

A thorny branch with a red rose and a pendant. The branch is dark and thorny, with a single red rose in bloom. A gold chain with a large, faceted, reddish-purple stone pendant hangs from the branch. The background is white.

A  
BATTLE  
OF  
BLOOD  
AND  
STONE

CHRONICLES  
OF THE  
STONE VEIL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
SAWYER BENNETT

# **A Battle of Blood and Stone**

**Chronicles of the Stone Veil**

SAWYER BENNETT

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# CHAPTER 1

## *Finley*

THE WRAITH IS easily ten feet tall but given the fact it flies through the air to hunt down its quarry, it's twenty feet above me as it hovers.

Ten minutes ago, I didn't know what a wraith was.

Still not exactly sure since I haven't had time to ask Maddox or Zaid about it. That's because the minute it flew out of the coffin we had just opened—in a dank mausoleum in a spooky cemetery on the outskirts of Pest in Hungary—I'd been fighting the creature off.

It's creepy as hell with skeletal-looking hands and feet showing under tattered, moth-eaten robes. Not an actual skeleton but rather thin, pale skin stretched directly over its bones, so it looks horrendously emaciated. The hood is pulled low over its head, which I imagine resembles the rest of its body, but I can't see any details. It's pitch-black where the wraith's face should be.

Honestly, I'm thankful all I can see are the hands and feet.

I send my whip cracking at it, but it's too far out of reach. All I'm succeeding in doing is letting it know if it comes closer, I'll get some good licks in.

Maddox, Zaid, and I are in Hungary searching for a relic Zaid had gotten a lead on from one of his darker contacts—namely Boral, his father. It supposedly acts as a compass of sorts—leads people to and helps them enter alternate realms. The information was sparse, and we have no clue how we can use it or if we can even locate the realm where Micah lives so we can try to steal the chalice and Blood Stone, but it's the best we've come up with so far in the last two weeks since Carrick disappeared...

Right after he told me that I was the reincarnated love of his life.

I was still reeling from that information when Rune—god of death and simply the biggest asshole I’ve ever met—grabbed Carrick and disappeared with him.

“Try to get it to come closer to you,” Maddox yells from beside a large headstone.

When the wraith shot out at us, we’d fled the mausoleum, knowing we’d be able to fight better out in the open.

Zaid had yelled, “Wraith.”

And that’s, of course, how I knew it was a wraith.

Maddox yelled, “Run,” from which I gleaned it was dangerous.

For the past five minutes, Maddox and I have been keeping the damn thing occupied while Zaid went back into the mausoleum to search for the relic.

“You want it to come closer to me?” I yell, flicking my whip in its direction. When it had dropped closer, I managed to rip a piece of the fabric from the bottom of its robe. Emitting an ear-piercing shriek of fury, it shot back up a little higher.

“Yes, be bait,” Maddox urges.

I can’t help but grin at that. While Carrick was overly cautious and protective, barely letting me out of his sight because of all the scary dangers in the world, Maddox hasn’t held me back once in the past two weeks. But that’s the difference between the two demi-god brothers. Carrick is cautious and wise, while Maddox is impetuous and shortsighted.

Regardless, I’m just glad to be doing something because sitting around waiting for Carrick to decide to show back up is driving me batshit crazy.

I'm told he'll come back. Maddox, having the ability to contact the gods, found out Rune is using Carrick for a project but that he is alive and unhurt. He's just currently indisposed.

It pisses me off, quite frankly.

He's a demi-god for Pete's sake. He could have come back by now. I'm sure of it, and when he does, he'll get a piece of my mind for all the worry he's put me through.

Except right now, I've got a bigger worry.

"Put your whip away," Maddox calls. "That will draw it in closer."

I take the briefest of moments to shoot him an incredulous look. He just grins back at me.

I trust Maddox. He wants the damn thing closer to the ground, so he can attack it. Otherwise, we'll continue this horror show dance whereby the wraith screams death at us and dive bombs, only to shoot back up into the air, hovering and waiting for another chance to attack.

Quickly, I coil my whip and settle it over me crossbody style. I'm not about to toss it away, but maybe this will appear less threatening to the creature.

It rides the air above me, slowly bobbing up and down. I can't see its face, but I can tell it's considering something by the way it lazily hovers without making a sound.

"Come to mama," I murmur as I stare up at it with defiance.

I expect it to fly at me at the same speed by which it has been doing all of its attacks. Quickly, but with enough time to react.

I'm not prepared for the way it shoots at me like a bullet, traveling so fast I don't think Maddox can reach me in time even though demi-gods are pretty damn fast themselves. I've seen Carrick move at a speed that renders him nothing more than a blur.



I have less than two seconds to react, which isn't enough time to get my whip off and uncoil it for an attack. Instead, I crouch low, put my hands up as if to ward the thing off, and call on my inner light power to protect me.

As expected, a filmy half-dome of a shield covers me and the wraith hits it so hard, the ground shakes. But then Maddox is there, a huge medieval looking sledgehammer in his hand. He swings it in a wide arc, aiming where the wraith's head would be under the dark hood. With a sickening thwack, the wraith falls to the ground in a pile of dusty rags. That hit alone would not kill the creature though. Maddox wastes no time dropping the sledgehammer and conjuring a spear from thin air—such is the magic of demi-gods—and thrusts it down hard through what would likely be the abdomen of the wraith. This also would not kill it but instead pins the monster to the ground, which is a good thing because it starts to thrash.

It's horrific watching as it squirms against the spear. To finish it off, Maddox has to penetrate the heart or the brain with iron. As of now, there's no way to tell where either are under the tattered robes.

It was smart of Maddox to pin it to the ground. Smoke seeps up around the area where the spear went in, indicating the tip was made of iron. While iron in the abdomen wouldn't kill the wraith, it would hurt and weaken the creature.

I release the dome shield over me—the only thing I've been able to learn how to do so far with my special angel powers—and stand straight. Maddox bends over the creature, then rips the robe's material from the creature's neck area and down the sternum. I still can't see the head inside the hood, but Maddox easily exposes the torso, which is hard to look at. The spear is through the stomach center, which is gaunt and so severely hollowed out I can see part of the spine pressing against the skin. The ribs are protruding, and I see the spot just between the fourth and fifth rib where I was taught to stab a fae so that the heart would be pierced. I don't have the strength to penetrate the sternum.

Maddox doesn't have that problem. He conjures an iron sword, raises it high so the tip points at the wraith's chest, and then drives it down hard. There's a crunch of bone as the sternum shatters, a hair-raising scream from the wraith, and then it falls abruptly silent the second the iron breaches the heart muscle.

Swinging his head to look at me, Maddox grins. "You make good bait."

"That was a little too close for comfort," I say with a shake of my head. I had barely gotten my shield up in time. "What would have happened if the wraith had gotten to me?"

"He would have sucked your soul out of your nose," Maddox replies calmly as he pulls the sword out of the creature. Rather than cleaning the black blood from the blade, he merely makes the weapon disappear.

"My nose?" I ask dubiously.

"Or mouth," he replies mischievously. "Can't quite remember which."

We're silent as the dark fae's body turns dark and then starts to smoke. As the ashy tendrils drift upward, the wraith slowly disappears into the night sky.

"What exactly is a wraith?" I ask as we turn toward the mausoleum to check on Zaid. Now that we have a few moments where we're not fighting for our lives, I'm curious.

Well, my life.

The wraith couldn't have hurt Maddox. Dark Fae aren't anywhere near as powerful as demi-gods, which was why the creature was focused on me.

"They're one of those Dark Fae that were summoned out of the Underworld by old priests or witches, virtually powerless until they were bestowed a little soul-sucking power from stone wielders. They evolved, and their powers were refined."

"So, they just hang out in cemeteries?" I press.

Maddox frowns as we approach the door of the mausoleum before shaking his head. “Actually, no. They’re most often employed to hunt someone down to kill them.”

I freeze in my tracks. “And what are the chances we just happened to stumble upon one, and it turned its attention to me?”

Maddox’s frown deepens with concern. “It would be too much of a coincidence it just happened to be here.”

“Shit,” I mutter, the realization hitting me. “You think Kymaris ordered this?”

Kymaris—Queen of the Underworld and my nemesis. The one who ordered my twin sister to be stolen and held captive in the Underworld and forced her to be a conduit to channel great power into her. Now Kymaris intends to doom the world when she obliterates the veil between her realm and earth, letting all her evil minions swarm and subjugate humans.

It’s this whole prophecy thing.

Maddox reaches out, clamping a hand on my shoulder. “It could be Kymaris. But it could be anyone who decided they didn’t like you sticking your nose into fae business.”

“That’s actually a list that’s adding up,” I mutter as I think about it. There’s Stan, the Light Fae noble, and Deandra, the Light Fae princess from Faere. Come to think about it, just about any fae would hate me and want to kill me. Humans are looked down upon, so it’s entirely possible we stumbled upon this creature and it locked onto me as being non-fae.

“Are you going to sequester me to the condo the way Carrick would at the hint I’m in further danger?” I ask him.

Maddox snorts. “I’m nothing like my brother. And besides that, I’m not madly in love with you the way he is. He has better reasons than I do to keep you alive.”

I know he’s teasing, but the pain of those words hits deep. Carrick is in love with me—has been for centuries. We’ve

loved each other over and over again through my every reincarnation.

Of course, I don't remember any of this, but the pain on Carrick's face made it clear he wasn't exaggerating about how hard this has been on him. He even asked the gods to release him from existence because it was too awful finding me over and over again, only to lose me to some quick and unpredictable death.

"He'll be back soon," Maddox says softly, apparently reading my expression.

Shrugging his hand off, I mutter. "I don't care when he comes back. We're doing fine without him."

"Keep telling yourself that, hot stuff," Maddox retorts with a laugh. "You might actually start to believe it."

Before I can come back with a pithy response, Maddox pivots and heads into the mausoleum. Zaid is going through a stone coffin and by the cement tops moved off the others, it looks like he's already searched four and is on the last one.

"Anything?" Maddox asks.

Zaid glances up, the flashlight he's holding causing a glow to hit him under the chin. It makes his gaunt face look almost as skeletal as the wraith's, and he shakes his head in dismay.

"A wild goose chase?" I ponder aloud.

"If the wraith was here to attack you, then I'd say you were set up," Maddox concludes, pinning his gaze on Zaid.

Zaid had gotten the tip from his father, and his face turns paler than normal. "Fucking Boral," he snarls.

Zaid's father is an evil, awful, hateful Dark Fae whose sole joy is murdering and pillaging. Lately, he's been trying to get back in his son's good graces, but Zaid hasn't wanted anything to do with him for centuries upon centuries.

Boral is persistent, though. He has embedded himself in with some of the original fallen Dark Fae recruited by

Kymaris and who will be a part of the *confractus muros*, which is the ritual that will bring down the veil between the Underworld and the Earth realm. Boral has been passing information to us from various Dark Fae contacts, including this relic that would supposedly help point us to the Blood Stone.

“I don’t think he set me up,” I rush to defend his dad. “Yes, he passed on the information, but I don’t think he knew a wraith would be sent after me. Maybe Kymaris knows he’s a double agent of sorts.”

Zaid looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “He’s evil, Finley. When are you going to get it through your head?”

“He has no reason to harm me.” I huff with frustration because Boral, despite his many faults, is our best source of information on Kymaris.

Our only source, really.

“Because it will hurt Carrick is reason enough,” Maddox points out. “Boral hates Carrick. If he can hurt Carrick, he’ll take the opportunity to do it.”

I shake my head. I don’t believe it. Over the past two weeks, I’ve had some conversations with Boral—disconcerting in the extreme—but I think he truly is trying to help us because he wants a relationship with his son again. And killing me would only ensure his son would never have anything to do with him again.

“I think it’s more likely that someone else wants me dead,” I say to my friends. And yes, they have become good friends, especially over the last couple weeks since Carrick disappeared. “Sending an assassin wraith is far too easy for Kymaris, and she would have done something like that already.”

“Maybe,” Maddox points out. “But it could just as easily be Boral. The relic wasn’t here, which is definitely a red flag. I don’t think we can trust him.”

“I never trusted him,” Zaid mutters.

“Then let’s test him,” I suggest.

Both men—well, dark daemon and demi-god—regard me with interest. “Let’s give him some false information to see if it reaches Kymaris. We can tell Boral we found the location of the Blood Stone, name a place, and then wait to see if she or her minions show up for it.”

“Kymaris would never fall for that,” Zaid scoffs.

“Well, do you have a better idea?” I snap. “Because having your father on the inside is critical so we know exactly what Kymaris is and isn’t doing. I know you don’t like him—”

“I hate him with all my being,” Zaid corrects.

“Yes, I know,” I reply softly. “And you have every right to feel that way. But you don’t have to like him to use him.”

It falls silent until Maddox says, “Let’s get out of here and head back to the condo. I’m starving. We can talk about it more over food.”

I roll my eyes because Maddox is constantly eating. He’s a big dude, though, so I guess he needs it. As he and Zaid move the cement coffin covers back in place, I lean back against the cold stone wall to wait for them.

Except when I do, I feel something depress inward by my shoulder blade. I jump away from the wall, then turn to look at it. There are words written in the Hungarian language carved into the stone, and a small part of the wall is recessed inward where I’d been standing. It’s a square about six-inches-by-six-inches, and I reach toward it to see if it will push in farther.

But Maddox is there, grabbing me by my wrist and pulling me completely away from the wall. When I look at him questioningly, he says, “I don’t feel like dealing with you if that’s a trap that cuts your hand off.”

“Oh,” I reply, taking a few more steps back.

Zaid moves past me, then sidles up next to Maddox. The two men study the wall for a long moment. Then, Maddox pushes on it again. To all of our surprise, scraping noises of

stone against stone fills the interior of the mausoleum. We all turn to the source, and it's coming from one of the coffins Zaid had been looking inside.

Except it's not the stone top moving, but rather the entire coffin is moving backward along the floor. It goes no more than a foot before it stops, revealing a rectangular cavity under it.

"Holy shit," I murmur as I step toward it. "It's like Indiana Jones."

Maddox is once again pulling me back. "And remember, there were tons of booby traps in that movie."

Alas, there are none as Maddox reaches into the dark hole and pulls out a leather pouch that is so old, it shreds to pieces under his touch. He pulls bits of the frayed material away, revealing an oval disc made of what looks like bronze. There are symbols etched around the perimeter.

Maddox holds it up. "Looks like Boral's information was good."

"Doesn't make it any less likely he sent the wraith after her," Zaid points out.

"But he's no more a suspect than any other fae out there," I reiterate.

"Food," Maddox barks. "Let's get back to the condo, and we can get the Scooby Gang to research this some more."

My Scooby Gang. I loved it when Maddox referred to Rainey and Myles by that moniker because it wasn't just cute, but it meant he saw them as a true part of our team.

"All together now," Maddox says, lining up shoulder to shoulder with Zaid and me.

Normally, humans can't bend distance, but I'm apparently the exception because of the light powers Sarvel the Custodia angel gave me. Over the past few weeks, I've tried tapping into my light powers to use them as a weapon with little success. As evidenced tonight, I can manage a fairly good

bubble shield but past that, I haven't even been able to get my fingertips to spark.

I have, however, gotten very proficient with bending distance. I could jump across small spaces before, but now I can move between continents. During those times when I'd miss Carrick the most, I'd envision a place and bend distance to go there. I'd never stay more than a few minutes because I know it's not the safest for me to be on my own, and then I'd head right back to my bed.

I've seen the Eiffel Tower at night.

The northern lights in Fairbanks.

The Great Pyramid of Giza that once covered the magical meteor.

Brief visits, just to hone my skills and let me have a few moments of wonder to distract me.

I stand close to Maddox, prepared to pull Seattle to me, but I don't need his help.

For that matter, neither does Zaid.

As a daemon, Zaid doesn't ordinarily have the power to bend distance on his own, but the trip alone won't kill him since he's immortal. He could easily have held on to Maddox or me, and we could have pulled him along. As it happens, though, it helps to have friends in high places. Given that he and Carrick are as tight as two friends can be, Carrick bestowed certain magical benefits on him. One was to bend distance, but it had nothing to do with allowing Zaid to travel freely. Rather, Carrick gave Zaid the ability purely as an escape mechanism for when his father found him, as Boral was forever trying to get Zaid to return to the fold.

Zaid's history with his father is brutal and so savage, I hate to even think about it. Zaid and his years of murdering and maiming alongside his father, Boral, eventually weighed too heavily upon him. The empathic power inherited from his Light Fae mother caused him to become so despondent over



his actions, he left his father and attempted to punish himself by crucifying his body to a tree with iron.

Luckily, Carrick found Zaid and changed his life for the better.

These days, he reluctantly gives his father small bits of his time as long as Boral is on his best behavior. Of course, Zaid and Maddox don't think Boral is capable of being good, which feeds their inherent mistrust of him.

"I'm thinking pastrami sandwiches when we get back," Maddox says, glancing past me to Zaid.

"You'll have to run to the deli," Zaid returns.

I just smile.

Here we are in a spooky cemetery in Hungary, having just battled a wraith to the death, and in possession of an ancient magical relic, yet these two are talking about pastrami.

It's things like this that actually help to keep me balanced through the craziness.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Finley*

CARRICK'S CONDO IS quiet. I'm lying on one of the couches in the living area, head resting on a throw pillow. I've got one foot planted on a cushion with my knee raised, the opposite ankle propped on said knee. I'm holding my phone before me, playing *Candy Crush*.

I've been here for almost an hour and a half. Other than to switch legs when one started to fall asleep, I haven't moved.

Here I am, supposedly the savior of the world who is destined to stop an evil prophecy, and I'm doing nothing but playing a game on my phone.

I could be researching down in the library, except I did that for four hours this morning and my brain hurts.

I could go to the gym and train, except I did that before the research.

I could walk over to One Bean and check on the rebuild, but there's no need. Rainey is overseeing it like a champ, and I get daily emails detailing the progress. She also sends along pictures and video.

And these are the borders of my existence. Outside of the occasional adventurous jaunt such as the one we made to Hungary three days ago, my life has become positively boring.

Rainey does such a tremendous job with One Bean that I'm wondering if she'll want to buy the shop from me.

Not that I want to sell it, but more like why even bother having it? If I'm more than likely going to die in this prophecy, what's the point in even having an interest in it anymore? Of course, what would I do with the money such a sale would generate, assuming Rainey could come up with

said money? I don't want anything, and, even if I did, I wouldn't have the time to use it.

Rather, I'd best be served to name her as my beneficiary and give it to her in my will.

I pause, my finger hovering over a red candy I was getting ready to switch with a blue. Shit... I need a will. I own property—the house and the coffee shop—and without Fallon to inherit it, I have no clue what would happen if I died without an estate plan.

The sudden thrill I feel at the idea of needing to see an attorney to create a will is sad, but at least it's something to do that's important.

“Are you as bored as I am?” Zaid asks as he walks in from the general direction of the kitchen, which is his domain.

I've learned more about Zaid over these last few weeks that Carrick has been gone than I have in the almost three months I've known him. I used to think he was Carrick's servant since he was always cooking and doing other odd jobs.

Turns out, he's not a servant at all. Rather, he's just a loyal friend who happens to love being in the kitchen.

He's also smart, crafty, and overly pigheaded about some things.

Most of all, I consider him a friend now, and I think he feels the same about me.

“So bored,” I reply as I exit out of my game. I sit up on the couch, settling against the cushions and crossing my legs Indian-style. Zaid plops in a chair on the other side of the coffee table.

As usual, he's dressed all in black and looks perpetually pissed off and disdainful. I've realized, though, Zaid just has a resting bitch face that doesn't necessarily match his mood. Although, granted... he is grumpy a lot.

Without Carrick around, he seems as lost as I do, and dare I say we've bonded since Rune took Carrick. Since then,

we've talked about a lot of things. I've gingerly poked into his background, particularly where Boral's concerned. In turn, Zaid tried to get me to open up about Carrick, but that's been a difficult feat to achieve since I don't even know how I feel about him.

Because he's gone and I'm completely in the dark, which is a horrible place to be.

"Who takes care of Carrick's businesses when he's gone like this?" I query out of the blue, something I wondered but had been afraid to know the answer to. Why I have the guts to ask it now is beyond me.

Maybe it's the boredom.

Zaid shrugs. "Each company has presidents and vice presidents, and they're all fully capable of handling matters. I assume he's passing on instructions to them."

And there it is. The real reason I've avoided this particular question because I knew the answer would infuriate me.

I can't help but sound petulant. "He has time to reach out to his businesses but not to me?"

"It's not like that, Finley," Zaid chastises. "If Carrick hasn't reached out to us, it's for a good reason. Trust me on that."

"Trust you on that?" I ask incredulously.

"I know Carrick, so—"

"See, that's just it," I snap harshly, throwing my hands out to the side in frustration. "I *don't* know him. Apparently, I've fallen in love with him over and over again throughout history, yet I don't know a damn thing about him. You might trust him, but don't ask me to."

"You're angry," Zaid says dismissively. "I get it."

"You get it?" I reply with a frown. I'm confused why he's not defending Carrick more.

"I get it."

We commence a staring match, but I resolutely refuse to continue with my rant. Zaid said he gets me, so why bother?

“Do you want to talk about what happened on the patio that night?” Zaid asks cautiously, his voice soft and conciliatory. I almost want to laugh because it’s so... anti-Zaid.

We haven’t talked a lot about what happened. Zaid found me on the patio, completely freaked out, and I became a sobbing mess. He held me in his arms while I got it out of my system.

He then led me inside, made me tea, and asked what happened. I didn’t have it in me to tell him anything but the very basics.

I was the reincarnated love of Carrick’s life, and Rune stole him away.

That was the nutshell of it, and Zaid didn’t push for details. He had merely said, “I’m glad Carrick finally told you.”

Which meant Zaid knew all about mine and Carrick’s history. I assume his brothers do, too.

To address Zaid’s question now, no... I don’t want to talk about what happened on the patio because I have never been deluged with such a myriad of gut-wrenching emotions as I had when I learned about my history, and I didn’t feel like facing them again.

But I do have curiosities.

I can’t help it.

“I’ve read some of Carrick’s journals,” I say hesitantly, my gaze going to my clasped hands. “They don’t mention me that I can tell.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Zaid says without any apology for his friend. My head pops up so I can see him, and his expression turns empathetic. Not a hard thing for Zaid as he is part empath. “Carrick would never write about you because he didn’t want anyone knowing about you. He didn’t want any of

his enemies to know about your existence in case it put you in danger. It was bad enough Rune had cursed you to die early and reincarnate. Carrick didn't want to make it worse on you."

"Oh," I whisper, something flickering warmly in my heart for the first time in two weeks. It's been so easy just to believe Carrick has abandoned me. Plus, after he basically told me I was the absolute love of his life, to find he had never once written about me in his journals that covered the time we had together had me feeling such a disconnect from him.

"I have stories I can tell you," he offers. "I was with Carrick from the beginning of your story together. I can help with any questions—"

I'm shaking my head before he can finish his generous offer. Zaid isn't the type to sit around and tell stories. He's always on the go with something to do, although I haven't quite figured out what exactly he does for Carrick other than handle the cooking. He has better things to do than give me a history lesson about... well... me.

More than that, though, I don't want anything tying me deeper to Carrick right now. My heart is already so shredded by what I've learned and then having him snatched away from me...

I'm feeling very overwhelmed right now.

"If you're interested," Zaid continues, despite the fact I'm shaking my head. "You can see all of your past lives."

My eyes about bug out of my head. "What?"

He nods. "Everyone's life is recorded and kept in memory crystals."

I'm stunned speechless. Like... who would record such things, how time-consuming would that be, and why on earth would that be important to begin with?

Perhaps because he's an empath, or maybe he can read my mind, he launches into an explanation. "I can tell by your expression that you're wondering why someone would bother

doing this, but why not? The gods have infinite magic at their disposal, but, more importantly, they have an army of demi-gods at their service. Many are created just to record history, which includes individual histories. But it's more than just the events themselves—it's from the people it happened to and their personal points of view, so you get feelings and emotions from watching them.”

“You mean there's like a horde of demi-god librarian types who record people's lives?” I ask, not able to comprehend what they do.

“That's one way of putting it, but they don't exactly use something as archaic as a camera. They use memory crystals, and while I don't know the specifics, I know there's some sort of magical automation to it. Carrick knows all about it. I only do because he took me there once.”

“Why?”

“When I was at a low point in my life and was considering staking myself to a tree again,” he murmurs, his eyes dulling a little.

I suck in a tiny breath of distress.

“Carrick merely whisked me away to this place called the Hall of Histories, then showed me the crystal that held *his* memory of finding me crucified on the tree.”

“I'm sure that was effective,” I say.

“Not nearly as effective as when he showed me the crystal of *my* memory of that event afterward.”

Zaid said the crystal not only showed events, but also the emotions the person was feeling. I can see how that would have an impact on Zaid.

He nods as if sensing the direction of my thoughts. “When I saw him approach the tree and he told me he was taking me down, I felt such immense relief. I knew I'd never appreciated anything in my life as much as that very moment when I was

rescued. It made me remember that I wanted off that tree more than I wanted to be on it.”

“I can’t even imagine what you went through.” I shift on the couch, looking Zaid straight in the eye. “Carrick told me some of it.”

“I know,” he replies, flicking a speck of something off his black pants. “And I don’t mind him sharing with you. You knew about my history in your first life, and every life after that.”

I smile sadly. Carrick had said my past selves knew the truth of what he was—a demi-god. He told Eireanne—and everyone after—everything, and no doubt would have included his good friend Zaid and his background.

“You didn’t like me when I first came into Carrick’s life,” I throw out as a conversation change.

“Who says I like you now?” he quips, but it’s done with the barest hint of a smile, which means he’s totally teasing. But then he soberes. “I wasn’t happy you were back. We didn’t know about the prophecy at that point. All we knew was Carrick would fall in love with you again, and you would die way too soon.”

I consider that, realizing Zaid knows as much about my past as Carrick. “I’m glad you were there with Carrick throughout history. I’m sure he needed a friend.”

Zaid is silent a moment, his gaze drifting as he considers something. When it returns to me, he admits with a guilty look, “I told Carrick that killing you should be an option.”

I beam an accepting smile. “It’s okay. Carrick told me that he actually strangled me once right after seeing me.”

His gaze drops as if that’s not good enough.

“It’s a good thing I don’t remember those things,” I quip. When he raises his head and an eyebrow, I laugh. “I’d be a lot crankier about all of this if I did.”



Zaid actually chuckles as he shakes his head. “I imagine you would be. But just know, if you want those memories when Carrick comes back, he’ll take you there.”

“And *is* Carrick coming back?” I ask bitterly.

“You know he will, Finley,” Zaid says in a chastising tone. He stands from the chair, then looks down at me. “He would never abandon you.”

Again, that tiny flicker, but I squash it.

Zaid must see it in my eyes—I want this conversation to be over.

Instead of continuing, he inquires, “Anything special you’d like for dinner tonight? I know the Scooby Gang is coming over.”

I shake my head, lying back down with my head on the throw pillow. “Surprise us. Anything you make is awesome.”

Zaid doesn’t reply but before he’s even left the living area, I have another game of *Candy Crush* going on my phone to occupy my mind. I don’t want to have to think about anything we just talked about.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Finley*

LEANING FORWARD IN my chair, I put one palm on the library table and then cover that hand with my other one. I put my chin on my hands as I stare at the candle before me. It's a Yankee Candle that Rainey brought over from the *Fantasia*, and its pumpkin-spice scent makes my nose wrinkle. We're barely into September, and it's too early for me to be thinking of pumpkins.

And not just that it's too early, but pumpkins are a symbol of Halloween, a holiday I much enjoyed as an adult since I like passing out candy to kids, but, as it stands... I might not be around for it this year.

That's because October's new moon is in five weeks, and it's when Kymaris' ritual to bring down the veil is supposed to occur. At least according to Boral's information that he got from his buddy, Kaesar, who is one of the original fallen Dark Fae that Kymaris will use in said ritual.

So yeah, I do not like the subtle pumpkin spice scent wafting from the unlit wick, but I do like Rainey's idea to try to use my magic to light it.

Ever since Sarvel, my Custodia angel, told me she put light power into me at my birth, I have been trying to tap into it in some form or fashion. It's worked on some occasions—like when I was able to break the incubus's compulsion.

Or when I was able to project myself into Zora's body in the Underworld.

The problem is that I have no clue how I accomplished those things, so it makes pulling on that power a mystery.

Sarvel told me now that I know I have the power within me, I need to believe and trust in it to call it forth.

She apparently handed me a crock of shit, but I'm still trying.

Tonight, Rainey's suggestion is to go smaller with my attempts. So far, I've been trying to do things like pull books off shelves with my mind, or create a glowing ball of light with willpower. Once, I even tried to make a mustache grow on Myles' face, but I didn't tell him what I was doing.

But Rainey's right. I need to start with something small and simple, and lighting a candle seems doable.

I stare at the wick a moment, but I can see Rainey and Myles sitting at the end of the table in my peripheral vision and it's slightly distracting. They're here for support and being incredibly quiet, but it's giving me performance anxiety.

So, I close my eyes, merely imagining the candle in front of me. The way the label looks with a cute little pumpkin on it and the burnt end of the wick, as Rainey had used the candle already. I try to imagine what the wick would look like if it were to light itself spontaneously without any outside help, then I will myself to make it happen.

For a second, I feel something stir within me—low in my belly—and I think I might have accomplished it. My eyes snap open, but the candle remains cold and dead.

“Damn it,” I mutter, pushing back from the table, pissed I just mistook indigestion for brewing magic.

“Want to try a spellbook?” Rainey suggests. She's found several in English, but they are mostly potions, and I'm not interested in those. I need something more theoretical that doesn't require ingredients.

“No,” I mutter glumly as I cross my arms over my chest, slouching in the chair. I glance over at my friends. “What if this light inside of me doesn't do much more than I can already do?”

Because I've gotten good with a bubble shield, which is sparked more out of fear than anything else. And my abilities to see fae, read vibes if I so choose, and hear them from great distances is sharper than ever. But surely, that can't be the extent of the gift.

Rainey rises from her chair, leans over, and kisses Myles. She looks back at me. "I'm going to help Zaid finish dinner. I think we should just wrap it up for the evening."

I give her a curt nod, my mind already racing on to other things. Rainey heads up the spiral staircase, and Myles fiddles with a book in front of him. We always have stacks of books to go through. Whenever one of us sees something of interest, we bring it back and throw it down. Everyone pitches in and reads when we can.

"Where's Maddox?" Myles asks since Carrick's brother hangs around more often than not these days.

"Off getting laid," I reply distractedly. But then, I add, "At least that's what he said when he left a few hours ago. *Hey... off to get laid. See you later.*"

Myles laughs at my mimicking of Maddox, which is quite good, but then sobers. "Shouldn't he be sticking around to protect you or something? Or at least have Lucien here?"

I shrug. Truthfully, Maddox doesn't think anything bad is going to happen to me in the condo. He's relying on the wards he, Carrick, and Lucien put in place to keep Kymaris and her minions out. "I don't think Maddox feels like I need constant babysitting the way Carrick does."

"And Lucien?" Myles inquires.

Another shrug. "I haven't seen him since our last trip to Faere when he brought Stan over to help me through the veil. He sort of does his own thing until he's affirmatively needed."

"You're safe here," Myles concludes. "The wards are enough."

"I agree. But also... I'm sort of just trusting fate."

He frowns, leaning forward to cross his arms on the table. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if Kymaris were to come after me now instead, well... isn't that how my fate is supposed to play out?”

“Not following,” Myles quips.

“In other words, there's no hiding from whatever is at the end of this path. I have to face it whether it's Kymaris at the ritual or her jumping out at me in the grocery store's produce section. Whenever we meet up is supposed to be when we meet up.”

Myles tips his head left and right a little as if he's weighing the merits of that. “Unless it's one of her minions who gets you. Like that wraith the other night.”

I shake my head emphatically. “Call me silly, but I don't think I'm supposed to die that way. I think I was designated to stop this prophecy because I have this connection to Kymaris. It's going to come down to something epic between us, and that's not happening until the new moon.”

Myles narrows his eyes. “That's pure conjecture, and you know it.”

“Gut instinct, more like it.” But then I decide to switch subjects on him, because again... I'm unsettled and feeling the need to make a difference. “I have an idea.”

His gaze is wary as it comes to me.

I smile, tipping my head. “I can try to reach out to Zora.”

“Not only no,” he says emphatically, pushing back from the table as if he needs to get away from such an idea. “But hell no.”

“Come on, Myles,” I whine, glancing briefly back at the staircase. “Rainey's gone. She doesn't need to know. And I can try for just a quick in and out.”

“You promised Carrick you wouldn't without him here,” Myles reminds me.

“Well, he’s not here,” I snap irritably. “And there’s no telling if and when he’s coming back.”

“It’s too dangerous.” Myles shakes his head, acting like he’s going to get up from the chair and leave if I insist on this foolishness.

“Fine,” I mutter, holding my hand up in a gesture of capitulation.

I want to reach out to my sister stuck down in the Underworld again. The last time didn’t go so well, and she zapped me with something akin to electricity. And yes, I did promise Carrick I wouldn’t try again unless he was around, but that’s not really what’s been holding me back.

I could have tried many times since Carrick got snatched away, but the main reason I haven’t is that I don’t think I can do it. I’ve had zero luck in tapping into my powers since he’s been gone—other than my little bubble shield—and it’s safe to say my confidence has gotten pretty low.

Not sure why I even suggested it right now with Myles. I’ll blame it on anger, disorientation, low self-esteem, and reckless energy. Carrick fucked me up good when he dropped his bombshell and then disappeared.

And while I come off as completely blaming Carrick for this jumble of a mess I’ve become, truthfully, a good part of it is because I think I’m in love with him.

Well, I’m fairly sure.

Except, I don’t have the history and the memories Carrick does. My fall for him was short and quick, so I’m not sure I can trust it.

Or do I trust it because that history made me inherently love him?

As if I had no choice.

The one thing that makes me think that we are truly fated to be together was that first time we had sex. The first time I had an orgasm with him, and there was a moment where a

barrage of images of his face flashed before me, and they were all different expressions I had never seen on him before.

I think, in my heart of hearts, those were actual memories surfacing through. All that snapping and clicking I felt, as if things were being put into place every time we come together, has to be a sign we are two halves of a whole.

I hang onto those little scraps of hope because if I believe in them, then it means all of what he said is true. That we are true loves destined to survive through eternity.

My throat clogs with emotion as my eyes get wet. This coming on the heels of Myles getting pissy with me about wanting to reach out to Zora. He had no idea my mind had gone places with absolutely nothing to do with my sister, and I don't want to explain it.

I give a little cough to clear my throat, leaning in toward him. Lowering my voice to a conspiratorial tone, I ask, "What's the deal on you proposing to Rainey? Come up with any good ideas yet?"

Just a few weeks ago, Myles had shown me the ring and wasn't sure when the right time would be. He was afraid that while this life-and-death and save-the-world stuff was occurring, it might not be appropriate.

I imparted what I believe to be sound advice. Given our world's fragile nature, there couldn't be a better time than now because we might not have tomorrow.

I've asked Myles about it a few times but he's blown me off stating he's been busy at work and hasn't had time to think about it.

Once again, he shakes his head, and I can tell the subject makes him uncomfortable.

"Myles," I exclaim, leaning over and giving him a tiny punch on the shoulder. "What the hell, dude? You want to marry my bestie, and now you're getting cold feet?"

The scowl he gives me is so fierce that I pull back. “Of course I’m not getting cold feet.”

“Then what is it?” I demand.

“It’s not the right time,” he mutters.

Oh, hell no. Not that again. “Haven’t we been through this? It’s the right time. Never a better time.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he replies snarkily. “I remember you saying that before. But that was different then.”

My eyebrows draw in tight. “How?”

“Because...” His voice trails off, and he doesn’t seem to want to finish.

“Spit it out,” I demand. Because I know Rainey will say yes, so he sure as hell better not be having second thoughts.

“Because I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” he exclaims in a rush of breath.

I rear back. “*My feelings?*”

His expression says he can’t believe I’d be that obtuse, but then he explains. “Your feelings because of finding out you and Carrick have loved each other for centuries upon centuries, and he’s been snatched away from you now. I know you’re in pain. Rainey knows it, too. It would be too insensitive to shove an engagement in your face right now.”

I’m so stunned by this admission that my jaw drops open. My friend’s thoughtfulness utterly warms part of me, but the other part wants to smack him.

“I’m fine,” I assure him.

“You’re not,” he snaps. “You won’t talk about it to us, you’re moping around, and you look like the world has already ended for you.”

I blink.

Blink again.

Do I really act that way?



Yeah, I don't talk about it. I mean, I told both Rainey and Myles the full story the day after Carrick was taken. Told them every detail I didn't tell Zaid, because Zaid knew most of it from first-hand experience.

But since then, I haven't wanted to talk about it. I don't want to keep slicing wounds open and letting them bleed for my friends.

We have an earth to save.

"Myles," I say quietly, but with a tinge of firmness. "Yes, I've been through a lot, and, yes, I'm a bit of a mess when it comes to Carrick. But that does not mean I wouldn't take complete joy in you proposing to Rainey. In fact, I'd say it's exactly what I need. Some type of refreshing reminder that love is beautiful and still very much alive. Please, please... I'm begging you... do not hold off putting a ring on that woman's finger because you think my feelings will be hurt. I assure you that will never happen."

His expression is dubious. "You're not just saying that because you're trying to be all brave and shit, are you?"

"Of course I'm trying to be brave and shit," I say in exasperation. "But I could also use something good and happy right now. So I suggest you get to thinking of something, okay?"

Myles gives me the biggest grin I've ever seen on his face, and it truly lifts my spirits. "Feel like brainstorming with me now?"

I snag one of the yellow legal pads and pens. "Let's do it. I'll take notes. You tell me your thoughts."

## CHAPTER 4

### *Carrick*

THE PLUME OF fire shot through a crack in the stone walkway, catching Carrick in the calf and blistering his skin raw. He ignored it as he continued his journey up the sloping path that reached a flat plateau. On one shoulder, he balanced a small boulder that weighed close to five hundred pounds. It was effortless weight, and, in ordinary circumstances, he could easily balance it, but with the flames shooting out at intermittent intervals, it required intense concentration, too.

For every boulder he dropped, he'd receive twenty lashes at the end of the day.

In all, nothing he couldn't handle. The burns healed, as did the split skin from the whip.

As did all the other torture devices Rune had been inventing to keep Carrick under his thumb and punished.

Since Rune had snatched him off his patio in Seattle, Carrick had been living in what looked to be a replica of the Underworld, or, at least, the way Finley and Boral had described it. Carrick himself hadn't been, never having had a reason to go in all his millennia of living.

But he was fairly sure this wasn't the actual Underworld, rather something that resembled it. It was cavernous and dim, light coming only from pits of fire pocketed in rocky crevices. It was hot and smelled like sulfur. Carrick suspected Rune created this place just to make Carrick uncomfortable, but really... it didn't matter where he was.

What mattered was where he was not, and that was with Finley.

Carrick raged with fury every time he thought about the look on Finley's face when she finally realized the truth about herself, then the horror when Rune snatched him away. In an overly dramatic fashion, Rune had actually thrown their bodies off the side of the building, knowing it would freak Finley out.

And it did.

Whenever he thought about the fear in her eyes as they disappeared over the edge, it made him grind his teeth so bad that they were in danger of wearing down to nothing. Of course, Rune merely bent distance as soon as they were in a free-fall and Carrick had ended up here.

Because demi-gods are servants of the gods, they must do as they are bid. As easily as a demi-god had been created, he or she could be uncreated.

Meaning, Carrick had no means to fight against Rune's imprisonment or protest the hard labor Rune had him doing. For days, he'd been forced to move rocks and boulders from one part of the cavern to another for no apparent reason other than Rune wanted him to work continually.

Carrick was up to the task, having incredible strength and power, but it was the futility of it that started to wear on him. He could take the backbreaking work, the burns from the fires, and the slices of the whip. He could handle any torture Rune thought to bestow upon him, and he could handle them for an eternity if he had to.

What he was having a hard time handling was the maddening unknown of what was going on in the Earth realm with Finley. She was trying to stop a prophecy from fulfilling, and he had pledged to help her do it.

Fuck, he had pledged to love her for eternity, then that asshole Rune took him away before she could even process it. Carrick knew how that beautiful mind worked, and he was sure she was pissed he was gone and feeling a bit lost at the same time.

Another spray of fire shot out between a crack in the stone he walked over, this time catching his bare foot and causing him to hiss. Upon his arrival, Rune had divested Carrick of his clothing and only given him a loincloth to wear.

Which was fine by him because it was an inferno in this place.

Carrick readjusted the boulder slightly as he continued the slog uphill. When he reached the top, he squatted and let it fall from his shoulder to the ground. He took care with unburdening his load because he also got lashes if he broke a boulder.

There was no clock by which to mark the passage of time. Carrick merely worked until he was told to stop. An ordinary day would have some hulking beast that looked like a man with fur all over him and a black executioner's mask covering his face driving Carrick off the plateau where he had unloaded the boulders. He was pushed down into a small valley—no more than a large crevice among rock formations that was maybe a hundred feet wide, and then to a small cell carved into the cavern wall.

Before being allowed to rest in his cell, Carrick had to receive whatever lashes he'd earned. Rune always made sure to appear so he could watch, usually lounging on a ridiculous-looking chaise with a table of food laden with all kinds of delicacies. If he thought that would torture Carrick, he was wrong. Food and luxuries were irrelevant in a place like this. Carrick had endured hardships far worse, and Rune knew it. All of his little displays of power were nothing more than a vain attempt to humiliate Carrick, which frankly, could not be done.

The man-beast gave Carrick a hard shove between his shoulder blades toward a wooden St. Andrew's cross where he'd eventually shackle Carrick to receive his lashes. Not that Carrick needed to be chained. He'd take his lashes only because he knew this was nothing more than a game to Rune. If he reacted or showed emotion, Rune would win.

Carrick's jailer shoved him again, harder this time. He wasn't expecting it and stumbled slightly. When he righted himself, he was shoved again.

For days upon days, Carrick had taken these little aggressions without so much as a backward glance. But the last shove broke something in him that he didn't know was fragile. A rush of rage swept through him, and, without thought, he half-turned and backhanded the man-beast in the center of his chest.

It was done with such force and full demi-god strength that the creature went flying twenty feet through the air where he landed with a thud on the hard-packed dirt. Carrick knew the creature was a Dark Fae and wasn't hurt. This was evidenced by the fact it scrambled to its feet with a growl, but Carrick could see its eyes were wide with astonishment behind that mask. While Carrick knew it was fae, it had no clue what Carrick was.

Turning to the cross, Carrick walked to it and waited for the jailer to come over and chain him. He noted he did so without any further abuses, making short work of it and retreating back a few feet. The fae now understood that the chains were for show anyway. Carrick could break them if he wanted.

"How many lashes are we on for today?" Rune's voice hit his ears, and he turned his head to see the god of Life had made his appearance.

As usual, he lounged on a purple velour-covered chaise with a table to the side filled with foods that admittedly made Carrick's belly rumble slightly but otherwise were of no consequence.

There was something different about this evening's visit from Rune. The blue-haired, mohawked god was wearing a silk lounging robe open at the chest, revealing his muscular form. Sitting on open areas of the chaise with their limbs draped over one another were three naked women.

Carrick had no clue their purpose, and he didn't care. He just wanted his lashes and for Rune to leave. Once he did, Carrick would be one day closer to Rune getting sick of this little game since Carrick refused to play the victim.

"Twenty," the masked jailer grunted. Carrick could hear the whip unfurl behind him and hit the ground.

So as to show no fear and complete nonchalance for what was about to happen, Carrick made sure his eyes stayed pinned on Rune for the duration. He kept a benign smile on his face, and while he could not help his body jerking each time the whip bit into his back, he never made a sound. The pain was excruciating, but Carrick's mind and willpower were far stronger than Rune would ever give him credit for.

Sadly, Carrick knew if he'd just show pain or humiliation or even beg to be let go, Rune would do it. That was all he wanted, but no matter how badly Carrick wanted to get back to Finley, he was never going to let Rune win against him.

The whip hissed and cracked, the sound of flesh tearing audible. Rune merely stuffed some sort of skewered meat into his mouth, chewing while smiling at Carrick's punishment. But with each lash and not much of a reaction from Carrick, the maliciousness in Rune's expression became keen.

When the last strike was done, Carrick could feel the blood trickling in rivulets down his back. It felt like he was on fire, but he also knew the cuts would soon start knitting, and, before long, he'd be healed.

The fae unshackled Carrick's bonds. Without a word to Rune, he turned for his cell.

"Halt," Rune commanded imperiously. With a low sigh, Carrick turned to face the bratty god of Life with a cocked eyebrow.

"I've brought you a gift." Rune motioned his hand out to the side with a gleam in his eye, and a bathtub filled with steaming water appeared. Carrick had not been allowed such decency since being trapped here.

Carrick was suspicious. Rune didn't offer gifts, especially given the level of hate he bore for him.

At a clap of Rune's hands, the naked women jumped off the chaise and ran giggling over to the bathtub. One suggestively ran her hand through the water before lifting a wet finger to her mouth.

Carrick's gaze went back to Rune.

With a solicitous nod, he grinned. "They'll help bathe you."

"Not interested," Carrick muttered and turned away once again.

"You're turning down my offer of a hot bath with three gorgeous women who are willing to do anything you want?" Rune asked, but by the taunting tone of his voice, he knew Carrick would never accept.

"Yup," was all Carrick replied. He didn't need to explain himself.

"So loyal to your little Finley," Rune cooed out. "She'd never know if you wanted to indulge."

"Not interested in the slightest." Carrick turned back to face Rune so he could see the determination in his expression. He wasn't going to play this game with him either.

Rune studied him a moment, tapping his finger against his chin. "All you have to do is beg me to release you, and I will."

"I'll pass," Carrick replied flippantly.

"Your girl is in danger," Rune taunted, and Carrick's body locked tight. "Had a nasty fight with a wraith last week. Your brother Maddox lets her run all over the place, and he certainly doesn't look after her the way you would."

Carrick's jaw locked hard as he digested that, but again, he would never show Rune his concern. He finally managed a calm smile as he shrugged. "Finley's strong on her own. Besides that, I expect she'll be fine since she's the key to the

prophecy. I highly doubt she's meant to be taken down by one of your dusty-clothed ghosts."

"Is she strong enough to take on Kymaris?" Rune drawled in amusement. "Because she's the one who has to do it, you know?"

Carrick couldn't ignore that. The gods had been very vague on what part Finley will play in the prophecy, and Arwen had only vaguely said she'd bear great sacrifice. It all sounded ominous, but Carrick had been lulled into believing that vanquishing Kymaris would be a group effort. This was the first time anyone said that the battle would be between Finley and Kymaris alone, and it terrified him.

"Ahh," Rune murmurs with a sly grin. "I see I have your attention now."

"You're saying Finley will fight Kymaris?" Carrick asked for clarification.

"I'm saying *only* Finley can stop her," Rune replied with a careless shrug. "How you interpret that is up to you."

It was clear Rune wasn't going to offer anything clearer than that, but Carrick was grateful for that information. It meant he had a lot of work ahead of him to get Finley ready for this. Time was running short, and she still hadn't figured out how to use her powers.

Carrick turned away from Rune. When he reached his cell, he grabbed onto the metal bars and pulled the swinging door open. He intended to enter, lay down, face the wall, and give Rune his back, which he knew would infuriate the god.

Instead, a crack of thunder rent the air, causing Carrick to wheel around to face whatever wrath Rune was going to level at him. Carrick came to a halt in a semi-crouched fighting stance.

But Rune was still on the chaise, his eyes wide with astonishment as he took in Onyx in full battle armor. The god of War was a beautiful vision despite the warrior vibe she radiated. Like Rune, she wore her magenta-pink hair in a



mohawk, but it was much longer and stood in a flowing wave from her crown to the back of her neck.

She glared at Rune, merely spitting out one word, “Enough.”

Rune pushed up from the chaise, giving his fellow god an incredulous look. “Enough?”

“Yes,” Onyx replied. “You’ve had enough fun with Carrick, and we let you have it. But enough is enough. We allowed him to take part in this prophecy so he could have the chance to ascend. It was a deal that was made, so he must be given that opportunity.”

“You can’t tell me when enough is enough,” Rune sneered. He was the one always at odds with his brethren—the most spoiled, the most entitled, and simply the biggest asshole.

Given Rune could kill Carrick with a mere snap of his fingers, it was certainly foolish for Carrick to enter the discussion. “Why such animosity, Rune? Why isn’t your curse enough?”

Rune turned from Onyx to face Carrick, rage morphing his face into a hideous mask. “Because I don’t like seeing you happy. You deserve every bad thing that could ever happen to you.”

And with that, Carrick tipped his head back and laughed deep from his belly. When he brought his gaze back to Rune, he shook his head in pity. “Get the fuck over it. It’s been centuries, you candy-assed priss pot. For fuck’s sake, I didn’t even mope this way when you killed Finley over and over again.”

Which was a lie. Every time Finley died in her past lives, Carrick was devastated, but he would never let Rune know that.

“Another thirty lashes,” Rune barked at the jailer.

“No,” Onyx murmured, but her tone was as hard as steel. “Collectively, the rest of your brothers and sisters demand he

be released. He's had enough."

She was talking about the three other gods in addition to her. Circe, the god of Fate, Veda, the god of Humanity, and Cato, the god of Nature. They operated simply by majority rules for most things, unanimity required for the important ones like Ascension.

Rune was livid over this proclamation, but there was nothing he could do about it. He wasn't strong enough to fight them on this, and they would fight him if he didn't come back into line.

"Fine," Rune snarled, giving a rolling wave of his hand above his head. The chaise, food, bathtub, and women disappeared, as did the masked jailer. "I've got better things to do anyway."

And with that, he vanished.

"Such an asshole," Onyx murmured under her breath as she walked over to Carrick. Before he could even thank her, she had him by the wrist and flashing out of this faux Hell of a place.

In a blink, they stood in what appeared to be a massively opulent foyer of what Carrick would peg as an Italian villa. He assumed Onyx owned it.

"I need to get to Finley," was the first thing Carrick said.

"Agreed," Onyx said as she lifted her chin toward the spiral staircase. "But you stink of more things than I can even describe, and your wounds need to heal. Finley does not need to see you this way, so go get bathed and you can return to her."

Onyx had an incredibly good point. In a million years and through a thousand more lifetimes, Carrick would never let Finley know what Rune had him doing these past few weeks. She didn't need that burden on her already-laden shoulders.

At some point, though, he would have to tell her what Rune said about her going up against Kymaris.

With no harm in asking, Carrick tipped his head to Onyx. “Rune said Finley would be the one to stop Kymaris, implying she was the only one. Is this true?”

Onyx seemed reluctant to answer, but she was the one who most often held true and fast to the rules, particularly when it came to not interfering once things were in place. Her expression was grim when she nodded. “It’s her burden alone to take Kymaris down. I hope she’s ready.”

Fuck.

She truly wasn’t. They had work to do.

Bending in a slight bow, Carrick said, “Thank you, Onyx.”

Onyx gave a slight bend back with a tiny smile. “Good luck to you and Finley. You’ll need it.”

## CHAPTER 5

### *Finley*

TIME IS TICKING, and I'm feeling the pressure. As of yesterday, Carrick has been gone three weeks and I've lost hope he's coming back.

Maddox tells me to keep the faith. He had it on authority from Cato—the god he was closest to—that Carrick would return. But while I trust Maddox, I sure as hell don't trust the gods. It's their vanity and their need to play their silly games that have me in the mess I'm in.

The October new moon is creeping closer, just about a month away, and we have no clue how to defend against Kymaris. We might know what day the ritual will occur, but we have no clue what time or where. We don't have the Blood Stone, nor any idea how to get it.

I can't even tap my powers, so what kind of savior of the world does that make me?

Maddox walks into the kitchen, officially convening the start of this little meeting I called with him and Zaid. We have decisions that have to be made, and we can't wait for Carrick to come back and lead us.

"Isn't Boral due to check-in today?" Maddox asks as he heads to the refrigerator and pulls out a beer. Zaid leans against the back counter, legs crossed casually with a cup of coffee in his hand.

I've also got a cup of coffee because it's still morning time and I roll my eyes at Maddox as he turns my way, beer in hand.

"What?" he asks innocently. "I feel like a beer."

“Whatever,” I mutter, then nod toward a stool. “And to answer your question, yes... Boral should be here in a little bit for a progress report.”

Zaid scoffs, still making it clear he is not on board with having his father working with us. He’s entitled to feel that way, but I think Boral is our best asset right now. He’s hanging around with Kaesar, one of the original fallen Dark Fae, and sometimes gets invitations to Kymaris’ house. In my opinion, he’s crucial.

Unfortunately, since the wraith incident, Maddox and Zaid distrust him even more.

“No one has shown up at Marianna’s house,” Maddox reports as he twists the cap off the bottle, placing it on the counter.

Zaid, who can’t stand anything disorderly in his kitchen, swoops in and nabs it. He throws it in the garbage can with a side glare at Maddox.

“If no one has shown up at the house,” I conclude with a pointed look, “then Boral’s not telling our secrets to Kymaris.”

Zaid and Maddox exchange a look, a clear indication they will always be dubious when it comes to the Dark Fae who has planted himself within Kymaris’ circle.

We decided to enact a plan to test Boral to see if he’s playing us. Since bringing him on board the day he told us about the ritual occurring on the October new moon, the information we’ve shared with him has been limited. He has absolutely no idea what my part is in the prophecy, that I have powers, or a twin in the Underworld. With him knowing so little, it was easy enough to fabricate a lie to see if it would make its way back to Kymaris. But we had to feed him the bait in a believable way.

*Operation Test Boral* went into effect four days ago.

Zaid’s father was set to come by to give us an update since he’d started hanging out with Kaesar, which included a few parties at Kymaris’ house.

At any rate, before Boral came to the condo, we staged the kitchen with a scattering of our yellow pads with scribbled notes and a few old books as if we'd been doing research. When Boral walked into the kitchen, Maddox and I were huddled over a book, murmuring in urgent but low voices.

We greeted him as usual. As he walked up to the kitchen island, I chatted amiably with him since I'm the only one who ever bothers doing so. He took a seat right in front of a yellow pad as I talked to him about the Underworld—one of my favorite subjects as I continued to work on a plan to save Zora. His gaze went down to the pad and when it did, I acted a little disconcerted it was sitting there. I made a big deal out of swiping it away from him so he couldn't see what was on it, but I'm positive he saw the address I'd written on there in black sharpie along with the word "fallen" next to it.

Of course, it was a plant and the address was that of Maddox's lady friend who has a mansion on the city's outskirts. It was where we'd spent the night after capturing the incubus for information.

Turns out, Maddox's lady friend is a Dark Fae, but she's not a fallen. She's also not in residence, but in Aruba, so it was a safe location to drop as bait to Boral. If he worked for Kymaris, the information would spur her to send someone to check it out. Maddox has been there the last four days, and, as he's just reported, no one has come sniffing around.

And that is enough to confirm that we can trust Boral—to me, anyway.

Well, at least as much as a Dark Fae can be trusted, but it's clear to me his loyalties are in helping his son over Kymaris.

Of course, my compatriots are not as easily swayed.

"Big deal no one has come yet," Zaid grumbles as he empties his coffee in the island sink and then rinses it. "Doesn't mean he didn't give her the information. Maybe he didn't even see the information."

“Oh, he saw it,” Maddox confirms. He’d been watching carefully as Boral zeroed in on it before I snatched the yellow pad away.

Zaid grimaces. “Again, that proves nothing. I say we can’t trust him, and we should ban him from coming around.”

Zaid wants him gone, but I want to bring him fully on board. He’s our best chance at finding out more details about when and where the ritual will occur. It’s a gut feeling I have—that he’s important to our mission—but it’s going to take a lot more to convince these guys.

Which I don’t have the time to do right this moment.

“Forget about Boral,” I say to the two men, who now focus on me. “He can be important later down the line, but, right now, we are dead in the water. We know nothing more than we did three weeks ago when we learned about the ritual occurring on the October new moon.”

Except that Carrick is apparently my eternal lover, but not going there.

“I have a suggestion,” I say, ensuring my voice is strong and confident. “I want to reach out to Zora again.”

“Nope,” Maddox says while Zaid shakes his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

I narrow my eyes, moving them between the demi-god and daemon. “You can’t tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“True,” Maddox says with a lopsided grin. “But I’m going to remind you that we have bigger priorities right now. We have to find the demi-god who wrote the *Libri Mysteria*.”

“We’ve been trying.” I wince at the whining tone of my voice. “Nothing’s working.”

“What about reaching out to that guy Carrick talked to at the party,” Zaid suggests. “What was his name... Wells?”

For a moment, Maddox and I just blink, then I exclaim, “That’s actually a great idea. He mentioned being able to get

information about the chalice.”

Although he wanted millions of dollars for that information, and I don't have that at my disposal.

“I suppose I could appeal to the gods again,” Maddox suggests half-heartedly. But we all know that would be a dead end. They are not going to help us in that respect as he'd already asked once when he was inquiring about Carrick and had been turned down.

“So really, we're back to reaching out to contacts and researching in Carrick's library,” Zaid concluded.

An idea strikes. I know it's asinine, but I still throw it out there. “I could just go hand myself over to Kymaris.”

Zaid's eyeballs about bug out of his head, and Maddox growls, “Are you fucking crazy?”

“Just pointing out that reaching out to Zora isn't the most dangerous thing I can do,” I quip, but then tone myself down. “But seriously... if I'm destined to somehow go head-to-head with Kymaris, why not just do it? If I go do it, isn't that what I'm fated to do?”

“And you're going to what... defeat her with your whip skills? Your little bubble shield?” Zaid sneers.

“Maybe,” I say suggestively, ignoring his taunts. “Maybe I need to face Kymaris to tap my powers. Maybe they'll come to me when I face off with her.”

“That's a whole lot of maybes that could get your ass killed,” Maddox mutters.

I shrug. “If you have better ones, I'm all for it. But right now, I'm the only one coming up with ideas. I say we bring Boral fully on board and tell him everything, let me reach out to Zora, and put me in the ring with Kymaris.”

Zaid and Maddox both look a little abashed because I *am* the only one coming up with ideas. It was my idea to test Boral too. I feel like I'm actually a leader in Carrick's absence, although I'm not really leading us anywhere.



“Let’s put aside all those things for a moment,” Zaid says, leaning his forearms against the counter. He’s dressed in his typical black from head to toe, and I have the insane urge to buy him a funky, bright colored sweater. “Let’s say we can find the demi-god who wrote about the chalice and the Blood Stone and we can make it into the realm where it’s being held—what would we be facing?”

I’ve actually given a lot of thought to this because we must get that chalice and the Blood Stone at all costs. “Carrick read that Micah drank his own tears from the chalice, and it transformed him into a monster. And we don’t know when this occurred, only the most recent translation was in the common era. He could have been doing that for thousands of years. I’m not sure I want to think about what we could be facing.”

“We need a show of force going in,” Zaid says with a grim expression.

“Me, Carrick, Lucien,” Maddox says, raising fingers on his hands as he counts names, “Finley, Zaid, and we’d want Titus, too. That’s six.”

“Not enough.” I shake my head. “We need more. I say we bring Boral.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Zaid says in an uncharacteristic burst of foul language. “Will you let it be with my father?”

“What about Pyke?” Maddox suggests. “He has powers, and he’s always fought alongside Carrick through the ages.”

“But can we trust him?” I ask. I’m rewarded with Maddox and Zaid roaring with laughter at my expense.

Zaid’s laughing so hard, tears start leaking out of his sunken eyes. He wipes at them, still snickering. “You trust my father, but you ask if we can trust Pyke?”

“I’d trust Pyke a million times over Boral,” Maddox adds, still chuckling.

Being the butt of their jokes pisses me off, so I’m growling when I say, “Look... we’re getting down to the wire. A month

until this ritual, and we've got to start making some risky moves. We need more help. So, unless you two boneheads have better ideas, I say we bring both Pyke and Boral onto the team."

Maddox opens his mouth as if to say something, but Zaid's phone rings. He answers it, listens, and says, "You can send him up."

That was obviously the concierge in the lobby letting us know Boral is here. He doesn't have the passcode to get up the private elevator, nor will he ever be given it. I know they think I trust Boral, but I don't. I merely trust he wants to help his son right now, and there's great loyalty there. I intend to use it.

We lapse into silence, not willing to discuss our consortium of prophecy busters with Boral on the way up. Until otherwise said, he's still more enemy than friend.

The elevator doors slide open, and I call out, "We're in the kitchen."

Boral appears and gives a tight smile to Maddox, a warmer smile to his son, and, to me, a genial nod as he murmurs my name, "Finley."

"Anything good to report?" I ask as I tap the stool beside me.

It's weird to think that I'm actually inviting a Dark Fae—who has probably killed thousands of people for no more reason than it was fun—to sit beside me so we can chat.

God, my life has changed so drastically these past three months.

Boral takes the stool offered, then swivels it to face me. Over the last few weeks, it's clear I'm the only one who truly tolerates him, and his attention always comes to me to report.

"Kymar is has eleven original fallen Dark Fae collected now," he says succinctly. "I've heard she's in southeast Asia with a lead on one that will give her twelve."

My eyes cut to Maddox, then to Zaid, as if to say, *See... if Boral were feeding her info, she would have gone to the address we slipped him rather than traipse off to Asia.*

“Any more information on what purpose the twelve serve?” I ask, although I know they will supposedly be a conduit according to what Boral told us before.

He shakes his head. “I only know Kaesar has said she’s promised the twelve that they will become her highest-ranking nobles when it’s all over.”

Something about his tone perks my interest. “You sound as if you doubt that?”

Boral leans his elbow on the counter, his back now fully to Maddox. He ignores his son, who stands on the other side of the island. “Kymaris isn’t exactly the most trustworthy fae I’ve ever known. She has no true loyalty to anyone, even those that give it to her blindly.”

See... right there. In my heart, I know Boral is an asset we can’t do without, and I know he can better serve us if he fully understands what’s going on.

I bring my gaze to Zaid, pointedly conveying that we need more of his help. I lean to the side to see past Boral and over to Maddox, giving him the same.

“It’s time,” I say to both men as I bring my gaze back to the Dark Fae sitting beside me. I’m not talking to him, but it’s his eyes I’m focused on. “It’s time we tell him more.”

I’m surprised when I don’t get immediate denials from Zaid or Maddox, and I cut them glances. Neither one is looking at me, eyes averted downward.

Boral is clearly confused. “Tell me more? What more?”

“There’s a lot more,” I say as I try to calm the racing of my heart. I’m not getting push back from Zaid or Maddox, which means their silence is an acquiescence.

Now that I have it, I have to be incredibly careful and deliberate in what I’m about to tell Boral because certain

things must remain secret. For example, my powers. I don't want him to know I have a light inside of me that will hopefully be tapped so I can use it to my advantage. But I do need him to know I'm at the center of the prophecy and the key to stopping it so we can have him find out what my part in the ritual is.

I don't want him to know about my sister being an identical twin, but he's going to need to know I want to travel to the Underworld for something important to me.

One last look at Zaid and Maddox. Both men are now focused on me. While I can see they aren't going to fight me, they don't like this move.

Tough shit. No one else is stepping up to make the hard calls.

Giving my attention back to Boral, I take a deep breath and let it out. "Okay... there are some things we know about what's going on with Kymaris that we need to bring you up to speed on, in the hopes you can get us some more detailed information. The first thing you need to know—"

"You better fucking stop right there, Miss Porter," comes from behind me, and I go dizzy with recognition at that voice.

I swivel around slowly on my stool to see Carrick striding into the kitchen. My eyes hungrily take him in, quickly ensuring he looks healthy and whole. I want to slap him for that *Miss Porter* dig, an effort to make me feel like I'm a child playing in the big leagues and I'm not allowed on his team.

Mostly, though, I want to kiss him.

His gaze locks on to me, and it seems like we stare at each other forever with the rest of the world melting away. I've spent weeks lying in bed at night, imagining all the things we would talk about when he gets back. Yet, at this moment, my tongue is completely tied.

Slowly, his attention moves to Boral as he comes to stand beside my stool. I merely tip my head back to continue to stare at him as he stays focused on the Dark Fae. "Apparently,

Finley seems to think you're ready to come on board with our team."

*Phew... no more Miss Porter.*

"I trust her judgment, but I'd never let her tell you anything unless you agree to a binding," he adds.

I wince because I never once thought of that. When I shoot Maddox a scowl, I can tell by his sheepish expression that he never thought to offer it either.

"A binding," Boral drawls slowly, and I can see the interest in the offer is deep. He knows it must be a phenomenal story if Carrick is insisting on a binding.

"Not a regular binding, though," Carrick murmurs. While his tone is soft, it's coldly menacing. "I want your heart instead of your tongue if you betray our secrets."

That gets *my* tongue loosened, and I jerk in shock. "You can do that? Take his heart rather than his tongue? Why didn't you do that for Nimeyah?"

Carrick's eyes move lazily toward me, and the smile he gives me says he thinks I'm adorable right now. I try to suppress a growl.

"A binding is usually of the tongue, but it can be something that provides a little more incentive to keep secrets. Whereas Nimeyah's vanity was enough to make losing a tongue too horrendous to break her promise, I imagine Boral here would go on with life simply fine without one. It's the promise of his heart I want before we say another word to him."

Geez... that's a big request. It's a lot to think about. I imagine—

"I accept," Boral says, and all of our heads snap his way. He didn't even need to consider it at all, and that confirms that my gut instincts were right about him.

Boral is looking squarely at his son, though. "I'll gladly give Carrick my heart if I betray your secrets."

Something about that actually warms my heart a little, although Zaid merely scoffs and turns his back on his father, fiddling with the coffee pot instead.

“Deal,” Carrick replies, and just like that, the spell is enacted. “But it’s going to have to wait as I have more important things to handle right now.”

Before I can even comprehend what’s happening, Carrick grabs my hand and bends distance, my stomach flipping at the sudden movement and the stretch across space. He doesn’t bring us far, though.

Merely to the library. It takes no time at all before he pulls me into his body and hugs me hard.

## CHAPTER 6

### *Finley*

I RETURN THE hug, wrapping my arms around his waist and pressing my face into his chest. He smells clean and comforting, and every bit of anger I'd been harboring while he was gone evaporates as my overwhelming relief pushes it out.

Carrick's hand goes into my hair. He grips and pulls my head back so I'm staring at him.

His eyes are burning like pots of molten gold. "I have thought about doing this every minute of every day."

It's all the warning I get before his mouth comes down on mine, and even though it steals the breath right from my lungs, I sink into that familiarity with no hesitation. The kiss speaks to me in so many ways. Carrick is saying he's so deeply sorry for laying such heavy stuff on my doorstep, only to get whisked away before we could discuss it.

The kiss speaks loudly to how much he missed me, and I even taste worry on his tongue.

The relief I feel from him at the mere claiming of my lips is overwhelming, and my heart even hurts a little for his worry. If he'd been somewhere where he couldn't get any information about what was going on back here, he must have been going mad.

With a sigh of regret, he pulls his mouth from mine. With my hair still wrapped in his hand, he just holds me immobile, taking the time to let his eyes roam over my face and then finally to my eyes.

There was a time when I thought the color of my eyes angered him, and, given the despondency he had felt at times upon my subsequent reincarnations, I can understand it. But

now he regards them as if they're the most precious jewels one could possess.

Finally, he relaxes his hold on me and smiles. "I need you to fill me in on everything that's happened since I've been gone."

"I will," I assure him. "But where have you been?"

"Doing a little job for Rune is all," he murmurs and I know it's a lie. There's no doubt in my mind he was with Rune and had no choice but to do whatever it was that Rune demanded, but it wasn't just a little job of no consequence. I can hear the slight tinge of anger in Carrick's voice. Given all that Rune has done to him, I know if Carrick ever had the ability to kill a god, he'd take Rune out in a heartbeat.

I do as Carrick asks as we stand closely, face to face, his hand still at the back of my head. His forehead creases several times with worry as I give him the watered-down version of events.

That I've been working on tapping my powers, but it's been a big bust, although I've got the cutest little bubble shield I can pop up around me. That we've found no information on the demi-god who wrote *Libri Mysteria*, nor any further info on the specifics of the ritual other than Boral's report today that Kymaris now has eleven original fallen Dark Fae.

"What's this I hear about a wraith attacking you?" he asks, his frown at its deepest.

"Clearly, you got some information wherever you were," I hedge.

He just stares at me, refusing to let me slide by.

With a sigh, I tell him about our trip to Hungary to search for the relic that could help get us to Micah's realm, then all about the wraith.

In the end, he's not all that angry at me for going. With a thoughtful expression, he bolsters my confidence that I might have at least had some good ideas while he was gone. "We do



need Boral to do more for us so it's a good call to give him more information. He's our best source so far."

I don't tell him about the two things that I really want—to make another attempt at reaching Zora and that I suggested to Maddox and Zaid that I go head-to-head with Kymaris.

The Kymaris issue would only serve to make Carrick think I was an idiot and no kind of leader, and the Zora issue is moot at this moment. I will, however, bring it up to him again when the timing is right.

It only takes us about ten minutes to catch up on my end, then both his hands go to my face. He bends, peering into my eyes. "And how are you holding up? Especially with everything I had told you before Rune took me away?"

The tender words threaten to undo me because I've had a spine of steel since he's been gone. Now that he's here, I just want to melt into a puddle of indifference for a while and let Carrick take complete charge of everything.

I really, really want a break.

So, I answer by snaking a hand to the back of his neck as I go to my tiptoes, and stare into those honeyed eyes. Life is too short, so I kiss him.

And it's an amazing kiss when he responds, but it's also short-lived as he pulls away. His eyes on mine, he chastises, "More of that later. Now I want to know how you're holding up."

I sigh, part irritation that he stopped the kiss, part avoidance of something I've been trying not to think about but mostly because I know I'll have to comply because Carrick won't let this go.

I finally admit, "I have a lot of jumbled-up feelings and a million questions, but I really just want you to take me to your bedroom and let's get lost in each other for a while. We can talk later."

Carrick doesn't reply. I can tell part of him wants to force me to talk.

But the greatest part of him is more intrigued by my request to go to his bedroom. He merely bends distance to his room, swirls me in a pearly gray tornado of magic that divests us of our clothing, and deposits us squarely under the sheets of his bed.

"Very convenient," I manage to giggle before his body rolls over onto mine and his mouth starts to tell me the story about how we've loved each other through eternity all over again.

\* \* \*

I'VE HAD MOMENTS throughout my life that have been impactful. Events I wish I could revisit and live over again. People who have made my life complete.

But lying here in this bed, Carrick spooned at my back and his arm holding me close to him, I can't think of anything in my life that has ever felt better. In fact, if I were to die, I hope it's just like this.

Except, given what I know so far about my fate and prophecy, it's not going to happen in bed with Carrick but in a battle to the death with Kymaris.

At least, that's the odds on the favorite scenario.

"You're quiet," Carrick observes, pressing his lips into the back of my head. "Did I break you?"

"Never," I assure him, although I will feel deliciously used in the morning. "But I sort of feel like we're back on that patio just before Rune came and snatched you away, and you had just laid that bombshell on me. I haven't been able to process it yet."

Carrick shifts, putting space between us, then forces me to roll over so we can look at each other. "Let's process it now. Because I've hardly thought of anything else in the last three weeks."

Placing my hand on his naked chest, I stare at the hollow of his throat before lifting my gaze to his. “I read your journals. Not all of them, but I flipped through a lot since we first met. I couldn’t find any mentions of me.”

“To keep you safe,” Carrick replies.

I nod and smile. “Zaid told me the same. He’s tried to help me through this, as have Rainey and Myles, but... I just didn’t want to talk to them. I only wanted to talk to you.”

“I’m here,” he says quietly. “Let’s talk about anything you want.”

I should have written down all the questions that have been buzzing around my brain for the last three weeks and put them in an orderly fashion. But I didn’t, so my first question is completely random.

“How old was I when Rune killed me in front of you?” I ask.

“Twenty-five,” he says softly. “You were young when we met, fell in love, and married, but that’s the way it was back then. At eighteen, you were of an age where you should have been married off. It’s only because your father loved you so much that he didn’t want to force you into a loveless match and you apparently had plenty of suitors seeking your hand.”

“That’s just so archaic. It’s hard to imagine me living in that time.”

“You were a lot more progressive than the other females of your time,” Carrick says with a chuckle. “You were rebellious, rambunctious, fearless, didn’t listen to reason, and never asked for help. You definitely weren’t the type to swoon over a big hulking Viking trying to molest you.”

I laugh, squeezing in a little closer to him. I’m glad I was independent and strong in my first life.

“Was I always like that?” I ask.

“Always. Every single reincarnation.”

My hand comes to his jaw, and I rub it along the bristles making their appearance. He could use a shave, but I like him like this, too. “And when was the last time you and I were together?”

“1961 through 1964.” His voice is rough, and I imagine many of the memories are bittersweet.

“How did I die that time?” It’s a horrible question for me to ask, but I want to know how I died every single time. And I want to know how we fell in love each time, and I want to know just... everything.

“A brain aneurysm,” he replies softly, and I can see the pain fresh in his eyes. “At night while we slept. I found you dead the next morning.”

Okay, that’s enough of the morose stuff. I need to hear it, but it’s going to have to be in doses, not for me, but for Carrick. This is very fresh to him—the sixties not being that far away for an immortal.

I smile mischievously. “What was your favorite thing about our time together then?”

A wide smile breaks out on his face. His eyes glittering, he snakes his hand around my lower back and pulls me in so my pelvis is up against his. “It was the sexual revolution, baby. It was easy to get you into bed.”

I’m laughing even as I smack him on the chest, then he kisses me hard because it’s a good memory.

It’s such a great kiss I think we might forget about talking for a while, but Carrick releases my mouth and looks at me with all seriousness. “Hit me up with some more questions.”

“Did I have special abilities? Like the way I can see fae now?”

Carrick shakes his head. “No. You were perfectly ordinary, and I loved you that way. Just as I love you this way.”

I stiffen when I hear Carrick say he loves me for the first time since he returned. I know he does because I remember the

emotion with which he said it three weeks ago.

He doesn't expect me to say it back, and I'm not going to say it just because I'm afraid he needs to hear it. But I am going to tell him exactly how I feel about loving him.

I take a breath and let it out slowly, shifting slightly so our eyes can connect. "It bothers me that you have a deeper connection to me than I do to you. I love you, Carrick, but I don't think it's the same way I used to. It's certainly not on the same level that you feel for me because you have the luxury of memories and time. I only have a gut instinct that I'm supposed to be yours."

"I know." His hand moves to brush some hair off my forehead before his eyes come back to me. "I'm just grateful you love me. That you know the truth and that whatever time we have left, we can do it together, with nothing between us."

Smiling, I nod. It's enough for him, but it's not enough for me. "Zaid said there's a place where our memories are held in crystals."

Carrick frowns. "The Hall of Histories. Would you like me to take you there?"

"Would you?" I ask in excitement, leaning up on one elbow so I'm staring down at him. "Let me see some of our lives together?"

"Of course I will," he says, his tone indicating it would be a given that he'd give me anything I ask for. "We'll go this evening."

"Why not now?" I ask, and I realize just how naive it was of me to do so.

Because I only get a flash of a sly grin from Carrick before his mouth is back on mine. He shifts me under his body, pushes his legs in between mine, and forces them to spread. He then kisses his way down my body, and I sigh when he stops to focus on that most intimate spot on my body.

This evening will be fine to visit the Hall of Histories.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Finley*

THE HALL OF Histories isn't easy to explain. I have no clue where it's located, other than Carrick took my hand and bent distance. We arrive in a small room with a shiny black floor and white walls. There's no furniture, no art on the walls, and no doors except one at the other side of the room like a bank vault made of thick steel with a giant wheel on the front that must be spun to open it.

I'm jolted slightly when a man appears before us wearing clothing I don't recognize as something humans would wear in any time period. Loose white pants and a white tunic that comes down past his hips with buttons up the middle. The collar has almost a Mandarin feel, but the entire ensemble looks futuristic.

I lean in toward Carrick and whisper, "Are we on a spaceship?"

Carrick smirks. "Let go of the alien thing, Finley. I promise you that they don't play a part in your life."

"Welcome to the Hall of Histories, Nuesh," the man says with a slight bow. "What may I do for you today?"

I frown because I don't understand why he'd call Carrick that, and then it hits me... that was his original name in Sumer when he was created. Perhaps he doesn't know Carrick by any other name, or perhaps demi-gods are most often referred to by their original names.

Regardless, Carrick is recognized. Because the man before us is not a human, fae, or daemon, I have to conclude he's also a demi-god.

Which is interesting.

He doesn't look anything like what a demi-god should look like, but, then again, I only have Carrick, Maddox, and Lucien to compare to.

While he's very handsome with pale blond hair cut short, denim-blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and near-perfect bone structure, he doesn't have the brawn Carrick and his brothers have. He also doesn't have the same vibe that sort of radiates off them—the type that says *I'll seriously hurt you if you get in my way*.

No, this demi-god is mild-mannered to the core, and I'm starting to understand the gods didn't create their progeny to all be warriors.

“We'd like to peruse some memory crystals,” Carrick replies.

The demi-god nods, his eyes cutting to me. “For you or for your friend as well?”

“Both,” Carrick replies, then introduces me. “This is Finley Porter.”

“Hello, Finley Porter,” he says, holding his hand out to me to shake, which, in my experience, is an anti-demi-god kind of thing. I take it, though, and he says, “I am Temen, the overseer of the Hall of Histories.”

“It's nice to meet you,” I reply formally. “Do you record the memories here?”

“Oh my, no,” he exclaims with an amused smile. “The gods have created a legion of demi-gods who are responsible for memorializing events and histories. I just manage the crystals that are the medium by which they are stored.”

“And every event that's ever occurred in any human's lifetime is recorded?” I ask curiously.

“Not just human,” Temen corrects me as he turns and starts for the vault door. He walks with the most perfect posture I've ever seen, with his hands clasped behind his back. “It includes fae, daemons, demi-gods, angels, and the like.”

“I can’t even fathom the amount of information that encompasses,” I murmur.

“It’s more than the human mind can conceptually perceive,” Temen says, not in an unkind way.

“I’m curious,” I say hesitantly, not wanting this to come off rude. “But to what purpose?”

“Why does anyone memorialize anything?” Temen counters, but he doesn’t expect me to answer because he provides it for me. “We write in journals to record our experiences so we can remember; we write for others so they can learn; and, just as importantly, we write for entertainment. It’s why we keep our favorite movies so we can watch them over again for enjoyment.”

An image of the gods sitting on couches, popcorn bowls in hand, watching their most favorite crystal memories flashes before me. It seems ludicrous.

But I can also envision Rune coming here to watch the crystal where he killed me—most likely from Carrick’s point of view—so he can relish the pain he caused over and over again. The thought is awful, and I banish it at once.

Focusing on why we are here, I pry, “And anyone can access these memories?”

As Temen reaches the vault, he shakes his head and grabs hold of the wheel. “Only demi-gods and the gods themselves are allowed to access these histories. You’re here as a guest of Nuesh, so you are allowed in with him.”

Whoa. I hadn’t realized the club was so exclusive. But then again, what human would ever know about this place? Or have the ability to travel here?

“Other immortals aren’t allowed here?” I ask just to make sure I understand.

“Correct,” Temen replies, then releases the wheel. He doesn’t pull on the door, merely steps back to let it slowly



swing open with a slight rasping noise. A tiny breeze hits me, several degrees cooler than the room we're in, and I shiver.

Carrick notices, and his arm comes around me. I wonder if the vault we're about to enter has to remain cold for the crystals?

Yet, when we step inside, I realize it's the same temperature as the room we left. The vault is no different than the outer space with the same black flooring and white walls. It's positively sterile looking, and the only thing of note is a square door in the far wall that has a simple knob on it. It sits in the middle of the wall, no more than a foot-by-foot square, and reminds me of the dumbwaiters that could be used to send meals upstairs in large homes.

I'm beyond perplexed as to where the crystals are or how we'll access them through such a tiny portal.

Perhaps a potion to drink that will make us smaller ala *Alice in Wonderland*?

Temen moves to the small door, and I sneak a glance at Carrick. He merely smiles and nods toward Temen, indicating I should watch.

So I do.

The demi-god raises his hands about shoulder high, facing the door. He chants something so low I cannot make out the words. A distinct whirring noise starts all around us, but then seems to focalize on the wall that holds the small door as if something behind the door might be moving on tracks or via a cable. It's distinctly mechanized sounding, yet I'd bet One Bean that nothing is mechanized about this.

It's purely magic, I'm sure.

The noise stops, Temen's chant ceases, and he reaches out to grasp the knob. It doesn't pull open. Instead, he slides it up. The interior is white like the walls and is brightened by a light I can't see. Set horizontally on a white rounded base is a crystal.

I'm startled to see it's the same type of crystal I'd seen in Arwen's hut, which were cylindrical, about an inch in diameter, and while the column was smooth, the ends were rough-cut points. While the crystals in Arwen's home were multi-colored, the one on the base is opaque white and about six inches long.

Temen reaches out and grabs it. He turns to Carrick and opens his palm with the crystal lying across it, but not in a way meant to offer it to Carrick. Not just yet.

"What exactly would you like to see?" Temen asks.

Carrick tips his head toward me. "I'd actually like to see her memories of our time together in Ireland when she was Eireann and I was Banan."

"Of course," Temen says, then starts to wave his other hand over the crystal.

"Wait," I exclaim, and Temen stops, looking at me curiously. "Carrick just tells you that limited information—Ireland and our names then—and you know what to pull up?"

"I know what every crystal holds," Temen replies mildly.

"You know what's in every crystal that holds every memory, event, and history since the dawn of time?" I ask skeptically.

Because that's impossible.

"No," he replies with a shake of his head and an understanding smile. "That would make my head explode. But when I hold a crystal and you give me the basics of what you need, I just *know* how to access it."

My head whips toward Carrick. "Sort of how Sarvel *just knows* when to intervene in my life."

He shrugs in response. "The gods work in mysterious ways."

"Well, it's convenient if nothing else," I quip before turning back to Temen with an apologetic look. "I'm sorry to

interrupt. Please go on.”

Temen’s blue eyes crinkle at the corners, indicating his amusement, then he waves his hand over the crystal again. When it starts to glow in a yellowish-white hue, he slowly holds it out for me to take.

I look to Carrick for guidance.

“Go ahead. Pick it up.”

I’m overwhelmed with excitement but terrified as well. I’m like an amnesiac getting ready to learn what my life was all about, and I’m scared there are portions I might not like.

With resolve, I reach out and grab the crystal.

The minute I do, my entire body locks as if I’m completely frozen in place. My brain tells my arm to move, but it refuses.

But then I have no opportunity to worry about my lack of mobility because I’m suddenly assaulted with flashes of memories that are flickering so fast before my eyes that I can’t keep up with them. They’re moving laterally across my vision, left to right, but I’m lucky if I have even a second to focus on a scene before another appears.

I hear voices, conversations, and music.

I feel the sun warming my skin and snow on my tongue.

I’m laughing and crying and moaning with passion.

I’m helpless to move or turn it off, so I give up trying to make heads or tails of it. I just stare ahead, watching the flickering scenes of my life go by until it suddenly ends and my body is released.

When I sag just a little, Carrick’s arm comes around my waist and he takes the crystal gently from me, handing it back to Temen.

“That was too much... too fast,” I mutter in dismay. “I couldn’t comprehend it.”

“Just give it a moment,” Carrick urges, squeezing my waist.

“No, it was—”

And like a curtain is lifted before my eyes, I suddenly remember every single thing from the time Carrick rescued me from the Viking raider until the moment when I somehow appeared before a strange man with a brilliant blue mohawk, his hand wrapped around my throat.

I know that last memory was the moment right before he broke my neck and killed me.

I shake that thought away, taking a moment to sift, and oh... the memories.

They're lovely.

So beautiful, my time with Carrick.

All the times he came to our farm and sat at our table for a meal. He had charmed my father, who was more than glad to let us marry. Of course, he died before that happened. I feel the aching loss of that man in the same way I felt the loss of my father when he killed himself.

I smile as I recall the romantic things Carrick did for me time after time, but I focus on the rose garden he had built me behind the manor house where I moved after we were wed.

It was stunning. I know how much I loved to spend time out there, tenderly hand pruning each plant, of which there were hundreds.

Oh... and the first time we made love. Although I distinctly remembered ways in which Carrick made me feel good before he took my virginity, it was our wedding night when I finally gave it to him. He was a gentleman, but he also *wasn't* I'm happy to say.

Memories flood me, each one as clear and robust as if it had happened just yesterday. And the feelings... so strong and vibrant.

My heart feels like it's swelling to epic proportions at how much I loved Carrick back then. More than my own life.

More than anything.

Wow. I can feel the times when he angered me. We'd have heated arguments that involved shouting sometimes, but it always ended with Carrick kissing me because we could never stay mad at each other for long.

Year after year, I note the highlights, knowing I can go back now that I have them and pick up the low lights one day.

They continue all the way up to appearing in Rune's clutches and the look of horror on Carrick's face just before my world went black.

When I died for the first time.

Carrick's hands come to my face, and I blink out of the memories. His head dips, eyes slightly concerned. "Are you okay?"

I nod and try to make light of it because the onslaught of such deep emotion shook me. I cough to clear my throat. "Apparently, I really loved the hell out of you back then."

Carrick's head tips back and he laughs deeply, delighted by my response, and then he kisses me, bending me backward.

When he lets me up for air, I glance at Temen, who is smiling broadly, his cheeks a little pink at witnessing such affection between us.

"What would you like to see next?" Temen inquires.

I have no clue, so I turn to Carrick for the answer. He ponders before saying, "Our time together in New Zealand, late 1800s. She was Hattie then, and I was Carrick."

My nose wrinkles inadvertently at the old-fashioned name of Hattie, but I suspect it wasn't old-fashioned then.

Temen waves his hand over the crystal. While he does, I ask Carrick, "Did you ever bring me here during my other past lives?"

He shakes his head. “You never asked to, but I don’t think you ever needed it. We always had time to fall in love the right way, creating new memories each time. We always had time where I could tell you all about your past lives.”

“Would you have brought me here had I asked?”

Leaning in, Carrick kisses me softly. “I wouldn’t deny you anything, Finley.”

I know, without a doubt, I wouldn’t deny him anything either.

Temen holds out the crystal, which is glowing again. I take it, smile up at Carrick, and say, “Let’s go to New Zealand.”

I don’t know how long Temen patiently stands there with us as I gather my memories to me like long-lost family members. Each past life doesn’t confuse my current existence, but rather makes me more complete. In some of my lives, I was a pioneering force of a woman. In the late 1800s in New Zealand, I was a female cattle herder.

Other times, my life wasn’t overly exciting—like when I was a laundress in fifteenth-century France. Carrick coming into my ordinary life was exhilarating to me. It made me feel like I was destined for so much more, and look at me now.

Every time period I soaked in always ended abruptly when I died. Sometimes, I knew it was coming like with a protracted illness. Other times, it was sudden and unexpected. Rune had endless possibilities, but he seemed to favor the more dramatic deaths that would crush Carrick.

At times, Carrick was with me when I passed. Others, I was alone when I died because he was out and about and we had no clue it would happen that day. We had always made a pact that we would lead our lives fully and not just wait for it to come.

And—always—he was the person I was thinking about when things went black.

“I think I’m done,” I finally say, feeling like my brain can’t handle any more stimulation. I hand the crystal, which had gone opaque once the memories were complete, back to Temen. Looking up at Carrick, I ask, “Perhaps we can come again?”

“Of course,” he assures me.

I turn to Temen, dipping my head. “Thank you so much for your time.”

He bows with a smile. “It was my pleasure to help a friend of Nuesh.”

Carrick gives Temen a nod, then takes my hand, preparing for us to bend distance back to Seattle.

“Wait,” I exclaim as a thought occurs to me. I pull away from Carrick, then pivot back to Temen. “Do you have the ability to look up events with some nominal information?”

“I can certainly try,” Temen replies.

“Can you pull up a crystal for the time when a book called the *Libri Mysteria* was written and its surrounding events?”

“Holy. Fuck,” Carrick breathes out in astonishment. “So simple.”

I look over my shoulder, grinning. “Right? It just suddenly came to me.”

Temen turns to the wall, replaces my crystal, and closes the door. After more whirring and sliding of gears, he opens up the door when it’s quiet. The crystal that sits there looks similar to mine, except it’s much shorter, maybe only about three inches in length.

After he hands it to me, I hold it out for Carrick to touch so we can see the event together.

The crystal glows blue as we both touch it and scenes start to flash. Various places and people running past me in a blur, and, finally, a man—presumably, the demi-god who loved Charmeine—hunched over a wooden table with a single

candle providing light as he copied words from a long scroll into a leather-bound book.

Carrick was right. It had been copied over at some point.

The crystal stops glowing. It takes a few seconds for all that to settle in as it appears the book was created over several years, transcribing it from many papyrus scrolls.

“Did you recognize the demi-god?” I ask Carrick.

His expression is disappointed as he shakes his head.

Damn it.

Handing the crystal back to Temen, I ask if he recognizes the demi-god. The crystal glows as he closes his eyes, but when he opens them, he also shakes his head. “I’m sorry, but no.”

“It was worth a try,” I reply glumly. I slide my hand in Carrick’s. “Let’s head back.”

“Wait a minute,” Carrick says, his gaze going to Temen. “Pull up the event for the original writing of that story on the papyrus scrolls.”

My eyebrows draw inward in confusion.

Carrick explains. “Just because that demi-god we just saw transcribed the story, it doesn’t mean he was the original author.”

“Brilliant,” I say with a beaming smile.

“Pull up all pertinent events surrounding the original writing on the scrolls,” Carrick instructs.

Temen does his thing, then switches out to a new crystal. This one is much longer than mine, at least eighteen inches, and the cylinder part isn’t smooth but rather gnarled and cracked. It doesn’t look well cared for.

It’s long enough that Carrick and I can both wrap our hands around it as it starts to glow.



Once again, places, people, wars, love scenes. A barrage of images flash through us, and my blood starts racing as I see a black stone chalice with a red jewel affixed to it. All of it blowing by so fast I'm afraid I'll forget details. Yet, at the end, we see Micah.

He's more grotesque than the *Libri Mysteria's* author had described, his face deformed and hideous. He's covered with matted fur and his back is hunched. Slime oozes from the corners of his mouth.

And then he's battling someone—presumably our demi-god—for the chalice, but Micah uses some sort of magic. He expels that person from his realm in a flash of blinding light and without us being able to see many details other than the demi-god was built like a freightliner.

Finally, we see a man bent over a stone table, meticulously journaling his experience on papyrus scrolls.

Not the same author from the first viewing, and we can only see his back as he's hunched over. When he reaches the end of the scroll, he lifts it and carries it over to a wooden trunk in what appears to be a tent of some sort.

He deposits it gently inside, closing the lid. When he straightens to head back to the table, I gasp so hard I start to choke.

“Fuck,” Carrick mutters as we take in the author of the *Libri Mysteria*.

Hair buzzed to his scalp, his gray eyes filled with ice and a look of isolation that I'd recognize anywhere.

Carrick's brother, Lucien.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Carrick*

SETTLED ON THE couch in his office, Carrick tucked his hands behind his head and stretched his legs out, crossing one over the other at the ankles. It was almost three AM, and he'd just left a warm, naked, and sleeping Finley in their bed.

Not for his decency or hers, Carrick donned a pair of pajama bottoms and a t-shirt before leaving his bedroom. The way things were heating up with the prophecy, people were coming and going at all hours from his condo, which had become command central of sorts.

He could have as easily stayed in his bed to contemplate things, but the lure of Finley beside him was too distracting, which was why he had relocated to his office. Through the pocket doors and to the windows overlooking the Sound, he couldn't see much of Bainbridge Island. It was mostly blacked out, everyone asleep, and the sky was overcast so the water was darkened. There was some glow from adjacent buildings and some of the smaller ones below him, but there wasn't much of interest to look at for the most part.

Which was fine. He didn't need that to think.

He tipped his head back, letting his gaze lift to the ceiling. Plain. White. Blank.

His mind began to wander.

If he didn't hear back from Lucien soon, he would have to go on a search for him, which would waste time. He'd put in a few texts and one phone call, telling him that he was needed urgently in Seattle.

Carrick did not tell him what it was about, though. That conversation was best done face to face.

Lucien had never been unresponsive before. If he were in the Earth realm, no matter if it were halfway around the globe, he would have replied by now. Carrick could only ascertain he was in some other AltVeritas where cell reception depended on the level of magic within that realm or whether its creator allowed Earth realm technology within its borders. There being thousands upon thousands of realms, Carrick would not know where to start. He would have to appeal to Veda for help, and she'd already done a lot for him. The favors she would bestow were probably running dry.

Carrick let those frustrations go because there was nothing he could do about them. Instead, he thought about his time in the Hall of Histories today with Finley. She had such delight in seeing her past lives, even though each one was abruptly ended when she died.

Sadly, some of those deaths weren't abrupt but rather a prolonged illness. She hung tough, though, and watched it all.

In the end, she had seen enough to prove that her gut instinct about their love was right. Seeing it over and over again, feeling the same level of devotion in each life, meant that what she and Carrick had was special enough to withstand eternity.

When Carrick watched Finley walk out of there, he knew she could never doubt his love for her and because she allowed herself to trust in her past incarnations, she could have faith that her present-day feelings for him could be trusted.

It was a good evening when they returned to the condo, riding high on Finley being able to learn some of her history.

Learning who was the author of the *Libri Mysteria* was a huge bonus, shocking as it was. Finley was brilliant to think of asking Temen for the recorded event and frankly, Carrick was embarrassed he had not thought of it himself but, admittedly, he'd been distracted by watching Finley take in the memories of some of her past lives. He was reliving them in his head right along with her.

Carrick wasn't surprised he didn't know about Lucien's past with Micah and Charmeine. They were created together as brothers with Maddox, but Lucien was more often than not off on his own, handling individualized dirty work for the gods. Sometimes, all three brothers fought wars together, but they spent more time apart than in a group.

Still, it was hard for Carrick to imagine Lucien in love. It was even harder to imagine him taking the time to write the *Libri Mysteria*, which was as much travel diary as a listing of powerful objects. Lucien didn't seem the cerebral type, but that was not to say he was dumb. On the contrary, he was extremely intelligent as all demi-gods were. He was just a doer rather than a ponderer, and Carrick couldn't imagine him being able to sit still long enough to write all those words.

Lucien was the isolationist, the one with the fewest words and the easiest to provoke to violence. This was in complete juxtaposition to Maddox's easygoing nature and penchant for mischief. Carrick fell right in between. He wasn't the oldest or the wisest, but he acted it and was often in the role of others looking to him for leadership when needed.

Despite their differences, Carrick had told both Maddox and Lucien about Eireann when he decided to marry her and make a life with a mortal. After he'd told Eireann the truth of who he was, he'd introduced Maddox and Lucien to her, as well as revealed that Zaid—who had been his companion for many years—was a daemon.

Lucien and Maddox then stopped Carrick from trying to destroy the world after Rune killed Eireann, and rode out each loss with him every time one of her new lives ended.

He supposed he loved his brothers for that alone, although there had to be a million other reasons as long as they'd lived.

Carrick just wished Lucien had shared his tale of woe because he could have been a source of comfort for his brother had he been allowed. He was sure Maddox would feel the same once he told him about Lucien being the book's author.

Continuing to stare at the ceiling, Carrick contemplated going back to bed. Finley was there, and she was warm, alive, and his for however long the fates would allow it. A small part of him believed she would make it through the prophecy, but only so Rune would have the satisfaction of ensuring her death thereafter. It would be like Rune to give Carrick a small victory only to take it away from him again.

But Carrick wasn't going to play that game with Rune anymore. He refused to hide from his fate by Ascending, and, as he promised Finley, he would wait for each reincarnation for them to be together again. There was something about Finley—this present incarnation of Eireann—that had shown Carrick that even small moments of happiness were worth the pain to be suffered. He could handle her deaths knowing he'd have her alive again at some point. The real suffering would be if Rune ever figured out that Carrick could be satisfied with this, since he might stop Finley's reincarnations. But Carrick didn't want to worry about the awfulness of that punishment should Rune bestow it.

He had enough on his plate.

Regardless, Carrick had resolved to do things differently in the future the next time his Eireann came back to him. He'd offer her the Hall of Histories when she was ready, not because it would push things along but because he saw how meaningful it was to Finley today to understand their relationship the way he did.

Hell, maybe he'd search for another way for them to make her an immortal. There were thousands of realms with different types of magics. Who was to say there wasn't something out there for them?

Maybe, just maybe, if they defeated Kymaris and came out with the Blood Stone intact, it could be enough to make her immortal. Finley might not want that, of course, but maybe the gods would grant favor on him and render him mortal. That would only work if Rune would lift his curse and let them have their short lives left together.

That would actually be a dream for him. His preference, really. To live a normal life where they would age and experience life together. They'd have children, a dog or two, and even a fucking white picket fence. That was a long shot, though. Rune was unlikely to give up his curse because he was a fucking asshole.

Carrick had his share of turmoil to think about regarding his future with Finley, but at least he had a future. Lucien had his crack at love, and it ended badly and permanently. It made his heart heavy for his brother.

But then, it lifted like mist rising from a mountain, and he knew that wasn't happenstance.

He sensed her before he saw her.

Dropping his gaze from the ceiling, he saw Finley—his Eireann—standing at the pocket doors, leaning casually against the jamb with her hands crossed over her chest. She wasn't there long because he had just felt her arrive.

Eireann.

She would always be that to him... the very first time he loved her. Carrick often caught himself almost calling Finley by that name because it was so synonymous with everything they stood for. It had always been hard to get used to her new name each time they met, but it was never hard to get used to her again.

She was the same, over and over again, in looks, spirit, personality, and love. She came back to him perfect every time.

Finley looked delectable in one of his t-shirts that came down to her mid-thigh. Her hair was sex-tousled, and there'd never be a time he didn't want to muss it up more.

"Penny for your thoughts," she said with a smile, pushing off the jamb and sauntering his way.

Carrick didn't move. Kept his casual recline on the couch, hands behind his head, enjoying watching her graceful and

seductive movements. But he did answer her. “Thinking about Lucien. If we don’t hear from him today, I’m going to have to go searching.”

“You mean *we* are going to go searching,” she corrected as her knees bumped the edge of the couch.

It didn’t stop her trajectory as she merely climbed up to straddle his thighs. She sat back, hands resting gently on her own thighs, and studied him.

“Yes,” he agreed. “*We* are going to go searching.”

Because they were partners in this.

Finley reached out and gently brushed along his forehead and over one eyebrow with a fingertip. “You’re worried.”

“It’s a constant these days,” Carrick replied with a wry smile.

“I’d like to be one of those girlfriends right now who say ‘honey, you look tired—you should come back to bed,’ but we both know you’re not tired and you don’t need the sleep. Lay your worries on me.”

Carrick stared at her for an overly long period, but mostly settled on her eyes.

They fucking did him in every time.

Pushing her hands away, Carrick covered the tops of her thighs with his palms. The softness of her skin wasn’t distracting but oddly comforting to him right now. She was offering her heart to him, and it was something he had not gotten enough of since they met.

He definitely wouldn’t worry her about his worries over their future. They’d face that together at some point.

But Finley was his partner in every way, and so yes, he was going to lay his worries on her. It was something they had always done in every past life she lived. She was his sounding board, always lending a quiet, nonjudgmental ear, and if she couldn’t give advice, she’d give all her support.

This was exactly what he needed.

“I’m worried about Lucien and how he’s going to take the news that we need the Blood Stone, and, more importantly, that we need him to lead us there to get it.”

“Because Charmaine is supposedly trapped inside?” Finley guessed.

Carrick merely nodded, giving her thighs a light squeeze.

“But wouldn’t he want to use this attempt to try to rescue her? I mean, maybe she can be freed.”

“Maybe,” Carrick agreed thoughtfully. “But we don’t know that. I’m wondering why he’s never made an effort before to rescue her. Micah is still a fae and can be killed by Lucien, so why didn’t he go back for her after he was cast out?”

“Maybe Micah threatened to kill Charmaine if he did,” Finley suggests. Then a light bulb goes off, totally apparent in her expression. “You’re worried Lucien is going to refuse to help us to protect Charmaine.”

“It’s crossed my mind,” Carrick woefully admitted.

Finley frowned slightly as she pondered. “But what kind of life does she have in that stone? Wouldn’t he be willing to risk it to save her?”

“What if she doesn’t need saving?” Carrick countered. “What if Micah eventually let her out, and she’s fine?”

“That’s a long shot,” Finley muttered, but then her expression softened as she stared down at Carrick. “You’re still worried about something else. More than just the mechanics of how this is going to work.”

She was astute, but more than that, she was pulling on their connection to come to that conclusion. Finley may not have real memories of their times together, and they’ve only known each other a handful of months in the now, but she knew him.

Knew him to his core.



He nodded, taking her hands in his to hold, then letting them fall back down to her thighs. “I’m not so much worried, but I do wonder if Charmeine is the reason Lucien is the way he is. I mean, he had it harder than Maddox and me because the gods used him in ways they didn’t use us, but they built us tough, you know? We have a conscience and feelings, but demi-gods know how to shield themselves.”

“So maybe it was him falling in love and losing her that made him such a loner and hard to get close to rather than the work he did for the gods?” Finley surmised.

Carrick’s smile was wry as he nodded. “And now I’m going to ask him to confront that again.”

“And yet, you have no choice,” Finley murmured sadly.

“No choice at all,” Carrick agreed. “You’re my priority. Helping you thwart this prophecy and keeping you alive. If I have to sacrifice my brother’s feelings, then so be it.”

Finley leaned forward, her expression filled with pain for his dilemma. “I’m sorry.”

She bent further, placing her mouth against his for a soft kiss.

“Don’t be,” Carrick assured her when she lifted. But she didn’t sit back—rather, she leveraged herself with her hands to his chest to stare down at him. “I’m not going to have regrets about it.”

“And if we’re able to get him to take us to Micah’s realm, and we’re able to get the Blood Stone, then what?”

“We protect it,” Carrick replied with a low growl emanating in his chest. Because Carrick had been considering something since his time with Rune. If Finley had to go up against Kymariss to stop the ritual, a good way to keep her safe would be to get the Blood Stone and prevent the ritual from happening.

“Then what?” Finley asks.

“Then we hunt Kymaris and destroy her.” Of course, Carrick wasn’t sure how that would occur. Did the prophecy mean Finley would have to do it, regardless if the ritual occurred? In order to be prepared, he’d have to assume so. Her fate might just depend on whether she could beat Kymaris in a one-on-one battle, and while Finley had come a long way in her physical training, she knew nothing about her powers or how to use them. She was at a horrible disadvantage right now.

Carrick needed a way to push Finley to access her powers.

Finley didn’t respond. He could tell by her expression she was on board with that plan, but he could tell something else was worrying her.

“Now lay your worries on me,” Carrick demanded, bringing a hand up to brush her hair back over her shoulder.

“I have got to tap into my powers,” she huffed, pulling back and sitting on her haunches again. “It’s ridiculous I’ve been gifted angelic light or whatever the hell it is, and I can’t do much more than put a bubble over myself. Which is great for rainy days here in Seattle, but I already have an umbrella.”

“I’ve got an idea on that,” Carrick replied, and Finley blinked in surprise.

“Like what?” she asked with excitement.

“Not going to share until I’m sure about it.” It was an answer she didn’t like, but she didn’t stay focused on it long as a light started gleaming in her eyes. It made him uneasy.

“I’d like to try to contact Zora again.” Carrick opened his mouth to argue, but, to his surprise, Finley clapped her hand over it. She chastised him with a shake of her head. “If in the worst-case scenario, Kymaris gets the Blood Stone and things go down on the October new moon, then we have to start acting now to figure a plan to get Zora out. We can’t do that until I can build some trust with her and she can hopefully provide us information to help us.”

Carrick wasn’t totally opposed to this because time was indeed running out. But he felt he needed to point out

something once again. “What if she’s in league with Kymaris? What if she’s your enemy?”

“She’s not,” Finley asserts with a confident lift of her chin.

“You don’t know that.”

“Fine,” she huffed with a scowl marring that beautiful face. “But we’re never going to know until we at least try to make contact. I need to have a conversation with her so I can start judging her loyalties. We’re in the dark where she’s concerned, and we need to know what we’re dealing with.”

She made an excellent point. They did need more information about Zora, and, as long as Finley didn’t give important information away, the risk was minimal.

Unless Zora had the type of power to kill Finley, but she hadn’t the last time a connection was made.

She had warned her off with a powerful zap of electrical current, though.

Carrick stared up at Finley, the woman he would love throughout eternity, and struggled against his need to protect her at all costs. But he also knew Finley—from her very first incarnation as Eireann—was a woman who wouldn’t take a backseat. It would stifle her if he made her do that. It would crush her.

“Okay,” he promised, taking a moment to enjoy her bright smile. “Let’s give it a go with Zora, but I want to be here.”

“Of course,” she assured.

“And,” he drawled, wanting to put one more stipulation into place. “I want to try this idea I have about tapping your powers first. I’ll need a day or so to arrange that if it can be. But I want you to have some control over the light inside you before you contact Zora.”

Finley wasn’t as happy about that, but she reluctantly agreed.

“Want to go back to bed?” Carrick asked. He didn’t need the sleep, but Finley did. He really had to stop keeping her up through all hours of the night. Perhaps he could slake his thirst for her with quickies during the day.

He was lost in that thought when he realized Finley’s hands had gone to the waistband of his pajama pants. They were merely held over his narrow hips with elastic and a drawstring.

Her fingers worked at loosening the string, and he held his breath as he watched. He didn’t try to quell the thickening of his cock just at that simple maneuver.

When she pulled the strings, his gaze moved up to hers. Her eyes were burning, yes... definitely with passion, so he knew he was in for something special, but also with an emotion he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

She brought him clarity. “I thought when we went to the Hall of Histories, the memories would change something in me. Make me feel deeper for you.”

Finley paused, and Carrick waited to see where she was going.

“But,” she continued. “The most it did was make me understand *you* better. I was able to see the depth of your feelings and commitment to me. It didn’t do anything to bolster what I felt for you.”

Carrick didn’t like that. It sounded ominous.

It sounded like she was pulling away.

He never expected her to have the same depth of feelings for him that he had for her. That would just be impossible, but he thought the Hall of Histories would surely have bonded them tighter.

“And what I realized,” Finley continued, making Carrick focus on her more clearly. For a moment, anyway, as her fingertips pushed down into the elastic just a few inches, causing his breath to catch. “Is that I didn’t need those

memories to strengthen my feelings. They were interesting, I loved seeing our past lives together, and it warmed my heart to see how much you loved me in all those times.”

Carrick’s heart started beating faster, not just because her fingers were inching inside his pants, but because her words were leading to something big.

“What I truly understood as we walked out of the Hall of Histories was that I had already recognized you long before you showed me those memories.”

The words made his chest constrict, then he blew out a long breath as her hand disappeared into his pajama bottoms and took his shaft in hand. It swelled more as she gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I recognized what you were to me long before,” she reiterated, giving his cock a way-too-soft stroke. “In my gut is where I held you. That instinctual place I’ve always trusted.”

Her words were killing him. Her hand was too, and he couldn’t help but thrust against the friction of her palm. When he did, her eyes started burning hotter and she gripped him harder.

“Every time we’re apart,” Finley murmured, giving him what he wanted by stroking his cock. “And every time you walk into a room after being apart, it’s my soul that recognizes you. It’s like ‘Hey you... there you are. I’ve missed you’.”

“Christ,” Carrick muttered, thrusting into her hand again. Her words were speaking directly to his dick as well as his heart. But, then again, sex with Eireann—Finley and all the others—had never been just sex. Not once.

For him, the heart had always been deeply entwined with the feelings of pleasure.

And here she was now, saying her soul was deeply invested.

It was more than Carrick could have wished for.

Finley gave a sly smile before her free hand tugged at the waistband of his pajamas. Carrick had no problem lifting his hips to accommodate. Soon, she had the entire length of him freed.

She only needed to scoot back on his legs to give her the room necessary for her to bend over his body. And when she took him in her mouth, the incredible feel of her tongue against his burning shaft and the pressure of her sucking made him believe in all possibilities.

He let her move on him, watching with eyes lasered on the top of her head as she bobbed, took him deep, and continued to pump him at the base while she sucked on the tip like a lollipop.

Fuck, she was good at that, a truly modern-day woman. Oral sex in days long ago had to be nurtured, experimented with, and taught.

Finley loved it as much as he did, and she never left him wanting.

Except right now, he needed more.

Her words still banging around inside his head—that her soul was committed to him by means of fate and destiny, just from some memories she looked at.

Carrick's hands shot out, hooked under Finley's armpits, and dragged her off him. She protested with a low growl in her throat that was cute, but unpersuasive.

Leaving his magic alone, he flipped their bodies with sheer determination and dexterity so she was on her back on the couch and he was over her.

He saw the moment of shock on her face for but a fraction of a second before he caught her mouth in a blistering kiss that was meant to seduce her further but also caused a bolt of lust to sizzle down his spine.

Aching and heavy with need, Carrick merely reached between their bodies, pulled the crotch of her panties hard to

the side with some nominal ripping sounds, and drove hard into her. Finley was ready—wet and tight—and her entire being collapsed around him. Her moan went straight into his mouth, mingled with his own.

The connection was deep, not unlike all the other times they'd been together—in this life and the past—but the pleasure he felt at being inside her body after she told him her soul recognized him even without her memories was almost more than he could bear.

He was a demi-god, for fuck's sake.

He felt like a sixteen-year-old boy at this moment.

Stilling the kiss, Carrick took a moment to rest his forehead against Finley's. A quiet moment to get his raging lust under control and to ensure he didn't spill before Finley achieved her pleasure. That was always paramount with him.

“Carrick,” she murmured, slipping her fingers into the hair at the back of his head. “If you don't fuck me, I'm going to go crazy.”

And... that was all it took.

His blood fired hotter than the pits of hell, and his cock seemed to swell even bigger inside of her. She felt it... gasped.

It was all he needed. Carrick drove into her over and over again while Finley wrapped her legs around his waist and held on for the ride. Planting a hand on a cushion and another under her ass, he lifted her hips so he could drive even deeper.

Finley moaned and cursed and pleaded with him to give her more, and he did.

Over and over again until she screamed out his name with her release and he exploded inside of her with such overwhelming force that he went dizzy for a second.

“Oh my God,” Finley moaned, still rocking her hips against his while he stroked shallowly inside of her. “What the hell was that?”

Yeah... that was different.

The most amazing experience with his Eireann he'd ever had.

Dropping her body down to the couch, he brought his weight down on her, keeping himself planted deep. Pressing his lips to hers, he whispered into her mouth. "That was two souls dancing."

Finley giggled. "You're such a romantic."

Carrick's voice turned rough. "I'm a realist, and you know it. But that's exactly what it was."



## CHAPTER 9

### *Finley*

AFTER PULLING MY hair into a high ponytail—which basically makes me look like I have a big horse’s tail attached to the back of my head because of how much hair I have—I give myself a once over in the mirror.

Today’s a big day.

Carrick is off doing something to help me tap into my light powers.

Lucien finally responded. He was busy doing something important in Marrakesh, but he’ll be here tonight. He hadn’t elaborated, and Carrick hadn’t asked because it didn’t matter. As long as he gets here so we could discuss the Blood Stone with him.

But, more importantly, today is a big day because I’m in charge of bringing Boral on board as a full-fledged member of the prophecy fight squad.

I shouldn’t have spent so much time worrying over what to wear to this meeting. My clothes aren’t going to make an impression on Boral one way or the other, yet I don’t want to come across as weak.

Which meant nothing too feminine.

I didn’t want to seem immature—which meant no skinny jeans and Chucks.

Ultimately, I just went with one of my workout ensembles of black leggings, a long-sleeved gray t-shirt, and a zip hoodie over it. It’s my most comfortable clothing, but it’s also what I wear the most now because if I’m not working out in preparation for a fight, I’m waiting for an actual battle.

It's simply who I am at my core.

Well, that's not quite true. That's my prophecy self at my core, but the woman Finley Porter has become is something distinctly different.

In the wee hours of this morning, I was most comfortable in a t-shirt, straddling Carrick's legs as we talked, and while comfort isn't the exact word I'd use to describe how it became after, I was most definitely right at home flat on my back with Carrick inside of me.

Carrick has become my home, and I don't question the beauty of it anymore. I merely accept and enjoy the time we have together.

I wink at myself in the mirror, pointing a finger with a smarmy grin. "You got this, Finley. Let's go bring Boral onto the team."

I'm confident as I walk into the kitchen where Boral, Zaid, and Maddox wait for me. While Carrick left me in charge of this—having ultimate trust in me to do what's right for our cause—he didn't trust Boral and so Maddox is here as my guardian.

Boral may not be able to reveal any secrets he learns, but he's still evil and dangerous, and Carrick would never let me be alone with him.

All three turn their heads my way when I walk into the kitchen. It's become a meeting place, usually where we all take our meals together rather than the formal dining room table.

"Would you like some coffee?" Zaid asks, and I take a moment to revel in the change in his tone with me. Those early days when he could barely stand to be in the same room to now as a friend.

"Actually, no," I say, moving through the kitchen toward the living area. I issue a simple command. "Follow me, Boral."

I hear stools scraping on the tile floor, then the fall of heavy steps as all three follow behind. I move through the living area, past the grand piano, and into Carrick's office. If Maddox and Zaid are worried about me letting Boral this far into Carrick's home, they say nothing.

But then again, I doubt they would. They know this is my show, and my decision on what to reveal.

"Nice," Boral murmurs as he surveys the decor and art pieces on the illuminated built-ins.

I ignore him and move to the end of the built-ins, where I reach under the decorative molding to depress the button that reveals the hidden passageway.

I turn toward Boral, who looks astonished as the door slides open, and say with a sly grin. "First secret."

"I'm intrigued," he admits and then follows me down the spiral staircase into the library, Maddox and Zaid not about to be left behind.

Boral whistles low when he steps off the last step, taking in the space's enormity, which encompasses the entire floor below Carrick's condo. His gaze shrewdly takes in the rows upon rows of bookshelves, housing thousands of books. Boral is an immortal Dark Fae. He's smart enough to know there are some valuable items housed here.

"Let's sit," I suggest, sweeping my arm toward the large conference table. It's covered with books and pads of paper filled with notes, mostly by our two best researchers—Rainey and Myles. They're both at work today, or else they'd be here. Myles still does his regular old IT job, but Rainey is now in Carrick's employ, overseeing One Bean's rebuilding, and, frankly, I've never seen her happier.

I know when it's all said and done, I'm either going to die in the prophecy, or I'm going to die by Rune's curse, but it is incredibly settling to me to know that Rainey—and by association, Myles—will stay in Carrick's life by virtue of working with him. They'll need each other.

I take a breath. I know what I'm going to do because I'd been thinking about it almost non-stop since Carrick left to do whatever he's doing. He's leaving it completely up to me to tell Boral what I feel is necessary. It's my choice if I reveal Zora's existence or my light powers.

What I wouldn't have given to have Carrick to bounce my thoughts off, but I also understand by him leaving, he's forcing me to deal with it. Again, it goes back to the trust he has in me, so I need to have that same trust in myself.

Boral is the first to sit, and I intentionally take the seat opposite him rather than the head chair at the end of the table. I don't want to infer I'm in charge but rather that this is a team. Plus, I want to be able to look him in the eye. Maddox sits next to Boral, Zaid next to me.

Leaning forward, I push some books away and clasp my hands before settling them on the tabletop. Boral is cocked back casually in his chair.

"There's a prophecy of doom enacted by the gods," I begin, and Boral's eyebrows pop up. "You know some of it. You know Kymaris is here with the intent to do a ritual to bring the veil down that separates the Underworld from the Earth Realm. And you know she's looking for something called the Blood Stone."

Boral merely nods, accepting my succinct summary of the general situation.

"What you don't know," I continue in a matter-of-fact tone, "is I'm the one fated by the gods to stop it."

That makes an impact and he straightens in his seat, leaning forward to match my pose with hands clasped on the table. "An ordinary human? How interesting..."

"I'm anything but ordinary," I reply blandly. "The night I was born, a daemon came into our house and stole my identical twin, who had been born just six minutes before me. A changeling was left in her place. My sister, whose name is Zora, was brought to the Underworld, where she was raised

and used as a vessel to store dark magic in. That was used to propel Kymaris into our world and grant her incredibly strong powers.”

“And your sister is still there,” Boral concludes. “That’s why you were asking about the Underworld when we first met.”

“Yes, and I intend to rescue her.”

“I’ll help in any way I can,” Boral says, and Zaid makes a scoffing sound from beside me. He’ll never trust a single sentiment his father utters.

Boral’s eyes cut to his son, but make no condemnation for the lack of respect. His gaze comes back to me. “Does Kymaris know you have an identical twin?”

Maddox stiffens at this question, and I could see why that would be suspect. It would be the most important information Kymaris could want right now outside of the Blood Stone’s location.

But I don’t take it that way.

The one thing I’ve been able to discern about Boral is that he’s whip-smart. He’s simply making a leap where Zora is concerned.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so. Kymaris would have been in stasis the entire time Zora was in the Underworld with her. The minute the changeling ritual was enacted, Kymaris immediately left her static form and projected into the changeling body, which was the woman who was my sister in this Earth realm for twenty-eight years. Her name was Fallon.”

Boral doesn’t offer condolences, and I’m not offended.

“I know a guy,” Boral drawls, drumming his fingers on the table. “His name is Ozigeor, and he’s an expert on rituals. He might have some—”

I hold my hand up. “Been there. Done that. Carrick and I talked to him about the changeling ritual.”

“But he tweaked the *confractus muros* ritual for Kymaris,” Boral offers solicitously, showing he’s already a team member.

I nod. “Yes, we know. Carrick tried to get the ritual from him, but Kymaris killed Ozigeor before he could say anything.”

Boral blinks in surprise. He clearly knew from his contact, Kaesar, about the ritual and Ozigeor’s part in helping Kymaris with it, but he clearly didn’t know the immortal sorcerer was dead.

“Does Kaesar know anything about how the ritual will occur? Anything that can help us figure out how to stop it?”

“Not that he’s said.” Boral looks to Zaid, then back to me. “But I’ll keep my ears opened.”

“Anything you can glean about the ritual will be super important,” I reiterate.

“Going back to your sister,” Boral says, his gaze shrewd upon me. “I understand why Carrick wanted to bind me with my heart. You having an identical twin in the Underworld who held magic, which she then shared with Kymaris, is important information. It could blindside Kymaris if used wisely. I would bet your sister is an important key in this prophecy.”

And that right there has made this all worth it. Boral is thinking the way I am. “I think so, too, which is why I want to rescue her.”

“In due time,” Zaid pipes up, his gentle but chastising tone leveled at me. “It’s not the priority now. We need the Blood Stone.”

I shift toward Zaid, giving him a nod of acknowledgment before turning back to Boral. “The Blood Stone,” I say dramatically. “We know where it is.”

It’s utterly silent as I let that news sink in, carefully studying Boral for even the tiniest reaction. He’s clearly surprised, but I don’t see any opportunistic gleam in his eyes.

“Are you going to tell me where?” he asks blandly.

“I trust in the binding Carrick put on you.” I’m the one who now leans back casually in my chair, letting my forearms settle on the armrests. “And I think you love your life too much to give it up for Kymaris. So yes, I’m going to tell you about the Blood Stone.”

From the corner of my eye, I can see Zaid’s head drop. I don’t know if he’s disappointed in me or is just exhausted from his father becoming involved, but I can’t spare him the sympathy just now. Later, I’ll have a glass of wine with him and we can talk.

I don’t spare any details as I recount the story of Charmaine and Micah in their utopian realm and how Charmaine betrayed Micah by falling in love with another. I explained how Micah’s rage and grief destroyed everything living and how the Blood Stone was created and attached to the chalice.

“If you don’t mind telling me, how did you find the Blood Stone?” Boral asks.

“Carrick’s brother, Lucien, was the one Charmaine fell in love with,” I reply simply, and Boral does a double-take. “Lucien doesn’t know we know that, though. He’s coming in tonight, and Carrick will talk to him. We want Lucien to take us there to steal the Blood Stone from Micah.”

“And once you get the stone?” Boral prompts, wanting to know our further plans.

It’s simple really. “We protect it. I’ll stack three demi-gods up against Kymaris any day. Then we’re going to keep it from her and hopefully destroy her. We want to prevent the prophecy from fulfilling, and this is the easiest way right now. Now, do you have any questions for me?”

“Yeah,” Boral replies without hesitation. “I want to know why you haven’t told me all your secrets.”

I jerk in astonishment because I have indeed held back a piece of information. Not because I’m worried about him telling Kymaris, but because I’m a bit embarrassed.

But he's called me out on it, and I want to be transparent. I downplay it a bit, though. "There was an angel at my birth who instilled powers in me that I'm currently trying to figure out how to use."

Stroking his chin, Boral nods. "You definitely have a lot of information Kymaris would reward greatly for. Your twin, your powers, and the location of the Blood Stone."

His tone is taunting, as if he's weighing his options. Zaid growls low beside me, and I reach out to lay a reassuring hand on his arm.

Just wait.

"Your secrets are obviously safe with me," Boral finally says. "But you didn't need the binding. Like I said, I have no desire to be under Kymaris' rule. I enjoy this world's freedoms and, frankly... her demons are just nasty little fuckers that I don't want swarming all over like rodents. What do you want me to do for you?"

"Hang out with Kaesar as much as you can. Give us as much information about what's happening in Kymaris' camp as possible. If they find the twelfth fallen or get a lead on the Blood Stone, let us know. If it's going to be a race to get it, we want a head start. And if you're able to find out any more about how the ritual will work, just on the off chance she gets her hand on the stone, we need to be ready to fight in a different way."

"I can do that." Boral cuts his gaze to his son. "Anything *you*, in particular, want me to do?"

I know if Zaid answered truthfully, he'd tell his father he wishes he was dead, but he's not going to antagonize our best chance at getting the inside scoop on Kymaris.

Zaid asks a question of his own, however. "How badly does Kymaris want Finley right now?"

"And what does Kymaris know about Finley?" Maddox adds.



I can't help but smile. My two protectors.

My friends.

Boral shrugs carelessly before giving me a sly smile. "As extraordinary of a human as you are, your name actually doesn't come up much. My feeling is she's too busy looking for the last fallen Dark Fae and the Blood Stone, but I do know you're on her radar merely because you have a demi-god at your side."

That makes me feel slightly better. Boral has confirmed my take on things, that I was sort of small potatoes for her to worry about just now. But I know that will probably change at some point.

We spend another half hour giving Boral details he thinks to ask for since my overview was pretty generic. Zaid remains typically silent, leaving it up to Maddox and me to relay information.

I'm relieved Boral knows everything, and while I'll admit it to no one unless Carrick presses me, since I won't lie to him, I am looking forward to picking Boral's brain about the Underworld. He's going to be a huge part of helping me formulate a plan to get Zora out.

## CHAPTER 10

### *Finley*

THE MINUTE BORAL leaves Carrick's condo, Maddox asks, "Feel like blowing off some steam?"

I had thought he meant a workout in the gym, and I was game for that. So I say, "Sure."

But rather than heading toward the gym, Maddox pivots in the opposite direction and leads me to the southwest side of the condo. It's an area I don't go to a lot as it holds a guest suite identical to mine and another guest bedroom.

Maddox opens a door I had thought was a utility closet, and I gasp when I realize it's a man-cave.

Dark paneled walls and gleaming hardwood floors, but the decor is distinctly different than the cool blues, light creams, and silvery grays throughout the rest of the condo. Persian rugs in crimson, navy, and beige are scattered under various pieces of furniture. There's a pool table, a bar to seat eight, a poker table, and even a dartboard. One wall boasts a flat-screen TV so large I can't even begin to fathom how big it is, and it's sectioned off with a massive U-shaped couch in cocoa brown, distressed leather with ornate carved clawed feet.

It was the antithesis of the rest of the condo, and not just because it's designed to serve men and their desires for liquor, football, and cigars. It's just overly staid in my opinion.

"Holy shit," I murmur as I follow Maddox in. "I had no clue this was even here."

He plops down in the middle of the couch, then reaches for a remote control. "I brought over my PS4. I thought you and I could practice our battle skills in a more chilled sort of way."

I snort as I take in the handheld gaming controls, the only reason that I recognize them is that Myles is a big gamer. He waves one at me provocatively and then nods to the cushion beside him.

“Come on, Finley,” he urges with a gleam in his eye. “Take a load off for a while and come spend just half an hour with me blowing shit up.”

Playing video games just isn’t my thing, but it’s better than sitting around and letting my mind become overwhelmed with planning, contingencies, and what-ifs. It would actually do me good just to take a brain break.

“Okay,” I reply almost giddily, moving to the couch and hopping the back of it to land on the cushion beside Maddox. He hands me a controller and says, “We’ll play *Final Fantasy VII*. You’ll love it.”

I wait as he boots up the game, studying the controller. I assume he’ll give me a lesson on what the buttons do.

“Does Carrick even come in here?” I ask as I kick my tennis shoes off and cross my legs.

“He used to PF,” Maddox says as the game starts to load.

“PF?”

“Pre-Finley.” He grins at me, then takes the controller I’m holding out of my hand. “But only to have a drink, conduct business, or maybe play some poker with friends.”

“But Carrick doesn’t have friends,” I point out. “And why hasn’t he come in here since I came into his life?”

“You are correct... Carrick doesn’t have friends. Maybe I should have said business acquaintances. And I imagine he doesn’t use this room very much these days as he hasn’t had much downtime since you came into his life wreaking havoc.”

I know he’s teasing, so I bump my shoulder against his good naturedly. “Well, maybe I can convince him to play a few games of pool. I’m really good, and I’m not above hustling him.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not a sucker then,” Carrick’s voice sounds from behind us. Maddox and I both twist to look at the door to find Carrick standing there casually, one arm raised and his hand resting against the jamb slightly above his head. The smile on his face is amused.

“You’re back,” I exclaim, pushing up from the couch. I was looking forward to unwinding a little with Maddox, but if it’s a choice between time with him or Carrick, I’m going to choose Carrick every time.

It seems just so natural, despite the fact I know Maddox is watching, to walk right up to Carrick and kiss him.

Or perhaps it’s him who is kissing me.

Regardless, my lips are happy for that brief connection, and I take stock of the fact I’m infinitely happier at this moment than I was a mere thirty seconds ago hanging out with Maddox, and I was pretty damn happy then.

There’s no getting around it.

Carrick just does it for me in all ways.

Taking my hand, Carrick shoots a quick glance over my head at Maddox before bringing his eyes back to me. “I brought someone I believe can help you to access your powers.”

There’s a distinct glimmer of discomfort in Carrick’s expression and I turn back to Maddox, who stands from the couch to face us.

He bears the same expression, which tells me he knew all along what Carrick had planned and it’s something I’m not going to like.

“Who did you bring?” I ask hesitantly, but there’s a tinge of warning in my voice that Carrick will get full blast if I don’t like his idea of “help”.

“He brought me,” a sultry voice says from behind Carrick, but his body is so tall and wide that I can’t see the woman.

But I recognize her voice. My teeth grind down hard as her hand creeps over his shoulder and she peeks around his arm, flashing me a victorious smile.

*Deandra.*

My eyes lift to Carrick, who stares at me guardedly, then back to Deandra, who has linked her arm through my man's and is actually leaning into him. Carrick makes no effort to distance himself, but, in fairness, they're both filling the doorway so there's no room to step to the side.

I give my regard to Carrick. In as pleasant a voice as I can manage, which still sounds incredibly biting, I ask, "Do you mind if we speak privately?"

Carrick nods and Deandra takes the hint, spying Maddox behind me.

"Mad Maddox," she calls out with glee, pushing roughly past me so I stumble to the side as she runs to Carrick's brother.

I watch over my shoulder as she leaps into his arms, wraps her legs around his waist, and plants a hard kiss on his mouth.

Oh my God.

Has she slept with Maddox, too?

Maddox merely laughs, slaps her on the ass, and lifts her under her arms to set her back down on the floor. I notice that Deandra is actually dressed in modern Earth realm clothing—jeans, an off-the-shoulder blouse, and wedge-heeled boots.

Unfortunately, the fact she's dressed for the Earth realm probably means she's here to stay.

Or, at least, I'm sure that's what Carrick is thinking, but I intend to change that assumption.

I move past him into the hallway and I can feel his presence behind me despite his steps being whisper quiet. I head to his room, which is closer than his office, so we can have privacy.

When he follows me in and shuts the door, I force myself to turn slowly to face him—straining to keep my emotions under control.

Taking in a breath, I let it out slowly. I try for a pleasant smile. “Deandra. Really?”

Carrick doesn’t move to me, which I thought he would. To either distract or comfort. He holds his place by the door, stone faced. “I think she’s the best option to help you learn your powers. She’s one of the strongest Light Fae in the world, and she has extreme mastery over magic.”

My control slips as I blurt out. “But she hates me and I hate her.”

“Exactly,” Carrick replies with a nod. “And that’s what will make her your best option.”

Chin jerking inward, I frown at the man that I love with all my heart. Is he off his rocker?

“You’ve had some success in using your powers,” Carrick points out, a fact I know as it frustrates me to no end that I know I’ve got the ability. “And you’ve been under great duress each time you were able to utilize them. Specifically breaking the incubus compulsion over you and Adira in the bar, and then again at your house. That is some serious use of magic right there. And I’d even dare say in Faere when you confronted Deandra, you were able to tap your powers.”

“But those were Zora’s powers,” I point out.

Carrick lifts an eyebrow. “Maybe so... but it’s quite possible you pulled on them yourself from a great distance, separated by a veil.”

“What about when the wraith was attacking me?” I argue, grasping at anything for him to send Deandra away. “I couldn’t do anything but a bubble shield.”

“But it *was* a use of your magic,” he counters. “It may not have been what you wanted, but you pulled on it. You need

someone that can provoke you into reaching deep and then using it properly.”

“You can do that,” I all but whine to him.

He shakes his head, looking more determined than ever to go through with this. “No, I can’t. I don’t think anyone can like Deandra, and we are on limited time, Finley. I need you to trust me on this.”

I blow out a frustrated breath, lifting one curly lock that had fallen over my forehead. I look around his room—a place that has become a sanctuary to me as it is when it’s just Carrick and me and our love connecting us. It doesn’t soothe me at all.

“Carrick... I honestly don’t think I can handle her being here, flirting with you. Taunting me with innuendos.”

His frown face is deep and he moves into me, hands to my shoulders. “Why would you even worry about those things? How can you when you know how deep our connection goes? It lasts throughout infinity, Finley. What you and I have, someone as shallow as Deandra would never understand. You’re strong enough to know all she can give you is meaningless words.”

God, everything he says is so rational and true.

And yet, I’m still insanely jealous of that witch.

“But,” Carrick says softly, bringing his hand to cup the side of my jaw. “I don’t think Deandra will be too hard to take. We’ve made a deal.”

“What sort of deal?” I ask skeptically.

“Well, first... she’s agreed to a binding like her mother, so she knows everything. While it may seem Deandra is as flighty and vain as her mother, she actually has a shrewd, calculating side. Her tongue wasn’t enough, so I asked for her heart to be bound to our secrets as well.”

My eyes bug out. “And she agreed to that?”

Carrick nods. "I have something she wants very much, and the offer I made was too tempting."

"Which is?" I prod.

"She wants freedom from Faere. She hates it there, and she wants to experience the adventures the Earth realm has to offer. But she's stuck there. Faere is operated strictly by magic. She has no possessions that would help her to pass here, and she has no money to set herself up in the lifestyle she would want."

I'm incredulous. "You offered her money?"

"A lot of it." His smile is sly. "And part of the deal for her to get the money is to treat you with respect while she's here. I also had a long talk with her about what you mean to me, so I don't think you're going to get the full-blown vapid Deandra."

I snort in disbelief. No one can change their stripes that much. "You told her about our past lives together?"

"I told her every bit of it. Once I had her heart in the binding, I didn't hesitate. I figured the more she understood that nothing will ever come between us, the less she'd antagonize you."

I chew on my lower lip as I ponder this, grudgingly admitting, "That doesn't sound so awful."

"Well," Carrick drawls in a hedging sort of way. His hands come to cup both sides of my face. "She still hates you because you're a human. And she's jealous of you because you're important to me. She's still going to piss you off, but again... that's what I think you need to tap into those powers. You need to be provoked, you need repetitive practice, and no one can piss you off consistently like Deandra can."

Before I can respond, he kisses me, and it's one of those toe-curling ones that make my head go foggy and my wits jumbled. By the time his mouth lifts from mine, he knows there's nothing left to argue.



Still, he placates me. “Please... give it a try. You have nothing to lose but some frustration and everything to gain if this works.”

I give him a mock glare, but then break into an accepting smile. Rising to my tiptoes, I give him a quick brush of my lips. “Fine. I’ll give it a shot. But out of curiosity, why didn’t you ask Pyke to do this? He’d have the same skill level with magic, and he’s at least a friend of yours. Don’t you trust him?”

“I trust him as much as I trust anyone in the royal family, and, yes, his skill level would be sufficient. But he wouldn’t take it seriously, and he wouldn’t provoke you the way Deandra will. Also, he’d flirt with you the entire time, so then I’d have to kill him.”

There’s no helping the laugh that escapes me, and I know without a doubt Carrick will be a million times more proprietary with someone like Pyke, who overtly likes to push his buttons by flirting with me. It would probably cost him his life.

“Deandra is bound and she knows everything, even about me being reincarnated. Nimeyah is bound, but she doesn’t know that piece of information. Can they discuss the mutual things they both know?”

Carrick shakes his head. “No, they are both forbidden from speaking of any of this with each other unless I give specific permission. Not that it would ever be needed. Nimeyah would like to pretend none of this is happening, and Deandra wants out of Faere for good.”

“And you’re not offering the same information in exchange for a binding to Pyke right now?”

“Not unless we need him in some specific role, but, right now, we don’t.”

Leaning in, Carrick presses his lips on my forehead. It’s not in a way that makes me feel like a child, but rather one of reverence.

Appreciation I'm doing this.

As he takes my hand, we head for his bedroom door, but then he stops, turning to face me. After a short squeeze to my hand, he says, "One other thing... Deandra is going to stay here in a guest room while she trains you."

He lays that on me without an ounce of apology in his voice, and I can tell he expects I won't make a big deal about it. Because if I believe in everything he's just said—if I believe in him—it shouldn't matter that the woman he slept with eons ago is under this roof.

I can give him that, but, jealousy aside, I feel the obligation to remind him, "You want an extremely powerful Light Fae who hates not only humans—but also really hates me—to be within close enough proximity that she could slit my throat in my sleep?"

Carrick cocks an eyebrow. "Well, seeing as how you sleep with me, I seriously doubt it's going to happen while you sleep."

I can't help but snort at his flippancy, but I know Carrick is never going to let Deandra hurt me. I wouldn't have put it past him to add my protection and safety to the binding.

"Fine if she stays," I mutter, exaggerating my distaste just a little. Carrick's right. Deandra shouldn't bother me one little bit.

\* \* \*

*I'M GOING TO kill the bitch. Sneak into her room and drive an iron spike into her heart.*

Of course, that's wishful thinking. What a mess that would make for Carrick—having to explain to the royal family that I killed their princess—but she is driving me to the brink of insanity.

In the last hour that Deandra has been trying to "teach" me how to use magic, a good fifty minutes has been spent with us lobbing insults at each other and making veiled threats.

Frankly put... I can't stand the woman.

Unfortunately, Carrick was right because the more she needles me, the more pissed off I become, and the more my abilities seem to open up. The only thing I can think of is if I am not under great emotion or stress, I'm actually a little too untrusting of my powers and have some kind of block going on.

But if I get scared or pissed off, I don't have time to doubt myself, so I'm able to reach more easily into myself.

I know this because the first taunt she sent my way caused something to happen. After Carrick had led me back to the man-cave where Maddox was teaching Deandra how to play pool, he set some ground rules and reiterated some warnings to Deandra. She merely smacked on some bubble gum with a sly grin, refusing to acknowledge what he had said.

It didn't matter. She was harmless.

I suggested we get started right away because if Carrick was right and she could help me get in touch with my own magic, then the sooner we started, the sooner she could leave. We had a few hours until Lucien arrived, so what better time? I took her to the gym, having to stop repeatedly as she oohed and aahed over Carrick's condo, exclaiming he was going to set her up in one just like this.

I highly doubted it, but I did know he'd throw a lot of money her way to get what he wanted.

She threw the first taunt at me no sooner than we had crossed the gym's threshold.

"Frankly, I don't see what Carrick finds to be appealing about you. I know I'm much better in bed with him than you could ever be."

I wanted to ignore the barb, but I couldn't. A warm glow flared in my chest, and, yes, part was anger, but part was something that felt strangely liberating. As if I had nothing to lose by tapping into my powers.

I whirled around on Deandra, feeling something hum along my skin, and she blinked at me with wide eyes. “Whoa.”

“Whoa what?” I demanded.

“Your eyes,” she murmured, walking up to me and tipping her head left and then right as if she were studying a bug in fascination. “They’re glowing.”

The minute she said that, the warmth faded, the hum disappeared, and I’m sure my eyes stopped glowing as Deandra looked positively disappointed in me.

It went downhill from there.

“Come on, human,” Deandra commands, looking down upon me as I lay flat on my back on the gym floor.

*Yeah... going to sneak into her room tonight and kill her.*

We’d been working on strengthening my defensive powers since those come a little more naturally. This consisted of Deandra lobbing balls of stinging magic at me while I tried to deflect them.

She did it over and over again, usually with insults and a constant barrage of badgering. More often than not, I could repel what she threw at me.

But every once in a while, she distracts me.

Like now as she forms a fiery blue ball in the palm of her hand, glances down at it fondly, and then at me with a malicious sneer. “Once you die, Carrick will be back in my bed.”

That hits me deep because it could be true. No telling how long it would take for me to come back, and do I really expect him to remain celibate?

Actually... I think I do expect him to remain celibate. That’s a huge conversation we’re going to have to have.

I’m distracted with thoughts of Carrick’s sex life after I die and her blue ball of energy smacks me in the stomach, causing me to stumble back before falling on my ass.

I just lay all the way down on the floor to stare at the ceiling, slightly humiliated to have let her get to me.

“Get up,” she demands. “Your concentration is shoddy.”

“You’re being a bitch,” I snap as I roll over and push myself up. “It’s disconcerting.”

Deandra moves so fast I don’t see anything but a blur, then she’s right in my face—glaring at me fiercely. “Do you think Kymaris is going to be polite to you? Do you think any of her Dark Fae will? They’re going to tear you to pieces unless you can learn to drown out the things that make you weak and have faith in your strengths.”

That’s actually not a bad pep talk, and it touches me in some weird way. But I can’t give her too much credence so I say, “Aww... sounds as if you care about me, D.”

Grimacing, she turns away, walking about ten paces from me. She turns back around, another blue ball of fire in her hand. Her eyes are lasered onto me. “No insults this time. You should have no fear because you know I can’t really hurt you. Just plain old Finley Porter, lowly human with some measly powers.”

“Not measly,” I counter. “They’re angelic.”

“Prove it,” she challenges me.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do,” I snap.

“No, you haven’t been trying,” she snarls back. “You let emotion rule your abilities. You’re hit or miss, and that will get you killed.”

“Well,” I drawl with condescension. “If you have any good suggestions, I’m all ears. But so far, all you’ve been good at is humiliating yourself into thinking that you could ever catch Carrick’s eye.”

I expect her to throw the blue fireball. I expect her eyes to fill with rage. I expect to get blasted with some painful Light Fae magic.

Instead, my insult about Carrick doesn't cause a reaction at all, and it suddenly hits me... she's not interested in him. She's just been using their brief past as a means to break through my tightly held control over my abilities.

And it worked to some extent, but I can't take Deandra everywhere with me to screech nasty things so I can access my power.

"Your powers haven't been defined, right?" Deandra asks, letting the blue fireball disappear. "Carrick told me that Sarvel put something into you, but you have no clue what it is other than it seems to be rooted in light. Is that safe to say?"

"Yes," I reply slowly, not sure where she's going with this.

"And it seems to me, your inability to access it consistently has something to do with your level of confidence. Which is understandable, given you're a lowly human and don't know anything about magic."

"Gee, thanks."

"In the almost hour we've been working, your best magic comes out when your emotions are focused—say, for example, on my insults."

"Yes, we've already sort of figured that out," I exclaim sarcastically. "It's the reason Carrick brought you here."

"But I think it's more than that," Deandra says, crossing her arms over her chest. "I think you're afraid to use your powers."

I frown as I shake my head. "No, that's not it. I want to use them. I need to use them."

"You're afraid," she replies confidently.

"Afraid of what?" I throw my arms out wide. "I'm most likely going to die in this prophecy, and I'm not even afraid of that. What could possibly spook me past that?"

"You're afraid of failure, Finley. You're afraid of violence. And you're afraid that tapping into these powers is going to

change you in a way you might not like.”

“No,” I say adamantly. “I have changed. I’m not the same person I was three months ago.”

“You’re enough of that same person that fear is what’s holding you back,” she asserts. She says it with such resolution that I almost believe her. “And I have an idea on how to confront that.”

I do not like the tone of her voice. It’s almost gleeful, and the low boil of something close to nausea in my stomach makes me wonder if she’s right. I’m afraid to use the powers.

The fear-of-failure part actually hit me pretty hard because I simply can’t fail. The world is counting on me.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask tentatively.

Deandra looks down her nose. “You’ll know when I’m good and ready for you to know. I’ll be back tonight around midnight. Be ready to go.”

“Go where?” I ask, almost panicked at the thought of going anywhere with her.

“Can’t stick around,” she replies lightly, ignoring my question. “I’ve actually got a realtor set up to go condo shopping.”

“You’re going to stay here in Seattle?” I ask, my nose wrinkling.

“I’m going to look at some space available in this building.” Her grin is obnoxious. If she moves in, I wonder if I can talk Carrick into moving somewhere else.

“Midnight,” Deandra reminds me. Before I can question her further, she steps away, bending distance to somewhere unknown.

I absolutely hate the time I just spent with her, mainly because I hate her, but I hate more that she’s actually given me some things to think about.

## CHAPTER 11

### *Carrick*

IN THE BEGINNING, Carrick accepted the gods offer to help Finley Porter with the prophecy and, in exchange, he would be allowed to ascend.

Then came the time when he started to care for her again.

Then he loved her again, and Ascension wasn't an option. The moment he promised to wait around for her next reincarnation, he knew this would be his life for eternity.

But somewhere in all of that, Carrick actually started caring about mankind. He spent his entire life—almost five thousand years—in the Earth realm. It was his home, and he had not realized how proprietary he had become of it.

So yes, he was helping Finley because there was something in it for him, then because his love demanded it, and now it was also because he had a personal stake in keeping this planet just the way it is.

It put even more pressure on him to make sure this meet with Lucien went well. His brother was prickly and cold, and there had never been an easygoing way between them the way there was with Maddox.

There was loyalty, yes. That came from coming into this world together and having each other's backs to fulfill the gods' wishes time and again.

But loyalty was not absolute, and Carrick honestly had no clue how Lucien was going to react.

At the last minute, Finley decided to sit out of this meeting, and she urged Zaid to do the same. They were all having a drink about half an hour before Lucien was due to



arrive, discussing different ways to approach Lucien about the Blood Stone.

Carrick should have known Finley's beautiful brain was ticking because she had been silent the entire time until she wasn't. "I think this is a matter best handled among the brothers. Zaid and I should sit this out."

Before Carrick could respond, Zaid put in his opinion. "Agreed."

And so, Maddox and Carrick awaited Lucien down in the library. Checking his watch, he hoped that this wouldn't take too long. Deandra had something she wanted to do with Finley at midnight, and he wanted to be in attendance for that.

The thud of heavy boots came down the spiral staircase, and Carrick watched Lucien come into view. Maddox, sitting across the table from Carrick, twisted in his seat to watch.

"What's up, bro?" Maddox said genially as Lucien came off the last step and headed toward the table.

He kicked out the chair next to Maddox, then returned the same greeting as he plopped down. "What's up?"

Then his gaze slid across the table, and he gave a chin lift to Carrick. "Where's Finley?"

"Gearing up for an evening with Deandra," Carrick replied, knowing how provocative that statement was.

"Deandra? Nimeyah's daughter?" Lucien asked with mild interest. He had not been around since the trip to Faere, so he wasn't up to speed on the animosity between the Light Fae princess and Carrick's woman. It had been over three weeks since they'd last seen Lucien, which was ironically on the day Deandra and Finley almost went at it in Faere.

"There are a few things we need to update you on," Carrick said.

He then told Lucien about their trip to Faere, how Finley somehow tapped into dark powers when Deandra taunted her, and that they believed Arwen to be dead.

It was a little more personal when Carrick told Lucien about Finley's sister, Zora, and how she contacted her. It was a bit of a bittersweet experience when he relayed to Lucien that Finley knew about her reincarnations and he took her to the Hall of Histories to see some of her memories.

Besides Maddox and Zaid, Lucien was the only other person in Carrick's life that knew Finley in each of her past lives as she was reincarnated each time. That brought a small smile to Lucien's face, which was an oddity for sure.

With all of that laid before Lucien, it now came to the part where they had to talk about the Blood Stone.

"Zaid's father, Boral, has been working with us and has gained access to Kymaris' inner group," Carrick informed his brother.

Lucien's eyebrows shot high in astonishment. "And Zaid agreed to that?"

Lucien and Zaid were more alike than not, both having done horrible, unconscionable things, which sadly, weighed on their consciences. Carrick knew that Lucien's role in getting Charmaine trapped in the Blood Stone was probably at the top of his list.

"Zaid has come to a reluctant acceptance of being around his father," Maddox answered his brother's question. "Boral agreed to be bound by heart rather than tongue, and the information he's bringing us is unparalleled."

That was a good set up to segue closer to the real reason they needed Lucien here.

"Kymaris is going to enact a ritual called *confractus muros* on the October new moon," Carrick told Lucien. "If she succeeds, it will bring the veil down between the Earth realm and the Underworld."

The implications of what would happen at that moment didn't need discussion. Lucien knew full well what unleashing the denizens of Hell upon Earth would mean.

“The October new moon is just about four weeks away,” Lucien pointed out. “That’s not much time to stop this, assuming you have a plan.”

Carrick’s gaze shifted to Maddox’s for a moment before looking back to his brother. “We do have a plan, and we need your help.”

“Of course,” Lucien replied, the oath of loyalty being given without thought. Carrick wondered if he’d hold true to that once he was told what they were after.

“Kymaris needs a powerful object to enact the ritual.” Carrick briefly paused before adding, “The Blood Stone.”

Lucien’s normally golden-tanned skin went so pale that even his lips lost their color. “Does she have it?” he asked hoarsely.

Carrick shook his head. “No. Not that we know about. Boral will let us know if that changes. But she does have her followers out looking for it.”

Lucien relaxed slightly by that news, his gaze shifting off to the side as he pondered this. Carrick could almost see the wheels spinning inside his head.

“We know about Micah and Charmaine,” Carrick said softly, but the words landed like a boom of thunder.

Lucien’s head jerked, his eyes slamming onto Carrick. The pupils were hazed red, and a growl started low in his throat. “Why in the fuck didn’t you just lead with that?” he demanded.

“Dude,” Maddox said with a hint of apology in his expression. “The subject matter seemed to require some subtlety leading up to it.”

Lucien glared at Maddox before giving his attention back to Carrick. “You read *Libri Mysteria*. How did you even find it? I thought it was lost.”

“It was here in my library,” Carrick explained, filling Lucien in on how Myles had been told about it at a party, had

seen it in the stacks, but hadn't bothered with it since it was in Latin. "I've collected thousands of books and manuscripts over the centuries. Don't even remember how I got it."

Lucien heaved a sigh, letting his head fall back to stare at the ceiling. Keeping his eyes there, he asked, "And you're sure the Blood Stone has to be used?"

"Yes," Carrick replied.

"And you plan to get it?" Lucien guessed, his head lifting and his attention back on his brother.

Carrick nodded, then made the request. "We need your help. We don't know how to get to Micah's realm. We need force to take it."

Lucien didn't respond, but rubbed his hand over his jaw in agitation. The mere fact he didn't readily agree to help retrieve the stone spoke loudly since he had already loyally pledged his help. Carrick felt a pang of guilt for getting that pledge before giving his brother the full story.

The silence extended, which didn't bode well, and compelled Carrick to ask, "Is Charmaine still alive within the stone?"

Lucien shrugged, but there was nothing blasé about the action. "I don't know. She was when Micah cast me out."

"Why didn't you go right back in and get her?" Maddox asked, because a demi-god against a Dark Fae would win every time. Even one with stone magic at his bidding. "You're stronger than Micah. You could have made him submit."

Lucien's eyes dragged to his brother, a torturous pain rimmed with rage making the red of his pupils go deeper. "Micah said he'd kill Charmaine if he ever saw me again. So, I stayed away. I thought maybe in time, he'd let her out. Maybe she would learn to love him again, and she'd be safe."

"Based on your description of the monster Micah turned into," Maddox pointed out. "I seriously doubt she'd love him again."

Lucien shrugged again. “The powers of the stone chalice made him that way. I’m sure the stone could have reversed all of the ugliness that had set in upon him. Hell, he probably could have used the chalice to make her love him again.”

“You don’t believe that for a minute,” Carrick assessed, paying careful attention to Lucien’s tone as well as the fact his eyes were still burning red.

“No, I don’t,” Lucien replied through gritted teeth. “Micah was a monster of the soul. The body was just mimicking his insides. He was beyond any type of salvation, so the most likely scenario is she’s still trapped in the Blood Stone and Micah’s still drinking his tears from the chalice.”

Carrick hated to use Lucien’s lost love as bait, but he had no choice. “If we get the chalice and the Blood Stone, we’d have the power to release her.”

Lucien shakes his head, the first real indication this conversation was going south. “Don’t you get it? If he sees me, he’ll kill her on sight. If you go in and try to take it, he’ll kill her. We should leave it be. If it stays there, Kymaris can’t use it, and all you have to do is find that bitch and kill her. I’ll gladly help you do that.”

Carrick took a deep breath and let it out. His heart squeezed in understanding of his brother’s pain and fear, but it wouldn’t deter him from what needed to be done.

“The Blood Stone is critical, brother,” Carrick said gruffly. “Leaving the stone be in the hopes Kymaris doesn’t get it would be foolish. We’re demi-gods. We don’t play from a defensive position. We have no choice but to retrieve it.”

Lucien abruptly stood from the table, sending his chair scooting backward several feet. “Figure some way to get the Blood Stone without me then, because I’m not going to risk Charmeine’s life for your quest.”

“It’s not a quest,” Carrick growled, also standing from the table. “It’s the fate of mankind. You need to prioritize.”

Lucien's eyes gleamed as he turned it back around on Carrick. "Are you telling me if the situations were reversed, you wouldn't put Finley above the fate of mankind?"

Lucien had him. Carrick would indeed let the Earth realm burn if it meant saving Finley, and because of that, there simply was no way he could argue. Carrick understood where he was coming from.

Shoulders sagging slightly, Carrick merely gave his brother a nod and then put his hands on the library table. Head bent, he stared at the glossy surface, mind already trying to figure out how they could find Micah's realm.

Perhaps it was time to go back to Wells and pay for his information... if Kymaris hadn't already done that. They had the relic from Hungary but no clue how to use it.

Carrick heard Lucien's footsteps as he moved to the staircase, and he had no intention of stopping him.

But his head lifted when he heard Maddox call out in question to Lucien before he could ascend. "What kind of life does she have in that stone, brother?"

Lucien turned slowly to Maddox. "What did you say?"

Maddox merely shifted in his chair to look over his shoulder at Lucien, as if this conversation wasn't important enough to warrant his full attention. But his words were sharp and pointed. "I said... what kind of life does Charmaine have living inside a fucking stone?"

Lucien remained mute, and Carrick had to wonder if the man had truly never considered that?

"Come on, bro," Maddox taunted. "Do you seriously think she's happy living inside a stone? I mean, what is that even like? Is she just miniaturized to fit inside a hollowed-out portion of it, or does magic give her some furniture to sit on? She has to be lonely, with no one but that monster crying in the chalice. She probably has to look at his hideous face as he cries into that cup and then drinks his misery. It's no kind of \_\_\_"

“All right,” Lucien roared, stomping over to his brother. Carrick braced for them to go at each other physically. Instead, Lucien just loomed over Maddox, who looked up at his brother with a bland smile. “Of course I wonder those things about her. It would be a horrid life to live, and there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t want to go in and rescue her.”

“Then why haven’t you?” Maddox queried, his head tipped in curiosity.

“Because... her being alive and trapped was better than dead,” he murmured, his eyes hard and resolute as he glanced up at Carrick.

“Better for who?” Carrick asked, and the question looked like it had the same force and effect as if a wrecking ball had just slammed into Lucien.

Once again, he went pale as the question was obvious in its answer. It felt better to Lucien to believe her alive, which meant there could perhaps be hope one day. But no one else would want that. Any reasonable creature would prefer death than an eternity trapped in solitude, and Lucien was just now having to confront that dichotomy.

“Fuck,” Lucien muttered, rubbing his hand over the top of his buzzed head.

Carrick and Maddox didn’t say a word as Lucien started pacing back and forth, repetitively cursing low under his breath.

He stopped, faced his brothers, and grimly announced, “My loyalty is to you. I’ll help you get the Blood Stone.”

Maddox rose from his chair, shaking his head. He knew what Carrick knew—Lucien was using this loyalty bullshit because he didn’t want to admit Charmaine would actually be better off dead than living life inside that stone.

But that was okay.

Carrick would have his brother’s back. “We’ll make it a rescue mission, Lucien. We’ll get the stone, and if she’s still

alive, we'll get her out."

There was no hope in his expression, only resolution as Lucien nodded.

It was settled then.

They were going to Micah's realm, and they were going to get the Blood Stone. It was the first time that Carrick dared to hope they might be able to stop Kymaris, which hopefully meant Finley wouldn't die.

"Let's strategize," Carrick said, sitting back down at the table.

His brothers joined him. For the next hour, Lucien educated them on the realm as he remembered it. He drew maps and diagrams, and they hypothesized what Micah's powers could be like if he'd continued to take from the chalice all this time. If the myth was true and the Blood Stone had limitless powers, *and* it was attached to the chalice, it stood to reason that Micah could have grown incredibly powerful in all that time.

Carrick, Maddox, and Lucien knew they couldn't be killed, but they could be obliterated until such time the gods might choose to put them back together again. It meant they couldn't just try to overwhelm Micah with their force. There would have to be some craft involved and more help.

By the end of the meeting, it was decided that, in addition to the three demi-god brothers, the others who would make the trip would be Finley, Titus, Zaid, and Boral. They would ask Deandra if she would join them, but they wouldn't count on her.

What Carrick had hoped for was that Finley would figure out her powers, as they could come in handy going up against the likes of Micah. At the very least, Carrick needed to make sure she could protect herself if he couldn't for some reason.

Whatever Deandra had planned for tonight, he hoped to fuck it would allow Finley to fully tap into her powers and be able to utilize them at will.



They decided to attack Micah's realm in two days.

## CHAPTER 12

### *Finley*

CARRICK AND I stand in his living room, waiting for Deandra to come up in the elevator. She had sent word to Carrick that we would be going somewhere for her next lesson, and so we'd need to bend distance from inside the privacy of his condo.

She's five minutes late as of now, and I'm tired. I stifle a yawn as today has been long and emotionally draining. It started off this morning with my meeting with Boral and officially bringing him on board our team, followed by a horrid afternoon with Deandra, and ending with a worn and withdrawn Lucien leaving the condo after Carrick and Maddox told him that we needed the Blood Stone.

Carrick and Maddox were worn out from that meeting, too. After I got the details, I know all three demi-gods came away with some emotional bruises. Carrick doesn't have to say it, but it's obvious he hates putting Lucien in this position. I know he'd much rather have just been able to offer help to his brother to rescue his true love from that stone without any ulterior motive.

Just as I know his devotion to me and our joint cause meant he'd have to hurt his brother to get what he wanted. I'm hoping we can pull off such a successful mission to Micah's realm that we can free Charmeine from the stone and maybe Lucien can have her back again.

Carrick grumbles as he checks his watch. "Light Fae aren't known for their punctuality. I should have tied her promptness to the money."

I laugh and lean into his side, giving him a playful pat on his stomach—which is rock hard, by the way. "As much as I

can't stand Deandra, thank you for putting so much effort—and money—into finding someone to help me.”

Golden eyes stare down at me, his lips curled slightly upward. “Thank you for trusting me on this.”

“Yeah, well, that remains to be seen depending on what she does tonight,” I point out.

And with that, the elevator doors slide open—Carrick previously having left permission for her to be let up—and Deandra steps out looking like she just got back from a long jaunt on Rodeo Drive. She's wearing a sophisticated cap-sleeved dress in a navy blue with a white belt cinched at the waist. On her feet are four-inch heels in matching navy, and she's sporting a pair of large and expensive-looking sunglasses despite the fact it's just after midnight.

The doors close behind her, and she does a little twirl as she removes her sunglasses. “How do I look? The clothing here is amazing.”

It definitely covers more than what she would normally wear in Faere, but I play nice. “You look beautiful.”

Which is the truth, so it didn't taste that bitter.

Carrick merely grunted, choosing to chastise her instead. “I expect you to be on time from here on out if you want the remaining amount of your money.”

My head whips his way. Interesting. He had not told me that he only gave her part of the money, but I guess he's only paying for results. That's why he's the smart multi-billionaire businessman, and I own a coffee shop.

Deandra glares at him, I think more offended he didn't compliment her outfit. I decide to break the tension by asking, “Where are we off to?”

Deandra walks up to us, takes each of our hands, and says, “Faere.”

And with that, a rip in the veil opens up behind us where the elevators are, and I can see it's nighttime in Faere. The sky

is incredibly dark with no sign of a moon or stars. Deandra summons an orb of light to hang over her head, providing enough illumination as we step through that I can see the unnaturally green grass that's pervasive in this realm.

We appear to be on some type of elevated plateau because, far in the distance, I can see the gaudy crystal castle of Nimeyah, which is lit like a beacon in the dark night. I wonder why she didn't get us closer, as I assume that's where we were going.

"What are we doing here?" I ask curiously.

Deandra puts her hands on my shoulders, then turns me one-hundred-and-eighty degrees. My jaw drops as we stand before what looks like an ancient Roman coliseum, the exterior completely lit by orbs of light on the ground angled upward. Except the structure isn't actually ancient. The marble is pristine, the columns supporting the archways are in perfect condition, and it actually shimmers with the tell-tale signs of something that's been magically built.

I'm truly awed. "What is that?"

"Once every hundred years, the Light Fae celebrate the creation of Faere with an event called the Festival of Creation. That includes games and actual battles of skill over several days. This is where it all takes place, and we just had ours a few months ago. My mother hides it with magic afterward as she thinks it's an eyesore, but I've temporarily uncovered it as we'll be practicing inside tonight."

I glance at Carrick, not liking the sound of battles in a Romanesque coliseum that was known in our history to have some of the bloodiest and most violent engagements known to man. Carrick merely shrugs, clearly willing to see where Deandra is going with his.

She leads us inside the largest archway and up a flight of stairs, which comes out on the lower level of the interior. It's incredibly dark, and we can only see a few feet ahead of us by the orb of light still hanging over Deandra's head. We walk

down to the first row of seating, which are long rows of marble benches that disappear into the darkness, but I imagine they run the perimeter of the coliseum. Given my observation of the outside, I'm assuming these stands rise upward a few levels as well.

I strain my eyes to see down into the pit below, but I can't make out anything. I know just from watching the movie *Gladiator*, it's probably hard-packed dirt and sits fairly low beneath these seats to prevent people from escaping.

"See," Deandra says brightly. "We'll have plenty of room here, no one to watch, and you can light up the sky if you want with that magic of yours, which we're going to tap."

"Well, I actually can't see much at all," I reply, but she ignores me.

"Ready to get started?" she asks instead.

My senses are telling me that whatever is going to happen is definitely going to be different than anything I've tried before when it comes to tapping my powers, and because I don't have a clue of what's going on, I'm admittedly a little bit scared. Still, I try to sound nonchalant. "Yeah... sure."

I am not heartened in any way when I see a wicked gleam in her eyes that makes my stomach bottom out. "Then let's begin."

Immediately, I'm surrounded in darkness so black I can't see my hand right before my face. I drag my foot and it feels like I'm standing on dirt. I turn and immediately see Deandra and Carrick in the front row seats where I had just been standing with them, about forty yards from me, the floating light above them making the area outside its perimeter even darker.

Deandra had transported me into the middle of the pitch-black pit and my heart starts to kick against my chest with apprehension.

Carrick and Deandra are engaged in conversation. I'm sure he's asking her what the fuck she's doing, but despite the fact I

know Carrick won't let me be harmed, I break out in a bit of a sweat wondering what's going to happen.

They're too far away for me to hear what they're saying. Rather than use my super hearing skills on Deandra, I instead strain to hear anything that could be near me in the dark because I know danger is going to be part of this little experiment she has planned.

I concentrate hard but it's utterly silent, which actually scares me a little more than if I had heard something breathing heavily behind me. What if something is stalking me and being incredibly quiet about it?

Whatever the conversation between Carrick and Deandra, it doesn't last long as they both turn back to the pit and stare down into it. I don't know if Carrick can see me or not, but I don't move a muscle. He's too far away for me to see the exact details of his face to know if he's pissed or on board with what Deandra has planned, but I can tell by the stiffness of his body that he's on edge.

And that causes my fear to notch up just a little bit more.

After I inhale deeply through my nose, I let it flow out slowly. I roll my shoulders, trying to loosen myself up. I'm missing my whip right now. In this darkness, I don't know that I've ever felt more vulnerable in my life. I don't know what's going to happen, what might come after me, but I immediately start to concentrate on tapping my bubble shield.

In other words, I immediately start thinking defensively.

Suddenly, lights flick on and I'm momentarily blinded. I hold my hand up to shield my eyes, but once they're accustomed, I take in the fact that just below where Deandra and Carrick are standing is a square opening in the wall covered with a gate made of thick bars. I can't see what's inside because it's dark, but, instinctively, I know something is in there.

I even take a few steps closer, chin jutting forward and eyes narrowing to try to see better. I make it no more than

three paces when whatever is in that barred opening starts a low, deep growl that causes the hair on my arms to rise.

Scrambling back a few feet, I look left and right, noting two more barred cages about twenty feet to either side of the original one. As if knowing my attention is on them, whatever is in those cages starts growling, too.

Fuck.

My mind is utterly blank on what to do, but while those cages are closed, I decide to take in the rest of the arena. I slowly turn around, note there are doorways in the pit walls as well as other cages. I have no clue if anything will be coming out, but when I get halfway around, my body locks tight as I see a large pole about a foot in diameter planted deep into the dirt.

And tied to that pole with her hands behind her back is my best friend, Rainey. She's gagged and can't speak, but I can hear her cries of fear and pleading. Tears are streaming out of her eyes, only to soak into the cloth gag.

Immediately, I'm filled with fury that Rainey has been brought into this, and my instinct is to run to her so I can release her from the pole. But then I realize that will be futile as I don't know what to do with her. I can't bend distance with her as it would kill her, and the pit walls are too high for us to scale or jump.

I'm sure I'll be ashamed later, but my next instinct is to turn to Carrick for help. Sadly, there's no time as I hear the screeching of metal and realize those cages behind me are now starting to open.

I wheel back around to face them, putting myself between whatever is going to come out and Rainey. It's up to me to protect her.

Three of the barred doors are slowly rolling horizontally. I do a quick glance around the rest of the arena, but I don't see any more cages opening. There are doors and something could be coming out at some point, so I'll need to keep that in mind.

From the tarry black interior of the first cage where I had heard a low rumbling growl emerges a creature that has to be of Nimeyah's making. It resembles nothing like what we have on earth, but it seems to be made of different parts of recognizable animals. It's four-legged with a hunched back and low-slung hips and there's a ridge of bony spikes running from the base of its neck between its shoulder blades and down to mid-spine. Its tail is that of a scorpion's, arched up and over the creature with a sharp spike on the end from which drops of something yellow drip. The top portion of its face is squashed inward with bulging eyes, but the lower jaw juts forward with huge canines. Saliva drools from the corners of its mouth as it prowls out of his cage.

At first, I think it sees Rainey and I and intends on coming our way, but incredibly it looks left and then right, eyes peering around for its quarry. It doesn't seem to see us and I wonder if it's blind.

From the other two cages, the same type of animal emerges. Rainey makes a tiny sound of distress and I look over my shoulder at her with a glare, giving a shake of my head.

The message is clear. Right now, they don't know we're here so be quiet.

I look back to the animals. The first one lifts its head and starts to sniff the air. I don't feel a breeze at all, and I hope to god our scent is stifled.

But, of course, we wouldn't be that lucky.

The animal catches a whiff of something and throws its head back, letting out a horrendous howl that sounds like fingernails scraping on a chalkboard. I grit my teeth, resisting the urge to clap my hands over my ears.

My blood runs cold when the other two animals start howling, too, and then as if they were synced into perfect unison, all three of their heads turn our way and lock onto me.



Lips peel back and they snarl as they start prowling slowly toward us.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I mutter under my breath.

My first instinct is to yell to Carrick for help, and I hate myself for it. I am a strong, accomplished woman who is deadly with a whip and six other types of weapons. I don't have those weapons now, but I haven't lost my spirit or ingenuity.

The first creature starts moving a little faster until it's into a trot, the other two following suit.

*Think, Finley.*

*Think.*

The monsters get closer, loping now with confidence. Rainey squeaks in terror behind me.

Instinctually, I feel the power of what I know will be a solid bubble shield welling up within me. I think it will be big enough to cover Rainey and me both, but I'm not sure about that damn pole she's tied to and I don't know how long it will last against three attacking monsters.

It doesn't take much thinking to figure out that Deandra put me into a situation where I can't use my defenses.

Or at least I can't use them with confidence as I don't know they'll protect Rainey.

I have no choice.

I am absolutely without choice.

I have to attack.

The realization of what I have to do—as well as what will happen if I don't do it—flows through me with confidence. I remember Sarvel telling me that as long as I believe in my powers, they are mine to use as I want.

I do believe in my powers, but Deandra was right about one thing.

I've been afraid to use them before in all the other times I've tried to develop them.

Afraid of failure.

That's just not an option right now because Rainey's life is on the line.

A zap of warmth moves along my extremities and I feel a tingling sensation in the palms of my hands. I don't question what it is or what I should do with it.

Instinctively, I throw my hands outward toward the advancing creatures—looking just like Elsa slinging ice and snow—and a bright light erupts from my palms.

It streams out in a white beacon tinged with blue and strikes the first creature in the face. It hits with such force, it's blasted backward where it hits the ground and tumbles several times before stopping on its side.

It doesn't move while the other two slide to a stop, now understanding its prey isn't going to be easy to take down.

I prepare to blast the other two, but the first creature stirs. It rolls to its feet, shakes its entire body as if throwing off the effects of my blast, and then turns its head slowly my way. Its lips rise, revealing teeth intent on tearing into me, and it snarls so viciously I almost pee my pants. Its two cohorts do the same, and then they start yipping at each other. I recognize it for what it is—they're communicating. This is confirmed as the animals spread out and start to circle Rainey and me.

They're going to surround us, then attack from different angles. I'm not going to have time to blast them all, despite the fact I still feel the power tingling in my hands.

It's not enough to knock them backward.

It's not going to be enough to hurt them.

There are too many to keep at bay.

I draw my elbows to my ribs, as if summoning my power to curl inward. I feel it coalesce and gather behind my

breastbone, burning, but not in a painful way.

In a powerful way.

I throw my hands out toward the first animal again before it can even advance another step. The light that radiates from my palms is much brighter. Within the stream of energy or magic or whatever it is, I can feel that it contains death. It's a distinctly sharp, focused feeling, and I know when it hits, that it will kill whatever it touches.

The blast hits the first creature, but it isn't thrown back like before.

It's obliterated into a burst of white sparks that zing outward and leave trails of sparkling dust in its wake. I vaguely hear a cheer of excitement from Deandra, but I ignore it.

Instead, I face the next creature, who just stares at me warily. The other one starts to back up. I don't underestimate their intentions or their abilities, throwing one hand at one creature, and the other hand at the other. Two streams of death rays simultaneously blow them into a million sparkling fragments, which float to the ground and eventually disappear.

The excitement of my accomplishment is too much to contain. I jump in the air, punching a fist up in victory and yelling out to the creatures who are nothing but a memory. "And that is how you do it!"

Whirling to Rainey, giddy with excitement to have shared this important milestone with my bestie, my smile slides off my face when I see the pole and Rainey are gone.

I waste no time, not even bothering to turn back to Deandra and Carrick in the stands. I pull them toward me in my mind, bend distance, and step right into Deandra with fury. "Where's Rainey? What did you do with her?"

Deandra laughs and waves a hand. "You're silly. She was never here. That was just a magical image of her."

I should be relieved that she never put Rainey in danger, but instead, I'm pissed at her audacity. She preyed upon my fears and with the hum of power still burning in my chest, I throw my hands out.

A white light doesn't emerge, but I didn't intend it to. I only intend to knock her on her ass. An invisible wall punches into her, tossing her back a good fifteen feet where she bounces off one of the marble benches before falling to the floor.

She's not hurt but her ego is bruised. Deandra jumps up, one high heel she'd been wearing missing, and circles her hands, muttering some language I don't understand.

I do realize that she's calling forth magic, so I ready a shield to protect myself.

"Enough," Carrick roars, and it's not just a regular roar. It sounds like it's broadcast over loudspeakers and it booms around the entire arena, stopping Deandra's motions and causing me to warily move a few feet away from him. He lowers his voice to a normal tone. "Enough."

"That bitch put me in a horrible situation and used Rainey against me," I complain, and I know I sound pathetic.

"How dare you call me a bitch, you bitch," Deandra snarls back. "And besides... it worked, didn't it?"

"When I was terrified that my friend might die," I point out. "That was a very specific scenario."

"And yet you called forth an attacking power you've never been able to do before." Deandra crosses her arms over her chest smugly. She manages to look stylish and haughty, even missing one heel. "Try it again without the fear."

Tipping her head to the right, she nods toward the middle of the arena. Planted in the middle on a large tripod is a circular bullseye she must have conjured.

Her gaze comes back to me. "Go ahead. Blast it."

Dubiously, I glance at it, to Carrick who watches me impassively, and then back to Deandra. Clearly, my confidence has started cooling.

She tips her head again toward the bullseye, and I turn my attention back to it. Now in the middle of the target is a picture of Deandra's face, and I can't help my smile.

I look back to my enemy, the woman I hate most in all the world, to find her smirking at me.

And reluctantly, I realize I don't hate her at all, though I still dislike her very much.

I call the power inward, but, this time, I give it some specific instructions. I throw a hand out toward the target, but rather than light or an invisible blast, an arrow shoots forth. It whizzes through the air toward the target, then plants its tip right in between Deandra's eyes.

"Bravo," Deandra drawls, clapping her hands slowly. I can't tell if she's truly congratulating me or herself for getting me to break through.

"I wonder what else I can do?" I ponder, looking at Carrick.

Deandra snorts. "Use your imagination, lowly human."

An idea strikes.

Without glancing at the infuriating princess, I toss a hand toward her over my shoulder. I hear a muffled sound of shock, pivoting to see that my magic didn't fail me.

She has a ball gag in her mouth.

Carrick chuckles but admonishes me. "Okay, Finley... you've had your fun."

When I wave my hand, the ball gag disappears. Deandra is furious again, though, and she raises her hands to throw some magic back my way. I fully face her, squat low, and hold my hands out, palms toward her with one poised just a bit higher than the other.

Our showdown is ruined when Carrick steps in between us, effectively causing us to lower our arms as he's not the object of our ire.

With a pointed look at Deandra, Carrick says, "Give that one to her, Deandra. You've made her life hell on more than one occasion with that mouth of yours."

"Or she could merely say thank you," Deandra snaps in irritation. "I accomplished in a matter of minutes what no one could do for months."

"I think the ten million dollars you've just earned is thank you enough," Carrick points out coolly.

But Deandra has a point. I am grateful to her.

I lean to the left to see her more clearly past Carrick. In a very genuine voice, I say, "Thank you, Deandra. What you did pissed me off, but it was highly effective. I owe you one."

"And you can bet I'll collect one day," she replies haughtily. "Now, I have a date tonight with a hot exiled Light Fae who is extremely endowed, so if you'll excuse me."

With that, Deandra blinks away as she bends distance to her well-hung lover.

"Fuck," Carrick mutters, and I glance up at him.

"What?"

"She just left, and while I can move back and forth between the veil to Faere, humans can't."

That's a true statement. Stan has had to bring me through my past two trips here.

"But I'm no ordinary human," I point out. "I can bend distance, and now I have all these crazy, cool powers I'm able to use. I'm sure I can go through on my own."

"Not really willing to risk that, Finley," he growls, raking his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“Oh, come on,” I cajole, stepping into his body and putting my hands at his waist. I tip my head back. “It was a risk the first time I bent distance, and that didn’t kill me. And since I’m destined to play a key role in the prophecy, I doubt I’m meant to die by getting shredded in the veil.”

“Maybe not,” he replies darkly. “But I’m not sure if I’m willing to risk it. We can head to the castle and ask Rebsha—”

I step away from Carrick and turn slightly away, envisioning the kitchen in his condo—our best gathering place for meals and meetings, which makes it my favorite—and imagine myself dragging a knife down the invisible curtain that separates our realities.

There’s no tingling in my palms like when I throw magic, but the warmth is behind my breastbone. In my heart, I know this will work.

“Finley,” Carrick warns, but he’s too late.

The air seems to split in a V-shape as if a zipper were being dragged down in the air. As it opens, I can see Carrick’s condo.

I shoot him a quick grin and jump through, wincing slightly as he yells at me in frustration.

Carrick is right on my heels as we step into his kitchen, but rather than congratulate me on mastering travel between alternate realms, he grabs my elbow and jerks me around to face him.

His face is livid.

## CHAPTER 13

### *Finley*

“**W**HAT IN THE fuck, Finley?” Carrick rages, those pupils tinged red, but I’m not worried. He’s simply scared I took that risk, and he’s reacting.

There’s something deep inside of me that makes me feel this might have been a common thing with us during my past lives with him. Impulsivity hasn’t always been a huge problem for me, but when I see an opportunity, I will take it. I imagine if I could give Carrick gray hairs, I’d have given him quite a few through the centuries.

I immediately walk into him, put my hand behind his neck, and pull him down for a kiss. At first, he tries to hold back to make a show of his irritation, but when my tongue swipes against his lower lip, he groans and opens up.

Something about his response hits me in a way that’s different. Obviously, my lust fires hot, which doesn’t take much from this man, but that magical warmth dead center in my chest sparks to life.

It’s as if Carrick himself is stoking my magic now that it’s been tapped.

And I find myself wanting to explore it even more.

I remember back to our first time together, when Carrick swept me up in that cyclone of wind and shadows, transporting me to the bed, and I wonder if I could do it. His bedroom is much too far away in my opinion.

Like the times before, I merely imagine it in my head, knowing I can do what I want with my powers and refusing to believe they have limitations at this point. My confidence level



is at an all-time high after my success in the coliseum, and I envision a swirl of wind sweeping us up.

It's not seamless like when Carrick has done it, and my stomach rolls as we're both lifted from our feet. Carrick gives a bark of surprise and holds onto me tight. I direct the swirling funnel through the condo, vaguely hearing glass break and hoping it wasn't expensive. Down the hall to his master suite, then I open the door a little too forcefully with a gust of wind and it bangs into the wall so hard I wince. That's going to leave a mark.

Bed in sight, all that's left is to remove our clothes. I squeeze my eyes shut, imagine Carrick naked—muscles rippling, erection hard and waiting. I think about my clothes coming off without effort, and even think about them landing in a neat pile on the floor.

Carrick and I are flung onto the mattress so hard that the wind is slightly knocked out of me. Carrick starts chuckling.

I open one eye hesitantly, then the other.

Carrick is indeed naked.

Well, almost.

His boxers ended up on his head and he's still wearing one sock, but it's on his hand. I managed to get all my clothes off, but I spy my bra hanging from the ceiling fan above the bed.

My face flushes as I look at Carrick in embarrassment, sheepishly admitting, "Not my best effort."

Carrick laughs, plucking the boxers off his head and tossing them over his shoulder. I reach out and pull the sock off his hand, then whip it in the opposite direction.

I'm laughing, too, as his mouth descends on mine for a glorious, tummy-rolling kiss that excites me as much as it calms me down from my magical high. Carrick is always the exact medicine I need.

His mouth pulls away from mine and his eyes are glowing with amusement as he stares down at me. Brushing a piece of

hair back from my forehead, he says, “You were really amazing tonight in the coliseum. I knew you had it in you.”

I flush with pleasure from the compliment. Before I knew who Carrick was to me—back when I thought he hated me and didn’t have much regard for me—I never thought I’d get an ounce of his respect.

I inherently know I have it, but hearing it out loud—in such a genuinely appreciative tone—bolsters my confidence even more. “Deandra was right about fear. I was afraid of failing. While it was totally sleazy to use Rainey to provoke me to push past it, it was exactly what I needed.”

Carrick nods thoughtfully. “That’s not exactly how I thought she’d reach you, but, in hindsight, it was the right move.”

I shift slightly, resting my head in the crook of his elbow. While moments ago, I was solely focused on sex, I’m focused on something else now.

“Do you think I have any limitations with these powers?” I ask.

Carrick frowns, and it’s obvious he knows what I’m thinking. “I think without knowing, it’s too risky to test them out on something big.”

I just stare at him, trying to look innocent.

“Like going up against Kymaris,” he clarifies, although he didn’t need to. That’s exactly what I had been thinking. Maybe I should just take her on now to save the heartache of retrieving the Blood Stone. Somehow, deep in my gut, I don’t think it’s going to work out well for Lucien. It’s going to end up being so dangerous that I could lose friends in this mission.

“Finley,” Carrick admonishes, his palm going to my jaw and thumb grazing my cheekbone. “We need to focus on the Blood Stone versus going after Kymaris. If we get that, it’s our best and easiest chance of defeating her and keeping you safe at the same time. And frankly, you’re no match for Kymaris right now.”

“You want to keep me safe. I get that. But why are you so focused on the Blood Stone?”

We’re leaving in two days as we had to get word to Titus that we needed him. He promised to be in Seattle tomorrow, and we’ll be doing some major planning as a group. There was never any question I would go. It was a given with me, and Carrick never voiced a concern.

Because we are clearly not getting to the sex part any time soon, Carrick rolls more to his side so he’s facing me, not hovering over my body. “I don’t know if there’s a right answer. But we do have to go with what we think might be the best choice. And I think the Blood Stone is the better bet.”

I frown. “You didn’t quite answer my question. Why is getting the Blood Stone a better option than just killing Kymaris now?”

And that’s when I see it. A tiny flash of guilt in his eyes, and it means he’s hiding something from me.

“Carrick.” I go up on one elbow to get face to face with him. “Why is the Blood Stone so important to you?”

A demi-god is never one to look away, and he stares boldly at me. “Because the Blood Stone is incredibly powerful.”

“Yes, I know. It’s limitless, and it has the ability to let Kymaris tear down the...”

My words trail off as I don’t focus on his words, but the tone in which he said them.

There was a hard, protective edge to his voice.

Then it hits me like a tsunami as I understand exactly why he’s so intent on making this our play—marching on Micah’s realm for the Blood Stone, which also includes a nab at the chalice.

Limitless power.

What is the one power Carrick has been seeking outside the bounty offered him by the gods when he was created?

My eyes flare wide with astonishment and my tone is slightly accusatory, but tinged with awe. “You think it can make me immortal?”

Carrick’s gaze doesn’t waver. He holds my eyes with his own, and it’s all the confirmation I need that he’s made this personal to him. It’s not about the prophecy when it comes to the Blood Stone.

“Whoa,” I murmur, settling back down on the pillow. I stare at his chest blankly as I ponder the implications.

“I don’t know that it would work,” Carrick says, but I keep my eyes fully on his chest. It’s a beautiful one, and I’d rather look at it right now than have to face the emotions swirling within me.

An immortal life with Carrick?

I didn’t think it was possible once the elixir was destroyed, so I didn’t give it much thought.

But now that I do think about it, I lift my eyes to his. “Why did Rune need the elixir? He’s a god, and he’s certainly more powerful than the Blood Stone. Why couldn’t he just make his human love immortal with his own power?”

“Majority rules for most decisions with the gods. But, sometimes, it takes a unanimous ruling. Making a human immortal is one such example. He asked, but they denied him.”

“But you could use the elixir—hypothetically—without asking permission?” I press.

“Demi-gods don’t have the same demands or responsibilities as the gods.”

“I guess I still don’t understand why they’d deny him,” I murmur pensively.

“None have ever taken a long-term partner. Not even with each other. Love can get in the way and interfere with the hard choices they have to make as gods. One having a relationship would make The Council weak.”

“So, if he had used the elixir, wouldn’t that still be going against them? Wouldn’t that anger the gods?”

“Most definitely,” Carrick replies. “And Rune would most likely have suffered some repercussions, but the gods would not have taken it out on the innocent human turned immortal. Once he turned her, she’d be his forever.”

“But you don’t face those same rules?” I ask him to reiterate, just because I need to be sure. If he were to face something heinous for making me immortal, I wouldn’t agree to it.

Still not sure I would.

It’s a big decision.

“It’s not something I had intended to talk to you about until we had the stone in hand.” Carrick moves his body over mine, elbows pressing down into the mattress near my ribs. “But since we are... would you want to be immortal?”

It’s not an exact answer to his question, but it’s the surest one I can give. “I know I never want to be apart from you.”

His smile is tender as he nods in understanding, but then his expression sobers a bit. “Listen... tomorrow when Titus gets here, we’ll be going over plans to get the Blood Stone, but there’s something I need to discuss just with you.”

I don’t like the sounds of that, and I’m most definitely not thinking of sex now despite the magnificence of a golden demi-god laying naked beside me. “What?” I ask, going up on an elbow.

Carrick’s fingers nab onto a curly lock of my hair and he gives it a small tug. He watches the hair stretch, then bounce back when he lets it go. He takes this time to gather his thoughts, and the fact he needs to do that causes my anxiety to rise.

When his gaze finally meets mine, he says, “If something bad happens to me while we’re in Micah’s realm...”

“Bad?” I exclaim almost hysterically as I sit all the way up. He matches my movement, coming up to one hip so we’re face to face again. “What do you mean bad? You’re indestructible.”

“I’m not,” he replies softly. “You know I’m not. Yes, I’m as immortal as they come and nothing can generally kill demi-gods but the gods themselves, but I can be obliterated into nothing.”

“No,” I say with a shake of my head.

“Yes,” he says firmly. “There are any number of modern weapons that would tear me to shreds so badly I couldn’t heal myself. But I’m more worried about how powerful Micah may have become with centuries of soaking up magic from the chalice. He could be strong enough to obliterate a demi-god.”

I had truly not considered this. In my mind, Carrick was invincible. I was the weak link in our relationship, which was why the thought of immortality had some appeal.

“If something bad happens,” Carrick continues, “Maddox, Lucien, and Titus will get you out of there and back to safety.”

I start to feel panicky again. “No, that can’t happen. It’s not —”

Carrick’s fingertips press to my lips, effectively silencing me. He leans in closer, lasering his eyes onto mine. “I will come back to you, Finley. The gods will put me back together, but I don’t know how long it will take. I don’t know how long I could be gone. I just need you to know that you might need to continue on without me and if I don’t find you in this lifetime, I’ll damn sure do it in the next.”

“No,” I say in denial because I can’t do this without him.

I can’t do life without him.

“You have to push forward.” His hand comes to the back of my head, and he touches his mouth to mine. “If you don’t get the Blood Stone, you attack Kymaris with all you have. Maddox, Lucien, and Titus will help. She’s going to have a lot

of forces around her and it will be dangerous, but you don't give up because I will be back. Okay?"

Christ... part pep talk, part fated goodbye.

But I'm strong, and I don't want him to know how scared he makes me. I smile confidently as I nod effusively. "I got this. I promise."

"I will come back," he reassures me once again.

"I believe you." I glance away for a moment, trying to steel my emotions so my lower lip doesn't erupt into a tremble. Garnering strength, I ask, "What if Kymaris wins?"

Carrick quirks his lips, trying to lighten the moment. "Then you and I will reunite in a shitty Earth realm. I'll find you as I'm fated to do, and I'll take you to another reality where we can live out our time together. And I'll never stop trying to break Rune's curse."

"And I'll keep coming back to you, too," I assure him. Because in that respect, the curse at least provides us with continued chances.

"Make sure you do that," he says before kissing me.

It's the type of kiss that says this conversation is over. And it's not just the kiss that distracts me.

It's his hands and then his body as I end up flat on my back with him covering me. His warm skin, the ridges of muscles I let my fingers play along. His scent. The dirty words he sometimes pauses to tell me.

All of this so familiar to me now because I have the knowledge that it has been mine for an awfully long time.

Carrick enters me and as always happens in that moment we join, the amount of love I have for him is almost painful in how overwhelming it is. It's a prediction of how devastating it would be if I were to lose him.

It's exactly how he would have felt every time I died.

Our story is tragic but as it's fated, we will continue to find each other. I will have to trust in that and let my worries go.



## CHAPTER 14

### *Finley*

TENSIONS ARE HIGH because tomorrow we march on Micah's realm.

Well, not march.

More like stealthily slip in.

Everyone is waiting down in the library except the one we're still waiting for, and I've been so excited all day, I refused to go down with the others. Instead, I wait for the elevator to arrive, nibbling on a fingernail and trying to contain myself.

The doors swish open and there he is, a giant man with cocoa skin, graying dreadlocks, and the most beautiful hazel eyes I've ever seen.

His smile breaks broadly and I hesitate only a heartbeat before I take a running, flying leap into his arms.

"Titus," I exclaim joyfully as I lock my arms around his neck. His arms go tightly around my back, and he swings me around a full three times while I laugh in glee.

When he finally sets me down, I'm a little dizzy. He steps back and peruses me thoughtfully, tapping a finger to his chin. "You've changed a lot in the last month and a half."

God, has it been that long since we last trained together? Titus has been in other realms, tracking down and destroying evil fae, or, in other words, living his real life.

"I have so much to tell you," I say, linking my arm through his at the elbow and leading him toward Carrick's office. "I'll try to give you the CliffsNotes version, and we'll catch you up as we go along."

Titus chuckles, moving easily alongside me despite his size.

“So, let’s see,” I mull aloud. “Kymaris, who is Queen of the Underworld, is here in the Earth realm. We’ve deduced that her intent is to bring the veil down and let her Dark Fae and demons run amok so she can rule Earth.”

“Kymaris, huh?” Titus says with surprise. When he’d last been here, he only knew there was a prophecy but not anything about it.

We move past the piano and enter Carrick’s office. “Fallon wasn’t my real sister at all but a changeling that was placed after my real sister—who is my identical twin—was stolen. Her name is Zora, and she was kept in the Underworld to funnel dark magic into Kymaris—who was in stasis, mind you—and on our 28th birthday, the ritual was enacted and Kymaris was projected into Fallon’s body.”

“She was a changeling?” Titus asks for clarification.

“Yes, but a changeling actually becomes a human baby, so Fallon was my sister for all intents and purposes until she died. Zora is still alive in the Underworld, and I’ve contacted her. Are you with me?”

“With you,” he mutters as I unhook our arms and move past Carrick’s desk to the end of the built-ins. Titus stops by the desk as I turn to face him.

“There was an angel named Sarvel—not the divine type—at my birth, and she put some type of light powers within me that I just learned how to use.”

I look up at the ceiling, trying to think what else I’ve missed. “Oh yeah... Kymaris is going to use a ritual that requires twelve Dark Fae that are original fallen to bring the veil down on the October new moon. You don’t even want to know about the little ritual I observed her perform to bring some of those fae to her, but let me just say she is one twisted and demented lunatic. At any rate, she needs the Blood Stone

to power up this ritual, and we're going to go steal it from a monster in another realm, which is why we need your help."

Titus just stares at me with wide eyes, speechless for a heartbeat or two, before he hesitantly asks, "Is that all?"

"Actually... no. I learned I'm actually a reincarnated version of Carrick's first love and I've had many reincarnations over the centuries with him. It's all part of this whole curse thing by Rune, which I'll tell you about later, but suffice it to say, I love him madly and he feels the same."

"Unbelievable," Titus drawls. "It's like a supernatural soap opera."

"Don't I know it," I say with a laugh, then reach under the molding to the button that will open the secret passageway. As the door slides open, I didn't think it was possible for Titus' eyes to get wider, but they do and it makes me laugh. "Right this way, sir."

"What in the hell type of secret society thing do you have going on here?" Titus quips as we descend down the spiral staircase. He's so big that he takes up almost the entire width of the steps and the steel structure rattles as we descend.

I laugh as I step off the staircase with Titus right behind me. Everyone is at the library table, some looking at him with smiles and others flatly.

But we are now officially convened.

I sweep my arm to everyone and welcome Titus. "Let the first official meeting of the entire Prophecy Busting Consortium come to order."

Maddox snorts, and I wink at him.

Titus glances around at the library with interest as I briefly look around the table at my team.

Carrick at the end, not that he's the boss, but this is his house. His brothers, Lucien and Maddox, sit to his left with Boral on the other side of Maddox.

Across from them are Rainey and Myles, who have met Boral for the first time and are regarding him dubiously. It's obvious to them that Zaid hates his father, and Zaid even argued with me right up until this meeting started that we were making a mistake bringing Boral with us.

I disagreed but was tired of arguing with him, so I sort of snapped and told him to just suck it up.

I felt bad about that, but Boral was such a useful asset. Yesterday, he found out Kymaris had a lead on the chalice by the gentleman Carrick met at the fetish party named Wells.

Unfortunately for Wells, the information he gave Kymaris supposedly didn't pan out and she killed him with little effort.

This provided us two particularly important pieces of information. As of right now, we are most likely going to win the race to the Blood Stone. And just as importantly, Kymaris' powers are still as immense, if not more so, because Kaesar reported to Boral that she tore Wells' head off with her hands. That wouldn't actually kill the fae but no worries—she mounted his head on an iron pike beside her backyard pool as a message her anger was swift and retribution was final.

The only one missing from our table is Deandra. She came by this morning to handle the transfer of the remaining monies Carrick owed her into her freshly created bank account. He invited her to join us on our quest for the Blood Stone, but she declined. Something about needing to buy furniture for her condo and handbag shopping. While my gratitude to her for helping me break through on my powers will always stand true, I lost what little bit of respect she'd gained with me by her not wanting to help us. I had thought she had a bit more character than the pervasive shallowness of the Light Fae, but I guess not.

Despite her claims of much shopping to be done, she ultimately pointed out as Carrick implored one more time for her to come fight Micah, that this simply wasn't her battle.

I'm sure she'd think differently if evil demons were swarming her brand-new multimillion-dollar condo, but not my place to point it out.

As we were walking to the elevator to see her out, I realized it might be the last time I ever saw the princess, and I was not unhappy with that prospect. Still, I minded my manners and even thanked her with genuine gratitude for helping me.

She smiled nastily and said, "Just remember... when you die, Finley, Carrick will be right back in my bed."

I felt Carrick tense but before he could disabuse her of that notion, I merely returned her smile with a sweet and demure one. "If you think you can get him there, by all means then... give it a try. But again, thank you for your help."

Deandra was stunned I wasn't lashing out at her. She looked almost disappointed before giving a curt nod to us both and disappearing into the elevator.

No matter, though. Deandra is powerful, but there's more power sitting around the table.

Greetings are handled efficiently. Maddox stands and clasps Titus' hand, then they bump chests and bang each other on the back. Classic bro hug. Carrick stands and shakes Titus' hand, thanking him for coming. Lucien gives a chin nod. Zaid stands and offers to go upstairs to get him a drink, but Titus declines.

Carrick is the one who introduces Boral to Titus, and it's clear by Titus' expression that he doesn't know about the history Boral and Zaid have together. He merely looks perplexed that we have a Dark Fae sitting at the table.

Titus moves around the table where he gives a solid hug to Rainey, lifting her off her feet, and lastly, an identical bro hug to Myles like he did with Maddox, except the back pounding was much more gentle.

When it's all said and done, Titus takes the seat next to Rainey and I take the one next to Titus, giddy to have him

back. When I playfully bump his shoulder, he grins at me and my gaze slides down the table to Carrick, who is watching us with a slightly amused expression on his face.

I know the information I gave Titus on the way down here was superficial at best and I'm sure he has lots of questions, but Carrick starts our meeting by talking about the Blood Stone in more detail for not only Titus' benefit, but also for Rainey and Myles as well, since I haven't had a chance to talk to them for the past two days. You know, being a little busy with Carrick, looking at my memories in the Hall of Histories, and working on my powers with Deandra.

Carrick doesn't wax poetic about the underlying love story, which I'm sure Lucien appreciates. He doesn't leave that part out, though, as it's essential to keep in mind that we aren't only stealing the Blood Stone, but we hope to release Charmaine from it.

When he's finished, it's Myles who wants to make sure he understands the full story because while he and Rainey will not be joining us due to the danger, they are a part of our team and have incredible insight and ideas.

"So," Myles drawls as he leans forward and rests his arms on the table. His attention is solely on Carrick. "If I understand you, the Blood Stone is necessary for Kymaris to pull off her ritual to take the veil down and we want to get it before she does."

"Correct," Carrick says.

Myles gives a side-eyed glance at Lucien before continuing. "There is a Light Fae stuck inside the stone, so not only do we want to steal it, but we need to do so in a way that protects her so she can be freed?"

"Exactly," Carrick agrees.

"Then you're going to have to fool Micah in some way, because the minute he knows your real reason for being there, he's going to either protect the Blood Stone through vicious

means, or, worst-case scenario, he's going to kill Charmeine to spite Lucien."

"That's our dilemma," I pipe in, and all heads turn my way. "We're going to have to take it by force, but we need to go in subtly."

"Maybe it would help if we knew more about the realm," Myles suggests, giving his full attention to Lucien. "Think you can describe the details to us?"

"I can grab the easel and a large pad of paper for you to draw it out for us," Rainey suggests helpfully.

Lucien straightens in his chair. "No need to draw it. I can show you in a different way."

I know demi-gods are powerful and that they are holders of great magic, but Carrick doesn't use his often, so it's a shock when Lucien does a short wave of his hand before him and what looks like a 3D holographic image appears before him. It's a mountainous region bordered by an ocean the lightest blue I'd ever seen.

Lucien pushes his hand forward, and the image floats to the middle of the table so we can all see it. He begins to talk and as he does, it rotates slowly so those on both sides of the table can get a good view. As I watch it, I realize it's actually a large island.

"This is the realm that Micah and Charmeine created not long after the meteor came to earth," he says in a low voice, and I can tell by his tone that he hates telling this story. He memorialized it once and it endured through time, but I suppose telling a group of people, some who are strangers, can't be easy. "They didn't name it as they couldn't agree on anything that did justice to its beauty. They modeled it after the area of the Earth realm where they were living at the time called Thera, which is now known as Santorini in Greece. They did invite others to come live with them, giving no prejudice to whether they were fae, daemon, or human. They created their realm to resemble Earth as closely as possible,

and they lived there harmoniously for thousands of years. Their magics were powered by two meteor-stone objects they were in possession of—a black jeweled rock that was set in a gold necklace and a rough-cut chalice made from a large piece of the stone.”

“It’s beautiful,” Rainey breathes out as she watches the island rotate, and I’m sure no one at the table disagrees.

In a flat voice, Lucien succinctly describes his visit to the realm and how he and Charmaine fell in love with each other. He doesn’t go into the details, but skips straight to Micah’s rage and how the realm was destroyed.

With a wave of his hand, the beautiful island changes. The ocean dries up to nothing but black sand. The flora and fauna wither away and the mountains break apart into craggy, jutting pieces. The skies darken but on the distant horizon of where the ocean waters had once been, a river of lava meanders closer to the shore. It hisses and steams as it cuts a swath through the black sand where it runs up to the base of the center mountain and starts to flow upward. The mountain cracks, pulls apart, and the lava disappears inside it. Ice forms at the tops of the rocky mountain peaks, and you can hear the wind whistling shrilly across the deadened land.

I can’t stop myself from imagining how cold that desolate realm is now, despite the river of lava that flows to it.

“Micah destroyed the beautiful realm he and Charmaine created, killing every inhabitant except Charmaine. He gave her one chance to forsake me and when she didn’t, he trapped her in the black jewel and sealed her in it by dipping it in the lava—known as the Crimson River—that had been pulled forth from the Underworld. The jewel turned blood red, and he affixed it to the chalice. It was no longer two objects but one, and was simply known as the Blood Stone. Some legends called the chalice itself the Holy Grail, but, to me, it is the object where Charmaine is held prisoner. I was cast out of the realm not long after.”



Because Rainey, Myles, and Titus are new to this story, Carrick filled in some details that Lucien left out, mainly that Micah had transformed into a twisted monster after drinking his bitter tears from the chalice. “But we can talk about how to deal with him physically in a bit. For now, we need to know how to slip into his realm unseen.”

For this, Lucien pushed up from his chair and moved to the opposite end of the table from Carrick. He pulled the image of the blackened realm with him, then stopped it from rotating so we were looking at the mountains from the perspective of the dried-up ocean floor with the lava river flowing up the slope of the middle mountain before disappearing inside. It was extremely weird to see the flow go against the laws of gravity.

Lucien enlarged the hologram-like image, then zoomed in to an area at the base of one of the mountains. It had large boulders the size of minivans scattered about. Pointing at a dark crevice, Lucien said, “This is the cave where Micah lives. Inside is a stone table and a chair carved from rock and on the table is the Blood Stone. Or at least, that’s what it looked like when I was last there.”

“So, we have to go into the cave?” Maddox asks, scratching at his chin. “That’s going to be tricky, so at this point, I’d like you to tell me there’s a back entrance.”

Lucien shakes his head. “Only the one you see, and the cave is small. Barely room but for the table and chair.”

“We have to draw him out,” Myles posits, and then smiles sheepishly. “And by ‘we’ I mean ‘you’.”

Lucien nods. “Some type of distraction he’ll have to check out.”

“What would draw him out?” Rainey asks.

Lucien shrugs. “He doesn’t want anything but Charmaine.”

The table is silent as we consider his distinct lack of desires.

It's Rainey who breaks the quiet. "Make him think Charmaine is outside of the cave."

I turn in my chair her way. "What do you mean?"

"You have magic at your disposal. I'm sure you can create a magical mirage, or transform your likeness into that of Charmaine's."

"Absolutely not," Carrick says. "Finley isn't going to be in his direct line of sight."

"Then let Maddox transform himself," Rainey suggests.

"I'm not going to dress up like a girl," he whines dramatically, but we know he's kidding. He'll do anything it takes, and he's all about the mischief.

"It could work," Lucien murmurs as he steps back from the floating image of the black island. He puts one arm across his stomach, propping up the opposite elbow so he can rest his chin in his palm. Pointing at the beach area, he says, "We could enter the veil here."

"Those boulders are enough to give us good cover," Carrick says.

"If we're lucky, Maddox can distract Micah enough for us to slip in and out of the cave quickly," Lucien adds. "I'm the one who will grab the chalice, though."

"And what do the rest of us do?" I ask.

As it turns out, the plan ends up being a lot more complicated than a distraction while we slip in and out. We spend the better part of two hours planning for every possible contingency or surprise. At one point, we scrap the *dressing up Maddox as Charmaine* plan and discuss going in with full magical force. Stun Micah to incapacitation, then take the chalice.

But that seems risky and far many more things can go wrong, especially since we don't know the depth or breadth of Micah's powers. He might not be so easy to take down and if

there's even a second where he thinks the Blood Stone is at risk, he could kill Charmaine with a snap of his fingers.

Thus, we go back to the original plan.

We also discuss the ethics of what we're doing. Yes, it's wrong to steal, but screw those sensibilities. For the fate of the world, it's an easily forgivable sin. But the big question is what do we do with Micah?

Kill him or let him live?

It's a question that inspired furious debate, and we were split along gender lines. Rainey and I wanted to spare him while all the men—including Myles to my surprise—felt it would be idiocy to let a monster like that live. He'd be hell-bent on revenge was their argument, and no one wanted to be looking over their shoulders.

Ultimately, it was a majority rule type of thing and the decision was made that Micah had to be terminated. I forced that tender, empathetic part of me to ice over and accept it. I knew this would only be one of many horrendous choices I'd be faced with in the coming weeks.

We're wrapping things up and I'm exhausted. I can't fight back the yawn and despite having the beauty of a demi-god in bed with me tonight, I really just want a good night's sleep so I'm fresh for our march tomorrow.

Carrick has something else to discuss though as he clears his throat to get everyone's attention. When he has it, he looks directly at me and tips his head. His eyes stay on me, but he's talking to the group. "I don't think I need to remind everyone here, but while getting the Blood Stone and saving Charmaine are important goals, let's not forget the most important is getting Finley out of there alive. She's the key to thwarting the prophecy so if things go south, I expect the priority to change to getting Finley back here safely."

The silence is almost deafening, a somber reminder that the weight of the world is still on my shoulders. We could fail in retrieving the Blood Stone, Carrick could be obliterated, and

yet I'm still supposed to come back and stop Kymaris from fulfilling the prophecy.

An actual pressure starts in my chest, and a sense of panic starts to well within me. My eyes dart over to Carrick, who is watching me like a hawk. His expression fills with worry as he doesn't need to be in my head to know that I'm in distress.

He starts to push away from the table, but there's a resounding crack that startles both of us and breaks our eye contact.

It's Myles who has brought his hand down hard to get our attention.

"This is starting to get really morbid," he says as he looks around the table. "We've talked about a lot of heavy shit tonight, and I think we need a pick-me-up."

"Here, here," Maddox exclaims, pounding his fist on the table. "Let's drink some brews."

"Or," Myles says with an admonishing look at Maddox before he shifts in his chair to look past Rainey to me. "We could have a moment of joy to share among friends."

My eyes flare with understanding, and I spare one tiny glance at Rainey to see she's clueless.

Which is even better, because when Myles pushes his chair back and rises, only to drop down to one knee beside Rainey's chair with a black box in his hand, the look on her face is so comical I almost start laughing.

Total surprise, which is awesome. She never saw it coming, and I really, really needed this at this exact moment.

Utter joy—because she loves Myles.

Tenderness, because while this isn't the most romantic of situations, his heart is big and he thought everyone could use a good proposal.

Admittedly, my eyes get a little wet and I blink rapidly. I dare look to my love and he's still watching me but with the

softest expression I've ever seen on his face. I've never asked him but outside of our first marriage, I wonder if he's ever proposed to me again.

I'm thinking he has.

I smile at him, then scoot my chair back just a bit and lean to the side so I can see Myles in action. He has a beautiful speech prepared because I helped him work on it. It was supposed to be delivered at dinner next weekend as he managed to score reservations—dropping the name Carrick Byrne, of course—at one of the most upscale restaurants in Seattle.

The ring was going to be slipped right into a glass of champagne brought to the table with dessert, and Myles was going to do the dramatic bending to one knee before everyone in the restaurant. He even went out and bought a new suit for the occasion.

But here he is, in the secret library of an immortal demigod, helping his friends get ready to march off to battle and he chooses this moment to propose to Rainey.

I think it's perfect.

I listen intently as he just wings it, and it's even more perfect than our speech we'd prepared.

But it's when he says to her, "Rainey... I've learned so much about destiny and fate these last few months, and I can only conclude Finley isn't the only one who has her life decided. I know mine is. It's decided that I'm only supposed to be with you."

There are tears. There's an obvious acceptance as she nods her head furiously as he formally asks her to be his wife. He slides the ring onto her finger, and then they are hugging, and kissing—with tongue, oh boy—and then everyone around the table is up and offering congratulations.

Well, not Boral as he doesn't know Myles and Rainey enough to do so, and, even if he did, I doubt he'd give a flying fuck about them.

Lucien also hangs back, quietly watching the celebration as Carrick conjures champagne and glasses—making Zaid look completely put out that he couldn't run to get them himself.

My gaze lingers on Lucien. I wonder if he would have married Charmaine if he had the chance?

I wonder if this makes him incredibly sad for his losses.

Perhaps more determined than ever to rescue his love from the Blood Stone.

Regardless, tomorrow, we are going into our own little mini-war where the stakes are about as high as they can be and it's not guaranteed that we're all going to come back alive.

## CHAPTER 15

### *Finley*

IT WAS A contingency we had not planned on and it hit us out of the blue—at the last minute—and there is nothing we can do about it.

Maddox was summoned away by the gods.

Our entire group—including Rainey and Myles, who wanted to see us off—had congregated in the living area of Carrick’s condo. On the floor were three duffel bags filled with iron weapons. All of us—excluding Rainey and Myles—were wearing black clothing with black face paint so we could blend into the darkened island and make it difficult for Micah to see us coming.

Even Maddox was dressed this way, as he never intended to hold the glamour of Charmaine the entire time. At some point, Micah would realize he was being played and Maddox would go into stealth mode like the rest of us.

We even had two vehicles waiting downstairs to take us off deep into the forest surrounding the base of Mount Rainier. We did not want to enter or exit Micah’s realm anywhere near civilization because one of our contingencies included making sure Micah couldn’t harm humans here should the battle spill back over into our realm. It’s why, I suppose, it was a good idea to kill Micah before leaving so as to further protect the Earth realm.

The summoning of Maddox happened shockingly with an appearance of Cato in the midst of our gathering. He was a massive man, taller than even Titus, and impeccably dressed like a male fashion model.

The summoning was brief as he took in the crowd, gave a slight nod to me, which I thought was odd, then gave his

attention to Maddox. “You have been summoned.”

“Fu—” Maddox started to say, but the entire expletive didn’t come out.

They both just disappeared.

And now we are standing here wondering what in the hell to do.

Carrick takes up cursing as the rest of us watch him, stunned and immobile.

“Where did he go?” I ask numbly.

“Who the hell knows?” Carrick grouses as he paces.

“Did the gods do this purposely to make it hard on us?”

Stopping to give me his attention, he shakes his head. “No. Cato doesn’t operate like that. But if Maddox has something to do for Cato, it will take precedence over him helping us.”

Discussions begin, wondering if we can adapt our plan and go without him.

Can we put this off a few days? Most likely not, because there’s no telling when Maddox will come back.

“We need a replacement,” Lucien concludes—basically the same thing we’re all thinking. We cannot wait to make our play for the Blood Stone. It’s too important to our end game.

“I’ll take Maddox’s place,” I say without hesitation. I’m the only one left out of me, Boral, and Zaid with the powers to protect myself.

“No,” Carrick, Rainey, and Myles all say at once.

“But—”

“Your powers are too new and too unpredictable,” Carrick says softly, giving me an apologetic smile. “We need someone with strong power because the minute Micah figures out there’s an imposter, he’s going to let loose with everything he has.”



“I can glamour myself to look like Charmaine,” Boral offers, and I’m surprised he’d make the offer for such a perilous position.

But he’s quickly shot down by Carrick. “I appreciate the offer, but your powers are limited to pretty much glamour and strength. You’re not going to be a match for him if he comes after you.”

“I’m touched you care,” Boral says with a smirk.

“I don’t,” Carrick replies glibly. “You’d do more harm than good out there. Besides, I need you to stay with Finley and keep the veil open for our escape.”

Carrick and Lucien could easily open the veil to Micah’s realm, but Carrick did some magic mojo to the relic we found in Hungary that could find realms, and it will now keep the veil open for us as long as the relic stays close to it. That’s Boral’s job.

“I suppose I can handle getting the Blood Stone on my own,” Lucien offers, “and you can be the distraction.”

“No,” I say, shooting down that idea. “We need both of you to go for the Blood Stone because we need the redundancy if Micah takes Lucien out. We need someone else powerful that can get it out.”

This was something we talked about a lot last night. Carrick and Lucien going into the cave together to retrieve the chalice.

Boral, Zaid, and I are going to be relegated to staying near the tear in the veil in case we have to make a quick escape, with Boral in charge of keeping the veil open. Carrick admitted they were my bodyguards, but, truthfully, I know they are there to manhandle me if I refuse to leave if things get dicey. While Carrick didn’t fight me on coming, he doesn’t want me to actively participate in a fight. While I want to argue until I’m blue in the face against it, I understand where he’s coming from.

On top of that, if I were to get thrown into the fight, it would be a terrible distraction to Carrick, so I agreed for us to play watchmen and be the last resort if we were needed. Otherwise, I was prepared to let Boral and Zaid pull me back through to the Earth realm.

“Pyke,” Carrick murmurs, his expression disgruntled. “He’s the perfect one to take Maddox’s place because we know Deandra won’t help.”

“Do you want to bring him fully on board?” I ask, wondering if Pyke would agree to a binding.

Carrick shakes his head. “I don’t think we need to. My history with Pyke is usually him joining me in frays because he loves the adventure. I can pose it to him in a generic way—we’re going into a different realm to steal a stone from a twisted Dark Fae. It’s just the sort of thing he’d love. If I can find him, that is.”

And with that, Carrick bends distance and disappears, presumably to find Pyke. I assume he’ll start in Faere, so we have nothing to do but wait.

Rainey and Myles had to leave. Myles’ aunt and uncle were coming into town for a few days, and they were going to hang with them on the *Fantasia*. They both, in turn, gave me long, hard hugs with similarly stern lectures on safety and to do as Carrick says.

Zaid ambles off to the kitchen, and Lucien disappears back toward the man cave. Boral takes out his cell phone, places a call to which he merely says to the person on the other end, “Up for some trouble this weekend,” and moves out to the patio to continue talking. I shudder thinking what Boral’s definition of trouble is, but there’s a good chance it involves something evil. Contrary to Zaid’s worries about his dad, I haven’t forgotten what an awful, twisted Dark Fae he is, and I certainly understand he’s not helping us to be altruistic but rather for his own personal gain with his son.

That leaves Titus and me and I'm more than happy for those circumstances. We didn't get a chance to talk last night. I nod toward the living area and he smiles, understanding my silent invitation to hang out.

I settle into a chair, sit in it sideways, and hang my legs over the armrest. Titus sprawls on the couch opposite me.

Grinning, he says, "So... you and Carrick are star-crossed lovers or something, huh?"

Titus got a lot of details last night to fill in my short summary, but my reincarnations didn't come up. They weren't relevant to the prophecy.

"Apparently, I had my first life in 1015 AD. I was a shepherdess in Ireland, and Carrick saved me from being raped by a Viking. My name was Eireann."

Titus whistles low with an amazed shake of his head. "That is unreal. I've never heard anything like that."

"Probably because it's a god's curse I keep coming back?" I reply casually.

That causes Titus to straighten slightly. "Say what?"

A welling of sadness hits me, and I push it down. Sadness for the horror that Carrick went through when Rune killed me.

I tell Titus the full story of Eireann and Banan, using both Carrick's narrative and the memories I saw in the Hall of Histories. He learns of our love, Banan's desire to make Eireann immortal, and his foolish attempt to take the only means to do it from a god. Titus winces when I tell him the part where Rune killed me and then cursed Carrick to have me and lose me, over and over again.

When I finish, he shakes his head sympathetically. "I can't imagine Carrick going through that. He never said anything."

"Zaid, Lucien, and Maddox were the only ones that knew about me," I reply softly. "It wasn't something he easily shared, I guess."

“What’s up with you two after this prophecy?” Titus asks hesitantly. “Because you and I both talked about the perils of an immortal and mortal being together.”

“Funny you should ask,” I reply, swinging my legs off the armrest and perching on the edge of the chair. I lean forward and lower my voice. “Clearly, I’m going to die, if not in the prophecy, then from Rune’s curse. Carrick says he’ll always wait for me to come back to him, and he’ll wait for me to fall in love with him again, then he’ll tell me the truth of our lives and take me to the Hall of Histories. This is how we’ll live, until I die again.”

“But...” Titus drawls. “Because I sense a ‘but’ in there.”

“But,” I say with a smile. “Carrick wants to use the Blood Stone when this is all over to see if it can make me immortal.”

“From what I learned last night, it seems it could work. It has the power of infinity, right?”

I shrug, looking down at my hands. Because who knows?

“What’s really eating at you?” Titus demands.

My head comes up, hoping he’d push me on this. Because who better to ask about this than someone who currently lives it.

“What’s it like... giving up your mortal life?” I ask.

Titus gave up his mortality roughly a century ago. I wasn’t sure the exact time frame, but I knew he was a hundred and twenty-nine years old and, by my guess, he was probably in his mid-thirties despite the graying dreadlocks.

“It’s a sacrifice,” he says somberly. “Because you watch your family and friends die, and then you are all alone. Except, well... you’d have Carrick.”

“An eternity with him sounds wonderful,” I admit. “But I want to make sure I’m not looking at it through rose-colored glasses.”

Titus ponders my questions a bit before answering. “There are two types of people. Those who plod through life without any great hopes or dreams. And then there are those who want to suck every bit of juice from the fruit of life and eagerly look around the corner for what is coming next. Those are the ones who are cut out for an immortal life. You’re one of those, Finley.”

A smile breaks out on my face and a small level of tightness that had been in my chest over this issue expands and relaxes before disappearing altogether.

Yes. I want an immortal life with Carrick if we would be so blessed. We could travel the world and the realms, seeking adventure and aspiring to every dream we ever had.

Or, as an alternative, a mortal life together. We could get married, have children, and then grandchildren. We could sit on a porch when we were old and drink tea and talk about our life together.

Both options sound amazing, as long as we were on the same path together.

“You do know, if Carrick can’t find a way to make you immortal, you could live in Semper Terra. You’d make a great Annihilator.”

I freeze, my body locking tight with the realization that could actually be an extremely easy option. I could live in Semper Terra. I’m assuming Carrick would be allowed to be there with me. Anyone living in Semper Terra doesn’t age by the magic imbued within the realm. But if a person leaves the realm, the aging process starts again.

And the thought of being an Annihilator—one of the badass warriors taught to destroy evil creatures?

I could get on board with that.

Sadly, all of this talk of immortality is probably nothing more than talk. I doubt immortality will stop Rune’s curse because he’s all-powerful. He can kill any immortal.

Our happiness would eventually hinge on Rune letting his hatred go, and I just don't see how that will happen.

“What would I have—” is as far as I get because a rip opens right in front of the elevator doors and Carrick steps through. I get a brief glimpse of Nimeyah's castle, and then Pyke.

Titus and I stand from our seats, and Pyke's eyes come directly to me. They warm, and he gets a flirty smirk on his face. Because he knows it irritates Carrick to flirt with me, Pyke makes a big production of coming straight to me for a hug.

I have no choice but to engage, but I keep it light with a tiny pat to his back. Looking over his shoulder at Carrick, I can see he's not amused but he's not going to say anything. It's by silent agreement with Carrick and because of how well I know him, that he would not want Pyke to know the history of us. Given that we weren't going to tell him anything really, other than we were on a mission to hunt a piece of stone Carrick wanted, Pyke was going to be kept in the dark.

“I'll go round everyone up,” Titus says in his deep rumbling voice I've really and truly missed.

When he's gone, Pyke claps his hands together and rubs them with a devilish gleam in his eye. Throwing a thumb at Carrick, he says, “He says we have a grand adventure ahead of us. Going to steal a stone from some monster?”

“That's the plan,” I say with an overly bright smile in return. “Carrick really wanted you to come with us. Said that you were always up for a fun time of fighting and general mischief.”

“Indeed I am,” Pyke replies gleefully. “It's so boring in Faere and modern wars aren't any fun to participate in.”

“First-world problems,” Carrick mutters, and I try not to laugh.

Everyone starts filtering into the living area. Boral from the patio, Lucien from the man cave, and Zaid from the

kitchen. Introductions needed are made, then we are loading up duffels over our shoulders and heading down to the cars waiting for us.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Finley*

IT'S AN OVERCAST afternoon as we head out of Seattle toward Mount Rainier, but there's no rain in the forecast. I ride with Carrick, Titus, and Pyke in the G550 while Lucien, Boral, and Zaid take Maddox's Hummer. Apparently, he had given Zaid an extra key several weeks ago in case we needed it when he wasn't around, so we decided to take him up on the offer because they didn't want to cram into Zaid's little Volvo.

Carrick must have told Pyke the basic plan of attack because he doesn't ask any questions about our mission. Rather, he drones on and on about court politics in Faere, about a pregnancy scare he had after a dalliance with a Dark Fae, fury for which his mother would have killed him were he to sire a daemon, and a new fashion line he was thinking of creating for members of the royal court.

I'm struck a little dumb listening to him, wondering how in the hell he and Carrick are even friends. I mean, I know they're not close friends and Carrick said most of their times together involved Pyke joining battles and frays Carrick was ordered by the gods to participate in, but the more I get to know him—or listen to him prattle—the more I realize he's just as vain, unambitious, and self-centered as his mother. It even pains me to admit that Deandra shows more substance than he does, and that's saying a lot.

But whatever. He's willing to lend his muscle and incredible power to help us collect the Blood Stone, and I'm grateful for it as I know the rest of the crew is. While we might have been able to pivot our plan and go in with less force, going in with more is the safer bet. It's hard to replace Maddox, a demi-god, but there's none stronger than a Light Fae prince after that.



A few miles south of Carbonado, Carrick turns off onto a dirt road that I never would have seen even if I'd been looking for it. It's really not even a road, but rather two tire divots running deep into the woods.

When we decided we needed an entrance and exit point that was away from human population for safety reasons, Carrick said he knew an isolated place.

And he wasn't kidding.

As we drive further, the forest seems to close in on us and the canopy of pines over the fir and cedar trees make it dim enough the automatic lights come on.

A few miles in, Carrick stops and I turn in my seat to see Lucien doing the same behind us. The headlights go off, the engines are cut and we all exit nabbing the duffel bags. We move on foot, following Carrick in a single file line through the trees until we come out into a surprise clearing that's roughly half the size of a football field. It's well isolated, surrounded by dense forest, and I guarantee no humans are around for miles.

Carrick turns to me as the others start pulling weapons from the bags. "This was where I first went to talk to the gods after meeting you. When I asked for Ascension."

I blink in surprise, tipping my head to the side. "You mean... they met you here?"

"No," he says with a smile and a dip of his head to brush his lips over mine. "There was a large puddle in the middle. I descended into it, and it brought me out to the gods."

"Wow," I murmur, looking to the middle of the clearing to where he had indicated. There was nothing but dirt covered by brown pine needles.

"Is this place sacred?" I ask.

"No more than any other place I access the gods," he replies dryly, and I think about him meeting Veda at a tropical resort not long ago.

He takes my hand, and we all move to the center of the clearing. I have my whip coiled and tied to a loop on my belt. Titus has both a long sword and a battle-ax in a harness, crisscrossed over his back. Boral and Zaid both chose iron swords. Lucien is going in weaponless, as is Carrick. But they are powerful with their magic, and can conjure whatever they want.

Pyke has no weapon going in, but he's going to be in disguise. If things go downhill, he, too, can conjure one with his magic.

“What does this chick Charmaine look like?” Pyke asks the group. By the mere fact he didn't ask this directly of Lucien leads me to believe Carrick didn't tell him the whole ill-fated love story. Which is fine—it's irrelevant to get the help we need from him.

Of course, I'm sure Carrick was clear with Pyke that Micah was no ordinary monster and it could turn extremely dangerous. Just as I'm sure that's probably the main reason Pyke wanted to join us... for the danger and excitement.

God, if he only knew what we were up against outside of just trying to retrieve the Blood Stone. He wouldn't be so cavalier then.

Lucien waves a hand and a holographic image floats in the middle of our circle, an actual lifelike rendering of what Charmaine looked like. She was beautiful, no doubt. Or is beautiful, I should say, since we think she's trapped in the stone. Wavy strawberry-blonde hair, incredibly blue eyes, and an exquisitely perfect face and body. She's delicate looking with fine bones and a sweet smile, which I'm assuming must represent her personality the most in Lucien's memory. She was the Light Fae to Micah's Dark Fae, after all.

Pyke studies her figure, which is clothed in a Grecian-styled gown in a blue that matches her eyes with a gold braided belt and sandals on her feet. She has a gold circlet on top of her head that holds a blue gemstone in the center, also the same color as her eyes.

“Pretty girl,” Pyke says almost dismissively, and then, before our eyes, he transforms into the exact likeness of Charmeine.

I have to wonder what Micah will do when he sees her. Will he know immediately that it’s a trick, or will he think she’s escaped? Most likely, he’ll think her a mirage, but will hopefully be intrigued enough or maybe lovesick enough to check it out.

“Any last questions before we go in?” Carrick asks.

No one says a word.

Carrick turns his attention to Boral and Zaid, merely saying, “Protect her with your lives.”

Zaid replies, “It shall be done.”

Boral doesn’t say anything, but part of me thinks he does that just to irritate Carrick.

“Then let’s do this,” Carrick says, pulling the relic we had retrieved from Hungary out of his pocket. With some ancient words I don’t understand, a small chime comes from the device and I hear an audible click snapping into place.

He hands the device to Boral. “This will keep the rip in the veil open for a quick escape if you need to get Finley back through.”

Boral nods, takes the bronze relic, and tucks it in his own pocket.

No more instructions are needed. Lucien, who is the only one of us who knows how to access Micah’s realm, makes a slicing motion in the air. A seam opens, revealing the darkness of the once-beautiful island. Directly in front of us is a boulder the size of a mini-bus, sitting on packed, black sand. It’s so big I can’t see any of the scenery beyond.

I can tell where the Crimson River is, though, because there’s a hazy reddish-orange glow in the sky beyond it. It surprisingly provides adequate light so that when my eyes adjust, I can see the rise of the craggy mountains beyond and

several other boulders of near the same size around us spaced twenty to thirty feet from one another. They sort of remind me of a Stonehenge in that they seem strategically placed, but all I really care about is that they provide adequate cover.

We step through the rip, Carrick leading first, then Lucien. Next is Pyke looking very Charmaine-like, then me followed by Zaid and Boral. I glance over my shoulder to see the forest clearing we left behind before the edges of the rip start to draw together.

I'm amazed when it doesn't close all the way, though, leaving a very thin line where I can see a thicket of cedar trees beyond. Boral stands station there as his instructions are to keep the rip open and to do that, the relic must remain close. He's the last who would join any battle, but, of course, I expect he and Zaid's primary purpose is to grab me and throw me through if things go bad.

I move a few steps from Boral to get closer to the group, hidden from anything on the other side—namely the entrance to Micah's cave.

Lucien points to the left of the boulder and tells Pyke, "The beach of the barren ocean is just around that way. You'll need to walk about half a mile before you see the entrance to the cave. Don't get close, though... stay at least fifty yards back."

"And do what once I get there?" Pyke asks, and I'm jarred that his voice is feminine to match the beautifully ethereal guise of Charmaine, although there's no way to know how closely he actually matches her tone.

"Once you reach it, just walk slowly back and forth," Lucien says. "Micah sits at his table, which faces the dead ocean, and broods. A lot. He'll see you at some point."

My curiosity gets the better of me, and I move to the opposite end of the boulder to peek around it. There are more boulders, and the lowest edge of the mountain is a sloping quarry of black shale. It leads up to various rocky ledges, and

past that, to the sharp peaks. I can see where the beach's edge meets the stone mountain, but I can't tell in the dim light where the cave's entrance would be. I suppose about half a mile down as Lucien told Pyke.

My eyes are drawn to the Crimson River, that flow of lava—a burning swirl of tortured souls—that comes from the Underworld and defies gravity to climb up into one of the mountains.

It's amazing that Micah had the power—obviously fueled by hate—to call forth the Crimson River from the depths of hell and into his realm.

My gaze shifts slowly to the horizon from where the river is flowing, and it's chilling to know the Underworld is just over that way.

Of course, I don't need that knowledge to be chilled. Despite the amount of heat that the lava must be putting off, the wind is blowing steadily and it's pretty damn cold. All of us wore cold-weather hiking gear, so I'm fairly warm except for my face.

Still, the desolate and barren place created from hate and betrayal makes me shiver hard enough my teeth chatter.

A hand comes down on my shoulder, and Carrick is there. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I reply with a smile. “Just... this place is creepy.”

He doesn't reply because I stated the obvious. Instead, he dips his head so he can lock his eyes on mine. “No heroics, okay?”

“Correct,” I readily agree. We've been through this many times. I'm here to watch and potentially as a last resort to use my magic, but, mostly, I'm pretty much decoration.

“And if something happens to me—”

“—you'll come back to me,” I finish.

“We'll always find each other, okay?” he presses seriously.

“Yes, Carrick.” I bring a gloved hand to his face. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” he replies, then looks over his shoulder at his brother. “You ready?”

Lucien nods and moves our way. They’re going to be using the boulders for cover. Eventually, they’ll climb the rocky ledges to a place near the cave entrance to wait for Micah to exit. I expect the journey won’t take them long given their speed and strength, although they won’t use magic unless necessary. It’s the best way to stay under the radar.

Once more, Carrick dips his head down as his hand goes to the back of my head. He gives me a hard kiss, then presses his forehead to mine. I inhale, taking in his scent, and then he’s gone with the wind, Lucien right along with him.

“Guess that’s my cue,” Pyke says, once again startling me with that sweet voice coming out of the likeness of Charmaine.

I give him a thumbs-up and an encouraging smile. “Good luck.”

He winks at me, then starts walking around the left side of the boulder and disappears.

Titus is the only one who has a purpose somewhere other than here. He’s not going to follow Carrick and Lucien onto the mountain to reach the cave, but rather get as close as he can using the boulders to hide his approach. He’ll set up somewhere halfway between where Boral, Zaid, and I will wait at the veil’s rip and the cave entrance. His job is to attack Micah from behind if necessary once Pyke draws him out to the beach.

In other words, if Micah goes after Pyke, Titus is going to be the one to help fight him while Carrick and Lucien get the chalice and Blood Stone.

“You good?” Titus asks as he steps near me, his eyes going to Boral suspiciously. He doesn’t know their past because I didn’t think it was my place to tell him. But he can sense

there's something dark and sinister with Boral, and I suspect that's all of his annihilator training.

"I'm good," I say, then give him a quick hug. "Please be safe."

"Always," he replies with a grin, then takes off in a crouching run away from us. I look around the edge of the boulder to see him make it to the next one. He doesn't wait long before he disappears around that one, and I can see him no longer.

Zaid goes to the side of the boulder Pyke went around, moving close enough he can look around to watch Pyke's progress. I promised Carrick I would heed his wishes to remain safe, and because there's nothing for me to do in the now, I move over to Boral and the rip he's holding open with the relic.

"You seem unusually close to Carrick," he comments casually. "You two haven't known each other long, yet I'm sensing a very deep connection."

I ignore his comments as I'm not about to share with him the beautiful and complicated love story I share with Carrick.

But I'm not standing near Boral strictly because I'd promised Carrick I'd be good.

I want information.

Throwing my thumb over my shoulder, I say, "The Crimson River. It's flowing from the horizon to the mountain."

"Weird, right?" Boral says in a sly voice. He knows about my sister and my interest in the Underworld.

"The myth says the river starts from a pit in the Underworld where evil souls are burned. I'm assuming... the Underworld is somewhere past that horizon?"

Boral grins, but, to my dismay, he shakes his head. "There's still a veil that separates it. The river might come through it at Micah's magical command, but you still have to get through a veil to go into the Underworld."

“I can do that.” Boral’s eyebrows shoot upward in surprise, and I feel the need to qualify. “Well, I think I can do that. If I choose to believe in my powers.”

“Sounds a little wishy-washy to me,” he points out.

“No matter,” I say with a wave of my hand, not wanting to engage in evasive sparring with him.

I turn slightly to look at Zaid, who is peering around the boulder to watch Pyke. I ignore Boral, and I can sense he doesn’t like I ended the conversation as he shuffles in place as if agitated.

Finally, he confirms the information I’ve wanted to hear since I learned from which direction the lava flowed. “You can follow the river to the Underworld. But the veil is on the other side of the river, and you’d need a bridge to cross it.”

I turn back to look at him, unable to hide my excitement. “That I’m sure I can do.”

Because if we defeat Micah and kill him, and I can get back into this realm using the relic, which is now set to the rip that Boral is holding, and I can cross the river with a magical bridge, then I could rip the veil there to sneak into the Underworld and rescue Zora.

Boral studies me as if he’s trying to penetrate my inner thoughts. “You and Carrick are very close,” he muses.

“So you pointed out,” I reply, not deigning to elaborate and moving a little to the right of the boulder to see if I can make out Carrick and Lucien moving across the rocky ledges or Titus sneaking among the boulders. It’s too dark for me to see details.

“Carrick would take you to the Underworld to rescue Zora,” Boral says confidently. “So why all the questions about trying to sneak in a back way?”

I pivot and turn back to Boral, taking a few steps toward him. “It’s my backup plan. In case something happens to him today.”



Understanding dawns on Boral's face, and his voice is somber when he says, "Then I'd like to offer my services to help you sneak in if something happens to Carrick."

"Why?" I ask, not suspiciously, but genuinely interested to know why he'd ever want to go back to the hell he'd escaped from.

"Because helping you might help bridge the relationship with my son," he replies simply.

This doesn't surprise me. It's been Boral's motivation to help us from the start. Maddox and Carrick are skeptical, and Zaid is downright disbelieving of it.

But not me.

I believe him.

"You know," Boral says, dropping his voice as he gives a quick glance at Zaid. "I don't hate Carrick."

Now, this does shock me, and my chin jerks inward. Boral has shown nothing but disdain for Carrick and vice versa. I know it's rooted in jealousy that Zaid is more loyal to Carrick now than he ever was to Boral in the centuries they were causing havoc together in this world.

Boral sees the shock on my face, then nods in understanding. "It's true I don't like Carrick, but I don't hate him. He saved my son from torture."

"Oh," I whisper, understanding that would be something to be grateful about if Boral genuinely loves his son like he claims and as I tend to believe.

"The thought of Zaid pinned to that tree, not able to die and in pain, to punish himself for the sins I led him to..." His voice gets a little choked up, but he coughs to clear it. "Well, let's just say I could never repay Carrick for helping him."

I smile, but it's sad. "I don't think Zaid will ever forgive you."

To my surprise, Boral chuckles. “That’s a very mortal thing to say. I have an eternity to work on him.”

I can’t help but laugh because he has a point.

“Pyke has reached the area of the cave entrance,” Zaid says over his shoulder.

That shocks me out of my conversation with Boral, and I hurry to Zaid’s side to look around the boulder.

Way in the distance, I can see the figure of Charmeine walking slowly for a few paces before turning around and pacing back the same distance. My gaze moves to the mountain, but it’s too dark to see the entrance from here. I move further around the boulder, looking up the mountain and scanning the other boulders. I can’t see Carrick, Lucien, or Titus, but I didn’t really expect to.

My gaze shifts back to Pyke, who plays the role of a forlorn, lost woman walking a beach to perfection.

How long before Micah notices her?

A rumble forms in the distance, and the ground shakes slightly under my feet. My head snaps Zaid’s way. “An earthquake.”

He shakes his head, brow furrowed into deep lines of worry. “Micah.”

## CHAPTER 17

### *Carrick*

CARRICK WATCHED PYKE slowly walk back and forth along the beach. He and Lucien clung to a narrow ledge that sat just above the cave entrance, waiting for Micah to come out.

Ready to get this over with, Carrick's energy hummed within him. The collection and safekeeping of the Blood Stone would end all of this, and Finley would be safe.

For the now, anyway. They both knew they'd have to deal with Rune's curse after.

The first indication that something was happening was the fall of loose pebbles and shale from above Carrick. He didn't dare look up, wanting to protect his eyes, but then he felt the rumbling.

And it seemed the entire mountain was starting to shake.

Turning his head, he looked over his shoulder in question at Lucien, who stood beside him, hands gripping hard to a small outcropping of rock to maintain his balance on the ledge. His brother merely shook his head to indicate he didn't know what was happening.

The rumbling grew stronger and a piece of the ledge Carrick stood on broke away, causing one leg to swing outward. He tightened his grip on the stony mountain to prevent falling, but Lucien had also reached out and grabbed him by the bicep until he could gain his balance. Shuffling to the left, Carrick was able to find a wider piece of the ledge to stand on.

Glancing out to the shores of the dead ocean, Pyke, in his Charmeine glamour, had stopped walking and faced the entrance of the cave. Carrick wondered if he could see them

standing on the ledge from the glow of the Crimson River, but Pyke never looked their way. Merely kept his gaze on the cave.

And then something Carrick wasn't prepared for came out of the cave.

Clearly needing to duck down to clear the top of the entrance, a huge beast came ambling out. He stood at least fifteen feet tall and his shoulder clipped some rock as he exited, causing large pieces to fall to the ground.

Carrick again looked over his shoulder at Lucien, muttering in a low voice. "He's a lot bigger than you described."

"He's definitely grown a bit since I last saw him," Lucien gritted back.

The ground shook with each lumbering step Micah took as he came out of the cave. Pyke's eyes flared slightly as his head tipped back, clearly as surprised as Carrick and Lucien had been.

Other than his enormous size, Micah was as Lucien had described in the *Libri Mysteria*. He was covered in hair all over his body, patches thicker on his back, chest, and thighs. Not only had his feet turned cloven, but his lower half was clearly animal, shaped like a goat with reversed knee joints. His arms were muscular, hanging slightly lower than a human's, and he had a long, whip-like tail coming out just above his buttocks that had a triangular-shaped end.

It was his face, though, that made him a monster. His hair was black, shaggy, and matted. There was little skin showing through the fur except around his eyes and his nose, which was mashed in. His lower jaw jutted with yellow fangs curved upward at the corners, and saliva dripped from one corner of his mouth. The horns on his head sprouted from just behind his temple, but rather than curving upward, they flared out to the side and curved slightly downward.

Sure, he was big, but Carrick knew he wasn't invincible just because of his size. While it was unknown if his powers had grown along with his frame, they had brought sufficient might to this realm to handle him.

Micah advanced toward Pyke, his shaggy head tipped to the side. While his face was partially turned away from where Carrick stood, he could only assume his expression would be one of curiosity and wonder.

He supposed it could be rage, but he thought not as Micah's ambling was slow and steady... almost hesitant.

When Micah was a good twenty yards from the cave entrance, Carrick made ready to jump down, knowing Lucien would follow. Their superhuman prowess would ensure they'd land soft as feathers and not draw Micah's attention.

But before Carrick could take a step off the ledge, Lucien once again grabbed his arm and his attention. With a sharp nod down toward Micah, Lucien growled. "Look at his hand."

Carrick's gaze moved away from his brother and down to the beast. His heart sank.

He was holding the chalice, which looked almost like a toy in his meaty grip.

"Fuck," Carrick muttered. "Change of plans."

"Let's ambush him," Lucien suggested in a low voice.

"I'll go first," Carrick whispered in response. "I'll aim for that arm to get him to drop the chalice. You grab it and run like hell."

Lucien's expression turned hard with determination. "I'm not one to run, but, in this instance, I'm with you."

"Let's do it then." Carrick prepared once again to make the jump, but before he did, movement caught his eye. Pyke was walking toward Micah.

"What the fuck is he doing?" Lucien grumbled in exasperation. "He's going to get himself killed."

Carrick thought the same thing, but he wasn't surprised. Pyke might be shallow and self-centered, but when he committed to a battle, he committed all the way.

He was absolutely not a coward.

"Is that really you, Charmaine?" Micah asked, his voice deep but also warped in a way that gave it a staccato sort of beat to his words.

"It's my spirit," Pyke replied, his voice coming across the distance clearly but with a ghostly sort of quality he had put to it. Carrick was impressed, even more so when Pyke said, "I managed to collect enough magic to project myself out. So we could talk, Micah."

The great beast's head tipped the other way. "You want to talk?"

His tone wasn't angry, merely incredulous. Not as if he couldn't believe she was standing in front of him, but rather that she merely wanted to talk after all these millennia.

"I'm lonely," Pyke said in a forlorn voice. "I want you to release me."

Carrick had to admit... that was more brilliant than he would have thought Pyke able to come up with on the fly. If he could convince Micah to release Charmaine, that would increase their chances of saving her life.

Micah didn't reply, merely tipped his head the other way. Carrick wondered if his intellect had devolved along with his form.

Pyke's gaze moved to the chalice, then back up to Micah's face. "Put the cup down. Come walk with me, and we'll talk."

Carrick held his breath, wondering what Micah would do. After being alone for so long, this had to be jarring for the beast to take in.

Micah's head dipped, lifting his hand to study the chalice. Carrick could see the red of the Blood Stone, and he was amazed by its brightness against the black of the cup. As if it

glowed from within, and he figured it might be the real Charmaine inside doing that.

Head lifting to look back at Pyke, Micah once again asked. “Is that really you, Charmaine?”

And this time, there was no wonder or curiosity in his tone. Carrick tensed as he heard the skepticism.

Before Pyke could answer, Micah bellowed, “Is it really you?”

The roar of his voice was so loud, Pyke actually stumbled back a few feet and more pieces of rock fell upon Carrick and Lucien.

It was a decidedly quick move. Far too quick for Pyke to react.

Micah thrust his arm forward, aiming the chalice and, more importantly, the Blood Stone right at Pyke. For a brief moment, Carrick was terrified it would kill Pyke, but whatever magic Micah threw his way did nothing more than melt his glamour away until there was nothing left but the body of a man.

Again, Micah roared, this time in fury at being fooled, and pulled his arm back—the intent he was going to thrust it toward Pyke and unleash his power clear.

“Shit,” Carrick cursed, leaping from the ledge straight at Micah.

Because of his strength, the push off from the ledge, and his superior agility enabled him to come down right on Micah’s right shoulder. Carrick used his momentum to wrap his arms around Micah’s thick bicep, his trajectory pulling Micah off-balance. The minute his feet hit the sand, Carrick did a half squat, then spun, twirling Micah a hundred and eighty degrees to disorient him. Rather than releasing him, he let the circle of his arms that were wrapped around Micah’s bicep slide down the length of his appendage. With a mighty heave, he yanked the chalice free from the beast’s hand.

Micah whirled on Carrick, bellowing in fury, and caught him in the chest with a vicious backhand. Carrick felt his sternum crack as well as several ribs when he was launched into the air. He came down hard on his back, but kept his grip on the chalice intact, drawing it in close to him as he jumped from the ground.

Advancing on Carrick, Micah's eyes were red with fury, and his fingertips sparked with what looked like arcs of blue electricity. He made it no more than three steps before Carrick saw Lucien flying through the air, having made his leap from the edge of the mountain. He came down hard with his heavy boots catching the back of Micah's right leg, which buckled and toppled the beast like a house of cards.

He was slow to get up, but not because he was hurt.

But because his gaze was riveted on Lucien, who had rolled and righted himself gracefully in between Micah and Carrick.

"Lucien," Micah growled, a long stream of saliva sliding out of the corner of his mouth.

Carrick knew he had but the briefest second to react, because Lucien's greatest fear was that Micah would go for Charmeine first. He pulled forth in his mind the image of the rip in the veil half a mile down the deadened beach and prepared to bend distance there when the chalice in his hand started vibrating.

The stone started to glow, going from red to white in the blink of an eye. The light was blinding and Carrick had to shield his eyes, but it was abruptly gone.

When he opened his eyes and blinked the spots away, he was stunned to see Charmeine—the real one and not Pyke—standing beside him.

Lucien turned slowly, perhaps sensing his love had been released. Carrick's gaze flicked to Micah, whose chest was heaving with fury.



“Lucien?” Charmaine said, her voice filled with wonder and relief and joy and every good feeling she must have at seeing her long-lost love.

“Charmaine,” he replied, voice cracking with emotion.

She flew the few short paces to him and then she was in his arms. Lucien kissed her hard.

Carrick’s heart warmed and he experienced a surge of joy for his brother, but it was short-lived as Charmaine tore away from the kiss. Her body stiffened and her back arched so severely, Lucien unwrapped his arms from around her and held her gently by the waist. When she let out an agonized scream of pain, Carrick’s eyes shifted to Micah, who held his arm out and aimed at Charmaine, his fist closed tightly as if he were holding something within it.

No, not holding.

Squeezing.

Squeezing Charmaine’s body with his magic.

Charmaine writhed in pain while Lucien watched helplessly. She screamed again. Carrick watched Micah’s expression, which was so hate-filled he wasn’t shocked when Charmaine went suddenly silent. Falling limp, Lucien caught her, cradled her, and lowered her gently to the ground as he fell to his knees. A small trickle of black blood—a nod to her fae heritage and not a darkness within her—slipped from the corner of her mouth.

Then, as all Light Fae do when they die, Charmaine burst apart in a shower of glowing white sparks, some carried off quickly by the wind and others falling to the ground where they extinguished.

Lucien bowed his head but a moment, but when he lifted it and turned slowly to look over his shoulder at Micah, Carrick was actually frightened by his expression.

It wasn’t angry, hurt, or even shocked.

It was devoid of everything, which was why Carrick was startled when Lucien came to his feet and flew at Micah. Despite the size difference, he caught the beast with his shoulder just at the waist and they both went flying several yards before hurtling to the ground, not twenty yards from the Crimson River.

It struck Carrick very quickly that Micah's powers had become so immense he was able to kill Charmaine, a Light Fae, without the use of iron. As far as he knew, the only fae with that power were Nimeyah, her husband Callidan, and their children, Deandra and Pyke. But just because Pyke had the power to do what Micah just did, did not mean he was immune to it being done to him.

"Go," Carrick shouted at Pyke, who was watching Lucien sitting on Micah's chest and punching him repeatedly in his monstrous face. Pyke jerked, looked at Carrick, and understood the missive.

He nodded and bent distance, disappearing. Carrick knew Pyke would go back to the rip and start urging the others through. Just as he knew Titus would be exiting, too. They had planned if Micah showed powers that could annihilate immortal creatures, Titus would become responsible for making sure Finley was protected. Carrick could only assume—and hope to fuck—that he was with her now.

The heat from the lava river caused sweat to pour from Lucien's face, but his expression was dead despite the unsavory conditions as he continued to pummel the beast. Micah roared in fury at the assault Lucien was relentlessly hammering down on him. With a mighty heave, he used both fists to punch Lucien in the chest. The force was enough to throw Lucien off and he tumbled across the black beach before coming to his knees.

Glancing down at the chalice in his hand, Carrick was startled to see the Blood Stone was still red, but the color of the large center facet had deepened so immensely it looked almost black.

He had the chalice and the Blood Stone in his hand. He could feel the power they still held, which was just as deep as when Charmaine was inside the gem. Pulling her out and killing her had not weakened either the stone or the chalice.

Lucien came to his feet, as did Micah.

Demi-god versus Dark Fae monster.

Chests heaving, determination in both their eyes.

They'd gotten closer to the Crimson River, and Micah threw it a wary glance as he attempted to circle on Lucien.

Put him closer to the river.

Lucien wouldn't give the ground though, and flew at Micah. Micah responded, lunging toward Lucien with such speed, Carrick barely could register it. Both used their preternatural powers to pummel each other in a blinding blur.

Another glance at the chalice and Carrick was torn. He knew Lucien would want him to escape while Micah was otherwise pre-occupied. It would ensure everyone but Lucien's safety.

But looking back at the whirling, speeding creatures trying to kill each other, Carrick knew he couldn't go. While he'd stack Lucien's physical power up against Micah's—even though Micah was so much taller and wider—Carrick was afraid of the magic Micah now possessed. Seeing him obliterate Charmaine with nothing but his mind and a squeeze of his hand had Carrick worried.

It really wasn't a choice at all.

He'd stay and watch. He wouldn't interfere if Lucien wanted to kill Micah with his bare hands. But he would be ready to lend his magic if Micah decided to pull on his twisted powers.

The punches were so fast that the sounds of fists connecting to flesh sounded like the rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun firing.

Then their punches slowed abruptly, not because of exhaustion but because Lucien was going with power versus speed. He caught Micah in an uppercut so forceful that Carrick heard his jaw break.

Another punch, this one to Micah's abdomen, was so powerful that black blood sprayed from Micah's mouth, ensuring there was some major internal damage just done.

Micah bent at the waist in pain. Lucien brought his knee up viciously, connecting with Micah's chin. The already broken lower jaw swung grotesquely to the side, and the creature's roar of pain hurt Carrick's ears.

Lucien spared a moment to look at his brother, shock on his face to see him standing there. It was clear he had thought Carrick should have taken the opportunity to escape with the Blood Stone.

It was that moment spared, only long enough for the brothers' eyes to connect, that gave Micah an opportunity. Carrick barely saw it coming, but he saw enough to know magic was being used. Micah's right arm lit up, a blinding white light from shoulder to fist. He charged at Lucien, broken jaw swinging but not seeming to affect Micah's determination.

Just as Lucien looked his way, Micah swung a powerful uppercut and caught Lucien under the chin. Carrick would forever remember the moment as it seemed to happen in slow motion.

Lucien was lifted off his feet, propelled upward into the air by not only the punch but also the magic that powered it. Ten, fifteen, twenty feet upward, and then he was sailing away from Micah.

Toward the Crimson River.

Carrick was horrified as Lucien's head turned, looked down below him, and he started flailing his arms and legs as if it could stop his trajectory. Carrick raised his hand, powered his magic, and prepared to pluck his brother out of the air.

Something slammed into him, an invisible freight train, and he went hurtling several feet, knowing Micah had hit him with magic. When he slammed into the ground, the chalice came free and tumbled several feet away. He ignored it, instead jumping to his feet to save his brother.

But when he turned that way, Lucien was splashing into the river.

For a moment, Carrick thought it would be okay. Lucien didn't sink but rather seemed to bob on the surface, his chest and head above the molten fire. He didn't catch fire or burn, just bobbed there.

His gaze went to Carrick, and their eyes locked.

Carrick saw it clearly on his brother's face.

He was relieved.

It was then that he sank below the surface of the Crimson River and disappeared.

Micah turned Carrick's way, and Carrick wasted no time. His brother was gone, but the chalice was within reach.

Lunging for the magical cup and gemstone attached to it, Carrick saw from the corner of his eye that Micah was rushing him. Carrick pushed from the ground hard, dove for the cup, and nabbed it from the blackened sand. As he did, he envisioned the rip in the veil, saw it open, and saw everyone on the Earth realm side looking back at the dark island expectantly.

Yanking hard, he pulled it toward him with a swiftness he'd never accomplished before. He rolled to his feet right as the rip came to a stop right before his face, and he once again made a dive to get through as quickly as he could.

And it was as he was diving through the rip, eyes locked on Finley, whose own flared with surprise as he tumbled through to the forest floor, that he became aware something was holding onto his leg.

Micah had come along for the ride.

“The chalice,” Micah roared as he jumped to his feet. He stomped over to a pine tree near the edge of the clearing. “Give me the chalice.”

Without hesitation, Titus and Pyke rushed to Carrick’s side to lend their strength and magic. Carrick was relieved to see Boral and Zaid herding Finley to the opposite side of the clearing.

It was startling to see Micah uproot a thirty-foot pine tree with absolutely no effort and swing it hard toward Carrick, but it was Titus who rushed forth to meet the onslaught with his battle-ax held low to the ground. Although human, Titus had a tattoo that was imbued with magic from *Semper Terra* that he pulled on to fortify his body and the ax. As the middle of the pine tree barreled at him, he swung his ax in an upward arc, cleaving the thick trunk in two.

The top half went hurtling, and Carrick turned to watch in horror as it started to come down on Finley. He prepared to flash to her, but instead was amazed to see Boral and Zaid push her down to her knees and wrap their bodies over her for protection.

Even more amazing was that up through their huddled mass, a filmy shield erupted—clearly Finley’s magic—and it covered them as the top part of the tree crashed down. It bounced harmlessly against the shield before it rolled away.

Carrick was certain they were safe, and he could only hope they stayed under the shield.

Whirling back on Micah, who tossed the other half of the tree away furiously, Carrick had a sharp image of his brother sinking into the Crimson River. He welcomed the rush of fury through his body that he had not allowed himself to feel before.

It overwhelmed him for a moment, but then he centered it. Micah started to rush, bellowing curses, and Carrick conjured a spear with a large iron tip. It appeared in his right hand and

he cocked his arm back, holding securely to the Blood Stone chalice in the other.

The spear flew swiftly from his grasp, straight at Micah, and, with utter precision, pierced his breastbone covering his heart. The minute iron touched the heart or brain, a fae should die.

But Micah did not.

At least not immediately.

He snarled in pain as he fell to his knees and attempted to remove the spear, but it had gone all the way through his body and out below his shoulder blade. When he pulled on it, the flared end caught against bone, and he threw his head back and brayed in frustration.

“Just die already,” Pyke muttered as they watched a weakened Micah fall forward, catching himself with one hand before he face-planted into the dirt.

He lifted his head with difficulty to glare at Carrick through a fall of dirty, matted hair that had fallen over one eye. The beast had no clue who Carrick was or why he wanted the cup. He didn’t know his brother was the one he had sent into the Crimson River.

But he did know enough to taunt, “At least Lucien and Charmaine got what was coming to them.”

Micah’s arm supporting him started shaking and his eyes drooping as his heart finally succumbed to the poison of iron. Knowing it wouldn’t do much of anything, he threw his other arm out—one last-ditch effort to hurt Carrick.

A blast of icy magic slammed into Carrick, who had not been expecting it, and tossed him back several feet, where he went down hard on his back. The impact once again knocked the chalice from his hand, but he didn’t worry about it.

Because as he lifted his head, he saw Micah finally collapse forward onto the ground. He gave one last heaving, shuddering breath and went still.

It was only once his body immediately turned black and started smoking that Carrick could let out a sigh of relief. As the ashes started to rise and float away, he let his head drop back down to the ground and heaved out all the air in his lungs.

He didn't get respite, though, as he heard running feet. Finley flung herself on top of him, hugging him fiercely as he laid on the ground. He chuckled, wrapping his arms around her, and they just held each other.

When Finley finally let Carrick up, they rose to their feet as everyone else started to draw inward. Pyke walked over, picked the chalice up, and examined it before tossing it to Carrick. "Hope it was worth it."

Carrick easily caught the cup just as Finley asked, "Where's Lucien?"

Looking back to the rip in the veil that was still hanging open, Carrick closed it with his magic before telling the group, "Lucien didn't make it."

"What?" Finley exclaimed in horror, taking his hand in hers.

Carrick pulled his hand free from hers. Instead, he wrapped it around her shoulders to pull her in close. He bent, placing a kiss on her head. "Let's head home. I'll tell you all about it."



## CHAPTER 18

### *Finley*

“IT’S UGLY,” RAINEY says thoughtfully, but not with mean intent. Just observation. “The whole of this is called the Blood Stone? Even though it’s a cup?”

My eyes drift from the Blood Stone over to my friend. She’s sitting opposite me at the library table. Forearms crossed on the table with her chin resting on top. It’s brought her eye level to the chalice.

I mimic her posture, my own chin on my arms and my gaze going back to the cup we’d taken from Micah two days ago. “I don’t think it has an official title, but it’s definitely one object now. We’ve just been calling it the Blood Stone.”

Carrick had attempted to remove the gem from the cup when we got back to the condo, but he didn’t try too hard as he was fearful of destroying it. While it had once been a singular chalice carved from meteor stone, and a singular stone jewel turned ruby-like after dipped into the Crimson River, it was now one.

Blood Stone seemed better than just calling it the Cup.

Regardless, it’s more unique than anything I’ve ever seen in my life.

“It’s powerful,” I reply, my tone not apologizing for the way it looks but pointing out it has something better than looks. “I can feel it.”

Rainey’s head pops up, head tipped in curiosity. “Really? What does it feel like?”

I also lift my head, straightening in my chair. Rainey does the same. My gaze shifts from her to the chalice. “It feels like that moment when you’re on a roller coaster, and you’re just

hovering at the top of a long drop. That combination of fear and excitement, and the possibility it could be either or both, but that whatever you get, it will be the thrill of your life.”

It’s not exactly ugly—the chalice—but rather crude. The stone it was carved from left a cup about six inches high from top to base. The cup and the base are roughly the same diameter, maybe about three inches, and the stem is thick. The chalice’s interior couldn’t hold more than four ounces or so of a liquid, so I don’t think it was created to slake thirst. My theory is it was created in the fashion of whatever chalices looked like at that period in history so it could hide in plain sight.

“Do you want it? The power?” she asks.

I blink a few times, looking away from the cup back to her. I’m truthful with her because I know I can be. “If it would stop the prophecy, then yes... I want it.”

Carrick and I have talked about the chalice a lot the last few days. When we got back from Micah’s realm, we examined it thoroughly. It seemed to me, not just by look but by touch, that the Blood Stone and the chalice had fully merged to become one. When I touch the gem—darkened in the middle since Charmaine’s death—it feels dark and somewhat sinister. When I touch just the stone of the chalice, it feels neither dark nor light, but rather just ready to be used.

Carrick said it felt the same to him. “It’s like the chalice is the powerful body and the stone is the magical soul.”

That was such a good way to put it.

Rainey settles back in her seat. It’s just us girls as it’s a workday. Myles is at his job, and Rainey came over on her lunch break. The rebuild on One Bean is progressing nicely, and today the new flooring was going to be installed. Rainey was hoping I’d take a look at it tomorrow, but honestly... my heart hasn’t been into my coffee shop. I was vague in my commitment.

I reach out and slide the chalice to the side, so it's not in between us. I'm tired of looking at it.

"Is Carrick okay?" she asks.

My fingers play with a lock of my hair hanging over my shoulder as I consider her question. "I think so. He and Lucien weren't overly close, but they were brothers and Lucien was helping us out. I think he feels guilty that he couldn't save him."

"Doesn't sound like he could do anything," Rainey points out. She and Myles are fully up to speed on what happened as I'd called them as soon as we got back to the condo after defeating Micah. I knew they'd be waiting on pins and needles.

"I've told him that, and he knows it. I guess it still doesn't feel good to watch your brother get taken by the Crimson River."

None of us know what it means. The river itself is almost mythical, but it's supposedly filled with evil souls stuck there for eternity. We know the river was able to seal Charmeine within the stone, another representation of its powerful nature. We are assuming the stone itself now has unlimited potential since its little bath in the river of souls.

But what did it actually do to Lucien? Carrick said he didn't catch fire or burn, but rather seemed just slowly to get pulled down into it.

Does that mean he drowned in it?

Flowed with the current somewhere else where he got out safely?

Or could it have turned him into something dark the way the gem was changed into the Blood Stone?

My thought was if the souls were stuck there for eternity, that perhaps Lucien was, too. Maybe the river was inescapable.

Carrick had no answers, and he has been reaching out to the gods every day to see if one will tell him what happened to his brother. As of now, they're being silent, and that includes efforts to find out when Cato will release Maddox. We've not heard anything from him since he disappeared the day we left for Micah's realm.

While Carrick is worried for his brothers, he's more worried about what their absence means to me and the prophecy. The plan after retrieving the Blood Stone was to secure it and then go after Kymaris. He wanted his brothers by his side for that battle, not to necessarily help defeat her, but to help protect me because it was my battle, too.

Carrick also needed them to help protect the Blood Stone from any attempts made by Kymaris to get it if she ever finds out we have it. He had wanted them to combine magic and reinforce the protections around the condo. I had offered my magical services to combine with Carrick's, but he kindly explained that my powers were too unknown at this point to rely on them.

He had a point, I suppose, but no matter... I trust him.

Boral has been hanging out back in Kymaris' camp, keeping an eye on them. He hasn't reported in since we got back, so I'm assuming they're still looking for both the Blood Stone and the twelfth Dark Fae she needs for the ritual.

Now there's nothing to do but wait for Lucien's fate to be revealed, Maddox to return to the fold, and for the October new moon to roll around while hoping we can protect the Blood Stone until then.

"Is that thing just going to stay down here in the library?" Rainey asks, tipping her head toward the cup and bringing me out of my thoughts. "I'd at least thought it would be in a fortified safe or a bank vault or something."

I laugh, because in our regular human life, that would be the most obvious thing. "As long as it's within the confines of the condo, there are better protections around us than any safe

or vault could give. Still... Carrick would like to fortify them more if he can when Maddox gets back.”

“Why not just take the Blood Stone somewhere else? Another realm or something? Just leave secretively. There’s no way Kymaris could find you.”

“We could,” I admit, and Carrick and I had discussed it. “But we can’t stay hidden forever, and we suspect there would be another new moon she could perform the ritual on. Also, who’s to say she won’t find us? We don’t know the magnitude of her powers. Regardless, we feel like we have to make our stand to end this.”

“So, it’s safe here,” she concludes softly. “And nothing to do but wait.”

I’d been lamenting just that thing, but something strikes me like a bolt of lightning. I smile at Rainey slyly. “Not nothing to do.”

“Why do you have that look on your face?” she asks skeptically.

“Because we have a wedding to plan,” I announce, pleased with myself to have given us something to fill our time.

Rainey frowns, taking a little bit of the wind from my sails. “Is this really the right time?”

Leaning forward, I look at her solemnly. “It’s the best time, Rainey.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I assure her with confidence. It will be good for us to have something to take our minds off the darkness facing us. “I understand from listening to Fallon go on and on about her wedding to Blain how much there is to do. It could take months to book out your venue—assuming it’s not overrun with demons—get your wedding dress picked out, test cakes, and all that good stuff. We might as well start now.”

Rainey smiles, but it’s half-hearted. Her gaze briefly drops down to the table before her eyes come back to me. “I don’t

want to wait months and months to marry Myles.”

“When were you thinking?” I ask.

She hesitates, ducks her head slightly, and gives me a sheepish smile. “Sooner rather than later.”

“Oh,” I reply, surprised she wants to move so quickly knowing the perfect wedding will take time to plan. “That’s not a lot of time, but I’m sure we can work it out.”

I ignore the slight welling of panic. I’ve fought Dark Fae, learned I’m destined to die, and have the responsibility of the world on my shoulders, but the thought of helping her get a wedding together in the next few weeks freaks me out a bit.

“I want to do it before the October new moon,” Rainey says quietly. “Everything is moving so fast, and dangers are coming every day. Look how much has happened in just the last five days.”

So much has happened in five days. Carrick returned and took me to the Hall of Histories, Deandra taught me how to use my powers, and we defeated Micah to get the Blood Stone. God knows what could happen tomorrow.

“Rainey,” I butt in softly, suddenly sad she feels the need to rush this out of a sense of doom.

“No,” she says adamantly, shaking her head. “Don’t make this into something morose. I want to be Myles’ wife. I have no doubts, so why are we waiting?”

“Um... because both your parents will kill you if you elope,” I suggest playfully.

“But I don’t want to elope,” she quips with a bright smile. “I want my core group there to witness it.”

“And just who is that core group?” I ask because we seem to be growing in numbers.

She starts ticking off people while holding up fingers on her hand. “You, Carrick, Zaid, Maddox, Titus, and Boral.”

“Boral?” I ask in surprise.

“He’s been very helpful,” she replies with a nod. “And, obviously, Lucien if he... um... you know, comes back.”

I study my best friend, but I don’t detect a hint of rash impulsiveness. She’s speaking from the heart.

“Okay,” I say with a firm nod. “Let’s plan a quickie wedding. We have just under four weeks before the October new moon. Let’s pick a date.”

Without consulting a calendar, which tells me she’s given this some thought, Rainey says, “Two weekends from this one. September twenty-ninth.”

“Sounds like the perfect date,” I reply, reaching way to the right and pulling a spare yellow pad and pen toward me. I scribble *Sept 29*, then underline it three times. Looking back up to her, I ask, “Flowers?”

“Just a bouquet,” she answers, again so quickly I can tell she’s already put the mental work into this. I now know I’m just here for validation, but I want to add some effort.

So I say, “How about calla lilies?”

Rainey grins, eyes alight with joy. “Perfect.”

“Cake?” I query.

“The answer to cake should always be *yes*, but, in this instance, let’s do cupcakes for ease,” she suggests.

“I still think we should taste test,” I say as I write down *taste test as many flavors as possible*.

“For sure.” She giggles, but then her expression turns a bit serious. “But the dress... that has to be perfect. I know we’re going to have to buy off-the-rack, but I’d love to be able to go shopping together for it. Do you think Carrick will let you out?”

“Of course he will,” I say assuredly, but truthfully, I don’t know how he feels about it. The danger is increasing, but I’ve also tapped my powers. I’m not defenseless.

Regardless, there is absolutely no way I'm going to miss a girls' day shopping for a wedding dress with my one bestie to marry my other bestie. Carrick will have to deal with it, but I expect he'll come with us. That's fine by me, but he'll have to wait outside each store. This is a *sans man* event.

"Does Myles know you're planning this?" I think to ask.

"No, but he will when he comes by later to pick me up," she says with a sly wink. "But he'd love just to elope, to be honest."

"Seriously, your parents are going to be pissed," I tell her.

"If we make it through this apocalypse—"

"Prophecy," I correct.

"Sorry, but to me, this is apocalyptic," she counters. "So, if we make it through, I'm sure we'll have a big wedding and invite everyone else. No one will know we already did the deed with just the savior of the world, two demi-gods, maybe three, an annihilator, a daemon, and a Dark Fae. Of course, if they knew, they'd never believe it, so I guess that's moot. The point is, I just want to make it official. We can do the big shebang after you save the day."

I laugh but part of it's forced, because I just realized... even if I make it through the prophecy, there's no telling how long it will be before Rune decides I need to die to torment Carrick. If Rainey and Myles wait until after this is all over, there's a good chance I wouldn't be around to see them wed because of the curse.

It overwhelms me a bit with gratitude, so I push out of my chair and walk around the table to Rainey. Bending at the waist, I wrap her in a big hug that sort of bends her neck at an odd angle. I squeeze a little too tightly as she gasps, "What's this all about?"

I pull away, my eyes a little wet as I look down at her. "It's just... this makes me happy. You and Myles getting married. We need some happy around here."



## CHAPTER 19

### *Finley*

“**N**O HOLDING BACK,” Carrick says in warning.

I nod. “No holding back.”

“You hit me as hard as if I were Kymariss standing right in front of you,” he instructs with a serious look on his face.

“Got it.” I bounce on the balls of my feet, taking his words for the pep talk they are.

His hands come to my shoulders, and he bends slightly to peer into my eyes. “You are strong and in control of your magic.”

I roll my neck and repeat, “I am strong and in control of my magic.”

“That’s my girl,” he says as he presses a hard kiss to me before taking several paces back.

“Or,” I drawl in slight hesitation. “I could incinerate your condo?”

Carrick laughs and shakes his head. “I’m sure you’ll control yourself fine. But in the off chance you’re right, I put sort of a protection spell around the gym so any fires you might start can’t spread.”

I stop bouncing, and my jaw drops. “Did you really?”

His grin is playful. “Maybe,” is all he’ll commit to.

We woke up this morning, had a bit of a leisurely morning in bed, which translates into Carrick wanting to make love slowly rather than the sort of frenzy we often find ourselves falling into, especially with the October new moon getting closer. There were no regrets on spending lazy time together in

bed. After, we enjoyed an immense breakfast prepared by Zaid.

I'm eating more than I ever have, but my body is actually changing for the better. I'd always been on the thin side, but with as much as I'm working out and training nearly every day, Zaid has been packing me full of good proteins and vegetables so I've become incredibly toned in all the right muscles.

I have never felt stronger physically.

Magically... well... that's another story as I'm like a baby foal taking her first uneasy steps into a new life.

Today, Carrick announced we'd be training with magic only. Hence the little pep talk before we start.

"You ready?" he asks. He's now a good ten paces from me in the middle of the gym's open area.

"Ready."

"Okay," he says, studying me carefully while he thinks. I get a little distracted watching him watch me because he's so incredibly gorgeous in track pants and a t-shirt, hair actually a bit messy after his shower as he did nothing more than run his fingers through it after a rough towel dry. I don't think he's had a haircut in the last few months and the longer, semi-shaggy look is a pretty damn big change from the suave, perfectly styled hair.

It fits his prophecy-fighting personality better, for sure.

"Here's the scenario," Carrick says, and I have to blink away my dreamy thoughts of him. "You're walking down a dark alley at night by yourself, and you have no weapon on you."

"Why in the hell would I ever do that?" I ask teasingly.

Carrick merely cocks his eyebrow. "Do we really need to discuss the fact you went into a dark alley without a weapon and almost got killed by a succubus?"

My face heats, and I look off to the side in slight embarrassment.

“So... dark alley, no weapons,” Carrick repeats.

“Got it.”

“Boral decides to go all evil, has ratted you out to Kymaris, and she has ordered him to kill you. He jumps out from behind a dumpster, ready to attack.”

I purse my lips, putting a hand on my hip. “Really? You’re going to use Boral as part of our scenario?”

“Can’t stand the fucker,” Carrick mutters. “So why not?”

“You know he’s actually very grateful to you for saving Zaid,” I say, feeling that Boral would probably hate me sharing that, but oh well.

Carrick scoffs deep in his throat.

“You should cut him some slack,” I suggest primly.

“Never,” Carrick growls back, and I don’t respond. We’ll always be at an impasse where Boral is concerned. “Let’s imagine a Dark Fae has jumped out at you. I’m the Dark Fae. What do you throw at me?”

This isn’t a trick question because there are probably a dozen different things I could come up with off the top of my head. I may not have tried all the things I’d use to attack with my magic, but I have often imagined scenarios in my head.

It takes me no time at all to pull out the thing that makes the most sense.

A magical whip.

Warmth fires up in my chest without much effort at all. I move like I’m reaching into my non-existent backpack over my shoulder and I conjure the handle and thong that’s electric white-blue and crackles with electricity from behind my back. Even the handle is lit up, but it doesn’t hurt my hand.

Slicing my arm down hard, I send the thong toward Carrick, but I pull it back just a tad so it doesn't actually strike him. He wasn't expecting it, though, and he jumps back a few feet as the electrical arc comes his way. It makes a louder crack than my real whip does.

"Not bad." He grins. "Granted, that wouldn't kill a fae, but it would make them think twice about rushing you."

As I let my arm fall, the thong comes to rest on the floor in a lazy "S" shape. I twirl the handle a bit, making the thong swirl in a pretty pattern of light.

"Conjure a weapon to kill," Carrick commands, and I lift my head.

Easy as pie. I drop the electric light whip and before the handle hits the ground, the entire thing evaporates into nothing. Rolling my wrist, I imagine a battle-ax appearing, except I make a minor alteration. The ones that Carrick has are incredibly heavy, and I usually have to wield them with two hands once I start to get fatigued. I make this one a little smaller, not as weighty, and the grip perfectly fitted to my hand.

The weapon appears just as I imagine it.

I swing it above my head, put my other hand to the hilt, and then throw it straight at Carrick. In an impressive and, I must say, incredibly sexy show of his powers, he merely sidesteps slightly so the ax flies by him. But even more impressive and totally the hottest thing ever is when his hand shoots out and he catches the rotating ax perfectly by the handle as it starts to whiz by him.

With a wave of his hand, it disappears. "Hit me with something else."

I hold my hand out, palm up, and a fireball erupts. It feels cool as it hovers above my skin. I note this came so easy and automatically that I didn't feel my magic fire up with warmth in my chest, but rather the warmth seems to be just hovering there in the background.

In other words, it took little effort.

With exaggerated motions, I act like a pitcher on the big-league mound. Bringing the ball to my chest, stepping back with one foot, and then raising the other knee high before firing the flaming orb at Carrick.

He's grinning broadly at my playfulness as he conjures a wall of water to douse the flames. When the two magics hit, they evaporate into nothing but steam.

"Again," he demands.

I push both hands out toward him to conjure up a fierce wind. It flows across the gym and hits Carrick so forcefully he has to lean into it to stay upright. He holds it for a bit and his feet actually start to slide backward, but then he does some type of witchy mojo that turns the wind back at me.

It hits me so hard I go windmilling backward until I fall on my butt while Carrick doubles over with laughter.

Glaring at him, I just wait it out until he's finished. When he straightens, he tips his head with an impish smile of apology. "Sorry. But on the plus side, you are throwing magic almost effortlessly. You just have to be ready sometimes to fail to meet your objective or have it turned around on you. You should have thrown that bubble shield against the wind."

He's right, of course. I need to be thinking moves ahead, like a chess game. I can't assume what I throw is going to work. In fact, I think his point is to assume it won't.

Carrick motions with his hands to get up, and I do. "Now, throw something at me with the intent to kill, not harm. You weren't all that serious before."

"No," I say, aghast. "I'm absolutely not going to do that."

"Come on, Finley," he snaps, bracing his hands on his hips like he's a coach getting ready to lecture. "You have to be committed to kill. Playtime is over."

I shake my head, cross my arms. "I could never muster up intent to kill you."

“But you can’t kill me,” he points out. “So take that worry off your plate.”

“We don’t know that I can’t kill you,” I say softly, a sudden realization hitting me. It’s one thing for Sarvel to suggest my powers are limitless and indefinable, and something else to practice throwing fireballs to fight against Dark Fae and the like.

But it’s a completely different thing to understand that there’s a possibility I might have the power inside of me to kill a demi-god.

I think it’s a long shot. The gods could always bring him back in the snap of a finger. Chances are, I don’t have that type of ability.

However... I am an anomaly. No human has been able to do the things I’ve done, so we can’t be sure about anything.

I shake my head again. “Not going to do it.”

“Finley,” he admonishes, moving toward me.

“No. Not going to it,” I insist. “I can kill evil things, but I’m not going to throw around killing magic to test the theory you’re indestructible.”

“I am,” he replies smoothly.

“I’m sure Lucien wouldn’t agree,” I snap, then immediately regret it by the flash of pain that flickers in his eyes.

Of course, it was just a flicker. Carrick is far more adept at keeping his emotions from showing, but I’m absolutely horrified I said that to him. I open my mouth up to start a rush of apologies.

Carrick truly knows me better than I know myself, so before I can get a word out, he presses a hand over my mouth. “I know you didn’t mean that, and I also think it’s a valid reminder that we can’t know anything absolutely.”

When he removes his hand, I gush, “I am so fucking sorry, Carrick.”

His hand goes back over my mouth, and he shakes his head. “It’s fine. Besides, I’m confident Lucien isn’t gone for good.”

I let those words settle over me as I study his expression, which seems confident in that prediction. His bearing is commanding, as always, and I don’t sense a single vibe of worry from him.

Okay, he could be playing me so I don’t worry, but I’m going to choose to latch on to that positivity. My hand comes to his wrist, and I pull his hand from my mouth. But before I do, I press a soft kiss there. “Lucien will absolutely be back.”

Carrick’s eyes fire up with a tender warmth that always makes my heart catch when it happens because it happens when I say or do something that affects him on an emotional level. Therefore, it is no surprise what follows is a dip of his head to put his mouth on mine and then a kiss that if it were allowed to go on might eventually lead to us getting naked, but as it stands... we’re not alone.

A slight cough to get our attention has me jumping back from Carrick, and I wheel around to see Maddox and Cato standing in the gym.

Not near the door where someone would normally enter, but in the opposite corner, meaning they bent distance to get in here and who knows how long they’ve been there.

Maddox stands casually, thumbs tucked into the front belt loops of his jeans. He shoots me a wink, and I smile back.

Cato takes a step forward, and my attention goes to him. He inclines his head toward Carrick. “Apologies for needing your brother, but he is back now and at your disposal.”

I think it’s very odd he would apologize, but I don’t know Cato. I don’t know much about any of the gods really since we’ve never talked about them all that much. Carrick says

they're all fairly egocentric and standoffish and that while Veda is his favorite, she stays at arm's length too.

"What about Lucien?" Carrick demands angrily, and no doubt he's perturbed they haven't been responding to his requests.

Maddox jerks in surprise and my heart squeezes to realize... wherever he's been, Cato didn't tell him about Lucien.

"I cannot say," Cato replies in a deep but totally smooth voice that sounds like it should be recording Barry White cover songs.

"Can't or won't?" Carrick growls, which is impertinent but Cato seems unfazed.

"Is there a difference?" Cato counters, absolutely no irritation in his tone about being questioned. "The result is the same for you."

I wince because that was harsh. Cato is essentially saying it's none of Carrick's business regarding his brother, and it's a potent reminder of how little control these demi-gods have over their lives.

Cato turns to me and I straighten a bit, totally disconcerted to have the huge god who can command lightning, among other things, focused on me. He tips his head, "Good luck to you, Finley, in the upcoming prophecy. I'm pulling for you."

I blink in surprise, any feelings of intimidation evaporating. I even take a step closer to him, head tilted. "You are?"

Cato smiles, and wow... it is the most gorgeous smile ever. His teeth may be the most perfect I've ever seen, and they gleam against his mocha-colored skin. But it's not just that... his smile actually reaches his eyes. It makes him seem almost human.

Certainly approachable.

"Absolutely," he replies. "All of us are."



“Even Rune?” I can’t help but ask.

“Even Rune,” Cato says with a nod. “Or so he says.”

“If he’s rooting for Finley, it’s merely so he can kill her after she thwarts the prophecy,” Carrick says in a low growl. “Most likely, he’s lying.”

Cato’s gaze shifts to Carrick, and he nods. “You’re probably right about that.”

And with that... Cato disappears.

It shocks me to know that one god acknowledges another may be untruthful. But truly, it’s not like these beings are actually ethical. Look at what they’re making me do.

Look at the way they use the demi-gods.

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on with Lucien?” Maddox says, and Carrick and I turn his way.

I move into Carrick, slipping my hand in his. He squeezes it. Carrick tells his brother in a grim voice, “Things got bad when we went to Micah’s realm to get the Blood Stone.”

“Bad how?” Maddox asks, and it’s a tone I’ve never heard before from the big lug. He’s always so genial and easygoing. Now he’s tense with an underlying hint of violence in his voice. It’s the first time I actually see him as a demi-god who would fight in brutal wars and carry out acts of brutality if the gods so demanded.

I rush in to diffuse the situation, hoping my gentler tone would help. “We got the Blood Stone, but Micah killed Charmeine. He and Lucien battled, and he threw Lucien into the Crimson River.”

Maddox’s gaze snaps to Carrick. “What does that mean? What happened to him in the river?”

Carrick shakes his head with a grim tightening of his jaw. “I don’t know. He didn’t seem to burn, but merely sink below the surface. I’ve appealed to the gods to find out, but as you could see from Cato just now... they’re not sharing.”

“He’s fine, I’m sure,” Maddox says, trying for a dismissive air to his words, but they come across shallow because he doesn’t believe it.

“Let’s hope,” Carrick says quietly.

“You have the Blood Stone?” Maddox asks, changing the subject. It seems the right time since I know Maddox and Carrick aren’t the types of brothers to discuss their feelings, and it was getting perilously close to that.

Carrick fills him in on everything that happened when we went to Micah’s realm, including a bit more detail on the battle between Micah and Lucien, to which Maddox once again reiterates his surety that Lucien will be fine. “I tried to separate the Blood Stone from the chalice, but they seem pretty bonded.”

“And the game plan is to protect them both,” Maddox concludes. “Maybe add some more protections to the condo, assuming you want to keep it here? Because one of us can take it to another realm. It would be hard for Kymaris to find us, especially if we hopped realms.”

“I’ve thought about doing that,” Carrick admits, rubbing his hand along his jaw. “But I feel like we’re better here with a big force around it, in the very off chance Kymaris could track us somehow. I wouldn’t say no if you wanted to move in here for a while.”

“I can do that,” Maddox says, and I wonder where he’s been staying the last few months. Probably at his Dark Fae lady friend’s house with the torture basement. “And then we sit around and wait.”

Carrick nods in affirmation, and that’s not exactly what I want to do. “I don’t think we sit around and wait.”

“Want me to help you practice your magic skills?” Maddox says with a waggle of his eyebrows.

This results in a growl from Carrick, and Maddox shoots him a wink. Carrick offers a glare in return.

But I'm not joking or in a playful mood as I pull my hand free of Carrick's and step away so I can face them. "I need to establish some contact with Zora."

My gaze moves back and forth between the brothers. Maddox looks intrigued, while Carrick seems dubious with a hint of stubborn refusal in his eyes. I immediately point at him. "And don't think to try to tell me no. I agreed I would only try to contact her when you were around, but if you think you can deny me, I'll do it when you aren't."

"Then I won't leave your side," he retorts ominously.

That pisses me off, so I give him a reminder I'm not without means. Envisioning the library, which I know will be empty—Rainey and Myles are at work and Zaid is out running errands—I latch onto the conference table, pull it hard, and step out of the gym and right into a chair.

I'm kicked back with my feet up on the table, hands laced behind my head, before Maddox materializes.

He grins, noting Carrick isn't here. "He must have checked the bedroom first."

I snicker because I'm sure that's where Carrick went.

The expression on his face is not warm and fuzzy when he materializes. I think he might order Maddox out so we can have a "debate" about the safety of contacting Zora.

I'm sure it might go something like our talk went the night Rainey decided she wanted to get married and we had to go dress shopping. It devolved quickly, lines being drawn. Eventually, neither of us won as Carrick agreed to let me out of the condo after I threatened to do it anyway without me telling him where I was going. In turn, I had to agree to let him come with us, which, honestly, wasn't a concession on my part.

It would be hilarious because Carrick would hate every bit of it, but truth be told... I love having him around no matter the situation. I just feel more settled when he's within sight of

me. This has been more so after realizing that he's not indestructible with Lucien's loss in the Crimson River.

Before he can say anything, though, I make the first move. "I feel very strongly about contacting Zora, and you're not going to talk me out of it."

He tries anyway. For five minutes, he prattles on about the possibility she could kill me through our connection and yammers that Zora could be in league with Kymaris. All arguments I've heard before.

While I listen, Maddox picks up the chalice still sitting in the middle of the table where we've left it. Carrick warded it against anyone handling it except Maddox and me. Part of it is he doesn't have absolute trust in some of our team—like Boral—and part of it is it's too dangerous to those without magic—which is everyone else but Titus, who has left to go back to his Annihilator duties.

I try to focus on what Carrick is saying but I've heard his overprotective speech before, so I get distracted watching Maddox try to pull the stone off the cup.

It's when he pulls out a pocketknife with the clear intent to pry it off that Carrick stops in mid-tirade to me and turns around to Maddox with a snarl. "Don't even think about it."

I have a feeling in all other times the two brothers have lived their thousands of years, Maddox doesn't obey Carrick often. But in this case, he snaps the knife closed and sets the chalice back down. Nodding at it, he says, "That thing has some major power. I've never felt anything like it before. It almost feels..."

"God-like," Carrick finishes the sentence.

That startles me, and my gaze snaps his way. "God-like as in *the* God?"

Carrick shakes his head but it's Maddox that answers. "No. As in the gods who sit on The Council. It has this sort of vibration that the gods give off."

I frown, thinking back to when I first met Veda and just most recently today with Cato. “I’ve never felt that.”

Maddox shrugs. “Maybe something only the demi-gods can feel since they’re our creators. Or maybe we’re just more sensitive to magic and power, and there’s nothing more powerful than the five together.”

I drag my eyes over to the chalice. “And you’re saying that thing feels like it has *that* type of power?”

Neither brother answers, but it’s Carrick I shift my attention to. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Tucking his hands into the pockets of his track pants, he locks his eyes on mine. “I wasn’t sure if it was just me or not. I was waiting for Maddox or Lucien to take a look at it. But yeah... it’s powerful on a completely different level than regular stone magic. I understand now if Micah had been feeding off that thing why iron didn’t kill him right away.”

“It could make someone truly invincible,” I muse aloud.

“I would say the possibilities of what it could do are endless,” Carrick corrects.

My mind starts to race with the possibilities as I remove my feet from the table and sit up straight. We could destroy Kymaris and all her demons. We could fortify veils where needed.

Hell, we might even be able to shift reality or time. Could I go back and save Adira? My dad?

Could we even prevent this all from happening by stopping the daemon that placed the changeling?

“I know what you’re thinking, and you can just stop,” Carrick growls, pulling out the chair next to me and sitting in it. He takes my hands in his, then leans forward with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on his face. “I know the Blood Stone can do big things. But its power gives even me a little pause, so we have to be careful. You can’t use it. It’s too much for you right now.”

I nod in understanding. Of course I know that, and I will respect it.

But still... when this is over...

“What do we need to do to protect it?” Maddox asks, settling back in his chair. I’m assuming by picking the cup up, he probably knows exactly what Carrick has already done to ward it.

Carrick doesn’t look away from me at first, still holding my gaze to make sure I understand the Blood Stone is far beyond my abilities to master or control. He needs my reassurance and since I’m actually in agreement that I have no business messing with something so powerful it gives a demi-god pause, I give him a smile of acceptance. “I understand, and I promise I’ll respect what you’re saying about it.”

I seal that with a quick kiss. Carrick seems satisfied, but he doesn’t answer Maddox’s question. Instead, he reminds me that we still have an outstanding issue with Zora. “Since you’re in such an accepting mood, do you agree we should hold off reaching out to your twin?”

My smile turns extra saccharine as I shake my head. “Sorry, babe... but this is one thing I’m not backing down on. I’m doing it with or without you.”

Heaving a sigh that is far too exaggerated in my opinion, Carrick’s shoulders sag just a bit before he nods in capitulation. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” I reply sweetly with a slight batting of my eyelashes for effect. “Let’s do it tomorrow night, and we’ll go shopping for wedding dresses on Saturday.”

This time, Carrick groans at the reminder he’s going to be chaperoning Rainey and me while we hunt for the perfect dress. Twisting in his seat, Carrick looks at Maddox. “To answer your question, either you, me, or Lucien, when he returns, needs to be at the condo at all times with the chalice. I’ve committed to escorting Rainey and Finley to shop for a

wedding dress Saturday, but if you'd like to take that duty, I'll stay with the cup."

Maddox grimaces. "I'd rather battle every demon in the Underworld than do that."

I cover my mouth and dip my head to hide my laughter, knowing Carrick hates it all the more. He ignores me and says, "But let's put up some extra fortifications both here and on the *Fantasia*."

"Agreed," Maddox says, then the two men are talking spells and ancient magics that I know nothing about.

I keep my ears open and listen intently, because... the more you know.

You know?

## CHAPTER 20

### *Finley*

THERE ARE TIMES—ADMITTEDLY few and far between—when I can forget about the perils facing me.

Tonight—right now—is one of those times.

The kitchen of Carrick's condo has become our place for casual hangouts. We use the library for business.

But in the kitchen with good food and typically good wine, we can let go of the horrors to come and just be ourselves. We can celebrate Maddox's return to us just yesterday.

It wasn't always like that. I remember back to the days when Carrick was an asshole and Zaid hated me. Rainey and Myles were oblivious.

And now, I look around at this group and this seems normal.

It seems like home.

Like family.

Zaid is at his usual post, finishing up our dinner. While I no longer see his glamour but rather his real daemon face, I don't see him as different from me.

Rather, I see him as a partner, friend, and, yes, a family member, although he'd probably never admit the same about me.

Tonight, we're having fajitas, and the entire island is filled with spicy seared steak and chicken as well as bowls of fillers like onions, peppers, three different types of cheese, salsa, sour cream, and guacamole. He even set out both corn and flour tortillas.



Maddox is at the end of the curved island, a seat he claimed early on when he joined us. The four stools opposite Zaid down the island's length are comprised of Myles, Rainey, Carrick, and me.

The obvious members we are missing, and not just in a physical sense, are Titus and Lucien.

The other member missing is Boral because while he is fully on the team, he's so disliked by everyone he wasn't invited. I don't spend too much time stressing over that being rude, though, because Boral probably wouldn't have come. He's been taking his role in providing crucial information on Kymaris to us very seriously and has remained by Caesar's side.

Boral had even mentioned they'd been bonding over old memories and good times, and I was afraid it had meant they were engaging in Boral's favorite past time of mayhem and murder. I try not to think about it though, and instead focus on the good right here in this kitchen.

Zaid pulls out the piece de resistance—a huge pitcher of margaritas—and starts filling salt-rimmed glasses as he orders, “Dig in.”

For the next few minutes, there's no conversation. No bowls are passed either, each of us leaning forward, left and right, to reach the various fixings to assemble our fajitas. I perch on my stool, standing and stretching Maddox's way, trying to ignore Carrick when he slips his hand in between my legs at my calf and starts a slow slide up.

Fortunately, no one can see. When his hand reaches my actual knee, I slam them shut and sit back down. Pulling his hand free, he laughs and steals a chicken fajita off my plate.

I turn down a proffered margarita from Zaid. After dinner tonight, Carrick has promised he'll let me reach out to Zora and I want to be clear-headed.

When the plates are loaded, conversation kicks back up in between bites of food. The clear runner for best conversation

of topic is the wedding since Rainey and I chatter on about it and they have no choice but to listen. Tomorrow we have a full day planned of dress shopping, cake tasting, and a fancy lunch down near the water.

Carrick remains conspicuously quiet about his wedding duties, but Maddox can't resist teasing Myles a little. "Dude... why bother buying when you're already getting the goods for free?"

There was a time when Myles would get mad or offended by such a thing, particularly from Maddox, who to this day still shamelessly flirts with Rainey. But the Myles sitting with a half-eaten fajita in his hand merely shakes his head with a knowing smile. "I'd try to explain it to you, but you'd never understand it... dude."

Me and Rainey turn our heads toward each other, smiling at the little slap down to Maddox that was loaded with a lot of love for my bestie.

"But I think there's someone who understands," Myles continues, then leans forward on his stool to look past Rainey and me to Carrick.

Carrick, as sexy as he can be in any situation, is bent over his plate, mouth wide open and about to take a huge bite of the chicken fajita he stole from me.

Everyone is silent, which causes Carrick to lift his head and glance around, eyes finally landing on Myles, who was the last that spoke, his insinuation—which would be accurate—being that Carrick would understand about that type of love.

But I can tell Carrick was only half paying attention. It's not often I see the big guy slightly embarrassed before he admits, "Sorry... what did you say?"

"You're someone who understands about love and committing to one woman," Myles says.

Not taking away from his manliness at all, Carrick's smile actually goes a little soft, his gaze flicking to mine. "Yeah... I do."

Thinking that was the end of a brief but sweet conversation about true love, Carrick turns his attention back to his fajita.

But Myles isn't done apparently. "As such," he drawls, waiting for Carrick to look at him again. "I would like to formally request that you be my best man at the wedding, not only because it makes sense since Finley is the maid of honor, but also because you are understanding and I would like you by my side."

Holy cow. I'm not prepared for the emotion that overwhelms me that Myles would select Carrick because he admires—of all things—his heart.

Carrick is clearly stunned as evidenced by the few scant seconds he doesn't say anything before finally saying in a gruff voice, "Yeah... man. I'd be glad to stand up there with you."

"Aww." I lean over and loop my arm into Carrick's, causing him to lose purchase on the fajita. It lands on his plate, but I ignore it, leaning my head on his shoulder and patting his chest. "You're the sweetest ever."

"Whatever," Carrick mutters, pulling free so he can piece his fajita back together. "I know Myles was just waiting to ask me when all of you were around so I couldn't decline."

"That's actually a true statement," Myles admits with a firm nod of his head. Then he grins at Carrick. "But I actually do want you to be the one up there with me."

This devolves into Maddox teasing Carrick about tuxedo shopping and an offering to throw a bachelor party, to which Rainey and I both exclaim, "No!"

Myles asks Maddox just for posterity, "What exactly did you have in mind for a bachelor party?"

Maddox claps Myles on the shoulder—a little too hard, which causes his fajita to go tumbling to his plate—and winks. "Ever see the movie *The Hangover*?"

This devolves into a weird bonding moment between Maddox and Myles, who apparently both rate *The Hangover* in one of their top three films, which actually makes me a bit embarrassed to admit they're my friends.

My phone starts ringing, and I glance down to see Boral's name and number on my screen. He'd taken to contacting me with any information because, in his words, "I'm the nicest to talk to."

Not that politeness matters to a Dark Fae who includes rape, pillaging, and serial killing in his list of hobbies, but I get what he's saying.

I'm the only one giving him a true chance.

"Hold up, guys," I say above Maddox cackling over something Myles says. "It's Boral, and he probably has an update."

It immediately goes silent and I connect the call, putting it on speakerphone. "Hey... you're on speaker and everyone is here."

It's a subtle warning to not say anything he doesn't want any of the others to hear. Not that he would hide information about the prophecy from them, but he might go off on how much disdain he has for Carrick or how much he longs for a chance with his son, which would be totally awkward for everyone.

"Good," Boral replies. "I've got some important stuff for you to hear."

I rest the phone on the center of the island as my eyes lift to Zaid's, which hold the usual amount of suspicion against his father within them. Everyone hunches in a bit closer to listen.

And just like that, our family gathering where we were celebrating food and true love turns to business.

"I've got some news on the twelfth front," he says, referring to the twelfth Dark Fae original that Kymaris has been trying to add to her collection for the ritual. "She can't

find a twelfth, despite trying the same summoning ritual that you had witnessed her doing and sending her daemons out all over the world.”

“Why isn’t it working?” I ask, intrigued by the possibility she’s getting weaker somehow.

“Word is out among our kind that she summoned Dark Fae to her by killing offspring. For those who sired daemons, it’s not sitting well she’s murdering children. For those without, it’s not sitting well she’s killing to force the original fallen back to her side. You have to remember, most Dark Fae who have escaped the Underworld don’t want anything to do with the possibility of going back or helping Kymaris. She wasn’t exactly a benevolent ruler. My assumption is that they’ve gone into deep hiding, possibly in other realms, or they’ve got some solid protection spells in place she can’t break. Regardless, she’s been frustrated.”

“This is great news,” I exclaim, happy Boral might be proving his worth.

“Not necessarily,” he says grimly, and my elation deflates. “Kaesar said she’s giving up trying to find one here. Apparently, her backup plan is to just summon a Dark Fae from the Underworld to serve as the twelfth.”

“Well, shit,” I mutter realizing she has one of the last of the two ingredients she needs for the ritual. Now, she’ll turn her sights solely on the Blood Stone.

“But why not just bring twelve original Dark Fae with her from the Underworld?” Rainey asks Boral. “Or summon those twelve when she got here. Why bother with the time and energy to search for them?”

“The pickings are a bit slim,” Boral replies, explaining something to Rainey that Carrick had explained to me long ago. “There were not a lot of original fallen on either the dark or the light side. It was a handful of rebellious angels. A good chunk escaped the Underworld in summonings with stone magic and were glad of it. The ones left behind, though, are

loyalists and most likely were left behind to rule in her stead until she could bring the veil down.”

“That makes sense,” Rainey breathes regretfully.

“But I have a better theory,” Boral says. Although I can’t see him, I can envision the sly expression on his face.

“And what’s that?” I ask.

“That the ones who are in hiding are hiding for a very good reason that has nothing to do with not wanting to be under her rule.”

“Which is?” I prompt.

“That the twelve she’s mustering aren’t going to be given the kingdom of riches they’ve been promised.”

“What makes you think that?” Carrick asks.

“Call it gut instinct,” Boral replies confidently. “Kaesar is going on and on about all the things Kymaris has promised him for his part in the ritual. It sounds too good to be true.”

“You think she’s going to kill the twelve as part of the ritual?” Maddox asks for clarification.

Boral laughs in response. “Why would you even question it? She killed those daemons to force those original eight to her side. Besides that, she has no love lost for those who escaped and didn’t return. The ones who helped her escape through the changeling ritual and were left behind are the ones who are going to get the spoils when they come through.”

“That’s a lot of conjecture,” Carrick muses.

“It would definitely explain why she just didn’t bring twelve with her, though,” Boral counters. “Or why she didn’t summon twelve from the Underworld when she got here. She clearly has the power.”

This is making sense to me. “They’re sacrifices, not conduits. Sacrifices fuel magic. And now she’s having to resort to using one of her loyalists left behind. It’s why she’s waited so close to the ritual date before making that decision.”

Boral doesn't respond at first, but then adds another ominous consideration. "While Kaesar hasn't reported anything new on the search for the Blood Stone, the fact she's going to pull one of her own from the Underworld might indicate she's confident she'll get it."

Carrick stiffens, leaning closer to the phone to growl. "Is there any indication she knows we have it?"

"None," Boral replies quickly. "At least Kaesar hasn't mentioned it, but I'm careful to not ask direct questions so he's not suspicious. It's a good thing he loves talking about this, and he loves to hear himself talk. I think if he knew something, he would have told me. Still, she doesn't have the missing twelfth to look for anymore, so she has nothing but time to find the Blood Stone."

"Anything else to report?" Zaid asks tersely, which is a bit of a surprise. He rarely says anything to his father if he can help it.

"Yeah," Boral says gruffly. "Kymaris is into some really sick shit. Those sex sacrifices she did to summon the original fallen look like Disney World compared to some of the things I've seen."

"Like what?" I ask without thought. Then I think. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

"I'll spare you the details, but let's just say they're twisted enough that even I'm shocked by them," Boral says. Knowing the awful things he's done and his lack of conscience, that says something.

I glance up at Zaid, who is as worried as I am by that proclamation.

"And what's the purpose of her doing these acts?" Carrick inquires.

"Honestly?" Boral asks, but it's rhetorical so he doesn't wait for a response. "I think most of it is she just loves doing sick shit. But some of it has to do with feeding her powers."

Human sacrifice is a hot commodity in the accumulation of dark power.”

“She’s sacrificing humans?” I ask, my voice shrill with panic. I turn to look at Carrick. “We can’t let her do that. We have to go shut this down.”

I believe in my heart the Carrick I had first met at the start of this journey wouldn’t have blinked twice at what was going on, not because he’s callous but because he understands and accepts the way the world works.

The Carrick who loves me to the depth of his eternal soul is bothered that I’m bothered. He looks down the kitchen island to Maddox, and they share some sort of look—an unspoken communication.

“You’ll stop it, right?” I ask Carrick, hating to force his hand in anything. But I can’t stand the thought of innocents being slaughtered and Seattle being her buffet line.

Pulling his gaze from Maddox to me, he says, “I’ll see what we can do.”

Those words in and of themselves are ambiguous and could mean a million different things. I get that he doesn’t want to promise me something he can’t deliver. But I know Carrick and my faith in him is absolute.

If he can stop her from doing that, he will.

“Maybe we need to change tactics,” Maddox suggests, and all our eyes go to him. “Maybe we just need to put her down. We have enough power among us to do it.”

Carrick’s expression turns grim. “Onyx told me that Finley is the one who has to take on Kymaris and she needs more practice and time to get used to her power. We need to know the true extent of what she has.”

Carrick had told me of this revelation when he’d returned from his service to Rune. And it’s true I don’t have a handle on what’s inside of me. Carrick and I are practicing every chance we can get, and I’m learning more and more things.



But the thought of going one on one with Kymaris right now actually scares me.

Still, I don't say a word. I don't want my fear to be the deciding factor.

"There's something else to consider, too," Rainey says, garnering the room's attention. "If Kymaris dies, hypothetically, wouldn't she return to the Underworld in some form or fashion?"

"Hypothetically," Carrick agrees.

"If we are going to rescue Zora at some point, I think it's better to do it while Kymaris is in the Earth realm. Once she returns to the Underworld, it's a complete unknown what she'll be and if she'll have power, but she'd have no use for Zora."

And that right there decides the issue, as I'm not putting Zora at risk. "We can't take Kymaris out until we rescue Zora."

No one says a word, not even Carrick, who has been against this from the start. The tone of my voice is clear I'm not budging on this.

"But," I add in a somewhat embarrassed voice, "I'm also not sure I'm ready to take on Kymaris just yet. I need more practice."

Carrick smiles at me in understanding, hand going to the back of my neck as he leans toward me. "We'll figure a way to protect the humans from Kymaris," he promises, and I believe him. "And we'll continue to practice and get you ready to take Kymaris down. I have total faith in you."

That I don't believe quite as readily, but I'm willing to accept the possibility he might be right.

"She's still in the same place, right?" Maddox asks of Boral.

"Yup. Settled into the neighborhood nicely," he confirms.

“Does she hold humans there?”

“No,” Boral replies. “She has a few extravagant parties a week, and by parties, I mean drugs, orgies, sacrifices. She usually sends one of her fallen out to get a human. Says it’s how they prove their loyalty to her. But they don’t need much of a carrot to do it. It seems all have bought into the dream she’s feeding them.”

My stomach turns and I push my plate away, my brain unable to stop the mental images of what Kymaris is doing. Family fajita night is officially over.

## CHAPTER 21

### *Finley*

TO CONTACT ZORA, I'm going to use a different technique than I did the last time. Our first meeting of the minds, so to speak, was done down in the library. I was able to connect by imagining the maze of caves in the Underworld to somehow project myself there. I called out to her and, thankfully, she heard and responded.

Granted... she didn't want anything to do with me after a few moments of conversation, and gave me a painful zap that sent me spinning away from our connection, so it wasn't all that successful.

She made it clear she's not interested in me, so I don't expect her to be receptive.

As such, I'm not going in subtly like I did the last time. Instead, I want to try to project right into her body, sort of like I did when I first saw her in a dream. Except it really wasn't a dream. I was asleep but I believe I was actually inside her and experiencing the Underworld through her eyes.

Yup... going to try to just jump right into her.

Now, there are downfalls to doing away with subtlety.

First, it's going to be considered pretty damn rude to just show up inside of her rather than asking permission to communicate. She might hold it against me and increase her distrust.

Second, and this is Carrick's concern, not mine... I might get trapped there somehow. He's afraid my psyche might get stuck or even held there intentionally. But I seriously doubt Zora wants to share body space with me for the duration of our lives.

Ultimately, I'm still going to do it because I don't have the time to be subtle or cautious. Within a few weeks, this is all going to be over. In that time frame, I have to figure out how to get Zora out of the Underworld. I know Maddox and Carrick are sort of feeling we have nothing to do but wait for the October new moon and the only priority is protecting the Blood Stone and increasing my skills, but, conversely... I have my biggest and most important mission still ahead of me.

Rescuing my sister.

After our fajita dinner—which most of us just picked at after Boral's call, except Maddox who can eat anything at any time—Rainey and Myles headed home and Maddox went into the man cave to play video games. He had officially set up residence in the condo in the other guest suite for the foreseeable future, which I love, but it also makes me feel the absence of Lucien all the more.

Zaid and I cleaned up the kitchen, and he left to go to his home. I had learned during Carrick's time away with Rune that Zaid actually has a small apartment here in the city. He had told me that while he was always welcome to live in Carrick's home like he had in their early days, he'd been living by himself for the last several hundred years.

"What happened to cause you to move out of Carrick's home?" I had asked as I dried the pan he'd just rinsed.

Zaid gave me a grim look, but I was touched he trusted me with the information. "It was at the time I'd stopped having impulses to go crucify myself back to a tree. Figured I was independent enough to live away from him."

And God help him—not me—I was moved to hug the daemon. It was totally awkward, and he sort of patted me on the back before not so subtly shoving me away.

But we had a moment.

When everything was done, the condo settled quietly, and we were ready to let me contact Zora, Carrick said, "Let's do this in *our* room."

*Our.*

It shouldn't have touched me as much as it did that he referenced it as "our" room. At Carrick's insistence, I'd moved all my clothes and toiletries into it after he returned from his jaunt with Rune. We'd even gone to my house and retrieved the remainder of all my personal effects. I wasn't ever going back there to live because I was never leaving Carrick's side, so it only made sense for me to fully move into the condo.

As for the house, I don't know what to do with it just now. The thought of selling it is abhorrent and there's no rush to decide, despite my impending doom either from the prophecy or Rune's curse. What I did do this week, however, with the assistance of Carrick's attorney, was finalize the creation of an estate plan that put the house along with One Bean into a trust. When I die, both will go to Rainey and Myles to do with what they want. I felt so much better after signing those papers.

We walk into "our" room, and it's fitting because we are an "our" in every sense of that inclusive word. Carrick called it "our" room in such a natural and easygoing manner, it sounded as if I'd been living with him in it for years. In a way, I suppose that's true since he's had so many variations of me throughout his long life and our relationship is more natural to him. He's spent far more time with me than I with him, which is weird and confusing. Granted, each of my reincarnations had differences, or so he's said, but Carrick told me once that—at my core—I've been the same person throughout time.

Since this is still somewhat new to me, although I feel a very transcendental type of connection to him, hearing him say "our room" out loud so casually and as if it's always been that way produced all the feels.

"Where do you want to do it?" I ask as Carrick closes the door behind us. He looks over his shoulder, eyebrow cocked due to my choice of words before turning to me.

"Bed will be fine," he replies, a slight smirk on his face.

My eyes narrow slightly as I drawl. “Are we talking about Zora or sex?”

Carrick’s expression sobers a little. “If it’s my choice, I would choose sex.”

“Of course you would,” I reply, snickering. “Not just because you love sex, but because you don’t want me to contact Zora.”

“Both true statements,” he says with a shrug, then nods at the two chairs that sit in the corner with a table in between. “But let’s do it—contact Zora, that is—with you sitting up. I don’t want you too comfortable.”

He needn’t say anything more than that. Carrick is tremendously worried I’m somehow going to get sucked away from him and while, with magic, I suppose anything is possible, I think chances of that happening are slim and the goal is well worth the risk.

I move over to the chairs, then plop down into one. Carrick moves the other around and puts it in front of me so when he sits, he’s facing my direction. He then scoots it in until our knees are touching, and he takes my hands in his.

“Going to keep hold of you the entire time,” he says gruffly, and I no longer think his worries are quite so cute anymore.

My heart recognizes he’s not ready to lose me just yet.

“It will be fine,” I assure him. “I promise I’ll be incredibly careful. If I sense anything bad, I’ll pull back right away.”

He sighs, but offers a small smile of encouragement. “Okay... let’s do this.”

I sit up straight in the chair, close my eyes, and give his hands a slight squeeze. He doesn’t squeeze back, merely tightens his grip.

I obviously have no clue what I’m doing. My first contact with Zora, I stumbled upon her during a dream. My second

was sheer dumb luck as Zaid had directed me to the same caves I had seen in my dream.

But this time, I want to go straight to Zora.

So, in my mind, I picture what she looks like. It's my face, which is something I know well, but rather than conjure the image of me as her identical twin, I think back to my dream.

When I saw her in the dirty mirror above that Underworld bar.

Despite the grime covering the reflection, her hair was a shocking snowy white and her skin was shades paler than mine, which says a lot as I'm pretty pale.

But it was her expression and a certain look in her eyes that I focus on. It was flat and unemotional. As I think back to that visage, my stomach tightens because it frankly scares me to consider what type of person she might be, given how she grew up.

I can feel my hands start to sweat against Carrick's, but I push that aside. I can't get distracted.

I call forth her face again, studying every plane and angle. Feel the sorrow well up inside of me because of that dead look in her eyes. Even with the same brilliant green, gold, and blue orbs as mine, hers seem dull and lifeless. I try to imagine her pain and wonder if it's even pain anymore. Has she become so hardened she doesn't feel? Does she even know kindness or love?

There's a slight pinching in my heart, and I take a shuddering breath. The pinching gets a little more pronounced as I lock onto my sister in my mind's eyes. Does her heart feel it?

There's a tiny tug.

Then a pull.

At first, I resist, my conscience perhaps recognizing danger, then I remember... I want to go.

To Zora.

I open myself up, feel something yank not at my heart, but perhaps my soul.

Then I'm tumbling through a swirling mist of gray, the sensation one of falling from a great height, and even though Carrick eased my fear of heights, my stomach isn't immune to the sensation. Bile rises in the back of my throat, and I choke it back.

Then I stop.

My eyes snap open, and I'm back in the Underworld. Except this is definitely different than my dream where my physical sensations seemed a bit dulled. Right now, I can feel the wooden chair I'm sitting on and see the grain texture of the wooden table, the mud walls across from me, and a grimy window.

"Carrick?" I say hesitantly to test how far removed from the Earth realm I am.

"I'm here," he says back, and I hear him incredibly clear from just a few feet from me. When he squeezes my hands, I can feel that, too.

Just as I can feel my hand gripping onto what I think is a crudely forged spoon. Dipping my head, I let my gaze drop.

And yes... there's a bowl of some food that's unrecognizable and the consistency of thick oatmeal. The spoon dips, grabs the grayish goop, and then I can feel it slide over my tongue. The taste is incredibly bland, but there's a hint of some unknown spice.

I reflexively squeeze against Carrick's hands, and I can still feel them.

Just as I can feel the spoon.

"I'm in both places," I whisper.

"What do you see?" he asks.



Before I can respond, a sense of unease hits me and then flat-out apprehension.

But those aren't my feelings. They're the feelings of whoever I'm inside of because I can feel Carrick's presence and I'm quite calm.

It's incredibly confusing.

"Who's there?" a female voice booms in my head, and my suspicions are confirmed.

I'm inside of Zora as that's actually my voice, but more hardened.

"Zora?" I ask in my mind, saving my actual voice for Carrick.

"I told you to leave me alone," she responds so loud that my brain seems to knock around inside my skull. Then she tries to push against me, and I feel like I'm being squeezed all over. I imagine myself digging my heels in and holding on for dear life. The pressure intensifies. I feel my grasp slipping until something pops and everything goes black.

I squeeze Carrick's hands, and, to my relief, he squeezes back. I try to strain against the darkness to see something, but it's utterly black without even a glimmer of light. I fight off the feeling of panic as I realize I've never been somewhere before that was devoid of any light, and it's slightly suffocating.

"Why won't you leave?" Zora asks in frustration.

I'm startled, because I assumed she pushed me out of her, but I'm starting to think she pushed me somewhere deeper. I can't see what she's seeing anymore, and I can feel nothing but Carrick's hands gripping mine.

"Zora," I say again, reintroducing myself, which seems silly. "I'm Finley. Your twin sister."

"Get out," she screams and I wince, not from the volume but from the anger in her voice.

“Please,” I beg. “Please give me a chance. Please just listen to me. If you do, I’ll never bother you again without an invite.”

There’s silence, but I can still feel her presence. I take that as her assent for me to continue. Hesitantly, I take a big chance that my first words don’t drive her away, but rather help to forge trust.

“I’m no friend of Kymaris,” I say softly. “She’s here in the Earth realm to conquer it, and I’m trying to stop her.”

“What do I care about your Earth realm?” she snarls condescendingly.

I choose my words carefully, trying to be as neutral as possible. “Because it’s where you’re from originally.”

I purposely don’t say, “It’s your home,” because I imagine she had some type of home these last twenty-eight years and I have no clue how she feels about it. If she hates it or loves it or has just become resigned.

Zora doesn’t respond, so I decide to continue talking in a gentle tone. I get the sense she’s like a feral animal, prone to attack or possibly run at any moment.

“Our parents thought they were having fraternal twins, but we were identical,” I say with a small smile I hope she hears in my tone.

“What’s this twin you speak of?” she asks haughtily. “You’ve used that word before, and I don’t understand what it means.”

I’m stunned into inaction. How can she not know what a twin is? Maybe fae don’t have twins so she’s never been exposed to such a thing.

“It means we were born of one egg that split in two,” I reply. “We were carried simultaneously in our mother and were born together. We’re identically the same, except your hair is white and mine is red. I saw your reflection in the mirror and we look the exact same, except for the hair.”

I can feel her ruminating, but she remains quiet.

“I didn’t know about you until a little over a month ago, and I can’t give up this idea of rescuing you from the Underworld.”

There... I said it. The reason for me contacting her.

“Who says I need to be rescued?” she demands angrily.

“Maybe rescued isn’t the right word,” I hasten to diffuse her. “Truth is... I want to meet you. You’re my sister. We share the same blood. And the world I live in is wonderful and beautiful, and I’ve seen a glimpse of where you live. It’s not... as nice. I want you to see the beauty of the Earth realm, and let me show you the wonderful sights and sounds and amazing food. I want you to feel sunlight on your face, Zora.”

My last words are roughened with emotion, because that’s only a tiny bit of what she’s been missing out on.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” she asks suspiciously.

My mind races. I have nothing to offer her. It’s not like I can send her pictures. It’s not like she can Google me.

But there might be something she can see that proves our connection. “Do you have a white feather on your leg?” I ask.

I can feel her surprise.

“Your right leg to be specific,” I continue. “It appeared the day Kymaris came out of stasis and left for the Earth realm. I think it probably appeared as the magic you were forced to hold was funneled out of you and into her.”

Zora gasps. “How did you know?”

“Because I have one, too,” I assure her. “It appeared on that same day. It was our twenty-eighth birthday. Did you know that?”

“Birthdays are irrelevant here,” she says flatly. “Time has no meaning.”

My heart aches for my twin. I want to tell her how wonderful birthdays are and that chocolate cake with buttercream frosting is my favorite, but I'd be willing to try all the flavors with her to find out what she likes if she'll just come to the Earth realm with me.

But that's too much for her to even process.

Instead, I keep her focused on the feather connecting us. "My feather seems to hold some of my powers—or rather, it helps to control them. I haven't quite figured it out yet."

"You have powers?" she asks dubiously.

"I was given powers at my birth after you were taken, but I didn't really learn to use them well until recently. An angel gave them to me. I assume the feather is maybe a symbol of the angel because they have wings."

But come to think of it... Sarvel didn't have wings. Of course, she could have them hidden, I suppose, but she's not a divine angel so maybe not. I shrug it off, not needing to get sidetracked with something that's irrelevant. The fact is, both Zora and I have matching feathers on our legs that appeared when the changeling ritual was completed.

"Do you have powers?" I ask. I strongly suspect she does since I was filled with some sort of dark power the day Deandra and I got into it.

Zora doesn't respond, which means she most likely does and doesn't trust me enough to share.

"No matter," I say brightly. "I have enough for us both, and I'll share anything with you. Do you have any questions about the Earth realm or about me?"

"No," she replies flatly, and my heart sinks. I never envisioned our reunion would go like this or that she wouldn't want to immediately escape.

I decide to change tactics, so I move away from family issues. "Do you know what Kymaris has planned in the Earth realm?"

Of course, I already know this answer, but I want to know if Zora knows anything.

Or, as Carrick and Rainey have both pointed out, find out if she's in collusion with Kymaris.

"Kymaris is death and destruction," Zora says in a low voice that's not fearful, but maybe cautious. "You can figure it out."

I swallow hard. "Do you support what she's doing here?"

"I already told you I don't care about the Earth realm," she retorts.

"I didn't ask that," I reply calmly. "I asked if you support what she's doing?"

When I'm met with silence, I'm disappointed to have hit a wall again, but then she replies, "No. I don't support anything she does."

Hope sparks within me. Just one tiny nugget of information that tells me there's a possibility with my sister.

"Will you please come to the Earth realm?" I ask, and I can't hide the pleading in my voice.

"No," she replies.

"Can I come see you then?" My heart is pounding, because if she declines and the conversation ends, I promised her I wouldn't bother her anymore.

"Why?" Her voice is dull and unenthused.

"Why?" I repeat, struck she'd even question my motivation. "Because you're my sister. My twin. I love you, and I want to know you."

Zora laughs, and it's scathing and brittle. "All things irrelevant here."

"Make them relevant," I demand angrily. "Give it a try."

There's no response. Wherever this dark place is that I'm sitting while talking to my twin, I can feel her pulling away or

I'm getting shoved somewhere else.

"Has anyone ever cared about you there?" I ask desperately. "Please tell me you at least have someone you can rely on and you're not utterly alone."

After a heavy pause, Zora says, "There is someone I trust. Who has helped me."

I sigh with relief. At least she has someone, although I can't imagine a Dark Fae having any type of care toward a human. But she's not alone, which is a comfort.

"Can I contact you again?" I ask timidly, then I cringe as I wait for her reply.

I don't get one.

Instead, I'm shoved violently out of the dark space. For the briefest of moments, I can see through Zora's eyes and I can tell she's heading out the door of what I assume is her miserable little home. I get a flash of the underground city I'd seen in my dream, and then I'm tumbling through gray mist again.

When I open my eyes, Carrick sighs in relief before bending his head and pulling my hands up to his mouth to kiss.

"Well?" His eyes are filled with determination to handle whatever emotions I might have.

"She doesn't like me very much," I reply with a bitter smile.

After I recount our conversation, Carrick tells me, on his end, that I merely sat quietly with my eyes opened except for our brief communication when I first connected.

"It's weird," I say as I play the entire experience back in my head. "I was with her... inside her conscience or whatever, but I still knew I was here. I could feel your hands, and I was reassured to know you were there. I could communicate with you."

“It sounds like you might have some mastery over projecting your conscience, or even a portion of it somewhere,” he muses. He releases my hands, and we both stand up from our chairs. Carrick bends closer and asks, “Are you going to leave her alone?”

“Well, technically, she didn’t say I couldn’t contact her again,” I point out.

“She shoved you out,” he counters.

“Semantics,” I insist, stepping around him and heading to the dresser that holds my clothes.

“Finley,” Carrick warns as he follows me. “You contacted her. She doesn’t want anything to do with you. I want you to consider giving up on her because I’m afraid you’re going to get hurt.”

I reach the dresser, open the top drawer, and nab the envelope I had put in there a few days ago. Pulling it to my chest, I turn to face him.

My soul mate.

“I love you for many reasons, one is that you worry about me. But you know I can no sooner give up trying to get Zora from the Underworld than I could give up on you. She’s my twin, Carrick.”

“I know,” he murmurs, then gives me a genuine smile of acceptance. “And I’ll obviously help you in any way you need.”

One hand still clutching the envelope, the other going to his shoulder, I rise up on my tiptoes and kiss him lightly. When I pull away, I press the envelope to his chest, forcing him to take it.

Carrick glances down briefly. “What’s this?”

“Read it,” I say, giving a quick nod at the stationary in his hands.

He opens the envelope, which is not sealed, and pulls out a single sheet of cream linen paper I'd found in Carrick's office. It's the fancy kind to write personal notes to people on.

It's folded in half and once he has it open, he takes in the first line before his eyes snap up to me.

"Dear Eireann?" he questions me in wonder.

"I thought I'd write a letter to my future selves for you to give to them. And since we're all Eireann, I addressed it to her."

Carrick's golden eyes lighten with emotion, and his eyes move back down to the letter.

*Dear Eireann,*

*You might think you don't know me, but you actually do. By now, Carrick has told you the truth of what he is—an immortal demi-god who is deeply in love with you and has been for centuries.*

*I'm one of your incarnations. Just one of many, really, with Eireann being the first. As such, we're all Eireann and I just wanted you to know that it will be all right. You'll love deeply and have so much happiness during your time with Carrick. One day, it will be gone and he'll move on to our next self, but take peace in knowing you'll experience joy that you could never have imagined.*

*Trust in Carrick. Love him as much as he loves you.*

*Good luck, and I truly hope that Rune's curse will end in your lifetime. If not, I hope you write your own letter to add to this one so all the future Eireanns can be inspired by our journeys.*

*With love,*

*Finley Porter*



Carrick's eyes pop up to me in astonishment before going back to the letter to read again. I wait patiently. When I have his attention again, I can see how touched he is.

"Too hokey?" I ask hesitantly.

"Too perfect," he replies gruffly, folding the letter and slipping it back into the envelope.

"Don't give it to them until you have their love and trust. Until you've told them the truth about everything."

"I promise," he says, putting a hand behind my neck and pulling me toward him.

My heart starts tripping as I see not only the utter love over my thoughtfulness, but also the low flame of desire that my actions produce.

Voice a little raspy, I say, "I hope by giving them this letter, it makes it easier on them and you."

"You're amazing," he murmurs before sweeping me up into his arms and carrying me to *our* bed.

## CHAPTER 22

### *Carrick*

AFTER A FULL day of wedding dress shopping with Finley and Rainey, Carrick couldn't help but think this moment might be the better part of his day as he rang the doorbell to the Lake Washington mansion. He could hear the heavy *dong* from inside that reverberated for several beats before dissipating.

The double doors were inset with thick, semi-frosted glass so while he couldn't see details inside, he could see a figure coming his way. It was large and hulking and most likely represented a security guard.

The left door opened and yes, there was a daemon with a larger-than-normal black aura around his body. He was easily seven feet tall, looked as thick as a rhinoceros, and, no surprise, he resembled one in the face as Carrick took him in.

Carrick was dressed casually in jeans and a lightweight sweater, and was surely a surprise to show up unannounced. The daemon gave him a critical look from head to foot, and Carrick could see in his eyes the moment he was dismissed as a threat. "What do you want?" he asked in a guttural voice.

"I'd like to see Kymaris," Carrick replied with a cordial smile, hands clasped before him.

The daemon smirked as he started to shut the door in Carrick's face. "She doesn't see anyone."

Carrick's hand shot out, grasped the edge of the door, and stopped it about a foot from closing. The daemon was shocked, his eyes growing wide, but then narrowing in anger. He attempted to close the door, but it wouldn't budge.

While Carrick continued to hold it open with just one hand, the daemon put his entire body weight against it and

tried to force it shut. He grunted and sweat popped out on his forehead, yet he couldn't budge it a fraction of an inch.

Carrick, meanwhile, just smiled as he easily held the door open and waited for the daemon to conclude that Carrick was stronger. It was actually quite comical when it happened, as the daemon had no clue what Carrick was. Only that he was powerful.

Giving up, the daemon puffed from exertion as he let the door go. Carrick gently pushed it all the way open and stepped into the foyer while the daemon took a wary—but very smart—step back. Carrick kept his genial smile in place, turning away to shut the door. Giving his back to the daemon was a show of strength and confidence, and it made the daemon take another step back.

When Carrick pivoted back to face him, he assumed a mild-mannered stance again by clasping his hands in front of his body and asking politely, “Now... may I see Kymaris, please?”

“And may I ask who you are?” the daemon asked just as politely.

“Carrick Byrne.”

Clearly, he was well known by name as the daemon's eyes bugged out of his head. He made a hasty retreat from the foyer and disappeared into the house, hopefully to get Kymaris. Carrick was confident once Kymaris knew he was here, she'd give him an audience. She was too narcissistic not to.

It was definitely a calculated risk coming here because while Carrick was nearly indestructible, it didn't mean Kymaris couldn't hurt him or even potentially detain him somehow. But he had calculated the risks versus the potential benefits, and he'd decided it was worth it.

He wanted to know what Kymaris knew, and he banked on her huge ego wanting to talk.

Carrick didn't wait politely in the foyer, but instead freely roamed. There was a double curved staircase leading to the

upper level off the end of the foyer, a lavish dining room that sat twenty, a study, a library, kitchen, and the rear of the house held an enormous living area that was much like his—so large it had clusters of furniture to fill the space. The back was almost all floor-to-ceiling windows, and he knew from Maddox’s description of the property that the basement ran the length of the house just under the living area and had the same windows to look through.

He heard Kymaris approaching before he saw her, recognizing the click of high heels against lacquered hardwoods. Turning as she entered the living area, Carrick wasn’t surprised in the least how she was dressed and he knew it was for his benefit.

Kymaris still wore her frizzy platinum hair in a strangely sloped beehive and her makeup was garish. Yes, she was still one of the beautiful Dark Fae with structurally perfect facial angles and a perfect female form, which she was showing off in a sleek black negligee and black heels. Not for modesty purposes, she had a black silk robe over it, but it was unbelted and did little to conceal the lack of material of the negligee itself or that what little there was in all was overtly transparent.

Carrick had expected her to be deliberately provocative because he’d had a taste of her ego one time before, and she thought her looks alone had the power to command. She was also a highly sexualized immortal based on Maddox and Finley’s report the night of the daemon sacrifices, so he knew she’d put effort into trying to seduce him.

He gave her a brief once over, merely smiling as she approached.

It didn’t matter that she was evil incarnate, her expression was welcoming and her voice light despite its huskiness. “Well, this is a nice surprise.”

Kymaris walked past him, her shoulder brushing his as she shot him an inviting look. Carrick turned to watch her proceed

to a built-in wet bar. She stopped and pulled the crystal stopper from a decanter of amber-colored liquor.

Looking over her shoulder, she asked, “Would you like a drink?”

“No, thank you,” he replied. Not because he thought she might poison him—for he couldn’t be poisoned—but because this wasn’t a social visit.

Kymaris poured her drink before turning to face Carrick, her robe billowing out to bare her legs for a brief second. Carrick’s eyes stayed pinned on hers, and she didn’t like that.

Pulling one side of her robe out, she waved it playfully, then took a sip of her drink. “You know... we don’t have such finery as this down in the Underworld. Although I had the power to conjure such pretty things, it’s just not the same as shopping at Saks.”

“Hmmm,” Carrick replied. “I am curious, though... how did you get powers to conjure down in the Underworld?”

He assumed she had some measurable powers, given that magic had been brought down into the Underworld and had evolved. But he was curious how she came by hers.

Kymaris shrugged as if the detail were insignificant. “One of my loyal followers had been summoned to the Earth realm by some stupid human ancient priest who thought to control a Dark Fae. Stupid human priest lost his head, and my loyal follower returned to me with a stone.”

Carrick smiled. That was pretty much what he figured, but he wanted to get her talking.

“And how exactly did you get your power to come here?” he asked smoothly. He knew the answer, but he wanted to get an idea of how much she was willing to share through her own arrogance.

Kymaris smiled coyly, but she couldn’t pull that level of bashful shyness off. Instead, she looked like the cat that ate the canary. “Oh, you know... a little ritual that pumped me up full

of good stuff that let me come and enjoy this lovely realm. Were you impressed with my fireballs?"

Carrick had to force down the growl of fury that threatened to erupt because of the reminder she had tried to kill Finley. Despite his swirling anger, he kept his tone bland. "They're definitely better than any I've seen in a Dark Fae, but pale stacked up against a Light Fae."

Kymaris narrowed her eyes at the comparison, her lips pulling back from her teeth in anger. "No Light Fae has the power I do."

"Not even your sister?" Carrick queried with a raised eyebrow.

Carrick could tell Kymaris wanted to erupt with fury at the suggestion Nimeyah would be stronger. But she reined it in, scoffing instead. "She's not my sister, and she wouldn't know what real power was if it slapped her in the face."

"It would be interesting to see you two battle," Carrick mused, his tone clearly doubting Kymaris' claim to be better.

"If you want to see a demonstration of my powers," she offered with a glare. "I can show you."

Carrick tipped his head and laughed at the suggestion, which infuriated her further. "Battle with you? A Dark Fae versus a demi-god? You'd lose, and you'd lose badly."

Kymaris' hand was shaking from his taunt, but he had to give her credit... she took in a breath and calmed herself. "You may be a demi-god, but you have no idea the extent of what I can do."

Carrick was done baiting her. He had no desire to push her to the point she clammed up. While he refused to stroke her ego, he decided to handle her with a bit more tact.

Nodding toward the furniture, he asked, "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she replied, moving gracefully around a couch to sit on the middle cushion. She put her glass of liquor on the table, then leaned sideways to pat the cushion beside her

invitingly. He ignored her attempt and took a chair adjacent to the couch.

She didn't look put out by the rebuff, merely leaned back, draping one arm over the back cushion and crossing her legs. Her robe fell open, exposing her entire negligee-clad body, but Carrick wasn't interested and he knew it would irritate her that he wasn't.

"Tell me why you're here, Kymaris," Carrick asked smoothly. "I know there's a prophecy, and I can only assume you intend to create some sort of chaos."

"Worried about your little human?" she purred in reply.

"Not at all." Carrick settled into the chair, propped an ankle on the opposite knee, and smiled. "You and I both know a human is irrelevant going up against you and your powers."

"And yet you're helping her," Kymaris pointed out.

Carrick was not about to give away a hint as to why he had a dog in this fight, and he had no qualm against lying to her. "I've been offered a reward from the gods to guide the human. But you and I both know the end result will be her death."

"True," Kymaris simpered with a tip of her head, but then her face hardened. "But if you think you can fool me into thinking you don't have feelings for the human, try again."

Carrick's gut tightened, but he didn't respond.

Kymaris laughed. "I saw the look on your face in that coffee shop when she was moments away from dying. It wasn't your actions—putting yourself between her and my fire—but your expression that gave it away."

"You're wrong," he replied, but fuck if she wasn't right. And she knew it. Redirecting, he attempted to appeal to her vanity again. "I know you have big plans here. I want to know what they are."

"Because?" she prompted.

“Because I live in this realm. I want to know what my future looks like.”

That seemed to make sense to her because her eyes gleamed with pride. Her ego was stroked because Carrick implied she'd win, and she had no hesitation in admitting something he already knew. “I'm going to open the veil between here and the Underworld.”

Not a huge revelation, but the fact she so openly shared it with him confirmed her confidence was at an all-time high. It was either because her ego was over-inflated or—gods help them—she had some reason to be confident he couldn't fathom.

“And what do you have to gain by doing that?” he asked.

“Everything,” she replied without hesitation.

Carrick played his part well, pretending to just catch on to her nefarious goals. “You intend to rule the Earth realm?”

Putting his elbow on the armrest and resting his chin in his palm, he said drolly, “It's not an overly lofty goal, but just how would you accomplish it?”

Carrick wasn't expecting her to spill her guts, but she apparently didn't feel she had anything to hide. She pushed away from her reclined position and scooted to the edge of the couch, clearly excited to share. “It's brilliant and nefarious. Once the veil is down, my most loyal followers will start to replace the world leaders.”

“Kill them and glamour,” Carrick murmured.

Kymaris took it as his appreciation for the art of murder and deception. “Exactly. And once those seats of power are secured, it will be easy to change over to my single authoritarian rule.”

“You and what army?” he asked, again... something he already had a good guess on.

“The number of demons waiting to explore this realm is staggering,” she replied confidently. “More than all the armies



in the world.”

“That many, huh?” His voice was dry, slightly skeptical, but only to prompt her to continue talking.

“Not just demons,” she purred, once again settling back against the couch now that she’d revealed her nefarious goals. “I’ve got an entire river of tormented souls just ready to be released back into the world.”

Carrick’s stomach bottomed out. That was something he had not considered because it never occurred to him it could be done.

“I’ve spent an eternity in the Underworld creating my demons, and they’ll carry out my plans beautifully. But unleashing the evil souls into the masses will make it just a little bit easier to control them.”

Fuck. She was talking about the start of the end of the human race.

She wasn’t finished, though. “Those who retain their humanity will make fine pets.”

Carrick had seen more violence and evil in his lifetime than anyone should be forced to bear. He didn’t think much could sicken him, but the thought of innocent humans being turned into play toys for Kymaris and her legions was too much to even think about.

He shrugged casually, despite the fact he felt like a coiled snake ready to strike and end her. “It’s an ambitious plan.”

“You don’t think I can do it?” she snapped, a sure sign her ego might be huge, but it was fragile.

Carrick smoothed his voice into neutrality. “On the contrary, if you have the power you say you do, I think you could do it quite easily.”

Her chin pulled in a bit as she studied him, and Carrick could see she was considering something that might not have struck her before.

“You could rule by my side.”

This offer did not surprise Carrick, just as he knew she'd never elevate any being as her equal. Still, he managed to flare his eyes as if the idea had never occurred to him. “That's unexpected.”

“It's the best deal you'll ever get offered,” she said haughtily.

“Let's say I consider this deal.” Carrick shifted on his chair and leaned forward, pressing his elbows onto the tops of his knees in a faux gesture of interest. “I would like to know how you're going to accomplish it. Would you need my help because I answer to the gods?”

His ruse worked... the prospect he was actually considering her offer. Kymaris ran at the mouth, revealing more than he ever thought she would. “I have a ritual I'll perform that will open the veil. But I'm missing something I need to pull it off.”

“What's that?” he inquired mildly, stunned she was going to open up to him.

Kymaris stood from the couch slowly, actually pulling her robe closed and belting it. Her expression hardened as she looked down on him. “Oh, I think you know exactly what I'm missing. If you think I'm stupid enough to tell you my secrets, you're more of an idiot than I had originally assumed.”

Fuck it all.

He was being played the entire time.

Pushing up from the chair, he rose and towered above her. She tipped her head back, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

“Yes,” she hissed. “I know you have the Blood Stone.”

“How?” he growled, but his thought immediately went to Boral. He was the only one with motive to betray their team. Knowing he would die if he told their secrets, Carrick imagined Boral might have been tortured for the information.

Carrick wondered how Zaid would take the news, but it wasn't something he could dwell on because Kymaris wasn't done.

“Save yourself a lot of pain and misery,” she said as she bent, grabbed her glass of liquor, and moved away from Carrick. Looking over her shoulder, she advised in an ominous tone, “And bring me the Blood Stone.”

Kymaris started walking toward the foyer, and he assumed he'd overstayed his welcome and was being shown out.

At the door, she put her hand on the knob, but she didn't open it. A thought seeming to have struck, she turned to him with a calculated expression. “Bring me the Blood Stone and I'll spare the little human her life. I'll even swear it in a binding.”

A guarantee that Finley would survive the prophecy was tempting indeed. If Carrick agreed to it, it meant he'd sacrifice the world to save her. If circumstances were different, he'd have no qualms about every human on Earth burning if it meant she could live.

But she was going to die anyway when Rune decided it was her time. He would gain nothing by this offer from Kymaris, especially since he had the upper hand by having the Blood Stone.

Carrick stepped up to her, tipping his head as he murmured, “What's to stop me from killing you right now?”

She smiled sweetly, giving him a poke in his chest with her finger. “You would have done it long before now and we both know it, so I'm assuming the gods have ordered you to let this play out. Now, I'm not quite sure what Finley's role is, but I suspect it might just be to have a human attempt a valiant save of the world because it makes good drama, don't you think?”

Of all the things Kymaris has said, this was the one he might agree with. The gods did love their drama.

Kymaris opened the door, then nodded her head toward the porch. It was dark and misting rain beyond the glow of the

exterior lights. “My offer to rule by my side is still open. Bring me the Blood Stone, leave your little human behind, and I’ll spare her life. I’ll even give her sanctuary and reprieve from the mayhem that’s coming.”

Carrick used the opportunity to throw Kymaris off the scent of their bond. “The human means nothing. As I said, the gods have promised me a reward for my role in guiding her.”

Kymaris inclined her head, as if to say, “Lines have been drawn.”

Carrick stepped over the threshold, and he didn’t look back. After he heard the door close behind, he heaved a sigh.

Envisioning Zaid where he’d left him just before knocking on Kymaris’ door, he bent distance to his side. The woods were thick and the rain didn’t reach where Zaid stood, looking down the sloped terrain at the back of Kymaris’ house. It was where Maddox, Finley, Rainey, and Myles had set up their spy nest the evening Kymaris performed her sex ritual to call forth Dark Fae.

“How did it go?” Zaid asked, turning Carrick’s way. He had a pair of binoculars in his hand, and he would have easily been able to see Carrick and Kymaris talking.

Carrick grimaced, rubbing his hand at the back of his neck. “She knows we have the Blood Stone.”

“Boral.” Zaid’s voice was flat in his accusation.

There was no need to reply, because Carrick was sure Zaid’s mind went to the same place his had. That Boral was most likely dead, and it probably wasn’t a pleasant journey getting there. He’d let the realization settle in, but figured Zaid might have some conflicting feelings despite his adamant refusal to let his father back into his life.

Getting information from Kymaris wasn’t actually the reason they’d come tonight. Carrick had merely wanted in the house so he could check things out, because he had something far more important to do than pick her brain. The information

he'd learned would turn out to be just as important as their primary objective.

"No humans in the house," Carrick said in a low voice. "Just Kymaris and one daemon."

"One of her rare non-party nights," Zaid muttered.

Carrick nodded as he stared down at the house. Such a shame because it was a beautiful piece of property.

"Everything set?" he asked.

"Easy as pie," Zaid replied, handing the small black box with its stubby antennae to him. It had a small green bubble light and one button.

Carrick's expression was hard as he stared down at the house. In her robe and high heels, Kymaris walked without a care in the world from the living area to the kitchen. She moved to the refrigerator and opened it, staring inside as she pondered what she'd like to eat.

Such a mundane task and she was utterly clueless.

Carrick's thumb moved to the button. Without an ounce of remorse, he depressed it. There was a second delay where nothing happened, then the charges that had been placed went off simultaneously with a ground-shaking *boom*.

Well-positioned bricks of trinitrotoluene—better known as TNT—placed around the base of the huge mansion by a very surreptitious friend of Zaid's who had the knowledge and skill to bring down a moderately sized structure with little effort, exploded.

Carrick's eyes were pinned on Kymaris when the explosion occurred. The queen of the Underworld stood in front of the fridge contemplating a sandwich one moment. The next, she was engulfed in a huge wave of fire that caused windows to blow outward from the intensity.

Fire and black smoke billowed upward, lighting the night sky. Carrick could feel the heat of the blast on his face.

Knowing Kymaris was out of commission for a while made him smile.

The explosion would not have killed her, nor had he meant it to. Finley was the key, and they'd have to face off. He had to let it play out.

But Kymaris would be slowed down, and this would put an immediate stop to her parties where humans were being sacrificed.

He'd promised Finley he would handle it, and he had.

For now.

But the queen of the Underworld would be back in action at some point, and he suspected she'd come for the Blood Stone and probably some retribution.

Carrick had already anticipated this before he and Zaid had come out here tonight. He'd told Finley his intentions, and he'd insisted it was time for Rainey and Myles to move into the condo until this was all over. While the *Fantasia* could be protected to some degree, Rainey and Myles would be too vulnerable as they went about their everyday lives. They were going to have to give that up for now and work remotely from his place until it was done.

Luckily, they didn't give Finley any flack when she insisted they had to do it. Earlier today, Maddox escorted them to the *Fantasia* to pack up their belongings, becoming temporary residents of Carrick's condo. They were there now with Finley, being guarded by Maddox in his absence.

But even his condo wasn't going to be completely safe, so these living arrangements were only going to be for one night. If Kymaris had enough Dark Fae to help funnel their powers along with hers at the protections Maddox and Carrick put on the building, they could bust through. He figured she had enough daemons to storm the condo to take the Blood Stone and lay waste to everything else. Humans would be caught in the crossfire, and Kymaris would not mind sacrificing them

and throwing the world into a panic all so she could get her hands on the Blood Stone.

It was time for them all to go on the run, but Carrick still had one more thing to accomplish to slow Kymaris down.

## CHAPTER 23

### *Finley*

WHEN CARRICK WALKS back into the condo with Zaid, he doesn't seem surprised to find Rainey, Myles, and me sitting sullenly in one of the groupings of furniture. I study him quickly and note that, if anything, he seems resigned.

I'm not exactly sure where he's been—he was short on details when he left—but his bearing upon returning is grim and worried, which makes me worried.

Earlier this afternoon—just after we had finished our dress shopping—Carrick informed us that Rainey and Myles were going to have to move into the condo. While he wouldn't say why, he said the danger was going to be quickly increasing to a level that they couldn't be kept safe on the streets, so they had to go into hiding.

Rainey wasn't happy. When she called Myles to tell him, he wasn't happy either. But I trusted Carrick and if he said it was the time to buckle down, even if it meant hiding within a fortress, they had to do it. Had it been my preference, they would have moved in here long ago, but, back then, Carrick was against it just like Myles and Rainey.

Now Carrick and I are in a vastly different place, and I know there's nothing he wouldn't do to ease my fears or ensure my happiness. Forcing Myles and Rainey here accomplished both, even though I had to watch them glower all evening and bitch about circumstances. I understand this completely because they have no comprehension of the upcoming danger forcing Carrick to do this.

Neither do I for that matter, but I assume I'll learn soon enough.



Once Carrick had laid down his edict that he was not going to give Rainey and Myles a chance to decline his invitation, and after I had begged and pleaded with them to just do it, they capitulated. As such, Maddox helped them pack up their belongings and they moved into a guest bedroom.

When they returned, Carrick gave me a lingering kiss against my temple, saying he'd be back soon. I was surprised he took Zaid with him, but not that he left Maddox behind to guard us.

I could have forced him to tell me where he was going, but I inherently knew it was something dangerous and bold. Perhaps too perilous and I might waste time trying to talk him out of it. Ultimately, I decided it was best not knowing and I'd trust Carrick was making the right move, whatever that might be.

"Where's Maddox?" Carrick asks as he and Zaid make their way over to the furniture grouping.

Tipping my head to the left, I say, "Kitchen."

"Maddox," Carrick calls. "We're back."

Within moments, Maddox is in the living room with a beer in one hand and a half-eaten sandwich, so thickly stacked with meats, lettuce, and tomatoes I'm not sure how he ever got his mouth around it without dislocating his jaw, in his other. He has apparently been successful, though, as he is enthusiastically chewing.

Carrick sits in one of the chairs opposite me, and Zaid goes to a love seat. Rainey and Myles are on a couch while Maddox chooses to remain standing.

"I went to see Kymaris tonight," Carrick said. Out of all the dangerous things I thought he might be out there doing, I never once thought he would do that.

"You what?" I exclaim, straightening in my chair. "Why?"

"Because you wanted me to do something about the human sacrifices," he reminds me.

Mouth dropping open, I stare at him in a mixture of amazement and guilt. Yes, I'd made him promise he'd do something, but that was in the heat of the moment. I'd been in shock and disgusted by what Boral had said was going on when he called yesterday, and I'd demanded justice, but I hadn't expected Carrick to move on it so quickly.

"What did you do?" I ask hesitantly.

"Well, to stop the human sacrifices, I blew her house up with TNT," he says, his eyes twinkling just slightly at making such an ostentatious statement.

"Whoa," Myles murmurs in appreciation. "Badass."

"She was in it, along with a daemon, but no humans. She won't die, but it will slow her down for a few days as she'll have to find more accommodations."

"Thank you," I whisper gratefully.

Carrick's smile is tender as he regards me from across the table. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you."

My heart flip-flops and my skin warms at the overt display of love and affection. It feels good that he doesn't care who is watching or listening.

"There's something else," he says, his expression hardening a little bit, and the sweet flutters in my heart stop as my stomach clenches. "I had a talk with Kymaris before we blew the house up."

"You what?" I exclaim again, shocked he would confront her. "Why?"

"Mainly, I wanted to get in her house and ensure I couldn't sense any humans there, but I also wanted to see if she'd open up about anything. I was banking on her over-inflated ego wanting to share her plans with me."

"And did she?" Rainey asks.

Carrick spares her a short glance and nods. "She offered to let me rule by her side, and she very happily told me how

she'd take over the world once the veil comes down.”

“I’m guessing it wasn’t a tempting offer,” I quip with a mirthless laugh.

Carrick actually cracks a smile. “I have what I want.”

“What else did you learn then?”

A glimmer of anger fires in Carrick’s eyes as his smile disappears. “It appears that Kymaris knows we have the Blood Stone.”

“Shit,” I hiss. I sink back down into the chair, but my eyes dart over to Zaid, who is bent over, elbows to knees and gaze pinned to the floor.

I don’t need to say it out loud. It had to be Boral.

“We have to leave,” Carrick announces, and all our heads except Zaid’s snaps his way. Maddox swallows another bite, then ignores the rest of his sandwich. “Now that she knows we have it, nothing will prevent her from conducting an all-out assault on this condo to get it.”

“But you have protections in place,” Rainey reminds him.

“Good ones, too,” Carrick agrees, but his tone is grim. “But Kymaris is powerful. If she has her Dark Fae—to whom she’s been funneling power—help her, they could bring the protections down. She could use her army of daemons to storm the place. She wouldn’t care about anyone else in this building being collateral damage. She won’t care about revealing herself to the world. The bottom line is that we are not safe here, but we also need to make sure we don’t give her any reason to go public. It would cause panic and chaos.”

“Just like in the *Avengers* when Loki brought the Chitauri into New York,” Myles says in horror.

“Carrick,” I say softly, prompted by my gut instinct telling me that we shouldn’t leave the safety of the condo. “Surely with you, Maddox, and me, our collective powers would outweigh what she could bring.”

“But it might not,” he counters. “And a one-percent risk is too great a risk. But regardless, her attempt to break through would cause havoc among humans. They’re ignorant of immortal creatures, magic, and the Underworld. To keep the peace, we need to leave.”

“Then we bring the fight to her now,” I say adamantly, anger welling within me. This is all moving way too fast. “We find her, and we tear that bitch apart with iron.”

“You’re not ready,” Carrick says in a low voice.

“I might not have full control of my abilities, but I know how to use them,” I point out. “Besides... it’s the whole team that will take her down, not just me.”

Carrick scrubs his hands over his face, clearly frustrated with something. When he looks at me, his jaw is locked tight. “No, it won’t be the entire team. You’re the key to thwarting it, which means you’re the key to thwarting Kymaris.”

“Well, yeah... that’s right, but y’all will be at my back,” I say hesitantly, confused why this is so bothersome to him right now.

Carrick growls with impatience. “We might be at your back, but it is *you* who has to kill Kymaris. You alone, and you are not ready to do that.”

It goes deadly quiet. Such a heaviness hanging in the air that it’s me—puny human—against the Queen of the Underworld. It’s literally going to be my powers against hers. My strength against hers. My determination against hers. Everyone else will have a front-row seat.

At least according to the prophecy as relayed by the gods and confirmed by Onyx.

“You’re just not ready,” Carrick reiterates. “So, we’ll obviously keep training to get you ready. Until then, our best bet is to go into hiding and wait it out until we can get past the new moon.”

“And then what?” Myles asks, sounding incredibly frustrated. “Surely there will be another new moon she can use. Do we stay in hiding forever?”

“No,” Carrick replies grimly. “We’ll have to find a way to end it, and Finley will be the one to carry it out.”

My head is slightly spinning at everything he’s laid down before us. I had assumed we’d take the next few weeks to just chill here in the cocooned safety of the condo. We’d practice my magic, eat good food, and laugh at Kymaris not being able to get the Blood Stone. Now we have to run, and it’s not sitting right with me.

“Rainey and Myles are going to have to go somewhere safe outside the city,” Carrick says.

“I know a place,” Maddox says, his sandwich apparently forgotten. “I have a friend upstate, and I have another idea, too.”

“What’s that?” Carrick asks.

“We get two daemons or Light Fae to glamour as Myles and Rainey, and we let them go about their regular business on the *Fantasia* and at work. Maybe it will throw Kymaris off, and we’ll be able to gauge if she goes after them for information.”

“And you happen to know some daemon or fae who are willing to risk their lives like that?” I ask with distaste.

“Favors are always owed,” Maddox replies with a wink.

Carrick nods at his brother, a gleam of pride in his eyes. “That’s a great idea. You handle that and getting them relocated.”

Surprisingly, Myles and Rainey remain incredibly quiet throughout this announcement, and their lack of objection or fight tells me they’re taking Carrick’s belief in the danger very seriously.

Swinging his gaze back to me, Carrick says, “I want you and Zaid to go to Faere. You’ll be safest there; the realm will

be adequately warded against Dark Fae, and Deandra can watch over you.”

“Absolutely not,” I say with a shake of my head. “I hate that place, and I don’t feel much different about its inhabitants. And if you make me spend so much as a second with Nimeyah or Deandra, I’ll never speak to you again in this lifetime.”

“Finley, we don’t have time to worry about your sensibilities right now. Faere is the best place for you.”

“Fine,” I say pleasantly. “But I’m not staying at the castle. We can go to Arwen’s. It’s far away from the castle, and the royals don’t go there.”

“You can’t stay there alone,” Carrick growls in exasperation.

“And just where are you going?” I ask with a frown.

“I’m going to try to slow Kymaris down even more,” he says darkly, and the set determination in his jaw tells me that whatever he has planned, I’ll never talk him out of it.

“How?” I gasp.

“I’m going after some of the Dark Fae she has collected.”

“How?” I ask again, dumbfounded. We’d never talked about such a move.

“Boral provided me with addresses for where some live, including Caesar. I’m going to start with him. Before I kill him, I’m going to see if we can find out what happened to Boral.”

“Why bother?” Zaid mutters.

My heart aches a little for Zaid, but neither his expression nor tone give away what he’s feeling. Carrick doesn’t bother addressing his question because the answer is obvious. It would be helpful to know what else—besides us having the Blood Stone—Boral revealed.

“I can help,” Maddox declares to his brother. “After I get Rainey and Myles settled, I’ll meet you. The more we can take

out, the harder it will be for Kymaris to do the ritual.”

“That was my plan,” Carrick mutters, casting a hard glance my way. “To have you help me with that, but if Finley insists on staying at Arwen’s instead of the castle, I’d rather you go there when you finish settling Rainey and Myles in.”

“I can do that,” Maddox says with a nod.

“But why bother taking out some of her original fallen?” I ask, wondering if this is time wasted and unnecessary danger. “She’ll bring more up from the Underworld.”

“True,” Carrick agrees. “But it will split her focus, which can only help us.”

“How many will you take out?” I ask him.

“I know the locations of three.”

I ponder this a moment. “Maybe you should take Maddox with you. I’m sure Zaid and I will be perfectly fine at Arwen’s. You can both join us there.”

Carrick’s expression doesn’t get any more transparent. He’s worried about me being in Faere without him. “You can either stay at the castle with Nimeyah, which is my preference, or you can have Maddox join you as soon as he gets Rainey and Myles taken care of. Those are your two choices.”

“I choose Maddox,” I mutter because I am not going to the castle. “What will we do when you come to Faere?”

“Maybe we’ll go to Nimeyah or maybe we’ll find a different realm,” he suggests, and I grimace. I might very well end up at the castle anyway, except it will be more bearable with Carrick there. “Maybe we’ll hop realms. We only have to keep it away from her until the new moon, which is twenty days away.”

Carrick has a good plan. I can tell by his demeanor that he’s confident it’s what’s best.

I trust him.

I really do.

But none of this is sitting right with me. Our regular plans have been completely derailed, and this new strategy takes us from the safety of a well-fortified place. On top of that, I don't want Rainey and Myles to go somewhere else. While I trust Maddox to do right by them and put them someplace Kymaris won't find them—and admit his idea of planting decoys is brilliant—it leaves them alone and unprotected.

Mostly, it puts Carrick out hunting for Dark Fae without me by his side. I'm not worried about our safety in Faere. We'll be fine at Arwen's. If trouble brewed, I could open the veil and go anywhere in the United States I could realistically envision.

My worry is not being with Carrick. Deep in my heart, I know it's because I'm still rattled about Lucien. It's been almost a week since he succumbed to the Crimson River, and he hasn't returned. I'm starting to believe there is no coming back from that.

Which means... Carrick isn't impervious to his life being permanently ended by some means other than Ascension.

I don't want any of this.

I want to lock us away in safety to ride out the storm, and I want Carrick by my side.

"I think it's a bad idea," I finally say.

"Which part?" Carrick asks mildly.

"All of it. Having Rainey and Myles leave," I offer.

"They'll be safer away from all this," Carrick replies firmly.

"Faere isn't the best option for Zaid and me. We should figure someplace else—"

"It's the safest, Finley," Carrick says softly.

"And you." I throw an accusing finger at him. "You're going to go battle Dark Fae, and something bad could happen to you, which—"



“Nothing bad will happen,” he assures me, but I can tell by his tone he’s starting to get a little irritated with me.

I glance around. Rainey and Myles are watching me with curiosity, Zaid with sympathy, and Maddox with enjoyment.

Carrick, though, is dead serious.

“But,” I throw out desperately. “What about Rainey and Myles’ wedding? That’s going to be ruined.”

Bursting out of his seat, Carrick glares at me. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Finley. The wedding isn’t important. Keeping you alive and the Blood Stone from Kymaris is all that matters right now.”

I feel like I’ve been slapped in the face by the man I love. He’s never spoken to me like that. In all the days he has known me and had cause to be frustrated by me, he’s never lost patience with me. I had always considered him to be the rock in the storm, taking a lashing and able to remain strong and steady. To have him lose it, and on me of all people, is frankly... crushing.

Without a word, I rise from my chair and move out of the grouping, skirting around it. I head past the free-standing fireplace, which still bears the damage of Carrick throwing Boral against it, and straight for the sliding doors that lead outside. It’s utter silence behind me as I leave the group for the solace of the patio.

## CHAPTER 24

### *Finley*

CARRICK DOESN'T FOLLOW me out immediately, although I know he'll come. He'll think he's hurt me, and he'll want to make it right.

I go to a wooden chest that holds warm fleece blankets, then grab one. It's still misting out, but some of the patio furniture is protected by an overhang. It's cold enough that my breath is frosty, and I consider turning on one of the outdoor heaters.

I don't, though, figuring I deserve to be cold and miserable given the way I just acted in there. It was not with the cool bravery and determination to do what was best for the cause that I've been exhibiting since becoming this sort of savior.

Choosing a couch, I settle one of the pillows behind my back and lean against the armrest, my legs stretched out before me. I settle the blanket over me and pull it up to my chin, staring at the southern part of the city that borders the water.

The sliding door opens with a soft whoosh, and I'm surprised he came out as fast as he did. I figured he was still continuing to make plans and ignoring my bratty exit because it didn't deserve attention.

Sheepishly, I glance up. "What are you doing out here?"

The chastising look he gives me causes me to duck my face under the blanket. He moves gracefully across the patio to the couch I'm on. Picking up my legs, he takes the center cushion and drapes them back over his lap, his palms settling heavy and comforting on my thighs.

"I'm having a moment," I say sullenly.

“You’re allowed,” he says simply as he looks straight ahead over the water. It puts his face in profile to me, which is as stunning from this angle as any other. Sometimes, there are brief moments I have doubts that someone as beautiful as him could love someone like me.

I even told him that once while we were lying in bed, and he stared at me as if I were crazy. He had told me I was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen in his almost five thousand years of living.

I chose to believe him but, sometimes... I have doubts that surface.

I push those away though, because I have enough worries on my plate right now.

“What’s going on with you?” Carrick asks, twisting so he can look me in the eye.

I shrug, pushing the blanket down a little and playing with the fringe.

“Finley,” Carrick warns, his tone implying he wants to talk and he’s not going to accept shrugs, silence, or being vague.

The sigh that comes out of me is long, and I hadn’t realized how much I had pent up. “I feel like I’m drowning,” I admit.

Carrick tips his head as one hand squeezes my thigh in reassurance. “How so?”

“Well,” I say sarcastically, but also with a hint of teasing, “it’s a little pressurizing to be the savior of the world, you know. And, apparently, I’m solely the one who has to take down Kymaris.”

Carrick’s eyes go soft with sympathy, and he nods in understanding. I get why he didn’t want to add that last burden to my plate, but I’m glad I know.

I pick at the fringe some more. “It’s just... my life has changed so drastically in such a short period of time.”

“From barista, to business owner, to savior of the world,” he murmurs.

“To finding out I’m under a curse to be reincarnated over and over again,” I point out. “Let’s not forget that.”

Carrick chuckles, draping his arm over the couch and leaning in slightly toward me. “You have the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“Right,” I say in agreement. “But... I felt like I was handling it, you know? I was focused and driven, and we had a solid game plan. And now it’s all messed up, and we have to run. I don’t like it.”

Carrick studies me for a moment, his eyes roaming my face and ending on my eyes where he stares the longest.

Always my eyes.

“You’ve been so strong, Finley. Hell, just in the last few weeks, you fought a wraith, learned how to use your powers from Deandra, and went to Micah’s realm to steal the chalice and Blood Stone. You’ve had a less-than-satisfying conversation with your twin, who doesn’t seem interested in being rescued from the Underworld, you’re going to have to battle Kymaris, and you might have to sacrifice yourself in this prophecy. Even if you do make it, you’re destined to die by Rune’s curse at some point.”

“Not making me feel better here,” I grumble.

“The point is, you’re entitled to have a vulnerable moment or two, my love. And I’ll always be there when it happens, to prop you up and reassure you.”

The flush of love and admiration sweeps through me so fiercely that it actually takes my breath away. “You know me so well.”

His hand moves from the back of the couch to push some hair behind my ear. “I’m just saying... you don’t have to be strong all the time. I’ve got you when you’re not able. So, tell

me what's really going on because I know it's not about Rainey and Myles' wedding."

Leaning my face into his hand, I briefly snuggle into it with my eyes closed. When I open them, I say, "So much has happened to me—overwhelming things—and I feel like I've changed so much. I'm afraid the real me is gone. That little episode you saw of me getting worked up and using the wedding as an excuse... that was the old me talking and making a point that things other than this prophecy can be important. I just don't want to stop being me, you know. I don't want to change into something I don't like."

"I don't think you've changed, Finley," Carrick says, and I frown that he can't see it. Again, he brushes my hair back from my face. "Everything you've been through, all the horrible, overwhelming, and life-changing events, merely chipped away all the things you were not. What is left is who you really are. And you'll always be the woman who cares about her friends' wedding."

"You really believe that?" I ask him curiously.

"Of course I do." His hand slides behind my back, and he pulls me forward just a bit to put his face nearer to mine. "And no one knows you better than I do. No one has seen who you are at your core the way I have. You are exactly who you are supposed to be—and whether you're worried about Rainey and Myles' wedding or saving the world—you're still the same amazing, brave, badass, smart, tough, funny, and sexy-as-fuck woman I've always known."

My gaze pins to his. "Thank you. That means a lot."

"Anytime," he replies, then releases his hold behind my neck and sinks back down to the pillow.

"What do you think about Boral?" I ask, my brain switching back to business.

Carrick's expression darkens. "I don't know. I can't imagine he'd voluntarily give it up because of the binding, but maybe Kymaris had some sort of magic to undo it."

“Is that likely?” I ask.

“No,” he replies grimly. “He was probably tortured for the information. If so, the minute he gave it up, he died. If he gave it up voluntarily because they found a way to undo the binding, then he’s dead by my hand.”

In my heart, I think he’s dead. I don’t think he would have voluntarily betrayed us, which would have betrayed his son. I also take stock of the fact that I’m actually feeling a sense of loss over Boral. He was a wretched creature who was responsible for who knows how much suffering and death. He had no morals, no conscience, and yet... he was helping us.

He’d wanted to make amends with Zaid, and damn it... I was actually starting to like the Dark Fae. He’d never been untoward to me, and he had always helped. He even protected me when we came out of Micah’s realm and the top half of that pine tree was going to crush me.

I felt in my heart that he truly had the power to be better just the way his son had. Because as Zaid had told me all those months ago in some of our earliest meetings, just because a person is born dark doesn’t mean they stay that way, just as being light doesn’t ensure they are good.

Everyone has the power to change.

Or as Carrick put it... to chip away those things they are not.

“You know,” I say hesitantly, my gaze going back to the blanket to play with a piece of fringe. “Boral was my sure ticket into the Underworld.”

I feel Carrick’s body jerk, and I risk a peek up at him. He’s shocked with a tinge of anger. “You were going to have him take you there?”

“No,” I rush to assure him. “I mean... not if you agreed to take me. But we had talked about it more hypothetically, and he told me the best way to go in would be through Micah’s realm. Follow the Crimson River to its source from the pits. It would be the safest way to go in without being seen.”

“You know I’ll take you, Finley,” Carrick murmurs. “But not until this is done.”

“I know,” I say confidently. Because he loves me, he’ll do it. He’ll even go after Zora if I get killed in the prophecy. He’s already promised that and he’ll follow through, just like he did by blowing up Kymaris’ house tonight to help put a stop to the parties and sacrifices going on there. He did that for me, not the countless humans he saved.

“Anything else wrong, *a thaisce*?” he asks.

“Ah-hashka?” I ask, phonetically sounding out a word I don’t know the meaning of and I’m sure could never spell. “You called me that the night the incubus almost got me outside of the bar.”

He nods with a smile. “Spelled a-t-h-a-i-s-c-e. It means *my treasure* in Gaelic. It’s something I called you when you were Eireanne and I was Banan.”

“It’s beautiful,” I reply softly, touched by the nickname he’s carried all these centuries. “Did I have a nickname for you?”

“An amadáin,” he replies with a grin.

“That sounds nice.”

“It means *fool* or *idiot*.” Chuckling, he gave a slow shake of his head. “When you were mad at me, that’s what you called me.”

“Ah-madoh-in,” I test the word out, repeating his pronunciation. “I like it.”

Carrick laughs, and I can’t help it. I do, too.

But then he sobers because while we find moments of levity, we have pressing things that need our attention.

“Are you okay going to Faere with Zaid?” he asks. “Because it’s not sitting well with me about you staying at Arwen’s.”

“The castle is a hard no for me,” I say with brutal honesty. “But I’m perfectly comfortable at Arwen’s. We’ll be safely secluded, and we can bend distance if danger approaches.”

“It truly is the safest place for you as Kymaris cannot get in, and she’s my only worry at this point. Maddox will be there soon, and I won’t be long after.”

“Then we run,” I whisper, the thought so unappealing. I hate looking over my shoulder.

“Or we stay with Nimeyah.”

I shoot him a look that says I hate that option.

Laughing, Carrick leans over to brush his mouth against mine. “All right... we’ll find somewhere else to go. Maybe we’ll see if Titus can set us up in Semper Terra.”

“My hero,” I murmur against his lips with a smile.

“Always.”



## CHAPTER 25

### *Finley*

THE SEATTLE MORNING dawns bright and without a cloud in sight, which normally puts more pep in my step because it causes feelings of hope and cheer. This as opposed to one of our cloudy days, with or without rain, which can be depressing, to say the least.

Despite the post-dawn, shining ball hanging low in the sky, I'm not pulling any optimism from it.

Because today, we all split apart and go our own ways for the foreseeable future.

I had not realized how much comfort I took from us all being together at the condo. Yes, it had become like a family and we were all getting along so well and even having fun during meals and playing games after. It was always enough so that the doom and danger lurked in the far recesses of our minds.

Now things are getting real.

Our family is being broken apart.

We've suffered the betrayal of Boral, or perhaps his torturous death, but the fact is we lost him. Lucien is gone, and who knows if or when he'll be back. I'm terrified we're going to lose more.

We're all trying valiantly to keep things upbeat in our conversation as we finish the amazing breakfast Zaid cooked. Made-to-order eggs, bacon, croissants, and fresh fruit. Zaid was making sure we stocked up on energy for our morning journeys.

Maddox is taking Rainey and Myles into hiding, then joining us in Faere. I asked him specifically not to tell me

where since I didn't want to be put into the torturous position of being forced to reveal where they were. I'd rather die and take it to the grave.

Carrick would be going with us to Faere, then off to kill Kymaris' ritual Dark Fae.

After that, Carrick, Maddox, Zaid, and I would be in charge of protecting the Blood Stone, and we still haven't decided how to do it. Carrick says the best option is to stay with Nimeyah as it's warded heavily against Dark Fae. If Kymaris made it into Faere somehow, we'd have Nimeyah and her family's incredible powers to help us defend it.

Assuming they'd agree to help us. I'm confident Pyke and Deandra would, but I can't see Nimeyah committing and it seems her husband does whatever she wants.

Maddox suggested we hop—not just among AltVeritas, but around the Earth realm, too. He felt it unlikely Kymaris could track us.

I wanted to go back to the condo and make our stand there, but purely for selfish reasons. It was my comfort zone, but truly, it wasn't good for humankind if we forced Kymaris to bring the battle there.

At this point, Kymaris probably doesn't care about keeping things under wraps. She could reveal herself to the world, and the human population would have no clue how to deal with her. She would love the challenge of attacking this building and the human carnage it would wreak. And even if she revealed herself, her Dark Fae, and her daemons to the world, no human force would be equipped to take her down in time to stop the ritual at the new moon. She could simply attack the condo, lay it and everyone in it to waste, and then hop to another realm until it was time for the ritual.

Ultimately, I had to admit the potential loss of human life was too much to bear and we had to leave.

When breakfast is done, we all congregate in the living area. Our bags were packed last night before we went to bed. I

immediately go to Rainey and Myles, wrapping my arms around both their necks as one of each of their arms go around my waist and we have an intimate but silent group hug. None of us want to say words that could be interpreted as a final goodbye, so I merely say, "I'll see you on the flip side."

"We'll have a huge party," Rainey says with a watery smile.

"And a wedding," Myles reminds us.

Rainey laughs, pressing her face to my shoulder to dry her tears as she mumbles, "I really do have an amazing dress."

I pull back because this could go on a lot longer, but it's only dragging out the inevitable. I look to Rainey, then Myles. "Take good care of each other. We'll contact you as soon as we're able to."

Both nod, prepared not to hear from any of us for a long time.

At least not until after the new moon.

I pull away as I know they won't be the first to do it, then give them my back, walking to stand beside Carrick. Any more time near Rainey and Myles and I'm afraid copious tears would be involved.

"All right," Maddox says, gallantly taking Rainey's suitcase. He does it only to annoy Myles, but Myles is too distracted and worried to be bothered. Maddox has no bag, but I expect he'll pop back in here at some point to grab a few things. He's not in the same type of danger we are. "Let's get going."

They move into the elevator, then turn around to face us. Rainey and Myles' eyes are pinned on me. I give a tiny wave as the doors slide closed, and then my friends are gone.

Taking a deep breath, I try to seem in control. I look up at Carrick. "Everything taken care of with the condo?"

"It's in the morning paper and on the news channels as we speak," he replies smoothly.

There are certain perks to being the richest man in the city, but Carrick's money and prestige came through for us. Our big problem in leaving was to make sure Kymaris knew we were. We didn't want her storming the place and killing people only to find the condo empty.

Carrick had reached out to all the news outlets to advise them that he was moving out of The Prestige and into an Elliott Bay home in Magnolia. The news also reported that the condo was placed for sale at an even thirteen million and that appointments for private viewings were being accepted immediately.

The hope was that word would get to Kymaris and she'd either accept we were gone or she'd send someone to check the place out. Since Carrick was opening it for showings, that wouldn't be hard and would prove we were indeed gone.

Obviously, Carrick had no intention of moving to Magnolia, but that might thin Kymaris' resources even more if she started looking for him there.

Regardless, we had to minimize the risk she'd bring her fight to this building, and this was the best way to do it.

"Then let's do this," I say, my gaze moving from Carrick to Zaid, who nods that he is ready.

Zaid and I have one large camping backpack with all our essentials—clothes, freeze-dried food, and filtered water bottles. While electronics won't work in Faere, we still brought ours with chargers in case we hopped around the Earth realm later. Zaid, being a million times stronger than me, insisted on carrying it.

Past that, we're traveling light.

The only other bag is a cushioned satchel holding the Blood Stone, which I'm carrying cross-body. The weight is nominal, and I feel weird without my regular backpack that holds my weapons. I left it behind, choosing to openly wear my whip at my hip. I know weapons are forbidden for humans in Faere, but our hope is that no one will see us as removed as

Arwen's hut is, and Carrick agrees I need to be well-armed. I also have a dagger on my other hip and throwing knives strapped to my ankles.

Like Maddox, Carrick would worry about clothing for himself after he took care of the Dark Fae and we decided where we were going.

His job being to open the veil into Faere, Carrick reaches a hand out and makes a slicing motion downward. A seam opens and he uses his hand to peel one side back, using his other to motion us forward.

I can see the brightly colored grass and purple-leafed trees in the distance. To the left, Arwen's hut looks the exact way it did the last time we were here.

Zaid steps through first, does a quick scan around, and then nods back at me. I step through, followed by Carrick, and the seam into his condo seals.

Carrick turns in a slow circle, critically perusing the area. Arwen's hut sits on the eastern edge of a small clearing bordered on all sides by thick forest. "You two stay here. I'm going to do a quick check of the perimeter.

And with that, he blinks out of sight, having bent distance to disappear. I turn toward the hut, intent on checking out the interior again, but I make it no more than three paces before Carrick is back.

I blink at him because his super speed still boggles my mind. "That was fast."

"I'm a demi-god—what did you expect?" Lifting his hand and sweeping it slowly to indicate the tree line that surrounds us, he says, "There's no one around so you should be fine. Still, I want you to stay in the hut until Maddox gets here."

We move to Arwen's hut, and I lift back the flap and duck slightly to walk in. Carrick and Zaid follow. We leave the door open to let in the bright light, which is sufficient for us to do a brief look around.

Pulling the satchel off, I let it fall gently to Arwen's bed. Zaid slips out of his backpack so it rests beside it. My eyes can't help but move to the blackened bloodstain on the lower part of the leather hide wall, but I quickly glance away.

Having checked out the perimeter of the area and the interior of the hut, Carrick walks back outside and I follow. He has more important things to do.

He turns to face me, then reaches out to pull me close. "I don't like leaving you, but there's no place safer from Kymaris right now. I'll be back soon, I promise."

"We'll be fine," I assure him breezily.

Dipping his head down, he brushes his lips against mine. "Try to stay out of trouble."

"Always," I murmur, tipping my head back to look at him.

We don't exchange words of love. The way we look at each other often speaks louder.

Carrick smiles as he releases me. Turning, he slices a rip in the veil, revealing an upper-class neighborhood where one of the Dark Fae he's hunting presumably lives. He doesn't look back, but merely steps through. The veil quickly disappears.

I stare at the space where he just was, my gaze slowly focusing on the trees about twenty yards away. And then I do what Carrick told me to and head back into the hut—pulling the flap door closed—prepared to wait for him to come back.

The minute I enter, I call forth an orb of light and send it to hover above us. My magic is coming so easily these days that I rarely have to give it much thought. The floating ball provides sufficient illumination to see that Arwen's place appears the same as it was when we were here last. The evidence of the violence that took place hasn't been touched. Her desk is broken in two, the chair in splinters, and shards of pottery are all over as if they'd been thrown or launched at something.

Once again, my gaze involuntarily slides to the blackish-gray stain on the inside leather wall. By its location, I imagine

Arwen sitting against it, legs stretched out. Perhaps injured or restrained. The bloodstain is level to where her heart would have been as she leaned against it.

Where a spike was likely driven through to kill her, leaving behind nothing but the spurt of blood from the sudden blow.

I turn away from the wall. Zaid squats near her desk, picking through some papers that had fallen.

“Wish I knew what happened to Arwen,” I murmur, more to myself than Zaid. He doesn’t respond.

I move around the bed to the low table in the middle. The crystals—once glowing in various colors—remain darkened in their bowl. One—about six inches long with my lock of hair draped over it—sits on the table. It seems like such an ominous sign as I never knew why she wanted my hair, and now it sits there looking dull against the dead crystal.

Zaid moves over to the black stain, then squats again to examine it. Hand going to the bottom of the hut, he lifts it a good foot off the ground so sunlight streams in. “Maybe she got out this way,” he suggests, but we both know it’s unlikely with that amount of blood.

I smile as he stands, appreciating his attempt to give me hope. Because he’s my friend and of course that’s what he’d do.

Just as I’m his friend.

“How are you feeling about your dad?” I ask him hesitantly.

Zaid’s body jerks slightly, but he stands and turns to face me. “Knew you couldn’t keep your nose out of it,” he grumbles.

“Then you should have an answer ready for me,” I quip.

“I don’t know how I feel,” he mutters, moving my way toward the low table. He bends slightly, staring at the crystals.

“My gut instinct says he betrayed us while Carrick seems to think he was tortured.”

“Regardless, he’s dead,” I say, not unkindly. “Are you okay with that?”

“What do I care?” he asks, his voice flat. He reaches out, then picks up one of the crystals in the bowl to examine it. “I hated him. I’m relieved he’s out of my life for good.”

“Really?” I ask in surprise. I thought death might change his feelings.

“Of course, really,” Zaid replies snappishly as he sets the crystal down and picks up another. His interest in the crystals keeps him from having to look me in the eye. “He made my life a living hell.”

Zaid sets the crystal down, but before he can pick up another to ignore me, I reach out and nab his hand. Zaid’s not one for touch, so his head whips up. I grip his hand hard so he can’t pull away. “I don’t think it’s your dad you hate. I think you hate yourself for what he made you become.”

A flash of fury skitters over his face, but it immediately melts into astonishment. I use the opportunity to press, squeezing his hand. “Zaid... you’ve more than made up for all the things you did with your father. You need to forgive him, but, more than that, you need to forgive yourself and move on. It’s over, and you are not the same person you were all those centuries ago.”

He might be grumpy on most occasions, but Carrick told me that Zaid has time and again performed acts of charity, kindness, and sometimes bravery to defend others in his quest to right his wrongs. It’s why his aura went from black to gray. I expect it will be white one day if he continues on this path.

“Maybe you’re right,” he mutters as he pulls his hand from mine, only to bend and pick up the crystal on the table with my hair on it.

Pulling the lock of hair from the crystal, he frowns, noting the color as he holds it up closer to the light source above us.



“This is the color of your hair.”

I nod. “I gave it to Arwen on our first visit. No clue what she wanted it for, and all these crystals were glowing different colors at the time.”

“They’re memory crystals,” Zaid says off-handedly as he stares at my lock of hair, then his eyes move to the crystal in his other hand. “They were probably glowing when she was alive, because her memories were alive.”

My heart sinks. More confirmation that Arwen is dead. “I didn’t realize there were memory crystals outside the Hall of Histories.”

“Of course there are,” Zaid replies as he moves around the table, his gaze alternating between the crystal and the lock of hair, appearing deep in thought. “It’s the magical version of taking photos or video to preserve memories, but I’m guessing they all die when the person who created them dies since they’re not glowing anymore.”

But then he halts as if something strikes him. His gaze moves from the crystal to my hair, then back to the crystal again.

His head snaps up, and his eyes are wide. Thrusting the crystal at me, he says, “Take this.”

My eyebrows knit in confusion. “Why?”

“Just do it,” he snaps, and there’s my grumpy Zaid.

Stretching my arm out, I turn my palm upward. Zaid places the crystal there. The minute it touches my skin, it lights up a deep red with orange and yellow streaks pulsing within it.

“What the hell?” I murmur, my gaze lifting to Zaid’s.

He holds up my lock of hair that had been twined around the crystal. “I think she made that crystal personally for you.”

I can feel power within it, and it feels like Arwen. Like she is standing right here with us. My fingers close and I grip the

thin cylinder, causing a shot of warmth to flow through me as a light shoots out from one end of the crystal.

I let out a tiny yip of surprise, but I manage to hold on. Twisting my wrist, I turn the crystal so the end from which the light is coming out points upward. I'm stunned when a 3D-holographic image forms before us of the inside of Arwen's tent.

"Whoa..." I murmur.

Then the picture starts moving as if it's a movie playing before us.

At first, I'm confused because it's the table with the bowl of crystals, and they're glowing. A hand comes into view—delicate and female, most likely Arwen's—and it's holding the crystal with my lock of hair.

I hear her murmuring in a language I don't recognize, but then the point of view of what we're seeing changes. It's as if Arwen, who I think is holding the crystal, is being swirled around, and the crystal and my hair drop to the table. The point of view shifts again, and it's like the crystal has become a camera of sorts to record the interior of the hut.

There's Arwen's table and chair, fully intact, but it doesn't stay that way.

From out of range of the crystal, Arwen comes flying through the air and lands hard on the table, causing it to crack and fold in.

My blood turns to ice as I realize she set this crystal to record her last moments. And I believe Zaid is right... she keyed it to my lock of hair so only I could activate it.

I hold my breath as I watch.

From the left of the hologram, someone flies across the room, past the crystal recording this moment, and straight at Arwen.

I gasp as I realize it's Pyke. Arwen tries to pull herself up from the wreckage of her desk when Pyke grabs the chair and

brings it down on her back so viciously it splinters apart.

While, logically, I know Arwen is a Light Fae and strong as steel, I can't help but gasp at the violence against her.

Pyke reaches down, grabs Arwen by her hair, and hauls her up to her feet. I bite down hard into my lower lip as he brings a dagger that's surely made of iron to her throat. Putting his lips near her ear, he snarls, "I'm only going to ask you one more time, cousin... what did you see of Finley's past or future?"

My head whips toward Zaid, who is staring back at me, aghast. We must be watching the moments after Carrick and I left from my meeting with her. We clearly missed the beginning of this confrontation, but she somehow made it to the crystal and my lock of hair to start recording the memory.

"Oh my God." My entire body starts to shake, but I hold the crystal tight. "This was right after the first time we met her. She told me about my twin being taken and a changeling left behind. She's the one who confirmed I had some type of light power inside of me."

"And Pyke wanted that information for some reason," Zaid growls.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Arwen says to Pyke, her voice trembling with fear. Zaid and I bring our attention back to the holographic memory playing out. "I didn't see anything. She was unreadable."

"You're lying," he yells. The hologram is so lifelike that I can see spittle fly from his mouth. "Now tell me or I'm going to kill you."

For a moment, I can sense the intense fear she's feeling, but then it disappears and Arwen's face smooths out. Her voice turns calm as she smiles at Pyke. "I'm not going to tell you anything."

Pyke leans in closer to Arwen, studies her face. His lips tighten and he grits out, "You know... I actually believe you."

Without giving her a second chance, he drags her across the hut by her hair. She struggles and kicks, but she doesn't cry out. I can feel the acceptance of her fate.

"No," I whisper, knowing what's coming.

Pyke throws Arwen forward. She stumbles and lands on her hands and knees near the side of the hut where the bloodstain lingers. With his boot at her rear, Pyke gives her a hard push and she sprawls forward, only to immediately roll to face him, ending in a sitting position. When he advances on her, she crab walks backward until her back comes to rest against the hut wall.

Right at the bloodstain.

I avert my eyes, but only for a second because Arwen taunts, "I'll never tell you what I saw about Finley, but I'll tell you what I saw about you."

Pyke looks absolutely horrified at the suggestion.

"At the October new moon—" Arwen says.

She's cut off, though, as Pyke bellows, "No."

He lunges forward without hesitation, one hand to her throat and the other holding the dagger plunging it straight into her heart. Pyke pulls the dagger free, and Arwen falls back to sag against the leather hide wall.

And then, Arwen slumps with pain and impending death. Her head turns my way and while her eyes are covered with skin, I know she can still see. She stares right where the crystal is on the table and she murmurs words that make no sound, but they sound prayerful.

Then her head falls back against the tent and the crystal goes black, the holographic image disappearing.

Arwen had died.

Slowly, I look at Zaid, whose expression, I'm sure, mirrors my own.

Holy fuck.

Pyke killed Arwen, but why would he do that? They were family.

And why was he so interested in what she saw about me?

An uneasy feeling settles deep in my stomach. I drop the crystal in the bowl, urgently telling Zaid, “We need to leave Faere now.”

“Agreed,” he says, and we both start for the bed to grab the backpack and the satchel.

My heart slams against my chest as I’m brought to a halt by a male voice taunting from outside the tent, “Finley... I know you’re here... come on out.”

He called my name and not Zaid’s. My gaze snaps to Zaid, and I whisper, “He doesn’t know you’re here. Get the chalice and get out of here. Go hide.”

Whether it’s my tone or because he accepts it as the best option, Zaid gives a curt nod as I turn toward the flap door. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly and plaster a smile to my face.

“Pyke?” I call, adding a surprised but genial lilt to my tone. I push the flap door open, then step into the sunlight to see the painfully beautiful Light Fae prince. His black hair shines almost blue in the light, and he grins at me warmly. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replies smoothly. He’s wearing black leather pants with boots, a crew-type shirt, and tailed jacket—remarkably similar to the way many of the male Light Fae here dress.

Images of him stabbing Arwen assault my mind, and I swallow hard against the bile rising within me.

Pyke studies me critically as I try to come up with an excuse as to why I’m here.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t give me an opportunity to provide it, because the grin slides off his face. I don’t know whether he used magic or perhaps my poker face sucks,

because his voice is dull as he concludes the truth, demanding, “You know, don’t you?”

“Know what?” I ask, but I can’t hide the tremor in my voice.

Pyke takes two steps toward me, but I hold my ground. Right now, as far as he knows, we’re just old friends running into each other.

The curving smile on his face doesn’t match the cold glitter in his eyes. “You know I killed Arwen.”

I want to feign surprise, but I don’t think I pull it off. “What?”

“Cut the bullshit, Finley,” he snarls impatiently. “While I can’t read exact thoughts, I can glean enough emotions to know you’re scared to death of me right now.”

Throwing my hands up in capitulation, I snap, “Okay, fine... I know. Want to tell me why you did it?”

“Not really,” he says with a feral smirk peeling his lips back. “But what I do want is the Blood Stone.”

I suck in a breath, my shock so immense I can’t hide it. “Why? And how did you even know I was here?”

“Easy to put a tracking spell on you,” Pyke gloats as he crosses his arms over his chest. “When I brought you back through the veil that time and we held hands, I marked you.”

I remember the tingle I felt. He’d joked it was attraction.

“I knew the moment you stepped foot in Faere,” he taunts. “Now I want the chalice.”

“And how do you know Carrick isn’t in the tent right now ready to blast you to smithereens?” I snarl, throwing my thumb over my shoulder.

Stalling.

To give Zaid a chance to sneak out under the bottom flap.

“If Carrick were here, he would have come out of there before you did, the minute I called your name. Now, the question is... why are you here alone? Perhaps guarding the Blood Stone while Carrick is off doing something else?”

There are a few choices available to me at this point. I could try to stall further, but Pyke isn't going to let that go on long. I could use my powers to fight, but something tells me to keep the secret of my magic close to the vest. While I had used my magical shield briefly to stop the top of the pine tree from crushing down on us while we battled Micah, Pyke was too engrossed in actually battling the beast to have noticed.

So, I do the only thing I know how to. My hand shooting to my hip, I unsnap the leather loop with a quick flick and grip the whip in my palm. Pyke barely starts to uncross his arms, face a mask of shock, before I have the whip launching at him.

It catches him just below his left eye. He howls in pain, his hand reflexively going up to touch the wound. His fingers come away coated in black blood, which continues to trickle down the front of his face.

“You bitch,” he hisses as I pull my whip back to strike again.

And then, my whip is magically wrenched out of my hand as Pyke makes a grasping motion and then yanks at the air. Without even touching me, he manages to pull it away and send it sailing off to his left, far out of my reach.

I reach for my dagger, but Pyke conjures rope out of thin air, makes a twirling motion, and sends it flying right at me. One end slithers around my wrist, wraps tightly, and then yanks my arm behind my back. The rope then snakes around, grabs my other wrist, and wrenches it back. Within just seconds, both my wrists are secured.

Quickly, I do an internal check to make sure my magic is there and accessible. Thank God, it is, which means the rope tying me is nothing but a rope.

Pyke waves his hand in front of his face, and the cut under his eye disappears. Glaring at me as he advances, he growls, “Now... give me the Blood Stone.”

“I don’t have it,” I yell. “Carrick does, and he’s not here.”

With two long strides, Pyke stomps up to me and crosses one arm over his chest, only to let it fly in a backhand at my cheek. It connects solidly and I go stumbling backward, but I manage to stay on my feet.

“I hate liars, Finley.” Pyke moves so fast I can’t even see it, but he’s suddenly gripping the front of my shirt and jerking me up to my tiptoes as he glares down at me. “If I could so easily put a tracking spell on you, don’t you think I could do the same to the chalice? I felt it when you arrived.”

The memory comes at me as fresh as if it happened today rather than a week ago. After the battle with Micah in the forest clearing was over, Pyke was the one who had picked up the chalice and returned it to Carrick.

He had touched it.

He had put a tracking spell on it.

Before I can ask why, he’s swinging me around and pushing me toward the hut. “It’s in there. Now get it.”

Heart hammering, hoping to God Zaid escaped, I walk to it. The fact Pyke seems to think it’s in the hut doesn’t give me hope, though.

With a feeling of dread, I step into the hut, Pyke behind me. My gaze immediately flicks to the bed. The satchel is gone, and there’s no sign of Zaid.

I look over my shoulder at Pyke, whose expression has turned thunderous. “Where is it? I felt it with you when you appeared in Faere.”

“It was,” I rush to assure him. “As was Carrick. He brought me here for safekeeping, then he left to go hide the Blood Stone.”



That explanation makes no sense as Carrick would never leave me behind. He would have battled Pyke right then and there, but the prince is either so outraged, so stupid, or a combination of both, that he doesn't bother to puzzle that out.

"Where is he?" he demands. "Where did he go?"

"I don't know," I say, which is the absolute truth.

Pyke must hear the veracity in my voice because he doesn't ask me again. Instead, he starts a short pace back and forth in the hut as he obviously ponders his options.

Finally, he stops, bringing his gaze to me. "Carrick has the Blood Stone, and I have you. This could work out."

Panic hits me as the meaning of his words sink in. I lunge for the opening of the tent, but I'm not sure where I think I can go with my hands tied behind my back. I stand firm in my resolve not to use my magic, because that's a secret I'm not going to give up unless I'm in a life-or-death situation.

Right now, Pyke seems to want me as bait.

Surprisingly, I make it through the tent flap and halfway around the side before I'm stopped by Pyke grabbing my elbow. He whirls me around to face him and smiles down at me maniacally. "Yes, I think a trade will work out nicely."

I lift my chin defiantly. "Carrick will never give it to you."

Pyke laughs with genuine amusement. "I guess there's only one way to find out, right?"

Before I can object, my body is pulled hard as Pyke bends distance, able to easily glide through the veil without ripping it. Benefits of being a Light Fae royal, I guess.

Instantly, we're inside a dimmed bedroom. I don't think we're in Faere as the decor looks distinctly Earth realm and is lavishly but traditionally decorated. The walls are wood-paneled with heavy velvet draperies closed almost all the way so only slivers of light come through. Sconces on the walls are lit, interspersed with oil paintings that appear costly. Several

table lamps are also lit, providing more glow, and there's a huge canopy bed with red velvet bedding.

"Where are we?" I ask as I slowly turn around.

From one of the darkened corners of the room, I make out a figure moving toward us. Tall, lithe, and wearing some type of cloak. There's a slight vibe of nausea indicating something dark, but I quickly turn it off. I've gotten good at pushing that feeling away so as not to get distracted.

When it steps into the light, I gasp in shock as I take in Kymaris standing before me. Her face is burned in some places, as is her skin showing outside of the cloak. Some are just pinkened skin, others are black with scabs. Based on the description of the explosion Carrick described, she healed a lot faster than we thought she could, which means her powers are greater than we thought.

What's more shocking than actually seeing her—being in her presence—is that Pyke is the one who brought me to her. I simply can't comprehend why he would do this.

Pyke shoves me so hard that I fall to my knees, almost toppling over to land at Kymaris' feet. I lift my head to see Pyke move past me straight to Kymaris, where he leans in and kisses a healed portion of her cheek.

"Brought you a present," he murmurs.

Kymaris doesn't take her eyes off me, but she curls an arm upward to bring her palm to his cheek. "Indeed, you have, my love. Indeed, you have."

My stomach sinks, finally realizing the implications of Pyke being in cahoots with Kymaris. Immediately, I realize it wasn't Boral who told her that we had the Blood Stone, but rather Pyke. And given Pyke has immense powers that are probably on par, or even greater, than hers, the situation just got unbelievably bad for us.

The only saving grace is that the chalice is with Zaid back in Faere, and Carrick will soon be arriving there.

Kymaris bends to peer at me, reaching out to take a lock of my hair. She rubs it thoughtfully between her fingers before bringing her eyes to mine.

“What makes you so special that you’d be written into this prophecy?” she asks quietly, her gaze boring angrily into mine.

Relief sweeps through me at her question. She knows absolutely nothing about me, and I’m grateful we never brought Pyke fully into the fold. The only thing he knows is that I’m part of a prophecy, but he’s never been told another piece of information.

Which means Kymaris is still in the dark.

I don’t respond to her question because I have a feeling that any answer I give—hell, just my voice alone—will anger her. Silently, I stare resolutely right back at her.

For a moment, I think she takes it as a direct challenge as her eyes start to turn red. But she reins it in, a slow smile curling her lips. She leans in just a little closer until I can feel her breath on my face.

“Nothing,” she murmurs in a light voice. “Nothing makes you special.”

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## **About the Author**



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

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