

#### Desires of the Otherworld 1: Eternity and a Day Copyright © July 2010 by Aline Hunter

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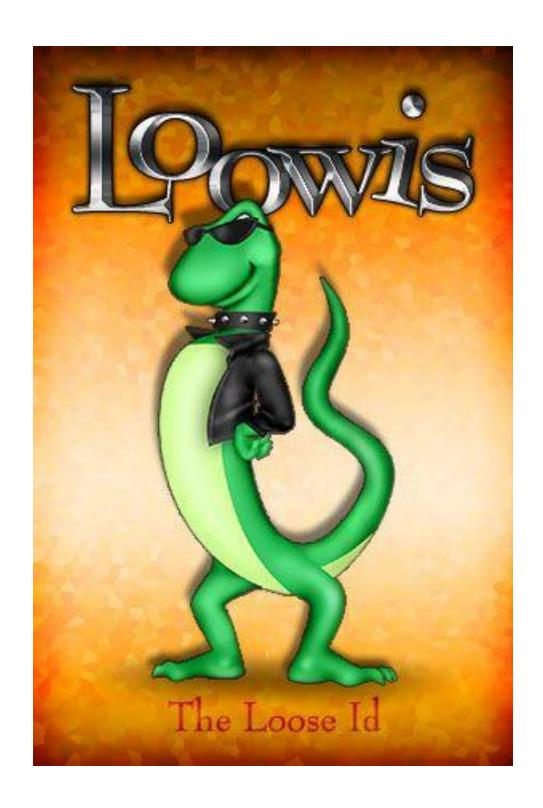
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### Chapter One

New York
Magik-masked building of Yuless Charon
Topside Residence

Runa Charon assessed her outfit in the large antique, mirrored vanity, scrutinizing the costume she had meticulously labored over for months.

It isn't half-bad.

She grasped the matching red cloak draped across the chair and slipped the weighted material over her shoulders. Working at the toggles affixed to the throat, she slid the wooden clasp into the leather loop and then spun in a circle.

The last 365 days of patience and waiting had finally delivered. Samhain had arrived. Or Halloween, as humans fondly referred to it.

This tide would be different. This Samhain Runa would prove she was more than a half-mortal, half-sidhe anomaly among her kind, more than just an outcast to be avoided and shunned, and she would start by beating the reigning champ for the best costume Crystal Crown at the eagerly anticipated Samhain Ball.

Runa closed her eyes and envisioned the night as she hoped it would be. Taking down Mynx Deirmetre, one of the sidhe's favored and most renowned debutantes, would be the icing on the cake, a cherry on top of the sundae, but the true glory would stem from the recognition Runa would gain from victory. It wouldn't be so easy for people to stare through her when she took the stage, accepted her prize, and waved to the crowd like a modern-day Cinderella. They would have to acknowledge her as one of their kind. She would no longer be apart, observing from the outside.

A soft tapping was accompanied by a muffled voice through the bedroom door. "Runa, can I talk to you for a sec?" An intrusion in general was unexpected, but the voice accompanying the faint knocking was a *mindblower*. Her sister Octavia never ventured from the underground residence buried beneath their father's magik-masked building, where she and the majority of the Charon family resided. She preferred to stay away from Runa—the sibling she detested. Of Runa's five sisters, Octavia despised her best.

It was a good thing the feeling was absolutely, positively mutual.

More than a simple case of sibling rivalry, Octavia had loathed Runa from the moment of her conception and had never tried to mask her disdain. The numerous "accidents" and mishaps Runa had suffered throughout her childhood were a testament to it. Taking Octavia's place as the baby of the family had come at a high price, and the consequence had left Runa living on the edge, always waiting for what might happen next.

Runa cleared her throat, shook off her momentary shock, and padded across the carpet to open the door. She placed her body in the doorjamb, prepared to slam the door shut—a necessary precaution as an unwelcome mortal in a fae household. Bar all the windows and batten down the hatches, especially when Octavia was involved.

"Hello, Octavia. Happy Samhain." Runa took in her sister's skintight leather pants and too-small cashmere sweater—typical Octavia whore-wear. Octavia viewed sex as a recreational pastime. The more hedonistic, bloodthirsty, and raunchy, the better. If she could have wandered the streets naked, basking in the attention from appreciative males, she gladly would have.

The girl got more action than a community shower at summer camp.

"May I come in?"

Runa arched a delicate eyebrow in disbelief. Octavia was being friendly...to her? Not in *this* Lifetime movie. Instantly suspicious, she questioned, "Come in for what?"

"I need to talk to you."

Grasping the door, Runa shifted her weight and got comfortable. "So talk."

Octavia's eyes narrowed, and her lips thinned. "Let me in, Runa. I refuse to discuss this while I'm standing in the hallway."

When she attempted to press forward, Runa blocked her path, effectively narrowing the entrance to her room. "Discuss what?"

"A surprise."

A surprise? From Octavia? That was laughable. "I don't like your surprises."

Octavia moved closer and clamped her hand around the edge of the door. "Trust me, you'll like this one."

Runa gave Octavia a quick once-over, studying her sister's skintight clothing again. There was no way she could conceal anything but skin and curves, so she obviously wasn't carrying anything deadly. Even still, that had never stopped her before.

"You come inside, you play by my rules. You leave when I say."

"Done."

Hesitating for a moment, Runa cautiously moved aside. This had better be good.

Her sister glided into the bedroom, walked to the four-poster bed, and slid atop the freshly changed linens. "I really love your costume this year, Runa. I think Little Red Riding Hood was an exceptional choice. Mynx has her work cut out for her this tide."

And the hidden camera is where? Runa gazed nervously around the bedroom. This certainly was not what she expected. Not from the wickedest—and most decidedly evil—of them all.

The last time she had trusted Octavia, she'd wound up in bed, recovering from the mug of hot chocolate Octavia had laced with oleander. It had nearly killed her. Of course, that ploy was tame in regard to the other more devious devices she had used in the past. Things like venomous snakes in Runa's dresser drawers, black widows between her sheets, tainted food waiting for her on the dinner table...

"Listen, Runa." Octavia broke the awkward silence. "I know I've been a real bitch to you. But I want to put all of that behind us and start fresh. What do you say?"

Runa clamped her gaping mouth closed. The last time she had checked, Samhain was not April Fool's Day, but she was willing to play along, if only to satisfy her demented curiosity.

What in Hades was Octavia up to?

"Okay," she offered slowly, inching toward the bed and folding her arms. *There's the bait. Where's the hook?* "What do you want?"

"I've arranged a very special date to escort you to Mynx's party tonight."

Runa's eyes flared, and her mouth opened and closed spastically in denial. The first and consequently the last date Octavia had set up for her had ended with Runa threatening her suitor with a knife in the gut when he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"I think you'll love him! And that's not the best part. He adores Samhain just as you do!"

"I don't think so, Tavia." Runa shook her head firmly. "You know I don't enjoy sidhe games."

Taking part in contests resolved with bloodshed and pain was *not* her idea of a good time. It was the foremost reason she was ostracized by her fellow fae kind. She was more human than they cared for, and she didn't partake in their extensive—and oftentimes brutal—sexual escapades. The concept of pain for pleasure was something the sidhe race had created, fueled by their need to give and receive misery.

Unlike Runa, true sidhe embraced their natural masochistic and sadistic tendencies, partaking in bloody orgies, their bodies smeared red by the human servants and waitstaff the sidhe bled dry and fucked until their bodies became blue and immobile from rigor mortis. True sidhe did not go searching for the things Runa longed for, such as love and monogamy.

"That's the wonderful thing!" Octavia's face brightened as she flashed the amazing megawatt smile that males found irresistible but caused Runa's stomach to churn. "He's not sidhe. He's a Draigen, Runa! This is your chance to meet the real

deal. Not some picture or secondhand story from someone else or the images in a crusty old book."

Runa glared at her sister, catching her easily in a lie. "Draigen don't travel to our realm willingly, Octavia."

Draigen kind didn't travel to the mortal realm, unless they were commanded by the powerful Erinyes warriors, goddesses who enforced the will of the Fates, also known as the Moirae. Yuviette, Runa's best friend and mentor, had told her about the dragon riders that aligned with the Erinyes before one of the immortal wars. The goddesses joined dragon and warrior together and created a powerful race unlike any other. Draigen were stronger, faster, and—in their dragon form—impervious to all magiks. They despised any realm that forced them to mask their true nature, hence their attraction to the Otherworld. A rare few were dedicated to keeping the peace among the mortal and immortal races. The remainder lived in relative seclusion.

"That's not true." Octavia's winsome smile faltered. "It is true they don't stay here for long durations."

"He's coming here tonight?" Runa asked, her treacherous curiosity overriding her skepticism.

Octavia surged ahead at the display of interest. "No, he's been here a tide, waiting for the next Samhain to open the portal from our realm so he can return home."

"I don't know," Runa murmured as a seed of doubt gained life.

"Runa." Octavia's voice and posture channeled a lecturing parent, complete with horn-rimmed glasses. "I know Papa wants you to be cautious because he worries for your safety, but honestly, you're destined to die anyway. What have you got to lose?"

Runa sighed, closed her eyes, and combed her fingers through her hair. What Octavia said was crude and atrociously delivered—with a powerful sting of bitchforce honesty for good measure—but it was factual. Being half-sidhe gave her superior strength, speed, and the ability to use fairy magiks such as glamour. But the mother who had died while giving birth to her had been a mortal woman, and because of that, she too was mortal.

Octavia was a sneaky little shit, tempting her like this. Meeting a Draigen would be the most intense experience of her life, and for someone who had never and would never be able to travel to the Otherworld, the prospect was undeniably exciting. That was another, more problematic idiosyncrasy of her nature—portentous curiosity. Already she could feel a corresponding hum of energy prickling under her skin in anticipation of coming face-to-face with a creature of legend. As soon as the portals closed at the end of the night, it would be another year before he or others of his kind could return to the mortal realm, if they chose to do so at all.

"Who is he, and where am I supposed to meet him?"

"You are not supposed to meet him, silly. I am. Since he's leaving, names are rather trivial. Wouldn't you agree?"

Runa glanced at the clock and grimaced. *Nearly dusk*. "I honestly don't have time. I should arrive at the party early this year and help greet the guests. Papa will be there, and I haven't seen him since he arrived back from London."

Octavia rolled her deep blue eyes in obvious annoyance. "Fine, Runa. Continue to live inside your perfect and safe little snow globe. I was just trying to do you a favor." She rose from the bed in fluid movement. "I suppose the Draigen can wait at Maxmillian's until he gets the hint."

Typical Octavia, thinking only of herself. Runa blocked her sister's path, allowing her anger to radiate clearly through her eyes. "You cannot leave him waiting, Tavia. Not on his last night in our dimension."

"That is exactly what I'm going to do. I have to meet Crowe at Tiffani's in twenty minutes. I'm afraid I don't have the time."

"Be responsible for once in your life! Don't ditch some poor schmuck so you can get reamed by a bloodsucking sidhe or three."

"He's not my problem." Octavia shrugged and brushed aside the personal jab. She maneuvered her thin body around Runa and strode purposefully for the door. "I only agreed to the date because I intended it for you."

"Wait a goddamned minute!" Runa snapped, stomping after her.

"I've really got to go, Runa. I'm already late."

After pulling the bedroom door open, Octavia stepped into the hallway and pivoted around. She peered through the remaining crack and smirked. "Good luck in the Crystal Crown contest. Rumor has it Mynx commissioned Lucilia Jacquard to design and create her costume this Samhain."

The door closed, and Runa stood rooted to the spot—perplexed, disbelieving, and pissed off. She hadn't imagined the conversation. Octavia *had* come to her bedroom extending some kind of truce by offering her a date with a netherworld creature...right?

Oh, it was real, all right.

She recalled Octavia's exceptionally kind and insightful parting blessing. It was a nice touch, reminding her that her odds of winning the Crystal Crown were as dismal as all the tides before. Lucilia was renowned for her hand-spun creations.

"Damn you, Octavia!" she spat, knowing she was going to be late to the party after all. She would not leave some poor bastard waiting around for a person who would never arrive, especially on Samhain.

Scurrying to the closet, she slipped her feet into the matching red velvet shoes she'd purchased weeks before and bent down to snag the bag containing a change of clothing. It was a lesson she'd learned long past. Corsets, tightly sewn hems, garters, and itchy pantyhose were only meant to be shared until the bittersweet midnight hour. Afterward it was all about Skechers, blue jeans, and cashmere sweaters.

She slipped soundlessly from her room, glided along the empty hallway, and descended the stairs. The person she was looking for was exactly where she knew he would be—perched on a stool in the kitchen, eating.

Raudan Dalmatica was immersed in the newspaper, his teeth sinking into the apple trapped between his long, dark fingers. A lean, muscled leg was braced on the counter; his chiseled, muscular torso was unmistakably evident beneath a skintight turtleneck. His dark hair was cut short and revealed slightly tipped ears very much like hers.

He was huge, even for a Haltija. And though he had practically raised Runa, she was wise enough to fear him for the damage he was capable of inflicting. His presence in her life was an unsolved anomaly. Haltijas were guardians of the gods' children and grandchildren. They didn't experience an instinctual pull to protect mortals, but there was a pull between Raudan and Runa. And Runa was unmistakably mortal.

"Raudan?"

He plopped the paper down on the counter and gave her his undivided attention. "What do you need, Miss Runa?"

"A ride into the Village," she said slowly.

"The Village?" He frowned. "Have the Deirmetres stopped holding the costume balls in their underground building?"

"No, I need to drop by the bookstore before I go. You know, that old one off of Regal Avenue? I would drive, but I don't want to take the risk of leaving my Z parked curbside."

He scowled sourly. "You don't mean Maxmillian's bookstore?"

"Yeah, so?"

"No, Runa." His tawny eyes narrowed.

"No?" She laughed at his expression. Raudan was generally Silly Putty in her hands. Telling her no was like refusing to pet a kitten.

"What do you need from the bookstore that cannot wait until tomorrow?" He graced her with the rare gift of his gorgeous smile. "I'll tell you what. If you're in any condition, I'll take you first thing in the morning."

"No. I have to go tonight." She met his eyes and folded her arms across her chest. Any indication that she would weaken, and Raudan would pounce. "Will you drive me or not?"

"If I don't, will you drive yourself?" he asked before biting into the apple and chewing loudly.

"Yes." She notched her chin. "I will."

He swallowed and swiped his tongue along one of his noticeably pointed canines. "I'll take you on one condition."

She smiled in relief, nodding. "Okay?"

"I want to know what you need at the bookstore."

She rolled her eyes as her anger resurfaced. As if he had to ask. "Octavia has some guy waiting for a date that will never happen, and she has zero intention of informing him about the sudden cancellation. The very least I can do is inform the poor bastard he's being stood up."

She carefully omitted the selfish reason she had decided to make the trek. The temptation to see a Draigen up close and in person was too great for her to resist.

"And how would you know about Octavia?"

Sarcastic now, she huffed. "She mentioned it when she came into my room to make a tentative treaty of peace."

He cocked an eyebrow in disbelief. "A truce, you say?"

"I know." She met his dubious stare. "It's the weirdest thing. It must be a tiding of the blue moon."

He studied her as he took unhurried bites of the apple. His long fingers grasped a paper towel on the stainless-steel holder. Once he ripped one free, he swiped it across his lips, wrapped the crinkled paper around the demolished core, wadded it up, and tossed the bundle across the room. The package arrived at its destination with an earsplitting *pop*; the garbage can settled as the apple slid to the bottom.

"Is that yes?"

"How does this sound?" He rose from the stool, and she had to crane her neck to maintain eye contact. "I'll take you there, but only if I can come into the bookstore with you."

"Raud—"

He cut her short with a wave of his hand. "That is not open for debate, and my offer is nonnegotiable. Do not fret, *selde*." His lips curved at the adornment he bestowed, a reminder he viewed her as a daughter. "I will stay as I always do, carefully hidden and unseen."

"You're incorrigible," she grumbled playfully. "Using such sweet reverence to bribe me."

He slid his hand into his pocket and produced the keys to his Citroën C-Métisse. "Is it a deal?"

"Okay." She snorted the word in feigned agitation and scurried past him, rushing for the garage.

It was nearly impossible for her to mask her excitement. Within minutes, she would meet a Draigen face-to-face. Would he look like a dragon? Would his skin be normal or scaled? Would he be as large as the myths proclaimed? As intimidating?

A loud *chirp* sounded as she raced for the black sports car.

"Not yet, Runa."

Raudan's voice reverberated off the concrete, and she stopped, knowing his I'm-not-done-with-you-yet tone all too well. He hiked his chin and motioned at her costume.

"Where are your daggers? Even on Samhain, you must be on the offensive."

Of course. Lesson number one of being a mortal among immortals: thou shall not attend social functions unarmed. A girl could never have enough brains, money, clothing, lipstick, or concealed weapons. Entering a party unarmed and surrounded by droves of her kin was just begging to have her throat slit.

She shoved her bag into his waiting hands. Twisting her fingers around the toggles on her cloak, she worked them loose and pulled the cape free from her shoulders and back.

Spinning around, she asked, "Satisfied?"

A broad grin encompassed his face, and he nodded. She wasn't sure how it looked, but then again, no one was supposed to see the thick black holsters sewn into the back of her costume, the heavy weight of her heart snatchers hidden within them.

She quickly resettled the cape around her shoulders. Raudan extended the bag to her when she was done, studying her dainty motions with a wistful smile.

"Oftentimes I think I underestimate you."

"How do you mean?" She slipped the bag under her cloak and placed it over her shoulder.

"Of all your siblings, you are the most resourceful. Maybe it is because of your special limitations. Yet somehow I cannot help but conceive that you are made stronger because of them."

She smiled. Reacting impulsively, she placed her weight onto her toes, braced her hands on his wide shoulders, and pressed a kiss to his cheek. In all the time she had spent under his prevailing influence, her guardian had never once told her how he felt about her. She was receptive to it, nevertheless, and had no such reservations about displaying her adulation.

"I love you too, Raudan."

### **Chapter Two**

Runa stifled burgeoning laughter when she and Raudan arrived in front of Maxmillian's bookstore bathed in the offensive glare of flashing blue lights and the ear-piercing screech of a police siren. Warning her guardian to slow down might not have gotten the job done, but even he couldn't rebuke a mortal officer of the law. Raudan sent a glare in her direction, his eyebrows forming a harsh line that ticked in time with his clenching jaw.

She lifted her hands into the air, simulating innocence. "Don't get mad at me, Speed Racer. Unlike other people I know, I actually *obey* the traffic laws."

He scowled, stared into the distance, and exhaled unhappily.

Runa smothered her amusement at his expense. She leaned against the window and peered up. The sky was gray, the last rays from the setting sun barely visible. She grasped the door handle, pulled the lever, and swiftly slid from the seat and stepped out of the car.

Raudan's warning growl followed her. "Wait for me, Runa."

She bent at the waist and tilted her head underneath the low roof. "I'll be right inside," she said.

"Please return to the vehicle, ma'am."

After lifting her head, she peered over the glossy roof. She knew it was wrong to use glamour against a mortal, but she wanted to go inside without Raudan.

"I'm sorry, Officer." She lowered her voice and allowed her magik to radiate outward, enhancing her already desirable features with the luminescence within. Brightening the blonde streaks in her multicolored hair, she also darkened the purple hue of her violet irises. "I just wanted to go into the bookstore. You don't mind...do you?"

Bubbles of laughter threatened to escape her lips when the cop's demeanor changed; his facial muscles went lax. He reclined across the car's spit-shined roof, and a goofy grin appeared on his face.

"No, I don't mind," he drawled, giving her the roaming eye while licking his lips.

*Damn*. He was good and twinked, but she knew he would recover as soon as she left the general vicinity.

"Wait for me, Runa!" Raudan bellowed.

She pretended not to hear as she rushed to the door of the bookstore. The musty zing of old paper, ink, and leather bindings assailed her when she stepped inside. She quickly erected her standard-guise cloak, which presented her as a normal twentysomething girl with brown hair, a scrawny frame, and big blue eyes. Then she glanced around, searching for signs of life.

She shrugged when no one appeared to ask if she needed help in locating that all-elusive book or journal. Stepping between the neatly stacked rows of novels and paperbacks, she walked to the back of the store.

The staircase in the rear of the building was crafted from the same dark wood she recalled from her childhood. It wound upward in dizzying circles. She took a deep breath and started climbing, her heels clacking softly against the thick oak slats. Upstairs was the place those in the know ventured. The rare first-edition volumes and novels—as well as handwritten texts—were displayed along the back wall.

She stopped when she came to the top floor. Dipping under the railing, she stared out the glass windows. The police officer was making angry gestures with his hands, indicating Raudan had to move his snazzy ride. Mr. Charm School Policeman didn't have the goofy grin anymore. He seemed agitated, tense...

Frustrated.

She cackled and stood straight, shaking her head. Raudan was going to be pissed when he parked and came inside. He couldn't say she hadn't warned him about speeding.

The three shelves with the ultra-rare novels were exactly where she knew they'd be. Their heavy leather bindings were protected inside crystal clear glass adorned with a tiny paper sign that warned, YOU TOUCH, YOU BUY.

A few of the journals were open, showcasing their immaculate condition. She stared at one in particular. Behold the Elypsian Fields had been inside the display for as long as she could remember. Resisting the temptation to lift the glass and touch the cover, she trailed her finger longingly along the crystalline casing. It appeared to be bound with tree bark, the edges rigid and dark. Its pages were said to contain stories of love and loss in the Otherworld, documenting the ever-important warring and consequent merging of the races over the millennia. She'd always wanted to learn why the Fates had chosen to bring enemies together, using the undeniable eccentricities of love to merge those who hated one another...

A hand grasped her shoulder, and she cried out in alarm. She pivoted on her heel and cursed her lack of awareness. One lapse in judgment, one minuscule second of time, was all it would take for someone to cut her throat.

Swinging her corresponding arm under and out, she rotated in a circle to sever the contact, and the hand vanished. The hood of her cloak dislodged from her head, and the soft red material pooled around her shoulders. She couldn't help but gawk at the Draigen standing directly in front of her. He was so massive and enormous that he blocked the entire space behind him from sight.

Blessed Fates, he must be seven feet tall.

Formfitting dark leather pants molded seamlessly to his thick, muscular legs; the same material clung to his impossibly broad shoulders, wide chest, and narrow waist. The matching leather coat he wore over his clothing made him look sinister and dark yet intriguing.

Her heart fluttered as her gaze swept over his face. She was relieved to discover he had no scales or blemishes as she had feared Draigen might. His skin was perfectly smooth and flawless, with a golden complexion much darker than her ivory pigmentation. The black hair cascading around his face radiated blue. The thick strands brushed his shoulders.

She froze and gasped when she met his eyes. Sweet heavenly Moirae.

Dark lashes that matched his oddly tinted hair framed his deep hunter green irises, complementing a face that outshone the beauty of any face she had ever encountered.

A wicked lick of heat swept through her body, and she took a cautionary step back. Averting her eyes, she shook her head. She didn't need her sensual nature rushing to the surface to cloud her judgment, and she did not want to draw him in accidentally with glamour.

"Octavia Charon?" His deep, rich voice carried a hint of the olde accent Runa had always been attracted to.

She attempted to respond and found herself nodding like a mindless twit—mortified, dumbed down, and embarrassed. Her reaction to this stranger—this netherworlder—was totally tantalizing and unexpected. Had she bespelled herself? Was that it? Or did he possess glamour of his own?

Is that even possible?

"You are not as I was told."

"And what were you told?" She could only imagine the exploits he had heard about Octavia. God help him.

"I was explicitly forewarned you would never deem to show yourself here, even as your word had been freely given."

Runa peered up at him, and his irises shifted from forest green to a brilliant reptilian emerald. His gaze drifted back and forth between her eyes. A rush of blistering heat burned through her bloodstream, causing her skin to tingle. She tore her eyes away and focused on a small black imperfection in the floor. Her body throbbed and pulsed in all sorts of dangerous places. Places that would bring her to her knees before him. Places that could potentially bring forth what she feared in others of her kind.

Places best left alone.

"To be told you would not emerge, yet here you stand. Why did you come?" His voice was like the richest satiny velvet. The extended vowels bristled along her spine.

Runa tried to keep her voice even, grappling for an answer, any answer. "I wanted to meet a Draigen." She ground her teeth together as she lost her train of thought, frustrated by her sudden inanity. "Since your kind doesn't venture to our dimension, this is the only opportunity I would have to meet one such as yourself."

She chanced another look. He appeared legitimately dumbfounded. A frown formed, nearly marring the perfection of his face. He seemed to be struggling with two very different emotions.

Confusion and...

She froze. *Holy light*, he was positively furious.

"Listen"—she shifted to the left, her intense desire to get the hell away from this dangerous being suddenly overriding her curiosity—"this is getting too weird. I only wanted to warn you not to spend too much time waiting around. My sister isn't the most reliable person, and she does this kind of shit all the time."

She kept her eyes on him as she moved along the wall, just in case she needed to break into a sprint or get the hell out of Dodge. He looked like he wanted to devour her completely, and not entirely in a manner she would appreciate.

A deep growl emitted from his chest, and she blurted, "I wish you a swift journey home. I can't stay. I have to go."

He moved faster than she would ever have given someone of his size credit for. Trapping her arms in massive hands, he lifted her from the ground in a singular movement that she did not anticipate. He leaned down as he drew her body upward, bringing her face to his. Emerald eyes glowered at her, and she knew two things with absolute certainty: One, he definitely did *not* want to eat her in the manner she would approve of. Two, she was pretty damned sure he was going to kill her.

### **Chapter Three**

Eric Locke resisted the overwhelming temptation to shake the lanky girl in his arms. The fucking sidhe tramp had tried to bewitch him. *Him*. Of all the creatures in the nether realms, he was *not* the one to fuck with. Grinding his teeth together in fury, he buried his fingertips into the softness of her skin until she grimaced in pain.

Venturing to the mortal realm each Samhain was something he and his Draigen brothers dreaded even though they knew it was a necessary evil—something that had to be done. Samhain was the one night per tide that vengeance came down on the heads of those in need of a beneficial dose of clarity, made possible by the portals that opened between all the realms on that single night.

It was their duty as the servants of the Erinyes—the most devastatingly powerful, beautiful, and dangerous females this side of heaven. They were a virtual law—only surpassed by the gods themselves. The Erinyes' visions, decrees, and judgments kept the tainted from wreaking harm on the weak and vulnerable, and the Draigen ensured those decrees came to fruition.

Without the Erinyes maintaining order between good and evil, beings such as the one trapped in his hold would continue to litter the mortal world with daemon magik, hexes, and plagues that would disrupt the natural balance.

And he had been warned about this sidhe in particular.

Octavia Charon, daughter of Yuless Charon, born some two hundred tides past. She was an aristocrat among her people, renowned for her beauty, prowess in bed, selfishness, bloodlust, and unrivaled ability to glamour and bewitch. Even now, with her fae magik blessedly ebbing, he was drawn to her—fucking *attracted* to her. His cock was pulsating, balls drawn taut, blood pounding while his skin hummed with the need to dominate and possess. For all the sense it made—which was none—he wanted to shove her against the wall and fuck her so thoroughly that the building would crumble to the ground around them.

He rankled at the thought. Fucking tainted fae magik.

Sidhe fae were one of the most despised creatures in the realms, an enemy of the Draigen, and a goddamned nuisance. As beautiful as they appeared on the outside, they were loathsome on the inside—treacherous, traitorous, and untrustworthy.

She'd almost had him too. The conniving little bitch.

"So you wished to meet a Draigen, did you?" he demanded, crowding her face and meeting her indigo-colored eyes. "Well, here I am, *aor jacusenne*. Am I all that you hoped for?"

"Let go of me, you ass!" She struggled in his hold, kicking her dangling feet frantically.

"An ass?" He raked his fingers into her skin until she winced. "What's the problem? Don't like what you see?"

"Put me down." She yelled each word crisply. "Right now."

He met her livid gaze and realized she was not afraid of him, not at all. The dragon within responded in appreciation at the proud display, heating his blood and causing his muscles to quiver in anticipation. The steady thrum of his cock was undeniable, a newfound surge of lust impossible to stifle. For a moment, something else surfaced—a deeper response than lust, desire, or sexual want. The bestial part of him wanted to lower its nose, inhale her scent, and place it to memory. A hard, violent tremor shot down his spine as he envisioned pressing her against the wall, burying his head into the delicate arch of her nape, and bathing the tender skin along her throat with unhurried laps of his tongue.

He caught himself just before he lowered his head. He forced her away from his body and held her at arm's length, infuriated by his lack of control. His lips curved into a sinister grin, and his eyes narrowed as she met his stare head-on and issued an unspoken challenge.

"Octavia Charon, you have been charged with transporting daemon relics across the realms, thereby endangering the precarious balance that must be maintained between the dimensions. Your peers have incurred the penalties for your crimes and have sent me to bring you before them. Once there, they will exact the punishment deemed befitting."

"Wait a goddamned minute!" Her voice rose in panic, and the skin along his neck prickled at the surge of urgency within her words. It had been easier to crack her steely exterior than he thought.

"Give me a second. I will explain!"

"Nay, I think not."

"But I'm not Octav—"

He blocked out her high-pitched pleas, tossed her over his shoulder, and strode to the room located above the storage space of the bookstore. He didn't want to remain in this realm any longer than necessary. One night per tide was more than adequate.

"Put me down!"

He shook his head in disgust. Why did they even bother coming to this domain? Eventually the entire mortal realm was going to burn. On a whole, the human race was more corrupt than the supernatural creatures and deities they knew nothing about.

No one can say the powers that be didn't try.

"If you don't put me down, you're going to regret it. So help me, Draigen. I'm warning you."

The little hellion was warning him, was she? Maybe some quality time among her bloodthirsty relatives would instill an adequate amount of the humility she so obviously lacked. Hell, it might be just what the snarky bitch needed.

"Cease with your prattling excuses, female. They will sway naught with me."

She tried to lurch from his shoulder, and he slapped her hosed thigh harshly. Sliding his fingers up her skirt and past her garter, he clasped the silken smoothness of her ass and squeezed the firm mound to keep her in place. The motion of the skirt settling against his hand brought her tantalizing scent to his nostrils—sweet, fragrant, female—and he scented her arousal. The temptation to slide his digits around and test the slick heat at the apex of her thighs rose within him. Would she be as wet as he imagined? He inhaled deeply, taking her musk into his lungs. She smelled incredible.

Grinding his teeth in agitation, he tamped down his raging desire.

A Draigen fucking a sidhe fae? That was rich.

"That's it, asshole!" She inhaled deeply and then screamed like a banshee, "Raudan!"

He had expected as much. Sidhe didn't travel alone.

"Scream until you can no longer draw air. I hate to be the one to break it to you, little screecher, but the portal awaits us. Whoever is in your accompaniment won't make it in time to see you off."

"Raudan!" she screamed again, this time in fear. Eric grinned. A good dose of the unfamiliar emotion would do her good.

A deep voice rang in his ears from the store below, calling out in concern. "Selde?"

"Raudan, help me!" Her terrified voice sounded pitiful and frantic, even to Eric's disillusioned ears.

"Almost there," Eric informed her as he stepped through the swirling vortex. After they crossed into the other realm, he closed the gate between the dimensions.

Runa's heart faltered when Raudan's frantic voice was replaced with an eerie, mind-numbing quiet. She watched in horror as the swirling purple gateway inside the wall shrank and disappeared.

"That's better," the Draigen remarked, apparently pleased by her newfound silence. "I traveled to the Tuatha Mound, per the request of the Unseelie Court. Don't bother thanking me; you're welcome."

The Tuatha Mound. Bile coated her throat as her stomach churned. The games and exploits of the Unseelie Court were legend. They were the most corrupt of the sidhe, the most bloodthirsty. Their natural propensity for violence had forced them away from the mortals they killed so readily, so easily.

For entertainment.

The enormity of her predicament—captured by a Draigen and being taken to the Dark Court for punishment—kept her quiet as he carried her through a narrow corridor and past small circular globes glowing from the sprites trapped within. Under normal circumstances, she would have been delighted to come face-to-face with a sprite. Now she just wanted to return to the safety of her realm.

The Draigen rotated his torso, and the bulky shoulder beneath her shifted. He opened a door and strode into a room. Voices drifted to her ears from a distance; she strained to listen as they grew louder. They spoke an olde sidhe dialect too quickly for Runa to decipher.

"Seevier." The Draigen's greeting silenced the various conversations. "I have done as promised, fulfilling your bargain with the Erinyes and thereby upholding the law."

His fingers unlatched from Runa's thigh, and his other hand roughly grasped her waist. He thrust her clear of his body, and Runa stumbled when he released her altogether.

"Face us, Octavia. Do not feign cowardice after the deed is done. You had no such qualms when last you came into our court," a man's voice taunted in the olde tongue.

Get your shit together, Runa. If you want to live, get your head on straight. It's game on—right now. Any display of weakness in front of the court would be an instant death sentence. Sidhe thrived to squelch the downtrodden. Only the strong survived.

Runa drew a deep breath and narrowed her eyes at the Draigen.

Cocky bastard.

What she wouldn't give to wipe that smug smirk off his face. If she got the opportunity, his family jewels—as her brother, Byron, would say—were as good as stonkered.

Runa spun on her heel and lifted her chin. Tapestries adorned the stone walls of the chamber, with images of men and woman caught in the throes of ecstasy. The lush vibrancy of her surroundings was crushed when her gaze flittered to two nude bodies—a man and a woman—affixed to St. Andrew's crosses at the back of the room. Both wore black leather masks, the eyeholes closed, the zippers at the mouth left open. The man's cock was hidden from view by a silver chastity device, while the lips of the woman's sex were stretched by clamps affixed to weighted silver balls. Neither moved or made a sound. Runa quickly looked away and focused on the group seated at a table directly before her.

The sidhe sat on one side of a massive table, just like *The Last Supper* portrait many households in the mortal realm kept affixed to dining-room walls. Only these fine, upstanding fae were more likely to stab people in the back *and* the throat—most likely at the same time. The table overflowed with fresh fruit and vegetables,

which were placed on the body of a naked woman laying faceup on the velveteen surface of the red tablecloth.

All eyes homed in on Runa. Their irises flashed in colors that didn't exist in the mortal realm. From what she could see, the table's occupants were all clothed, which meant the festivities had yet to take place. She suppressed the shiver that traveled down her spine at the knowledge of what was in store for the people being primed for a bloodbath and forced herself not to take another glance in the direction of the cuffed man and woman. Already she could envision them as they soon would be, covered in semen and blood...

The beautiful male seated in the middle of the table spoke again, shifting from the olde tongue to a language she could get behind. "You have not honored our agreement, Eric," he sneered in English, staring at Runa with a mixture of disgust and outrage. "This is most assuredly not Octavia Charon."

The Draigen shrugged his massive shoulders. "She proclaimed herself as such, Seevier."

Runa bit back the retort that waited on the tip of her tongue, tempted to tell the stupid son of a bitch just how arrogant and wrong he was.

Seevier's bright blue eyes traveled up and down the length of Runa's body. "Speak your name," he ordered.

"I am Runaeska Charon, fifth daughter born of Yuless Charon, descendant of the fae ferryman Charon of Hades." Her voice didn't waver, and her eyes didn't falter. Thank the Fates.

"Sister of Octavia Charon?"

"One would assume so," Runa snapped as her temper got the better of her. "Unless there is another Yuless Charon with five daughters, one of which is also named Octavia, whom I remain blissfully unaware of."

His arrogant expression was replaced with a seething anger, and she considered punting her smart-ass mouth across the room like a Super Bowl football. Her stomach sank, and her heart started racing, panic causing time to slow down as a natural fight-or-flight instinct overcame her pride and quick temper. This wasn't anything like the occurrences back home. An insult delivered to the wrong sidhe could very well be the death of her. She moved her hands to her hips, thankful for the cloak and Raudan's persistence. If not for each, she wouldn't have access to her only defense—her daggers.

"I have met the daughters of Yuless, but not you. Not the fifth daughter born some twenty tides or more past. Why have you been kept so carefully hidden?"

She shrugged and spoke casually though she wanted to bolt for the door, masking the fear his words wrought by bringing a lifetime of indifference into play and hoping her voice didn't break and betray her. "I am quite content where I am. In *my* world."

Movement to the right got her attention, and she glanced over. The Draigen had moved to lounge against the nearest wall. He observed their exchange with a rapt curiosity and keen interest.

"Yes, well," Seevier said, "Octavia has been here on several occasions. On her last crossing, she stole a daemon artifact—the Horns of Racheron the Brutal, to be exact."

Unholy omen. The breath exited Runa's lungs, and she struggled to breathe, grappling for words. Her sister had taken one of the three artifacts necessary to allow immortals and formor daemons—the very evil from the bowels of Hades itself—to roam freely through the realms. At last count, two artifacts were accounted for in the mortal dimension. If all three artifacts were brought together on battlegrounds of any of the great immortal wars that had split the realms in the first place, the portals would open. Immortals and daemons would be free to roam the untainted earth, upsetting the balance and bringing forth what mortals viewed as the apocalypse.

She tasted bile and a lemony bitterness that accompanied nausea. The violent trembling spreading through her body caused her to stammer, "R-Racheron the B-Brutal?"

"I see you understand the severity of the crime." Seevier nodded, rising to his feet. His body was swathed in dark royal blue from head to foot.

Royal blue...

Runa stilled, the quaking in her limbs vanishing as pure, unfiltered terror washed over her. He wasn't a mere male born of royalty as she had assumed; he was King of the Dark Court. Why had she not used her dim-witted brain?

Seevier, as in Seevierous the Black, first chosen of the Unseelie Court. There was only one other with equal power—Seevier's twin, Aeigis the White, first chosen of the Seelie Court and king in the mortal realm.

"We were forced to pay the penalty for her deceit. Afterward we contacted Crowe Persais, our liaison placed in the White Court. He confronted your sister, and she gave her oath she would meet with the Draigen ordered to bring her before our justice and return Racheron's Horns."

Seevier walked past the sidhe at the table and stepped from the dining platform. He was as beautiful as the stories proclaimed. His incredibly tall frame was perfectly sculpted, his broad shoulders heavily muscled and lean. The open neck of his shirt revealed flawless alabaster skin that was enhanced by his long raven black hair. Whereas Aeigis the White was the fae symbol of love and devotion, Seevierous the Dark was the personification of sex and the desire for power—the embodiment of what women and men, both mortal and immortal, lusted for.

He wasn't interested in her—not yet. But he was king.

She had no doubt now that he was aware she was cloaking.

"I'm aware." He smiled, his full lips pursing seductively as he advanced. Tapping a finger to his forehead, he said, "Lest you've forgotten those lessons by your friend"—he concentrated and grinned as he collected her friend's name from her head—"Yuviette. I am also graced with telepathy, little sister."

"Then you know I'm extremely uncomfortable being stalked." Runa swallowed down panic and forced her legs to remain still even as her muscles tensed in preparation to flee. She gripped the daggers and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. To step backward was a direct insult. One did not spurn the advances of royalty. Not if one wanted to live.

"I *am* aware." He nodded and drew nearer. So close that soon, he would touch her...

She stepped back, unable to prevent her defensive reaction.

He froze in astonishment and outrage and snarled furiously, "You dare to offend me while in my domain?"

"No." She breathed. Her torso heaved, and her heart hammered furiously. "I was brought here mistakenly. I would ask permission to return to my realm. I wish to return home."

"You are home, sister kind."

He started forward again, his angry expression receding and an alluring smile returning. "Remove your glamour and reveal yourself, Runaeska. All of your sisters have been lovely and incredibly delightful to me." He paused, licked his lips, and pressed them together as if he was recalling each one individually. "In a multitude of different ways. I am sure you will be no different. If Yuless has kept you from my court, you must be exceptional."

"Don't come any closer," Runa cautioned, knowing all too well what he intended. If he touched her, he would own her—mind, body, and soul. It was his dark gift, his legacy.

A sidhe king who could never be resisted.

"That's not *entirely* accurate, Runaeska." His sapphire blue eyes shone in anticipation. "I only own you if I want to own you. Considering the cost of your sister's deceit, you should be thankful I would allow you to pleasure me."

An unexpected wave of unbridled fury erupted in her stomach.

Pleasure him?

The scuzzlenut king was no different than any of the sidhe she dealt with on a daily basis. And there was no way she had partaken in the bruises, beatings, and hellacious weapons training Raudan had insisted on so she could learn to defend herself, to be docile now. She just had to bide her time, inform him that he was wrong, and return to the sanctuary of home.

"Don't come any closer," she growled in warning, hands trembling and voice shaky.

He didn't listen and crossed the remaining distance. Panic, desperation, and fright caused her to react instinctively, and Runa decided it was better to burn out

than to fade away. Shock crossed his face in the instant she made the decision. Dropping her glamour, she pulled her daggers free.

She thrust her arms back and stepped into a defensive stance, forcing her cape to billow around her back and free her arms to wield the blades. She lifted the heart snatchers, smirked at his abject expression, and arched an eyebrow mockingly.

You're not so cocky anymore, you goddamned conceited bastard, she thought. When he met her eyes, she realized he'd heard her perfectly.

Even as her stomach knotted and a fear-induced adrenaline spike sent her heart racing, she held her ground. If she was going to board the express train to the pearly gates, at least it would be on her own terms, with a slathering of pride to light the way.

The rest was gravy.

### **Chapter Four**

The sound of uncomprehending fear was something Raudan had never heard from Runa. Not in all his tides of tutelage and servitude. And the sound of her horrified scream as he strode through the door of Maxmillian's bookstore unnerved *him*, a fifteen-hundred-year-old Haltija.

Raudan rushed up the stairs and attempted to repress the fury he felt toward Maxmillian the Dwarf Tosser. The portal the aging ogre kept in his loft was a danger to everyone, mortal and immortal alike. And though Raudan would readily admit to its convenience when he needed to cross the realms, it was nothing more than a threat to those like his selde when unexpected guests crossed from the Otherworld.

He made it to the top of the stairs and ran toward the sound of her cries. Then suddenly, they were gone, replaced by a bone-chilling silence that stole his breath and sent an icy shard of foreboding through his heart.

The inner calling he shared with Runa vanished.

"Damn it," he snarled and stormed into the back room that housed the portal. The brick wall in the center appeared just as the others around it. He approached the area that could be manipulated by spell and magik and touched the surface. The bricks were warm, indicating the gateway had recently been accessed and closed.

He cursed himself for allowing Runa to come here and for keeping the location of the portal secret. He had worried that if she knew about it, her curiosity would draw her to it. Because of his choice to keep her unaware, she had been thrown into a situation that left her blindsided and unprepared. She knew very little of the Otherworld, with the exception of fairy tales and the half-assed mythology her best friend imparted.

Raudan felt his heart lurch at the thought of her alone and confused in another reality, without him beside her to guide the way, to protect her...

To heal her.

Pacing, he rifled through his pocket with trembling fingers, yanked his cell phone free, and scrolled through the list of contacts. Contacting Yuless Charon was out of the question. Runa's father had proven himself to be an inept parent at best. Raudan's only alternative was Byron Morgianne, Runa's half brother.

The phone rang once, then twice, and then a third time. The sounds of fighting and chaos nearly drowned out Byron's voice.

"Lo?"

"Byron? Byron!"

"Raudan, is that you?" Raudan heard the loud *thwack* of flesh meeting flesh, a heavy scuffling, and then Byron's muffled voice became clear. "Kind of busy at the moment, if you get my drift. Fuck all, one sec!"

"Damn it!" Raudan roared furiously. "This is important, Byron!"

Byron the Magnifique, dubbed thus by his little sister because of his "delicious" Australian accent, was at the underground ring again, fighting netherworld creatures for pleasure and adulation. He was cursed with two of the least desirable sidhe traits—lust and violence. Byron lived for what he called the *thrill of the kill* and *the luck of the fuck*. He was his father's shining hope, a son both cunning and virile—the result of an intense but brief encounter with Aishress Morgianne, a dioane sidhe warrior princess who lived in the Tui'Lia Mound in the Australian bush.

Unfortunately for Yuless, Byron was like his mother, devastatingly beautiful and unapologetically brash to a fault. He had no interest in business dealings, stock markets, or wine tastings; instead he chose to sell himself and his talents in a multitude of different ways—including prizefighting.

The speaker rasped as if the other end was being raised into the air. The sound was followed by the scrape of cloth and the loud splitting rip of flesh meeting flesh.

"Stay down, you dumb son of a bitch!" Byron raged in Raudan's ear, and a painful-sounding *thump* burst into the phone. "Crikey, do you actually want to test your immortality? Do you want to be good and bloody stonkered?"

"Byron!" Raudan yelled.

"I'm here, mate, I'm here." Byron cleared his throat. "You caught me at a bad time. A wrath daemon decided to test his mettle, and I had to jewel the bloke. He won't be walking straight for days, the fucking wally."

"It's Runa," Raudan said quickly, knowing he didn't have time to prattle. It wouldn't be long until Byron selected another target.

A ragged exhale echoed through the phone. "Ah Christ, tell me she's all right."

"I don't know if she's all right. I don't even know where she is for sure. She asked me to bring her to Maxmillian's—"

"Maxmillian's! Bloody hell! You do know what today is, don't you? What the fuck were you thinking?"

"You know Runa! She would have done as she wished whether I accompanied her or not!"

"Where is she?" Byron spit each individual word through the phone, sounding both furious and terrified, and Raudan braced himself for the impending explosion.

Byron was going to lose his already volatile control when he discovered his baby sister—a fragile mortal—was in the Otherworld.

### Chapter Five

Eric watched in astonishment as the mousy fae girl he'd transported through the dimensions vanished, replaced by a sidhe enchantress. Her lush brown hair glimmered, shifting into various shades of brown, red, and blonde. Her skin paled, sparkling in the dim sprite lighting.

And her face...

By the Fates, her face.

What had started as fear distorting a plain visage had become fury marring the features of an etherian. He responded to the display, rocking an impressive hard-on that throbbed mercilessly as the blood pumped through his veins and a newfound ache surged through his body.

"Briette!" the king brayed, his eyes intent on the one sidhe who dared rebuke him. "Teach this little bitch a lesson."

An overwhelming impulse to protect and shelter rose in Eric; the beast under his skin responded with a primordial instinct as old as time. Just as it had the first moment he had laid eyes upon her.

Fucking hell, it couldn't be. Not unless...

"Halt!" He unplanted his feet and made his way to the impossibly breathtaking sidhe girl.

Runaeska Charon.

Her gaze flickered from the king to Eric, and she lifted the daggers as if she was preparing to engage him in battle.

His heart tightened as his admiration increased. Even in light of her situation, she stood proud and unafraid. *As fearless as the most seasoned Erinyes goddess*.

He maneuvered his body in front of her, intentionally obstructing Seevier's view. "Answer me true. Did you bespell me in your mortal realm?"

She glared at him. "Absolutely not. I only use glamour on those I want to attract, and trust me, you are *not* my type."

She spoke as if he'd insulted her somehow, displaying her brightly colored eyes for the first time. They were unlike any he had ever seen—unique and exceptionally lovely. A gold ring circled each pupil and fanned into winding strands of deep purple that reminded him of rare eylypsian violets.

Her curt dismissal brought another painful jerk from his straining erection, the thick material of his trousers suddenly tight and confining against the engorged flesh. He stifled the groan that rose from his chest and threatened to seep past his lips.

Impulsive fae! Was she reckless as well as fearless? She had just issued a challenge to a Draigen, enticing him to attract her by claiming he was not her *type*. The king had indicated she was barely twenty mortal tides—a fucking baby and far too young to have taken many lovers. But then, sidhe males were renowned for luring females into their beds.

Particularly beautiful ones...

He gazed into her tantalizing face, and the beast inside him roared to life, confined only by the barrier of his skin. The room shifted, perceived through Draigen eyes, which shifted color, distinguishing hot and cold, near and far. Panic crossed Runa's delicate features when he met her stare, and his other half observed her closely. He drew a steadying breath, forced the beast to quiet, and stepped toward her.

"Stay where you are," she warned.

"Nay, little one."

The scent of her fear seared his nose, scorching his throat, and the already enraged dragon responded, demanding to break free. His blood raced through his veins, the sound of his pounding heart agonizingly loud in his ears as his entire body began to hum.

"Be calm, Runaeska!" He had never lost his composure before, but now he teetered on the brink. There was something special about the sidhe female, something his dragon half demanded he recognize and accept. While hesitant to believe she could be his Fated, Eric remembered all too well how his brothers Marshall and Colin had become after they had found their Chosens and mated. His own reaction and predisposition wasn't too shockingly different.

He attempted to appease the beast by trying to calm her, speaking in a soothing tone. "Of every person in this room, I am the one you should trust implicitly. There is no reason to fear me."

"No reason to fear you?" She shied away as he continued to approach, and flashed him a wounded look that conveyed a sense of betrayal and distrust. "You are the reason I am in this situation."

"Aye." He nodded, eyes drawn to the skin along her collarbone, which shone like pale sand in the sun. "You speak true. But what's done is done. Now we must seek to rectify the situation."

She stopped and stood her ground. "I'm listening."

"There's a good girl." He offered a smile that had never failed to melt the hearts of other females. She met the gesture with a scowl.

"Don't try to butter me up. It won't work. Just get me the hell out of here."

He couldn't help himself; his smile broadened. Gods, she was beautiful *and* ballsy. He couldn't wait to take her home, remove her clothing, and issue a challenge of his own. By the time he was finished exploring her lush curves, tasting

every square inch of her porcelain skin, she'd be begging for mercy. And if she played her cards right, he'd be more than willing to oblige her desires.

"If I get you the hell out of here, what will you grant in return?" He moved closer, craving her nearness, and listened as her heart increased tempo, the tiny little pulses hammering like a drum in his sensitive ears.

She licked her crimson-colored lips. "What do you want?"

What *didn't* he want?

He would start with her heart-shaped mouth and work his way down. His eyes roamed over her tiny body, which was revealed to his gaze now that her cloak was thrust back. She was smaller than he preferred his females, impossibly tiny. Yet her soft curves more than compensated for the failing. Her rounded breasts strained against her tailored dress. A tight corset thrust the creamy globes upward into the sheer white material covering them like a veil.

His eyes drifted downward, taking in her minuscule waist and slim hips, pausing as a single wicked thought threatened to spill his seed before he'd even had the chance to touch her: Would she be as bare as all fae were? If her skin glistened all over...

He groaned at the thought, and her expression changed, fear replacing the courage he had seen displayed so proudly just moments before. "I will not hand myself over to you in place of another," she vowed, erecting an invisible wall and shutting him out. "Forget it. The answer is no."

"Eric, need I remind you that you are in my house?" The king spoke before Eric could demand a reason for her hasty decision.

She closed her eyes, swallowed loudly, and fisted her daggers so tightly her knuckles flashed white.

"I've not forgotten," Eric answered but kept his eyes riveted on the most captivating creature he had ever seen, unwilling to look away.

"Then remove yourself from matters that no longer concern you. You've brought a member of the house of Charon to face our justice, and while it is not the one we seek, we must send a message that this kind of behavior will not be tolerated."

"What punishment do you intend for the girl?" he asked, wanting her to know what fate awaited her here, carefully gauging her reaction.

"She will spend a tide servicing the entire court, rotated between us as we deem fit. She will be allowed to return to her realm at the next Samhain."

Her breathtaking violet eyes fluttered to his, and the large pupils shifted from side to side, as if she was absorbing the gravity of the situation.

It couldn't be. Was she excited at the prospect of being made a whore?

He damned himself for forgetting what she was. Of course she would be excited! She was a fucking sidhe fae! She would become nothing more than a receptacle for their lust, an empty object to be pillaged at their blood-letting sexual

orgies—left broken and soiled. Even the most masochistic fae rarely survived a tide in the Dark Court. Of course, the souls that passed into the next life arrived in the arms of the gods happily.

Just as she would.

His other half erupted in fury at the thought, and his vision shifted again, allowing him to perceive things in total clarity. He could hear the possessive propensity inside his head, unyielding and uncompromising—shelter, protect, nurture, claim—and he ground his teeth together.

"Please." Her unexpected appeal was featherlight.

"Please?" he growled, angry at her for being what she was, for bringing these unstable urges from within him.

For rejecting him.

A sidhe telling a Draigen no.

"Don't leave me here."

He shifted toward her, and she didn't move away, remaining perfectly still. He extended his hands, and she stayed compliant and passive, allowing him to encase her wrists with his fingers. A surge of unbridled hunger racked his body. Perhaps she did prefer him, and pride prevented her from speaking out. It was a known fact that sidhe were curious about the Draigen because no Draigen would dare touch or accept a sidhe into their bed.

A violent trembling radiated from her delicate wrists, and his chin shot up. He peered into her face, stunned by the sight that greeted him. The luminescence in her alabaster skin was absent, her violet-colored irises dark and unseeing, the golden centers dull.

She was in shock? No, this was more than shock.

She was completely fucking *petrified*.

He spoke in a husky timbre so there was no mistaking his purpose. "A tide spent with me is the boon I request, Runaeska. The very same they would take from you. You can stay with your people or come with me. Choose quickly. The king grows impatient."

A tide was the perfect solution. If he was experiencing nothing more than an intense lust, he would enjoy the girl for a year and return her to the mortal realm after he was sated. If she was something more, he had time to consider his options.

"A tide?" she gasped in horror, face going ashen. "B-but, I can't stay here—"

She started to argue, mumbling incoherently. His sensitive ears distinguished the sound of the fae king's approaching footsteps, and a renewed fury distorted Eric's vision. Even without her consent, he couldn't leave her here. Christ, he *wouldn't* leave her here. Not with succubi and incubi blood drinkers.

Even if she was one herself.

For fuck's sake!

He swiveled around, growing increasingly agitated as well as unmistakably protective. A deep growl rumbled in his chest as his vocal cords rippled, and his skin began to prickle and itch.

He'd rip out the king's throat and kill the entire worthless lot of them if it was necessary to keep her with him. He would face the fury and judgment of the Erinyes afterward.

"Wait! Don't go!"

Her sharp plea brought his focus back to her pensive face, and he realized she regarded his turning away as recognition of her previous denial instead of a display of protection. Believing he'd dismissed her.

"You," she whispered. Her panicked violet eyes met his, and her chin trembled as she lifted her face. "I choose you."

### Chapter Six

Runa met Eric's gaze without flinching. A raw hunger that he didn't attempt to mask burned in his eyes. She had always shunned sexual attention, but in this circumstance, she was relieved by his interest. If he didn't take her with him, she would be left with no other choice but to turn her blades to her throat. She would rather die than become a whore of the Dark Court.

"Are you certain?" he asked in a rich, husky tenor, his eager eyes shifting into a glorious, vivid green that reminded her of *exactly* what she was agreeing to.

As gorgeous as he was, he was an immortal and not entirely man. Each time his irises changed so drastically, forming strange and intricate desertlike lines and patterns, she could *feel* the dragon under the surface staring back at her.

The better of two evils, she reminded herself. "Yes."

His lips curved into a devastating smile, and his emerald gaze drifted over her body and stilled at her hands and daggers. "Put those away. You no longer need them."

She peered around Eric's massive shoulder and met the king's infuriated stare. Her heart barreled into her stomach, and she darted behind the safety of Eric's large frame.

"I beg to differ."

He chuckled as if he found her display amusing, and reached for her again. Wrapping his left hand around her arm, he tilted her chin with his right. His fingers were surprisingly gentle as he lifted her face, the edge of his thumb brushing her jaw in lazy motions.

"Trust me. I won't let him touch you."

Trust him? He was a Draigen who wanted to expel all the pent-up sex trapped inside his phenomenal body *into her*. But at this point, did she really have another choice? She drew an exaggerated breath and averted her eyes, and he released her. Slowly, she lowered the daggers. He appeared as intimidating as hell. She could only hope the king thought so as well.

"It's all right." Eric smiled encouragingly when she worked the blades into the holsters at her back.

"That's easy for you to say," she muttered.

Placing his hand to his chest, he clenched a fist over his heart. "I give you my solemn vow. He will not touch you. Now stay behind me and keep quiet."

His countenance changed, and he spun around. He crossed his imposing arms over his chest as he addressed the king. "I am taking the girl with me, Seevier. You can't force another to forfeit her freedom in the place of the individual responsible. I'll return next Samhain for the guilty party who is due punishment, and I will bring her back to face not only your justice but the justice of the Draigen and Erinyes as well."

"You cannot change the decree of the Erinyes, Eric."

"You dare to tell me what I can and cannot do, *sidhe*?" Eric expelled the word as if their kind were the vilest beings created.

"Runaeska Charon has offended me—her king. Returning Octavia Charon to face our justice is one thing. But allowing that little bitch to leave without recompense for the disfavor is something I will not abide."

Runa pulled her right dagger free, stepped around the shelter of Eric's body, and revealed herself. Blood was the universal payment for disrespect and dishonor among sidhe in the mortal realm. She would gladly relinquish that if Seevierous would allow her to leave.

She pressed the dagger into the meaty flesh of her palm as Eric reached out to stop her. The sting didn't arrive until air brushed the surface of the wound and blood began to ooze, pooling inside her hand. She clenched her fist, squeezed, and watched as her life's blood spattered to the floor.

"I apologize for any insult, my king. Please accept my humble apology and blood offering as penance."

"I do not perceive your apology as either humble or sincere, Runaeska Charon."

She stared at the floor, focused on the thick red liquid between the grouted stones, watching in numb detachment as the drops that fell from her clenched fist hit the dark red surface and splattered outward. The morbid image of her bleeding out and being left to die flashed in her mind, and she shuddered at the thought, knowing it was an utmost certainty if she remained among the court. Then she glanced at Eric.

He was livid. Harsh lines creased his forehead, and his lips were thinned. His eyes had taken on that strange glowing hue; fine lines crackled and extended throughout.

"Come on," he ordered.

She slid the dagger back into the holster, struggling momentarily as the sharp edge snagged the leather. When she placed her trembling fingers into his outstretched hand, she felt the weight of the king's stare, and she peeked at him through her lashes. His beautiful face was sinister, and witnessing her departure seemed to incense him further.

"I will bring this matter to the attention of the Goddess Idona, Eric."

A growl rippled through Eric's chest, and he yanked Runa close. His voice was an ominous rumble of outrage. "I intend to seek out Idona this very night. So I issue fair warning. If you proceed, you best prepare for her ire at being laden with this foolery twice on one Samhain."

Eric wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her toward the large wooden door at the far end of the room. The sound of olde sidhe filled her ears, spoken briskly. The voices changed, becoming heated as the king's irritated voice rose in anger. She scurried for the door and stepped into the narrow corridor.

"You should not have given the bastard your blood out of obligation, Runaeska." Eric released her. "He is undeserving of the honor and intentionally disrespected the Erinyes and the Draigen who serve them by questioning my decision."

"I didn't know." She sighed softly, adding, "And it's Runa, not Runaeska. My father is the only one who calls me that."

She peered around, studying the vines along the walls. A door at the end of the hall was open—the very same that contained the vortex Eric had brought them through. She didn't know how to access portals; she had never been taught. Could she go to it and think of home to cross?

"Don't even think about it, Runa. Unless you wish to renege on our agreement? I'm sure Seevier wouldn't mind if I took you back."

"Why won't... Can't I just go home?"

Eric stared at her with an odd expression, as if unsure how to answer. He clenched his jaw and wrapped a hand under her arm. Taking a right, he led her down another corridor.

She hesitated before repeating, "Why?"

He kept his eyes forward and answered gruffly, "You could warn your sister of what we intend. Is that not the way of your kind?"

Runa shrieked in frustration and pulled free. After being thrown into the fire by Octavia, there was no way in Hades she would do anything to save her wretched ass.

"When I say Octavia can rot, I mean it. She's an evil she-bitch who deserves to burn. I wouldn't piss on her if she caught fire."

His full eyebrows lifted in surprise, and a playful grin formed. "Is that a fact?" "Absolutely. She can simmer."

Eric's expression changed as raw desire radiated from the depths of his bright green eyes. "You're not very forgiving," he murmured, stepping forward and brushing against her, "are you?"

She took a shaky step back, unsure if she was excited or frightened by the prospect of him stalking her, thinking perhaps it was a bit of both. "No, and if you don't let me go home, I'll know where you sleep. Just think of all the possibilities."

He continued forward, and she mirrored each step back until the wall stopped her short. He placed his hands on either side of her head and bent at the waist. His face descended as he lowered his wide shoulders. Her stomach folded in on itself, and her heart started racing. He was what every male aspired to be but would never compare to. His large body was perfectly proportioned, broad shoulders and corded arms filling out a rugged physique that towered over her.

And then there was his unbelievably gorgeous face...

Eric's heated breath caressed the corner of her mouth, and she realized the fae had it completely wrong. The sidhe dark king was not the personification of sex, lust, and temptation. That title belonged to someone else entirely.

And he was standing just inches from her.

"With you in my bed, I can think of all sorts of wonderfully wicked possibilities." He met her gaze, and her lips parted in awe. Up close, his irises flashed brilliantly, shifting from creamy jade to jeweled emerald. The pupil widened, nearly eclipsing the colored portion. "And I promise you, *aiarya*. I *won't* be sleeping."

His mouth captured hers as his body surged forward and pinned her in place. Her knees caved as the breath left her lungs in a devastating rush that swept through her nerve endings. She grasped his arms to stay upright.

Sweet God in heaven.

He was amazing—chiseled and cut, warm and strong. She squeezed his muscles and imagined what they would feel like with his shirt gone. His mouth slackened as his warm tongue slid past her lips, delving inside and stroking in a circular motion, gently teasing and enticing her to kiss him back.

Giving in to temptation was reckless, but even still she relaxed her mouth and met each caress with a hesitant lapping. Raking her fingernails into his arms, she pressed her aching breasts into his chest and breathed in his incredibly exotic and masculine smell. He cupped her bottom and brought her flush against him. His rigid cock pressed into her stomach, the hard steel digging insistently into the yielding softness of her body. She inhaled raggedly, shocked and awed by his size.

He muffled her soft gasp with his lips and rotated his pelvis. Grasping her tightly, he curved his fingers into the fleshy portion of her hips and ass. He rubbed his erection roughly against the cloth concealing her sex, urging her into a slow rhythm that kindled the rising heat.

She moaned in ecstasy and was grinding against him when an unexpected realization hit. Her desire came without the need for blood, an impulse to bite at his skin, or a need to tear at his flesh with her nails. She possessed no compulsion to bestow pain, to fight for dominance. Tears of relief and excitement burned her eyes.

This was how it was to kiss without restraint, to experience pleasure without pain, excitement without fear. To let go and release the combustible fae sensuality she had kept so carefully contained for fear it would reveal in her the darkness of her kind and cement the fact that she was no better than those who repulsed her.

Eric trapped the tip of her tongue in his mouth and suckled gently. Hot wisps of fire streamed through her veins at the erotic display, sending waves of heat roaring throughout her muscles and increasing the liquid warmth and wetness pooling between her legs. His tongue flicked against hers, hot and silken as it moved back and forth in perfect harmony with his devilishly rolling hips.

She cried out when his mouth retreated, buried her fingers into his shoulders, and pressed against him, desperate to sate the unfamiliar ache that raged inside her body.

Eric basked in the absolute perfection of the woman in his arms. Runa was the epitome of what the Fates had intended man to lose himself in. Enticing and responsive, she was by far the most sensual and exotic female he had ever touched. She tasted as good as she smelled, with skin softer than the finest diamond dust.

He thrust against her, and she moved as he instructed, rotating her hips and bucking her rounded little ass in his hand while grinding her belly against his fully engorged cock. If they continued at this rate, he would lift her skirt, rip off her panties, and fuck her until he found the release his body was raging for.

"I want to take you right here, right now," he murmured, brushing his lips against her ear. "And you'd let me too, wouldn't you?"

Her chin fell back, and she whimpered. Wrapping her fingers in his hair, she pulled his head closer. The sound of her tiny cries inflamed him, so unexpectedly hushed and light, eager and expressive.

"Aye," he crooned, sliding his tongue along the shell of her ear and exhaling. "You would."

Her heavy sigh almost sent him over the edge, and he was forced to take control. He would be no better than the fae in the nearby room if he fucked her against the wall in front of anyone who might happen by. Uncovering her tiny body and discovering the pleasures that awaited him were something he wanted to experience alone. He also had other obligations to fulfill. He had to speak to Idona about tonight's happenings and meet his brothers.

Christ. his brothers.

They would ride him hard when he arrived at Matilda's with a sidhe in tow. Not that he blamed them. Every dealing with the blood-letting fae kind always resulted in trouble—or death—of some sort.

Pressing a soft kiss to Runa's temple, he eased off her body, keeping his hands in place until she regained her balance on wobbly legs. He frowned when she averted her eyes as if embarrassed, studied her bowed head, and experienced a pang of guilt.

Was she truly as she presented herself, more innocent than not?

"Are you truly only twenty tides young?"

She was unable to disguise her impassioned voice when she answered, "Actually I'm twenty-three tides old."

"Damn," he murmured. "You're just an aoretaa."

She peered up at him. "A what?"

"A child."

She lowered her head again and shrugged. "I'm not a child, believe me. Age is relative."

Suddenly reflective, he cupped her chin and forced her to look at him. "I'll ask you the same question in a century or two. Then we'll see what you have to say."

The sound of approaching footsteps reminded him it was best they leave, and he slipped his fingers under her arm. The entire fae compound was underground and consisted of winding hallways and doors designed to confuse and trap outsiders. He hurried to one of the exits hidden among the twisting ivy vines, called out his name, and announced his departure. The leaves and stems shifted, revealing a large oak door.

"Wicked." Runa looked at him and bestowed a cock-rocking smile that made his knees go weak.

He returned her smile and motioned to the exit. "Let's make haste, aiarya. There is much to do tonight."

She stepped through the door and into the dark. He lifted his head when he crossed the threshold, and stared at the sky. It was a clear night. Stars shone like miniature diamonds in the distance, lighting the sky.

"It's beautiful here."

He grinned at her obvious enthusiasm, pleased that she was interested in his home. "This way."

She scurried to keep pace as he led them through the thin wooded area surrounded by trees. "How do you travel?" she asked exuberantly, her eyes wide and sinful lips parted. "Yuviette told me you prefer pandemonium nightmares."

Pandemonium nightmares?

He frowned at the odd question, thinking it strange she would believe they used such ancient methods to travel. Ancient daemons and forest creatures kept them around for old time's sake, but otherwise...

He stopped his trek, disbelieving and stunned by the very real possibility Runa had been kept ignorant of how things evolved in his realm. Her reactions, mannerisms, and excitement all but confirmed the newness of her surroundings.

Eric gently turned her toward him. "What *exactly* have you been told about the Otherworld, Runa?"

"How do you mean?"

He grinned at her baffled expression, and the temper he found so bizarrely attractive resurfaced.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, Runa." He pulled her close and brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face. "You have no idea."

Baton Rouge, Louisiana
The Underground Ring of Zeronines the Warlock
Ruler of the Ring Tournament
Competitors' Lodgings

Raudan was a dead man.

As soon as Byron Morgianne retrieved Runa and returned her safely home, he was going to string the Haltija up by his fucking toes and bleed the useless bastard dry.

He shoved articles of clothing inside his duffel and stepped into the large walkin closet to collect daggers, .45s, silver and mystikal bullets, various clips for his Beretta, a sword, and his revolver. He slid the sword and daggers into casings along his belt, pushed the .45s into the holsters under each arm, and notched the Beretta and his revolver into place at his waist. He tossed the clips and mystikal items into the duffel and zipped it closed.

Taking a shaky breath, he attempted to find some semblance of inner calm.

A little over two decades ago, he had lived in the Otherworld full time as a mercenary. He didn't care which side the Fates deemed his clientele. Good or evil, light or dark—if the money was there, his motivation was there. Emotional detachment made it easy to work without guilt, to tackle jobs others passed on. It was what he was known for, what he was good at.

Until one tiny complication had come into existence and changed everything.

Dropping the duffel, he placed his hands on the door frame, bowed his head, and closed his eyes.

When his father had sent word about the newest addition to the Charon family twenty-three years ago, Byron had offered a half-assed congratulations. By then he had amassed a shitload of experience with his father's intense desire to procreate. Even still he'd done as protocol dictated, and traveled to the mortal world to meet his youngest sister on the following Samhain. And waiting just past the threshold of his father's building had been a stranger who had arrived shortly after Runa's birth.

The moment they had shaken hands, Byron knew what Raudan was. Purity had radiated from the Haltija's skin like encompassing electricity. Understandably, it had thrown him off. Only the descendants of the gods were protected by the keepers of their children—the Haltija. Yet there a Haltija had stood, protecting the child he felt the call for.

Byron's baby sister. A mortal.

Byron had stomped into the nursery after the odd introduction and peered into the decorated crib. A pair of large purple-tinted irises with golden centers had gazed up at him, seemingly trapped inside a flawless porcelain face. Even then her short tufts of hair were variegated and curled around softly tipped ears, giving her the visage of a cherished baby doll. She had studied him quietly for several long moments, blinking her doelike eyes as if she was sizing him up. Then she had gifted him with a gummy smile and a soft coo, extended her fat little arms, and clenched her chubby fingers open and closed.

Just like that, for the first time in his life, he fell in love.

Runa was nothing like their parasitic relatives. She deserved to live her life in happiness, cherished by those who loved and accepted her. Over the years, he had tried to ensure that, making the conscious decision to live in the mortal realm until she passed on to the next life. Unfortunately, the rest of the family wasn't as gracious or as thoughtful, and as the Fates would have it, their esteemed father had decided to keep her hidden away in a gilded cage. Yuless Charon forced everyone to keep Runa ignorant of the workings around her, absolutely sheltered in the dark—nestled away from the creatures he believed could do the most harm.

As if somehow it would spare her the same fate as her dam.

Byron slammed his fist into the door frame once, then twice, and sent chips of wood skittering across the floor. Shame burned like fire in his stomach and squeezed his heart like an unforgiving vise. He never should have entered Zeronines's tournament this Samhain, even with Runa's blessing. Her time was short enough as it was, and he had chosen to spend it fighting and contesting.

For sport.

"Byron?"

Lucian's voice freed him of his guilt-induced stupor, and he lifted his head, facing his best friend and constant companion. The last nygromancer daemon known to the realms resembled a mortal as closely as any immortal possibly could, but he was far more deadly, with the ability to conjure immeasurable magiks and the power to summon the denizens of Hades itself. Byron noted his observant black eyes were shadowed with concern.

Of course he is concerned, Byron thought, raking a trembling hand through his hair. Lucian cared for Runa too. It was impossible *not* to love her.

He bent at the waist to snatch the handles of his duffel. Runa couldn't wait any longer. Too much time had lapsed as it was.

"I'm ready."

Lucian strode into the room, voice composed and demeanor focused. "Where do you wish to transport first?"

"Raudan is waiting at Maxmillian's in New York. Do you know of it?"

"I do." Lucian nodded. "The lodging and shop of Maxmillian the Dwarf Tosser."

"We travel to retrieve him. Then we'll go to Matilda's."

"Why Matilda's?"

"It's the one place all travelers gather to peddle wares after a trek into the mortal realm. It's the place people will remember me best." He met Lucian's gaze and grumbled, "And it's the place the Draigen gather each Samhain."

"You have reason to believe a Draigen is responsible?"

"I have no idea who is responsible. But it's the best plan I could come up with in the past hour. She could be anywhere, Luca. If a Draigen didn't take her, they are the first who could discover who did. Besides, Colin Locke owes me a favor."

Lucian clasped Byron's arm in a display of support and to establish the physical contact necessary to bring Byron with him as he teleported. "We will find her, Byron, and we will bring her home."

Byron closed his eyes, bowed his head, and braced for the stomach-churning jolt that accompanied the surge of being moved from one point to another in a given instant. As he did, he said a hasty prayer that his friend was right.

# Chapter Seven

Matilda's Juke Joint *appeared* to be a normal bar. There were tables and chairs, a jukebox blasting brash heavy metal, and of course, the bar, complete with nifty little stools that swiveled.

It was the patrons Runa was having difficulty acclimating to.

Although she had seen each of the races on occasion, she had never been so close to so many in one place. Since her arrival at the bar some time ago, she'd seen daemons of various denominations, imps in a vast assortment of bright colors, a couple of male Lycae who oozed the inherent sexuality that made them so irresistible in the mortal realm, and a few vampires, all of whom were breathtaking beautiful—as well as absolutely deadly.

Eric had placed her at a corner table the moment they came inside, ordered her to cloak her appearance, and warned her not to run or else he would drag her back inside kicking and screaming. Before he'd worked his way to the bar, he had also insisted she keep quiet and wait for him. He had spoken briefly to the cyclops bartender, motioned at her table, and then disappeared into the back.

The creature's big black eye had remained on her ever since.

She wasn't complaining about the time alone. She needed to process everything. From the bargain she'd struck with a Draigen to learning the truth about this realm.

It was embarrassing to discover that the dimension wasn't the old Western version of *Bonanza* hell she'd always envisioned. The technological advancements and amenities more than exceeded anything she could have dreamed of back home. It made sense, considering immortals had been around since the dawn of time.

Or as Eric had summed it up so eloquently while driving a massive sports car that was a mash-up of a Mercedes and a Ferrari, "Edison wasn't responsible for crafting the first lightbulb any more than Franklin was for discovering electricity. They were just the recipients chosen to relay the concept – in your particular dimension."

So here she was, trapped in another dimension very much like her own, only more advanced and therefore exceedingly complicated. And here she was, in this dangerous haven of the netherworld, without the single person who could procure her well-being.

Raudan.

She knew what must be at the forefront of her guardian's mind, because she'd been thinking of it too. Without Raudan, her body would heal injuries slowly. If someone delivered the right punch or blow to her body, it would kill her.

Her fingers twitched involuntarily as if reminding her of the failing, and she lifted her injured hand. The cut oozed around the middle, but the edges had finally started crusting over. To her relief, Eric had been so preoccupied he hadn't seemed to notice her injury or her inability to heal immortally fast—yet.

"Damn it." She crammed her hand into her skirt.

She shouldn't give a shit what Eric thought. He had kept her here against her will instead of sending her home, and he had offered a half-assed excuse when she asked why.

Then there was his impulsive behavior.

Shoving her against the wall without her consent, kissing her until she couldn't breathe, brushing his magnificent body against hers and creating sensations that enticed her to react in a multitude of different ways...

Okay, that part wasn't a total negative.

"Hello, ma chère."

Runa glared at the source of the unwelcome interruption standing in front of her. He was dressed casually in jeans and a white dress shirt. His short blond hair was messy, and a thin layer of stubble shadowed his face. His looks screamed attractive human male, but his red-rimmed eyes didn't.

She didn't speak, nodding dismissively.

He snagged an empty chair and pulled it in front of her. Taking a seat, he spread his legs wide and rested his elbows on his knees. She looked to the bar, avoiding eye contact with her unwelcome admirer. The cyclops was still watching. He seemed displeased with her new companion, but he didn't intervene.

The intruder put his face in her line of sight. "Are you mute?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you hard of hearing?"

She narrowed her eyes, distorted her voice, and answered, "No hablo es Frencho."

He grinned, gripped the chair between his legs, and scooted closer. "What about English? It is, for the most part, a *multidimensional* language."

She shrugged and gazed around the bar.

"Disguising what you most want to hide will not work with me, lovely fae. I'm a guise daemon, and I can see everything"—he hesitated, and she could feel the weight of his stare moving over her—"perfectly."

She hit him with her best do-not-go-there glare. "What do you want?"

"Isn't that obvious? I want you."

"Sorry, Casanova, I'm taken."

"No, I don't believe you are."

He trailed a finger along her knee, and she ground her teeth together. The gift of touch was something that required express permission, and the daemon as shole hadn't said the magik word.

Just let it go. He's not worth the trouble. "I don't care what you believe. I'm taken. Go annoy someone else."

His hand moved up her knee, and she inhaled sharply, reminding herself that if she got into an altercation, it could very well be her last.

Keep the temper in check, clamp it down.

"Don't touch me," she warned. Turning her attention to the bar, she noted the cyclops was still observing but doing little else.

What the hell was he, a sick one-eyed voyeur?

She shifted her focus to the daemon when his fingers slid up her skirt.

"That's your problem." He leaned closer, purring thickly. "You need to be touched all over. Your body is begging for a good fuck."

"That may be." She clamped her hands into tight fists when her fingers started itching for the comforting weight of her daggers. "But you are *not* the one for the job."

"Why don't you withhold judgment on that until I'm nestled between those glorious thighs of yours?"

She peered across the bodies and heads crowding the bar and sighed, her shoulders sagging in disappointment when she didn't see Eric. The daemon snagged her attention once more when he flicked her garter.

"I'll remove your stockings with my teeth. Then I'll lick a trail up your legs. I can only imagine how delectable you'll be." He inhaled deeply, stroked her skin, and brushed a light flick against her panties. "Your cunt smells amazing."

That does it.

Runa kicked off her heels and reached for the toggles at her throat. She worked them free and tossed the cloak along the back of the chair. Then she dropped her bag onto the floor. She clutched the chair on either side of her thighs and shoved back with her left foot until she felt the corresponding *thud* that ensured her chair was fully supported against the wall.

Whatever Eric was doing was about to be interrupted. Not that she felt entirely bad about that. Leaving her out in the open and unattended was his mistake, not hers.

"You will, huh?" She dropped her false appearance and enhanced her glamour. Brushing her foot along his leg, she started a sinful path to his knee and stopped when the sole of her right foot rested on the chair between his legs.

"Yeah, baby. I will," he promised, his red-rimmed eyes glowing.

She grinned seductively, tightened her hold on the chair, positioned her foot to push off, and prepared for the impact her body was about to make with the wall when she sent his touchy-feely ass sailing across the room.

\* \* \*

"Colin to Eric. Come in, Eric. Do you think you can pay attention for just a goddamned minute?"

Eric's gaze drifted from the door to Colin. He scowled at his brother's annoyed expression, cursed under his breath, and nodded. The meeting was an important one, and he needed to focus.

Each tide one of the brothers met with Lenore, the Goddess of Divination. This tide Colin was the designated Draigen, and he was trying to share the wisdom she had imparted with the rest of his brothers. But it was difficult to keep focused when he had a one-track mind.

Eric couldn't think about anyone other than the fascinating girl waiting alone in the bar, much less concentrate on anything significant. He had never wanted *any* female like this. The minute they'd arrived in the parking lot, he had considered turning around and taking her home. He couldn't wait to strip her clothing away. To see what was hidden beneath. To hear her expressive whimpers and soft sighs in his ears...

"Goddamn it, Eric!" Colin snapped two fingers in front of his face. "Pay fucking attention! I want to get home at some point tonight."

I'm so fucked. "I'm listening."

Colin narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "The end of the mortal dimension is unavoidable at this point. Everything is occurring just as Lenore said it would. The artifacts necessary to open the portals between the realms were combined sometime during the evening. So from here on in, interdimensional travel is a given. No more one-night-a-year bullshit. I know, I know, all of you are as ecstatic as I am."

"Damn." Gabriel slammed his shot of vodka before he gasped, "Can't we try to retrieve the artifacts, separate them, and close the portals?"

Colin shook his head. "No, the damage is done. The merging of the races has begun. Soon all of the other nifty little apocalyptic happenings will follow suit."

Marshall brought his feet off the table with a heavy *thud*. "I know I've been out of the loop with all the shit I've had going with Isobel, but the last I heard, it was only rumored."

"Not anymore." Colin poured himself another shot. "When the portals opened, Willow Miloradovic departed to retrieve the baby born of her brother."

Gabriel's face distorted as he grimaced. "A child conceived by a vampire and a Lycae? The shit is going to stain the walls."

Colin nodded, poured another shot, and passed it to Gabriel. "And Bridon is traveling to retrieve the child before Willow can."

"So the sister of the Lycae who died is going head-to-head with the brother of the vampire who died. How poetic is that?" Marshall remarked.

"It's fucked-up. That's what it is." Nox motioned for Colin to pour him a shot. "I feel for Willow. Can you imagine having a fucking leech for a niece or nephew? And to top the shit, Bridon thinks Willow's the reincarnation of his Fated. She'd better get in, get the bloodsucking Cabbage Patch, and get the fuck out."

"What about Bridon?" Trace snapped, openly defending the vampire king who was his close friend. "I'm sure his kind won't be excited by the prospect of their king having puppies for children."

Colin slapped the bottle on the table. "Let's report on the night's workings so we can get the hell out of here. I caught up to our friend Dynexter in Tennessee. He was peddling nifty little sex spells that absorbed the life from his clients. He has been handed over to the keeper at the gates of Tartarus."

Nox went second. "I nabbed that bastard Academus in New Orleans. He was using a unicorn horn to charm and lure innocents. After I discovered the bodies of the girls he had accumulated in the cabin in the middle of fucking nowhere, I tore out his throat and severed his head."

"Jesus." Marshall grimaced.

"The bastard won't hurt anyone else." Nox extended his glass and waited for another shot. "I got the horn. I'll return it to Idona."

Marshall went next, staring at Nox piteously. "I bested the black-arts witch we've been tracking. She was given over to Tartarus."

Gabriel sighed, disinterested. "I nabbed the portal daemon you sent me for. He's been safely escorted to Tartarus and is awaiting word from his kin."

Trace waved at his glass, waiting for Colin to bless it. He tossed his drink back and cleared his throat. "I went after the sidhe in London. She was bad as the rest of them, handy as fuck with glamour. I retrieved the blood-eating dagger and escorted her to Tartarus. Nox, I'll give you the cursed blade so you can pass it along to Idona. She's still pissed at me."

Everyone glanced at Dante briefly. It was his tide to relax, and they envied him the luxury. Then all eyes settled on Eric, who was angry and obviously disappointed. His brothers already knew he'd failed his task to procure Racheron's Horns. Due to this, each brother would have to up the ante and bust his balls to keep the mortal realm as clean from the influence of Hades's disciples as possible.

Eric shifted in his seat and pried his eyes away from the door. He had worked the details in his mind on the drive over, dissecting the conversation from every possible angle, and he still couldn't think of a single explanation that wouldn't make him seem like an idiot and complete asshole.

It was bad enough he hadn't gotten the job done.

He blurted out the first words that came to mind. "I went to rendezvous with Octavia Charon, and she sent her sister in her stead."

"Yeah, and?" Gabriel asked.

Eric pinched the crease between his eyes. How would his brothers react when they found out a sidhe female was waiting in the bar to be taken to their shared home because she could very possibly be "the one" for him?

They'll lose their collective shit. That's what they'll do.

"Oh, man." Nox groaned. "She bewitched you, didn't she? That's why you're so fucking twitchy."

"Not exactly." Eric snatched the bottle from Colin, poured a shot, and tossed it back.

"I'm still waiting." Gabriel folded his arms and arched an eyebrow.

"For Christ's sake, it can't be that bad," Dante said before his face shifted to an expression of dawning comprehension. "Oh, man. You fucked her, didn't you? Shit, Eric! What were you thinking? You know better!"

"I did *not* fuck her!"

Trace shuddered in revulsion. "You slept with a sidhe? It's not like you have problems roping in females, Eric. If you wanted to get laid, any of the nymphs or sirens here would have been more than willing to do you right. Goddamn, man, that's just... Yeah."

"What's going on, Eric?" Marshall asked with obvious concern. "It's easy to see you're all wound up."

"Of course he's wound up!" Gabriel thundered. "He's been taken for a ride by a sidhe. I've heard that shit can take centuries to get over! Once you go sidhe, you never go back. Does anyone remember that asshat Mortimer? One good lay from that bitch Cormilla was all it took. He was never the same."

Colin slammed his fist on the table. Snatching the bottle, he placed it in front of him. It was his table this tide, and everyone knew to shut the hell up. He stared at Eric and said, "Tell us what happened, Brother."

"Damn it." Eric raked his fingers through his hair, pulling on the heavy strands. "I honestly believed the girl was Octavia Charon." He hesitated, recalling Runa's frantic words of denial. "She tried to tell me who she was, but Christ, we were warned about the lengths that bitch would go to elude her punishment. When we arrived at the Unseelie Court, she dropped her glamour. For fuck's sake, she was masking herself as this back-ass ugly creature in an effort to *hide* her looks. That's when I knew she wasn't lying."

"Was Seevier not appeased?" Colin inquired. "Sidhe generally take the punishment out on a blood relative in the event the guilty is not accounted for."

Eric cursed softly when he envisioned Seevier's eyes and the way they had flashed with undisguised lust when he saw Runa. He took the bottle from Colin and muttered, "The bastard was appeared, all right."

Colin exhaled in relief, cracking a smile. "Then what's the problem? I know Racheron's Horns are gone, but we knew the mortal realm wouldn't last forever. Now it's about the war of souls, keeping the peace, and creating a level playing field."

Eric took another shot and forced it down before he answered. "It's a problem because the girl was terrified. And she didn't want to stay—"

Nox waved a dismissive hand. "I don't buy that, first time or no. Sidhe live for that kind of crazy shit. It's part of their nature. It's in their blood. They are traitors and blood letters, the entire lot of them."

"She isn't like that!" Eric knew his brothers would react adversely, especially Nox, but goddamn if it didn't rile the shit out of him. "She's only some twenty tides old, a mere aoretaa."

"What do you mean *she isn't like that*? When did you start defending sidhe?" Nox demanded, his gaze darting upward to meet Eric's. "For Christ's sake, Eric! You didn't take her? Tell me you didn't take her." When he didn't deny it, Nox raged on. "She's here, isn't she? You brought her with you! Goddamn it, Eric! She can't be *her*. For fuck's sake, she's a *sidhe*!"

"Shit, man." Trace shot him a look of sympathy. "That explains the ultrabright peepers you've had going all night. I thought you were wired or in need of a decent piece of ass. But this isn't a simple case of the beast searching for a little extra action, is it? She's your Chosen. You've finally found her."

"I don't know what she is." Eric lowered his head. He'd been asking himself the same question all night. "I couldn't leave her there. She couldn't have defended herself."

"Damn," Dante murmured. "A sidhe for your Chosen? The Fates must really hate you, Eric."

Nox snarled in outrage. "Would you listen to yourselves for a fucking minute? She can't be his. She's a goddamned sidhe fae! Has a millennium somehow managed to impair your memory—"

A loud crash from the bar brought Eric's head up as his fingers came out of his hair, leaving the long strands in disarray. Catcalls rang out from the other room, and voices intensified as a fight erupted.

Runa was out there.

Alone.

"Goddamn it!" Eric lurched from his seat and stumbled from the table. He heard his brothers' confused mumbling as they moved in behind him, and he yanked the door open.

Multiple onlookers blocked his path, and he shoved them roughly aside, getting angry looks and choice expletives hurled his way, but nothing more. No one was moronic enough to cross his path when his eyes were blaring neon. It was a universal do-not-fuck-with-owner warning signal.

Eric stomped to the people forming a ring around the combatants. Runa was facing off with a daemon who had completely turned and was at least three times her size. Her daggers were out, and her face was a study in concentration.

The daemon lunged, and she countered the movement by pivoting out of the way and delivering decisive slices with her weapons. So far the daemon had at least a dozen bloody wounds that oozed into his shredded shirt.

Eric felt a hand latch onto his shoulder, followed by Bernie's apologetic voice. "I'm sorry, Eric. I watched her like you told me to. But you know Elias. He's always looking for a bit of sport, and since he can see through glamour, he took a liking to the sidhe. I figured she wouldn't mind the attention. Most of her kind doesn't."

Eric's lips thinned as he watched Runa. "As you can plainly see, she did mind."

Trace moved to stand beside him for a better view. "*That's* her? I thought you said she was just a baby who couldn't defend herself."

Eric sighed and shook his head. Runa was beautiful, seductive, enchanting, ballsy, impulsive, and completely fucking reckless.

"I'm going to stop them—"

"Nay." Nox grasped his shoulder. "She's in our world now. There's no better time than the present for her to acclimate."

"She could be hurt," Eric growled, keeping his attention on the fight. Fates, but she was quick, dodging each move before the daemon could touch her, rebounding before he had the chance to take action.

"Nah." Dante chuckled and slapped him on the back. "She seems to have the upper hand. Besides, she's an immortal. The only way he can do any real harm is to sever her in half, rip off her head, or tear out her heart. What's the worst that can happen?"

## Chapter Eight

The daemon was one big-ass mamma jamma. As he charged her with hands extended, Runa cursed her volatile temper and the rash decision to plunge headfirst into a fight with a creature designed to pillage and destroy.

He lunged with horns lowered, and she pivoted on her heel, stepping back and diving to the left. Twisting her blades in her palms, she made thin cuts across his shoulders. He brayed in fury and came at her again, this time with clenched fists.

"You can't run forever, fae!"

She studied his feet and the momentum of his body, anxious to see where he planned to move before he pushed off. A daemon was more than capable of latching onto her. If not for Raudan's training, she'd have been pummeled already.

His weight shifted to the right, and she braced to move left, waiting until he took another deadly swipe before dragging her blades along his chest and then getting the hell out of the way. She moved close to the wall with arms extended, careful to maintain her center of gravity.

"All of this fuss from a sidhe," the daemon mocked. "You should be groveling before me, you fucking tramp!"

He continued charging, and each time she maneuvered effortlessly out of the way, rewarding his labors with new lines of crimson. Raudan had taught her how to weaken her opponent using blood loss, but the daemon was healing as fast as she delivered blows.

You can't subdue those who don't lose blood.

She had known they had an audience as soon as she kicked the chair and sent the daemon plummeting backward, but when massive shapes flooded her peripheral vision, she felt an outpouring of relief.

Eric had returned, and not a moment too soon.

She moved out of the way when the daemon propelled himself forward, stepping clear. She waited for Eric to intervene, and a pang of apprehension seared through her chest when he didn't move. Did he intend to stand there and watch while this asshole ripped her apart?

"Don't think you're saved, tramp," the daemon derided, tossing his head back and laughing. "The Draigen won't do shit for a sidhe."

"Don't call me a tramp," she demanded breathlessly. It couldn't be true. Eric had promised to protect her. He had given his vow at the Dark Court.

Two more swipes from the daemon and Eric still didn't move, standing immobile at the edge of the circle of spectators—*enjoying the show*.

So that was his intention! To take her from the sidhe court so he could manipulate her in exactly the same manner. Her heart ached at his betrayal and violation of trust. Fates, but the Draigen had been convincing! She had fallen for his act, hook, line, and sinker.

Damn it! How could she have been so naive?

Rage and sadness engulfed her, distorting her vision as her eyes blurred with tears. A fresh rush of adrenaline pumped into her system, fueled by anger. Netherworlders were all the same, every single one of them, and she was doomed to die here because she always maintained faith in others. She would never see Raudan, Byron, Yuviette, or her father again because of that shortcoming, and she had no one else to blame but herself.

"Does that bother you, tramp?"

In all her life, Runa had never given in to the taunts, degrading insults, or scheming devices intended to lure her into a death match. Raudan's first lesson was that by partaking in despicable blood frays, she was no better than those who instigated them. But none of that mattered now. In venturing to the bookstore under false pretenses, she had made her bed. Now it was time to lie in it.

"To hell with it," she muttered.

If they wanted a show, then so help her, she would give them one. She propelled her body off the wall with the natural agility she had been born with, moving just when the daemon thought he had her. She leaped off a stool beside the bar, turned her daggers in her palms, and brought the hilts up as the blades came down. She landed with a *thud* on the daemon's broad back. Gripping his heated skin with her thighs, she shoved the daggers into the flesh between his spine and scapula. She flexed the muscles in her shoulders, chest, and arms, straining with all her strength.

The daggers turned, locked into the skin and muscle, and created grips for her to hang on to. She latched onto them, keeping balanced as he tried to wrench her from his back.

"You fucking bitch!"

He changed tactics, rushing for the bar, and she relaxed her legs, prepared to yank the blades from his flesh and jump free. His hand caught her foot and pulled, keeping her flush with his back. He laughed and rushed backward. The impact of her torso between his and the wall was excruciating, and she nearly lost her grip on the heart snatchers. He heaved forward and then repeated the crushing blow. She whimpered, unable to constrain the sound of agony.

Keep it together.

When he lunged again, she fisted the daggers, braced for the impact she knew was coming. A distinct *snap* echoed through her skull as something broke in her side, and she bit back a scream. Calling on all the strength left in her heavy arms,

she rotated the dagger hilts and slipped the blades free. He grasped her throat when she attempted to leap to freedom, and her feet left the ground.

He carried her across the room and tossed her roughly against the bar. The counter caught her in the middle of the back, and she cried out. The wound in her ribs radiated ravaging fire, making each intake of air sharp and agonizing.

"That hurts, does it?"

She groaned and clenched her stomach muscles instinctively as he created a fist and brought it back. His crushing blow landed in the exact location of her injury, and she felt something give inside. The pain was dull, hollow, terrifyingly scorching, and she emitted a strangled cry.

The daemon lifted his fist again. "How about once more? Then we'll call it even."

Runa held her breath and, seeing an opportunity, seized it. She spun the dagger in her left hand, blade up and hilt down. The daemon's head shot back as the dagger slid into his chin, and the bolster met the intended target with a sickening *slap*. She held on to his shredded shirt and followed him down as he toppled over.

He collapsed on top of a nearby table, shattering and splintering the wood as they crashed heavily onto the floor. His fingers came up to surround her throat. She shifted her right hand, shoved her other dagger into his groin, and applied pressure.

"I wouldn't suggest that, hombre," she rasped with difficulty, tasting the metallic twang of blood creeping up her throat. "I'm sure they'll regenerate just fine. But damn, it'll hurt like a bitch. Don't you think?"

Bloodred eyes widened as they met hers, and he nodded, gurgling through blood and metal. "Truce?"

"Truce." She winced, as the movement from her diaphragm was sheer torture. "But I'm going to need this back."

She yanked the dagger free from his chin with a wet *slurp* and placed as much distance between her and the daemon as possible. The room started to spin, and she pressed the back of her hand to her lips, attempting to stifle the building nausea.

Goddamned mortality, she thought scathingly, will suck the life right out of you.

The wound ailing her was a mortal one. The pressure as blood seeped under the skin and pooled in her stomach was becoming notable. When the daemon had power driven his fist into her side, he had probably buried a few ribs into one or more of her tender organs.

A blur of massive black shapes came forward, and she swallowed the blood collecting in her mouth. Lowering her hand, she peered down and stared at her now-bloody knuckles.

Eric closed the distance, and she stumbled away, snarling, "Get away from me."

"What's your fucking problem?" the tall blond Draigen on his right asked, scowling with what she distinguished easily as disgust. "You won."

I won? She scoffed at his deluded praise. "I said get away from me."

She shoved past their enormous bodies and moved to retrieve her bag, unsure of what to do or where else to go. Without Raudan she wouldn't heal. All that was left was to wait to die.

"Runa, wait."

A hand gripped her shoulder, forcing her to turn. She cried out, reaching for her injured side. The motion upset her variable equilibrium, and a torrent of blood barreled from her stomach and exploded from her mouth. She bowed over in time to see the thick red liquid gush past her lips and splatter onto the polished wood floor.

"Fucking hell!" someone roared in horror.

She struggled to stand, shoving aside any lingering embarrassment over the unpreventable reaction from her body. She was beyond caring if they were disgusted or repulsed.

She was dying, and dying *hurt*.

A deep male voice demanded, "What's wrong with her, Eric?"

Followed immediately by another. "Who fucking cares?"

"Runa." Eric sounded almost...afraid. He cupped her bloody chin and forced her to meet his panicked stare. "What's wrong? Why aren't you healing?"

That is the million-dollar question, isn't it? She snatched her face from his grasp and stumbled toward her bag, finding it poetically macabre that he cared now. People always care when it's too late.

"Please, Runa." Eric clutched her arms and knelt to her level. His irises glowed green, and his expression was one of unadulterated terror. "Why aren't you healing? Is it a curse? A hex? Tell me!"

A curse and a hex, most definitely, she thought bitterly, trying to laugh at her private joke but producing a disturbing wheeze instead. Her stomach protested the blood collecting in her gut, and she shoved away from Eric's embrace in time to expel bright crimson against the wall. Agonizing pain crushed her chest, making it impossible to breathe, and she felt warm bubbles seeping from her nose.

"Just leave me alone." She wheezed, choking on the metallic blood that was slowly suffocating her. "Let me die in peace."

"What do you mean *die*?" Eric pivoted around, and when he saw her face, he paled. "Oh fuck." He changed tactics, screaming at her. "You will tell me what's wrong! Right fucking now, Runa!"

He tried to pull her into his chest, but she didn't feel his arms, snared in the despair of absolution. She was going to die. *Here*. In this strange place. She had always known she would die, but it seemed so unfair now. She was too young. There was still so much she wanted to do, to experience.

Unexpectedly, calm swept through her, soothing her, cocooning her. The despondency she felt evaporated, replaced by the purest sense of peace and serenity. As the feeling surrounded her, the ache of grief and sadness in her chest abated. There was only one person who provided that feeling. The strength of their bond engulfed her, reassuring and comforting her as the void between them vanished.

He was here. He had come for her.

"Raudan," she whispered before she broke down. Resting her head against the solid wall, she deteriorated into gut-wrenching sobs.

Raudan felt his bond with Runa restore the moment Lucian teleported them into Matilda's, and it didn't take long for him to ascertain that Runa was hurt. Haltijas shared the pain of those they protected. It assisted in healing their charges' injuries more efficiently.

His selde was suffering terribly.

"You son of a bitch," Byron howled and launched across the room when Raudan saw her.

She was bent against the wall with a huge male Draigen crowding her. Vivid red stains marked the floor and the wall at her feet, scattered outward in random specks. Byron tackled the male and took him to the floor as Raudan made haste to her. She lifted her head. When she saw him, her frail shoulders sagged, and she continued to cry.

"Just where do you think you're going?" A hand rested on his shoulder, and Raudan slid his fingers up, latched onto the wrist, and applied subtle pressure to bring the owner of the appendage to his knees.

"A fucking Haltija?"

Raudan stared into the face of the blond Draigen. Meeting shifting yellow eyes, he warned, "Come near my selde again, and I will kill you. Do you understand?"

"I hear you." The Draigen groaned. "And we're on the same team, just so you know."

Raudan snorted in distain, relinquished his grip, and hurried to Runa. He opened his arms, and she stumbled into them, smiling, though he knew it pained her to do so.

"You came for me." She sniffed back the blood in her nose. "I'm so sorry I didn't listen."

"Hush, selde." He pulled her into his chest and went to his knees in the same motion, carefully trailing his fingers along her body to locate the source of her pain. Splaying his fingers wide, he closed his eyes. "Let me concentrate. We will discuss this later."

He allowed the wholesome part of his being—a gift from the goddesses who had created his kind to protect their own from harm—to exit his body and enter hers. Then he said a prayer to the Fates as the light worked its miracle, and he

thanked them for the gift of time. Otherwise this child he loved as if she were his own would have passed over.

And he would have arrived too late.

Eric shoved the male who had tackled him across the room. There was only one thing he was thinking of, one person.

My Fated. My Chosen.

Runaeska Charon was his. He knew it in every facet of his being. All his petty doubts, fears, uncertainties, and even his damnable pride evaporated when he realized she could be lost to him.

His attacker recovered, stepped in the direct path between him and Runa, and leveled a gun at Eric's chest. The sidhe was large, standing nearly as tall as any of Eric's brothers. His blond hair was unkempt, his blue eyes were crazed, and he was carrying enough ammunition and weaponry to start a small war.

"If you move," the furious man snarled, "I'll kill you."

"That gun won't do shit to me, *sidhe*." He moved forward, eager to tear the fae to pieces, limb by sidhe limb.

"Back off, Eric! Stand down!" Colin roared as he walked into the semicircle of bodies. His voice changed as he addressed the sidhe, becoming impractically cordial. "I thought you had had retired from Otherworld dealings, Byron."

*Byron*? The name was familiar. Eric glanced around the room. The crowd was silent, watching the altercation unfold with a muted interest. He returned his attention to the sidhe, narrowed his eyes, and growled.

"I was retired." Byron thrust the gun at Eric. "Until someone brought my sister here and nearly killed her."

His sister? Nearly killed her.

Eric visualized the vibrant red blood—so stark against Runa's fair skin—coating the inside of her lips and bubbling out of her nose. When he pitched forward, the crushing impact of the bullet penetrating his chest sent him staggering back.

He recovered swiftly, baring his teeth. "I would not be so bold if I were you!"

"I told you not to move." Byron shoved the gun into a holster, produced a large revolver, and pointed it at him. "Do it again. I'd love nothing more than to stonker you good and proper."

"The girl is your sister?" Colin asked pleasantly, as if Eric hadn't just taken a direct hit to the chest from the psychotic sidhe bastard.

"Have you gone deaf? I just bloody said she is!"

"Then I suggest you lower the gun." Colin spoke quietly, the warning evident in his tone. "That Draigen you are so intent on killing just so happens to be her Chosen, and by association, our mutual brother." After a moment's pause, Byron snorted morosely and shook his head. "That's not possible."

"Why not? Each of us discovers our Chosen by chance. The Fates have the ultimate say. Races, divinations, and loyalties are not a factor."

Eric's attention went from the sidhe to Runa, and his chest heaved. Her head was tucked into the shoulder of the male who held her. Her eyes were closed, as if she was blessedly free of the pain she was tortured by moments before.

He stepped forward, and the force that ripped through his chest was extensive and debilitating. It slammed him backward. There was only one explanation for the power behind the impact. Magikally enhanced ammunition.

"Fuck me," he rasped as he dropped to a knee, gripping the floor so he didn't collapse on his face. He staggered, unable to find his balance as he struggled to remain upright.

His brothers lunged forward, snarling viciously, only to be set back by a blinding burst of light. Eric watched as a daemon stepped forward, lifted his hands, and displayed the bright blue brilliance that shone from his palms as his eyes began to glow silver.

"Do not make me invoke a shield, gentlemen," the daemon said. "I would prefer to keep this as amicable as possible."

"Tell me what is what is wrong with her," Eric demanded.

"Nothing is wrong with her," Byron retorted as if he found the question incredibly insulting.

Nox ambled into Eric's line of sight, grumbling and wringing out his wrist. "She must be descended from gods. She has herself a Haltija guardian."

Eric's gaze flittered to the male cradling Runa. Haltijas were descended from gods themselves, supremely powerful and nearly indestructible—even for immortals.

Why would a sidhe have one as a protector?

"We leave now," Byron instructed the daemon quietly.

"I won't let you take her!" Eric came to his feet.

Byron cocked the gun and fired, sending Eric to the floor once again. He rose again and then again, continuing onward, meeting each blast that sent him reeling, somehow finding his balance. He was fueled by one purpose, one goal, to get to *her*. The final round brought him to his knees, and he could no longer plant his feet. He swayed as if drunk, with limbs that were both weak and disoriented.

"Your kind mate for eternity, don't you, Colin?" Byron emptied the chambers, sending the spent casings bouncing along the floor, and slid fresh rounds into the revolver.

Colin lost his cool composure, growling, "Aye, when we have found our Chosens."

"And if your mate dies, you'll follow them into the ever after, won't you?" Byron locked the cylinder in place with a deft flick of his wrist. "That's why your race is nearly extinct."

"Aye."

"Then if you care for your brother"—Byron stepped back and stopped beside Runa and the Haltija—"you'll help him forget about my sister. She isn't meant for any immortal, especially him."

"She is mine!" Eric bellowed wildly, swaying back and forth as he attempted to rise.

"It's not bloody possible, Draigen!"

"When she searches her soul, she'll feel it as well." Eric wheezed as air escaped through the ragged holes across his chest. "We have been Fated to each other."

Byron shook his head. The fae's visage was no longer distorted by rage or fury. Instead he was studying Eric with a mixture of pity and understanding.

His voice echoed the sentiment. "You can't even begin to comprehend what I'm about to tell you, but when the reality hits, it's going to hit hard."

Eric cursed when he lost his balance and collapsed. They were taking her, and he couldn't stop them. Even the magikally impervious beast that drove him was subdued by the mystikal rounds, which had no doubt been crafted by the daemon in Byron's accompaniment.

"This isn't about Draigen or sidhe, past quarrels or revenge. My sister isn't like us. I would give anything to alter that truth, but I learned a very long time ago you have to accept that which you cannot change." Byron met Eric's pained-laced stare and said quietly, "My sister is mortal. *Runa is mortal*."

Then they disappeared.

She was gone.

## **Chapter Nine**

New York, Central Park Six weeks later

Runa watched Yuviette glide across the way with two double mocha lattes in hand. Her dark red hair fell loose in long waves to her hips, and her vivid hazel eyes shone. Her clothing was carefully pieced together, the expensive tan camel coat matching her boots perfectly—each article from one well-known designer or another.

"He's here, Runa. On the edge of the trees, to the left." Yuviette passed her a cup while taking a seat on the blanket.

Runa sighed and placed the coffee in her lap. She didn't ask who *he* was. She knew exactly whom Yuvi spotted among the trees. Not that it would be difficult to notice Eric. He was a walking personification of sexual enticement and extraordinary good looks.

Good looks that had nearly gotten her killed.

"Will you ever give the guy a break?" Yuvi turned her head, sending waves of scarlet cascading around her shoulders. "I was seriously gung ho about your decision to make the poor bastard suffer for an eternity, but jeez. He's been coming to our realm every single day, for what, the last four weeks? For a Draigen, that's really saying something. What's it going to take?"

Initially when Eric hadn't come around following her trip to the Otherworld, the rejection had hurt more than Runa cared to admit. After he had proclaimed her as his Chosen in front of the gods and everyone at Matilda's, she'd at the very least anticipated an apology or some gesture of guilt for his unforgiveable conduct. Then she reminded herself that distance between them was for the best. The circumstances made them incompatible. Not to mention, she couldn't exactly trust him. Males of worth didn't allow their mates to be bloodied and beaten to a pulp.

It simply wasn't meant to be, no matter how she longed for him. Even if the indelible impression of their short time together was something she couldn't forget and had made those first weeks back in the mortal world *hell*.

She couldn't eat since food tasted like cardboard. She couldn't sleep because when she did, she saw Eric's face. She couldn't train with Raudan because the experience was a bittersweet reminder of her time with a Draigen who had captivated her entirely. She obsessed about Eric, unable to keep him off her mind,

and became resentful of the man chosen by the Fates to sate this uncontrollable need within her.

Because she couldn't have him.

A deep-seated finality took root when she accepted that simple truth, and it allowed for a hollow amount of comfort. She knew that by staying away, Eric had accomplished two very important things: he had eased the pain of their brief time together by giving her distance to forget, and he had allowed himself a probable future that would span more than one lifetime. Although he had betrayed her, the forgiving portion of her nature wanted that for him. She needed to know when she was gone, he would remain.

But just as she accepted her lot in life, just she'd made peace with the fact it wasn't meant to be...he was there.

The first time she had seen Eric outside her father's building four weeks ago, her heart had plunged into her stomach, and the intense chemistry between them had come rushing back. Instead of fear or anger, bitterness or outrage, she'd remembered his taste, his encompassing warmth, his throaty voice whispering sensual promises into her ear.

And Fates help her, she'd wanted to experience it again.

She had stood rooted to the spot, watching in a hazy detachment as he stepped into the traffic and walked in her direction. Up until that point, she hadn't realized she'd forgiven him for his past failings and had become inexplicably drawn to him as those Fated to each other were intended to be. Then, at the last possible moment, she had come to her senses and rushed back into the building.

The look of dejection in his face still ate at her, but Eric needed so much more than she could offer. He deserved someone who could give him an eternity. It didn't matter if her heart skipped a beat every time she knew he was so temptingly close. If anything, her volatile emotions made her more determined to stay the course.

"When you come off cloud nine, just let me know. I'll be sitting here hawk eyeing that outstandingly fabulous-looking Draigen staking us out in the trees."

Runa felt her face flush in embarrassment. "I didn't ask him to come here, V."

"But he can't *not* come to you, right? That's how it works. Like two little magnets you are, drawn together through this dimension or the next." Yuvi exhaled in bliss. "It's so romantic. I wish someone would dote on me like that. And don't forget, he is your Chosen, Runa."

"He might have been," Runa murmured whimsically, "in another life, perhaps."

Yuvi lowered her cup and gave her a scathing look of annoyance. "Please don't start with that self-sacrificing crap. It's depressing. There are alternatives if you're distancing yourself from him to be a modern-day martyr. I might not be able to make you immortal, but I'm confident that I can give you one hell of a boost of longevity."

"Don't, Yuvi. Not today, please."

"You're going to have to talk to him at some point. Hell, if you don't want him, I'll take him. Do you think he'd be interested in an exceptionally powerful volva sorceress? Or do I have to be chosen by the Fates to bring something to the table?" Yuvi crinkled her brows and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "What if I told him I was kick-ass in the kitchen? Do you think that would work? The longstanding belief is that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Of course, if he's not receptive to that. I could mix a love brew."

"I get the point, okay?"

"Then give the guy an opportunity to explain himself. Don't tell me you're still pissed the pitiful, misguided soul thought you were immortal?" A wicked glimmer flashed in Yuvi's eyes, and she grinned mischievously. "My sources tell me that you weren't too shabby taking down that daemon asshole in Matilda's. If you'd been an immortal, you'd have owned him."

Runa tried to quash the smile forming by attempting to scowl and failed miserably.

"I see your wicked little grin! Don't try to pull one over on the master. I know you too well. Besides, when it's this close to Christmas, you're always a sucker."

"I am not a sucker." She glared at Yuvi, and her friend shrugged.

"Go ahead and lie, and no, I'm not seeing your future. I don't have to. You can tell me you prefer Samhain and the drab costumes to peppy Christmas cheer. But I see the way your eyes twinkle when the decorations go up each year, and I know about your secret obsession with *A Christmas Story*, which is actually kind of pathetic..."

"Don't bash *A Christmas Story*. It's a family classic for a damned good reason," she grumbled and made a mental note to hide her DVD as soon as she made it back to her bedroom.

"So are you?"

"Am I?"

"Still mad at him for thinking you were an immortal?"

Runa shrugged, attempting to pacify Yuvi while denying the enormity of her feelings. "I'm not angry he thought I was immortal, but his actions revealed what kind of person he is. That is exactly why a future between us would never work. He stood there and watched that daemon beat me down, V. He wasn't concerned until after the fact."

"But he was concerned, right?"

"Would vou lav off?"

Yuvi groaned dramatically. "I think that's my problem. I need to get laid in the worst way. Hey, do you think that yummy brother of yours would be up for some slightly rough casual sex? The things I could do to him..."

Runa squirmed at the unwanted imagery. "Don't ask me about having sex with Byron. It's disturbing. Besides, he's so determined to find Octavia he wouldn't be of any use to you anyway."

"That's so hot. I can picture him all pimped out, ready to kick ass and take names. He's wickedly sexed already, but with a smidgen of loyalty and devotion?" She sighed at Runa's warning glare. "Okay, no Byron. What about Eric? Does he have any single brothers? Why don't you go ask for me? I'm sure he won't mind the pleasure of your company. Ask him if we can double!"

Runa moved the cup into her left hand and palmed her forehead with her right. Damn Raudan and his last-minute Christmas shopping. It left her alone with Yuvi for *far* too long.

She was laughing.

It was the first time he had seen Runa smile in weeks, and the sight warmed Eric, combating the chilly winter air. He moved closer to the edge of the trees, enjoying the peace her nearness brought. His only reprieve in the last six weeks had come when he returned to her, remaining so close yet so far.

Learning of Runa's mortality had been a shock. He couldn't deny the crushing weight that had settled in his chest when he discovered the true reason she didn't heal as an immortal did. However, dealing with the caustic repercussions that had followed was beyond devastating. In those precarious first weeks, he had torn apart the Erinyes' archives, desperate for answers of any kind. Through all his sorting, flagging, and page tearing, he had discovered a few cryptic pages that indicated children conceived of a mortal and an immortal were a rarity. But he had found little else.

When the ledgers weren't forthcoming, he'd visited Lenore and demanded a glimpse of his and Runa's future. She had turned him away with a soft smile and a firm hand, offering cryptically, "She is blessed by light. A positive omen if ever there was."

Whatever that fucking meant.

After days of reflective contemplation, he had accepted the harsh yet undeniable truth. Unless Runa chose to become a netherworld creature who was made and not born, she would remain mortal and eventually die.

There was nothing he could do.

"I figured I'd find you here."

He didn't turn to acknowledge Colin, studying Runa as she lowered her face to her palm and shook her head. He strained to hear her laughter, hoping to perceive the sound of her happiness, and clenched his jaw when he didn't.

"Eric, how long are you going to do this? If you have chosen this future, why not go to her? Enjoy the time you have together."

He wanted to rage at his brother, to tell him to return home to his Chosen and leave him in peace. But it was a fair question, wasn't it? He tore his attention away from Runa and met a blue-green gaze that was very much like his.

"I've heard her quietly spoken whispers. She believes me no better than those in the court I removed her from. She both detests and fears me."

"And that's understandable, isn't it?" Colin stared past the barren branches and studied Eric's mate in the distance. "She is young, and the circumstances that brought the two of you together were unexpected. You can't fault her insecurities, but you can help her overcome them."

"And what would you suggest?" Eric snapped as he grappled with his unstable temper. "She doesn't want to see me."

"You don't know that. Talk to her, Eric. It's not that complicated."

"She hates me."

"She does not."

If only that were true.

He didn't blame Runa for the betrayal she felt or for the anger. He had stood idly by as the fucking daemon assaulted her, which was completely inexcusable. He detested himself for being more concerned about how his brethren perceived him than how she did that night. His behavior at Matilda's had not been befitting a Fated male. Runa was meant to be the most important being in his life, the one he cherished above all else, but because of him she had nearly died.

Should have torn Elias apart and left the pieces scattered about in warning.

"Go home to Aonia, Colin," Eric said, knowing where he would choose to be if the roles were reversed. "I'm sure she doesn't appreciate your frequent absences."

"Nia understands, believe me. I am here with her blessing. She's worried about you as well."

"Can't you give me a moment's tranquility? Leave me in peace, Brother. *Leave me be.*"

"Since I knew you would continue with the same train of thought, I've agreed to a most humble request. Someone would like an audience with you. I hope you don't mind, Brother."

Eric narrowed his eyes and turned as a throat cleared.

Raudan Dalmatica.

The first task Eric had undertaken when he returned to the mortal realm was to learn everything about his mate, including the identities and pasts of those most instrumental in her life. It had been an easy enough feat, with one notable exception.

The Haltija.

"When did the two of you become friendly?" Eric asked sardonically. "Or have you been taking my personal business into your own hands now?"

Colin answered, "When it became apparent you wouldn't traverse the threshold on your own, I decided a little push couldn't hurt."

The Haltija snorted with undisguised distain. "He has surpassed the threshold, Colin Locke. Only he has done so from a distance. For future reference, stalking is a crime in this dimension."

"Is it even possible to stalk your Chosen, Raudan?" Colin grinned, patting Eric on the shoulder in a gesture of solidarity. "She seems to take comfort in his presence, wouldn't you agree?"

"She does, even if she does not yet realize it. I would not have agreed to meet with him otherwise. Byron will be none too pleased when he learns of my decision."

Warily, Eric questioned, "Your decision?"

"When Runa returned home, she became withdrawn and detached. She didn't seek out the things that once brought her joy or comfort." Raudan's piercing amber eyes glowed gold. "Until she saw you again."

Hope welled in his chest. "You're certain of this?"

"I cannot ascertain the will of the Fates, and I do not know the power they hold over Chosen couples. Yet...I adore my selde. I have since the first moment I held her in my arms. That is why I have come to you."

"I don't understand," Eric murmured hoarsely, deterred by Raudan's decisive response. "What is it that you want?"

"Your brother tells me that when you find your Chosen, you live for no other purpose. Is that true?"

"It is."

"Then I want the same thing that you do. Runa craves stability in her life, and she needs someone who doesn't view her mortality as a weakness or a detriment. Do you understand?"

He nodded. "I understand."

And he did understand, implicitly. Nox, Gabriel, and Trace had warned him to stay away from Runa. They knew that once he mated his Chosen and consummated the bond, he would follow her no matter where she chose to go—be it in this life or the next.

"Purchase my selde a Christmas present that will please her to no end, and do so quickly. I wish you to take her to a place away from here that is hidden and protected." Raudan narrowed his eyes in warning. "So long as it is a place that will not see her harmed. But prepare yourself, for I will not forewarn her of the arrangement, and she may or may not be a willing participant."

"Why wouldn't you tell her?" Colin openly disapproved of the decision. "We don't keep secrets from our mates. It's a bad habit that is best never started."

"I am her guardian, and I have my reasons." Raudan glared at Colin, then turned to Eric. "Runa might have been distracted by the pain she experienced during your encounter with Byron, but her ears continued to function perfectly. She

is well aware of the consequences should she allow a relationship to flourish between you. And she refuses to allow you to sacrifice your immortality for her."

"She turned away from me when I came for her because she fears for *me*?"

"You didn't realize?"

"No." He exhaled slowly, shaking his head.

Raudan scowled. "Then why have you stayed away for so long? I assumed it was self-preservation."

"I believed she hated me."

Eric swiveled around and studied Runa. She wanted him too. That changed everything.

"All you need to do is show her the prize is worth the sacrifice. That shouldn't be too difficult," Colin offered encouragingly.

Raudan's exaggerated exhale stifled Eric's exuberance. When Eric turned to face the intimidating Haltija, the man appeared contrite, bordering on heartbroken.

"I'm afraid it will difficult, especially for my selde." A determined shift of his jaw erased his wavering facade. "I have conditions I expect you to agree to before I'll do this. If you accept my terms—"

Eric interrupted him before he could finish. "Name them."

## Chapter Ten

When Runa's voice broke through his chaotic thoughts, Raudan peered over the multiple racks of clothing and offered an apologetic smile.

"Forgive me, Runa. What did you ask?"

She frowned playfully and crinkled her eyebrows in the manner she had adopted as a child. "I asked why you wanted to eat so early. You're not leaving me with V to go shopping again, are you?"

He forced a thin smile. "I want to eat before the crowds rush to the trough."

"Okay, if you say so."

She returned her attention to shopping, sorting through the racks.

Someone thrust against him, and he turned. He glowered at an old crone and her chatty compatriots, and they scurried away, breaking apart as the influx of people in the middle aisle forced them to separate. Christmas was a strange time in the mortal realm. The holiday brought out the best and the worst in people, in all facets of life. For every individual who wanted to help his fellow man, there was another waiting in the rafters to steal his wallet.

Another person bumped him, and he bit back a growl. "I am going to be across the aisle, selde. But I will be watching."

"M'kay," she responded absently, oblivious to his plight.

She is going to be the death of me.

He moved across the way and reclined against an empty wall. Focusing on Runa, he continued to validate his recent decision. She needed to distance herself from her toxic family. It was something Raudan had wanted for her early on. Yuless Charon was a consistently absent parental figure. He mourned the loss of her mother so much that he didn't want to be close to anything that reminded him of her. Including the child she had left behind.

Then there were the notorious Charon siblings.

The oldest, Genovia, didn't reside at any of the Charon residences, making the smartest decision of her life by escaping her family permanently. Next in line was Byron, who loved Runa unconditionally but was absent for extended periods of time when taking random jobs in the mortal realm.

And of course there were the terrible four—Yuliee, Serena, Milessa, and Octavia.

Raudan had never understood their hatred toward Runa, as it started when his charge was just a baby. Eventually the sisters left the Charon upside residence and had taken to the mound belowground to escape the family's anomaly, leaving Runa completely isolated. But he had always been there, ensuring she was never completely alone, and he had always intended to be—until he had discovered something astounding and horrifying while healing her injuries weeks ago in the Otherworld.

Their connection was fading.

For the first time in his existence, he wanted someone else to be there to care for his ward after he was gone. His selde—the daughter he would never have.

Runa hadn't begun to notice the division. Her emotions were unstable, and too much had occurred in such a short period of time. He was also certain Eric's presence had masked the void, shadowing the increasing rending as their bond dissipated.

It was intended to be a blessing that Haltija felt little emotion, and even now he didn't know what it was that made him love her so. There was something special about the mortal child he had raised, something he intended to unearth while she fulfilled her destiny.

She lifted her tiny head, as if sensing his chaotic thoughts, and her lavender eyes flickered as her gaze drifted aimlessly around the room. When she saw him, she grinned and arched an eyebrow. His chest ached, and he felt the crushing pain that came with the knowledge he was already being forced to let go. He had no choice but to place her into the hands of another. The man the Fates had chosen to cherish and protect her.

He loved her too much not to.

\* \* \*

Raudan is acting weird.

At first, Runa had attributed his behavior to crazed holiday shoppers. Raudan detested crowds, and the mentally challenged people were out in force this year. Then they went for an early dinner, and she knew something was terribly wrong.

When Raudan asked for the check, she noticed he hadn't touched his food; everything was exactly as it had been delivered to the table, only shuffled around the plate.

Uneaten food was definitely un-Raudan-like.

Back at home, Runa pushed aside her lingering doubts as she put away her purchases and slid the presents she'd chosen to the back of her closet. She ran her fingers along one in particular—a long silver box with a big red bow on top—and smiled when she pictured Byron opening her gift.

Her brother *loved* his toys, and the hand-forged sword was right up his alley.

A knock was accompanied by Raudan's deep baritone. "Runa, may I come in?"

"Yeah!" she called out and flipped off the light. She hoped his mood was improved as she stepped from the closet. He stood at the door and appeared distracted, almost angry. He had not improved.

He seemed...worse.

"Is something wrong?"

"I need you to dress in something warm, slacks and a sweater perhaps."

"Why?" She peered down at the blouse and skirt she'd worn shopping. "Are we going somewhere?"

"It's a surprise, Runa."

She wasn't sure she believed him, but she moved to do as he asked. She returned to the closet, flipped the switch, and flooded the area in soft white light. She changed quickly, choosing black wide-leg slacks, a black cashmere sweater, and her matching Frye engineer boots. She snatched her red peacoat as she turned off the light. After shoving her arms into the slightly belled sleeves, she pushed the big black buttons into the allotted holes.

"Will this do?"

"Perfect."

She peered up as she buttoned the coat, and to her relief, Raudan seemed more relaxed. Maybe he did have a surprise. It would explain the tension and his lack of focus. She slipped her wallet into her coat and went to the dresser to retrieve her daggers.

"You will not need those, selde. Not tonight."

She stilled and turned to meet his unwavering gaze. Raudan never stopped her when she went for her heart snatchers. *Never*. It was his insistence that kept her armed everywhere she went.

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive." He opened the door and smiled, gesturing to the hallway. "After you."

She stepped past him, ill at ease and wary. Something was wrong, very wrong. She had never doubted Raudan before. She had trusted every command and order he had ever given her.

Until now.

\* \* \*

"Is that the last of it?" Marshall shoved another bag through the blackish purple vortex that swirled and distorted along the edge.

"I don't know. Ask her!" Eric grumbled.

An abrasive voice filled the air. "There's one more! And make sure she gets this one!"

Yuviette reappeared with another shopping bag. Thrusting it at Marshall, she studied the portal she had created minutes before. She touched the outer edge with

her finger and traced the flickering circumference. It didn't waver but was strong and unyielding.

"Damn," she purred, "I'm good."

Eric turned away before he said something he'd regret. Annoying as she was, the witch was good, very fucking good. She alone had created a barrier that mortals couldn't see in Central Park, scryed with Colin to pinpoint the exact location of Locke Manor, *and* created a portal to transport Runa through.

Now that the logistics were out of the way, it was time for the hard part—bringing Runa home. He wasn't pleased with the secrecy. It seemed wrong that each time his Fated crossed the dimensions it would be by force. He cursed in his native tongue and raked a hand through his mussed hair. It was a necessary evil *and* one of Raudan's terms.

"You're as bad as Runa." The witch poked him in the arm. "Trust me, this will all work out. Raudan got my stamp of approval before he came to you, stud muffin. They don't call me Yuviette the Seeing because I guide the blind."

As she rummaged around her massive purse, her entire upper torso appeared to vanish inside the bag. She found what she was looking for, surfaced, and thrust a thin box into his hands. Eric flipped the plastic box over and stared at the cover.

"A Christmas Story?" he asked dumbly.

"Runa *always* watches *A Christmas Story* on Christmas. It's a tradition." Yuviette snickered and snorted. "Better you than me, bud!"

Taking a step back to the portal, he handed the box to Marshall and muttered, "As soon as you get home, get me the SliverCast version of this."

"A Christmas Story?" Marshall cackled and rattled the box.

"Don't start." Be damned, but he was nervous. By night's end, his Chosen would be settled inside his home, nestled securely in his room.

In his bed.

The thought of Runa moving against him in the hallway flashed through his mind, and his body reacted as it always did. His mouth went dry, his sac drew tight, and his cock rose to full mast. A shudder of raw sexual need coursed through him, desire, want, and lust coming full circle. For weeks, he'd envisioned her beneath him—her body open to his touch, her luminous skin glistening with shimmering, diamondlike beads of sweat as he tormented her in all the ways she'd tortured him in his dreams. He would part her thighs, nuzzle her skin, and explore every single inch of her.

He couldn't wait to taste her again.

"They're almost here," Yuvi informed him excitedly. "I have to skedaddle!" She tugged on his shirt. "Just remember, Runa is one of the most curious fae you're likely to meet. It's a blessing and a curse."

She pulled away, walked into the trees, and disappeared into the darkening night.

"That's one weird witch," Marshall said. "I'm going back to the manor. I don't want Isobel snooping around when you bring your mate home. Nox, Trace, and Gabriel will be bad enough."

"Thank you, Marshall." Eric extended his hand, and his brother took it. "For everything."

"No problem, man. Glad to be of service."

Eric watched Marshall vanish into the vortex before he turned and combed shaking fingers through his hair. He recognized Runa's voice in the distance, and the sound caused every muscle in his body to go taut and then shudder.

This was it.

Their time had finally come.

## Chapter Eleven

"Raudan, tell me what is going on!" Runa struggled to keep her voice steady. Since they'd left the building, he had been almost frightening in his intensity. When he didn't respond, she stopped walking, planted her feet, crossed her arms, and openly defied him.

"We are not there yet, Runa."

"I'm not going anywhere with you. Not until you tell me what is wrong. You're not telling me something. I can *feel* it!"

"Very well. Step over here so we can speak privately." He indicated an expanse of trees to the right.

She complied and stepped inside the cover of multicolored leaves and sparsely covered branches, fully prepared to pivot around and lash out at her guardian. She stumbled when she glanced at the shadow standing in front her. Eric stood only a couple of feet away. He met her eyes, and she saw a promise of some kind within his stare.

As if he had expected to find her here.

Large hands enclosed her arms from behind and turned her numb body slowly.

"Raudan?" she whispered his name as the unbelievable reality started to sink in.

Eric was here because somehow Raudan had planned this.

"Listen to me, selde. I've done something you may never forgive me for, but you need to know I do so only because I love you. I hope that, given time, you can find it within your heart to forgive me."

Runa had often imagined how Raudan would reveal he cared for her. But none of her daydreams had yielded this result. She didn't want to know he loved her like this. Never like this.

She stared into his determined dark brown eyes and whispered, "What have you done?"

"I have arranged for you to go with Eric. You are Fated, Runa. You need to be with the one person the gods have chosen for you."

"I can't go with him!"

"You are going back with him, tonight."

She shook her head, struggled to break free, and wriggled loose from Raudan's grip. "I can't go back there again! I won't! Do you remember what happened last

time? He nearly got me *killed*, Raudan! You almost didn't arrive in time. You said so yourself!"

"It won't be like that," Raudan rebuked firmly, speaking with total confidence. "Eric has given me his oath on the matter, and he is bound to his word."

"You will not make this decision for me. This is my life. My life! You can't determine my future!"

"Nay, you're wrong, Runa. It's my life too. I also have a say." Eric's soft exhale bristled against her nape as his hands rested on her shoulders.

The breath left her lungs in a painful lurch.

Dear God. They were serious.

She went for her daggers, and her chest heaved. Now she knew why Raudan had said she didn't need them. He had this planned all along.

She latched onto her only hope, hefting her chin with a purposeful arrogance. "Byron won't allow this. He's returning home with Luca tomorrow. He'll come for me, Raudan. You know he will."

Raudan released one of her arms, slid a hand inside his jacket, and produced a weathered envelope. She glanced down, noting the broken black wax along the edge. Her stomach sank.

The Morgianne seal.

"Byron won't be coming home for Christmas this tide. He isn't willing to take the risk of losing Octavia's trail by allowing it to go cold. He won't know you're gone. No one will. As far as everyone is concerned, you are returning with me to visit old friends who live abroad."

She stared at the stranger before her in disbelief, amazed at the complete change in the man she viewed as a father. "Who are you?" she asked in a hollow voice.

"I apologize, Runa," he answered with gravity, averting his eyes. "This isn't easy for me, but it is necessary."

Raudan extended the envelope to her, and when she reached for it, she felt something cold clamp around her wrist. She stared dumbly at the intricate golden bracelet surrounded by Raudan's dark hand, the shimmering metal stark against his chocolate-colored skin. Comprehension struck swiftly, then alarm. The letter drifted from her suddenly limp fingers.

A slave band.

They were extremely rare, kept only for extreme circumstances. The wearer was bound to the person holding the key. They could not defy, harm, or run from their keeper without experiencing unbearable pain.

"No, Raudan!" she snarled, growing cold at his impassive face. She swallowed and blinked back tears. "Who has the key?"

Eric's mouth brushed against her ear. She heard him inhale quietly before he rasped, "I do, aiarya."

She narrowed her eyes at Raudan. "I'll hate you for this. You know that."

"I do, and it pains me more than you can ever know." He glanced away from her rage-filled gaze, his normally confident and strong voice breaking. "I love you, selde. I wish you happiness in your new life. Good journey."

He kissed her forehead before releasing her abruptly. Once he'd pivoted around, he stepped from the trees. She stood in a daze, watching through a thin sheen of tears as his large body grew smaller and smaller until he disappeared from sight.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Eric gripped Runa's trembling shoulders and turned her slowly. "Show me *your* face, Runa." It had been weeks since he'd seen her true form; the dark strands of limp hair dangling from her shoulders were a stark reminder of what beauty lay hidden beneath.

Her impossibly long eyelashes drifted to her alabaster cheeks as her hair brightened into the vast array of colors he remembered, the strands wavy and thick. Her skin lightened, appearing to glow from within, and her body shifted from tall and gangly to petite and delicate. He inched closer, touching her silken hair and then trailing his fingers along the indention of her spine until his palm encompassed the small of her back. He placed his nose to the top of her head and inhaled deeply.

She smelled intoxicating, like fresh, clean linen left to dry in the summer sun. He tilted her chin upward, anxious to see her eyes, and smiled when he discovered they were closed.

"Look at me."

She didn't immediately, hesitating until her lips parted and she gasped quietly as if pained. Her lids fluttered, and she stared up at him, revealing pools of golden violet. They were as beautiful as he recalled, with spools of stringed gold fading into liquid lilac. He lifted his hands to cradle her face and twined his fingers into the soft hair on either side of her neck, brushing his thumbs over the outline of her jaw.

"You're so beautiful."

"Don't."

"Don't?"

"Don't...force me to do things."

"I haven't forced you to do anything."

She gawked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Then her temper set in. "Yes, you have," she snapped unhappily. "And you're about to force me to do something else. I don't want to go with you. I want to stay here."

Raudan had warned him she would be angry and confused. She was about to be taken from everything she had ever known. Eric tried to remind himself of all the reasons to be patient with her, to give her space and time to adjust. But he had craved nothing but her for so long, and now that she was here, staring up at him with those sparkling amethyst eyes...

"Kiss me, Runa," he murmured, face descending.

"No."

The instant the word passed her lips, she gasped, and her entire body jerked. Her irises dulled, radiating pain and anger. She darted forward and pressed her mouth to his chest. He frowned, puzzled by her odd reaction, and she tried to yank free of his arms. Overpowering her tiny body easily, he tucked her against his chest and held her there until she quieted.

"Are you really that desperate?" she questioned. "I know some people are willing to stoop so low. But using a slave band... Don't you think that's beneath you?"

He lowered his fingers to her wrist and fingered the thin bracelet, just one of Raudan's many terms. The Haltija had insisted the charmed piece of jewelry would keep her from harming herself or others, as well as deter her from running away. But gauging her reaction, it held an altogether different purpose.

He met her wounded gaze, and she quickly peered away.

It couldn't be. It was too easy.

"Look at me."

She met his stare, glaring at him hatefully.

"Say my name."

"Eric." She exhaled the word in outrage.

"Smile for me."

She bestowed a half-agonized, half-crazed grin, clenched her fingers together, and created tight little fists.

"Do you have to do *everything* I tell you to?" She didn't answer, stubbornly silent. He smiled expectantly. "Answer me, Runa."

"Yes, you sadistic bastard!" she railed. "Are you satisfied?"

"Aye, I'm very satisfied."

He grinned, finding that anger only enhanced her pixielike features. He released her wrist and used his hand to bring her flush against him. He bent low and brushed his nose against hers. He wanted her more than he had ever wanted another, and after being tormented by her nearness for weeks, his body was desperate for release. His cock strained painfully against his jeans, the need to claim and bind so strong he could barely contain the beast within, and the woman with the power to ease it all was waiting in his arms.

Bound to do anything and everything he told her to.

Christ.

He retreated, gazing into a confused face with eyes that glittered in the dark like beckoning purple diamonds. She shook her head, realizing his intent.

"Don't—"

"Kiss me, k'iea sebea. Kiss me now."

Runa stared deeply into Eric's sparkling green eyes before she gave in to his demand. Winding her fingers into his soft hair, she pulled his mouth down to her own. She didn't understand what had possessed Raudan to hand her over to Eric—wrapped up like a Christmas present, complete with a slave band—but regardless of the reasons, she had only one thing on her mind.

Payback.

If Eric wanted a kiss, she would give him a kiss. A kiss so damned good he would never forget it. A kiss that would leave him completely breathless and, when she was finished, writhing in unspeakable pain.

The exact same thing he was punishing her with each time she didn't do as he said.

It was only fair.

Eric's lips parted, and as his tongue teased and caressed the seam of her mouth, her mind went blank, her body went flaccid, and her vengeful plans were momentarily forgotten.

His strong hands wound down her body, wrapped, cupped, and lifted from underneath. She felt the proof of his arousal pushing through the thickness of her coat, massive and solid, prodding against her.

"Wrap your legs around me."

She didn't know if she obeyed because he told her to or because she wanted it for herself, but she did as he said. He pulled her closer, his experienced hands guiding and directing her until the hard ridge of his cock was nestled at the cleft of her sex. The friction was incredible—pressing, rubbing, grinding—so good, so amazing.

He groaned and thrust roughly against her. "Aye, that's it, aiarya."

His lips ravished hers, and his tongue explored the cavern of her mouth, plunging deeply, stroking gently. He removed a hand from her ass and worked at the buttons on her coat, growling in frustration when they didn't budge.

"I want to touch you. Undo them for me."

She fumbled with the buttons with trembling fingers as she matched each agonizing swirl of his tongue. When she tugged the last one free, his hand returned, gliding over her thin sweater to her breasts. She moaned when his thumb flicked over a sensitive nipple and slowly rotated around the rippling skin, over and over, until the peak hardened. He quickly shifted to the other breast, lavishing attention until he achieved the same outcome. He pinched the nipple gently through the cashmere and lace and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Blessed Fates," she groaned wantonly into his mouth.

Nothing had ever felt so wonderful, and each touch fed the overwhelming heat, drenching her panties in a scorching wetness. She thrust her hips against him in wild abandon, desperate and aching for more of him.

"You like that, do you?" Eric licked a path to her ear. He bit her lobe gently and whispered, "Do you want me to remove your shirt and take your pretty breasts into my mouth?"

She managed to remain silent by pride alone.

"Would you like me to, Runa? I know every part of you is going to be perfect." He laughed at her attempt not to answer. "Answer me."

Goddamn him! "Yes."

"What about here?" He thrust his hand between her legs and possessively rubbed the cloth covering her sex. "I would love to taste your sweet little cunt and make you come with my mouth. I would tongue you all night if you'd let me. Will you let me?"

"Stop—"

"Nay, answer me." His fingers settled over her, rubbing in a circular motion, quick and teasing.

"Y-yes," she stammered hoarsely, drowning in the erotic sensations he was wringing out of her body.

"Then let us make for home. I'll give you everything you want, Runa. *Everything*."

Home.

A bucket of ice dumped over her head wouldn't have elicited better results. Cold swept through her at the reminder of who he was and exactly what she was doing. She nodded in false meekness, feeling unfulfilled and achy—sex moist, heart pounding, and nipples tingling—and screamed inwardly at the rending weakness.

Eric was brash, cocky, and demanding. He would force her to leave her world behind and drag her kicking and screaming to his. Once there, he would coerce her to recognize their bond, tormenting her traitorous body until she caved. Chosen immortals consummated their bonds with sex and the spoken words, and she couldn't allow that to happen. No matter how much she craved and burned for his touch. No matter how hard it might be to fight her sensual nature.

She wouldn't let him sacrifice his immortality for her.

He lowered her gently and cupped her breasts, teasing the taut centers with torturous, featherlight strokes of his thumbs. "I can't wait to see all of you." He stared at his hands as he thrummed her nipples masterfully. "Christ, I want to taste every last inch of you."

Runa braced herself for what was sure to be mind-boggling agony. If refusing a command hurt like a bitch, causing intentional harm would surely be much, much worse.

"Eric," she whispered seductively and placed her hands on his chest, massaging the corded muscles. "There is something I've wanted to do to you since the moment we first met."

#### 72 Aline Hunter

His eyelids crept low, and he swallowed convulsively. Cupping her face in a large palm, he promised in a thick, impassioned voice, "You can do whatever you like to me, aiarya."

She moved her knee shrewdly, got in position, and asked, "Have you ever been good and bloody stonkered?"

## **Chapter Thirteen**

This was *not* the homecoming he had expected.

Eric slammed the large stainless steel refrigerator closed and moved to the matching one beside it. Incoming footsteps caused the tension in his neck to increase. It was early yet, but his brothers could return home at any time from a night spent working the realms. And he wasn't in the mood for petty bullshit.

Nox strolled into the kitchen, clothed from shoulder to boots in black snake leather. His usual pissed-off visage took an upward swing when he spied Eric.

"Is the honeymoon over?"

That was Nox—the consummate asshole.

He gave his brother a customary middle-finger salute and slipped past his slightly shorter but equally massive frame. Stepping over to the cabinets lined above the counter, he pulled one open with a flick of his hand. Nox came in beside him, unperturbed and ready to wage war.

"That bad, huh?"

You have no fucking clue. "Fuck off, Nox."

"I tried to warn you. If you haven't bound her to you yet, it's not too late."

You're so fucking wrong, as usual. It's far too late when it comes to her. You worthless cock whore.

"Piss off." He strode from the kitchen, desperate to get away from Nox's amused snickering.

When he returned to his room, he opened the door quietly and stepped inside. Runa was exactly as he had left her—tucked inside dark blankets, heavy strands of multihued hair billowing around her face and shoulders. Against the dark backdrop of his linens, she looked like an angel, and adding easily to the effect was the fact that she was beautiful when she slept.

The hell with beautiful. Calling her beautiful was nothing short of an insult, especially since he'd removed her clothing to place her into his bed—their bed—and got a full-on view of her delectable body.

He sighed and rubbed his fingers against his eyes, resigned to the tiny creature who enthralled him completely. Hopefully the impulsive female had learned a valuable lesson, and any reprimand from him wouldn't be necessary.

He had other plans in store for her when she woke.

A light tapping drew his gaze away from the bed, and he moved silently across the room. Placing his food and drink on the nearby table, he glanced at Runa before he opened the door. Colin was covered in a blackened smut of some kind. The greasy liquid smeared down his leathers. "I'm sorry it took so long. The black-arts practitioner caused more trouble than I gave him credit for. Is she still out?"

"Aye." Eric moved aside, inviting his brother in. "She hasn't moved or made a sound. If she weren't breathing, I'd think the damned thing killed her."

"No, it won't kill her." Colin stepped inside and walked to the bed. "She'll probably have one bitch of a headache when she comes around. You should have a dose of quill handy, just in case." Eric followed his brother's unhappy gaze to the gold bracelet around Runa's wrist.

"You know, I still can't believe her Haltija got hold of a slave band. Those things are priceless—as well as goddamned dangerous. You should consider removing and destroying it."

"She'll flee if I do. I gave Raudan my oath I wouldn't remove the bracelet until we were bound together."

"It's unbelievably cruel keeping it on her. She's your mate. Not your prisoner or slave." Colin ran blackened fingers across his face. "The sooner you mate her to you, the better. When Byron discovers she's here... Fuck, I don't want to think about what he'll do, especially if she's wearing that slave band. You'd better say a prayer Octavia continues to elude him. He was always impulsive."

"I'll rip out his throat if he tries to take her from me again. It's what I should have done the first time."

"Byron isn't like most of the sidhe we monitor, Eric. He's not descended from glamour or magik fae. He's the great-great-grandson of dioane sidhe warriors."

"That explains the pet nygromancer he keeps around for protection," Eric retorted. "Since he's so goddamned infallible."

"Wrong again. The only reason Lucian Kross survived the cleansing eight centuries ago is because of By—" Movement from the bed stopped Colin midsentence. Turning from the bed, he spoke over his shoulder. "I'm going to go. Someone is finally coming around."

"Thank you for coming by on your way in."

Colin stopped at the door and reverted effortlessly to Draigen tongue. "Bind her to you as soon as possible. Once upon a fucking time—before it all went to shit—I considered Byron Morgianne a friend. I don't need to tell you what I owe him, and I'm obligated in this situation if he comes for her. You feel me?"

Years before, Byron had come to Colin's aid to rescue Aonia from a horde of blood-letting vampyren—vampires who slowly drifted into insanity because of a curse in their bloodline. Colin had been trying to repay the debt ever since.

Eric glanced at Runa, who was sleeping safe and sheltered in his bed. If she was taken by anything that would harm her, and someone brought her back to him...

"You have my word."

"Thank you." Colin exhaled in relief, shoulders drooping in exhaustion. "I'll see myself out."

Eric waited until the door closed before he released a restless sigh of his own. He walked to the mirrored cabinet in the bathroom and plucked the quill from the middle shelf. Runa was extremely fortunate. He had exactly one dose of the archaic pain compound left over from his introduction to an enchanted blade. A half-strangled moan sounded from the blankets, and he made his way around the bed. Crouching down, he got level with her face.

She licked her lips and murmured, "It hurts."

"I expect it does." He pulled the last tab from the box and instructed, "Open your mouth."

"What?" She winced and immediately parted her lips.

He placed the thin piece of paper onto her tongue, and it dissolved instantly. He knew it wouldn't take long for the magikal compound to take hold. Within seconds her eyes widened cautiously, and her gaze drifted to his face.

The relief in the pools of violet gold was evident.

"Better?"

"Yes, thank you," she answered, averting her eyes.

She looked guilty, and she sounded guilty, but was she?

"Is that remorse I detect in your voice? Or is it a result of the harm you wrought on yourself?"

She pulled the blanket closer, huddling into the pillow as if for protection. "Both."

"Heed me, aiarya. If you do that again, I won't give you anything to alleviate the pain."

She nodded and burrowed deeper into the covers, tucking them under her chin. She started to say something—opening her lush lips and inhaling—only to close them again.

"What were you going to say?"

She shrugged, her gaze darting up to his face, then back down. "What does that word mean?"

"Aiarya?"

"You've called me that several times."

"Aye." He trailed his hand along her jaw and flicked his index finger playfully against her nose. "So I have."

Runa closed her eyes as his fingers tickled her nose. "So what does it mean?" For all she knew, he was calling her a haggard, bloodthirsty bitch in his language.

"It's meant as an endearment." His husky voice sent electric shivers down her spine, and she pulled the thick blanket closer. "It roughly translates to the English word for 'pet."

Pet. The word permeated in her brain, and her stomach lurched. Pet!

Airy warmth brushed against her face. She opened her eyes and gasped audibly. Eric's bright green eyes were inches from hers, shining clearly in the darkened room.

He pressed his lips to hers and asked in an all-too-familiar husky whisper, "How do you feel?"

How *did* she feel? Her head didn't hurt, the dreadful ringing in her ears was gone, and when she moved, her entire body didn't ache. But her instincts told her the smart thing to do was to act as if she were in mortal agony.

She responded uneasily, distrusting the gleam in his eyes, "I think...I feel fine."

He pushed away from the mattress, walked past the bed, and disappeared through the doorway at the far end of the room. The squeaky sounds that shrilled out of the door were followed by the familiar crash of running water.

"Runa," Eric called from what she quickly gathered was a bathroom. She sat up slowly, scanned the bedroom, and kept the blanket clenched snugly to her chest.

Eric appeared in the doorway, pulling his shirt over his head. His bulky muscles contorted and flexed in a seamless motion as his hair tumbled loosely around his face. He tossed the wadded material carelessly to the ground. Bringing his hands to each temple, he combed his fingers through the heavy strands. The light framed his incredibly toned and muscular body, casting a halo around his broad shoulders.

He seemed to enjoy her stare, standing proud and unembarrassed as her gaze traveled the length of his spectacular frame. When he spoke, his accented voice was calm yet irrefutable.

"I'm going to ask you to come in here to join me, and if you don't, I'm going to order you to. After what you've put me through, I'd say I've earned it."

"Eric," she pleaded, fully prepared to beg for space, if necessary. Staring at his body was difficult enough. If she touched him, would she have the power to deny him anything he asked for? Would she have the willpower to say no?

Highly damned unlikely.

"Will you bathe with me?" He placed large hands on either side of the door frame and leaned forward, corded muscles in his neck, shoulders, chest, and abdomen straining. Her gaze followed the thin trail of raven black hair that started below his belly button, wound down his smooth, tanned skin, and disappeared from view.

She swallowed back panic, whispering quietly, "Please—"

He shook his head, rebuking her gently. "Nay, I will not be swayed, and I will only ask you once more. Will you bathe with me?"

She considered saying no, but it wouldn't matter. He wanted her, even after she had cruelly racked him in the balls and sent them both barreling into the ground in agony. Uncertainty swamped her, as did confusion and doubt. Was he asking in an attempt to give her a choice just before stripping away her free will? Was he really no better than he had proved himself to be weeks before?

"Runa?" He spoke her name like a lover's caress.

She stared down at her hands, clasping her fingers together. "If you promise not to make me do things I don't wish." Her voice faltered, and she cleared her throat. "Then yes, I will."

"I promise. Now come to me."

She chanced a look through her lashes and saw that he was still there, watching and waiting. Her hands trembled as she cast aside the thick black comforter and inhaled raggedly at the cool rush of air that crashed against her naked skin. Though Eric had left her revealing red underwear in place, she could feel his gaze roaming over her as if she were completely naked. She rose from the bed, keeping her eyes averted as she traveled to the door, nervous and slightly embarrassed. No other had seen her like this, and she worried she wasn't as enticing unclothed as Eric perceived her to be.

His warm fingers wound around her hand, and she followed as he led the way into the dimly lit room, comprehending in her hazy daze that the space was large and cream colored, but little else. He came to a stop beside the bathtub. Releasing her, he bent over the edge of the tub and twisted the handles to stem the flow of water.

He turned and started to remove his jeans, his tanned fingers pulling the button fly open. She didn't look away, watching as the thin line of dark hair descended farther down. Shoving the material away from his hips, he revealed himself for the first time to her stunned eyes.

Blessed Fates.

The fully erect cock protruding to his belly button was massive—huge and rounded, bulky and engorged, long and thick—and her sex clenched even as her stomach sank. There was no way he could make love to her without rending her apart. He was larger and wider than any male she had accidentally happened upon during a random Samhain dalliance.

She forced herself to breathe, gulping loudly.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked hoarsely. He crossed to her and wrapped his arms around her back.

He worked the clasps of her bra with a practiced ease. Snapping them free, he slid the thin strips away from her arms and gave a throaty growl of approval as her breasts were revealed. He cupped one in each hand, his palms so large they surrounded the aching mounds.

"Your skin's so damned soft and smooth, like crawler silk."

He trailed his fingers down her quivering belly, knelt, and removed her panties, pulling the flimsy garment away from her legs. He ran his slightly roughened hands over her skin, stroking her breasts, stomach, and the backs of her thighs before cupping her ass.

"Completely perfect." He pressed his face into her stomach and ran his tongue along the rim of her belly button.

She closed her eyes, swept into pure sensation, swamped by raw sexual hunger. This was a battle she was going to lose. All her good intentions, everything she swore she could never allow to happen, were going to.

Think about him, she reminded herself, drawing on the one thing that had the power to curb her undeniable urges. "You promised," she told him breathlessly, aching and wanting him all the more for denying herself.

He rose, wrapped an arm around her waist, and carried her to the tub. He stepped into the piping-hot water and lowered them below the surface. The head of his cock pressed against the sensitive cleft of her mound as they descended into the warm depths. She scurried forward, straddling his waist and inadvertently placing her too-sensitive breasts in front of his face as he braced his back along the back of the tub.

Bringing a hand to her shoulder, he forced her to arch her back and captured a nipple in his mouth. He suckled gently, flicking his tongue back and forth. She cried out, wrapping her arms around his neck to draw him closer.

You're not supposed to allow this. Say something!

"We can't—"

He released her only so long as it took for him to snarl, "The hell we can't." He cupped her other breast, claimed the aching bud, and sucked greedily.

The pressure of his mouth and the suction of his tongue unfurled blistering waves of liquid fire in her stomach. Her blood began to pound in her veins, enveloping her in mind-blowing heat. She ran her hands along his back and shoulders, digging her nails into the smooth skin. He responded with a throaty growl, seeming pleased with her reaction. He grew wilder with his mouth, tugging at her tender flesh with his teeth, eliciting a gasp.

You'll kill him if you let this continue.

"We shouldn't—"

Words caught in her throat when his hand came up to work at one breast while his mouth ravaged the other. His fingers pressed, rotated, then started over, while his tongue and lips did the same. His touch caused her skin to prickle as her breathing hitched and her body came to life. With each brush of his tongue and nimble fingers, her stomach knotted, the walls of her sex spasmed, and she struggled to breathe.

"Do you like that, aiarya? Do you like me suckling you?"

"We can't do this." She tried to argue, to resist, and he pulled her nipple back into his mouth and pressed his thumb gently onto the other, teasing the surface in a frenzied motion.

"Answer me." He growled against her skin, clamped a nipple between his teeth, and skimmed his tongue along the edge.

Shouldn't answer. Don't answer!

"Y-yes," she stammered.

He continued to lavish attention on her breasts with his fingers, mouth, and tongue, arousing her until she burned with need. She writhed and squirmed, unable to remain still. The ache between her legs became overwhelming—a deep inner clench and release that left her empty and needing.

"Do you remember the other place you wanted me to taste you, Runa?"

When he slid his fingers against the moist and swollen lips of her sex, her mind went blank. She gasped and rose from the waist-deep water, arching her back as he stroked, delved, and petted. The roughened pads of his fingers were tender as they sought, parted, and rubbed. Each lingering caress felt like a firebrand against her sensitized flesh, leaving a trail of quivering skin in its wake. Her body shuddered as her newfound pleasure grew. An instinctual need to press down on his clever hand overcame propriety, reason, and logic. She wanted more of him, lusted and yearned for his touch, maddened by a coil of heat that built in her belly and spread through her.

"I've dreamed of touching you like this," he groaned as if reading her mind and pressed a finger between the swollen labia. Dipping into her slick slit, he traced a path upward to rub her clit, causing her to cry out. "You're so hot and wet. Are you wet for me, Runa? Do you like what I'm doing to you?"

It was too good, and she didn't hold back, whimpering, "Fates, yes!"

The pleasure consumed and engulfed her in a raging inferno that pulsed through her blood, creating something powerful. She groaned and ground against him, wanting to experience what was waiting for her. Something she had always wanted to have, yet feared she never would.

Close...

She started trembling, her skin prickling until she could feel the heaviness of the air and the heat of the water lapping against her skin. The unexplored muscles inside her body spasmed, tightening and clenching spastically.

"Oh God, Eric."

So close...

"Come for me, Runa." He cupped her breast, thumbed the nipple, and continued stroking her clit purposefully. "I want to see you come for me."

Runa's breath hitched at his words. He snatched a pert nipple in his mouth and tongued her silken skin in a deliberate rhythm. His mate was more passionate

than he had ever dreamed—excited by mere touch and on the verge of orgasm from his fingertips alone—and she made him so goddamned hot it was painful. His cock throbbed, and his heavy sac was full and near to bursting. He continued fighting the impulse to lift her up and plunge into her over and over, riding her hard and fast until they were both utterly spent.

She whimpered, arched her back, and moved against his hand, drenching his palm in hot, and what he was sure was undeniably sweet, honey. He flicked her distended clit with his middle finger and then massaged the swollen nub. Her eyes slid shut, her head fell forward, and she mewed frantically.

Fucking hell.

Once she came, he was going to pick her up, carry her to the bed, spread those perfect legs of hers, and explore every delicious crevice with his tongue. It was all he could think of after seeing her completely undressed and discovering she indeed *was* bare all over. He would spend so much time devouring her pussy and bringing her to orgasm with his mouth, she'd never remember any male who had come before him. He could only imagine how luscious she would taste, how rich her cream would be.

"Feels so good," she purred, riding his fingers, panting, and whimpering as she started to climax. She pleaded with him to keep going and begged him not to stop. He obliged her, groaning in agony as she writhed on his hand. His cock jerked, desperate to be inside her. She was resplendent like this, freed by her passion, whispering what she wanted and moving her supple little body against him.

He visualized her riding his cock as she was riding his hand. He would hold his own release until she took hers, and once her tight, wet cunt clenched his cock and started milking him, he would release into her womb, solidify their bond, and possess her completely.

Must claim her, need is so strong...

"That's it, aiarya," he ground out, on the verge of ejaculation simply from watching her grind against his palm. "Come for me."

"I'm...I'm..." She moaned, thrashing wildly.

Her entire tiny frame froze, and her torso erupted in infinitesimal tremors as her breasts quivered ever so slightly. She cried out as she climaxed, and buried her sharp fingernails into his skin. He reveled in the diminutive sting wrought from her sexual release and found a profound pleasure from witnessing it, but he nearly stopped his ministrations when as he watched in shock as she crested, she whimpered repeatedly...and started *glowing*.

Her skin lit from within as if miniature diamonds were embedded beneath the surface of her flesh, and she began to sparkle, emitting a prismatic light that shone from her hair and glistening skin. He moved his fingers rapidly to intensify her orgasm, amazed by what he was witnessing. The tips of her hair dipped into the water and tickled his thighs when she tossed her head back, her entire body

trembling. He cupped one of her quivering breasts and stroked the silken skin possessively.

When she collapsed against his chest, she was breathing heavily. He withdrew from her scorching heat and placed his hands on her back, gently winding his fingers up and down her sweat-slickened skin, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Her glow slowly dimmed, her flawless alabaster complexion returned to normal, and she sagged in his arms.

This was how it was meant to be—good, right...

Fated.

She could try and deny their connection, but her response proved what they already knew. She was his. He wasn't going to allow her to deny him simply because she wanted to alter the course of the future. If the rest of their time together was anything like this, it was worth sacrificing an eternity.

His cock twitched—a painful reminder of his own needs. Grasping her delicate face in his large hands, he forced her to meet his eyes. She didn't pull away when he leaned forward to kiss her; she opened her mouth willingly and met the shallow flicks of his tongue. Her breasts brushed against his chest, and he bucked his hips into the empty air, his cock straining miserably. He had taken no other since he'd met his Chosen, and before that...

No female compared.

Pulling away from her mouth, he left a path of kisses along her jaw and throat. The skin was moist and salty, smooth yet slick. Flicking his tongue out, he licked at the spot below her earlobe and nipped the vulnerable flesh gently. When she moaned, he swirled the tip of his tongue along the delicate shell, wetting the surface. He blew against the dampened skin and inhaled softly. She shuddered, legs flexing against his thighs while her fingernails scraped his chest.

He coiled his hand down, felt her liquid heat, and fingered the moist seam, causing her to moan. Her pussy was so wet, the outer lips slick and smooth, the mouth drenched and ready.

Take what's yours.

"I have to be inside you, aiarya. I can't wait any longer."

He was going to have her, right here, right now.

He sat upright and moved her down his body, positioning her over his cock. She tensed, her fingernails burrowing into his pectoral muscles. "W-what, w-wait, please wait!" she stammered and tried to move away from the erection that prodded her sensitized lips, seeking the slick velvet haven within.

Confused by the scent of the fear that overcame her arousal, he gazed into her face. Her hesitancy had removed desire from her eyes and replaced trust with doubt.

"What's wrong?" He frowned when she started to tremble.

She still thinks to refuse me.

A surge of anger came at the thought. She continued to persist in her feeble attempts to keep them apart, even now—even as she clearly wanted him as much as he wanted her. He was going to bind them together, with or without her permission. Her foolhardy belief that abstaining would prevent him from cleaving to her was ludicrous, and he chose to make himself clear.

"I will not be deterred from binding us together, Runa, regardless of your fear for my future. Your body wants this as much as mine. You want me as much as I want you. And by the Fates, I *will* have you."

She tried to speak when he fisted the base of his cock, unperturbed and determined, and her amethyst eyes went wide. She struggled, gasping for words, and pressed upward with her knees to avoid the swollen head that slid along her drenched labia.

"Y-you're too big. Y-you'll hurt me."

The temptation to slide into her alluring heat was incredible, but he hesitated, hindered by her apprehensive face. The first time she had seen his erect flesh, her violet eyes had gone wide, as if the visual had given her cause for panic. He'd been told numerous times—from countless appreciative females—that he and his brothers were blessed by the goddesses. No doubt he was larger than other males she had been intimate with, and because her frame was so incredibly delicate, his size frightened her.

He attempted to reassure her. "Nay, I would never hurt you. I'll take you nice and slow until your body adjusts."

He didn't think it was possible, but she trembled harder, her fear palpable. A surge of protectiveness overcame his lust, and though he knew it would be sheer hell, he vowed then and there to take this night slowly.

"I *ache* to be inside you. You can't possibly fathom how much." Pressing a kiss to her trembling mouth and running his fingers over her multicolored hair, he struggled for the control he was known for, keeping his voice steady and calm. "But if you are not ready to join our bodies, will you ease me?"

"How?" She averted her eyes, stared at his chest, and nibbled her bottom lip.

He lifted her over his straining length, placed her on his thighs, and reached for her hand. He guided it to his cock, hissing at the first touch of her soft fingers around him, and instructed in a husky voice, "Stroke me."

Eric's cock was deceptively soft, the skin smooth and silky. At first glance the engorged flesh looked completely solid and hard, unyielding and frightening, but when he wrapped her fingers around the turgid length and directed her into a slow rhythm, she was amazed to discover how sensitive and beautiful this part of his body was. Years spent with fellow fae meant she had witnessed her fair share of sexual escapades, but Eric's shaft was the first she had seen this close, and she had never touched a male intimately before.

After a moment of guiding her hand, he let go and reclined against the back of the tub, watching through heavy-lidded eyes. She held him firmly, moving her fingers up and down, starting at the base before working her way to the tip. She hoped her lack of experience wasn't obvious. Mirroring the motions he had shown her earlier, she hoped she was reciprocating the pleasure he had given her.

The rounded, plumlike head went slick, the dark pink tip shining in the dim lighting. She brought her free hand to the crown and rolled her thumb along the thin slit at the top. A crystalline bead appeared, and she smeared it over the wide bulb, spreading the shimmering liquid with her thumb, amazed by the sticky sheen. Eric's throaty rumble caused her to hesitate, and she glanced up. She'd been so engaged in touching him, she had forgotten he was watching.

He spoke something thickly in his language, then cut himself short midsentence. "Don't stop."

He was so thick and long, she couldn't fit her fingers entirely around him. Placing her free hand near the nest of crisp black hair, she moved the other to the top. Sliding both hands up and down his slick flesh experimentally, she squeezed ever so slightly.

"Damn it," Eric growled and clutched her hands. He guided her fingers in a frantic motion, sliding her hand against his slick flesh faster and faster. "I cannot hold my seed, Runa."

His breathing changed, becoming uneven and loud, and he shifted his body so that the rounded glans thrust against her chest. She let her hands go passive beneath his, her palms brushing against the iron-hard velvety skin as he guided her motions.

"I'm going to come on your breasts," he grated huskily, shoving his cock into her hands as he bucked his pelvis. "I'm going to spend myself all over your beautiful breasts. Do you want to watch, aiarya?"

She nodded, marveling at the strength in his body as he tensed with each thrust of his hips. His bulging muscles strained, flexing underneath her legs and lifting her easily out of the water. She imagined him making those same motions between her thighs and wondered what it would be like to feel him taking control, moving inside her.

Would it hurt? Would he even be able to fit?

No, she decided anxiously. He was far, far too large for her much smaller body.

He cried out in words she couldn't understand, his legs going taut beneath her as a steady stream of hot, creamy liquid shot upward and splashed across her breasts. It went on and on, his cock jerking with each volley, the heated wetness coating her nipples. She continued moving her fists up and down his length until he stopped thrusting beneath her. His hand eased away from hers, gently brushing her fingers along the part of him that remained huge even as it became soft.

"Come here," Eric instructed tenderly and pulled her into his lap.

He reached along the back of the tub for a plush rag folded on the side, dipped the cloth into the water, and bathed her breasts until she was smooth and clean. When finished, he grasped her by the arms, nestled her comfortably against his solid chest, and reclined.

She tucked her hands under her body, going limp against him, and he bestowed the lightest of touches along the indented line in her spine, whispering softly to her in his language.

She sat in stunned silence, shocked at the things he had done to her and then the things she had done to him. It was incredible that this massive male capable of wreaking such harm was so easy—so unfailingly gentle—with her. The intimacy of their being together brought a warm feeling to her chest, and her stomach knotted into a pleasant fluttering sensation that felt like the wings of butterflies.

Contentment, she realized. She was experiencing contentment for the first time. It was unlike anything she had ever known, give-and-take, a tentative trust developing. Even as she knew it shouldn't, even as it was unfair to him.

Soon the light, feathery touches and the rocking of the water lulled her into a hazy state, and she closed her eyes and went soft. His deep voice threaded into her heart, the words foreign yet beautiful and intricate, each one humming from his chest and echoing quietly against her ear.

Her last coherent thought before she dozed was that he sounded undeniably gorgeous, mysterious, and sexy when he spoke his language. And if he continued to converse with her using it, she would be able to deny him nothing.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Runa woke with a vague recollection of where she was. Opening her eyes, she waited until her pupils adjusted. Her mind was fuzzy from sleep, but she remembered Eric taking her from the tub, toweling her dry, and carrying her to bed the night before. She'd never slept with anyone in the past, but she found she enjoyed the experience immensely. The warmth that seeped from Eric's large body cradled protectively around hers made her feel safe, and the soft caress of his steady breathing against her neck provided its own brand of intimacy.

With his arms gone and the bed alone holding her, she realized just how much she missed the closeness...and him.

Damn it! She closed her eyes and counted to ten as the ramifications of her choices the night before brought on suffocating feelings of guilt and anger, mingled with an undeniable amount of pleasure. She wasn't supposed to cave to Eric, to show the weakness she experienced in his presence. It didn't matter that he was her Fated. The reactions of her body were something she couldn't control, but her mind was another thing entirely.

Inhaling deeply, she strove for calm, damning the erratic beating of her heart as anger and happiness collided to create the oddest juxtaposition of joy and sorrow. In the past twenty-four hours, she had been betrayed by Raudan—the one person she trusted most—and entrusted into the care of Eric, a man she wasn't sure she could trust at all. It was something she never would have predicted, and cemented the fact that the one tenet of faith she had maintained in her life—that Raudan would never harm or deceive her—was not as steadfast as she believed.

Given from the hands of the one person she trusted most into the hands of the one man she trusted least. The irony was not lost on her.

Now she didn't know what to think or whom to confide in.

Hoisting onto her elbows, she glanced around. The room was huge, with a high ceiling that allowed plenty of room for the gigantic family residing inside. Aside from the gargantuan bed, a long table next to a door, and a colossal wardrobe situated against the far wall, there wasn't a lot of furniture. She peered around the empty space. Eric was also tidy. There were no dirty clothes scattered about, no clutter, no dust bunnies. Her gaze drifted over several large bags nestled against the tan-colored wall beneath the window.

*Prada, Gucci, Ralph Lauren, Dior.* Her eyes froze on a set of pink bags huddled together. *Victoria's Secret.* 

Her blood boiled as she shot from of the bed. After scurrying into the bathroom, she grabbed the long silver handles above the sink, blasted the water to hot, and scampered out of the room to find clothing. She rummaged inside one of the Victoria's Secret bags, snagged a matching black bra and panties, and slid them on.

By the time she returned to the mirror, the large glass cabinet was good and steamed.

Just like her.

"Yuviette Zidana the Seeing. I, Runaeska Ione Charon, summon you to scry!" She wrote Yuvi's full name across the frothy gray surface with her index finger and smeared it away with her hand, leaving a huge streak of wetness trailing behind.

She returned to the bedroom, snatched one of the Ralph Lauren bags, and chose a pair of dark wide-leg blue jeans and a soft pink cashmere turtleneck. She put the jeans on first. As she slid the sweater atop her head, she heard Yuvi's cheerful voice.

"Runa! How goes it, chica? Merry Xmas!"

Runa pulled the sweater down her face and glared at the smiling image staring back at her through the perfectly clear and now-smoke-free glass. Yuviette was at home. The shelves with mystikal elements stacked neatly behind her. Several lines of clothing floated next to the wall as if she was deciding what to wear later in the evening.

The Christmas party at Mynx's...

Damn her!

Runa stomped into the bathroom and emphasized each word that came from her lips, making it a blunt statement of fact and not a question. "You were in on this. No one has your compulsive label-shopping obsession."

"Guilty." Yuvi shrugged, her winning smile never wavering.

"How could you?" Runa accused, chest heaving and limbs trembling as she relived the same sense of betrayal she had with Raudan. Wait a minute, *Raudan!* "You and Raudan were in on this together!"

Yuvi didn't seem the least bit remorseful, lifting a tube of lipstick and applying it between words. "I tried to talk some sense into you on several different occasions. You can't run from fate, Runa."

"If I stay here, he will bind us together. You know what that means for him," she snarled furiously, both resentful and livid.

Yuvi stopped smoothing her lipstick and met Runa's enraged gaze through the mirror. "He's already spoken the words to bind you together. That's what informs the gods he has accepted their divine choice in the matter and thereby solidifies the bond. You don't necessarily have to have sex for him to stake his claim."

Runa started pacing, replaying the events of the night before over and over in her mind. When he had spoken to her in his foreign tongue, the words had been so intense, and it had seemed as if he repeated a particular phrase more than once. She had assumed it was an endearment of some kind. But what if it wasn't?

Not possible.

It can't be...

She stopped, spinning around. "He couldn't have! And even if he did, there must be some way to reverse it!"

"He could have, and he did," Yuvi chimed, completely unfazed. "You know it too. That warm, fuzzy feeling you're experiencing? It's not the holiday spirit. When he accepted the will of the Fates, he did it for the both of you. Once done, it's done, home skillet."

Runa leaned against the wall to remain on her feet. After Eric had started speaking to her in his tongue, a feeling of complete happiness had overcome her, relaxing her, comforting her. And then this morning, her first thoughts when she woke were of him.

Contentment.

"Why would he do this?"

It will kill him.

"Now, now." Yuvi nailed her with a scathing look of impatience. "Eric couldn't do anything *but* claim you. It's ingrained in him as a male. When your Chosen comes a calling, you drag her off by the hair like a heathen caveman. He can't help himself. None of them can. And before you go all damsel in distress on me, you should know I'm *almost* certain this fairy tale has a happy ending."

"I thought you were always certain?"

"Not always, chickadee. Even us incredibly powerful volva seers occasionally stumble across unforeseeable roadblocks."

Runa ran her fingers through her tangled hair and pondered the odds of getting a shower in peace. She wanted one desperately, needing time to think.

"Go for it, little cave chick. I got a bag of B and BW for you, along with your favorite shampoo and conditioner. There's also some drying dust I conjured up and a few other little things us girls like to keep around."

Runa gawked in astonishment at her friend's smiling face. "How do you do that when scrying?"

"It's my mirror." Yuvi leaned forward, and it looked like she tapped on thin air. "I've charmed it to read minds. It comes out like a little radio broadcast with visual imaging in my brain, feeding me random thoughts. It's the niftiest spell ever when someone is trying to fuck me over. I can see that shit coming from a mile away."

Runa didn't waste time returning to the bedroom and retrieving the bags with bath and shower products. She showered quickly in the walk-in stall. When finished, she dressed in the same clothing and started the painstaking task of brushing her hair free of tangles. Yuviette was still in the mirror, applying her makeup. She had moved on to mascara.

"Are you going to the party?" Runa kept her voice neutral, unwilling to betray her disappointment at not being able to attend this year.

Yuvi stopped momentarily to answer. "Sadly, no. I have work to do. But since it's Christmas, I might as well look scorching hot. The rendezvous *is* at a bar hosting a dirty-Santa wet-T-shirt contest. Does that count?"

"I suppose."

Yuvi grinned. "Tell me about your Draigen. Is he as yummy as he looks? You really hit the Fated jackpot."

Runa felt absurdly possessive for some reason. She pushed aside the emotion and answered, "Even if we're bound together, sex is a definite impossibility."

"Nothing is impossible. Tell me your problem. If you have the question, I have the answer."

Runa hesitated, fingers twined in her damp hair going motionless. Yuviette would know. She was several hundred years old and had had her fair share of sexual exploits. Runa envisioned Eric's bare body, struggling for some way to explain that wasn't tacky, and remembered all too late that Yuvi could see and hear her thoughts.

"He's well endowed, no?" Yuvi asked carefully.

Runa nodded, unable to speak, mortified, embarrassed, and oddly outraged that Yuviette had seen Eric nude through her eyes. She waited, thoughts rambling through her head even as she tried to keep her mind blank. Would he fit? Would it hurt? Was it possible? Would it happen at all?

She cursed under her breath, realizing she *did* want to make love to him. The sensations he brought from her body were incredible, and she couldn't stop thinking of how it would be to feel him lodged deeply inside of her, so they were connected in the closest possible way a male and female could be.

"It won't be thoroughly enjoyable the first time. I won't lie to you," Yuvi finally said. "But it's more than possible. Besides, my fortune-teller radar has informed me it will happen. So you may as well stop stressing over it. The sooner you straddle the problem, the better. No pun intended."

"You try not stressing over it."

"I told you a long time ago that you should consider expanding those limited horizons."

Runa poured a pinch of the drying dust into her palm and massaged it into her hands. "I wasn't exactly introduced to many outside of fae society. My options were limited."

Sidhe sex meant painful sex, and she hadn't wanted her first time to consist of lust and misery. It was rather ironic, in retrospect. She had wanted to save herself for someone who wouldn't hurt her, only to be doomed by fate from the start. She dropped the bottle back into the bag and ran her fingers through her damp hair, feeling the strands respond as they dried out.

Suddenly, Yuvi blurted, "Time is up, bugaboo. I've got a little something special for you in the black bag from Pleasures. Check it out when you get a chance. I know you didn't get Eric a Christmas present, so I did. And you are not doomed; it will all work out. Promise."

The mirror returned to normal as a knock sounded from the adjoining bedroom. Runa exited the bathroom, walked through the bedroom, and opened the door. Her eyes went wide in shock.

An honest-to-God *brownie* stood in the hallway, holding a huge tray of food. He looked fae, but he was much shorter, with tipped ears and a little button nose.

We're not in Kansas anymore...

"Ello." He offered a friendly smile, speaking in a heavily accented voice, bobbing his head in greeting. "Master Eric told me I was to bring this when ye woke. Doona go a telling him I was a wee bit late, yeah?"

Runa nodded, reaching for the tray.

"Oh no, Miss, to the side with ye." He shook his head, reprimanding her, and shoved a small hand against the door. "I best serve this up proper. Else my arse, 't'will be on the clothesline."

She moved aside, and he scrambled into the room. After walking to the side table, he set the food out like a minibuffet. When he finished, he rushed to the center of the room, muttered something she didn't understand, and a table with chairs appeared, complete with a large silver tray, crystal glasses, and silverware.

"Right as rain, we be. The master will be pleased." He pivoted around to study her again.

He started from the top of her head and worked his way down, his tiny brown eyes taking in everything. She cleared her throat, fidgeted nervously, and prepared to move. His hand stayed her.

"Doona be taking offense to me, lassie. Ye be a wee little creature, and I doona recall seeing anything as small as we brownie folk in the manor afore." His cheeks reddened slightly, but his smile was genuine. "If ye pardon me saying it, a pretty thing ye be as well, with that calico hair. It's no wonder the master is so taken with ye."

She felt her face flush at the compliment. "Thank you."

"Do ye reckon..." He glanced hastily at the door and lowered his voice. "Ye could visit me house and meet the missus and me wee bairns? It's on Locke grounds, not far from the main house here. Ye be wee enough to fit inside our humble home. We would love to share a spot o' tea with ye."

He was so sincere that she answered without thinking, grinning at the gesture of kindness and trying to mimic his coarse and distinct dialect. "I'd love to share a spot o' tea."

"It's settled, then." He rushed for the door, only to come to a sudden stop and spin around. "Where be me manners? Me name is Timmon, Mistress. Timmon Forsyth. If ye need anything, I'm the man to get it. I'm the head keeper of Locke Manor." He notched his chin proudly. "Me wife is the cook, so I expect you'll enjoy the vittles she's prepared. The master will be along shortly."

He yanked open the door and vanished without as much as a footstep or a sound...or a good-bye.

Runa returned to the bed and sank onto the mattress. Twisting her body around, she rested her head on the pillow. She recognized the feeling permeating her system as a heavy weight settled inside her chest. It was the same sensation she had experienced when she woke to find herself alone.

She missed Eric. Missed him something fierce.

It was as if a void was created in his absence that hadn't existed before, an empty hole in her soul that yearned for the one person who could complete it.

And now she knew why.

## Chapter Fifteen

Eric rushed through the hallway in long strides, dodging the bodies and objects in his path. It was only an hour ago that he had left Runa to meet with Marshall, but Christ, it felt like a fucking eternity. Images from the previous night returned, and his body reacted as if he'd been denied release entirely. He had been so close to taking her before she stopped him, so ready to lose himself inside her heavenly little body. And by the Fates, she had been so ready.

Hot, wet, and slick...

His much larger frame nearly collided with one of the brownie housekeepers underfoot, and he cursed eloquently, sidestepping and then continuing on course, clearly out of his element. The binding words were meant to ease the tension raging inside him, but they had had entirely the opposite effect. He wanted Runa even more, and if what Marshall had told him was true, he would have to take her soon or continue to suffer in agony.

He stopped in front of the bedroom and attempted to collect himself. He cursed his body and resisted the instinctual urges that came from the awareness that Runa was on the other side of the door. If she'd allow it, he'd burst inside and take her against the wall, against the sink, on the floor—or each one in varying order.

But if he wanted to gain her trust, he knew he would have to earn it.

Rein in the fucking beast. Take it slow.

He clutched the handle, opened the door, and stepped inside. The bed was neatly made, a table for their breakfast set, but Runa was gone.

"Where did you go?" Her soft voice carried from the other side of the room.

He stepped forward, peered over the bed, and gazed into brilliant amethysthued eyes. She was crouched down, sorting through the bags sent by the witch. Her hair was loose, cascading around her shoulders. And she was dressed; her light pink sweater matched the stain on her cheeks and her sensual, heart-shaped mouth.

A spike of unbridled lust caused him to ache all the way to his bones. He wanted to feel those plush lips all over his body—his chest, his stomach, and then lower...

"I had errands to see to," he snapped, irritated by his lack of control.

"Oh." She lowered her eyes and wrung her fingers.

Smooth move, asshole. That'll win her over. Her forlorn gesture spoke volumes. In two strides he was kneeling beside her.

"I had to meet my brother Marshall. He's been holding something for me, keeping it hidden." She peered up at him through long lashes when he placed the box he had retrieved into her lap.

She lowered her eyes, staring at the present. "What's this?"

"Merry Christmas, aiarya."

Her surprise was short-lived. She smiled, beaming exuberantly, and his entire body melted. He decided then and there that next Christmas he would have the fucking bedroom crammed with things for her to open—if only to see *that* smile.

She removed the red holographic wrapping paper, carefully peeling the corners and pulling the paper free to reveal the box beneath. When she lifted the top, she stilled.

"Is that," she whispered, "what I think it is?"

"I don't know," he said playfully. "What do you think it is?"

She dropped the lid and reached inside the box to lift the book free. "Behold the Elypsian Fields."

His breath exited his lungs in a painful lurch when she looked at him. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears, creating huge shimmering pools that radiated violet. The sight killed him. He had thought she was admiring the book in Maxmillian's the first time he had seen her. He must have been mistaken.

"Don't cry," he said uncomfortably, wanting to console her.

Instead of bursting into tears as he expected, she laughed, sniffling and shaking her head in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I didn't expect to get a gift, especially something like this."

He felt like an asshole scrounging for approval, but his pride demanded to know. "Do you like it?"

"Like it?" Her brushstroke eyebrows furrowed, and she scowled at him, cradling the damned thing to her chest as if it were the *Book of Destiny*. "If only you knew how I long I've coveted this book. I asked for it several times, but my father..." She stopped speaking and lowered her eyes to the book in her hands.

His relief was replaced by an intense desire to learn everything about her. He wanted to know about her father, about her life, about everything that had happened in the twenty three-tides since her birth.

He touched her hand. "Tell me."

"He was peculiar about the things I learned. If it weren't for Raudan and Yuvi, I probably wouldn't know anything about this realm." She chuckled, and her lips curved in an impish grin. "But V wasn't exactly honest, was she? I can't believe I asked you about pandemonium nightmares. Talk about mortification."

"You don't have to worry about that. Not anymore. I'll teach you everything about my world—our world." He glanced at the food waiting nearby. Timmon had done exactly as he requested, bringing enough food to last until evening meal. "Starting with how mated Draigen share meals. Are you hungry?"

When she nodded, he stood, helped her to her feet, and took the book from her. He tossed the tome to the bed as he walked her to the table. She seemed nervous but slid dutifully into place after he pulled out a chair, situating herself as he took the trencher and went to the sideboard. He selected the choice cuts of meat, fruit, baked bread, and pastries, collected the large container with the freshly strained dewberry juice, and brought it all to the table. He placed the tray between them before filling their glasses and taking his seat.

"Eat, aiarya," he instructed, anticipating how erotic it would be to watch food pass her soft lips.

"Have you already eaten?"

He chose a ripe strawberry from the tray and brought it to her mouth. "Our females *always* eat first."

She took the fruit, brushing her lips against his fingers in the process. She reached for another strawberry on the tray and brought it to his mouth. He took her offering, smiling down at her. Before he could stop himself, he was leaning over, brushing his lips gently against hers. Her lips parted in response, and he dipped his tongue inside the warmth of her mouth, tasting the tartness of the berries and her natural sweetness.

Pulling away, she whispered quietly, "Why did you bind us together, Eric?"

*Shit.* "How did you know?" He had spoken the words in his tongue the night before, purposefully in a language she wouldn't understand.

"I...I can feel it." She hesitated as if uncertain. "Can't you?"

"Aye." He nodded, seeing no reason to deny it. He lifted his hand to cup her face and brushed his thumb along her cheek. Her haunted eyes pained him, and he sought to reassure her. "I feel it as well."

"Why did you do it?"

He couldn't say for certain. The need had been so strong, so intense, he had acted on impulse. "I had no other choice."

"I'm so sorry," she said, turning away from him, her eyes downcast.

Was she sorry for him? The beast rankled at her selflessness. How could she ever think herself unworthy?

"Runa." He grasped her chin and forced her to meet his level stare, aware his eyes were glowing, wanting her to know both parts of him shared the same sentiment. "I am more than content with my fate. I desire you more than any other, and I want you so badly..."

I want to spread you across this table, bare your tiny body, and devour you instead of food.

He cleared his throat and released her. "Never apologize for being my Chosen." He paused, afraid to ask but unable not to. "Unless it is me you find lacking as a mate?"

He had proven himself unworthy by leaving her to fend for herself with that fucking daemon Elias, and he'd heard her speak of it on more than one occasion as he lingered out of sight in the mortal realm.

"No," she murmured. "You're unlike anyone I've ever met. But lacking? Definitely not."

For the first time, she initiated contact between them, placing her dainty fingers against his cheek. His heartbeat accelerated, his skin tingled, and his shaft filled with blood. The beast clamored. *Take her. Claim her. Bind together completely*. He closed his eyes, waging an inner battle that was becoming treacherous. He would have to shift soon or find release in her body. If he didn't, he could become a danger to everyone around him.

When he opened his eyes, she was studying him with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. "What is it, aiarya?" he asked hoarsely.

She blushed and shook her head, dropping her hand into her lap. He chose another strawberry and brought it to her mouth. She accepted the fruit and retrieved another from the tray, then offered it to him.

"You're not supposed to feed me." He frowned at the small sliver of fruit in her fingers. "Not until you are sated."

"Since I don't like eating alone"—she smiled when he opened his mouth and accepted the food—"I guess that's something we'll have to work on."

\* \* \*

The Otherworld Swanarri Province, The Bastillian Foothills Swamp of Despair

"What a shitty way to spend Christmas," Byron grumbled, sloshing through super-thick muck up to his knees that may very well have contained the substance he was complaining about. Octavia was one smart bitch. She had covered her tracks completely, and each trail rendered exactly the same result—jack shit. It was if he were tracking a phantom—one that left nothing behind.

Until he overheard a random conversation at Miser Murphy's Pub that tweaked his interest.

Two wraiths had been discussing some heavy shit that was set to go down within the week, something that had been several hundred centuries in the making, and the person responsible was the very one who had opened the dimensional portals permanently among the realms—using Racheron's Horns. At that point Byron had moseyed on over to buy them a drink or three, and when they weren't agreeable to his display of hospitality, Luca had taken a spin inside their heads. The nygromancer hadn't gotten much, just garbled images and impressions, but the chaotic thoughts had drifted to one place repeatedly.

The Swamp of Despair, or as it was formerly known, Swanarri Lake.

Nothing seemed to thrive in the pit of shit, which was devoid of sun and always overcast. The trees were nothing more than thin pieces of bark that stretched into the air like decayed land markers, and the air smelled of death. The lake had become a marsh that couldn't support any form of life. Even cockroaches were scarce.

It was an uninhibited wasteland.

"It would be easier if I knew where to teleport," Lucian remarked, moving in slow motion through the slimy mud just ahead of him. "Do you truly believe your sister would come to this dismal place?"

"Let's see," Byron snarled with each slurpy step, scowling at a large crow that swooped past them, squawking, "She's a life-sucking, backstabbing, two-faced, bloodthirsty, disloyal, and conniving bitch. I think this place would suit her just fine."

"Why don't you tell me how you really feel?"

Byron grunted in response. Winding his hands into his jacket, he adjusted the holsters strapped across his chest. He pictured Runa opening her Christmas gifts and scowled. Being away from his little sister during the holiday only fueled his bad mood.

"Stop." Lucian's command was feather soft. The daemon's face contorted in concentration, and his eyes slid shut. He lifted his hands, absorbing traces of the magik he was sensing. "There's a disruption of power ahead, coming from the north."

"Is it her?"

"I'm not sure. The energy feels odd."

Anything that was *odd* to Lucian was *not* good. "Odd?"

"The power is malevolent, so it is definitely dark magik, but—" Lucian turned to face him, legitimately dumbfounded. "The caster isn't tainted by the aura of hell. There's nothing there. I can't sense him."

A burst of flame appeared, and Lucian spun around just in time to erect a shield, the bright blue wall absorbing and reflecting the searing heat.

"Bloody hell!" Byron bellowed and crouched, as there was literally nowhere to duck. "What the fuck was that?"

"Whoever you are," Lucian brayed furiously, "you do not want to fuck with me."

Another blast came, and this time Lucian was prepared. He lifted his arm dismissively, and the ball of red wisps bounced off the blue, fading away into nothing.

"Goddamned whacker," Byron yelled. "Too much of a bloody coward to take us on face-to-face. This is why I hate magik. Any sodding tool can grow a backbone from a mile away."

A lyrical voice drifted through the bog. "I suggest you leave, before *this* sodding tool gets pissed off and shows you *her* goddamned backbone!"

Her?

"Who are you?" he demanded. "Reveal yourself."

"Oh yeah, like that's going to work." The haughty voice snickered. "You've trespassed into my space, pretty boy. Not the other way around. Don't even think about trying to threaten me. That little fire display you just witnessed is nothing compared to the gift I reserve for especially unwelcome visitors."

"If you're so fucking ace, why hide?" he goaded. "Or *are* you just another sodding tool without a goddamned backbone, as I pegged you from the start?"

Silence was the reward for his effort. There was no snide retort, no witty comeback.

Lucian met his stare and rotated his chin slyly to the left. Byron didn't move, waiting for the daemon to disappear and teleport to the bloodthirsty bitch diddling with a flamethrower. The nygromancer vanished and reappeared within seconds, holding a furious, thrashing creature obscured by a long brown cloak.

"Let go of me, you ape!" she shrieked. Lucian subdued her easily. Speaking in daemon tongue, he invoked a spell, and her entire body went still. He released her and stepped backward in the thick mud.

"I have only hindered your magik and your body," Lucian chided angrily. "Do not force me to take both from you permanently."

"All right, fine," she snarled. "Can you tell me what you want and get the hell out of my swamp?"

Byron spoke to the back of her hooded head. "We are tracking someone, and we have reason to believe she might be here."

"Stop right there, imbecile, and take a good look around. No one comes here. That's why I like the bog. It's isolated, quiet, and *private*." She exhaled loudly, obviously annoyed. "Actually, that's not entirely true. I was recently accosted by two incredibly rude ignoramous assholes. But then, you know that."

Lucian narrowed his eyes. "You've seen no others pass through recently?"

"Maybe," she answered evasively.

Byron's string-thin patience snapped. He stomped through the heavy mud toward her. He was drenched, achy, exhausted, and goddamned miserable. He'd be damned if he allowed some desolate, wart-infested swamp bitch to add to his misery.

He moved around her immobile body to face her, snarling heatedly, "We don't want to be in your fucking pit of despair any more than you want us here, and we didn't ask the person we are trailing to come through your nasty-ass version of home. But since she did, you're going to tell us what we want to know, or so help me, I'll make you wish you had."

"Yeah, sure," she muttered, releasing an extended sigh of boredom. "For the sake of long-absent conversation, let's say I did see this fae girl you're looking for. What of it?"

He hadn't mentioned they were tracking a fae.

She knows something.

He snatched the hood shrouding her bowed head and thrust it back. "I'd say you'd better start talking or—"

Lush white blonde hair, large sky blue eyes, luminous, pale skin, full ruby red lips—she wasn't some old crone surviving in a wasteland. She was the most insanely beautiful female he had ever seen. What in Hades was she doing *here?* 

"Why did you have to go and do that?" she purred in a lyrical voice, syllables raspy. Blood rushed straight from his head to his cock, bringing him to full attention.

Happy holidays, indeed.

Before the night was done, she'd be grateful they'd visited her little neck of the swamps. He'd fuck her so thoroughly she'd beg him to return for a repeat. And if she made it worth his while, he just might.

"You're bloody gorgeous." He swiped an appreciative finger along her soft, pale skin.

"I know," she replied in a jaded tone, as if she received the compliment all the time. "But now that those glorious baby blue eyes of yours have seen my face, you're going to wish you'd left well enough alone."

She lifted her hands, and a massive wave of burning energy scorched his chest. He flew into the air, unable to force his frame around, and crashed onto his side in the thick muck. He heard Lucian's rage-filled bellow, and he struggled to focus. The overcast sky swirled brown, becoming gray, and then everything went dark.

# Chapter Sixteen

In the hours spent with Runa, Eric had become completely smitten. She was clever, thoughtful, and amazingly mature for her young years. She listened without interrupting, answered his questions without restraint, and he learned the witch had spoken true, for Runa's curiosity *was* limitless.

She asked question after question about his race, his home, the realms...his family. He answered truthfully but attempted to keep her focus on the realms and creatures she was so eager to see versus the deeper topics he was hesitant to delve into.

She would learn soon enough of their families' disastrously connected histories.

When he asked her questions about herself, she was shy and modest, revealing very little, saying only that she had graduated from NYU with a degree in psychology and enjoyed Clark Gable films. When it came to her family, she was equally vague. She didn't know much about her mother, aside from the fact that she had died in childbirth. From what he gathered, her father had made himself scarce soon after she was born.

She gushed unabashedly about her brother, Byron, whom she obviously adored. Eric experienced a pang of guilt at her sadness at their separation, and he vowed to reunite the siblings as soon as she and Eric had consummated their bond. She was much more reflective when discussing Raudan. She seemed to still be hurt by what she perceived as his betrayal. He quickly changed the subject, inquiring about the witch. She became playful when discussing Yuviette the Seeing, sharing stories of their silly escapades, snaring him further with her easy laughter and gorgeous smile.

Other than her obvious concern regarding his decision to bind them to each other, she seemed content enough, happy even. But now the time had come to introduce her to his family, and the prospect put him on edge. He weighed the positive and negative aspects of what was bound to happen.

Locke Manor was Runa's home now, and the sooner she settled in, the better. However, if she was made to feel unwelcome in any fashion, he would be forced leave and take his Chosen away. It wouldn't be easy to abandon the home he had existed in for over a millennium, but Runa's happiness was paramount.

He combed anxious fingers through his hair, deliberating how it would play out, replaying the possibilities back and forth through his frazzled mind. His mated brothers and their Chosens were sure to be on their best behavior. Colin and Marshall had assured him that Aonia and Isobel were ecstatic about the prospect of a new female in the household. Trace, Gabriel, and Dante would keep their mouths shut, if only out of respect for the gods and Eric's decision.

But then there was Nox. His youngest brother wouldn't be understanding or courteous and would muck it all up if given the opportunity, just to be spiteful.

You could say to hell with it. Keep her with you the rest of the night. Deal with the assholes later.

His shoulders contorted, growing tense at the weight he anticipated was soon to come. He pulled the shirt he'd worn during the day over his head and tossed it into the basket at the back of the closet. Once he'd yanked a black turtleneck free of the hanger, he walked into the bedroom.

Nox had issues—serious goddamned issues—and a sidhe living under their mutual roof would only fuel his animosity. His brother wouldn't care that Eric's mate was innocent of any wrongdoing, or that she wasn't even aware of the existing history between Draigen and her kind. After the deaths of their parents during the last war of souls, Nox *hated* the sidhe fae—all of them.

"Eric, what should I wear?"

His large body crashed into Runa's when he rounded the corner. He let go of the shirt, wrapped his arms around her diminutive waist, and pulled her close. Her hands wrapped around his bare arms, fingers digging in as her body folded into his. His reaction to her nearness was combustive and immediate. Fire and lust raged, giving him yet another hellish erection that would ache until he thought he'd go mad. The need to take her had intensified throughout the day, and each time he touched her, he wasn't sure he could resist.

Fates, he wanted her so badly.

"Whatever you want," he answered with a heavy tongue, staring down and meeting her violet eyes. She didn't move away and stood utterly still. She pulled her glistening bottom lip into her mouth, nibbled gently, and it was over.

*For fuck's sake*. There was only so much control he was capable of.

He had her flat on her back on the bed in an instant, covering her tiny body with his while finding her lips and kissing her deeply. To his delight her mouth opened in welcome, tongue winding wickedly against his as her hands trailed around his bare stomach and gripped his back. He ran his hand under her sweater, caressing her soft skin. Cupping her breast, he pinched her nipple through the lacy material and was rewarded with a throaty moan.

"You're killing me, Runa." He lifted away to watch her face as he slid his thumb across her nipple, circling the stiff peak, which hardened and puckered.

Her eyes slid closed, and she sighed. He dipped his head, lifted her shirt, and pressed his mouth to her bra. Finding her nipple, he suckled through the thin material. He flicked his tongue in fast motions, nudging her thighs apart with his knee to settle his hips between them.

"That feels so good." She writhed against him before relaxing and twining her fingers into his hair.

"Let me make you feel good, aiarya."

He moved down her body, pressing kisses to her taut stomach, swirling his tongue around her belly button.

"I need... I have to...to tell you..."

"Tell me?"

She gasped when his mouth brushed across her tender skin, and clutched his hair with trembling hands. He returned to her breasts, rubbing the pads of his fingers expertly across her nipples in a deliberate, circular motion. She arched her back to give him better access, inhaling raggedly while pulling him against her.

"I can't think when you do that." She groaned, undulating beneath him, driving him mad.

"Then don't think. I only want to give you pleasure, nothing more. Will you allow me to touch you, to taste you?" She hesitated, going motionless. "Trust me, Runa," he whispered thickly. "Let me please you."

He knew the instant she made her choice, but thrilled in her softly spoken answer just the same. "Yes."

He tore the sweater from her body and removed her bra before carefully pulling away her jeans. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, completely flawless, and this time she didn't shy away from his touch.

"I've wanted this for so fucking long, dreamed of tasting you." Was he speaking aloud or in his mind? He wasn't certain. Grasping her scant black panties, he pulled them from her legs. When he pressed his hands against her inner thighs, eager to expose her to his hungry gaze, she tensed. She lifted herself on quivering elbows, and her panicked amethyst eyes met his.

"Nay, aiarya. Spread your pretty thighs. Let me see you."

She exhaled raggedly but did as he asked, resting back and placing her hands across her stomach. Her muscles were tense, her body trembling, but she didn't move or jerk away as he moved easily between her parted thighs and into position. He placed her feet over each of his shoulders and moved down the mattress, pulling her to the edge of the bed.

"That's it. Oh Christ. Runa, *you're beautiful*." He didn't bother silencing the groan that came from his chest, awestruck by the sight before him. She was completely smooth and hairless, her pale pink flesh shiny and flawless, and she glistened.

He edged closer, eager to taste what he had dreamed about for the past six weeks. He cupped her tight, rounded ass. She tensed when he pressed his lips against the softness of her inner thighs—first one, then the other—and Eric grappled for patience.

"Easy," he soothed, barely maintaining control.

He leaned in, darted his tongue along the softness of her labia, and tasted her honeyed sweetness for the first time. She was exactly as he knew she'd be—hot, creamy, and delectable.

"Blessed Fates," she cried out at the first touch of his tongue, bowing her back and burying her fingers into the comforter on either side of her body, clenching the thick material in her fists. "Oh sweet Moirae."

"So sweet and responsive." He blew a stream of air against her heated skin and slid his tongue into her drenched seam. She squirmed and writhed, moaning in pleasure. Licking in a firm, decisive stroke, he sampled the nectar produced by her excitement, and she whimpered in a way that had the beast within rising to the surface. A hot flush spread over his body, his vision changed, and his skin rippled as the dragon bristled against his skin. Both man and beast feasted on the woman in their hold, drinking her in, basking in her taste and scent.

He parted her swollen lips, separated the delicate folds within, and flicked his tongue against her luscious wetness, treasuring her display of trust and rewarding her for it. With each lick, her muffled mews transformed to ragged panting. She wound her fingers into the blanket, rolled her hips, and pushed her pussy into his mouth. He slid his palm from her rounded cheek and brought his hand around. She tensed when he invaded her with his middle finger and carefully pressed inside.

"Relax," he instructed softly. "Relax for me, aiarya. I meant what I said. I only wish to pleasure you, nothing more." He slipped another finger into her, working them back and forth in her velvety wetness, and with each giving inch of molten heat, he knew why she was afraid of his size.

She was tiny everywhere.

"Tight as a fucking vise," he rasped, enthralled by the snug walls of fiery satin that clenched his fingers like a suckling mouth.

"I know," she moaned. "That's what I—Oh God!"

Her words were silenced when he pushed away the hood masking her clit, sucked the swollen bud between his lips, and continued working her with gentle plunges. The beast in him was frustrated and impatient, making logical thought difficult, clamoring for him to claim her once and for all; soon he became rough, nibbling with his teeth while thrusting inside her until his knuckles met her yielding softness. He rotated his fingers in her slick heat, pressing back and forth against the snug inner walls until he found the sweet spot that would send her over.

She came abruptly, her skin glowing as she thrashed and cried out. He didn't stop, stuck in his own sexual frenzy, demanding she surrender all of herself. Growling deep in his chest, he thrust his hips mercilessly into the bed as he tongued and tasted her climax, rotating his pelvis and creating a maddening friction against his cock. She was musky, sweet, and hotter than hell.

Her inflamed reaction cemented his decision. Tonight he would tease her, bring her close to orgasm, but deny her release. Only when her body was merged with his would he allow her to come. He couldn't wait any longer. If he continued to

deny himself or the beast under his skin, he would put her in danger, take her roughly, and possibly hurt her. Each time he scented her musk and the dragon pressed against his skin, he was far too eager to spend inside her fragile body.

As her orgasm ended, her skin dimmed, and she twined her fingers into his hair. "Stop, please. It's too much."

He cleansed the skin around her pussy with gentle laps of his tongue, licking away the cream left by her climax. Releasing her reluctantly, he shifted his hips and cursed the rock-solid hard-on that throbbed painfully in his jeans. It was agony, staring at her swollen and glistening cunt, unable to slide inside her to find the relief he so longed for.

"Eric." She released his hair and stared at the ceiling. "I have to tell you something."

He eased her legs from his shoulders and traveled back up her body, pressing kisses against each of her peaked nipples, keeping his hips flush against the mattress to hide his erection. "What do you have to tell me, sebea?"

"I—" she stammered, cheeks flushing pink. She met his eyes and then quickly looked away. "Back in my realm, the sidhe are very rough, and I…" He frowned, and she tried again. "Sidhe sex is painful sex—"

Rage, fury, frenzy overcame him—each emotion intense and unstable.

The thought of her with another male hadn't enraged him before, but now that he had bound them, the thought incensed him so completely that his vision changed and his bones burned as if he were trapped with a coven of vampyren, preparing to shift and tear them limb from limb.

He wanted to kill someone.

"I don't want to know."

She peered up at him with wide eyes. "You don't understand—"

"I said I don't want to know, Runa!" He cursed in his language and braced his fists against the bed to move away from the temptation of her body. "What happened before is in the past, and I don't wish to speak of it."

He turned from her before he lost his control, retrieved the turtleneck from the floor, and threw it over his head. He pulled the soft material over his torso, desperately wanting to hit something—hard.

"All right," she demurred softly.

After composing herself, she climbed from the bed, retrieved clean clothes, and hurried into the bathroom. When the door closed quietly behind her, he sank into the mattress and raked his fingers through his tangled hair.

Fates help him—and her. He was no better than Colin and Marshall, absolutely possessive in all matters concerning his Chosen. He didn't want to share any part of his mate with anyone, including the portion of her life that had existed before he came into it. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, breathing deeply in an attempt to gain a measure of calm. Runa couldn't alter her past. It wouldn't do

either of them any good to rehash things they couldn't change. He wasn't going to ask, and by the Fates, she wasn't going to tell.

He didn't need to know about her sexual history before he had come into the picture, and more importantly, he didn't *want* to know.

#### Chapter Seventeen

Eric's harshly spoken words had one positive result; they had diverted her focus from the building tension about meeting with his family. When Runa emerged from the bathroom, dressed in simple black slacks and a matching cashmere sweater, she noted Eric had also calmed. He stood with his back to her, adjusting what appeared to be his belt. He looked absolutely breathtaking in black formfitting slacks and a turtleneck that molded perfectly to his body, displaying the muscles that flexed and stretched with each movement.

She slid to the left and out of his way as he stepped into the bathroom, and walked to the bags beside the bed to collect the black boots she had arrived in. The sound of the running water mingled with the sound of him brushing his teeth, and she cringed. Perhaps he wanted to forget what had happened between them and was removing any and all traces of her.

She cursed herself softly. Stop reading into things! You brushed your teeth too, you know!

By the time he came out of the bathroom, she couldn't meet his eyes. It had been so much easier when she hadn't cared one way or the other what he thought. But knowing he believed her to be nothing more than a whore, no better than the sisters she detested...

She felt incredibly dirty and cheap.

Eric crossed the short distance between them and took her hand in his. "Are you ready?"

She didn't trust herself to speak, so she nodded and followed mutely as he led the way from the bedroom. Her first memory of his brothers wasn't an entirely fond one, which put her on edge. And Eric was so tense and unapproachable, his jaw clenched and face forward.

It was as if he were bracing for war.

When they neared two large doors, softly spoken voices spilled from the dining hall. She clutched Eric's hand as if it were a life-support vessel. His fingers squeezed in return, but he didn't stop, leading them inside. The space was large and open. The fresh scent of paint and wood hovered in the air. She knew without being told that the men seated around the long table were his brothers. They all had the same features and stature, tall and impressively built. With the exception of the blond one, whom she recalled only too well, they also had Eric's blue-black hair.

The conversation stalled when they strode inside. Uneasy and apprehensive, she moved closer to Eric. He let go of her hand, wound his arm around her waist, and pulled her into the sheltering curve of his shoulder.

"She's here!" A very tall and exceptionally beautiful woman jumped from her seat. Mahogany hair drifted to her waist, and her chocolate-colored eyes shone.

"Wait for me!" another feminine voice snapped playfully, and Runa turned in time to see another woman—this one blonde and blue eyed—coming from the other side.

"Welcome to the family!" The brunette shoved Eric aside and bent to embrace her. "My, you are a little thing!"

"Let me see her!" the blonde demanded. "Wow, Marshall told me you were teeny, but this is incredible! You're just like a brownie. How tall are you, four feet?"

She hated being short, always had. "Five feet, actually."

"Introduce us, Eric," a voice called from the table, and Eric rewrapped his arm around her waist and guided her to the left.

He stopped in front of chairs with an empty trencher, much the same as one they had shared throughout the day. Then he introduced his brother Colin and the dark-haired female as his mate, Aonia. Next were his brothers Gabriel and Trace, who were cordial but not overly friendly. Then he presented his brother Marshall and his mate, Isobel, nodding to his brother Dante, who was seated beside them. Eric hesitated when he came to the blond brother with the glittering yellow eyes. His entire demeanor changed, voice carrying what she easily perceived as a hidden warning.

"This is my brother Nox."

Nox snatched a piece of food from his tray as he stared at her. "She looks different, but that's probably because she's not getting the shit kicked out of her."

Eric pulled her chair from the table, and she sat. Placing her hands in her lap, she twined her fingers together as he took the tray and went for food. She fidgeted uncomfortably. All eyes were on her, and she hated being the center of attention. What must they think? Did they appreciate her presence in their shared home? When Eric returned with the tray, he sat beside her and placed his hand over her worrying fingers, stilling the anxious movements, brushing his thumb over the sensitive skin at her wrist.

"So, Runa," Aonia said. "Have you seen the grounds? Just inside the forest beyond the brownie village is an enchanted lake, and farther back is the fabled Stone Mountain."

Runa forced a small smile. "Not yet."

"I plan to take her tomorrow." Eric chose some kind of bread from the platter as he spoke and brought it to her lips. She blushed in embarrassment but took it. Peering out from her lashes, she noted the approval of his mated brothers.

"Isn't this shit all warm and fucking cozy," Nox growled and glared at her with hatred so intense she quickly glanced away.

"When you take her," Colin continued as if Nox had never spoken, "be sure to swing by Timmon's cottage. He's spoken of little else."

"I can imagine." Eric chuckled, grinned in her direction, and chose another item from the tray.

"So can I," Nox snarled. "It's not often we welcome a fucking sidhe into our domain, much less our home."

Runa took the tangy fruit from Eric's fingers and stared at the clean, starched linen draped across the table. She didn't understand the reasons behind the animosity, but she remembered Nox all too clearly from Matilda's.

"Shut up, Nox," Isobel snapped. "Go spread your impressive state of worthlessness somewhere else."

"Don't you wish you could make me, Isobel? Or will you have my brother do the job?" His eyes brightened to a canary yellow. He pinned them on Runa, and she shifted uneasily in her seat. "It's not as if I'm speaking untrue. She *is* sidhe, and before Eric's mating they were most unwelcome here. In fact, the last one who dared cross our borders was torn apart limb from limb."

"Don't make me come across the table," Eric warned, the threat made all the more ominous by his casual demeanor. "I want my mate to enjoy her first meal with her new family, but I'm sure she'll enjoy it just fine after I remove your sorry ass from the room."

"Don't push me, Eric. I'm not in the fucking mood."

An argument erupted between the brothers, spoken in their foreign tongue. She didn't need to speak Draigen to know two things: the conversation concerned her, and neither one of them was willing to back down. They roared at each other furiously, and Gabriel and Trace jumped into the fray, snarling and slamming fists against the table, causing trays to crash loudly to the floor. Voices intensified, blaring off the walls until the hanging pictures began to vibrate and shake.

"I am justified in my rage!" Nox reverted to English, and she knew he was speaking so she could understand. "The bitch has no business here. I don't care if she's your Chosen!"

"Don't be assholes!" Isobel snarled, her blonde hair lifting as if it were electrically charged. Her glacier blue eyes shone white. "This is evening meal, not a prize match in a pit!"

"Shut your mate up, Marshall," Nox snapped. "She's interfering in matters that do not concern her."

"You did *not* just say that, you rotten prick!" Isobel pushed her chair away from the table, lifting hands that paled as steam drifted from her palms. "I'll put your ass on ice permanently!"

"No, Bel!" Marshall shouted in alarm, grasped her wrists, and stood between his brother and his mate. "Shut the fuck up, Nox!"

"Why should I?" Shoving away from the table, Nox froze Runa in place with his portentous topaz-colored eyes. "You should not be here, *sidhe*. The Fates did a

disservice to the memory of my family by tossing you upon us like the fucking plague. Then they disgraced my brother's centuries of service by saddling him with a worthless whore for a mate who will eventually die and take him with her when she does."

Eric launched over the table, crashed into Nox, and seized him by the throat. The moment they collided, a painful surge of energy rippled through the room, bristling against Runa's skin, but it was nothing compared to the misery she felt at hearing each of Nox's brutally honest words.

How many times had she said the same thing? That she would be the death of him? That she had to maintain a distance? She had sworn she wouldn't allow them to join, but the minute Eric had spoken the words, she'd all but forgotten her vow.

"Back the fuck off, Nox!" Colin came to Eric's side as Trace and Dante worked to break them apart. "Can't you feel his beast? He'll fucking shift and rip your wretched ass apart!"

Runa rose from her chair in a daze and stumbled numbly from the room. How could she possibly deter Eric after he had clearly made his choice? The weight of the all-but-forgotten slave band felt substantially heavier on her wrist—a stark reminder of her situation and Eric's determination—and the damned thing removed all her options. She couldn't run from Eric. She couldn't disobey him either. Her mind was in chaos, searching for something—anything—that would stop what had been set into motion. What could she do that would make Eric turn from her? He wouldn't be easily dissuaded from taking what he wanted.

And he wanted her.

She remembered his heated outburst when she had tried to reveal her innocence to him, the way his eyes had flared with revulsion as he misinterpreted her intended declaration, believing she had the exact opposite to say.

Suddenly, she knew what she had to do.

The answer had been in front of her the entire time.

## Chapter Eighteen

Eric tightened his fingers around Nox's throat, mercilessly cutting off his oxygen. The beast under his skin demanded he shift and seek retribution. He roared in outrage, barely containing himself, skin aflame as he felt himself nearing the change.

"Let him go, Eric." Colin wrapped an arm around his chest and attempted to pry him loose.

Tear him apart. "I'll kill him."

"He's our brother, regardless of his actions, and you're not thinking rationally. Release him, Eric, and calm down. We just returned this particular portion of the manor to its former glory. Don't obliterate the brownies' efforts by losing your shit. Mellow the fuck out."

The beast was so close. Eric's vision distorted, and his bones began to contort, readying his body to shift. He fought against the dragon, cursing it for making things more difficult than they already were.

You don't want her to see you transform in a rage. It will only frighten her.

He stared into Nox's blaring yellow eyes and bashed him against the wall, cracking the plaster. "If you ever speak to her like that again, I swear to the fucking Fates, I will rip out your throat, *little brother*." He let go and stepped back, shrugging aside Colin's hold and turning, ready to collect Runa and return to the sanctuary of their bedroom.

"She's gone." Aonia sneered at Nox. "She left as soon as you got a piece of asshole here."

He rushed from the room, angry and disappointed. He had known it wouldn't be easy, but he had never expected it to come to blows. Hopefully when he explained the situation to Runa and told her of the past, she would understand Nox a bit better.

Or in the very least, be able to tolerate his worthless ass.

He burst inside the bedroom, expecting to find Runa in tears or draped across the bed. Instead she stood in the center of the room, waiting for him. Her tiny hands were clasped in front of her, and her variegated head was bowed.

"Sebea," he began, calling her his love, his heart, wanting to comfort her.

"It's true you know." She lifted her head and met his stare with one that was oddly empty. "I am a sidhe whore. We all are. It's in our nature, in our gene pool. The slut trait is carried over from the moment of conception."

He pushed aside the rage that attempted to surface at her admission. "I don't care about any of that. It's in the past."

"You just don't get it." She laughed, taunting him. "I've not just been taken here or there, fucked in little lover's trysts or in the back bedrooms of fae mounds. I've been used in front of others, displayed for the masses to watch, taken in ways you cannot begin to imagine. I've had lovers young and old, kind and harsh, rough and tender. I've been brandished in all the ways a person can be, by more people than you can count!"

"Do not tell me any more." He snarled each word crisply as his bestial half threatened to consume him.

"You need to hear this so you will release me from our bond. It's better for both of us." She didn't hesitate or flinch. "I've been fucked from the front and from the back. I've been sucked off, and then I've done the same in turn."

"Don't, Runa."

"I've been used by countless groups of males—"

Other males touching her? "Stop!"

"All at once, all at their leisure."

"Runa—"

"Sometimes they took turns, but sometimes they couldn't wait and took whatever part of me was empty and available at the moment. Then they rotated and started over." She surged ahead, heedless, reckless. "They fucked me so hard I couldn't walk for days after. And I loved it, all of it. I couldn't get enough—"

"Don't say another fucking word!" he roared, face hot and chest heaving, unable to bear what she was saying. His entire body shook violently; the need to destroy was paramount. His control slipped and fell away, yet somehow he managed to order icily, "Do not speak again unless I specifically tell you to do so!"

She opened her mouth and winced, trying again with the same result. He took a hollow amount of comfort in the fact the slave band forced her to remain silent, knowing he would have lost his control if she had continued. She remained passive when he strode to her and gripped her sweater. After pulling the garment roughly over her head, he threw it onto the floor and knelt to remove her boots. She had been with so many, yet she denied the one person she was Fated for. Even worse, she smeared it in his face, demeaning him just as Nox had said she would.

He struggled for calm as he stared up at his mate. She refused to meet his gaze, staring blankly ahead. Her dainty chin quivered, revealing she wasn't as unshaken as she appeared, and he reminded himself that this was his Chosen. She was his one chance at happiness and fulfillment, and he would not come to her in violence. But by the Fates, he would have her. And tonight she wouldn't stop him.

"Lie down on the bed," he instructed after he had removed all her clothing.

She seemed to try to fight the compulsion, hesitating and frowning, but she finally did as she was told, walking away and tempting him with a glorious view of her perfectly rounded bottom. He waited until she was situated on the bed before he made quick work of his own clothing.

He joined her on the mattress. Stretching out beside her alabaster body, he kicked aside the comforter, knocking it to the floor. He had imagined how it would be the first time, but it was never like this, never with him forcing compliance. He considered removing his command and allowing her to speak, until her words resurfaced in his mind.

No. He couldn't have her say something more to exacerbate his rage. It would be reckless to allow her to taunt him further. He was holding on to his sanity by sheer willpower alone.

He peered down at her and said, "Listen to me carefully, Runa. You may have had hundreds of lovers—thousands. But starting tonight, you will have only one. *Me*."

She started to tremble and closed her eyes, and he lowered his head to her neck, nuzzling the silken skin at her collarbone. He shifted his body, pressed his mouth against her throat, and licked the soft hollow at the base. He raised his head and saw her bottom lip was quivering and her eyelids were slammed tightly closed. She lifted her hands but dropped them, balling her fingers into tight fists.

"Look at me."

When her eyes opened, he bent down to kiss her, maintaining eye contact while he brushed his lips across hers. She didn't accept him as eagerly as she had before, but he didn't hesitate. Thrusting his tongue into her mouth, he cupped her breasts and teased her nipples until they went taut and hard. He caught her soft moan in his mouth and, bracing on his elbows, moved over her, spreading her legs with his knee. He settled his body against hers, eager to lavish attention on the creamy swells.

Taking one bud into his mouth, he teased the other with his fingers, tormenting with gentle flicks and thrums. She bucked beneath him. The softness of her skin teased his cock, the smooth surface of her thigh caressing his sac. He cursed when he nearly spent himself across her silken flesh. Working his way past her belly button, he licked a path to the paradise that awaited him at the apex of her thighs.

Cannot wait any longer. Must claim her.

He knew exactly how to get her fervent for him, and he planned to use his knowledge to gain what he wanted most. He would bring her to the brink of orgasm, so close she ached just as he did. When she could no longer take the miserable emptiness within, she would be more than ready to accept him into her body.

As she was intended to.

He wasn't easy with her, and he didn't take his time or tease. He parted her labia with his fingers, inhaled her unique, musky scent, and buried his face in her

cunt. He tongued her relentlessly and rotated between sucking on her clit, lapping at her slit, and delving into the haven that awaited him just inside. She whimpered, moving against his mouth, her body going rigid as she neared orgasm.

He ripped his lips away, and she cried out, trembling violently and breathing in uneven pants. He waited until she was still and the pleasure had passed before starting again. Winding his hands up her body, he rolled her nipples between his fingers, massaging the pert mounds in his palms. When he achieved the same result and she neared climax, he pulled his lips free of her sex, leaving her body aching and writhing.

He worked a finger inside her impossibly tight passage, thrusting again and again into her velvety, hot smoothness. Stroking her in the steady rhythm he fully intended to match with his now-pulsating and aching cock. She responded as he had hoped, meeting each thrust.

"Like that, aiarya," he instructed in a husky timbre. "Move for me. Show me what you want. Show me what feels good."

She ground eagerly against his hand, arching her back, spreading her legs. He lowered his head and indulged in her deliciously dewy and satiny flesh, flicking his tongue quickly across her clit and building her pleasure until she squirmed uncontrollably beneath him. He hesitated as he tried to work another finger into her and met resistance as she tensed. She could barely take his fingers, even as wet and excited as she was.

"Easy," he whispered. Carefully parting and stretching her, he scissored his fingers.

It took several smooth passes until she relaxed and pressed into his palm. Moaning and thrashing her head on the pillow, she ground against his hand, meeting the jagged thrusts. He spread his fingers wider, preparing her body for what was to come. Then he sucked her clit into his mouth and trapped the tiny bead between his teeth.

He felt her body tense for orgasm a third time, and he removed his fingers. Lifting away, he fisted his pounding shaft and rubbed the tip of his cock against the folds of her pussy, smearing the proof of her arousal all around the head. He met her dazed and hazy stare as he bumped her clit, moved along the cleft, and finally spread her swollen lips.

I'm about to claim my Chosen, my mate.

He allowed himself to savor the moment, reveling in the ecstasy of her lush little body parted for him like an offering. Then he carefully fed the large, meaty tip of his cockhead into her, hissing at the scorching heat and unbelievable tightness that surrounded him like a fist.

"So hot and tight, sleek as satin." He settled his towering frame over her entirely, surrounding her tiny body and preparing to invade it as well. She panted, clinging to his arms, and when she met his lust-filled gaze, he saw fear in the golden violet pools.

Fear of what he was about to do? Of consummating their bond? He regretted the circumstances that didn't allow him to ask the simple question.

"You're mine, Runa." His voice contorted as the dragon urged him to take the final step and remove that last remaining barrier between them. "From this moment, you belong to me."

Her lips parted when he leaned forward to capture her mouth. His tongue darted inside at the same time he surged forward, joining them together in one solid and forceful thrust, burying himself to the hilt. Her entire body shuddered, and he captured the soft cry that erupted from her lips, claiming her breath in the same instant he claimed her body.

Holy fucking Fates.

The blistering fire around his shaft *was* the best version of heaven imaginable, a constricting satin unlike anything he had ever experienced. She was so tight it was agonizing, so sultry it heated his already prickling, sensitive skin. He closed his eyes and basked in the amazing feeling of her body squeezing him.

So fucking good.

He pulled his hips back slowly, groaning at the impossibly wondrous friction, and shuddered when it brought the head of his shaft to the mouth of her sex. He reached for her hips and held her firmly in place as he thrust into her again, burying himself so deeply the head of his cock delved into the soft, giving warmth of her cervix. She forced her lips away from his, wailed in agony, and pushed against his chest.

He lifted onto his elbows in panic, staring down into her pained eyes. Tears spilled free, the salty trails streaking down her temples. "Runa?" He stopped moving and cupped her tiny face in his large hands.

She tried to speak and winced, pressing newly formed tears free from the corners of her eyes and onto his hands.

He cursed himself. She couldn't speak. "Tell me what's wrong. Speak to me."

Her soft sobbing would have made her difficult to understand, but she chose two words that he heard perfectly. "It hurts."

Damn it. She was too small for him, too delicate, and he had moved too soon after he'd entered her, thrusting too deeply. "It won't happen again, sebea." He pressed soft kisses to her eyes and then her mouth. "You need to adjust to my size. I'll be gentle. I'm sorry I wasn't before. You just feel so good, Runa, so incredible."

He licked a path past her collarbone to a pert nipple and sucked it into his mouth, teasing the skin with his tongue. He wanted to make this good for her. As good as it was for him.

"No." She whimpered, tensing and inadvertently clenching the cock wedged deep inside her body, causing him to groan. "You have to s-stop. Please, Eric. It hurts so b-bad."

Knowing she had no reason to trust him, he hoped she would just the same. "Relax for me. I won't hurt you again. I swear it."

"Please." She closed her eyes, trembling beneath him, shutting him out entirely.

For fuck's sake!

Unnerved by her quiet plea, he struggled to find an inner strength of will and the necessary control to stop. He held his breath and began pulling free of her fisttight sheath, inch by painful inch, intending to do as she asked. His body reacted to the friction. His cock pulsed as he started to come.

"Damn it!" He cursed in his language and thrust into her one last time, speaking the words ingrained in him as a male from the time of his birth, binding them together as his seed burst free and coated her womb.

"Bound to me by the Fates and cleaved to me by choice. I accept the will of the gods. I claim you as my Chosen."

Of their own accord, his lips drifted to the vulnerable space between her shoulder and neck. His teeth elongated, his canines sharpening. The primitive instinct to mark and dominate overcame everything else, and he bit down. His bite brought her to orgasm even as she whimpered in pain. She wailed her release as her pussy squeezed and clenched him, extending his climax as he jetted another stream of semen inside her.

Taking care not to rest his entire weight on her much smaller frame when his body was spent, he pulled his teeth free of her flesh and began lapping at the marks left behind. It was done. Both halves of him were wholly sated, relieved, and content.

He and Runa were bound together, a Fated pair, and nothing in this reality or the next could separate them now.

## Chapter Nineteen

Runa felt the jerking pulses deep inside her body that were wrought by her orgasm, accompanied by a scorching heat as Eric found his release. He collapsed on top of her, breathing deeply against her neck as his tongue bathed and soothed her skin. She remained perfectly still, burning and aching in places she had never imagined, fearing any kind of movement that would lodge or dislodge him from her protesting body.

The pain she had experienced when he first thrust into her had been gutwrenching, so intense and profound she couldn't think, couldn't reason, and was left only to feel and endure. The second time was borderline agony, which was eventually surpassed by the third as he spent himself inside her.

Now that it was blessedly over and done with, she never wanted to feel him rending her body in two again.

Not now, not ever.

"Let me move. I don't want to crush you," Eric said thickly, his voice heady.

He eased free, and she bit down on her lower lip, stifling the cry that threatened to escape, ignoring the sticky wetness that clung to her skin. The dull, stabbing throb continued to ache in the pit of her stomach even as he moved to her side. He flipped onto his back, reached for her, and she struggled to sit. The warm gush of his seed escaping her sex soaked her inner thighs, coating the sheets beneath her.

"Runa?" She could hear concern in his voice. "Are you all right?"

*No.* "Yes." She nodded numbly, answering in a carefully level and monotone voice. "I just need to go to the bathroom."

"Let's shower together," he murmured, brushing his fingers along her back. "I don't want to be apart from you."

Don't panic. Stay calm. "I need a bit of privacy." She shook her head, escaping his tender hands to climb from the bed. Rushing to the bathroom, she refused to break down until she made it safely inside its confines.

When she was hidden within the enclosed space, she spun around and sagged against the door as it closed behind her. She lifted her fingers to the small, rounded punctures in her shoulder.

"You can't stop fate, Runa," Yuvi had said. As usual, she was right.

She inhaled sharply, fighting back tears, and winced as the motion caused her to tighten her vaginal muscles. She felt a pulsing ache deep inside, a remembrance of how things were versus how things should have been. Tormenting Eric with the stories of others in an effort to dissuade him had provided the opposite result. She had never considered that he might use the blasted slave band to stop her vile lies, silencing the malicious words that had come so easily from her lips.

"Young and old, kind and harsh, rough and tender...from the front and from the back...countless groups of males...couldn't get enough."

She covered her ears, attempting to stem the echo of her thoughts.

Telling him the things she had witnessed was terrible enough, but attempting to pass them off as acts she had done herself... No wonder he had taken her as he did.

She moved away from the door and shuffled to the sink, peering down at the trickle of his seed intermingled with her blood as it oozed down her leg. She could use the towels on the shelves to clean herself, but her body hurt, and the soft folds of her sex were burning, so sore that it was uncomfortable to move. The calming balm of hot water cascading over her skin would be heaven, and she wanted to shower desperately.

She made her way to the stall, stopped, and stared at the faucets.

If she turned on the water, Eric would come into the room to join her. She was certain of it. After weighing the consequences, she stepped inside, closed the glass, and braced her hands against the cold ceramic wall.

Then she cried.

Eric sighed into the quiet room and tossed his legs over the edge of the bed. He knew Runa was angry at him for binding them together, but he couldn't regret the decision. Not after discovering how perfect it could be between them. Now he wanted to show her he wouldn't hurt her; he would give her pleasure that surpassed his own. With control no longer being an issue, he could take his time and bring her to climax over and over again.

But first came her holiday tradition—the movie the witch had sworn Runa viewed each and every Christmas. He had planned to surprise her directly after evening meal, until Nox fucked everything up. Hopefully it would lighten her dark mood.

He walked into the closet, flipped on the light, and reached along the top shelf for the DVD box. He'd purchased the damned thing on SliverCast but assumed Runa would identify with the DVD box better than a printed receipt and a detailed explanation of magikal technology. The sound of the shower didn't come as a monumental surprise, but still he shook his head, chuckling softly. His mate was about to learn she would have little privacy in most matters concerning him, especially when her need was based solely on pride. Anger for binding them together was one thing, but distancing herself from him because of it was another.

He snagged the thin box between his fingers, strode into the bedroom, walked over to the bed, and froze. Red smears took up the center of the tanned sheets, spaced about in random spatters. It only took a split second for fear to seep into his stomach. In his focused mind-set, he'd forgotten all about her mortality and the inability to heal as he did.

What if he had hurt her? Christ!

"Runa!" he roared. Dropping the thin box, he burst into the bathroom.

He rushed to the shower and pulled open the glass door coated in steam. She was facing the wall, hands splayed on either side of her head. He looked down at her thighs, and his heart sank. Crimson streaks tainted her pale skin, and a thin river of pink trailed down her leg.

"Fucking hell," he exclaimed in horror, hurrying to her. "How badly are you hurt? Tell me!"

"I'll be fine," she answered softly, keeping her face turned away from him.

"Do I need to summon a healer? Don't lie to me! How badly did I hurt you?"

"No, I don't need a healer," she said, sniffing. "I'll be fine. I'm not lying to you."

"You're bleeding." He cupped her chin, and she attempted to yank loose.

"Of course I'm bleeding!" She lifted her arms and struggled from of his hold, fighting until she gained her freedom. Her frail shoulders sagged, and she blurted, "I'm sure the worst is over now."

She continued to deny him the eye contact he so desperately craved. After creeping to the water spray, she stood directly beneath it. She cupped her hands to collect water, brought it to her face, and brushed her hair away from her forehead, then repeated the motion several times as if it calmed her. Several random images came into his mind then, each equally important but nearly goddamned irrelevant—until now.

Her plea not to be left at the Dark Court to be used as a whore. The first moment he had kissed her, and she lowered her face in embarrassment. The way she had stared at his body fearfully the first time she saw him nude. Her gentle fingers running along his shaft experimentally as if she'd never touched a male before.

"You're too big." Her voice resounded in his mind. "You'll hurt me."

And then, after Nox's harsh words reminding them of what would occur when they mated, she had returned to their room and told him of her numerous conquests, angering him to the point of rage. "You need to hear this so you will release me from our bond."

Her responses, reactions, hesitancy, and when he had thrust into her, she had been so tight—too tight. Had there been a moment when he felt a slight giving, a resistance? Why hadn't he seen it before? It was so evident.

Because deep down, while you may have wanted and accepted her, all you saw was a sidhe.

She had lied to him. She wasn't a sidhe whore; she was something else entirely. "It was your first time." He choked, feeling sick and suppressing the urge to vomit.

She paused, stared at the wall for several long, excruciating seconds, and then nodded curtly. Lowering her head and bracing her hands against the brown ceramic tiles, she allowed the heavy streams of water to soak her hair and shoulders.

His chest caved in on itself.

She had been a virgin—a goddamned innocent—and he had taken her virginity like she was a random late-night bar fuck. He felt shame, recalling all too vividly how he had forced his cock inside her body, making her accommodate him completely before surging into her tiny frame one final time as he came—unable to control himself even after she had told him to stop.

The pain must have been unbearable.

"Christ, Runa." He spoke brokenly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He didn't think she'd heard him, and he almost repeated himself, until she whispered, "I tried to."

Then he remembered her blushing, trying to tell him something and insisting it wasn't what he thought. He had lost his shit. "*I don't want to know*," he'd raged at her, furious at the thought of another person touching what he viewed entirely as his.

He felt completely unworthy, standing dumbly as she wet her hair and struggled to pull a cloth from the shelf built into the wall.

"Nay," he told her, breaking free of his stupor and walking around her shivering body. He snatched a cloth, held it under the spray, and then knelt before her. "I'll care for you."

"Can't I have at least *some* privacy?" She dissolved into tears and wrapped her arms around her waist.

He answered in his language, speaking in hoarse syllables as he removed the traces of her virginity mixed with his seed, telling her she would never have privacy to allow him the absolution of guilt, then expressing his deep regret and sorrow, and finally begging for her forgiveness.

"I don't understand you." She sniffed as he finished cleaning her, wiping away fresh tears with the back of her hand.

"I'm asking for your forgiveness. I'm fucking begging for it." He removed the blood from his groin that he should have noticed immediately before dropping the cloth to the floor, completely disgusted by his actions and his treatment of her.

"There isn't anything to forgive. I don't blame you, Eric. It's not your fault. It's mine."

He had expected her anger, even her complete rejection and condemnation, but never her declaration of guilt. *Rage at me, damn it*! He forced her to look at him,

gripping her chin. "Do not ever say this was your fault. The blame rests solely on me."

"No, it doesn't," she argued weakly through a new volley of tears, and each tiny crystalline drop killed him. "I goaded you intentionally, telling you terrible things that weren't true. I shouldn't have."

He left the shower to retrieve towels. Once he'd lifted her from the stall, he carefully fluffed her skin dry. He felt each of her pained movements as she walked slowly into the bedroom, and he immediately returned to the bathroom for quill, realizing as he reached for the cabinet that he'd forgotten to instruct Timmon to bring him more of the magikal compound.

Of all the things to forget with a mortal mate.

He stopped his fist from breaking through the glass just in time, swiveling to the right and punching through the wall. He pulled his clenched fist from the tattered plaster and concrete and fisted the sink with both hands, unable to meet his own eyes in the mirror.

This isn't about you, he reminded himself, taking a deep breath to clear his mind. Take care of *her*.

He got his head straight, returned to the bedroom, and walked into the closet to dress while Runa chose clothing from her bags. He retrieved fresh linens from the top shelf on the way out and strode purposefully to the bed, wanting to remove the sheets before they upset her. His heart ached as he stripped away the bloodstained sheets, each crimson smear smashing into his chest like a coiled fist.

All she would remember of their first time together was pain.

"A Christmas Story?" Runa interrupted his chaotic thoughts as she padded over in silk pajamas, clutching the box he'd dropped to the floor, her nose and eyes pink and slightly swollen from crying.

He cursed in his language, then shifted easily to hers. "I wanted to surprise you."

"Can we watch it?"

His sense of self-worth plummeted. He would have moved the fucking realms if she had asked it of him at that very moment. "Of course we can. But first I need to go see Colin. He has quill I can give you."

"No." She shook her head, staring at him in mortification. "Please don't, Eric. I don't want him to know."

His jaw twitched as he ground his teeth together. He could alleviate her obvious discomfort, needed to. "I won't be gone long, just a few minutes."

"I don't need it," she insisted, imploring him with her dulled purple irises. "Please."

He struggled with his obligation to see her cared for, but ultimately relented, unwilling to upset her further. "I'll do whatever you wish."

He finished with the bed, lifted her in his arms, and placed her on her side, facing the wall. She relaxed into his body when he slid in behind her, sighing softly and resting her head on his arm. He called for the hidden screen in the wall to activate, selected the SliverCast movie by voice, and wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back into the protective shelter of his body.

The movie started, but he couldn't see or hear, lost in his inner torment.

If he had known Runa was a virgin, he would have taken her slowly, ensuring she knew just how beautiful she was, worshipping her and the gift she was giving him. He wouldn't have been so crude, so careless...

So goddamned selfish.

He replayed what he had done to her over and over, and as he did, he realized one thing with utmost certainty: if Runa had been frightened by the prospect of making love to him before, she would be absolutely terrified of it now.

## **Chapter Twenty**

The Otherworld

Marduk Province, City of the Phoenix

Home of the Marauder Coven

Something is wrong.

Yuviette Marauder felt it inside her body, a ceaseless humming in her blood like a bee trapped inside a glass jar, buzzing haphazardly until it was undeniable. Byron's failure to meet with her at Apollon's Tavern was *not* good. It set off her seer-sense radar like a Cracker Jack box with a bottle-rocket prize detonating inside.

She forced herself to breathe deeply, fighting the frantic wisps of energy that fizzled in her veins and set off inner alarm bells that had the power to rape and pillage the entire room. Her powers increased with adrenaline, and it had taken her hundreds of years to learn proper control. The proverbial checks-and-balances magik system blew balls, and most of the time she felt like she'd just unearthed a winning ticket to the fuck-you lottery bowl.

Being a witch was hard. Being a witch and a volva sorceress was harder. Being a witch, volva sorceress, and a seer was the fucking *pits*.

She shooed off the oncoming waitress with a swish of her hand, distracted and troubled. Byron would never have missed this meeting. Not when it involved Runa and some strange-ass happenings in regard to the hex Yuviette had been working.

And neither would Lucian.

She wound her fingers around the glass of red wine, and she downed it, hoping the alcohol would ease the fire burning under her skin. The nygromancer had no clue she was his Chosen. She'd hidden the truth from him like a dirty little secret, obscuring their link by using magik of her own. Fortunately, he had been recovering from a little one-on-one match with a fae-lock at the time, and he hadn't paid her much attention when Runa introduced them on a bright, sunny, and generally quaint afternoon. Otherwise she would have been as good as fucked.

Not that it would have been an entirely bad thing.

Remember the past, or you're doomed to repeat it! she reminded herself, recalling exactly why she kept a safe distance from the one person fate had decided was born to rock her Wiccan world. She would never be vulnerable to anyone again,

especially to someone who had the power to weaken her defenses by simply uttering choice words derived by the gods.

Fucking sexist bullshit. A woman should be able to choose her fate without a cocky Neanderthal coming along and clubbing her over the head like a helpless seal. If Yuvi hadn't seen Runa and her Draigen as happy as two little tank engines in the not-too-distant future, she would never have agreed to help Raudan reunite them.

She slapped money onto the table and rose from her seat. Snagging her clutch, she strode for the nearest exit, her patent-leather heels clacking with each fluid step. Something was running afoul in a badass way, and she needed the proper gear to uncover exactly what.

"Yuviette, is that you?"

She wanted to spin around, bestow the middle finger, and enlighten whoever had delayed her departure with a good old-fashioned *fuck off*. Instead she slipped on her happy mask, going bubbly and energetic, lifting her face, and smiling exuberantly. Her facade never wavered, even when she recognized the lesser warlock from a charm gathering decades ago. But then again, it was second nature after all these years.

Charlatan. Pretender. Deceiver.

Practice makes perfect.

"Hello, Vern."

His dark gaze glided over her body appreciatively, taking in the short black dress that left little to the imagination. "You look amazing. What's the occasion?"

I wanted to tease a daemon that I can't have.

She feigned boredom. "I'm late for a meeting with the coven. I lost track of time"—she lifted her arm and motioned to her bare wrist—"again."

"If you're all-seeing, why can't you track the time?" he asked, bursting into belly-rippling laughter at what he obviously considered a decent joke. She smiled and joined in, hating herself with each cackle.

Laugh it up, you dumb son of a whorehound. As soon as I leave, I'm going to hex you with a flaming case of genital warts you'll never get rid of. Kiss your sex life good-bye.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

She sighed again and shrugged, exaggerating the motion, tossing waves of thick red hair over her shoulder. "I'm afraid not, you sexy warlock. I have places to go and witches to meet. How about a rain check?"

He nodded eagerly, and she scurried away before she actually gave in to the temptation and hexed the poor bastard. Once outside she flagged down a cab, gave directions that would leave her close to her safeguarded home, and rested against the repulsive seat covered by magikal plastic. She tried to see Byron but came up totally blank.

Damn it to hell!

122

The only other alternative was attempting to see Lucian. She had avoided that little dalliance entirely after the first time, when she had been blessed with a stark image of the two of them together that had scorched itself into her memory like an orgasmic firebrand. Unlike the cyclops, fortuned to foresee their own demise and therefore their future, seers could never see what waited ahead unless it was through another's eyes.

Fuck it.

She closed her eyes, picturing his dark hair, undeniably gorgeous face, and eyes that flashed from midnight black to burnished silver when provoked. Her heart skipped a beat when nothing happened, and she tried again, becoming frazzled.

There were only three reasons she wouldn't be able to see him...

He could be cloaking himself, but that wouldn't make any sense. Her message had arrived safely two days past. She had received confirmation from the papillion messenger who had delivered it personally.

He could be hurt. Immortals healed quickly, but daemons required blood to survive. Left wounded, it wouldn't take much to weaken him. She shook her head, knowing that was wrong too. Lucian was too powerful. He'd take down anything within a one-hundred-foot radius that tried to stop him.

Which left reason number three.

She couldn't see him, and she couldn't sense him. The most powerful wielder of magik left in the realms, the last of his kind...

And her goddamned Chosen!

She snarled at the cabbie, dropping the sticky-sweet display, and snatched the seat in front of her, "Pound the pedal to the metal, NASCAR. I'm in a hurry."

"Shut the fuck up—"

She lifted her hand and brought forth the magik inside, silencing him in the same motion as she began guiding the wheel. She increased the speed via the assistance of his now-immobile foot and forced his tub-of-lard ass back into the seat. "A word of advice, dick for brains," she purred just behind his head. "Don't ever tell a volva sorceress to *shut the fuck up*, especially one who has somewhere important to go. When we have places to be, we needed to get there *yesterday*."

She drove to her allotted destination and exited the car without paying the fare. It wasn't like he had driven anyway. Then she cloaked herself and walked past the back alley into the cemetery, skirting her way across. It was quiet out, and the moon held an odd twinge of red.

A killing moon.

She rushed to the black marble mausoleum with the name MARAUDER stenciled in Olde English. After slipping inside, she rushed to the back, spoke her name, and dissolved the shield to descend into the crypt. The minute her feet hit the last stair, she heard her sisters' howls of laughter. While immortals didn't technically celebrate the mortal holiday known as Christmas, her sisters embraced any opportunity to get their freak on, and there was nothing better than a little

mortal manipulation through a midnight water pool with a bottle of alcohol to light the way.

"Oh God, did you see that?"

She recognized Elizabeth's youthful voice, which was followed immediately by her eldest sister, Astrid's.

"I know, right? How can mortals be so asinine?"

She stomped past them, feeling their eyes burning holes into her back. She blocked out their inquisitive whispers. As soon as she arrived in her room, she opened her hands, inhaled deeply, and released the air slowly from her nose. It was time to focus. Emotion only muddled magik; it didn't help it.

"What's up, home skillet?" Astrid's teasing lilt resonated off the high ceilings.

She didn't react, retaining her focus. "Not now."

"Does this have anything to do with that Lich, Alucard?"

"Alucard," Lizbeth croaked.

Focus, need to be clear. "Zip it, Asti! If you want to know what's eating my fucking goat, read my mind already! I need to concentrate, okay? Thanks." She pictured Lucian's face as she stepped into the circle drawn on the floor, first thinking his name and then speaking it softly.

"Lucian."

"Oh snap," Lizbeth muttered, snickering. "I thought you were just saying no to daemon bait."

She reached out with her chi—her life force—and tried to brush against traces of the vigorous energy he radiated, feeling...

Nothing.

"Fuck!" she snarled, stepping from the circle and kicking off her heels. This was going to take heady magik involving blood and a few other nifty little tricks she'd learned over the years.

"Hey, V." Astrid spoke cautiously. "If you can't sense him, then your gut instinct is probably right. He could be, well, you know."

"I see death too, Asti," she reminded her sister. She removed her dress, snagged a pair of jeans and a potion-stained T-shirt, and started putting them on. "I'd see him, especially inside *my* circle."

Her circle of power was a mystikal tool that was hers and hers alone, created with splices of her blood mixed with remnants of every dimension in the realms. She could beam Spock to her personal mother ship, if she were so inclined.

Lizbeth chimed in, "Where did the papillion say she found him to deliver your message?"

Yuvi shrugged. "Somewhere in the Bastillian Foothills."

Lizbeth's footsteps registered immediately, but the hand she placed on Yuvi's shoulder took time to process. "Don't you think that might be the best place to go searching for answers?"

Of course it was.

She went to her closet to prepare, and the instant she moved, her sisters scattered, rushing to gather their own things. They would never let the opportunity to kick some ass pass them by. She didn't mind the impending company. The three of them together would bulldoze anything and everything in their path.

When she agreed to help Byron in his quest to locate that traitorous bitch Octavia, she hadn't given any thought to the ignorant slut or potential danger. She hadn't even bothered *seeing* what would happen. But what if she was somehow responsible?

She closed her eyes and sought the mistress of smut, delving into her gangbang future, and her mouth flew open. She couldn't see Octavia either.

I'll fry her goddamned bacon!

She packed as light as she dared. Snatching her casting wand, she continued to picture Lucian and the vision she'd snatched from him of their future together, making love in a field covered with flowers in every color of the dimensional rainbows.

If anyone dared to harm one hair on his perfectly sculpted head, they were as good as dead.

## **Chapter Twenty-one**

Runa scanned the card hidden inside the Pleasures bag, cringing at the impeccable cursive penmanship containing the warning that had come too late.

Runa,

I couldn't help myself. Lacy underwear is one thing, but no man in this world can resist a bustier, garters, and panty hose.

One last thing, chickadee. Before the two of you get down and dirty, make sure he is aware he's treading on virgin territory. I know, I know, it's not funny. But seriously, tell him.

V

She read the letter a second time and shoved the bag she'd just opened into the top of the closet. Eric had cleared an entire side for her things, and she'd just started the process of organizing, taking her time so she didn't finish the task too quickly. After sliding the letter into a drawer situated beneath her hanging clothes, she returned to the bedroom.

In the days following the night they got down and dirty, Eric had made sure he was readily available but abidingly distant. He shared meals with her, took her out on the grounds to roam the property, and introduced her to several of the brownie families who lived in the woods behind the manor. But each night after they shared evening meal, he was gone with his brothers to protect the balance among the realms.

She sighed, glided to the window, and stared out at the blackened sky. Nighttime was the hardest time, and each passing one was becoming more difficult to bear. She studied the bizarre red stain skimming across the surface of the moon and wondered if Eric was enjoying the unusual sight as well, hoping for some strange reason that he was.

Then at least we'd be sharing something together.

Eric had vowed he wouldn't come to her until she initiated the contact, and sworn he wouldn't touch her unless she specifically asked him to. Aside from pulling her into his body each morning when he arrived home as they slept, he had remained unfailingly true to his word. The space mounting between them was unbearable.

The tightness in her chest became suffocating, making it difficult to breathe. In spite of everything that had occurred, she yearned for Eric. She ached to feel his fingers against her skin, his lips against her own. They were bound now—their hearts and souls merged—and would remain so until they died. At this point, she was willing to let him have her, even if there was some pain involved. Their future, no matter how brief, had to begin somewhere. She just had to take that first all-important step to start their journey.

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass, dejected and miserable. Maybe she had been as masochistic as her kin all along and didn't know it until now. That would explain the constant compulsion to beg Eric to touch her again, to surrender anything and everything to him without hesitation. Or maybe the feelings were linked to something deeper, attached to the emotions that assailed her when he was near. Never had she felt this way for another—utterly unhinged by what he thought, wanted, and needed.

She strode to the far side of the room and did a cartwheel, then followed it up with a back handspring. She did it again, performing aerials and short passes inside the long bedroom. She needed to train, craved the daily routine of working the bags, sparring with daggers and swords. Nothing felt as good as burning her muscles, extending her lungs and her body, pushing herself beyond all physical limitations. Without the activity, she had too much pent-up energy, too much time left alone with her brain with nothing to do but think.

The door opened as she was midair, and was accompanied by Aonia's worried voice. "Runa, are you all right? I heard something fall."

Straightening her sweater, Runa shoved stray strands of hair away from her face and met Aonia's inquisitive stare. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"You didn't disturb me, believe me. I've been bored out of my mind with Isobel gone to visit her family. If you want me to be honest, I've been stalking your room for the last two nights hoping maybe you'd venture outside. Colin told me to give you time to settle in, but I'm sure you've noticed how lonely our nights can be."

Endless and unrelenting. "I've noticed."

Aonia hesitated, still smiling, and asked, "Can you do that again?"

"Do what?"

"That feat you just accomplished, flipping over without using your hands."

Runa moved across the room to gain momentum and pushed off, carrying her body over and doing an aerial walkover.

"That is incredible!" Aonia's brown eyes sparkled. "Can you do more of those kinds of feats?"

Kinds of feats? "Do you mean tumbling?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Um, yeah, sure, all kinds—"

Aonia snatched her arm and dragged her from the room. "Come on, I've got just the place to take you. All selkie can do water spirals and spins, but watching movements that are the equivalent on land is just amazing!"

"You're a selkie?" A seal creature mated to a dragon creature? How in the world did that come about?

"Eric didn't tell you?" Aonia rolled her eyes when Runa shook her head. She led the way into the large living room and moved deeper into the manor, past the residence, and into the hallway.

Anxious now, Runa said, "I haven't been here yet."

"Don't worry. I have. And you're going to love it!"

"Maybe we shouldn't—"

"Oh please!" Aonia snorted as if she knew exactly what Runa was thinking. Shoving past a set of doors, she entered a completely barren hallway. "Don't be taking any of that garbage Nox said to heart. He's got serious problems, Runa. Everyone knows it, including the second coming of Hades himself. He would sink everyone with his gloom ship if given the chance. Besides, Mr. Antichrist is on a little vacay, working out his issues."

"He certainly hates my kind."

"Yes, well, you're not responsible for what happened to his parents."

"What happened to his parents?" Eric had mentioned them to her briefly, saying only that they had died a long time ago.

Aonia laughed nervously and shook her head. "Eric will tell you, Runa. It's really not my place. It's not important anyway. You're family now."

The temperature took a sudden dip and directly ahead she saw a set of metal double doors. They barreled past them into a large space with a gargantuan ceiling and walls so far apart she could get a workout running from side to side. The gym was a thing of beauty. There were weights, bags, and various pieces of equipment. But it was the floor mat along the side that got her attention.

Aonia stopped at the edge of the mat, plopped down, and crossed her legs. "This is better, right? To tumblamabob?"

"Tumble," Runa corrected, smiling and curving her feet into the mat, relieved to feel the slight give beneath her toes. "And yes, this is fantastic."

"Then show me how you *tumble*, and I'll tell you the story of how Colin and I met. It's rather long, I'm afraid. So if you're not up for it..."

"Are you nuts? Start talking!" Curiosity gratification *and* the opportunity to alleviate pent-up steam? She didn't have to be told twice. She rushed to the opposite end of the mat and started with a round off and flipped into whip backs, listening with glee as Aonia's soft voice sang merrily in her ears.

"Let's see now. I suppose I should start with my engagement to the selkie prince Brasher the Wayward..."

"How are you, Brother?"

Eric jolted to awareness, breaking free of his daze, and glanced at Gabriel. "I'm good."

"That's a relief. I didn't want you driving your Stellian into a ditch or wormhole. That's the third time you've ate grass." He hesitated, then offered, "You know, if you want, I'd be more than happy to drive."

"I'm good."

Gabriel shrugged. "How's mated life?"

Agonizing. "It's good."

"So everything is..."

"Good," he finished, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

Gabriel reclined in his seat. "I'm glad to hear it. From what I've seen the past few nights, I thought you were fucking miserable."

That's the understatement of the fucking tide.

The last three nights had been agony, and the days that followed had made them even worse. Experiencing what it was like to be with Runa only to have it ripped away and flaunted in his face was *excruciating*. And like some freak who got off on the perverse feeling of degradation, he counted the minutes until he would be with her again. He was no better than a beaten dog that came back for more, just on the off chance he'd get petted instead of kicked—and he knew it.

Fortunately, he could take out his pent-up aggression on the cockbites who dared to do stupid shit each night. He was grateful to the spineless hacks for a change. As far as he was concerned, they were performing a goddamned community service. If he didn't have them to unleash hell on, to remove the constant ache mounting inside his body...

He shuddered. He didn't want to think about what might happen.

After several quiet and awkward minutes, he said, "I don't like being apart from her, if that's what you want to know."

"Then when we make it home, stay there. You don't have to go back out tonight. Enjoy some quiet time with your mate. The rest of us have it covered."

He shook his head. "You're two short with Marshall and Nox gone."

"Don't give me that." Gabriel lifted a hand into the air when Eric attempted to continue. "I'm not going to sit here and pretend I know what the fuck is going on with you, because I don't." He lowered his hand and shifted in his seat. "I'm happily *unmated*, and hopefully I'll stay that way for a long-ass time. But it's obvious something went down with you and your female after Nox displayed his rotten table manners at meal."

"If I remember correctly, you weren't exactly an innocent bystander, *Gabriel*. I distinctly recall you defending Nox. So the way I see it, the problem I'm facing right now is none of your fucking business. Why don't you and asshole brother go play hide-and-go-fuck-yourselves?"

Gabriel winced. "Now, that wasn't nice at all. Here I am, trying to show my concern like a good brother should..." He continued, sarcasm gone, "When you bring that shit to work with you, it becomes my business—our business. Since all of us have to deal with your snazzy bullshit."

Eric glanced from the road and narrowed his eyes at his brother. "Snazzy bullshit?"

Gabriel motioned across the seat at Eric's naked body. "It's not normal, Eric. You can't escape the shit that's going on in your personal life by reverting to your beast every time something pisses you off. Go to your Chosen and let her ease you, man, before you kill someone."

He cringed. He had been allowing his beast free rein; he didn't have any other choice. He'd just forgotten to bring a change of clothing this time around.

Shit.

Packing clothing for a trip was definitely indicative of a problem.

"I'm newly mated. It's normal for our aggression to peak before it settles."

"Not like this. I've spoken to Colin."

They've been discussing this shit together? "What the fuck are you, a couple of gossiping old nursemaids now?" he growled. "Don't you have better shit to do?"

"We are concerned, and after you shifted tonight, we knew it was time to intervene. When we get home, make plans to stay there, *indefinitely*. You're not coming out with us until you've gotten your shit straight. Consider yourself relieved of duty."

Anger and frustration brought on a familiar fiery ache in his bones and muscles.

"You can't do that."

"See." Gabriel notched his chin and shook his head. "There you go again. Don't try to tell me this is a classic case of newly mated aggression. I just told you to spend time with your female, something you should be *thanking* me for, and you're giving me shit instead. You've got to get a grip on whatever the fuck this is."

Eric opened his mouth to argue but closed it when he realized there was nothing he could say that would validate his behavior. He *was* teetering on the brink, nearly out of his mind with longing for his other half, hungry and desperate for one female who could soothe the savage beast.

They pulled into the long drive, and Eric drove round the back. He parked along the rear entrance to the gym and killed the motor.

Gabriel shoved his door open and stopped just before he climbed out of the car. "If you need to talk, my door is always open. I didn't want to be the one to deliver this shit-ass news. None of us did. We drew fucking straws."

Eric sat in the quiet car long after Gabriel had closed the door and gone inside. He contemplated his next move. Days with Runa were bad enough. Nights alone with her... Fuck.

He wasn't sure he could stay away from her, even after having given his word. But he knew his brothers were justified in their decision. He was completely on edge, a live wire ready to explode on anyone and everyone. Including his Fated, if they continued on like this.

He entered the manor through the back and snatched one of the robes lined neatly along the walls. Voices drew his attention, and he walked out, pulling the plush material around his body. Aonia was sitting at the edge of the fighting mat, watching Runa as she performed somersaults and handless cartwheels.

Runa came to a stop, asking breathlessly, "He came for you, even knowing he could die?"

Aonia's dark head bobbed. "It might sound romantic now, but at the time I was terrified!"

Runa bounded off again, and Aonia prattled on happily. Eric watched Runa for several minutes before darting into the side hallway and exiting where he wouldn't be seen. It was the first time she had left the bedroom without his encouragement, and developing a friendship with Aonia was a good thing.

He made it to their bedroom and went directly to the shower to wash away the filth of fighting and his recent shift. The smell of Runa's shampoo lingered in the air, and as usual, his body let him know exactly what it was missing. He fisted his cock and drew his fingers down to cup his sac. As he stroked himself, he imagined Runa's small fingers wrapping around his length, her touch soft and teasing. Licking his lips, he recalled her taste as he had gone down on her. She was warm and responsive—sleek, eager, and wet. Her soft cries had echoed in his ears as she whispered his name.

He didn't have time to enjoy the memory. His release was immediate, completely hollow, empty, and weak, and he knew it wouldn't do shit to alleviate his lust as far as his mate was concerned.

His body knew what it was being robbed of, and it wasn't going to be deterred.

Just thinking about Runa made him rock hard again, and he felt the corresponding tingle under his flesh that caused his entire body to hum. Being so close to her but unable to touch or taste her skin.

It was going to be one hell of a long night.

He went into the closet to dress, spewing a string of expletives when he stepped on something sharp. He bent down to retrieve the shining object, and his chest felt as if it were being crushed by an invisible weight.

The slave band.

He wasn't sure if he should laugh at his dumb luck or throw the cursed thing across the room. He had removed it that same night he ruined everything, taking it from Runa's wrist while she slept.

He rubbed his thumb along the smooth edge.

He should have listened to Colin, destroyed the thing, and chased her endlessly until she caved. She hadn't been able to tell him to stop when he hurt her, forced into silence and unable to do anything without his express permission.

All because of this fucking slave band.

A light went off in his brain—a shard of hope.

He heard Runa's footsteps outside and quickly pulled on a pair of loose flannel pants. Grasping the slave band in one hand, he hurried to retrieve the key.

This would work. It had to work.

"Eric? Is everything okay? Gabriel found me in the gym and told me you decided to come home early."

He strode from the closet and stopped several feet from her, basking in the beautiful vision of her flushed cheeks and tangled hair. She was adorable, like a beached mermaid come ashore to dry in the sun.

She smiled nervously. "Eric?"

"I want to give you something, Runa," he said, moving closer, extending his hand. She didn't shy away, reaching out and opening her fingers while stepping forward. He pressed the key inside her palm, allowing her to see what he had given her before winding her fingers over the top.

A deep frown brought her mahogany eyebrows together, and she peered up at him through her lashes. "I don't understand."

He revealed the slave band and clamped the magiked metal that stretched to accommodate its wearer around his left wrist. Then he stared into her honeyed amethyst eyes, the twined golden centers sparkling like the jewelry flush against his skin.

"Me," he told her hoarsely and knelt at her feet. "I want you to have me."

## Chapter Twenty-two

Runa was stunned, completely caught off guard. Eric stared up at her with the most hopeful expression, causing her heart to cave. She had a Draigen male completely at her disposal, prepared to do anything and everything she wished. Instead of fear or reluctance, she felt a newfound confidence emerge. She peered down at the bracelet.

The slave band would ensure he couldn't do anything she didn't want. He had to stop when she told him to, had to listen to everything she said.

Sweet Moirae. He was hers for the taking.

There was no better time to take that first step than the present.

She blurted the first thing that came to mind, eager to explore his body as she'd imagined, demanding boldly, "Lose the clothes and lie on the bed, on your stomach."

The shock in his face was quickly replaced by an eager grin. He did exactly as she ordered, pulling the flannels from his hips and presenting her with his perfectly muscled shoulders, back, and sculpted ass. He laid his body out like a glorious buffet, stretching his arms over his head and turning his face on the pillow to watch her.

Runa approached the bed slowly. Sliding the key into her pocket, she climbed up on the mattress. She straddled his waist and tried to decide where to start. There was so much of him to learn, to put to memory. Each night she had dreamed of touching the curves and crevices along his abdomen, itched to drag her nails along the indention of his spine. She leaned down, pressing as close as possible, craving the contact. When the bunchy material of her sweater got in the way, she tugged the cashmere from her torso and threw it to the floor.

She started over, pressing her breasts against his shoulders, the sensitive skin along her stomach brushing the heated warmth of his back. He groaned, clasping the wooden headboard with his large hands. She raked her fingers along his sinewy forearms, tracing the corded lines to his biceps. The toned muscles were easily identifiable, his tanned skin amazingly defined and soft. There were no marks or scars, one characteristic of an immortal who hadn't been wounded mortally prior to achieving maturity. They healed quickly, even as children.

"Your body is stunning." She scraped her nails along his shoulder blades, following the vertebrae along his back. "I suppose that impressive gym of yours is used for more than decoration. I'm sure women can't get enough of you."

She grimaced at the blatant jealousy in her voice, knowing he heard it as well.

"Every part of me belongs to you, Runa." He groaned, adding in an impassioned voice, "Only you."

She leaned down, pushed aside his dark hair, and brushed her nose against his shoulders before pressing her lips against the back of his neck. His entire body shuddered at the contact. She smiled, pleased by his reaction.

"Eric?"

"Yes, sebea?" he asked, stirring beneath her with each stroke of her hands.

She sighed playfully. "Now, what does that word mean?"

"It means"—his voice was heavy with emotion, so distorted by his olde accent that the vowels extended and carried—"my love, my heart."

Her heart lodged in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. Could he really mean that?

"Is that truly how you think of me?"

He spoke in his tongue and then reverted to her language so she could understand. "Of a certainty, my Fated female. There is no other who has or will carry such a place in my heart. For me, you will always be the one."

Hope and longing strained her voice. "You barely know me."

"We are twin souls, Runa. A Fated pair separated when the gods perceived we had become too lax with the gift of our other half. You would recognize me anywhere, just as I did you." He inhaled raggedly as she massaged his shoulders. Then he said, "I remember the way you looked at me in the bookstore, aiarya, even through your glamour."

"Don't flatter yourself, *sh'mai*. You stand a good two feet taller than I do, and you're hocking enormous. I would have acted exactly the same if an ogre had caught me off guard."

"Keep telling yourself that, but we both know better," he murmured, turning his head and gazing up at her, lips curving into a lopsided grin. "What does *that* word mean?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She shifted her body away, giving him room to move, anxious but excited. "Turn over."

He released the headboard, shifted his large body over, and lifted his arms above his head, leaving his hands loose and limp. His front was as impressive as the back, each crevice defined and cut. He seemed completely unfazed by the jutting erection that jerked when she glanced down, as if it could feel her gaze upon it. She couldn't tear her eyes away from that impressive part of him, amazed by the pink skin that she knew was soft and smooth but also devastatingly rock solid and unyielding.

"Don't stop, Runa. Please."

She forced herself to meet his gaze as he reached for her, slipping his hands around her hips and helping her straddle his waist. He let go and glided his hands up and down her arms, over and over, until she calmed. He squeezed her arms lightly before he let go, placed his hands over his head, and relaxed into the pillow, closing his eyes.

She moved the pads of her fingers along the contours of his cheekbones, following the line of his squared jaw. Though he shaved each morning, the shadow she'd become enamored with had resurfaced, and she scraped her nails carefully across his cheek.

"So soft." She caressed his eyelashes, which were equally silky. When she brushed her thumb along his full bottom lip, he opened his eyes. The irises flashed vibrant green, and she knew what else she wanted.

"Would you speak to me in your language?"

"Ae niea, aor erondeaa," he murmured hoarsely. "As you wish, little enchantress."

His words were softly spoken, made all the more eloquent with his heavy accent. Though she couldn't understand them, with each movement of her fingers as she put his body to memory—starting at the hollow of his throat and moving across his broad shoulders and firm pecs—she realized she didn't need to.

Eric was her Fated. The one male she was intended for. Or if the theory of twin souls was true, the other half of her soul. From the moment he had first kissed her, she had felt something unlock; the sensual portion of her she had believed long dormant had taken on life. Since he had consummated their pairing, she ached for him, longed to be with him in the way mated pairs should.

"Eric..." She hesitated, and he stared up at her, halting his soothing flow of words. "If I said I wanted to be with you again intimately, would you swear to take it slow and stop if I asked you to?"

His chest stilled beneath her fingers when he stopped breathing. "Aye." He nodded finally, speaking in a heady tenor. "I give you my solemn oath, Runa. I'll do whatever you tell me to."

She rose onto her knees and removed the small key she had placed in her pocket. Her eyes homed in on the shiny gold metal that was charmed along with its individual forged band.

Slave bands were vile creations. Every story she had read of them ultimately ended in devastation. Matters of the heart and soul were meant to be difficult and tempestuous. Anything that brought an unnatural balance changed what might have been, what *should* have been. Or as fae referred to it when one used a cursed item for personal gain—*Nis'ta*—altering one's fate.

"I refuse to take this any further with that slave band anywhere near this bed. We should be together because we want to be. Not because we're told to or because of circumstances we can't control." When she lifted her gaze to his face, he looked devastated, as if she'd done something he himself should have been capable of. "Tonight I want to start over. With nothing hidden or forced between us."

"You honor me, sebea."

She extended her hand to him, palm up. "Give me your hand, sh'mai."

Her fingers trembled as she pressed the key into the tiny slot and turned. The gold shrank slightly as it broke from his wrist. She caught it, returned it along with the key to her pocket, and relaxed her knees. She kissed him softly, and when his lips parted in invitation, she took it. Her tongue slid into his mouth, and she reveled in his delectable taste. He was an intoxicating mixture of earth, spice, and man—completely masculine. His tongue mirrored her movements, following her example, allowing her to set the pace.

"Touch me," she pleaded feverishly, clutching at him to wrench him closer.

His strong hands cupped her ass, squeezing roughly and then massaging. "Everywhere, sebea. I'm going to touch and taste every inch of you tonight." He lifted his head and kissed her deeply.

Then she knew she was totally lost. Her breasts ached to be touched, taut nipples so sensitive that she brushed them against his chest to ease the dull hammering. Her core clenched spastically, making her desperate to put an end to the emptiness she could no longer bear.

"Sh'mai"—she breathed the word into his mouth, staring into glorious green eyes the color of flawless emerald—"means beloved of my soul."

# **Chapter Twenty-three**

Beloved of my soul.

Runa's admission brought forth the amorous portion of him that had been long dormant. Eric clasped her hips and changed their positions, rotating her onto her back as he came up and over her. He settled his body against hers, pressing his weight between delicate legs that parted in welcome. He met each soft thrust of her tongue, taking her succulent flavor into his mouth. He made measured movements, following her lead.

Tonight she would take control, even if he had to encourage her.

"Touch me," she pleaded for the second time, dragging her fingers up and down his spine, kneading his lower back.

"Where do you want me to touch you?" He lowered his lips to her throat, teased the silken flesh up to her ear with his tongue, and then exhaled against her sensitive skin. "Tell me."

"Anywhere," she groaned, wrapping her fingers into his hair. "Everywhere."

He moved his lips downward. "Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you."

She arched her back and brought his face to her breasts, but he didn't give her what she wanted, asking expectantly, "Here? You want me to touch you here?"

Her sensual sigh was as husky as her voice. "Yes."

He placed his palm over one of the soft mounds, and she moaned, writhing against him. Lightly, he brushed his thumb over the satiny lace covering her nipple, making slow circles.

"Please, Eric."

"Tell me what you want, sebea," he whispered, lowering his head but stopping just before his lips touched the surface of her skin.

"No," she rasped, and when he tried to lift himself from her body, she stopped him, bringing him closer as she hoisted herself up. "I won't tell you. *I'll show you*."

She licked a thin line from his shoulder to his chest. Pressing her lips to his nipple, she nibbled at his heated flesh. He threw his head back and snapped his teeth together. The feel of her warm mouth and naughty tongue sent tremors throughout his body. His cock went as hard as a centuries-old diamond.

"By the Fates, Runa," he rumbled as his control started to slip. "Do you mean to tempt me beyond reason?"

Her throaty laugh was not that of a timid or shy girl but that of a temptress. "Am I tempting you? Do you want me to stop?" She tilted her head back, grinning. Her wide violet eyes flashed gold.

"You'd better not stop," he growled, palming her head and bringing his arm underneath to support her neck and shoulders. "I want to feel your lips all over me."

He bowed his head, unable to resist the temptation of her impish expression and her luscious mouth. She met him halfway. Her tongue brushed against his, uninhibited and unreserved, and her fingers drifted down his spine, curving along his hip and then drifting under. He cursed harshly when her fingers wrapped around his cock. She moved her hand steadily, winding up and down his length, rotating her thumb along the head. When she massaged the indenture below his glans, his eyes rolled back in his head.

Her lips brushed his ear, and she taunted teasingly, "Do you want my hands all over you as well?"

His entire body quaked. She wasn't timid or uncertain, and her willingness excited him in ways he had never dreamed. "You have no idea how much that would please me," he managed to answer and moved away from her grasp. He was so juiced he wouldn't be able to control himself if she persisted. "But I won't last if you do. I want you too badly."

He slid his fingers to her bra, unsnapped the front clasp, and peeled the lacy material away. The sight of her multihued hair tumbling around her shimmering skin was striking; her small pink nipples were unbelievably erotic against the creamiest alabaster. The gods had truly blessed him, for she was the most exotic female he had ever seen, far beyond extraordinary.

And she was his. She belonged to him.

"You're exquisite," he murmured, skimming his fingers along the outline of her neck and following the soft curves of her breasts. He marveled at the softness of her skin. "I've never seen anything in any dimension that compares to you."

"Are you trying to flatter me?" A slight blush stained her cheeks, and her lips curved shyly. "If you are, it's working."

He shook his head, answering thickly, "I speak true. You enchant and excite me like no other, Runa. I can't stop thinking of you. Even when I sleep, there's no escape." Bringing his lips to a peaked nipple, he darted his tongue along the edge of her areola, and her fingers sank into the flesh in his back.

"Eric." She sighed and arched her spine.

"When you say my name like that, I want to devour you."

She encouraged breathlessly, "Then do it."

His good intentions evaporated. He thrust his hand down to work on her jeans, struggling with the button. She pushed his useless hand away and did it for him, unzipping them and gasping his name as his hand slid under her panties to palm her drenched cunt.

"Wet already," he groaned against her breast, his cock near to bursting at what he had discovered. He pulled his hand away and removed her jeans and panties. Her skin seemed to radiate from the inside out—pale, pink, and luminous.

She writhed under his hands. He flicked his tongue over her belly button and then moved upward to nuzzle her breasts. Each featherlight brush of his shadowed cheeks against her nipples caused her to cry out, and she thrust her belly against his chest, threading her fingers into his hair. The urge to plunge inside her fiery heat was surpassed only by the greater need to take her gently and introduce her to the pleasures that were meant to be shared between them.

"I want you liquid, sebea. I want you so hot and needy you'll want me inside you more than you've ever wanted anything in your life. When you get there and I know you're ready, I'll make it worth the wait."

Eric's tongue traced the tip of an aching nipple, and Runa urged him closer, clenching fistfuls of his hair. "More," she pleaded breathlessly. He chuckled and backed away from the heat he had created, then blew on her overtly sensitized skin until she thought she'd go mad.

His intentionally fleeting touches against her nipples were so light and feather soft they were barely noticeable, only enough to feed the inferno that had overtaken her body. Every surface of skin he stroked and licked sizzled and burned long after the attention was gone, and she writhed beneath him helplessly.

"Please, Eric. *Please*," she begged, beyond caring at her shameless display of want. She remembered what it felt like to combust into a million pieces, and he alone had the power to wring it from her.

"I will," he promised against her skin. "I'm going to please you all night."

His lips covered a nipple, and he sucked the throbbing peak into his mouth, giving her what she believed she would die without. She pressed his head to her, keeping him close, fearful he would pull away. With each blissful tug of his mouth, her insides clenched, pulsing with an agonizing ache. It was much the same as the first time they had come together, only this time her body reacted out of need and desire instead of uncertainty or fear.

Eric's fingers tickled down her rib cage and slid over her hip and thigh, and she opened her legs wantonly, eager and ready for his touch. "Have I told you how this excites me?" Eric reverently caressed the outside of her hairless sex. "I've brought myself to come just thinking about it."

He had? She envisioned him clutching and kneading himself, stroking his satiny flesh. The thought caused her body to combust, creating a fire beneath her skin. His finger teased her cleft, and she thrust against his hand, pressing her head back into the pillows. She gasped when his finger slipped against the entrance and slid inside.

"Fates, yes," she panted, undulating in ecstasy.

"Slow, have to take it slow," he mumbled, speaking so quietly she barely made out the words. He dipped his head to her breasts, soothing the ache in her nipples while he worked his finger in and out of her body, initiating a rhythm she knew would bring her body to the brink.

Each motion of his hand was deliberate and gentle, and suddenly it wasn't nearly enough. Her body needed more than his careful manner, tentative touches, and fleeting kisses. She lusted for more than his delicate handling of her as if she would break or run at the first opportunity.

She longed for that wild portion of him, the feral half that had her whimpering and pleading for release, so close to climax she thought she'd weep with anticipation of it. She wanted more; she *needed* more. His mouth, tongue, fingers, and attention were precursors to what she desired, for what she'd craved each night he forced himself away from her—keeping a safe distance.

"I ache inside." She trapped his face in her hands, gazing trustingly into his dazzling emerald-hued eyes. Mirroring his earlier words, her voice went deep, alluring, seductive. "I want you, Eric. I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Are you going to make it worth the wait?"

She could see the flicker of indecision in his eyes. Then he kissed her harshly, thoroughly, as he'd done that first night they met. She moaned into his mouth, encouraging him, returning each silken brush of his tongue with hers. Her hands drifted down, and she scraped her nails into his back, marking his skin.

His lips vanished, and his large hands splayed around her back, grasping her roughly to prop her against the pillows. "I want you to come on my tongue. I have to taste you again," he told her in a hoarse voice, staring into her eyes and daring her to look away as he moved down the bed and placed his shoulders between her legs. She held his gaze, mesmerized by the hunger and anticipation in his expression, as if he was the one receiving the pleasure.

Her head lolled at the first flick against her aching clit, followed by a second, and then a third. She cried out, arched her back, and called his name as an orgasm claimed her. The raging fire overcame everything as encompassing electricity stretched from the pit of her belly and engulfed her entire body.

"I can't get enough of you. You taste so fucking good, aiarya." Eric's voice managed to break through the intensity. He lapped at her tenderly, sending miniature aftershocks through her body as she trembled through the last throes of climax.

His finger replaced his mouth, and he entered her slowly, carefully. "You're so small and tight. I don't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you again."

"You won't hurt me." She widened her legs farther to give him better access. Their eyes met, and she knew by his tortured expression he was thinking of how he had taken her before. "I trust you."

Eric clasped her hips, pulled her up, and flipped their bodies around, returning them to the way they'd originally started. She braced herself on his thighs, gazing down, awestruck by the sheer temptation he presented as he propped himself against the headboard. He looked like a god against the pillows. His bronzed skin was smooth, flawless, and taut over his torso, and his strands of dark hair lay scattered around his shoulders.

He cupped her breasts, caressed the nipples, and gazed expectantly into her eyes. "I want you to be in control this time, sebea."

She brought her focus to his cock and wound her fingers around the silken shaft, thrilling in Eric's throaty groan of encouragement. She caressed the tip with her thumb, spreading the shimmering bead that appeared at the thin opening. He was so broad, the rounded head so soft. A thought came into her mind, a compulsion, a newfound craving.

"Eric." She purred his name, dipped her head, and brushed her cheek against the slick head of his cock as her finger flittered along the sensitive crown.

"Don't tease me, Runa." He growled deep in his throat and thrust into her hand.

She grinned and arched an eyebrow, eager to bestow a beneficial dose of retribution. "Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you." She cupped his sac in one hand and darted her tongue along the tip of his cock, focusing on the crown. His breathing hitched, and his stomach muscles quivered.

She lifted her head, continuing to stroke him with her hand, and whispered, "What do you want?"

"Take me in your mouth." He hissed when she dipped her head and licked the slit in the center, collecting the drop that formed. It tasted salty and slightly bitter. "Wrap those beautiful lips around my cock and suck, aiarya."

His eyes rolled back when she did as he asked. Pulling the tip into her mouth, she sucked greedily and worked the length in perfect harmony with her hands. The head was wide, and she could only take the tip inside. The girth was so thick she couldn't close her fingers entirely around it. The silky skin brushed her lips as she worked him in and out of her mouth, his cock smooth against her tongue.

"Move your hair to the side," he ordered in a heady tenor, his voice nearly unrecognizable. "I want to watch."

She moved a hand from the base and pulled the multihued strands over her shoulder before fisting him once more. He leaned forward, reached between her legs, parted the silken petals with his fingers, and rubbed the swollen nub at the top. Her sex was hot and drenched, her clit throbbing as he teased it with swipes of his thumb.

"You're wet for me, aren't you?" he asked, growling as she slid her lips up and down his engorged flesh. "You want to feel my cock deep inside that tight little pussy of yours, don't you?"

She moaned at his frank and explicit words, stunned as they made her heart race and her core spasm. He fisted the sheets with his free hand, and his hips lunged up. Gagging reflexively when the head of his cock nudged the back of her throat, she pulled back and resumed her ministrations, taking as much of him into her mouth as she hollowed her cheeks and sucked.

"That feels so good, Runa," he groaned and rubbed his fingers along her cleft. "Your mouth feels so good."

Saltiness coated her tongue, and she swallowed and moved faster, bobbing her head up and down. She lifted her gaze, and her stomach knotted when she saw him watching her, his heavy-lidded eyes full of lust and desire, his lips slightly parted. Suddenly, his face contorted, and his jaw clenched.

"Stop," he bit out, forcing her to break suction as he slid from her lips. "Fates, you tempt me beyond all reason."

Pulling her hand away, he guided her onto her knees over him. He shifted his back on the headboard, fisted himself, and guided the tip of his cock to the mouth of her sex and brushed it back and forth between her folds. He worked the head inside her and reclined back. Bringing his hands up, he cupped her perfectly rounded breasts and skimmed his thumbs along the areolae. She trembled but didn't attempt to move as she decided what to do.

Her anxious eyes flittered to his, and he smiled, teasing her nipples and causing her eyelids to flutter closed and a whimper to escape her.

"The rest, *aor sebea*, is up to you."

Her heart hammered, and her breath caught. This was what she wanted, what she craved. Yet an unexpected surge of fear suffocated her. What if she was wrong? What if it did hurt as badly as it had the first time?

Eric remained utterly still with the exception of his experienced and teasing fingers. He didn't look away; his green eyes distorted slightly with the cracking lines that told her his other half was observing her as well. She moved experimentally, lowering her body and experiencing the accompanying pressure, fullness, and weight of his cock as he slid into her.

Eric's eyes closed, and he moaned breathily, clutching her breasts. "Runa."

She inhaled deeply and then exhaled as she relaxed and cautiously pressed down. He slid in farther, creating more pressure, more fullness. There was no pain, just the wondrous feeling of his body as he fed into her. Her body continued to stretch to take his rigid shaft, inch by slow inch.

"Sweet Moirae," she murmured and braced her hands on his shoulders when her knees went weak. The movement caused her to shift upward, and a portion of his cock slid free, coated in her arousal. When she pressed down once again, he slid deep, and she cried out in pleasure.

Eric snapped something ferociously in his language. His jaw clenched, and his brow furrowed, creating a harsh expression she couldn't read.

She froze, nervous and doubtful. "Did I hurt you?"

"Hurt me? Hell no!" He released her breasts and gripped her hips, his fingers biting into her skin. "Take the rest of me. You're so close."

She forced herself to relax, and her body slowly accepted the intrusion, taking the remainder of his thick length until they were completely joined. She remained motionless over him, enjoying the sensation of their bodies so impossibly close. She could literally feel him pulsing inside her. The softness of his sac pressed against her ass.

"I can feel you inside me," she whispered.

He caressed her cheek and peered into her face with adoring eyes. "And I can feel your heartbeat, sebea."

She clenched her inner muscles unconsciously, and they groaned at the exquisite sensation it produced. Her head lolled on her shoulders, and she arched her back, inadvertently taking him deeper. His fingers bit into her skin as he guided her back up his length.

"Make love to me, Runa. I've returned to our bed each morning and thought of nothing else. Give this to me."

She followed the direction of his calculating hands, lifting away until she felt the hollow emptiness of his loss. The undeniable pleasure as his thick girth slid back into her eager body was extraordinary, so intense she didn't think she could endure it

"You feel so good." Her fingers curved into his giving skin, and she drew in ragged breaths, panting as he guided her in a glorious rhythm.

"Christ, yes, just like that," Eric instructed, thrusting upward as she came down, bringing them together in a loud slap of skin meeting skin. "All of me. Take all of me. Your pussy feels so good, so hot and tight."

His fingers splayed over her stomach, and his thumb rotated over her clit, rubbing in a furious circular motion that sent her spiraling. She ground against his pelvis. A thousand prickles under her skin grew hotter.

She whimpered as she felt herself nearing orgasm. "I'm going to... I'm about to..."

"Come," Eric growled, his silken hair brushing her skin as he snatched an erect nipple with his lips and brought it into his mouth.

Her body erupted, vanishing into raw heat. Pleasure took over her senses, until there was nothing but her and Eric—the man she was destined for, the man she knew she was lost without. He groaned when she came from the rise of climax, relaxed, and he scattered kisses along her throat.

When he spoke, his voice became throaty and deep. "I want you completely, Runa. Will you accept what I alone can give you? Will you have me?"

She knew he was asking permission to bind them to each other, even though it was already done, even as he'd already accepted her as his mate. When she lifted her head and looked at him, he was staring at her as if she was the most treasured thing in the world, and her heart melted. Then it dawned on her he was asking because he wanted her to want him, needed her to need him, and he wanted to hear her say it aloud.

It was a sentiment she shared, something she had agonized over the last few days. Each night he left with his brothers, she had come so close to professing the new feelings that she could no longer deny. She wanted him, needed him, yearned for his nearness. This was as it was meant to be. This was their destiny, and Fates help her, she wanted him. He was the air she breathed, the male she had always been intended for.

"Of course I'll have you," she answered softly, tears pooling in her eyes. "I would have no other."

He released her hips, cupped her face in his large hands, and kissed her deeply. He pulled away to whisper against her lips, "I want to look into your eyes when I come inside you."

Her gaze rose to his, and he clutched her hips in unrelenting hands, thrusting up and into her harshly. His emerald eyes were unrepentant and refused to look away. His pupils flared wide, eclipsing the irises but for small slivers of bright emerald. "You are mine, Runa. *Mine*," he said as if warning her there was no going back. "There will never be another, only me."

"Only you," she repeated, bracing her hands on his chest and riding out the storm.

His entire body tensed, and he bellowed loudly as his seed burst into her, warming and coating her womb. His shaft pulsated as he thrust into her, jerking over and over as he climaxed, as if he intended to brand her with his body, burying himself so deeply she would keep a part of him inside her forever.

When he reclined against the pillows, she flung herself against his sweatslickened torso, panting softly. After pressing her lips to the salty skin at his throat, she dropped her ear to his chest and listened to the steady pumping of his heart. He brought his arms around to draw her near, murmuring Draigen words into her hair as a deep purring emanated from his chest.

"Eric?"

He squeezed her gently. "Runa?"

She smiled into his shoulder. "It works both ways, you know."

"What does?"

She lifted her head to meet his curious expression and grinned mischievously. "If I'm yours, then you're mine too."

"I'm yours, *k'iea sebenne*." His voice deepened, and he thrust into her once again. She gasped in surprise at his unrelenting thickness. "And I want you again."

She blushed, embarrassed by the newfound intimacy of looking into his eyes after what they'd done. "But you just—We just—You can't possibly."

He responded by flipping her over and pressing her back into the pillows. Rolling his hips, he captured her lips. He moved in a slow rhythm, thrusting his still-hard length back and forth in sure, intentional strokes that sent ripples of ecstasy coursing through her sex.

#### 144 Aline Hunter

"I can, and I will, Runa. I promise you." He pulled away to stare into her eyes as he brought their bodies together once again in a firm thrust that left her gasping. "Over and over again."

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

"Pitch-black, mucky, nasty-ass, filth-infested, disgusting, mud-reeking, snake-creeping, frog-hopping—"

"Clandestine cesspool," Yuvi huffed before Lizbeth could finish, slopping through thigh-high muck and wishing like hell she'd brought her enchanted broom.

Retrospect was a harsh mistress.

She pretended not to care about the disgusting slurping sounds when her sixhundred-dollar Theory boots were sucked into mud, intent on the area revealed in the glow from her spark lantern.

"Why in Hades would they come through here?" Asti complained. "Take a look around. It's—Ewww!"

"Zip it, Asti!" she grumbled, equally cranky.

They had traveled directly from home using a mutual portal shared by a sister coven a bordering province over. Once there, they had procured pandemonium nightmares for transportation, gathered the necessary supplies, and then set off for the foothills. But all had *not* gone according to plan.

Byron was the most sought-after tracker in the realms for a damned good reason. He was incredibly proficient at remaining hidden, especially in less civilized terrains and locations. They lost two days speaking to dwarves, elves, and hobbits along the way who didn't know squat, and they were forced to track him with spells that faded and lost the visual.

Fortunately, a tree gnome in the neighboring forest was tickled by the prospect of females entering his domain, and at the cost of an hour spent in his repulsive company, he confessed he had seen Byron and Lucian heading north four days before—into the Swamp of Despair. A cursed place, one eternally hexed. And it was a shame to see.

The land had once been lush and gorgeous, brimming with prosperity and happiness. Fairy tales were woven from long-departed inhabitants, namely about the unicorns and maidens that had once thrived in the nearby forest. Until the swan king, Hansraj Dinarii, passed away, and his only son and the heir to the dynasty went missing.

Some claimed the place once known as Swanarri was set upon by a random horde of assassins who craved to mate with the swan females. For of all the creatures in the nether realms, swan maidens were renowned to be the most beautiful and captivating. But others insisted the violent act was sparked by the outrage of a black sorceress after her affections were spurned by the swan prince, Hadrian Dinarii.

"Yo, Yuvi. E.T. just called. He said to phone home when you come back to earth," Asti snarked.

Yuvi lifted her fingers and created a phone. Swiveling her head around, she brought her hand to her ear. "Hey, Asti, kiss my wand."

"Does something seem wrong to you?" Lizbeth asked, her nose twitching. "I can't describe it, but something's off."

"I don't know." Asti shrugged. "Maybe it's this nasty-ass bog of filth we're shucking through for Lovelorn Ice Princess over here."

Yuvi snorted. "It's called the Swamp of Despair for a reason, twiddledee and tweedletwat."

"I'm serious." Lizbeth's words were clipped and cool. "Stop and *feel*. Something isn't right here... It's...it's"—she grabbled for the right word—"empty."

Yuvi stopped treading mud. *Damn it*. All magikal creatures radiated their own energy signal, an aura, and if Lucian had passed through the area, a trace or residual of him would have remained.

She hoisted her casting wand from her belt and shoved it into the air, whispering Lucian's name to evoke a trace. Nothing happened. The wand's magik didn't tingle her fingers as it always did, and the corresponding surge of power didn't occur. She went stock-still.

"Wait a damned minute!" Pointing the wand at the nearest tree, she called the element of fire. "*Ignis*!" Her sisters both stared at her, dumbfounded and equally shocked, and she tried again, uttering the same command.

Asti and Lizbeth stared at each other and blurted, "Oh shit!" at the same time. Each of them extended their arms and thrust back their cloaks, searching for any energy. With each sweep of their fingers, their agitation increased. As sisters of a coven, they were already connected, but as siblings, they shared everything.

Yuvi sent her own power out and yelped in outrage and panic. "Bugger this! Our power is gone!"

"How is that possible? Is it a shielding spell?" Lizbeth's face paled in fear. "What if it's an entrapment?"

"Calm down!" Yuvi snapped. "We can't be sure what this is. Let me think."

If it was a shielding spell, especially a powerful one, Lucian might have been fooled. His touch and familiarity with magik were unparalleled. However, if he wasn't looking for it, he could have slipped. But an entrapment would never happen, not after what had happened to his family. He'd created an amulet he kept round his neck for such a purpose. It would light up like a blue-light special if someone attempted to trap him with magik.

Her gut sank in dread. They had no such charm for protection.

"We should go back to the horses and rethink this." Lizbeth's face was ashen, and her light blue eyes were huge in her cherubic face surrounded by long black hair. "We didn't bring enough scrolls, paeons, or potions. We could be walking into a trap."

"Fine, we'll go back the way we came. When we can feel our power again, we'll conjure items for protection. Then we have to come back."

"I don't know, V," Asti argued cautiously. "This has bad-news karma written all over it."

A strange sound came from the left, from deep in the muddy bog. Yuvi spun toward the noise and removed the revolver stocked with enough sleep potions to give someone a nice extended nap. Asti was right. This was a terrible idea. Unlike other immortals with enhanced strength, agility, and reflexes—volva relied solely on magik. Without it, they were defenseless, helpless.

But she wouldn't stop until she found Lucian—she couldn't.

"What *is* that?" Liz leaned forward and crinkled her nose. "It looks like roadkill."

Yuvi lifted her lantern, and studied the dark blob several feet away. Whatever the lump was, it appeared to be inching closer through the mud. She took cautious, slurpy steps toward it, leaving her sisters a safe distance behind.

"Maybe you should leave it the hell alone," Asti hissed quietly. "We need to get outta here, pronto!"

The blob lunged from the mud and took hold of her cloak. She yelped, shoved the gun into the mass, and pulled the trigger. The round was silent as it exited the chamber, but the potion made a tiny *poof* as it found its mark. The blob staggered and crashed into the water.

"It's not a blob!" Lizbeth sneered, angry and frightened. "It has hands!"

Yuvi snatched the thing and pulled, flipping it over. When she saw the face covered in mud, her breath caught. She dropped the lantern and fell into the muck, flopping into the slimy gunk to her neck. She slapped at the watery muck frantically, pulling him closer.

"Lucian? Lucian!"

The potion should have taken him to never-never land, especially in the shape he was in. A large wound clogged with dirt and goo marred his temple, and his dark eyes were cloudy.

"Yuviette?" His deep voice was weak. She knew she had to get him to a location where they could conjure and get fresh blood into his system. "What are you doing here?"

Those ready-made excuses she'd diligently prepared went to shit. She lifted her head and scanned the area around him. "Where's Byron?"

The name caused the daemon to become crazed. His eyes flashed bright silver. He mumbled incoherently, saying things in ancient daemon tongue that she couldn't translate.

"Lucian, Lucian! Calm down. I don't understand you."

"Must get to her. Not much time." He yanked her closer, his nose against hers as his eyes seemed to focus and then glaze over. "Byron—took Byron."

Then he went limp.

# Chapter Twenty-five

A soft rapping at the door roused Eric from an unbelievably tranquil slumber. His body was relaxed, brimming with unbelievable fulfillment, contentment, and satisfaction. He opened his eyes, noting the first rays of sunshine filtering through the shimmery window. His arms tightened possessively around Runa, and he moved nearer to her small frame. She mumbled something softly and resettled trustingly against him, breathing deeply as she continued to sleep.

His Fated fulfilled all his imagined longings in more ways than he had dared to hope. She was wild and teasing, eager to accept the most enjoyable aspects of their relationship, becoming a mate he was more than pleased with. He buried his nose into the lush hair at her nape and inhaled her sweet fragrance, wanting to stay just as he was for the remainder of the day. This was what he was intended for, what he was destined to be. A protector meant to nurture and love.

The knock sounded again, and he carefully untwined his arms from her warm body and slid from the bed as not to wake her. She flipped onto her stomach, clutched the pillow, and nestled her face into the soft, cushiony material. Her heart-shaped lips parted, and she sighed softly.

He didn't bother dressing before walking across the room. Since he and his brothers went out at night, those working inside the manor knew not to disturb them until after the sun centered the sky.

A knock before noon was an indication of trouble.

He frowned at the brownie who peered up at him as he cracked open the door. "Timmon?"

"A visitor has arrived for ye, Master Eric. I placed her in the foyer and told her to stay there. She's waiting for ye."

"She?" Eric echoed quietly, arching a brow.

The brownie wrung his hands together. "She said to tell ye she's come about the wee lass and her brother, and ye'd best not keep her waiting... I think it's best ye heed her, Master. Strange happenings are taking place."

A thick rumble of annoyance emitted from Eric's chest. The witch had picked a wretched time to pay a social visit. He had planned on waking his mate properly, taking her with his mouth and tonguing her clit until she cried for him to come inside her and ease the burn.

Now it would have to wait.

"Tell her I'll be right down."

Timmon nodded curtly and spun on his heel. Eric closed the door and went to the closet. After dressing in blue jeans, he chose a thin turtleneck from one of the hangers and pulled it over his head.

The servants were already at work—dusting, sorting, and scurrying about—when he stepped from the bedroom. Locke Manor had been a massive castle until his parents and brothers had obtained the property. The entire hold had been renovated as the tides passed, giving the visage of a castle on the outside and a modern mansion within.

He descended the stairs and walked across the entrance hall. Movement from the foyer caught his attention, a quick flash as someone scurried back and forth. The moment he stepped inside the immaculate room, the witch swirled around, her gaze locking with his. She looked terrible, coated in several layers of thick black mud.

"Finally!" she snapped. "Where's Runa?"

"She's sleeping."

"Good." She relaxed and asked, "Now where's the other one?"

"The other one?"

"I'm here." Colin stomped into the foyer in flannels and a T-shirt. His short black hair was unkempt, and his eyes were swollen, both telltale signs of a person woken from a sound sleep. "This had better be good. If you dragged me down here for nothing, I'll have your ass for breakfast."

Yuviette lifted her arms, making desperate, jerky motions, and Eric recognized what was out of place. The witch's chatty and annoying demeanor was gone, replaced with a seriousness he had never thought possible from the flirtatious female. What if she was here because of Runa? What if she'd seen something in Runa's future?

"Why are you here, witch?"

"Do you greet all visitors so graciously?" Sparks flew from her outstretched fingers, and she cursed, flapping her hands like a monkey. "I'll tell you when I soundproof the room. I need to concentrate, *if you don't mind*."

She lifted her hands into the air and chanted quietly, her face focused. Eric heard a distinguishable *whoosh*, as if a flurry of air was sucked into the room, followed by an eerie silence.

Yuviette's shoulders sagged, and she spun around to face them. "Houston, we have a problem."

"A problem?" Colin asked.

She opened her mouth to answer, when another surge of magik overtook her. Her hazel eyes flashed silver, and she clenched her hands into fists. A ringing burned Eric's ears, and he watched in amazement as objects began levitating from their perches, vases filled with flowers floating about as if on strings. The furniture followed suit, chairs and a full-size couch rising into the air. She shook her head, scrunched her face tight, and things plopped back onto counters and shelves.

Colin studied her with a puzzled expression. "What's wrong with you?"

"Too much power is overhauling my motherboard. If I don't release some of the energy, I'm going to explode." Her attention settled on the fireplace, and she stomped to it. She opened her palms, said something mutedly, and a mass of orange flame expelled from her palms into the safety of the tile and brick. When the flames vanished, she sighed and said tiredly, "I can't say I don't deserve this. Not after taking Lucian's blood."

"What the hell is going on?" Eric snapped impatiently.

"I'm here because your sweetheart's brother is in a spot of trouble." Yuvi pointed at Colin. "And your brother here owes him a favor. I'm here to collect on his behalf."

"Byron?" Colin asked with obvious concern. "What's happened?"

"I'm not sure. I can't see him."

"But you see everything." Colin stated it as a fact.

"I used to." The witch exhaled, walked to a chair, and collapsed into the cushions. "A few tides ago things started going hazy, like a shade of some kind was clouding my vision. I assumed it was a natural drawback of procuring divination. Seeing the future is one thing, but seeing the future and the outcomes of every possible scenario as the future changed would drive anyone insane. It's magik's inherent lunacy blocker."

"If you can't see him, how do you know he's in trouble?" Eric questioned.

Shaking her head, she rested her elbows on her knees. "Byron was supposed to meet me four nights ago." She studied Eric carefully, adding, "About Runa."

"What about Runa?"

"I've been bartering with the overlord of the Liches to perform a ritual."

He forced the dragon to remain calm, asking tersely, "What kind of ritual?"

Her hazel irises flashed silver, and she slammed her eyes closed, answering through clamped teeth, "One that would make Runa everlasting."

"Everlasting?" He shook his head, uncomprehending.

Yuviette sighed and reopened her eyes. "It's a hex that initiates a freezing of age, beginning at the summit of the ritual's conclusion. She would still be susceptible to harm and she'd heal the same, but her clock would never stop ticking. The twisting of the curse demands that the weaver of the spell die in order for it to work, the intended's life for a death. That's why I had to think outside the box."

Colin's lips curved in unmasked admiration. "Liches can't die."

"Exactamundo. Alucard requested an item of Runa's to foresee her impending journey into the ever after so he would know what kind of demise he would undertake. It was his reaction after touching the ring I'd taken from her that forced me to arrange a meeting with Byron."

Eric's body hummed, dragon and man both concluding the same thing. The undead creature had to do the spell. He would force the Lich if he had to.

He could have his Fated for an eternity.

Yuviette lowered her eyes. "He agreed. But there's a stipulation."

"Well?" Eric demanded. "What does the carcass want?"

"He wants Runa's hair."

Both brothers frowned and echoed simultaneously, "Her hair?"

The witch's fingers twitched, and she rose from the chair in frustration and returned to the fireplace. She studied the dying flames left from her last tantrum and said, "Asking for the hair of a mortal threw me for a loop too. There's no power to be had, no special abilities to wring from it that are worthy of the trade. I wanted Byron to go with me to visit one of the oldest oracles of the covens to ask questions, but he never made it to our rendezvous."

"We're talking about Byron," Colin grumbled, swiping a hand across his face. "He could have gotten distracted by a piece of ass on his way to meet you. It wouldn't be the first time."

"He wouldn't miss anything if it had to do with Runa—anything. That's why I went sniffing around when he didn't show. My sisters and I managed to track him to the Swamp of Despair using the messages we'd exchanged via papillion. We found Lucian there, incoherent and knocking on heaven's door, neck deep in the muck."

"The nygromancer?" Eric asked in disbelief.

"One and the same." She nodded. "That's where it gets weird. When we were out in that swamp, our powers were completely nullified. We couldn't access magik or trace it. That's the only way someone could have gotten the jump on Luca."

"Where's he now?" Colin asked.

"Out of his gourd, speaking in daemon tongue, and acting crazed. We were forced to knock him out so he could begin to heal, and I took some of his blood to warp to the portal and travel directly to you."

Colin hesitated. "And what did you discover of Byron?"

"Absolutely jack squat. There were no signs of him, and we couldn't use our senses or powers to track him. We were like mice trapped in a snake's cage in that marsh, waiting to be tormented and then slowly digested."

"Nullified magik wouldn't be a problem for Byron." Colin's brow creased as he processed the information. "He's completely reliant on brute-force persuasion. Do you have reason to believe he's still there?"

"I'm not sure, but it's a start." She shrugged, then faced both of them. "I need you to return with me. Something's going on in the swamp, something I can't see."

"I'll get ready." Colin pivoted to leave.

"Get your brothers too," Yuvi instructed, stopping him. "We can cover more ground, and anyone we meet along the way will be less likely to pick a fight if Draigen are the ones asking the questions."

Colin nodded and hurried from the room, jogging when he entered the entrance hall. Eric waited until Colin disappeared before he approached Yuviette, unwilling to wait and too desperate not to ask.

"What about the Lich? Did you barter a deal?"

Yuviette reached into her coat and produced a large pair of scissors. "Take me to Runa. It's time for a makeover."

\* \* \*

The Otherworld
Province of Madness, Realm of the Wraith
Pandemonium Palace

Byron struggled against the thick metal chains attached to the wide shackles clamped around his wrists. He bent forward, straining to loosen either the latch in the wall or the chains themselves, and sagged after several minutes, breathing heavily and wanting to rip something apart.

He had a vague recollection of the happenings in the swamp, such as Lucian's frantic battle cry and the subsequent consuming blackness. But his thoughts always returned to the most breathtaking woman he had ever seen, the one who had managed to take him totally unawares.

Beautiful and conniving little bitch.

He could smell her unique sweetness each time she approached, a mixture of lilac, honeysuckle, and fresh morning dew. When her succulent scent came once again into the dark, dank space, he closed his eyes and slumped against the wall. Each time he attempted to speak to her, she bestowed a cock-rocking smile and walked away. So it became a game, pretending to sleep while her glorious gaze roamed all over his relaxed form. Her gaze was palpable, leaving a trail of fire wherever she dared to stare. But today the tramp wouldn't be allowed her lot as a voyeur without a price.

It was time to throw down the gauntlet.

He knew when she peered past the metal bars in the wooden door and her gaze flickered over his frame.

"Open the door, remove these chains, and I'll give you exactly what those hungry eyes want most, love. Think about it. My freedom in exchange for the wildest fuck of your life."

Byron lifted his head, looked at the door, and met the eyes of the traitorous female. Her cheeks reddened, and his cock pulsed in appreciation.

Fates, it had been a long time.

She turned to leave, and he lowered his voice menacingly, allowing his anger to seep through. "When I leave this shit heap, you'll be making the trip with me. I've had days to think of all the ways I'm going to repay you for locking me away like a hound from hell in a fucking kennel. Mark my words, swamp tramp. The clock is ticking. And your sweet little ass is *mine*."

"Don't threaten me."

Raw hunger suffused his body, and he closed his eyes. *That fucking voice*, as erotic and sensual as the most seasoned siren's. She could move mountains with it, persuade nations to go to war, bring kings to their unworthy knees before her...

He lifted his lids and exhaled, speaking huskily. "I don't make threats, love. That's a bloody fucking promise."

She narrowed her eyes, glanced quickly over her shoulder, then turned back to him, hissing, "Some of us have as little control in this situation as you, fae. If I had the choice, I'd be out the door with my bags packed, on my way to another dimension far, far away."

He studied her, asking doubtfully, "You don't wish to be here?"

She flung waves of wheat blonde hair over her shoulders. "That's a moronic question. Do *you* wish to be here?"

"Release me." He lifted his shackled hands. "And we can leave this place. If you are in danger, I can protect you."

She snickered mockingly. "This place is Pandemonium Palace. And I've seen the extent of your protection, wannabe warrior hero. One look at my face had you fawning and stumbling over your feet like a swooning adolescent."

He brushed aside the jab to his ego; he had more important things to worry about. "Do you mind telling me what the fuck I'm doing at the Palace of Chaos?"

"Zoraida brought you here," she mumbled and glanced anxiously over her shoulder again.

Bloody hell! Zoraida the Collector? The sorceress was the most vicious and evil female in the Otherworld and had been rumored to be building an army that would bring a war of souls directly to the realm centering all the dimensions. And he was in the dwelling of the wraith, warriors who rose from death by the light of the moon and stars, their mere existence a gift from the gods for their lost mortality and eternal servitude.

What would possess the normally peaceful warriors to align with the vampyren queen?

"Wait!" Byron bellowed when she started to depart. "The rumors are true, then? The queen has acquired a stronghold?"

She nodded. "She grows more powerful with each blood letting. With the dawn of the tide and the agreement with the wraith king—"

He interrupted, "What does the crazy bitch want with me?"

"You're just worm bait. Who knows, maybe if you're lucky, she'll release you when the matter is settled as a display of appreciation."

The bitch wanted Lucian. The nygromancer had power the vampyren whore would kill to obtain. Centuries of different abilities amassed over the tides.

"Where is he? What have you done with him?"

The female seemed puzzled. "Done with whom, lunatic?"

"Don't play coy with me, you cagey bitch! Where is the daemon who was traveling with me?"

An *aha* expression smoothed her face. "As far as I know, the daemon in your accompaniment is dead. Zoraida felled him with an ax cursed with a strain of madness when he tried to stop her."

Lucian was dead? A weight constricted his chest, a sharp and agonizing pain. Lucian was the last of his kind and the distant ancestor of vampire and vampyren alike.

A loud *bang* echoed from a distance, and she jumped from the door, shielding her striking face with the hood of her cloak. She settled the unattractive brown burlap material over her shoulders and turned to meet his eyes.

"I have to go. If they discover me speaking with you, it's back to the oubliette," she whispered, peering at him one final time before disappearing from sight.

## **Chapter Twenty-six**

"Rise and shine, chickadee."

Runa groaned when the warmth of the blankets was replaced by tepid morning air. She batted her sleep-filled eyes and lifted her head from the pillow, frowning at the mud-caked face that lowered to greet her.

"V?"

"Here, sebea." Eric appeared, frowning at Yuviette and offering Runa one of his shirts.

Runa placed her arms into the oversize garment and blushed when Eric shoved her hands aside, intentionally trailing his fingers along the skin between her breasts as he slid the buttons into the grooves and then began rolling the sleeves. He bent his head and whispered, "I wanted to awaken you differently, aiarya—much differently. I should have made the witch wait downstairs."

She glanced at Yuvi. Her friend looked absolutely wretched and miserable, covered in mud and blood. "What are you doing here, V?"

"I need to show you something."

Yuvi dragged her off the bed and away from Eric. Pulling her into the bathroom, she produced a large Ziploc bag and a shining pair of scissors. Once they stood in front of the mirror, she snatched a long piece of Runa's hair, hoisted the strand into the air, and snipped the scissors inches from her head.

"What the hell?" Runa screamed. "You said you wanted to show me something, not scalp me!"

"I *am* showing you something." Yuvi grasped another large chunk and snipped it equally short. "Your new hairstyle."

Runa darted away from the dual blades. "I don't want a new hairstyle!"

Yuvi shoved the shorn pieces into the baggie and shrugged. "Tough nuggets, chica. I've finally found a way for you and the sexy fire-breather to have a happily ever eternity, but the hex calls for a sacrifice of a little hair follicle and protein. Don't worry. You'll rock a pixie cut until it grows back."

"You're making me immortal?" She stopped struggling and went still.

"Not immortal, everlasting."

"Everlasting?"

"Yes, *everlasting*—as in continuing on indefinitely. It's a way to energize your clock like a zany pink rabbit that keeps going and going. I didn't mention the possibility to you before because I couldn't weave the hex."

"What kind of hex?"

"It's your basic run-of-the-mill Kansas City shuffle. A binding is performed on one of your possessions, and the caster takes your place to suffer your death. All I have to do is hand over your hair. The Lich stitching the magik already has your ring. It's cake really."

"Which ring?"

"What's with the interrogation?" Yuvi snipped another large piece and put it into the bag. "It was one you never wore. You'll never miss it."

There was only one ring she never wore, one piece of jewelry she was too afraid to damage. "Please tell me you didn't take the light onyx."

Yuvi met her eyes in the mirror. "Okay, maybe you will miss it."

"V! I never wear that ring because it belonged to my mother!"

"Oh, Runa," she murmured, lowering the scissors. "I didn't know."

Yuvi's crestfallen face made Runa wish she could take back her harshly spoken words. Her best friend was giving her an invaluable gift, one she should be kissing her ass for, and Runa was raving like a snarky bitch.

"I'm sorry, V. It's just a ring. I would've happily handed it over for what you're doing for me." She thought of Eric and added softly, "For us."

"It's us now, is it? I take it you're no longer angry with me?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

Yuvi didn't answer, taking her time and cutting away the final pieces of hair. She pushed the strands into the bag and sealed it closed before she began evening out the frayed strands, running her fingertips along the super-short waves.

"I can't see your distant future anymore, chica. I haven't seen anything from you in years. The only reason I knew things would work between you and Eric is because of a vision I had when you were twenty-one."

Runa stopped staring at her chopped hair and focused on her friend's face in the mirror. "You're joking?"

"Fraid not. Four years ago I was blessed with a hellacious bout of divination. Soon after my visions began to wane, and the images began to blur. I can still see things, but not from everyone." Yuvi stood back, admiring her work. "It looks better than I thought. You've always had lovely features and a beautiful neck. Short hair enhances that."

Runa frowned at her reflection. The short hair did emphasize the elegant curve of her neck, high cheekbones, and tipped ears. Still, she muttered, "I look like a fifteen-year-old schoolboy."

"I beg to differ, k'iea sebenne," Eric said as he came into the room. He met her gaze in the mirror. His irises were a bright vivid green, pupils already large and dilated.

He approved, all right. Wholeheartedly.

"That's my cue to GTFO." Yuvi snorted, snatching the bag of her hair. "I'll be waiting for you downstairs, Pepé Le Pew. Don't molest her for too long."

Runa relaxed when she heard the bedroom door open and close. Combing her fingers through the short tresses, she found the once-calming gesture didn't have the desired effect. With Eric so close, her body reminded her of just one thing—the two of them together the night before.

Eric's silken hair trailed against her bare shoulders as he bent down and brushed the back of her neck with his lips. He gripped the bottom of her shirt and lifted it over her head. Then he turned her in his arms, placed her on the counter, and bared her naked body to his sexually charged gaze.

"I never got to tell you good morning, sebea."

Eric dropped to his knees as he spread Runa's thighs and slipped her legs over his arms. He cupped her ass and brought her pussy before his fervent mouth. It was a sight he would never tire of, one that would always excite and electrify him. He could spend days between her legs if given the opportunity, doing nothing more than wringing orgasm after orgasm from her lithe body and tasting the sweetness of her climax.

"I'm going to taste you until you beg me to ease the ache, Runa."

His tongue slid deeply into her cunt, and he savored her creamy liquid response, excited and inflamed by her desire. When he nestled himself between her glorious legs and she was like this—expressive, eager, and wet—he wanted to thank the gods and then worship the gift he'd been given.

"Eric." She tugged at his hair, writhing her ass against his hands.

He flicked his tongue faster, coming close to her distended clit, and stopped before he made contact. She arched her back, trying to work herself against his mouth. He continued teasing and tormenting, delaying the orgasm he knew she'd experience when he took that most sensitive bead of nerves between his lips.

"Eric, please."

"Is this what you want?" He flicked his tongue over the swollen nub, and she cried out, thighs quivering.

"You know it is," she rasped, grinding against him.

With a savage growl he took her clit between his lips and sucked ferociously. He watched her face as she came apart, her lips parted and her eyes glazed, and gloried in her climax. Her skin started to glow before she achieved orgasm, and this time, instead of fading, the brightness in her skin lingered, causing her to sparkle and shimmer.

"Ease the ache, sh'mai," she purred huskily.

As he stripped away his clothing, she opened her legs in invitation, revealing her glistening flesh. A heavy growl erupted from his chest. Teasing and tempting his mate were one thing. There was no danger to be had, no loss of control. They were little more than extended foreplay, intended to excite and build anticipation. But he wasn't as easily contained or controlled, and when she opened herself to him like this, giving herself like an offering...

"Turn around," he demanded in a guttural tone, lifting her effortlessly from the counter.

When she was in position, he slapped her ass and smoothed the sting with his palms, changing her yelp of shock to a rumble of pleasure. Fisting his cock, he pressed the head to her wet cleft and slid back and forth.

"Eric?" There was a whisper of uncertainty in her voice.

"Trust me, sebenne," he said, feeding the tip between her swollen folds. He rocked carefully, entering her sex from behind, groaning as her pussy surrounded and gripped him.

"Sweet Moirae." She gasped, bending slightly and pressing back.

The impulse to drive into her was there, a primal urge to stake and claim what belonged to him. "Runa." He exhaled roughly, burrowing his fingers into her soft skin. "Grab on to the counter. I'm going to fuck you hard, sebea."

"Yes." She wiggled her bottom, trying to bring more of his length into her body. "Anything you want. Take me any way you want."

He thrust into her harshly, burying his cock completely inside her blistering sheath, and she cried out. He forced himself to remain still, his entire body quaking with the effort.

"Did I hurt you? Do you want me to stop?"

"No." She groaned, rolling her hips. "Don't stop."

He pulled from her body and then thrust deeply, repeating the mind-blowing motion again and then again. Each time he was rougher, more insistent, becoming entirely demanding.

"You feel so fucking good. So tight and hot around my cock." He barreled in and out of her pussy, grinding with the motions and rotating his hips. "Being inside you is like coming home."

"Yes. Eric. Yes."

He pounded into her mercilessly, bringing her bottom back as he thrust forward. Her head flew back, and he studied her face in the mirror, then peered down at her generous breasts bouncing with each relentless stroke. He wanted her to remember this while he was away, the rightness of the two of them together, just as he would.

Runa's cry of ecstasy was accompanied by the walls of her pussy clenching him as she came. He peered down and watched as he slid in and out of her sex. He felt

his seed start, semen surging from his now-taut sac. "Going to come so hard," he snarled, plunging into her as her tight sex milked him, and he flooded her womb.

She rode the ferocity of his orgasm, meeting each of his merciless thrusts as best she could, until her head lowered and her body sagged. He wound an arm around her waist to keep her upright and bent down to nuzzle her neck.

"My beautiful little mate," he said, aware of the purring that radiated from his chest as a display of affection from his feral half. "I'll never be able to get enough of you. I'll always want more."

He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the shower.

"It feels funny."

"What does?"

"My hair—excuse me, my lack of hair."

After lowering her to the ground, he pulled her into his arms. "I like it. It allows me to see all of your delectable features." He kissed the slightly pointed tip of her ear to prove his point. Lowering his mouth, he pressed his lips against the soft spot at the juncture of her throat.

He murmured against her skin, "Don't you think it's worth what we'll be getting in return?"

An eternity shared together. He couldn't wait.

She wrapped her arms around his waist and gazed into his face with earnest eyes, the glow in her skin matching the golden irises surrounded by amethyst. "Forever is an awfully long time, Eric. Are you sure you want to spend an eternity with me?"

He smiled and bent to claim her lips, but not before he answered, "*Vrara* spent with you? I can't wait to show you just how much I *denenne* that, aiarya."

# **Chapter Twenty-seven**

Runa finished dressing and exited the closet. She came around the corner and froze, her eyes going wide.

Eric stood in front of the huge wardrobe, covered in the same scaled leather as the first time they met. His chest and waist were saddled with leather holsters occupied by an assortment of various weapons. She gawked at the armoire in disbelief, amazed at the sheer volume of armaments stored cleverly inside. When it was closed, it looked like a decorative antique piece of furniture, not the housing for a personal arsenal.

"Are you planning to kill someone downstairs?"

Eric met her eyes as he slid a dagger into a holster on his leg. "I hope not." He stood straight and remained silent for longer than she liked, the heaviness of the quiet room making her uncomfortable and edgy.

"Is this about Yuvi and the hex?"

He sighed and shook his head. Stepping over, he wrapped his fingers under the curve of her arm and led her to the bed. "There's something I need to tell you."

She perched on the edge of the mattress. Her heart fluttered in alarm when Eric started to pace, and she instinctively knew it had to be bad news. He wasn't being honest with her. Something was wrong, something dangerous, and somehow he was involved.

Anxious, she blurted, "I don't want the hex if there's a danger to you. It's not worth it, Eric."

He muttered something in Draigen and came to her, taking a knee and getting eye level. He took her hands in his, brushing his thumbs along the backs of her fingers. "It's not about the hex, Runa. It's Byron."

A shroud of dread settled over her, distorting her senses and perception. Everything was clearer and sharper, but distant and impossible to interpret. An odd, high-pitched drone consumed her ears, the entire room quietly ringing, and when she tried to swallow, her mouth was dry and uncooperative. Byron had prepared her well enough over the years, warning her that with his work history he'd accumulated one hell of a long line of enemies.

"What's happened to my brother?" Her voice sounded detached, seeming far away. She braced herself for Eric's answer, anticipating the worst.

He released one of her hands, cupped her neck, and curved his fingers into the short hair at her nape. "The witch said he didn't arrive to meet with her, and she went looking for him. She found the daemon he travels with, but he was badly injured and couldn't tell her what happened."

Her skin cooled, and her heart slowed—a natural fae reaction to grief and sorrow. Lucian was the most formidable being she'd ever met, matched in her eyes only by Raudan.

If something could fell a nygromancer, it would have easily disposed of Byron. She heard Eric say her name, but it didn't compute. Memories of Byron flashed in her mind, a collage of images appearing individually but instantaneously, and she struggled not to cry.

"You're going to avenge him, then? Is that it?"

"Avenge him?" Eric frowned, hunter green eyes flickering back and forth between hers before his eyes went wide. "Christ, Runa. Byron's not dead. At least the witch doesn't think so. I'm going back with her to find him."

She blinked, disbelieving. "What did you say?"

"Byron's alive."

The world spun, coming slowly into focus, and she lurched from the bed. "I'm going with you."

"Nay," he rebuked her, gripping her arms in tender but unwavering hands. "You'll stay here, where it's safe."

"I will not stay here. Byron isn't just my brother, Eric. He's the only family I've ever known."

"I will find him, and I will bring him home. Have faith in me, Runa. Trust me to do this for you."

"You don't understand. I have to go. I have to find him," she whispered desolately. "He's all I have."

"You're wrong," he corrected in a throaty growl, his eyes shifting to a bright jewel green. "You have me."

She peered up, looking directly into his wounded eyes. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Listen carefully to what I'm about to say, sebea." His serious expression ensured she grasped the gravity of the situation. "You can't go, because if you do, I won't focus on Byron. My attention will remain solely on you. I would be worthless to the witch and a liability to my brothers. You'd put both of our lives at risk. If you want to find Byron, you'll stay here."

She heard the sincerity in his voice and saw it displayed clearly in his eyes. "Where does V think he is?"

Eric kissed her forehead and returned to the armoire. "Yuviette located Lucian in a cursed swamp. We'll start there."

"We?"

"Colin, Gabriel, and Trace are going with us. Dante will stay to watch over things until Marshall and Isobel return." He slid a gun into the holster along his chest, misreading her apprehensive expression. "Don't worry. Nox won't return before we do, and Aonia will be here."

She hurried across the distance and touched his arm. "It's not Nox I'm worried about, Eric."

His face smoothed in understanding. He smiled and caressed her cheek. "You'll miss me?"

"Yes," she whispered, lifting her hands to his nape and bringing his face down to hers.

"I'll miss you too. Being apart from you is going to kill me."

"Then hurry back." She moved into his comforting embrace and maneuvered her arms cautiously around his heavily armed body. "Find my brother and hurry back to me."

\* \* \*

The Otherworld

Marduk Province, City of the Phoenix

Marauder Family Crypt

"Stop ogling that daemon already, and get your ass over here!"

"Oh, shut your gob, Liz. V told me to keep a close eye on the patient."

"Your eyes, Asti, not your Roman hands."

"Jeez, can't a girl have any fun? He's so yummy."

"Not with that one, you can't. Get your bahonkus over here. Stop fooling around."

Gentle fingers skimmed his brow and disappeared. Lucian Kross opened his eyes, blinking rapidly until things came into focus. The space was dark, the air heavily charged with the lingering essence of magikal renderings. Two women—one light and the other dark—gazed into a porcelain font with a thin mist rising from the center. He visualized Yuviette's beautiful face in the swamp, her cheeks and chin covered in mud and her hazel-green eyes flashing, and he realized the females had to be her sisters.

He was in the home of the blessed three—the Marauder Coven.

"How in perdition are we supposed to find him, Ast?"

"Without a personal belonging to bind the water's eye with, we can't. And I sure as turd will not be going back to the swamp of disrepair to retrieve one."

Byron.

Lucian sat up on the makeshift bed, head pounding, muscles and limbs frail and weak. The witches noticed him as he tumbled over the side and collapsed onto the ceramic flooring in a naked heap. He felt for the charm around his neck and noted it was null of energy as well.

Need magik.

"Shit," the dark one cried out. Rushing for him with arms outstretched, she ordered, "Don't move, Lucian. Yuvi broke the curse a few hours ago, but you're still bound to the wound that bore it, and you still need blood."

They came to him, hands grasping his arms, and the moment their skin made contact, the power shifted.

"No," the blonde snarled, attempting to break free. "Damn you, no!"

"My deepest apologies," he said without guilt, rising to his feet as their hands slid along his torso and then his legs, unable to break the contact. "I will revive myself inside your circle, but first, I need to make it there."

"Don't—" the dark one pleaded as the magik and life force exited her body and suffused his own. "Don't take it all."

He peered down at her terrified face. "I won't, ditten."

When he had absorbed enough of their combined energy, he stepped away and severed the flow of magik. Their hands flopped along with their bodies to the floor, their chests heaving and eyes wide.

"Where is Yuviette?"

"Fuck you, asshole," the blonde spat.

He narrowed his eyes and stated matter-of-factly, "I have no time for your petty childishness. Tell me where she is, or I will take the information by blood."

"She went for help." The other sister panted, managing to lift her head. "Collecting on the debt owed by Colin Locke before she returned to the swamp."

Lucian strode to the circle etched in gold, and his magik flared. He spoke in ancient daemon tongue, the very language of his lost race, calling upon the eight elements. Wind. Earth. Fire. Water. Thunder. Ice. Light. Dark. Each one poured into the marked circle, surrounding him, engulfing him—replenishing, solidifying, and strengthening.

The wound at his temple closed, the cursed mark evaporating as if it had never been. His body hummed, pulsating with magik and power. He clenched his fists, lifted his arms, and opened his hands at chest level. Liquid blue shone from his palms, covering the room in a glorious luminosity.

The vampyren queen had fucked with the wrong daemon and schemed against the wrong family. He would drain every ounce of energy and magik from her body, and once he was done, he'd leave the soulless bitch to rot in a time without end.

"Zoraida," he snarled, closing his fingers and shrouding the room in darkness.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

Runa took her time as she strolled through the brownie village, traveling in the direction of Timmon's cottage. With Eric gone, she had decided there was no better time to accept the invitation for tea and a formal family introduction.

I should scry to Raudan, she thought for the second time in just minutes. Her guardian would be able to help. He was a born tracker and defender. And now, with things settled between her and Eric, she wanted to see him, to talk to him, to thank him.

To tell him she didn't mean the awful things she'd said...

"Good afternoon, Missus." An oncoming brownie tilted his head and tipped his cap.

"Good afternoon." She nodded and walked past.

The small village resembled a miniature suburbia, minus the driveways, cars, and busy streets. The houses were spaced accordingly, allowing plenty of room between for gardens and white picket fences. There were well over two dozen of them scattered about, and as she came to the center of the town, she eyed the wishing well placed directly in the center. The first time Eric had brought her here, she had made the wish that they would find common ground. If the magik water worked once, perhaps it could work again.

She ambled to the magikal relic crafted of stone and wood, leaned over the rim, and made her wish.

"Mistress Runa, is that you?"

Runa lifted herself from the stone rim, smiling as her head surfaced from the well. "It's me."

"Lassie, why did ye go and cut ye beautiful hair? It's a right crime, it is!"

She giggled and lifted her hand to her shorn locks, combing her fingers through the snipped strands. "My friend decided it was time for a makeover."

Timmon's disapproval was obvious. "Tell that friend she better no' mess with ye hair again, ye hear? Calico tresses bring good fortune."

"Good fortune, huh?"

"Aye, Missus. Those blessed with hair that shines in all the gods' colors come from the gods themselves."

"Well, Timmon." She laughed and jumped from the small set of stairs leading to the well. "I can disprove that theory right now. My father is fae, but my mother was mortal. No descendant of any gods here."

"Pardon me sayin' it, but wrong ye be. All creation comes from the gods, mortal and immortal alike." He offered his arm, and when she slid her hand into it, he chided, "Now, doona cut that hair again."

"Okay." She continued smiling and didn't argue.

"Now, tell me what brings ye to me humble village. I know Eric departed this morn. Downright disagreeable he be about it too."

"I'm accepting the invitation for a spot o' tea with a most gracious family, good sir."

"Why didn't ye say so? Right happy, they'll be!" He played along, almost skipping as he guided her through the houses and brownies along the street.

Timmon's cottage was painted yellow, and the rounded windows were trimmed in white. He opened the wooden gate in front and waited for her to enter before closing it behind them.

"Timm?" a soft feminine voice called from inside.

"It's me, Bee! I've brought company for tea."

Runa stepped past the threshold. The home was small, with a large sitting area in the center that branched off into other rooms. The ceilings were low, meant for those no taller than six feet.

"Let me take ye coat." Timmon waited as she slid free of the bulky material and handed it over. She stepped toward the fireplace and took the seat Timmon indicated.

A tiny woman appeared, carrying a small tray. She was shorter than Timmon, obviously a brownie herself, and beautiful. Her brown hair flowed freely down her back, and her caramel-colored eyes were warm and friendly. She placed the tray on the center table and wiped her hands on her apron.

"I apologize. Tea is all I be able to offer ye. The bairns ate the last of the tarts this morn afore naptime."

"Runa, allow me to introduce my wife, Beatrice."

"Nice to meet you." She smiled, extending her hand.

Beatrice returned the smile, accepting her hand and shaking it stoutly. "Welcome to our home."

Timmon plopped down into a nearby chair. Rubbing his shoulder, he muttered absently, "Damn the treks to Stone Mountain. Brutal, they be."

"What?" Runa asked, but she was quickly distracted when Beatrice dropped her hand and rushed to the teapot, cups, and saucers.

"Would ye care for sugar?"

"Yes, please."

Beatrice handed her a cup and saucer, then turned to pour another. Runa took a small sip of the tea, then lowered the cup onto the matching plate.

She glanced at Timmon and asked, "You were at Stone Mountain?"

He shifted in his chair, nodding dismissively. "I go there from time to time to speak with the centaurs who bargain with the nomads."

"You have centaurs in the wood?"

"Aye," he answered but shook his head at her eager expression. "But they have left until the new tide."

She didn't attempt to mask her disappointment. "I was going to take a trip into the forest today to see the enchanted lake."

"Doona be going into the woods without Eric, Runa." Beatrice's brown eyes flashed amber as the golden orbs leveled on her. "There be dangerous creatures that roam—"

An earth-shattering explosion sounded in the distance, causing the ground to shake. The cottage rumbled—windows, glass, and mortar all cracking. The tray on the table fell to the floor, breaking the porcelain, sending the hot brown liquid splattering in different directions. Multiple shouts rent the air, followed by the loud droning of a horn.

Beatrice gaped at Timmon. "That be the blare of a battle horn."

Timmon darted for the door, screaming, "Take the children to the basement, Bee. Go now! Hurry!"

Runa followed him, running down the porch. The sky began to shift, the sun vanishing under a thick blanket of black. Gray swirled, bringing on a terrifying version of dusk, eclipsing the afternoon sunshine.

"What is happening, Timmon?"

Timmon stopped, turning on her. "Runa, get your arse back to me cottage and fast! It's no' safe out here!"

A loud roar filled the air, shrill and high-pitched. She lifted her eyes to the blackened sky. When she located the source of the sound, her jaw dropped and her heart plummeted.

"Oh sweet Moirae."

Several dragons filled the sky, their bodies ravaged and torn, bodies black and eyes glowing red. On their backs were cloaked figures holding large staves outward. She lowered her eyes, stared into the distance, and gawked at the mass of cloaked bodies coming over the ridge. A nearby cottage exploded, and Runa's breath caught when she realized the dragons were releasing bursts of blue flame, each flashing ball detonating upon impact.

"We have come for the one born of light," a deep voice bellowed from above, accompanied by the shriek of the winged serpent he rode. "Give her over to us."

"Blessed Fates, fallen riders," Timmon whispered. His dark eyes rotated until they met hers, and he froze, staring as if truly seeing her for the first time. "They mean ye, Runa."

"M-me?" she stammered. "Why?"

"I doona know why, but ye must listen to me, lass. Run north into the forest, past the enchanted lake. Ye'll see the mountain to guide ye above the trees. Follow it. Go to the Stone Mountain, Runa. Do ye understand? Ye must make it to the mountain! Run!"

She turned on her heel, calling on the speed bestowed to her kind. The cottages sped by in a blur, the world shifting underfoot and around her as more explosions sounded. She entered the clearing that came before the trees, producing a newfound burst of energy as she saw a sliver of black above her in the sky.

Her legs moved rhythmically, in harmony with her hands. The cold wind blew into her face, wrapping around her body but failing to slow her down. She lifted her eyes and located the large peak of the mountain in the distance. She focused on the gray sliver, determined and uncompromising. Raudan had always taught her to block out everything but the end goal—the prime objective.

Soon she felt the pounding of feet and sensed the approach of those who had taken to ground. Her lungs were protesting now, burning miserably; her numb legs ached from exertion. Her muscles were on fire, and her breathing was labored.

She didn't leave the cover of trees when she finally came upon the frozen lake. She wound around the area instead. She continued on her chosen path, her legs going watery. Branches slapped her face, a few breaking skin. She didn't stop as she listened to the hoarse growls approaching fast from behind, combined with the violent pounding of her feet.

Each step brought the mountain closer, and soon the cover of trees began to vanish, eventually dissipating altogether. A large meadow surrounded the enormous rock mountain, the center carved with the likeness of a dragon. A waterfall cascaded along one side, and steam rose from the pool below.

If Timmon told her to make it to the mountain, there had to be a reason. Perhaps he'd lied and the centaurs were still there. But why would he lie about such a trivial thing?

A large explosion settled in her ears, and the ground shook, sending her crashing face-first into the ground. She scrambled to her feet and glanced under her arm. Crossing the distance were several robed creatures, their faces charred and badly burned. Her body damned her; her legs went boneless, slowing as her strength ebbed. She raced for the foot of the mountain and staggered as she neared it. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to climb, and nowhere to hide.

Slowly, she turned, shoulders heaving, lungs fighting for essential oxygen. The hooded figures were nearly upon her, close enough that she could smell their rotted skin and decayed flesh. She stepped backward, one foot behind the other, until the brisk solidity of the mountain met her back. Still, they advanced until only a short

distance remained between her and them. Their capes billowed behind them like blackened fire, shadowed wisps that foreshadowed hell.

Braced to defend herself, she waited as they approached. It wouldn't take much for them to overpower her, but she couldn't risk going down without a fight. If she died, so did Eric, and that was unacceptable.

An outraged roar unlike any she'd ever heard before resounded through the meadow as a mass of gold engulfed her vision, blocking out her pursuers. The dragon's body was as large as a house, and its scales radiated luminescent brilliance even under the cover of dark. Massive jaws snagged one of the hooded figures, then another. It swallowed them, opened its mouth, spread its magnificent wings, and breathed an endless wall of red fire.

When the flames settled, more dark figures approached, and the outraged creature disposed of them one by one, taking them in its jaws and devouring them. Several came around the side, and the dragon spun its huge body, flailing a long and deadly spiked tail. The assailants were severed in two by the blow, their bodies scattering in multiple pieces across the distance.

"Fucking hell." A familiar yet unexpected voice resonated inside Runa's head when the last one was disposed of.

"Nox?" she croaked, standing only because the wall supported her back.

"Who the fuck did you think it was, your fairy godmother?"

His golden head spun around, his canary yellow eyes flashing. He snorted and moved in her direction, muscles and limbs rippling with a grace that belied his size.

"I hope you don't get airsick. You should probably close your eyes."

"What?" She gulped. "Why?"

She knew the answer when one of his large clawed hands surrounded her torso, his fingers snaking around and lifting her from the ground. She gripped the surprisingly warm and scaled skin and slammed her eyes shut. Her stomach somersaulted as he leaped off the ground and launched them effortlessly into the sky.

\* \* \*

New York Magik-masked building of Yuless Charon Topside Residence

Raudan rubbed a hand over his bristled face, dragging fingers down his mouth and shaking his head to stay focused. All his research and effort were for naught. The goddesses and oracles refused to speak with him regarding Runa, and Yuless Charon refused to discuss her mother or reveal any of the intimacies of their relationship prior to Runa's birth.

"Fates be damned!" he snarled, slamming the book closed.

He needed sleep, needed it desperately.

"Raudan Eljias Dalmatica," a voice whispered faintly. "I, Lucian Angeleus Kross, summon you to scry."

Raudan lifted his head and gazed across the bookshelves, stopping at the fountain below the windows. He stood and walked toward the shimmering water, then frowned at the rippling face of the daemon in the pool's reflection.

"Lucian?"

"Where is Runa?"

Raudan crossed his arms, prepared for what was coming. "Close by."

"You're lying to me," Lucian snarled. "Stand aside. I'm coming through."

The water bubbled and swirled. One hand broke through, then the other, and Lucian's head surfaced. He rose fluidly from the ripples, creating a cascade of water that spilled free from the fountain and coated Raudan's brand-new Prada shoes. Lucian stepped away from the water that flowed around him but never made contact with his body. He stepped out of the fountain and onto the floor. The daemon's eyes were silver, his skin was coated in an eerie hue of blue, and power radiated off him in waves.

"Where is she, Raudan?"

Raudan lifted his hand and massaged his weary eyes with his fingers. He had known that Byron would notice her absence sooner rather than later. "She's with her Fated. Runa is no longer a child, and Byron can't expect her to remain under our watchful eye forever."

"She is with the Draigen?"

"Yes—"

Lucian snatched him by the forearm and teleported. Blackness came first, then disorientation. The library vanished, becoming a large hall of some kind. Loud explosions boomed from outside, vibrating along the walls and ceiling.

"Damn it. They are already here."

"Who are where?" Raudan yanked his arm free of Lucian's hold.

The daemon turned to him, his silver eyes as reflective and captivating as polished mirrors. "What do you know about fallen stars, Raudan?"

He shook his head dumbly, unsure of the importance of the question. "The celestia?"

"Yes—fallen stars, celestia, supernovas—those chosen by the gods to watch over the many souls from above. The eyes in the sky, as it were."

"They are a myth."

Lucian shook his head and corrected, "They are a rarity, but *not* a myth. Celestia only descend from the sanctity of heaven when they've set eyes upon their Chosen. And as you are well aware, discovering the other half of one's soul is a rarity in and of itself." Another explosion rocked the room, sending portraits and

vases crashing to the floor. He continued, his words rushed. "They are doomed the moment they fall, as their light begins to dim. A few choose to fade slowly, but most pass their radiance along to another."

"What do celestia have to do with Runa?"

"Everything," the daemon answered, staring him in the eye. "Her mother was one."

Raudan advanced on Lucian and stopped just short of tackling him to the ground. The daemon lifted his hands into the air.

"I have no reason to play you false. Think of what I'm telling you, Raudan. It explains everything. Her mother's passing, Runa's inability to heal, your instinctive call the first time she drew air."

A newfound clarity replaced years of confusion and uncertainty. The child born of a mortal wouldn't need the protection of a Haltija, but the child of the eyes of gods would.

Raudan narrowed his eyes at Lucian. "How do you know this?"

"I absorbed the memories of a deranged bitch who wants to bring forth Armageddon. She got a piece of me with the cursed ax, but not before I took a ride inside her warped head. I couldn't see everything, but I saw enough."

"And why does a witch want my selde?"

Lucian growled, expression dark. "She's twisted a contract with the wraith king, promising him that which will allow him to thrive in the day in exchange for a relic. Runa isn't a celestia, but the light of one still shines within her." The ground quaked, and Lucian roared over another explosion, "We are standing in Locke Manor, home of Colin Locke and his brethren. Sense your selde and take me to her. The hex the witch intends to evoke is only accessible upon the turn of each new tide, but in order to twist the magik, she needs the relic from the wraith king."

"That's tomorrow!"

"I'm well aware of that. Find her, Raudan, now!"

He stopped arguing and sent that portion of himself outward, but in the instant he felt for Runa, he knew it was too late.

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"The connection between Runa and I began to diminish the moment she met Eric. It's the only reason I entrusted her to him."

"What the fuck are you doing here, Haltija?"

He and Lucian spun around, coming face-to-face with one very pissed-off Draigen and the small female huddled behind him.

"I'm here for my selde. Where is Runa?"

The young woman peered around the Draigen and answered, "She went into the brownie village to visit Timmon." 172

"She went alone?" Raudan thundered. "Where the hell is Eric?"

"My brothers went to look for your selde's ill-fated sibling."

"What happened to Byron?" Raudan barked furiously. "Someone tell me what the hell is going on!"

Lucian extended his hands to interject. "Byron isn't anywhere near the Swamp of Despair. He's being used as a pawn, a distraction intended to divert attention."

"A pawn for what?" Raudan stopped short as Lucian teleported and disappeared.

## Chapter Twenty-nine

Runa groaned, opened her eyelids, and stared at the dark wood ceiling above her. She shifted her body against the hard flooring, recalling the dragon holding her tightly and the blackness that came when she opened her eyes and viewed the tiny world below.

"What the fuck is going on, *sidhe*?"

Nox appeared, his yellow eyes angry and bright. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. His blond hair was messy, and a slathering of a darker shadow covered his face. He stood over her, waiting for an answer.

She licked her lips and asked, "How long have I been out?"

"Twenty minutes, give or take. Now answer my question. Why the hell are fallen riders descending on Locke Manor? And don't tell me it's not because of you. They all but left the brownies to burn once they realized you ran."

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't know?" She struggled to sit upright and massaged her throbbing temples.

Untrusting eyes narrowed. "No, I wouldn't."

"Then we are at an impasse, because I have no idea what they wanted. I don't even know what the hell they are."

His nostrils flared wide, as if he could detect the sincerity of her words by scent alone. Then he started pacing, his feet stomping loudly, causing the sound to ricochet inside her pounding skull. "Goddamn it," he grumbled, speaking quietly to himself. "We can't stay here. Not safe, not secure. Damn you, Eric. You and the fucking Fates."

He rushed from the room and reappeared within seconds, carrying a large black duffel bag. "With Eric gone hunting fae, you've become my responsibility. But let me put this out there from the start so we're clear. If it were up to me, I'd take you directly back to my realm and let those fallen soldiers have at you. The only reason I'm not is because my brother will suffer as a direct consequence." She swallowed convulsively, watching as he strode toward the door, tossed the bag to the floor, and slid into a sleek black leather coat. "From here on in, you do exactly as I say. And if you don't, I'll bind and gag your ass." He stopped to stare directly at her, warning thickly, "Don't fuck with me, fae. You won't like the outcome."

She glanced away, peering around the room, staring at the wooden ceilings, walls, and furniture. "Where are we?"

He answered as he straightened his collar, "What's the matter? Don't recognize your own realm?" He bent down, retrieved the duffel, walked to a nearby table, and snagged a set of keys. "Get off your ass. We have to move."

Her feet were wobbly, her legs unsteady. Nox frightened her, even now. His loathing was very real, filtered, if anything, because of her relationship with Eric. Yet he had defended her when she needed him, coming to her aid when he didn't have to, she reminded herself. That had to count for something.

"We need to find Raudan," she said, fidgeting when he nailed her in place with those hate-filled eyes. He seemed to consider her words, weighing them for worth. "He'll know what to do. He always does."

"It's not a bad idea," he pondered, his face going soft as he became thoughtful, making him appear far less ruthless, almost vulnerable. When he noticed her staring, his lips thinned, and his eyes narrowed. "We'll discuss it in the car."

She followed him out the door of what she quickly discovered was a cabin. Parked in front was a shiny black Dodge Challenger, the flawless metallic paint shining in the descending midday sun.

Nox opened the door, tossed his duffel inside, and climbed in. She rushed to do the same and situated herself in the front seat. The motor purred as he turned the ignition over, the mufflers roaring happily. He rocked the gearshift, slamming it into reverse. After whipping the vehicle around, he speed shifted into first gear and drove through a dirt path surrounded by trees.

"Where would the Haltija be?" he asked as they hit a paved road, wheels catching and squealing when the gravel was replaced with something level and solid.

"I don't know. I could scry him."

"No, they'll be ready for that. We can't use magik."

She extended her hand. "Give me your cell, and I'll call him."

"Don't have one." He punched the gas, released the clutch, and shifted gears. "You'll have to give me a location."

No cell? She shook her head, thinking. "Um, home, maybe?"

He quickly glared at her, then returned his focus to the road. "If that's all you've got, consider yourself fucked."

Her temper revived, and she snapped, "I've never been apart from Raudan before. He's always resided where I did and traveled where I went."

"I can't take you home, fae. Whoever sent the undead army for a social call will undoubtedly have someone waiting there, just on the off chance you decide to return. That's why we couldn't stay at the cabin. Too many people know the location."

"I thought you didn't venture into our realm."

"We don't, not if we can avoid it. The cabin was acquired over a decade ago when Marshall got a hard-on for Isobel and missed his chance to cross back before the portal closed. I've been staying there to give everyone space after—"

He didn't finish, exhaling loudly and wringing the steering wheel. She refrained from mentioning the altercation at dinner, wriggling in her seat and latching her safety belt instead. Her fingers trembled from shock that threatened to come on strong if she didn't distract herself.

She stared ahead and asked, "What were you doing at Stone Mountain?"

"Timmon scryed me and told me of my brothers' departure. He thought it would be a good idea for me to make the trip back until they returned." He glared at her, and his eyes slitted. "Looks like I came home just in time."

A chill shot down her spine, her skin going pebbly as the cold seeped into her muscles, and her mind registered that she was in the mortal realm and poorly clothed against the harsh bite of winter. Her red peacoat was long forgotten at Timmon's cottage, and she'd chosen to wear a turtleneck that was unbearably thin. She wound her hands between her legs, slowly rocking, her teeth beginning to chatter.

"For fuck's sake." Nox scowled. Gripping the wheel with one hand, he struggled with his jacket. He pulled one arm out, then the other, and tossed it in her direction.

"Thank you," she said, her voice cracking as her body trembled and quaked. She placed the heavy material around her shoulders like a blanket, taking shelter behind the leather warmed by his body.

He grunted and bobbed his head, glancing into the rearview. He downshifted, revved the motor, and reached for the dial to work the heater. A blast of cold air came first, followed by a warmer flow that emitted from the engine.

"W-where are we g-going?"

"To get some answers," Nox answered, glancing at her and then quickly back to the road.

## **Chapter Thirty**

"Stop thinking of her, Eric." Colin's voice was intentionally quiet, the words intended for him alone. "I know it's difficult, but we need your focus *here*. Dante is watching over things at home. She'll be fine."

The world slammed into focus, and Eric cursed. Now he understood. Now it all made sense. Each time his mated brothers insisted they needed to return home after a long night working the realms—had to return—they meant it, *literally*.

"It's up here," Yuviette yelled from ahead, spinning around and waving her wand. She maneuvered the muck easier than they did by the aid of a flying broom. It would have been comical if he weren't shucking through the repugnant sludge himself.

The witch had teleported them to the swamp, but not before they traded Runa's hair to the Lich king in exchange for twisting the hex that would extend her life. A growl rose from his throat at the thought. The creature seemed eager—too eager—to make the trade.

As if he knew something they didn't...

Colin sighed and clasped his shoulder. "Eric, you have to get control."

Fuck.

The witch's scream got his attention, and he watched as she and the broom plummeted several feet from the air and plunged into the thick mud. "Son of a bitch!" she yelped, lifting her arms and swinging her hands, sending flecks of the brown gunk flying all around her.

"Run out of gas?" Trace joked. He extended his hand, offering to help her stand.

"Piss off." She shook off his help and coated him in a splattering of mud when she thrashed to her feet, covered from the waist down in gunk.

"What happened?" Colin asked.

"This is where the loss of magik starts." She rolled her eyes, slapping at the mud on her jacket. "Obviously."

"Shouldn't you have thought of that before you rode through on your broom?" Gabriel taunted.

She stepped through the muck and faced her tormentor, the smile on her face anything but serene. "Don't fuck with me, lizard boy. I'll turn you into a Disney on Ice version of *Puff the Magic Dragon*, complete with green scraggly hairs on the top

of your head and flaming purple scales. You'll make Barney look like a T. rex." She narrowed her eyes and pointed at Trace. "Give me my bag."

Trace tossed over the large burlap sack. The witch caught it midair and then disappeared inside as she'd done with her purse the first night they met. After several long seconds spent thrashing around, she resurfaced, pulling something free.

"I had no choice but to craft this out of kelpie hair, which I nearly drowned to get. Byron had better be worth it."

Gabriel arched a brow. "Unicorns?"

"It's the only mystikal creature that appears the same on either side of the realms. When this baby hatches, it will see *all*." She lifted her hand, opened her fingers, and revealed a small stone wrapped in multicolored fibers. She brought her hand to her lips, keeping her fingers wide, and whispered, "*Volat*."

The stone warbled on her palm, jolted across her skin, then split in half. A vivid butterscotch butterfly erupted from the center, growing larger, wings spreading as it traveled around the witch.

"Show me that which does not belong."

The butterfly vanished, disappearing into the distance.

"Whoever shaded this place did an excellent job using the base elements to enhance the glamour." Her lips curved, and she lifted her eyes to the sky. "If it weren't for Lucian, I'd never have believed it possible to block and mask using an enchantment."

"Do you mean to tell me all of this"—Eric motioned around at the vast nothingness—"is the result of glamour?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Not possible." Gabriel shook his head. "We'd sense the magik."

"Not if the glamour is kept in place by an object or a tether. That's how Lucian was caught unawares. The longer a masked object remains in place, the more it becomes an actual part of the surroundings it inhabits. You don't sense anything out of the ordinary because the ornament responsible has become embedded within the very thing it was created to shield."

Colin seemed genuinely confused. "Everyone knows Swanarri Lake is cursed. There is no need for a shield or a mask here."

Yuviette spun around. "What if it isn't? What if everyone simply assumed the worst, choosing to believe that swan kind vanished? There is no history of the actual events here. Not in the *Book of Tyme* or in the written word."

The orange butterfly returned, whirled around the witch, and headed east.

"Bingo." She grinned, swinging her arms wide as she hurried through the mud. They followed, easily maintaining the pace. The butterfly stopped several feet away from a rotting oak. It hovered midair and darted upward as a crow lurched from the branches and took flight.

Yuviette lifted her hand, revealing the husk the butterfly had left behind, and said, "Dormio."

It flew back to her hand, shrinking and returning to the shell. The surface rippled and became whole.

"Now." She slid the stone into her pocket. "This is where it gets tricky. The swallowtail detects what doesn't belong, but doesn't pinpoint it. That's where I come in."

She removed gemstones from her bag and handed one to each of them, instructing, "Stand away from one another and create a square. I can't filter light and dark since there are only four of you, but hopefully that won't be a problem. I'll base myself in earth and water."

She produced a bottle of water, splashed a portion onto her face, pulled an envelope from her pocket, and emptied the dirt contents onto her hands.

"What do you mean? What won't be a problem?" Eric questioned.

"Shush!" Her eyes flared silver, and she pointed out their places. "I don't have time to explain the logistics." They spaced out, and she moved to the middle, motioning for them to lift their hands to display the stones. She lifted her arms, and the stone began to hum, a tingle of power twining down Eric's arm.

*Magik*. His brothers felt it too, shifting their feet and staring across the circle at one another.

"Damn it," the witch cursed, closing her eyes, beads of sweat forming on her brow. "Fucking black magik!"

Her fingers contorted, bending oddly, and when her mouth moved, words remained trapped behind tight lips. Her lids fluttered, lashes flickering across a slight speckling of freckles across her fair skin.

"No," she managed to gasp, her body shaking. "Damn it. No no no!"

She went completely still, and her eyes flew open. The hazel was gone, replaced by reflective black.

"Yuviette," Colin started to move forward. "What's wrong?"

"Can we help her?" Eric asked through gritted teeth. The stone had turned hot, the surface burning the fleshy skin of his palm.

"No, you can't help her. But I can."

Eric narrowed his eyes at the nygromancer daemon who suddenly appeared. He seemed very much alive for someone purported to be very near death. Lucian walked to Yuviette, brushed his hand across her face, and closed her obsidian-colored eyes. He studied her face, never taking his attention from her as he spoke.

"I need one of you to shift to locate the tether. Who's the lucky volunteer?"

"I'll do it." Trace stepped forward, shucking his coat, which he handed to Colin. "What am I looking for?"

The daemon glanced away from Yuviette long enough to accept the stone from Trace and instruct, "The crow. The only living creature you'll find in this enchantment. When you find it, destroy it. It's the only way to sever the shade."

Trace nodded, forgoing the task of removing his clothing. He strode a safe distance away, cracked his neck, and bowed his head. A glow enveloped his body and expanded outward. The change was quick, exactly as the gods had intended it to be, so fast there was no danger of being harmed while the body was in flux. He shook himself when finished, rotating his shoulders and gazing into the sky. His blackened scales shone blue as he pushed off the muddy earth with broad hind legs, spreading his wings and climbing effortlessly into the sky.

"Clever girl," the daemon murmured, pressing his tall frame against Yuviette's body.

"What's the matter with her?" Gabriel asked.

Lucian tucked a strand of stray hair behind her ear. "She's entranced by the allure of black magik. Seers are white casters by nature, but volva tendencies make them an easy target for anything dark. She knew the danger of calling upon the elements without basing herself in all of them, especially after taking my blood. She's just a trigger-happy little witch."

A loud *squawk* reverberated in the air, and Eric looked over his shoulder. A crow darted into the cover of clouds overhead, its wings beating frantically. But it didn't make it far. Trace swooped down upon the dark shape, widened his jaws, and snatched the harping bird into his mouth. The mud splattered on impact, coating them all as he landed. His brother swallowed, turned his triangular-shaped head away, and belched fire through his nose.

Yuviette sagged into Lucian's arms, and he lifted her frail-looking body into his chest as everything changed around them. The swamp vanished. The mud up to their knees dissipated and retreated, thinning out and becoming clear. The clouds parted, and the sun seeped past, brightening the sky and touching the once-dead trees whose branches suddenly lifted upward. Each second revealed another layer until they stood not in a swamp, but in a beautiful valley that was dormant only by the season of winter.

"With that out of the way." Lucian's eyes turned silver when he stared directly at Eric. "You and I need to talk."

# Chapter Thirty-one

North Carolina-Tennessee Border Blue Ridge Mountains Paddie's Shack

"Keep your eyes down and your yap shut," Nox warned, adjusting his too-large jacket over her body. He placed a plain black baseball cap on her head and tightened the back until it fit snugly. "Don't talk to anyone, and stick to my ass like flypaper. Do you understand?"

Runa bobbed her head, and he led the way to the shack nestled under a line of trees. It was nearly dark. Multihued flashing bulbs lit the roof, guiding the path toward the ransacked building.

Nox opened the door and allowed her to pass. She waited until he came inside and closed the door before she peered around cautiously. It was loud; god-awful heavy metal music blasted from blown speakers in serious need of a replacement. The multiple conversations let her know the place was packed—as well as the disgusting repugnance of body odor.

Nox grasped her arm, and she maneuvered through the crowd, past tables full of Lycaes, daemons, and trolls. His fingers tightened around her elbow, and she stopped, listening as Nox spoke from behind her to the bartender.

"Where is she?"

"She's busy."

"Didn't ask what she was doing."

Hesitation, then. "She's at the mall."

"Come on." Nox tugged on her arm, pushing her forward and parting the mass of bodies.

They exited the main room and passed smaller ones crammed with pool tables, the loud *thwacks* of balls breaking bouncing off the walls. Another hallway led them to a door. A big white sign in the center of the door declared MANAGEMENT NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR ANY DAMAGES, LOSS OF LIFE OR LIMB. ENTER AT YOUR OWN RISK.

"All right, fae, this is it." Nox stopped and checked her over one final time. "Stay close, and if someone talks to you, keep your mouth shut. Got me?"

When she nodded, he breathed in deeply and opened the door. The minute she crossed the threshold, the noise hit her as if there was a barrier of some kind buried within the entranceway. The entire space was huge, like a massive trading complex. Not exactly the basement located beneath a shabby bar. Vendors were spaced out, bodies crowded around booths that extended as far as the eye could see.

"The mall?"

"What did you think? That we shopped for weapons and spells at the local Target? Come on."

They waded through the masses until they came to a small trailer surrounded on all sides by covered booths. A sign posted outside indicated the shop was CLOSED TILL MAÑANA—PISS OFF. Nox walked around the side to a door located on the back. He raised his fist, pounded three times, and waited. Seconds passed, and nothing happened.

He moved closer to the door and pressed his face against the metal. "Open up, Teryn. I know you're in there, and you know we're here." Silence greeted him, and his voice thickened, becoming throaty. "Either you open the door and let us in, or I'll kick it down and escort your ass to Tartarus for peddling vampbane."

The sound of movement was followed by a distinct *snap* of a lock being slid free. The door in front of Nox opened inward.

"Get in." Nox shoved her inside and followed close behind.

The trailer was musty, and the smell of incense and powder clung to the threadbare carpet. Skulls, animal skins, and numerous glass containers lined the walls. Runa walked to an empty metal chair and perched on the edge, placing her elbows in her knees and peering around.

"Don't get too comfy. You won't be staying long," the woman, Teryn, warned. She turned away from the door, not bothering to bolt the locks.

Her short black hair was worn in an eighties punk-rock motif, the Mohawk in the center dyed Bozo the Clown red. A thin black wifebeater displayed intricate tattoos lining her arms and neck. One long feather earring dangled from her left lobe and brushed against her shoulder.

Nox stood before the doorway, barricading it with his body. He looked scary as hell in the confines of the small trailer—massive, deadly, and pissed off.

"What do they want with her?"

"I don't want to get involved."

His eyes flared jeweled yellow. "Tartarus is calling."

"What the hell makes you think I know jack about this?"

"Because you always know when it comes to the fallen. Your charms are what bring their asses back from the other side."

"Someone could be passing off my work as their own."

"I swear to the Fates, gypsy, keep fucking with me. I'll make sure that niece of yours misses her next round of the bane. How long will it take before she loses herself to the bloodlust?"

"Fates damn you, Nox." Teryn crossed her arms. "Have you heard of the Ahriman veil?"

"Of course I have. The lovers' crown."

"Someone has finally managed to barter for it. The wraith king has agreed to trade the veil for the light of a star."

"A celestia?"

"No, not a celestia." Teryn glanced at Runa, then quickly away. "The one who carries her light."

*Celestia*? The term seemed familiar, and Runa tried to place it, struggling to remember until she glanced into Nox's pensive face. He stood rooted to the spot, his eyes going clear as if truly seeing her for the first time.

"She's a fucking sidhe fae! The gods would not deem to grace her kind with such a gift!"

"Not her kind—your kind. She is mated to your brother. Her light is a gift upon your family."

"The hell you say!"

"We are on the verge of the end of another realm, Nox. The war of souls isn't far off, the battle to maintain the balance near at hand. That's why the gods began the merging of the races hundreds of millennia ago, bringing the warring clans, tribes, packs, and enemies closer together. There is a reason we are the only dimension that always survives. It's impossible to completely loathe those you also love."

"Love her." He spit the words. "I can't stand the fucking sight of her! If not for Eric, I'd hand her to the wraith king personally!"

"The gods have a purpose for everything, including this."

"I will not pucker up and make nice because they've decided to merge our people together. After what they allowed to happen, I hope they all fucking rot!"

"Including your brothers?"

"This has nothing to do with them. It's not Eric's fault he can't see past his dick! Everyone knows that when you meet your Chosen, you're screwed. You can't control it, even if you can't stomach the person intended for you, even if you hate everything they represent."

The woman moved quickly, snagging Runa's forearm and Nox's in the same motion. "I don't have time for this, and neither do you. It's time you found some common ground and stopped being a narcissistic asshole."

Runa wasn't certain what happened next. Her body slid from the chair and sank to the ground. Memories of her childhood flashed before her eyes, a picture show that was accompanied by deep flashes of emotion that seared her chest—the

vague recollection of meeting her brother for the first time, the happiness and pride at Raudan's praise, graduating high school and college with honors. Meeting Eric, forcing herself to stay away, giving in, accepting him as her own—happiness, awe, joy, and finally love.

Then came the memories of an isolated childhood—the despondency of being alone. Raudan's presence but never her father's, watching families together in the park, feeling the intense longing to belong, to be a part of something more.

The memories changed, allowing her to experience emotions she'd never known but dreamed of—the adoration of a child for his parents, the loving touch of a mother's hand, the solidarity of being one of eight, the vivacity of shifting one's form and taking flight. Then it became dark, emotions painful, her chest heaving with the weight of grief, the heaviness of anguish suffocating her.

They were gone. All of them.

His mother, his baby sister—Arden.

The females of his race gathered in a secluded location in the mountains. A meeting of faith falsified in order to annihilate them. One by one, they faded, and their passing was felt by all, a rending in half.

A deeper wound could never have been made.

With the loss of their Fateds, his brethren soon followed—fathers, sons, brothers—every mated male taking the same path of those they could never live without. Draigen mate for life, and the death of their mates had all but eradicated them. And it all started over a broken heart, a lover betrayed. A sidhe king declared war on that which took his intended and mated her—the dragon kin, the Draigen. He too perished for his efforts, but not before he created sons, the two who would split into the courts that ruled the light and the dark, the good and the evil.

Her people were responsible for the loss of Nox's female kind, those he hoped to mate and one day love, the only ones who could bear their children and ensure the longevity of their race.

Teryn released her, and Runa crawled away. Scrambling on her knees, she retched into the carpet with Nox following suit beside her.

\* \* \*

The Otherworld
Province of the Dragon
Locke Manor

It was a good thing Lucian was holding the witch in his arms. Otherwise Eric would have torn the daemon limb from limb for wasting precious time in the swamp.

"Where the fuck is she?" Eric lifted his head, scenting the air, observing the entranceway of Locke Manor through Draigen eyes. It didn't take long after their

arrival to ascertain an attack was under way; loud explosions echoed from outside the manor.

The fallen army had come for one person—his mate. The descendant of a celestia.

It was something he would have never dared to believe. Yet when he tried to deny the truth, he recalled how Runa's skin shone from within, the prismatic glow of diamonds surfacing, and knew Lucian's revelation was true.

"Eric, is that you?" Dante appeared with Aonia at his back and the Haltija walking alongside.

Colin stomped to his mate and enveloped her in his arms. She sagged against him, brown hair cascading around her face as she began to weep softly.

Eric continued his infuriated trek toward Dante. "Where is she?"

"I could ask you the same, Eric!" Raudan's brown eyes flashed amber. "I trusted you to keep her safe. You gave your oath!"

Lucian strode to a nearby chaise lounge and placed Yuviette atop the cushions. "You two, stop arguing. Someone needs to get outside and put an end to the horde that's threatening your home. The rest will come with me."

"I'm not going anywhere." Eric's voice conveyed his beast's rage. "Where is she, Dante?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say Pandemonium Palace," Lucian answered before Dante could. "Zoraida will have her package hand delivered. She won't take the risk of revealing where she sleeps."

"What the hell does the vampyren queen have to do with this?"

Lucian's eyes changed color, black evaporating into silver. "Do you recall the tale of the fall of Hansraj Dinarii?"

"We don't have time to discuss tales of lore." He didn't know where Runa was, didn't know if she was afraid or injured, in harm somewhere and in need of him. The familiar rending in his muscles that came prior to a shift permeated his body. Trace rushed to him and wrapped a hand across his shoulder.

"Hear him out, Eric. Cage the dragon."

Lucian walked away from the witch, blue light cascading from his tanned skin. "Swan King Hansraj Dinarii didn't die, and Swanarri Lake wasn't cursed after his fall. He was killed, and soon after, the land was tainted under a created shadow. It was meant as a punishment, revenge against his son."

"Behold the tale of a lovelorn queen, smitten with a would-be king. When her affections were forsaken, she bewitched his kinsmen and enslaved him." Gabriel repeated the folklore rhyme.

Lucian nodded. "Zoraida captured Prince Hadrian Dinarii and took his people as slaves, keeping his kind in servitude inside her veiled kingdom. But even with his people under her control, she lacks the one thing she craves most, the one thing her all powerful vampyren king cannot provide her. That's why she needs Runa.

Everyone knows the wraith have but one desire—to walk under the rays of the sun. She intends to trade Runa for the Ahriman veil."

The pieces came together, sliding horrifically into place.

"The lovers' crown," Eric murmured in comprehension. The vampyren queen wanted the heart of someone who didn't want her, but with the crown, she would gain exactly that. No one could deny affection to the wearer of the veil.

"Now that we are all on the same page"—Lucian seemed pleased, a chilling smile forming—"decide who is going to stay and take care of the fallen soldiers. The rest are coming with me to pay a visit to Ulrich, the wraith king."

### Chapter Thirty-two

Runa barely had a chance to recover from the overwhelming nausea that sent her to the floor when the trailer unexpectedly lurched and shook in a surge of magik.

"Well, that's just great!" Teryn fumed, her face turning a laughable hue of lobster red that matched her hair. "Get the hell out! It's better to take your chances running in the open than trapped inside a flammable container!"

"We can't run. As you are well aware, I cannot shift here." Nox helped her stand, though he was visibly shaken. His voice cracked slightly when he asked, "Where's Dhagger?"

"You just threatened to cut off her supply of bane. What makes you think I'd tell you?"

"The fallen can't travel to this realm. That only leaves the vampyren."

"Leave it be, Nox Locke!"

"I'm not leaving until you tell me where to find her."

"She can't help you—"

"She can, and she will. As a member of the order, she's obligated to offer assistance against the vampyren when requested."

The woman's face was no longer angry; it contorted in fury. "Get out!"

Nox smiled arrogantly. "She's here, isn't she?"

"I said to get out!"

"That's enough, Nana." A tall shape moved silently from the darkened kitchen, willowy legs covered in tight black leather with wisps of silver flashing. Each step was self-assured, confident—deliberate.

Her dark hair was cropped short to her chin, the raven-colored tresses straight and smooth. Her skin was deathly pale, unflattering and harsh against the black turtleneck. Dark circles were prominent against the hollows above her cheeks, her full lips almost purple. When the vampire finally stepped into the faint light, Runa was able to distinguish the shapes of weapons hidden inside her leather pants and across her chest.

"I'm not a member of the Order anymore. The Phoenix revoked that privilege when I stopped masticating on a regular basis." Her steely gray eyes stopped on Runa. The irises shifted and became red. "You look like shit," Nox remarked. Runa accepted his extended hand, and he stepped in front of her.

"No." The vampire smiled without humor or warmth. "I look like death."

"Just leave," Teryn snapped and then turned to her niece. "Dhagger, please—"

"Not too close, Nana. You know better." She sidestepped the woman, ensuring they never made contact. "And you also know better than to ask me to stay here."

Nox seized the opportunity. "I just need to make it topside."

Bloodred eyes rested on Runa. "You're Eric's Fated?"

Runa moved around Nox, stopped by the large arm that blocked her path when he realized her intent. "I am."

"You're so tiny, so frail," Dhagger rasped, stepping closer. "And you smell exquisite." She inhaled deeply, and her eyes slid closed. "Like cool winter sunshine and fresh lemon balm—delicious."

Nox growled, his chest vibrating as Eric's did when he lost his cool. The sound didn't stop when he finally spoke, causing his thickly pronounced syllables to ripple. "Christ, Dhagger. I thought you were fighting the change. Have you fallen so far from grace?"

The vampire stopped, blinking rapidly. Her darkened lips thinned, and she swallowed; the motion was obvious behind the thick material around her neck. She appeared to stop breathing altogether, lowering her eyes and bowing her head.

As if she's ashamed.

"Nana?"

Teryn hiked her chin. "In the bread basket."

Nox turned as soon as Dhagger moved away, urging Runa toward the door. When she didn't move quickly enough, he wound an arm around her waist, lifted her from the ground, and opened the door, taking them both outside. He took several long strides before he put her down, then lifted his head and surveyed the booths around them. Loud voices came from the area they had entered from, and he stilled as if listening to the droned conversations.

"What's her deal?" she asked.

He led her between vendors, keeping his voice low. "She was embraced against her will by a coven of vampyren several months ago. She's resisted the change, but it's only a matter of time before she caves. Bloodlust is a ticking time bomb."

"She looked like a vampire."

"Vampyren are vampires—cursed ones."

"Cursed ones?"

"As in damned, doomed—condemned."

Dhagger walked around a booth directly in front of them, eyes no longer red but a cool slate gray. "Going somewhere?"

"Don't take this personally"—Nox placed himself between Runa and the vampyren—"but fuck off. I didn't bring my brother's Chosen for you to munch on."

A flicker of emotion crossed her face, but it was gone just as quickly. "You interrupted my dose. She's in no danger with me." Nox studied Dhagger but didn't speak, his body tense and squared jaw tight. "I can help you get through the door."

His attention flickered to the entrance. "What did you have in mind?"

Runa observed the numerous vendors and booths. Being protected by a Draigen was all well and good, but if she was caught alone, she needed to be able to protect herself.

She nudged Nox and said, "I need daggers."

He turned from Dhagger and frowned at her. "No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. I can't defend myself. What if something happens? What if we're separated?"

"For fuck's sake, fae. Nothing is going to happen. Dhagger is more than capable of taking on the vampyren at the door, and once we cross the barrier, I'll be able to shift."

"That's all rainbows and gumdrops in theory, but I'd rather take the added precaution."

"Listen—"

"No, you listen." She made her point by invading his personal space and pointing at his chest. "I need daggers. If something happens to me, something happens to Eric. I refuse to go anywhere unarmed. After what happened at the brownie village, I need to be able to protect myself."

"Here." Dhagger stepped forward, removed the harness latched across her torso, and shoved two sheathed blades to Runa's chest. "Sweet baby Hades, I feel so bad for Eric. You're already behaving like bickering children."

"Do you know Eric?"

"I do." Dhagger nodded. "He helped me out once. Shortly after..." She paused and continued. "He's an exceptional person. You're very fortunate."

"I know." She glanced at Nox. He didn't smirk, keeping his emotions carefully hidden. She offered the daggers to him, and when he took them, she shrugged out of his coat and wrapped the holster over her shoulders. She'd just finished sliding the second dagger into place when she asked, "What's a celestia?"

Nox and Dhagger stared at her awkwardly. She shrugged into the jacket, and Nox finally answered, "I'll tell you when we make it to the car. We can't stay here."

"No, you can't," Dhagger agreed. "I'll take the lead at the door. Stay behind me, and wait until I clear a path. Once it's done, cross into the mortal realm, and don't stop." She locked eyes with Runa and added, "And no matter what, don't look back."

# Chapter Thirty-three

A line of pale-skinned vampyren stood before the door, blocking any potential exit from the mall. Runa noted that unlike Dhagger, their lips and eyes were red hued, and their skin was luminous and vivacious. The netherworlders bartering nearby paid them no heed, continuing on with business as usual.

Dhagger slid her hands into her pockets and removed a pair of leather gloves. She put them on, adjusted the Velcro along the back, and reached for to the silver stakes protruding from grooves along her leather pants. Her voice had changed, sounding almost businesslike. "I'll take out as many of them as I can. The minute the door is clear, haul ass."

Nox whispered cryptically, "And if Viktor is with them?"

"I'm not one of his until I turn completely, and I'll do whatever it takes to kill him before that happens." Dhagger took a deep breath. "I would ask a debt of you."

"And I would honor it."

"I want your word that if I do this, you'll find me in the event I turn, and put me out of misery. I don't want to be as they are, and the Order will not move against one of their own—regardless of the circumstance that severed the tie."

"I give you my oath."

Dhagger smiled, showcasing slightly pointed canines. "Then let's dance."

She moved away, and Runa's stomach knotted, concern overriding her desperation to escape. She did a quick head count, guesstimating that at least twenty bodies stood between her and freedom. "There are too many of them for one person."

Nox chuckled—the sound strikingly similar to his brother's amused laughter. "Dhagger isn't your average bear. The Order may have forsaken her, but slaying is what she does. As one of the few blessed, the strength of the Phoenix is in her blood. The vampyren will never be able to take that from her. They are fools for trying to harness it."

"Who is Viktor?"

"The vampyren king's second and the one who embraced her."

The first vampyren didn't know what felled him, staked quickly in the chest and relieved of his head courtesy of the wicked-looking dagger. The rest, alerted now to Dhagger's presence, formed a semicircle around her. She moved faster than a fae, with reflexes like those of a hunter, but it was her first blow that allowed Runa to glimpse her true power. Her kicks and punches were the equivalent of a destructive wrecking ball gone wild, each one sending bodies flying through the air.

"Let's move." Nox pushed her ahead of him toward the now-visible door. A movement to the left came, and Runa faltered; the breath was knocked from her lungs as she was tackled to the ground, taking Nox along for the ride. Nox kicked the face of the vampyren who held on to Runa's leg, forcing him to let her go. "Run, now! Make a break for the door."

"Dhagger." A seductive male voice seemed to freeze time, the husky lilt settling over the room like a calming drug.

The rubber soles of Runa's boots were slick from the blood on the floor, making it difficult to find traction. She made it to her feet and hesitated. Taking the time to look at Dhagger was dangerous, but her curiosity got the better of her. The silver stake and dagger remained clasped in her hands. Her shoulders were heaving with each of her labored breaths, and bodies lay scattered in bloody mounds at her feet. But she wasn't moving, her body still, head held high.

"Damn it, Runa," Nox railed. "We can't help her. Move!"

Vampyren pressed the advantage, rushing to the area between them and the exit. Their red eyes were bright, lips pulled back as they bared bone white fangs.

"Now, there's a good girl," the same lyrical voice cooed, and Runa peered over, enticed by the cadence and sound. A large vampyren had his fingers wound into the short hairs at Dhagger's nape. His free hand guided her turtleneck down as his mouth descended. Dhagger jerked and released the objects in her grasp. The weapons clamored to the ground. He drank for several agonizing seconds before he lifted his blond head and licked the blood clean from his lips. "I've wondered why you've not come to me before. Bane will only keep the thirst at bay for so long, murka."

Runa didn't get to see what happened next. Nox thrust her behind him as several vampyren advanced. Her heart was pounding, breaths coming out stinted. Fear and panic combined, along with a regret that she might never make it through the doors to safety.

"When did the Draigen become an advocate for the sidhe?" The vampyren released Dhagger, and his bloodred eyes homed in on Nox.

Nox addressed the male with more animosity than he had ever shown her. "After my brother mated one, *Viktor*."

"And who is the unfortunate brother? No, wait, let me guess." Viktor smiled. "Is it Trace? He's always been closer to our kind than you and your brethren. Can I expect a visit from the vampire king on his behalf?"

"Bridon Walkyr and his kin are nothing like you."

"They are exactly like us."

"I'm not going to argue with you, sin eater. But I will present you with the opportunity to walk away. The girl is Eric's Fated. My brother will rip you from throat to asshole if you don't allow her a safe return home."

Viktor approached them leisurely, flexing his muscular shoulders. "I'm afraid that's not possible. You see, the deal has already been made. All that's left is to warp to Ulrich accompanied by your new sister."

Nox roared, more beast than man, and then came chaos. He attacked each vampyren as they came until he was flanked on all sides. Runa scrambled past as they slowly overwhelmed him, running as fast as possible to the door. She burst into the corridor located inside the mortal realm and ran toward the sounds and voices just inside the bar. She rounded the corner and stopped.

Just inside the hallway, standing between her and escape, was Viktor.

A crash sounded from behind, and she spun around. Nox's face was bloody and swollen, but he had made it through. Cool skin caressed her throat as a hand wrapped around her nape, and was accompanied by a bray of fury as a flash of light blinded her. The hallway went black, sending her into oblivion as she was transported away.

\* \* \*

The Otherworld
Province of Madness, Realm of the Wraith
Pandemonium Palace

Eric paced, unable to remain still, anxious for word from Colin. His skin was prickling, spine shifting, bones aching, vision sharpening. His brother had shifted shortly after their arrival and flew over Pandemonium Palace, hoping to entreat the king telepathically. Colin had insisted he was the smarter choice to initiate contact as he could speak without the encumbrance of volatile emotion.

Eric's fury resurfaced when he thought of Runa alone and frightened inside the keep. The primordial half of him was quickly gaining ground. He knew it, could feel and sense it. The last time he'd been so unhinged was after his parents and sister passed. He'd almost forgotten what a blessing it was not to feel the loss of something so important, so monumentally significant.

The loud thrashing of wings signaled Colin's return, and everyone gazed into the blackened blueberry sky. The massive dragon didn't hover above the ground, choosing instead to land at a safe distance. Each of the beast's footsteps shook the cold earth, and when he was nearly upon them, he bowed his head and shifted.

"Ulrich won't allow entry or grant an audience." Colin spoke the moment he went from the form of light to man. He shrugged into the coat held out to him by Trace, covering his naked form. "I was only able to communicate with the guard at the gate."

"What did he have to say?" Eric braced himself to battle his beast when he received the answer.

Colin hesitated before he met Eric's anxious gaze. "Ulrich intends to ask Runa to pass the light into his keeping."

"That is impossible!" Raudan thundered.

"I say we shift and demolish the entire fucking keep." Eric shrugged out of his coat. "We gave him the opportunity to do this amicably. I will not stand idly by while Runa waits for me."

Lucian lifted his hand, indicating the need for quiet. His onyx irises flashed silver; his eyes shifted back and forth as his brow furrowed. "A wise idea," the daemon said. "The time for contemplation and reflection is over. You and your brothers should shift immediately and space out across his hold. I'll take Raudan and enter from beneath."

He knew Lucian was keeping something from them and growled, "What's changed, daemon?"

"I couldn't sense her before, but I do now. They've finally found Runa. She's here."

### Chapter Thirty-four

Goddamned black magik. It consumed her, enthralled her, and trapped her inside her traitorous body. Each time was worse than the one before. The dark portion of her soul mercilessly teased her.

Tempting and enticing. "Just once, taste the forbidden."

Yuvi knew the moment she was overcome by the allure of the dark in the swamp. The very instant it brushed against her, she was all but doomed. Yet even as she remained unable to move or speak, appearing to be trapped in a heavy slumber, she heard it all—including Lucian's revelation about Runa. She raged at her body, demanding her lips to move, willing her tongue to formulate words.

Because now she understood why the Lich wanted Runa's hair.

They would all travel to recover Runa, risking their lives in the process, when all they needed was the hair she'd handed over just hours earlier to a scheming overlord.

The black magik, sensing her pending departure, tempted her again. The delicious surge of power rubbed against her, inside her. "It would be so easy to give in," it whispered, "to trade the purity of light for the glory of the dark."

Dark magik was without morality. She could do whatever she chose, could manipulate and control all those around her. She could have everything she ever wanted. She alone could stop what had been set into motion.

No! She wouldn't give in to the temptation. Open your eyes, open your fucking eyes!

Rough hands shook her, and she heard Nox bark, "Wake up, witch!"

If only you knew, you bristly prick!

"Where are they?" he snarled, shaking her until her teeth clattered. The motion shook her body and disrupted the allure of the black magik. The heavy weight started to lift, and she was able to twitch her fingers, but her eyes remaining sealed.

"Damn it, wake up!" He shook her again, harder.

Just like that, Draigen. Once more.

"Let her go, Nox!"

"Dante." The hands vanished, and she plopped back onto billowy cushions. "Where's Eric?"

"What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be in perdition—holy fuck, man. What the hell happened? You're bleeding all over the rug."

They continued speaking, but she didn't listen, focusing instead on the ability to move. One eyelid fluttered and then the other—camera one, camera two. So far so good.

"I'll have to fly. We don't have time to summon for someone to warp us there."

"No," she murmured, wincing at her dry and scratchy throat. Her equilibrium was shot, and she struggled to find balance, warbling atop the couch.

"I have to stay with Nia," Dante said, continuing on as if he didn't hear her. "Gabriel chased off the pests outside. Maybe you should take him with you."

"Alucard," she rasped.

"Gabriel is still here? Where is he?"

"Upstairs."

Goddamn it! She cleared her throat, growing testy. "We need to see Alucard."

They spun around, finally taking notice. Dante was furious but composed, not a hair out of place. Nox, on the other hand, looked like he'd been driven over repeatedly by a deranged hitchhiker in a Mack truck.

"What are you talking about?" Nox asked, moving in her direction.

She didn't answer, waiting until he was within her reach. The black magik was still present, but it was ebbing, as was the power derived from Lucian's blood. She wasn't a transporter by nature and therefore was unable to teleport at will, but maybe—just maybe—there was enough juice for one more trip.

She wound her hand around his shoulder as he bent down. She pictured Thorodan Hall, recalling the dark oak table where she had struck the deal for the everlasting hex. Her gut clenched, and the world shifted. Nox caught her before she polished the matching oak floor with her face.

"What the hell are you doing, female?" Nox snapped.

"We need Runa's hair."

"Her hair?"

"Ulrich doesn't need Runa's light to walk in solidity during the day. He only needs a portion of the radiance she carries to achieve the result—like a charm crafted from a part of her. I traded Runa's hair for a hex that would make her everlasting, using Alucard as the facilitator. He agreed to the terms because the bastard saw how she would die—or should I say—the motivation behind the person who ultimately kills her. He tricked me by taking something he knew I would need to twist the magik to undo this entire mess."

"Can't you use something else?"

"I wish. The success rate of trapping light in a charm or object is virtually nil. I'll need that entire bag of hair, all of it."

She heard footsteps fast approaching and lifted her face, using Nox's arm to remain upright and pretending to be on top of her game.

Alucard strode into the hall, surrounded by the servants who never left his presence. It was a good thing. Without the constant shade his fae slaves provided, his true form would be notable to all.

She glowered at him, seething in fury. "You scheming son of a bitch."

He grinned and shrugged. "I pictured just how lovely you would be when you discovered what you'd done, but let me just say, my wildest imaginings don't compare. You're exceptional in your anger."

"Give me the hair."

He sat in the head chair as a servant moved to do his bidding. "A deal is a deal. I've already performed the spell as agreed and fulfilled my end of the bargain. Your friend is all but immortal."

"Unless she dies twice," she snapped.

"Let's hope that doesn't become necessary."

"Sorry piece of shit—"

"Such pleasantries you bestow, Yuviette. Seems to me that you want something I have in my possession." He lifted a hand to inspect his immaculate fingernails. "You would do well to remember that each time you speak."

His smirk sent her over the edge. She lunged at the Lich with the sole intention of sending him to another death he would easily overcome. Crossing the short distance, she scrambled over the table. "I'll hex you with a guise curse and let the world get a glimpse of that *Terminator* face, Skeletor! That'll win over all the ladies!"

An arm wound around her waist, and Nox pulled her back. She thrashed and flailed, infuriated by Alucard's amused chuckles.

"What is it that you want?" Nox asked, groaning as her elbow caught him in the rib cage.

"She knows what I want." Alucard smiled, gently rapping the top of the table with his fingertips.

"I can't bargain with something that doesn't belong to me. Lizbeth is my sister, not my possession."

His smile never wavered, and he bobbed his head. "That's true."

She closed her eyes and suppressed the urge to scream. "Name the terms."

"Your servitude for the next quarter century, during which you will reside under my roof, in exchange for a bag of hair."

She nearly gagged. "You've lost your fucking mind!"

"I'll expect you to begin upholding your end of the agreement within a fortnight." He didn't look away, his aqua eyes bright and prismatic—the only

portion of his shade that was actually real. "I am willing to renegotiate those terms of course, with Elizabeth."

"Have you taken a gander into a mirror recently? There is no way, my man."

"That's my price. Take it or leave it."

A quarter century living among Liches. She shivered at the thought. "There must be something else—"

He stood, turning and nodding to his servants. They started to leave, walking from the room.

"Wait." She needed what he had, and he knew it.

Runa, you fucking owe me.

She trudged the distance to Alucard, extended her hand, and forced back the grimace that sealing the deal wrought. Her fingers slid past his, and she shook.

"We have an agreement?"

"Yes," she hissed. "But there is one stipulation. I need one of your people to teleport me to Pandemonium Palace." She glanced at his entourage, grimacing. "I'll never forgive myself if I've made a deal to stay in this shit pit for nothing."

### Chapter Thirty-five

Byron jolted awake with the first blast that rocked his cell. The chains overhead jostled, sending dust throughout the room. The second sounded like a freight train and was followed immediately by a sound he knew all too well.

After one heard the battle cry of the Draigen, one never forgot it.

Ancient dust shot from the mortar and blocks overhead, and he strained against the chain, staggering as his cramped legs didn't want to cooperate and allow him to stand.

"That won't do you any good," the soft, feminine voice he'd become fixated on chastised. "The chains are enchanted to the stone. The wall could tumble into the moat, and you'll just sink along with the shackles."

He narrowed his eyes. "Come to watch me drown?"

"If I were smart, I would."

The distinct scratch of the key being forced into the door silenced him. He kept quiet, biding his time as she entered the small room. It was the first time she'd ventured so close. If she moved within reach...

She snorted as if reading his mind. "I'm not stupid. Your chain is only so long."

"Why have Draigen descended on the wraith?"

For once she hesitated, lowering her eyes. "I shouldn't have come here."

"Why did you, then?" His voice was husky, the question spoken with an intentional double meaning.

When she lifted her head, she was no longer timid. Her face was the beautiful yet haughty mask that captivated him. "I'm leaving the palace. Zoraida doesn't care who destroys one another, so long as she gets what she came for. I can't afford to remain in the path of destruction."

"That's sweet, love," he drawled, reclining against the vibrating wall. "I'm touched you came out of your way to say good-bye."

"You. Are. A. Jackass," she snapped, thrusting back the hood of the cloak and allowing her pale blonde waves to tumble freely around her shoulders. Her scent hit his nostrils, and he inhaled deeply.

"What are you doing?"

He met her distrusting stare. "I'm thinking about how good your skin is going to taste."

She rolled her eyes and dug inside the cloak, lowering her head as if she was unable to find what she was searching for. "Damn it," she grumbled, pushing aside the heavy material and revealing her body to his roving gaze for the first time. Full breasts, flared hips, long legs.

"Bloody hell," he groaned. "So that's what's what you've kept hidden beneath that sack."

"Yeah, well." She started pilfering inside the brown leather purse slung across her curvy hips. "Enjoy the view while it lasts. As soon as I find the key, I'm outta here." She lost her footing as a force actually shifted the palace. Boards fell from the rafters and crashed next to his body.

"Key, key, key," she chanted until more boards fell, this time near her head.

She jumped away from the falling rubble, and he caught the edge of her cape with his hand. Kicking blindly, she tried to scramble away, unable to break free as he tugged her closer and then closer.

"Let go!"

"Not a chance in hell."

He released the scratchy material, wrapped an unyielding arm around her midsection, and warded off the blows she aimed at his face.

"You don't get it," she shrilled, pressing her breasts against his chest and inadvertently brushing her soft curves against his now fully erect cock.

"Oh, angel." He thrust his hips and cupped the softness of her ass, grinding against her. "I so get it."

Something ripped the lid off, removing the entire roof as a red wall of fire erupted overhead. Beams started to fall, and he turned, sheltering her beneath him as the remainder of the ceiling came down. When the dust settled, he couldn't quiet the groan that slipped past his lips. Nestled as he was, he could appreciate every inch of feminine softness.

She kept her eyes closed and asked in a calm voice, "Would you kindly remove yourself from my person?"

He bowed his head, breathing softly against her mouth. "Why should I?"

The floor lurched violently, and she snapped, "Do you really have to ask that question?"

"I can't think of a better way to go," he said, swooping down and claiming her lips.

Fire raged on contact—the soft fullness of her mouth, the sweet, honeyed taste. His tongue moved past her lips and dipped inside. The hands on his shoulders stilled, and her fingers unexpectedly wound into his tattered shirt.

"Stop." She panted, breaking away. "I have to get out of here."

"Forgotten about me already? Now that just won't do."

"Let me up," she demanded in her usual cold manner. "I've got to get out of here, and you've got your own problems."

"The only problem I have," he said, rotating his hips, "can be dealt with easily enough."

Ocean blue eyes flashed in anger. "The Draigen are here because the vampyren have taken one of their mates in a bargain with Ulrich. If you continue on this path, your sister will just have to grin and bear what the vampyren intend."

He froze. "What did you say?"

"You're not very quick on the uptake, are you?"

The Draigen were here. One of their mates had been taken.

Runa.

"Get me the key, now."

"I need my satchel."

He scanned the area and located the bag amid the rubble. It was on the other side of the space, out of reach.

"If you want me to retrieve it, you're going to have to let me move."

He returned his attention to her. He'd vowed to himself that when he finally obtained his freedom, he was taking the icy bitch with him, but now...

"Your name first," he demanded, tightening his hold. "Tell me."

"Elsa."

Elsa.

He moved away from her, allowing her the room to stand. She didn't waste time, crawling away on hands and knees. She pulled the bag free and removed two objects, rising to her feet.

"Tell me your name."

"Byron Morgianne."

"It's been a pleasure knowing you, Byron Morgianne."

"No, it hasn't. Not yet." He looked into her face and promised, "But it will be."

She tossed the key in his direction and placed a small, round crystal over her chest in the same motion, whispering an incantation. He caught the small piece of metal just as the crystal flared white, and she disappeared.

### **Chapter Thirty-six**

A hand smoothed her brow. Runa gravitated toward the touch as she slowly came to awareness. Deafening explosions accompanied a vibration that shifted the hard and unyielding surface beneath her.

"The crown, as agreed, Ulrich."

She forced her eyes open at Viktor's voice, her eyelashes fluttering against her cheeks. The strange man stroking her face was middle-aged and battle worn, with a thin scar that ran in a zigzag from forehead to chin. His blue eyes were thoughtful and curious. Fine lines accented his lips, and a scant scattering of gray marred the black hair at his temples.

He didn't turn from her as he spoke. His deep voice, while calm, conveyed his anger. "You didn't tell me she was but a child."

"You didn't ask," Viktor quipped.

Rolling from the slab beneath her, Runa staggered to her feet and grappled for her daggers as she backed away from them. Two-to-one odds weren't great, especially when she was facing off against a vampyren and some other netherworld creature. But if she wanted to make it out of the situation alive, there was no better time to put Raudan's training to use.

Pulling the weapons free, she demanded, "Where am I?"

"Pandemonium Palace, love." Viktor came into her line of vision, striding past an elaborate stone fireplace. "Your new home away from home."

Remaining where he was, the older man kept his eyes trained on her. "How many tides have you witnessed?" he asked.

She gripped the handles of the knives and placed them in front of her. "Twenty-three."

"Twenty-three," he mused, his expression understanding but heavily burdened. "And what importance are you to the Draigen?"

"I'm the Chosen of Eric Locke," she answered evenly. "He and I have consummated our bond."

Ulrich's eyes narrowed as he turned to Viktor. "This is hardly the agreement Zoraida and I settled upon. You promised a celestia on the threshold of passing, not a child with barely twenty tides of existence, Fated to a Draigen. Now I understand why they are so willing to shed blood. This isn't a matter of the Erinyes and keeping

the balance. You not only captured one of their own, you also endangered that which we have vowed before the very Fates to protect."

"Willing to shed blood?" she blurted, taking a step forward, her voice quaking as a sliver of hope sparked to life into her chest. "They're here? Eric is here?"

"The Draigen are of no consequence to me or mine," Viktor interrupted. "Nor are the politics of those who would gladly remain the boot heels of gods. You were assured the possession of the light of a celestia, and that is exactly what I have delivered." He extended his right hand palm up. "The Ahriman veil."

"Nay, I think not."

Viktor's lips thinned, revealing the tips of his fangs. "You dare renege on our agreement?"

"I will not exchange my Chosen for the Chosen of another." Ulrich brought his right hand toward the scabbard with a sword nestled inside and rested his scarred fingers atop the hilt. "My men and I serve the gods above all, being but paltry boot heels, if you will. And though we remain neutral until the time arrives to whet our blades and hone our swords, we do not partake in the murder of innocents."

Viktor's beautiful face altered, his red eyes sparkling vividly in the candlelight. "I care not what you do with the girl, Ulrich. Keep her until she ages to a vintage year, or return her to the Draigen, if you are so inclined. But I demand the crown as agreed. The queen awaits my arrival upon the chime of the witching hour."

"Christopher," Ulrich bellowed, and the door to the room flew open. A man stepped inside, clothed in the breeches with a thin silver chain mail. He appeared at least a decade younger, but like Ulrich, his dark brown hair had begun to gray along the temples.

"My lord?"

"Escort the lady to the main hall, and send a messenger out to relay a truce to the Draigen. Return her to their keeping with my most humble apologies." Ulrich glanced at Runa, voice going soft. "Rejoice in your union, lady. It is a rare privilege to be cherished."

"I do." Her life hadn't truly begun until she met Eric, and she wasn't willing to let it slip away now.

"If you will not uphold our arrangement, then you will not keep the girl," Viktor snarled. "You cannot have something for nothing!"

Ulrich nodded at Christopher. The knight approached and extended his arm.

"Come with me, lass."

After she slid her right dagger into the holster, she slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. The relief she experienced as some of the fear and uncertainty abated was unbelievable.

Eric was here. She was returning to his side, where she belonged.

Viktor lurched forward, intending to bridge the gap, but the sword Ulrich placed at his throat stopped him.

"You sought to deceive using weakness and treachery, Viktor. However, unlike me, your loss will not go unrewarded. The bounty you will receive is the very gift of your life. Leave this hold in peace, return to your people, and consider the debt paid."

"Fool. Did you honestly believe I would be negated so easily?"

Over a dozen vampyren appeared as they warped into the room. Ulrich vanished, his body becoming an odd white vapor as he phased, and reappeared in the same instant behind Viktor, sword lodged beneath his chin.

"Zoraida will not care if I remove your head from your shoulders, but I'm sure you don't share the sentiment. Call them off."

Viktor cackled. "The queen will have your heart, mark my word."

It was Ulrich's turn to laugh, only his mirth was laced with bitterness. "She is welcome to try, for even if she succeeds, the organ will resurface upon the morrow."

Runa stepped from the room and into a hallway. Five other armed men in regal tunics and armor frowned down at her. The largest of the men stepped forward, and Runa started to retrieve her right dagger once more.

"Back away, Matthew." Christopher barked the order. "Ulrich wishes her returned to the Draigen."

"Get her out of here!" Ulrich roared from the room, and a loud shrill pierced the air, followed by the sounds of heavy fists.

Christopher snagged Runa around the waist, lifted her from the ground as she screamed and thrashed to get free, and departed in a smooth sprint. Matthew and the others rushed into the room, and Runa heard the sound of metal sliding against scabbard as swords were drawn. They rushed from the hallway and into a large room that split in three directions. Vampyren blocked all the exits, their irises emitting a vibrant bloodred sheen.

"Bloody hell." Christopher's words were distorted by his ragged intakes of breath. He bent to place her feet on the ground and snagged her arm. He didn't look at her; instead his focus flickered across each individual vampyren. "Call to your Draigen and tell him we are directly in the center of the keep."

She remembered the way Nox had spoken to her telepathically, and thought, "Eric?"

"The crown," the vampyren chimed together. "Give us the Ahriman veil."

Christopher removed his sword from its sheath with a seasoned grace. He took Runa's arm, spun her around, and brought her to his back. "Come closer, sin eaters, and heads will roll before this dance is done."

Runa unsheathed her daggers and stood behind Christopher, clear of his sword arm. There were nine vampyren total, and the deafening noises from outside were getting closer.

"Eric," she thought again, her heart pounding.

Two vampyren at the front surged ahead, coming at Christopher with raised arms and fangs bared. Bending at the knee, he rotated the blade as if it weighed nothing more than a utensil. He brought the sword to the right, severing the head of the closest vampyren in a spurt of blood. Then he spun his body in a perfectly balanced circle, bringing his torso in the opposite direction as he shifted the weapon from the right hand into his left and decapitated the second vampire before the first body hit the ground.

"Kill him!" the remaining seven screeched and rushed them as a group. Christopher shoved Runa away, sending her barreling into the nearby wall. They swarmed him, their claws and teeth striking out.

"Eric!" she screamed his name both aloud and in her mind, staggering as the roof started to shake and crumble to the floor all around her. A horrifying roar sounded, reverberating off the ceiling and granite floors, and then Eric's voice echoed in her mind.

"Runa!"

"Sweet Moirae," she gasped, moving to the side as Christopher deflected blows from the cursed vampires surrounding him and brought his sword within inches of her face.

"Where are you, sebea?" Eric demanded, and another furious bray sounded overhead. "Tell me so that I can come to you."

"I'm in the center of the keep—"

Runa saw what was coming, but there was no time to move and nowhere to go. She tried to dodge out of the way, keeping her daggers up and at the ready if one of the vampyren slipped through. All she had to do was bide her time and stay alive long enough for Eric to find her. She might not be able to take on a room of vampyren, but he certainly could.

A vampyren latched onto Christopher and sank its razor-sharp teeth into the giving flesh at his neck. His massive frame was forced backward, and the large sword in his left hand moved, the notched blade pointing in an awkward ninety-degree angle.

Perhaps it was the adrenaline pulsating through her veins, but she didn't feel pain when the sword penetrated her chest, the edge striking home and sliding with a sickening ease into her flesh. A dull sensation seemed to encompass her heart as if she was suffering the loss of not only her life, but the life of someone she held as far more important.

Christopher forced the vampyren away, redirected his weapon, and pulled the obstruction free of her body. He continued attacking as if nothing had occurred, and she dimly perceived that he wasn't aware of what he'd done.

She sagged toward the floor, dropping her daggers and lifting trembling hands to her chest. In that moment she saw Byron rush into the hall, focused and prepared to battle, and relief and gratitude allowed her to smile in spite of what was happening. Her brother was alive and unharmed. Eric had found him.

Dizziness came, then a wavering of vision. There was something she wanted to say, but her lips refused to move. Then she remembered it didn't matter. He would still hear.

"I love you, sh'mai," she thought as she was encased in darkness.

\* \* \*

"Your destination, Madam," Alucard announced, and Yuvi wanted to slap him senseless. Now that they had arrived at their intended destination, she wanted nothing more than his speedy departure and insincere "fare-thee-well."

"Thanks for nothing," she snapped, yanked her hand free from his, and stepped away from the groupies he never left behind. The entire room shook around them, and loud Draigen roars and bellows thundered outside.

"Hell yeah," Nox growled enthusiastically, his jeweled yellow eyes glowing neon. "Better late to the party than never."

"Men," she muttered and turned, eyeballing the large, circular room and trying to decide which way to go. She stayed away from Pandemonium for a damned good reason and had never imagined she would regret the decision not to partake in the solstice festival held at the palace each tide.

"The main hall is directly ahead," Alucard offered, pointing north. "This is the entranceway. I wasn't sure where you wished to—" He staggered midsentence, falling face-first into the floor, grasping at his chest. Blood pooled from his dark shirt, staining the velvet lapels of his expensive coat. His servants surrounded him in alarm, their voices combined in panic.

Alucard lifted his head, and she saw his true face—something that could never be masked as he suffered death. His wrinkled forehead and weathered skin were pale, thin, and cracked. Yet his stark blue eyes remained unchanged, allowing her to see the same man, despite the shift from young to old.

"Oh shit!" Yuvi spit the syllables in dread. There was only one reason he was dying here and not suffering his torment in front of gods who had given him life in reward for misery.

He was experiencing Runa's death.

Alucard attempted to speak and choked, gurgling through the blood that pooled at his lips. "My half of the bargain is done, seer. Now I expect you to hold true to your word. The spell has been triggered. Your friend is everlasting."

#### Chapter Thirty-seven

Byron watched, frozen, as Runa's delicate fingers clenched the mortal strike when the sword slipped free, winding around her shirt as she slid down the wall. She glanced up, her face ashen. But when their eyes met across the way, she smiled.

He tore through a vampyren in his path, grasping the foul creature by his hissing head and twisting until the delicate bones in the neck snapped. He dropped the now-truly dead corpse and went for a second when the room began to teem with more.

He swiveled to the right, leaving the warrior who had felled his sister to fend them off. When he made it to Runa's side, her eyes were closed, her chin limp against her chest. He ran his fingers lightly across her shorn hair, truly frightened for the first time in his nearly fifteen hundred years of existence.

"Damn it, Eska. Please don't do this to me," he pleaded hoarsely, pushing aside the hands latched to her chest so that he could access the fatal wound. He frowned, noting the lack of blood, and grasped the bottom hem of her soft sweater. He shoved the thin cashmere upward. There was no injury to match the ragged hole in the material; not even a scratch marred her fair skin.

Quickly, he pressed his ear against her chest. The steady rhythm of a heartbeat greeted him, along with the shallow but steady rise and fall of her breast.

"Rellie." He exhaled in relief and pulled her into his arms. "I ought to tan your hide for making me so clucky."

A loud snarl came from behind him, and a clawed hand wrapped around Byron's throat. Byron released Runa and turned, whipping his right leg out and sweeping the vampyren off his feet. The creature snarled upon impact with the floor and tried to find his feet when Byron lurched on top of him and wrapped his fingers around the blood drinker's throat. Red-rimmed eyes glowered at him, sharp fangs snapped, and the vampyren attempted to speak and gurgled instead.

"Night, night, jackoff." Wrapping his free hand behind the vampyren's head, he got a decent grip and turned until he heard the distinct sound of breaking bone.

Several vampyren moved away from the wraith and stared directly at Byron. He muttered, "Fuck me," dived for Runa's daggers as they advanced, and leaped onto his feet. Three of them circled him, claws extended, fangs bared. They attacked at the same time, and he focused on the one in the center as sharp talons ripped the skin along his right arm and left shoulder.

"Bugger this," Byron snarled and crossed his arms, brought the daggers together, and created a lethal pair of scissors. One deft motion and the vampyren's head rolled from his shoulders, bouncing as the body flopped at Byron's feet. A sharp set of teeth pierced his shoulder, and he pivoted around, bringing the blade of the right dagger back. As he brought it down, he aimed for the softness of the eyeball and was rewarded with a gooey *gush* as the blade sank past the socket and into the skull.

Furious, crazed, and locked in the grips of a brawler's bloodlust, Byron blocked out the creature's roar of pain as he released the blade. The vampyren fell to his knees, and Byron turned his focus to the final bloodsucker in his way, who was about to have a very bad fucking day.

"You want a piece of me, mate?" Byron extended his arms. "Come get it."

Bloodred eyes darted to the lone dagger in Byron's hand, and Byron laughed and tossed it to the ground. He waited as the vampyren rushed him, and moved aside at the last possible moment to snag a handful of hair. Using his weight, Byron forced the vampyren to the ground and followed, placing his weight on his back. He proceeded to bash the vampyren's head into the stone flooring, over and over again until blood coated his tattered shirt, his fingers, and a solid portion of the floor.

An ace-ripping sound came from the roof, and Byron's chin snapped up, his wild eyes locating the source. Large claws came through the wood and plaster, coming together and demolishing the ceiling. The motion was repeated, more clawing and tearing, until all he could see was an expanse of the dark blue sky and the gigantic shape that blended into the night.

"Where is she?" The outraged mental demand was intended for all in the vicinity, and Byron easily placed the voice of the Draigen from Matilda's—the male who claimed to be Runa's Fated. The dragon's triangular-shaped head appeared through the hole in the ceiling, its icy green eyes emitting their own brand of light. He roared, "I'll rip each and every one of you apart! Where is she?"

"She's here! I have her!" Byron yelled and tried to steady his quaking limbs as he crawled away from the vampyren to Runa. His attention darted around the room. He spotted the wraith in the corner, swinging his sword and continuing the good fight. The warrior's strength was beginning to wane, his sword arm trembling with the effort of fending off the remaining vampyren.

Byron's breath caught when he turned and got sight of the adjoining hallways. More vampyren appeared, fanged and animalistic faces barreling toward them. There were over a dozen, their eyes glowing like fiery embers, their teeth ivory white and visibly sharp.

"Bugger me," he rasped.

"Stand aside, my Fated brother. I'm coming through."

"Whatever the fuck you say, mate," Byron thought and muttered. Cradling Runa to his chest, he rushed for the nearby fireplace. "Roast the entire bloody lot of them." Byron dived past the wraith and vampyren, running at full speed to the

ancient stone housing. The ground lurched beneath his feet, and he fell directly on his ass, cracking his skull against the stone backdrop in the process.

The ceiling caved, and rafters of wood and stone fell to the floor, scattering across the room. Two vampyren rushed toward the fireplace, and Byron released Runa as he struggled to clear his head, find his feet, and brace for an attack. The first came at him while the other snagged Runa by the leg and pulled her out of his reach.

"Fucking coit!" Byron roared as he clocked the vampyren in front of him in the jaw and swiveled to protect his sister, when the creature snagged his shoulder, the sharp fingernails descending into his skin, forcing him back and away.

A massive black shape descended, engulfing Byron's peripheral vision. He brought his leg up and spun, aiming for the vampyren's kneecap. The gratifying sound of breaking bone chimed in his ears, and he shrugged the bastard aside. A horrible ripping sound—like plastic being rent in two—was accompanied by an agonized shriek.

Spinning on his heel, Byron watched as Eric feasted on the arm dangling between his enormous incisors, a hand visible between them. The vampyren who had been holding Runa now stood in front of her limp form—armless, bleeding, and petrified.

The vampyren snagged Byron when he started to move, and he brought up his elbow, cracking the thing across the jaw with enough force to break it, sending the vampyren to the floor. His eyes widened as the dozen or more vampyren charged them, and he turned to the dragon just beside him, taking large steps backward as he did.

"Take Runa to safety," Eric instructed in Byron's mind and finished the job he had started, opening wide and ingesting the one-armed vampyren like a fucking snack. He rotated his enormous body, creating a barrier between Byron, Runa, and the vampyren. An earsplitting crack echoed through the room as his tail rotated in a semicircle. Blood splattered against the walls as the scaled, ropy appendage made contact with flesh and bone. Several of the vampyren were torn completely in two, while others were left with gaping wounds that allowed their innards to flop outward and fall toward the floor.

"Ain't that a bitch," Byron muttered and lifted Runa, keeping her close to his chest. He kept his focus on the vampyren as he edged over to the fireplace. Only this time he remained standing just inside, enjoying the show.

The Draigen was built like a brick shit house, all muscle, blue-black scales, razor-sharp teeth and talons, and enormous fucking wings. It puffed out its chest, balancing on rear legs, and released a flaming wall of fire. Screams reverberated off the walls as vampyren burst into combustive flames, their cries of pain carrying into the starry night above. Eric devoured the sin eaters with a perverse satisfaction, chomping bodies in two and mincing them into bits with the sharp spikes along his tail. They tried to flee, knowing they were good and fucked, their

frantic bloodred gazes seeking escape routes. Each one who didn't manage to transport in time was stopped, taken between teeth or smashed via tail.

Within seconds, bloody piles of flesh and bone lined the floor, lying at the claws of the beast intent on destruction. Some were still moving. Eric sniffed at the fallen warrior lodged against the wall, but let him be, surveying his handiwork instead.

"Fuck all," Byron groaned, rubbing at the knot on his head. "You sure know how to pick them, Eska. And you owe me one ripping-good explanation."

\* \* \*

Eric's senses were sharper in his dragon form, allowing him to locate Runa's unique scent before Byron strode from the fireplace covered from head to toe in black soot. His Chosen was limp in the sidhe's arms, her small chin tucked against her chest. He wanted to shift back to his human body, eager to hold his Fated in his arms, but he listened to his feral side instead. He needed this form to protect her from harm.

Footsteps from the hallway breached the room, and Eric turned toward the sound. He started to snarl in warning but stopped, aware of the scent of someone most unexpected.

"Nox?"

"Aye," Nox yelled before he came into view with the witch in close accompaniment. "It's me."

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, Eric." Nox sighed and rubbed a hand along his battered but healing face.

"Oh, Runa," Yuviette murmured tiredly. She walked to his Chosen and lifted Runa's face with tender hands. "What a brave girl you are, and what a dumb seer I've proven to be."

Eric studied her reflective face closely. "What's the matter, witch?"

"Nothing's the matter." She returned Runa's chin to her chest and turned to face him, oddly deflated. "The magik of the spell has been initiated and twined. Alucard suffered the death intended for Runa just minutes ago. She is now everlasting."

"You managed it, then? You worked the deal with the Lich?" Byron's hard-ass facade cracked when Yuviette nodded, but he kept the wet tears that formed in his light blue eyes from spilling over. Lowering his head, he whispered against his sister's head, "Thank the Fates."

"She'll never age and, if guarded properly, will never die." She met Eric's level stare and warned, "But she is not invulnerable. She will always be mortally frail and easily harmed. And there will always be those who seek the power she unwittingly wields."

Lucian's clear baritone carried across the open space. "Then consider it a blessing she's mated to a Draigen who can protect her."

Eric shifted his long neck down and around, watching as the daemon, Ulrich and the Haltija approached with the wraith king's army flanking them.

"Bloody hell." Byron chuckled. "You are a sight for sore fucking eyes, mate. Do you know that?"

The daemon smiled, black eyes going silver. "I am no longer so easily overtaken."

The loud crash of wings sounded just before Colin and Trace landed atop the demolished ceiling. "All is well, Brother?" Colin asked.

"Damn it," Eric said with some amusement. "I suppose I should change to speak to them. I'm certain that you, Trace, and Nox can take it from here."

"Nox is here?"

"I know. I can't wait to hear his explanation myself."

Eric peered around the room and paused when he located the Haltija. "Would you be so kind?"

Raudan shrugged out of his coat and started over. Eric willed the change to happen. He stood as a man in the same instant he lost the scales and tail, reaching out for the coat with a hand instead of claws. He bowed his head as he accepted the garment, pulled it over his shoulders, and slid the buttons into place.

When done, he stepped to Byron and extended his arms. Seconds passed in silence, an inner communication and mutual understanding taking place between the two men. After a moment, Byron handed Runa over, balancing her head with his hand until she was safely tucked in Eric's embrace.

Ulrich walked over to his fallen comrade against the wall and assisted him as he struggled to find his feet. When he was steady enough to stand, Ulrich left him behind and came to Eric, stopping beside Raudan and Lucian. "You must forgive me, Draigen. When offered that which would allow me to claim my Chosen, I was willing to pay any cost."

"I should kill you."

"Vengeance is best served to those guilty of the crime," Lucian growled, brushing a lock of dark hair away from his face. "You should seek to punish the vampyren queen for what has transpired, not each other. She may not have gained what she sought this night, but by instilling a wedge between the warriors and children of the gods, she will have procured some concession."

Ulrich notched his chin proudly. "Zoraida did not receive the Ahriman veil. Viktor transported himself out of harm's way before he could retrieve it."

"Why does the queen seek the veil?" Byron asked.

"She seeks to use it to sway the once-swan prince and now-king, Hadrian Dinarii," Lucian answered. "The two children born of the fallen swan king possessed the unique ability to magnify or nullify magik in those around them. Hadrian is an enhancer. His sister is an abolisher. If Zoraida can convince Hadrian to give himself over to her keeping, she will become as powerful as a demigod."

Ulrich glared at Lucian and demanded, "How do you know this?"

"I went for a ride inside the warped mind of the harpy before she tried to kill me."

"Damn it," Ulrich grumbled, palming his neck and massaging. "Had I known why Elsa continued traveling here after the fact, I would have openly denied the vampyren bitch."

Byron came to attention at the mention of the name, and Lucian studied him closely as he asked, "What part does she play in this?"

"Elsa is Hadrian's twin." Ulrich sighed, and his hand drifted from his neck. "She travels with Zoraida in exchange for unrestricted access to her brother. I assumed she wanted to speak to me in an effort to keep him free of the queen, and I refused her request for a private audience."

Runa stirred in Eric's arms, and he lost any interest in the conversation. He wanted to return home with his Fated and immerse himself completely in her presence. He had nearly lost her for the second time—a third wasn't an option. He glanced at the nygromancer to ask to be transported home, but before he could speak, Lucian approached Yuviette. He bent close to the witch and whispered quietly.

"No way," she muttered. "You have no idea what I went through to get this."

Lucian moved nearer, until his face was buried within the red hair at her ear. Eric was close enough that he saw her already pale skin shift to a deathly shade of white, her hazel eyes going dark brown. After a moment, she reached into her jacket, removed the plastic baggie stuffed with Runa's hair, and handed it over.

Lucian started talking in the very instant he turned from Yuviette with a strangely satisfied smirk on his face. "Ulrich, I can craft a charm that will allow you to thrive in the day. But it comes at a price."

"What do you seek, daemon? What do you wish to bargain for?"

Lucian turned from Ulrich without answering, strode to Byron, and said, "I offer you the Ahriman veil coveted by Elsa Dinarii in severance of the long-standing debt between us. What say you, my friend?"

### Chapter Thirty-eight

Runa woke basking in the warmth of Eric's body, his naked limbs entwined with hers, his bare stomach caressing the skin along her back and thighs. The first rays of dawn flittered through the window, the bedroom calm and quiet.

She didn't move, unwilling to disturb the tranquil moment. This was how she wanted to greet each and every morning of every day for the rest of her life.

She closed her eyes to remember, visualizing the miraculous happenings as she drifted in the abyss between the here and there. After she had told Eric she loved him and lost consciousness, she had gone to the most beautiful place—a realm consisting of nothing but light. Her mother had been there, and together they had traveled to an unending river. The opposite bank had been too far away to see, but the rippling water was so clear and untainted she could peer beneath the surface for miles and miles.

She had waded into the river Styx, deeper and then deeper, and as she did, she *knew*.

The secret of passing on radiance, the reasons so few stars fell to those they loved, and most importantly, why her mother had given her light so selflessly. The children of gods lived by one unerringly important truth—nothing ever truly dies. The soul simply lies in wait for a time of culmination, of reckoning.

The war of souls.

At the end of each war, the souls of all—both good and evil—were given a second chance, an opportunity to set things right. The humans existing in the mortal realm were nothing more than fallen immortals of each dimension before, given another opportunity at life because the gods loved them too much to eradicate them completely.

Was it real? Or had it all been just a dream?

Eric's body shifted, reminding her that real or not, she was alive and held in the arms of her Chosen. She shifted her bottom, grinning as she teased the prodding length of flesh resting against her thigh and felt the immediate response.

"Keep wiggling like that," Eric grumbled, his voice thick and heavy with sleep, "and I won't be responsible for what happens."

"Promises, promises." She wrapped her hands around his arms as they surrounded her, gasping when his fingers brushed her peaked nipples and teased each one in turn.

His fingers tickled her rib cage and drifted past her belly button. He found and teased her sex, dipping past the sensitive folds to the hot wetness of her arousal.

"Fates, I always want you to be like this," he growled, rubbing his bristly chin along her nape. He pressed two fingers inside her and placed his thumb over her clit. He encouraged her small whimpers with the soft rubbing of his fingers and bent to her ear to whisper, "Just like this."

"Please," she pleaded, releasing the right arm latched around her torso and reaching behind her, trying to fist his cock.

"Is this what you want?" His fingers slid away, and she felt the large, rounded head of his cock his hidipping into her from behind.

"Gods, yes, Eric." She pressed back, inviting him to move fully within her.

He lifted her right leg and slid into her inch by inch until he was encased completely. The sheer heat and size of his cock touched her very center. When he flicked the pad of his thumb across the sensitive bundle of nerves at the top of her sex, it brought her to orgasm before they'd even begun. She cried out, her body shaking and back arching.

"Ride it out, sebea," Eric murmured with a husky voice. "Make it last."

She took in the waves of pleasure, each one better than the one before. Eric continued pumping his hips, and each firm thrust created all-new ripples of heat. She tried to match his fluid motions, acclimating to the strong and steady pace he set. Eric moved the hand from between her legs and gripped her throat, bringing her head up and back. His lips brushed the tip of her ear, descending until his ragged breathing was the only sound she could perceive.

When he finally spoke, his voice was coarse, his vowels heavy with his accent and desire, and she knew he was close to climax. "I want to hear you say it before I come. Tell me."

Her body shivered in response, and her voice strained with emotion. "I love you."

Instead of increasing the pace, he pistoned his hips slowly, thrusting oh so carefully, maneuvering her leg with his thigh and using his free hand to caress her. The hand at her neck was tender, a gentle thumb stroking the skin beneath her ear.

She neared orgasm for a second time and whimpered, knowing what he wanted to hear. "I love you, Eric." She gasped.

His hand rose from her mound and rested against her belly, trapping her against him. He dipped his head to her shoulder, brushed sharp teeth against the sensitive skin near her throat, and sank them into her flesh. The world was obliterated. Her core squeezed the hard shaft inside her, urging him to join her in release, and she gloried in Eric's heavy moan at her ear. She felt him climax as he squeezed her stomach, pulled her against his chest, and groaned.

He rolled her onto her back with a satisfied sigh, lifting her leg and coming up and over to blanket her body while keeping them joined. She welcomed the heaviness of his weight and opened her legs so he could settle between them. He kissed her before pulling away to lick and soothe the sting left behind after his bite. Then he whispered something husky and foreign in Draigen tongue.

"And what does that mean?"

"It means"—he lifted his head and brushed his lips against hers—"I love you, my most beloved Chosen."

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"We should go see Byron and Raudan." Eric patted her rump as she bent over to lace her boots. His lusty gaze glided up and then down her body. "They're anxious to see you."

She giggled at his blatant sexual attention, playfully swatting his hand when he came behind her, palmed one cheek, and squeezed. She straightened at the waist and winked over her shoulder. He spun her around, snagged her hands, and pulled her into his chest.

"Keep looking at me like that, aiarya, and we'll never make it downstairs."

She was tempted to say, *promises*, *promises* but put a tap on it. Accepting his hand, she followed as he led the way from the bedroom. Her brother and guardian had traveled with Eric to bring her home the night before, and she imagined they were as eager to see her as she was them. There was so much to digest, to take in, and she had so much to say to both Byron and Raudan. Brownies were scattered about, going about business as usual. The manor had taken damage, but not nearly so much as the village.

"Where's Timmon?" she asked, peering around.

Eric squeezed her fingers. "He's in the village, reconstructing the damaged cottages. He's fine."

They came down the stairs, and a smile surfaced when she recognized her brother. He was facing away from her, covered in a long leather coat with the collar lifted and strands of blond hair hanging just over the edge. Byron turned as they approached, and bestowed on her the devastating smile she had adored for as long as she could remember. Eric released her hand, and she ran across the room into her brother's waiting arms. He smelled as he always did—of expensive leather and fresh soap—and she brought the welcoming smell into her lungs.

Her voice was muffled by his sweater, nearly breaking with an onslaught of unexpected tears of joy and relief. "I was so afraid, Byron. I thought something terrible had happened to you." She pulled away, aware of the answer before she even asked, her attention on the weapons strapped across his chest and waist. "Are you leaving so soon?"

"I'm afraid so." He nodded, lifting a hand and brushing it across the top of her head. "I wanted to say good-bye before I went. I still have yet to locate our hell-bitch sibling, and there's something else I need to see to."

"Oh, Byron," she groaned. "Let it go. Don't waste any more time on Octavia. She doesn't deserve it."

"I can't do that, rellie. Tavia was a part of everything that's happened, and I want to know why. Until she's in the custody of the Dark Court, I can't let this rest." At her apprehensive expression he chuckled and said, "Don't worry, Eska. This is what I do, what I'm good at." He swiveled his large torso and glanced over her shoulder. "The bloke says he loves you. Is the feeling mutual?"

"It is." She bobbed her head, peering behind her to gaze at Eric. He grinned, and her heart spasmed.

"All right, then. But you best warn the sod that if he ever hurts you, I'll bloody fucking kill him."

Lucian strode into the foyer with a gleam in his eye and a spring in his step. He was also dressed for travel. He smiled at Runa and dipped his head in greeting. Then he asked Byron, "Are you ready?"

"Right-o, mate." Byron wound his arms around Runa and kissed her quickly on the head. He spoke over her shoulder to Eric. "You'd best take care of her."

Byron let go, and Eric wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling into the hardness of his chest. "You have my oath."

As Byron bent and lifted the large duffels at his feet, Runa rolled her eyes. "We haven't even talked about everything that's happened. Isn't there anything you want to say?"

Byron's bright blue eyes were wistful as he stood tall and smiled at her. "I've always known you were special, Eska. From the moment I first laid eyes on you."

Lucian walked to her brother and clasped his shoulder. In the next second, they were gone.

### **Epilogue**

Eric stood at a distance while Runa and Raudan reunited, smiling as the large Haltija opened his arms and his selde stepped into them. He heard his brother approach but didn't turn from the scene playing out before him.

Neither spoke, watching as the large Haltija wiped tears away from Runa's eyes. She laughed then, swiping her hands across her cheeks and shaking her head.

"What do you want, Brother?"

Nox sighed and answered, "To apologize."

"I've accepted your apology."

"Aye, that you have. But she hasn't."

For a moment Eric was silent. Then he asked, "What makes you think she will?"

Nox paused, weighing his words. "When Teryn merged our memories together, and I saw life through her eyes..." He stopped and swallowed hard. "She never hated me. Even after what I'd done, after the things I said. She was hurt and confused, but there was no blame. Unlike the others of her race who have sought retribution or lashed out with some burden of shame, she only wanted to understand." He cleared his throat. "I've never spoken of what happened after Mother and Arden passed—have never particularly wanted to. But now..."

Eric turned to Nox, clasped a hand around his neck, and pulled him into an embrace a millennium in the waiting. His brother reciprocated the gesture, clinging to the shirt at his back. It was extraordinary—the way things came full circle. Bringing those who had once stood so far apart closer to one another and joining enemies together for the greater good.

Maybe, just maybe, Eric thought as he stared at his Chosen and embraced the brother who had remained lost for so very long, the Fates knew what they were doing after all.



#### Aline Hunter

Aline Hunter is the alias of multi-published author J.A. Saare, who has written stories featured in horror magazines, zombie romance anthologies, and flash fiction contests. Her work has a notable dark undertone, which she credits to her love of old eighties horror films, tastes in music, and choices in reading, and have been described as "full of sensual promise," "gritty and sexy," and "a breath of fresh air."

Currently she is penning multiple projects within the urban fantasy, erotic and contemporary, and paranormal romance categories.

Catch up with Aline at <a href="http://www.alinehunter.com">http://www.alinehunter.com</a>. Those interested in her tamer side can learn more by visiting <a href="http://www.jasaare.com">http://www.jasaare.com</a>.