



Chapter 1

BLACK, DARK, VOID. FALLING, HURLING, head over heels through the nothingness, my body flails about as I try to right myself. BAM. I slam into a hard surface, and the air swooshes from my lungs.

Arms searing, I push up on my hands. White vapor appears from nowhere, and it writhes and swirls in front of me then freezes into the form of a face. A woman. Sonia? Reconfiguring, another visage forms. Abaddon.

A thin smile spreads, and the image morphs into that of Lucifer. “You will not succeed. Darkness always prevails.”

Sucking in a breath, I open my eyes to see faint shadows of the crystals hanging above. Alive. Awake. In my bed. In my castle. In my kingdom. In my realm. I exhale. Sweat hangs on my brow, and I toss my covers and cross to the water bowl. Dousing my face, I lay my palms on the soft wood of the bureau and inhale. Exhale. *Just a dream.*

Neither Lucifer, Abaddon, nor Sonia possess powers in my realm. They cannot hurt me or any fae here. I lured their mutant kobold army who attempted to invade us into the deep, dark abyss of Lower Earth, ending the hideous beasts. Yes, Lucifer or whatever evil spirit I encountered thought it could trap me in that realm, but the goddesses granted me power to escape.

Inch by inch, I stretch my aching wings to full span.

Perhaps the trinity of witches, Alena, Camille, and Hunter, curtailed the power of the evil

spirits inhabiting Lower Earth. I pray they did after we risked much aiding them, opening our rings enabling them to pass into the dark realm. Maybe Sonia, as well as her son Thanatos, and grandson Theron, have been dealt with.

My mind spins with the quandary.

How does one curtail the power of a spirit? Good or evil, souls remain eternal. There is no way to end one. At least Sonia, Thanatos, and Theron cannot pass through our rings. Only souls of the Creator can override our ring magic. Bumps form on my skin, and a chill crawls down my back.

Yes, Lucifer and Abaddon possess the power to enter this realm. No histories describe them doing so, I assure myself. And again, they hold no power here.

Still, I have no idea what the witches hoped to, or did, accomplish in Lower Earth. An image of Hunter's pale, slack form crosses my mind. I hope he lives.

I fold my wings on my back and spin to face the window, the faintest glow of light slipping around the curtains. I cannot tarry on this issue. There stands no use while the High Council controls my rings and therefore my access to Upper Earth and the trinity witches. This challenge brings me to a bigger problem, Aleem's trial. The High Council charges him with treason for allowing the witches—more particularly the female Alena, being a vampire-witch hybrid—to cross our realm.

Lifting my eyes to my crystals, I say a silent prayer to the goddesses. My mind jumps to another problem: The speed of charges brought against Aleem, resulting vote for a trial, and descent of the High Council guards gave me no time to replace the set of ring crystals I had lost in Lower Earth. Without them, I have no access to Lower or Upper Earth. And the High Council has Aleem guarded day and night. I doubt I can contact him without being discovered. *Does he possess an additional set of crystals? Has he instructed one of his judges to secure them for me, or should I ask someone else? Who could I trust with such a task?*

Taking a deep, centering breath, I savor the feel of the cool rock on my feet. I draw back the curtains and look out over the meadow. The first light of day graces the sky, forming a yellow hue. I lift my wings and arms, stretching them towards the ceiling. Letting my wings fold behind me, I spin.

There is much to do before those called to be witnesses in the trial depart. Flitting to my closet, I pull on my riding pants and slide into a blouse and vest.

I exit the bedchamber and, nodding to my guards, enter my study. Papers litter the desk, and I sort them into piles. Plans for the summer solstice celebration kept me and my two most trusted counselors, Holden, my Fae at Arms, and Quinn, my cousin and heir presumptive, up well into the night. My early morning will not help me in sorting details of that event either. Even as I try to focus on the guest lists, seating charts, menus, and entertainment options on the pages, my mind wanders.

Who could replace Aleem if the council finds him guilty? His first judge is but fifteen, not yet ready to rise to the Keeper's post. That counts another fact in our favor: Father sides with us as well. Surely, as a hallowed elder, and a prior king, his testimony would also benefit our point of view. Holden can testify to the safety measures enacted even if the council disagrees with my course of action. They cannot persist in turning a blind eye to the growing threat from below.

They *must* allow me to utilize the rings again. We need to know what happened in Lower Earth that day. I wonder if Sonia, Thanatos, and Thereon joined Abaddon and Lucifer. *Because if that be the case...* I cannot entertain the thought. *The goddesses be with us all.*

The only way to gain this knowledge is through communication with the witches above. What we do not know of these evil beings *can* hurt us. The council must be swayed to let us work with the trinity. I will go to the trial. That should be my course. I start to the door. It swings open before I reach it.

Alfreda—I cannot call her my handmaid because she serves as so much more, a mother figure, confidant, and friend—stands wide-eyed in front of me. “They said you rose early. Did you have another dream? Is something wrong?”

“Nothing a visit to the High Council will not solve. Ready my trunk to travel with the others to the trial.”

She catches my hand as I brush past her. “Not all can be solved with brute force. You need to show you respect their authority. At least appear to be repentant.”

“But they are wrong. This is about much more than they realize. If they only knew the evil that I experienced.”

Her eyes narrow. “Are you sure flaunting your crystal-adorned brow is wise?”

“The rumors of my appearance exaggerate reality, I am sure.”

“The chance that they may learn your secret is not the only problem. You may be a royal, and a monarch, but you know the High Council supplants your authority when it comes to the

rings.”

“But the mission of the fae aligns with that of the trinity, to guard Upper Earth from the evil spirits of Lower Earth. And Alena forms one of the trinity, her witch heritage allowing her soul to persist.”

“She still is half vampire. See it from their point of view. Law forbids interaction with them. Aleem engendered the whole realm.”

“Is that what you think? That I put our fae in harm’s way?” Tears threaten to form in my eyes. To risk my people would be the last thing I would do.

Alfreda rests her hands on my shoulders “I think you are young and determined.”

“I cannot lose Aleem as Ring Keeper.” I bite my lip, for I cannot say my other thoughts aloud. *I worry they may do worse, take his wings.* My stomach clenches. In giving me a set of ring crystals, he enabled me to defeat the kobold. But for this alone he could be removed from his post. They could banish him to the cold tundra of Willhelm for a deed I pushed for.

“I fear your presence may make things worse for Aleem.”

I grip Alfreda’s arms. “I hate feeling—”

“Powerless? Out of control?” Her eyebrows rise.

Lifting her hands from my shoulders, I stand upright. As one of the eldest, Aleem holds a revered position among the Keepers. I must believe they will see his wisdom in aiding me.

“I guess I must have faith the council will see Aleem’s wisdom in this.”

A smile spreads on her face. “You have a celebration to plan, and you should revel in your victory and the peace that graces our land because of it. Worry not when there is no need.”

“You are correct. All will be well.” I put on a brave face as my innards scream at me, kiss her cheek, and skip around her.

Exiting my study, I glance down the hall. With no one about, I jump to the windowsill and into the air. I soar high above the castle. Below, the green meadow calls to me. Light bounces off the dewdrops, causing the blades to sparkle as if topped with tiny diamonds. I coast down in wide circles, breathing in the sweet honeysuckle and lavender. The cool air washes across my body. *All will be well. How can everything not be perfect with such beauty?*

Alighting in the empty courtyard, I flit to the table and pluck a grape from the bunch. I wind around and take my seat. Motion catches my eye, and I look up to see Holden, golden wings spread wide, gliding towards me. *Holden.* My feelings for him grow every day. *How could I not*

have seen what could be between us for so many months?

Landing, he lowers his wings and approaches. Blue irises and a perfect smile greet me. Golden hair falls over his brow as he glances around then leans over and kisses my lips.

“Good morning.” My smile spreads across my face. How can everything not be perfect when I have his affection?

Jumping the table and sliding into the chair beside mine, he runs his finger down my nose. “How was your sleep, my beautiful queen?”

“Fitful. And not long enough.” I rest my chin on my hand and lean towards him, unable to rein in the smile spreading across my face. I take in his fair eyes and light hair, today pulled back into a tight bun on his neck, in preparation for sparring with his soldiers, I imagine. *How is it that just the sight of him elicits such joy?*

He grips my hand. “Have you figured out how to rid the universe of all evil yet?”

“We shall never defeat the darkness as long as beings harbor sins of their own.”

“And what iniquities would they cast stones at you for?”

I smile. “Pride and greed.”

“I believe one who risks her very life to save her kingdom may deserve a bit of boasting. But what avarice are you guilty of?”

Biting my lip, I wonder if I should speak the words. He declares his feelings for me with ease. *Why should I not?* “I wish to look upon your face every day.”

“Then I am just as covetous as you. For I desire that as well.”

“To look upon your own face? I should say you are quite proud, too.” I laugh.

“You know what I mean.” He lobs a grape at me.

I chuck a handful back at him.

Catching one, he tosses it my way again. “And I am definitely not a good role model.”

“Yes, how so?”

“Leaving my country to serve a traitorous queen?”

I pelt him with another grape. “I have not been charged with such. But it was I who kept us up into the wee hours of the morning. That will not serve us well today.”

He grabs my wrist as I reach for more fruit. “Yes, if you were not so detailed about the celebration, we would have been in bed sooner.”

“I want it to be perfect. It is the first celebration when all can truly relax and enjoy a kobold-

free realm. If *someone* would not bring wine to planning sessions, I believe—”

“They would be a lot less fun.” Picking up an apple, he eyes me with a sideways glance.

“Are you two arguing already?” Landing opposite us, Quinn lowers his green wings and slides into a seat.

“Good morning, cousin.” My side catches with grief as I take in his face. The square chin and dark hair so much like my eldest brother. Staving off the passing emotion, I offer him a plate of biscuits. “Prince Holden was complaining about my organization style. He thinks me too detail oriented.”

“You do tend to be preoccupied with particulars.” Quinn lifts a pastry from the tray.

Holden motions to Quinn. “I like you more today.”

I look at Quinn, wondering why he sided with Holden. The two have been on opposite sides of every discussion for the past week. Perhaps Quinn has decided to set aside his jealousy or opposition, whatever the ill feelings are, or maybe he loathes planning festivals as much as Holden. *I need female friends*. But I require Holden and Quinn to help me list the games of skill for the festival. Looking between the men, I vow to demand of Quinn the root of his animosity before they travel to the High Council gathering. I have put the discussion off too long as it is.

“I can finish the plans for the parties while you are attending the trial.” I look back to the meadow, thinking of the journals that should be completed as well.

If honest, I dread the task. I do not want to be reminded of what passed the day I entered Lower Earth. The beings haunt my every dream, but it must be done. Each fact needs be preserved in the texts for future generations. My experience could aid fae, as the histories did us, in ways we could not even ponder. Speak with Quinn before he leaves, plan for the celebration, record my victory in the journals, I tick through the items in my list.

Holden lays his hand on my arm. “Someone is way too serious for a supposed day of rest.”

“Someone does not know the meaning of responsibility.” Quinn points at Holden.

And he returns to mocking Holden. I fight rolling my eyes and think back to the day we first met. They seemed so alike—both soldiers, royals. *Except* Holden bears the title of prince of our neighboring kingdom of Hilbron, and Quinn serves as only my heir presumptive, a tentative title indeed. Perhaps therein lies the root of his angst. But he accepted the position, has said he wanted it, is happy here. *Before*. Before Holden sided with me to aid the witches of the trinity.

Another rabbit hole. As seems to be their pattern, the trinity of witches have disappeared

without a trace. If the trinity is still a trinity. If the one they call Hunter still lives and their powers are intact. I hope they persist for I believe we, as well as they, may benefit from an alliance. If he perished, the witches may have lost their advantage in the battle against evil, and I can place no blame with the other two for taking time to mourn and regroup. Tears form in my eyes as I think how the witches' hearts must be broken, especially Alena's.

"Are you thinking of the witches again?" Quinn's voice brings me back to my reality. "I do not see why you are so preoccupied with them. We should shoot in the meadow. Let us plan for the solstice while we practice our aim."

Holden snatches a pastry from the tray. "Oh, Quinn, ever so sensitive. What if it were Titania that died? I hope you would at least shed a tear before taking over her reign. And why do you not see that we share the same goal as the witches? This trinity seems to be willing to do whatever it takes to safeguard their realm from evil."

"Yes, *their* realm, Upper Earth. I did not see them volunteering to fight the kobold."

Perhaps I have misplaced favor on Quinn. *How can he not see our mutual purpose?* Maybe he should not be sitting at this table. Laying my napkin on my plate, I stand.

"Nor did we ask their help. Please, do not argue. We fight the same enemies as this trinity. There is nothing to be gained by this debate."

"I am sure the High Council will have much to say, cousin." Quinn holds my stare.

Does he challenge me? Threaten me? Hold your enemies close. "Yes, cousin. Let us not converse on this further. We should take to the meadow for some archery. I will meet you there in an hour."

Bowing, Quinn jumps into the air. I watch him fly away, wondering if I can trust him with my kingdom. *Differing opinions promote well-thought-out solutions*, I remind myself. *You harbor radical ideas. Quinn's views represent more traditional lines of thinking. You cannot discount him for that. He did not take the issue to the council, Regin did.*

"I do not understand why you keep him here." Holden matches my step as I cross the courtyard.

"He is my cousin, and I have no heir. He stabilizes my reign."

"And what will become of him when you do have an heir?" Holden whispers in my ear.

As his warm breath crosses my neck, I shiver. I dare meet his beautiful blue eyes and words fail me. *Why, oh, why does he have this effect on me?* It was not this way before. My brain lacks

rational thought in his presence.

“I must see to Mother and Father.”

“Are we still to meet in the wood after midday?”

“Yes.” My face flushes at the thought of being alone with him. Few things have brought me more happiness the past days than the hours we spend together.

Stopping, Holden bows, turns on his heel, and takes flight. I watch him, noting how the sun shines through his golden wings. *Focus, Titania.* A queen cannot be distracted by such things as amber wings and muscled backs. Looking to the doors before me, I swing them open and enter the passage.

I am glad for the weekend days of rest and to have fewer fae in the castle. My wings itch with new growth and the sense all are watching me. Brighter green, changing to a crisp, spring-yellow green, the sheer structures have begun to replace the frayed, burned ends. It is so at odds with my blazing new red hair, which is also a side-effect of my magickal expulsion from Lower Earth. And, of course, there is the matter of my face. I hear the rumors, whispers in the halls. They think me a witch or wizard, say the adornments magnify my senses. If they only knew the truth.

This thought leads to more worry for the trial the High Council called for. Many judges will be in attendance. *What if they learn my secret? What if they learn of Mother’s gift of foresight?* Powers that manifest in our realm historically only manifest in the lines of the Ring Keepers. Discovery of gifts in others could spark a full inquiry, not to mention fear—nay, even hostility—towards those who may demonstrate gifts. Disruption of the balance of power could upend our realm. Me, a female queen, rising to the monarchy at but fifteen and unwed, with the responsibility for a kingdom on my shoulders, causes strife enough. The last thing I need is more eyes on Aubren and my reign.

Reaching my parents’ quarters, I slip through the door. Mother sits in front of the window, her light hair shining in the sun, and Father is at his desk, reading. With Father engrossed, I flit to Mother and, landing beside her, kiss her cheek.

“Good morning. Are you enjoying the view?” I slide my palm into hers and squeeze her cold fingers. The texture of her skin, so soft and thin, as if a stretched parchment-thin pastry dough, seems ready to rip at any moment. I wonder how much time her body may have left in this realm. Tears pooling in my eyes, I watch her face, offering silent prayers for a response.

Why I still hope, even expect, one will come, I do not know. Tucked away in my mind, in my heart, a glimmer of faith remains. If I just say the right words, play the right song or poem, perhaps recite a key memory. Part of me believes when I fulfill my purpose hers will be realized as well. Her trance will be broken. She will return to us. That pressure weighs on my shoulders. The need to end the evil ones. Ever since I secured my reign by besting Ethan, I have felt the yoke of that burden. Not only for my mother's sake, but for the prosperity of the realm.

"She loves spring. The grass is quite green this year, do you not agree?" Father crosses to us.

"I love how the sun shines on the dew in the morning." I look from his wrinkle-ringed green eyes to Mother and squeeze her hand. "Do you love how the sun reflects off the droplets as well, Mother?"

"Morning? Ha." Father strokes his gray laced mahogany beard. "It is almost midday. I thought you would have breakfast with us, but Alfreda said you were still asleep. How late into the night did you work? Or did something else occupy your time?"

I imagine a defense a normal mother may make. *Leave her be. She needs her rest.* But Mother's blue irises stay glued to the window. I smooth my riding skirt to my leg. "We were planning for the solstice celebration. I rose early but had tasks to finish."

"Of course. Planning with Holden, I am sure." Father's eyebrows creep up.

"Also Quinn. Should we all walk together this morning?"

"No, take your mother. I am engrossed in my reading." He describes the ancient text tracing the lineages of the witches.

"I am grateful for your help, Father. The more we know of Sonia and her line, the better prepared we can be. Have you learned anything useful yet?"

Replying with a negative, he saunters back to the desk. I lift Mother's hand, and she rises from her seat. I hook her elbow in mine and we walk through the passages, out to our favorite garden, into the orchard, and then to the meadow. The evaporating dew forms a haze over the field, creating the sense that we walk through a dream. But this is my life, and the scenes that come at night appear to be more of the things of nightmares. As we enter the forest, I talk to her of plans for the solstice celebrations, my apprehension about the High Council trial, and the animosity between Quinn and Holden—more specifically, Quinn's seeming hostility or jealousy.

Having nothing else to speak of, my mind wanders. For the most part, I have accepted, even become grateful for, what transpires during our walks. I could have died in Lower Earth. But the

goddesses granted me time, and I will value all of it. I use these moments with Mother to reflect, brainstorm, and wonder what advice she may have given. The trial will be. I cannot change that, only prepare for what they may decide. But I will not live with the unease between Quinn and Holden. It is not healthy for me and does not make for a strong kingdom.

Having made my peace, I recite the names of the flowers for Mother. We weave between the trees, and I listen to the sound of the forest, the babbling of the brook, the songs of the birds, and the breeze tinkling through the leaves. I savor the soft moss underfoot, moist air on my skin, and warmth of the intermittent sunlight on my wings. The smell of earth, our soil, Aubren, surrounds me. It harkens memories of our many walks in this wood. I exhale. *Holden is not your only happiness. We are safe again.*

Rounding back to the castle, Mother and I pass through the orchard to the garden. I commit to her my pledge to speak to Quinn about Holden this day. A towering rose bush with huge white blooms beckons me. Approaching it, I lean over to smell a flower. Its sweet aroma fills my nose, reminding me of May celebrations. I close my eyes, picturing the lunches in the garden and teas on the verandas we enjoyed when my brothers still lived. How happy we had been.

A tear escapes my lid and rolls down my cheek. As I swipe it away, movement in the flower catches my eye. A brown grasshopper emerges from between the petals. Mother's hand darts in front of me and snatches the bug. Pressing her fingers into her palm over and over, she pulverizes the insect, and I stare in shock as she squats and mashes the brown and green goo remains of the animal into the dirt. Standing, she spits on the soil and twists the toe of her shoe into the spot, grinding the parts of the bug into the ground.

Startled out of my trance by her repetitive stomping, I wrap my arms around her shoulders. "Mother, Mother, it is gone. It will not hurt you."

Her eyes cut to mine and the glaze returns. She blinks and her eyeballs quiver in their sockets.

I fear she may be having an epileptic fit or seizure. We need help. "Alfreda—"

Wings spreading high, mother spins in front of me and clutches my arms. Her nails dig into my skin. "More to come. You need them."

Grip loosening, her eyes roll back and her knees buckle. Winding my arm around her back, I catch her as she slumps into my embrace. I nestle her head in my lap and stroke her cheek. Her skin feels ice cold under my touch. Squirming out of my vest, I lay it over her. I glance up to see

Alfreda hurrying towards me.

“Heavens be. What happened? One of the gardeners said they heard you call my name.”

“I do not know.” My side ticks, and tears fill my eyes. “There was a grasshopper on the rose and—”

“She had a premonition, right?”

“Yes. I have not seen her move that fast or with such fury since...” I cannot bear to speak of it aloud. Not since the day my brothers died. When their bodies were brought to the courtyard, she ran to each, flinging her arms around their torsos and hugging them with all her might. Father and Alfreda spent an hour prying Mother from Rigel’s frame.

Alfreda runs to get water, and I rock Mother in my arms, grateful for the tall hedges that shelter us from view. Her face appears the color of snow, but her breaths seem even and her heartbeat strong. *More to come. You need them. What more is to come? More grasshoppers? I need the grasshoppers? Or someone else? I had been talking about Holden and Quinn when the fit started. There was more danger to come, and I needed Holden and Quinn to help me stop it?* My mind races with interpretations of her words.

Returning with a pitcher of water and a cloth, Alfreda pats the cool towel on Mother’s forehead. “What did she say?”

I keep my eyes trained on her face. “I do not know. It was—”

“You are keeping secrets from me now?”

“No, I...” I meet Alfreda’s hard stare. “She said, ‘More to come, you need them.’”

“If only there could be more context and details to these omens.”

Mother twitches in my arms, and her eyelids rise. But there appears to be no recognition in her stare. I squeeze her to me, relishing in the fact that she has woken. For as long as she draws breath, I will hope for her to return to her former self.

Standing, I support Mother’s waist. Step by step, we creep through the garden paths towards the castle entrance. With each footfall, Mother’s back straightens, her wings returning to their normal slacked state on her back. Glancing at her face, I recognize the return of the normal haze of her state, eyes glazed and darting this way and that, with so few blinks you would think her eyes would shrivel and dry into raisins.

We escort Mother to her chamber and take her to the bed. Rolling back the down coverlet, I rest her on the mattress and remove her shoes. She spins her legs up and lies back as if repeating

the act from a preset routine. I tuck the covers under her chin, and she closes her eyes. Seeing her still looking so pale, my breath catches in my lungs. I force an exhale.

Alfreda's warm arm wraps around my waist. "She will be okay, dear."

"Her skin is so pale, so cold and thin. It seems as if she could evaporate into thin air any moment." Tears fill my eyes. "I cannot lose her. Not before..."

I bury my face in Alfreda's chest. A queen should not cry, but my tears come like waterfalls from my lids. "I want to be able to say goodbye to my mother. I have to bring her back. She seemed so close today. I do not understand. The grasshopper set her off somehow."

"She hates those things. Always has. Hated that they eat her flowers. I would guess that triggered her."

Hearing someone enter, I blink the tears from my eyes. I raise my head to find Father before me. I explain Mother's episode as he kneels in front of her. Thoughts swirl in my mind. *What is coming? Is it indeed Holden and Quinn that I require? Who else could it be? They came here to help me fight the kobold, and together, we defeated them, secured this kingdom and our realm.* My stomach turns. *Could there be others? Have the evil spirits of the deep bred more armies?*

"Titania, I am sure you have much to attend to." Alfreda lays her hands on my shoulders. "We will watch your mother."

My mind darts to Quinn whom I told I would shoot with in the meadow. "You will come get me if anything changes. As soon as she wakes?"

"Yes, yes. Go. Splash your face with some cool water." She pinches my cheeks. "Your mother will be fine."

I nod and, patting Father's arm, leave them to watch her. Walking through the stone passage, I try to clear my mind, silently reciting my list of chores for the day. But my brain worries for Mother. *What if she gets sicker? Titania, you cannot tarry on these thoughts. Take things as they come.*

to be a Fae Guardian
by Tricia Copeland

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