



Immortal Alliance (Shadow Guardians #7)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When One Man Isn't Enough

I find myself at the center of a war between realms, with three powerful kings vying for my heart and body.

I'm half angel, half succubus—a contradiction of light and dark that burns within me, demanding balance. Each night brings dreams of my forgotten past, memories of blood and betrayal I can't quite grasp.

Now I stand with the Vindication—a group of rebel lords and fallen kings fighting against the tyrannical Fallen Angel Variant and the manipulative Midnight Queen.

Baron, the brooding vampire whose darkness calls to mine; Dragan, the fierce gargoyle whose protective nature ignites my passion; and Cambion, the Fae king with light magic I desperately need all stand alongside me.

I crave their touch, their power, their devotion. Each feeds a different part of my dual nature, and I need them all to survive.

As we plan our next move to liberate innocent fae and stop Morrigan's deadly ritual, the connections between us grow more intense, more complicated, more essential.

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EILISH

The Veil

Silvanus warned me that Morrigan couldn't be trusted, but I insisted that we save her from Variant's palace. And that was a huge mistake. I'm just as guilty as Cambion in the destruction of Pyre's home—I can't blame Cambion for things that I contributed to indirectly. All of us have made mistakes, but mine won't let me sleep through the night.

The others choose to believe in fate, but I struggle to believe that something out there is writing my story, that I don't control the things that I do or say. My head hurts, but not as much as my leg. I feel just strong enough to heal the gash on my thigh, because I'm slowing us down. The realization of my role in all of this pains me more than I care to admit. And though I don't know who took my memories or who killed my family, I know that whatever power rests inside me is responsible. The one who killed my mother and sister, the dark figure who haunts my dreams... he wants me for something.

And the Midnight Queen knows what that something is.

I'm upset she escaped, but maybe it's for the best. I'm not sure I would have been able to control my impulse to kill her after Baron revealed that she'd been present the day he was killed. I care for the vampire deeply—so much that seeing him avenged would have brought me pleasure.

I kick a loose rock and stand up to pace between the trees. The fire from the campsite

casts my shadow on the trunks of the living oak. Anger, guilt, and frustration war within me. So much blood has been spilled in the race for power, the race for the Throne of The Gods. But how powerful could the throne be, if all of the gods were slaughtered by Abedon?

Did none of them best him in combat? One being was strong enough to lay waste to the deities, and yet Silvanus was able to imprison Abedon almost single-handedly. A branch snaps to my left and I reach for my dagger. Baron holds his hands up defensively and winces as if the action summoned some sort of.... Of course. Anyone who has been stabbed to death with a dagger to the heart would be uneasy around an enchanted blade like the one Pyre gifted me.

“I’m sorry, Baron. I wasn’t thinking. The memory must still be fresh for you,” I say softly while sheathing the blade. “How did it feel? When the last piece clicked for you, I mean.”

“It was painful and enlightening.” He moves closer, leaning against the tree beside me. “I expected the memory or the knowledge to change me somehow, but then I remembered that those things had already happened to me, even if I couldn’t recall the details. Life doesn’t care about the details. It makes us who we are without much care for how we feel about the matter.”

“Will it be the same for me, you think?”

Baron shrugs. “You’re plagued by nightmares, Eilish. I’m not. And you’re constantly proving just how much of a contradiction you are. Who knows how you’ll be when you finally remember everything?” The vampire pulls me against him and just... holds me. Baron and I usually struggle with our burning hunger, but this is different. He tilts my head back and brushes my lips with his. I shudder and cling to him. There’s no lust, no seduction, and none of the urgency that usually flows through our kiss. It’s desperate and deep and so much more than a kiss should be.

His hands against my lower back make me feel safe and secure in his embrace, like I can face the dawn without fear of what might come next. Baron's kiss feeds something in my soul, the part of me that yearns for Cambion's light. It's not enough from the vampire to allow the angel in me to flourish, but it's enough to make me feel something that isn't dictated by my succubus side. His hand moves further up my back and traces the lines that mark me as an angel. I twitch, but I don't pull away from the embrace.

It feels intimate in a way I've never felt before.

"Pyre is training you to take his place," I say as he nods. "That means you'll stay here when all of this is over?"

"When all of this is over seems a long way off," he answers with a shrug.

"It all has to end some time," I say.

He nods. "And when it does, yes, I do plan to remain here."

"Then what will become of us?" I ask as I face him.

"I don't know," he answers. "But, let's not worry about that now. Our focus needs to be on the immediate future, Eilish. We need to focus on defeating Morrigan."

The sound of Kolvar's laughter breaks the moment and Baron steps back. I stare into his eyes and feel like I'm drowning in a sea of emotions I don't understand. Licking his lips, Baron takes my hand, leading me back to the camp where the others listen to Kolvar's tales. Kolvar reveals how he and Cambion first met before the great battle.

"I was in the middle of a tavern brawl—of course, I were the one winnin' and I'll call anyone a liar if they say that ain't true. Then the King of Some Fuckin' fae realm

comes inside and the whole place gets real quiet. He's got that annoyin' look on his face that's a cross between constipation and amusement. You know the one."

Everyone laughs and nods in agreement, but I bite the inside of my cheek and continue listening as Kolvar recants the tale. I can't say I'm in a very jovial mood.

"Cambion looks right at me and says, 'I could use someone with your skill, satyr.' I swear by the gods that I laughed right in his smug face. Then he raises his hand and knocks me on my ass with a spell! That's cheatin' in a tavern brawl, you know? But Cambion don't care one bit, just cocks his girly brow at me."

"Then what? You kills him?" Flumph asks nonsensically. I roll my eyes and pinch the little sprite's cheek. Noni laughs at Flumph's poor attempt at humor and cuddles up with her master. Pyre shivers in his robes and Noni uses her magic to comfort him. A small smile tugs at the corner of his lips and he slowly drifts off to sleep as the story comes to an end—Kolvar and Cambion shared a few drinks after their fight came to an end and the large satyr agreed to help in the battle.

I find the story interesting, but I also think it shows more about Cambion than the others realize. "Cambion didn't want to bring the Unseelie here," I say suddenly, surprising myself with the weight of my own words. "There are deities tangled in this mess and other beings like Morrigan. Cambion, Variant, and Theren are all victims in my eyes. They're being controlled by... something and shouldn't be held accountable for—"

"No," Dragan barks. "I won't sit here and listen while you try to defend Cambion or any of the others. Eilish, Cambion may not have meant to bring the Unseelie army to our doorstep, but he deliberately went behind our backs and practically handed Theren everything he needed to find us."

"Just listen for a second," I argue. "You weren't there when I was talking with

Theren.” I stand up and look around the camp at my companions. “Cambion tried to help Aima and me. He argued on our behalf and begged Theren to see reason. And when I was connecting with him—”

“How do you know the connection was real?” Dragan cuts me off again. “After we trusted Morrigan when you told us about your vision, I can’t risk believing in him or her again. This group can’t afford any more hits. Until Cambion proves his worth, he’s as much an enemy to me as the others.”

“Don’t trust my vision, then, but trust my magic, Dragan. You’ve seen some of what I can do, but there’s more. I can use my magic to probe someone’s soul. Kolvar witnessed it, and so has Aima. And when Theren touched me in the clearing, he wasn’t alone there. The King of The Unseelie Court isn’t in control of himself. I don’t know what’s happened to him, but that person I met out there, that isn’t him,” I argue. “And neither is Variant. We need to help Cambion so he doesn’t end up like them, trapped in his own mind while Morrigan uses him as a puppet.”

“Morrigan has no power. Even Pyre couldn’t sense much of any strength inside the Midnight Queen.” Baron stands up and faces me boldly. “I’m not saying you’re wrong or right, but we can’t just go on another rescue mission when we don’t have all the answers. We have to assume that Cambion may already be corrupted. Let’s follow Kolvar’s plan, all right?” The vampire reaches for me, but I turn away from him and walk over to my corner of camp, keeping my back to all of them.

When the others fall asleep, I follow suit. I don’t know how long it is until Pyre wakes me. He limps off and I follow him as he points to another portal not far from where we stand. “That’s the main portal to the Unseelie Kingdom, one not even Noni knows of. You and I need to close it, Eilish. I can’t do it without your power.”

“What about Baron?” I ask.

“He isn’t a strong enough spellcaster just yet. Please.” Pyre begins walking toward the portal, leaving me no choice but to follow him. His steps are careful, so as to not cause himself more pain than necessary. “I agree with you, by the way. The others do as well, but it’s still too soon for them to properly process what they saw in that clearing. I know Cambion wasn’t acting freely and he did what he thought was best. It’ll take the others time to see that. Give them that time.”

We close the portal much more easily than I’d expected and make our way back before the others are the wiser. I lay beside Dragan. Though we’ve argued over Cambion, I still find myself seeking his comfort. Baron reaches for me subconsciously in his sleep and I tangle my fingers with his and close my eyes. But, of course, the dreams return...

Go, now, Eilish, run!

The voice grows more insistent, panicking even. I don’t know where it’s coming from, if someone I can’t see is talking to me or if the voice is just in my head. Or if I’m just imagining the whole thing.

“I can’t... run anymore,” I say out loud, panting with the exertion it takes to speak. My voice sounds strangely foreign—high-pitched and terrified. Inhaling, I shake my head as I face the road ahead of me—asphalt that stretches for what seems like miles, with only the loneliness of a dark forest on either side to keep it company. And the occasional broken-down car, mostly reduced to a skeletal, rusted frame.

It’s coming , the voice warns. I can hear it. Tree limbs snap behind me, accompanied by growling and the sound of something sniffing, catching my scent on the wind. Move, Eilish!

My heart beats like a frightened bird trapped in a tiny cage. The chills are growing stronger now, refusing to let go. Beneath my armpits, my shirt is soaked, and still

more beads of perspiration bleed from my hairline. I'm so exhausted, the idea of continuing on makes me want to pass out.

If it finds you, it will rip you to pieces, the voice cautions.

My eyes open just as the sun begins to rise. What was the beast chasing me in the forest? No. Not a beast, a man. I know it wasn't a beast, though it growled like one. Whoever he was, Morrigan didn't want him to catch me. Was it out of concern, or something more malicious?

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FLUMPH

The Veil

My skin prickin' like a son o' a bitch when I sleepin'. Everythin' begin to spin around, like when that fuckin' dragon show up an' starts burnin' shit. It were real scary. One minute, I helpin' the shadow dick fight the Unseelie jerks, an' then the fightin' turn real crazy. Harpies—big fuckers with pretty faces an' ugly-ass wingses—just swoop down an' picks up soldiers like they don't weigh nothin' at all! It scare the shit outta me an' I was screamin'! I ain't afraid to says it.

There be some things in life us sprites ain't 'pose to see. An' a giant dragon be one o' them.

I thought my heart was gonna fall outta my anus-hole when the ground were shakin' an' rumblin' all scary-like. The growlin' an' breathin' fire weren't no fun, neither. Then the lightnin'! HOLY FUCK! Since when do them big lizards do that, huh? I ain't never sees it before. Then again, I ain't never really seen a dragon before, either, so I don't really knows exactly what they like. But breathin' fire an' lightnin' ain't fair. 'Specially when I were already injured. There I was with my body all hurtin', an' then suddenly I was over by the window, watchin' all hell break loose in The Veil.

Ain't nothin' scarier than a fuckin' dragon, and that's that! I'll never sleeps agin without that big 'ol thing poppin' into my brain all creepy-like. If not for Noni, I don't 'pose I'd be here. She a good one. She don't piss me off as much as she used ta. Now, we sorta friends an' I ain't all that uncomfortable with it no more. Not when

she save me every times I get my ass blown off or skewered onto somethin' sharp an' pointy. I owe her a hug or somethin', but that it. I ain't all lovey-dovey.

But there been a real naggin' thing in my brain that won't go away. I gotta talks to Pretty soon as possible. She the only one who wantin' to figure out what goin' on with the elf. If it was my choice—which I knows it ain't—he'd be sinkin' to the bottoms of some ocean with rocks tied to him's foots. Fuck him an' his perfect fuckin' hair. Unseelie an' Seelie can both suck a greasy dick!

My little feets carry me over to wheres Pretty sleepin'. I tap her cheek, but she don't wakes up. She havin' one o' them dreams again. I go back to bed an' let her sleep more. But in the mornin', we already packin' up an' movin' out like I ain't in needs o' some beauty rest after all this shit. I overwhelmed by all the fightin' an' dyin' an' betrayin'. These giants gonna be the deaths o' me, I swear it. An' when I do finally die, I don't wants no necromancer bringin' my sexy bones back to life.

When the group leavin' the forest, I hear them fuckin' harpies again an' nearly fall offa the Shadow King's shoulder. He glare at me all pissy-like, so I goes to climb up Pretty so we can talks 'bout stuff. Real important stuffs.

“Don't looks at me or let 'em know we talkin',” I whisper, real quiet, in her ear. She just nod her head an' get to listenin' real good. “So, the Mother Heifer was doin' that creepy shit when she leave her body again. An' when she don't thinks I listenin', I really really listenin', you know?”

She nod again.

“Well, she say somethin' 'bout her lover, Abbey, not so long after she babblin' 'bout a great dark power or somethin' like that,” I say. “Now, I thinkin' they one an' the same, you know? She been talkin' 'bout inefebles power an' whatsnot for a long time now. Then she escapin' not too long after. Coincidences? I don't thunk so.”

Pretty lookin' real confused, so I tell her all the stuffs I hears the Mother Heifer say. She look like she ate somethin' real bitter an' that mean she thinkin', soze I leaves her to it an' flys over to Assface. The enormous Satyr cast a shadow on the Ashland ground bigger an' wider than the fuckin' mountain we gettin' closer to. He swattin' at me likes I some sorta fly or somethin'.

“Hey, you mean what you say when you say you wantin' to library them fae like me?” I ask him.

“Liberate,” he grate through him's teeth. “And, yeah, I meant what I said. Worry not, pest. I'll free the faeries and make sure Variant and every sort like him are dead and gone soon enough.”

Them words makin' me happy, so I flys by the satyr for a while longer, but when we gets to the fuckin' mountain, I gotta rest my wings. Shadow King still lettin' me sits on him from time to time, an' that make me even happier.

Then he go ahead an' make me gag real hard-like when he say, “Thank you for fighting beside me in the cottage, Flumph.” Shadow Dick go all quiet then, makin' me real awkward, an' I don't know whats to say so I just say somethin' real random.

“How 'bout them fuckin' spirits possessin' the soldiers?”

He snort an' I knows he know what I doin'. I thinks it funny how we talks 'bout them creatures like we ain't similar to them. Heck, for all the Shadow King know, he might be from this place! Not much known 'bout The Veil. Then he tell me what he reads in the library 'bout him's kind, lookin' all sad. Guss he ain't from here. Some witch did somethin' to some rocks an' he was born or some shit... I don't know, I gave up listenin' after a while. ‘Specially when we get to the Echoin’ Spire.

That thing is huge!! Bigger than even Masky—an' that sayin' somethin', ‘cause he

real big. I don't likes the ones in the robes, though. They fuckin' scary.

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CAMBION

Oronrel

I stand in my study. The balance is in shambles and Variant has all but taken over what's left of the three realms. My hands tremble slightly as I grip the tankard of mead delivered to my door by one of the faerie servants in my employ. They will all leave soon enough if Variant has his way, for we're on the brink of war and destruction. I drain the mead from my cup and slam it onto the surface of my desk. It has been many years since I've partaken in such activities. My body was once a temple.

A sharp knock sounds on the door. "Enter," I shout, thinking it's one of the servants. But it's not. Instead of a fae creature, something else entirely steps into my study. Her pale locks and even paler skin practically glow in the faint light cast by the fire. My eyes devour her as the subtle curves barely concealed beneath the confines of her clothes beg to be appreciated fully.

"Who are you?"

"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. "And I come here to make a request."

I wish for her to keep talking, for the words that drip from her succulent lips make me think lecherous thoughts. I'm drunk, but not from the liquor. In fact, it takes quite a lot for me to feel inebriated by common drink.

“What would 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. I continue to advance, placing my body between hers 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. “My mother and sister are in danger and that’s why I’ve come.”

“You believe I can help?”

She nods. “I know you can help. You are the king.”

“And what do I get in return?”

She nods again, as if she expected this line of conversation. “For their protection, I would do anything.”

“Anything?”

“Whatever you ask of me, my liege.”

“Whatever I ask?”

“I’m sure you understand my meaning, My King.” Eilish’s fingers dart to the tie that keeps her robe closed. She pulls the string and 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 they’re

eager to feel my hands and mouth. “You would give me your body to save them?”

“I would, My King.”

“And who do they need saving from?” I ask, still thinking clearly enough to know the stakes of this arrangement and the weight they carry even after she leaves me this evening.

“An Unseelie lord’s son. He calls himself Prince Yanhir, though he holds no such title. My sister has been hurt by him many times because he thinks he’s entitled to whatever he lays his eyes upon. She resisted and paid a horrible price. So I killed him in retaliation, and now his father seeks to do us harm... as well as... another.”

Her revelation doesn’t surprise me entirely. “And who is this other threat?”

“Unknown, My King,” she admits bashfully.

“You don’t know?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve never seen it, but it’s something very dark.”

“It?”

“Something not of this world. I know it sounds crazy—”

“No, not crazy.”

I want to help her. I can’t explain why. Yes, I want to fuck her and she’s clearly offering her body. But, even if I didn’t agree to help her, I could still fuck her. I’m the king, after all.

But, no, there's something that calls to me, something within me that wants to do whatever she asks of me. I don't understand why. "I'll do it. I'll protect your family." My hand reaches down and I trail my fingers along the top of her skirts, feeling the way she shivers at my touch.

"Thank you, liege," she whispers.

"Beautiful," I breathe. "So very beautiful and fragile, even as you hold magic within yourself." I force myself to look away as I feel beguiled by her innocent seduction. Something I suspect she is unaware of. My lips brush hers, just a faint kiss, but it sears me to the bone....

In a blur of movement and gasps of air, we tumble to the bed, tugging away layers of clothing that keep our hands at bay. She's naked underneath me and I can't tear my eyes away from her. She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen.

I spread her legs and look down at the pink folds of glistening flesh. My cock is throbbing and begs me to slip inside her but I want to look at her first. I feel my mouth salivating.

I lean down and taste her as she bucks underneath me. She begs me to enter her and I chuckle, appreciating her need. I push myself between her legs as I grip onto her hips and I thrust inside her. She screams out and digs her fingernails into my back. The feel of her is both exquisite and devastating.

Each thrust builds toward something that rocks me to my core. Her hips roll and we grind against one another in an erotic dance of limbs. She drenches me in her passion. I feel more alive than ever before. I've fucked many women before, yes. But, I've never felt this. I've never wanted to lose myself in a woman before.

When Eilish shudders with release, clenching and milking my flesh with the force of

her climax, I see light behind my eyes and tumble over the edge with her...

I should never have crossed this line...

The sound of rattling chains wakes me from my slumber. Though I was with Eilish in a lover's embrace, the dream isn't one of happiness, but pain. I knew what I was doing was wrong, and yet I allowed my body to be enthralled by her feminine wiles. Even now, flashes of pale skin and rosy nipples seep into my mind. More shuffling in the darkness draws my attention. Aima. I'm glad I'm not alone, but my comfort shouldn't come at her expense.

Daylight finally spills into the cell, illuminating the healing cuts and bruises on her face. I never wished for this. I never wanted my old friend to suffer at the hands of my brother.

"Don't do that," Aima demands in a biting tone. "I can practically smell the stench of your self-hatred and pity from over here. It doesn't matter whose fault this is—there's no going back now."

"Looking past it doesn't make it right," I rasp.

"Neither does looking back, either." She snorts and shakes her head, causing her chains to click against the marble we're tethered to. "I'm leaving, by the way. After we're rescued, I mean."

"You think we will be rescued?" I laugh.

"I know we will be."

"Maybe you will."

“Both of us,” she insists. Then she takes a big breath. “And when we are rescued, I don’t think I’m coming back... what happened in that room, Cambion... I can’t go through all of this for a third time. I can’t sit around and wait for the real Theren to return.”

“Where will you go?”

She chuckles. “Wherever. I don’t know yet. I just... I feel so broken. They took something from me, and I want it back. Torture changes people. But being tortured multiple times? I’m lucky to still be breathing. My sister didn’t last a third round... I won’t, either. I know it.”

“What about Kolvar? Perhaps you can stay with the mercenaries,” I suggest.

She looks down at her feet and I notice how far we’re hanging off the ground. My toes are numb and the skin around my wrists is raw and bleeding. I dangle here like some fish at the market waiting to be purchased. Aima shakes her head and quirks a little smile.

“Don’t even think about escaping. I tried while you were knocked out,” she says. “I couldn’t get high enough to look at the locking mechanism before my feet went numb and I fell back down. Just a tip: don’t drop more than once, or else your wrists will look like mine.”

I glance over at her hands and grimace. The skin is torn and bleeding, eating through almost to the bone as the shackles bear all of her weight. “I’m sorry, Aima. This never should have happened.”

“Look, I’m all right. And, for the record, I don’t think you betrayed us.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t. Nothing you did was intentional, remember? We’ve already been over this, and I don’t think you’re guilty of anything other than loving your brother,” my old friend says. “If my sister were in the same situation, I wouldn’t know what to do. I’d slaughter everyone until I got to her, but you... you can make something out of this. This is an opportunity in disguise.”

I attempt to answer, but the door to the cell opens with a bang as it hits the wall.

Variant.

He walks into the grimy little room with bars on the windows and wards all around, whistling a merry tune. My enemy stops right in front of me and taps my forehead with his finger. There’s something not right about his eyes or the rune on the side of his head, hiding in his hairline.

“Your friends were caught in an explosion. We don’t know if anyone survived.”

I don't say anything. Baron is already dead, Pyre is a necromancer with insane power, Dragan and Kolvar are too stubborn to die, and Eilish and the others are always protected. There’s no way they’re dead. Variant must see the disbelief in my gaze, because he grips my jaw painfully.

“Morrigan has escaped, and your little friends can’t hide in the spirit world forever, Cambion. I’m on my way to finding a key to that font of magic the necromancer has at his disposal. And when I get my hands on it... let’s just say things will get very, very bad for all of you.”

“Whatever plan Morrigan has will be stopped, Variant,” I respond, my voice coming out icy.

“And what makes you think that?” he asks smugly. “Last I checked, your allies were

scattered and you're here being tortured and chained to a wall."

I reach out with my magic and probe Variant's mind. There are barriers and I'm weakened by the beatings, but I fight my way through. A flood of information prickles at my consciousness.

VARIANT

Nowhere

Darkness... there's so much darkness here. And I, a creature of light and power, grow weaker with every passing second. Seconds? Does time even matter anymore? Whatever spell Morrigan has woven around me won't unfurl its clutches.

I once thought I loved her, that we shared a connection no one else understood. She, the ancient being with infinite knowledge, and I, a king on the rise towards greatness. But she besmears my name and the legacy established by my father and his father before him.

I have visions, visions of angels falling from the sky. Their wings are torn and burning from their backs. When they finally hit the ground, I see their women, their mates, crying over their bodies, holding bloodied feathers in their hands. I did this... not the me that I am or the me that I thrive to be, but the me I never wanted to become—a dark, vile creature that thirsts only for the pain of others.

Morrigan reached inside me and found that part of me. She took it into her palm and defiled it, forging something new and much more dangerous...

I stand in the throne room, with tendrils of ice surrounding me. Baron's lifeless body

rests at my feet, but unlike the angels, he's alone in his death. No woman cries over the loss of his life. The allies he depended on are too late and I... I'm the one who did this to him...

No. No, that isn't right. I'm not in the throne room, I'm in the darkness...

I'm in the place where Morrigan locked me away with her power. Even weakened by Silvanus' mirror, she's still formidable in her own right. What magic she can't wield on her own, she syphons from enchanted objects or... wait... I'm supposed to remember something important, something about autumn. No, not autumn, but harvest .

Morrigan is harvesting innocent fae to fuel her talisman...

She needs an angel.

She needs an angel and a mirror. She needs a talisman and a vampire to kill a god... she needs an angel... Not just any angel, but the angel, the one who will either bring great destruction or carry the way to redemption on her wings.

Her? Yes, her.

Eilish is her name.

CAMBION

Oronrel

Variant tears himself away from me, eyeing me suspiciously.

“What did you see?” he barks. I feign ignorance, shaking my head and blinking at him in mock confusion. He grows irritated and storms out of the cell. When I no longer hear footfalls down the corridor, I turn to Aima.

There’s so much anger and rage roiling off her, it takes my breath away for a moment. When she pulls herself together, her eyes meet mine, and I take a few seconds to reassure myself that she’s all right. Despite what she claims, I don’t believe Theren and the Unseelie have broken her.

“Aima?”

She gives a curt nod and a tight-lipped smile. “Yeah, I’m all right. Did you see something?”

“Has Theren ever mentioned a spell Morrigan may have placed on him? Maybe something innocuous that might mean more than he thought?” I ask.

She shakes her head for a moment, but some form of realization dawns on her and her expression changes as she struggles for words. When she speaks, it nearly leaves me speechless.

“Theren told Eilish that what we see isn’t real. He told her that the Theren walking around isn’t really him,” Aima explains. “She couldn’t tell me much else, but it was pretty clear what she meant.”

“Well, I just heard something similar from Variant. Not a spoken word or admittance, but his actual thoughts.”

“You were able to access his mind?”

“Yes. His thoughts were much easier to locate than they should be, which could mean

the spell is wearing off without Morrigan's magic to sustain it."

"Morrigan's in power and no one even knows it," Aima says, taking in a deep breath. "So many people in the Realms believe she died in the war." Aima closes her eyes, hanging her head so low her chin touches her chest.

"If Variant really did lock her away in that tower, there's a possibility that he's been fighting her magic for a lot longer than Theren has," I say. "Maybe Variant has moments of lucidness where he's able to think clearly."

"Maybe?" Aima struggles against her shackles once more.

I hate seeing her in pain, so I flatten my feet against the wall and push myself away from the marble. I position my body awkwardly so that she can turn and use my bent legs to rest her weight against me, taking some of the pressure off her wrists. "We need to watch things from this side as much as we're able to, from this fucking cell. The others won't know what to look for in Variant and Theren, but you and I have spent enough time with the two of them to know the differences in their behavior."

"So, what's your plan?"

"For now, just keeping us both alive," I reply.

"Cambion... you can't keep taking my punishments because it's pointless. If you do, they'll just find new ways to hurt me. You weren't fighting in that battle. I was. Unseelie want revenge, they want to hurt those who killed their brethren. And at the moment, that's me."

"I won't let them hurt you, Aima."

"You have to," she argues. "Our job right now is to buy the others time. If... the

Unseelie do something twisted, something like what they did to my sister. I want you to—”

“No. I won’t listen to this. We’ll make it out of here, Aima. Together. I refuse to believe anything else.” My body aches with a furious passion. The pain doesn’t come in waves anymore, but in a constant onslaught of agony. “It’ll hurt like hell, but we’ll make it.”

Aima snorts and looks me in the eyes once more. “I should have chosen you, Cambion.”

“No offense, but I’m glad you didn’t. Your choice made both of us stronger. We may have endured tragedy afterwards, but I have faith that everything leading up to this moment is happening for a reason. There’s light left to be discovered, Aima. We just need to be patient and never give up, even when we find ourselves in the thick of it.”

“You make it sound easy.”

“It isn’t,” I concede. “Our time here will be hard, but you’re right. We’re keeping the enemy busy. We’re buying our allies time. And when that light finally returns for us, we’ll join their efforts and make these assholes pay.” I grow quiet for a few seconds. “Are you with me?”

“I’m with you.”

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:48 am

DRAGAN

The Echoing Spire

Constant vibrations of energy flow through the ground beneath my cheek. I miss the warmth of the crackling embers of the fires in the hearth, the scent of old books in the library, and the sound of Eilish humming a wordless tune as she strolls through the cottage.

Pyre has lost his home, and we're the ones to blame. Now, I rest on the cold, harsh stone and feel the thrum of magic all around me. The temple is unlike anything I've ever seen, with its walls of glistening jade and the swirling well-pool of magic at its center. Though I find the sound of the rushing waterfall soothing, I can't sleep.

Nearby shuffling draws my attention and I crack open an eyelid to see who else is awake. Eilish. She moves through the cavernous chamber carefully, brazenly walking past the Sentinels who guard the Echoing Spire.

I stand up, in order to follow her, clearing my throat to make my presence known. Eilish casts her brilliant gaze on me and a smile blooms on her stunning face. She lifts her hand and I grasp it gently, walking beside her through the chamber. "Why are you awake?" I ask quietly, even though I keep my eyes on the Sentinels. The strange, insect-like creatures make me nervous. I catch the small shrug of her shoulders from the corner of my eye.

"I can't stop thinking about Cambion." Her soft voice barely echoes through the space between us.

“You should do us all a favor and stop,” I grumble. “What a disappointment he turned out to be.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not that simple, Dragan.” I look down at her and she continues, but not before taking my hand and squeezing it. “The four of us have been through so much together, we owe him the chance to explain what happened. Especially after I saw Theren in my vision.”

I shake my head. Cambion can fucking rot in hell for all I care. He turned on us and joined forces with his fucking brother, Theren. And then Theren did what we all knew he would—he turned on his own brother, just like he did all those years ago.

“Your visions aren’t... reliable,” I say to her.

She pauses and then looks up at me. “This vision was different... it’s an omen. I’m sure of it.”

“Eilish... your visions...” I’m not sure how to say this because I don’t want to offend her. “Your visions led us to Morrigan and look what became of that? We can’t risk any more losses,” I finish on a sigh. “Making it out of the Veil Forest was hard enough. Now, Morrigan’s out there somewhere, plotting against us.”

“I know this vision was different,” she insists and looks at me with a yearning expression. “You have no reason to believe in my visions, I understand that. But try to believe in me , Dragan,” she implores. “Please.”

“I want to believe Cambion wouldn’t endanger us without reason, but I’m not so sure. And Theren... he’s not the man you think he is.”

“Dragan...”

I shake my head. “You don’t know him, Eilish. The rest of us do. Theren was carefully bred to become the perfect leader to the Unseelie, the dark fae. Everything about him is corrupt.”

Eilish squeezes my hand again and I can see the truth in her eyes—she doesn’t believe me. “Then what about you and Baron? You were chosen to be kings for a reason, and I see those reasons in each of you.”

“No,” I mutter as I shake my head. “I don’t believe any of that fate and destiny bullshit anymore. I’ve even begun to doubt myself.”

“You can’t,” she starts but I interrupt.

“You weren’t there in the beginning, Eilish. We were young and arrogant, but our skills spoke for themselves—Morrigan chose us because she knew she could mold us into what she wanted. She chose us because we were strong but impressionable. It had nothing to do with destiny.”

“That can’t be why,” Eilish says.

“Cambion, Variant, and Theren already knew Morrigan from their training with her, so she knew what they were capable of. I was different. I came from a race, the gargoyles, who simply came to be.”

“What do you mean?”

I shrug. “We were created and then used as soldiers for whatever king or nation called on us at the time. Morrigan needed to have the backing of the gargoyles because we are a powerful race. She chose me to lead my kind because, of all the gargoyles, I was the most ruthless.”

Eilish falls quiet as she listens. I stop beside the glittering pool of energy at the heart of the chamber and look up at the enormous statue of an elven woman weeping into the vat of magic that shifts in color like opals in the sun.

“We were all chosen by Morrigan because she saw us as weak,” I continue. “She chose us because she knew we’d be easy to manipulate and then cast aside when she was done with us. And we’ve done nothing but prove her right.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“It’s true nonetheless, as much as I wish it weren’t,” I reply with another shrug. “The power was within the oath, not within us or even Morrigan.”

“The oath?”

I nod. “It was Silvanus’ oath that ended the Singularity. Morrigan played us for fools and gave us thrones we were never meant to occupy. We weren’t ready to be leaders, much less kings. And she knew that. With Abedon locked away, the only thing that stood between Morrigan and ultimate power was Silvanus and... us.” I take a breath and try to force my anger back down again. Thinking about Morrigan upsets me. “She defeated us once before and she knows she can do it again. This fight is doomed to end in her favor.”

“How can you think that?” Eilish demands, shaking her head as she releases my hand and then throws her arms into the air, to further drive home the point that this conversation is frustrating her. “Look at you! Look at all of us.” She stares into my eyes and I wish I still possessed her naiveté, her belief that good can still triumph.

But, I know better.

“We might be facing difficult times, Dragan, but you can’t just give up!” she

continues. “We’re still alive! We’re still fighting, and that means Morrigan never defeated us. So long as there’s breath in our lungs, we’ll continue to fight.”

“The world hasn’t been kind to you, Eilish,” I say in a low voice as I bring my fingers up to trace the line of her cheek and jaw. She’s the most beautiful fucking creature I’ve ever seen. And she’s also the most deluded. “How can you still have so much hope?”

“Because hope is all we have left.”

I dip my head low and press my lips against hers. Those warm, soft hands which have given my body so much pleasure trail up my shoulders and lace behind my head. Breathless gasps float between our mouths. The kiss is slow and gentle, but no less passionate than the embraces we’ve shared in the throes of ecstasy. She slides her tongue against mine and whimpers in the dark. I feel her dark and seductive power with each brush of her lips, and I taste the seduction on her tongue.

We break away and I reach up to push a lock of white hair behind her ear. Just behind the white hair is a tendril of pure black—a reminder that Eilish still needs to feed the lightness within her, or else she risks the darkness taking over.

Pressing her hand to the center of my chest, she licks her lips suggestively. I stare into her endless cerulean gaze until there’s nothing left but us.

“I will have hope, Eilish. And I will pray to whatever gods are still out there that the destruction of the worlds doesn’t come by our hands.”

“There’s so much goodness left in the realms,” she answers, her voice small. “I see that now, Dragan, and I don’t believe it will be by our hands that more suffering is unleashed.”

I kiss her once more as the others begin to stir.

Leaving Eilish beside the water, I walk back to the place where our group slept through the night. Baron grumbles something under his breath and kicks the snoring mass of satyr flesh beside him. Kolvar jumps up with a startled bellow, causing my sensitive ears to ring. As the group awakens one by one, the planning can finally begin.

EILISH

The Echoing Spire

I feel the presence of a Sentinel beside me. It hovers like a shadow in the darkness, silently watching as I stare into the wellspring of energy. The presence of the enigmatic being is somewhat comforting. I turn to face the hooded figure, still intrigued by its ghoulish, insect-like features. A gnarled hand reaches toward me from the sleeve of its robe. Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I allow it to touch me. A hissing voice enters my mind, and I wonder if this is the way most creatures in the Veil communicate.

Eilish...You must follow your instinct. It is you who will shape the realms, the voice whispers.

I cringe at the sensation. The physical feeling is a nagging tingle between my ears that crawls across the inside of my skull.

Find your purpose.

What if I don't know what my purpose is? I think in response.

Sometimes, the path ahead can only delineate itself when it's set against the dark memories of the past.

The Sentinel materializes a thick leather book from the air and hands it to me. The book feels heavy in my hands. I flip through the yellowed pages and look up at the creature in question when I find the pages empty.

Why have you given me this? It's an empty book?

Write, instructs the voice. Chronicle your journey so others may learn from your trials and accomplishments. You are no longer a lost girl, Eilish. Become the woman you were always meant to be. Take back the honor they took from you.

The Sentinel breaks our connection and joins the others of his order and the book dissolves into my hands, gone just as quickly as it appeared. Pyre passes the creature and they share a nod of acknowledgment before Pyre comes to stand before me. His sightless eyes reflect the swirling magic of this place.

"Did you," I start as I watch the Sentinel walk back to the others of his kind.

Pyre nods. "I heard everything that passed between you both. And before you say anything on the matter, no, I don't believe Cambion is guilty of betraying us. I'm upset I lost my home and things I hold dear. But I don't blame Cambion for my losses."

I smile up at him because I appreciate his trust in Cambion. And I'm relieved to know he agrees with me. "We're the only ones who feel that way."

"Baron understands, but his anger is yet too fresh," Pyre says with another brief nod. Then he looks at something in the distance before glancing back at me. His expression softens. "The Sentinels respect you now, Eilish. They watch and know

everything and they believe you're proving yourself to be worthy of this quest. Establishing peace must be our priority." He takes a breath. "That is a great honor."

"Honor or not, we need allies, Pyre," I say on a breath. "With Cambion and Aima gone, there isn't much we can do about any quests." I pause as I inhale deeply. "Kolvar offered us the aid of his clan and I think we should consider it."

"As do I."

I nod. "And I don't know what the others think about liberating the Threst , but I can't leave those poor fae in the hands of Morrigan and Variant..."

Of one thing I'm sure, Variant isn't himself. He's under the thrall of Morrigan and I don't believe he can be held accountable for the atrocities that have occurred in his name. Atrocities that, most recently, include the murder of fae women and children. I know Dragan and Baron don't agree with me, but they don't understand the truth—they didn't see the vision I did. Variant is trapped within his own body, just as Theren is. The two of them fell victim to Morrigan's magic and she's been controlling them both.

"I agree we need allies," Pyre says, his white and sightless eyes glowing. "And I'm certain the fae will be grateful to learn they haven't been forsaken to the oppression of Variant. But, liberating the Threst will be no easy feat, Eilish." He takes a deep breath. "There will be orcs and demons guarding that horrible place. Going at this alone would be foolish."

"Baron and Dragan," I start but Pyre interrupts.

"If the others refuse to follow you, I'll force them," he says with a smile that speaks to his jest, but I know he could force the others to do whatever he wanted them to. He's that powerful.

Pyre takes my hand and leads me back to the group. I sit beside him and find my attention moves to Baron, because I can feel his gaze on me. When I look at him, the vampire stares at me unabashedly but I can't read his expression.

His eyes bore into mine, and I feel them slide over the curves of my body. Something about the expression in his eyes feels so primal that the succubus inside me can't help but take notice. I feel my heartbeat begin to speed up as Baron leans back against the jade wall of the chamber, bare-chested with all his scars on display. As well as his sleek and defined muscles. The paleness of his skin contrasts greatly with the darkness of his hair and the bright blue of his eyes. He's more powerful than he was even a week ago, and I sense this newly awakened power within him.

I want it for myself.

And he knows this. The flicker of understanding in his eyes is as unmistakable as is his lust.

Pyre squeezes my hand, pulling me away from my thoughts as he breaks the trance Baron weaves over me.

"Now's the time to unite everyone," Pyre whispers to me. When I look at him, he simply nods and I realize what needs to be done.

I clear my throat to get everyone's attention. Then in a loud voice, I say, "We are The Vindication," I pause as I look at the others and sigh heavily, even as I draw courage from Pyre's touch. "Our title implies that we search for justice and truth," I continue. "Our faction is comprised of fugitives of war, rebel lords, fallen kings, and creatures deemed too dark to have a say in the way of the world. We've faced lifetimes of agony, but we're still standing. But we can't stand alone, not against Variant and Morrigan."

“What do you suggest?” Pyre whispers and his breath fans across my face, causing me to close my eyes as I breathe him in. There’s a connection between the two of us. Yes, we’re friends, but our connection runs deeper than that. We would be lovers, if Pyre hadn’t promised himself to a life of celibacy.

“Kolvar will take Dragan and me to the mortal realm to meet with the Mercenary King,” I answer as Dragan immediately begins shaking his head. I quickly continue because I don’t want to lose my momentum to an argument. I need to get my ideas and thoughts out first. “We will petition for Galmer’s help while Pyre and Baron finish securing the Veil from this side.” I pause as the others sit up straighter. I can practically see the protests in their eyes. “Flumph and Noni will travel by portal to watch over Cambion and Aima.”

“What about Morrigan?” Baron asks, pulling his tunic over his head. “Last I checked, Morrigan was our number one enemy. And yet, no one knows where she is! We should be scouring the Veil for Morrigan, not venturing off in different directions.” He glances around at everyone and his jaw is tight, his eyes narrowed. “Separating is a bad idea, trust me on this, Eilish,” he finishes as he focuses on me again. “What if there’s another attack?”

Pyre responds. “There won’t be. The Veil is fractured, yes, but it’s not broken. Morrigan isn’t strong enough to fight us, or even to provoke the powers that rest here,” he takes a breath as he looks around himself. “She will go after Variant and the talisman, which means the answer to our problems at the moment remains the same: we can’t allow Morrigan to get ahold of the talisman,” he continues. “We must liberate the Threst and save the fae who are currently being sacrificed in order to power the talisman.”

Morrigan’s plan is to use the talisman to help her locate Silvanus so she can kill him and get her power back. Power that Silvanus has been keeping from her, in an attempt to help reverse the damage she’s already done.

I take my cues from Pyre and finding my courage, I clear my throat and hold my chin up high. I know the best way forward and I will stand up for what I believe in. “I’m going with Kolvar to gather allies,” I announce as I focus on Dragan. “And I hope you’ll come with me.”

“Eilish,” Dragan starts but I shake my head.

“My mind is set,” I interrupt. My voice echoes through the chamber. “One week. That’s all the time we have before we put this plan in motion. I suggest you all prepare for what’s to come.”

“There’s no changing your mind then?” Dragan asks me as he pulls me aside so we can speak in private.

“No.”

He pauses for a moment. “Of course I will come with you,” he says but his jaw’s tight.

“Thank you,” I start but he shakes his head.

“I just hope you realize the danger we’ll be facing.”

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BARON

The Echoing Spire

Eilish's words echo in my mind and I can't stomach the thought of her on her own again—without me there to protect her. She fared well the last time, but I can't help but feel our luck is running thin. If luck is what it should be termed, that is. The important thing is, we've survived. But we'll only continue surviving if we make smart decisions.

And I'm not sure Eilish's most recent decision is a smart one.

I grab Dragan by the shoulder and steer him aside. The large gargoyle bares his teeth at me, and I swallow the urge to knock them down the back of his throat.

“What the fuck do you want?” he demands.

“To tell you you'd better not get her killed,” I snap.

Dragan eyes me warily, then jerks his head in the direction of one of the large statues that decorate the Echoing Spire's main chamber. I follow closely behind. He sits in a stone chair and I take the one beside him.

Crossing his arms over his large chest, Dragan sneers at me. “You and I understand one another now more than ever.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t like this plan any more than you do, but Eilish and Pyre are convinced it’s the right one.”

“I trust Pyre,” I say resolutely.

“But you don’t trust Eilish?”

I glare at him. “She doesn’t have the experience Pyre does.”

“Regardless,” Dragan says and acts as though he’s bored with the conversation. The prick. “I won’t get her killed.”

“Her life is in your hands.”

“Her life is in her own hands,” Dragan argues. “Or haven’t you noticed?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

He sneers at me, like my question is a stupid one. “If you haven’t noticed, Eilish is steering her own ship.”

“I’ve noticed.” I nod as I consider this fact. “And?”

He cocks his head to the side and breathes deeply. “I have no choice but to have faith she knows what she’s doing.”

I glare at him because his response sounds imbecilic. “Even though she views Cambion and Theren as victims?”

Dragan shrugs. “You’ve been manipulated by Morrigan in the past, and so have I. We all have. If we don’t consider ourselves traitors to our own cause, then how can we

point the finger at Cambion?”

“You’ve forgiven him then?” I demand.

He shakes his head. “No. I’m not willing to forgive Cambion yet, but the more I think about it, the more I’m starting to believe Eilish is right.”

“About what?”

“We owe Cambion a chance to give his side of the story. He owes us an explanation and we owe him the decency to listen.”

I don’t say anything right away. I simply chew on this information. I’m surprised to hear Dragan say as much because a few hours ago, he seemed to believe the exact opposite. “And Theren?”

His eyes narrow and he balls his hands into fists. “Theren... he’ll be lucky if I don’t sever his head on sight.”

I roll my eyes. Dragan is strong, but he can’t hope to beat Theren in combat if the Unseelie King is at full strength. But, that’s not a conversation I’m interested in having at the moment. “You’d better keep a close fucking eye on her, gargoyle,” I say. “If anything happens to her, I’ll kill you myself.”

“Those are big words,” he hisses through tightly clenched teeth.

I stand to walk away, but he grabs my arm. “If you’re looking for a fight, look elsewhere,” I tell him.

Dragan stands and then takes a few steps forward so we’re toe to toe. “I’m not looking for a fight,” he says but his body language says otherwise.

“Then what are you looking for?”

“I don’t need you telling me to keep Eilish safe,” he seethes. “I love her as much as you do, you fuck.”

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Wow, that’s a big admission.”

“I won’t let a fucking thing happen to her,” he continues. “Regardless of whatever the fuck you tell me.”

He releases me, and stomps away. I can’t help my smug smile as I do enjoy getting under the hothead’s skin. Even if it’s become too easy a game to win.

With a sigh, I go in search of my mentor, Pyre.

I find him leaning over a large boulder, his eyes shut and his brow pinched in concentration.

“Don’t linger unless you have a reason,” he grumbles as he turns to face me.

“I’m worried about Eilish and this plan,” I start.

He shakes his head. “Whatever worries you, Baron, isn’t your burden to bear.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re allowed to care for Eilish, but don’t let it cloud your judgment concerning what must be done.”

“Sometimes you make no fucking sense.”

“Making sense is all about timing.”

“Then fuck off until the timing is right,” I answer with a smile.

The bigger man chuckles at me. We’ve found a friendship which still surprises me. I hadn’t imagined myself capable of friendships or even interested in them. And yet, Pyre is certainly that and Eilish...

Eilish is something different altogether. Dragan says I love her... maybe I do? Maybe I don’t? My feelings for her are confusing and I’d rather not think about them.

Pyre snorts and claps me on the shoulder. “We need to discuss Silvanus.”

“So discuss.”

He points to a scroll that suddenly appears on the rock face, “Read it.”

I approach the scroll and quickly read the explanation detailing Silvanus’s role in ending the Singularity. My interest is piqued when I begin the section that outlines Silvanus’ connection to Eilish.

“Jesus,” I whisper in awe.

“Eilish was his student,” Pyre explains with no surprise. “Silvanus was also her protector.”

“Do you want me to listen or keep reading?” I ask.

“Listen,” Pyre answers with a smile.

“Her protector?”

“He attempted to keep her hidden in the glade with her mother,” Pyre answers. “And she became his student.” His smile grows. “But, she proved too tempting even for him.”

“Meaning?”

“Silvanus and Eilish were lovers.”

I nod but I don’t say anything. I’m not surprised.

“Are you jealous?” Pyre asks.

“Strangely, no,” I answer with a shrug. “And I feel no jealousy when she’s with Dragan either.”

“And me?”

“You haven’t fucked her.”

He chuckles. “True enough.”

“But if you had or were fucking her,” I start as I consider the possibility. “It still wouldn’t bother me.”

“You understand her needs, her duality.”

“Yes, I believe I do.”

Pyre nods and grows quiet for a few seconds. “I have tasted her enough to know I want more,” he says and his expression is a curious one.

“But your oath...”

He nods. “I’ve come to question that oath.”

“Desire is a difficult thing to avoid,” I say with a laugh.

“I’ve avoided desire for a very long time,” Pyre responds as he shakes his head.

“That’s not it.”

“Then?”

He nods. “When I taste Eilish, when I touch her... there’s an energy between us I’ve never experienced before. I feel as if I’m able to... think more clearly.” He grows quiet and I’m fairly sure he’s trying to find the right words to explain. “Questions or problems that vexed me before... I find myself able to solve them more easily, more quickly.” He takes a deep breath and expels it. “I’m beginning to believe the Veil wants me to join with her.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” I ask.

He faces me then. “You.”

“Me?”

“I wanted to obtain not only your permission...”

“I have hardly a right to give my permission,” I interrupt, surprised he would even ask for it. “Eilish is her own person.”

“Yes, but you and I share a special bond of friendship and I respect that bond.”

“I appreciate that.”

He nods but I can tell by his expression there's more on his mind.

“I want to experience Eilish fully,” he says and his white eyes bore into mine. “But I want to experience her with you at the same time.” I don't say anything right away because I'm surprised. He continues. “I believe the power unleashed between the three of us would be... strong.”

I chuckle. “Strong? It seems you're suffering a loss for words, my friend.”

“Perhaps I am,” he says with a chuckle. “I admit, I'm trespassing on new soil. This realization has only very recently dawned on me.”

“Then are you convinced by your... realization? Or still pondering it?”

“I'm convinced,” he answers firmly. “I want it to happen.”

“When?”

“Soon,” he answers immediately. “My... desire for her is all-consuming and now that I've made this decision, I want to experience her... as quickly as possible.” He clears his throat. “With or without you.”

I chuckle and shake my head as a thought occurs to me and steals the laugh from my lips. “Fucking shame you aren't a creature of the light.”

“I've thought the same myself,” he answers on a dejected sigh. “She needs to take a lover of light magic soon.” He pauses as he looks up at me. “Very soon.”

I nod, because I know the truth in his statement. In order to maintain the balance

between light and dark that lives precariously within her, Eilish must take Cambion or Variant as her lover. And Variant is out of the question. Obviously.

“I’m ready when you are,” I say in answer to Pyre’s unstated question.

“I appreciate your... generosity,” he replies with a smile. “But returning to our previous subject...”

“Which was?”

“Silvanus.”

“Ah.” We both grow quiet for a few seconds as I continue to process. “So, both Morrigan and Silvanus had affairs with their pupils?” I ask as I face him again. At the silent question on his face, I continue, “Flumph said Morrigan was very... intimate in her conversations with Variant.”

“Perhaps,” Pyre responds. “Though I doubt the affairs have much to do with anything.” He clears his throat. “Of course, if Morrigan was aware of the sexual nature of Eilish’s relationship with Silvanus, Morrigan might well be threatened by Eilish in ways we haven’t considered.”

“I doubt it. Silvanus has been missing for a long time.”

“Not missing,” Pyre corrects me. “Silvanus disappears without a trace for years at a time, only surfacing when he so chooses and appearing only to those he views as loyal to him.”

“Aima explained Silvanus’s connection to Morrigan, but this... this information changes things,” I say as my mind begins to run with the possibilities. “Not to mention the fact that Eilish is already tangled up with enough men to make my head

spin.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because we don’t know everyone’s intentions. We don’t know what Cambion, Variant, Silvanus, and Theren want... truly want. Of course we know what Morrigan wants and Eilish believes she could be controlling Variant and Theren, but...” My voice trails as my thoughts travel in another direction. I look up at Pyre. “What if Eilish’s actions are being swayed by her heart or her lust? What if Theren and Variant realize they can sway her into believing they’re innocent in all of this?”

“We need to have faith, Baron.”

“I can’t survive off faith alone, and neither will this resistance if Eilish fails to keep her emotions in check.”

“Could you not say the same of yourself?”

“I could say the same of any and every one,” I answer with a shrug. “But I’m not the last of my species. I’m not the one holding the balance of everything in the palm of my hand.”

“You’re wrong, you know,” Pyre says as he looks over at the group while they begin to prepare for the journey ahead.

“Wrong about what?”

“The role you play.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the fact that your role in this is more important than you know. Seeing the truth now may be impossible but, in time, you will come to understand.”

CAMBION

Oronrel

Sunlight streams into the room, breaking up the shadows as it warms my face. I feel soft linens beneath my cheek, where previously there’d been nothing more than the jagged concrete of the dungeon floor or the steel top of the tables on which the Unseelie tortured me. It takes a minute for my brain to register the softness of a featherdown mattress.

Why am I in a bedchamber? And where is Aima?

Panic runs through my veins like tendrils of ice as I shoot up from the bed. Scanning the room around me, I learn I’m not alone. An Unseelie servant stands with his hands folded politely in front of him. He lowers his head in a show of respect none of the other Unseelie have adopted in my presence.

I throw aside the covers and lurch to my feet, only to fall to the ground with a clatter. The pain in my body returns ten-fold and shivers overcome me. I’m still weak and unwell. Looking down at my battered figure, I tear open the bloodied scraps of my tunic. Festered wounds and sticky, dried blotches of crimson pepper my torso. My fingers tremble as I lower the waistband of my trousers to find even more scars and fresh gashes slicing my thighs and legs. The servant looks at me as if I’m a mild inconvenience, but he summons a group of masked Unseelie women to tend to my needs.

The male servant disappears while the women wash me and bandage my body until I almost feel like myself again. He returns when they finish.

“The king requests you accompany me to his private study,” he tells me. “Any dalliances will result in punishment by the royal guard.”

“Take me to him,” I answer and he all but carries me down the corridor, our footfalls tapping lightly against the black marble floors. Colors dance along the walls as sunlight streams through the stained-glass windows. I’d almost forgotten how beautiful Oronrel was before everything changed.

When we come to a stop, the servant knocks gently on the large door before us. Narrowing my eyes, I struggle to note just how many protective runes are carved into the wood. Too many to count.

I’m not surprised. Theren is petrified of Variant, thus these protection runes make sense—as overdone as they are.

Theren opens the door and instantly dismisses the servant. The Unseelie beside me hesitates, but only for a moment. I glare at my brother, unable to fathom how the same blood runs within our veins and yet, we’re as distant to each other as strangers.

Theren pulls me into the room, slamming the door so hard, the framed maps on the wall shake. He approaches a chair that sits in front of a man-sized mirror. It’s a mirror I know well—one that Theren has feared since we were children.

The image in the mirror is that of Theren—his reflection. As he’s facing the mirror, I meet his reflection in its glass. I catch his gaze and I can’t explain the expression in his eyes.

“Cambion,” his reflection says. As I approach him, I notice his physical body stands

staring into the enchanted glass as though he's bewitched. But the facial expression on his face is placid. He merely stares straight ahead as though he sees and registers nothing, like he's in some sort of trance. Yet, the Theren reflected in the mirror is anything but placid.

"You're trapped in the mirror," I say, my own voice and words shocking me.

But the truth is obvious. The reflection in the mirror isn't the reflection of Theren's body at all—it is Theren!

"I've tried to reach out to you, brother," the reflection says. "But I've been unsuccessful until... I faced the angel on the battlefield."

"Eilish."

He nods. "Something in her power cracked the spells in my mind." The desperation and sincerity in Theren's voice wars with the memory burned into my mind—a memory of Theren standing on the hilltop outside Pyre's cottage. Standing there with a legion of Unseelie soldiers behind him.

"How do you expect me to trust this isn't another one of your ploys?" I demand.

"I can only hope you know me, brother," Theren replies with urgency in his tone and eyes. "It's been so long since I've been myself, even I struggle to understand what's real and what's artifice."

I lean against the chair before the mirror because I'm still exhausted and I can't keep myself upright. "Your loyalty is still in question until I learn the truth for myself. I can't be certain your tongue isn't forked." It suddenly feels like so much time has passed between us—memories of our shared boyhood don't even feel real anymore. Instead, they seem like a distant dream.

My brother presses his hand against the glass. "I never betrayed you, Cambion."

"What of the Great War?" I demand, my eyes narrowing as I glare at him. "Before you were ever imprisoned in this mirror, you made the decision to fight alongside Morrigan and Variant."

"I'm not imprisoned in this mirror," he responds. "It's just the easiest way for me to appear to you. For now." He takes a deep breath and expels it. "As to the Great War, yes, Morrigan came to me before the advent of the war, but I tried to resist her as soon as I learned her intentions."

"And Variant?"

He sighs heavily. "Variant was already under her spell by then."

"How convenient," I respond although there's a part of me that wants to believe Theren's story. It's the child within me who still wants to put faith in the bonds of blood.

"I never turned my back on you." Theren stops talking abruptly, seeming to fight with himself. "I don't have much time."

"For what?"

"We must find Silvanus, Cambion. He holds the key to dissolving Morrigan's plans."

Theren's reflection begins to fade and fairly soon, I see the placidity of expression belonging to the imposter Theren reflecting back at me.

"Wait!" I try to touch the mirror, to restore my true brother, but the false Theren turns around and suddenly grips me in a spell.

“Guard!” he calls out and the door to his chamber immediately opens. A manservant steps forward.

“Why is he in here?” Theren demands.

The servant appears confused and Theren orders him to remove me. All the while, he seems strangely unaware of the conversation with my true brother.

The servant drags me back to the bedchamber, where I stop him before he closes the door. “Where is Aima?”

“Aima is a traitor to the crown,” the guard responds.

“What does that mean?”

“It means she doesn’t hold the status of royalty, thus she’s been condemned to the dungeons. Consider yourself lucky, Prince Cambion,” the guard finishes as he motions to the luxury surrounding us.

“Lucky?”

He nods. “Be grateful you don’t face execution yet. Aima may not be so lucky.”

The door shuts and I hear the sound of a lock. I stand there for several heartbeats before I limp over to the large glass doors that lead to the veranda. Pushing them open, I look out at the glory of Oronrel. But all I see is a prison.

“Please don’t give up on me, Eilish,” I whisper to the wind.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:48 am

BARON

The Veil

I watch as Eilish excuses herself from the others and heads for the spring—a magically heated pool where each of us has been bathing. The others continue their conversations and I watch as Pyre’s sightless gaze moves from Eilish, to land on me. Moments later, he excuses himself from Dragan and Kolvar and approaches me, where I sit away from the rest of our group. While I’ve changed in numerous ways from the man I used to be, I still relish my solitude—something that’s becoming more and more difficult to find lately.

“It’s time,” Pyre says in a low tone as he approaches me.

“Time?” I answer as I look up at him.

“She’s alone,” Pyre answers.

I nod as I recognize his meaning. “Then it is time.”

“I...” Pyre starts. “I should warn you...”

“What?”

“As I’m the Keeper of the Veil, it’s the spirits in the Veil that flow through me; it’s the spirits that have allowed me to live as long as I have.”

“Okay and?”

“And the spirits will feel and experience my need and urgency as much as I will,” he continues.

“What does that mean?”

“They will use my body to experience Eilish at the same time I’m experiencing her.”

“So, what? You’ll be possessed or something?”

“Similar, yes. Don’t be surprised if you see me morphing into other... creatures as they pass through me.” He takes a breath. “And please try to keep Eilish calm.”

“Understood,” I say with a quick nod as something dawns on me. “That’s why you wanted me there? So Eilish wouldn’t freak out?”

“Partly,” he answers.

Dragan looks over at the two of us with a suspicious expression in his eyes. “You go to the spring first,” I say as I face Pyre again. “To avoid suspicions.”

He simply nods and walks into the forest, disappearing in the trees. I wait perhaps another five minutes, until Dragan’s involved in a fiery argument with Kolvar, before I stand up from beneath the tree I’ve been leaning against. Then I make my way towards the spring, excitement stirring deep within me.

EILISH

I submerge myself in the warm water, loving the feel of the water as it trickles down my face and back as I emerge again. It feels so wonderful to wash the dirt and sweat from my body and I relish the quiet tranquility of this place. It allows me to think, to enjoy my own solitude.

Realizing the others will want their chance to bathe, I swim to the shores of the spring and step out of the warm water, collecting my hair in my hands in order to wring it out. The beads of water move down the lines of my body as I search for my clothing, but I don't see it anywhere. And that's strange because I'm certain I left the pile on a large rock at the mouth of the spring. But as I look down at that rock now, my clothing is nowhere to be found.

I look up again and notice something white in the distance, within the forest. I start towards it, thinking it could be my chemise? The white cloth is maybe twenty feet from me—in the dark forest and when I reach it, I realize it is my chemise. Reaching down, I pick it up and wonder how in the world it got here. I turn around, looking for the rest of my clothes, but realize nothing else can be accounted for.

That's when I hear it—a low growling sound from behind me. With my heart in my throat, I turn around and notice a large, black wolf standing maybe ten feet in front of me. The creature stares at me from black eyes and its shackles are raised as it growls. Fear begins spiraling within me as my breathing increases and I take a few tentative steps backwards. The wolf moves with me, its growling growing even louder.

"I won't hurt you," I say as I look the creature in the eyes and summon my magic. But I feel nothing.

I move back another two steps until I feel my hands coming into contact with something... furry? It feels like I'm in slow motion as I turn around and realize my fingers are resting on the fur of a huge, black bear. The thing easily comes up to my waist and when I turn to look at it, it growls at me, pulling its lips back to reveal two

enormous fangs inside its top jaw and two on the bottom. I pull away from the gigantic thing instantly as both animals continue to show their impressive teeth. It's then that I realize the only way out of this is to run.

I turn and begin running as quickly as I can, ignoring the pain in my feet as I clamber over leaves, branches, rocks and other forest debris. All I can think about is escaping as I travel deeper into the dark forest. I can hear the sounds of the bear and wolf behind me. What's strange, though, is that I can't see them. I hear growls on either side of me and I turn my head in each direction, trying to understand why I can't see anything when I can so distinctly hear their growls and their paws as they pound the forest floor.

My foot catches on something and before I can comprehend what's happening, I'm falling. I hit the ground hard and roll through the foliage as the palms of my hands, my knees and one side of my hip sting. I sit up immediately, shaking the confusion from my head, and find the huge bear directly in front of me. The wolf appears just to my right and it growls even more loudly than before. Its hackles stand up straight and it drops its head low, as if it's about to pounce. I push back on my hands and crab-walk backwards, away from them both, until my back hits a tree.

About to right myself, I push my palms against the ground when tree roots begin to bubble up from the dirt, breaking through the earth. As I watch them, they wrap themselves around either of my wrists, pinning me in place, before pulling themselves back into the ground, tethering me where I sit. I try to pull against them but the roots are tight. I don't understand what's happening. I flail against the restraints of the tree, kicking my legs out as the tree roots begin to bubble up from all around me, disrupting the earth like zombies pushing up from their graves. One root grips my left ankle and another my right, each of them pulling my legs apart. I struggle against but the roots are firm.

I look up and notice both the wolf and bear continue towards me as I start to

whimper. Unlike Cambion, I don't have the ability to converse with the animal world. I lack Beast Sense or anything similar.

But, I do have magic.

I close my eyes as I summon my magic to protect myself. I don't want to hurt either animal; I just want them to leave me alone. When I open my eyes again, I hold out the palms of my hands as far as the roots will allow them, which isn't very far. I feel the energy of my magic begin heating my palms as blue electricity sizzles from both of them.

Roots continue to blossom from the surface of the dirt and as I watch, they begin to extend towards me, growing as if on fast forward. I struggle against the roots holding me in place but it's no good.

So I start to focus. I'm fairly sure I can zap the roots to free myself but as I try, a strange thing occurs—I summon my magic but nothing comes. I close my eyes and try to beckon my power again but it's like trying to start a dead engine.

When I open my eyes, I watch as the roots that have pulled themselves out of the ground, continue to move closer, towards the opening of my body. I struggle against them again, not understanding what magic is at work here.

Be calm , a voice sounds in my head. I don't recognize it. You are a female on offer to the male spirits of the Veil, it continues. Allow them to experience you, receive them. They will not harm you.

It's then that I realize the voice belongs to one of the Sentinels. The one who spoke to me earlier.

Allow the spirits to dominate you, to fill your body with their seed, the voice

continues. Do not be afraid and do not fight them. You are a creature of desire, allow the spirits to feed your desire and to consume it.

I don't know if it's the succubus rising inside me, but the fear I'd just experienced suddenly blanches into an overwhelming need, a desire that begins growing within the pit of my belly.

As the tree roots move closer, I watch as the largest one pushes beyond the others and they rescind back into the ground. The roots around my wrists continue to hold me tight, but now I don't fight against them. Instead, I watch as the main root reaches my sex. It doesn't enter me but begins to change colors, going from dark brown to a dark orange, then shifting to a vibrant green. The texture changes as well, morphing from the roughness of tree bark to the soft pliability of a tentacle. As I watch the roots shift, I get the feeling another spirit has just replaced the tree's spirit, if trees even have spirits.

The tentacle root touches the inside of my thigh and it's cold and wet. I close my eyes as I feel it move past the sensitive nub of my clit. I don't fully understand what's happening to me but I can't think about it for long because I feel the tentacle push into me and I arch up as my channel stretches around it.

At the sound of a loud growl, I open my eyes and realize the bear is now standing directly in front of me. The tentacle root immediately pulls out of me and begins to dive back into the ground as if the bear has commanded it to do so. The black wolf steps out from behind the bear and the two animals stare at me. They're no longer growling—they simply observe me.

As I watch, they both begin to fade as if they're in the process of disappearing into the ethers. But as they fade, something else begins to appear—faint outlines of men... I can see the shapes of their shoulders, head and chests and the color of their skin and hair.

“Baron?” I ask, my voice belying my shock. “Pyre?”

They both stand above me, as naked as the day they were born.

“I don’t understand,” I say as Baron drops down to his knees beside me. It’s then that I realize the tree roots have released me. I pull my arms up and rub my sore wrists, noting the redness of my skin where the roots secured me in place.

Afraid the roots might return, I scurry upward, into a sitting position as I look up at Pyre who stands before me, saying nothing. His body is... incredible with its sculpted muscle. And his erection is just as enormous as I remember it.

“Pyre?” I repeat.

“He can’t hear you,” Baron says. “He’s channeling all the spirits in the Veil.”

“Then the tree,” I start.

“Was one such spirit.”

I start to stand up but Baron grips my arm and pulls me back down. “Just wait,” he says.

“Why would you chase me?” I suddenly demand.

“Pyre and I were channeling the male spirits of the forest. He still is,” he answers as he looks at Pyre and I do the same. As Pyre stands there, a glow encapsulates him. And within the glow, I can see a multitude of creatures obscuring his features with their own. I recognize a satyr, followed by an owl, followed by something I’ve never seen before, followed by a centaur. The faces keep coming but behind them is Pyre.

“What’s happening to him?” I ask, not able to conceal the worry in my tone.

Baron pulls my hair behind my ear and traces his finger down my cheek. “Pyre made the decision to have sex with you,” he starts.

I turn to look at him in surprise. “But his oath...”

“He believes this is what the Veil wants him to do.” He looks up at Pyre again. “And judging by what we’re witnessing, I think he’s right.”

“I’ve always wanted Pyre,” I admit. “But I want him . I don’t know how I feel about the... others.”

“They are one and the same, Eilish,” Baron says. “Pyre is as much the Veil as the Veil is him. There’s no separating them.”

Then Baron pulls me into his arms and I rest my face against his chest. “I heard one of the Sentinels,” I say. “It told me to give myself to the spirits.”

“That’s why Pyre and I are here,” Baron responds as he rolls us both over so I’m now on top of him. I sit up and support myself with my arms outstretched and my hands resting on the dirt.

“Baron?” I start.

He smiles up at me. “Don’t be afraid.”

Then he grips my hips and pushes them up so my ass is in the air. He takes hold of each of my thighs and spreads them. He runs his fingers down my ass until he reaches my opening. Taking two fingers, he pushes them inside me as I buck.

“So wet, Eilish,” he whispers with a smile. “Are you ready for him?”

I nod and Baron spreads my lips open. “She’s ready,” he says.

I feel something then—something long and narrow that laps at my pussy. I look down and see what appears to be a tongue, but it’s the length of a snake. It curls around my clit and sucks and I close my eyes as I rock against it. Seconds later, it enters me and I rock against it, loving the feel of it as it shoves into me.

I open my eyes and see Baron staring up at me. The tongue pulls out of me and it’s replaced with something I struggle to describe. Something that feels like a vacuum as it attaches itself to my clit and sucks. I feel my mouth drop open as Baron reaches down and pushes two fingers into my sopping pussy. He finger fucks me as the creature sucks my clit.

“I want Pyre,” I say. “The real Pyre.”

Baron never pulls his gaze from mine and I realize he’s absolutely turned on as he watches me.

“I’m here,” Pyre whispers into my ear as he grips me around the middle and I feel his stomach against my back. He leans down and kisses my neck. That’s when I feel the head of his erection at my opening and I close my eyes. I let out a little yelp when I feel him push into me. His cock is so large, I can feel myself stretching around him, trying to accommodate his girth.

“Eilish,” Pyre whispers as he thrusts all the way inside me in one motion. I scream out in a mixture of pain and excitement and open my eyes. The first thing I see is Baron staring up at me.

“I want to be inside you with Pyre,” Baron says. “I want to feel him fucking you.”

I swallow hard. “How?”

He reaches up and grips either side of my waist, pulling my hips down slightly. Pyre doesn't stop fucking me and his thrusts are long and deep.

“Fuck her, Baron,” Pyre whispers.

He pushes inside me once more, then stalls. And that's when I feel the tip of Baron's erection at my opening. He pushes his abdomen upward and his tip enters me, sliding against Pyre's cock. Pyre groans at the same time I do and Baron thrusts himself even deeper. There's pain as my pussy stretches around both of their big cocks, but the pain recedes as my flesh yields.

“Oh, fuck,” Pyre groans.

“More, Baron,” I say as he looks up at me and smiles, his fangs fully lengthened. Then he thrusts the entirety of his cock inside me and I clench my eyes shut as Pyre begins to glide in and out, pushing against Baron's cock and my walls.

I've never experienced anything like this and it's pure heaven. I love the feeling of both of them inside me, filling me fully until all I can feel are both of them, shoving into me. Baron reaches down and starts rubbing my clit with his thumb and I pop my eyes open as I stare down at him. His fangs poke into his lower lip and his eyes glow with his need. He reaches up and pulls my head down, perching his fangs above my neck as he continues to manipulate my clit.

Baron breaks the seal of my skin as he sinks his fangs into me at the same time that I scream out and my body erupts in a powerful orgasm around both cocks. Pyre pumps me even faster as Baron drinks from my neck. I feel another orgasm take control of me and I rake my nails down Baron's chest as my body shakes.

Pyre's breathing quickens and Baron pulls his fangs from my neck. At the same time, he lifts his abdomen up and pulls my hips down hard, trying to get inside me as deeply as he can. Pyre grabs my hips and continues to slam into me. Another second later and he explodes inside me, collapsing against my back. Baron holds me upright and Pyre steadies himself behind me as Baron pumps me from below, slamming his cock n Pyre's. Baron scrunches his face as he releases himself within me and I collapse against his chest.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:48 am

EILISH

The Veil

Kolvar meets me at the entrance of the Echoing Spire. He puts his arm over my shoulder with an infectious smile.

“You ready, lass?” asks the burly satyr.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

He chuckles and we walk over to Dragan, where he stands beside Pyre. Pyre’s mouth flattens into a thin line. “I can only hold the portal open for a few seconds. After that, you’re on your own until Baron and I finish healing the Veil.”

“Thank you, Pyre,” I say.

A swirl of purple energy begins to form in front of us until there’s a break in the fabric of the spirit world—it’s the opening of Pyre’s portal. Without hesitation, I jump through the vortex of power. That unsettling burst of frigid air cascades over me like a winter storm, and then all I feel is sweltering heat.

I drop from the portal and hit something but whatever it is, it’s yielding. I open my eyes at the same time that I feel gritty sand in my mouth, but before I can think another thought, I find myself rolling down a steep dune. My eyes burn against the unforgiving sun as my vision struggles to adjust to my new surroundings. Being in the Veil for so long, I’ve grown accustomed to darker and more subdued colors.

I stop rolling once I reach the bottom of the dune. Catching my breath, I brush the sand from my muslin shirt. At the sound of movement, I turn to see Dragan falling down the dune after me, landing with a loud grunt and a string of complaints. Kolvar is next. He knows to throw his body in the right angle to plant his hooves into the sand and slide down the mound, as opposed to rolling like Dragan and I just did.

“Are you okay?” Dragan asks me.

I turn to look at him and simply nod. I still find it nearly impossible to look at Dragan. Ever since Baron and Pyre took me together, I feel this incredible sense of guilt whenever I look at Dragan. Of course, he has no idea what happened between the three of us... “You?”

“Yes.”

Kolvar casts us a smug look and I shove his shoulder lightly.

The satyr looks up at the sun. “We have maybe five hours until the sun begins to set beyond the horizon and the darkness will make it difficult to make our way.”

“We could magic the light?” I ask.

Kolvar shakes his head. “Don’t attempt to use magic here. The ethers are thin in the Decolate Border, and that means demons could be close by.”

“Demons?” I repeat.

He nods. “And they can sense magic from miles away. Not to mention... magic just ain’t the same here. It’s muffled, like a scream in a hurricane. And stay close, lest you fancy gettin’ lost.”

“How do you know all of this?” I ask.

“My clan has been wanderin’ these wastelands for a long time.” He looks up at the sky, then back at us. “Once the sun sets, I’ll use the stars to chart our way to the Mercenary Stronghold.”

I look around myself at the landscape Kolvar refers to as a “wasteland.” There doesn’t seem to be a bush, tree or an animal for as far as the eye can see. Instead, it’s just a mass expanse of sand and dust.

“How did all of this come to be?” I ask.

“Galmer was the first to lay claim to these lands. His mother was a rebel queen, a human, who led the humans in battle during the first Singularity. That’s where she met Galmer’s father. The surge in magic of the Singularity allowed him to take the form of a human man, and they spent his last night alive together. After Galmer was born, his mother—along with the other humans—were wiped out entirely. Galmer was raised by rebels until he broke away and set out on his own.”

“How did he become a mercenary king?” I ask.

“Galmer’s always had the strength of a soldier and the conviction of a good leader. A natural talent for carvin’ his own way through the world. Folk of all walks o’ life took notice an’ swore their allegiance to him. Galmer wasn’t keen on bein’ a leader, I’ll tell you that much. But he saw how much the realms needed him, and he cast aside his own needs for theirs.”

I listen closely to Kolvar’s tale. The satyr has a way of telling a story with such color, I find myself riveted by his words. “And the clans?”

“Six of ‘em. The Banefire Horde is mine. Then, there’s the Olveroth, who are mostly

lycans and beast shifters. Sunder's Might are of the king's direct lineage. The Adamante are rock trolls, golems, and gargoyles on rare instances." He pauses and looks at Dragan with a big smile. Then he turns back to me and continues his explanation. "Mournblades are vampires, demons, and fae creatures who are more assassins than anythin'. The Thradsaryl are wraith warriors and powerful spellcasters. But there are also those who live in the stronghold who aren't part of the clans. Galmer allows refuge to all wayward stragglers."

"He sounds like a good man," I say.

Kolvar nods. "That he is."

DRAGAN

Mortal Realm

Ripples of heat waft from the dunes beneath our feet. The sun is still high and Eilish hasn't complained once, while I can hardly keep my mouth shut. My boots sink into the sand, the heat is oppressive and I'm in a shit mood. Gargoyles aren't meant to live in the sunlight, not when our kind thrives in the night. Almost as quickly as I arrived here, I yearn to return to the Gorge, where shadow and stone reign above all.

Eilish brushes the sweat-dampened strands of hair from her face and knots it atop her head. Lean muscle etches its way across her body, making her as strong physically as she is magically. Even the scent of her sweat is beguiling, tinged with the fragrance of her soaps and the very essence of who she is.

She catches me staring at her and immediately looks away. I feel as if she's hiding something from me, though I don't know why I feel this way. She just seems...

distant somehow.

“How are you handling the sun?” she asks.

I lift my arm to show the cuff Pyre gifted me. “I haven’t turned to stone, so I guess Pyre’s bracelet is working.” At the mention of Pyre, she immediately drops her attention to the ground before her. Hmm...

Eilish looks forward once more and shouts to Kolvar. “How far?”

“Another hour until we reach the end of the border,” the satyr replies. “Then we’ll make camp in the desert plains for the night before we start a four-day trek through the valley at the base of the canyon.”

“And from there?” Eilish asks.

Kolvar nods. “The Mercenary Stronghold is carved deep into the canyon, surrounded by high walls. It can’t be seen by anyone who doesn’t know what to look for, perfectly camouflaged with the terrain.”

I’m itchy. I’ve got sand in places it shouldn’t be, and my already piss-poor mood is souring by the second. Something’s going on with Eilish and I want to know what the fuck it is. But, I’m not eager to open that conversation with the fucking satyr right here. So, we push on through the flat, open expansion of cracked earth.

“Had I known what this place looked like, I never would have agreed to come,” I grumble.

“Ah, does the sunlight not agree with you?” Kolvar asks in a patronizing tone.

“This place is a shithole,” I answer.

He nods, his eyebrows reaching for the sweltering sky. “That it is.”

The only thing in sight for miles and miles are splatterings of completely dead grass and the cacti that call this barren land home. Eilish explores her surroundings with exuberance, as if she doesn’t find fault with anything around her. And she looks different in the daylight as well. Her skin appears pinkish and her white hair is even brighter, aside from the strands of black that remind me she needs to feed from a man of the light and soon.

A man from the light? I think to myself and scoff inwardly.

The only “man” of light from whom Eilish can feed is Cambion. No one else, with the exception of Variant, would be able to survive her hunger. And clearly, neither one is an option. And I’m both pleased with that fact and disturbed by it. Pleased because I don’t want Cambion to have her. I’m already torn by the fact that I have to share her with that fucking vampire. But, I’m also disturbed because I know Eilish needs to feed from the light, so she doesn’t lose herself to the darkness within her.

I’m so occupied with watching Eilish that I don’t notice Kolvar’s change in mood until Eilish catches on and lifts a finger to her lips. She creeps along the ground with skill I hadn’t known she possessed.

With lightning-quick reflexes, she snatches a snake from the ground before it can lunge for Kolvar.

“Come on, I’m not going to hurt you,” she says to the snake as Kolvar and I exchange a look of surprise.

She laughs openly as the thing wiggles around in her hand, tail rattling fiercely. And, once again, I’m captivated. I know what I feel isn’t a result of her seduction, but, instead, it’s Eilish’s unique charm. A charm that’s been in the process of unveiling

itself. Eilish wasn't always this confident. In fact, this is a new side of her—and I've loved witnessing the changes in her. Where once she was meek and passive, now she's a force to reckon with.

Not to mention the skills she showed in our fight against Theren and the Unseelie army in the clearing at Pyre's cottage. She was nothing but fearless in the face of what could have been her end. But she didn't drop back and she didn't bow down to Theren.

I'm proud of her.

My hands clench with the urge to grab her and steal the air from her lungs with a searing kiss, but I hold myself back. I don't like this power she has over me, but I'm also powerless against it.

As we approach a small cluster of rocks above a prickly sprout of foliage, Kolvar drops his bags and Eilish climbs up the rocks to watch the sunset. Streaks of crimson and orange stretch across the sky as I climb up beside her.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she asks.

"Yeah, it's great," I grumble and then shake my head as she pulls her attention from the sky and faces me.

"You have no idea what you've been putting me through," I groan.

She appears perplexed. "What I've been putting you through?"

"I can't take my fucking eyes off you," I confess. "If that fucking goat weren't here, I'd have already had you at least three times by now."

She looks over at Kolvar and smiles. “Don’t tell him your nickname for him,” she whispers.

“You’ve grown, Eilish,” I say in serious contemplation. She turns to look at me and there’s surprise in her gaze. “I used to think of you as innocent and naïve, but now I realize you’re far from it. You’ve impressed me.”

“Thank you, Dragan,” she says, her grin broad. “To hear you say that means a lot to me.” She leans against my shoulder as the last of the daylight is chased across the sky by an ebony sea of clouds.

Stars twinkle above our heads. Though it’s not as vibrant as the churning galaxies of the Veil, it’s beautiful nonetheless. Pale moonlight illuminates the regal features of her face and reflects against the white ocean of her hair.

“I know something’s bothering you, Eilish,” I say, my voice deep.

She tenses immediately. “Nothing’s bothering me,” she says.

“I know you well enough to know when you’re bullshitting me,” I respond. “Not to mention, you’re a terrible liar.”

She tilts her head slightly and toys with the loose thread at the cuff of my sleeve. The temperature begins to drop, and I wrap my arms around her to keep her warm.

“Some things are better left unsaid,” she whispers.

“Tell me.”

She’s quiet for a few seconds. “I don’t want secrets between us, Dragan,” she says. “But I’m worried about how you’re going to react if I tell you...”

“You need to trust me and be able to speak your mind,” I say. “We can’t have secrets between us, no matter how difficult they might be.”

She takes a deep breath and looks up at me, those blue eyes swimming with unshed tears. “Baron and Pyre,” she starts and then swallows the words. She takes a deep breath and nods, as if she’s encouraging herself. “They both had me the other night.”

I feel my stomach drop. “They both fucked you?” I ask, not intending for my words to sound angry but I’m fucking pissed off as much as I am shocked.

“Yes,” she says.

“How?”

“What do you mean?”

“How did they both fuck you?” I demand.

“Does that matter?”

“It does to me.”

She swallows and doesn’t say anything for a few seconds. “They were both... inside me at the same time.”

I nod and feel my anger swell. My hands fist at my sides. “When you went to the spring?”

She nods.

“And no one told me.”

She appears perplexed. “I... Maybe they didn’t feel as if they needed to tell you?”

“Was this planned?”

“I don’t know,” she answers as she takes my hand but I pull away from her. “Dragan,” she starts.

“Did you enjoy it?” I demand.

She gulps. “Dragan, please.”

“Did you fucking enjoy it?” I ask as I glare down at her beautiful face.

“Yes,” she answers and drops her attention to the ground.

“They didn’t ask me to come with them,” I say, more to myself than to her.

“Come with them?”

“They didn’t invite me.”

She nods. “Maybe they thought you’d be angry.” She takes a breath. “Baron and Pyre share a special friendship, you know that.”

“Yeah, and Baron and I fucking hate each other,” I respond. “And now I want to fucking smash his face in.”

“Dragan,” Eilish says as she reaches out and grips my hand, not allowing me to pull it away. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

I nod and try to calm myself. “It’s not fucking easy, Eilish,” I say. “Having to share

you.”

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CAMBION

Oronrel

My magic isn't what it should be, but I slip into the corridor with a simple cloaking spell. Unseelie guards, dressed in their armor, line the walls. They're unaware I move among them. Though I wish to help my brother, I must first check on Aima. She's my friend and former love, but most of all, she's part of our quest to bring peace to the realms. I can't and won't abandon her.

The dungeon is heavily guarded and encrypted with spells strong enough to discourage anyone trying to stage an uprising. I'm tempted to slit throats and bathe in the blood of those who attacked my allies in the Veil, but I look beyond my anger and wait for one of the guards to open the door. When he does, I slip through and follow him to the dungeons.

There, I see her. Aima lays on her side within one of the cells, curled into a ball with her arms around herself. I wait until the guard finishes his business and exits the dungeon, never realizing I'm here with him.

Once he leaves, I take the steps separating me from Aima. Then I reach through the prison bars and brush my fingertips against her cheek. She immediately opens her eyes, then pulls back in shock and scrambles to her knees, fear in her pitch-black gaze. She can't see me, just as the guard couldn't.

"Aima," I whisper as I remove the concealment spell. "It's me."

“Cambion?” she says as recognition settles over her.

“What have they done to you?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” she assures me. But I know the truth. She’s close to breaking, even if her pride keeps her from admitting as much. “What are you doing here? If they catch you—”

“They won’t.”

“You don’t know that! Go back to wherever they’re keeping you! So long as you’re obedient, Theren won’t kill you. Especially if he thinks you’re valuable to Morrigan.”

“I won’t leave you, Aima.”

“You have to!”

“No, we can escape—together. I’m working on pulling together a plan. It’s dangerous, but I’m confident it will work.”

“Cambion,” she sighs. “Stop trying to save me. I’m not your responsibility.”

“I can get us out of here.”

“How?” she demands.

“The mirror I took from Pyre’s secret room may be able to home in on his specific magic signature.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the mirror might be able to reveal our whereabouts.”

She inhales deeply and then shakes her head as she looks at me. “You’re nearly as bad as Kolvar, you know that?” she says with a fond smile.

“I would prefer you not compare me to a satyr, thank you,” I grumble.

Her smile deepens. “He’s not just a satyr. He took so many beatings for me when we were here the last time, I lost count. He nearly died for me, and I didn’t know him for as long as I’ve known you.” She takes a breath and faces me in earnest. “I don’t want to shoulder the guilt of causing someone’s death, especially yours.”

“Having friends who wish to save you isn’t a burden, Aima, it’s a blessing.”

“I don’t look at it the same way.” She unfolds her limbs and slides up the wall to gain some form of balance. “And if you’re trying to do this simply to find redemption for your actions, then go fuck yourself.”

“I’m not after redemption. At least, not yet,” I reply. My knees creak as I move closer to the bars. Hanging her head, Aima scrubs her hands over her face. I lower my tone and try a gentler approach to obtain the information I want. “If Theren is no longer at the head of the Unseelie Court, it was not by Morrigan’s doing.”

“What do you mean?”

I shrug. “Morrigan wouldn’t want her pawn to lose power.”

Aima nods. “Someone infiltrated Oronrel. I don’t know who it was, but I can sense a foreign magic here in the palace.”

“A foreign magic?” I ask, my tone laced with doubt.

Aima nods. “You’ve been gone so long, you can’t tell the difference anymore.” She stretches, and I hear her spine pop as she adjusts herself. The color drains from her face and she breathes through the pain. “But, I know it’s true. Once I find out who it is, I can put an end to the unlawful executions.”

“ If you find out who it is,” I respond before shaking my head. “You need to understand

there’s more at stake than finding a spy. We need to get back to our group if we have any chance of making it through this—“

The sound of approaching boots cuts me off, and I cast the concealment spell only seconds before the door bursts open. Aima glances up briefly as two guards enter the dungeon. One of them forces open her cell while the other enters. Aima dodges his attempt to restrain her.

I make it across the dungeon just as she slams her knee into the guard’s abdomen. Aima is loyal to the Unseelie, which means she won’t stop until she sets them free. Regardless, I won’t leave her behind. The sounds of her fighting continue behind me as I move unseen out of the dungeon. I hurry back to my bedchamber, easing the door shut behind me before collapsing onto the bed.

My entire body throbs with pain.

BARON

The Veil

“You’re catching on quickly, Baron,” Pyre says as he instructs me through the

process of closing one of the ancient rifts in the Veil.

My hands quiver and sweat pours down my face, but I ease the tear shut with unwavering concentration. Green is the color of my particular magic as it shifts and contorts the portal until the spell is complete.

Pyre spins me around and slowly hovers a hand in front of my face, as though he's using his power to probe my energies.

"There aren't many who can close a portal that old on their first try," he says.

"You don't sound very excited about that."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm very impressed with your growth," Pyre says as he steps back and hands me a small tool to carve new runes into the stones surrounding the old portal. "But the last Guardian of The Veil who learned that quickly turned dark long before I came along. From what I know, he was killed by the Sentinels for trying to taint the wellspring. Your aptitude reminds me how easy it is to turn."

"Turn?"

"All things have a dark side, Baron," he mutters.

Then he kneels down beside me and draws intricate runes at a speed that baffles me. "Guardians are no exception to that rule, especially when you take into account the fact that we are dark in nature." He looks up at me. "Your job is to make sure you feed any energy you absorb back into the Veil so it can thrive. Keeping that energy inside you will only make you susceptible to corruption. Either that, or feed it into Eilish, but you must remove it from yourself."

I stand and dust the chalk off my hands, scowling up at the sky above us, wondering

if Eilish is doing the same. She's changing me and I'm not sure it's for the better. "I have feelings for her," I reveal. "Feelings I shouldn't have. And I'm afraid they're weakening me."

"Feelings aren't a sign of weakness."

I nod but I can't say I agree. "Dragan has fallen for her hard, and I don't want to stand in his way if it means losing him as an ally."

"Why would you lose him as an ally?"

"Because he's jealous of the bond Eilish and I have," I respond.

"Could you leave her?" Pyre asks.

I swallow hard. "I don't know." I pause as I further consider it. "The dark bond she and I share, it's growing. I thought it would have dwindled away by now, but that doesn't seem to be happening." I turn away and Pyre follows me to the next portal. We work diligently, side by side, to heal the Veil.

"Is that a problem?" he asks.

I shrug. "I shouldn't be able to feel anything, right? I don't have a soul."

"It doesn't matter what you believe you should or shouldn't feel. The truth of the matter is that you feel what you feel, so why fight it?" he asks with a shrug. "Life is short, Baron, even for those of us who don't have souls."

I consider his words but then shake my head. "I can't allow myself to get closer to Eilish. I can't become invested in her, not when our futures lead us in different directions."

“And why is that?”

“I want to become the Guardian of The Veil. I’m working hard at this and I have no intention of giving it up. There are so many things I still want to learn.”

“Like what?”

“Like how to save you,” I say without thinking. Pyre’s head snaps around and he glares at me, but I don’t back down. “You’re always talking about dying, how could you think I wouldn’t pay attention? Not to mention the part of the broken prophecy that says you’ll die if a particular series of events come to pass. I won’t let it happen.”

“You have no choice, Baron. It’s best that you prepare for the outcome we both know is coming.”

“Fate is changeable.”

“Not mine,” he answers with no emotion. “I’m a necromancer. I know when death approaches and approach it does.”

“I don’t want to hear that bullshit,” I snarl. “I need you, Pyre. All of us do, for different reasons. The realms won’t be the same if you aren’t here.”

“All things continue.”

“What about the fae you protect? What about Noni?” I insist as I shake my head. “No. I will find a way to save you, prophecy be damned.”

Pyre faces me with a strange smirk on his face. One that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “You won’t give up on me,” he starts. “Yet you’re so quick to turn your back on Eilish.”

“Eilish doesn’t need me,” I protest.

“Do you truly believe that?”

“She has Dragan and Cambion and whoever else she chooses. Men fall at her feet... you’ve seen it.”

Pyre grabs my arm as if to drive home his point. “Eilish needs all of you, not one or two. All. That means you have to pull your head out of your ass and accept what’s happening.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you have feelings for Eilish, and it’s clear to anyone with eyes that she feels something for you, too.”

“She’s a succubus. All she knows is desire and sex. Feelings don’t enter into it.”

“Are you really so stupid?”

“Fuck you,” I start but he chuckles and interrupts me.

“You’ve conveniently forgotten she’s also angel. And Eilish knows her heart as well as any of us do. Yes, she feels lust and desire but which of us don’t?” He pauses for a few seconds and then looks at me with the expression of someone who knows something I don’t. “I’ve watched the two of you.” He takes a breath. “Have you ever considered that the feelings you have for her are intentional?”

“Intentional?”

“Fate, as you called it before, has brought you together because you need one

another.”

“I need Eilish because I need to syphon this excessive dark energy and she’s the only one strong enough to tolerate it?”

“Yes, that’s one of the many reasons.” He pauses. “Feeding your darkness into Eilish will keep you from corruption.”

“And what does it do for her?”

Pyre shrugs one massive shoulder. “That should be obvious?”

“It isn’t.”

“Eilish needs darkness just as much as she needs light. You can feed her darkness with your own,” Pyre finishes. “You and Dragan are only part of the darkness she requires, however. It seems all of you have forgotten that our angel-succubus is also royalty , which means she has her father’s appetite.”

“Her father’s appetite?”

“The appetite of an Incubus,” Pyre continues. “She’ll need Theren’s darkness, as well.”

“Bullshit,” I say as the word catches in my throat.

“I’m afraid not,” he replies dryly. “Have I ever misled you regarding the destinies you each must fulfill in order to restore the balance?”

I don’t answer his question because it requires no response. And I’m seething over the thought of Theren and Eilish. Theren’s a fucking backstabbing piece of shit and

the idea of his cock inside my angel...

My angel.

Fuck. I do have it bad.

Pyre reaches into the lapels of his coat and pulls out the last thing I expect to see: the book of prophecies we thought was lost forever. Somehow, he's managed to save the book of his former lover's visions from the explosion at the cottage.

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MORRIGAN

Jadyrar Sea

My pale fingers claw across the citrine sands of the beach. Baron was right in that the Jadyrar Sea looks like molten pearl swept along the shore. I hear it crashing on the jagged stone off to the east, but I'm unable to lift my head high enough to see its true beauty.

Tingles prickle my skin as I feel the spray of the sea, causing chill bumps to rise all over my arms and legs. Slowly, I crawl into the small cave along the coast and somehow manage to prop myself up against the wall. Something prowls along the beach, trying to sniff me out, but my scent is masked well beneath the aromatic fungi that clings to the cave walls.

Pressing myself into the deepest corner, I close my eyes. Hiding from Eilish and the others is much easier than avoiding the creatures of this world. I look down and gently peel back my makeshift bandage. Escaping the cottage during the battle was more difficult than I'd anticipated, for I had not expected to be ambushed by seven demons...

Now, there's not enough strength left in my body to build a fire. The truth hits me with clear precision: I can't stay here, or I will die.

The faint simmer of magic at the core of my soul is my only hope. I shut my eyes and reach for it, allowing it to engulf me in a faint light as I summon an astral manifestation of myself to the Castle in the Sky. Taking a vessel is dangerous if the

match is incompatible. While feeders like vampires and succubae are able to absorb souls and magic, I possess the ability to sever my soul from my body and take possession of another body, a vessel.

As I creep through the thin membrane between the astral plane and reality, I search for a body to inhabit. I look for someone whose magical fingerprint is strong and similar to my own, someone with undiscovered potential. My search leads me to a Seelie woman. She's beautiful and carries within her the ability to birth a child of magic, even if she doesn't know it just yet. Perfect. Mothers are natural vessels.

I reach out with the last ribbons of my power and latch onto her. The soul within her body fights me and, in my weakened state, I nearly lose the battle. One forceful push isn't enough. Bracing my hand at the center of her chest, I finally push through. The woman gasps and grits her teeth, a contorted expression twisting her face. My hand squeezes her soul until it writhes in pain and submits to my will.

The further her soul submits, the more of my astral form seeps into her body. I test my control over her by wiggling her fingers, and when her body complies, I realize I've been successful. With my other hand, I punch her soul from her body completely, slotting myself into the vessel like dipping my feet into a warm bath. I feel myself adjust to the Seelie woman's body as I watch her soul turn grey and seep into the Veil.

I feel renewed. Invigorated. Discorporation always puts a little spring in my step.

I walk through the halls of Variant's castle in search of my pitiful lackey. The door to the throne room is open, and I step inside the space where so much history has been shaped. Being here in physical form is much different in a body that isn't my own.

When I enter the room, Variant lifts his head from where it was resting against his palm. He rakes his gaze over my new body and stands up from his throne.

Even now, I find him desirable.

“Morrigan?” he whispers in disbelief. “How is it possible?”

“I used what magic I still had left,” I respond in a voice that isn’t my own.

“So, you’re a mortal, then?”

“Perhaps,” I retort dryly, not appreciating the comparison but I suppose it’s a fitting one.

“And you’ve come here why?”

“Because we need to begin,” I bark in response. His question is stupid. “The others are already plotting what they’ll do next.”

“The others?”

I nod. “They will not be defeated easily, Variant,” I say. “But, they aren’t our problem at the moment.”

“And what is?”

“I need the talisman, I need my magic restored to me or everything we’ve set in motion will be for naught.”

Variant nods and circles me like a vulture. “How long until your mortal vessel cracks?”

“Perhaps four months, if I don’t abuse the flesh.”

“Then we have time to have a bit of fun.” He chuckles suggestively.

“We don’t have time for fun.”

“I can see the desire in your eyes, Morrigan. I hunger for the same.”

“Is sex all you think about?” I demand as I step away from him, placing some distance between us. Though I’m the one who bespelled him, Variant seems to have a hold on me that I can’t quite escape. If not for the attraction between us, I would have suspected foul play or some form of magic. “We need to get the talisman and figure out what the others have planned,” I insist. “And that is the only subject on my mind.” I take a breath when he doesn’t respond. “The easiest way to kill the others is to isolate them individually and pick them off one by one. I trust you can do this?”

Variant approaches me and wraps his fingers around my throat. It’s not a threat of death or violence, but a promise of sexual fulfillment.

“What’s the rush, pet? Why not put this new form of yours to good use?” Then he glances down at my now corporeal form and nods, his gaze filling with undisguised lust. “You chose well, Morrigan. I like my women with fair hair, blue eyes and large busts.” He leans down to whisper in my ear. “Your body reminds me of the angel.” He traces his tongue along the curve of my jaw before biting my lower lip so hard, I can taste blood.

“Get away from me,” I start, angry that my form reminds him of her .

He pulls away from me. “Guards!” he yells and immediately the doors to the throne room open and two guards appear. Variant takes a few steps away from me so he can fully face them.

“Take this woman to my bedchamber. I have plans for her.”

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

The sun rises on another day, and Kolvar looks up at the sky with a smile on his face. I follow his gaze, but I see nothing aside from the holes that pepper the rockface that looms above us.

“We’re here,” Kolvar announces, leading us around the side of the immense boulder to a large crack in the canyon wall. I squeeze between my companions and when I step out on the other side, I can’t help the way my jaw drops.

Kolvar was right—we’ve arrived... somewhere. Large walls encircle an enormous kingdom of polished terracotta. A kingdom that appears out of nowhere, a mirage in this endless desert of sand.

Kolvar shouts for someone to open the gate and two men with scarves over their faces obey without hesitation. Vibrant red streamers hang between the stalls of a bustling marketplace at the heart of the stronghold. Elves, demons, ogres, gnomes, trolls, golems, satyrs, pixies, nymphs, and other creatures fill the streets. It’s been many years since I’ve seen this many species existing in apparent harmony.

Sirens sit high on a balcony, singing to those below as halflings and sprites dance a happy jig. My eyes are hungry as I try to take in each little detail. I look back and notice the way Dragan takes everything in and smiles, causing my heart to stutter for a moment. It’s very rare that he smiles, but when he does, it’s devastating in its beauty. And he hasn’t smiled at me for a while, not since our last conversation when he learned about Pyre, Baron and me. Truth be told, Dragan’s been avoiding me.

Kolvar weaves through the throng of creatures, pushing toward the north end of the stronghold.

“The east belongs to the Banefire Horde, Adamante, and Mournblades. The West belongs to the two noble clans, and the king and his family take the north. Everything else belongs to those under the king’s protection,” the satyr shouts above the activity in the streets. I notice how the streamers, banners, and shutters of the buildings change colors to pay tribute to whichever clan they belong to.

There are guilds and trade shops everywhere, surrounded by homes that reach toward a bright blue sky and are carved from the same terracotta that shapes the walls. Green ivy and fragrant flowers add splashes of emerald among the shades of orange, red, yellow, gold, sapphire, and purple. We walk up a large staircase that leads to an oasis garden of tropical and desert plants. Two enormous doors carved from soapstone open as Kolvar gives the signal.

“This is the Hall of Clans. As a chieftain, I’m tasked with representing my people here at the gatherings.”

“You have a fully operational government here,” I say in awe. I don’t know what I was expecting before arriving here, but it wasn’t this.

Kolvar nods. “Despite what people think of mercenaries, we have just as many politics as any other civilization, we just aren’t as civilized.” Then he snorts.

The Hall of Clans is a large room with wood-paneled walls. Tribal rugs cover the natural floors and a firepit rests at the center. The ceiling is open to let the smoke out, and the scent of roasting meats permeates the air. My stomach rumbles and I look over at Dragan, only to find him already studying me. As soon as our eyes meet, he looks away.

The sound of hooves catches my attention, and curtains open to allow a centaur into the room. He's nearly a head taller than Pyre and he's wider than even Kolvar. The expansion of his chest alone seems to take up the entirety of the room.

Silken tresses fall naturally in golden waves around his face and shoulders, and a bronze circlet rests on his brow with a ruby at the center. The color brings out the unique shade of violet in his eyes. Kolvar takes a knee, and Dragan and I follow suit. It's unusual for the gargoyle to bow to anyone, which speaks volumes of the centaur's commanding aura.

"Stand, please," he says in a pleasantly clear voice. "Any friend of Kolvar's is a friend of mine."

"This is," Kolvar starts but the centaur interrupts him with a smile.

"I am Galmer, King of The Mercenaries."

"My name is Eilish," I offer with my own smile as I stand and turn to face Dragan. "And this is Dragan."

"Welcome." The king gestures to two seats beside his throne at a long table in the center of the room. "Will you have a seat?"

Dragan and I obey the kind request. As soon as we do, Galmer settles his attention on me. He doesn't say anything right away, but studies me with kind eyes.

"You are quite beautiful, Eilish," he finally says before he looks at Dragan. "The gargoyle is a lucky man. Any man brave enough to take on a succubus is greatly rewarded."

I look to Dragan and notice he simply nods at Galmer, but his lips are tight and his

jaw is even tighter. I can't help but wish I'd never told him the truth about Baron, Pyre and me. Things would have been much better if I hadn't.

"How did you know what I am?" I ask Galmer.

"When you live as long as I have, Eilish, there is very little that remains a mystery."

"Well, you're wrong," I say and then wince as the words leave my mouth. I don't mean to offend him but I most likely have. I can't help it—Dragan has me on edge and that edge has put me into a foul mood.

"Wrong?" Galmer asks.

"I'm not all succubus," I answer. "I'm also half angel."

Luckily, the conversation only sparks a bout of laughter from the unusual king. "I like your fire, Eilish."

His compliment makes me smile. It's not every day that someone treats me like an equal only seconds after learning what I am. I find King Galmer refreshing. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Now that we've exchanged pleasantries," he says as his smile drops slowly. "Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

I take a big breath. "Morrigan, the Midnight Queen, and Variant, the King of Light, are holding fae creatures captive in a place known as the Threst . These fae are tortured and drained of their life forces so Variant can twist their energies to serve Morrigan's purpose. We seek to liberate them."

"These people deserve to be free," Dragan adds.

“And bringing this atrocity to light may turn the tides in our fight against Morrigan and those who follow her,” I continue.

King Galmer nods solemnly. “And what do you wish from me?”

“Men,” I reply. “Reinforcements. Soldiers.”

“Ah,” he answers with a nod and doesn’t appear to be surprised. “How many?”

“As many as you can spare,” Dragan responds.

“And perhaps a place where our resistance may flourish. Perhaps we could join forces—” I start.

“As I said, I like your spirit. But I can’t give you what you seek. At least, not yet.”

“Why?” I ask, shaking my head as disappointment courses through me.

“Even though I hold the title of King, I make no decisions without consulting the clan leaders.”

THEREN

Oronrel

Snow drifts softly to the ground, dampening the rotting wood that's still somewhat blackened by the fire that burned here only hours earlier. I smell the scent of the mountains and the forest all around me as the cold seeps through my robes. Wind gusts through the open door, causing the blanket of white beside me to dance and swirl about, carrying a tinge of blood on the breeze. I push to my feet and walk towards the door, the metallic aroma leading me to the gory scene of Eilish's mother and sister—what's left of them, anyway.

If I were to close my eyes, I'd still hear Eilish's deafening scream shake the mountains. That day was monumental for all the realms, not just the tiny glade on the outskirts of Oronrel.

My youthful love for the angel-succubus set everything in motion. If not for my constant visits to the forest, Prince Yanhir would never have known of the existence of Eilish's sister. Out of guilt and concern for Eilish's family, I stood watch over their grove for many months. It wasn't until Prince Yanhir tried to force himself on young Solya that things began to change for the worse.

I wasn't there the day Eilish slaughtered the Unseelie prince, but I heard the stories as they tore through the palace. By the time I arrived to the glade, it was already too late.

Years and years passed, and Eilish was no longer the young girl I'd loved in my youth. Instead, she became a fierce young woman who struck fear into the hearts of

the Unseelie Court, for they knew not what she was capable of.

My heart races as the memories play endlessly through my mind. Though this place is filled with pain, I still return here time and time again. I witness the aftermath of Cambion's failure to protect Eilish's family and my failure to warn her about the one who hunted her—Prince Yanhir's father.

Cambion and I are both to blame for her ill-fated journey, and we're the reason she ended up in Morrigan's clutches. I fear the Midnight Queen would never have known of Eilish's existence if we'd done as we promised and kept Eilish from harm.

I walk away from the steaming pools of blood in the snow and make my way along the winding path that leads to a dark cave. It's different here now. I no longer writhe in pain among the shadows that always linger here. No, I stay on my feet and feel my way through the darkness, prodding along the walls of my mind. Each day I feel more and more like myself, but the other me—the false me—he's here, as well.

I can sense his presence easily, though the shadows are dense and slick like oil over water. The sound of my own heartbeat is loud in my ears as I search for the opening...

It's not a door nor a window, but a fracture in Morrigan's spell. My fingers graze the edges and I slip my hand through the fracture, using the small crevasse to find a wider opening. I push forward and tumble toward consciousness...

The sensation of returning to the forefront of my mind causes me to shiver. I stand up from the chair in front of the mirror and take a few minutes to catch my breath and to quiet my sporadic heartbeat. Once I have control of myself, I start for Cambion's bedchamber.

There's no use knocking, so I force the door open, not surprised when I see him

hovering near the veranda. His eyes snap to mine and I raise my hands in surrender.
“It’s me, Cambion.”

“Theren?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Is it safe for you to be here?” he asks, moving around the room in a panicked flurry as if to check for any hidden enemies.

“No. It’s not safe,” I answer. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m here now... I need you to know... something.”

“What?”

I pause and take a deep breath. “That day on the battlefield... so long ago.”

Cambion glances at me. “Do I even want to know?”

“Listen. Whether you want to or not,” I reply dryly. My brother can be difficult. “I did fight beside Variant, but not willingly.”

“You’re telling me,” he starts but I hold up a hand to silence him.

“That day, you saw me beside Variant in body .”

“It wasn’t just you who fought beside him.”

“You saw me and my Unseelie army,” I correct. “But you didn’t see my mind and you didn’t see what was inside my heart .”

“I fail to understand,” he starts.

“Will you just shut the fuck up and listen!” I clear my throat and continue. My brother can be absolutely exhausting. “We weren’t always close, you and I, but I always valued our kinship more than any promise of power or wealth or fame.”

“Then why...”

“You will never truly understand the entirety of my story, brother, because you didn’t experience it. But as I watched angels fall from the sky and gargoyles plummet to their deaths, I had only one thought... and that thought was riddled with the fear that you would never forgive me, even if you knew the truth.”

His shoulders relax and Cambion moves to stand in front of me. “I’m trying to learn forgiveness, but I need actions, Theren, not words. Prove to me you can be trusted. Prove you had no willing part to play in the betrayal that cost us the war and the infiltration of the Unseelie Court.”

“Once I’m free of this prison, I will prove everything.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” Cambion asks skeptically.

CAMBION

Oronrel

I believe him.

After nearly an hour of Theren explaining his side of what happened during the Great

War, I believe him. But I don't trust him—not yet. There's still much my brother must do before I can set aside the anger I feel toward him.

He sits on the bed, watching me as I pace, and I know he's looking for forgiveness I can't give when so much still remains to be seen.

“And what of all the things you did to Aima?” I hear myself ask.

Theren stiffens and he looks down at the floor with a wave of regret wafting off his figure.

“Aima knows I love her, but not in the way she wants me to.”

“She's still in love with you.”

Theren nods. “We were together out of convenience and loneliness bred from the deceit of Morrigan.”

“I doubt she believes the same thing.”

“Aima chose me, but was already in love with someone else.”

I take a deep breath as I look at him. “Eilish?”

“Eilish,” he affirms. “She's owned my heart from the beginning.”

It's a truth I've always known but one I don't want to face. Not now. Not then. Not ever. “You should have told Aima. You should have told her the truth about how you felt rather than pretending otherwise and then treating her like she was a carrier of the plague. And leaving her in the dungeons to be tortured after everything she's sacrificed for you and her people?” I feel my anger growing. “There's no way to

forgive you for that, Theren.”

Theren winces and meets my gaze once more. “I wasn’t in my right frame of mind,” he says. “I was being controlled by Morrigan, as you know. I would never have harmed Aima—you know that.”

“I hope you speak the truth,” I answer.

“I don’t want to argue with you.” He takes a breath. “I need to fix something I didn’t have time to set right before the balance shifted...” He takes another breath and then runs his fingers through his hair as he faces me and his expression is one of pure seriousness. “There’s a Cockatrice after Eilish.”

“What?” I ask, shocked. Cockatrices are expert killers. Although they look like small dragons, they aren’t related. Instead, they have the scaly body of a lizard, the face and beak of a vulture with feathers and horns that run the length of their spines. They stand perhaps six feet tall but the length of their tails is easily double their height. Their wings look like those of a bat.

“One of Abedon’s executioners,” Theren continues.

“You mean to tell me one of Abedon’s executioners is looking for her?” This is bad. Very bad.

Theren stands and nods his head solemnly. “Eilish’s mother kept her hidden in the glade for a reason. But when Eilish killed Yanhir, his father went to Morrigan and asked the Midnight Queen to kill her. Morrigan was too busy casting her spells on Variant to be bothered with some succubus-angel hybrid in the mountains, so she sent a Cockatrice in her stead.” He pauses. “By the time he located her home, the balance had already shifted.”

“Was the glade completely untouched by the war?”

“The glade was well hidden by magic, and you’d already wiped Eilish’s memories long before the Cockatrice found her living in the glade on her own.”

“Then you know about that?” I ask, surprised to know Theren is aware I wiped her memories.

“Yes, there is little I don’t know about the past,” he admits with a shrug.

“I didn’t mean to clear her memories,” I say.

“We will get to that in a moment,” Theren says with a cryptic nod.

“How did Silvanus play into all of this?” I ask, wanting to change the subject.

“Silvanus was well acquainted with Eilish before you ever wiped her memories. And when he realized she was in trouble, he came out of hiding to help Eilish, but by that point, Morrigan had learned of Eilish’s importance and she interfered.”

“Morrigan interfered how?”

Theren nods. “Morrigan knew Eilish was the key to the ritual of freeing Abedon and, simply put, Morrigan got to her first. She guided Eilish away from Silvanus and the Cockatrice so she could earn Eilish’s trust.”

“It worked,” I answer with a grunt. “We freed Morrigan and all but pointed her in the right direction to find an unspeakable amount of magic in the Veil.” I shake my head as I realize how prettily we worked into Morrigan’s plan. “With the energy Morrigan already took from the fae and the power I believe she intends to steal from Pyre, she’ll have everything she needs to kill Silvanus and take back her magic. After that,

there's no stopping her and Variant from taking over all the realms entirely."

Theren nods. "Then all Morrigan needs is Eilish to act as a conduit."

"A conduit for what?" I insist.

"The ritual."

"Tell me what you know of the ritual," I say.

"No. First, tell me what happened when you took Eilish's memories." Theren glares at me as he moves toward the door. He pulls it open and watches the corridor for a few seconds before closing it again. "I don't have much time before I'm thrust back into my mind by the spell that still keeps me hostage." Theren exhales. "Tell me the truth and do so quickly, brother."

"I'm more interested," I start but he interrupts me.

"Remember, I'm not the only one who needs to prove his loyalty."

My spine straightens and I wonder how much I should tell him. I decide to tell him the entire truth. Maybe because I need to get the truth off my own shoulders. "When I arrived in time to see what had become of Eilish's family, I realized I couldn't tell her I failed to uphold our agreement, that I failed to protect her family," I explain. "But Eilish returned before I could clear away the bodies. She was distraught, and I made her return with me. Then I used a spell to erase her pain..."

"A spell?" Theren repeats, eyeing me suspiciously.

I nod. "One of our father's. It was only supposed to make her forget my failure. It wasn't meant to make her forget... everything."

“What else?” Theren hisses. “There must be more to this story.”

“After I brought her back to the palace, I kept a strict eye on her. I noticed she would fall unconscious for long periods of time, always forgetting what happened each time she awakened again,” I explain, shaking my head as I remember the impossibility of the situation. “But, I couldn’t watch over her each day, everyday as I was king...”

“So?”

“So one day I left her on her own, and I went in search of Dragan so we could meet with Baron and decide what should be done about Variant. We went to the Castle in the Sky and that was when we watched Variant kill Baron. After that, the war erupted. And everything went to hell. I never went back for Eilish because I was never able to,” I confess.

“You were wrong for using father’s spells without any guidance, especially when we both know he succumbed to darkness.”

“I’m well aware.”

He nods to let me know he isn’t finished. “And leaving Eilish on her own? You have some nerve berating me for the way I’ve treated Aima when you’re just as guilty, yourself.”

After he takes several deep breaths, Theren leaves me standing at the center of my bedchamber without another word. I feel the weight of our conversation, but an unusual sense of relief washes over me. My brother isn’t as vile and corrupt as I once thought.

MORRIGAN

The Threst

Fine silk brushes my cheek as I blink against the gray hue of light filtering through the opening of my tent. Variant is beside me, curled around me like ivy, and I press myself against the hardness poking my hip. His hands grip my waist and he rocks his pelvis into me. I smile in the muted glow of dawn, feeling his hand slide along the curve of my thigh. This vessel has already known his possession and yearns for it once more. Part of me wonders if Variant prefers this form over my true figure... and then I wonder if Abedon preferred another to me, as well.

But I shove those thoughts aside and pull away from the angel beside me. He grumbles something underneath his breath and rolls out of the tent. I tug my clothing back into place before I join him. Variant calls for his riders to pack up the camp as I wander through the bog. The waterlogged patches of grass beneath my bare feet squelch with each step. The air is tainted with dank must and the scent of fungi. There's a dark creature who lurks here, and I intend to claim it as my own.

Water splashes and I peer out from the corner of my eye, catching just a subtle swish of tail before the surface ripples once more. I continue through the marshes, cutting through the fog with care so I don't fall into the murky waters. Another flash of movement and I raise my hand as if to cast a spell. Great sadness fills my heart as I drop my hand to my side, useless without the magic that once coursed through my veins.

I reach for my sword instead, carved of pure gold and dotted with sapphires. Faint

light twinkles off the tip of the blade and the creature who lives here stills in its movements, no doubt sensing danger.

“I heard your song in the night,” I explain. “You seek a rider who holds the same darkness in their heart that rests in your own. I come to offer you myself, for I know little else but vengeance.”

The sound of hooves trudging through the marsh catches my attention and I spin around, aiming my blade for the creature’s heart. Her large, pale eyes stare back at me, and a smile curls my lips. Tilting her head to the left, she regards me with caution. I sheath my blade and offer my hand. Her skin is pure white, slick with the same dew that clings to the blades of grass beneath my feet. Cold fingers rest in mine, but only for a second as the creature steps back and transforms, shifting into a black horse with a dripping mane.

A kelpie is quite rare after the war. I’m lucky to find one in the marshes that surround the Threst.

The kelpie lowers its head in a show of submission, and I circle around to mount the large beast. It tosses its mane and nickers as I click my tongue and urge it back toward the camp.

Variant’s eyes widen at the sight of the mystical creature. “You... captured one?”

“I didn’t have to. I think we’ve come to an understanding.”

“Not many have the courage to ride a kelpie, Morrigan.”

“I am not just anyone.” My tone is harsh, but it’s time for Variant to learn which of us is truly in charge. He eyes me with interest before climbing into the saddle of his own horse.

We ride side by side to the large dome at the heart of the marshes. The dome is made of pure crystal, held together by glistening silver that's nearly invisible to the naked eye. It can only be seen when the sun has just barely begun to peek over the horizon, or if one dares to approach the army that lays beneath it.

Nearly four hundred orcs and demons guard the sphere, night and day.

"Your army is plentiful here, Variant," I say. "I'm impressed."

He shrugs. "I'm not Theren, I don't spare any expense when it comes to safeguarding our resources," he mutters. "It's bad enough we have rebels fighting us on top of Eilish and her brutes," he finishes. His eyes cut toward me with animosity. If I had even an ounce of power, I would have made him swallow his tongue for his insolence.

I ride toward the front gate and climb off the kelpie. She shifts into her female form and walks beside me into the Threst. One of the guards stands before me to block my entrance, clearly not recognizing me as the Midnight Queen. The kelpie's eyes turn bright red and the guard drops to the ground, gurgling as he drowns on water summoned by my new companion. A kelpie's loyalty is something earned through the darkness of one's soul, and it's everlasting.

I chuckle as we pass cages and cages of fae. A large door opens on Variant's command and the artificer looks up from her workstation. The short, pudgy woman glances my way and hurries over with the talisman clutched in her thick fingers. I snatch it from her and feel the power within the artifact as it begins to match the pulse of my heart.

Finally!

This is the moment I have long been waiting for.

Variant moves to clasp the talisman behind my neck, but the kelpie beats him to it. Once the clasp is fastened, the power moves through me like a shockwave. The burst of dark, pilfered magic fills me. Tainted, succulent power.

Reaching deep into my soul, I summon my body to me. The Veil fights the connection, but I feel my vessel begin to crack and shatter around me like thick porcelain tapped with a hammer. It falls away like dust on the wind, and I stare into the reflective walls of the Threst.

“It’s good to be back. Now, we can begin our plans for Silvanus...”

DRAGAN

Mercenary Stronghold

Galmer leads me through a set of curtains where a gallery overlooks the entirety of the stronghold. I fight to keep the surprise from my face when I notice the sheer number of flags that represent the different clans.

“There must be legions of mercenaries here beneath each banner,” I say, despite my efforts to keep the awe from my voice. “I had once envisioned something similar for my own kind—for the gargoyles. We were prosperous before the war, but when I was... punished for rebelling against the false king, most of my people were killed or forced to guard his palace.”

“Where are the rest of you?” Galmer asks.

“Hopefully still in the Gorge. I don’t believe there are more than forty of us now, though, even if the Shadow Realm remains untouched by Variant. I can sense when

another of us is lost.” My thoughts return to Thoradin and his spirit in the Veil. He seemed so at peace with his fate—I wish nothing but the same for the rest of my comrades.

“I hope you eventually find your people again,” Galmer says.

I nod but my people aren’t the subject of my thoughts at the moment. “You have hundreds of thousands of mercenaries at your command, and I’m certain those who dwell in the city would gladly fight for you. Why haven’t you attempted to take out Variant already?”

Galmer shakes his head and points to the market district. “They are tired of fighting. They come here for protection, honest work, and a chance at survival. Those who wish to fight are tested and united with a chieftain to further their skills. But our goal is to strike silently and carefully so we lessen the number of casualties.”

“How?”

“Our clans have infiltrated the ranks of Variant’s army—some of them watch over the precincts and the cities in the realms, and some transport refugees and resources back here. Everyone within these walls has a part to play,” Galmer explains. “Take a walk through the streets. Maybe, when you return, you’ll understand what I’m trying to accomplish.”

The centaur takes his leave. I walk along the gallery and vault over the railing, landing on my feet and feeling the ground tremble beneath my boots. No one stops to stare as I wander through the stronghold. No one here asks questions or passes judgment on those who walk the streets. Every species is equal, in a way. Even so, I can see the pain of their pasts as vividly as my own—warriors with scars on their faces and maidens with fatherless children. All are dressed in the dark colors of mourning to honor their loved ones.

My journey takes me to each corner of the stronghold. I observe fine blades crafted by the blacksmiths, smell the books at the library where the spellcaster guild meets, and purchase flowers for Eilish at the botanist's shop where herbs hang in the window. Flowers because it's time I ate my pride and apologized for the way I've been acting towards her. Yes, it hurt and angered me to learn that Baron and Pyre had her at the same time. At first I couldn't understand my reaction—I already knew Baron was her lover and I had my suspicions about Pyre. So why did her news bother me so much? After reflection, I realized it was simply because I'd been left out in the cold. I didn't like the fact that the two of them gave her so much pleasure while I was left to argue with Kolvar.

And once I realized it was purely jealousy that was guiding my actions, I felt beyond ashamed. And embarrassed.

The sun begins to set in the distance, and I feel the cool breeze against my cheek. On my way back to the others, I see the familiar sight of a stone beast—a guardian, a gargoyle—perched on the wall. The creature's eyes flash before he leaps from the stronghold, wings spread as he swoops down to land in front of me.

“I never thought I'd see the King of Shadows in this place,” the gargoyle's deep voice rumbles. He's not one of mine. “After I heard of the raids on the Gorge, I figured you'd been slain with the others.”

The news of my home falling to Variant should surprise me, but it doesn't. I'd expected such to be the case when I'd first left with Eilish and the others. I look down at the flowers in my hand and realize I can't smell their sweet fragrance or bask in the glow of the setting sun any longer. Pain and loss roil within me and I struggle to meet the other male's gaze.

“Where do you come from, brother?” I ask finally.

“My name is Myerdoth and I once served our maker.” His statement is short and curt, and I get the impression Myerdoth is a man of few words. “And before you ask of your army, they are no more. Only four gargoyles of your original forces remain. I don’t know their whereabouts.”

“So there are... six of us in all the realms...” My chest clenches tightly. “I thought more would have resisted, or maybe fled the Gorge before Variant could take command.”

Myerdoth simply shakes his head.

“My companions and I are on a mission,” I say, choosing to change the subject. I can’t think of the failure I am to my own kind. “We aim to stop Variant and all who conspire with him. I offer you a place with us.”

He seems like an honorable man, and I would regret not asking.

“I’ll consider it. But you should know... just because there are only six of us still living doesn’t mean it has to remain that way.”

“Explain.”

“There’s a way to create more of us... more gargoyles.”

I shake my head and frown at him. “What are you talking about?”

“A book once owned by my mistress. It’s known as the Stone Grimoire.”

“What is it?”

“A way to expand our numbers,” he answers and with that, Myerdoth takes to the

sky, disappearing on the horizon.

I turn around and head back to the Hall of Clans where Eilish sits on the steps. A smile blooms on her face when she sees me, but the smile is quickly replaced with concern. No doubt she's worried I'll ignore her as I have been.

I hand her the flowers, loving the way they make her eyes light up. That faint glow that emits from her body shines in a sign of her pleasure. "These are for you... to say I'm sorry for being such an asshole."

"Thank you, Dragan."

"You're welcome." I watch her as she stands up and wraps her arms around me. I hold her tightly and kiss the top of her head.

"I know this isn't easy for you," she starts.

"It's not, but I'm coming around."

She pulls away from me and looks up at me, her eyes penetrating mine. "Then you still... want me?"

I'm shocked by her question. "Of course I still want you! I'll always want you."

She shakes her head. "Maybe I phrased it wrong," she says and inhales deeply. "Do you still want to be with me, knowing what happened with Pyre and Baron?"

"Yes. I can't not be with you." I pause as I search for the right words. "I think all of us... need to talk. You, me, Baron and Pyre."

"Why?"

“To map out how this all works,” I answer with a shrug. “If we have to share you, what does that look like? Do we have you separately or together?”

“I understand.”

“I... I didn’t like the idea of you with Pyre and Baron because... I wasn’t involved. I know it sounds completely idiotic but... I felt left out.”

She smiles up at me and squeezes me tightly. “I don’t want you to feel that way, Dragan.”

I chuckle down at her. “Don’t worry—you’ll make it up to me later.”

Her smile broadens. “I will?”

“Oh, yes, you will.” I take a big breath as my thoughts turn to other subjects. “And in other news, you won’t believe what just happened to me.”

“What?”

“There’s another gargoyle here. His name is Myerdoth and he says more of my kind... more gargoyles can be made if we locate something called the Stone Grimoire.” The excitement in my voice is evident but it fades as I recall the rest of my conversation with Myerdoth. “Variant has taken the Gorge. Only four of my unit remain.”

My voice breaks. Eilish holds me closely and I lean into her, loving the feel of her warmth. “I’m sorry, Dragan,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

Kolvar appears at our side. “The clan leaders have arrived.”

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

Kolvar sits beside me, with Dragan on my other side. After giving me a slight nod, Galmer calls for the others to settle, and the leaders of the mercenary clans take their seats at the enormous table with a fire burning at its center. Through the flames, I meet each of their stares unflinchingly. The king raises his hand and makes introductions. One by one, the chieftains stand to honor their leader and make their presence known.

“Kolvar of the Banefire Horde,” Kolvar says as he stands and pounds his fist against his left pectoral before taking a seat again.

“Hemoteph of the Olveroth.” A tall male with thick black hair stands up with so much force, his chair scrapes back. He eyes me with a cunning grin. And Dragan groans something that I can’t make out.

“Belroth of the Adamante.” The leader of the Adamnte clan is a large golem with luminescent blue eyes.

“Draken of the Mournblades.” I recognize Draken as a vampire immediately. Though he seems to be of a different sort than Baron, his mannerisms are similar to those of the former King of Death.

“Imatriat of the Thradsaryl.” My eyes nearly bulge out of my skull when a crowned spirit floats up. He looks human, aside from the ghostly transparency of his flesh and

the tattered remains of his robes.

“And last but not least, my son Novak represents the Sunder’s Might,” Galmer says.

The other centaur at the table looks far too young to be a leader of any sort, but there’s a wisdom in his eyes that belies his age.

Galmer turns to me next and smiles. “I present to you, Lady Eilish Inoa Fulthain, daughter of Gildlorthoine, the lost King of The Succubae, and Maeline Fulthain, Healing Light of The Angels. Eilish is here on behalf of the Rebel Lords of The Vindication.”

I resist the urge to glare at Kolvar for informing the king of my parentage. For so long, my existence has been hidden, but now it seems like a power play and I’m not sure how I feel about that. The others in the room chatter amongst themselves for a moment and I sit up straighter in my seat. Dragan grips my hand beneath the table. I give him a small smile.

Dragan is then introduced and the king lifts his hand once more and silence falls on the Hall of Clans. “Eilish and Dragan have come here to ask for our aid in the liberation of the Threst . Many of us have heard of the horrors that take place in those marshes, so let us keep that in mind as we deliberate.”

I sit in silence as each clan leader presents their argument or their support. After hours of getting nowhere, I stand. Kolvar grabs my wrist and pleads with me to sit, but I refuse. This is my moment to try to persuade these men, and I’m going to take it. Calmly, I remove my arm from Kolvar’s grasp and face my audience.

“You all fight for one purpose or another, whether that be freedom for yourselves or the freedom of others. I’m not asking you to join us against the false king or to take on Morrigan and her followers. All I ask is that you help me free the fae who are

currently being tortured and drained of their life forces.”

“It’s not so simple,” says Imatriat of the Thradsaryl. The wraith warrior’s voice sounds slightly distorted, but it booms through the chamber. “Any act to help the fae in Variant’s clutches is an announcement of war.”

“I understand your concerns,” I say. “But I believe we can accomplish this feat with stealth. After the Threst is destroyed, we can part ways if that’s what you please. But I implore you to consider becoming our allies, as Kolvar has done.”

“And whether you fight Variant now or later, eventually you will have to fight him,” Dragan adds. “Unless you’re willing to subject yourselves to his tyrannical leadership.”

“Never,” Galmer says.

I look at him. “The day for you to choose sides is coming and it’s coming quickly. You can join us in this quest only and free our fae friends from imminent death, or you can pledge yourselves to our cause and help us unseat the false king,” I continue. “The choice is yours.”

Belroth is next to speak. “What says the King of Shadows?”

Dragan stands without releasing my hand. Several of the males at the table glance down at our intimate touch and scowl. Clearly, they aren’t used to seeing women in positions of power. Well, it’s about time that changed.

“I am the King of Shadows,” Dragan says. “And I’m a loyal member of the Rebel Lords of The Vindication.”

“As is Cambion, King of Nature; Baron, King of Death; and Pyre, Guardian of The

Veil,” I add.

“With Kolvar and Aima, our Unseelie ally, we are a powerful force to be reckoned with,” Dragan continues. “Variant and Theren have both come to realize that, and so will you.”

“We’ve heard of your necromancer ally. What makes you think we want any part in forbidden magic?” asks Draken of the Mournblades. “Even we vampires have limits regarding what we’re willing to subject ourselves to. Soul magic is frowned upon for a reason. It’s dangerous.”

Galmer raises a brow and meets my stare head-on. I nod to Dragan and he returns to his seat as I remain standing. My hands rest on the tabletop, and I lean forward to get a good look at the males around me.

“Whether you help me or not, I will lead an attack on the Threst ,” I say, my eyes narrowing as I glare each one of them down. “Anyone who isn’t afraid to get involved in this fight is more than welcome to join us, but this isn’t a mission for the weak-willed. Only those with the courage to face Variant and Morrigan should stand with us.”

To my surprise, the clan leaders begin to stand, one by one. I can’t hold back my surprise and awe as I watch each one pledge himself and his people to our cause. After another few seconds, each person in the room is standing. Tears well in my eyes as each of them names us their allies. Galmer casts a fond smile my way, giving me the sense that he’s proud of me.

“You have earned the respect of the clans, Eilish. And we will stand by you in the liberation of the Threst. ”

BARON

Jadyrar Sea

I crouch in the sands, not at all surprised that our efforts to secure the tears in the Veil have brought us here. Morrigan was here not long ago. The imprint of her body is still pressed into the sand. Beside me, Pyre kneels and hovers his hands above the ground. His brow pinches slightly and I watch his eyes flicker, knots forming in my stomach.

“She took a vessel,” he says as he looks around himself. “There’s barely any magic here at all. Morrigan used what magic was left to enter the physical world to possess some unsuspecting person,” he growls. “But her body isn’t in the Veil, which means she found enough power to summon the vessel to her.”

“She has the talisman...”

Pyre nods and stands. I raise to my feet only to sway slightly, but Pyre’s hand on my arm steadies me. It’s been too long since I fed from Eilish and I’m feeling weak, light-headed.

“You must feed soon,” Pyre says.

I scoff as I regain my footing, gesturing with my arm stretched wide. “And whom am I supposed to feed from?” I ask.

Shuffling across the sands, I look at the footprints that litter the beach. Morrigan survived here without food or water when she was injured and without much power.

As much as I hate to admit it, I’m impressed by the treacherous Midnight Queen.

“Come,” Pyre says. “We must find the tear here and repair it before something slips

through. Morrigan's magic obscures the energies here. It may be difficult."

Pyre leads me along the shore, and I think back to the days when we tore through the library at the cottage and speculated on what the hell was going on in the realms.

"Did you ever figure out your part of the prophecy?" I ask.

"Just that I will die, and I fear it may be soon. Much sooner than most of you realize," he replies with a shrug that reveals he cares little about the subject of his own mortality. "And my death is not mentioned in just that one prophecy, but many. Different languages, different verses, different rhymes, but all translate to the same thing."

I stumble and Pyre catches me. Nausea and pain render me useless. "You can't keep pushing yourself unless you feed, Baron. Let me help you, take my blood..."

"No. We don't know what your blood will do to me," I say as I shake my head. "I've already been addicted to forbidden power once before. I'm not willing to go through that again. Just... help me up."

Pyre supports most my weight as we travel closer to the rift. When he sets me down, I watch him work his magic. No matter how many times I see it or attempt such spells on my own, I will forever be captivated by the control and power it takes to close a tear in the Veil.

My attempt to stand on my own doesn't go well. My body heaves and I expel the contents of my stomach onto the beach. Vampires can only digest real food if they've fed recently. But Eilish has been gone too long and her blood no longer sates me. Pyre seals the rift and walks over to me. As he uses his thumbnail to slice along his wrist, I feel the hunger take over. He holds his wrist out to me and though I don't want to, I grip his arm and sink my teeth into his flesh as I pull strength from his

veins. Each mouthful is like a current of magic that causes my body to tremble from head to foot.

When I've had my fill, Pyre heals his wound and helps me stand. I can feel my strength returning within seconds. Colors are more vibrant now, and the air seems thick with life and energy. The world was so dull before, in comparison.

"You should be sated for a while, but I'll keep an eye on you to make sure I haven't created a monster. There are more than enough in the Veil already."

I follow Pyre further along the beach and each time my feet sink into the sand, I wonder if this will be the last time he and I walk beside one another. There's so much I have left to learn from him—so much to still know about being a guardian. Even more importantly, Pyre is my friend. One of my only friends. I can't imagine a world where he doesn't exist, and that realization catches me off-guard.

"I'm going to find a way to save you, Pyre."

"There's nothing that can be done about my fate and the sooner you accept that, the better."

I grab his arm, and he glances down at my hand with a lift of his brow.

"I'm serious," I tell him. "I don't care how forbidden or tainted the magic might be, I'll resort to whatever I have to so I can make sure you're still around to see us fix the bullshit Morrigan and the others started."

"Fate won't..."

"We can't do this without you and, quite frankly, I don't want to. You're a friend and an ally and I don't want to lose you. Maybe I'm being dramatic, but I don't care."

“Overly dramatic.”

“I will find a way to beat this, Pyre,” I promise.

The vow lingers between us. I know Pyre is skeptical, but if he doesn’t know it already, he’ll soon learn just how stubborn I can be.

DRAGAN

Mercenary Stronghold

The king invites us to share in his feast, and Eilish thinks it's rude to deny him even though I've let it be known that I want to retire to our tent so I can fuck the ever loving shit out of her.

Now in a crap mood, I remain at her side as we partake in our evening meal, both of us seated around the king's large table. Eilish's smiles at me as she samples a bite of fresh greens. My gaze remains locked on her subtle movements and I find it difficult to look away from her.

"You enjoy teasing me," I whisper.

Her smile broadens. "I do."

She then turns her head and talks with the clan leaders. I can already see they're all fascinated with her. The lycan, Hemoteph, seems the most enamored because he won't take his fucking eyes off her and he's worn a smile during the entirety of their conversation. I clench my fists at my sides because I don't appreciate this show of interest in her. All these assholes know she's with me—it's obvious and, yet, none of them seem to care. Kolvar sees my reaction and laughs at my expense.

"This will be a problem that follows you," the goat says.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

“Her,” he says and motions to Eilish. “A beautiful woman will attract male attention wherever she goes.”

“Yeah, thanks for pointing out the obvious, asshole.”

Kolvar just laughs as I down my irritation in a glass of red wine.

Eilish, meanwhile, pretends to be oblivious as she coyly flirts with the man-beast before her. I can smell her arousal and I know the others can, too. She tosses her hair over her shoulder and reaches below the table to graze her fingers against my throbbing erection. I grab her hand and hold it there, rubbing her fingers over my prick which only causes it to throb even more.

At the same time that the other men’s interest in her infuriates me, it also excites me. More than it should.

“Someone seems exceptionally... excited,” she whispers into my ear as she squeezes my heavy cock.

“And someone else won’t stop fucking flirting with every cock in here,” I respond.

She giggles. “Is the big, dangerous gargoyle jealous?”

I reach over and grip her thigh above her leather pants, squeezing it. “The big, dangerous gargoyle can think of nothing more than bending the little angel over and shoving his big, dangerous cock into her.”

I can smell her need increase tenfold and realize I could be causing a major problem for myself because if I can scent her desire, so can all these other assholes.

Lifting up a little in her chair, she whispers into my ear, “Galmer was unable to find

us a room. We'll be lodging in a tent, near Kolvar's men. Make sure we're far enough away so they won't hear us."

Once we finish our meal, I follow Eilish into the desert. Her seduction wraps around me, but I'm willing to be her victim. The succulent fragrance of her nectar mingles with the air and I breathe in deeply.

"This way," she calls out in the dark.

I've lost sight of her but I follow her voice around a large outcropping of rocks. When I see the naked silhouette of her body beneath the crimson glow of the sky, I stop dead in my tracks. Her curves beckon me closer and I hurry my steps until I close the distance between us.

My knees hit the dirt in the blink of an eye as she reaches for me. I dip my head low and slide my tongue across her lips. She moans, reaching for my belt without hesitation. The desire burning in her eyes nearly takes my breath away. Her fingers wrap around my pulsating cock and I bite down on her bottom lip just to hear her gasp.

We're far out of hearing distance of anyone at the stronghold, but I wouldn't care if we were in the center of the whole fucking town. All that matters now is Eilish. And getting inside her as quickly as I fucking can.

I buck against the palm of her hand as she begins to stroke me in long, languid motions. "You push me, Eilish."

"Push you?"

"You enjoy teasing me... I know you do... was that male at dinner desirable to you, or were you just trying to fuck with me?" I ask thickly. The muscles in her thighs flex

and I lean forward to bite the mark left behind by Baron's last feeding. Baron...

I'm visited with images of Baron and Pyre inside her and my anger grows.

She clings to my shoulders and nods.

"That's not an answer," I say as I wrap my hand around her throat. I'm feeling dominant tonight.

"I... wanted to... provoke you."

My fingers slide inside her soft pink tunnel and a trickle of wetness covers my palm as I grind it against her mound. She rides my hand to her first climax, and I watch her beautiful face as she loses herself in the pleasure I bring. She shimmies and tries to plant herself in my lap, but I roll onto my back. My fingers slide free as I position the engorged head of my prick at her entrance. She hisses, sinking down on my length. I feel her stretching to accommodate my girth and it's delicious.

Her hips still and I slap her bottom to get her moving. "Ride me. Hard. Don't stop."

Bracing her hands on my chest, she pushes herself up before slamming back down.

"Tell me about Baron and Pyre," I demand.

She slows and I can see the concern on her face. "Dragan," she starts.

"I want to hear what they did to you while you ride my cock," I say in a tone of voice that brooks no arguments.

She nods and finds her rhythm again. "I was on my hands and knees and Baron was below me," she starts, before losing herself to my dick as she grinds against it. I reach

out and smack her ass as hard as I can and she yelps.

“Keep going,” I growl at her.

“And Pyre came up behind me,” she says. “I could feel the head of his cock at my opening.”

She slows and I smack her ass again. “Tell me about Pyre’s cock,” I demand.

Her breathing comes faster. “It’s so big, Dragan,” she says. “I could feel it stretching me.”

I grip her by the hips and flip her over, needing to assert my dominance over her. I push her legs up beside her head as I slam into her. She cries out but I’m relentless. All I can think about is Pyre’s cock sinking into her. I suddenly wish I had been there—wish I could have witnessed the desire on her face as the enormous necromancer fucked her.

“Don’t stop,” I groan.

“Pyre fucked me for a while and then Baron pushed himself into me.”

“Into your pussy?” I start.

She nods. “They both fucked me...together. I could feel them pushing against each other and... it was like nothing I’ve ever felt before,” she finishes and then realizes her mistake. Her eyes go wide as she looks up at me but I’m not offended. I’m so turned on, I’m about to cum.

“Dragan, I,” she starts.

“Shh,” I interrupt her. “Tell me how much you loved feeling them both inside you.”

“I loved it,” she admits.

“Tell me you want to feel me with them.”

Her eyes go wide again. “I want that so badly. I want to feel all three of you... together,” she says and I flip her over so she’s on all fours as I imagine Pyre taking her in the same hole where Baron fucks her from below. She starts to tremble beneath me as an orgasm seizes her and I’m not far behind.

My spine tingles with my impending release and I toy with her nipples. I grab her hips with both hands and thrust inside her until I reach her depths. A loud moan tears itself from her chest.

Her body clenches around my shaft and thick spurts of seed coat her insides until it trickles down her thighs.

Twenty minutes later, we spar in the dunes without any weapons and she’s unusually quiet. A few moments later, she reveals what’s been bothering her.

“I know the last of my memories will return soon,” she starts.

“How do you know?”

“It’s just this... feeling I have,” she answers with a shrug.

“Isn’t that good?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “I know the missing memories have something to do with my mother’s and sister’s deaths, but... part of me doesn’t want those memories to resurface. They might break me.”

“I don’t think so. You’re much stronger than you were then, Eilish. Nothing can break you unless you let it,” I reply.

“There’s still so much I don’t know. So many questions I still have.” She takes a breath. “I still don’t understand why I am the way I am—how I have two sets of wings.”

“Do you think those answers will come to light as well?”

“I hope so,” she says. “I already know my father was an incubus. His wings were like mine, from what I remember. Pyre and Noni both know of him, and so does Theren. I know very little, but I want to learn more.”

I pause as I consider telling her what I know. I’m just worried it might open a can of worms I’m not ready to face. “I knew your father, Eilish.”

“What?”

“Theren and Cambion did, as well.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” she demands, angry.

“I didn’t piece it together until I learned who your father was. And that was only recent.”

“How did you know him?”

“Cambion and I went to him to ask for his aid during the war, before Theren sided with Variant.” I pause as I take in her stunned expression. “Your father refused us.”

EILISH

Mercenary Stronghold

The light inside the tent is barely glowing when I return. I can’t believe Dragan knew my father, that all of them knew my father and yet none of them ever told me! My mind is a minefield at the moment, and I can’t seem to settle my thoughts no matter how hard I try. Nights like this usually come with dreams, dreams I’ve been dreading since my memories started to return. I need to know who erased my memories, but I fear the answer might not be something I can handle.

Why didn’t Dragan tell me sooner? Why didn’t any of them tell me sooner? I guess I can understand why Baron wouldn’t have mentioned it—he probably doesn’t remember the fact that he knew my father. And Cambion has never gone out of his way to tell me anything so I guess that makes sense as well. But Dragan...

Dragan owed me more than this.

Yes, he might have only recently found out who my father was but as soon as he knew, he should have come to me! He should have told me!

I lay my head down in an attempt to rest and find myself hurtling through a seemingly endless vortex of images from my past and present. And then, there’s nothing but darkness...

“Mother!” I shout, bursting through the door as the remnants of my home crackle like

embers in the hearth. I can't find her! Panic begins to bloom in my chest.

He was supposed to protect them!

My hands burn as I sift through the ash, looking for any trace of my mother and sister. "Solya!"

A man stands over me.

Silvanus.

He helps me to my feet and his eyes are just as hard as they always are. He's a god—he doesn't understand the pain of losing someone.

"Don't let him take you, Eilish," he whispers. Suddenly, he's gone, blown away with the snow that hovers on the wind.

Crimson catches my eye, stark against the white snow. A trail of blood leads to the mangled bodies of my family—their heads severed, displayed on pillars of ice like macabre statues. Chunks of flesh litter the ground, and I fall to my knees...

"I'm too late," Cambion says as he appears above me.

I peer up at him from over my shoulder, not caring if the snow and blood have begun to soak through my breeches. His eyes are full of emotion even as his expression remains impassive.

I gave this... cold, heartless being my body, and he failed to keep his promise. My foot slips as I lunge for him, brandishing my dagger dangerously close to his heart. He takes advantage of my slip by overpowering me, then slamming me to the ground. The blade goes flying.

“You killed them! This is your fault!” I scream at him.

“I didn’t kill them.”

“You didn’t keep your promise! You might as well have killed them!”

I struggle to free myself from his grip but he’s strong. He keeps me pinned as I glare at him.

“Calm down,” he orders and I spit in his face.

“As soon as you release me, I’ll just try to kill you.”

“I know you’re upset, Eilish,” he starts.

“Upset?” I scream and wrestle against him but he keeps me pinned in place. “If you value your life then kill me now because if you don’t, I won’t stop hunting you until I slit your throat from ear to ear.”

“I don’t want to do this to you, Eilish, but you’re leaving me no choice.”

He narrows his eyes and repeats something in a language I don’t understand. All of a sudden, coldness descends over me and I can’t move. My entire body is as frozen as the tundra surrounding us.

Cambion releases me and sits up, removing a small black book from his breast pocket. He opens the book and begins to read in a hissing voice that crawls across my skin and sinks into my bones. My vision fades over and over again until there’s nothing but sounds and shapes as I float through oblivion...

Bright light burns my eyes and I roll onto my belly. A chilling breeze flows through the building and encompasses me in its cold embrace. I take a deep breath and roll onto my back before I push to my knees and then stand. I walk towards the window and that's when I realize I don't recognize my surroundings.

And I'm the only one here.

Something is wrong, but I don't understand what or why.

The door opens and a handsome elven man with golden hair and skin approaches me.

I feel my expression contort into one of bewilderment. "What happened? Where am I and who are you?"

He approaches me and then reaches forward, tilting my head from one side to the other with a scowl on his face. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

"Sorry? For what?"

"What do you remember?"

"I... don't know," I answer as I look at him and wonder why he acts as though he knows me. "I don't know you."

He snatches his hand back and glares at me. "Impossible. I'm..." Then he stops speaking and stares at me for a few seconds. "Do you know who you are?"

I shake my head before my mind can catch up with his question. The man leaves, but he returns again and again and again. Each time he returns, his face isn't familiar to me.

But he brings me something that numbs the frustration and the pain, that allows me to escape the fact that I don't know who I am or where I came from or where I am. He brings me a syringe and teaches me how to medicate myself. And I inject the bright green liquid and it thrums through my veins and causes me to lose myself.

"I'm sorry, Eilish," the beautiful man whispers. "I'm sorry I have to do this to you but it's the only way to ensure no one knows the truth of my mistakes."

For two months, I remember nothing of the man, even as he continuously returns and brings me food, treats, clothing, and the glowing green liquid he calls Atacomite. I eat and I sleep, wandering aimlessly through the halls of this immense palace that means nothing to me. But this morning the man doesn't come. This morning, I let myself out of my room and I follow the hallway down the stairs to the large double doors that lead outside. And once outside, I follow the pathway through the courtyard, beyond the flowing fountains and the sculpted rose bushes and into the forest.

And I lose myself within the trees as a horrible growl fills my ears.

A man—no, not a man, but something man-like—stands tall in the distance. He turns to me and I scream. The head of a beast rests on his shoulders, and he transforms into a hideous monster.

I run as quickly as I can until I can't run anymore.

A voice calls behind me, but it's muffled by the trees. Deep bellows mix with the roar of the terrifying beast that chases after me. I know that voice... at least, I think I do... but nothing is certain and I can hardly see in front of my face.

Suddenly, another voice enters the chaos.

This one is a woman...

I shoot up from the pillows and pull mouthfuls of air into my lungs as the dream begins to fade. Silvanus was there, but... it was Cambion who erased my memories! And it was Cambion who drugged me!

Seething anger blinds me for a moment and I nearly knock over the lantern beside me.

Dragan rolls over and places his arm on my chest; the weight of him helps to calm me.

“Eilish?” he asks.

“I had a nightmare,” I pant.

“Another memory?” he asks as he sits up and collects me in his arms.

“It was...” I’m so flabbergasted by the vision dream that I forget I’m still upset with Dragan for withholding information about my father. But none of that seems important any longer. Not now—not when I know the truth.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I know who took my memories,” I tell him. He sits up even straighter and faces me with concern.

“Eilish, you just woke up from a dream...”

“It was Cambion,” I interrupt. “He took my memories after my mother and sister were killed. I went to him, asking that he protect them, and in return I had sex with him. And he failed to keep his word. It was his fault they died.”

I push away from him and stand up, needing some distance as the thoughts race through my mind. I'm still so much in shock. I can't believe Cambion would deceive me like this! And to have covered it up all this time!

"He had the fucking gall to pretend to make that Transmutation Stone when all along he knew it wouldn't return my memories!" I yell at Dragan.

Dragan frowns slightly. "I know Cambion can be more than a little cruel, but I don't think he would purposely erase your memories."

"He did this to me, Dragan," I insist. "I know it." I take a deep breath. "And he took me back to his palace but he was afraid it would get out that he took my memories so he... he doped me up with Atacomite," I continue as my voice cracks. "He... he made me addicted to it!"

"Cambion wouldn't," Dragan starts.

"He did!" I yell at him. "I know the truth, Dragan!"

Dragan inhales deeply. "If he did this, there has to be more to it."

My anger is far too fresh to allow for any other alternative. I'm convinced the vision I saw was the truth. It was a memory. It was real. And Cambion is the reason for my memory loss and he's the reason I no longer have any family. And he's the reason I got addicted to Atacomite.

"If Cambion took your memories, it must be because he wanted to shield you from the pain of losing your family in such a brutal manner," Dragan offers, his voice soft.

I don't know what to think but I really don't want to believe Cambion's capable of such evil.

BARON

The Veil

Pyre's blood is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It makes a mockery of what I felt while using the Transmutation Stone to try and recover my memories. The magic allows me to feel the Veil, not just walk through it. Everything seems to slow down and allow me to tune into its frequencies. And the knowing glances Pyre sends me tell me he's more than aware of his blood's effects on me.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get you back to the Spire, now that the Veil is..." he stops talking and lifts his hand to say I shouldn't speak either. It appears as though he's listening to something but I hear nothing.

"The mirror," Pyre says, finally. "I can sense the catoptromancy mirror, but it's covered in Cambion's magical signature. I think he's trying to reach out to us. Can you sense him?"

I shake my head as Pyre creates a portal and we walk through it, arriving in the Ashlands of the Veil. The signal from the mirror is much stronger here and I can finally feel it. I help Pyre in his search for the foreign energy that pulls us towards it. It fades in and out, like whoever is using the mirror can't sustain a connection for more than a few seconds.

A loud roar breaks through the silence, sending the harpies scattering. The ground quakes as the dragon lands only a few feet away. His large emerald eyes glare menacingly at me and I feel the urge to flee.

“Careful, Baron, Wynroth is a guardian of this realm as much as we are,” explains Pyre. “He’s an elemental dragon, which means he can wield virtually any natural power he comes in contact with. The two of you need to be properly introduced.”

I hesitate to follow my mentor as he walks closer to the great beast. He grasps my hand and forces it flat against the dragon's muzzle. My hand shakes, and I hear a voice in my mind.

Reach out to him, Baron... let him connect with you. Show him you’re a guardian.

The large black body of the dragon stretches nearly from one end of the Ashlands to the other. Those enormous fleshy wings and glistening scales do nothing to bring down my sudden burst of fear.

“Pyre, I watched your friend here,” I start, looking at the dragon. “Barbecue some of Theren’s soldiers and then electrocute some more,” I remind him. “I think I’ll sit this one out and just watch you from a safe distance.”

“Don’t be a coward, Baron. Connect with Wynroth .”

I close my eyes just to shut Pyre up and open myself to feel the power of the Veil. It doesn’t take long for the giant serpent’s voice to blare through my mind.

I am Wynroth!

I jerk back and stare at Pyre as I try to comprehend what just happened. The proud smile on my friend’s face is unsettling as much as it is pleasing.

“What the hell was that?” I ask. “Why was his voice in my head?”

“That form of magic is very old and very rare. It was only used by powerful

spellcasters and rangers who tended to the mystical beasts throughout the realms. You learned it much faster than I did,” he explains. “Being able to communicate telepathically with a creature of the Veil without years and years of practice is almost unheard of.”

“It has to be your blood boosting my abilities,” I start with a shrug. Then I face the dragon again.

I am Baron and Pyre is training me to one day become the Guardian of the Veil, I think the words to the dragon.

It nods slowly as Pyre whispers something and the creature takes to the sky once more, looking much more appealing from a distance.

“Maybe one day he’ll let you ride him.”

“Not fucking likely,” I say. “You were using his eyes to see that night, so I know you watched him all but decimate the Veil Forest.”

“It’s in his nature to kill anything from the physical world that poses a threat to the Veil, so his choice to burn the forest was his way of eradicating multiple threats at once. Count yourself lucky I had enough control over him to keep him from killing all of us,” Pyre snorts. “The demons, harpies, spirits... they have nothing on Wynroth. He’s powerful and he’s been in the Veil much longer than I have. Wynroth predates even the Sentinels.”

I shrug and try to imagine anything older than those who guard the wellspring of magic at the heart of the Veil. It seems pretty impossible, seeing as how they were practically little more than dust, insects, and bone.

Either way, I follow Pyre through the Ashlands and up that damn mountain. We make

it to the Echoing Spire in time to see that no one, aside from Flumph and Noni, has returned from their quests. The sprite and the little house brownie look worried.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Noni been thinksin’ that we oughtta get dickhead and Aima outta the Unseelie palace or else Pretty ain’t gonna have nobody to back her up when she come back,” Flumph grumbles.

Noni shakes her head. “No, that what Mr. Flumph say. Noni hear Theren talking to Mr. Cambion about escaping soon, and she think Master and Mr. Vampire should help them.”

Pyre and I share a look. There’s no way either of us is willing to help save Cambion or Theren, unless it’s absolutely necessary to our overall mission.

Noni tells us what she and Flumph have seen, and we come to the conclusion that giving Cambion and Theren the opportunity to explain themselves is as far as we’re willing to go once they’re rescued, unless they can otherwise prove their trustworthiness.

THEREN

Oronrel

“No more putting yourself in danger when I’m not there to protect you,” I groan. “I can’t... I can’t handle the thought of something happening to you. I need you, Eilish. Whatever’s between us is too much for me to handle. Don’t provoke him. Promise me.”

She lifts up onto her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. “I promise I won’t do so unless it’s necessary.”

I grip her hips and pull her body flush against mine, and she smiles beguilingly. Never before have I seen anyone more beautiful. Even the legendary beauties within the halls of Oronrel pale in comparison.

“It’s not necessary. At least, not anymore. I’ll protect you, Eilish. I’ll protect you with everything I have.”

My hands stroke her hips and I lean forward to devour her mouth with a reckless abandon that causes her to moan into my kiss. I love her taste. Her elegant fingers toy with the strands of hair at the nape of my neck as I lift her up. She wraps her legs around my waist as I force my tongue deeper, delving into the heat of her mouth as I feel the liquid pool between her thighs.

A gentle snow drifts around us, fluttering to the ground and blanketing the vast landscape in white. Steam coils from her lush mouth as she sucks air into her lungs before returning my kiss.

When I lay her on the ice, she hisses slightly, arching her back and pressing into my equally cold body through the fabric of my tunic. I whisper a small spell under my breath and will her clothing away so I may feast on her naked glory.

My hands caress the soft curves of her body as my teeth nip at the delicate skin of her bottom lip. A moan pierces the air, and she presses her thighs together as if trying to feel friction. I move away from her mouth to sink my teeth into the base of her throat, then lick the sting away. She groans into me, grinding her core against the rigid length of my cock as it weeps at the tip, yearning to be buried within her body.

Prying her thighs open, I slot myself between her legs. She throws her head back and

licks her lips as I thrust my erection in the crook of her thigh. The smug, seductive smile that appears on her beautiful face is far more than I deserve, for such purity only belongs to those who don't dwell in darkness. But my thoughts are thrown askew when she rakes her nails down the length of my back.

"More," she moans breathlessly. "Please, Theren."

"I'll give you what you need, Eilish. You're so beautiful..."

"Please," she begs shamelessly, rolling her hips until the weight of my cock slips against her folds, causing her legs to tremble. The snow and ice are forgotten and she tangles her hands in my hair, yanking my mouth back down to hers. My fingers pet her mound, eliciting a growl from her lips. It's not long before my fingers are slick with her creamy essence.

I need her now, but her pleasure must come before mine. I begin slow, teasing thrusts of my tongue into her mouth as the pressure of my hand rides against her femininity. Light dances all around us as we chase that delicious pressure. My breathy chuckle against her chest sends her heart racing, and I taste her pulse with my tongue. I lightly bite her nipple before I follow it with a flick of my tongue.

"Please, please..." she gasps over and over.

My lips pepper kisses along the length of her torso, branding her skin with my touch as I explore every inch of her with my mouth. The heat rolling off her body is something new. We always play like this, but never before has she begun to glow with each stroke of my tongue. Growling like a beast, I settle between her thighs, placing my thumbs on each side of her velvet-soft lips. I spread her open and I can't pull my eyes away from her bright pink flesh. Heat tinges her cheeks and she turns her head to look away.

“Watch me, Eilish. See how I pleasure you.”

She forces herself to look down and I smile up at her. My eyes flicker down to watch a single bead of her essence drip from her sweet center and I flatten my tongue, licking up her slit just once. She flies off the ground and her legs slam shut, but I’m relentless. My thumbs stroke her folds as I close my mouth over her sensitive clit and suck. She screams and fists her hands in my hair, riding the waves of tingles that have no doubt overcome her body. I blow on her clit and slip a finger inside her liquid heat.

She squeals when I plant a wet, hot kiss on her succulent flesh that causes her legs to tremble. Her eyes roll back as she watches me. I lean forward to taste her deeper, fingers thrusting and curling the way she loves. Incoherent babbles fill the air as she tries to scramble away, but I’m too strong.

“Theren... I c-can’t. Please.”

My tongue flattens once more and I drink in every twitch of her femininity.

“I need... oh...” She tenses as my tongue glides against the bundle of nerves. “More... more please. I need you inside me...”

“I could stay here all day, Eilish. I’m not through with you. Nowhere near it.”

I dive back in, slurping up the nectar that flows from her core. She squeezes down onto my finger and tries to close her legs as another climax causes her to shudder. Opening her legs wider, I add another finger and curl them up toward her pubic bone.

She screams, thrashing as she looks down at my glowing eyes and bites into the flesh of her wrist to cut off the next moan.

I ease back and move off her clit with my tongue, even as I continue to stroke it with my thumb. “Don’t fight me, Eilish. One more. That’s all I need, and then I’ll take you. I promise.”

I awaken to the emptiness of my bedchamber and my hips thrusting against the sheets. When my tongue darts out to wet my lips, I swear I can almost taste her.

MORRIGAN

Oronrel

The kelpie thunders towards the Unseelie Kingdom; the black iron of the gates coil with dark mist as I dismount. The kelpie shifts into her feminine form. She walks one step behind me, ever watchful of those nearby. Pressing my hand against the spells on the gate, I bend them to my will, pulling their dark energy inside me. The bars burn brightly, hissing, until the lock shatters and the gate opens on my command. Guards race toward the entrance, but none dare to fight me.

“Where is Theren?” I demand.

The guards are too tongue-tied to respond.

“Tell him the Midnight Queen awaits him in the throne room,” I say in irritation.

I walk through the front of the palace, making my way across petrified wood floors and past stone walls. Black marble braziers light a passage between large columns swirling with intricate runes, and the throne of jagged shards of black onyx sits at the far end of the cavernous chamber.

The heels of my boots click on the obsidian floors as I walk up to the throne. Unseelie watch as I sit on their king’s chair.

Theren pushes through the doors a moment later, fire snapping in his vivid gaze.

“Morrigan,” he sneers. “Why do you sit in my throne as if you’re the Queen of Oronrel?”

“You and I must talk, Theren.”

“About?”

“I’ve gone deep into the forests and found no sign of Silvanus, and Variant is no further along in his search for the one who will serve as a sacrifice in the ritual. The temple has been located in the Cogost Mountains, but the same problem remains: we need the two sacrifices.”

Theren tilts his head and watches me with wary eyes. “What are the requirements? Perhaps my men would serve you better than Variant.”

“A necromancer and someone with magic in their blood, but no true arcane power. They must complete the tantric ritual of their own free will. Only then can I open the Veil.”

Theren throws his head back and barks out a tendril of laughter. “I’ve been to the Veil, Morrigan. I’ve fought this necromancer and I’ve seen the power he wields. He will never agree to take part in your ritual.”

“I don’t need him to agree.”

The Unseelie King approaches the throne. He lifts a hand and touches my cheek, ignoring the angry hiss from the kelpie.

“So much beauty has been retained in your form over the years, but your soul is just as mangled and ugly as the rest of this putrid world,” he says.

“You forget who is in control, Theren.” I stand and grip his throat in my hand, forcing the spells within him to cause his knees to buckle. “I can feel you fighting me, puppet. I don’t like it.” Yanking my hand away, I stare down at the place on his neck where a red mark is visible. Using the influence drains my power. I won’t be able to hold Theren’s mind captive for much longer.

The king climbs to his feet and his expression remains impassive, but there’s no defiance in his eyes anymore. I step down from beside the throne.

“We cannot lose now,” I tell him. “If you break free of my command, I will be forced to kill your brother. You and I had a deal, Theren: I get what I want from you, and Cambion stays alive.”

I turn to leave, but the kelpie’s sudden aggression puts me on edge. She leads me over to a dark corner where a blast of magic sends me sprawling across the floor. I look up as Cambion reveals himself from the ethers. The kelpie’s power swells as she reaches toward the former King of Nature.

Water begins to fall from his eyes like tears, spilling past his lips as he struggles to breathe.

“Morrigan!” Theren calls from behind me.

I place my hand on the kelpie’s shoulder and she stops her magic from killing him. He falls to the floor on his knees, where he belongs.

“You filth! What makes you think you can attack me?” I insist.

Theren moves to stand beside me. I see the betrayal in Cambion’s gaze as he stares at his brother, and I find it delicious.

“Whatever hold you have over him, Morrigan, he will be free of you,” Cambion hisses at me. “And when that day comes, there won’t be anywhere you can hide where I won’t find you. My allies grow stronger each day and we will have our revenge.”

“Take him to the center of the throne room,” I order the kelpie. “It’s time we remind Cambion who it is he seeks to rebel against. Let him taste the salt of the marshes on his tongue until he chokes. Let him gasp for breath only to breathe water. And when his life begins to slip away, let him crawl to the surface like a drifter at sea.”

CAMBION

Oronrel

I know nothing but darkness now. I don’t know whether Aima is safe or if the others are still alive, or how long I’ve clung to the traces of consciousness at the back of my mind. And all the while, I try to reach beyond this world and the next, hoping Pyre and the others can pick up my signature and find us here in Oronrel.

My body thrashes on the obsidian floor, fingers clawing for a shore that doesn’t exist. The kelpie’s magic is strong, as she feeds on the darkness of the Unseelie kingdom.

A break in the onslaught of hellacious water and I gulp sweet air into my lungs. The darkness begins to fade, but somehow it still lingers at the edges of my vision. I look up into Morrigan’s face.

“You will not succeed, whether I die here or not. The realms will be rid of you and the fae will once again be free.”

“Big words from a man who will die at my order,” she spits back at me.

“It took me a long time to come to my senses, but I will not be—” I begin to cough and sputter, trying to spit out the water even as it fills my mouth instantly.

The sound of crashing waves roar in my ears. I crawl toward Theren, trying to reach my brother, but Morrigan’s magic forces me to the floor once more. She mocks me. Her laughter mingles with the pounding of my heart as panic begins to cripple me once more. Shadows swallow me whole, pulling me deeper and deeper toward that frigid sense of demise that licks at my boots.

All before it fades once more...

“Cambion,” Morrigan purrs, brushing the hair from my forehead. “There’s nothing you can do to stop me. I’m so close to getting my powers back, I can taste it. You are of no use to me, and neither are the others. As for the angel, she is alive simply because I will it to be so.”

“You’re lying.” I cough roughly, feeling the burn in my lungs. “Eilish and the others are alive because they refuse to give up fighting. Tell yourself all the lies you wish, Morrigan, but I know just how weak you really are. I see your stolen power fading even now.” I watch her expression fall for just a few seconds but it’s long enough for me to see the truth. “You’re afraid, aren’t you?”

“No, Cambion, I’m not afraid,” she spits the words at me. “You are the one who should be afraid because it’s you who’s going to die here and now. I won’t die unloved and abandoned by my allies. You betrayed them. What makes you think Eilish and the others will ever forgive you?”

“I don’t think they will,” I respond. “I would never expect them to forgive me.”

“Then why continue to fight alongside them?” she demands.

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“No,” she almost interrupts me. “They will never accept you as their equals, given your lies.” She pauses and a broad smile takes over her face. “Join me on my quest to set things right.”

“You seek the power of the Veil?” I ask mockingly.

“Yes.”

“Well, I’ve seen it for myself, and Pyre is the Guardian of The Veil. He’s the one who wields its power. Not you. Never you.”

“Once the Veil is torn open, I will ride through the portal with an army at my call. We will lay waste to all who seek to rise against me. You know yourself how hard the mighty fall in battle, Cambion. You and your pitiful friends are merely a bump in my road.”

“Not even Theren’s army could take the Veil,” I reply. “Not even a hundred legions of orcs and demons could take on the great beast who sits on the mountains as though he’s king.”

“Pyre,” she starts.

“I don’t speak of Pyre, but the creature who calls the Veil its home.”

“And what is this beast?”

“A dragon you’re no doubt familiar with, for your kind failed to slay him in the

mortal realm. His name is Wynroth and he's an elemental capable of great destruction." I watch Morrigan flinch. She clutches a hand to her chest, and I remember a tale she once told me as a child. "You were burned by his fire, if I remember correctly?" I continue, enjoying the sudden doubt in her expression. "Scorched to the bone and left for dead, until Abedon found you."

"Elementals no longer exist," she sneers. "If they did, the world would be overrun by them. They were creatures that bred by the dozens. Not even the Singularity was enough to stop them. But where are they now? Gone."

"The former Guardians of The Veil brought the dragons into the spirit world, Morrigan. They aren't extinct. They roam freely in the territories of the Veil. Had you not run away so quickly in the fight, you would have seen Wynroth for yourself." I face my brother, even though he's not my brother at the moment. Morrigan's magic still overwhelms him. "Theren was there with me. He saw the dragon suck the lightning from the sky and decimate all who dwelled in that clearing."

"And yet here you are."

"Wynroth answers only to Pyre," I say with a gasping wheeze, still feeling a tight pressure in my chest.

Morrigan pulls Theren aside. She whispers to him as the kelpie stands over me with a lustful gaze that makes my stomach turn. Though she appears to be a beautiful woman, the kelpie is more a demon than any succubae could ever hope to be. I know she needs darkness. A promise of more could sway the kelpie to my favor.

"My allies would welcome you," I tell the creature. "You would not be used for Morrigan's bidding. A vampire, a King of Shadows, a necromancer who deals in forbidden magic, and a succubus. You would have your choice of rider. Perhaps even the king whose realm you feed from now."

I flick my gaze over to Theren and the kelpie shivers. Her pale eyes blink rapidly before she presses a hand to my chest.

Returning to the kelpie's side, Morrigan orders, "Push him to the brink and then hold him there. Make him weep for death."

Morrigan reaches into her robes and pulls out a dagger that's familiar to me—it's haunted my dreams for many years—the dagger of pure ice that killed Baron.

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EILISH

Mortal Plane

“The clans are ready,” Kolvar announces outside my tent.

“Good,” I say as I pull the tent flap aside and Kolvar takes in my outfit with a pronounced smile.

Dragan was able to find armor for me from one of the guild masters. The armor is in pieces and the one I’m currently lifting over my head has an ebony cowl with a face guard that covers half my face. The shoulder braces are made of hard leather that’s surprisingly comfortable. My slender frame is cupped nicely by the tight leather breeches. A coat of demon fur rests on the chair beside me, but I forego the pelts just yet.

Serrated arm plates protect my biceps beneath layers of metal that connect to the shoulder braces. The breastplate is finely crafted from metal and covered with thick leather, embellished with the emblem of the Vindication: a flock of ravens morphs into a serpent wrapped around a dagger similar to the one Pyre gifted me. The sheath at my thigh holds the comfortable weight of the dagger, and my fingers brush the hilt as I fasten the last strap on my armor. In the sweltering air of the desert, I loathe the heat trapped in the leather. But I need protection.

Dragan ducks into the tent and trails his gaze over my figure. “The horses are ready, Eilish.”

“And the mercenaries?”

“Ready to follow your command,” he answers with a breathtaking smile. “Do you have the explosives?”

I nod. “In my knapsack,” I answer. There are three of them and they’re meant to explode the Threst and all the demons and orcs within it.

Dragan looks me up and down and nods as his eyes meet mine again. “You’re a good leader, Eilish. And your potential will only continue to grow.”

My cheeks flush as I rim my eyes with black coal. When my preparations are complete, I follow Dragan from the tent and see the army standing at the ready. The mercenaries look toward me with such expectation in their eyes, I feel overwhelmed. But with Dragan and Kolvar at my side, I take a deep breath and address my troops.

“I feel like you’re waiting for an explanation,” I begin. “A reason you’re risking your lives. But, there’s no explanation or reason I can give you that would suffice. All I can promise is that I won’t shield you from the truth. We face orcs and demons of impressive numbers. Spellcasters and dark fae, as well. But we face these foes together and we face them to protect the freedom of all who call the realms their home!”

An eruption of cheers follows my words and I mount the horse brought to me. “Let’s liberate the Threst and strike fear into the hearts of those who seek to oppress us and steal our freedom!”

I ride toward the gateway that leads to the fae realm. Dragan casts me another smile and I see the pride on his face. It fills me with warmth and a sense of pride I haven’t felt in as long as I can remember.

The ride through the dunes is long and the treacherous heat batters down on us. We pass through with the help of the Mages Guild and find ourselves not far from the entrance to Earlann—the place where Cambion led us while on the run from Anona and her goons.

I shove the terrible memories to the back of my mind. “Let’s make camp here,” I say before facing Dragan and Kolvar. “The three of us should scout ahead so we can strategize our attack.”

“Aye, that sounds fine by me,” Kolvar says.

I dismount the horse and tie her to a tree. “There don’t seem to be any sentries out. Strange, isn’t it? Last we were here, Variant had eyes all over this realm.”

“He’s placing his forces elsewhere—it could buy us time now but it will be a pain in the ass later,” Dragan complains. “We should get moving if we want to arrive beneath the guise of nightfall.”

“Do you have Noni’s map?” I ask.

He flashes the scrap of paper in his hand. I snatch it away with a little grin and pull my cowl lower. As I walk, I can feel the proof of Dragan’s incendiary claim from the night before. He must have taken me at least four times and each time he wanted me to detail my time with Baron and Pyre.

The map leads us to a large marsh. Every step feels unstable as we trek through the sodden earth. The ground squelches beneath my feet and I nearly fall, but Kolvar steadies me until I recover my balance. We continue down a path through the marsh until a hill appears up ahead. Beyond the hill, a large sphere hovers above the ground. Lying between us and the Threst is an army of orcs and demons, just as we suspected.

“Well, now we know where the sentries are,” I say.

“What’s the plan?” Kolvar asks.

Dragan’s gaze scans the legion before us. “I could take a group and cause a distraction. Eilish, you and Kolvar can make your way to the entrance.”

“You should take Myerdoth with you,” I suggest. “Circle around the west side and distract them. Kolvar and I will approach from the southeast and slip through the first gate. If there are wards, we might have to fight our way through them.”

“And if Morrigan’s there?” Dragan asks.

“Then we fight her, too,” I say with conviction. “I’m tired of running from her. It’s time she realizes what we’re capable of.”

“I agree,” Dragan says.

I nod. “Regardless, our priority remains the same. We set the fae free and we bring the mercenaries back to the stronghold.”

“If some of us fall?” Kolvar asks.

“Our fallen are not left behind, we bring them with us no matter what.” I kiss Dragan quickly but he grips me around the waist and pulls me closer.

“Be fucking careful,” he whispers into my mouth.

“You too, soldier,” I answer with a secretive smile. “Survive and you’ll be rewarded... amply.”

He smiles down at me as I pull away to move with Kolvar toward our position as the gargoyle makes his way back to the mercenaries.

Kolvar points up to the long staircase that rises toward the sphere. “That be the only way inside, I reckon.”

“No doubt there are guards on the other side as well.”

“What do you say? We go in with force?”

“No,” I say. “We go in with stealth.”

DRAGAN

The Threst

“I count at least four hundred guarding the sphere. How will we retreat?” Myerdoth asks. The ground begins to quake as we approach. An endless horde of beady eyes stare right at me, as though they hunger for my flesh. I lift my hand to stop the march toward the Threst . Myerdoth seems nervous; he must not have seen battle in quite some time, but the determination in his gaze is comforting.

“We retreat only when Eilish gives the signal. Until then, we’re on our own,” I answer.

I can smell the putrid stench of sweat clinging to chainmail and leather. Greasy, ghoulish green skin stretches tight over bulbous skulls with pronounced brows and extended lower jaws. Large teeth snap as the orcs bellow. A low growl makes my ears twitch and I see four large hounds move to the front of the horde. I’ve seen these

creatures on the battlefield before, when I faced Variant and Theren. They're like enormous wolves with black, matted fur and glowing yellow eyes.

"Stand your ground!" I ride in front of the soldiers, making sure the formations are in order. "Archers, fire!"

A hailstorm of arrows whistle through the air, whizzing past my ears as they strike their mark with a solid hit. Orcs screech and charge, with demons by their side.

"Ready, men!" My horse rides fast toward the army heading right at me. I meet Myerdoth's gaze from where he sits astride his mount at the front.

He signals the attack and standing upright on my horse, I allow my wings to unfurl before I take to the sky, needing a better vantage point.

Swords and shields clash against one another in a chaotic boom that shakes the earth. Swooping down, I plow into a row of demons, knocking them back so the mercenaries can advance. Deadly spells fly across the battlefield as I summon my blade of shadow. A large demon approaches, his enormous head shielded by a thick helmet with a sharp point near the forehead. I twirl my blade with a flourish and raise it overhead, bringing it down on the demon's chest. The mountainous creature howls, but shakes off the pain.

Suddenly, I feel my power pulled from me and my wings stop flapping. I fall downward and crash into a group of armored demons. My head rings and spots dance in my vision, but I climb to my feet and spread my wings once more. Golems, faeries, shifters, and vampires fight side by side in a battle reminiscent of one that had long been forgotten. Lycans summon their beast forms and attack with a fury as winged hybrids toss orcs from one end of the field to the other. Expressions of sheer terror on both sides of this fight make me hate Morrigan even more.

“Myerdoth!” I shout, warning the gargoyle a demon is sneaking up behind him. He quickly decapitates the demon and then races over to my side. “I need you to help me take down one of the large ones,” I say. “The fewer of those big fuckers, the better.”

He takes one look at the colossal demon and quirks a brow. “You expect me to fight that?”

“Not alone.”

The surly gargoyle grumbles something under his breath, and I find myself wondering if this is how my companions feel whenever I give them attitude.

Myerdoth goes high while I go low, pounding my fist into the demon’s knee until I hear it pop backwards. The sickening crunch of bone causes the huge creature to groan loudly. Myerdoth delivers a harsh blow to its throat and the demon topples over, crushing several small orcs underneath it.

“Next time I’m in direct danger, I’m stabbing you in the leg and using you as bait,” Myerdoth bitches.

I laugh in the midst of the fight. I’ve missed this. Not the violence or bloodshed, but the camaraderie and the thrill of battle.

My blade slices through armor and cuts down my enemies with great ease. I fight beside creatures I once considered beneath me, but now I see them in a different light. Each of us is the same. Just as important as the next. And all are crucial to this rebellion.

Myerdoth sidesteps an attack and tosses me his blade. I swing both his and mine in a deadly arch. The body crumples to the floor and I return Myerdoth his blade.

We fight side by side until the swarm is too dense. Thradsaryl wraith warriors flood the battlefield, sweeping across the land like a fatal storm. Orcs and demons alike scream out into the night as the full moon illuminates the gory scene taking place all around me. Blood stains my armor and covers my face. I can taste the coppery tinge of death on my lips and I fight to defend my wounded allies.

“Myerdoth! Take the spellcasters up the hill with the archers. Attack from a distance. The rest of us will hold off the bulk of the army,” I yell.

Turning, I feel a shield bash into my skull. My knees give and I fall to the ground, stumbling back as I shake my head to clear it. Moments later, I’m back on my feet and I cleave the opponent in two. Another demon attacks, but this time I’m too late. One of the Seelie mercenaries jumps in front of me, taking the blow before I have time to react. I kill the demon with a battle cry that makes nearby orcs scurry away in fear.

I look down and kneel beside the Seelie woman who gave her life for mine.

She smiles. “I... always thought gargoyles were arrogant, entitled pricks.” She nods. “And I was right,” the mercenary chuckles.

“Thank you for saving my life,” I breathe as I hold her.

“I believe in the cause you fight for.” A tear falls from her large eyes and slithers down her cheek. I lift her from the ground and carry her away from the fighting.

“Hold on for me,” I whisper to her.

“There may not be hope left for me, but my people can still be saved.”

“I’ve seen the world beyond this one, and there is more peace in the Veil than there

will ever be in the realms,” I tell her as I watch the fight in her eyes begin to fade. “The one who guards the souls who call the spirit world their home will take care of you,” I finish as she closes her eyes and a sweet smile takes hold of her lips. “He won’t allow your death to be in vain. Rest now. And may Pyre deliver you to serenity.”

BARON

Oronrel

“Someone is calling to us,” Pyre says.

I watch as he helps a soul through the portal. Once the spirit disappears, he follows close behind, keeping up with my pace using the sound of my voice. I stop beside the Echoing Spire.

I can feel something—a tugging, nagging feeling from deep within me. It’s the feeling that someone is in trouble. Someone close to me.

Pyre’s body goes rigid and I suddenly know. “It’s Cambion, isn’t it? He’s in trouble,” I say. “I can feel it too.”

“Cambion is dying.” Pyre claps his hands and pulls them apart as if he’s manipulating the molecules in the air to form a portal. Though I’ve trained with Pyre for months, I know my power is nowhere near his. I wonder if it ever will be.

As the ethers begin to swirl, I feel breathless with the nerves that start tugging at my composure. I thought I felt nothing for Cambion, but perhaps I sympathize with him more than I allowed myself to believe. My power reaches out for the signal as Pyre and I slip through the opening.

We appear in the throne room in Theren’s palace. A strange creature huddles over Cambion’s flailing body as he struggles to draw breath, and Morrigan stands above

him, clutching the dagger... that killed me.

Flashes of my old life and the things I've lost begin to assault my consciousness, threatening to pull me under until Pyre breaks the spell when he hurls a shadow charm at Morrigan that sends her crashing into the wall. The creature, a kelpie, hisses and attacks Pyre, but I use my power to trap her in the pool of water spreading across the floor.

Morrigan recovers from her fall and lunging, she uses the ice dagger to slice at Pyre. She twirls and slashes the blade with impressive skill I can't help but admire. But Pyre jabs his palm into the side of her arm, sending the blade clattering across the glistening obsidian floor. He lunges for the Midnight Queen, but Morrigan runs. Pyre blasts her with a second burst of magic, knocking her down. I send out my own shadow feelers and realize she's unconscious.

The kelpie breaks free. Water begins to float around her as droplets defy gravity, vibrating until they form into a stream of water that shoots right toward me. She attempts to use her magic to drown me, as she's done to Cambion. But, in doing so, she frees Cambion from her spell.

The elf is too weak to stand. I walk toward the kelpie and fist my hands in her hair. "Your power only works on someone with a soul, sweetheart. Better luck next time."

I use my dagger to slice her throat, bathing myself in thick, black blood that covers my neck and face. I need to feed, it's true. So I take a few swallows of the kelpie's blood but the taste is too sour so I drop her dying body a moment later.

Cambion struggles to pull himself upright but he's barely even breathing. Had we arrived any later, he'd be dead. Not that I think he deserves to live...

I shove my shoulder beneath his and stand, bearing his weight. Pyre runs toward

Morrigan with deadly intent gleaming in his eyes. It's then that I realize Morrigan's body is surrounded by a river maybe two feet high. The kelpie, in her last moments, must have ensured Morrigan's protection.

Touching.

"Pyre!" I yell.

He stops in his tracks. "She needs to be killed, Baron."

"I won't argue that, but think about Aima. She's here somewhere and we need to find her. Cambion is barely hanging on as it is," I reply as Pyre faces the elf and sees the wretched state he's in. "Aima's life is more important right now," I continue. "We can fight Morrigan another day."

"No," he starts.

"You stopped me from hunting her in the Veil... this is no different." I glance at the river swirling around her. "Besides, that river is going to be a bitch and a half to cross. It's kelpie magic."

"Fuck," Pyre says and I watch his resolve break, but I don't feel victorious. I turn to face the elf who leans against me and still struggles to breathe. I tap Cambion's face, trying to get him to look at me. "Hey. Open your eyes. Where's Aima?"

"She..." His eyes close again and he starts to lean on me more than before.

I smack his face this time. "Hey, Forest Fuck, stay with me! We need to hurry before Theren comes back and Morrigan wakes up." I pause for a moment to make sure he's still awake. "Aima..."

“Dungeon... Tortured...”

Crouching low, I summon my vampire power and lift the elf above my shoulders. He won't be able to walk so I'm going to have to bear his weight. Then I follow Pyre through the palace, instructing the blind necromancer where to go using the memories of the last time I rescued someone from the dredges of this fucked up place.

“There might be runes on the doors—” A flash of Pyre's magic interrupts my words as he uses his power to shatter the door like glass. We move quickly through the dungeon, searching every room until we find a blood-soaked chamber with a large copper tub at the center.

My gut sinks as Pyre reaches inside and lifts Aima out of the slimy liquid. Quickly, he casts a portal as soldiers begin to race down the corridor.

Once on the other side, the four of us collapse onto the ground. Cambion lands beside me as Pyre uses his body to cushion Aima's fall. Noni and Flumph appear right before the portal closes. The small fae creatures look exhausted.

“Bout time you fuckers showed up!” Flumph yells. “I was nearly skinned alive an' sold for my parts on the market!”

Noni shakes her head and limps over to Aima. “Noni do her best to keep Aima alive, but she cannot heal her no more. She is too tired, Master.”

Pyre tucks the house brownie into his pocket without saying a word and carries Aima into the Echoing Spire. I lift Cambion's unconscious body and follow Pyre. When we reach the Sentinels, they take Aima and Cambion from our arms and disappear into the darkness.

“You should not have stopped me,” Pyre says.

“I know.”

“But you did the right thing.”

“This another one of your weird riddles? Because I’m not in the mood right now.” I walk over to my bedroll in the corner and flop down on the blanket. My back and side protest the movement because I’m exhausted. I lay down as I face the stars above us. “Morrigan can ride a kelpie. That means there’s very little light left in the Midnight Queen.”

“The kelpie isn’t dead, Baron. It will regenerate and when it does, it will hunt you.”

“Perhaps,” I suppose. “But, for once, I feel like my life is no more valuable than anyone else’s.” It’s true. Though I’m pissed at Cambion for his stupidity, I have to trust that whatever his reasons for doing what he did, he has good ones. If we’re going to end this, I can’t keep thinking of my allies as enemies.

Pyre looks at me and nods as if to say he agrees with my thoughts. “Cambion has made mistakes,” he starts.

“We all have,” I interrupt him. “And it’s time I start acknowledging my own before I pass judgment.”

Pyre nods. “I believe the Cambion who awakens here will not be same.”

CAMBION

Echoing Spire

The familiar thrum of the Veil's power is the first thing I notice as I fight toward consciousness. Power is stronger here, but not as strong as the guilt I feel for leading Theren and his army through the portal. No matter what punishment befalls me in the hands of my allies, it's well deserved. Even now, as my body feels bloated and waterlogged, I don't think it's enough. They should have let the kelpie have her way with me and allowed me to be lost to the abyss.

My eyes open and I see Baron kneeling over me. I scramble back on my hands, reaching for weapons, but the fight quickly leaves me.

"I'm not going to fucking attack you, dickhead," the vampire says on a breath. "Jesus, I just fucking brought you back to life."

I collapse against the ground. I'm exhausted and I can't put up a fight even if I wanted to.

"Thank you," I mutter as I squeeze my eyes tight. Part of me wishes Baron would just kill me, like I'm sure he wants to. It would be poetic, really, that the one who hates me the most would be the one to finally end it all. Would I remain here in the Veil once dead? Or would my soul return to the places that haunt me the most?

People tend to think spirits haunt them, but it's the other way around.

When I open my eyes once more, Baron's perplexed expression only fuels my own confusion. "I won't make excuses for myself. I should never have stolen the mirror from Pyre's secret room, and I shouldn't have crossed into Oronrel without telling the rest of you."

"Okay, that's a good start," Baron says.

I take a deep breath. As the minutes pass, I start to feel better and better. "Even

though it wasn't my intention to lead Theren back here, I had a part to play and for that, I apologize."

Baron glares at me. "You think we'll just accept your apology and forget the devastation you've brought on us?"

"No," I reply. "I don't expect you to accept anything I have to say. What I expect is punishment of the highest degree." I turn to face Pyre. "My actions destroyed your home and they wounded the Veil. Innocent lives were lost, and I will never be free of the guilt."

"Don't forget that Morrigan escaped," Baron adds.

I nod but don't shift my gaze from Pyre. Baron can suck a cock at the moment. It's Pyre I need to make amends with—or at least apologize to. "The torture I received at the hands of the Unseelie was... unforgettable, but it didn't cleanse me of my guilt." I take a breath. "I can only ask that you allow my soul to take dormitory here, in the Veil, upon my death." I pause. "If you would be so kind."

"Shut your fucking mouth, Cambion," Baron says. "We aren't going to fucking kill you, asshole."

"You're not?" I ask, shocked.

"Did you not hear me when I told you we just brought you back to life, dipshit?" Baron demands.

"I thought you brought me back to life so you had the full satisfaction of killing me again."

"Fuck," Baron grumbles. "You are even dumber than you fucking look." He glares at

me. “And you look pretty fucking dumb.”

Pyre lowers his head and glares in my direction. “You have much to atone for, Cambion, but you won’t die by our hands. As for your guilt and the torture you sustained, I see them as punishment enough. My fight is with Morrigan and her disciples, not you.”

The bitterness and the anger I once felt for my companions is no longer there. “Thank you. I will do whatever is asked of me so I may once again earn your trust. My lessons have been learned and, no matter how long it takes, I will never stop trying to right the wrongs I’ve committed.”

Baron stands and offers his hand. With his assistance, I pull myself to my feet and sway for a moment. He stares into my eyes and doesn’t release his hold. I feel something probing at me, something searching within me. It’s his power.

“He isn’t under her influence,” the vampire announces. Pyre releases a long exhale and both of them look relieved at the revelation. “Now, tell me what you learned while you were in Oronrel. We know someone has infiltrated the courts, and supposedly Morrigan has your brother under some sort of spell,” Baron says.

“The Midnight Queen does indeed have Theren hidden beneath a thick barrier of magic, trapped in his own mind.”

“Though not fully,” Pyre says. I look at him and nod.

“His interactions with Eilish on the battlefield cracked the barrier enough for him to pull through temporarily. And the things he revealed to me are quite disturbing.”

“Do you know who infiltrated the Unseelie Court?” Pyre asks.

I shake my head. “No, but whoever it was, they aren’t one of Morrigan’s followers. Aima sensed the magic signature and she believes this person was a changeling. Learning its true form may be impossible.”

I quickly look at Pyre. “Aima?” I start.

He nods. “She’s healing and in the hands of the Sentinels at the moment.”

I nod as Baron grabs my attention.

“What else?” he demands.

“There’s a ritual that Morrigan and Variant are trying to complete. Tantric magic that must be performed by a necromancer and a woman without magic abilities, but a woman who comes from arcane lineage. Aima’s sister was very magically powerful, but Aima has no magical talents of her own. I think she’s compatible with the ritual, and it’s simply a matter of time before Morrigan realizes the same for herself.”

Baron whirls around, chest heaving as his anger seems to boil over. He shoves Pyre’s shoulder and gets in the necromancer’s face. “Is this what the prophecies say? Is that how you die?”

I step between them. “The prophecy must be completed willingly by the two participants.”

Baron appears to calm down. He steps away from Pyre and faces me. “What happens if the ritual is completed?” he demands.

“I’m not sure about the details, but Morrigan seemed convinced it would tear open the Veil so she could bring an army over to secure the Echoing Spire for herself.”

“Why does she want to come here?” Baron asks.

“She needs the power here to defeat Silvanus, but she and Variant are still struggling to locate him.”

Baron finally backs off, and Pyre’s gaze seems troubled as he faces Baron. The two of them hold one another’s attention in a way that it appears they’re communicating. I step away and pull the mirror from my pocket. “I was lucky they didn’t find it on me. But I always intended to return it, Pyre.”

He snatches the mirror and, with a flutter of his cloak, he disappears into the spire.

Baron scrubs a hand over his face. “This talk isn’t over, Cambion. But rest now. You’ll need your strength for what’s to come.”

FLUMPH

The Veil

Aima ain't lifted her head since we brung her to the other side an' them Sentrals or whatever the fuck they be called brought her back ta life. I guess she weren't quite dead but she also weren't quite livin'.

Anyhow's the Sentrals did the best they could an' now it be up ta Aima ta make sure she want ta live. The Sentrals said she gotta fight for her life it it mean enough to her.

I been scratchin' my head tryin' to think o' somethin' that'll help, but I feelin' useless as usual. Noni doin' her healy bit, so I ain't got nothin' to do till she done. I'm gettin' real fuckin' tired o' havin' to see my friends hurt 'cause o' that Unseelie prick Theren. He an' I gots us a big problem. If he come near me, I'll teach him a thing or two.

“WHEN THE FUCK THIS SHIT GONNA BE OVER?” I ask.

Vampy toss a fuckin' boot at me an' it nearly hit me, too! I sticks my tongue out an' throws the boot back. It don't even get close to him, but it feel good to do it. Noni finish up her healin' an' fall back on the pillow. She lookin' real pale in the face.

“Noni need sleep, Mr. Flumph. But there's something itching at Noni's brain. Somebody needing help from Noni.”

“Well? Who it be?”

“Noni think it Mr. Dragan... the energy feel real big and dark like him, but not mean. Not to Noni.”

“Them at the Threst , ain’t they? Maybe they gettin’ barbecued by some big fuckin’ demon or some shit like that. It’d be a real shame if Shadow Dick got all crispy-like when he protectin’ Pretty an’ all. Should we go see if he needin’ somethin’?”

I flys over to Noni an’ picks up the little house brownie. She battin’ her hands at me but I don’t really care. Somethin’ wrong, then we needs to fix it.

We land over in the corner by our bags an’ I give her my last cookie. She gobble the fuckin’ thing up an’ already she gots more energy than she should.

Once she ready to go, she open one o’ them portal thingys an’ I shoves us through the openin’. The second I open my eyes, I see a demon’s ass comin’ right for me!

I jumps to the side an’ Noni go flyin’ outta my arms. The demon fall right beside me. When I looks up, I notice we right in the middle o’ a really bloody battle. Can’t these fuckers do anythin’ without causin’ a fuckin’ war?

My poor little wings flys me up high soze I can gets a good look at what goin’ on. Noni zippin’ ‘round the battlefield an’ I spots the gargoyle. Wait... I spots two gargoyles. Which one o’ them be my gargoyle? Their big ugly asses all looks the same to me.

Arrows start flyin’ right toward me an’ I gotta get to my friends. I follow Noni’s hyper bouncin’ till Shadow King pick her up. I hear him shoutin’, soze I gets closer.

“What are you doing here?” he ask.

“Noni sense you need her,” the little brownie say.

Somethin' real sappy-like cross the gargoyle's face an' he lift the side o' hims armor an' I see a big 'ol gash in him's side. It be bleedin' somethin' fierce. Noni gasp an' try to help, but she can't. Not here, not with all this shit happenin' 'round us. An' I knows the faerie realms drain her magics faster than the Veil.

I search for Pretty, but she ain't nowhere I can see. That ain't good.

EILISH

The Threst

I can hear Dragan calling to the forces as he crouches low to the ground. Kolvar covers my advances and we move closer to the Threst . Orcs and demons rush toward the mercenaries, leaving a clear path to the stairs, and we run quickly and quietly towards the entrance.

The door is heavily warded, just as I feared. Kolvar lifts me onto his shoulders and I grip the bottom of one of the silver hexagon borders between large slabs of pure crystal. I hoist myself higher as Kolvar leaps up beside me. We climb, using the silver frames to balance ourselves until we reach the peak of the curve.

A burst of black smoke bellows out from the opening at the top. When the smoke ceases, I peer inside and see what looks like an enormous cauldron beneath us. The vat of boiling goo isn't ideal to land in, but there's a crate of fabric beside it. The bloodied cloth causes my stomach to turn as I think about the poor fae creatures at Morrigan's mercy. But I see no other way inside. Kolvar nods and I lower myself down, hanging by my arms as I summon my courage.

I let go.

The fall feels endless but my body hits the pile eventually and I roll out of the way for Kolvar to do the same. With my hand hovering above the blade strapped to my thigh, I move through a narrow passage lined with cages. Fae creatures of all sorts sit within their metal enclosures—some in better shape than others. Heavy boots thunder from the other side of the sphere, and Kolvar and I hide in the shadows behind a cluster of cages.

“You shut up or else I’ll come down there wif the electrifyer,” shouts a demon guard.

A small, plump female swathed in robes approaches the cauldron. She must be the artificer. My suspicions are confirmed as she pulls enchanted weapons from the roiling goop. Kolvar moves along the left as I move to the right, where a large demon stands guard before me. When Kolvar gives the signal, I attack without hesitation.

My dagger glides across thick skin until I plunge the blade deep into the demon’s belly and twist, gasping as his soul is absorbed by the serpent at the hilt. The artificer trembles, raising her hands in surrender as Kolvar kills another demon on her other side.

I lunge, gripping her and turning her so she faces away from me. Then I press my dagger to her throat in case she means to sound the alarm.

“I’m not loyal to Morrigan,” the woman says. “I have no fight with you.”

“The talisman,” I start. “Is it complete?”

“No,” the artificer replies. “Morrigan tried to pull its power prematurely but it wasn’t ready. It required more lives, more power.”

“But she possesses it now?”

“Yes, but her power is still hindered,” the woman responds.

Kolvar restrains her by binding her hands behind her back and shoves a rag in her mouth, securing it behind her head. Then he drags her along with him as he unlocks the cages. We move swiftly, without stopping, from one floor to the next. I cut through our enemies as Kolvar follows behind with the newly freed fae. On the final floor, I see the entrance straight ahead, but something doesn't feel right. I lift my hand to stay Kolvar's movements. He pauses as I assess the eerie silence in the Threst .

Morrigan.

She and a strange creature appear out of a puddle of murky water. Kolvar shoots me a worried look. The satyr has no defenses against Morrigan's magic, and neither do the fae.

I push back and pull him aside. “You have to go. Get Dragan and the others and try to make it back to camp. I'll distract Morrigan, but if she triggers my magic, I could kill everyone here and I don't want that.”

Kolvar pulls me into a hug and I hold on tight. “You be safe. If you don't come back before the legion heads out, I'm comin' for you. No matter what.”

I give him a smile. “Go. Be safe.”

The satyr releases me, and I sheath my blade at my thigh once more. Soft padding at the bottom of my boots allows me to walk silently across the floor. Two demons kneel before Morrigan as she barks orders at them.

“Your job is to find more fae to feed the talisman, so I expect you to get it done.”

She catches sight of me as I approach. “Eilish... you...”

“Morrigan,” I say and the sound of my voice belies the way I feel about her.

An orc comes in through the entrance, his body riddled with arrows. The door closes behind him and Morrigan’s eyes snap with fire. “My Queen, a legion of soldiers scatters our numbers. We are losing.”

Hope flares within me and I use the distraction to my advantage, carving through the demons at Morrigan’s side in the blink of an eye. She turns to glare at me. Pressing her boot to the back of the orc, she pulls his sword free before rushing toward me. I block her strike with my dagger.

“I’ve fought in thousands of wars before you were even born. What makes you think you can best me?” she demands.

“I figure my inexperience matches your lack of power.” I hurl a ball of light at Morrigan. She lowers her sword to block the spell, allowing me enough time to plan my next attack. Glimpsing Kolvar slipping toward the entrance, I throw myself at Morrigan.

She’s taken aback by my sudden aggression and stumbles. But the Midnight Queen recovers quickly and whispers a spell. The strange creature appears, and stares at me from large, unblinking eyes.

I suddenly feel like I’m drowning. Water replaces the air in my lungs and I fall to the floor. My dagger clatters beside me, but my arms are free. The power is dark, and I feel the succubus side me churning, hungering for that darkness.

I grab the creature as red mist spills from my lips and flows into her eyes. I can finally gasp for breath and I climb on top of the creature, pulling the darkness from her body. Large, rubbery wings shoot out of my back, knocking Morrigan off her feet. For a moment, my own darkness takes over, powered by the creature's shadow

magic.

Only when the creature stops flailing do I move away from her. My stomach heaves and I vomit. There's terror in Morrigan's eyes as she hurries to grab the sword. I reach for my dagger and my wings melt into my back once more. With trembling hands, I watch Morrigan. Nausea and dizziness creep up inside me.

Morrigan attacks first. I block.

"So, the angel and the succubus in your blood are fighting for dominance?" the Midnight Queen chuckles. "I told you this would happen. I told you to maintain the balance between the darkness and the lightness within you. You knew you needed Cambion and yet you allowed him to slip through your fingers."

"Cambion loves his brother. He did what he thought was right."

"And he died because of it."

Morrigan's words cause me to stop mid-strike as my stomach falls. Cambion's dead? No! He can't be... "You're lying."

"No... the kelpie was quite thorough."

I can't believe it. I won't.

Not when Morrigan has lied repeatedly and manipulated everyone. My heart knows Cambion is still alive, but my anger takes hold. All my training kicks in. I let Morrigan get a hit; she grazes my thigh with the sword and the victorious smile on her face buys me a chance. I take it. My elbow bashes into the side of her head and I pummel her with three rapid-fire spells.

The Midnight Queen drops to the floor, unconscious. My legs buckle, but I refuse to fall. I limp toward the stairs and make my way to the cauldron. The Threst can't remain standing. I push the cauldron over and head back to the door with my blade in hand. The one-way wards allow me through without tripping alarms.

The sight before me will forever be branded into my memory. Bodies scatter the ground, and the earth is soaked in blood. I reach inside the sack on my back and carefully pull the three explosives out. Then I pull the pins from the devices. As they begin ticking loudly, I throw them overhead into the Threst.

I run as quickly as I can but the explosions trigger faster than I imagine they will. The blast catapults me several feet into the air. I bounce off the stairs and roll onto the ground. I pull myself to my feet even as my body screams in pain. But I'm alive. At least I'm alive.

Orc bodies obscure the path, but I make my way across the battlefield. Though the marsh is vast, I know my way. Boot prints and horse hooves lead me back to camp, but the mercenaries have already moved on.

I follow the tracks back to the gateway. Though my leg is bleeding and I'm moving at a snail's pace, I'm still moving. I'm exhausted and my body aches but I won't give up. If the mercenaries moved on, they must think I'm dead, lost in the explosion.

Dragan...

Dragan must be beside himself with worry. It's that thought alone that won't allow me to stop moving.

A long, painful trek takes me to the gate that leads to the mortal realm. Once I pass

through, I hear Dragan's deep voice.

"I don't fucking care if it's blown up!" he yells. "I'm not leaving her behind!"

I feel a smile on my face, but my throat is raw and I can't call out to him. Instead, I continue forward. A mercenary sees me, and immediately runs toward me, pulling me into his strong arms as he carries me back to the others.

"Lady Fulthain!" someone else screams as heads begin to turn in my direction. I see smiles overtake their features as they begin to clap and cheer.

I watch as Dragan turns all the way around from where he stands in the center of the mass of soldiers. Whatever he was saying, the words drop off his lips as soon as our eyes meet. At first there's shock on his face and then intense relief. I smile at him and he immediately takes off, running toward me. He pulls me from the man's arms and smothers me in his own.

"Fuck, I thought I fucking lost you, Eilish," he whispers as his voice cracks.

"Dragan," I start but I can barely hear my own voice, it's so hoarse.

He pulls away from me and I see the path of his tears cutting through the dirt on his glorious face. I reach up and wipe his tears away with the pad of my thumb.

"I love you," he whispers.

The End

Find out what happens next in:

FORBIDDEN HUNGER

Book 8 of the SHADOW GUARDIANS Series!

FORBIDDEN HUNGER

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.

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?"

"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.

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 Oronel. 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.”