

# Prologue

Lilith peered at the crystalline waters and was not displeased by her reflection.

Irises stained a deep crimson that matched her plump lips. A soft glow irradiated from her pale skin. Feral black hair intertwined with fragments of bone from her enemies.

Not all of it was nice, though. There were hungry bags under her eyes, too. A consequence of the months spent underground, healing, waiting, trembling with rage. Soon, she would have to go to the surface to replenish, and then the hunt could begin.

For the time being, she marveled a little longer at her reflection. Clawing her way back from the edge had left its marks on her body, and she was enraptured by them.

She was not quite who she used to be. But it was hard to say if she was a witch, demon, or goddess. She thought about it while licking her dry lips. And then the answer hit her. Godhood fit her like a black velvet dress, and she would wear it like armor.

Walking away from the natural pool and her newly discovered nature, a pang of pain made her shudder. She leaned against the cold rock to steady herself.

First the shock, then the humiliation. She cursed into the empty cave, and her rough voice reverberated through the slimy walls. She had underestimated the damage inflicted upon her, and her patience was running dry.

Months had passed since she had been forced to hide like

vermin in a cold underwater cavern. Cut off from the kingdom and throne she had sat upon for centuries. All because of a sad creature she had raised as her own.

If she thought carefully, the signs had been there from the very beginning. A propensity for rebellion. A heart too human to kill without mercy. But pride and love had blinded Lilith, and because of that, she had let the weeds grow and fester.

None of that mattered now.

A crooked smile surfaced on the face of the newborn goddess. She would use that anguish to recreate herself, and the effort would only make her revenge all the sweeter.

## The Woman Who Was Born Twice

I picked up the delivery box, locked the door behind me, and wrapped my thin scarf over my nose.

Cold no longer bothered me, but pretending it still did gave me a fleeting sense of belonging and, most of all, it muffled the shouts of fishers and dockworkers echoing through the thick fog.

They were only trying to get their boats safely back to the harbor. But their shouts reminded me of other nights filled with terrors and made my medallion feel heavier than it should. I touched it warily, hidden beneath my wool sweater, and hurried through the docks, trying to leave my grim thoughts behind.

Surely this fog was playing tricks with my mind, or maybe it just reminded me too much of home. The place where I had been born twice, amid pools of blood and piercing cries. I could never return there because everything that happens twice is bound to happen again, and I wasn't ready to face it. Not until I fulfilled my promise to Adam. Not until I broke his curse.

Less than a year had passed since Adam and I arrived at Latis Island, a beacon for tourists whose definition of the

supernatural had been ripped out of a children's book. I couldn't care less about their bizarre superstitions, but after months of chasing shadows, I was beginning to wonder if there wasn't a ring of truth to their tales. At this point, hope was my only sustenance.

Locals believed we were a family of misfits and runaways and we saw no reason to deny it. It wasn't such a wild stretch. Adam appeared to be on the verge of puberty, and I could pretend to be his young guardian. Albeit a very careless one.

A tattoo of a dragon spread from the tip of his fingers to his left cheek, imbuing Adam's pale skin with a mixture of black, orange, and crimson. My brown skin wasn't any less odd, but instead of tattoos, I had a collection of scars. Not deep enough to be visible from a distance, but sufficient to keep people from asking awkward questions.

But then again, I doubted we needed any kind of pretense to fit into this place. It was Latis' thick veil of weirdness that allowed us to hide in plain sight. Truth be told, I had never felt so plain and normal in my life.

The locals were simple, feral, and practical. Nothing like the horde of tourists that visited the island each summer, eager to quench their thirst for a watered-down version of the supernatural. Living among Latis' strange inhabitants, sharing their bread and butter, caring about their insignificant little troubles, made it easy to believe we could make a home of this place. But it was when I shook with terror and lay awake in the dead of the night that I remembered why we could never again settle on this earth.

I was trapped in limbo. Too strange to be human. Too frail to be whatever I had been in the past. Never in my long life had I met someone like me; I only knew what I really was from old

stories.

I was not a witch. Although, in the past, I had earned my place among them and managed to learn a little trick or two. But what I did wasn't magic. It was a way of willing Spirits into existence, of summoning beasts lurking beneath the fabric of reality.

It was useless to think about that now because most of it was gone, shattered by a cascade of shitty bad decisions. The only Spirit I could still summon was trapped in someone else's body, and extracting it would get its host killed.

I eyed my surroundings cautiously. The fog brought another layer of blindness to my already scrambled perception. Halfway across the harbor, I almost crashed into a shape and the heavy delivery box nearly slipped from my grip. Before I could stop myself, a loud "Who goes there?" escaped my tight lips. I almost drew my blades alongside it.

"Lau, dear!" a familiar voice said.

My muscles relaxed in a heartbeat. "Saul!" I said, feeling embarrassed by my reaction. "How are you? It's a bit dangerous to be so close to the water in this weather."

The old man raised his hands in defeat, as if I'd just caught him doing mischief. "Alright, alright, you worry too much, Lau. I'm an old man, you know." He winked. "I've lived a long and fulfilling life. No point in being too careful just to stretch my life by a couple of years. Might as well not live at all." His smile was broad and filled with sunshine.

I hated when he said those things, but I didn't press him further. The townsfolk already called me Old Sister when they thought I wasn't listening, and they didn't mean it in a good way. It took me a heartbeat to notice the pouch of Latis' smelling salts on Saul's hands. He had drawn a near perfect line at the

entrance of his boat, almost as a warning for unwanted visitors. "What could you possibly need so badly that couldn't wait 'til morning?"

He laughed heartily and the tension that had been building around my shoulders lifted. When his chuckles dissolved, a worried expression took hold of his features. "I was looking for you, gal! Help this old man one more time, will you?"

I smiled, knowing well what he was talking about. "Alright, but only if you tell me what the hell is going on here." I pointed to the salt at his feet.

He looked puzzled at first, but quickly turned his attention to the fog that thickened around us. "One can never be too careful with this weather," he said, then snickered.

It sounded so unlike him. It made me shiver. I waited for him to elaborate, but he stepped onto the deck as if he had just stated the obvious and left me chewing on my thoughts. I rolled my eyes and sighed, glanced one last time at the dark line of salt at my feet, and stepped inside his floating home.

He had fashioned it after one of the many local stories. Sirens' tails decorated the hull, and the prow had been shaped in the form of a female fisher carrying a lamp while pointing towards the horizon. *Carlota, the Brave*. One of the rumored founders of the town.

Saul gestured at the table when we entered the cabin. Coffee was brewing on the stove and the unmistakable smell of cinnamon buns filled the air. It felt like home here, as much as I hated admitting it. Better than home, actually.

The letter was on the table when I sat alongside pictures of smiling young children. I couldn't help staring at them and a strange longing swelled in my chest. When Saul put the mugs of coffee down and sat in front of me, I was lost in thought.

Like his grandchildren, I had lost my mother too soon. The last memory I had of her was as still as a picture. She sat on a bench, unsmiling. Her skin had been a shade darker than mine, but we shared the same golden eyes and a nose too big for our faces. In my mother's case, that nose had failed to spoil her beauty; I wasn't so sure about mine.

"They've grown," I said, trying to shake the longing.

"Yes," he said in a quiet tone.

"Will they come this summer? You think I could meet them then?" The words flew from my mouth before I could quench them.

"I'm counting on it, gal. I even talked to Sally about renting a little room at her inn. *Carlota* isn't big enough for all of us," he said, referring to his boat.

"Are you sure you want your grandchildren near the town's most boisterous fishers?"

He chuckled. "Those idiots helped me raise their mother," he said. "Besides, ya know how much Sally is dying to meet the kids..."

He gripped his mug and stared into the distance. Sadness drew deep lines in his face. If he knew how much I wanted to stand up and hug him right now, he would laugh at me. Instead, I picked up the letter and read it aloud, translating its contents in the process.

Two cinnamon buns had found their way into my stomach by the time I finished penning Saul's reply. In all these years, he never learned how to speak or write in French. But he also never doubted he would one day convince his grandchildren and son-in-law to visit him.

It looked like Saul's persistence was about to pay off, and that made me feel like a coward. Deep down, I knew I wasn't going

THE SUMMONER'S CRY

to be around to witness it.