

CHAPTER 1



SMOKE CHOKED REYA DAWN, thick and acrid, clawing at her throat as she stumbled across the uneven, soot-dusted floorboards to slam the window shut. Her hand trembled on the wooden frame, slick with condensation and grime. The icy draft cut through her skin, but it was the scene outside that froze her breath mid-gasp. The air was alive with the bitter tang of burning wood and metal, mingled with the sickly sweet stench of charred flesh.

Once, the view from this window had been a living canvas of vibrant green fields, rippling like silk under golden sunlight. Wildflowers had painted the landscape in dazzling bursts of color, their delicate fragrances carried on soft, playful breezes. Beyond them, the ice mountains had loomed like silent guardians, their pristine peaks glimmering with an ethereal radiance, whether drenched in sunlight or moonlight.

Now, all that beauty was swallowed by desolation. The fields were blackened wastelands, their fertile earth cracked and bleeding tar-like sludge. The floral rainbows had been obliterated, replaced by curling smoke that stung her eyes and turned the world gray. Even the majestic ice mountains bore the scars of destruction, their snow-packed faces smeared with streaks of toxic ash that hung heavy in the air.

No one dared venture far enough to measure the devastation, but rumors whispered that only their castle remained. The goblin horde left nothing untouched. Fields, forests, homes—it all fed their greedy appetite for ruin. These squat, gnarled beasts were relentless, their grotesque faces contorted into mockeries of glee as they burned, tore, and consumed. Their war cries were guttural, a sound that grated on her ears even through the thick stone walls of the castle. And their hunger? Insatiable. Every fae was either bled dry on their blades or roasted alive, the crackle of their flesh blending with the triumphant howls of their executioners. These monsters weren't just at the gates—they were an infestation, and they were almost here.

Reya slammed the shutters closed with a resounding thud, her chest heaving as though the smoke had invaded her lungs. The cold stone wall against her back offered little comfort as her heartbeat thundered in her ears. Precious few of her kin remained, huddled behind these battered walls. This was the last stronghold. They all knew it.

“Reya, your parents wanted you in the courtyard,” Lily, her lady-in-waiting, chided, her voice edged with urgency as she packed bag after bag. The flickering torchlight cast restless shadows across her face, emphasizing the tightness in her expression. She clutched her hands together as if trying to steady herself, but the tremor in her fingers betrayed the fear threading through her heart.

Reya nodded, a careful, measured gesture, though inside, her thoughts churned like a raging storm. She had no intention of simply obeying. Not without speaking to them first. If they expected her to leave without question, they were sorely mistaken.

She inhaled sharply, the breath of earth rising from wet damp stone and melted wax mixed with the crisp night air. Her pulse quickened, a drumbeat urging her forward. She needed to see them. To look into their eyes and read the truth they wouldn’t speak. Was there truly no other way? No escape, no loophole, no mercy?

Time slipped through her fingers like grains of sand, each second stretching impossibly long, yet vanishing too fast. The world seemed to tilt, the echo of expectation pressing against her chest.

She needed to act. Now.

She flung the bedchamber doors open and was instantly engulfed by the chaos of the corridor. Shouts echoed against the high ceilings. Every corner burst alive with movement. The guards barked commands, their voices sharp and urgent, while courtiers and attendants rushed past, their expressions hollow and pale. The flickering torchlight painted everything in a frantic dance of orange and shadow, lending an air of unreality to the scene.

Reya weaved through the crowd, her boots whispering over the cold, smooth flagstones. The air inside was almost as oppressive as the smoke outside—hot, stifling, and heavy with fear. The noise swelled and receded like waves in her ears, blending into a cacophony of despair.

When she pushed open the carved double doors of the throne room, the solemnity of the space hit her like a slap. The marble columns glinted coldly in the flickering light of the chandeliers, and the air was taut with dread. On the dais, her parents stood like statues of sorrow, their faces etched with the burden of countless lives. Reya stepped forward, her heart pounding not only from her frantic sprint but from the dread of what was to come.

“Reya, what are you doing here?” The king’s voice cracked, raw and jagged, shattering the heavy silence of the room. His words reverberated against the cold stone walls like a hammer strike, pulling every set of eyes to her. The gravity of their stares pressed down on Reya like a leaden shroud, suffocating and relentless.

“There has to be another way to defeat the goblins, father.” Her voice came out more fragile than she intended, trembling like a candle’s flicker in a storm. The taste of smoke and fear clung to the back of her throat with unyielding bitterness.

The king’s expression didn’t falter, but there was a shadow behind his eyes—a grim acceptance, carved deep into the lines of his face. He shook his head, the

motion slow and deliberate, like a man bearing the burden of a thousand invisible chains.

Without a word, his answer tilted her world. Pain spiraled outward from her heart as it broke under what had to be done.

Turning to his closest guards, the king's voice hardened, regaining its authority as he issued the order. "Bring the remaining fae into the interior courtyard." The guards nodded briskly and exited with sharp precision, their armored footsteps fading down the hall.

Then his gaze shifted back to Reya, and her heart lurched in her chest. "It's time."

The words struck her like a blow, robbing her of air. Terror coiled around her ribs, a venomous viper sinking its fangs deep into her chest. She stumbled back a step, her legs threatening to buckle beneath the stress of those two simple words. They had spoken of this plan in hushed tones many times before, their voices tinged with the hope that it would remain a distant hypothetical. But now, the hypothetical was an unrelenting reality.

The air in the room grew colder, as if death itself were creeping closer, drawn by the grim ritual about to unfold. Reya's gaze flicked to her parents, her mother standing tall despite the pallor of her cheeks, her lips set in a line of quiet resolve. The light from the chandeliers above seemed dimmer now, their once-proud brilliance dulled, casting eerie shadows that danced across the floor like specters.

It would take all of her parents' blood—every last drop spilled in sacrifice—to open the ancient portal to save the last of the fae. The thought clawed at her mind, leaving behind jagged trails of dread. The portal was a lifeline, yes, but it was also a finality. Once their lives faded, the door would close, sealing off this realm forever. The ancient texts had always said there would be no return, no reversal. A world left behind for ashes.

Reya's vision blurred as tears welled in her eyes. Her pulse pounded so loudly she could barely hear anything else. Her throat ached from the pressure of unshed screams. The thought of her parents—her mother's gentle hands, her father's steady voice—reduced to empty vessels, lifeless and cold, was a horror too great to hold. Yet there was no other way. The goblins were so close now that their guttural snarls and the screech of their blades echoed through the castle walls.

Her chest tightened further, as if the despair of the room was an invisible force crushing the breath from her lungs. Still, she straightened her back and met her father's gaze, desperate to cling to whatever strength she could summon.

Time had run out.