



CHAPTER ONE

Poisoned Lullaby

My mark has a death wish. Which, I suppose, is convenient for me.

It's two ticks since I stepped into the pub, I've yet to give any indication of my intent to seduce him, and he's already palming my ass like it's a tankard of cheap ale.

He hasn't even offered me a sodding drink.

My first instinct: snatch his wrist and twist until I feel the satisfying snap of cracking bone.

I know better than to trust my first instinct.

Instead, I turn swiftly, smile sweetly, and gaze into his eyes like they're a map to someplace less seedy with someone less slimy.

At the sight of my face, his jaw—scratch that, his entire face—goes slack, and his hand slides off my ass like it's slicked with oil.

It's typical.

I'm beautiful. Not arrogant, just honest. My birthright is coiling men so tightly around my finger, they'll willingly follow me to an early, watery grave—beauty is a given.

The eyes of the entire pub trail my every move, drinking me in, savoring me like a glass of the disgustingly sweet wine the

fae like to drink. They watch my mark, too, with dark scowls instead of salacious leers. Not because of what he is but because he's drawn my attention in a room full of men who'd welcome me with open arms and silk sheets.

I drown out the feel of their eyes and focus on my mark. He was brazen enough to touch me on sight, but now he can't work up the nerve to speak.

Some marks require more effort. A few drinks to loosen up or a few minutes of idle conversation. This one won't need it. The cinnamon spice of his lust sits on my tongue and burns my throat, giving him away. I might not even have to sing to convince him to drink the poison stashed in my dress.

As a siren, I've always been able to feel emotions. Some are basic: sadness feels heavy and cold; happiness is light and warm. Some are more complex: bitterness is sharp like a sting, hot like a flame, and persistent like a bad cold. I can block out the way emotions feel against my skin, but when they're strong, I can't turn off the way they taste.

Without a word, I sink into a wooden chair at a pub table and cross one leg over the other. The hem of my inky-black dress slithers up my thighs.

I flash my mark an inviting smile and pat the empty chair next to me. He tumbles into it, eyes wide. The flavor of his lust mixes with something stale and bitter like rank alcohol—nerves.

As I lean forward, I have the satisfaction of watching his gaze slide from my luminescent honey-colored eyes to the dip in the front of my dress. The heat of his desire spikes, wrapping around me like a blanket of fire. I place a hand on his lower thigh, close enough to his knee to be benign yet far enough up his leg that his body tenses.

He swallows.

Biting back a smirk, I lean farther, pressing my full lips to the curve of his ear. He reeks of nerves, sweat, and freshly baked bread. "Follow me." I don't sing—not yet—but I slip a musical lilt into my voice.

He clenches the table so tightly, his nails leave indents in the wood. "Uhhh . . ."

I take it as a yes.

Standing, I grin, slow and seductive, before walking away, making sure the ass he seems so taken with sways with each step.

I don't need to hear the thunk of his boots behind me to know he's following.

The enraptured pub crowd parts for me like a pair of gossiping lips in a schoolyard. Their unbridled lust nearly sears a hole through my tongue, but no one tries to speak to me as I make my way through the side door of the pub and into the alley, breathing in the crisp Keirdren air.

It's a perfect night. The only light comes from the stars and the white light of the slivered moon. Mist hangs in the air, engulfing me in its cool, damp familiarity. The alley is still. The dark cobblestones are neatly paved and speckled with shades of brown and gray—a sharp contrast to the navy-brick exterior of the surrounding buildings.

My mark enters the alley.

I suck in another misty breath before turning to face him. His green eyes are still dazed as the pub door slams shut. We make quite the pair: me, armed with my face and vocal cords, and him, a dreamy expression and lovelorn eyes.

"What's your name?" he sighs out.

I smile and step closer. The toes of my shoes kiss those of his leather boots. "Saoirse." It comes out a breathy whisper.

My mark makes a noise that isn't a word.

I inhale, taking in fog through my nose, my mouth, my pores. The water tingles where it touches me, calling out. Urging me to act quickly. I tamp the feeling down like leaves at harvest. I want to take my time. Savor my kill.

The mist condenses around me, forming a sheet of water that curls into a long tendril.

He stares as I twirl the ribbon of water in my hands, around and around.

The water calls me to sing, but instead, I speak. "You touched me when you saw me. Why?"

His eyes follow the swirling water. "Y-you're beautiful."

I tilt my head to one side. The water speeds up, as do his eyes. "That means you can touch me?"

"Y-you're—"

"Beautiful," I finish with a roll of my eyes. "Yes, you said that. Do you make a habit of touching beautiful women without permission?" My eyes flash silver with my words.

His heartbeat quickens. He opens his mouth but doesn't speak.

Irritated, I release the water, and it splatters against the cobblestones, splashing his boots and my bare ankles. It sends a surge of power pulsing through me, and I can no longer stall my craving.

Kill.

My instincts tug at my heart, my lips part, and a song pours out. Soft, soulful, wordless.

What little expression remains on my mark's face melts like chocolate in the sun, leaving those bright green eyes vacant.

I am no longer smiling.

I bend toward him, still singing. He mirrors my movements, a puppet on a taut string, poised to snap.

Silver eyes holding his, I slide a hand down the front of my dress and slip out the vial of *shikazhe*. The midnight-blue color of the liquid gives away the vial's contents on sight. Still, when I hold it out, he takes it without question.

"Two drops on your tongue," I whisper.

Never, not once, does he look away from my eyes as he pops out the cork and tilts the vial, dropping two beads of blue onto his tongue.

I gently extricate the vial from his hands, tuck it back in my dress, and turn to leave.

There's a *thud* as his body hits the cobblestone. I don't pause. The fun part is over.

My fingers plunge into the leather pouch tied around my neck for the small clay bead etched with golden runes. I set the gray bead on my tongue and click it into place, embedding it behind my false wooden tooth.

The transformation of the *keil* bead ripples across my face like a raindrop in still water.

My hair—dark and thick and wild—loses its shine, and the silken-smooth skin of my face—deep brown, like the bark of a samsam tree—withering into a burn that stretches from eyebrow line to chin across the right side of my face.

My steps echo against the cobblestones as I leave the alley. This part of South Vanihail is littered with shops, pubs, and restaurants in neat rows. Torches hang from light posts at each block, but their flickering does little to illuminate the quiet streets.

I plod to an alley a few storefronts away where I've stashed

my leather satchel and extra set of clothes. It's a comfort to arm myself with loose pants, a thick wool cloak, and my usual worn leather boots.

I toss my pub clothes in my bag and shoulder it. The mist wisps against the exposed skin of my face as I leave the alley. It beckons to me, *sings* to me, but I tug up my hood and lower my head.

Only one kill tonight.

Most everything is closed this time of night, so aside from the whistling wind and occasional wandering water fae drunk on berry wine, the streets are quiet.

I trudge out of the clustered center to the sprawling outskirts of the capital sector of Vanihail. My already aching feet whine with the knowledge that I have another long walk ahead of me after this. It doesn't help that the paved cobblestones fade into dusty dirt roads as I cross from South Vanihail into North Vanihail. Time spent maintaining the sector decreases the farther you get from the coast—the farther you move from the Palace.

As I drag myself up the final hill, I spit out my *keil* bead and tuck it away. I sense my Employer's presence before I see him leaned up against the trunk of the samsam tree we've designated as our meeting point.

His silhouette mirrors the tree's: lofty, dark, and skinny, with spindly limbs that stretch longer than looks natural. As always, my Employer's face is hidden by nightfall and the shield of his cloak.

I stop a half-dozen paces away.

For a few ticks, we're silent, observing each other.

He speaks first. "It's done?" His voice is deep, gravelly, and no doubt disguised by a *keil* bead.

"Yes, sir," I say.

I know little about my Employer, he knows little about me, and we both know better than to ask questions. Still, I've gleaned the essentials. He's a right-leaning ambidex (most Keirdren soldiers are), he pays on time, and he's an assassin for the Raze—an infamous group of powerful fae who slaughters other powerful fae for a hefty fee at the request of still other powerful fae.

Usually, the Raze doesn't employ women, but five lunes ago, I became the first. Unofficially.

Everything about my Employer is calm. I run my tongue along the roof of my mouth, searching for an emotion other than the earthy flavor of his apathy.

As always, there's nothing.

A soft jingle of coins precedes my Employer dropping a burlap bag of gold ranis at my feet. "The Raze and Spektryl thank you for your service."

I've never met Spektryl and I doubt I ever will. As the Raze assassin credited with the highest number of kills, he's likely busy. At least, he used to be.

Five lunes ago, Spektryl stopped killing, and when the Raze hired me, all my kills for them were credited to him. My Employer has never told me why and, as long as he continues to pay on time, I don't ask.

I swoop forward and snatch the bag of ranis. "Thank you, sir."

With a nod, my Employer moves away from the samsam tree and melts into the night as though consumed by fog. An air fae trick.

I met him after I curled my fist around a sleazy water fae's throat behind a pub and squeezed until he stopped breathing. My Employer slinked up behind me with an alluring proposition: How would I like to get paid to kill?

It was an easy yes.

With my satchel weighted by gold and shoulders weighted by exhaustion, I descend the hill, headed home.

By the time I've made it into North Vanihail's residential area, my body aches. The houses are smaller here. Short, squat, and mostly made of rotting wooden slats coated in chipped paint, with thatched roofs that leak year-round. There was once a trail of dirt we called a street, but it's been overgrown by weeds that have since died, leaving a sad brown path in its wake.

My time in the Vanihailian Barracks means I'm in excellent physical condition, but I'm still half-asleep as I stumble up the rose-lined pathway to the tiny white mill house I call home.

I raise a hand to knock on the blue wooden door when it's yanked open, and I'm accosted by a nimble pair of brown arms twining around my waist and a flop of dark hair against my chest.

"Pinecone!" the creature attached to the arms cheers.

My exhaustion goes up in flames. With a wide smile, I return the hug, lifting her and spinning her around. "Hey, Beansprout!"

As a sprig, Rain had nicknamed the family after objects that snatched her attention. I was dubbed "Pinecone" and she "Beansprout."

I'm still carrying her as I march through the front door and kick it closed behind me. "Mom! Dad!" I screech, voice muffled from Rain's big hair. "It's me!"

"Is that my Pinecone?" Running footsteps thunk against the steps, and a breath later, my mother rushes into the main room. She wears a long white nightgown and forest-green slippers, and her hair is wrapped in olive leaves for the night. She claims it softens her coarse head of dark curls, but I think it reminds her of the home she left behind in the earth fae sector, Kurr Valley.

None of us is related by blood—hell, we're not even the same

species—but they’re my family just the same. Scratch that, they’re my whole damned world.

I taste the fruity zing of Mom’s excitement as she catches sight of me and charges.

I don’t have time to set Rain down before she sweeps both of us into a hug. “Did the Barracks let you out before graduation?”

Her hug jostles the ranis in my bag, and the coins clink together. I jerk away. “Not exactly . . .”

My mom’s excitement flickers away, replaced with something that stinks of disappointment, tinged with rotting fear.

Without missing a beat, she scoops Rain into her arms, taking her from me. She disguises the action as affection, but I see it for what it is. She’s protecting Rain from me.

It stings.

More than stings.

I pretend not to notice.

“Saoirse.” This is a different voice. Deeper.

I surreptitiously adjust the strap of my bag, slinging it against my back, out of sight and, hopefully, out of his mind. “Hey, Dad.”

My father is a large man. Tall, hulking, bulky from hours tossing around heavy sacks of flour in the mill, with black hair and skin like burnt umber. He looks like he hasn’t smiled in lunes. Or slept in lunes, for that matter.

I try to hug him, but he gives a sharp nod to the bag strapped across my chest. “What’s in the bag, Saoirse?”

I fold my arms, sensing an impending spat. “Money.”

Dad’s expression doesn’t change, but his stance stiffens. “Rain.”

“Yes?” Rain sidles around Mom and hugs me from the side.

“Go wait in your room. Your sister will come see you in a moment.”

"But—"

"*Now*, Rain."

She pouts but scurries away, shooting me one last look before darting to her bedroom or, more likely, to the top of the stairs to eavesdrop.

Twisting the bag around to my front, I drop the sack of coins on the floor. "You didn't have to do that." I nudge the bag closer to him with my foot. "This is for you. It should keep Rain safe for another few lunes."

My father ignores the gold in favor of scowling at me. "You know how I feel about how you made this money."

"You have any better ideas? The mill doesn't bring in enough for what Rain needs."

"And how would you know what she needs? You're never here."

It would've hurt less if he struck me across the face. Punch me in the gut, slash me with a blade, but *never* tell me I don't provide for Rain.

"Because I'm *working*," I say.

"You call what you do work?"

My nostrils flare. "I was talking about training at the Barracks. *That's* where I spend most of my time. Sometimes I go out for a job. And yes, Dad, it's all work."

A spot at the Vanihailian Barracks is one of the most coveted positions in Keirdre. To anyone but my father, having a kid in the Barracks—training for a ranked position in Keirdre's military—would be a damned high honor.

"You wouldn't need extra work if you hadn't insisted on joining the Ranks," he says.

"We're having this spat again? My graduation's tomorrow."

"Exactly why we're having this discussion. Do you think attending graduation is a good idea?"

"It's a necessity," I say. "When I place first at the Ranking, I'll get a highly paid assignment and we can finally stop worrying about missing payments."

"There's going to be water in the arena, Saoirse." His expression softens with his words. "If you lose control—even for a moment—everyone watching will know what you are. And they'll kill you."

My mother flinches, and I taste both of their fear again. Only this time, it's not directed at me but *for* me.

My anger flees. "I won't." I will myself to believe it. "I'll be careful. I promise."

Dad still looks unconvinced. "Saoirse—"

"Dad." I cut him off with a teasing grin. "Can't you just be happy to see me?"

He rolls his eyes but pairs it with a rueful smile as he tugs me into a hug. "Of course I'm happy to see you, Pinecone. I just worry about you. You take so many risks."

"I know." I pull back to allow my mom to join the hug. "But after I graduate, I can take better care of Rain. And in the meantime, my Employer ensures we're not in debt. I know it's a risk, but it's for Rain, and she's worth everything."

And there it is. The inevitable twinge of guilt.

The words are true. Mostly.

I like to think my work for the Raze is for Rain's sake. But it's a lie to suggest there isn't a part of me that can't resist the pull of a kill.

Sirens were made to kill. Our purpose is to lure, seduce, and destroy. It's wrong, and I know it's wrong, but that knowledge

does nothing to ease the feeling of euphoria—of complete and utter *bliss*—when I lead a man astray.

The horrifying truth: I'm as drawn to water as men are to me. When I near it, it speaks to me. Urges me to act. *Kill*. The call of the water is as fierce as it is deadly. My own personal Siren Song.

Hodderscape