

She Was Supposed to Die Today

She was supposed to die today.

The prophecy was unfolding as planned, on schedule, so elegantly. She had finally made the decision to sacrifice herself for the greater good.

Then, just like that, she changed her mind, thanks to her boyfriend and his confounded map. The little halfling appeared and rescued her, completing the reversal.

How very tedious.

Still, today isn't over yet. Even now, as she lies there surrounded by friends and family, my dark servants are rising out of the ground, preparing to soul terminate the humans. What grand theater it will be!

At the end—at the very end, when the five-pointed star is completed—the world will be washed in fire and reborn as the new kingdom. My kingdom.

And then I will convince my beloved to join me at my side. What a pair we will make—the ultimate combination of light, dark, and everything in between.

But first, the girl. The prophecy. The party to end all parties.

Let the carnage begin.

CHAPTER 1

My So-Called Death



Sunshine?

The voice is insistent, piercing through my foggy brain haze. “Sunshine!”

I blink. Gray light, a blurry figure. *Figures*—plural. My temples throb, and my mouth feels like a giant, yucky cotton ball. Prickly needles press painfully into the backs of my arms and legs. The air against my skin is a cold, clammy blanket.

“Sunshine, are you all right? You hit your head and lost consciousness for a few minutes.”

A face hovers over me. Several faces, actually. A tall, tall man in a fancy gray suit. A kind-looking woman in pastel nurse’s scrubs and clogs.

And a cute guy in a brown leather jacket. He rakes his hand through his tousled, tawny hair and gives me a lopsided grin. “Sunshine,” he exhales. The way he says my name in that dreamy deep voice sets my heart aflutter.

Wait. *Sets my heart aflutter?* What century is this? Am I having a retro dream?

“Thank goodness you’re alive!” The nurse kneels down at my side and pushes back her long red curls. She touches my forehead tenderly; her vanilla lotion smell is familiar and comforting. “I can’t believe . . . we thought you were . . . I don’t know what I would have done if . . .” Her words unravel as she begins to tear up.

I rub my eyes. Information floods my scrambled synapses. The nurse is my mom, Kat Griffith. My human mom.

“Where’s the owl?” I ask her groggily.

“What owl?” Mom asks, confused. Behind her the man in the suit squares his shoulders and gives a little cough. That’s Aidan, my not-human dad.

“The owl that was here before,” I say. “With that girl?”

And then it comes to me. I *know* that girl. She’s Anna Wilde, who is ten and dead and invisible to most people. The owl is her favorite stuffed toy.

I tried to kill myself earlier, and Anna saved my life.

I tear up too as I remember.

“You’re okay now, Sunshine,” the leather jacket guy murmurs. Nolan, my brilliant and awesome boyfriend. No wonder my heart was set aflutter before.

Nolan is wrong, though. I’m *not* okay, not really. Because I am a luiseach, an elite guardian angel-superhero who fights demons and helps the dead cross over to the other side.

“Her heart rate is very elevated,” Mom says, pressing her cool fingers against my wrist.

“That’s normal—for her,” Aidan replies.

Other memories come rushing back. Earlier I learned that my very existence was going to jeopardize the future of the human race, civilization, the world as we know it. Major stuff.

And so I split the ground open with my special luiseach knife and plunged in like a sacrificial lamb.

“Her pulse is starting to regulate,” Mom says.

Aidan peers at his sleek steel watch. “That took a little more time than usual, but it’s understandable, given the circumstances.”

Then everything went crazy, haywire, out of control. Just as I took that plunge, I learned that my death was going to make the situation much, much worse. So naturally, I decided to bail. But I couldn’t. I was falling into an abyss with no way to reverse or rewind—on top of which, a zillion demons were waiting for me down below.

Thank goodness Anna appeared out of nowhere with her stuffed owl and pulled me to safety. Once we were aboveground and free and clear of the demons, she let go . . .

My smile vanishes.

The demons. They’re still down there.

“*Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,*” I mutter under my breath. I hoist myself up on my elbows and try to stand up. My brain swirls with nausea and dizziness.

“What do you think you’re doing, young lady?” Mom puts a firm but gentle hand on my chest. “You can’t move until I’m done checking your vitals! And we have no idea what sort of trauma your head, neck, and spine may have sustained . . .”

“Mom, you need to help me up. There were demons down there, and—”

“*Demons?*” Aidan interrupts sharply.

“Aidan, can we close the ground back up? Like, immediately? I saw hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Dark spirits too. What if they try to climb out or fly out or trapeze-artist out or . . .” Fear is fueling me now, and I’m babbling at the speed of light. Aidan isn’t just my dad and my mentor—he’s also a super-big-deal luiseach. If anyone would know how to undo what I did, it’s him.

His brow furrows as he glances over his shoulder. That’s when I notice the others standing nearby: my friends Ashley and Lucio . . . and Victoria, who is Anna’s mom . . . and Helena, who is my bio-mom, not that I like thinking about my genes being linked to her genes in any way whatsoever.

Aidan reaches a hand in Helena’s direction. The two of them used to be a super-big-deal luiseach couple until they had a bad break-up—not your typical “we need to spend time apart and date other people” break-up, but a “one of us wants to kill our infant daughter for the greater good and the other totally doesn’t” break-up.

That infant daughter was me. Helena tried to kill me again this morning, just before I tried to kill myself. Yup, it’s been a busy day.

“The incantation,” Aidan says quickly, and Helena nods and joins his side. They confer in low voices. Lucio starts to follow Helena with an expression of pure rage . . . no one can blame him, considering that she had his parents executed sixteen years ago . . . but Aidan gives him a warning look, and he retreats with clenched fists.

“Can someone please explain to me what’s going on?” Ashley bursts out. “First, the earth splits open, like, like, in the new *Star Wars* movie. Then Sunshine, you *levitate* . . . and thrash

around, drop into a ginormous hole, fly back out, and crash-land in this Goth lady's—" she gestures to Victoria "—front yard. Is this some sort of demented magic trick? Is this what people in Washington do to freak out the tourists?"

I stand up slowly and peer around. This time Mom doesn't try to stop me, although she does give me one of her extremely stern nurse-mom looks.

Whoa. Ashley is right. Victoria's yard looks postapocalyptic, like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* postapocalyptic. (My literary idol Jane Austen is rolling over in her grave right now.) Jagged, gaping chasms crisscross the pine-needle-littered lawn. Chasms that I created with my luiseach knife. The dark, brooding evergreens don't help. Neither do the dying spring flowers that are brittle and hoar-white with frost.

I frown. There was something else here before. *Someone* else. A man in black. Where did he go? Did I imagine him?

"Are you okay?" Nolan joins me at my side. I feel a rush of warmth as I always do when I'm with him—not just because I'm madly in love with him but because he's my protector. Protectors have an instant radiator effect on their luiseach. (Every luiseach has a protector and a mentor.)

"I'm okay. Well, *ish*. How about you?" I reply. That's when I notice the cut on Nolan's left temple, crusted with blood. Helena did that to him.

"Are you all right?" I ask worriedly.

"I'm fine. Your mom checked me out. Listen, Sunshine, today isn't the way I imagined saying 'welcome back' to you after not seeing you for three months. Well, except for the part when we, um . . ."

Kissed for the first time, I finish in my head. Said "I love you" to each other for the first time.

He smiles shyly. I smile back.

If only we were alone right now, but no. Just then Aidan and Helena sweep by us and position themselves in the center of the war-zone lawn. They look very serious and ceremonious. What are they up to? Can Helena even be trusted, after everything? They close their eyes, extend their palms upward, and begin chanting in unison—strange, ancient words.

This must be the incantation Aidan mentioned. I don't know what the words mean, yet a deep part of me recognizes them, reacts to their magic.

"Excuse me a sec," I say to Nolan. He nods, comprehending.

I step forward and take my place to the left of Aidan, away from Helena. I begin to chant, my words mumbly and improvised at first, then clearer and more sure.

Something reacts.

A sudden frigid wind blasts across the yard and pushes against us. Wobbling, I dig my Chuck Taylors into the ground to steady myself. Aidan and Helena remain still as statues and continue chanting.

The wind intensifies. Pine branches crack and tumble to the ground. An entire tree falls with an ominous *thud*. Slate tiles blow off the roof. A stone bird fountain splits in two.

What is happening? Are *we* doing that?

It occurs to me that I should get Mom and Ashley out of there. But Nolan being Nolan, he knows exactly what I need and ushers the two of them toward the street. Mom protests; Ashley doesn't protest at all and in fact is screeching hysterically about returning to Austin *immediately*.

The earth is shaking now. The walls of the chasms start to close, inch by shuddering inch. The incantation is working. We are keeping the demon army at bay.

I shutter my eyelids and go into a sort of trance. I chant faster and faster, the words tumbling over each other, my voice hoarse with urgency . . .

Someone screams.

My eyelids fly open. *Oh, freak.* Nearby, a humungous wild animal is crawling out of one of the chasms. It peers around hungrily and leaps onto its nearest prey: Victoria.

I blink. It's not a wild animal. It's a demon. A *serpent*-demon. We are too late. They are coming for us.