

# Chapter One

## Reverie

Love stories belong to other people; people who aren't like me. It's for those with empty blood and normal vocal cords. They don't weep with sparkles smearing their cheeks, and doctors certainly don't brand them as infants.

My destiny is to be alone, and perhaps it's why I've dedicated my life to photography. Romance might not be in the cards, but a small part of me hopes it'll transfer through osmosis. As if being around delightful examples of love will force it to ooze into my existence.

No luck in the oozing love department so far. I'm twenty-eight, single, and sitting at a bar, drinking alone.

Well, not entirely alone.

Prestley watches me with a wry smirk, polishing a crystal glass with a slice of mist. As the Whisp proprietor of my favorite puff bar, he's seen me in all moods. Today's dour attitude is more commonplace than I'd like to admit.

"Bad day?" he asks, placing the sparkling glass on a shelf.

I scoff, sitting back on the stool, and crossing my arms. "Actually, no." I sigh dramatically. "They were *so* in love, Prest. You should've seen the first kiss. Steamy as all Hells." I pause, tapping my chin. "Could be because she's a Dragon, and he's a Water Sprite, though."

His thundercloud eyebrows raise. "Some get all the luck."

"And take it from the rest of us," I mutter, my tone sour. My clients never see this level of dourness during their special day; I save it all for my favorite Whisp. Every evening after photographing a wedding, he has a goblet of femire ready when the cloudavator brings me up to his bar.

Reaching for another glass that's already spotless, Prestley wipes it down as he asks, "The one thing you wish you could forget?"

"You're *so* hilarious," I mutter with a scowl. He loves this question because he knows my photographic memory will never let me forget a single moment. "Maybe the groom scratching

his crotch mid-vows? He really dug in there like two hundred guests and a videographer weren't watching."

"That's not too bad. Better than the bridesmaid who forgot to put underwear on before dancing."

I shudder. "That isn't just a memory — there's actual photographic proof of her choice."

Thanks to the curse of a photographic memory, I remember every single detail. Not just from today's event, but *all of them*. The flicker of doubt in a groom's eye. The nervous nail-picking of a bride. The dung-colored napkin at table eight from the Culmer wedding two years, six months, two weeks, and three days ago.

The look on my ex's face when he ...

Nope. We aren't going there. Suffice to say, it's a burden more often than not. Not as much as my glitter and Song, but damn near close.

Tilting the drink back, I pour the remaining dregs into my mouth and slam the goblet onto the cloud counter.

Prestley narrows his eyes. "I just polished that counter, Reverie."

I lean on an elbow, giving him an inebriated grin. "Come on, Prestley, use a little dew and it'll be good as new." With a chortle, I declare, "Hey, that rhymed."

His pupils crackle with slivers of lightning as he rolls his eyes. "Want another?"

"Keep 'em coming."

"Coming right up." He floats over to the wooden barrel full of femire.

Swiveling to gaze at the scene behind me, I allow myself a moment of appreciation. The sun's setting, its rich hues creating heavens on earth as the clouds offer a spectacle of colors. Out of dozens in the surrounding area, Prestley's puff bar is the highest. Thousands of feet in the air, I'm graced with the most stunning view of Gondora, the City of Clouds.

Only a handful of times each year do the clouds clear. Otherwise, the floating city nests inside fluffy clouds, with mist rolling between the glass domed roofs and under the golden bridges connecting clusters. Air traffic zips through; a colorful array of Dragons, and other flying species. At this time of day, all the glass and gold remind me of an elegant engagement ring caught in rainbow light.

Glancing at my glittered veins, I raise my slender hand, allowing the light to catch the multi-faceted lines covering my body. They're all colors of the rainbow, their pastel shades matching my iridescent hair, reflecting the light like a crystal suncatcher.

The soft purring of the cloudavator draws my attention. A lavender male Gargoyle, featuring wings with membranes the color of eggplants, rises through the cloud line, his long silver hair glowing in the sunset. He's already watching me with an expression I don't understand. My heart does a little pitter patter, forcing me to look away. I'm here to get drunk — nothing else.

Prestley drifts over with my newest drink in his fluffy palm. Unfortunately, he catches my observation *and* avoidance of the Gargoyle. With a knowing smile, he places the goblet in front of me. "A little fun wouldn't kill you, Ree."

I shoot him a dirty look. "I can be fun."

He makes a show of judging my black sweater and pants. "Do you own any other colors?"

"Yes," I shoot back defensively. "I also love the color purple." I lean down to grab a shoe, lifting it like it's proof of my diverse wardrobe. "And my shoes are pink!"

He chuckles. "Didn't you buy those shoes because they were twenty percent cheaper and at the time, you needed a pair immediately?"

I rolled my eyes so hard, it actually hurt. Placing the slip-on shoe back onto my tired foot, I snap back, "Just because I'm prudent with my money and prefer comfort over style, doesn't mean I'm not capable of having a good time."

Prestley smirks, his eyes flicking over my shoulder. Before I can see what has his attention, I hear a deep voice of velvet. "Is this seat taken?"

My shoulders tense as I white knuckle my drink. Prestley raises his eyebrow, mocking me before giving the source of the voice a genial smile.

"Well, hello Luca. No, I believe that seat is currently empty."

Damn Prestley. Damn him to all twelve Hells. Instincts have me adjusting my sweater and hair to cover my siren brand. The less this stranger knows about me, the better.

Hunching over my drink, I try to ignore the enormous form sliding onto the stool next to me, holding my breath when shadow blocks the sunshine. It doesn't bother me to lose the warmth, but the assumption irks.

I turn, ready to snap at the stranger for his lack of consideration — *because it's about the principle of the thing* — and the words die on my tongue.

My gaze trails up to silver eyes caressing my face with uninhibited fascination. A wide, dimpled smile splits across a chiseled jaw. A sloped nose juts out from beneath a broad forehead, with thick black eyebrows raised as the man observes me in return.

He must notice my ire, though, because he asks, “Are my wings bothering you?”

To my surprise, he tucks them in tight, allowing the sunshine to beat down on my shoulders. The returned warmth of the sun is suddenly too much with the new heat coursing through my body.

I shake my head. “No, it’s fine. Don’t tire yourself out on my account.”

Tearing my eyes away from his suede-soft pale purple skin, I take a sip of my drink, trying desperately to focus on the fruity burn.

It’s not that I hate men or want to be alone. It’s because when men find out I’m part siren, they think I’m potentially tricking them, because there’s no way they could possibly be attracted to a siren without being manipulated. After twenty-eight years of begging them to believe that I didn’t manipulate them into fucking me or feeling affection, I’m ... dedicated to embracing loneliness.

A thick finger taps the bar top in front of me. “What’re you drinking?”

After taking a long, pointed sip, I mumble, “Blackberry femire.”

“Sounds delicious.” A pause, then, “Prestley, be a doll and get me a goblet of the same?”

My head shoots up, finally giving the man a proper examination. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say he’s yet to look away from me since sitting. Two matching dimples in his broad grin send an unfamiliar zing of desire to my core. That beautiful, beatific smile reveals elongated pearly white fangs.

I smash the tiny part of my brain wondering how they feel on skin.

Giving him an exasperated groan, I say, “I’m not going to sleep with you because we drank the same drink. So, don’t bother.”

His head jerks back, the smile twisting into a disgusted frown. “Excuse me?”

I motion to him — every muscular, meaty inch — and say, “You’re sitting here because you saw a Glyridite sitting alone and thought, ‘Huh, she’s pretty. Maybe my Saturday night could be better with some glitter on my cock and rainbows in my mouth,’ right?”

All amusement washes away from his expression. For a split second, my anxiety spikes at the darkness spreading in his eyes. “I assure you, Miss...?”

“Nonya.”

He smirks. “I assure you, Miss *Nonya*—” I swear he tries to swallow a laugh as he says my fake name. “—that if I wanted to fuck you, it wouldn’t be by spending fifty corals on a drink.” His eyes flick to Prestley. “No offense, Prest.”

“None taken,” my betrayer of a bartender quips as he places a goblet in front of the man. “Her name is Reverie, by the way.”

“Prestley,” I say sharply, glaring. “*Boundaries*. I’m going to glitter this entire goddess damned bar if you say another word.”

His mirth fades. “Don’t you dare. I’d hate to ban you for life.”

“I’d clean it up,” I mutter. Glitter’s greeted with nothing but disgust in most of Gondora. Just my lot in life, I suppose.

His puffy lips purse. After shooting another withering look, he levitates away, leaving me with my conversational captor.

“For someone who’s supposed to be the embodiment of puppy kisses and rainbows, you sure are a sour black cat.”

Whipping my head to glare at the offensive man, I jutted a finger in his face. “That’s a stereotype. Plus, puppy kisses are too wet to be a symbol of happiness. That’s asinine.”

He raises a dark eyebrow. “Wetness doesn’t equal happiness for you? What man convinced you of this?”

My cheeks heat; from rage or humiliation, I can’t decide. “You’re so crude. That was incredibly inappropriate.” I grind my teeth. Motioning to the half-empty puff bar, I ask, “Why did you sit here and not in any of the other dozen empty chairs?”

“Maybe I wanted to be the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

Stunned, words fail and my jaw drops, then snaps shut with a loud crack as my teeth gnash. “Is that another sex joke?”

He shrugs a broad shoulder. “You clearly have such a filthy mind, Miss Nonya. Are you the type of woman who blames her own dirty thoughts on a stranger?”

With a growl of frustration, I turn away, determined to finish my drink and leave. I do *not* care about his consuming presence, or those teeth, or that smile, or those muscles.

I *really* don't.

Scanning the bar, I search for a familiar face to finagle a rescue from, but the only one is Prestley, who is watching this interaction with self-satisfied amusement.

Dunghole.

I sense the Gargoyle's gaze on the back of my head, but I steadfastly refuse to give him what he's clearly looking for. He's an attention-seeking jerk, only offering maddening quips and dirty jokes. Like every other man on this continent.

"The name is Lucasta, by the way. But friends, and my lovely mother, call me Luca."

My molars grind to dust as I refuse to respond, keeping my back to him. I take a deep gulp of my drink, wishing the fizzy burn didn't prevent me from guzzling it. The last thing needed in this moment is making a fool of myself *and* sending puke onto an unsuspecting pedestrian on the bridges below.

The cool shadow, blocking the last lingering bits of light, shifts. "I personally don't actually like being licked by puppies or hounds. I'm a chimeragon lover, actually. I have one waiting for me at home. His name is Reginald Destau. Reggie for short — his full government name is reserved for when he eats my slippers or that one time he turned my Aunt Libby into stone."

I nearly choked on the liquid in my mouth. Sputtering, I break my vow of silence to peer over my shoulder. "Is she still stone?"

He chuckles, a warm, enveloping sound. "Lucky for her, she's also a Gargoyle. It was a temporary setback for her day, but she's refused to visit since." He actually sounds annoyed by her choice.

"Can you blame her?" I say incredulously.

"Yes," he says defensively. "It lasted for three minutes. He's mostly a chimera; only one-fifth of a Gorgon. It's never permanent, and he did it because she refused to give him a bite of her muffin."

Against my better judgment, I ask, "What kind of muffin?"

He frowns. "Why does that matter?"

"Because if it were lemon poppyseed, that means Reggie is unreasonable, because who would get that upset about lemon poppyseed?" A smile begrudgingly lifts at the corners of my mouth. "But if it was for an apple streusel muffin, then I'd say three minutes wasn't enough."

The smile spreading across his face is so charming that a teeny tiny piece of my hardened heart thaws. “Ah, so you *can* be reasonable.”

“About muffins,” I clarify. “But very little else.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says in a conspiratorial tone.

I allow myself to get immersed in the swirling mercury of his eyes; just for a second — to prove I’m not actually unreasonable. The longer I look, the faster my heart thumps. Twilight twinkles behind him, the rising sister moons casting an ethereal glow against the silver strands pouring over his shoulders like liquid starlight.

The growing warmth in my belly is uncomfortable. Again, ignoring my better judgment, I spin on my barstool to face him fully. My long legs bump into one of his thick thighs, but he doesn’t react. He just ... watches me.

Who is this man? Why is he so enamored? I’m a Glyridite. He doesn’t even know I’m part siren. It’s a misplaced fascination.

“So if you don’t want to fuck me,” I say quietly. “Then why did you bother sitting next to me?”

“The sunset.”

Dumbfounded, I jerk my head back in surprise. “The sunset?”

He nods. “You watched the sunset like it was a work of art worth memorizing.”

Now is probably not the best time to mention my photographic memory. “Well, I appreciate beautiful things.”

“Me too,” he murmurs, the intensity of his stare making me squirm.

Trying to diffuse the confusion making my insides feel funny, I say, “I’m not going to sleep with you.”

“But perhaps have a drink with me?”

“A single drink,” I agree. “Nothing more.”

“Nothing more.”

We both take a sip of our beverages, never breaking eye contact. Maybe Prestley is onto something; it’s been years since I’ve trusted anyone with my heart. Would it hurt to try once more?

Besides, what kind of wedding photographer would I be if I didn’t give Fate a chance?

# Chapter Two

*One Year Later*

Reverie

After this date, I'm giving celibacy strong consideration. It's a testament to my die-hard romantic heart that it hasn't happened already — but this shamrock-green male Orc might be the final reason.

Especially since the next thing out of his mouth is, "How many men have you slept with?"

*Eww.*

We're at a bar called No Name, the type of place that offers deep shadows for privacy, comfortable booths, and a simple menu. Before I arrived, he'd chosen a booth in the furthest corner, with the darkest lighting.

Red flag number one.

Unfortunately, red flag number two is the fact that he can't seem to stop talking about sex. I mentioned photographing weddings, prompting him to ask what species have sex at their ceremonies. When I mentioned loving puff bars, he asked me if the cloud edges are stable enough for fucking.

So, this asinine question shouldn't surprise me, but it does. Because who in the Hells asks these kinds of questions on a first date?

*This man, apparently.*

Inhaling a steady breath, it's a struggle to not snarl when I say, "I'm not sure why that's any of your business, Maureo." I cock my head. "Why? How many partners have *you* had?"

After eyeing my cleavage, Maureo scoffs, waving a large hand flippantly. "It doesn't matter how many women a man has been with. It only improves his worth."

Staring at my almost-finished glass of femire, I see-saw my jaw. *This fucking guy.* When I refocus on his mediocre features, I bat my eyelashes. "One hundred."

It's not a hundred. More like less than half of that, but I'm aiming for shock value here. As expected, Maureo sputters. "One *hundred*? I knew sirens were loose, but that's outrageous, honey."

Maureo leans back on his side of the booth, appraising me with new eyes. His lewd gaze cramps my stomach with dread.

Since this is a blind date, I dressed for the likelihood of creepiness. I'm wearing a black shirt that shows enough cleavage to entice — I'd hoped he'd be nicer, okay? — and carefully hides my brand. My pants cover everything below the waist. Yet, I still feel naked under his hungry gaze.

A sinking lump of dread settles low in my belly.

*One ... two ... three ...*

He pats the ocean of space between us. "Come closer, honey. You're so far away. I don't bite ..."

Dating in Gondora is exhausting. Sighing, I toss back the rest of my femire, then say, "Why in the twelve Hells did you ask me out on a date? This isn't a date — it's a sex interview, one I did *not* agree to."

Maureo's expression darkens. "Yureka said you enjoyed having fun."

Yureka and I are about to have an in-depth conversation about how to vet potential dates. Grabbing my purse, I shift out of the booth. "Yes, dunghole, *fun*. As in getting drinks and discussing how we were bullied a lot as children because we were ugly."

I flick my gaze over his less-than-impressive features. "Something you apparently never grew out of."

Slapping enough corals on the table to avoid him chasing me down to pay my share, I snap, "Don't worry, Maureo, I'll pick up the mantle of being your adult bully. Learn how to brush your hair. Find a new cologne. You smell like the underside of a hydra's tail."

None of this is true either, but I hope my words haunt him.

The Orc sputters, clenching his fists. Before he can collect himself and possibly start a physical confrontation, I hurry out of the bar.

After summoning a Dragxi, I text Yureka, who is both my wedding assistant and a friend.

**Reverie: I'm on the way, but whatever cesspool you dragged that one from needs to be quarantined. He asked how many people I've slept with.**

Within a minute, a blue Dragxi appears, wearing a wooden seating saddle. The Dragon looks at me with one blue eye.

***Where to?***

“Brawling Battle Gym, please.”

***Got it.***

The Dragon takes off into the puffy clouds settled low in the city today. Thanks to the Dragon's magyck, the wind's kept off my body, allowing a peaceful journey. I'm not in the mood to step into a crowd, but Yureka's been begging me to go out with her to some fight night at a local battle gym.

Personally, I think it's barbaric. Fighting for sport? Training to kill after going to work in an office, wearing a suit? I swear, only men invent these kinds of things. I suppose it's better than the times of old, where all species battled it out for power. We're *civilized* now, apparently.

So civilized I'm paying seventy-five corals for the possibility of having blood spattered on my clothes. I examine my all-black outfit. The blood wouldn't show up, but I'd know it was there.

When my phone vibrates, I check Yureka's text.

**Yureka: He did not! Oh my goddess, that's absurd. My mother knows his mother from a local social club for forest dwellers.**

**Reverie: Well, let her know that he's sex obsessed and said sirens are normally loose.**

**Yureka: I'm buying your drinks tonight.**

**Reverie: Hells yes you are.**

Putting the phone back into my bag, I stare blankly at the buildings passing by. The sun is almost set, so most of the buildings are lit, with the glass domes illuminating the sky.

It's difficult to not be depressed about another failed date. I'm a wedding photographer who can't find a relationship to last more than a few months. Every week, I'm capturing so much

love with my camera — but as part siren, society decided my worth the moment I exited the womb.

After spending years being objectified, used, and rejected, I want someone of my own. To walk down the aisle with a partner smiling proudly; to spend the night celebrating with loved ones. Yet, after all these years of trying to date, it always ended in rejection.

A year ago, I thought maybe, just maybe, things could be different.

But since that night at Prestley's, since Lucasta ghosted me, that hope has dwindled each day.

My phone rings. It's Kahlo, my second photographer. Frowning, I answer.

"Hello?"

His words slur as he says, "Ree, I've made a mistake."

Dread creeps into my veins like smoke. "Elaborate."

"I was slimed by a Slogoth."

Immediate rage has me snapping, "How in the Hells do you miss a Slogoth, Kahlo?"

A fucking Slogoth, of all things. A towering soft-bodied creature of slime, hired to clean the streets of debris. Its slime isn't actually poisonous, but it instantly removes any toxins or dirt. Considering Kahlo loves to imbibe gibbonroot every day — to *relax*, or so he claims — it's no wonder it wiped him out so entirely.

"It doesn't matter how," he says dismissively. Which means he probably tried to impress a woman. "But the doctor said I'm out for the count until next month. Can't use my arms or legs or ... anything. As is, I have a nurse holding up—"

"*What!*" I shriek, panic thrumming my heart to a painful pace. He's supposed to be working at the wedding *tomorrow*. "Kahlo! This is the busiest month of the season!"

"I know, I know." He sounds embarrassed, but not nearly enough for the severe headache this will cause. "Look, I asked my cousin. He confirmed he can join this month."

Instantly suspicious, I ask, "Is your cousin even a photographer?"

"He is. Really good, too."

"If he's so good, why is he available?" There's silence, which amps up my anxiety. "Hello?"

Kahlo sounds cautious as he explains, "He recently had to scale back on shooting his own weddings; does mostly second shooting now. Less pressure."

A plausible reason. Barely. “And he’ll be there tomorrow?”

“Yes, he already confirmed. I sent him the timeline and shot list.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “This is a disaster, Kahlo. The Orc wedding at the end of the month needs someone who can travel with me. They’re Orc royalty — I can’t fuck this up. Did you confirm that one as well?”

“All of them are confirmed,” he assures me.

My trepidation eases. That makes this less of a disaster, but still stress inducing. Working with a whole new person, a man no less, is not my favorite thing. “He better be a quick learner.”

“He is,” Kahlo says quickly, albeit slurred. There’s murmuring on his side of the line, then he says, “I have to go. Turns out there’s a dozen shots required after being slimed.”

“They better miscount and give you thirteen,” I snarl. “You owe me big time.”

“Love you too, Ree.” He sounds genuine, but he can fuck off right now. A Sloth? There *has* to be a woman involved, because he may not be the brightest bulb, but that’s a level of stupidity even *he* normally doesn’t exhibit.

“I hope it’s fourteen.” I hang up.

Unbelievable. My upcoming weddings are extravagant and hard won. This past year, it’s been difficult running a photography company as a solo artist. There’s a particular company, Stone and Skies Visuals, that keeps underbidding me. Potential clients continue sending emails to let me know this company gave them a better deal.

It’s been frustrating, to say the least.

In a cut-throat industry, the solution usually is to increase marketing and maybe lower prices. But having no roommate — because who in the Hells wants one of those? — means my apartment is more expensive. Do I want to save money, live with a stranger, and charge less? Or keep prices the same, hope more clients choose me, and pray the rent doesn’t rise?

Quite the conundrum.

When the Dragxi lands, I pay and hop off, immediately spotting Yureka. Her bright green skin and hair stick out against the blue Elves behind her. She’s standing in a long line that snakes around a black brick building. When the metal door opens, presumably the entrance, I hear pounding music and gleeful hollering. I should’ve brought my earplugs that I wear at wedding receptions.

Sighing, I walk over to Yureka, giving her a hug. Taking stock of the people waiting in line, I'm surprised to find a wide variety of species. Elves, Witches, goblins, various flyer species, and even a cluster of pixies hover in the air next to some Cyclops.

The moment I'm close enough, I exclaim, "You will never believe what happened."

Yureka grimaces. "Er, I set you up with a dunghole Orc?"

I wave away the words, already over it. A bad date is normal at this point. "Yes, but besides that, Kahlo got slimed head to claw by a Slogoth."

She arches a forest-green eyebrow. "How in the Hells did he pull that off? Aren't those things like twelve feet tall?"

I throw my hands up. "Fuck if I know! He claims to have a cousin ready to step in tomorrow." I let out a sound of frustration. "*Ugh!* This is terrible timing."

Yureka, ever the peacekeeper, puts a hand on my arm to give it a soft squeeze. "It'll be okay. Kahlo is a bit of an idiot, but he also wouldn't send an amateur."

I sigh, scanning the line again. It's doubled since I arrived. "You're right. But I swear, I should fire him over this."

"Maybe." A crease deepens between her brows before she throws her arms around me. "We'll figure it out, okay?"

"Thank you," I say, the words muffled in her hair.

"But that's a Future Us problem," she says, smiling. "Let's enjoy tonight, okay?"

I exhale sharply. "Fine, you're right." Craning my head to see how many more people are in front of us, I ask, "Is this actually that popular?"

Excited about the topic change, Yureka practically hops in place. "Oh yeah. I was lucky to snag tonight's tickets. The headliner features a Regenerator, which means 'death' is allowed." She uses fingers to air quote the word 'death.'

I frown, not understanding. "So, people die here?"

She shoves my shoulder playfully. "No, silly. It's a Regenerator, so it can only die by fire or drowning. Neither is allowed in the arena without special permits."

Still not quite sure what to expect, I nod along, pretending to understand. We discuss the different fight rules, half of which I don't understand. Before long, we're handing in the tickets and entering the building.

I hadn't paid attention to the size of the building, but the inside is ginormous. Brightly lit, like the sun itself is right overhead, it's also packed. There are more species in here, including a group of Satyrs — they love a good gambling situation — Orcs, Angels, ghouls, phantoms, and even some Gargoyles.

I study them, not intending to compare them to Luca, but I do. The species has skin that is different shades of purple and blue, but otherwise, their features can vary. Some have red hair with twisting horns. Others have black hair with yellow eyes. None have white hair like Luca, though. None are as muscular, either.

*Stop it.*

I don't need to think about him whatsoever. The fact that a year later, he still plagues my thoughts, pisses me off.

I squeeze through a pair of Sprites, careful of their delicate wings. One of them, the taller man, leers at me. I ignore him, keeping close to Yureka as she guides us through the crowd.

Finally, she finds our seats on the lower level. The arena itself has staggered stadium setting, each level offering enough space for wings and large hindends. Smaller species like us are relegated to the front so we're safe from trampling. It also means we naturally have better seats. Small creature privileges, I guess.

As we sit, I watch the fight already underway. It's between an Ogre and a Cyclops with no weapons. Just using their strength and smarts. Well, smart is a generous term because neither species are known for their intelligence.

"Would you like something to drink, miss?" An orange pixie flits out in front of us, holding a small pad of paper. We both order beers, and focus on the fight.

Normally, I'd prefer to be curled up in bed to watch a movie or read a book. However, I have to begrudgingly admit it's thrilling to feel the energy in the air and hear the roar of the crowd.

When the Ogre passes out from a pretty vicious punch, the referee declares the Cyclops the winner, and the crowd screams in approval. A pair of Orcs drags the Ogre out of the arena, trailing blood across the sand.

The roaring cheers die down as the attendees chatter about upcoming bets. Apparently, the next fight is a Regenerator and some Gargoyle who never loses.

“Two beers,” the pixie says, using wind magyck to levitate our mugs of golden alcohol. I thank him as Yureka pays. He grins and flies off.

Taking a sip, I grimace. “This is disgusting.”

Yureka chuckles. “Well, if you want good booze, go to Prestley’s. This is part of the *experience*, Ree. Stop finding reasons to not be here and enjoy yourself.”

Frowning at her call out, I sip my beer again, pretending it’s delicious. Yureka pats me on the thigh. “There you go. The more you drink, the better it gets.”

“Doubt that,” I mutter, watching the bloodied sand get covered by some Elf attendants.

After a few more sips, I’m relieved when the horn is called, announcing the next fight. In the center of the arena, a presenter suddenly appears. A male phantom grins at the crowd, lifting his translucent hands.

“Wings and fangs! Have I got a treat for you! A highly anticipated battle between Richor the Regenerator and Lucasta the Lucky, the undefeated champion of over fifty battles!”

Beer spews from between my lips.

