

THE RAVEN QUEEN'S HAREM



MIDNIGHT'S
END



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANGEL LAWSON

Midnight's End
Raven Queen's Harem
Part 6

By Angel Lawson

Thank you for sharing this series with me. I've loved entering the world of Reverse Harem books and I'm hooked on the style, readers and amazing community.

Thank you for giving me a place to tell the story of my ravens (or crows really, as we call them in the south.) For years I had five crows that followed me. Greeted me when I walked outside. Said hello and trailed me on walks. I had a million stories wound up in my head about these guys but I never knew how to do it...there were FIVE of them. A whole murder. None were better than the other.

And that's why I love reverse harem. The genre gave my birds a place to live.
Thank you.

~*~

Please make sure to follow my Facebook group and mailing list for future projects! (including two announced at the back of this book!)

One for sorrow,
Two for mirth
Three for a funeral,
Four for birth
Five for Heaven
Six for Hell
Seven for the devil, his own self

Chapter One

Dylan

Dawn breaks over Central Park, bringing light after another sleepless night. The Raven Guard is nearly whole, but the impact of the events in the Otherside is worse than when Bunny lost use of his wing. We're lame and incomplete, lacking a member that may never return, and painfully missing our queen.

Our mission is clear: heal the sick, build an army. Both were directives Morgan declared before she abandoned us, slipping away in the Otherside's core. None of us believe she was taken against her will. No, Morgan has a mind of her own, a plan she has chosen not to share with us, and as her loyal Guardians we have little choice but to do as we're told.

She needs us now more than ever.

"How the hell are we going to find an army?" Damien asks across the room. I listen as my brothers bicker over the same argument. Who does she expect us to recruit? How do we know who to trust? How long can she wait? What if we're too late?

"I'll make a list," Sam says. "We have allies."

Clinton replies in a low growl. "Do we? People we trust?"

I watch him closely. He's been jaded since his time in the dungeons. Paranoid. If he hadn't had healing time with Morgan...only the gods know what mental state he'd be in now. Unfortunately, he's right. Now that the three parts of the Darkness are together, sides will be taken. Those who want the apocalypse on the Earth realm, and those who will fight with us to stop it.

"Make a list of who we need to approach," I tell Sam. "We'll find enough warriors to return with us."

“And if we don’t?”

A shadow passes by the door and all of us look toward it. We aren’t alone in the house. Hildi is here. Sue and Davis helped remove the corpse of her partner Andi moments before our return. We were too late with the cure, at least to spare her life. Adding another layer of grief in the house is hard to manage.

Sam’s question still lingers, waiting to be answered.

I take one last look out the window at the cloudless, blue sky outside. It’s the exact opposite of what Morgan will see from the Otherside. Turning to face my brothers, I declare, “Then we go back and fight alone.”

Chapter Two

Morgan

The strings tighten, pulling hard against my waist.

“Ouch,” I say, grunting through the discomfort and pain jabbing into my ribs. “Is this really necessary?”

“You’ve been invited to a formal dinner with the Morrigan and her court,” Nevis says, pushing her knee into my back for leverage. I buckle, but the corset doesn’t allow me to move far. “This is considered appropriate dress.”

“She must plan to kill me in this. Because there’s no way I can defend myself while wearing this wretched thing.”

Nevis replies with final hard yank.

Truthfully, the gown is exquisite. The fabric is a dark blue silk, embroidered with tiny gold stitching. The hem grazes the floor and the skirt is fluffed out with thick crinoline. A glance down reveals that my breasts are an asset I’d never fully realized. Just seeing the whole outfit, along with my carefully arranged hair and makeup, in the mirror brings me to a halt.

I’m not here to win beauty pageants or attend royal dinners. I’m here to kill the queen, destroy the three and go home with my Raven Guard to live happily ever after.

That’s the only fairy tale I want.

Nevis, on the other hand, has other plans.

“Her primary weakness is your sexuality. The way you’ve embraced it and your harem of lovers, her former soldiers. Your connection with them drives her mad. But most of all, it gives you strength. And you must play to your strong points over the next three days.”

The Morrigan announced that the binding ceremony will take place in three days. Apparently the best time to perform such magic is during the three full moons. Once the spell and ceremony take place, Anita, the Morrigan, and I will join together into one badass queen.

Oh, and then we’ll conquer the Earth realm by spreading plague, death, and destruction, just like the Morrigan did in her own world all those years ago.

At least, that’s her plan. I have another. Well, sort of. It’s being formulated and relies heavily on my guardians returning with an army, Nevis and her underground dwellers, and Bunny.

Yes, I’m relying on Bunny, my conflicted and confused guardian, to take down the Morrigan. What possibly could go wrong?

“So, what?” I ask Nevis, who can’t stop staring at my ample cleavage. “I’m supposed to flaunt my tits and she’ll back down?”

“No,” the woman says, rolling her eyes. She’d been assigned to me when I first arrived, and she saved me from a violent assault from Casteel, the Morrigan’s commander. I learned soon after that she was part of an entire underground community that had lived and prospered after the Morrigan ravaged their world eons ago. Nevis is clever and knows the Queen well. She has spies everywhere, and although it’s uncomfortable to treat her as my slave, we both know it’s for a greater good. “It will unnerve her and reinforce the fact she can never get over the Cu’s rejection. That betrayal consumes her every moment and every deed.”

“Won’t that just make her angry?” The last thing I want is to end up in the dungeons. “And seriously, that girl needs to get over it.”

“She’s already angry. Your strength—your sexuality—is something she desires more than anything else. Think of how strong she would be with the true love of her own lover, much less a harem? Her jealousy will keep her focused on the ceremony and taking that strength for herself while giving us time to get ourselves in order.”

I nod, hoping she’s right. And I hope my Guardians return in time.

Taking one last look at myself in the mirror, I tug up the bodice of my dress, hoping to cover my chest a little better. Nevis steps forward and yanks it right back down. I sigh and hope I can get through the meal without passing out from the tight corset.

“Okay then, dinner. Anything else I should be prepared for?”

Nevis looks like a young woman but is much older. The healing springs below the castle keep her youthful but she has the wisdom of decades of life. Her eyes are steel, holding mine steady as she delivers her final directive. “One small thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re going to have to forgive Bunny.”

Chapter Three

Morgan

“It’s not possible.” The words come out in a low hiss, as we’ve left my quarters and are walking down the hall. Nevis is three steps behind me, partially because of her height. The rest is due to the fact she’s my servant and shouldn’t walk near me anyway. At least, that’s what she says. I’m not well-versed in slave/prisoner etiquette.

Nevis doesn’t reply and keeps her eyes trained on the ground. Two guards walk within striking distance and I know I should keep my mouth shut, but forgive Bunny?

Hell. No.

Just thinking about it makes my blood turn to a raging boil.

We arrive at the main hall and the doors open wide, revealing two long tables down the side of the room and one up on a dais, overlooking the floor. Three ornate chairs wait in the middle. There’s little doubt one of those is for me.

Although the soldiers are nearby, I’m not in shackles. There are no weapons pointed at me (at least that I can see) but a wave of panic rolls over me when I spot Anita coming down the hall toward us. I reach for my blade normally tucked by my side and come up with nothing but a handful of silk.

“Oh here we go,” I mutter to myself, because only the gods know what kind of mindset she’s in today.

“Hello, Morgan,” she says, swishing my way in a beautiful gown of her own. The fabric is in a similar cut to my own, but instead a deep emerald green that looks flattering with her blonde hair. We assess one another, physically as well as mentally. Despite her smile, I catch the tic in her left eye.

I grunt in reply.

The third piece of the Morrigan's puzzle is Anita. Her twin, Xavier, was a sacrifice to the Morrigan when our bond allowed the plague to slip from me to him. After his death, Anita took the virus from me and passed it along the citizens of New York before I caught and imprisoned her. Her connection to the Morrigan gives her immunity, but it also simply makes her a pawn.

She deserves death for what she's done but neither the Morrigan nor I can take her life. Not yet. We need her for the ceremony. My only hope is once her usefulness is over, I can slit her throat myself.

My murderous thoughts must be evident on my face, as a small cough and nudge from Nevis makes me snap my eyes to the room. All eyes are on the two of us and we line up, side by side, and walk down the black rug that leads to the main table.

Four huge stone fireplaces sit against the walls with massive fires burning in them to take the chill off the room. Tapestries hang from the ceiling, each emblazoned with images from long ago battles. The one commonality is the dark raven flying across the sky in each and every one.

“So they're letting you walk around without chains?” Anita asks, glancing around at the dozens of soldiers that flank the walls of the room. She gives the one closest to us a flirtatious smile and he stands a little straighter. “I guess most of these guys have good aim.”

“Seems like you'd be a little nicer to me since I got you a free ride back to this hellhole,” I reply. The men and women sitting at the tables lining the aisle watch us like celebrities on the red carpet. Many smile. A few narrow their eyes. I don't understand these people and the world the Morrigan has built for herself. Do they even know what they're missing?

“I do appreciate that,” Anita whispers. “Although I do wonder how angry your little birds were when they realized you bailed on them.”

I cut her a glance. We're approaching the dais, where two servants in fine clothing each extend an arm, directing us to walk away from one another and around the back of the table. Before we part, I grab Anita by the arm and she stops, studying me.

"Never speak of my Guardians again."

The smallest curve graces her lips and she nods, knowing she hit me on a sore spot. I push back my shoulders and walk up the steps, holding my hem from the ground. The instant we step behind our seats a call breaks through the crowd, echoing off the stone walls.

"All stand for the Queen of Ravens," the voice announces.

The response is instant, something I've never seen outside of a movie. People scramble to their feet, dropping their drinks to the table, scuffing the floor with their chair legs. Soon the entire room is on their knees, everyone including Anita.

A sharp jab to the back of my knees with the butt of the nearest soldier's blade forces me down as well.

She arrives in a wave of frigid air, magic in her every step. There's a darkness, an ancient power that I have tasted more than once, and the link between us begs to drink from her well of energy once again.

I swallow back the desire, seeking the peace and control my Guardians taught me to draw from. After my healing session with three of them at once and days of repeated fueling with Dylan before I arrived in the Otherside, I am strong, but just being in her presence makes me feel weaker.

The Morrigan is a stunning woman. Her hair is long and sleek, her body curvy and strong. Her eyes are the darkest obsidian, filled with eons of wisdom, rage, and death. There's evidence that she maintains her youth from the water that flows beneath the castle, and there is no doubt that everyone in the room worships her as much as they fear her.

That's when I spy the man behind her.

Bunny.

Sweet, sexy, kind, and artistic Bunny.

My betrayer.

My savior.

My...I-don't-know-what-to-do-with-him-Guardian.

As much as I hate the way the Morrigan makes me feel, dammit, Bunny makes me feel worse. Just seeing him standing there is like a punch in the gut, or really, like he's reaching across the long table and ripping my heart out with his bare hands.

"Forgive Bunny." That's what Nevis said back in the room. He watches me now, his copper eyes taking me in. Despite my anger with him, the spark flares between us—he is one of my mates, after all—which is why his betrayal cuts to the bone.

There's little to no chance I'm forgiving him. Not in this realm or any other. Not for what he did to me, the risk he exposed our world to, and certainly not for what he did to the other Guardians.

The Morrigan slithers across the dais, her eyes gliding past Anita and then me. Her chair is held out and in moments she's sitting above the rest of the room, waving her hands as an indication to sit.

I stare at her, my jaw hanging because I cannot understand this world.

The Morrigan glances at me and says, "Sit, and shut your mouth. A fly will get in there."

I regain my senses. "I doubt flies live in such an icy realm."

Her black eyes penetrate me and I feel the cold, not only on my skin, but in my heart. "It's unfortunate you're only here for the three days, Nemain, we could have had such fun together."

“Nemain?” I ask, hardly aware of the servants loading the table with food. The spicy scents fill my nostrils and my stomach rumbles with hunger. “What does that mean?”

“Long ago, that was your name.” She cocks a smile at me. “Mine is Anand, by the way. I’m assuming that your Sentinel never told you. God forbid he humanize me in any way.” When I look confused, she laughs. “The Morrigan is my title.”

“What about her?” I ask, looking over at Anita.

“Macha,” the Queen replies. “Once upon a time, we were three strong.” She looks out the window at the rising moon. “Soon, it will happen again.”

Wine is poured and I help myself to a full glass. I watch as our plates are filled and forgo paranoia over the strange meal and dig in. The meat is tasty although of a mystery origin, and I don’t dare ask what sort of animal it’s from.

Bunny sits at the end of the table, just below ours. It’s obvious The Morrigan—or Anand—wants him in my line of vision. She watches us, small evil smiles gracing her lips as we avoid one another. I finally turn to her and say, “Why didn’t you kill him?”

She looks down at Bunny with sad apathy. “I admit he’s useless as a warrior, but his skills in the magical arts are extraordinary. It would be a waste to dispose of him.”

Bunny stares between the two of us. I’m unsure if he can hear our conversation. Anand tilts her head and says, “On the other hand, if you wanted to kill him, be my guest.”

Bunny’s wide eyes confirm that yes, he can hear our discussion.

“Me?”

“Far be it for me to judge a woman scored. I’ve burned a swath of revenge across this entire land. Bunny’s sins are his to contend with and yours to execute.” She takes a sip of wine. “But if I were you, I’d enjoy a slow and painful death.”

Anita laughs, choking on her wine, finding the entire thing hilarious. Three days with these lunatics, then I can take them down once and for all.

From his spot at the lower table, Bunny makes eye contact and I hold his gaze, unwilling to look away. My rage is palpable. My heart destroyed. The Morrigan knows me better than I assumed because slow and painful is exactly how I'd fantasized his death would be.

Chapter Four

Bunny

Sitting in such proximity to Morgan is unbearable. So much so that the instant the Queen is distracted I escape the grand hall, bolting for my castle tower studio for a moment of peace.

I pass few people on the way to my studio, most still enjoying the entertainment and revelry of the banquet. The soldiers pay me little attention. They see me as nothing more than a pawn, a way to help the queen get her way, and I'm well aware she only keeps me around for my abilities.

Oh, and a reason to taunt Morgan.

Gods above, Morgan.

Seeing her in that dress, the way it accentuated all of her delicious curves, her presence, her beauty made men stop and stare at her. There was no doubt why The Morrigan needed her to bond. She was the epitome of youth and life.

I wasn't sure what would happen when she saw me, if she'd leap over the table to throttle my neck, but the feeling the magic spark between us. The fates know we are still destined, but what I've done complicates things.

Actions can carry more weight than even fate.

I step into the room and busy myself with reigniting the dwindling fire. The wood takes a minute to catch and I lean back on my heels and watch the flame lick around the edges. Once I successfully captured Morgan and turned her over, I was rewarded with a bundle of firewood and a roll of new canvas. I eagerly used the wood while I was unsure what she wanted me to do with the canvas. There's little doubt she'll tell me when she's ready.

The heat warms my small tower room but not the ice in my chest. If looks could kill...there's no doubt Morgan would have slashed my throat with her dinner knife. I knew she was angry, but I'd hoped that working together to get the other Ravens back home and initiating the plan to end the Morrigan would bring us back together and I could attempt to salvage something between us.

Maybe not what it had been before, but at least perhaps she would listen to my apology. But no, we seem past that.

I don't blame her.

And I don't blame my brothers.

The blame lands squarely on my shoulders. I allowed my insecurity, jealousy, and lack of faith in Morgan and the others to put us all at risk. I stand and walk over to the canvas and pick it up one-handed and then roll it across the floor. I stand over the beige fabric and flick the blade from my razor open, thumbing the sharp edge.

I'll have to figure out another way to get Morgan to forgive me, not only because I want her to understand but because there's no way for her to win against the Morrigan without me.

Until then, I consider, kneeling on the floor and scoring the canvas with the blade. I'll cope like I always do. Deep within my art.

Chapter Five

Morgan

When The Morrigan finally releases us from her never-ending dinner party, I'm past tipsy and on the way to drunk. The wine here is strong, the food salty, and the company unbearable. Nevis escorts me back to my room and I proceed to blabber about my thoughts on everything.

“You'd think, with so much power, the Queen would pick a nicer place to live. Somewhere with central heating and carpets on the rugs. Running water. Electricity.”

We pass a window that looks out onto the desolate landscape. “And a place near the sea. That's warm. Why not Florida?”

I stumble over the hem of my dress and Nevis grips my arm to hold me upright.

“And Bunny? Did you see him? With his messy bronze hair and those adorable glasses?” I scoff. “I want to punch him in those pretty little lips.”

She stops in front of my chambers and I sway back and forth before leaning against the wooden door.

“He hurt us so bad,” I tell her in a whisper. “Sent my mates to the dungeons to be terrorized and beaten. Separated us, divided us to make me weaker—all for *her*. I can't forgive him.”

“Are you sure of his motives?”

“I don't need to know his motives, Nevis. I saw what he did to the others. What he did to me the last time we were together. I feel my pain and I healed the wounds of my guardians. Forgiveness isn't an option.” The wine swirls in my belly. “If anything, he deserves what the Morrigan suggested.

Death.”

Nevis opens the door to my room and nudges me in. With assistance I make it to the bed, where I push her hands away. Lying face down, the feather pillow envelops me and I grip the mattress. The spinning room finally slows.

“Go away.” I tell her as she starts to help me undress. “I just need to lie here. Just sleep. Now.”

“Morgan.”

“Go.”

I’m half asleep by the time the door clicks shut.

Chapter Six

Clinton

Cirice pushes the two bottles of ale across the bar and wipes up the wet droplets left behind with a towel. She studies them with her vivid green eyes, the gold flakes sparkling.

I swallow half the ale in one gulp and Sam drowns the whole bottle. It's been a long day.

"Didn't know if I'd see either of you back in here again," the bartender says. Sam pushes his empty bottle toward her and she slides him another. She nods at me. "What about you Clint?"

I guzzle the rest and wipe my mouth. "I'm fine."

I'm here to assess the crowd, not get trashed. Scanning the crowd, I spot a few familiar faces. The Shaman's table is empty and as much as I hate it, he's the one I'm here to see.

"Word in the alley is that you guys came back without Morgan," Cirice says.

Sam puts down his bottle. "What else did you hear?"

"That you left the prisoner of the Morrigan but came back free men—carrying a cure to the sickness plaguing the city. But you left your girl *and* one of your guard behind. What gives?"

"How the hell did you hear all that?" I growl.

"Part of the job." She shrugs and the neon lights behind the bar shine off the top of her smooth head. Her ears point slightly and her canines are a tiny bit elongated. I've heard she's from a fae realm but that's outside my concern or worry. "But you obviously came here for something. Want to tell me what it is?"

Sam and I share a look, but we both know we're short on time. Dylan estimates we have three

days before the phase of three moons turns full, and that is when the Morrigan will have her ceremony.

“We need fighters. Allies. Anyone willing to go back to the Otherside and fight the Morrigan.”

Her slim eyebrow arches. “You want an army?”

“As many as we can get.”

She holds my eye and I feel like she’s digging into my soul. I don’t know what Cirice’s power is, if she’s gifted in any way, but from the warm charge rolling down my spine there’s no doubt there’s more to her than appears.

Leaning over the counter she says, “I met your girl—the human. She’s strong. Went head-to-head with the Shaman and it seems like maybe she won.”

I keep my face neutral. We never asked how she managed to get us all in and out of the Otherside—even using the tunnel underground. There are rules—balances between the realms. Passage doesn’t come lightly.

“What’s your point, Cirice?” Sam says.

“Morgan is powerful. She’s smart but she’s also naïve. You have to go into the Morrigan’s castle fully loaded. You don’t just want people in your army. You want fighters. The best.” She looks between us. “People like yourselves.”

An uneasy feeling emerges in my stomach. “What are you thinking?”

The gold in her eyes twinkles. “You need the Legion of Immortals.”

Sam’s jaw drops. “The Six?”

“No.” I hold up my hands. Full stop. No.

“Without them, you’ll lose the war.”

“With them will cause chaos and we’ll all probably die before we even get to the battle,” I snap back.

She rests her hands on her hips. “You know I’m right. And you know they’re exactly what you need.”

“Too bad it’s impossible,” Sam says. “The Shaman owns their contract. I don’t think he’s going to hand them over easily.”

“Nothing is impossible.” The knowing look on her face says it all. “You just have to be willing to fight for it.”

Chapter Seven

Morgan

At some point during the night the walls and floors stop spinning and I fall into an uncomfortable, light sleep. My head pounds at any movement and the sun peeking in the arched, lead glass window makes my brain want to shatter into a million pieces.

“Here,” a voice says. “Drink this.”

I crack an eye through the sharp, spiking pain and see Nevis standing over me with a glass of water.

“Is that the good stuff?” I ask.

“Straight from the source. You’ll feel better soon.”

After three attempts to sit up on my own, Nevis has to help me, navigating the cup near my mouth. I take a sip of the cool water and lie back again.

“God, what happened last night? I just remember lots of wine, loud music, and the Morrigan freaking me out.”

“That about sums it up, although there was the interesting part about the Morrigan trying to get you to kill Bunny.”

I search my memory but mostly I come up with the image of Bunny sitting at the foot of the dais looking handsome and out of my reach. Another sip of water and my brain fog clears and I do recall the faint whispers of The Morrigan, Anand, as she called herself, taunting me with the option to take

Bunny out myself. The thought, along with the gallons of wine in my belly makes me nauseous.

I look at Nevis and concede, “If you want me to forgive him and the Queen wants me to kill him, I have to trust that one of you may have a better plan in mind.”

Nevis grins. “I hoped you would come around to seeing that.”

Tears prick to my eyes. “Even though it may not seem like it, I do wish I could forgive Bunny. Wash it all away and make him pure again like this water.” I hold up the glass. “But what he did...it was awful. Unforgiveable.”

Nevis leans over and pushes my hair out of my eyes. It’s a motherly move and in this moment I appreciate it. I’m away from home, without family, and sick. I’m also about to have to make a decision that could alter my life and those of my mates forever.

“I still think you should talk to him and find out why he made his decisions.”

“But...” I swallow back my words and wipe the tears from my eyes.

Nevis frowns. “But what?”

Many of the emotions I’ve been carrying for days erupt in one emotional purge. “What if I forgive him and the others hate me for it? What if he’s truly evil and it’s all just a game. I’m just a pawn. They put me through tests before. What if I fail this one?” The words tumble out in between sobs. “And then there’s the other side of this. What Bunny did to me was wrong and the risk he put the whole world in is unspeakable. But what he did to the other Ravens was more than I can absolve him for. I can’t make that decision.”

Nevis wraps her arms around me, bringing me in tight to her chest. If someone walked in on us right now I have no idea what the punishment for her or for me would be, but I don’t care. I take the chance and embrace her back.

“I want you to look at something,” she says in my ear. We part and I wipe my nose again on the

bedding before following her to the dressing chamber. A long mirror leans against the wall and Nevis positions me so I'm standing directly in front of it. I'm in the dress from the night before. It's wrinkled as all hell. My ribs hurt from the corset as much as the crying. My face is streaked with black kohl and my hair looks like a bird's nest after a tornado.

"If you want me to look at a hot mess, I've got it. Thanks."

Her hand clasps mine and she smiles. "You may look a little worse for the wear, but there's more."

"I'm not sure I can handle any more, Nevis."

"In two days you're slated to either succumb to the Morrigan or take over. What I see in the reflection is the future Queen of both realms. The Queen of Ravens—and not the Goddess of War. If you fight through the obstacles in your way you can shine a light on this world. We need you. My people need you. Your Guardians need you." She runs a hand down my hair. "That includes Bunny. And to accomplish what you need to do to make that happen you need his help, too."

"But what about—"

"You're the Queen. You make the decisions." She touches the charm hanging between my breasts. "They are here to follow you. They trust you. And it's time for you to repair the damage between you and Bunny."

The idea leaves a sour taste in my mouth. "What if I don't want to?"

Her lips tug into a frown. "Then I'm afraid you aren't ready and it may be another millennium before we have the chance to break free from the Morrigan's reign of terror."

I'm at least a foot taller than Nevis and wearing an impressive gown. I'm young and have strength and power that I'd never expected in life, but this woman next to me seems so much stronger.

"I'm not sure if I can do it," I admit.

“You have two days to figure it out.”

Chapter Eight

Damien

“No,” Dylan says. There’s zero wavering in his voice. The problem for him is he’s not the actual leader of the group. We all get a vote and from the set of Clinton’s jaw and the tension tugging at Sam’s eyes I know Dylan is not going to get his way without a fight.

I sigh and start what is sure to be a fight. “Cirice has a good point, these guys are the best. Well, other than us, but it would be better to go in with a small, solid team than with less skilled soldiers.”

“They’re savages,” Dylan argues. “They spent centuries working directly under Camulus. His special team. They raped, pillaged, and burned their way through history.”

“But these six were cast out because of their refusal to fight for Camulus in the modern era,” I say. “The War God sold them into slavery as punishment and they’ve been under lock and key with the Shaman ever since. Maybe they’ve changed?”

“Or maybe they’re worse than before,” Clinton adds. “I, too, am worried about bringing them into the battle on the Otherside, they could easily betray us as well.”

“Not if they’re bound,” Sam says. “We could try to win their contract.”

Dylan narrows his eyes at our brother. “You want to be slave owners? I never thought I’d hear those words from you.”

“I don’t want to own them, but I would like to control them on the battlefield. Once the war is over we can determine their fate.”

I think on it for a moment. The lives we’ve led and how we died and were remolded by the gods to serve the world in another way. How that time of service is now upon us. It’s with that in mind that I say, “Maybe we owe them an opportunity to redeem themselves. We were given a second chance.”

Dylan sighs and paces the length of the library. Being away from Morgan for this long is taking a toll on all of us. The worry. The fear. Our bond is tight. The healing between us bolstered us all in a way we’d never experienced before but even so—we are made to be a team. A unit. All of us with our mate, and leaving her behind doesn’t feel right.

Finally he stops and runs his hand over his hair, leaving it in small, messy spikes. “Even if we agree to this, we have to actually procure the contract. The Shaman’s fee will certainly be heavy. And costly. We already are tied to him with one debt.”

The monthly fights. Adding to that debt would be a burden none of us want to bear. But even so, this is greater than the four of us.

“We’re talking about the apocalypse, Dylan,” Sam says. “We’ve spent our lives carrying the weight of the damned. One more isn’t going to destroy us.”

If we had to vote right now I suspect at least three of us would agree. We’re desperate and most certainly running out of time. But I’m known for my impulsiveness. My willingness to take a risk. Without hesitation I say, “I’m in. Let’s try to win the contract for the Legion of Immortals.”

As expected, Sam and Clinton nod their approval. Dylan stares at the floor, knowing he’s lost

this argument. “Fine,” he says. “But don’t come to me to fix this when it all implodes, got it?”

We share a moment of understanding, because even though we promise we won’t, we all know he’s got our back—for better or worse—because that’s how the Raven Guard operates.

Chapter Nine

Morgan

After a bath to soothe my aching ribs, and a generous plate of eggs, bacon, and biscuits, Nevis helps me dress. My closet is filled with dresses and gowns. It feels weird wearing the Morrigan's clothing, like a lamb being dressed for slaughter, so I reach for the suit I wore from The Nead.

Nevis shakes her head. "Dress the part. Today, you're not a warrior. You're a guest of the Queen."

"A guest?" I snort. "I may not be in the dungeons, but I wouldn't call myself free."

I feel like a dick the instant I say it. Nevis is a slave and has been since birth. The Morrigan controls every aspect of her life, and the small part she doesn't is in the hidden underground community she's desperately trying to free. I reach for the nearest dress, a pale blue that has the shimmer of silver, and hold it up. "How does this look?"

"Lovely."

Nevis insists on taming my hair, using a hot iron to straighten my normally curly locks. She braids the top part so that it pulls away from my face. I'm marveling at her skills when there's a knock on the door.

Apprehension tickles my spine. I'm still reeling from the attack by Casteel. His behavior was vicious, and there's no doubt he'll be back for more once he recovers from the wound Dylan gave him.

Nevis steps forward and opens the door. Her shoulders visibly relax when she sees the courier in the hallway. He passes me an envelope stamped on the back with a wax seal. I fight the urge to

laugh at the formality but it also only confirms I'm a stranger in a strange land.

I scan the card. After the courier leaves I say, "I've been summoned to the Morrigan's chambers. What do you think she wants?"

"Gods only know," she replies, bringing me a pair of soft slip-on shoes. "Just try to behave yourself, okay?"

I make a face. "I'll do my best not to get killed before my army arrives, if that's what you're saying."

Nevis smiles. "Precisely."

*

The queen's chambers are a level above mine and we pass through six different guards before we're allowed to enter. The first two take their time searching me for weapons. I don't blame them. Nevis had to convince me to leave the fork from breakfast on the table and not slipped into the stocking band around my thigh.

"Take your time," I hiss at one of the soldiers as his fingers linger over my waist. "Ask Casteel what happened when he took advantage."

The soldier freezes, turns pale, and abruptly steps away.

I'm not particularly surprised to find Anita on the other side of the double doors sitting on a plush, dark purple chair.

"Good morning, Morgan," she says, taking a sip of steaming tea. Her own servant stands against the wall and I recognize her from underground, although her expression is blank as stone.

“Anita.” I take the seat next to her and ignore the tea.

“How did you sleep?” she asks, looking like a princess that grew up in this world. “I love these feather beds. I wish we could get something like that back home, you know?”

No. Really, I don't.

She doesn't stop, even though I say nothing to encourage her. “You drank like a champ last night. Should have told you the wine is stronger here. But their hangover tonic is to die for.” She smooths out the skirt on her dress. “I really should thank you for bringing me back with you.”

I fight the urge to grab her neck and snap it between my hands. Luckily, she's saved not only by my incredible self-restraint but by the Morrigan entering the room.

She's dressed to perfection in a black tunic and tight pants. The top is cut deep, revealing a large swath of pale, perfect skin. She looks better today than the night before and I wonder how much of the water tonic she took this morning to maintain her appearance. She sits, and her servant begins preparing her a cup of tea.

“Ah, Macha and Nemain. You both look lovely today.” Her eyes linger over me as if she's searching for something—a crack or possibly a change of some kind. “I hope your quarters serve you well.”

“Mine are fantastic, Your Majesty.”

She smiles at Anita. “You always loved the creature comforts, dear sister.” The Morrigan takes a sip from her cup and looks at me. “And how about you, Neman? Sleep well?”

“If you mean black-out drunk, then sure.” I flash her a smile. “It was grand.”

Her eyes narrow but the expression on her face doesn't change. “I called you here to explain the next few days. Last night was just the kick-off of our three day celebration leading up to the bonding ceremony. As you've seen, I've loaded your room with clothing and supplies to get you

through a variety of events. All are optional but I suggest you take part in as many as you can. The members of my court and the citizens of my kingdom want a chance to see the women that will help me expand my reign from one world to the next.”

“You want us on display?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around the details she’s given.

“Before you kill us to make yourself stronger.”

The Morrigan tilts her head. “I’m not killing you, dear Nemain. We’re fulfilling destiny. The fates have finally aligned. Anand, Macha, and Nemain all together on the full moons. We’ll join as one and prevail over many worlds.”

I open my mouth to tell her that she’s deranged. Crazy. Out of her fucking mind, but a sharp look from Nevis keeps me quiet. For now.

“I’d like to proceed as though you are not prisoners here. I want you to have full access to the castle and surrounding grounds. I’ll have an itinerary sent to your rooms so you can enjoy the festivities.” She sets her cup on the table. Her dark eyes flick between us. “Understand you will be watched, and if you do anything to disrupt my plans, I’ll shackle you in the dungeons.”

“I, for one, cannot wait to join in the celebrations,” Anita says.

“And you?” the Morrigan asks me.

“I won’t cause any trouble,” I tell her. I do not add that my guardians will do the damage for me. “In fact, I’m really eager to learn more about your kingdom. So far I’m very impressed.”

The Morrigan thrusts her hand on the table and gestures for us to do the same. Anita places hers on top of the Morrigan’s and I place mine on top of Anita’s. The Queen lays her other hand on top, sandwiching us in. A hum of energy builds between our skin, something I’ve only felt with my guardians in the heat of passion. There’s no denying the power charging between us. The current is strong, dark, and filled with a hunger and want like I’ve never experienced. It’s like a shot of adrenaline. Endorphins. The most delicious drug I’ve ever experienced. I taste it on my tongue, feel it

traveling up my arms, in my fingertips and throughout my entire body.

“Together, we can be a force beyond recognition. I hope you appreciate the opportunity I’m giving you.” She lifts her hand, and like it was never there to begin with, the energy fades and immediately I miss the feeling of power coursing through my veins.

We’re dismissed, and Nevis and I walk down the stone hallway back toward my rooms. Once we’re out of earshot of the soldiers I grab her arm and say, “Take me to Bunny’s chambers. Now.”

Chapter Ten

Dylan

My stomach is tight with dread as we enter the building. It’s almost midnight and the earlier fights are already in process. The shouts and jeers from the crowd echo around the room and I glance back at my brothers—giving them one last chance to back out.

I’m met with three sets of determined eyes. Okay then. We’re doing this.

The walkways are bottlenecked, but once we enter as a group, eyes shift our direction. We’re not scheduled to fight tonight and rarely do we appear otherwise. I hear our name whispered through the crowd; the energy level rises significantly. They all suspect they’re in for a surprise.

Little do they know.

“The Shaman should be down by the ring,” Sam says. We break right, down the stairs and toward the ring where two female demons are in the throes of a death match.

The crowd parts, allowing us to pass. Our names are called and I hear my brothers speaking to

people in the audience. I keep my eyes forward, focused. I'm not interested in friends. I'm interested in allies. It's the only reason I'm here.

When the Shaman senses our presence he glances up, making eye contact.

"You survived the trip to the Otherside," he says as we approach. His eyes flit over my brothers, searching for scars or wounds.

"With a little help, yes," I say. In the ring, one demon punches the other and a splatter of blood lands on the mat nearby. "Morgan obviously did not make it back over."

"She specifically asked for one-way passage. I wasn't sure if she got it for herself or one of you."

"You knew she was planning on staying?" Sam asks.

"She was well aware of the sacrifice she'd have to make for your safe return." He glances at the fights on the stage. "I hear you managed to bring back a cure."

"It's been delivered to the proper authorities," Clinton declares. None of us plan to reveal the source of the cure. "But hopefully the spread will end when a vaccine is made and delivered."

Admiration shines in the Shaman's eyes. "Your girl is tough. Follows through. I'm impressed."

"Well," I say, crossing my arms. "She still needs our help."

"Which is why you're here."

The buzzer for the fight sounds, thankfully, as one demon has decapitated the other and continued to bash her head on the blood-soaked mat. The fight isn't real. It's just a fantasy, but the result is still gruesome and will require a fair amount of cleanup before the next bout.

I turn back to the Shaman. "We're here to make you an offer."

The Shaman's mouth twists with interest and he leans against the stage. "I'm listening."

Clinton steps forward. “We’re looking to buy the Legion of Immortals. We have cash, jewelry, or gold. Whichever you prefer.”

Surprise flickers in his eyes. He waits a beat and strokes the small beard on his chin. “You know money doesn’t interest me.”

Damien sighs behind me. The money and gold was a wish—one we knew he wouldn’t take. “But you’re willing to sell their contract.”

“Sell isn’t the right word. I’ll offer their contracts up as winnings.”

I fight the urge to run. This man. Making a deal with him is like courting the devil. “What do you want? Another year of our service? Tack on another decade?”

“Let’s make this interesting. If you beat the Legion of Immortals in the ring, I’ll not only give you their contract but I’ll tear up yours as well.”

“And if we lose?” Clinton asks.

“I expand your contract for another fifty years.” He pauses. “And the girl, too.”

Chapter Eleven

Morgan

Nevis asks no questions as we hurry down the hall. The dark hole in the pit of my stomach expands as we get further away from the Morrigan.

“What was that?” I ask in a shaky voice that matches the tremor in my hands. “I mean, I know. I’ve felt it before but from far away. But up close...”

She leans in, clasps my hands and whispers, “The Darkness in the Queen is unmatched. It’s one of the reasons she needs to bond with you. Her body is wearing down, the power is taking a toll and unlike you, she doesn’t have a harem of extraordinary beings to help balance her.”

I don’t tell her what I’m thinking. How my body already craves another hit of that raw power. I feel the tickle in the back of my throat and the twitch on my skin. We reach Bunny’s door and she knocks, though I’m impatient and desperate enough that I would’ve barged right in.

There’s movement behind the door and I tap my feet. Unable to wait a moment longer, I push past Nevis and fling open the door, just in time to find Bunny covering a painting attached to the wall with his one good hand.

“Morgan?” He wipes his hands on his paint-stained clothing. Looking me over, he frowns. “What’s wrong?”

“Leave,” I direct Nevis. The words come out harsh, like my frayed nerves. “Wait outside, please.”

“Of course,” she replies and walks out the door. I close it behind her and twist the lock.

“What are you doing here?” he asks, but it’s clear he senses whatever is happening to me since the Morrigan shared her power.

“I need you, Bunny. If I’m going to make it through the next two days, I’m going to need your help.”

“I’ve been waiting for your arrival,” he says. “I’ve already told you I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

I don’t want to hear his words right now. I need to feel the heat of his body next to me. I need his yin to my yang, the white to my black before whatever the Morrigan infected me with consumes me whole.

I step forward but he holds up his hands. “Wait. I don’t know what this is but I definitely smell her on you.” He walks to his work table and grabs a paintbrush and dips it in a jar of paint. He goes to the door and from memory, paints a large symbol on the wood in black.

“What is that?”

“A symbol that will cloak our energy. The one we create when we’re together. She’s highly sensitive to it and if she knows you’re here...”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling a wave of dark nausea roll through me. “I don’t have a lot of time, Bunny.”

He comes to me quickly, good hand clenched around my waist, holding me up. I feel the shift almost instantly. The balance. What brought me to these men in the first place. His beautiful face is close to mine, his soft lips, his conflicted eyes. He won’t kiss me first. He’s waiting for permission. An order. That’s how much things have changed between us.

Another surge of darkness rocks me and I can’t wait another moment. I press my lips to his, opening my mouth and drawing his tongue inside. A counter wave rolls over me. Goodness and light

—I can't deny that is Bunny's core. He isn't evil. I've tasted that.

His hand does not move, although his fingers dig into my sides. I feel his hardness when he brushes against me. I feel his desire thudding in his chest. His lips move from my mouth down the column of my neck, edging across the expanse of my chest. My nipples harden and painfully point. My belly twists with a different, more carnal need.

This isn't the lost soul I've battled with. Bunny is strong. He's competent. He fulfills his duty like a soldier on a mission. My hands fall limp as he sucks at my neck, lathing my skin with his tongue.

Bit by bit, the Morrigan's darkness drains from me and when I'm seconds from crawling out of my skin with want, Bunny stops, withdrawing his mouth and blowing on the spot he'd focused on so intently.

“Don't move,” he commands, leaving me and then returning with a small pot and an ultra-thin paintbrush. I recognize the gold shimmer of paint. It's the one he coated my body with at The Nead. With a steady hand, he quickly works over the heated mark. Standing back, he eyes his work with satisfaction.

“What is it?”

He holds up a mirror and although the paint is already fading, as well as the red of my skin, I spot the Raven Guard's symbol. “She thinks she can have you, Morgan, but you're already taken. That mark is just another bind to tie you to me.”

A mixture of gratefulness and fear rises in me. It's the fear that speaks. “And what if I don't want to be bound to you anymore? What if I kill you like the Morrigan suggests?”

Bunny pushes his glasses up his nose, but any sign of the unsure Guardian is gone. There's no one here to back him up. He is the leader of my guard in this world. My only protector, and I realize now how much of this he planned—not to hurt me—but to end this with the Morrigan once and for all.

He gazes at my body, the one that just betrayed me so quickly and would have done anything to be closer to him. “I know I hurt you. I know the others want to skin me alive. But we’re in this together and sometimes a sacrifice has to be made. Look at the Morrigan, sweetheart. Do you not see how her court will do anything for her? Xavier gave his life. Anita will give hers, and if you push me away, she’ll take you, too. Everything about this world is a sacrifice. I’m just the only one willing to admit it.”

“So you’re saying all of this was for me. The mind-games and torture in the dungeons? Dividing everyone?” I shake my head, still unable to forgive like Nevis wants me to. “I think you just like pain, Bunny. You like taking it from me and inflicting it on yourself and everyone in your life.”

His jaw tenses. “You’re wrong. Open your eyes, Morgan. This is war, it isn’t pretty and it sure as hell isn’t without regret.”

I hate the fact I taste him on my mouth. That I need him so desperately to survive the next few days. But I remember the wounds on Clinton’s back. The way Sam’s eyes were clouded and close to death. For them, I will work with Bunny, and for them, I will keep him at arm’s length.

“Come back when you need me. I’ll be here,” he says as I spin on my heel and head to the door. Nevis waits on the other side; whatever she hoped would transpire in the studio falls from her face the instant she sees us.

I catch a glimpse of Bunny’s face as I start down the stairs. I expect to see anger or even a little bit of hate, but I don’t. I only see resolve and the smallest quirk on his lips. I throw a vulgar gesture his way and head back to my rooms.

Chapter Twelve

Clinton

“No,” we all four say at once. Dylan shoots us a look and controls his rage. “Keep Morgan out of it.”

The Shaman shrugs. Cleaners scrub down the mats so the fights can continue in a moment—if we get our way, we’ll be up next. But right now the bargain is too high and the bastard knows it. “That’s my deal. No offense, but without your full line-up, you’re asking me for six warriors for the price of four.”

“We can sign for Bunny,” Sam says. “Five of the Raven Guard for six Immortals? Seems like a fair trade.”

The Shaman laughs, his teeth white against his dark skin. Rings glint on his fingers. “You take me for a fool. Add in the girl and I’m game.”

I grit my teeth. “Without the Legion, there may be no girl to return.”

He waves his hands like it’s no concern. I look to the others. There is no way we can barter with Morgan’s life—her freedom. We’re bound to protect her. And serve her. Not the other way around.

“I guess we come up with another plan,” Sam says. Anger mingled with defeat sparks behind his green eyes. We were so close to a solution. And so very close to running out of time.

“Or we just go on our own. We can challenge the Morrigan. We’ve done it before,” Damien adds.

“And barely walked out alive,” I growl, low under the sounds of the crowd. There’s a murmur amongst the audience. Probably in anticipation of the next bout. They’ve no doubt been watching us and wondering why we’re here. “Morgan specifically asked me to return with an army. I cannot disregard her wishes.”

“You won’t have to,” a familiar voice says from the crowd. Looking up, I see Hildi pushing through the masses of people. Her eyes are ringed in red from grief.

“What are you doing here?”

“You need an army. I’m here to fight.”

The Shaman stands and looks her up and down, a glint of excitement in his eye. “She can take the place of the girl. You five against the Legion. If you win, you take their contract and do with them as you like. If I win? I own you all for another half century.”

We’ve made a makeshift circle and I thrust my hand in the middle, signaling my agreement to the bet. Damien follows, his tattooed hand on top of mine, Sam next, and then Dylan.

We look to Hildi and Dylan says, “It’s your choice. Don’t do this for us.”

“I’m not doing it for me,” the Valkyrie says, her voice thick with emotion. “I’m doing it for Andi.”

He nods in approval and she places her hand on top. A stack of five warriors making a pact for our lives and freedom. A sacrifice risked for a better world. The Shaman’s dark hand comes down on top and a flash jolts between us—tagging us as chips on the table.

“You have thirty minutes to prepare,” he says, with a wicked grin. “I suggest you use it to pray.”

Chapter Thirteen

Morgan

Rejuvenated from my encounter with Bunny, I pick an option from the Morrigan's extensive list of activities surrounding the bonding celebration. Training exercises by the Morrigan's men. It seems wise to check up on the competition.

Nevis said nothing once I left Bunny's studio. It was clear I felt better physically while still warring with myself mentally. Whatever judgment she held, she kept to herself.

It felt wrong to use Bunny for his body. I mean, that was one of his betrayals. Using me for pleasure yet giving nothing in return. It had been one of the first signs something was wrong. Shouldn't I feel guilty for doing the same?

These questions linger as Nevis guides me through the castle and out the back patio where I'm met with humid, warm air. We're not outside—no, the climate is too harsh on the barren landscape surrounding the castle. This is more like a greenhouse—an enormous one with glass ceilings and walls that stretch as high and far as my eye can see.

Lush greenery climbs the walls. The scent of flowers mingles with the smell of straw, and I suspect livestock. It's an entire world here—much like the one underground--and as I look around I spot familiar faces from Nevis' home.

“What is this place?”

“It's how she stays alive. Her heart may be cold and her soul as dark as the nights, but to survive she must have nourishment and keep her soldiers and staff fed.”

“Is it connected to your home?” I ask.

“Yes, the heat and water comes through pumps engineered by our people.”

We walk through the maze of gardens that go for miles. Some are filled with flowers and trees. Others have vegetables and a few unidentifiable fruits. The sound of animals calls from the other end. I see a large deer-like animal with horns grazing on a patch of grass. When it looks up, I see it has three eyes and two tails, and I hold back a startled gasp.

“What?” Nevis asks.

“The animals here are not the same as back home.”

She smiles. “I’m sure there are many differences.”

We reach a terrace that looks over a valley below. The field is made of dry grass, and men in black uniforms are clumped together. Fear trembles through me when I spot a figure bellowing at soldiers.

Casteel.

“So he is alive.”

“Dylan cut off his hand, but the healers were able to restore him to full capacity despite that.”

“Bunny functions with only one hand—one arm, really. I doubt Casteel will slow,” I say, watching him lash a whip at one of his men. From here, it looks like there are hundreds of soldiers, maybe more. I have no idea how Clinton and the others will raise an army large or skilled enough to take down the force below. I’m not even sure what to do with them when they arrive back.

Or if they will.

“Thank you for showing me around.”

“Do you think it will be helpful?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure the Queen added it to make me realize how powerful her army is. Just as she did this morning with the Darkness. It’s all just here to keep me off balance. To question my abilities and make me heel.”

“Yet you found a way around it this morning.” Her comment is pointed.

“I won’t give up,” is all I say to her. “Not now. Not until the final moment, and I’ll do what it takes to keep fighting.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sam

Thirty minutes isn't much time to prepare but it's also just enough time to panic. Or maybe that's just me, I think, looking at my brothers and Hildi as we wait in the changing room.

“Any idea on how this will go down?” Clinton asks.

“I do,” Hildi says. “I owed the Shaman for some gambling debts a few years ago. I paid them off by working the back. Including handling the Legion.”

“What do you know about them?” Dylan asks. “I've only read about them in texts, as part of the greater mythology surrounding Camulus, the God of War. I've never seen them in person before.”

“The Shaman doesn't use them for standard battles in the ring. He's more likely to send them to other realms looking for fighters to come to Earth. Where do you think he gets so many participants?”

Damien removes his rings and tapes his knuckles. “They're all in his debt, like us.”

“Exactly. The Legion are different. They were tossed out of the Immortal army for refusing to continue their barbaric ways. The Shaman snapped up their contract and they've been in his service ever since.”

“So they refused to stoop to Camulus' brutality. Isn't that a good thing?” I ask.

Hildi snorts. “They were part of an elite death squad. They had no civility. No moral code. They wreaked havoc and mayhem for centuries.”

“Sounds like the kind of soldiers the Morrigan would love to get her hands on,” Clinton says, standing and lacing his boots. “Too bad we'll get them first.”

“Tell us anything you know,” I say to Hildi and Dylan. We have ten minutes and I’d like to be as prepared as possible.

“The mythology states that Camulus traveled the world to find the strongest fighters for the Legion. Each were known for their heroic last stands—something that probably caught Camulus’ attention. Most he collected on the battlefield, moments after their death. He granted them immortality and a spot in his special army. These soldiers cut a swath through the world with a particular kind of mayhem, but as we talked about, six men refused to continue and were released from Camulus.”

“Who are they?” Clinton asks. From the set of his jaw I can tell he wants to know everything he can about his opponents.

Hildi sits on the bench next to the lockers. “They’re a mixed lot. The one thing they have in common is a taste for blood. But to get it started, there’s Miya. He’s a Japanese swordsman who won his first duel at the age of twelve.”

“So he was a prodigy,” Clinton says.

“His opponent was a well-trained Samurai with a blade. Miya had a sharpened stick.”

Damien winces. “Ouch.”

“Then,” she says, “there’s Agis. He was known as the God of Death due to his refusal to die although severely injured. He kept fighting and allowed his army to get through.”

“What army did he lead?” I ask.

Dylan looks at me. “The Spartans. For over a decade.”

“Total badass, then,” Damien says. Everyone nods.

“Next up, we have Roland.”

“That’s a wuss name,” Clinton snorts.

Hildi rolls her eyes. “He was one of the twelve peers of Charlemagne, who we all know was a ball-busting general.”

“So we have a Japanese sword-fighter, a Spartan, and an all-warrior,” Clinton says in a strained voice. “Perfect. What’s next?”

“Marshal, a famous knight known for sprees of murder and theft. On his deathbed, it was said that he bested over five hundred knights during his career, and took large swaths of land for his king,” Hildi replies. “That just leaves Armin, a German strongman that was basically unstoppable and destroyed everything in his path, and Rupert, the child prince who ran away and joined the army at age fourteen. He was so good, people believed he had supernatural abilities.”

“Did he?” I ask. I wouldn’t put it past any of these men to have demon blood.

She shakes her head. “Not until he died.”

“Great. How do we plan on defeating them?” I ask. “Because we have to defeat them. Not just for Morgan, but I don’t want to work for that bastard out there for another fifty years.”

Clinton stands just as the warning buzzer sounds from the ring. “We’ll beat them like we’ve beaten every other opponent tossed our way. One at a time.”

Chapter Fifteen

Hildi

The doors of the training room open and for a moment I'm struck still. The volume of the crowd hits me first, roaring like a freight train, so much that I almost recoil at the vibrations. But that's not what startles me. It's the arena that has replaced the old warehouse with metal bleachers soaked in beer and sweat. The stadium is wide and circular, the ground covered in sawdust and sand. The seats reach the ceiling, which is wide open, revealing a dark, starlit sky.

“Dear gods, what sort of witchery is this,” one of the men behind me mutters. I look over and take in the sight of Dylan wearing traditional warrior armor, the thick coil of his whip hung at his hip. A ripple through the crowd brings me back to myself and I note the weight in my hand and lift the sword—a Valkyrie blade—and the heft of a shield on my back.

A quick glance shows me the others are outfitted similarly. Helmets, shields, chainmail linked over their broad, strong shoulders.

We're in a tunnel, the sort that leads to the center of the arena. The Shaman clearly saw fit to make a spectacle of our competition. Why not? The fight will become the stuff of legends. The sort Morgan and Dylan will write in their history books for future generations.

All the more reason to be the victors.

The doors behind us close with a loud slam, the bolt thrown to ensure no escape. I came to this fight to do what is required to bring down the Morrigan. To force her to pay for what she took from me. The image of Andi's final breath is seared into my brain, my heart, and I felt the pain of the thousands of other deaths in the city before the cure made it into the right hands.

Morgan didn't fail me. Neither did her guardians. The Queen of Darkness must be tamed once and for all, and if that means bringing a crew of ruthless murderers into her realm, so be it.

"It's magic," I say as a reminder. Surely they know. It's not their first time in the ring nor experiencing the Shaman's mysticism. "We fight to the death."

"All six," Clinton grunts from behind a silver facemask. His gray eyes hold mine.

"I feel the eye of Odin with me," I tell them. "Thor's power flows through my fists. And Freya's lust for new souls in my blood."

There's no buzzer—not in this arena, but something louder—a gong--vibrates that the time has come. The Shaman appears in the middle of the stadium and he waves us forward, just as he waves his hand toward the opening on the other side of the field.

As though they appear from the ether, six magnificent males stride forward and the crowd falls into a hushed reverie.

Instinctively I grip my sword and I feel the others shift into a defensive position around me. I've seen the Legion before. Mentally, I understand their strength and immortality, but being on the ground with them, in their presence, even while surrounded by the strongest fighters created by the hands of gods, is humbling.

Miya's long black hair trails behind him. His goatee is trimmed and highlights the sharp lines of his jaw. His outfit is solid black. His feet are bare. Leather straps around his chest and the hilt of his sword juts over his shoulder.

Next to him strides the God of Death, Agis, carrying a metal helmet adorned with a razor sharp spike across the top. He's clad in a tight leather tunic and pants, thick-soled boots, and a silver-tipped spear gripped in his free hand.

My eyes skim over the others, trying to take in their weapons, their stature and size. I'm looking

for weak spots I know I won't find. Anything to get the upper hand. Rupert walks forward in fighting leathers, brown leather gloves and boots. A quiver of arrows hangs from his back, a bow down by his side. He's next to Armin, who has on form-fitting armor from the neck down. His eyes are so blue they shine like sapphires even from a distance. His beard is thick and blond, his hair shaggy around his ears, and he's built like a godsdamned tank.

Rounding out the edges are Roland and Marshal. Roland is thin and lithe. I won't underestimate him. His reputation is that of a sadist, although it seems impossible. He looks the youngest of them all with dark, curly hair and pink cheeks. The glint in his eye and the slight tug at his lips confirm that he's eager for the bloodshed to begin.

And then Marshal. It's impossible to get an estimate of his expression with a full helmet covering his face. He moves smoothly even though he's carrying his body weight in armor, including chainmail around his neck, as well as a sword and shield in his hands.

There's an energy that rolls off of them. I've felt it with the Ravens when they've fought in the ring. But this...this is different. For the first time, I really question our decision to make this bet.

I feel separated from my body as the Shaman announces the terms of the fight. My sword is weightless as the guardians secure their armor. The only signal that the battle has started is the vibration of the gong, the Shaman disappearing, and roar of Clinton racing past me, declaring his loyalty to Morgan.

Pulling the shield off my back I follow the men into battle, prepared to meet my destiny.

Chapter Sixteen

Morgan

After the walking the castle's grounds I fall into a deep sleep, napping before dinner. I dream I have wings, with long black feathers that guide me from this world back to my own. The sensation of Earth fills my senses. The smells. The air. The warmth of humans and society. Spreading my wings, I soar over The Nead, my stomach lurching at being so close to home, at once both excited and homesick. The kind of sensation a dream gives you—when you know it's not real. But you want it to be, so badly.

It only takes a moment to realize the house is empty. I circle, arcing over the park until I catch the faintest of scents. Then I race over the city, eyes scanning for my mates. I follow their trail to a familiar part of town. The warehouse trembles with excitement. They're at the fights—*no*, in the fights. Landing on a ventilation ledge, I peer inside.

The ring is no longer a ring, but morphed into something larger. From the inside I'm not looking through slats in a window but sitting atop a massive arena. Below, gods below...I spot six enormous fighters clashing with five familiar bodies.

The crowd screams for bloodshed, swords crash against one another. Dylan squares against a dark-skinned man who wields his sword like a second hand. The whip unfurls in my guardian's hand and the sound of it lashing out creates a rip in the night.

I scan the others, terrified to watch any one fight; Damien, Sam, and Clinton each grunt, defending. And then in the middle, as though she's always been there...Hildi.

I have no doubt that her being here means one thing: Andi is dead. The way she goes after a

man twice her size is the only proof I have. Vengeance is in her every move. I feel her pain all the way up here.

Movement catches my eye. The warriors below continue to circle one another, taking the occasional shot. I duck my head when a massive opponent brings down his weapon on Damien, a large mallet that looks as if made of stone. Damien is fast. Agile. I don't want to watch. I don't want to see this.

Why? Why are they here?

“For you,” a voice says next to me. I look over and see another bird, a large falcon, perched on the thin ledge. The voice is familiar: the Shaman. I open my mouth to speak but words do not come out. I'm a bird, for Christsake.

But even though I have no voice I do hear him, and the words formulated in my head are communicated back.

“They're here for you,” he tells me, nodding his beak below where the battle rages on. “They made a bet looking for soldiers for your army. If they win, they get to keep the Legion.”

“If they don't?”

“They'll be in my debt.”

I look down to see if I can get a sense of who is winning. It's impossible with so much metal and steel. “And Hildi?”

“She asked for a spot on the team. I always knew she was a champion.”

“Do you think they'll win?”

The instant I ask this I hear the sound of a body dropping hard. One of the warriors has fallen. Blood drips from Clinton's sword. He never hesitates, jumping into the next battle. Now the numbers are even.

“I never underestimate your Ravens,” he says. “Neither should you.”

“Why do you think I underestimate them? I have complete faith.”

“Do you?” His beady brown and yellow eyes stare at me. “All of them?”

I look down once again. Dylan yanks his whip, disarming the soldier he’s fighting. In a blink he has the man bound and a knife pointed at his throat. Damien lunges nearby, sliding across the sandy floor, getting the upper hand on his opponent, while Sam has one constrained in the crook of his elbow, one hand on his head. The sound of his neck snapping is clear over the roar of the crowd.

I look back at the falcon. “You don’t mean the ones on the ground, do you?”

He flexes his wings, spreading them wide. The fight below has turned into a blood bath. Five of my soldiers now against three of theirs.

“Get ready, the battle is coming for you. Make sure you’re as strong and as prepared as they are.” He launches from the ledge, soaring into the night. I look back down just in time to see Hildi run her sword through the gut of her victim. Turning for the falcon, I search for him. I have more questions. More thoughts. But my feathers start to fall, gloss black into the night. With the sound of the arena still in my ears I wake, arms spread across my bed, the coppery scent of blood in my nostrils.

My army is coming.

Chapter Seventeen

Morgan

Dressed in another ridiculous gown, I await an escort to take me to dinner. Well, the word “dinner” downplays the scene in the grand hall. Really it’s a formal banquet, everyone dressed in their finest, including Anita, who looks like a beacon in a blood red dress.

“Where do all these people live?” I ask Nevis as we enter the room.

“The Queen has surrounded herself with a court of loyal citizens. They stay on the castle grounds, under the protection of the Queen’s magic.”

“What’s it like out there? Beyond the walls?” Anita asks. I’m surprised at her interest.

“Cold, dark, and dangerous. There are some small villages on the outskirts of the kingdom. Wild areas that the castle does trade and barter with. But no one has traveled further than the Queen’s territory in many years. Beasts roam the hillsides, thieves and dark magic lurks in caves and the barren fields.”

Anita shivers and I suppress one as well. It’s hard to shake the chill of the castle. Some of it real, other parts psychological—like a dark depression. I know now though that some of this is the actual Darkness. The power wielded by the Morrigan. The one I had a faint taste of back at the Nead, the one my guardians helped quell with their love and affection. But even after my moment with Bunny earlier today, I feel the desire for a taste of her power. It’s the one thing that makes me know, she and I are one. And from the dark circles under Anita’s eyes and the red scratch marks on her arms, I know she’s jonesing for another hit too.

“How was your afternoon?” I ask. I’m carrying the weird dream I know the Shaman sent me

deep in my chest. “Do anything interesting?”

“I spent time in the royal antiquity room. Jewels and artifacts from throughout history.” She leans in. “Did you know the Hope diamond is actually a fossilized dragon’s eye? The Morrigan has a matching one that she uses to control the beasts.”

I wait a beat for Anita to laugh and tell me that was a joke, but no, she’s serious.

“Wow. No, I didn’t know that.” I do notice that she sways a little and I reach to hold her steady. “You feeling okay?”

She stabilizes herself and replies in a low voice, “I’ve been a little rocky since that power blast earlier today. Like, I was never into drugs and stuff. Okay well, maybe a little bit of OxyContin back in college. A little boost to get through exams, and obviously Xavier dabbled, but I never knew what real cravings felt like. Not until today.”

I don’t reply right away but Nevis discreetly presses her heel against my toe. The pain is sharp but I bite it back. I should have the same cravings as Anita and the only reason I don’t is Bunny helping me out. I can’t let her or the Morrigan know I have an outlet. More than ever, she needs to think I hate him.

With the warring feelings in my heart, that won’t be so hard to do.

“Yeah, I felt shitty all day. I had to take a huge nap.”

She nods. “One more day and all that delicious darkness will be ours, all the time.”

Instead of arguing, I lift my skirts to walk down the aisle, but Nevis holds me back.

“Tonight you’ll follow the Queen down the carpet in royal formation.”

“What?” I glance at Anita. She’s smoothing her hair and adjusting her bodice to reveal more cleavage. Obviously she knew about this.

“It’s just a formality,” the servant says. “Just follow behind her. Smile and nod.” Nevis narrows her eyes at me. “You can do that, can’t you?”

I have no idea when I got the reputation of being uncooperative. I’m about to ask when the hallway falls silent and the Morrigan is ushered in by her protective unit.

Led by Casteel.

My instant reaction of rage and anger answers that question. These people made me uncooperative. They made me the woman I am today, one who is vengeful and determined.

The Morrigan once again wears her signature black, in a dress made of slick leather that molds to the curves of her body. It’s interesting that she has me and Anita dress in such formality while she looks like a demon from the sex realm, but whatever. I guess that’s her style.

“Dears,” she says when she sees us, and my first reaction to her isn’t hate. It’s desire. Desire for her power and the dark energy that lurks in her every move. “You look outstanding. Perfect little princesses for the court to love and adore.”

Anita doesn’t even hide her desperation, moving quickly to touch, taste, and smell the queen. Casteel holds her back, blocking her with his arm that no longer has a hand attached. There’s nothing but a wrapped stump.

“Let her pass,” the Morrigan says with a stern voice. There’s little doubt she dislikes Casteel’s interference. Her eyes flick over me as well. “Let them both come to me. I know they need a little bump to get through the night.”

I don’t want to. I don’t want that garbage in my system, but Nevis nudges me forward and I know I have no choice. The instant I’m in range, black tendrils of smoke swirl off her body—the kind I saw in the ring when she fought Dylan. The kind from the photos Sam took moments before he was captured. The Darkness, the Morrigan’s essence, is *alive* and I watch helplessly as it wraps around

my wrist like a manacle, injecting me with the cold, hard power my body is eager to taste.

It feels like a tiny prick—or dozens of them, really—sinking into my flesh. It feels good; the rush of absolute power. It hadn't been this way back home. As quickly as the smoke arrived it vanishes again, flickering back into her body.

“Just a bit, dears, to tide you over until the ceremony. I need you strong but not doped up on a level of power you can't understand.”

“Thank you,” Anita says, licking her lips. The rings have vanished under her eyes and she looks more alive now than before. I touch my cheeks, wondering if they have the same glow.

The Morrigan looks at me expectantly and I nod. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She smiles and walks past us, getting into position to lead our procession. Casteel passes me and says, “You look ravishing tonight, Morgan. Not as good as you did wet and naked, but still, removing all that fabric is half the challenge.”

A jolt shocks through me and I grab Casteel by his lame arm and jerk it behind his back in a quick move. He falls to the ground on his knees, whimpering when a bone cracks. The soldiers around us pull their weapons, and I feel the steel point of at least six blades at my neck and back. The strength running through me isn't my own, and when the Morrigan turns to see the commotion there's no denying the glint in her eye.

“Stand down, Casteel,” she says, her lips curved in a nasty grin. “Only you would be foolish enough to push your vendetta against a woman filled with the Dark spirit. If she kills you right now, I'll do nothing but watch.”

I drop him, pushing him forward. He grunts as he falls, cradling his already weak arm. I straighten and Anita smirks at me as I line up next to her. The Darkness rolls and expands inside of me, reacting to the feel of me using it.

The Morrigan turns and says, “Are you ready, girls?”

“Yes,” I declare, holding my chin high.

Because yes, I think I am.

Chapter Eighteen

Dylan

Unbelievably, in a haze of blood and sweat, the fight comes to an end. My brothers, Hildi, and I stand over the slain bodies. The roar of the crowd is both as astonished as I am and ecstatic at the results. I hardly remember it at all. Not the kills, not how we came out on top. But we did, and I'm not one to argue with the fates, so when that final buzzer rings I raise my arms like a champion and accept the win.

Now to take our prize.

"Go clean up," the Shaman says. He's not as angry as I expect. "I'll have the Legion and the paperwork prepared for transfer."

"That's it?" Clinton asks, never one to trust the Shaman. I understand. There's usually a catch, but as we walk back down the tunnel that is already shifting back to normal with a magical haze, and enter the training room, I realize that for once there isn't.

"I wish you luck," the man says, although I'm not sure he believes in such a thing. "Believe it or not, I'm on your side. The Morrigan's ways...they aren't my own. I like the balance of the realms as they are."

"Because you profit from it?" Hildi asks, the large cut on her cheek already starting to fade.

"Because it took many centuries for me to settle in. Establish my ways." He smiles. "Plus, I like the comforts of this world. Coffee. Pizza. The internet. An apocalypse isn't in my favor any more than it is in yours."

There's honesty in his words. And truth.

“And the Legion,” I ask. “How will they feel about it?”

“The stories of the Legion are complex and not always as they seem. But they’ve waited a long time to put a god *or* goddess of war to an end. They’ll be useful allies. I understand why you’ve chosen them.”

Clinton pulls his shirt over his head, there’s a nasty bruise on his side, but it too is disappearing. He jerks his chin at the Shaman. “Any suggestions on how to handle them?”

“They’re soldiers. Warriors like yourself. Tell them what the mission is and they’ll fight accordingly.”

The Shaman spreads his right hand and waves his other across his palm. There’s a ripple in the air and a roll of thick paper appears. It’s old and the magic holding it together is strong enough to smell. Sulfur is the primary odor.

“Once we sign these, they’re yours.”

“And when the battle is over? What do we do with them then?”

The Shaman shrugs and unfurls the papers. “That’s up to you.”

He cuts his finger with a sharp blade and places a drop at the bottom. He passes it to me and I scan it over. I see no tricks. No manipulations. Once we sign, the Legion will belong to us. And their contract as well as our own with the Shaman are now void.

I take the blade and slice into my own skin. Blood beads at the tip of my finger and with a look at the others I seal the contract between us.

Now we’re the owners of an army.

Morgan

There's little time for food, and I'm definitely holding back on the drink tonight as the affair seems to be more about dancing and socializing than anything else. I still can't exactly figure out what and who the members of the Queen's court are, why they're here, but at least three handsome men line up and ask me to dance.

"Thank you," I say to the most recent one. He's blonde with brilliant green eyes. I smile sympathetically. "But, no. I really can't."

Seriously. I have no idea how to dance—at least not in the style of the Otherside.

Anita has no problem saying yes and once they walk away from me they rotate over. Her red dress flares as she spins, completely fluent in the movements of this world. Her hand lingers flirtatiously over the shoulder of the blond courtesan that I'd just rejected. He doesn't seem to mind. Why would he? Anita is at home in this world. The way she has acclimated to the kingdom brings about a million questions, and without realizing it, I scan the room for the one person that can answer them.

"It's fascinating, isn't it?" Bunny says, from behind me, like he knew I was searching for him. "How you and Anita are so different."

"Why is that?" I ask him, feeling our bond stretch with him so close. The Morrigan's Darkness tickles at the back of my throat. I'd give anything for Bunny to douse the fire with his mouth.

"She didn't have five guardians watching over her from the day she was born."

I glance over, unsure if us speaking is a good idea. There are no runes to protect us from the Morrigan's careful eye—other than the one Bunny etched on my skin. Somehow I doubt that's enough.

Yet Bunny grazes his fingers on my waist and offers me his hand. "May I have this dance?"

“I’ll tell you what I haven’t told the others...I can’t dance.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage.” He gives me a crooked smile and a strand of his copper hair falls in his eyes. He’s wearing formal attire; black pants and a gray tunic. Add in his glasses and he looks quite distinguished.

I don’t hesitate. I want his touch. I crave the way he soothes the dark power surging inside of me. My body trembles in relief when his hand takes mine and I fight to keep my knees from shaking as we walk across the marble floor. He leads me gracefully, the warmth of his hand easing into the dip of my back. There’s no lack of confidence as he guides me with only one hand, but he does stand close,, using his full body to lead. Without missing a beat we fall in step with the music.

“Why are you shaking?” he asks in a low voice. People are watching, including the Queen.

“She keeps pushing her magic on me. Anita, too.” I look at our connected hands. “I think she’s testing me, seeing how I handle such an influx of dark power.”

“So that’s why you came to me before.”

I nod, not feeling the slightest bit of guilt. “I can’t do the job I need to if I’m drunk on dark magic, Bunny.”

“You know you can come to me whenever you need to. I don’t judge.” He spins me around and my skirt flares like a flower. When I come back to him, he pulls me closer, dropping his hand behind my back. I don’t miss the way his eyes graze over my breasts or the gentle but possessive feel of his hand. “Believe it or not, we have the same goal.”

It *is* hard for me to believe that. But I think about my dream earlier in the day. My guardians are sacrificing themselves for this fight. Hildi has joined in at the risk of everything. And the Shaman, what had he said?

“I never underestimate your Ravens.”

I knew at that moment he didn't just mean the ones in the fight below, but the one in front of me, too. I open my mouth to tell him everything, about the directions I gave Clinton. The dream and the warriors the guardians went up against. How I'm doing all of this to save my world, my family, and how I want to save him, too.

Our eyes meet and I feel walls crumbling between us. We're bigger than this. Bonded. Mated in all ways except one.

Before I can speak, the music changes and Bunny twirls me to the edge of the dance floor, slipping through a crowd of people until we're behind a large stone pillar near one of the roaring fireplaces.

It's against that pillar, hidden from the eyes of the court that Bunny kisses me, deliciously hard. He takes the Darkness building up inside and gives me something I'd been missing since arriving in this cold, barren kingdom.

Hope.

Chapter Twenty

Bunny

Gods, her mouth. Her lips and the way her breasts look in that antique gown. I love Morgan in all ways: fighting in the ring, modeling for a painting, laughing on the rooftop garden; but here, in this dress, her image burns into my mind as one of my favorites.

She's fought me for days, angry and hurt. I understand it, I do. Betrayal cuts deep, but I'd hoped she see the bigger plan. That once we were both here, free to roam and plant the seeds of a rebellion, we would have one another. Together, with the help of the Guardians, we would become whole.

She's close—nudged by the need to rid herself of the Morrigan's poison. A side effect I don't think the queen anticipated.

"She'll see," she breathes.

"She may." I peer around the pillar and find the queen involved in conversation with her courtesans. "But I've blocked her from your emotions. When we're together, she can no longer sense our bond and the strength that ties us together."

"It's still there, isn't it? The bond?"

"Only one thing will tear that apart."

Another glance tells me someone else is looking—someone dangerous. I release my hold on Morgan.

"What?" she asks. I know her worry isn't about herself. It's about the plan and time slipping away before the Raven Guard arrives. There's little time for a mistake.

“Casteel. He’s watching. And waiting.”

“For what?” She slips away and the coil between us ebbs.

“For an opportunity, I’m sure. To what end, I don’t know. I’m sure the queen has made it clear you’re off limits.”

“I’ve made that clear, too.”

I smile. “I’m sure you have.”

“One day,” she says, rounding the pillar to rejoin the party. “That’s all we have to survive. One final day and this will be over.”

I watch her vanish around the marble column and hope she realizes we will have to do more than survive for the next twenty-four hours. And if she isn’t willing, then the fate of us all may succumb to the Queen and her darkness.

Chapter Twenty-One

Damien

The Nead, the spacious mansion that has provided the Raven Guard shelter, suddenly feels small.

I stand in the foyer and watch as Sue and Davis jump to work, figuring out places for these men—these warriors--to sleep and prepare, until we embark on our journey to the Otherside.

I don't know what to expect from the Legion. They're legends—close to a myth--that Dylan would read about in his musty books, but they're here. Standing in our foyer looking decidedly... normal.

“Does anyone need a drink?” I ask suddenly, feeling the urge. “Because I need a fucking drink.”

Sam perks up, as well as Clinton, who's already headed to the library. I pat one of the warriors, Agis I believe, on the shoulder and nod for him to follow.

Clinton pours drinks and passes them around. Dylan comes in the room and shuts the door behind him. I swallow the fiery liquid in a quick gulp and wait for what comes next.

“First,” Dylan says, holding his drink in his hand. “We're not looking to keep you as slaves. That has never been our interest but you how the Shaman operates. Contracts and manipulation. It was the only way.”

My brother looks over the room. It's packed between the four of us, Hildi, and the six Immortals. “The Morrigan is making her move tomorrow. Her intention is to bring the Darkness from her world to this one, kicking off the apocalypse.”

“The sickness,” Miya says. “I’ve seen it before, during other times. It was made from her dark energy.”

“We’ve managed to stop that for now,” Sam says. Hildi scoffs bitterly under her breath and takes a big gulp of alcohol. Clinton refills her glass.

“That was the closest she’s come to getting through in a long time. But other forces have aligned. Both of her sisters are alive right now, Macha and Nemian. Although we tried to split them using our own dark magic, it didn’t work as anticipated. The Morrigan must be destroyed.”

“And you need our help,” says Rupert. He leans against the leather sofa as though the fight earlier didn’t happen and that his freedom doesn’t hang in the balance.

“Yes, we need your fighting power,” I say. “We must get to our mate before the binding ceremony starts, but the Morrigan will be armed to the teeth. Her soldiers are strong and deadly.”

“And after this battle is over?” Roland asks.

“You’re free to go,” Dylan says. He does not add that there will be conditions.

“And if we fail?” Armin asks. He’s huge, even more so in human clothes where his muscles bulge against the fabric of his shirt.

Clinton places his glass on the bar. “We won’t fail.”

We study one another—ten men and one Valkyrie, and that much is understood. Failure is not an option.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Morgan

The morning of the ceremony dawns gray like every other I've experienced on the Otherside. Nevis opens the curtains wide, blasting white light into the room, and I shield my eyes.

"Are we in a rush?"

"Preparations will last all day, starting with a dip in the royal springs and a blessing by the court priest."

"This kingdom has a priest?"

"Yes, and you're due to join the Morrigan and Anita soon. Eat your breakfast." She points to the small plate of food next to the bed.

Less than a day before the ceremony happens. I wanted to bide my time until this day, until my guardians arrived, but I feel off kilter. Like I should have done more. The harsh frown tugging at Nevis' mouth implies the same.

"What have I done wrong?" I ask her. "Where have I failed?"

"You're here, Morgan, and you're treading lightly. It's the best we can hope for."

But her disappointment is evident as she combs through my hair, working out the tangles from the night before. "Bunny and I have made up," I say. "Or at least I think we have."

"You've forgiven him?"

"As much as I can," I say, but doubt lingers. I haven't told him all of the plans. And I certainly haven't let myself truly go with him. "We're watched constantly. Even with the rune of protection he

gave me, Casteel kept an eye on us both last night.”

Nevis twists my hair into a tight bun and wraps my naked body in a thick robe. “Uh, no clothes?”

“I told you, bathing in the springs.”

Gods, what have I gotten myself into. “And these springs? Are they the same as yours below?”

“Not exactly. They’re natural but not from the same well that has the healing properties, but to keep the queen calm some water is added daily to the pools. Her vanity knows no bounds, Morgan. She feeds on her beauty and control over others. Be careful when you’re with her today. You’ll need all your strength as she’ll be testing you, weakening you before the ceremony tonight. She can’t allow anything to interfere with her plans.”

“How do I fight back?” We’re at the door, about to leave my room. I’m in the robe and have on felt slippers.

She turns and takes my hands. “You’re powerful in your own right, Morgan. You have the tools and strength it takes to do this. Dig deep. The real challenge for you is pretending like you haven’t succumbed to her will.”

We’re quiet in the hallway, the entire kingdom seemingly still asleep. Nevis leads me to a bathhouse. Stained glass windows line the wall and the bath itself is large and square. Steam rises from the water and just as I arrive, Anita turns the corner in a matching robe.

“Morgan,” she says. “Have fun last night?”

“Sure,” I reply, remembering what Nevis just said. Fake it. Pretend. Stop being such a judgmental bitch and get through the day. “I’ve never been to anything like that before.”

“Well, Mother and Daddy prepared me with cotillion and etiquette classes in high school. I loathed it at the time, but now I understand that they were grooming me for this very moment.” She

gives me a sympathetic grin.

Grooming. It's a strange word but obviously exactly the right one for the circumstances. "Yeah, no such luck. Somehow my parents didn't get the memo."

Nevis walks over at the same time as Anita's servant. They both reach for our robes. Anita dutifully unties her belt and I do the same, feeling incredibly awkward.

"Don't worry," Anita says, flinging her hair over her shoulder. Her body is perfection. Except for the one blemish at the base of her neck. I narrow my eyes. It looks like a hickey. "This is all just part of the ritual. The Morrigan wants to make sure we're 'pure' before the ceremony tonight."

I pretend not to care about being stark naked in front of Anita. That I'm as confident as she is. I follow her down the steps into the steaming water and quickly submerge. "What do you mean pure?"

"Pure. This water is enchanted. It will rid us of any disease or lingering energy from past lovers." She laughs and adds, "Not that your Guardians were diseased or anything, but the Morrigan doesn't want anything left of them."

I frown and glance up at Nevis. She's focused elsewhere, on purpose I assume. "Why does it matter?"

"We're binding as one, Morgan, but the Morrigan needs us to be as pure as possible to channel all of our energies together." She bobs in the water and that's when I notice the love mark on her neck fading away. Subconsciously I reach for the place Bunny marked me and gave me his rune and wonder if it's still there. I'm not sure it matters anymore. "I saw you sneak off with Bunny last night—don't tell me you didn't kiss and make up."

I shake my head. "No. We didn't."

She rolls her eyes. "Too bad. I know I spent my last night in physical gluttony." She leans forward and mock whispers. "Three men. At once. It was pretty epic."

A strange feeling blooms in my belly.

“You’d know all about that wouldn’t you, though?” she says.

Feeling the urge to disappear, I submerge fully under water, pushing out the sound of Anita’s voice. Even when I emerge it’s like she’s a mile away, blathering on about whatever she finds so important. For me it’s like a bell rang, my mind clearing and reality coming into focus for the first time in days.

I guess I always assumed Bunny and I would have a chance.

I figured there would be time to fix this. To resolve our problems and repair what went wrong. But if the Morrigan succeeds tonight and one of us doesn’t make it out alive, I’ve given up any chance of mating with him for good.

Three days ago I didn’t think I would care. But now? I’m consumed with devastation and loss.

*

The priest stands at the end of a small garden. Roses with thorny vines climb the walls surrounding the area. The petals are a deep blood red.

Anita and I wear long white dresses, and the priest watches us carefully as we kneel before him. As usual, I’m lost and follow Anita’s lead. Bowing when appropriate, nodding when necessary. I don’t understand the language the priest speaks, but the sense of dread in my belly only grows when he touches my head with an oily thumb and sends me on my way.

“What’s next?” I ask Nevis in a harsh tone on the way back to my rooms. “A parade?”

I’m tugging at the collar of the ridiculous gown, desperate to rip it off. Barely in the door, I

yank it over my head and toss it toward the fireplace, cursing when the fabric falls short of the flames.

In nothing but the simple white bra and panties I was given after my bath, I walk to the closet and grab another outfit. That too brings about a fury of anger and I pull each and every dress from its hanger and toss them on the floor. “I’m sick of this place, the way it makes me feel. The Darkness ebbing in me even after the cleansing.” I grab my arms and squeeze, trying to feel something other than the hollowness of the castle. “Everything about this world is wrong. I need my guardians. I need to get out of here.”

I’m mostly ranting to myself but Nevis has closed the door quickly to make sure no one hears my tirade. The door knob jiggles and we glance at one another. I had one job. Fake it.

My heart sinks even further when the door pushes open and Casteel walks in the room.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dylan

The light flips on over my study and I stride in with Armin close behind. I'd asked who wanted to be a representative of the group—a leader for the upcoming battle. The massive warrior stepped forward.

He was silent on his way up the stairs, but now that we're in my study some of the hard expression fades as he takes in my books and maps.

“This is all yours?” he asks. I'm surprised by his grasp of the English language. I'm not sure why, he's no more American than I am. Time and magic have brought us a both a long way from who we were originally.

“This house and property has belonged to the Guardians for a long time. With the help of others that believe in our mission, we've amassed quite a collection of history and documents about the past and future.”

“And your goal is to bring down the Goddess of War? The Queen of Ravens?” he asks, looking over a stack of books. “Your queen?”

“We were created by the gods to watch over her—keep her in line. She is precariously close to crossing it.” I nod to a painting leaning next to the fireplace. It's one of Bunny's that depicts the castle in explicit detail. “We are not bound to the Morrigan. Our actual queen is in that castle fighting for her life as well as the freedom of those in two realms. She left us with instructions to bring an army back.”

“And we're that army,” he says.

“Yes.”

“And your queen. You think she’s still alive?”

“Absolutely. For one, the Morrigan needs her. The other? I can feel her.”

Armin frowns. “How is that?”

“She’s our mate.” I say it clearly so there is no misunderstanding.

“More than you?”

“All of ours.” The hair on the back of my neck pricks with possessiveness.

“The Valkyrie. Who does she belong to?”

“Freya,” I reply. “She’s here on her own mission. A willing and capable soldier.”

He says nothing else on the subject, just walks over and studies the castle. “When do we leave?”

“At dusk.”

He pushes his hands in his pockets. Shoulders at ease. “And you have a plan?”

“That’s why I brought you up here.” I spread a map across the table. Davis gave it to me when we returned from the Otherside. “We’ll make one together.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Morgan

Nevis instantly sinks into the wall, trying to vanish in Casteel's presence. That move worked for her last time, but Casteel isn't the Queen's commander because he's an idiot. He shuts the door and glances over at her with dark eyes. "Don't move."

She slowly nods.

I can't take my eyes off his arm—the tied shirt covering the stump at the bottom, given to him by Dylan. There's no doubt he'll take out his anger on me. I'd narrowly escaped before, but no one is coming to save me this time.

"You have a habit of coming into my room uninvited, Commander," I say, reaching for a dress on the floor. I quickly slip it over my head. "We've just come from the blessing ceremony and my cleansing bath. You know about that, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then you're aware of how excited the Queen is about the ceremony tonight—I'm sure you don't want to interfere with her plans." Last time, he came in looking to rape me. I ease near the fireplace, reaching for a poker. I grip the iron rod in my hand and hold it in front of me.

His good hand lingers near the sword on his belt and I'm not prepared for what he says next. "I'm not here to hurt you."

"I don't believe that."

"What if I told you I don't want the ceremony to happen tonight?"

I let his words sink in but they do nothing to allay my fears. “It would say you didn’t give a rat’s ass about the cleansing or blessing. It would mean my life is in danger.” I swing the poker around in my hand.

“I told you, I don’t want to hurt you.”

Casteel is a beast of a man. Everything about him is imposing. He’s the perfect foe for my Guardians and it’s no surprise they’ve clashed more than once, and by the end of the day, I suspect they’ll battle it out again. But I don’t doubt his loyalty to this kingdom and the look on his face is honest—sincere.

“Then what do you want?”

“To end the binding ceremony and Anand’s quest for destruction.”

I glance at Nevis, who looks as confused as I must. The use of her first name, the familiarity is the most disconcerting.

“You want to stop all of that.”

“Yes.” He lowers his hand, no longer threatening to pull his sword. “I’ve been by her side since the beginning. Since she used the name Anand. Before she was the Morrigan. I fought with her after Cu’s betrayal. I felt her anger and regret and I would do anything to ease her pain, even if it meant destroying the world we lived in. And together, we burned this land to the ground. She did it out of rage. I did it out of the desire to please her.”

I frown. “You love her.”

He nods. “Always.”

“Does she know?”

“She’s been unable to see anything but war since that day.” He walks across the room and looks out the window. Completely vulnerable. “I want the gates closed. Forever. I want Anand to live

a full life—a real one. Not this power-hungry quest that never ends.” He turns to look at me. The pain and desperation in his eyes is unmistakable. “I need her to fail tonight. And I need you to win, to close the gate and never return.”

“And what about the Morrigan?”

“Leave her alive, that’s all I ask and I promise we will never meet again.”

I’m stunned by Casteel’s revelation and as much as I believe him, I do not trust him. “How am I to do all of this? Stop the ceremony and get the gates closed. I could barely get here in the first place.” I don’t mention the Ravens and the warriors I know they’re bringing to me now. Players are in motion—there’s no going back.

“I tried to hurt you when you first came. My plan wasn’t to actually harm you—but to scare you. Get you out of here for good.” He raises his disfigured arm. “I paid for that—although to be fair, the Raven and I had a score to settle. There’s a way to turn all of this around, but it has to be done by you. You’re the only one strong enough to do it.”

“I’m not sure I am. Her darkness? It’s consuming—I’m no match for her.”

Nevis makes a small sound and we both look over. In a soft voice she says, “There’s one way to get you to the Morrigan’s level.”

“How is that?” I ask.

The resolution in her eyes says it all, and the way Casteel nods at me makes me know he’s aware as well. There’s one way for me to become stronger than the Morrigan—a way to beat the Darkness—and change the fate of all of our worlds.

They want me to close the circle with Bunny.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Bunny

The star in the far right corner of the sky needs a little more shimmer. Using the end of my paintbrush, not the side with the hair, I dab a little silver and the feeling of completion settles in my bones.

I've spent the last three days, other than the time with Morgan, working on the mural. The content came to me as I worked—more muse than anything else. But now that it's laid before me, the full story of why I'm here and what I'm to be used for clicks into place.

I need to go to the underground and then...

My eyes wander over the painting. It's the entire story, from the Morrigan's creation to the death of Cu. Then the gods forming the ravens, plagues, death and war. All of that comes to the current day. Morgan as a child. The ravens in the treetops. The cat, the prince, even the loss of my arm. That, I realize now, was intentional. They'd never wanted to kill me. I was weakened physically and mentally. To get her here. To set things in motion. But another player is on the board. A shadow from the past that now pushes the pieces.

I tear off my smock and grab my things.

The clock is ticking, but the painting, it shows me that I have time.

We have time.

And the destruction can finally come to an end.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sam

In the training room, seven new uniforms appear in the closet. Davis eagerly assists the Legion and Sue helps Hildi zip up her perfectly fitting suit. Each is equipped with weapons suited for our particular skills. Hildi's has a shield attached to the back and her long Valkyrie sword is nestled underneath. Her blonde hair is knotted in a dozen braids and her eye makeup is black and fearsome.

"I can understand why people would both love and fear seeing that woman come for them at the final moments," Damien says as he buckles his boot. "Not a bad way to die and go to heaven."

A few of the Immortals seem to agree. Their eyes watch her with interest. Rupert walks over to her now and engages in quiet conversation.

"This all seems a little easy, don't you think?" Damien adds. Boots secure, he checks his weapons.

"How do you mean?" The past week has been exhausting. We fought to the death. We gained contract-owned warriors. I've worried over Morgan and in my mind played out a dozen scenarios how this can go wrong.

"We have our army." He nods at Hildi. "Added a strong, loyal member, and we should get back to the castle in time for the ceremony. That all seems much too easy."

I study him for a moment. His tattoos peek above his collar. He's only wearing one ring tonight as well as just two small earrings. He's in fighting mode, as we all are, but something is bugging him. "What's your concern?"

"Bunny." He says his name quietly. "Only the gods know what he's doing."

As a group, we're conflicted about Bunny. His betrayal tears at the fabric of who we are as a unit—as a brotherhood. We've fought, lived, and now loved side-by-side since our creation. His actions hurt. Some of us more than others. Dylan and I have faith that he may have been working with us. Clinton and Damien, not so much.

“Dylan says he saved Morgan from Casteel. And she obviously still trusts him. She gave him the uniform and stayed with him on the Otherside.”

“They haven't fucked,” he says.

“No.” We would have felt it. And frankly, I've been waiting for it. The longer it takes, the more worrisome it is. “Maybe there hasn't been an opportunity? It's not like the Morrigan will allow them to be near one another. Morgan may be in the dungeons.”

“If Bunny is truly on our side, he could be dead.”

I shake my head and focus on securing my belt. We would have felt that, too.

“I can't forgive him,” Damien says. “Not for sending us to the dungeons. Not for hurting Morgan like that.”

“I understand, but until this is over we can't do anything about it. We need him. So does she.” He can't argue that. None of us can. The circle is almost complete and to beat the Darkness, Morgan needs Bunny to close the gap.

Otherwise, all of this? I look around the room. May be for nothing.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Morgan

Nevis is stunned silent when Casteel reveals he is aware of her underground community.

“How long?” she asks.

“Since it began.” He leads the way down to the dungeons, to the tunnel that will take us back to her people, to a safe place for the rest of the day. “There are few secrets in the castle.”

“Does she know?”

“If she pressed it she would, but Anand is obsessively focused on her mission. She’s just happy to have the castle run efficiently and to have the elixir from your water source to keep her healthy and strong.”

The news rocks my friend and as we reach the dark end of the dungeon she stops and whispers to me, “If you stop all of this, what happens to us?”

It’s an honest question—one I had not considered when agreeing to Casteel’s plan. If we close the gate and contain the Darkness to this world, Nevis’ people will never gain their freedom.

“I will not allow your people to suffer any longer.”

“But how? How can you promise that?”

My list of challenges is growing. I pull her close and grip her hands. “Do you trust me?”

“I want to.”

“I understand and if that’s all you can give, I’ll take it.” I step into the tunnel, pulling her with

me.

*

The confusion I feel doesn't lessen as I travel beneath the castle. It does intensify when I exit the small door and stand at my full height. Bunny is already there.

“Did you...” I start to ask Nevis, but she shakes her head.

“We're short on time,” she says, looking between the two of us. “Follow me.”

I've learned a lot about my sexuality over the past few months. I've learned its power and the control I have over my mates. I've learned about energy and electricity. Love and compassion. Force and passion. I glance at the man walking next to me on the smooth, dirt path through the village. He's the only one that has truly hurt me. But then I wonder, as he slips his glasses up his nose with his one good hand and the other lies limp by his side, maybe he's also the one that has sacrificed the most.

Nevis takes us to the far reaches of the community, to a small but sturdy hut. The walls are made of red clay and the roof thatched from hay. She stops at the door and says, “This is our wedding house. Newlyweds come here to celebrate and consummate their relationships. You'll have the quiet and peace to figure out your next step together.”

“Thank you,” Bunny says, as though he's not the least bit surprised. Did he know it would come to this?

“I'll sound the gathering bell when time is close. It's important we're back in the castle and ready when the Queen sends for you.”

I nod. “Yes. We'll be ready.”

She gives me a tight, understanding smile. “Good luck and may the gods bless you.”

She turns and walks down the path. I watch her go and then spin to face Bunny. He’s already opened the door and holding it wide for me. With a knot in my belly and a grim set to my jaw, I step past him and enter the house.

The cottage is sparsely decorated. A queen-sized bed is the focal point, a white, hand-stitched quilt covering the mattress. There’s a small kitchen with a table and a stove. A claw foot tub sits in the corner.

“I never thought our relationship would end like this,” I say to him. “Forced. A cog in a wheel bigger than both of us.” He smiles wistfully at my description. “Actually, the weird thing is I thought you’d be my first.”

“In a different life I probably would have been.”

We stand before one another, neither dressed in our finest as we were just the night before. At the banquet there had been at least a sense of danger. Of desire. Definitely desperation as the Darkness surged in me and needed quenching. If we’d been pushed together at one of those times I easily would have succumbed, but now I’m cleansed. Clean from that dark energy—primed for the Morrigan’s binding.

Now I just feel helpless. Hopeless, despite what Casteel told me in my room upstairs. There are too many balls in the air; my guardians, the warriors they bring with them, Nevis and her people and the whole gods-damned world back home that doesn’t even realize they’re on the edge of a knife. There are too many people counting on me, relying on me, and I’m nothing but a girl.

“I don’t know what to do,” I say to him in a whisper.

He lifts his hand and tucks my hair behind my ear. Instinctively my body reacts to his touch; butterflies flutter in my stomach, my knees tremble, and my nipples tighten in anticipation. His pupils

dilate, the dark center spreading over his copper iris. I feel his fingers clench in my hair and I lean into his palm.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t.”

He tilts his head and his hair falls into his eyes. His tongue darts out and my traitorous lips quiver, thinking about kissing him. “You don’t have to. It’s okay if you don’t. But we’ve got to do this, okay?”

I nod. “Okay.”

He grazes my neck with his hand, the pads of his fingertips rough from use. A chill runs down my spine—the good kind—and he brushes his warm lips against mine. There’s no hesitation, there’s no time for that. I’m thankful because it’s time to turn off my gods-forsaken brain for just. One. Fucking. Minute.

My body responds to his like a flower to sunlight. I lean into him, tasting his mouth, sucking his tongue. The layers of conflict fall between us, like the shedding of our clothes. I unbutton his shirt, slipping the wide metal buttons through the slits one after the other. The solid curves and planes of his bare chest peek out at me along with the taut ladder of his abs. His body is unfamiliar to me, I haven’t had the pleasure of spending time exploring him and today would be no different.

He bunches my dress in his hand, lifting it up my body, his knuckles grazing my stomach. My belly clenches and there’s no denying the warmth between my legs. Our mouths part but our breath mingles as we remove the final barriers between us.

Bunny nudges me toward the bed and I fall back, knees dangling over the edge. He stands before me, hard. Ready. Big.

His eyes drink me in. I brace myself for him, half eager, half feeling a pit of hollowness deep

inside. It shouldn't be like this—out of our control. My fingers clench the bedding and I close my eyes.

I feel nothing but a flutter by my legs, knees brushing knees. I blink and find him over me. His mouth is inches from mine and he whispers, “I can never take back the pain of what I did, but I can redeem myself in the eyes of the gods and my brothers and you.”

His length is between us; pressing and solid. My legs part and his hand ghosts down my inner thigh. I shift, welcoming him, my core slick.

The energy between us ebbs, the Darkness beaten back inch by inch, and something different rises, something I've only grasped in my fingers like the wind. I cling to the feeling, the power, and lasso it around us like a bond. I touch his chest, feel the pebble of his nipples beneath my fingers. With my mind—my body—I pull, bringing him closer. To my mouth, to my body, and with one hand I guide him toward me. The goddess flares the instant we meet. I roar against his lips and he pushes in, slowly, achingly.

Finally.

He enters me and it's like a link in the chain. A piece of the puzzle clicks into place. A rush washes over me. *Everything* makes sense. Feels right.

And it's not enough.

It's like a trigger, those pieces clicking together, link by link and the swirling energy kicks me to life.

“Oh,” I say to him, to the world. “Oh, Bunny. I...”

I push Bunny off and on his back, his expression shock and regret. I feel the loss of our connection but that is short-lived. The entity inside me understands. She knows the path we're on and is no longer allowing the weaker side of me—the human part of both of us--to fuck this up.

His head presses into the pillows and I straddle his hips. His cock is slick with my heat and I don't hesitate before sinking down, guiding him to the depths of my core.

“Uhhhh,” I cry, followed by prayers to the gods. The flip switches in Bunny's eye and once he understands how this is truly greater than the two of us, he reacts with force.

His hips buck against me and I ride him hard, feeling every inch of him, from tip to the base of his cock when he slams into me. Sweat pools between us, I feel it on his fingertips when he pinches my nipples and on his face when I suck his jaw. The walls fade, the bed disappears and we're just two, bonding, binding, and mating.

We close the circle, the one that started with Clinton and forged with Sam and Damien. Strengthened by Dylan but left incomplete. On purpose. I see that now. He was waiting. I was forced back. Now is the right moment for us to complete the bond of the five. Our eyes meet and for the first time I know the path ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bunny

A goddess, with hair of ebony and eyes as dark as obsidian hovers above me. Her body is perfection, her skin smooth as silk. I grip her hip and pull her to me, harder and harder she rides, tumbling us both toward ecstasy. Her hair spills over her shoulders, bouncing with her breasts. Morgan's lips part and the moan that comes from her sounds like an angel singing.

Tension builds in me but I know this is a moment about both of us, a unique point that ties us all. My brothers surely feel the mounting energy, the power surging in his glorious woman. She's in control. She *owns* us all. Her skin burns as if on fire. Her lip trembles and everything from her sharp breaths to her shaking shoulders sets me on edge. Coiling and twisting in frenzied harmony.

“Do you feel it?” she grinds out.

Fuck yes, I feel it. Her. Everything. I can't speak. I can't formulate words. But my eyes meet hers and I nod, grunting with every thrust. Her hands move to the slab of headboard and she grips it as she cries out. It's not just pleasure. Certainly not pain. The essence of Darkness releases from her body, every dark tendril lingering from the Morrigan's touch. The infection festering deep in her soul.

Bright light engulfs us. Warm and full of charged energy. Tilting her head back she spirals, biting down on her lip. I let go, the room fading around us. It's just us and warmth. Love and righteous power. Once we ascend to this, everything I've held back for so long frees—I groan.

“Gods above,” I grind out, my teeth clenched. My eyes squint, trying to look at her with the glow of power behind her. I spill everything I have into Morgan just as she tilts her head back. She tightens around me and mercy, it feels like nothing I've ever dreamed of. Nothing a mortal man could

know. We writhe against one another, riding out the moment, the event, because nothing in our world will ever be the same.

We're one.

We're bonded.

We've mated.

And as Morgan's body slows and the bright light fades to a hazy glow, she smiles down at me. Her mouth lazy and her eyes are glazed and there's no doubt in my mind we've changed the fate of humanity.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Clinton

Deep in the bowels of earth, the ground shudders beneath my feet. I touch the wall for purchase. That's when I realize that it's not the floor or even the walls. It's coming from inside my body. My chest.

"Morgan," Sam says. He's right behind me. "Do you feel that?"

"Yes," Damien replies. In the torchlight, Dylan nods. The Immortals and Hildi look at us with confusion.

"She closed the circle."

Which means one thing. She and Bunny have consummated their relationship. What we don't know is Bunny's frame of mind. Did he do this for us or the Morrigan? Which side is he on? Whatever the case, we now have a united bond. It also means that her power is fully balanced. She doesn't need us to keep her even. She'll have full control over an enormous amount of ability that she can use for good *or* evil.

"Do you think she's ready?" I ask.

"I think Morgan is strong and steadfast," Dylan replies.

A second wave rolls over me—us, and I cling to the wall. It's not a bad feeling. Just overwhelming. I can't help but ask, "And Bunny?"

Damien pushes past me to walk down the hall, his torch taking the light with him. "We'll find out soon."

Chapter Thirty

Morgan

I can't see the power, but I feel it. It's in every inch of my body—trembling beneath my skin, in my muscles. Everything changed the instant Bunny entered me. No, everything changed with that first kiss from Clinton months ago. That simple touch cumulated in this event. My body hums in awakening. Not just physically but mentally as well.

Bunny lies next to me, his cheeks red. His copper eyes are clear and I lay a hand on his chest, feeling the heartbeat inside.

I understand now. His motives. His fears. His loyalty.

“I forgive you,” I say to him.

“I'll earn that forgiveness for the rest of our lifetimes.” His fingers graze the underside of my breast and a pool of heat gathers below my belly. There is no ache left in me, not after the explosive orgasm we just shared, but my body crackles and sparks with renewed desire.

I lean over to kiss him. It's a kiss of forgiveness. A promise.

“They're coming,” he says. Our noses are inches apart. “They're in the tunnels.”

“I feel them.”

“They felt us,” he replies.

I open my mouth to tell him about my command; that they bring me an army, but a wave of chimes sounds from outside the cottage. There's no mistaking. It's time.

He kisses me where he marked me days ago and the rune ignites.

“Will that help?”

He shakes his head and slips his glasses on. “You don’t need my protection anymore. You’re strong and ready.” He touches the spot. “That’s for me. For you to remember who you belong to.”

I look down and see the outline isn’t the symbol from before but a darker brand.

Five flying ravens.

*

The white gown clings to the curves of my body like a second skin. I’ve seen the design before, it’s identical to the style the Morrigan prefers. It’s no surprise when I enter the enclosed field behind the castle that Anita is wearing the same one.

It’s dark, but the stone walkway leads to a paved area in the middle of green grass surrounded by flaming torches. Moonlight filters through the rooftop. The ceremony begins at midnight and we wait in a hidden area away from the crowd. Soldiers are positioned three feet apart. They’re *everywhere*. I strain my ears and search my heart for any signal of my guardians. I find nothing but the steady beat of my own pulse.

“I spent the afternoon reading books from the Queen’s library,” Anita says. Her face looks fresh, but I also see a bit of tiredness in her eyes. Her human vessel is feeling the strain of the Morrigan’s presence. I’ve had my guardians to help carry the weight of the Darkness. “I couldn’t sleep. Too excited, you know?”

“This is really what you want?” I ask her. She had a life. A family.

“More than anything.” She gives me a curious look. “I know you’ve been brainwashed by those roommates of yours to fight against this, but you have no idea what awaits on the other side.”

Heavy footsteps echo off the ground. I look toward the castle and see Casteel walking down the center path. He's escorting the Morrigan personally. She glides across the stones toward the small platform in the middle of the field. The audience, I'm assuming the most loyal of her court, watches in silence as she takes her place. Her dress is black, made of a shiny, tight fabric that looks like wet paint. Her hair is back and she wears a headdress made of glossy feathers. A crown of glittering black jewels sits on top.

There's no sense of betrayal on Casteel's face. Nothing but stone-cold loyalty. The priest from earlier in the day steps on the platform and nods at the Morrigan.

It's time.

My Guardians are not here.

The priest says something in a language I do not understand, but a wide smile appears on Anita's lips. There's a nudge at my back. The blonde woman next to me links her arm with mine and we leave our spot in the shadows and enter the ring of fire. At the edge of the platform Anita leans in and whispers, "I forgive you for what you did to me back home. Today we start new. As one. I'm thankful you're my sister."

The priest doesn't smile when he sees us. Neither does the Morrigan. Her eyes are closed as if in prayer. With the help of assistants, we take our positions, each on the side of the Queen. I feel the Darkness ebbing off of her but it's different. It's like the energy bounces off. I have a shield of protection.

"We shall now begin the ceremony," the priest says, now in English. Or maybe, I think, watching his lips, I can just understand what he's saying? The shape of his mouth doesn't match the words and they echo in my head.

"At the beginning of time, a child of the gods was born, blessed with three souls. Macha, Nemain, and Anand. These three cultivated and protected land and agriculture, fertility, and the art of

war. Together they were equals. United, they held magnificent power. Betrayal and deceit split them apart and only one remained to protect and fortify these lands.” Every eye watches the priest as he spins his tale.

“Anand, the goddess of war, has ruled the Otherside since that time. But her true glory is to leave this realm and conquer others. And to do that she must unite again with her sisters.”

At the back of the circle is a flat stone table, or altar, and the priest turns toward it. “We start with a sacrifice of one of the gods’ chosen. His blood will act as a conduit to bring these three together.”

A sacrifice? Seriously, where is Dylan? Clinton? Right about now would be a good time to come in and shut this nightmare down. But there is no cavalry. No heroic entrance, just the sound of a man being dragged from the back of the gardens toward the altar.

It’s Anita’s gasp followed by a gleeful laugh that forces me to look up at the man gagged at the mouth and bound at the ankles. I stare into those deep copper eyes and choke back on my emotions.

The Queen plans to sacrifice Bunny.

Chapter Thirty-One

Dylan

Light greets us at the end of the tunnel, along with the sharpened tips of blades. Nevis is at the front, and they wear mismatched clothes but clearly want to be seen as a united force.

“Why the blades?” I ask, stepping into the humid cavern. I have my hand on the handle of the coiled whip at my side.

Nevis looks over my shoulder, sees the men pushing out of the tunnel. Whatever she’s thinking, I hope it’s not some sort of attack. Her people look strong but not Legion of Immortals strong.

“We’ve decided to join your fight, but Morgan has changed the terms of our agreement. She no longer wants to kill the Morrigan.”

“What? Why?” Damien asks, moving next to me.

“The Commander made a deal with her. He bought her time. Allowed her to be with the last of her mates. She’s at full strength.”

“We’re aware,” Clinton says. “What are the terms of her agreement with Casteel?”

“Morgan spares the Queen and leaves, closing the gate forever.” Her eyes grow tight. “This leaves us with a problem. There’s no assurance we will not continue to be the Kingdom’s slaves.”

“Morgan won’t betray you,” I say, but I don’t know that. I don’t know how having so much power will change her. I don’t even understand why she’d give Casteel a chance.

Nevis nods. “I hope not, but we’re willing to reveal our numbers to the Kingdom. Risk our peaceful society for a chance at the future.” She grips the handle of her sword. “We’ll lead you to the

battle and fight by your side, and if Morgan fails we will kill the Queen ourselves.”

It’s a bold move. Most likely suicide, but I understand. Being under the control of a sadist makes it worth taking the chance to end it when you have it. And this may be the only one they get.

“Casteel...he wants to save Morgan and see the gate closed?”

“Yes.”

We’re walking across the cavern to one of the pipes that leads to the castle above. I wave my soldiers through and they are followed by the people of the underground, some who will surely never see this place or their loved ones again.

“Why is he doing this?” I ask, trying to wrap my mind around the change.

Nevis stops and looks up at me. She’s so small but also incredibly strong. In the heart and mind, if not physically. “He loves her.”

“Morgan?”

“No, Anand, his true love from the days before. She’s his mate.”

Those are words I understand. Feelings I can comprehend. I nod and move toward the pipe to follow the others to the battle above. We’ve all done foolish things for love, I’m doing my own now.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Morgan

“I told you to kill him.”

The Morrigan’s words cut into my mind like a razor. I don’t need to look away from Bunny lying flat on the altar to know she has a smile on her face.

“You think I didn’t know you were going to him? That you’d forgiven him? Your weakness brought us to this moment, Nemain.”

I finally look at her. I’m not the only one; Anita, the audience, Casteel, and even the priest is clinging to her every word.

“What are you talking about?”

“You think I don’t want you at your peak strength before we bond? That I don’t want your raw power? You’re both alive because I need it that way.” She glances at Bunny and sneers. “Or did.”

The power she speaks of crackles in my fingers; if the Morrigan feels it, she doesn’t care. She nods at the priest. “Kill him and begin the ceremony.”

He walks to the altar and pulls out a sharpened blade on a small shelf beneath. Three goblets sit beneath Bunny’s head, a slanted piece of wood falling toward each one. The goblets are to be filled with blood. Bunny’s blood.

Although I feel my guardians in this world, they are not here. My eyes connect with Bunny’s. There isn’t an ounce of fear in his eyes. He’s always known it would come to this. Sacrifice is his role. His destiny.

Not if I can fucking help it.

The Morrigan, too caught up in her dramatics, turns her back to watch the priest work. I do what I came here to do. Channeling my lessons and training, I go for the weakest point, lunging for Anita and gripping her by her stupid, perfect hair.

“Ahh! Morgan!” she shrieks. I close a hand around her throat and the sound becomes more guttural. The Morrigan spins, anger twisting her lips. She doesn’t even have time to speak before I whisper in Anita’s ear and wrench her neck to the side, severing her spine in one snap.

Her body drops to the ground with a thud.

My strength surprises me. Clinton and Dylan taught me that move, but I’d never had the power to pull it off. But just then I knew I possessed it. I used it, and just as quickly I tear the slinky white dress at the collar down to my feet and step out of the shell of insanity in my fighting suit.

“I don’t need her,” the Morrigan says. She flicks out her hand and whatever light—whatever energy Anita possessed--lifts from her body in a swirl and slams into the Queen. She licks her lips in pleasure. “She was rendered weak during the original split. She was nothing but a pawn and her duty is fulfilled. But you...you’re magnificent, Nemain. So much rage. So much anger. Don’t pretend you don’t feel the dark power surging in you. I can taste it from here.”

“But I don’t. That’s what you don’t understand, Your Highness,” I take a step forward. Casteel and his men haven’t made the slightest move. On her call or his, I do not know. “The Darkness is gone. Banished by the love of that man right there.” I point to Bunny. His eyebrow lifts at the word love. “You can kill him but you can’t take away what he’s given me. What we have together.”

A commotion rises at the edge of the field. I smile.

“What we all have together,” I amend. I pull my sword from my back, the one that works well in my world but is a force in this one. The jewels sparkle on the hilt. “Say goodbye to tyranny!” I shout to all of the Otherside.

And we begin to fight.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Bunny

Chaos explodes when Morgan raises her sword. Casteel's men scatter to the edges of the field. The priest drops his knife and runs. Two queens face one another mere feet away.

I wriggle my feet and wrist against the tight rope.

Morgan, never taking her eyes off the queen, lifts her hand toward me. Warm air blasts in my direction and I squint against the draft. The ropes twist and slither apart, alive with whatever power she blasted my way. The instant they are free I jump from the altar and pick up the priest's discarded weapon. It's ceremonial, I see, flipping it in my hand, but it will do.

I don't know what Morgan's plan is or how she wants to end this, but I know the Queen is hers to take. I hop off the platform and search the field for my brothers. It's not hard to find them. A sea of scuffles move along the edge.

I move to join my brothers when a massive hand grips me on the shoulder. I look back and see Casteel. I tighten my hold on the blade.

"Weapon down," he says, jaw tight. "Your true Queen has a handle on this. Your fellow Guardians will fall in line. You're needed for something else."

I frown, confused by his words. "What is that?"

"You painted the mural. You've seen the prophecy. Only you can close the gate for good."

"You want the Morrigan locked in?"

He nods. "I'll clear you a path."

I don't understand what's happening here but if he's willing to betray the Morrigan, I'm willing to follow his lead. I step into his shadow and we push through the sea of kingdom soldiers fighting for their lives. I spot Damien breaking a man in two. I see Sam clashing with a man twice his size. There are others, faces I don't recognize, but they're wearing our uniform and as Casteel leads me away from battle I pray to the gods I will see them all once more.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Clinton

Morgan is too far away for me to see but I feel her—sense her. She's claimed her power. It's possible she didn't need us after all.

The kingdom's soldiers swarm, hundreds of men charging toward us with a taste of blood on their tongues. We've been asked by the people underground not to kill the queen—that Morgan has a bigger plan. I have to trust this is true but we were not asked to take it lightly on her army, and I plan to slash and slay my way to the platform.

It's eleven against hundreds, but we still have the edge. I slam my foot into the chest of the nearest soldier. I plunge my blade into his throat. I do it again. Jabbing elbows, kicking in kneecaps. I break necks. Shatter spines. Blood coats my hands. My face. The air fills with blood and screams. Glancing to my right I spot Agis rip the arm off a foe. I'm pleased to see he doesn't smile. That the act takes him to a deeper place. I've been there. I *am* there.

War is fucking hell.

Miya cleans up my mess, taking down swaths of charging men with his double-edged sword, and slowly we creep toward the middle, stepping over the slain on our way to the beckoning light.

We need our mate and then we need to get the fuck out of this gods-forsaken hellhole for good.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hildi

Inch by inch we creep toward the center of the batshit crazy atrium. Nothing about this place makes sense, especially the crazy-as-hell woman up on the platform. We've cleared enough distance that I can finally see her—my friend—Morgan and my enemy—the Goddess of gods-damned War.

A body slams into me and I stumble. I'd let myself get distracted and now I'm on my back with a blade plunging toward my face. A pair of hands grips my shoulders and pulls me to my feet. Another figure moves like a wall of thunder, pummeling the soldier into dust.

"Thanks," I say to Armin. His blue eyes make me unnerved. I nod at Dylan, who pulled me away. He stares at me with judgment.

"Stay focused," he says.

"I am." I prove this by knifing a soldier running at us.

"This is not about revenge. We promised Nevis."

"You promised her," I reply, already stepping into the fray. "I joined this army on my own terms, Dylan."

"This is bigger than you," he argues, but there are too many soldiers to fight and too little time to get to his precious queen on the platform. I don't care about some lame request by a bastard commander. I care about what that bitch took from me. I promised to make her pay.

I unsheathe another sword, this one ancient and filled with the wrath of Freya. I always keep my promises.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Dylan

Keeping one eye on Hildi and the other on the blood-thirsty soldiers, I let my heart guide me to Morgan. It seemed impossible when we first entered the field—the platform too far away—but now a sea of black uniforms covers the ground and my Queen is in reach.

I'm not a fan of this plan, allowing the Morrigan to live. Casteel isn't to be trusted and I doubt the gate can truly be closed. Nevis obviously agrees, which is why she waited for us at the tunnel entrance.

But what none of us understood then and what I'm barely grasping now is the immense power Morgan yields now that she is complete. She's an entity of glorious energy, equal to if not dwarfing the Morrigan next to her. I'm not sure she's even aware. When she moves, the earth trembles under my feet. My heart clenches with love. And my body aches to be possessed by her.

She is the true goddess...almost. There is one final move.

"Kill her," I say under my breath. "Take her life. Claim the throne."

Her ebony eyes connect with mine.

The blades of the soldiers still fighting drop to the ground. They fall to their knees and the Morrigan's face freezes, her expression caught in that moment.

The ten other members of my army stand ready. Even the Immortals feel her power. We wait to see where she leads us.

"Your army has fallen," Morgan says, walking across the platform and facing the Darkness.

“Your court has abandoned. You have nothing now.”

“Nothing?” The platform shudders. The grass shrivels under my feet. “I will eat you alive.”

“No,” Morgan says. “You will submit.”

“Never.”

“Submit and I’ll spare your life.” The sword hangs in her fingertips.

The Morrigan smiles—no, laughs. “Little girl, you’re nothing in this world. A speck. Once the heady glow of your mates wears off, you’ll understand. Once they leave and betray you as I’ve been betrayed.”

Morgan points her blade at the Queen’s heaving chest. Black smoke swirls at the Queen’s feet. Morgan raises her other hand and white light shoots to the glass rooftop.

The Guardians and Immortals are now surrounding the stage. Rupert stands next to me, watching the scene unfold. Hildi is between me and Armin. Rage vibrates off her body. I don’t know about the others, but I feel the immense, conflicting power churning in the two goddesses above.

“Do you see this light? This power?” Morgan says, drawing it back to her and cradling it in her hand like a pliable ball. “It didn’t come from the Darkness, it came from a well of hope. Of love.” She glances down at us, making eye contact with each of her guardians.

“Love is for fools.”

“Turning your back on it is even more foolish,” Morgan replies. “I know what you did. You tell the story of your betrayal, but what about your own? How you scorched me and Macha into the ground. How you rallied an army to destroy everything before you.” She moves inches away from the queen and I take a step forward protectively. Morgan holds her hand up, telling me to stand down. “You had love, Anand. You had it all around you and you gave it up for a bastard demi-god who wanted nothing more than to use you.”

“Cu was my everything.”

Morgan shakes her head. “Gods that is sad. Pathetic. As much as I hate Casteel, you really don’t deserve him.”

The queen frowns. “Casteel?”

“Are you truly unaware of his dedication to you? His loyalty?”

“Of course I am.” She’s barely holding on to her rage but Morgan has kept her interest. The words of truth will do that.

“He loves you, you know, but if you do this—continue this desperate crusade and cross realms, you’ll lose him forever.”

Footsteps sound on the stairs to the platform and Casteel emerges from the field of bodies. I tighten my grip on my sword. One false move and I’ll end them both.

“Tell her,” Morgan says. She certainly isn’t afraid of the Commander, not anymore. The soldier stands before the queen.

“I love you, Anand. I have since the days before, when this land and the people on it flourished.”

Her expression is one of confusion. “You love my power.”

“No.” He laughs bitterly. “If I could I would banish The Darkness to other realms. Back to the underworld where it came from.”

There’s an identical look of surprise on Morgan and the Queen’s face when the commander steps to Anand and touches her cheek. Something flickers in her eyes and for once it’s not anger.

Slowly, I move to the platform and my brothers do the same.

It’s time to take Morgan home.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Morgan

We're close. So close, but I know my job isn't done. Casteel may have asked me to spare her life but I owe a debt to Nevis and her people. Not only did she save and support me, but the underground dwellers came up and fought with my men. They built an army. And it's time they shared a spot in this kingdom.

There is only one way to do this. And I look down at Anita's dead body thinking of how this started. One vessel to another. Sharing. Spreading. Sacrificing.

I sense Dylan behind me. Damien is close. Sam and Clinton right behind. I don't just feel them—they boost me—fill me. I want nothing more than to get home and spend time with each one of them. Alone. Together. A whole life filled with peace and love. A family. Babies.

But that will never happen if I leave things as they are. And the choice I must make is a long shot. The Shaman knew it when he gave me passage. The odds of me coming home alone are slim.

I snatch a moment and turn to face my mates. There's no time for words but I connect with each, staring into their eyes. Blue, green, gray, and purple. As usual I'm missing one but I have no doubt he's working to get us out of here.

“Whatever you're thinking—don't,” Dylan says. I smile and walk away. There's a skirmish behind me and it only takes a glance to see my guardians restrained by the men they brought with them. The Ravens fight back, but these men...they're strong and they were sent here for a purpose. Emotion isn't part of their job.

“Love you, girl,” Hildi says, pushing through the commotion. There's no doubt she gave the

order to this group of soldiers. She may be just the kind of woman they need to tell them what to do.

“You, too.”

I walk across the platform to Casteel and the Morrigan. They’re lost in their own world. I extract my sword and press it into Casteel’s spine. He looks down in confusion.

“You asked me to fix this so I am.”

I expect him to fight but to my surprise, he doesn’t. Everyone knows, including the Queen. I stand face-to-face and say, “Thank you for revealing my true powers. I couldn’t have done it without coming here, having my feet on this land and being in your presence.”

“You’re not stronger than me.”

I glance at my Guardians, my friends and the people filling the ground, some of their faces feeling the moonlight for the first time in ages.

“Oh but I am. I am so. Much. Stronger.”

I push up on my toes, because my sister is taller than me. I don’t know what she expects but it’s not this—not a kiss, and when our mouths touch it’s like a bomb goes off. Good versus evil. Light against dark. Two queens battling for control.

The difference is, she’s alone. Her soldiers are dead. Her commander had dropped his weapon. And the light comes shining through. I feel the relenting on her lips. In the taste of her tongue. The Darkness is foul and it fills me, angry and bitter. We’re nothing but vessels and this one is up for sacrifice. Pain fills my limbs, my fingertips and toes. Poison attacks my organs, stabbing away at the muscle of my heart.

There’s one final moment, right after the Darkness consumes me, when I’m filled with centuries of hate and pain and destruction, that I see the true face of Anand. Her eyes are bright—and green. Her cheeks are rosy. Her hand slips into Casteel’s and she kisses me on the forehead.

“Thank you, Morgan,” she says, realizing what I have done.

I’ve freed her and the people of the Otherside. I fall forward but I’m caught by many hands. As they lay me on the ground I look to the sky and see one last thing.

The sun.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Bunny

I hear the pounding of footsteps as I blow on the painting. The magic is weaker when wet, but there's no choice. Casteel wants the gate closed but we've got to be on the other side before that can happen.

A wave of Darkness hits me in the gut moments before the sounds in the hall. Morgan. She's hurt. Or injured—or worse. I clench the rolled-up mural in my hands. The final scene of a rising sun. A goddess in white on the ground.

There's no mistaking the imagery.

“Bunny!” My name is a desperate shout. I run to the door and down the hall. I meet the frantic faces of my brothers. I look for kingdom soldiers chasing them. No one follows but their allies.

Who I don't see is Morgan, and I scan the group. My eyes finally settle on Clinton, who's carrying her in his arms. Her face is pale. Black stains her chin. The hollow in my stomach grows.

“Tell me you're ready,” Dylan says. “Because we've got to get the hell out of here and lock the door behind us.”

“I'm ready,” I tell them and jog up the stairs to my studio. I lead them to the window looking out over the kingdom. The sky has parted blue and the land as far as the eye can see comes to life. I glance back at Morgan and realize that it is because she's carrying the Darkness and it's killing her.

I've already drawn the symbols around the window, the ones that will allow us to pass and then seal the gate behind us. Casteel made that clear. Do not return and do not give her a chance to get out.

“Once I activate the gate we’ll only have a few moments. Go first,” I tell Clinton. “Get her back.”

What we’ll do with her is beyond me. I pray the gods will have an answer.

Clinton doesn’t hesitate. He carries Morgan like she’s light as a feather. He steps to the edge and the outside world vanishes—instead, he’s looking into the dining room of The Nead. He steps through and they both vanish.

Dylan hurries the others through. Hildi and the six warriors I do not know. Sam and Damien, each giving me a look that contains less hate than I imagined. Once Damien crosses over, the edges of the window turn fuzzy and the kingdom comes back into view.

“Go,” I say to Dylan.

He steps to the edge and puts his feet in first. I watch as the gate closes on itself, bricking up like the window never existed.

“Bunny.” He stares at me, his eyes imploring. I shrug. If this is my penance, I’ll take it.

There’s a beat, a moment, and the bricks build one by one closing one realm to the other. Dylan reaches out his hand and grabs me by the collar—yanking me through.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Morgan

I'm drowning in a lake made of black oil. The surface is on fire. Liquid clogs my throat. I gasp for air, for the edge, but there's nothing there but Darkness. Dank, foul, darkness.

I fall...slipping into nothing until my feet touch solid ground. I blink, thinking my eyes are closed but no, just black. So much black. I open my mouth and scream. This time it works. I hear my voice. The sound of my fear. What happened to my Guardians? The castle and the Morrigan?

I still taste her and the filth I consumed in my mouth.

Taking a step I move across the void, my feet echoing in the nothingness. I knew it was a risk—a sacrifice I was willing to make. But this? This is what her soul looks like?

I scream again. "Hello!"

My voice mocks me in return. I hold my hands to my ears and scream. Scream for the loss of my mates. The loss of my realm. Scream for wanting it back—the feeling—the love.

Hands grip my arms and pull them away from my ears. White teeth shine in the dark. Long braided hair hangs over a broad shoulder. "Why are you screaming, child?" the Shaman asks.

"Did you bring me here? Drag me to this place?"

"You consumed the poison. That was not my doing."

"How do I get out of here?"

“I don’t know.” He clasps his hands together. I count three rings on each hand.

“I took the darkness and gave her my light.”

He frowns. “That doesn’t sound right.”

Wings flap overhead. I look up and spot five ravens, all flying in a row. One carries a charm in his beak. My mind breaks and I grip it with my hands.

“Dig deep,” the Shaman says. “You can’t give away what isn’t yours.”

I feel in my belly. I reach in my heart. I feel a pebble—round and perfect. I pull it out and see it is a shiny pearl—white and bold. I hold it to the sky. A raven, the biggest of them all, swoops down and takes it in his beak and flies away. The pearl leaves a trail, glossy like a satin ribbon, and I glance at the Shaman. “Follow it, child. That’s your way home.”

I pick up my feet, sticky from the black goo, and chase after the raven.

*

“Morgan.”

“How much longer?”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Shut up. She’s moving.”

“I can’t handle this.”

“I can’t handle your mouth.”

“Seriously, is this what you want her to wake up to? The five of you acting like assholes?”

The final voice cuts through my mind like a knife.

“Hildi?” I rasp. My voice feels like sandpaper mixed with tar.

“Babe.” It’s her voice but I feel five other sets of hands. Strong, capable hands. Familiar hands. I blink and spot my guardians. Hildi elbows Dylan out of the way and brings a glass of water to my lips. The liquid is cool and I gulp it down faster than I should. She wipes my chin and says. “Nevis sent it to help you heal.”

The wicked feeling in my throat vanishes, soothed by the water. It settles in my belly and I feel the magic working. I look at Hildi and the first thing I think of to say is, “I’m so sorry about Andi.”

“You tried.” She brushes back my hair. “You should have killed her.”

“Death would have been too good for her. This way, she has to live with the consequences and redeem herself to the people in her kingdom.” I search for a pair of copper eyes. I find them near my feet. “Redemption is good.”

I wiggle to a sitting position, feeling almost back to normal. I’m on the bed in my room. I look around at my things, my books and journals. The trinkets I’ve collected during my time in New York. It truly feels like home.

Again I focus on Bunny. “Did you close the gate?”

“Yes.”

“And the Darkness? I know I carried it with me.”

Dylan takes my hand. “The Shaman was waiting for us when we came through. He cured you.”

“What was the cost?”

“He took the Darkness with him,” Damien says. “Locked up tight. I made the box myself.”

That news doesn’t sit well with me and from a glance around the bed, not with anyone else

either. Clinton stands, arms crossed, to my left.

“We didn’t have a choice,” Sam says. He leans over and I brush his hair out of his eyes. Gods, I’ve missed him. All of them.

“Okay, it’s time to give Morgan a little rest, everyone out.” The directive comes from Sue and I smile thankfully at her. I love my men. I adore my mates, but choking down an unhealthy dose of evil wore me out.

Everyone leaves, but I grab Dylan’s hand before he leaves the room.

“Hey,” I say quietly. “Do me a favor.”

He touches my hair and runs his fingers down my cheek. “Anything.”

I nod at Bunny, who is leaving the room. “Be nice to him. Things got complicated.”

He smirks. “He’s one of us. Don’t worry.”

“That’s exactly why I am worried. It’s not like you guys are easy on one another.”

He leans down and kisses me on the forehead. “You got it, Your Highness.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He nods and heads for the door, but the glint in his eyes says this is just the beginning.

Of so many amazing things.

Chapter Forty

Morgan

Recovery comes slow. Not just for my body but for my mind. For the harem and the new people that have entered our group. There's a different feel to the house, with it being so crowded, but it's also nice having people around that understand what you've been through—people who willingly fought by your side.

Hildi still occupies the guest room—not wanting to go back to the apartment she shared with Andi. I like having her here, having another woman in the house. My ravens are amazing, but a friend who is just a friend with zero complications? It's a gift.

The men—the fighters that joined our army—they've camped out in the basement, near the training room. Davis and Sue created bedrooms down there. They keep to themselves for the most part but I've seen them come and go from Dylan's room. Negotiations are in progress. They aren't slaves, Dylan told me. But they are caught in a bit of transition. Where do they go from here? And how does he make sure they've adjusted to modern ways?

I've taken to writing again. About the Otherside and the Morrigan. I've shown some of my work to Professor Christensen, who thinks it should be documented. Maybe. I just like feeling the normalcy of pen on paper again.

There's a knock on my door, firm and quick. I lay my journal on the window seat and cross the room. I open the door and find Damien on the other side, leaning one arm against the frame. He's wearing low-slung black jeans and a long-sleeved gray shirt. A thin strip of his lower belly peeks out. My eyes linger on the scattering of hair that travels below.

When I look at his face, my heart pitter-patters. His eyebrow is raised.

“Hey,” I say, happy to see him. His smile in return confirms he’s been looking forward to our meetup as well.

I spot a fresh tattoo on his arm depicting the fight with the Morrigan. I reach for his arm and run my fingers down the ink. The heat and electricity between us crackles.

Yeah, there’s that.

In the dark place, when I was consumed by the Morrigan’s waste, the Shaman tried to tell me something. The pearl. That is the light inside of me. It wasn’t gone—just overwhelmed by the Darkness. I didn’t lose that. I carry it with me—the tiny piece of the goddess that lives inside. That piece. It burns with hope. With love.

I hold Damien’s violet eye.

And a little bit of lust.

I still need these men to balance me. They’re my mates.

He holds up his hand and shows me a sleek black helmet. “Want to go for a ride?”

“I’d love to.”

I grab my boots and slide them over my jeans. Damien comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His lips find my throat and he showers me with warm kisses.

He spins me around and pushes my hair out of my eyes. “I’m glad you’re feeling better.”

“Thank you,” I say, kissing him on the mouth. “I’m glad you came back for me.”

He smirks. “There was never a chance of that not happening, babe.”

“Need me too much?” I ask.

He pulls my hips to his and I feel his hard length. “You have no fucking idea.”

It’s my turn to give a wicked smile. I fist his shirt and say, “Take me on a ride and bring me back and show me.”

“Deal.”

My knees buckle just having him near me, but I gain composure and lead the way to the garage. There’s one thing I’ve learned about Damien. If I hold off a little bit longer, cruise through the city with my arms tight around his body and bide my time, I’ll be rewarded with the ride of a lifetime.

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“I told them to be nice to you.”

I dip my fingers into the salve and gently touch the bruise on Bunny’s cheekbone. He flinches but steadies himself and allows me to rub on the cream.

“You didn’t need to do that,” he says, wincing in pain. He’s on the bed, head pressed into pillows. “It’s sort of...um, a ritual.”

The Ravens beat the shit out of Bunny.

Betrayal comes with a price, even if it’s for a reason.

“It’s not the first time one of us has had to run the gauntlet.” He holds his ribs when he says it. “Dylan had to run it once. Clinton twice.”

I stare at him for a minute, not really wanting to know more than I already do about the archaic punishment system that involves sticks. A little of my concern fades when his lips twitch into a slight smile. He and his brothers are right again and that’s all that matters.

“No more secrets, okay?” I tell him. Everything we went through on the Otherside together brought us closer. We had to learn to trust one another.

“Yeah. I learned my lesson on that one.” He reaches out and grazes my cheek. “Never underestimate what you can handle.”

I take his hand and kiss his knuckles. “Same.”

I continue checking his wounds. The bruises on his ribs are dark purple. The one on his back looks painful and red. I sigh and drop his shirt. “You know, I haven’t tested my healing powers on anyone since we returned home.”

His quirked eyebrow peeks out over the frame of his glasses. “Interesting.”

“I mean, obviously I would have to be gentle.”

He nods. “I can do gentle. I mean, you know, if you’re up to it.”

I don’t tell him that I’ve been looking for a chance to be close to him again. On our own terms, without danger and obligation over our heads. I knew the opportunity would come for us—there’s been no rush.

“Let’s see if my mojo still works,” I say, genuinely curious.

I take my time peeling off his shirt. His body is still magnificent, regardless of the beating. I strip him completely, removing his pants and boxers. He’s not too injured that his body isn’t reacting and I’m pleased to see his reaction to me, despite the pain.

I crawl up the bed, kissing every bruise. I breathe hot air against his skin and his cock grows harder with every touch. His hand pushes against the hem of my shirt, nudging it higher and slipping his hand underneath. His fingers find my breast, grazing then tugging at my nipple.

“Gods, Bunny,” I mumble, feeling the sensation ripple down my body. I lay my hands on his abdomen, on the ladder of taught muscles, and miraculously the bruises fade. Just in time because I’m

dying to straddle him, feel him between my legs.

Even so, we take our time, hands wandering, bodies connecting. His wounds heal, slowly fading with every touch. I shimmy out of my skirt and his fingers grip the side of my panties, tearing them off in a snap. I smile at his eagerness, the way it excites me, and I climb in his lap, wrapping my legs around his back. I kiss the wound on his cheek, the bridge of his nose and his lips. I taste his blood, suck on his tongue and cry into his mouth, begging for him to enter me.

“Fuck me,” I whisper.

Better now, he stands and drags me to the edge of the bed, tapping my knee with his hand. I open for him and he looms over me, a god in his own right. He’s gorgeous, hair flopping into his eyes, jaw tight with want. His torso tapers into a muscular V, pointing at the hard length bobbing between his legs. He dips his fingers against my core, feeling, to make sure I’m wet and ready.

I moan and writhe against his fingers, letting him know I am.

I really, really am.

I issue a prayer that he doesn’t make me wait, and thank the gods when he enters me quickly with a relieved groan. “Feeling better?” I ask as he takes a moment to stare at me, our bodies adjusting to one another.

“You have no idea how much.”

My fingers weave into the blanket covering the bed. “Don’t make me beg,” I say, pushing against him.

“Queens don’t beg,” he replies, pulling back just an inch before slamming into me.

But I do beg, not because he isn’t fulfilling my need, but because I can’t get enough. I start a chant as he plows into me, more forceful than I knew Bunny could muster. He sets up a rhythm, a mixture of hard and deliriously slow. I bend my knees and inch down the bed, feeling each hit all the

way to my teeth.

His thumb grazes my clit, sending sparks across my body. All thought of healing Bunny are gone—all thoughts entirely are gone. My mind is filled with nothing but the feeling of him inside of me. The way he looks at me. How his jaw tenses with every thrust. How his knees shake as he gets closer.

Our eyes connect and a lazy smile falls across his lips. It's mimicking my own. I feel it. I feel him. After all our struggles, the pain and distrust, I'm not just healing Bunny.

We're healing each other.

*

Nothing gets a Southern girl more excited than snow.

And New York's first snowfall is a doozy.

"Come outside with me?" I ask each and every one of my Ravens. They all shake their heads and mumble about other obligations. I'm starting to think they're afraid of snow. "Really? No one?"

Hildi dashes downstairs and I'm not even brave enough to approach the Legion. Damn, those guys are terrifying.

"I'll go," Sam says after a long pause. "Let me get my camera."

I wait in the foyer, dressed for a blizzard. I'm tugging my fuzzy black hat over my ears when he walks in wearing a normal jacket.

He looks me up and down. "Warm enough?"

"I don't know," I reply. "I was thinking I may need some of those foot and hand heaters."

“I’ll keep you warm,” he says with a smile. He’s not even wearing gloves.

We step out of The Nead and into a world of white. It’s like the sky dumped a cloud on the city. I shiver. “Seriously, aren’t you cold?”

“We’re like, half bird, Morgan. We don’t get cold.”

“You’re not a bird.”

He shrugs. “I promise we do not get cold.”

This could explain some of the reason they weren’t affected by the Morrigan’s freezing castle. I tug my scarf up over my neck and we cross the snow-covered road into the park.

Everything in sight is covered in a thick layer of ice and snow. The tree limbs, the railings. I run my hand over a pristine, snow-covered bench and gather a clump before crunching it into a hard ball.

“We don’t have this back home.” I smell the snowball. “Maybe occasionally, but it’s more of a mess than anything else.”

I look up and see that Sam has his camera out; he takes a series of photographs and I strike a variety of silly poses.

“Want to take a look?” he asks, holding out the camera.

I’m not sure I do. Not after the last images he captured. But those days are over. The Darkness is gone, the Morrigan is contained and things are even and balanced between the realms.

I take the camera and look into the screen. There’s nothing but blue sky, white snow and me looking like a dork.

“It’s really over, isn’t it?” I ask him.

His eyes are the brightest of greens and he wraps an arm around my waist. “You stopped the apocalypse, Morgan. You saved us all.”

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. I wrinkle my nose. “I didn’t do it alone.”

He presses his lips to mine. They’re cold. So are mine. Our tongues are hot.

“We all made sacrifices along the way, but you were the one chosen to stop her. And you did it. I’m proud of you.”

Before I can speak I hear laughter, the sound of a group of girls walking down the path. Their voices turn to a whisper and I look up to see them glancing over at us—well, really, at Sam.

When they see us looking they pick up the pace and race through the snow, across the park.

“They think you’re cute.”

He smiles. Adorably. “Jealous?”

“Should I be?”

“Only one girl has my heart.” He grabs the front of my coat and pulls me to him.

“Is it weird, that five of you have mine?”

“Not for a minute.” He lifts his palms to my cheeks and they’re oddly warm against my cool skin. “This is who we are, Morgan. Why we were made and who we will be for an eternity. The gods blessed us with the sole job of loving and protecting you.”

Snowflakes fall and one lands in his eyelash. I wipe it away. “You’re really good at that, you know.”

“At what?”

“Charming me.”

He smiles. “Well, you know the other part of it...”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re way too much for one man to handle. The gods knew this and had to send reinforcements.” His lips quirk teasingly.

I wrap my arms around his waist and hold on to him. I snuggle in the crook of his neck and say, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

I kiss the tender flesh of his throat. “For being you.”

Because he’s relaxed, he’s also unaware. I take the snowball still in my hand and crash it over his head. Ice explodes and he shouts in surprise.

“You didn’t.”

I shrug, but the glint in his eye changes to something mischievous and I turn on my heel, running for cover just as a barrage of snowballs comes my way.

I run, but I don’t really hide.

I’ve never wanted to be found so much.

*

It’s after midnight when I make my way into the kitchen. Sue has long gone to bed but there’s half a chocolate cake on the counter left over from dinner. I hold the knife over the cake and start to cut a wedge. What the hell? I move it over half an inch. What the hell. I take the whole thing.

I really like chocolate cake.

Setting the plate on the table I move to the refrigerator, looking for milk. Swinging the door open, I spot the carton.

Fuck.

It's Dylan's milk.

It says so in black Sharpie. I scan the rest of the shelves. Nope. Nope. Nope. No other milk.

Fuck.

Dylan is...particular. About his things. His wants. He marks his food. His books. Hell, he's even marked me.

I glance at the cake. So moist. So delicious. It would be a waste not to eat it and a shame not to wash it down with a cold glass of milk. Without another thought I grab the carton and fill the glass. Shit. Too much, that's like, the whole carton. I pour a little back in and maybe he'll just think he drank it all. Sue will get him more.

I'll leave her a note.

I sit at the table and like a bloodhound on a trail, I've barely got the first forkful in my mouth when Dylan walks in. Shirtless. Pajama pants low on his hips.

"Hey," I say around a mouthful of cake. Did it just get hot in here? I turn around and take a gulp of the milk. Then another, and hide the glass under the table. Then I wipe my mouth and ask, "What are you doing down here?"

"Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd come down for a snack."

"You never sleep."

He shrugs and walks to the cabinet, pulling out a glass identical to mine. I shove a hunk of cake

in my mouth and start to stand. I've got to get out of here.

The next minute passes in a blur of cake, refrigerators, and milk cartons. Dylan lifts the carton and shakes it, the little bit left swishing inside. He looks at me. I look at the door.

I bolt for the hallway but his gods-forsaken excessively long arm shoots out and blocks me in. "Did you drink my milk?"

"Hmm?"

"You know the rules, Morgan." He points to the carton. "My name is right here."

"It wasn't me."

Stares.

"Seriously."

Harder.

"I didn't drink your milk, Dylan."

He doesn't move. His eyes are narrow and I've never truly been afraid of Dylan. Well, at least not in a long time. We've been through a lot together. So much. We've fought and killed for one another. But now? He has murder in his eyes, directed squarely at me.

"So look..."

His eyebrow quirks. His chest and torso are very close. His arm, lean and taut with corded muscle takes up much of the space. It's hard for me to take my eyes off of that part of his body.

"What if I did drink your milk?"

"So you drank it."

"No." I hold up my hands. "What if I did drink it? I'm asking...hypothetically."

He moves his arm but still takes up the entire doorway with his wide shoulders and long body.

He crosses his arms and tilts his head. “I don’t know, Morgan. Theft is a pretty big deal.”

“What if I worked off the debt?”

He looks me up and down, blue eyes skimming over my tank and shorts. “I’m listening.”

I don’t need to tell him what I’m thinking. I simply touch the fuzzy hair trailing down his lower belly. His stomach twitches but his jaw remains set.

His hand grips mine and stops me from moving any further. I look up at him curiously, but he moves with cat-like reflexes, lifting me off the ground with one arm, clearing the table with another, and dropping me on the edge.

“Lay back,” he commands.

I nod and do as he asks.

His hands find the top of my shorts and he tugs, pausing for me to lift my hips. He leans over me, mouth inches from mine and whispers, “I told you I came down for a snack.”

I wait for him to kiss me but he pulls back and vanishes. That’s when I feel his hands on my inner thighs and his mouth...

“Oh,” I gasp, feeling the warmth of his breath, the tickle of his tongue. I reach for the edge of the table. My legs hang over the side but he pushes my knees back, spreading me wider. He works his tongue, his lips, his breath. My hips raise off the ground pushing, pushing for more friction.

I close my eyes and sink into the feelings, the care and determination Dylan uses with every flick. Each stroke. But he also leaves me hanging, pulling away just as I’m tumbling over the edge. Drawing me further and further into a spiral I can’t quite catch. I hear a strange sound and it comes from deep in my throat.

I hear a sound, a sharp intake of breath across the room and open my eyes. Clinton stands in the

doorway watching. Waiting. Our eyes connect and I lick my lips, knowing what it feels like to have more than one set of hands on me at once. What two mouths can do. He doesn't move. He simply observes and it sends a shudder of pleasure down my body knowing that he's there.

I have little doubt Dylan knows he's there and when he gives my clit one final suck and lifts his head and nods at his fellow Raven, butterflies race through my belly. Clinton stands before me, runs his fingers down my thighs and says, "Is this okay?"

I nod. "Yes. Please."

I hear the sound of his zipper over my heartbeat. I feel the hard tip of his cock as it teases the slippery wet of my core. I turn my head in search of Dylan and find him leaning against the counter top. There's no mistaking the tent in his cotton pants.

Clinton lays his hands on my breasts, fondling my nipples, and my toes curl. I'm thankful that he doesn't make me wait long, running a hand down my belly and grazing his thumb across my clit. I bite down on my bottom lip when he enters me. I glance to the side just in time to see Dylan reach his hands into his pants.

It's a trio of sounds: deep grunts from my chest as Clinton claims me, the rocking of the table with every punch, and the short panting from my left as Dylan's hand moves in time, pumping up and down.

Clinton's dark hair spills into his face, his jaw is tight. His eyes focused. Dylan got me ready and I'm already teetering on the edge. The man inside of me grows frantic, lifting me off the table and pulling me to his chest. He kisses me, fucks me, consumes every inch of me. We share it all. Energy. Life. Love, and just when I think my body may break, that it may all be too much...I shatter.

And he comes, slamming into me so hard I cry for mercy.

I fall back against the table, breath ragged, Clinton still twitching inside of me, and glance over

at the third member of this late night club. Dylan hasn't come but he's moved closer and I splay my hand on my belly. He leans down and kisses me, hard and possessive. Dark like his soul. Consuming like his passion. And he comes in an explosion of cum across my stomach. His head tilts back and his hand grips my head and fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

Yeah, I'm at a loss for fucking coherent words, too.

Clinton's gray eyes scan the table behind me and narrow.

“What?” I ask, exhausted and unable to lift myself to see what he's looking at.

“Did you seriously eat all the cake?”

Chapter Forty-One

Morgan

“So is this dinner thing mandatory?” Hildi asks. She’s standing in front of my closet, flipping through my clothes. Nothing but a dress will fit her and even then it will probably only come to her mid-thigh.

“I’m surprised it took Sue this long to work out a configuration in the dining room to fit all of us.”

She holds up a black dress. I shake my head. On me it looks okay. On her, I think it may veer into street walker territory.

“Hold on,” I say, digging through the outfits. I pull out a dress that hits me below the knee. It’s a green and white wrap dress. A little cool for the weather but it will have to do. “Try this.”

She takes it and nods in approval.

It doesn’t take long for us to get ready and together we walk down the three flights of stairs. “I’m really glad you’ve been staying here,” I tell her. “Being the only woman around can get a little crazy.”

She laughs. “I never understood your whole...thing with the guys. I mean, I get it, they’re hot and they’re all completely devoted to you, but...”

“It’s a lot of work. We’ve established some rules. And now that the end of the world isn’t crashing down on us we have time to feel things out a little better.”

“Like fucking on the kitchen table?” She shakes her head.

I pause, fingers gripping the bannister. “You know about that?”

“Everyone knows about that.”

My cheeks heat up. “Even the guys downstairs?”

“Yes.” She sighs. “Really, we’re going to have to look into some different living arrangements. It’s fun being here but the, uh...sexual tension? It’s a little much for outsiders and those boys...it’s a whole lot of testosterone in one place.”

“We’ll tone it down,” I say. “Promise.”

“No, you’ve sacrificed enough. Live. Love. Be happy,” she says. There’s a touch of pain in her voice but not as much as a week ago. We’re down in the foyer and I spot the Legion walking into the dining room. I expect Dylan is handing out drinks and everyone is waiting for us to arrive.

I grab her arm before we reach the door. “I am happy,” I tell her, wanting to add that I wish her happiness as well. She’ll get it. I feel it. “Take your time. We’ve all been through a lot.”

We cross the threshold and I don’t know what Sue and Davis did, perform a magic spell or hire a carpenter, but the dining room feels wider and longer. The table is big enough for all of us and is set with The Nead’s finest china.

I make eye contact with Clinton first and he pushes his hair behind his ear, no doubt to see me better. Damien stands next to him; ink peeking out from his shirtsleeves. He looks adorable in a short-sleeved button-down complete with a bow-tie. I can’t help but smile when I look at him. Sam has out his camera and blinds the two of us before we can even get in the room. His smile is more blinding than the flash.

Bunny sidles up to me, latching his hand to mine. I’m so thankful he’s here. That we worked through all our differences. Trust is important—we’ve learned that the hard way.

“Come on,” he says, “Sue set you up at the end of the table.”

Because, in this world or the next, I am still the Queen.

I take my place and watch as my guardians stand behind their seats, Dylan across from me, eyes ever alert. His face is different, more relaxed, and I think for once he feels secure. We all do.

The six members of the Legion of Immortals take the remaining chairs. They look adorable—okay, super hot—cleaned up and dressed in formal wear. With a little assistance I have no doubt they'll find a place in our society.

Davis fills each goblet with deep red wine, finishing with the glass in front of my plate. I lift it up and hold it out.

“Thank you for being here,” I begin. “For being part of a remarkable point in history. We stopped a plague. Saved the world. Foiled an apocalypse. Does anyone know? Nope. Not really. Does it matter? Nah. We've don't need glory or recognition.” I stare at every face. My mates. My best friend and the new friends that helped us accomplish our mission.

“Thank you,” Dylan says, cutting in before I can finish. It's clear he speaks for everyone at the table. “You brought us together. Made us whole.”

I raise my glass and they all do the same; we're a table of magic, power, and mystery. I can't wait to find out where destiny will take us next.

Epilogue

“Do you think it will work?” Sam is the only one that dares ask the question out loud. His green eyes are a mixture of excitement and fear. Damien can’t even look at my face—his gaze planted firmly on the ground.

And Dylan? He’s across the rooftop, unable to even be near us.

“I did the spell. Accurately, I think.” Bunny nods his approval. He helped me, along with Tran at the magic shop.

“The Shaman had nothing to do with this, right?” Clinton asks. His jaw is set and shoulders tense. This means so much to them. If it fails...if I fail...

“Do you think I’m crazy? No freaking way I involved that bastard in something so important.”

“So what do we do?” Sam asks.

“Well, it should be like riding a bicycle, don’t you think? Instinctive.”

Damien finally looks up. “It’s been a long time since we’ve shifted.”

I take his hand in mine. “Today is the day you reclaim your wings. Don’t be afraid. Embrace it the way we do everything. Fear doesn’t guide my Raven Guardians, even when it comes to this.”

I tug him by the shirt and his violet eyes flash at me. His lips are sweet when I kiss him for good luck. The best part about my harem is they do not fight and squabble over the attention I give to the others. They’re patient.

Good things come to those that wait.

The kiss seems to have calmed him down, and he walks across the garden to stand with Dylan.

I take time with the others. I feel the tension ease off Clinton as our mouths connect. I taste the excitement from Sam in the way his fingers dig into my sides. Bunny wraps me in a nervous hug, using both arms. Yes, both. The extent of my power is great, and with the books in the library downstairs, I can do many things. Healing Bunny was the first. Giving them back their form is the second.

After years of not being able to use both arms, Bunny has made up for lost time, linking his around me at every opportunity. Battling the others with newfound speed. He kisses my neck, biting my chin and finally crashes his mouth into mine.

“I have no doubt you pulled this off. I know what you can do. What you’ve already done.” He holds up his reclaimed arm. “The power you hold, thank you for using it to give this back to us.”

I touch his cheek, so thankful we’re all back together again. I want it like this always. Forever.

The others wait, ready to begin the process. Dylan still stands by the edge of the roof, looking out over the bare trees of the park. The sky is a gorgeous blue. Cloudless and crisp. I roll my eyes at the others and they fight back a laugh. Someone always needs a little extra coaxing. I cross the garden and slip my hand into his.

“They’re waiting.”

He looks down at me. His eyes reflect the blue of the sky. “They should go without me.”

“They won’t. You know that. They need your eyes and your leadership. You’re the Sentinel.”

“Someone should stay back to protect you.”

I snort. “You really think I need protecting? From who? Sue’s cheesecake? That thing needs protecting from me.”

He shifts on his feet, biding time to make up another threat. “The Legion is still here. Gods know how many enemies they have.”

“Hildi has them under control.” More like under her spell. I’ve never seen a group of men so fascinated by a woman. Well, other than my own. “Stop procrastinating, babe. This is my thank you for everything you’ve done. For your love and devotion. For your protection and grace.” I squeeze his hand. “Not to mention the sexual awakening I’ve had. Can you believe I was a virgin when I got here?”

At that he smiles, because he remembers the meek, curious girl with a head full of stories and imagination that arrived here months and months ago. That girl had no idea what was in store for her future.

“I guess it would be rude not to accept your gift.”

“Terribly rude,” I agree, feeling the ice melt. He’s always the last one to commit, but when he does, he’s all in.

He finally relents and goes to meet his brothers. I go with him, making a circle of six. The incantation isn’t difficult—it’s the final part of the spell. When the last word parts my lips, the air shimmers, the ground trembles, and my men slowly vanish into glossy black. Their feet do not hit the ground. Their wings take over naturally, instinctively, and without another look in my direction they lift off the rooftop and soar.

*

I retreat to the cushioned bench that overlooks the city. I’ve watched many things from this perch. Fireworks. Sunsets. Snowfall and rain. But feeling the passing shadow from overhead and the widespread wings of my ravens soaring through the sky is the best.

They go for hours, sailing out over the park and reaching the high peaks of New York’s skyscrapers. One always remains in sight. I’m trying to learn who is who in this form. It’s harder from a distance. Up close I can see their eyes and then, without a doubt, I know.

The sun begins to fade and a chill rolls over the rooftop. One by one, my ravens meet in the sky, flying in formation. The first, Dylan, drops to an ornamental tree in the garden, plucking something out of the branches with his beak. He joins the others in a circle overhead. I shade my eyes and see whatever it is in his mouth fall from the sky. I hold out my hands and it fumbles twice before I catch it.

It's a box.

Butterflies form in my belly and the shadows that cross over me are no longer winged and in flight, but human and standing before me. That is, until they kneel.

Their hair is wild. Their eyes bright. A smile tickles their lips.

“What is this?” I ask. The box is square, light, and tied with a bow.

“Open it,” Damien says.

I do and find the most amazing diamond and platinum ring inside. I hold it up and it sparkles in the fading daylight. It's a circle of five crows, linked one after the other, encrusted in jewels.

“What is this?” I ask again, unable to say anything else. That's when I notice the piece of paper tucked inside. With a shaking hand, I lift it out.

Sam clears his voice. “Read it. Please.”

My voice cracks when I speak, “We waited a thousand lifetimes for you. Those days were dark. Listless. But we knew something was on the other end. Something good, we hoped. Something we could fight for. The gods never told us it would be you. So strong. So beautiful. So sexy and perfect and full of life.” I pause, blushing hard, and with tears filling my eyes. Bunny nods for me to continue. “Share our life with us. Fill our beds. Make us a family and lead us to the future. Seal our destiny, Morgan, Queen of the Ravens, by declaring yourself ours and us yours officially.”

The paper trembles in her hand and Clinton takes it from her. They're all still kneeling, but

Dylan steps forward.

“Marry us,” is all he says.

I spot the tears welling in the corners of his eyes. I look at the faces of the others. I love them all so much. I don't need the ring to prove that. Or a ceremony, but they want it, and I want them. An image of the five of them dressed in tuxedos flashes in my mind. And then the honeymoon. I bite my lip and blurt out, “Yes. I will take you all as my husbands. It will be an honor to be your wife.”

I hold out my left hand and with the others' permission he slips the ring on my finger, sealing our promise to one another for the rest of our lives.

Thank you for reading The Raven Queen's Harem. This is the final book although keep your eyes out for a few follow up novellas and additional stories. It may be a little too hard to let Morgan and the Raven Guards go.

Special thanks to Vanessa, AG (for my covers), Jennifer for the awesome beta work, Soobee for being an awesome cheerleader, My Riverdale Girls with Pep!

The Raven Queen's Harem FB group which is so fun and gives me a chance to engage with new readers and I LOVE THIS. The whole community and of course Lisa who pushed me in this new direction that set our careers and friendship in a whole new direction we never saw coming.

I hope you all follow my work toward the new adventures, but if not, we've always got these sexy, hot ravens!

But! Before you go I have two new projects in the works and one sample to share with you. The Huntress: Trial of Gods is a collaboration between me and Lisa Swallow. We couldn't wait to give you a taste of this epic story of Artemis and her harem of delicious gods.

I'm also excited to announce [Elites: The Supers of Project 12](#) and exciting Reverse Harem superhero series, with heroes, villains and all the drama in between!

The pre-order is live now!

But don't forget! Keep scrolling!

[The Huntress](#): A Reverse Harem Fantasy is available on Amazon for preorder now!

Scroll down for an exclusive excerpt!

Huntress: Trial of Gods

By

Angel Lawson

&

Lisa Swallow

The forest is warm this time of year, even after the sun dips behind the trees. My skin is salty with sweat, my hands stained from a day on the hunt. I killed a deer and two rabbits—all three with my bow. Iris took the bodies into the shed, where she'll skin and prep them for winter.

Victoria walks next to me, eyes ever alert on our way to the falls. My bow hangs on my back, still dirty from today's hunt. "A few more days like this and we'll be set for harsh weather, don't you think?"

I nod in agreement, stepping over the roots and rocky path with my bare feet. "Iris will cure the meat. Hestia has grown enough herbs and spices to keep us in stock."

It always seems too early to prepare for winter—for the lean days ahead—but two decades of living in the forests have taught me it's never enough.

"Thank Zeus we do not have to worry about feeding males. Dione told me she watched them eat in the village. Barbaric, shoving handfuls in their mouth like swine." She jabs me in the rib. "Sort of like you."

I frown as much at her for invoking Zeus' name as making fun of me. "I'm not that bad."

She raises her eyebrows and a teasing grin lifts her lips. It's not the first time I've noticed the difference between us. Her skin tans and turns a golden brown. Her eyes are bright blue like the sky. She has dainty fingers and her feet are never black with grime like my own. But she works in the

settlement, not out in the woods like I do. Her calling isn't with a bow and arrow, but with keeping order for all the females.

There's still a last bit of sunlight when we reach the edge of the falls, and I peer into the clear pool, getting a look at myself. Red, wild hair that falls halfway down my back. My eyes are dark green. My cheek has a smear of something, dirt or blood, across my pale skin. Even though I ruffled at Victoria's comment, barbaric may not be the wrong description. I've always had a desire for freedom, an urge to climb trees and hunt in the depths of the forest.

Which is fortunate, because I have no other choice.

Setting my bow on a large rock, I peel off the leather tunic and pants and leave them on the grass. The water is cool against my hot skin, providing relief from a weary day. Victoria strips, leaving her smock and skirt next to mine. I watch her enter the water. Her breasts are smaller than mine. Her belly a bit rounder. Her hair is never knotted like a wren's nest. Not like my own. Hers is sleek and combed—braided neatly down her back.

“Here,” she says, offering me something from her satchel. It's a small lump of soap. “Dione made it yesterday.”

I hold it up to my nose. “Smells like lavender.”

“She found a patch growing near the back fields.”

We lather and scrub, sharing the soap. Victoria takes a moment to remove a stubborn patch of dirt from my back.

“What do you think they're like?” she asks, kneading my shoulders.

“Who?” I know who she's asking about. We've discussed it over and over.

“Men, or even just *a* man.”

“How would I know? I've never seen one.” Although, this isn't exactly true. Not a lie, either.

I've seen one in my dreams. My brother. He's a man now, just as I am a woman.

“Dione says they smell. And they have wide noses. Their arms are big.” She flexes her tiny bicep. I make one and it's not much bigger, but at least a small mountain of muscle appears. We laugh.

“I think they're not worth thinking about. You know they do not think of us.”

“What if they do?” she asks quietly. “Your father sent you here. He created this place for you to be safe. He must think about you.”

“Or he wanted me out of the way, so he can continue his patriarchy over the world.” I swim away from Victoria. I climb out of the water, my hair dripping wet.

Once we're both lying on the grass to dry off, I feel her fingertips on my hip. I wince from the pain. “I fell. Chasing the buck. I'm sure the bruise will be worse tomorrow.”

“There's salve in the pantry.” She looks up at the stars. “I didn't mean to bring him up. Zeus. Your father. I know it's painful.”

I nod and say nothing. What is there to say? He tore me from my mother. My brother—a twin. He sent me to this place to be raised in freedom away from the dark, seedy politics of the world outside. It seems like a kind thing to do—except the hole it left in my soul hurts like hell.

It's almost dark when we dress and head back to the hidden encampment. We cross the wards that keep our home safe from outsiders and find the rest of the group sitting by the fire, eating dinner. I grab my bowl and take a large scoop from the pot. The venison smells delicious. I offer Iris a smile as I take my usual seat.

A throat clears a few feet away and I brace myself. I'd hoped maybe we'd lingered long enough at the falls to miss Empanada's nightly blessing. Not so lucky, it seems, and Victoria smiles sympathetically at me from across the fire.

Empanada takes a deep breath and begins. “We take a moment to thank our creator and

protector, Zeus, for providing us with a safe home, dense woods, and capable women in our community. We're lucky to have this safe haven from the politics and war of the outside world, where the goddesses are treated as inferior and the gods dictate our moves. Here, we are free to roam, live, and survive as equals."

The firelight flickers, crackling and snapping with roaring heat. Empanada's eyes skim over me and my skin blisters. She, like everyone else, is aware of my lineage, And of the myths that swirl around my inclusion in this community. Even if Zeus was trying to protect me, it still hurts to be pushed aside while my brother was accepted. Each woman is my sworn protector, dictated to keep me safe—even if I am the strongest and do not need their protection.

That thought becomes truth when a twig snaps in the woods beyond the clearing. I'm up and standing on my seat in a heartbeat, bow out and arrow nocked. Most of the women around me scatter, although a few warriors move into position. I stretch my elbow back just as a shadow moves in the distance. I release the arrow, aimed true at the heart of the trespasser.

Thwick

I relax, knowing the point met its mark when I hear the sound of impact. Stepping forward, I move to the edge of the clearing to see who got past the wards and dared approach our encampment.

I expect a body.

I find a man, upright and walking toward me with the arrow tight in his fist.

"I'm looking for Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto."

Without thinking, I nock another arrow and say, "You've found her."

His face comes into the firelight and I freeze, fully aware that this is no mortal. I'm spinning this over in my head when he declares, "Then I regret to inform you that your brother, Apollo, is dead."

Chapter 2

My bow doesn't waver. It's still trained on the man's throat, but his words echo in my ears.

“What did you say?”

“Apollo is dead.” His eyes soften. “I'm sorry.”

I become aware of the others behind me, the warriors and fellow encampment dwellers. I lower my bow and say to him, “You can't be here. It's forbidden.” Then I tilt my head in question.

“How did you pass through the wards?”

“I came here as a messenger of Zeus.” Ah, my father could crash through any magic he wished. He looks at the weapons still aimed at him. “I mean you no harm, but I do have to speak to you further. Privately.”

Curiosity, along with the numbness of hearing the news about Apollo, makes me careless. “I'll meet you near the willow tree east of the ridge.”

He nods and vanishes back into the woods. Two of my fellow hunters silently follow him. I let them go. There could be more. This may not be as it seems.

I glance at Victoria, who looks pale in the firelight. I offer her a tight smile while knowing our world has been irrevocably changed. I secure my bow on my back, the quiver in a leather sheath.

“I'll be back,” I say to my friend.

“Be careful.”

I disappear into the dark. The woods are a sanctuary. I've spent countless hours combing the forest each day. It's how I learned to hunt. To kill. I'm happier with my hands dirty, climbing trees or chasing animals, but something has always told me that my survival skills come as a gift from my father.

The moon lights my path, and just before I reach the willow tree, I pause and assess the messenger. The male. It's not a fabrication that I've never seen one. I've never had the interest. I have my friends and companions. My activities and role in the encampment. Men are nothing more than a myth—something girls like Victoria dream about. A cautionary tale in Empanada's weekly blessings. Beings obsessed with power and politics. But now there's one before me. Two heads taller than I am. Hair the color of straw. It's too dark to see the shade of his eyes but they look light, like Victoria's. Gray perhaps. Maybe blue. His jaw is a fine, sharp line and his nose slants evenly across his face. Lithe muscles line his arms and bulk up his shoulders. He carries a blade at his hip. A leather cuff wraps around his wrist.

His clothing is not made of leather—or at least, not all of it. It looks finely made, as if on a machine. The stitches are even and close together. The fabric is vibrant colors, vivid blues and greens, the darkest black. His eyes skim the forest and pause when they reach me. He's aware. Not a fool, although it's unlikely my father would send someone ill-prepared to find me.

I step under the long, wispy branches of the tree and approach him.

“What is your name?” I ask. Directness has never been a problem for me.

“Hati.”

“You aren't Greek.”

“I'm from Odin's realm.”

“Norse, then.” I've heard tales of the Norsemen, of this land they call Valhalla. I find it curious my father would send someone from outside to seek me out—to tell me this news. But nothing Zeus does ever makes sense to me. “Tell me, how did my brother die?”

“He's been at the Academy, training for the trials.” I watch the man closely as he speaks. The way his lips move. The lines of his face. They're hard—not soft like the women in the encampment. Everything about him seems angular, from his shoulders to the tapering of his waist. His voice is

deep, so much I can almost feel it in my chest. I move closer and take a whiff. He smells different, too. Musky, like the scent of bears downstream in the fall.

“What trials?” I ask, then add, “What Academy?”

He tilts his head. “You do not know about these things?”

I shake my head. “I live in a world of hunting and gathering. We’re an isolated community. My father didn’t tell you?”

“He said to be discreet.” A smile lifts the corners of his lips. “And to watch my back. I believe his exact words were, ‘The women of Artemis’ village are deadly. Tread carefully.’” He looks at my bow. Assesses my muscles. “The Academy is the premiere school for training and educating the most elite gods of the three realms. Greek, Roman, and Norse. Applicants begin when they are twenty-one and typically spend the next three years learning politics, bureaucracy, and climbing the social ladder. Once attained, they will begin a lifelong career in ruling the masses.”

“And the trials?”

“It was announced three weeks ago that things would be different this year. Your father, Zeus, is retiring from his position of leadership over the Academy. Everyone assumed he would give the role to Apollo, who is—was—coming of age and set to graduate this year, but he didn’t. Instead of appointing a successor, he declared a series of trials to take place over the next school year. The winner takes his place.”

I absorb this information. One thing, other than the death of my brother, bothers me. “Why is my father retiring?”

“That I cannot answer.” He gives me a tight smile. “I’m nothing more than a messenger.”

“Again, how did my brother die? In these trials? An accident?”

“Apollo was the shining glory of the Academy. There was little doubt in anyone’s mind that he

would win. Actually, he won the first challenge easily.” His eyes connect with mine and I feel something--a chill?--creep up my back. “Not everyone wanted your brother as their leader.”

“What are you saying?” I ask.

“Apollo was murdered.” He takes a deep breath. “And your father requests that you come back with me to the Academy.”

“What? Why?” This fact is more alarming than the death of the brother I’d never known.

“Because, Artemis, daughter of Zeus and Leto, he wants you to take his place and complete the trials in place of your brother.”

Chapter 3

I leave Hati in the forest and return to my encampment. I cross the wards and the others wait for me, their differences from males more noticeable. Victoria greets me by the fire, her forehead lined with worry. Her voice is much softer, more musical than the man I just left in the woods.

“What did he want?” she asks, following me to my hut. It’s built of straw and mud, the rooftop thatched with heavy branches, once green but now dried and brittle. I was going to replace them before the first snowfall. Now I walk to the small chest that holds my belongings and begin packing quickly.

“My father summoned me.”

“Zeus? He sent that messenger?”

I nod, tucking a tin of salve along with a book Dione got for me in the village in the front pocket of my hunting bag. I take other things. A pair of leather pants. My one other shirt. The soft moccasins Victoria made for me out of the skin of an eight-point buck I killed last summer.

“My brother is dead.” I say in a distant voice. It’s hard for me to process how I feel. Apollo and I hadn’t seen one another face to face in decades, but I dreamed of him often.

“Apollo? He’s dead?”

Even out here, in the farthest depths of the unpassable forests, Apollo is a legend. Victoria is one of few that know he’s my twin. I pack the remainder of my things. There aren’t many. We lived a simple life here and I cannot imagine the one I am going to. Academies? Governments? Classes and politics? It seems a fantasy.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and clutch my quiver and bow in my hand. “Be safe,” I tell Victoria, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes. “I hope to only be gone for a short time. Surely they’ll see I’m not made to live in their world.”

My friend shakes her head and wraps her arm around my shoulder. “I always knew you were bigger than this place--than the women that hide and toil here. Zeus has called you for a reason, it cannot be a mistake. Go, show the world how strong you are, that you are mightier, more loyal, and cleverer than any woman they have ever encountered.”

I wrap my arms around my friend, missing her already. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me I will not return any time soon. I give her hand one last squeeze and then slip into the night.

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