Chapter 1

The sun was meant to be immortal, but its light had been swallowed by the mouth of the beast.

The entrance to the Head Priestess' office was an unwelcomed sight and spoke only of trouble. This was not the first time I'd been summoned to the abyss she called her office, and I was certain it wouldn't be the last. My only regret was that I'd dragged my best friend Dealla into the mess this time.

Anxious energy rattled through her like a kettle preparing to screech, and her skin, typically a warm shade of umber, had turned a sallow grey and remained that way since we'd been caught sneaking off temple grounds.

I'd been desperate for an escape from the chaos of Midsummer preparations, and Dealla had refused to let me go alone. Together, we'd

made an unsanctioned retreat to the local village, and we would have made it back unnoticed if not for the snitch Imogen.

The Head Priestess' most devout acolyte had caught us creeping through a side door after hours and had immediately reported us, leading to our current situation.

Rather than getting ourselves ready for the festivities like the rest of the girls, Dealla and I had been subjected to flower crown construction duty. Our fingers and our backs ached after spending the afternoon twining evening primrose and bog rosemary into the traditional headwear. We'd made dozens upon dozens of crowns, and the Head Priestess was expecting a prompt delivery.

Dragging out these last few minutes was only aiding in our tardiness and likely increasing her ire. Seeing no other option, I raised my fist, and my knuckles rapped against the wood.

When no answer came after several seconds, I debated dropping our crown-filled baskets and making a run for it, but the thought was dashed as the door swung open to reveal a young attendant.

The girl couldn't have been any older than thirteen, but she was hunched over like a woman four times her age. I felt a pang of sympathy, but there was nothing I could do as she scampered away.

The door clanged shut behind us, and I released a forlorn sigh before stepping further into the space.

My feet clattered against the stone floor, and a shiver skittered down my spine as I scanned the shadows. A peculiar darkness clung to the corners of the room like it was waiting to consume us the moment our backs were turned, and a lamp on the large oak desk in front of us appeared to be the only thing keeping it at bay.

The sudden clack of boots drew my attention to an obscured alcove in the back left corner of the room, and I watched as Head Priestess Yuna emerged, floating to her desk with a brutal precision.

With her wraith-like frame and eyes the shade of crow feathers, Yuna oozed constant displeasure. Add her ruby ceremonial garbs and the oak circlet atop her head, and she was the perfect mimicry of a disturbed goddess.

I cursed the naivety of my younger self. She'd foolishly thought this woman would be a source of comfort following the Holly King's massacre, but she'd been wrong, so incredibly wrong. There was nothing warm about her.

Yuna settled herself on the chair behind the desk and tersely beckoned us forward, and Dealla and I had no choice but to obey.

We placed our baskets on the desk before her, and I observed the sickly-sweet performance she put on as her wrinkled knuckles brushed against the dainty flowers. Her touch was feather-light, but the blossoms seemed to wilt under her ministrations.

"I hope this activity has served as an adequate reminder of how we ought to behave," Yuna tittered, her steel-like gaze snapping to mine. "I do not want to see any more charades tonight, especially not from someone of your status, *Cerridwen*."

I had to bite back a snarl.

Yuna knew what she was implying and what she was doing by invoking my birth name. It was her way of reminding me what part I was being forced to play and who I was playing it for.

Three years had passed since I'd last seen his wretched face, but that wasn't nearly long enough. I wanted nothing to do with the man.

He was the twin brother of my family's murderer, the leader of the eastern territory of Antron. He was the Oak King, but he was also my husband-to-be.

"I can assure you the lesson has been learned," I gritted out, not attempting to veil my disgust.

I knew I shouldn't rise to her bait, but we'd been playing this game for weeks. She was the fox, and I was the rabbit who was sick and tired of being stuck in her burrow all day– forget the consequences.

"I'd be mindful of the tone you take with me. I am a handmaiden of the Goddess Morrigan, and I will still have authority over you even after you take your place at the king's side."

A poorly concealed chuckle loosened from my chest.

She was delusional. I could count on one hand the number of times the Oak King had visited this temple. Once he called me to the palace, I doubted that I'd ever see Yuna again.

"I am warning you one last time, Cerridwen. One foot out of line and all privileges will be revoked, including contact with Dealla."

Any humor I'd found in the moments prior vanished.

I'd been stripped of my worldly freedoms at the temple. I'd been bruised and battered, and I'd borne the brunt of their jeers, but the thought of losing Dealla was unimaginable.

She was my sister in everything but blood. She was my other half, and the one person who had kept me afloat in my grief. We'd fought for each other, and no one– not a king or Head Priestess–was going to keep me from her.

An animalistic growl tore from me. “Threatening my friendship is not the way to gain my compliance.”

My chest heaved, and I could feel the pressure building in my skull as onyx clashed with amber.

“Leave us,” Yuna commanded Dealla, her stare momentarily snapping away from mine, but my best friend ignored her, turning to me instead. Her hazel eyes were filled with worry, and I knew that if I asked, she would stay, but I couldn’t let her. This was my burden to bear.

I tried to draw as much strength as I could from her parting squeeze, but the comfort ultimately drifted away as the creaking door opened and fell shut once again.

“Good. Now that she’s gone and you’re done having your fit, I think it’s time we had a little chat. Sit.” Yuna gestured to the seat directly across from her, but I remained stationary.

“I’m done with the etiquette lessons. Your cronies have poked and prodded at me enough already. I’m not going to sit here and listen to how you think I ought to take a breath between words or how I need to add an extra bounce to my step. If there’s nothing more, I’m going.”

I didn't dare wait for her reaction. I dug the balls of my feet into the floor and pivoted. Only a few strides separated me from the exit. I could do it. I just needed to reach the door and–

A low rumbling laugh bounced off the walls of the chamber.

The voice was undeniably male and was coming from an alcove I hadn't been aware of. The hair on my arms prickled when his figure appeared. He was tall and broad shouldered, but an emerald cloak shielded his face from view.

Visceral unease rushed through me. There was a very short list of men who were allowed on temple grounds, and the appearance of any of them did not bode well for me.

"What is the meaning of this?" I questioned, trying to keep the quiver from my voice.

The air grew thick, and the world moved in slow motion as a tan hand lowered the hood to reveal a handsome face and a wicked grin.

"We're here to talk about our betrothal, my dear."