



## CHAPTER I

“Do you have a moment, Lis?”

Looking up from the chamomile I'd been grinding into a powder for Baron Huntington's teas, I saw Naomi standing in the doorway of my chamber. The brunette was already dressed for the evening; the gossamer of her gown would've been completely transparent if not for the fabric's strategically placed panels in a deep shade of cerulean.

The Baron of Archwood led, well, an unorthodox life compared to most mortals, but then again, Claude wasn't just a mortal. He was a *caelestia*—a mortal that descended from the rare joining of a lowborn and Hyhborn. *Caelestias* were born and *caelestias* aged, just like us lowborn, and at twenty-six, Claude had no plans to marry. Instead, he preferred to spread his affection upon many. He, much like the Hyhborn, was a collector of anything beautiful and unique. And one would be unwise if one thought to compare oneself to any of the Baron's paramours, but it was doubly foolish to measure oneself against Naomi.

With her glossy hair and delicate features, she was utterly breathtaking.

I, on the other hand, happened to look like someone had taken different traits from other people and pieced them together on my face. My small mouth didn't match the natural pucker of my lips. My too-round, too-big eyes seemed to take up the entirety of my face, giving me the appearance of looking far more innocent than I was. That had come in handy more than once while I was on the streets, but I thought that I vaguely resembled those creepy dolls I'd seen in shopwindows, except with golden-olive skin instead of porcelain.

The Baron once told me I was interesting to look upon—“stunning” in an odd sort of way—but even if that weren't so, I

would still be his most favored, the one he kept close to him, and that had nothing to do with my odd attractiveness.

Tension crept into my shoulders as I shifted on the settee and nodded. Dragging my teeth over my lower lip, I watched her close the door and cross the sitting area of my quarters—my *private* quarters.

Gods, at twenty-two years of age, I'd been here for . . . for six years. Long enough for me not to be shocked by the knowledge that I had my own space, my own rooms with electricity and hot water, something that many places in the kingdom didn't have. I had my own bed—an actual bed and not a pile of flat blankets or a mattress made of flea-infested straw—but I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

I focused on Naomi. She was behaving strangely, repeatedly clasping her hands together and releasing them. Naomi was nervous, and I had never known her to be such.

“What do you need?” I asked, even though I had a feeling—no, I *knew* exactly what she wanted. Why she was nervous.

“I . . . I wanted to talk to you about my sister,” she began—tentatively, and Naomi was never tentative in anything she did. There were few who were as brave and bold as her. “Laurelin has been unwell.”

My chest squeezed as my gaze returned to the bowl in my lap and the yellowish-brown powder within. This was what I'd dreaded.

Her sister had married a wealthy landowner above her so-called station in life. A union heralded as a true love match, something I would've normally scoffed at, but it was true. Laurelin was the rarity in a world where most married for convenience, opportunity, or security.

But what did love really do for anyone? Even her? It hadn't stopped her husband from wanting a son even though Laurelin's last birth had nearly taken her life. So she kept trying, no matter the risk.

He'd gotten his son now, and Laurelin had been struck with the fever that had taken so many after birth.

“I wanted to know if she will . . . ?” Naomi took a deep breath, stiffening her shoulders. “If she will recover?”

"I'm assuming you're not looking for my opinion," I said, grinding the pestle into the mound of chamomile. The slightly fruity tobacco scent increased. "Are you?"

"Not unless you have been moonlighting as a physician or midwife," she replied dryly. "I . . . I want to know what the future holds for her."

I exhaled softly. "You shouldn't be asking this."

"I know." Naomi lowered herself to her knees on the floor beside me, the skirt of her gown pooling around her. "And I know the Baron doesn't like it when someone asks you to do this, but I swear he will never know."

My reluctance had little to do with Claude, even though he didn't like it when I used my foresight—my heightened intuition—for anyone but him. He feared I'd be accused of being a conjurer dabbling in forbidden bone magic, and while I *knew* the Baron did worry about that, I also *knew* that it wasn't the magistrates of Archwood he was concerned about. All of them were in the Baron's pocket, and none of them would go against a Hyhborn, even if he was only a descendant of one. What he truly feared was that another with more coin or power would steal me away.

But his command to keep my abilities hidden and my own fear of being labeled a conjurer hadn't stopped me. I just . . . I just couldn't keep my mouth shut when I *saw* or *felt* something and was foolishly compelled to speak up. It was the same in all the places Grady and I had lived in before the Midlands' city of Archwood, which had caused me to be accused of being a conjurer and led to us fleeing in the middle of the night more times than I cared to remember to avoid the hangman's noose. My terminal inability to mind my own business was how I met Claude.

And it was also how people in the manor and beyond had learned of me—the woman who knew things. Not many, but enough.

The reason I didn't want Naomi to ask this had everything to do with her.

When I first came to Archwood Manor, at sixteen, Naomi had already been here for about thirteen months. The same age as Claude, she was only a few years older than me, and clever, and she was so

much more worldly than I could ever hope to be that I assumed she'd want little to do with me.

That hadn't been the case.

Naomi had become, well, my first . . . friend outside of Grady.

I would do anything for her.

But I feared I'd break her heart, and I was as terrified of losing her friendship as I was of losing the life I'd finally carved out for myself in Archwood. Because more times than not, people really didn't want the answers they sought, and the truth of what was to come was often far more destructive than a lie.

"Please," Naomi whispered. "I have never asked you anything like this before, and I . . ." She swallowed thickly. "I hate doing it, but I'm just so worried, Lis. I'm afraid that she will leave this realm."

Her dark eyes began to glimmer with tears, and I couldn't bear it. "Are you sure?"

"Of course—"

"You say that now, but what if it's an answer you fear? Because if it is, I won't lie. Your worry will turn to heartache," I reminded her.

"I know. Trust me, I do," she swore, the rich brown curls spilling over her shoulders as she leaned toward me. "It's why I didn't ask when I first learned of the fever."

I bit down on my lip, my grip on the mortar tightening.

"I won't hold it against you," she said softly. "Whatever the answer is, I will not blame you."

"You promise?"

"Of course," she swore.

"Okay," I said, hoping she spoke the truth. Naomi wasn't a projector, meaning she didn't broadcast her thoughts and intentions like so many did, making them far too easy to read.

But I could get inside her mind if I wanted to and find out if she spoke the truth. All I would need to do was open my senses to her and allow that connection to snap to life.

I didn't do that when I could help it. It was too much of an invasion. A violation. However, knowing that hadn't stopped me from doing it when it benefited me, had it?

Shoving that little truth aside, I drew in a breath that tasted of

the chamomile as I set the bowl on a small table. "Give me your hand."

Naomi didn't hesitate then, lifting her hand, but I did, because it was so rare for my hand to touch others' flesh without their intentions, and sometimes even their futures, becoming known to me. The only way I could touch another lowborn was to dull my senses, usually through alcohol or some other substance, and, well, that dulled everything else too and didn't last very long, so there really was no point.

I wrapped my hand around hers, wanting to take just a brief second to simply enjoy the feeling. Most didn't realize there was a world of difference between being touched and touching. But this wasn't about me. I couldn't take that second, because the longer I held Naomi's hand, the more likely it was that I would end up seeing things about her she might not want to know or want me to learn. No amount of humming or keeping my mind active would stop that.

Quieting my mind, I opened my senses and then closed my eyes. A second passed, and another; then a series of tingles erupted between my shoulder blades and spread up, over the back of my skull. In the darkness of my mind, I began to see the hazy form of Naomi's face, but I shut that down.

"Ask the question again," I instructed, because it would help me focus on only what she wanted to know and not everything else that was taking shape and forming words.

"Will Laurelin recover from her fever?" Naomi said in a voice barely above a whisper.

There was silence in my mind, and then I heard what sounded like my own voice whisper, *She will recover.*

A shudder of relief went through me, but my skin quickly chilled. The voice continued to whisper. Releasing Naomi's hand, I opened my eyes.

Naomi had gone still, her hand suspended in air. "What did you see?"

"She'll recover from the fever," I shared.

Her throat worked on a delicate swallow. "Really?"

"Yes." I smiled, but it felt brittle.

“Oh, thank the gods,” she whispered, pressing her fingers to her mouth. “Thank you.”

Now my smile was a grimace as I looked away. I cleared my throat, picking up the bowl. I barely felt the cool ceramic.

“Has Claude been having trouble sleeping again?” Naomi asked after a handful of moments, her voice lighter than it had been when she walked into the chamber.

Thankful for the change of subject, I nodded. “He wants to be rested for the upcoming Feasts.”

Naomi’s brows rose. “The Feasts don’t start for several more weeks—at least a month or so.”

I glanced at her. “He wants to be *well* rested.”

Naomi snorted. “He must be quite excited.” Leaning back, she toyed with a sapphire hanging from a thin silver necklace she almost always wore. “And what about you? You excited?”

I lifted a shoulder as my stomach tumbled a bit. “Haven’t really thought about it.”

“But this will be your first Feasts, right?”

“Yep.” It was the first year I was eligible to attend, as one must be twenty-two years of age or married, which made little sense to me, but it was the Hyhborn and King Euros who made the rules, not me.

“You are in for . . . quite the show,” she said slowly.

I snickered, having heard the stories.

She tipped toward me once more, her voice lowering. “But will you be partaking in the . . . in the *festivities*?”

“Festivities.” I laughed. “What a tame description.”

She grinned. “What else would I call it?”

“An orgy?”

Tipping her head back, she laughed, and it was such a lovely, infectious sound. Naomi had the best laugh, causing a grin to tug at my own lips. “That’s not what happens,” she said.

“Really?” I stated dryly.

Naomi feigned a look of innocence, which was rather impressive considering there was little about her that could be called innocent. “The Feasts serve as a way for the Hyhborn to reaffirm their commitment to serving lowborn by sharing their wealth of food and

drink.” She recited the doctrine as well as any prioress would as she folded her hands demurely in her lap. “Sometimes a lot of drink flows, and with the Hyhborn around, certain *activities* may occur. That is all.”

“Ah, yes, reaffirming their commitment to lowborn,” I said a bit sarcastically. She was speaking of the uppermost sphere of Hyhborn—the ones known as Deminyens.

When Deminyens emerged from the ground, it was said they came into existence fully formed and were ageless, capable of manipulating the elements and even the minds of others. Some of them were the lords and the ladies of the Hyhborn echelon, but those weren’t the most powerful of the Deminyens. The princes and princesses who ruled over the six territories within Caelum, along with the King, were the most frightening in their power. They could take different shapes, whip rivers into a frenzy with a flick of their wrists, and even seize the souls of the lowborn, creating the terrifying creatures known as the Rae.

Not much was known about any of them except for King Euros. Hell, other than Prince Rainer of Primvera, we didn’t even know their names. The only other one we ever heard about, and that was usually through the rumor mill, was the Prince of Vytrus, who ruled the Highlands, and that was because he was dreaded by most. After all, he was known as the hand that delivered the King’s wrath.

I almost laughed out loud right then. Hyhborn were the Protectors of the Realm, but I wasn’t exactly sure how they served us. Even though the Hyhborn were mostly like absentee landlords who came around only when the rent was due, the Hyhborn controlled everything about the lowborn’s lives—from who could obtain an education to who could own land or companies. And I was of the mind that the Feasts were more of a way to provide the Hyhborn with what they wanted. Our indulgence in all manner of things, from gorging on food to indulging in the delights of each other during the Feasts, also *fed* the Hyhborn. Strengthened them. Empowered them. Our pleasure was their sustenance. Their life force. It was more for them than it was us.

Because there were so many more ways they could prove that

they cared for us lowborn, starting with providing food throughout the year to those in need. So many either starved or broke their backs in the mines or risked their lives on hunts to keep their families fed while the aristo—Hyhborn and the wealthiest of lowborn—became richer, the poor even more impoverished. It was the way things always had been and always would be, no matter how many lowborn rebellions rose up. Instead, they provided food only once a year, when much of the food went to waste while everyone was engaging in those certain *activities*.

But I didn't say any of that out loud.

I might be reckless, but I wasn't a fool.

"You know, they're not all that bad," Naomi said after a moment. "The Hyhborn, I mean. I've known of a few lords and ladies who have stepped in and aided those in need, and those in Primvera are kind and even caring. I think more are like that than not."

At once, I thought of my Hyhborn—the unnamed lord who had touched my chin and asked how my arms had become so bruised. I didn't know why I referred to him as mine. He obviously wasn't. Hyhborn might fuck their way through the entirety of the lowborn race and then some, and a few might even claim a lowborn as theirs, at least for a time, but they were never a lowborn's. It was just that I didn't know his name, and it was an odd habit that had begun since that night.

Honestly, I doubted the Hyhborn lord had ever realized that he'd saved Grady's life that night. The Mister would've punished him for talking back in front of Hyhborn, and far too many didn't survive his punishments.

My stomach took a quick, sharp tumble like it always did when I thought of my Hyhborn, because I *knew* I would see him again.

That had yet to occur, and anytime I thought of it, I was filled with a mixture of dread and anticipation I couldn't even begin to try to understand.

But maybe Naomi was right about many of them being what they claimed to be—Protectors of the Realm. Archwood flourished partly because of the ones in Primvera, the Hyhborn Court that sat just beyond the woods outside of the manor, and my Hyhborn *had*



punished the Mister. Though he had done so rather brutally, so I wasn't sure that was a good example of a kind and caring Hyhborn.

"Do you . . . do you think there will be Deminyens at the Feasts?" I asked.

"There are usually a few of them that show." Her brow creased. "I've even seen a lord or two in the past. I do hope they show this year."

Toying with the pestle, I looked over at her.

Her grin turned sly as she twisted the silver chain around her fingers. "There's never a need to use the Long Night with a Hyhborn," she added, referencing a powder made from the seeds of a trumpet flower. The powerful herb, in the right dose, left one drowsy and without much memory of the time after ingesting it. "They are quite delightful."

My brows rose.

"What?" she exclaimed with another robust, throaty laugh. "Did you know that the Hyhborn are known for climaxes that can last for hours—actual *hours*?"

"I've heard." I wasn't sure if that was true or not, but hours-long orgasms sounded . . . intense. Possibly even a little painful.

Her gaze flicked to mine. "Are you able to touch a Hyhborn without . . . *knowing*?"

"I'm not sure." I thought about Claude and then my Hyhborn lord. "I can touch a *caelestia* for a little while before I start to know things, but I've never touched a Hyhborn before, and whenever I'm asked something that deals with them, I sense nothing. So, I'm not sure."

"Well, might be worth finding out." She winked.

I laughed, shaking my head.

She grinned at me. "I need to get going. Allyson has been a mess of late," she said, speaking of one of the newest additions to the manor. "I need to make sure she has her head together."

"Good luck with that."

Naomi laughed as she rose, the gossamer pooling around her feet. She started for the door, then stopped. "Thank you, Lis."

"For what?" I frowned.

“For answering,” she said.

I didn’t know what to say as I watched her leave, but I didn’t want her thanks.

My shoulders slumped as I lifted my gaze to the slowly churning fan above me. I hadn’t lied to Naomi. Her sister would survive the fever, but the foresight hadn’t stopped there. It had kept whispering, telling me that death still marked Laurelin. How or why, I hadn’t allowed myself to find out, but I had a feeling—and my feelings were rarely if ever wrong—she wouldn’t live to see the end of the Feasts.