

CHAPTER 1

IT WAS HER WEDDING DAY. SHE SAT RESPLENDENT IN HER TOWERING tantour, its flowing veil obscuring the glint emanating from the slit of her eyes and the fire within. She was the lady Destiny.

Even on this day she could not promise to be pure. It was just as well that no one—and especially not the groom, still scheduled to arrive—could catch a glimpse of those eyes. If her mother and her sisters, who knew her best, had caught a flash of the need in her veiled look, they would have put it down to her need for orderliness—Destiny’s need for everything to be *just so* at all times, perhaps even more so on this, her wedding day.

Yes, the tantour that perched regally on her head and towered higher than the horns of the mightiest beasts in the land had served her well. It would continue to do so when she walked out with the groom after the ceremony. This last requirement had been revealed to her only minutes ago when she took her seat upon the silver casket. The throne had been specially designed to match the silver of the tantour.

She now stood up in her red gown, knowing she would do as she’d been asked. Otherwise, it would bring too much disorder. And it was disorder she could not abide—not on her wedding day or any other day.

Why, then, was something bothering her, something stuck in her mind? Why did a voice tell her this was not how she had foreseen it and was not in the cards at all? What had she intended?

She always had the answers to what was happening then and what was to come. She was, after all, Destiny. Hers alone was the power to configure the best possible future. Whether she was actively involved in its manifestation or not, she knew what would be.

Destiny had done as much with her wedding ceremony. By thinking matters through, she had settled how she, unlike other brides, would get the first glimpse of her husband in the course of the marital exchanges. She had also raised questions not asked by other girls her age.

Those girls, she knew, might have been asked for their consent for marriage after they crossed the barrier to womanhood. While their guardians wished to know if the men who proposed would be able to look after them over the course of the girls' lives, the girls wanted to know whether these men would be true partners in every sense of the word.

In any case, Destiny thought impatiently, the elders always left the choice to her. She was permitted autonomy in all matters, not only whom she wed. Accordingly, she had chosen not to learn the holy texts.

She had all the powers in the world—could turn sand into gold if she wanted to, move objects using her eyes, hear and witness events happening miles away, levitate, even vanish into thin air—but she had refrained from using them. For what was the point of using magic? It was like playing a video game in which one is granted unlimited lives, regardless of performance. Instead, Destiny had agreed to play the game of reality with all its inherent rules and unpleasantness.

And so, although she could think herself into any place she liked, she preferred to travel in ordinary ways with sunshine, good food, the company of beloved souls, and unexpected adventures along the way. For it was in the journeying, not the destination, that she took the most pleasure.

True, something about possessing these powers was comforting to Destiny. Yet, it was never about the powers themselves, but about the idea that they reflected who she really was. She never used her powers to advance her personal interests. She didn't have to. Nor did she need to prove anything to anyone.

When the urge to reveal her powers grew strong—and at times it grew very strong indeed—she would simply peer into the place unknown, a place where the True Giver, who owned those powers bestowed upon her, resided. He and only he could determine when and how those powers were used.

Man was manifest, she thought, an ever-recurring finite aspect of the infinite. A man could not wield unlimited magic. If a man became all-powerful, then he could create his own reality at will, which made him a creator. But

no one could stand being both creator and created, for the unbearable solitude it engendered. And this, too, was a reason Destiny chose not to use her powers to control her own affairs. For in doing so she would be forever isolated from those who lacked this power. She would be alone in her greatness.

Fate, her husband-to-be, was the only man on earth who could stand such seclusion. Perhaps that was why he'd been known in the Lands as "he who is neither created nor the creator." Rather, he was between the two—a portal linking the human world and the Divine, ignored, feared or despised by people and beloved by the divine. In promising to be his wife, Destiny would stand beside him on the earthly plane. She had been entrusted those powers by him.

Of this trust, Destiny was well aware. She had been prepared for it all of her life in a most nefarious way. Ever since she was a child, Destiny had been haunted by an evil no ordinary person could bear. It had taken place in her own dreams and visions. That's where Dhumanos, the Archon of all Archons, visited her, compelling her to use her powers and to react, to claim a specific rank among her people, to proclaim herself the ruler of the land.

"Destiny, you are Fate's equal," Dhumanos said. "You've seen all that he has seen. This makes you the Savior in people's eyes. Don't worry about confrontation! You and Fate are like the two voices in one mind that must never meet or else doubt and confusion shall reign. Indeed, the day you join, another fall from Eden will take place."

Even as she rallied against these words, she knew Dhumanos had taken root deep within her. If he hadn't, she would not have to fight this battle of wills with her ego. His words would have washed over her as harmlessly as rainwater slides off a slicker, leaving the wearer dry and warm beneath.

Even now, on her wedding day, his presence and those of his handymen, the Archons, showed in her glazed, fiery eyes. She could only pray that their evil would not infiltrate her nuptial ceremony as it had her slumber.

For as long as she could remember, Dhumanos had haunted her dreams so often that as a child she dreaded bedtime. It took a long time before she realized it was him. Dhumanos never appeared in his true form, but instead he visited her as someone she knew and loved. It began most benignly with the smiling face of her mother, a sister, or a close friend. And when the person would speak, it was always in his or her true voice in words they commonly

used with Destiny. Then this trusted person would suddenly begin spouting an evil thought or encouraging Destiny toward an evil deed.

As soon as Destiny recognized the error in the script, the person in the dream would change, first to an unrecognizable person and then into a creature so frightening it caused Destiny to awake.

Dhumanos did not stop there. He sought to capture Destiny's mind during her waking hours as well. His goal was to generate fear—fear that she would somehow engage in the wrong he tempted her with because he understood fear can cause someone to stumble into the very thing they wished to avoid. And so Destiny also came to dread the moment she awoke as much as she dreaded sleep. It was so hard to keep from interpreting the dreams or dwelling on them so much that they might manifest in her waking reality.

At first, neither Destiny nor her matriarchal protectors knew that Dhumanos had entered the scripts of her dreams. All they had received was a warning that the child, Destiny, must be on her guard. If the evil rose above acceptable levels, they were told it could burn the soul. They didn't know, however, the extent of the damage already wrought.

Destiny recalled the countless nights when she woke drenched in sweat and she would have liked nothing more than to turn away from the images before her eyes.

It was a loss of balance that created momentum and dragged her soul into endless karmic machinations. She might be entrapped in impossible situations, which were the visuals of her dreams converted to half reality, and be restricted within them for eons.

Destiny wanted to believe that as Fate's bride she would be beyond Dhumanos's reach, but there was nothing further from the truth. The fact that she was about to wed Fate only made her a more attractive prize.

Fate was her anchor point, her protector, the sun of her galaxy that lit the pathways. As long as she preserved her place in his vision and stayed under his care, she would continue to receive the substance of life—the power that could help her detect the works of Dhumanos and avoid falling into his schemes, the mathematics of behavior.

Without Fate, Destiny would once again be led astray in her dreams and in life. She might find herself in a place from which she would never wake up. She would slide from this dimension altogether.

Destiny was all too aware of the precariousness of her situation, but even as she struggled to overcome the pitfalls of the ego and the fatal errors it encouraged, she could never hide the fact that she was different from others who might, in their behavior and appearance, seem similar to herself. For in the end no matter how long beauty hid, it would eventually make itself known.

Thus, certain guilt would well up within Destiny at even the slightest display of this uniqueness with which she was endowed. She could hide her power, but she could not hide her rare beauty. She could not hide the paradox of a form that was nearly translucent like that of an angel. The strength and ferocity she reflected in her eyes and body when she was angry or standing up for a righteous cause would make the most powerful of humans tremble and shake.

The week-long festivities had begun seven days ago and were soon to culminate in her going away from home. Her groom would soon arrive, followed all the way from Demire by his own serpentine procession.

But they must have completed their many circuitous undertakings by now, she thought. She, too, had been presented with her lengthy silver chain of cloves by her friends at the start of the wedding ceremony.

She had responded by attaching flowers inside each of which had been placed silver coins. She would carry these living gifts on the journey to her new home and later attach them to the latticed entrance of the sprawling castle in which Fate dwelled.

As she went about the required rituals, Destiny was watched from the heavens and from the Netherworld. Beings from both realms knew that her life would change forever and not in the manner that she saw fit but in a way that they had predetermined for her. For the scripts of hell, which she thought she had cast aside, would soon raise their heads, mocking her and her belief that she was stepping into a life that had been decided solely between herself and her future husband.