



ABBY ARTHUR

KISS OF
BLOOD
— AND —
CHAOS

A FATED WITCH PRINCESS NOVELLA

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DARKNESS, thick and tangible, surrounds me when I wake, screaming. A bloody face lingers on the edge of my mind, quickly fading as consciousness snags my attention. I claw for that face with my thoughts, try to remember who he is...or was. All I can cling to is the name. *Sen*. I think that's what he calls me, but maybe that's what I call him? Any chance of retention slips from my thoughts like sand through the claws protruding from my fingers.

It's always this way. I wake in dark and suffocating silence with only my own screams to accompany me. The phantom dreams that plague me when I try to rest tease me with secrets I can't remember.

Looking up, I swallow hard against a scraping, clawing dryness in my throat. My stomach gnaws at

me, and I wonder when food will come, but I hate the thought at the same time. Food is never a dead thing. It always comes into the darkness, shivering with terror so thick it burns my nose. Their blood...it smells so sweet coursing through their veins, riding the pulse of their roaring heart. And that glowing part in the center of their bodies—a part I shouldn't be able to see—that tastes the best. Like melting chocolate over a decadent cake.

But I've never eaten cake... At least I can't remember having any. *So why would I compare it to that?*

The question makes my head pound with a violent pain, and I scream again.

My voice is deep and foreign to me every time I hear it echo in the darkness. Chains rattle around my wrists, glittering faintly with a spell that drains my strength. Shackles also bind my ankles. All the spelled manacles keep me from going far in this stone prison.

Still, I dare to rise, dare to stretch the soreness out of my body that's grown from not moving in...I don't know how long. Time is impossible to track when surrounded by only gloom.

I stretch for the ceiling too high to reach, and bend to the side. No matter how much I move, the gnawing need inside me, begging for sustenance, doesn't fade. It makes my insides feel hollow, vacant to the point of

pain. Too often to count, I've expected death from starvation, but death never comes.

Stepping forward, a bone cracks under my foot, and I freeze, frowning. Bones have always been down here. Some before I came—maybe prisoners who passed in this cage before me—but not all the bones precede my time. That makes the deepest part of me sour in misery, while another part of me fills with glee.

Those deaths I caused. One was a man so young and fit. He fought me in a rage of desperate need to survive. It was fun, as much as I hate to admit that, letting him punch at me, drawing black, inky blood with a silver blade he bore. They—the prison guards—let him in with a knife. Must have thought it funny to give the man an illusion that he might survive me.

Too cruel, I think now. His body is now only bones. His soul burns in the Infernal Realms. And still, I'm stuck here, starving once more.

"Don't give up," a voice says to me from the darkness. Despite myself, I freeze and jolt to see who's there.

I know it's no one, just madness from hunger and loneliness playing with my mind. Even so, a figure is there. A girl with hair as black as night and eyes as blue as a sky. At least, I think they're the same color. I haven't seen the sky lately to know for sure.

Beautiful. I've always thought that about her. She's a

kind relief to the ever-present silence and turmoil of my imprisonment. Even though she isn't real.

Those large, stunning eyes watch me as I sink back to the cold, wet ground. Something about how bright they are pulls at part of me, telling me I should surmise *something* from their color. But like many memories, I don't remember.

The dank wall rests against my thin shirt, giving my broken mind something new to focus on. I don't shiver. Cold never bothers me, only hunger does.

My gaze remains on the girl. Her figure is a ghostly silhouette in this deep darkness, but I see it with my keen eyesight. She visits off and on. First, I met her as a child, and now she's a young woman. If I can believe her aging is true, it would prove I've been locked up in here for years.

"Back to torment me?" I ask her with a wry grin. She only cocks her head in a sly, attentive way. I don't expect her to speak. She rarely does, which is why the words I did hear play in my head now. "*Don't give up.*"

"What is there to live for?" I ask.

I receive no reply. Just more staring from that intoxicating gaze.

I must like solitude, if she's a figment of my imagination. If I really wanted a conversation, wouldn't I be able to make her talk?

Shivering with the dry hunger, I pry my gaze from

her and grab a bone off the floor. It's not sharp, so I snap it in half, making a razor edge appear. I slice the sharpness across my wrist, making black blood ooze and drip. Too quickly, the wound mends. I slice it again, and again, it heals.

"I can't die," I explain to the girl. "I've tried, many times. Even stabbed myself in the chest. All that does is hurt a lot. Even my heart mends."

"It won't be like this forever," she says, and that voice, it's sounds like the most gorgeous symphony. I wish she would talk more.

The beautiful ghost rises from where she sits and comes closer. Her hand rests on my cheek, a cold, barely-there touch. Then she kneels before me. Bones don't move under her spectral form. Everything is silent, floating on the edge of my longing. Longing for her to be real, for my life to have meaning.

Her face levels with mine. Those full, lush lips draw my eyes. I want to kiss them, and not in the way I've done to the victims in this cell. I want her to know how much she means to me; how lonely I am without her.

But who am I to think anyone would want to kiss me—this unlovable monster that I am?

The whisper of a thumb brushes my cheek, taking away a tear I can't hold back.

"Don't go," I tell her, because I know she will. She always does.

Her dark brows bend in sympathy, though no words come from her mouth. Then, as if heeding my deepest desire, she leans forward, and those ghostly lips gently caress mine. I expect her mouth to be an ethereal whisper, but it's warm and very much alive. Hunger gnaws at my consciousness, but it's different from my need to feed. It's a desire urging me to deepen this kiss, to drown in her and know what she tastes like.

A clammer outside the stone walls hits my ears like a cacophony of screeches. It's so loud after hearing nothing for an eternity that I jolt in surprise, clenching hands over my pointed ears.

The sound continues, but I don't focus on it. I'm too busy searching the darkness for the girl.

She's gone.

My cold, black heart sinks in sorrow at everything I've just missed.

Screams break through my efforts to block out all noise. Confused, I touch my mouth, but the cry isn't from my lips. Odd, because the only screams for years have been mine.

The cell begins to shake. The bones surrounding me rattle. Small stones drip from the ceiling and clatter against the grimy floor.

A fresh scent fills the air, salty and damp. With it comes the effervescent smell of fear—sweet like honey

and bitter like coffee. My starving body craves it, making me leap to my feet.

The chains binding me rattle, but I jump forward towards the smell, towards that fear. I *have* to devour it. I *need* it.

The shaking continues, followed by cracks that appear in the walls. More screams. Then an explosion.

Rocks cave in from above, coming to crush me. Even starved, I move fast, dodging every rock. They fall like a staircase, and I run up them as far as the chains will allow. Once I reach their limit, I'm pulled back like an anxious dog on a leash, jerked down to the rubble. I land hard, one wrist breaking as I try to stop my fall.

Seconds pass, and my wrist bone snaps back into place, rattling the shackles. Another second and it heals, but I don't watch it. I'm too busy looking up. It's dark, but not pitch black. There're little beads of light, and even that small bit of light hurts my eyes. It's been so long since I've seen anything other than my cell. Now I'm looking at...stars.

THE SCREAMING HAS LESSENERD, though I can't say why. I see only those glorious orbs of light sparkling in a blanket of dark sky. *Sky*. Good gods, I forgot all the colors it can be. Even at night there're deep blues and blacks along with those whites and dim yellows.

I breathe in deeply, smelling the air. The powerful scent of a sea slams into my senses—salty and violent. The sound of waves crashing against rocks blares in my ears, though it can't be that close. I've never heard the water before. Maybe the walls of my cell were just that thick.

It doesn't matter.

Fear remains in the air, along with the decadent smell of metallic blood.

My chest heaves rapidly, and I jerk at the chains

holding me. They sparkle and sputter with enchantments, but I pull and pull. I *will* be free. Because there's so much blood and emotion. It's not just one person around here, but many. I *must* feed. It's all that I can think.

But my chains don't break.

I scream, a cry different from the ones I wake up to. This one is monstrous, ravenous, and I pull at the shackles again. My wrists break with how much I tug, and the inkling to bite them off occurs to me.

Just as I raise my wrists to the sharp tips my teeth become, a figure breaks the glorious dance of the stars above. It falls through the hole, screaming a manly cry of fear. The cry quickly squelches when he lands on the rocks with a delicious snap.

He doesn't move, but he still breathes. I hear the rasping breaths he takes. His eyes are wide, but he can't run, can't fight due to whatever broke.

I'm a little sad about the lack of a chase. It's always nice to play with my food. Though, right now, I'm too hungry for it to matter much. I jump on him before he can think to scream. My teeth dig deep into his neck, and I draw in his blood—that marvelous, sweet, and rich red blood. I soak up his terror into my spirit, let it feed the desiccated misery inside me. And the bright, white glow in the very depths of his being—that I devour last. To capture it, a shadowy dark thing inside

me reaches out—I believe it to be called chaos, as I’ve heard my guards refer to it. It’s so starved that the man is gone in a moment—his soul transported through me to the Infernal Realms, where he can burn forever.

Still, I hunger.

I move to rise from the limp corpse, to seek the next victim I can smell. My search is quick, as another man falls from above. Once I finish him, another comes. And another.

It’s not until I’ve devoured five that I finally have the will to think straight and observe the faces of the ones I’ve eaten. All are men, and all look vaguely familiar. They bear tattoos on their necks that hide a mark I don’t think I’m supposed to see. It’s a symbol made up of triangles that forms a star. A circle connects the points of the star.

I should know what the symbol means, but like many things, I can’t place it. What I do know is that these men were my guards. Normally, this is the moment I find remorse at what I’ve done, at how I’ve killed a living, breathing person, and worst of all, damned their souls to an eternity of fire.

But these are the men who kept me imprisoned. Sympathy does not exist for them.

“Demon Prince,” someone calls from above. The voice is deep and earthy and strong. Hearing that title strikes a chord with me. Demon Prince is what those

guards called me, but I don't know what the title means...if there's land to go along with it or something different.

I glance up to see who's there. As I do, blood drips down my chin. I lick my lips to savor the remnants. Then pause.

This figure above me is huge, and I squint to make out who it may be. A man, I presume, or at least something like one. Even in the dark, I can see he's green. My keen sight lets me take in every feature he bears. Chiseled cheeks that seem too sharp. Canines that protrude past his bottom lip. Something like antlers branch from above pointed ears, and a dazzling crown made of gilded tree branches dangles between them.

The man—no, not man, faerie—watches me in silence. Large, iridescent wings flutter ruminatively behind him, as if mirroring the slow, pondering thoughts in his head.

His smell finally reaches me. It's a mixture of many things: power burgeoning like life radiating out of a forest. His blood oozes with that same might, so fierce it would be a masterful meal. However, the magic sparking in his very core tells me he is a dinner I will never devour, for I will be dead before my razor-teeth can touch his flesh.

"Who are you?" I ask, surprised by how full and

sharp my voice sounds. It's rich, even to my ears, after I'm well fed.

A staff manifests in the faerie's hand, long and gnarled at the top, containing a large, green gem. It glows as the faerie smashes one end of the staff against the ground, and that incomprehensible power inside him surges towards me. I half expect it to slide through my core and kill me in ways I never could, but the magic slides past my body.

My gaze jumps to follow it, sparkling in the air. The fae's power seeps into my shackles, devouring the spell that keeps me, and erodes the chains from silver, to rust, and then nothing.

I'm free.

"Come out from that pit and I will tell you who I am."

I don't need to be asked. The second those shackles are gone, life buzzes into me like I haven't felt in ages. It rushes into my core, reminding me of the strength they took, and I leap. It's not a jump that brings me to the top of the cell. The pit I was kept in is deep. I do, however, land many feet higher against the wall. My claws dig into the stone, and I climb.

Reaching the surface, I swing my body over the edge in a valiant swoop and land on my feet.

Wind sweeps across me, blowing over the sea and taking strands of my long, gold hair behind my back. It

surrounds me on all sides—the sea. I’m on an island with a single, towering building looming above me. A prison built for one.

I should be honored. My captors were so afraid of me they placed me here, alone.

But I wasn’t ever completely alone. I glance to the place I was caged, thinking of the spectral girl who kissed me. A small pang stabs my heart, like it’s worried I’ll never see her again. I can’t deny the sadness, and desperately hope she follows wherever I’m heading.

The large green faerie with the antlers makes a deep humming sound, perhaps him clearing his throat.

I lift a brow in his direction and keep my feet planted in place. Part of me that’s always ravenous wants to bite him. I’d like to say I don’t because I can respect the one who freed me, but the truth is, that intense power around him reiterates to my instincts that I don’t stand a chance.

“I am King Darevon of the Coeval Islands, The True Fae King of this region. Do you know who you are?”

I cock my head slightly, taking in his staff and broad shoulders. “Why would you ask such a strange question? I’m—” but as I think of the answer, my tongue stops behind my teeth, which are now dulled and unthreatening. “I’m Sen,” I say, remembering the name I hear in my dreams.

The fae king frowns, as if I've disappointed him. "Do you know why you were locked in the prison?"

I lift my shoulders in a clueless shrug. "Because I did something terrible." My mind races, because I honestly don't know. No matter how hard I try, the reason has never come to me. "Did I do it to you?"

The king's lips are a flat line of deep green flesh. "No. Not to me. If you betrayed me, I would not have thrown you in *this* prison. I would trap you in the work of my forest. Roots and vines would cut through your body and feed off that unholy chaos burning in you. There would be no chance of you breaking free." The fae king's menacing, green eyes look to the pit I was kept in; though, I still feel he watches me. "Those who put you here wanted your body preserved. That way, when it suited them, they could free you."

I swallow hard, brow furrowing as I try to understand.

The fae king turns that sharp, all knowing gaze back to me. "It may take time for you to remember who you are. But when you remember, that's when your true power will come."

His words vibrate in the air like a portent of a brewing storm, but I shake my head. The memories I can't reach burn beyond my conscious. "I am me. What more could there possibly be?"

"Much." He says, and the words are harsh. "For now,

Prince, come with me. I freed you of this place; you owe me a debt."

For reasons I can't explain, I follow him down the rocky terrain lining the island my prison was built. The gravel slips under my feet, but I never fall, never falter. The strength in my body, the nimbleness, is more than it was with those chains on me. I feel light as a feather, free as a cloud, and ready to take on an army.

"Who threw me in there?" I ask, the idea I owe them a visit suddenly crossing my mind. "There's much I'd like to...discuss with them." Though the ideas I have in mind are far from cordial. Would stabbing out their eyes be too kind?

"You are not ready to face them, yet," the fae king says as we step on a sandy beach. In the sea, a ship floats at a dock. It's large and green like the king, and it glitters with magic.

"So you know who they are?" I press.

The king turns to take me in, his wings fluttering in what I think to be irritation. "Yes."

"Then tell me," I demand, hardly excited to deal with a prison of ignorance after escaping one of physical confinement.

The king's intense, green gaze is unwavering. "Do as I ask of you, and once you complete the task, I will tell you who they are."

My jaw clenches, and I feel those dulled teeth of

mine sharpen to pointed tips. My fingers elongate with claws I didn't know I retracted. "You will tell me, or—"

Magic, wild and fierce, presses against me from all sides, suffocating me like an invisible cage. The fae king steps forward as I gasp for air that won't come. "You will do as I say, and once you finish that task, I will tell you who imprisoned you. Not before. Understood?"

I can't voice a reply, and though part of me still wants to tear into this faerie I wouldn't be able to defeat, there's another part of me, small as it is, that agrees.

The fae king must sense my tiny resolve because his magic instantly dissipates. I gasp for air, falling to my knees. Breath seeps deep into my core. I didn't know oxygen could taste so good.

"What is it you want from me?" I ask, looking up to see the fae king walking away. His wings flutter, and suddenly he's no longer walking but floating...and ignoring me.

Part of me wants to snap at his insolence. But what can I do against a being that can suffocate me without a word?

I glance back to my prison and that lifeless black tower looming above it. A large beacon of light beams out from the top. *My prison was a lighthouse?* It seems that should be much more twisted than it sounds.

My gaze turns back to the fae king and his ship,

where he now stands on the deck, looking at me. *Is he waiting for me to decide to follow him?*

Without hesitation, I get up from where I gasped for air and go to his ship. Even if I'm walking into a new trap, it's better than staying near the one I just escaped.

SITTING in a room within the massive ship, I watch the water and sky pass by below, though I don't hear any water hitting the ship. It floats through the air, carried by magic that glitters beyond the window.

On the deck above, a number of faeries with the same green skin as the king care for the ship. I took one look at them, and my stomach knotted with a need to devour their life.

Due to this, the king hastily shoved me into this room and placed a silver goblet with a pitcher of deep green liquid before me. I didn't have a chance to ask where he got it, and the question doesn't plague me as much as I'm glad to have the blood. I sip it now, the fae blood. It tastes different from humans. More earthy and wild, like the very nature

of their existence is wrapped up in the plants of the soil.

The blood doesn't curb all my hunger, doesn't squelch the need to feed on emotions or devour their souls. But it's enough to sedate the majority of my cravings and to keep me from murdering those beyond.

A knock comes on the door, and the fae king enters before I can say anything. He ducks so his antlers don't hit the doorway. Once he's in the room, his magic surrounds me in silent warning, and a smaller faerie enters after him. She holds a bowl of water and a rag.

"Get cleaned up," the king says, and it feels like an order in my bones, just as much as it sounds like one to my ears. "When you're presentable, we will talk again."

He leaves me with the small faerie, who barely reaches my chin in height. Her eyes are the first thing I notice about her. Unlike her hair and skin and clothes that are green, her irises are orange. Just like when I see the bright blue of the ghost girl's eyes, something inside me says I should know what the strange eyes mean. Still, I don't remember.

The faeries orange eyes lock on me, even as her wings flutter gracefully behind her back, propelling her through the room. Silently, she sets the water basin on the table along with the rag.

As much as I hate it, the idea of eating her crosses my mind. However, something about the delicate size

of her small bones and the sharpness of her features holds me back. I know it has nothing to do with my good nature, but everything to do with the fact her smallness reminds me of the ghost girl.

“Thanks,” I say as she backs away, bowing slightly, though her gaze doesn’t leave mine. There’s a blade at her hip, and I realize she must know how to use it.

“Sen, is it?” she asks, and the words out of her mouth are sharp, like I imagine that blade is. It makes my lips twitch with a grin. It’s then I feel the dried flakes of blood from my earlier meal pull at my chin. What a sight I must be.

I simply nod because saying “Yes” to the name feels odd, as I’m not sure it is my real name.

“Well, get to work,” she demands.

Taking the rag, I dip it into the water, let it soak up the warmth as steam rises around my fingers. When I glance into the bowl, my reflection makes me pause. I haven’t looked at myself in years. I’m shocked by what I see, having forgotten the details of my face. It’s perfect, sharp, and handsome, and I mean that in the humblest way. I’m not just pleasing to look at, I’m striking. How could I forget that part of my charm, my lure?

I clean the blood from my face, turning the water in the bowl a transparent red. Moments later, the water bubbles and the redness disappears, replaced by perfectly clear water once more.

The faerie digs around the room while I clean, pulling an outfit out of a bench that doubles as a storage compartment.

“Put these on,” she says.

Again, her demand makes the corner of my lips twitch. I take the clothes but set them on the table.

“What does it mean?” I ask, and she pauses. Her brow narrows with confusion I can also smell on her.

“What does what mean?”

“The color in your eyes. I know it’s something, but I can’t remember.”

One brow rises, her orange gaze taking me in. She seems to weigh whether this is a question she wants to answer. Finally, a decision is made because she says, “They express that I’m a Jäyûn.”

Jäyûn. I whisper the word, feeling it on my tongue. At the same time, I let it sink into my core, hoping the meaning will arise. “I still don’t understand.”

She nods, takes in a deep breath, and, to my surprise, elaborates. “It means I have magic besides the magic of my kind. Each species in the realms has magic. But that magic is connected to their souls. A Jäyûn’s magic is more—gods given power connected to their spirits.”

“Ah,” I say, thinking of the ghost girl. She must be a Jäyûn. “What kind of power do you have?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” The small faerie

crosses her arms, simultaneously fluttering her wings so her feet touch the floor. She stands sassily with her hips to the side.

“Does the eye color have any indication of what your ability is?” I ask.

“Perhaps.” Her voice is tight.

Stopping in the middle of wiping dried blood from my hands, I take her in, wondering if I should press for more information. The need to know presses hard against my mind. “What do blue eyes mean?”

She snorts once, as if finding the question random. “Just get dressed.”

Frowning, I stand, knowing the discussion is over. Feeling no shame, I strip out of the grimy, nasty outfit I’ve worn since the day I was encaged. I use the rag to wipe away grime and wonder at how the water cleans itself. It even smells like lilies, though there’s no visible evidence of soap.

Ripples of muscle appear under my body’s filth as I clean my arms and stomach. I can’t comprehend how I’m still this strong after being chained. It’s a phenomenon I don’t want to ponder.

I slide into the new clothes, and the faerie sits on the bench across the small room, watching my every move.

“Enjoying the show?” I ask.

One very orange eye twitches as her lips—a deeper

color of green—curve down. “I don’t remember you being so brazen,” she says.

“You know me?” I ask, and all the cheekiness inside me fizzles. “How?”

“You must remember that yourself. I can’t intervene with the spell over you, or you will never be free of it.”

“Spell?” I stop trying to tie the belt on my pants and step towards her. “What spell?”

She shakes her head and heaves an enormous sigh.

“Call me Rori,” she says and stands despite the fact I’m leaning into her, still waiting for an answer to her confusing statement. Even though she’s short, she presses into my aura, unafraid of my might. “We’re going to be quite close for a while.”

“Why?” I ask, still not backing away.

“Because King Darevon says so.”

Just as the name passes her lips, the door to the room swings in again. The king is there once more, but this time he holds something in his arm. It’s a deep green, deeper than his skin...like the color of Rori’s lips. Gold patterns of leaves and tiny birds are stitched into it. He hands the fabric to me.

Holding it up, I see it’s a cloak. “What’s this for?”

“The place you’re going is cold,” he says.

My brow lifts. “I don’t get cold.”

“But mortals do. If you are going to blend into them, you must look the part. When you’re not ravenous, you

look like an elf. That makes sense, because you were one once, before you became a demon. That you can use to your advantage. Elves live where you're going."

My mind races with the facts he's telling me. I didn't know them...and part of me wonders why he feels the need to share. Didn't Rori say I have to remember things for myself? Perhaps what I *am* doesn't matter as much as what I've done—what I forgot I did.

I cock my head, addressing another issue. "Where is it you think I'm going?"

"To a place called Jasikx," the king says definitively. "It's a kingdom in the human Realm of Alëunná."

"And why am I going there?"

"To bring me back a traitor. A boy with fae blood in his veins. He's half-human and half-fae. We call him the Human Fae King, and he belongs with me."

"And if I don't do this?"

The room darkens with a menacing gaze the king gives. His height intensifies, making him appear giant, though I know it has to be an illusion. The cabin ceiling isn't *that* high. For some reason, I know I'm supposed to be afraid, but all I do is look at him in slight boredom.

"If you don't bring me this little king, you will go to the prison I told you about—the one where my forest will eat you alive."

I know the threat is real, but it doesn't shake me, doesn't make me willing to do something this king

thinks he can demand. He isn't *my* king. "And," he says while his darkness shrinks, bringing him back to his normal, albeit still large, body, "if you do not go, I will never tell you who imprisoned you on that island."

"Fine," I say. The desire to know *who* imprisoned me trumps any longing for defiance. "I'll bring you this half-human you want, but you must swear on your true name you will keep your word."

THE FAE KING DOES, indeed, swear to keep his word, though I can't say what his true name is. He doesn't tell me. Which I don't expect him to. For reasons I can't explain, I remember one fact about the fae: their names are power. They don't go by their true names, and to know a fae's true name is to wield power over them. It would be ridiculous to give that control to anyone, especially a fiend such as me.

"When do I get this Human Fae King for you?" I ask as the True Fae King turns to leave again.

"Rori will answer that," he says and disappears through the door.

My attention goes to her, taking in her sharp, orange eyes and pointed expression. "Soon," she says. "First, we

must make sure you won't go killing every living soul you encounter." She floats past me on her silver wings. At the door, she spins quickly in the air, facing me. "Well, come on. We must practice." She looks away, almost turning to go, then pauses again. "And put that cloak on."

"Why?" I hold up the beautiful green fabric. "I don't need it. I don't get cold."

"It's not for that," she says, and I should have asked more questions because the moment I slide the cloak over my shoulders, the fabric encompasses me in a tight squeeze.

"Hey," I yelp as I try to struggle out of it. A tiny laugh tickles my ears, and I glare through the cloak hood—the only opening in it—to see Rori holding herself in a torrent of laughter.

"This is not funny."

She stops floating to land on her feet and wipes a tear from her cheek. "If you could see your face, you'd know exactly how funny it is... Finny, you can let him go."

"Finny?" I ask with a frown, and just as I say the name, or title, or whatever it is, the cloak loosens. "The cloak has a name?"

"Every magicked cloak has a name," Rori says, as if that answers everything.

Shaking my head in irritation, I try to take off the

clasp where the cloak is held to my neck, but the cloak moves out of reach.

“Finny’s not coming off,” Rori says, her arms crossed, and her brow raised in a superior grin. “He’s to help you. To cage you if you try to hurt anyone and can’t keep your issues under control.”

“Issues?”

She doesn’t explain, but starts to float on her wings, disappearing into the hall. Reluctantly, I follow. The cloak hugs my neck and trails me as I climb the stairs.

Back at the top of the ship, I look around. We soar through clouds so thick they leave moisture on my cheeks. Coeval faeries, in their loose-fitting green clothes, still operate the sails and keep everything working.

“Smell them,” Rori demands.

I lift a quizzical brow at her, surprised she’d suggest such a thing.

“You have to smell them all,” she gestures to the crew of faeries. “And when you smell them, you must resist the urge to eat them.”

I roll my eyes, finding this whole exercise useless. I’m a demon. Eating things is what I do... “You’re a Demon Prince,” she tells me, as if that’s supposed to hold some deep, philosophical meaning. “You are ancient—old enough to control your hunger. I wager you could be in a large crowd and everyone would

think you're the elf you once were, save more beautiful than your former self."

"Are you complimenting me?" I ask with a twitch of a grin.

Her gaze is hard and unwavering. "On the contrary, I'm simply stating a fact. When the God of Chaos makes a demon, he takes their soul, replaces it with his dark and menacing chaos, and that changes your appearance. It removes blemishes, extra fat, anything that might make you look less alluring. It's a demon's most powerful asset. But you already know that, right?"

For a second, I just watch her, letting her words seep into me. "It feels as though I'm hearing that information for the first time."

She nods and glances at the clouds we float through. "It may be a side effect of the spell you're under. When you remember who you are, everything should be so much easier."

Turning, I take in my surroundings, wondering at how a spell could make me forget the very facts of my being. What else has it done to me?

In a sudden movement, the cloak hood lowers itself. Wind gusts golden strands of my long hair across my face. I scoff at Finny, finding his prank rather rude, as I try to gather the length of my hair together. Rori laughs and, for some reason, her giggles don't make me want to rip her head off. Rather, they touch a part of me deep

down. It's like I knew a laugh like that before, and I found it comforting. But the moment I have the thought, it slips from my mind just like the dreams I wake up to.

Finally having my hair together, I hold it in one hand to keep it out of my line of sight. It's then, as I look out over the edge of the ship, that I see trees peeking through the clouds. They are huge, reaching high into the sky. Their boughs brush the clouds we sail through.

Darkness looms in the depth of those trees, quiet and watchful. As we float by, I can't help but wonder at their branches, how they twist together and sag. Their leaves are a vibrant, striking green. The tree trunks, only of which I can make out from between the clouds, are deep green, like the Coeval faerie skin.

"That is one of the Coeval Islands," Rori says beside me. "When we fae die, we become those trees. Our people live in the branches and our ancestors protect us from danger."

I squint, willing my eyes to cut through the clouds and see the trees more clearly. A blackness claws up the trunks like sickening veins, sprawling and clawing. "It seems sick."

Rori nods as I turn my gaze back to hers. "The islands are dying."

My brow twitches, finding that oddly hilarious. “How can an island die, exactly?”

Rori glances to the part of the ship where the large steering wheel rests. The True Fae King stands there, near the sailor controlling our flight. “The land in any realm is only as healthy as its ruler. You would know that, if you could remember.” She says that last part softly, lacking the jab I think it should normally hold. “The magic of each land is tied to their king—it’s in his blood. It’s like that in any realm. Just as a race’s magic is in their soul, and a Jäyûn’s magic is in their spirit. It’s the way. But in Coeval, the magic is shared between two kings: one for the fae—pure and whole—the other, a king of flesh and gold. The True Fae King,” she nods to him.

“And the one you desire me to hunt?” I guess.

She nods and turns those orange eyes back to me.

“Why me? Why not send a letter asking the Human Fae King to come back?”

“It’s not that simple.” Her tone is downcast, and part of me wonders if there’s some kind of bad blood between the two kings.

“Seven years ago, there was a battle. The Human Fae King died, and his son, the one who now lives in Alëunná, fled for his life. We cannot reach him, no matter how we try.” Her gaze is fierce, burrowing into

my skin. “And we have tried. We need you, a creature of stealth and speed, to get him back.”

My shoulders sag at the idea. “How do you expect me to do that, exactly?”

“By first learning to control your hunger. Then, by coming to his false home and helping us capture him.”

“And you freed me—a Demon Prince—from a prison just for this task?” The idea is too bizarre to understand. If I was in their shoes, I would never have let out a creature that eats what I eat. Isn’t the realms better off without me?

“It has to be you,” Rori says. “For you are key.”

I stare at her, watching the wind blow her deep green hair, which is pulled back into a ponytail, yet also braided in numerous little plaits. Her wings rest low and unsure against her back as she leans against the side of the ship, watching the island float by.

“Do you know what I did to be thrown in there?” I ask her, feeling that she must.

“Ay,” she says, looking at me. “Which is exactly why you are perfect for this task. Now,” she says, spinning to look at the crew. Her lips are set in a tight line, and the scent of defensiveness in her emotions tells me I won’t get more facts from her. She nods to the crew. “Smell them.”

I don’t. Instead, I keep my gaze on her. “What evil deed did I commit?”

I have to know. If it's as bad as I think, I shouldn't be on a ship. I should still be caged... Maybe I shouldn't have eaten the guards with such glee.

"I cannot," Rori says. "You must find out for yourself. You must conquer the curse you're under. If I tell you, the spell will never break."

I clench my jaw, feeling my dull teeth wanting to sharpen. Momentarily, there's a desire to rip out Rori's throat, to drink her blood, and have her soul pass through me to the Infernal Realms. Sometimes, when the souls pass, I know secrets. Perhaps by eating her, the truth would come to me.

For some strange reason, I don't jump her. I only run my tongue across my teeth, willing them to stay blunt. If I am cursed, and she says I must be the one to break it, for now I have to believe that is true. I have no other facts to go on, after all. So, after a moment, I turn my gaze back to the crew of faeries and take in a deep, deep breath.

They smell like enchanted trees and exotic flowers. Their emotions are a mixture of uncertainty and fear, but also hope. I have the strangest sense that hope has a lot to do with me.

One fae, just a few feet away, sneaks by. His emotion smells the most intriguing: jealousy. I couldn't say why or what it's directed at, just that I desire to devour it.

I jerk forward, fully intending to eat his jealousy, but

Finny—the cloak—squeezes my limbs and makes me fall flat on my face.

A growl slips from my lips, and I squirm against the thick fabric. I'm a powerful creature of speed and stealth. I can break out of this.

The smell of that fae quickly turns from jealousy to intense fear as he runs. *Gods, I love it when they run.*

My claws are out, and I slice at the irritating cloak. The fabric tears, and I'm about to claw all the way up its side, but then Rori stands over me. There's no fear in her that I can smell. The fragrance emanating from her is one of sheer determination...and magic, which smells a lot like orange buds.

Rori's orange eyes glow as she holds a hand out to me. Her fingers bend in a sharp, contorted form. My limbs don't move, though I command them to. Magic binds me.

"Resist the urge," Rori says, not moving her hand.

"What are you doing to me?" I hiss, still trying to rip the cloak clean off. It restrains me.

"I am a Jäyûn," she says forcefully, as if it takes effort to hold me down. "My magic is the kind that won't let you move."

I growl still, my teeth sharp fangs. Now I really want to rip out her throat, but try as I might, I can't push past her invisible strength.

One more growl, which makes my ears burn from

its harshness, and I finally give up. Rori remains over me, her hand still contorted in whatever position her magic needs to hold me. When she's satisfied I won't move, her hand finally lets up.

"Poor Finny," she says to my cloak as I get to my feet. "We'll get you stitched up in a bit."

I touch my face where something wet drips from my nose. My fingers come back black with my blood.

"You're sorry for Finny? Look what happened to my face."

"You self-heal," she says with a passive wave of her hand. "Finny can't."

DAYS GO BY, and I stay on the ship, letting Rori push my resolve to its limits. I try eating half the crew, and she stops me with that power she has. Then we do it all over again.

Between the attempts to *not* eat people, I drink fae blood from a pitcher. When I ask Rori where the blood comes from, she says the entire crew contributes, except for the True Fae King. His blood has the magic of his land in it, so he won't be sharing that with anyone.

As I let the green, sticky liquid pass my lips, I ponder each fae on this ship. I try to imagine who they are and what makes them so willing to share their blood with me. The question plagues me so much that I enthusiastically don that annoying cloak named Finny

and head back up to walk among them. Rori, who stands like a guard outside my cabin, sees me leave my room and doesn't attempt to stop me. She follows up the stairs.

Rather than try eating the fae today, I watch them. Some spar with each other in the open space on the deck. A girl with sharp features and sharper movements swings a sword against another fae. He's one of the tallest and strongest I've seen, aside from the fae king, that is. Rori says the girl is her sister, Ambr. "The moment she heard about the mission to find you," Rori explains, "Ambr barged right into the True Fae King's throne room and demanded to be allowed on the mission." Rori's lips twitch with the memory. "She was so young then, twelve years old. King Darevon said she could join if she strengthened herself and prove worthy of the task on the Day of Turning—her eighteenth birthday. She trained hard, and he allowed her to join the mission a year ago."

There's a pause as we watch Ambr dive away from the sword of the large fae she duels. Even from a distance, I can smell the spitfire emotions that emanate off her. I can't imagine what sort of blind courage would drive someone to break into a king's throne room. Such audacity.

"That's Kembry," Rori points to the guy with Ambr, who now jumps clear over her body to avoid a stab. His

wings flutter, and Ambr's quickly on his tail. Their duel continues in the air. Watching them with a grin, Rori says, "They both believe fervently in the cause."

The cause? I wonder, but don't venture to ask. My attention draws to two other fae at a makeshift table made of crates. They play a game Rori calls *catches*. After a few rounds of watching them throw dice and move pieces of jade figurines across squares, I ask to play.

The two fae—one who appears young, maybe a teen, and the other an elder with silver in his hair—just look at me. First with eyes wide and fear leaking from their core. Then they glance to Rori, who nods, and the young one scampers away.

I can't judge them for their fear. I have tried to kill them both a few times already.

Silently, I commend the elder for his bravery and learn his name is Yen. The younger fae is his grandson. They both have family back home on the islands. Yen tells me how the trees they live in grow weak, due to the sickening of the land, and fae houses are falling out of the branches. Fae have died in this tragedy, and now many are forced to live on the ground, where predatory beast I can't comprehend hunt them. For this, Yen and his grandson eagerly agreed to join the mission to find *me*. They—the whole crew and king—have been searching for years.

The news slowly eats at me as we play a few rounds of *catches*, which I seem to be a natural at. I can't imagine why any of them would think freeing me will solve their problems. Certainly, there are better, easier ways to retrieve their wayward human king.

I excuse myself after winning a third round to venture below deck. It's there I run into the cook, who's deep at work chopping on meat. Lots of meat.

"Coeval faeries need a hearty diet of protein," the cook tells me. Haney is her name. "It helps our wings remain strong. But not all fae eat meat like we do," she says this thoughtfully. "I heard the snow faeries of Draffle eat a large helping of moon dust. Try understanding that one?" She laughs, and despite myself, I laugh with her.

I don't ask, because I don't want to know. But still, she shares another problem the people of the Coeval Islands face: Their food supply is growing scarce, all because of the Human Fae King's absence. The fae are relying on help from the human realms to survive.

Haney looks at me with a sparkle in her deep green gaze, and I fear I see tears there. In fact, I smell the emotions on her, and though sorrow is among them, so is hope. And that hope she has is held in me.

I excuse myself before a tear can dampen her cheek, and I head back to my quarters. Partly so I don't try devouring those extremely tasty emotions, and partly

to get away from the expectations placed on me by these strangers. How am I, one Demon Prince, supposed to help reverse all these problems? The weight of their hope is too much to bear.

Rori follows me, ever a silent guard, in case I can't control myself. At my cabin, she waits outside, and I rest on the small bed. Though, I don't lay down. I lean back against the ship's wall, my head near the small circular window that looks out to the clouds. I close my eyes, trying to forget the pain I smell from the fae when they think of their home. Clenching my jaw, I also try shaking off their need for me to help them.

I swallow hard, trying all the more to forget...and then to remember. If I could just push past this curse blocking my mind, would I really have to carry the hope of all these fae? If I could remember, I wouldn't need them in order to take my revenge on the people who threw me in that prison. I would know who did it on my own.

Memories don't come flooding back. There's just cold emptiness as I try to push through the black void... and her. The girl with the eyes as blue as the sky. I wish I could see her again. I even try to will her presence into the cabin. But I'm not mad with starvation. There's plenty of fae blood to keep me calm. Therefore, the only way I can see her is when I close my eyes and

remember her dark hair and tiny frame...and those warm lips as they brush mine.

I fall asleep thinking of her, and wish I'd meet her in my dreams. But instead, I see the bloody face of a man and hear the name *Sen* before I wake up screaming. Like all the other times, the dream slips from my mind as soon as my eyes open.

Rori comes in, eyes wide in panic.

"Just a dream," I tell her.

She stares my way for a few long moments, and I can smell the questions emanating off her. "Do you want to talk about it?" she finally asks.

I shake my head. "There's nothing to talk about. All I remember is blood."

"Okay," she says, and sinks to the floor across from me. I don't ask, but I do wonder how her wings don't get crushed as she leans against the wall.

"Who's the girl you think about?" she voices, and I flash a look at her.

"What do you mean?" My tone is defensive. I know I haven't said anything about the girl.

"You call out to her in your sleep."

"Oh," I say and look at my hands. The nails look blunt and normal. "I don't know her. She's just a ghost."

"That you care about?"

I bite my lip to keep from lashing out with a sharp-

toothed growl. Having Rori ask about the ghost feels like she's scraping at a gaping wound.

"I don't know who she is, only that she visits me sometimes when I'm at my lowest."

Rori nods, playing with the edges of Finny's embroidered hem as he hangs near her on the wall. The way Rori rubs his fabric, and how her gaze appears to look at something far from this room, makes me wonder what's on her mind. I don't have to ask, because she eventually says, "Maybe she was a victim of yours, before you lost your memory."

My brow pinches at that idea. I can't imagine someone I killed wanting to kiss me.

"What makes you say that?"

"Because I've heard demons can sometimes see the souls of the people they devoured...like the souls haunt them."

I snort, though not because it's funny, simply because that could make sense. "I'm sure I would haunt the person who killed me, too. But..." I think of how the girl never seems angry or violent. I'm sure a murder victim would be violent. "I don't think that's the case. Anyway," I look up, my tone resolved to change the subject, "I've been needing to ask. How do you know so much about demons?"

Rori shrugs, letting Finny rest freely against the wall. Her hands come to her lap as her gaze returns to

me. "I've studied demons intently for years, seeking to know what we would find once we found you."

"Oh," I say and look away from her. Just the reminder of how much these fae think they need me, again, makes my insides squirm.

"I wager you can't remember much about your own kind, am I right?" Rori asks.

The question makes me flash my gaze back to her. I puff my chest out. "Of course I know myself."

"Really?" Rori's lips curve in a knowing smirk. "So you know that being a Demon Prince means you are of the first race of demons? You know you're as old as the second era, when the elven race was created. Of course, you know you were an elf. You still look like it, so obviously you know that. You also know that your blood has healing properties—it heals you, but if you let someone else drink it, it heals them, too. Ah, and you also know that when you eat a soul, it goes to the Infernal Realms to feed the power of the God of Chaos. And, undoubtably, you know that if you fail to completely eat your prey's soul, they will go *demented*—crazy, and start killing people?"

I swallow hard, because I didn't remember all that. But out loud, I say, "Yes, I know."

"Of course." Rori nods as if bowing in surrender. The conversation ends there because I refuse to speak, and eventually I fall back asleep.

Come morning, Rori brings me back to the top of the ship, and we practice smelling but not eating the crew. At some point, I get a taste of a fae's emotions, and I feel that emotion seep into me like decadent candy. I shiver with the ecstasy of its taste and breathe in another deep breath. It turns out I don't have to actually touch my prey to eat the emotional part of them. I'm surprised I never knew it.

At first, I think Rori doesn't notice what I'm doing, but then she tells me to control myself, to limit the amount I take. I'm only slightly bummed my sly discovery didn't get past her.

Still, she nor Finny—that most annoying cloak—tries stopping me. Rori simply tells me a little is okay, that, in fact, I *should* eat. I haven't fed on emotions since the day I was freed. And after all, I will wither without them...maybe go a bit hunger crazy.

Rori tells me when I've had enough, and she encourages me to move on to the next fae. So I do, nibbling a little here and there.

"You've got it," Rori says, and I smile, somehow glad to have done what she asked. The joy in her expression is enough to make it all worth it.

"So, what does this mean?"

Rori's brow bounces with glee. "That it's time to go hunting for the Human Fae King."

“THERE’S something you should know about where you’re going,” The True Fae King says as I stand near him on the ship. Clouds brush past us like always, and Finny rests loosely on my shoulders. My hair, which Rori has helped tie back from my face, doesn’t try blowing in the way. This lack of hair in my eyes makes it easy to see the vast shore of the realm we float towards. It’s so long, I can’t see where it ends and where it begins.

The city within it is masterfully different from anything my erased brain can remember. Buildings as tall as the trees I saw on that Coeval island brush against the clouds, and there're lights everywhere. As far as the eye can see, little glittering lights in the buildings and along the roads. Most fascinating of all, there

are little contraptions, like tiny buildings on wheels moving along streets. Even they glow with something Rori calls headlights. I can't pry my gaze away from the wonder.

"What is it I need to know?" I ask when the True Fae King doesn't elaborate. I turn to see him watching me, and I wonder if the awe in my face is that transparent.

"There are people in this realm called Black Ones," the king says. "They get their name because of the creatures they hunt. When they slay their prey, they are covered in black blood."

My heart sinks to my stomach. "Demons. They hunt demons! You're sending me to a place where people will try to kill me? What kind of death wish do you think I have?"

The king's eyes glisten, and his antlers tilt back. A purely jovial laugh erupts from his core. "Kill a Demon Prince? That will be the day." The fae king wipes a tear from his eye. "All you must do is trust your instincts, ancient one. No one can hurt you."

I glower at him, not sure I believe his words, but who am I to argue. I still can't remember anything this so said curse keeps from me. I need the king in order to exact revenge on the ones who put me in that prison, and for that, I must capture his Human Fae King. King Darevon holds all the cards in this game. All I can do is what he asks.

“Rori will go with you,” he says, turning to face the fae in question. She floats on her dainty wings with a sword at her side and donned in thick clothes. With her are seven more fae. I haven’t met them all, but Ambr, Kembry and Yen’s grandson—Kip, as I’ve heard him called—are among them. All are dressed warm and bear weapons. “Her soldiers will accompany you.”

“How cold is it where we’re going?” I ask, not that it matters to me.

“The kingdom of Jasikx is in the heart of winter,” the fae king says. “It’s a bitter time for those who can’t bear the touch of frost.”

“Ah,” I say, and leave it at that. The ship sinks out of the clouds, lowering to a dock in a bay near the harbor. I’m too captivated by the commotion on land to ask more questions. The True Fae King disappears below deck, not wanting his presence noted, and I follow Rori off the ship with the others.

As soon as we’re on land, the ship sets off again, leaving us alone in this human realm.

The smell of people around me is all consuming. Laughter and anger, sadness and joy. There’re so many emotions here. So much blood, too. But I don’t go chasing after anyone. My time with Rori was enough to prove she’s right: I can control my cravings. I simply follow her down the street, sipping on a little joy here, a little humdrum there.

Finny covers my face in the darkness of his hood, hiding my features from those around me the deeper we get into the city.

We make it to a place with a stairway leading underground. Rori calls it a train station for something they call a subtrain. I'm silent with awe as we take the stairs down and approach the large metal boxes glowing inside with magicked light. Sliding doors pull apart as we approach, and all us fae get in.

No one gives us much thought as I take in the people. I guess they shouldn't. A number of those around us are human—I can tell by the way their ears are small and rounded at the tip.—but a few are colored with deep purple skin, with ears like Rori. They are fae of a different race. Of which, I don't know, and being this close to them, I don't ask.

I also see elves on this sub train. Their hair is a light shade of green, where mine is that rich gold.

"We'll be on this for a while," Rori says to me quietly. "This city on the coast isn't where our target lives. He's at the capital, deeper inland. You may rest if you want. I'll let you know when we arrive. Oh," she says it like an afterthought, "and be careful how much you let yourself taste. The Black Ones can sense when your power is feeding, it will bring them running."

My eyes widen. "You couldn't have told me that sooner?"

Rori just grins, and I know for some twisted reason, she gets a kick out of every moment I find myself surprised.

Time ticks by, and the train ride goes on and on and on. The underground passes outside the window, and one of my fae companions, Kip, pulls out a compact board for a game of *catches*, which he plays with the big fae I saw sparring, Kembry.

Some of my other fae acquaintances sleep, and my eyes wander to the other people on this train. The humans all have small, rectangular devices held before their faces. Some are talking to something I can't see. Others have little plastic pieces in their ears and laugh at glowing images on their screens. Rori says those devices are called jCrystals, and the humans use them to talk to each other, listen to music, and watch shows.

"Gods, I need to get myself one of those." I can hear the fascination in my tone.

Rori shakes her head. "They're a waste of time, and they'll keep you away from the truth of nature and life."

I laugh at that. "Spoken like a true faerie, I'd say."

"Or one who's never used a jCrystal before," says an aged human at my side. His white hair and the wrinkles in his face tell me he's rather old for his race. "What brings you all to the lovely Realm of Alëunná?"

I just stare at him, unsure of what to say, and keenly aware that Finny's hood hides my face in shadow. Rori

is the one to save me, mentioning something about family to visit. She and the old man talk about a number of things thereafter, like the old man's grandchildren, which he has photos to share on his device. Apparently, that's another thing the jCrystal can do—take pictures.

Suddenly, he's showing me videos of his family during some holiday I don't understand. He laughs at the way one of his grandchildren shoots the other with a blunt tipped arrow, and I find myself laughing with him.

It's a fun change from being surrounded by the magical, albeit old-fashioned fae who saved me from a prison.

Eventually, the old man grows tired, and settles in for a rest. I don't know why, but I end up joining him, waking later with a scream that makes everyone on the train jump to stare.

"Sorry, sorry," Rori says to everyone, bowing in apology. "He gets nightmares."

Other than glares, nothing goes awry and soon the train finally comes to a stop. I bid farewell to the surprisingly fun to talk with, elder man, and he wishes me better dreams upon departure.

"Good job," Rori whispers to me as the man disappears into the crowd. Her tone is genuine, but I have no idea what she's complementing me on. "He's a Black

One,” she says. “If you had tried to feed on someone, he would have jumped you. But you didn’t, so he had no reason to try killing you.”

“Oh,” I say, swallowing hard at the idea. I’m too shocked to think of how close I was to a demon hunter, even an aged one.

“Is there some sort of code that they can’t attach unless I attack?”

“Something like that,” Rori says, walking away.

I follow her out from the underground, feeling the need to press her for more information. But then I step out into the new city, and all words leave me in a gasp of awe.

It’s bright here with all the glowing lamp lights, but still the sky above is dark. Early morning, I would wager.

“The Black Ones will be out,” Rori tells me. “Be careful.”

“What is the plan?” I ask. “We just walk the streets hoping the Human Fae King will find us?”

“He lives in the castle,” Rori nods down the street, and my jaw drops. Far away, on the edge of the city, a tall onyx castle looms on the side of a volcano. Lava flows around it in rivers of molten fire, seeping into the city, but not harming it. Everything, from the skyscrapers to the city streets, appears to have been

built in a way that accommodates the volcano and its fury.

“So we raid the castle?” I say incredulously. “With its royal guards and...”

“And booby traps,” one of the fae says. I glance to see it’s Kembry coming beside me. “There’s no breaking in there. We know. We’ve tried already.”

“Oh,” I say, trying to sound surprised. “Glad that’s off the table.”

“There’s a place to set up shop that way,” Rori says, pointing down the street at an indistinct destination. “Then, with your help, he will come to us.”

Rori pats my shoulder and starts to walk. The others follow her, but I stop dead in my tracks. “Wait, why do I get the feeling there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“Because you’d be right about that,” Kip says, grinning.

“And this is supposed to be funny?”

“Not exactly,” Ambr says. “But it might be.”

I open my mouth to ask them to elaborate, but something nearby draws my attention: a strong, luring fragrance I can’t escape. I spin on my heels, looking for it, and when I think to ask my fae companions if they feel it, too, I glance over my shoulder and find them all gone.

My teeth sharpen behind my lips. *Should have known better than to trust them.*

Alone, I spin back around, feeling Finny hug me gently in the cold, winter air. Neither the presence of this enchanted cloak, nor the cold trying to touch my skin, bothers me. Even the sharp sting of betrayal can do no ill will as I stand on the sidewalk, smelling the sweet scent of turmoil and deep emotional pain. It's like candied lilacs and fragrant roses, so enticing, my mouth waters with longing.

I step forward, following the pull of that delicious smell, longing to sink my teeth into the flesh of this deeply hurting soul. Part of me screams to stop, saying I'm walking into a trap. But the ravenous, feral part of my being won't listen.

Then I see her, the source of these delectable emotions, and my feet stop dead. My heart pounds behind my ribs, and I stare. It's *her*. The ghost-girl. Only, she isn't a ghost at all. Her hair isn't black as I study her, but light brown. Still, I know those cheek bones anywhere, and those eyes as blue as the sky are unmistakable. She's physical and real, and emanating the fragrance of such broken pain that it takes everything in me not to run towards her and consume her where she stands.

For a second, she watches me back, her head tilting to the side in contemplation, like it often did in the cell. It's then I know I was wrong, that her eyes aren't as

blue as the sky, but paler, like a blue crystal glowing through ice.

My heart lurches into my throat as the smell of her makes the cravings in me ignite. I have to move, or I'll kill her. And I can't do that, not after how much help she's been...not with the memory of her lips still fresh against mine.

I run.

I HEAR sharp heels tapping the ground behind me, expressing that this girl—who's not a ghost—chases me.

Why is she chasing me?

My nails turn to claws, and the strongest cravings in me scream to turn, to devour her, but I won't.

My feet slip on piles of snow, and my reflexes recover from the surprise. My reactions are almost as fast as the initial slip, so I doubt my momentary floundering is even noticeable to a human eye. I turn a corner, thinking I might throw the girl off, but I skid to a halt when I see my mistake.

This is a dead end.

I spin on my heels, the fabric of Finny flaring out as I turn. Like that, I stand in wait as her presence draws closer. The girl, who's even more lovely in her true

form, stands at the end of the alley entrance. Her chest heaves slightly as she breathes heavily. The smell of her rich, human blood coursing through her veins, intensified with her adrenalin, burns down my throat as I breathe.

A growl rumbles through the air, and this time it doesn't come from me but from a large, wolfish creature that's nearly as tall as the girl. Its hair is wafts of smoke, and its eyes are menacing red gems. Its teeth are sharp fangs craving flesh. I don't recall having seen a beast like this before, but something about it seems demonic, like it carries the same chaos that's in me.

My heart lurches with fear that the creature would devour the girl. In an instant, I move, ripping her from the beast. Her back slams against the wall to our side as the beast lurches forward, teeth snapping. Only it doesn't bite for the girl. It bites for me.

In a blur, I jerk out of its reach, but its fangs close around Finny, ripping the cloak from my neck. Finny falls in a billow of fabric, surrounding the wolf-thing in a tight embrace I know all too well.

I glance around the alley, at the snow and the garbage can reeking not far behind. It's just me and the girl and that creature.

She's feet away, as I've jumped back to avoid the beast, but now that it's caught on the ground by the cloak, I'm surprised she doesn't run.

I leap over Finny and his beastly catch, landing mere inches from the lovely creature I wish to know better. So many questions play in my mind. Like how she's here, and if she remembers me. She whispers something under her breath: an incantation, I realize too late. Her ice-blue gaze glows with a powerful glower. In mere moments, she moves with speed to match my own. Her sharp-heeled boot shoots for my face.

Catching her foot in my hand, I throw her leg back, trying not to hurt her in the process. She bears a blade in one hand that I didn't see her draw, and suddenly there's an intense burning in my side.

I bite back a grimace as the pain claws through me, calling up my feral instincts. The fragrance of the girl's emotions brush over me so powerfully. Hatred is among them, and anger and rage, along with that deep sorrow nearly hidden from me now.

I don't understand why she feels this way, nor do I know why she stabbed me. I don't have control over my body as I suddenly grab her by the throat, needing that blade out of my side. Still, I pause, even as it burns under my skin.

Captivated by the girl's pristine features, her lush lips, and delicate face, I can't pull my gaze away. She squints her eyes shut, as if trying to hide them from me. And that smell, her delicious emotions. I can't stop myself from reaching out for them. My magic pulls on

her pain, sucking it inside me, filling me with strength. As much as I don't want to take it from her, I can't stop myself now. She tastes so *good*!

Her eyes flash open, and it's too much for me. My mouth closes around hers, and it's soft and hard at the same time. Warmth seeps into me, both from her touch and her taste.

The blade falls from my side, and her hands bury into my hair. I drown in her kiss, in her emotions, sucking on her lower lip as her blood ebbs into me.

She kisses me back, pressing her body against mine. It's like we belong together, like we were meant to be like this.

A snarling growl erupts with the tearing of fabric. Part of me knows that's the beast ripping through Finny.

Suddenly, I remember my hand is still around the girl's neck. I'm still choking her. And I'm not just kissing her, I'm feeding off her. Worse, it's not just her blood and her emotions I taste. The deepest, brightest part of her touches my senses. I've tapped her soul.

Stopping abruptly, I pull away from her mouth. She gazes up at me dreamily, like she isn't ready for our embrace to end.

I let her go, remembering that when I eat a soul, it goes to the Infernal Realms. It burns.

An apology tries to form in my mouth, but as the words settle on the tip of my tongue, a single, fierce battle cry erupts behind me, and I whirl. Part of my consciousness is aware of the girl sinking to the snow-covered ground, and as much as I want to help her up, I resist the urge. A being runs at me with a sword made of shadows. His eyes are black like the sword. His skin is a creamy color with a hint of green. His ears are slightly pointed with darker green tips. The glare in his gaze speaks of rage.

I dodge his blows as magic, black like smoke, wafts off him. I'm half aware of the beastly creature behind me, looming over the shreds of my cloak.

I jump and dive to avoid both the beast and the new arrival, whose stamina intrigues me. I can smell that there's no fear in him. Only determination and drive, and perhaps a small ounce of surprise.

Before I can wonder why he's even slightly startled to see *me*, a green figure leaps from above, graceful on the back of silver wings. Rori. She lands on the snow with a blade in hand. Other fae join the battle, brandishing swords or wielding vines growing out of their belts. They don't try to *hurt* the young man who arrived, but stop him. It's then I finally realize who it is. This is the Human Fae King I was sent for.

The knowledge that if I capture him, the True Fae King will tell me who imprisoned me makes me lurch

forward. I will catch this young man and I will have my vengeance.

As I leap towards him, a solid form made of black smoke slams into me. I'm pushed back against the wall at the alley's end. The force of magic doesn't stop, but continues to pummel me, forcing blood up from my breaking chest. The fae are pinned, too, held back by the Human Fae King's magic.

Through a dizzy fog created from the sheer pain of the shadow power, I notice the king approach the girl.

"Sheva!" he says her name. "You stupid, stupid princess." Even at the insult, I can hear the care in his tone. He lifts her into his arms, and though his magic keeps beating down on me, he carries her out of sight.

SHE'S A PRINCESS? I think as the power continues to pummel me. Black blood oozes out of my mouth and nose, but all I think of is that girl.

At some point, the magic lets up, and I slump to the ground with the other fae.

I laugh. It's a dry, empty sound.

I've kissed a *princess*. Twice now. It's so ludicrous the laughs won't stop.

"Why did she try to kill me?" I ask around the empty humor, more to myself than anything.

"She's a Black One," Rori says, wiping her deep green blood from her face.

"Wait," I pause, jumping to my feet. The broken bones in me are already healed. "Are you telling me I'm

bait? That the Human Fae King and the *princess* are Black Ones? Demon hunters!”

“Yes,” Rori says, unfazed by my burst of rage. She bends down to help Ambr up. The two girls look like they’ve suffered less from the Human Fae King’s magic than what I or Kembry faced. I can’t explain why, but I’m glad it was only the three of them who came down to help, and the rest of our entourage didn’t get involved. Death might have struck one of them if there were more. Still, they did abandon me, so I shouldn’t care either way. Then again, they also came to my rescue.

Shaking my head, I take a second to decide if I should help up Kembry. Growling with reluctant resolve, I finally hold my hand out to the large fae and help hoist him to his feet. He grunts with a few broken bones of his own.

Making my teeth sharp, I bite into my wrist and hold it out to him. “Drink it.”

Kembry’s green brow pinches with offense.

“Demon blood can heal you. At least that’s what Rori says.”

“It’s true,” she agrees, and though still frowning, Kembry ventures to oblige my offer. He sips the blood and winces as it goes down. By the twisted shape of his lips, I guess it isn’t as delectable a flavor for him as it is me.

Kembry pushes my arm away with a gasp, holding his broad chest like I punched him. He falls to the ground, moaning, as I listen to the sound of bones snapping back into place.

“Seems you were right,” I say to Rori as Kembry rises between us, a bit uneasy on his feet.

“I’m rarely wrong,” Rori assures me. “You fed on her,” she says, as if to change the subject. And suddenly I remember she’s right. I fed on the princess, on the girl who would visit me. Sheva. She has a name. I whisper it under my breath, feeling it float through the air, and then I gasp, recalling the icy cool flavor of her soul. I kissed her mouth and nipped her *soul*.

“What was it you said happens to people when a demon doesn’t fully eat their souls?”

Rori pauses in the middle of dabbing at Ambr’s bloody face. “They go demented and start killing those around them.”

“Yeah, that.”

Rori’s orange eyes meet mine. She knows exactly why I ask, and a fae curse slips through her lips. “You weren’t *supposed* to eat her.”

“It’s not like I wanted to. I was left with little help when you all just disappeared on me.”

“Don’t spin this on us,” Rori says. “I’ve spent much time teaching you to control yourself.”

“Days aren’t enough to curb a millennium of cravings. And nothing could prepare me for that, for *her*.”

“One human, no matter her title, shouldn’t make a difference. They all taste the same.”

“No,” I shake my head. “Not her. Sheva,” I pause at her name, wonder at it before continuing, “she is not just anyone. She’s the girl I told you about.”

Rori steps away from Ambr and comes to stand before me. “I’m not following.”

“The ghost! The girl who visited me in prison.”

Her orange eyes widen. “Oh.”

I nod, swallowing hard as Sheva’s flavor still lingers on my tongue—so sweet and delicious, I *need* more. I close my eyes to ward off the want. “What do you think that means?”

Rori shakes her head, but by the solid wall that seems to build around her gaze, I think she knows more than she’s saying. “It doesn’t matter what it means. You just sentenced her to death in the slowest and most painful way.”

My heart falls to my stomach, and it burns in the acid that greets it there. My first thought, no matter how stupid, is that there’s no way I will ever get close to Sheva again, to talk with her, to really get to know her...

My second thought is to pull myself together, to figure this out. I can’t just let her die.

“A witch,” Rori says, breaking through my torment.

“What?” I ask, brow tight with confusion.

“You once asked me what blue eyes mean for a Jäyûn. It means the Jäyûn is a witch.”

“Ah,” I sound. Though the fact doesn’t make much sense, as I’m not sure what witches can do.

“Your princess is quite powerful, too. She comes from a long line of witches and wizards.”

My shoulders slump with the lack of understanding. Though, I’m sure the witch stuff has something to do with the incantation Sheva muttered—the one that gave her speed to match mine while we fought.

“We need to get out of here,” Rori says, glancing over her shoulder to see pedestrians peeking in at us from down the alley. “More Black Ones could be close. Kembry, can you carry him?” She nods my way, and just as I’m about to protest being lifted by a fae, Kembry’s remarkably strong arms wrap around my middle, and his silver wings start fluttering us off the ground.

I cry out in protest, my legs flapping at nothing—as if that can help me find land.

“Hold still,” Kembry says, his voice hot on my pointed ear. “You’ll make us fall.”

The idea of plummeting doesn’t sound so awful. I know I can catch myself, or at least land as nimble as a cat. I even ponder the idea of letting Kembry struggle a little after leaving me to the wolves like that.

Petty desires aside, the idea of more Black Ones coming for me if I hit the ground alone makes me cross my arms over my chest and still.

Along for the ride, I frown as low-hanging clouds whip at my face. I gasp when we suddenly dip under a very large gryphon who doesn't seem to watch where it's going. Something Kembry calls a skytrain zips past us, too. It reminds me of the train we rode underground, but it flies through the air with a number of compartments he calls cabs.

"Why didn't we take one of them to the city?" I ask. "It looks much more fun and would have a better view than the underground."

"They only operate for inner city travel. The underground railways are for cross-kingdom."

I grunt in understanding, though I don't actually get it. I can't remember coming to a place like this before. The tall buildings that reach the clouds have windows that reflect our figures as we fly. Seeing myself secured in Kembry's grasp makes me frown. I appear so helpless.

The flight is much longer than I would have liked, but I don't ask where we're going. My mind is too caught up in the knowledge that Sheva is cursed. Cursed because of my bloody kiss and that dreaded chaos swarming inside me.

I should never have agreed to help the True Fae King. I should never have come *here*.

The thoughts are still on my mind when Kembry and the others finally lower back to solid ground. Though, it's not actually ground, but the branches of huge trees reminding me of the ones that grow in the Coeval Islands we passed. Small buildings appear within the boughs. When I look down through them, I notice a building around the trunks.

"It's a Faerie Inn," Rori says when she glances my way. My confusion must be plain as day on my face. "They accommodate all kinds of us," she says as we walk down a long, thick branch towards a door.

Inside, a small desk with a clerk awaits us. The worker is a pale, yellow faerie with wings the same pale yellow. Her long hair is tied above her head like horns, and a sharp tooth smile beams when she sees us.

"Welcome to Faerie Inn!" Her gaze lands on me, and the grin dissipates to a frown. I suddenly wish Finny was on my shoulders and not a torn shred of cloth. Ambr has him bunched in her arms, I realize, surprisingly glad we didn't just leave him in the snow.

"The elf's with us," Rori says firmly. "He will be of no trouble."

"He is Fae Bound?" The yellow faerie asks, and I freeze at what that statement might mean.

“Yes,” Rori confirms, and now I’m all the more curious. I open my mouth to press for explanation, then clamp it shut again because the yellow faerie starts digging around in her drawer for something. Keys. Long silver keys. She hands one to Rori, one to Kembry, and one to Kip. Moments later, we’re splitting up into twos and scampering off to disappear into the tree-house inn.

“What in the name of the gods is Fae Bound?” I ask Rori the first chance I get.

She swallows hard and uses the key to open a large wooden door that has flowers growing out from it. “It’s what you are.”

She steps inside, and I follow, slamming the door behind me. “What I am is a demon. And you said I’m under a spell—cursed. Was it a fae who put this spell on me?”

“No!” Rori cries, and her silver wings flutter at her back in frustration. “Being Fae Bound has nothing to do with that curse or your imprisonment. We didn’t throw you in there. I promise.” She draws an x on her chest and touches her forehead in a gesture I don’t understand. I simply guess it means she’s swearing on her life, and on her honor as a fae, that she speaks the truth... In fact, I *know* that’s what she’s doing.

I’m almost stunned to realize I *do* understand her fae gesture, that I nearly miss her next words. “Fae Bound means you made a promise to us. Which you did. You

promised to help capture the Human Fae King. Your word on this matter is binding among the fae. In that..." She pauses and swallows deeply, as if afraid to carry on. "In that you cannot break your word or suffer severe pain by way of death. Except you aren't mortal, so it would be eternal torture worse than that prison."

A dark gloom rises up in me, keeping my feet still. My teeth sharpen and my claws jut out. I shiver with the desire to cut her throat for the trickery done to me. How could I have been so stupid, so blind?

"It's not a big deal," she assures me, but I can feel her binding magic reaching out, brushing my flesh if I happen to lurch forward and act on my savage instincts. "Capturing the Human Fae King should be simple for you. You're not like us."

I laugh, because this is just too absurd. "Did you see what he did to me? To *us*? With just magic, he pinned us all against a wall and *hammered* us with a force that broke *bones* again and again! You think that is simple?"

Rori's shoulders fall. "It will be, Sen. I promise." She crosses her heart and taps her brow again—binding her words. "The moment you get your memory back, the moment you know everything that you are, you will have no trouble fulfilling your end of the bargain. The second the agreement is fulfilled, and I promise, you want him just as much as we do, you will be free of your Fae Bond. There is no trick about it."

Clenching my sharp teeth, I shiver, still wanting to devour her. But there's something in me, buried deep and fighting for its freedom, that knows she speaks the truth.

I growl deeply, making tiny cups on a little table in the room rattle.

"Get out," I tell her, and my voice is just as deep as my growl. Rori doesn't move for a moment, just watches me like a mother, sorry for scolding their kid.

"I said. Get. Out." On the back of my words, a deep vibration of power surges from me and Rori visibly shudders. Her eyes widen at the sensation, and she bows slightly before obeying my command. The door latches at her back, and I know she waits outside like the guard she was on the ship.

In her absence, my anger doesn't fizzle, but I know there's no getting rid of Rori, not with how deep I am in this mess. Still, just having her out of the room is enough for me to at least retract my claws and dull my teeth.

Sauntering over to the little table with the cups that rattled, I study them for a moment, taking in their delicate drawings of woodland creatures. A heady smelling herb brews in the teapot beside it. A complimentary tea from the inn, I presume.

I grind my very dull teeth, thinking about the way I kissed the princess, how I've cursed her. Rage boils

inside. Mixed with the thought of being Fae Bound. I can't stand the sleight of hand pulled on me.

I lift the tea pot and thrust it across the room, letting the clay shatter in a very satisfying clang. The tea bursts across the wall and seeps to the floor, filling the room with an intense smell of roses.

With that smell, all I can think of is Sheva... She visited me so many nights when I thought hunger would get the best of me, when I was sure I would starve to death. She would watch me with those ice-blue eyes. Sometimes she would speak. Because of her visits, I had hope.

Death is how I repay her?

No, there has to be a way to help her. Some sort of solution to make this right. Demons might be soul suckers, but perhaps there's a way to reverse the effects of our bites.

I PEEK my head outside the room's door to find Rori sitting against the floor, one knee risen gracefully so her arm can rest on it. Her head is tilted back and her eyes closed. I wonder momentarily at how she could sleep out here. Then I think of the skill she had in that alley fighting the Human Fae King, and I know she'd have a blade drawn before I could blink if need would have it.

"Rori," I hiss, and her eyes flare open.

"Yes, Prince?"

"Come in." I push the door open wider and walk away, expecting her to follow. She does.

"What else happens when a demon doesn't finish a soul? I know you said the person goes demented. But there's more to it. There has to be."

Rori nods and folds her hands behind her back. Her orange eyes skim the room, taking in the broken teapot, which I don't feel an iota regretful about. I go to sit on the narrow sill of the window and look through the tree branches beyond, trying to see the city streets below. They are so far away, I can barely make out the people walking there, even with my magnificent sight.

"Her soul will pass through you, slowly," Rori finally answers. "What you've done is plant the chaos from yourself into her. It will eat away at the goodness of her soul—the human magic there. The chaos will pull that power through you and into the Infernal Realms. There it will feed the God of Chaos and strengthen his power."

"Is there a way to undo that?"

Rori takes in a deep breath, making her green cheeks puff out. She blows the air back out hastily, flattening the cheeks once more. "For most, to reverse the effects, they would just kill the demon. It is said that when a demon is killed, every soul they devoured is freed from the Infernal Realms, allowed to rest in peace on the Dead Islands. But you are a Demon Prince. Simply killing you is not an option."

"What else can be done?"

"According to the laws of the Gods, the soul is not bound to the Infernal Realms until it is fully consumed. So, theoretically, one could travel to the Infernal

Realms and fight to retrieve the partially eaten soul. Then it could be brought back to its rightful body.”

“And that is all that can be done?”

“That is all I know, at least.”

I watch her with a narrowed gaze, reading the twitch of her wings and the slight downturn of her lips. I do not think she lies.

“Undoing a feeding was never the aim of my demon studies,” Rori says. “I admit, the Black Ones might know more than us. And in fact, they might be working on a way to save your princess as we speak. If I may, I advise you to focus on the reason we’re here. Saving the Coeval Islands is our first and most important goal.”

She raises her green hand to silence the protest I want to bark. “Your fate is tied up with us, Sen. You are Fae Bound. If all this goes wrong, you are in as much trouble as we are.”

My teeth sharpen at the knowledge, and I grind those points together, wishing all the more I had been smarter than to make a deal with the fae.

“You may leave,” I say, and Rori doesn’t try to resist.

In her absence, I stare out the window, watching the sun cast shadows through the leaves, which, I suddenly realize, are lush and green despite the fact that it’s winter in the city.

I don’t move an inch, letting the chill outside the

windowpanes try to seep into my flesh, try to chill that which can't be frozen in me.

My mind doesn't think for the longest time. It goes blank, and I feel like the statue I would often become in the prison, silent and starved. Only now, where that empty, nagging need for sustenance once was, it's satisfied.

When I do venture to think, it's only about Sheva and her fate and the way her lips felt. I remember their warmth against mine, and the taste of her mouth and blood and those emotions. Such deep sorrow swarms in the depths of her. Part of me aches to think of what she went through to feel such turmoil. Whatever hurt her so badly, I want to destroy it. I want to take all her pain away. Though, if I had eaten all her turmoil, would it have helped?

I can feel her soul when I think about it. It's soft and tender, and cold. It seeps slowly through the chaos in my chest, like a wisp of light floating through a black hole.

If only I could sever the connection and end the pull for good. Would I save her from more torment? Or would I cause her more pain?

Darkness settles outside with the coming of night. Still, I sit on the sill. Still, I ponder her.

A tug comes at the very core of me, and I jerk to attention, closing my eyes to notice it more fully. The

tug is like a string attached to my heart. My body remains sitting in the window, but my spirit follows the pull through darkness, through a void, until I slam against a sheet of coarse fabric, refusing to let me pass.

My claws form, slicing at the fabric as the need to follow that pull intensifies. The fabric won't tear. Growling, I look through the large pores forming in the fabric as my consciousness pushes through it, and then I see her: The princess, floating on her back in the void.

"Sheva!" I say, but she doesn't move. She just floats like a specter lost in a deep, enchanted sleep.

"Sheva," I say again, my voice melodic and cooing, as if the tone alone could pull her out of her slumber.

"Look at me," I beg, only after saying the words do I remember the cloth still separates us.

Her eyes, those dazzling pools of blue, flash open. For a second, they take in the surroundings, confused by what she finds. Then her gaze lands on me, and I press my arm hard against the fabric. It forms to my fingers and muscles like a glove, but I can't break through.

Still, I see her so clearly now. If I could only reach half an inch more, I could brush away the tear that trickles down her cheek.

I pull my arm back. The need to get to her claws through my chest like a desperate warning. I press my

face forward, opening my mouth wide, letting my sharp teeth form, and try to bite my way through.

"You can't run from it," I tell her, as if she doesn't already know the death the chaos has started in her. "He won't evade me for long. Once I get my claws in him, I will come for you. Whatever it takes."

Finally, the curtain tears, and I tumble through it, falling straight towards Sheva and her wide, fearful gaze. *Don't be afraid!* I want to scream, but I'm falling so fast. I want her to know I will do whatever I can to help, but I already tumble past her. "I'm coming for you," I promise.

My spirit slams back into my body, and I find myself staring out the window again. Darkness is beyond, but morning teases its arrival along the eastern sky.

"Rori," I say as I walk towards the door. Flinging it open, I find she sleeps in the hall once more. "We need a plan." She rubs at her sleepy orange eyes. "We're getting that Human Fae King. This ends today."

AS IF MY venture to speak with Rori was a floodgate, all seven fae on this mission flood into my room. Two sit on the bed I haven't touched. One has a needle and thread and is mending the shredded fabric I know to be Finny. My heart almost breaks for him. Almost.

Two other fae sit at the table with the clay cups and no teapot, as that's still a shattered mess across the room. Seeing this, Rori disappears, announcing that she'll grab a teapot from the other room. I couldn't care less, but by the expression and relief I smell in the other fae, it matters a lot to them.

The last two fae to find seats are Kembry and Ambr. They both perch themselves on the mantle of a makeshift fireplace I've all but ignored.

When Rori returns, she balances a number of other

mugs precariously in her arms and passes them out to the others.

"Is tea some sort of fae fetish?" I ask from the windowsill I'm still perched on.

"Every fae starts the day with tea," Kip says, as if it's common knowledge.

"You were boarded up in your cabin so much on the ship you didn't notice," Ambr says.

"That still doesn't explain why you drink it."

"Must there be a reason for everything?" Rori asks, a slight chuckle in her tone. "But if you must know, it's our sort of first-meal. The way you drink blood, we drink tea. Albeit, you don't need to feed nearly as often as we need our morning cup of herbs."

"It gives you vitality?" I ask.

"Yes," Kembry says, sipping from the steaming cup Rori poured him. It's almost funny to see such a big fae perched on the mantle, thoughtlessly swinging his legs, with a small teacup in his large grasp.

"Then what in blazes is in it? All I smell is roses."

"Any kind of flower," one of the other fae says. This one I don't know the name of. "We need at least three cups of flower tea a day. At least to stay tip top. Is it not the same for you?"

"You know it's not, Tin," Ambr barks from the mantle, brow pinched. Unexpectedly, she throws something small at Tin's head. I don't know where she got it,

but it bonks the apparently ignorant faerie in the head. Tin grimaces, rubbing a tiny gash that bleeds deep green. It smells so inviting, I almost move to lick it.

Luckily, I've fed enough lately to show restraint and just watch the blood smear.

"You didn't have to stone him," Rori scolds her sister.

Ambr's shoulder twitches with a shrug. "He didn't have to be so stupid, either. He knows better."

I catch a small glare from Tin, but find it fascinating that he doesn't protest.

"He's supposed to know everything about me?" I ask Ambr, somehow feeling like I need to defend Tin's honor. How was he supposed to know I don't drink flower tea? It's not like we've met, other than distant observation on a ship, of course.

Ambr stares me down, and though I can see a retort forming behind those green fae eyes, she bites her tongue.

"We've all studied demons," Rori says. But even as she says it, there's a strange sort of fog that gathers in the room. I can smell it in everyone's emotions. Some of the fae are on edge, like they want to scream something in my face. Others are just waiting for me to wake up and realize...something I don't know.

Their auras are overwhelming, and just to calm the atmosphere a bit, I breathe through my nose subtly and

suck in all their mixed feelings. It's a sour taste, and I wish for some blood to wash it down with.

"Well then," I finally say. "Since I know I can't press any of you for whatever this is," I gesture to the air, "how about we make a plan? Getting this Human Fae King is at the top of my to do list. That way, once complete, I can get away from you all and try to solve that other problem I caused. You know, when you all left me for dead in the streets." I pause with a sly grin. "No hard feelings, by the way. I would have done the same for you. But then again, I didn't know I was Fae Bound at the time." None of them meet my gaze, and I can feel how torn they are about it. It strikes me as strange, because they seem to care an inconceivable amount about me.

"Well," I press, "let's make a plan. How are we going to capture this guy? And please don't say using me as bait. That already failed."

"It wasn't just to use you," Kembry says, breaking the silence. "We had hoped that if you saw him, you'd *remember*."

"Shh," Rori hisses.

I glower at her, then at Kembry. "Remember what?"

"We can't tell you," Rori says. "You have to break the spell yourself. Now, Tin," Rori faces him. "Let's show Sen what it is we know."

Tin wastes only a second to gulp the rest of his tea.

The small gash on his face is slowly clotting, and I try not to stare at it while he leaps from the bed. On his feet, he sets his cup in the space he left. Standing before us all, he draws his hands apart from each other in a spiral motion. Sparkles of silver and green light dance from his fingers and pictures appear in the space between them.

“Whoa, wait,” I say, studying Tin’s eyes. They are green like the other fae, not strange and exotic like Rori’s orange. “You’re not a Jäyûn. How can you do that?”

“It’s Coeval Fae magic,” Tin says. “We can all show our memories if we want to.”

“This is a memory?” I look back at the picture and recognize what I stare at. The Human Fae King. I’d recognize him anywhere after yesterday. His creamy skin, tinged with green, is a dead give away. And that rich black hair to match his dark eyes... He’s unmistakable.

Tin waves his hands across the air to show me different images of the Human Fae King. Some are when he was younger—twelve, according to Tin. It was when the young king moved to Jasikx to live with the royal family here, seeking refuge from the attack that had taken place in Coeval. I remember Rori saying it was during that attack his dad, the late Human Fae King, had died.

Tin shifts through more images, and continues to explain things, like how the local royals call the Human Fae King “Zi” and how he’s grown up with the humans here: Princess Sheva and her elder twin brothers.

When the images pass by of Zi and Sheva together, I can’t explain the boiling anger that rises up in me. It’s clear Tin’s spied on them for years. There are memories of Sheva and the king training together, of them becoming Black Ones together, even going to coffee shops and just living.

I want to rip off this the Human Fae King’s head and send it to the True Fae King in a sack.

Tin slides the images away, and I’m able to retract the claws I didn’t know I had unleashed. The image I see now stops my heart. It’s of a dragon. Tin calls her Csharynn and shares her with me by showing two images, one of her in a humanoid form where her skin is a blue-gray and her features are dressed in deep blue scales. The other image is of her in her true dragon form: a long, lean body donned with those same dark blue scales. The tail is a sharp tip. Without Tin saying so, I know the tail has a razor edge, like a sword. But more than that, I know that tail can cut through a being and sever their spirit from their body.

I don’t say this out loud, and Tin doesn’t mention it.

For a few long moments, all I can do is gaze into the images of this horrible Csharynn. A deep, agonizing

pain squirms in the very depths of my being. I can't pin-point what it belongs to or why it's there, but I know I want Tin to get rid of his memories floating before us.

"Stop," I say, standing to my feet in a movement so fast it makes Tin shiver. His wings flutter nervously at his back, and I wonder if he fears I'll eat him.

"She's the Human Fae Kings' friend. I get it. I don't need to know more."

"R-right," Tin says, swiping his hand to make the image disappear.

Cold nervousness leaks from every fae in the room, even Rori. I glance at my hands, seeing sharp claws. Running my tongue over my teeth, they're sharp.

"Sorry," I say and turn away to compose myself. With my back to them, the fae seem to sigh a moment in relief. Except after the sigh passes, there's anything but relief left behind. More like...disappointment.

"So we know the Human Fae King is a freaking powerhouse of magic. He lives in a creepy castle on the edge of a volcano guarded with booby traps, and somehow we're supposed to capture him. I have yet to hear the plan of how you think we will do that."

Ambr answers. "Nearly every morning, he would leave the castle with Princess Sheva. They go on patrols in the city to hunt demons. They're really good at it, by

the way.” She says that with what I think to be admiration.

“A little respect, please?” I say to her, gesturing to myself. “It feels wrong to admire someone who takes joy in killing my kind.”

“Right,” Ambr’s lips twitch in a way that seems amused, more than respectful.

“What my sister is trying to say,” Rori cuts in, “is that the original plan was to intercept him during the hunts. But now that you’ve severely injured his hunting partner, I’m not so sure he’ll be heading out.”

My face flattens into an unamused expression. “I don’t need to be reminded of that.”

“Right,” Rori says, and I don’t hear much hope in her tone. Still, I don’t feel the desire to hurt her like I do when Ambr makes comments of the same kind. Strange.

“The new plan,” Kembry says, and I swivel my attention to him. “Is to play a waiting game. We can’t just break into the castle. The Human Fae King knows we’re here for him. We’ve been trying to bring him home for years. We have eyes on the castle at all times. When he leaves—and at some point, he *will*—our spies will send word. Then we’ll go out to intercept him.”

OUR PLANNING COMES to a quick end after Kembry's "waiting game" statement, and somehow, I find myself drawn into a game of *catches* with him and Kip. The morning quickly rolls by, and the fae drink three more cups of flower tea, each. After the third cup, they all take turns slitting their wrists and letting their blood drip into a cup. I watched with surprising restraint as they pass it around the room, and finally give it to me.

Lifting the cup to my lips, I look at them all over the brim, and find my heart warm with a strange sort of camaraderie. I blink the idea away, not ready to let them find a place in my heart. I am Fae Bound, after all. How do I know they won't betray me again?

Sinking into myself, I suck the blood down, one delectable morsel after another.

That one fae keeps stitching Finny back together, and Rori and Ambr spend some time doing each other's hair. Some of the fae guys who keep their hair long even help each other braid their green locks. Their finished results are much less elaborate than what Rori and Ambr do to each other. By the time I'm done drinking the cup of green blood, Rori's orange eyes set their sights on me, and I have a deep inner knowing I'm about to be pulled into something I'm going to hate.

"We have to do your hair!" Rori says. "Those braids I put in a few days ago are coming loose. Let me fix it."

"Ah, no!" I say, rising to my feet as she steps forward. Ambr is right on her tail, smiling wickedly. "I refuse to end up looking like a she-fae."

"Oh, we won't do that to you," Ambr says, and I highly doubt that's true.

"Not happening," I reiterate, claws drawn. Still, they pursue me, and I wonder at how crazy these two sisters really are.

"He's out!" comes Tin's voice from across the room. All eyes turn to him. "The Human Fae King is heading into the city."

I don't ask how he knows, just assume he's our direct line to the spies they spoke of earlier.

"Let's move," Rori says, the need to do my hair gloriously forgotten.

The one fae stitching Finny rises, replacing her

sowing needle with a sword. From the other side of the room, Tin throws me a drab, dark blue cloak and tells me to wear it in Finny's place. I put it on without question as the others start to leave. I'm surprised to find the new cloak doesn't squeeze me tightly or try to play any pranks. It's just a lifeless cloak.

For some reason, I'm disappointed, and slide Finny a glance where he lies on the rumpled bed. "Get better soon," I tell him, then finally follow the others out of the treehouse inn. I stop on the edge of a branch and witness their silver wings take them into the air. In the distance, I can see the onyx castle and the volcano it's carved into. I expect that's the way we're heading, and so I look down, quickly mapping a way through the branches, fully intent on following the fae on foot. With my dexterity and speed, I know I can make it out of this tree and still keep up with them. I leap, fully intent on catching a branch below, but before I can make contact, arms snag me from the air.

The same fae curse Rori uttered earlier crosses my lips, and I glance up to see Kembry's face. "You again," I say with a frown, folding my arms across my chest.

"I know you're excited," he says with a sly twitch to his mouth. "You always are."

"You speak as if you know me."

A short pause, in which I can smell the hesitancy in his emotions. "Maybe I do."

The traffic in the sky keeps me from asking him to elaborate. We dodge mostly gryphons, again. I swear they're creatures that don't know how to watch out for others. Skytrains are still active and a few dragons soar on the winds, too, making me think of that black and blue one named Csharynn.

Each one of my sharp teeth wants to sink into her flesh, but another part of me, a part I don't choose to acknowledge, would like to flee the realm, putting as much space as demonly possible between us.

The flight is only slightly shorter than yesterday, which isn't much. Dangling from Kembry's arms makes my armpits sore, and I gladly leap the last hundred feet from his hold on to the concrete. *Bless'ed land!* I could dive down and kiss it. But something sharp and aromatic snags my senses. All the joy I have at being on the ground flees as I take in a deep breath and savor the fragrance: candied lilacs and roses coated in the utmost misery. Beyond that is the crisp, raw fragrance of a soul I've already tasted.

"You didn't say Sheva was here, too," I hiss, mouth watering with the need to finish her. I clench my jaw and swallow hard, forcing away the cravings.

"There isn't time," Rori says. "We have to go."

She's off running. Some fae still fly but I follow Rori on foot. We burst out into a street and there's people. So many people. Humans and fae and elves and all sorts

of magical vehicles strolling the streets. There are also coffee shops and boutiques. I can scarcely take it all in as I spin to my side and follow Rori.

It's then I see him, the Human Fae King. He bears a crown this time, and for some reason, seeing it makes my gut twist in disgust. I can't say why, but it feels abominable for him to wear that. Perhaps it's because I know how much he betrays his people by letting them suffer. All the while, he hides here in this human realm.

At the moment I notice the young king, he sees me and yells at the two with him, "Run." His voice rings in my ears, clawing at my eardrums because it sounds so familiar. No matter how hard I try, I can't place it.

Sheva takes off in a mad sprint without looking back at me and Rori. She listens to the Human Fae King like his command is law. It makes me hate him all the more, but part of me is just glad she's alive and capable of running. It trumps the desire to rip out the king's heart.

There's a last person with them, a blond-haired boy. Tin showed us him in the memory reel. Zevikx Ginsted was his name...a friend of Sheva's. I'm not sure if that should make me relieved or defensive yet, and since I'm now in a high-speed chase down a sidewalk, I decide to put my judgment about him on hold for the moment.

With my demon speed, I run past Rori and catch up

to the Human Fae King and his small posse just as they turn into an alley.

“You can’t run forever,” I say at them, my voice calm and demanding.

“And you think you can?” the king asks, his tone as cold as the snow under our feet.

“I have no desire to *run*,” I scoff, picking up on the emotions the three emanate. Sheva smells confused, or at least that’s what I can pick up under the scent of chaos inside rotting her soul. Zevikx smells vigorous and ready to engage if the opportunity arises. But he also smells...different...old. I don’t have time to ponder what that means, because my attention snaps back to the Human Fae King. He’s emanating a fragrance of utter irritation.

Strange.

Why would he be *irritated* with me?

Then something clicks inside me, like a key falling into place. A crack breaks through the darkness of the spell binding my memories. Nothing comes through, except a knowing that the Human Fae King holds the answers.

Words tumble from my mouth, drudged up from the knowing. “Give me back what is mine.” I sound ominous, foreign. Just as I speak, Sheva grips her head between her hands like it hurts to hear me.

Her hiss of pain rings in my ears and a dagger flies

at me. I don't see who threw it, just know that it comes for my face. I bend at my waist and catch the dagger out of the air. My hand stings where the blade slices my palm, and black blood drips to the snow below me.

I don't think, just hurdle the blade back at the Human Fae King. He jumps out of the way, and the dagger goes straight for Sheva's face. My heart leaps into my throat, and I move as if I could catch the blade before it strikes her.

There's no need.

She drops to the ground, and the blade flies past her head.

There's no time to watch her recover, though I hear her scream when the king engages me. Seconds pass as a sword made of black smoke magic slices in front of me. I dive out of the way, my demon speed giving me the upper hand.

Flashes of green flesh appear, and I know the fae have joined the fight. There's a voice in the back of my mind that tells me to tackle the Human Fae King, but I don't listen to it. I take the moment of the fae's distracting arrival to cut through the commotion and pull Sheva out of the fray.

I pin her back against the alley wall, trying to keep her safe. It's then I finally let myself take her appearance in and comprehend that her hair is platinum blonde. Yesterday it was brown. I want to know why

she doesn't wear her natural black locks, but the battle behind us makes the question irrelevant.

Her eyes squeeze shut tight, and all thought of changing hair fizzle as agony billows off her like a roasted fragrance. This close, I can see the bright light inside her split with black—the chaos. It carries a disgusting fragrance I'd compare to rotting flesh.

My heart breaks knowing I did this. The least I can do is help ease some of the misery. I touch her temple and let the pain devouring her seep into me.

Her ice-blue eyes—witch eyes—open, and there's calmness there. Dare I say, peace. I can taste it on the tip of my tongue, but I refuse to eat such a beautiful emotion from her. After everything she's been through, she deserves this good one.

The battle behind me clambers on, and I remember we aren't alone, that the Human Fae King is here. "I told you he can't run from me. Stop trying to intervene."

Her keen brow narrows, and she struggles against my arm pressing her to the wall. I lean in closer, unwilling to let her get caught in a fight with the fae. I can't guarantee they won't hurt her.

My eyes lock with hers, and she must realize she's no match for my demon might, because she stops fighting. Her breath brushes my lips, and though the battle behind me rages, I don't hear it.

“They’re not afraid to kill you, if you keep getting in the way,” I say.

I expect her to retort, to argue. But just like the silence I often received in prison, she doesn’t speak. She just looks at me.

The longer I look at her, the more my vision turns bleary and the surrounding noise disappears. It’s replaced by the song of a forest. Birds singing in trees and wind rustling in the leaves. Silver sparkles trail through the air, created by wings, and there’s a rushing waterfall.

“Sen,” I hear my name, and turn to see the man who called me, but before his form can come into view, the vision disappears.

Black smoke looms around me, so thick I can’t breathe. Screams split the air, and a predatorial urge makes a growl rise up from deep in my chest.

I whirl, partly enraged that my memories were once again stolen from me. Another part of me is just *done* with this annoying young king.

I lurch for him through the gloom, my demon eyes seeing through the darkness. Every time I’m close to grabbing him, his smoke magic swings at me like a whip, and I’m forced to dodge or burn.

I don’t know how much time passes, but a whistle pierces the air, and I know it’s Rori who gives the call.

I growl at the Human Fae King, not ready to give up.

However, the smell of fae blood is thick and heavy in my nose.

There's pain in the air. Pain that comes with an impending death.

Someone grabs my arm, and I glance back to see Kembry. He jerks me to his chest, and we're in the air before I have a chance to find the one who's hurt.

"I can help them," I hiss, looking down at the alley as we float above. I can't see through the smoke anymore.

"No," Kembry says in my ear. "You mean more to us safe, not captured."

"Go back to the place," Rori yells at us from the roof of a building nearby. Kembry doesn't argue, and I don't ask what "the place" is. I just look behind us for as long as I can, watching the fae escape the darkness. Then, as the darkness fades, a green figure rises on silver wings. A black stake nips her wing, and she falls.

"No!" I scream, noticing Ambr's face right before she disappears behind a building.

“GO BACK!” I scream, but Kembry doesn’t turn. I fight him as he flies on. My resistance makes him dip and sag, but he doesn’t let me go. Even as my claws slice him, and burning tears sting my eyes, he grips me tightly against his chest and won’t let me go.

I don’t understand the rise of emotion or why losing Ambr makes me so distraught, but it does. I feel like my heart is being ripped from my chest and sliced into pieces, then returned behind my ribs with only parts remaining.

“I’m sorry,” Kembry says in my ear, and I can hear the sorrow in his own words. I can smell the sadness in his heart. Snow begins to fall around us, and at some point, Kembry brings us down.

I glance around to see where we are, finding leafless

trees loom over us. Paths wind through them, looking like previous snowfalls have been shoveled off their tops. Some pedestrians walk by wearing thick winter coats and hats. The sight of them makes me lift my cloak's hood, remembering how Rori wants me to blend in.

I'm silent as the snow falls and Kembry doesn't try to strike up a conversation. His arm drips green blood through his coat...where I sliced him. There's another gash on his cheek from where the king or Zevikx or Sheva got him.

My wrist is at my mouth, and only for a second do I consider how weird this might look to the mom and child playing in the snow nearby. Still, I bite through the flesh under my palm to draw blood and hold it out to Kembry.

"No," he says. Modesty ripples through his emotions. I shove my wrist to his lips before the gash can heal and the black blood stops flowing.

He spits against the taste, still unpalatable for him, apparently. Even so, some makes it into him, and the wounds in his flesh mend.

"You don't have to do that," Kembry says. "Your blood is precious."

I scoff at his statement. "It heals. And we already lost friends back there. I won't have you bleed to death."

Kembry opens his mouth to say something, but

words don't get to come. More fae land in the woods near us. Tin and Rori and only two others. I already expected to miss Ambr, but...

I glance at the sky, hoping to see Yen's grandson. No one else comes.

"They're dead?" I ask, though I don't need to. Another piece of my heart is already missing. I already know the answer.

When did I let these fae mean something to me?

Rori nods. Her jaw clenches, and her orange eyes glisten with the need to fight back tears. She opens her mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. She sucks in a tight breath, and I can't help myself. I move with my demon speed to stand before her, and then, moving with the speed of a mortal, I pull her to my chest. Her head rests against me, and her tears finally fall.

"I'm sorry," I say as my chest dampens with her tears.

"She was only nineteen," her muffled voice says, and then she squeezes me tightly, as if holding me will ease her burden. The agony emanating from her is fierce, like a devouring monster, but she fights it like the warrior she is. Her agony doesn't grow strong enough to devour my senses, but still, I breathe in some of her pain, let it feed me and ease her burden.

I feel the sadness in each fae around me, especially Tin. He was rather close to Kip. I sip off the tip of their

sorrow, letting them have the chance to breathe. Moments pass, and I smell the salt in their tears. I think of the harm the Human Fae King has brought to them. First their dying land. Now this? Are they not his people? Does he not *care*?

I want to rip that crown from his head and take his head from his shoulders.

This isn't how a king should be.

Sucking in a deep breath, Rori pushes away from me. She wipes the tears from her cheeks and squares her shoulders. Locking her gaze with mine, she says with iron in her tone, "Ambr knew the dangers." She turns to the others. "As we all do. This isn't over."

"No, it's not," I agree, hearing the rumble of might in my voice. It makes Rori's gaze flash back to me, and the scent that comes off her turns hopeful. "What did you just say?" she asks.

I blink, confused. "I agreed with you."

"No," Rori shakes her head. "The way you said it. The tone you used."

I can smell the other's emotions twitch. The sadness at losing their friends doesn't leave, but there's the strangest, most bizarre churning of hope in them. "Did something happen to you during the battle?" Rori presses. "Did you see something. A memory, perhaps?"

Clearing my throat, I tilt my head and think back to what happened. "I, ah. I pulled Sheva out of the fray.

She was hurting and when I looked at her, I saw a meadow...and someone called me Sen."

Someone behind me gasps. I think it's Tin.

"Did you see their face?" Rori asks. "Did you see who called you that?"

I shake my head, trying to force my way to the secrets locked behind the spell I can't pass. Though, gratefully, the spell is still cracked in my mind. "No... I honestly don't know what I saw." I stop trying to push against the memories. "But with how much you all hope in me, I wish I did."

Rori shakes her head and pats my shoulder. "This was progress. More than anything we've had in years." Her eyes glisten with such yearning, such expectation, that I want to flee in fear of letting her down. "You said it was the princess who triggered the memories. Not the king?"

I nod.

"Fascinating," Kembry says.

"Anyone going to tell me why they are so excited about a memory I don't remember?" I ask.

They remain silent, though some have to bite their tongue to hold themselves back.

"Didn't think so," I say with a sigh.

"You have to be the one to break the spell," Tin says, and I'm surprised he's the one to remind me this time. I'm used to it being a Rori thing.

“Sure thing,” I say, feeling lost as ever. “So, what do we do now?”

Rori runs a hand through her hair, through the braids Ambr had woven mere hours ago. “We need to visit the dead,” she says calmly, though the faintest of tremors shakes her tone. “They won’t rest among our family.” Her orange eyes find mine. “But we must be sure they pass on, to properly rest.”

I don’t argue. Nothing in me wants to deny these friends a proper goodbye. Though, I refuse to let Kembry carry me. I run along the streets and climb to the roofs of buildings. I use my demon speed to keep up with the fae as we return to the alley our battle took place.

There, among the snow and brick walls, loom two large trees with green trunks.

I jump from the roof to the snow-covered ground, listening to the whiteness crunch under my feet.

The trees are slimmer than the ones I saw in Coeval and they aren’t as tall, but they still reach past the three stories of the buildings they grow by. The one towards the back is Ambr. I don’t know how I can tell, but something about the way her deep, vibrant green leaves shimmer tells me so.

Kip is the one closest to me.

For a long moment, all I do is look at the trees the fae turned into. I take in the deep grooves of their bark,

the knotted twists of their boughs, and mourn for the family they left behind. It's an empty feeling in my chest, and I'm awed by how it feels like their shortened lives have stolen pieces of my own soul.

Rori sits in the branches of Ambr, leaning into the green bark. A tear drips silver from Rori's cheek and lands on the branch. A small, white flower blossoms there.

The others walk among the two trees, resting their hands on the bark and mouthing something incontestable even to my demon enhanced hearing. Their mixed emotions swarm over me: anger, sadness, remorse. I let them have their moment, don't take any of their pain. It feels like it would be an injustice to the ones who died if I did that now, at their graves.

Once each of the living fae has touched the trees, I step forward. My hand moves of its own accord. My palm rests flat against the trunk of Kip, and I close my eyes.

"Rest in peace with the wind of eternity through your leaves," I say.

A gasp comes from somewhere nearby. I open one eye to see Tin there, gawking at me. I close my eye again, feeling it wrong to speak anything—even a question—when my hand touches Kip's remains.

Keeping my eyes shut, I let some force flow through me. It's like the way I smell emotions, only slightly

different. I can feel the life in the tree, the transformation of Kip into this. There's still life here, no matter how different. Sorrow shivers through it, a deep knowing that he isn't home in the land of his kind. He is not resting in the graveyard of his family, not carrying the generational duty of the fae to serve the ones that come after.

"We will do what we can to bring you home," I tell the tree. Though I have no idea how such a task can be done.

"Sen, look." Tin's voice cuts through the silence, and I open my eyes. Still keeping my hand on the tree, I look to where Tin points. From the concrete ground, where the tree's roots grow thick and strong, a small version of the tree begins to burgeon. It bears tiny branches with tiny, bright green leaves.

"What is this?" I ask aloud.

"It's a sapling to bring him home," Tin says, and he steps forward to gently lift it by the roots. With it in hand, he rises.

"Ambr has one, too," Kembry says. He walks towards it, but Rori drops from the branches above to pick up her sister's little tree. "Part of them can come home," she says around tears and a lump in her throat that makes her words strangled. My own heart clenches at the rush of gratitude pouring off her.

"I take it this isn't a common thing," I say.

“No,” Rori voices, and turns to face me. Tears rush freely down her face. “It is not common.”

“Then why now?”

“In time,” Rori says. “You will know in time.”

“Ah, one of those things,” I sigh. It seems wrong to get frustrated in the presence of the dead, so I simply look up at the trees, watching their leaves shake in the wind, shimmering silver.

My gaze slides to where I pinned Sheva against the wall, where that memory started to form. “Why do you think meeting the princess has caused the spell to start breaking?”

I glance at Rori, because my question is addressed to her. She wipes her cheeks free of tears, but she doesn’t answer. “Tell me,” I insist, and I can hear the demand in my tone. “You know something you aren’t sharing. You hinted at it earlier. Tell me.”

She glances at the small tree of her sister. While brushing the tiny leaves with her fingers, I sense the struggle going on inside the fae: her sadness at her sister’s passing; her desire to spew every secret and throw them before me. I know how much she wants the spell I’m under broken, but she keeps her lips sealed on the matter. Finally, however, she does speak. “There’s a bond between you two. Not everyone can see it. Only some. Since I’m Jäyûn, I am of the ones more likely to notice it.”

“A bond?” I press.

She nods. “It’s like a cord connecting you to each other. It’s rare. I’ve never seen it in my lifetime. But I’ve heard of it before. Some call it heart mates or soul mates. I like to call it *fated*. But the cord isn’t exactly that. It’s not a guarantee that you are both meant to be together. It’s just that it often happens that way.”

I swallow hard, letting her words wash over me. *Is that why I would see Sheva in prison?*

“What’s strange about this,” Rori adds earnestly, “is that the cord is not just between you and her. I saw it before the battle started. In addition to the thread between you and her, there’s a thread from the princess to the Human Fae King.” My claws protrude at the idea, making me want to hunt the half-human down and kill him all the more. “And,” Rori continues, interrupting my thoughts of murder, “there is a cord from her to the other boy who was here. To her friend, Zevikx.”

I choke at the idea. “She is linked to three of us?”

Rori nods. “It is not that she chose such a fate. The gods have connected you all. I could not say why, but it’s clear your futures are woven together.”

I laugh dryly because this is so absurd. When I think of Princess Sheva, part of my very core feels empty without her presence to fill it. Now, Rori says two other guys are linked to her. Do they both feel the way I do?

It’s maddening to consider, but there is one thing I

know that's worse than the idea. "I care about her," I say and stop more words from tumbling out. It's shocking to hear them out loud, to realize they're true. I swallow hard and force myself to continue. "I've cursed her. You say her life is linked to mine—fated—and yet I can feel her soul passing through me to the Infernal Realms. I've doomed her."

Rori comes before me and places a hand—the one not cradling her sister's tree—on my shoulder. "I wouldn't give up just yet. You kissed her yesterday, and she's still alive now. A normal person would have died already. She's a fighter. There's still hope."

Shuddering at the swarm of emotions in me that I can't fully comprehend, I cling to Rori's words. I don't know how, but somehow, I have to free Sheva. Somehow, I will reverse what I did.

But first, I have to fulfill the promise I made to the True Fae King. I must no longer be Fae Bound. Considering how being around Sheva is able to break through the spell hiding my memories, I think I know a way to speed all this up.

“I NEED TO GET TO SHEVA,” I say to all the fae still standing under the trees.

For a moment, their green eyes just study me, and their wings twitch, confused, at their backs.

“You’re here for the Human Fae King,” I say. “If you help me get to Sheva, I think I can better get to him. Will you help me reach her?”

“Of course we can,” Tin says. “But it won’t be easy.”

Rori looks down the alley to the street where people walk idly by. “We should discuss this somewhere privately,” she says in a low voice, and I wonder what it is she senses that makes her on guard.

“Let’s go back to the Inn,” Kembry says. “We can all use some food, and we can make plans there.”

. . .

CRAMMING into the room I claimed for myself, all fae gather. The small trees of Ambr and Kip rest on the mantle above the fire, which now glows brightly to warm the fae. Apparently, it's chilly in the room, and they were near frozen from flying out in the snow. Small rivulets of ice melt off Rori's wings as she sits by me in the window. Kembry is at the table with one of the other fae. The other one I don't know the name of sits alone on the bed, mending Finny once more, while Tin stands before us all. The magic of his memories fills the space between his hands as he points out the castle's security. First there's a long, narrow bridge over a deep ravine. Lava flows at the base. Guards man the bridge at two gates, one at each end.

At the castle itself, there's numerous spells set about it that will trigger different hazards: a flurry of arrows, impaling spears, and my favorite, incinerating barriers. Oh, and let's not forget the lava tunnels.

"Is there not a secret escape passage for the Royal Family?" I ask, swallowing hard against the impossible task before us.

"We think that's the lava tunnels," Kembry says. "The Jasikx King probably has a way to make them traversable, but only when necessary. Otherwise, the lava cuts them off to anyone daring enough to try breaking in."

“So this is impossible?” I ask, feeling my determination to reach Sheva start fizzling with impeding defeat.

“To most everyone who exists in the realm, yes,” Tin says. “But for an immortal such as yourself, I’d say you have a chance.”

My ears perk at the insight. “Really?”

He shrugs with a nod—two conflicting gestures. “No matter what you run into, you can’t die. I’d say the worst you’ll have to face is pain...perhaps a lot of pain. Also, avoid being caught. You may be immortal, but, as you know, a prison is an alternative. From what I understand, if the King of Jasikx gets his hands on you, you won’t get away. He’s rumored to be a ruthless man since the queen was murdered.”

My heart stops at the words, and for a second, I don’t care about the death traps I’m supposed to get through. All I can think of is Sheva and her deep, brooding pain. Her mother is dead. That has to be the source of her sorrow. I don’t know why I didn’t ask more about her life. The fae probably know *many* things about the princess of Jasikx...but no. I want to hear about her from *her* lips. I want to know her because *she* wants me to know her.

It only seems right.

“So, Tin,” I say, bringing my thoughts back to the matter at hand. “How do you surmise I can pull this off?”

. . .

“YOU’RE ALMOST THERE,” Tin’s voice whispers in my ear as I run through the city. It’s dark now, as we decided it best to wait until nightfall before enacting our plans. Now, alone, I head towards the guarded onyx bridge leading to the castle. Before I left the inn, Rori cast a fae spell over my right ear, allowing me to hear anyone else who has the same spell. It reminds me a bit of what the jCrystal can do—connecting people on a chain of communication. But this is the fae version of it, and, I presume, how Tin is able to communicate with the spies I’ve never seen.

“I see it,” I whisper back, coming up to the end of a long road. There are no buildings this close to the bridge. Just trees that look black in the night and bare of leaves. A thin layer of snow blankets their empty branches. I hide behind their trunks as I take in the gate at the end of the bridge. My demon claws are already drawn, and I’ve left my feet bare. Cold snow melts under the soles of my feet, but the ice of the frozen substance doesn’t bother me. It just makes me aware that it’s there.

When a guard’s back is perfectly turned away, I dash through the shadows cast by the trees and drop down into the ravine, using my claws to dig into the side of the cliff. Moving just as fast as I did when I ran, I

maneuver myself to crouch under the bridge. Then I pause, listening to hear if any guards spot me.

There's nothing but their quiet conversation about something that recently transpired in the castle. I allow myself a moment to listen in, to hear them mention Sheva's name and something about a concert... She's a singer, I gather.

I force myself to move on, reminding myself I want to learn about her *from* her.

I continue my travels by digging my claws into the underside of the onyx bridge. My feet grip the smooth surface with a sticky substance Rori spelled them with. Like a cat using its claws to climb a tree, I scale the length of the very long bridge. My muscles don't mind the strain, and my claws don't lose their sharpness as I go.

Halfway across, I pause to lift my head and gaze at the river of molten orange and red that flows below me.

I have no fear, because I know I won't fall. It's what lies ahead that makes me on edge. Making it to the other end of the bridge, I use my claws to grab onto the cliff opposite where I started. I press myself against it, listening silently to the voices above. More guards wait on this end. There's also a large, onyx wall looming above the cliff, making an easy entrance from here impossible.

Guards patrol the top of the wall, so I wait as their forms moved in and out of view.

"The lava entrance should be a few feet away," Tin says, watching my struggle through an orb of shadowy light he has hovering near me. It's near invisible to my eyes, so I presume a mortal wouldn't see it at all.

Glancing down the cliff, I look for all the places lava gushes out of the side. Some magma rivers just flow out of the wall without any space to pass through. There are hundreds of those, filling the moat below. After a number of heartbeats, I begin to fear the tunnel I look for doesn't exist. Then I see it: A tunnel slightly larger than the others, and with a space at the top, which lava doesn't touch.

With a quick look up at the guards once more, I hold my breath and wait for the right moment. Then I rapidly scale the wall.

No arrows shoot my back. No shouts rise, and once I'm hidden by the hole, I let out my held breath with a sigh. "Phase one complete," Tin says in my ear, and I can hear the relief in his own tone.

"How many more fazes to go?" I ask as I start scaling the ceiling. Lava flows under me in this tiny cave, so close I can smell its heat. It's hard to breathe with how thick and hot the atmosphere is in here, so I lean into the immortal part of my being and press on. Appar-

ently, oxygen is just a commodity my body likes but doesn't need.

Small pieces of molten rock pop here and there. One jumps on my sleeve, scorching my flesh, and I hiss as it burns.

Gripping the wall with only three touch points, I shake the arm tentatively through the air, making the lava fall off as my skin mends itself. Seconds later, I make myself move faster, and scale the tunnel in a rapid dash of claws and sticky feet.

Relief washes over me when I come out the other side, standing in a cave that cuts through the underside of the volcano. I gasp in a deep breath of stale, oxygenated air and listen. All the while, the near invisible orb of light belonging to Tin hovers near my face.

A narrow path lays before me, and I walk it quickly. Nothing tries to jump out at me yet, but my senses are on high alert, listening for the booby traps I'm sure to find. A fork soon appears—one part leading upstairs and the other going deeper into the underground.

A tug at my feral instincts makes me pause, and I stop to listen again. Moaning comes in the distance, and though I should go straight up those stairs, I suddenly follow that sound, venturing deeper into the volcano.

It isn't long before I stop dead in my tracks, seeing cages of innumerable numbers in a large, open cavern.

Creatures of all kinds fill those cages: human, fae, elf, dragon...and things I've never seen before. Some are beautiful, some hideous beyond reason. Each one of them has black markings on their skin—words in a foreign, boxy alphabet I can't read.

So much pain and turmoil floats in the air, along with dull emptiness. It's like some of the creatures are aware of their suffering, and others have gone dead to it.

My spirit vibrates inside with intense anger for these poor creatures. Something in me says they didn't deserve to be trapped here, and something very wrong is happening. Before I can think straight, my foot moves forward and a burning in my heart makes me dare to free them. A sudden noise at the other end of the room draws my attention.

A door opens, and every part of my body freezes in shock. That shapeshifting dragon with gray-blue skin walks into the cavern wearing a dress of dark blue scales. My emotions fight inside me: part of me saying to kill her, the other reminding me that I'm here for Sheva.

I can't make myself move. I just watch as Csharynn approaches a cell. The door opens for her, and a creature that doesn't look like anything I've seen before steps out to greet her. Its body is burned beyond recognition, its skin flaking with ash.

“You need to get out of there,” Tin whispers in my ear. “She’s a monster. If she finds you, everything is over.”

His soft-spoken words break through my stupor, and, just as the dragon starts to turn my way, I dash back down the tunnel towards the stairs I previously ignored.

As I go, a sharp pain claws at my mind from the other side of that spell keeping my memories. There’s a glaring truth hiding there, desperate to make an appearance, but it can’t break through.

Growling, I run, all the more eager to find Sheva, to remember. Untouched by any booby traps I have yet to encounter, I reach the top of the stairs and stop at a door. A strange aura vibrates from the other side.

Taking a moment to gather myself, I let my senses reach out, prepare. And then I rip the door open.

Arrows shoot at me in a rapid flurry. I duck and spin and jump through them all.

One snags me in the leg as I leap over the last of them, and I snarl with the sting of it. When I land in a crouch, I see the remaining shafts of arrows stuck into the wall around the door or fallen on the steps beyond. It’s then I pull the arrow in my leg out and grunt with the agony that shoots through me. Just as quickly as the pain comes, the injury mends.

I continue on up another flight of stairs. A volley of

spears launches out of nowhere, and I leap up the wall to avoid them all. Back on the steps, I run again. Suddenly, a slew of swords protruding from the wall attack me next. Each I anticipate, hearing the mechanisms that make them move and reacting at just the right time. I run on, but suddenly two attacks happen at once. While I try to avoid one, I miss the other.

A crossing of two sword slice through my side, and I scream. My voice echoes through the tunnel, and I quickly shut my mouth. I don't need guards to know I'm here, and I hope beyond hope they have all their faith in these contraptions so that they don't bother patrolling this area.

Grinding my sharpened teeth together, I force myself forward, letting the blades slice through my middle. They tear through organs, flesh, and bone, ripping my shirt. I tumble forward on the other side, letting the blades linger behind me.

Pain shoots through my core as the immortal part of me ignites, mending the huge gap in my middle. The sound of my black blood dripping from the blades echoes in the darkness. My healing is silent as night, and in no time, my body is renewed, though my shirt is ruined.

Despite the success, a gnawing emptiness claws inside me, reminding me of all the times I starved in prison.

I swallow hard against the need, knowing I've used much of my inner resources to recover from that last injury. The lack of blood won't do me well for long.

Looking up, there's a stone entrance ahead. It appears different from the ones before, like it belongs to the onyx castle. I all but sigh in relief and run for it, moving a bit less quickly than before. My ears strain for the sound of any other contraption that might desire to do me in. None come as I step out into a dark hall. It's lit by torches glowing with faint fire that doesn't appear to consume the torch itself.

I've made it to the lowest levels of the castle.

My shoulders lower in relief, but my body trembles at the same time. My gut is still raw and needy.

"You'll have to find a way outside," Tin says in my ear, unaware of my growing weakness. "There's incinerating walls up ahead. Only the Jasikx king can take them down."

"I'd hate to burn all the flesh off my body," I say, knowing at this point I wouldn't heal from that kind of injury without more blood in me. "Not to mention I'd lose all my clothes. I don't want to show up to the princess nude."

Tin chuckles faintly at the comment, and I'm glad he doesn't know how frail I feel.

"There's a weakened place in the wall," Tin says, and I skim the air for that dim glowing orb of his magic. It

hovers near a piece of brick that seems ready to crumble.

“Got it,” I say and start pulling the brick free. A hole soon appears in the wall, and I shimmy through it the moment it's big enough. Stepping out into the night air, I slump to the ground with a sigh.

For a second, I just sit there, waiting for my strength to come back. It doesn't, so I make myself rise and skim my surroundings. Tall towers loom around me and high walls with numerous windows cut into their mass. I'm deep in the castle now, hidden by the shadows of a dormant garden, which is frozen in a winter coated courtyard.

No lights are on in any of the rooms, which makes sense with how high the moon is. It's most likely early in the morning. No guards are in this courtyard, either, and I presume that means they're on the walls or near the people they protect.

Shaking a bit from the need to feed, I slink through the darkness, smelling the air.

Tin encourages me to go right, but I go left, following the delectable fragrance of a human.

A young man sneaks into the hall ahead of me, and though Tin's voice fills my ear, I don't hear him.

I sneak up behind the boy—a servant, I presume, judging by the thin shirt he holds to his bare chest. His pants aren't even tied, leaving me to only imagine what

he was up to with the person I can smell on the other side of the door he just left.

“Don’t scream,” I say, looking deep into his normal green eyes. The cry that was moments from leaving his mouth stops. “Be still,” I tell him, and he fails to try and fight me.

I slice a claw along his neck, drawing rich pools of crimson. In a rush, I lap it up, and drink of his life and vitality. At the same time, I feed on the fear my words don’t let him act on, and I swallow his emotions with erratic glee. However, that white crystal of frozen comfort that lingers in his middle, I leave that untouched.

When I’ve had my fill, I force myself to pull away and drive my teeth across my thumb, drawing a few beads of black blood to the surface. I place my thumb on the boy’s lips. “Drink,” I say, looking him in the eye. He does. After a few sips, which he doesn’t choke on like Kembry does, I pull my thumb free.

“Forget all of what happened here,” I tell him. I glimpse down at the shirt he holds, then back to his face. “And give me your tunic.” He does so without question. “Only remember what it is you did this evening.”

I flee, my speed returned to what it was before I lost so much blood. Out of sight, I take off my tattered shirt and don the one the boy gave me.

"I didn't know you could do that," Tin says in my ear, his voice shivering with an ounce of fear.

"I didn't either," I say. "Let's ponder it later. I think I'm close."

"Yeah," Tin says. "Just climb that tower."

I follow the near invisible glow of his orb to a looming onyx tower.

"Okay," I say, and let my claws dig into the stone side. As I go, I force myself to forget the people I saw in the volcano's bosom. As much as they deserve my help, my head hurts too much when I ponder them.

Scaling the wall is easy, easier than crawling upside down under the onyx bridge. It's also *much* easier than running through booby traps. Nothing tries to stop me as I go, and I remain in the shadows cast by the bright moon above. When a cloud passes over the moon's rays, I take that moment to peek into a window Tin says is Sheva's room.

Inside, there's that wolf-like beast with black-smoke fur and a girl sitting in a bed. The girl's skin is deep caramel, and her hair a deep, deep brown. I know Sheva changes her hair, but that skin isn't her pale flesh, and this girl smells...lively and whole, lacking the pain Sheva always carries. Knowing this isn't the princess, my stomach drops.

“WHAT DO you mean it’s not Sheva?” Tin asks as the small orb of dark light floats near my face. “It’s Sheva’s rooms. I’m sure of it. That’s her pet rafe. Oh,” he pauses, “that’s her friend. Hekxa—I think that’s her name.”

I search the gloom of the room for as long as I dare, feeling the clouds about to part and let through moonlight once again.

The rafe’s nose twitches, and his deep red eyes flash open. I don’t wait for him to come to me and blow my cover. I retract my claws and slide down the edge of the tower, then drive my talons back into the edge and shimmy around out of sight, just as the rafe’s large, billowing head pushes through the window and studies the night.

“She’s here,” I say to Tin. “Not in her rooms, but she

has to be somewhere. I'm not going through everything I just went through to give up now."

"Do you want me to scour the castle?"

I shake my head. "No." I close my eyes to think. Open them again. "In fact, Tin, I think I can take it from here. Why don't you just wait for me. I'll need your help to get back out, but right now, I just need to be alone."

Tin doesn't argue, and the orb of shadowy light blips out of existence.

Still clinging to the edge of the tower, hidden in the shadows of the wall, I close my eyes and remember what it felt like in prison, alone, starving. I cling to the feeling of desperateness I felt, the loss, the emptiness. In that moment, I find the cord that was always there, linking me to the princess I didn't know she was.

The cord is like glowing filament I can almost see pulling from my chest through the surrounding space. I follow that glow as if it's a marker on a map. It guides me up the tower, higher than Sheva's rooms, to the one at the very top.

I peek through the window to see the cord did not lead me astray. Sheva is there, sitting up in an enormous bed with a black duvet. Something glows in her hands, illuminating her face. For a moment, I think it's a jCrystal, but then I notice how her eyes are shut. A force of power hums in the air, smelling wild and

ancient. That's how I know that isn't a communication device, but something much more devious.

I press open the window and slink into the room, silent as the demon I am. Moonlight streams in on half my features, and I don't try to hide. I don't need to hide from her.

Something in me says to make sure she's okay, and my senses study her body. The chaos is still in her, rotting her soul. Less of the white light glows through now; it's so dark. Still, the chaos hasn't won yet, and that means Rori was right about something: The Black Ones must have a few tricks up their sleeves to fight this. I just wish I could say they were winning.

Confusion emanates in Sheva's emotions, along with awe and a sense of fear. Still, I don't taste pain, so I don't interfere with whatever magic comes from the thing she holds. As the power pulses through her body, I steal a peek at the device. It's a deep blue eye, and of a dragon, judging by the vertical pupil. Its gaze is locked on Sheva and though it doesn't speak, I can feel in the air a sense that if I intervene, the dragon's magic would make my intrusion painful.

Due to that, I wait. It feels like eternity standing there, watching her laying on that bed. She has something like a winter cap over her head, and there's no hair peeking out of it. Before I can wonder why, I watch her eyes flash back and forth behind her eyelids as if

she's in the middle of a deep dream. I wonder what exactly it is she sees, but at the same time, I'm happy just to watch.

She jerks suddenly, gasping in a deep breath that nearly makes my heart flip in surprise. The dragon's eye drops from her hands, and she studies her palms.

"Playing with dragon magic, now?" I say. My voice sounds too loud in the silence, and she jolts with surprise. Those ice-blue eyes of hers are wide with fright, which I can smell wafting off her. But as soon as the fear comes, it's crushed with a new emotion. Anger.

Why is she mad at me?

"What are you doing in here?" she asks, her tone firm. One hand slides under the blanket, and I remember the dagger she keeps strapped to her thigh. *She wears it even in sleep?*

I step forward, feeling moonlight glisten against my side. There's a fresh smell that enters her emotions, and it's so delectable, I can taste it on my tongue. It's spicy with longing, making the edges of my lips twitch. The cord between us shimmers strongly.

I restrain from eating anything she feels, wanting her to feel everything to the fullest.

It's then, as my senses search her, that I know what she's about to do. Moving fast for a human, she has that blade out from under the blankets, and I track the flow of the blade until she holds it poised at me. Elven words

are etched into the length, and they glow faintly with ice-blue light. Her magic.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I say, stepping forward again, but this time with my hands near my face. Her emotions hitch on guard.

"Stay back," she hisses.

I move forward again. She's half trapped under the blanket, and I'm thankful for that. In the amount of time it would take her to throw it off, I could already make my move.

"How did you get past the guards?" she asks, and I know she's trying to stall, trying to find an advantage in this situation. Her eyes speak of her determination, and my heart flips, finding her adorable.

"That's my secret," I tell her with a wry grin. "Why would I share it when you clearly don't trust me?"

The next time I move, she jerks her blade, as if to remind me she holds it. "I said. Stay. Back." Her tone is dark, menacing, and I shudder with the need to hear more of it. As usual, she doesn't talk again, and my shoulders fall with a sigh. Why is she always so quiet around me?

I can't take it: Her silence, the space between us. I move with my demon speed and carefully pull that dagger from her grasp. Simultaneously, I pin her to the bed. Her body, still under the blanket, emanates warmth I want to drown in. Those stunning blue eyes

stare widely up at me. Her breath hitches and brushes my lips when it comes back out. I can still smell the mixture of emotions swarming in her: fear, confusion, and something wild.

“Your magic won’t work on me again,” she hisses, and while I’m stuck wondering what she means by magic, she tries to kick me from under the blanket.

That just will not do, and I pin her more firmly. She’s strong and lithe, which I’m sure comes from training as a demon hunter, but she’s no match for me. She remains stuck under my body, and by the anger burning my nose and the fire in her gaze, I know she doesn’t like that.

“I’m not using any magic on you,” I assure her. My gaze locks with hers, and I know she doesn’t believe me. She still wants me gone.

“You’re lying,” she nearly whispers, and her tone is heady, making my heart flutter and the edges of my mouth twitch.

“I assure you, I’m not.” My mind races for something I can say that will appease her. At the same time, I start to remember why I’m here. Will my memories really start to return, and the curse crack like before?

Right now, nothing is happening.

“If it means anything,” I say. “I didn’t mean to feed off you the other morning. There was just...so much of

you, your emotions and your blood. It was too much to resist. I'm sorry."

Internally, I kick myself, realizing how absolutely stupid that just sounded. Then I catch a whiff I don't ever want to smell—the metallic scent of the Human Fae King's magic.

"You smell like him." I nearly hiss, feeling my expression gnarl. My fangs flash before I reel them in, surprised at how much I hate the Human Fae King.

"What are you talking about?" Sheva asks, and I'm amazed that's her question. That the sight of my sharp teeth didn't shock her.

I force my face to smooth and just look at her. Her warmth seeping through the blankets is delightful, but I know this isn't the most decorous way to talk with anyone, especially a girl I want to impress.

My gaze shifts to her hands, and a pang stabs my chest because the palms are blistered and red. The scalding forms two half circles—one on each palm, and I know this had to be the work of that pendent she held.

"You're burned," I say.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"I can fix it."

Her brow narrows in an ice-blue glower. "How?"

I let my fangs out and bite my bottom lip. Black

blood oozes down my chin before the wound seals back up. "My blood will heal you."

She scrunches her face in protest, though I can smell excitement in her emotions. "No thanks," she refuses me.

I almost roll my eyes at how stubborn she is, but instead, I heave a small sigh. The last thing I'll do is force her into anything, so keeping her gaze locked with mine, I ask, "If I let you go, will you be civil? Will you let me talk to you?"

"Are you serious?"

"Fine. I'll just stay right here." My eyes slide to her lips. "We don't have to talk. You seem much more interested in doing anything but that."

She squirms, trying to break free again, and I know better than to let her loose. Who knows what other weapons she sleeps with.

Suddenly, I sense something in her shift. It's like ice drawing to attention, and I see her lips begin to part. Warnings flare in every fiber of my being, alerting me to the fact she's about to cast a spell.

I don't think, just act. My lips collide with hers, firm but gentle, and she freezes. Her mouth is warm against mine, and it just rest there, shocked. Then that cord between us tightens, and her lips press back against mine. We kiss for a few moments, my blood inevitably passing between her lips. I can feel the magic of it

healing her hands, even without looking. Then I speak against her mouth. “No spells. I’m using none on you; why don’t you do the same for me?”

I let go of one of her wrist where I hold her arm pinned against the pillow, hoping for it to be a sign of good faith. She shudders when I let my fingers slide down her arm. Then she swings a fist against the side of my head.

What a way to thank me.

I move in a blur, catching her blow before she can land it. The movement makes me flow into motion, and I jump off her completely, thinking maybe the space will help her trust me.

She leaps from the bed then, a movement of flowing blankets as she throws them back. Her bare feet contact the polished floor, and I instantly know what she looks for. That dagger I took and let fall. Spotting it, she bends to grab it, but I run with my faster speed and kick it under the bed. She swings up her fist, hoping to contact my chest, but I dodge. The air crackles as I sense her calling for her magic, and I grab her arm, spin her around before the words can form on her lips, and pin her against the wall. My mouth is over hers again, this time because I enjoyed how easily it stopped her spells last time.

She kisses me back again, and the cord between us reaches my heart, drawing me towards her. I kiss her

like I've never kissed anyone before, tender at first, then harder. I bite her lower lip with my blunt teeth, surprised that I have no desire to feed, only to feel her pleasure. It's in this moment a shiver trails through my body, so subtle I don't think she can feel it. With it, the deep secrets hidden beyond my reach crack again, and I suddenly see the bloody face that would always wake me from my slumber, screaming.

I don't remember who he is, but I know why he bleeds. That dragon's tail sliced through his head, cutting through bone and spirit.

I pull back from Sheva, the image too shocking to desire more kisses.

Words cross my mouth, though I don't notice them as much as I remember the image in my mind. "I said no spells."

She glowers at me, her bright eyes helping to chase away the horrid memory. I know the look of hatred is only an act. Her emotions speak the opposite of her gaze.

Still, the air hitches with the spark of her power, and finally I clamp a hand over her lips.

"I *swear* I didn't mean to feed off you. I came to you for help."

Her brow furrows, and I smell the sour scent of confusion. She pushes against my hand, trying to

loosen my grip enough to bite me, but I press into her, growing slightly annoyed at this game.

“Please,” I beg. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Finally, she goes limp and slumps back against the wall. It’s then I realize my whole front is pressed against hers, keeping her pinned.

“Why should I trust you?” she asks. “No demon is trustworthy. And you know something? Emry showed me that you were there when Zi’s dad died. Did you kill him?”

All at once, a number of thoughts rush into my head at her words. It’s like a flood gate snapped, and the curse in me can’t hold back all the secrets anymore. For one, Zi’s dad—the Human Fae King—is who I dream of, the one with the blood rushing down his face. Csharynn killed him.

Then there’s that name—Emry. It strikes a chord in my heart. I can’t say how I know it, but I understand Emry’s eye is what Sheva held when I first entered this room... He’s an ancient creature, a seer who knows all things. Out loud I say, “Emry, brother of the dragon goddess, Myra?” It’s as if I’m comprehending the information myself.

“Are you suggesting I shouldn’t trust what Emry showed me?”

“No,” my eyes lock with her, more facts flooding my heart and mind. “On the contrary, you should ask him

to show you more. In the meantime, why don't we start with this."

I pull away from her, holding my hand out between us. It's like part of my being is operating on its own accord, while the rest of me drowns in facts and memories so fast I can't wrap my mind around it all.

"Hi," I say, and my voice is a million miles away. "I'm Sen."

Sheva doesn't move, but she also doesn't try to cast another spell.

"Isn't this the way you humans greet someone for the first time?" I press, pulling some of my thoughts away from the overwhelming flood filling my head. "You give your name?"

"Minus all the kissing," she says curtly and crosses her arms.

A smile tugs at my lips, and I'm grateful for her words. They help me gather myself again. "I like the kissing."

She snorts. "And I'm sure you've kissed many people."

I cock my head. "Not as many as you might think." I'm surprised how true I know that statement is. I can remember.

Her brows narrow again. "You're a Demon Prince. I know that makes you ancient. Don't try to act coy."

Part of me rises in defense, wanting to guard an

honor I didn't know I had. "I wasn't. I don't have to kiss every person I hunt to feed. Besides, you don't know everything about me."

"I know enough about demons to know I can't trust you."

I look at my hand, still extended between us, and curl my fingers in before claws can form. She's not going to shake my hand, so I lower it back to my side.

"At least I already know who you are, Princess."

Though the words aren't complete truth. I hardly know anything about her except that we are connected to each other. On top of that, the same cord binding us binds her to two other guys. I can't bear to comprehend what that means right now. The rush of memories returns full force, and I have to sit.

I turn and go to rest on the bed. Images, truths, lies, they all hasten past my mind's eye. I'm too stunned to make a sound. Too shocked to do anything.

I know why the fae have been so helpful and gracious with the abomination that is me. We're friends. Each one of the fae that came to this realm with me has been by my side for as long as I can remember. Kembry and I used to play in the boughs of the trees in Coeval when he was young. We were the best of friends.

But then Csharynn, the Dragon of Darkness, came, and the blight arrived on the islands. The Human Fae

King was killed, and I was brought to those cages under this volcano. She experimented on me.

I know why the True Fae King searched for me all these years. I'm the only person alive to right this wrong. But to do so...

"I need your help," I say again, to Sheva, starting to understand what that entails. "It's simple," I assure her, hearing the earnestness in my tone. My intensity has to do with so much more than just myself. I can see a path that will help save the Coeval Islands, and I can see the way to return Sheva's soul. "And if you help me, I will help *you*. I know your soul is rotting, and that's my fault. I want to fix it, but I need your help first."

She snorts and finally steps away from the wall, arms crossed. "Just like a demon. You make a mess, and now you expect something in return before you fix it, which you won't. No demon in history has *ever* tried to reverse their disastrous feedings."

"True." I cock my head again in thought. "But I'm not a demon in the sense you think. So let me just say this. What I need is the Human Fae King's hair. Getting it off his hairbrush would be enough. Get me that, and when you have it, bring it to the place we first met. I will free your soul then, before it's devoured by the Inferno Realms forever."

At that, I rise from the bed and dash to the window, jumping out of the room with a fire in my veins that I

haven't felt since that dragon stepped into my life, killed the once Human Fae King, and took me from my home.

"I am coming for you," I say in the darkness of the cold palace grounds, my voice reverberating through the air, riding the back of magic I didn't know I had. It seeks out the dragon in her abominable lair. "I remember who I am, and Sen is only part of my name. You gave me this body, you put me in that prison, and you will pay for what you've done. I'm no longer the boy I once was. You will not take my home from me, my kingdom. Your magic cannot stop me now."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abby Arthur lives in small town Iowa with her husband and son. She's absolutely obsessed with writing young adult fantasy and mildly enjoys sleeping, eating, and breathing. When she's not writing, she's thinking of her next book to create and watching Asian shows or Marvel movies.

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