

CHRONICLES  
OF THE  
STONE VEIL

THE  
MIDNIGHT  
REALM

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
SAWYER BENNETT

# THE MIDNIGHT REALM

CHRONICLES OF THE STONE VEIL

SA ER BENNETT

*The Midnight Realm* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Sawyer Bennett  
Kindle Edition

All rights reserved.

Cover Photo: Michelle Lancaster – IG @lanefotograf / [www.michellelancaster.com](http://www.michellelancaster.com)

Find Sawyer on the web!

[sawyerbennett.com](http://sawyerbennett.com)

[www.twitter.com/bennettbooks](https://www.twitter.com/bennettbooks)

[www.facebook.com/bennettbooks](https://www.facebook.com/bennettbooks)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

## CHAPTER 1

### MELL

**Y**OU WOULD THINK being king of the Underworld would be a job full of nothing but perks—as the title would imply—but there are downsides.

The biggest one right now is having to put up with this asshole. Maddox, the demigod, was sent to Vyronas by the god of Life—and death—Zora, to collect me to answer for my crimes.

It's not that I mind facing the consequences. I knew they would be steep when I made the decision to intervene in a battle that I'd specifically been told to avoid.

But... fuck it.

I'd do it all over again.

Maddox and I pass through the veil that separates Vyronas from the First Dimension of Earth, emerging onto a path carved along the Jungfrau. It overlooks the vibrant green valley of Lauterbrunnen, the craggy, snow-covered peaks of the Bernese Alps in the distance.

Zora chose to settle here when she journeyed from a mortal life to death and from death to the god of Life. Her powers are infinite, and she could live anywhere she wanted, including in mystical realms that can't be accessed by anyone but the gods.

Instead, she chose a modest Swiss chalet with a killer view and her two Bernese Mountain Dogs, Urosin and Mattia. Zora chose a life of solitude, which isn't surprising. She spent the first twenty-eight years as a mortal trapped in the Underworld, isolated from family and love, made to endure painful magical infusions to store energy until such time it could be funneled into Kymariss, the then ruling queen of the Underworld. An overly long and involved story that eventually led to Kymariss's death and my ascension to the throne, but suffice it to say Zora's an introvert by circumstance and inadvertent design, and thus chooses to live in far-off places.

Maddox moves to the front door and it grates, the familiarity with which he walks right on in without knocking. He's known her barely a year,

whereas I'm all she's ever known. It's true I'd be welcome here anytime I wanted to visit, but I don't.

My time with Zora ended the minute her sister Finley rescued her from the Underworld and she no longer needed me for protection.

Or maybe it never truly started, seeing as how I was one of the Dark Fae tasked with holding her prisoner. I was also responsible for forcing her to submit to the brutal infusions of magic by the Light Fae prince, Pyke. It was my duty to Kymaris that had me hurting the frail human I'd come to love and desire. A pathetic excuse, really. Zora never could've loved a monster like me, but my blackened heart beat for her.

That was then, though.

This is now.

Tucking my black wings in tight, I bend slightly to get them under the human-size entryway, closing the door behind me. Urosin's and Mattia's booming barks echo through the chalet due to the open layout, high ceilings, and distinct lack of furniture. They run straight for Maddox, not to rip out his throat as an intruder but to bound joyfully around him, vying for his attention and scratches. My teeth grit as he bends over to rub them, twisting his head to shoot me a shit-eating grin.

A crisp breeze that smells of mountain snow washes over me, and I turn to see Zora walking in from the deck that overlooks the valley. As a god, she can look and dress any way she likes, but she's wearing jeans, knee-high boots with shearling trim, and a fuzzy-looking sweater in a deep, hunter green. Her snow-white hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and her blue-green-gold eyes look upon me with displeasure.

Maddox calls the dogs to his heel and walks out the front door with them. He doesn't do it out of consideration for me, but rather out of deference to Zora. A god meting out punishment isn't a public affair, and Zora would never stand for someone to watch.

"You knew better," she chides as she crosses the polished wood floors. "You were forbidden to interfere in the battle of Vyronas, and you've managed to really piss Circe off."

Circe is the god of Fate and can be prickly. But I can't help but point out, "She might manipulate the fates, but I also know she embraces free will."

Zora glares at me. "Onyx wants your head on a platter."

The god of War. She's not prickly, but downright ruthless. She's the one I really need to worry about offending because supernatural beings like

demigods and the king of the Underworld are not allowed to help sway the tide of mortal battles, unless Onyx wants it done.

“She’s my daughter, Zora,” I say, clasping my hands in front of me. “There was no way I was going to leave Thalia’s life up to the fates, and I didn’t do much other than destroy a few demons to give the mortals a fighting chance.”

It’s been a weird few weeks. My daughter, Thalia, who I had never met, was battling an evil sorceress in her dimension of Vyronas. I watched from afar, but when she called out to me for help, there was never a choice to ignore it.

“You disobeyed your gods,” she says, and while her voice never rises in volume, the floor shakes with her power.

Most immortals would quake because Zora could kill with the snap of her fingers. But I’ve been in existence for millennia, and I don’t scare that easily.

“What is to be my punishment?” I ask, needing for her to get on with it. I don’t require the lecture I’m sure she’s itching to give.

It’s not that she’s truly mad at me, but more concerned. If I had disobeyed only Zora, I’d likely get a slap on the wrist. But I thumbed my nose at her brethren gods, and they’re probably calling for my death.

Zora sighs and shakes her head. “I’ve managed to get The Council to agree on banishment to the Underworld. You cannot pass through the veil anymore.”

“For how long?” I inquire. The freedom to come and go between realms is a luxury, but I can do without for a while.

“For eternity.” Zora lifts her chin, her expression hard and unyielding.

“Eternity?” I exclaim in horror. “But Thalia... I want to visit her. She’ll have children one day.” I try to rein in my temper, but it’s not working. “I’ll have grandchildren one day. You can’t keep me from them.”

“I can keep you in the Underworld,” she retorts hotly, lightning crackling within the depths of her eyes and her hands curling into fists. I brace for her to strike, but instead she takes in a calming breath and lets it out. “Amell... Onyx wanted your powers stripped and you tossed from your throne. This was a good compromise.”

“Take my powers,” I growl, throwing my arms wide. “Take your fucking throne. Do not keep me from my child.”

Zora’s expression softens, and she reaches out to touch my chest. There was a brief time when we were lovers, and her mere touch could get me to



grant her almost any wish. Now, I only feel a frustrated kinship for all we shared.

“I’m truly sorry, Amell. The decision is made.”

It’s no balm, her apology. Gods apologize for nothing, yet I hear the regret in her tone.

It means shit to me right now as my temper flares. I step away from her and pivot on my foot, leaving her presence without a *by your leave*. If she wants to strike me down for my insolence, so be it.

I stride out of her house, deciding to walk down the mountain before creating a door through the veil to go back to the Underworld. Once I step through, I’ll be stuck there, so I’m going to take time to enjoy the beauty of Switzerland.

A low whistle sounds, and I turn to see Maddox, casually leaning against a tree. The dogs are off in the distance, running down a grassy hill. “Boy... that’s harsh.”

Of course, the asshole eavesdropped.

I ignore him and head along the path, but he falls into step beside me. “I need you to do something.”

The request is so shocking, I stop and glare at him. Maddox takes two more steps before realizing he left me behind and turns back. “A favor,” he clarifies.

“Why would I ever grant you a favor?” I ask. We’ve hated each other from the moment Zora became a possession both of us coveted.

He shrugs. “Never hurts to ask.”

I just stare at him, waiting to hear what he thinks I might be able to do for him.

“I want you to reincarnate Lucien,” he says.

His demigod brother.

I laugh, shaking my head. “I’ll pass.”

Pushing around him on the trail, I walk again. He blurs, whizzing past and stopping before me. “Why not?”

“Because you’re a prick.”

Maddox cocks an eyebrow. “You don’t have the power to do it,” he surmises, but he can’t hide the hope in his eyes.

“Don’t I?”

“If you possess such power, then use it. It won’t cost you anything.”

“Again, that’s a hard pass.”

I start walking again, but his next words freeze me in place. “You’re jealous,” he drawls, and I glance back at him. “You can’t stand the fact I’m the one in Zora’s bed now.”

I’d given up the dream of being with Zora a long time ago, but I’m not going to waste this opportunity to needle the demigod. “Maybe you’re the one who’s jealous,” I lob at him. “Because I had her first. I took her virginity, you know. And she begged me to do it.”

All true. Not a lie within that taunt, and it strikes its mark true and bold. Maddox snarls and flies at me. I brace, locking my arms around him, and we tumble down the mountain path. We roll and bounce, throwing punches along the way.

I’m able to bound up from the ground when I reach a plateau a few seconds before him and aim a well-placed kick under his jaw. Maddox’s head snaps back, but it doesn’t stop him from charging like a bull. Lowering his shoulder, he catches me just below the ribs and drives me into a tree which is pulverized by our velocity.

I push him off, wings flaring, and launch myself at him. He meets me with full force, and the impact of our bodies colliding makes the mountain shudder.

“Enough,” Zora bellows, using tendrils of lightning from her hands to wrap around our bodies and fling us apart.

Maddox slams into a large boulder from which chunks of rock explode, and I turn another tree into toothpicks. While he capitulates by holding his hands up in surrender, I lunge forward only to have Zora’s lightning lasso throw me back on my ass.

“I said *enough*,” she growls.

But it’s not sufficient to dissuade me. I’m poised to attack as soon as she lets me out of these magical shackles.

Instead, she says, “Be gone, Amell.”

Before I can protest, I’m back in the Underworld, still sitting on my ass at the base of my throne on the Bridge of Judgment, the Crimson River churning two hundred feet below.

“Your Highness.” Calix rushes over, reaching a hand out to help me up.

I swat it away in irritation as I jump to my feet. Calix backs up and bends in a low bow, bobbing repetitively until I acknowledge him.

“Stop doing that,” I growl.

“Of course, Your Elaborate Marvelousness.” Calix straightens and looks

at me with hopeful eyes. He's a short man, no more than five four with curly blond hair, a broad nose, and thin lips.

He's a weasel of an assistant, inherited from the former queen and mine to use as long as I want to keep him around. He was a weasel of a man back in the First Dimension, a minor lackey under a corrupt Roman senator in the year 748 BCE. While the senator he worked for received a one-way ticket to the Crimson River upon his death, Calix was kept by Queen Kymaris to serve her needs.

"Stop calling me those stupid names."

Calix bobs his head. "Of course, Your—"

I hold up a hand to stop him.

Old habits die hard. Kymaris loved the lavish praise and idiotic names he bestowed upon her, but getting him to just call me Amell has been trying my patience.

"I've got a job for you." I ponder exactly how I want to do this. "I'll need to take your body for a bit."

"But—"

I touch Calix on the wrist and his body disappears.

He's not gone, though.

His soul remains, a writhing ball of blackened smoke tendrils hovering before me.

Calix can hear me, but without the mechanics of a voice box that comes with a body, he can't speak. I kind of like him this way.

"I want you to find the demigod Maddox." The smoke rolls over on itself, expands and pulses. I take it to be excitement to serve. "Make his life hell for a few days."

The smoke contracts, coalescing and darkening.

Needing clarification.

"Do poltergeist shit," I mutter with a wave of my hand. "Knock stuff over, turn his lights on and off, whatever."

While Calix doesn't have a physical body, he is a ball of supernatural energy, an unencumbered soul with free rein to cause havoc if I so grant it.

I instruct Calix where to go. Maddox is living in Southern California near his other demigod brother, Carrick, and his wife Finley.

Who happens to be Zora's twin, but a redhead.

It's a tangled web.

Ripping a hole in the veil with nothing more than a magical thought—

such are the powers Zora bestowed when she sat me on the throne—I usher Calix through. I'll snatch him back after a few days of driving Maddox crazy, thus ensuring me the last, if not pettiest, laugh.

I don't dare step through the hole back into the First Dimension. Zora's sentence is absolute, and I have no intention of disobeying it. While I know Zora would protect me as best she could, I don't trust Circe or Onyx not to come after me.

I don't trust them not to go after Thalia, either.

So I'll stay put.

For now.

## CHAPTER 2

### A

“**N**YSSA... I NEED two vodka tonics,” Maria yells across the bar to me. Someone has the jukebox cranked.

I nod at her, commit the request to memory, and continue building the two drink orders put in prior to hers.

The Crazy 8’s is hopping tonight, and I don’t mind the bustle. It means better tips, especially since I pour my drinks strong.

“Do you need a break?”

Glancing over my shoulder, I find Sam looking at me with worry. He’s a sweet man—the owner of this bar—but I don’t like anyone trying to take care of me. I have a distinct aversion to it, actually.

“I’m good.” My tone is curt, and I’m not even sorry. It’s best to keep him at arm’s length, even though I can tell he’s the type of good-hearted guy who routinely takes in strays. I don’t want him getting attached to me in any way, because I won’t stay here long. It’s impossible for me to settle down.

This is my eighth night in a row I’ve worked, and in those eight days, I’ve picked up partial day shifts too. I’ve been here two weeks, and the small apartment Sam rented me above the bar suits my needs. I figure I’ll stick around a few months before moving on.

Not to find greener pastures, because those don’t exist.

Really, I’m just trying to outrun my demons. About the time I start feeling secure, it’ll seem like the walls are closing in, and I’ll jet.

I mix drink after drink, pull pints, and force myself to act interested in those sitting at the bar hitting on me. I’ve become good at pretending, and my tip jar is filled with green—mostly fives and tens—which is pretty good for a dive bar like this.

A man takes the bar stool right in front of where I’m pulling cold bottled beer out of the cooler.

“Be right with you,” I say without glancing up. I efficiently twist off the caps, tossing them to the floor where they’ll be swept up later tonight, and

hand the bottles off to a couple a few seats down. I mark it on their tab and turn to the new customer. “What can I get you?”

When my eyes make contact with the man, my entire body locks in recognition. Same dirty-blond hair, except it’s thinning on top, and watery blue eyes that make him look perpetually sad. It’s been nine years. He’s gained a little weight but is otherwise utterly recognizable.

“I’ll take a screwdriver,” he says before his gaze moves from me to check out the other patrons in the bar.

I’m stunned into inaction. While I would know Vince Matheson anywhere, he doesn’t recognize me at all, and I don’t know whether I should be offended.

Granted... I’ve changed a lot in nine years. My dark brown hair has been bleached platinum and cut short in shaggy layers. It’s an awful hairdo, and I did it myself with a cheap drugstore kit and a straight razor. I’ve lost weight since he last saw me, and while it’s noticeable in my body, my face has thinned out the most.

No, I shouldn’t be offended he doesn’t recognize me. Not sure anyone would from nine years ago.

His gaze comes back to me, and I manage to offer up a polite smile before turning to mix his cocktail. With my back to him, I feel his eyes on me, and I verify it with a quick glance in the mirror behind the bar. I’m wearing a mashup of clothes I got from Goodwill—a denim skirt cut super short and frayed, a tank top that’s tight and a little too small for my breasts, and a mesh overlay shirt that really doesn’t conceal the fact I’m not wearing a bra.

It’s a provocative outfit, designed to up my tips. Vince’s eyes drop to my ass, and it does surprise me just a little. The way I look now wouldn’t have appealed to him back then, but maybe he’s changed.

Turning, I set the drink on a napkin, and he slides a credit card toward me. “Open a tab, if you don’t mind.”

His voice is what I remember. Timid, butterfly soft.

“Got it.” I put his credit card in a leather jacket awaiting his final tally and move down the bar to handle some refills. When I glance back at him from time to time, he’s not watching me anymore. He focuses on his drink and his smartphone, closed off and not inviting conversation.

After about ten minutes, I can’t help myself, and I move back to him. His drink is only about half empty, but still I ask, “You want another?”

His head lifts and he blinks at me in surprise. “Um... yeah. Why not?”

I mix his second drink even stronger than the first and set it down before him. “Thanks,” he says.

“My pleasure.” I lean on the bar, folding my arms, and I know it plumps my breasts. His eyes can’t help but flick there. “You from around here?”

He shakes his head, hand curling around the first screwdriver. “Traveling through. Looked like a nice bar to have a few drinks.”

I flash him a flirty smile. “This place is a dump, but I make excellent cocktails.”

Vince smiles back, taking the bait. “Too bad you’re working or I’d buy you one. Of course, it probably wouldn’t be as good as yours.”

“Too bad indeed,” I purr, reaching out to stroke a fingertip down the back of his hand.

Vince flushes as I draw away. I shoot him a wink and turn toward the rear bar, noticing now that his attention is fully on my ass where I want it to stay.

I’ve got him hooked.



IT DOESN’T TAKE long... a few hours and four screwdrivers with double shots of vodka, and Vince is drunk.

I’ve managed to flirt with him for the last hour and a half, lacing dirty talk and innuendo within our conversation and ensuring that his butt would stay glued to the bar stool.

He practically drools as he watches me.

I smile as I walk by, approaching Sam down at the other end of the bar. I tap him on the shoulder. “Do you mind if I take a fifteen-minute break?”

“Of course not,” Sam exclaims, sounding relieved I’ve asked for a bit of time from behind the bar. I know he doesn’t want to lose one of the best bartenders he’s had in a while.

He’s a sweet man, and I wish I could care more about him, but I don’t.

“Thanks.” I head back down the bar toward Vince. He smiles as I get nearer, but I can see he has to squint a little to stop the blurred, drunken vision. I don’t waste any time. Leaning over the bar toward him, I say, “I’ve got fifteen minutes and an apartment upstairs. Care to join me?”

Apparently, Vince isn’t that drunk because he asks, “Is it going to cost me anything?”

I wag a finger playfully. "I'm not that kind of woman," I tease, although I used to be. On occasion, I've had to spread my legs for money, but now I make it slinging drinks. "Only going to cost you a little bit of time."

"Then let's go," he says, lurching up off the stool.

I meet him at the end of the bar and take his hand. Winding my way through the crowd, we head to the back hallway, past the restrooms to a staircase that leads up.

The boards groan under our weight as we ascend and leave the loud music and chatter of people behind.

At my apartment, I let go of Vince's hand to pull out my key. He steps into my backside, his hands going to my waist. His breath is hot on my neck as he slurs, "You going to be a good girl for Daddy."

I push the door open and step through, turning to face him as he stumbles in. My hand goes between his legs, and I find him soft.

Typical.

"I don't know." I work at his belt, giving him a playful look, and I lick my lower lip to hold his attention. "Have you been a good daddy?"

"The best," he assures me.

"You going to let me tie you up and have my way with you?"

"Oh God," he mutters with a groan. "Please say that's not a joke."

"It's not." I grab his hand and lead him to my small bedroom that contains nothing but a rickety iron bed and one night table. All my possessions hang in the closet or are still secure in my suitcase. "Get naked."

While Vince stumbles around shedding his clothes, I pull out some fishnet stockings I sometimes wear with short skirts.

When I turn back to face Vince, I find him standing there naked, swaying. His dick is still limp, which is fine by me.

"Get on the bed, Daddy."

He complies, a lecherous grin on his face. When he's on his back and in the center, I crawl over him in a straddle, my skirt rising indecently. Vince's hands come to my hips to try to push it up more, but I knock them away.

"No, no, no," I chide. "Wrists together and above your head."

"Whatever you say, darlin'."

I work efficiently, wrapping the fishnets above his wrists and tying them to the iron bars. The bed is so old and wobbly, he could probably wrench one of the bars loose if he tried, but that's not going to be an issue.

Settling down on his soft stomach, I press my hands to his chest and dig



my fingernails in just a touch. He moans from the bite of pain.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” I ask, even though I know the answer. There’s no way he’d ever let me tie him up if he did.

He squints at me, the alcohol muddying his brain. “I know you?”

“Yes.”

“From where?”

I can barely get the words out. “7493 Melody Lane.”

The jolt of shock that courses through his body is palpable, and his vision clears. Lifting his head off the pillow, he peers at me hard, trying to see through the platinum hair and hollowed-out face.

Vince is still not quite able to make the connection, because I’m not the only girl who lived at that address, so I supply my name for him. “Nyssa.”

It takes a moment for him to search his memory, but then his eyes widen when he matches the name with my new face. I can read every emotion flickering across his face.

Unease.

Lust.

Fear.

Hope.

He opens his mouth, to say what, I have no clue. He snaps it closed just as quick when I pull the switchblade out of my back pocket.

Pressing the tiny silver button, the blade ejects with a soft snick, and Vince’s eyes bug out of his head. “Nyssa... what the hell?”

I put the knife tip to his pudgy throat and glare at him. “What the hell? That’s all you have to say to me?”

“What should I say?” he retorts and tries to buck me off. It causes the blade to nick him, and I grin as a rivulet of blood runs down his pale skin. “I’d be careful, Vince. Wouldn’t want me to slip now, would you?”

He eyes me warily, body going still. I consider my options carefully. Never in a million years did I think our paths would cross again. Lifting the blade from his neck, I hold it up before me and run my finger along the edge. It slices my skin, attesting to its sharpness.

“What do you want from me?” Vince rasps.

My eyes travel slowly from the blade to his face, and I open up to let my emotions swell. I’ve been holding them back all night, and rage and fury now sweep through me. It burns like acid.

“I want you to die, Vince,” I say quietly.

He opens his mouth in protest, but his words are cut off as I lash out with the blade. It slices through his skin as if it were as frail as cotton candy, and I only know I hit the carotid by the spray of blood that hits me in the face.

I gasp and sputter as I spit it out of my mouth. I can feel it dripping down my forehead and cheeks as I watch Vince's eyes bulge from their sockets. He gurgles and then chokes on his blood and I watch, transfixed, for what seems like hours.

It's such a good show, I don't want it to end.

When the light goes out of his eyes and his head lolls, I release a long sigh of relief. I roll off his body and stagger into the small bathroom. My reflection is hideous, my face covered in blood and my platinum hair stained pink. I smile and find even my teeth are covered with it. Makes sense since I had my mouth open when I made my strike.

I'm a monster, and I start to laugh.

Dropping the knife in the sink, I walk out of the bathroom. Well, *walk* isn't quite the right word. I shuffle as if drunk or high, and maybe I am.

Euphoria coursing through me, I lurch out of my apartment and practically fall down the stairs. I push through the crowded bar, and a few people scream when they see me.

One man reaches out a tentative hand. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?" I ask, then peals of laughter start again. The man jerks his hand back.

I push people out of my way as I head for the front door. When I reach it, Sam's there, staring at me in horror. "Oh my god, Nyssa. What happened? Do you need an ambulance?"

I find that funny too. "No, Sam. Thank you. An ambulance is definitely not needed."

Pushing through the door into Toledo's summer heat, I'm vaguely aware of Sam and a few patrons following me out. I have no clue where I'm going, but I look left, then right. The streets are crowded with bar hoppers, people making wide arcs to clear a path as they take in my appearance. Across the street sits a waiting cab, and I've got some cash in my pocket.

A hand touches my arm, and I turn to see Sam. "Let me help you," he says kindly.

I laugh again, then make myself stop to give him some respect. "No one can help me, Sam. I'm beyond help."

"You're not," he insists.

I pull my arm free and start backing toward the curb. I keep my eyes pinned on Sam, trying to accept the sympathy in his gaze.

It bounces right off me.

“Fuck this,” I snarl, finally realizing I’m in deep shit. I just murdered a man. Spinning, I make to dart across the street for the cab. I need to put distance between me and the dead body upstairs. I ease off the curb and take no more than two steps before a horn draws my attention.

Twisting my head left, I gape at the city bus bearing down on me. I hear the shriek of brakes, people scream from the sidewalk, and then the bus slams into me. For the briefest of moments, I feel pain in every molecule of my body, and then it all goes black.



UNBEARABLE HEAT IS the first thing I register as consciousness returns. I open my eyes, clearly remembering the bus hitting me. I brace for what I know will be excruciating pain, but all I feel is stifling heat making my skin prickle.

Blinking several times, I start to panic because I can’t see, but then realize I’m in a very darkened room.

A hospital?

I sit up, pressing a hand down for leverage, and I’m stunned to not feel a mattress but a dirt floor. “What the fuck?”

Rolling to my knees, I push up to my feet. I have no pain whatsoever, but I’m not relieved. I’m distinctly anxious.

As my eyes adjust, I focus on my accommodations. The thick metal bars dredge up the panic welling inside me.

A jail cell?

I move to the bars, wrap my fingers around them, and peer out of my mini prison.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter as I take it all in.

A midnight sky with low-hanging stars, a hill made of shiny black rock sprouting from the ground and pushing higher still, and an obsidian castle with turrets and spires rising so tall, I can barely see the tips. A red river of thick lava flows between my cell and the castle, the source of the heat I feel.

My head twists and I take in other cells carved into the side of a mountain. Thick grates covering black holes and from within those spaces, I hear screaming and howling laced with deep misery, regret, and terror.

I'm not in a hospital.

I'm fairly confident I'm in Hell.

I'm dead—flattened by a bus—and I was sent straight to Satan's dominion.

I can't help it. I start laughing again, releasing a mirth that comes from deep within my belly. I laugh so long and hard, tears leak from my eyes, but I can't stop it.

Dropping to my knees, I roll onto my side and hold my stomach, now aching from the hilarity.

It's more than just laughter, though.

It's pure joy.

Because no matter that I'm here in Hell, Vince Matheson is still dead, and that makes it a very good day.

## CHAPTER 3

### MELL

THE AMBER LIQUOR slides down my throat and burns nicely. It hits my belly with the same warming effect, and I lift my wings to settle back into my chair with a fatigued sigh.

This job is fucking exhausting. I didn't get this gig because I wanted it—I got it because I was apparently the most qualified. Having served as Kymaris's second-in-command from the very beginning, I had the respect—and fear—of the Dark Fae nobles, gentry, and lower caste.

I didn't want it. After everything I'd been through with Kymaris, and then Zora, and then a potential apocalypse I wanted no part of was averted (thanks to Zora), I just wanted to live my life in peace.

But our newly minted god of Life asked it of me, and there's not much I can deny Zora after all the pain I've caused her.

"Relax," Sorcha purrs. Her claws spring forth from the end of her fingers and graze along my thighs, the leather preventing her from scoring my skin. She's kneeling before me with promise in her silver eyes.

"Trying," I mutter, taking another large gulp of the Kentucky bourbon brought to me from the First Dimension by one of my Dark Fae brethren who travels there often.

Sorcha is a beautiful Dark Fae of noble blood and sister to my closest friend, Truett. She shares the same blond hair and bluish tint to her skin that defines their familial line. We pleasure each other whenever we feel like it, but there are no bonds or commitments. That's not the way of our race. The only reason she's here and not someone else is because she was convenient.

But today... she's not doing it for me. I'm still pissed that Zora's imprisoned me here, which isn't the true punishment. That would be the fact I can't visit Thalia. And Zora knew that would hurt worse than anything.

I'm also annoyed because if punishment is supposed to be a deterrent to future actions, she's misjudged me. Supposing I get out of this prison at some point, Zora's sentence won't prevent me from protecting my daughter if she

falls into trouble again.

“I know exactly what you need.” Sorcha reaches to the laces of my pants—claws safely retracted—but a loud knocking on my door has me pushing her hands away.

“Enter,” I command as I rise. Sorcha rolls to her hip and lounges against my chair, arm resting on the cushion. She’s completely naked and doesn’t care who sees her.

Neither do I, for that matter.

Calix comes in with his hands folded before him. He returned yesterday after spending a week torturing Maddox with poltergeist fun. I took great joy in his recounting of how particularly annoyed Maddox was when his lights would come on in the middle of the night or when the ice maker on his fridge spontaneously spewed cubes all over the kitchen.

But I needed Calix here more than I needed him back in the First Dimension plaguing Maddox, so I recalled him.

As if his eyes were magnetized, they land right on Sorcha. She leers at him, biting into her lip with a sharp fang that draws blood, and he immediately averts his gaze.

“What do you need?” I ask him, actually grateful for the interruption. I wasn’t feeling it tonight with the blue beauty lounging naked on my bedroom floor.

His head whips my way. “They await you on the Bridge of Judgment, Your Most Muscled Eminence.”

I look past the ridiculous name as I’d forgotten all about my judgment duties, but it’s my excuse to take my leave of Sorcha. She’d told me to relax, but I don’t have the ability. I’m too wound up over my imprisonment, so the thought of tossing souls into the Crimson River is more to my liking than sex. Perhaps by causing others suffering, mine won’t seem as bad.

Glancing back at Sorcha, I say, “Go home to Calashte. I won’t be back anytime soon.”

She pouts as she rises, nabbing the nearly translucent dress she arrived in. “I think I’ll go visit Jago instead.”

If she thought her statement would make me jealous, she’s misjudged me for thousands of years. “Give Jago my regards.”

Sorcha glares, and without putting her dress on, blinks out of sight. I imagine she’s appearing before Jago right now, and given her nakedness and beauty, she’ll get what she wants.

I motion with my hand, and Calix precedes me out the door. I follow him through the castle.

My abode is neither humble nor cozy. Created from black obsidian, crystals, and glass, it's so one-dimensional that I sometimes get disoriented walking the halls. Kymaris did like to make a statement with her inherent wickedness, and black is the in color for all villains.

Well, not all villains. While I like black, I like other colors too. Maybe I need to make some changes to this dark monstrosity the way I have with the makeup of the Underworld itself. When Zora bestowed the weight of king upon me, she gave me incredible power to wield in my rule. With that power, I changed the very landscape of the Underworld to make it more visually palatable. There are thousands of Dark Fae, daemons, and even some humans who live in this underbelly dimension, and there's no reason it can't be a bit more comfortable.

When we were cast from Heaven eons ago, it was meant to serve as a punishment. But we've done our penance.

As we walk toward the bridge, Calix says, "Skicru is here to see you."

I blink in surprise. She's one of the heads of the five noble lines in the Underworld. "Did she say what she needed?"

"Only that it was private and would not take much of your time."

I nod but don't respond. Skicru will have to wait until after I render my judgments. It's an event that calls out the inhabitants of Otaxis, the capital of the Underworld.

The Bridge of Judgment is a massive obsidian walkway that connects the castle to the city. It crosses the Crimson River that flows two hundred feet below, constantly churning and bubbling with the violent souls of the condemned.

Halfway across the bridge, a slab of flat rock juts out. Upon it sits the throne made of ebony crystal from which Kymaris used to rule. I had it relocated from the castle out here to the bridge for a few reasons. Mostly, I hate sitting in it, and since I conduct most of my business inside the castle's throne room, I wanted it to be more comfortable for myself.

Out here, I don't use it often, but it is rather imposing. As I decide the fate of those who come before me, I don't ever want them feeling safe. They're in Hell for a reason, and I want their fear maximized.

On the far side of the bridge, two Dark Fae wait with a long line of recently departed humans here to be judged. Those fae are part of what would

be considered a royal guard. They wear the same clothing Kymaris had put them in—pure black from head to toe, including helmets with face shields. Tall, brawny, and intimidating, these fae ensure the humans remain cowed and don't cause trouble.

As I walk to the throne, I take in the landscape of Otaxis and beyond. I've changed it a great deal. Before, it resembled a dark cavern with a craggy ceiling so high up and dark, it was hard to see. The buildings were all made of brown mud, stone, and wood. The only light came from the glowing red river and by torches throughout the city. Dull and depressing, and I still feel tremendous guilt that this was all Zora ever knew for twenty-eight years of her life.

The changes I've made are quite beautiful. I first used my powers to clean up the city. Buildings are now pristine whitewashed stone, veins of magical light run down the center of all streets providing a warm glow, and streetlamps abound with the same soft light.

On the outskirts of Otaxis, I birthed night-blooming trees and carved a crystal-clear river, cool and refreshing, through the rocky hills. It is the antithesis of the Crimson River.

Overhead, I wove a magical spell to create a velvety, night sky to hide the ugliness of the cavernous world and lit it with a billion low-hanging stars. On the horizon, I faded the sky from blues to purples to pinks and finally a yellow incandescence that simulates a rising sun just on the edge of tomorrow. The Underworld is vast, so no matter how far you travel, you will always have the black velvet sky melting into a sunrise on the horizon like a never-ending painting.

Yes, I gave the Underworld a makeover. A world I'd have wished for Zora to see when she lived here, knowing it was too late but still providing me with satisfaction because I made this place mine. If and when Thalia or my future grandchildren visit, it will be a place they enjoy coming to.

All that aside, this is still Hell, and no matter the beauty I've chosen for it—for myself and the Dark Fae who live here—it's a place where nightmares are formed for some.

I move to the throne and settle into it, tucking in my massive black wings as the back of the throne is too high to settle them over. On the other side of the river, with Otaxis looming behind them, many residents have come out to watch the festivities. There's an almost carnival-like atmosphere as the tossing of souls into the Crimson River is genuinely considered a good time.



We're Dark Fae.

We're evil.

This is high entertainment for us.

With a flick of my wrist, Calix strides down the bridge toward the line of humans, stopping about twenty feet away.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he lifts his chin and calls out so the people across the river can hear as his voice echoes off the stone caves where the dead humans are kept. "Listen, one and all, it is Judgment Day. Sitting before you is his magnificence, King Amell, anointed by Zora, the god of Death. I am his steward, Calix, and I shall reap you individually for the king's consideration."

Zora's really the god of Life, but I don't correct him. He thinks it sounds more ominous, and so do I. I also don't insist he shorten his little speech. It makes him feel important.

His voice is imperious. "The recently departed will step forward, one by one, and receive the grace or vengeance of our esteemed ruler. Prepare thyselfes."

My eyes drift to the line of humans. Their bodies aren't real, facades of what they looked like in their prior life the moment before they died, including an illusion of the very clothes they were wearing at their time of death. The only thing that's real are their blackened souls within.

Today's crowd to be judged is quite small. Maybe only a hundred. It varies, depending on who gets sent to me and how long I go between judgments. Usually when the prison cells are full, then I have to reap.

Thankfully, I don't have to judge every human death. In its simplest form, the ones who led good lives go somewhere other than here. I don't know where that is, but I'm guessing up to my former boss, the supreme deity who rules the heavens and cast his traitorous angels down into the Underworld.

The souls that are inherently evil without any chance of redemption go straight to the Crimson River. Zora's far-reaching power lets her judge the nearly one hundred and eighty thousand deaths in the world each day. It's instantaneous and spot on, and she keeps the river churning.

Those who might be questionable are sent to me. It's what some call purgatory, but those souls don't linger here long. They're brought before me and one of two things happens:

I either judge them unworthy and into the river they go where they will suffer unending torture and suffering.

Or, I give them a second chance to make things right. A reincarnation into a harder life than what they had before. An opportunity for them to do penance and save their soul. I hand those out rarely because frankly, I don't give much of a fuck if people get second chances.

Calix motions to the fae guards, and they drag a man forward kicking and screaming. He's maybe in his fifties, wearing a track suit with pizza sauce on the front, and has the disconnected look of someone with no conscience. Doesn't mean he's not emotional as tears stream down his face. He looks intermittently over the side of the flat bridge as his socked feet slide across the slick obsidian. The guards shove the man ahead until he's standing before Calix and then return to their post.

Under Kymaris's rule, Calix had been granted nominal powers to help make his servitude easier on her, not him. One such power is the magic of conjuring, and with a flourish, he twists his wrist, and an ancient-looking scroll appears in his hand.

It's over-the-top embellishment, but Calix likes his flair. He pulls it open and clears his throat. "Jordan Baxter. You appear before King Amell to be judged on the crime of murder where you knowingly and without conscience put a pillow over your mother's face and smothered her until she was dead. You did this for the inheritance money. How do you explain your actions?"

The man clasps his hands and falls to his knees, tear-filled eyes pleading with Calix. "That's not true. I didn't do it. She died of natural causes, and her life insurance was only ten thousand dollars. I would never do such a thing. I loved my mother."

Calix angles his body and points to me. "It's not me but King Amell you should beg to."

The man opens his mouth, but I make a shooing motion with my hand, my magic slinging him off the bridge. He hurtles over the side, screaming all the way down until he hits the river.

The lava flow incinerates the soul with a wild shriek of approval and a spray of sparks. The Underworld rumbles slightly as it receives the sacrifice.

The Dark Fae across the river cheer in approval, and the humans at the end of the bridge start screaming and begging for mercy.

Just another day in Hell.

Judgment Day moves quickly as I don't need to hear pleas and excuses. Whatever charges Calix reads off are the absolute truth. No mistakes are made. You either belong in Hell or you don't. The only reason we even

bother with this is because once in a blue moon, extenuating circumstances pop up that might please the gods to award the accused another try at life. Zora is the one who gets credit for such generosity.

After tossing a good thirty people over the edge, the guards drag forward a young woman. She's incredibly beautiful, and based on the way she's dressed, I'm guessing incredibly wealthy. She died in designer clothes, dripping with expensive jewelry. I can tell she once held power and sway over many people because of her looks and money, but now, she's just a terrified woman on the verge of pissing her fancy lingerie.

Calix reads out her charges, which include over two decades of gluttony, narcissism, bullying, taking advantage of weaker beings, cheating, and drug use. It was an overdose that caused her death. Ordinarily, a bad personality wouldn't end you in Hell, but her repeated unsavory behavior, along with the knowledge that she enjoyed hurting others, has her standing before me.

"How do you answer these crimes?" Calix asks.

The woman's pained stare comes to me. "Please... Your Highness." Tears slip from her big blue eyes. "I may have led a selfish life, but I haven't murdered anyone. I haven't raped anyone. Eternal damnation is too strong a penalty."

"You never helped anyone either," Calix points out, scanning his scroll.

"That's not true," she insists. "I donated to many charities."

"Only for the tax break." Her jaw drops that he knows all her dirty little secrets. "You were mean, self-centered, and vindictive your entire life. You not only took advantage of people, but you enjoyed causing their suffering."

She changes tack and surprises me by admitting it all. She purges her sins. "Yes, you're right. I was an awful person. I was raised by awful parents and surrounded myself with horrible friends. I didn't have any good role models. But if you give me another chance, I swear I'll do good. I'll be everything I wasn't in my life."

It's a pretty speech, but I don't hear any truth in her vows. She's desperate and thinks she can manipulate me like she has others. Besides, she blames others for making her the way she is, and I can't suffer people who don't take responsibility for their crimes.

I give her my verdict with a subtle hand motion, and she goes hurtling over the edge with a high-pitched scream of terror. The river hisses its pleasure, the ground shakes, and the fae cheer.

I motion for the next person to be brought forward.

## CHAPTER 4

### A

**T**HIS NIGHTMARE IS apparently very real. I'm in Hell.

Another person—an old man who bilked money from people in a Ponzi scheme—gets tossed off the edge of the bridge, flipping end over end. I watch with fascination as the churning lava river reaches tendrils of molten liquid up to catch him, as if it's plucking a meal out of the sky. I swear it even lets out a satisfying belch when the man disappears beneath the fiery liquid and the creatures across the river—a mix of human-looking and monsters—cheer their excitement.

“Move it, human.” I'm jabbed in the back by one of the massive guards.

It appears I'm next, and while I know it's a 99.99999 percent certainty I've got no hope of escape, I won't go down without at least trying to make a run for it. I immediately dart between the two guards who are so stunned by my move, they don't react quickly enough to grab me. No one had tried to run yet, and they'd gotten complacent.

I push through the remaining people waiting for judgment and focus in on the two guards at the end of the bridge. They squat low, brandishing the pointy ends of their spears my way.

I won't make it past, but I kick it into high gear and sprint faster, barreling right at them. It's my only option. Maybe I'll be able to dodge their weapons.

Maybe I can do one of those slick moves you see in the movies, like a baseball slide under their legs.

Maybe I'll—

Something wraps around my waist and I'm pulled backward. My feet fly up, and I land flat on my back, hard. Hard enough that I should be wheezing, but there's no pain at all.

So strange.

I'm hauled up by the two guards I'd blown past earlier. I look down but there's nothing around my waist, and I have no clue what pulled me off my

feet. The guards drag me across the slick stone toward the creature named Amell, king of the Underworld. I have stupid thoughts about why he's called Amell—I thought Satan ruled Hell. Or is it Lucifer? Hades? No clue.

It had been surreal watching the massive man with his glossy raven wings flick his wrist casually, rendering judgment with a mere wave. Bodies over the edge, burning up far below.

It's what awaits me now.

I jerk and struggle against my captors' hold, trying to back up as they push me forward. My thrift store boots scrabble against the slippery black rock. I curse vicious snarls of expletives. "Let go of me, you creepy, motherfucking douchebags."

I twist to the side and launch a kick at one of the guards. My foot bounces off his shin, and he doesn't even break stride. I lean into him and try to bite his forearm, but he claps me in the head, dislodging me before I can sink my teeth in.

It's not lost on me that I didn't feel any pain from my kick to his leg or his big hand smacking my head. My body clearly isn't functioning right, but that just makes me fight harder. The fact I can't feel pain means I shouldn't have anything holding me back in my desperate attempt to not get hurled into that river.

I kick, spit, try to bite, curse, and scream. I've been debased to a cornered, rabid animal. The guards' hands clamp on tighter, and their steady strides bring me closer and closer to the man named Calix who has been reading out the charges and seems to know a lot about each person per the document in his hand.

My eyes flick over to the king lounging on his throne. He sits upright, not slouched, but he does lean against one armrest casually as he watches, drumming his fingers on his thigh. The king is all rippled muscles that flex under a formfitting leather vest and pants. His face is near perfect, precise angles and lines, along with full lips standing out starkly against his cropped blond hair. The two slashing golden brows above his dark blue eyes make him look distinctly annoyed.

When we reach Calix, the guards shove me forward as they release me, and I fall to my knees. It's where many of those who came before me have fallen, pleading for their salvation.

I don't do that. I pop to my feet and my hand shoots out, wrenching the scroll away from the man. My move is so sudden, he stares at me

dumbfounded.

“Got your scroll, motherfucker,” I sneer and toss it over the edge.

It doesn't even anger the man. He merely twists his hand and another scroll appears. He reaches out, making a move to offer it to me. “Want to toss this one over? I can play this game all day.”

His smug amusement enrages me, and I scream as I charge at him. The smirk is wiped off his lips as I punch and pummel him. I know it will do nothing to save me from my fate, but it sure feels fucking good to throw some violence before I die.

Or rather, before my soul becomes fully damned.

Suddenly, I'm ripped away from the man, though not by the guards. Not by anything I can see, but my body moves as if the massive hand of a giant were around me.

I'm hurled to the side of the bridge, my feet stopping right at the edge, and my body leans way out. My arms flail as I try to pull myself back, but I hover in midair, the balls of my feet now the only thing touching the stone walkway.

My head twists and I see the king holding out his hand with his fingers down as if he's controlling marionette strings and I'm the puppet he's manipulating.

This is it. He doesn't even need to hear my crimes. He's going to dump me in.

I hiss at him. “Go ahead and do it, you big old, winged bat. You don't scare me.” I look around wild-eyed at this place called Hell and scream, “None of you scare me.”

The king arches an eyebrow and slowly rises from his throne, his massive wings stretching outward. I should be scared, but I've lost all common sense. I'm either immersed in the worst but most vivid nightmare imaginable, or I'm on the precipice of eternal suffering, which I undoubtedly deserve for killing Vince.

Looking like an angel of death, the king doesn't walk my way. Instead, he pulls his arm back hard and as if invisible ropes were tied around me, I fly toward him. I crash onto the rock bridge, sliding to a stop right at his booted feet.

I look up, pushing my hair out of my face to find him staring down at me. He's utterly terrifying as he towers above. The silky-looking wings arch high over his blond head as they settle against his back.

“Aren’t you quite the feisty girl?” he says in a rich baritone as he squats before me. His fingers come under my chin, pushing my head up for a better look.

I snarl at him. “I’ll have your balls for lunch if you let me have that dagger on your hip.”

Surprisingly, his lips twitch as if he’s fighting back a smile. But maybe I imagined it because he stands straight and looks to Calix. “The charges?”

“Murder,” the man replies as he consults the scroll. “Oddly, just before she died herself. Tied a man to her bed and slit his throat.”

The king’s eyes come back down to me. “You really do like cutting into men.”

“You’re not a man,” I snap.

“No, I’m not,” he agrees. “How did you die so suddenly after you committed murder? Did you kill yourself?”

I press my lips shut. I’m not about to provide fodder for him and those watching.

Calix chuckles, however, and my head turns his way. His eyes pinned on the scroll, he says, “It appears she tried to cross a street and stepped in front of a bus.”

The king winces. “Ouch. That had to hurt.” He then rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Murder usually earns you a one-way ticket into the river, but there’s a reason Zora sent you here for judgment.”

Zora. The person Calix called the god of Death.

“Are you sorry for what you did, human?” the king asks.

“I’d do it all again if you put me back in that same position,” I choke out. I’m operating on little control over my words and actions. I know my full demise is mere seconds away because I’ve watched this creature throw every other person into the river. He’s going to do the same to me, and I want everyone to know that I have no fucking regrets.

King Amell tilts his head, his brows furrowed. “Would you, now? You know you’re pretty much demanding I toss you over.”

“Do it, then,” I hiss, then to add insult, “You nasty buzzard.”

Pressing his thumb to his chin, he rubs his lower lip with his finger as he considers me. After what seems like forever, his hand drops and I close my eyes, knowing I’m about to be hurled.

“I think you might be fun to play with,” the king says, and my eyes pop open to stare at him in shock.

But he's not looking at me anymore. Instead, there's another wave of his hand and a thick metal collar appears around my neck. Chains are attached to the front and connect to shackles on my wrists.

He turns his back as he issues orders. "Take her to the castle."

One of the guards jerks me up by the arm and drags me across the bridge toward the massive structure of spires. I don't think to struggle against him because I've earned a reprieve from that river. I don't know what awaits me, but it has to be a step up from eternal damnation.

I twist my neck and look over my shoulder just in time to see Amell flick another person over the edge. The screams shred my ears, and the cheers from the crowd terrify me. While I didn't see any joy or pleasure in his task, the king doesn't look distressed by his duties.

Just another day at the office.

As I'm brought into the castle, my jaw drops at the size of the building. In the massive entryway, the ceiling rises so high into spires that I can't see the tops of some. The walls and floors are done in a black tile polished to such a sheen I can see my reflection clear as glass. It looks like a version of me walking upside down in pace with my own steps, and it's disorienting.

I'm boggled as we pass people—no, not people—creatures. Some look like humans, some look like monsters. Some look like a combination of both.

Most snarl at me as we walk by, and one particularly gruesome-looking thing with horns curving from under his jaw and a triple row of sharp teeth murmurs, "Like to take a bite out of you, little girl. Maybe later."

I shudder, and my stomach pitches as I realize I'll now be in continual danger. Amell said he wanted to play with me, and given that this is Hell, I'm guessing it's going to be painful.

I'm led along several corridors and down a spiral staircase carved from black stone in one of the turrets. It gets colder the farther we descend, which surprises me. I thought Hell was supposed to be hot.

At the bottom, we traverse more corridors until we enter a long hall with cells built into the stone on both sides, each one separated by thick metal bars. I see what looks to be other humans in the cells.

At least they look like humans, but I can't be sure. I don't know enough about this place.

There are no beds, no sinks, no toilets that one might enjoy in a prison.

Just the same craggy obsidian rock, and not even the comfort of a blanket.

I'm led to a cell and shoved in, the metal door clanging behind me. The



guard pulls out a ring of keys and locks me inside.

“What about my chains?” I ask, holding out my shackled wrists.

“You look good in them,” he says from behind his full mask and laughs wickedly as he turns and walks away.

I pace around the small room, which can't be more than ten-by-ten feet. While I can feel the cold damp, it doesn't seem to bother me. I don't have any chills or feel the need to seek warmth. I'm still wearing the same clothes I was in when I killed Vince, but they're not covered in his blood. They look pristine, as a matter of fact. My skin is clean too.

Moving to the bars, I see in the cell opposite me a man lying on his side, curled into a ball, his back to me. I grab hold of the bars and put my face up to it. “Hey... you.”

He doesn't move or acknowledge me.

“Dude... hey, you in that cell. Wake up.”

Nothing.

“He won't answer you,” another man's voice says from the cell to my left.

I can't see him, but I still turn my head that way. “Why not?”

“He stopped talking about ten years ago, give or take a few months. At least that's what the other prisoners say.”

My jaw drops. Ten years?

I swallow hard. “How long have you been here?”

“About three, I think. Every once in a while, a guard will tell us if we ask.”

“And what do we do? Just stay in this cell until we die?”

The man laughs, and it's not mean. More sardonic than anything. “Die? You're already dead. You're nothing more than a soul right now, here to serve at the pleasure of the king. What do I do? I do whatever he wants me to do.”

Images flash through my mind as to what that could mean. Maybe clean his toilets? Service him in other ways?

My stomach rolls.

I glance back at the man lying in his cell, completely mute. I wonder what he's been made to do the last ten years, and I also wonder how long it will take me before I stop speaking as well.

## CHAPTER 5

### MELL

I FIND SKICRU waiting for me in my council room. I had this space created when I took over rule of the Underworld so I'd have a proper venue to meet with the noble lines of Dark Fae. In here, we discuss important topics such as trade, commerce, infrastructure, and the like. The Underworld doesn't just exist. It needs management, especially coming off Kymaris's rule since she didn't give a shit about anyone but herself. Her thousands upon thousands of years of disinterest and evil intent left this realm in chaos.

I took a different approach to governance when Zora asked me to step in. The first was that this is our homeland. Before, it was a prison, and we made do with what we had. But with the change in management, Zora gave us a chance to have a good life, and I wanted to make sure we took it.

In addition to improving living conditions, I'm trying to use the nobles to help me build a solid infrastructure.

Skicru is one of my original fallen sisters—not by blood but by circumstance—cast out of Heaven right alongside me. She's beautiful, and deadly. From her descended and later evolved the succubus and incubus fae and all their iterations that require sex to maintain their strength. If you're in bed with Skicru—and I have been on many occasions—you're going to get a workout. Only because I'm Dark Fae am I able to withstand the drain of life force, but lesser beings die between her legs as she sucks them dry.

While she has the strength of a hundred humans and can snap necks like no tomorrow, she comes off as willowy and delicate. Her clothing is always provocative but romantic. Today she's wearing a flowing dress of ivory silk, and her angel-blond hair floats over her shoulders. If she had her original white wings she fell from Heaven with, no one would question she was an angel.

Skicru is lounging in a chair, talking to one of her brethren. Torak. He's a Dark Fae but not an original fallen. He's of noble blood, though, and has been a loyal member of Skicru's family so long I can't remember where he

came from.

Their heads turn my way when I enter and they stand in deference, but I wave them down. I can't stand all that bowing and bobbing shit that Kymaris always insisted on.

I take a chair across the table. "Calix said you had something urgent to discuss."

"There are rumblings," Skicru says, her expression taut.

"Such as?" I drawl.

"Ariman." She leans forward, crossing her arms on the table. "He's not liking the rules you're putting in place."

"Oh, you mean my prohibition on the wanton killing of humans and daemons?" The sarcasm drips from me, but Skicru is not telling me anything I don't know.

Ariman is an immortal human priest who harnessed stone magic in the First Dimension and came here a few thousand years ago. Next to me, he was one of Kymaris's most trusted allies, responsible for enacting the changeling spell that our former queen used to tear the veil so her demons could wreak havoc in the real world.

Moreover, he was directly responsible for much of Zora's pain as he oversaw the funneling of magic into her for twenty-eight long years while Kymaris stayed in stasis until she could be reborn in the First Dimension.

I can't stand the fucker for that reason alone, but he's a menace outside of that. Kymaris let him run rampant with his power and bloodlust, and I've been struggling to rein him in. He has followers—those who bemoan the loss of their evil ruler and would like to break free and ruin the First Dimension.

It would be a lot easier if Zora would just let me kill him outright, but she's firmly against it, despite what he did to her.

"It's better to make friends with him, Amell," she had advised with a look on her face that said it really wasn't advice but an edict. "His magic has been instrumental in restoring powers to many of the Dark Fae. You'll make enemies if you disturb that resource."

I didn't make friends with him, but I allowed him to live.

"He's been putting out feelers to the nobles about a potential coup," Torak says. "It's always very veiled and subtle, but make no mistake, he's got a plan."

"And do you have interest?" I ask, my eyes lasering onto Skicru. She leads her people from the city of Kasdeya and her forces are immense.

“Would I be here talking to you if I did?” she retorts.

I take a second to ponder but ultimately shake my head. I trust her. “No, you wouldn’t. What’s his angle?”

Torak scoffs. “He wants to be king, but he’s not phrasing it in that way. He’s going old-school Roman republic, saying there should be a governing senate, but that only means he’s promising positions of power to those who help him rise.”

I rub my hand over the back of my neck. I hate this shit. If I didn’t have the burden of the Underworld on my shoulders, I’d be living in Vyronas with Thalia and her family. I’d abdicate in a heartbeat if Zora would let me, but she trusts no one else to render judgment and keep the Underworld secure.

And it’s not just about keeping those down here safe, but keeping the rest of the universe safe from my subjects. We’ve had millennia to grow even more evil than the original rebels cast from Heaven. Stone magic, along with evolution, has bred some seriously deranged fae who would love nothing more than to carry out Kymaris’s wish to overrun the First Dimension.

Pushing up from my chair, I incline my head at Skicru and Torak. “Thank you for coming to me with this. I think I’ll call a full council meeting and address this head-on as a group. Are there others who are interested in what Ariman is selling?”

Skicru and Torak stand, but it’s Skicru who answers. “Jago. He thinks the idea has merit.”

“Shit,” I mutter, scraping my hand over my scalp. Jago is influential and hot-tempered. He’s a ravager, evolved to lust after mayhem and destruction. But he can be reasoned with, if you catch him in the right mood. “I’ll get Calix to set up a meeting. You’re more than welcome to join me for dinner and stay the night if you wish.”

Skicru nods. “We accept your gracious offer.”

I incline my head. “You know where the guest wing is. Make yourselves at home.”

With that, I pivot and walk out of the room to find Calix waiting for me. “Your Inconceivableness—”

I glare at Calix and he amends. “Your Highness, there has been a tear noted in the veil between here and Faere. It appears a few fae have gone through, and Queen Deandra is requesting that you, and these are her words, ‘Repair the opening and get your murderous thugs under control before she incinerates them.’”

“Fuck,” I mutter. If it’s not one thing, it’s another.

Deandra is the newly ascended queen of the Light Fae. They differ from us Dark Fae in that when they were cast from Heaven, they were only banished to the mortal realm of the First Dimension rather than trapped in Hell with us. Their sins weren’t as great for they didn’t actively rebel against God, only supported those of us who did.

Her mother, Nimeyah, was an original fallen angel, and with stone magic, she created her own dimension called Faere where she has lived a life of luxury and complacency.

Right up until Kymaris killed her as a sacrifice in an attempt to tear the veil completely open.

“Have Truett handle it,” I instruct Calix. “I don’t have permission to leave the Underworld.”

“Of course,” he says with a low bow.

He starts to turn but stops when I ask, “Where is she?”

Calix frowns. “She? You mean, the new prisoner?”

“That would be the one,” I reply dryly.

“She’s in a cell. Shall I get her?”

“No,” I say, turning from him.

I can get her myself.

I make my way down to the prison, which doesn’t get much use. It’s not often I allow a soul to stay here the way I did with the hellion who I put in chains not long ago. I really have no use for her, but she intrigued me way too much.

A mere break in the monotony.

In all my time of rendering judgments, I’ve never seen anyone so brave in the face of eternal torment. The fact she had no regrets should have gotten her tossed over the side, but she earned a reprieve so I could study her a bit more.

My life isn’t boring, but it’s also not that exciting either. I can have any pleasure I want—food, sex, wealth, luxuries—but nothing has made me feel even remotely alive since... well, since Zora was here.

And now this woman who slit a man’s throat and seemed to enjoy doing it fascinates me. She’s probably nothing more than a plaything, but I intend to see what she’s made of.

As I walk the corridor between the cells, the few humans down here shrink away in fear when they see me, and some moan piteously, as if I’m here to drag them to the river.

I ignore them. They were here by Kymaris's judgment, not mine.

When I reach the woman's cell, she doesn't shrink away or make a single sound. Instead, she wraps her hands around the bars and peers at me without a single bit of worry in her green-gold eyes.

Fascinating, her lack of fear.

She's young by human standards... can't be more than mid-twenties. Thin in an underfed kind of way with a hatchet-job haircut on her bleached locks. Still, you look past all that, she's quite pretty, despite her murderous talents.

"Your name," I demand.

"I'm sure it's on that scroll your lackey has tucked away somewhere."

Insolent too.

She could be a lot of fun.

My hand shoots out, grabs the manacles around her wrists, and calling on my powers, I bring us both to the Bridge of Judgment where not but an hour ago, she escaped only by her moxie.

We stand at the edge, her shackles and collar gone. My hand grips the back of her neck, holding her in place but with a slight pressure that lets her know I'm the only thing between safety and damnation.

"Let's try again," I say as she stares down at the river churning below.

"Your name?"

"Nyssa McKnight," she grits out.

"See, that wasn't so hard now, was it?" I pull her back slightly from the edge and turn her toward me. She doesn't avert her eyes but raises them boldly to mine, fuming over her lack of control. I take in the lift of her chin, the clench of her fists, and the hate in her mossy eyes. "Most beings with any lick of common sense would be quaking in their shoes right now."

She snarls, "Am I supposed to be afraid of a big man-bat?"

I jerk her closer to me, using my strength and my hand at the back of her neck to force her to her tiptoes. I bend down to put my face closer to hers. "Careful, little girl," I warn with a squeeze. "There are worse things than being thrown into that river."

"Like having your balls cut off?" she taunts, and I go still as I look down to see she's palmed my dagger and has it pressed against my jewels.

Calmly, I bring my gaze back to hers. She seems so triumphant, having scored that little victory. "You're not even sorry for murdering that man, are you?"

“Remorse is overrated.” She presses the edge of the dagger against my groin and admittedly, I flinch. I’m immortal and can grow my balls back if she follows through, but it’s going to hurt like a bitch.

I call forth my power, freezing her arm in place. Her eyes go round, and I reach down to wrap my fingers around her wrist. Slowly, I bring it up, twisting so the dagger is now poised right under her chin.

Fascinating.

Not an ounce of fear in her eyes. Not confidence either. Just freedom because of her complete lack of regard for her own safety.

“You can’t kill me,” she says with a sneer. “I’m already dead.”

“True,” I say, and the dagger disappears. She’s still locked tight by the back of her neck. “But I can hurt you. I can make you beg for the Crimson River.”

“There’s no pain here,” she points out. “I’ve been thrown around enough... but no pain.”

“That’s because you don’t have a body yet.”

Her dark eyebrows press together, standing out starkly against her platinum hair. “I have a body.”

“You have an illusion. A small gift to all souls entering the Underworld so you don’t go crazy over your circumstances. A bit of normality before you’re judged.”

“It sure looks like I have a body. Still wearing the same clothes I was in when I slit Vince’s throat. Was able to get that dagger from you without you knowing. I’m hardly a ghost.”

Smirking, I sling her away from me. Not hard enough to make her go down, but enough to give us distance. “You’re not breathing.”

“What?” she exclaims.

“You’re not breathing. You don’t have a heartbeat. You’re solid, but you’re not real.”

Nyssa presses her hand to her chest, pushing hard. She opens her mouth, attempts to suck in air. When nothing happens, I see her first sign of weakness as panic fills her eyes.

“I... can’t... breathe.” She stares at me desperately, hands clawing at her throat. “Help.”

I don’t. I let her suffer so she knows I’m in control. Any grace she gets will be by my hand, and I’ll make the little killer grateful for it.

Walking to her, I watch her enter a full-blown meltdown over the

psychological mind fuck she's experiencing, thinking she needs oxygen to breathe when a dead person doesn't need such things.

I put my palms to the sides of her head. She grips my wrists, thrashing in her delirium, and I bring my mouth to hers.

It's not a kiss by any means.

I blow breath mixed with my power into her, and the minute it hits her lungs, I feel the change take hold.

Releasing my grip, Nyssa falls to her knees, grunting from the pain of the bone hitting hard against the stone. Her palms press down, and she inhales deep breaths.

I stare in amazement as the real Nyssa McKnight has been reborn. Her true form before she bleached her hair and hacked away at it with what must have been a butter knife.

She throws her head back to glare at me. "What did you do?"

"I gave you a real body. One with nerve endings, blood, and a need for oxygen, which we have plenty of here in the Underworld. You can now feel pain. You can now be hurt. In fact, your body can be torn to pieces—and trust me, there are many creatures here that would love to tear you apart. Now, stand up."

Sucking in another breath, she rises, and her hatred once again mars her pretty face. I study her critically. "You look much better as a brunette."

Her hand flies upward, finding her hair long. She pulls a chunk forward over her shoulder to look at it. "How did you know?" she whispers in fascination.

"What you really look like?" She glances at me and nods. "I didn't. I just called on my powers to return you to your original form, and this is what I got."

She drops her hair, and her lips press in a flat line. "That's not who I am anymore."

"No, I suppose not. You're mine to do with what I want now."

"Am I staying here forever?" she demands.

"You're to do whatever I tell you to do."

"Will you throw me in the river at some point?"

I grin evilly at her. "There's a good chance."

Nyssa looks around, taking in the city of Otaxis across the river before looking back to me. "This is Hell, right?"

"The Underworld," I correct. "But yes, many from your dimension call it



Hell.”

She frowns in confusion. “Dimension?”

“You have a lot to learn, especially if you’re going to survive. I suggest you start figuring things out.”

## CHAPTER 6

### A

THE COLLAR AND chains don't reappear, but I'm in no way free. Amell turned me over to Calix, who took me back to the black castle. He gave me the grand tour, which essentially consisted of the kitchens where I'll be working and then the most direct route back to my cell where I'll sleep.

There's nowhere for me to run or escape to. The castle is loaded with creatures that look at me as if I'm a tasty morsel, and now that I can feel pain, I don't relish the thought of being chewed to pieces.

I can't get a grasp on how things work here. I know Amell is considered king. I see human-looking creatures, but they're more than human because they're otherworldly in their beauty. Like, the most gorgeous supermodels times ten. But there are others who are distinctly not human. Are they demons? Reincarnated souls?

And why are there so many inside the castle (which is monstrous)? A city sits across the river, but I don't know who lives there or what anyone's purpose is.

What exactly is this Underworld used for since the judgment of souls is handled so efficiently?

I have no concept of time. Calix turns me over to a stern woman named Rhynda. I mean, she looks like a human. No horns, slime, or black glossy wings, but she's terrifying in her own way. Her dark hair has been pulled back in a severe bun and she has a hardened resting bitch face. She wears no apron or chef's outfit, but rather a fitted leather ensemble with metal breastplates and a flogger at her hip.

"You are lowest on the totem pole here in the kitchens," she explains as I glance around, counting five other workers in addition to me. There are five wood-burning ovens with workers baking bread and what look like pastries. In the kitchen's center, a wooden work table sits under a chandelier of rusted metal, illuminated by artificial balls of light.

So strange.

There's a massive pantry on another wall, and I can see what look like strange vegetables, hanging hunks of dried meat, and baskets of dried plants.

"Your primary duties are to keep this place spotless throughout the day."

"How long is a day?" I ask.

"As long as I tell you it is," she snaps. "You are to serve any noble who requires something of you. They say jump, you ask how high."

"What do you mean by serve? And what is a noble?"

"Are you stupid or something?" she asks, head tilted slightly.

"Not that I've ever been told," I mutter.

"If a noble asks you to lick his boots, you lick until you're told to stop. If a noble asks you to strip naked, you strip."

"And if I refuse?"

The flogger materializes in Rhynda's hand from the strap at her side, and she holds it out for inspection. "Then you get punished."

Fuck.

She's not done, though. She slaps the leather fronds against her palm. "If you disobey me in any way, you get this. If you look at me funny, you get this. If you so much as cause me a moment's irritation, you get this. Am I clear?"

"Crystal," I say sweetly with a deferential bow of my head, although I vow to find a way to poison her food if I can.

With me put firmly in my place, I'm given clothing to wear that matches the other workers—a pair of brown pants made of a material that feels like stiff denim and a brown wraparound tunic that ties at the side. My shoes are taken from me, and I'm given none to replace them, but I'm graciously allowed a strip of leather to tie my hair back.

I have no clue how many hours I work, but I'm hating the fact that Amell gave me a working body. I'm no stranger to hard work and can handle a ten-hour shift behind the bar with no issues.

But I can tell by the fatigue in my body that I've been working longer than ten hours. Without the comfort of good shoes, I'm limping by the time I'm allowed a small bowl of a tasteless, thick stew and then ushered back to my cell.

A man takes me back to the prison, and I waste no time in asking for information. He's in his early thirties, I'd estimate, wearing the same type of clothing as me. His dark hair is long and greasy, his pale face smudged with dirt, and he smells. I'm guessing bathing isn't something that's offered.

“What’s your name?” I ask as we leave the kitchen.

He walks slowly so I can keep up, given the way I’m hobbling. “Will Goble.”

“Are you human?”

He nods, glancing over his shoulder at me. “The non-dead variety.”

“What does that even mean?” I ask.

“It means that I’m very much alive, whereas you’re dead.”

“How does that happen? How did you end up here?”

Will gives a mirthless laugh. “I was dating a woman who said she was into Wicca. I thought it was cool and all. Turns out she was into a little darker stuff, and I was a sacrifice.”

“Oh my fucking God,” I mutter as I amble along. “So you weren’t killed but... sent down here to what...?”

“It was an exchange. She got power, I got sent here.” Will’s voice is flat. I guess that’s the only way to be when all your joy has been stolen. “I’m the guy in the cell next to yours.”

“I’m Nyssa, by the way.”

“I know. Word spread quickly that King Amell kept you. It’s not really done anymore.”

“Anymore?” I prod.

We head down the spiral staircase that leads to our cells. “When Queen Kymaris ruled, she kept the worst of the souls and forged them into demons. I’ve heard that’s not being done anymore, and the castle does seem to be purged of them, from what I can tell.”

A shudder ripples up my spine. I absolutely don’t want to know what those demons might have been created to do.

“So, Amell is like a benevolent ruler?”

Will turns around on me as we reach the bottom of the stairs. “Listen to me, Nyssa. No one here is benevolent. Everyone here is evil. Don’t undertake a single action or utter one word before you remind yourself of that fact. If you keep that in mind, temper your behavior, you can live relatively easy under the radar. And by easy, I mean working your body to the bone every day, and sleeping on a hard floor at night. That’s the best your life—or rather, your dead life—will ever be.”

I’m stunned by his words. Despite how fantastical all of this has been so far—the Underworld, the Crimson River, a crazy king who might throw me in it on a whim, the monsters I’ve seen—none of it truly seemed real until

right now.

“I understand,” I murmur.

Will leads us down the corridor to our cells. I take the time to scan left and right. Most of the cells are empty, but a few hold people. Everyone sits or lies on the hard stone floor looking bored and defeated.

When we reach our prison abodes, I glance around for a guard. The iron-bar doors are open, and Will walks through his, pulling it shut behind him.

“When do they lock us in?” I ask before heading into mine.

“They don’t,” he says, sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall.

“Aren’t they afraid we’ll escape?” I ask in disbelief, looking around again as my mind churns with a potential plan to get out of here.

“Where would you go, Nyssa? The Underworld doesn’t have a front door you can come in and out of. It’s sealed off. The most you can hope for is to escape into Otaxis, but the first fae or daemon who finds you will either turn you back over to Amell, or worse, keep you for themselves to brutalize and torture. Humans—dead or alive—are hated and lowest on the food chain. It’s safer to stay here.”

For the first time in years, I feel like crying. I suck it up, though, moving to my cell and pulling the door shut. I see my new home has been furnished in my absence. A single bucket sits in the corner, apparently a place to relieve myself.

I feel so defeated, I can’t even bother to be horrified. Placing my back against the stone wall that separates my cell from Will’s, I slide down with a heavy sigh. Leaning my head back, I try to reconcile this as my life.

Or rather, my undead life.

Something strikes me, though. “You said a fae or daemon might find me. What is that?”

Sitting just on the other side of the stone wall and near the barred doors, I hear Will clearly as he answers. “The Underworld was established and is populated by Dark Fae. That’s what King Amell is. Daemons are the product of Light and Dark Fae, and a few reside down here with their dark parent. Daemons are different from demons. Demons are created by magic and using dark souls that are sent to the Underworld.”

“I don’t understand a thing you just said.”

“We have nothing but time, so I might as well fill you in on everything.”

I pull my legs up and wrap my arms around my shins, curling in for warmth against the chill down here. I settle in to learn more about my new

home.

Will tells me an incredible story about an angelic rebellion in Heaven, after which God cast out those traitors. The worst of the fallen angels were banished to the Underworld and sealed within, stripped of their wings and most powers. They were called Dark Fae. The fallen angels who didn't actively participate but did sympathize were cast down to Earth, also stripped of wings and most powers. They were called Light Fae.

"You said they were stripped of their powers, but I've seen Amell do some magical things," I point out.

"Many fae now have stronger abilities thanks to stone magic, but Amell has powers granted directly from the god of Life, Zora."

"Stone magic?"

"From a meteor that crashed to Earth thousands of years ago. The stone had magical properties. Pieces made their way into the Underworld. The Dark Fae nobles had power again, and they evolved over time. They're not what they were in their former glory as angels, but they're strong, immortal, and the nobles can wield deadly magic."

"Why does Amell have wings, though, if they were stripped? Did Zora give them to him?"

"No clue," Will says. "But he had the wings before he became king, which wasn't all that long ago."

"You mentioned Queen Kymariss."

"She ruled before Amell," Will replies with what sounds like a nasty taste on his tongue. "Evil incarnate. She almost succeeded in opening up the veil between here and the First Dimension so all her demons could escape and destroy that world."

I feel like I'm losing my grip on reality. "Amell mentioned dimensions. What does that mean?"

Will sighs. "This is going to take a long time to educate you."

It feels like it takes hours for Will to fill me in on everything, but without clocks, I can't be sure. I'm exhausted and need about a million hours of sleep, but I want to make sure I understand everything. The more knowledge I have, the better I can defend myself.

"Let me see if I have this straight," I say from my position on the floor. I'd long ago laid down, curling into a ball. My long hair feels weird and abnormal. It's been so long since it's had any length. "And this is in no particular order... big rebellion in Heaven. Angels tossed. Really bad ones

came to Underworld and they are Dark Fae. The not-so-bad went to Earth and they're called Light Fae. Magical meteor touched down on Earth and was hacked away, pieces stolen to use its magic. With that magic, alternate dimensions were created... sort of like different worlds layered on top of the one you and I come from, which is known as the First Dimension. How am I doing so far?"

"You're an excellent pupil," Will replies with a chuckle.

"Okay, so, Kymaris was an original fallen angel ruling the Underworld, and they don't get any more wicked than her. She attempted to take over the First Dimension by doing a ritual to tear open the veil between our world and this one."

"A changeling ritual," he confirms.

"Right. A baby was stolen from the First Dimension, held here in captivity, and stuffed full of dark magic. After twenty-eight years, it projected Kymaris into our world, and she was able to perform a ritual that tore open a huge hole in the veil that separates the worlds."

"Go on," he urges.

"Kymaris was defeated by a human named Finley, although she was aided by other creatures. I think you said demigods, Dark Fae, Light Fae, and daemons."

"And her sister, the human who was held here for twenty-eight years," he adds.

"Zora." Such a pretty name. "Who died in the battle against Kymaris but was reborn as the god of Life, and thus death."

"I think you have the gist of it," Will says with a yawn.

"What about the Light Fae?" I ask, still buzzing with so many questions. "Where are they?"

"They live in a dimension they created called Faere. Their queen, Nimeyah, was an original fallen but was killed by Kymaris. Nimeyah's daughter, Deandra, rules Faere now."

"And why is Amell the king?"

"Because Zora decreed it so, and she's a god. It's as simple as that. I'm really tired, Nyssa. Let's get some sleep."

"Okay... but one more question." Will sighs but doesn't object. "How many humans are down here? I'm assuming it's mostly fae and daemons who inhabit the Underworld?"

"From what I can tell, there are a handful of us. Those you see in these

cells and some who are servants in noble households. Most are dead, though... like you. Which I guess means you're immortal."

"And you're not," I breathe out, a sudden sadness filling me. It's not in my nature to care about people. I don't have the bandwidth for it, but I realize... Will was taken from our world. He has a family back home that misses him, I'd bet.

"You'll be here forever, Nyssa. At least I'll age and die at some point. Or get killed by an angry fae. At least I can hope that my soul leaves this place when that happens. I didn't ask to be here, and I don't think I've ever done anything to warrant the Crimson River."

"I'm sure you'll go to Heaven," I say, although I don't know Will really at all. But I hope he does.



## CHAPTER 7

### MELL

LEANING AGAINST THE open door that leads out onto the balcony off my suite, I stare at Otaxis, pondering the ways I could make life better for the inhabitants. It was a good start, cleaning things up, adding lighting. The night sky that hides the cavern ceiling still lends to the darkness our kind favors, but the jeweled stars add beauty, which had never been important to Kymaris.

Can't say it was important to me either, but when Zora tasked me with keeping the Underworld quelled of any additional thoughts of uprising, I knew the best way to do that would be to improve living conditions. Next up, I'll work on infrastructure and commerce to level out the disparity between nobles and the lower caste. Unhappy citizens want to rally for change. The desire for change can easily be fanned into a burning desire for insurrection.

A knock on my door has me turning. Calix enters and offers a slight bow. "All the preparations are done for the arrival of the nobles. Would you like me to provide for any form of entertainment?"

I shake my head. "Not this time."

Calix looks disappointed, but I don't give a fuck. Kymaris always had some sort of debauchery going on when she had guests. It often involved debasement of humans or the lower caste fae and daemons.

Not that I'm against debauchery, although my tastes and Kymaris's are quite different. It's that I want to keep this meeting with the nobles all about the tough business of ferreting out potential traitors. It's not a party but a fact-finding mission.

"Is the meeting closed, or will you want servers?" he asks, hands clasped before him.

"Someone to serve drinks only," I reply. "No food."

"I'd be happy to—"

"Actually, I need you to do something else for me."

Calix inclines his head. "Whatever Your Menacing Scrumptiousness desires."

I glare at Calix. I should rip his tongue out to stop him from using such ridiculous platitudes in my title, but there are more important things to focus on. “I want you to travel to Vyronas and seek out my daughter, Thalia. Explain to her that Zora has forbidden me from leaving and that I’d like her to visit whenever she can. Let her know the means to travel are within the book.”

“The book?” Calix asks with interest.

I’ve got no intention of spilling any secrets to one of Kymaris’s former servants. “She’ll know what I’m talking about.”

Another look of disappointment, but I stare the man down. It takes less than a second for him to start bobbing and backing out of my room. “I’ll just see to a server for tonight and then I’ll be on my way.”

A thought strikes me, one that’s been brewing for a few days. “Where did you put Nyssa?”

“The kitchens, Your Highness.”

“Have her serve.”

“Of course,” Calix says, edging toward the door without showing me his back. I suspect that’s hundreds of years of training when he served Kymaris. She never let anyone turn their back on her.

“On second thought,” I muse as another thought strikes, “I’ll see to Nyssa. You go on to Thalia and deliver my message.”

Yeah, the human woman has been plaguing my thoughts since she arrived. I decided to keep her but haven’t figured out what to do with her. It was her brazenness, lack of fear, and out-of-control spirit that rendered me unable to disconnect from the possibilities. I’ve stopped myself half a dozen times from seeking her out, but this is a good opportunity to see if she’s calmed down any.

I’m not sure what it says about me that I hope she hasn’t.

I hope she’s still as feral as she seems. Murderous, for sure, but oddly, I didn’t smell true evil on her.

Of course, you don’t have to be evil to sin. One good sin is enough to get you here, but for all her bravado about being glad she killed that man, she doesn’t seem wicked in any other way.

More’s the pity.

A puzzle is what she is.

A very pretty puzzle that I’d like to figure out. Something to break the boredom of millennia trapped in Hell.

I move through the castle, trying to avoid eye contact so I'm not stopped. There's always a bustle of Dark Fae within these halls as the business of running the Underworld cannot be done single-handedly. In addition to those who serve me and my needs as ruler, nobles and their families live in various apartments within the luxury of the obsidian towers.

Still, it's not overly crowded. The castle could easily house a thousand, but there are probably only a quarter of that living here currently. Many moved out to their own homes in Otaxis once I took the throne and made upgrades.

I halt at the doorway leading into the kitchen, and the bustle of workers all dressed in brown makes the search for Nyssa difficult. Upon the hard crack of leather on skin, my head turns, and I see Rhynda—a Dark Fae ravager who was in service to Kymaris—striking someone across the back.

Not just someone.

Nyssa.

She's bent over, naked from the waist up. She holds her shirt to her chest, and Rhynda brings a flogger down on her with another sharp crack. Nyssa's body jerks, but she doesn't utter a sound.

Impressive. That had to hurt.

I walk over as Rhynda raises the flogger for a third hit, but she sees me and lowers it, assuming a position of attention with her hands clasped before her.

"Your Highness," she says, and Nyssa's head whips my way. Her chocolate-brown hair falls over one eye as she watches me warily.

Her back is crisscrossed with red streaks, and I ignore the surprising burn of anger deep in my gut, for I should have no care whatsoever about this inconsequential human's pain.

I force neutrality into my tone. "I see the new servant is giving you trouble. What warranted the beating?"

"She broke a pot of flour, Your Highness." Rhynda gives a smug smile as she lifts her chin, clearly proud of herself for keeping order in her kitchen.

"High crimes," I muse as I note the shards of pottery and a pile of smeddum on the floor.

"It's incredibly valuable, King Amell, as it must be imported from the First Dimension. I'm sure she won't make the mistake again."

I glance at the work table to my left, taking in various clay pots filled with what looks like more flour and some sugar, some smaller pots with

spices... all of which are valuable imports.

Reaching out, I push one pot of sugar off the edge of the table. It falls to the floor and shatters, spilling the sweet white crystals everywhere.

My gaze locks onto Rhynda. "Do I deserve a beating?"

"Of course not." She sounds highly offended. "You're the king."

"And that's just some sugar and flour, easily salvageable. Go easier on my possessions, Rhynda."

"My apologies, Your Highness," she rushes to assure me. "I didn't realize this one was important to you."

"No more important than any of my other possessions. I don't want any of them broken."

"Understood," she says, and then barks an order at Nyssa. "Put your shirt on and clean up this mess."

"Actually, I have work for the human to do. She won't be returning to the kitchens today."

Rhynda doesn't look put out and merely yells at another servant to sweep up the spilled flour and sugar.

Nyssa has fully straightened, clutching her shirt to her chest, still staring at me cautiously.

"Get dressed," I order, refusing to turn around to give her privacy.

It doesn't seem to bother her as she pulls the shirt away and arranges it so she can thread her arms through the sleeves. I shamelessly take in her beauty as I'm given a brief glance of perfect breasts with pebbled nipples.

It doesn't hold my attention so much that I miss how she winces as she moves, although she doesn't utter a sound to indicate she's in pain.

When her shirt is wrapped and tied off, I jerk my head. "Follow me."

I wind back through the hallways and up staircases that lead to my personal suite. It's far more space than I need with a massive living area filled with black leather and chrome furniture and a massive onyx fireplace on one wall. The balcony that overlooks Otaxis is the focal point of the room, and I leave the doors open at all times. We don't have foul weather here. The temperature is always comfortable, and we don't have snow, rain, or storm events.

We don't have sun either, but you can't have everything.

Turning left, I lead Nyssa into my bedchamber. The bathing area in the corner holds a sunken tub the size of a small pool, and with a single thought as to what I want, it starts to fill with honeysuckle-scented hot water.

“Get in,” I order her. I rifle through a closet, pulling out a large towel and setting it on a bench.

“Why?” she asks, and I turn to see her standing in the doorway, refusing to come in farther.

It’s adorable that she thinks she can refuse me anything. I hold my hand out to her, not in invitation but as a conduit of my power, which forces her legs to move. She growls as she tries to fight the magical pull, but it only takes her a few steps to realize it’s futile.

She easily walks right into my grasp, my hand tightening on her throat as I pull her in closer. “Because you stink, and I have a job for you.”

It’s certainly not because I know she’s sore and it will make her feel better.

Releasing her, I nod toward the bath before stepping onto the dais that holds my massive king—no pun intended—size bed. Flaring my wings to get them out of the way, I sit on the edge and cross my arms over my chest. I watch her without comment as she turns away to discard her clothes.

It’s difficult to appreciate her rounded backside with the angry welts between her shoulder blades. Once she’s submerged to her shoulders, she moves over to the far side where an arrangement of soaps sit alongside clean cloths.

She’s silent, and I’m content to watch as she bathes, never revealing any of her body to me. There are times when she shoots lethal looks my way, and I smile in amusement.

After she washes and rinses her hair, she asks, “So, what’s the job I have to do?”

I start to answer, but her eyes narrow. “Oh shit... it’s not to... like... service you, is it?”

I snort, although I wouldn’t say no if she offered. “It’s to pour drinks for a council meeting in a few hours. You’re to keep cups filled but otherwise keep your mouth shut.”

“Thank God,” she mutters as she leans her head against the edge of the tub.

Her abhorrence of me is irritating. “You’re too skinny for my tastes, anyway.”

An absolute lie, but I’m the ruler of the Underworld. Evil is my middle name, and there’s not an ounce of remorse in telling her untruths.

Nyssa glares at me. “I wouldn’t be so skinny if you fed us properly.”

That surprises me. I have no clue how or when she's fed, but I don't let her see that it bothers me. I wave a hand in dismissal. "You were skinny when you got here."

"I'm just saying, you work us to the bone, barely feed us, and then expect us to do it all over again the next day."

Standing from the bed, I move to the tub. She sinks a little lower in the water, but it's clear and I can see everything. "You do understand you're in Hell, right? You murdered a man. Things aren't supposed to be comfortable for you."

"I'm well aware of the concept," she says through gritted teeth.

My gaze moves over her body, not holding my interest back. "If you wanted to work for me personally, I would see that you got more food. Better clothing."

She snorts. "I know what work for you personally means. No, thank you."

I grin and shrug. "Worth a shot. Someone will be by to get you in a few hours to take you to the council room. Remember... pour drinks and keep your mouth shut."

She gives me a snappy salute. "Aye-aye, Captain."

I turn on my foot before she can see the smile on my face.

## CHAPTER 8

### A

I GRIND MY teeth as I stand by the long table that holds food and carafes of wine, awaiting the arrival of... well, I'm not sure who's coming. I think I remember Amell saying it was a council meeting, but I'm not sure. It was hard to pay attention with the king's proximity to me while I was bathing.

It's not that I was shy about being naked. Showing my body has never bothered me.

It has more to do with the fact that he's a man—no, a fallen angel—who elicits a wide variety of emotions.

First and foremost, I hate him for no other reason than he's the source of my current state of flux.

But I'm also intrigued because while he rules Hell with an iron fist and could throw me in the Crimson River whenever he feels like it, he's given me a reprieve. And that standoff with Rhynda over the spilled sugar was mind-boggling. He stopped her from beating me and ordered her to have a care. Granted, he considers me only a possession, but I could tell by the look on Rhynda's face, he's never done that before.

And then, there's the problem that I find the man—beast—far too attractive, which makes me more intrigued and dampens the hate. There's no other way to describe him—he's simply beautiful. From his massive body, rippled with muscle covered with golden skin, to the perfection of his face. The classic square jaw, full lips, and mesmerizing eyes. He's a fucking romance novel hero who happens to sport two massive black wings that, when spread, have to be at least fifteen feet wide. They arch higher than his head and are so long, the feathers drag along the ground. When I was following him earlier, I had to be mindful not to step on them.

I wonder what they feel like. Are they as soft as they look? So black they shimmer blue anytime the light hits, and in this monochrome world, the tint to his wings is actually quite brilliant.

My teeth grind even harder that I'm sparing more than ten seconds of my

energy to think about his physical appearance or the way he gave me a hot bath, because I did indeed stink. It's awful living in these conditions, but I suppose I better get used to it.

I can't trust him, though, and I have to remind myself what Will told me... everyone here is evil, and I shouldn't utter a single word or take an action without remembering that.

So I order my brain to shut the fuck up and stop thinking of Amell in any way other than being the wicked ruler of the Underworld who would see me cast into the river without a moment's pause.

The double doors open, and I turn to see people—or whatever they are—filing in.

All look human, for the most part, although one tall man has bluish skin that makes his long blond hair seem almost white.

Yes, they look human, but in a way... they do not.

They're actually all too beautiful to be human. Like Amell, they have perfect bodies and ethereal faces without a single thing out of place to make them look a fraction of ordinary. Are they so beautiful because they're fallen angels? But I don't know if that is indeed what they are. They could be Dark Fae who descended from the original fallen.

The only one I know for sure who is an original is Amell, and whether I'm biased or not, he's more stunning than all the others.

A large oval table seats twenty—I know, because I had time to count—and the guests take seats. By my quick perusal, there are only eleven—six women and five men.

“Girl,” a deep voice says, and my head turns that way. One of the fae waves a hand. “Bring me wine.”

I'm a bartender by trade, at least that's what I was at the time of my death, and serving alcohol is second nature. But it's intimidating being in a room full of large, unearthly beings that could crush me with one strike of a fist. Will told me that a fae has the strength of a hundred men and could break me with nothing more than a firm grip.

Grabbing one of the metal wine carafes, I hustle around the table. The fae is impossibly handsome with jet-black hair and even blacker eyes.

Those eyes roam over me from head to toe, and I hate the clothes that Amell left for me. When I got out of my bath a few hours ago, my rough denim uniform was gone and a dress was lying across the bed alongside a platter of meats, cheese, and fruit. I had no doubt it was all for me. While I



ate, I studied the gown draped over the large mattress, but I couldn't figure out why I should dress up to serve drinks.

After I ate, I put the dress on. White folds of silk gathered at the shoulders and under my breasts in a classic Grecian style. Not sure why that's the style down here, but there was a pair of gold braided sandals too. Even though they're thin soled, it's better than being barefoot. I combed the tangles from my hair and let it dry naturally because in Hell, they apparently don't have hair dryers.

"You must be the new plaything I heard Amell saved from the river," the fae says when I reach him, his hand slapping my butt before squeezing. I try to skitter to the side, but his hand slides to my waist and he pulls me in closer. "I can't wait to try you out."

Nausea hits and I react on pure instinct, jamming my elbow hard into his ribs. It's not hard enough to hurt him, despite using all my strength. It does surprise him, though, and he loosens his hold so I'm able to wrench away. The wine in the carafe sloshes over the edge, spilling to the floor.

The fae's hand shoots out and grips my wrist, jerking me back in. My stomach drops as I see the fury in his eyes. "You dare strike a noble?" he growls, squeezing my wrist so hard I'm afraid it's going to snap.

"Jago!" My head whips toward the door to find Amell striding through, his eyes pinned on us. "Release her immediately."

Chairs screech as they're pushed backward, the fae around the table standing in deference to their king.

Except the one holding my wrist as he lifts his chin in defiance. "She's a lowly human."

"She's *my* lowly human," Amell says quietly as he stops at the edge of the table across from us. "Let her go now, or I'll make you let her go."

Jago engages in a staring contest with Amell that lasts all of three seconds. When Amell's eyes turn a glowing red, Jago slings me away from him.

I stumble and slosh more wine out of the pitcher before catching myself. Scuffling backward, I press against the wall.

All the fae have their eyes on Amell, a muscle ticking in his jaw. The fire in his eyes finally subsides, but his gaze doesn't waver from Jago. It's to the whole room he speaks. "This human is off-limits to everyone. No one is to touch her, and no one is to harm her. Anyone who does will earn a ticket straight to the Crimson River by my own hand."

There's a lot of coughing and nervous shifting as Amell's eyes come to me. "Continue to serve the wine."

I nod, and to show I'm not scared—even though I am—I move right back to Jago and fill his cup first. I expect anger, but when I glance at him, he's only staring at me with keen interest.

As if I'm a bug under a microscope.

Amell moves to an empty seat—interesting there's not a throne or a bigger chair for him that screams he's in charge—and settles into it. I move directly to him rather than the fae next to Jago and fill his cup. He doesn't so much as glance at me as he ignores the wine and clasps his hands on the table.

"I called this meeting because I've heard some disturbing rumors," he says, and the air turns electric with apprehension. It feels like violence could erupt at any moment.

I move to the next fae, a beautiful woman with magenta hair and matching eyes. My hand is shaking as I pour her wine, but she doesn't look at me either. I move on to the next.

"It seems some of you may not be happy with my rule here in the Underworld and are thinking to unseat me."

I freeze where I'm standing, behind a fae's chair as I'd been making my way to the next cup.

"I'm opening this table for discussion," Amell continues. "If anyone disapproves of my rule, now is the time to talk about it."

He waits, looking around the table. To everyone's credit, not one fae drops their gaze from his.

A man sitting next to Jago answers. "Your Highness."

"Yes, Ariman," Amell says, sweeping his hand slightly to indicate he has the floor.

The man stands, and I hadn't paid him much mind before, but now that I'm getting a good look, I can tell he's not fae. I'm not sure what exactly a daemon looks like, but his appearance is too ordinary. He's not unpleasant to look at—he's handsome enough with wavy brown hair that reaches his shoulders, a well-muscled body though not as big as the others, and pretty blue eyes.

"I believe we should reinstate the practice of twisting demons," Ariman says, and I can tell by Amell's face that it's a disastrous idea.

Amell's tone is unimpressed. Almost lazy. "And why would I do that?"

“Because we have an abundance of evil souls being sent to us every day. Kymaris knew the value in them. You’re wasting them in the Crimson River.”

“Kymaris is no longer queen,” Amell says in a low voice.

Ariman inclines his head, a silent admission he understands who is in power. “We could make another play for the First Dimension. Zora gave you additional powers, and with my stone magic, we could finish what Kymaris started.”

“Zora would not care for such an idea.”

Scoffing, Ariman drawls with exaggeration, “Zora doesn’t control us. The gods don’t interfere in how the dimensions are run.” He looks around at the other fae, and I note some are nodding. “The gods cook up their little prophecies, and then they sit back and watch them unfold. They send their demigods in to fight if necessary. But they wouldn’t stop us from carrying on Kymaris’s vision. They didn’t stop her from trying, and they won’t stop us.”

“Us?” Amell asks, cocking an eyebrow. “There is no *us*. There is only me. I am the king, and my rule is absolute.”

“Maybe that’s why you’re hearing rumors,” Ariman hisses.

There’s no doubt in my mind that whatever rumors Amell is referring to, it’s Ariman who is at their origin. It’s clear this little speech of his was designed solely to float out his ambitions to the important nobles in this realm.

He looks around at the other fae, eagerly searching for someone to take up with him.

The room remains silent.

“Sit, Ariman,” Amell says sharply and the man obeys. “It appears no one thinks your idea has merit.”

“I think it has merit,” Jago says, and my eyes dart over to him. He leans casually in his chair, tapping a finger against his goblet. “I’m tired of being stuck down here. Kymaris was trying to gain freedom for us all.”

“At the expense of many human lives,” Amell points out. “She wanted to run her demons over the First Dimension like a swarming plague.”

“You won’t find anyone at this table who thinks that’s a bad thing,” Jago drawls. “We’re evil. It’s what we do.”

My stomach rolls as I think about what these creatures could do if they were ever let loose.

I expect Amell to reason with Jago, but instead, he says, “You have the

power to go through the veil yourself. You're a ravager. Why not just go wreak havoc topside as much as you want?"

"Because I want to bring everyone with me. I want us to destroy every living thing up there."

A shudder ripples up my spine at the cold menace in Jago's voice. Ariman smiles smugly as he leans back in his chair.

"Let's take a vote," Jago suggests, looking around with a smile. "All those in favor of us continuing Kymaris's work, raise your hand."

Jago's arm makes it only halfway up before Amell says, in the deadliest tone I've ever heard, "This is not a democracy. Anyone whose arm goes up will meet the Crimson River."

Jago's arm falls to his lap, and he glares at Amell who stands and presses his palms on the table. "I'm only going to say this once, and if any of you disagree, you name the time and place, and we'll battle it out for the throne. I am the sovereign ruler of the Underworld. It is my edict—not Zora's—that we will not twist demons. It is my edict that we will not make any attempt to bring down the veil to storm the First Dimension. Anyone here with the power to rip their own door out is free to go and carry on as much destruction as desired. But I am not going to ever condone a large gateway to free everyone. Are we clear?"

Almost everyone around the table nods. Ariman and Jago don't move a muscle, but Amell doesn't call them out.

Instead, he resumes his seat and says, "That is all."

Chairs scrape against the black marble floor as the fae exit. A few chat amiably as they leave. Ariman and Jago have their heads bent together in secret discussion.

The blue-tinged Dark Fae with the blond hair stays behind. Since I didn't fill his cup before, I round the table to do so. When I reach him, he places his hand over the top and gives a slight shake of his head.

I take several steps back before heading to the side table to deposit the carafe. I then turn for the door.

"Stay," Amell orders without even looking at me.

I don't argue but position myself near the table and wait for further instruction.

The blue fae has a wry smile for his king. "Did you accomplish what you'd hoped?"

Amell sighs, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah... I got exactly what I

wanted.”

Understanding dawns on me. He wanted to see who would be bold enough to speak out against him.

“Jago’s a blowhard, but Ariman has power, and he’s guaranteed to have a slew of Kymaris’s supporters behind him.”

Amell nods and stands. “At least we know for sure who’s at the head of the rumors. Did you handle the issue with Deandra?”

The blue fae rises and grins. “I did, but please don’t ask me to deal with that woman again. She’s incredibly full of herself.”

Laughter brightens Amell’s face, and I almost lose my breath because he’s even more beautiful with light in his eyes. “I’m surprised you didn’t try to seduce her while you were there.”

Interesting. I look back to the other man.

His grin is boyish, making him look distinctly non-evil as well. “Who says I didn’t?”

Chuckling, Amell inclines his head. “Thank you, Truett. I owe you one.”

“Just doing my king’s bidding.” Perhaps because the mood is light and these two might be friends, Truett’s gaze lands on me. “Of course, if you felt me deserving of a reward, you could lend me your little prize for the evening.”

Amell’s smile is still pleasant, but his words are hard. “I said no one touches her but me. Not even my closest friend.”

Mischief morphs Truett’s face as he rounds the table, clapping a hand to Amell’s shoulder. “That’s not what you said. You said no one touches her. You never said that you’d be touching her until just now.”

My face heats, and my eyes widen. I lock onto Amell, wanting to know if that’s true.

He gives nothing away, only smiles in that lazy, *I don’t give a fuck* manner. “Did I say that? Hmm... I don’t remember.”

Truett barks a laugh and heads out the door.

“Come,” Amell says, motioning me forward. “I’ll walk you back to your cell.”

“Why?” I ask. We exit the council room, and I see Jago casually leaning against a marble column.

Amell nods his way. “Because I don’t trust some fae to keep their hands to themselves.”

“Oh.” I practically have to jog to keep up with his long legs.

We're silent as we head down the spiral staircase, and I expect that's far enough for Amell, but he surprises me by walking me all the way to my cell. The others are empty, so it must still be too early for quitting work.

I step into mine and start to pull the door closed. Amell frowns as he looks in. "Where's your bed?"

I look behind me, then back to him with narrowed eyes. "There isn't one."

His eyes land on the bucket. "That's all you have?"

I sweep my hand to indicate the entire corridor. "It's a prison, Amell. It's also the Underworld. You told me it shouldn't be comfortable."

"You feel comfortable using my name?" he asks, a golden eyebrow arching high.

"Are you going to smite me?" I ask cautiously.

There's no hesitation. "No. I'm not."

With a wave of his hand, a bed appears, complete with a pillow and a blanket. In the corner is a privacy screen, and I see a toilet peeking out. "There," he says with a smug smile. "That's better."

"If you can just wave your magic wand and make things appear, why do you need to import flour from the First Dimension?"

The corner of Amell's mouth quirks upward. "Thank you would have been the more appropriate response."

"I'm just saying... you have major magic sparking from your fingertips. Why the big deal about me breaking a pot of flour today?"

"Do you think the king of the Underworld has time to bring flour to our dimension for the masses?" he asks.

"You're not a multi-tasker?" I toss back.

Amell chuckles and shakes his head. "It's not a matter of me not being able to do it, but rather giving that job to others so that they contribute to our society."

And well, that actually makes sense to me so I leave it alone. I glance around. "And the other cells?" I inquire.

"What about them?"

"They should have the same benefits."

Amell scoffs. "Why should they?"

"Because they're human like me," I snap.

"Not like you," he murmurs, surveying my dress before his eyes lock with mine. "Those were all of Kymaris's collection and of no concern to me."

But... perhaps you'd like to barter for their comforts?"

My eyes narrow on him. "Barter? Like what?"

Amell shrugs. "Haven't got the details figured out, but you serve me personally, and I'll upgrade your friends' cells."

"Serve you? In what ways?" I ask suspiciously.

"In any way I want," he replies, a devilish grin tipping one side of his mouth.

"I'm not having sex with you."

"Won't you?" he counters confidently.

I cross my arms over my chest, refusing to have this discussion.

Amell's hand goes to the iron door, and he opens it for me to come out. "I promise you I won't touch you unless you ask me to."

"I won't ask," I say adamantly.

"I think you protest too much."

"I want your word."

"I'm evil. Why would you trust it?" he asks.

"Because you stopped Jago from hurting me, so I actually think you've got some decency."

Reaching out, Amell takes a lock of my hair and studies it. "You shouldn't get complacent with me, Nyssa. I'm a fallen angel, a traitor to God, and a Dark Fae monster that rules the Underworld."

I swallow hard and wonder if I'm about to make a monumental mistake. "I'll take the chance. I'll serve you, and you make the living conditions here better."

"I accept," he says, far too quickly.

I truly just made a deal with the devil.

## CHAPTER 9

### MELL

WE RETURN TO my suite, and Calix is outside the door waiting, throwing a wide-eyed glance at Nyssa walking behind me.

“I delivered your message to Thalia,” Calix says with a low, deferential bow. “She said to tell you she’s disappointed but that she will endeavor to visit you when she can.”

I nod as I open the door, motioning for Nyssa to precede me, and Calix follows.

“Let Rhynda know that Nyssa won’t be returning to the kitchens but rather will be serving me personally.”

As expected, Calix looks somewhat offended, since he’s my go-to person when I need something. I throw him a bone and lean closer as Nyssa walks deeper into the suite. “Relax... she’ll be doing her servicing in this suite.”

Understanding dawns on Calix’s face, and he grins slyly. I don’t disabuse him of any notion that it mostly just means keeping things clean and picked up. If he wants to think I’m fucking her, so be it. It will spread throughout the Underworld and will help protect her.

But just to be sure, I say, “I announced it to the nobles at the council meeting, but I want it to be known that no one touches this human, or they will suffer my wrath.”

“Understood, Your Most Glorious Majesty,” Calix says with another low bow and backs out the door, which I close behind him.

I turn to find Nyssa out on the balcony that overlooks Otaxis. From this view, she looks like a fallen angel herself with that white dress and her long hair flowing down her back, but she is far from angelic.

Joining her outside, I stand next to her at the railing. She doesn’t ask, but I explain what she’s seeing, pointing toward the city center. “Otaxis is the biggest city in the Underworld. It used to be called the Caverns because that’s really what this area is... physically, anyway. Just a huge, cavernous settlement that built up as our population grew.”



“But I don’t see caverns,” she says, eyes sweeping the entire city of whitewashed buildings and glowing streets.

“I changed the landscape a little when I became king. The night sky is an illusion. A way to make it a bit nicer down here.”

Nyssa tips her head back to stare at the inkiness above dotted with large twinkling stars. “You should call it the Midnight Realm.”

I can’t help but laugh, and she looks at me curiously. “You’re quite the romantic with a name like that.”

She grimaces and looks back up at the sky. “I’m the least romantic person in the universe. I’m just saying... it’s perpetual midnight here.”

“Hmm.” I point off to the eastern horizon where it seems as if the sun might be rising but really, it’s just a sharp display of my powers. “The city of Calashte is that way. My friend, Truett, whom you met, lives there with his people.”

“His people?”

I shrug. “That’s a loose term. Not quite a family, tribe, or clan, but the fallen angels and their descendants who settled and populated that area. Truett is the oldest and thus looked at as a de facto leader.”

“But you said it yourself tonight. You’re the sole power in the Underworld.”

“That would be true.” I nod toward the west. “The city of Llandam is that way, and just south of it is Dras-tea, which sits at the edge of the Black Ocean.”

“How big is this Midnight Realm?” she asks, and I don’t correct her on the name. I kind of like it.

“It’s fairly contained to what I’ve pointed out. When we were expelled from Heaven, there were only about a thousand of us who were tossed into the Underworld. We grew slowly because Dark Fae have difficulty procreating. But we’re talking thousands upon thousands of years, so we’ve pushed outward from Otaxis. The cities are pretty much run by the nobles, which are the original fallen. Below them are the gentry, and below them, the common fae as well as daemons who choose to live here with their Dark Fae parents. Would you like something to eat?”

She shakes her head. “What makes a Dark Fae noble, gentry, or common?”

“The amount of power they have. Original fallen were gifted stone magic when they arrived and are the strongest. They are the nobles. Gentry are

progeny of Dark Fae and have powers as well. Common fae are also progeny but don't have much in the way of powers. Wine?"

Her eyes come to me, and they narrow. "This isn't a date."

I can't help but snort. "No, it's not, nor will it ever be. You're my servant. I'm being polite, since I'll be having some."

She shakes her head again and turns her attention back to the city.

"Suit yourself." I return to the living area. Laid out on a buffet table is a tray of meats, cheeses, and fruits as well as carafes of wine. I pour myself a glass and ignore the food as I ate just before the meeting. I was offering her food as I figured she'd be hungry, but I don't want her to consider me kind in any way.

Nyssa comes in from the balcony. "I know you're recently crowned and Kymaris ruled before you, but was Satan before her? Or is it Lucifer? Or Hades? I'm confused."

I sip my wine before moving to one of the leather couches. I settle onto it and motion Nyssa into a chair where she sits primly on the edge, hands clasped.

"Kymaris was the original ruler of the Underworld. Names like Satan, Hades, or Lucifer are written in many works and portrayed as overlords. Maybe your First Dimension histories and bibles and stories didn't like the idea of a female ruler. Interesting enough, though, Lucifer is actually an original dark fallen, but he escaped to the First Dimension eons ago and lives in the Florida Keys with his wife."

Nyssa's jaw drops over that little piece of information, but she recovers. "So Dark Fae can go into the First Dimension? Why couldn't Kymaris?"

"Kymaris could. But she wanted to obliterate the entire veil separating the worlds so everyone here could leave. She wanted to decimate the humans and take over."

"Why?"

"Fae hate humans. God loved them more than us. Or at least, that's the history that's been handed down. Kymaris wanted free of this place so she could take back what God denied her."

"You were her next in command. You approved of her plan then, but not now?"

Fair question. "It didn't matter if I approved or not. She was my queen, and I followed her rule. I choose to rule differently."

She points a finger at me. "There's a story there as to why that's so."

A story that's so complicated and at times shameful, it calls for a radical change of subject. I flip the spotlight back on her.

"I have to say, I'm fascinated by how readily you've accepted your fate. Most people who come to the Underworld have a hard time believing this isn't just a horrible nightmare. I've watched people go over the edge of the bridge, screaming on the way down but believing they'll wake up safe in their bed when they hit the river. Not you, though. You accepted it from the start."

Nyssa shrugs, gaze falling to her hands. "I always knew I'd end up in Hell for the things I've done."

And that's just another example of why she intrigues me so much. I don't get a whiff of evil off her, but she's done enough—more than just the one murder—leading her to believe she'd land here one day.

Her head lifts, eyes locking onto mine. "Why didn't you toss me into the river?"

I raise my cup of wine to her in a toast. "I admire someone with spirit. I believe the moment you called me a 'big old, winged bat' guaranteed your safety."

And then it happens. She smiles, and it's breathtaking. I feel my black heart skip a beat, but I ignore it because I'm Dark Fae and while I've shown that I can care about humans—Zora and my daughter Thalia coming to mind—I know it's nothing more than just a care. I'm too ancient and too saturated with an eternity of malevolence for it to be anything more.

But I am still curious. I saw her reaction when Jago grabbed her, and it was the first time I've seen her exhibit fear since meeting her on the bridge. "What did Jago say to you?"

"He said he couldn't wait to try me out," she replies, her eyes shadowed with disdain.

I set my cup on the table and lean forward toward Nyssa. "Jago is extremely dangerous. He's a ravager fae, which means his entire makeup is programmed for violence. But he's only one example of the dangerous creatures that are in this castle, in Otaxis, and beyond. You cannot leave the castle under any circumstances unless I'm by your side. Is that clear?"

"But you've told people to leave me alone."

"I have, but I don't trust anyone in this realm except Truett. Don't ever forget that the Dark Fae aren't just inherently wicked, they are incredibly powerful. While our original powers were stripped, the powers regained

through stone magic have made many more potent than ever. But what makes them dangerous, most of all, is they have no morals.”

“Do you have morals?” she asks.

“Not many.”

She blinks in surprise, but I don’t elucidate.

Instead, I stand and motion for her to do the same. “Come. Let’s talk about your duties.”

I walk her through the suite explaining that she’s to care for it, including the laundering of my clothes. “I’ll have Calix show you what to do. You’ll also be responsible for bringing all my meals from the kitchen.”

As I enter the bedroom, I nod toward a trunk at the end of the bed. “Fresh linens are there. The bed is to be changed every day, and you’ll be responsible for ensuring the sheets get laundered along with the bathing towels.”

“Seems simple enough,” she says.

It’s very simple and all stuff that could be done by magic, but I need to keep her busy.

“I’m sure I’ll think of other things, but that’s the gist of it until I can figure out a better way for you to work in the castle without getting hurt.”

I work at the laces of my leather vest. Because I have wings, I often don’t bother with anything covering my torso, but I wore the vest to the council meeting in an effort to be a bit more formal. It’s cut low in the back to accommodate my wing roots.

“What are you doing?” Nyssa exclaims as I shrug off my vest. I try not to laugh at her wide-eyed stare at my naked torso.

I toss the vest at her, hitting her in the chest so she’s snapped out of her ogling. “I’m going to bed. One usually removes their clothes when they do so.”

My hands go to the laces at my pants and I start pulling them loose. Nyssa spins to face away. “You’re just going to get naked right here in front of me?”

“Oh, come on, little human. Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a naked man before.”

“I’ve seen plenty,” she mutters. “And you’re not a man.”

I’d like to hear more about that, but now isn’t the time. While her back is to me, I divest myself of my boots and pants, and with a grin, toss my pants at her.

They hit her in the back, and she turns to grab them. I see her struggle against it, but she ends up staring with no shame.

I stand naked before her, all six foot seven of me, way too curious to see how she'll handle it.

Nyssa is mute, her fingers squeezing and crumpling the fine leather in her hands. Her eyes slowly travel down my body, lingering a bit too long on that part of me that makes me distinctly male. I might like how her eyes flare a little too much as she takes in my size, although I'm not even hard.

"Um..." She coughs to clear her throat. "Um... where will you be sleeping?"

I cock an eyebrow at her and nod toward my bed. "Right there."

"Of course," she stammers. "And... um... do you always sleep naked?"

"Always," I reply with a grin. "I'll have more clothes for you tomorrow, but you should be comfortable enough in that dress to sleep in it for tonight."

"Sleep where?" she inquires. "Do I go back to my cell?"

I nod again toward the bed. "Big bed. Lots of room."

Nyssa's eyes flash with indignation. "I'm not sleeping in that bed with you."

I shrug as I pull down the covers, revealing satin sheets below. Love the feel of that shit on my body. "Floor is hard and cold. You'll find an extra blanket in the closet."

With a mere thought, I lower the glow of the artificial lighting in the various lamps throughout the room until the only light comes through the windows—the city glow of Otaxis.

Pressing my knee into the mattress, I stretch onto my stomach and wrap my arms around a pillow to lay my head on, facing away from Nyssa. I stretch my wings once, rustling the feathers to get comfortable, and they fold in against my back. It's a pity their length completely covers my nakedness, as I'd like to see Nyssa squirm a bit more.

"I said I wouldn't touch you without permission, Nyssa. If you want a good night's sleep, get in the bed."

She doesn't respond, but I hear her moving about. I lift my head so I can see what she's doing.

After folding my clothes, she lays them on top of a dresser and then moves to the closet. She comes out with a thin blanket, spreading it atop the marble floor before settling down on it.

Stubborn little thing.

I close my eyes and inhale deep, ready to drift off.

“Why do you have wings and no one else does?” she asks, her voice traveling across the expanse of the room.

My voice is lazy, hopefully coming off as nonthreatening. “Get in the bed as I know you have to be miserable down there, and I’ll tell you.”

I keep my eyes closed and the smile off my face when I hear her walking across the room. The bed dips slightly as she gets in, and I lift my head, turning it her way to see her practically clinging to the edge to stay as far away from me as possible.

I resettle onto my pillow. “God stripped us all of our wings when he cast us out. Most adapted and left the thought of them behind. I missed mine, so the first bit of stone magic that found its way into the Underworld I used to my advantage and gave myself back what had been taken.”

“Why?” I can see her eyes glittering from the filtered city lights.

“Because there’s nothing like the power of flight.” I can’t help but think of all the times I took Zora flying when she was a child, and then later, I bestowed upon her the ability to use her own magic to call forth wings. I have no clue if she still uses them as a god since she can transport anywhere she wants with a single thought.

“You have a daughter?” Nyssa inquires.

“Thalia. She’s a little older than you. Half human and thus mortal.”

“It’s weird to think of you having a daughter that age when you don’t look that old.”

“Ah,” I say softly. “But I’m very, very old. I’m as old as time.”

“And she’s your only child?”

“One and only. She just got married not that long ago, and I was able to be there. But I broke some rules while I was out, and Zora has banished me here indefinitely.”

“Why? What did you do?”

Chuckling, I turn my head away from her. “It’s late, Nyssa. Get some sleep.”

She huffs but doesn’t say anything else. She also tosses and turns, trying to get comfortable. I know it’s my naked presence and not the bed itself, which is actually quite dreamy to sleep on.

After more than an hour, she finally settles, and before long, her breathing deepens.

Only then am I able to let go and fall under myself.

## CHAPTER 10

### A

THERE'S NO SUNRISE in the Midnight Realm, but it's light that finally pulls me out of slumber. I open one eye and see the bedside table lamp is on. It glows with some type of magical light Amell controls.

It all comes tumbling back, from the minute Jago grabbed me until I climbed into Amell's bed last night to sleep. The scenes flash by, although admittedly, I get stuck on the memory of naked Amell.

I've never given much thought to the beauty of a man's body before, but his is sheer perfection. All that golden skin and muscle with those glorious black wings. He's a giant of a man, and let's just say all his parts are proportionate.

A sizzling bolt of realization hits that he might still be in the bed. I'm on my side, right on the edge of the mattress, and I can't tell if he's behind me. Once I fell asleep last night, exhaustion pulled me under deep. I strain to hear anything, but it's absolutely silent.

Taking a breath, I roll onto my back, twist my neck, and my heart about leaps out of my chest when I see Amell lying there.

Naked, of course.

He's on his side facing me with his head propped in his hand. His wings are tucked in tight with the arches peeking just over his head. My eyes catch the bulge of his biceps, over his chest, and down. The lower half of his body is covered with a silk sheet.

For my benefit?

"Sleep well?" he asks, and my eyes snap to his. I scramble upright, intent to roll off the bed, but he says, "Stay," and I freeze.

"Relax," he adds. "Lie down for a minute and let's discuss your day."

I stare at him dubiously, wondering if lie down and talk means "sex."

It's possible he's a mind reader, being king of the Underworld and all, but guessing my emotion is on my face when he says, "You're safe, Nyssa. It appears I have to repeat this often, but I won't touch you unless you ask me

to.”

He hasn't asked, which is confusing. “But you want to?”

“I want to very much, but when you're immortal, you learn to be patient.”

“But you could force me,” I point out, intent on arguing this to complete clarity. “You're evil. You have no morals.”

“Few morals,” he corrects me. “Although admittedly, they're self-serving.”

“As I said, you can force me.”

“I could easily force you.” I flinch at that admission and wait for him to reassure me. But he doesn't. “Now, lie back down, face me, and let's talk.”

Reluctantly, I do so, but only because being this close to such masculine perfection makes me feel all kinds of things I shouldn't be feeling. I settle on my side facing him, mirroring his pose, trying to look casual. I feel anything but.

My eyes are drawn to the light smattering of golden hair over his broad chest sitting above ripped abs. A little trail of hair below his navel disappears under the sheet.

“It's okay to touch me if you want to, Nyssa.” My gaze jerks upward to meet his, my face flaming with embarrassment. His mouth curves on one side. “You don't even have to ask my permission.”

We stare at each other, his dark blue eyes reflecting the glow of the lamp behind me. I have no clue what even possesses me, but before I know it, I'm blurting out, “Can I touch your wings?”

Absolutely wrong question as Amell's eyes turn completely dark, the cobalt leeching away to black. And then... red flames.

My brain tells me to get the hell away from him, but his voice stops me. “You can touch.”

“Never mind.” Voice shaking, heart hammering, I keep my eyes on his.

Amell rolls my way and onto his stomach. As they did last night, the wings flare slightly, rustle, and then settle along his backside. From the arches to the tips, they cover his entire frame, and I recall how the tips dragged on the floor when he walked.

Crossing his arms on the pillow, he rests his cheek there and watches me. His eyes are blue again and maybe it was just my imagination.

I tentatively reach across the bed and let my fingers trail along the outer ridge, covered by layers of flat black feathers at least a foot in length each. They're thick enough I can't tell if it's muscle or bone underneath. I press my



palm down and move it inward toward the middle of his wing, feeling the firmness give way. I hold my breath as I sift my fingers in between the feathers to feel what's underneath. It's downy soft.

Amell utters a sound deep in his throat, and his feathers flutter again. I snatch my hand back. "Did that hurt?"

"No. It felt a little too good."

Pushing up, he rolls the opposite way and out of the bed. The silk sheet slips off as his wings lift briefly to spread, and I get an unobstructed view of what might be the most perfect ass before the wings tuck back into place.

He walks straight to a dresser and pulls out clothing. With his back to me and hidden by his wings, he dresses. I roll out of the bed and immediately start stripping the sheets, remembering that's one of my duties.

By the time I have them off, Amell is dressed in black rough denim and boots. He's not wearing a shirt, and I must say, I like that better than the vest.

From a purely artistic point of view, that is.

"Let's talk about a few ground rules," he says as I stand there with the sheets and pillowcases in my arms.

"Okay."

"Outside of the suite, you stick to the main part of the castle. That would be the grand foyer, which leads out to the bridge, the kitchens, and my suite. Do not go down other hallways at all. You'll be safe enough that way as it's fairly populated with visitors and residents."

"Residents?"

"A lot of nobles live within the castle, which has multiple apartments. Many others travel here to meet with the nobles. Stay in the main areas and you'll have less chance of someone harassing you. Now that my interest in you is known and will have spread around, that will make you of interest to other fae."

"I don't understand why I'm of interest. It makes no sense—I'm just a dead human."

"And fae hate humans."

"You don't," I point out. "You made a daughter with a human."

"It's an old bitterness that's not been let go by most. Humans are seen as frail and weak, yet they have the privilege of the First Dimension. They serve no purpose to us, nothing more than toys, since their life is so fleeting. You're also shiny and new since humans rarely stay here. But because you have my interest, others will want a taste. They'll want to see why you're

good enough for a king. Others would just want to hurt you to hurt me.”

“But... I’m a servant who cleans your suite,” I sputter.

“They don’t know that, though, do they?” he counters. “I’ve told the council you’re off-limits and that news will have traveled. You stayed the night in my suite.”

My eyes flare with understanding. “So now everyone assumes you’re banging me.”

“Which will give you the best measure of protection.”

“That’s why you had me stay here last night?” I ask incredulously.

Amell grins. “Mostly, although one could hope that you’d ask me to touch you.”

“I won’t,” I maintain.

Chuckling, Amell moves over to a large desk against one wall. It’s covered in old books. He sits and opens one up and peruses. “Go to the kitchens and fetch my breakfast. Rhynda will have a tray ready. I had some clothes procured for you. They’re hanging in the bedroom closet if you wish to change.”

“Um... thanks.” I turn to head back into the bedroom because while this dress is beautiful, it’s not practical.

“Nyssa,” Amell says, and I turn to face him. “You may also use my bath any time you desire.”

I don’t respond, but I’m grateful. Taking one yesterday made all the difference in the world. This place doesn’t smell like fire and brimstone as so many stories led me to believe, but it was still nice to clean up.

In the closet, I’m stunned to find modern clothing from the First Dimension. At least I think they’re from there. They bear manufacturers’ labels, although I don’t recognize the brands. Of course, I was never a brand shopper to begin with, getting most of my clothing from Goodwill. I’m grateful not to be in those scratchy brown garments and almost sigh in relief as I slip into a pair of tennis shoes that feel like heaven on my feet.

I grab a comb from a vanity beside the bath, and that’s when I notice a small tray set out that wasn’t there before. On it are little luxuries from the First Dimension, including bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and lotion. Even a toothbrush and toothpaste. I almost cry as I brush my teeth, and when I head back through the suite to fetch Amell’s breakfast, I thank him for the items.

He waves a hand, not even looking up from his book. “Not a big deal. We

have imports come in from the First Dimension all the time.”

Amell is right. Traveling from his rooms to the kitchens is a direct shot, and there are many fae around. Several regard me with knowing looks, others with surprise. I suppose word about me hasn't made it all the way around yet.

I pass Amell's friend, Truett, as he walks with a female who looks just like him in skin and hair color. He nods politely.

When I glance back, he's telling the woman something about me, and she looks over her shoulder at me in surprise.

Okay, word is getting around.

In the kitchen, Rhynda is as grumpy and intimidating as ever, but at least I know I'm safe from her whip.

“The king's tray is ready, but he's ordered that you eat first,” she says and gives me a tiny shove toward one of the tables. There's a wooden plate with some bread and an apple. Beside it are crocks of butter and jelly.

It's perfect, actually, and I wolf it down. I'd kill for coffee, but I haven't seen a hint of that around so I make do with a cup of water.

The rest of my day passes far too slowly. After bringing Amell his breakfast, I put new linens on the bed and clean the entire suite with materials I found in the closet. Amell left after he ate and didn't return for lunch, which means I basically sat around and did nothing. I poke around the books on his desk, but they're in languages I don't understand.

I unmake the bed and make it back up, just for something to do.

After fiddling with the knobs on the tub, I take a long bath. Amell hadn't touched them when he filled it up for me last night, but it does appear there's some manner of actual plumbing. I wash my hair and comb it dry, which takes a couple hours.

I try to nap, but I can't.

I stand out on the balcony, leaning on the rail to watch the bustle of Otaxis below. It takes me a few moments to realize there's no transportation system. People walk everywhere, and as I stare harder, I watch people blink in and out of existence.

Like they're teleporting. I make a note to ask Amell about it.

Finally, Calix shows up to take me to the laundry room. It's beside the kitchens, and while there're tubs with running water just like the bath, all the washing is done on scrub boards by hand. I clean his sheets gently since they're satin and hang them to dry as Calix provides instruction.

I have no way to tell time, so I don't know how far after lunch it is. I just

know I'm hungry. It's only when my stomach rumbles that Calix chastises me for not eating. "There are standing orders in the kitchen to feed you anytime you're hungry."

Calix takes me there and just before leaving says, "Amell is gone from the castle and won't require dinner tonight. You may get your own from the kitchens later."

After he departs, I sit at the table and scoop into a bowl of stew Rhynda provides. Will is working along a far wall, slicing big hunks of dried meat. I wonder if it's from the First Dimension or if they have animals down here. I try to get his attention, but Rhynda's watching with her flogger, and I don't want to land him in trouble.

Not wanting to get in the way, I go back to the room and stare off the balcony for who knows how long. Then I pace some more.

Eventually, I recline on the bed, not tired but so bored, I force myself to fall asleep.

When I wake up, I have no idea how much time has passed, but I'm disoriented and starving. Amell isn't in the room, and I have no clue what time it is. There are no clocks and no sunrises or sunsets by which to gauge time. I can only guess based on how my stomach aches, so I head back to the kitchens, confident enough to make the journey on my own.

To my surprise, it's nearly empty when I arrive, which tells me it's much later than I'd thought. Only a handful of people remain, and one of them is Will.

When he sees me, he looks around quickly to note that Rhynda isn't there and rushes to give me a hug. "How are you doing? There are all sorts of rumors going around. Some think that Amell killed you, and others think that you're being forced—"

I stop him with a hand to his shoulder. "I'm not being forced to do anything. I'm basically in charge of keeping his suite cleaned, and truth be told, I'm bored silly. I wish I was still in the kitchens with you."

"Don't ever wish that," he says with a shudder. "Are you hungry?"

I nod, and Will rushes off to grab me some food. He sets before me a platter with cheese, bread, and fruit, much like the platter I had in Amell's room last night. None of it looks like anything I've ever eaten before.

"Is this from the First Dimension?" I ask as I sniff it.

"No," he says with a wrinkled nose. "They have their own food sources down here. It's best you don't ask, but I've eaten it since I've been here and

it's not too bad."

I hesitantly pick up a piece of cheese and it smells... well, cheesy. I take a bite and chew. "It's actually good."

"Listen... I have to finish cleaning up. You can fill me in when I'm done."

By the time I've cleaned my plate, Will is off duty, and I walk out of the kitchens with him. The regular hustle and bustle of the castle has died down, which makes me think it's pretty late.

As we walk along, Will has me recount everything that happened. I paint with broad strokes and leave out naked Amell and sleeping in the king's bed.

When we reach the door that leads down the spiral staircase to the cells, Will says, "You need to come down and see the changes. I don't know what happened but... well, you need to see it."

Laughing, I shake my head. "I already know... beds, toilets, and sinks. I was there when—"

Will shakes his head. "No. It's more than that."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my curiosity piqued.

"Just come on," he says, grabbing my hand and leading me down the staircase. I know I'm not supposed to be down here, but it's so quiet, it won't hurt to take a quick look.

When we reach the bottom, I immediately note the first difference. Gone are the iron bars on each cell, and in their stead are wooden doors.

Will drags me to his cell. "Real doors for privacy, and they have locks on the inside."

"Wow," I exclaim, because that's pretty big.

"And look inside," he says.

I peek in and in addition to the bed, toilet, and sink is a chair, dresser, and a small book stand with a lamp, and most importantly, a thick rug on the floor.

Small things, but big comfort.

"Who did this?" I ask.

Will shrugs. "No clue. I came back yesterday and it was like this."

Curious, I move to the cell that was mine, and I find the same things installed. I wonder if I'm going to be coming back here to live.

"This is all great, Will. But I need to get back. I'm not supposed to be down here."

"Oh," Will says, eyes widening with worry. "I didn't know."

“No, it’s okay. Maybe we can chat outside the kitchens tomorrow when you’re done working. It’s in an area of the castle I’ve got permission to be in.”

“Yeah, that would be great,” he says enthusiastically. “I’ll walk you back.”

Will and I turn for the staircase, but I’m brought up short by a large figure standing in the shadows at the bottom. He steps into the light—a huge, hulking Dark Fae who looks mostly human except for his extreme beauty, which I’ve found to be common, and yellow glowing eyes focused solely on me. He prowls toward us, and the more I stare at his eyes, the more I feel a pull toward him.

When he gets closer, the very weird sensation of desire wells up inside me, and I gasp in confusion. “What is that?” I whisper to Will.

“An incubus,” he replies, and my head turns his way because the fear in his tone scares the crap out of me. “He’s focused on you, Nyssa.”

“What do I do?” My voice trembles and my legs feel weak. Amell told me last night he’d not seen me exhibit fear except when Jago grabbed hold of me, but if he could see me now, he’d know I’m terrified.

I don’t understand how a creature can make me feel lust when I’m repulsed at the same time.

I back up, giving a quick glance behind to see where I can run. There are intersecting corridors fifty feet away.

Will steps aside and presses against the exterior wall of his cell. The incubus doesn’t pay him any attention, still prowling toward me with a laser-like intensity.

“I heard there was a tasty snack in the castle, and I’m guessing it must be you,” he purrs, and damn... his voice sounds like sex and honey. My instinct is to walk to him.

I force myself to keep moving backward. When the fae passes Will, he tears down the hallway and up the spiral staircase. I can’t say I blame him. He’d be no match for a fae.

In an effort to slow the thing down, I attempt conversation. “So, you’re an incubus, huh? What exactly does that mean?”

“It means I eat tasty little snacks like you,” he rumbles.

Oh shit. I do not want to get eaten.

“Um... why do I feel funny?” I ask as I glance behind me. Almost at the intersection.

“We’re sex fae,” he says with a dark laugh. “We fuck and suck you dry. Your soul will be mine when I’m done, and I won’t hunger anymore.”

Shit.

I’m in so much trouble.

Two more steps back and I’m in the middle of the intersection. I don’t waste a second and bolt left, tearing down the slick corridor, grateful for the treads on my new shoes.

I look over my shoulder and see the incubus is in hot pursuit. I try to kick it into high gear, but I’m jerked off my feet when his hand wraps in my hair. I slam down onto my back which knocks the air from my lungs and the incubus straddles me.

His hand comes to my face where he grips it hard, and the minute his skin touches mine, my body arcs up as a bolt of searing lust pulses through me.

“Please,” I whisper as tears leak from my eyes. Not to let me go, but to touch me.

“I’ll give it to you, little snack,” the fae growls and then bends to kiss me.

I close my eyes and try to jerk my head to the side, even though my body tells me to capitulate. I feel his breath on me, and I know I’m about to die... for a second time.

And then... he’s gone.

I lift my head to find the incubus lying twenty feet away, and booted feet stride by me.

Black wings trail behind, and I scramble up as Amell walks toward the incubus.

The fae rolls to his knees and cowers, exclaiming, “I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

“You knew,” Amell snarls as he grabs him by the arm and hauls him up.

Knew what?

About me?

“I swear I didn’t, Your Majesty. Please.”

With no effort whatsoever, Amell pulls the incubus toward me. Even though the fae is almost as large as Amell, he’s powerless against the king’s hold.

Amell holds out his hand, and I don’t think twice.

I take it.

And then everything turns black, and I feel like I’m spinning and falling and then... everything is straight and I can see I’m standing on the Bridge of

Judgment with the Crimson River churning below.

I barely have time to understand where we are before Amell casually pushes the incubus off. His screams get fainter the farther he falls until I hear the splash into the river and the ground shakes.

“Thank you,” I sigh, feeling safe for the first time.

“Don’t thank me,” Amell snarls as he grips me by the back of my neck and drags me to the edge. “You’re next.”



## CHAPTER 11

### MELL

**A**CIDIC RAGE BURNS within, all directed at the incubus who was on top of Nyssa, about to devour her from the inside out. But when I tossed him over the edge, my fury didn't abate, and I realized Nyssa putting herself in danger angered me even more.

"You were in an area of the castle you were forbidden to be," I growl as I hold her by her neck.

Nyssa jerks and twists, attempting to escape my clutches. Her feet dig hard against the stone, trying to push back against my strength, but it's futile.

I try to force some measure of calm into myself. Had Nyssa died—which she most assuredly would have when that incubus was done with her as they suck your life force dry through sex—her soul would have gone straight into the Crimson River. There are no further chances in the Underworld for a human if you die here a second time. It would've happened immediately and without me even knowing. There wouldn't have been time to save her, and that's why I'm so fucking pissed.

Stupid, ignorant mortals.

"Let me go, you asshole," she screams, kicking backward at me and swinging her arms in an attempt to strike my body.

I'm the asshole?

I swing her around to face me. Letting go of her neck, I fist the front of her shirt and pull her in close, forcing her to her tiptoes. Her expression isn't the least bit recalcitrant, her eyes blazing with the same level of fury I feel.

"Do you know what that incubus would have done to you?" I demand, giving her a shake to force some regret into her eyes. "He would have raped you, repetitively. He would have used every touch, kiss, thrust into you to take pieces of your soul. It would have been agony as you gave it up to him—excruciating pain not just to your body, but to your existence. And when he'd gorged on every bit and fueled his body, this new body I gave you would be dead again. And you know where the remainder of your soul would have

gone?”

She doesn't answer. Doesn't even give me the courtesy of a nod.

I lean in closer, my lips curled with a sneer. “It would have gone straight to the Crimson River. I wouldn't have been able to stop it.”

I expect to see understanding, fear, and regret, and yet I get nothing but defiance. She has strength and resilience I've never seen before in a human. Hardly have I ever seen it in immortals.

With a sigh, my anger dissipates, and I drop my forehead to hers. “I should just throw you in the river and be done with it,” I grumble, although I don't mean it. If I did, she'd already be over the edge.

“Or you could kiss me,” she whispers.

My head jerks back, and I glare down at her with narrowed eyes. “What did you just say?”

Gone is the rebellion from her expression, replaced with uncertainty. “I said you could kiss me.”

Permission.

Or manipulation?

“Why? So I won't throw you in the river?”

“I can't stop you from doing it if you really want to, and it's no more than I deserve.”

It's not the first time she's said that. She truly believes she deserves damnation.

“Then why do you want me to kiss you?”

Her gaze slides over the bridge's edge to the frothing river below. “Because I'll probably end up there at some point. Maybe I want something good before that day comes.”

It shouldn't affect me... the acceptance in her voice that this is as good as it's ever going to get for her. It most definitely shouldn't make my black heart thump that she considers a kiss from me something good in all the bad.

She watches me expectantly, a glimmer of yearning there. I release her shirt, moving my hand to the back of her neck. “You've given me permission to touch you, and you know I'm going to take more than a kiss, whether you like it or not.”

“Well, duh,” she drawls. “You're the evil king of the Underworld.”

There's no stopping my bark of laughter. No one down here has that dry humor. It's not only refreshing, but it turns me the fuck on.

It's game time.

My mouth takes hers in a consuming kiss that should frighten her, but she moans and sinks into it. Her small hands rest on my chest as she slides her tongue against mine, and I feel it in my balls.

Christ, this little dead human with a blackened soul and a complete lack of fear of eternal damnation has made my body react in a way no other creature in my existence ever has.

Just from a kiss.

Wrapping my arms tight around her, I envision my bedroom and pull it toward me across time and distance. I take a short step forward, leaving the bridge and coming to a stop right beside my bed. I release my hold on the convergence of two places, and the bridge snaps back into its proper place.

I lift my mouth and give Nyssa a slight push.

She looks around, chest heaving. “How do you do that? Are you teleporting somehow?”

“It’s called bending distance.” I sit on the bed and remove my boots. “The more powerful fae have the ability.”

“Bending distance? What does that mean? Is it...”

I stand from the bed and start working at my pants. I could just make them disappear with a conjuring spell, but I’m enjoying the way Nyssa’s words trail off as her eyes zero in on my hands.

Stripping has never been a part of foreplay among the fae. We have high sex drives and don’t need much to get ready. It’s a pleasurable release and nothing more, because our hearts rarely have the ability to care for someone.

Not sure if you’d call me lucky, but I had the experience of caring for a human before. Zora begged me to take her virginity, and I did. We were intimate for several years before her sister Finley came to claim and bring her back to the First Dimension.

Yeah, I cared for her and felt the loss when she left, but I don’t recall ever stripping for her. At least not in a way I enjoyed simply because her eyes were pinned on me the way Nyssa’s are right now. Not a shy bone in her body as I slide out of my pants and reveal myself to her.

She stares at my cock, which reacts to her perusal.

“Get naked,” I say, and her eyes jerk up to me.

My turn to watch.

She makes a fast grab for the T-shirt—an article of First Dimension clothing I had Calix acquire for her—and starts to yank it up.

“Slow,” I rumble as I walk toward her. I hold out a hand, and she

hesitantly takes it. “Shoes off first.”

Nyssa holds on to me for leverage, toeing the tennis shoes from her feet. I drop her hand and take a slow walk around her. “The rest of it... slowly.”

She lets out a gust of breath and when I’m behind her, she pulls the T-shirt over her head. When it’s free, her chocolate locks—much better than the platinum she arrived in—fall down her slender back.

Her body is as it was when she died, too thin and clearly malnourished. I’ll need to see that she eats more.

I move around to her side, and her neck twists as she watches me. My eyes drop to her breasts as she’s not wearing a bra. I don’t know if it was an oversight on Calix’s part or if she chose not to wear one, but I’m pleased with what I’m looking at right now. Her breasts are small by ordinary standards, but given her small frame, they look fucking perfect on her.

“The rest of it,” I say quietly, moving to her front.

Her fingers go to the button on her jeans, which are baggy on her, and the zipper slides down. She shimmies them off, not bothering to take her panties along. Stepping out of the denim, Nyssa stands straight to stare at me, mostly naked but with the sexiest bit of lace scrap between her legs. If I paid Calix for his work, I’d give him a raise for choosing those panties.

She hooks her thumbs in the strings at her hips, but I shake my head. “I’ll do it.”

I step into Nyssa, my head bent and eyes locked on hers. My fingers graze the edge of her panties before they dip in. She trembles as I pull them down her thighs. I’m on my knees before her as I pull free the lacy strip, my wings spreading outward so they don’t bend on the floor.

Nyssa gasps, and I look up at her. She’s staring at my wings, first the left and then the right, branching out and away from my body. Her hands go to my shoulders, then up to the arches to stroke outward.

My wings are such an inherent part of me, and because I’m so attracted to Nyssa, just her innocent touch makes me hard. Every stroke I feel in my cock.

Bringing my hands to her ass, I pull her into me and bury my face between her legs. Nyssa shrieks as I give a long swipe of my tongue up her center, her hands going from my wings to the back of my head to hold me to her.

But I’m not going anywhere. Despite her dark soul, she tastes like fucking sunshine. Gripping her ass hard, I worship her with my mouth,

listening intently to every little moan, relishing the bite of her nails in my scalp.

Giving thanks up to the God who kicked me out of Heaven when she breaks apart with a sob of my name and a buck of her hips against me.

Fucking perfect.

I stand, tucking my wings back in. I lift Nyssa in my arms and bring her down on the bed with me right over her. Her eyes are bleary, her chest heaving. She places her hands against my pecs but doesn't push me away. Merely strokes a thumb over my nipple, and I groan.

I bend down and kiss Nyssa, sliding my tongue along hers, and the act seems deeply intimate. I've kissed exactly two human women in my lifetime—Zora, and Thalia's mother—and neither one was like this.

It was always a means to an end—sex and release—but with Nyssa, I feel like I could lie here for hours with my mouth on hers.

That is until her hand slides down my stomach and she grips my cock. I groan as she squeezes and then strokes, and the dangerous demon inside threatens to bust loose.

Wrenching my lips from hers, I stare down at her. I know my eyes are glowing, but she stares right back at me without a lick of fear.

I wrap my hand around hers and force her to squeeze me harder as I guide myself to her wet heat. Nyssa's legs wrap around my waist, just under the edges of my wings.

I kiss her once more, swallowing every noise she makes as I swivel my hips and work myself into her tightness. She writhes and undulates under me, uttering mewling noises of need.

When I'm fully seated, the pressure is so intense that my wings involuntarily spring outward, flaring wide and moving lazily up and down. Nyssa gasps, eyes wide as she watches them.

With her legs already locked behind me, I put an arm under her and lift my wings as high as I can, the muscles in my back stretching. I draw them down hard, causing a current of air to lift us both off the mattress just a few inches. I pull out of her slightly before we fall back down, and the force of it causes me to drive deep into her.

She cries out, and I worry I've hurt her until she says, "Do that again."

Grinning, I run my nose over her jaw. "Some other time. I want to go slow now."

My wings settle, and my hips move. Nyssa seems to like that, too, as her

legs tighten on me and she bites down hard onto her lip.

I fuck her slowly, fusing my mouth to hers. My hands wander over the softness of her skin, and I attune myself to every little motion and noise she makes. I open my senses, lock onto her heartbeat, and marvel that mine thumps just as hard and fast, keeping tempo with hers.

As king of the Underworld and the mightiest Dark Fae in the world, I should be able to last a lot longer, but damn if my connection to her doesn't overwhelm my senses.

Nyssa arches her back, and she doesn't have to say a damn thing. I can feel she's close to another orgasm. I can actually feel the heat of it curl inward, can feel her entire body tighten with anticipation. I thrust into her harder, and the little minx bites my shoulder in retaliation.

Or maybe it's gratitude because she groans, "Amell... I'm so close. So, so close."

Once again, my inner demon that wants to conquer every bit of her rages and demands to be let loose, but I hold back. I don't want to scare or hurt her.

Odd, as I've never had to hold it back before—neither with fae nor human. But Nyssa... she draws on my darkness.

I gather her in tight and kiss her hard, my hips punching against hers as I can feel my own release sneaking up on me. I have the power to hold it off but fuck if I want to. I'm ready to dive as soon as she tumbles over.

Nyssa wrenches her mouth from mine, turning her head to the side. "It's too much. Too much."

Am I hurting her? I slow down.

Her eyes spring open, and she clasps my face. "Don't you dare stop. It's too much in a good way."

Smiling, I capture her mouth again, and she locks her arms around my neck. I have no clue the time that elapses. It could be seconds or hours, but I fuck Nyssa like I've never fucked a living creature before.

Nyssa bucks and arches and bites down hard on my lip as she comes. The feel of her rippling is my downfall, and my orgasm rips through me, pleasure as hot as the Crimson River flooding my veins.

"Fuck," I rasp out, my head dropping to Nyssa's shoulder in what feels like a never-ending tidal wave of pleasure. It's so forceful, I lose sense of anything around me, other than the pulses of euphoria that cause my hips to continue bucking against her.

"It's not stopping," Nyssa moans as she clings to me. Through our

connection, I feel her pleasure still raging, and I think it's causing mine to do the same.

I force myself to stop moving and pull my weight off her a bit. I look down to find this beautiful woman absolutely wrecked. I can see it in the slackness of her face, the flush of pleasure across her breasts, and the dreaminess in her eyes.

Pride swells within that I did that to her.

She focuses a bit, eyes clearing. "Are you smug right now?"

"A little," I admit. She would be smug too if she knew that shredded me from the inside out. I kiss her mouth softly. "I didn't hurt you?"

"Not at all. But, um... I've never..."

Her words trail off, and my eyes flare. "You've never had an orgasm?"

"Yes, I've had an orgasm," she snaps but then lets out a soft sigh of embarrassed admission. "But not unless I helped myself get there. And never one that forceful. Did you use magic?"

"I didn't use magic," I assure her. "And you must have had some shitty lovers."

"Another understatement," she says with a faint smile.

She looks slightly broken—not by me, but perhaps by memories. I want to probe and find out what was so horrible, but I don't. Not really my business, and it doesn't change anything we just did or will do again.

But we do need to talk about something. "I could have thrown you in the river, Nyssa. You have to promise not to defy my orders again. My rage can sometimes be uncontrollable."

She frowns. "Would you have really?"

"I almost did." Fuck if there weren't a few seconds there when I was almost blind with the fury over her getting herself into that predicament. "I'm volatile. All Dark Fae are, and sometimes extreme emotion outweighs common sense. Don't put me in that position again."

"I'll try," she says quietly, gaze sliding away.

"I'm serious, Nyssa. Don't let me be the cause of your demise. Promise me."

Her eyes snap back to me and she glares. "I can't promise something that I don't give two shits about. I don't give a fuck if you throw me in the river."

I'm shocked, but I keep my expression neutral. "You don't mean that."

She pushes at my chest, but I don't budge. "Get off me."

Christ, I hate the pleading tone in her voice, especially since I'm still

buried deep inside her and could fuck her again right now if she wanted me to.

Reluctantly, I roll to the side. She slips off the bed away from me and strides into the bathing area. I watch as she turns on the water and then with angry, jerky movements, she ties her hair on top of her head with a piece of leather.

“Nyssa.” She refuses to look at me. I bend distance to her, and she jumps when my hands go to her shoulders to turn her my way. Her body tenses. “You cannot want to go into the Crimson River. It’s eternal torment.”

“Then don’t throw me in,” she snaps.

“Don’t piss me off,” I retort.

“Then don’t—”

I kiss her, guaranteed to shut her up. I’m greatly satisfied that when I pull back, she looks like I’d just knocked her over the head with a brick. “I’m trying to keep you safe, Nyssa. This is your life now. I need you to adjust so you stay safe.”

Her gaze drops briefly before lifting right back up with a sigh. “I know. And I’m sorry. I won’t stray where I’m not supposed to.”

Relief makes my legs feel like jelly. I hadn’t realized how important it was for her to say that just now. I don’t think I’d harm her, but I don’t want to put it to the test again.

Another kiss, softer this time, my hand pressed to her cheek. “Let’s take a bath.”

Her eyes move to the arches of my wings. “Can you get in the bath with those things?”

Chuckling, I pick her up and move to the edge, stepping into the water with her. “I’ll show you.”



## CHAPTER 12

### A

**P**INS AND NEEDLES zing through my right arm tucked under my head, drawing me from slumber. But those little pricks of pain are forgotten as soon as I note I'm being held by the king of the Underworld. He's at my back, spooned around me, his arm wrapped tight around my waist. It takes a moment to figure out where the gentle warmth is from—and then I realize the softness is from his feathers.

He extended his left wing forward to cover me.

A rush of emotion hits. Panic, accompanied by a sense of claustrophobia, as if I'm trapped, only to have it give way to tenderness that he'd be so thoughtful. I've never been held like this before.

Never been held... at all.

I'm exhausted this morning. After our bath last night, Amell brought me back to the bed and fucked me again.

And again.

And again.

As tired as I am, I'm exhilarated because I've woken up changed. Amell made my body do things I had no clue it was capable of. If he wasn't actively screwing me throughout the night, he was touching, licking, biting, and sucking every part of me. I had so many orgasms, I thought I might die of the sheer bliss.

In return, I gave to him just as generously. I'm well acquainted with his body now with both my mouth and fingers. It was a power rush to have him begging me, and no matter how much sex I had in my lifetime before, last night was the first time I've ever felt treasured.

What does that mean today, though? Was last night a onetime-only thing? Amell almost threw me in the river yesterday, so it's not like he cares for me.

It could be that when he awakens, I'll be back down in my cell and forgotten.

I hold perfectly still, not wanting to shatter these last dredges of intimacy

I might have with him. I know it can't mean much because he's king, and well, I'm a dead human given a new body.

But still... this is nice. I feel safe and secure, and that is also something I never felt in my prior existence.

Not once.

"I know you're awake, Nyssa," Amell says in his baritone voice. "I can practically hear the gears in your brain working."

I relax now that I've been found out and roll to face him. His wing lifts and settles in place behind his back. My body is chilled by the lack of warmth, but when I see Amell's hot gaze as our eyes connect, I flush from head to toe.

His arm pulls me in closer, hand dropping to my ass. "How do you feel?"

"Sore," I admit. Deliciously so.

His smile is beautiful, if not a bit smug. "A warm bath will make you feel better."

I yawn, my body feeling the effects of so little sleep. "I'd actually sell my soul to the devil for a cup of coffee."

Amell snorts and squeezes my butt.

And then he simply vanishes, causing me to yelp in shock. I sit up in the bed, disoriented by his disappearance, and look around, as if I expect him to pop out from behind a piece of furniture.

Hesitantly, I pull the satin sheet over my body, feeling strangely vulnerable to have been left so suddenly.

"Coffee," Amell says as he reappears by the side of the bed with a tray in hand.

"Shit!" I exclaim as I clutch the sheet to my chest. "That scared the crap out of me. How do you do that?"

"I bent distance," Amell says as he sets the tray on the bedside table. It holds a glass French press filled with dark liquid, and the aroma wafts toward me. "I basically pull to me a spot I wish to go so I can step from one place to another. The really powerful are so good at it, it looks like they're just disappearing or reappearing."

Amazing. "It's like an Einstein-Rosen Bridge."

Amell pours a cup of coffee. "I didn't realize you were versed on the general theory of relativity and spatial dimensions."

"I'm not." I take the cup from him with grateful hands. "But I'm a big fan of Dr. Jane Foster's."

His golden slashing eyebrows draw inward. “Dr. Jane Foster? I’m not familiar with her work, and I’ve read about every book in existence.”

Snickering, I shake my head. “She’s not important, but that’s what bending distance sounds like,” I say as Amell places the French press back on the tray. “You’re not having any?”

“Can’t stand the stuff.”

I wrinkle my nose. “You really are evil, but how did you manage to get it?” I ask. I’ve not seen any in my few forays into the kitchen.

“I’m the most powerful Dark Fae in the world. There’s not much I can’t acquire either myself or through others.”

“You went to the First Dimension just now to get this?”

He shakes his head. “I’m prohibited from leaving.”

“Why?”

“For helping Thalia out of a predicament when I was forbidden from doing so.”

“Because she’s your daughter and you love her,” I surmise.

“Obviously.”

No, it’s not obvious to me. Not all parents love their children. “Did you love her mother?”

“No,” he replies unemotionally as he gets back in bed, settling on his side and once again facing me with his head propped in his hand. “It was a once only. She wanted a baby.”

That’s... weird.

I sit cross-legged, the sheet tucked under my armpits, and sip my coffee. It’s disconcerting, the way he so casually lounges, oblivious to his nudity. My eyes keep darting to his wings, folded tight to his back. They’re fascinating to me.

“You like them,” he says matter-of-factly.

I blush at him calling out my ogling. “They’re stunning. And so soft. And that thing you did last night, lifting us in the air...”

“That felt especially good,” he agrees. “I’ll take you flying sometime.”

My eyes about pop out of my head. “Really?”

“Of course.”

My gaze drops to my cup. This is all so surreal. I’m in freaking Hell, at any given time probably close to landing myself in the Crimson River, and yet some of the best experiences of my life are happening.

“Those look like some heavy thoughts,” Amell observes.

“It’s just...” My eyes lift and I cradle the cup. “I don’t understand why this is in my hand.”

Amell frowns. “Not following.”

“I murdered someone. I got sent to Hell. I should be in the river right now. And here I am with a cup of coffee, in the king’s bed.”

“I see how that might be confusing,” he says, but offers no further explanation. “Why did you kill Vince?”

My body jerks so hard, the hot beverage sloshes over the edge of my cup and discolors the white satin at my lap. “Shit... sorry.”

Amell waves a hand, and the wetness and stain disappear.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You can’t just do that to your own sheets each day and clean them?”

“I could,” he replies blandly. “But then what would I have you do? Now, why did you kill Vince?”

I’m prepared for the question the second time. “He was opportune.”

Shifting up to his elbow, Amell reaches out and drags a finger across my satin-covered thigh. “You know, if you felt just a tiny bit of remorse, I could petition Zora to have you reincarnated.”

I can’t make this any clearer, so I look the king dead in the eye. “I’m not sorry in the slightest.”

“Zora could command me to throw you in the Crimson River,” he says, voice tight with tension.

“It would be deserved,” I reply.

“So be it,” he says, and I can’t tell anything by his tone, it’s so neutral. He exits the bed and heads toward his closet. “I’ve got some things to handle this morning. I’ll grab my own breakfast.”

Reaching over, I set the coffee on the table and slide out of bed, bringing the sheet with. I wrap it around me as I ask, “Are you mad I’m not sorry about it?”

Amell turns, a pair of pants in his hand. “Of course I’m not mad. I’m evil, remember. I don’t care if you murdered a hundred men.”

“I don’t think you’re evil,” I say, clutching the sheet at my chest.

“I was kicked out of Heaven for plotting to overthrow God. I’m absolutely evil.”

*Whatever. I don’t see it.*

Amell finishes dressing. “I’m going to be gone all day, but I’ll try to be back in time for dinner.”

Sighing, I look around the room I cleaned quite well yesterday. I'll wash sheets today, even though there are three more sets in the trunk at the end of the bed.

"Can I go back to working in the kitchens?"

Amell's eyes narrow. "What? Why?"

"Because there's not enough to do here to keep me busy, and I was bored out of my mind yesterday. I tried to read your books, but they're in another language."

"Good thing," he mutters. "You might have accidentally summoned a demon."

I ignore the quip. "There's no more than an hour of work at most in here. I need to stay active, or I'll go crazy."

Moving close, he takes me by the chin. "You'd rather work in the kitchens under Rhynda's rule than work here?"

"All day, any day." I'll throw myself in the river from boredom otherwise.

Amell sighs, rubbing his thumb over my cheek. "You're a strange woman."

I stare up at him. This man—no, Dark Fae—has the power to blink out my existence with a snap of his fingers. He could hurt me in a million different ways by his strength and darkness alone.

Yet now, he actually looks at me with tenderness and worry.

It makes no sense.

"I'll let Rhynda know you'll spend your free hours with her, whatever those might be."

"Free hours?"

"Don't think after last night I won't be spending more time in my room. And if I'm in this room, then my order is you'll be in this room too."

"Oh." Warmth creeps up my neck by what that means. "Okay."

Then Amell bends distance to somewhere else, and I'm alone.

## CHAPTER 13

### MELL

THE BRIDGE OF Judgment is cleared of all souls. Another day that not one is worthy of reincarnation, and the Crimson River's hunger has been sated.

There are a dozen things I could be doing in my capacity as ruler, but I choose to go to my suite in the hope of finding Nyssa there. I know the chances are low because she legitimately prefers spending her days working in the kitchens to alleviate her boredom. For the past two weeks, she's headed there after breakfast, returning just before dinner so she's available to serve me.

I've not made particular efforts to seek her out during the days, forcing myself to be satisfied with having her in my bed at night, but I've had Calix keep a close eye on her. He's advised me that she works hard and without complaint under Rhynda's keen and merciless watch. More importantly, he's told me that Rhynda has kept her ravager side in check and hasn't lifted a hand toward Nyssa.

Calix says that Rhynda will barely make eye contact with Nyssa. Word has gotten around that I threw the incubus who went after her into the Crimson River, so most beings give Nyssa a wide berth in the castle. It appears she's moderately safe for now, but I haven't loosened my control of where she goes. My suite, the laundry, and the kitchens, and that's it.

I can tell she's not arrived yet the minute I step into my rooms. Nyssa puts off a vibration I can feel when I'm near her. No clue what it is, but it's been there since we first fucked.

Walking through to the bedroom, I happily note that Calix has come through for me. I sent him on errands this morning, and he's left the bounty laid out on the bed.

More clothing for Nyssa from the First Dimension. I specifically had him buy for comfort, although I'm not in the least bit put out by the pile of sexy lingerie. I'll make sure to reward him for his extra effort.

In addition to the clothes is a pile of books. I don't know what she likes to

read, so I instructed him to get a variety.

I also had him get chocolate because while Nyssa tends to be very closed off about her human life, she mentioned a few days ago how much she misses chocolate.

I'd have preferred to procure all this stuff myself, but given my inability to leave the Underworld, I have to rely on Calix for now.

Reaching out, I pick up a black lacy bra and study it. We don't have such things in the Underworld, but I'm looking forward to taking this off Nyssa.

"That's a little too frilly for you."

I jolt, recognizing Zora's voice but turn slowly to look at her. She's the only being who has the power to sneak up on me.

"You could knock," I say dryly, tossing the bra back on the bed.

She shrugs, moving forward to examine the items laid out. Zora looks as lovely as ever with her white hair and exotic eyes, yet now she emanates power. A side benefit of being a god.

"Are you still mad at me?" she asks, facing me with her hands clasped placidly before her.

"Are you going to open my prison doors?" I ask.

"No."

"Then I'm still mad at you," I reply, walking into the main living area. As expected, she follows.

"Interesting... all the things you're providing for your new acquisition." Her tone is playful, not condescending. Zora doesn't like me being mad at her. We've shared too much.

I ignore the jab. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No. I won't be staying long. Just checking in."

"You never just check in." I pour a glass of wine from the sideboard and move to the couch. Without invitation—she doesn't need one as her welcome is always implied—Zora settles in on the opposite side.

"True. But I did want to make sure you were okay after your dustup with Maddox."

"Dustup?" My laugh is mirthless. "We tried to kill each other."

"Which is impossible. The extra powers I gave you for taking the throne makes you Maddox's equal in terms of immortality and strength. You two attacked each other knowing nothing would come of it."

We attacked each other over Zora, and she knows it.

"I don't know what you see in him," I grouse, not from jealousy but pure

consternation. “He’s arrogant and pigheaded.”

“Sounds a lot like you.”

I sip my wine, noting she doesn’t deny seeing something in him.

“Did he ask you about reincarnating Lucien?”

“He did,” I reply with a genial smile. “And I declined to look into it.”

Zora nods her acceptance of my edict, though not without a slight flattening of her lips. She won’t ask me to reconsider—she respects my decision as king of the Underworld. It’s born from the fact I didn’t want this job and took it only because she begged me to.

And I only agreed because I felt so fucking guilty about helping to keep her prisoner in the Underworld for so long.

“How are things?” she asks, referring to my realm as a whole.

I wasn’t going to bother with such unimportant chitchat, but since she’s here and asking, I tell her about Ariman and Jago wanting to carry on Kymaris’s work.

Zora grimaces as she hates Ariman as much as I do. He’s the one who worked with Kymaris’s lover, Pyke, to funnel the dark magic into her. It was excruciating to watch. While I wasn’t responsible for the actual torture, I was responsible for bringing her to those sessions.

Zora may have forgiven me, but I’ve not forgiven myself, nor will I ever.

“Just let me kill Ariman,” I say, leaning forward in my seat. “And Jago, for that matter. Let’s quell this once and for all.”

“No,” she replies, and I’m not surprised. She’s forbidden it before. “If you kill either one of them based on rumors and innuendo, you risk their supporters turning on you. There are too many Dark Fae still worked up about Kymaris’s death, ending their quest to subjugate the First Dimension.”

“If I kill them without mercy or trial, it will send a message that I am as ruthless as Kymaris. It will keep the subjects in order out of fear.”

“But you’re not Kymaris. If you were anything like her, I’d never have asked you to take the throne. It’s because you’re unlike her that I know you’ll do everything to protect humans in the First Dimension and others from the evil that abounds here.”

“It’s not all evil and you know that,” I mutter with frustration. It’s more than just nature that makes a creature wicked. Just like there are evil humans, there are Dark Fae who are content to live a peaceable life here.

“That’s true, not everyone here is evil. All the more reason for you to be an autocrat without seeming like an autocrat. Figure a way to be a diplomat.”



I growl my displeasure.

“This is your life now, Amell. You are tasked with keeping the rest of the world safe from the beings under your control. It’s a heavy burden, one that won’t get easier over time. You will always have usurpers and those who covet your throne.”

“I hate this fucking job.”

“And yet you do it because you feel beholden to me. I hate that for you.”

I blink in surprise. Since Zora became a god, we haven’t talked about her years in the Underworld. I apologized back when she was still human for all the pain I caused, but it’s not been mentioned since. I had thought—wrongfully—that Zora assumed the matter was behind me.

“I hate what I did to you,” I counter, because apparently we need to get this put to bed once and for all.

“I know you do. You’ve apologized, and I’ve accepted, if you remember.”

“I remember. It doesn’t make it any better for me.”

“Well, you need to let it go, Amell. Or if you can’t let it go, remember that for all the ways in which you were complicit in my imprisonment down here, you’re the only one who gave me any kindness or care. I wouldn’t have survived the Underworld without you.”

I nod, because I know that to be true. I wait for the inevitable sadness to overtake me when I think of the times Zora and I had together, first as her caretaker and friend, later as her lover.

I had loved her. At least, as much as I was able to.

It was never enough that I would’ve helped her escape. It wasn’t even close enough to give up my allegiance to Kymaris.

But apparently, it was enough for her to not hate me forever.

“So,” she drawls, having deemed this topic completed, “tell me about your human. I heard she called you a big old, winged bat.”

My lips curl at the memory. “It saved her from the Crimson River.”

“Aaah,” Zora says knowingly. “She’s a toy.”

I frown at the description of Nyssa. That’s not quite accurate, although I admit, “She intrigues me. She’s absolutely defiant and doesn’t care if she gets thrown into the river. Said she always knew she’d end up in Hell.”

“Big words coming from such a tiny, mortal thing,” Zora muses.

“I’d love to know why she is the way she is. I’ve tried to get her to tell me about her mortal life, but she’s not giving it up.”

“You must not be doing that great of a job in bed, then,” Zora says, and I about choke on my sip of wine. “Oh, come on, Amell. You don’t think I don’t know what’s going on down here? I know everything.”

“Then why are you bothering to visit to check in if you know everything?”

“Because I know you’re starting to care for the human, and I don’t want to see you hurt. I’ve come to give you my unsolicited advice.”

A coldness creeps up my spine. “Which is?”

“Throw her in the river and be done with it.”

The god has rendered me speechless. I’m shocked at such a brutal suggestion because although Zora is a god, she’s not without compassion or mercy. It’s why she wants me to evaluate souls for reincarnation.

“Not going to happen,” I growl.

Or, at least as long as Nyssa doesn’t piss me off so much that my rage gets the better of me.

Zora shrugs, clapping her hands on her thighs before rising from her chair. “Well then, I guess I should be going since we have nothing else to discuss.”

I don’t stand but incline my head at her. “Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too,” she says but then shocks me even more. She holds out her hand and sitting on her palm is a long, cylindrical crystal. It’s opaque white and quite ugly in a bland kind of way.

“I thought you might want this,” she says.

“My décor is already complete, but thanks,” I reply dryly.

Zora rolls her eyes. “It’s from the Hall of Histories.”

“And that means something to me?”

“The Hall of Histories is where every life—mortal and immortal—are recorded in the form of memories. This is Nyssa McKnight’s crystal.”

It’s a gut punch to know that all the answers to my questions about this woman are sitting in Zora’s palm. Answers Nyssa refuses to provide.

“I can see you warring with yourself over whether you should take it. Afraid to be intrusive?”

I snort as I reach out for the crystal. “If you think I’ve got a conscience over poking into her life, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“The question is,” Zora drawls, “do you really want the answers?”

I examine the crystal, turning it over in my hand. “You must think I do or else you wouldn’t have bothered to bring this to me.”

“Maybe it was a peace offering,” she suggests.

“Or bribery?” My eyes move from the crystal to her multihued eyes. “I’m not helping Maddox.”

“Even if I opened your prison doors and said you could leave the Underworld?”

Damn her for dangling such a sweet carrot.

But I’m a principled evil Dark Fae. “No, not even then.”

Zora nods once, a graceful acceptance of my refusal. “Be well, then, old friend.”

That twinges a little. Her declaration that I’m her friend. Maybe she truly does forgive what I’ve done.

I hold up the crystal. “Thanks for this.”

“All you have to do is open your mind and it will show you all. Use the information wisely.”

She disappears before I have the opportunity to assure her I will.

Staring down the crystal, I don’t have a moment’s hesitation about peeking into Nyssa’s life. I wrap my hand firmly around it and open my mind as Zora ordered. The crystal glows bright, and the information comes in powerful torrents. Not just flashes of a story but deep understanding of the meaning behind what I’m shown. It takes no more than a few seconds to receive the memories, but when the crystal goes dark, I know every intimate detail of Nyssa’s life from her point of view.

And I wish I didn’t.

“I wouldn’t think it possible, but you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Nyssa walks into my suite, and I’ve gotten used to the way my body tightens when I see her.

She’s beautiful, of course, but it’s the fact that she’s got flour smudged across her forehead to which she’s completely oblivious that makes her so appealing.

She’s just so... anti-Underworld.

Nyssa brings a freshness to an otherwise stale and mundane life.

Even though she’s had a hard day of labor in the kitchen, she’s got a smile on her face. When I don’t smile back, she asks, “What’s wrong?”

I shake off the memories I just watched in the crystal and attempt a smile. “Nothing’s wrong.” Then I redirect. “In fact, Calix went to get you more items from the First Dimension.”

Nyssa follows me into the bedroom, and I nod toward the bed. When she

turns that way, I drop the crystal in the top drawer of my dresser and watch as she paws through the clothes. She holds up the same black bra I had been checking out and cocks an eyebrow.

“I’d be very pleased if you wore that so I can take it off you,” I say.

Nyssa flushes and drops the bra, then utters a squeal of excitement. “Books,” she exclaims, picking them up one at a time and reading each title.

I move beside her. “Were you a big reader?”

She shakes her head. “Not in recent years, but I used to enjoy it.”

I know every bit of that to be true based on what I saw in the crystal. “I’ll get more for you when you finish those.”

“Thank you,” she says, and then shocks me by throwing her arms around my waist to hug me.

It must shock her, too, because before I can react, she scrambles back. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to—”

I jerk Nyssa close into me again, forcing her arms around my waist. “You can touch me any time. You don’t have to ask permission.”

Her head falls back as she looks at me. “Thank you for the clothes and the books. That was very nice of you.”

“And chocolate,” I say, turning her to face the bed again.

Nyssa groans, and though it’s for the chocolate, I’ve elicited that sound from her before, and it hits me right between the legs.

She picks up a candy bar from the pile of various wrapped chocolates and studies it. “I’m going to do so many dirty things to you after I’ve had my bath.”

If the woman thinks she can say things like that without it affecting me, she needs to pay more attention to the king of the Underworld.

I step in behind her and pull her body against mine so she can feel my hardness. Leaning to the side, I nip at her ear. “I’m not about to wait for your bath to do those dirty things.”

Laughing, she spins in my arms to face me, her hands going to the laces of my pants. “Fine. I can totally do dirty things to you now.”

## CHAPTER 14

### A

THIS IS BY far the best job I've had since I've been back in Rhynda's kitchens these last few weeks, but I don't dare tell her that, or she'll never let me do it again. I got paired with Will at one of the long tables to peel root vegetables.

I've settled into somewhat of a routine, and while I have no clue if it will be my permanent existence, for now, it's more than one could hope for in Hell.

I've been in Amell's bed each night, but he's always gone by the time I wake in the morning. I take a quick bath and head straight to the kitchens where I gobble down whatever food Rhynda offers and get straight to work.

I break for lunch—only to eat—and when the king's dinner is ready, I take it to his room. Amell is always there waiting. Sometimes he's hungry for food, and other times, he's hungry for me.

Regardless of the order of life in the Underworld, we always eat the evening meal together, and Amell will often share tidbits about his day. He spends a lot of time talking to nobles to ensure things are being run to his satisfaction. He walks the streets of Otaxis and other cities to make sure matters are orderly. Lawlessness permeates the city since there are no real laws to abide by. Disputes are handled by brute strength, but in the case of impasse, Amell rules over those.

And he sits on the Bridge of Judgment and sends souls to their doom.

Amell also pokes at me, trying to learn about my life, but I only give away mundane details, adept at redirecting if he gets too personal. Somehow, I feel deep in my gut I only have the king's favor because I'm a bit of a mystery to him. If he ever discovered the true me, he'd see me as no different from any other wicked soul that comes his way. He never believes me when I tell him I'm not redeemable, and he's only interested in my life to try to disprove me.

I pick up another veggie from a large basket on the floor and set it on the table. Will is an expert at peeling these things, but I find them cumbersome.

They're unlike any vegetable I've seen in the First Dimension. About the size of a basketball, they're dark gray to black with hard, wart-like knobs all over. It takes a large, sharp knife to cut the thick outer peel off, but inside it looks and smells like a potato.

While the work is hard and the pads of my fingers are shriveled from the wetness under the peel, I get to talk to Will whenever Rhynda isn't around.

"... and she's pretty nice, for a Dark Fae," Will continues, talking about a friendship he struck up upon his arrival in the Underworld.

"Like is it a romantic thing?" I ask in a low voice, glancing at Rhynda yelling at someone near the ovens.

"God, no," Will exclaims.

"A sexual thing, then?" I prod.

"No." He sounds just as offended. "We're friends, and that's all. Besides, I can't have any type of relationship down here."

"Why not?" I saw my knife blade over some particularly hard knobs.

"For a million reasons, but a few stick out. One, she's immortal and I'm not. Two, she could kill me with not much effort. Three, she's evil."

"But she's nice," I remind him.

"Yeah... for a Dark Fae."

I laugh, finding the entire situation amusing. I then find it amusing that I find *anything* amusing in the depths of Hell.

"Most of all," Will says, his tone turning sad, "I'm mortal, and everyone else here is immortal. I'll be dead in a blink of their eyes."

My skin prickles at the thought. Yes, I know Will is here as a sacrifice, but he wasn't killed. Merely sent to the Underworld as a gift. He's going to age, and at some point, he won't be useful anymore.

"Can you go back to the First Dimension?" I ask.

"Of course." He glances at me before going back to his peeling. "But chances of finding a way to escape through the veil are nil."

"Maybe I could find a way for us to escape," I muse.

Will's hands still and he turns to me. "You can't escape, Nyssa. You're dead. If you go back through the veil into the First Dimension, you're nothing more than a spirit. You only have a body here by the king's good graces."

"Oh," I murmur. I knew that, actually. Or, I should have known that. Just because I have a body now and can feel everything doesn't mean it's mine to keep.

Sometimes it's hard to remember that I'm dead, and my life there is over.

“Well,” I say, sawing another hard bump, “I can probably help *you* escape.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Will says hesitantly. “I mean... if we get caught, it’s the Crimson River for us.”

A wave of anger hits me, not because I’m trapped here—I deserve this—but for Will, who did nothing and is stuck here.

It’s not fair.

I lean into the table, trying to saw harder but my knife slips. Luckily, it angles down away from my hand and lodges in the wooden top, but the round vegetable squirts free of my hold. It shoots across the table, dropping over the edge and rolling down the length of the kitchen where it stops at Rhynda’s boot.

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath as her head whips our way. She focuses in on the fact I’ve got no vegetable before me and my knife is lodged in the wood.

She bends over, picks up the vegetable, and walks toward us. I cringe inwardly. I don’t know how this is going to go.

Rhynda sets the vegetable in front of me, then clasps her hands behind her back. “It helps if you lay a thick towel under it for stability.”

My jaw sags and I stare at her in disbelief that I’m not getting a tongue-lashing.

I dip my head. “Noted. Thank you.”

To my shock, Rhynda bows reverently. When she straightens, her eyes move to something behind me. “Your Highness.”

I spin around to find Amell standing there. He’s imposing due to his height and those massive wings. But after all the time we’ve spent alone in his bed, he doesn’t inspire fear in me anymore.

“Were you standing there the whole time?” I ask him.

His lips twitch. “Only appeared as Rhynda was walking toward you.”

Relief surges through me that he didn’t hear my conversation with Will about escaping. Such thoughts could land me in the river. “What are you doing here?” I ask.

“I’m going on a trip, and I thought you’d like to come along.”

I can’t help the excitement. “Yes, I want to go. Now?” I turn to face Rhynda. “Is it okay if I leave early?”

Rhynda looks bewildered I’m asking her permission. She stammers, “Per the king, you’re free to come and go as you please.”

Pivoting back to Amell, I reach out and take his hands in mine—a move that causes Rhynda to gasp behind me and has Will backing away warily. “I can’t wait. Can we go now?”

Something flashes in Amell’s eyes. Not quite lust. Not quite amusement. But something that tells me he likes my exuberance very much. He leans in, bending low to put his mouth near my ear. “Watch yourself, Nyssa. I’m trying very hard not to take you back to my room.”

It’s a threat that would be wasted because if that were truly an option, I’d vote for that rather than a trip, and I’m sure he would too. But I pull away to put space between us.

Amell chuckles and advises, “We’ll bend distance to get there.”

He holds out a hand, and I start to reach for him but then change my mind. I turn to Will, grab his arm, and haul him toward me. My gaze goes back to Amell. “This is my friend, Will. He’s human.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Amell says dryly, his eyes on Will. “But I’d advise you not to touch, Nyssa.”

Will jerks away from me, taking a few steps back as he stammers, “My apologies, Your Highness.”

I glare at Amell. “That’s not nice.”

“I’m the king. I don’t have to be nice,” he says just before lunging to grab my hand.

Then things go dark, and I’m spinning out of control, only to suddenly straighten up when it brightens again.

I’m standing before a large stone mansion. The midnight sky is above, laden with stars and a possible sunrise on the horizon that will never actually come. I glance around and see we’re on a butte above a valley of sorts. It looks like a functioning town below with roads and buildings, and farther out what might be farms with planted crops. The hills are rocky and other than the green of vegetables poking from the fields, it lacks any type of life.

“Where are we?” I ask Amell, his hand still clutching mine.

“Calashte. It’s the farthest city from Otaxis, and the regions beyond it are completely barren.”

“Uninhabitable?”

Amell shakes his head. “Quite habitable, but by abominations that have been banished from the cities.”

“Abominations?”

“Dark Fae offspring and souls twisted by magic. Kymaris loved meddling



with the natural evolution of our kind. Most have been cleaned up from the cities, but there are still those who live on the fringes.”

“And you let them live?”

“As long as they behave,” he says, his eyes glittering with death should they step out of line.

A tiny tremor works its way up my spine. God help me, but it’s attractive how powerful he is and that I’m flirting with serious danger all the time.

Amell turns and knocks on the stone mansion’s thick wooden front door. It’s so weird to me that there are things here in the Underworld as normal as houses that people—or rather, Dark Fae—live in and that knocking out of politeness is normal.

The door swings open and Truett stands before us. He’s Amell’s closest friend and offered him advice after that council meeting.

The two fae clasp each other at the forearms before Truett turns to me and inclines his head. “Welcome, Nyssa.”

“Thank you,” I reply, feeling very out of place.

Truett leads us through what I assume is his home. The floors are well-worn wood and the walls the same stone material as the outside. The furniture is heavy and rustic, complemented with woven rugs and tapestries in rich colors, including burgundy and forest green. It’s the complete opposite of Amell’s shiny black castle.

The place is huge, and other fae mill about, just like in the castle. They all look like Truett, with their bluish skin and platinum hair, and exquisitely beautiful faces and bodies.

We enter what looks to be a sitting room with a huge hearth that has a merry fire crackling within. A couch faces the fire with two chairs flanking it. Amell and Truett both take the chairs, so I sit at the end of the couch closest to Amell’s seat.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Truett says, and I wonder how he sent notice to Amell. They don’t have cell phones, and I’ve seen no signs of telepathy. He must have sent someone by bending distance.

“I assume there’s a very specific reason you wanted me to come here versus you coming to Otaxis.”

“Fewer ears around.” Truett’s gaze comes to me, and he pointedly asks his friend, “Can you trust her?”

Amell’s gaze cuts to me, shrewd and unyielding. “I trust she would like to stay out of the Crimson River, so it’s fine to talk in front of her.”

I find this funny, because Amell knows very well how little I care about the Crimson River. Which means he must trust me, and that right there softens me a little more toward the big guy.

“There have been raiding parties on the outlanders. Mostly killing livestock, but one fae daughter was raped and murdered. She belonged to Mertuk.”

I gasp, my hand covering my mouth. Neither fae look at me.

“Has justice been meted?” Amell asks.

Truett’s jaw ticks as he shakes his head. “They’re robed and masked. Mertuk was bound with iron chains and couldn’t help his daughter. He was forced to watch, but he couldn’t get any details to help identify them.”

I hear a low rumble from Amell’s way as fury etches his face. I thought it might be coming from his chest, but the house shakes.

“Ease up, friend,” Truett growls. “Before you tear my house down.”

My fingers grip into the seat cushion, but the shaking stops. Amell rises from his chair and I move to stand, but he spares me a glance and says, “Stay.”

Butt back on the couch, I clasp my hands in my lap.

“Watch her,” Amell says to Truett without looking my way. “I’ll be back soon.”

And then... he disappears, having bent distance somewhere that isn’t here.

“Where did he go?” I exclaim.

“To see Mertuk. To offer condolences. To investigate on his own to see if he can figure out who it was.” Truett settles back into his chair, his long legs stretched out. He wears dark denim-like pants similar to Amell’s and no shirt. His body is as muscled as his king’s, but he’s not as tall. “So... you’re an interesting creature, aren’t you?”

“I suppose,” I reply awkwardly.

“I never thought Amell would be interested in a human after Zora.”

“Amell... cared for her?”

“It was a complicated relationship,” Truett says.

“Complicated? How?” I lean forward on the couch, angling toward him, eager to learn about this human turned god who had the king of the Underworld’s affection.

“The type of complicated that Amell should tell you about. Ask him.”

Not sure I have the guts to ask him such a personal question. “And you

and Amell have been friends for a long time?”

“Amell?” he says with a husky laugh. “You call him by his first name?”

“Should I not?” I ask, my heart beating a little faster.

Truett shrugs with a smirk, popping a dimple out of his perfect face. “If you’ve called him by his name and he hasn’t killed you, I suppose it’s fine.”

I remember every bit of Will’s warning that all fae are dangerous and death could be a natural byproduct of interacting with one, but it pisses me off that this asshole is trying to make me uncomfortable about my relationship with Amell.

“Are you purposely trying to scare me?” I ask.

Truett blinks in surprise. “No. Of course not. I’m genuinely curious about you.”

I sense that’s the truth, so it settles me. “I saw you and a female in the castle when I first came. Are you married?”

Truett chuckles and shakes his head. “Marriage isn’t a custom we observe here in the Underworld. The woman you saw is my sister, Sorcha. She was asking about you.”

“I’m quite the oddity,” I mutter.

“Only because you’ve garnered Amell’s interest. It’s made Sorcha a little mad with jealousy. I was making sure she understood Amell’s penalty if she harmed you.”

My blood turns to ice. “Would she harm me?”

Another casual shrug. “I doubt Sorcha is jealous enough to risk the Crimson River, but she’s also hotheaded.”

“But why is she jealous?” I ask, then it dawns on me. “Were she and Amell... um...”

“Fucking?” he supplies, and I nod. “Yes, but they weren’t committed. Monogamy isn’t generally practiced here in the Underworld. All fae females want the highest favor of the king, so yeah... she’s jealous you have all his attention.”

Well, that’s very interesting. Amell doesn’t do monogamy, and he’s screwing other fae. Or at least Truett’s sister. He also cared for another human who was in the Underworld. Perhaps we’re a fetish for him?

I want to press Truett for more, but I’m afraid it will depress me. While I know I could never hope to be anything more than an interesting diversion for Amell, it does hurt to know I’m not all that special.

Not that I’d ever complain. I’m well aware I don’t deserve more than

what I have, and I'm lucky to have it.

I change the subject. "You said Sorcha was your sister. Do you share parents?"

"Yes. Our parents were original fallen angels turned Dark Fae."

"Hmm," I murmur, looking around the room. I'm sort of tapped out on conversation. I could ask more about his family—where are his parents, how long has his sister been having sex with Amell...

Eons, I'd imagine, which, how can you be intimate with someone that long and not have feelings?

Maybe he's bored and I'm just something to break the monotony?

Or maybe I'm not sexy enough, and it's becoming apparent when he compares me to Sorcha or any of the other Dark Fae he's been with?

"You look pained." Truett's observation turns my head his way.

"No," I reply with a faint smile. "Just wondering how long Amell will be gone."

"You're wondering where you stand on the totem pole with Amell," Truett says, scoring a direct hit.

Amell may be the king of the Underworld, but I'm the queen of letting things bounce off me. My outer shell can't be penetrated. "I know exactly where I stand, and I truly don't care what Amell does and with whom he does it. If he chooses to throw me in the Crimson River, so be it."

"That's good to know," Amell says from behind me, and I whip around on the couch to see him standing there with a grave look on his face. His attention goes to Truett. "Keep me updated and call on me immediately if there's more unrest."

Truett stands, inclines his head.

"Let's go." Amell holds out his hand. I can't tell if he's mad for what he heard me say or if he's distressed over what happened to Mertuk's daughter.

Without any clear understanding of what may happen, I have no choice but to step around the couch and take Amell's hand.

I look back to Truett, and he offers me a smile that looks genuine. "Good luck, human."

Then it doesn't look genuine anymore, but somewhat mischievous.

Amell starts to bend distance, things spin and darken, but before we blink out of Truett's home, I catch him winking at me, and I have no idea what it means.

## CHAPTER 15

### MELL

WE STEP INTO the living area of my suite, and with a skillful use of magic, I make sure both Nyssa and I are naked upon arrival.

“Where are my clothes?” she gasps.

“They’re not needed,” I say as I jerk her into me. My mouth crashes onto hers, and I take one of her hands and force it onto my cock.

She reflexively squeezes, and her touch is so electric, I can’t hold back the groan.

Fuck, I need this.

I’m still raging inside about Mertuk’s daughter, and deep in my gut, I know either Ariman or Jago is behind these attacks. Mertuk had no useful information for me, so I have no way to protect my people.

And yes, for as much as I hate this job, these are all still my people, every one of them either original fallen or spawned from the fallen, so they are mine to protect.

Nyssa’s tongue lashes against mine, and when my hand goes between her legs, I find her soaked for me. Ten seconds of foreplay and she’s ready, and it cools some of my anger.

But not enough to slow it down or be gentle.

“Tell me to stop if this is too much.” It’s the only warning she gets before I push her onto the white fur rug in the middle of a sitting arrangement and bend her over a chaise lounge.

My body has come to know her well and yet it feels better each time I press my length into her from behind. I grunt at the tightness and smile wickedly at her cry that’s probably mostly pleasure, but there could be a pinch of pain as I didn’t take my time with her.

I hold still to give her a chance to say stop, but she pushes her ass back against me, and it’s all the permission I need.

I fuck Nyssa hard, using her soft, pliant body to quell my rage with pleasure. Her tiny moans and breathy pleas for more turn anger into lust.

My wings flare outward as I wrap both my arms around her stomach and pull her upward, my hips still driving hard against her. Fingers find her clit, and I barely touch her before she's exploding into an orgasm that I feel rippling all around me.

I thrust hard, driving madly into her as I let her fall forward onto the chaise again. My hands at her hips, I pump and pump and pump until I'm coming so hard, the castle starts to shake.

Nyssa gasps and cranes her neck to look back at me. I'm still rocking into her, my orgasm going on and on. "Look at you, little human," I say through gritted teeth with my eyes locked on hers. "Causing me to set off an earthquake that I bet was felt well into the First Dimension."

Her eyes go round with awe, and her face flushes. "Really?"

"Yeah," I grunt, slamming into her one last time and holding still. I close my eyes and try to pull my power back in. The rumbling and shaking stops, and my wings fold tight against my back.

I again wrap my arms around Nyssa and let us fall down to the plush rug where we lie on our backs staring up at the glossy arched ceiling of smooth obsidian.

"Are you okay?" I ask, surprised I actually care. But I do. I don't want to hurt her, and I can be rough.

"All good," she says, and my head rolls to look her way. She wears a dreamy smile as she stares upward, and fuck... it makes me smile. "Do you feel better?"

"I feel calmer," I admit.

Nyssa's eyes move from the ceiling to me. "Will you be able to prevent this from happening again?"

"I'll send some guards to patrol, but Calashte is expansive, and it will be hard to monitor all of it."

"What happens to the girl who died? Does her soul go into the river automatically?"

"Deep questions," I say, going up on one elbow to look down at her.

"If you don't want to answer." She shrugs, as if it's not a big deal.

But I like talking to her.

"I don't mind answering your curiosities. It's dinnertime, though, so let's eat while we talk."

With some creative bending of distance and a magical flourish, I'm able to grab food from the kitchen, wrap Nyssa in a robe, and seat her at the

dining table in my suite. She looks absolutely wrecked—probably a bit from the way I just moved her about in a whirlwind of power, but I think mostly from the force of our orgasms.

Hell, mine triggered an earthquake.

“Eat,” I say, gesturing to the food. Some sort of meat and vegetable pie Rhynda created. “You wanted to know what happens to Dark Fae when we die?”

Nyssa picks at the crust and nibbles on it. “And... well, how can you die? I thought you’re immortal.”

“It’s incredibly difficult to kill us, but a strike of iron to the heart or brain will do the job efficiently.” I can’t believe I just told her that... the one way guaranteed to kill me, and Nyssa being a murderess. “As for what happens when a fae dies, it depends on who’s in power. When Kymaris ruled, she sent all souls directly to the river or twisted them into demons for her personal use. I choose to pass judgment case by case.”

“You reincarnate Dark Fae souls?” she asks, surprise on her face.

“No, our banishment from Heaven into the Underworld was meant to be eternal. Reincarnation is not a luxury afforded to the Dark or Light Fae. But I can choose to spare a soul and not send it into the Crimson River.”

“Where does the soul go, then?”

“I unmake it. And that’s what I did for Mertuk’s daughter.”

“Unmake it?”

“Her soul is simply no more.”

Nyssa’s face screws up slightly as if the idea is distasteful, but then she says, “That sounds awful, but it must have been a great comfort to him.”

“I’d like to think so.”

Silence ensues while we eat, but I can tell the questions are not done. She’s prioritizing.

“Did Mertuk love his daughter?”

I frown at her, trading my fork for my wine goblet. “Of course.”

“So, fae can love?”

“Yes, fae can love. Why would you think we can’t?”

Nyssa shakes her head and becomes engrossed in her pie. “Never mind.”

I reach out and grab her hand that has her fork lifted halfway to her mouth. “Why would you think that?” I repeat, and my tone lets her know I expect an answer.

Sighing, Nyssa tugs free and drops her fork to her plate. “It’s just

something Truett said. He said you don't have marriage here and you aren't monogamous. I assumed it was because everyone is evil and thus there's no capacity to love."

"Interesting," I muse, although it's a logical conclusion.

"How come you rule differently from Kymaris?" She looks me right in the eye, and I blink in surprise. She's like a journalist peppering a politician with all the hard questions.

I think about it a moment, take another sip of my wine. "I guess I'm just not as hard-hearted as she was."

Nyssa's gaze drops to her plate. "Truett said when Zora was a human, you cared for her." I grit my teeth and make a mental note to knock Truett's teeth out of his blabbing mouth. Eyes still downcast, she adds, "He said it was a complicated relationship. But if you don't have monogamy, how were you even in a relationship?"

I don't answer, waiting for her to find the courage to look at me first. As the seconds tick by and the silence grows heavier, Nyssa finally forces her gaze up to meet mine.

"It was complicated because Zora was a prisoner, and it was my job to watch over her while she was here. Kymaris was using her as a conduit to store immense dark magic for a spell she would later use to tear down the veil between our worlds. It was also part of my job to make Zora submit to the infusions of dark magic, which were most unpleasant."

Nyssa's expression tightens. "How long was she here?"

"Twenty-eight years... since the day she was born," I reply, hating how Nyssa pales at that revelation. Might as well feed it all to her. "She was raised by a Dark Fae couple, and not well. They weren't good to her. I protected her as much as I could and helped her move out when she was able to survive on her own."

"You cared for her a great deal." Nyssa's conclusion is not wrong. "Even though you were her jailer, so to speak."

"Of course, I cared for her. When she got older, we..."

My words dry up, and I don't know why it's so hard to talk about being intimate with another woman.

"You had sex," Nyssa supplies, which isn't the full truth. Zora offered me her virginity, and I gladly took it and kept taking for myself after. "But Truett said you've had sex with his sister, too, and that, well... probably a zillion others over your long life."



“Are you jealous?” I ask with one eyebrow cocked.

“No,” she asserts far too strongly. “I’m well aware that I’m a diversion. Something new and interesting. I expect that will wear off soon enough, and I’ll probably end up back in my cell or in the river.”

My heart squeezes, because I know about Nyssa’s life and I know why she would feel that way. She expects nothing but rock bottom for herself.

I know all of this, but I want to hear her say it. So I poke a little. “Why would you think that? Maybe you’re not giving yourself enough credit.”

Nyssa rolls her eyes and pushes her plate away, barely a quarter of her food eaten. “Lay off, Dr. Phil. My life isn’t available for shrinking.”

“I have no clue what that means.”

She expertly changes the subject. “How did Zora become a god?”

“I let her leave the Underworld when her twin sister came looking for her. She played a part in a prophecy that resulted in Kymaris’s death. Zora sacrificed herself for the world and died. The gods decided—”

“Gods? As in, there are more than Zora and the same God that kicked you out of Heaven?”

“There are more, yes. Circe, the god of Fate. Cato, the god of Nature. Onyx, the god of Conflict. And Veda, the god of Humanity. At any rate, the former god of Life, Rune, was stripped of his powers for meddling in the prophecy, and Zora was brought back as a god.”

It’s an impressive story summed up in only a few words, and I expect Nyssa to ask for deeper explanations about the prophecy, but instead she asks, “Do you miss Zora?”

“No.” It’s the truth. There was a time when I did, but that gave way to contentment for her new happiness. She was a mere blip in time during my immortal life.

Nyssa stares at me before blurting, “I need a favor.”

I blink at the rapid about-face, my lips curling in amusement, for I think that was very well calculated. “Do tell.”

“You said Zora was able to leave and go back to the First Dimension. I want you to release my friend, Will, who you met today.”

Huh. I didn’t expect that. I search my memory as I have no clue who she’s talking about, but then I remember the human in the kitchens earlier. No clue why he’s even in the Underworld as he fell under Kymaris’s rule.

“He was a human sacrifice,” Nyssa says, her tone brittle with anger. “An innocent guy who didn’t deserve to be sent here.”

I scoff, waving my hand. “No one who ends up down here is innocent.”

“He is,” she says, her hands tightening into fists on the table. “His girlfriend performed a ritual and traded him for something. He had no clue that any of this even existed. He’s a nice guy. He should go home to his family.”

Another squeeze of that blackened organ in my chest. I know Nyssa would never ask to go home to her family. I expect conditions here are much better than she ever had above.

“What will you give me in return?” I ask, curious as to just how strongly she feels about this man’s freedom.

“Anything,” she says without hesitation.

“A blow job?” I ask curiously.

Nyssa rolls her eyes. “That’s not a hardship.”

“I don’t know,” I reply darkly, my body tightening at the prospect. “You’ve not had me fuck your face yet.”

She swallows hard, and the thought of her swallowing is very appealing indeed. “Okay... a blow job it is. Let’s do this.”

I wave my hand. “I don’t want that.”

She huffs with exasperation.

“Well, I do want that,” I admit with a grin. “And I will have it soon, and you’ll enjoy it, but I want something else.”

“What?” she asks suspiciously. Gone is the confidence to offer up anything in return for her friend’s freedom.

“I want an honest truth about your life. You’re hiding every bit of it from me, and I want you to give me one honest piece of information about you. And it has to be something you’d rather me not know. You seem to think you deserve the worst for killing a man, but I don’t see it that way.”

Nyssa’s skin leeches of color, and her head bows as she sucks in a quavering breath. I almost retract my words because I can see even thinking about such a request causes her pain.

But I don’t.

I think she needs to talk about these things.

Finally, she lifts her head and I hate the dead look in her eyes. “Fine.”

My heart slams inside my chest at the prospect of her sharing herself with me.

Voice devoid of emotion and her gaze unfocused, she says, “I was a prostitute. I turned tricks to buy drugs and alcohol.”

I don't say anything. Her revelation isn't meant to encourage discourse. Nyssa's eyes focus and home in on mine. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Is it an honest truth about yourself?" I ask, although I already know it is. I know everything about her.

"Yes."

"Then I'm satisfied. I'll release Will back to the First Dimension."

"Really?" she asks, life back in her eyes and face flushed with excitement. "You'd do that?"

"A deal's a deal," I assure her.

I'm about to ask if she wants to go release the human now, but she flies from her chair and barrels into me. I don't know how to handle it when she flings her arms around my neck and squeezes me in a hug so tight, I can barely breathe.

Then she crushes her mouth on mine for a scorching kiss that makes me ache to be inside her again. I lift and carry her into my bedroom.

The human's release can wait.

## CHAPTER 16

### A

IT'S WARM AND safe waking in the arms and feathered cocoon of Amell. A twinge of guilt plucks at my conscience that we never left the bed after he carried me here last night. We never got around to releasing Will, but it's the first thing on my mind as soon as I awaken.

I let it take a back seat, though, as I decide to let myself have this experience of being held by a man.

No, not a man. He's a Dark Fae. The overlord of Hell. Powerful, and per his claim on numerous occasions, evil.

Amell just doesn't feel evil to me, though. I'm sure he must have done horrid things over his long life. A rebellion against God is pretty bad. I know he was faithful to Kymaris when she ruled, and I've learned enough about her to know she was evil through and through.

He kept Zora prisoner and forced her to submit to what would probably be considered torture.

All very, very bad things, and yet... I'm not afraid of him.

I like him.

And he makes me feel safe, for the first time in my existence. Outside of him almost throwing me in the Crimson River that one occasion, he's shown me kindnesses that don't mesh with how the ruler of Hell should behave. He made my cell comfortable, stopped Rhynda from beating me, and in bed, he's an attentive lover who is as interested in my pleasure as his own.

Let's face it... Amell could have raped me if he wanted. He could let every Dark Fae have their way with me.

It's the fucking Underworld.

But he's been protective.

Most of all—and the thing that's probably endeared him to me, even though it came at great discomfort—was his insistence to hear a personal truth. He could have taken carnal pleasure in exchange for Will's release, but he instead negotiated that I reveal myself to him.

He wants to know me, and simply put... it's touching.

Honestly, I felt sick revealing to him some of the vile things I did outside of murdering Vince in cold blood. I've sold my body more times than I can count. I bought drugs with the money. Sometimes, I just paid for a hotel room to have a warm place to stay for a night and a shower. If I was lucky, I had enough for food, but that was a luxury. The drugs were to numb me to the harsh nights sleeping on the streets and the even nastier things that happened to me because I couldn't protect myself.

All of it is an immense embarrassment. I was not a good person in my mortal life.

But I'm in a place that doesn't hold angels in high esteem. Good people are in another place. Hell was built for people like me.

The Crimson River was specifically designed to punish people like me.

It's what I deserve, but it's not what I want anymore. Unfortunately, I want Amell.

It's a pipe dream, for sure. I have his attention for now, but nothing good ever lasts. Whether it was a numbing hit of heroin or a warm bed for the night, it always ended.

Nothing endures for me.

"You know how I can tell you're awake?" Amell asks, his voice lazy with a hint of amusement.

*Busted.*

"How?" I whisper, feeling his arm tighten around my stomach.

"Because you actually relax when you sleep. But when you're awake, your body tenses, as if waiting for something bad to happen. It's subtle, but I can feel it."

Amell is spooning me, and I restrain myself from burrowing backward into him.

"What has you all up in your head this morning?" he asks.

"I am wondering when something bad will happen."

Amell pushes me to my back, moving his big body over mine. I itch to stroke the feathers on his arches that halo his head. "Were you always this negative when you were alive?"

"I was pragmatic."

"Hmm," he murmurs, his blue eyes sparkling like cut gems. "I'm surprised you didn't jump right out of bed and insist we go free your friend."

"It was first thing on my mind, but truth be told... it's nice lying here

with you.”

The rumble from Amell’s chest sounds like laughter. “The little human is growing fond of her captor.”

“Not in the slightest,” I retort.

Amell laughs again and slides a hand down my thigh. “Little liar. Want me to make you show me how fond you are?”

My breath hitches as he pushes my legs apart. Yes, I think I’ll let him prove it to me.

There’s a knock on the main door of Amell’s suite. “Your Highness,” Calix calls out, loudly enough we can hear him here in the bedroom.

Amell sighs, pulling his hand away. He rolls from me, removing the soft cover of his wings, but he pulls the sheets up over us. “You may enter.”

Calix enters with his head bowed, eyes pinned to the floor. “Your Highness... you have a visitor.”

“Important enough to disturb me?”

The growl in Amell’s voice has Calix’s head snapping upward with fearful eyes. “I believe so, Your Unparalleled Exaltedness.”

I stifle a giggle as Amell’s lips flatten. “Who would that be?”

“Your daughter. Thalia is here to see you, along with her husband and uncle.”

Amell bolts out of the bed but not before I see the pure elation on his face. I’ve never seen him look so happy, and it sparks joy inside me. Part of me has always felt a little sorry that Amell has such an immensely important job with little reward.

It seems lonely.

Calix averts his eyes again, given that Amell is gloriously naked with his wings spread, feathers rustling and settling, rustling and settling.

That’s his tell for when he’s happy.

“Please show them to the receiving room,” Amell instructs. “I’ll be there imminently.”

Calix nods, bows, and backs out of the bedroom. We hear the door to the suite open and close.

Amell strides to his closet and quickly dresses. He starts for the door and halts, turning my way. He’s forgotten about me, and it pinches a little.

It’s clear I’m only an afterthought when he says, “You can head to the kitchens, Nyssa.”

I nod. “Of course.”

I get a brief but distracted smile, and he's gone.

Flopping onto my back, I release a long sigh and take stock of my feelings. I shouldn't be so hurt to be dismissed so easily. I learned long ago to keep my expectations low with other people, and I need to remember to do the same with Amell.

I must learn to accept what I'm given because anything more than the Crimson River is a gift.

And I need to be satisfied that Amell has agreed to let Will go. It might not happen today or even tomorrow, but I vow I won't let him forget his promise.

I bathe and dress in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt—again, another nice thing Amell did for me. I tie my hair up into a ponytail and head toward the kitchens.

The castle's main hall bustles as normal with Dark Fae. Some stand around talking while others walk to a particular destination. I've learned not to be startled by fae blinking in and out as they bend distance to travel.

I've become confident enough to walk with my head up rather than ducked down, trying to avoid notice. I've been given a wide berth since Amell threw that incubus into the river.

So I'm a bit shocked when I hear a female voice demand, "Human... come here."

I turn, searching the crowd. I'm not the only human who works in the castle, so the command might not be for me.

But then I see her, and I know it's me.

Truett's sister, Sorcha, is twenty feet away, crooking her finger.

She's incredibly beautiful, same as Truett. It doesn't matter that her skin is blue or her hair almost white, she's still stunning. She wears what looks to be camel-colored leather pants with boots, and a coat with long tails. It's unbuttoned, and the shirt under is tight across an ample bosom and cut low to show cleavage. Her platinum hair is plaited away from her face but falls in long waves over her shoulders and down her back.

I glance around, though I'm not sure for what. I have no clue if I have to obey her. I think not, but I don't know if she'd do something if I refuse to go to her.

"Human," she bellows, and several fae stop to watch. "Don't make me come get you."

Anxiety presses hard on my chest and my legs feel heavy as I walk her

way.

Sorcha's eyes roam over me critically, and her upper lip curls in disgust the closer I get.

I stop a few arms' lengths away for safety, although I know with her super strength and speed, she could lunge and snap my neck in a nanosecond.

"So, you're Amell's new plaything," she sneers. "I don't see the appeal."

Something tells me to cower and act subservient, but I do the opposite. "You don't need to see the appeal. You only need to know that Amell sees it."

I stare in wonder as Sorcha's face purples with anger, blood rushing to her cheeks mixing with the blue pigment of her skin. Basic color science.

Her lips peel back and she snarls, "How dare such a lowly human speak so disrespectfully to a noble Dark Fae."

"If I'm so lowly, how come you're so bent out of shape about what I say? I should be beneath your ire."

Sorcha moves so fast, she's a blur, but in the blink of an eye, she's toe to toe with me, her hand wrapped around my throat. She squeezes, not hard enough to snap my spine but with enough force I can't breathe.

At all.

I kick and flail, the lack of oxygen freaking me out, even though it's only been a few seconds.

"Let her go." A blue hand clamps around Sorcha's forearm and grips so hard, she's forced to release me.

It's so sudden, I stumble and fall to my ass. I scramble backward and look up to see Truett holding Sorcha's arm as she tries to jerk away from him.

"Get off me, Truett," she snarls, launching a roundhouse punch with her free arm that lands on his jaw.

His head barely rocks, and he ensnares her free hand. "Are you fucking crazy?" he hisses. "Do you know what the penalty is for touching her?"

Sorcha turns hateful eyes toward me. "She's not even worthy to grace these halls. Let me take her to the river right now and be done with it."

"And Amell will be tossing you in right behind her," Truett growls.

"He'd never," she says. She sounds so confident, I believe her.

Truett looks at me, easily holding his sister as she struggles to break his hold. "Go on. Get out of here."

He doesn't need to tell me twice. I push up off the floor and sprint toward the kitchens, glancing only once over my shoulder to see the siblings in a



heated argument.

I nearly knock into Rhynda when running in, and she glares at me while nodding at one of the stoves where a large pot sits. “There’s hot porridge. Get yourself something to eat, then I want you polishing silver today.”

I withhold a groan of disappointment, because that’s a never-ending, sucky job. I don’t know where all the silver plates, goblets, and utensils come from, but there’s a fortune’s worth down here, and it’s always tarnished. Maybe it’s the air of Hell itself that blackens it.

I make my way to the stove and scoop a bowl of the porridge. It’s not bad, just tasteless, but I’m honestly not hungry. This morning has been the worst I’ve had here so far. I’m still a little sad about Amell’s indifferent dismissal, but I’m terrified Sorcha might slip behind me and bend distance to the river so she can chuck me in.

“Good morning,” Will says as he walks by, carrying a huge bowl of what looks to be sugar peas, I’m guessing an import from the First Dimension. “I’m shelling today. What are you doing?”

“Polishing silver,” I mutter, and his eyes warm with sympathy.

“Do it on that table over there and we can talk,” he says.

I nod in agreement and finish my breakfast. I then go to the large pantry that holds all types of serving ware and grab dingy wine goblets from a shelf. These have intricate scrolls and etchings, and I’ll have to get inside the little nooks and crannies. I also nab some rags and a glass jar of what Rhynda told me was polish. It smells foul, but it does shine up the silver.

Once I’m seated at the table with Will and we’re both solid into our work, I scan for Rhynda.

I don’t see her anywhere, so I kick Will under the table. “I’ve got some amazing news.”

He glances up while his fingers still work at the pods. “What’s that?”

I can barely contain my excitement. “Amell’s agreed to release you back to the First Dimension.”

Will’s head snaps up and his eyes actually glaze over. “Don’t joke around about stuff like that.”

“I’m not joking, Will. I asked him to, and he said he would. His daughter is visiting, but I’m sure after she’s gone, he’ll do it.”

I expected a wide smile, but Will’s expression looks haunted. “And what exactly did you have to give up for my freedom?”

I know what he’s insinuating, and I rush to reassure him. “Nothing I

didn't mind giving up."

Not exactly true. I didn't want to divulge anything about my life, but if it was to buy Will's freedom, I was very happy to give it to Amell.

Will frowns, his hands going still. "I hear you saying you didn't mind, but why do I get the vibe that it was something big? He didn't make you do something... um... gross or painful or—"

I wave my hand at him. "It was nothing like what you're thinking. He simply wanted a truth about me. Something personal. It was no biggie."

Will stares at me a good long while, but then a smile breaks out across his face as if he's just now understanding what I've told him. "You mean... I'm going home?"

"You're going home," I say.

I know Will would like to scream out in joy or dance around the table or throw his arms around me in a hug of thanks, but he's been in servitude long enough to know that would earn him a beating. Instead, tears pool in his eyes. "I can't... I don't even know what to say, Nyssa. I thought I'd die here."

"Well, now you won't." I keep my voice cheery and bright, hoping to dash those tears. "Now... what's the first meal you're going to have when you get back?"

Will closes his eyes a second before pinning them on me, and the tears are gone. "A huge, greasy cheeseburger with lettuce, tomatoes, onions, pickles, ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, and a fried egg on top."

"Oh damn, that sounds good," I say, my mouth watering from the thought of it. The food here is edible, but it's nothing I'll ever crave.

"Nyssa... I'm shaking," Will says, holding out his hands. And sure enough, he's trembling hard. "Am I really going home?"

"Yes, Will. You're really going home."

Rhynda walks through the doorway, giving Will and I the evil eye. I polish hard and Will keeps shelling. We work in quiet until she moves to the other end of the kitchen. The silence is dispelled when Will asks, "Tell me something personal about you, Nyssa. Give me something to take back with me that you don't share with anyone."

My heart twists so hard, it's actually difficult to breathe. I suck in air through my nose and let it out slowly as I look up from the goblet. Will's eyes are on his task, his face stretched in a dopey smile.

I've never had friends before, and Will's only been in my life a few weeks. I won't ever see him again, so I could give him a truth to remember

me by.

And he'd be gone, so I don't have to think about it anymore.

"I have a brother," I say quietly.

"What's his name?" Will asks, eyes still glued to the peas.

"Samuel, but I used to call him Sammy."

"Were you two close?"

I rub hard on a rosette. "I haven't seen him in fourteen years... since he was a baby."

"What?" Will says, his brow furrowing as he looks across the table at me.

"He's my half brother, actually. He was just a baby when our mom died. Both our fathers were deadbeats and out of the picture."

Will's eyes soften. "What happened?"

I focus back on the goblet, but the rest of the story pours out. "We went into foster care. Sammy was a baby and easily adopted out. A twelve-year-old is a lot harder to find a home for."

"You two were separated?"

I nod, a lump in my throat. "I have no clue what happened to him or where he is. But I always like to think he was adopted by wonderful people and his life has been nothing but lollipops and rainbows."

Will puts the bowl aside and hops off his stool. He walks around the table and I panic. "What are you doing? If Rhynda sees you, you'll get beaten."

"I'm leaving this place. One last beating won't matter, and I want to hug you. You look like you need a hug."

I'm stunned when his arms go around me, and it's only the second time I've been hugged in sympathy or love since my mother died. The first was the social worker who held me as I cried when Sammy went away.

This second time by my new friend, after I just told him about Sammy.

I'm stiff at first, but then I melt into it. I never craved physical touch after so many years of only having the bad kind, but Will is a good man, and I let myself have it.

But only for a few seconds, because I don't want him to get beaten. I squeeze him hard and then push him away. "Get back to work before Rhynda sees us."

Will nods, eyes still soft with empathy and gratitude—and a tiny sparkle of happiness for his future.

I push away thoughts of Sammy, of almost getting killed by Sorcha, and that it's true I'm probably just a plaything for Amell like that blue-skinned

witch said, and I let myself be happy for Will.

We work for a good long while, but time really has no relevance here. You work until you're told to stop. You eat when you're told to eat.

Calix is the one who tells me my work is done in the kitchens for the day. He appears at the table and says, "King Amell requests your presence."

My eyes slide to Will, and I shrug when I see the question in his eyes. Maybe Amell's daughter has gone and he wants me to fetch a meal.

Maybe he wants to take me to bed.

Maybe he wants to throw me in the river.

Any one of those are a possibility, but damn if I'm going into that river without him holding up his end of the deal to release Will.

"Let me just put this stuff away," I say as I rise from my stool.

Calix looks positively offended. "You don't keep a king waiting."

"I'll put it away," Will says, and I give him a soft smile.

"See you later," I promise him, and then turn to follow Calix out of the kitchens.

## CHAPTER 17

### MELL

WHILE I KNEW about Thalia from the very moment she was conceived—because I intentionally impregnated her mother—I spent most of her life in the shadows. Her mother graced me with permission to visit their dimension of Vyronas to see her from a distance. It was part of the bargain we struck, and all it required was a little blood sacrifice on her part.

But not all that long ago, Thalia spilled her own blood and called me forth from the Underworld, having just learned I was her sire.

She needed help, and I gave it.

I also got a daughter in truth because the parents who raised her were dead, and she accepted me for what I was.

Zora's edict that I do not leave the Underworld wouldn't bother me at all if it weren't for Thalia. She recently married Bastien, and together they reign over the kingdom of Vyronas. Soon they'll be making little princesses and princes.

Some might think it odd that the darkest of Dark Fae cherishes his family, but just because we got tossed out of Heaven doesn't mean we have no capacity to love. Quite the contrary, fae can feel so deeply, we can rumble the earth.

I gave them the tour of the castle, Thalia exuberantly chatting and asking questions. Bastien wore his usual sour expression, as he does when around me, and Thalia's Uncle Heph looked around with wide eyes.

I showed them the Bridge of Judgment and the Crimson River and even invited them back to watch a judgment day if they wanted, although Thalia wrinkled her nose and Bastien looked offended. Heph was fascinated.

Now we're back in the receiving room, settled onto couches with wine. I sent Calix to get Nyssa as I want her to meet Thalia.

Rather, I want Thalia's take on Nyssa, and there isn't a soul in this universe or across time and dimensions who I trust for an opinion other than my daughter.

“How goes it with sweeping up any remaining Ferelith supporters?” I ask as we wait.

Ferelith was a sorceress who used blood magic to seize control of Thalia’s kingdom. I showed her how to use the shadow magic inside her by virtue of my blood and helped her take back her throne.

And got banished here for my efforts.

I would do it again because Thalia’s life was in danger, and there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her.

“We’re still finding small pockets of people who aren’t necessarily Ferelith supporters,” Thalia says, rubbing her fingertip over her cup of wine, “but they’re trying to keep the art of blood magic alive.”

“We’ve got the army out rounding them up,” Bastien adds.

“Although I’ve been lobbying the idea of perhaps allowing some blood magic to remain,” Heph says. Blood magic was banned in Vyronas, and Heph—brother to the queen and Thalia’s uncle—used it, anyway.

For that matter, so did Queen Selena when she summoned me.

Heph took a life, though, and was banished. But Selena’s act was minor as she only spilled her own blood.

Thalia shoots a hard look at her uncle. “We’re not talking about this again.”

“It would be for added protection to the realm,” Heph says.

“I have the Book of Shadows,” Thalia replies, and I hear frustration in her voice. “It’s all the protection we need.”

I hold my tongue, but I’m with Heph on this. It’s true Thalia has the Book of Shadows. I gave it to her to help defeat Ferelith, and it contains the darkest spells imaginable. But it never hurts to add a little blood to the mix.

“Not up for discussion,” Bastien says, his tone making it obvious he’s tired of this same old conversation.

The door to the receiving room opens, and I crane my neck to see Calix leading Nyssa in. I sense immediately she’s nervous, and she’s wringing her hands. A split second of warmth spreads through my chest at the sight of her beautiful eyes before my gaze is ripped away by the dark bruising on her throat.

I explode out of the chair, thundering so loud the walls shake. “What the hell happened to you?”

Calix scrambles out of the way, and Nyssa freezes statue still as I stride over to her. My hand is gentle despite the fury roiling through me as I lift her

chin to take in the mottled purple marks on the front of her neck, a visible hand imprint.

“It’s nothing,” Nyssa says, jerking her head away.

I take her chin again, this time with a little more force to make her look at me. “I’m not asking. I’m ordering you to tell me who did this to you.”

“Or what?” she says softly. “You going to throw me in the Crimson River if I don’t?”

“It would be a hollow threat since you seemingly don’t care.” My hand falls away, and I look to Calix. “Find out what happened.”

Calix bends distance out of the room, not wasting time with actual running.

I stare down at Nyssa, disappointment heavy that she doesn’t accept that I care for her well-being. She regards me warily as we wait for Calix to return.

A small cough from behind me—fuck... I forgot Thalia was here. I turn toward her and see she’s amused and curious as she nods toward Nyssa.

It says, *Make the damn introduction.*

She just witnessed earthquake-level anger from me over a woman, and she wants to know who she is.

My hands go to Nyssa’s shoulders and I steer her toward Thalia, now standing from her chair, along with Bastien and Heph.

“This is Nyssa, a recently departed soul from the First Dimension who was spared the Crimson River.”

“She’s dead?” Heph asks curiously.

“I guess that’s relative to where you are. She’s alive enough here in the Underworld.”

Thalia, ever kind and polite, steps closer to us. She keeps her hands clasped before her but smiles brightly. “I’m pleased to meet you. I’m Thalia.” She gives me a slight punch to my arm. “This big brute’s daughter.”

I shoot a glare at Thalia, but I don’t miss the slight quirk of Nyssa’s lips. She inclines her head. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

I introduce Bastien and Heph, but before they can extend greetings, Calix pops back into the room, and he looks like he’s ready to vomit. “Your Grand Resplendence, I’ve been able to find out what happened to your... um, well, your...”

“Her name’s Nyssa,” I say blandly.

“Yes, Nyssa,” Calix says and bows. “A million apologies.”

I point to her throat. “Who did that to her?”

Calix's bottom lip trembles. "It was Sorcha."

My eyes shoot to Nyssa, and I'm stunned to see her slowly backing away from me, fear etched on her face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude to her —"

I hold up a hand, cutting her off. Looking at Nyssa but addressing Calix, I grit out, "Get Sorcha and bring her here now."

Calix blinks out of sight.

I move to Nyssa, vaguely aware of Thalia stepping away to give us some privacy. Once again, my hand goes to Nyssa's chin. "I'm not mad at you. Sorcha knew not to touch you."

I note my hand trembles, and it's only because of the rage churning inside me. Nyssa is off-limits to everyone, and the penalty was made clear. Sorcha could have fucking killed her—permanently this time—with her strength. If Nyssa dies here, there's no undoing it.

Potential death aside, it's enough that Sorcha caused her pain.

Calix reappears, out of breath. "She's gone back to Calashte, Your Majesty."

If that witch thinks she can hide from me...

I envision Truett's house where Sorcha resides and pull on every bit of power that Zora imbued within me. I seek Sorcha, home in on her essence, and bend distance. I pull her right to me—sitting at a table with Truett drinking ale.

I don't step through, though, my power rippling all around as I hold the two distances together. Five feet from me as I stand in my own castle is Truett's dining room. He and Sorcha are stunned.

With only my thoughts, I jerk Sorcha from her chair and she flies toward me. My hand wraps around the front of her throat, exactly how I envision she had hers around Nyssa's.

I squeeze hard, and she tears at my hands with her nails. Truett crosses the divide, and I release the distance, letting it snap back into place.

He says nothing, but a quick glance his way and I see him pleading with me not to hurt her.

My voice quakes with fury. "You knew she was not to be touched."

Sorcha's face screws up and hatred blazes from her eyes. "She's a filthy human. Our kind hates humans, and yet you care for her like a little puppy. It's disgusting."

I could rip off Sorcha's head right now and end her life, but that's too



good for her. She'd just be unmade.

"You knew the penalty was the Crimson River," I snarl. "You deserve no less."

I'm prepared to bend distance right to the bridge and hurl her over, but it's Nyssa who lunges at me, her small hands wrapping around my biceps. "Don't. Please don't throw her in."

My eyes drop down to her as I easily hold Sorcha one-handed. "My rule is absolute."

"I'm begging you, Amell. Please don't do it. Give her a pass."

I frown. "She would have killed you."

"Probably, but Truett stopped her." Nyssa looks at my best friend, then back at me. "I'm asking you not to kill her for his sake, not hers."

I'm so stunned, you could knock me over with a feather. She's requesting I show Sorcha mercy? My gaze moves to Truett, and I see the torture on his face. He loves his sister. He loves me. He's loyal to me and my throne, and he knows there are no exceptions to my rules.

He'd never ask me to spare her life.

"Fuck," I mutter, throwing Sorcha away from me. She flies across the room, the only thing stopping her trajectory a wall that shudders upon impact.

Sorcha falls to the ground but immediately gets to her feet, hissing at me in anger.

"Return to Calashte, Sorcha, and do not leave it. You are permanently banished to live the rest of your immortal life there and are not welcome in any other part of the Underworld."

She glares hatefully and bends distance, blinking out of sight. Truett shoots me a wary look of gratitude and follows his sister.

I release a heavy sigh as Nyssa's hands fall away from me. She's pale and shaking, and I want to take her in my arms and comfort her.

But I don't, because that's not something the king of the Underworld should even care about. This, despite the fact I almost killed a Dark Fae brethren because she bruised my little human.

"Return to my suite," I say to Nyssa. "Stay there until I join you."

Nyssa nods, eyes downcast. She pivots to leave, but it's Thalia who scurries past me to take Nyssa by the arm. "If you need anything while you're here, you have Calix send word to me, and I'll come."

My chest squeezes that Thalia would offer such a kindness. She doesn't know Nyssa and shouldn't care about a degenerate soul who's stuck in Hell

for eternity. But she's doing it because it's more than obvious I've got a soft spot for this woman.

She's offering her a bit of normalcy... one human woman to another.

"Thank you," Nyssa says softly and pulls away, walking out the door.

I sigh, shoulders slumping slightly. This has been a shit show of a morning.

"Bastien," Thalia says, turning toward her husband. "I want you and Heph to return to Vyronas."

I blink in surprise at the request. Bastien erupts, and I expect no less. "No way I'm leaving you here alone."

"She's not alone," I say with a smirk. "She has me."

Bastien doesn't even look my way as he knows I'm just poking fun. Thalia moves to him, puts a hand to his face, and says, "I'd like to talk to my father alone, and I won't be long behind you. I promise."

I avert my eyes the minute my son-in-law's face softens. He knows Thalia wants to talk to me about Nyssa, and that implies I'm soft and not the hardcore asshole he wants to make me out to be all the time.

Heph moves to me and we clasp arms. "Sorry we didn't get to share a pint," he says. "Maybe next time."

"You're welcome here whenever," I assure him. I grew fond of the old blood magic practitioner when I was in Vyronas.

Bastien offers me a chin lift, and I tear an opening in the veil between my receiving room and the throne room in Thalia's own castle in the capital city of Clairmont. Bastien and Heph step through, and I close the seam.

Thalia moves back to the chair she'd been sitting in and picks up her wine. She gives the adjacent couch a pointed look, her silent order for me to sit my ass down and spill everything.

"I don't know what you're looking for me to say." I do take a seat, ignoring my own wine.

"Well, obviously, you have feelings for her. And obviously, you wanted to talk to me about it or else you wouldn't have brought her into this room to begin with."

No sense arguing the truth. "Fuck, I wanted to rip off Sorcha's head. And then that frail human who swears she has no heart or redeemable soul begs me to spare her. She's confounding, to say the least."

Thalia's laugh is musical, and I roll my eyes that my daughter finds humor in the king of the Underworld being confused by a dead human.

“Start from the beginning,” she says as she settles into her chair, as if she knows this is going to be a good story.

“She caught my interest when she called me a big old, winged bat just as I was about to throw her into the river,” I say.

Thalia grins. “Oh, I like her already.”

My daughter listens attentively as I tell her everything, including that I’m fucking the human. Although I don’t say it in such crude terms, I don’t sugarcoat it either. It’s enough that she knows Nyssa sleeps in my bed.

“I like her,” Thalia says after I finish. “I mean... I’ve only observed her beg you for mercy for someone who didn’t deserve it. Speaks a lot to her nature and is at odds with the fact she killed someone so brutally.”

“She had a rough life.” I’ll never divulge the details I learned through the crystal Zora gave me. “She definitely doesn’t deserve a one-way ticket to the Crimson River.”

“So reincarnate her,” she says. “You know that’s the right thing to do.”

I don’t respond, rather pick up my goblet and swallow what’s left of my wine.

“Ahh,” she drawls, and I glare at her. “You don’t want to give her up.”

“She’s a great fuck,” I growl, intentionally trying to be crude so Thalia doesn’t pick away at my feelings by using reverse psychology on me.

She takes a delicate sip, waiting for me to say something else that is more conducive to honest communication.

“Fine,” I mutter, slamming the empty goblet on the table and slouching back into the couch. “I want to keep her. I like her. If I reincarnate her, I lose her. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Is it the truth?”

“You know it is,” I say, my eyes locked on hers.

“Then keep her. It’s as simple as that.”

“And what... dress her in finery and let her rule at my side?”

Thalia shakes her head, holding out her arms. “Whoa, that’s above my pay grade. I can’t tell you how far to take this thing you have with Nyssa. You’re going to have to figure that out on your own.”

“Gee, thanks, kiddo,” I drawl sarcastically, yielding a grin from Thalia. “You’re my favorite child.”

“I’m your only child.” She stands and sets her cup on the table. “Now, I’m going to head home while you figure out your stuff. I’ll come back to visit when I can.”

Thalia steps into my arms, and I hug her.

“I love you,” she says, and my body tenses. It’s the first time anyone has said those words to me.

And for the first time in my immortal life, I give them to someone. “I love you too, Daughter.”

## CHAPTER 18

### A

PACING THE LIVING area of Amell's suite, I try to guess what type of mood he'll be in.

So far this morning, I've felt humor and tenderness in bed, only to have him dismiss me without a backward glance, followed by fear over the fury that rolled off him when he saw my bruise, then confusion that he would even care that I was bruised, and...

Well, the last one is just very confounding.

He introduced me to his daughter, and that's the thing I'm struggling to understand most.

The porridge I ate for breakfast sits like a lump in my stomach, and it makes me long for the days when my belly was so empty I'd go dumpster diving without a second thought just for some cold, cast-off french fries.

I'm expecting Amell to pop in at any moment, so when the door to his suite slowly opens, I'm not as startled as I'd wound myself up to be. Amell walks in and looks every bit the king of the Dark Fae. When he dressed this morning, he chose all black, including a fitted leather vest and wrist guards. It's not so much the clothing, though, or the massive wings that set him apart from all other fae. It's his bearing.

Regal, confident, and so powerful, he could crush a mountain of enemies if he wanted.

A slight tremor of fear—or maybe excitement—slips through me.

Without a word, he steps close and presses his fingertips to the bruising at my throat. I haven't looked in the mirror to see the damage Sorcha did, but it's painful when he touches me. I can't help but flinch, and his mouth flattens into a grim line.

"You should have told me it was painful," he chides.

"You didn't give me an opportunity to do much of anything before you banished me to your suite."

"That may be so." He wraps his entire hand around my throat. For a split

second, I think this is the end and he's going to kill me, but then a delicious warmth spreads from his palm to my neck and then courses through my body. It feels like I swallowed liquid sunshine and when his hand pulls away, I know I've been healed.

I touch my throat, and there's no pain. "Thank you."

He doesn't respond but moves to the sideboard that always holds a full wine carafe and pours a goblet. He offers it to me, but I shake my head, so he sips instead.

"Why did you intervene with Sorcha?"

He's asking because he doesn't understand the concept of mercy. He spends his days rendering harsh judgment on those who deserve to be in Hell, and with those he chooses for reincarnation, it isn't so much a mercy as a sendoff on a journey that will be harder than their previous life.

No time to be coy, so I offer the truth. "I didn't want your relationship with Truett to be harmed."

"It wouldn't have been. He understands and accepts my rule."

"It would have," I say, pushing my hands into my jeans pockets so I stop wringing them in nervousness. "He may understand and obey it, but he'd always look at you first and foremost not as his king or friend, but as the one who destroyed his own flesh and blood."

Amell takes another sip of his wine and studies me. His eyes are penetrating, as if he's trying to figure out a deep mystery. As if he's searching for an all-important question to ask.

Instead, he apologizes. "I'm sorry that happened to you. I thought my rule would make you safe enough, but apparently not. As such, I can't let you move about the castle on your own."

I pull my hands free and hold them out beseechingly. "You can't keep me in this room all day. I'll go nuts from boredom."

"I agree. You'll accompany me wherever I go."

The magnitude of that proclamation hits me hard. "Oh," is all I can muster.

Twenty-four seven with Amell?

At his side during all his hellish duties? Not that I know what they encompass, but still... that's a lot of time together.

And... an inconvenience to him?

"That seems like you're going to a lot of trouble to keep me both safe and entertained."

“Does it really?” he asks. “I sort of see it as averting future trouble, so it’s a wash.”

It’s not a wash at all. Everything he’s done concerning me has cost him something, whether it be time, conscience, or question to his rule.

He’s gone above and beyond what a king should do for someone as lowly and unredeemable as I am, even going so far as agreeing to Will’s release.

He introduced me to his daughter.

A surge of fondness renders me breathless. Few people have ever elicited such emotion from me, mostly since there have been so few I’d ever let get close enough for me to develop feelings.

And with that tenderness, something hotter pools low in my belly. The best way I know how to show my gratitude is through sex. For my entire life, it’s been the only thing of value I have to give.

But right now, I don’t want to just give something to Amell for what he’s done.

I actually want to take, because if I give Amell pleasure, it will pleasure me.

That is antithetical to everything I’ve ever known when it comes to sex.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, my voice raspy.

Amell cocks an eyebrow at me. “I was going to ask if you were ready to set your friend free.”

I walk toward the king and come to stand before him. I tilt my head back as his height demands. “We can set him free later. I’d rather touch you first.”

Amell’s blue eyes darken to the color of denim and red pulses within his pupils. He sets the goblet down and reaches out to finger a lock of my hair. “What did you have in mind?”

“I’d like to taste you.” He doesn’t need more explanation than that.

“Fuck,” he growls, his hand sliding to the back of my neck. “Words like that will land you in bed where we’ll stay for the entire day.”

“You make that sound like it’s a bad thing,” I say with a slight smile, a renewed ache pulsing between my legs.

“It’s not a bad thing at all.” He releases me and takes a cooling step back. “But let’s go handle your friend first. I don’t want him on your mind at all when you’re... tasting me.”

“Um, okay.” I’m slightly confused because, well... he knows I’m offering a blow job, right?

“One thing first,” Amell says just before leaning in to kiss me. More than

a brush of his mouth against mine, but not a toe-curler either.

My lips tingle, though, in an unnatural way. “What was that?”

“A bit of protection,” he says, taking my hand in his and walking us to the door. “Insurance if you’re in harm’s way again.”

“Why would I be?”

“You shouldn’t, but I never say never. This way I’ll always know where you are.”

I find his statement odd since he said I’m always to be with him, but I don’t question it.

Amell leads me through the castle, holding my hand the entire time. I believe this is calculated on his part, and everyone notices. While I don’t garner much attention when I walk these same halls, everyone looks at the king with his tall frame and luscious wings trailing behind him. More than one pair of eyes drops to where our hands intertwine, and I see confusion and even hatred.

I don’t see one smile or indication that anyone finds it sweet.

In the kitchens, Amell releases me to find Rhynda, and I spot Will still shelling peas. I rush over to him, and he nearly spills the bowl when I touch his shoulder.

“You scared the crap out of me,” Will says grumpily, and then his eyes widen as he sees Amell talking to Rhynda.

“It’s time, Will. You’re going home.”

“Right now?” he asks, his eyes shimmering with hope.

“Right now.”

“Come, Nyssa,” Amell says, and I look over my shoulder to see him by the door. “Bring your friend.”

I offer my hand to Will. “Let’s go.”

We follow Amell out of the kitchen. I almost feel sorry for Rhynda as she looks so befuddled over Amell coming for one of her human workers.

Will’s hand is slick with sweat, and he tries to pull it away. “I don’t think he wants me touching you,” he whispers as we follow about five paces behind Amell. “There are rumors that you end up in the river if you do.”

“I think us holding hands in friendship is okay,” I murmur back and give him a squeeze of reassurance.

Amell leads us out the castle’s front double doors, so tall, they stretch almost three stories. The path leads directly out to the Bridge of Judgment.

Will tries in earnest to jerk his hand from mine, but Amell says, “Easy,



human friend of Nyssa's. I'm not tossing you into the river."

This was done without him seeing us behind him, so he either has super hearing or eyes in the back of his head.

"It's okay," I reassure Will, but I drop his hand so he's not distressed.

Amell walks out to the middle of the bridge where his throne sits. The air is warm from the river churning below.

He turns and addresses Will. "Where would you like me to return you?"

My heart aches—Will seems so lost right now. His eyes come to mine. "Where do I go? Straight to my parents, who probably assume I'm dead. What do I even tell them?"

"Yes. You go straight to the people who love you most, and you tell them whatever you think will make them feel best."

Will nods and takes a deep breath. "Okay. Yeah. That's good advice."

"Very well." Amell circles his hand from which a shining light trails, creating a large circle in the air that grows bigger and bigger. The inside glows, then turns transparent, and I can see a small farmhouse sitting at the end of a gravel driveway.

"That's my grandparents' house," Will says in amazement.

"Your parents are there, having their Sunday dinner," Amell says.

My jaw drops in awe. "How did you know that?"

Amell shrugs. "I don't question the powers Zora gave me. I just use them. I'll let you two say goodbye."

And then to my surprise, Amell walks back toward the castle doors, stopping about twenty yards away.

Allowing us a moment of privacy.

I don't waste time because Will needs to get back to his life. I grab him in a fierce hug, and he squeezes me in return. "Thank you, Nyssa. There's no way I could ever repay you."

I lean my head back, hands going to his shoulders. "Sure you can. Have a great life."

"I will," he says and kisses my cheek. Then his eyes bore into mine. "I can look up your brother if you want. See how he's doing. Not that I can let you know anything, but if he's struggling in any way, I'll help him. That's how I can pay you back."

"You'd do that?" I ask incredulously, my heart hammering with the possibility that the worry I've carried for the past fourteen years might be alleviated.

“Of course, I would. I’d do anything for you.”

“It will be hard. I’m sure the adoption records are closed and—”

“I’ll figure it out, Nyssa. I’ll use every resource I can, and I won’t give up until I find him.”

Tears prick at my eyes, and I hug him again. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

Will laughs. “That makes me feel special.”

“Well, you’re the only friend I’ve ever had...”

We both laugh before I release him and push him toward the opening between dimensions.

His smile turns nostalgic and his eyes stay pinned on me as he walks backward toward it. He doesn’t release my gaze until he steps through the opening and it seals, causing Will to disappear.

I wipe my leaky eyes with my fingertips and look back toward Amell. He reaches his hand out to me, and I move to him to take it.

“Are you hungry?” he asks. “Because once we get in bed, I’m not letting you out for a very long time.”

I smile with extreme happiness for what just happened. “Maybe I’m the one who won’t let you out of bed for a very long time.”

Amell chuckles and rather than walk back through the castle, he bends distance and we flop right onto his bed.

## CHAPTER 19

### MELL

WHILE MY MIND is mostly on Nyssa's desire to "taste" me, I'm a little put off that she had obviously shared something very personal with Will.

He knew about her brother.

Yes, I stepped away to give her privacy to say goodbye to her friend when it was time for him to leave.

Yes, I shamelessly eavesdropped because I'm the king and I do whatever the fuck I want.

I know about Nyssa's brother, of course, because I have her collection of life events from the crystal. I knew they were separated when he was a baby and she was only twelve, but the crystal didn't reveal many memories involving him. There was the initial separation after their mother died, and then they went into separate foster homes.

A few instances of her asking the social worker when they'd be together again, only to be handed vague answers.

Then learning about her brother being adopted.

By then, she was in a bad situation of her own, and the fact he was adopted and she was alone changed her. She cried when she learned that, but she never cried again after, even though she had good reason to.

"Does it hurt your wings to lie on your back?" Nyssa asks, and I jolt slightly. I'd been lost in my thoughts about her past.

"What?"

"Roll onto your back," she commands, and it's cute that she thinks a king would do her bidding.

And yet, I roll, folding my wings in tight.

Nyssa straddles my hips and places her small hands on my chest. She looks so serious. "Thank you again for releasing, Will."

"We had a deal," I remind her.

"I know," she replies with a faint smile. "Which is why what I'm about to do has nothing at all to do with Will and everything to do with me."

I watch mesmerized as she works the laces of my leather vest. I could make it disappear with magic, but I like watching her concentrate, and I really like the tiny caresses where her fingertips touch my skin.

She peels the vest apart, exposing my entire chest, and sits back with her hands on her thighs. Nyssa lets out a huff of breath as her eyes roam my entire torso. “You’re really beautiful.”

I almost snort because it’s a weak word to describe me, but I can’t deny that her enjoyment of my physical appearance turns me on.

Her hands glide over my chest, pressing into my muscles, and her fingertips circle my nipples. My body tightens from the tingles of pleasure she leaves behind, and I’m shocked so light and innocent a touch even registers.

Nyssa scoots down to my thighs so she can access the laces of my leather pants, and my cock starts to thicken. I try to force it to behave because I want to see exactly what she will do to me in my natural state.

It’s a bit beyond my fae superstrength, though, when she bites her lower lip with every lace that comes free and she reveals a little more of me.

“Lift your hips,” she says, scooting back a bit more.

My pants are molded to my body, so if I want her to free me, I have to help. I do as she asks, and she pulls and tugs, working the material down over my hips.

When my cock is freed, it’s already half hard, and apparently Nyssa has found a true weakness within me. My body wants her with very little effort on her part.

I see no triumph on her face as she stares at it for what seems like forever. Only hunger, and fuck if that doesn’t make it thicken more.

She takes me in her hand, and I let out a long breath. Palming me gently, she glides her other fingers over the top, ever so soft. She doesn’t squeeze or stroke, but only offers butterfly touches that drive me fucking crazy. Nyssa watches in awe as my dick submits to her gentleness and becomes fully erect.

Throbbing, actually, and I grit my teeth. If she doesn’t do something soon, going to have to throw her on her back and—

Nyssa squeezes, and my hips buck at the sensation. She starts to stroke, and I go dizzy.

I’ve been jacked before and had more mouths on my dick than I can recollect, but I don’t ever recall anything feeling more pleasurable than her small hand working me.

It's when she leans forward and her breath blows across my skin that I'm somewhat afraid of what I might feel. When her tongue touches me for the softest little taste, my hands curl into fists so tightly, I feel my bones splinter from the force and they burn as they regenerate and heal.

When she takes me into the hot depths of her mouth, I know nothing is ever going to be the same.

My control only lasts about ten strokes of her tongue before I'm going berserk with need and I'm jerking her off me. She cries out in protest, and it's adorable as she glares with her lips all wet and puffy.

I will all of our clothing away, roll her to her back, and plunge into her. She's so fucking wet.

Nyssa gasps, and I feel her body ripple around me as she adjusts to the invasion. I pump into her hard, my wings spreading to stretch and ease some of the tension within me.

My mouth slams onto hers, and I quiet her moans with my tongue. With my hands, I force her legs around my hips and when she locks tight, I use my great wing span to lift us off the bed.

Long, lazy strokes propel us gently upward. I keep my mouth on Nyssa's and my arms wrapped around her back, while my hips drive my cock into her.

I fly us up, the ceiling soaring far above us still, and turn toward the wall.

When her back touches the cool stone, she gasps and wrenches away from the kiss. I hold still inside her as she looks at the ground thirty feet below, and her arms and legs tighten around me.

I grin as her eyes come back to me, my wings flapping in slow movements to keep us hovering with her pressed into the wall.

My hips move, resuming a steady thrust, and Nyssa's eyes flutter. I angle my wings, using their strength and lift to slam harder into her.

Push her solidly against the wall so I have leverage to fuck her deeper.

"Amell," she groans, her nails sinking into my shoulders just above my wings. "I can't..."

"You can," I assure her. "You're strong."

Her head falls forward to my chest and I curl around her, hips thrusting as I have one palm under her ass, the other pressed against the back of her head. My wings push against the air holding us above the bed, but as my orgasm builds, I don't know that I can concentrate enough to keep us aloft.

"Gods, Nyssa... why do you feel so fucking good?" I groan.

*Translation... why do you make me feel so much?*

Her only response is her body going tight as she throws her head back, screaming out her release, bucking against my hold. The strength of her orgasm startles me so much, I get no more than a half a thrust into her before I'm coming.

My entire body locks as the orgasm utterly fucking destroys me, which includes my wings freezing as pleasure ripples down their lengths.

Nyssa and I plummet downward. With one arm locked around her, I use my other hand to grip her hair and force her mouth to mine. I kiss her as we free-fall, both of us shuddering with pulsing pleasure and without another care in the world.

Except I am aware of gravity, and before we hit the bed, I pull a quick bending of distance that allows us to land gently on the mattress—me on my back with my wings folded underneath, and Nyssa on top of me.

“Oh wow,” she whispers, sucking in oxygen as if she's been deprived forever. “That was...”

She shudders again, her muscles rippling around my cock, which is still hard and could physically go for another round, but I'm not sure I'm mentally up for it.

That sex was so impossibly amazing, I feel weak.

During that fall, I could almost imagine what it might feel like to be human. Where all the sensations were so overwhelming, I didn't think I could handle it and would easily perish.

There's never been anything daunting in my immortal life, and yet the feelings Nyssa provokes scare the shit out of me.

I'm the king of the fucking Underworld. I rule all Dark Fae and judge souls. I can't afford to be brought to my knees by a human.

Nyssa collapses on my chest, but then immediately pushes up to stare down at me with wide eyes. She looks confused, possibly even frightened.

She starts to pull away, but my hands go to her hips and I pin her in place, my cock still lodged deep inside her. But I'm not thinking about sex right now.

“Are you afraid of me?” I ask, dreading that she might say yes.

She shakes her head. “No. Just what you make me feel.”

Relief nearly makes my head spin, but I push it aside because her admission is monumental. Nyssa is an enigma. She gives nothing away for free.

I know I'm definitely different after that... encounter. Maybe she is too.  
"What do I make you feel?"

Again, she tries to push away but I hold her tight. "Tell me, Nyssa. You have nothing to lose and nothing here can hurt you."

Pain washes over her face, probably a hundred memories hitting her all at once. I'm not privy to what she's thinking right now, but she had another thousand I saw through the crystal.

"You just... make me *feel*, and I've spent a good chunk of my life learning how to be numb. And when I was numb, I was invincible. Nothing could hurt me. It feels very dangerous to let that protection go."

"Why did you want to feel numb?" I ask, then hold my breath, waiting to see if she's ready to let me in and reveal all the things I already know.

She shakes her head but doesn't try to pull away. "It's not important."

"It is to me."

Her eyes lock with mine, and she seems to be searching to see if I'm lying.

I'm not.

Nyssa's gaze falls to my chest. "I did a lot of bad things in my life, and —"

"Stop." Her head snaps up. "I'm not interested in what you did. You're in Hell already, so it doesn't matter. I'd like to hear what happened to you that made you think it was better not to feel anything at all."

"It's not important."

"You said that once already, but given that I'm asking again should clue you in that it *is* important."

"Why?" she asks, exasperated. "I'm a lowly human who's not even really alive. Just a plaything—"

I jackknife upward, my arms banding around her, my face to hers. "Don't ever refer to yourself as a plaything again. How can you even say that after what we just shared?"

I kiss her, long and slow so she has time to digest those words. When I pull back, I ask one last time. "Tell me who Nyssa McKnight was."

Nyssa's eyes lock with mine. "She was abandoned. Abused. Beaten."

My heart pounds because she's giving me her life, one word at a time. After her mother died, she went into the foster system and never came out. She got shuffled among group homes at first, having to defend herself from the older kids.

“Molested. Overlooked. Forgotten.”

At age fourteen, one of the older foster kids took it upon himself to teach her about the birds and the bees in a very hands-on way. He threatened to kill her if she told anyone.

“Raped. Discounted,” she says quietly.

The man she killed—Vince—was her foster father in her last home at age fifteen. He took her virginity in a very painful way. After he left her room, she packed a small bag, stole money and credit cards from his wife’s purse, and ran.

“Desperate.”

Nyssa lived on the streets thereafter. Ran with a bad group of kids who forced her to steal to be able to stay within the safety of their group. She knocked over her fair share of old ladies, making a grab for their handbags. The kids eventually turned on her, beat her badly, and took what she had.

“Used. Minimized.”

She unfortunately learned her body was the only value she had to help her survive. She sold it often in dingy back alleys to buy food and drugs, necessities she felt she needed to make it.

A tear slips out and runs down Nyssa’s cheek, and it’s enough for me to break my silence. I call forth the crystal, and it appears in my hand. Loosening my hold, I lean back slightly to show it to Nyssa.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Your life. Zora gave it to me. It holds all your memories, and I was able to see them all.”

I expect her to be mad that I’d pry, but instead, she gives me a sad smile. “So you know all those things are true, then.”

“Foolish human,” I say gruffly and push the crystal into her hand. I wrap my own around hers, pressing tight, and I call forth a series of specific memories. The crystal glows, and Nyssa gasps as she’s assaulted by the recollections I force her to watch.

*Choosing to stay at a homeless shelter.*

*Accepting help.*

*Detoxing and joining NA.*

*Respecting her body.*

*Applying for jobs and despite rejections, applying for more.*

*Bartending and finding value in hard work.*

*Pride in making money and being able to afford to rent a place.*



I pull the crystal away, and it darkens again. Nyssa's eyes fly open and meet mine. "That was the last year of your life. You were changing the narrative, Nyssa. My words to describe you would be strong, determined, and resilient. There's no doubt in my mind, had Vince not walked into that bar, your trajectory would have continued upward. Unfortunately, he snapped that very fragile ego you were trying to build, and you had a moment where you lost control."

"And ended up in Hell," she murmurs. "Where I belong."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I'll tell you this... Vince deserved what he got, and his soul went straight into the Crimson River. He never even made it to me for judgment, so you can rest easy at least knowing he's being eternally tormented. I'd also go back to the First Dimension and hunt down every human who ever hurt you and tear their hearts out if I was allowed to leave, then I'd ask Zora to send me their souls so I could be the one to throw them in the river."

And that right there earns me a small smile. That's what I was aiming for.

"The mortal life you had—it was horrible. But it's gone. There's nothing to be ashamed of, and there's nothing to apologize for. It's over, and now you're here where you can have a good life. You will always be safe with me. I promise you that."

Nyssa sniffs but there are no tears, even though her voice is a little watery. "How come I had to come to Hell to actually find someone who cares?"

"How come I've lived millennia and you're the only being who has the power to bring me to my knees?"

"Fate?" she asks with a tiny laugh.

Thinking of Circe, the god of Fate, I can't discount that at all. But who knows.

All that matters is the here and now, and I'm going to take Thalia's advice and keep Nyssa forever.

## CHAPTER 20

### A

AMELL WAS DEAD serious that I'm not allowed to go anywhere in the castle without him. That means he has someone else deliver our meals, and I'm no longer allowed to fetch them.

I expressed my discontent about not being allowed to work in the kitchens, mainly because I need to feel useful. The biggest thing that helped with my addiction recovery was having a purpose. I explained how much that job at Crazy 8's meant to me, how Sam had been willing to take a chance on someone who'd been pretty unstable most of her life.

I told Amell a lot of things. Once I knew he'd already seen every bit of my horrid life in that crystal, I had no reason to keep my secrets from him. Of course, he pushed and prodded and asked all kinds of intrusive questions. I think he's a bit fascinated by humans, as I don't think he has a lot of experience with us.

He knew Zora, of course, for twenty-eight years, but it was such an odd relationship. He was her jailer and lover, but more than that, she wasn't an ordinary human. She had no real human experiences, having lived her entire life in the Underworld until her sister rescued her.

There's Thalia, of course, but he only had a few weeks with her and in a limited capacity. I think it's incredible how deeply Amell feels for her, even though they don't know each other all that well.

Regardless, I informed Amell this morning that if he doesn't find something useful for me to do, I'll go crazy, and he won't like me much that way.

He cocked an eyebrow, staring in that imperious way he often does, and God help me, I like it when he does that.

Today I am by his side as he said I would be. He met with nobles in his council room to discuss First Dimension imports. This is an actual "thing" in which he has fae make routine visits into that dimension to bring back all sorts of items, though mostly food. I learned that the types of crops and

animals here in the Underworld are edible, but nothing near as good as we have above.

Now he's giving me the grand walking tour of Otaxis.

"It's actually a beautiful city," I say as I take in the clean streets lined with glowing veins of crystal to light the way. The whitewashed buildings with thatched roofs and large windows are actually cozy and charming. Of course, monsters live inside, but it works.

"It wasn't always," Amell says as we traverse through a marketplace. "This is really just one large cavern you can't see anymore because of the night sky. And the buildings were all mud and wood, fallen into disrepair. Kymaris didn't care about anyone's comfort but her own. It was dark and dank. The fae were miserable and angry, always at each other's throats."

"So you changed it all?" I ask as I look around at the size of this place. Buildings sprawl over hills that rise upward. The city itself has blocks upon blocks of businesses and housing. The marketplace is so big, I can't see where it ends.

"Zora gifted me with almost godlike powers." Amell nods at certain fae we pass. Most are exceptionally beautiful like him. Some are the opposite—downright terrifying. Amell explains those fae are from magic and evolution gone bad. Regardless, they give him plenty of space.

"You used your powers to help the residents be... what... happier? Thus a nicer, gentler Dark Fae."

Amell snorts. "It's not so much to make them happier but to discourage the desire to want to try a massive escape again. Kymaris had most of the Dark Fae ready to storm the First Dimension to take it over. Why wouldn't they, just to have the luxuries of that realm?"

"By making it nicer here, you hope to keep them satisfied."

"That's the hope," he mutters, but I can tell he's worried that the likes of Ariman and Jago could be fomenting an insurrection. "With that said, I am fully prepared to strike down anyone who tries to make another play for the First Dimension."

I shiver slightly because the malice in his voice is frightening. I never want to be on his bad side. I mean, there was a time I didn't mind provoking him because I didn't fear the Crimson River. To me it was no different from the rock bottom I'd already hit.

But now, things are different.

I want to keep this new life of mine.

Amell and I stroll through the market, rows and rows of small wooden stalls or carts of fae hawking food, clothing, and trinkets. Amell tries to get me to sample some grilled meat on a skewer, but I've seen the odd-looking animals here and decline.

He laughs and takes my hand, and I try to tell myself to not be so excited over the way it makes me feel, the touch of his palm against mine as we walk. I've seen people in love walking this way, the touch of another providing comfort, an affirmation of feelings, but I've never had it myself.

It's nice, and I feel safe.

Up ahead I hear music, and as we get closer, lots of voices raised with shouting and laughing.

We turn a corner and come upon what looks like a pub. A wooden sign hangs over the door with a word on it I can't read as it's in another language. The double doors are wide open, and the front is nothing but windows with the shutters pulled aside so we can see in.

Some kind of band plays stringed instruments and drums. A long bar is tended by two beautiful fae females serving drinks poured into carved wooden cups. The party-like atmosphere spills onto the street, and patrons sit and drink around outdoor tables. The crowd includes a mix of creatures, from the beautiful to the repugnant. A creature that looks part lizard and part human has a scaly arm around a beautiful female fae who looks like a Victoria's Secret model.

A pang of nostalgia pulses through me—this is no different from Crazy 8's, which was where I was trying to restart my life. Granted, I served humans and these are immortal Dark Fae, but it's the same fun vibe.

"Do you want to go in for a drink?" Amell asks, and I realize I've stopped to stare.

I shake my head. Despite being with the king and knowing his absolute power here, I'm still very aware of my vulnerability as a fragile human. The one thing I've learned very clearly is that fae hate humans.

Well, except Amell. He most certainly doesn't hate me.

"King Amell," someone calls from the crowd inside. "Come join us for a drink. You don't grace our streets nearly enough."

Amell sighs and looks down at me. "Come on. One drink so I can make nice with my subjects."

He doesn't give me room to argue, tightening his hand on mine and pulling me in.

I'm immediately overwhelmed as we wind through a very thick crowd and fae press in upon him to clap him on the back or say a few words. He knows many of them by name, but I'm not introduced.

Someone shoves a cup in his hand, and he accepts a boisterous toast. I glance around and note that every single fae who looks at me does so with open hostility. I move closer to Amell, and even though he's engaged in conversation with others, his arm comes around me to pull me even closer.

This is all well and good for a few minutes, but then I'm pushed slightly aside by a female fae pressing her body to his front and sliding her hands over his shoulders.

She's stunning with midnight hair and golden eyes. Her dress dips low, exposing her breasts, and is cut high on her legs.

"There you are, lover," she purrs, not seeming to care that I'm actually glued to his side with his arm around me.

My stomach pitches as there's no doubt Amell has been intimate with this female, and I'm flooded with jealousy and insecurity. How could I ever compete with someone like her?

The scrappy part of me—the part that lived on the streets and used a knife to chase off someone if they got too close to a dumpster I was diving in—wants to push her away.

I am given no opportunity as it's Amell who stops her. "Back away, Yvaine. You aren't allowed that familiarity with me."

His words are low and deep but spoken with so much power, she scrambles away from him.

She looks confused, and I'm guessing he's never said those words to her before. Her eyes cut to me as Amell's hand slides from my lower back to come around my shoulder, a very distinct and protective move. Hatred blazes at me, and Amell is getting good at making those who scorn my human frailty positively loathe me. It's clear I am special to him.

"Citizens," he says above the chatter and music, and the room silences. "I thank you for the drink, but I have duties to attend to. Let it be known, in case it hasn't made its way to the city streets, this human is under my protection. Any ill will done to her is done to me. Hate her, you hate me. Touch her in anger, you touch me in anger. Cause her harm, and that harm comes to me. The penalty is the Crimson River, whether you look at her with malice or you break her neck. There will be no exceptions."

The crowd is utterly silent, and my face heats so hot, sweat beads on my

forehead. I glance around, and every fae who returns my stare has a smile on their face. It's so ridiculous, I almost laugh.

Amell takes me by the hand and pulls me out of the bar. We're three blocks away when Amell glances down at me with a smirk, and I can't help but giggle. He laughs and shakes his head. "Don't take it personally. They were all told an eternity ago to hate humans, and even though most of them have never met one, it's ingrained."

"Okay," I say, just glad to be out of there.

"And Yvaine..." To my surprise, he sounds distinctly uncomfortable.

I rush to reassure him. "If you want to sleep with her or any other, I won't be mad. That's your prerogative as king."

Amell stops in the middle of the sidewalk, others flowing around us, and glares at me. "You want me to sleep with other females?"

"Well, no... but... I really don't have a say in such matters."

"But you do," he rumbles, his hand under my chin. "I could tell you were not happy when Yvaine touched me. I felt it. And I don't want you to be unhappy here."

I melt a little at his proclamation, but I need clarity. "I don't know how life works here. I've learned enough to know that fae have high sex drives, and you're indiscriminate in taking lovers. I know as king, you should have what you want. I also know monogamy isn't a thing. I just want to fit in safely, that's all."

Eyes softening, Amell puts his hand to the back of my neck and dips his head to kiss me. "The only thing you need to know is that you are the only one I want in my bed. If you want to call it monogamy, you have it. If you want me to smite any female who looks my way, I will."

"You most certainly will not," I gasp.

Amell laughs and chucks me under the chin. "You're so cute with your little human sensibilities. But trust me, after that display in the bar, no one will come near me or you."

I can't do anything but nod. He's making exceptions for me and changing rules and threatening the Crimson River. No one has ever been my champion before. No one has ever cared for me before. It doesn't seem real.

"Come on," he says, pulling me into his embrace. "I have to judge some souls, and you can watch."



IT'S BIZARRE BEING back on the Bridge of Judgment. Twice now, I've been on it at Amell's mercy with him nearly tossing me in. The third time with Will was much nicer.

I feel safe now, or at least as safe as one can be stuck in Hell where dangers lurk around every corner. I believe Amell won't let harm come to me, so it eases my anxiety to be back out here.

I stand next to the king. He chose not to sit on his throne but stand in front of it as the recently departed are brought before him.

Those souls who might be worthy of redemption.

Calix reads the charges, and Amell is a harsh jurist. They're brought forth by the fae guards, begging, pleading, crying for mercy. One after another they go over the edge, except Amell doesn't flick them over with his power. He merely nods his chin that way, and the guards do the dragging and tossing. The citizens of Otaxis who came out to watch cheer each time, thriving on the carnage and display of Amell's brutal power.

A young man is brought forth and thrown onto his knees before Amell. His hair is long and greasy, his face pockmarked, and he's painfully thin. Instantly, I recognize the look of the streets.

Calix holds up his scroll and announces his crime.

He killed a woman in a carjacking.

Like all the others, he cries. Tears flowing, snot pouring, he begs, "Please don't throw me in the river. I can be a better person."

Amell isn't moved, and he nods toward the edge of the bridge. The guards lift the man under his armpits, and he stares at the king. "I always knew I'd end up here one day."

The guards start to drag him away, but to my surprise, Amell says, "Wait."

He steps forward and asks the man, "What did you mean by that?"

Still crying, he shakes his head. "I've done so many bad things... I just... I deserve this."

His tone is so defeated and heavy, I pity him. Amell seems perplexed and studies the guy with shrewd eyes.

And then I'm totally shocked when he says, "I'm going to reincarnate you."

The man gasps and the guards immediately release him. He sags to the ground, and his head tips back to look at Amell.

"You'll be given another chance at life, but it will be harder than the one

you just left. Every obstacle and hill you faced, the new ones will be bigger and steeper. If you want to redeem your soul, you'll do better. If you don't, your next death will land you straight into the Crimson River. Do you understand?"

The man nods furiously before hesitantly asking, "Will I remember this? Will I know that I have to do better and what the stakes are if I don't?"

Amell shakes his head. "No. You won't."

And that's all the advice he gives.

A thick stream of light shoots down from the midnight sky above, the rays shimmering with billions of sparkles. From within the brilliance, two large men step forward. They're dressed in black—weird clothing that's not of the First Dimension but looks futuristic with clean lines and no buttons or pockets.

They lift the man under his armpits, same as the fae guards did to throw him into the Crimson River.

I step closer to Amell and whisper, "Where are they taking him?"

"To Zora," he answers, his eyes watching the men as they step backward into the light to disappear. "She'll actually reincarnate him."

"And he'll have no guidance?"

Amell shrugs. "Who knows? Circe might meddle in his fate."

I know much more about the gods now since Amell has spent many nights, our bodies tangled in his bed, educating me on all the fantastical things about the universe.

"Why did you do it?" I ask, not sure I'm worthy of his thought process.

"Because he reminded me of you." Amell stares down at me, his eyes warm. "You said those very words... knew you'd end up here one day. He might have deserved the river, but I can't be sure. Perhaps he had things happen in his life that led him down a bad path, just like you."

I have no clue if he made the right decision, but it touches me that my experience has made Amell look differently at situations. It's no small power to change a king's mind or have influence on him.

Not that I want to influence him, but it definitely makes him more real to me. It softens his edges a little.

There are more souls to be judged, and Amell works through them swiftly. He doesn't spare another, and when he's finished, he turns to me. "Want to fly?"

I glance up at the dark sky, curious what it would be like to be among



those stars he created. “Yes, I’d enjoy that very much.”

“Then let’s go,” he says, and that’s the only warning I get. Amell sweeps me into his arms and cradles me against his chest. Those beautiful wings unfurl and push downward, propelling us off the ground. They make hard swipes against the air, sending us higher and higher.

Up, up, up until Amell angles his body and we move forward. He flies us right over the top of the castle, and I shudder as I look down. We’re hundreds of feet in the air, and Otaxis looks so small, the Crimson River just a tiny ribbon of reddish orange winding toward the horizon.

Amell flies us east through the starry night, and despite the height, I eventually relax, safe and secure in his arms.

“That road leads to Calashte,” he points out below. It winds along rocky, barren hills devoid of travelers. While Otaxis was by no means thriving with flora and fauna, it did have trees and bushes planted along the sidewalks. Cactus-like and spiky, they would hurt if you ran into them, but some bore flowers in muted colors. The trees had ghostlike bark and silver leaves.

Below is nothing but rocks and dirt. It’s quite depressing.

“Did you change all the cities or just Otaxis?” I ask.

“All the cities,” he replies. “But the areas in between would be a waste of time. The only fae who travel between cities are nobles, and they can bend distance. Those who can’t stay within their comfort zones. The roads are rarely used.”

We fly onward until the lights of Otaxis fade and the only illumination is from the stars. But Amell created them to hang low and in such multitudes that it’s as good as the glow of a heavy, full moon.

Amell descends and alights with perfect grace atop a large butte that is more of the same I’ve seen—rocks and dirt. While the night sky is beautiful, and the faux sunrise on the horizon is dazzling, everything else is drab.

“I thought we’d have a picnic,” he says.

I glance around and wonder where and how. We have no food.

But Amell reminds me that he is the king of the Underworld with powers gifted from a god. He turns in a slow circle, holding out his hand. From the ends of his fingers pour waves of colorful light shooting over the landscape. The light bathes the rocky terrain, which shimmers and then morphs into thick green grass, large shade trees, and fragrant patches of wildflowers. Twenty yards away through a wide furrow of eroded soil, a fresh creek springs forth, babbling among boulders that rise from the ground.

Amell faces the horizon, lifts his hand, and the top of a glowing ball starts to appear.

A sunrise.

He's actually creating a sunrise and as the light warms my face, I can't help but smile. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed that until now.

Amell turns to me. "Do you like?"

I spin slowly, taking it all in. As far as the eye can see, beautiful rolling hills of green grass, a sparkling blue stream, trees and bushes and even birds chirping. "It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen."

He seems pleased by that and motions to something behind me. A red-and-white-checked blanket is spread on the ground under a picnic basket, shaded by the sprawling, leafy branches of a large apple tree heavy with ripe fruit.

I walk over to it and kneel on the blanket, opening the basket's wicker lid. My eyes bug out as I see fried chicken, fresh fruit, and chocolate cake.

Craning my neck, I look back at Amell. "How?"

He cocks an eyebrow at me, and yeah, that was a dumb question. There's not anything he can't do.

"What will everyone think about these changes?" I ask with a laugh.

Amell walks over and settles on the blanket, lounging on his side to face me. "No one can see it but us. It's an illusion."

I reach into the basket and pull out a chicken leg. "It sure seems real."

He laughs. "It's real, but it's not permanent," he clarifies. "And it's only for us to see. The food Calix put together, and I summoned its appearance."

"It's amazing," I say, holding the chicken up to sniff before taking a bite. I groan as I flop onto my back. "This is the best food I've ever had."

I look up into the branches above and marvel that I can smell the apples. "Thank you," I whisper without looking at him because I'm afraid he might see my vulnerability born of his actions.

I want to cry. No one has ever thought to do something so thoughtful for me before, and I'm not sure I can convey any more gratitude without breaking down.

## CHAPTER 21

### MELL

I'M NOT SURE what I'll do if Nyssa starts crying. It's not something she does, and I know because I've seen her life. The last time tears were in her eyes was when she learned her brother had been adopted, but she didn't even let the tears fall. She wiped them away.

Every terrible thing that happened to Nyssa throughout her life never produced a single tear, with the exception of the day she learned her brother was being adopted. All her memories that I saw came directly from her, and I could feel her emotions as things happened.

Tears are foreign to me. Fae don't cry, and often our own emotions can be muted. Usually the softer ones stay hidden, although my anger does get out of control at times.

It's because of my lack of experience with emotions that I'm uneasy right now watching Nyssa battle hers. I don't know if her feeling so deeply is good or bad. I don't know how to offer comfort.

So, I do the next best thing. I distract her by reaching over to pull the basket nearer to me. "That chicken good?" I ask.

She smiles, nods, and takes another bite. Her eyes look distinctly dry.

I grab a piece and also pour some wine. We eat in silence for a bit. I admit I like the food from the First Dimension much better than what we produce here, and now that Zora allows free but monitored travel through the veil by trusted Dark Fae, it's not hard to have it on my table every day.

With Nyssa going to be what I'm hoping is a permanent fixture here, I'd like to provide that for her.

"The sun is nice," Nyssa says as she looks around. "But I like the night sky more."

I blink at her in surprise. "Really? I assumed you'd like the sunlight better."

"It's very pretty, but your velvet sky and huge stars are a piece of art to me."

My heart thumps a few times, because I've always felt that too. I wave my hand and the sun disappears, reverting to the inky sky with the threat of a sunrise on the horizon.

"Your midnight realm." She sighs, tips her head back, and smiles. She reaches a hand, squints, and pretends to pluck a star. "They hang so low, it feels like I can touch them."

Her gaze comes to me, and I mimic her actions. I reach up, pinch at a star that's too far away to actually grab, but when I lower my hand, a sparkling diamond sits in my palm.

Nyssa gasps in delight and takes it, holding it up to examine. "It's so beautiful."

"So are you."

She lifts her eyes to me, mouth parted slightly. "I'm not."

"The most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I say, and she blushes over the truth in my words.

"Another first," she whispers as her gaze lowers in shyness.

I know what she's saying. No one has ever said that to her. She's had a lot of firsts with me.

With a wave of my hand, the food and wine disappear. I pull Nyssa to me, rolling her onto her back so I'm hovering over her. "I want you to be happy here."

"I am," she says, a simple, genuine statement.

"Because you can't ever leave, you know that, right?"

She nods. "Only two ways out... the Crimson River or reincarnation."

I don't confirm that, because it's not exactly true. I'd never throw her in the river, and Zora could potentially reincarnate her. I know Nyssa doesn't have remorse for her offense, but knowing what I know now, and since Zora is aware of it too, she'd give her another shot at life.

I just don't tell Nyssa that, and I don't have a single fucking ounce of guilt either.

"I don't want you to leave," I tell her. "I want to keep you."

"You mean... like a pet?" Her impish grin has me itching to spank her.

"As my lover," I clarify. "For eternity."

Because I want her for that long and more. I've never wanted anything to be solely mine, and the thought of not having her is unbearable.

Bending down, I kiss her. It was meant to be nothing more than an affirmation that she has me, but the minute our lips touch, our connection is a

live wire snapping with electricity. It's like that every fucking time I kiss her, and my body wants more.

She wants it, too, arching up into me, hands going straight to my hips to try to meld our bodies together.

My hand slides between her legs—I fucking hate these denim pants she wears—but good thing my magic is strong and I can dispose of them quickly. I'm interrupted before I can make good on that thought.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty.” The voice comes from behind me, and I spring to my feet and whirl that way, snarling with menace. I put myself between whoever it is and Nyssa until I can confirm if it is friend or enemy.

And yes, as the king, I have plenty of enemies.

I relax when I see it's Truett and Uriens, looking incredibly apologetic about disturbing me in an intimate setting. They can't see the beautiful scenery I'd set with the thick grass, apple trees, and running stream, but they could see me on top of Nyssa.

Thank fuck I didn't make her clothes disappear because her body is for my eyes only.

“What is it?” I growl, irritated my time with her has been interrupted.

“Calashte is under attack,” Truett says, and I lock tight over the hardness in his tone. “A legion of demons, twisted fae, and some nobles.”

Rage sweeps through me, and blue arcs of electric magic crackle from my fingertips. “Nobles? Who?”

“Jago,” Uriens says. “He's leading them.”

“Ariman?” I ask.

Truett shakes his head. “He hasn't been spotted, but that doesn't mean he's not out there. It was a blitz attack, and they're sweeping through the city. Our people are fighting, but we can't push them out. We need your help.”

“Of course,” I say and then turn to Nyssa who scrambles to her feet. She looks scared, and I quell the crackle of power as my hand rests against her soft cheek. “It will be fine. I'll go fix this, and I'll have Uriens return to the castle with you. Stay in my suite until I come for you, okay?”

Nyssa nods and I bend to kiss her. As I start to pull away, her hand locks around my wrist. “You won't get hurt, will you?”

Fuck, that makes me feel good... that she worries. A first for me too. “I'm the mighty king of the Underworld. I'll be fine.”

Her smile is wan, but she nods again.

I turn to Uriens, an original fallen and as trustworthy as they come. He's

also powerful, and I'll need him. "Take her straight to my suite at the castle and then join us in Calashte."

"As you will it," he says with a slight bow. Reaching out, he takes Nyssa's hand and bends distance away.

"Let's go," I say to Truett, prepared to bend distance, but something on his face halts me. "What is it?"

"Sorcha has been staying on the outskirts. A small house."

"And?" I prod impatiently.

"She's gone. There's blood everywhere."

I don't feel bad that Sorcha's potentially dead. She should be in the river, and had it not been for Nyssa's kindness, she would be. But I don't like seeing my friend upset. Sorcha is his sister, and he bears love for her.

"We'll find her," I say, but it's the least of my worries for the time being. "Let's go."

Truett and I bend distance to a small plateau that overlooks the small valley of Calashte. There's active fighting going on in the streets, buildings burning. The first thing I do is quell the fires, and they extinguish with a hiss, leaving nothing but smoke wafting upward, which I blow away with a mere thought so I can see what's going on.

My eyes scan the distance, my powers allowing me to distinguish the demons from the fae. They're the monsters Kymaris created when souls were sent her way. She'd take the most evil and vile—serial killers, rapists, sociopaths who had no conscience—and she'd recreate them into horrid-looking creatures, hideous even by Underworld standards. She had hordes and hordes, locked in cells in the mountains around Otaxis, and part of her plan to overrun the First Dimension was to let them loose on the population. She would have succeeded, if it hadn't been for Zora and Finley vanquishing her.

Well, Zora, really. She held a part of Kymaris within her after the changeling ritual was completed, and it was her death that killed our sinister queen. Finley's part was important too. She figured out that she had a twin sister, rode into the depths of Hell to free her, and then ultimately, she was the one who had to drive the dagger into her sister so Kymaris would die. I hated her for that, but once Zora was reborn, I let it go.

I wish I had time to round up the demons and toss them into the river en masse, but I don't. I send out a searing blast of power aimed only at the twisted, and they all burn from the inside out. Their screams pierce the air,

startling the enemy fae. Their physical bodies crumble to ash and float away, their evil souls being unmade.

Immediately, the Calashte fae who had been preoccupied with the demons turn on Jago's forces, and the fighting intensifies. There's no way for me to employ mass destruction like I just did on the demons without harming our own, so I open my hand and call forth my sword that rarely sees use these days. Truett follows suit, and we leave the plateau, bending distance right down into the fight.

Once in the thick of things, I easily distinguish friend from foe, and I tear through the enemies without resistance. My power and strength are unmatched, and I relieve bodies of their heads with my sword and unmake their souls before their corpses hit the ground. I walk through the streets, swinging my long blade, sprayed with the black blood specific to the fae and daemons.

And I look for Jago.

Without the demons to overrun the Calashte residents, and with me at their side, it takes hardly any time to turn the tide. With only a few enemy fighters left, I order Truett, "Capture one of them."

He nods, and they converge on a large incubus fae backed into a building. I focus on his sword, turning it white-hot so he screams and drops it. Truett and his men jump him, dragging him toward me.

He fights and snarls, but he can't overpower the three equally powerful fae who have him. They force him to his knees, and he sneers, "You might as well kill me. I won't tell you a thing."

I smile at him blandly. He's going to die, and he knows it. But he will tell me everything I need to know first.

My hands grasp onto his head, and a jagged light zigzags over the top of his skull and shoots upward. The incubus screams in agony as I press my fingers into the light, pulling his head apart. No blood wells, only light mixed with all his memories.

It comes in waves of understanding as I take it all in, but a few things become immediately clear.

It is indeed Jago behind this attack, although he's not been seen since the fighting started. Jago has promised his followers he will open the veil to unleash all of Hell's inhabitants into the First Dimension.

Most importantly, though, the attack on Calashte was nothing but a distraction.

More pointedly, it was meant to distract me.

Pressing my fingers into the fae's skull, I breach the bone and rip it in half, incinerating his brain.

He falls to the ground and bursts into ash.

"Did you find Sorcha?" Truett asks.

"He didn't know. But this was a diversion to get me away from the castle."

"Why?"

"He didn't know that either, but I want you to assemble every single fae loyal to my crown and get there immediately."

Truett starts to nod but doesn't dip his chin fully before I disappear and bend distance straight to my suite.

"Nyssa!" I bellow, hearing nothing but silence in return. I can feel she's not here because I imbued her with protection that would allow me to find her.

My stomach cramps as my fears are realized.

The distraction wasn't just to get me from the castle. It was to separate me from Nyssa.



## CHAPTER 22

### A

SORCHA DIGS HER claws into my upper arm, and I feel them pierce my skin. I grit my teeth because I know she wants a reaction and I refuse to give her one.

Uriens brought me to Amell's suite as instructed, advised me to stay put, and returned to Calashte to help with the fighting.

I paced the room, lost in thought. I wasn't worried about whatever Amell was running into because there is no one more powerful. I doubt all the Dark Fae in the Underworld could take him, given that Zora has made him practically invincible.

Rather, my thoughts are occupied by our time together just before Truett and Uriens interrupted. Amell called me beautiful. Plucked a diamond from the sky for me. Created a lush wonderland and brought forth sunlight.

He told me he wanted me to be happy.

No one has ever wanted me to be happy, including myself. I never thought it was attainable, so I never strove for it.

For most humans, this would probably be nothing out of the ordinary, just something that might happen on a date between two people who are into each other.

Coming from the king of the Underworld, I expect this was a big deal for Amell. It was more than a big deal to me because he's created a life for me better than anything I could've ever imagined.

And yet, I have no idea what any of this means. I'm confounded, and I don't like it.

"Let's go," Sorcha hisses, punching her nails in deeper. Warm blood runs down my arm.

She showed up at Amell's suite a few minutes ago. There was a knock on the door, and I assumed it was Calix, perhaps with food or an update on Amell.

Instead, I didn't even have time to slam the door in Sorcha's face and I

knew I was in immediate danger. She twisted her torso and backhanded me in the jaw. I flew from the impact, landing hard on my back and sliding across the slick floor. The burst of pain blurred my vision, yet I flipped over and tried to get to my feet to run.

Didn't matter, though.

She was on me, yanking my hair to pull me upright. "Been waiting for this," she hissed, jerking me around, her face close to mine.

"Amell's going to kill you for this," I said through gritted teeth. I tasted blood.

"Amell's a fool and has no business being in power. He's become weak," she spits with derision. "Falling in love with a lowly, piece of shit human. Refusing to carry out our former queen's vision."

Falling in love? He surely hasn't. "If you think to use me as a pawn, Amell doesn't care about me in that way. I'm of no use to you."

Sorcha drags me down back halls so we stay out of the main portion of the castle. We haven't passed a single fae, not anyone I could yell to for help. Not that any of them would help me. I think they stay away from me because they fear the Crimson River, but none would be moved to extend themselves for me. Maybe Calix, since he's such an ass-kisser, but no others.

Sorcha pulls me through a doorway where we descend winding stone steps carved into the obsidian mountain. We go down, down, down, and it gets hotter. The air is thick, and my lungs burn.

It's hot the way I thought Hell would feel, and sweat trickles down my back. After what feels like a thousand steps, Sorcha pushes through a door, and we walk out onto fine black sand. A gust of heat hits me, and I gape at the Crimson River flowing before me. Up close, it's enormous, at least a hundred yards across, over which I see the twinkling lights of Otaxis.

The river itself puts off almost unbearable heat, and it's far more colorful than I'd thought. It's not just the reds, yellows, and oranges you'd expect from a thick lava-like flow but every shade of those colors. The viscous liquid froths and jumps as if alive and looking for a meal, and I remember how it made noises after every person was tossed in. Almost as if belching in satisfaction with each soul it consumed.

And now it looks like Sorcha's going to throw me in, and I know I don't have the physical strength to fight her.

Doesn't stop me, though.

I dig my heels into the sand, and Sorcha is caught off guard by my

unwillingness to come along peacefully. She looks over her shoulder and glares, giving me a hard jerk that causes me to fly toward her. Her free hand wraps around the front of my throat, and she puts her face close to mine. “I wish I had just a few minutes so I could peel you alive. But as it stands, we need you for something more important.”

We? Who is we?

Sorcha spins and drags me along in her wake, following the curve of the river and around the large rock outcropping upon which the base of the castle sits.

I nearly sag—hundreds and hundreds of fae and demons have gathered, stretching back as far as the eye can see.

An army.

Standing at the front is Jago, talking to two other Dark Fae dressed in what looks to be battle armor, all of them carrying swords. Beside him stands Calix, listening in on the conversation. He’s also a traitor.

“I have her,” Sorcha announces proudly, and Jago turns to look at us. Sorcha slings me forward, and I stumble before falling flat on my face in the black sand, right at Jago’s feet.

He laughs as Calix hauls me to standing, and I wrench free as soon as I’m upright. I take a step back from him, wrapping my palm over the area where Sorcha dug her claws into me to stop the bleeding, but the raw, open flesh is coated with sand and burns like the fires of Hell. I wonder if raging infections from dirty wounds are a thing down here.

“I hope you feel good about selling out your king,” I seethe at Calix, then turn to Jago. “And there’s no way you’re ever going to get his throne.”

Jago’s eyebrows rise in surprise as he shakes his head. “I want no such thing. Why would I want to rule this cesspit? And to be clear, Amell is not my king.”

“If you don’t want the throne, then what do you want?” I ask.

Jago moves in a blur, grabbing my arm and hauling me into him. “Ideally, fifteen minutes with you flat on your back beneath me so I can see what has Amell so intrigued, but I’m going to settle for him to open that veil and let us through.”

“Impossible,” I breathe out. “He’ll never let it happen.”

Not to mention, not sure he can. Amell told me Kymariss was only able to rip a hole big enough to let her army through after enacting a spell that took twenty-eight years to funnel magic into Zora, then she had to sacrifice an

original fallen Light Fae.

“I suspect it’s not impossible,” Jago says smugly. “My scouts report he decimated my soldiers at Calashte, barely breaking a sweat. He’s no ordinary Dark Fae.”

No, he’s not. Zora gave him powers the others don’t have. They also have no clue the full extent of his abilities. The attack on Calashte was obviously a setup to gauge Amell’s strength. Jago isn’t as stupid as I thought. I look around for Ariman, but I don’t see him.

“Even if Amell could open the veil enough, he’d never do it. He’s promised Zora to keep the First Dimension safe.”

“He’ll do it if he wants to keep you alive,” Jago says with a harsh laugh, bending his head to sniff my neck.

I shudder in revulsion.

“J-a-a-g-g-o-o-o,” a deep, ominous voice bellows, echoing from all directions and causing the ground to shudder. “Release her.”

*Amell.*

Jago’s soldiers unsheathe their swords, holding them angled before their bodies as they look around. Jago reacts swiftly, and before I know it, I’m spun, pulled back into his chest, and a knife is at my throat.

Everyone’s heads turn left, right. People spin in slow circles and tip their heads to watch the skies, expecting Amell to swoop down on his raven wings.

“There he is,” someone yells.

“The bridge,” another voice calls out.

I look up, and Amell is standing on the edge, wings flared, and staring down at us. His hands are fisted tight and I can’t see the expression on his face, but I don’t need to. I heard his tone when he called out, and I can feel waves of dark fury pulsing from him.

Everyone can feel it because several of the fae utter fearful cries, and they all push in closer. The demons gnash their teeth and snarl, too hardwired to kill without mercy.

“Steady,” Jago calls to the legions of his faithful and then looks up at the bridge to yell to Amell. “Keep your distance or your human will die.”

“What is it you want?” Amell merely asks, his voice booming with power and it bounces around inside my head.

“Open the veil,” Jago barks. “Let us through to the First Dimension, or your human dies.”

“That’s all you want?” Amell asks as he stares down.

“That’s all we want,” Jago confirms as he removes the knife from my throat and pushes me slightly forward, his hand gripping the back of my neck. “Let us through, and you can have her back.”

I hold my breath, waiting to see what Amell does, but I’m not prepared when he jumps from the bridge.

Not a swan dive with wings buffeting the air to make a gliding descent, but feet first, straight down, his wings extended upward.

Nothing to slow him down as he slices cleanly through the air. When he lands on his feet without even a wobble, the ground shakes like a major earthquake, and fae stumble from its force. I’d fall myself if Jago didn’t have such a firm grip on my neck. It was an intimidating move, and several of the fae break ranks and run. Amell’s eyes cut their way, and they burst into flames, screams of agony cut short as they dissolve into heaps of ash.

“Enough,” Jago growls, giving me a slight shake with his one-handed grip. “Or I’ll rip off her head.”

Amell’s gaze slides to him before slowly lowering to the inflamed gouges on my arm, still dripping blood.

“Who did that to you?” he asks quietly.

I don’t even think to lie. “Sorcha.”

Amell’s eyes fill with his apology, but within those burning-red pupils, I see retribution. Without his attention ever leaving me, I hear Sorcha scream in agony. My head whips her way, and she bursts into flames like the others, only to burn out quickly and collapse into a pile of black dust.

Jago jolts and pulls me back into him, knife again at my throat. A measure of protection for himself since Amell has made it clear he doesn’t mind obliterating others.

Twisting his neck, Amell looks up at the bridge. I’m stunned to see it packed with fae, their swords drawn. At the forefront stands Truett.

Did he see what just happened to his sister? Is he here to fight for Amell or against him?

“Open the veil now,” Jago screams, panic in his voice. “Let us through, or I’ll stick this knife through her. We only want out. We want what Kymaris promised us.”

“I can’t do that.” Amell stands casually, arms loose at his sides, but his feathers rustle nonstop, bristling with his rage. “I made a promise to Zora to protect the First Dimension from assholes like you.”

Jago roars and drags me toward the river’s edge. I dig my feet into the

soft sand, but it's no use. Hand at my neck again, he screams at Amell. "Open the fucking veil or she goes in. I'm not going to say it again."

The lava bubbles and burps, shooting droplets into the air and when they hit the ground near my feet, they sizzle like bacon in a frying pan. I know to the very depths of any soul that remains within me that Amell will never give Jago access to the First Dimension, so my fate is ultimately damnation in the Crimson River.

Amell stares at Jago with hard, unyielding eyes. He has not only this realm to protect but the First Dimension as well. "I'm not opening the veil," Amell says calmly.

Jago's grip tightens, and I know the push is coming.

Then... I don't feel anything but rushing wind and a disorienting spin as I whirl in nothingness.

My feet hit solid ground and hands steady me. Then I'm looking into Truett's silver eyes. "You're safe now."

I gasp, realizing I'm on the Bridge of Judgment, out of Jago's grasp. Truett pushes me back, but I scuttle around him to peer over the edge to watch.

Amell lifts an arm, clenching his fist tight as if holding on to something. I can't hear words, only the cries of dismay from the fae below.

"What's happening?" I whisper.

"He's taken away the ability to bend distance for those who can," Truett says. "He's not going to let any of them escape his wrath."

"He's mad they wanted out."

Truett looks at me. "You don't know much, do you, human? He's furious they took you. He's vengeful that they hurt you."

I ignore the jab and gaze back down, but there's no stopping the yelp of fear and amazement that pops out of my mouth as a massive wave from the river rises up, its edges frothing. I think Amell might have it sweep away the traitorous fae, but I soon realize that's far too simple.

The wave twists and arcs and undulates, and as I watch, it takes shape. Wings form along with a massive body and a long neck.

A dragon made of lava and fire.

It flaps its wings hard, wafting currents of hot air toward us on the bridge as it lifts from the river. It flies higher and higher, sparks trailing in its wake, circling the castle as Amell holds the fae in place.

Cries requesting mercy ring out as the dragon aims its body downward,

wings tucked to speed the descent. As it gets closer, the fae scream in terror. I clap my hand over my mouth, uncertain what it will do.

The dragon banks hard, swooping toward the horde of traitors. I expect fire to erupt from its mouth, but instead, it glides mere feet above them and just as it passes, its massive tail whips out and catches the entire horde, effortlessly sweeping them into the river.

It wheels around and lands on the black sand facing Amell, awaiting its next assignment.

The sacrifice to the torturous depths is so great, the resulting earthquake disrupts chunks of rock from the cavern ceiling high above the illusory midnight sky. It rains down around us, and Truett pulls me into him, covering my head with his arms as rocks bounce harmlessly off him.

When it stops, I glance back over the edge and am shocked to see Jago and Calix. They weren't swept into the river but instead are on their knees before Amell.

Once again, things spin, the ground shifts under my feet, and it goes dark for a few seconds before I'm on the ground standing next to Amell. I wobble slightly but correct my balance, then jolt when I see his entire army that was on the bridge is now standing behind us.

It's an impressive display of his power that he can move hundreds of fae in the blink of an eye, a message that should he be opposed again, he can quash the uprising with very little effort.

Amell moves to stand before Jago. "Where is Ariman?"

The fae glares back at his king, lips flattened in an expression that says he's not saying anything.

Amell's hand shoots out and clamps onto Jago's scalp. I'm stunned when his fingertips press right into the top of his skull, and his muscles bulge as it appears he's pulling it apart. Bright light streams from Jago's head, and Amell examines it as his captive screams in agony.

"Interesting," Amell mutters, pushing Jago away. He falls to the ground, holding his head and writhing in pain. But there's no blood, and his skull appears intact. "I understand Jago's motivations, but I'm curious, Calix," Amell drawls as he moves to stand in front of the human cowering before him. "Why be a part of this?"

"I was serving Kymaris," he cries, lifting his head so pitiful tears streak down his face.

"Kymaris is dead," Amell points out. "So you weren't serving her, but

yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Your Most Benevolent and Gracious Omnipotence. Please... mercy. I beg of you.”

To my surprise, Amell’s regard turns to me. “Should I show mercy to Calix or Jago?”

The weight of his question scares me, and I back away, shaking my head. “Don’t ask me to make that decision.”

“Why not?” Amell’s eyes are tender but also brimming with vengeance. “They used you. They were going to throw you in that river no matter what.”

“No, my lord,” Calix wails. “We wouldn’t have.”

Jago manages to push himself back to his knees, although he keeps a hand pressed to the top of his head as if staving off a headache.

“Decide, Nyssa,” Amell demands. “Show me what you’ve learned since coming to live in this midnight realm.”

I look at both men without an ounce of pity for either. Yet something inside pulls at me to give grace in my judgment. Knowing they both would have killed me without a second thought, it’s shocking when I say, “You should spare them the river and instead unmake them.”

Amell appraises me, looking neither disappointed nor angered by my answer. He nods, and Calix utters a cry of gratitude. He clasps his hands and shakes them at me. “Thank you, Nyssa. Thank you.”

“She doesn’t make the decisions,” Amell says, turning toward him, and Calix blanches. “While she still has the soft soul of a human, I have the dark heart of a fallen angel and leader of the Underworld. I have no mercy nor will I ever show it to any of my enemies.”

Understanding dawns, and Calix and Jago bolt at the same time, a pitiful attempt to outrun Amell’s judgment. He watches for a moment before the dragon flaps its wings and takes flight. It reaches out with its back legs and scoops each man up within its claws.

They scream and writhe as the dragon rises high into the air again, makes a lazy loop around the castle, and then bullet dives right into the river, incinerating both men. The river belches its delight.

Amell stares thoughtfully at the roiling liquid before turning. He takes my arm and lifts it to examine the puncture wounds before wrapping his hand all the way around. A warm tingling spreads through me, and when his hand pulls away, I’m healed.

He immediately turns to Truett. “I’m sorry about Sorcha.”



“You had no other choice,” Truett says with an incline of his head. “I apologize on behalf of our family that she betrayed you, and I thank you for unmaking her rather than sentencing her to the Crimson River.”

Amell nods and says nothing further, and I’m shocked the matter is resolved. Sorcha was Truett’s sister, and Amell essentially killed her.

And he’s... all right about it?

“And Ariman?” Truett asks, referencing the bizarre way Amell looked inside Jago’s head.

“He wasn’t involved. This was Jago’s doing.”

“I still don’t trust Ariman,” Truett grumbles.

“Agreed,” Amell says with a grim expression. “You can disperse the army.”

Truett offers a slight bow, and I have no more time to be amazed by any of this as Amell takes my hand and bends distance to his suite. He releases me immediately, and I don’t like the look on his face.

His next words verify the bad news. “You can’t be kept safe here. I’m sending you back to the First Dimension.”

## CHAPTER 23

### MELL

“**W**HAT?” NYSSA CRIES, moving toward me.

I hold out my hands, stopping her in her tracks and shaking my head. “I can’t protect you here.”

“You just did.”

“But I might have been too late. Jago wanted to use you, but what about the next fae who just hates you and attempts to throw you in the river before I can stop it? You saw it wasn’t enough of a deterrent for Sorcha. She came after you regardless of my wrath.”

“Then don’t let me out of your sight,” she snaps bitterly.

“It’s too great a risk.”

“And I don’t give a fuck about risks,” she screams as she barrels into me. She slaps her hands on my chest and tips her head back, eyes wild with fear. “I don’t want to go. You said you wanted me here, and I want to stay with you.”

Nyssa’s hands slide up and around my neck. She tries to kiss me, but I don’t let myself be pulled down to her lips. Otherwise, my resolve will buckle.

I remove her hands, holding her at her wrists, and give her a small push. “It’s done.”

“No.” Her head jerks back and forth as she looks around. “Please don’t do this, Amell. Please don’t make me go.”

My heart shreds with every plea that falls from her mouth. Her misery is unbearable, but it’s better than her being dead.

I summon Zora’s demigods, and a beam of light shoots from my ceiling, hitting the floor beside us. It shimmers as two of them step forth, ready to take Nyssa away.

She sees them and yanks her wrists free from my hands. I easily let her go, thinking she might run, but instead she sinks to her knees at my feet. She curls into a fetal position and starts crying.

Wet, wracking sobs, begging me to reconsider. She tips that beautiful face back and tears stream down her cheeks. My heart fucking breaks in half as I witness this woman who never cries expose every vulnerability to me.

“Don’t do this, Amell,” she whispers hoarsely. “You know what my life was like before. Being here, with you, is the only true happiness I’ve ever had. Don’t take it away from me.”

I reach my hand out to her, and she places her palm in mine. I ease her up off the floor and cup her cheeks. “I promise you’ll go back to a better life, Nyssa. You deserve that, and I can’t guarantee your safety here.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“I can’t ensure your happiness, damn it,” I bark at her. It’s not true. I know I can keep her happy for eternity, but if I make her believe otherwise, she’ll go, and that’s best for her. So I give it to her hard and cold. “I don’t want to be responsible for it. You are too much of a responsibility, and I don’t have time for you. It’s not worth the effort, and I don’t want that type of commitment. So I’m telling you to go and be happy. Take this shot at another life rather than the river.”

If I meant to break Nyssa and cut off her feelings for me, I accomplish it with those few words. Her tears immediately stop, although her cheeks remain wet. She pulls away from me and her eyes go dead.

The light just extinguishes, and I watch her rebuild every fucking protective wall she’s ever constructed around herself.

In so few words, I have obliterated every good thing in her life, and along with it, in my life as well.

“It’s for the best,” I offer quietly.

There’s not a flicker of emotion on her face. It’s even worse than when she first arrived, because at least then she was brimming with insolence and sass, when she showed me the promise of what she could be.

Now, she’s less than what she ever was, and I have to push away the doubts racing through me.

I glance at the demigods waiting patiently and give a short nod. Permission to take her.

She doesn’t fight when they each grasp an arm. She doesn’t even look at me again. Merely bows her head and walks placidly between them.

I keep thinking maybe she’ll glance back at me one more time, but she doesn’t. She disappears into the beam of light, and just like that, she’s gone from my life.

“F-u-u-u-c-k!” I roar at the top of my lungs, and the castle shakes so hard, chunks of obsidian rain from the ceiling. In a rage, I turn toward the sideboard and fling it across the suite, fracturing it into a billion splinters against the opposite wall. I pick up the couch and hurl it toward the balcony. It sails through the open doors and over the edge. I kick at a chair and it crashes into the wall, knocking more rock loose.

I turn to the wall closest to me and punch it, my fist going through the rock, pulverizing my bones and shredding my skin. It’s already healing when I pull it back.

“I’ve never seen you throw such a tantrum before.”

I whirl around to see Zora there, and I’m so furious, for a moment I consider attacking her. Not because she deserves it, nor do I think I could beat her, but because if I did, she’d destroy me and end my miserable life.

But I don’t. I need Zora’s help more than ever. “You need to do more than just a reincarnation of Nyssa.”

She cocks a white eyebrow at me, arms folding over her chest. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, put her back into her current life, but in a different place for a fresh start. Set her up for a better existence, and put her near her brother so she can be a part of his life in some way. Make her safe from the police looking for her for Vince’s murder and protect her. You know she deserves it.”

“I don’t know that,” she says.

“You fucking do,” I snarl as I stride into her personal space. Glaring down at her, “Don’t pretend, Zora. You’ve been interfering from the start by giving me that crystal. I don’t know what your game is, but you better not make Nyssa suffer, or I will find a way to end you.”

Zora’s eyes widen with shock, and she has every right to evaporate me. Instead, she murmurs, “I didn’t realize you cared about her so much.”

“What does it fucking matter?” I turn away. “My care for Nyssa almost got her tossed in the river.”

“But you saved her,” she points out.

“I can’t watch over her all the time. It’s not safe here.”

“You have the power and the ability to make it safe, so don’t use that as an excuse.”

I sigh, scrubbing a hand over my scalp. “She deserves more than a life in Hell. She deserves sunlight and flowers and friends. She deserves a chance at

goodness, Zora. Her life was so shitty, she shouldn't have to prove herself in a reincarnation. She did it down here when she asked for mercy for the assholes who would have killed her. She's pure, and you know it."

"That's a lot to ask," she says dubiously.

"You owe me."

Zora laughs in surprise. "I owe you? How do you figure?"

"For caring for you," I say, for once taking some credit for the good I did for her rather than miring myself in the guilt over the bad. "I kept you safe. I showed you some happiness. I let Finley take you out of here, and I helped give you the means to defeat Kymaris. I betrayed my queen for you, so yeah... you owe me. I've never asked you for a single thing, but I'm asking for this now."

Zora's arms relax and she moves toward me. Tipping her head, she studies my face. "I'm curious... if I offered to lift your banishment instead, alleviated your rule from a job you detest, and let you go live with Thalia, would you take that, or would you rather me help Nyssa? What would you choose?"

That's not a tough decision. "Nyssa. I'd choose Nyssa every time."

Zora smiles. "It's worse than I feared."

"How's that?" I ask, irritated.

"You don't just care for her." Her expression is grim. "You love her."

"Try not to sound so delighted," I snarl.

"You're making a mistake, Amell. You should keep Nyssa here."

"No. She deserves more than what I can offer, if you promise to give her a good life."

"I'll give her the best life," she says softly. "But I still think you're making a mistake."

I hesitate, because Zora is right. I love Nyssa. Love her so much I know I'll never get over the pain of losing her. She'd have a good life here. There would be risk, but I could probably keep her safe with some effort.

But Zora will give her the best life. One with her brother, free of pain. So much more than I can offer.

"Do it," I say, dropping into the lone chair I didn't destroy.

"Once I do this, there's no going back. She'll be alive again in the First Dimension and lost to you."

"So be it." I close my eyes and rub at the bridge of my nose. I wonder how the fuck I'm supposed to continue on without Nyssa.

When I open my eyes, Zora is gone.

## CHAPTER 24

### A

*Three months later*

UNLOADING THE LAST bucket of fresh freesia from the delivery truck, I waddle-walk it into the large cooler at the back of the store and set it down next to the other bundles of flowers. Water sloshes over the edge and soaks into the fabric of my new tennis shoes, and I grimace—I just bought these. The first pair of good shoes I’ve ever bought for myself, given that all my clothing was either stolen or hand-me-downs.

*It’s just water, nothing but a discomfort,* I tell myself. Besides, I’ve been through a lot worse in my twenty-six years.

I close the cooler and the back door, waving to our delivery driver as he pulls out. Moving through the rear of the flower shop, I watch with envy as Tonya works on a casket spray for a funeral tomorrow, her blond head bent over her work, tongue peeking out the side of her mouth in concentration.

I stop at the edge of the large wooden table where she works, admiring the white roses and gladiolas she’s placing with perfect symmetry.

“It’s gorgeous.” I lean my forearms on the table to watch. “I unloaded all the deliveries and everything’s cleaned up. Want me to do anything else?”

Tonya looks up and smiles as she tucks in some limonium, a nice alternative to baby’s breath. “You’re off the clock, Nyssa. Go home and relax.”

“You sure?” I never mind staying. I love my job here at the Spring Lily, the only flower shop in the tiny town of Edenton, Iowa.

She gives me one of her mom looks, the one that says I work too hard. “Go home. Tomorrow I’m going to teach you how to make some standard bouquets for the stock cooler.”

That brings a smile to my face because I’m all about learning something new.

Tonya’s hand halts me as she tilts her head. “Your smile is beautiful, Nyssa. You should do it more.”

The bell hanging above the shop's entrance door rings, and Tonya glances at the small computer screen hanging on the wall that shows the security feed for the front of the store so she can see when customers come in. We spend most of our time back here working, unless there are shoppers who need help.

It's just Nick, though, so Tonya goes back to the casket spray and I watch, absorbing her techniques that I hope to be able to replicate one day.

The saloon-style door between the design room and the main shop swings open, and Nick bursts through. His mop of curly red hair is sweaty, and he slings his backpack down on the floor before moving around the table to give Tonya a hug. "Hi, Mom."

Nick grins at me. "Hi, Nyssa."

"What's up, kid?" I reply.

"Why are you so sweaty?" Tonya eyeballs her son as he plops down on a stool next to her.

"Roger and I raced from school to the hardware store," he says, grinning with a full set of braces.

"Well, get your homework done," Tonya says, returning her attention to her work. Nick hops off the stool and grabs his pack, pulling out a math text and a spiral notebook.

I push off from the table. "I'm going to head home."

Tonya glances up and smiles. "See you in the morning."

"See ya," I say, sparing another glance at Nick who's searching for a pencil.

He's fifteen and forever disorganized, which amuses me because I'm the same way.

He's my brother, after all, although Tonya and her husband, Billy, renamed him with the adoption.

No one knows who I am—my real identity.

When Zora set me up with a new life here in Iowa, she went so far as to help me secure a job at Tonya's flower shop so I could look in on Sammy—now named Nick—in an unobtrusive way.

I've been here three months now, and I often think back on that day when Zora showed me everything I could have, and then delivered on it.

Her demigods escorted me through that beam of light that led from Amell's castle right into a Swiss chalet with the most stunning scenery of snowcapped mountains outside the large floor-to-ceiling windows. The



change in environment befuddled me, particularly when two huge dogs bounded my way, nails scrabbling over polished wood floors. They weren't barking and their tongues lolled out of their mouths, which told me they were friendly. I knelt to pet them and when I straightened, the demigods were gone.

A woman stood out on the balcony. She wore jeans and a sweater—totally ordinary looking except for the bright white hair that poured down her back.

I knew without a doubt that it was Zora.

She leaned against the wooden railing, staring at the green valley below. I could tell she knew I was there, in what I assumed to be her home, just as I knew she was waiting for me to join her outside.

I went to her, standing to her right, and stared at her profile. She was lovely, and when she turned to look at me, I was astounded by her beautiful eyes. Distinct bands of blue, green, and gold that made her eyes look like jewels.

She smiled, her words sounding like a chastisement. “You left the king of the Underworld in quite a mess.”

I blinked in surprise. He was a mess?

He destroyed me.

“Do you know who I am?” she asked.

“Zora, the god of Death.”

“Well, it's actually the god of Life, but death is also my jam.”

So weird... she's this supernatural being capable of great power, dressed like a normal woman, and using words like *jam*. It left me even more confounded than when I arrived, and still in great pain over how callously Amell tossed me from his life.

*I almost wished he'd tossed me over the bridge*, I thought.

“Don't ever think that,” Zora chided. “You have so much to live for.”

It didn't feel like it, and my gaze lowered from her penetrating one. It didn't even surprise me she could read my mind.

“This is what I can offer you,” she said, and I was curious enough to look up. She waved her hand, the mountain range before us faded, and I was staring into downtown Edenton. “A new life in this town. A great job. A home. Friends. And you'll be able to see your brother. And you'll never be asked to pay for your crimes against Vince.”

The scene changed and zoomed in on a redheaded boy walking down the

street with friends. It was Sammy.

I gasped and leaned forward, peering harder.

“He has a great life,” Zora murmured. “You’d be able to watch him unobtrusively and see it for yourself.”

I reached out a hand, trying to touch him.

“Or,” Zora said cautiously, “you can go back to Amell.”

My hand dropped and my head whipped toward her, just as a fresh, lancinating pain sliced through me upon hearing his name. My eyes narrowed. “Excuse me?”

“Amell loves you. If you want, I’ll send you back to him. I’ll make Amell keep you there.”

I stumbled, the idea sounding for a split instant almost too good to be true. But realization crashed upon me that it was the worst thing she could offer. “He doesn’t love me,” I said, the words bitter on my tongue. “If he did, he never would’ve said what he said to me. He wouldn’t have sent me away.”

Zora didn’t argue. “Make your choice.”

Pushing aside any possibility that Amell loved me, and focusing on the pain, I gave her my answer.

So I have a lovely home, a great job, and I get to watch Nick thrive with a stable, loving family. It was more than I could’ve ever hoped for just to be able to see him once in a while and assure myself he was happy.

Grabbing my purse from a cabinet in the break room, I head out through the front of the shop and turn north. Edenton is an idyllic town of approximately three thousand residents, and the downtown area is filled with cute shops and small bungalows. I live a few blocks away and have yet to buy a car since I can walk wherever I need to go. Once winter comes, though, that might become a different priority.

Dale Idler is sweeping the sidewalk outside his hardware store. His son Roger is a year younger than Nick, and they’re close friends.

“Hi, Nyssa,” he says as I walk by. “Gorgeous day, isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” I say with a smile. “I’m assuming that new faucet handle hasn’t come in yet?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll call as soon as it does. Better yet, I’ll come over and install it for you.”

I shake my head, holding a hand out. “You don’t have to do that.”

Dale levels me with a stern look. “That’s what we do here in Edenton. I won’t hear any more about it.”

I flatten my hand over my heart in gratitude. “Thanks, Dale. That’s super nice.”

On the next block, I stop and talk to Karen Price outside the post office. She’s Tonya’s cousin and only a few years older than me. We’ve gone out for drinks a few times after work.

It’s a beautiful afternoon as I walk the last block to my house, the temperature hovering in the mid-seventies. The spring flowers are blooming, and I consider planting some myself. I’m only renting the small house I’m living in, but the landlord wouldn’t mind me sprucing up the front yard.

I check my mailbox, which is mostly junk mail, but I smile when I see a card from Will. I reached out to him when I arrived and we talk a few times a week by phone. He sends me quirky cards in the mail and it feels good to have a connection with someone that knows a little of what I’ve been through.

I wave to Jan next door sitting in her rocking chair. She’s a recent widow and spends her days watching the world go by.

“Good day at work?” she calls out.

“It’s always a good day when you’re surrounded by flowers,” I say.

“I’ve got a pie in the oven. You come have a slice with me after dinner.”

I step onto my porch and give her a dubious look. “I don’t know... what kind of pie?”

“Cherry.” Jan’s eyes sparkle because she’s gotten to know me pretty well the last few months we’ve been neighbors, so she knows cherry is my favorite. “And I even got some vanilla ice cream to go with.”

“Sold,” I exclaim. “About six thirty?”

“See you then.”

I beam a smile at her and unlock my door. Before I step in, I look around at my new little world.

A lovely small town, a great new job, sweet and helpful neighbors, and I get to watch my brother flourish.

Everything I could ever want.

I step inside, shut the door, and lean back against it. The smile I’ve been donning on and off all day vanishes.

Because none of this is the thing I want most.

## CHAPTER 25

### MELL

THERE'S NO POMP and circumstance on the Bridge of Judgment anymore. I have my fae guards bring out those to be judged and set them up along the bridge. I walk down the line, inherently knowing each person's sins because of my power. I look into their eyes for a flash of anything that might interest me before I give them a push. It takes only a few minutes each day, far more efficient than the old way when Calix ran the show.

Having pushed the last person off for this session, I head back to my suite, choosing to walk through the castle rather than bend distance.

Truett meets me just inside the massive double doors and updates me on his work. I put him in charge of traversing the Underworld looking for other supporters of Jago and his group that perished down by the river three months ago. A few have been rooted out and destroyed, hopefully clarifying the message that I am not to be trifled with.

We could find no proof that Ariman played any part in this failed escape attempt. Then again, Jago just wanted out, whereas Ariman wants to carry on Kymaris's work to conquer the First Dimension.

Regardless, I'll have to keep my eye on him as he remains a potential danger.

I've thrown myself into my work, determined to be a better king. Sure, I made our realm prettier in the hopes of keeping the residents happy, but it's not enough. I've established leaders in each city along with their own governing council to handle ruling under my guidance. I've created a forum for residents to bring forth grievances, and another to work on better infrastructure.

I've established laws to cut down on some of the wanton crime inherent with an entire realm populated with evildoers, but for the most part, I let the citizens do as they like. As long as they stay within the place created for them to be what they are meant to be, I'll keep judgment and punishment to the souls sent to me.

Not sure it's doing any good, but at least it keeps me occupied. If I'm not busy, I'm thinking way too much, and no one likes being around me when I'm brooding.

In my suite, I head straight to the sideboard, cleared of wine carafes and now stocked with the best bourbons from the First Dimension. I pour myself a glass and wish I could get drunk on this stuff, but I can't. It's just not strong enough for fae, but I like the taste.

I step out to the balcony, bypassing the only chair remaining in the living area. I haven't replaced the furniture I destroyed the day I sent Nyssa away. It's not important.

Granted, when Thalia came to visit a few weeks ago, it wasn't exactly comfortable since there was nowhere for everyone to sit, but I wasn't in the mood for company, anyway. It didn't take her long to figure that out. When she asked where Nyssa was, my curt reply—"Gone"—immediately worried her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she'd asked.

"No."

And she didn't ask again. In fact, no one asks, and that's the way I prefer it.

I lean against the balcony rail and look out over Otaxis. The streets are bustling, and if I had any common sense, I'd go down to have some fun. Drinks with my subjects and any number of fae beauties I could fuck.

It would get my mind off...

Nope. Refuse to think about it. I sling back the bourbon and turn on my heel, intent to pour another.

I come to a dead halt, though, when I see Zora in the one chair left in the living area.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as I walk past her to the liquor.

"Thought I'd drop in... see how things are going."

"Want a drink?" I ask.

"I'm good."

I open the decanter, pour a generous three fingers, and take a sip. I stay at the sideboard, my back to Zora, and wait for her to say something.

She remains quiet as a mouse, though, and my nerves are frazzled from the millions of questions swirling in my head.

I finally turn and ask the most important one. "How is she?"

I haven't seen Zora since Nyssa left. I have no idea what she did with her,

but I expect she gave her a great life near her brother as negotiated. I've resisted time and time again calling out to the god of Life to demand an update.

Zora taps her fingers on the armrest. "She's good."

Another sip of the bourbon. "Is she happy?"

"I don't know." She stares at me with her gem-colored eyes, and I know she's going to make me work for it.

"You do know," I accuse. "You know everything. You're a fucking god, for fuck's sake."

Zora stares at me without expression, refusing to engage with my impertinence.

I tip the glass, pouring the bourbon down my throat, and give my back to Zora again. I pour another glass, this time almost to the top. Who knows, maybe I can get drunk.

The silence is almost deafening, and after taking another hefty swig, I drop my head and sigh. "I want her back."

"I told you you were making a mistake," she chides.

I glare at her over my shoulder. "Do you want a medal or something?"

Zora stands, her face a mask of anger. Her hair lifts and crackles as she says, "Careful, Amell. I have a soft spot for you, but it doesn't mean it will always be that way."

I should apologize, but I don't. I just stare at my drink sitting on the sideboard, my hand curled around it. "I want to fix it with her. Bring her back to me."

"I can't," Zora says.

I wheel around. "You can. You have the power."

"I can't," she says. "Not because I don't have the power but because Nyssa has a new life. She has free will. I'm not forcing her back here."

"Then ask her if she'll come so—"

"Amell," Zora snaps, and I blink at her. "I'm not doing any of this for you. You want to fix it, you fix it, but leave me out of it."

"I'd fix it if you'd let me out of this hellhole," I grumble. "Lift my punishment."

"I can't do that either," she says, and I have to resist the urge to throw my glass across the room. "It was a unanimous decision to punish you in that way, and I cannot rescind it or make an exception."

"Then let me talk to all the gods and request it."

Hope surges in me when she doesn't immediately deny my suggestion, as she's shot down everything else I've asked for.

"It's Circe you'd need to convince," Zora finally says.

My brows furrow, and I forget about the bourbon. Stepping toward Zora, I ask, "Why Circe?"

"Because you fucked up the plans she had for you," Zora says. "And she's pissed. But if you appeal to her, maybe she'll convince the others."

"Wait a minute," I say, raising my hand. "What plans of Circe's did I fuck up?"

"It was her idea to throw you and Nyssa together."

That piece of information slams into me like a wrecking ball, and I stumble back a step. "What?"

Circe is the god of Fate. She's the ultimate meddler, so this shouldn't surprise me, but it does. She's never shown any interest in the workings of the Underworld.

"Circe put Vince on a collision course with Nyssa. Knew she'd kill him and that would earn her the ticket to your bridge."

My head spins with this revelation, and I'm having a hard time buying it. "And she just happened to make Nyssa walk right in front of a bus?"

"No," Zora says. "But Circe has a way of knowing what people will and won't do. What their limits are. If she didn't come to you then, she would have come at some other time."

"Why?" I mutter. "Circe doesn't know me. I have no importance to the gods."

It's very subtle, and I almost miss it, but Zora actually blushes a little.

I pounce. "Wait... it wasn't just Circe. You were involved too."

Zora lifts her chin, her face imperious. "Yes. Fine. I wanted you to be happy, and I might have bemoaned that to Circe, and then she came up with this plan."

"The crystal," I say, pointing my finger at her in accusation. "Another ploy to get me to fall for Nyssa. You wanted me to see her life."

"I want you to be happy," Zora says softly, reiterating her original intent. Then her expression hardens. "And, of course, you fucked it up by sending her away."

"It was a horrible decision. I was operating on emotion, and I was so angry that she came so close to permanent death."

"Bullshit," Zora says with a laugh. "You were scared how much she

made you feel when you almost lost her. So you took the easy way out and sent her away.”

“Fine... yes. I was scared, angry, whatever. I don’t care what you call it, I just want to fix it. She said things to me... I said things to her that weren’t true. Please, tell me how I can make this right and convince her to come back.”

Zora doesn’t answer right away, her eyes studying me for some deeper truth I haven’t revealed yet. But I’ve withheld nothing. It’s obvious I’m miserable without Nyssa, and I need to get her back.

“I’ll talk to Circe, but you need to prepare yourself that Nyssa might not want to return here.”

I nod, relief surging within me that she’ll at least try to get me to the First Dimension. “If that’s the case, I’ll have to be happy knowing she’s happy there. But I have to see it for myself.”

“Okay.”

“There’s something else,” I blurt as an idea strikes me.

Zora tilts her head, awaiting my request.

“Is it possible to turn an immortal, mortal?”

Her eyes widen. “You mean... could you be turned mortal and stay in the First Dimension with Nyssa?”

I nod, tamping down the surge of nausea that comes with such an idea. It would mean giving up my life, essentially. For someone as old as me, a mortal life of another forty to fifty years is a mere blink of an eye.

And yet, if that’s all I could have with Nyssa, I’d give up everything for it.

“I don’t know,” Zora says, and I can tell she’s perplexed by the idea. “But even if it could be done, I’m not sure I could give you up. You’re too important to the Underworld.”

“Then be glad I’m not actually asking that of you right now. But anything you can do to give me a small reprieve to visit her would be appreciated.”

“Not appreciated,” Zora says with a smirk. “You will owe me big-time.”

“Gladly,” I reply.

I’d give anything for just a few minutes with Nyssa.



## CHAPTER 26

### A

I'D LIKE TO say it took me a long time to get used to small-town living, but it didn't. Having actually slept on big-city streets, the quiet, slow ease of a tight community has been a balm. Of course, the security of having a home with a roof overhead and food in the fridge helps too.

The downside to living in such a community is that you know everyone. Not deeply, but you make acquaintances every day and you see them over and over again.

The hardest part has been meeting new people of the male variety. Edenton is smack in the middle of corn fields, and farming is big here. The men are hardworking and as earnest as they come.

They're also a little overeager in their pursuits, and when I go out for drinks with Karen at the local honky-tonk, I would suffer alcohol poisoning if I accepted every drink someone tried to buy me.

I get it... I'm new to town, and that makes me shiny, but I don't want to be on anyone's radar.

Karen nudges me in the ribs playfully. We're sitting at the bar with beers in front of us, and it's still early. The place is only about half full, but country music blares from the jukebox, and I've already turned down two drink offers.

"Jonas Bauer is totally staring at you," she says with a grin.

I don't bother looking over my shoulder to where he's playing pool with his friends. I also try not to laugh at Karen, because things sometimes move so slowly in Edenton that this is considered big news. If she knew about all the sleazy men I've had to fend off during my life on the streets, she would know I don't give a crap about Jonas Bauer staring at me.

"So, how was work today?" I ask, making it clear that my change of subject is because I have no intention of acknowledging Jonas's interest.

Karen rolls her eyes. "Same ol', same ol'. There's only so much excitement on an assembly line."

She works over in Waterloo at the John Deere plant, which is considered a really good job in these parts. It's probably where I'd be working had Zora not used her deity mojo to get me the job at Tonya's shop.

The bartender sets two shot glasses in front of me and Karen. "These are from Jonas."

"We don't want them," I say.

"Speak for yourself," Karen says, pulling one in.

"He already bought and paid for them," the bartender says. "Drink them or not, your choice."

"Fine, but don't let anyone buy me drinks after this, okay?"

"Whatever you say." He shrugs.

"Cheers," Karen says, holding up her shot glass. I have no clue what the amber-colored liquor is, but I guarantee it's not top shelf, not that it matters since I'm not drinking it. I rarely drink more than a beer or two when we go out. My days of chasing highs and inebriation are over.

"You can have mine," I say.

Karen downs her shot, gives me the stink eye, and pulls the other drink in. "What's the deal with you, Nyssa? You shun all attention from men."

There's no way I could ever begin to explain it to her, but before I can come up with a lie just so I don't have to, she gasps and asks in a hushed voice, "Are you gay? Is that why?"

I laugh and shake my head. "No, I'm not gay, but if I were, I wouldn't accept drinks from any women."

"Why not?" she asks, sucking down the second shot like a pro. "Did your heart get broken?"

A simple five-word question, and the staggering pain wells up inside me. My gaze drops to my beer, and I fiddle with a corner of the label. Swallowing hard, I admit, "Yeah... I got it broken bad, and I'm just not interested in putting it back out there again."

Karen doesn't say anything, so I twist to look at her. She appraises me before shaking her head. "I don't see it. I know we haven't known each other but a few months, but you don't seem like the type of woman who could ever break."

I blink at her in surprise, because she would indeed be talking about the old Nyssa. The one before I killed Vince. I was a resilient bitch who kept pushing on, no matter what.

But that Nyssa hadn't known Amell. That Nyssa never opened her heart

even a fraction of an inch to anyone.

“Everyone,” I say slowly, choosing my words with care, “has a breaking point. Everyone has their moments of weakness. But you’re right... it was hard to break me, and I won’t let it happen again. Thus, I won’t be accepting drinks.”

Karen has no clue how serious I am, because she grins and shakes her head. “So you’re just going to be alone the rest of your life?”

“I’m good at being alone, trust me.” I pick up my beer and sip.

“Well, at least you can be my wingman.” Karen twists on her stool and looks out over the bar. “Oh shit... Jonas is coming this way.”

I let my gaze slide to the mirror behind the bar and see him sauntering over with his pool stick in hand. He approaches on my left and leans his arm on the bar.

“You too good to accept a drink from me?” he asks with a charming smile.

“Not at all,” I assure him as I turn slightly his way. “I’m just not interested.”

This seems to offend as his chin jerks inward. “It was just a drink, for God’s sake. Not like I’m asking you to sleep with me.”

I turn away from Jonas, take another sip of my beer. “That’s good, because I wouldn’t be interested in that either.”

Karen snorts, but it’s not really funny. It was a direct cut, delivered so he will go away and stop wasting time on me.

“Frigid bitch,” Jonas sneers as he pushes away from the bar.

I catch movement behind me in the mirror, a large presence that has moved in close, and the words make me light-headed. “I suggest you apologize to the lady before I knock your teeth down your throat.”

It’s not the words so much. It’s the voice.

*Amell.*

I focus in on the mirror, see his large frame behind me, how he towers over Jonas. How had I forgotten how tall he was?

Jonas tips his head way back and holds up his hands in surrender. “Sorry, man.”

“Not me,” Amell growls. “Her.”

I still haven’t turned around so Jonas has to push back in beside me and lean forward so I can see him. “Sorry, Nyssa. That was uncalled for.”

“It’s okay,” I murmur.

Jonas scrambles away, and now it's awkward. I don't look at Amell. I don't know that I can handle it, so I hunch over my beer.

Karen nudges me again. "I don't think this guy wants to buy you a drink."

"I don't know what he wants," I say, and then loud enough so I hope he hears, "but it would be nice if he just went away."

Amell moves to my left, takes the place Jonas just vacated, and leans on the bar. I refuse to look at him.

"I just want to talk, Nyssa."

"You know this guy?" Karen gasps, then nudges me in the ribs again.

"Unfortunately, yes." I look at Amell, and for a moment, I'm struck dumb by the yearning in his blue eyes. But I shut it down. "I don't want to talk. Go back to Hell."

"Damn," Karen mutters, but she has no clue I'm not being rude. Just wishing him back to his actual home.

Amell sighs. "I wish you wouldn't make this difficult."

I open my mouth to tell him off, because how dare he accuse me of being difficult when he shredded my heart and kicked me out of his home. The same home he'd asked me to stay in forever.

But it strikes me mute when I realize that it's utterly quiet in the bar. No music, no patrons talking, no pool table balls clacking.

I twist in my stool and see that everyone is frozen in place. My gaze goes to Amell, and he smiles. I twist the other way and see that Karen's frozen as well, her eyes wide and focused on me since she was watching my exchange with Amell.

"What did you do?" I exclaim as I wheel around on him.

"Gave us some privacy," he says as he straightens.

And then it hits me... he's wearing normal clothes. A pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and—

"Where are your wings?" I exclaim in a panic, jumping off my stool and moving around to his back. Nothing but broad shoulders and a tee stretched taut. "Oh God... where are your wings?"

"Easy, Nyssa," Amell says gently as he faces me. "It's an illusion. They're hidden so I can move freely in the First Dimension."

"How are you even here?" I ask, completely dumbfounded. So much so, I've forgotten I'm mad and not speaking to him.

"Special dispensation from the gods," he replies. "And I don't have long, so can we please talk?"

Now that the surprise and wonder have abated, the crushing pain caused by looking at him floods back. I shake my head adamantly. “No. There’s nothing to talk about. I need you to leave.”

“I won’t,” he replies stubbornly. “I don’t have a lot of time, but I’ll stay here until I’m pulled back.”

Sighing with frustration, I hold out my hands. “Amell... I just... I can’t.”

“I made a terrible mistake with you,” he says.

My body goes rigid as my eyes lock onto him. I glance around at the surreal stillness of everything else in the bar, and it’s so quiet, I hear my heart pounding in my chest.

“Give me five minutes, Nyssa. I’m begging you, and I can guarantee the king of the Underworld has never begged anyone for anything before.”

A long breath escapes, and my resolve melts. I guess part of me wants to hear what he has to say so maybe I can make sense of how badly I misjudged things.

“Fine.” I look around and wave a hand. “But not here. Put this back to rights, and we’ll go somewhere else.”

Immediately, the sound returns, and it’s so loud and sudden, I jump. I turn to look at Karen, blinking in confusion because I was on the bar stool, and now I’m standing.

Reaching out, I put a hand on her shoulder. “You okay? You zoned out there for a minute.”

“Um... yeah,” she says with a brilliant smile. Her eyes cut to Amell. “Is he the one who broke your heart?”

“Yeah, and I’m going to give him five minutes to listen to what he says. I’ll be back.”

“Okay,” she says hesitantly, glancing at Amell. She leans in close. “But my vote is for forgiveness. He’s gorgeous.”

My smile is wan. “Be back soon.”

Grabbing my purse, I walk out of the building with Amell following. The bar is situated at the end of Main Street, so we’re only four blocks from my house, but I’m not taking Amell there. That’s my space, and I don’t want him in it.

There aren’t many people out as most of the businesses are closed, but it’s a pretty walk with all the streetlamps lit along the main thoroughfare. I cross my arms over my chest and Amell falls into step beside me.

“This is a nice place,” he says casually. “Of course, anything other than

the Underworld is nice.”

“Not true,” I say, then mentally kick myself for admitting I’ve been in worse places than Hell.

That I actually found beauty there.

“Have you seen Sammy?” he asks, and I wasn’t prepared for that to be an important question with our limited time.

I glance over at him. “Yeah... I work in his mom’s flower shop so I see him from time to time. He’s got a great life here.”

“Thank fuck,” Amell murmurs, and I try not to be warmed by the fact that Amell is invested in my brother’s security and happiness.

Which translates to him being invested in my own.

Amell takes my elbow, stopping to turn me toward him. “Nyssa... I don’t have a lot of time. I said things to you that weren’t true, and I need to correct that.”

“You’ll need to be more specific,” I say, anger flaring.

He nods, eyes shining with sympathy. “I gave you many untruths, and I did it to push you away. I thought you’d have a better life away from me, but as someone pointed out recently, I think I was just scared by the depth of my feelings. Jago nearly killed you, and I didn’t think I’d survive losing you.”

I furrow my brows, because that makes no sense. “So you didn’t think you’d survive losing me, yet you lost me anyway. You look like you’ve survived just fine.”

“Yeah, okay... maybe I survived, but I’m not living. Not really.”

I glance around, nibbling on my lip. This is a lot. It’s something I never thought I’d hear. I left Amell behind and never expected to see him again.

My eyes come back to him. “You know all the terrible things that happened to me over my life.”

Amell nods.

“Nothing had ever hurt me the way you did, because I never let myself care about anything. But I opened myself to you and laid my heart on the line... and you just... you crushed it. You did it in mere minutes and never once thought to try to talk it out with me. I don’t know why you’re here, but if it’s to apologize, I accept. But I don’t think there’s anything else to talk about.”

“But there is,” he insists, hands coming to my shoulders. “You still haven’t let me set my lies straight.”

“What lies?”

“All the ones I told you to make you leave. Don’t you remember?” I try not to. All I allow myself to retain is that Amell didn’t want me anymore. “I told you that I can’t ensure your happiness. That’s a lie, because I know I can. I told you I didn’t want to be responsible for you, but having you to care for is the most important, rewarding thing I’ve ever done in my long existence. I said I didn’t have time for you, but time moves achingly slow without you by my side. I even told you that you weren’t worth the effort, but in truth, creating dreams with you was the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“Amell,” I whisper, because admittedly, his words punch deep.

“I told you I don’t want commitment, and that’s the biggest lie of all. I want to bind my life to yours, and yours to mine, and I want to live until the end of time with you. I want to worship and love you every day until the world can’t go on anymore, and then I want to love you beyond that into the next world.”

That gets the most visceral reaction from me and I tear free of him. “Don’t use that word.”

“Love?” he asks gently, reaching right back for me. His hands go to my face this time, and he pulls me close. “It’s the best word I have to describe what I feel for you. I love you, Nyssa.”

My gaze drops, but he doesn’t let it stay there. A hand comes under my chin, and he forces it up. “I’ve given those words to one other person in my life, and that was my daughter. And while I love Thalia dearly and would sacrifice anything for her, if I had to go the rest of my life banished in the Underworld to never see her again, I could handle it. I can’t, however, handle another fucking day without you. I am begging you to give me another chance to prove it to you.”

“Another chance?” I ask, confused as to what that means. I’m alive again. Zora gave me a new body. “Would I have to die?”

“No,” he says on a long sigh, what I think is relief that I’m even entertaining this. “You would travel to the Underworld as any human would travel to another dimension.”

“But I’d age—”

Amell shakes his head. “No. If you let me, I can make you immortal. There’s strong enough magic to do it. There’s even a dimension called Semper Terra where they use stone magic to stop the aging process.”

“Oh... wow,” I mumble, mind spinning. I mean, he’s apologized. He said

he loves me. He's asking me to return to the Underworld.

Do I forgive him? I accepted his apology, and he's said all the right words, but... I still feel the pain he caused.

"If you don't want to come with me," Amell says, and my eyes fly back to him. "If you're happy here, especially since you're near your brother, I've petitioned the gods to grant me mortality. To free me from my obligation to the Underworld and let me live out a short but what I know will be a very satisfying life with you."

My eyes flare, my mouth falling open. "You'd do that for me?"

"I'd do anything, Nyssa. Anything you could imagine in that beautiful head of yours, I'll do it, if it means you'll come back to me. Say you forgive me."

"I do," I say without hesitation. Because his willingness to give up his life to be here with me tells me all I need to know.

"And do you love me?" he whispers, dipping his face close to mine.

I take stock of my feelings, surprised to find that deep cut of pain is gone. I reach to see if it's hiding in some recess of my heart, but I don't feel anything except unwavering love for this man.

I only know I want to spend the rest of my life with him.

"Yes," I whisper back, locking my hands around his wrists. "If I didn't love you, you'd have never been able to crush me the way you did."

"I'm so fucking sorry," he mutters, resting his forehead against mine. "I'll never, ever hurt you again. I swear it."

"I believe you," I murmur, lifting my face so my lips brush against his.

And then, he's kissing me hard. His arms wrap around me, and I sink into him, tears springing to my eyes at the familiarity of his taste and touch. Gratitude for finding something I'd lost and for the first time since leaving the Underworld, nothing but pure happiness coursing through me.

Amell lifts his mouth and peers at me solemnly. "Now... where do you want to live? My world or yours?"

Hmmm... that's something I need to think about.



## EPILOGUE

### MELL

NYSSA STRUTS DOWN the Bridge of Judgment, and while I know she's not exactly comfortable in her outfit, she is indeed smoking hot. While she prefers the relaxed ease of her First Dimension jeans and T-shirts, she doesn't mind the theatrics of head-to-toe black leather with stiletto boots, and she looks positively wicked. In her effort to win over the Dark Fae in this realm, she decided to play their game. Knowing how much they love to watch a judgment, cheering as each person is pushed over the edge, she decided to give them a better show than Calix ever did.

She twists her wrist—compliments of basic stone magic gifted to her and powered by the pendant hanging between her cleavage under the black leather bustier—and a scroll appears with the information about the recently departed.

“Listen, one and all, it is Judgment Day. Sitting before you is His Magnificence, King Amell, anointed by Zora, the god of Death. I am his wife, Queen Nyssa, and I shall reap you individually for the king's consideration.”

That's right.

My wife.

I married her in an elaborate Underworld ceremony the likes of which no one will ever see again. Marriages aren't done here, and ours wasn't performed with any nod toward religion. We don't have legal marriage licenses in Hell. But I wanted a ceremony—held on the bridge for all of Otaxis to watch—so that everyone would know Nyssa is beyond special to me.

We didn't exchange rings, as custom dictates in her dimension, but rather words.

Important words that rang out for all to hear, that she would rule by my side with equal weight and authority. Nyssa didn't want that responsibility, but no one else needed to know that. My public statement was meant to help

keep her safe and secure as she melds into this new life with me.

Lifting her chin and looking down at the fae watching the judgment on the other side of the river, she proclaims, “The recently departed will step forward, one by one, and receive the grace or vengeance of our esteemed ruler. Prepare yourselves.”

The guards pull the first wretch forward. I lean back on my throne, lazily resting my chin in my hand as I watch Nyssa do her job with a pride that makes my chest swell.

A young man, at most in his early twenties, is thrown at her feet. He looks up at her with fear and awe, tears streaming down his face.

“Alec Leonard,” she says as she consults the ancient-looking document in her hand. “You’ve been charged with the sin of rape, on not one but three occasions. How black is your soul?”

The man starts babbling, begging for mercy. Nyssa squats before him, a move that makes her ass look unfathomably good in those leather pants, and studies him. She’s looking into his eyes to see if there’s any chance of redemption.

Granted, since Nyssa started helping me on the bridge, she’s shown to have a softer heart than I do. Zora hasn’t seemed to mind the increase in requests for reincarnation, so I don’t begrudge Nyssa the tiny mercies she seeks.

The fact that this man is a rapist, though, is pretty much a guarantee he’s going over the edge. Her past can’t help but play a role.

However, even if she were inclined to grant him grace, I’m not going to do it. Every rapist goes into the river, no matter what.

Nyssa stands and looks at me. The crowd of Dark Fae below hold their breath as they watch her.

She holds out her arm, waits for a few dramatic seconds, and gives me the thumbs-down sign.

It’s an indication the fae are indeed starting to love Nyssa as they cheer before I even flick the guy over the edge. The roar of approval makes me smile, and I wave my hand, careening the doomed man off the bridge. His screams are barely heard over the whooping fae, who don’t quiet until after the ground stops rumbling in gratitude for the sacrifice.

Nyssa winks at me and turns to the next unlucky soul.



IT'S NOT OFTEN that Nyssa and I are separated in the castle. Issues regarding her safety have been worked out, for the most part. Over the few months she's been back in the Underworld with me, she's not only gained favor among the Dark Fae, but I've sufficiently protected her with stone magic.

To keep her from aging, and in essence granting her immortality, Circe gifted her with the stone pendant. As long as she wears it, she remains at her current age and doesn't succumb to sickness. It also provides her protection from physical harm as well as grants her nominal powers, such as the ability to bend distance—which also keeps her safe—as well as conjuring, although she doesn't use either very much.

I could've given all these things to Nyssa myself. The powers Zora bestowed upon me are godlike, but Circe offered the gift, and I wasn't about to anger her by refusing.

I check Nyssa's usual haunts—the new library I built with some nifty magic and a massive import of books from the First Dimension, then the outdoor gardens I built and which she maintains, and lastly, the kitchens.

It's there that I find her at one of the large stoves teaching Rhynda the fine art of cooking. She dumped the leather outfit in favor of some leggings and a button-down, her hair pulled into a ponytail. I don't know what they're preparing, but I smell garlic and lemon, and I know I'll be eating well tonight.

I lean against one of the work tables, my presence causing great discomfort to the workers, and watch with a barely concealed grin as my little human teaches a fae ravager.

“Now, we pour in a little white wine.” Nyssa tips a bottle while Rhynda bends over the pan. Steam rises, and she inhales. “We'll let this simmer for about ten minutes to burn off the alcohol.”

“That makes sense,” Rhynda says with a serious nod.

I duck my head, rub my hand over my mouth to conceal the smile that won't be contained, but I can't hold back the snicker.

Nyssa and Rhynda look over their shoulders at me. Nyssa rolls her eyes, and Rhynda snaps to attention.

Handing the spoon to Rhynda, the new queen of the Underworld instructs, “Put the chicken cutlets in there after the alcohol has burned off. Squeeze some more lemon over it and a few tablespoons of the capers.”

“Thank you for the lesson, Your Majesty.” Rhynda says. “I'll send a plate to your room when it's done.”

Nyssa smiles and pats Rhynda's arm, and it's a testament to her charm that the ravager actually smiles back at her.

As she walks my way, I push off the table and shake my head. "You've got everyone under your thumb. You know that, right?"

"Hardly," she drawls and walks into my embrace.

I wrap my arms around her waist and dip my head to nuzzle at her ear. "Want to get naked with me?"

"Always," she whispers, and that's all I need to bend distance to our suite.

But rather than deposit her at the bed, I stop before the fireplace mantle in the living area. The furniture has all been replaced with plush couches that invite lounging and a Persian rug to cover the cold marble floor.

"Let's check in on Nick," I say, turning her toward the large silver mirror above the hearth.

A wedding gift from me.

A magical camera, so to speak, where Nyssa can drop in to see how he's doing. We've used it a few times to check in on her friend Will, too, who, by all accounts, has reacclimated to his life in the First Dimension.

The mirror's surface undulates, goes opaque so our reflections disappear, and then focuses on what appears to be a diner. Nick is sitting in a booth sharing a banana split with a pretty girl about his age.

I don't know that I've ever seen anything more fucking wholesome in my life.

"Oh, look," Nyssa croons, her hand pressing to her chest. "He finally asked her out."

I move behind her, wrap my arms around her waist, and draw her back into my body. We watch silently as Nick and his love interest talk about a new movie coming out they both want to see.

"I love this. Thank you again," she says for the hundredth time.

"It was my pleasure." And it was. Anything to help ease her conscience over choosing to come to the Underworld with me.

It was never really a serious consideration, her staying there. Even though I offered, she didn't want it. She was at peace knowing Nick was happy and well cared for, and while the people of Edenton were nice and welcoming, she didn't fit in.

Or as Nyssa told me that night when we stepped through the veil, "I don't fit in anywhere in the First Dimension. It was nothing but pain for me."

I can't say I wasn't relieved with her choice. I was pretty sure my request to stay with her there wasn't going to be granted. Besides, I wanted more than an average mortal life with her.

"That's enough," Nyssa murmurs, turning into me. The mirror settles back to its normal reflection. "I believe you said something about getting naked? Why don't you do your magic mojo, get these clothes off me, and let's get it on."

I laugh, squeezing her tight. Dipping my head, I brush my lips against hers. "How about we do it the old-fashioned way? Let me strip you naked slowly while I taste every inch of skin that's revealed."

Nyssa shudders in my arms, telling me she likes that idea very much.

Gliding my lips along her jaw, over to her ear, I whisper, "Then... I'll bury my face between your legs and feast."

"Amell," she groans, her fingers pressing into my lower back. "Please say you're not joking."

Chuckling, I sweep her into my arms and carry her into our bedroom. "Not joking. But first you have to tell me how much you love me."

Sliding her hand along my neck, she regards me with amusement. "I tell you that every day, several times a day."

"Not enough," I declare.

Nyssa presses her mouth to mine, not to kiss me but to offer the words I want. "I love you, my king. More than anything in all the dimensions."

I nip her lower lip before dropping her on the bed, her eyes dark with anticipation.

Nyssa goes to her elbows, cocks an eyebrow. "Are you not going to give me the words back?"

I crawl onto the bed and hover over her body. Fingering the top button of her shirt, I murmur, "Oh, my queen... I'm going to show you rather than tell you. You're going to be very happy with how I'm about to express myself."

Laughing, Nyssa wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down for a kiss.

Explore the fantastical world of the Chronicles of the Stone Veil! [CLICK HERE](#) to see what's available now and what's coming soon in this series of love, loss, lust, and the otherworldly.

[Click here](#) to see other works by Sawyer Bennett

Don't miss another new release by Sawyer Bennett!!! [Sign up for her newsletter](#) and keep up to date on new releases, giveaways, book reviews and so much more.

## CONNECT WITH SAWYER ONLINE:

[Website](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Amazon](#)

[BookBub](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance,

and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

If you'd like to receive a notification when Sawyer releases a new book, sign up for her newsletter ([sawyerbennett.com/signup](http://sawyerbennett.com/signup)).