

Chapter One

Being a ruler is incredibly boring. It had taken me only about a week to figure out that this life wasn't for me. I knew I didn't want the title, and I had weighed heavily on that decision, but it wasn't like I could do anything about it now. My kind had wanted me to take it. My father had wanted me to take it. It appeared that I had wanted to take it. So here I was, bored out of my mind while I waited to be needed. My biggest concern in my land, since accepting the throne, was the half-breeds integration into my territory. But things were not bad there to my knowledge, though I knew something would happen sooner or later. I hadn't had to kill anyone at least. It was not in my kind's nature to accept those who were more than one species. But nothing was going on. I kind of regretted the decision of taking the crown what with my life going from a hundred to zero in such a short amount of time.

All I had ever wanted was to just blend in and live my own life for myself. That reality seemed something that I would never have. The happiness I'd had after taking the throne hadn't lasted more than forty-eight hours before dissolving into boredom and depression. Sure, I was glad to be making positive changes in my territory, but it came at the expense of what I wanted for myself. I had thought laying down my life for others had been the ultimate sacrifice on my part. Oh how wrong I had been. The ultimate sacrifice is not death, it's life. In death you can escape, but sticking around and doing a job others want of you without much freewill on your end...now that's a sacrifice. But, at least I was avoiding stress, which I was sure made at least a few people happy who worried about me in my current condition.

In the one week I had been Queen so far, the time seemed to drag on already. In fact, the biggest thing to happen around here had been my expanding stomach, which was now *huge* in my opinion. I looked about seven months along, by human standards, and I truly hoped I wouldn't get much bigger as my self-image was waning by this point. Though, Kafkus still gazed at me like I was the most beautiful woman ever. That helped a lot, but only when he was around, which he wasn't at the moment.

Kafkus had been a high ranking member of the royal guard before he had decided to move to the human world to be with me, but I had known just how much he'd missed it. He was a warrior after all, and a warrior without his training or army was just not the same. In an attempt to perk him up, I had put him in charge of the royal guard. It seemed to work. He was gone most of the day, and came home all sweaty and gross, but he was happier than I'd seen him in a long time. He much preferred this world to the one I did. I had offered to join him from time to time but he wouldn't let me until the baby came, despite my protests that I couldn't be hurt by their weapons *and* the fact that I was the ruler and should have final say. I never was much for just standing on the sidelines, not when I was usually pushed to the front by some unseen force that liked to screw with my life.

I hadn't been back to the human world since I had come here to accept the title, and I felt a little homesick despite the fact that this was technically my home. But I think the fact that my parents were both gone now was a big part of my wanting to leave. My father had sacrificed himself to save my life only a week ago, but it still didn't feel like he was really gone. It usually felt that way

when I lost a loved one, and I didn't like how that number kept growing. I now had three holes in my heart from the three I had lost, though two of those holes had slightly healed while the newest was still fresh and tender at the thought of him. Living in his room didn't help with that fact despite how much Violet had changed it to look like my room in the human world. The bathroom hadn't been altered though, and that's where I spent most of my time.

The view from the window of my new deep tub was pretty, though I did miss my oceanic view. The tub was definitely an improvement from my old one though, and I had loved that tub. This one, like the other, was carved from rock, but it could have easily fit ten people fully submerged. There was a shallow side near the wall where a waterfall fell into the pool I soaked in. That was equivalent of a shower which no human one could even compare to. I could sit in this tub for hours, and I had over the last week. The water soothed me and helped my stressful yet dull mind. Though I did feel even bigger in here, Kafkus assured me that I was not the whale I swore I was.

It seemed, at the thought of him, Kafkus came into view. I could smell him long before I saw him though. He smiled when he caught my gaze, though my own smile wasn't completely right and he seemed to catch onto that fact.

"What is wrong, my Queen?"

The sigh worked its way out without my permission. "I want my body back."

He stripped down and slid into the water, positioning himself at my back. I let out a contented sigh as my head found its way to rest between his cheek and shoulder. Its favorite spot. His touch had been enough to lighten my spirits a bit, but I still was anxious about the baby, and its undesired effects on my body as it wouldn't stop growing. I still didn't know how long I had left before little Spero would make his grand entrance into this world. I dreaded that day. Not his arrival itself, I was excited for that, but the pain it was going to cause me. I had already had one—all too memorable—glimpse into what labor felt like and was not looking forward to the day it came back.

"You are still beautiful to me, Quartessa," he said and my smile became genuine. Though, one thing weighed on my mind that had a lot this last week.

Though we were reunited, Kafkus and I still hadn't commemorated the event with a good throw down beneath the sheets, and I was getting a little frustrated with that. I understood his reasoning for wanting to wait, but damn, it had been a long time for me, aside from my night with James that I didn't really want to remember, even though my opinion of the guy had improved since then. I liked to feel in control of my own body, and I hadn't been that night thanks to his damn mental persuasion tactics.

"Beautiful, but not sexy."

"I will always find you attractive, no matter how pregnant you are."

"Uh huh."

He sighed. "We have discussed this."

"Maybe we should discuss it some more," I said as my hand glided higher up his thigh but he pushed it away and I spun around to pout at him.

"I would love nothing more than to ravage you, my beautiful Queen." His eyes backed up

his words and I think that made it worse on my end. “But I am willing to wait until you are no longer carrying another man’s child. You should be willing to wait too.”

“You said that you would love the baby like your own, so what does it matter?”

He flashed me a warning look only he or my father could give me. “We have been over this.” I blew him a raspberry and he pulled me back into his lap. “When will the others be arriving?”

“In the morning. I’m kind of nervous about it.”

“I am sure it will be fine. You have informed our people, correct?”

“Yes, still nervous though.”

Tomorrow was a big day for my land. It was the first day in the history of Kortis that full-blown humans would set foot on its ground. Sure, Daryl had been here before, as had Malcolm, but I didn’t count them since they were only partly human what with them being werewolves and all. But they also hadn’t really been invited before. I had simply needed them and brought them here to help me. They had stayed wolves on my orders so no one would notice that they weren’t from our land. This was a social visit, and all of my kind knew they were coming. Though, I would have to keep an eye on them in case they encountered any other species that might see them as a threat to our world’s existence. I was also nervous with how my kind would react to them despite the fact that they knew of their arrival. You never know what to expect when you decide to do something that has never been done. So many things could go wrong that I didn’t even know where to begin to worry.

I had talked to Kyle through the rose, that was our direct phone line, and I knew he and Kate were most excited to experience my home firsthand. I had told them many times that they would never be able to, and Kate had been jealous that her brother had gotten the opportunity when she hadn’t. My alliance with King Vengal was fresh, so I didn’t know if he would allow me to bring humans through his portal, and I didn’t want to ask in case I pissed off my new ally. I knew I needed his permission to send the wolves that way but that had been pushing it. And I vividly remembered how angry he’d been when he had spotted them at first. So, I would be testing everyone’s breath holding capabilities through a water portal that was my kind’s usual way of travel.

“Has King Wylen contacted you?” he asked and my frown reemerged.

“No. You think he’s mad at me?”

“No, I think he is waiting for you to contact him.”

“He never waits for me. He always sends messages just to check on me when he hasn’t heard from me in a while.”

I hadn’t heard from Wylen since I had taken the crown, but I assumed that he knew I had. Word spread fast and far in this land, making it to people who had no connection to the normal routes of communication. He was probably letting me settle into my new title, and I hoped that my upcoming wedding to my Zolera warrior hadn’t somehow made him think that I didn’t want his love as well. I still hadn’t broken that part of the mate bond so that we could love each other again as I had with Kafkus. But, on that topic, I hadn’t heard from James either on whether or not he was willing to accept that I loved Kafkus again. Apparently it took a lot of thought on his part. That made me nervous since it left me feeling like he was going to release me and I was going to have to

deal with the asshole again. Even if he did decide to stick around as the third wheel (fourth once I did the same to Wylen) I didn't know how long his niceness would last. I was never going to be able to fully trust him. I knew that. And I was prepared for when that day came that his true colors reemerged.

Daryl had informed me the day before that he and Malcolm were just about done with deciphering the talisman ritual, and assured me that I wasn't going to have to kill anyone to accomplish it. Once complete, that object would be able to keep James away if he did decide to go all dickhead on me again. I was happy for the prospect of a backup since James could come to this world if he decided to. My blood had given him that access and I wasn't happy about that fact. He popped into my life so randomly, and I was still not used to it. Though I did often feel like I needed to keep an eye over my shoulder at any given moment whenever I spoke of something I didn't want him to know. He often poofed into my life at the worst possible times.

"You miss it, do you not?"

"Miss what?"

"The human world. You just bathe all day here."

"Not *all* day."

He eyed me. "And how long have you been in here so far?"

I glared at him, realizing that I had been in far longer than I normally bathed. "About three hours. I would gladly join you in training the others, but you won't let me."

His fingertips spiraled around my ginormous belly before his hand planted down on it. "Once you are no longer with child, I would be fine with that."

"I am the ruler here, yet you still don't let me decide how I spend my days. As I have told you before, the blades in this land won't kill me and any wounds would heal right up."

"You would still exert more energy than I think you should this far along. You need rest. I am not trying to control your life, Quartessa. And I know that you are the ruler here. But you have been through so much already. I would blame myself if something happened to you, or him. I merely think you should avoid stress and strenuous activity until he is born. After that, I would love another chance to see if I have advanced enough to finally take you with a sword."

I smiled at the thought, but frowned when his prior words echoed in my head. Though I understood his point, I didn't want to. "I hate just sitting around, doing nothing. You know me."

He gave me a firm nod. "I do know you, very well in fact. And that is why I did not think you would accept the throne. Your mood since you have does not disprove my theory."

I sighed. "I just expected more...just more. Did my father just sit around all day doing nothing?"

"Your father spent most of his days writing the history of our world. He experienced so much in his centuries of life and firmly believed that it needed to be recorded for future generations."

"I guess that makes sense, but I'm not in a writing mood. Though I did promise the royal duo that I would write my other victories for them, and I'm sure Kate will want copies to try to sell as well."

"The royal duo?"

“Lessia and Rouger, King Vengal’s kids. They think I’m like a superhero or something.”

“And you do not see yourself as one?”

“Right now I feel like a bloated waste of space.”

“You are nothing of the sort. You are a beautiful woman, Quartessa. You are a warrior. You are our kind’s hope for peace. And you are a soon to be mother.”

“Your sweet, but there’s plenty of bad to go with the good.”

“Yes, but the good outweighs the bad by staggering odds. I know the sacrifice you made when deciding to take the throne. And I know the real reason you did that.”

“And what’s the real reason?”

“Because it was your father’s dying wish for you to do so. I know that it is not what you wanted to do.”

The damn smart man did know me well. “Honestly, there was no real way around it. Apparently I proved that I deserved the title to our kind, but so much has happened in this life to make me not want it. I’m sure my other lives have something to do with that as well, though I don’t remember them. It seems so long since I was a Queen here.”

“It has been a very long time since then, my love.”

“My real plan was to take it, get things squared around and then find some way to slip my brother into the slot. That’s why I put him in charge whenever I want to go to the human world.”

“Whatever move you decide, you have my full support. But I think you should stay the ruler here. You have a certain way with our kind unmatched by any other. I do not know any other ruler who could enact such change even before taking the crown and have their subjects agree.”

“Says the man who didn’t want me to take the throne. You just think I should stay so that you can.”

“I would be happy to stay,” he said with a shrug. “But, if you decided that the throne was not right for you after giving it a fair chance, then I would not mind returning to the human world. It has grown on me a bit.”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I do. I only wish to be with you, whatever it is that you choose to do, or wherever you decide your place is. If we remain in Kortis I will be happy, and if we return to the human world I will be happy still. It is you that I follow because, no matter where I am, as long as I have you, my life has meaning.”

“I just wish that I hadn’t had two lives between this and my real one. I think that’s why I have such an issue with things here. You know, conflicting ideals between lives. That’s what screwed me up. I know it. Why can’t I just be me? Without all this other crap which I can’t remember but which has obviously affected me somehow?”

He pulled me closer to him, his lips brushing my cheek. “You are not screwed up. If that were true, I would not be the happiest man in our kingdom because soon I get to call you my wife.” His kind words made me smile.

“I think I am the luckier one in this scenario.” My palms went to his cheeks and I pulled him to my mouth before he could argue. He would have, and I knew it.

“Do you know what you have done to me?!” a voice yelled and I sighed into our kiss before

cutting it short.

James was standing just in front of the tub, looking like he was going to murder someone. It might have scared me, but I knew that he wasn't going to do shit. Though, I did wonder if he was going back to the James I wished I could forget by his tone and actions.

"What exactly have I done to you?" I asked once I had pulled away from Kafkus, my tone lacking much care in what James had to say. His eyes focused on mine and it was obvious that he was beyond pissed.

"You have made me a laughing stock!" His words told me nothing. I hadn't even seen the guy since I had broken part of our bond to allow me to have feelings for my man again.

"Care to elaborate?"

"You think that you can just make up your own rituals and think there will be no consequences or adverse effects?!" I mulled over his words but didn't catch his meaning.

"What are you talking about? I still feel the same, mostly anyway." The darkness had been pushed further back inside of me, but it was still there. I could feel that I still belonged to James as well though I still loved the man whose lap I was sitting on.

"You did not bend our bond so that you could love him," James growled.

"I didn't? But I do love him. What's the catch then?"

"No, you bent our bond to *include* him!"

"What?!" I shrieked, unable to hold it back at the unexpected bomb James had dropped on me. "Are you telling me that he's mated to you too now?"

"In a way. That's why I am now a joke to my family."

"Why didn't you say something about it before? We talked right after it happened."

"I did not know the spell you used would have this result or I would have stopped you beforehand. You did this! You fix it!"

"Uh..." I glanced over at Kafkus who had a rather disgusted look on his face at the prospect of being mated to James. "I'm not sure how I am supposed to do that. You could just...un-mate him I guess."

"It doesn't work like that. Since you brought him in the only way I can do that is to un-mate you as well."

My heart leapt with the possibility. "Do that then."

He shook his head. "We already discussed that. It's not happening."

"Then I don't know what you want me to do about it. I obviously didn't know what I was doing enough to predict this."

"Then try thinking before using magic that you know nothing about!" He started pacing back and forth rather fast, his hand on his chin as if struggling with one hell of an inner debate. "I only have a week to do it. Today is my last chance." He was talking more to himself as Kafkus and I watched him wander the room and exchanged disturbed glances. I doubted Kafkus wanted to be mated to this man, even less than I did.

"Your last chance for what?" asked Kafkus and James sneered at the man.

"If I have not accepted you within a week of you entering her and my bond, the bond is void." He continued pacing but my mind expanded on his words as there was a new hope that there

was another way out of the bond. Aside from killing him or cutting the heart from someone I loved.

I stood up, despite the fact that I was naked. He had seen me naked plenty. “So, if you just run out the clock then our bond will be broken?”

“Yes, but I will not let that happen.” His eyes fell to my very round belly and they filled with purpose.

“What are you goi—”

Before I could finish my words, James was in the pool, on top of Kafkus, his hands gripped firmly around his neck. I tugged on the darkness—since it was the only thing that stood a chance against James—and he went flying against the wall on the opposite side of the room. With my mind, I held him there as I got out of the water and marched up to him. Fury like no other was raging through me at his attempted attack on my man.

“You think I will just stand by and let you kill my soon-to-be husband?!”

He sneered at me. “I was not going to kill him. I was merely doing what needs to be done.”

“I don’t care what you were trying to do. Get the fuck out of my world!”

His scowl transitioned into a disturbing grin. “You forget, mate. Your power comes from me.”

Without touching me, he knocked me to the ground and I slid far away from him on the cold tile. I tried to get up, but I couldn’t, as if he had glued me to the floor. Kafkus was out of the water now, a dagger in his hand as he stood in a “come and get it” pose before the demon. I knew that he was no match for James, and that fact scared me to no end as I struggled to get to my feet through the invisible bindings keeping me down. I knew that I should have brought one of those damn ceremonial daggers here just in case. They were the only blades which could actually stand a chance against James or might even be able to kill him. I knew they could kill me at least.

James waived his hand and the knife in Kafkus’ grip went flying. Kafkus started moving towards James, but his stance and movements told me that James was moving him and not that he was approaching him of his own accord. Kafkus stopped just in front of his face, seemingly frozen, and James turned back to me with a sneer.

“This is your fault, Quartessa,” he said and did something I had not been expecting. Where I thought he was going to kill Kafkus, he kissed him. I mean *really* kissed him. His hands were on Kafkus’ face and his mouth was obviously open on Kafkus’ mouth.

It was exactly what I thought two straight men who hated each other would look like in such an intimate act. Each was a face of true disgust, close to the point of looking like either might throw up at any moment. The sight might have made me laugh under different circumstances, but the look in Kafkus’ wide eyes told me exactly what James was doing and the scene lost all sense of humor. His face may have been one of detest, but his eyes looked as though he were drowning. I knew he was shoving that darkness down his throat, as he had done to me, and I felt my own tug on me, telling me to rip James’ head off. I wanted to stop it, wanted to stab James and make it all stop, but I couldn’t move an inch, nor did I have an effective weapon to use on him.

When James pulled away, Kafkus’ face had changed to flummoxed, as if he couldn’t believe what had just happened. The darkness within me came back to the surface as if James had given me

a second dose, but I knew what had happened. Bringing Kafkus into our bond had somehow given me a vacation from its all too powerful presence, but only until James had accepted Kafkus into that bond. I fought hard to push it back, but my week off from trying made it harder than it should have been. The fact that I was pissed at James wasn't helping that fact either. I wanted to strangle him with his own intestines.

There was no longer a force holding me down but I still didn't move. My guilty conscience had taken me over. I should have been able to stop James. Kafkus was now as screwed as I was and for the first time I was glad that I hadn't brought Wylen into this. Though, I was now saddened by the fact that, until the bond was broken, I was not going to be able to really love him...again. What I had done to Kafkus had given me hope that I could have the same with Wylen. But now...I was just depressed again, and my hope that I would ever be able to love Wylen again was gone.

James approached me, but I just sat there as he squatted on his heels in front of me. "This should prove that I do love you."

My eyes darted to his, his words just dissolving my regret and pissing me off. "No, this proves that you will do anything to keep me against my will. Is the nice guy gone for good? Because I don't want to see you anymore unless you can be decent."

He smiled and it was a mixture of caring and not. "This *is* the nice guy."

"Bullshit."

"I could have killed him and it would have accomplished the same goal. So yes, I did what I had to otherwise. You will always be mine."

Before I could wrap my head around that, he vanished, leaving Kafkus and myself alone, but in a much different place we had been in only a few minutes prior.

"We are going to have to kill him," I said and my words held much conviction but not much contemplation.

"What did he do?"

"He made you like me." I couldn't bring myself to look at Kafkus so my chin dropped to the floor. Kafkus had changed so much just because of his close proximity to me. He had been nearly killed, multiple times, turned into a werewolf, and now...he was part demon. "I am so sorry, Kafkus. Had I known this was what I was doing, I wouldn't have done it."

He approached me, though I could only see his feet, but he sunk down to the floor to pull me into his arms. "I would rather this than what we had before. At least I can touch you without it feeling as if I do not know you."

"I have screwed up your life...so much."

"I do not feel different. Your worries are unfounded."

I shook my head. "You don't feel the darkness?"

He pulled my face to look at him, though my eyes still didn't make contact. "I do feel it, but it hasn't changed me, nor has it changed you. I was willing to sacrifice myself for you. Surely you can see that this is better." My eyes finally found his and I saw what I had avoided. His eyes were hollow, not completely but enough to sink my stomach more.

"We should go to the human world tonight. I want to get ahold of Stephan."

"The demon you would not seek help from before because it would cost you more than you

would gain?”

“It was one thing to trick me into this. It is quite another to drag you along and try to take all the good I know you possess. I’m going to kill him, and Stephan knows how.”

“Do you think that wise? Surely his father would seek retribution.”

“At this point, I don’t care. Lucifer can’t come to this world so I am safe here. If I did it, I would have to live here in Kortis for the remainder of my days.” The words made me sigh. “Always another sacrifice to make.”

“I am alright. You do not need to do that.”

“You are fine now, but when the darkness takes hold...” I couldn’t finish the thought. I couldn’t bear to think of Kafkus as bad, or what would happen if he lost himself to it like I almost had on far too many occasions already. The thoughts I had when the darkness reigned were too much to remember. They had told me to kill, and not just my enemies.

“When the darkness takes hold you will be there to bring me back.” His hand brushed my wet hair out of my face and he tried to convince me with his eyes as well. They weren’t right so it wasn’t as believable as he tried to make it seem.

While that was possible, it wasn’t completely true. And what if I wasn’t with him at the time...I dared to think what he would do without his own consent. I knew all too well how lost one could get when consumed by it.

“Let’s go.” I got to my feet, which was getting harder these days, and turned back to him.

Kafkus expression hadn’t changed, but his frown was much more prominent. “I think that you should sleep on the decision, not rush home and secure that you will have to live purely in this world with your choice. I only say this because I know it is not what you want, and keeping you happy is my job.”

Sleep was the furthest thing from my mind, but I knew he was right that this was something I should think on. Even though Lucifer couldn’t set foot in my world, he still had the power to summon me to Hell no matter where I was. So I guess my plan wasn’t great, and I was going to have to find another way, but I would not take the heart of someone I loved. That was not an option.

“I need some air. I’m going for a walk.” Kafkus got to his feet and pulled me into a tight hug that gave me only a shred of the comfort it normally did due to the circumstance.

“Then I will join you.”

Since I hadn’t brought more than the one human pregnancy outfit I had been wearing when I had returned to this world, I’d had clothes made for me. The normal Zolera toga-like dress worked well to accommodate my belly, and was comfortable. The dresses were white, as I had specified that I wouldn’t wear gold, but I still wore my silver circlet made of my father’s ashes when I left the castle. That signified who I was to my territory, though they all knew me anyway. Since I was a child, I was known as the Princess. Even in my other form, my kind still recognized me as me. I mostly just wore it because it reminded me of him and gave me strength when I needed it for that fact.

As I pulled on my dress, Kafkus slipped on his own toga which I knew he preferred to jeans, unlike me. But he did seem ok, for the time being at least, so I tried to shake off my concerns until

they were needed. The darkness didn't really attempt a hostile takeover unless I was pissed off. As long as nothing happened to make Kafkus angry, he should be alright. He did run hotter than I did though. That was a *big* concern I couldn't distract myself from no matter what I tried.

As we strode out of the castle, hand in hand, I realized that I had locked myself away for far too long. It was a beautiful evening in Kortis. The sky was a vivid shade of violet as the sun was half gone over the horizon. The air was fresh, smelling of salt from the ocean, but also of the flowers and trees that we passed.

"My Queen," a woman said with a bow as we passed and I gave her a smile.

It was nice to not be thought of as some weird conglomerate of species as I felt I was at times, and called so by others with my newer Aukum attributes. I had been an outcast here, but only in my own head I guess since they always accepted me. I just never lived up to my own expectations, and now I guess I was changing what those expectations were.

When we entered the village, there were a lot more royal pleasantries waiting for me since many were out enjoying the evening. It was a little overwhelming. As a Princess, I didn't get *nearly* this much attention. I attempted to take it in stride as I smiled to each one who called out to me in a respectful voice and gave a lot of nods. It was nice when we reached a lesser dense area of people, probably because of where we were entering.

The half-breeds were part of my kingdom now, but I was nervous to see how they were blending in. They had lived for who knows how long deep in those woods for fear of being killed because of what they were. I noticed that the homes we had built for them looked deserted from the outside, but there were little faces staring out of the windows as Kafkus and I approached. This fact concerned me since it seemed like they had been exiled or had shut themselves away.

"I told you this would be a hard change," said Kafkus, voicing what I already thought.

"Maybe I should throw a party or something where they can all mingle. They just need to start a dialogue with the locals. It will be fine in time...I hope."

Kafkus shrugged. "This was your decision, so whatever you feel is best."

"Well, *thanks* for the advice."

"This circumstance has never been approached before. I do not know what to do to blend them into our kind. Therefore, I have no advice to give you."

While I understood, I had hoped he would be able to help me somewhat. "Didn't my father have an advisor or something?"

"Yes, though I doubt he would have any better advice than your own. I told him that his services were no longer needed since the way you were taking things was beyond the realm of his expertise."

I didn't voice my annoyance that I had no one to seek advice from as I approached Gretyme's home—which was first in the half-breed section—and knocked lightly on his door. When the door opened, I was face to face with another half-breed. She was familiar with her flaming hair, Zolera skin tone, and leaf-like veins that wound up her body. Though I didn't know her by name, I recognized her as the one who had healed Daryl and Malcolm after the other half-breeds had skewered them at our first encounter.

When she caught my eye she smiled. "Greetings, my Queen."

“Uh...I may have the wrong home. I was looking for Gretyme.”

“No, you have the right home. I am his wife, Scallia. Did you wish to speak with my husband?”

“Yes, please. If I may ask, how are you all doing here?”

She gave me a half-smile. “I know your heart was in the right place when you invited us here, Quartessa, but I do not know if we will ever fit in. We have been outcasts for so long.” She shook her head. “I will go get him for you, please, come in.”

Kafkus and I stepped over the threshold and Scallia gestured us over to the singular sofa that was common in non-royal homes. She asked us politely if she could get us anything. We both shook our heads before she disappeared behind a door on the opposite side of the room. Her words had bothered me and, while Kafkus remained silent, my own thoughts were heavy.

I knew their integration into my land would be difficult and take time, but it had only been a week and Scallia seemed like she had already given up hope that their kind would ever fit in here. I had to do something to right that fact. I had promised to help them all, but it felt like I had somehow failed them.

If things wouldn't work out here, maybe I could buy an apartment complex in the human world for them to live in. I had money now, and I wanted to use it for good. Perhaps Violet could help me change them all so that they could pass for human. I could take care of them there, help them fit in with society. I wasn't sure they would go for that, but it was better than just letting them hide in their homes.

When the door opened again, Gretyme was standing there. He was smiling at least, though I thought that was more of a cover from what his eyes told me.

Gretyme was half-Makne, half-Yaro. Since one species was very tall and the other was very short, he was roughly my height, maybe just a little taller. He looked mostly Makne, but his hair was a blazing fire like his wife's.

“Ah, my new Queen. To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit?”

“I wanted to talk to you about how things are going for your kind here.” I scooted over a bit to allow him room to sit but he dismissed me with a gesture.

“Let us take a walk.”

Both Kafkus and I hopped to our feet and followed him outside. He led the way through the homes of his fellow half-breeds and it was an eerie scene. Both our guide and the grounds were oddly quiet. Not a single soul was outside enjoying the land I had given them. My eyes kept hoping to find someone out for an evening stroll, but the only half-breed in view was Gretyme.

“Why do you all stay inside?” I asked as my eyes surveyed that desolate scene. It should have been as full of life as the area the Zolera inhabited had been tonight.

“You may welcome us here, but the rest of your kind does not. Though there have been a few Zolera nice enough to pay our homes a visit. Your friend Violet has been very polite and hospitable, but she is not the norm around here.”

I smiled at the thought of Violet being friendly to them but it turned into a frown that not many more were doing the same. “Are they being mean to you all? I can do something about that.”

He shook his head. “They accept us here by your word since you are their ruler, but you

cannot force them to see us as equals, nor to want to spend time with us.”

“But why hide in your homes? This land is yours to enjoy.”

“We have lived alone and forgotten for so many years, it is just as hard on us to see ourselves as equals as well. We are not worthy.”

I grabbed his hand to stop him and spun him around to face me. “You *are* equal. No kind is better than another, so why should blends between them be that way?”

He shook his head and resumed his pace until my hand fell off of him. “You are so young and full of unrealistic dreams, Quartessa.”

My feet just couldn’t start again after his words had left me annoyed, but not at him. Equality was unrealistic?

Kafkus placed his hand on my back. “I told you, my love, this would not be easy, from either side it would seem.”

“Gretyme, what would make you see different?” I called after him some three houses away by now as I forced myself to catch up to him.

He stopped dead, his eyes falling upon something I couldn’t see, probably because what he was looking at was internal. “I see nothing that would cause the change needed to allow what you want to be true. You cannot control the mindset of others. You cannot make them think something new when it has been a certain way since long before you were born. Even before your life as Celia, Quartessa, this has been the ways of our world.”

“That’s why I’m changing it to begin with. It shouldn’t be this way.”

“Then it will take time, and we will try. But I cannot promise that your Zolera and us will ever be more than beings who occupy the same land. Your intensions were good, my Queen, but I see no end to this segregation.”

His feet started moving again, but mine failed me more than before. King Vengal had told me that I needed to do this right if I was going to do it at all. What was the right way in this scenario? Was there some potion that would make my kind blind to other’s differences? If that were the case I could end the racism going on in the human world as well as what was going on here. That’s what this felt like to me, racism.

“Kafkus, you really have no advice here? I could really use some about now.”

He grabbed my hand but my eyes were stuck on Gretyme as the distance between us grew more and more. “I think the only way to know how this is going to turn out is to give it time. You have done all you can. It is up to both sides to decide where to go from here.”

The darkness tugged at me, wanting me to just destroy both sides and end it all, but I didn’t listen to it. That wasn’t the peace I wanted to bring to this world. It did, however, remind me of the other problem we had taken this walk to clear my mind from.

“I want to go to the human world for tonight,” I said and Kafkus squeezed my hand before letting it go completely. “We can come back in the morning with the rest.”

“You are not going to contact Stephan, are you?”

“Not until the morning at least. You were right. I need to think on it some more if I don’t want Lucifer dragging me back to Hell and doing who knows what to me. I want to talk to Daryl to see if I can ward him off. I’m doubtful, but who knows?”

“That is better reasoning than what you were thinking of doing before. And I think a trip to our human home might lift your spirits a bit.”

I smiled at his words, though it was more that he had called it “our” home that had done it. “I love you,” I said and kissed him softly on his lips, lingering as long as my mind let me.

“And I love you, my beautiful Queen. Come.” He held out his hand and I took it, and together we made our way back to the castle. Not that we had to pack, but we would need to inform my brother that he was in charge for the night should anything happen while we were gone. Since the week had been very quiet, I wasn’t really worried...except for Gretyme and his kind. But that wasn’t an emergent need and may rectify itself if given enough time. How I hated playing the “wait and see” game. I wanted results.

Gader was in his room which was the first place I looked. That’s never the case but I was not at all displeased with it since everything in my life seemed to be a long list of last case scenarios. He was sitting on the padded seat in front of the window, a piece of paper in his hand as he scribbled on it. When he saw me, he smiled but his eyes went back to the paper before he opened his mouth.

“Did you need something, sister?”

“Kafkus and I are leaving for the evening.”

“The castle or our world?”

I moved closer, taking the seat next to him. “Our world. I need to talk to Daryl about demon stuff which now involves Kafkus.”

His eyes found mine again. One of his eyebrows rose, quickly followed by the other. “You have reunited, is the demon not happy with that fact?”

“Not in the least, but it’s worse than that.” My eyes darted to Kafkus who had remained in the doorway. His face was straight but his eyes told another story altogether. “You know that darkness I have inside of me?”

“Of course. I have had to assist you a couple times in returning you to yourself from it.”

“Well...Kafkus has it too now.”

Gader’s eyes shot open as they darted to his best friend as if asking him without words if what I was saying were true.

“I feel no different,” Kafkus said with a shrug and my brother’s eyes fell back on me.

“I would ask if there were a way to remove it, but as you explained before, it is not a rout you would take.”

I shook my head. “But there is another possibility that may get rid of it, from both of us, that is if I can find a way to keep from being hunted by the devil himself if I can manage it. That’s why I need Daryl.”

“You are forever doing things that are liable to get you killed, sister. But I understand that you would go to any lengths to help those you love.”

“I would.”

He gave a small glance back at Kafkus then leaned into me as not to let him overhear. “You promise me that if he begins to lose himself that you will try your hardest to bring him back.”

I stared at my brother, though it was a little hard with how close he was to me. “Was that

even a question? Of course I will. I didn't go through all that I have to be with him, just to let him go nuts and destroy the world, or himself."

Gader's voice dropped to a level only I could hear, and his words explained why. "He may best you in brawn, sister, but you are stronger than him. If he has the bouts that you have had...I doubt he will come back as easily."

"Some took a lot of time and effort to bring me back, it was not easy."

"I just mean that it will be harder for him. Know that."

I nodded and he pulled back, my eyes catching side of the front side of his paper. Whereas I had thought he had been writing, he had been drawing. My brother was a very talented artist. It was a face, one I recognized but one I didn't especially care for. The fact that she was dead and gone had done little for my distaste of the woman, but I knew my brother loved Gwinny beyond words.

"You miss her, don't you?" It was a stupid question to ask, but it just kind of slipped out.

"As much as you miss Clifton I would wager, though I do not have others to lessen the strain on my heart. I do not know if there is another woman who would love me the same out there." His eyes went to the window, a void of hope clouding them.

I hadn't seen Gader this sad in my entire life. I wanted to help but I didn't know what to do for him. He probably felt more alone than I did with his wife gone, our parents gone, and his closest friend spending more time with our guard and me than him. I had been selfish, feeling sorry for myself for all I had gone through and continued to face. He needed to be a priority. He was the only remaining flesh and blood I had left in this world. I would make time for him once I figured out and enacted my plan to deal with James. Until then, he just needed a little reassurance.

"Brother, your heart will heal," I encouraged with my hand on his knee. "And you will find a special woman who will love you for you. I can feel it." He said nothing but nodded as shallow as he could with me still understanding the gesture as a nod. "Are you going to be ok with us leaving?" A tear fell from one of his eyes, landing on his cheek before working its way down to land on the back of my hand.

"I will be fine. It hurts from time to time but I am living in the present, not the past." I opened my mouth but found no words to speak and he removed my hand from his leg. "Go, I can handle the crown for one night."

I nodded but frowned. "Try to get some sleep."

He made an attempt at a smile which I appreciated. "You too."

When I reached the doorway, Kafkus took my hand and together we headed back outside. My heart fluttered as we entered the ocean, heading for that glowing green whirlpool that would take us to where it felt like I hadn't been in so long. I was going home.