head to the bar, only to have a familiar elven man step in front of me.

Cornaith Daegwyn bows his head full of black hair and lifts his gaze. I bow my head in respect. “Hello again.”

“I was hoping to see you once more, Daesyn,” he comments. “How have you been?”

“Better,” I reply, hating small talk and looking for a way to escape. “How are you?”

“Interested in the future that is playing out around us,” he comments, his eyes tracing my face. “Don’t you see it happening?”

“Other than tight dresses, posh suits, and dancing to old music, I don’t see much else,” I comment, wondering what planet this looney bin is on. I know elves are old as shit, so maybe he has lost his mind at some point over the years.

“I believe there is an alpha hellhound’s son looking for you, and I must retire. Do remember me, dear Daesyn, I am waiting for the third meeting we will have.”

Before I can reply, he walks away, the crowd swallowing him up in dresses and suits just like we spoke about. The elves are weird.

“Wow! Just fucking wow,” Ryker comments behind me. I turn to see him in a sexy suit, which makes him look more

wow than me, if I'm being honest. He offers me his hand. "Dance with me."

"I don't like dancing," I reply even as I take his hand, knowing I can't say no to him over this. I feel an instant buzz as his hand touches mine, and he leads me into the dancers before pulling me against him, taking control of the dance.

Which is good, as I have two left feet. Soon I forget that there are people around us; it just becomes me and him, the two of us staring at each other as we dance around in circles, perfectly blending to the music. "I love dancing with you. By the way, yellow suits you."

"I prefer purple," I reply.

"My favourite has become purple," he comments, stroking his hand down my back in a sensual way and dipping me in time to the music. I gasp as he pulls me back up to spin me around so my back is at his front, and he moves me to the music all the time. "I dream of purple eyes. I see you everywhere—sleep, in the day or at night—it doesn't matter, you're in my head, Dae."

He spins me once more, pulling me back to him. I wrap my arms around his neck this time, our bodies pressed so close there isn't an inch of space. "I haven't really thanked you for coming after me in the Otherworld."

"You didn't need to. I know you would come after me in hell if I need you," he replies. "But I wouldn't want you to. Hell isn't safe, and my father wants you dead."

"He can get in line," I reply.

Ryker laughs as I rest my head on his chest, looking around the dancers to see Poppy and Toth dancing with each other. I grin, a warm feeling filling my chest when I see how he looks down at her.

They might not have kissed yet, but it is going to happen. They have a connection, much like I do with more than one guy.

"Wanna grab fae wine and get the hell out of here?"

“Now you’re talking,” I reply, letting Ryker pull me out of the crowd, towards the bar. Having a connection with someone might make me weak, but there are a million reasons why living alone was never the answer.

I wish it didn’t take me this long to realise a life lesson I should have always known. Pushing everyone away only hurts me.



CHAPTER 50

Catherine jumps to the left, narrowly missing my blast of shadow magic I've thrown at her. Of all the people that had to get into the top ten of this test, I was hoping it wouldn't be her. But of course it was. Her smug ass face smirks at me as she brushes off dirt from her white, very tight clothes. I float in the air as she rises up, shadows pouring around her body and building like an explosion. I duck for the impact, using shadows to protect myself as power explodes out of her, and it barely makes me shake an inch.

When I look back, she is breathlessly holding herself up, glaring at me with her usual amount of hate. Her daddy dearest hasn't let us fight each other since I came back. In fact, I've mostly been on the sidelines, but this time, Catherine asked to battle me in training.

Poppy, Ryker and Sebastian tried to talk me out of beating the living crap out of the bitch who has caused a lot of trouble for me.

It didn't work.

Mixing my fae powers with the shadows, thick roots shoot out of the earth and wrap themselves around Catherine, the dark shadow-covered roots radiating with black power.

"Enough!" Professor Artic shouts, but I don't stop. The roots wrap themselves around her neck, tightening as she starts screaming and begging for help. Something hard slams into my side, breaking my attention, and I roll across the ground, looking up to see Professor Artic in the spot I was, on his knees. He picks himself up and runs to Catherine, tearing the

roots away from her and pulling her unconscious body out of the plants. He looks back at me after lying her down, her chest moving up and down. “I told you to stop! You could have killed her, you insane child!”

“One, I’m not a child,” I reply, standing up and brushing off leaves from my clothes. “Two, your daughter happily sold me out and nearly got me killed. Tit for tat.”

“Get out of my class, and don’t you dare come back!” he screams at me.

“Happily,” I drone, walking away through the trees. Sebastian runs to my side, but Ryker walks off as I watch him go. Poppy is called next to fight, and I wave at her, telling her it’s okay. I can do this on my own, and so can she. A big cup of coffee and then nap time is calling for me.

“What’s wrong with Ryker?” I ask Sebastian as he runs his hand down my arm, catching my fingers with his before letting go.

“Us. Hellhounds have strong senses, and he knew from one look at me. I think you need to talk to him about what you want. I don’t think he has an issue with us being together, but he doesn’t know where he stands with you,” Sebastian explains to me as we head through the forest.

“I don’t know what I’m doing. Relationships aren’t something I have experience with,” I tell him truthfully. “Let alone more than one.”

“Okay.” He pauses and steps closer, brushing his body against mine and making my heart beat fast as I remember what it felt like to have him inside of me. How flawless his amazing body is, how his hands are too skilled, let alone everything else he can do. That one night is etched into my mind, and it always will be. But every time he is close to me, my body comes alive, wanting more. Wanting him close. “How do you feel about me?”

“You want to talk about feelings?” I ask.

“Yes,” he replies, lifting a strand of my loose black hair and tucking it behind my ear. “That’s how you deal with a

relationship. I'm just as fucked up as you, I think we all are, but I knew exactly how I felt about you when I saw my father stab you. I knew it instantly."

"I couldn't see him or anyone hurt you," I reply, feeling the pressure to say anything else, but I can't. I don't know how to. A part of me knows that everyone, except for Mossy, who I have told I love has left or died, my mother being a big part of that fear. I might be brave, and I will happily face an army in hell, but saying how I feel seems like a bigger battle.

Because I have to trust I won't get hurt, I won't be destroyed.

Sebastian chuckles, leaning down and brushing his lips across mine. "We have a long time, no pressure."

"Everyone I have loved has left or died, Seb," I whisper back, feeling like a ball of worry is in my throat. "Being close to anyone has always been something I've pushed away. This place, being in this world and finding you... Finding a new family has taken me by surprise."

"You've been alone too long," he replies, stepping back. "You better get used to the idea that being alone isn't in your future."

He kisses me one more time before turning away, looking over his shoulder. "See you around."

Before I can reply, he disappears into a shadow portal, and I shake my head, knowing that damn prince is making me feel things.

So are quite a few people recently, and I have a sinking suspicion I'm going to be hurt in the end. Shaking my head, I go back to our treehouse and get into the lift. The lift bings open on our floor, and I step out, immediately sensing I'm not alone.

"I can see why he would give up everything he is due for you," a man's deep voice fills the room. I follow the voice to find a man sitting on the sofa, his arms stretched across the back. The man is huge with a bald head that has unusual runes tattooed on either side. Several rings are pierced through his

ears, and I walk around the kitchen to face the stranger, pulling out the dagger I hide on my back just in case this man isn't friendly. Judging from the size of him, it is going to be one hell of a fight if he is here to kill me. I might not be able to die, but I won't go down easily. He is wearing clothes that make me think he is better suited in *Game of Thrones* than in my apartment. A big fur-lined cloak covers his shoulders, black trousers and shirt underneath. Two large swords are on a belt around his waist, resting on the sides of his thighs. When I meet his eyes, I nearly step back.

Pale blue eyes stare back at me, and I know he is related to Ryker right away. They have the exact same eyes, even if they don't look like each other.

"Who are you?" I ask, gripping my dagger tightly and holding my other hand, calling a bunch of shadows to dance around my palm. The man tracks my movements in a way that reminds me of Ryker too. There is evidently a hellhound in my apartment. "And if you're here to kill me, please don't make a big mess."

"Your Unseelie fae blood makes for an awful smell," he tells me, sitting forward and resting his palms on his knees. "My name is Costin Maddock, alpha of the hellhounds, and you have become an issue for me."

"You're Ryker's dad?"

"The one and only," he replies with a smirk that is very much like his son's. But Ryker does it better. "Now I want you to blood swear to me that you will tell my son you don't want a mate. That you have chosen someone else. You smell like many men, it shouldn't be an issue."

"Or what?" I reply, wondering what his plan is. "What are you going to do?"

He laughs. "You are very brave to stare down an alpha hellhound and demand an answer. For that alone, you are going to die."

I try not to laugh, but I fail, a chuckle escaping my lips. "Many have tried and failed. Good luck with that."

“Maybe you’re insane as well,” Costin replies, a tic in his jaw pulsing as he stands up off the sofa. I brace myself as his eyes turn red ever so slowly, and then flames burst around him, his voice going so much deeper in tone. I see the alpha for the first time, the fear he clearly commands. How did his son turn out a million times different to this monster? “Either way, you will die, and this silly idea you are an alpha hellhound’s true mate will die with you.”

“Bring it on, asshole,” I say, waving my hand over. This is going to hurt.

The alpha charges at me, shifting into a hellhound when he jumps in the air, and I dodge out of the way as he crashes into the kitchen units, breaking some of them in the process. Dodging one of his claws, I dig my dagger into his front leg, and he roars, pushing the whole weight of his body into my side and knocking me over. I turn over just as he lands on top of me, his large paws right by my ears, clawing into the floor. Flames burst out of him, and they drop onto me like a wave of magic, holding me in place, making it impossible for me to move.

The flames are controlling me. Costin lifts his head, teeth shining in the moonlight, and I wonder how long it will take for me to come back from a ripped off head just before something slams into him, and then Ryker is picking me up, pushing me behind him in a second’s notice.

“Get the fuck out of here, Father,” Ryker coldly warns. “Killing Daesyn is pointless, she is immortal and my true mate. I will die with her, my hellhound and I have chosen that fate.”

Costin growls low, looking directly at me before clawing a line across the floor in front of him. He suddenly disappears in flames, and I sag a little in relief, picking up my arm to see a nasty cut I barely felt Costin do. Ryker slowly turns to me, his eyes blazing with fire as he looks down at me.

“Are you finally speaking to me now that your dad tried ripping my head off?” I question. Ryker ignores my question, picking my arm up and looking at the cut. He rips off his

hoodie and tears the fabric before wrapping it around my arm, while everywhere he touches my skin with his fingers sends a jolt through me. How I never saw the connection we have before and figured it out just shows how stressed this place makes me. I should have figured it out. But I can figure out what is pissing Ryker off now.

“You’re mad because I slept with Sebastian.”

Ryker stops for a second and looks up, tucking the bandage in place, letting my arm go instantly. “If you didn’t want me as your mate, you could have found a better way to tell me.”

I frown. “Who said I didn’t want you as my mate?”

“You chose another...,” he draws off. “You ignore me mostly, you never seek me out to just be with me like I do you. Everything about you seems uncomfortable when I’m near.”

He stares me down, waiting for an answer before shaking his head. As he steps away, I grab his arm to stop him. “I feel uncomfortable around you because the second we met, I felt confused. I felt like part of me wanted to hunt you down and stab you to find out what you knew, but the scary part was that I couldn’t stop thinking about you. Then you were around all of the time, and I liked it. I’ve spent every year of my life since I was eight not trusting anyone and expecting everyone to use me in some kind of way, but you didn’t. You just wanted to be there for me, to protect me, and it shocked me. Since you saved me in hell, I’ve been addicted to how you make me feel. I have never felt that way, and then when you told me we are mates...well, I don’t know how to not mess this up. I’m worried I am going to.”

“You could never mess things up with me.” He turns back and steps into my space. “I am not going to walk away, Daesyn, and yes, you can trust me. You always can.” He pauses. “Fuck, even if you wanted to just be friends and torture me for the rest of my life, I would take it just to be near you. I would take anything I can get.”

“You get all of me, Ryker...but the others. I can’t—”

He stops me with a kiss. Only a gentle, sweet kiss that melts everything inside me before he pulls back.

“I’m not asking for that. I don’t care about them being in your life.” He kisses me one more time, making me smile. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’re a handful, Daesyn Heartlocke. The more hands the merrier, in some sense.”

“So I can date all the guys in the Reaper Realm?” I tease.

He grins and shakes his head. “Don’t push it.”

“Thank you for talking to me,” I admit, wrapping my hands around his neck. “And saving my ass from your father.”

“Sorry about him. He is an alpha dumbass, and I will deal with it,” he promises me. “Now that he knows you can’t be killed, you don’t have to worry about him attacking you.”

“You’re the only hellhound I want in my apartment, Ryker,” I reply, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

I don’t move, pausing with my face inches from his, and he slowly turns to meet my gaze. Our lips are a breath apart as we look at each other and my heart pounds in my chest. I know why it’s dangerous to fall in love now. It consumes you.

He consumes me.

“Kiss me,” I all but beg. “I want you, Ryker. I want us.”

“Good, because I’m always going to want you too,” he admits before kissing me, devouring my lips, the connection between us buzzing across my skin. He picks me up and lies me down on the sofa, never breaking the kiss as he helps me rip off my clothes. He tears off his shirt, and my eyes widen.

Holy chest muscles.

Every inch of him is ripped and sexy. I place my hand over the tattoo on his chest, and he stares down at me, watching as I brush the tips of my fingers over the markings.

“Someday, you will have my mark on your chest,” he leans down and brushes his fingers over my chest, right above my heart. “A wolf in flames will appear here when we mate.”

“I’ve always liked markings,” I admit, biting on my lip. “I like the idea of a mark showing I am yours.”

His eyes seem to burst with flames for a second, before his lips scorch my own while his hands explore my body. His fingers brush my nipples and make their way down to my centre, causing a surge of desire. Then he pushes his trousers down, revealing his large and thick cock. I’m not innocent enough to ignore that he is big...and that is going to hurt.

But I’ve never been one to back down from a challenge. And this challenge, I’m going to enjoy the hell out of.

I slide my hand down his chest and then stroke my hand slowly down his length, making him give a sexy grunt. His eyes never leave mine as he grabs the sofa cushion, the muscles in his arms popping. This is a moment I’m never going to forget.

Ryker covers my hand on his cock and takes it off before leaning down over me. I’m buzzing with need as he hitches my leg around his hip and cups my ass with his one hand, arching my core to his cock. The tip presses against my entrance at the same time Ryker presses his thumb on my clit, his eyes still focused on me. Pleasure courses through my body as he inches his cock inside of my wet core, rubbing my clit the entire time, making me so close to coming with every second that passes. When he is fully seated inside of me, he speeds up his circles on my clit, and I cry out, coming hard around his large cock. He groans and thrusts out of me and then back in, leaning down and cupping the back of my neck, deeply kissing me. The pleasure is mind-blowing with every thrust, leaving me breathless and never wanting this to end. Ryker’s eyes are glowing with fire, a rumbling-like growl building in his chest as he starts thrusting harder, and I feel myself crashing into another orgasm.

I cry out his name as my body shakes with pleasure, the feeling indescribable as Ryker comes inside me, and I wonder why I ever pushed this man away, why I ever tried to fight my feelings for him. “I love you.”

His eyes light up, even more than before, and he kisses me before telling me, “You know I’ll always love you.”

Hours later, we both finish once again and curl up on the sofa under a blanket, my stomach rumbling.

Sword jumps onto the counter, making me jump and pull the blanket over us more. He drops the two small net bags he has over his shoulder full of food. “Why is it every time I leave for food, this place is destroyed?”

Ryker and I laugh as Sword mutters some swear words under his breath and picks up a broken cabinet door before we get dressed and help him fix it. I might be able to deal with this complicated relationship stuff after all.



CHAPTER 51

There isn't enough coffee in the world to make this demi-god smile.

Finn takes up all the space on the sofa, his eyes flickering between the cup of coffee in his hands to me ever since I gave him the thing. I sip my own coffee quietly until the silence becomes a little too much.

"There are no rules against you being friends with a mortal, are there?" I ask, grasping for straws. "We could be friends."

Finn lets out a low laugh. "With how addicted I am to your mere presence in my life, I don't see our friendship lasting long."

"You're always protecting me, Finn, but how do you see this ending? The academy will come to an end, and then I will go back to Earth, back to being on the run," I say, looking away from him and to the tree in the middle of the apartment. I will miss this place; the Reaper Realm has snuck its way into my heart but not as much as one other place.

The Otherworld.

And I can never go back there. "Who says you will be running and not ruling, Daesyn?"

"Because Ryker needs to rule hellhounds, Sebastian doesn't want the throne, and neither do I. There is no chance the reapers would accept a half Unseelie queen. There is one person in this test who not only wants it but damn well deserves it." I pause and meet his gaze. "Poppy. It has to be

her, and I'm going to get her to the end of this test. One way or another."

"I was never talking of the reaper throne, Daesyn," he replies. "I was speaking of a world which will soon be in need of a royal when its king loses its head."

"The Otherworld?" I ask, furrowing my brow. I told the guys everything I learned at the castle, all of the story of my mother and the fact she was meant to be queen. She was meant to rule. But I am not a princess, and I don't have any claim to that throne.

Most importantly, I want to run after all this. I'm not looking for a throne, for people to rule and look up to me. That sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. "I can't go back there. Not with the powers I will be given. My birthday is so close, only a week away. I can't be in the Otherworld for that or ever after."

He nods, understanding flashing in his eyes. "We can't escape our fate, Daesyn. Trust me, I have tried many times."

"Running has always worked for me before."

"This time, I have a feeling you don't want to run from what you have found," he replies. "Look at me and tell me you want to run from us. From the people you care about, like me."

"Look who is making it difficult to be friends now," I respond, my mouth feeling dry as he looks right at me.

I turn away first, and silence descends upon us all.

"In the spirit of friendship," his deep voice cuts into the silence. Gold dust fills my lap and reveals a dagger I know well. The one Mossy stole for me what seems like a long time ago.

I pick it up and balance it on my finger, seeing how flawless it truly is when it balances perfectly.

"Thank you," I whisper, closing my grip around the hilt. "I didn't expect a gift, and I was fully planning on stealing this back."

He smirks. “You’re the only thief I would happily let steal my favourite dagger. It used to be my father’s, and it’s all I have of him.”

“I can’t take this,” I say, shaking my head and offering him it back. He softly pushes the dagger back to me, and I tilt my head to the side.

“Accept my gift, Daesyn. It would mean a lot to me if you did,” he gently replies. “It was yours from the second I saw you falling through the air.”

The room fills with deep sexual tension. A tension I wish I could do something about. “I don’t think we are talking about the dagger anymore.”

“What else would we be talking about, Dae?”

I sense the magic, like a knife cutting through the tension, right before a letter bursts out of fire right above my head, and it slowly floats down onto my lap. I frown at Finn, but he shrugs, making it clear it wasn’t him who made the note. I rip it open, reading the writing inside.

Your godfather is waiting. Burn this letter to make a portal to me. Come now.

FINN PICKS the letter from my hand as I stand up, reading it quickly before giving me a questioning look. “You have a godfather.”

“Apparently. I met him once before, and I have been looking for him since. I was hoping the Unseelie would attack somewhere and I could search. But it’s been quiet since we came back,” I reply.

“It hasn’t been quiet. Lots of reapers have been going missing, and Unseelie slaves have been killing their owners before killing themselves. The city is quietly stirring,” Finn tells me, and he holds up the letter. “Do you want to go?”

“Yes...will you come with me?” I ask, feeling strange to be asking for any help. “I mean, just for backup.”

Finn smirks and shakes his head, stepping up next to me. “I will always be at your side, Dae.”

“Damn, you’re making our friendship hard, demi-god,” I reply, calling a small fire into the palm of my hand, the fire made of pure shadows. Finn drops the letter into my flames, and suddenly it bursts into a full-size shadow portal, sucking us both in so quickly I stumble right to my feet on the other side. Then, my hands and knees smack onto dry stone that sticks to my palms as I look up at the large fire pit right in front of me. Finn offers me his hand, and I grab it, getting onto my feet as I take in the room we are in. A long circular cage wraps around the clearing in the middle, and there are people inside it.

Unseelie fae. Dozens, if not a hundred, eyes stare back at me from inside the cage. Some are young children, one woman is holding a baby, two of them are elders that are close by, and all of them are wearing dirty or ripped clothes. The place stinks, and my heart almost feels like it stops as I see first-hand what Einar and Sebastian’s evil mother, Annalee, have done to Unseelie fae.

“I’m glad you came.”

I look up to see my godfather walking down invisible steps around the fire pit from a ceiling door hatch. He finally gets to the bottom and stops right in front of me, looking just like he did the last time.

“I want your name this time,” I say as an introduction. “And fair warning, try to hurt me and I won’t even need his help to kill you.”

He smiles and folds his hands behind him. “Your father was just as quick to warn and snap if need be. He would kill anyone who found out about Ingrid being Unseelie without a second thought.”

“He protected her how he had to,” I respond to Faolan, noting he didn’t tell me his name once again but I already

know it. Maybe fae names are power or some kind. Maybe he thinks I will know something from his name which I don't. I glance at Finn, who is close to my side. I would do anything to protect him. "Why did you want to meet? How did you get down here?"

"He isn't really here," Finn tells me and reaches closer, wiping his hand through my godfather's shoulder, and he disappears like smoke for a second before reappearing. "Unseelie fae magic."

"I could teach you this one day," he simply responds. "And if I were really here, I would find a way to free our people. Would you not do the same?"

The weight of all the eyes in the room on my back seems heavier suddenly. "Yes, and I am trying to figure something out. The Protector queen might be able to help."

"I am glad you asked her. That is what I came here to find out," he tells me. "And to remind you what you are fighting for."

"I haven't forgotten."

"You must leave now with the demi-god. Before anyone senses you are here," my godfather tells me, and before I can reply, he disappears into smoke.

"I don't like him," Finn announces, wrapping his arm around my waist. "It is time we—"

"Wait!" a small voice calls out. I pull away from Finn, despite his annoyance, and follow where the voice came from to find a little boy behind the bars. He has bright purple eyes, a nasty scar on his right eyebrow, and thick but dusty blond hair. In his arms is a toddler, a baby really, tiny and wrapped around his neck. "Are you going to save us?"

I sigh, feeling hopeless right at this moment. "I'm no hero, kid, but yeah. I'm going to do everything I can to get you and every Unseelie fae out of this place."

"Then you're a hero," he tells me, flashing me a toothy grin. "My mother died last week from disease, but she said she

saw me in a field, holding the hand of a girl with black hair. She said we would be in the Otherworld soon.”

“I hope you are there soon. I’m sorry I can’t do anything for you right now.”

“You give us hope,” an elderly woman nearby cuts in, and I meet her bright blue eyes. “Hope is worth its weight in gold.”

“We must leave,” Finn demands, placing his hand on my shoulder. I see the boy’s eyes as Finn uses his magic to portal us away, and I feel the boy’s eyes haunting me, haunting every decision I make going forward from now on. There is a face to who I am rescuing, and that makes my stomach almost drop from the weight of it. I turn to face Finn, needing an escape, something to distract me.

So I do the most selfish thing I can think of. I kiss him even as the gold dust still floats in the air around us. He doesn’t push me away; instead, he pulls me hard against his body and sinks his hands into my hair. His tongue invades my mouth in the best way, and I swear I could come just from his kisses alone.

“This is disappointing,” a female voice drones. I jolt, and very slowly Finn breaks his lips from mine, pulling me to his side. An Unseelie stands in the middle of Finn’s apartment, her eyes glowing gold and her feet floating off the ground slightly, a gold haze to them. The Unseelie is clearly a slave, judging by her clothes.

“Who are you?” I gently ask. “I mean, you’re welcome here—”

Finn pushes me back. “That’s my mother, Artemis, and she is using moonlight to possess the Unseelie fae woman.”

Damn, there is a goddess in Finn’s apartment, and I was just making out with her son.

I am speechless.

“Son, I did warn you that mortals can offer such pleasure, but they must be resisted for the mission at hand,” Artemis replies, her voice changing in tones with every word, making

it hard to listen to her. I can feel her power now, like sunlight cracking through holes in a steel box. There but distant.

And her power is extreme, it is just like Aphrodite's.

“Mother—”

“No, this one has no goddess or god blood. You will marry the Riverlite girl that isn't in the test and complete your mission with a child from her before coming home. You will find the next queen of the Reaper Realm and make sure the crown is on her head soon. This was why you were sent to Messorem, have you forgotten?”

The goddess's words take a second to hit me, but when they do, my heart beats faster than ever, even as I feel it being ripped apart. Finn and Laelia?

“I have not forgotten. I was side-tracked.”

“I can see that. I am glad to hear you are on track. I will be back soon,” she promises, her eyes never leaving Finn before her eyes fade from gold to purple, and then the woman stares blankly ahead for a second. A gasp leaves her lips, and then she collapses onto the floor. I rush over, turning her on her back and feeling her neck for a pulse.

“She is dead, trust me on that,” Finn somewhat coldly replies. I grit my teeth and lower my head, sucking in a deep breath.

“I'm sorry,” I tell the woman, not even knowing her name, as I close her eyes. I can get Sebastian to help me bury her with the other Unseelie. I pull myself up and finally look at Finn. Angry words escape my lips. “You're fucking engaged to Laelia? When the hell were you going to tell me that?”

“It hasn't been agreed yet—” he tries to defend.

“I don't give a shit. You...,” I drift off. “I thought we had something real, and the whole time it was just a distraction to you?”

“Fuck no!” he roars, storming right up to me. He reaches out, and I move away, slipping his own dagger out of my pocket. He keeps walking to me as I hold the dagger out, not

even sure if I could hurt him with it. My back hits the wall, and he corners me, so I lift the dagger to his neck, holding the tip right under his Adam's apple. His eyes stare down at me, not fazed by the dagger at all. "I told my mother that so she wouldn't look closely at you, she wouldn't see who you really are or how much I will protect you."

"Are you going to marry Laelia?" I demand.

"It's my mission. If I fail, the gods will kill me," he tells me. I gulp and shakily lower the dagger. He lets me step away from him.

"The irony in the fact I've fallen for a demi-god who will die if he is with me and I'm immortal is endless," I respond, refusing to let the tears fall as I call for a shadow portal. "But it's true. It's so true, and it hurts so much."

Finn doesn't stop me as I jump into the portal, getting away from him, needing space before I really let the pain settle into my heart.



CHAPTER 52

“P ersephone Riverlite!” I shout as I walk out of the shadow portal I cast where I landed perfectly in our apartment. Mossy runs out of her door first, jumping onto my shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” Mossy asks just as Poppy comes out of her room.

“Hey! Mossy and I were playing Monopoly, you could join —”

“Did you know about Finn and Laelia being engaged?” I cut in. The instant look of guilt on her face answers my question right away, and a sharp sting of betrayal cuts into my chest.

She rushes to me, placing her hands on my upper arms. “I found out not long after we came here because my parents sent me a letter explaining the engagement. It isn’t real, and I knew Finn would never go through with it.”

“He is.” I shrug her hands off. “And you knew we were getting too close. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Tears fill her eyes as I step back, needing space. “It was a mistake. I did try to tell you once, but we got interrupted, and then it seemed pointless because I see how Finn looks at you. I assumed he would find a way to change the engagement to you once you’re on the throne.”

“I’m never going to be on that throne, Poppy! Don’t you get it? I won’t,” I snap, and she jolts back. “As for Finn, he

knows the only way we both survive this is if he marries her. And if I knew, I wouldn't have fallen in love with him!"

A silence builds between us as we both stare at each other, a big wedge building in our friendship. She should have told me about this, and I don't know why she didn't. She could have saved me so much pain, so could have Finn. I'm furious at them both.

The elevator bings, and I turn to see Toth walk in the apartment, pausing in his steps.

"Everything okay?" Toth asks.

Poppy wipes her tears away. "You're mad at me, and I deserve it, but you are really upset with Finn and the situation. I might be an idiot, but I think true love will find a way."

"This isn't a fairy tale, Poppy. The gods don't give a shit about true love or anything other than getting their way," I coldly reply. "And I'm mad because I thought you cared about me."

"I do," Poppy whispers as I walk away, storming into my room and slamming the door shut. Mossy silently wraps his arms around my neck as I sit on the bed, covering my face with my hands.

"I can put monkey poo under Finn's pillow," Mossy eventually whispers. "And a guide drawing for virgin dummies."

"Please don't draw a virgin dummy guide," I mutter, not commenting on the poop. I don't put anything past him, but he does make me slightly smile. "Shall we get out of here? I need fae wine, and I know exactly who will have some."

"Let's go and see the prince," he replies, and very sweetly he kisses my cheek. "Everything will be okay. I'm your family."

"I love you, Mossy," I whisper back, standing up off the bed with him holding onto my neck with his tail. I wave my hand and make a portal on the wall, big enough for me to step right through, and I come out in Sebastian's room. Mossy passes out this time, too much portal jumping for one little

monkey, and I cuddle him in my arms as I walk out the entrance hall and into the massive space to find Sebastian and Eira on the sofa, watching a Christmas movie even though we are nowhere near Christmas.

“Vixen, to what do I owe this pleasure?” Sebastian’s silky voice greets me. Eira watches me like a hawk as I walk further into the room and pick up a bottle of fae wine off Seb’s bar. I place Mossy down on the armchair and sit down on the other side of Sebastian. I take a long drink, aware of them both watching me before I speak.

“Can’t I just drop in?”

“You always can,” Sebastian replies, linking his fingers with mine. He knows something’s up, but he doesn’t push on it. One of the many reasons I’m addicted to my messed up prince.

The princess on the other hand just stares me down. “The spirits get restless when you’re here.”

“Sorry about that, kid,” I reply, not really sorry about it at all. I take another long drink. “What movie are we watching?”

“You’re not meant to be here,” Eira goes on, ignoring my question.

“Eira, enough. You don’t have to be rude because the spirits are,” Sebastian tells her. She narrows her eyes at me before climbing up off the sofa and storming out of the room, right to the door, and slamming it shut behind her. Sebastian sighs. “Sorry about her. She isn’t used to sharing my attention.”

“I get it,” I reply, nodding at Mossy. “Neither is Mossy. In some ways, we both have kids.”

Sebastian picks the bottle up off me and takes a long drink. “You’re damn right.”

I snatch the bottle back, flashing Sebastian a cheeky grin. I drink quite a bit before coming up for air and instantly feeling that lovely buzz spreading all around my body.

“Who do I need to kill for upsetting you?” Sebastian asks when I hand him the bottle back. “Just give me a name.”

“That’s all it takes?” I question. “Giving you a name and you will protect me?”

“When it comes to you, yeah,” he replies. “But I suspect simply letting you get revenge will be more interesting. You don’t need me or anyone to defend you. You are strong enough on your own.”

“I used to think that, but now I’ve gotten used to having people around me. Watching my back,” I admit. “I don’t think I ever want to go back to being alone.”

He leans across and kisses the side of my head. “You won’t have to, vixen. You were never meant to be alone. We can get out of here once the test is over.”

“You know I don’t want the throne, right?” I ask him, snuggling into his side. His hand falls on my hip, rubbing circles softly into my skin.

“That makes two of us. Three if you include Ryker, which you should,” he replies. “I think Poppy should take it.”

“I don’t know anymore...,” I admit, struggling with the fact she lied to me about Finn and Laelia. She knew it would hurt me, and she didn’t tell me the truth. “I don’t know about anything anymore.”

“Poppy loves you and is a good person. Whatever she has done to make you doubt that, rethink it. I highly doubt she did anything on purpose to hurt you,” he tells me. “Family argue and make mistakes, but we don’t give up on them.”

“Like you have given up on your mother?” I softly ask.

He is quiet for a while before he speaks. “I knew her soul was darkened beyond hope way before she threatened Eira in envy. If she were to change, I would help her, but I know she won’t. My mother doesn’t have it in her.”

“Do you think she will give up the throne?”

“No, not without a fight,” he replies. “But can we drink and fuck our problems away for one night?”

I take the bottle off him and grin. “Now you’re talking, prince charming.”

* * *

I TIPTOE out of Seth’s bed, careful not to wake him up, and head to the bathroom in just one of his shirts and my panties. Once I use the loo and wash my face, feeling a hangover hitting my head hard, I leave the bathroom. I go into the kitchen, making myself a glass of water right before I hear her small voice.

“They will make a deal with you,” Eira claims. I turn to see Eira sitting on one of the stools, but she wasn’t there a second ago, I’m sure of it. I gulp. Sebastian’s sister is seriously creepy, but I suspect it’s more to do with the spirits’ involvement in her life than who she really is under it all. I think if she went to school or had friends, she might come out of her “talking for the spirits” shell she is hiding under.

“I can’t give them the cursed rune,” I tell her, and she turns her head to the side. “Want a drink of milk or something?”

I’m so clueless with kids.

“Milk sounds good,” she replies. “There are cookies above the fridge in the cupboard, but I can’t reach them.”

“I can,” I reply with an arched eyebrow, well aware I’m being used. I make Eira a glass of milk before getting the box of cookies down and placing them next to us before sitting on a stool near her. She grabs a chocolate-coated cookie and dips it in her milk.

“They can take the runes when you have all four. They want you to get them,” she tells me. “I’ve told them they can’t hurt you, because you are a good person and not like my mother. They have promised me they won’t hurt you.”

“You think I’m a good person?”

“Yes,” she replies with a toothy smile, even though she is missing one tooth from her top row. “And my brother loves you. I want to help.”

“You’re too grown up for your age,” I reply, sipping on my water.

She shrugs. “I talk to ancient spirits all day. They tell me the history of the worlds and the future. They tell me too many things.”

“I think they know you’re lonely,” I gently say. “I was a lonely kid once.”

“You were?” she quietly asks.

I shake my head and cross my arms, leaning back in the stool. “I lost my mum and uncle when I was eight and had to go alone to a new world. Well, not alone as I had my monkey sidekick, but it was hard. Mossy couldn’t speak English, and no humans would help me. I was just another supernatural orphan who they didn’t want anything to do with. I was alone.”

“I was mad at you because I thought you’d take Sebastian from me,” she whispers, a little catch to her voice. “Mother wants me dead, and my brother is all I have.”

“I would never take him from you,” I tell her, reaching over and covering her little hand with mine. “If anything, you just gain a sister with me. I will be here, even if you don’t like me.”

“You’re not that bad.” She wiggles her nose, but there is a big smile there. “Plus, you need me, or the spirits will kill you.”

“Death threats and cookies. This has been an interesting night,” I reply with a smile. This kid is just like I was when I was her age. Messed up and scared of letting anyone get close. Tough luck for her as I’m not going anywhere.

“I’m going back to bed. Night, Eira,” I say, sliding off my stool.

“I won’t forget, by the way. The spirits told me I should say that to you.”

“Forget what?” I ask.

“I don’t know. They just said that and nothing more,” she replies with a shrug. “Thanks for the cookies.”

I watch the strange little girl that reminds me so much of myself until I walk away, feeling like the spirits are watching me ever so much closer now.

And the thought does nothing but creep me out more.



CHAPTER 53

“I never expected to see you back here, Ingrid,” the Seelie king, although a younger version of him, coldly states in a room I’ve not seen before. It’s a bedroom with a massive balcony overlooking the Otherworld. Even being in a memory, the place is so beautiful and real.

And so is my mother.

I can’t stop staring at her, wishing I could run across the room and pull her into my arms, to tell her who I am and how I miss her so much. My mother has black trousers and a white top on, a white cloak falling around her shoulders. Her red hair is pulled back in braids, in a style I never saw her do with her hair before.

In fact, I’ve never seen her wear colours like this.

“I need your help, and I don’t know who else to turn to,” she says, her voice nothing short of desperate.

Einar sharply turns towards her and storms over, grabbing her chin with his hand, but she disappears into smoke, reappearing nearby. Einar laughs a cold laugh. “You want my help but won’t come to me in person. Hiding with magic like a coward.”

“We both know if I came here, you would lock me up or kill me.”

“I never want you dead, but you do need to learn your lesson. You are meant to be my wife!” he growls out, pulling the crown from his head and throwing it on the floor between

them. “My mate! This castle, this damn crown, it is all nothing without you by side.”

“Find your soulmate, as it isn’t me,” she replies, her voice cracking.

“What do you want, Ingrid?” he asks, turning away from her and looking back out at the Otherworld. “What made you desperate enough to turn to me for help?”

“I’m pregnant, and the reaper queen killed my mate. Killed the family,” she whispers, her voice catching on a sob. “Now I’m back here, and you are hunting Unseelie, making it impossible for me to live. Stop hunting them for the reaper queen.”

“That I will not do until you are back at my side and my queen,” he coldly responds. “Make your choice, and do not come back to ask for help. Every day you avoid your place at my side, the more I will kill.”

“If...” She stumbles back on her feet. “If I come back to you, will you protect my baby?”

He turns his gaze back to her. “Never. That bastard will be sent away.”

Her eyes search the room for a second, and she pauses on me, a small smile tilting up her lips. Can she see me? I step forward, but she is already disappearing into smoke. “Then you will never have me, Einar.”

Einar starts roaring out her name as he throws fire around the room, smashing and burning everything nearby in his anger.

The not-so-much-a-memory version of Einar’s hot breath blows against my ear. “See, you ruined everything.”

I jolt awake, gasping for air and clutching the bed sheets tightly under my hands. The door to my bedroom opens, and Ryker walks in, a cup of coffee in his hands in my favourite blue mug.

“I—” he starts and stops when he sees me. “Was that fucker king in your dreams again?”

“He showed me another memory,” I admit, sitting up on the bed as Ryker kisses me before handing me the coffee. I take a burning sip, waking myself up. “Thanks.”

“I shouldn’t have left to make you coffee without waking you up,” Ryker says, and I shake my head.

“No, he can find me when he wants,” I say, wanting to make sure he doesn’t blame himself for the Seelie king’s actions. “He is powerful, and I don’t know how to ward him off.”

“Maybe we should ask the elves for guidance,” Ryker suggests, pulling his shirt off, and I stare blankly at his perfectly chiselled chest, forgetting what he just said. Ryker chuckles as he pulls on a new black shirt, taking away my new view. “The elves might help us find a way to defeat him.”

“Maybe,” I reply.

“Are you coming to training today?” he asks as I sip more coffee. I sigh and nod my head.

“Yup,” I reply before drinking the rest of my coffee. Ryker heads out to leave me to grab clothes and have a quick shower before getting dressed. I come out to find Mossy sitting on Ryker’s shoulder, talking to him.

“So you don’t like dog treats?” Mossy asks.

“No...because I’m not a damn dog,” he replies.

“If it looks like a monkey, smells like a monkey, it’s a monkey,” Mossy replies. “That’s all I’m saying.”

I chuckle as I walk past them and grab a waffle off the plates of food Sword has left out. “What’s your plan for today, Mossy?”

“More messing with the castle guards. This time, I’m going to set the alarms off in the bathrooms, and once they go in there, I will lock all the doors. It will be hilarious.” Mossy snickers to himself, and my lips twitch. I shouldn’t encourage this behaviour, but... “It will be more fun when they realize how much horse poo I’m leaving in the toilets for them to be stuck with.”

“How are you transporting the poo?” Ryker asks, rubbing his chin.

“I have my ways, dog boy,” Mossy replies, jumping off his shoulder and onto the tree in the middle of the room before climbing his way up it. I eat my waffle as we go to the elevator and head down.

“Poppy and Toth have gone ahead,” Ryker tells me. I told Ryker and Seb about everything the next day when I refused to do anything but drink and pass out in Seb’s rooms. Wallowing and eating my body weight in cookies did help.

“I don’t know why you think I’d care,” I dryly respond. Ryker simply kisses the side of my head and doesn’t say a word.

Clever guy.

We silently walk through the moonlit forest and to the clearing where we always meet for training, seeing that everyone except Catherine and Finn are already here. Poppy and Sebastian are stood near each other, and I move away from them, Ryker following to my side.

“Do you think there will be a new test soon?” Ryker ponders as we wait in the clearing for Finn with the other seven students. One of whom I’m not talking to but can feel her eyes watching my back. Finn...I’m not sure how I’m even going to look at him today, but staying in my room, pretending to be ill for the last day, hasn’t made anything better.

“Hopefully. This group is still too big,” I say, seeing Catherine walking next to Finn through the forest, looking up at him all lovey-dovey. “Like her. She can go first.”

“I’m not against you on that idea,” Ryker replies as I finally meet Finn’s gaze. His eyes cut into mine, and I instantly notice he hasn’t been sleeping, as he looks as tired as I feel. He stops, never taking his eyes from me.

“Pair up for training. Miss Heartlocke, you’re with me. Poppy Riverlite, you are needed back in your apartment immediately,” he instructs us. I glance at Poppy to find her shocked gaze turning to me. She mouths that she will be okay

before walking off, and I close my eyes for a second. Ryker steps in front of me. “Careful, friend. Just be fucking careful.”

“I fucked up, and I won’t again,” Finn replies, looking over Ryker’s shoulder right at me. “Give me a chance. We need to talk.”

“As long as it involves training with daggers, then sure.” I sarcastically smile, pulling out two of my daggers.

“We can play however you like,” Finn responds as Ryker steps away. Finn places his hand on my shoulder, and we both disappear in gold smoke, reappearing in another part of the forest where we are alone and there isn’t a sound around us. Finn makes two gold daggers appear in his hands as I try to take him by surprise, lashing out with my arm. He blocks my hit, our daggers clashing, and pushes me back a few steps. We start to circle each other.

“I should have told you, and we could have handled it together,” he starts to say. Filled with anger, I run at him, and he grabs me, rolling me onto my back and holding me down. I struggle, knowing my eyes are filled with tears, and I’m not fighting as I usually would do.

This damn demi-god makes me weak.

And I hate it as much as I love it.

“I’m in love with you,” Finn whispers. I freeze under his grip, releasing my grip on the daggers in my hands. “And gods be damned, I will only choose you. I will give up everything and risk everything to be with you. You’re fearless, beautiful, kind and good. I was a goner the second we met.”

I lean up and kiss him, pouring my own feelings into every single movement of our lips. He groans and pushes his body against mine, rubbing a large bulge against my thigh that I want to explore.

“Usually I wouldn’t interrupt such an interesting show, and in the future, this could be fun to replay, but I need Syn.”

Finn growls against my lips, but he stops and kneels up, letting me go. He helps me climb to my feet with him to see Seth leaning against a tree, his eyes burning with red fire. He

holds his hand out, revealing a pendant necklace with a glowing red crystal in the middle with a rune drawn in silver on the case. “It took Azi and I some time, but we found the forsaken rune, and it is yours. Take it and absorb the power.”

“What does it do?” I ask, walking over. Seth slides the pendant into my hands, and before he can answer, it glows brightly and the runes on my body suddenly appear. The purple light from my runes seems to battle against the red glow of the pendant, and then it cracks.

The pendant cracks in two places before a rush of deep red sparkling energy bursts in the air in front of me. Everything freezes for a second, making it impossible to see anything but red and purple light, right before the red magic slams into me in a wave, attacking my body. A boom fills my ears, and I fall backward, crashing onto my back on the ground. The lights instantly dim, and I lift my hand, seeing the purple rune is now half red.

Burnt leaves fall onto my face as I sit up, seeing Finn on his back, blood pouring from his cheek, and Seth is nearby, passed out as well. I rush to them both, checking to see they are both alive from the rise and fall of their chests. As I step towards Finn, a gold portal appears under my feet, and I scream as I fall right into it.



CHAPTER 54

I slam hard onto a cold floor, smacking my mouth against the tiles and immediately tasting blood on my tongue as I groan in pain. What the effing hell just happened? I lift my head, coming face to face with a man who is clearly dead. Almost letting out a scream, I stumble away from the body and bump into something else. I turn slowly, dreading what I'm about to see, and find an angel's white wing spread out on the floor. I follow the wing to see an angel who helped me, who was friends with Queen Evie, who I never knew the name of. Her neck has been slit, her blood pours around her, mixing in with the blood of the several other angels nearby.

I glance up as I hear a noise to see double doors swing open, the sound of creaking wood filling the silence.

Taking a deep breath, I know exactly where I am even if I haven't been in this room before. I'm in the Otherworld, a day before my birthday, and I can feel the familiar energy buzzing around me, welcoming me home even as pure dread fills my stomach. I have to get back to Earth. How the hell did someone make a portal between worlds? No one has that power anymore. I can't smell anything but blood as I crawl to my shaky feet and count the dead angels in the room.

There are twenty-four of the angels, all of them killed in the same way, their throats slit, and it doesn't even look like they put up much of a fight. They were taken by surprise, likely pulled through a portal just like I was, but they were killed outright.

The only motive I can think of for why Einar would kill the angels is one simple reason.

The divine rune.

God knows what it even does, but I know he will do anything for the runes, even kill for them, and this is just more proof.

I look back at the doors and slide my hands to the daggers at my hips, finding they are gone. Dammit, I dropped them with Finn.

I'm weaponless.

Time for plan two then. I close my eyes and call for the shadow magic I know so well, only to find nothing happens. I call for my fae magic, and the same thing happens. Nothing. I hold my hands out, pulling on the magic with all my might, but not even a sliver of it actually comes out.

Fuck.

It must be the forsaken rune. What the hell has it done to my powers?

"Don't keep me waiting."

Remembering who I am, who my mother and father were, I focus on being brave as I lift my head and meet Einar's gaze. He is dressed up, that much is clear, in a detailed blue blazer with gold embellishments and a white shirt underneath. His crown glitters under the lights above us, and he looks regal.

If not cold.

"What have you done?"

He smiles a cold and calculating smile that makes me wonder how my mother was ever even friends with him. "I did nothing but watch. Now come."

Knowing I'm powerless and weaponless, I figure running is my only shot out of here, and I figure I'm not getting far by doing that right now. If I go with him, I might find a way to grab a weapon and fight my way out of here.

Deciding my fate for now, I walk over to him but refuse to take his hand. He smiles and nods his head forward, walking alongside me as we head into a massive room. This room has

silver floors and walls, with flowers and thick vines painted on every inch in impressive detail. There is nothing but two seats in the whole room, two thrones. They are ancient, made of old stone and carved into two wings that float out to make the throne. The thrones constantly float off the ground, something like glitter is sprinkling off them at the bottom, and several diamonds are embedded in the armrests.

It's beautiful.

"The fae used to have wings, were you aware of that?" Einar asks me, walking ahead when I stop and sitting on the throne on the right side. "These thrones treasure what we used to be and used to stand for."

"What do you want, Einar?" I demand, crossing my arms. "You do realize you just declared war against the angels? And all their allies?"

"What's a little war to bearers of the runes?" he questions, spreading his arms out. Green and black runes burst out from his skin, covering every inch of him in the same rune markings as I have, but they are different colours. I feel an instant need to be closer, my body pulling me towards him, but I hold myself still, only letting my hands shake.

Einar notices, of course.

"The runes call to each other," he remarks. "The cursed rune wishes to be close to me. Close to the runes I now bear."

"Congrats. Can I leave now?" I bite out.

His eyes narrow. "Don't you want to know what my runes do?"

"I'm not that interested," I respond.

His laugh fills the room. "I have the forgotten rune and the divine rune. Together they can do something truly amazing."

"What would that be?"

"Take the power of anyone I wish and make the world forget they even existed," he tells me, watching me so closely, waiting for the moment I realize he planned this for me. He doesn't want to marry me (thank god) or kill me. He wants me

to be forgotten and powerless. He wants my parents' legacy, me, gone forever from everyone's minds. "I am going to take your powers, I already am draining them from you, just like I did the angels before their deaths, making me so powerful. Then I'm going to make the world forget who you are. You will be nothing to no one but the gods and me."

"I will never let you do that," I reply. "Making me powerless and forgotten will not stop me. I will fight with every breath I have to destroy you and take that throne."

"So you want to rule?" he asks, laughing around his words. "You, a nobody bastard child who is a dirty assassin and a thief? A half blood reaper? You are nothing, Daesyn Heartlocke, and the world will think the same thing very soon."

Tears fill my eyes as anger burns through me until I think of Finn. I think of Sebastian, Seth and Ryker. Of Poppy and Mossy, my uncle and even Toth. These are my family, and they tell me all the time I am worth more than my past. What I did back then was to survive, and I can't be controlled by it anymore.

I might not be perfect, but I would make a damn good try at being the queen of the Otherworld and fixing the misery this pathetic excuse of a king has done.

The one thing that makes me different from anyone else...

"I will fight for the Unseelie fae and the Seelie fae who you have destroyed. You might think I am no one, but you sure are scared of me," I respond, smirking at him. "You're terrified of me, and that makes me a threat to you. A threat who will never stop."

"You will stop because the gods demand it so."

My blood feels like it turns to ice as I turn around and see my uncle...but not my uncle at all. A goddess in my uncle's body. A cry escapes my lips as I realize she is killing him by possessing his body, and there is nothing I can do about it.

"You bitch!" I scream.

“My name is Artemis, and you are putting my only son’s life in danger. For that alone, this punishment is fair. One mortal life for a warning. The next time, I will take someone you are much closer to,” she warns and looks over my head. “Work your magic, mortal king, and send her to somewhere no one will ever find her.”

Oh god.

Artemis smiles at me. “The gods always win, child of destruction. Where you’re going, you will never get my son or the power this world is bursting to give you. In fact, you will be lost forever and alone for all time. Powerless and immortal. Immortal and trapped.”

Tears fall down my cheeks as I look into her eyes, the gold glowing eyes of a goddess. “You best hope the prison is strong enough, because the second I’m out, I’m getting my power and destroying the world of the gods. I’m coming for you.”

Her eyes blink with slight fear before they fade from gold to my uncle’s normal green eyes. He gasps and falls to his knees as I run to him, catching him just before he falls. I collapse with his head on my lap, and my tears fall onto his cheek. He keeps a small smile on his face as he reaches up with a shaky hand and touches my cheek with his one finger, just like he used to when I was a kid.

Then he is gone. Just gone.

I scream and scream, even as the king blasts me with rune power, forcing my uncle’s body from my arms as I float up in the air in a burst of green and black light energy.

The gods better watch out. I’m coming for them next.

Then it’s the throne of the Otherworld. It’s going to be mine.



EPILOGUE

“Do you take this honour in the name of the gods who watch over us?”

I look down at my new bride, not the one I want, but the one who will do even as blood coats her wedding dress. Angel blood. She passed the test I gave her with flying colours, and even I didn't expect to see the joy in her eyes as she murdered angel after angel until they gave up the divine rune. She certainly shares my more insane tendencies and will happily join me in taking over the worlds with my new powers now the woman who could have stopped us is out of the way.

If Daesyn didn't love a demi-god, she would be at my side and not hated by the gods. She made the same mistake her mother did and fell for the wrong man. The goddess is on my side, and she came to me the second Daesyn escaped my castle. We made our plan, a plan that made Daesyn think she was free and safe before we took everything from her. I just needed to find the runes, and the goddess told me where to look.

Now I've won. And the brave didn't.

Brave but dead doesn't keep you safe. Ingrid and Daesyn finally know that.

I wasn't expecting my captive to be pleasant company, or the nights she snuck into my bed chambers. I saw the same darkness in her eyes as is in mine, in those late nights.

She is young and fertile and not unpleasant to look at.

She almost looks like Daesyn. Close enough to be a twin, and if I close my eyes or turn her head away, I can pretend.

I will deal the cards the gods have chosen for me.

“I, Laelia Riverlite, do take this honour and sign my soul to my new mate. I do accept the crown of the Otherworld.”

The fae priest places the crown on her head, the one that was meant for my beloved Ingrid and then for Daesyn before she chose the wrong side of the gods.

“Then I welcome the new queen of the Otherworld. All bow to the queen and king.”

The crowd in our throne room fall to their knees as I lean down and kiss my eager bride, a kiss promising destruction and ruin on all those who have betrayed us.

On anyone who dares to enter our world and all the worlds we will take...



DESCRIPTION OF THE FORGOTTEN RUNE

The gods may think they have won...but I won't be forgotten.

Thrown into Gods Chará, a land with no magic and no end, Daesyn has to escape and get back to the world that has been forced to forget her.

With a little help from an unexpected goddess and a flash from the past, Daesyn is going for the Otherworld throne her mother once ran from.

The world might have forgotten who Daesyn is, but real love can't be so easily erased.

War is here, four worlds are fighting, and Daesyn is nothing more than a thief.

Can a thief change the world?

Fans of epic urban fantasy romance will love this four-book series by USA Today Bestselling Author G. Bailey. This is a reverse harem romance meaning the main character will have more than one love interest.

This series is a crossover of the series, A Demon's Fall, but can be read on its own.



PROLOGUE

After searching for this magical land for so long, I hardly believe it's real as I step onto the gold stone. In the back of my mind, I can see my sweet little toddler stumbling through the forest with her bright-purple eyes and kind smile. Daesyn, my child, is worth searching for months for this place. In a clearing of tall, dark trees is a statue of a goddess, one long lost to the worlds, and even the forest around here has started to take back the stone sculpture with weeds and ivy wrapping around everything like a snake.

Reaching into my pocket, I tug out an amulet and hold it out in front of me. I sink to my knees and bow my head. It's taken me many moons to find this amulet in the human world, and goddess knows if it even has a tiny bit of magic left in it. These amulets are the last tokens the gods left us so many years ago, and most people don't even know what they are. My love of reading is the only reason I know.

"Goddess Aphrodite, I beg for your assistance and intervention in the name of love. My daughter, my sweet baby girl, is destined for such a fate. I fear I will not be able to save her from it." I pause, thick heavy tears falling down my cheeks. "She is only a year old, and already I sense the danger coming for us. Will you help me?"

The amulet in my hands glows pink, shimmering when I look down at it. The amulet begins to feel hot in my hands, almost like it's burning, but it's just warmth. The pink glow spreads around me, and I feel nothing but comfort and love.

"I hear your wish, Ingrid Heartlocke, and I will protect Daesyn Heartlocke in the many trials she has to come."



CHAPTER 55

The Gods Chará makes Earth look like a supe lover's playground.

With the sharp spear tip that I have made with ice and torn fabric from my top, I sketch another X into the wall of ice at the back of the cavern. The ice never melts in here, nor does this place make any noise. The water is still, filled with monsters I don't want to face, and even they are silent. It's a silence that someone could go mad in alone. I suppose that's what I must be now, slightly mad perhaps. There is no actual sunlight here, just the blue reflection from some mysterious light that appears every few hours, and it casts deep shadows around the cavern. I stare at my crappy artwork of dates where none of the X's look the same, even if they are creative enough to keep me from losing my mind. I never thought I'd think this, but I miss talking to anyone. The silence of this place is worse than the blistering cold ice storms or frozen lakes full of monsters. I count the markings on the wall and realise I've been here two weeks. Two full weeks. No wonder I'm going mad. I've been stuck in this ice hellhole eating strange fish and talking to myself for entertainment.

Talking of fish, I pick up a piece of the unknown purple fish I caught last night and take a reluctant bite to fill my empty stomach. The fish tastes disgusting, and I'm sure one of the mystery fish is going to poison me. Between eating fish that taste like gone-off fruit and freezing every night when this place seems to go still, I'm sure I might have died in my sleep a few times.

The cursed rune does seem to work still.

And whatever the forsaken rune does. I've run my mind over all the possibilities, but I can't figure out what the rune is meant to do except the fact my powers didn't seem to work in the Otherworld when I needed them.

"Fuck my life," I mutter to myself, smacking my head against the cold wall of my prison. I'm stuck here, immortal in a place where there's literally nothing but monsters and ice. In the silence, where I can't fight my heart or mind, I think of them.

Every single time.

Seth, Ryker, Finn, and Sebastian flash through my mind like beacons of light in the darkness, reminding me not to go too far over the edge, into the pit of darkness that draws me in. They don't remember me anymore if what Einar said is true.

But how can they truly forget someone they love... I couldn't forget them. Not really. Not in my soul. I need to get back to them and then I can make a plan. No magic in any world, not even the runes, could take away the mating bond Ryker and I have. That's where I'm going to start.

The cold, blue world stretches out in front of me like an endless sea, and it never changes, no matter how much I stare at it and wish it would. I sigh as I pull my messy, tangled and dirty hair out of the band I found stuffed in my pocket. The band, I think it's one of Poppy's, and it makes me feel like I have a tiny bit of her here with me. I go over to the edge of the ice cavern and kneel, tipping my hair into the water. I shiver as I run my shaky hands through my hair and wash away some of the dirt and grime out of my long black locks. It takes me a long time, as usual, to get brave enough to actually pour some ice water on me, to wash myself down. My clothes are now a disgusting shade of brown, and no matter how many times I wash myself down, I still feel dirty.

But the clothes are the only thing keeping me from absolutely freezing, even when I'm soaking wet and stinging cold.

I braid my hair with my numb fingers before sitting on the ice in the small corner of this cave that I found for myself. At

least I've got something on my back in here and my trusty ice pick. But without any weapons and only an ice pick to help me, there isn't much use at all if one of the big monsters in this place came after me. I've been lucky so far, but that luck can't stretch for that long. I rest my head back, a sinking feeling of hopelessness overtaking me. One of the many thoughts that go through my head in the empty silence is how much I miss my uncle and how much I want to avenge him. I felt like I only got him back for a second before he was taken, stolen from me by the gods.

I hate them so much. I hate them for everything they've taken off me in fear of what I might have become. The funny thing is, they have shaped the monster they were so scared of. If they had just left me and my family alone, I wouldn't ever have gone after them like I want to now.

The gods aren't the only ones I am gunning for. Einar NightHold is next.

Einar is going to pay for everything he has ever done, now he's apparently made me forgotten from the world. Which I can't fully believe until I see it. The forgotten rune can't just make people forget an entire part of their life. There must be a loophole to this magic. Once I get out of this damn place, I'm going to find the loophole.

At some point, I think I drift off into a restless sleep before waking up with a jolt, hearing a loud noise nearby that woke me up. I pick up at the spear of ice, which is already melting a little, much to my annoyance. I quietly head outside the cavern, praying there are no massive monsters out here. The cold, blistering air blows loose strands of my hair around my face as I search the ice and mist. There's nothing here, just floating bits of ice in cold water and islands of ice floating on still water. Occasionally, snow falls from the sky, but there're no clouds in the mist that I can see. There's nothing above me to suggest where the snow actually comes from, and there's no hope for me to climb the sheets of smooth ice that tower into the sky. I've searched around this hellhole, Gods Chará, before concluding that I'm just stuck here and there's nothing. I can see why this place was created for the gods to be captured. If

they were stuck here, with no one to speak to and just monsters for company, it's a perfect torture.

Eventually, a good hour after watching the still world, I decide to go for my daily walk, while keeping an eye out for what that noise was. Part of me knows it was most likely one of the monsters, but another part of me is so bored I'm almost curious what the monsters look like. I head across the circle of ice and jump onto the next one, which is a small leap away.

This slab of ice is a lot bigger, stretching over at least a mile from what I worked out. I head across it just seconds before the ice below me shakes hard and a wave of water slams over the side of the ice, smacking me straight onto the ice and slamming my face hard against the surface. I groan in pain as I manage to pick myself up on my knees and hold myself. The ice shakes harder, and my eyes widen in fear, seeing a deep crack appearing underneath my hands.

"Shit," I mumble, crawling into my feet. "This is really not my day. Or month. Or fuck it, year."

I try running straight back to the way I came, but I can't see the smaller ice slab anymore, and it looks like the whole platform has actually moved. "Crap, crap, crap, crap." I do a quick spinning around as the ice keeps cracking, wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do next. I'm going to have to go in the water and swim like my life depends on it.

Even if I know there're monsters and massive fish in that water. God knows what else could be lurking down there, designed to kill gods. I wouldn't stand a chance, and even though I'm immortal, being ripped to pieces or eaten doesn't sound like fun.

I'd much prefer a bottle of fae wine and singing karaoke with Mossy any day.

Even though I know it's not safe down there and it's freezing, I don't have a choice. Staying on the ice here is just going to end up with me in the water with massive pieces of ice to hold me down. If I dive in now, I can have the freedom to swim without worrying about the ice.

Just as I thought this place couldn't get any worse...

I brace myself for the cold water before jumping in, gripping the ice spear tightly in my hand just in case. The water swallows me, and the cold is so much worse than I thought it would be as I swim deeper to keep my body moving. Part of my mind goes into shock, I'm sure of it, as I dive deeper under the water before letting myself float. The water stings as I blink my eyes open and stare into the empty, bottomless pit of deep water around me.

Like something is calling me, my gaze drifts to the empty, bottomless depths of the sea, and I can't look away. There is nothing but dark depths of water, endless and empty, but something makes it impossible to look away.

Until I see something, something blinking below that looks almost pink. It draws me into its depths, making me want to swim towards it even when I know in the back of my mind that's a death sentence. I need to get to the surface and swim to get out of this water. It's too cold. It's too dark and endless.

For some reason, I stay floating in the cold water, frozen to my core, looking down at the pink light below. The light morphs itself into the shape of a sphere with eyes in the middle, glowing brighter than the rest. The eyes are too big to be human. I know that. Even as I realize I'm struggling for air, I still don't swim up. I'm mesmerized with the glow that looks like a sphere, and it soon starts floating straight up towards me. I stay very still, almost freezing under the water. In fact, I feel like I've turned into the ice myself.

Seconds feel like hours as the sphere floats up, and I reach my hand out, desperate to touch it, to be near it. The sphere slams itself into my chest, and I slam backwards in the water in shock.

I try to gasp as something takes over my body in a way I can't even explain. All I feel is love and comfort, even when I lose complete control of my body and someone else takes over my mind until I hear a voice in my head. A voice I've heard before. Just once.

“Hello,” Aphrodite says into my mind. Her voice is silky and beautiful, a kind of voice that you’d follow into a war with no weapons against an army.

Even when I can’t see what she looks like, I can tell she is enchantingly beautiful. I feel her beauty, her core of her being, which is just love and peace. Nothing more. Even as she possesses my body, I feel she doesn’t want to hurt me.

“Daesyn Heartlocke, it is good to see you again.”

Even when I have no control of my body, I see out of my eyes at the pink glow around us and how we are floating in the water aimlessly.

Usually that would scare me... but I don’t feel frightened of Aphrodite.

“Why have you come?” I ask her, my voice clear in my mind. I feel like I’m talking to myself, even when I know I’m not. “Are you trapped here as well?”

“Part of me is, yes,” she admits, sorrow leaking out of her words. “This is the only realm I can truly possess someone in. I have been able to send words to you. Do you remember?”

“The words Finn said to me... that was you?” I ask.

“Yes.” She giggles. “It is unfair his declarations of love cannot be understood by you.”

“I think that was the point,” I softly reply, wishing I could smile.

“Don’t you think it’s been too long you’ve been trapped in here?” Aphrodite asks.

“Yes,” I say it to my mind. “It’s been way too long. Can you get me out?”

She is silent, and I find myself rambling. “I know that you’ve already done one thing to help me and I’m cheeky for asking for another. I can’t stay here, forever forgotten. I need to save my people and the Otherworld. Finish what my mother and father would have wanted for me.”

“They never wanted that for you.” She giggles. Almost childlike, but yet so alluring.

“Did you know my parents?”

“Your mother... she was a good soul, and so are you. Ingrid might not have wanted this life for you, but you were born with everything you need to survive it. The runes are more than face value and, my dear, why not ask the ones who created it to help you in return for a promise of their return?”

“I can’t ask anyone trapped in here. The spirits won’t be able to hear me,” I remind her.

“But yes, I’ve come here to save you. Mostly because of an old promise, but I’m also curious about what trouble you’re going to bring to the world. My dear sister has taken it too far, and we all have demigod children down on Earth who we wish to see, but we cannot. It’s time for a change.”

“You have children on Earth?” I ask her, my heart feeling like it’s bursting at the idea of getting out of here. A wave of sorrow hits me like a truck. Aphrodite’s sorrow.

“Yes, I have four children. Four beautiful, beautiful children. They’re all demigods and they are hiding because the gods kill demigods after Finn,” she replies. “Which is not fair!”

“Why?”

“The gods, my family, fear the unknown. Something made Torfinn so special because of how powerful he is,” she says into my mind. “Demigods usually get a little bit of our power, but he got too much. He’s practically a god, and that is unnatural. Only we are gods.”

“You know what my fate is, right?” I ask her.

“Yes. Daesyn, you need to tell Torfinn to use his full power because the only one that can stand up to his mother is him. She is weak to her own gifts.”

“I will,” I say. “I am going to go to the Otherworld and get my power. Then, once everyone I love is safe, I’m going to

come after the gods to make sure they don't harm anybody again and never come after me again."

"Remember who helped you, Daesyn," she reminds me. "We'll be meeting soon under a sky of destruction."

A massive blast of pink light explodes in front of my eyes, so bright it seems to blind me for more than a few seconds. I can't see anything at all until it suddenly disappears with Aphrodite's spirit: I'm left shivering on a red carpet, my hands digging into the thick fibres as I lie on my stomach. I blink my eyes open to see old yellow wallpaper in front of me, and smell nothing but staleness and mould-scented food. The room isn't as cold as the ice, and I sit up, my body aching, and I look around to see my old apartment. I don't know where I was expecting her to leave me, but this wasn't the place I was expecting to be dropped. My old apartment hasn't changed a bit since I was last here, except for now it is covered with dust and cobwebs in every nook and cranny. The scraggy, aged yellow sofa of mine that's pushed up against the window looks like it's seen better days. But after weeks of sitting on ice, even the carpet seems comfy. The small kitchen has got rotten food on the edge and in the fruit bowl. God knows what's in the fridge. I don't even want to open it, but I force myself to stand, my clothes dripping water all over the place as I head to the kitchen. I find myself a clean glass and pour some water into it, downing the lot before putting it down. As I crawl to my feet and look through the cupboards until I find the coffee first and turn the kettle on. As I wait, I chew on some crisps and devour the whole packet in a few seconds, barely registering the cheese and onion flavour. I pour myself a massive cup of coffee and sigh as I breathe in the coffee scent.

I hear a tiny movement in the floorboards behind me and I turn around as a hooded figure stops in the middle of the room.

"I'm going to be pissed if you disturb my coffee and I."

His laugh fills the room as he lowers his hood, surprising me with his stern yet kind eyes. "I haven't forgotten you or your love of coffee, Daesyn Heartlocke. Welcome back."



CHAPTER 56

“Alun Riverlite,” I say his name, feeling really strange that I’m actually talking to another person. There’s finally someone else here with me after two weeks in complete solitude. Alun smiles at me, his hands resting together in front of him, and his long black cloak traces against the carpet. Alun looks older than when I last saw him, like the months have aged him beyond what they would usually do, and I bet it’s everything to do with the mess Poppy and Laelia have gotten into with me. I’m surprised he is here. The deal we made seems like years ago, but it’s not, and I didn’t hold up my end very well.

But at least his daughters are alive. The same can’t be said for my family. A bitterness I’ve swallowed deep down for a long time rises to the surface. I miss my family, my mum and Uncle Arthur. Even thinking about them makes a pit appear in my stomach, threatening to pull me under in a wallowing darkness of grief. I’ve always told myself I’m the strong one, the one who has dealt with so much that nothing can get to me anymore.

All of this has made me out to be a liar to myself. To my own soul.

I drink some of my coffee as I walk out of my kitchen area and across the room. The coffee isn’t the best I’ve ever had, but it’s been weeks without a drop, and this coffee currently tastes like liquid gold.

“How do you remember me?” I ask, pushing more confidence into my voice than I thought I had. A part of me wants Alun to say that he’s never forgotten that the forgotten

rune was nothing more than a sick game from the fae king and a goddess who wanted me gone. That everyone was lying about everything. But of course, that is not the case.

Just my luck.

“A particular goddess believes you might need some help to survive what is to come. You have powerful friends, Daesyn,” he tells me. “I’m still in awe that a goddess was anywhere near me, let alone used the rest of her magic to bring my mind back. She can’t help us anymore, I know that, but we are blessed indeed.”

“Aphrodite might be the only good goddess left up there,” I comment. “I owe her too much.”

“I’m sure she will collect,” he carefully warns. “Gods always collect.”

He has a point about her. Everything I know about Aphrodite pictures her as a goddess of love, beauty, and pleasure. I just have to wonder what part of me she wants me to owe her.

“I definitely know that,” I smoothly reply. “Did she bring Velia’s memories back?”

“Yes, my wife remembers,” he tells me, and a part of me is happy to have one more person remember me and everything I’ve done, but another part of me feels like my life has been stolen in the cruellest way.

I’ve never been this alone in my life. I always had Mossy, but now I have so little it actually hurts, and I haven’t even seen the men I love look at me like a stranger yet.

That is going to sting.

“A lot has happened in these past two weeks, Daesyn,” Alun states.

“I need to know everything. You might want to start from the beginning,” I suggest as I walk closer.

“No, not yet. I will wait while you go freshen up because, no offence, child, but you need to shower,” he suggests.

“No offence taken,” I say, knowing I must smell bad and look even worse. “Give me twenty minutes.”

“I will protect and ward the house in the meantime. Just in case your past comes knocking.”

“It’s technically a flat, and don’t ward anything outside this flat. The surrounding flats are full of supernaturals in hiding,” I say. “And that might piss them off.”

“Understood,” he replies, bowing his head at me as I walk past.

“And I swear it doesn’t usually smell this musty when I actually lived in here.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he mutters, looking at the painting of Mossy on the wall.

It’s one of those cartoon paintings, and I had it done as a Christmas present one year when we had a little extra money. The painting is dramatic, and it suits Mossy down to a tee.

I hope he is okay. I have to pray Mossy is smart enough to keep himself out of trouble.

I walk to my bedroom door, looking back at Alun and feeling grateful that he has decided to help me one more time. I almost don’t want to leave the room in case he disappears and I have to figure out how to save everything from going any more wrong on my own. I shut the door behind me, staring around my tiny single bedroom which has little more than a bed and wardrobe, both of them older than I am. A light layer of dust is on my bedsheets and pillows, and at the end of the bed is a small yellow blanket which was Mossy’s. I pick up the blanket, running my fingertip over Mossy’s name on it. I can show him this, and maybe he might take a second to really look at me now.

Mossy trusted no one before he met me. Much like Ryker, Seth, Finn, and Seb. My heart feels like it’s been stabbed with the thought of them not remembering me. I gulp, pushing the emotions down, and I open my wardrobe. My clothes that I missed so much are a little dusty but nothing too bad, and I

pull back the secret hidden wooden compartment at the back to find my weapons. I grin at all of them, lined up neatly.

Time to get back to being myself. I lay out a new leather outfit on my bed before going into the bathroom and taking a long-needed shower. The water is soothing and feels amazing on the cuts and bruises on my body. I wash my hair four times before the water turns clear and my hair feels soft once again. After brushing my teeth, I braid the top of my hair and leave the rest down as I head back out into the bedroom. Quickly, I get myself fully dressed and throw the mucky clothes into the washing basket. It feels so good to be back in normal clothes. Only a few things missing now. I clip four black daggers with silver markings onto my hips and one sword on my back. All done, I turn to look at myself in the dusty mirror. My eyes are glowing purple, radiating my power, and my black hair falls past my shoulders, matching the black clothes. I look like I'm ready for a fight.

And I am.

My name is Daesyn Heartlocke, and I won't be forgotten. It's time that I get back in the world and make them remember me. There is no way I'm going down without a fight. Closing my eyes, I call my shadow powers to me, and they instinctually react, slamming into my chest with a whoosh. I open my eyes to see my shadows glowing purple as they bounce around me in swirls of energy.

I'm back, bitches.

I lower my hands, letting the shadow magic drop away, and pack a small bag with clothes and the blanket before going back into the living room. The windows are open, blowing a breeze in that smells like the fish and chip shop down the road. Much better than dust and mould-scented food. I head to the kitchen, feeling Alun following me with his eyes.

"You look much more yourself, child," he comments. "I felt that power you released in there. You have gotten stronger...by a lot."

"I have the forsaken rune now. Do you know what it does?"

“Other than clearly making you more powerful? I am unsure,” he replies. “But I will enquire.”

“Thank you.” I nod as I flick the kettle back on. After pouring myself a second coffee, I brace myself for whatever has happened as I sit with Alun.

“Which of my daughters should we talk about first?” he asks. “Both of them are in an interesting situation.”

“Poppy. Tell me about Poppy,” I ask, leaning back. “Tell me she isn’t dead. She’s like a sister to me. Even if she doesn’t know who I am anymore.”

“Frankly, she is thriving. Persephone doesn’t remember how she suddenly got so good at fighting or having survival instincts at all, but she’s holding her own in tests. They’re down to the final five now, and it’s getting to a point where they are planning the final test. I think you need to be there for her.”

“She doesn’t remember me,” I remind him.

“I will tell her you are here to train her and advise her in the end of the test. Or something.” Alun waves his hand. “Either way, we will get you back at her side.”

“We all know there should only be one person on that throne. It should be Poppy,” I firmly say. “She is kind, selfless, and she has a good soul. The throne, the reapers, would be lucky to have her as their queen.”

“I’ve always known this,” Alun admits and runs his hand over his face. “I sent her into the Royal Reaper Trials because I saw something in her she couldn’t. You may think that I had chosen my other daughter over her, but I hadn’t. I chose the daughter I knew could be an amazing queen to be given the chance to fight for it. She just needed to wake up to who she is, and nothing in the world could do that except for experience. In some ways, I chose Poppy. I chose to give her something, a life that could be extraordinary rather than the life that my other daughter now has...”

Finally, I realise what Alun did. I always thought they had chosen Laelia to keep alive and safe, but that wasn’t the case.

They knew Laelia didn't have it in her to be a queen and rule, let alone fight for the chance to. Poppy does. Poppy is a queen without a crown.

I clear my throat. "Laelia... well, I don't know if you were aware that she was captured by—"

"My daughter married him. Einar NightHold," he interrupts. "She is the new Seelie Queen of the Otherworld."

"Pardon?" I say, coughing on the bit of coffee I had in my mouth, not expecting him to have said that. Laelia, a queen of the Otherworld? A reaper? A woman who was engaged to Finn and hasn't got a caring bone in her body?

And hates me... At least they have that in common.

"Yes, she's the new queen. I found out when she came to visit me and tell me I was protected by her and her new husband. Laelia is in a world of illusions. I listened to everything that she had done to get to that point and how she'd fallen in love with him. Together they have plans to rule everything."

"He's a psychopath and a murderer," I growl out, crossing my arms. "Einar killed dozens of angels for the runes, and he is powerful now. She just jumped into bed with a man she won't be able to escape."

"Yes. I'm well aware of what he's done, and I am aware that my daughter has made a terrible, terrible mistake," he sadly says. "But she's still my daughter, and I want her alive when this all ends. Mistakes don't define our ending if we are given a choice."

"I have to warn you, I came back to take the Otherworld Throne, and no one's going to stop me. I will help Poppy get the Reaper throne because you're right, she damn well deserves it. I suspect she can win this herself. She will make a damn good queen. But the Otherworld needs me to save them and stop Einar. He is ruining and destroying everything good in the place I belong. My people are locked up and enslaved by the reapers in those dungeons. I'm going to take them back to the Otherworld and I'm going to take over the throne

because my people are suffering and I've been selfishly avoiding the truth. I've been so lost in my own love life, my own need to stay alive, everything, because I didn't really look at the bigger picture."

"How exactly do you plan to take a throne and bypass an army to kill the king?" I ask.

Grinning. "Two weeks of solitude and being forgotten by the world has been the perfect time for me to make a plan. I know exactly what I'm going to do."

His eyes glisten. "Just don't kill my daughter, please."

"I will try not to, but it sounds to me like she's changed a lot," I warn him.

"I think she was the one who killed the angels," he admits.

"Then it won't just be me gunning for her. Evelina will, too."

"She doesn't remember the angels. They were forgotten, and so was the rune by the powerful magic," he replies and meets my eyes. "The runes should all belong to you. They are a set, and they should not be separated between two people. That's what everyone says. It's what the spirits whisper."

"The spirits want the runes and will kill me for them," I say. "Einar, too, I bet."

"You're the only one who can take all the runes and give them back to the spirits. I believe it is best you do that."

"The plan for now is to get me back into the reaper world and near the test," I say.

"The Royal Reaper test is controlled by the gods' magic. It won't like that you're not contending anymore."

"Trust me, the gods think they have taken me out of the race," I say. "Unluckily for them, I've just begun."

"We should go back to my house for the night and travel to the city in the morning," he suggests, standing.

"Just like old times," I say, standing, too.

“Yes, but this time no one remembers who you are, and you should wear blue contacts, just in case,” he suggests. “Daesyn, be careful who you trust going forward. No one owes you any loyalty, and you made friends with some of the most dangerous men in the worlds.”

I wrap my hands around my dagger hilts on my hips as Alun opens a portal of shadows. “Don’t worry. They could never handle me anyway.”

I run through the portal, back to the world I once wanted to escape.

This world is going to remember me, one way or another.



CHAPTER 57

The little cottage has changed little at all. It's still quaint and sweet, nestled in the fields with only the stars to look down upon it. I can hear the kelpies outside, but everything is peaceful, like the worlds and all its troubles don't touch this place. I walk through the fields towards the cottage behind Alun, who glances around a few times, no doubt to make sure we are alone.

Good idea. I push a little of my shadows out, testing my senses, and it feels like they are blasted alive, to the point I can feel everything around me from the strands of grass blowing in the wind to the bees flying around a nest in the forest. I gulp and pull it back with a little effort and find Alun watching me as we walk, his eyes clouded.

"Where did you go when you were being hunted?" I ask him before he can say anything about the magic. I can feel how powerful it is. "You know when the queen found out about Poppy and I."

"About you being Unseelie?" he enquires, raising an eyebrow. Ah, I forgot to mention that minor issue to him. "I suspected you were keeping a big secret, but I wrongly assumed it was to do with your parents' whereabouts."

"You were almost right," I say.

"And to answer your question, we hid in the forest with Caliphe when they first came to look, and then we just moved ourselves back into our home after a few weeks," he explains. I fondly remember the Buttery sprite who lives with them, her yellow skin, glittery yellow hair, and fast green wings. She is a

beautiful fae creature. Much like Mossy. “We owe Caliphe our lives. She hid us in places that no one would look.”

“Still, hiding from the fae king and the reaper queen is quite a feat,” I say.

“The fae king’s magic was hard to hide from, but his guards are slow, unused to actually fighting or searching. The reaper queen has a much better army, but the guards aren’t that smart, and I basically taught them all everything they know on hunting.”

“Very interesting.” I chuckle. “No wonder Poppy is a smarty pants.”

He laughs. “They’ve got their beauty from their mother, but their brains, I definitely feel they’re more influenced by me in that department.”

“And Pops can fight.”

“That’s me, too.” He laughs fondly, and I smile, but in the back of mind I feel like I’ve lost her and my men, and Mossy. They don’t know me anymore. An overwhelming feeling of loneliness tries to swallow me, and I push it back. I’m not falling to pieces. I can’t. Too many people need me, even if they do not know who I am.

Whether Alun can read minds, and he hasn’t felt like telling me, he speaks. “Thousands of people’s lives depend on you and your actions, Daesyn. Nothing was ever going to be easy when they runes are involved. Nothing coveted is easy. Even if your friends and lovers never remember who you are again, you can be there. You can remind them with your presence what they can’t.”

“Hopefully,” I say tightly.

We head towards the cottage, and I see Velia in the doorway, but my eyes flicker over the hill where the city is fully visible. Messorem, the city of reapers, is massive and awe-worthy, especially from up here, but my eyes drift to the portal to the Otherworld. I’m going there and getting my power as soon as possible. The Otherworld gives me what I need, it’s just waiting for me now.

I pull my gaze away and walk to Velia, who has tears in her eyes and a giant smile. “Oh, my dear Daesyn. I cannot thank you enough for everything you did for Persephone, and I am so sorry for everything you lost. You are goddess blessed, and we are blessed to be part of your journey.”

“Honestly, it’s good to have someone know me,” I say as I get a bit closer. I expected her to move away so I can head inside, but instead she pulls me into a tight hug. Usually I’m not a hugger, but the lack of any contact with people makes me wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly. A mother’s hug. Even if she isn’t my mum, I can feel the comfort from it. It’s something I needed.

“The goddess is watching over us, and with that magic, we cannot fail. Do not be frightened of your path in life, it is open for you,” she whispers to me. “And your name will be written in history as a saviour and a queen, I have no doubt.”

“All I want is to do the right thing for my people. Both Reaper and Unseelie Fae,” I admit to her as she lets me lean back.

She gently places her hands on my cheeks. “I’m not your mother, but I am proud of you, and know that you have a home here, Daesyn.”

Tears fill my eyes, and my voice breaks. “Thank you.”

Velia embraces me one more time before letting me go, whispering, “Persephone told me in her letters that you are a sister to her and she could never forget you. Love cannot be forgotten.”

I hope that’s true.

“Now come in! I’ve already made you a pot of coffee, and dinner is cooking. You must be starving for an actual cooked meal!”

“Definitely,” I answer as I follow her inside. I glance across into the living room and the beige sofa, a memory flashing into my mind of Finn lying on it, his arm relaxed behind his head and his eyes catching mine. It was the middle of the night and he was awake, like me. It was the first time he

just looked at me and saw right through me, touching my soul. I didn't even realise that is what he did.

And now all I want is for him to be here, looking at me in the same way. But the sofa is empty, and the room is cold.

I miss him, and I miss all of them.

I head into the kitchen with Velia, and she smiles at me as I sit at the table. Velia pours me a coffee before talking quietly with Alun and kissing his cheek.

"I'm going to sort the horses," Alun tells us before leaving.

I sit quietly, watching Velia cook things around the kitchen. Suddenly the Sprite appears in a burst of yellow dust, and I smile at her as she flies around my head and stops in front of my face. Her eyes are enchanting as I stare at her and she tilts her head.

"You need help," she says into my mind, never actually speaking. "I remember you."

My heart pounds. "Did the goddess help you?"

She nods, and that little of hope fades. "Well, good to see you again, Caliphe."

Caliphe lifts her dress a little at the sides and bows her head. Actually bows at me. Velia gasps and bows her head, too, both of them silent.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Sprites only bow to royalty. She thinks you are a queen," Velia claims, her voice in awe. "Sprites were created to worship the royals and protect them."

"Not yet, but destined," Caliphe says into my mind. "And I am helping you."

"Are you now?" I ask, arching an eyebrow.

"You're alone."

Ouch. Caliphe giggles in my mind before flying to Velia, who looks a little shaken as she goes back to cooking her food.

I watch Caliphe's beautiful wings with interest, how they move softly and leak glitter into the air.

"I'm sure Alun told you of Laelia's... recent mistakes," Velia says, stirring the sauce into a pot of what I think is pasta.

"Yes..." I awkwardly say. "I'm sorry she made that choice."

"So am I," she replies, sadness dripping from her tone. "All I've wanted to do was protect my children in any way I could, but I let Laelia down. I didn't teach her—"

"I'm sorry to cut in, but the choices Laelia made are her own and due to her own nature. You can nurture a cactus with all the love in the world, but it still pricks you if you get close."

"Maybe you could talk to her," she suggests.

"Laelia hates me," I explain. "She thinks I took Poppy from her, which I understand because she has a jealous nature about her."

"She does. Poppy could never have anything growing up unless Laelia had it first," she tells me. "And in this case, it's a throne."

"There is only one hope for Laelia that's going to get free to her. Her sister."

"They do have a bond like no other," she says and sobs a little. "I'm sorry. I don't want to cry in front of my guests."

"It's okay," I say. "I will pretend I can't hear or see the tears."

We eat dinner in silence, making simple plans for tomorrow morning and leaving Velia here because it would be safer, and not look so suspicious for Alun to turn up with me. I'm officially going to be the new student of Alun's, personally taught by him, and I am going to pretend to aspire to be one of the cherished five. Velia had contacts made for me a long time ago, just in case I needed to disappear, and they will make my eyes turn blue for twenty-four hours. I have ten of them, so ten days before I have a really big problem. I end

up sitting at the window watching the stars after dinner, unable to sleep and get comfy on the very soft bed. I'm used to the ice floors and coldness I can't feel here, even if I am very grateful to be out of that place. The eternal stars shine so brightly in the sky, and I watch at them, wondering if the gods can sense me here. Sense me coming for them.

They aren't the only ones I hope can sense I'm here. My men are in this world, the men I'm in love with and can't imagine my life without anymore. Seth might be on Earth, and I have an idea how I could find him, but he will be harder to convince or get close to. I have to hope his demon remembers me and wants me like he always has done.

I wish I had taken the leap and mated with him, and the others. Then we could never have been separated like now.

No magic can erase that bond. It's everything.

And I'm not giving up on it.

* * *

STORMFIRE IS JUST as massive as I remember as he towers over me, his dark eyes searching mine in the darkness of the stables. "Hey, old friend."

I get a neigh in return, which I assume is a good sign before I pull myself into the saddle and grip the reins tightly. Alun nods at me as he walks past and to his horse three stalls down. I gently coax Stormfire out of the stables and stop outside, looking down the winding path ahead as Velia walks over, a knitted blanket around her shoulders. Velia gave me one of Poppy's old cloaks, a deep-green that rests nicely off my shoulders and keeps me warm. My bag is tied to the side of Stormfire, and I pat his neck as Velia walks up to me.

"Keep her safe," she tells Stormfire.

At least I think so until Caliphe appears on Velia's shoulder and kisses her cheek softly. She flies over to me and climbs into my bag, disappearing from sight, but making it clear she is sticking around.

“Is she coming with me?” I question. “It won’t be safe for fae in the reaper castle.”

“That’s exactly why she is coming with you. One, she will convince Poppy I trust you, and two, you need one of your own kind watching your back. Caliphe is a powerful sprite and a brilliant sidekick until Mossy remembers, and she might help convince Mossy of who you are.”

My chest feels warm as I nod. “Won’t you miss her?”

“As much as I miss all my children,” she says thickly. “But go, and ride fast. May the gods watch over you. I will pray every day for your journey to be safe, Daesyn. Go.”

I nod at her as Alun races past, going fast down the path out of the house and into the forest. I tap my legs around Stormfire, and he bolts after Alun’s horse, clearly understanding there is a rush today to get to the reaper castle and face what lies there for us. It’s time for me to face the truth of Einar’s forgotten rune and see what he has done to everyone I love and care about.

I push down my feeling of doubt and worry about what I’m walking into; I keep my head low as we race through the forest on Stormfire. I nearly fall off the saddle a few times and I feel sick to my stomach not long into the ride, but this time is a lot easier than it used to be. The trip to the shadow pit lake feels quicker than I remember it being last time, and there is a difference, the pit is guarded by reaper guards in deep black cloaks, the rose symbol on the clip holding the cloak together on their chest. Five of them are spaced out around the dark pit of shadows, and two of them step forward, their scythes glowing like the moon in the night sky. My heart is pounding as I grip my daggers under my cloak, preparing to fight.

“All entrances to the city are forbidden for newcomers to enter. Go back.”

Alun lowers his hood, and I see the guard visibly widens his eyes. Alun is badass. “I am one of the queen’s trusted, and I have important news for her. I highly doubt you wish to face her wrath if I am refused.”

“I am sorry, Alun Riverlite. I did not recognise you. Who is your companion?”

“My assistant who is training to be one of the cherished five,” he tells the guard. “Now move, you are wasting precious time.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard says, and my heart slows down.

I release my iron-tight grip on my daggers and hold the reins once more. Alun’s horse trots and jumps straight into the shadow pit, and they both disappear. Stormfire heads in straight after them, and I hold my breath as we dive headfirst into the shadows, my eyes clamping shut. When the silence falls over me, I open my eyes to see a pathway of shadows as Stormfire races through it. The shadows feel almost wrong because there’s no noise. It’s completely silent here where there is no life, only darkness and tiny bits of light, which turn into nasty shadows that look like they want to swallow me whole.

Finally, I spot the light ahead, the end of the shadow portal. Stormfire jumps out of the shadows to the other side and onto the cobblestone streets of the city. The clacking of his hoofs on the stone overtakes the sound of the wind whistling through the city. I smell food cooking nearby, a herby scent mixed in light smoke. The city, which was once bursting with life and people, is almost empty. There’s no one on the streets, no carts or marketers, and it is empty except for a few guards in their cloaks, their scythes standing out in the darkness. I spot a few of them curiously turn their heads back to us, but they don’t say anything before they carry on walking. I lead Stormfire to the side of Alun, who looks down at me for a second.

“Why is it so silent?” I question.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Things have clearly changed.”

“Not for the better, it seems,” I comment dryly, feeling like that’s a massive understatement.

A guard walks over to us and stops in front of our kelpies. “The queen is expecting you. Please follow through this portal

we will make for you.”

“I expect our horses to be cared for well,” Alun warns, patting the neck of his horse. “I am holding you personally responsible.”

Damn, Poppy’s dad is scary.

“Y-Yes, of course. Of course,” the guard blurts out. “We will take them to the royal stables in which you can find them there, but they’ll be well looked after.”

“I expect as such,” Alun replies, pulling himself off his horse and undoing his bag.

I take my bag off the clip and hang it over my shoulder, where it falls on my hip.

Four royal guards make a large portal a few feet away as I climb off the horse and straighten my shirt.

“Keep silent, Cali,” I warn her under my breath, but there is a good chance she has passed out thanks to the shadow magic if she is anything like Mossy.

Alun looks to the guard. “Seems I’ve been away too long, and the world has gone silent. What happened here? Where are all the people?”

“There’s a lockdown the city,” he explains. “Royal order. That’s why you’re not allowed to ride through it. Between the Unseelie rebels rising up and everything else that’s happened recently, it’s not been safe for the city to be open until the new king or queen is crowned. We are all looking forward to a fresh face to battle against the Unseelie.”

“Thank you for your information,” Alun tells him before knocking his head towards the portal.

Walking with Alun, we go through the portal, leaving the outside of the city behind. I didn’t know it was possible to make portals into the castle from the outside, but I’m corrected as we come through into the throne room. Even though I’ve seen the throne room a dozen times, it still takes my breath away a little to see it. The dozens of swords, sent by the gods,

surround me as we walk down the middle to where the queen is sitting on her throne.

Queen Annalee Husk looks right through me like she doesn't know who I am at all, and a part of me is relieved as much as another a part of me struggles with it. I struggle with the fact that it is so real that I've been forgotten.

“Alun, it's lovely to have you here. Have you come to see who will take the throne?”

“Of course, I could not miss it,” he responds, bowing his head.

I'm not doing that.

“Always so lovely to have you in court, Alun. Is Velia not travelling with you?”

“Velia finds it hard to watch the tests when her daughter is involved. She sends her love and hopes to see you soon.”

“I completely understand,” Annalee responds.

Bullshit.

“I wanted to introduce you to someone. This is Daesyn Heartlocke.”

“An interesting name. What does Daesyn mean?”

“It is from an old human language, Gaelic. It means beloved,” I answer, holding my head high. “I believe my parents chose my name because they loved me before I was born.”

Until you killed my father and forced my mum and I into hiding.

Bitch.

“Heartlocke was once a clan here until they were tragically killed. Are you one of the last of the clan?”

“A distant relative, yes,” I reply.

Her lips disappear into a tight line. “Any family left?”

“No.”

“Same,” she responds with a sigh and turns to Alun. “You are so welcome here, and lucky for you, there’s only five left, and there’s a big test in two days’ time. I’m sure you want to catch up with your daughter now and rest.”

“You are always so kind,” Alun responds.

I roll my eyes as I turn away.

“But I noticed the city is under lockdown,” Alun says. “Do you need me to fight to protect you?”

She leans back on her throne, her fake nails tapping on the seat rests. “The Unseelie rebels, yes, they have become more than a nuisance. Part of the city on the north side is currently under their rule, and they have killed hundreds of my men. We have locked them in, and they will starve themselves out, eventually.”

“You are ever so wise,” Alun responds.

I curl my hands into fists.

“Honestly, it’s like they are rats that you can never quite get rid of. They keep breeding more of them, taking what they like and causing trouble all over the place.”

Pysco bitch face.

“I am sorry this is the end of your rule. It would have been so much nicer to end in peace,” Alun comments.

“I wished for the same.”

“The next ruler will have a difficult start,” Alun comments.

The skin around Annalee’s eyes tightens. “One of our children will take over. That is my hope. Ah! Here’s my son now, who is definitely a contender to win this throne, aren’t you?”

My heart starts rapidly pounding my chest, and my mouth goes dry as Sebastian walks into the room.

His dark-blond hair is tousled to the side, the only bit of colour against his dark-black shirt and tight black trousers. Shiny black shoes and a big-ass sword on his back. Every part of me comes alive as I look at him.

The dark prince of the reapers is stunning, and he is mine.
Even if he doesn't remember me anymore.

Sebastian's purple eyes, so much like mine, glow under the light of the throne room as he looks right through me like I'm no one to him. I feel like I've been stabbed a million times in the heart, and considering I've died so many times before, I know this feels worse than any of those.

I hold in the urge to run to him, to slap him until he remembers who I am and scream until Einar can hear me all the way in the Otherworld.

He turns away from me to his mother, and a sob nearly comes out of my throat until I swallow it down, forcing myself not to make any noise.

"Of course, Mother," he says, inclining his head in a respectful way.

But I see it all in his eyes. The things he doesn't say. I know how he feels about her, how their relationship is. I know so much about him, and he knows everything about me, too.

We're not anything to each other right at this moment, or at least in his eyes. Sebastian walks straight up to us, running his eyes over me for more than a second.

A tiny bit of hope crawls alive in my chest. Having him closer is torture. I can't reach out. I can't say anything to him.

His eyes lock on to mine, his magic reaching out and searching for something, anything, but I block it easier with my own barriers. Sebastian can't feel what I am right now.

It would be like pulling him into a tornado with no clue what a tornado is.

"Who is this?" Sebastian asks Alun, his deep voice echoing around my mind.

"My name is Daesyn Heartlocke," I say.

"And why are you here?" he asks, taking another step forward.

This time I can smell him, the mix of sandalwood and oak, musty and alluring.

No matter what is forgotten between us, that pull is still here. That need to be closer to each other. I can see it in the way his hands twitch, the way he stares at me. Oh, I'm not that forgotten after all, it seems.

"Prince Sebastian, why should I answer you?"

I hear his mother's gasp as nothing but a curious, amused smile appears on Sebastian's face.

"Try not answering me. See what happens, beautiful."

I grin, loving this tiny bit of feeling like he is the same Sebastian I've always known.

"Daesyn is here as an assistant to me," Alun cuts in. "I have been training her for a while. She hopes to be one of the cherished five for the new queen or king."

"Can she not talk for herself?" Sebastian asks, his eyes narrowing on me. "You didn't seem like a coward to me, but perhaps I was wrong. So you want to be one of my trusted guards?"

"Yes, if you win."

Sebastian would make an excellent king... maybe for a while, but war would chase him. This city hates fae, they all do, and they don't care that there is a difference between Seelie and Unseelie. Technically, Sebastian is an heir to the throne I am going after, but if he has his memories back, he won't challenge me for it. We could rule together; I know I damn well need help.

I have no blood claim to the throne. I only have a dire need to fix the broken world where I belong and I have to start at the top.

His laugh echoes around the throne room as he starts to walk past me. He pauses, and I can feel the heat from his hand almost touching mine. "You best hope someone else wins because I would never have you working for me. Coward."

I stuck in a deep breath as he storms off and out of the room.

“I wouldn’t recommend a friendship with my son. He does have such a dark side,” Queen Annalee comments.

“Don’t we all, Your Majesty,” I respond.

“It’s time I retire. Enjoy your stay,” she curtly replies.

My words touched home, it seems. I nod at her. Alun says his regards to the queen before we turn and walk out. I feel like I can actually breathe when I’m in the corridor. Alun pats my shoulder before leading us as we follow two guards through the endless corridors and to a small side garden, filled with tiny water streams and yellow flowers, mixed with white and pink. We are instructed by the guards where our rooms are, that there is a ball tomorrow, and where the reapers in the academy test are staying.

As the guards stalk, I look over in the flower bushes just in time to see Mossy climb up a growing plant on the wall and slip into a space between the bricks. He turns around, like he can sense me, and looks right my way. Our eyes lock across the garden, and the fae monkey I’ve always thought of as a brother, turns and disappears into the space.

Damn, my heart hurts today.

“This way,” Alun instructs and leads me into another corridor. This one is green painted with tiny bees painted everywhere in a forest.

We get to four sets of oak double doors with numbers marked on them.

“This is your room. Mine is next door,” Alun tells me, pointing at the room on the far left and handing me a small key. “I would suggest putting something near the door and protecting it. Also, lock up. Maybe a chair against the door.”

“A chair won’t stop anyone who wants to get in.”

“But it gives you a second to wake up and fight,” he answers. “Sometimes the simplest way is the best.”

“Maybe,” I reply before heading to my door and unlocking it as I head inside. My keys drop from my hand when I see someone standing right in the middle of the corridor, someone I’ve wanted to see for a long time, someone who I’m completely and utterly in love with.

He turns his head, his eyes meeting mine across the room.

“I’ve waited a long time to meet you.”



CHAPTER 58

“Ryker...” I breathe out his name like a prayer, and his eyes narrow on mine before turning into confusion. Carefully, I kick the door shut behind me, not wanting anyone else to hear this conversation. I have to tell him everything and pray he listens. Thick black locks of hair are brushed to the side, but some locks fall across his achingly dark-blue eyes.

“How could you possibly know my name?” he asks, stalking towards me with his six-foot frame towering high.

I let him move me back to the door and smother me with his presence. My eyes flicker to his rolled-up sleeves and the dagger tattoos on his arms.

Sexy hellhound shifter with tattoos.

I won the mate jackpot.

He boxes me in, his arms resting on the doorframe at my back, and I breathe in his smoky scent that reminds me of bonfires at the beach. Ryker’s eyes burn into his hellhound, red touching around the blue as he leans down and sucks in a breath.

“How the fuck do I smell you on me when we have never met?”

“Because we have met before and become... close.”

Close? Really, Dae?

He tilts his head to the side. “I would remember being inside you, beautiful. And I have been. I’ve been addicted to

your scent without even knowing who you are. You're my fated mate."

"Have you heard of the Forgotten Rune? Or any of the runes?"

"Like Protectors have?" he questions.

"Sort of. How about the Cursed Rune?"

His eyes flare. "It's a rumour. A story made to scare kids."

"I have two of the runes in those stories, and they are real. The Cursed Rune and the Forsaken. You could rip my heart out right now and I wouldn't die. I can't die because of the Cursed Rune. I was given it as a baby to save my life by my mother, the keeper of the rune and an Unseelie fae," I tell him.

This time he steps away from me, running his hand through his hair.

"I don't know if you're crazy or not. All I know is what my hellhound is telling me."

"What does he say?"

He smirks. "Devour you, mark you, mate with you. He trusts you, and that can't be built overnight. What is your name?"

"Daesyn Heartlocke," I answer, feeling vulnerable in this moment with him. I didn't realise how desperate I was for him to trust me. "Half reaper and half Unseelie fae. I'm the keeper of the Cursed Rune and The Forsaken Rune. I am here to free my people locked in the dungeons below before going to The Otherworld and killing the king. And to get your memories back."

His eyes widen, but he doesn't move away from me.

I keep talking, knowing he needs to know more about us. About how much I know him. "We met months ago outside Poppy Riverlite's house, the first night I came to this realm. You stood in a field as I watched the stars, and since then, we circled each other constantly before you told me what I was to you. You have saved my life, and I have saved yours. We

fought tests, monsters, and everything together before I was taken to the Otherworld.”

“What happened next?” he asks, this time leaning against the wall, but his eyes never once break from mine.

I wonder if any of them strike some kind of memory for him.

“You came after me with Torfinn, Sebastian, and Seth, who is a demon overlord from Earth. I am dating them as much as you and I wish I told you this more often, rather than being stubborn all of the time, but I am completely in love with you. And if you don’t remember me, can’t, please trust that feeling in your chest because I know you love me, too. You’ve told me. I’ve felt it, and no magic in any world can take away what we share. I’m your fated mate and you are mine.”

His eyes widen, and he straightens, walking up to me. My legs feel wobbly as he cups the back of my neck and he stares down at me.

“Mine.” He breathes the word across my lips. “I can’t remember any of this, but I can feel it. I can feel how goddamn in love with you I am, and I trust that. I trust you.”

Knee-shattering relief slams into me, and I feel my eyes welling up.

“You’re the crazy one.” I chuckle, needing some humour to break from the moment, and he grins.

“We are a match made in Hell.”

Then he kisses me. Even though it’s not the first time we have kissed, it almost feels like it. His lips devour mine as he pushes me against the door, pleasure coursing through my body. I need him closer, much closer...

“Ouch!” Caliphe shouts in my mind, and I jolt away from Ryker, wincing. Caliphe flies out of my bag that I just squashed against the door behind me and huffs at us before fluttering down the corridor.

Ryker looks down at me after staring at Caliphe for a moment. “A friend of yours?”

“Newly acquired,” I admit. “I want to tell you everything. From the start, and it’s a lot.”

“How about a cup of coffee each before we begin?” he asks, running his fingers down my arm.

I shiver.

“You still remember that I love coffee?” I ask, searching his eyes.

His eyes fill with pity and anger. Not at me. But what has been taken from him. “No, it was a guess. I’m sorry. I can see how much you want me to remember.”

“I will find a way,” I say firmly as Ryker offers me his hand. I take it, linking our fingers and feeling more grounded than I have in weeks. “There has to be a way to take it back.”

I am relieved Ryker is listening to me and believes me, but I always knew he would be the easy one to convince. Seth, Torfinn, and Sebastian are going to be another matter. For the next few hours, I tell Ryker everything, in detail about what he can’t remember, and he explains the version he does remember, which is the same except for the fact I wasn’t there and the parts I should have been are missing. It’s like I’ve been cut out of history.

When I’m done, Ryker’s hair is messy from how many times he has run his fingers through it. “I’m so sorry about your uncle and how my father treated you. For so damn much.”

“I have to get revenge for my uncle and do what he wanted. He would want me to save the Unseelie here and save my world. The Otherworld,” I firmly reply. “I’m going to need your help. I know you used to go down there and you grew up here in the castle.”

“The only person who would stand a chance of getting them out would be Sebastian,” he replies. “And figuring he doesn’t remember you, I will have to convince him.”

“I have things to do here in the meantime,” I say. “There must be a loophole in the forgotten rune. Magic like that always has a failsafe.”

“The spirits are said to covet the runes,” he reminds me.

“I know, but they are my last resort. Asking for their help will come with a big price.”

“Whatever the price, we will pay it together. I’ve looked for you my whole life,” he gently says, moving closer to me. “And now you’re here, as complicated as it is, I’m going nowhere.”

Without warning him, I climb onto his lap and wrap my arms around his neck, kissing his neck softly, enjoying the light groan that escapes his lips. “Thank you.”

“Dae, anything for you,” he whispers into my ear before turning my head and kissing me like he is imprinting every memory of me into his mind, into his body, until I have no idea who I am anymore except his mate.

And I know, deep down, no one will ever separate us again.



CHAPTER 59

C racks of pure, brilliant sunlight beam through a window, the thick frame casting deep shadows around the edges. The beams of light stop right before my feet, and I feel frozen, stuck in the shadows as the window slowly creaks open.

“How is it... that I can feel you are free of the Gods Chará but I cannot find you in any realm?” Einar asks, climbing through the window.

He searches around the room, a coolness to his eyes that makes me tenser than I need to be.

He can't kill me, and apparently, he can't see me either. He searches, never leaving the light-cast square on the wooden floor. A frustrated growl echoes around me. Some might find it frightening, but I don't.

“If you are back in the Reaper Realm, I will find you there, easily, Daesyn Heartlocke,” he warns. “I only have to tell the queen of your name.”

“Then why haven't you?” I ask, falling for the bait, curious if he can see me at all.

His eyes snap to the shadows to my left, and he reaches out, grabbing nothing but air. Angry, he steps back, curling his hands into fists. “Wouldn't you like to know the answer to that, child?”

“Perhaps,” I taunt. “But I have a feeling if you could find me, you would have. Maybe making deals with the gods has backfired on you.”

He swears, storming past me and grabbing nothing but air. "I should be able to track you."

"Einar, I'm sure you brought me into this nightmare, to scare me, but I hate to tell you, only you look scared. You should be," I say, lowering my voice into a whisper. "I'm coming for you, King of the Otherworld, and you should be fucking frightened of what I'm going to do next. Don't worry about finding me—"

I pause, feeling the control of the dream slipping from him to me. Like the reins of a horse have fallen into my hand. "I'm coming to you soon, King Einar, and I'm not leaving without your head."

I gasp as I wake up, my heart pounding as I grip the sheets on either side of me, sweat pouring down my back. Why can't he find me? Part of me wonders if Aphrodite made it impossible for me to be tracked, but that seems like a stretch. I'm sure she would have mentioned it. So it must be someone else helping me, or possibly, this is what the Forsaken Rune does. Yellow light flickers at the end of my bed, and slowly I see Caliphe fly up from under the bed, I think, and float in front of me.

"I will make you something to stop the dreams. To stop him coming for you," Caliphe softly tells me. "I can help."

I tilt my head to the side. "Thank you. I would very much appreciate it. I wondered where you had gone today."

"I am old enough to understand when two mates need to be alone," she tells me.

I watch the sprite, the beautiful, enchanting little creature.

"How old are you then?"

"My kind live through the ages, sleep or awake. I would not guess an age, a number, to give you. Only that I wake for changes in time, or when a great leader needs me, but I am considered young for my kind. When I awoke this time, I was lucky to find the Riverlite family when I was injured. They helped, and I owe the family a great debt."

“Who are you awake for now?” I ponder, my heart pounding away.

“More than one great leader will be born in the times ahead,” she replies. “But you should ask me what you wish to know.”

“Are you here for me?”

“There are many paths carved out for your life, told by time, set in the ways of the past,” she tells me. “They say you will do unendurable things and pay an unbearable cost. One will forget, one will die, one will suffer, and one will never, ever rule. All of this will happen soon as the cursed rune is held by you.”

“I’ve heard this before and made head nor tail of it,” I say, but the one will forget has happened, just to more than one. The unbearable cost... is losing them. The men who love me, the life I had built and fought for. The family I had found. Suffering is something I know well.

“Let me sing a song to you. A song I believe is heavily linked to your life, and it was the first time I heard of you, a hundred-odd years before your birth,” she asks.

I lean back on my pillows, nodding once at her. Moonlight is streaming in from the window, the silver beams mixing with the yellow magic she holds, the two mixing into a gold that shines so brightly. She is beautiful in a way only fae can be, and it’s no surprise. When she sings, her voice is nothing short of angelic.

“The girl who was promised

Stole a rune that can only demolish.

In her haste, she spoke a single curse.”

My mother. That part was about her. The promised girl, who was to marry a prince and stole the rune she was meant to protect, that only brings about disaster.

“A trade will be made

For a child held with a blade.

This is a song of disaster, and the four who will follow.

A man from Hell, a fallen god, a fire alpha, and a dark prince.”

My heart is pounding. How could this have been predicted? My love for them and how they love me? Yet she is singing this song, and I believe her when she says this was written way before I was born.

“When the curse is done,

One world will be gone.

The cursed rune is a song all fae sing,

Because the destruction it promises will beloved.

In the night, the Unseelie will rise,

and in blood... they will take what was ruined in lies.”

Silence drops between us as I try to take in everything she has sung to me, and I nearly jump as she places her tiny hand on my cheek. “I will make us tea.”

In seconds, she is gone, leaving me alone in the foreign bedroom. In the castle I want nothing more to do with thanks to the sadistic queen and my kind locked in the dungeons below my feet. The very thought of them down there makes me feel sick to my stomach. I climb out of bed just as I hear my door slam open. I grab my daggers off the end of my bed and rest them against my bare thighs, Ryker’s long shirt falling to just below where my hands rest. I clutch them tightly as Sebastian walks in, and I relax my tense shoulders a little bit, more so when I hear the door shut and Ryker walks in after him.

Suddenly my bedroom feels a lot smaller than it is, with these two alpha males filling the space with their presence alone.

The reaper prince and half seelie fae, the heir to the otherworld throne and the heir to the hellhounds of Hell.

Between me and them, we make quite the scene, and the space in here is not enough.

Sebastian's eyes are dark, searching my own in the shadows of the room. "I don't believe the bullshit you've convinced my best friend of. I'd remember."

"I wish you did," I admit, but I don't let myself break as I drop my daggers to the floor, letting them clink against the wood. "I wish you'd remember every secret you've told me, the pain you've shared of your past. I know about your sister and her unusual gift of speaking to the spirits and—"

He is in front of me in moments, his hand wrapped around my throat. Not hard enough to hurt me. Just a warning. "How the fuck do you know about her?"

"Because," I say, holding my hand up to Ryker at my side, begging him not to interfere. Not yet. "You told me, and I've met her several times. I know you protect her from your cruel mother, and you hate your father nearly as much as I do. I've looked into your soul and you've looked into mine, and we are the same, Seb. We are the same."

He drops me and storms away to the window, holding his hands down on the windowsill, his head bent.

"She is telling the truth, Sebastian," Ryker says, coming to my side. "If you trust me, trust this."

It hurts that the only way to get him on my side is to trust Ryker because he doesn't know who I am. For more than a few moments, it feels hard to breathe. Like I'm losing him.

Sebastian turns back, his eyes cutting through me. "I won't help you free the prisoners because when I am king, I will freely give them to you."

"We both know, no matter who sits on that throne, letting the dungeon full of Unseelie prisoners free cannot be their first move or the Otherworld will attack," I tell him. "I've thought it all through, and the only way this can be done, without blame, is to make sure it's clear they were broken out by me. I'm already on your father's list, but don't let the entire Otherworld come for the city, especially when it's already at war."

“Fuck,” Sebastian mutters. “Fine, we will do it your way. I will make a plan and get back to you.”

He walks to the door, and I scramble for anything to say to him. Just something to make him stop. “We used to drink fae wine during balls, in the throne room, and you’d tell me stories of your childhood. I liked the one about Ryker and you climbing to the roof of the castle and getting your leg stuck,” I say, nervously chuckling to myself. “Ryker was too busy laughing to help, and then he fell off the roof, leaving you stuck for hours before the guards found you both.”

“We got into so much shit for that.” Ryker laughs.

“He could have told you that,” Sebastian growls out.

“I didn’t,” Ryker bluntly adds, but he is already leaving. “I also didn’t tell her about your sister and the fact you’ve taken her somewhere, hidden her from your mother.”

“Shit friend you are,” Sebastian snaps.

Ryker actually looks thrown back it.

“Those hours on the roof, your leg stuck in the glass, dripping blood below, you didn’t want to be found,” I softly say, and he stops at the door. “Part of you wanted to bleed out right there, but you knew your sister needed you. That’s why you looked at the stars and used your powers of shadows to halt the blood loss. Seb, you told me that was the point in your life that you stopped hating your existence and finally saw yourself as someone who deserved more. You’ve always lived for your sister. For a future of peace and for a life with me... You wanted me.”

Sebastian doesn’t look back as he leaves, slamming the door shut behind him. And my heart feels like it cracks into bits, and I almost stumble back. Ryker holds me in his arms, wordlessly taking me to the bed and holding me as I silently cry for the stolen memories.

“He will remember you, and this will be nothing but a bad memory one day,” Ryker promises me.

But those memories feel like whispers lost on the wind, and I have no idea if it’s possible to get them back.

* * *

SEBASTIAN WALKING OUT, effectively ignoring me, is heavily playing on my mind as I walk through the familiar trees, sparkling moonlight illuminating my path. Alun and I were invited to the training grounds to meet the final contestants in the trials. Little does anyone know, I was one of them once. Now I know the king can't find me, that he isn't waiting around a corner, ready to cast another curse on my life. I feel a little more confident that I can do this. Not giving up is one thing, having confidence I can actually make it is another.

"At least the hellhound remembers," Alun softly whispers to me, never glancing down as he walks at my side.

Ryker is my only light right now, in an endless night of black skies, and I'm thankful he remembers.

"That makes three of you. Four if you include Caliphe," I say. "By the way, did you know Caliphe is super old and wise as shit?"

"Wise as shit?" he repeats my saying, looking at me this time. "Such a human expression. Yes, I knew of her age and I was surprised she came with you. Fae creatures are known for being picky with their friendships and bonds, but you have an unusual connection to them. They like you."

"I believe the fae creatures are just like any race. They fear those who pose a threat," I say. "They are hunted and react just like any hunted being would do."

"An interesting conversation for two strangers in this forest."

Finn's voice cuts through the endless night around me, and I don't turn back, forcing him to walk around me, his presence making my heart pound that little bit faster. I'm sure he will hear the sound and assume I am scared of him, like everyone else, but I'm not. This, between us, is something even the gods can't understand.

His eyes slam into mine, taking my breath away, like he always does. His gold eyes, the very colour of his wings, shine against the dim moonlight across us. Two gold stars in a sky of silver. His light hair is braided in several sections, tied at the base of his head, and in the weeks apart, he looks...tired. His once flawless skin has a dullness to it I've never seen before, and I can read the tiredness in his face.

He isn't sleeping.

That makes two of us.

"Torfinn, it has been a long time," Alun interrupts our staring, but Finn doesn't look away for more than a second.

His eyes briefly soften when he looks at Alun. "Hello, old friend. Your daughter shows many of the same characteristics, and training her reminds me of fighting with you in the war."

"I am happy to hear this. May I introduce Daesyn Heartlocke," Alun replies, waving a hand at me. "She is an assassin I have trained and trust. I have brought her here to personally train my daughter in the last few tests."

"Has the queen allowed this?" Finn demands.

Alun stands straighter. "Is there a problem?"

For the first time, I feel speechless, unable to make words come out of my mouth to defend Alun. Being here, seeing Finn look at me like I'm dirt under his shoe, cuts a hole in my chest too deep for me. I feel like I'm being ripped open at the seams.

Finn looks down at me, his form towering over me. "Is there?"

"Of course not," I answer... sweetly. "I was just so in awe of a demigod."

Finn pulls a face and looks away, just like I knew he would. I need him off my back right this moment, and I don't even have a single clue how I'm going to attempt to tell him who I am. I just know this isn't the moment. Alun glances at me from the corner of his eye, likely wondering what the hell I'm doing.

“Poppy is over there.” Finn points to the clearing. “I will take the others for training and check in soon.”

“Thank you,” Alun respectfully replies.

Finn looks at me once more, but it’s a suspicious look, nothing more, before he walks away. I suck in a breath and walk with Alun to the clearing, past five trees that look slightly burnt.

“That could have gone better.”

“Being around him is a risk for me,” I admit. “His mother could find out, and I have to be careful until I go to the Otherworld.”

“You should go now,” he suggests.

“I have a feeling, deep in my gut, that if I go to the Otherworld, I won’t leave for a long time. I need my men back and my people free first,” I whisper back. “My plan isn’t changing.”

“I have sent word to the Unseelie rebels about you,” he tells me.

I touch his arm, making him stop. “I never asked you to do that. They won’t even know who I am.”

“I’ve told them you are an Unseelie fae, hidden in the castle, and you plan to free your people. I warned them to be ready,” he explains. “I am sorry if I overstepped.”

“No, it’s okay. Better they are prepared,” I agree.

“Dad!” Poppy shouts from the distance.

I turn to see her running over, her long black hair flowing around behind her in the wind before she crashes into Alun with a humph.

“My darling daughter,” he soothes, wrapping his arms around her. “I am so proud.”

She laughs, and it makes me smile, even as her confused eyes turn to me. “Who is this?”

“I’m Daesyn Heartlocke,” I introduce myself to my best friend, a woman I count as a sister. A woman who has no idea who I am.

“Persephone Riverlite, but my friends call me Poppy, and you can, too,” she says with a big smile as Alun lets her go.

“Daesyn is the daughter of a dear friend of mine, and she is a trained assassin who lives on Earth, mostly,” he explains. “I asked her to come here to guide you in these last tests for the throne.”

“Wow,” she replies, looking me over. “You kinda look like me, if I’m being honest. I’d love to learn from you.”

“Awesome,” I awkwardly reply.

She turns to Alun. “How long are you here for?”

“Until you win this and after if you need my guidance,” he replies.

Her cheeks brighten up. “If I win, that is,” she says. “I mean, it’s going to be hard with who is left.”

“I’ll make you impossible to beat,” I tell her.

She beams at me. For a second, it’s like normal, and then a shadow crosses her eyes.

“Can I have a moment with my dad? Alone?”

“Sure,” I reply. A sharp tug at my heart makes me move, and I walk over into the trees. I hear them shouting not long after, and I can just make out the name they repeat. Laelie.

The only warning before his axe is pressed against my neck is a ruffle of leaves. I hit his arm, knocking his grip and sliding out of the way, unhooking two daggers from my belt.

“You’re lying about who you are.”

I tilt my head to the side. “I’m not the only one, demigod. What do you want?”

“The truth.”

I smirk. “Finn—”

“Don’t nickname me when you don’t know me,”

“Fine,” I snap. “Torfinn, I haven’t come here to hurt you or anyone who is innocent. I vow that.”

His eyes still search mine for a long time. “I feel like I know you and I don’t ever forget a face, Daesyn Heartlocke.”

“Maybe I’m a ghost,” I whisper back.

“Ghosts don’t exist. When you’re dead, you’re gone,” he replies. “So be careful, new girl. I don’t trust you and I’m watching.”

“Cool,” I say, sliding my daggers away. I turn and walk through the trees, back to Alun and Poppy who are still arguing. Better them than a suspicious, trigger-happy demigod. I turn my eyes back to see he is watching me still. “Don’t watch my ass for too long, Finn, you might fall in love.”

I chuckle as his eyes burn gold and jog the rest of the way back to Poppy and Alun, who fall silent.

“Time to train,” I tell Poppy. “We can start with running to build our strength. Let’s go.”

“I hate running,” she groans.

I chuckle. “I know.”

For hours I train with Poppy, everything from core strength to dodging, to sword fighting, and I realise she has changed so much in the few weeks I’ve been gone.

Poppy might win this without my help.

But either way, I’ve got her back. Even if she doesn’t remember why.



CHAPTER 60

“I don’t know what made me design and make this dress, I don’t even remember why. Aren’t you lucky it fits you exactly?” Professor Nordvik claims, tightening one more bit of lace and making it near impossible to breathe.

The dress is breathtakingly beautiful, and I look like a dark storm about to crash into the ball tonight. My dress is made of shimmering black material, wound tightly around my waist with added lace going up into a line. More of the material is wrapped around my upper arms, attached to a cape of pure black English netting that falls around my feet behind me. The bottom of the dress is dozens of layers of netting and satin, each layer a slightly different shade of black. The only tiny bit of colour is the silver pins around my waistline, each one a different flower.

“How very lucky,” I reply. “This is beautiful.”

Professor Nordvik stands back, running her eyes over me one more time before clearing her throat, tucking some of her brown hair behind her ears.

“You are so familiar. Are you sure you haven’t been to court before?”

“Never,” I lie. This time the lie is to protect her, not myself, and even then I don’t like saying it to her. Being a liar is something I want to put in the past.

The door is knocked twice before I shout for whoever it is to come in, and Poppy enters, followed by Alun in a tux. Poppy’s dress is an earthly gold chiffon ballgown that goes from her neck to the floor and even covers her arms. The gold

bounces off her bright eyes and peachy complexion, and once again, she looks like a queen. Our hair is styled very similar, half up and half down, wavy with braids curled around the sides.

“You look very nice, Dae,” she says, her voice friendly but slightly off.

I don’t blame her after our training, when I pushed her to the limit, time and time again. I had to make sure she wouldn’t lose, but without the friendship we had before, I bet I came across as demanding.

“So do you,” I reply. “But balls and dresses aren’t my thing.”

“That’s a shame. The dress does suit you,” Professor Nordvik claims. “I must be going, more dresses to help with. Have fun at the ball.”

In seconds, she uses the shadows to disappear.

Alun nods to the door. “Shall we?”

“After you,” I tell him as Poppy hooks her arm in his elbow.

They head out into the corridor where a lift door is glowing gold around the edges. The doors open to the velvet green- and gold-rimmed lift. We head inside, and the doors shut before the lift moves and within seconds, stops.

“I’ve heard a rumour from a friend that there is test being planned,” Poppy quietly tells us before the doors open.

“Who told you?”

“It was—” She pauses as the door opens, and her face lights up as I turn to see Toth waiting for us. He bows his head. “Toth. He is seelie and a good friend of mine. Toth, this is my father and Daesyn Heartlocke.”

“An honour to meet you both,” Toth replies, stepping out of the way for us.

His eyes are devouring Poppy’s dress, and I feel awkward being in the way. We all get out of the lift, and I pause to

breathe in the scent of sweet flowers, overpowering perfume, and magic that touches every inch of this room and the hundreds of people in here. The crowd is thick with people; the music is slow and sensual from an orchestra at the back of the room. The bars are crammed with people, which makes me frown. Getting a drink to withstand this ball is going to be difficult.

“I’m glad to know Poppy has close friends here,” Alun is saying as I refocus my attention on the conversation. “How did you two meet?”

There is a blank expression that fills both Poppy’s and Toth’s expression, just for a second, but I see it.

“Oddly, I don’t really remember,” Toth says, laughing it off with Poppy.

“Maybe we had too much to drink at one of these balls and met then?” Poppy questions.

“That must be it,” Toth agrees. Alun gives me a knowing look. “May I steal Persephone for a dance?”

Alun nods, and the pair of them walk off together, walking so close their arms brush.

“Is she training well?”

I answer Alun’s question as we head closer to the bar. Seems I’m not the only one who needs a drink. “Yes. I wish I had years to teach her things, but she can do this.”

“Good to hear—” Alun’s words fade away as I see someone across the room.

In fact, the ball, the people, the music fades into nothing but colours and buzzing as Seth’s eyes find mine.

In a black suit, no tie, buttons undone, and sleeves rolled up, he stands at the end of the bar, nursing a whiskey in a tumbler. My heart pounds as I meet his red, endless eyes and hold them. No recognition shines in his eyes. Despite how much it hurts to see it, I still find myself walking towards him. He is still until I’m right in front of him, breathing in his scent. That mixture of fire and mint.

“You should be careful who you stare at, darling,” he warns, his voice rippling over me. “Come with me.”

I don't fight him as he roughly grabs my hand and downs his drink before dragging me behind one of the pillars of the ballroom, hiding us from view. His body presses against mine, pushing my back into the pillar as he grabs my other hand and holds them above my head. I could escape him... but I don't.

“I want to talk to your demon. I know he wants me,” I say. Seth may have forgotten me. The magic of runes is strong, but his demon is ancient, powerful, and I need to know if he remembers.

A light growl leaves Seth's lips as he leans in closer, brushing his lips across my ear. “My demon wants me to rip your clothes off and fuck you right here and now. Do you want that, darling?”

“Maybe,” I breathlessly reply.

His chuckle is dark. Wicked. “I don't know who you are, but you're brave or stupid. Which one?”

“Daring,” I counter. “Which one are you?”

His eyes flicker with darkness. “Dangerous.”

“Show me,” I suggest.

He pushes away from me, taking several steps back. I miss his touch instantly. “Come to my room tonight, four-one-eight on the right side of the castle, and maybe I will.”

Seth walks away from me, and I rest my head back on the cold stone, sucking in a deep breath. This is harder than I thought it would be.

When I've calmed myself down a little, I come to the conclusion that going to Seth's room would be a very bad idea that would end in sex, and his demon possibly claiming me, and it's not fair when Seth doesn't remember who we are to each other. I love him, and our mating should be done when we both know everything.

My moral conscience and my vagina don't agree, but thankfully I make the decisions. Mostly.

“May I have a dance, Daesyn Heartlocke? You seem lonely,” a tall, willowy man asks, stepping in front of me.

The shock of him knowing my name, looking at me with clear recognition, makes me speechless for a moment.

Cornaith Daegwyn.

“I thought touching me would be bad?”

“Gloves.” He holds his hands up, his narrow blue eyes bright. “I trust you not to touch my skin otherwise, Daesyn.”

“How do you remember me?”

“Rune magic does not work on my kind,” he explains as I take his gloved hand and let him lead me into the dancers. He places his other hand on my waist, keeping us at a respectful distance. “But I cannot help you with getting anyone else’s memories back. I have done you a favour, though.”

Never trust an elf. I don’t know where I heard it, but it comes back into my mind right now. “What did you do?”

“Warded you from those who wish you harm and remember who you are. Einar, for example, will not be able to see you or hear you. I’ve also made it quite impossible for the queen to remember your name when speaking to Einar, and her cherished five have the same problem,” he claims.

My eyes widen. “Why on earth would you do that for me?”

We dance seamlessly as he speaks softly. “I am repaying a debt to your mother.”

“You knew my mum?”

“Yes.” He smiles. “I was once beaten terribly, and I ran to the Otherworld, looking for shelter from my brother who was the old ruler of the Elven race. Your mother found me, sheltered me, and healed me back to strength when you were a baby. I repaid her kindness with a promise of protection for you, and I made wards around the island she was living on with your uncle before I threatened to my kingdom and battled for my throne. I am terribly sorry for your losses, but I believe, completely, they are here watching over you as angels.”

I wish, because I've never felt as alone and lost as I do now.

"It seems you repaid her kindness already. Why help me?"

"A life for a life," he states. "I touched your hand when you were little, and the future, this, was shown to me. Without my protection and magic, you would have died by now. Now, you have a chance."

"Thank you," I tell him. "I won't forget what you have done."

The dance slowly comes to an end.

"I saw one more vision and I must warn you." He pauses. "Watch out for the sister with an arrow. The king may fall, but the queen always repays the favour."

"I feel like I owe you more than thank you can say."

The song ends, and he steps back, bowing his head to me. I bow my head back.

"When there is peace, you are welcome in my realm. I hope to bargain a peace treaty someday."

"Someday," I reply with a smile.

Cornaith disappears into white light, making some reapers gasp nearby as I disappear into the crowd and head to the bar, Cornaith's warning playing over in my mind.

The queen with an arrow must be a certain Riverlite who is sitting on a throne, and I will never turn my back on her. Especially not now.



CHAPTER 61

The selection of sweets and peanut butter candies, all things I know Mossy loves, sit at the bottom of the tree in the gardens, untouched for what feels like a good hour before I hear the tree rustle just a little. I keep silent as I sit on the bench near a thorny rose bush that is dead. There are no flowers blooming on it, I notice, as Mossy jumps down and grabs a handful of peanut cups.

“Hey, Mossy,” I say, relieved he came at all. Just seeing him makes me feel a little better.

He pauses, a peanut cup shoved into his mouth, and turns to me. His eyes are sharp, but the softness of Mossy shines through. Forgetting me hasn’t changed who he is. “How the fuck do you know my name?”

“There is a complicated long way of telling you, but in short,” I answer, “let’s say we are friends and someone cast some powerful magic on you, making you forget me.”

Mossy seems to think about it. “The buttery sprite told me the same weird story, but it can’t be true. Reapers like you want us dead.”

“I would never hurt you. I vow my life to that,” I swear. “And I’m not just a reaper. Can’t you smell what I am?”

“Of course I can. I am a fae, monkey, and smarter than any idiot in this castle,” he states.

“And you fell for a sweet trap,” I reply with a grin.

“Fuck you.”

My heart warms. “I love you, too, Mossy, and that is the truth. I’m worried about you running about the castle and I’m only here to say you can stay in my room anytime you want.”

He grabs as many sweets as he can before jumping up the tree, not replying to me. Only when I rest back on the bench, knowing I can’t do anything else, do I hear his voice above me.

“The fire-stinking wolf thing and the moody-ass prince are always watching you,” he warns me. “I’m safer hiding in the shadows, but thanks.”

I chuckle. “Still, the offer is there.”

“You’re a stranger, and I trust no one,” he replies, and this time the garden goes silent, and I feel myself alone once more. I stand and walk around the garden, brushing my fingertips over the various leaves as I get to a pond covered in water lilies, so many of them that I can hardly see the water below. Light from the castle and the moon above shines down on the flowers between the thick, floating green leaves, and I stare at them, feeling alone in my dress.

“You’re looking beautiful tonight, mate,” Ryker tells me as he comes to my side, looking at me, but I stare at the pond instead.

“I’ve always thought I was used to being alone because after I was eight, that’s what I was, but I had Mossy. I had people around me, a job to do, and I always fought for that. Then I came here, and my world was rocked upside down by everyone who slipped into my life and became family. I didn’t realise losing them from my life would crush me, but it has, and now I’m falling. I’m falling so damn hard, and I don’t know how to stop myself. No one I care about remembers me, my mother, my father, my uncle, and everyone is dead. Now I’m just alone.”

Ryker turns me by my shoulders and cups my face with his hands. Tears coat my eyes as I look up at him.

“Love, even lost, is never wasted. You’re not alone, Dae. I’m not going anywhere, and I remember nothing, but I trust

my heart. I trust you completely, and if you asked me for anything, I would give it to you.”

“Ryker... I never want to lose you,” I softly tell him. “But the path I’m choosing for myself will be dangerous, and I don’t want to drag you into it because of the mating bond.”

“Drag me, sweetheart,” he says around a chuckle, and I smile. “If you want me, I’m yours, and I will follow you to Heaven or Hell if you ask.”

“I love you,” I tell him, and for a moment, it’s like he remembers everything. “I love you, too.”

Ryker kisses me softly, brushing his lips across mine in a tender embrace before picking me up and carrying me farther into the garden, into a corner hidden by bushes and tall trees. Where we are alone, with nothing but shadows around us. Our kisses turn feverish as I pull at his clothes, desperate to have him now. To have that connection to him. I tug at his belt as he kisses my neck.

His hands go to the back of my dress, and in one rip, he breaks the lace, and it loosens. His hands slide into my corset and run over my breasts, making me moan. He pulls me onto his lap as I free his cock from his trousers. After pushing my panties to the side, I slide onto him in one long, easy glide. I throw my head back, enjoying the feeling of him inside me, the burning connection building between us.

“You’re mine,” he growls as I ride him, his hands gripping my waist tightly.

“Yes,” I reply. I am, my heart, my soul, belongs partly to him, and it always will.

He flips us over and covers my body with his, thrusting into me harder as his tongue explores my mouth, sending me crazy.

“Mate with me,” he pleads between thrusts, his fiery breath in my ear as his teeth graze it. “I don’t give a fuck about the past, only the future, and I want you forever.”

I decided not to go to Seth, purely because he would treat me like a one-night stand and he doesn’t remember... but

Ryker. We are mates, and he loves me no matter what.

Mating with him. It feels right, and I'm tired of fighting the right things in life.

"I will be your mate, Ryker," I tell him.

Something changes as his eyes burn into fire, and everything seems hot, like we are lying on the flames of Hell. I gasp as he thrusts harder, and suddenly he bites down my neck. Pleasure, like coming a thousand times at once, slams into me, and I cry out, not caring who hears me as the mating bond snaps into place between. Ryker groans my name as he comes inside me and releases his teeth from my neck to look down at me. My arm feels like it's burning, and I look over to see black, swirling runes of flames are appearing from my wrist to my elbow. A mated symbol for the world to see. I glance at Ryker's arm and see the same markings appearing. When they finish, they glow like fire for a second before fading to black.

I love them.

The mating bond feels like a string tied to me, looped around my heart, and I can sense how Ryker feels.

Joy. Love. Acceptance. All these emotions mix with my own as we stare at each other, words not needed.

If the world falls, I will never be alone. I can feel Ryker with me, always, as my mate.



CHAPTER 62

“**Y**ou seem different this morning, Daesyn,” Alun comments with a knowing smirk and lowers his voice. “I offer nothing but congratulations on the mating. The Hellhound is an honourable man.”

I smile at him before glancing at my arm, where the literal markings are shown. My black vest top does nothing to hide them, and I don't want to. “Thank you.”

Alun is silent as we head through the castle, following after two guards who came to our rooms and told us there is a test this morning and we have been invited by the queen to watch. I hate that I'm not involved in whatever crazy test they will be facing, but I have to trust Sebastian, Ryker, and Poppy can survive this on their own. The other two, Catherine and a man called Lewis, need to get out of the way. I know little about Lewis, other than he is clearly good at staying alive and winning, which means he is deadly. Looks wise, he is a slim guy with black hair and a large nose, but I bet he is fast on his feet. I've told Ryker and Poppy this, and both of them are going to be careful today. We head through a solid oak door, where the guards stop outside and find the queen with her cherished five around her, looking at a wall of magic, showing nothing but deep water, filled with creatures I've never seen before. I focus on everyone in the room first, including someone I didn't expect to see here.

Costin Maddock, alpha of the hellhounds.

His eyes snap to me with a deadly sneer. If looks could kill.

But Costin doesn't remember me, he just thinks I'm a stranger who has mated to his son, and I'm not sure what he can do about it. Last time he threatened to kill me, but I'm interested to see if he is that brave this time.

"My son claims you are worth more than the throne I can give him," Costin claims, and the queen turns back, noticing us. Alun bows his head, but I won't. Not when I know how cruel and vindictive, the rulers in this room are. Respect has to be earned, not given.

"Ryker makes his own choices," I say. "Do we have a problem?"

His smile flashes more than a few teeth. "What has been done cannot be undone, other than in death... but I have no interest in killing you."

"Mating bonds do break people's souls when one of them dies," Queen Annalee agrees. "I would not advise it, dear friend."

"Such a pity. At least there is some hope for my useless son—"

My dagger is at his throat before anyone has noticed me move. "Insult my mate again, and I will kill you, alpha or not. Do you understand?"

Costin's eyes burn with anger.

The queen squeals and backs away. "This is not a place for violence!"

"Daesyn," Alun warns, but Costin hasn't said anything. I press my dagger blade slightly into his neck, cutting a tiny bit of blood, which drops onto my blade.

"That's a warning, Alpha Costin. Don't make me regret backing down," I warn before lowering my blade.

He immediately tries to go for me, and I smile as I step back, ignoring his snarl.

"The test is starting. Will you behave?" Queen Annalee snaps.

Costin inclines his head, well aware this isn't his world and he can't do shit about me here. I grin as I make my way over to Alun, just as I feel another male come into the room.

Finn's presence soaks the room in magic. God magic.

I don't look at him as he stops at my side. "Alun, your trainee is too bloodthirsty."

"That's one of the reasons I admire her," Alun replies, and Finn chuckles low. "And her power is unlike anyone I have met before. The gods have truly blessed Daesyn."

Finn stops laughing at that.

I try to ignore his presence as I look at the choppy waves of the sea in front of me, wondering what exactly this test is. The sea stretches out for miles, and above it there is no land, nothing but endless dark-blue skies with no clouds or stars. The portal is just under the sea line, with a small rim of space for me to see above, and it is full of dark caverns with strange white creatures swimming around. The creatures look like a mixture of dolphins and humans, with flat faces with only a row of sharp teeth. They don't have arms or legs, but a smooth body and a massive fin on their back, which looks as sharp as their teeth.

"What are they?" Alun asks before I can.

Queen Annalee laughs. The sheer amusement in her voice, even when she knows her son is going to be in that water soon, makes me feel sick. I hate this bitch. "They are called the Airina, and they enjoy supernatural blood as well as storing treasures, which they protect at all costs."

Fuckedity fuck. They are in so much trouble.

She pauses as a blast of darkness appears in the middle of the sea, and slowly it becomes a clear bubble with Professor Kate and the contestants. My eyes flicker to Ryker and Poppy, who are standing together in blue wet suits, the same as everyone else is wearing. Sebastian is on his own, and gods, I miss him. Catherine and Lewis are standing together on the other side of the bubble, the only ones with tritons that glow green on the ends of the three tips.

I curl my hands into fists as Annalee keeps talking. No doubt loving the danger she has put her son into.

“The only way to leave this sea is to kill one of the creatures, a female, and take the jewel in her chest. Unfortunately for our people, the Airina race are fast and few in females. They will be lucky to find one or two jewels.”

Fear stills in my chest as I don't blink, I don't look away from the bubble in the water as it bursts, and Professor Kate disappears in shadows. Poppy and Ryker swim straight to the nearest cavern, where there might be air, and a much safer bet than the surface where many of those creatures are swarming, noticing their new prey. Sebastian is not far after them, but three of the Airina slam into him at the same time, soaking the sea in streaks of blood.

“No!” I whisper in horror, stepping forward towards the portal.

The blood clears until I can see Sebastian has a sword in one hand and shadows swirling around his other palm. His stomach is heavily bleeding in two spots, but his back is straight, and he doesn't seem to be shaking in pain. I have to hope they aren't too deep.

Sebastian is ready this time, thank gods, and he wraps a tendril of shadow magic around the Airina as he gets closer and pulls him towards himself, before stabbing it in the chest. An ear-splitting noise echoes around the sea, and even through the portal it hurts my ears, and I flinch. Sebastian grabs the dead Airina and digs around in her chest, not aware of two more Airinas behind him.

I can't warn him. I can't do anything as they slam harshly into his back, taking the body right out of his hands and leaving him passed out and underwater.

He is going to drown.

“Pull him out!” I shout, crying out my panic. “He is clearly too injured to carry on with the test. Pull him out and get a healer!”

“I don’t know if you have a soft heart or you are a new, too close friend of my son’s, but the tests do not work like that. If he pulls himself out, then he will be healed. If not...”

“He is your son!”

Her eyes harden. “If you’re so concerned, go and get him yourself. But you cannot leave unless you have a jewel.”

“Your Majesty—” one of her cherished five tries to talk to her, but she holds a hand up.

My mind is already made up as I pull my shoes off and unclip a blade in my hand.

“Daesyn, they have spells, so they can breathe a little longer. You cannot.”

“Then I die for him,” I say, pulling off Alun’s hand. “I can’t watch.”

A hand wraps around my wrist, glowing gold for a moment, and I look up at Finn. “You have four minutes of breathing air before my spell runs its ground. Go.”

“Unfair,” Queen Annalee breathes out, a flirty tone underneath her words that makes my skin crawl.

I suck in a deep breath before running and crashing through the portal, right into the sea. The water is freezing, hard enough to stop my heart if I let it, but I only see Sebastian as I dive for him, swimming as fast as I can towards his floating body, softly falling through the sea into the dark depths. I glance up for only a second, seeing Ryker and Poppy creating a big distraction with the Airinas by a cave, and in the distance, Catherine and Lewis aren’t just fighting the Airinas but themselves. Shadow magic crashes everywhere around the sea as I keep diving down and finally get to my dark prince. I grab the collar of his wet suit and pull him to me before realising the shadow magic around me. My shadows blast out, making a sphere of shadows around us that hold Sebastian in place. I lay him down, checking his pulse to see he is still breathing before sliding out of the shadow sphere. I send the sphere to the surface of the sea with Seb, praying he will be all

right for a moment before I swim up myself, heading right for Ryker and Poppy.

Ryker's eyes widen as he shoots his head my way, shock coating his eyes. Three more Airinas appear out of the darkness, and this time, they see me. I grin as I stop in the water and curl my hand at them.

Come and get me, baby.

They roar, the noise echoing around me underwater before they rush at me. I slam up a wall of shadows, letting them slam hard into it, using their speed against them before swimming over the wall and coming down with my daggers, nicking two of them in the neck before kicking the third as hard as I can with no shoes on. The two's blood fills the sea around me, the metallic taste disgusting as I throw myself at the third and stab her three times in the chest. The other bodies float around me in the blood, making it impossible to see much ahead of me. I slide a dagger into my belt clip before reaching into the Airinas chest and digging around. The first two don't have jewels in their chests, but the last one I check does.

My chest starts to feel tight as I swim out of the blood and head up to the surface. I use my shadow magic to cloak me, the best I can, before I crash into the cold air and climb into the shadow sphere.

Sebastian is still unconscious as I press the jewel into his chest and let go. Shadow magic, dark and powerful, smothers Seb before he disappears along with my sphere. Breathless and tired, I take a deep breath before diving back underwater and searching for Ryker and Poppy. I see a floating body in the distance. A triton slammed into his chest.

Lewis.

Catherine killed him, I bet. I don't have time to feel sorry for the guy as I see Ryker in the middle of a pool of red blood, and Poppy is nowhere to be seen. He is searching for bodies for jewels. I dive, heading towards them just as I see Catherine appear right behind Ryker. He doesn't have time to react before she stabs him in the back with her triton, and I scream. I

slam a wave of dark shadows at her, even mixed with fae magic, not caring who sees.

Ryker!

Before my magic can touch her, she disappears, likely with a jewel. Fucking bitch is dead. I swim to Ryker and pull out the triton from his floating body, feeling that he is still alive but bad. He needs to get out of here now. I search his pockets, happy when I find a jewel.

He was looking for one for me.

Without even a minute passing, I press the jewel into his chest, and he disappears back to the reaper realm.

Two minutes pass, four more bodies checked for a jewel and nothing.

Another two minutes, I count, and my lungs are burning as I pull the next body towards me. This one has a jewel, and just as I gasp in a mouthful of water, the spell running out, I disappear into shadows.

Bright light shines in my face as I slam onto a cold surface, coughing up water onto a shiny black floor.

“Thank the gods!” Alun is saying, picking my hair up.

Another pair of hands rest on my shoulder. “I was so worried! You are so brave, Dae!”

Poppy.

“Ryker?” I groggily whisper, sitting back and coughing on the words. “Where—?”

“Being healed right now, alongside Sebastian. They are both out of the test but alive. They will recover,” Alun gently tells me, picking up a blanket and wrapping it around my shoulders.

I look up at Poppy.

“It’s just you and Catherine left.”

She holds her head high. “I was named after a powerful goddess, and I might be goddamn terrified, but I won’t let the

world fall into her darkness. That throne is mine.”

It’s the first time I’ve heard her claim the throne as her own, and it sounds good. It sounds like the only way the Reaper Realm has any chance of recovering.

“May the realms bow down to the new queen.”

“Soon,” Alun whispers as I rest back and close my eyes, dreaming of another realm calling me home.



CHAPTER 63

SETH

“I know that look,” Azi comments, walking over to sit next to me on one of the many chairs by the window, pure, clear glass with the best views over the city in front of us. Burnt yellows, deep oranges, and smooth purple colours reflect off a sun catcher above my seat. The sun catcher is cheap and out of place in the sleek, modern room, but my daughter made it for me. A long time ago. This is one of many apartments I own, overlooking the beautiful human city of London.

The city itself isn't that human anymore, not that it ever was, but now everything isn't hidden, the magic speaks for itself. So do the supernaturals who live here, feeding off the deepest sins humans always have. London is an easy city to get lost in, and for supes, this makes it home. This place is perfect for them. But right now, as the sun slowly sets across the skyscrapers that fill the city, it's nothing short of beautiful. In all my years, so many of them, I've always admired the sunset, the beauty it brings to the end of the day, every day, forever. The lowering sun almost makes me forget the woman I've not stopped thinking about. The one my demon burns for.

Az doesn't push, doesn't say anything as he pours himself a drink from the small table between us and drinks.

He knows if I want to speak to him, then I will. It's always been like this between us. We weren't the closest growing up, but recently, the war changed us. I risked a lot for him, something I've never done for my family, and he did the same for me. The war was won, in blood and power, but the

shadows of what our other brother did still haunt us both. His daughter still lives, but thankfully she has the soul of an angel.

Where the light came from, no one knows, but it's there.

“There's this girl,” I say, and then correct myself. “Woman. I don't know why, but my demon, he claimed her immediately. When he saw her through my eyes, he locked on like she was a prey we have been hunting forever. It was different, and after the long years of my life, different is usually a forewarning.”

I'm not one to open up my feelings to anyone, but this time, my brother is the only one left on this planet that could possibly understand my demon. His is just like mine. Our demons are something I've never been able to fully explain or understand myself, no matter how old I get. My demon, he's all the bad traits, the dark traits, the evil and the corruptness in my soul. Everything rolled into one. He's all the parts of me that have no emotions, and instead makes choices based on a primal sort of desire, the desire for lust, suffering, and darkness. The woman I met in the Reaper Realm was enchanting.

Daesyn Heartlocke.

I scented her from the second she walked in, like a wolf tracking a deer, and I watched her continuously as she avoided conversations until the Elven King found her. Their conversation was interesting to say the least.

When I heard the Fae king wants her, a possessive side of me wanted to hunt him down and put an end to his life.

The ballroom was full of people, dozens of women, but none of them stood out like she did, and it was like I knew her well. At least that's what my demon instantly thought. But I've never seen her before in my life. I would remember. As for her power, she is something I haven't quite come across in all my years. Something darker, as dangerous as the pits of Hell itself. And yet there's a small side of her that smells like home, not this home, but the one in Hell. The home we lived in with my parents, which is little more than rubble now. Those memories are locked away in the back of my mind because, not that they

weren't good, of how they ended. My mother and father dead. Opening that door to the past is not something I want to do. Not right now. Not ever.

I look across the city, hearing his children in the background laughing. Their echoing giggles travel down the corridor to this room, and it is wonderful to hear. I do love seeing my niece and nephew. I'm going to enjoy watching Evie and Azi, and their family, control those kids as teenagers.

"Find her, date her if she is this much interest to your demon. You know as well as I he will not back down until she is yours," Azi responds.

"She is trouble," I warn. "Danger follows her like a storm to a beach."

"Can't do much harm, dating this woman? She might be your mate, like Evie is to me."

I chuckle as I raise my glass to my lips, drinking down the four-hundred-year-old whiskey in one shot.

"Mates aren't harmful?" I question. "But how many children do you have again?"

He laughs, punching my shoulder playfully. Still hurts. Fuck. "It's not that bad. Plus, they have plenty of dads to help. It's not so overwhelming then."

"If you say so. I have one kid, and she was a handful young," I reply.

He leans back in his seat, silent for a while. "Now, tell me, what did you learn at the Reaper Realm other than this woman?"

"Don't you want Evie to be here for this?"

"No," he casually replies. "Evie is frantically looking for the missing angels. Many were close friends of hers, and no one seems to know where they went."

"I found nothing on the angels, I'm afraid," I tell him, and I feel for them. Over the years, I've met several of the angels at various balls and parties, and none of them deserve anything bad to happen to them.

But I doubt they are on an all-expense paid holiday that they forgot to tell anyone about.

I quickly go through everything that I learnt from being at the Reaper Realm, specifically on the queen, Annalee. “Her grip on control is tight but slipping. Especially with the Unseelie Rebels now controlling a large section of the city. Looks like their slaves are fighting back, and I’m not against their fight. I might join them.”

“Evie has expressed a dislike for slaves in the realm. Our warrior army could help them, if it comes to that,” Azi claims. “We fought hard for freedom, and I see no reason Unseelie fae should not have the same.”

“The main issue is The King of the Otherworld. If you were to help the Unseelie claim freedom, they’d only be dumped back in a world that marks them for death. I believe there is much to be watched, brother, before decisions can be made.”

“Tell me of the Royal Reaper Trials. They must be closing soon.”

“There’s only two people left in the running for the throne, and both of them are not under Queen Annalee’s control. I worry about what might happen when the throne has to be given over.”

“Do you not believe she’ll ignore tradition and stay in power?”

“Perhaps. She certainly won’t hand the crown over and disappear into the shadows. She is a puppeteer,” I answer, clearing my throat and I stretch my legs out. “The two who are left are young, impressionable, but I do not know them very well. They might make good rulers. Evie was once young, but look at her, sitting as a queen on the throne, and she did so much good in such a short time.”

He seems to contemplate my answer for a while, looking over at the city. I stand and go pour myself a new drink as a flash of white passes by the door. And then something smashes smashing a distance. I cringe a little. Everything in my

apartment here is worth a fortune, everything older than time itself and irreplaceable.

Now something is broken.

Azi just smiles. “You shouldn’t invite the whole family if you don’t want to break things.”

Before I say a word, something else breaks in the distance. “Next time I’m baby proofing the entire apartment.”

He laughs. “How is your daughter?”

“Busy and bossy. Something she learnt from Hali,” I say. “Last I heard, she was in Africa searching through some ancient ruins that have been found. Something to do with the origins of demons. I’m not sure. I told her I could tell her more about history, but she doesn’t particularly want that. She wants life experience right now. With her immortality, I do not blame her.”

He smiles. “Tell her to come and check in. We all miss her.”

“I will do, but first she will be seeing me,” I say. “As much as I adore you coming here with the kids, breaking my priceless shit, I have a realm to return to.”

“Good luck, brother,” Azi says to me and grins. “Next time I will bring Star. You know she loves anything she can scratch with her claws.”

That damn tiger. “Make sure you replace anything they break. I hear the protector vaults are filled with jewels.”

His laugh travels with me as I jump through a fire portal and straight into the Reaper Realm. I land myself right outside the castle. The spiralling towers cast deep shadows across me from the moon. Despite there never being any sunsets or sunrises in this realm, it is still very beautiful. It has more stars than any other place I’ve been. They literally fill the entire sky, cramped together, casting such bright light that I don’t miss the sun here. It’s not a realm I would choose to live in, but I see why people do. If you love the darkness, the eternal nights and cold temperature, this would be perfect.

The moon looks strange between all the stars. Alone, somewhat akin to what I felt for years. I head inside the castle, none of the guards brave enough to stop me. I follow my senses until I find the queen with her cherished five. The queen and her team of trained monkeys in cloaks. There is only one of them, Professor whatever his name is, who seems to have anything about him. The other four must be adept at fighting, but they aren't at conversation, that's for fucking sure.

The queen simply nods my way. The room is full of other reapers, and most are drinking from the bar, some laughing in a way that sounds nothing short of fake. I need a drink to deal with this shit show. I've dealt with many queens in my entire lifetime, but Queen Annalee has to take the cake for being the most annoying. I just get my drink poured from the stunned Unseelie fae bartender when her conversation drifts over to me.

"The stupid girl actually jumped into the portal, into the sea, and took them on herself, saving her mate, saving my son." She laughs. "Then she almost drowned!"

A growl vibrates in my throat.

"Watching Daesyn almost drown was quite amusing for daring to go in to save them. Their souls belonged to the gods, she had no right."

"We agree," several of her cherished five say. Training fucking puppets. "I mean, she's not a hero. How could she be? She is nothing short of—"

Enough.

My demon roars the word in my head. Nothing but pure anger fills me, a possessive kind of anger. I need to defend her, the stranger who I don't know. My feet are moving before the conversation has even ended.

She sucks in a breath, and in response the cherished five are quick to make a line in front of her, their scythes out. Puppets with sticks.

I simply smirk and portal myself right behind her in the blink of an eye. Smoke and ash fall around my feet as I tap her shoulder. She cries out like I've stabbed her and stumbles back, fear turning her eyes glasslike.

"I believe the woman was brave," I say with a smirk.

Her eyes are nothing but cautious as I carry on talking.

"I was interested in your little story there. I can't quite agree about this girl jumping into a sea to save someone as being anything other than heroic."

If not stupid. If not, something I want to smack her ass for doing.

Dammit, I don't know her. Daesyn is a stranger... with a hot ass.

Queen Annalee sweetly smiles at me, her cherished five moving closer every second. They don't trust me. No one in this room does. But they have to put up with me because of Evie and the king, and my brother specifically. The fact they would struggle to get me out of here, even for an army of them, it would take time to force me to move a step. Queen Annalee hates me for a personal problem. The first night I was here, she flirted all night and snuck into my room... and I threw her out with a fire portal before she could even say a word.

I would never touch her. Her beauty isn't anything that interests me. She is like a dead butterfly, dead on the inside and rotting but still beautiful enough to lure someone into staring.

Luckily for Queen Annalee, I promised myself I'd be good for at least a while and stop doing soulless, empty shit for the next few years. Set a good example for my niece and nephews.

Make the world better and all that shit.

"She isn't heroic, she's just a stupid woman who's in love. She should have died in the ocean with the rest of them."

Hearing that Daesyn has a mate doesn't bother me as much as I thought it might do.

I still want to punch him, though.

“Your Grace,” one of her cherished five interrupts. “The power that she blasted out. I’ve never seen anything like it. The mix of shadows with light and green.”

“Perhaps she has an underlining fae blood in her line,” she replies, waving him off.

“Yes, it must not be strong, or she would have different coloured eyes,” she counters.

For some reason, a pair of glowing purple eyes flash into my mind, bright and beautiful.

The most stunning eyes I’ve ever seen. But then the image is gone. The image of eyes that I’ve never seen before in my life are just gone, and I want it back, but I can’t see them anymore.

The queen laughs and joins back in their conversation. “It doesn’t matter. She’s made herself close to one of the contenders for the throne. That Riverlite girl.” She pauses, distaste filling her eyes. “But even then, I doubt that she’ll have much choice who her five will be. I did not. In the end, it is always down to politics.”

“The new queen will have to learn,” one of the male cherished five replies with a tone that is nothing short of expectant.

The new queen should fire him first.

“It seems this Riverlite girl has a good friend. A brave one, and she might not need the outdated advice you all offer on ruling. I’m sure my queen will be more than happy to offer advice,” I reply and grin at the silence following my speech.

Queen Annalee’s smile tightens, her eyes blistering with the need to tell me to fuck off out of her realm, but she can’t. I give her a sarcastic smile.

“I must take my leave. The whiskey in my room will be getting lonely.”

“Sleep well,” Queen Annalee bites out.

“Oh, I will,” I say. “Don’t worry, you will see my pretty face again. I will be staying until the end to make sure everything goes accordingly.”

She does nothing other than incline her head and turn away from me. I try not to laugh as I walk away, seeing her shoulders tense, knowing I’ve really pissed her off. Job done for the night. I portal myself across to the infirmary just to double-check that Daesyn’s not in here after today. I need to see her for reasons I can’t explain. I’ve never been protective over a woman, not even my daughters’ mother. I cared for her, yes, but this is very different. My demon wants to be at Daesyn’s side, and inside her, all of the time.

I sense her first, a gentle wave of her power flowing through the space. I walk down the corridor until I find her sitting on a bed, a healer waving her hands over her body with a big blue light shining from her fingertips. I count the bruises on her body, wishing I could kiss each one of them and burn whoever touched her to the ground. She doesn’t see me through the thick glass as I stare at her, her black hair tumbling around her shoulders, her skin so pale, her bright eyes so big. Magic, like nothing I’ve ever tasted before, springs up to life off her skin. All I want to do is kiss her to find out what she tastes like, to imprint my soul against hers and find out if we are as destined as it feels.

Fate has a strange way of showing us our future. My mother used to tell me that, one of my very few memories of her I will let myself remember.

I wonder what she would tell me to do about Daesyn Heartlocke.

One thing is certain. I’m going nowhere. Hell help her soul when mine is her friend.



CHAPTER 64

A blue fog softly breezes around me, brushing against the black dress I have on. There is nothing but empty dark-blue skies around me, and in the very distance, I see a sun rising high in the sky. The blue fog is the colour of topaz jewels, and I brush a hand through it, clearing the path in front of me. The path is paved with black square stones, and each one glows blue as I step on it. The fog clears slowly. I head down the path until it ends, and in front of me is a blue pedestal.

The most stunning crown is sitting on the pedestal, magic flowing off it, bursting with life. Silver and gold branches wind around four clear jewels, and within the diamond-shaped jewels is blue mist, like the surrounding fog.

“The crown of the fae queen,” Einar’s voice calls out, the fog clearing to reveal him.

He doesn’t look at me, so I assume he still can’t find me. The temper in his voice tells me I’m likely right on that one.

“Have you ever heard the story of the first royal of the Otherworld and her crown?”

I don’t answer. I’m not playing his games, but my eyes do flicker to the crown. He sighs.

“Being the excellent host of this dream, I will tell you. Every ruler of the Otherworld is shown this crown and given the chance to take it, and none has ever been able to touch it. My fingers fell through it, like my father, like my grandmother, and the many others before me. The old story tells of a queen who united the Otherworld, and the fae creatures made the

crown for her. The creatures took it on her deathbed and encased it in magic, magic that can only be unlocked by a worthy ruler of the Otherworld."

I'm not surprised he couldn't touch it.

"Does this not even tempt you into talking, Daesyn?" he muses. "How about a little gleam of information on your dear friend's sister? The one you promised to save."

My heart tightens as I glare at him. "She is your queen, you wouldn't hurt her."

He laughs, searching around where I am. "Ah, there you are! I did miss your condescending voice."

I grit my teeth.

"Laelia is useless to me, nothing more than a play toy to buy me time and produce me an heir which I'm happy to announce will happen sooner than we predicted. Laelia is pregnant."

Fuck.

I see his smile, where he thinks he has won, but her being pregnant changes nothing for me. Laelia and her baby can go home without a throne, and Einar is a dead man walking. That's the end goal for me... even if his child would be a threat to a grip on the throne. Laelia isn't going to survive long when Queen Evie has her memories back, either. The baby might be the only thing that will stop Evie from killing her right away.

"I see you are so happy, you are speechless."

I step back, feeling sick.

"But don't worry, I will leave you to sleep, Daesyn, while I work out a way around the spell you have cast. I will find you and kill you for good this time. Making them forget wasn't enough... but I bet it hurts. I bet you are struggling."

The only thing I'm struggling with is the burning fury I have for this shitty king. The sooner I kill him, the better. His laugh is the last thing I hear as the world disappears into a fading darkness.

As usual, I'm a breathless, heart-pounding mess when I wake up in my bed, sheets ripped around me with traces of shadow magic lingering on them. Well, that's new.

"Daesyn!" Caliphe shouts into my mind, a clear warning.

I grab my knife from under my bed just before Finn is in front of me and his hands reach for my face. I swipe my knife out at him, cutting his arm, and he hisses as he steps back. I roll off the bed, holding the dagger between us and lighting my other hand up with shadows.

"Sneaking into my room in the middle of the night isn't a good idea, Finn," I casually warn him. Really hurting him isn't something I can do, and even the small cut, which is healing quickly, makes me feel sick to my stomach. "What did you do to Caliphe?"

"The sprite is napping," he replies. "I don't harm weaker fae creatures. That is cruel and unneeded."

We circle each other, and his hands glow gold.

"What do you want?"

"I've been dreaming of you," he claims, eyes burning. "Dreams of us together, fighting, kissing, and training. Over and over the dreams come, before I had met you. Weeks' worth of dreams. Now tell me, how did you do it or I will look into your mind and find out."

"You can look into my mind and see?"

"One of my gifts, yes," he says.

I smile and he looks confused.

I drop the shadow magic and make it disappear before putting the knife on the bed. "Go for it."

"This will hurt," he softly warns, stepping closer.

I breathe in his scent, the thick magic mixing with his natural forestry scent. He smells like home. My heart pounds as he cups my face, his glowing eyes looking down at me.

"It will be worth it."

The pain is immediate as I lower every shield in my mind that I've ever made and let Finn take everything, every memory, every emotion. He sweeps through my mind like a wave until I can only sense Finn, feel him, and our connection burning to life.

Then he is gone, and I open my eyes, swaying on my feet as he practically jumps back, his eyes going wide.

Then he roars, grabbing his head, and blasts the room with gold magic. It turns everything to gold dust, from my clothes to the bed and my weapons. There is nothing but me left as I fall to my knees, witnessing and feeling the pure magic of a god. It's overwhelming, warm and wicked all at the same time.

Finn goes silent, and when he lifts his head, his clothes are ripped in so many places they are little more than rags. My voice gets caught in my throat.

"My fearless Daesyn Heartlocke... I remember you. It's all back."

Fearless is far from what I feel as a sob I've been holding in since this all happened comes rushing out of my mouth, and the next thing I know, I'm in Finn's arms, on his lap, pressed against his chest.

"I thought I'd lost you all," I breathe out, looking up. "Your mother... she killed—"

"I saw," he says, angry and sad at the same time. "I'm so sorry. She will regret helping Einar and taking my memories of you. She knew I'd burn the world down to save you, to be with you, so she found another way."

"But your magic found a loophole, one she couldn't even see," I whisper.

His fingers trail down my arm. "I can't offer you the stars, the moon, or even a cloud in the sky, but I offer you my life, my heart, and my magic. I'm in love with you, Dae, and I want you as my mate."

All the cracks in my heart, in my soul, slowly seem to soften and heal. I will never forget this moment.

“I offer you everything I am, Finn, because it’s yours. It always has been. We both have been a little too stubborn to see it.”

His lips slam down on mine, sealing our promise to each other with a passionate and soul-burning kiss that curls my toes. He slowly lays me down on the dust-covered floor, covering my body with his and drifting his lips down my jaw.

“I’ve wanted to touch you since we met. I’ve wanted to kiss here.” He pauses on my collarbone, kissing a spot there softly. Then he goes lower and lower until he has kissed every inch of me. Or it feels that way. Finn makes his clothes disappear as he climbs back up behind me and takes my lips once more.

Ever so slowly, like he wants to remember it as much as I do, he presses into me. Inch by inch, until it feels like I can’t take any more of him, but somehow, I can. I moan, pressure shaking through me as he fully seats himself inside me, and our bodies, both of us, glowing gold.

“I’ve always imagined this... but never once did I think it felt this good to be inside you.”

“I love you,” I tell him just before he thrusts out and back in, taking my breath away and stealing the sounds from the back of my mouth with his kisses.

I moan as he slams in and out of me, rapid and fast, our glowing turning the room brighter by the second. My orgasm builds up with every thrust, until I can’t see anything but gold light, feel anything but Finn inside me, filling me up. The pleasure crashes through me, and I cry out, blasting the room with my magic by accident, but I barely notice as Finn finishes, and magic like I’ve never felt it drenches the room.

“Dae, Dae, Dae,” he groans my name, his head bowed and my fingers digging into his shoulders. His skin, every inch from his neck down, is filled with looping gold symbols, runes, much like the cursed, but they seem more.

Godlike.

I lift my arm, and around the mating marks of Ryker's are the same looping gold symbols. Slowly they fade into black on both of us, and Finn smiles down at me.

"Hello, mate. I love you so much."

"I can't believe that just happened," I say with a smile and a slight chuckle. "I've thought about it so many times, but that was so much better..."

"Did you imagine me bad in bed?"

"Well, it was your first time, and usually—"

He nips at my bottom lip. "I'm a demigod, not some mortal man."

"Noted." I grin and then I notice the room. Vines, with stunning gold flowers, cover every inch of the room, encasing us on a bed of gold dust in the middle. "I think the queen might be pissed about her cleaning bill."

He laughs and kisses my forehead. "I will deal with it, my mate."

"Together," I reply, holding him closely as I rest my head on his chest. "We deal with everything tomorrow."



CHAPTER 65

“So you want the foul-mouthed fae monkey to remember next. Not, you know, Sebastian or Seth?”

“So judgey. You love Mossy really,” I tease, knowing in fact, he isn’t a fan of my bestie. But he puts up with him all the same.

Finn and Ryker look at each other, and both of them shake their heads. Having them back at my side, as my mates, feels amazing and like parts of my soul that went cold have smoothed over, changing into something much stronger. I sense they feel it as well, a sense of rightness, of how our lives have always been building up to this moment. Seb is sleeping off what happened in the test, and I have no idea where Seth is, but a lingering part of me suspects he is here in this realm.

“He calls me virgin angel fucker,” Finn coolly reminds me.

“Well, at least one of those three names won’t be true anymore,” I murmur.

Ryker snorts on a laugh, and Finn glares at us both as I flicker my eyes to the tree and the pile of sweets underneath them.

“Once we get Mossy back, I want you to get Sebastian’s memories back for me, please. I need to go with Ryker to the Unseelie fraction of the city. Speak to my godfather about our plans,” I explain the plan.

This morning, after I stopped Caliphe from ‘smiting’ Finn for knocking her out, Ryker came rushing in and was relieved to hear there was a way to get his memory back. He didn’t

seem bothered about Finn being my mate alongside him, and though it's somewhat unusual for me to have more than one mate, it's not unheard of in this world. Queen Evie has four mates, and so do many protectors and demons.

“Caliphe can cloak us, and Mossy will come to help us distract the guards so we can sneak in.”

“If the monkey takes the bait,” Finn reminds me, about the same time Mossy jumps down from the tree, not touching the food and looking at the bush we are hiding behind.

“I'm not stupid and I can hear you,” Mossy says.

Finn grins as he stands tall. “I've wanted to do this for a long time.”

Gold tendrils of energy snake out of the ground, wrapping around Mossy's feet as he tries to jump away, and then he gets mad. He lashes out as we walk out of the bush, and Finn leans down.

“Bastards, the lot of you! You can all go to—”

He is cut off as Finn lays his glowing gold hand on top of Mossy's head, and he stills. Ryker places his hand on my back as we wait in silence, and then Finn lets go, and Mossy stumbles forward. I lean down and catch him, picking up in my arms and holding him as he opens his eyes, glossy with unsaid emotion.

“Dae!” he exclaims and jumps up to my shoulder, hugging my neck. “What rotten bastard took my mind? I didn't know who you were!”

“Einar has a rune that makes people be forgotten, and he used it to make the world forget me,” I say. “The loophole is Finn's power to see into minds and unlock parts with his power.”

Mossy slowly lets me go and turns to Finn. “I shall call you virgin angel fucker no more. You are now the remembering god.”

I cough on my laugh at the look on Finn's face. “I guess it's an improvement.”

“You’re mated to them both? Even the dog?”

“Why don’t I get a less nasty nickname?” Ryker demands, placing his hands on his hips.

Mossy looks over at him. “When I find a more suitable name.”

Ryker rubs his chin. “We should get moving. I’m sure Caliphe is waiting by the barrier.”

“Who is Caliphe?” Mossy asks, then he seems to remember. “The stuck-up sprite from the Riverlite house is here, helping?”

“Yes, and be nice. She has kept me safe and is living with me for a bit.”

Mossy overdramatically gasps. “You replaced me!”

“No,” I say, twitching my lips. I missed this pain-in-the-ass monkey. “Caliphe is free to leave whenever, but you are stuck with me, Moss.”

His cheeks look a little bright as he huffs. “I’m not sharing my sweets.”

Finn ignores Mossy on my shoulder and cups my cheeks, kissing me softly once. “Be careful out there, and call for me in your mind if you need me.”

“I will,” I promise him before taking Ryker’s outstretched hand and moving close to his chest, before he makes us disappear in a shadow and reappear at the edge of the forest by the wall protecting the castle lands.

Caliphe’s yellow form appears in the tree above us, and she floats down, her big eyes taking in Mossy.

“He remembers.”

“I am the only fae creature bitch in Dae’s life,” Mossy exclaims. “Let’s make that clear right now.”

Caliphe just frowns at him and lifts her head high, not bothering to give him a reply. “Now the lesser fae creature has his memories back.”

Ouch.

“We should be able to cover your movements through the streets. I will cloak you, and Mossy can search, but we should head there now.”

“I know the way to a pub with an underground tunnel to the fraction. The pub is called Darkorb,” Ryker tells me, linking our fingers.

Caliphe’s magic washes over us as Mossy grumbles on my shoulder about buttery sprites not being as nice as butter. The second the magic feels locked in place, we all head to the wall and through the unguarded gap and out into an alleyway in the city. Ryker pulls me to him as Mossy jumps off my shoulder, and then we use shadows to bounce our way across the city undetected with the fae creatures’ help. The guards don’t see us as we pass them, the empty city making it easy. Finally, we come to a heavily guarded part of the city, and Mossy pushes open a door down a small alleyway. Caliphe floats down with us, and Mossy jumps on my shoulder as we go into the door and pull it shut.

“Why hasn’t this place been found?” I ask Ryker as we go down a dark, damp corridor that smells like stale beer.

“Years of wards,” he answers as we come to a wooden door. His eyes still find mine in the darkness, our mating bond connecting us deeper than a single touch or look can. “In this city, they had to find a place to send Unseelie, who fled, and this was where they went. The tunnels under the city have been home to Unseelie for a long time, and the wards they have woven are... impressive. Deep.”

“I hate that my kind have ever had to live in tunnels,” I admit.

The door slowly creaks open of its own accord. No one to be seen. I walk in first, noting everything around me in case of an ambush, and instead I feel the wards as I face the long tunnel in front of me. Thousands of wards crash into me at once, and my body feels like it’s been pricked a dozen times. Both Caliphe and Mossy flinch, and I press forward through the wards, more and more of them popping up as I keep going.

“What—” I grit my teeth. “Are they even searching us for?”

“Ill intent, danger, anything that could go against an Unseelie fae,” he replies through gritted teeth. “Basically, they are checking you aren’t an intruder.”

“If I was?” I question a little later as the push through the wards starts to feel less... demanding.

“You’d be dead,” another voice answers before a familiar Unseelie fae comes into the light, by a pair of stairs going up to a pothole.

“Faolan,” I greet him. “Hello, godfather.”

He inclines his head, his eyes somewhat shocked. “Did your mother tell you about me?”

Of course, he doesn’t remember who I am, and I have no choice but to lie rather than explain what happened. “Yes.”

His eyes soften. “I am sorry for your loss, and your uncle as well. I was glad when I received word of your plans, even if I am concerned for you.”

“The Unseelie prisoners will be freed, and I will lead them down here to you in a week, on the night of the final test for the throne. It will be the perfect distraction.”

His eyes burn in the darkness. “You have the same fire in your soul as your mother did. I miss her terribly, and she would be proud of you.”

“I know,” I say, my voice breaking a little. “Will you be able to shelter the Unseelie and hold your ground here until I come back from the Otherworld for you?”

His head tilts. “You plan to go to the Otherworld after freeing our kind?”

“Yes, and I hope my friend will be on the throne when I return and make a peace treaty with her,” I admit. “If everything works out, I will have the throne and the king will be dead.”

“You’ll need a bigger army than just yourself to take the throne,” he warns. “Even if you managed to kill the king on your own, his soldiers would turn on you.”

I hold my head high. “The Otherworld hasn’t given me a gift yet, but I have two runes, and I’m impossible to kill. I don’t need an army.”

Ryker growls at my one-man mission of pain, and likely, a lot of it. “But you can hurt, and we don’t even know what the Forsaken Rune does.”

“You have the Forsaken Rune?” Faolan interrupts. “Then you won’t need our army at all.”

“Do you know what it does?”

He nods. “I studied many ancient texts as a boy and came across a book on the rune. That rune gives you the power to open a portal to Hell and command an army of souls. You have an army under your feet, and the rune is basically a crown. You are the Queen of Hell, Daesyn. The Immortal and Damned Queen of Hell.”

I look up at Ryker, who is more connected to Hell than anyone I know, and he grins.

“My father is going to be so pissed.”

I can’t help but laugh for a moment and smile. Seth and Azi gave me the crown to Hell and an army to go with it. “Is there a cost for using the rune?”

Faolan nods. “Every portal you open takes life from you... but you have the Cursed Rune. Your mates are linked to your life, and it will weaken you all through that connection, but it’s only temporary.”

“Thank you for your help, Faolan,” I tell him. “I hope when we are all free, we can sit down for a drink of fae wine, and you can tell me about my parents.”

He bows his head. “It would be a great honour, dear Daesyn. Travel safe.”

“Same to you,” I say before turning around and walking out of the tunnel, which is much easier than going in.

Mossy and Caliphe are waiting near the door and jump on my shoulders as Ryker peeks out.

“Safe,” he says.

We head out before he pulls me to him and we get back to the wall. I climb through first, with Ryker following, and pause when Seth waits in the shadows of the trees, his red eyes glowing, anger rolling off him.

He is in front of me in the blink of an eye, and his lips crash down on mine with a burning fury, mixed with a searing passion that weakens my knees. Seth holds me to him with his arm, and I feel Mossy and Caliphe have left my shoulders as Ryker clears his throat.

Seth breaks our kiss only to growl at him.

He growls right back.

“Hey, do you remember?” I ask Seth.

He nods, eyes burning.

“Einar is going to burn under my hands before I remove his head.”

“Get in line,” Ryker says before I can say it.

“My favourite one is back!” Mossy says from Ryker’s shoulder and looks at Ryker. “No offence. You’re third.”

“Who the fuck is second?”

“The prince. He gave me food,” Mossy replies.

Seth grins.

“Fuck’s sake, I will cook you a seven-course meal to get you to stop putting dog treats in my bed,” Ryker replies, making us all laugh.

“Eight course with peanut butter cheesecake and you have a deal,” Mossy says.

Sebastian steps out of a shadow portal, followed by Finn. Seb’s eyes meet mine, so many unspoken words between us.

“When are we going after the king?” he asks a simple question to us all, but the words are filled with malice and

anger. There is going to be a big queue for the king's head, it seems.

Fantastic.

“After we break out the Unseelie from the prisons under the castle when the last test is on. I'm not leaving this world until then,” I say. “Then we are going to the Otherworld, and I am taking the throne, burning his armies down and becoming the queen the realm needs. I'm done letting my home suffer and I'm going to do my parents proud, make all their sacrifices worth it. I'm not finishing until there is peace.”

One by one, my mates bow their heads to me, even Mossy and Caliphe joining in, and my cheeks burn red. “We follow you to the end, Daesyn Heartlocke. To the end.”

“To the end,” I whisper back, hoping our end is nothing less than perfect.



CHAPTER 66

RYKER

Part of me does not want to go back into my apartment, mostly because my beautiful mate won't be in there and I miss her presence already. I can just see her black hair wrapped around my hand as I kissed her, her soft body pressing into mine, her curves begging me to grip them and kiss her in other places. But I need new clothes, and my hellhound needs a run in the forest. Having a mate is better than anything I ever thought. It's a different sense of belonging, something I've not had much in my life. Being dumped in this world was always something I saw as a curse, but it gave me the chance to find Daesyn, and for that, it was worth it.

My inner hellhound tenses at the scent of who is in my apartment. Who is just past the door waiting in there for me. The man I've tried to avoid speaking to for far too long about everything. My father.

With a sigh, I open my door and slam it shut behind me. My father has made himself at home on my sofa in his leather clothes, eating all of my food by the looks of it and resting his feet on my favourite towel. Bastard. His flame-filled eyes flicker towards me.

"Your step-mother misses you," he says, straight out with the blackmail.

I don't mind my step-mother, but she isn't my real mother, and we both know it. If anything, I feel sorry for her, being mated to this brute. Strangely, the pair of them work well together. Her kindness offsets his strength.

“Well, tell her to come say hello,” I counter.

His returning grin is nothing but predatory. “She’s not allowed here. We don’t mix with this kin usually. You’re an exception. You always have been, and look where that got us.”

That didn’t take long.

I give him a tight smile before leaning on the wall. “What do you want?”

“You’ve mated with her. A reaper who smells of Unseelie fae. Have you lost your goddamn mind?”

“I know you have a problem with it. I’m not stupid, but I don’t want to hear it.”

“I have more than a problem with it,” he shouts. “You just met her, and you’ve mated like a teenager finding out his cock works for something other than peeing.”

“Careful,” I warn him.

“You act like you have been in love with her for years!”

“I am in love with her,” I reply. “And I don’t need to tell you why or explain any of it. It just is what it is.”

“You selfish, selfish boy. The pack will never accept you having a reaper as a wife.”

“Lucky I don’t care for their opinion,” I reply. “I’m not a people pleaser.”

He glares at me. “The reapers have messed with your head. Your mother—”

“Careful,” I warn him a second time. “I won’t warn you three times. That is my mother, and Daesyn is my mate. They won’t be spoken about with anything other than respect.”

He stares at me, standing up off the sofa, all pleasantries now gone, which I’m thankful for. I don’t know him, and I hate when he tries to pretend to be nice. He was never nice to me. He was a shit dad. He crosses the room and stands right in front of me, careful not to push it too far. We could fight if we wanted. We could ruin our apartment. How this entire castle could go down in flames in one argument between us.

But he knows doing that wouldn't be the smartest move. "What do you expect me to tell the hellhounds about your new mate? Their future leader?"

I simply cross my arms and look my father straight in the eyes, not backing down. He's about the same height as me, thankfully. Some people say we look very similar, but I don't particularly see it.

"I've made my choice," I tell him. "You have plenty of betas around who would die for the position. The alpha line doesn't need to be kept with blood, only power. Your father wasn't an alpha. You took it, and someone else can take it from you. The point is. I don't know why you're here, and you should leave."

"I'm here because I'm your father!"

"Only in title and blood," I remind him. He never sent me gifts for Christmas or birthdays. He was never there for me growing up or in any of the times I actually needed him. "You aren't there like family should have been and yet you still want to call yourself family to me."

I walk to the door and pull it open. "I think your time is up in this world. Go home. Don't expect me to visit."

"You will regret this!" he warns me, storming to the door. He pauses in the frame, looking down. His voice lowers. "No matter what, you still have a home with me. Come home when this blows up in your face and you're alone."

"I won't," I tell him, letting him leave and slamming the door when I can, knowing I won't regret any of these actions in the future. He's just a part of my past, and I know exactly who my future is with.



CHAPTER 67

My apartment feels cramped with Sebastian, Seth, Finn somehow sitting on the sofa, and Ryker in the small kitchen, pouring four cups of coffee. I thank him as I take mine and sit on Finn's lap, resting my knees near Seth. The sofa seems smaller than it is, all of us pressed together and closer than usual. If we plan to spend the rest of our lives together, this is a good start.

Not.

It's awkward, I realise, as no one actually knows what to say.

"Where did you go before you came here with Alun?" Seb finally asks, breaking the silence as everyone accepts a drink from Ryker.

Between sips of coffee, I briefly explain everything that happened, and each of them looks more surprised about Aphrodite's interference than I do.

"She will want something in return for helping you. No god or goddess makes deals with mortals without payment," Finn says.

"I suspect she got payment from my mother," I admit. "I don't know what, though."

"Talking of mothers. How are you going to stop her touching Daesyn?" Seth roughly asks Finn, none too threateningly.

"I'm cloaked by the Elven king. They can't see me, and neither can Einar. He can reach me in my dreams but not

actually see me in them. He just taunts me,” I explain.

Ryker’s voice is nothing short of possessive. “That bastard needs to die.”

“Laelia is pregnant and married to him,” I tell him. Silence. That’s what comes next. “I should tell Poppy and Alun... but a part of me knows what they will say, and it will contradict what I have to do next.”

“I can always bring Poppy’s memories back. She might—”

“No,” I interrupt. “But thank you. I-I just can’t break her heart right now, and when she no doubt asks me to leave her sister alone, I won’t be able to. I think it’s best she forgets until I deal with Laelia,” I suggest. “But as long as she is pregnant, we can’t kill her.”

“The child will be a contender to your throne,” Seth darkly warns.

My power swarms under my skin at the threat. “Then when the baby is older, he or she can fight me for the throne or walk away. I won’t ever hurt a baby or child.”

“Laelia is never going to give that throne up, and she no doubt loves Einar. It will be a fight,” Finn warns me. “We know Laelia is heartless and evil, proven by her killing of the angels.”

“Evie believes they are missing, but she cannot figure out where. Some of those angels were close friends,” Seth adds in. “I am going to tell her what happened, and you will have an army behind you in the Otherworld from Earth.”

“I know the portal they can go through,” I say with a smile. “That makes two armies and the Unseelie army in the Otherworld already. Though they might not follow me.”

“I can convince them,” Seb says with a wicked grin. “I’m their prince, and you are who I chose for the throne. With me at your side, if you’ll have me.”

“If I’m taking a title of queen, you four are my kings,” I firmly say.

“Does that make me a prince then?” Mossy pops up from the kitchen, a mouthful of cheesecake that Ryker made for him shoved in his mouth.

“Prince Mossy does have a cool ring to it,” I say.

He gives me a monkey smile. “Awesome,” he says. “I’m going to nap. Where is the bedroom?”

“Err...” I pause.

Finn clicks his fingers, winking at me. Did he get rid of the roots and dust and magically conjure a bed?

Damn.

“In there you will find a bed,” Finn says, just as the door is knocked twice.

Ryker is at the door before any of us get up, and I hear Alun’s voice before he comes in, taking in the cramped room.

“Poppy wants to speak to us, Daesyn,” Alun tells me. “have you decided if returning her memory is wise?”

“Yes, we have decided to not return it yet. She needs a clear head for the test,” I say. “But maybe we should return Toth’s memory and get him to keep a close eye on her.”

“He loves her,” Seb says. “He might not keep that big a secret.”

“If he loves her, he will,” Finn suggests. “The final test will take everything from Poppy to win it and beat Catherine, who has already made it clear killing for the throne is something she is willing to do.”

“Will the gods be watching the test?” I ask Finn.

“Closely,” he warns. “But it means no eyes will be on the prisons.”

“Is everything ready?” I ask Seb and Ryker.

Ryker is the one who answers. “Between us, we should be able to blast all the doors open level by level, and some of them are strong, even down there. We will work it out so the weak are carried out and the strong help.”

“I have an idea on how I can break all the doors at once,” Finn says with a grin. “Leave it to me and you get them out.”

“Remember, your Unseelie powers won’t work down there,” Seth warns me. “But I will hold a portal open at the top of the prison, one that leads to the tunnel entrance. I have two of my men guarding the entrance that night.”

I breathe out a breath. “This could go so wrong.”

“But it is the right thing to do. I will be your ears and eyes in the test, making a good excuse for your absence. You will have to come in the beginning,” Alun states. “May the gods bless our mission.”

“I don’t think praying to the gods for this is a good idea,” I say. “I mean, they hate me.”

“Not all of them,” he reminds me, and I smile tightly, knowing he is right. “Come, Poppy is waiting.”

“Alun, there is something I have to tell you before we see Poppy. Part of me didn’t want to tell you, upset you, but she is your daughter, and it feels wrong,” I say.

The room goes silent, quickly.

“Laelia is pregnant,” Alun announces. He already knows. His eyes cast downwards. “Poppy is not to be told about this until the test is over, and we will discuss it then as well.”

“It changes nothing for me,” I warn him. “My people will forever suffer while her husband has that throne. Maybe her child could rule one day, and be good, but I’m not willing to wait those years out with Einar or Laelia on the throne.”

“Despite...” He pauses and gulps. “I have fought for what is good in the world for a long time, longer than you. I am not going to stop you, Daesyn, and my allegiance is on your side. But please don’t kill her. She was not born to be a queen, or a ruler, and has none of the qualities that a queen should have.”

Honestly, I have no idea if I have any of those qualities. I stand and walk behind Alun to the door, looking back at my family. Most of it.

“Be back soon.”

“We will sort out dinner,” Ryker says. “Be safe.”

“Always,” I say with a wink before heading out.

The corridors of the old castle are silent as we head down them and out through the forest, right for my old apartment. I haven't been back in it since coming back, and I'm not sure I want to see more proof of how I was forgotten as Alun presses the lift button at the base of the tree. I don't have a second to back out as Alun leads me into the lift and we go up to the apartment, the door flickering open.

It isn't Poppy who greets me, it's Sword, sitting at the counter, plates of food all around him. His eyes look over at me before he disappears.

Damn, I've missed the little Bwbachod.

Poppy comes out of her bedroom, dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. Toth appears out of my room, which he must have taken as his own room at some point. His long black cloak hangs over his tall form, and he inclines his head our way, but it's Poppy who speaks. “You came.”

“Well done on passing the test and being in second place, no matter the outcome of the final test,” I say with a smile.

“I couldn't be prouder,” Alun says, pulling her into a short hug. “But I have to see the queen for a meeting on the takeover of the throne. I wouldn't want to be late for her invitation.”

“May I walk with you? I am heading to the medical bay to pick up some new herbs that need grinding down,” Toth asks, his hands resting behind his back.

“Of course,” Alun agrees, his eyes resting on me.

He is giving me a moment to be with my best friend, a woman I see as a sister, before I have to leave. I have to leave without her knowing who I am. Maybe he is giving me a chance to talk to her in fear of the final test, in fear she might lose her life in the test.

But not one part of me believes anyone but Poppy is destined to take the throne. Alun and Toth leave, but I catch

Poppy's eyes nervously tracing after them, well after the lift has gone down.

“Boyfriend and dad's first alone time, huh?” I question.

She turns to me, her cheeks burning red, a contrast to her long black hair that is straight around her shoulders.

“I'm not sure who I should worry about. Toth or my father,” she admits with a sigh, crossing her arms. “Toth asked me to be his mate last night, told me he loved me, and I just went silent in shock. Then the first thing I blurted out was that he had to ask my dad for permission, rather than tell him I've been in love with him for as long as I can remember. After that, he was quiet, and I didn't know what to say...”

She pauses, her eyes going wide. “Just like I've just blurted out my life problems to you instead of offering you a drink and the chance to sit down.”

“I don't mind,” I tell her, heading to the counter and sitting on a stool.

She joins me as Sword places a large coffee in front of me... in my usual mug.

“I know fae creatures aren't—”

“I love fae creatures like Sword here,” I interrupt her.

Her eyes narrow on me. “How do you know his name?”

“He is well-known around here for his coffee,” I say. “And they are my favourite drink.”

“Right, of course,” she says, looking away.

I pick at some of the food as I wait for her to tell me why she asked me here.

“Thank you for coming. I wanted to ask you something... well, I best just say it. What is it like to kill someone? To take a life? I've never...”

I pause, placing my coffee cup down. “You never forget any life you take, even if they were evil and you had no choice. Taking a life is easy; living with the guilt and pressure in your chest is harder. I've learnt to accept that any life I have

taken was deserved, and therefore, the world can't judge me for it."

"I have to kill Catherine," she admits, folding her hands. "Otherwise she will kill me, I know it. Only one of us walking out of that test, but I don't want the debt of her soul on mine."

"It won't be," I firmly tell her, placing my hand on her shoulder and softening my eyes. "The debt goes to the gods, for this test, and for the battle for the throne in the first place. They carry the debt of her soul, no one else, Poppy. Do what you must to win, because the throne is yours and your people need you. This realm needs a queen who wants peace... who fights for what is good and pure. And that's you, Poppy."

Her eyes shine with tears and a little confusion. "That was beautiful, and I feel like we have been friends for much longer than we have. I feel like I know you."

"Maybe we were friends in another life," I jokingly say, needing her to stop looking at me in such confusion.

She smiles. "Maybe we were sisters, willing to die for each other."

"Sounds right," I say tightly, my chest hurting. I clear my throat. "I have something for you. From a friend."

I pull out Finn's glowing gold dagger that I asked to borrow from him earlier today and place it on the counter in the middle of us. "It's blessed with the magic of the gods, and my friend swears on his life the dagger has its own magic of luck. Take it."

Poppy wraps her hand around the dagger, the lights above reflecting off the metal. Mossy stole this dagger for me once, and then Finn got it back. And now it's going to keep my friend alive when I can't.

"Thank you, but this is too much."

"I insist," I tell her, climbing off my seat. Poppy stands with me. "And as for Toth, maybe you should tell him how you feel before it's too late. Take it from me. The world can slip from your fingers in an instant, and you will regret it. He is a good man."

“You might be right,” she replies with a small smile. “Thank you for coming. I know it was silly for just one question, but I felt like I had to see you. I know, weird.”

“It’s not,” I say, my throat feeling tight. “I mean, I’m glad you asked me here.”

Before she can say anything, I go to the lift and press the button. She waits nearby as the lift comes up,

I turn back to her. “Catherine favours her left, always puts her foot down before punching, and has a weak punch at best. Her magic is fast and hard, but she runs out of stamina quick, so wear her out. Watch out for her shadow jumping, a trick I’ve seen her do, and try to get behind her and hit her with magic when she is worn out.”

“How in the gods do you know that?” she asks.

I wink at her as the lift doors open and I step inside, pressing the button for the ground. “I’ve been watching. Good luck, and hopefully next time we talk, you will have a crown on your head.”

“I will,” she whispers as the doors slide shut. Goodbye, Poppy.



CHAPTER 68

The final test is in a temple of the gods, one in the middle of an ancient forest on the boundaries of this realm. A place filled with the monsters gods created, creatures bred from them and every other wicked and evil thing in this world with no home. They all live in that forest, a place not even the bravest of souls want to go.

Luxitus Forest.

The temple itself towers above the autumn-touched trees, spiralling pillars of sandstone and asymmetric oval markers for the levels. There are tall, pillar-marked balconies, but at the top of the towering temple is a flat surface and two purple glowing swords in the middle.

“They both will be dropped in random places in the forest and are expected to fight their way to the top. They are magically banished from using magic or other weapons against each other. The only way to fight for the throne is with the swords,” Alun quietly tells me, his voice too tense, too worried.

Mimicking my own feelings on tonight. So much could go wrong if one tiny bit of our plan goes out of control. I cool my features, despite the fact I can feel the queen’s eyes on me, watching me too closely.

I feel her walk to my side without looking, the coolness of her magic a frosty welcome.

“When I was young, I won this test by ripping out the throat of my enemy and pushing another off the top of that temple. I killed so many for this crown because I wanted the

Reaper Realm to finally have a royal who would die for the title and her people. The king before me did not, and the first thing I did was label him a traitor and kill him on the throne.”

My breath hitches. “If you dare lay a hand on Poppy—”

“Persephone will not win this, she does not have it in her to make that final blow. To kill for the throne.”

“You do not have a clue who she is. Poppy will be the new queen of the Reaper Realm,” I firmly state. “I have trained her and seen her true self. Under pressure, she will fight.”

“Catherine understands what the throne needs, unlike the Riverlite girl,” she replies.

Ah, she thinks if Catherine is on the throne, she will escape any judgment of her time on the throne.

“Why bother speaking with me. What do you want?”

Her eyes glance down at me. Sometimes she reminds me of Sebastian, the slight tilt of her head, the slope of her nose, but when I look into her eyes, I see nothing of my dark prince. I see nothing but a cold, heartless woman.

“I do love my son and daughter... despite my lack of parenting skills. You are in my son’s life, and I wish for you to ask him where my daughter is. I want to see her.”

“Ask him yourself,” I say, turning away, hearing the cherished five whisper about how Poppy and Catherine have started the test.

“As your queen, I demand you to ask,” she sneers, grabbing my arm.

I snatch her hand and twist, easily forcing her to drop her grip, and I step away.

One of her cherished five, hidden in a deep cloak, notices us. “Queen Annalee, is everything—”

“It’s fine.” Her eyes burn with hatred as she looks at me and then turns away. “Has the test started? I want to see this end.”

I smile, crossing my arms as she turns away from me to the portal as it splits into two, one side showing Catherine and the other Poppy, following them like shadows as they run through the forest. I ignore Catherine, watching as Poppy ducks behind a tree from a massive creature of some kind and looks right at us. Like she can see the portal, see the magic, and she smiles.

A deadly smile.

I feel like her eyes are telling me to go, her smile telling me she can handle this. To do what I have to do.

Good luck, Pops.

I nod at Alun before sneaking out of the room and making sure I'm not seen before I whistle to Mossy, letting him know to cut off all the cameras around the castle, making sure we can't be seen. I run down the corridors, passing several guards who are staring into space, fixed to the spot thanks to Caliphe and a little magic spell she wove into the guards' drinking water. They won't remember anything, and they can't move for two hours. Seeing as the guards usually stand around, hopefully nobody will look too closely or order them to do anything.

My heart is pounding as I run to the door leading to steps to the dungeon doors, and rush down them to the bottom where Ryker, Seth, and Sebastian are waiting by a glowing purple door covered in runes.

"Where is Finn?"

"Busy with a minor problem with his mother," is all Ryker says quickly. "This door has never been here before. It's rune magic, and I can't break it. None of us can. It drains you, and it has death markings."

I bet I can break it. I don't mind dying. It's not new to me.

"If I pass out, one of you best catch me," I tell them before unleashing my power like a storm, aimed right at the door.

I let my shadows mix with my Unseelie magic. A clash of purple, green, and black swarms the door until there is nothing but my power. The door drains me quickly, like water escaping down a river into the sea, and I can't stop myself. A scream

rips from my lips as more of my magic drains from me, and sweat pours down the back of my neck. I can't smell anything but my magic, hear anything over the sound of my ears ringing until there is a crack, and the door explodes. I feel myself slam across the room, a warm body catching me with an oomph before darkness swallows me whole.



CHAPTER 69

TORFINN

The Unseelie fae before me are empty, soulless, bar my mother's presence in her body. Sometimes, I wonder if my mother even notices the life she takes when she comes to see me, to make sure her son is okay, as she takes the life of someone else's child. Her eyes glow with her power. It seeps into the room, escaping the body she is in, and once I found it comforting. I wanted to see her, to have her near me, but then she took Daesyn from my life. Took her from the world.

In the weeks I didn't remember, I had never felt so... hollow. I knew someone was missing from my life, but I couldn't remember why. I couldn't stop thinking about the missing piece of my life, and then I saw her.

Daesyn Heartlocke.

Immediately, my mind and soul knew she was someone to me, and my dreams were haunted by her. The woman I thought was a dream.

Now I know she isn't, and I won't let my mother, goddess or not, ever come between us again.

This visit couldn't have come at a worst time.

Ryker saw the Unseelie fae walk into my room as I gathered my weapons, ready to break out the Unseelie from prisons with Dae. Our bond was like another part of me, and still me at the same time. It was us, very part of our souls, breathing life between us.

“Son... You have mated,” my mother gasps, actually gasps, stumbling back from me. “Dear holy gods, they will kill you for this. For joining with the Cursed One!”

“And you took her from me,” I growl out, letting my power seep into the world. She thinks I got all my power from her, but that isn’t the truth and we both know it.

I took more. I demanded more.

I am more.

“Wait!”

“Get out of my realm and don’t ever come back. We are coming for the gods, go and warn them, and none will be spared,” I warn her.

This time she stands her ground, but still, her eyes are too revealing.

She fears me.

And even after everything she has done, I don’t think I can watch her die. A monster she might be... but she is my mother.

“I will give you this one warning, Mother, because a part of me loves you. I know you love me, and you gave me the best chance you could in life, but what you did to Daesyn, my mate, is something I cannot forgive. You gods have spent too much time away from life, frozen in your world of clouds, and you have forgotten emotions. What it is to be alive. Immortality has ruined you, and power has taken from your mind. Leave, Mother, and don’t come back to our realms. If you love me, you will do this.”

“She will destroy us! Kill us all! Will you let her?”

I pause for just a second and lift my eyes to hers. “Fate weaves her path, and not even you can stop her.”

She screams at me before the body drops to the floor, dead. But my mother’s presence floats around the room, like a drifting wind, and her voice is gentle in my mind.

“For you, I will leave. For you, I will keep silent about the threat. I always loved you more than myself, dear son. I will protect you, even from them.”

“Goodbye, Mother,” I say, turning away and heading for my mate. For the mission we have planned, for everything our future holds, knowing for the first time in my life, I feel like my mother is on my side.

Even if I can't forgive her, it's something she can hold on to. Something I can, too.



CHAPTER 70

I wake up with a banging headache, my mouth dry as I look at the brick ceiling in front of me and feel arms tightly grasped around my waist, my head resting on a warm chest. At the same time, I realise it's Seb holding me. Finn steps into the room.

His eyes are burning with anger and worry for me as he reaches for me. "What the fuck happened?"

"I broke the door," I dryly say.

"She's good," Ryker comments. "The sassy sarcasm confirms it."

I wink at him.

"Are you sure?" Sebastian asks me.

Seth is watching me closely as Finn offers me a hand and carefully helps me stand. I look towards the blasted-open doors, which are nothing more than cinders on the floor, torched with shadow magic. Parts of the door are still alight, and the room smells of smoke with an overwhelming tinge of thick magic. I can sense the wards now the door is down, the heavy beat of them pushing against my skin. Even though I'm a bit shaky, I stand straight and hold my stance.

"Finn, it's your turn. Break them out," I say with a smile.

Finn nods before cracking his fingers as he walks into the doorframe and stops, no doubt looking down at the spiralling prisons I've seen in dreams. Thousands of thousands of my people are caged in here, and it's going to be one hell of a mission to get them all out.

“I will get working, too,” Seth says, stroking his fingers over my arm gently as he passes.

Seth goes to the right wall, covered in dust and cobwebs, that burn away as he starts making a portal. He takes his time to make one portal big enough for five people at once to walk through. We need to get them gone, and quickly, before anyone notices.

I only look back at Finn once and I feel his magic, like a distant rumble of a storm before it hits land and then it explodes out of him. Giant waves of gold magic in interlocking streams form in the middle of the room above the prisons then shaping into a dragon with long teeth and eyes that remind me of Finn.

He is the dragon. His power, anyway. The dragon swirls down into the darkness of the prisons, lighting it up from the inside. The metal doors burn away into nothing but dust, the dust sprinkling around like light in the darkness, making it seem almost beautiful here when it's not. When it's prisons that have kept my kind locked away, in misery, never seeing the moon or stars watching outside. People trapped in dark, dingy dungeons, children, babies, I can hear all of them, and it's over. It's not happening anymore. They will finally be free, even if it's the last thing we do, I am freeing them.

This city is losing its slaves.

Finn falls to his knees when his power no doubt drains, and I rush to him. I kneel in front of him, picking up his sweaty face to look at me.

He nods once. “It's done. Go.”

“Thank you,” I shakily tell him.

I know that I have to leave him, make it all worth it. I press my lips to his forehead before starting to follow Ryker and Sebastian down the steps. I go straight into the first cell, seeing a young woman with two tiny children under her arms in poor excuses for clothing, nothing more than two great pieces of grey cloth shaped into a ripped dress. The children have blankets, at least, but they are rough material and filled with

holes. Seeing them like this rips me right back to when I was a child, not much older than these kids, begging for food in my own ripped clothes.

I remember the sorrow, the empty and gnawing pain it fills you with, and I know I will never forget it. I have to pull myself from the past, from the haunted memories, and save them. The girl is clutching what seems to be an ivy woven stick in her hands, like it's a toy. They're all too skinny, too frightened.

And each of them have purple eyes, glowing with power, even under this distress. That's why they are here, locked up, because of their powers. What they could do.

And it's wrong.

"You're free," I tell them, my voice catching at the look of hope in their eyes. Hope, even under this, is alive. Hope can be alive like fire, and I want it to set the world alight.

"Go through the fire portal to a section of the city. It's controlled by the Unseelie Fae, and he will care for you. Trust me, okay?"

I know, once Poppy gets the throne, she won't try to get that part of the city back right away. She will try to find a way for peace, and it will give me time to do what I have to in the Otherworld.

"I'm one of you and I'm getting you free," I tell her, needing her to move. To do anything.

The woman doesn't seem to know what to say for a long time. She looks at me, her eyes speaking of years of distrust and cruelty she has endured before I see it.

I see the moment she chooses to trust me, right before she steps out of the room, past me.

"Come, we follow The Cursed Saviour," the woman whispers to her children.

A new nickname... and it's worse than the Cursed One or Bearer of the Runes. What will they come up with next? I walk with her, a few more stragglers coming out behind us,

their whispers like smoke on the wind. I can see it but can't catch it. The near-silent prison hums with excitement, hope, as they catch on to what's going on. Ryker shouts orders, barking at the strong to carry the weak, demanding that no one is to be left behind.

Pride hits me hard in the chest, my mates showing the world how it should be done. Sebastian's doing the same as Ryker, but much lower down by the sounds of it. This is the plan. I guide them through to make sure we get everyone out of this prison. Ryker and Seb are going to search, as they know them best and grew up in this hellhole of a castle. I take the young woman and the two children to Seth's portal, and they both recoil in fear. The girls hiding behind their mothers, clutching her dress tightly. The excuse of a dress barely holds on to her thin figure.

"I trust him with my life, with my soul, and he is fighting for you. Go," I tell her.

"My name is Tasses," she softly tells me. "We will pray for you and never forget." She nods at me once before she bravely takes her children through the portal. Seth stands near, holding it together, no doubt draining him slowly to hold a portal like this for so long.

Tasses leads the way for everyone else, and no one even blinks as they head through. My eyes catch on the third man to walk through, holding a woman in his arms, her legs burnt and bandaged roughly in cloth, a baby cuddled to her chest. The man is huge, and his eyes burn as blue as the deep oceans of the sea as he nods at me. For the next ten minutes, it's havoc at the portal. Everyone starts to realise what's happening, that there is a safe way out, and they run out of those prisons, and I don't blame them. It becomes utter chaos as we try to get everyone out safely and quietly, but with children crying, babies echoing the sound, and the many cries of disbelief, we are no doubt attracting attention.

Just in case... I walk over to the corridor that leads down to the prison, down the steps beyond it, and watch. I stand still, knowing that I need to make sure no one gets in here, and I am willing to fight, no matter how weak I feel. Many of the

women and men are injured, being carried out by someone else, and they stink so badly. The smell is awful, filling up the room, and if I were a weaker person, I'd be sick myself. I feel nothing but anger. Anger at the treatment of these people and how they are being treated like this for just what's in their blood. Nothing more. Nothing less. They're not bad people. They haven't destroyed anyone. They haven't hurt anyone. They've just been locked away because of who they are, because of the power that they have, the power that most likely half of them wouldn't even use to hurt a fly.

Gritting my teeth, I look back just as I start to hear footsteps in the distance, shoes clicking on the stone as the footsteps come down the stairs. They are too clicky to be anything but high heels, and my mind drifts to Poppy and Catherine, hoping that Poppy has won by this point, but I know she hasn't.

The bells of the royals haven't rung, so no one has won. I was told it's four bells for Poppy and five for Catherine. A way of announcing the results to the whole city and apparently another tradition. I hate it all. I can't be there watching what's happening and whether she's going to win. I want to be cheering her on in any way possible, but this is more important, despite how I feel. Being protective of Poppy is nothing in comparison to how protective I feel of my race, of those here who can't save themselves. There's no way I could ask her to free all the Unseelie when she takes the throne.

When, not if.

The Reaper Realm would revolt against her, the reapers so used to their slaves and everything that they have. Plus, the Otherworld is not going to protect them when Einar is on the throne and hates Unseelie as much as so many of the Reapers do. Now there's a chance I can get them all out, and then I can go and take the Otherworld.

I can make the worlds, all of them, finally listen to the cries of the Unseelie. I will open their eyes and demand they listen to me.

The clicky heels come to a stop, and I'm not surprised when Queen Annalee appears at the bottom of the stairs. With a smug smile, she looks across at me, her face pulled into a tight pinch full of annoyance. Three guards follow her down the steps. They're silent, their footprints silent on the stone, and their swords look sharp.

They are well-trained. I can tell from how they hold themselves, let alone their silent moves. I pull out to my daggers the minute I see her, and her eyes track the movements.

"I'm gathering my son is down there with you, playing hero to the scum," she enquires.

"Yes," I answer truthfully, wanting to hurt her so badly. "Did you want to see him? He might need to you to wait, say, ten minutes to an hour. Make sure we are all gone by then."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of conversation. Get my son, and I will consider a fair punishment for you," she responds. "I'm still the queen."

"Not for long," I reply. "And when you're not, I'm going to ask Persephone to arrest you for the unlawful killing of the Heartlocke clan, including my father. Kriffin Heartlocke."

Her eyes betray her emotions. Shock. Disbelief. Pain... and jealousy. All of it. "No wonder you look so familiar. I'm afraid you will struggle to find proof of my involvement."

"You killed them all!" I snap at her. "You're a monster, and the sooner that crown is off your head, the easier it will be for me to avenge my family. My clan."

"Mother," Sebastian coldly states, moving to my side.

Her eyes search him before she smiles.

"Come with me and we can move past this. I want my children back," she softly says, but I don't know who she is kidding.

I can predict what Seb is going to say, even if she can't.

"No. You might have given birth to us, but don't for a second think we owe you anything. We are better off without

you.”

“You are not leaving this castle.”

I glance back, seeing that there are still loads of Unseelie moving through the portal. We need more time. Looking at Seb once tells me he knows the same thing.

Sebastian replies, “Why did you have children?”

She stumbles for an answer, but Seb knows it. “Power. That’s why.”

“No, it wasn’t just that,” she replies. “I have no family left, none, and I knew the throne would be taken from me. I wanted something real.”

“Then let us go with the Unseelie and walk away,” I suggest.

She ignores me altogether, like I’m not here. “Sebastian, please come with me and let the guards deal with this. We can get a bottle of fae wine and see if the new queen needs a king. Everything is not—”

“It’s always about power,” Sebastian growls, shadows spreading out of his hands. “I am not yours to command, control, or use to keep the throne. I belong to one other soul, and she is standing right next to me, and she gave you an offer.”

A single tear falls down her cheek. Not for Sebastian, but for the power and throne she has lost. For the power she can’t have anymore. “The offer is rejected.” She turns to her guards. “Kill them all.”

Seb. I feel his hurt like it is my own, breathing inside my chest. I know he was aware of her distaste for him, but hearing it is something else. I want to hug him, tell him I’m here, but I can’t. We have to fight. I brace myself to take on four trained guards as Seb’s power swirls around him, the shadows darker than the colour black. Before her guards can reach us, a blast of gold magic slams into the rocks around the end of the corridor, and the walls collapse in, dust clouds forming in the space between us. I turn to Finn as he lowers his hands.

“Time for us to go.”

“Thank you,” Sebastian tells Finn as I take his hand after putting one of my daggers away.

“I know family can be difficult,” Finn responds as the final Unseelie makes their way through the portal.

Seth’s eyes meet mine, and I see the strain in them that his demon is fighting. “Time.”

My men go through the portal last, and just as I step through, the first bell rings.



CHAPTER 71

“Spirits, I want to make a deal,” I say, wrapping my hands around the cold silver scythe in my hands that I was given in the Unseelie tunnel after all my people had gone down it. The bells stopped ringing after the second one, and none of us have any idea what that means. What it means for Poppy and the throne. Part of me wants to go back to the castle and find out, but I can’t.

That is Poppy’s future, and this is mine. Hopefully, we meet somewhere in the middle. I’ve planned this from the start, but actually doing it is another matter, my fragile hold on my nerves threatening to fall. My men, my mates, stand a few feet away and the portal to the Otherworld is right in front of me. The magic shimmers, casting a green and yellow glow across my skin. The Reaper Realm is on the edge of war, plain and simple, and the Otherworld is no better off. Whatever becomes of my future, I want to make the world a better place than it has been for most of my life. Queen Evie changed her world, fixed what was broken, and it cost her dearly, but she still did it. Earth has changed in her rule, making a home for demons and protectors, and I want to become that. I want to find her strength and channel it as my own. My eyes flicker to Seth, proud and strong nearby. His demon, who never once forgot me, almost flashes in his eyes.

“Don’t give up,” he warns. “We are here for you.”

And that’s the truth. They, each of them, are here for me, and no rune, no magic in the worlds could break us apart now. They have tried and failed to do that.

The spirits are silent to my demand, and I grit my teeth. “You want the runes so fucking bad, make a deal with me or I’m going to the Otherworld and you’ll never see me again. I know you were once more powerful than the gods, and now you need to be called to this world to exist or speak through a little girl. Don’t you want that power back? Don’t you desire revenge? Don’t you want the world to know you as more than spirits?”

The moment I’ve said my piece, I feel the elements crash around me, and they suck all the air from the world until I’m choking, like I’m underwater. In the corner of my eye I see my mates rush at me, only to be thrown away like stones in the wind.

“How dare you call to us, curssseed one. We do not speak to you.”

The voice is so inhuman, so empty and hollow. I shiver as air slams back into my throat, too much air, until I can’t concentrate on anything but the presence of the spirits around me.

“I am Daesyn Heartlocke, barer of the Cursed Rune and the Forsaken Rune. I want to make a deal that benefits us both.”

A hissing fills the wind at my suggestion, but I feel the change. They are listening. “Tell us.”

“When I call you, you will give my army your powers and make them invincible for a short time. Strong enough to fight gods. Long enough for us to win the war, destroy the gods, and in exchange, I will get the other two runes and then give them all to you.”

“You do not know the price for the runes being taken from your soul,” one of the voices whispers in my ear, my ears feeling like they are on fire and burning.

Flame.

“What is it?”

“Another deal?” the other one hisses, but the flame spirit answers me.

“Death. For without the Cursed Rune, you will die.”

I halt, feeling the spirits powers swirling around me. The pressure of them here, waiting for their deal. They know what I will say, what I have to do. “What would I need to trade for my life to be spared if I gave you the runes?”

All I hear is howling wind for a long time until a new voice answer me.

“In the Otherworld, there is a ring of power, older than us. Older than time. Find it, and we will consider saving your life.”

“What is the ring called?”

“You have a deal, currressed onne.”

The spirits disappear as quickly as they came, and I nearly fall off my feet but I manage not to as my men rush to me. Seth gets to me first, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“Did they agree?”

“Yes,” I tell them. I will tell them about the ring later... when we get through what has to happen next.

I look up at the portal to the Otherworld. “It’s time to go home and receive my gift. It’s time to find out why the gods fear me so much. I’m worried the power will change me.”

“With us at your side, nothing that world can do will change you,” Finn states.

“We do this together,” Ryker suggests, and we do.

We walk into the portal together, but instead of coming out into the Otherworld, I see nothing but a blinding light as a voice I’ve never heard whispers into my mind.

“An Otherworldly welcome, Cursed One. We have waited for you.”

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DESCRIPTION

Thousands of Fae slaves freed. The Otherworld throne to take. A war to win.

No big deal for an assassin/thief... right?

With her new mates at her side, Daesyn heads back into The Otherworld to get her powers, unsure if Poppy has won the Royal Reaper Academy test and unable to help her.

The war has begun, not only with the Unseelie and Seelie fae, but with the gods who watch every move made. Can Finn convince his mother to help his mate?

Daesyn needs to find a way to get all four runes, save her world from its ruler, and free her people before the gods decide to end them all.

Fans of epic urban fantasy romance will love this four-book series by *USA Today* Bestselling Author G. Bailey.

This is a reverse harem romance, meaning the main character will have more than one love interest.

This series is a crossover of the series, *A Demon's Fall*, but can be read on its own. This is the final book.



CHAPTER 72

“An Otherworldly welcome, Cursed One. We have waited for you.”

The words repeat in an echo around me, like they are spoken on a wisp of wind and belong to the elements more than they do me. I can't breathe for a few moments, as every inch of my body feels like it's been ripped apart by power.

Fae power. It's all I can feel and focus on as it reshapes my body to its will, morphing me with the gift of power from The Otherworld. I didn't think it would hurt to receive my powers. I should have known better.

I grit my teeth, digging my hands into the damp ground under me, wishing it would stop. I was just with my mates, well, Ryker and Finn, but with Seth and Sebastian it is only a matter of time. They are my mates in every sense of the word and in my heart. The magic, thick, heavy, and ancient, continues to rip through my body, and I pray the runes I have will keep me alive. I can't die because of The Cursed Rune that I was given as a baby, and The Forsaken Rune will only do so much to stay bonded to me. Its only use to is to call an army of the dead, and I need to be alive to use that. Everyone I love flashes before my eyes like a movie, starting with Ryker, my hellhound prince and true mate. Then Finn, my demigod mate who ignored the wishes of his goddess mother to be with me. Sebastian, who threw away a crown and his life in the Reaper Realm to be with me, and finally Seth. My overlord demon, who saved my life and stole my heart in the next breath. I want to be his mate because I love him, like I love each of them. I used to be so alone, with only Mossy for

company, but it's not like that anymore and it will never be again. Even if I must rip the worlds apart, I will find a way to be with them.

Poppy Riverlite. For a second, I feel like she is next to me, my soul sister. It kills me that I couldn't be there for her final test for the throne, but I know deep down she will win. She is meant to be queen and she will make a better queen than I ever could.

But I will try for my people, for The Unseelie who have been hunted and chased their entire lives by the king.

King Einar and his new pregnant bride, Laelie.

I know exactly how I'm going to handle Einar, but Laelie, she is a problem I'm not sure about. It's been months now since we heard of her pregnancy, and she might have had the baby for all we know of how far gone she is. I would never hurt that baby, even with the threat against my throne she or he might pose.

I have too much to do, too much to lose, to die from taking a step through a portal. I force my eyes open, and my eyes burn with the effort and the blasting purple light surrounding me. A cry leaves my lips as I sit up and look around me in a daze.

Purple fae magic is swirling around me, spinning and dancing like Gwragedd Annwn's. Water sprites. I remember seeing one just once, as a child with my mother, in a pond. It was small and tiny, its body made of the brightest, clearest water, and it danced like this magic. The same dance, one that tells tales of older magic and lost folklore that couldn't be said in any kind of words.

It's beautiful, even as the magic slams through my stomach like a spear, lifting me into the air. There isn't any pain, just a numbness setting through me as I float, held up by the magic.

I feel like I'm held for days, with no way to tell the time or count the hours. No sunsets, no moonrises, nothing changes until suddenly it does. The magic spear disappears, and I fall through the magic and crash out of the portal onto sand,

rolling to a stop with a bright light of the sun shining down on me.

The Otherworld.

I'm home.

"Dae!" Finn shouts seconds before he is picking me up in his arms, and I'm too weak to even wrap my arms around his shoulders. He kisses my forehead. "I'm here. You walked into the portal and didn't come out the other side. I nearly lost it, but I could sense you were alive with our bond, but not where you were. It's been four days, and the others have gone to search for you. I stayed just in case."

He pauses, and I manage to finally look up at him, his eyes like gold stars in a dark sky. His skin is a little tanned from waiting out in the sunlight, I'd guess, and his white hair is almost glowing now. He is so handsome, breath-taking as a son of a goddess should be. But it's the way he looks at me, like I'm his entire world and he almost lost it.

"Ryker will be able to sense you're here and will bring the other two back," he tells me, reassuring me. "With Mossy and Caliphe, too. They went to ask the fae creatures to look for you."

Ryker. I can feel my bond to him and Finn alive, burning within me, and I try to reach out to Ryker through it. To tell him I'm okay.

My throat is dry like sandpaper, and my lips are cracked dry as he sets us down, somewhere shaded, and I glance up to see thick leaves hanging down around us. Finn keeps me on his lap but hands me a bottle of water, and I drink it quickly, soothing my throat. "Thank you."

I have to clear my throat a few times, knowing I'm safe in Finn's arms even in The Otherworld. I can feel my powers back, the ones Einar took from me with the Divine Rune, and something else. Something new. "Four days?"

"Four long-ass days," Finn states. "Where did you go?"

I try to think back to the place with magic, and I only get the deep feeling I wasn't meant to know where I was. "The

Otherworld gave me power, and it took me, held me. I don't know where it was."

"Do you have powers now?" he asks, running his fingers through my long black hair, searching my purple eyes. "There is something different about you, I can feel it."

I imagine the power I saw and hold my hand out in front of me. I reach for my Unseelie fae magic, which is usually hard to pull from my body, but this time it's like breathing. Purple magic explodes out of my hand and cuts a deep line through the sand in front of us, destroying it into nothing but a large gap.

Dust settles as my eyes widen. "I was trying for something small..."

"That wasn't small," Finn replies, tightening his grip on me. "That power is destructive, Dae."

"Just what we need. I think I could destroy the gods with it," I say, feeling I am right. I know I am, deep down in my soul. This power I've been given means I can destroy anything, and with The Cursed Rune, I can never die.

"Has anyone else come from The Reaper Realm?" I ask. Poppy. I need to know what happened to her and who is sitting on the throne of the Reapers.

Finn gives me a sad smile. "No, no one has come through. I'm sorry."

"There is still hope," I say, even as my heart hurts more than it should. Tiredness spreads through me as I rest my head on Finn's chest. "I'm just going to close my eyes for a little and then we can save the world."

"You rest first," he breathes, kissing the top of my head, and I feel his daggers appear in his hands in a blast of gold light. He wraps his arms around me. "No one is touching you, Dae. Sleep."

Nothing in the worlds could stop his command from working as I fall asleep in my mate's arms.



CHAPTER 73

A sky full of icy rain falls on us about a mile away from the nearest village, marked by signs on the path. Finn swears and moves closer to me, tugging the hood of his cloak up. I pulled mine up about ten minutes ago when I looked up at the heavy, grey clouds drifting towards us. It's bitterly cold out, and the howling wind is slowly turning the rain into hail. We stayed at the portal for as long as we could without food or water and decided we needed to find a village to trade for a bed for the night and something to eat. My stomach rumbles, but I don't take my eyes off the dark shadows under the trees, marking every movement the wind makes and keeping my senses alert.

From the tense way Finn is holding himself, his daggers still held at his side, I know he is doing the same.

My cloak is soaked and stuck to me within minutes, my boots filling with more water with every muddy puddle I step into. Between my starving stomach, aching muscles, and soaked clothes, I barely manage a smile to Finn as he looks at me.

"We will need to pretend to be travellers, and you need to keep your head down with those eyes," Finn warns.

"I'm used to being unseen," I remind him. "I was once a thief and an assassin. It was my job to be unseen."

His daggers disappear into gold dust, and he moves closer, picking up my wet hand and linking our fingers. Finn never needed to say many words to make me understand he is always there for me.

Even if I hated him when we first met. I stopped hating him when I realised why he put up a wall between us and who he really is behind it.

That he is as messed up as I am and trying to make a good life from the tiny bits that life gave us.

The village is small but big enough that travellers aren't going to be looked at too deeply, and the streets are filled with uneven stones, flattened to make a road, but puddles of rain and mud are hard to dodge as we walk through. The houses are basic, brick and stone, slate roofs, and short stone walls. There are few fae around, and the ones we do come across don't look our way as we head through the village and find an inn at the end of a darkened street. The inn looks busy, yellow light shining from the bay windows onto the dark street, and shadows move around inside enough to suggest there are a bunch of people in there. Finn nods at me, and I tug my cloak tighter as we head inside, and I step behind him, keeping my eyes low and hidden under my cloak hood. The inn has a bar, and there are twenty-two fae in the room, from my quick count, and the creaking floorboards above me suggest more upstairs. At least five of the fae turn to look at us, watching us with clear distrust as Finn leads me to the bar.

"We need a room and food. We pay well," Finn gruffly states, and I hear him drop a bag of gold coins, the money the fae use, onto the table. Thank the fae that Finn thought ahead more than I did, as any money I have wouldn't be accepted here.

The bartender and inn owner, if I had to guess, is a big man with a long grey beard, scars on his thick arms, and he sighs.

"You gonna cause me trouble?" he demands, his voice gruff. "Where the Unseelie go, there is trouble."

I lift my head, because there is no point in hiding now, and meet his green eyes. "Lucky I'm half reaper and maybe that will give us luck."

"Maybe, doll," he replies and takes the bag of gold, exchanging it for a worn silver key. "Third floor, room two.

I'll bring up grub and drinks in half an hour. No trouble."

"Thank you," I tell him, knowing he is taking a risk by letting us stay. I won't forget his kindness.

Finn takes my hand, and we go up the three flights of stairs to find our room, and Finn unlocks the door, waving me in. The room is dark and cold, but it's dry, and that's all that matters to me as I unclip my cloak as Finn shuts the door. He clicks his fingers, and the fireplace lights up, warmth and light filling the room. There is a small double bed, that makes me wonder if Finn is going to hang half off it all night, and a line across the room to hang clothes. Other than one tiny window that gives a brilliant view of a brick wall with ivy on, there is a tiny, uneven wooden table and two creaky-looking chairs by the fire. I hang my cloak up and pull off my clothes until I'm just in my underwear and I climb onto the bed, pulling the bedcovers onto me to stop my shivering. It doesn't work well. It's still freezing, and my wet hair just makes it worse. Finn strips off, leaving only his boxers on, and I admire his golden muscles, his broad shoulders and narrow waist, the six-pack in front of it.

He smirks as he looks over at me, reading my expression.

"Does my mate want to share this bed?"

Hearing him call me his mate makes me shiver for another reason than the cold. He is walking to me, a man on a mission, just as the door is knocked. Finn doesn't bother to hide his annoyance as he pulls the door open and a small fae woman squeals, nearly dropping the silver plate filled with food and drinks in her hands.

"Thanks," Finn gruffly says and takes the tray, and the fae woman near enough runs away.

I shake my head at my grumpy demigod as he puts the tray on the table. I wrap the blanket around me and sit opposite him, barely saying a word as I devour the stew, bread, and milk. It's all bland, and there isn't an herb in sight for flavour, but I don't care as I eat it. I was so hungry. Finn seems to be in the same boat as he doesn't pause, and soon, we have eaten everything.

“I was thinking one of us should go downstairs, listen to see if anyone talks about Einar or the rebels,” I suggest.

“Not tonight,” Finn replies. “It’s too risky for either of us or we could be caught. The inn was sheer luck when they knew what you are.”

“I wouldn’t be,” Caliphe exclaims from nowhere in sight, and I turn to see her slide through the window and fly to me.

I grin, and she smiles back. “Glad to see the hellhound wasn’t wrong and you are back in The Otherworld.”

“Seems The Otherworld wanted me for a bit,” I reply. “Are Ryker, Seth, Sebastian, and Mossy, okay?”

“Yes, and with the rebels. They found us and suggested sending me to get you, as it would be easier and safer than the others travelling. They attract too much attention,” Caliphe states. “I will go and spy around the inn and in the villagers’ homes.”

“Aren’t you tired?” I softly ask. “You can rest.”

“It’s been a long time since I was home, and I do not tire here,” she explains and bows her small head before flying out the window.

“Always a surprise, that one,” I murmur, my voice drifting off as Finn presses his lips to my shoulder and softly kisses me. His hands glide around my stomach, and he pulls my back to his body, pressing me against every hard inch of him.

I turn around, and he kisses me, devouring my lips with a passion only my mate can have. I wrap my legs around him, sinking my hands into his hair as he carries me to the bed and lays me down. The fire makes his skin glow, his eyes burn, and his hair like wisps of a flame as I look up at him.

“You’re so beautiful,” he tells me, running his hand down my chest.

I unhook my bra as he pushes my panties to the side and slides a finger into me, making me gasp. Finn doesn’t waste time, bringing me close to the edge before stopping and

pulling off my panties. He flips me over, and in one smooth glide, he is fully inside me.

I moan, clutching the bedsheets tightly as he thrusts in and out of me. A perfect rhythm.

“Not yet,” he growls as I feel myself getting closer. His hands dig into my hips as he thrusts harder and harder. He tortures me, never letting me get close to the edge until he decides.

His thumb barley grazes my clit before he whispers into my ear, “Now, Daesyn.”

I cry out as I climax around him, and he thrusts a few more times before joining me with a shout that could shake the walls of the inn.

I collapse under him, and he picks me up, tucking me into his body and wrapping us in the surrounding blanket. “I wasn’t expecting that tonight.”

He chuckles. “Then what comes next is going to be another shock. I only need a small time to rest.”

I laugh as he grips my ass and pulls me up his body, lining us up. He is hard once again, and my eyes widen as desire flickers through my body, ready and waiting for him. He cups the back of my neck and pulls me in for a soul-searching kiss.

“I love you, Finn,” I breathe out as he sinks home, and the night around us is completely forgotten. The war that is coming with it.



CHAPTER 74

“**T**hey said Queen Laelia is close to giving birth, and apparently the payment for joining the royal army has tripled. Most of the men in the village have gone to the king,” Caliphe tells us as we walk out of the village, the brisk morning air a sharp wake-up call.

I nod and open my bag for Caliphe, and she heads in. The birth of that baby isn’t going to make any of this easier, and I actually feel sorry for the innocent baby about to be brought into this world. I know what it’s like to be a young child, powerless and in a situation that is dangerous. Einar, the baby’s father, did that to me.

“Thanks for the information. There are some snacks in there for you,” I tell her before doing most of the bag up, leaving a gap for her.

Finn is chewing on an apple, and we pause at a signpost, where there is meant to be a carriage coming through that could speed up the four-day walk. After another bag of gold, the inn owner told us about this carriage, and apparently, they are well known for sympathising with my kind. We don’t dare use magic here when it could be traced. When we were close to the portal, it would have been ignored as stray magic from the reaper realm, but out here? We can’t risk it. Either way, it’s a risk we decided to take to get to the rebels as quickly as we can.

“We head to Port Mare and make a plan there,” Finn suggests after finding his apple, and just in time, as a creaking carriage appears down the road.

The five horses pulling the carriage are old, greyed, and look close to collapsing, and the man on top of the carriage seat doesn't look much better. I can't see anything but his grey beard and wrinkled chin as he gets close, the rest of him hidden in a deep-blue cloak.

"Get in, Unseelie. Where are you two headed?" the man asks, his accent unfamiliar.

"Port Mare. Urgently, and we will pay for the speed," Finn says, reaching into his pocket.

"Don't need no payment to help my own kind," the man replies, lifting his cloak so I can see his purple eyes and feel his magic, somewhat hidden by a barrier. I smile at him, and he winks before leaning back. "Get in before someone sees you or one of the simple village folk reports you to the guards for money. They are all hungry and poor, you realise?"

I nod and climb into the carriage, Finn following behind me and shutting the door. It takes off fast, jolting me in my wooden seat, which probably had cushions at some point to make it comfy. Finn nearly slips off his seat as we go over a bump, and I try not to laugh.

"Get some rest, I will watch out," Finn commands, and I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Do you think because you're now my mate, you get to command me to do anything?"

He smirks, crossing those large arms of his. "Yes. You're mine."

"And you're mine," I reply with my own smirk to match his. "But you don't get to boss me around."

His eyes brighten. "I thought you loved my commands last night. They are part of the reason we barely got any sleep."

My cheeks burn, remembering the four times he did command me last night and the many, many times I got pleasure from it.

He laughs, deep and husky. I shake my head and lean back, grumping about demigod assholes under my breath.

I don't get any sleep on the journey, and I'm surprised how fast the Unseelie carriage driver goes, managing to get us to Port Mare in two days, never stopping other than toilet breaks, like the gods themselves are driving him faster. Not that the gods are who we should pray for, not after what they did.

I look at Finn for a second as he opens the carriage door, the thick scent of the sea lingering in the air. It's his mother I'm going after, and no matter how he feels, I don't know if I can kill her, knowing that she did try her best for him.

And he loves her. I know it.

We need to talk about his mother at some point, before I go after them with the power I've been given. Port Mare isn't a place I've been to, and it's simply a small, busy row of houses and a bunch of docks with hundreds of ships. The docks are full of fae, cargo, and fish in baskets that they are selling.

The second we shut the door, the carriage driver is off, and I didn't even get to ask his name or thank him for bringing us here. He does wave, though.

Caliphe peeks her head out of my bag and whistles to get my attention. I look down as she whispers to me, "Find a ship called Greyor. It's the rebels'. Ryker and the others went on it."

"How did they remember who I am?" I whisper to her.

She shrugs. "The rune doesn't work well in this world. They weren't made for fae, and maybe Einar couldn't get it to work on everyone."

"They might have a touch of god blood and perhaps their own abilities of the mind," Finn suggests. "Seth had nearly broken down the magic on his memories, and that's down to the god blood he has."

"Seth has god blood?"

"The overlords are demigods," he replies, like it's nothing.

"I don't think they know that," I reply with wide eyes.

Finn shrugs and takes my hand as we head through the busy docks, waiting several times in the thickness of the crowd

before we can see the ships' names. We search at least twenty ships as we walk past, gaining a few suspicious glances our way, even with our cloaks hiding our faces. I wouldn't be surprised if Einar has people out here looking for me, and with that in mind, I make sure not to meet anyone's gaze. I don't want to fight and seriously hurt anyone here. It would attract the wrong attention.

"There," Finn murmurs and points at a smaller ship tied to the end of one of the docks, a large painted sign with the name *Greyor* on the side. We head over and walk up the steps, slipping on board, and the second I do, a sword is at my throat. Swallowing the urge to knock it away, I look over at the fae holding the blade.

I don't know him. He has strong features, a white tattoo marked over his dark-skinned cheek. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"Daesyn Heartlocke, and this is Torfinn White. We are looking for the rebels and they will be expecting us," I say.

The man's eyes widen, and he lowers his sword. Finn grabs his throat in the blink of an eye and holds him against the boat.

"Touch my mate again with your blade and I will sink it into your skull," he growls, waiting for a nod before dropping him onto the ground.

"That's not how we make friends," I say.

He flashes me a grin. "I only want to be your friend, Dae."

Something about that makes my heart flutter even as I offer the man my hand up. "What's your name?"

"Greyor," he answers. "The ship is mine and named after my father, with the same name. A tradition in my family."

"Sorry about my mate," I say. Finn growls, and I clear my throat. "We should leave. It's dangerous every second we are here. The king is hunting me."

"We will leave immediately for the island," he replies. "Our leader told us to give you passage and keep you alive."

I'm sorry about my reaction, but this is the life here."

"I understand, and you're forgiven," I say, patting his arm.

"You're not," Finn grumbles, and I grab his hand, leading him away from Greyor before he makes him pass out in fear. I turn back as Finn asks a question. "Are there any beds down there?"

"Yes, many, help yourself," he instructs, pulling the wooden staircase up.

I see two other fae men on board, picking up rope and keeping their heads down.

"Go and sleep, Dae. You look close to passing out," Finn instructs me, softly this time.

"If I sleep, he might get into my dreams and see that I'm The Otherworld," I reply, my eyes already drifting shut. "Ryker makes him stay away. I can stay awake until Ryker—"

"Let the bastard know we are coming for him. He can't see or touch you anymore," he tells me, kissing my cheek. "You need sleep either way to see the Rebel leader with a clear head."

"Promise you won't scare Greyor anymore?"

He laughs and makes me no such promise as I head down into the ship, finding a small bunk bed, and I'm fast asleep before I've even taken my boots off.

* * *

MORGANIA MACCAILEIN'S name is whispered by the men and women on board, like they are talking about a saint, and they might as well be from the stories I've heard. The leader of the rebels, who I refused to help when we first met, is a brave fae woman. She has single-handedly taken ships, killed hundreds in a fight she should have died in, and saved thousands of Unseelie, and Seelie who were accused of being sympathisers to the Unseelie. I know she is a woman I need to work

alongside and figure out a way of getting along with winning this goddamn world back.

The ship easily navigates through the currents of water, passing little others on the way to the island. The cold air turns warmer, and I shrug off my cloak as I lean over the edge of the ship front, watching the island coming into view. It's well hidden under the water, right on the edge of The Otherworld, and I suspect it's a lot harder to find than Greyor made it seem. Finn steps up to my side, looking ahead.

“Do you think she will rally an army to fight with us?”

“Yes,” I reply but I can't hide my nerviness from him. “I've always fought on my own and I'm not used to asking for help. I don't want to demand anything from my people, but...”

“The war must be won,” he agrees. “And Einar off that throne.”

“What if they want Morgania as queen after this is over?” I say. “I mean, she is their hero, not me, and even if my family bloodline is important, even if my mother was to marry the king once, it does not give me royal blood. Maybe we would be better finding a small island and relaxing.”

“We will deal with that issue, if there is even one to be found when this is over, later,” Finn gently suggests instead of disagreeing with me, knowing that I want the crown. I want to rule and make this place better than it ever has been.

The Otherworld is my home.

I nod and stay silent, watching as the island gets closer, pushing down any intruding thoughts about what I should be doing and the future coming my way. The ship docks in a stream right outside a small wooden port, and I rush to the edge of the ship, smiling down at who is waiting for me. Ryker, Seth, Sebastian, and Mossy on his shoulder are waiting in a line, their eyes fixed on me. The second the steps are laid down, I run down and crash into Ryker first. Seth and Sebastian embrace me next, and Mossy jumps on my shoulder, cuddling my neck.

“Don’t disappear like that again,” Seth warns, a dark grumble to his voice.

“I’ve told her the same damn thing,” Finn says, stepping into our little circle.

“Did you get your powers, then?” Ryker asks, moving a bit closer. “You seem different.”

I don’t get a second to answer him before Morgania walks up to us, her arms crossed against a yellow tunic dress, her white hair tied back and showing off more scars on her neck. She meets my eyes with a strong and determined gaze. I’m shocked she remembers me.

“Are you back here to ask for an army, Daesyn Heartlocke?”

I make sure to hold myself up straight and meet her eyes with the same fierceness. “I want to take Einar off his throne and make sure Unseelie are welcome in my world. I’ve freed the prisoners in The Reaper Realm, and I am here to free The Otherworld. The Otherworld has given me a power that will even destroy the gods. I was born for this, but I do need your help. I need an army.”

Morgania watches me, and her keen eyes show nothing of what she is thinking. “I will give you an army, Daesyn Heartlocke. We have a hundred thousand Unseelie fae hidden on the island, and at least sixty thousand could fight a war, a few thousand could be healers. But...”

She pauses. “I need you to show me, and your people, why you are worth fighting for. The king’s fleet of ships is ten thousand strong and filled with magical cannons that would quickly turn the tide in a battle. Get rid of them and we will follow you.”

“Ten thousand ships?” Sebastian questions. “Are you fucking kidding? She can’t take out that many and survive.”

“I believe she can, young prince,” Morgania states. “The people might follow you, if there wasn’t a baby on the way who is the real heir.”

She turns back to me. “The Unseelie are fearful and have lived without hope for a long time. Most of them will hide their entire lives, even if I call them to fight. They need to see a light of hope.”

She steps closer, her daunting task hanging over me. That’s a lot of ships to take out in one go, but all the years of being an assassin, of training and learning... I might be able to do this. “I am going to presume you’re wanting the throne after all this is done and even with Sebastian at your side as one of the two heirs. Married, of course.”

She gives me a pointed look. “They will still need a reason to call you their queen. Fight for us and we will do the same. Now, you look tired and in need of a bath.”

I don’t dare sniff my clothes, as I know she is right.

“The hut you used before is free, and I will send someone to fill the bath.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, and she inclines her head before walking away.

“Only ten thousand ships, huh?” Ryker asks, rubbing his chin.

“That’s one too many,” I mutter with a smile. “I’m going to need a plan and a backup plan in case it goes wrong.”

I look at Mossy, and he sighs. “You need me to be sneaky, don’t you?”

“Something like that,” I say with a smile, forming a plan already that I have no clue if it’s going to work or not.

“You could use The Forsaken rune,” Seth suggests.

“As a last resort,” I say. “Pulling an army of souls from Hell into The Otherworld is very dangerous and has to be thought out.”

Seth steps closer to me. “Syn, I should head to Earth and ask Evie to send an army. I can look into the Reaper Realm while I’m passing, see who is on the throne.”

“We will leave you two alone for the night before you go,” Ryker suggests, his eyes betraying that he doesn’t want to leave, but I need some time with Seth.

I’m happy that he is close to me and I’m sure he feels the same way. Seth nods his thanks. Finn kisses my cheek, and Sebastian winks at me, waving at Mossy, who grumbles as he runs after them. Caliphe slides out of my bag and goes with them. Seth wraps his arm around my waist as we walk down the port, onto the white sandy beach and down a walkway through palm trees.

“How are you?”

“I’m okay,” I tell him honestly. “Well, a little overwhelmed, but in a good way.”

He squeezes my hip, and I look up at him, his red eyes glowing like embers of a fire, and his white hair is a little longer now, softer almost. His shirt is rolled up to his elbows, loosely tucked into his black trousers that are scattered with sand. The first four buttons of his shirt are undone, and my hand itches to reach out and rest my palm there, to feel his heartbeat.

“I felt you disappear, even with a mating bond,” he tells me, his body as tense as his words. “I couldn’t breathe or move from the shock. It paralysed me to think you were gone, and then something, a spark flickered, and I knew you were alive, just far away, somewhere I couldn’t see or feel you.”

“Seth,” I whisper, and we stop, right outside the hut where I spoke to my uncle for the first time in years. My chest hurts with the fact I won’t speak to him again.

He places his hands on my upper arms, rubbing circles with his thumb on my left shoulder. “I love you, Syn. I have done a long time, and you are my true mate, the only female I would risk my life for. Die for. It’s you, Syn. It’s always been you.”

“I love you, too,” I admit and cup his cheek. “I wasn’t ready to be your mate before because I felt like it was... well, I wasn’t good enough for you. I’ve done some terrible things.

I've killed men and demons alike for money. I'm tainted, and you... well, you might be an overlord demon, but I can see your soul is good. I told myself that you could do better, and I'd be okay with that...then you forgot about me. You looked through me, and it broke down every wall I put up to hide how I feel. I never want you not in my life, Seth, because I love you. I love you so much that I know if anything happened to you, it would darken my world to the point I'd never climb out the shadows like you once taught me how to."

I chuckle a little in pure happiness, tears falling down my cheeks, and I read the look in his eyes. "I'd like to be your mate, to bind our souls forever, for the world to see. I'm also in love with the others, and they will be my mates, too. If you can accept that and if you want me, the mess that I am, I'm yours."

"If..." he drawls out the word, stepping even closer. Our bodies line up, and he gently grips my throat to angle my gaze up to his. "If I want you? Fuck, Syn, I want to claim you as my mate more than I want to breathe. I love you. I love you, and you are enough. If your soul is tainted, then mine is burning in Hell, and together, I think that makes us a great partnership."

I lean up and kiss him, washing away any other thoughts than taking my mate after waiting all these years. He groans and picks me up, like I weigh nothing, and pulls me against his hard body as his tongue explores my mouth. Seth manages to unlock the door to the hut and carry me inside the dark room before putting me down. It's warm in here, and I still shiver from the need to rip Seth's clothes off as he shuts the door and turns back to me. His eyes are glowing red, like burning lava, as he looks at me.

Seth slowly pulls his jacket off and drops it to the floor. "To become my mate, you must promise yourself to me for eternity. You must vow your life to mine, and I vow mine to yours."

"I will when you're inside me," I tease. Teasing a demon overlord likely isn't the smartest thing I've done recently, but I have the suspicion it will be the most pleasurable.

Seth growls as he closes the space between us and kisses me again, this time passionate and slow, drawing out each kiss until it feels like I can't think.

His hands rip at my clothes until they are a puddle at my feet, and I step out of them. Seth wastes no time picking me up and carrying me to the bed, laying me down and diving between my legs. I moan the second his hot tongue finds my clit, and my back arches as he circles my clit, teasing and pulling me to the edge. He masters my body within seconds, just like last time, and just as he slides a finger inside me, I come.

"Seth!" I cry out, and he groans against my clit as I clench around his finger, riding out the waves of the intense orgasm. "I want you. I need you."

"Anything for you, my mate," Seth replies, leaning back to undo his shirt and trousers, pushing them off as I watch. He crawls over me, gripping my hip and lining his cock at my entrance.

I reach between us and stroke him, pushing the tip of him into me. He groans, and slowly, inch by inch, pushes into me. It's a tight fit with how big he is, but he feels incredible as he completely fills me up.

"I take you as my mate and vow to love, protect, and cherish you for eternity. I vow on my soul and blood to be yours," Seth says, and with each word he thrusts into me, driving me crazy with need.

Seth grips my throat, turning my head so my eyes lock on to his. "Tell me you're mine, mate."

Feeling myself getting close to the edge, I look deeply into his eyes. "I take you as my mate, Seth, and promise myself to you for an eternity. I am yours."

"Mine," he growls, but it's Seth's demon who roars the words as he loses all control.

He thrusts into me deeply, the bed snapping and breaking under his thrusts, but neither of us much notice as I clench around him, coming harder than I have in my entire life. Seth

bites down on my shoulder as he thrusts hard and deep, spilling inside me and marking me as his mate in every way possible. I feel a connection, a deep bond come to life inside me, snapping into place like it has always been there and waiting.

A mating bond.

“We broke the bed,” Seth whispers in my ear as he slides out of me but pulls me to his side, holding me close. I place my hand on his chest, hearing his heart beating fast under my palm, beating as fast as mine. “And I love you. I should have said that when I was inside you.”

“I love you, too,” I softly tell him and lean up, my hair spilling around my shoulder like a curtain. He strokes his fingers through it and cups my cheek. “Us against the world?”

“Always, Syn,” he murmurs. “I’ve been on your side since we met and I would have followed you into Hell even back then.”

“My mate,” I whisper with a big smile I can’t hide.

He mimics my smile and leans up, kissing me softly.

“Forever.”



CHAPTER 75

The ashy smell of fires being put out fills my senses as I finish my climb onto the roof of the tallest building on the island and sit on the edge, overlooking the rows of palm trees, the water current, the ship resting in the nearby port, and the island full of Unseelie going about their morning jobs. The sun is slowly rising, pulling yellow and orange light into the darkness of the world, and I lean back, letting out a long sigh. I snuck out of bed early, leaving my guys fast asleep and Mossy snoring when I realised I wasn't getting much sleep with all the thoughts swirling around in my mind.

I hear Morgania before she walks across the roof and sits next to me, her bright eyes turning my way. "It's a nice view, but a dangerous climb. You have a thing for danger, Daesyn?"

I chuckle low. "I like quiet places not many would be able to find me."

She laughs this time. "The top of a roof where everyone can see you hanging your legs off the side wasn't a good plan."

"Perhaps not," I reply, pulling my legs up and resting my head on top of them. "I love this world, and every time I'm here, it's home. It's in my blood, in my soul, to want to be in The Otherworld."

"I've always felt the same, as do many in my army," she replies, watching the island with me. "I want to make The Otherworld a better place, but I am not its queen. I hope you will build a council of Unseelie and Seelie fae to help you rule with your mates. To make a fair world."

“I’ve not thought about it,” I admit. “All I can think about is killing Einar and making him suffer for what he did. What he took. The gods, too.”

“Not all the gods are evil,” she quietly tells me. “The goddess of love woke me one night and poured in my mind memories of you, things I didn’t remember. She did it to save you.”

“I believe she helped me because of something my mother gave her and likely to save her from me later on,” I reply. “Always a game with them.”

“Maybe,” she replies, her agreement silent but there. “Have you made a plan?”

“Yes. I’m leaving today, but there is something I wanted to ask you before I left.” I pause and smile. “You made it easier by finding me.”

“I have never been an easy sleeper. Not in many, many years,” she admits. “Fear pauses the heart and pushes the sleep dust away.”

“That it does,” I say.

“Ask,” she commands, getting to the point. “I made a deal with the spirits.”

Her eyes widen, and I see nothing but dread. “They want a certain ring in exchange for saving my life when I give them all four of the runes back. In exchange for giving them the runes, they will give every single soldier in my army a power boost. They will be protected by the elements themselves.”

“Daesyn, that was a brave but reckless deal to make,” she replies. “The spirits are unpredictable.”

“I can’t live without The Cursed Rune, and I also want it gone so I can live out my life with my mates. I want to age with them and one day die with them,” I tell her. “I want to have children without worrying about what the runes in my body could do to them. It’s the only way out for me, and I need to find this ring before the war is over.”

“I don’t know about this ring,” she finally replies. “But on an island two weeks’ travel away live the Finfolk.”

“Secretive Warriors whose sole purpose is to protect magical items,” I say, remembering stories about them. “They might have a magical ring.”

“They don’t like females,” she warns me. “They are an all-male race of immortals, and they kill females on sight.”

“What a bunch of idiots,” I mutter.

She softly laughs. “I agree. I suggest sending your demigod and the prince. The show of power and royalty they would present might stop the Finfolk from killing them on sight.”

My heart lurches at the idea of sending two of the men I love to danger, but I don’t see a way out of this. I need to destroy the ships and I need the ring. I can’t be in two places at once.

“Will you spare a ship to take them?”

“They can go with Greyor. I heard he is fond of your demigod,” she replies with amusement.

I laugh and grin at her.

“Yup, they are the best of friends,” I reply. I hear a little scratching before Mossy is running across the roof and jumping in my lap, giving Morgania a look over before facing me.

“We have been apart too much,” he protests. “I’ve had to resort to making friends with the posh, bossy fairy.”

“Caliphe isn’t that bad,” I tell him. “Are the others awake?”

“Yes,” he replies and frowns. “They sent me to find you and denied me breakfast until I did. I really dislike them all. Can you put them back where you found them?”

I try not to laugh when he looks so serious, but Morgania laughs deeply, and he scowls at her. I stand, placing Mossy on my shoulder and offer Morgania my hand.

“I’m going to stay for a while. Enjoy breakfast,” she says and turns away.

I climb off the roof, down the pipes, and jump onto the sand in one move, not surprised to find Sebastian waiting for me.

He tugs me by my waist and kisses me deeply, and Mossy jumps off my shoulder as Sebastian walks me back, pressing my back against the wall. Peace and pleasure mix throughout me as he breaks away and grins.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” I breathe out.

He grumbles and buries his head in my neck, breathing in my scent.

“I wanted a second alone,” he tells me. “I’ve missed you.”

“I missed you longer,” I reply as he looks up and kisses my forehead, taking my hand and walking me over to the building that smells like food.

We find everyone at a long table and a space waiting for me between Finn and Ryker. Ryker has already made me a plate of bacon and various fruits, and what I think is coffee.

I sit, inhaling the bitter smell. “Where did you get coffee from?”

“I packed some,” Ryker explains and winks at me. “Couldn’t leave without coffee when we have a world to save.”

“No, we couldn’t,” I reply with a big grin. I wait for Mossy and Sebastian to sit before I explain everything, from the deal with the spirits, the ring, and Morgania’s suggestion.

They are all silent after I finish, and I eat my food in silence, letting them think about it. “I met a Finfolk once.”

I turn to Finn. “They are strong fighters, and the only way to gain their respect is with strength. I think Morgania is right. Sebastian and I should go.”

“I can come with you to the ships and whatever devilish plan you’re thinking of,” Ryker says, nudging my shoulder, and I wink at him.

Finn holds my knee under the table as we all finish our food, and I look at Sebastian. “One of my childhood nurses told me stories of the Finfolk. Including how my father never once challenged them.”

“You don’t have to go—”

“I will go,” he interrupts me. “I can’t let Finn have all the fun.”

Finn crosses his arms. “It will finally be a fight worthy of my skills.”

I laugh and rest my head on Ryker’s shoulder as those two argue about whose skills are better, and all I can think of is having both using different skills on me at the same time. I’ve never shared a bed with more than one man before, but it’s something I fully intend to do before I die.

Ryker looks down at me, leaning down and whispering in my ear, “I can smell your desire. What are you thinking about?”

My body clenches, his whisper making it so much worse as I look at him. “Sharing.”

His eyes burn, suggesting he might be open to my thoughts, and I have to look away before it gets too heated over breakfast. Finn and Sebastian are looking at me, and I suspect they can read my thoughts with what is flashing in their eyes.

Mossy makes retching sounds in disgust as Caliphe lands next to him, looking between us all with a small fruit in her hands. “The monkey might be dying.”

“He is being an ass,” Finn tells her.

She looks at him. “Oh.”

I chuckle and shake my head before drinking more of my coffee. I hope, one day, this will be normal for us all. Breakfast, desire, and pain-in-the-ass fae creatures.



CHAPTER 76

For a few seconds, I finish braiding my hair and looking out at the sea of ships docked at the royal bay, a mixture of red wooden, white sails, and choppy water slashing. Ryker crouches next to me, his dark cloak whipping in the cold, brittle wind as he turns my way.

He doesn't need to say it. My plan could go wrong in a million different ways, and it would be easier to simply use the Forsaken Rune. My plan risks his life and Mossy's, but not my own, as I can't die. What I'm planning to do could hurt a lot, though.

More if Einar gets his hands on me. Thankfully, Einar doesn't keep the bulk of his ships anywhere near his castle, and I've noticed that only half the ships have guards on board, and most are already heavily drinking before the sun has even set.

"We need to wait for nightfall," Ryker eventually says. "Then we can do the crazy and insane plan you have. I—"

"I know, you think it's a risk," I interrupt him and finally look away from the ships to meet his serious gaze.

I stand, and he rises with me, coming closer and placing his hands on my shoulders, slowly running them down my arms and leaving my skin tingling everywhere he touched. He links our fingers and tugs me closer to him, an inch of space between us.

"I will follow you into an army of fae without blinking," he gently, softly, tells me. He leans closer and presses his soft lips to my cheek. "But losing you, I'm not risking that. If

anything goes wrong tonight, I'm pulling you out of it and we can figure out another way."

"So, you don't think I should just use the rune?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "The runes are power and have a cost. It should be a last resort."

"How did I get so lucky as to fall in love with you?" I question.

He smirks, making him more handsome in a heartbeat. I mean, he is always gorgeous, but there is something about a smirking Ryker that makes my legs weak. "Is it corny to say I'm the lucky one?"

"Yes, but I like it," I reply, and he laughs before kissing me, quick and passionate, both of us aware we can't stay out here kissing when our enemies are so close.

Ryker breaks away first, and I mutter about us needing alone time as we leave the hidden cliff and back onto the path leading into the bay. It took us three days to travel here, hiding on a ship and jumping off at the right moment. We snuck into boxes of beer, pouring them all into the sea and keeping a few for ourselves that are in our bags, packed with supplies. I sent Mossy and Caliphe off to work the second we escaped the ship and I must hope they can work together long enough to do the handy work for tonight.

We leave the path after a mile, heading into the forest of trees and down to the river leading off the sea until we find a cave, hidden away from sight and deep enough to block out the wind. Ryker makes a small fire as I watch the slowly setting sun over the horizon, right in front of the cave entrance.

"I wouldn't risk a fire usually," Ryker says, lighting a bunch of logs with only the click of his fingers. "But anyone seeing smoke will think it's just guards or kids messing about. The royal guards all look like they care more about their drink than anything going on."

"They are paid to be loyal, and I doubt many of them are actually in the army for their love of Einar," I say, knowing it's true. "They fear him. He destroyed a fae race, nearly killing

them all, and he kills anyone who displeases him. It doesn't make for a king people will bow to in respect. He is a king of fear."

"My father wears a similar title," Ryker agrees.

"Are you sad that you're in this world?" I question. "I mean, because I am?"

He doesn't answer right away. "My home was never in Hell, Dae. It was with Sebastian first, my brother in everything but blood, and then it was with you. I felt the world shake when I sensed my mate was near."

He pauses. "I believe it doesn't matter which world we are in, as long as we are together."

"Now that was corny," I whisper, but tears fall down my cheeks, and I gaze at him as he looks over his shoulder at me. "But I'd never make you stay here."

"I like it here," he honestly tells me. "But the king's stench needs to go first."

"Agreed," I reply and move closer.

The heat of the fire is nothing on how warm Ryker feels as I lean my head on his shoulder, and he rests his hand on my thigh. I look at him before kissing his neck and softly pushing him back onto the cave ground, and he rests his arms behind his head as he lets me kiss him, lets me take control. I push his shirt up and slide down, hear his sharp intake of breath. I kiss his chest, his stomach, and as low as I can before I hit his trouser line. Ryker seems like he has stopped breathing as I undo his trousers and pull out his hard cock, stroking him in a way that makes him groan and dig his hands into the ground, sparks bouncing off his fingers. I don't pause as I take him into my mouth.

"Fuck, Dae," he groans, his head falling back as I start to move, building into a rhythm.

His hands dig into my hair, but he lets me stay in control, and I move faster, feeling him getting close. He tries to warn me, and I only speed up, wanting to see him lose control. He

does, with a growl that cracks the walls of the cavern as he finishes. I wipe my lip as I rise, and he looks at me in shock.

“My turn?”

“Nope,” I reply, and he frowns. “We need to get ready, and I don’t want to be distracted.”

“Then what was that?” he seductively purrs, tempting me. So tempting me.

It’s near impossible to resist my mate.

I meet his eyes. “My way of saying thank you for being here. For loving me. For being my mate, my family, no questions asked.”

“You never need to thank me,” he softly says, brushing his hand down my cheek. “I meant what I said. I would follow you anywhere.”

“Me, too,” I whisper back before pulling him in for a tight embrace and never wanting to let go.



CHAPTER 77

I don't remember falling asleep; I don't remember resting long enough to even pull me under, but there is no doubt in my mind this is a dream.

A nightmare.

I'm standing in the middle of a fae cemetery, the yellow gravestones in the shape of trees so easy to spot. Each stone is created different, a few of them with various stones and ivy crawling up. But the two graves in front of me make my heart feel like crumpling and my body weak.

One has my mother's name written across the stone.

And the other has my uncles.

I take a step back, not wanting to see this place, not like this. I don't want to see where they are buried in a nightmare with him so close. He brought me here to hurt me, and it does, to see this. To see where they are and not really know.

Einar reaches for the space I was just in, catching nothing but air, and he growls. His cloak is like darkness wrapped around him, leaving no light to be seen. He looks older, colder, and more stressed. Maybe knowing I'm here is having a bad effect on him. I like that idea. "I thought you'd be tempted to touch the stones. This is all you have left of your family."

He pauses, looking around, past me a few times. "And family is so very important."

I haven't decided if I want to speak to him, but I won't play into his games. I won't look at those gravestones, not right

now. Einar clicks his tongue and rests against my uncle's tombstone.

I can barely hold in the urge to rip him off it.

"I didn't want your uncle to die. That was her fault. Your mate's mother. I kept him alive before and I would have again."

"Why?" I ask. How he knows Finn is my mate now worries me. He shouldn't be able to know that.

He shoots his head towards me, and I step away, further into the black fog building around my body. "He reminded me of your mother. Like you do. It's why I could never kill you."

"You tried to kill me many, many times. Not just in this dream world," I counter, moving as I speak to make sure he can't find me. I'm too far from him and I could run, anyway.

He rests his hand on my mother's tombstone. Soft. Gentle. Like a lover's touch, and the world tastes like rotting apples as sickness crawls up my throat. "That was a test, for The Cursed Rune. I would much prefer to have you by my side and rule with you, but you are too wilful. Now I've decided I will kill your mates and keep you as my toy. A toy to remind the worlds what I do to my enemies."

I growl this time. "And what would dear Laelie, your pregnant queen, think of a toy?"

He smiles directly at me this time, and I move, but he still looks at the spot I was in. My heart slows down a touch.

"She isn't pregnant anymore, but I hope to fill her with another heir soon. We have a son."

Ewww.

"Congratulations," I deadpan.

He laughs, rising. "Tell my bastard son that he is dead to me now. I have a real heir and I plan to make sure he has nothing in the way of claiming his throne."

"Good luck with that, Einar," I reply as sarcastically as I can manage when I'm burning with fury for Sebastian.

“Because I’m going to kill you and disown your new heir and kick your queen out of my world.”

I pause as he looks at me and walks my way, tracking my voice. But I can hear another voice, pulling me awake, the way only a mate can do.

“I’m going to burn your world down, Einar, and I’m going to enjoy it. See you soon.”

I can’t make out what he shouts, screams at me, as I laugh, letting my body fall into the black fog.

I wake up with a jolt, Ryker’s hands on my shoulders shaking me, his eyes panicked. “Dae, wake up! Wake up! Come on!”

“I’m up,” I groggily manage and feel Ryker’s instant relief. I rub my eyes and stand in the cave, the fire long gone out and the night pitch-black. “Wait, did I fall asleep?”

“No,” he replies. “It was like sleep pulled you under. One minute we were talking and the next you just fell.”

I burrow my eyebrows. “Damn.”

“Indeed,” he agrees. “I’ve been trying to wake you up for hours, but we need to go. I hear the bell ring. The one marking the middle of the night.”

“Damn,” I mutter, rushing out of the cavern with Ryker. We needed to be in the bay when that bell went off. It was the only signal I could use to make sure we were doing the plan at the same time.

“Do you think Caliphe and Mossy managed to turn on all the cannons and take off the safety clips?” Ryker asks as we run to the road and cut through the forest to the bay, running along the cliff edge.

Before we left the island, I asked Greyor to show me how to make a cannon accidentally go off, and he explained that with a safety clip undone and a big shake to the ship, they would fire. The king would have had every ship ready with magical cannons, and it will only take one cannon to bring down a ship. Unfortunately for the king, he lines up all his

ships in circles, and it's too easy to turn them to face each other.

“Let's hope so because when I use my Unseelie powers to turn the ships to face themselves, we need the cannons to go off,” I mutter. This was the plan, simple and easy, in the idea. I can pull up seaweed from the sea and slowly change each ship, but I was going to start at nightfall, ready for the morning. Now I'm going to have speed things up.

We rush down the edge of the forest and climb on the rocks to get to the beach, running in the shadows until we are under the port. There are a few beggars hidden in the darkness, watching us, but they won't get in the way.

“Watch my back,” I tell Ryker.

His eyes burn like molten fire. “Promise.”

I smile, even with my nerves shaking me from head to toe. I sink to my knees and dig my hands into the ground, feeling my Unseelie powers coming to life. The water is a different sort of earth, and it takes me a few seconds to reach for the seaweed, instead of the roots of a tree I usually feel for. I'm aware of my body glowing purple, attracting attention as I focus on the ships. It hurts to pull this much seaweed up from the floor, my chest straining as I try to turn the first ship. I can't see anything but the outline, but my magic lets me feel the slippery bottom of the ship as it wraps around and starts to turn.

“Intruders! Here! Sound the alarm!”

I hear the shouting and I feel Ryker place his hand on my arm, right before he shifts in a fury of flames. The royal guard's footsteps sound closer, a lot of them, as I pull more power into the sea and move three more ships. The plan has changed, and I don't have time to do what I was going to do.

Time for plan B. The harsher plan.

Teeth and claws, Ryker crashes into the guards who come at him with spears and in the corner of my eye, as my heart races for him, I see him effortlessly set them on fire and rip others apart. Two guards get around him and run for me, and I

let go of my power just in time to pull my daggers out and block their spears.

Just about.

The tip of one of the spears cuts into my hand, and I knock him off, sliding under the pair of them and jumping up. I whack them on the back of their heads at the same time, and they both fall forward, easily killed.

I look back to see Ryker has finished off the ten or more other guards all littered about with so much as a scratch. It's pathetic really. "If I get to rule, my soldiers will never be this easy to beat. That move was basic, and they should have been able to stop me."

Ryker growls in agreement, and I see more guards filling up the beach in the distance.

"Time for plan B!"

I run to the port and jump up the wooden planks, climbing on a few crates until I'm on top of the wet, slippery dock. Ryker makes one effortless jump and lands next to me, his hellhound eating up the space with odd flames flickering off, threatening to set fire to the damp wood. I nod at him before running down the port and climbing into the first ship, where Mossy and Caliphe are sitting on a bunch of knocked-out guards.

"Hey, you even tied them up?" I say, offering my hand out, and they both high five me. The guards really do suck if they let two fae creatures knock them out and tie them up.

"Is it plan B?" Caliphe questions, and I nod, pulling up the stairs to this ship.

"Hold on," I warn them before using my Unseelie power to wrap seaweed around the bottom of our ship and push it out to sea, faster than a ship would usually move. Sweat lines my brow as I push all my power into the seaweed, into the sea itself, until our ship is a dot on the horizon, well away from the others.

I blow out a breath and look down at Ryker. My first plan was always risky, but it was safer than plan B and the mess

I'm about to cause.

The Forsaken Rune.

An army of the dead.

I gulp and close my eyes. I walk to the top point of the ship and feel for that place inside me where the runes are. It feels like a closed door, locked, and bolted to make sure I never accidentally touch what is in there. Before, it was just the Cursed Rune, and now the Forsaken Rune is its friend, both like hovering feathers in a warm breeze within my soul.

It doesn't take much to open the door I keep locked so tightly, only a thought, and the dark, raw power of the Forsaken Rune blasts into my body.

I jolt, gasping for air from the power, feeling how alive the magic is. How wrong it is. It's not meant to be held by a mortal, or even a god. This power belongs to them, the spirits, and all this time it's been waiting to go back to them.

"Soon," I manage to bite out, my entire body covered in sweat now. Purple light shines everywhere around me as I lift a hand towards the sea and open a portal. It feels natural, right, to pull a portal to Hell in the middle of the sea.

When it's so wrong.

The Forsaken Rune wants me to call the power, tempts me to, and I sigh as a portal the size of a house rips open in the sea. Above and below it.

"Come to me," I sing, in a voice that is not my own. I feel my feet leaving the ground, I feel the Forsaken Rune wrapping its cold hands around me, controlling my body. The portal fills with people, pouring out into the sea, walking on water.

Not people. Souls.

Evil, cruel, terrible, and inhuman souls that are forced to walk the plains of Hell for what they did. I watch as hundreds and hundreds of them pour out the portal, and they look up at me.

I'm their queen.

I hear the screaming, the drums beating, the alarms in the distance. I even feel my mate so close by, concerned about me.

But I only want one thing.

“Destroy the ships, the men, and anyone who fights. Leave the children, animals, and women alone,” I demand, my voice singing to them. “Fight for me, dead souls. Fight. When your task is done, you return. The portal will close.”

I collapse onto the decking, smacking my head, and I gasp as warm hands wrap round me, picking me up onto a naked lap. Ryker smiles at me, and I turn, looking through a hole in the ship to see an army of the dead wash over the ships, breaking them apart, killing and destroying.

“What have I done?” I whisper in horror. This was what we needed to happen, to fight the war coming up and to save this world. But this is awful, and not a fair fight. Nothing about the runes are fair or honourable.

“This is war,” Ryker softly whispers, because the truth is, even if they are all Seelie and bastards who hunted my kind, killed their Unseelie neighbours, and work for an evil king... they might not all be evil. Some of them down here might not deserve to be killed, but the souls won't care about that. The ships near the bay, the ones I've turned, are shaken when the souls climb aboard. The cannons go off, but they blow up the bay instead, wood spraying everywhere.

“We should leave and hide. The king will come,” Mossy suggests softly, placing his hand on my foot.

Caliphe lands next to him, her eyes sad. “The war must be won.”

“By us. It must be won by us,” I whisper, but it doesn't stop the screaming of thousands of soldiers as they die.



CHAPTER 78

“**Y**ou’re making a mistake,” a creature tells me, and I turn to see a small shell, with bright eyes and a glowing body, a small tail hanging from the shell. I don’t know what sort of a fae creature this is, but those eyes, that scent, I’d know anywhere.

“Not taking a fae this time, Mother?” I question, crossing my arms. We have been traveling for three nights and four days, but the sun hasn’t all risen yet, frosted beams of yellow and orange are hanging around. I haven’t seen my mother, well, spoken to her, since after I took my mate, and I would never call Daesyn a mistake.

She is the greatest thing to ever happen in my life, and I intend to spend the rest of my life with her.

Showing her how much I love her and always will do.

“I know you do not prefer when I take any life, but I wanted to speak with you,” she replies. “Warn you of what will happen if Daesyn comes into our realm.”

I hear the fear in her voice. “You should have grown better at hiding your fearful tone over the years. Makes for a better lie.”

“I am not lying,” she hisses. “Son, listen to me. I love you and—”

“You don’t know how to love anything!” I shout. “With you, it’s all fake, and it’s all games. None of it is real.”

“You’re my son, and I do love you like I loved your father
—”

“No, you do not. You treat me like a possession, and you can’t accept who I love. Daesyn is my mate and my queen,” I firmly state. “And I will not stop her coming after you for what you did to her uncle. To us. You took her from me.”

“Just memories,” she replies.

“You took her from me, and I will never forgive that,” I reply, picking up the creature. It’s already dead, has been from the second my mother chose it. “And I hope we never see each other again. You are already dead to me.”

“Torfinn!” she screams as I drop her into the blue sea and close my eyes, resting on the edge of the ship as it floats through the sea.

I focus on the scent of the sea salt to calm me.

“Mothers,” Sebastian comments, moving next to me. “Why are they being insane?”

“Just ours,” I respond. “Is your sister safe?”

“Yes,” he replies. “I made sure of it before I left. No one will find her, least of all my mother. When this is over, I want to bring her here. I think she will love The Otherworld.”

“I’m sure Daesyn will want her to be brought up in the castle,” I comment. “It would be nice to have a child around. Not that I have a clue how to talk to a child.”

“Give them sweets and you’re good,” Sebastian replies with a low laugh. “I’m glad she has you. I don’t think I would have been able to keep her safe or understand the power she holds like you do.”

“I’m glad she has you. You bring her back from the edge,” I reply. “I used to be jealous of it, that connection you have, but now I am thankful. This war, this world, all of it comes at a cost, and it’s all on her.”

“We have to get this ring,” he replies sternly. “We can do this for her.”

“I don’t plan to just get the ring,” I tell the truth. “I want to convince them to come back with us and fight.”

Sebastian pauses for a moment, and I don't blame him. "Would they?"

I shrug. "I'm going to convince them."

"No offence intended," he starts. "You aren't the best at negotiations unless you use your fists. Maybe I should ask."

"They like fights," I reply with a brutal grin. "I plan to be bloody by the time our negotiations are over."

"You're way too much like Daesyn," he utters, and I think that's the first time he said he likes me.

"I will take that as a compliment," I reply, patting his shoulder once as I turn away and look up at Greyor.

The man can't even meet my eyes, but he shakes from head to toe, letting me know he is aware I'm watching him.

"Might want to stop the ship here. We will take a small boat the rest of the way," I shout up.

"Y-yes," he shouts back.

Sebastian shakes his head. "I'm surprised he hasn't taken us right to the Seelie King with how scared he is of you."

"I've been nice since we came on here," I reply. "It's his problem."

Sebastian tries not to laugh, but he fails as he walks to the rope bridge hanging off the side, where a small boat is resting. We wait for the anchor to drop before lowering the small boat with two oars into the sea and climbing down the rope bridge. The island is about a mile ahead, hidden in deep-blue, unnatural fog that doesn't touch the gentle waves. The sea is still here, too still for being close to a large island. Sebastian takes the oars, and I reach into the cold water, using my power to push us along faster. The sea shimmers with gold as we fly through it, making tiny waves that flatten within seconds. The island softly appears, nothing more than jagged rocks and black sand beaches for miles. We pull up on the shore, the black sand cold to touch, and it feels like the sun never touches this place as Sebastian and I pull the boat further up the beach to stop it drifting.

“Looks dead here,” Sebastian comments, picking up a handful of cold, black sand.

“They are here all right,” I murmur, sensing them.

I barely get a second to pull my axes out before we are surrounded by Finfolk. They dress in full armour, brown and gold pieces shaped to their bodies, with black fabric between the metal and their skin. They have helmets covering their faces with high metal pieces holding stars rising from their ears, which are long and narrow, spiking into the air.

They hold various weapons, from axes like mine, two daggers, and swords. They all glow with symbols special to their race, which give them protection in battles.

I flip my axe around and meet the gaze of the tallest and largest Finfolk here. “We came for help, my old friend. Shall we?”

I swear he grins under that helmet before he runs at me, sword raised high. I meet his sword with my own, several times as we equally match each other in strength. Sebastian wisely stands back as I fight the Finfolk soldier, who is the same height as I am. He pushes me with his shoulder to try to make me lose my grip, and I use the pause to knock him back on the ground. I lean down and punch him hard in his neck, the only free point, and he groans, kicking me between the legs. I fall, groaning in pain myself as he jumps on me and punches me hard, throwing off his helmet onto the ground. Blond, bright-eyed, and scared is all I get before he hits me again. Hard enough to snap my head to the side. I laugh, tasting blood in my mouth, and punch him right back. I don't know how many punches we both get in before he laughs with me. We both pause in the sand, laughing deeply, and my old friend wipes the blood off his face.

“Good to see you, old friend.”

I stand and spit some of the blood in my mouth out.

“You, too, Dantilous,” I say, offering him my hand, which he accepts.

“Why are you here with the prince?” he asks.

“I have a mate, and she is going to be queen. She has the runes, the old ones said to be rumours, but they are real, and she wants to give them back to the spirits. They said a ring could be traded, and seeing as you lot are like pirates with treasure over magical items...” I leave the rest unsaid.

Dantilous looks between me and Sebastian. “What else do you want?”

“For you and your army of Finfolk to come and fight for the new queen. Help her win this war, and you will find a queen who welcomes you into this world. No more hiding.”

“We do not help females,” Dantilous hisses, loud and clear.

I keep my eyes on him. “Then you will be exiled here forever. She is powerful and my mate, Dantilous.”

“You cannot say you admire my father’s rule,” Sebastian speaks, and I look to him, as does Dantilous. “You are fae and hunted, like the Unseelie. Being immortal and stuck on this island cannot be what all your people want?”

“We did used to travel for more magical items. Between the worlds,” Dantilous comments, and there is a hushed whisper in return. “And mate occasionally. Not all of us prefer males.”

I nod to Sebastian. “We will be the new queen’s consorts and we will make a trade with you. Fight for us, and every year we will give you a magical item from the royal chests. We also have alliances with other worlds and might be able to trade things with them.”

“You offer a good deal, but we are not decided,” Dantilous comments. “You will stay on your ship, and your answer will come tomorrow. Get off my island, friend.”

“Thanks for not killing us on sight,” I comment.

He grins. “I was tempted, but your blood tastes good.”

“I wouldn’t be telling my mate that,” I reply and bow my head.

He bows back and walks away, Sebastian coming to my side.

“I don’t think they are going to help us,” he comments.

I watch them disappear into the fog. “Then gods help the havoc I’m going to bring until they do.”



CHAPTER 79

“**T**o Daesyn and the rune!” Morgania shouts, her figure highlighted by the flames of the fire she stands before, that flickers inside a stone fireplace.

I grip the seat edges under me as a room full of Unseelie, and some Seelie, look my way. I grip it tighter to stop myself screaming as they all cheer my name and several more drinks land on my table that I’m sharing with Ryker. Ryker reaches over and holds my knee. Morgania is lost in the crowd in seconds, and it seems all caution has gone to the wind. We were told to meet her here, and I didn’t expect to walk into a tavern full of at least a hundred rebels celebrating the ship’s destruction.

The thousands of lives that were lost in it.

Mossy yawns on my shoulder. “I’m going to nap in the bag.”

“With Caliphe in there?” I question, but truthfully, I’m jealous. We all haven’t slept in at least twenty hours, and my eyes are burning as I keep them open. Staying alert really isn’t an option at this point. I glance at Ryker, who looks as tired as I am. Mossy doesn’t answer me as he climbs into my bag, and I do up the zip, leaving it a little open. Within seconds, I hear Caliphe complain about smelly monkeys and personal space.

“I think they secretly like each other,” Ryker comments, a yawn hidden in his voice.

“I think we need to find a bed, and not here,” I murmur.

Ryker nods in agreement. We might trust Morgania, but the others here? No. The king will be out looking for revenge for what I did, and I can't risk someone betraying us when we are tired.

Morgania slides into the seat in front of us, handing us two silver cups with red liquid inside. "Fae wine."

"Thanks," I say as we both take the drinks. I sip a little, but Ryker takes a long drink and puts his empty cup down.

"I missed fae wine," he says and stretches his arm across the back of my chair.

"We are going soon," I tell Morgania, and her eyes widen.

Something about her expression puts me on edge, and I tilt my head to the side, watching her. I place my drink down instantly, too. "What have you done?"

"What do you mean?" she asks, her eyes sharp and her hand sliding to her sword at her belt.

I stand and slide out my dagger. The room, which was full of laughter and light, goes silent. I look around, seeing each one of the fae here to celebrate, go for their weapons.

"Bitch. What have you done?" I demand.

Her eyes soften. For a moment. "He promised to take back the law and free Unseelie. Our army isn't going to beat his, and we can't rely on some assassin to bring fighters to win this war. It was best we made a deal with the king."

"No," I whisper, picking up my bag and pulling it over my shoulder. We need to leave. Now. It might already be too late.

"Are you insane? He won't ever take back his law!" Ryker shouts, and he looks to me.

I nod before spinning and kicking Morgania in the chest. She flies backwards as I jump on the table and jump off on the other side. Ryker is at my side as we head to the door, few fae trying to stop us, but flames flicker from Ryker like a wall, protecting our path. We crash out into the cold air, the night full of stars and the king waiting on a horse outside.

He looks right past me, at Ryker, and I realise he can't see me. Even now. Ryker whispers low, no fear in his voice, just sharp orders. That's how he is hiding how frightened he is. Not for himself, but for me. Like I am for him. "Get out of here while he can't see you."

"No," I whisper back as Einar climbs off his horse.

Ten guards move forward, bows pulled, and several of them are aiming at me because they can see me. The army of fae soldiers waiting in the shadows, likely blocking every exit, makes me pause. I don't know how I'm going to get Ryker and I out of here.

Even with Einar not being able to see me.

"Morgania, come out," Einar calls.

I step aside as she walks out and bows low at the king she swore to destroy. I feel sick just seeing it happen and I look away, unable to watch his horror show.

"Daesyn, I know you're there and that you can hear me," Einar calls.

Ryker growls, and he stops in his tracks, his lip curling in amusement.

"Bastards like yourself aren't welcome in my world," Einar drawls. "Not weak ones like yourself."

"Funny, as you have always been here," Ryker replies. "A real bastard and a right prick. What do you want?"

"Daesyn," he replies. "Give her to me."

"No," Ryker replies, and he sighs, following Morgania's gaze to me, where he thinks I might be.

"I don't know which magical being helped you, but unless you come to me, then this is going to end very badly," he practically purrs.

"Are we free to go?" Morgania asks. "I mean, Your Majesty, we did everything you asked."

"No," he replies with a cruel gaze and looks behind him. "Kill everyone in this town."

“Yes, my king,” the soldier replies.

Morgania runs inside, trying to warn people, but an arrow slides through her chest, and she screams. I grab Ryker’s hand and drag him with me, away from all of this while they are distracted for a moment. I see alleyway ahead, with two guards in the way, but they look easy to take down. One second I’m running, and the next Ryker roars, falling on the ground, two arrows in his knees. He barely holds himself up, pain laced across his face.

I can almost feel his pain as my own.

“Ryker!” I scream, and he pushes me with his hand, blood pouring into the mud.

“Get out of here and don’t look back. Live for me, Dae. Please. Just go!” he begs. “I’m your mate and I have never begged you for anything. Do this for me! Go!”

I look behind to see Einar walking over, his eyes searching, ten guards walking with him. Screams fill the air from the Unseelie, and I look down at my mate. Ryker looks up at me, his black curly locks of hair falling flat in the pouring rain, his bright eyes like blue diamonds floating on a pale sea, and within them I see no regret. No pain. Just fear for me. I won’t leave him. I can’t.

“I can use my power. I can—”

Even as I say it, my body aches from tiredness, from using too much with the ships. I’m running low and I don’t know if I can even pull a little bit of it. The new power pools within me, but as I look at Ryker, I know there is a chance I would kill him, too. I don’t have any control.

I don’t know what to do. I don’t know—

“Go,” he pleads one more time. “Please, Dae. He won’t kill me right away; he will use me to get to you. Run and find the others. Be safe.”

The final plead breaks something inside me, knowing he is right, and tears fall down my cheeks as I turn and run. I’ve run away since I was eight years old, through portals, through human cities, and away from who I am. All I’ve ever done is

run, but until this moment, it's never hurt this much. Every step feels like a stone is thrown at me. I easily knock out the guards in the alleyway, allowing myself to look back one more time as Einar's guards carry Ryker, my mate, away.

"Come for him and you might be able to save his life!" Einar shouts to me as I run, anger burning through me like a wave. Ryker was right. He won't kill him when he can use my mate to get to me.

This war is ending with Einar's head detached from his body, and it's going to be soon.

I turn on the path and hide in the forest, waiting until the screams disappear and the sounds of horses fill the night. In the morning, I'm heading to the castle to save my mate, kill the king, and show the Unseelie why I should be their goddamn ruler.



CHAPTER 80

“**Y**our hands are shaking,” Caliphe gently tells me, landing on my hands wrapped around a sword I stole from a guard. It’s been three days and two nights since Ryker was taken by Einar, and I’ve followed them back to the castle earlier this morning, hiding in the nearby beach caverns to get some rest and make a half-decent plan.

“Going into this castle is a death sentence,” I murmur to her, keeping my voice low so that Mossy doesn’t wake. He scouted all the paths and these caverns, never sleeping on the trip here, and he needs some rest. “Einar will be waiting. I’m going to knock out a guard on the road and sneak in, but he will sense me. I have to go get Ryker, but I don’t know what to do.”

Caliphe smiles at me. “You need help, and you can ask The Otherworld for it.”

“The Otherworld already gave me powers that I can’t control or safely use,” I whisper back. “If I start using them, I feel myself slipping into a darkness, and I’m not sure the way out with my mates around.”

“Don’t ask them for powers, ask for help,” she replies and waves her hand deeper into the cavern. “Go and ask in the darkness, in the land itself, for help in the morning with what you have planned. Then you will sleep, rest, and we will save Ryker.”

“Maybe you should rule The Otherworld. You’re stronger than anyone I know,” I tell her.

She smiles again. “Maybe I will rule in another way. Fae creatures are hiding here, stirring, needing a leader to teach them which fae to trust. I could guide them with all I know.”

“Mossy would help you, I bet,” I gently suggest. My hands have stopped shaking, and I know it’s down to her.

“The monkey is not as stupid as I once thought,” she replies. “But ruling anything but the food deliveries in this world is not for him.”

“You might be right,” I chuckle, looking down at my best friend since I was a child. Mossy will outlive me. Fae creatures are immortal in a way we are not, and I’m glad of it. I’m glad I got this time with him, that he became family to me, and we grew up with each other. I stroke his fur softly, and he smiles in his sleep. “Watch him for me, Caliphe.”

“Yes, of course,” she replies and flies down, sitting at his side as I head into the cave.

Nothing but the drifting rays of light from our fire to guide me. I trip on a rock almost immediately and swear to myself as I carry on, kicking dirt with my feet until I find myself completely in darkness.

Immediately, I feel like I’m not alone and I pull my daggers out.

Caliphe, what have you sent me into?

The feeling of not being alone doesn’t fade for a long time as I stand in the shadows, watching everything I can see, checking my back a few times, but nothing comes out of the darkness. Something deep down tells me I’m not in danger, even if years of always being in danger have trained me never to trust anything.

I still lower my daggers to my sides, watching to see if that brings something out of the shadows.

“I was born here, in The Otherworld, and I died here, too. On the same day,” I start off, feeling foolish talking to a world and expecting any kind of response, “I was never frightened of dying and I didn’t know why until recently, until I learnt how far my mum went to save my life. The Cursed Rune has been

with me for my entire life, and in some ways, that means my life has been on borrowed time. Perhaps this is all for nothing and I'm going to spend my life as Einar's prisoner and watch my mates die, but maybe there is a slight chance my life was meant for a reason, and that reason was to save The Otherworld. To save you."

I slide my daggers back into the clips, hot tears dripping down past my chin and onto the dirt-covered ground. "I love this world, and of the three I've lived in for a time, this world calls to me. I feel like I'm home, something akin to being around my mates. I want to fight for you and to win, but the odds are stacked against me. So, if you could do anything to help me, tomorrow morning at daylight would be the time. I know you're there, this world made of ancient fae magic, and I know you helped me with this new power. I hope you understand that using it now could kill my mate, bring down the castle, and kill innocents. I won't do that unless I have to, and then what will there be left to take on the gods."

I blow out a breath. "Let me save you."

I turn around, feeling foolish for even attempting to talk to a world made of magic, and there is nothing but silence that follows me, the presence I felt long gone and my plea for help with it.

* * *

"Hi!" I say, jumping up a random, blond Seelie guard after he finishes peeing up a tree.

He doesn't even get his hand to his sword before I slam my dagger into the back of his head, and he falls like a log, face-first into the leaves. I glance up to make sure no one saw before starting to strip his armour and cloak off, and sliding it over me, pulling up the hood.

"I can't believe it took two hours to find a short guard," Mossy mutters, climbing into my bag with Caliphe. "I was beginning to think all fae are tall."

I grunt as I tie a strip of fabric around the fee's hands and feet, and finally his mouth before leaving him a ditch nearby. Sweat lines my forehead and the back of my neck as I head to the horse tied on the road.

This is not going to work.

I try to ignore the voice in my head as I swing myself up on the brown horse with white patterns of hair on its legs. The seat is still warm from the hours the guard spent sitting here as I take off down the road at a slow pace, heading for the gates to the castle ahead. There is only one way into the castle, the rest is smothered with traps and guards, making it impossible to sneak in. Luckily for me, the king has called all his guards and army soldiers back, so they shouldn't look twice at me with my soldier's cloak and armour as I head through the gates. I've seen dozens of female guards in the bays, and in the king's personal guard. Within a few minutes, I fall in behind six carriages and several guards on their own horses, heading in the same direction. None of them look my way as I ride behind them and pray to The Otherworld to give me good luck. The path spins and turns until the castle gates, looming gold metal twisted and designed to look like a shield with snakes and fae wings spread over the middle, where there is a large lock. These gates remind of the ones around the reaper castle that spoke to me and had their own magic left by the gods.

I hope these aren't magical or, dammit, I'm in trouble. The carriages stop, and a guard comes to speak with the rider before waving him in. The rest of us with him. My nerves are all over the place as I keep my eyes low and head down as I ride into the castle, the guards not looking my way once.

"Talk about sheer damn luck," Mossy mutters, and I must agree with him. I didn't expect to get in here that easily.

The road from the gate to the castle is filled with soldiers and horses, many leaving their horses with the waiting guards. I watch everything around me before I see a small door, right before the main part of the courtyard. The door is slightly open, and it's hidden well in a little nook.

“Attack!” guards scream behind me.

I turn, my eyes widening as the sky and forest are filled with eyes. Fae creatures. Unfamiliar birds, exotic creatures, and small dragons fill the horizon, and I’m not sure what is in the forest, but they don’t look friendly.

“Told you help would come,” Caliphe whispers to me as the guards all run straight for the gates, not looking my way as I climb off my horse and run in the other direction, easily mixing in with the Seelie fae running that way. The ground is shaking as I get to the door, and Caliphe slips out of my bag, hiding in the shadows of the door. “I have to go.”

“I understand,” I tell her. “Thank you for everything and be safe.”

Mossy pops his head out of my bag and looks up at her. “Don’t die, pink stuff. I like you, and you won’t be dead. It would be like holding a dead fly.”

“Thanks,” she replies, and I’m surprised when they both bow at each other before she flies off.

Mossy climbs out of my bag as I step into the door and pull it shut behind me. The corridor is bright thanks to the fire lanterns hanging off hooks on the walls, and it’s empty, a staircase leading down to the castle and another door. I pull the door open to find the staircase leading somewhere else. I reach out with my other senses, and I can’t find Ryker, even though part of me feels he is close by.

“I need you to find Ryker for me. I figure if we both go in different directions, one of us will find him,” I ask Mossy, and he nods, climbing up the stairs.

“Don’t die either,” Mossy tells me. “Not for the dog.”

“Mossy—”

“I’m joking!” he replies with a monkey grin. “I like the loyal fire dog.”

Then he is gone, and I blow out a breath, reminding myself who I am and why I’m here. I’m Daesyn Heartlocke, bearer of

the Cursed and Forsaken Rune and hella badass Unseelie fae/reaper.

I can do this alone if I must.

My mind drifts to my other mates, the ones I haven't let myself think too long about in case I fall apart. They must be alive and well. I know Seth is okay on Earth, but I don't have a clue if Queen Evie will send help to revenge angels she can't remember. Finn and Sebastian... well, my life literally depends on them and how well it goes with the Finfolk. With Finn's amazing people skills, I have no doubt it's going badly. I don't even know about Poppy, my best friend, and what happened to her. I miss them all so damn much.

It's for them, for Ryker, that I don't give up and fall to my knees. It's for my mum, my dad, and my uncle. It's for everyone I have lost and everyone who needs someone to save them. I can be that for them, I know it, and I will make this world better. I will make it safe and protected and give everything I have.

Maybe that's why The Otherworld helped me today. It knows and believes in me.

Just like my mates do. Like Poppy did. Like my mum always did.

I push the door open at the top of the stairs and step out into a long, red-tiled room, and I'm not alone. Sitting on a silver couch, looking out the window, is Laelie.

For some reason, she looks a lot older than she did the last time we saw each other, and her eyes are clouded, different. I guess having a half fae baby, a short five-month pregnancy which is normal for half fae born in this world, has that effect on someone. It's a miracle the baby survived because they usually die.

Like I did, and the Cursed Rune is the only reason I'm still breathing.

Laelia tenses, but she doesn't move as I take in her white crown of diamonds, her pale-purple gown, and the sharp

purple sword at her side, resting tightly in her grip. “He thought you’d go to him first. He is waiting for you.”

“Your king and husband, I’m guessing?” I ask, slipping out my daggers. I won’t kill her, but I won’t let her get in my way. “Where are they then?”

She rises this time, her eyes flashing with anger. There is the Laelia I know. “I wanted to marry Torfinn and be a good wife to him. I should have been, and then you had to turn up. The second he saw you, it was over for me, and you knew it. The second Poppy saw you, she had someone else to model after instead of me!”

“Poppy and your father asked me not to kill you,” I tell her. “But I want to kill you. I want to destroy you for what you did to the angels, but that is not my revenge to have. Get out of my way.”

“No,” she simply replies. “If you kill Einar, my son will be in danger. We need him to protect us.”

“Do you love him?” I ask. “Einar, I mean.”

Her expression scrunches up. “Love is for the weak, and I am not weak. I don’t believe in that.”

“Poppy loves you. I bet you love your son. How could you not believe it’s real?” I question. I don’t know why I’m wasting my time speaking with her when Ryker could be suffering. I walk closer, and she pulls up her sword.

“When you’re dead, I will get my family back. You’ve been a curse ever since you walked into my life,” she breathes out. “And according to Einar, you’ve been one since you were born.”

She attacks me quickly, but uncoordinated, and it’s easy to spin on my foot and move out of her way. Black shadows lace around her, and instead of using the sword, she flings shadow magic at me. It brushes off my skin, barely touching me, and I step through it. Laelie’s eyes widen as I come crashing down on her, knocking her sword from her hand across the tiles. I place my dagger at her throat, holding her against the wall with little effort.

“How the hell did you kill those angels?” I demand.

Her eyes meet mine, so much like her sister’s, but all the goodness in Poppy’s soul is not in Laelie’s. “I held them with shadow magic and easily killed them. They are weak at it.”

“You slaughtered them!” I shout. “That’s not—”

“Right? Fair? Who cares? They had the rune, and we needed it,” she replies. “Now he has both runes. The Divine and the Forgotten Rune. Don’t you care what happens when you use all four runes?”

“What does it do?” I demand.

“Makes him powerful. So powerful. He can’t be stopped,” she breathes out and looks to the corridor to our right.

I slam my dagger hilt into the side of her head, and she collapses down the wall.

It won’t be him holding all the runes, that’s something I’m certain of, and I will only have them for a short time. I hope I can handle that sort of power.

Leaving her in the corridor, I go to the window and pause, a smile tilting my lips up. The castle is surrounded, and there are so many I recognise. Queen Evie, her mates, her tiger, and my mate are fighting their way through the armies with their own. The impressive show of power is incredible. Nearby I spot Finn and Sebastian, and an army of men in armour fighting the soldiers with them.

The Ffolk.

“They came,” I whisper to myself, spinning as a door opens behind me. I lift my daggers, only to lower them as Poppy walks into the room, reaper guards moving in the surrounding shadows.

She looks at her sister, pausing before looking up at me.

With a damn crown on her head. “We had a few problems in our realm, but I’m here. You’re my sister, and I believe you have a king to dethrone.”

“You remember me?” I whisper.

“I did the second the crown touched my head,” she admits and runs to me, wrapping her arms around me tightly. “Thank you for not killing her. We are in every shadow and fighting for you. The king is in the throne room, my guards say. The route is clear for you.”

“I missed you,” I tell her, leaning back. “Thank you for coming.”

She grins. “Wait until I tell you about my wedding night. I’m married, mated, and a queen now.”

“I can’t wait,” I reply, winking at her before leaving my best friend, my sister in everything but blood, and run to the throne room.

The corridor is littered with shadows and dead guards, and I jump over a few to get to the throne room doors. The shadows part as I walk to the door, and they open on their own, revealing the beautiful throne room. The silver floors and walls, with flowers and thick vines painted onto them, are just as impressive as the last time I was in here. The throne, floating off the floor with its long wings, is empty, and Einar is standing in front of it with a sword to Ryker’s throat.

He doesn’t pause and slams the dagger through Ryker’s chest as I scream, running to him. Ryker’s eyes widen, and he falls forward. I slam a blast of shadows at Einar, sending him crashing into the throne as he laughs. I fall to my knees, catching Ryker and turning him over.

He reaches up and cups my cheek as I build up my Unseelie power and slam it into the earth around us. Real vines blast out of the floor, cracking it, and wrap around Ryker. My power heals him, slowly, as I rise from my knees, vines hanging in the air around me, shadows spreading from my feet.

“I plead for forgiveness and mercy. You don’t want to kill me, Daesyn. What would the people say? If you kill the king and queen, and their son? You would be the villain!” he says, his voice smug and not an inch of fear in it.

“I. Don’t. Care.”

The throne room goes dark as I let go of my power and turn the king of the Seelie fae into nothing but dust on the throne.



CHAPTER 81

The king who tormented me for so many years was a lot easier to kill than I thought. I should have made it last longer, I should have drawn it out, but all I could think about was killing him for hurting my mate, for hunting my kind, and killing hundreds of thousands of Unseelie. The power given to me by The Otherworld fills every inch of my body, lighting me up from the inside as I stand still, letting it control me, letting it fill me until all I can feel is the need for revenge on everyone who has ever hurt me. It started with Einar, and now he is gone. There are others to hunt. The gods, but not until I have the other two runes, not until this war is won and my family is safe. Slowly, the dust left on the throne changes in shape into two small stones. One is white, with a silver symbol to mark it as the Divine Rune, and the other is purple, smooth, and shiny with a gold symbol for the Forsaken Rune. I walk up to the throne, a ringing in my ears not settling even as I sense other people in the room with me.

“Daesyn!” Poppy shouts, warning me not to touch the runes that call to me, but her cries fall into the wind gathering around me, in a room where there shouldn’t be a single breeze.

The runes want to be with each other, and the pull is something I could never resist. No one alive could. My hands glow with gold magic, so strange and unusual, as I reach out and grab the runes. White and purple light blast out of my hands, shining so brightly it hurts to look at them, but I feel the change in myself, the new runes connecting to my soul.

It’s too much.

I fall to my knees in front of the throne, gasping as I hold my stomach like it might fall out. The floor underneath me cracks, and screams fill the air as my skin burns to life with symbols. I'm covered in them, and I can't see past the white symbols on my skin.

Not until I hear a voice in my ear. "Our deal has begun, cursed one. Your army will win with our power, and you will bring the runes to us. You have a day."

The spirit leaves instantly, and I collapse onto the cold floor, coughing out a mouthful of blood as someone leans over me, pulling me up.

"Dae, Dae!" Poppy shouts at me, brushing stray bits of my hair out of the way. "Don't you dare die on me, Dae. Wake up."

"I'm awake and in dire need of coffee," I mutter, blinking my eyes open. I feel different, stronger, immortal in a way an endless power could be. I see Poppy differently now, a gold aura shining around her body and her crown. Gold with tints of darkness. "Ryker?"

"Toth is healing him," she tells me. "The army, well, something has changed, and everyone is pretty much untouchable. It's like the elements are protecting us all."

"The spirits," I tell her as she helps me sit up. The room is still spinning, but I manage to focus on Ryker and Toth, both their auras bright and colourful, even if Ryker's is a bit faded from his injuries. My mate is healing, I can tell, and he will survive this with Toth's help and the healing I gave.

"What did you give the spirits for this help, Dae?" Poppy demands, grabbing my arms. "Dae, you're glowing and you seem...off. What did you do?"

"I'm going to help them win the war," I tell her, feeling like it's the right thing to do, and it's all I want to do right at this moment. I don't look up or focus on anything else as I walk to the window and smash it into pieces with only a touch of my power. I don't blink as I jump from the window into a

shadow portal I've called and land right in the middle of the Seelie Fae army.

Dozens of shoulders spin and turn on me, shock and fear flashing in a few of their eyes as I rise. A mixture of colours surround me in an unnatural glow, and all I can feel is power as I pick up a sword from the ground. Dangerous old magic lights the sword up with a rainbow of fire, and I hold it in the air.

“Run or you're going to die. I'm the queen now, and this is my world. You bow to me or you leave.” I pause to smile. “One way or another.”

A few of them run while others charge at me, calling me a bitch and screaming Einar's name in some backwards sense of loyalty to a king who is dead and never cared for them. I smile as I meet them in battle, my sword and body more powerful than before, and each hit of my sword sends each soldier flying backwards or bursting into gold dust. Time passes slowly as I kill one after another, aware of people looking my way, aware of the line of bodies I'm leaving. I don't attack anyone who runs from me, just the ones who dare to try to attack me.

I only stop when a familiar face makes me pause. I lower my sword and run to Seth, jumping into his arms and deeply kissing him. He is covered in blood, mud, and gods knows what else, but I don't care.

“What happened to you?” he demands, his arm tight around my waist. “You're different.”

“I am power,” I purr to him, and his eyes flash, red fire burning up in them.

He cups my cheek and shakes his head. “You've always been power, Syn, but you aren't just that. You've taken too much. You need to let it go.”

“No,” I say, pushing away from him and shaking my head. “I have things I need to do and I—”

“Daesyn!” Sebastian shouts, and I turn as he cuts down a guard and jumps over his body, walking to me, reaching into

his pocket.

The ring. He might have the ring that can save my life, and then I could give the power back. If I want to.

It's addictive to have.

The ground violently shakes under my feet, and a scream catches in my throat as Seth grabs hold of me, both of us falling through a crack in the ground and landing on a rough piece of rock.

“Syn, are you ok—” He pauses, his eyes widening, and he pulls me harshly against his body, trying to protect me from what he saw.

I don't even want to look up, to see what made Seth scared. Actually scared. Demon overlords are never scared. The ground doesn't stop shaking, and I look up just as a giant, unnatural wave crashes into us, sweeping me away from Seth and into a whirlpool of water. I choke on it as I try to swing my arms, try to grab anything, but the current is fast. Several things crash into me, cutting my stomach and legs, and making me gasp, letting out any air I had hold of. I feel myself drowning quickly, and even with the knowledge I can't die, fear still takes hold of me.

My mates are in this water. This tidal wave sent by only one thing. A god. My body smacks hard into a tree, and I grab hold of it as tightly as I can, my body shaking from lack of air, black spots dancing in my vision in the dark water. The current suddenly stops, and I swim up towards the light, breaking free of the surface and coughing on the cold air. It's too bright as I try to look around, the grey, muddy water blocking out everything except the castle in the distance.

The fighting is still carrying on in the courtyards. The stone walls have been washed away, and so many bodies float in the water.

“SETH!” I scream. “SEBASTIAN! FINN!”

I swim through the water, getting to a male body floating in the wrong way and move past him to climb onto a door, cracked but still floating. I pull myself up onto my feet and

look at the surrounding chaos, knowing exactly who did this. I can still feel my mates are alive, not Sebastian, but I know somewhere deep down that he is.

But the gods are getting involved. They will kill them to get to me, and there is only one way to stop the gods.

I was born to do just that.

I don't know what I'm doing as I imagine a portal and hold out my hands, pushing shadows into the darkness, and with it, I pull the power The Otherworld gave me. My shadows, always dark purple and black, glitter with gold dust as they shape into a star. The star shimmers and waves like a portal should, and I pray to no gods as I jump through it to find the ones I'm hunting.



CHAPTER 82

For five long, stretched-out seconds, there is nothing but darkness on the other side of the portal. The darkness that reminds me of the alleyway corners I hid in as a kid, with only Mossy to hold my hand and promise there was nothing in the shadows. This darkness doesn't feel empty, not at all, and eventually I tell myself to move. I walk through the darkness and out into a world that would make the human authors of fairy tales weep. Beautiful green grass fields, hills and mountains as far as I can see, little mansions stretching into the sky made of swirls of white oak, stone, and gold. Flowers of every colour fill the world with a sweet scent, and a light, warm breeze wraps around me.

This is where the gods live and weep into the worlds, causing havoc whenever they please while they are untouched.

While they live as gods.

I feel nothing as I lift my hands, calling the unnatural power to my fingertips. It grows, stretching out in waves of gold tendrils that fill every bit of space around me. They shout, their magic rising to fight me off, but it does nothing against the power I've been given.

I remember my uncle's face as he died; I remember the thousands of Unseelie who died, and my mother last but not least.

So much pain caused by them.

"Stop!" a familiar voice shouts.

I turn to my left, letting my power continue to rise, and find the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Her skin is light pink, her hair a dark shade of pink that falls around her body, mixing with her soft white dress. Her eyes are brighter than any light I've seen, and I realise straight away who she is.

And it does make me pause.

"Aphrodite?" I question.

She nods, carefully avoiding my power as it stretches beyond her. I make sure she isn't touched by it, the little control I have over the magic at this point.

"Irene, your sweet mother, wouldn't have wanted you to be a god killer. This isn't your fate."

"If I let them live, they will never stop hurting the people I love," I whisper back.

Her eyes are sad for a moment. "There is another way, Daesyn, but you have to make the choice. I've watched your entire life, from the second you were born, long before your mother asked me to bless you. I've seen every human, demon, fae, and protector you have killed to survive. I've seen you love your mates with a passion that could set the worlds on fire. You have family, love and protection far beyond what I could give you. For them, can't you see that this is a step too far?"

"I—"

I pause mid-sentence as a pink haze surrounds Aphrodite and pulls away from her, creating a human shape before features slowly define themselves. My heart feels like it's exploding as I look at my mother, a light-pink shadow around her body, but she looks just as she did the last time I saw her. Her hair, her eyes, her dress, it's all the same.

"Mum?"

She nods, tears falling like starlight down her cheeks as she walks to me. "Daesyn, I'm so proud of you. So proud of the woman you have become and the queen you will be. The second you were born, I knew you were special, and no matter

the cost, I had to save you. And look at you, saving the worlds, being a hero when your life has been so hard.”

“How are you here?” I whisper, half sobbing as I walk the final step towards her. I want to reach out and hug her, but something in the back of my mind tells me not to, pushes a wall of air between us and warns me that where she is and where I am is not the same place. Two worlds that shouldn’t ever touch.

She looks behind her, and I follow her gaze to see Aphrodite on her knees, struggling. “It takes great power to pull a spirit into this world. I don’t have long.”

“I never thought I’d see you again,” I whimper. “Everything I am is because of you.”

“No,” she replies softly. “You never needed me, Daesyn. You were always so strong. So strong, but listen to me. Killing the gods will ruin your soul. The runes are already doing it, taking from you, and this would be too far. It will mark you, and you will never escape it. This isn’t what you were born for. The Otherworld gave you this power, yes, but it’s your choice what to do with it.”

“Mum,” I whisper.

“I love you so much, and your father does, too. He has always been there for you, as has your whole clan. Be strong and know we will be waiting for you one day. When it’s your time,” she softly tells me. “Live bright. Live free and be the queen I could never be.”

“I love you, too,” I whisper as she fades into the light and a cry burns in my throat. I fall to my knees and wipe the tears away as Aphrodite looks up at me, sweat lining her forehead, her eyes less bright than before.

“You deserved to say goodbye,” she tells me. “A real goodbye.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, looking at my power stretching around us, the gods running away, defending themselves. “I can’t kill them. I can, but I shouldn’t. There is a price for taking a soul, and taking the gods... I can’t do that to myself.”

She smiles softly. “Then make them bow, Queen Daesyn Heartlocke. Make them bow to a mortal queen.”

My smile is nothing short of vicious as I rise to my feet and walk through my power towards the hundreds of gods waiting. I use my power to trap them in a stone courtyard, and I create high walls of gold to make sure no one escapes.

A few of them scream, most of them stand still and cold like their souls as I stop in front of them.

A goddess with white hair, eyes the mirror image of Finn’s, steps forward for them. Artemis, goddess of the hunt. “God killer, we have expected you for a long time.”

“I am no god killer,” I tell her. “But bow to me, give me your blood and pledge to never harm another being, and I will let you stay.”

“Or?” Artemis questions.

I reach my hands out and call to my shadows. Two dark portals pull themselves out of the ground, shaping like mirrors. “Or you can spend your lives in the Gods’ Chara.”

Unsurprisingly, no one bows, and I smile, as it’s just what I wanted. My feet leave the ground as I call power to myself, binding the gold dust into tendrils of power that wrap around the gods. They fight, smacking power into me, but it bounces off, and it’s nothing to stop them as one by one I throw them through the portal into the Gods’ Chara. Two male gods fall to their knees and bow first, followed by three more goddesses.

I leave Artemis until last and I wrap my power around her tightly, pulling her to me. Both of us float in the air, watching each other. “Won’t you bow for Torfinn? I thought you loved your son.”

“He chose you,” she screams at me. “My only son let me down and chose you.”

“I’m his mate,” I remind her.

She only screams at me, and I don’t pause this time before throwing her through the portal and closing them behind her.

Aphrodite walks around me and kneels, bowing her head. “My queen. The gods’ queen.”

I make sure to look at the seven gods and goddess left. “Cut your hand and bleed onto the dust. I will know if you hurt a soul. Mortal or not, and I will come back to put you in the Gods’ Chara.”

They each do as I ask, and I feel the connection instantly before I look down at Aphrodite. “I hope you find your children.”

“I will,” she replies with a smile so bright it could light up the worlds. “I hope I am free to visit you, to give blessing to your children.”

“Who said I was having children?” I reply with an arched eyebrow.

She winks. “The gods.”

I laugh before I slightly bow my head to her, and she bows back to me, as do the others. I open one more portal back to the throne room, back to my world and my home. Where my mates are. The dark shadows dance around the portal, and I remember what I was like there, how much the runes have a hold on me in that world.

It was different here, like I could finally think straight. But I must go back to them. Always to them.

My hands shake as I walk through the portal and step out the other side. The throne room is quiet, still for only a second. A brief second where I can hear little screaming outside from the war, where there is only the breeze and the feeling that my mates are close by.

I only get a second before the spirits burst into the world and come straight for me.

Air. Water. Earth. Fire.

All four elements crash into my body, into my soul, ripping me apart from the inside. The wind floats my body into the air, dirt and rocks smacking into me from the earth. Water surrounds me, drowning me, and my insides feel like

I'm burning. They are hurting me on purpose, for making them wait, or they are so beyond feelings and emotions they don't care what it does to me. My powers are gone, and I reach for them to protect me, but nothing works. I'm powerless against the spirits.

“Ourrrs.”

The spirit's voice drowns out the world around me, and I try to scream, try to cry out as they rip the runes from my soul.

I feel them go. First the Forsaken Rune and with it goes Earth, shaping into a glowing green man. The Forgotten and Divine Rune is pulled next, shaping into water and fire women. They both glow green and red, and I know what is coming next.

I feel as Air reaches into my soul and takes The Cursed Rune. The rune that has been with me my entire life and kept me alive. The pain is overwhelming as it's taken from me, and Air disappears, letting me slam onto the ground.

I cry out with the impact, but only for a moment, as everything begins to fade into a calmness. The air element wraps itself into a glowing man made of pure white light, covered in symbols that I've seen on my body so many times before.

The spirits look down at me, their faces void of any emotions.

And all I want is my mates. I think I try to call for them, but I look over to see the door is blocked with a glowing wall of magic from the spirits. They aren't going to let them in here.

“They—they have the ring,” I wheeze.

The air spirit looks down at me and tilts its head to the side. We watch each other, and I feel a connection to the spirit, the part of him which was the rune I held my entire life.

But I don't think he understands me now. Whatever the spirits are now, they aren't human. They aren't mortal or fae.

They just aren't.

The air spirit holds its hand out and creates a portal, to leave I presume, and my heart drops. I'm going to die. Really die this time.

It's so cold in here, and my hands shake. My heart races as I watch the shimmering gold portal flicker right before a little girl walks through it.

Sebastian's sister. The princess. Eira Husk.

She is wearing a black dress, her hair pulled up high in a ponytail, and she looks so young to be in the presence of spirits older than anything I can imagine. Eira looks down at me and pauses, her eyes widening.

The reaper in her must sense death, how close it is, or I really look that shit. I don't want her to see me die. Why would they bring her here?

Eira opens her hand to reveal a small gold ring. The ring isn't special, very common in appearance, but the way the spirits all rush to her makes me think it isn't common at all. "My brother knew you might come to me, speak to me. It's been five days since Daesyn left this world, and I know you've been looking for her. This was the deal you made, and you never lie."

"Neveerr," the air spirit speaks, understanding her. "It is the key to our world."

"Save her," Eira demands, and my heart warms. "You four have been my friends, but it is time for you to go home. Save my queen and then leave."

This girl is six and about to save my life and the world.

A warm feeling burns throughout me, and I gasp, feeling like my soul has been smacked back into my body. Everything aches as I watch the air spirit pick up the ring and slide it onto his finger, and for a second, a brief second, I sense how happy he is. The spirits have been lost for such a long time, and I don't think they even knew how they would get back to their world. The gods took a lot from them, like they did me and so many others.

They disappear slowly into white light until there is nothing left of the spirits in this world. The door crashes open, and my mates run in, Finn getting to me first and picking me up in his arms.

“Are you okay?” Seth demands, looking between me and Eira.

I wink at Eira as she hugs Sebastian, who is watching me closely. Ryker kisses the top of my head, and I let out the breath I was holding.

“It’s over.”



CHAPTER 83

Finn strokes his hand down my back as I lean against him, listening to Ryker explain how most of the Unseelie fae gave up after the water hit, or died within the brutal waters. The fight was messy, and my mates were tired, worn out from days of holding the castle until it was over. Healers are everywhere now, fixing what they can and saving lives. Toth has spent a few days in the dungeon, freeing the hundreds of Unseelie fae who used to be the upper families until Einar took them prisoner. Now, a lot of them are making their ways back to their lands and what is left of them, promising to pledge allegiance to me when I am ready. The Seelie army is mostly gone, and what is left is locked up until they take blood oaths to me as their new queen, which all of them have agreed to do. Some of them are more than willing and claimed to be forced to work for Einar, and it wasn't what they wanted. Either way, I won't trust them without a blood oath. Finn has magically held the locks on the prisons, and as far as The Otherworld is concerned, the war is over. On our side, there were many lost, too, but it's over. Poppy's reapers have taken hold of the castle and locked down everything until I take my crown. We are in a spare bedroom, with a large window that overlooks the devastation outside the castle, the mud and water everywhere, the bodies and the crows flying around, waiting.

Seth walks in, his eyes darkening when he sees me. I smile at him as he walks right up to me and kisses me deeply, even with Ryker's arm around my waist. Seth left me to help Queen Evie's soldiers with portals back to Earth, and I know I owe her a big debt for her help. Finn and Sebastian said goodbye to the

Finfolk yesterday, right after I came back. Their help won't be forgotten, and I know they helped themselves to many magical items in the safes around the castle. Evie herself teased them with some magical items, and it seems they are going to visit the demon queen soon. Finn and Sebastian still haven't told me how they convinced the Finfolk to fight with us, but a part of me thinks the Finfolk want freedom as much as all of us did. They knew fighting here was a chance at a new world.

Seth breaks away, leaving me wanting more, and kisses me one more time, softer this time. As soft as a demon overlord can be. "Evie wants to see you. If you're up to it."

"You do look pale," Sebastian states, walking closer, and all four of them look at me. Covered in damp clothes, streaked mud and blood. They look as bad as I do. One thing we haven't had time to do is a good shower since I came back. We are all tired and worn out, but I owe Evie some of my time.

"I'm good for a bit," I tell them, and their over protective sides aren't hidden well as they all raise their eyebrows. It makes me smile. "I'm sure Evie wants to get back to her world, and I can't rest in here all day."

Ryker growls, and Finn huffs.

Seth takes my hand, and Ryker walks on my other side as we leave the room. Ryker and Sebastian stay behind to speak with the soldiers and sort out the burials of the Unseelie, which will no doubt take us a long time. Seth guides me up several winding staircases until we come to a large room with red carpets, tall brick walls, and several random seats dotted around. Evie is speaking quietly with Poppy and Toth, and behind them, Laelia is in chains attached to the wall, a long red cloak tied around her and food spilled nearby.

"The new queen here to kill the last?" she asks.

"Shut up," Evie growls at her.

Laelie's eyes are like daggers as she spots me, and I look away from her to see Poppy turn my way.

She smiles, albeit sadly, and walks up to me. Evie and one of her dark-haired mates stay near Laelia and Toth, close

enough to claim her as theirs. Poppy hugs me, and I hold her back, sensing something is wrong. “Evie wants to take Laelia as her prisoner to live the rest of her life in her prisons. I’ve tried speaking to Laelie, but she won’t talk to me, nor does she want to see her baby.”

I look over Poppy’s shoulder at the demon and protector queen. “Poppy…”

She leans back, tears filling her eyes. “I know. I have to let her go because of what she did to the angels.”

“The angels were her people, and she slaughtered them,” I softly remind her. “Laelia is a danger to everyone if she was free.”

Poppy wipes tears away. “Being queen means making the hard decisions, right?”

“Right,” I whisper, hugging her once more. “But I’m always here for you, and you will get through this.”

“I missed you so much,” she whispers back. “And I hate what I’m going to do.”

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell her.

She nods, letting me go, and walks up to Evie. I follow and stand at her side as Evie casts her eyes on me.

“Queen Daesyn, good to see you are well. I heard it was touch and go for a moment there.”

“I owe my life to a six-year-old girl,” I tell her honestly. “Eira Husk, princess of the reaper realm and sister to one of my mates. She is very special.”

“I’m sure she would get along well with my children,” Evie replies with a small smile. “They all sound like trouble.”

I laugh and nod. “Thank you for coming.”

“I couldn’t miss the chance to make an allegiance with two new queens. I like my worlds at peace, and you are said to be quite a force to be reckoned with,” she replies. “And Seth is family, as is his mate.”

“I heard the gods bowed to you,” Mossy states from behind me.

I turn as my best friend runs and jumps into my arms, and I can't help the biggest smile on my face as I squeeze him tight.

“And I am the only family to you that matters.”

Evie and everyone laughs as my heart warms.

“How on earth did you hear that?” I question.

“The new ruler of the fae creatures heard about it,” Mossy tells me with a monkey wink. “A certain bossy little pixie.”

“Caliphe?” I question.

“Yup. Turns out they all love her and blah.” He huffs. “They are going to help you with the bodies and spread the word to the Unseelie they are safe, and anyone who supports the new queen should come here. Seelie, who want peace, too.”

I squeeze him tight. “It's good to see you.”

“The gods bow to you?” Evie questions, her eyes wide when I turn her way and nod once. “Impressive.”

“You may take my sister,” Poppy says, her voice cracking, and everyone turns to her. Toth moves to her side and wraps his arm around her waist. The pain in her voice makes my chest hurt. “But I want to be able to come and see her. With her son, too, and my parents.”

“We will treat her kindly in our prisons,” Evie vows. “But she must serve a life sentence for the lives she took. They were innocent and my family, and what she did was evil.”

Poppy looks to her sister, who glares at us all. “I understand, and I will not stop you. Take her.”

“Bitch! I guess you have a new sister now! A new baby! Why would you care what happens to me?” she screams at Poppy.

Poppy stands tall. “You made your bed, and I will not keep your baby from you. You are my sister as much as Daesyn is,

but she did not murder angels and marry an evil man who killed hundreds of thousands. I will not protect you from this.”

“I don’t want to see the baby or you ever again,” she hisses. “You’re dead to me.”

“I’m sure that will change,” I say, and she glares at me, turning away.

I place my hand on Poppy’s back as she stands tall, the queen of the reapers in every sense of the word.

Evie inclines her head and turns to me, and to Seth. “You both owe me an invitation to this world when it’s not at war. I like fae wine and parties.”

“Me, too,” I say with a grin.

“We will invite you back for the crowning soon, and a huge celebration,” Seth suggests, and I nod, agreeing. With everything we have been through, we need a party. We need fun and lightness back into this darkness that has held this land for so long.

Evie looks at her mate. “Take her.”

He nods and goes to Laelie, who screams and tries to fight off Evie’s mate with no luck. He is twice the size of her and picks her up like a doll.

Evie opens a portal. “Azi will stay to help burn the bodies for a while.”

“Appreciated,” Seth replies. “Goodbye, Evie darling.”

Evie chuckles as she bows to us, and we all bow back before she walks through a portal she makes out of nowhere and disappears. Laelie’s eyes meet mine as she is dragged through the portal, and it blinks out of existence. Poppy cries then, and Toth pulls her into his arms, holding her tightly as I sense the bond between them. They are mated.

I place my hand on her back, just being there for her in the silence that is left until a baby cry echoes around us. I turn to see an old, grey-haired Unseelie woman carrying in a baby in a bundle of white blankets. The baby keeps crying as Poppy turns to them and then looks at me.

“I know he is a threat to your throne, but I want to take him home to the reaper realm. He will be brought up with us and my parents, and when he is eighteen, I will make sure he signs away any claim to the throne,” she asks me, picking up the baby from the Unseelie woman. The baby stops crying straight away in Poppy’s arms, and she looks at him with nothing but love.

“What’s his name?”

“Miyako Nighthold,” Poppy tells me and looks at me. “It doesn’t matter what darkness could be in your blood, but the light that could be there, too. I know he is good, and I will make sure he is.”

I move closer and smile as I look at the baby with dark hair and eyes, the very image of his aunt. “This is his world, too, and you best bring him back often. No fae should be pushed out of their world.”

“Really?” Poppy whispers, and I nod.

“I want you to come here often, too. I need my sister.”

“I need you, too,” she replies with a big grin.

“Now the sappy stuff is over,” Ryker says, leaning over to see the baby and smile at me. “How did you win the last test?”

Poppy winks at me. “I fought like Daesyn and made sure Catherine was dead before getting to the end.”

“And when she came out of the games, the previous queen tried to kill her,” Toth adds in, his eyes narrowing.

“She is in the prisons. I thought Sebastian might help me decide what to do with her,” Poppy adds in. “The guards protected me and bowed to me instantly. She never stood a chance.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there,” I tell her.

“You had a world to save,” she replies. “And I had a realm to save in my own way, by becoming a queen. The first thing I did was make a law freeing all Unseelie. Anyone found to hold an Unseelie slave or hurt a fae in any sense will be dealt with.”

“Thank you,” I softly tell her. “I really never thought this day would come.”

“Daesyn,” Sebastian says, walking into the room. “There is something you need to see.”

Poppy hands Toth the baby and follows me out with Ryker and Seth, and we follow Sebastian down the stairs to the entrance hall of the castle. It’s pretty much destroyed in here, rocks and dead bodies everywhere, the floor covered in blood. I try not to look at it as I find Morgania and at least a hundred Unseelie fae outside the broken stone doors.

Morgania falls to her knees in the blood, and I watch her carefully.

“You betrayed me to Einar,” I say.

“Everything I did was to save my kind. You, more than anyone, should understand that,” she replies.

Every single one of the Unseelie fall to their knees until everyone is bowing. It’s not something I’m ever going to get used to.

It’s not something I truly wanted. I want to rule to make things right, not to be bowed to, but I understand both of these things have to happen together or I will never truly get enough respect to hold the changes I want to make.

“Why are you here?” Seth demands.

She looks up at me. “To pledge myself to the new queen of the fae. The rightful queen of The Otherworld. I will serve you however you wish for the rest of my life.”

“You nearly cost me my mate’s life. You cost him days of torture and pain,” I growl at her.

Ryker places his hand on my arm, stopping me.

“This is a time for peace,” he reminds me. “I’m alive. We all are, and we should start by showing forgiveness. It’s always a good place to start.”

My shoulders drop as I look down at Morgania and I close my eyes for just a moment. There was no line I wouldn’t cross

to save my people, just like she wanted to, and she made a mistake. A costly mistake.

But she is one of my people, and everyone deserves a second chance. What I do in this moment will be remembered by all the fae who are looking to me to be better than the king they have suffered under for so long. He was motivated by revenge and jealousy, and I won't be what he was.

I walk up to Morgania, holding up a hand to my mates and Poppy to stay behind. I offer her my hand, and her eyes fill with tears as she looks between my hand and my eyes. "We all wanted to be free, that's it, and we all have made mistakes. Why don't we work together to build a better future?"

She takes my hand and rises out of the blood, mud, and dirt. "I want nothing more than a world where my children can be free."

I didn't know she had children, but it doesn't surprise me. "Good, because if you betray me again, I won't go easy on you."

"I'd expect nothing less, Your Majesty, and you have my loyalty," she tells me, letting my hand go and pulling out a dagger.

I step back as she cuts her wrist and her blood drops to into the mud.

"I swear to be loyal to your reign and court. Long may you rule, Queen Daesyn Heartlocke. The cursed queen."

The Unseelie echoes her words until it's all I can hear and all I can think about. I walk through the now free Unseelie fae, who bow, and out into the warm sunlight shining down on me. For a moment, in the light, I swear I see my mum, my uncle, my father, and everyone I have lost in the light.

And they are smiling at me. They are smiling at my future as they fade away into the light.



CHAPTER 84

“**Y**ou look delicious,” Seth murmurs behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing his warm lips on my bare neck.

I sink into my mate’s touch, closing my eyes and enjoying his grip on me. It reminds me of last night when he was inside me, and the night before and the night before that. We all share one bedroom now, and it turns out, when we aren’t fighting a war, we don’t have to leave the bedroom often. His hands tighten, and a growl vibrates in his chest as I force myself not to let him rip the dress off me, like I can imagine him doing within moments. His eyes are burning red as I break away from him and chuckle.

“It took the seamstress an hour to get me into this dress with all the lace, and I’m not letting you ruin that,” I tell him.

“It would take me two seconds to get you out of the dress and change your mind,” he replies, his voice silky smooth and full of promise.

My body shakes, and I’m thankful as the door is knocked twice, and in comes Poppy. If she picks up on the sexual tension in the room, she doesn’t comment on it as she rushes to me. Her dress is pretty, pink, and tight at her waist before flowing down in waves of cerise and silk, matching her silver crown with dark stones.

“You are meant to be with the others. Out!” Poppy orders Seth.

Seth winks at me, looking so much like a king consort already in his black tux before he walks out the door Poppy

came through.

“You look incredible!” she squeals and walks around me, admiring my dress for the crowning.

My dress is dark purple, the new royal colour on all the banners with fae wings and a crown in the centre to mark my rule. The corset is tight, open at the back with hundreds of pieces of light-purple lace holding it to me. The bottom half is a mixture of purple silk and velvet, and a belt of diamonds is around my waist. My hair is pulled up in braids and curls, ready for the new crown.

“I bought you something,” she tells me, pulling out a long silver box from her pocket.

“You didn’t have to,” I whisper.

“It’s from my family to yours, a sign of our friendship,” she tells me, her eyes filling with tears.

I hug her tightly before opening the box and finding a stunning gold necklace inside. The necklace has a dark, black oval-shaped stone in the middle and beautiful gold swirls around the edges.

“It’s a bit of the reaper realm. Your second home in the stone, and the gold is from Earth, so you have a little of that world, too.”

“I love it!” I admit, tears pricking my eyes as I take it out and Poppy helps me clip it on. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You don’t ever need to,” she tells me, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Now let’s go and get you a crown.”

“What if I’m a shit queen?” I ask her.

Poppy and I have become even closer, even with two realms to rule. Toth has officially been crowned king of the reaper realm, not a small feat for a Seelie fae, and Poppy has happily fallen into the role of aunt/mother. Laelia still won’t see any of her family, but Evie has said she is eating and resting in the new prisons. She deserved less. The reaper realm is flourishing under Poppy’s rule, and despite how many

Unseelie fae left, many decided to stay and live under the new laws Poppy set out, making them free.

I doubt I can be as great of a queen as she is.

Poppy pauses and looks me dead in the eye. “You’re Daesyn Heartlocke and you’re one of the strongest, kindest, and bravest women in the worlds. I don’t doubt for a second you are going to be a queen of legends.”

I wipe a few tears away and chuckle at her.

“So are you,” I tell her softly. “Let’s get me a crown then.”

She laughs and hooks her arm in mine, leading me from my dressing room. The castle has been remade and redesigned over the last few months, making it a real home for us. The left wing is ours, with sitting rooms, one massive bedroom and bathrooms, and one kitchen. The right wing is for guests, and only recently has it been finished.

The bulk of the work went into fixing the ballroom and the throne room, keeping our history as best we could as we have lost so much in the war. The new laws I made in the days after the war were accepted by most, hated by few, but we didn’t have much of a rebellion on our hands when it became clear to them what would happen if they didn’t free their Unseelie slaves and lands. The Unseelie were healed and looked after in the reaper realm until they were strong enough to come back to The Otherworld, which most of them have now. The portal is no longer guarded, and it’s open for anyone to walk between the worlds, the way it should have always been. There is a lot still to deal with, and I believe there will be for many, many years. I intend to spend my life fixing this world until every baby born into it is safe and free.

Guards line the halls of the corridor outside the throne room. Their dark-purple uniforms and silver brooches with our royal crest on them make them stand out on the gold mosaic floors and pillared walls. Banners and buntings made of flowers hang in the air with magic, gold dust and purple petals floating around us and onto the purple carpet stretched down the length of the throne room.

At the end, past hundreds of people sitting either side, are my mates. They stand proud and tall in their black tuxes on either side of the throne, its wings stretched out. A priestess stands in the middle of them, and a cushion is held in her hand with my crown resting on it. I know, nearby, there are four more priestesses waiting with crowns for my king consorts.

I blow out a breath when the music starts, a deep sound, and the bell in the tower rings loud, echoing around the entire Otherworld. I turn to Poppy, and she nods to me.

“You got this,” she whispers and nudges me along, down the runway of carpet.

The seating is full of so many people, and I smile at as many as I can until we get near the front, where my friends and family are seated. Toth is holding Miyako in a green blanket, and the baby is fast asleep, his dark hair like the night sky. Seated next to Toth are Alun and Velia, and they both smile proudly at me. Velia wipes a few tears away, and it reminds me of yesterday when she came to see me, telling me how proud she was of me. It was a mother’s love, the sort I’ve craved for a long time, and I didn’t know how much I needed it until that moment. In the next row, Evie and her mates, her children, and ward are sitting. At the end, her tiger huffs and lies down, clearly not a fan of the crowning. Evie winks my way, and for a moment, I’m back to the ball where we met and fought, and she showed me grace by saving my life. She saw something in my eyes, in my soul, and I know she was right. My life would have been wasted if I ended it there and then.

Poppy bows her head as she lets me go at the end of carpet, in front of the priestess. I bow back to her before turning and kneeling before the priestess.

The room goes deadly silent.

“Do you, Daesyn Heartlocke, take this crown and vow to the fae gods to spend your life serving The Otherworld?”

I suck in a breath, feeling like my life has always led to this very moment. To who I am meant to be.

“I vow it.”

The cold metal of the crown rests on my head a second later. “Then rise, Queen Daesyn of the fae.”

“Queen of The Otherworld!” everyone cheers behind me as I stand, looking across to see matching gold crowns being placed on my mates’ heads as they vow the same as me. Ryker winks at me as he walks over first and offers me his hand. I take it, and he leads me to the throne, and I sit on the cold stone.

Mental note: Going to need cushions.

Mossy jumps down from somewhere in the ceiling, onto my shoulder, and curls his tail around my neck. I nearly laugh when I turn to see he has a tiny suit on, with a bowtie and a little silver crown on his head. “I am Prince Mossy now.”

“Yup, you are,” I say, not disagreeing with him even a little.

Ryker turns, his eyes widening at Mossy, but he wisely says nothing as he turns back to the crowds. Seth and Finn come to stand on my other side, and Sebastian moves on the other side of Ryker. I’m sure we look nothing short of royalty as I look over the crowds of people here, so many of them we rescued from the prisons in the reaper realm. Now they are thriving, alive, and helping build this world back up. When the priestess has stepped to the side, I clap my hands, and the room goes silent.

“It has been many, many years since all of our worlds have known true peace. There have been wars, pain, and death. It has been all we have known,” I start off, remembering the speech I’ve rehearsed a dozen times in the mirror. “But I am glad to say that is the past and we will learn from the mistakes made. Today there will be a blood parchment signed by all the royals, one of promised peace for a hundred years and a vow to protect our people always. We will thrive under this new beginning. Let us begin now with celebrations.”

“Long live the queens!” someone shouts, and soon they are all echoing it, cheering that spreads outside this room and into the streets and forests. The Otherworld is cheering.

* * *

“I FEEL like I haven’t got a moment of you,” Ryker whispers in my ear, coming up behind me as I talk with Azi.

Azi smiles and bows his head before leaving me with Ryker, and I turn in his arms.

“I think I’ve almost lost my voice from talking to everyone,” I admit.

“That’s why I have a bottle of fae wine and your other mates waiting in our bedroom as we speak,” he murmurs, his voice full of promise.

I shiver everywhere and I don’t even bother replying as I nod, and he guides me out of the ballroom. As we leave, I see Poppy who winks my way and distracts anyone who is walking over to us so we can escape. Ryker’s hand stays on my lower back as we rush down the busy corridors and into the silence of our private quarters, and Ryker locks the door after us.

Finn’s laugh echoes to me from our bedroom, and the scent of the lit fire spreads to me as I walk over and open the door, going inside and Ryker following me. Finn, Seth, and Sebastian are pooled on the bed, fae wine, chocolates, and small cakes on a platter between them. I groan as I kick my shoes off and rush over. Finn hooks his arm around my waist and pulls me onto the bed, offering me the wine without saying a word. I take a deep drink and pick up a cake that Seth offers.

“Your favourite flavour. Chocolate,” he murmurs.

“Thank you,” I say, taking the cake and swapping with the wine.

“So, you managed to rescue her?” Sebastian asks Ryker, who is undoing his bow tie and pulling off his jacket.

The sight makes my mouth water, and I clench my thighs, knowing my hellhound shifter can scent my desire, anyway.

All my mates can scent my desire or feel it through the bond. And as I moan around a slice of chocolate cake, I find all four of them watching me very closely.

“The crowns suit you,” I find myself saying, even as I put the cake down and Finn makes the plate float across the room.

Seth’s hand rests on my ankle and very slowly pushes my dress up to my thighs, and I lean back on my elbows, watching and trying to remember to breathe.

“Some help?” Seth asks Finn, who grins and clicks his fingers.

My dress disappears, leaving me in lacy white underwear and nothing else. The tension in the room hits a new high as Seth leans his hard body over mine and kisses me passionately, deeply, and I moan into his mouth. He kisses down my body, and Finn takes over, kissing my neck while Sebastian undoes my bra and plays with my nipples. When we are all together, like this, it’s my favourite. It’s always so much more to have them this way, all of us crashing into pleasure together. Seth’s magic brushes my skin, and the smoky scent of his magic lingers in the room as he literally burns my panties away into nothing before diving between my legs and my back arches, even held down by the others. I cry out quickly, my pleasure rising, and Seth wastes no time getting me right to the edge before stopping. He leans back, wiping his mouth and using that hand to stroke himself. He must have got his cock out at some point. Ryker is covering me within seconds, completely naked, and I look over to see Finn undoing his trousers.

I am one lucky, lucky woman.

Something about him not using magic to do it makes me even wetter. Ryker easily thrusts his cock into me, and I gasp, loving the thick feeling of him. I wrap my hand around Finn and guide him into my mouth, like he always loves me doing as Ryker thrusts into me, getting me closer. I cry out as an orgasm crashes into me, and Ryker groans, filling me as he finishes seconds later. Finn is close, and I only have to suck harder, and he is finishing in my mouth, and I swallow all of him before he leans back. My body is twitching as Seth picks

me up and pushes me against the wall, filling me with his cock and growling in my ear. He is so hot inside me as he fucks me hard against the wall, the whole wall shaking with each thrust. A second orgasm slowly builds as I dig my nails into his shoulders and he moves me to the bed, sliding out of me to turn me over and bend me over the bed.

But it isn't Seth who slides into me, no, it's Sebastian. He is longer than Seth and doesn't feel as hot, but he is still incredible as he grips my hips and thrusts hard and long. Seth groans, and his hot cum spills over my back as Sebastian sends me crashing into my second orgasm. I clench around him, moaning as he comes with me. I collapse in a shaky mess on the bed, vaguely aware of one of them cleaning me up before tucking me into Finn's chest and under the blankets. Seth lies on my other side. Ryker rests his head on my hip, and Sebastian is near my feet as I try to fight how tired I am.

"Sleep, you're safe with us always, Syn," Seth murmurs, sounding sleepy himself.

I do as he asks, easily drifting into a long sleep. The next morning, I wake up alone and have a quick shower before dressing in leggings and one of Seth's t-shirts that falls to my knees before heading out to our living areas. I find everyone in the dining room eating various breakfasts that Sword has made after moving himself into the castle over a month ago. Finn hands me a big cup of coffee, and I sigh.

"This is why I love you," I say around the cup.

"She means the coffee," Mossy claims, sitting next to me with an orange-coloured muffin. "Now, I have an announcement."

"You do?" Ryker questions with clear worry. I don't blame him; Mossy's announcements are not usually anything good.

"I have found a mate, and she is moving in tomorrow. We met in the forest," Mossy claims. "She makes me very h—"

"You best being saying happy, Mossy," I interrupt.

"Yes, that as well," he agrees with a nod, and I see the light in his eyes.

I don't think Mossy ever expected to find others like him, let alone a female mate that will put up with his annoying butt.

"I can't wait to meet her," I tell him with a big grin.

"If she is anything like Mossy—" Ryker gets cut off as a muffin hits his face and slowly drops to the floor, leaving a splatter of orange crumbs.

"You will not insult my female, or you will die, dog man!" Mossy shouts.

"I was going to suggest we should get more peanut butter snacks if she is anything like you!" Ryker shouts at him.

Mossy groans. "Peanut butter cake would be amazing right now. I'm sure she will love it."

"That isn't how you say sorry," I tell him.

"I know," Mossy replies before jumping and running out of the room before I can catch his ass. I shake my head and look up at Ryker and all my mates.

"Are you sure you want a lifetime of this madness?"

"Certain," Finn answers, and they all nod, with small smiles that match my own. Our family might be mad, but we are happy. Loved. And most importantly, free.



EPILOGUE

“**A**im lower, son,” I gently say, reaching over and lowering Thale’s arm and helping him hold his bow a little better.

For a seven-year-old, he has an amazing aim usually, but today we have the targets moving and a greater distance away than usual. His arrow lights up gold, his powers from his father, Finn, coming to life, and I watch as he shoots. The gold arrow lights up the space between us and the target and crashes right into the middle of the bullseye.

“Yes!” Thale shouts, jumping in the air and spinning around to face me.

Thale’s hair is blond, almost white in colour, and his eyes are a blistering shade of purple. I think he looks just like Finn, but everyone else thinks he has more of my appearance. Thale wraps his arms around my waist, and I hug him tightly. His aunt Eira will be so happy to see his training has been going well when she is back from her honeymoon with her new mate. One of Evie’s sons.

“I’m so proud of you,” I tell him as he leans back.

“Can I go and play with Nisha?” he asks, and I nod.

Within seconds he is running across the gardens and into the castle, looking for the dark-haired Unseelie fae girl whose mother works for us. I think they are going to be mates, with how obsessed they are with each other and have been since they were toddlers. Somehow, they always found each other.

I look up as Ryker's hellhound walks down the steps, and at his side is Poppy. I grin and run across the garden to her, flinging my arms around her shoulders and hugging her as tight as I can with her large bump in the way.

"Will you tell Toth to stop getting you pregnant? I can never hug you properly these days!" I say, half joking and half not. Poppy is pregnant with her third child in the space of four years, and I never do get to see my best friend as much as I would love to.

"We want a boy, and so far, it's been two beautiful girls," she replies with a smile and then she winks. "Plus, I like the making-a-baby part."

"I'm sure you do," I laugh, and Ryker comes to my side, rubbing against my hip before running off into the gardens. "Did you bring Miyako with you?"

She nods and gnaws on her bottom lip. "What is it?"

Poppy sighs at my question and hooks her arm in mine. "Why don't we get some coffee first, and maybe Sword might make us some cake."

"I'm sure he will for you," I reply, leading her up the steps and out of the royal gardens.

The sound of fae birds' melodies fill the air, along with the scent of magical flowers making every summer day so sweet as we head through the castle. I sense my mates on a floor down, training with the personal royal army they have made. Ryker and his father made an alliance two years ago, and now we have five hellhounds living in The Otherworld with fae mates. It was a big step for Ryker's father and one we never thought would happen. Sebastian hasn't seen or heard from his mother since becoming queen, and none of us mind all that much. According to Poppy, she has gone to Earth and sold royal jewels to make herself a queen in a sense to humans, but with money instead.

I'm glad to say we haven't heard a peep from the gods over the years, and that will hopefully stay that way. We walk into the living rooms, and I'm not surprised to see a pot of

herbal tea that Poppy loves and a cup of coffee on the coffee table, and a small plate of cakes.

“Someone is always listening in this castle, I swear,” I whisper to Poppy, who laughs.

“It’s the same in my castle now the fae creatures have started living there,” she tells me. “A lot of the reapers are unsure of them, but when they help with laundry and cooking, they end up loving the fae creatures being around.”

“How are things in your world?” I ask. “I’m sorry I haven’t visited in over a year.”

“I understand why you don’t leave here,” she softly tells me. “And I prefer coming here, anyway. I love this world.”

A warm breeze blows through the door and softly moves through Poppy’s hair.

“I’m sure The Otherworld loves you, too.”

She laughs. “Things are good back home. I did come here for three reasons. The first was just to see you.”

“Of course,” I reply, picking up my coffee and taking a deep sip.

“The second is to return the fae magic orb that hangs over our city. It was made with fae magic and thousands of deaths of your kind. That magic shouldn’t be a light over our city when it was made with darkness,” she says, and I nod. It’s something we have talked about, and my court has questioned me more than once about the fact it should be taken down because it is a reminder of the deaths and magic stolen in the early years of the law against the Unseelie.

“Thank you,” I softly tell her. “I don’t want anything of their rule, the near enough destruction and slavery of my people to be standing.”

“Good.” She blows out a breath. “I have reapers working on how we should take it down, but we could use some help. It’s a lot of magic, and we can’t risk it going wrong.”

“I will send my best with you when you return,” I say, thinking of Morgania and two other members of my court who

are good at magical problems. “What is the last thing, then?”

“Miyako has come to me and said he is in love with your daughter.”

The world goes quiet for a long pause as I try to take in this news.

My daughter, born a year after I took the crown, is in love with Miyako?

Calista, my daughter who is half hellhound and my firstborn and heir, has been quiet for the last few months when she got back from a year of travelling around the worlds. I think of her now, her long black hair and bright-purple eyes, the same as her brother. She was a surprise, whereas Thale was planned, but I love them both the same. Calista couldn't make me prouder. She is going to make a brilliant and kind queen one day.

But I never expected to hear this.

“Does she love him back? She never said anything to me,” I reply.

Poppy nods. “Apparently they are mates but haven't mated yet because they want our blessing.”

“How did this happen?” I say, leaning back. “I mean, they have grown up around each other, but they always seemed to hate one another.”

“Hate and love, fine line,” she reminds me. “Miyako is good man, there isn't an ounce of his father in him and nothing of my sister either.”

“That's because you brought him up and he is honourable like you,” I admit. I always have been wary around Miyako because of who he is, who his parents were, and the threat he had to my crown until he gave up the right when he was a teenager. But I must admit, he is a good person and a part of my family.

“I don't know how the people will take this. Their heir and the son of the fallen king,” I softly reply.

She nods. “Agreed, but if they are mates, and in love as Miyako claims, then it cannot be stopped.”

“I need to speak to Calista,” I say, standing. “Are you coming?”

“Yes, sure,” she replies. “I never miss a chance to see my favourite niece.”

“Your only niece,” I say, and she chuckles.

“Where is my nephew, by the way?”

“Chasing the Unseelie fae girl around,” I tell her, hooking her arm in mine.

We pass some guards who bow low, and I nod at them.

“Now if any two people were mates, it’s them,” she tells me, and I’m certain of it.

We wind around a corner and across a balcony, and Poppy pulls me to a stop. She places her finger to her lips and points down below the balcony. I lean over, surprised to see Calista standing with Miyako. They are holding hands, talking softly.

“Do you think my mum will give us her blessing?” Calista asks Miyako.

He leans closer and presses his lips to her forehead, and she sighs from the contact. It’s something to see, as Calista has never been one to have a boyfriend or any boys around. I wondered for a while if she liked girls, as she has many friends, but I think it might have just been because she always liked one boy. I just missed it. They both look so perfect for a moment, both with hair the colour of the night and pale skin. Calista wears a white tee shirt tucked into leggings, and two daggers clipped to her thighs. Miyako has a long black cloak covering thick trousers, and a ripped black shirt. On his back are two swords, and I know he is an expert in combat, as much as my daughter is.

I trained them both.

“I will tell her how much I love you and have done since we were kids. I will tell her of how I admire you deeply for the pure and beautiful soul you have, and how your beauty

compares to no other. I will tell her about every word in my soul that has been written for you,” he replies, cupping her cheek, and she sinks into his touch. “You’re my destined mate, I feel it in here.”

Calista places her hand on his chest. “I feel it, too. I have done since we were young, and I pushed you away because it scared me. I understand it now and I can’t imagine a life without you in it.”

“Neither can I,” he replies and leans down to kiss her.

I turn away and look at Poppy, who smiles.

“I guess we have a mating to celebrate once I tell her fathers and calm them down,” I whisper to her as we back away from the door.

Poppy hugs me tightly. “I am so happy you agree. Our families will be linked in more than friendship now!”

“We always have been,” I tell her, and she nods, agreeing. Some bonds are deeper than blood and marriage, and mating. They are made in friendship and choosing the people you call your family.

I leave Poppy on the balcony and head through the castle, looking for my mates, when I nearly crash into a pink monkey. Mossy’s son slams into my chest, and I stumble back, nearly falling over.

“Hello to you, Duke,” I mutter, picking up and placing him on my shoulder. Mossy had four children with his mate, but only Duke has decided to join his dad and live in the castle with us, much to the annoyance of my mates.

Mostly because Duke is a little clumsy and he might have caused more than a dozen accidents around the castle.

“Sorry, Your Majesty,” he mumbles.

“I’ve told you, it’s Daesyn or Dae,” I softly tell him. If fae monkeys could blush, he would be. “Any chance you’ve seen any of my mates around?”

“Yes, I will show you the way,” he says and jumps off my shoulder.

I follow Duke through the castle and to the training rooms, where he points at the door before disappearing down another corridor. I slide into the training room where Finn and Sebastian are training with swords, shirtless and sweaty.

My vagina all but comes alive with a fast beat as I watch them. Their swords clang loud as they crash into each other, their muscles clenching and straining under the pressure of the hits. I watch in a trance as they circle each other, and because they know each other's moves so well, the fight goes on for a while before Finn makes a wrong footstep and Sebastian knocks him on his ass. Finn's deep laugh echoes around the room, and Sebastian offers him his hand, pulling him back onto his feet.

Then they notice me, and I watch how their faces light up, like I imagine mine does.

"Come to train?" Sebastian questions, a hint of a promise of pleasure in his voice. We've had sex in this room so many times before, during, and after training that I'm surprised every inch of this room doesn't have our bodies imprinted on them.

I shake my head. "Nope, but we need to talk. All four of us about Calista."

"Is it that our daughter is in love with the Nighthold boy?" Finn asks, and my eyes widen.

"You knew?"

He nods. "Overheard them this morning. I wanted to work off my emotions on the subject before talking with her."

"I'm not sure he is right for her," Sebastian says, placing his hand on the bars of the ring. "What do you think?"

"Do Ryker and Seth know?"

"Seth isn't back from the mortal world and the visit with his brother until later today," Finn reminds me. "And Ryker shifted and chose to work off his anger in that form."

"They are mates," I tell them. "I think our opinion on the coupling doesn't matter. Plus, she is happy, and that is all that

matters to me.”

“If he hurts her, death will be a blessing compared to what I will do,” Finn growls.

“I shall help you, brother,” Sebastian agrees. “But we all know the boy, and he isn’t evil, and if he loves her, then we must give our blessing.”

“Our daughter is growing up quick.” I sigh. “Kind of makes me want to give her and Thale another sibling.”

“I can make that happen,” Sebastian promises, and Finn’s smirk suggests he is down with helping, too.

I shake my head and walk to my mates, filled with the promise of the future ahead.

I was once cursed, and now I’m free. I will never be the cursed fae again.



GLOSSARY

The Gods- Twelve different gods and goddesses that have untold power. They do not mix with mortals and live on Olympus.

Demi-gods- Forbidden children of gods.

Reapers- A noble race who have control over shadows and can preach the portals of hell. Powerful reapers can control the dead and bring back souls.

Unseelie Fae- Currently imprisoned and banished due to crimes in The Fae War.

Seelie Fae- They rule the Otherworld under the rule of the Seelie Fae King.

Demons- From hell and usually have brightly coloured hair/skin. Their powers vary depending on their gene line.

Overlord Demons- Stronger than many races and only ones who can enter the third layer of hell. Set with protecting hell from its downfall.

Protectors- Supernaturals with angel blood who were created to control the supernatural race.

Werewolves- Closely related to shifters but their sole animal is a wolf. They must change when there is a full moon.

Witches- Witches are controllers of the elements and have incredible powers. They are marked with their fate at birth.

Shifters- Supernaturals who have the ability to shift into any animal.

Familiars- Creatures of any race who are bonded to a supernatural being.

Hellhounds- Born from a mix of werewolf shifters and demons, hellhounds are a new race. Hellhounds are fast, can turn into fire, and they are hired guardians for portals to hell.

Angels- A race once thought extinct. Angels come from heaven and it is forbidden for them to mix outside their own race.

Otherworld- Home to the fae and controlled by two courts. The Unseelie Court and the Seelie Court.

Unseelie Court- One of the two fae courts. The Unseelie control half of the Otherworld and is currently ruled by no one.

Seelie Court- One of the two fae courts. The Seelie control half of the Otherworld under the rule of The Great Fae King.

The Reaper Realm- A world connected to Earth and can only be accessed by Reapers travelling through shadows. Holds the main portal to the Otherworld.

Messorem- (The evernight city)- The reaper's main city and home to the royal reapers.

Demon and Protector City- The main city for supernaturals on earth. Ruled by Queen Evelina.

Elves- A dying race. Many do not know their origin. Elves can read minds with their touch and see their futures.

Ellyllon- Home of the Elves. A forgotten world said to be full of unspoken treasures.

Bwbachod- Hobgoblins who love to clean and organise. Deadly when threatened.

Gwragedd Annwn- Water sprites who protect the waters on every world.

Kelpie- Water horses that can travel in darkness and through shadows.

Buttery sprite- Creatures that live to cook and bake.

Finfolk- Secretive Warriors whose sole purpose is to protect magical items.

The Spirits- Ancient powers that follow the elements of fire, earth, water and wind.

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G. Bailey is a USA Today and international bestselling author of books that are filled with everything from dragons to pirates. Plus, fantasy worlds and breathtaking adventures.

G. Bailey is from the very rainy U.K. where she lives with her husband, two children, three cheeky dogs and one cat who rules them all.

A few random facts about her...

She loves tea. (She may be a little obsessed but what Brit isn't?)

Chocolate and Harry Potter marathons are her jam.

She owns way too many notebooks and random pens.

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