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DARK SKYE

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PROLOGUE

Deep within the Alps, mortal realm

ROUGHLY FIVE CENTURIES AGO

Crawling along a meadow on her hands and knees, Lanthe scoured the grass for berries or dandelions—anything to dull her hunger pangs as her stomach seemed to gnaw on itself.

Her older sister, Sabine—or Ai-bee, as Lanthe called her—would soon be back from the nearby human village, where she'd gone on a desperate food run. Lanthe had wanted to accompany her, but Sabine said nine was too young.

So Lanthe waited in this meadow, her favorite spot below the high mountain abbey where she lived with Sabine and her parents. A fir-tree forest surrounded the small clearing, and a placid lake reflected the sky like a mirror. Her dress hem continually danced with swaying wildflowers.

Here, she could coax rabbits to share dandelions with her, naming the creatures and talking to them. Other times, she'd spend hours lying in the grass, gazing up at puffy white clouds to spot shapes.

But today was cloudless. Which was why she frowned when a shadow passed over the sun.

She shielded her eyes to peer upward—and saw . . . wings. Deadly wings. They belonged to a boy, one who looked as shocked as she was.

He was a Vrekener! An enemy to her kind.

As she scrambled to her feet, their eyes met. His had gone as wide as hers. They stared, right up until the moment he flew headfirst into a tree.

Spell broken, she hiked up her dress and ran for her life. Before she'd made the cover of forest, he dropped in front of her, spreading his wings.

She gasped, momentarily stunned by the sight of them. Vrekener wings were jagged—more dragon than dove—with a tapering flare at three points along the bottom. The flares farthest from the body on either side were tipped with talons. *Scary* talons.

She whirled around to flee in the other direction, skirting the lake. Though she was as fast as a fey, he again caught up with her, corralling her with those wings. On the inside, they were gray, with lines of light forking out all over them.

Lanthe and the boy stared at each other, his gaze flicking over her face. Whatever he saw there made him exhale a sharp breath. *Pub*.

No use running. And no one would ever hear her scream. Her parents were all the way up in the abbey, a pair of recluses. Would Sabine find Lanthe's mangled body down here?

Not if I use my sorcery. At the thought, she began to tremble. Lanthe didn't want to call on her powers. It seemed every time she did ended in disaster. But she would against a Vrekener.

Even if he was the most handsome boy she'd ever imagined.

Looking to be a year or two older than she was, he had vivid gray eyes, tanned skin, broad cheekbones, and sandy brown hair that tumbled over his forehead and around his horns. Those jutting spikes were smooth and silvery.

He had even, white teeth, with a pair of fangs! She had the mad urge to tap one of those points with the pad of her forefinger—

"I smell magics on you," the Vrekener said, narrowing those gray eyes. "Are you a little Sorceri?"

There was no denying her species, so she raised her hands threateningly. Power easily leapt to them, swirls of dazzling blue light sparkling in her palms. "I am the Queen of Persuasion, a great and terrible sorceress," she

said in an ominous voice, even while fighting the urge to bite her fingernails. "If you come any closer to me, Vrekener, I will be forced to hurt you."

He didn't seem bothered whatsoever by her show of sorcery. As if she hadn't spoken, he said, "Or maybe you're a little lamb. From the sky, you look like one, crawling around in a white frock and eating flowers."

She drew her head back, sputtering, "Wh-what?" Was he jesting with her?

Yes, his eyes gleamed with amusement. While she was fearing for her life—and threatening his—he acted as if he'd just stumbled upon a new playmate.

One he'd been longing for.

"What's your name, sorceress?"

She was so startled she found herself saying, "Melanthe. Of the Deie Sorceri family."

He sounded out her name. "Mel-anth-ee." Then he pressed his hand over his chest. "I'm Thronos Talos, Prince of the Skye." His tone was filled with importance.

"Never heard of you," she said, casting a glance over her shoulder toward the abbey. If Sabine caught this boy here with Lanthe, her overprotective big sister would kill him with her fantastical powers.

Lanthe didn't like things to be killed, not even handsome Vrekeners.

As the Queen of Illusions, Sabine could make her victims see anything she chose, changing the appearance of their surroundings. She could also reach into a person's mind, draw forth his worst nightmare, then present it to him.

Unlike Lanthe, Sabine never hesitated to use her powers. . . .

"Is that where you live?" the Vrekener asked, interrupting her thoughts. Was he following her gaze to the mountaintop?

"No! Not at all. We live far away from here. I walk leagues to get to this meadow."

"Really?" He clearly disbelieved her, but didn't seem angered by her lie. "Strange that I sense sorcery from that direction. *Lots* of it."

Vrekeners tracked Sorceri by scent—and by power outlays. Lanthe

would have to get her parents to use more caution. Or try to. They were consumed with creating ever more gold. "I don't know what you mean."

He let it go. "So what's persuasion?"

She glanced down at her palms, startled to see how much sorcery she wielded. Did she really mean to hurt him? He didn't seem as threatening anymore.

Pursing her lips, she called back her power. "I can make anyone do anything I tell them to do. It's called persuasion, but it should be called commanding."

Years ago, when she'd first used it, she'd crossly told Sabine to shut her mouth. For an entire week, no one had understood why Sabine hadn't been able to open it. Her sister had almost starved.

"That sounds impressive, lamb. So you're as powerful as you are pretty?"

Her cheeks heated. He thought she was pretty? She gazed down at her frayed dress. Though faded nearly white from repeated washing, it used to have color. Sorceri loved color. Her feet were bare because she'd outgrown her boots. She didn't feel very pretty.

"I'm sure you get called beautiful all the time," he said confidently.

No. She didn't. She rarely encountered anyone besides her family. If Sabine complimented her, she'd remark on Lanthe's ability, not her looks. And sometimes her parents didn't seem to see her at all—

The boy started striding toward her.

"Wait, wh-what are you doing?" She tripped back until she met a tree.

"Just making certain of something." He leaned his face in close to her hair, and then he . . . he *scented* her! When he drew back, he wore a cocky grin, as if he'd just won a prize or discovered a new realm.

For some reason, that grin made her feel as if she'd run all the way up the mountain. Her heart pounded, and she couldn't seem to catch her breath.

"You smell like sky. And *home*." He said this as if it was significant—a weighty and undeniable truth.

"What does that mean?" Gods, this boy confused her.

“To me, you smell like no one else in the world ever has, or ever will.” His gray irises glowed silver with emotion. A breeze ruffled his sandy brown hair. “It means you and I are going to be best friends. When we grow up, we’ll be . . . more.”

She focused on the words *best friends*, and ached with yearning. She’d always wanted a friend! She loved Sabine, but her sister was twelve and usually had grown-up stuff on her mind, like how to get warm clothing for the coming winter, or enough food to feed four.

Lanthe supposed someone had to be concerned with those things—since their parents were always preoccupied. When Lanthe had been a baby, she’d called for *Ai-bee* over their own mother.

But Lanthe could never be best friends with a Vrekener, despite how intriguing she found him. “You should go, Thronos Talos,” she said, just as her stomach growled, embarrassing her and deepening his amusement.

“You might be a great and terrible sorceress, but you can’t eat sorcery, can you?” He spread those spellbinding wings. “Will you stay here if I go find food for you?”

“Why would you do that?”

His shoulders went back, his silvery eyes alight—as if with pride. “That’s my job now, lamb.”

She sighed. “I don’t understand. We’re *enemies*. We’re not supposed to be like”—she waved from herself to him—“this.”

He winked at her. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”



Four months later

Thronos . . . told.

And then Lanthe made him pay for it.



ONE

An island, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

MODERN TIMES

As Lanthe sprinted down a shaking, smoky tunnel, she focused on her friends ahead: Carrow, a witch, and Carrow's newly adopted daughter, Ruby. The witch was holding the seven-year-old girl in her arms as she ran headlong for an exit out of this godsforsaken maze.

Lanthe followed, gripping her sword with a gauntleted hand, her metal claws digging into the handle. She tried to smile for Ruby, who was frowning back at her.

Carrow—or Crow, as Ruby called her—and Lanthe had attempted to turn their dire escape into a fun-filled adventure for her. Snarky and adorable Ruby clearly wasn't sold.

Charging into the tunnels had seemed like such a good idea at the time, a way out of the Order prison they'd all been jailed in—and an escape from other immortals. After tonight's cataclysmic overthrow, Loreans stalked the fiery halls, hunting for prey. Carrow's estranged husband, who might or might not be evil, hunted for her.

Another quake rocked the tunnel, grit raining down over Lanthe's black braids. Unfortunately, Lanthe had her own stalker—Thronos, a crazed, winged warlord who'd been obsessed with capturing her for the last five hundred years.

But Vrekeners feared enclosed spaces; anything underground was a forbidding landscape, much less a failing tunnel. He'd never follow her into this subterranean maze.

Explosions sounded somewhere in the distance, and the tunnel rumbled. *Seemed like such a good idea.* She gazed up, saw the immense ceiling supports bowed from strain. No wonder. New mountains were sprouting from the earth all over this prison island, courtesy of Lanthe's fellow Sorceri.

A boulder dropped in her path, slowing her progress. Rock dust wafted over her like a grainy curtain, spattering her face and Sorceri mask. Carrow and Ruby grew indistinct in the haze. The two turned a corner, out of sight.

As Lanthe increased her speed, she gave a frustrated yank on her *torque*, a treat from the humans for all their immortal captives. The indestructible collar prevented them from using their innate abilities, neutralizing strength, endurance, and healing.

Some of the prisoners—all of the most evil ones—had had theirs removed this night. Lanthe still wore one, which wasn't fair, since few would consider her "good."

Without that torque, she would have been able to command stronger beings to protect her and her friends. She would have been able to read an opponent's mind, run with supernatural speed, or create a portal to step through—away from this island nightmare forever.

Away from Thronos.

Lanthe hiked up her metal breastplate—not ideal for running for one's life. Nor were her metal mesh skirt and thigh-high stiletto boots. Still she sped forward, wishing her thoughts would stop returning to her age-old foe.

During their captivity, she'd had the shock of her life when guards had dragged Thronos by their cell. He'd let himself be seized by the Order and taken to her prison—Lanthe knew it. With malice in his eyes, he'd grated to her, "*Soon.*"

When Carrow had asked about that, Lanthe had been sparing of the details: "Would you believe that Thronos and I were childhood friends?"

Later, Carrow had pressed, so Lanthe had admitted, “He’s broken because of me. I ‘persuaded’ him to dive from a great height. And not to use his wings.” Most of his skin had been slashed and scarred, the bones of his wings and limbs fractured—before his immortality had taken hold, before he could regenerate.

What more could Lanthe say? How to explain the bond she and Thronos had shared? Until he’d betrayed her fragile trust . . .

Well, Carrow, Thronos led his clan to my family’s secret lair one night. His father killed my parents, lopped their heads right off with a Vrekener fire scythe. My fierce sister Sabine retaliated, taking the father’s life. When she was nearly murdered, I gave Thronos wounds that would last an eternal lifetime, then left him to die.

Alas, since then, things have gone downhill.

“Air’s getting fresher!” Carrow called from somewhere ahead. “Almost there!”

At last, the smoke was clearing. Which meant Lanthe needed to catch up. Who knew what could be awaiting them out in the night? Thousands of immortals had escaped.

Had this many enemies ever been so concentrated in one inescapable place?

She readied her sword. A vague memory arose of holding her first one. Mother had absently handed each of her daughters a golden sword, telling them, “Never depend solely on your powers. If you and your sister want to survive to adulthood, you’d best get handy with one of these. . . .”

Now Lanthe kept her weapon poised for—

Pain on her ankle?

Body reeling forward?

One second Lanthe had been sprinting; the next she was on her face, sword tumbling in front of her. Something had her! Claws sank into her ankle, piercing the leather of her boot. She screamed and thrashed, but it hauled her back.

Ghoul? Demon? Wendigo? She stabbed her metal claws into the ground, scrabbling for purchase, looking over her shoulder.

Her own nightmare.

Thronos.

His scarred face was bloodied, his towering body tensed. A maniacal glint shone in his gray eyes as his wings unfurled—they seemed to flicker in the dim tunnel. A trick of light.

The bastard had actually braved an underground shaft. *Vrekeners never abandon their hunt.*

“Release me, you dick!” She kicked out with more force, but she was no match for his strength. Wait, why didn’t he have a collar? Thronos was akin to an angel, a warrior for right.

She knew he’d become a warlord. Had he turned evil over these centuries?

“Let her go, Thronos!” Carrow yelled, charging. She’d parked Ruby somewhere, returning to take on a Vrekener.

For Lanthe. *I knew I liked that witch.*

Before she could reach Lanthe, Thronos had used one of his wings to send Carrow sprawling. The witch scrambled up again, drawing her own sword.

Lanthe continued to thrash, filled with dread. Thronos was too strong; like Lanthe, Carrow still had her collar.

When the witch charged again, a wing flashed out once more, but Carrow anticipated the move, hunching down to slide under it. She shoved her sword up, piercing the wing, leaving her weapon to hang like a giant splinter.

He gave a yell, releasing Lanthe to pluck the sword free. Blood poured from him, pooling in the gravel.

Carrow lunged for Lanthe, snaring her hand. Before she could get Lanthe up and running, Thronos seized Lanthe’s leg again, wrenching her back—but Carrow and Lanthe kept their hands locked.

It was a losing proposition. Ruby was vulnerable without Carrow. And for all the grief, heartache, and pain Thronos and his kind had dished out to Lanthe over the years, she didn’t believe he could murder her in cold blood.

She chanced another look back. No matter how much he'd looked like he was about to.

His blood-splattered face was as grim as a reaper's, his lips thinned, his scars whitening. The age-old question arose: did he want to abduct her or kill her? Or abduct her to torture then kill?

No, no, he couldn't hurt her; Lanthe was his fated mate. Hurting her would hurt him.

The tunnel quaked again. In the distance, Ruby called, "Crow!"

"Save Ruby!" Lanthe cried. Smoke thickened, rubble building around them.

Carrow shook her head, digging in determinedly. "I'll save you both."

In a deafening rush, rocks began to tumble down from the ceiling, filling the space between Carrow and Ruby.

Ruby screamed, "Crow! Where are you?"

Carrow screamed back, "I'm coming!"

"Save your girl!" Lanthe yanked her hand free, allowing Thronos to haul her away. "I'll be okay!"

Carrow's stricken face disappeared as he dragged Lanthe into the smoke.

After three weeks of imprisonment at the hands of vile humans, Lanthe had been caught again—by something she hated even more than mortals who enjoyed vivisectioning their captives. "Let me go, Thronos!" Her body lurched with each of his limping steps.

Almost at once, he veered into a smaller off-shoot tunnel that she hadn't seen when speeding past it.

"You're going the wrong way!" She dug her metal claws in, raking furrows into the ground. When a cloud of gravel erupted in front of her face, she coughed up grit. "Damn it, Thronos, turn back!" Blood continued to pour from his wing, leaving a trail beside Lanthe's furrows. "We were almost at an exit before!"

She and Carrow had been hoping to reach the shore. Now he seemed to be ascending. Leave it to a Vrekener to make for the high ground.

“Centuries I’ve waited for this,” he grated, never loosening his viselike grip around her ankle.

Another quake rocked the tunnel. When a boulder crashed down beside her, she stopped clawing with her gauntlets, instead crying, “Faster, idiot!”

As if she weighed nothing, he yanked her up from the ground and into his arms in one fluid move. He’d grown taller than any Vrekener she’d ever seen. He must be nearing seven feet in height, looming over her five and a half feet. With his gaze boring into hers, he squeezed her against his chest.

His hair—too light to be black, too dark to be brown—was streaked with ash, the matte gray matching his eyes. But as he beheld her, his irises turned to that brilliant silver—like lightning. Like his ghostly wings.

“Let me go!” she yelled, slashing at him with her claws.

He dropped her to her feet—just to shove her against the wall. With his rigid body pressed against her, he leaned in, tilting his head creepily.

Was he going to kiss her? “Don’t you dare!” She moved to strike him again, but he pinned her wrists above her head.

A heartbeat later, he took her mouth, dumbfounding her. He slanted his lips more aggressively, burning away her shock.

She bit his bottom lip. He kept going. She bit harder.

He squeezed her wrists until she thought he would snap her bones. She released him, and he finally drew back, smirking with bloody fangs.

“Now it begins.” With his free hand, he swiped his fingers over his bloody mouth, then reached to smear her lips with crimson.

She jerked her head away. *Dear gods, he’s been maddened.*

Another quake; more rocks joined that huge boulder, blocking the way they’d come.

“Just brilliant!” She was trapped with Thronos, her survival tied to his. She gazed back at those rocks. Had her friends made it out alive?

Reading her worry, he sneered, “I’d be more concerned about *your* fate.” She faced her enemy with dread. “Which has at last been sealed. . . .”



TWO

I *have her.* Thronos just stopped himself from roaring with triumph. *I bloody have her.*

With her wrists still pinned, he ripped her mask away, his gaze taking in her face. Her wide blue eyes were stark against her soot-marked skin. Dust coated the wild, raven braids that tangled about her cheeks and neck. His blood painted her plump lips. Even in this state, she was still the most alluring creature he'd ever seen.

And the most treacherous.

He tore his gaze away, focusing on their survival. This ungodly tunnel would fail soon. Out in the night, dangers would lurk in every shadow. Most species on this island hated his kind.

He released Melanthe's hands, just to yank her back into his arms.

"Hey! Where are you taking me?"

Earlier, Thronos had scented saltwater and rain-steeped air—must be an exit from this maze. With her trembling body squeezed against his chest, he began running/limping in that direction, blocking out the grueling pain in his lower right leg.

Pain from just one of the injuries she'd given him.

Get her to safety; refrain from murdering her.

In a short while, the smoke started to thin. Fewer rocks fell.

Melanthe peered around her. "It's clearing! Faster, Thronos!"

Instead he stopped dead in his tracks, kicking up gravel. He'd caught a scent. *Can't be right.*

When he set her to her feet, she demanded, "What is wrong with you? The way back is blocked; we're almost out!"

But the threat was already *in*.

"Is something coming? Tell me!" Her sense of smell wasn't nearly as keen as his.

An eerie howl echoed down the tunnel. Others joined it.

"Are those ghouls?" she asked, a quaver in her voice.

Even immortals beware their bite. The mindless beasts grew their numbers by contagion. A single bite or scratch . . .

The ground vibrated from their approaching footfalls. *Must be hundreds of them.*

He would have to fight a swarm of ghouls—underground. Did Lanthe comprehend the danger they faced? Had he captured his prize only to lose it?

Never. He shoved her behind him, flaring his wings.

"You brought me this way! You've doomed us." Oh, yes, she understood the danger. To herself, she muttered, "I was so close to escape. As usual, Thronos ruins my plans. My life." She snapped at him, "My EVERYTHING!"

He swung his head around, baring his fangs. "Silence, creature!" His old familiar wrath blistered him inside—the wrath that sometimes made him wonder if he mightn't just kill her and spare himself this misery.

Melanthe is misery. He knew this well.

"All my life, I've just wanted to be left alone," she continued. "But you keep hunting me . . ." She trailed off when an eerie green light began to illuminate the shaft. The glow of the ghouls' skin as they neared.

From behind him, she said, "I wish to the gods that I'd never met you."

With all his heart, he told her, "Mutual."



There was no way she and Thronos could get past this throng without a single contagious injury.

Though he was now a battle-tested warlord, attacking hotbeds of Pravus in between his searches for her, he was weaponless, about to fight in his least advantageous surroundings. Lanthe's powers were neutralized; she didn't even have her sword. She splayed her fingers out of habit—to wield sorcery she couldn't tap—and awaited an unstoppable attack.

In these seconds, she swept her gaze over Thronos, as she hadn't been able to do for years.

He had on dark boots and broken-in black leather pants that molded to his muscular legs. His white linen shirt had cutouts in the back—they buttoned above and below the roots of his wings. The humans must have taken his customary trench coat.

She glanced up at his silvery horns. Though many demons had two, Vrekeners usually sported four. But two of Thronos's had been removed—probably because of how damaged they'd been in his “fall.” The remaining pair were larger than normal, curving around the sides of his head like those of a Volar demon.

He lowered his hands, his black claws curling past his fingertips. As all the muscles in his body tensed for combat, he brought his wings close to his sides. The top joints were so gnarled, she could almost *hear* their movements catching and grinding.

When he was young, he'd been able to pin his wings down along his back, until they were undetectable under a coat. Now, because of his injuries, those flares jutted by his sides.

His formerly black wing talons had been “silvered” once he'd become a knight—honed, smoothed, and sharpened until they'd turned color.

Few of her kind ever got close enough to a Vrekener to know what those wings truly looked like; well, at least not the Sorceri who'd lived to

tell about it. She remembered how startled she'd been to discover what covered the backs—

One bloodcurdling howl sounded from ahead. A ghoulish battle charge?

A tidal wave of contagious, vicious killers flooded toward them, their watery yellow eyes burning with rage. They climbed the walls, scrabbling over each other to reach their prey.

The ghouls were fifty feet away. *Forty.*

Thronos's wings rippled, as if with eagerness. Lanthe's last sight on earth might be a Vrekener's wings. *Not a big surprise.*

Thirty feet away. Twenty . . . then . . . striking distance.

One of his wings flashed out, then the other.

Beheaded ghouls dropped in place. More than a dozen gaping necks pumped their blood, a syrupy green goo.

Her lips parted. "What the hell?" The silver talons of Thronos's wings dripped green; they'd sliced through throats like a razor blade.

Like his father's fire scythe.

Eyes wide, she sidled along the wall to get a better look at him. She hadn't known Thronos was that fast—or that his wings were so deadly.

The scent of ghoulish blood fouled the air and made the next line of them hesitate. Never ceasing their wails, they stared down at the twitching bodies of their kind, then up at Thronos, confusion on their faces.

When another wave decided to shoot forward, he used his wings again. Goo splashed the walls, striping the fallen bodies. A pool of green seeped toward her and Thronos.

His wings moved so fast she could barely see them, could only feel their backdrafts over her face. Headless bodies piled up, and Lanthe felt . . . hope.

Back when she'd allied with the Pravus Army, Lanthe had observed soldiers sparring—vampires, centaurs, fire demons, and more. They'd always grunted and yelled when they struck. Thronos was eerily silent. One male against a horde of baying monsters.

Gods, he was strong.

Technically he was a demon angel—though Vrekeners vehemently

denied any demon blood in their line. Right now, he looked seriously demonic. Watching him like this, she realized that in their confrontations over the last few centuries, Thronos had been pulling his punches.

He might not have wanted to kill his mate, but he could've taken out Lanthe's protector, her sister Sabine. Yet he hadn't. Earlier, Thronos could've killed Carrow without a thought. Instead, he'd spared her life. Why?

As the bodies accumulated and poisonous blood crept toward her boots, Lanthe grew queasy. A quake sent her stumbling against the rock wall. The force shuffled the mound of ghouls, sifting corpses. The sheer number of slain was mind-boggling.

When his next strike felled yet another line of them, no more advanced around the corner. They sounded as if they lay in wait outside the tunnel.

Thronos turned to her, broad chest heaving, his grave face covered in grit and sweat. His collar-length hair was damp, whipping over his cheeks.

She grudgingly admitted that he looked . . . magnificent. For so long, she'd focused on his scars, his weaknesses. She'd underestimated this male.

He grated one word: "Come."

One of Lanthe's favorite mottos was the simplest—*when in trouble, leave*.

Seeing no other choice, she crossed to him. He lifted her into his arms, one looping around her waist, the other coiling around her neck.

Unbidden, memories of her childhood arose, when his expressions had been open, his words kind to her. When he'd nicknamed her and taught her to swim.

He'd been a fascinating mix of cocky and vulnerable; one minute he'd be flashing a teasing grin, the next his cheeks would heat with a blush. . . .

"Hold on to me, Melanthe."

She could only nod and comply.

He booted bodies away, then took off in a limping sprint. She knew what he planned. To evade the ghouls just outside the mine, Thronos would run to the very edge, then leap into flight.

He'd taken her into the sky before—when she'd been a girl who'd trusted him utterly. Years later, she'd witnessed a Vrekener fly Sabine to a

great height, just for the pleasure of dropping her to a cobblestone street below.

Sabine's head had cracked open like an egg, but somehow Lanthe's sorcery had wrenched her from the jaws of death.

Ever since then, Lanthe had had nightmares about flying.

Could Thronos even carry her? According to rumor, he suffered inconceivable pain whenever he flew, his twisted wings not working right on the best of days; surely they were exhausted from beheading scores of foes. The left one still bled from Carrow's sword.

Tightening her arms around him, her metal claws digging into his skin, Lanthe squeezed her eyes shut—which only increased her awareness of *him*.

His heartbeat thundering as he ran.

The rippling of his surprisingly large muscles.

His breaths in her ear as he clutched her close, like a coveted treasure.

She had no warning before he shoved his legs down, swooping his great wings. Her stomach dropped when they shot into the sky.

As raindrops hit her uncovered skin like bullets, she peeked down; ghouls leapt for them, but Thronos had flown too high to be reached.

So high. The ground grew smaller . . . smaller . . .

"Ah, gods." *I'm going to vomit.*



THREE

Free of the tunnel! Thronos sucked in breaths of fresh air as he ascended. At last, they'd emerged from smoke and soot to clean rain and gusting ocean breezes.

Struggling to ignore the agony flying always brought him, he outlined his plan. *Focus: survival, escape, then revenge.*

On the other side of the island, he had the means to leave this place, but reaching that distant coast wouldn't be easy, not with so many blood-thirsty foes in play.

There were winged Volar demons who would attack in the air as a pack. Sorceri could wield their powers from the ground. Even in this rain, fire demons could launch their flames, grenades that seared flesh away like acid. The mortals of the Order would likely send ground reinforcements—or air strikes.

Now Thronos would have to elude any threat, yet already his wings screamed with pain—both old and new. His bones grated on each other like cogs with no notches, the muscles knotted around the joints. He avoided flying whenever possible, but saw no way around it; the ground was a free-for-all.

All across the landscape, Vertas allies lay beheaded or wounded. Cerunnos slithered after fey; vampires took down members of the good demonarchies. The Pravus were wiping them all out.

Just as they had the mortals.

For all his life, Thronos had been a sword for right. But not tonight. No matter how badly he craved to fight alongside his allies, he wouldn't jeopardize his catch.

It struck him again: *By the gods, I have her.*

He adjusted his grip, inhaling sharply from the feel of her against him. He hadn't held her since they'd been innocent children. Despite his excruciating pain, his thoughts were anything but innocent.

Most of her curvaceous figure was on display in her shameless Sorceri garb. Aside from her gauntlets, she wore only a metal breastplate and a minuscule skirt configured of mesh and strips of leather. When he'd dragged her through the tunnel, it'd ridden up to reveal a shockingly small black thong and the flawless curves of her ass. . . .

Now the molded cups of her breastplate pressed against him. Her waist and hips were so damned womanly, eliciting lust.

This was the body he should have been enjoying for the last five hundred years. The body that should have given him offspring ten times over. *Wrath welling.*

"Take me down!" she suddenly screeched.

"You want down? I should open my arms—let you feel what it's like to plummet!" *As I learned from you.*

"D-don't drop me!" She was shaking against him. Her claws dug in deeper, tiny hooks in his flesh. More pain to put with the rest of it. "Is that your plan? To torture me before you kill me?"

Kill her? "If I wanted you dead, you would be so."

She lifted her head from his chest. Her rain-dampened face was drawn, her plump bottom lip quivering. Amidst her panic, she seemed to be taking his measure, determining whether he was telling the truth. "But torture's still on the table?"

"Perhaps."

When he sensed an air current and abruptly dipped to catch it, she cried, "Take me to the ground, or I'll vomit!"

Thronos knew she would stop at nothing to get free. But to act as if she would be sick? She used to love it when he took her into the air, would laugh with delight. He'd flown with her often, back when he'd been addicted to the sound of her laughter.

"I can't take this height, Thronos! I swear to gold."

They were only a few hundred feet in the air. Yet her vow to *gold* gave him pause. She would consider it as sacred as a vow made to the Lore.

"Oh, gods." A second later, she heaved, throwing up a concoction of gruel, water, and dirt on his shirt.

A growl sounded from his chest; hers heaved once more.

If his arms hadn't been full, Thronos would have pinched his brow in disbelief. Not only did his fated, eternal mate have no wings, she now suffered from a fear of heights.

Yet another way the wicked sorceress was all wrong for him. In addition to the fact that she despised him as much as he despised her, Melanthe was a light-skirted liar and thief who'd proved malicious to the bone.

But she hadn't always been that way. He remembered her as a sensitive girl—though already mischievous.

He spotted a grassy plateau, high above the ocean. No creatures in sight. He descended, landing without particular care.

When he released Melanthe, her right leg stepped left, then her left leg stepped right. He predicted her fall and readily allowed it. When she landed on her knees, she heaved again.

Exhaling with impatience, he used the time to wipe away her sick from his shirt and check himself for ghoul wounds.

No marks.

From her spot on the ground, Melanthe said, "I thought Vrekeners were supposed to keep the Lore hush-hush from humans. If so, bang-up job you're doing!"

Since memory, Vrekeners had been tasked with stamping out evil in

the Lore—and with hiding its existence, punishing anyone who threatened the immortals' secret.

Yet all the while, this human enclave had kept its acquisitive gaze on Loreans.

Getting captured by them had been as easy as Thronos had expected.

Melanthe eyed him. "If all the good immortals still have their collars, why don't you?"

"The better question: How could you possibly have retained yours?"



FOUR

Lanthe swiped the back of her forearm over her mouth. “I wondered that myself.”

Earlier, Lanthe, Carrow, Ruby, and two other Sorceri had been whiling away time in their cell, awaiting their turn at vivisection, when suddenly they’d felt a presence; a sorceress of colossal power had descended on this island, La Dorada the Queen of Evil.

That female had liberated all the evil beings, popping their collars off—members of the Pravus like Lanthe’s cellmate, Portia the Queen of Stone.

Portia had used her goddesslike control over rock of any kind to raise mountains up through the center of the prison. The force had crushed the thick metal cell walls like tin cans.

Her accomplice, Emberine the Queen of Flames, had lit the place up like an inferno. Immortals had flooded out, overpowering the Order’s various defenses.

Then . . . *pande-fucking-monium*.

Humans—and collared Loreans—had been gutted, drained of blood, infected by ghouls or Wendigos, raped to death by succubae, or eaten by any number of creatures.

The Queen of Evil, a freaking fellow Sorceri, had left Lanthe helpless in the midst of that chaos. *Real solidarity there, Dorada.* And yet she'd freed Thronos, a Vrekener? He was a "knight of reckoning," the equivalent of a Lore sheriff.

Lanthe raised her face to the rain, collecting a mouthful to rinse. Then she turned to him. "Maybe you lost your collar because you've become evil over all these centuries."

"Or maybe my mind was filled with evil imaginings." Another flash of his fangs. "You have that effect on me."

Lanthe worked her way to her feet, swaying dizzily. He'd dropped them onto a sliver of land, hundreds of feet above the ground. From this unsettling vantage, she scanned the night. Though a Sorceri's night vision wasn't as acute as most immortals', she could see a good deal of the island, even in the darkness.

Skirmishes were breaking out all over, and the Pravus were dominating. The island teemed with them. She didn't remember this many Pravus in the cells. She'd bet that alliance was teleporting reinforcements here to pick off the helpless, collared Vertas.

Like me. A year ago, she and Sabine had switched sides, helping King Rydstrom the Good reclaim his kingdom of Rothkalina.

Prior to that, the sisters had been all Pravus, all the time. Once Lanthe got free of Thronos, maybe she could try to slide back to her former alliance, at least until Sabine came and saved her.

Her big sister must be worried sick over her weeks-long disappearance. Before leaving their home to hunt for a new boyfriend, Lanthe had left her a note that merely read: *Out getting some strange, XOXO.*

In fact, Lanthe was surprised Sabine hadn't found her by now. She always had in the past. They'd never been separated for this long—

Her eyes widened. From this height, she'd spied Carrow, Ruby, and Carrow's new vemon husband, Malkom Slaine. Though that vampire/demon was one of the deadliest, most fearsome beings in the Lore, he appeared to be shepherding them to safety.

Guess he decided against killing Carrow.

Lanthe's heart leapt to see them safe, and she drew a breath to call for them, but Thronos slapped his calloused hand over her mouth.

She kicked back with her boots, struggling against him; he held her with minimal effort. He waited until Carrow was out of earshot before releasing Lanthe.

"They're going to worry about me!" She strained to keep them in sight.

"Good. If the witch is foolish enough to care about someone like you, she deserves woe."

Someone like me. "Speaking from experience?" She whirled around on him, eye level with his chest. The wet linen of his shirt clung to his muscles, draping over his pecs, showing hints of the scars beneath.

Why haven't I ever noticed his muscles are so defined? Probably because each time she'd seen him, she'd been running for her life.

She craned her head up to peer at his face, at the raised scars there. *All caused by me.* A deep one twisted along his chiseled jawline, while four shorter ones slashed diagonally down his cheeks, like Celtic war paint.

Once a body became immortal, it was unchangeable for the most part. Though a Lorean like him could buy a glamour from the witches to camouflage those marks, he would always have them.

Despite his scars, females would still find him handsome. Very much so.

"What are you looking at?" he snapped, seeming disturbed by the perusal. But then, he seemed disturbed in general.

"My lifetime enemy." She'd spent that long constantly fleeing Vrekens. Now she was trapped with the object of her fears. Not exactly helping her Vrekener PTSD.

But she'd escape sooner or later; she always did.

And then he'd just come after her again, as *he* always did. "Well, you've got me, Thronos. Now what happens?"

She thought she saw a flicker of shock in his eyes, as if he could barely accept his success after so long.

"Now I'm going to get us off this island."

"How? It's thousands of miles from land, surrounded by shark-infested

waters.” The humans had been prepared to prevent escape. Well, prepared for everything *except* a really piqued La Dorada. “You can’t fly that distance.”

Though he’d tried to hide it, she’d seen his pain from just a short jaunt—his face had grown drawn and waxen, his lips a thin line.

Considering that others of his kind could fly hundreds, if not thousands, of miles at a time, she wondered what his limit was. “Especially not with me in tow.”

He looked like he was biting down rage—as if just the sound of her voice was setting him off. “I have other means of escape.”

“Uh-huh. Listen, there’s a key to my torque down there.” Of sorts.

Each collar was locked and unlocked with the thumbprint of the warden, a troll named Fegley (not *literally* a troll). When Lanthe and company had stumbled across the trapped warden, Lanthe had cut off his hand for ease of use. But before Lanthe could free herself, Emberine had stolen the grubby thing and incinerated the rest of Fegley!

Which had forced Lanthe and her friends to hit the tunnels. . . .

“If you help me get this collar off,” she told Thronos, “I could create a portal to wherever you want.” Or she could command him to repeatedly stab himself in the dick. Then she’d run away as fast as she could manage—seeing as she would be laughing really hard.

This was assuming her sporadic persuasion worked, but she was hopeful; after all, she’d been storing up a lot of it over the last three weeks.

Thronos pinned her gaze with his own frenzied one. “You’ll wear that collar for the rest of your immortal life. That you retain it is a stroke of fortune.”

She knew he was serious. Which meant she had to get away from him and find that hand. “You always wanted me biddable, didn’t you? Like Vrekener females?” Lanthe had heard they never laughed, drank, danced, or sang, and always wore drab, full-coverage clothing.

A world away from merry, hedonistic Sorceri females with their racy metal garments, brightly colored masks, and bold makeup.

And, horror of horrors—Vrekeners disdained the wearing of gold.

For a gold-worshipping sorceress like Lanthe, this was blasphemy. “You always wished I’d been born meek and powerless.”

“You might as well have been powerless. Over these centuries, you could hardly use your abilities—even without the collar.”

Burn. Worse, he was right. Though persuasion was her root power—the one she’d been born with, akin to her soul—she’d almost extinguished it by healing her sister from repeated Vrekener attacks.

Each time the winged menace found them, Sabine would charge into danger. Each time, Lanthe would clean up the damage, commanding Sabine’s body to mend itself.

Lanthe’s ruined power was well-known. While Sorceri had stolen other abilities from her, there’d been no takers on her defective soul.

“Look at your glittering eyes. Sensitive about this, creature?”

She reminded herself that she had managed a few spurts of persuasion in emergency situations. On one night, the stars had aligned, and she’d rendered Omort—a nearly omnipotent sorcerer—temporarily powerless.

Long enough for the demon King Rydstrom the Good to fight and kill him. Without Lanthe’s help, Rydstrom never could have freed all the rage demons of Rothkalina from Omort’s oppression.

How badly she wished for everyone in the Lore to know about that! Then they’d respect her.

She narrowed her eyes, recalling another time she’d conjured persuasion. “I used my sorcery *on you* the last time we met.”

Thronos clearly didn’t like to be reminded of that. A year ago, he’d set a trap around one of her portals, lying in wait for her to return. When she’d come upon him and his knights, she’d eked out some sorcery—enough for her to get through the portal.

“If you recall, I resisted your commands!”

Just as she’d been sealing it, he’d managed to shove his boot through the door. Alas, the portal closure had *severed his foot*.

Because of him she’d failed to rescue her sister from a perilous situation, so naturally Lanthe had kicked his foot around her room, screaming at it.

She slit her eyes up at him. “I vow to you I’ll get this collar off me, and when I do, I’ll demonstrate how powerful I’ve gotten!” The rain continued to pour; ghouls howled below. But Lanthe was too pissed to pay them any mind; she had eons of pain to vent. “I’ll command you to forget I ever lived!”

A muscle ticked in his clenched jaw, and those slashing scars on his cheeks whitened. “Never!”

“Why not, *demon*? Every day I wish I’d never been in that meadow when you flew over.”

He unfurled his wings to their terrifying full length, a span of over fifteen feet. “I’m no *demon*.”

“Uh-huh.” *You keep telling yourself that.* He looked to say more, so she cut him off. “Even if you manage to get me off this island, you can’t just keep me. I have friends who will come for me.” King Rydstrom—now Lanthe’s brother-in-law—was ferocious about Sabine’s and Lanthe’s protection, vowing to slay anyone who thought to harm either sister.

He understood that without Lanthe, his beloved wife Sabine wouldn’t have survived all those years, and he felt indebted to her. But Rydstrom and Sabine didn’t know the truth: Lanthe had caused the Vrekeners to descend on them in the first place—because she’d stupidly befriended Thronos, a fact that she’d never revealed to her sister.

“And what friends would those be?” Thronos grated.

“Perhaps you’ve heard of my brother-in-law Rydstrom, the ruler of Rothkalina, master of Castle Tornin?”

Rydstrom had alerted the king of the Air Territories—Thronos’s brother—of his protection. Any plot to harm either of the sisters would be considered an act of war against all rage demons. “Rydstrom is my protector.”

“I have no fear of him. Just as I had no fear of your previous protector. *Omort the Deathless.*”

She could only imagine what Thronos had heard about Omort. Once he’d stolen Rydstrom’s crown, Omort had instituted a reign of terror in

Rothkalina. Though she and Sabine had resided with their brother—*half* brother—in the seized Castle Tornin, that didn't mean they'd shared Omort's sickening behavior.

They would've escaped, but he'd had lethal controls in place, forever forcing them to return to him.

She remembered telling Sabine, "I'll scream if he beheads another oracle." He'd butchered hundreds of them, peeling their heads from their necks with his bare hands.

"What can we do?" Sabine had said, sounding as blasé as ever. "Take it up with management?"

Anyone who contradicted Omort was slaughtered. Or worse.

Lanthe had a brief impulse to explain to Thronos what things had really been like with Omort. To explain that she'd lived in Castle Tornin under two kings—and now thanked gold for her new life under Rydstrom's reign. But then she recalled that she wouldn't be around Thronos long enough to waste the effort. Not that the Vrekener would believe her anyway.

So she returned to intimidation. "If you don't fear Rydstrom, then maybe you'll fear Nix the Ever-Knowing." The three-thousand-year-old Valkyrie was a soothsayer, rumored to be on her way toward full-blown goddesshood. Though Nix was insane—seeing the future and past more clearly than the present—she was steering the entire freaking Accession, that great immortal killing time.

"Nix, then?" he scoffed.

Okay, so maybe she and Lanthe weren't tight, *per se* (they'd scarcely spoken). But Nix had been in on the plot to kill Omort, had aided Sabine, Lanthe, and Rydstrom. Rydstrom considered her a good friend. "Yes, the Valkyrie is one of my best friends."

"With so much practice, sorceress, I thought you'd be more skilled at deception." He drew his lips back from his fangs. "Who do you think told me how to find you?"

Lanthe rocked on her feet—either from shock or because the ground

was moving again. “She wouldn’t.” Lanthe should’ve known better than to trust a Valkyrie!

“She would and she did. Along with some advice concerning you.”

“Tell me.”

His answer: a smirk.

“Then you did let yourself get caught by the Order?” He had to have—how else could mortals have captured a male who could fly?

But then, how the hell had they taken half of these beings? She’d probably been their easiest catch. When Lanthe had left Tornin, heading to the mortal realm to find a lover after her long sex drought, a woman on the street had offered her discount gold; Lanthe had followed like a slaving dog—right into a trap.

“That’s a big risk, based on a mad Valkyrie’s word,” Lanthe said.

He raked his gaze over her. “My reward is commensurate. As will be my revenge.”

Squeezing her temples, Lanthe began to pace the small expanse of land, steering clear of the edges, while keeping away from Thronos’s imposing presence. She’d spent ages bolting at the sight of him; now this proximity was messing with her mind.

Unrelenting Vrekener attacks had affected Lanthe and Sabine in different ways. While Sabine had been left deadened to fear, Lanthe had grown chronically nervous, always expecting another surprise strike. Now her every instinct for survival was on high alert just from his nearness—

The plateau suddenly split open like halves of a log chopped in two. She screamed as a gorge yawned between her and Thronos.

When the motion stilled and she could clear her vision, she saw they were on opposite sides of a brand-new chasm.

Those rising mountains were making all the earth around them shed away, like chunks from glaciers. “You’re going to get me killed up here!” she yelled, but Thronos was already in flight.

The ground disappeared beneath her feet; before she could fall, he snatched her close as he took to the air once more.

“Ah, gods. This is happening. This is actually *happening*.” She buried her face against his chest. *I hate this, I hate this.* . . .

“Your fear of flying inconveniences me. When did this develop, sorceress?”

“When one of your knights took Sabine high into the air—then *dropped* her. She was fourteen.” At the memory of Sabine’s head exploding, Lanthe heaved again.

“What lies are you telling now? No Vrekeners attacked your sister.”

She fell silent. Was *he* lying? Or did he truly not know his knights had hunted her and Sabine? As prince of the Air Territories, Thronos was the Lord General of Knights, in command of their staunchest warriors.

Did some of those men have their own secret agenda?

If Thronos forced her back to his home of Skye Hall, then what was to stop those knights from pitching her over the side?

When he slowed, she cried against his shirt, “Yes, not so fast!”

He turned in place, inhaling sharply.

Curiosity demanded that Lanthe raise her head. “Oh, my gold.”

That new mountain jutted from the center of the prison, sloughing off the structures. Each chunk of concrete that fell was swept up to circle the peak like a tornado. Portia’s work. How much she must be enjoying this!

Ember’s towering flames wreathed the entire thing. The sorceress’s fires burned so strong, they grew in the rain, heating the drops to steam.

They were two of the most powerful Sorceri ever born. Their abilities were in a league even with Sabine’s illusions.

Part of Lanthe couldn’t help but marvel, as she might at a work of art.

“*Offendments*,” Thronos hissed near her ear. The Vrekener word for wrongdoing. “This is the work of your people. Your . . . ilk. And you wonder why Vrekeners were entrusted to battle the Sorceri?”



The mortals’ former prison was now a picture of hell.

Thronos didn’t regret the defeat of the Order—he’d found these hu-

mans contemptible—but now a greater evil reigned. As he watched the flames climb higher, the show of Sorceri might called to him.

To vanquish it.

For now, their actions would serve as a timely reminder of what he was dealing with. Melanthe's sorcery wasn't awing, but hers was more insidious. Everything about her was. Already she was trying to sow dissension, lying about Vrekener attacks.

He turned away from the spectacle and swept forward, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"I hate this, I hate this, I hate this," she chanted, her face tucked back against his chest.

He hated it too. The only Vrekener in history who despised flying—and it was because of his own mate.

During those four childhood months he'd spent with Melanthe, he'd once encountered a crazed sorceress who'd told him, "Melanthe will never be what you need her to be."

At the time, Thronos had thought that he and Melanthe would prove her and everyone else wrong.

How naïve he'd been.

His mate couldn't be more unsuitable for him. In addition to all their history—and all her offendments—Melanthe was a Sorceri, a species that confounded him with their counterintuitive ways.

They covered up their faces with masks, calling it ornamentation—instead of concealment. They didn't trust their own kind, had no unity. They loved to revel with other Loreans, but if they possessed something of value, they would hole up in faraway keeps like hibernating dragons. They could be brave when facing a violent enemy, yet debilitated by their fear of losing one of their precious powers.

Though Melanthe's sinister persuasion wasn't lost, it was *contained*—a step in the right direction.

She wanted that torque off? It would ring her neck for eternity!

"Where are we going now?" She was no longer shaking. Her body *shuddered* in his arms.

He forecasted more sorceress vomit directly. “I told you. I have means to leave the island.”

Thronos had information others didn’t. His cell in the prison had been near a guard station, and he’d heard them talking about the Order’s escape plans in case of an emergency.

There were rumors of a ship on the far side of the island.

All the members of the Order were dead. No mortal would’ve lived to take Thronos’s ship. And even if other Loreans happened to hear of it, they wouldn’t be able to cross the mountainous terrain of the inner island before he could.

He didn’t expect the berth to be visible from the air—the Order had been clever with cloaking their structures—but Thronos would be able to scent the craft’s engines. Once the rain stopped pouring.

He would use the vessel to get himself and Melanthe close enough for him to fly back to the Skye. There, when he was thinking more clearly, he would decide her fate.

She’d asked if he planned to kill her. Never. But that didn’t mean he should honor her by making her his wife and princess.

Maybe if he could eventually teach her right from wrong, he would use her—his mate and therefore his sole option—to continue his line. He felt a duty to reproduce since his family had been winnowed down. Even now, he was his brother King Aristo’s heir.

But that would mean Thronos would have to marry Melanthe first. He couldn’t even explore her body until then. The mere kiss he’d taken from her was an offense.

He peered down at her in his arms. How could he wed her after everything he’d heard about her? When he didn’t know the extent of her involvement in the atrocities under Omort’s reign?

He remembered Aristo telling him centuries ago, “Your mate and her sister have allied with their brother Omort the Deathless, leader of the Pravus. Reports filter out from their hold. Thronos, what their family is doing . . . it’s beyond appalling.”

Incest, blood orgies, child sacrifices.

Melanthe—the sister of Omort and possibly his concubine—mother to my offspring?

WRATH. He felt like he was drowning in it. Engulfed in it.

“You’re hurting me!”

He found his claws digging into her. He didn’t loosen his grip.

“What are you thinking of to make you so enraged?”

He clenched his jaw, unable even to speak. He listened to her heartbeat, focusing on it. *Get control, Talos.* Early in his life he’d seen the tragedies even a brief loss of control could wreak.

Glass shards like fangs flaying my skin. He gave his head a hard shake, increasing his speed.

In a softer voice, Melanthe said, “Nix wouldn’t have sold me out if she’d known you were going to hurt me.”

Debatable. He’d met the Valkyrie a year ago in the mortal city of New Orleans, when he was still regenerating the foot he’d lost because of Melanthe. Nix hadn’t seemed to be tracking reality when she’d told Thronos where to be to get captured—and when to be there, just a week ago. All those months spent waiting since then had been punishing.

“What did that Valkyrie tell you about me?” Melanthe asked. “What was her advice?”

It’d been one cryptic sentence: *Before Melanthe became this, she was that. . . .*

The female would say nothing more, no matter how much he’d pressed. “She mentioned nothing about my treatment of you,” he grated as the pain in his wings intensified steadily.

With the pain came equal parts wrath.

Because of the creature in his arms, he’d had lifetimes of both.



FIVE

Numbed to the drizzle and cold, Lanthe was lulled into a kind of exhausted stupor as the flight went on and on and on. When they'd crossed over an expansive forest, the noises of the battles grew dimmer.

She dared a glance back, could still see bursts of spectral light. Soon that melee would spread outward all over the entire island. Thronos had to know that.

His face was tensely set—as if he were concentrating on blocking out his pain. There'd be no talking. *Think about something else, Lanthe. Anything else.*

Yet now that she was his captive (temporarily), she found her mind mired in thoughts of him. A memory arose of their first day together, when he'd tried to feed her—his idea of courting.

Unfortunately, he hadn't known she was a vegetarian.

"For you." Thronos proudly dropped a carcass of bloody meat at her feet.

She burst into tears.

"Why do you cry?" Despite all his confidence, he looked confounded—and pained, as if her tears tormented him. "You don't like my gift?"

"Th-that was my bunny!" One of the woodland creatures that she called friend.

"It's decent meat. And you're starving."

Her face beated. "I am not!"

"Are too. You were scrounging for twigs, lamb."

"They're b-berries! I like to eat berries."

The next morning, when curiosity had driven her back to the meadow, she'd found it littered with piles of berries. Thronos had been standing among them, with his fingers stained, his chin up, and that cocky look back on his face. Delighted, she'd leaned up and pecked his lips. His wings had snapped open, a reaction that had seemed to embarrass him.

After that rocky start, they'd grown to be best friends, just as he'd promised.

Later on, he'd asked her why her parents didn't buy food. She couldn't make him understand that her mother and father worshipped gold more than anything it could purchase. Not to mention that they'd deemed Lanthe old enough to begin stealing her own way through life—

Thronos's grip was loosening in midair! "Wait!" she cried.

But he'd only repositioned her in the cradle of his arms. Apparently he was adjusting her for the duration—and wasn't about to dump her like an armful of firewood. After a moment she relaxed slightly.

Though she had recurring nightmares about Vrekeners sweeping down on her, she was now trapped directly under a pair of wings. Talk about immersion therapy.

She stared up at them, spread in flight, wind whistling through his healing sword wound. As a girl, she'd been obsessed with his wings, touching them all the time.

She'd been fascinated to discover the backs were covered with scales like those of a dragon. As if in a mosaic, Thronos's black and silver scales had made slashing designs that resembled sharp feathers.

During the day, the undersides were dark gray. At night, they turned black, stark against the electrical pathways that forked out along the bones. Each of those pulselines shone as bright as phosphorescence.

One night when they'd secretly met, he'd spread his wings, showing her how the pulselines moved. It'd looked like he'd been surrounded by

lightning wings. He'd demonstrated how he could use tricks of light to camouflage his wings so they'd be invisible in the dark.

When he'd grown embarrassed by her wide-eyed stare, those pulselines had quickened, like a blush.

"I never knew these were scales instead of feathers," she told him. "I guess none of my kind have gotten a good look at the backs of Vrekeners wings."

He appeared troubled. "That's because no Vrekeners ever retreat from Sorceri."

Now Thronos's wings were contorted in places. She'd always imagined the bones had been set badly, but up close, she could see that they'd mended true, in strong straight lines. Maybe the muscles had bunched, growing off-kilter?

Biting her bottom lip, she dared to reach up and touch a pulseline. Its beat accelerated, and his grip tightened on her.

The first time she'd ever voluntarily touched him as an adult.

When he cast her a killing glance, he again resembled a reaper, every inch a "righteous reckoning." His silvered talons glinted, as ominous as a sword blade. "Why did you do that?" he demanded.

"You used to like me to touch them."

Voice brusque, he said, "You assume I remember that far back?"

What if he didn't? His mind might have been injured. For some reason, the idea of that made her chest ache. She remembered every second of those four months. Regardless of their history, she found herself thinking of them—of him—far too often.

As they gained altitude to crest another mountain, her ears popped. Rain fell even harder, drops pelting her, winds buffeting them. She heard crashing waves. They'd reached the far coastline? She blinked against the rain, saw he was following the shore north. Or south. Who knew with her wretched directional skills?

He looked as if he were trying to scent something. He flew them to a point, hovered, then returned down the coast, flying farther in the opposite direction. Again he repeated his pattern, clearly growing more frustrated.

“Even if your senses are as keen as a Lykae’s, you can’t scent through pouring rain.”

“*Silence.*” He dove to circle a tree at the very edge of the storm-tossed peak.

The tree swayed in the winds, the top like the deck of a pitching ship. Yet the bastard tossed her onto a thrashing limb! She clawed her gauntlets across the wood, scrabbling for a hold.

If she fell, she’d tumble down the mountain, her body dashed to pieces. Apparently he’d forgotten how susceptible to injury Sorceri were!

Or maybe he hadn’t forgotten.

Once she’d steadied herself, she eased around to crawl along the limb, the wood slick beneath her hands and knees. Kneeling before the trunk, she stabbed her gauntlet claws into it, then peered up, blinking against the downpour. No leaves screened her from the gale. Above, bare limbs spread out like veins, as if they were stretching for the sky’s arteries of lightning.

Thronos stood at the very top, easily balanced, rising to his full height to ride the movement. A hand shielded his gaze from the horizontal rain.

As she put out a prayer to the gods that he got struck up there, her teeth began chattering. She soon shook until her head bobbed, and not just because of her fear of heights. She hadn’t had more than an hour or two of sleep at a time for three weeks, and had rarely eaten the gruel they’d been served.

Right now, she should be tucked in bed in her warm tower at Tornin, watching DVDs on her solar-powered TV and enjoying sumptuous foods and sweet Sorceri wine—while waited on hand and foot. Instead, she was trapped with her worst nightmare, strangling with the need to kill him.

A burst of hysterical laughter left her lips. *Lanthe and Thronos, sitting in a tree, k-i-l-l-i-n-g. . . .*

Damn it, why the hell hadn’t Sabine found her? Maybe the double-dealing Nix had steered her wrong—while giving Thronos detailed directions to find Lanthe.

If Sabine found out he had her sister, she would unleash hell.

That night so long ago, when Thronos had led others to the abbey, Sabine had noted the way he'd stared at Lanthe: "The young Vrekener looked at you with absolute yearning. His people must have somehow discovered you are his fated mate. They attacked our family to secure you for the hawkling's future, to groom you. To *break* you. As they do with so many other Sorceri children."

Which Lanthe had supposed was true. But she'd remained silent, and to this day, Sabine had no idea of her sister's connection to Thronos.

What was he planning for Lanthe once he'd gotten her off the island? Did he expect to have sex with her? She recalled the way he'd kissed her in the mine.

Oh, yeah. He expected it.

She heard a swoop of wings as he returned to stand behind her. She chanced a look over her shoulder, hating how he was totally in his element. As the tempest raged all around them, flashes of lightning illuminated his horns, wings, and fangs.

A true demon.

She remembered calling him one when they were young. He'd been horror-struck, hadn't come back to the meadow for three days. Later she'd realized he'd flown home with the question: "Mom, Dad, am I a demon?"

When he'd finally returned to Lanthe, he'd been quick to present all the information he'd gathered about how Vrekeners were completely, utterly, without a doubt different from savage demons.

Vrekeners couldn't teleport like demons, their eyes didn't grow black with emotion, and males didn't mark their females upon claiming. While demon horns had a function in that species' mating rituals (Thronos had blushed at that), Vrekener horns were only for menacing show, to terrify wrongdoers. Their wings were for swift capture of prey, to stamp out evil as quickly as possible—because evil could spread.

She'd rested her chin in her hand and asked in a saucy tone, "And your fangs? Do they stamp out evil too?" He'd looked troubled for the rest of the day. . . .

Seeing him in this lightning, his species was plain to her—just as it was

to many others in the Lore. When Loreans called Vrekeners *demonic angels*, it wasn't because they *resembled* demons.

She recalled Sabine and Rydstrom debating Vrekener origins. Rydstrom had said, "They are sanctimonious, maniacal, and deluded. My kind claims no affinity with theirs."

Now Lanthe blinked, and Thronos was gone. As thunder rocked the night, he moved from limb to limb, an eerie predator. He alighted on one above her. From there he could have spread his wings, blocking the worst of the storm for her, but he was content to watch her suffer.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this helpless, this powerless. The key to her collar was on the other side of the island. Thronos had separated her from her only shot at getting this thing off her neck. Not that she could simply walk up to Emberine and Portia and ask for it back. But Lanthe could've planned a sneak attack, *anything*.

Her portal power sure would come in handy right now.

He moved to a nearby limb, hanging from his arms to bring their faces inches apart. "I told you that I'd have you soon."

"You also told me you knew a way off this island. But you can't find it, can you?"

"We'll reach it in the morn."

"Uh-huh." *Bully for us*. When she turned away, he vaulted to the other side, leaning in once more.

"In the tunnel, you let go of the witch's hand so she could protect her young. Why would someone like you be moved to help her?"

Again with the *someone like you*? "Why should I tell you anything? You won't believe a word I say."

"Lies do spill so readily from those red lips. But I learn much from the very untruths you speak."

She dared to loosen one gauntlet to give him a vulgar hand gesture. "Learn *this*, demon."

Between gritted teeth, he said, "Call me that again, harlot."

She detested that word! With all the countless immortal and mortal languages, why was there no male equivalent?

A gust of wind drilled rain against her, sending her into a fit of coughing.

His voice a harsh grate, he said, "A male shouldn't be heartened to see his mate's misery. But this pleases me well."

"Mate? I'll die first."

He brought one of his wings closer to her, easing that talon to her face. The silver length was rounded, smooth as ivory on the outside of the curve—but she'd witnessed how sharp the tip was.

"I could have killed you so easily, so many times." He ran the back of the talon across her throat, letting the threat hang between them.

"Instead, you sent your knights to do it!"

"These lies again?"

Did Lanthe ever lie? Of course. In the noble pursuit of gold, she pulled out all the stops. She also lied to avoid trouble. Those outside her new family might get an earful now and again. But few things irritated her more than disbelief when she was actually telling the truth.

"You foul Sorceri pride yourselves on falsehoods!"

Foul Sorceri . . . Someone like you. "I'm so sick of you! You'd think after five hundred years that you could take a hint. I will never want you like you want me!"

"WANT?" His claw-tipped hand slashed the tree, his fury bubbling over—as if she'd hit an exposed nerve. "Do not ever mistake my interest in you! Fate has saddled me with you, cursing me with a female I find lacking in all ways!" His voice continued rising with every word. "Instinct compels me to pursue you, to protect you. Otherwise I'd take your head myself! I want you like a man with a badly set limb wants his bone rebroken. It's a bitter necessity. *You* are the bitterest necessity."

His words didn't hurt Lanthe. She'd been scorned by men before. Why would she care what a scarred, maddened Vrekener thought of her?

She didn't care at all. He mattered not at all.

When she just blinked up at him, he seemed to rein in his fury. "What either of us *wants* is immaterial. I've taken you because that's what fate decreed. You're mine by the laws of the Lore, the laws I uphold."

“And you always follow the laws? You act like Vrekeners are so righteous? I’ve seen more evil in your kind than in most Sorceri I’ve met.”

“Now I know you lie! You resided with Omort!”

With each Accession, a warrior for ultimate good, or ultimate evil, was born. Lanthe’s half brother had been that warrior a few Accessions ago, bringing evil to the Lore for centuries. After her mother, Elisabet, had given birth to him, she’d been cast out in shame by the noble family of Deie Sorceri. By the time Lanthe and Sabine’s father had come into the picture, Elisabet had been . . . troubled.

This Accession, twin girls had been born for ultimate good, daughters of Rydstrom’s brother, Cadeon, and Cadeon’s Valkyrie wife, Holly. Lanthe was a doting auntie to them.

“You remained with Omort,” Thronos grated, “during his reign of child sacrifices, orgies, and incest.”

Omort had hosted orgies and made a willing concubine of his half sister Hettiah, who’d died the same day he had. Toward the end of his reign, when Omort had demanded sacrifices, he’d yelled, “Something *young!*”

Until that one fantastical day when Lanthe had challenged Omort, she’d been helpless to stop him. She would be haunted forever by the things she’d seen him do. *Take it up with management.*

“I did remain with him,” Lanthe admitted. “For ages.”

“Then what evils do you think Vrekeners have perpetrated to measure up to that fiend’s?”

“Torture, murder, thievery. Even you know your kind steals Sorceri powers.” The fire scythe his father had wielded wasn’t good only for parent beheadings; it also drained powers from its victims, a process Sorceri derisively termed *neutering*.

It was rumored that some “benevolent” Vrekener had ordered the knights to siphon sorcery, *instead* of taking lives. Yet in the last century, the knights had begun doing *both*—so that those abilities could never be reincarnated. . . .

“We harvest and store them, preventing them from being used for evil.”

“To us, a root power is like a soul. You’re stealing souls!”

“Sorceri steal each other’s powers, like cannibals feeding! How many have *you* stolen?”

She didn’t answer, was guilty as charged. She’d had no choice, since hers kept getting poached by smooth-talking Sorceri males. How many times had she fallen for one’s seduction, only to discover he’d used sex to lower her guard?

But she never stole from decent-minded Sorceri, the ones who only wanted to be left alone to drink, fornicate, gamble, and worship any gold they’d swindled, swiped, or conjured.

“Yet you had to steal, didn’t you?” Thronos bit out. Fat drops of rain pummeled them, batting against his wings. “Since yours were continually robbed?”

She hadn’t known he was aware of that. No one would want her worst enemy to know she’d been a dupe.

“Was that how you got caught by the mortals?” He canted his head in that foreboding way. “Were you away from Rothkalina seeking another power?”

“I don’t think you really want to know the answer to that question.”

“Tell me, or I’ll toss you down the mountain myself.” He reached forward, his fingers making a cage over her throat, his expression promising pain.

He was a monster, a world away from the boy he’d been when he fed her and held her—and she’d sighed words she could never take back.

Oh, well, he’d asked for it. “I was seeking something else entirely. After losing a wager with my sister, I had to go without sex for a year. I was on the hunt for a new lover when I got nabbed.”

He gave a curt yell, lifting her by her jaw. She dug her gauntlets into his forearms, but he didn’t seem to feel them. “Wh-what are you doing?”

In the bobbing tree, he held her body aloft, so her gaze was level with his.

Mother of gold, he *was* going to toss her! She couldn’t stifle a whimper of fear.

His head rushed toward her body. She braced for a vicious strike of his horns. Instead of hitting her, he rubbed the base of one over her shoulder and neck, marking her with his scent.

As if by doing so, he could pry her out of some faceless male's arms.

The behavior was blatantly demonic.

When he finally pulled back, his eyes gleamed with rage. "You crippled me. For centuries, you cuckolded me over and over again. The pain you gave me in the past wasn't enough for you? You wish to deliver more?"

Right now? Desperately! She wanted to claw his eyes out, to rake her gauntlets down his scarred face! "Because you deserve it!"

He tossed her back down to the limb. "Look what you wrought, Mel-anthe!"

As she scrambled toward the trunk, he ripped open the front of his shirt, revealing scars she hadn't seen before, marks jagging along his rigid torso. He pounded a fist over the center of his chest, over the raised scar there. "Does this one look like it was deep? Half an inch closer, and it would have pierced my heart!"

She blinked against the rain, against tears that seemed determined to fall. But not out of pity, out of impotent fury.

"Every second I fly is hellish! Because of you!"

"I'd do it all over again!"

He threw back his head and gave a roar up to the lightning-strewn sky. When he leveled his gaze on her, she shrank under the savagery she saw there. "Gods damn you, sorceress! You have no reason to hate me as I do you!"

"No reason?" she sputtered. "Do you know what it's like to feel panic whenever a cloud passes over the sun? To hunch down, gasping for breath, pulse racing? You and your scarred face are the star of every nightmare I've ever had!"



Melanthe's eyes blazed with hostility. He stared into them as lightning reflected across those blue depths.

He was his mate's bogeyman? Fitting.

She was his bane.

Melanthe is misery. He shook his head hard, ignoring the weird ache in his horns, preventing himself from rubbing them over her again. He could barely reason, his thoughts a snarl in his mind.

Control. If he couldn't maintain it, then she would wind up dead. Which would end his plans for continuing his line.

Without that, and without the chase, what reason would he have to live?

Lose control, lose your mate.

Yet keeping her alive didn't mean he had to prevent her suffering. So why had he experienced the impulse to shelter her with his body? He needed to remind himself of all he'd lost. Of all his agony.

He'd implied to her that he didn't remember their childhood time together. In fact, he recalled every moment with a blistering, crystal clarity. Earlier, when she'd stroked his wing with her eyes full of wonder, it'd brought him right back to the first time she'd touched him. . . .

Biting her bottom lip, she tentatively reached in, tracing a pulseline. His wings had flared uncontrollably, embarrassing him, making the back of his neck heat.

"There," she murmured with a grin. "You're not so scary, then. What's it like to fly?"

He took her hand. "I could show you."

And Thronos remembered those agonizing days after his fall, when he'd fought not to succumb to his injuries. He'd heard his mother's voice saying, *"Don't you understand what she's done to you?" He must have been calling for Melanthe. "What her kind have taken from us? Your father is gone." Then, lower: "And so too will I be."*

He remembered attempting to fly once more; his atrophied wings had been unable to support him. The humiliation had burned worse than the unbearable pain. He'd ignored the whispers when his people had dubbed

him their “tragic prince,” forever cursed to desire the wicked sorceress who’d nearly murdered him.

He’d told himself it would all be worth it—once he had Melanthe again.

Bile rose in his throat as he remembered seeing her as a woman for the first time. He shook away the memory—*lest I murder her*.

For centuries, he’d vowed *she* would be worth all his pain. He craned his head up at the trunk of this tree.

Never forget. . . .



SIX

Lanthe woke to the feel of her stomach lurching as her body tumbled from the tree.

She unleashed a scream, fumbling to latch onto a limb; her arms wouldn't respond, filled with pins and needles. Falling! The drizzly fog was so dense she couldn't see what was below her—

She landed with an *oomph*.

Thronos had caught her in his arms. Breathless, she stared up at him as his wings held them aloft.

After the freezing night she'd just spent in the tree, his body was a hot haven. Warmth from his damp chest seeped into her, dulling some of her alarm.

Yesterday she would've sworn she could never sleep with a Vrekener nearby. But apparently, she'd been out.

As rain softly fell, his gaze roamed over her, and when his eyes began to glow with something other than rage, she swallowed. Though she was loath to admit it, chemistry sparked between them.

She might be the bitterest necessity, but his instincts were doubtless screaming inside him, commanding him on a loop: *MATE FEMALE!*

Which was never going to happen. A: She didn't do males she hated.

Just a rule she had. And B? She was in the fertile time of her infrequent Sorceri cycle, could all but *look* at seed and get knocked up.

She had to trust that he wouldn't force her. She wished she could probe his thoughts, reading his mind, but her collar prevented it. He'd probably developed mental blocks anyway. . . .

Her gaze was drawn behind him, and her lips parted.

While she'd dozed, he'd clawed slashes into the tree. The marks were all around the same size, lined up and patterned along the trunk.

She'd bet there were roughly five hundred slashes, one for every year he'd gone without his mate. "You're insane," she whispered. She'd been around enough crazed males to last an immortal lifetime. She gazed up at this one with wary eyes.

She recalled the things she'd told him last night—*I'd do it again!* Maybe she oughtn't to poke the bear so much.

Yet even as he drew his lips back from his fangs, he seemed less frenzied today; still simmering, but perhaps the night had been cathartic for him. "You're one to speak of insanity, when your line is tainted with it."

Had he found out about her mother, Elisabet? Or just assumed this because Omort came from Lanthe's family? She averted her gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Untruth," he grated. "Tell me another, and I'll throttle you." He shot into the sky.

"Where are you taking me?"

He headed north away from the coast back toward the island's interior. Or maybe he headed south. East?

He didn't answer her question, asking one of his own: "If you believed yourself to be targeted by Vrekeners, why not communicate with me in our few encounters?" He sounded almost normal.

"You always looked murderous. I couldn't be sure that you weren't on board with their plan to out and out kill me."

"On board to murder my fated *mate*?" he said, as if she'd spoken nonsense.

“So you’re saying you had no idea that we were targeted?”

“I know what you’re trying to do, and your divisive tactics won’t work. I sought—and received—the sacred word of Vrekener knights that they would visit no harm upon you or your sister. I will always believe that over the accusations of someone like you.”

“You made them vow that?”

“I knew well that Sabine’s death would destroy you. I wanted revenge against you, not against a broken shell of a mate.”

Though this was surprising to Lanthe, it didn’t change their situation today. “It happened, Thronos. Whether you want to believe me or not.”

“You sound like *you* believe what you’re saying. No doubt, typical Sorceri paranoia. Your kind are notorious for it. You probably mistook a Volar demon for a Vrekener.”

“That’s the other reason I never tried to communicate with you—I knew you’d never believe me.”



On edge, Thronos didn’t reply. He just scented other immortals. They must have overrun even this farthest edge of the island.

Earlier, when he’d finally picked up the vessel’s scent, he’d begun cutting across a forest to reach it, which was proving to be more of a risk than he’d expected.

He needed to concentrate on their escape, but now that he was thinking more clearly, he couldn’t stop replaying Melanthe’s words from the night before. Why would *he* be her nightmare all these years? Why would she fear when a cloud crossed the sun?

Unless she’d actually been attacked.

“Why did you say that about my line?” she asked. “Being tainted?”

Melanthe didn’t know this, but Thronos had briefly met her mother when he was eleven. And it had scared the hell out of him. “I’ll answer as soon as you admit it’s true.”

She didn't bite, instead saying, "Speaking of communication, did you ever think about contacting me when I was in Rothkalina?"

"You know that demon realm is out of my reach. The portals have been guarded by armies for the last two reigns."

"You could've sent a message to a letter station at one of the portal gates."

"What should I have written? *Dear Harlot, rumor has it that you are very happy with your new life in Rothkalina with your beloved brother Omort. I hear that you have all the gold you could ever want, and I know how much you always enjoyed a good blood orgy. Well done, Melanthe! By the way, would you like to meet for a rational discussion about our future?*"

"Well. I *did* have a lot of gold."

Do not strangle her!

In a matter-of-fact tone, she said, "I'm just pointing out the sole true detail about your pretend letter. Oh, and you should know . . . if you keep calling me *harlot*, sooner or later I'm going to have a rage blackout, and then I'll wake up to find you—awfully sadly—dead."

"You threaten *me*? A powerless, physically weak sorceress?" he sneered. "I must amend my treatment of you forthwith."

"You've turned into a sarcastic, unbalanced, judgmental dick." To herself, she muttered, "Man, can I pick 'em."

"If you take issue with the term *harlot*, then perhaps you shouldn't have slept with half the Lore."

"Half?" she scoffed. "Three-quarters for the win!"

How could she sound so bloody uncaring, when he was insulting her character?

"Besides, I don't take issue with the term as much as the fact that *you* feel you can judge me. I despise judgmental people."

"As do most creatures who deserve to be judged."

"You got me. I'm a *bo fo sho*."

What did that mean? "You speak like a human."

She nodded, as if that hadn't been an insult as well. "I watch a lot of TV."

Yet another thing they didn't have in common. "Naturally, you choose pointless pastimes."

"I did so much reading in my first couple of centuries—when I was in hiding from Vrekeners—that I figure I can skate a little now."

"I marvel that you had time for anything other than your conquests."

"So I'm a TV-watching harlot who deserves to be judged?" She gave a disheartened sigh. "Thronos, you have to know that I'll never be what you need me to be."

He scanned the ground for movement within the stands of trees. "I was told this long ago. I also heard that I'd never survive the injuries I sustained. Then they said I'd never fly again. Yet I did, and I do. Once I get you to my home, you will *become* what I need."

"I like myself!" she cried. "Did you never consider becoming what *I* need, Thronos?"

"I'm confused about your preferences. Should I emulate a drunken fey? Or a slick-tongued sorcerer who beds anything that moves?" Or maybe she preferred them like her first: a leech.

Don't think of that memory. . . . "In the Skye, I will make you understand the value of loyalty, honesty, and *fidelity* to a single male."

"You just confirmed what we've always heard: that Vrekeners kidnap and brainwash bold, independent Sorceri females, turning them into blank-eyed slaves to their men."

"It isn't like that! Sorceri young are happy among us, accepted as our own." As soon as they were disempowered.

"Uh-huh," she said. He was beginning to recognize that was her way of indicating *untruth*. "They're trapped in a dismal floating realm filled with grim, self-righteous killjoys. They are in our version of *hell*."

"Since you'll soon see the truth of my words for yourself, there's no sense in arguing about it."

"Because you're taking me to Skye Hell? You think I'll be happy among you? Accepted as your own?"

"I said other Sorceri were," he pointed out. "Not you. You don't deserve happiness. You deserve the full force of my revenge."

“Revenge? After that night in the abbey, I never *tried* to hurt you, Thronos. I’ve just lived my life. I wish to all the gods that you could learn to live yours without your *bitterest necessity*.”

His rage had been so intense the night before, he only vaguely remembered calling her that. But he couldn’t regret it. Considering his still-seething wrath, his words could have come out much worse. His actions as well.

As he soared over one mountain peak, heading for another, his gaze shot downward.

Fire demons had gathered in wait. For him, their enemy. Their hands were aglow, filled with flames.

They attacked, streams of fire burning through the fog and rain. Thronos’s wings had been swooping, gaining altitude; at once he brought them closer, arcing his body down, gathering speed to elude their strike.

Against his chest, she cried, “Don’t drop me, Vrekener!”

If he could dive down behind the mountain ahead . . . He picked up speed. Almost there—

A trap. They’d driven him into a broadside from another waiting group. Fire began to crisscross in all directions, flames zooming through the air toward them. A kill zone.

There was nowhere to fly, trails of fire showering all around him.

Impact. A sphere of flames, large as a cannonball, struck him in the wing. Like a hammer of the gods, it sent him reeling into another group’s volley.

His wings were fireproof, but the flames clung to his scales, as if he’d been doused with oil.

“Thronos!” Melanthe screamed in pain. The fire was wrapping around him to lap at her. “My legs!”

When he smelled her seared skin, he had no choice but to separate her from the fire. He did all he could; he wrapped his wings around her body, covering her as he dove evasively. The speed might help him shed the flames.

No way to stop his descent. The base of a mountain rushed closer, fringed with jagged boulders. His mate screamed again, this time in terror.

Had the fire subsided? At the last second, he opened his wings, sculling them forward like oars in thick water. “*Abb!*” he yelled against the pain as he scooped air, slowing their descent into the boulders.

Boom!

Another fire grenade blasted him square in the back, exploding flames all over them, accelerating his velocity even more.

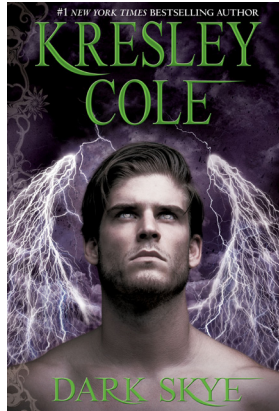
He gritted his teeth, knowing he had only one chance of keeping Mel-anthe unharmed: fold her within his wings and take the impact on his back.

He turned in the air, praying to every deity in the heavens. . . .

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from DARK SKYE!

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