



Forbidden Hunger

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: When Darkness Calls, I Answer with Fire

As the leader of the rebellion against the Midnight Queen and her cruel reign, I never expected to find myself caught between four powerful men who awaken both sides of my nature.

I am the last daughter of the King of Succubae, born with angel wings and demon fire in my blood. My dual nature makes me uniquely dangerous—and irresistibly compelling to the four former kings who now fight at my side.

There's Dragan, the brooding gargoyle King of Shadow whose protective instincts match his raw power. His stone form melts away at my touch, revealing the jealous possessive alpha male who makes my blood run hot. Then there's Baron, the vampire whose sardonic wit hides a hunger that only I can satisfy. Cambion, the golden-eyed Fae king whose light balances my darkness in ways I never thought possible. And Theren, the Unseelie royal whose complicated past with me remains unfinished.

Each claims a piece of my heart, each feeds a different aspect of my soul. Together, we're building a resistance against forces that would tear the realms apart.

But when ancient prophecies surface and my mysterious parentage becomes the key to everything, I must embrace both my light and darkness to save not only my men, but all the realms.

The Midnight Queen calls me the harbinger of death. My enemies fear what I might become. My lovers know what I truly am.

As war looms and allegiances shift, I'll need the strength of all four men to survive what's coming—and they'll need me to keep their own darkness at bay.

One thing is certain: the fate of worlds rests on choices I alone can make, and time is running out.

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CHAPTER ONE

DRAGAN

Mercenary Stronghold

She's alive!

Seeing Eilish fills me with immense relief followed by gratitude, the likes of which I've never felt before.

She sighs into my shoulder and I can feel how overwhelmed she is. Noni climbs off my shoulder and hops onto Eilish and immediately begins tending to her wounds, which aren't as deep as my own.

"Noni must focus on healing Mr. Dragan," she says as she hops back onto my shoulder.

Eilish eyes me with worry. "Dragan... will you be all right?"

"I'm fine," I insist, although I don't know the extent of my own wounds.

"Should I go to Earlann and find you a healer?" she continues.

"We were lucky to make it out of that battle without attracting Variant's attention. Let's get back to the stronghold and tend to our wounded there."

Myerdoth offers to assist me onto a horse and I accept his help.

The gateway to the mortal realm is only a few miles away, but the journey through the scorching sands nearly bleeds the remaining strength from my body. Sweat mixes with blood and marsh water, soaking through the lining of my armor until I feel chapped and sore. I can barely keep my eyes open.

I can see the canyon valley in the distance and Eilish reaches for my hand. “We’re almost there,” she says encouragingly.

Sentries blow the horns and the south gate to the stronghold opens. The camp is set just inside the walls and healers tend to the wounded. Eilish and Myerdoth help me to our tent and Myerdoth lowers me onto the floor.

“Can you get a Mage or a healer?” Eilish asks him. He nods and disappears as she leans over me and helps me remove my armor. When she sees the gash in my stomach, she recoils and then swallows hard.

“How bad is it?” I ask.

She nods. “Pretty bad.” She looks at my face and holds the top of her hand against my forehead, in the age-old way of judging my temperature. “You’ve lost a lot of blood, Dragan.”

A few minutes later, Myerdoth returns with a member of the Mages Guild with him. The older woman immediately enters the tent and sidles up alongside me. She focuses her hands above the wound and uses her power to knit the injury closed.

“How long until I heal internally?” I ask between breaths. The pain is terrible.

“Your body is exhausted,” the old woman answers, her long gray hair falling in front

of her face as she lifts her head from her handiwork to look at me. “I would suggest a week or so until you are fully healed, maybe less if you have regular healing treatments.” The mage hands Eilish a small black pouch. “Make sure he drinks at least one cup of this each morning, or else he will prolong the healing process.”

As the mage leaves the tent, Kolvar steps inside. “King Galmer wishes to see you both.”

“Dragan’s in no shape,” Eilish starts but I wave her concern away.

“I’m fine. Just... help me up.”

Kolvar comes to my side and assists me in standing. I’m unbalanced on my feet and I have to lean against him. He looks at me with concern in his eyes.

“I could tell the king,” he starts.

“You’ll fucking tell him nothing,” I interrupt as I glare at Kolvar, followed by Myerdoth, followed by Eilish. “And will the three of you stop fucking babying me?”

Eilish smirks as she looks at Myerdoth and Kolvar, who just shakes his head.

The entrance to the stronghold opens to see us inside. The market is filled with people draped in black cloth as they cry for the lives lost in the liberation.

An enchantment causes petals of white lilies to fall from the sky like snow. A choir of female elves sings a low lament in honor of the dead, their voices rising in a beautiful, somber melody.

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Eilish lowers her head and I reach over and tap her on the shoulder. She looks up at me and I offer her a smile. “You did the right thing—regardless of what you see around you.” I take a deep breath and steel myself against the pain from my wound. “This is just what war looks like.”

When we arrive in the courtyard of the Hall of Clans, King Galmer stands in his garden, long hair blowing in the hot breeze as he turns his gaze on us.

“More mercenaries returned than I had thought possible,” he says. “We feast tonight in honor of the fallen, but rest assured the fae you rescued are safe.”

Eilish and I bow our heads humbly to the king. I do my best to stand unattended, but it’s a feat.

Galmer moves to stand before us. “You and your allies may seek refuge among us. Those who wish to join your cause may do so freely.”

“But?” Eilish asks.

He nods at her. “But... I speak for my own in that we don’t want to be thrown into the thick of war with a false king and a crazed sorceress.” He takes a breath. “The Midnight Queen considers you an enemy and therefore you endanger us all with your presence.” Galmer takes a deep breath. “I wish for you to understand that, as your flag flies beside the other clans here.”

“Are you asking us to leave?” I demand.

Galmer looks at me. “No, I’m asking you to understand.”

“We do,” Eilish answers and reaches over, taking my hand.

Galmer nods at her again. “Come to the meeting tomorrow night. If the people speak in your favor, we will offer you a more permanent place for you to grow your resistance.” He clears his throat and faces Eilish. “I wish to have your ear for a moment, Lady Fulthain.”

I immediately straighten my posture and Eilish looks over at me. “It’s okay, Dragan. You need to go back and rest.”

She’s right. But I thought I lost her once...

“I promise her protection,” Galmer says with a smile as he faces me. “You have my word that she will be safe.”

“Dragan,” Eilish starts.

I nod and bow to the king as Eilish joins him inside. I stay behind and gesture for Myerdoth to accompany me back to the tent. The gargoyle is quick to comply.

“You can trust the king,” he says and I just nod.

“You mentioned this Stone Grimoire earlier,” I start as Myerdoth supports me with one shoulder. I accept his offer because I’m too weak to continue standing on my own.

“I did.”

“Tell me everything you know about it and where it was last seen.” He looks up at me

with an irritated expression. I clear my throat. "Please."

"To understand, we need to visit the library," he responds. "Are you capable," he starts.

"I'm fucking fine!" I insist.

"And fucking stubborn," Myerdoth adds as he shakes his head. "If you pass out, I'm going to leave you where you drop."

"Fine."

We weave through the streets and I'm beyond grateful to have Myerdoth beside me. I couldn't make this trek alone. When I feel as if I can't move another inch, Myerdoth announces we've arrived.

We make our way to the large library and find a table near the back. Books float from one shelf to the next as mages use spells to replicate texts destroyed in the raids and small fae creatures organize the tomes.

I sit across from Myerdoth and the gargoyle watches the mages with distrust.

"The witch who created us wrote all of her spells in a black, leather journal with the symbol of strength and honor upon its cover." He traces the symbol onto a scrap of paper. The scratch of the quill causes chill bumps to bloom on my skin. He passes the scrap of paper to me and I study the strange drawing.

"Watch by day, protect by night. Only we can defeat darkness," he starts.

"With darkness," I finish as I look up at him. "I've known the oath all my life. It was from the grimoire?"

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“Yes. The oath had been ingrained into us from the start. We are natural protectors, the gargoyle race.”

“Then you were there from the beginning?”

“I was.”

“Tell me the story of the witch you mentioned earlier,” I say. “Please.”

Myerdoth’s lips part slightly into the only semblance of a smile I’ve ever seen from him. “She gave us life and allowed us freedom, but I chose to stay with her. As her first creation, there was an incredible bond between us.”

I hold up a hand. “Wait a second,” I start and then take a pause. “Are you telling me, you were the first gargoyle?”

He nods as I try to decide if he’s full of shit, delusional or just completely insane.

“I see the doubt in your eyes,” Myerdoth continues as he extends his forearm and unties a brown leather cuff that covers his skin. Beneath the cuff is a glowing red rune—and it’s in the exact shape of the picture he scribbled on the piece of paper.

“What is it?” I ask.

“The mark,” Myerdoth answers. “That shows I was the first of my kind.”

“What does it do?”

“Protects me,” he answers with a shrug. “I can’t be killed unless the mark is destroyed,” he continues as he covers the rune with the heavy leather cuff once more.

“Hence why you keep it covered?”

“Hence why I keep it covered. In times of war, I cover the leather with metal armor.”

I nod as my thoughts return to the witch and the story of the grimoire. “This woman created you and allowed you freedom, yet you chose to stay with her.”

“I did.”

“You loved her?”

“She was my mate,” Myerdoth reveals with a quick nod. “We only have one in all our lifetimes.”

“Is that true?” I ask, surprised to hear it.

“I would think you already know the answer to that question.”

I think of Eilish and I swallow hard. “Yes, I suppose I do.”

THEREN

Oronrel

I know I should fight these visions, the ones that pull me into her darkness, but I can’t. I glide my hands across her alabaster skin as my hips thrust into the wet,

pulsating suction that holds me captive. The memory of Eilish's love makes me dread ever leaving, ever seeing the light of day and feeling the burden of being king. Here, she's my home—and my undoing. I lick the sweet-tasting sweat from her lips and push her knees toward her chest. She gasps, squeezing around me like a vise.

The snow melts beneath our heat, pooling around us...

Water fills Cambion's mouth as he reaches for me. My arms refuse to move, but my muscles twitch. Morrigan stands over him and I see the horror of his fear in his golden eyes...

Blue eyes stare up at me as the sound of Eilish's moans fill my ears. Pale fingers reach up to brush the hair from my face. The gesture is kind and out of place in the midst of our desperate race to reach inside one another's souls.

Something breaks... the vision begins to shift between the study in Oronrel and the glade. Morrigan... she is weak... now's my chance...

Glass shatters, and I stare into my own reflection. Scarlet liquid pools between my fingers. I pry a piece from the mirror and tear open my robes. I blink in the darkness of the study and see the rune Morrigan used to bespell me. I carve it out of my flesh, feeling the heat of my blood sizzle as I defy the magic. My reflection screams and claws at the surface, but I grit my teeth and dig a little deeper. A chunk of skin falls to the floor amid so much blood.

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My hands slip and the mirror drops from the wall, breaking into a thousand tiny shards.

“I am... free.”

The magic of the Midnight Queen begins to fade, and I run for the door, glancing back at the droplets of blood that serve as a reminder of my path. I look at my wound and heal it with a simple charm.

I must find Cambion and the others, to warn them. The door eases open without so much as a squeak. My bare feet tap softly against the petrified wood. Holding my breath, I move quickly between each open archway until I reach the throne room. The doors open just barely wide enough to let me through.

Water... there's water everywhere.

So, my vision wasn't completely false. Is my brother still alive?

The doors open suddenly, and the servant who watched over Cambion leads a throng of soldiers toward me. “Halt! I'm your king!” I shout, but the soldiers don't stop.

The man looks at me with narrowed eyes. I take a step closer, my mouth set in a line.

“Until Oronrel falls, I'm its leader!” I say with steely reserve. “The Unseelie Court hasn't yet removed me from my position. It's still my bloodright to—”

“I am the head of the Unseelie Court now,” retorts the man I thought was a servant.

I pull back because I don't understand his words. What the fuck is he talking about?

His eyes flicker and his face begins to shift, to morph into someone or something else. The men under his lead begin to back away from him, their mouths dropping open in astonishment and horror.

As we watch, he morphs into a creature I haven't seen in many years. The Cockatrice... at least, that's what he appears to be. He must have come across dark magic over the years in order to alter his appearance in such a way.

I should have recognized him. The Cockatrice snaps his fingers and the Unseelie suddenly jump at attention, clearly under the thrall of the creature's dark magic. They thrust me to the floor, using their weight to hold me down as I fight against them.

Morrigan's dwindling magic still weakens me, so it's a fight I can't win. A heavy, blunt object strikes the back of my head and I see stars as my body goes limp.

I can hear the sound of movement and action as the Cockatrice summons the Unseelie Court to this room. But as I watch, it is only the women of noble blood who fill the seats around me as I lay limply on the obsidian floor. I don't know where all the men have gone.

"Our great leader has defied the orders of one of our most holy figures," the Cockatrice announces. "The Midnight Queen has long been a treasured ally and friend to this great kingdom." A round of shocked inhalations and sounds of outrage fill the room. The Cockatrice continues: "Oronrel may suffer the loss of a blood-born king, but we gain the Midnight Queen's allegiance in return. He's a traitor to our people and a known affiliate of the war criminals who plot our demise."

"Don't listen to him. He lies!" I scream as I lift my head from the ground and am rewarded with intense dizziness and nausea. The Cockatrice must have afflicted me

with magic, as I can't imagine the blow over my head would leave me feeling such.

The Cockatrice speaks over my pleading. "We have all watched the Unseelie King's sanity slip further and further away since the Great War that sent his brother into exile. Haven't we already suffered at the hands of his father long enough, a man who succumbed readily to the darkness?" A round of cheers and claps ripple through the room. The Cockatrice then quiets all the women and continues his speech. "At the very least Theren, Son of Elioth, is guilty of treason for conspiring with the enemy!"

I watch as heads nod and voices sound in agreement. I feel so weak, so ill, there's nothing I can do to force them to listen to reason, to ignore this insanity. Treason is punishable by death in Oronrel. Without me to protect the Unseelie people, there's nothing stopping Variant and Morrigan. The Cockatrice might not be working for them, but his greed will serve their interests if he's still devoted to Abedon.

The soldiers, who were once under my rule, pull me from the throne room as the court deliberates, and they toss me into a grimy cell in the dungeons far below the castle.

Once I'm imprisoned within my own stone cell and the guards have left me to my solitude, I punch the wall, feeling my knuckles tear and bleed. I broke free from Morrigan only to be imprisoned by my own fucking people. My head still throbs painfully as I flop onto the rickety cot. The place where I carved the rune from my flesh is already healed. I must regain my strength if I'm to escape.

The door to the dungeon swings open. I look up but I can see little in the darkness. But I can hear and the sound I hear grates against my nerves. The Cockatrice chuckles darkly.

"You are now an enemy of your own kingdom, Theren."

“What do you get out of placing Morrigan in charge?”

“When the Midnight Queen is confident she will be victorious in her mission, I shall set Lord Abedon free,” the creature responds. “He will once again rule these realms and my kind will flourish, as we did under his reign, before he was exiled from this land. The Singularity must be completed; darkness must eclipse the light and burn it with chilling fire until there’s nothing left but ash and rubble.”

CHAPTER TWO

MORRIGAN

Earlann

The kelpie is dead. The artificer is gone. The fae have escaped. The Threstis destroyed. Physical pain is the least of my worries as I climb out of Variant’s bed. Servants scatter, trying to get out of sight as though they fear I’ll lose control and smite them.

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They are right to think so.

I shuffle to the study, where Variant researches the ritual. He barely glances up at me as the spell I've placed him under demands obedience, forcing him to sift endlessly through the pile of ancient texts.

"Eilish was successful in liberating the fae in the Threst," he says. "It won't be long before word spreads through the realms."

"Don't remind me."

"I suppose you also don't want to hear that Theren has freed himself from your witchcraft?"

I stop instantly, turning to look at Variant. "He what?"

Variant glares at me. "When Eilish knocked you unconscious, it weakened your spell on Theren and he was able to break himself out of the enchantment," he explains. "A maid found his skin with the rune lying on the floor in a heap of blood and glass."

"He cut it out of himself?" I repeat, strangely awed.

"Exactly," Variant responds with a frown. "He's been arrested and the Unseelie Court has declared him an enemy of Oronrel." Variant steps away from the texts and walks over to me. "You have no allies in the Unseelie Kingdom. If we let Oronrel slip through our fingers, we won't be able to recover. Theren's army was significant even after he failed to secure the Veil. We could use his numbers especially after the mess

at theThrest.”

I reach for the ties of my robes and pull them free. Soft fabric pools around my ankles as Variant stares unabashedly at the curves of my naked body.

“Would you be willing to take Theren’s place?” I ask in a sultry tone. “Would you be willing to unite the fae courts beneath one king and lead a force into the Veil?” I ask as I walk to him and reach out, raking my fingers through the long locks of his hair, I brush my lips along his neck as his hands grip my waist. “What do you say, Variant?”

He licks his lips and reaches between us to unbuckle the belt at his waist, his gaze never leaving mine. Then he reaches inside his trousers and frees himself from the restraining fabric. My hands replace his, caressing him to hardness until my fingers ache to hold his girth. Variant cups my rear and lifts me, setting me down on top of the cluttered desk, not bothering to clear it. I groan loudly and Variant doesn’t wait to hear any protests or encouragement as he steps between my thighs.

I shiver as I watch him spit into his palm and slide his fingers between my folds to rub and stroke the saliva into my flesh until my body yields. There’s no other preparation, no soft words of affection, just two bodies uniting. No gentleness exists between us; we are raw and hungry for release, seeking numbness from all the pain. Variant pulls away slightly, but not out of my body as he tilts his pelvis and presses forward harder. He clenches his jaw as my body fights the intrusion. The sweet, sweet burn causes my eyes to roll back.

“This means nothing, Morrigan.”

It hurts so good. Variant seats himself completely inside me as though it’s where he always belonged—more so than any throne. Bucking my hips, I lean up to press a kiss to his mouth, but he pulls away. He turns me around and pushes my chest against the desk. He lifts one of my legs and bends it at the knee, spreading me open for his

claim. His hands grip me tighter as he slides in and out, moving back halfway before slamming deeper inside, grinding his hips and expertly caressing every sensitive place within me.

“Don’t fight the spell, Variant. This feels so right.”

“I hate you...”

“Then fuck me harder.” I meet his thrusts as he impales my quivering body over and over with his thick and rigid cock. My thighs tremble with a pleasure and I realize I’ve grown addicted to him—to his body, to the way he makes my body sing.

Suddenly, I want to shatter the intense sense of power and defiance he holds dear until nothing else exists in his world but me.

The moans that fill the study are carnal and untamed as Variant’s hand moves to wrap around my throat, pulling my back against his chest. I’m close... so close... hanging on by the tips of my fingers. One final thrust and the world begins to spin. He uses my body for his pleasure, and I enjoy the ride.

Variant spills his seed inside me and then moves away from me with a hiss. I spin around and reach for him, but he brushes off my hold. His eyes blink rapidly as he fights the spell that weaves around him, forcing his submission. I won’t let him go. I’ve lost Theren—now Variant is all I have left.

When he finds calm once more, he bends at the waist and breathes deeply. “I will go to Oronrel. But I grow tired of this game, Morrigan. In the end, I will either submit to your treachery or I will fight free as Theren has.” He glares at me. “I have no love for you.”

But he’s my only hope. I can’t lose Variant.

My magics reach for him. The rune on his left pectoral flares to life. “What you fail to see, Variant, is that I don’t care if you love me or not. I’ve loved and been scorned by forces muchstronger than you and it hasn’t broken me. If you seek to wound me with words alone, I hate to inform you, but you’ll have to try harder.”

I leave him there as I pull my robes on once more. He’s served his purpose for now. I have no other need for him at the moment.

But something unexpected creeps up... Silvanus.

I sense his presence. He is close.

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

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The portal opens and scorching air puffs into my face with a cloud of hot sand. Pyre seems unfazed by the harsh landscape. Baron and Aima come through next, simultaneously complaining about the heat. The vampire hisses and holds his middle finger up to the sun. With Pyre's help, he's learned to tolerate the sun, but that doesn't mean he particularly enjoys the intense light.

I walk beside Aima, trying to gauge where she's at mentally. Since she awakened in the Veil, I've watched her don a mask to hide her true feelings. "How are you faring?"

"Better than I expected."

"Pyre told me where they found you," I mutter. "Aima, if there's anyone who understands what you've been through, it's me. No one else has suffered greater at the hands of the Unseelie than the two of us."

"I heard about the ritual Morrigan is trying, Cambion," she spits the words back at me. "I know you think it's me who's required for it, so... no. You don't know what I'm going through."

"That ritual won't come to pass," I start.

Aima shakes her head. "It seems like I escape one ill fate only to be ensnared by another. What you've been through in Oronrelis nothing compared to what I've seen and felt at the hands of our people," she barks at me and then takes a deep breath. "All I need is space." She pauses to glance at me over her shoulder. "It's nothing personal, and at the same time, it is. I need to find myself again, Cambion."

“Well, I’m here if you need me.”

My feet sink into the sand as we trek through the dunes. Baron continuously asks if Pyre can cast a portal, no matter how many times the necromancer explains magic is different in the mortal realm. Flumph is truly no better with his complaining. Thankfully, Noni and I have enough decency not to bother Pyre as he navigates the unforgiving scorch of the Decolate Borders.

It takes three days to reach what appears to be a newly built mercenary outpost. A man with a red scarf over the lower half of his face aims a crossbow at us as we approach.

“Who are you and what do you want?” he demands.

“We are allies of Kolvar, Chieftain of the Banefire Horde,” Baron replies. “My companions and I are the Rebel Lords of The Vindication. We stand with all those who fight for freedom in the realms.”

“Aye, we know of The Vindication,” the man says as he lowers his weapon and steps aside. “Apologies,” he says. “Can’t be too careful after the last battle.”

The sentry whistles, and an armed escort appears, in order to take us to the entrance of the Mercenary Stronghold. Before we follow him, I turn back to the man. “Of what battle do you speak?” I ask.

The sentry looks at me as though he’s shocked I don’t already know.

“Lady Fulthain rode to theThrestwith a few hundred of our best. She successfully freed the fae and liberated that horrid place. There were losses, but we all sleep better at night knowing theThresthas been destroyed.”

That Eilish is accepted as a leader to these people is a thought I struggle for a moment to grasp.

The gate drops and Kolvar runs to Aima, sweeping her up into a welcoming embrace. I glance away to give them a moment of peace. Baron and I push forward with Pyre, Flumph, and Noni, headed toward the heart of the stronghold where we find a utopia of sorts. I can hardly believe my eyes as species that once warred with one another trade goods and exchange pleasantries.

Flumph's eyes bulge out of his head. "The fucks goin' on here? It ain't right, I says."

Kolvar catches up with us. "Come, my friends. Let me take you to the others."

The large satyr guides us through the streets and stops just outside another gate. This one seems newly crafted—black, with a strange emblem on it I don't recognize. Though most of the clans here are familiar enough to identify, this is one I haven't seen before.

Kolvar unlocks the gate and lets us pass.

A moment later, Eilish walks out of a shadowed doorway with Dragan and another male gargoyle by her side. Just the sight of her is enough to make my heart beat faster. She sees us and her expression breaks into a huge smile.

For a second, I allow myself to hope she's glad to see me. But she bypasses me as Baron throws his arms around her before kissing her in such a way that the rest of us suddenly feel uncomfortable. Dragan even clears his throat.

Eilish separates herself from Baron and pulls Pyre into a warm embrace, then Aima, and finally, she faces me.

“Cambion,” she says.

“Eilish,” I answer as I swallow hard. All eyes are on us both and it feels like an eternity passes before she takes the steps that separate us and she wraps her arms around me. It takes me a moment to bring my arms up to hold her—I’m so stunned. I didn’t imagine I would receive this type of warm reception. I thought she hated me. She holds me for a few heartbeats longer than everyone else.

“Dragan,” I say as I face the immense gargoyle who glares down at me.

“You’re alive,” he answers and then turns away from me, taking his place beside Eilish. He’s protective of her—he always has been, but now it seems even more so. He won’t leave her side and I notice, with interest, that Baron takes up her opposite side. Neither Baron nor Dragan have said one word to each other. I can’t help but wonder why.

Flumph all but mauls Eilish, climbing up and wrapping his small arms around her neck and squeezing. “You have no fuckin’ idea how happy I is to sees your face! It been hell livin’ with these damn giants.”

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Eilish smiles and rolls her eyes. She gives Noni a snuggle as well and gestures for us to follow her inside. “There are still many things left to be built, but King Galmer says we can stay for as long as we need to. This is the start of something great here, I can feel it.”

She turns around to face me and her smile appears a bit sadder. The others continue forward, marveling at our new surroundings. I’m overcome with the need to speak with her, in private. So, I pull her aside.

“I need to talk to you,” I say as I swallow down any pride I still have left.

“I’m sure it can wait, Cambion, you must be exhausted.”

“No, it can’t wait,” I answer as I reach out and take her hand. She looks down in surprise.

“I need to tell you...” I start and then lose the words. “I’m sorry, Eilish.”

“Cambion, this can wait,” she says and starts to pull away from me but I only hold her hand even tighter.

“No, it can’t wait,” I insist. “I have done horrible things. I’ve treated you... terribly and I ruined my relationship with Dragan, Baron and Pyre.”

“We know you had your reasons,” she offers.

“They weren’t good enough,” I insist. Her eyes go wide. Clearly, she isn’t

accustomed to me apologizing. And I feel ashamed for that fact. “I want you to know I’ve changed, Eilish. Everything that’s happened to me... it’s all given me insight and perspective I didn’t have before.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” She studies me with a smile. “Is that all?”

“No,” I say as I shake my head. I glance down at my hand that still holds hers. “There’s more. Something I have to get off my chest.” I take a deep breath. “It was my fault that your mother and sister died,” I say the words and they sound like they aren’t even coming from my mouth. They’re foreign and ugly and I hate them with every part of my being. “I never meant to betray you and I never meant to fail your family. Their deaths are on my hands and for that I’m so sorry.”

“I know,” she says sadly as she glances down and pulls her hand from mine.

“You know?” I repeat, puzzled. “How do you know?”

“I may not know everything, but I know enough,” she answers as she takes a deep breath and faces me once again. “And I’m upset, Cambion, but I... I don’t hate you.”

“I am the one who took your memories,” I continue.

“I know. And you took them because you wanted to protect me from the grief of knowing my mother and sister were dead.”

“Yes, but I also did it to cover my own ass.”

“I’ve thought of that as well,” she says and nods. “I’m sure that’s why you got me addicted to the Atacomite as well?”

I swallow hard. I don’t know how she’s figured all this out, but she has. And, now,

the only thing left to do is admit my mistakes and try my fucking best to atone for them. “Yes, I introduced you to the Atacomite because I didn’t want anyone to ask questions. I wanted it to seem like whatever you said, they were simply the ramblings of an addict.”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think all of this through and while I am still angry and hurt,” she starts before breathing in deeply. “I’ve realized that none of those feelings will help us get any closer to the goal we’re all after.”

“I don’t... I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” she answers with a shrug. “But let’s no longer worry about the past when we’ve got a pretty rocky future that needs all the focus it can get.”

Her smile makes me feel as if my insides are breaking into a million pieces. She is truly the best example of goodness and I don’t know how I failed to see it before. How could I ever have called her a demon.

She is the closest thing to perfection I’ve ever seen. And if I’ve been lucky enough to earn a second chance for her favor, I will honor her in every way possible.

CHAPTER THREE

BARON

Mercenary Stronghold

“What the hell do you mean, Cambion is the one who erased Eilish’s memories and got her addicted to the Atacomite?” I demand as I realize the fucker failed to fill me in on this juicy morsel.

My head is spinning and I can barely feel the ground beneath my feet. Just when I'd started to let go of the past and give Cambion the benefit of the doubt, this shit happens? I want to pound my fists into his face until he wishes he was back in the hands of the Unseelie. My eyes snap over to Eilish.

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Her gaze is sad, but her posture is relaxed. “Did you know this?” I ask her.

“She knows,” Dragan explains as Eilish nods. “Kolvar, too.”

“If she knows, then why isn’t she demanding Cambion’s blood? I’d want the fucker’s head on a platter!”

“Baron, please calm down,” Eilish says but I can’t calm down. And I can’t, for the fucking unlife of me, figure out why she isn’t irate!

“Luckily for Cambion, Eilish isn’t you,” Dragan says darkly and I wonder what the fuck is wrong with him. We don’t like each other on the best of days but the way he’s acting now—something is going on with him. He’s acting more prick-like than usual.

“You can’t think this is okay?” I insist as I face him.

He frowns at me. “Of course I don’t think it’s fucking okay.”

“Then why aren’t you freaking out about it?”

“What good would that do?” he responds with a shrug. “I’ve decided to let Eilish handle it the way she sees fit. And whatever she decides, is fine by me.”

I study him with narrow eyes. “Who are you and what have you done with the former King of all Assholes?”

Dragan chuckles as I frown at him and start pacing, trying to rein in my anger before

I do something stupid like kill the one guy Eilish needs to feed her lightness. Well, she could feed from Variant, if such were an option. From where I stand, neither option is looking good right now. I don't know whether she just has bad luck with men or if the universe is trying to piss me off but, regardless, I'm good and pissed.

"You can feel the way you want to but Cambion's going to need to perform some miracle of redemption for me to trust his sorry ass again," I growl.

"Can I speak to you alone for a minute?" Dragan asks as he starts for a clearing maybe twenty feet from the barrage of tents. I follow him and once I'm in hearing distance, he starts in.

"You need to drop this whole Cambion shit," he says.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I demand. "He fucking stole her memories and got her addicted to Atacomite!"

"I'm fully aware, Baron."

"Okay, then what the fuck am I missing here?"

"It's none of our damn business, that's what you're missing! This is between the two of them—Cambion and Eilish. It doesn't concern us."

I get right up into Dragan's face. "You really believe that bullshit? Eilish is ours. You and I both know it. It's written in the stars, according to Pyre and the Midnight Queen."

"Yes, but you and I aren't the only ones who have claim to her, or she wouldn't be over there talking to Cambion." He points out the two of them and I stop fuming to watch them for a few seconds.

“She needs Cambion as much as she needs us,” Dragan says. “Without him...”

“I’m aware of what the fuck happens to her without him. The darkness takes over.”

“Right.”

I tug at the strands of my hair. “I just don’t understand how she can...” I start.

“How she can what?” Dragan demands.

“I was furious when I found out Morrigan erased my memories, but Eilish... she’s acting like it doesn’t matter to her that Cambion stole hers.”

Dragan shrugs. “I guess she figures it doesn’t matter now.”

“Doesn’t matter?” I repeat, in shock.

His eyebrows reach for the sky. “What’s done is done. It’s in the past. No use in dwelling on something Eilish can never change.” He takes a breath. “And onto another subject,” he starts.

I look over at him. “There’s more?”

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He glares at me. “I know about what happened between you, Pyre and Eilish.”

Surprise echoes through me but I try not to show it. “So what?”

“So we all have claim to her as we mentioned before.”

“And?”

“And I think we need to sit down and figure out what the fuck this looks like moving forward.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve never had to share a woman before and I’m fairly sure you haven’t either.” He takes a breath. “Not to mention the fact that we all hate each other.”

I glance at Cambion. “Some more than others.”

“That’s all I have to say.” He starts to walk away but then turns around again. “And before you and Pyre go off to fuck her again, I’d appreciate a heads up.”

“Fuck you!” I respond, anger seeping through me. “I don’t fucking owe you anything.”

“Then you won’t care if I take her with Myerdoth or maybe Kolvar or fucking Cambion for that matter?”

“As long as Eilish wants it, I don’t care who you fuck her with.” That’s a lie but I’m not going to tell him as much. Dragan can go fucking die and rot in hell for all I care.

I walk away from the gargoyle to find Aima sitting on top of the wall not far from the line of tents. I jump up to join her.

“I never thought anything was beautiful about the mortal realm, but the stars are lovely here,” she says. “Oronrel used to have the most breathtaking skies, but now it seems like the stars are hiding beneath a thick fog of deceit.”

“May I?” I ask, motioning to the bandages on her side. She nods and I peel them back. Pyre is right—the magic here is different, sluggish and thin, but I use one of my potions to apply a poultice to her wounds. “That should speed up the healing. You’re strong; you’ll bounce back in no time.”

She nods and we both grow silent, watching the stars and the mercenaries below as they bustle about their business.

“Are vampires usually this quiet?” she asks.

“I’m just trying to figure Cambion out,” I answer with a shrug. “And that’s taking up most of my thoughts because I’m so damn confused.”

“Confused about what?”

“Eilish trusts him and the others insist Cambion isn’t our enemy, but he’s made no effort to prove me wrong in my assumptions. And to know he wiped Eilish’s memories?”

Aima shakes her head. “Cambion isn’t who you think he is, Baron. I’ve known him for a long time, but if I thought for a second that he was a threat to our cause, I

wouldn't hesitate to kill him myself. He screwed up in a lot of ways, yes and some bigger than others, but we all have."

"Yeah, that's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Then maybe you should start listening?"

I snort a little and we watch the clouds obscure the moon. My senses are heightened at night and I smell other vampires within these walls, vampires I have no intention of ever meeting.

"Baron!" Kolvar calls. "Come meet the other clan leaders."

Aima gives me a look filled with amusement as I leap from the wall, landing on my feet in front of the satyr. He raises a brow, but says nothing. We walk to the gate, where a collective of males stand looking mildly constipated. One of them is a vampire. He watches me as though there's some unspoken truce between us. There's no such thing. I trust vampires about as much as I trust elves, and that isn't much at the moment.

"Baron, King of Death, these are the clan leaders."

Each of them bows his head in a sign of respect, but I don't return the gesture.

Kolvar clears his throat before continuing. "Hemoteph of the Olveroth, Belroth of the Adamante, Imatriat of the Thradsaryl, Prince Novak of the Sunder's Might, and Draken of the Mournblades." He looks from them to me. "You will need to get to know them, for Lady Fulthain has named you one of her ambassadors and a representative of The Vindication."

Lady Fulthain? It takes me a second to figure out the satyr is talking about Eilish.

Once that surprise registers, I face the next one: Eilish wants me to be a diplomat? I resist the urge to laugh, but just barely. Luckily, Flumph is close enough to hear our conversation. The sprite nearly faints from his fit of giggles, until I peel him off the floor and hand him over to Kolvar.

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“Don’t think I’m obligated to show you respect just because we’re allies in this fight,” I say. “My respect is something that must be earned.”

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

I sit beside Aima as a mage tends to her injuries. She’s been through a lot—possibly more than any of us could ever fathom—but she holds strong and I admire her for it. Someone like Aima should be in my place, leading a rebellion and shaping the fate of the world.

“How do you do it?” I ask.

She turns to face me. “Do what?”

“How do you hold on to so much pain and show nothing but courage?”

“I wasn’t always brave, Eilish.” Aima turns her head and plucks at a loose thread on the sheets. “When my sister was alive, I was meek and obedient. My heart was my biggest weakness, and I failed to see that for so many years. The Unseelie women of noble blood are taught at a young age to cut off our emotions. I was different. I was the only one in my family without magic... and I was happy.”

“What happened to your sister?”

“She and I were close, despite our differences,” Aima sighs. “But she had a cold brutality to her that I could never duplicate, nor understand. Her magical talent seemed unrivalled in Oronrel. And that was what attracted Morrigan’s attention. The Midnight Queen knew my sister was powerful, but that she would never submit. In the end, we were summoned before the king and she was held down, rendered helpless while Morrigan siphoned the magic from her blood.”

“I’m so sorry, Aima.”

“So am I,” she replies quietly. “Your sister was still young at the time of her death, right?”

I nod and chew my bottom lip. It takes me a while to summon the courage to discuss Solya. We walk past the gates and out onto the flat expansion of land beyond them.

“I need time to think,” I tell her, “and I can’t do that with all of them hovering over me all the time.”

Aima doesn’t argue. “Their resentment for Cambion will only hinder our mission. We need to find a way to get them to trust him again, or Morrigan will win. A united front is the only way to beat her.”

She’s right, of course. Aima and I may have had our differences in the past, but now I’m glad to consider her a friend.

“I agree. We have to resolve this rift between Cambion and the others.”

“You’re the key to that rift,” Aima says.

I nod. “I was angry with Cambion at first. I still am, but I also understand he had his reasons, such that everyone does. If I can forgive him, I believe everyone should be

able to forgive him.”

Aima laughs. “Unfortunately, men are not so simply swayed. And your... friends are among the most stubborn of the stubborn.”

“They will come around. Dragan is already on his way.”

“And Baron?”

“Will take some more convincing,” I finish for her with a smile.

“I’m glad you don’t hate Cambion,” she says softly. “I’m glad you can recognize he isn’t the same man he used to be.”

We reach a large plateau, and it seems as though the sky is much bigger here than it is beyond the walls. Just barren wasteland and stars for miles and miles.

“Cambion and I haven’t spent much time together since his arrival, but I can see the changes in him.”

“Actually, he isn’t so different,” Aima replies with a shrug. “Not really. He’s just returning to the Cambion I knew as a child—the real Cambion. The great battle turned him into a bitter king who was overcome with anger, but I always wondered if the real Cambion was still hiding in there somewhere.”

After a few minutes, we begin our walk back to the stronghold. The streets of the city within the walls are quiet at night. Even the guards who patrol the area do so silently. Aima and I head to her tent, where she removes her tattered clothing. I give her a folded pile of new clothing. The tunic of which bears the symbol of our rebellion on the back.

When I turn to leave, Aima stops me. “I need your help with something, Eilish.”

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“Anything.”

She hands me a pair of scissors and holds her long, black hair out for me to cut. “You want me to cut it?” I ask, frowning.

She nods. “For my people, the length of one’s hair is a sign of loyalty to the crown. If my king is no longer on the throne, then I want it cut.”

She shifts slightly, as if uncomfortable in this vulnerable moment. I do as she asks and cut until she tells me to stop. When I’m finished, her hair is short, barely more than a finger’s length all the way around.

Though it’s short, it suits her.

CHAPTER FOUR

FLUMPH

Oronrel

Once again, I finds myself back in this shithole Unseelie palace for the millionth time since we brokes Aima and Kolvar outta the dungeon the first time. I sick an’ tired o’ bein’ ass-deep in Unseelie soldiers while runnin’ for my life all the time. An’ this time... somethin’ don’t smell right... We hidin’ like always, usin’ Noni’s creeper powers to walks through the corridors till we gets where Pyre was tellin’ us to go.

But what I sees in the throne room done burnt out my poor little eyes. I slaps a hand

over Noni's eyes as the Mother Heifer rides Variant on Theren's old throne. That can't be too comfortable, with her ass slammin' down on him's lap like that. For fuck's sake! Can't they find a bed or somethin'?

When theys done makin' ugly faces at each other, I move my hand from over my eyes, but we still listenin' to what they's sayin'. I ain't never gonna be able to unsees Morrigan's ass flappin' around like that. It seared itself into my brain an' it can't get out. Good thing she puttin' on a robe, or else I'd be blind for the rest of my fucked-up life.

"Theren is set to be executed, then?" Morrigan ask, all snobby-like. "It's a pity he won't be there to see his sacrifices bear fruit in our mission. I had hoped to stand beside the both of you when we tear open the Veil."

"I'm sure he'll be sorry to know he disappointed you," Variant answer all sarcastic like.

Morrigan don't seem to notice. "I know it won't be long now. I already sensed Silvanus."

That grab Variant's attention. "Silvanus?" he repeats.

"He must be out of hiding, but he's moving quickly. I can't get a trace on him."

"My men are already scouring every inch of the realms," Variant say. "We'll find him." Then he sigh real hard like. "As for the Unseelie, I may be ruling Oronrel, but the Unseelie Court still has power."

"So?"

"So, whoever is leading the Unseelie needs to be found and brought to our side, lest

we wish to court danger.”

“Yes,” the Mother Heifer say while she nod. “Take full control over Oronrel and the court while the search for Silvanus continues. I will find a new artificer and search for a bloodline compatible with our ritual. Let’s hope those vermin who attacked theThresth have suffered too much to be any threat to us at the moment. We have more important things in which to tend.”

“And what of Eilish?” Variant demands.

“What about her?”

“You said you saw her with wings, but not those of an angel, yet she also possesses her angelic wings.”

“So?”

“Is it possible for a creature to possess both types? Furthermore, no succubus I’ve ever heard of had wings, except the—”

“Incubae?” Morrigan laughs. “Indeed. Our little angel is also the last daughter of theKing of the Succubae. That means she possesses traits and abilities that are not only different to any other creature but also more powerful...”

“Fascinating...”

Morrigan don’t seems to like the expression on Variant’s face. She got them eyes full o’ jealousy when she turn ‘round an’ sneer at him.

Noni pull me over to the side an’ whisper real low, all secret-like. “We got to save Theren from the naughty king, Mr. Flumph. Master will be upset if we let him die.”

“FUCKS THAT!! Ain’t no way in hell I’m riskin’ my ass for that fuckhead. He can rot or gets hanged up by him’s throat for all I care—”

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Noni cover my mouth and squint her big, freaky eyes at me. “We tell Master what we hear and then we help. No more hiding, Mr. Flumph.”

Noni flash us back to the mercenary stronghold an’ it still hot as shit outside. I was hopin’ we’d get a nice cool breeze or maybe some rain, but even the clouds seems dehydrated. Noni lead me to the vamp an’ Pyre to tells them about what we hears in Oronrel. I really hate that fuckin’ mask Pyre always wearin’ outside o’ the Veil.

Never thought I’d miss that place, with its big scary dragon an’ winged hags with them large claws an’ shit! But I do. Ain’t no fresh-baked cookies in this rotten desert!

“Noni think we should save Theren, Master. You say he important, right?”

Pyre nods, an’ Noni an’ me follows him an’ Baron over to the gargoyles that ain’t doin’ much o’ anythin’ but lookin’ at books. Shadow King know somethin’ up ‘cause he get that real pissy look on him’s face that make me laugh. When he unhappy, I happy.

“Guess what, fuckers? We’re goin’ to save Theren!” I call out.

“What is the fool sprite going on about,” King Shadow Dick ask.

“That’s right, King o’ all cocks!” I say an’ I get right in him’s face. “O’ all the dicks in the realms we could be savin’, we gotta waste our time on that slimy sack o’ goblin balls. An’ for the life o’ me, I can’t understands why.”

“Theren’s role in this situation is not yet complete,” Masky say in him’s deep, rumble

voice.

For once, Shadow Dick an' I seems to be on the same side. "Let him rot," the gargoyle say. "We can make do without him. We've done just fine so far without the likes of Theren, the son of—"

"A bitch?" Everyone turn an' look at me all funny-like. "What? Ain't that what he was gonna say? If not, then he shoulda! Ain't no good woman givin' birth to that forked-tongue bastard. Not to mention, somebody gots to put a wrench in the Mother Heifer's plans. I don't wanna see her ridin' Variant's dick no more."

All o' them make a ick face, an' I agree.

DRAGAN

Mercenary Stronghold

"No, I'm not going," I say. "Theren can rot in that Unseelie dungeon from here to eternity for all the shifts I give."

I walk over to the weapons rack in the barracks, but they follow, of course. Mercenaries train with a sense of vigor I haven't seen in some time. They breathe new life into the rebellion. Now that we no longer stand alone, I see no reason to free Theren.

"Pyre says," Baron starts.

"Fuck what Pyre says!" I yell as I turn around to face him. "We fight alongside lycans, wraith warriors, and golems now. What help can Theren really be to our

cause?”

“There’s more to this than brute force, Dragan. We need information and strategy. Theren can give us both, not to mention a healthy dose of magic,” argues Baron as he glares at me.

“Of all people, I would think you would stand against this idiotic plan the most.”

“And why is that?”

“Because fucking Theren betrayed us, Baron!” I yell at him. “He fought beside the man who carved out your heart with a dagger, and yet you’re willing to risk your life all over again to free the prick? Nah, I think I’ll stay behind for this one.”

“You and I know our way around Oronrel,” he insists. “We may have to fight our way out, but we have an advantage now. And with Pyre, things won’t be as difficult.”

I glare at the vampire over my shoulder. “I’m still healing from the fight at the Threst. And our chances of making it out of Oronrel alive are slim to none. It’s a suicide mission. Theren was the Unseelie King—that means he’ll be heavily guarded and the wards will be near impossible to break through.”

“Variant is now king, and we all know how sloppy he is.”

“But he commands both the Seelie and Unseelie armies now,” I counter. “What hope is there?”

Pyre speaks up, appearing out of nowhere as he’s wont to do. “Silvanus has come out of hiding.”

“He has?” I ask.

“Yes, I can feel his ethereal footprints and I know he’s come back,” Pyre says. Then he clears his throat. “That means Morrigan is also well aware of this fact. Which, in turn, means Variant and the Midnight Queen will have all their men hunting Silvanus.”

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“Why would Silvanus have come out of hiding?” I ask.

Pyre shrugs. “I don’t know, but whatever his reasons, it’s buying us time. We need you, Dragan.” I’m quiet as I consider it. Pyre continues. “We could be at the southern outpost by dawn.”

They walk away and Myerdoth gives me a strange look—one that feels as if he can see inside my soul and I don’t like the feeling. “What?” I demand.

“I believe we should go and help,” he answers with a shrug.

“Ugh, fuck you, dickhead,” I respond as I glare at him. The gargoyle says nothing, but he walks away with a smirk on his face. The fucker.

I find Eilish leaning over the table in the main room of our headquarters. A map is spread across the table and a candle flickers beside it, casting enough light so she can read.

“You look busy,” I say, startling her.

Eilish’s smile is most beautiful when it’s aimed at me. She stands up straight and stretches her arms above her head, making her large breasts ride even higher. I can’t help but focus on them.

“You men are all the same,” she says with a laugh.

“You have perfect breasts... can you really blame me?”

She giggles and saunters over to me with swaying hips. She wraps her arms around my middle. “And you look grumpy.” She reaches up on her toes and kisses the tip of my nose. “What’s wrong?”

“Theren’s in trouble and the others want me to join his rescue party.” I take a big breath. “And I don’t fucking want to because I don’t fucking like Theren.”

She smiles up at me. “But are you going to, regardless?” The press of her curves causes my heart to thunder.

“Only if you ask me to.” My hand toys with a lock of her pale hair. She’s close enough to kiss, but I tease us both with just a faint brush of my lips.

“Then I’m asking you to, Dragan.”

I nod, not surprised, but I’m annoyed all the same. “What exactly are you asking?”

“I’m asking you to bring Theren here and we can decide together whether he’s guilty or not. But we should at least give him a chance.” She pauses. “You and I know how it feels to be manipulated by Morrigan.” She presses a soft kiss to my cheek and turns back around, returning to her work.

“You do that on purpose,” I say.

“What?” she asks as she remains bent over the table with her ass facing me.

“The way you bend over like that.”

“Oh, do you like it?” she continues with a giggle.

“You know I do.”

“Um, Dragan,” she starts, glancing over her shoulder at me.

“What?”

“Don’t you have somewhere to be or someone to rescue?”

“Yes, and when I return, you’re going to be the first person I visit.”

She turns around to face me before pulling herself up on the table so she’s sitting and facing me. Then she spreads her legs and I wish to fucking hell that she weren’t wearing pants. “Is that so?”

I take a few steps nearer her. “Yes, and however much bullshit Theren forces me to put up with, that’s how hard I’m going to fuck you.”

“Promises promises.”

DRAGAN

“So, when will you open a portal to Oronrel?” I ask as I face Baron and Pyre, who both just chuckle to themselves like I just told the best joke. Flumph and Noni have already gone to Oronrel ahead of us to find the safest way for us to get inside.

“We’re walking, aren’t we?” I continue as I frown at them both.

“Yes, and we’d both appreciate it if you wouldn’t complain the entire way,” Baron says.

“There isn’t enough magic in the mortal realm to create a portal there,” Pyre explains. “And though Baron is being an asshole in telling you not to complain, it should be noted that there are still Precincts and demons in the air,” Pyre starts.

“So, shut up or we’ll be forced to gag you,” Baron finishes with a polished smile.

“I’d like to see you fuckers try!” I respond.

We walk for what feels like an eternity plus a few years before we reach the gateway leading to Earlann. Finding the entrance is easier than before, but when we arrive in the fae realm, I immediately notice the numerous scouts in the forest surrounding the city. Sentries with enchanted bows walk along the walls and the roofs of the homes within Earlann’s walls.

“We must move quickly,” Pyre says as he crafts a portal to send us directly into Oronrel. Baron passes through immediately, and I follow him. Pyre comes through

last, in order to close the portal behind him.

We appear near what seems to be a bathhouse for members of the Unseelie court. Naked Unseelie women with supple curves splash about in the waters. I can recognize the beauty in their naked forms but I feel nothing... no sexual desire, no stirring of my cock... nothing.

I glance down at my crotch and frown.

Baron takes notice and gives me a knowing expression. "I see Eilish has a hold on you, as well." The vampire's words are almost pitying."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask.

He shrugs. "It seems we both have been beguiled by the angel as much as we've been seduced by the demon."

"Then you feel nothing for those women either?"

"Nothing," he affirms with a quick nod. "And what an exquisite fall from grace it's been." He glares at me. "It's a shame I have to share."

"You didn't seem to have a problem sharing her before," I fire back.

"Yes, that was an experience I don't regret. Pyre and I were able to give Eilish the most incredible sexual encounter she's ever had." He finishes his comment with a deep smile and I want to smack it off his face.

But, all the while, I wonder if it's true. Does Eilish prefer fucking Baron and Pyre over me? It's not a thought that's plagued me before but now I can't rid myself of it. At the thought that Baron does things to her I don't... I almost can't handle the

possibility.

Pyre leads us through a door that was barely visible to the naked eye. As we turn a corner, Flumph and Noni reunite with us. The sun sets beyond the palace as we creep through the halls, undetected so far

But when we turn the next corner, Baron lifts his hand in the air in order to stop us. I listen to the sound of retreating footfalls as they disappear down the corridor. Noni directs us to a part of the dungeon I've never seen.

Noni stutters to a stop outside a large iron door. "Theren in there, Master. But iron not good for faeries like Noni and Mr. Flumph. We can't go inside."

CHAPTER FIVE

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

Sunlight spills over the horizon and I watch the colors of the sky change with each passing moment. The city is bustling with activity. I'd nearly forgotten the sound of laughter before I came here. King Galmer has built something I can only hope to give my people when this fight is over. Those who dwell within the walls of the stronghold live in peace and prosperity, guided by a firm but loving hand of a ruler who thinks not of himself, but of the good of the people. We could all learn something from the great centaur king.

When the sound of clashing swords reverberates from the training yard, I hop down from the wall and make my way over to where Eilish trains with some of the mercenaries. It fills me with awe to see just how far she's come. Before, Eilish fought with inexperienced fumbles and a rare flash of luck, but now she's a warrior. Each

step she takes is carefully measured. Each strike is unpredictable and performed with great skill.

Eilish has consumed my thoughts for a long time, but now the fantasy of her that once lingered in my meditations no longer slakes my lust or eases my weary heart. When she catches me watching her, she turns that vibrant blue gaze my way and I'm helpless. I approach her as she fights, appreciating the way she tosses her dagger from her right to her left hand depending on where her opponent stands. The way she throws her weight into each block and the way she uses her surroundings to her advantage are something to be admired.

"You're very talented with your blade," I say. "You've made much progress." I think for a moment that she'll be offended by my words, but she isn't. Instead, she finishes her training and I see that faint glow surround her, just like it did before I left the Veil to find Theren.

"Thank you," she says and smiles but I can see she's still guarded with me. She doesn't trust me—as well she shouldn't, owing to the things I've done. The mistakes I've made.

“Can we talk?” I ask.

She walks closer to me and I see the sweat that beads on her forehead and her upper lip. “Is everything okay?” she asks.

There’s a strange formality that exists between the two of us now that wasn’t there before. I suppose it’s better than outright hostility or anger, but it feels disingenuous all the same.

“Yes, everything’s as okay as it can be, given the circumstances, I suppose,” I say as we start away from the mercenaries and the tents.

“What’s on your mind, Cambion?” she asks.

I look over at her and inhale deeply, not appreciating the heat of the air that enters my lungs. In the fae realm, the air is much lighter, cooler and entirely more comfortable. The heat in this place is nearly unbearable. “I need you to know the truth,” I start.

She smiles up at me. “Haven’t we already had this conversation?”

“No,” I answer.

We move to a bit of shade to escape the sun. She leans against the wall, and I watch a bead of sweat trickle down her neck and get lost in the crease of her ample breasts. I lick my lips without thinking and lose myself in her blue eyes.

“Okay,” she says, “What truth do I need to know?”

“You always thought I didn’t desire you,” I start. “But I’ve wanted you from the moment I saw you. I just had to fight my feelings because I didn’t want you to learn the truth about who was responsible for your family and I didn’t want you to find out I’d lied.”

She frowns at me. “I’m sorry if I find that hard to believe,” she says. “One thing of which you’ve been strict about is your disinterest in me.”

“It was all a lie, Eilish.”

She nods but doesn’t appear convinced. “You treated me like I was less than a person,” she starts and I see the anger in her eyes. “Then you erased my memories when you failed to protect my family... a subject which I still don’t have all the details for.”

“I’m willing to explain what happened and why I didn’t uphold my end of our agreement,” I start but she silences me when she holds up one hand.

“I’m not ready to hear that just yet,” she says. “I’m still working through the details of everything I’ve come to learn just recently. And with Morrigan and Variant to worry about, I don’t think there’s much more my brain can handle.” She takes a breath. “So, if you don’t mind, can you keep that information to yourself for now?”

“Of course,” I answer with a nod. “Whenever you’re ready to hear what happened, please come to me and I will explain it all.”

“Okay,” she says. “So going back to the conversation we were just having... in all the time I’ve known you, you’ve done nothing but treat me as if I’m the bane of your existence...”

“I know,” I say and nod. “I can’t deny any of it. It’s all true.”

“Why would you treat me like that?”

“Because I wanted to push you away for the reasons I already mentioned and, more than that, I was jealous.”

“Of what?”

“Dragan and Baron—of the way you got along with them so easily. The way they obviously and openly cared for you. I always wanted that... but I didn’t understand how to get it. Not when I was hiding these horrible secrets from you.”

“I know I should be angry with you and I am angry, but I care for you.” She pauses. “I always have.”

I reach down and take her hands, closing the gap between us. She doesn’t fight me so I move closer. Pressing my forehead against hers, I breathe in the scent of her. “I care for you, too, Eilish. I was wrong for what I did and how I treated you. And I don’t expect your forgiveness. But the truth is I do care for you.” I take a deep breath. “And what’s more, I know you need me.”

“Need you?” she repeats.

“The light in you is dwindling,” I explain. “We can all see it happening. The darkness is taking over and the angel within you is suffering.”

“Yes,” she says and nods as she glances down at the ground and I see the black tendrils of her hair. Last I had seen her there were just a few strands but that number has increased to double, at least.

“I want to help you,” I say as I reach down and grip her chin, lifting her beautiful face so she’s forced to look at me. “Do you remember... do you remember what it was

like between us?”

“No,” she answers. “I mean, I get snips of visions here and there of the two of us but I can’t recall the memories, themselves.” She grows quiet for a few moments as she looks up at me. “Did we just have sex one time?”

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“No,” I say and shake my head. “After I took your memories, and realized I’d stolen all of them, I took you back to my palace and I kept you there because I was afraid you wouldn’t be able to care for yourself since you had no idea who you were or what happened. And while you were in my custody, I came to you numerous times. We spent most our nights together but it was always the same in the morning—you would never remember anything.”

“That must have been... frustrating for us both.”

“To say the least,” I answer as I smile down at her. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to feel you again. There were somany moments when I wanted to come to you and I wanted to ask if you felt anything towards me.”

Something shifts between us and she lifts her face as if she wants me to kiss her. So I do, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into me, then I drop my face and take her lips. She opens her mouth and I push my tongue into her, loving the taste of her.

“I’ve missed that,” I say when I pull away.

My hands brush her sides, moving up to cup her breasts as she gasps. I dip my head low and steal another kiss and this time, she thrusts her tongue into my mouth. The kiss is devastating... slow and sensual, deep, and filled with so much emotion that her faint glow becomes almost blinding. My hands slide higher to tilt her head to the perfect angle so I can taste her tenderly.

She’s exactly what I remember.

“I need you, Cambion,” she whispers. “I’ve needed you for a very long time.”

“To feed the lightness within you,” I say.

She nods. “I need you to keep me balanced.”

The light around us swells as the blood rushes to my erection. It’s been too long since I’ve felt her heat, the wetness of her body. Eilish’s arms wrap around my neck and I lift her higher, pressing her against the side of the watch tower. She gasps, and I swallow down her sweet sighs. And when she pulls away, I feel like I’m floating in a vat of raw emotion.

“I’ll give you whatever you need,” I say.

And just when I think she’s going to give in to the fever between us, she takes a deep breath and stalls me with one hand. She closes her eyes and I watch her pant.

“I,” she starts. “This is all happening too fast,” she finishes.

She pulls away, placing several feet of distance between us.

“Eilish?”

She shakes her head. “I need time, Cambion. All of this is so sudden and I can’t help but think of everything that’s passed between us and the truth behind...” she doesn’t finish her sentiment but I understand it, all the same.

She can’t give herself to me when she hasn’t forgiven me.

“There are things I need to focus on, and I can’t do that when my judgment is clouded,” she says but I realize the words are just an excuse. She can’t have sex with

me when she's still blaming me.

"I still have anger and pain where... you're concerned." She offers me a sad smile.

"I understand," I say as I take a few steps away from her, to show that I'm willing to give her the space she asks for.

"Lady Fulthain!" someone calls, and Eilish leaves me standing there, feeling as if I've failed yet again. I don't know how to make things right but I desperately want to. I need to make things right but I'm not sure if that's even possible anymore.

There are things I wish I could take back, but then I wouldn't be here with her now. One day, I wish for her to look at me the way she does Baron and Dragan. Or even Pyre.

My feet carry me to the Hall of Clans, where several of the chieftains welcome me graciously. One in particular offers me a place in his clan if I'm not deemed worthy to be part of The Vindication. Imatriat of the Thradsaryl says he once knew my mother.

"The Seelie Queen was a great friend of the humans before the dawn of the modern world. She mentored me in ways that prepared me for the Singularity," he explains. "Sadly, my spells were not as powerful as her own, which is why the event turned me into this. I was once a king. Now, I'm a wraith fighting in a war that seems impossible to win."

"I thought it was hopeless as well, but Eilish showed me things can be different," I say. "Already she's struck a significant blow to the enemy, one from which Morrigan won't recover. If we continue to apply pressure, the Midnight Queen's plans will fail."

"And what of Abedon and Silvanus? They're no less treacherous."

“You’re right. Silvanus is no saint in all of this,” I say. “He’s just as manipulative as Morrigan, but at the moment, he’s against her—and that makes him useful. As for Abedon,” I continue, “may the gods help us, should he rise from his tomb.”

BARON

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Oronrel

“Shit!” I yell.

An explosion sends us careening into a large wall. My back hits the stone with such force, my teeth rattle. Debris rains down on us as Pyre shields Noni and Flumph with his body and then forces them through a pocket portal to get them out of Oronrel safely. I climb to my feet only to get kicked back down by a hulking Unseelie soldier.

“We’re really going to owe the Mages Guild after this. My body is almost completely wrecked,” I say.

Dragan mumbles something similar and hits the large man from behind. I duck to avoid getting completely demolished by a group of soldiers running right for me. Pyre is pissed and heading toward the shield dome the Unseelie trapped Theren behind.

And speaking of Theren... I never thought I’d pity the bastard, but seeing what his own people did to him makes my stomach turn. No one deserves that.

A spell knocks me back as I attempt to cover Pyre, and he casts a barrier over himself to block any harmful magic the Court tries to use against him. I reach for my daggers, but they fail to penetrate the armor.

“Fuck! What did Morrigan do to these guys?!” Dragan shouts over the roar of soldiers flooding the small room. “They weren’t like this in the Veil.”

“This isn’t Morrigan’s doing. She doesn’t have the power to pull off something like this.” I flip and summon the shadows, and they give me a burst of speed. Dragan hacks away at the Unseelie soldiers who try to fight their way toward Pyre to keep him from releasing Theren. Pyre pushes his hands against the shield blocking our former sworn enemy. Pyre’s power begins to crack the forcefield. The sound is deafening, but I continue to fight with everything I have.

As the magic weakens, Theren snaps out of his stupor. He sees Pyre working to free him and bites into his hand as if he weren’t bleeding enough already. The blood pools on the floor and Theren begins to chant. I watch with sick fascination as he reaches inside the rippling crimson puddle, which is now somehow up to his elbows, and pulls something out. It looks like a spear. Blood magic is almost as rare and forbidden as necromancy and catoptromancy. Maybe the others were right—maybe Theren is more powerful than anyone knew. If such is the case, his magic will come in handy. Unless he fucking well turns on us.

Pyre finally breaks open the shield, but an alarm blares through the palace. “We must move quickly! Reinforcements are headed our way. I sense at least one hundred soldiers.”

Theren stands, albeit unsteadily, and pushes to the front of the fight. Half his left ear is missing, as if they clipped the elven point off to shame him. Words of slander have been carved into every inch of his torso in the Unseelie native tongue. Bruises and cuts litter his skin like freckles. And yet he battles against the soldiers without pause.

I move beside Theren and Dragan does the same. Pyre takes the rear and covers our retreat. We fight our way down the hallsslowly and with every shred of our remaining strength. Pyre is weaker after using his magic to free Theren, but he’s not in danger of needing to return to the Veil just yet. He won’t be able to cast portals, that much is certain.

“Theren, got any bright ideas on how to escape?” I ask. “I could really use a break right about now.”

Theren takes a sharp left. We follow. He leads us into the armory and slams the door. Pyre leans against the wall as Dragan uses his weight to keep the soldiers from busting in. We need a plan.

“What the hell do we do now?” Dragan asks.

“There are no more passages leading out of the palace they don’t know about,” Theren groans. “We have to fight our way out. There’s a door behind the throne that was installed in case of an assassination attempt. It’s probably our only chance.”

“Where does it lead?” Dragan asks.

“To a volcano in the mountains that hasn’t been active for many years.”

Pyre nods to confirm Theren’s claims. We grab more weapons and open the door. With a shockwave of Pyre’s magic, an opening allows us to dash down the corridor. Dragan and I flank Theren and we move as one to the throne room. But in the vast, open space, there are spellcasters.

Fuck.

“I go right, you go left,” I propose with a chuckle as I look at Dragan and he glares back at me. Clearly, there’s still bad blood between us. The fucking gargoyle can hold a grudge and then some. “First one to kill a spellcaster wins. No shadow magic aside from your sword, and I won’t feed to increase my strength. Deal?”

“Are you making this into a game?” Dragan kicks a soldier back and blocks another with his shadow blade.

I shrug indifferently and spin my dagger, waiting for the next attack. “Might as well. If I'm going to fight, I want to enjoy it.”

“Says the one who can't die because he doesn't have a soul!” Dragan says.

“What do you say? Yes or no?” I ask as I fight off yet another stream of soldiers.

“You're on.”

Pyre shakes his head as Dragan and I launch ourselves into a mass of spellcasters. Flashes of colorful light fill the room as we dodge one spell after another with smiles on our faces.

CHAPTER SIX

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

Lying in bed, I sigh heavily as I struggle to comprehend why I kissed Cambion. Our bond should have suffered at least a little, right? Then why do I feel like I can't breathe without him? When we were so close and the desire was building inside me, I felt different. I felt light and almost like I was under the influence of something.

It wasn't the dark and wholly encompassing passion I feel with Dragan and Baron. It was something more... wholesome for lack of a better word. Yes, I wanted Cambion—my desire was definitely there but it felt more innocent in a way.

This isn't the lust of my succubus side, of that I'm sure. Cambion is the light, he's warmth—and that's what I want—what I need. His light pulls at my own, encouraging my angelic side to come to the forefront.

Even if I wanted Cambion then and I still do now, it doesn't change the fact that for now, I have to resist him and the others. There's too much at stake—too much going on with Morrigan and Variant. I've been thrust into the position of leader and I need to do just that. I can't have men on my brain.

Someone clears his throat from outside my tent. I throw my legs out from under the covers atop my cot and tighten my robe before I answer. "Yes?"

"Walk with me," Myerdoth requests. The gargoyle chose to stay behind to watch over me after the others left. Dragan was uncertain at first, but after a conversation with Myerdoth, he gave his blessing.

“I have to change,” I say as I let him in and I pull on my breeches and tunic. I forego the corset, finding it impractical for a night walk. The polite gargoyle keeps his back to me as I change, making no move to sneak a glance and I appreciate that. He offers his arm once I’m dressed and we set out into the streets.

“I sensed you couldn’t sleep,” he says.

“I’m too worried to sleep.”

“For Dragan and the others?” he questions.

“No. They’re fighters at heart. I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“Then?”

I nod. “I worry for myself, honestly. Finding my purpose here, finding the strength to lead everyone.”

“They all follow you willingly.”

“Yes, but what if it’s not enough?” I wonder aloud. “And I can’t help but wonder if Baron, Dragan or Cambion all wish to lead in my stead? Maybe they think they’d do a better job of it? And I wonder the same, myself”

“Why would you think that?”

I shrug. “They were all once kings.” I take a breath.

“They don’t appear as kings now with the way they squabble amongst themselves,” he answers with a shrug.

“You weren’t on the road with us when we traveled to Earlann at the start of our journey. All three of them fought for leadership and they all seemed to have been well equipped for the position.”

“Why fear that then? Who cares if they wish to lead?”

“I hope none of them resent me for this position I’ve taken.”

“Do any of them seem to resent you?”

I’m quiet for a moment. “Well, no.”

“Perhaps there is your answer?” he asks, his eyebrows raised.

Myerdoth falls silent once more, but his steps slow to a more casual pace. He takes me to places in the city I’ve yet to visit and he shows me where the fae we rescued are living after their liberation. “You should visit them. They all sing your praises and I’m sure they would love to meet the one who freed them from Variant and the Midnight Queen.”

“Allof us saved them. Not just me.”

“That’s not the story Kolvar tells in the Hall of Clans,” the gargoyle says with a slight twitch at the corner of his lips. “I know being a leader is difficult. I was the first of my kind and one of the last, just as you are. And though I’ve lived to see this world die and resurrect itself more times than you can imagine, I still carry the burden of a leader and the guilt of a survivor.”

We return as the sun rises. Myerdoth flies up onto the wall and turns to stone—into his gargoyle form. I shuffle into the building, walking over unfinished projects that are sure to make this place a home worthy of the rebellion. Other clan leaders that

neighbor our section of the stronghold compliment the progress we've made. Just a few weeks ago, we were a group of wayward souls hiding in the spirit world. Now, we're respected leaders of a resistance that seeks to unite the realms.

Cambion's tent flap opens, and his bare chest glistens in the faint light of the sun. Leaning against the frame, he eyes me with precaution—as if I'm the one who's a threat to his sanity.

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“Did you enjoy your walk?” he asks. The tone of his voice caresses my senses like a lover’s touch.

“I did. Myerdoth is good company.”

A flash of jealousy appears in his eyes for a moment. He clenches his jaw and bites his lower lip. My eyes drop to his mouth, and I suddenly wonder which one of us is truly guilty of seduction.

“Things must be hard for you,” Cambion says softly. “Being thrust into a world filled with cruelty, forever the victim of someone else’s mistakes. I’m sorry, Eilish.”

“You’ve already apologized numerous times,” I answer, not meaning to sound irritated but I can’t help it. There’s just somuch on my mind. “You don’t have to apologize again, Cambion. I’ve accepted your apology.”

“I just hope to be whatever it is you need.”

“And what do you think I need?” I demand.

“Me.” His answer surprises me, but I don’t cower from it.

“Why do I need you?” I ask, enjoying this game. “I already have Dragan, Baron and Pyre.”

“You need a man to feed the light within you and I want to do just that. You don’t know what it’s like to feel the lightness filling you from the inside out. You don’t

remember.”

“And if you were the one to restore my balance,” I start as I look up at him. He is beautiful. He always has been. He’s much prettier than Dragan and Baron are, for lack of a better word. But, it’s true. Cambion’s beauty is the type artists seek to imitate. “What then?” I lower my gaze, feeling the heat in my cheeks. “What happens when you’ve had what you want from me? Do things go back to the way they were?”

“No, definitely not,” he answers as he shakes his head with determination.

“I don’t want to be seen as a demon in your eyes again, Cambion.”

He inhales deeply. “I vow never to treat you the way I have. I was afraid and I pushed you away. I’ve wanted you all along, Eilish. I was just too afraid of what would happen if you knew the truth. I was afraid and I was so full of shame and anger towards myself.” He takes a breath. “But things are different now.”

“Are they?”

“Yes. I see you now, Eilish. And I don’t see a demon. I see an incredibly strong and powerful woman. A beautiful woman. I see thereal you and she’s the same woman I’ve always seen.”

DRAGAN

Oronrel

Baron may have won our little competition by killing the first spellcaster, but I’ve killed three since. So I consider myself the winner.

Regardless, the four of us look like we've bathed in blood as we race towards the door behind the throne. Pyre covers our retreat as the blaring light of day nearly sears my eyes. Baron hisses beside me as well, and Theren's no different.

Pyre, hidden behind his mask, doesn't complain.

"Keep moving!" he urges.

I throw open the door and spy a black gate.

"Go through the gate," Theren orders.

I'm the first to reach it. The gate shakes as we climb over it, and I wince. I wasn't healed before I came on this mission and the beating my body has taken is only going to elongate my healing time.

"Next time you two decide to drag me along on some fucking quest, make sure you wait until I'm healed!" I complain.

"Stop whining," Baron says.

Our heavy footfalls pound against the blackened field as we head for the mountains in the distance. Theren stares at us in confusion.

"What the hell are you looking at?" I demand.

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“How are you both resisting the sun?” he asks as he looks from Baron to me.

“Magic, dipshit. What else?” Baron replies.

Pyre leads us deep into the mountains, far beyond any structure I can remember from my time in the Unseelie Kingdom. Theren and Pyre, however, don't seem to be as hesitant as Baron and me. We reach the volcano and I see what appears to be a ruin of homes made from bright red lava crystals. Bones litter the ground as though we walk through a graveyard.

“Where are we?”

“Mount Dolgum,” Pyre says grimly. “It's the birthplace of the succubae.”

I feel my guts begin to twist and churn as memories come rushing back to the forefront of my mind. This is the last place I want to be. I suddenly feel sick to my stomach and I fall to my knees and grip my aching head...

I miss the moonlight of the fae realm, for it always brought me peace. I don't know where I am or what I'm doing anymore, but she comes to me each day for hours to feed on my lust.

Have the realms forgotten me? Have my allies forsaken me?

I hear the conversations between Lamia and the false king as I lay here on the bed. They whisper about dark prophecies and the rise of a force greater than anything the worlds have ever seen. And Lamia sounds... intrigued by it all.

In my mind, I hope Variant knows Lamia will attempt to betray him for whoever holds the most power. It's the nature of her kind to do so. The fact that I'm still here after all this time means she just wishes to make me suffer. No longer is this about feeding her darkness, but it's about watching me squirm beneath her might.

It's about forcing me to my knees.

The greatest torture of all is knowing I'm a willing victim to her treachery. She owns me, and I feel her possession to the depths of my broken soul. Not even my thoughts are safe from Lamia's wrath.

It wasn't always like this. In the beginning, I fought back. I met her assault with violence, but she soon learned violence is what I was born to sustain. So she took that violence away. Now, her seductions are almost as sweet as they are excruciating. Lamia tells me her worries, tells me she loves me, and slowly, the world begins to fade.

Her daughters are no different...

I'm lost.

Every voice from the past is barely a whisper in the back of my memory. I struggle to remember the taste of mead and roasted pork. To remember what it feels like to soar across the sky with my army of gargoyles. It's all gone, stolen from me in such a way that I'll never recover. Each scent is replaced by the musk of her pheromones that cling to the bedsheets. I know only the feeling of Lamia using me until I lose consciousness from the lack of strength in my body.

My eyes open and I take a deep breath. Pyre's holding me and he helps me lean against one of the lava crystal homes, but I can't bear to feel the crystal against me. I fall once more and expel the contents of my stomach onto the ash-covered ground.

“Why did you bring me here?” I ask Pyre.

He opens his mouth to answer, but Theren’s next to fall. Theren doesn’t pass out from the weight of the memories pushing in on him—he succumbs to his own wounds. Pyre scoops the former Unseelie King into his arms and carries him closer to the volcano.

“Because here the ethers are thin and I may be able to cast a portal. It wasn’t my intention to wound you, Dragan. I only wish you peace from the darkness of the past.”

Closing my eyes once more, I breathe through my mouth to keep the nausea at bay. I shouldn’t be here, kneeling beside the bones of Lamia’s people as if I, too, am nothing but a corpse left behind to rot in the aftermath of her fall.

I fucking hate it, but she still has a hold over me, even after all these years. After so much time spent thinking I was free...

My eyes turn to Theren. He will never be free, either. Morrigan had her claws in him for far too long. We’re both hopeless.

“No,” Baron says suddenly, glaring at me. “Whatever you’re thinking, cut that shit out.”

“This place is...” I start.

“I know,” he sighs. “How do you think I felt, seeing Morrigan standing over Cambion with the same dagger she gave Variant to kill me? It brought up a lot of bad shit for me, too, but I pushed through it and you need to do the same.”

“Fuck off,” I growl at him, which seems idiotic considering I’m still on all fours and

heaving up nothing.

“Whatever could break you before is meaningless,” Baron continues as he walks over to me. I look up at him and watch as he extends his hand. “There’s nothing you aren’t strong enough to overcome now. Even your own demons.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

MORRIGAN

Oronrel

Dirog and Hastur hold Variant down. He writhes and flails as he attempts to fight off the two hulking demons with large, black horns curling up from their bony heads. Gray, leathery skin covers their bodies, broken only by glowing green eyes and flat noses pierced with a row of gold hoops.

I'm angry with the King of Angels because he's been attempting to free himself from my influence, such that Theren did.

Variant snarls and wiggles his arm free, just long enough to land a punch to Driog's face. The demon barely flinches. Variant's power is useless against Aivii demons, because they're completely resistant to all forms of magic, spawned deep underground in damp earth and stone.

The heels of my boots crunch down on the shards of mirror scattered across the floor of Theren's study. Blood, blackened and congealed, still stains the grain of the hardwood where the former Unseelie King carved the rune from his flesh. Things aren't as they seem where Theren, Son of Elioth, is concerned.

"I underestimated Theren's love for the hybrid..." I say. "It won't happen again. Eilish will answer for her disobedience." I take a breath as I look at the destruction of the mirror. "Theren and the others are useful, but they must be eradicated if their trouble outweighs their use. Eilish, on the other hand—she's the key to all of this. The prophecy demands—"

"To hell with the prophecies!" Variant shouts. "This is the second time they've done

this, Morrigan! They're winning because you're still too blind to see that Dragan, Cambion, Baron, and whoever else in these godforsaken realms are too strong!"

"I see all, Variant," I seethe as my eyes narrow.

"We can't let the succubus come to full strength, or everything will be ruined!" I yell. Then I take a deep breath as another thought occurs to me. "And must I remind you it was your fault they escaped with Theren, not mine?"

"How the fuck was that my fault?" he insists.

I shrug. "I wasn't here when they rescued Theren. You were supposed to rule Oronrel without divergence from the plan!"

Variant slumps against the desk as Hastur wrenches his arm behind his back. He eyes me with something akin to contempt, and it causes me to chuckle. Though my spell enforces obedience, it doesn't make the victim mindless. Sadly, whatever arrogance was there before the spell still remains.

But, where Variant is concerned, I have to admit I like his arrogance. I wouldn't choose for him to be my mindless minion. I like his... spunk.

"When Eilish and the others first escaped your palace in Earlann, you told me they were weak and gullible. That their aimless bickering and hatred for one another would tear them apart long before they became a threat," I sneer. "And now look at them."

"You were the one who watched them grow stronger in the Veil and did nothing to stop it."

Dirog slams his fist into Variant's abdomen. I walk over to Variant and yank his head

back by his hair, forcing him to look into my eyes.

“You seem intent on provoking my anger,” I seethe. “Dirog and Hastur will watch over you, now that you think it’s wise to fight my spell. Everything you do or say will be reported back to me, do you understand?”

“Yes, I fucking understand.”

“Then be a good little soldier and find out where the mercenaries are hiding in the mortal realm.” I release him, and the demons drag Variant from the room. It’s a pity how far he’s fallen from my good graces, but he can be taught again. I haven’t given up on Variant. We’ve come too far to turn on one another now.

As the demons move swiftly down the hall, the Cockatrice joins me in the study. He turns up his nose at the gore, despite his own proclivity for violence.

“You still hunt Eilish?” I ask.

The Cockatrice nods. “Indeed. Though not because you ordered me to do so, Morrigan. You may be the Midnight Queen to the lesser species, but I serve my master.”

“Abedon has spoken?” I ask as the creature nods. I immediately feel as though the ground shifts beneath my feet, this information rocks me so. “When?”

“He speaks only to my kind, for we’re all that’s left of those who are loyal.”

“I am loyal!”

“To yourself,” the creature snorts. “I’ve watched you, Morrigan, as I’ve watched all the others. You displease him. Siding with a feeble god like Silvanus was unwise.”

“No. I didn’t side with Silvanus!”

“You imprisoned my master so you could devise a plan to kill him and take his power for yourself.” His mocking laughter causes my skin to crawl as he paces toward me. “But you aren’t the only one on this journey. My master will have the girl from the prophecy.”

“You can’t be sure the girl from the prophecy is Eilish!”

“I’m as certain as you are, for I see with my master’s eyes and this Eilish will be the one to bring upon Abedon’s reckoning. You and Silvanus and all the others who turned your backs on him will suffer greatly...slowly. And when he’s done with you, I will pick the meat from your bones and feast upon your flesh while you still live.” A long, snake-like tongue spears out of his mouth and licks along the side of my face. “So play your little game, Morrigan, but you know what comes upon the wings of darkness.”

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In the blink of an eye, the Cockatrice is gone, leaving me alone and trembling like the last leaf in autumn that has yet to fall. Tears prick my eyelids.

No. This can't be true.

Abedon loves me. He would never forsake me, no matter how vile my betrayals have been. I'm his only weakness and he's mine. Destiny binds us together in ways very few understand.

THEREN

Mount Dolgum

Hot, moist soil dampens my cheek as I try to breathe past the putrid odor that causes my nose to tingle. My fingers are numb and cold, yet I'm sweating. Rope digs into my wrists and I try to see past the sweat in my eyes as I fight through the nausea still assaulting my body. The rope is crude, fashioned by raw materials found around the ruins of the old succubus village, but the spells cast on the fibers are strong. And not fae. They must be the necromancer's.

The vampire and the gargoyle stand nearby, watching me with their dark eyes. I know they're even more wary of me now that they're aware I use blood magic. As a catoptromancer, I know the risks of the forbidden arcana more than most. My father succumbed to darkness, but I won't follow in his steps. Though I'm of the Unseelie, I'm no more evil than anyone else in the realms. "How far are we to the volcano?"

“Close,” the necromancer responds.

“We can’t stay here long. Morrigan will—”

“Shut up,” Baron hisses, flashing his fangs in a warning that I’m sure causes others to cower. He lifts me off the ground and leans me against a rock that presses against my broken bones that have yet to heal. I rasp painfully, fighting through the black spots in my vision.

“We have questions that need answers before we head for the volcano,” he says.

I grind my teeth together, because I knew this would happen. “And what do you want to know?”

“What are the plans of the Midnight Queen and Variant?” the gargoyle asks. I turn my head to observe him, ignoring the throbbing at my temples.

“Which plan?”

“Don’t toy with us.”

“I’m merely asking because Morrigan always has more than one plan. She’s a schemer, Stone Lord—surely you’ve noticed by now,” I reply, watching the way the harsh planes of his face tighten with anger.

“Don’t fuck with me, Theren,” he says.

“If you mean to ask what Morrigan intends to do with the power she seeks from the Veil, I’m surprised you don’t already know.”

“Be surprised then but fucking answer the question,” Baron says.

“She intends to murder the last being in the realms with a divine title.”

“Silvanus,” the necromancer says.

“Precisely. Once Silvanus is slain, there’s nothing to stop Morrigan from getting her hands on the Eclyp. Then Morrigan can focus on the prophecy.” I see the way they regard me with suspicion. They have every right to do so and they would be wise not to let their guards down.

“What’s the prophecy she wishes to complete?” the vampire asks.

When my answer doesn’t come, a fist collides with the underside of my chin. Blood fills my mouth and I spit it toward the necromancer’s boots as I look up at him. “Get your pups under control. Beating me won’t get you the answers you seek, Necromancer.”

“His name is Pyre,” Baron seethes. “So fucking use it.”

The necromancer rests his hand on Baron’s arm, stopping him from landing another painful blow to my already aching head. I run my tongue along my gums and wince when I touch a sore spot.

“There are other ways I can get the information out of you, Theren,” Pyre threatens. “I don’t need anyone to beat you.”

“But it’s fun to watch after everything you’ve done,” Dragan adds.

“It wasn’t me who did those things... not all of me, anyway,” I insist.

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“What the fuck are you talking about?” Dragan asks.

I shrug which causes pain to blast my entire body. It takes me a moment to catch my breath. I need to heal myself but I currently lack the strength. “Morrigan’s spell tore... out my darkness and forced it to overcome me. In doing so... she locked away my empathy, free will, and all the goodness I’ve ever possessed.”

“Keep explaining,” Baron demands.

“I was trapped in... my own mind, unable to escape the grim... reality Morrigan forced on me. All the while, I was unaware of my actions... until Eilish touched me on the battlefield,” I explain. “She was the one who set me free.”

The gargoyle paces. “How do we know you are free? How do we know this isn’t one of Morrigan’s plans, and that you won’t turn dark on us again?”

“You don’t.”

“What?” The perplexed expression on the Stone Lord’s face causes me to chuckle until my broken ribs insist I don’t.

“As much as you’re afraid to trust me, and afraid that I might not be entirely free of Morrigan’s spell... I fear it far more than any of you.”

Pyre shakes his head and drops to one knee beside me. “What does the Midnight Queen intend to do once she has all that power? What’s her plan?”

I press my lips into a thin line. If I give them what they want, they'll surely kill me once they know everything. I can't risk my only chance of staying alive. Not yet. Not until I see with my own eyes that Eilish is alive. I trust no one, not even myself, with her safety.

"I'm not telling you anything. You're the ones who released Morrigan in the first place."

Searing pain bursts from my chest as Pyre punches my sternum. I feel him grip my heart as magic forces its way into every fiber of my being until I no longer know where I begin and he ends. His eyes are white as snow and sightless, yet he sees everything. Everything that I ever was and ever will be. He pulls back, stumbling slightly as he stares down at his hand in awe.

I look down, staring at the seared earth, unable to meet that unsettling gaze any longer. He knows the horrors of my past and the things I fought to keep hidden for many years. And yet... he says nothing.

I watch his boots retreat from my line of sight as he walks away. The others chase after him and I'm left on my own once more. Morrigan will send forces after me. It's only a matter of time before we're running for our lives again.

Part of me wishes they would leave me here, now that Pyre knows everything.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

"Then I nearly gets my ass blown clean the fucks off by some stupid ballmunchin'

spellcaster with bad aim,” the annoying sprite says. “My poor little wings was tryin’ to keep up, but they sneaks out the door before I could get there. Then, Noni takin’ her sweet fuckin’ time to poof us back here,” he continues to complain while shoveling handfuls of food into his mouth.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and wait for him to finish chewing obnoxiously before I ask anything else. Flumph smacks his lips and grabs a bread roll from the table before he burps loudly, only a few inches from where I sit.

“I seen your dickhead brother. He less crazy than he were, no doubt, but he still ain’t good.”

“I need to know if my brother is safe?”

“Safe as can be ‘spected with him’s body all broke an’ shit. Thought he were gonna fall right over when they were fightin’ them pain in the ass Unseelie fuckers.” Flumph begins to gulp down a pint of ale as I stand and walk away from the table.

I search the Hall of Clans for Eilish, but she’s nowhere to be found. Aima stops me as I make my way towards the barracks.

“She isn’t there, Cambion.”

“Where can I find her?”

Aima shrugs as Myerdoth appears at her side. “Last I saw, Lady Fulthain was near one of the outposts. I think she’s practicing making her wings appear and disappear at will.”

“Out in the open?” I ask, unable to hide my surprise. “Pyre says there are demons out there.”

“There are demons everywhere,” Aima says with a roll of her eyes. “Eilish isn’t helpless, Cambion.”

I know Eilish is more skilled now than she was before I took the mirror to Oronrel, but she still shouldn’t be out on her own. Aima and the stoic gargoyle head off to find Kolvar as I make my way to the south gate. The sentry sees the emblem on my tunic and opens the gate for me.

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“Are you going after Lady Fulthain?” A minotaur stops me to ask.

“Yes.”

“Can you tell her our scouts have located some vehicles, but they’ll need magic to get them repaired?” he growls. I glance down at his chest and notice he wears the colors of the Olveroth.

I nod even as I wonder what Eilish needs the vehicles for. The stables are a short walk from the gate, so I fetch a horse to track Eilish through the desert. After hours of searching the dunes, I see a figure shoot up from the ground only to plummet back to the sands.

I race over to see Eilish on her back with her wings spread across the hot ground.

“What in the bloody hell are you doing?” I ask.

She smiles up at me. “What’s the point in having wings if I can’t use them? I just wanted to learn how to fly. Dragan has been too busy and, last I checked, the rest of you don’t have any wings, unless you count Flumph.”

“Have you been successful?”

“See for yourself.” She jumps up to her feet, closes her eyes and a pair of huge, white and feathered wings appear from her back. I haven’t seen them in a very long time. Her wings begin to flap and within seconds, she’s airborne. She comes back down a few seconds later and the wings disappear into her back.

“Impressive,” I say with a big smile. Then I clear my throat because I have news to relay and I don’t want her to feel I’m wasting her time.

“Flumph and Noni have returned and apparently Baron, Dragan and Pyre freed Theren from Oronrel, but I don’t know much besides that.”

“Are they all unharmed?”

“From what I could understand, yes. Though Theren sounds to be in bad shape, which is to be expected, given the fact that he was a prisoner to the Unseelie.” I take a deep breath. “I can’t necessarily rely on the sprite for reliable information.”

“That’s great news,” Eilish says as she takes the steps separating us and wraps her arms around me. I’m surprised at her exuberance and it takes me a second before I return the hug. Then I hold her tight, feeling the excitement inside her as though it’s my own.

“Yes, I’m relieved,” I admit as she pulls away from me but neither of us drop our arms. I swallow hard as I look down at her full lips and the way her eyes stare into mine.

“I don’t want to further disturb you,” I say and I don’t understand why I feel so uncomfortable all of a sudden. “I know you were busy practicing.”

“Cambion?”

“Yes?”

“Stop talking.”

She leans up on her toes and presses her lips against mine. I feel the familiar roar of

ecstasy in her kiss, but there's more. Before I'm able to understand it, she steps away. I can't help the feelings of disappointment that pass through me but I don't say anything. Instead, I just stand there.

She walks over to her water canteen to hydrate herself. "I'm so happy Theren's alive, Cambion," she says and she sounds just as uncomfortable as I feel.

"Yes, I am too."

She nods. "I can't imagine what he's been through. When he reached out to me on the battlefield, I was pulled into his mind and he seemed so afraid."

"You and I have been toyed with by Morrigan in the past. It most likely won't be the last time it happens before all of this is over," I say calmly as I glance back the way I came and think about returning. I can't stand being so close to her and yet so far away. Moreover, I can't stand this awkwardness between us. It feels so unnatural. I almost prefer the way we used to bicker or ignore one another.

"We need to make sure Theren is well and then we need to keep moving forward," I say, not even truly paying attention to my words. "Whether he joins us or not. I was blind before, but never again will I allow harm to come to this resistance because of my actions or Theren's."

"Speaking of moving forward, I have a few things in place." Eilish walks over to the horse and climbs into the saddle. I reach for the saddle horn and mount the horse behind her. The heat of her body seeps through my tunic and I have to fight against brushing my lips on her neck.

"And what do you have planned?" I ask.

"Rovers?"

“Pardon?”

Eilish chuckles and clucks her tongue to get the steed moving. “I’ve established outposts through the realms with a few of the clan leaders, and there are people feeding us information on Variant’s movements...”

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“But?”

“But I think we need groups policing the cities, safe houses on the borders,” she says. “And Rovers—volunteer vigilantes that travel through the regions who are willing to place themselves between Variant’s brutes and innocent fae.”

“You’ve been busy.”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you need the vehicles?” I continue. “One of the sentries said the scouts found some vehicles, but they need magic to do the repairs.” I clear my throat. “I was asked to deliver that message to you... Lady Fulthain.”

A smile appears on her face and we speed back to the stronghold. Eilish jumps from the saddle before the horse comes to a stop. I guide it into the stables and hand the horse over before chasing after her.

She runs to the dungeon beneath the barracks, where Morrigan’s artificer hunches over a desk, sketching out what look like pans. The walls of the cell are covered in other drawings and diagrams of strange contraptions.

“What is this, Eilish?” I ask.

BARON

Mount Dolgum

I want to punch him in the face again, but Pyre stops me. Theren's sarcasm knows no end and I'm tired of listening to him dance around our questions. Pyre may be able to see things from Theren's soul, but he's oath-bound as a necromancer not to give premature knowledge or reveal the true meanings of the prophecy. Which means he's just as big a pain in my ass as Theren at the moment. No matter what I ask, Pyre and the Unseelie bastard rebuff my efforts.

"How the hell are we supposed to take him back to the stronghold if we can't even trust him?" I insist.

"You don't have to trust him, Baron. You just have to trust me," Pyre says.

"This cryptic routine of yours is pissing me off," I say and head back over to Dragan and Theren. The gargoyle straightens and scowls down at the Unseelie with nothing more than annoyance in his gaze. Eilish must have talked to him already, or he'd be just as furious as I am.

I grab Theren by the front of his blood-soaked shirt and haul him upright. Pyre has healed the majority of his injuries, but Theren's not altogether healed—just enough that we can make it down this godforsaken mountain.

"What now, vampire?" Theren insists and Dragan watches me with a suspicious gaze. "Beating me will do nothing. I already told you. Those like Pyre and I are bound by forces much greater than you will ever comprehend. Even the gods who declared our practices forbidden don't know the full truth."

"The full truth about what?" Dragan asks.

"We have oaths," Theren responds, as if that makes any sort of fucking sense.

“Yeah, well, I took an oath once, too, and that got me killed. So don’t try to feed me some bullshit about honor-bound promises and destiny, just tell me what the fucking hag has planned.”

Theren’s jaw ticks and he looks at Pyre for several minutes before replying. It’s as though they’re speaking telepathically or through expressions alone.

“There’s a prophecy,” Theren starts. “Not the one Morrigan is following, but the one she’s trying to avoid.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I demand.

He glares at me and continues. “In the Midnight Queen’s time, magic as we know it didn’t exist. She and her coven were the first to discover magic. And they kept it secret. Morrigan, however, got greedy.”

“Glad to hear not much has changed,” Dragan says.

“Not greedy for power, but greedy for love,” Theren continues. “She fell hard for Abedon and he gave her what she needed to unlock her potential. It wasn’t long before she discovered the prophecy that would be her undoing... that would be the undoing for all the gods and those who fought for power,” Theren mutters through bruised lips.

“What prophecy?” Dragan asks.

“A prophecy that said six warriors, three of darkness and three of light, would pledge their love and loyalty to a new goddess who would rise in the aftermath of a cleansing shadow.”

“And then what? The end of days?” Dragan asks.

“No,” he hisses. “A new beginning for all!”

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“What new beginning?” I ask.

I look at him. “The true balance, one birthed of love and not fabricated by magic.” He pauses for a moment. “Morrigan fears she’s not the one from the prophecy...”

“But Eilish is,” I answer.

Theren looks at me. “Yes. Eilish will be the one to bring the war to end all wars.”

“So, what’s the prophecy Morrigan’s trying to complete?” Dragan asks.

Theren lowers his gaze. “She only told Variant. Morrigan was careful. In the event that one of us was released from her magic or corrupted in some way, she wanted to be sure that neither Variant nor I knew everything. So she only told us each certain details.”

“Abedon is alive,” Dragan says. “He’s imprisoned, yes, but there are signs everywhere that indicate his rise is imminent.”

“And Silvanus refuses to answer Eilish’s call,” I add. “For all we know Silvanus could be focused on his own agenda.”

“Maybe, but we need to focus on the Cockatrice,” Pyre says.

I press the heel of my hand into my left temple, trying to banish the headache brewing there. “The Cockatrice that went after Eilish is still out there?” From the look of Theren’s face, I already know the answer. I kick one of the red crystals on the

ground. It hits a rockface and shatters. “Great. At least we know one of Abedon’s enforcers is doing his bidding while we waste our time chasing after Morrigan. If you ask me, Abedon is the biggest threat to Eilish’s safety.”

“He’s the one who infiltrated the Unseelie Court,” Theren says. “Variant may have control over the throne and the soldiers, but the crown means nothing if the Court isn’t on his side. Oronrel is torn. It may never know peace again so long as there are two rulers at opposite ends of this war.”

“And what about you, Theren?” I ask finally. “What side are you on?”

“Unlike my brother, I’ve always known what was at stake. If not for Morrigan’s spell, I would have been in this fight long before any of you.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

He looks at me and narrows his eyes. “I’m on Eilish’s side. I always have been.”

For a moment, I see red. I leap toward Theren and wrap my hands around his neck. I hate it that he knew Eilish before I did, before any of us did. I hate it that he loves her without fear. But most of all, I hate it that I’m starting to believe him. Dragan is the one who pulls me away this time. I shake off his hold and close my eyes as I talk myself down, but the gargoyle won’t shut up.

“We need Theren. If not for his magic, then we need him to help us sustain Eilish’s strength.”

“Quiet!” Pyre turns his back on us and walks to the edge of the cliff. His senses seem to make the air vibrate, not unlike the Echoing Spire’s energy. “Orc raids on the borders. If we don’t hurry, they’ll be here by nightfall.”

CHAPTER NINE

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

The artificer, Zir, hands me another sketch with intricate notes along the edges: ideas that will unite the powers of magic and science to create new weapons, security, and possibly portals through the mortal realm in addition to powering the vehicles found by the scouts. I'm excited and nervous, but I need something solid to present to the clan leaders in order to get their approval.

"These are amazing, Zir," I say. "If this works and we get King Galmer's approval, then we can create strongholds like this all over the realms."

"I will keep working on the plans," Zir answers.

She doesn't talk much, but she holds no loyalty to Morrigan and even agreed to work on my ideas in order to regain her freedom. That's the only reason she's still alive. She's powerful and her power is useful. And because she holds no allegiance to Morrigan, I don't consider her an enemy. Not that she holds any allegiance to me either.

The Midnight Queen hadn't even bothered to learn the woman's name before enslaving her to craft the amulet and that's something Zir holds against Morrigan. But, I'm also being careful by keeping Zir in the dungeon. The dungeon is a precaution and, thankfully, she understands that.

When all the plans are finished, I'll have Pyre look them over and ward them against anyone who may be a potential threat to our resistance. We're playing it safe this time. There's no room for error.

I know we're close to something; I can feel it.

Leaving Zir to her work, I climb the stairs to exit the barracks.

Draken and Hemoteph await my arrival near the entrance to the resistance's section of the stronghold. The vampire and lycan are at one another's throats more often than Cambion and the others. A fond smile curls my lips as I catch sight of them, and Hemoteph's wolfish grin spreads from ear to ear.

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He licks his lips and bows his head. “Lady Fulthain,” he says deeply. “Your beauty rivals the moon tonight. And you smell... exquisite.”

The lecherous glimmer in his eyes causes me to look away. I don’t desire him in the way I desire the others, but my body doesn’t bow to the commands of my heart. The succubus wants to feed as much as the angel does.

“I have a few things drafted up. Things I wish to present to King Galmer,” I say.

“Yes,” Draken replies, “so you said before.” He circles me, eyes locked on my neck as though the secrets of the universe are hidden beneath my skin. “But what makes you think Galmer will be open to so many changes?”

“Somany changes?” I repeat.

He nods. “My scouts tell me you’ve got more planned than we discussed.”

“I only wish to protect the stronghold and its people.”

“We were fine before you came along. The only problems we face now are because you decided to make a premature strike against Variant and Morrigan.”

Hemoteph advances towards me quickly, no doubt scenting my need in the air around me. I take a few steps back until I’m pressed against the side of one of the buildings. Draken closes in on me until I can sense nothing but the mingling aroma of our shared pheromones. A tongue traces up the length of my throat as hands—too many hands—grope my body. They’re mindless, driven by my hunger as it calls out to

them.

I don't want this... I don't want them. But my body says otherwise.

"I bet you would taste sweet," Draken says.

"Stop," I demand.

"Your body sings to us," Hemoteph responds. "I can smell your wetness."

"Do your best to ignore it," I answer with tight lips. "Regardless what you think my body is saying, I am saying stop."

"You want it. It's what you're made for. Don't fight us..." Draken's words are cut off when something in the shadows charges him and hurls him into a brick wall. I hear grunting and the fleshy sound of a fist colliding with someone's jaw, but I can't see what's happening because Hemoteph's body blocks my vision. Moment later, he raises his hands in surrender and helps Draken to his feet.

When Hemoteph steps aside, I see Cambion standing before me, the two clan leaders hurrying away from him.

"Your king will hear about this!" Cambion shouts after the retreating silhouettes. Then he turns to face me and before I can speak, he grips my hand and leads me back to my tent in the barracks. It's maybe a two minute walk.

"I'm okay, Cambion."

"I want to make sure," he says as he lifts me and carries me into the tent, depositing me carefully on the cot. Then he checks me over for any injuries even though I know he'll come up empty-handed. I try to assure him I'm all right, but he doesn't listen.

Cambion is much different now than he was when he left the Veil. He looks the same, yes, but inside he's night and day different. Gone is the angry and pompous man I once knew and in his place is someone caring and brave. I brush my hand through his long hair and his golden eyes meet mine.

"If they come near you again..."

"It wasn't their fault, Cambion."

"You told them to stop." He takes a breath. "I heard you."

"But you know how my hunger is. The scent of my seduction is strong," I reply regretfully, all too aware of the trouble it caused Cambion and me in the past. "You should go. Galmer will want to know what happened." My hand drops from his hair as he stands to leave.

"I'll be back to talk to you about this, Eilish," he says.

"Talk to me about it?"

He nods. "Just because you're a succubus—it doesn't mean they were right in their actions." He chews his bottom lip for a moment before leaving me to my solitude and I recline against the pillows, taking deep breaths as I try to fight against the desire that flows through my veins. If Cambion hadn't stepped in, I'm not sure I would have been able to resist both men and that's a problem. I need to be their leader, not their lover.

DRAGAN

Mount Dolgum

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“Pyre has been gone for a long time,” I say as I begin to pack up camp.

Baron’s eyes are closed and his back is to Theren as he goes into some sort of trance. It’s not unlike Cambion’s meditation, but I suspect it’s something Pyre taught him while they were in the Veil. Having Pyre gone for more than a few minutes doesn’t sit well with me. He left to make sure the orc raids weren’t too close to our camp but he should have been back by now. Having Variant’s minions nearby means we need to move quickly if we want to avoid another fight. “So, it’s official, then?”

Baron cracks one eye open. “Official?”

“You’ll be the one to replace Pyre when his part of the prophecies is complete?”

“Pyre’s my friend as much as he’s my mentor, which means I won’t let this part of the prophecies complete. If the realms are this fucked up with him alive, imagine how they’d be without him.”

“Right.”

“Pyre isn’t going to die if I can help it, so don’t think about me replacing him anytime soon.”

I lift my hands in defense, not realizing just how much the prophecy affects Baron. “I thought—”

“Yeah, I know what you thought. And Pyre thinks the same. I know you don’t want me to get my hopes up, thinking I can save him when it’s written in the stars or some

shit, but I don't believe that. Prophecies are just possibilities. Nothing in this life is a guarantee."

"Then what about Theren?" I ask. "If nothing in this life is a guarantee, then it's possible he isn't the villain we've all made him out to be."

"Bullshit."

"He could be a victim of circumstance, like Eilish said," I continue. "Don't we owe it to her to make sure before we do something drastic?"

"I'm not going to kill him, if that's what you're asking," Baron says.

"I'm not asking anything," I correct him and stand up to kick dirt onto the fire to put out the flames. "I've seen you angry and I've seen you violent, Baron, but never have I seen you so cruel. You looked as though you wanted to hurt Theren, not because you wanted to get information from him, but because it felt good to do it."

"You have to admit, letting out some frustration on the guy who nearly destroyed the Veildoes feel good," he argues with a shrug. "Theren may not be our enemy at the moment, but he sure as hell ain't a friend." He takes a breath. "And we still don't know everything about Morrigan's plans. Until I know for certain Theren's not part of them, I'm keeping a close eye on that son of a bitch."

"What do you think about the prophecy, then?" I ask. "I mean, it's pretty clear he's part of it. Three of light, three of dark. You, me, and Theren are clearly the darkness. Cambion, Variant, and someone else—"

"Silvanus," Baron inserts, interrupting me once more. "The third is Silvanus."

"Silvanus?" I repeat, shaking my head.

“He and Eilish were lovers before. I don’t know for how long, exactly, but he tried to train her as a favor to Eilish’s mother. And if Morrigan is trying to avoid the prophecy where Eilish rises as a new god, then killing Silvanus gets Morrigan her powers back and stops that prophecy all at once.”

“And you think you can do the same for Pyre?”

Baron nods, walking over to me to ensure Theren can’t overhear our conversation. Though he appears to be resting, there’s no telling just how far the cunning Unseelie is willing to go in his treachery.

“Morrigan has defied prophecies and bent the will of fate itself to design her own destiny,” Baron says. “Why can’t I do the same? Why can’t all of us? We shouldn’t let prophecies spoken thousands of years ago dictate our paths.”

“We can’t do that because there are some forms of dark magic that you can’t come back from,” I argue. “Aima said she watched Morrigan change over the years, watched her fall deeper into madness and obsession. That will happen to you too, Baron, if you aren’t careful.”

As I walk towards Theren, I feel something. A sense of concern washes over me, though I’m not sure why. Baron seems to have the same foreboding feeling I do, because he reaches for his blade.

Pyre appears through the trees and runs up the mountain. He looks rattled. “There are more than I thought. The orcs are scouring the countryside. At least thirteen are behind me.”

“What do we do?” I ask.

“Protect Theren and fight our way to the volcano,” Pyre answers.

So much for avoiding another fight. “What happens when we get there?”

“The ethers will be thin enough that I may be able to transport us further away from Oronrel without expelling too much magic,” Pyre huffs, trying to catch his breath.

“From there, it will be a long journey to the mortal realm.”

I see a horde of orcs break through the tree line not far from the location where we spotted Pyre. “All right,” I say. “You take the lead and I’ll cover Theren.”

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Baron shoves me aside and unsheathes his blades. “Head for the volcano. Another forest lies between here and there. You’ll need a head start. I’ll keep the orcs at bay.”

Seeing the conviction in his eyes, I nod. Baron pushes toward the edge of the mountain as Pyre lifts Theren. I can see Pyre pouring magic into the former Unseelie King, trying to heal his wounds enough to allow Theren to walk on his own. When Theren breathes a sigh of relief, he takes his weight off Pyre’s shoulders and walks beside me as Pyre makes a mad dash for the dark, mangled forest I remember from before we entered the Veil the first time.

CHAPTER TEN

THEREN

Fae Realm

“So, the succubae were born in Mount Dolgum?” I question as we hurry through a dense cluster of trees that smells faintly sweet. I know this forest well, for I often spent time hidden among the gnarled, twisted branches to escape my father’s cruelty. “Then why are there legends about the volcano?”

“Because that was where Gildlorthoine bred his harem,” Pyre responds. “It’s said the incubus simply crawled out of the magma and mated with a hybrid that was part harpie and part siren. Their daughter was the first succubus. Through the ages, they became stronger and the seductive properties of their kind were legendary through the realms,” Pyre finishes.

He unstraps the bow from his back and pulls the string until his knuckles brush his cheek. He releases the arrow. It whistles through the air and strikes an orc between the eyes. It's so far away that I see only a blur of movement as the body hits the ground.

"And the succubae would return to the volcano to breed when they reached their fertile age?" I ask.

"Yes," the necromancer replies. "Gildlorthoine chose Lamia as his queen because she was the fiercest warrior and had birthed several impressive daughters."

I see Dragan flinch at the mention of the succubae queen. I know the story as well as everyone. If not for Lamia's betrayal, Dragan and Cambion may have had a chance winning the war. And Pyre fought beside them that fateful day with his army of the dead. Even then, Pyre's magic made me uneasy. Necromancy pushes boundaries even I'm unwilling to cross. While blood magic is powered by life force, it requires the subject to still be alive. Though taboo, my powers are nowhere near as frowned on as Pyre's.

He catches me watching him and quirks a brow. The hue of his scarlet hair is a startling contrast to his pale skin and white eyes. Pyre's mask was broken in the fight at Oronrel, so the sharpness of his otherworldly features is now on full display. I suddenly wonder if he's had Eilish. I know they've spent much time together...

Baron nearly mows me down as he fails to slow his momentum. An army of orcs is on his tail. The others break away from me and begin to fight. Rope still digs into my wrists, but I crouch low, ready for whatever comes my way.

Orcs swarm me, and one rushes forward. I turn away as if to retreat, but I run up the trunk of a large tree and flip over his head, causing the orc to smack into the trunk and fall over dead. Luckily for the rest of us, orcs aren't known for their intelligence.

Two more reach for me. I kick one in the chest and then drop to the ground before the other can tackle me. Hands grip my hair, but I roll away in time to avoid the next attack, bringing my knee up and slamming it into the belly of my opponent. Dragan, accidentally or not, tosses an orc right at me. The thing pushes me into a tree and I feel the air punched out of my lungs. Then Dragan kills the fucker and nods at me in apology.

I nod in return. Of all of them, I'm most grateful to Pyre for healing me as much as he has. At least now I can move without the pain of broken bones. No, my health isn't fully restored to me but I feel a hell of a lot better, all the same.

I catch my breath and turn to look at Baron. The vampire seems skilled with a blade—I watch him slice through the orcs with practiced ease. Pyre pulls back on his bowstring and fires arrow after arrow without blinking. His aim is beyond anything I've ever witnessed, despite the fact he's blind. I turn around long enough to see an orc with a bubbly, distorted face rush me with a serrated sword. It catches my shoulder as a sharp jab hits me in the kidney, but I don't go down. The orc with the wicked-looking blade pulls back to attack again. I kick it in the knee, hearing the crunch of bones as it accidentally decapitates another orc.

"Anyone want to untie me?" I shout.

"Fuck no!" Baron responds.

I roll my eyes at the vampire and decide his response was just the answer I was looking for. They won't release me and they won't ever treat me as their equal, owing to the shit I've done. They don't care if I was under Morrigan's spell. They don't trust me and they never will.

And that means there's no reason for me to stay here—as their prisoner. Especially now that I've got the opportunity to flee. So I take it.

I turn around and run deeper into the woods. Getting away from the bulk of the horde is my best bet. A second or so later, I'm taken down. Greasy, bluish hands batter my ribcage. I sidestep and circle the orc like a beast on the prowl. The orc swings, and I use my elbow to jab him in the midsection. The smell of bloated, diseased flesh fills my nostrils. He lunges. I rear back before slamming my elbow into the side of the orc's head.

I feel myself growing dizzy, because I'm still not fully healed, but I attack over and over while taking blows to the rest of my body.

"Theren!" Dragan calls as he appears beside me. My escape attempt wasn't much of an attempt at all and I wonder if he even realizes that's what it was.

"Here!" I jump back to put some distance between myself and the putrid orc. "I could really use some help right about now." Scanning the area around me, I see no sign of Dragan, but more orcs approach from the left. I curse beneath my breath. "Any fucking time, gargoyle!"

The horde nearly reaches me at the same instant the others appear. Pyre catches an orc with a vicious uppercut that sends the creature sprawling, while Baron stabs another in the head.

I move so Dragan and I are back to back. "Never thought we'd be fighting like this," I say.

"Never thought you'd be fighting on our side again," he responds, like the asshole he is.

My reply is nothing more than a pained grunt as a fist bashes into my abdomen. Pyre shoves me forward and the three of us make for the volcano once more as Baron stays behind. I don't look back. I can't. Eilish needs me. What comes for her is much

stronger than Morrigan and Variant combined. “How far until we reach the volcano?”

Pyre fires another arrow and then uses the hard end to hit an orc upside the head. He spins, eyes flickering like white orbs in the darkness. “It’s a three-hour climb.”

His words do nothing to ease the tension in my body. Dragan doesn’t seem too pleased, either. Strangely, they both seem impressed—albeit begrudgingly—by my ability to fight while restrained.

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

I thrum my fingers against the top of the table. Galmer sits across from me with a dark expression on his face, still silent after I brought to light what nearly happened to Eilish. We need Galmer and his followers as allies, but if Eilish isn't safe here, I'll leave immediately... taking her with me.

“While I fully understand the seduction of a succubus is hard to resist, I assume your men will take necessary precaution when around Lady Fulthain from here on out,” I say.

“She warned us that something like this was possible,” Galmer mutters. “I apologize, and I will extend that apology to the lady herself when she visits in the morning. Thank you for bringing this to my attention before anything worse could have transpired. Hemoteph and Draken may not be saints, but they are good men. But even good men make stupid mistakes. This will not happen again.”

“Thank you, King Galmer.” We bow our heads in simultaneous respect and I leave the Hall of Clans to return to the Vindication headquarters.

The night grows darker as I find myself standing in front of Eilish's tent.

“Eilish?” I call.

I hear shuffling beyond the barrier between us just moments before the tent flap opens and Eilish stands before me. Her skin is flushed and plump as if she's just stepped out from a bath. Water clings to her tresses and a faint fragrance of wildflowers tickles my nose, but it's still not strong enough to hide her scent.

And her scent is stronger now than I've ever witnessed it. She needs to feed and she's forsaking herself for not doing so.

"Eilish..."

"You should go. The hunger is getting worse and I don't want to ruin this... new friendship between us."

"This isn't a friendship."

"I don't do this on purpose, Cambion," she says with sad eyes. "Lock me away or tie me down far from the stronghold so I'm not a danger to anyone. I hate being like this, and no one else deserves to be lured against their will."

I duck inside her tent and face her in earnest. "You'll hurt yourself if you don't feed, Eilish. The hunger and the pain will only get worse until the fever takes over completely."

"It's better than what will happen if I feed from someone who isn't strong enough to handle it, someone who is innocent." She shivers with revulsion and casts her gaze around the room. "If I succumb to this... hunger, then everything you once thought about me would be right. I'd be no better than Lamia and Morrigan."

"I'm strong enough."

She looks at me and shakes her head. "You still need to rest and heal, Cambion. You

aren't fully recovered."

I move across the room in the blink of an eye. "Let me help you," I whisper.

"Cambion..."

"I'm strong enough. You won't hurt me."

She pauses as she studies my face, trying to decide if I'm telling the truth. I'm not sure if I am but it no longer matters. I want her as much as she wants me. And we've both waited long enough.

"There's still... animosity between us," she says.

"There's still animosity from you to me, you mean to say," I correct her.

She nods.

"What better way to remove it?" I ask. "Let this be the way we start over. I know you're still angry with me and I know I have to repent for the things I've done but if you truly meant what you said earlier—that we have larger enemies on which to focus, then show me by allowing me to quench your hunger."

"I must feed soon," she says on a deep exhale. "The fever and the need have been coming quicker now that you're here. It's as though my desire for you fuels my succubus appetite, or maybe it's the angel's appetite? I'm not sure."

"It doesn't matter, Eilish. This is your body telling you what you need. Listen to it."

She hesitates maybe another few seconds but then she closes the distance between us. Her lips are on mine as I peel away the silk of her robe, dropping it to the floor as I

thirst to see hernaked. Once I do, I take in the beauty of her curves as much as I can before she forces me down on the cot.

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Eilish is soft in my hands and I can't remember why I denied us both for so long. My palms slide along the curve of her hips. She bites and nibbles her way down my neck, reaching for the laces of my trousers, but I stay her hand. Her eyes fill with confusion as she looks down at me.

"I won't fuck you, Eilish. That's not what this is about."

"Then?" she starts, confused.

"No more talking," I say as I kiss the corner of her mouth and spread her legs gently. Then I switch places with her, settling her down on the cot as I drop down between her legs. I leave kisses on her thighs as I trail to her sex and lick up her slit, loving the taste of her on my tongue.

She grips my head and yanks it upward. "We don't have time for that," she says. "I want you and I want you inside me... now," she says.

I unlace my pants and slide them over my waist as she tugs open my robes. My footwear falls to the ground with the rest of our apparel and I move over her gracefully. Eilish is impatient, but I enter her inch by inch, feeling the wet grip of her channel.

She cries out once I'm fully ensconced within her and a bright white light emanates from her body as her wings shoot from her back, arching around each of us. The light is blinding and I have to close my eyes against it. Moments later, it extinguishes itself.

I open my eyes and find her staring up at me as her wings sink back into her flesh.
“Are you okay?” I ask.

She nods and I began finding my rhythm within her, pushing into her and pulling out again. Every thrust feels like heaven and the glow of her skin transfers to me, until we’re both glowing from head to toe. And the feel of electricity hums along my skin.

“I remember,” she whispers. I look into her blue eyes, feeling as though I could get lost in them. “I remember this,” she continues. “The way you feel, the light that fills my body.”

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper.

Her eyes flood with tears and I kiss them away. Eilish trembles with each slow thrust as I change the angles of our body to stroke her deeper. Nails bite into the muscle of my back as I lift her right leg and place it on my shoulder, opening her wider for my claim.

The throes of her first climax hit me like a hammer to the gut and I hold back from spilling my seed too soon. Her hands roam the contours of my flesh as I feel the sensation of her magic unfurl within me.

“Yes... take what you need,” I mutter.

The feeling spreads until I’m overwhelmed. Eilish gasps and moans, meeting my thrusts with unbridled desire. I pick up speed, slamming into her with powerful snaps of my hips until she shatters once again. Her power grows stronger, wrapping around us like a cocoon of warm light. I use my thumb to brush away another stray tear.

The light surrounding us begins to grow brighter.

“You are beautiful and strong,” I say, my voice more air than sound. “I’m unworthy of this gift, Eilish. If the world should end tomorrow, I’m grateful you chose me.”

“Cambion!” Her lip quivers and I slide my mouth over hers. “I need your seed,” she whispers. And the words thrill me.

Her cries morph into ragged groans of pleasure until it’s too much. The force of our passion is so strong, my arms just barely keep me from crushing the delicate creature beneath me.

I continue to kiss her through the waves of pleasure until we’re reduced to nothing more than a pile of flesh and bone, blood and soul.

And it’s then that I release myself within her. When I pull out of her, I notice the black tendrils of her hair are now white.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORRIGAN

Oronrel

Something has happened. I feel it in the depths of my being.

Eilish.

She’s stronger now.

She’s fed her angel, which means she’s taken Cambion as a lover. The pang of regret catches me off-guard. I always had a soft spot for the elf, but what’s done is done. And now Eilish is more powerful. I sensed the shift the moment she fed from the

former King of Nature. With Cambion and the others feeding her, she will only continue to grow stronger. I can't allow that to happen.

She's moving—fast. I can sense her movements as she passes into the fae realm. I sit on the throne and tear my soul from my body, searching through the thin space between the astral plane and the physical one. My soul manifests within a tent.

Eilish stands from her bedroll and laces her boots. She cocks her head and snorts bitterly as she realizes I'm here.

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“Bold, Morrigan,” she says. “Is it fear that keeps you from visiting me in person? Or something else?”

“I come to warn you, Eilish.”

It’s true. Though I hate her, I still need her... alive.

She glares at me. “Considering what happened to me the last time you supposedly tried to help me, I think I’ll forego the speech and get right to the point.” She crosses her arms and cocks a hip. “I’m not interested in anything you have to say.”

“The Cockatrice hunts you.”

“Yes, I know,” she sighs with exasperation.

“You can’t trust Theren.”

“Why?”

“He may have broken free from my spell, but he was dark long before I interfered. If you don’t believe me, ask Cambion. Theren once studied beneath Abedon himself. That’s why I used him. He’s just as much Abedon’s servant as is the Cockatrice, and I fear they both seek to kill you.”

“Let’s say I believe you,” she starts with narrowed eyes. “Why do you care if I live or die?”

“Of course I care if you die!” I say, sounding shocked.

Eilish takes a step toward me. “Because I’m the key to some prophecy?”

I’m getting sick of these games. I smile and my own eyes narrow. “You are a tool, Eilish. A means to an end.”

“Whose end?” she asks, with a skeptical look on her glowing face. Cambion looks good on her.

“No matter what happens, there will be more death.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means everyone you love is in danger. There are forces moving against you—forces that are far more dangerous than Variant or I could ever be. Believe what you will, but you’re a beacon of destruction. Your very existence challenges the fabrication of this world.”

There it is. The flicker of doubt.

“You’re lying,” she says.

“You know my words to be true,” I insist. “You’ve felt it all along. You, Eilish, are the harbinger of death. So many have already fallen, and your little resistance has only just begun.” My hand reaches out to brush her cheek in a phantom touch. Tingles spear down my arm as she flinches away.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” she seethes.

I drop my hand. “Come with me. You’ve seen the visions, the prophecies... you and I

are meant to fight side by side against the darkness that's coming. We aren't meant to fight each other."

She laughs at that. "You think I'd willingly go with you? And leave the others?"

"They won't survive the war if you continue to deny your fate."

Eilish lifts her chin defiantly. "From what I hear, there's more than one ending to this story, Morrigan. Which makes me think if you're desperate enough to come here, you know not many of those endings are in your favor. I think I'm liking my odds so far."

My soul snaps back to my body.

Standing up from the onyx throne, I blast one of the columns with my magic and it explodes before my eyes. The tip of my middle finger turns black, charred from the talisman. Each time I use too much magic before the piece has time to charge, I feel it wearing away at me. I must get my power back!

The Cockatrice enters the throne room, casting a disinterested glance toward the destroyed column before meeting my gaze.

"What?" I demand.

"An orc scout has reported that Variant and his party have located Theren and the others. There's a fight in the forest beneath the volcano, not far from Mount Dolgum."

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“Good. With any luck, Theren will be back in the fold before—”

“You misunderstand, Morrigan,” the Cockatrice sneers. “Theren will never return to Oronrel.”

“Then?”

“I will use him and the others to get to Eilish and then I will kill her, which will end my contract with you once and for all.”

“What do you want me to say?” I ask, frowning at the ugly creature.

“Nothing,” it responds. “After my contract is finished, how long do you think it will be before I get my hands on that enchanted mirror in which Silvanus hid your power?”

I lunge for the Cockatrice, but he moves out of the way.

“What use do you have with my power?”

“As I said before, I have my own plans where the angel is concerned. My master wants her, and I will get my hands on her—whether I have to kill you to do so or not. Your days are numbered as it is, Midnight Queen. I would tread carefully.”

My teeth ache as I clench my jaw. The Cockatrice walks past me and flops onto the throne. I storm out of the room. My skin prickles and the urge to yank the hair out of my head is strong, for the anger that radiates from the depths of my spirit is

deafening.

I want the Cockatrice dead.

As soon as Variant returns, we'll find a way to end the foul thing.

Abedon's little lap dog has no idea whom he is dealing with. I've peeled the skin from creatures more threatening than him and lived to tell the tale. My days aren't numbered, but his are, for no fires of the underworld burn hotter than the scorn of my rage.

EILISH

Siranthria

A blanket of rain falls in this part of the fae realm. We're fewer than twenty miles from one of the great elven cities, where my people believe demons are keeping a group of rebels captive. With any luck, the rebels will help our cause and gain their freedom in return... however, I can't help but think about Morrigan's words.

Rain obscures everything in sight as the storm pushes our way. Mercenaries splash through puddles, their hounds following close behind. We move as a small unit beneath the dim light of a streetlamp. Our connection, Inkor, a yellow-eyed basilisk shifter, stands at the gate, ready to let us in.

"Welcome to Siranthria, Lady Fulthain."

Belroth moves ahead of me and blocks me from sight as we enter the city walls. Pulling my hood lower, I move behind him through the streets, careful to duck into

the shadows whenever city guards or Variant's men pass by. The rebels are held in a guard tower nearby. Belroth takes four men and goes east as I continue toward the north. Nothing here is dry or safe, as the entire city looks abandoned after the raids.

I eye the fence that blocks the entrance to the guard tower. One of the mercenaries in my team boosts me over and I land on my feet with a splash. The water slides right off my gear, but even so, the cold finds its way into the places where neither leather nor hide cover.

Dipping low, I slide my dagger through a few of the links in the fence, allowing my team through. Myerdoth looks up at the guard tower.

"I'll keep watch," he suggests and briefly takes to the sky before he lands on top of the tower. I prod along the door and find it's not warded with magic. With a flick of my wrist, the lock gives and we press onward.

My team moves through the doorway and I cover them from the rear. Someone signals to me and I see the rebels behind iron bars. It's the same sort of iron Morrigan used to imprison the fae at theThrest, the sort of iron that burns faeries. Pressing closer, I lean toward those cowering near the far wall.

"You must go away," a small, frightened voice squeaks.

I approach slowly, raising my hands to show I mean them no harm. An elf shivers in the corner, and I notice his ears have been clipped by the guards. Variant apparently has taken his cues from the Unseelie Court—more and more elves are being shamed in the same way, according to my scouts.

"Don't be afraid of us," I say gently. "We're here to help you."

The elf turns his head to show a series of burns and other injuries. Parts of his golden

skin have been peeled away, and blood leaks from wounds that look infected. He must have fought the guards and this was his punishment. And yet, despite the shaming and the injuries, he holds himself with pride.

“It’s all right,” I continue. “My name is Eilish. I’m here to get you out.”

“I-is it true? The Vindication has come for us?” one of them stammers. I nod and the team begins to saw through the bars. I’m surprised they’ve heard of us but proud.

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Myerdoth pops his head in through the window. “Guards are approaching. They aren’t aware of our presence, but we must leave quickly.”

“Can you buy us some time?”

The gargoyle grumbles incoherently before flying off once more. A loud crash from down the road sends the guards scurrying toward the sound. Lightning claps from up above as we free the rebels and escort them safely out of the cell and back through the narrow alleyways toward the city gate.

Inkor scratches his head in disbelief. “Didn’t think you’d actually be able to pull it off.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I respond with a smile.

He returns it. “Belroth was right about you, Lady Fulthain. The world needs fierce leaders like you.”

Removing his hat, the basilisk takes a knee on the wet cobblestone. I place my hand on his shoulder and signal for him to rise.

“This isn’t a time to bow to anyone. You’ve done us a favor this evening, and I won’t forget it. If you need anything, please, don’t hesitate to call on me.”

Belroth and the others join me with the rest of the rebels and we make a clean exit before heading back to camp. While the others pack up, I return to the stronghold.

Tonight was a success, but the Midnight Queen was right about one thing: I am the reason for so many deaths. If not for Dragan embarking on this journey with me, the gargoyles would still be alive. If not for me, Morrigan would still be trapped in the tower of Variant's palace. All of those lives would not have been lost in the Veil, if not for me. If I'd been stronger... my mother and sister...

I approach the walls of the mercenary stronghold, but I can't bring myself to enter. The colorful flags are like a knife to the heart—they remind me of the bodies that littered the battlefield after we liberated the Threst. And among those banners is a flag of my own making, a symbol of my accomplishments as much as my failures.

Instead of entering through the gate, I turn my back on the stronghold and ride toward the desert. There's a place in the realms where I know I'll find the answers I seek. I must go back to where it all started.

If I'd just joined Variant when I'd the chance, thousands of lives could have been spared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

BARON

Fae Realm

"Fuck!" I dive toward the ground as a shield attempts to bash my head in.

The ground begins to shift and churn with each blow that batters my body. My jaw clicks and my back aches, but I continue to fight so the orcs can't reach my companions. There is a selfish bastard no matter how truthful his story may be, but if saving him saves Eilish from whatever Morrigan has in store for her, then I'm willing to swallow my pride.

“Do you fuckers breed like rabbits, or are you spawned in a sewer somewhere?” I grumble.

The orcs snarl and attack with a vengeance. A sea of grotesque faces and disfigured bodies flood the trees, blocking my view of the others as they retreat. And then a low growl catches my attention, pulling my focus from the fight. The orcs break rank, creating a path right toward me.

Variant.

The false king approaches on his great steed, white wings hanging low beside him in a show of power as much as the crown of gilded stag horns and pure diamonds on his brow. Variant unlatches and pulls off the majestic robes that cover his shoulders, letting the fine fabric flutter to the ground.

“You disappoint me, Baron.”

“Good. I live to disappoint you, asshole.” I twirl my dagger and saunter toward Variant. “You and Morrigan bring nothing but chaos and destruction to the realms.”

“I’m surprised you care.”

“I can admit to not giving a fuck before, but that was the past. Now I know what’s important. No more hiding, no more running... we bring the fight to you.”

“You’re standing in the way of things you don’t understand.”

“I understand a lot more than you think I do, Variant,” I chuckle darkly. “It’s you who’s clueless. We aren’t just a bunch of outcasts staging a rebellion. You forget that we were kings, warriors of our own right and men of power. Magic flows through my veins as much as it flows through yours.”

“Shadow tricks and poison? I’d expected more of a challenge.”

“Much has changed since our little run-in at the palace. I’ve got a whole new bag of tricks.”

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“It doesn’t matter,” Variant scoffs. “In the end, you’re nothing more than an obstacle that stands between me and my quest. Which means you must be removed.” The false king spreads his wings, unsheathing his enchanted sword.

Variant hastens a step forward, and the orcs form a circle around me. The first hit strikes so hard it sends vibrations up my arm as I deflect with the dagger. I roll my shoulders and match him blow for blow until we’re both panting.

“Give up, Baron,” he warns. “Or I’ll kill you for the second time.”

That burns me like no fire ever could. I have to remind myself this isn’t the real Variant—the real Variant is trapped within himself just like Theren was. “I know the real you is in there, Variant. You have to fight Morrigan’s control.”

“Morrigan doesn’t control me.”

“Bullshit. She’s controlling you now, but you can break free just like Theren did.” The next swing knocks my dagger to the ground. I roll, evading another strike. “Open your eyes and see what’s going on, you dumb fuck.”

“Your words have no effect on me,” he responds. “You and I aren’t friends so stop acting as though we are.”

I shake my head. “You might be my enemy now, but we were once friends... brothers, bound by our oath. An oath you swore to uphold!”

Something flashes on the other man’s features and for a moment, I think I see the real

Variant before he panics, blocking me. I shove him against the tree and the orcs screech, ready to defend their leader. Variant kicks me back. I stumble, but regain my footing. There's a pull between us, a string tethering our minds... possibly remnants of our vows or even the real Variant trying to communicate. Either way, I'm outnumbered and quickly running out of energy. Feeding from Pyre helps, but it doesn't last forever.

Flipping back, I grab my dagger while reaching for a second blade. Variant eyes my hands and advances. I manage to hit his arm, sending his sword clattering to the ground. But as I turn, a knife sinks into my belly and twists.

“Die, you wretched maggot!”

The laughter that bellows out from someplace deep inside me dislodges the smile from Variant's face. “I'm already dead, asshole.”

Something about the blade acts as a sort of conductor. I grab Variant's arm and the tension grows, boiling the air in my lungs until I feel like I'm choking on it. A blur moves from Variant's body into mine—his soul. I feel the life writhing inside me. Pyre told me this could happen, that I could act as a vessel.

Baron!Variant's voice booms inside my head. The body I hold captive begins to fight the bond, wriggling as though in fear.

I can buy you some time, but it will only last for a moment,Variant says. When I give the signal, go as fast as you can and find the others!

The soul snaps out of my body and flies back into Variant's. My old ally's face contorts. He doubles over and shouts, “Run!”

A flare of magic freezes the orcs. They make no move to attack as I run as quickly as

I can. Eilish was right. Variant and Theren aren't the enemies we thought. I would do well not to let my guard down around them, but I find comfort in knowing all hope isn't lost. Whether in the deserts of the mortal realm or in the frigid mountains of the fae world, we will stop Morrigan—once and for all.

My hand brushes the already healing wound in my abdomen and I wince. This is twice now that Variant has stabbed me under the influence of the Midnight Queen. If I can learn to master my new abilities, there may be a way of getting through to him.

DRAGAN

Fae Realm

I hear a twig snap. We should be far enough away from the fight that the orcs couldn't have followed us, but then again, it's not in the nature of orcs to be stealthy. I summon my shadow blade, causing Theren and Pyre to regard me with caution. Sneaking through the underbrush, I lift my sword to the throat of the newcomer.

When Baron collapses against me, I dissolve the blade and help him back to camp. "You should have said something. I could have stabbed you."

"Too late," he says with a smile and glances down. I see the huge red blood stain on the front of his shirt and I take a deep breath. "Jesus."

"Good thing I'm already dead."

I toss his arm over my shoulder and we limp toward the circle of bedrolls arranged around the fire. The light illuminates Pyre's face as he continues to heal Theren.

“Baron?” Pyre says as he stops tending to Theren and stands up, concern on his face.

“I’m fine,” Baron says and glances down at his stomach. “Just a flesh wound.”

“You’ve been gone a long time,” I tell the vampire. “We intend to get moving again at dawn. If you need to—”

“We can head out whenever you want, I’m starting to heal already.” He takes a deep breath, still leaning against me, as Pyre turns to face us.

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“Why the sneaking around?” asks Pyre.

“Saw fire. Had to make sure it wasn’t an orc camp.” Baron hisses as I set him down on one of the bedrolls. His eyes close for a moment as he lifts his tunic to show off a collection of wicked bruises and a gash that’s healing itself as we watch. “More and more orcs kept coming. Thought I was done for.”

Cocking my head to the side, I smirk. “You look like shit. Are you sure you aren’t part orc or something? Because I can see the family resemblance.”

“Well, you ain’t all that handsome either, sunshine.” The vampire grits his teeth and prods the hot kindling with his knife until the metal glows a bright orange in the night. He presses the tip to one of his many wounds. The skin sizzles and closes itself as the smell of burned flesh permeates the camp.

“Variant and I had a little discussion,” he says. “And by ‘discussion,’ I mean he tried to kill me again.”

Part of me is actually glad Baron made it out of the fight intact. Variant could have easily made Baron’s life hell, but the vampire is clearly more powerful than I thought. It strikes me then that I’m the least powerful among the four of us, in terms of magic. At least until I locate the grimoire.

“Did Variant give anything away?” Pyre asks.

Baron shrugs. “We were fighting. I was getting weaker after fighting against the horde. Then he saved my life.”

“Variant saved your life?” I ask.

“Maybe he’s lost too much blood,” Theren adds.

“Good Variant saved me,” Baron responds, glaring at us both.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I ask.

“It means Variant’s soul is imprisoned by Morrigan same as mine,” Theren responds.

Baron shrugs indifferently and grabs the water canteen out of Pyre’s hand. He dumps the water all over his chin and chest.

“I absorbed Variant’s soul into my body after I felt a strange channel open up, and then the real Variant bought me enough time to get out of there before the orcs tore me to pieces.”

“And now?” Pyre asks.

Baron shrugs. “We should be able to make it to the volcano without any more trouble, if we leave now.”

“Woah! What do you mean, you absorbed his soul?” I insist.

“Any form of leech species that feeds off the life force of others has the potential to be a vessel,” Pyre informs us. “Baron is able to host souls or even large amounts of magic.” Pyre continues to explain. “Unless the individual is particularly strong like Eilish, it takes years to fully master this ability. Baron, however, already shows promise.”

I run my hand along my jaw with a scowl etched onto my face.

Theren seems less confused than I am as he nods along with Pyre's words. "One training to be the next Guardian of The Veil, another a hybrid destined for great things, an elf with great arcane abilities, a necromancer... this rebellion has power." Golden eyes fall on me. Theren jerks his chin towards me and asks, "What about you? What's your mission in all of this?"

"Gargoyles were killed by Variant during a raid in the shadow realm. I wish to make more of my own kind, but I can't do that without the help of a witch's grimoire." I kick a stone and it rolls into the fire. Sparks fly with a crackle.

"How do you know that?" Theren asks.

I shrug. "One of my kind, Myerdoth, was the first gargoyle. At one time, he was a statue sitting atop a palace wall when a witch cried out for help as a battle raged beneath him. It was her pleading for a guardian and the spell on her lips that brought the statue to life. And the statue became Myerdoth. He saved her and—"

"And in return she blessed the earth, making sure any gargoyle created of the stone would come to life and rule the night? Yeah, I've heard the legends," Theren finishes.

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"I can show you where the grimoire is," he offers.

Hope dares to stir within me. "And I'm sure you want something significant in return."

"Of course," Theren admits without hesitation. "The stone grimoire creates life out of practically nothing. With enough time, you could have another army of gargoyles at your command. What I want, the grimoire can't give me. But you can."

“I’m not as skilled with magic as some of our other companions. I’m sure Cambion or even Pyre would be of more help.” My boots tap rhythmically against the ground, matching the constant thrum of my erratic heartbeat as excitement flows through me.

“No, they can’t,” he says.

“What is it you want, exactly?” I ask.

“Darkness. Shadow. And lots of it.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THEREN

Fae Realm

“I’m a catoptromancer without a mirror,” I explain. “Though I use blood magic in battle and have other spells at my disposal, that’s nothing compared to what I can do with a reflection.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Dragan demands.

“As Unseelie, I draw my power from the darkness, and you are the King of Shadow,” I hedge, hoping the stone brute will catch my meaning without my having to actually say it.

A mirror of pure shadow would be my ultimate weapon, aside from my spear staff. With my army now at Variant’s beck and call, I need whatever help I can get. And at the moment, that help comes in the form of Dragan.

I wish it didn’t.

“You want me to craft you a mirror of shadow?” he asks.

Pyre shifts uncomfortably and I understand why. Our magics may be on the same spectrum of light and dark, but on different scales of taboo. I’m wary of him, as well—even as I begin to respect his craft. Baron, however, walks a frail line between what he was and what he will become.

Like Eilish, he hasn’t matured into his powers and could stumble past the point of neutrality and end up swimming in inky black darkness until he’s swallowed by the abyss. So could I and so could Cambion, but I’m ready for whatever comes next. Only now do I see I have more in common with the necromancer than I initially thought.

“It will take time, but once it’s complete I will take you to the grimoire,” I promise. “It lies in a parallel between our world and another, a pocket realm of sorts that can only be accessed by mirror gating.”

Dragan’s mouth pulls into a tight frown. “And how do you know this?”

I smile. “Because I was the one who put it there.”

The gargoyle whirls around, wrapping his fist in the front of my tattered robes. I lift my hand to keep the others from interfering.

“Why?” he demands.

“Myerdoth’s witch asked me to,” I continue. “She knew I was the only one who could protect it, and I’ve done so for many years. Imagine what would have happened if Morrigan had gotten her hands on it. You already saw what Variant can do to the gargoyles. They’d be mindless slaves, forced to fight against their king. Is that what you would’ve wanted for your kind?”

With a low growl, Dragan releases me, and we resume our trek toward the succubae breeding grounds. As we scale yet another peak, I notice there are more ruins like those we found in the mountains.

“There was never a forest here, was there?” I ask, looking over at Pyre. His sightless eyes bore into me as he gives a steady nod.

The ground is littered with bones and armor, as though a great battle took place under the mountain. Charred earth rests beneath the trees that have grown here to hide the truth. Silvanus must have come here, trying to obscure what really happened. I grab Baron’s dagger from his belt and slice open my palm.

The blood floats in the air like paint against an unseen canvas as I draw the symbols of arecallspell. Images begin to flash all around us, becoming more solid as I summon an illusion of the past.

Fire falls from the sky. Succubae scream out in agony as they flee for their lives. Lamia stands there in her armor, ready to fight beside her female warriors, when a large shadoweclipses them. The Incubus. Throwing his head back, he releases a roar that causes the volcano to erupt, spewing a river of molten lava that flows across the mountaintops. It scorches the succubae hiding in their homes. Cries echo up towards the sky as Gildlorthoine, the lost King of The Succubae, lays waste to them all. His sword of flame sweeps low, severing heads and cleaving through armor. Lamia retreats with her daughters, abandoning her people to be slaughtered.

The illusion breaks.

Dragan takes a deep breath. “Lamia said she and Variant were responsible for the extinction of her race...”

I hand the dagger back to Baron and seal the cut on my hand with a quick spell.

“After Gildlorthoine destroyed most of the mountain, Silvanus planted this forest. He must have been the one protecting Eilish’s father. But something had to have triggered the Incubus’s rage.”

“Perhaps the loss of the one he loved,” Pyre suggests. “If Maeline was killed, it would have sent him into a rage. Eilish says she sensed Silvanus’ presence the day her family was murdered by the Cockatrice. If the Cockatrice told Gildlorthoine, that would explain why he killed the succubae. He couldn’t bear to breed their numbers anymore without feeling as though he betrayed her.”

“But Gildlorthoine abandoned Eilish and her mother,” Baron says.

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“For their protection,” Dragan replies in Pyre’s stead. “Lamia would have seen his love for Maeline as a slight to her and her daughters. She would have gone after Eilish and her family if she’d known. Silvanus forcing him to disappear and hiding all of this is what kept them alive for so long.”

I kick aside a pile of volcanic rock and bones, then dig through the ash with my fingers until I hit something smooth and metal. Pulling the item from the wreckage, I see it’s a crown. The others hover nearby, gawking at the sheer size of the thing. It easily expands the width of my shoulders, and I’m larger than both Baron and Cambion. Dragan lets out a long whistle.

“If it comes down to telling Eilish’s father that we’re all having sex with his daughter, I’m not going to be the one to fight him,” Baron says. “I’ll leave that for Silvanus.”

The vampire’s sarcasm isn’t much appreciated by Pyre and Dragan, but I chuckle at the off-handed statement, nonetheless. Even though I love Eilish and I’ve never stopped, hearing this news doesn’t bother me. I’ve long known what she is and what that means. I would never be enough for her.

Shaking his head, Pyre forges on. Heat begins to radiate from the volcano, causing sweat to soak through our heavy clothing.

I run my fingers through the hair that clings to my forehead and sigh. “None of you ever chooses an easy quest, do you?”

“Nah, if someone isn’t captured or close to dying, then what’s the point?” Baron responds.

FLUMPH

Desolate Border

I sees Pretty ride off toward the sands, sneakin' out. An' then I grabs my boots an' stuff my little foots inside, ready to go after her. I forgettin' somethin', but I can't remember what. By the time I'm catchin' up, I hear her hummin'. She usedta hum that tune when she had them nightmares 'bout her mother an' sister dyin'. It real creepy, an' she actin' all sketchy an' whatsnot. I don't want her to sees me 'till I knows what she up to.

"I should have never started all of this," she say, but to no one. Great! She talkin' to herself now!

Theys all crazy. Maybe it 'cause they big. 'Cause us little guys ain't all that crazy, not like this.

"Grow up, Eilish!" she shout to herself. "Stop blaming everyone for your problems. Morrigan was right."

MORRIGAN? THE MOTHER HEIFER AIN'T RIGHT!

She ain't right 'bout nothin'. What Pretty thinkin', goin' off like this? Why she say the Mother Heifer right? Somethin' 'bout this don't sits well with me. I ain't likin' this one bit. If that mangy wench done said somethin' to Pretty that makin' her go all crazy, then I wanna kill her. Even more than I already did. I wanna pokes her eyes out with my hands an' use 'em to decorate my room back at the stronghold.

First, though, I gotta see where Pretty goin'.

My ass is sweatin' like a nightmare! Why Pretty gotta go wanderin' through the desert like some sort o' moody teenager? But it too late now. I already out here, walkin' along the hot sand, hatin' that I didn't bring Noni along. 'Least she woulda poofs us further ahead so we don't gotta walk so much. My wings ain't even workin' right in this awful weather. The sun is a fuckin' dick today, scorchin' my back an' head 'till I feels like I'm bubblin' in some stew.

I thinkin' she lost, 'cause she ain't gots no map or nothin'.

But then she touch somethin' an' it shimmer like a curtain o' starlight. This ain't good. Though it look pretty, I know a gate when I sees one. 'Specially after Cambion opened the one to Earlann. Pretty step through it an' I follow her, 'cause she ain't 'pose to go places on her own. Not when the others are so far away doin' fuck all. It ain't too scary over here on the other side, but I still don't likes it all the same.

It snowin' here. We on some sorta mountain or somethin', but not at the top. We by a lake.

It ain't a big lake, but bigger than me. A small little house built beside it, an' I start gettin' a rumble feelin' in my belly. Not like I hungry or anythin' like that, but the sorta rumble that mean we ain't 'pose to be here. Pretty startin' to look all scared-like an' that don't mean nothin' good, either. Without Noni, I can't poofs to the stronghold. I gotta leave Pretty... I don't wanna, but I gotta.

She shouldn't be here on her own. I knows that, but what choice do I gots?

I turn 'round an' flys back to the gate. It all shimmery an' stuff still, so I hope it don't close before I get back with one o' the giants. Back into the fuckin' desert I go, flappin' my little wings fast as I can 'till I reach the outpost. One o' them mercenaries with the shifty eyes lookin' at me all pissy-like.

“Give me a ride back to the king,” I tells him. “I a valuable member o’ the Giants of The Vindication or whatever. They needs to know what goin’ on, an’ if they finds out that you ain’t helpin’ me, you gonna be in a fuck ton o’ trouble.”

I climbs up on him’s shoulder before he answer. The mercenary get on him’s horse an’ ride fast. I can feel my bit o’ hair flutterin’ in the wind. It dryin’ my sweat, even though it smell like hot ass an’ gots all kinds o’ sand flyin’ into my eyes.

When we stop at the front gate, I hurry through the market an’ right up them big fuckin’ stairs that always make me tired just lookin’ at them. Kolvar give me one o’ him’s “you ain’t ‘pose to be here” looks an’ I flips him off, shovin’ right past him ‘till I sees the elf sittin’ next to the horse king.

“Hey! Pretty gone, an’ you sittin’ here shovin’ your face with eats?”

He glarin’ at me all scary-like, but I ain’t too scared. I get up on the table an’ stomp right over to him. Noni scurryin’ in from another room. She don’t like when I get in the elf’s stupid face, but I don’t care.

“What are you talking about, Flumph?” he say. “Speak plainly.”

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“The angel done snuck outta here an’ it don’t look like she’s gonna be comin’ back anytime soon.”

“Eilish left?” He stand up an’ him’s chair fall back. It crash to the floor, hurtin’ my little ears.

“That what I said!... MY NEW CROSSBOW! That what I were forgettin’!”

Noni sigh an’ pulls me off the table. She draggin’ me outta the big buildin’ an’ all the way to my room. We stops by my bed an’ she throwin’ my clothes at me. That another thing I forgot.

“Where the hell you think we goin’?”

“If Mr. Cambion is leaving, then we go with him. Get dressed, Mr. Flumph. Noni going to get the others. Mr. Kolvar and Miss Aima will want to come. Noni thinks we have to fight again. Master ain’t here to help, so we help,” the brownie say. She gots her chin up an’ her armor on in no time.

“But I don’t want to fight no more! They got lots o’ big people now! I ain’t gotta.”

“We help our friends, Mr. Flumph.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EILISH

Delendren Glade

This is it.

This is the place from my dreams, the place that's been calling to me since I first left. With tears in my eyes, I turn around and spot the gate I used to come through every day. But back then, there was no desert, just the ancient buildings left over by the humans. Did they turn to dust like everything else, or have they been buried deep beneath these sands?

Regardless, this is my home. The Delendren Glade was once a haven for all, a place where my mother healed warriors and fed the hungry.

To return here after so much heartache and misery... it shakes me to my core.

I can practically hear my mother calling out from the doorway as my sister and I run through the lavender fields with twigs in our hair and stains on our dresses. My head begins to spin and I feel like I'm drifting on a memory.

I walk to the place where I found them... only to see that a garden has been planted there. The garden is untouched by the snow; it's lush and green as though spring exists only in this small patch of the glade. I fall to my knees, gently brushing the petals with my fingers.

Tears stream down my face as I remember them. And I remember me. The way I used to be.

Solya's laughter surrounds me though I know she's long gone, somewhere in the Veil or the afterlife. The only thing haunting me now is my own memories.

Whoever did this, whoever planted this garden here, I must thank them. When the

time is right.

For now, I stand and move toward the hovel.

Old, rotting wood squeaks beneath my feet as I step into a small kitchen with a table at its center. Bottles of powders and hanging herbs are covered with dust, cluttering the cupboards and countertops. A small healing room is off to the right, where cobwebs drape from the slanted ceiling. I walk past the doorway, toward the room I shared with my sister.

Solya's book is still open on the table between our beds.

I sit on the edge of my mattress and toy with the lace that lines my pillows. We never had much, but mother always did her best to give us what we needed. Running my hand along the edge of the nightstand, I open a secret notch. I dig a little deeper into the compartment and pull out a journal—one I recognize. It's my old journal. The leather is thin and threadbare, and the pages are yellowed from age, but the binding is still intact.

Suddenly a stream of excitement blares through me—this is it! I think. This could help me restore the memories I'm still missing. I flip the journal open to a random page and read aloud.

"I met a stranger in the woods today. Though he has yet to tell me his name, I know he's the Unseelie Prince. He talks in circles, like he's afraid of me as much as I am of him. Mother tells me to stay away from him, but I find myself enchanted by the man who lurks in the shadows. He says my smile is more beautiful than the three moons of Oronrel."

My hand flutters through the pages and stops on a page slightly smeared with bloody fingerprints. "They took Theren," I read "His father is angry. There are whispers

through the city, whispers that Theren is being held in the dungeon. Mother warned me that pain would come to us both if we didn't set aside our foolish love. But I fear it's too late for Theren and me, too late because we are in love and that love is pure."

Hands trembling, I tuck the journal into my bag. The house no longer feels warm from the strength of my memories. Instead, the frigid cold claws its way through the layers of my leather armor and I hurry from the hovel I once called home. Maybe this place can be restored to what it once was, but there's a darkness here that makes me think maybe restoring it isn't such a great idea.

A figure appears before me. The snow doesn't sink where he stands and I know he's not real, but I recognize him, all the same.

"You were here to kill me that day," I say. "You are the Cockatrice, one of Abedon's creatures."

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He doesn't speak, but I know the truth. He's still out there, somewhere. Maybe not hunting me any longer, but he still does his master's bidding, whatever that bidding is. I approach him, watching as he shifts into the beast I remember.

"Why does Abedon want me dead?"

The beast growls, hunkering down as his tail flicks back and forth. But it doesn't respond.

"Morrigan was the one who sent you after me. Did you come for me because it was she who asked? Or was that part of your master's plan, as well?"

A feeling inside me says nothing happens in the realms without Abedon's knowledge. Morrigan may think she's in charge, but while her former lover might be imprisoned, he's not powerless or blind. He knows all. He sees all. And the race to open his prison is working in Abedon's favor.

Whether the Cockatrice or Morrigan succeeds, Abedon will be free. And when he is, there must be someone there who's ready to stop him.

My vision of Morrigan standing beside me could mean something. But I don't trust her.

"There's something we're all missing, isn't there?" I ask out loud. Turning back toward the mountain, I sling my bag over my shoulder. There's something here. I can feel its energies reaching out to me, similar to my own and yet very different.

My feet carry me along the mountain path as the wind blows snow off the treetops. Thick slabs of ice cover the side of the mountain, leaving nothing for me to hang onto if I lose my footing.

The energies I feel are growing stronger with each step.

CAMBION

Mercenary Stronghold

“We have never met,” I observe. “Come. Tell me your name...”

“Eilish, my king.” The slight rasp to her voice makes my prick thicken in my trousers. That’s a voice that should be screaming my name to the rafters while I repeatedly plunge myself into her velvet wetness. “And I come here to make a request.”

I wish for her to keep talking; the words that drip from her supple lips make me think lecherous thoughts. I’m drunk, but not from liquor. In fact, it takes quite a lot for me to feel inebriated by common drink.

“What might your request be?” I saunter over to her, drinking in the sound of her labored breaths. She’s nervous. Good. She should be.

My hands itch to squeeze her ample ass and caress the tantalizing curves of her hips and breasts. Fuck. That’s a body crafted for sinful pleasure. My sinful pleasure.

I continue to advance, placing my body between her and the door. “Speak up, Eilish. It’s not wise to keep a king waiting... unless you toy with danger in hopes of being

punished for it.”

“N-no. Not that,” she insists and then swallows hard. “My mother and sister are in danger. For their protection, I would do anything.”

“Anything?” I repeat.

She nods. “I’m sure you understand my meaning, my king.”

Her fingers jump to the tie that keeps her robe closed. Pulling softly on the string, she allows it to slip from her shoulders. Finely crafted leathers and delicate lace cling to her glorious proportions, a perfect contradiction that makes me throb with need as her words echo in my mind.

I flick open the clasp between her breasts and they spill from the fabric as if eager to feel my hands and mouth. “You would give me this... you would give me your body to save them?”

“I would give anything.”

I shake my head to relieve myself of the memories that still haunt me. The Cockatrice is still out there and he exists only for the purpose of serving Abedon. But his contract with Morrigan remains, which means he may still be after Eilish.

I was a fool to have let her out of my sight. Eilish is strong and more skilled now than she has ever been, but there are beings in the world that would benefit greatly if they collected the bounty on her head or sought to enslave her for her power.

King Galmer waves me goodbye with a wish of good fortune as I run from the Hall of Clans. A tangerine light glows from the end of Myerdoth’s cigarette as the large gargoyle leans against the brick, eyeing me as I approach.

“I need your help,” I tell him, and feel my heart sink into the pit of my stomach as I struggle to breathe evenly.

“Go on.”

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“Lady Fulthain is gone. She never returned from the raid and our sprite companion has informed me that she’s heading somewhere very dangerous.”

“What do you need from me?” The gargoyle takes a long drag and exhales through his nose. I smell the faint aroma of wolfsbane and hemlock with subtle notes of chamomile and lemongrass.

“We need at least two archers, three footmen, and a tracker. There’s no telling what direction she went or if the sandstorms have blown away her trail. I leave in an hour.”

The cigarette dangles from Myerdoth’s lips as he nods and soars toward the barracks. I head back to the Vindication headquarters to gather my things. Flumph and Noni exit their room, dressed for battle and carrying their small weapons. Their loyalty never fails to amaze me.

The three of us leave the compound only to be stopped by a soldier. “Lord Cambion,” he says with a bow of his head. “The artificer in the dungeons is asking for Lady Fulthain. I thought you should know.”

“Thank you.”

Flumph and Noni accompany me to the dungeons, where Zir’s head pops up as I approach. She shuffles over and opens a small chest with a pile of rings inside. Small crystals are engraved along with several runes, but they flash with blinking lights like human technology.

“What is this, Zir?”

“Her Graciousness instructed me to craft communicators for the Rebel Lords of The Vindication and their allies. These are in the final stages of testing and I wished to show her.”

“How do they work?” I reach through the bars of the cell and pluck one from the pile.

“They are linked by magic signatures, allowing the users to contact one another using telepathic frequencies.”

“Telepathic frequencies,” I repeat. “As in... read each other’s minds.”

Zir nods.

“Is it safe?” I ask.

She nods again. “It is entirely safe and will allow you to track one another and speak with your minds.”

I slip the ring onto my finger and it tightens itself. A small needle pricks my skin and I blink as a map appears in my vision. After the ring adjusts, my sight clears.

“It only works from one ring to another at the moment, so it won’t help you locate Her Graciousness,” Zir explains. “Not unless she were to wear one, as well.”

I eye her with interest. “How did you know she needs to be located?”

She smiles. “There is very little I don’t know, though my visions come in clouded context usually.”

“Thank you.”

The small woman flushes and hurries away with the box. Flumph gives her a look that says he's still skeptical of how helpful the artificer will be, but if Eilish trusts her, then so do I. I grow weary of questioning everything. If there are consequences to be had, then I will face them with dignity.

Noni takes the lead as we head toward the stables. Myerdoth waits there with a handful of mercenaries to join our efforts, and I thank them all as I mount my horse.

“No matter what we face, we return with Lady Fulthain. Those of you who aren't willing to give your lives for the leader of our rebellion, turn back now. I won't hold it against you.”

No one turns away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THEREN

Delendren Glade

“Yes,” Pyre says with glee. “I feel the Veil's presence here. The ethers are thin.”

He stands at the heart of the volcano and rips open the fabric of the universe. It's beautiful magic, yes, but treacherous if not used carefully.

“It will transport us directly to Eilish.” The necromancer gestures toward the rift.

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I'm the first through the portal and a sharp wave of dread lances through my body. Why are we here? Why is Eilish here? This place holds very little happiness, filled with agonizing memories that are sure to harm her more than do any good.

"What the fuck?" Baron shouts. His voice echoes through the mountain.

Dragan punches the vampire in the arm. "Good job alerting whatever's here that we just arrived."

Pyre stands between them like an irritable father. "Enough fighting. Eilish is here for some reason, and we need to get to her before she discovers there are darker things on this mountain than the four of us." He shoves them down the worn path, where the prints from Eilish's boots are still visible.

But I sense something else. Morrigan. She's near.

"I feel weak and I won't make it up that mountain. I still need to heal," I say on a breath. "You go without me; I'll make sure nothing comes after you." It's not a lie, but it's also not the truth.

"We aren't leaving you so you can flee as soon as we turn around," Baron says.

"I'm in no shape to go anywhere," I answer.

Pyre nods. "Theren speaks the truth. Were he to try to escape, he wouldn't last long." Then he walks over to me and places a hand on my shoulder. He closes his eyes and I feel his magic swirl around me.

“What are you doing?” Dragan asks.

“Ensuring our friend does not try to voyage any further than ten miles from this location,” Pyre answers.

The others say nothing more and simply follow Pyre as he begins the long walk up the side of the mountain. I watch until they disappear behind a cluster of trees and then I enter the small hovel where so many of our destinies became entwined.

Footsteps approach from behind me, and I recognize the sound of her heartbeat whenever I’m near. She doesn’t expect me. I never wanted to come. It’s been years since I last saw Eilish. So many that I fear she doesn’t remember me.

And yet I sought her out, trying to ignore the raging beat of my own heart as she comes closer, wings dragging on the ice. She sits beside me on this felled tree where we shared our first kiss. The snow falls gently to the ground.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispers.

I chuckle bitterly, flinching slightly when she rests her head on my shoulder. “If my father had his way, I would be. The Midnight Queen saved me...” I look up at the unforgiving sky and wonder how it is that we’ve come to this. “I can’t stay long.”

“I come here to think about you often,” she says.

“Oh?”

“The young man with golden eyes...”

I can hear the smile in her voice and I swallow past the lump in my throat. She lifts her head and forces me to face her. She’s too close and yet still so far away.

I shift uncomfortably and she wraps her wings around us. “I miss you, Theren.”

“There’s nothing of worth to miss.”

“I don’t believe that.” She entwines our fingers and I feel her warmth as potently as I feel the sun shining down on us as we sit beside the lake. “Tell me what happened. Please? Tell me what kept you away for so long. Did your father hurt you?”

“You don’t want to know, Eilish.”

“I do,” she whispers. “Please, let me heal you.”

“The wounds that cannot be seen are ones that cannot be healed.”

How right I’d been that day. Those wounds left behind by my father left me achingly fragile inside, broken in a way my soul could never repair. Physical pain I can endure, but the mental scars that collect within my mind are irreparable. I’m broken.

“My father has always hated me because I showed promise when I was very young. My magic was more powerful than his before I could walk, even though he’d all but succumbed to the darkness. Whenever he got angry at Cambion, I stood up for my brother. I took the beatings and the torture.”

Her faint gasp grates on my nerves as I don’t want her pity. I pull away, moving to stand so I can look out at the frozen water. “This time, I couldn’t fight him off. I was dragged down into the dungeon and held there without food or water for so long... When I refused to break, he summoned me to him...” The breeze swallows my voice and the quiet echoes between us for a few seconds.

“Theren?” Eilish asks in a soft voice.

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I nod, remembering. “The things that happened... the pain is far more than you can imagine,” I say as I look at her and wish I hadn’t. She’s more beautiful than I remembered. So angelic. So innocent.

“Tell me, Theren.”

I shake my head. “I dare not speak of it. But I endured because I had to—for Cambion. If my father didn’t have me as an outlet on which to release his anger, then he’d do so to my brother.”

“Cambion is lucky to have you as a protector.”

I shake my head and look away, realizing the danger I’ve put her in. She moves over to me silently and pulls me into her embrace. A whisper of a kiss on my brow nearly shatters me to pieces.

Broken. I’m broken.

Tears fall from her beautiful eyes.

“I must live with the knowledge that you’ll leave me,” she says. “And I’ll drown in the guilt that I’ve caused you so much sorrow.”

“Our love was destined, Eilish,” I say as I shake my head. “I could never have fought the bonds between us.”

“Yes,” she agrees and then inhales. “But look at the pain it’s caused us both. If my

love only brings you hurt, then please... don't love me, Theren."

"Asking me not to love you is like asking the sun to stop rising."

The door swings open and Morrigan's boots click against the wood, interrupting my vision of the past. I scrub a hand across my face and try to push down my nausea. Morrigan's scent is like a cloud of deception. Her presence is somehow more disturbing than the memory of my father's rage. I turn to take in the sight of her carefully crafted façade of power. I know she weakens herself with each spell she casts using her stolen magic.

"I always knew you'd come crawling back here, Theren," she says. "Eilish is here, I sensed it the moment she stepped through the gateway."

"So?" I demand, surprised.

"Bring her to me and none of you have to die. Hasn't enough blood been spilled on this land?"

MORRIGAN

Delendren Glade

The glade is serene. Tufts of white fluff trickle down from an azure sky as I stare across the frozen lake where the hovel still sits after all these years. Somehow, it's remained untouched by the madness of the realms. I can almost feel the healing powers of Eilish's mother as I walk across the fragile surface of ice that covers the water. There was a time when I might have called Maeline a friend, if not an equal. To think it was her daughter to be born the night the prophecies were spoken... it

rattles me. Even now.

Though the fields are covered in frost, lavender still sweetens the breeze, bringing forth memories best forgotten. I approach the hovel, brushing my hand along the wood of the door where notches have been carved to mark the growth of two children. The sense of home hasn't been lost, despite the great acts of violence against Maeline and her daughters. Fate would have it that I will be the one to end Eilish.

Perhaps today. Perhaps here in the glade. Perhaps soon.

The shrill screech of the door's hinges echoes inside as I step over the threshold. And I laugh when I see Theren standing at the heart of a small kitchen, his eyes looking haunted by ghosts of the past. He turns and looks at me with an expression of pure contempt before the shutters slam on his emotions, blocking me out of his mind.

"So, here we are," I chuckle. "A fallen king and a desperate sorceress. My, how times have changed us, Theren."

"Why come here, Morrigan? What do you hope to find in the glade?"

"I'm here for the same reason you are—to find Eilish."

"No, you're not," he replies with a hint of humor in his voice. "You sensed him, didn't you? Silvanus. He's near."

"Silvanus?" I repeat, hating the taste of the word on my tongue.

"Yes. Perhaps he's in the Raven Forest or some other pocket realm. I can feel him, and I know you wouldn't leave Oronrel without Variant unless you had to. You couldn't wait, couldn't risk losing Silvanus' trail. So you're here, using Eilish to draw

him out of hiding.”

“My, my, you seem to have gotten quite bitter since we last spoke.”

“Being tortured by my own people tends to do that.” Theren reaches behind his back. I take a step toward the door and summon a blade of ice, drawing on the elements. His head cocks to the left with a knowing smirk on his face. “I know your spell lingers, Morrigan. And the only way to defeat it is through magic. So, I hereby challenge you to an arcane duel.”

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He slices open his hand and the blood flows from his palm like a scarlet ribbon.

“My blood magic against your sorcery,” he adds.

I use my own blade to carve a rune into my wrist. A magenta flame crawls up my fingers, reaching for the ribbon of blood. “I accept your challenge. If you lose, then you must submit to me. If I lose, then you go free. Forever. My magic will never have a hold on you again.”

“I accept the terms,” he says with a nod.

Our magic weaves together, forging a mystical contract bound more by the fabric of the universe than our words. A vibrant glow envelops us, swelling until Theren gasps for breath. I hold back a bit longer, waiting for the sensation to become unbearable before I breathe in. Then, I spin on my heels and transport myself onto the frozen lake.

Theren steps out the door and smirks. “You will learn to regret your decision to enslave me, Morrigan.” He squeezes his hand into a fist, causing blood to drip into the snow in a beautifully macabre scene. The blood begins to swirl, forming a golden staff with a blade at the hilt and a luminous ruby that vibrates with dark magic.

Recognizing the weapon, I take a subconscious step back. “How is it possible? Only the strongest mages can wield the Staff of Scorn.”

“You answered your own question,” he sneers. “There are no mages who can match my power. The staff came to me in a time when I feared mirrors the most. While the

glass can betray me, toy with my mind, blood is the purest element. So I mastered it in secret, and now it will help me defeat you.”

Fear cloying at my insides, I spin the blade in my hand and hold it out in front of me. Magic courses through my bones, pulling strength from the talisman. This fight... it will take everything out of me.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance, Theren. You’ve proven to be a bigger problem than you ever were a help.”

“You know what they say about hindsight,” he answers with a shrug.

His casual attitude vexes me and I feel my eyes narrow. “If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll make sure you watch Eilish gasp for breath as I kill her with unhindered joy!”

Theren releases a bloodthirsty roar and races toward me. His red floods the whites of his golden eyes and dark veins crawl up his neck. He slides to a stop, using the momentum to hurl a vicious spell at me. I summon a shield and block the ball of roiling energy. The impact causes my arms to burn.

He’s right—he’s powerful.

He doesn’t hesitate to fire one spell after another in a hellstorm of magic. I struggle to catch them all. One grazes my arm, tearing through my flesh like the claws of a beast.

My visions shifts and I see Theren’s aura. It bursts with flames like a phoenix of vengeance and I know the odds aren’t in my favor. I press my hands together, palms flat, and pull them apart. Lightning crackles, growing stronger as I allow it to build before I channel it through my blade and slice the blade toward him. Theren goes flying, but he stabs his staff into the ice and uses it to slow himself.

The ice begins to shift and crack beneath our feet. I jump into the air, hovering above the trees that surround us, and scream. Shockwaves boom toward Theren, but he deflects them with a wall of ice. The scream bounces off the surface of the ice and ricochets back at me.

He stands and walks toward me atop the frigid waters. “You can always submit, Morrigan. Let’s not drag this out any longer than we must.”

“I won’t give up.”

“No, but you will run out of power in that talisman of yours before I run out of blood.”

THEREN

Delendren Glade

Morrigan crouches in the snow beside the fractured lake. Her lips are tinged with blue and the long strands of her ebony hair are whitened with frost as the day grows colder. Puffs of steam flow from her barely parted lips as she glares up at me. She’s beautiful in her own right, but the Midnight Queen’s beauty can’t compare to Eilish’s.

I watch as Morrigan wobbles to her feet, the blade in her hand a reminder of her treachery.

“Broken Theren,” she wheezes. “What would your father say if he saw you now? Would he be proud that you’ve toed the line he once straddled?”

“Elioth was a poor excuse for a father. And I don’t give a fuck what he’d think.”

“But you’re aware he’s alive?”

“I don’t care.”

“You should,” she answers with a serpent’s smile. “He waits in the depths of the abyss for the one who sent him there,” she taunts. “If Abedon releases him, then they’ll be unstoppable. There won’t be anything to keep them from taking your little angelic whore. They’ll use her and defile her as they strip away her magic, little by little. And then they’ll burn this world and the next.”

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“And you’re telling me this because? You see yourself as some sort of savior?” I throw my head back and laugh. “Silvanus trapped Abedon. You are the one who forced Variant to break his oath. You are the one who started this chaos in hopes of taking Abedon’s power for yourself. And, unlike the others, I have no doubt that he will rise. And when Abedon rises... I hope to hell that I’m one who gets to tell him you played the starring role in his capture.”

Morrigan looks surprised. “You want him to rise?”

I frown at her. “I’m Unseelie, Morrigan. I thrive in darkness.”

I attack once more, lunging for her as I strike hard with my staff blade. A thin line of blood appears on her cheek. Morrigan shrieks with fury and bolts of magic batter my body, knocking me off my feet. I spin the staff and secure it to my back, then slide on my knees across the snow until I ram my shoulder into her middle. Morrigan isn’t expecting a physical attack, so she falls and she falls hard. I flip back onto my feet and grab her blade from the ground. It causes my fingers to grow numb as I examine the spells at work.

I use it to stab myself in the abdomen as Morrigan looks on in horror and confusion. Blood pools from my middle, steaming in the snow. Morrigan summons her blade back to her hands. And from the blood, dark figures rise, morphing until they look identical to my own image. She hisses and turns to flee, but there’s nowhere to go. Spotting a tree, she climbs it with unmatched speed, what little magic she still possesses aiding her all the way. Morrigan looks up at the sky and whistles. The sound is faint, so quiet my twitching ears barely pick up the sharp notes.

A swarm of black birds swoop down from the sky. I turn around and run for the hovel in order to take shelter from them. The birds are so close, I can feel the flapping of their wings on the back of my neck. I dive through the door and slam it shut. Morrigan is trapped in the tree as my minions hunt her from the ground and I'm trapped within the hovel so long as her swarm lingers. The throbbing in my head amplifies with the horrid shriek of distorted caws that sound far too similar to the cries of children.

The Obuqui birds are from the Cogost Mountains, their nesting grounds not far from Redoleir Village. Last I saw, the place was in ruins, just as much as the succubae home. But if the Obuqui aren't extinct, their black riders still draw breath. It would seem Eilish and the others have a lot more to worry about than demons, orcs, and Unseelie armies. The forces that dwell in the Cogost Mountains are legendary for a reason.

When the cawing and squawking halts, I move away from the door. The birds burst inside as I race for the rear entrance, slamming that door shut as well. I see several barrels off to the right and use my power to barricade the door with the barrels as I climb onto the roof through the only window in the room. Morrigan approaches. Her robes billow in the wind like an enemy's banner on a battlefield. She stops when my minions appear behind her, turning slowly to defend herself. I jump from the roof and charge.

While Morrigan uses her magic to destroy my shadow clones/”:/8*9\

pushes her into the side of a tree. Immediately, the Obuqui birds disappear. Morrigan grips her side as she falls down to the ground, desperately attempting to catch her breath. I walk over to her and she looks up, her eyes going wide. She scrambles back on her hands and knees, her fingers digging into the snow until she claws out a branch. I watch her lips move quickly as she whispers a spell. The branch forms into a wand within her hand, twisting and bending to the will of her magic.

I circle her. “That won’t help you.”

“Perhaps not, but I won’t bow to you.” Morrigan twirls the wand and a burst of dark magic strikes me in the shoulder. I release my staff and return her blow with one of my own. Each spell causes her hands to tremble. She can’t keep this up for much longer. But her determination and resilience have gotten her far before.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SILVANUS

The Raven Forest,

Shadow Realm

I should deny her these visits: when she races off to the forest to find me, for the two of us to be alone. As a god in my own right, I should have more control. But, alas, I do not. I enjoy her spunk, her naughty inclinations and her zest for living. I have lost that zest long ago—I find it amusing to witness in another.

I wrap my arms around her and manifest the two of us into my small pocket realm tucked away between worlds.

The Raven Forest is ours only.

Though it had not been my intention to awaken this side of her, it was a fond discovery for both of us. I had merely intended to watch her—to keep an eye on her comings and goings but I found myself drawn toward her. Perhaps it is simply because she is beautiful. And as I am a male, of course I desired her. And as I am a god, she was simply mine for the taking.

And take her I will. Repeatedly. The time has now come...

Eilish leans against the side of a tree, long, elegant lines and tantalizing curves on display. She is seduction even though she does not know why. I watch her, chest heaving. Her scent is thick on the wind. She is ready.

Eilish's eyes observe me in turn, tracking my actions closely like a feline in the night. "Why won't you let me stay here with you?" she asks beguilingly.

"You know the answer to your question."

"This isn't the place for mortals, only gods," she says and rolls her eyes at me. She takes liberties with me she should not. But I have never reprimanded her so she does not understand her error in judgement. Perhaps one day she will.

"There are bad men after me, Silvanus—men who would do me harm if they found me." Eilish lowers her head bashfully, a pretty pink tinging her cheeks, but I know it is merely manipulation. I have taught her well, after all.

"I am your protector. You know that," I respond.

"But, you can't protect me every minute."

"I am a god, or have you forgotten?"

"I haven't forgotten," she says and gives me that suggestive smile. "And I know I'm not the only one hiding," she goes on. "Tell me, Silvanus. What are you so afraid of that you hide here in the forest?"

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“I am afraid of nothing,” I growl at her.

“Then why are you hiding?”

“I am not hiding so much as I am biding my time.”

“For what?”

“It is not your concern,” I say, rather impatiently.

She appears hurt. “You've barely spoken a word to me lately. Did I do something wrong? I've followed all your instructions closely. I'm getting better with magic—”

I stop her ranting with a kiss to her forehead, moving quickly before she can even comprehend what I am doing. She curls her fingers around my shoulders. We are hidden here, in shadowed captivity, and yet I find myself cautious. She is young and yet she has the power to undo me with a single look. Though I steel myself against her wiles, there is a part of me that yearns to claim her like a ravenous beast. If only she knew what dark forces lay beyond her glade... she would not be here with me now.

A warm, inexperienced mouth slides over my own and Eilish releases a pitiful whimper. I can feel her need—it circles me like a heavy fog. She has not known the feel of a male before. Her body is still virginal but it calls to me, all the same.

It is time she became a woman.

I grip her wrists painfully and wrench them above her head. She squirms, and it is delicious. I brush my hand down her chest and lift her up to accommodate the difference in our height, crowding her against the tree by pressing my body flush to her curves. Eilish gasps, feeling the prod of my erection as I slip my tongue into her beckoning mouth. Her scent fills my lungs, causing my head to spin. I do not fight it, though her power has little effect on me.

“You should be punished,” I say.

“W-why? I don’t know what you mean.”

“You forget your place. You forget who I am—what I am.”

“You’re Silvanus—the god of the natural world.”

“You would do well to remember that.”

“I don’t understand,” she says, shaking her head as her large eyes fill with tears. “What have I done to upset you?”

“You tease me.”

“How?”

“There are many examples but I will give you one.” I take a breath and stare down at her. “Lying in bed while you pleasure yourself, knowing that I watch you always.” She inhales as her eyes widen and she pretends to be surprised by this information. “That coy smile on your mouth is quite telling,” I say with a laugh.

Eilish’s face grows flushed with embarrassment and arousal. “I had hoped... perhaps...”

“That I would want you? That I would appear as you touched yourself and slide inside of you, right then and there?”

“Y-yes...”

I smile as my hands continue to roam freely, sliding up her thighs until I brush her wetness. Yes, she is ripe and she is ready to be plucked. “It is time for you to become a woman.”

I rock against her thigh, grinding my bulge against her. My hand wraps around hers, trailing it down my body and forcing her to grip my hard cock. My clothing has already melted away, into the dirt of the forest floor.

“You are going to take my virginity?” she asks. “My mother warned me to save my innocence for my husband.”

“You will never have a husband,” I respond.

She does not seem to be upset by the information or perhaps she is too nervous to respond.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she breathes, her large eyes wide with anticipation.

I chuckle at her insolence. “Yes, I am going to take your virginity.” Her tongue flicks out and traces my bottom lip. “On your knees, Eilish.”

I brush my fingers through her hair as she drops to the ground. She looks up at me with those big blue eyes before she faces my erection.

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“Take it into your mouth,” I tell her.

She swallows and brings her face closer to my manhood, taking it between her lips. When I feel the warm wetness of her mouth, I brace myself against the tree as I hold her head in place. She pulls back only to catch a breath and then she brings her head forward again, taking my length into her mouth as far as she can, causing me to shudder slightly.

She inches forward, taking me from her mouth and grasps the base of my erection while she slides her tongue along the slit of the crown.

I moan as she dips her head lower and sucks the throbbing length of my cock between her full lips. I yank a little on the strands of her hair and she beams up at me, smiling with hereyes as her tongue rolls. She releases me with her hands and grips my legs, offering her mouth to be used for my pleasure. I do not deny her. I thrust deeper and she swallows more and more of my hard flesh. I growl in the back of my throat, wordlessly praising her.

I grip myself and arch off the dirt ground as seed bursts from my loins. The wet splash against my abdomen is burning hot and uncomfortable. I lay there, panting, until something breaks through the fog. The ethers are shifting.

After wiping myself off, I walk over to the ancient wellspring. The glittering pool of magic swirls and I see Eilish climbing the mountain, inching closer to the Incubus’s sanctuary.

Though I know she only wishes to see the creature who sired her, he is no father.

Gildlorthoine is a demon, a monster at heart, and I must go to her before she is killed. The forest quakes with fear. The trees groan and I realize if I leave this place now, I may never return. There are lines in this world, lines that I risk my life to cross and lines that I will defend to the death.

The Raven Forest does not wish for me to leave. This is my home, my domain. Another may stumble upon this pocket of peace that I have created, from the soil to the breeze. The brush, the crisp green leaves, the blackened bark, and the white halo of light that appears in the sky... it is all by my design.

No hooves have trampled through these lands, no blood has been spilled. And I intend to keep it that way. If I cannot seek refuge within the Raven Forest, then no creature shall. Dipping my hands into the wellspring, I churn the waters until it glitters no more. My eyes well with unshed tears as I gaze at the melting image of the trees. Insects wriggle out of their hiding places in fear. The sky begins to warp like a painting left out in the sun, bereft of its vibrancy.

I begin to sink into the muck as my sanctuary is bled of its life. I am buried beneath the weighty blanket of earth, moving and shifting with the changing of the realm. And when I surface, there is no grand celebration as there once was, no song sung in my honor by a bard upon his steed. Flowers no longer fall from the sky to cushion my steps as I bestow a gift upon those who are devout... no, none of that remains. Why? Because most believe the gods have abandoned them. I am the last of my kind until a new pantheon shall rise from the ashes of the old.

Morrigan and her filth do not belong here, but neither do the rest of them. What they have done to the realms sickens me. And yet I stroll through the forest surrounding the Delendren Glade as if time itself has reversed. But this is no merry greeting on a fine spring day, when the air is filled with the laughter of two happy girls and their mother. The glade is cold and colored by sadness that reaches into the very depths of my being.

Eilish should not be here, for if she knew the truth, I fear she would never recover from it.

My eyes linger on Theren, Son of Elioth, as he pelts the Midnight Queen with a spell that nearly severs her head from her shoulders. His power has grown greatly, despite Morrigan's influences, and a spark of pride for the young boy I knew in his youth begins to flourish within me. Theren is not a child anymore, but a king who has had his kingdom stolen. I understand him most of all. The Hall of The Gods was once my kingdom as much as it was to the others.

And that was how it all started, was it not? The times indeed are repeating. I recall a specific day with absolute clarity, a day when I changed from a mere spirit of the forest to a god among mortals. Three stood before the Throne of The Gods, three with their destinies entwined.

Morrigan was denied the ascension, for her heart had never been pure nor her intentions impartial. Abedon was also denied, as he did not possess the neutrality required of an ineffable being.

It was I who was chosen to join the rest among the stars. It was I who helped to create worlds and govern them, punishing those who were unworthy. Blessings were abundant, yet the greed of Abedon had been consuming to all the realms. Morrigan had come to me in fear, begging for my help as she suspected Abedon would do something terrible. And terrible things were exactly what Abedon was particularly good at. So, I went to him. I, a god, was nearly defeated by one who had been deemed undeserving of my rank. We battled in the way that Morrigan and Theren battle now, and I see the same potential for overshadowing darkness within Theren that I saw that day in my old companion.

Even so, Theren will soon learn the significance of his suffering, and I will have little part to play. Eilish is the destiny that awaits me. Even now, as she climbs fearlessly to

the top of the mountain, there is a vulnerability inside her that will stay her hand against even the most formidable opponents. Eilish's weakness is her bleeding heart, her compassion. She will believe herself stronger for it, believe it makes her different from her enemies. What she seeks upon that mountaintop is not a father, but proof she is more than the others say.

Many months have passed since I last spoke to Eilish. Her memories have mostly returned, and yet I hesitate to approach her. Has she grown to hate me for my part in her destiny? I know not, but I climb the mountain with ease. I move swiftly, past those who seek to come to her aid. Dragan, King of Shadow, climbs beside the necromancer and the vampire. I know him more than the others. Gargoyles are creatures that thrive in darkness and yet are not naturally dark creatures. There is a difference. They are guardians, protectors that watch over the realms beneath the light of the moon. At least... that was what they once were.

Our paths will cross again, but not until more hardship tears the world asunder. These men are more important to the realms than they believe.

Ahead, I see Eilish. She reaches up with one hand, dangling over the edge of the overhang, and claws her nails into the frozen stone for purchase. When she catches on something, Eilish hoists herself up onto the ledge and crawls on her hands and knees. Worry more potent than it should be starts to boil up inside me. The sound of her pattering footsteps echoes through the cave as she approaches the entrance to her father's lair.

EILISH

Delendren Glade

Fingers numb and trembling, I step into the shadows without fear. Though my arms are aching and my lungs burn from the thin mountain air, nothing could keep me from pushing forward. And I feel strong—stronger than I have in a very long time.

I owe that strength to Cambion. In joining with him, there was something that happened to me—yes, my hair returned to its natural white, but there was more. Much more. I don't feel that horrid hungering anymore. I feel satiated, complete, for the first time in my recent memory.

The blinding, white light that encompassed us as soon as I felt Cambion's erection inside me seemed to have pulled any pollution from within me. I feel clearer, stronger, more capable of doing what I need to do.

I lift my hand and summon a ball of light to guide me as I move deeper into the cavern. Large claw marks mar the stone along the edges of the tunnel, as though an enormous creature has been dragged through the opening against its will. I reach out to touch the marks, to feel the depth of the claws that gouged the stone.

I step inside, moving slowly through the tunnel, feeling along the walls with my hands. Ripe, musty air fills my lungs and causes my chest to ache as I delve deeper. A cliff with a sudden drop beyond appears before me. Turning back isn't an option, not when I've come this far. But the hole is too wide for me to jump. And I can't fly across—the tunnel is too narrow to accommodate my wingspan.

With an exasperated sigh, I drop the ball of light and watch as it falls into an endless chasm of shadow. No going back. No going forward. The only way to go is down. I jump, spreading my wings as far as I can to slow the momentum of my fall. I can still see the light below me but it's difficult to focus on as I drift downward. I hit a film of grease that covers the surface of dirty water.

I gasp loudly and suck in a mouthful of air that smells like decaying flesh. Slicing my

arms through the water, I swim toward the opposite wall, then grip the stone and lift myself out of the water. Bones and bloated bodies wearing armor from many different kingdoms float on the surface of the water, each of them in various stages of rot.

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I gag and then retch until there's nothing left but acid in the pit of my stomach. The light hovers above the water, and I summon it to me. A few feet above my head is another tunnel. The freezing temperature of the water that clings to me causes my teeth to chatter and stiffens my joints. Thankfully, the armor I wear was crafted with care of the elements, or I'd get ill from the cold. I scale the stone wall, sliding my fingers in between slimy cracks until I can steady my grip and pull myself up.

By the time I reach the tunnel, I'm winded, but there's light up ahead. I creep along the walls until I come to a stop just outside what looks like a central chamber. Dozens of tunnels pepper the dome-like walls. Pillars tower overhead, breaking up the light that shines through a crack in the ceiling. The ground is dark and moist with an unknown sludge that sticks to my boots as I tiptoe out of the tunnel. Approaching, I see that the pillars are carved with ancient runes and pictures of battles won and lost, beautiful and faded around the edges over time. I keep moving, counting my steps and noting the direction in case I get lost.

A growl, low and menacing, bellows through the tunnel, and I follow the sound to what looks like a dragon's horde. Piles of gold and jewels reach the ceiling. In the corner is a large figure, swathed in tattered cloth. Six great horns protrude from his brow, arching upward like the branches of trees.

Though he appears broken and scarred, he stands to his full height, nearly reaching the top of the pillars. Black eyes stare at me as he doubles over once again, dropping down on his hands. I hear the sound of bones popping and cracking, reforming themselves until he's only a foot or so taller than Pyre. He stands up. The creature before me is now a man, with skin as pale as the snow atop the mountain, features sharp enough to cut diamonds, black hair that brushes the floor as he walks, and a

body that ripples with tight muscle.

He's stunning.

He lifts his head in a way that speaks of imperial blood.

"Who... are... you?" he rumbles, voice harsh as though he hasn't used it in some time. I stand tall, not willing to cower before this stranger even as darkness permeates off him in waves. "Answer me..."

"My name is Eilish."

"I know... no Eilish."

"No, you never knew me," I say. "But I'm known as Lady Eilish Inoa Fulthain, daughter of Gildlorthoine, the Lost King of The Succubae..." I pause but he doesn't appear to recognize his name. I take a deep breath and continue. "And daughter of Maeline Fulthain, Healing Light of The Angels. I'm the leader of the Rebel Lords of The Vindication."

My mouth feels dry with fear, my tongue thick as he walks toward me. For a moment, there's softness in his eyes.

"Maeline..."

"My mother."

"She is gone," he groans. "Taken from me."

"By the Cockatrice—"

The words barely leave my lips as Gildlorthoine, my father, barrels toward me with a murderous look in his eyes. I dodge him, climbing up the pillar as he engages in some internal struggle. He drops to his knees beneath me and lowers his head in his hands.

“Years of waiting for answers... years of fighting whatever army sought to enslave the Incubus King...” he says and his voice trails into silence. His thoughtful expression blanches and he faces me with anger. “I thought you had died with them, or the Cockatrice had killed you to spite me,” he cries. Then he grows quiet again before a suspicious expression overcomes his face. His eyes grow wide with the delirium of insanity.

“You are not Maeline’s daughter! You are not mine!”

It’s as if there are multiple people living within him, using his face to reveal their expressions. He’s been here for so long, I imagine his solitary life has taken an immense toll on his sanity.

I’m not able to consider the subject for long because Gildlorthoine rams his horns into the pillar and it begins to crumble beneath me. I jump and roll as I hit the ground. He runs toward me, but a burst of light knocks him back. The force of the magic is much greater than my own.

I turn to look behind me, to see where the magic came from and that’s when I see him.

Silvanus.

Gildlorthoine climbs to his feet and goes for Silvanus’s throat. I block the attack with my magic and the elusive god turns to look at me as though seeing me for the first time. But I know such isn’t the truth.

I know Silvanus deeply...intimately.

Silvanus turns his head, keeping me in sight even as he watches my father closely.

“You defend me, fair creature?”

“I always will.”

PYRE

Incubus Cave

The stream of complaint that hovers in my ear sets my teeth on edge. Though I can't see, I sense the restless spirits that dwell here. They call to me. I reach through the ground, feeling for the souls until they latch on. I carry them within me, looking through their eyes as the others search my gaze.

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Baron has grown used to my powers, but the gargoyle still seems put off by the art of necromancy. I smile, turning to walk along the tunnel where I sense Eilish's presence. Her scent is sweet to me, but not cloyingly so.

I remember the feel of her sweet channel as I pushed within her and I yearn to feel her again. Ever since that night, I've thought of her constantly. So have the male spirits in the Veil. And they encourage me to take her again so they can experience the feel of her, just as I do. But I hold back. There is doubt and confusion within me over the fact that I have broken an oath I swore so long ago.

Yes, I had believed the Veil wanted me to break my oath, but now I wonder if I influenced my own beliefs. I have wanted Eilish from the moment I saw her—was that need and desire the driving force in my decision to break my oath? Or did the Veil really speak to me, such that I first imagined?

Dragan and Baron clutch their chests as we reach a large hole in the tunnel, one that leads down to a dark aperture that collects mountain water and other less sanitary things.

"You might want to hold your breath on the way down," I mutter before diving into the chasm of darkness.

Dragan hits the water first, not surprising as he's heavier than Baron and me. I catch myself on the edge of the tunnel leading out of the aperture, while Baron casts a spell to keep himself from hitting the water, hovering on a thin barrier of shadow.

Dragan pops out of the water with a snarl, spitting the foul water from his mouth.

“You dicks could have fucking warned me!”

“It’s not our fault your fat ass can’t float,” Baron snorts humorously. “You should have used magic like a smart gargoyle. I bet Myerdoth would have at least glided through the fall.”

“Yeah? Well, you and Myerdoth can suck my—”

“Quiet!” I hiss. Dragan and Baron sneer at me, but they obey anyway. I hear something, voices. I recognize the tone of Eilish’s voice just before I hear her scream.

We sprint through the tunnels and burst through the end of one, just in time to see Silvanus appear before Eilish as a flash of magic shoots from the ends of his hands. Baron hisses, flashing his fangs as he charges the solitary god. I toss Baron aside with my power and place myself between the vampire and Silvanus.

“You protect him?” Baron accuses.

“He protects Eilish!” I yell at him.

“Against what?” Baron demands.

I glance forward and see nothing. I don’t understand.

“Eilish screamed,” Dragan says as he glares at me. “And the only one here is Silvanus.”

Baron stands there, steaming in anger. He throws his chest plate and tunic to the side, baring his chest and abdomen. He pushes a hand through his dark locks and then leaps forward, attempting to attack Silvanus again, but I stop him.

“I don’t want to fight you, Pyre,” Baron says. “But I will to get to him.”

“We need him. You aren’t thinking straight,” I answer.

“We don’t need anyone who abandoned us to Morrigan’s treachery.”

Even though I don’t want to, Baron has left me no other choice. I throw a punch of energy at him, knocking him against the wall as I cast an orb around Dragan to keep the gargoyle still, as well. “Go!” I roar to Silvanus.

The god meets my gaze and something passes through us. A barrier in my mind breaks and I see a vision of... the future, of something I’m destined to do but hadn’t realized until that very second.

Black eyes blink up at me as tears of ecstasy spill from beneath her long lashes. This isn’t the face that I once loved, but her soul remains the same. My love, my hope, my dreams... she is my everything. I didn’t see it before, or maybe I just pushed the truth out of my mind. Whatever the reason, I’m ashamed.

I kiss her soundly, tasting the soft flesh of her mouth as I love her with this form that’s unworthy to behold her glory.

This beautiful creature clutches my hips and rocks with me on the altar.

Eyes watch us from the shadows, eyes we both have grown to hate. Morrigan and Variant, tangled in a mass of limbs as they fuck against the wall of the temple, spurred on by the passion I feel for my mate. She will never know it was her life for which I gave up everything, sold my soul to the Veil... just so I could watch her love another—another who couldn’t love her back. And though I watched her die once, I’ve saved her many times since.

Aima.

I don't know how it's possible but it is. As long as what Silvanus shows me is the truth—and on that account I'm convinced. I trust in Silvanus, even if the others don't. As he is a god, it's not his place to explain his actions to any of us.

My love wears the face of the Unseelie warrior, Aima, but I know her heart once belonged to me. She's reborn into this body so I may love her again.

The vision ends and I know Silvanus is gone.

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I'm left with the haunting realization of what he's revealed to me. It was a warning as much as a foresight. If Aima is the reincarnated soul of my mate, then it's only a matter of time before it's discovered. And in that discovery, Morrigan and Variant can use her to sway me.

I look to Eilish with borrowed eyes. I'd hoped I would have more time, but I fear the clock is ticking much faster than I anticipated. My gaze ultimately shifts to Baron and I remember his promise to save me. I allowed him to give me hope, despite everything within me warning me not to.

And now I know my efforts to resist the vision will be futile at best.

And that is when I hear the growl of the beast. I turn to face Gildlorthoine, in his beast form—scarred and angry. He opens his fanged mouth and howls. The sound shakes the cavern around us and I hear Baron swear as Dragan sucks in a breath.

With Silvanus gone, the four of us stand united to face the Incubus. Dragan summons his shadow blade and Baron and Eilish unsheathe their daggers. I feel their eyes on me as my vision begins to fade. The spirits are passing into the Veil, using me as a gateway, but I have just enough sight left to cast a force field around us as the Incubus charges.

Gildlorthoine bounces off the barrier and rolls onto his hind legs as he howls out his fiery anger.

“Great,” Dragan snaps, “now he's really pissed.”

The End