

# One

I was going to die.

It was too soon. I still had too much to do with my life; a Court to establish, discover a way for my people to be more fertile but most of all, I still hadn't convinced Kai Gracen he belonged at my side. I should be sitting safe — barring Sidhe politics — as Ryder, the Lord of the Southern Rise Court.

Instead, I'd allowed myself to be convinced by Kai to go on a run and once again ending up in a situation where I would die far from my family with the possibility of leaving nothing behind of my body except for what a wild animal shat out near his den to ward off other predators.

I think that was the main reason he was trying to kill me. Given enough time, he would give in to the tight desire brewing between us but as in all things, Kai never did anything the easy way. He had to fight with everything, chew through all possibilities and then choose a course of action I never even considered.

Which was why I was clinging to the side of a large, hairy beast while it thundered us both to certain doom over a sheer cliff.

I'm not sure how I get talked into such precarious situations. No, that is a lie. I know exactly how I get talked into these things. I do this to myself. Because I cannot resist the challenge in Kai's dusk-hued violet eyes when he throws down an impossible task at my feet.

There wasn't much time to contemplate why, and how, I was holding onto the shaggy behemoth of a mammal — or at least I thought it was a mammal — instead of working on cementing the Court's relations with the human world surrounding it. The beast itself smelled. Mostly of manure but also of dried grasses and dirt. Its thick wooly hide scratched my fingers and any other bare skin I had pressed against it, including my belly where my shirt rode up nearly to my chest, inching towards my throat with every thundering stride the monster took. There were bound to be biting insects riding the beast along with me and if I survived the experience, I was sure to be taking them home to the Court if I didn't get a chance to disinfect myself.

Why didn't I simply let go?

A few reasons. The first was the creature moved at an alarming speed, carrying us in magnificent leaps over the stretch of plains below the lava fields teeming with dragons. Secondly, those same plains were ripe with razor-sharp grasses and releasing my hold would mean a dangerous tumble through the knife-like surface where I also had a good chance of striking a prickly, shards-of-glass like patch of paho'eho'e lurking in the golden sheaves.

And lastly, but certainly more importantly, if I let go of the bison, I would instantly become a meal for the pride of lions chasing the herd down towards the sea.

I couldn't hear the cats' screams and roars as they chased the herd. Not above the gnash of hooves slamming into the ground and the terrified snorts of the angry beasts. For all I knew, the lions hunted silently, slipping through the grasses in a rush of whispered sounds. These were human creatures, so far removed from my experience I had no knowledge of how they hunted but one thing was certain, their teeth were massive, their claws were deadly and their fur so closely matched the swaying grasses, I couldn't see them chasing us.

But they were there. I knew it. The bison knew it. And it would simply be a matter of time before one of them caught up with the beast I rode and I would be torn apart, leaving nothing for Kai to find once he caught up with me.

## Two

There was a roar. Distant and throaty. I recognized it. Or at least I thought I did. I could have been wrong. For all I knew it was a dragon sweeping down from Pendle to have an easy snack of Sidhe and bison before continuing on with its day of sex and fire. Bracing myself to be engulfed in flames, I tried to tighten my grip on the moving beast, digging for all I was worth. The herd veered, driven into a direction by some unseen threat then I heard the rumble again, a bassline of sound deep enough to rattle the teeth in the back of my head.

The bison heard it as well but they were intent on escaping the more immediate threat, the long-toothed cats chasing them. The grasses tore at my face and arms, and I closed my eyes, screwing them tightly shut before I lost one of them to a quick-slicing sheaf. I'd gotten lost in the drumming thump of the creatures' hooves on the prairie's packed soil then something shifted, changing the sound.

It was harder and the beasts felt like they were moving quicker. The air hitting me churned from a sun-warmed, grass-scented gusts to a cooler, steady brush, its soft kiss carrying a hint of salt with it. A few more strides and I realized I no longer was in danger of dying by a thousand tiny cuts. Risking a peek, I opened my eyes and found the herd surging down a stretch of black asphalt, a curving ribbon hugging the edge of the shoreline's cliffs.

I didn't know the area. Not well enough to know where the road led to or even how far it went. It couldn't have gone too deeply into Pendle or Kai would have taken us up this way to Elfhaim, but perhaps the bison knew their hunters chasing them wouldn't be able to keep up with them on a full, unhindered run.

Falling now wasn't an option. Not on the rough ground beneath me, an ebony river of danger coursing a few feet below my left shoulder. With my right leg hooked over the creature's back, I tightened my hold on its undulating torso, thankful its hindquarters were slimmer than its massive chest and shoulders. The creature probably didn't appreciate my hold on it, bucking as it ran, hoping to dislodge the heavy parasite on its side but I wasn't going to let go.

Or at least not until I was sure I was safe.

My shoulders ached from the strain of holding on and the terror clenching my guts as tightly as I did the bison wasn't letting up at any time. Then the roar was back and I craned my head up, trying to see what I hoped was salvation coming up behind us. Burdened by my weight, the beast carrying me was slowing, unable to keep up its pace with me dragging it down. The rest of the herd thundered ahead of us, surging over the ribbon of road with its panoramic view of the ocean and an impending disastrous plunge into a lava field I didn't think the creatures would be able to navigate.

What I saw lightened the pressure in my chest but at the same time, also drove knives through my belly. A deep purple car named after a bursting star roared up over a small hillock on the road chasing not only the herd but closing the distance on the small pride of lions hot on our heels.

The machine broke through the pride, sending the lions into an ungainly scatter but they'd gone too long, hunted too hard to give up their prey. My sturdy steed faltered, its legs knotted up or its hooves catching on something in the uneven road because its run broke, its body dipping dangerously to the side then upright again as it gained its footing. The car was catching up quickly, its engine screaming, much like a blessed lizard taking the night sky in full wing.

The mid-morning sun was to the right of the herd, blinding me when I looked up towards the mountain but the steel-grey sky grabbed at the car's bright paint, turning it a silvery mauve against the black road. It lurched forward, its engine straining to catch up then the herd shifted again, driven to the right of the asphalt. The machine drew up next to the bison I was riding and through its open passenger window, I

caught sight of the fierce concentration on Kai's face as he maneuvered the car around the weaving animal I clung desperately to.

"What the fuck are you doing, lordling?" He yelled at me, his face half turned towards me but his eyes were firm on the road ahead. "Get off that damned thing and get into the car! You're going to get yourself killed!"

## Three

He was beautiful and deadly, so much like the dragons our kind revered. Perched precariously on a runaway bison probably wasn't the best time to be awestruck by Kai Gracen but there was little I could do about my reactions to him. Even as angry as I was and how much I would love throttle him to death at that moment, I knew I never could.

Not just because I wouldn't be able to bring myself to do it but also because Kai could easily skin me alive and debone my flesh with one of the many knives he had hidden about his body before I could launch an attack.

Much like the dragons, Kai was not one to poke at.

"How?" I shouted through rattling teeth. I was stupid enough to try to get a look at where the bison was taking me and nearly lost hold. The creature was moving too quickly and from what I could see, there appeared to be a very large chasm in my immediate future.

"Put your damn legs through the open window and slide in!" Kai barely gave me a glance, fighting to keep the purple car on the road. The asphalt was beginning to break up more and the vehicle rattled and shook, a jittering target Kai wanted me to jump into. "Hurry up! We're running out of road!"

I'd always thought myself fairly in shape. I trained every day with Alexa and spent a good portion of my puberty learning about military strategies and combat skills but what Kai proposed was insane. My back was to the car and even if I was able to maneuver my legs around or under me, I was going to have to swing in and hope my core strength was good enough to hold my weight.

I wasn't cut out for these kinds of things. I was a diplomat. A leader of my people. Not some hardscrabble monster bounty hunter with less sense than an ostrich — I knew what one of those was — and a death wish. Because if anyone ever had a death wish, it was definitely Kai and he seemed bound and determined to drag me along for the ride.

"Do it!" he shouted at me. "Or I'm going to be picking up pieces of you from here to the end of Pendle."

The bison was definitely flagging and the lions were becoming larger, their powerful bodies seemingly filled with endless energy when I specifically recall Kai telling me they were sprinters mostly, not long-distance runners. I wish someone had told the lions that because by now, they should have fallen off their prey so I could of let go.

I did let go. Or at least unhooked my legs from the beast's torso. Scrabbling for a very tight hold on its thick pelt, I lifted my aching limbs up, bringing my knees as close to my chest as I could then took a leap of faith and punched them back out as Kai brought the car as close to the animal as he could. I felt his hand grab the waistband of my jeans, yanking me towards him and the hard scrape of the rubber gasket along the window frame tore at my skin but I couldn't seem to get my fingers to work and they cramped, refusing to let go of the bison. I'd been holding on too long, too hard and now they were locked into place, my knuckles torn raw by the roughness of its hairy shoulders.

Kai yanked hard, pulling me towards him and I was once again reminded how much stronger he was than me. He'd spent his life hunting and hauling back enormous predators, mostly the ainmhi dubh who preyed on the edges of civilization, arcane creatures more vicious and capricious than the lions running us down. Another vicious pull on my waistband and my fingers gave in to the pressure, pulling free of the bison's pelt. I ached too much to do more than fold down into the seat and a second later, the car was spinning, driven into an about-face maneuver Kai could probably do with his eyes closed.

The car fought the road, bucking much like the monster I rode moments before as its tires sought some kind of purchase across the broken asphalt. The herd veered, tearing right and back up across the prairie,

furry minnows leaping through a golden sea of waving grasses. Panting heavily, I watched them disappear into a dip, losing sight of the creature I'd clung to for so long. The lions gave chase but they were finally worn out, plunging into the grasses with little hope of catching up.

Next to me, Kai straightened the car and hurtled us back down the road we'd traveled on, taking us towards the city. He didn't so much as look at me but I could feel his repressed anger rolling off of him like sheets of heat. Or, much like a dragon bathing its victims in fire.

"Kai —" I began but he shook his head, gritting his teeth with an expression I knew all too well. He was frustrated and about to blow.

"I don't know what fucking possessed you to jump off of that cliff and onto the bison," he grumbled at me, that rich throaty purr of his weaving in and out of his melodic, old world-tinted Singlish. "I told you to get into the car. What part of that didn't you understand? If the herd hadn't gotten to the road, there was no way in hell I would have been able to rescue you and you'd be elfin nuggets right now for those fucking lions."

I only had one excuse but it was a good one. Clearing my throat, I said very carefully, "You said to get into the Nova. Actually you said to jump into the Nova. And I know that your mastery of Sidhe is sometimes tenuous but let me inform you that the word Nova? It sounds very much like our word for cow."

## Four

We were going back to the scene of the crime or rather the leap. I noticed this time, Kai kept us very far away from the cliffs, choosing instead to bring the car to another clearing, hopefully one safe from thundering herds of massive beasts with horns and shaggy shoulders as well as the sand-colored cats who liked to feed on them. When he first told me he was going on a run, I did everything I could to attach myself to the mission, finally bribing him with the promise of getting the final licensing for his rebuilt Mustang through the bureaucratic red tape holding up its approval to run on the roads.

There was a reason I went with him. Many reasons. Mostly, because he was always so incredibly alone. Most of his life was spent on the run, lurching from one disastrous event to the next, wrestling with his own demons while taking down monsters too fierce for anyone else to tangle with. When I first learned of his existence, there were whispers of his reputation proceeding him, a coldhearted, killing machine who took on contracts no one else would touch. I'd expected to find an Unsidhe archetype, the epitome of one of their dark warriors, someone trained to kill without any emotion but that's not who answered the knock on his door.

He was so damned young, barely an adult but his eyes were wary, feral and fierce. I'd taken him for a disaffected Sidhe, a member of a distant Court who'd left behind his people and culture. I hadn't known what I knew now. I couldn't even imagine the atrocities that had gone into his creation but had I known, I still wouldn't have been prepared for the beautiful elfin man dressed in leather and denim who opened the door for me to enter not only his home but his world.

He was far from what I imagined. I instead found a sarcastic, generous soul wrapped into a powerful, lean body and possessing a wicked, nimble mind. He had skills I couldn't even begin to comprehend and an ability to shift midstream, forcing his will on everything and everyone around him. He'd been raised by a despicable human being, a man who I suspected took Kai in to profit off of him but Kai had an odd deep affection for the old man, one I don't think was returned but neither one of them allowed anyone to get close to them so I didn't know for sure.

Kai and I started off as adversaries but over time that changed. I didn't know how he stood immune to the attraction between us, not just the genetic pull of our compatible souls but also the explosive chemistry brewing every time we were near one another. He was stronger than I was, not just physically but also emotionally, because by now I was driven half mad by the want of him whereas he could simply shrug it off as if I were nothing more than a casual acquaintance.

Sometimes it hurt to look at him because he stole my thoughts and breath. Then there were the times when I wanted to kill him because he took chances, risking his life. But that was something else I discovered about him. The heart that beat in Kai's chest was far from cold. It burned with passion and warmth and possess a sense of justice I marveled at. He was a very good balance for my overly trained diplomacy. I just wish he saw how well he fit into my life and my Court.

"We're looking for pygmy unicorns. Remember that." Kai muttered. "Tiny horses. With a single horn coming out of their forehead. The University is paying us good money to verify their migration into the area. There will be no more jumping on cows, bison, antelope, alligators, or anything else on that carousel you've cooked up in your brain, okay? The only thing you should get into or onto is this car. And please, for Pele's sake, remember that the fucking cats on this world can climb trees. So can bears. And if you have any questions about what an animal can do, just assume it's going to eat your face and get into the fucking car. Got it?"

"Do you just like yelling at people? Or is it a hobby of yours?" I asked, knowing it would get a rise out of him. The bison could have been my mistake. Nova really did sound like cow and I'd primed myself to obey everything Kai told me, mostly out of self-preservation and because I still couldn't quite trust him not

to shoot me if I pissed him off. Since he was still driving, I had high hopes he couldn't reach his gun. "And pygmy unicorns are a myth. I've lived a very long time and have never seen one. What makes you think they're real?"

"I don't care if they're real or not. I just have to spend three days out here looking for them and since you decided to tag along, you're going to be on watch with me." Kai pulled the car under a stand of banyan trees, their canopies stretching out to cover nearly the entire clearing. The air was cool beneath them and we were well within sight of the watering hole a few hundreds of yards away. "This is a part of the job. Sometimes the contracts are to just sit and watch so that's what we do. So now, do me a favor and help me set up camp. You're lucky this is a hatchback because we're sleeping in it. This is the kind of place we can't put up a tent to sleep in. If you did that, you might as well put up a neon sign that says; limited time, all-you-can-eat buffet while supplies last. So get your ass in gear, lordling, and help me put up the monitoring equipment the University gave me. Then, I'm going to go find something for us to eat."

## Five

Dinner was some kind of chicken. Or at least I thought it was a chicken. There were times when it was just best to not look too closely at what Kai offered me to eat. I'd learned from experience he not only had an iron stomach but also a questionable idea of what constituted as food. There were times when I thought he was pulling a prank on me but after knowing him for more than a few months, I realized he literally ate everything and anything offered up as a meal.

Regardless of its dubious origins.

Since making his acquaintance, he's fed me wondrous things like sushi burritos and carne asada fries as well as lau lau and pho bo kho. Unfortunately, Kai has inordinate fondness of less palatable things like rolled flat cuttlefish jerky drenched in sugar and soy sauce, canned peas swimming in mayonnaise, and my personal, all time least favorite thing I have ever been given to eat, a roasted beetle maggot the size of a large carp served with a side of chili oil.

This was offered up to us while standing next to an understreet kiosk, waiting for Cari to finish shopping at a witch supply store. Kai handed over the money to the little old lady manning the wheeled cart, accepting the bulbous white lump with a murmur of pleasure, thanking her profusely when she slathered it with the hot red sauce I soon learned was a close approximation to sipping lava. I took the bite he offered me, eating it off of the fork he'd just had in his open mouth and I could taste him on the bit of flesh he held out, a kiss of cinnamon and cloves on the plastic tines. Then the taste of the gelatinous flesh hit and I ran to find someplace to be sick. By the time I came back, he had finished his meal and was now scouring the kiosks for something sweet.

That was his one weakness. Besides throwing himself at impossible flights. Kai Gracen *loved* chocolate.

So, I made sure to bring some with me on this trip.

I cut my teeth and paid my dues some of the most nerve-racking, mind bending politically fraught arenas and I'd been taught to exploit the weaknesses of both my enemies and friends but this was different. I'd first given him chocolate as a way to build a bridge between us, hoping to take advantage of his somewhat feral nature and have him acquaint me with pleasure of his favorite treat yet knowing him, growing to know him, I now brought some along simply because I knew it made him happy.

I loved to see him happy. I didn't think he got enough of it and if anyone deserved a bit of joy, it was Kai.

Even if he fought tooth and nail every step of the way.

"Do you think the watering hole will be enough of a lure?" I asked, pounding in another stake into the ground with the rubber mallet Kai gave me. Once we had them in place around the car, they would serve as an activated boundary, keeping wildlife away. Or at least that's what I was told in theory. It was always my experience things never seemed to work as they were intended. For all I knew, they were meant to draw the allegedly pygmy unicorns to us so we could document their existence. "It's kind of like trying to capture a cloud, isn't it? We know nothing about their feeding patterns or mating rituals. You're out here chasing shadows."

"Yeah but it's a job and I took it," Kai murmured from his crouch near one of the ice coolers he was using as a table, working the flesh free from the bones of the creature he'd brought back after five minutes of hunting. He worked swiftly, dumping the bones into a pot of water while setting the chunks of meat into a basket made of foil sheets. "Let me finish up with this and I will bury it under the coals of a fire to cook. It'll be done in a couple of hours. Just in time for us to get settled and begin our watch. Watering holes usually get visited at dawn or dusk so we'll want to be in the car by then. We're far enough above the rise

to not bother anything coming down to drink. Anywhere closer and we would spook them. It's why I had us up on the cliffs over there but I can't trust you not to jump off of them again."

I said nothing. Sometimes silence was the best option. His skill with the knife was scary and not for the first time I wondered at the sanity of falling for a man who could slit my throat before I blinked. On the other hand, those skills kept us alive in some of the most precarious situations and despite my pushing every single one of his buttons — a very quaint human phrase — he hadn't stabbed or shot me yet.

Yet.

"What exactly are we eating?" I pounded in the last stake, activating the glyph on its top, bringing the warding circle up around us. It was elfin magic but low-level enough I hoped it wouldn't bother Kai. He had an adverse reaction to the arcane, some of it because it tangled with his chimera nature but mostly because of his repulsion and the memories of how his own father used blood magics to torture him. "It looks like a bird."

"Nope. It's actually lizard. Not sure what kind but it was fat and we have an added bonus of unfertilized eggs." He grinned at me, plopping a handful of yellow orbs he'd pulled from the creature's innards into a skillet. They rolled around, coming to rest near pieces of onion he'd chopped up earlier. "Now, I just need to find where I put the dried sparrow spit."

## Six

The lizard — whatever it had been — was delicious, made even more so by sharing the hatchback space with Kai. It would be a tight fit once the hatch itself was closed but with the backseats down, there was more than enough room for us to sit up and pick the grilled meat from the bamboo skewers Kai used to add a char to the roasted flesh once he'd dug out the foil packet. As primitive of a meal as I'd ever had, it was probably the most tasty. There was something sensual in watching Kai eat. When given the chance, he savored his food, taking oddly delicate bites and chewing carefully. There'd been more than a few times when we had to bolt down something quick for sustenance, driven back to the run we were on, but now we had time to sit and wait.

There was something to be said about jobs set up to watch for mythical creatures.

"I don't think I can eat another bite," Kai murmured, his shoulder brushing up against mine when he reached for a wet napkin to wipe his hands with. "We can have the rest tomorrow. The coolers will fit in the front seat so nothing will be able to get inside of them. First time I was out with Cari, I told her to lock down the coolers in the transport we were using but she forgot. Next morning, I made her pick up every single piece of bone and trash the bears left behind. We spent the next four days eating berries and whatever fish I could find in the river. I think that's why she doesn't like sushi."

The food was sealed up tight before I could offer to help and Kai told me to stay there while he put the coolers up. I agreed mostly to watch him work. I love how he moved, serpentine sleek with grace and a surety of where to put his feet. He caught me watching and shot me a curious look as if wondering what I was up to.

If there was one thing I've discovered about Kai — my chimera — he didn't see himself as someone anyone would want in their lives. So now, I would have to spend the rest of my lifetime proving him wrong.

The sun was chasing down the horizon by the time he settled into the back of the Nova, pulling the hatch down behind him. We would have to figure out a way to sleep diagonally when it came time but knowing him, he planned for someone to be up all through the night, watching the watering hole for his elusive prey. The cameras were set up on the edge of the perimeter and would fire off at any heat signature, capturing wildlife with its sensitive lens, but Kai was at his core, a hunter himself, and he would want to see his prey.

"Thank you for saving me today," I said, ripping away the comfortable silence he'd let grow between us. "You've taught me a lot. For instance, I knew I couldn't let go because the creature's hooves would've shattered my head and well, I definitely would've been a snack for the lions. I'm learning a lot about how to live in this new world of ours. It's a lot more dangerous than I ever imagined. I'm glad you're here with me. Mostly to save me from myself."

"If there's one thing I can count on, it's you landing in the biggest pile of shit you can find." He chuckled, the cinnamon zest of his skin intensifying with his laughter. Most humans couldn't smell the richness of his unique scent but they were aware of its faint hint, trapped in the limitations of their senses. "You're lucky I like you. *Now*. Or I would've left you for the lions."

"Then you would've had to raise our nieces yourself." Pointing that out to him got a grimace but I knew better. He adored the girls, going out of his way to bring them small presents from places he'd been and reading stories aloud in their nursery until they fell asleep. It lightened my heart to know they would know his voice and also terrified me because I also suspected one day they would take up his guns. There was too much of his fearlessness in them and the potential of a Stalker Gracen dynasty was very real. "I know you said you could eat anything more but I brought those chocolate drops you like. The ones in the foil. They're in my bag on the top if you want to get them."

He was quick, my Kai, and I was fairly certain the words were barely out of my mouth when he had the bag's zipper undone.

"Here," he whispered, holding up the first dollop he'd unwrapped. "Open your mouth."

*That* was how I knew I affected him the same way he touched me. It was the little things Kai did. The ways he showed how he loved someone. He didn't speak with flowery words or make grand gestures. Instead he would offer up the first piece of chocolate, willingly giving the first taste of his deepest love to someone else he cared about. I tasted his affection on the tips of his fingers when I closed my lips over the chocolate bit, leaving a kiss behind to thank him. I would never get poems from Kai Gracen. There would never be sonnets written about my verdant eyes or how the sun glistened in my golden hair.

Instead, I would get grilled lizard and the chance to watch a sunset from the back of a Nova hatchback he borrowed from Cari to go on a run that would essentially trap him with me for three days. He'd grumbled when I told him I wanted to go but hadn't given up too much of a fight.

He wanted me there. He'd come for me when I'd stupidly misinterpreted what he said and ended up on the back of a bison. He also stood by me during my darkest times and threatened to kill my enemies. I may one day have to take him up on that but until that time, I simply wanted to be with him, sharing the relative peace and quiet of the watering hole at dusk as wild animals gathered at its edge to drink their fill.

I understood their thirst because I had an insatiable need for the chimera sitting next to me and instead, sucked on the bit of chocolate he gave me.

"Look," Kai whispered, pointing to something near the water. "Over there."

They were hard to see, several petite equine creatures nestled up near the feet of an elephant dipping its trunk into the clear, crystal waters. They glistened and danced at the edge of the watering hole, their dainty hooves leaving triangular divots in the mud. Their manes were short, a faint magenta against their pearlescent hides but it was the curl of black horn rising from the middle of their foreheads that caught our attention.

"By the Gods, I guess they are real," I stammered back, looking at wonder at something impossible lapping up a bit of water. "I never imagined —"

"Just goes to show you, if you wait quietly enough, the impossible comes to you," Kai murmured, reaching for the cameras' trigger mechanism. "You've just got to be patient."

"I understand that now," I conceded, placing my hand on the spot between his shoulder blades where I knew he wore the scars shaped like a black pearl dragon on his skin, a horrific gift left on him by his father but one he wore proudly, knowing he'd survive and now thrived. "I promise, Kai, I will wait an eternity with you, just to see the impossible."