

Chapter One

Time to listen. Time to learn the truth. Time to run before Harmonia Shae lost her soul.

Harmonia kept close to the wooded cliffs along the mountainside of Sandovia. Her means of escape was the shimmering elliptical portal hidden within the cave on the west side of the tallest oak tree. Another thousand feet and she'd be in Sedona.

An eerie sensation prickled the hairs on her neck. She stopped and hid among the large red blossoms of the cliffrose flower and the purple sage covering the desert terrain.

A nauseating stench filled her nostrils. Only one terrestrial in their realm carried the odor of rotten egg and damp dirt. Searching the clumps of trees, a troll emerged from the underground tunnel to her right. As she sprinted to a nearby Jupiter tree, his beady laser-ray eyes narrowed in on her location.

The troll's heavy body followed her along the cliff, watching her like a predator stalking his prey. Her heart blasted in her chest—a quick, hard pulse in her throat at the chance of being caught. Clutching her fingers, she scanned his energy field and took hold of the Jupiter's heavy limb. She pulled herself onto her feet and gave the area a once-over, making eye-contact with the beast.

The troll pointed toward the mountain's edge. She turned to her left. Two djinn shifters from her stepmother's harem were guarding the cave's entrance.

"Do not teleport. Enter through the portal," her cousin, Tilion's warning words rang in her ears.

Time was against her. How could she distract the djinn and get through the portal? She spotted a patch of prickly cacti close to the cave's opening. With a calming breath, she evoked her water magick. Clearing her mind, she concentrated on the molecules and cells within the plant. She forced the water inside the cacti to push to the surface. If she did the incantation right, the thorny spikes would turn into powerful daggers.

As she watched hundreds of thorny spikes shower down upon the two Djinn, a sweet bewilderment of tremulous apprehension coursed through her. The hysterical note in the Djinn's screams thrilled her. She watched them dash toward the cliffs where the troll stood with his raised hatchet. A thunderous roar echoed from the troll giving her the distraction she needed.

Fifty feet to freedom. Harmonia sprinted to the cave's entrance, not slowing down until she was through the oval portal and on the other side of the realm.

Shadows of light streamed through cracks in the rotting wood. Old rusted tools were nailed to the wall. A large water tank filled the room. The portal's vibrating energy faded, replaced by a wall of wood. On the roof, a series of staccato taps sounded...rain, or bird.

She opened the door a crack and peeked out to make sure her arrival hadn't drawn anyone's attention. As she inhaled the sweet aroma of rain, an eager hopefulness filled her heart.

A slight sprinkle of rain lingered. She left the shed and tilted her face to the sky. She loved how the rain filled her soul, melding with her own water magick.

Shaking out her damp hair, she pulled her unruly curls into a ponytail and dusted off her clothes.

She walked toward the row of buildings. People leisurely walked under the overhang roofs paying no attention to the sprinkles of rain, or her. Good.

From her backpack, she retrieved the sketch of the town. Her cousin, Tilion, had marked the saloon along with the location of his apartment. Looking down the street, she saw the visitor center and took a final look at the watershed, which housed the portal. A large Raven sat atop the electrical wires. "Bittersweet irony," she said to herself.

She strolled along the sidewalk keeping pace with the troupe of shoppers, remembering to blend in and not bring attention to her presence. The sign for the Cowboy Saloon was two buildings away. Now, to meet Tilion.

She pushed the swinging half doors. Men wore wide-brim hats, patterned shirts, and tight jeans. Women paraded in low-cut tank tops and form-fitting jeans.

Harmonia scanned the room; a magical energy vibrated through the place. She couldn't identify each species, but smelled the lemongrass of fae. Djinn also frequented the establishment. She smelled their scent of Elderberry. A quiver of uncertainty edged its way toward her mind, but she squelched the doubt. This was her only chance at freedom.

Intrigued with the violins and rousing hillbilly beat, she followed the music past tables and booths where the aroma of cooked meat permeated the air. She never understood the desire for red meat—not one of her favorites. Past the dining area, six men leaned against a large mahogany counter. She took a seat at the end of the bar to wait for Tilion.

"You want a beer?" A woman behind the bar with magenta spiked hair asked.

"Sure."

The bartender slid her an icy mug; the tangy taste met with her palette.

"You here for the rodeo?" A cowboy with a black stetson and plaid gray shirt asked, moving his way closer to her end of the bar.

Narrowing her eyes, she scanned his aura. Human. Harmless. She relaxed. "Meeting a friend. Do you know him? Tilion Shae," she asked with a fruity tone, hoping to replicate the sound of the other women.

"Nope."

The bartender's brow arched. She took out a GPS signaler like the one Tilion carried and went toward the back as another girl came out. Harmonia pushed down the anxiety that churned inside her body. *Did the woman with magenta hair know Tilion?* She wondered at the way she disappeared at the mention of his name.

"Dance with me." Taking her hand, the cowboy edged her toward the dance floor. A perfect cover to inspect the crowd and learn the customs of these humans. She joined in the line dance and followed the woman in front of her. Caught up in the joviality of the dancers, Harmonia kept her eye on the crowd, and searched for Tilion and potential problems. The music slowed, and she returned to her seat.

She'd spent the last two days obsessing about her escape. She was clueless at what to do without Tilion. Out of the corner of her eyes, two gnomes sat watching her. Panic settled deep within her stomach. They smirked broadly, licking their brown lips. Their lustful eyes reduced to slits. *Disgusting*. Not willing to wait for Tilion any longer, she moved toward the half-doors and stepped out of the saloon.

Her cousin warned her to only trust Lara, the wife of the ambassador of the human realm. She kept the address in her pocket. She'd find her in the morning.

A couple of blocks down from the cowboy saloon, she took a seat on the bench in front of a general store. She watched to see if the gnomes were going to follow her. Positive they weren't, she walked along the sidewalk, gazing into the windows of the pottery and crystal shops. A red neon sign—Amy's Sushi—caught her attention. Crossing the street, she opened the weathered door and glanced behind her, making sure no one followed. A succulent ginger aroma wafted through the air. Her mouth watered. She gasped at the sight of raw fish under a glass counter, all the while scanning the room for terrestrial energy. Thankfully, none.

At the counter, a man in a solid white cook's shirt with a black scarf tied around his head invited her to sit. She ordered a platter of sashimi, yellowtail, and spicy tuna. Each bite tasted like a piece of heaven. Satisfied with her meal, she waited until the last customer left before pulling the address from inside her flowered tunic. "Could you tell me where this house is?"

"The Avery's live on the outskirts of town. Take 89A toward Oak Canyon about ten miles. The road is full of switchbacks and on the right, you'll see Oak Canyon Road. Turn right. Follow the road until you reach the river not far from the Canyon's campground. You'll find their cabin." He lifted the lid from a platter and sliced her a piece of soft, white cake. "Any friend of Lara is a friend of mine."

"Thank you." She popped the cake into her mouth and sighed at the creamy buttery taste of the dessert. "This is delightful."

His whole face beamed with a smile. She retrieved a twenty from her backpack and paid her bill.

Leaving the restaurant, she walked through town cautiously. Against the wood building, leading into a tiny parking lot outside the saloon, stood the female with the magenta spiked hair from the bar. When Harmonia walked past, the woman fell in step and touched her arm.

"Tilion's been detained," she said, with an acute note of distress in her voice.

Harmonia stopped in mid-stride. "No." A flush of adrenaline raced through her body. "What happened?"

A stifling sensation of fear threatened to overtake her thoughts. The woman's shield blocked. Her unreadable aura made Harmonia cautious of the fae standing in front of her.

"I can't say. Go to his apartment and lock the door. Do not wander around town. Hurry and hide." The woman pointed to the end of the street. "He lives behind Ler'shy's. Go!" She went back into the saloon leaving Harmonia frozen in place.

Seeing the fork in the road, she looked for a two story building with the name Amsted apartments. The woman's words haunted her, and worry ate at her nerves.

She unlocked the apartment and entered a sparsely furnished room: A couch. A table. A television. "Ugh!"

Opening the bedroom door, she stood in the doorway. A king size bed. A dresser. No pictures on the wall—sterile, like the rest of the house, except for the few clothes hanging in the closet. She tossed her backpack on the burgundy comforter. Too early for sleep, she turned on the television. The loud noise ruffled her already frayed nerves.

Shoulders tight, her body ached. Taking a deep, pained breath she closed her eyes. She couldn't help thinking of how her father would punish Tilion for breaking Marid law and helping her journey to Sedona. The Marid king demanded law-abiding compliance from the women of his harem. She'd challenged his dissent. Tilion and her chaperone would be punished for their disobedience.

Last week when her chaperone thought she slept, Harmonia time-traveled through the magnetic field to Oaf to speak with her grandfather, an Anunnaki ancient god. "Beware of spies within the ranks of the harem. Listen to Tilion and return to the human realm. Traitors exist." His words still reverberated in her soul. *Traitors.*

Inside the living room the magical shield protected her, yet the apartment walls closed in like a suffocating blanket. She opened the sliders and watched the sun recede behind the red mountain.

The twilight of the desert landscape with its winds played on her nervous system. Suddenly, a formidable echo traveled through the patio and gave her a chilly feeling. An unshakeable sixth sense of being watched filled her essence. Grinding her teeth, she evoked her assimilation shield and listened to the magnetic sounds vibrating in the air. The energy sizzled with subatomic particles, the same power she used when stepping through the quantum energy of time. Who ever watched was from the inner dimension of the terrestrial realms.