

— FATE OF THE FAE —



RUTHIE'S  
FAE  
KING

VERA RIVERS

# RUTHLESS FAE KING

Fate of the Fae

# VERA RIVERS

**Ruthless Fae King:**

Fate of the Fae - Book Four

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## HAZEL

“It’s only ten people,” my mom said, shaking her head.

“Progress is progress, Vanya,” Nylah replied. “It’s *ten people*. Every life we save from Conjurite magic is worth it. Even if it’s just one life.”

“We need more than that,” my mom said again.

“I know,” Nylah said gently. “But we’ll get there. I understand your impatience. I understand your need to make things right as soon as you can. But we must trust that we’re on the right path. Terra won’t lead us astray.”

My mom sighed and nodded. Nylah, the High Priestess of Jasfin, the woman with direct contact to the Goddess Terra herself, was never wrong when it came to matters like this.

“Ten means we’re doing something right, Mom,” I offered. “If it was only one or two, we could still call it a fluke. But now that we know we’re doing something right, we just have to expand our *reach*, if you will.”

It had been months since the war between Palgia and Jasfin had officially ended. The war had left a lot of destruction in its wake, with small towns that had to rebuild, and Fae who had lost their loved ones were still in mourning. But good had come in the months that had followed—events that proved that good prevailed.

Mom had started working with Nylah, training to be a priestess. She was still at the start of her journey, and although



her power was strong, she had much to learn. But she showed a lot of potential.

I had healing power, too. It must have come from my mother, passed down through our blood. Nylah was also teaching me how to use it, but I wasn't going to be a priestess. I didn't know what I would be yet. My whole life, I'd felt like I was just wandering around, not knowing where I was meant to be or what I was meant to do.

Living at the palace with my mom and Ellie, with Nylah teaching us and Rainier and Dex as kind to us as they were, at least I felt like I knew where I belonged.

“You're right,” Mom finally said. “We are doing something right. It's just been so long since the war ended, and we still have a whole kingdom filled with people bound by Conjurite magic, and I ache for them.”

I walked to her and hugged her. She was such a beautiful soul, always willing to be there for others, even at her own expense. Learning to be a priestess was the right thing for her—she could help so many people.

“We should go,” Mom told me. “We still have to get dressed before dinner.”

I nodded, and we said our goodbyes to Nylah.

Nylah stayed in the cathedral adjacent to the palace, where she had living quarters of her own, an office where she researched old scrolls and studied prophecies and spent a lot of time in prayer to the Goddess Terra.

Mom and I walked through the palace to our own living quarters. As we walked, I hummed a song she had sung to me since I was a child. Mom hummed along with me, and I felt close to her. Since I'd been born, it had only been the two of us, and we'd fought for our survival, standing side by side no matter what.

Now that we were at the palace, we had support and love from Ellie—my half-sister—and her husband King Rainier, from Nylah and Dex, the king's general. It was wonderful not

to have to fight alone anymore, but the bond I had with my mother would never break.

“I’ll see you at dinner,” Mom said when we stopped at her room.

I nodded and went onto my room alone, locking myself in. My dress was already laid out on the bed, shoes ready, and the jewelry had been chosen. I still had to get used to being waited on hand and foot by servants like this.

Life at the palace was luxurious and nothing like what I was accustomed to. I’d spent a lot of time sleeping under bridges, getting something to eat only every few days, and wearing whatever there was to cover up. Now, I had a soft pillow for my head every night, the finest silk clothing, and three meals a day with family and friends, so that it wasn’t just about eating—we grew closer as we spent quality time together.

Tonight’s dinner was bigger than just a family gathering. We would have guests.

Just thinking about the dinner made me feel sick. Rainier hadn’t hosted a lot of parties and grand balls since the war had been over. We’d all been living in the lap of luxury, but we’d still been isolated from the rest of the world. Tonight, though, we had a guest of honor, and Rainier had pulled out all the stops.

My stomach twisted with nerves.

Instead of getting ready as I should have, I pushed open the French doors that led out to my private garden.

When Ellie had given me this room, the garden had drawn me more than the vast space, the luxury furniture, or the bathroom that was big enough to house a family of four if it had to.

Since then, I’d used my magic to cultivate the garden into a lush sanctuary.

Now, when I stepped through the doors and into the sunlight, I was surrounded by evergreen plants, flowers that

burst with color, and a carpet of soft green grass that invited anyone to lay down on it and stare up at the sky.

I walked to a corner where I'd been growing Lettles. The plants had deep green heart-shaped leaves and fine white flowers that looked almost like snow when there were a lot of them put together, but what I liked most about them was the way they sparkled in the sun.

I kneeled on the grass and outstretched my hands. I closed my eyes and focused on my power—the power of creativity, of healing, the power of life.

Magic flowed from my fingers like colored light, and the plants responded to it. They craned their necks and danced, tugging at their roots, and the leaves grew bigger, and the snow-white flowers bloomed brighter and smiled up at the sky, celebrating the simplicity of being alive. I sensed them reaching for me and my magic, taking what I gave them and becoming beautiful.

I opened my eyes and smiled at how well my plants were coming along.

The garden looked nothing like it had when I'd found it, first.

I lay back on the grass and closed my eyes, drinking in the last rays of the setting sun. I took deep, even breaths. Time was ticking by, and it was getting later and later, but I didn't want to leave my sanctuary, the safety and the privacy of my quarters, for a dinner where I had to make polite conversation.

*He* would be there, and I didn't know if I had what it took to face him.

Finally, I stood and walked back into the palace, closing the doors behind me. I should have declined the invitation, told them I wasn't ready to face a dinner like this. But it was too late now—not arriving would just be rude.

I dressed into the clothes laid out for me before I walked to the dressing table.

I stood in front of the mirror and tied my hair into a bun on top of my head. When I turned my head this way and that, it

made me feel elegant and graceful. But my head ached dully, and the tight bun only increased my headache.

I pulled the bun out again, letting my brown hair fall like a curtain around my shoulders. I tried pulling half of it back, but that didn't feel right, either.

Nothing felt right.

Finally, I just ran my fingers through it and left it as it was.

I ran my hands down the bodice of my dress. It was a deep evergreen, the color of the forest behind King Rainier's palace. The dress complimented my pale skin and brought out the blue in my eyes.

This would have to do. I couldn't fuss any more. I was already late.

My stomach twisted in a knot of nerves, and I breathed in deeply through my nose and out through my mouth to try to calm myself.

"It's just a dinner," I told myself. "It's not a big deal. Everyone you know will be there."

Everyone, including Erol.

Just thinking about him made me shiver. He'd been the Conjurite King Falx's right hand, and he'd been the one to keep us locked up in the dungeons under Falx's castle. He'd been merciless and menacing.

Except for the part where he'd set us free, but it was hard to see the Regent of Palgia through a screen of mercy after everything he'd done.

He was, after all, still ruled by Conjurite magic.

Finally, I was ready to go. And much later than I should have been! I picked up my skirts and ran through the hallways of the palace. I hopped and skipped over the intricate flowers that had been laid into the marble floors. I knew they'd been turned to solid stone, and stepping on them wouldn't damage them, but it felt wrong to step on beauty. I always skipped over them.

I turned the corner and ran along the corridor with the large oil paintings of previous kings and queens on either side, a long red carpet stretched from one end to the other.

Finally, I turned down the hallway that would lead me to the dining room.

I bumped into someone tall and solid.

“Oh!” I cried out and bounced back. I tripped over my feet and sat down on the ground—hard. My green skirt puffed out around me, the bodice digging into my chest. I winced.

“Are you all right?” a deep voice asked, and my stomach clenched.

When I looked up at him, Erol’s dark eyes locked on mine, and a shiver ran down my spine.

“Hazel,” he said politely. “Here.” He held out a hand.

I hesitated before I took it. When I did, the Conjurite magic that danced on Erol’s skin reacted to the Luminescence within me—the light magic that was the very essence of the Fae. Fear curled at the pit of my stomach.

Erol pulled me up with ease, and when I was on my feet, I peered up at his enormous form. He was tall and broad, and he was built like a warrior, with taut muscles and a fluid way of moving.

I retrieved my hand quickly, fighting the urge to wipe it on my skirt.

“You’re late,” I said.

The dinner had started at least half an hour ago, if not more.

“So are you,” he countered.

“You’re the guest of honor,” I pointed out. “Being late to your own event is poor form.”

“Without me, there wouldn’t be an event, so it doesn’t matter.”

I bristled at his arrogance.

Erol glared at me, and I glared right back. I'd been nervous to see him again, remembering the torture and pain he'd put us through while we'd been prisoners in Falx's dungeon. Erol ruled by fear, the Conjurite magic doing most of the dirty work, but even when he hadn't used magic, he'd done things that caused those around him to fear.

When I thought back to Erol, when I heard his name, that was what I thought about—the man who'd captured us and treated us poorly, the man who'd done Falx's bidding no matter what the cost.

Now that I faced him and glared at him, we were on equal footing. He was a guest here in the palace, and so was I. He wasn't anyone's right-hand man, and I wasn't a prisoner. The concept was liberating, and the fear subsided completely, determination following in its wake.

I knew who I was—I might not have known my direction, but I knew my allegiance, and I knew where my roots were. I was deeply grounded in light.

Erol wasn't.

His face was hard, his jaw set. Thick eyebrows overshadowed his deep eyes, and his high cheekbones made him look as regal as he was now that he ruled Palgia on behalf of Rainier.

Conjurite magic rose all around us, dimming the last of the natural light that came from the windows. Fear followed on its heels, but it wasn't my fear. It was the Conjurite magic, and I didn't have to own it.

I flared my own magic to remind Erol where he was and who he was dealing with.

“What are you going to do, Hazel?” Erol asked. His voice was silky smooth, a deep growl at the back of his throat. “If I didn't know any better, I would have thought you were challenging me.”

“I'm just reminding you who you are. *Where* you are. I'm not your prisoner anymore. There isn't a single hexed stone within these walls that will take away my power.”

Erol laughed mirthlessly. “So, you want to dance, huh?”

He took a step closer to me, and with it came a wave of his magic. My power rose to meet it, and for a second, it looked like we were going to come to supernatural blows.

Erol was so close to me, I could see the small scar under his right eye, the stubble on his chin. His eyes were drowning deep, and the determination riddled his face. He stared down at me, and he was so close, a sigh would push us together.

His eyes flitted to my mouth, and the atmosphere changed. I was suddenly achingly aware of how close he was to me, of the warmth radiating from his skin, the depth of his eyes that drew me in.

I swallowed hard. Erol wasn't an enemy anymore. He hadn't been for some time, but now, standing this close to him, his bulk, his raw power was *attractive*.

I swallowed hard, and I couldn't stop myself—I looked at his lips, too. They were full and kissable, and just imagining how his lips would feel on my skin...

I snapped my eyes back to his. What was wrong with me? He was a monster, he didn't deserve any kindness, and I *couldn't* be attracted to him.

Except I was.

My breath caught in my throat.

“I don't think this is—” I cut myself off when I became aware of something out of place in the darkness that surrounded him. Beneath the darkness, beneath the power that rolled off Erol's skin, there was something more. Something... light.

I frowned.

“What?” he asked in a gravelly voice.

“Nothing,” I said and took a step back, breaking the tension between us. “They're waiting for us.”

“They are,” he confirmed.

I nodded once and stepped around Erol. I didn't want to give him my back, but it proved to him that I wasn't scared of him. What was he going to do in the palace, after all? Anything he did that was out of line would start a war all over again, and Rainier seemed to be convinced that Erol was now on our side.

I wouldn't have given him the benefit of the doubt, but the spark of light confused me. Erol had good within him—a lot more good than I'd thought.

And if he had good in him, if he was a soul that could be saved...

That changed everything.



## EROL

The dinner was for me. King Rainier had put a lot of effort into welcoming me, and I almost felt like I belonged here.

But it wasn't that simple. I didn't belong in a kingdom where Luminescence was this popular. I was tainted with Conjurite magic and belonged in Palgia, where I'd always been.

I glanced at Hazel where she sat on the other end of the table. She carefully cut a piece of meat with a sharp knife. Watching her eat was like a dance—everything about her screamed elegance and grace.

When I'd seen her first, she'd been covered in dirt and lived in rags as Falx's prisoner. She'd caught my eye from day one—something about her made my heart beat faster, made me think about what life could have been if Falx and his high priestess hadn't found me.

Thinking about things like that was dangerous. Looking back, waxing nostalgic, wondering what could have been...

It was just a recipe to drive a man crazy. I would know—I'd spent a lot of time in my life thinking about what could have, should have, would have been, if things had been different.

They weren't different, so what was the point?

But sitting here between these people who all clung to hope as if it was some lifeline made me think that there was

something to it. Maybe hope wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Except, that was part of what could drive me crazy. I'd been through enough to know that holding onto my sanity was important. Falx and Lavinia—the Conjurite High Priestess of Palgia who had carried out all the spells Falx had envisioned—had driven enough people to the brink of insanity. If Falx hadn't been able to break their bodies, he'd broken their minds.

“Erol,” Ellie, the new Queen of Jasfin, said, snapping me out of my train of thought. “How have things been in Palgia?”

I shrugged a large shoulder. “Normal. Not much has changed.”

That wasn't entirely true—a lot had changed since the tyrant who'd ruled the land with an iron fist had died and Rainier had allowed me to take over in his stead as Regent. In a lot of ways, though, things were the same. The people still went about their daily lives, Conjurite magic still reigned, and there wasn't much to be done that made that big of a difference.

“Well, we're hoping to change that, soon,” Ellie said warmly.

“How?” I asked with a frown.

“Well...” She glanced at Nylah. “We're working on a way to rid the people of Conjurite magic once and for all.”

I narrowed my eyes and swallowed the bite I'd been working on. “That's impossible.”

“Why?” Ellie asked. Her eyes were sharp, and she was a force to contend with despite how soft-spoken she was. She was every bit a queen, standing at Rainier's side with power that matched his.

“Because once Fae give up the light, it's over. It's not like we can just switch it back on, you know.”

Ellie nodded and glanced at Nylah again. I took the opportunity to glance at Hazel. She'd hooked her brown hair behind one pointed Fae ear, and she looked deep in thought. I

willed her to look up at me—I wanted to look into those eyes again, eyes like a clear fall sky.

When we'd met in the hallway earlier, her feistiness had been a surprise. I'd known her as a subdued creature while she'd been my prisoner, trying not to draw attention to herself.

Now, she demanded attention, and she deserved every bit of it. She was stunning.

That dress—evergreen and flattering—only complemented the *goddess* I saw when I looked at her, and it brought out the green flecks in her blue eyes.

“Nylah, Vanya, Hazel, and I have been able to use healing magic to bring back Luminescence,” Ellie said.

I frowned, staring at her again. “What?”

“We've already helped ten people,” Vanya said, nodding. Her auburn hair had been tied back, and she looked different than when I'd seen her in the cells, too. They both looked like a spark had been ignited within them.

That was what happened when there was something to hope for, I thought bitterly.

“How?” I demanded.

On the outside, I was calm. I'd practiced my poker face for some two hundred and fifty years, if not more. The only way I'd been able to keep Falx off my back was by looking like I didn't give a damn about anything or anyone.

On the inside, I was reeling. Was it really possible to get rid of Conjurite magic and go back to our Fae roots?

“With healing power,” Vanya answered simply. “Some of the Fae have a gift for it.”

“I've seen it work,” Hazel added, speaking up. Her voice was a little husky, but her words were clear, and they carried across the table.

I could listen to that voice all day.

If it was possible to drive away the darkness, could my people go back to what they used to be? What was more...

could I?

Becoming Conjurite hadn't been as simple for me as giving up the light and choosing dark magic, the way most of the Conjurite had. I'd been forced. If I could give it all up, I wouldn't think twice, but it wasn't that easy.

"Do you realize what it will mean for you to do it on a large scale?" I asked, cutting the large hunk of beef on my plate with vigor. "Most of the Fae who have Conjurite magic *chose* the dark side. It won't be that easy for them to just give it up. What if they don't want to?"

"We're not here to force anyone," Rainier chipped in. "But how many do you know—aside from the late king and his high priestess—who want to hold onto the darkness they've chosen?"

He was right. I didn't know a single Conjurite who would fight the idea of returning to the light if they had the chance. Being Conjurite was horrible. We had a lot of power, but it was rooted in darkness and fear, and it wasn't the life anyone wanted to live. The glamor of having so much power was attractive, but everything else was a sentence.

Once the novelty of the new power wore off, things started going wrong. Nightmares every night meant no one ever got a good night's rest.

I helped ruled a kingdom of people on autopilot. They regretted giving up the light once they realized that the rest of their lives would be filled with blackouts where they hurt each other but couldn't remember it, where they said nasty things they didn't even think. Being Conjurite meant no one could love the way they used to, because love was good and being Conjurite...wasn't. We all lived hell every day.

"It will take a lot more than you realize. You have no idea what you're up against," I hissed.

I wanted to be healed as much as anyone else. I wanted to have that option, to go back to a life that was filled with love and light. But did they think the dark goddess Cyrene would just let them all go when she had them in her claws?

A part of me wondered if they knew about Cyrene at all—she hadn't shown her face in all the wars and battles. She'd conveniently let Falx and Lavinia take the fall for what she'd orchestrated behind the scenes.

Cyrene was the mirror image of the Goddess Terra, the darkness where Terra was the light, the captivity where Terra was freedom. As soon as the Fae gave up the light and turned toward the darkness, Cyrene had them in her grip and damned them to a life of eternal darkness.

I glanced at Hazel again. She spoke up now and then, but she was silent for the most part, and her poker face was as good as mine. What was she thinking?

Had she felt that same spark I'd felt when we'd met earlier? Hazel had always been a point of interest. From the moment she'd arrived at the dungeon as my prisoner, I'd been fascinated by her. Now that she was free and her own person, she was that much more mesmerizing.

Being so close to her in the hallway before dinner had brought to the surface feelings I hadn't thought I could ever feel now that I was Conjurite. But I'd felt them around her.

Had she felt them, too?

I stared at her until she looked up, her eyes locking with mine. For a moment, a jolt passed between us, and I felt it to my very core. It was over so fast, I didn't know if it had happened, and when Vanya started to speak, telling me how they'd managed to bring the Conjurite back to their Luminescence, Hazel's eyes were firmly trained on her mother.

I wanted her to look at me again, but no matter how hard I stared, she didn't. Either she was determined not to look at me because she felt it as well, or she wasn't interested because she felt nothing at all.

"I won't deny that we've had challenges," Nylah said softly.

When she glanced at me, she looked guilty.

"What happened?" I asked.

The High Priestess never looked uncertain as she did now.

“We lost one,” she said softly.

“One what?”

“A Conjurite,” she sighed. “The process of leading them back to the light isn’t easy, and...the darkness won out.”

Ah, there was a catch. It made more sense, now. The darkness wasn’t just going to give up. Cyrene wouldn’t let go of her people, and if they managed to escape, losing them altogether was less of a loss to her than losing them back to the light.

“So, it’s not as straightforward as the Conjurite making a choice,” I said.

Nylah shook her head.

“There’s a risk involved with everything, isn’t there?” Ellie asked. “It’s just as serious as the risk of becoming Conjurite. The loss of life just isn’t as apparent when they choose the darkness.”

She was right. The Fae who decided to give up the light did die, in a way. They died on the inside. It wasn’t apparent because they still lived long lives, but they weren’t full lives.

“Hmm.” I speared a piece of meat and chewed it vigorously while I thought.

“We won’t hide the facts from anyone,” Vanya said firmly. “When your people make the choice, they will know what they’re risking.”

“That’s fine by me,” I said. “It’s more than what they got when they gave up the light.” No one had been told exactly what it would mean, and by the time they figured it out, it was far too late.

Ellie looked pleased, and when she and Nylah glanced at each other, a silent conversation passed between them.

I hoped for their sake—and for my people—that it would be smooth sailing, but I didn’t expect it to be. In theory, it was

all very grand. In reality? I still didn't think they would be able to pull it off just like that.

Dinner was pleasant enough, despite the war within me, wondering what was going on with my emotions and why someone like Hazel could unlock them when I'd been cold as stone and as emotionless as one for centuries.

When it was over, Rainier stood and suggested that we talk business in his office while the others entertained themselves in one of the great rooms. I nodded, and we excused ourselves. The others rose and left through a side door. I watched Hazel, willing her to look at me one more time.

She glanced over her shoulder at me before she disappeared, and my heart leapt in my chest when she did.

There *had* to be something there.

I followed Rainier through the palace.

Where Falx's castle was drab and dull, decorated in monochrome colors, as if the life had been sucked out of everything, Rainier's palace was an explosion of color and life. The paintings were spectacular, the plants overwhelming, the decorations luxurious and tasteful. When I saw it, I wanted to drink it all in and get away from it at the same time.

I wasn't used to a life like this, and I hated being reminded of everything I'd missed out on because of the path I'd had to walk.

Rainier closed the door behind us when we stepped into his office. I'd been here before, but it never ceased to amaze me that this was a room where work took place. If I had a view like this—his French windows overlooked a valley with large houses and lush greenery, a river snaking through it all—I would have stared at it all day.

From my own office in the castle in Palgia, I could see a vast stretch of land, but it was barren and colorless, a result of the Conjurite magic that had gripped the kingdom for centuries. Green shoots had shown itself over the last couple of months, with plants starting to grow. But they were meager

and didn't always make it in a landscape that was so harsh and unforgiving.

"Thank you for coming to dine with us tonight," Rainier said.

He took a seat in one armchair that faced his desk, not sitting in the large chair behind it. He gestured for me to take the other seat. He was offering for us to talk as equals.

"It was my honor," I said and sat down, swiveling toward the magnetic view rather than to face Rainier directly.

He leaned back in his chair, making himself comfortable, and I felt the liberty to do the same.

"You seemed skeptical about removing the Conjurite magic from Palgia," Rainier said.

I nodded. "It's not as simple as you're making it out to be."

"I can't imagine it will be."

"The Queen seems to be positive they'll figure it out."

"She is. And I'm positive she'll make it work, too. Nylah is training Vanya and Hazel, and collectively, their power is incredible. They've already saved ten people, as you heard."

I bristled at the term. "It's not like we're drowning, unable to help ourselves."

Rainier nodded without countering me.

"It's a wonderful feat to be able to give that choice to ten people again," I agreed after a beat. "But we're talking about millions. Ten people, in the grand scheme of things, is nothing."

"I understand what you're saying. They're just scratching the surface. I have faith they'll figure it out."

I nodded curtly. It was a great idea to be able to offer the choice to my people and allow them to return to the Luminescence. To have a kingdom freed from darkness was a dream I hadn't dared to consider because it had always seemed impossible. Focusing on what could never be would only make a man miserable. But if there was a chance...



“I want you to take them with you when you go back to Palgia,” Rainier said.

“What?”

“The healers. Nylah and I have discussed it, and the only way I think they’ll be able to really figure it out is if they’re there with you. We can only do so much from here. I’m sending Fae in the morning to prepare the castle for their stay. I imagine it’s not very...welcoming.”

I thought about it. To have them come to Palgia with me made sense. Where else were they going to find an abundance of Conjurites to work with? I still wasn’t sure they could do what needed to be done to free them all, but did that really matter?

“Palgia is your kingdom, Rainier,” I finally said. “If you want to send them with me to stay in Palgia, I won’t go against it.”

“They’ll still be your guests, and the last thing we want to do is impose.”

It was nice of him to say, but he was ordering me, telling me he would send people ahead, telling me what they were going to do. Although Rainier might have meant well, did he have any idea how much he sounded like Falx? I didn’t have a choice in the matter, much like I hadn’t had it long ago.

Hazel flashed before me. She would be one of the healers, wouldn’t she? If she was in the castle, close to me...

“You and your people are always welcome at the castle.”

Rainier nodded and smiled. “Thank you. I think it could amount to something wonderful.”

“We’ll see.”

We sat in silence for a while, and my mind already spun with preparations that would have to be made. Falx’s castle hadn’t been arranged for guests—the few people he’d invited for banquets and balls had never stayed in the cold, heartless, unforgiving place for very long. It had forced them to choose

to leave. Those who'd spent more time there had all been prisoners.

Like Hazel and Vanya. Rainier was going to have his hands full getting it all ready in just a few days. It would take a whole army, and a whole lot of magic.

Rainier had both at his disposal.

The darkness inside me rose up with jealousy—I was Conjurite, I had power, and yet Rainier was above me in station and in wealth. It was downright wrong. I wanted to battle him for it here and now.

Rainier frowned at me, and his magic rose to meet mine. For a moment, light clashed against dark.

I forced myself to reel it in. This wasn't the place or time.

“What about you?” he asked.

“What about me?” His question had nothing to do with our little metaphysical standoff, and it confused me.

“What would you do if you had the choice?”

I studied Rainier's face. He was open with me, and he genuinely wanted to know. I'd been so accustomed to serve a king with an ulterior motive, with selfish plans, that I still struggled to shake the habit of not trusting. But Rainier wasn't like that. He was a king who really cared about his people, and now that Palgia was—in effect—his, he cared about those with Conjurite magic, too.

His honesty deserved a response from me that was equal to it.

“I would take it,” I admitted. “I would leave the Conjurite world behind in a blink.”

“Despite having chosen it?”

I contemplated how much to say. I stood, walking away from the chair toward the large windows. The sun had set behind the horizon, allowing the darkness to creep in, but splashes of deep orange, pink, and purple still painted the sky.

It tainted the world below in brilliant shades of purple and blue.

“I didn’t choose this life,” I finally confessed. “I never asked to become Conjurite.”

“Can it be forced on Fae?” Rainier asked.

“No, it can’t. It still has to be a conscious decision, but there’s a lot of trickery involved. Power is always attractive, isn’t it? That’s what Conjurite magic promises. Power and riches.”

“Riches?” Rainier echoed, surprised. “I wasn’t under the impression that Palgia is a rich kingdom.”

“It’s not,” I confirmed. “Having a lot of money, gold stacked high, and vast stretches of land means nothing when you have nothing to show for it. What can you buy in a kingdom where nothing grows? What’s the point of buying material things when mere survival is a struggle? Having a lot of land is wonderful...until you can’t cultivate it. Without *life*, riches mean nothing.

A lot of the Conjurites were Fae who suffered, poor Fae who couldn’t get by, or Fae who couldn’t defend themselves against the raids that happened when Conjurites started stealing from each other. I’m talking about centuries ago, now. Long before my time—by the time being Conjurite was offered to me, it was the norm. Everyone had already done it.”

“This is a part of the kingdom’s history I know nothing about,” Rainier said. “So, someone with a lot of power—a Conjurite who already had that link to the dark magic—forced you to turn, too?”

I scowled. “If you’re asking me if I *chose* to give up the light, I did. I made that choice consciously, knowing what I was giving up. But you see, it was out of my hands.”

I glanced at Rainier. He sat in his chair, looking at me with an open expression, and he said nothing. He only let the silence between us grow. I filled that silence—it was what he wanted, but I didn’t have much to hide anymore.

“When I was born, I was a powerful Fae. One of the most powerful in the kingdom. My power had started much earlier than what’s normal, but when I came of age, it broke loose in an enormous surge. Falx and his dark High Priestess, Lavinia, found me. They wanted my power for themselves.” I looked at Rainier over my shoulder. “If you understand half of Falx’s greed for power back then, how he needed everything he could hoard for himself, you would know how desperately he wanted to use me.”

“Enough to convince you?”

“Enough to force me,” I answered. “He threatened my family. My father had left us to fend for ourselves by then, and I’d been the man of the house. Falx promised that if I didn’t turn to the dark side and relinquish my light, he would kill my mother and my sister. And if you know anything about Falx...”

“He would have kept his threat,” Rainier finished for me.

I nodded. “I had no choice but to do what he asked. I said the words. I gave up the light, but it wasn’t what I wanted. At least my mother and sister are safe.”

“I’m sorry,” Rainier said, and the sympathy in his voice made me frown at him.

“I’m not asking for your pity.”

“It’s not pity. I understand your pain. Where are they now?”

“They’re in Palgia, still. Safe and sound, since I did what Falx asked. I haven’t spent any real time with them in over a century. I see them once in a while to be sure they’re all right, but if anyone caught wind that I might be connected to them in a way that could still hurt me...I was terrified of what Falx might do to them.”

“Even now that he’s dead?”

I hesitated. “It’s not that simple.”

How could I go back to the family I’d abandoned? How could I go back, a tainted, dark man, when my mother and

sister were still pure and light? They deserved all that was good, all that was worth it. I was none of that.

“Erol, you can return to the light if you want to,” Rainier said, standing. He took a step closer to me. “I know my wife and Nylah will do whatever it takes.”

I shook my head. “You have no idea what power I have, and how hard it will be to drive away the darkness. Right now, they’re not strong enough.”

Rainier frowned. “You can’t tell me you don’t want it gone.”

“I’m not,” I protested. “I’m saying I don’t know how to get rid of it with how strong it is, how deeply I’m rooted in it. I’m not trying to be coy, Rainier, I’m being realistic. I know a lost cause when I see one.”

Rainier put his hand on my shoulder, and his power pulsed through me. Automatically, my darkness rose up to counter the light. I had to force myself to back down, to not go up against Rainier.

The darkness within me had a life of its own, and to try to fight it would only hurt me, and it would hurt the people I’d come to respect.

It was that life of its own that made me nervous to see my family again. What if I did something to hurt them? What if Falx would get his revenge on me beyond the grave after all?

The darkness we lived in wasn’t a joke. It was a living, breathing thing that lashed out when it felt like it. I wasn’t always in control. Sometimes, the darkness took over, and I became less than the sum of my parts—I maimed, I destroyed, I killed. I’d done a lot of that over the years, acting on the darkness that took over. I’d always felt terrible afterward, although a part of me relished in the pain, the anguish I caused.

Forget about monsters in children’s stories, hiding under the bed. As Conjurites, the monsters were inside of us, and there was no getting away from them, there.

The fear that settled in the pit of my stomach was the essence of the dark magic in me, and I had to force myself to ignore it.

“I want you to consider it,” Rainier said. “We might not do it right away, but in time, we’ll find out how to fight the Conjurite magic you wield. Once you’re free, you can have Palgia to rule as your own.”

I frowned. “What?”

“You heard me. Once you’re rid of the Conjurite magic, you’ll be King of Palgia, and the kingdom will belong to you.”

“You’re *giving* me a kingdom?”

“I am.”

I was confused. “Why?”

Rainier had been kind to me from the start, merciful after Falx had been killed and just when it came to what I’d done for my kingdom. But this was about the spoils of war, about the right Rainier had to Palgia since he and Ellie had defeated its king.

“Because you deserve more than what this life has offered you, and I want to set things straight.”

“It wasn’t your fault it went wrong in the first place.”

Rainier shook his head. “We’re not only bound to fix something if we ruined it. It’s the right thing to do. If you really want it, then I know you’ll do what it takes to get it.”

I didn’t know if he was talking about my Luminescence or Palgia. But right now, it was one and the same, wasn’t it?

“Okay,” I said.

Rainier grinned at me. “We still have a long road to walk, my friend.”

*Friend.*

“But every step we take in the right direction is a victory. One day, we will look back together, as allies, and know that we overcame the darkness together.”

He held out his hand, and I took it. This time, my darkness didn't rise to fight him. We shook.

I wanted this. To be king—not just a regent acting in Rainier's absence, but a true king—and to rule my people with a just hand, to lead them back to the light.

Was it really that simple?

A part of me said "yes." It was nothing more than a choice.

But if it really was that simple, I would have been able to leave the darkness behind a long time ago.

The darkness was still here. It wasn't going to be that easy.

## HAZEL

The fire crackled happily in the hearth, although it wasn't cold outside. Nylah almost always had a fire going, and we were welcome to join her in the cathedral at any time. We had all found unexpected friends in Nylah and Ellie.

The four of us—Nylah, Ellie, my mom, and me—sat curled up on the couches surrounding the fireplace. We had our fingers wrapped around cups of coffee and herbal tea, and soft music floated from invisible speakers overhead.

“Last night wasn't so bad, was it?” Ellie asked, glancing at me.

“Not at all,” I said.

“I know you were nervous about seeing Erol again.”

I shrugged, acting nonchalant. Since seeing Erol, I couldn't stop thinking about him. What was it that drew me to him? I'd felt something from him—a spark of life. Was that even possible? He was a Conjurite, his very essence rooted in darkness. How could I have felt something like that if it wasn't supposed to exist?

A part of me wanted to ask Nylah or Ellie if it was possible, but I was a little shy to admit that I was drawn to Erol.

“How does Conjurite magic work?” I asked instead. “I mean, I know that Fae have to give up their light for it, but doesn't that by definition mean they don't have any light left?”



“That’s right,” Nylah said. “It’s exactly how it works. Terra withdraws completely.”

“So, without Terra’s light, darkness rules. What about what’s in each of us that doesn’t have anything to do with darkness and light?”

“What do you mean?” Nylah asked, looking confused.

“We’re souls in our own right. We can exist either with the light or without it, which makes us free agents, right? What about that part, the inherent foundation? Can that still be good, even when the light leaves?”

Nylah mulled over it. “I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it, or asked Terra about it. You’re right, we are all beings despite which side we choose, and that never ceases to exist.”

“Erol does have a form of goodness in him,” Ellie offered. “It’s why Rainier decided to let him rule in his place.”

That answered my question, but only to a point. I couldn’t ask more without telling them what I’d felt. Still, something didn’t make sense to me. I’d felt something with Erol—he’d had light. Not just goodness, but *light*. But he was so deeply rooted in dark magic, his Conjurite side took over seemingly with a life of its own.

It didn’t make any sense.

“When we heal them, we take away the darkness and return that light to them,” Ellie added. “That’s why this is such a big thing, even if we only started with a handful of people. To be able to give that back to them...” She sighed.

It had been a long road for all of us, fighting the darkness that had come with the Conjurites and the war between Jasfin and Palgia. Even though the war was over, we still had a long way to go, and we all felt that weight acutely.

“Does that mean there isn’t light left in them at all when they turn away from Terra?” I asked.

Nylah and Ellie both nodded.

I shook my head. It still didn’t make sense.

“How, then, do they return to the light so easily?” I pressed.

“It’s not easy at all,” Nylah replied. “It’s like being reborn, I guess. It’s a miracle that it’s possible at all.”

“But there has to be light inside them to be able to return to it, right?”

Nylah frowned. “I don’t think so, Hazel. It can be hard to wrap your mind around, because we’re rooted in light, and we never even considered life without it.”

It wasn’t easy to wrap my mind around it, but that wasn’t because I couldn’t imagine what it had to be like to give up the light and live a Conjurite life. What I’d felt from Erol...it just didn’t add up.

Pressing even more would let the others realize there was more to my question, so I tried to let it go.

“Speaking of letting go...” Ellie glanced at us, making eye contact with each of us with a secretive smile. “I’m pregnant.”

We stared at her, blinking, before Nylah was the one to break the silence.

“What?” She clapped her hands to her mouth.

Ellie nodded, a smile stretched from ear to ear. “I’m not very far along. I’m not due for another eight months or so. I should have kept it quiet for longer—Ren and I agreed to that—but I just couldn’t keep it back from you anymore! We just won’t let the kingdom know until I am further along.”

“Oh, Goddess, it’s wonderful news!” Nylah cried out and jumped up. She pulled Ellie into a hug. “The royal family is expanding!”

Ellie giggled, and we all gushed and congratulated her, taking turns to stand and hug her.

“It’s not nearly official yet, so don’t tell anyone, okay?” she said. “The only reason I’m telling you is because you’re my family.”

“We won’t tell a soul!” I promised. “I can’t believe I am going to be an aunt!”

“I’m so glad you shared it!” Nylah said. “We will have so much to prepare!”

Ellie giggled with excitement, and she beamed and glowed with pride and joy. I smiled, watching her as she accepted the well-wishes and blessings from her friends graciously. Her excitement was contagious. For a brief moment, a pang of jealousy shot into my chest.

I wanted what she had—a love that would last forever, a male to stand by my side and support me no matter what. A baby. Or two, or three. The idea of starting a family had always been enticing.

I’d grown up as an only child, and it had always just been my mom and me. We were a family and went through everything together, but it wasn’t the same as the fairy tale families I’d seen around me and heard of, and I wanted that.

What I wanted most was a home to settle down in, children who could carry forth the legacy of everything we’d been through and everything we’d learned. What was the point of overcoming adversity if there was no future to pass it on to?

The women still gushed and cooed over Ellie and her pregnancy when I drew my concentration back to the conversation.

“How will it work with your magic?” Mom asked Ellie. “Will the baby inherit your power?”

“I don’t know,” Ellie said. “I haven’t even thought about it. Nylah, what do you think?”

Nylah furrowed her brow. “Hmm. You were born with the light, Ellie, so I can’t see why your baby won’t have the same light. You and Ren both have incredible power. I can’t see how the baby would have anything less.”

“If your baby is born with the light, the future of the kingdom will be bright indeed,” Mom said. “They will have healing power like no Fae that’s ever been heard of, an amalgamation of your power and the king’s.”

“Healing power?” I asked.

Nylah and my mom both nodded.

“I guess that makes sense. The baby will inherit it. I don’t understand how it works with me, though.”

“How what works?” Mom asked.

“Ellie was born with the light, so it makes sense that she can heal the Conjurites and bring back their Luminescence. What about me? I wasn’t born with the light, I was just a regular Fae baby.”

Nylah tapped her finger against her chin.

“Well, let’s work it out. Terra bestowed the light upon Ellie when she was born, but since she was born from Vanya, Vanya has the light, too.”

Mom gasped. “Really?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Nylah said. “Terra is just and kind. She wouldn’t have given you a child with abilities you yourself didn’t possess. How could you raise a child you don’t understand? Her kindness would have allowed you to have it, too. Why not give you a special gift she bestowed on her daughter?” She smiled. “I see that light in you when we work together in your priestess training.”

My mom beamed, looking pleased with herself.

It still didn’t explain why I could heal the Conjurites.

“You were born of Vanya, Hazel,” Nylah said, as if she could read my thoughts. “It stands to reason that you were born with the light then, too. It’s really a matter of genetics, if you think about it.”

“It has very little to do with genetics,” Ellie said with a laugh.

Nylah shrugged and laughed, too. We all joined in. Joy flooded the room as we sat together, sharing in the happiness of the news.

My mind drifted away from the conversation again, to what lay ahead of us. We were going to save the Conjurites. I

wasn't sure how we would do it—we had so many of them to help, and we'd managed to save so few. I was convinced we would figure something out. Nylah had never been more determined about anything, and Ellie was personally invested, since the Conjurites were now also her people.

If there was one thing my half-sister had in abundance, it was compassion. She'd inherited that from my mother, just as I had. We all cared so much about the people who were trapped in darkness, serious about freeing them. They hadn't realized what they were doing when they'd given up the light. They'd been ruled by a king who'd taught them that the darkness was the only way to go.

Erol flashed before me again, with his dark hair and deep eyes. The way he'd looked at me sent shivers down my spine just thinking about it, and my insides clenched. He was handsome in a rugged, unrefined kind of way, and despite the fear that flowed from him like a river, his raw, unadulterated power made me ache for him.

Even now, when I wasn't close to him.

“Hazel?” my mom called, and I glanced up, realizing they were talking to me, and I'd missed a part of the conversation.

“What?”

“Rainier requested that we travel to Palgia with Erol,” Mom said.

“What?” I repeated. My stomach twisted at the thought of going back.

“The only way you can work with the Conjurites that need to be saved is to be where they are.”

That made sense. “Where will we stay?”

“You'll be Erol's guests of honor,” Ellie said. “You'll stay at the castle with him, and he'll take good care of you.”

My stomach twisted again, and I felt sick. “We're going back to the castle?” My voice was thin, and I felt shaky.

“You have a choice, Hazel,” Ellie confirmed. “I understand the trauma that you had to endure. If you don't want to go

back to Palgia, you do not have to. It is completely your choice.”

I exhaled, trying to gather my thoughts. “I want to help those that want to come back to the light, but the thought of being back in Palgia terrifies me.”

“We’ll be there as guests,” Mom said carefully, but she looked as pale as I felt.

We’d spent a year and a half as Falx’s prisoners in the dungeon below the castle. To go back there felt wrong. We had escaped, and it had been a struggle to get back to Jasfin, to win back our freedom. How could we choose to go back there, now?

Mom reached for me and squeezed my hand.

“I feel it, too, sweetheart. It won’t be the same. There’s no one else who can do this job, and we owe it to them to help, to show them the way back to the light.”

I swallowed hard. Of course, Mom was right. That didn’t mean I liked it.

“You’ll be perfectly safe,” Ellie said. “We’ll check in with you daily, and make sure we have trackers on you. You’ll have everything you could possibly need to ensure that this stay will be a lot more pleasant than the last.” Her features darkened as she thought about the time she’d spent in the dungeon with us.

It was where I’d found my long-lost sister, where my mom had found her daughter. It was where our family had become whole again.

“You keep saying ‘*you*,’” I said. “You’re not coming with us?”

Ellie shook her head. “I can’t, not now that I’m with child.”

Of course, she had to stay here while she was pregnant.

“And Nylah?” I asked, looking at the High Priestess. I hoped she would come with us, too. I knew the answer to the question before she shook her head.

The High Priestess of Jasfin wouldn't go with us to Palgia. Her place was here, to look after the royal family, to do her duties as the one person with a direct link to the goddess Terra.

"Does Palgia have a high priestess yet?" I questioned.

"Not yet. Erol will choose someone as soon as we take care of the Conjurite magic. Right now, the only person who could fill the position—since everyone is Conjurite—would be a Conjurite priestess, and we don't want that."

I shook my head. We definitely didn't want that.

"We still have a few things to figure out," Ellie said. "We're taking this one step at a time. If you need time to think about your decision—"

"I'll go," I interrupted.

Ellie smiled—an expression that conveyed her relief.

I understood what they were doing. It made sense to send me and my mom, since we were the ones who could heal the Conjurites. The idea of going back still terrified me, no matter how much everyone told me that it would be okay.

"I've asked Ren to send a personal guard with you two," Ellie added. "I know how tough this will be on you, and I think it's only right."

"Who?" Mom asked.

"I asked Zita," Ellie said. "She's an incredible warrior, and she's a very good friend. She has a newfound skill—it turns out she can predict a warrior's moves before they make it, so she can prepare, block, fight back in ways no other warrior can. I think she'll be the best person for the job."

"That already sets me at ease," Mom said.

I had to admit it helped to ease my mind a little, too. It didn't change that the journey there and our work in Palgia would be challenging.

I'd hoped I would never have to go back there again.

## EROL

I waited at the hovercraft for the women to arrive. My stomach was twisted in a knot of nerves, and I scratched the skin just below my thumbnail until it became red and angry.

What the hell was wrong with me? I didn't usually care so much. Hell, I didn't usually care at all. The sooner I got back to Palgia, where things made sense to me, the better.

I may have wanted the light back, but that didn't mean that I was used to it, and I felt out of depth here. The light crawled on my skin, itched under my collar, made me feel antsy.

Why was I this nervous about taking them back to Palgia with me?

I knew the answer to that question. I was taking them back to Palgia to host them as guests in my castle. The females who'd spent so much time in my dungeon. It hadn't been my orders that they'd been thrown in there in the first place, but that was where they'd been. I was used to being a jailer, a warden. Now, I had to play a host. It hadn't been my job or my calling, and I hated the idea of having to please someone.

Hazel would be one of the guests, as I'd suspected. A part of me rejoiced that she would be around—keeping her close would allow me the chance to get to know her better.

I flashed on the way she'd nearly recoiled from the power that had oozed out of me when we'd met in the hallways



before the banquet Rainier had hosted for me. She'd feared me.

And why not? For a long, long time, I'd been the villain. Although I wasn't one anymore, that didn't change what I'd done to Hazel and her mother. To the current Queen of Jasfin.

I shook my head. All was fair in love and war.

For just a moment, I wondered what it would be like if Hazel could see me as something else than the bad guy.

*As if you could ever be the good guy.*

The voice in my head was harsh and loud. I had done so many bad things in my life, there wasn't hope for me being a hero.

So? It wasn't my job to be a hero. I was bad, and I was good at it. The past couldn't be changed, the slate couldn't be wiped clean. Sins could be forgiven, sure, but they could never be undone.

It would be tough for Hazel to avoid me if she stayed under my roof, I thought. A part of me relished in her fear of me. A voice at the back of my mind challenged my malice, but I ignored it. Lately, that voice had sounded more and more, and it felt like a party in my head—good fighting bad all the damn time. Especially when Hazel was around.

I couldn't just ignore her and what I felt around her, though. Even if I wanted to.

The magnetic pull between us intrigued me. Had she felt it, too? I was convinced she had. It couldn't have been one-sided, could it?

Rainier and Ellie arrived at the hovercraft where we waited in the palace courtyard.

Ellie stepped forward and took both my hands in hers. The contact was uncomfortable—the queen was a being of light, and although she didn't try to use it on me, push it into me, I was still painfully aware of it. The darkness inside me wanted to curl away from it, and I had to fight the urge to yank my hands out of her grasp.

“Thank you for coming, Erol,” Ellie said warmly. Despite the fact that I’d been her prison warden, she didn’t seem to have any hard feelings toward me. “And thank you for allowing us the opportunity to change things for your people.”

*My people.* I glanced at Rainier, who smiled and nodded. When she said it, she meant as king. When I said it, I meant as a Conjurite. Palgia didn’t belong to me yet—I wasn’t convinced I could rid myself of the darkness so that I could rule the kingdom as my own. Ellie spoke of it as if it had already happened.

“Your faith in me is moving, Your Highness,” I said. And misplaced. What if I failed? “I’ll take good care of them.”

“I know you will,” Ellie said and smiled warmly before finally letting go and stepping back to join her husband’s side.

“If you need anything, say the word,” Rainier said. “We’re here for you, no matter what you may need.”

“Thank you.”

Rainier nodded, and I returned the sentiment with a curt nod of my own.

A warrior arrived. She wore the Jasfin colors—black leathers with silver thread decorating the sleeves and pantlegs, creating the Jasfin crest on her chest.

Her blonde hair was styled in a short, sensible cut, and she was muscular with bright eyes that missed nothing.

“This is Zita,” Ellie introduced her. “She is a respected member of our Elite Guard, and now she will be Vanya and Hazel’s personal guard.”

Zita bowed. “Sir.”

“None of that,” I said and waved my hand. “I’m more of a warrior than anything else.” I saw us as equals. It would take some getting used to when I finally ruled the land—*if* I ever did—and my station would be above everyone else around me.

Before anyone could respond, Vanya and Hazel appeared. They both wore traveling clothes. Vanya wore her dark blonde hair back in a bun, her blue eyes bright. She carried herself

with a regal air. When she saw me, she pursed her lips together and offered a polite nod.

Behind her, Hazel followed, and I couldn't take my eyes off her. She moved with elegance and grace, taking pride in who she was. Her skin was blemish free, her dark hair tied back in a high ponytail, and her eyes were a darker blue than Vanya's, the color of the ocean. Her gaze locked on mine, and a shiver traveled through me as power passed between us.

I cleared my throat and stepped aside. "Welcome aboard, ladies."

Zita let Vanya and Hazel walk first, before she stepped onto the craft herself.

"We'll be on our way, then," I said to the King and Queen and bowed from my hips. Rainier held out his hand, and I shook it, and Ellie beamed at me with one arm looped through his.

"It's going to be good, Erol," she assured me.

"I hope you're right, Your Highness," I said.

"She usually is," Rainier said, and they grinned at each other.

I turned and entered the hovercraft, too, the door closing firmly behind us.

Hazel, Vanya, and Zita were all seated and strapped in. Vanya and Hazel sat next to each other, with Zita facing Vanya. The last seat next to Zita was open, and I took it, strapping myself in to face Hazel.

The craft hummed to life and lifted into the air.

"This is much easier than on foot," Vanya said dryly.

Hazel laughed, and the sound was warm and light. "Yeah. Warmer, too."

We looked out of the windows as we crossed over the Uprain mountains that lay between Jasfin and Palgia.

When Hazel, Vanya, and Ellie had escaped from the dungeon, they'd had to cross Palgia on foot to get to the border

that would mean their safety. It had taken them several days. Now, with the hovercraft, the journey from Jasfin to Palgia would take mere hours. If the pilot decided to floor it, it would be even less than that.

The mountains below us were breathtaking, with snowcapped peaks and green valleys between the rise and fall of purple rock. We spotted the villages where humans lived, farming, creating goods, selling between Jasfin and Palgia.

When we crossed the Palgian border beyond the mountains, the land changed, and the beauty of Jasfin on the one side was in stark contrast to the lack of color in Palgia.

Since Falx had died, the land had started to restore itself. The biggest source of dark power was gone, but the kingdom was far from being free from the dark magic. Bright green leaves had started showing themselves here and there, and grass had started to grow, yet the kingdom was still largely barren, with sparse vegetation and more darkness and death than color and life.

I glanced at Hazel. Her face was an expressionless mask, but in her eyes, I could see the warring emotions. They came with me so that they could help my people, but I knew she relived the horrors of being in Palgia as prisoners.

I wished I could offer some comfort. I wanted to reach for her and touch her hand, her arm, her shoulder. I wanted to tell her that the past was over, she was free, and I would make sure she was never in harm's way again.

How could I say those words, though? She wouldn't believe me—all I could do was show her that her safety, her freedom, was more important to me than most other things.

“Palgia is a very big kingdom,” Zita breathed.

“It's roughly the same size as Jasfin. The barrenness is deceiving.”

She pursed her lips together. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. I didn't know her at all. A part of me was offended that Rainier thought it was necessary to send a personal guard along, but I couldn't exactly fault him for that. The last time

Vanya and Hazel had been here, they'd been held in dungeons where the bricks had been hexed so that they'd been stripped of their magic. The whole kingdom was filled with Conjurite and dark magic.

It wasn't a dumb move on his part. It was a frustrating move on mine. I automatically wanted to face off against another warrior—we were on opposite sides, Zita and me.

*Except, you're regent now, working for Rainier.* Same side, then. Some days, that pill was a bitter one to swallow.

Surely, the presence of a personal guard would ease Vanya and Hazel's worries about coming back to a place where they'd been prisoners before.

I couldn't get upset about any of it—they'd been treated with the utmost hatred buried in the heart of darkness, and Rainier was taking every precaution.

"It's so good to see the greenery," Vanya said softly. "When we passed through here last, there wasn't much vegetation to speak of, but now... It looks much better already, Erol."

"I don't know how long it will take to restore the kingdom to what it could be," I admitted. "Falx reigned with darkness for a long time, and before him, his father was just as dark and cruel. It's a lot of damage that needs to be undone."

"We know it can be done, and that's all that matters," Hazel said.

I nodded. "Sure. It can be done. I just worry about how long it will take."

Hazel frowned. "Why?"

"We're talking about millions of people who have given themselves to the darkness. It won't be easy to reach them all, and even if you do, taking care of ten at a time...it will take many lifetimes to reach them all. I'm just thinking about logistics. What if they all die?"

"Our margin of error is small. We're talking about less than ten percent," Hazel pointed out.

“Ten percent of ten Fae is one death. Ten percent of millions? Can you afford those odds?”

Hazel bristled, glaring at me. I stared coolly back at her. She could get upset all she wanted, I was looking at facts.

“Not everyone will want to do it if it means they might die,” I added.

“We’ll figure it out,” Vanya said, defusing the tension that grew hotter between me and Hazel.

I wanted to rile her up, get her angry. She was hot when she was feisty. I wanted to see what she would be like if she lost control.

Zita nodded next to me. “If anyone can do it, it’s them. They tap into the Goddess herself, and that’s not something to sneeze at.”

“Maybe,” I grunted, irritated when the tension faded again.

It was easy to talk about the Goddess Terra and how powerful she was, but no one considered the dark goddess Cyrene and how powerful *she* could be. The Conjurites weren’t religious in any way. We knew about the goddess Cyrene, knew that by giving up the light, we vowed to serve her.

Lavinia—Falx’s high priestess—had been the only Conjurite I’d known who spent time in prayer to the Dark Goddess. The rest of us allowed the dark magic to drive us, and we did as we were told.

It had always been that simple. It had always been that *complicated*.

I wanted to say something about it—did they know what they had to contend with? Did they realize who they had to go up against?

Before I could say anything, Hazel turned her face to me, her eyes bright, and she stared into my soul.

“We have faith, Erol,” she said gently. “Faith and hope. Armed with the light, Terra’s blessing, and our hope and faith, darkness can’t prevail.”

She was beautiful when she talked, and the flicker of hope in her eyes was reassuring. It resonated with something deep inside me—something I hadn't known was still there. When she looked at me and I was aware of the spark of light within her, it reminded me that somewhere, very deep down inside, there was still a spark of something beautiful within me.

I just hoped to the Goddess—I wasn't sure to which one I hoped and prayed anymore—that what I had left was still enough to save me from the life I'd chosen.

Without it, the darkness would rule all, and I would lose what I'd come to love. I would lose my kingdom, my people, and what I'd come to know as a certain freedom.

## HAZEL

I was terrified of going back to Palgia. I still had nightmares of being stuck in the dungeon, of eating the gray sludge they fed us there, and being helpless without magic.

To go back to the castle of our own free will sounded crazy. I kept telling myself that we were here for one reason and one reason only—to save lives. So many Conjurites needed saving, and that was what we were here for. It was all that mattered.

Our past here and the pain we'd suffered wasn't nearly what the Conjurites had to deal with in the long run. To be that caught up in darkness...

The very thought of it was terrifying. We'd been caught in the darkness for almost two years in total, but even then, it had ended, and the darkness had never been a part of us.

I kept falling back on Ellie's compassion for her people, on Nylah's connection with Terra, who had given us the healing power in the first place. I told myself again and again that this was where we needed to be. If it wasn't scary, if it wasn't hard, then the end result wouldn't be worth it.

Erol was difficult to read. He seemed irritated and frustrated all the time, snapping at us when we talked about things he didn't agree with. His views on setting the people of Palgia free were clearly in direct contradiction to ours.



As soon as the hovercraft landed in the castle courtyard, Erol undid his seatbelt and left the craft. We stayed behind. I wasn't sure I wanted to exit. Now that we were back at the castle, the horrors of our time in the dungeon rushed back at me, pounding into my mind over and over.

"What's his problem?" Zita asked with a scowl.

"He's a Conjurite," I said softly. "I guess he can't help it."

"Why did he bother bringing us here if he doesn't believe in what we're trying to do?"

"Rainier asked him to," I countered. "Ordered him to, rather. He had to do it."

"If he tries to get in our way—" Zita started, but Mom cut her off.

"We're here to do something that's bigger than the darkness in Erol. We can't expect him to act right when everything in him wars against it. We should be more forgiving."

"After what he did to you, I don't know how you do it," Zita said tightly.

She was right—it was a lot harder to do what we said we would than I'd thought at first. We were here as royal guests, ordered and invited by Rainier, but we were in the heart of darkness, and the dangers of being here were very real.

"We should probably get out of the craft," I finally said.

Mom and I glanced at each other, nodding, but we still stayed in the craft for a long time, scraping together the courage to get out.



WHEN WE WERE IN OUR ROOMS, EROL WAS STILL NOWHERE TO be found. I was relieved. He was riddled with darkness, and his Conjurite magic couldn't help but flare to the surface every time we ran into each other. It had happened when we'd arrived at the hovercraft this morning, too. He'd been

gracious, smiling, ready to put on the face Ren needed to see, and at the same time, his magic had washed over me like a wave. It had sparked the fear I'd already had about coming back here and made it worse.

I'd been able to fight it—after spending so much time in Palgia as prisoners, my mom and I knew how to combat the feel of darkness, to keep the fear at bay. I'd learned how to discern between the fear Conjurite magic tried to instill, and the one that was my own.

Our rooms were beautiful. My mom and I each had a large room with a bathroom, a living area with couches arranged around a hearth, and a small kitchen. We had a door between our rooms so we could visit each other privately if we wanted to.

Zita had a similar room across the hallway from us, close so that she could check on us at any moment, but she had her privacy, too. Erol treated her as a guest, just like he treated us, and not as a servant of some kind, traveling for the sole purpose to look after us. I was sure it was because of Ren, too. All of this had to be—Erol surely wasn't one to exhibit that level of kindness.

When I'd walked into the room first, I'd been surprised about how homey it was. The castle lived in my memory as a cold, dark place, and I'd expected only a small step up from a cell. The rooms were nothing like that. Loose rugs had been thrown onto the slate floors, thick velvet curtains framed the windows, and the furniture was luxurious and comfortable.

It screamed of Ren, of Fae kindness and Fae riches, used to do good.

“What do you think?” Mom asked when she opened the door between our rooms and popped her head through. “Pretty grand, huh?”

“It's so much more than I expected,” I admitted. “Ren must have thought about this for a while.”

“I know, me too. Did you see everything is brand new?” Mom walked to the couches and ran her hand over the

cushions. “None of this has been used. We’re the first—it looks like Erol bought it all to allow us a cozy stay.”

“Ren wanted us to have a cozy stay,” I corrected her.

“Erol allowed it.”

I studied the furniture, the rugs, the curtains, and realized she was right. Erol had made sure that our stay here was warm and welcome by getting all new things to make us comfortable.

“He didn’t fight Ren on it,” I said. “That doesn’t mean that he liked allowing it. Or that he would have bothered doing any of this.” I wasn’t under any illusion about what Erol was...and what he wasn’t.

“It’s nicer than I thought he was capable of.” Mom nodded. “Sometimes, I allow myself to think that he might not be the monster we thought he was.”

“I think he has good in him, Mom,” I agreed. “I think he was Falx’s puppet for a very long time, but I think there is good in him.” I considered his behavior on the craft, how cold and sullen and hostile he had been. “It’s just hidden very far away at times.”

Mom hummed as her only reply.

A servant summoned us for a light lunch. Erol wouldn’t join us, because he had business to attend to. A part of me was disappointed, but another part was relieved. I struggled when I was around him, not knowing what I felt. Being back in the castle was also challenging, and taking things one step at a time was easier.

“Are you sure you don’t want to rest first, Mom?” I asked while we ate.

She shook her head. “No. We’re here for a reason, and we’re going to get going as soon as we can.”

“It might be a good idea just to rest and adjust to the new atmosphere,” Zita said, breaking off a piece of bread and popping it into her mouth. “The Conjurite magic is everywhere. It dances around us in dark whispers and crawls

on my skin like insects.” She rubbed her arms and shivered to drive her point home.

“You haven’t lived in the midst of the power,” Mom pointed out. “Hazel and I are used to what this feels like, and it won’t affect us.”

Zita would grow accustomed to it in due time, but she didn’t have to do anything other than keep us safe.

We would begin to heal Conjurites directly after lunch. We would start with the servants in the castle. Erol had sent most of them away—we could only heal so many at a time—but we couldn’t do without servants at all, and after making sure they knew what was at stake, and if they wanted this at all, we’d decided to start with them.

After lunch, a servant took us to a private sitting room. It was just as comfortably arranged as our rooms were, and I wondered if Erol had gone through the trouble to create more living spaces like this for us, or if this had been here all along.

Ellie had been in the castle a couple of times when we’d been prisoners here, but I’d never been out of the dungeons and didn’t know how anything had changed since Falx had been defeated.

Mom and I made ourselves comfortable on the couches, while Zita showed in the first Conjurite servant.

She was a small female, and her dark eyes were wide with fear.

“Come in,” Mom said gently, smiling at the female. “Sit down, make yourself comfortable.”

The woman sat down, but she perched on the edge of the seat, and she didn’t look comfortable at all. She looked like she would get up and run at any moment. Her ears were sharp, her black hair had streaks of gray in it, and she looked like she’d been through a long life, but her skin was smooth and blemish free, and she moved with a fluid grace.

Mom went through the process of getting to know her a little. She asked her name—Evanore—and how she’d come to work at the castle, how many children she had, and other

questions like that to try to put her at ease. It didn't seem to help, so eventually, my mom got to the point.

"You know why we're here," she said.

Evanore nodded. "To get rid of the Conjurite magic."

"Right. Is that what you want? You do understand what the risks are?"

Evanore nodded again. "I do. I've lived in this darkness for so long, and I feel like I've been blindfolded my whole life. I don't see the beauty around me anymore, I don't feel the joy of small things..." Her eyes welled with tears. "Once upon a time, beautiful things used to matter to me. They don't anymore. I shouldn't care about it, because the power I got in return is enough to keep my family safe, but I miss the person I used to be. I miss being able to love my family with the same passion I used to have. It was a mistake choosing the darkness. King Falx made it seem like such a good thing, and..." A sob racked her chest. "It's been six hundred years since I last saw the light. If I have to choose between this and death...I'm willing to risk it if it means I have a chance at starting over."

She closed her eyes, and her brows knitted together as if she was in distress, searching for something lost to her forever.

She was more than six hundred years old. I shuddered at the thought of living submerged in darkness for that long.

"Give me your hands," Mom said.

Evanore hesitated.

"It's okay," Mom urged. "You're not alone."

Evanore took her hands. The Conjurite magic in her rebelled, and the room filled with darkness, swirling in the corners like fog. My stomach twisted and curled with fear, and my throat closed.

It wasn't my fear. I pushed it away, reminding myself—and the fear—that it had nothing to do with me.

I watched as Mom's appearance changed. Her hair became like spun gold, and her skin glowed softly, as if she was illuminated from within. She closed her eyes.

“Evanore,” she said. “You chose the darkness, relinquishing the light. Terra is right here, asking you to choose her again. If you want it, the light is yours. You just have to reach out and take it.”

Evanore’s face crumpled. “I can’t,” she sobbed

“Of course, you can,” Mom assured her. “Just reach out and take it.”

Evanore took a deep breath. At first, it didn’t look like anything had happened. The room remained dark, as if the clouds had moved before the sun. The darkness tugged my clothes, nipped at my ankles.

Mom was still a glowing beacon in the midst of it.

Slowly—so slowly, it was almost impossible to see at first—the darkness started to retreat. Evanore’s face changed. Her dark hair grew two or three shades lighter. Her skin shimmered lightly. When she let out a breath, she sagged against the couch, and when she opened her eyes again, they were a bright green, not the dark brown she’d walked in with.

“Oh,” she exhaled in a breathy voice.

Mom smiled. “Welcome back, Evanore.”

Evanore beamed. “Thank you so much!” She pulled my mom in a hug, and Mom laughed as tears streamed down Evanore’s cheeks.

Finally, after a long time, Evanore let go. She stood.

“Can I bring my daughters to you?” she asked.

“Of course,” Mom said. “You can bring anyone you want. We’re here to restore the light, and anyone is welcome.”

Evanore nodded and looked at me with so much love and light spilling out of her, she was a sight to behold.

She left the room, with Zita shutting the door behind her.

“There are four more, waiting,” she said.

“Send them in,” Mom told her.

“Don’t you want to rest?” I asked, worried.

She already looked a little pale.

She shook her head. “There are only a few servants here, and we’ll take care of them as soon as we can. The sooner we rid the castle of darkness, the easier it will be once the Palgians start coming.”

I nodded. She was right, there was only one way to do this.

The handful of servants working lined up, and we worked together, helping them. How many of them usually worked here? I imagined a whole lot more than just the few who came. How many of those asked to leave hadn’t wanted to be free of Conjurite magic?

What if most of the Conjurites didn’t want this, and our attempts would be in vain?

We managed to do more than half of the servants before we took a break. The moment the last of the group was gone, Mom fell back against the couch.

“Mom!” I cried out.

“Vanya!” Zita’s voice joined mine. “Are you okay?”

“I’m just exhausted,” Mom said in a thin voice. “That took a lot more out of me than I expected. Some of them are old, and the darkness had a very strong hold on them.”

I glanced at the time. It had been nearly six hours since we’d started, and Mom was exhausted. She would have to rest before she helped the others. I wasn’t nearly as strong as she was—it would take me longer, and I would have to rest longer, too.

My heart sank. How were we going to do this? How could we help the people if it took this much out of us, if it took this long for such a small group?

The ten people we’d helped in Jasfin hadn’t been nearly as powerful or as old, and they hadn’t been in their own kingdom, rooted in the darkness like they were here.

Mom glanced at me, and although neither of us said it, in her eyes, I could see she worried about the same thing.

“Send another one in,” Mom said weakly.

“I’ll do one,” I replied.

“No, let me,” my mom countered.

Zita shook her head firmly. “You need to rest. You can’t do that again right away. You have to look after yourself, or no one can be helped.”

I was glad when my mom listened to her. She could be headstrong, like me, but she had a soft spot for Zita, and I was glad Rainier had chosen to send the warrior along with us.

Zita looked concerned as she studied my mom’s face.

“I’ll help one,” I told Zita, who nodded and stood reluctantly, leaving my mom’s side.

She walked to the door and let in another Conjurite servant.

This time, it was a young man—hardly more than a teenager. The darkness within him wasn’t nearly as powerful as it had been with Evanore, or some of the others, and he wasn’t very chatty, either.

I tried making conversation, but after it failed, we got right to the point.

I held his hands, and he closed his eyes.

The darkness swirled inside of him like a hurricane, a storm that threatened to break loose. I shivered, the fear clutching at my throat, scratching at my skin. I wondered absently if it would leave a mark like a feral animal.

I focused on the light within me, anchoring myself in Terra, and while I held onto the boy’s hands, I poured that light into him. In my mind’s eye, I saw him fill up with light, as if he were a cup. Slowly, as the light filled him, the darkness had nowhere to go but out, and it spilled out of him. I watched as it turned into light before my eyes, a thing of ugliness transformed into a thing of beauty.

It took a long time for all of the darkness to disappear, even though I didn’t have to fight nearly as hard as I’d thought



I had to. I just had to be persistent.

Finally, it was gone. When the boy opened his eyes, they were hazel, not almost black, and his hair had become almost white, it was so blond. His skin glowed gently.

He grinned at me. “That was...cool.”

“It was,” I said with a laugh. My back ached, and I fought to stay upright.

He stood, and when he left, I lay back onto the couch, too.

“Are you okay?” Mom asked meekly from her couch.

“Perfectly fine,” I breathed.

“We might have underestimated what it would take to do this.”

We had. We’d thought it would be a piece of cake, and it was everything but. Most of the afternoon was gone, and we’d only helped a few people.

My mom sat up suddenly, as if her body had been jerked upright by an external force. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and when she blinked them open again, they were white. The color of her irises, her pupils, was all gone.

“What’s happening?” Zita cried out in a panic.

“She’s having a vision,” I answered. I’d seen my mom do this before. It had been as terrifying then as it was now, but at least I knew what it was. “She’s seeing something from Terra. A message. Mom, what do you see?”

“Stop it!” Mom suddenly shouted. “Do you think you can take away my people and I won’t put up a fight?”

“What is she talking about?” Zita asked, confused.

I frowned and shook my head. “I’m not sure.”

“If you don’t take your hands off my Conjurites, you’re in for a hell of a ride. Go back to where you came from. Terra has enough worshipers! These Conjurites are *mine!*”

We stared at my mom as the color came back into her cheeks and she squeezed her eyes shut. When she blinked

them open again, they were back to normal.

“What was that, Mom?” I demanded. “What happened, what did you see?”

Mom shook her head and pressed the heel of her palm against her head.

“Oh, Hazel...we’re not alone here.”

“What does that mean?” Zita breathed hard and fast, and she looked like she was ready for battle, but there was nothing to fight.

Whatever had just happened, it had been a vision, a message, and nothing palpable.

“Why aren’t we alone, Mom?”

“The Conjurites aren’t just removed from the light.” Mom grabbed my hands and squeezed so hard, it hurt. “They’re not just lost, wandering souls. They’ve been taken captive by another goddess. She owns them, and by giving up their light, they pledge their allegiance to *her*.”

“Who?” I asked.

“The Goddess Cyrene,” Mom exhaled. “She’s dark and terrible and...” Her voice caught in her throat, and she swallowed hard. “Lavinia must have served her, too.”

I shook my head. All this time, we’d thought that being a Conjurite meant the Fae were cut off from the light. We’d never considered that they might belong to someone else.

“She’s furious that we’re helping them,” Mom continued, and she lifted her hand to her forehead with trembling fingers. She touched her temple once before she rubbed her nose, worried her lower lip with her fingers, and then crossed her hands in her lap. “If we keep doing this... I don’t know what will happen, but it won’t be good. This isn’t just about helping people after the war.” She looked at me with large eyes. “This is a whole new war that we knew nothing about.”

Zita and I stared at her before we glanced at each other, shocked.

“I don’t understand,” I finally said. “I thought that this was the end of it all. I thought...”

“I know,” Mom said. “It looks like we thought wrong. This is just the beginning.”

## EROL

The days were long and exhausting. Being the Regent of Palgia had been a blessing because it meant I was no longer part of Falx's rule of terror, but taking on the role of a king had come with new challenges, and I wasn't used to it just yet. It had been a while since the war had ended, but being kind was a never-ending job.

When I finally dropped myself in bed at night, I was out like a light in no time at all, and I had deep, dreamless sleeps.

Maybe it was because I knew that the threat to my life was finally over.

I'd done horrible things for a long, long time. I'd slept poorly for centuries, and I'd always had nightmares that rattled me awake in the middle of the night with the kind of fear that not even a Conjurite warrior like me had been able to shake.

The moment Falx had been killed and I'd been released from his rule, the nightmares had vanished, and I'd slept like the dead ever since. It was as if Cyrene had wanted me to think that I was free, that things would finally change. I felt cheated, betrayed, and it was exactly what she'd wanted me to feel.

I let out a groan. I'd spent a lot of time training before dawn. I was still a warrior at heart, and now that I acted as king, I didn't want to let my skill and prowess as a fighter slide. I needed to be ready for battle now, more than ever.

I'd seen how Rainier had fought alongside his men in the war against Palgia. I had seen how he'd moved, how he'd laid down his life for his people.

I intended to do the same. These people didn't belong to me yet, but I was determined to find my way back to the light and become king. When I did that, I needed to be able to stand up for them, to defend them, to do the right thing.

As soon as my eyes fluttered closed, Hazel flashed before me. She was somewhere within these walls—in her quarters by now, probably, fast asleep in the giant bed I'd ordered to make her room comfortable. I hadn't seen her since we'd arrived. I'd barely touched ground, always running after the next thing that needed to be taken care of.

A pang of longing shot into my chest. I wanted to see her, to be close to her. She was so young, and yet she was so strong. Not only as a Fae, but emotionally. She'd survived what Falx had done to her—what I had done to her.

*Go to her. Take what you want. Such a young, slight thing. You could easily overpower her.*

I forced my dark thoughts away. I couldn't do that to her. Taking Hazel, taking what I wanted, would be to ruin her, to ruin her beauty and her goodness. It was what I liked about her.

It was what I *hated* about her.

I wanted to crush the beauty, to erase her purity, and make her more like me so I could stop thinking about her and move on.

“Stop it!” I shouted at myself. “You're a monster!”

*And you're so good at being a monster. It took centuries to cultivate, and now you're pushing it away? Your kindness at times, your generosity...it's pathetic. You've become everything you despise.*

I clutched my head, my nails scraping against my scalp until it burned and ached.

How was her stay here? How did they fare looking after the people who volunteered to be saved?

If I went to her now, I could find out anything I wanted to know. I could take anything I wanted to have. That little warrior Rainier had sent along with them was nothing compared to me. She didn't have enough power to fight me.

I was Erol, Falx's right-hand man for centuries! I'd been chosen to give up the light because of my power. I could crush Zita like a bug, leaving Hazel wide open, and—

*No. What did they all say? It's a choice. It's always a choice.*

The voices in my head were all my own voice, the emotions in my chest all my own. They warred with each other and drove me crazy.

I walked to my bedroom door and locked myself in. I took the key and threw it out of the window. Tomorrow, servants would come to find me.

Would a locked door really stop me? I could run it down with ease, obliterate it with my power.

"Stop it," I snarled at myself again and gritted my teeth. I balled my hands into fists, digging my nails into my palms. When the pain grounded me—even just a little—I realized that could work.

I walked to the wall and punched it as hard as I could. Pain shot into my arm, and my wrist ached like hell. It pushed away the turmoil in my mind, and although I writhed in pain, I welcomed it.

When I finally made it back to my bed, I was smarting. My hand hurt, my head throbbed dully, and I was exhausted. I felt like I'd fought a physical battle for hours. It would allow sleep to finally take me away.

Hazel popped into my mind again, despite the pain.

I decided to seek her out tomorrow. I wanted to see her, and to find out how things were going was a good excuse. Maybe, in the morning, I would finally be able to think

straight and be one person alone in my body, rather than two halves of a whole who couldn't agree with each other.

I wanted to fall asleep. I so desperately wanted to escape, to go somewhere else. It would be a nightmare, but it would be away from here.

Sleep didn't come. Instead, movement in my room yanked me out of the calm, and my eyes shot open. Adrenaline pumped through my system, and I was wide awake.

"So, you think playing dress-up will make the facts go away?" a sensual female voice said.

It echoed all around me, and I jerked around, trying to see where it had come from.

The voice laughed. "Oh, Erol, you're so naïve. For a man of more than three-hundred years, it's pathetic."

"Show yourself!" I shouted. "Or do you prefer to insult me from the shadows like a coward?"

"Oh, big words for a man at my mercy," the voice said, but then a figure appeared before me. Black hair streamed down past her waist. She wore black robes, her long nails were painted black, and she wore black makeup—heavy around the eyes with dark lips.

"Cyrene," I breathed.

"Oh, so you remember your goddess," she said dryly. "I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

I shook my head. She came closer to me, one step at a time, although it looked like she floated, rather than walked. Black fog curled from underneath her dress, and her marble skin was so light, it showed blue veins beneath it. Fear preceded her. It pushed against me, wrapping itself around me, and squeezed like a snake that wanted to strangle the life out of me. I squirmed and struggled against it, but it wasn't a physical thing I could fight, and the fear pushed into my throat like a thick, slimy eel. I fought to breathe around it, jerking and spasming.

Cyrene watched me struggle, her face amused. She circled me with her strange, floating gait, and I tried to keep my front to her. I didn't trust her at my back. The fear paralyzed me, making it harder to move, to breathe, to think.

"What do you want from me?" I gasped in a strained voice.

"I want you to remember who you are...and who you are not. You pledged yourself to me, Erol. You gave up the light, and you turned to the darkness. You've served me well for centuries. Now, I learn that you're done with me. Do you know what it's like to have to hear from others that you're not interested anymore?"

I pulled my lips back in a snarl. "We're not in a relationship, Cyrene. This isn't a matter of give and take. In fact, so far, it's only been take, take, take."

She laughed, and the sound of her voice was like glass shards against my skin. I cried out as it cut me, causing physical pain.

When I looked down, there was no blood. The skin wasn't broken. It was all an illusion, like everything else was with the Dark Goddess. It was how so many Conjurites had been tricked into turning to the darkness—she knew how to make it look so attractive, like it would be a good thing.

Until it turned out it wasn't.

"You're arrogant for someone so out of control." Cyrene stopped in front of me, far too close for comfort. I tried to back away, but I couldn't move. Either the fear, or her power, paralyzed me.

"I'm not out of control," I snapped.

"No, you're right. You're in control...*my* control." She laughed, and the sound was painful yet again.

"I'm not your servant anymore," I hissed. "I don't want this life, and there's nothing stopping me from walking away now!"

"Oh, Erol," Cyrene said, and in her eyes, I saw pity.



I hated it, I hated to be treated like I couldn't take care of myself, and someone had to feel sorry for me.

“It's this naiveté that I've always found so attractive about you. Your power is irresistible, it's why I had to have you. Your childlike wonder is an added bonus.”

What in the seven realms of hell was she talking about?

Her words rang in my ears. What did she mean when she said she had to have me?

“How do you think Falx and Lavinia found out about you and your power in the first place? Falx was a nasty piece of work, but nothing he did was original. It all came from me.”

I stared at the Goddess, my jaw dropping open. How could I not have known there was more to it than just mercilessness? I'd always thought Falx had been treated so badly as a child, he'd taken it out on the people around him and allowed the darkness to change who he was. If he'd just been an agent all this time...

“You're not going anywhere,” Cyrene said simply. “Are we clear?”

“You can't control me!” I screamed. My voice was loud, echoing around us in the pure darkness.

“Can't I?” Cyrene laughed. “Your mother and sister are still alive, thanks to me.”

“What?” I cried out, fear strangling me anew. “You can't —!”

“I can, and I will. If you don't stick with the program, I'm taking them away from you. I won't make it pretty, either. A clean death sounds like something Terra would do, and that's not my style.” She sniffed. “I have better taste than she does.”

I shook my head, confused, paralyzed by fear and hopelessness.

I'd thought now that Falx was gone, my family was safe, and I could finally breathe easier. I'd thought they were out of danger.

If I wanted to turn toward the light, I would lose them for good. If I stayed in the darkness, I would lose all of Palgia and the chance to make things right and be a better man.

No matter what I did, I would lose.

“A king always has tough decisions to make,” Cyrene said.

“Get out of my head,” I snapped.

“You just need to decide what you’re willing to lose,” she added, as if I’d said nothing.

“Go away!”

She pursed her lips together as if dejected. “Fine. I’ll go... for now.”

Just like that, she vanished.

I looked around frantically, but I was alone in the room. She really was gone.

My brow was slick with sweat, and my throat was raw, like I’d screamed for years.

I sank back against the pillows, my body numb. I would never get away from this hell, would I? I’d thought I was free, but I was more of a prisoner now than I’d ever been.

At least, back then, I’d known I had nothing. A man with nothing had nothing to lose. Over the past year, since the war, I’d started to find beauty in the world. I’d seen myself as a man who could have things.

Now, I had everything to lose.

I couldn’t fall asleep. Fear plagued me, and I was terrified that it was already too late for my family. What if Cyrene had threatened me, making me think I still had a chance to save them, but they were already gone? I didn’t trust the dark goddess any more than I’d trusted Lavinia and Falx.

I got up and got dressed. It was close to dawn—the sun was a silver line on the horizon, a promise of the day ahead, but the night still clung to the landscape, drenching it in the monochrome that painted the world in the sun’s absence.

I snuck out of the castle, not willing to alert anyone of my leaving. I'd moved around without being seen more than once within these walls, and I took the path least traveled by those in high positions. I walked through the dungeons, the cafeteria, the kitchens—all now empty. A narrow door led out into the gardens, sunken into the ground and rock, and the stairs to the servants' entrance was a steep climb.

Finally, I was outside the castle walls, with a large field stretching toward the forest behind the castle.

I jogged easily toward the tree line, the crisp air refreshing in my lungs as I breathed in and out. Between the trees, I walked to the wooden structure where I'd stored a hover bike a long time ago, in case of need.

It was good to have my own transport once in a while, to come and go as I pleased without the servants or anyone else knowing about it.

The machine was well-oiled and ready to use, and I powered it up and moved through the trees. As soon as I was far enough from the castle that the sound of the engine wouldn't wake anyone, I opened throttle and sped across the landscape.

The modest home I'd bought shortly after Falx had died was quiet in the morning light. A rooster announced the dawn's arrival as the first rays of light kissed the earth, and the front door cracked open.

I held my breath from where I watched the house from the trees.

My sister Agatha stepped outside and stretched. She tilted her face toward the sky, closed her eyes, and smiled as the sun brushed her delicate skin.

She hadn't given up the light. Aggie and my mother were both still Luminescent, Fae who bore the light, who followed Terra, who lived without fear and sacrifice.

Aggie frowned and looked in my direction. I ducked back into the trees a little so she couldn't see me. She knew something was here—she'd always had sharp senses. I heard

my mother's voice call her from inside, and my heart constricted.

I yearned to go to them, to hold them in my arms and know that they were all right. I missed them so much.

Seeing that they were safe was enough for now. They were still alive, and if I played my cards right, I could keep it that way. I just had to do the right thing. Being a Conjurite meant not being able to love like we'd used to when we were Fae. I'd experienced that, too, with everyone except my mom and my sister. My love for them had always overshadowed the darkness, and no matter what, I would take care of them.

Aggie hesitated, still looking in my direction, and for a moment, it looked like she would come to me to investigate. My mother called again, and she obeyed, turning into the house, and shut the door.

I let out a breath through my nose. I fought myself for a moment, wanting to go there and knock on the door, to see their faces. I couldn't do it—I had to keep them safe.

So I turned my bike around and made my way back to the castle. As long as they were alive, I could figure this out. I would go about my day, doing what had to be done, ruling a kingdom...that would never be mine.

## HAZEL

The morning air was irresistible. Everyone in the castle was still asleep, but I couldn't stay indoors. I missed my garden back at the palace in Jasfin—I wanted to go outside and grow my Lettles, or lie on the green grass and look up at the sky as the light breathed life into a new day.

Here, all the gardens were drab and barren, struggling to bring forth any kind of vegetation.

I slipped out of my room. I strained my ears for a sound from Zita's room—she might want to know where I was going—but I heard nothing. I walked through the castle, sticking to the carpet runners where I could so that my footsteps didn't echo through the colossal stone rooms and tell everyone I was up and about.

Finally, I found a door to let myself out into the morning air outside.

I carefully shut the door behind me and broke away from the castle.

I walked through what must have once been elaborate gardens, beautiful, green, with rolling lawns and trimmed hedges. Roses, maybe, and fields of Lettles.

Now, there was only the vague memory that something had once been here. What would have been hedges were low, dried shrubs that stuck their dried branches into the air like gnarled fingers, reaching for the unknown. The grass had long gone, replaced by vast stretches of dust and rock, and a

fountain at the far end—what once was a rewarding destination at the end of the paths that led through the gardens—was nothing more than a dried-up concrete structure that looked tired and broken.

The whole kingdom was tainted with darkness. Everyone that had once been beautiful was now sad, broken, forgotten. I doubted anyone who still lived remembered the beauty from once upon a time, and those that had come after the reign of darkness knew only destruction and nothing else.

A breeze picked up, and despite the warmth of the sun baking on my bare arms and cheeks, I shivered. I wrapped my arms around me and kept walking.

The sound of a hovercraft sounded, and I spun around.

It wasn't a craft, but rather a smaller vehicle, for one man alone. Erol rode past me, his face twisted in a mask of anger.

As if he sensed me, he pulled the craft up short and turned his head. His dark eyes locked on mine, and a cold finger dragged a line down my spine, making the hair on my neck stand on end.

His power was thick in the air around him, the fear and the darkness palpable. It made me want to cower, to back away, to run. He scowled at me. It was what he wanted, wasn't it?

I was about to turn and flee. What could I do against him alone?

Despite the darkness and the fear that oozed out of his pores as if they were his entire makeup, something beneath it beckoned to me. It was a spark of light, a flash of goodness. I frowned, tilting my head. When I looked at Erol, I saw all the darkness, the pain he'd inflicted, the fear he wielded. I felt his power, running over my skin like electricity.

At the same time, I saw a man who was filled with light, shrouded in love, and happy. It was strange, seeing this double vision of him. Whenever I blinked, the one was gone, with only the darkness remaining, but then it would show again.

I shook my head.

“What?” Erol snapped, and his frustration crackled in the air around us.

“Erol,” I said softly. “Are you okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” he demanded.

“You just seem—”

“How would you know what I am and what I’m not?” he cut me off. “You’re here by royal decree, and you can do whatever you want to the Conjurites who volunteer for your outreach program, but don’t you dare think you can drag me into this.”

His words were harsh, and his lips curled away from his teeth in an animalistic snarl. I saw the man who’d captured us and thrown us in the dungeon. I saw the man who’d marched Ellie out of the dungeon countless times to do Falx’s bidding.

I feared him, but at the same time, my anger flared to the surface.

“You are a piece of work, you know that?” I snapped.

Where did my boldness come from? I’d been ready to run a moment ago.

I wasn’t a prisoner anymore. I wasn’t weak. I had power. I had purpose. I had a sense of belonging I’d never had before.

Erol had bullied us and hurt us and done the bidding of someone who’d only wanted the worst to happen.

*It wasn’t his fault. He has good in him. He has a spark of light that no one can deny, they just don’t see it.*

The thoughts yanked me out of my anger and frustration.

I’d had a snarky remark prepared, but instead, I let go of my anger. I saw the man he used to be—that was what it had to be when I looked at him. I saw a man who was pained, tortured, a man who’d been hurt as much as he’d hurt others. His wounds were emotional, but the scars were there, a reminder that would never go completely away.

That changed everything. Erol had been hurt somehow, too, though not in the same way we had. He was still hurting.

I could forgive him for what he'd done to us. It had been Falx, not Erol. He was a prisoner. He just didn't realize it yet. I was the only one that saw it—he had a spark of light, but he was somehow held hostage by the darkness.

“What are you looking at?” Erol demanded, and I snapped out of the strange vision I kept having when I looked at him.

“Nothing,” I said quickly.

He climbed off the bike and marched toward me. The fear he wielded preceded him and tried to wrap around me, but I wasn't scared of him. Not the way I used to be. I still broke out in goosebumps and considered which way would be the fastest to run to get away from him, but it wasn't as it had been before.

Erol wasn't a threat. Somehow, I knew he wouldn't hurt me no matter how domineering he looked.

He stopped right in front of me, and when I stood my ground, glaring up at him as he stormed toward me, his steps faltered. Confusion flickered across his features.

“What are you doing out here?” he asked. “You should be in your room.”

“I was taking a walk.”

“The grounds are off-limits.”

“To guests?”

He snapped his mouth shut and clenched his jaw.

“I thought you said we were here by royal invitation. I didn't realize these *precious* gardens were private.” I gestured at the barren mess all around me.

Erol grunted and balled his hands into fists, but it didn't look like he wanted to do anything to me. Instead, it was like he fought a war against himself.

His eyes were deep and dark, his mouth twisted. He glared out at me from underneath thick, furrowed brows. And yet, despite his anger rolling off him in waves, I couldn't miss how attractive he was. He had a face like he'd been sculpted by the



gods. He was *beautiful* to look at the way a majestic beast was mighty, relishing in its own power, its very being rejoicing with its existence. He was dangerous, and I wanted to run and get closer to him at the same time.

My hand lifted as if it had a mind of its own. Erol didn't flinch or pull back, and I brushed my fingers against the smooth skin on his jaw. He hadn't shaved in a few days, and the stubble on his chin made him look raw and powerful.

When my fingers touched his skin, electricity jolted through my body. My breath caught in my throat, and Erol's eyes changed. They became deeper, darker still. His lips parted as if he wanted to say something, but no words came out.

The atmosphere between us shifted, and all the anger and frustration bled away. What remained was something a lot more powerful—an attraction that drew us together like magnets.

*Run. Run, this isn't right. Erol is a Conjurite.*

I fought with myself, my logical mind telling me to get away from him. Another part of me—a part much more carnal, a part much more in tune with the vision I kept seeing of him, a good man superimposed on top of the bad—wanted to get closer to him. This strange magnetic power that drew us together was new. I wanted to know what I felt. I wanted to know why.

Most of all, I wanted to know *him*.

Erol moved closer to me, so close that I could smell the musky scent that rolled off him. He lifted his hand, as I had, and brushed a strand of hair out of my face, blown into it by the breeze.

The same electricity ran between us when he touched me, and I gasped.

Erol froze, his eyes flitting across my face before they rested on my lips, and this time, I couldn't think about anything other than what it would be like to kiss him.

As if he read my mind, he slid a thick arm around my waist and pulled me tightly against him.

He kissed me.

His lips were firm, but the kiss was gentle. I melted against him, giving in. He pressed his mouth harder against mine and slid his tongue along my lower lip. Heat rushed through my body and pooled between my legs, and I was ready for him. If he dragged me to his bedroom right now, I wouldn't protest. He was a drug. I'd had a taste, and now I wanted more. I wanted it all.

I opened my mouth, letting Erol in. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and I moaned softly.

My magic rose to the surface in a hurry, and it clashed with Erol's dark power, already wrapped around me. It created a kind of metaphysical spark, and searing heat rushed through my body.

Erol yanked back at the same time I cried out.

We stared at each other, breathing hard.

His eyes weren't filled with lust anymore. Now, they were filled with panic.

"Erol," I started, but he shook his head.

"No," he said and ran to the bike. He jumped onto it, and in a flash, he was gone.

I stood in the middle of the broken gardens, staring at Erol as he sped away from me and his frame shrank in the distance.

## EROL

**D**amn it! Damn it all! I wasn't going to get away from this hell, was I?

It wasn't enough that I'd suffered for centuries with a decision I'd been forced to make, living in darkness when I would never have chosen it for myself. It would never end—the freedom I'd thought was mine now had been ripped away again.

I'd never had it, in fact. It had been nothing more than an illusion.

Maybe it wouldn't have bothered me as much if I hadn't seen what life could be like after it all. If Rainier hadn't given me a chance to redeem myself, and I'd never met Hazel and Vanya, and learned that they could save Conjurites, I might not have tasted the bitterness of disappointment.

I'd seen the other side now. I'd seen how good the Fae could be to each other, and to me. I'd seen what life in the light could be like, and I'd nearly tasted it myself. I'd come so close...only for it to be taken away with a threat that still stood.

I stomped into the castle, wired and on edge. Anger and frustration bubbled just beneath the surface, and I felt like I was a ticking time bomb, ready to explode.

“You!” I shouted at a guard who stood on duty nearby.

He ran forward to me and bowed his head. “Sir?”

“We’re sparring. Now. Find someone to relieve you of your duty.”

The guard nodded and ran away to do my bidding.

I itched for a fight. I had to get rid of the pent-up energy inside of me.

I walked to my quarters and dressed in fighting leathers so I could meet the guard. Gone were the days where taking out my mood on innocent victims was encouraged—no, expected—by Falx. I was still a prisoner to the darkness, but at least I could decide what effect I had on the people around me. I didn’t have Falx forcing me into cruelty day in and day out. It was a small blessing, and for that, I was grateful.

My mind turned to Hazel. I hadn’t expected her in the garden, and I’d taken out my foul mood on her. She hadn’t deserved it, but she hadn’t fled from me, either.

It would have been better if she had—what could I possibly offer a woman like her?

Sex, that was what. Every time I saw her, I envisioned having her horizontal beneath me, my cock hammering into her. I wanted to fuck her. I wanted to kiss her and suck her and lick her. She would taste like the heaven I would never find. She would unleash a beast inside of me that would take her to the seven realms of hell and back.

I wanted her so badly, I trembled with need for her.

My cock punched up in my pants just thinking about her.

The other night had been terrible, wanting to claim her, take her, and fighting myself. My mind was a dark place, my needs and wants ugly.

*She deserves better,* a part of me said.

*It doesn’t matter what she deserves, it matters what you want,* another part of me argued.

I hated that I thought of her that way. She really did deserve better—better than me, better than anything I could ever give her. She wasn’t only beautiful and graceful, the kind of woman who would be a pure treasure on my arm. She was

smart and bold, and her confidence in herself had grown since I'd seen her last. She'd become a force to be reckoned with, her power strong and within reach. It was ready at her fingertips, and she could summon it at will. She could have summoned it against me when we'd met this morning. She could have pushed me away when my power had descended on her, challenging her.

Hazel wasn't like that. She didn't look for trouble and pick fights. She'd had more than one opportunity to do that with my power challenging her. She was kind and forgiving—especially the latter, since she didn't look at me with pure hatred after what I'd put her and Vanya through while they'd been in the dungeons, here.

How could Hazel look at me without disdain?

Instead, she looked at me with wonder, and I was drawn to her. It seemed that she was drawn to me, too, and that was a problem.

What did I have to offer her? Nothing but pure darkness. Hazel was filled with light, and she had so much good to offer the world. She could never be with a man like me, a man ruled by a power beyond my control. If I was with her, she would be subjected to Cyrene's whims, just as I was.

I couldn't do that to her. Finding companionship, friendship, even love, in a woman like Hazel would only drag her down. Our lives would clash, and I would never want her to choose darkness over the power she had now.

I grunted while I dressed, furious at everything I was losing. I'd given up the light so many years ago, knowing what I was giving up. I'd expected nothing but a life in the shadows, and it was exactly what I'd gotten.

Everything was different now. I'd expected more. I'd had hope. I'd believed I could return to the light, and I'd met people I wanted to become closer to. I'd thought I would gain something along with the freedom I had.

To have it stripped away from me now was so much worse than when I'd given it all up in the first place.

Thinking about it made it harder to breathe. I had a pain in my chest, lodged between my ribs, that wouldn't go away. I scowled and pressed my fingers against my ribs, but disappointment wasn't the same as a physical injury, and it wouldn't heal and go away after a while.

The guard was dressed and ready when I walked out to the field where the warriors often trained. We called it a field, because that was what it had once been, but it was nothing more than a large patch of dust with rocks that cut and bruised when the warriors fell onto it.

Rainier had large training facilities at the palace in Jasfin, and I was jealous. When I'd seen them, I'd decided I would have something similar built at the castle, but I hadn't come as far as having someone draw up plans to make it happen.

Did it matter now? This castle would never truly be mine, the kingdom would never belong to me. It might be my responsibility to prepare warriors for battle, but the urgency to build better facilities was gone. It would only be for another king, another ruler, and I would yet again have to bow down and let someone else take over.

"Ready?" I asked, marching to the guard.

"Ready," he answered.

The word was barely out of his mouth when I blasted him with my power, the darkness so intense, the guard had no chance against it. He screamed and fell backward, writhing on the ground, fighting invisible demons that the darkness brought about in his mind.

"You weren't ready," I scowled.

"Please, mercy!" he cried out.

I rolled my eyes. The warriors were becoming complacent in the wake of the war. I pulled the magic back, letting the guard up...but the magic wouldn't respond. The darkness wouldn't stop tormenting him.

I gritted my teeth and grabbed onto my power to regain control. It was harder than it should have been, and it took longer to reel it back in than I'd intended.

Finally, the darkness and fear let go of the guard, and he slumped on the ground, breathing hard. When he looked up at me, his eyes filled with terror.

I snarled at him, snapping my teeth like I was a damn animal. My anger wasn't aimed at him—I was furious with myself. I was terrified of what was happening to me. My power had always been strong, but it had never been out of control. Not like this.

The guard sank into a battle stance, ready to do what I needed him to do. He would spar with me even though he was terrified of what would follow.

I stared into his eyes and saw the terror there. It reflected my own fear, that paralyzing terror that came with knowing I could lose the people I loved.

Sympathy and remorse filled me. I shifted, uneasy. These sensations were foreign—I'd forced them away for a long time, not allowing myself to feel anything other than rage. It had been the only way to drive away the reality that I was stuck in a life I'd been forced into. I'd started feeling things again when I'd believed it was all over.

Now, I was stuck with these pathetic emotions—they wouldn't help me in the life that lay ahead. My future was grim after all, and there was no place for sympathy, regret, forgiveness, understanding. There was no place for hope.

“Get out of here!” I yelled, growling the words at the guard.

I didn't have to tell him twice—he ran away from me as if my darkness was nipping at his heels. Maybe it was.

I jammed my thumb and forefinger into my eyes and groaned. My power was out of hand. It had gotten the better of me, done something I hadn't intended.

It was worrisome.

Not only that; it was proof that I would never be able to go back to the light. The darkness was within me, and it was in charge. Black magic was at the wheel, and I was just along for the ride.

## HAZEL

**M**om and I sat in the formal sitting room, ready to help more Conjurites. After the last two we'd helped, we'd taken a step back to figure out how we could speed up the process. We just didn't know how we could change things. We had the power to heal them, sure, but the darkness was so deeply rooted in some—especially the older, more powerful Conjurites—there was no way to get around it. We had to fight through it.

We'd decided to tackle the next couple of Conjurites together in the hope that putting our power together would create a stronger force to drive out the darkness quicker.

Mom smiled at Zita, who nodded at her from the door.

“You've got this,” Zita said. She glanced at me, but it seemed almost as an afterthought. “Both of you.” She turned her eyes back to my mom. “Just remember who you are and why you're here. Your power was given to you for a reason. Terra didn't just allow you to have the light by mistake.”

Clearly, Zita and my mom had talked about this in private. I'd spent a lot of time alone the last couple of days, reflecting on what I'd learned about Erol, trying to figure out who he was and what I felt around him. My mom and Zita had spent that time focusing on what we'd come here to do in the first place. They'd created a bond, and I was glad my mom had someone she could confide in when she felt she couldn't talk to me.



We'd been together my whole life, and leaning on each other had been natural. We'd been all the other had. I was nineteen, though, and my mom had fought through a lifetime of struggle before she'd had me—running away from home, falling in love, having Ellie, and losing it all again before she had me. I could turn to her with anything, but I knew I couldn't always offer her the same support.

Since moving to the palace in Jasfin, we'd created friendships and bonds we'd never had before, and it looked, for the first time in a very, very long time, that my mom was happy.

"We just have to take this one step at a time," Mom said, turning her head to me. "We have to let Terra guide us. Without that guidance, we can't do anything. It's what this is all for, after all."

Before, we'd thought it was about freeing them from a life without anything to hold onto, but things looked a little different now that we knew there was another goddess involved.

Maybe the other goddess and her involvement was what made it so much harder, so much slower.

"You can send them in, one at a time," Mom said to Zita after taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "Even if we help just one, it's better than nothing."

She was right. Every soul mattered. I just hated how slow it went, and that we couldn't seem to crack it to make it run smoother. It would take a thousand lifetimes to help all the Conjurites if we did it this way.

I forced the thoughts away—I wasn't going to be negative. We'd come here because Terra had bestowed a gift upon us, and a calling along with it. We would do what we'd come here to do, no matter what.

Two women walked in together.

"One at a time," Zita said.

"Please, my mother is very afraid," the younger one said.

“Let her stay,” Mom said. “It’s perfectly fine.”

I nodded, agreeing. The two women reminded me so much of me and my mom, and how we’d done everything together. I wouldn’t have let her go in alone, either.

The older woman looked terrified. The Conjurite magic was thick in the air, the fear swirling around our feet, darkness pressing in from the outside as if it wanted to squash us. It knew what we were going to do, and it wasn’t happy.

“Sit here with us,” Mom said, patting the couch next to her.

The older woman sat down, her fingers trembling when she reached up to her face and scraped her hair back. Her daughter stayed close to the door, watching us dubiously. She didn’t look like she agreed with what we were doing here.

Mom talked to the older woman, trying to find out what she had come for. Did she know what it all meant? Did she really want to give up the darkness?

“Most of us do,” the woman said. She interlinked her fingers and twisted them together nervously. “Not all of us have the strength to stand up and face it, to do this despite how hard it keeps pulling us back. The darkness can be so punishing, and we fear it. What if we die?”

“Do you mean that all Conjurites want to return to the light, but the darkness won’t let them?” I asked.

“And the fear of dying. What if it doesn’t work and we die, and then it’s all over before we ever have a chance at happiness again?” She blinked at me, her eyes panicked. They flitted toward the door all the time, as if she tried to figure out how she could escape without Zita stopping her.

“I don’t want it,” her daughter said tightly, pursing her lips after each sentence as she spoke. “I’m here to look after my mom, to make sure she’s okay. She can do what she wants, but she’s not dragging me down with her.”

“I’m not dragging anything or anyone down,” the older woman said softly.

“You’re just throwing away our relationship,” her daughter sneered. “You think I’m going to stick around once this is over, but we can’t live in one house with light and dark together. You didn’t think about that—you only think about yourself.”

The older woman sighed. “It’s a touchy subject.” She looked at my mom. “I’m ready. It’s been a lot of years of pain and struggle, and I’m tired. I’d like to live out the remainder of my days in peace.”

Mom nodded and held out her hands. The older woman hesitated before she put her hands in my mom’s.

I moved so that I sat closer to her, on her other side, and I put my hand on her shoulder.

Mom closed her eyes, and I felt her draw inward, reaching for the light that was buried within her. I did the same, drawing my focus away from everything in the room and toward my healing power.

It worked. As Mom and I reached into the light together, we drew it out, and it was stronger and brighter than if we did it alone. In my mind’s eye, I saw us holding onto the older woman, and we carried her toward the light, toward Terra.

“Oh!” she cried, and tears rolled down her cheeks. Her eyes were still closed, but an ethereal expression crossed her face, and she looked like she was on a different plane, reaching for the light out of her own accord. The darkness didn’t fight so hard to hold her back now that Mom and I worked together.

When she finally fluttered her eyes open, they were a light gray and shone brightly, as if she had the light within.

“Thank you,” she breathed, and she looked at her daughter. “It’s worth it, my sweet. Please, don’t hold back anymore. You can’t live in captivity forever.

Despite the transformation her daughter had just witnessed, she scowled at her mom.

“You think you’re not betraying your own by what you’ve just done, but you’re wrong. Turning to the light isn’t as

glamorous as it seems. You forget that it's the Fae Queen who destroyed our village, who stood there without remorse and stripped us of the few things we had left. How can you pledge your allegiance to *her*, to the Goddess she serves?"

"What?" I asked, confused. Was she talking about Ellie?

"I know what you're talking about," my mom said, putting two and two together, too. "It's not what you think."

The Conjurite glared at her, and with it came a wave of dark magic—she was furious, and I understood her reasons.

"Let's take it easy," Zita said, stepping forward when the Conjurite daughter flared her magic. Zita pushed her own light magic toward her, a warning that she would have trouble if she decided to pick a fight in here.

The Conjurite glared at Zita, too. She was riddled with anger and resentment.

"It's exactly what I think," she spat. "She came to our village, filled with innocents who never did anything to anyone, and she ruined what we'd worked our whole lives for. We're still rebuilding! You live in the palace, surrounded by luxury and riches. You have no idea what we had to go through." She twisted her face into a mask of bitterness. "You've probably not worked a day in your life." She spat onto the floor, and I stared at her, shocked at the intensity of her outburst.

"I'm going to have to escort you out," Zita said. Her voice trembled with anger, but she kept herself in check. She would defend us without thinking twice, but Zita wouldn't deliver the first blow.

"Sure, kick me out because I'm not acceptable, that's how things work where you come from."

Zita held out her arm, gesturing toward the door she'd opened, and the Conjurite marched out.

I watched her go. When she was gone, her mother sagged onto the couch, deflated.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s been a tough journey since the war, and some of us have a lot further to go than others.”

“Don’t be sorry. A lot of people suffered pain and destruction because of the war,” Mom said. “I just want you to know that my daughter, the Queen of Jasfin, might have caused the destruction in your village, but she wasn’t herself. She was controlled by Falx, and she regrets her actions deeply. We were all hurt by the war in one way or another.”

I knew my mom thought about our time in the dungeons, and how our lives had been affected by that, even after we’d been set free.

“I understand,” the older Fae woman finally said. “It might not be so easy to convince my daughter just yet. The hold the Conjurite magic has on the people of Palgia is strong, and many might not realize that this is what they really want.”

My mom took the woman’s hands, squeezing them. She smiled warmly at her.

“I’m just happy you’ve found your way home,” she said.

“Thank you,” the older Fae answered with a smile of her own, and Zita escorted her out, too.

When we were alone, Mom dropped herself onto the couch. She was pale again, but not nearly as drained as when she’d helped someone alone.

“We’ll have to keep doing this together to spare our strength,” I said.

Mom nodded. “It will just take twice as long, then.”

“You’ll figure something out,” Zita said, coming to join us on the couches. She leaned forward, her elbows on her knees, ready for battle despite sitting down. She was a warrior through and through.

“Why didn’t you explain more about what Ellie had suffered, destroying those villages?” she asked. “That woman was very upset about it.”

“And with good reason,” Mom said. “They saw a Jasfin woman destroying their village, only to become queen. In their

minds, there's no excuse. It's impossible to explain the power of darkness to someone who is also riddled by it. The Conjurite woman wouldn't have understood no matter how hard we tried."

"So, the whole kingdom is filled with people who might see us as the enemy?" Zita asked.

"We just have to try harder to get around the hold the darkness has on them," Mom replied, determined.

It was a sound conclusion, but it wouldn't be that easy. We all knew it.

"I don't think that the light is gone from them completely," I offered.

Zita and my mom both looked at me, frowning.

"What do you mean?" Mom asked.

"Well..." I wasn't sure how much I could say, but I wanted them to understand. I believed there was something that could still be saved. We just had to look in the right place. "Every time I'm with Erol, I have something I can only describe as a vision."

"What kind of vision?" Mom and Zita asked in unison.

I explained how sometimes he was malicious and dangerous, the villain we'd come to know in the dungeons, and sometimes, I saw him for what he could be. Or for what he'd once been—filled with light.

"There's still something there," I concluded. "That changes everything."

"That does change everything," Mom agreed. "I didn't realize you had this gift."

"What gift?"

"You see something in them that no one else can—you see the light that still remains. It's a gift, a magical power unique to you, Hazel."

I blinked at her. I hadn't realized it was unique.

“We all have something that makes us special,” Mom added.

She was training to be a priestess with visions that were unlike any other. Ellie had the light, her direct link to Terra that surpassed even what Nylah could do. Rainier was the most powerful Fae king in history, and Zita had a knack for fighting, for knowing ahead of time where the enemy would be and what they would do so that she always won. It had only become apparent recently, but it was there.

I had something of my own, too.

Mom and Zita exchanged glances.

“What?” I questioned when I noticed a silent conversation passed between them.

“You like Erol, don’t you?” Mom asked.

I shook my head, but my cheeks burned. “No, it’s not like that. It’s just what I noticed when I’ve been around him. I can’t like him, Mom. He treated us terribly, and—”

“He was under Falx’s rule, just like Ellie was,” she interrupted. “And everyone who isn’t inherently evil deserves forgiveness. I know I don’t hate him for what he did anymore.”

The truth was that I didn’t hate him anymore, either. Far from it. I wasn’t ready to admit that I felt something for him, though.

“Can I give you a word of advice?” Mom asked.

“Please,” I said.

She was much older than I was, and she’d accumulated years and years of wisdom.

“Don’t be afraid to love. What you feel is never wrong—trust your heart to guide you.”

Mom glanced at Zita again, and I didn’t miss the gaze that passed between them. It was clear that they were a lot closer than I’d realized, connected on a different level.

Was it that easy? I considered my mom's words. Would my heart truly lead me in the right direction? Would it guide me to where I needed to go, or would it lead me astray?

I'd never been in love. My whole life had been about survival. I'd only been a teen when Falx's guards had thrown us in a dungeon, and thinking about boys and first kisses had been the furthest from my mind.

The attraction to Erol was there. It was real, and it was strong.

I just hoped that it was right, too. Erol was still rooted in darkness, and despite the spark of light I saw within him, he still had his free will. He could still choose to remain bound to the darkness, to be a Conjurite.

I couldn't be attached to someone like that.

I hoped he would choose to come to the light, not only because I liked him and wanted to get to know him better, but because everyone deserved to be saved from the darkness they were caught up in. Even Erol, with his wicked ways when we'd been captives here. Even the Conjurite daughter who was so filled with resentment.

Everyone deserved a second chance, to be allowed to hope.





## EROL

“**A** visitor for you, sir,” a servant said when I sat at my desk in the office.

I’d been poring over books and ledgers, trying to make sense of numbers that meant nothing to me.

“Send them in,” I said, relieved about the break.

I didn’t have anyone scheduled for today. A part of me was terrified Rainier had come to see me, to see how my progress was going in to get back to the Luminescence. How could I tell him that the opposite was happening, that I drew deeper and deeper into the darkness?

“Thank you,” a gentle, female voice said before I saw her, and my stomach twisted. I froze, the voice so familiar, I wanted to break down and cry.

Along with the emotions came a wave of anger as light filled the room. It pushed against me, and I scowled.

When Agatha stepped into the office and the door closed behind her, I could only stare.

“What are you doing here?” My voice came out as frustrated as I felt.

“I came to see you, little brother,” my sister said and crossed the room.

I backed away. I didn’t want her this close to the darkness. My darkness didn’t want to be this close to her light.

“Don’t—” I started, trying to warn her, but she was a slight thing and much quicker than I was. She wrapped her arms around me and held onto me.

I only fought my instincts for a moment before I wrapped my arms around her, too, and drank in her closeness and her warmth. The darkness inside me protested and yanked my arms back. I jerked away from her.

A hurt expression crossed her face.

I turned my back on her and took a few steps away.

“You came,” I said tightly.

“I couldn’t stay away,” Aggie replied.

“You should have,” I snapped. “For both our sakes,” I added through gritted teeth.

“Erol...” Her voice was gentle, her eyes pleading.

“It’s not safe for you to be here. I’ve stayed away this long for a reason. What if—”

“Falx is dead, Erol. It’s okay for me to be here. We’ve stayed away from you for far too long—these centuries felt like an eternity.”

Falx may have been gone, but I was still here. Cyrene was still here. Anger washed over me in a wave, and I clenched my jaw, biting it back.

Agatha was my big sister, and I couldn’t stop loving her. She was everything to me. I wouldn’t take my anger out on her. I wouldn’t force my darkness onto her.

Thinking about how I felt for her pushed the darkness away a little.

She was right; it had been forever since I’d spent quality time with them, finding out who they were and who they had become in the time I’d been gone. I’d checked in on them from time to time, of course, making sure that they were okay, but I hadn’t stayed long enough to have a real relationship with either Agatha or my mother.

I let out a shaky breath and tried to shake the anger and the underlying fear that anger masked. With Falx gone, there was no immediate danger for her to be here, and as long as I stayed loyal to Cyrene, nothing would happen to her or my mom.

Not unless I did something to them.

The fear returned and hit me like a ton of bricks. Anger followed in its wake that my sister was stupid enough to come here in the first place, that I was stupid enough to hold back.

That I was *weak* enough to allow love to win out like that. It was pathetic for a Conjurite.

Aggie frowned at me, tilting her head to the side. Her hair was a light brown, so long that it brushed against her hips, and she had the delicate, slim features and pointed ears of the Fae. Her hazel eyes held warmth, golden flecks dancing in them when she smiled.

Before I'd given up the light, Agatha and I had looked so much alike, everyone had thought we were twins despite being more than a century apart. The darkness had changed a lot of things about me, least of all my appearance.

"You came to see us a few days ago," Aggie said, looking around the office and finding a seat for herself. She sat down in a large armchair, her tiny frame almost childlike against the velvet cushions. She ran her fingers along the armrests. "Why didn't you come in?"

"How did you know I was there?" I asked.

"I sensed it," she said. "I always sense it. You know I know where you are all the time."

I nodded. My sister and I had always been so close before I'd had to join Falx and Lavinia at the castle, and our bond had allowed her to keep tabs on me although I'd insisted on keeping my distance. I'd always been terrified that because of our sibling bond, the darkness would have spilled over to her, but she was still as riddled with light as always.

"You left before I could come to you," she said.

I nodded again. “Falx may be dead, but I’m not free from my restraints. I’m bound to the darkness forever, and no matter what I do...”

How could I tell her that I had to distance myself from my family, that I had to keep doing the wrong thing so that I could do the right thing? It didn’t even make sense to me when I put it into so many words.

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“We’re okay, Erol. We just miss you.” Her hazel eyes were serious, and my heart constricted.

I balled my hands into fists again. If she stayed around me too long, she wouldn’t be okay anymore. I would make sure of that.

Agatha watched me with eyes that knew too much. “She’s controlling you, isn’t she?”

“Who?” I asked.

“Cyrene.”

“How do you know about her?” I snapped. “It’s got nothing to do with you!”

“I’ve been doing my research on what you’re going through, and I had a dream.”

I sank into an armchair next to hers. “What did you see?” The darkness let go for a moment, and I let out a shaky breath. I sagged into the cushions, exhausted.

“I saw a dark goddess, who used Fae for their power, stripping them of the light so that they lived in darkness and fear. There were so many people with power—not only the Fae, but the humans, too.”

“A long, long time ago,” I recalled. “Falx’s high priestess had mentioned it to him once, but nothing had ever come of it, because the humans have no power anymore.”

“They were greedy and used their power for the wrong things,” Agatha said. “I read history books that explained how they expanded their riches with their magic, rather than doing

good. Terra realized that it was the perfect kind of power to use against the Fae—Cyrene would turn them all to her darkness if she got her hands on them. So, to punish them, she stripped them of their magic, making it safe for them to exist without Cyrene claiming them, and stopping them from hoarding riches with power that was meant for bigger things.”

I shook my head and laughed bitterly. The darkness swirled inside of me, angry and irritated with my sister’s light. It had only let me rest for a moment. It came back in fuller force now, and my skin burned hot.

“It might have been better for all of us if she’d stripped the Fae of their power, too,” I said through gritted teeth. The darkness revolted at my speech. “None of this would have happened. I would have been a free man, I would have been with you, and you would have been safe.”

“We’re safe, Erol, thanks to you.” My sister reached for me and squeezed my hand.

“Maybe I should have let you die, saved myself, and none of this would have happened in the first place,” I bit out.

Agatha’s eyes widened, and hurt flickered across her face. “You don’t mean that.”

I stood and stomped toward the window, taking in all the gray in the landscape.

“It would have made my life a hell of a lot easier. Do you hear me? It’s hard having to look out for you because I know you can’t look out for yourself.”

I didn’t turn to see her face. On the one hand, I didn’t want to know about the pain I caused. On the other, I just didn’t care.

“Erol...” Aggie said softly. “It’s going to be okay.”

The darkness let go of me again, as if it got tired of holding on so tightly, and I slumped forward.

“Only if I keep doing this,” I said dully.

Agatha frowned when I finally looked over my shoulder at her, so I told her. She’d already known about Cyrene, anyway.

Keeping it from her was pointless.

I told her about Cyrene appearing, threatening my family yet again. I told her about Rainier's promise that I could inherit the kingdom if I would turn to the light, and how his people were trying to save the Conjurite.

Aggie listened quietly until I was finished. For some reason, the darkness stayed away long enough, too.

"It's pretty dire, huh?" I finally said when Agatha didn't reply right away. "You don't even have a response."

"I do have one," she said. "You might not agree with me."

"What?"

"I'd celebrated my hundred-and-third birthday just before you were born, and I was so excited to have a little brother." She smiled, becoming nostalgic. "When Mom went into labor, it took nearly two days for you to come. You took your sweet time and put her through hell." She laughed, and her laughter was bright and cheerful, like chimes in the wind. "When you finally came, it was with such a force of power that it rattled the house to its very foundations. Your power was incredible—more powerful than anything the Fae had seen in a long, long time."

It was the reason Falx and Lavinia had come for me. I only knew now that it had been by order of the Dark Goddess, and not because they'd wanted that power for themselves, although they'd enjoyed it as their own for a long time.

"That power is what will save you, Erol," Aggie finished. "Don't lose hope."

"My power is what will kill me," I clapped back. "It's what's keeping me here, twisted and bound to the darkness, doomed to live the rest of my life in the shadows without a kingdom of my own, without people I care about, without—"

I cut myself short before saying Hazel's name. It had been on the tip of my tongue, but I wouldn't talk about her.

The anger appeared again, rearing its ugly head. "I don't want it gone, anyway," I sneered. "The darkness is what gives

me my power. Why would I give that up? I'd be a fool. It would be easier to grow stronger and take what's mine from Rainier rather than wait for him to give it to me on his terms. I'm not a child, waiting for a reward!" I slammed my fist onto the desk so hard, the wooden top cracked.

Agatha stared at me, terrified.

Good, she feared me.

"You should run while you still can," I said in a low, threatening voice.

She stood, and she looked like she was going to follow my advice. She didn't. Instead, she forced herself to stay put.

"I know you're used to driving everyone away—or hurting them—but I'm not going anywhere. I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

That drove its way through the darkness and stabbed me in the chest. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry. I wanted to break things—I wanted to break *her*. I wanted to confide in her, pour out my heart and soul to her.

I wanted her to know about Hazel, about the future I was terrified of never getting, of the pain and the hurt I caused that made me feel guilty every day...

I wanted to scream at her and punish her and make it so that she never came back to tell me the life I'd chosen wasn't worth it, because the power I wielded was all that mattered, and I had it all at my fingertips.

My head spun with the back and forth—it had never been this bad.

Hurting Agatha would kill me, though.

Telling her how I felt about Hazel would only make things worse. She was another part of the life I would never have.

"I know you have what it takes to break free," Agatha said, her voice trembling but her face determined. "Even if you don't know it yet. You didn't witness the power that shook this earth when you were born. And Cyrene might be a force to be reckoned with, but so is Terra. You're going to make it out



alive, brother—we all are. We'll bring you home, and we'll see you happy yet.”

I smiled at her, but it was a bitter, twisted snarl. It was pathetic of her to hope, to dream. I hated it. I was jealous of it. I didn't have the courage to crush it.

I didn't know how it could be, though. Cyrene had a hold on me—she would kill my family if I did anything she didn't like. If I stayed in the darkness, my family would live, and the rest of the world could continue on to live lives that were riddled with light.

It was a sacrifice I had to make. Cyrene wanted everyone to herself, but as long as she had me, maybe the rest of the people could go free.

Even Hazel.

Thinking about it made me ache. I wished things could be different. This sacrifice was my burden to bear, and I wished it on no one else.

Agatha put her hand on mine, and the darkness recoiled. I yanked my hand back. She dropped her hand, and her face remained expressionless.

“Promise me you'll come see us more often, or let us come to see you,” she said. “There's no reason not to, now that Falx is gone.”

“I'm a Conjurite, Aggie,” I said. It was all she needed to know.

“You're my brother,” she replied. “That's all I care about. I want you in our lives again—me and mom both.”

“I can't promise.”

Agatha sighed. “Fine. I'll see you again soon, brother. I know you'll be back, one way or another. Until then...know that we miss you.”

She turned and left the office, and I sagged against the desk I'd cracked. I hadn't promised anything, not only because I couldn't make promises I couldn't keep, but because, as

much as I loved my family, a part of me didn't want to promise...because I didn't care about keeping my word.



## HAZEL

**T**he dead gardens at the castle drew me. I couldn't help myself—my fingers itched to do something about them. It was in my nature to heal, to create, and the gardens were everything that went against my grain.

I woke up early in the mornings. When I was alone outside, before the day had properly begun, I felt like my magic worked the best. There were no distractions, no Conjurite awake with their darkness tainting the fresh air and bright skies, and my magic flowed through my fingers like water.

It was therapeutic, too. Every morning, before we started helping Conjurites in a painstakingly slow process to save them from the darkness, I worked a little bit on the garden, bringing life back into the dead leaves, the roots that didn't take nutrients from the ground anymore.

It was frustrating that we couldn't do as much for the Conjurites as we'd hoped, and at least recreating the garden gave me a sense of fulfillment—it was one thing I knew I was good at, and my magic never failed me.

I worked in one corner of the garden, bringing a patch of roses back to life. They'd been long gone, dead to the world. It took a long time to push my magic into the roots, to let them take hold again. Green leaves started sprouting along the thorned stems, and buds started to form. I smiled when I finally saw the first signs of life.

“There you are,” I said. “You had me worried you weren’t going to show at all. It’s such a beautiful day, and we could really use your color.” I talked to the roses as I grew them, pouring my magic into the roots, allowing the plants to get used to the idea of life again.

“I’m going to let you show your true colors, and this garden will be one to be proud of yet. You’re the first, you know. The hedges on the other side of the garden are playing along, but we have stretches and stretches of garden that just won’t budge. Maybe, if the plants realize there’s magic and life to be had, they’ll change their minds about cowering away.”

I hummed while I worked, letting the music wrap around me and the plants. Everything about Palgia was so dark and dreary, I needed some color, some light, some life to make the place worth looking at again.

While I worked, I became aware of being watched. My skin burned, and I broke out in goosebumps. I jumped up and spun around, and Erol stood behind me.

He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck, glancing around.

“I was just...I walked through the gardens, and I... Do you have everything you need?” He seemed unsure of himself—maybe he didn’t know if I wanted him here.

“I have everything I need,” I confirmed. “I was just tending to the garden. I hope you don’t mind.” I’d never asked if I was allowed to work on the garden, to stick my fingers in the ground and treat it as my own.

“I don’t mind,” Erol said. He glanced at the roses. “It looks like they’re coming back to life.”

I nodded. “It’s taking time, but I think they just need a bit more encouragement.”

“I can’t remember the last time these gardens were something to look at. It’s been a long, long time. Centuries.”

I hummed. “It takes a long time to wake up from a deep slumber like that, but it’ll get there.”

When Erol didn't say anything and just stood there awkwardly, I kept talking to fill the silence. He looked like he wanted to stay, and I wanted him to know that he was welcome. Despite what he'd done to us, I didn't fear him, and I wanted him to know that.

"You see, the heart of the plants is in the roots," I said and kneeled. I pushed my fingers into the soil around the roses. The soil had been hard, but I'd wriggled it loose with a small garden fork I'd found in a shed that must have belonged to a gardener, once. "Put your hand here."

Erol hesitated, so I took his hand and guided him to the soil, flattening his hand on it.

"Don't do anything," I warned. "Just feel." I didn't want him to use his dark magic and kill the plants again. He would learn to do something like this once he returned to the light, but he couldn't yet. "Ready?"

I closed my eyes and pulsed my magic into the earth. I let the very essence of life flow through my fingers, flooding the ground with healing and light.

Erol gasped, and when I looked at him, his face was filled with wonder.

"It's growing," he said, nodding to the roses.

The leaves had grown bigger, and the buds looked like they were on the verge of bursting open, bringing color back into the monochrome world.

"It's much the same as we do with Conjurites," I said. "It's just much easier with roses—they don't have a lot to say about the matter."

I smiled at Erol, and he chuckled.

"I can imagine the Conjurites have a lot to say about it."

"You have no idea," I said. "Some don't agree, and others... There's so much fear."

Erol's face darkened, and he withdrew his hand. "I didn't think it would be an easy task."

“Neither did we,” I admitted. “It’s just...harder than we imagined.” I looked at my hands. “We’re not giving up, though,” I added quickly. “We just didn’t think we would have to face more than an absence of light.”

I swallowed hard. Erol’s large form loomed next to me, and I was aware of his closeness. I liked having him this close. His dark magic was on the surface, threatening to look for trouble, but beneath it all, there was goodness, and it was warm and pulsing, drawing me closer.

Right now, I was the only person who could sense it. Mom had told me that. We would find it and bring it to the surface, if that was what Erol wanted.

Judging by the look of awe on his face when he looked at the flowers, the life that teemed before us, it was exactly what he wanted. Even if he didn’t know how to put it to words yet.





## EROL

**I** loved Hazel's voice. It was a little husky, and so soothing. I could listen to her talk all day and all night, if she'd let me.

Hazel explained to me how she used magic to bring the garden back to life, and I could only stare at her.

She was so young when she first came to Palgia, but I watched her blossom into an adult. It was a shame she lost those years in a prison cell for something that was completely out of her control.

It had taken me months to find a way to help them escape—Falx had had such a strong hold over the guards and the warriors, forcing them to do his bidding, and I feared that he would kill Vanya and Hazel.

It had been a huge risk, and I'd been happy they'd gotten away.

She closed her eyes again after explaining how she poured her magic into the plants, showing me how they responded to it. Her skin glowed softly, her dark hair seemed to shimmer when I didn't stare directly at it, and a pang of jealousy shot into my chest.

I'd been connected to the light like that, once. I'd been a creature filled with magic the way she was.

Years and years had gone by where I hadn't missed it at all. I'd pushed it all away, refusing to think about what I'd lost. Now that I saw how she used her power, how connected she

was to the essence of life itself, I wanted it back. It was impossible to keep pushing away when she made it look so glorious.

“What’s wrong?” Hazel asked.

Her eyes were trained on me, and she had a look of concern on her face.

I cleared my throat and shook my head, dropping my poker face into place again.

“Nothing.”

She tilted her head to the side, her dark hair slipping over her shoulder. We sat together on the ground—it had been warmed by the sun, or maybe by her magic, and she was very close to me, radiating that same warmth.

When her hair slid over her shoulder like that, I wanted to run my fingers through it, to feel what it would feel like against my skin.

“It’s not a crime to feel something, you know,” she said.

She studied my face, and I looked into her blue eyes. They were large and liquid and drowning deep, and I could fall into them if I wasn’t careful.

Hazel swallowed hard, and her eyes slid to my lips just a moment.

So, she felt it, too.

Desire wrapped itself around us, tugging us closer to each other. Warmth flowed through me—the same warmth in the ground, the same warmth that had been absent from me for centuries. I stared at her lips. I wanted to suck the bottom one into my mouth and nibble on it. I wanted to feel what her lips would feel like on my skin, working her way down my body until she reached my cock. Her mouth would be heaven around my sex. Her voice was husky, and I wanted to hear it when she cried out as I fucked her.

My body tightened. I leaned closer to her—I wanted her. She was such a delicious young thing that could give me what I wanted.

I could fill her up and use her until there was nothing left.

A part of me reveled in the idea, and I reached for her. A small voice at the back of my mind reminded me she was more than just a toy to be used, an object of desire. I wanted her to like what we were doing, too. I didn't just want to use her and discard her.

I gritted my teeth and pulled my hand back.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I bit out. “Don't tell me what it means to be a Conjurite, what it means to feel. Or not.” I had to fight this urge to be with her, to claim her, to take her—I wasn't the right male for Hazel, and she deserved something better.

*What about what you deserve?*

The voices in my head drove me crazy, the back and forth between two parts of myself. I wasn't right, I wasn't right, I wasn't right. I had to keep telling myself that.

In fact, if ever there was a *wrong* male for Hazel, I would be it.

She was irresistible, and although I knew I had to stay away from her...I couldn't.

“I'm not the enemy, Erol,” she said hotly.

I bristled, and my magic rose around me, the darkness irritated by her light, my ego irritated by her words.

Hazel matched my power with hers, her magic rising to meet mine. They clashed against each other, the daylight flickering around us as her light and my darkness tussled. Hazel pursed her lips, and her eyes locked on mine, determination clear on her face.

I fought her, pushing my darkness toward her. I was far more powerful than she was. She had more power than I'd expected, but...

“Erol,” she said softly. “Is this really who you want to be?”

Her quiet words despite the force of her magic pulled me up short, and my magic died down.

“What?”

“It’s always a choice, you know.”

I blinked at her. It wasn’t a choice. The voices, the darkness, the urges and needs that controlled me...they weren’t a choice. Becoming a Conjurite had been, but this was the nightmare that being a Conjurite was, where my body didn’t only belong to me anymore. I shared a life with the darkness, I shared a body with the kind of power that had a will of its own and—

Hazel lifted her hand to my face, and when she touched me, the war inside me settled. I took a deep breath, and calm flowed through me. Her healing power pulsed through me, driving the darkness away a little. It wasn’t far off, and when it came back, it would be in full force. For now, I could breathe.

“It’s okay,” she said to me, even though I hadn’t said anything. Her eyes were a dark blue, and in them, I saw goodness. How long had it been since I’d felt this kind of goodness? Around Aggie, I was aware of the light, but it didn’t feel like this. This felt...good, warm, comfortable. Home.

I leaned in. This time, it wasn’t my need for her taking over. I wanted to be closer to the warmth, closer to the peace that came with it. I closed the distance between us. She leaned in, too. The darkness in me rejoiced. This was what I wanted. The good in me warred with it. I wasn’t taking anything, she was offering.

*Take what you want, don’t be pathetic.*

*She’s saying yes, it’s not taking, it’s receiving.*

*Fool.*

When I kissed her, the voices stopped. I only brushed my lips against hers, terrified that if I didn’t focus completely on control, I would lose it and do what I wanted to do—grab her and fuck her.

Darkness rose around us again. My skin itched. Her power frustrated me. I wanted to squash it, to force it away—I wanted to get rid of it, but her mouth was so soft on mine, and

despite the ebb and flow of the darkness that threatened to get control of me all the time, the peace and warmth that came from Hazel surged through me like a pulse of its own.

I ached to be plugged into that warmth, so that this freezing hell I was in could be over for a while.

*Pathetic. Soft. Weak.*

I fought the words that rumbled around in my mind. I fought the darkness that threatened to grow stronger and stronger and eventually swallow her whole.

Even though she was aware of the darkness thickening around us like a fog, she didn't pull away. She cupped my cheek, her fingers resting on my cheekbone, and I wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer.

Kissing her was like breaking through the surface of the water, and I was finally able to breathe. Kissing her was like wandering in the desert for years without reprieve, and finally, I could rest my aching bones.

Kissing her was like coming home.

I slid my tongue into her mouth, and she met me halfway, her own dancing around mine. I groaned, and my cock punched up in my pants, responding to her closeness. She was so damn beautiful, so attractive, I wanted her. I wanted to strip her of her clothes, unwrapping every inch of her before I tasted her, running my tongue over her skin until she bucked and writhed and gasped beneath me.

She moaned softly into my mouth, as if she was privy to my train of thought and liked what she saw, and I tightened my arm around her, pulling her closer still.

We were twisted together, lost in our kiss, but it was more than that. A part of my power I hadn't felt in a long time awoke as if from a deep slumber, and her magic rose to the surface, responding to my power. With the power that came from somewhere I didn't know still existed in me, my darkness rose, too. I tried to push it away—Hazel deserved so much more than the darkness within me, and I didn't want her close to it.

The magic wouldn't budge, though, and Hazel's power wrapped itself around mine. Our power rubbed up against each other as if glad to see the other. It intertwined and twisted together until it became something I barely recognized. My power had never looked attractive, but with hers wrapped around it, twisted into a braid of something new, it looked like it could be something good, something...*right*.

That didn't make sense. A part of me marveled at the miracle of what we created together. Was it possible that Hazel and I could belong together despite who we were—*what* we were? Another part of me, the darker part, wanted to yank back and unwrap my magic, detangling it from hers. My need to be close to her won out, and where I'd run away from her the last time, this time, I stayed put.

The darker part eventually won out. As if it had had enough of the power it didn't want, enough of the light that irritated it, it grew ugly and malicious and yanked me back with an audible crack.

I breathed hard when I stared at her, filled with warring emotions—hatred, lust, desire to inflict pain. Yet, I was also filled with yearning, longing, the desperate want for more of the heat, more of the power that showed a side of me I hadn't seen in a while—that showed me the side of her I couldn't get enough of.

Hazel looked up at me with eyes filled with need. Could she feel the darkness? There was no way she could miss it, but it looked like she ignored it.

*Now's the time to take her, if she wants to be such a naïve fool. Go on, show her what she's missing. Take what you want, she's practically giving it to you on a silver platter.*

She breathed hard, her lips parted, and I wanted to do so much more to her than just sit in the garden and kiss her. I wanted to drag her to my room and take her, claim her, make her my own.

“Join me for a private dinner,” I blurted out in a hoarse voice.

She blinked at me. “A private dinner?”

“Tonight.”

Her eyes searched my face. I shut off whatever I felt, whatever I thought. I would give her the choice, even though it went against my grain. I didn't usually give choices—I told people what to do. I *made* them do what I wanted them to do.

I didn't allow myself to feel anything. If I did, I would feel dark things, which I didn't want. Or I would feel good things that I didn't deserve. The mixture confused me, so I shoved it all away.

The longer she took to answer, the more I became sure it would be a no. Why would she want to dine with a monster like me, anyway?

Why did a monster like me care about fine dining in the first place? The whole thing was a joke.

I was about ready to turn around and march away, her answer be damned. It was a mistake to have asked at all.

At the same time, I wanted her to join me. I wanted more of this warmth, this peace, this reprieve from the darkness that ruled me more and more.

Hazel smiled and lifted her hand to my mouth, her fingers gently pressing against my lips to silence me. The feel of it calmed me, and I relished in it. I pressed my hand to hers and kissed her fingers.

*Pathetic. Soft. Weak.*

“I'd love to,” she said. “Thank you.”

I grunted and stepped back, breaking the contact between us. As if the darkness had been holding its breath, I could breathe easier again now that I'd put distance between our magic. I wanted to be around Hazel, but being around her hurt like hell, and I didn't like it.

I had to figure out which battle in my mind to side with.

Tonight, I would know.

*If she's in your private quarters, you can take what you want and be done with it.*

I didn't want to do that.

Hazel was different. She wasn't a means to an end. I wanted to be with her. I wanted to have a conversation with her, so I could hear her talk again. I wanted to kiss her again, feel her soft lips against mine, taste her tongue swirling around mine.

*If you take her and get over yourself, you can squash this ludicrous idea that you want the light. You can get rid of her altogether, and we can keep going the way we always did.*

I shook my head.

“Are you okay?” Hazel asked, concerned.

“Fine,” I hissed.

She snapped her mouth shut, eyes wide. Her fear rose to the surface, and my Conjurite magic liked it. I grinned at her.

Uncertainty flickered across her features. She still feared me—her confidence and gentleness had either been a façade or short-lived, and we were back to the hierarchy I understood. She was Luminescent, and I was a Conjurite. She'd chosen a life of weakness, and I'd chosen the path of dark power. She—

The expression on her face stopped my train of thought. Despite fearing me, being uncertain of my behavior, warmth flowed from her again. Either she saw something in me that wasn't there—or buried so deep I didn't know about it—or she was a damn fool to keep believing in me. Her faith in me pulsed warmth through me again, and I flashed on her touch, on our kiss.

I still wanted to fuck her. I wanted her beneath me, writhing. I wanted her up against the wall, gasping. I wanted to pin her and take her.

And yet...I wanted to see her have pleasure, too. I wanted her to moan with delight, not fear. I wanted her to look at me with eyes filled with affection and warmth. I wanted to taste her, to relish in her closeness, and feel her hands on my body,



gentle and caressing. She had a soft touch whenever she made contact with me, and it was as addicting as it was irritating.

I wanted it.

I wanted her.

*Pathetic. Soft. Weak.*

“I’ll arrange it and let you know when you’re expected,” I said gruffly. I cleared my throat and stood. “I have things to take care of.”

“Okay,” she said.

She struggled upright. I didn’t bother giving her a hand.

I turned on my heel and marched away. She was nothing but a Luminescent, nothing but an object of pleasure, and I would claim her before the night was out. Now that I moved farther and farther away from her, I could think straight again.

The voice that told me good things that contradicted who I really was faded away until only the darkness remained.

I was still the Conjurite Regent, forced to stay that way for the rest of my life. I couldn’t let her affect me the way she did. What kind of ruler would that make me if I abandoned the darkness I wielded, the power I possessed, for a small woman with light?

*A free ruler*, a little voice said at the back of my mind.

I squashed it. Everyone wanted to change me, to save me. Rainier, Ellie, Vanya, Nylah.

Hazel.

Did it look like I needed saving? For centuries, I’d done my thing, and it had been fine. I was still alive, and so was my family. I’d done what needed to be done—I’d stepped up to the plate.



## HAZEL

**I** was in trouble. I was falling for Erol, and that was dangerous. What if he never turned back to the light?

I couldn't imagine he would choose to stay rooted in darkness. When I was with him, I couldn't help but feel the spark of light and magic in him. He could still be saved. When he'd kissed me, my power had intertwined with his, creating a new braid of magic that was a lot stronger than anything I'd ever felt from him, or that'd I'd possessed alone.

It wasn't his dark magic that had wrapped around mine, either. It was that spark inside him, the magic that hid behind the veil of darkness that resided within him.

I found my mom and Zita in my mom's room, sitting on the bed. They were in deep conversation when I knocked the door and opened it. When I stepped in, they'd been holding hands, and let go of each other. Neither of them jerked away as if I'd caught them in something, but I was aware of their connection.

"I have a problem," I sighed, sinking onto one of the couches that created an intimate circle around a bunch of bookcases in my mom's room.

"What?" Mom asked. "Is everything okay?"

"More than okay," I answered. "I think I'm falling for Erol."

I'd felt unsure about admitting to it before, but after my mom had encouraged going with what I felt and trusting my

heart, I felt more confident about confiding in her and Zita about it.

“Really?” Zita asked with a frown.

I nodded and relayed that he wanted me to dine with him. Alone. I didn’t share the kiss. That was my little secret for now. My stomach still erupted in butterflies when I thought about it, and my cheeks burned brightly.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Mom said. “Get to know him a little better, see if what you feel is only physical attraction or if there’s more.”

“Do you think it could only be physical?” I asked, trying to think back to when we were together. I did feel attracted to him—I wanted to give myself to him, body and soul. When I thought about our magic and how it had twisted together to create something new, I shook my head. It wasn’t just physical; it was so much more.

“I don’t know if this is a good idea,” Zita said, standing from the bed. She walked to the window and looked up at the sky.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because he’s your captor,” she said simply.

“Not anymore,” I pointed out.

“That doesn’t change the facts. He’s also a Conjurite, and very high up in the food chain. He’s powerful, and I don’t know if you want to tie yourself to that.”

“He won’t be a Conjurite forever,” I argued.

“What if he is, though?” Zita replied. “What if he never decides to turn away from the darkness?”

I bristled. I knew Zita was only trying to look out for me and my mom, but I didn’t like the words that came out of her mouth.

“I don’t think it will be a problem,” I said. “He still has good in him; he still has a spark of light. It’s all he needs to find his way back.”

Zita clenched her jaw. Clearly, she didn't agree with me.

"Zita has a point, Hazel," Mom said.

I stared at her, mouth open. She was supposed to have my back.

"Erol did a lot of bad things. We also know that he's not in control of himself, and you aren't an ordinary Fae."

Zita snapped her head to my mom, but she didn't counter her. They were locked in a staring competition for a moment, but then Mom looked at me again.

"Keep following your heart. It will lead you down the right path. When I met Chilton, I knew it wasn't what everyone thought was right. He was a human, and I was Fae. Ellie came from that match, and everything turned out exactly how the prophecy had foretold. It was so much bigger than love across species. Your connection with Erol might not be across species, but it's across magic, and you can figure it out. If it's meant to be, it will be. Just...be careful, okay? The darkness isn't a joke, and if it sucks you in..."

I nodded. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"You're still very young, and your first love is as magical as it can be blinding. I trust that you will do the right thing, but you should listen to your heart and your gut."

Zita seemed happy that my mom had added that and relaxed a little.

Her words made me feel at ease. She was right, and I would trust what I felt. If it had been purely physical, I might have wondered about what Zita had said and taking it as truth, but it wasn't just about that. It was about our magic and how drawn we were to each other.

I'd burst into the room, excited and gushing about what had happened between me and Erol, and I hadn't noticed the atmosphere in the room. Now, after I'd gotten it out, I became aware of the intensity.

Mom and Zita had been in deep discussion about something, and I'd interrupted it. I'd noticed, lately, how they

exchanged glances, how they touched each other, and how concerned they were for each other's well-being. I hadn't thought anything of it before, but now, I started to realize there was more to it than just the bond between Fae and their warriors and guardians.

Something was brewing between Zita and my mom.

Since my mom had had me, she'd been alone and wandering, taking care of me, putting her own needs aside. My father had been nothing more than a fling, and my mother hadn't had a companion to lean on in a long time.

I'd always wanted her to look after herself, too. She needed to focus on her own needs and her own happiness.

Maybe that was what Zita could give her. If my mom found companionship, love, support from the warrior, then I was happy for her.

She deserved so much more than the hand she'd been dealt all these years.

"I should go," I said and stood. "I didn't mean to interrupt anything. I should have checked with you before barging in like this."

"You're always welcome," Mom said with a warm smile.

I knew she would always be there for me, and I loved her for it. She wasn't just a good mother, she was also a wonderful friend and confidante. She deserved to be allowed to focus on her own heart, her own path forward.

I left the room and shut the door behind me, closing the two Fae in together. I truly hoped my mom was finding her happiness, too.

What I wanted more than anything was that we all ended up with our happy endings.



## EROL

I didn't sleep well.

Since Cyrene had come to me, my dreams had been terrible again, filled with blood and gore, with fear and loathing. I jerked awake at least three times a night, and when I woke up in the mornings, I felt like I hadn't slept at all.

I stayed up later and later in the hopes that I would be so exhausted, I wouldn't have what it took to dream.

It didn't work.

When I jerked awake, it was the middle of the night. I couldn't remember what I'd dreamed, just that there had been a lot of blood, a lot of cruelty, and so much darkness. It had felt the way it had when Falx had still been alive, and Lavinia had messed with my head for fun.

I let out a breath, trying to calm myself.

"You know the drill," I told myself, speaking into the dark room. "We're just going to have to face this one night at a time." One night at a time, for the rest of my life.

I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, the way it traveled in through my nose, filling my chest, and out through my mouth again. I repeated the process. In, out, in, out.

"Erol," a voice said, and I stiffened. The voice was all around me and inside me. It was *everywhere*.

"What do you want?" I bit out through clenched jaws. I'd just managed to calm my heart rate enough that I could fall



asleep again.

Cyrene appeared before me in the dark of the room with a smile on her face.

“I thought we could chat for a while.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Is that how you treat a goddess? I don’t remember you being this disrespectful.”

“I don’t remember you being around at all,” I pointed out.

I knew I was playing with fire, making the Dark Goddess angry, but I was frustrated, irritated with her, and on edge after yet another nightmare. The less I slept, the crankier I became, and it had been dozens of nights of restless sleep in a row so far.

Cyrene laughed despite my snappy remarks. “You’re right, I haven’t exactly been around, showing my face to you. Lavinia was here, making contact with me, doing my work. And Falx obeyed me through her. The system worked. You don’t have a high priestess, so I have to make do without a middleman.”

I scowled. Cyrene was more a voice in the darkness than a figure I could make out. I knew where she was—her energy was darker than the darkness in the room, and her pale skin was almost translucent. I glared in her general direction.

“So, now I’m supposed to be a ruler and a priest of some kind?”

She laughed. The sound was awful, scraping against my skin, and I recoiled despite myself. I hadn’t wanted her to know how revolted I was by her—a poker face had always been my best defense—but it was impossible to hide my disdain.

She laughed again, amused by my reaction, and it only pissed me off that much more.

“You’re more than powerful enough to fill both roles,” she said. “Why do you think I wanted you all to myself?”

I bristled but didn't answer. My anger grew the longer she talked, and with it, my magic rose to the surface. I wasn't going to be able to fight her. She was the source of my dark power, after all.

My magic grew thicker and thicker anyway, and I relished in the feel of having so much power at my fingertips. The sensation wasn't voluntary, but I couldn't deny it. Being this powerful was incredible.

The room around me started to tremble. The curtains blew inward as if the windows were wide open, which they weren't. My power sounded like thunder from above, rumbling and roaring.

Cyrene laughed, a deep laugh all the way from her belly. She loved my power as much as I did. The sound of my magic was so overpowering, it almost drowned her out.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," she said, her voice in my head now so I could hear her over the magic that had taken control of me. "All of this is possible because of me."

"I don't want it!" I shouted, although deep down, a part of me knew that wasn't completely true. I wanted the power.

"You're nothing without me, Erol," Cyrene snapped, her voice suddenly cold, the humor gone out of it. "If you turn away from me, you know what will happen to your family, but not only that—you'll be nothing more than a weak, pathetic Fae who can't fend for himself, much less anyone else. It's your choice, in the end, but you should strongly consider what you stand to lose."

Just like that, she was gone as if she'd never been. I stared into the darkness, blinking my eyes, looking for the ethereal shimmer that showed me where she was. I strained my ears for her voice.

It was nowhere to be found. She was gone. She'd finally left me alone.

I sagged in relief, the tension finally leaving my body. She was a pain in the ass, and no matter what I did, I would never

be able to escape her. Not if I wanted my mom and sister to live.

I wanted to get out of these nightmares, to leave the darkness behind and finally walk in the light again. I hadn't wanted it as badly before as I did now. Being with Hazel, feeling the power she possessed, seeing how she transformed the world around her, made me realize how much I wanted to be a part of that.

I would never want it enough to sacrifice my family. I just wished there was another way to gain the kingdom, to become king and rule the people, lead them in the way they needed it.

Cyrene's words echoed in my mind.

*You're nothing without me.*

The dark magic I possessed, the power I could use as I pleased, had come from her. What if, by giving it up, I wouldn't be powerful enough to rule Palgia? What if, after I'd fought Cyrene and somehow saved my family—already an impossible feat—I just wasn't enough to lead my people?

Rainier was powerful. He wasn't just a good king, he had the power to back him, and it was why he stayed on the throne. It was how he and Ellie had defeated Falx and Lavinia in the first place. Without magic, neither of them would have succeeded.

I needed magic to keep my position. I needed to be powerful so I could look after myself, my family, my subjects.

If I wasn't powerful enough to do that, what was the purpose of it all? After so many years of power—albeit dark magic that was cruel and merciless—did I have what it took to be nothing?

The thoughts were troubling, and I tossed and turned for a long time before exhaustion dragged me under and I finally fell asleep again.

Thankfully, the slumber was dreamless for a change. Not that it mattered all that much—a dreamless sleep wasn't a lot of help when being awake was becoming a nightmare, too.



## HAZEL

I looked at myself in the mirror. I'd put on a gown that I'd brought along in case I needed to dress up a little. I didn't expect to have any balls or banquets. Erol didn't seem like the social kind, and as regent, he didn't have the same responsibilities to be social as Ren and Ellie did.

Still, I was glad I'd brought something.

Tonight, I would eat with Erol, alone. It was like a date, but he hadn't labeled it as one. My stomach erupted in butterflies when I thought about it, anyway, and I touched my fingers to my lips, remembering the feel of his mouth against mine.

My hair hung loose over my shoulders, and the dress was a light blue that brought out my eyes. It was made from a shimmering silk and hugged my waist before flaring out a little from my hips, with a slit to my thigh on the right. I'd paired it with ballet flats—I'd never been a fan of heels, and it would be far too formal for just the two of us.

I checked my makeup and reapplied the nude lipstick I'd chosen. With magic, I tried to change my appearance—I put on more makeup, made my lips bright red, did up my hair, made my skin shimmer. I took it all away again, going back to my nude lips and understated makeup. I didn't want to look like I'd tried too hard, but I wanted to look pretty for him.

I rolled my eyes at myself, fussing like this. I'd never cared so much about my appearance or about what anyone thought of me.

Then again, none of the people who'd seen me before—no matter what state I'd been in—had been Erol. I cared what *he* thought of me. I wanted to impress him. It was silly, but that didn't change the fact that I liked him, and I wanted him to like me, too.

When I was ready, I walked to the door between my room and my mom's. I lifted a hand to knock. I wanted to show her what I looked like, to ask her advice for my dinner with Erol. Before I knocked, laughter sounded from the other side of the door. My mom and Zita were together.

I lowered my hand again. I didn't want to bother them. I was going on a date, they could be left alone so that they had their date, too.

A smile played around my lips. It was nice to think of my mom dating again. I didn't know how serious things were between her and Zita, or if anything would come of it, but she deserved happiness, and Zita was a good person. She had always been someone I respected—not only as a powerful female warrior, but as someone who'd been there for Ellie when she'd needed a friend, and someone who'd been there for us when we'd struggled to settle in at the palace at first. She was the perfect balance between rough and tough and ready to fight, and kind and caring and aware of what was going on around her.

If my mom could find her happiness with anyone, it would be with someone like Zita. For too long after she'd lost Chilton, the love of her life, Mom had been with men who didn't care about her, only about what they could get from her. It took a woman who understood her softer side to really show her what was worth loving about her, and I wanted that for her.

I left my room and walked through the castle. My shoes clicked softly on the stone floors, echoing through the hallways on my way. Erol had sent me a message with a servant, asking me to come to his quarters rather than meeting him in the large banquet hall.

When I arrived at his quarters, the door was already open, and Erol waited for me.

His eyes locked on mine before he slid them slowly down my body. I shivered, feeling his gaze like a physical touch.

“You are beautiful,” Erol said, his eyes finally fixing on mine again. They filled with lust, the darkness of his irises growing darker still with primal need.

My cheeks flushed, and my ears burned as I blushed.

“You look great, too,” I said in a breathy voice.

Erol had also made an effort to dress up a little. He wore black pants that shimmered as he moved, a midnight blue shirt, and black shoes. It looked almost like we’d dressed to match.

When I stepped closer, Erol slid his hand around my waist and dropped a kiss on my cheek. I breathed in his scent, and my body tightened in all the right places.

“Come in, please,” he said and stepped aside so I could walk into the room.

This had to be the king’s private living room. Large, luxurious couches and chaise lounges were arranged in an intimate circle around a hearth where a fire crackled warmly. Above it, a large screen was mounted, where I assumed all the holograms of the news and other shows were displayed.

Behind the couches, a table had been set up, with a golden tablecloth, tall candles with flames that danced and tugged on their wicks, and pitch-black dinnerware.

Long-stemmed red roses in black vases littered the room, with more candles on bookshelves, a coffee table, and any other flat surface that could be found. The effect was as romantic as it was dangerous—the darkness and the black décor wasn’t lost on me, despite the soft light of the candles.

It was so symbolic of how I saw Erol—the spark of light inside him was like a candle, flickering in the darkness, driving it away as proof that there was still something left, still a bit of hope.

“This is beautiful,” I breathed.

I walked to the table. As if Erol had just thought of it, he hurried to one chair and pulled it out for me. I sat down, and he helped me move the chair in before he sat down opposite me.

He lifted his glass in a silent toast, and I did the same before we each took a sip. The black wine glass was filled with red wine, and the liquid ran down my throat. The bold flavor—with a hint of citrus—lingered on my taste buds.

“How have you been?” I asked Erol when we set down our glasses and a servant appeared with the first course—a light summer soup that didn’t seem to belong in the heavy, black plate it was presented in. But the taste was flavorful and savory, and I shoveled another spoonful into my mouth.

“I’ve been busy,” Erol admitted. “Running a kingdom is hard work, even when you’re not technically king.”

“I can only imagine,” I said.

“How is your project coming along with the Conjurites?” he asked.

We were making polite conversation. It was pleasant, but a part of me wanted more. I wanted to get to know *him*, not the face he put on for me, not the polite and reserved man who sat opposite me.

*The night has only just started, there’s still time.*

I shook off my impatience. Where was this coming from? I knew exactly where—I’d felt something when Erol had kissed me, something deeper and more intense than anything I’d felt before. I wanted more of that. I wanted to explore it.

I didn’t want to be impolite and focused on his question.

“It’s slow-going,” I confessed. “And the Conjurites have a lot of resentment toward us.”

“What do you mean?” Erol asked. “I made it very clear, when I sent out the word that you were coming to help, that it was a choice, and no one would force them into anything.”

I nodded. “The woman we helped chose to turn back to the light, but her daughter...well, that wasn’t so easy. She wasn’t



only against the idea, she was also against *us*. She saw us as the enemy, and I'm sure she's not the only one."

Erol shook his head. "The war is long over. We're still recovering in some ways—it never clears up quickly—but surely, with Rainier being the rightful king after Falx died—"

"She's upset about what Ellie did in the villages when Falx sent her to destroy them," I said, interrupting his train of thought before he came to the wrong conclusions. "They don't understand why they should trust people who are willing to hurt them for no good reason."

Erol stared at me.

"I remember that day," he said in a brittle voice. "The destruction was vast, and it tore her apart. It was hard to watch—I knew she hadn't wanted it, and Falx was doing it through her." He looked down at his plate and pushed away the remainder of his soup, his appetite spoiled. "I stood by and did nothing." His remorse was so strong, I could almost feel it in the air.

"You didn't have much of a choice, did you?" I argued.

Erol shook his head. "If I'd stopped her, Falx would have had me killed, and then taken out his anger on Ellie, and possibly even the people in that village. It would have been worse for everybody involved."

I nodded. "You were all puppets. That's how I feel about the Conjurite magic, too. The Conjurites can't help what they do and can't escape it by themselves. That's why we're here to help. I just don't know how to do it. We're already struggling with how slow it is and how long it takes us to do, and the risk it poses if we lose someone again. If they fight us on it, and see us as the enemy rather than people who are here to help..."

"Leave it to me," Erol said, his face changing from remorse to determination. "I'll take care of it."

"How—"

"Do what you came here to do. I'll make it right. I'll make sure you're as well received as should be expected."

I wanted to know what he meant by that statement. I didn't want him to threaten the Conjurites into fear and submission. That would just defeat the point of it being a choice in the first place. It was the Conjurite way of doing things.

I couldn't demand that Erol tell me how he wanted to change things. I had to show that I trusted him at least in part.

I just hoped it would work out right in the end.

"How is your mother?" Erol asked.

"She's doing very well," I said with a smile, thinking about the bond my mom and Zita were creating. "She's happy, and I love to see that. She's been through a lot of pain and suffering in her life."

Erol nodded, and a servant appeared to take away our soup plates to clear the way for the next course.

Plates of seafood appeared in front of us. A salad with shrimp and a divine creamy sauce along with it had me trying my best not to stuff my face.

"I'm glad she's doing well," Erol said.

His face changed, and I had a feeling he thought back to the years we'd spent in his dungeon. I didn't want him to think about that.

"Do you have a family?" I asked to change the topic.

"A mother and a sister. My father...isn't in the picture. He hasn't been for a long time."

I was surprised to hear that.

We ate our entrées while he told me about his mother and his sister, about the house he'd bought them not too far away, and how he tried to make sure they were still all right through it all.

When the main course arrived, it was roasted duck with vegetables and wild rice. I frowned when I also saw Orbin on my plate. The green vegetable was a delicacy in Jasfin, and only the nobility and royal family ate it in abundance because it was so hard to grow throughout the year.

“Where did you find this?” I asked.

“I had it sent from Jasfin for tonight,” Erol said. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” I said and took a bite, groaning with delight.

He beamed at me, pleased that I liked what he’d ordered. It was moving that he’d gone out of his way to do something for me.

While we ate, we talked more about family, about finding the right people, about having someone to lean on.

“For a long time, I was worried that my power would corrupt my family, somehow,” Erol said.

He glanced up at me to gauge my reaction. He was confiding something in me he didn’t tell a lot of people, I realized.

“Why?”

“They’re not Conjurites.”

I gasped, staring at Erol. “They’re Fae?”

He nodded. “The last thing I want is for this darkness to creep into their lives and taint it as it tainted mine. I don’t wish this on anyone.”

His speech was more proof that he was inherently good, that there was something worth saving about him.

There was a lot worth saving.

“Tell me about them,” I probed, and Erol told me about his sister and how close they’d been once, how she loved animals, and tending the farm was perfect for her. He told me about his mom and her embroidery, how she created wonderful quilts with so much color, the Conjurites traveled from near and far to buy them because of the bright hues that were a stark contrast to their drab world.

“They sound wonderful,” I said when Erol fell silent, a smile on his face after thinking about his family in such a warm way.

“They would like you, too,” he added.

“I’d love to meet them.”

“Would you?” Erol asked, his brows knitting together.

I nodded. “Will you receive them at the castle, soon?”

“I wasn’t going to. It’s...dangerous. It always was. Now that Falx is gone...I still fall back onto my reflexes, trying to protect people when the imminent threat is long gone.”

“I know what that’s like.” I knew all too well how the habit of surviving didn’t go away, even though it was clear it wasn’t necessary to keep fighting to stay alive anymore.

Erol nodded and pushed the last of his Orbin around on the plate. I watched as he withdrew and shut down from me.

I reached across the table and put my hand on his. He glanced up at me.

“I think it’s noble how you want to protect them. I’m sure they feel it, too.”

“I don’t know. Through their eyes, I walked away, chose a different life, and didn’t look back.”

I shook my head. I was convinced that Erol’s mother and sister understood he wanted to keep them safe from the darkness that penetrated everything else in Palgia. I would have done the same thing.

“You’re so kind to me,” Erol said in a low voice. “Even after everything I’ve done—”

“That’s in the past,” I cut him off. “You had no choice, you said so yourself. You have a choice now, and you’re not the same person.”

Erol shook his head, but he didn’t say anything. His emotions seemed close to the surface, like he struggled to keep it together.

I stood and walked around the small table to him, standing in front of him.

“You’re not a bad man, Erol.”

He looked up at me. His face was raw with emotion, his eyes deep and dark and churning.

“How can you say that?” he asked. “After everything I did...”

“You hate yourself for what you did, which means you’re inherently good. And I’ve *seen* the good in you. I’ve seen—”

I couldn’t keep talking. Erol wrapped his arm around me, pulled me onto his lap, and kissed me.



## EROL

**E**verything about Hazel made me want her. She was incredible and the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She was funny and smart, and she was kind and compassionate.

She was forgiving.

Somehow, the thing that made her even more attractive was the way she looked at the world, and not the way she looked, period.

When she told me that everything would be okay, because there was good in me, I couldn't hold back anymore.

I grabbed her and kissed her.

A part of me screamed at me for being so forward, for taking what I wanted. I expected her to push me away. I always expected that from her.

She never did.

She was surprised when I pulled her onto my lap, her delicate form light as a feather when her legs were cast over mine, but she melted against me and kissed me back.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and opened her mouth when I slid my tongue along her bottom lip. Kissing her was the first bit of pure bliss that I'd experienced in centuries, and I couldn't get enough of her.

My cock was rock hard in my pants, my body aching to have her beneath me. I wanted to drive my hips into her again

and again, claim her as mine.

She moaned softly while she kissed me, and the sound of her voice was an aphrodisiac on its own.

I lifted my hand, trailing it slowly over her torso, warning her of what was to come, in case she wanted to pull away. When I cupped her breast, she didn't stop me, only moaned again, and then arched her back, pushing herself into my hand.

I growled with need and lifted her. I carried her to one of the couches and sat down with her on my lap again. I let my hands roam her body, feeling her curves. Her chest rose and fell faster as her breathing became shallow and erratic. I kneaded and massaged her breasts through the delicate material of her dress, and she gasped and moaned louder as I did.

I kissed a line down her jaw and onto the soft skin of her neck. I licked and nibbled my way down to her collarbone before dropping kisses on her shoulder.

I slid my hand around her waist and found the zipper that kept her dress together. When I unzipped it, the gown came undone, falling away from her glorious breasts, and she was half-naked on my lap.

I stopped kissing her and stared at her chest. Her milky skin was blemish free, her breasts beautiful—they were perfect, with erect pink nipples, and her chest rose and fell harder and harder, still.

I cupped her breast in one hand and dipped my head to the other, sucking her nipple into my mouth. She cried out, running her hands through my short hair. I groaned when she scraped her nails lightly over my scalp. She writhed on my lap, moaning. I pulled her tighter against me, sucking harder on her nipple, and I gyrated my hips beneath her so she could feel how hard I was for her and how badly I wanted her.

When I moved my mouth to her other breast, swapping my hand and my mouth, she cried out and moaned in the same way as with the first, and the sounds of her pleasure were a



turn on. The scent of her arousal reached my nostrils, and I growled at the back of my throat with need.

I wasn't going to be able to hold back for long.

"Oh, Erol," she gasped. "I want you so badly."

Yeah? I would give her exactly what she wanted.

I tipped her backward and laid her on the couch cushions. I wanted to take my time, slowly working her toward it, so that by the time I got on top of her, she would be more than ready for me. Although, judging by the sounds of her arousal, she already was.

When she lay back, I pushed up the skirt of her dress, bunching the material around her waist. We would get rid of it later.

I ran my finger along her slit and groaned.

"You're so wet," I growled.

"You made me this way," she answered in a breathy voice. "Ah!"

She cried out when I pushed my finger into her tight entrance, confirming that she was, indeed, very wet and very ready for me.

While I slowly slid a finger in and out of her, I closed my mouth around her pussy. She gasped and moaned when I flicked my tongue over her clit, and I felt the waves of pleasure run over her body, her center contracting around my finger as she relished in the pleasure I poured into her.

I alternated between licking her clit and sucking on it. Judging by the sound of her breathing, she was getting closer and closer to her orgasm.

"That's it," I growled against her clit. "Come for me."

She screamed when my voice reverberated through her, and her body contracted, her core tight around my finger. She writhed and then arched her back and curled on the couch as ecstasy took over.

Her power grew in the room, as if she'd exploded into a show of light, and it was warm and inviting and strangely familiar.

My own power rose to meet it, automatically responding to the Luminescence. The darkness in me wanted to drive away the light.

I tried to push it down, but our power intertwined as it had before, twisted into a thick braid that was difficult to break just like that.

I let go of her, planting one more kiss in between her legs, before I reached for my pants and undid them. I pulled my cock free, hard and eager, and moved so that I hovered over Hazel.

"Erol," she whispered, her eyes glazed, her cheeks pink in the aftermath of her sexual bliss. "I haven't been with someone like this."

"What?" I asked, pausing.

"This is...my first time."

I blinked at her. "You're...a virgin?"

She nodded, pursing her lips together as if she was a little shy about it.

My body screamed at me to take her, to plunge my cock into her and ride her hard. I needed the release, I ached to be closer to her, I wanted her to be *mine*.

She was a virgin. A Fae. And I was a Conjurite. I couldn't do this to her. How could I be her first and bring so much darkness with me? What if I tainted her, ruined her forever?

I couldn't let my lust take over and take what I so desperately wanted without thinking about what it might mean.

"Is that okay?" she asked.

"It's more than okay," I said, but I pushed up my pants again. "Come, let's finish our supper. I still have dessert prepared, and it will be a shame to waste it."

Confusion and uncertainty flickered across her face. She sat up, tugging down her skirt, and pulled the bodice of her dress back into place. I helped her zip it up before I took her hand and helped her to her feet. I planted a chaste kiss on her lips. Her cheeks were still a bright pink, but the atmosphere between us had shifted.

I led her back to the table, and the servants brought out the decadent chocolate cake I'd had the chef make for the occasion.

We made small talk, polite and shallow. Hazel smiled and laughed graciously at my jokes, but the closeness we'd shared a moment ago was gone.

I ached for it, hating that it wasn't between us anymore, but it was better this way.

Hazel deserved better. She deserved the best.

I was far from it.



## HAZEL

“**H**ow was your night with Zita?” I asked my mom when we walked through the gardens I’d been working on.

Mom offered me a secretive smile. “It was good. We’re getting closer. I found an unexpected friend in her.”

“It seems like you found more in her than just a friend,” I pointed out.

She glanced at me, and I smiled.

“I’m happy for you, Mom. Whatever it is you and Zita will end up being, I just want you to be in a good space.”

Mom nodded and looked ahead. “I’m in a very good space.”

That was all I wanted for her.

“What about you?” she asked. “You don’t seem nearly as happy today as I thought you’d be.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know what’s going on between me and Erol. One moment, I think he likes me, and he wants to figure out what things can be between us—the power gets so strong, and there’s something there, I know there is. The next moment, he acts like he wants nothing to do with me. I don’t understand how it works.” I sighed. “You told me to follow my heart, but what do I do when my head gets in the way?”

“It’s a tough one. I’m sorry. Love and relationships are always difficult to navigate, whether you’re a teenager just coming into womanhood, or you’ve been around for half a millennium.”

She was right about that—it didn’t seem nearly as easy to figure things out with Erol as I’d thought it would be.

I didn’t understand why he’d pushed me away last night. The sexual tension between us had been intense, and I’d wanted him so badly. There had been no doubt that he’d wanted me, too. When he’d pushed me away, I’d wondered if it was because I’d told him I’d never been with a man before, but it couldn’t be about that. Our power had mixed together, creating something that couldn’t exist without things being just right between us. The magic wouldn’t respond the way it did when we were together if the union wasn’t right. Did Erol feel the same way about it?

What if it was right, but his Conjurite magic fought it, and he was just leading me on, playing games? It was the nature of Conjurite magic to be untrustworthy, to cause pain, to destroy.

“I don’t know how to keep seeing him as the person of light I see beneath all the darkness, and how to know if the darkness is too much. I’m terrified that it will override everything that’s good about him, and it will be tucked so far away, it won’t matter that it’s there. The way it used to be, before, when he kept us in the dungeon and treated us the way he did.”

I glanced at my mom after admitting my fear, willing her to give me an answer that would make me feel better.

“It’s good to guard your heart and not to jump into something without weighing all the facts. You’ve always had a good head on your shoulders, you’ve always looked at the world through a logical lens. Just remember, my darling, that Erol helped us escape. He may have held us captive, and he had a hand in all the terrible things that happened to us, but if the good wasn’t in him and the darkness had been too much to let it all out...he would never have done something as dangerous as letting us go free. The goodness might be hard to

find sometimes, but he did a good thing, then. He's capable of it now, too."

I hadn't thought about it that way. Erol had helped us escape, even though he'd been the king's right-hand man, the one doing the torturing, the one keeping us captive in dire conditions. He'd helped us so that Ellie could go back to Ren, and they could win the war against Palgia.

If Erol had been only evil, or if his goodness had been too weak to push through, that would never have happened. It had been the darkest of times for him, too.

"Thank you, Mom," I said finally, taking what she'd said about him to heart.

I could see Erol as a male with goodness in him—my judgement of character wouldn't be wrong.

That didn't mean that he didn't have a choice in the matter. I had to keep reminding myself that no matter how badly he felt about the things he'd done, he could still decide to give into the darkness. I still had to be sure that whatever happened between us, whether he pushed me away or drew me closer, it was his choice.

He could push the darkness away and choose to pursue the light, and we would be there to help him. The flipside was that he could also allow the darkness to take a hold of him, be in control, and then he would only toy with me without ever giving me an answer or a clear message about what he wanted.

I hated that I didn't know what it was that I saw when he pushed me away. I hated that I didn't know who to trust—the good man within, or the darkness that ruled him.





## EROL

I walked to the formal sitting room I'd set up for Hazel and Vanya to help the Conjurites. I wanted to see how they did it.

Since I'd been with Hazel that night after our supper, I'd thought long and hard about what it meant to give up the darkness. I couldn't break free from it without losing everything that mattered to me, but I wanted my people—soon to be Rainier's people completely—to be free. They deserved that, and if I was the only one that had to live in darkness...

It was a small price to pay for so many lives to be saved.

Hazel had told me that it took a long time to free the Conjurites from the darkness. When Ellie had mentioned it first, and Rainier had said he'd had trust in Vanya and Hazel to figure it out, I'd been skeptical. Ten people, compared to an entire kingdom, was child's play. It had sounded impossible then and still sounded like a tall order now.

The difference was that I wanted it, now more than ever. I'd spent time with Hazel, I'd seen the way she, Vanya, and Zita interacted with each other, and the light was attractive, magnetic. The light was home.

I wanted it for myself, so badly. Not only because it would give me a kingdom, but because when I saw Hazel talk about things the way she did, when I felt the magic she displayed, I yearned for that kind of warmth again.

This wasn't about me anymore. It was about a bigger picture, and they were here to fulfill that bigger picture.

When I stepped into the room, Vanya and Hazel looked up.

“Don't mind me,” I said softly. “I'm just here to watch.”

Hazel's eyes tracked me as I crossed the room and took a seat in a far corner where I would be out of the way.

Zita's eyes followed me, too, but where Hazel's eyes had warmth in them, Zita looked suspicious.

I didn't blame her. She was here to look after the two healers, and I was a Conjurite. My magic clashed directly with theirs. I just had to prove that I didn't mean any harm. I was only here to watch, to learn, so that I knew how I could help.

“You can send in the first group,” Vanya said.

“Group?” I asked when Zita disappeared.

Hazel nodded. “We're trying something new. We become exhausted so quickly, we want to try doing more at one time to see if we can cover more ground before we're too tired.”

She looked like she wanted to say more, but a group of Conjurites walked into the room, single file, and Vanya and Hazel turned their attention to them. They welcomed them with such warmth, it was hard to tell that they were against the Conjurite magic. They treated each and every one of the six people who walked in as if they were guests of honor, as if they were friends.

I watched as they offered seats to the group and started a casual conversation. They asked after their family members, their livelihood, finding out if they were happy and what the Conjurites truly wanted in life.

I watched my people begin to relax in the presence of the Fae. Healing Fae had a stigma around them in these parts—a lot of the Conjurites believed that the Fae were wholly against them, viewing them as abominations. I watched as the two healers wiped away that misconception and made the Conjurites feel at home.

“Let’s get to the reason you’re all here,” Hazel said gently. “We’re going to address the darkness directly, and we’re going to show you how to find your way back to the light. Ultimately, it’s your decision, we’re just here to guide you. It also means that it’s not only our power, but yours, too. If you decide, at any point, it’s not what you want, that’s okay. No one is forcing you to do anything you don’t want, and no one will be upset if you change your mind.”

The Conjurites all nodded, looking happy with what was said. I couldn’t take my eyes off Hazel and how beautiful and kind she was, how she treated each and every one of the Conjurites with compassion and respect.

It was a strange concept in a world where it was every man for himself. Out here, not being the first to kill and destroy meant you ran the risk of being killed or destroyed, and no one was willing to take that risk.

Except Hazel, who seemed to care more about others than she cared about herself. It made no sense, and it made her ridiculously attractive.

Vanya took over and said a couple of words, explaining the process, before she and Hazel took hands. They told the Conjurites to take hands, too, closing a circle between the eight of them, and Vanya and Hazel closed their eyes.

I was aware of their power immediately. It rose to the surface, and it burned hot, scalding on my skin. Vanya’s and Hazel’s expressions became ethereal, their skins shimmering and glowing as the power within them grew.

I became aware of the darkness when it started to crawl across the floor and push in through the windows. The light in the room dimmed more and more. My power became so strong, it wrestled with the light.

Hazel opened her eyes and frowned at me.

“What are you doing?” she asked softly.

“Nothing,” I answered.

It was true. I wasn’t in control of what was happening. My magic grew thicker still, until it pushed into all four corners of

the room. It reached into every Conjurite, found the darkness within them, and drew it to the surface. They'd moved closer to the light, but the darkness wrapped around their wrists and ankles and drew them back, dragging them away from the light they sought.

"Erol!" Hazel cried. "Stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything!" I snapped, but that wasn't entirely true. I was doing *something*. It wasn't by choice, but my magic let the Conjurite magic in each of the group flare up, and I yanked them away from Terra, away from the light they'd reached for. I grabbed them hard and pulled them back.

"You belong here!" I shouted.

They opened their eyes, and the whites of their eyes had turned black. The Conjurite magic was strong in the room now, and in the background, I heard Cyrene laugh.

She was doing this. She'd pulled them back, and she had used me to do it.

"Get out!" Zita demanded, stepping forward. She was in battle mode, ready to take me on, magically or physically.

I was ready for her. When she approached, I sank into battle stance. It was a reflex. The darkness had drowned out my rational mind, and my body acted on what it was trained to do.

When she lunged toward me, making the first move, I twisted out of her way so that she missed her blow. I knocked her off balance, and when she fell past me, I used her weight and momentum against her, slamming her into the floor.

My dark magic wrapped itself around her throat like two giant metaphysical hands and started to squeeze.

She coughed and spluttered, kicking and writhing on the floor, clawing at her neck to get rid of the hands that choked her. She couldn't—they weren't real hands, and her fingers slid through the darkness again and again.

"Erol, don't!" Hazel screamed, jumping up.

She wrapped two small hands around my enormous bicep and tugged and pulled, but I swatted her away like a fly. The darkness was in control, and a part of me—the Conjurite part—relished in what was happening.

The other part of me, the part that had only been along for the ride since the day I'd been forced to give up the light, watched in horror as I did exactly what I'd told myself I would never do again.

“Let her go!” a panicked Vanya pleaded, and she ran toward me. I felt her coming with all her Luminescent magic. She was powerful, but I was stronger than she was.

When she reached me, I didn't use magic to do anything to her—my power was too busy choking Zita, who started blacking out on the floor. I pushed Vanya aside as she came for me, and the power behind my movement was so strong, Vanya flew back. She hit a wall with a thud, crying out as the air was forced out of her lungs, and she sank to the ground.

“Erol!” Hazel shouted, and her voice pushed through the waves of power that blocked everyone out. It reached me when nothing else could, tugging me back to reality.

I saw what I was doing. I saw Zita, her body limp on the floor and her eyes rolling back in her skull. I saw Vanya, trembling on the carpet on the other side of the room. I saw the Conjurites, *my* people, terrified of me, huddling together.

Lastly, I saw Hazel's face and the terror and pure sorrow in her eyes.

That snapped me out of it, and I came back to the present. The darkness retreated, and I looked around at the destruction I'd caused. The anger was replaced by remorse immediately, and I felt terrible.

“Fuck,” I breathed. I ran both hands over my head. “What did I do?”

Hazel's eyes filled with tears. Seeing her cry—knowing it was my fault—broke me.

I pushed past her, past the Conjurite who huddled together like sheep, and left the room, leaving the chaos I'd created

behind for someone else to clean up, like the asshole I clearly was.

I ran through the castle, the pain of my mistakes on my heels. Cyrene was right next to me as I ran, whispering in my ear, in my *head*.

*This is who you are. You can never get away from it. Destruction, pain, fear; it's all you're capable of. You think you have good in you, but there's only a void where the good used to be. You're better off like this, with the power you wield. You don't deserve anything else.*

By the time I reached my room, my breath scraped in and out of my lungs, and I felt sick to my stomach. I ran to the bathroom and threw up, retching into the toilet until my stomach was empty. I gagged a couple of times more before I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and stumbled back into my room.

I had to get out of here. I had to get away—far away from anyone and everything so I didn't hurt another soul. I'd nearly killed Zita, and I was too scared to know what I'd done to Vanya. If I'd caused any kind of damage to Hazel's mother...I would never be able to forgive myself.

Hazel had become so much to me in such a short time, and to be the thing she hated was too much to bear.

I packed a bag as fast as I could, not bothering to ask for a servant's aid. When the bag was ready, I ran through the castle again. I ignored guards and servants who wanted to help, who fell to their knees with pure fear when I hurried by. Word about these things spread fast, and by now, they probably already knew what a monster I was.

I'd only fooled myself into thinking I'd changed. I hadn't changed at all—I was still Falx's right-hand man, the one who killed and destroyed on his behalf.

No, not Falx's. Cyrene's.

I was Cyrene's bitch.

The hover bike was where I'd left it in the shed outside the castle walls, and I kicked it until it shuddered to life. I swung

my bag onto my back, got on the bike, and opened throttle. The bike took me away from the castle and the hell I'd created there and took me toward the jagged mountains to the north.

I had a cabin up there, hidden away from everything and everyone. Not even Falx had known about it—it had been my sanctuary where I'd had a chance to escape to a handful of times during my tenure at the castle under Falx's rule.

Now, I couldn't think of a better place to lock myself away. I had to isolate myself from the rest of the world before I destroyed everything that was good.





## HAZEL

“**M**om!” I cried out. I wanted to run to her, but Zita lay limp on the floor, and I didn’t want to leave her side.

She looked pale, her lips were blue, and she had bruises like a necklace around her throat although Erol hadn’t once physically touched her.

My heart broke as tears rolled over my cheeks. What had he done?

Mom groaned on the floor across the room, and she pushed herself up. She pressed her hand against her head, her face twisted in pain.

“Mom, oh, thank the Goddess you’re okay! I-I don’t know if Zita is alive.”

Mom blinked at me, orienting herself before she crawled across the floor to me.

“Oh, no, no,” she muttered and cradled Zita’s head in her lap. “My darling, no.” She hesitated before she touched Zita’s throat, her face crumpling at the sight of the bruises, before she pressed her fingers carefully against her skin.

“She’s alive,” she breathed.

I let out the breath I’d been holding. As long as she was alive, she could be healed.

Mom put one hand on Zita’s chest, one on her head, and closed her eyes. I felt the magic pulse around us, tapping into

the light that came from Terra. I watched as my mom used the same power she used to save the Conjurites to draw Zita back to the world of the living, away from the darkness Erol had dunked her into.

Zita's eyes fluttered open. Her body stiffened, and she tried to get up.

"No, don't move," Mom said in a gentle voice. "The danger is gone, let me complete the healing."

Zita's eyes were wide, still filled with panic and rage. She was in fight mode and wanted to deal with the threat. But Erol had fled, leaving the destruction behind.

My heart ached just thinking about what he'd done.

When Zita finally sat up, her face had color again, her cheeks rosy, and the bruises around her neck were almost gone.

Mom threw her arms around her neck. "I thought I lost you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Zita said, wrapping her arms around my mom and holding onto her tightly.

I became aware of the Conjurite group, still in the room, watching us with large, fear-filled eyes.

"It's okay," I said, standing. They had to be guided through this, they had been rattled to their core just as we had. "I'm so sorry this happened. The journey through the dark magic isn't always an easy one."

The Conjurites exchanged glances.

"If you're ready to leave, we'll understand," I said.

It was six people we might lose, people who might never want to turn to the light. We had to deal with that loss and move forward. We'd known from the start there would be roadblocks.

"We don't want to go," one of them said.

"What?"

“We don’t want the dark power anymore. We’re tired of the darkness being in charge. We don’t want to lose control, to hurt people when it isn’t our choice. If we can go through the process, even if it means our death, we’d rather stay.”

I looked over my shoulder at my mom. She locked eyes with me, as surprised as I was, and nodded.

We would try to help them—we would do what we could.

After I made sure Zita was okay, and Mom was still strong enough to do something after she’d healed her, we took our positions. I tried to push Erol and what he’d done out of my mind. I couldn’t think about that now. Zita was alive, my mom hadn’t been too badly hurt, and we had lives to save.



THREE DAYS PASSED WITHOUT ANY SIGN OF EROL. NO ONE knew where he was, or when he would be back. Only the guards had seen him leave.

I worried about him. After the initial shock had worn off and I’d processed what had happened, I’d realized none of it had been him. Erol hadn’t tried to stop the process on purpose. His power had taken over, Cyrene had used him to stop us from saving the Conjurites.

“I have to find him,” I told my mom and Zita at the breakfast table that morning. “I can’t just let him think he’s a monster. It’s not right.”

“He *is* a monster,” Zita replied before taking a large bite of golden toast.

I shook my head. “I refuse to believe it. He has good in him, Zita.”

“He hurt us,” Zita clapped back.

“His power hurt you,” I countered. “We can’t pick and choose what we want to believe about the Conjurites. We’re here to help them, and that includes Erol.”

Zita scowled, but my mom put her hand on hers.

“She’s right,” she said softly. Zita looked into my mom’s eyes, and the hardness bled out of her face. “We can’t decide that some of the Conjurites are worth saving, and some aren’t. They’re all prisoners of the darkness. Terra hasn’t turned away from any of us, no matter what we’ve done. We can’t do that to Erol.”

Gratitude for my mom being on my side flooded me.

Zita still looked unhappy, but she nodded.

“You’re right,” she relented. “We’re here to help, and if anyone needs help, it’s Erol.”

“I have to find him,” I repeated.

“I just wish we knew where to start,” my mom said.

I thought the same. I didn’t know Erol that well, and I didn’t know Palgia that well, either. I wouldn’t know where to begin.

After the breakfast plates had been cleared, and Mom and Zita had gone for a walk before we summoned another group of Conjurites, I walked to my room.

“My lady,” an older servant said, her head bowed. She shuffled closer, hands tightly clasped in front of her. “If you’re looking for the Regent, I know where he might be.”

“What?” I went to her. “Tell me, please.”

She looked up at me with watery eyes from a wrinkled face.

“He has a cabin in the mountains. He visited it a few times during Falx’s reign. If he wants to isolate himself, that’s where you will find him. It’s a good place to start.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

She shrugged. “The servants see all and know all. I’ve been here at the castle since long before Erol came to join us, and I’ve seen him grow. He’s done a lot, my lady, but I pity him. Here.” She handed me a folded map.

I unfolded it, and a red cross marked a spot in the mountains.

“It’s an old map, the new structures aren’t on it, but you only need a location.”

I reached for her and touched her shoulder. “Thank you. I want to help him. He deserves freedom as much as the rest of us.”

The servant bowed her head and shuffled away.

I ran to my room and packed a small bag before I summoned a guard to prepare a hovercraft. They hesitated until I reminded them that I was a royal guest and working with Rainier, the King of Jasfin. It spurred them on, and within the hour, we were ready to leave.

The flight to the mountains was a short one. I asked the pilot to drop me a short distance away from the point on the map. I would summon him if I needed to go somewhere else—if Erol wasn’t there. I didn’t want to arrive with a large entourage and scare him away. We needed to talk alone.

After I stood with my feet firmly on the frozen ground high up in the mountains, the hovercraft lifted into the air and disappeared. I wrapped my fingers around the device in my pocket. I could call the pilot back at any moment and be saved if I was stranded alone.

I flashed on when we’d traveled through the Uprain mountains on foot, when we’d fled from Falx and his armies, when we’d finally found freedom again. It felt like a lifetime ago, now, yet it was so similar. It was Erol who needed to find freedom this time, not me.

I followed a narrow path, winding its way up the mountain. It led through rocks, gnarled trees, and over a thin stream. At the stream, I kneeled and drank deeply. The water was icy cold and fresh, and it tasted like heaven.

I walked on a few more hours. Just as I thought I would never find any cabin, I was in the wrong place, looking for something that wasn’t there, a structure appeared around the next bend. The cabin was small, but it was in good condition, well looked after, and smoke curled from the chimney.

Before I reached the door, it swung open, and Erol stood before me. His chest heaved as he breathed hard, and his eyes were filled with panic and rage.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded

“I came for you.”

“What could you possibly want from me? Leave. Now.”

I shook my head. “You’re not going to push me away again.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave before I hurt you, too,” he snapped.

“You won’t hurt me, I said, taking a step closer to him.

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.” I took another step closer. “You didn’t do what you did on purpose. You didn’t sit in on our sessions to stop us. You weren’t in control, and I don’t blame you for what happened.”

Confusion flickered over his face before his expression hardened again. “Well, you should,” he bit out through gritted teeth. “I’m a monster, Hazel. I hurt people, I’m cruel, I’m merciless. It’s not just what I do, it’s who I am. I’m done trying to be better, I’m done holding onto the hope that something will change. The sooner you accept that this is who I am, the better. Save the rest, but leave me alone.”

I shook my head and took another step toward him so that I was almost right up against him.

“Everyone is worth saving,” I said. “You have good in you. I’ve seen it.”

Erol growled at me. “Stop saying that!”

“I’ll stop saying it when it becomes true. I know who you are, Erol. I know who you are *not*. You are good and kind and gentle, and the destruction you cause is not your fault.”

Erol’s face started to crumple. I was breaking through to him.

“Stop it,” he growled, but his voice had more emotion now. “I don’t know why you’re here.”

“I’m here for you,” I said. “I’ll stand by your side, no matter what comes. We can face this danger together.”

Erol frowned.

I reached up to him and cupped his cheek. A beard had covered his face in the few days he’d been alone up here, and it made him look rough and rugged. He leaned into my hand, putting his over mine.

“Why?” he asked, and his voice was low and brittle.

“Because I’m in love with you,” I said simply.

His eyes snapped to mine, and I saw the confusion in them before they lit up.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

He stared at me, and for a moment, I worried that I’d overstepped by confessing my feelings to him. I wasn’t sure what emotion I saw on his face, and we were caught in a moment where time stood still.

Until he grabbed me and kissed me.

The kiss was urgent right away, and I poured everything I couldn’t put to words into it. He had no idea how special he’d become to me and how serious I was about him. I knew he wasn’t perfect—no one was—but the darkness in him didn’t rule him. He could still change things if that was what he wanted.

He pulled me into the cabin, our lips still locked, and he kicked the wooden door shut.

I was vaguely aware of an open-plan room with a kitchen corner, large couches that faced a beautiful view of the mountains, and fur rugs and throws over everything.

Erol and I tried to move in a direction, but we stumbled and tripped over each other’s feet. He lifted me, growling at the back of his throat, and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

Erol was a big man. His thick arms held me up with ease, and he carried me to the only bedroom in the small cabin. In the room, he pushed me up against the wooden wall, gyrating his hips so his cock grinded against my sex.

Heat erupted at my core, and I moaned into his mouth. I wanted him. I'd never been with anyone, and I'd never wanted to be with anyone the way I wanted to be with him.

Erol broke the kiss to move his head to my neck.

"You can't leave me hanging again," I gasped as he kissed and nibbled the skin of my neck.

"What?" he asked.

"I know I haven't been with anyone, but I want to be with you. Don't stop again."

Erol looked at me, his eyes nearly black with need. "It wasn't because of you I stopped before. It was because of me. My darkness—"

"I'm not afraid of you."

Hunger crossed his features, and his eyes were filled with lust.

He curled his lips away from his teeth, but I grabbed him and kissed him again. He breathed hard through his nose as our tongues intertwined, swirling around each other.

His hand slid to my breast, and he roughly kneaded me. I cried out as he touched me, my nipples erect, pushing against my bra.

Erol pushed his hand under my shirt, and his fingers found the cup of my bra. He flipped it down and pinched my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. I moaned when he rolled it between his fingers, tugging just hard enough to make me cry out in pleasure.

He pushed me against the wall, his hips holding me in place, and shoved my shirt up. I helped him, pulling it over my head, and dropped it on the floor. Erol's hands slid around my back, and I arched into him, allowing him space to undo the bra. He pulled it off and tossed it to the side.



When he looked at my breasts, he growled again.

“You’re incredible,” he said, staring at me.

I blushed, but Erol didn’t waste any time. He dipped his head, hands on my ribs to lift me a little more, and he sucked my nipple into his mouth. I gasped and moaned as he sucked on one and then the other.

My body was on fire, and need pooled between my legs, soaking into my panties.

Erol carefully lowered me to the floor and planted me on wobbly legs. He kneeled before me and kissed a line of fire down my stomach, both hands on my ribs. I felt small in his grasp.

He reached the waistband of my pants and snarled before he ripped the button off, not bothering to undo it. He yanked my pants down, and I gasped. I lifted my legs one by one as he pulled off my pants, and I was naked.

He glanced up at me before he lifted me again, and I put both my legs on his shoulders. They were powerful and broad, and he pinned me against the wall again. He dropped a kiss onto my clit, and my breath caught in my throat.

Erol glanced up at me with a lustful grin, and his fingers found my entrance. I cried out when he pushed two fingers into me, closing his mouth over my center at the same time. I trembled and shivered against him as he sucked on my clit and pumped his fingers into me.

An orgasm built inside of me, the sexual release I craved creeping closer and closer. I ran my hands through Erol’s short hair, and he groaned against me. His deep voice reverberated through my body, and his onslaughts were incredible.

I whimpered, my moans becoming louder and louder as he pushed me closer and closer to the edge.

When I came undone, I cried out, and intense pleasure washed through my body. I gripped Erol’s head, pulling him against my center, and the orgasm rolled through me like waves. I tipped my head back against the wood behind me and opened my mouth in a silent scream of pure bliss.

My body clamped down on Erol's fingers, and he stilled inside of me as I bucked my hips, riding his hand and his face while the orgasm pulsed through me.

When I finally began coming down from my sexual high, Erol helped me to the ground. I put jelly legs down one after the other and struggled to keep my balance. I leaned against the wall, panting.

Erol stood and kissed me again. I tasted myself on his lips. He slid his tongue into my mouth, the kiss sensual and slow.

He wrapped his arm around me and spun me around, leading me toward the bed. We collapsed onto the mattress, his thick fur blanket soft underneath me.

Erol reached behind his neck and pulled the shirt he wore over his head. I stared at his body—he was shaped like a god, his muscles bulging, chiseled and defined, and his sheer size astounding.

He undid his pants and kicked them off, too. His biceps bulged, and his chest flexed, and when he was naked, his cock stood upright, eager to have me. His size was impressive, and I looked into Erol's eyes.

He crawled on the mattress, the bed groaning under his weight.

“We'll go slow,” he promised.

He positioned himself between my legs, and my thighs fell open for him with a mind of their own.

Erol lowered his body onto mine, lying on top of me. He held himself up enough not to crush me, and his body was hot, his skin branding me where he touched me.

He looked me in the eyes. His eyes were dark and drowning deep, filled with affection and lust in equal measure.

He cupped my cheek. It was hard to imagine that such a big hand and rough fingers could be so gentle with me. He traced my eyebrow with the tip of his finger, sliding toward my cheekbone, moving down my face toward my lips before he kissed me again.

The kiss was so gentle, filled with warmth and love, and I lost myself in it.

I could lie here and kiss him forever. In this moment, nothing else mattered—not why we'd come to Palgia, not what we were doing to help the Conjurites.

I was convinced that he was the sole reason I'd come. It had been set up that way, I was sure of it. Terra knew what she was doing. Erol was the man for me, the mate I'd been yearning for.

Erol's hand slid onto my breast, and he slowly massaged it, his strong fingers touching me with care.

It encouraged the need to have him inside me, until I wanted him so badly, I felt like I would spontaneously combust.

"I want you inside of me," I whispered.

Erol looked at me, and his face filled with the same primal need that echoed through my body. Worry crossed his features.

"I don't want to taint you," he said. "This darkness...I'm scared it will spill into you, and it will ruin what you are."

I touched his cheek. "It won't."

"How do you know?"

"Because this...it feels right. Nothing that feels this right can be a bad thing."

Erol hesitated and then kissed me once more.

His tongue slid into my mouth, and he moved his hips so that the tip of his cock pressed against my entrance. I trembled in anticipation and held my breath. Erol moved slowly, pushing his thickness into me. My body gave way as he slid deeper and deeper inside me.

I cried out when a sharp pinch accompanied his entry.

He froze.

"Don't stop," I gasped.

The pleasure that came with the movement overrode the pain a hundredfold.

Erol pushed himself deeper and deeper until he was buried inside me.

I breathed hard, adjusting to the size of him. He didn't move, allowing me the time.

When I lifted my head a little and kissed him, he made a growling noise at the back of his throat and moved his hips.

The sensation was incredible, the friction spreading the same kind of pleasure through my body as he'd given me with his mouth and fingers.

Erol listened to my moans, my breathing, and bucked his hips faster. He pounded into me, and I cried out as his cock rammed into me again and again. The sex was incredible—I'd wondered about it often, but I'd never have been able to imagine it would be quite like this.

In no time, Erol built another orgasm inside me. The feel of his cock sliding in and out reduced me to a trembling, gasping mess, and Erol pumped faster and faster, still.

The pleasure came to a point, and when it erupted and flowed through me, I screeched and gripped Erol's thick shoulders. He grunted through clenched teeth, pausing his onslaught as I let the waves of pleasure roll through me, taking me away to another plane.

It was incredible, and my power surged to the surface.

When I came down from the orgasm, Erol planted a kiss on my lips. He moved back and forth, pumping his hips in and out of me, and I moaned and gasped as he picked up his pace again.

He grunted and groaned, clenching his jaw as he rode me, and I lay on the bed, letting him have his way. My breasts jiggled with the movement, and the sounds of our sex filled the room. My own mewls intertwined with his grunts and groans, accompanied by the slap of our hips as he pumped into me.

His strokes shortened, kicking into a new gear. His brows knitted together, and he pulled his lips back in concentration.

Another orgasm crept up on me. The feel of him ramming into me at an unfathomable speed brought back the same sexual high, and I wanted more of it.

Pleasure riddled his face, and Erol thrust himself into me as far as he could. I cried out when he buried himself inside of me, and his cock pulsed and jerked as he released. It couldn't be anything else.

My orgasm ripped through me at the same time, and we were right there, together. Erol dropped his head into my neck, breathing hard into my ear, and I gasped and moaned into his before the sheer force of the orgasm took my breath away completely.

Along with my release, my power surged to the surface again, and this time, it filled the room.

Erol's power rose to meet it. It was laced with darkness, but it wasn't Conjurite. It was Luminescent—the goodness I'd seen in him all along showing itself as if it was done hiding.

Erol snapped his head up, and his eyes widened as they locked on mine. I felt his emotions, warring and confused. He knew he was a Conjurite, but this surge of magic that came from him was different, unexpected.

I touched his cheek, and we were tangled together, not only physically but magically, too.

A bond grew between us, forged by our closeness, our pleasure.

Erol's emotions passed to me and mine to him, and we sensed each other. We weren't two people anymore, but one.

Finally, the orgasms faded, and Erol collapsed on top of me. He rolled off almost immediately so he wouldn't crush me.

We lay side by side on the bed, breathing hard. Our skins were wet with sweat, and my body felt like it was on fire. I

still reeled in the aftermath of our sex and of the bond that had been forged between us.

“I don’t know what that was,” Erol admitted.

“It’s a mate bond,” I said softly.

“I know.” He cleared his throat. “I mean, I don’t know how it’s possible.”

“We’re meant to be together,” I said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Erol nodded. We both knew it wasn’t simple at all, but I didn’t know how to put any of it to words. Erol had the light inside of him, even if it was far, far away. He was my mate, and we would find that light together and bring him home.

Erol took my hand and pressed my knuckles to his lips. “I didn’t say it earlier, but...I’m in love with you, too.”

My cheeks burned bright red, and a smile spread across my face. “Too late to tell me now that you don’t feel the same.”

Erol laughed, and his laughter was genuine, coming from his belly.

He pulled me tightly against him, and in his arms, I felt safe.

In his arms, I was home.



## EROL

**W**hat had I done to deserve a woman like Hazel by my side?

When I'd come here, I'd believed I was beyond saving—after what I'd done to Zita and Vanya, after how I'd terrified those poor Conjurites.

“Technically, what you did was a good thing,” Hazel said.

We lay in bed together, naked. The sheets tangled around our legs, but Hazel didn't make a motion to cover herself up, and I loved seeing her nude in all her glorious perfection.

I would never get tired of staring at her.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “How can you say what I did was good?” It was a miracle the damage I'd done had been so minimal, and it was even more of a miracle that Hazel had forgiven me at all.

I'd always been in awe of her good nature and kind heart.

“If it wasn't for your outburst and the fear you instilled in every single one of those Conjurites, they wouldn't have been as eager to get rid of the darkness as they were. They'd told their friends and family, and we have a lot more people who want to be helped now. You helped them without knowing it.”

I shook my head. “I didn't help them; I terrified them. We're just lucky it turned out right, after all.”

Hazel didn't answer me, but she didn't argue with me, either.



“It’s great that we have so many who want to change their lives,” she said instead. “We still don’t know how to do it faster, so that it’s worth our while. It still takes so much out of my mom, and I don’t know how to change that.”

“You’ll figure something out,” I said.

“You didn’t say ‘we,’” she pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s because I’m no help at all. In fact, the only way I can help is by staying far, far away from it all.”

Hazel shook her head. “You can’t hide out here in this cabin forever.”

“I can give it my best shot,” I said.

She smiled at me, but her face became serious again.

“You can’t live in fear of yourself.” She cupped my cheek and ran her fingers through the beard I’d grown over the last few days.

“That’s how Conjurite magic works,” I said with a sigh. “If I fear myself, at least I can deal with that. It’s fearing for everyone else that kills me.”

“You know you don’t have to fear for others,” she said.

I glanced sidelong at her, wondering how much I could say. I could tell her anything, I knew. Hazel wouldn’t hurt me. She didn’t have a bad bone in her body. She’d come all the way over here to find me, to tell me she was in love with me.

To bring me back.

“I’ve had to fear for others my whole life,” I said. “I didn’t turn away from the light because I wanted the dark power. I did it to save my family.”

Hazel frowned, so I told her the whole story—how Falx and Lavinia had come to me because of my power and forced me to give up the light, or they would hurt my mom and my sister. When I finished telling her the story, Hazel’s eyes were wide and filled with sympathy and pain.

“I can’t believe you had to go through that,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged and tucked one arm under my head, looking up at the ceiling.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s my burden to bear. Don’t we all have parts of our past that we keep to ourselves?”

“Not like that, Erol.”

I glanced at her but then looked up at the ceiling again.

Through the bond we’d forged, I felt Hazel’s sadness at what I’d been through. It was heartwarming that she cared so much, but it would only drag her under if she cared that much about something she couldn’t change.

I opened my mouth to say as much, but she spoke first.

“Bring them to the castle,” she said.

“What?”

“Your mother and sister. Bring them to stay at the castle.” She pushed herself up on one elbow, her hair falling over her shoulder and arm. “I’m serious, let them live with us. We’ll go through the steps with you so you can give up the darkness and turn back to the light, and while we’re doing that, we can look after them with our magic. Zita will look after them physically and magically, and we can make sure that they’re safe.”

I stared at her before I shook my head.

“You have no idea how powerful Cyrene is and what lengths she’ll go to in order to get what she wants.”

“She doesn’t have an idea what *we’re* capable of, and what *we* will do to get what we want—what’s right.” The determination on her face was beautiful, and how much she cared was moving.

I wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. She was so amazing, looking past all the darkness and the bad inside me, seeing something that I didn’t even know was still there. Now she wanted to look after my family, too.

It only made me want to get rid of this darkness that much more—Hazel deserved a worthy Fae as a mate, and I wanted

to be that worthy Fae. I was tired of living in darkness, and if there was a way to save my family, I would do it.

“Okay,” I said.

Hazel smiled, excited. “Really?”

I nodded and grinned at her. “Really. I’m so ready to be done with this.”

Hazel grabbed me and kissed me hard on the mouth before she snuggled against me, her head on my chest. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and sighed contentedly. It looked like, against all odds, things could get better after all. Somehow, despite being so far removed from the light, Terra had remembered me, and she wanted to bring me home.

I was ready to go.

Just before my eyes fluttered shut, Cyrene appeared at the foot of the bed. She watched me, a smug expression on her face.

The happiness twisted into fear. What was she so smug about? She was about to lose me and the family she’d threatened. When it was all over and done with, there was nothing she could do.

For a moment, I considered that if I took Hazel as my mate, that would make her family, too. And if Cyrene threatened to kill my family once I turned back to the light...

Would letting Hazel help me do the opposite of what I wanted? Would it put her in danger rather than saving everyone?

Fear gripped my gut and twisted, hard. I wanted to jerk up, push Hazel away, tell her to get out of my life for good.

I couldn’t be the reason she died.

*No, Cyrene is just playing games, I told myself. She’s putting stuff in my head so I’m too scared to try. Everything will be okay. Soon, this will be all over.*

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Everything was going to be okay.

*Will it?* Cyrene asked, her voice in my head, before she disappeared completely.



## HAZEL

“**E**verything is okay, Mom,” I said, talking to her over the holo-device the pilot had given me. Mom’s face hovered above the device in a clear picture. I sat on a rock in the morning sun, wrapped in a thick fur coat Erol had offered me. “More than okay,” I added with a smile.

“How long will you still be away?” Mom asked.

“As long as you can spare me. I think it’s a good idea to just be here with him a few days, away from everything.”

“You can stay a while longer,” she confirmed. “We’re managing okay over here. We’re not helping nearly as many Conjurites—I’m much better when we’re together—but I understand that you need time.”

I nodded, grateful for my mom’s understanding. It was important to take care of Erol, and the truth was, I wanted more time alone with him. Not only to figure out how we could move forward, but to get to know each other and spend time alone, together.

After I ended the call, I walked back into the cabin. Erol was out hunting, and he wouldn’t be back immediately. I took the time to clear up the cabin, putting things away, sweeping, and washing the few dishes that we’d accumulated over the past few days.

It felt good to do something with my hands. I’d lived in the palace in Jasfin for a almost a year, where servants had done

everything for us, and although it was a luxury I'd become accustomed to, it felt useful doing something like this again.

When Erol arrived, he carried a large, feathered bird under one arm. I didn't recognize it—the animals in Palgia were very different from those in Jasfin or Tholand, where I'd grown up.

"That's a big bird," I said when Erol slammed it down on the kitchen counter.

"It should last us a few days," he said with a nod.

I filled a kettle and put it on the gas burner to boil water for something to drink.

"Do you think we'll be here that much longer?" I asked. I glanced up at him.

Erol folded his thick arms over his broad chest and leaned against the counter—it was dwarfed by his size. In that stance, he looked like a sullen stack of muscles.

"I don't know if I'm ready to go back yet," he mumbled. "The darkness hasn't tried to control me since I left the castle. What if, when I go back, it starts to control me again?"

"You can't stay away forever. I know what happened was terrible, but I'm not the only one who knows you weren't in control, you know. We all want to help. If we set the plan into motion, and we get started on getting rid of the Conjurite magic... The sooner it's over, the better it will be. For everybody, but especially for you."

Erol grunted, but he nodded. "You're right. I'm just not looking forward to the process. Cyrene is going to fight us on it."

I hesitated, something pressing on me. "I know it won't be easy. In the process of helping the people after you left...we lost another one."

Erol's eyes widened. "What?"

"One of them didn't make it. The darkness was too much, and...she died."

His face changed. For a moment, smugness flickered across it.

“So, you’re failing.”

“We’re not failing. It’s two out of a lot more than ten, by now. The percentage is lower.”

Erol pursed his lips together. I hated this part of him that showed through, the darkness that relished in pain. It was the darkness I hated, not Erol. He was a wonderful man under all of that.

Was I an idiot to fall for the man beneath, when all the power changed who he was? Like Zita had said, he had been my captor, a Conjurite ruler, someone who’d done terrible things out of will. Then again, it hadn’t been free will, and no matter how many times I told myself maybe I was better off without him, I just couldn’t stop seeing the man beneath—the man who deserved to be saved.

“We’ll figure it out,” I said. “We knew it was a risk.”

“It’s a hell of an uphill battle you chose,” Erol said. “You might not win this war.”

“Nothing will stop us from trying,” I replied, determined. “We didn’t come here because we thought it would be easy.”

Erol ran his fingers over the dead bird, deep in thought. He fought something that flipped back and forth between evil and goodness. Sometimes, pure evil took over, and the glint in his eyes terrified me. I saw more and more of him, but that darkness in him wasn’t gone—far from it.

He still deserved to be saved. Everyone deserved it, no matter how terrible the things they’d done were. Everyone deserved to live in the light, to be forgiven, to have a second chance.

I took a deep breath and focused on that.

“Let’s go back,” I offered. “Bring the bird with you, we can give it to the kitchen for a feast tonight. We’ll invite your mother and sister to stay at the castle—they can feast with us—and then we’ll do what needs to be done.”



Erol looked reluctant, but he knew as well as I did that there was no other way to do this. We couldn't go around it—going through it was our only option.

I loved being here in the mountains alone with him. In an ideal world, we could hide out here and just be together, the two of us, forever.

One day, after this was all over, we would come back, and we would rejoice in our victory.

Erol finally agreed and walked into the bedroom to pack. I followed him in, and we started getting our things together.

We rode back on the hover bike Erol had used to get here. I sat behind him, my arms wrapped around his torso, and I pressed myself tightly against him as we sped through the countryside.

When we arrived back at the castle, Erol put the bike away, and we walked in through the front doors together—he was the Regent, and I was with him. We had nothing to hide, and he had nothing to fear.

He held my hand but squeezed it tighter when we walked into the living room, where my mom, Zita, and a few warriors were gathered.

“You're back!” Mom breathed, jumping up to greet us. She hugged me, holding me close. “I missed you.” She turned to Erol. “Welcome home.”

“I'm sorry for what happened,” Erol blurted out.

Mom smiled. “All is forgiven. We won't think of it again. Now, Hazel tells me we're expecting guests?”

I glanced at Zita, who joined my mom. When Erol nodded and looked at her, she held out her hand to shake his—she'd forgiven him, too. It took a big person to do that, but Zita had always been just and fair, and we'd all been through hell and back together, more than once.

We could do it again.

“I sent word to my mother and sister,” Erol confirmed. “They'll arrive before tonight.”

“I can’t wait to meet them,” I said with a smile.

“We’ll take good care of them,” Mom promised Erol.

“Do you think you can? This is much bigger than anything we’ve had to face before—lives hang in the balance, and if we fail...” He let his voice trail off before his emotion showed through. Through our bond, I felt his uncertainty, the worry that he would lose his family. What if everything backfired, and instead of saving them, it blew up in our faces?

I sent him good thoughts through our bond, hope and calm. I wanted him to trust me. I had faith in my mom, and in Terra. We could do this, and we were all on Erol’s side.

He glanced at me, and his expression was a mixture of panic and hope. At least, hope was there, too.

Erol’s family arrived not long after. We were still gathered in the living room when a servant announced them, and a warrior brought them in.

One of the women ran to Erol and threw her arms around him.

“Oh, little brother, it’s a treat to see you again so soon!”

Erol hugged her and grinned.

“You thought you were rid of me for a while, eh, Aggie?”

She laughed and turned to me.

“I’m Agatha,” she said. Her long brown hair had been braided, and her hazel eyes were warm. I held out my hand, but she pulled me into a hug instead. “My brother chose wisely.”

I gasped. “You know we’re together? How?”

“I have a bond with him, too. A sibling bond isn’t nearly as intense as a mate bond, but I can sense your connection to him. You’re beautiful, and you’re filled with light.” She took both my hands in hers. “He needs that. Thank you for taking care of him.”

I didn’t know what to say, but Erol came to us with an older woman who looked so much like him, there was no

mistaking who she was.

“This is Marilla, my mother,” Erol said.

Marilla stepped forward. “Hazel,” she breathed. “I’m so glad to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine,” I said. When I held out my hand once again, Marilla hugged me just as Agatha had.

I didn’t know what I’d expected, but Erol’s family was nothing like it. They were warm and bright and happy, smiling easily, and they were so positive. When Erol had told me they were Luminescent, it had been a surprise, but seeing them now, I could see where the spark of light, the goodness in Erol, had come from.

We all sat down, and the servants brought us hot drinks made of cocoa beans and cream, with cinnamon, cloves, and an almost citrus aftertaste.

“I’m going to take the recipe for this back to Jasfin,” I said after taking a few sips. “I don’t think I’ll drink anything else ever again.”

Erol chuckled. “It’s addictive. I only have it on special occasions, or I wouldn’t ever drink water again.”

“He’s always loved it,” Agatha said. “I remember making pots and pots full when he was in the house.”

She and Marilla laughed, and Erol smiled, but I could sense his unease through our bond. He didn’t like looking back at the past, thinking about what he’d lost.

We would give it back to him. We just had to break through the darkness to bring him home. It wasn’t a small feat; I was aware of that. From what Erol had told me, and the bit I’d felt with the other Conjurites, Cyrene wasn’t happy about letting the Conjurites go, letting the people escape the darkness. Erol was the farthest gone.

Cyrene was no match to the light, to the goodness and the magic Terra had bestowed upon us, and even though I worried that the journey would be a tough one, I doubted we would fail.

We hadn't come here to fail, and I wasn't leaving Erol behind. Not now that I knew how I felt about him and how he felt about me. Not now that our bond had been forged and we were connected, bound to each other as mates. I wouldn't leave my mate to suffer alone in the darkness while I continued living in the light.



## EROL

I'd always had fitful nights until Hazel had come to me in the cabin. Since she'd slept next to me, her light had driven away the darkness enough that I'd been able to sleep. I felt more rested than I had in a long, long time.

After my family had been put up in their own rooms and taken care of, I'd worried that Hazel would go back to her room, and I would have to sleep alone again. She hadn't. Without talking about it, without asking, she'd come to my quarters with me, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

It had felt like we'd always done this. Being with Hazel felt seamless and easy, and she fit into my life as if she'd been made for it.

When I woke up the next morning after another good night, Hazel lay next to me.

"You're awake," I said when I noticed her eyes were open.

She turned her head to me and smiled. "Good morning."

"Are you okay?"

She nodded and turned onto her side, leaning forward to kiss me before she fell back onto the pillow.

"I'm all right," she said. "I just have a lot on my mind. Today is going to be a big day."

Today, we would start the process of trying to get rid of the Conjurite magic in me. Vanya and Hazel had both suggested

we get to it as quickly as possible. There was no use postponing it—we had to face the music at some point. My mom and sister were here, now, as safe as they would get.

“Are you ready for this?” she asked.

I nodded slowly. “I’m ready to try get rid of this thing once and for all, but...I’m terrified that something will go wrong, and despite all our effort, I’ll lose them.”

“I’m here,” Hazel said, determined. “My mom is here. Zita is here. We all have the same goal, and we’re aware of the dangers. We won’t let anything happen to you or to them.”

I wanted to believe her. She had so much faith, and her childlike trust in the bigger picture was contagious. I still worried—she didn’t know Cyrene and how much the dark goddess was capable of. I’d been her servant for a long, long time, even though it hadn’t been direct. The orders had come through Falx or Lavinia, but Cyrene had been at the wheel all along, and she was more serious now than ever to stay in control. To just walk away wouldn’t be that easy. I worried that Hazel and Vanya weren’t aware of what it really meant.

“It’s going to be okay, Erol,” Hazel assured me. I sensed her determination and her blind faith in the process through our bond, and I knew she felt my uncertainty and fear, too.

I got up. “We should get ready. Shower with me?”

She smiled and nodded, and we walked to the shower together.

It took a while for the water to warm—in Jasfin, they used Fae magic to build and create and do small tasks like warming water, but here, the Conjurite magic didn’t allow for such luxuries. Dark magic didn’t allow for an easy life like that.

When the water was warm, I stripped off my clothes. Hazel did the same, and I stepped under the spray first. She followed, and when her naked body pressed against mine, the water running through her dark hair, wetting it, I kissed her. I tasted the hot water on her lips and traced my fingers over her curves.

When we'd been in the cabin, I'd slept with her again and again. I couldn't get enough of her, and it felt like every time we had sex, it only strengthened our bond.

Now, I wanted to be with her before we tackled something as serious as me fighting this darkness. I was terrified something would go wrong, and this would be the last time we could be together.

Hazel reached up, throwing her arms around my neck. Her breasts pushed against my torso, her nipples erect. My cock was hard, and I grinded myself against her, letting her feel how much I wanted her.

I wanted to pleasure her, to explore her body with my fingers and my mouth. Hazel didn't let me. Instead, she sank to her knees before me. She reached for my cock and wrapped her fingers around it. I hissed through my teeth and groaned when she sucked my head into her hot mouth.

Her lips were heaven, the feel of her mouth almost as perfect as the feel of her pussy.

She bobbed her head back and forth, taking me in as deep as she could before dragging her tongue up my length and encircling the tip with enough pressure to make me release all my inhibitions.

She repeated the process. With one hand, she gripped my shaft, closing the distance she couldn't cover with her mouth.

The feeling was positively orgasmic. If she wasn't careful, I would lose my seed in her mouth, and I'd have nothing more to give before we finished our shower.

When the orgasm got dangerously close, I pulled back, slipping out of her mouth. I took her hand and tugged her up.

I spun her around and kissed her over her shoulder. She twisted her head, one arm around my neck. With the other arm, she reached behind her and put her hand on my thigh, gripping the flesh, massaging and kneading it.

I cupped her breast with one hand and reached between her legs with the other. I pushed my finger into her slit and rubbed her clit. She moaned as I rubbed her in circles, pushed her



closer and closer to the edge. I pinched her nipple between my fingers and rolled it, relishing in the sounds of ecstasy that escaped her lips between our kisses.

Her breathing became harder and heavier as she got closer. I loved it when she orgasmed. I loved being the one to push her to the point of pure pleasure.

When she fell apart, I held onto her as she shuddered. I bit her shoulder lightly, and she whimpered as the orgasmed rocked her body.

I pushed her against the wall, and she braced her hands against it, pushing her ass out to me. I gripped her hips, and my cock found her entrance. I bent my knees while she simultaneously lifted up to her tiptoes, and my cock slid into her. She cried out as I started bucking my hips, stroking in and out of her. I leaned against her, pushing her against the shower wall, trapping her between the tiles and my body as I pounded into her. I loved the feel of her core tightening around my cock with every thrust. I loved the way she gasped and moaned, the sounds of her sex addictive. I loved the way she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

It wouldn't take me long to orgasm—her slick body under the hot water was so arousing.

I pumped into her, faster and faster. The bathroom steamed up, a combination of the hot water and the friction we created together.

My balls tightened, pleasure erupted, and I shoved myself deep into her. She screamed and orgasmed at the same time I did. I loved it when she did; the bond grew stronger whenever we orgasmed together, our power merging together to make something new, something powerful. It was when we were together and we orgasmed in unison that I had proof that not all was lost—there had to be light in me if I'd bonded with a Fae and my darkness hadn't pushed her away.

Although my darkness surged to the surface, too, I ignored it.

Finally, after I recovered from the earth-shattering orgasm, I pulled out of her.

Hazel sagged against the tiles, her body trembling and numb. I loved that I had this effect on her.

“Come here,” I said and turned her around. I held her against me and stroked her back while her breathing recovered.

At last, I reached for the soap and sponge and worked up a lather. I started washing her, running the soapy sponge over her entire body, cleaning her. I kissed her as I did this, taking care of her.

She returned the favor, and we washed each other. We didn't say anything—there was nothing to say. She knew how I felt about her; through our bond, we could feel each other's emotions. Nothing else mattered.

I didn't want to touch on what would follow once we faced the darkness together. I didn't want to talk about my family and the danger they might be in again.

We stood under the hot spray together, taking care of each other until it was time to turn off the water and get dressed.



WE WALKED TO THE LIVING ROOM WHERE WE'D ALL GOTTEN TO know each other last night. We'd decided to meet with my family here, where there was enough room for everyone. The formal sitting room was small and uncomfortable.

“How are you feeling?” Aggie asked, coming to me when we'd said our hellos to everyone in the room.

“Fine,” I lied.

Agatha narrowed her eyes at me. “It's okay to be scared.”

“Fear has been my constant companion for centuries. I'm used to it.”

She nodded, letting it go. I was relieved. I might have been used to fear, but the fear that came with Conjurite magic was very different from the fear I felt today. Fear as a side effect, and the inherent terror that I would lose my family, were two very different things.

Hazel came to me, her eyes warm and gentle.

“We’re going to get through this,” she said. “Mom will take you through the process—she’s a lot more powerful as a healer than I am. I’ll be with your family, taking care of them, and Zita will have my back for anything physical that might happen.”

I nodded. The logistics were sound.

“We all know what we’re doing,” Hazel reassured me.

I nodded again, clenching my jaw. I twisted my fingers together. I didn’t trust myself to speak. Either I would snap at Hazel, my fear translating into anger, or I would sound as scared as I was. The one, I wouldn’t do to her because I cared for her. The other, I wouldn’t show because I was still a man who’d endured pain and suffering for centuries. I wasn’t about to crack and show weakness now.

Vanya came to me. She’d pulled back her light hair in a ponytail, and she wore fighting leathers, the same way Zita did. Hazel had dressed accordingly as well. They’d all come prepared for battle.

Vanya took my hand and led me to the couch on the far side of the room. I glanced at my mom and sister, who sat some distance away, in front of a crackling fire. She talked to them, and they were all smiles.

Zita stood close by, keeping watch.

“It’s going to be okay, Erol,” Vanya said. “I have faith.”

“It’s all you seem to have,” I snapped. Where had that come from? The Conjurite magic in me was already revolting.

Vanya’s eyes widened.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

She shook her head. “Don’t be.” She put her hand on my shoulder, the other still holding my hand, and closed her eyes. I didn’t know what to do or what to expect.

At first, nothing happened. What if nothing happened at all? What if I couldn’t be saved, and all these precautions were for nothing?

Vanya’s hand warmed, and when I looked at her, her skin glowed as if she had a fire burning within. Her hand became scalding hot, nearly burning my skin. I wanted to jerk away, but I fought it, gritting my teeth.

The magic that flowed from Vanya to me suddenly yanked me inward. I was caught in darkness, and I saw nothing. I was blinded. I looked around, searching for any sign of light or life in the pitch black, but there was nothing.

I couldn’t even feel Vanya’s hands on me anymore.

“Hello?” I called out, but the darkness swallowed the word so that I could barely be heard. “Hello?” I tried again.

“Erol,” an unfamiliar voice said, and I spun around, looking for the person who’d spoken.

I still couldn’t see anything.

“Where are you?” I called out.

“Erol,” the voice said again.

This time, a dim flicker broke the complete darkness. It was far in the distance, but it was there. I turned and instinctively moved toward it.

“That’s it, Erol. Come to me. All you need is to follow the light.”

I hesitated, suddenly unsure. The light was so attractive, I wanted nothing more than to go to it, to roll in it, to *bathe* in it, but something didn’t feel quite right.

The darkness behind me was safe and familiar—it was what I’d known all this time.

“Erol, you have nothing to fear. You just have to choose what you want.”

I didn't see her, but I instinctively knew who was talking.

Terra.

"Come, Erol," she called. "Come to the light."

I took a step forward. My feet were stuck in something, and when I looked down, the floor was like tar—shiny and black, and my feet sank into it. When I lifted my foot, the tar made it hard to come away.

I fought it and took another step, and then another. Vanya's magic was around me, guiding me. It was hard at first, fighting the sticky blackness that insisted on keeping me back. I was determined—if a bit of tar was all I had to fight to get to Terra, I would march until my legs fell off.

Vanya's magic made it easier and easier. Every step brought me a bit closer to the dim light in the distance, and my muscles kicked in. My thighs punched up and down as I marched through the thick sludge.

"It's working!" I cried. After all this time, I'd thought I was doomed to live a life in darkness forever. It was right there! The light was within reach. I just had to—

"Oh, no, you don't," Cyrene's voice sneered behind me, so loud in my ears, I screamed. "You're not going anywhere."

"I'm going!" I shouted. "It's what I want, and you can't stop me!"

My sister and my mom were here somewhere. I couldn't see them, but I sensed them. Their Luminescence was like a beacon in the darkness. They were still alive, and they were safe. My sister didn't feel scared through our sibling bond. It was okay. Cyrene could fight me as long as she left them alone.

"You don't know what you want," Cyrene snapped. "And you don't have what it takes to navigate this world without me! You're nothing, Erol!"

"No!" I yelled, drowning out the horrible sound of her voice, the uncertainty she tried to sow with her words.

I marched forward again, fighting the tar beneath my feet. It was thicker now, harder to fight through.

I didn't care. I had to get out of here.

I became aware of Cyrene behind me. I saw her, although I wasn't facing her. She was almost one with the darkness, but her pale skin glowed dully, and the black fog that surrounded her was everywhere, making it harder to breathe. I saw her face twisted in a snarl, anger riddling her features.

"I said, no!" she screeched, and she slammed her hands down onto my shoulders. Her long, oily black nails dug into my skin, and I let out a growl as the searing pain shot through my body.

Her power throbbed through me like poison, and I curled in pain.

"Erol!" Vanya shouted from somewhere beyond the darkness. "Keep fighting it!"

I would fight—it was what I did best. I reached down deep and grabbed all the magic I had, throwing it outward as hard as I could. I had to get Cyrene off me.

Screams and shouts rang around me, and it wasn't from the darkness, but beyond it.

It yanked me out of the blackness all around me.

My power had rocked outward when I'd tried to get rid of Cyrene, but using Conjurite magic against the very essence of darkness hadn't worked.

Why would it?

Instead, I stared at the destruction around me. The destruction I'd caused.

The room looked as if something had exploded in the middle of it. The couches were up against the walls, on their sides, half on top of each other.

The coffee table was broken, one leg in the hearth, close to the flames.

My mother and Agatha lay on the floor, moaning. Blood ran from Agatha's temple. Zita was sprawled on her stomach, and Hazel's limp body was draped over the back of one couch.

Vanya lay on the other side of the room on her side, her face twisted in pain.

The dark magic swirled inside me, powerful, and a part of me relished in the destruction. Another part of me ached, and I let out a cry of shock and horror.

"Erol." Hazel pushed herself up. She carefully slid to the ground.

"What did I do?" I asked in a hoarse voice.

"It's okay," she said, coming slowly toward me.

Vanya climbed to her feet, too. She pressed her hand to her side and limped a little.

Zita jumped to her feet with a loud curse and glared at me with so much anger, I thought she might attack me. Instead, she ran past me to make sure my mom and Agatha were okay. They were both awake, breathing, talking, and it looked like no one had been badly injured.

"We'll figure this out," Hazel said.

I shook my head. "We can't. This isn't going to work. She won't let me go!"

"We're not giving up after one try." She reached up to cup my cheek, and I ached for her touch. When she lifted her hand toward my face, a flash of red drew my attention, and I grabbed her wrist. She had a long cut along her arm, and it looked deep.

"I hurt you," I gasped.

"We'll heal it," I said.

I let go of her hand and shook my head, backing away. I couldn't do this—I'd hurt her, I was bad for her.

"I have to go."

“Don’t run, Erol,” she pleaded. “We’re all okay. A little worse for wear, but we can figure it out and try again. Just... stay.”

I shook my head and turned toward the door. Didn’t she get it? What if the next time, I did damage that couldn’t be healed? What if I killed someone? It was in my nature—it was at the core of who I was.

Cyrene would push me to do it, and I wouldn’t allow it.

Hazel saw a man running away, but that wasn’t what this was. I didn’t leave because I was too scared to keep trying. I left because I couldn’t afford to hurt the people I loved.

Not my mother and sister. Not Vanya and Zita. Not Hazel.

“Erol!” Hazel called after me.

I ignored her, opened the door, and left. I wasn’t running.

I had to protect them.

Even if it was from myself.





## HAZEL

“**W**here are you going?” Mom called after me when I ran toward the door Erol had just exited.

“I’m not letting him get away this time!” I replied over my shoulder. “This isn’t over until it’s over!”

I ran down the hallways, my feet beating against the stone floors.

I started searching for Erol, poking my head into every room, until I remembered our bond. It would take forever to find him that way, but through our bond, I could sense where he was.

He was in our quarters. I hoped he wasn’t packing—he had to stop believing that we would all be better off without him.

“Erol,” I breathed, gasping when I ran into the room. “Don’t go.”

He spun around to face me. His hands balled into fists, his eyes were large, rolling around in his sockets like he was panicked.

“Why do you keep following me?” he demanded.

“I’m not letting you go like this,” I said. “We’re going to figure this out. I told you that before, and I meant it.”

“Don’t you get it?!” he cried out, and with his bellowing voice, a wave of his magic washed over me. It was dark and powerful, and I shivered with the fear it instilled in me. I pushed the fear away, but this power was a lot stronger than

anything I'd felt from Erol before. "Didn't you see the destruction? Hell, you were right here in the thick of it as a captive, you know exactly what I do and who I am! Stop looking for the good in me, Hazel. You're seeing things you *want* to see. You're not seeing what's real."

I shook my head. "I don't accept that. I have a gift, Erol. I can see what's really there, underneath the façades and the masks and the acts. I see what's at your core, and you're not this man you believe you are."

"I am!" he shouted, and with his words came yet another blast of magic. This time, it was so powerful, it nearly knocked me off my feet. I stumbled backward, scrambling to find my balance, and caught myself on a chair nearby.

"Don't do this," I said. "You can choose!"

Erol jammed his thumb and forefinger into his eyes. He shook his head and laughed bitterly. The laughter in this moment was out of place, worrisome.

"You really don't understand. Why would you? You grew up in an easy life with light and magic and hope. You never had to fight the darkness one day in your life, and you think you can walk in here and tell me how I can get away from it? You have no idea what it takes."

His speech was condescending, and my anger bubbled to the surface.

"Don't you dare tell me what my life was like. You have no idea who I am, or what I went through before I ended up in the dungeons below this castle. Do you mean to tell me that you don't think being a prisoner here for nearly two years was hard? Do you think being in the midst of all this darkness for that long taught me nothing about what to expect? Don't flatter yourself into thinking that you're the only victim around here. We've all been through hell and back, we've all fought our own demons. I want to be with you, I want to help you. I know you want it, too. Stop pushing me away."

Erol laughed again, and the sound was creepy. It wasn't the kind of laugh that usually came from him. It was almost as if

the darkness had taken over completely, and the laughter belonged to someone—*something*—else deep inside of him.

“I’m trying to tell you that you don’t understand. I’m trying to show you this is a lost cause. You don’t get it, Hazel. I *like* this. I want it.”

I stared at him. “What? What are you talking about?”

“The destruction I caused in there, the pain...I relish in it. When I hurt people and destroy things, I feel most alive. It’s what I’m meant to do, and giving that up...I *can’t*. A part of me doesn’t want to.”

I stared at him, mouth open. His words didn’t make sense.

“How can you say that?”

“It’s true, Hazel. It’s what I feel. Sure, a part of me hates it, but the part that loves it...” He shook his head, not finishing his sentence. “Stop trying to save me.”

He marched past me and out of the room and left me behind alone. His words swirled around me.

*I like this. I want this.*

How could that be? How could Erol tell me he wanted to remain as a Conjurite, to use dark magic and live in the darkness? He’d asked me to help him, hadn’t he? Or had I forced it on him?

He’d seemed so on board when we’d been at the cabin together. Now, he was nothing more than a monster who relished in pain and destruction. But that couldn’t be him. I saw his goodness.

I sank onto the chair I’d caught myself on and covered my face with my hands.

Was any of this real? Or was it all a game? I wanted so badly to believe that Erol had what it took to break free, but what if he didn’t?

What if I had to let him go, because he just wouldn’t do what it took to follow me into the light?



## EROL

I had to get out of here. I had to leave the castle behind and get out into the fresh air to breathe. I felt like I was drowning in my own power, in my own twisted outlook on life.

I couldn't shake the look of pure horror on Hazel's face when I'd told her this was what I wanted. It wasn't entirely true—a part of me still wanted to be free. That part seemed to be buried more and more underneath the darkness I wielded, that little voice that screamed for help becoming softer and softer, until eventually, it would disappear.

When I walked out of the castle doors and into the gardens, my skin was on fire, and I felt like I would explode. The magic danced on my skin, thick in the air around me. Everything was tainted by darkness and magic.

Cyrene's voice was in my head. *Well, that was interesting.*

“Leave me alone!”

She only laughed, and the sound felt like it cut me up from the inside. *Come now, you can't tell me you want to get rid of me. Not after that display back there. You sure know how to pick 'em, huh?*

I shook my head, not bothering to respond.

*I have to say, Erol, you had me worried there for a second. Bringing your family here to protect them... That was brilliant. It was a loophole I didn't see coming, and I see everything*

*coming. Still, it was a waste of time, in the end. You don't want to walk away from me, do you?*

I continued to ignore her. I wouldn't indulge her, give her what she wanted. It was bad enough that she was so powerful now—I was so far gone—that she was in my head like a clear voice. A voice clearer than my conscience.

*It's a good thing you realized what you wanted before it was too late, Cyrene went on. You would never have been happy with her. Your life would have been so empty and bland, so void of magic. After so many centuries living with power, can you really give that all up and become weak? I don't see how the light is worth it.*

“Will you stop?” I snapped.

Cyrene laughed again. Nothing I said was funny, but she insisted on laughing, scraping and tearing me up with that horrible sound. Maybe that was why she did it.

*It's sweet that you bound yourself to her. Did you do it because you wanted to get closer to the light? I guess it makes sense. It didn't work, clearly, but interesting attempt.*

“You don't know anything about it,” I snarled. She'd baited me. I wanted to ignore her, but it was hard to when she was in my head like that.

*Well, it's good riddance, if you ask me.*

“I didn't.”

That didn't stop Cyrene from offering her opinion.

*You would have lost so much if you'd decided to go through with it. Your power is one thing, but the rest of what you have? People fear you. They revere you. This is an entire kingdom set up to follow the darkness, and you wanted to throw all of that away. Falx is gone. He paved the way for you, and all you have to do now is step into his shoes and keep going. Palgia needs you.*

I shook my head. “The kingdom doesn't belong to me, and I won't ever have it.”

*Not if you give up so easily, but with your power, it won't be a problem overthrowing the Fae King and taking back what you deserve. How many years did you serve Falx with no reward? This will be your reward.*

My steps faltered. The magic was so thick around me, I could run my fingers through it like water. Would I be able to take on Rainier and take back Palgia to rule as I pleased?

He could keep Jasfin to himself, I didn't even want what was his. I just wanted what was mine. Cyrene was right—I'd been under Falx's thumb for so long, I deserved more for the centuries I'd sacrificed for him.

*I like the way you think, Cyrene said, although she'd been the one to suggest the idea. You would be way better off running the kingdom the way you know how. You'll never be able to take a wife and have the life you keep hoping for, and there's nothing wrong with that. As soon as you accept it, you can move forward. You'll never be good enough for Hazel, anyway.*

Her words cut me like a knife, and I stopped. They took my breath away, and I gasped, pressing my hand against my chest. I would never be good enough for her. Cyrene was right. Hazel deserved so much more than the monster I was. She saw something in me that wasn't there, and she could do better.

She had to find someone else—even if that meant I had to find a way to sever the mate bond.

Just thinking about it shot a pain through me like I'd been physically stabbed, and it was unbearable. I was no stranger to pain. I took a deep breath, and another, and another, trying to get through it.

I would never be good enough for Hazel.

The pain grew in my chest, and it felt like it would suffocate me. Knowing that I wouldn't be enough—knowing it was true—hurt so badly, I'd never felt this kind of pain in my life. I couldn't keep doing this to her. We had a mated bond, but she deserved to be free of me.



I reached for our bond and blocked it. I couldn't break it, I didn't know how, but I could push her far enough away that I wouldn't hurt her again.

I let out a cry, and it ripped through the gardens. I let it all my pent-up magic loose, and it rocked across the castle grounds with a roar. I watched as the darkness obliterated everything that was good in its path, snuffing out the light.

Hazel's gardens that she'd worked so hard on curled up, shriveled, and died before my eyes. The roses, in full bloom, dried, and the petals fell to the floor. The stems became brittle until they turned into powder. The white flowers that spread across the garden like snow became dry and ugly.

I watched as I destroyed all her hard work. A part of me ached for her, but I pushed it away. I wasn't in control. I couldn't afford to feel—it only made my life that much harder.

I had to accept that this was what I was—darkness, destruction, and death.



## HAZEL

I walked back to the living room in a daze. When I opened the door, my mom and Zita sat together on one couch they'd pushed onto its feet. Agatha sat on the floor, and Marilla stood close to the fire. She'd pushed aside the broken coffee table, removing it from the fire so that it wouldn't be a hazard.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked.

I nodded, but tears welled in my eyes, and I shook my head instead. I sank into the couch and covered my face with my hands, my shoulders shaking as I sobbed.

"I don't know how things could have gotten so bad!" I cried. "I knew it would be hard, but I thought it was what he wanted. I thought our bond would be enough to bring him back to the light."

Mom rubbed my back in circles.

"The darkness in him is a lot more powerful than the other Conjurites we helped," she said softly. "He's a lot more important to Cyrene. I should have known that it would be this difficult. I underestimated what it would take."

The darkness swirled inside Erol. I felt it through our bond. He was so upset, so worked up, so filled with the ugliness that the dark magic provided. All I'd wanted to do was help him, to set the man I'd fallen in love with free.

I reached for Erol, tried to find him through our bond. Could I bring him back? Maybe if I reached for him, I could

convince him that—

Erol slammed a block between us, throwing up a wall so that I couldn't find him through our bond. He didn't want me to reach him; he'd shut me out.

“Oh!” I cried, the block causing my physical pain.

“What is it?” Mom asked, worried.

“He shut off the bond,” I whimpered. Tears rolled over my cheeks freely, and I doubled over as the pain and heartbreak got the better of me.

My mom tried to stroke my back, to be there for me, but there was nothing she could do. It was all over.

“We're not done here,” Zita hissed.

I looked up at her, my cheeks wet with tears. I hiccupped. “What do you mean?”

“We didn't come here just to turn away and give up. We're going to figure this out, one way or another.”

I shook my head. “You were so against it.”

“Yeah, I was. I figured he was a monster because of what he'd done to you and Vanya, and what I feel for you mother...” Zita took Mom's hand. “I'm biased and protective.”

Mom squeezed Zita's hand, and it was beautiful to see the two women so connected and so in love. They were on the same page. It only made me feel the pain of losing Erol all over again.

“We came here for a reason,” Zita continued. “And we're not stopping until we know how we can win. What I saw today...that man is not in control. He didn't choose this life, and he would never hurt you. It was something else that hurt you, and we're going to fight it.”

I blinked at Zita. “He told me it's what he wants.”

“He doesn't know what he's saying,” Mom offered.

“He doesn’t,” Zita agreed. “I’m convinced of it now. What you feel for him, and the bond you share...that wouldn’t have happened if you weren’t fated. You can’t be fated too pure evil if you’re Fae.”

“The darkness is so powerful within him,” I whispered.

“Yes,” Zita said. “That’s why I think you should send for help. I think we should reach out to Nylah and ask her to come.”

I gasped and wanted to protest, but Mom spoke before I could say anything.

“She’s right. I think it’s a good idea.”

Agatha came to me.

“My brother is good. I know it doesn’t always seem like it, but that you’re not giving up on him... You don’t know how much it means.”

I looked at her and then at Marilla. In both their faces, I saw so much pain. They’d lost Erol a long time ago, and they’d lived with this knowledge that darkness consumed him, and he was trapped inside it.

The determination, the spark of hope I’d felt before, returned. Erol needed help, and we would give it to him. One way or another.

I didn’t know what it would mean for our bond and our relationship. If, after it all, he decided he still didn’t want to be with me, it would hurt like hell, but it didn’t matter.

I hadn’t forged the bond with him because I wanted him to change his mind or drag him to the light. I’d forged a bond with him because he was my fated mate, he was my person, and I loved him.

Even if we didn’t end up together, that would never change. I loved him, and he deserved to be free.



## EROL

**A**fter I blocked our bond, Hazel didn't sleep in my bed again. The farther she stayed away from me, the better. If my outburst in the living room that day was anything to go by, just being close to me was dangerous. I didn't want her to get hurt, I didn't want her tied up in this mess.

Most of all, I wanted Cyrene to stay as far away from Hazel as possible. I may have lost her, but at least it meant Cyrene had lost her, too. I didn't trust that I was strong enough to keep the Dark Goddess at bay anymore.

The pilot lowered the hovercraft to the ground, and I stepped out. I'd traveled to the west today. I hadn't visited the lands in a long time—it was time for me to see my people.

I walked into a village with guards and warriors flanking me. I'd asked them to come along, not for protection against the people, but for protection against myself. I had no idea what Cyrene would do, and I was terrified that she would use me to do something evil, as she had twice already—once to kill Hazel's garden, and once to stop freeing a group of Conjurites.

The Conjurites looked happy to see me. They left the fields they tended and the stalls they manned to see me, and they had smiles on their faces.

“Majesty, Majesty!” a child shouted from not too far off and waved at me.

I only nodded curtly at him.

“It’s a pleasure to have you visit, sir,” the village mayor said, coming to me with reverence. “If you’d let us know in advance, we would have prepared a feast in your honor.”

“That’s not necessary,” I said in a cold voice. “I won’t stay long. How are the crops?”

“Much better than we expected. Better than this time last year. There seems to be hope that the crops will offer a good yield this year.”

I glanced at the fields. The crops were meager compared to what they should have been, but the few plants that stood in a row, yearning for more sunlight than they got, looked much better than they had in a long time.

*It’s a pity it all has to go to waste,* Cyrene said, her voice clear in my head.

“Don’t,” I bit out.

“I beg your pardon?” the mayor asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.” Telling him I had voices in my head would just make him think I was crazy. Maybe I *was* going crazy.

*Destroy it.*

“No.”

The mayor frowned at me.

I turned away from the fields. I wasn’t going to ruin their hard work. These people had done so much for the kingdom, for me, even though they hadn’t had it easy. Falx had ensured that they lived a hard life, and things were only getting better now. I couldn’t that away from them.

*You’re ignoring me,* Cyrene said, and I imagined her pouting.

“I’m not doing what you want me to do. You don’t control me.”

No one heard me as I walked back toward the hovercraft. I would have wanted to stay longer, but I was worried I would



do something to hurt these people or ruin their hard work. I had to get away from there as quickly as I could.

I thought about Hazel and her garden, and how I'd destroyed it all after she'd worked so hard at it. I couldn't do that again.

Power swirled at my center, growing stronger and stronger. It threatened to break free and obliterate everything in its wake. The power was uncomfortably hot, and it felt like broken glass and rusted nails on the inside of my skin.

She was doing this. Cyrene made it harder and harder for me to keep it in, so that I would want to get rid of it and let it out.

I fought her. I held it back, biting down on the magic, refusing to let it burst outward. I wouldn't do that to my loyal subjects.

*They all gave up the light. Do you really think they don't know what it means to be Conjurites?*

"I don't care!" I shouted.

The guards and warriors glanced at me, unsure.

"I don't care what they gave up by choice, I care what I'll be taking from them against their will."

Two warriors stepped closer, noticing I was fighting Cyrene and struggling to stay in control.

"If you know what's good for you, you'll come no closer."

The warriors glanced at each other and hesitated. Half the time, the words that came out of my mouth didn't belong to me, even though it was my voice. It felt like Cyrene talked through me. It made me feel pathetic and weak. Why couldn't I fight her off?

The warriors stepped back when I glared at them.

I marched toward the hovercraft. Before I stepped in, I glanced over my shoulder at the village mayor. He looked nervous, worried. If he had any idea what Cyrene had wanted me to do, he had reason to be.

“Good job,” I said. Forcing the words out was hard, and they tasted bitter in my mouth—in Cyrene’s mouth.

The mayor beamed, pleased that I was happy with his work.

I stepped into the hovercraft and gave the pilot the word. The guards and warriors climbed into the hovercraft with me, and we lifted into the air.

I directed the pilot to take me to the next town. I had to talk to the mayors around the kingdom and make sure everything was okay. It had been too long since I’d seen them, and if I wanted to retain their loyalty, I had to stay in their minds.

That was what I told myself, although the truth was that I needed an excuse to be away from the castle. I couldn’t be around Hazel, or face Vanya and Zita. I couldn’t be around my mom and sister after how I’d acted. I was ashamed and embarrassed, and I refused to admit to even that.

The next town was larger than the village where we’d just been. We touched down, and I stepped out. Again, I was met by a mayor who was happy to see me, excited to show me the changes he’d brought to the village. He’d done a lot, and I nodded while he talked.

Inside me, Cyrene was irritated. She didn’t like the mayor. He wasn’t my favorite person, either, but he did good for the town, and they’d voted him in, happy to have him in charge.

“These are for the winter,” he said when we arrived at new storage facilities he’d erected. “We’re already storing crops for the winter where can spare them, so that we can last all year round. Now that the crops are better, and we have a bit to spare, we can start planning ahead.” He looked at me with bright eyes. “It’s a strange concept to be able to do that, and not expect it all to crash and burn.”

*He’s so filled with hope, Cyrene said bitterly. I don’t recognize my Conjurite anymore. This is the second one who’s looked happy.*

I ignored her and tried to focus on what the mayor said through the words that rung in my ears.

*I'm not going to go away just because you ignore me, you know,* Cyrene said.

“Would you like to see the new school?” the mayor asked.

I nodded and let him lead the way. The guards trailed behind us, hanging back farther the more it looked like we had it under control.

I was in charge here. Cyrene had wreaked havoc in my personal life, but I was still the Regent, and these were still my people. So what if they had hope? What if they found happiness? They deserved it after the centuries of hell Falx had rained down on Palgia. Just because the Conjurite magic was rooted in darkness didn't mean that fear and death had to be all there was to think about.

The school building was bland and boring, but the town seemed to be proud of it, and that was all that mattered.

“I'm pleased,” I finally said. “You're doing a good job.”

The mayor beamed, just like the previous village mayor had.

*Now would be a great time to burn the school building to the ground. A little humility goes a long way.*

“It's downright spiteful,” I hissed.

“What?” The mayor blinked at me.

“The school building is beautiful,” I said a little louder, enunciating the word as if that was what I'd said all along.

“Thank you!”

Cyrene's laughter in my head wrapped all around me, making me feel sick to my stomach.

“Please, join us for dinner tonight,” the mayor said, inviting me to eat with him and his wife. “It will be an honor to have you.”

I would have said yes in the blink of an eye if I'd been here alone. Unfortunately, Cyrene would take the opportunity to do something despicable.

"I have a lot to get through in the next few days," I said apologetically. "I can't stay, but I'll be back, and we'll have dinner together."

The mayor nodded, a little disappointed, but I felt elated that so far, Cyrene hadn't managed to control me into doing anything horrible. I'd been terrified to come out and see the people, but it was working.

When we got into the hovercraft again, I felt triumphant.

*What are you so happy about?*

"You don't control me," I said.

My entourage pretended that they didn't hear me having a one-sided conversation with myself. I'd stopped trying to act normal in front of them. They'd seen much worse, and they were too afraid of the repercussions to say something.

*You don't have what it takes to stop me.*

"And yet, I did."

Cyrene laughed menacingly. *Is that what you think you did? Oh, Erol, your childlike confidence and trust would be adorable if they weren't so pathetic.* Her tone was mocking as she sneered at me. *Don't think you've broken my hold over you. I'm still here, and you're not off the hook. You're mine, remember? I have you all to myself.*

"You were wrong about me." I turned my head toward the window, looking out at Palgia below me. "I'm not nothing without you. My power isn't only because of you. I was a powerful Fae before you came for me. It's the reason you wanted me in the first place."

It had taken me a while to realize the truth. I'd believed Cyrene when she'd told me that without her power, I would be nothing. I'd been a fool to let her convince me when the facts had stared me in the face all along, but today had proved that I

wasn't her puppet, and it might be a fight, but I could choose if I wanted to do her bidding.

Getting her out of my head was a different kind of obstacle I had to figure out, but one step at a time.

Knowing who I was and what I was capable of—separate from who she had turned me into—was the first step.

*You're playing with fire, Erol. You know what happens when someone plays with fire.*

I wanted to answer her, to give her a response worthy of my strength. I'd stopped being so terrified of her, and it allowed my arrogance to come to the surface.

*You're going to get burned!* She screamed the words in my head, and my power was suddenly so strong, the hovercraft wobbled and jerked beneath us. The pilot barely had control, and the craft spiraled downward toward the ground.

“Stop it!” the pilot shouted. “Erol, you're going to kill us!”

He was right. It just wasn't me—I wasn't in control anymore.

Terror gripped me around the throat, and for a moment I was sure this was it—I would be the reason all these men died.

The hovercraft dove downward, nose first, and everything in the cabin that wasn't strapped down tumbled around. A box hit one guard in the face. Something sharp cut a warrior strapped in next to me, and his blood dripped on the wall in front of us.

They tried to fight my power, raising their own Conjurite magic to stop me. The more I fought Cyrene, the more she dug her claws into me. I felt her oily nails dig into my flesh as I had when I'd tried to turn toward the light, and I cried out, gritting my teeth, grabbing the armrests so hard they cracked.

“No!” I yelled. “You won't take control!”

With everything I had, I forced Cyrene back and grabbed a hold of the hovercraft controls. The pilot regained control, straightening the hovercraft. The loose objects fell to the ground. A guard threw up and groaned.

The pilot put the craft down on the ground in the middle of nowhere, and when the doors opened, we all stumbled out. My men stayed close to the craft while they tended to each other, but I stumbled away as fast as I could.

“You’re not going to win this!” I screamed at Cyrene. “You can fight me every day, but you’re not going to force me into doing something I don’t want! I’m stronger than you are, I know how to stop you now!”

Cyrene appeared in front of me. The men behind me screamed—a sound of pure terror. So, she’d taken a physical form they could see, too.

She was terrifying to look at. Her skin was so pale, the map of veins beneath her skin made her look like the living dead. Her black hair melted into her black dress, and the smokey fog that curled around her spread around my feet, around the men behind me.

They all cowered away. I looked over my shoulder at them and saw the pure terror in their eyes, the fear that made them stop thinking rationally and paralyzed them.

“I don’t only control you, Erol,” Cyrene said in a voice that sounded like four of her were talking at the same time. “I *own* you. If you win a powerplay between us, it’s only because I let you. I am Darkness Eternal, and you won’t ever get away from me. Do you understand?”

“I have power,” I protested, lifting my face to look her in the eye. Her orbs were pure black, and it was hard to keep looking at her when I wanted to bow my head in submission. “I’m strong enough to fight you, and I will.”

Cyrene laughed and shook her head.

“I underestimated your stubbornness. Or maybe it’s downright stupid. I don’t know, but you’re nothing without my power, and you can’t fight who I am and what I’ll do to you.”

She yanked me into a vision. My mom and sister sat together in one of the bedrooms at the castle, talking. Guards marched in and grabbed them. Agatha screamed. Mom tried to

fight back. The dark magic was so powerful, neither of them could do anything, not even with their Luminescence.

“That’s not real,” I gasped, trying to convince myself as I watched in horror. “You’re messing with my mind!”

“Oh, it’s real,” Cyrene said.

The guards dragged my family kicking and screaming to the dungeons below the castle. I knew what it was like in there. I knew what life waited for them.

“I-I’ll just release them when I get back!”

Cyrene shook her head. “You won’t see them ever again. I warned you about trying to get away from me. I told you I would kill them, and now, I will.”

My head spun, and bile pushed up my throat. My mind worked overtime, and something occurred to me.

“If you wanted to kill them, you would have done it right away. You’re keeping them for something.”

Cyrene smiled. “You’ve always been smart—the cunning mind of a warrior. You’re right, I’m keeping them for leverage.”

“What kind of leverage?” I demanded.

“The kind that will get me what I want. You’re going to give in to me and do as I tell you. It’s the only way you’ll ever see them again.”

I shook my head. “I’ll find another way.”

“Oh, no. You won’t. This is the end of the line for you where your power and your free will is concerned. You pledged your allegiance to me, and it’s time to pay up.”

“I won’t destroy my people’s lands! I won’t hurt them!”

Cyrene laughed as if I’d missed something obvious.

“I’m not asking you to ruin the kingdom. Ruining the land hasn’t done us much good over the past couple of centuries. Falx was narrowminded. No...you’ll do something else.”

I stared at Cyrene. No matter what she did to me, I wouldn't do her bidding. I couldn't.

"You'll kill Hazel," she said.

My blood ran cold, and my ears rang. "What?"

"You heard me. It's her, or your family. You think you can fight me? You're about to learn the hard way that it's better to do what I tell you to do and leave it at that. If you fight me, I'll hit you where it hurts most."

"I won't do it," I swore. There was no way I would kill Hazel. I'd pushed her away, but I loved her. She was everything. No matter what Cyrene did to me, I wouldn't hurt her.

"You don't have a choice," Cyrene said. "Do it, or I'll make you do it."

"You can't!" I cried out.

"Are you sure about that?"

She disappeared, and it was as if she'd never been. The countryside was beautiful, and the black fog was gone.

I turned toward the men, who straightened up and looked around as if they weren't sure what had happened. Did they remember seeing her at all?

My stomach turned and twisted with dread. What had I done? Trying to get away from Cyrene, fighting her...

I'd been arrogant enough to think that it would change something. I'd been a fool to think that I could get away from her.

She'd threatened my family, but after centuries, I'd become reckless, thinking that I was home free.

It turned out I was wrong—very, very wrong.

I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't hurt Hazel, no matter what happened. If Cyrene forced me into killing anyone at all...I would kill myself.



I turned around to go back to the hovercraft. I took one step forward before darkness slammed into me and drowned everything out until I knew no more.



## HAZEL

“Nylah!” I cried out when the High Priestess of Jasfin stepped out of the hovercraft. Her white robes and long hair blew in the wind from the craft’s engines as it took off again.

I threw my arms around my friend and let out a shuddering breath of relief.

“I can’t tell you how good it is to see you.”

“You’ve been having a hard time,” Nylah said. A statement, not a question. When I pulled back, she looked at me with her golden, shimmering eyes. She hooked her hair behind one pointed Fae ear. “Come, let’s talk.”

“Don’t you want to rest after your journey?” I asked.

Nylah shook her head. “There are more pressing matters.”

We walked into the castle, and my mom and Zita waited for Nylah there. After they hugged her, Nylah put her hands on my mom’s shoulders.

“I’m so happy for you,” she said with a warm smile.

My mom blushed and glanced toward Zita, who looked shy, too.

“Both of you,” Nylah said, putting her hand on Zita’s shoulder. “A noble woman deserves a fine reward, and finding true happiness is the most divine reward known to Fae kind.”

The two women blushed again, and Nylah smiled before letting go of them both.

She turned to me. I felt left out in her congratulations. Of course I wished my mom and Zita every happiness. They deserved to find love—my mom more than anyone I knew. I wanted this for her.

I just felt that I'd been robbed of my own happiness. I'd done everything right. I'd sacrificed a lot and stood by what was right for as long as I could remember. It was how my mom had raised me. But now...

“How is Ellie?” Mom asked.

I felt bad that I hadn't thought of Ellie and her pregnancy.

Nylah beamed. “She's doing well. The child is strong, and the power they wield is like nothing this earth has seen. Terra has a great destiny for that child, and Ellie and Ren will be blessed beyond measure.”

It all sounded wonderful, and I was glad for Ellie and Ren, that they were happy and their family would grow.

Nylah and I walked to my room. After ordering herbal tea from a servant, we sat on the couches, arranged around bookcases. The large window overlooked a private garden that was ugly and dead.

“It's so much harder to save the Conjurites than we thought it would be,” I sighed. “I'm starting to think it's impossible.”

“It's never impossible. Remember, the light always wins over the darkness.”

“Does it?” I asked dully. “It doesn't feel that way. It feels like we're buried at the heart of darkness, and it will never end.”

“Have you struggled to reach the Conjurites, to break through the darkness?”

I relayed everything that had happened with the Conjurites we'd saved, how hard it had been, how slow-going, and the deaths from the process. I told Nylah that it was easier when

my mom and I worked together, and better to do it in a group so that it was one stretch of power, and by the time we were drained, it was all over.

“It’s worrisome that it’s taking so long,” Nylah said, her brow furrowed. “I’d hoped Terra would have shown us a way to do it faster, but I’ve heard nothing from her on the topic.”

“Neither has my mom,” I admitted. “It’s been trial and error, so far. More error, in fact.” I took a deep breath and finally told Nylah about what had happened when we’d tried to help Erol.

Nylah listened, a concerned expression in her face.

“He’s very powerful, and Cyrene must have a very strong grip on him. I don’t blame her; he’s an asset she can’t afford to lose.”

“I thought we could do it. I want it, Nylah. At least, I thought he did. Isn’t it a matter of will power?”

“It is,” Nylah said, nodding slowly. “He’s very powerful, and it might not be that simple.”

“Apparently not.” I hung my head. “I thought we could do it, but it went wrong, and now...” Tears welled in my eyes.

“There’s more to it than just Erol’s journey back to the light, isn’t there?” Nylah asked.

I nodded, knotting my fingers together.

“I love him,” I said. “And...” More tears streamed down my cheeks. “I think it’s too late. I think it’s over.”

“Tell me what happened,” Nylah said, sipping her tea when we were finally alone.

“Erol is my mate, but because of Cyrene’s hold on him, we will never be together. But it’s not just about me, even though I want to be with him more than anything. The kingdom is at risk because he can’t let go of the darkness. Even if we can’t be together, I want him to come back to the light. But now, it seems impossible.”

Nylah's brows drew together in a frown, so I started from the beginning. I went all the way back to when I'd run into Erol in the palace hallways in Jasfin and what I'd felt then. The spark, the light, the small flicker of hope that had started everything that had followed.

As I talked, tears flowed, and I didn't try to stop them. I might have, in any other circumstance, but the pain was real, and it had been days since I'd seen Erol last.

"He cut me off, blocking our bond," I finally said through my tears. "I don't know what to make of it. The bond was forged, and that doesn't happen when it's not real, does it? It has to be real."

"Terra doesn't take the bond lightly," Nylah said, though she seemed hesitant.

"But?" I asked, urging her to finish her thought.

She took a deep breath, studying my face. "I don't know how it works when one of you is a Conjurite. The mate bond between two Fae is already partly a riddle; no one truly knows how it works. When one party is a Conjurite, it might change everything. I'm so sorry I can't give you the answers you're looking for."

It wasn't what I'd wanted to hear from Nylah. I'd needed her to tell me something I could hold onto. I'd hoped for an answer that would set my soul at ease. Right now, I felt torn apart, shattered into a thousand pieces. I was sick with worry about Erol. Where was he? What was he doing? Was he okay?

Without the mate bond between us to find him, to know what he was feeling, I was left completely in the dark.

It was ironic, since he was the one captured in darkness, not me. Still, I felt lost and alone, forgotten, wandering without a beacon to lead me home.

"Did he truly love me?" I asked. "Was it all a lie, a game that his Conjurite side enjoyed? I feel like he played with me—he's a cat, and I was a naïve, trusting little mouse. What if he just got bored with me and cast me aside when the game got tiring?"

Nylah frowned, watching my face as she listened to my words. It didn't look like she was looking at *me*, though. It was like she looked right through me. Her face changed, and her eyes glowed and churned so that I didn't know the depths of them. I was too scared to find out, so I looked away. The power Nylah possessed, although good, was terrifying in how strong it was. She was closer to Terra than anyone alive that I knew of, and it was scary to be that close to the Goddess.

Nylah turned her head toward the window, but what she saw wasn't in this realm.

"Hazel, young one, fear not," she said in a strange voice. "From pain sprouts joy, and from sacrifice sprouts everlasting life. You walk in the shadows, but this is not the end. The light will prevail. Stand strong, child. The darkness is thick, but it is always darkest before the dawn. A new sun will rise, and you will look back at the night and wonder why you feared it so."

Those weren't the words of Nylah herself. She'd spoken with the words of the Goddess Terra.

She blinked her eyes, and when she looked at me again, Nylah's eyes were her own.

"It doesn't feel like everything will be okay," I admitted.

"I know." Nylah leaned forward and hugged me, holding on tightly. "It never does, but Terra is true to her word, and she wouldn't have offered a vision, a prophecy, if it wouldn't come true. Have faith, my friend. You'll be okay."

"Will we learn how to do this? Will Terra show us an easier way to help the Conjurites, a better way to help Erol find his way back?"

"Terra reveals all in good time. I trust her when she says that this isn't the end."

I wanted to believe that it was true. Terra had always come through for us before; her prophecies had never been wrong.

I just didn't know if it meant that Erol and I would end up together, if he cared about me at all. The words were only that the darkness would pass. Did that mean that my time with Erol would end, too?

I wished it was all over. In some ways, I wished it had never happened at all.





## EROL

I didn't know what happened. When I opened my eyes, I lay face down on the dried grass. The wind rustled through the grass, whispering messages of doom. I lifted my head—the hovercraft was gone, and so were my men. I was alone.

I pushed myself up. My body ached, and my head throbbed painfully.

“Hello?” I called out, looking around, but there was nothing around me except the flat countryside, stretching in all directions. In the far distance, almost on the horizon, I saw the mountains where my cabin was, and just beyond that, the castle.

Dark clouds drew together above me. Thunder rumbled overhead, and the wind picked up. It tugged at my clothes.

I took a step forward, and then another. My body moved of its own accord. Power rippled around me—the darkness above, the storm that brewed, all came from within me. The magic was so thick, I couldn't breathe.

The only thought that swirled through my mind was that Hazel had to die.

*No!*

This time, the voice in my head didn't belong to Cyrene. It was my own voice. Everything else about me—my body, my motives, my magic—belonged to Cyrene. She thrust me forward, marching me back to the castle to complete her

mission, and I was nothing more than a passenger in my own body, along for the ride.

*Stop it! I won't do it!*

Cyrene laughed out loud, her laughter dancing around me, louder than the thunder and the wind.

“You can't stop this, Erol,” she said. “Finally, you understand that you have no control over yourself or your life. You belong to me.”

*I won't do it!* I shouted again. The voice was only in my head, I couldn't even speak the words I wanted. Cyrene really was in control. *You can't do this to me. Let me go!*

Not only did she not do what I asked, she ignored me completely.

I flashed back on Ellie and how I'd taken her to the villages to destroy them. Falx had controlled her, then. I'd thought it was pathetic at the time—how could anyone be so weak that their will didn't override the power of someone else's magic?

I understood it now. The frustration, the pain of being controlled.

The fear.

I marched ahead. My breathing was rhythmic, my heartbeat steady as I walked on, but inside, I was screaming. I was hyper-aware of everything around me—the storm that built above me, the darkness that drowned out the sun. The solitude.

I was truly alone.

My thoughts raced to Hazel, and I searched desperately for our bond. I had to warn her. I found the bond and started to lift the wall I'd slammed down. I had to talk to her one more time. She had to get out of the castle. She had to get away as fast as she could and take everyone with her. It wouldn't be a fair fight. Cyrene was more powerful than ever, letting her true force out, and she used the magic I had to fuel it.

“Oh, no, you don’t,” Cyrene snapped, and she slammed the wall back into place. “You’re not going to win this. I call the shots. I won’t risk her getting away. Those healers have caused enough trouble with their outreach program, trying to take my Conjurites away from me.”

*They’re helping them,* I countered.

“They’re ruining them. Why fix something that isn’t broken? They’re meddling with my plans, and they have to go. All of them.”

When Cyrene said they had to go, an image flashed in my mind. I saw Hazel, Vanya, and Zita—all dead. Their blood was on my hands and stained my clothes. I saw my mom and sister, not as the Luminescent Fae they were now, but as creatures of darkness.

*Leave them out of this!* I cried out. *Let them go, you promised!*

“You changed the game when you went against my wishes. We were doing so well, too. For centuries you played along just fine, and then you had to start thinking about being a hero. You’re not a hero, Erol. You’re a villain. It’s all you’ve ever been, and all you ever will be.”

My heart shattered in my chest.

Time became strange—it stretched thin, doubled on itself, folded, and stretched again, until it felt like an eternity, before the castle popped up not too far away.

My chest burned, my lungs screamed at me, and I tasted my heart in my throat. Adrenaline pumped through my body, and my palms were clammy, slick with sweat.

My mind spun, but it was mentally exhausting trying to fight Cyrene, to push her out. I needed a mental break from all of this.

I suddenly walked in the sun in a beautiful garden. The sound of water flowing nearby was soothing.

“Erol?” Hazel asked, and she smiled at me. Her dark hair hung loose over her shoulders, and I walked to her, running

my fingers through her hair before I touched her cheek.

“I was hoping you’d come. Ren prepared a meal for us. We should go inside.” She nodded toward the palace.

I frowned. How had I ended up in Jasfin?

“Where are we?” I asked.

She laughed, the sound clear like a bell. I could listen to her laughter all day.

“It’s my private garden. I told you I wanted to show it to you. It’s not a crime to be alone together, you know. Everyone knows what we are.”

When I didn’t move, she came to me and took my hand.

“Are you okay?”

“Something’s wrong,” I said. At the back of my mind, a little voice screamed that this wasn’t real. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t be silly,” Hazel said. “You’re right where you belong.”

The images disappeared, and I was in Palgia. The darkness had grown thicker, although it wasn’t nighttime yet. I knew the sun hid behind those clouds.

Gale force winds blew around me, ripping across the landscape. Debris blew around—broken branches, pieces of wood that belonged in the walls of homes. Half a cart rolled by.

I’d been hallucinating. Hazel, the palace in Jasfin, her garden...

None of that was real. I was starting to lose it.

“You can try whatever you want, you’re not escaping this,” Cyrene said.

I looked around. Her voice was crystal clear all around me, bright despite the roar of the storm, but I couldn’t see her. If I could face her, we could settle it between us, and no one had to get hurt. All I needed to do was find her.

*Where are you? I demanded. I'll take you on, we can take care of this once and for all. Show yourself! You're hiding away like a coward!*

I hated that I couldn't speak. I was a prisoner in my own body.

Cyrene chuckled. "You're trying every trick in the book to distract me from what we're going to do next. You sound like a child, looking for one excuse after the other. It's pathetic. Your fear makes you weak."

*Just show your face, damn it!*

"I can't very well show my face when I'm inside of you."

I stilled, and my body ran cold. Was this all that was left of me? A dark goddess who controlled me? Was my future to be stuck in this body that didn't belong to me, only able to see what was happening without the power to control anything anymore?

"You're finally catching on," Cyrene said smugly. "I wondered how long it would take you."

*After everything I've done for you, after all the years I've given you, this is how you repay me? This is what it comes to?*

"If you wanted a just reward, a happy ending, you should have thought twice about turning away from the light."

*You didn't leave me a choice!*

"Everyone has a choice, Erol. You made yours."

I bristled, my fear and panic giving way to anger and resentment. I hadn't had a choice, unless I'd been willing to lose my family. I would never have done that. She was right, ultimately, though; I'd been the one to choose to let them live.

The castle loomed, coming closer and closer. The darkness around me grew thicker and thicker until I couldn't see anything anymore.

They were all there; I sensed their Luminescent power.

An urge to snuff out that light erupted inside me. I wanted to drag them into the darkness with me. I wanted them to give

up the light so that they could be warriors of darkness, fighting alongside me to attack whatever beauty was left in the world and ruin that, too.

And if they refused to come to the dark side with me, if they refused to turn to the darkness...I would kill them all.

My desires terrified me.

*It's not what I want*, I said.

"It's what I want," Cyrene replied. "And we are one, now. What I want, you want."

My heart hammered in my chest. Pain flooded my body. I knew what would follow, and to think about hurting them was horrifying. I couldn't do it. I couldn't be here, watching as Cyrene destroyed everything that was good in this world.

It was easier not to feel, easier not to be present while it happened.

I fought, struggling against the hold she had on me. If I could just get rid of the claws in my chest, my shoulder, my neck...

But Cyrene's grip on me wasn't just her poisonous, oily nails digging into me anymore. She was the very blood in my veins, the power that ran through my body.

It was as she'd said. She was me.

There was no more time for talking, nothing left to say. She wouldn't let me go, and no matter how strong I'd been as a Luminescent, that had been a long, long time ago. There was nothing left of that man.

Just the monster remained, with a dark force at the wheel, driving me straight toward the gates of hell.

I did the one thing that would protect the bit of me that was still left—I switched off every part of me that cared, every emotion, and let my body march on as the puppet I was.





## HAZEL

“**W**hat’s with this weather?” I asked, rubbing my hands together against the cold. The temperatures had suddenly plummeted. This morning had been warm with the sun out, and now it was as dark as night outside.

“I don’t know what’s—” Loud thunder and a crack of lightning that momentarily lit up the sky drowned out the rest of my mom’s voice.

We huddled around the fire in the living room.

“Where are Marilla and Agatha?” Nylah asked. “I haven’t seen them since yesterday.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I think this is hard on them. They came here with the idea that Erol wanted to turn things around, and...” Another loud crack above made me pause until the worst was over before I kept talking. “They ended up seeing something very different.”

My heart constricted as I spoke, and I leaned in a little closer to the fire. The warmth could seep into my hands and warm up my body, but it wouldn’t help to warm up the coldness in my chest where a whole heart had been. I was nothing but a compilation of broken pieces and refracted light now.

Nylah shook her head. “This situation will right itself, Hazel. I know it’s hard to believe when everything feels so dark.” She turned her head toward the window at the storm

howling outside. “Terra told us that the darkness wouldn’t prevail, that the sun would come out again, and I’m holding onto that.”

I nodded. Nylah was right, Terra had sent us a message. I just didn’t know how things could get better from here; it seemed like our current situation continued to get worse.

The weather didn’t help. Darkness had already ruined everything I’d held dear. It had taken Erol away from me. Looking out of the window now and seeing how the clouds blocked out the sun only felt symbolic of what this life had become and of what Erol dealt with all the time.

We fell quiet. Mom and Zita sat huddled together for warmth and whispered softly to each other from time to time. I didn’t join in on any conversation—I had nothing left to say.

The atmosphere slowly shifted. The change was subtle at first. The darkness pushed its way inside through the windows and underneath the doors; until suddenly, everything seemed to be wrapped in it, and the black power clung to the furniture, the curtains, the very foundations of the castle.

I looked up and frowned, locking eyes with Nylah.

“Something’s wrong,” we said in unison.

As if the verbal acknowledgement had allowed the darkness the permission to rule, the magic grew thick in the room. It crackled like static, dancing on my skin. It was in the air, so that I had to breathe carefully, or it would force its way down my throat and try to suffocate me.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked, sitting up.

Zita jumped to her feet. “We’re under attack.”

“How is that possible?” I asked, even though I knew she was right. The darkness in the room was riddled with power that wanted only one thing—triumph.

I sensed Erol, becoming aware of him. I ran to the window and looked out.

He stood in the middle of my garden, the garden he’d ruined, and despite how far away he was, his eyes locked on

mine. They were black, and I shivered as they drew me in, threatening to pull me into the darkness. My mind spun, as if he'd tried to roll it, and I squeezed my eyes shut to break the contact.

“He’s here,” I said in a hoarse voice.

“What?” Nylah came to the window.

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat. My emotions threatened to get the better of me. Not only had I lost Erol when he'd run away and thrown up that wall between us, but the man who stood out there was nothing like the man I'd come to know.

He was pure evil, wielding darkness as if it was all there was in his life.

It was. There was nothing of him left.

I clapped my hand to my mouth, and tears welled in my eyes.

Erol sent a blast of magic toward us, and it was so powerful, it smashed the windows. Zita lunged forward and tackled me and Nylah to the ground, protecting us from the glass that flew into the room. It ripped the curtains, peppered the couches, turning them into shivs.

The wind whipped around the room now that there was no glass to keep it out, and the darkness was inside. The roar of the storm made it impossible to hear anything else.

Zita jumped to her feet and leaped through the window, running toward Erol.

“No!” Mom shouted. “What if he kills her?!”

“Not on my watch,” Nylah said and followed Zita.

My mom and I stared through the window as Zita attacked Erol. She threw her magic at him, blasts of light that pulsed through the darkness, strobing and flashing.

It hit Erol in the chest, on the jaw, on the thigh.

He barely stumbled. He offered a malicious grin and threw darkness at Zita.

It slammed into her, and she screamed. The sound of terror could be heard above the rumble in the air that followed.

Mom gasped and threatened to jump through the window, too. I held her back.

“He’s too strong!”

“Not if we’re all in this together!” she said and yanked herself free.

Before she could reach them, Nylah used her own magic to stop what Erol was doing to Zita. She wrapped Zita in a bubble of light, and the darkness bounced off her and dripped to the ground as if it was oil.

My hands trembled, and fear threatened to choke me. I struggled to breathe. I didn’t know if it was from the darkness or my own fear getting the better of me.

I wasn’t a warrior. I knew how to heal, how to create. I knew how to bring light and love. I didn’t know how to fight, to conquer, to destroy.

I couldn’t leave them out there alone. This was partly my fault. I’d gone to Erol and convinced him to turn back to the light. I’d pushed him into this, and it had only ripped him apart and yanked him further away from me. I couldn’t let anything happen to the people I loved because I’d played with fire.

If anyone was going to get burned because of this, it was me.

I summoned all the courage I could muster and climbed through the broken window, too. I was careful not to let any of the shards scratch or cut me.

I ran toward Nylah and my mom. Mom had added her magic to Nylah’s so that they blocked the darkness Erol pushed against them. They held him back well enough, but they couldn’t use extra power to help Zita. They had nothing left to give.

Zita lay in the dirt, curling in pain as the darkness tried to consume her from within. Erol’s power was so much stronger than I’d ever felt it before.

I ran to Zita. I could heal her.

I felt Erol's eyes on me, burning, dark, menacing. I refused to look into them. The man was gone, and only the monster remained. I couldn't afford to let him get into my head, to let his power take control of me, too.

I put my hands on Zita's chest. She looked toward the heavens without seeing anything and screamed repeatedly. The darkness had gotten a hold of her, and it squeezed the light out of her, crushing her. I forced my power into her, flooding her with light. I pushed so much into her, any other Conjurite or Fae might have buckled under it. The darkness in her was so strong, it wrestled with the light.

Zita's skin became mottled and purple with bruises as she fought the darkness inside of her. My light helped, but it looked like we were going to lose this battle.

"We can't hold him off much longer!" Mom warned me.

Erol came closer and closer. With every step he took toward me, the power pulsed thicker. My ears rang, it pushed against my skin like a giant hand, and it made it impossible to breathe.

I turned my focus to my own magic and used Erol's rhythm to pulse it into Zita's chest.

It was the only way I could do it without his power railroading me completely.

Zita gasped as if she'd finally come up for air, and the bruises on her skin started to fade.

I helped her to her feet.

Nylah's and my mom's magic started to buckle. The darkness was too much.

"We have to get out of here!" I screamed.

"Go!" Nylah yelled. "I'll hold him as long as I can!"

"We can't leave you!"

"You won't, I'm right behind you!"

I nodded, and Mom grabbed Zita's hand. They ran toward the window we'd used to get out and climbed through it. I hurried after them. Nylah followed behind us a moment later. We waited until she was with us before we ran through the castle.

The darkness was everywhere. We could barely see anything. The lights in the castle were on, but they did nothing.

"We have to find Erol's family!" I shouted. "I don't know where they are, I can't sense them at all!"

Nylah stopped.

"We have to go. *Now!*" I urged.

Nylah didn't move. She closed her eyes, and her magic rippled outward like a sonar.

"They're in the dungeon," she finally said, opening her eyes.

Terror filled my body.

"We have to get them," Mom said.

I froze. "I can't go down there again. I can't—"

"We have no choice. We can't leave them behind."

The castle trembled, the walls groaning around us, and we felt the darkness grow thicker still. Erol had just entered the castle; I had no doubt about it.

"We have to move fast," Mom said, and I nodded. She was right, we had no choice. Erol was here to kill anyone who stood in his way, and we had to get out as fast as we could.

Flashes of the night we'd escaped from the dungeon came to me, and my stomach curled and twisted. I felt sick, and I worried I would throw up as we ran.

Mom somehow found the way to the dungeon. I hesitated at the top of the stairs that spiraled downward. It was like a black hole, and I was terrified if we went in there, it would suck in our freedom, and we would be stuck down there again.

Erol's power pushed against me from behind. He was on his way, following us—following the light. It was ironic that the very thing I'd wanted him to do all this time was what would allow him to kill us. We were beacons of light in the darkness, and he was on his way, not to join us, but to eradicate the light once and for all.

Fear laced every decision, every thought, every breath I took.

Nylah turned to me. "It's not your fear."

She'd taught so many people that exact thing. This fear didn't belong to me, it was born from dark magic, and it was the essence of Conjurite magic.

I didn't tell her that a lot of it was my own fear as well. It didn't matter.

I took the first step down, and another, and another. I hoped that with every step, it would get easier, but it didn't. I felt like we were descending into hell itself.

When we stood in the long hallway between the cell doors, I moaned with fear and anguish. This was it; we'd reached hell.

"Marilla!" Mom shouted, running from cell to cell, seemingly unbothered by the memories of our time here.

"Over here! Vanya!" Marilla called out, and we moved to the only closed door. The dungeons had been empty for a long time, but that didn't make any of this easier.

The door was jammed shut by magic. Mom rattled it, tried to open it, to no avail.

"We've tried for hours," Agatha said on the other side. "I don't know how we got here, it was this darkness that dragged us down, and now we can't use our power to get it open."

The hexed stones in the wall, I realized. They prisoners couldn't use their magic.

But we weren't prisoners. We could still do what needed to be done.

“We have to do it together,” I said.

I flattened my hands against the thick metal door. A shiver traveled through my body.

Erol was at the top of the stairs. His darkness preceded him, a force to be reckoned with. It crept down the stairs, slowly, a predator looking for its next kill.

“Come on,” I urged Mom and Nylah.

Mom’s eyes were wide, rolling in her sockets. She felt the pain of the past, too. Memories plagued her as much as they plagued me.

“As soon as we get them out, we can get out, too,” I reminded her. It looked like we took turns being strong for each other.

Mom and Nylah flattened their hands against the door just as I did, and we turned our attention inward, to the light within us. We tapped into the same collective power, into the light Terra had put into us. The metal door warmed under my palms, and a moment later, the lock clicked open.

Marilla swung the door open from the inside. She looked haggard, her hair matted and knotted, her face dirty. Her eyes were sunken, and she was skin and bones. Agatha looked just as bad—it looked as if they’d been down here for years and not just a day.

“We don’t have time,” I said when Mom stared at them in horror, trying to find the right words.

The darkness was on us, and if we waited a second longer, trying to escape would be pointless—we would be dead. I had no doubt that Erol had only one goal in mind: to kill us all.

Zita and Nylah sprang into action, grabbing Marilla and Agatha by the hand.

“This way!” I called, and they followed. Mom finally sprang to motion and brought up the rear as I followed the all-too familiar route to the dining hall where we’d eaten so many meals as prisoners.



The hall was deserted, a thick layer of dust covering everything. The large counters with food dishes were empty. I was acutely aware of the lack of guards.

We ran toward the kitchen. This was how we'd escaped last time.

The door was shut and locked.

"No!" I growled, throwing my weight against it. It wouldn't budge, and the force hurt my shoulder—it would leave a bruise.

I could deal with those as long as I was alive.

"Let me," Zita said, stepping up.

She threw her body against the door as I had, but her warrior strength broke through, and the door splintered around her. She kicked the wooden slats out of the way, letting us all through before she followed.

We ran toward the steep steps that led to the servants' entrance.

Mom went through first, with Marilla and Agatha behind her. They struggled, weak as we had once been, but Nylah was right behind them, helping them up physically as well as with her magic.

"Go, go, go," Zita said quickly when it was my turn.

I took one step up before I paused.

Erol was right behind us. His power was so strong, we could barely see anything at all, and I struggled to think straight. The fight for survival, a natural instinct, had kicked in and taken over. All I'd focused on until now was that we had to get away as quickly as we could, with everyone together, our lives still intact.

Every step through the dungeon, on this path Erol had sent us on the first time, brought back memories I wished I could forget. Except...Erol. I couldn't forget about him.

He'd been the one to help us escape, arranging a way for us to get out despite the guards being everywhere, despite how

weak and powerless we'd been.

He'd been our hero that night, even though he'd been our warden for months on end.

He'd had good in him.

I flashed on our first meeting in Jasfin after it all, and the spark of light I'd seen in him. I'd seen that same light and goodness when we'd arrived here at the castle and when I'd gone to help him.

This darkness, the power, the promise of death, wasn't Erol. I ran from him, but it wasn't *him* who did this. It was something else. He was a victim, a prisoner, just as we had been.

"What are you waiting for?" Zita cried out. "He's gaining on us!"

I shook my head. "I can't go."

"What?" Zita and my mom—who'd come back to the top of the stairs to see what took us so long—cried out in unison.

"He's not himself! He needs help!" I said. "I can't abandon him now. I can't leave him behind to suffer in this mess all by himself. It's all he's ever had. I can't do that to him."

"He'll kill you!" Nylah cried out.

"You told me yourself—with Terra's words—that this was the dark before the sun came out again. I can't run from him, Nylah. I'm...I love him."

Nylah stared at me before she nodded.

"Do what you need to do."

"How can you say that?" Mom screeched, furious. She glared at me. "Hazel, come here, right now! We're not leaving you behind!"

I shook my head, determination taking over where fear had ruled a moment ago.

"He needs me."

"He'll kill you!"

“He’s not a monster.”

“You said that he’s not himself! There’s nothing left!”

I shook my head. “I refuse to believe it. Everyone deserves a second chance; everyone deserves to be saved. That’s how we do things, Mom.”

She wanted to argue, but she knew I was right. Her face crumpled as she accepted it. She ran down the stairs and threw her arms around me.

“I love you more than life itself. I’m so proud of the woman you’ve become.” She held me at arm’s length and looked into my eyes. “Come back to me.”

“I will,” I promised.

Zita and Mom looked at each other, and a wordless conversation passed between them before Zita nodded.

“We’ll see each other again,” she said.

I nodded. I was terrified this was goodbye, but I had to do the right thing.

Zita and Mom ran up the steps, leaving me behind. When the door slammed shut again, it felt too final.

I swallowed hard, tasting my heart in my throat. I wished I could just run, too.

What about Erol? He needed someone to fight *for* him.

That was exactly what I had to do.



## EROL

I walked through the abandoned dining hall. I could see their footsteps in the thick layer of dust on the floor. They'd come through here, escaping the way I'd let them get away a year ago.

I let my steps falter on purpose, giving them a head start.

"You can't stop what's happening," Cyrene snapped, knowing what I was doing.

She might have been right, but I could give them time to escape. They knew how serious this was. They could sense I would kill them. If they got away before I got to them, there was nothing Cyrene could do.

I heard the sound of a board being kicked, footsteps in the kitchen, and something inside me cracked.

When Hazel turned the corner, my heart stopped altogether.

*What are you doing here? I tried to let you escape!*

I tried to shout at her, to tell her to leave, but my words were still just a voice inside my head.

"You just can't let well enough alone, can you?" I heard myself say instead.

Hazel jutted her chin up into the air. Her defiance was beautiful. Goddess, I'd missed her so much over the past few days. I wished I could cross the floor, take her in my arms, and hold her tight.

“You just had to be the hero, the one who saves the day.”

I hated the words that came out of my mouth despite what I felt.

“Erol, this isn’t you,” Hazel said.

I scowled at her. “How would you know who I am? You don’t know anything! You’re young and foolish.”

On the inside, I melted that she would still think so good of me, even though none of it could be seen.

“I know who you are, and I know who you are not,” she said. Those words hit me hard—they were the same words Cyrene had said to me when she’d just been a voice inside my head. “I’ve seen the good in you, and I refuse to believe that it’s not there anymore.”

Cyrene laughed through me, and the sound was harsh and uncomfortable, even though she used my voice.

“It doesn’t matter what you see and what you think. Once this is all over, there won’t be anything left of you, and your Good Samaritan run will be over.”

Power collected all around me. The magic thickened, and Cyrene prepared to strike Hazel down.

As my magic grew, Hazel summoned her own power. Her skin started to glow, her eyes changed, like a whole galaxy lived in them.

The light that poured out of her touched me, and I wanted to bathe in it.

It only angered Cyrene.

“You’re no match for me,” I snarled.

“You think that darkness is all there is, so you don’t know what power the light has. You’ve been absent from the light for so long, you’ve forgotten what power it has. Cyrene,” she addressed the Dark Goddess instead of me, “You’ve had him long enough.”

“We’ll see about that,” Cyrene said, and the power she summoned was so great, it felt like it would come undone at

the seams. The darkness became so thick, I couldn't see much. I was aware of Hazel and where she was, but I couldn't see her face, her eyes. I couldn't reach her at all.

This was where we ended, where I lost Hazel, and I wouldn't even be able to look at her one last time.

My heart cracked, splitting down the middle as I thought about losing her once and for all. Not being with her was one thing, but killing her...

The anguish was too much to bear. I didn't want to see it.

"You're going to watch as I kill her," Cyrene said to me.

A part of me I didn't know was still there snapped. Instead of giving in, turning my face away, and letting Cyrene take over as I had until now, I dug my heels in and forced my own power—even if it was just willpower—to the surface.

*No!* I cried out. *You're not using me to take her!*

Cyrene tried to unleash her magic, but I stopped her. It was hard to hold her, and I wouldn't be able to do it for long.

*Hazel, run!* I shouted, but she couldn't hear me, and despite knowing that I would strike her down, she stayed put. Oh, I'd always loved her stubbornness, her sheer force of will and determination. Now, I hated it. Why wouldn't she just let me go?

"You won't stop me!" I screamed, my voice bellowing, bouncing off the stone walls around us and coming back at me.

I sounded harsh and merciless and nothing like the man I'd become. I sounded like the Erol I used to be when I'd done Falx's bidding—and so, Cyrene's—without question.

*I'm not letting you do this!*

"Then I'll destroy you along with her," Cyrene sneered at me.

*I don't care!* If she killed me, she couldn't use me to do evil anymore. I didn't want to die, but if it meant Hazel could

live, I would give it all up in a heartbeat. I would rather be dead than have a future without her in it.

The power built inside me as Cyrene struggled against me, and I fought it. I threw everything I had into it. I screamed in my head, the magic started to pull me apart. My body ached, my flesh tore, and the power took over. I wouldn't last very long. I could already feel my energy running out as if I was a vase that had cracked. As long as my power didn't seep out and Cyrene regained control, I didn't care.

I looked at Hazel, who stared at me with eyes filled with horror and pain.

She could see what it was doing to me.

I wished she wouldn't.

*I love you*, I told her, although she couldn't hear me. *You were my hope, you were my future.*

I closed my eyes and waited for the end to come.





## HAZEL

I watched Erol as he talked to himself. It was as if he'd gone crazy, his attention turning away from me and inward toward something I couldn't see.

After the third time he talked to himself, I realized what was going on.

He was talking to Cyrene. Or she was talking to him. Whatever it was, it was all wrong, and it was clear he wasn't in control. He tried to fight her. I didn't only see his struggle, I also sensed how hard he fought against the darkness.

He still had light in him. He still had that spark. I'd felt it when our bond had been forged; I'd seen it every time we'd interacted. Erol still had what it took to face Cyrene, to take her on rather than to sit back and admit defeat.

That kind of power, that kind of strength of will, deserved to be saved. Erol wasn't a bad man, he was good, and he deserved to live. He would give it all up for me, and Cyrene wouldn't hesitate to kill him.

After that, I didn't doubt that she would kill me, too.

I wouldn't let her do that to either of us.

Erol was stuck in a battle inside himself, and they'd both seemingly forgotten about me.

Instead of running away while I had the chance, I ran toward Erol. I held out my hands and summoned my power. By the time I reached him, I shoved all the power I had into

him. Healing power, light... Anything I could muster. Whatever I had to give, I would give all of it until there was nothing left for me to pour into him.

The moment the light touched him, it yanked me along with it, and suddenly, I stood in some kind of dreamscape. The dungeon, the dining hall, the kitchen...

It was all gone. We stood in a strange void, with darkness covering everything so that I could only see Erol. He was standing in front of me with his head tilted down and his gaze pale and ghostly.

I only let the strangeness of the situation jar me for a moment. I was here to help.

I lifted my hands, balled into fists, and slammed them down on Erol's chest. I screamed as I did, shoving as much power into him as I possibly could.

The moment I touched him, I could see the hold Cyrene had on him. I heard her voice, felt her power.

She had her claws in Erol, and the metaphysical image was terrifying. Her hands were buried in his chest, one hand wrapped around his heart, long black nails digging into the red flesh.

"Take it!" I cried out. "Erol, take what I'm giving you!"

He heard me. When he became aware of me, I felt the wall between us crumble, and his emotions flooded through our bond. He was terrified, he was furious, and now that I was here, he was relieved. He was still in awe that I'd come back for him. Underneath it all lay an incredible love for me. He still cared. He'd always cared.

"I'm here," I said. "I'm not going anywhere. We'll do this together."

Erol gasped, and his eyes became bright.

"I thought I wouldn't ever see you again," he said, and this time, I heard his voice, and I knew the words he spoke were his own. "You shouldn't have come back for me."

"You should never have left," I said.

“I didn’t know what to do.”

“I do,” I said, and I pumped more of my power into him.

Cyrene had his hands around his heart, but she didn’t take into consideration that I *had* his heart, and he had mine.

The power filled Erol, pushing the darkness away. I watched as he slowly filled with light. It started at his feet and filled him like he was a cup.

When the light reached his heart, he would be free of her. She wouldn’t be able to fight it. We were stronger together, and our bond allowed me to give him something she couldn’t force on him. She didn’t have any kind of bond with him, their relationship was non-existent. The only emotion he felt for her was pure hatred. Love trumped hatred, every time.

The light filled Erol up more and more. I looked into his eyes, and he looked right back at me. Affection passed between us, more than could be put to words.

The light was so close, he only needed a little more.

Before I could pour more into him, Cyrene manifested herself into a physical form, and she jumped between us.

She broke the contact between me and Erol, and I fell backward, my hands breaking away from his chest.

We were back in the real world, the dining hall all around us, old and dark and dusty.

It was the first time I’d seen Cyrene, and she was a creature of dread. Her black dress was ripped and ugly, hanging from her like rags. Her black hair was tangled, and her pale skin looked dry. Her long nails were broken in strange angles

Her eyes were pure black, like they were filled with oil.

“You just had to get involved, didn’t you?” she snarled at me, and it was the first time I’d heard her speak with her own voice. The sound was dreadful, as if she was all around me and in my head at once, and I shivered with cold and fear. “Stupidity is what gets a lot of people killed.” She looked me up and down with loathing. “It’s a pity. I would have been able

to use your power. I know a rotten apple when I see one, and you...you will never work for me.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I won’t do a thing you ask of me. I won’t turn away from the light.”

Her face twisted with rage, but then she laughed, and the sound was like sandpaper against my skin.

“That’s why I’ll just kill you and get it over with. You’ve been a problem for far too long, meddling where you don’t belong.”

Cyrene’s power was suddenly so strong around her, her black hair rose as if the air was loaded with electricity. She lifted her hands upward, her bony fingers curled, her nails creating claws. Her face twisted into an ugly mask, and her power hummed around me.

I let my power come to the surface to meet hers, but she was so much stronger than I was.

“This is the end, little Fae healer. You thought you had it all figured out.”

Her power washed toward me, and it was so strong, there was nothing I could do. I cried out as it washed over me and flattened me.



## EROL

“N O!”

Cyrene was going to kill Hazel. She wanted her out of the way, and Hazel had been on the verge of saving me.

I jumped onto Cyrene, wrapping my arms around her to tackle her to the ground. She'd manifested into a physical being, and physical fighting was my natural warrior's reflex.

Cyrene was still a goddess, and when I grabbed onto her, my arms grabbed nothing, and I fell to the floor. I rolled over and pushed up, getting to my feet in a flash. I stood over Hazel, sinking into a battle stance. I would protect her, no matter what. She wasn't conscious, and I worried something serious was wrong. Before I could check her pulse, Cyrene appeared before me again. She stood tall, towering over me. She'd made herself look bigger in the hopes that it would scare me, but I wasn't scared of her. I was sick and tired of this game.

“I won't let you kill her!” I yelled, looking up at Cyrene.

“You want her dead,” Cyrene said. “You came here with that exact purpose. It's the only way to save your family.”

My family was safe. I'd seen them escape with Vanya, Zita, and Nylah.

“I never wanted it,” I countered. “*You* wanted it. You took over, but it was never my own will.”

“Don’t you get it?” Cyrene asked, her face mocking. “You belong to me. I am you.”

“I’m my own person!” I shouted. “And you were right, everything is a choice. I don’t want this life; I don’t want this darkness. I want to be free.”

Cyrene guffawed, throwing her head back, and the sight was a terrifying one.

“Did you really think saying those words would change anything? It’s not as easy as you think it is. You can’t go back, Erol.”

“I can,” I said. “Conjurites have been freed before. I’ve seen it.”

“You’re not like the rest of them. You have nothing left in you that’s good, and turning to the light will only ruin the bit of what’s left.”

“I’d rather have nothing and be free, than have all the power in the world and be your slave! Terra!”

Cyrene frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, Goddess Terra, please, if you’re out there...I need you!”

Cyrene shook her head. “It’s not going to work.”

“Terra!” I called again.

The more I screamed, the more worried Cyrene looked.

“Stop that!” she hissed. Her anger gave way to uncertainty, and then an emotion that looked very much like fear.

“Terra!”

A bright flash of light filled the room, and Cyrene screamed. She covered her face with her arms and cowered away.

A being appeared before me, the light so bright it was hard to look at her at all.

“Erol,” she said. “You called.”

“I-I did. I need you.”



“I didn’t think I would hear you call again.”

I didn’t know what to say. I sank to one knee and bowed my head.

“Don’t let Cyrene take Hazel away,” I begged. “She only ever wanted to help me. She only ever loved me, despite everything I’ve done. I don’t want her to die, and I don’t want to be the one to kill her. Please, help me.”

Terra kneeled before me. She reached for me, and when she touched my shoulder, warmth flowed through me, although I couldn’t feel the physical touch at all.

“What do you want, Erol?” she asked.

“I want Hazel to live.”

“And for yourself?”

I dared to look up into the bright face. I couldn’t make out her features, but I had the strange sensation that she was smiling at me, her eyes warm and welcoming.

“I want to be rid of this darkness forever. I’m so tired... tired of doing the wrong things, tired of not having my own choices. I’m tired of living in darkness and fear. I just want to do what’s right, without all these voices in my head arguing with me about it.”

“What will you do if you return to the light?” she asked.

“Live a life of goodness, a life that matters,” I said. “I have nothing to show but destruction and pain, and I don’t want that to be the rest of my life. I want to help people. I want to live fully, and I want to be with Hazel.”

“Do you love her?”

“More than I’ve loved anyone,” I confessed.

Terra regarded me, and I waited for her to speak. I was terrified she would turn me away. How could she forgive a man like me, who’d hurt and killed so many? How could she banish the darkness in my life when it had controlled me, defined me, for so long?

“You are a good man, Erol.”

When Terra said that, my eyes welled with tears. Hazel had called me a good man, but Terra was a goddess. She knew all, saw all.

“How can you say that after all I’ve done?” I sobbed.

“I’ve seen your heart, and I saw that everything you did came from a good place. Our actions don’t always define us. You chose to sacrifice yourself to let your family live. There is honor and goodness in that. You were willing to die so that Hazel and the others may live, too. That goodness has prevailed despite all the years you have been drenched in darkness. I see your heart, and I approve of your love for Hazel, and the purity of your intentions.” She took my hand and held it in both of hers.

“Come home, Erol,” she whispered. “I hereby set you free to do the work of the good, to spread light throughout the earth as was your calling all along.”

Light flooded my body, rocking through me as if it had been slammed into me, wave upon wave. I cried out, and tears rolled over my cheeks. Terra didn’t only drive away the darkness, she also healed all the wounds created by Cyrene digging her nails into me. She washed away all the pain and forgave all my transgressions—there were so many, but she wiped the slate clean.

I fell to the ground, holding myself up with one hand so that I wouldn’t crush Hazel beneath me. I looked down at her limp body.

“Will...will she be okay?” I asked.

“She’ll be just fine, thanks to you and your attempt to save her from Cyrene.”

Terra smiled at me. I couldn’t see it, but I felt the warmth that radiated from her.

Relief washed through me. All I wanted was for Hazel to be safe.

“We have to do one more thing before I go,” Terra said.

“What?”

She grabbed me, a little roughly, and she brought her face so close to mine, the light was blinding. She blew power into me through my mouth, and I felt it fill me up like a balloon. When I was so full that I felt like I could burst, Terra stepped back.

“Let it go, Erol. Use what you have and save your people.”

I did what she said. I let go of the magic within me. It pulsed out of me like a wave, and the old metal furniture in the dining hall blew outward, crashing into the walls. I closed my eyes and felt the magic blast further and further like ripples in a pond. It raced across the lands, starting with the castle and washing outward. It touched every soul in Palgia and drove away the darkness. It showed them who they used to be and let them see the light again, and I felt as each and every one of them accepted it, embraced it, and turned away from the darkness.

Despite the risk of losing someone, nobody died. I didn't know how I knew—I just did. Cyrene had lost, and her power to keep her people, killing them if she couldn't keep them in the Conjurite darkness, was gone.

They knew what was happening. They knew how it had all come to be, and they had a divine understanding of everything that had happened—Falx and his control, the darkness, the power that dragged them under without choices of their own.

My kingdom was finally free.

The earth drank in the power, and the destruction and death disappeared. The darkness vanished, running away from the light, and the earth was renewed.

When the light finally stopped pulsing out of me, I slumped forward, shifting on the dusty floor so I sat down next to Hazel.

She moved next to me.

“Erol?” she asked.

I looked at her, and she gasped. “What happened?”

“I'm free, Hazel,” I said. “We're free.”



## HAZEL

Cyrene was gone. Every bit of darkness was gone. When I blinked my eyes open, the whole dining area was filled with a strange, pulsing light.

When I turned to see where the light came from, Erol sat next to me, his skin glowing.

“I’m free, Hazel,” he said when he saw me. “We’re free.”

“How...?”

“Terra. She came when I called her. I couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t fight Cyrene alone. She was going to kill you, and I couldn’t do it.” His voice trembled, and his face crumpled, but he laughed through his tears. “She came for me when I called her. I thought she’d given up on me.”

“Never,” I said. “Terra would never give up on anyone, least of all you. Neither would I.”

Erol blinked at me before he grabbed me and pulled me against him. He planted kisses all over my face.

“I love you so much,” he said. “You have no idea.”

Our bond was open again, and through it, I felt the intensity of his love for me, the truth of everything he said.

“You look different,” I mentioned.

“How?” Erol asked with a frown.

His dark hair had become lighter, and his almost-black eyes were hazel now, with golden flecks in them.

“You’re alive again.”

Erol hugged me tightly against him.

“I love you, too,” I said. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For saving me.”

Erol shook his head. “You saved me.”

“We saved each other,” I added with a smile.

Erol climbed to his feet, offering me a hand to pull me up.

“There’s more,” he said. “Palgia is freed, too.”

I was confused. What did he mean? Erol took my hand, and we made our way back through the dungeon, climbing the stairs to the castle.

Everything was filled with light, and it had a shimmering quality to it that I’d never seen in Palgia before. Erol led me through the castle hallways and out the front door in the courtyard.

When we walked to the gardens, I gasped.

Palgia wasn’t the ugly, forsaken land I knew. It was beautiful. The gardens had been restored—the hedges were evergreen and perfectly trimmed, roses and Lettles and other flowers in full bloom. Perfect rolling lawns stretched as far as the eye could see, and the fountain in the center babbled happily as water poured out of it.

When I turned to look at the castle, it was like new, with climbers all over the walls.

The rest of the kingdom was beautiful, too. The trees were lush, the shrubbery thick and healthy. The orchard beyond the castle bore fruit, and the small stream behind the castle sounded like a roaring river.

“Oh,” I breathed.

“The people have returned to the light,” Erol said to me.

He pulled me closer to him again, looking deep into my eyes. “They’re safe. They’re happy. They’re home. This

kingdom is one to be proud of, and we can live our lives in peace.”

“Where’s Cyrene?” I asked.

Erol shrugged. “Who the hell cares?”

He burst out laughing, and the sound was contagious. I laughed with him, and the world seemed to relish in our joy.

I touched Erol’s shimmering face, cupping his cheeks. I looked into his eyes, stood on my toes, and kissed him.

Terra had been right—the sun had come out again, and the darkness was gone.

We’d just had to have faith.

“Hazel!” someone cried out, and when I turned, Mom ran toward me. “I thought we would lose you!” She pulled me into a hug.

Zita joined us, holding onto the two of us tightly.

“I’m okay,” I said. I reached for Nylah and hugged her, too, when she joined us. “You were right.”

Nylah smiled and looked at Erol. “It’s even more than I could ever have dreamed. He’s pretty handsome, too.”

I giggled and blushed. Erol was so attractive, I could barely stop myself from grabbing him and kissing him again. It wasn’t just his handsomeness, though. It was everything about him—most of all, the light that shone from inside him.

“Oh, Erol, my darling boy!” Marilla reached for Erol as if she’d seen an apparition.

“I told you he would come back to us!” Agatha said and beamed at her brother. “It just took a little longer than we thought.”

I stared at Erol’s mother and sister. They had been emaciated, so thin and sickly when we’d gotten them out of the dungeon, but they were healthy and beautiful again, their skins smooth and blemish free, hair glossy, and their clothes had been restored, too.

“What now?” I asked, looking around.

I had no idea what we were meant to do now; our calling had been fulfilled. The Conjurites were free. They were Fae again.

“Now, we celebrate,” Erol said, rubbing his hands together with a grin.

I laughed. I liked this positive Erol, who glowed with happiness and light, who was the man he was meant to be.

I could make a life with him. I could do forever with him.

Today was the start of our journey together.





## EROL

I walked through the castle, checking every public room where the guests would be.

“We need flowers here,” I said to one of the servants who dusted a coffee table in a private living room for the guests.

“I’m on it, sir,” she said and hurried out of the room.

I nodded, making sure everything else was fine before I walked to the next room.

Hazel found me in one of the last rooms. She came to me and kissed me.

“You’re not supposed to run around, checking on all these things. That’s what you hired the planner for.”

“I know, I know. I just want everything to be perfect.”

She smiled and cupped my cheek, running her fingers through the beard on my chin. I’d grown the beard while I struggled with my dual personality—it was how I liked to refer to my stint with Cyrene. Hazel had told me she liked the facial hair, so I kept it. It was much lighter than it used to be. I still had to get used to seeing myself in the mirror after the darkness had left me.

Hazel had helped me—had saved me. I would lay down my life for her,

Everything for her.

“The guests are already arriving. You should get dressed. The ceremony will start soon.”

I pulled her closer to me and kissed her deeply. When I let go of her, her cheeks turned bright pink, and her blue eyes grew darker with need.

“I can’t wait for the ceremony, because after that, we get to celebrate. I can think of a few ways I’d like to get started.” I put my hands on her hips and grinded myself against her.

Hazel giggled and blushed again. “Don’t get me worked up now; it’s going to be a long day.”

I wagged my eyebrows at her before I let her go, and she laughed, walking away from me. It was hot to watch her go. She was beautiful in every way, and I loved having her beneath me, writing and gasping, strengthening our bond.

When Hazel was gone, I shook myself out of my awe of her and turned toward the room where I had to get dressed. We stayed in a room together, since she was my mate, but we weren’t going to get ready for the ceremony together.

I chuckled to myself, thinking about how everything had come together over the years. The first time I’d seen Hazel, she had been a prisoner in Falx’s dungeon. I hadn’t realized back then that she would be my mate. Now, we had defeated a dark goddess together, we’d forged a mate bond, and freed a kingdom.

I would never in my wildest dreams have thought anyone could revive me, bringing me back to life after I’d spent centuries being dead on the inside.

“Are you ready, sire?” my valet said, coming into the room with the clothes I was meant to wear.

My outfit consisted of black, shimmering pants and a purple shirt, embroidered with golden thread with the crest of Palgia. Golden epaulets adorned my shoulders, with a golden sash across my chest and medals that adorned my breast.

The valet slicked my hair back—it was longer now that I didn’t have to keep it in a warrior’s brush cut—and combed my beard.

Shiny shoes on my feet were polished to within an inch of their lives so that I could see my own reflection in them.

I looked at myself in the mirror again. I hardly recognized the man I saw staring back at me.

“Not bad, Your Majesty,” the valet said with a smile.

“You can’t call me that yet.”

“It’s only a matter of time. I think a slip of the tongue is in order.” The valet offered a secretive smile.

I grinned back at him. A thrill ran through me.

I walked through the castle. The sound of my feet was muffled on the carpets I’d had put in all the hallways. I’d always hated the sound that echoed off the cold stone. I’d done a lot to change the castle and make it my own after the land had been rid of darkness.

Tapestries and oil paintings hung on the wall. The thick velvet curtains, old and tattered after centuries of wind howling through the cold hallways, had been replaced by light curtains of satin, with sheer lace curtains that could be drawn aside to admire the view.

All of the gardens around the castle were in bloom, thanks to Hazel and her affinity for making things beautiful.

When I walked into the grand ballroom, it was filled with guests. I spotted Vanya and Zita first. Vanya wore an elegant blue dress that brought out the sky blue of her eyes, and her blonde hair had been done up in intricate curls. Zita wore a more understated gown that hung straight down her fit, warrior body, her short white-blonde hair had been combed to the side, and she wore subtle makeup.

“You look wonderful,” Vanya said with a smile. “Are you nervous?”

“I am,” I admitted.

“It’s going to be great,” Zita added, excited.

“I hope so,” I replied.

Through the crowds, I spotted Rainier and Ellie. They smiled when I walked to them. Rainier wore a black leather shirt with a red sash, and he looked every bit as regal as the King of Jasfin should. Ellie wore a red dress that matched his sash. It had an empire waist to cover the belly she sported underneath it, carrying the future of Jasfin cradled in luxury and fashion.

“You look great,” Ellie breathed. “I can’t believe we’ve come this far! Are you happy?”

“Happier than I ever dared to dream,” I said.

Ellie beamed at me. “When you find your love, everything changes in ways you could never have imagined. Trust me, I know what it can be like.”

“We both do,” Rainier said. He held out a hand. “I know we’re going to do the whole drill later, but I want to take this moment now to congratulate you. We wish you both every happiness. You deserve everything that’s coming to you, my friend.”

I warmed at the word ‘friend.’ I’d started off as the enemy, and I’d never thought I could become anything more. When Rainier had told me I could rule Palgia on his behalf, we had become partners of a kind, and we’d become friendlier with each other than when we’d been at war.

Being called a friend was a whole new level, and I’d never thought it could make me this happy to hear it.

After talking to Rainier and Ellie, I walked through the room and greeted the guests who had come from near and far to attend the ceremony. All the statesmen were present, the mayors and everyone in charge of every corner of Palgia. They’d come to pledge their allegiance to me over again, to renew their loyalty. They’d come to celebrate our victory together.

Palgia had never been as rich as it was now. Our crops were abundant. Rain fell constantly, and the rivers and lakes were full. The countryside was lush, and every household had more than they could want.

Palgia was equal to Jasfin and Tholand now in riches, after it had been pathetic in comparison, and I was proud to be called Palgian.

When the event planner came to me, whispering in my ear, it was time to start.

The crowds fell quiet and shuffled so that they could all look toward the front of the room. I walked up the steps and met with Nylah, who would oversee the ceremony.

She wore her white robes, decorated with rubies and diamonds, her long hair twisted into a complicated braid.

“Nervous?” she asked.

“Terrified,” I admitted. “And ecstatic.”

“The best combination there is,” she whispered with a smile.

The doors opened, and music started as Vanya and Hazel appeared at the door. Everyone turned to look at them, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from Hazel.

She wore a lilac dress with a bodice that accentuated her full chest and her tiny waist. It was decorated with diamonds that ran down the skirt, as if stars had fallen and dripped the diamonds all over her.

The skirt was wide and light and shimmered as she moved. Across her chest, she had a golden sash that matched mine. On her head, she wore a diamond tiara, and her makeup was elegant and tasteful.

She held Vanya's hand as they walked to me, but her eyes locked on mine, and neither of us saw anyone else in the room.

“Hi,” she said with a shy smile when she reached me.

“You're beautiful,” I said, squeezing her hand.

“You're everything,” she breathed in return.

I turned to Vanya.

“Thank you,” I told her. “For everything. You have no idea how much it all means to me.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Vanya answered with a smile. “From now on, call me Mom.”

I beamed at her, and she hugged me.

When I looked over her shoulder, I caught my mom’s eye, and she smiled at me, just before wiping a tear that slipped from her eye. Agatha looked just as pleased next to her.

In the last couple of weeks, my sister and Hazel had become very close. It was so good to be able to have them all with me, and to not have to fear for their safety as I had for so, so long.

We turned to Nylah, and Vanya joined Zita at the front of the crowd.

“We’re gathered here today,” Nylah started, smiling warmly at both of us, “to celebrate the mated union between two individuals who have found each other against all odds. Terra has already solidified and approved of their bond, but this ceremony is twofold. Not only are we celebrating the union, we are also watching their ascension to the throne of Palgia.”

She nodded to Rainier, who walked up the steps and stood next to me.

“You have proved yourself a worthy king,” he said. “Not only were you willing to lay down your life for your people, but you also gave them what’s best for them, and you fought for their freedom. A better king could not be asked for, and it is with great pride that I officially hand you the Kingdom of Palgia. Long live the King!”

“Long live the King!” everyone in the room echoed.

Rainier turned to Hazel. “You’ve proven that you are a wise woman with the strength to support your mate and your king through every adversity. You are loyal to your people, and you are willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. A king always needs a good partner by his side to guide him, to support him, to be his strength in times of weakness, and his biggest ally in his victory. You are worthy of the throne. Long live the Queen!”

“Long live the Queen!” the crowd repeated.

A servant stepped forward, holding a velvet pillow with a crown on it. Nylah took the crown and lifted it into the air.

“With this, I bestow upon you the burden, the responsibility, and the honor of being the King of Palgia.” She lowered the crown onto my head. It was heavy, and I had to focus on keeping it on. “You are now, and will be until your death, the King of Palgia, the start of a royal bloodline. Your offspring will follow in your footsteps as rulers, and you will be remembered in history as the king who laid it all down for his people. Erol the Brave. Erol the Selfless. King Erol of Palgia.”

“Kind Erol of Palgia! Queen Hazel of Palgia!” the multitude cried out, and the whole room fell to one knee with their heads bowed.

I looked out over my people, and a lump rose in my throat. Their loyalty was moving.

Hazel took my hand and squeezed it, sensing my emotions. She poured love and support through our bond. She was happy for me, and I felt it.

“I love you,” I mouthed to her.

“I love you, more,” she mouthed back, and I smiled at her.

When the men and women in the room stood again, it was done. Hazel was my mate, and we were the official King and Queen of Palgia.

Music played, and we joined our people on the floor in a dance. It had been centuries and centuries since this hall had seen people dancing, and I rejoiced in how we were free to enjoy ourselves again.

The celebration lasted a long, long time. My people were merry, they danced, and they ate with their king and queen, and this was the start of a glorious future.

I would not have been able to do it without Hazel. I would not be able to rule this kingdom without her by my side.

From here on out, we would only follow the light.





## HAZEL

**I**t was the early hours of the morning when the last of the guests finally left, and we could go to bed. It would have been rude for the hosts to leave the party, although I'd wanted to sneak away with Erol hours ago.

Now that we were alone, I tried to get out of the dress.

It was large, with hoops and boning, and it was impossible to get out of it alone.

"Help me!" I giggled, and Erol came to me, already shirtless.

I would never get used to his chiseled body. No matter how many times we'd seen each other naked, I would never get tired of it.

"How do you want me to do this?" Erol asked, scratching his head. "Women's clothing is too complicated. It would be better if you were naked all the time."

I chuckled. "You'd like that, huh?"

"It would save me time undressing you when I want you," Erol said in a throaty voice.

I blushed. "Pretty clothes are half the fun, you know. It's nice to dress up and look good for your mate."

"You could wear a burlap sack, and I would think you look amazing."

“Silk is so much more comfortable.” I smiled, pursing my lips together. “Just lift me out of it.” I’d already managed to unbutton the bodice of the dress and pull down the zipper at the back of the skirt.

Erol stepped closer to me, his bare feet underneath the swaths of cloth that billowed to the floor now that the dress was loose and sagging downward. He wrapped his large hands around my waist, and I braced myself.

He lifted me out of the dress with ease.

He lowered me a little, but I wrapped my legs around his waist. The dress hadn’t required a bra, and I wore only the lace panties that had come with the gown in the same lilac color.

Erol groaned when I kissed him, sliding his tongue into my mouth, and I moaned softly.

He held me tightly and carried me toward our bed. The large king-sized bed had tall posters and sheer cloth draped all around it that we could close for privacy if we wanted.

We’d never used that much space, even though the mattress could hold a full family, it was that big. We always slept pressed tightly against each other so that we were merged as one.

Erol crawled onto the bed, and I let go of him, falling onto the mattress. He lowered his muscular body onto mine, and I gasped when he grinded his hard cock against me.

“You’re still wearing pants,” I pointed out.

“You’re still wearing panties.”

“It’s hardly anything,” I argued with a giggle. “Barely bigger than an eye-patch.”

Erol grinned. “I’ll get rid of mine if you get rid of yours.”

I nodded and pulled down my panties, wriggling out of them. Erol pushed up and stood on the mattress, and I watched him slowly pull down his pants, making eye contact with me all the way.

He kicked his pants off and to the side. He kneeled over me before he positioned himself between my legs. I opened them for him, letting him lie where I liked having him the most.

He kissed me, cupped my cheek, his fingers in my hair. Our tongues tangled together. My breathing changed, became faster and shallower. Erol moved his body on top of mine, sliding his cock between my slick folds, but only teasing me with his tip. I wanted more. I wanted him to take me, and pound into me with the intense passion I felt coursing through my own body. I got wetter and wetter for him.

“I ache for you,” I gasped. “Just take me.”

He grinned, letting out an animalistic growl, before he plunged into me.

“You’re so ready,” he grunted.

“I’ve been ready for you all night,” I said.

A primal look crossed Erol’s features. “It’s a good thing you didn’t tell me this when the guests were still here. I would have invented a reason to throw you over my shoulder and carry you out.”

The giggle that escaped my lips was breathy and trembling with his thick cock inside me, and I shivered. He moved inside of me, slowly withdrawing until only the tip was in, before he pushed into me again. I cried out as he continued the slow movements, stroking sensually in and out of me.

His movements were so achingly slow and teasing, driving me crazy. I craved a release, but Erol knew how to draw it out so that I squirmed and begged him for it.

“Please,” I gasped as his body moved on top of mine. “Harder, faster. Make me come.”

Erol chuckled into my mouth. “I love it when you beg.”

“I love it when you give it to me after I beg,” I muttered against his lips.

Erol bucked his hips harder and harder, moving in and out of me faster and faster. He broke the kiss, unable to lock our

mouths while he bucked his hips, and I moaned and whimpered. The sounds of our sex filled the room, and the smell of us together was intoxicating. I cried out as Erol hammered into me more and more.

The orgasm grew inside me as he pushed me closer to the edge. His face was riddled with concentration, with his jaw clenched as he focused on bringing me to my peak.

When the pleasure exploded inside me, I cried out. Erol slowed his onslaught ride down, moving enough that the orgasm kept rolling through my body. I gripped his shoulders, and my fingers bit into his skin. He growled and kissed me, nipping my bottom lip with his teeth.

I curled and wrapped my body around him as I reached the height of pleasure.

When I finally came down from my sexual high, Erol kissed me.

“You’re so hot when you do that,” he chuckled.

“I love it when you make me do that.”

He pushed his arm underneath me, and I arched my back to allow him room. He held me close and rolled over onto the other side of the large mattress, pulling me up so that I sat on top of him. I yelped and repositioned myself.

When I sank down on his cock again, Erol groaned. I braced myself on his strong pecks and looked into his eyes.

I loved being on top. I’d learned a lot over the past couple of months with Erol, exploring different positions and foreplay. Erol had awoken a sexual being inside me, and I had an insatiable appetite that he seemed determined to satisfy.

I rocked my hips back and forth, stroking his cock in and out of me. Erol gripped my hips, his large hands covering me so that his fingers kneaded my ass while I rode him.

I looked into his eyes as I bucked my hips faster and faster. I gasped and trembled, the pleasure rendering me weak. Erol helped me, using his hands on my hips to pull me closer and push me farther, driving his cock into me.

My clit rubbed against his pubic bone, and the sensation sent pulses of pleasure to every nerve in my body. Erol's breath was on par with mine. He gasped and grunted, getting closer and closer to his orgasm.

I was the first to topple over the edge, and I cried out. Erol pulled me forward, pushing into me as far as he could go, and when I collapsed on his chest in sheer pleasure, he pulsed and jerked inside me, joining me in ecstasy.

Our power rose and intertwined, and it filled the room with light. Our skins glowed, and I looked up into Erol's hazel eyes. The golden flecks shimmered in the afterglow of our union.

He ran his fingers through my hair, and we rode out the orgasms, the power, the pleasure together. We were one, and our power intertwined together to form an unshakable bond.

Finally, after we'd both calmed, I clambered off Erol and collapsed onto the mattress next to him.

He pulled me closer to him, and I lay on his chest. His heart beat against my cheek, and he ran his fingers through my hair. The stroking motion soothed away all my anxiety about what would come next.

"I love you, my queen," he said. "I can't wait for forever with you."

"It's already started," I answered. "And I couldn't be happier."

## EPILOGUE

## HAZEL

### *One Year Later*

**B**eing back in Jasfin felt a lot like coming home, although I had more than one home now. Ellie came to the courtyard when we stepped out of the hovercraft and threw her arms around me before she hugged Mom and Zita.

Finally, she gave Erol a hug. He tensed, but only briefly. My strong, warrior Fae was still getting used to love and friendly embraces.

“Welcome, welcome!” she cried. “I can’t believe you’re finally here! It’s been too long!”

I laughed. “We saw you last month!”

“Do you know how much time has passed since then? Come, you won’t believe how much Deron has grown! He’s sitting now! The royal sitter told me it’s early, and I’m so proud!”

She gushed and relayed everything about the little prince as only a proud mother could.

“When will you and Erol have children?” Ellie asked, interrupting herself and her rambling.

Erol cleared his throat.

“Oh,” I said, blushing hard. “I don’t know. It will happen when the time is right.” I wouldn’t admit that seeing Ellie and



Rainier with baby Deron so often made me broody, but all would happen in good time. Terra had divine timing, and Erol and I both trusted her that everything would turn out the way it should.

“You’ll love it,” Ellie said with a warm smile. “I can’t tell you how wonderful motherhood is. I’d never thought it would be this fulfilling.” We walked into the royal nursery, and the three of us greeted the nanny.

Deron sat in a playpen, drooling over something he kept sticking in his mouth.

“Hello, handsome man!” I cried and reached for him. He held out chubby hands, and I scooped him up and nuzzled his neck. He blew spit bubbles and giggled, tangling his sticky fingers in my hair.

“Oh, no, let me help,” Ellie giggled and carefully untangled his fingers from my hair.

“He looks so much like Rainier,” I said. Deron had black hair, like the Fae king, and icy blue eyes. But he had Ellie’s nose, and when he offered me a toothless grin, I noticed he had her smile, too.

Magic washed over me, a little scattered and haphazard, but it was clearly there.

“Oh, he’s powerful,” I breathed.

Ellie nodded. “Nylah says she’s never seen anything like his display of power—not even when Rainier was younger! I’m trusting Nylah and Terra to guide us. I’m completely out of my depth here.”

I nodded. Ellie had grown up human, and she didn’t always know what it meant to raise a Fae baby. She had Nylah at her side, who was like a mother and a sister combined. Sometimes, she called Mom, who also offered advice and guided Ellie and Rainier.

After handing Deron back to the nanny, Ellie showed us to our rooms herself, and then we settled for the evening to rest after our journey.

Erol was excited about the ceremony in the morning, and he made love to me in all the ways he knew how before we fell asleep, tangled together.

The next morning, we dressed in royal robes and walked to the throne room together. Mom and Zita were already there. We were all dressed in white, wearing varying styles that were in fashion, our clothing made of different fabrics. The throne room had been decorated with vases filled with lilies, white roses, and Lettles, and the white silk covered both thrones to complete the picture of purity.

Nylah, wearing her white priestess robes, took her place between the thrones, and a moment later, Ellie and Rainier arrived with Deron, completely dressed in white satin and silk. He grinned at everyone watching him, and awe rippled through the crowd.

Deron was already stealing hearts left and right.

Rainier and Ellie handed their precious child to Nylah before they sat on their thrones.

“Today, we’re here for a very special event,” Nylah said. “A son has been born, the heir to the throne of Jasfin, and we call on Terra to take this child and make him her own.”

A white flash of light filled the room, and everyone gasped, bowing their heads in reverence. Terra wasn’t here, but her presence was, and it was enough.

“With this, we welcome the Crown Prince and acknowledge him, pledging our loyalty to his future as the leader of this kingdom.” Nylah turned to Ellie and Rainier. “This is a blessing, and he will do great things.”

Ellie’s eyes filled with tears, and even Rainier looked emotional. Erol sniffed next to me, and I took his hand and squeezed it. Love flowed freely through our bond, and I felt a sense of yearning from him. He wanted this, too.

It wouldn’t be long now for me to be with child. I sensed it, I felt it in my very bones.

After Nylah handed Deron to Ellie, and the baby kicked his chubby legs and blew spit bubbles, she looked at the

audience again.

“We didn’t plan any of what will follow,” she said, and her face changed, glowing softly. Her eyes became like a fiery pit, glowing with intensity. “Terra has asked me to make another statement, to call another being home.”

We all frowned and glanced at each other.

“Do you know what she means?” I whispered to Erol.

He only shook his head.

“Vanya, if you’ll come to me,” Nylah said.

Mom hesitated before she stood. Ellie and Rainier looked as confused as the rest of us.

When Mom joined Nylah, Nylah took her hand.

“It is customary for every kingdom to have a high priestess who will guide the king and queen in their journey as leaders, who will communicate with Terra, who will draw from her wisdom, who will translate visions and dreams and look into the future for answers. It’s an honor only bestowed upon a select few by Terra herself. It usually goes from mother to daughter, but on rare occasions, Terra selects someone who is worthy to offer their lives in eternal service to the Goddess of Light.”

Nylah smiled at my mom. “Palgia has had a rocky road, with a priestess who led the kingdom astray and carried out the will of Dark Goddess. In the absence of darkness, and in the presence of pure light, the King and Queen have reigned without a link to the goddess. Terra would like to rectify that and would like to ask you, Vanya, if you’d be willing to offer your life to servitude.”

Everyone gasped. Mom blinked, surprised.

“Me?”

Nylah nodded. “You have shown great power since we started working together, and you are ready to take up the mantle, if you want it. Terra will never force anyone to do something they don’t want themselves, and ultimately, it’s for you to decide. But—”

“I’ll do it,” Mom said before Nylah could finish.

“I had a feeling you would.” Nylah touched her fingers to my mom’s forehead, and light filled my mom so that she glowed, her features becoming ethereal. “It’s not an easy task, but it’s a position of the highest honor. Who better to lead the King and Queen than the Queen’s mother?”

Another flash of light filled the room, and we all gasped. Terra was here, and she was pleased. We could all sense it. When the light faded again, tears streamed down my mom’s cheeks. I was crying, too.

After all my mom had lost, after years of wandering, of living without anything, of having nothing but scraps for food...she’d been given the highest honor that could be bestowed on a Fae.

“Thank you,” Mom finally whispered.

“Don’t thank me, I didn’t plan this any more than the rest of them did. Welcome to priesthood. It’s wonderful to have a sister.” Nylah hugged her, and there wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

When the ceremony wrapped up, we moved to the next room, where a feast had been laid out on long tables with white tablecloths. More white flowers and white carpets adorned the room, continuing the symbol of purity. The message was twofold—no one had expected that in addition to gaining a crown prince, Palgia had gained a high priestess of their own.

Nylah came to us where Ellie, Rainier, my mom, Zita, Dex, Erol, and I stood together. Ellie bounced baby Deron on her hip.

“That was unexpected,” she said.

“And after what we’ve all been through, that’s saying something,” Dex said.

We all laughed.

“I didn’t plan any of it, but Terra has divine timing, and she’s never wrong,” Nylah said. “She—” Her words cut off as

her face changed, her eyes glowing. She looked into the distance, not seeing anything in this realm. I'd come to learn that it meant she was having a vision.

"Today is full of divine purpose," Mom whispered.

Nylah's face remained ethereal, and then it was as if she snapped out of it. She looked sharply at Dex.

"What is it?" Ellie asked. "What did you see?"

"I saw Dex..." Nylah started, but her voice caught in her throat, and suddenly, her eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry, I...I can't." She clapped her hand over her mouth and turned, running from the room. Sobs racked her chest and could be heard all the way from the door.

"What was that?" Zita asked.

Dex looked confused.

"I don't know," Ellie said, looking worried. "I'll go talk to her."

She handed Deron to Rainier, who kissed the baby on the head.

"Whatever it is," Mom said, her voice sounding a little strange, "this is the start of another chapter. Our story is far from over, and I have a feeling this isn't going to be an easy road."

Did my mom just have a vision, too?

"Has it ever been?" I asked.

Erol pulled me closer.

"No," Mom said and turned her eyes to Dex. "But I have a feeling it might get even harder."

Dex pursed his lips, and I looked at Erol.

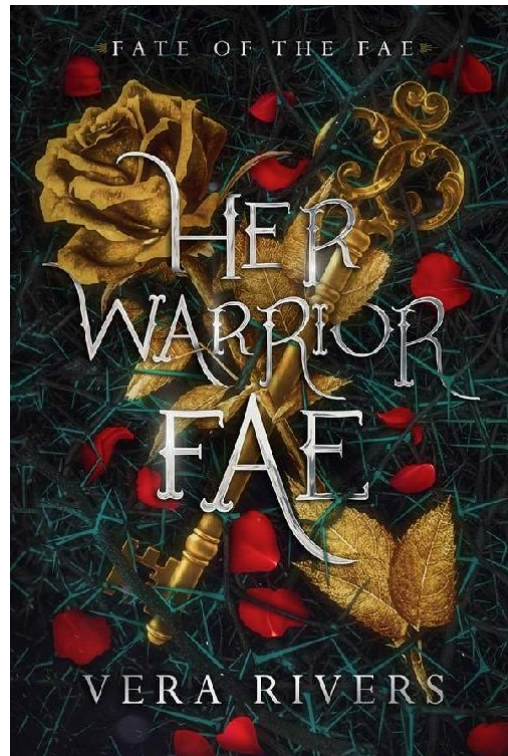
"Whatever comes," I said, determined. "We'll stick together and get through it."

"Hear, hear," Rainier said, and he held onto little Deron just a little tighter.



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