

VOICES FROM THE VOID

AN ANTHOLOGY

RAVEN BLACKTHORN



This is an anthology of works of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. The information in this book is not intended for medical purposes. No generative AI was used to write this book.

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FAE-BLOODED

BY PAMELA ERNEST

Bernard, we must talk.
I stopped shaking the imp I had in a stranglehold and looked up, listening.

Humans are encroaching upon our territory. They must be redirected.

Crap.

“It looks like today is your lucky day, you little jerk.”

I sliced a small hole in the veil and tossed the offensive creature through, grinning at the satisfying ‘thud’ as it hit the ground. Pinching the opening closed, I murmured the incantation to knit it back up. Hopefully I’d scared him into staying put in Faery for a while.

Probably not. Imps were the worst.

On my way. Where are they?

A vision appeared before me: two humans near a creek in Bigfoot clan territory.

In a flash I swept past them, registering as nothing more than a breeze to their senses, and found a nice, cozy spot to plop down. I manifested a fishing pole and cast out into the water as they came through the trees.

“Bernie!”

I looked up, feigning surprise.

“Hey, guys! What are y’all up to?”

I reeled in my line, setting the pole aside.

“Too pretty to stay inside,” Josh said, pulling out a bandana and mopping sweat from his forehead. “We’re scouting locations for the club.”

“Well you picked a nice spot, that’s for sure,” I said, standing to shake his hand.

“We’ve never come this far,” Sera added, stepping out from behind him. “I had no idea there was a waterfall. And look how clear it is!”

“Beautiful, but deadly,” I nodded at the whirlpool, barely visible beneath the surface.

“Oh, wow,” Sera said, moving in for a closer look.

“Careful!”

I lunged for her just as the rock she stepped on rolled out from under her foot, throwing her off balance. She overcorrected, arms flailing, and fell face first towards the creek. I grabbed her by her backpack and held on. She hovered just above the water for a split second before I was able to pull her to safety.

“You were nearly a goner,” I said, letting go as soon as she was steady.

“I don’t know about being a goner,” she said shakily. “But I sure would have been soaked.”

I looked back at the water, adjusted my sight from human to fae and noted the pissed off expression of the undine that would have been all too happy to hold her under. It sneered at me, then darted toward the whirlpool.

Nope. She definitely would have been a goner.

Yet another reason for them to stay away from our lands, the deep voice resonated in my mind.

Agreed, old friend. I’ll get them on their way.

See to it they don't return. I cannot guarantee their safety.

"This spot's not safe for field trips," I said.

"Oh, come on, Bernie," Josh protested. "She slipped. That's all."

"That's where you're wrong." I shook my head. "The creek looks harmless, but it isn't. The rockbed is as sharp as glass. If Sera had landed in there, the best case scenario is that she would've been cut to ribbons, and we're a good 3 miles from the road. Sorry, guys. I can't condone it."

They exchanged a look.

Ugh. Time to pull out the big guns.

"Besides, I've seen three copperheads since I've been here, and you know how aggressive they can be."

Josh shivered and scanned the ground. "Copperheads? Screw that. I'm out. Bernie's got a point. Let's find somewhere a little more hospitable."

He turned to walk off, but Sera hesitated.

"Watch out for that poison ivy, buddy." I called out to Josh. "It's thick through here."

That got her attention.

Sera swung her head so quickly her ponytail made a swishing noise along her backpack, and she tugged her sleeves down to her fingertips to cover her arms. "Yeah, let's save this spot for another day."

"Don't rub your eyes," I warned. "You can't be too safe around this much of it. Stuff spreads like wildfire."

Ah. That did it. I'd be sure to reinforce the glamour. They wouldn't find this place again.

They turned from the creek, eyes darting between snake pits and suspicious greenery. Perfect. I smiled and followed them out.

A quarter of a mile out, I smacked my forehead. "Aw, man, I left my fishing pole."

Josh hesitated, looking uncertainly at me and then back at

the ground. Big guy had a healthy fear of snakes. Can't blame him there. I took no real pleasure in amplifying their fears, but it had to be done.

"Tell you what, y'all go on ahead. I'll get my gear and catch up with you later in town. Are we still on for a club meeting this afternoon?"

"Yes, at two," Sera nodded.

"Alrighty. See you there."

"You sure, man?" Josh asked.

"Totally."

I waved them off, listening to be sure they kept moving. They did.

Back at the creek, I'd barely settled in when I caught a shimmer out of the corner of my eye.

"Talking Crow. It's good to be in your presence," I said, watching the water.

"Bernard. You have my gratitude for the quick removal of the humans. It's the closest they have wandered to our lands. I'm interested to know why."

I felt rather than saw him take a seat nearby. It would do no good to look directly at the clan leader; he existed beyond this dimension. A blurry presence, impossible to focus on. Something that humans haven't yet figured out.

"Curiosity, mostly," I said. "They've uncovered a surprising amount of local lore."

"And what will they do with this knowledge?"

"Write books. Spread the word about the high strangeness of the area."

"And your countermeasures, Warden?"

"I'm redirecting them at every angle."

"Hmm. Are you adhering to their laws as part of your redirection?"

"I am not," I smirked. "In fact, I've taken great pleasure in thwarting their plans."

Talking Crow let out a deep chuckle.

“I will leave you to it, then. Keep them out, or there will be dire consequences.”

“That’s the plan.”

He shimmered out of sight.

I took a deep breath and blew it out. That was not the type of interaction I particularly enjoyed, but as a Warden of Faery, it was inescapable.

Lost in thought, I turned away from the route of my human friends and slipped deeper into the woods.



THE TINY ROCK troll who’d placed the loose stone in Sera’s path cursed the Warden for his quick save of the human. Her sacrifice would’ve earned him favor with the water sprites.

Still, not all was lost.

He had gained something of value: the Warden cared deeply for the human.

Pleased with this knowledge, the troll began his slow roll toward Dogman’s cave, eager to discover what kind of barter such information might fetch.



TEN YEARS AGO, some people in town had created a club and called themselves Bordertown Paranormal Society. I’d barely given them a second thought. It was in the heyday of popular ghost hunting TV shows, and teams were springing up all over the country. Just groups of like-minded individuals that wanted to traipse through a cemetery to scare each other; nothing too threatening.

However, this one particular group had stood the test of time. They had started with Josh and Claire, and had put real

effort into researching paranormal topics and keeping good records of sightings and strange occurrences.

When Sera joined they really started to expand, bringing more people into a public paranormal club that now holds monthly meetings at the local library, talking about ghost hunting, teaching dowsing classes and how to use meters and other equipment.

Within the last year, they started adding road trips and hikes, sharing far more of the local lore and legends than I was comfortable with. In fact, there had been a few times when they had stumbled onto something that wasn't just campfire stories. There are real magical beings in the area who had the misfortune of being spotted over the years, and suddenly people weren't scoffing at the witnesses anymore. They were taking the sightings seriously, and worse, they had begun reporting them to others. I had scrambled more than once to ensure glammers were battened down tight.

This is my area. I'm in charge of keeping the peace here. And if pesky kids start putting their noses where they don't belong, I'm gonna have a problem with that.

So, I did what any other self-respecting Warden would do.

I joined them.

"Hey, gang!" I plastered a smile on my face and swaggered into the room.

"Hey!" sang Claire from the whiteboard. I stood behind her to take a closer look. She was drawing a map of the Sandhills. Oh boy.

"So," I said, sucking my teeth. "What're we discussing today?"

"Club members wanted to hear more about experiences close to town," answered Sera, juggling her laptop and a full backpack as she came through the door. I moved quickly to help her. She had taken a shower, a precaution against any unrealized poison ivy contact, I'm sure. Her hair was still damp

and hung down to her mid shoulders. She smelled like warm vanilla; I tried to act like I didn't notice. Like I wasn't giddy just being near her.

"Thanks." She smiled, handing off the backpack. Oof. It was either full of books or rocks. Knowing Sera, it could be either. Or both. Most likely both.

"It looks like you came prepared," I smiled as I hefted the bag onto the table.

"Always!" She said brightly. I laughed. Her mood was contagious. It's the fae blood in her. Just enough for a touch of light, not enough for the stain of dark. If I were to fall for any human, it would definitely be her.

"Ooo, snacks!" Distracted, I reached for a piece of chocolate off the tray in the middle of the table and popped the candy in my mouth. Caramel. My favorite.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gents," Josh called, closing the door behind him.

Greetings rang out. I smiled and nodded as I chewed. Hail, hail, the gang's all here.

"I'm glad everyone could make it today," said Claire as she fiddled with the dry erase marker. "We need to make some decisions on what field trips we want to schedule for the rest of the year. I'm thinking we should do a couple of more localized spots."

"I like the sound of that," said Sera as she pulled up a new document and began typing meeting minutes.

"Great! We've done the original monster bridge. Where else should we go?"

"What about down around the Copan/Hulah area? We can show them where I saw the 'Not A Deer.' And maybe out towards Cross Bell Ranch, touch on the Mullendore murder case," said Josh.

"That could be fun. A sort of folk-lore/true crime type of trip," I nodded. Plus it would be relatively easy to keep them

out of harm's way; I'd just need to make sure the fae creature that Josh called 'Not A Deer' stayed well away. I moved to grab water out of the fridge.

"Nice!" Claire wrote quickly. "Any other ideas?"

I kept my mouth shut, waiting to see what they came up with.

After a few beats, Josh said, "Sera, what about your disappearing house? Maybe we could take them to it and you could share the story."

I choked on my water and managed not to spit it all over everyone.

I rubbed my eyes then noticed them all looking at me, save Sera. She was typing, but her cheeks were definitely pink. Adorable.

"I take it you haven't heard this one yet, Bernie?" Josh grinned.

"I have not. Please, enlighten me."

Looking a little embarrassed, Sera began to talk. When she was done, I was staring incredulously at her, a feeling of dread deep in the pit of my stomach.

"Bernie, you okay, man?" Josh dropped a hand on my shoulder.

"Uh, sure. I just can't believe ya'll are buying this." Hurt flashed across Sera's face, but she covered it up quickly. I felt like the world's biggest ass.

"I get it," Sera said, with a self-deprecating smile. "I wouldn't believe it either, if it hadn't happened to me. I'm just glad I had witnesses."

She *did* have witnesses. Which means it will be harder for me to make it go away.

"So, wait. Exactly how far away is this place?"

"Just right outside of town," said Claire. "It's still early. We can make a quick run out to the area, if you want."

I wouldn't pass on this for the world.



PLEASE DON'T TURN HERE. Please don't turn here.

I'd been chanting this in my mind through each and every turn, my stomach dropping further as each of those turns were indeed made. Surely Josh would drive straight on by; this last one was pretty hard to see. I felt my hopes rise as we passed it, only to have them dashed when he stopped, put the SUV into reverse, and backed up.

Crap.

Josh pulled into what looked like not much more than a bare space between the trees. We drove about a quarter of a mile and he parked the Expedition in the middle of the old dirt lane, so overgrown there were just a couple of tire tracks left on it. We jumped out and stood in the hot afternoon sun, looking over open pastures—open pastures that encompassed a very thin spot in the veil between this world and another. Thus the reason for my trepidation.

“Okay, so tell me your story again,” I said, shading my eyes as I looked around. Sera began to talk and I opened my senses, adjusting my eyesight so I could see the overlapping realms.

“When I was about ten, my brother collected old beer cans and I would help look for them. You could still occasionally find them in trash piles around abandoned houses. We were choosing random dirt roads to drive down, and we ended up on the main road out there.” She waved back to where we entered. “My brother saw a barn off this way, so he turned down this lane to get a closer look. When we pulled up to about where we are now, we saw not only an old barn, but a house on the other side of it, with a large trash pile between them. There wasn't a ‘no trespassing’ sign, so we stopped.

“We didn't find any cans, but the place was cool so we decided to explore. The barn was open and there was some old rotted tack still hanging on the wall; not much else. We were

about halfway through when we heard footsteps above us in the hayloft.

“My brother yelled, ‘Run!’ and we hightailed it to the car. We jumped in, hearts pounding. But when he pulled out of the drive, instead of heading back east—the way we’d come—he turned west.

“We’d made it about a mile before the road dead-ended. No signs, no turnoff, just an abrupt stop. We had no choice but to turn around and drive past the place again.

“As we slowed down, we realized something was different. The driveway now had barbed wire stretched tightly across it, not loose or sagging like a gate. This was taut. Secure.

“And you could still see our tire tracks, clear as day. There was no way we’d driven through that. None.”

“What happened then?”

“We went home and told our parents. They said we’d imagined the whole thing, and honestly we kind of forgot about it. It wasn’t until four or five years later, after I started driving, that I ended up back in this area. I tried to find the place, but never could.

“Searching for the property became this weird hobby I shared with my friends. We spent hours driving around, trying to track it down.

“If you couldn’t find it, how did you decide this was the right spot?” I waved my arm in the general direction of the field.

“I didn’t, until a few years ago. A friend and I volunteered at the Historical Society, fulfilling local photo requests. One came in for an old frontier cemetery, so we drove out and took the pictures. On our way back to town, I happened to look across a field and nearly screamed, ‘There it is! That’s the house and the barn!’

“My friend slammed on the brakes and asked, ‘Are you sure?’ I told her yes, absolutely, and started snapping photos. We were stunned. This was a road we’d been down hundreds of

times, searching for that property, and we'd never seen it before? We figured maybe, with it being winter and the trees bare, the lack of foliage had finally revealed it.

"We came back to my house, still giddy, and I uploaded everything to my computer. We looked through the shots, marveling at our find. I then sent the cemetery photos off to the Historical Society and, well, life happened. It faded to the back of my mind, especially now that I knew where it was. I kept meaning to go back, once the weather warmed up.

"When I joined the paranormal group, I told Claire about it. Her mom had grown up out there, so Claire gave her a call to see if she knew who'd owned the land. Her mom said, 'Oh, yeah. That was the Thomason's property. They tore it down back in the late 1960's or early '70's'.

"Claire and I just stared at each other. I said, 'But I have the photos from 2018'. I pulled up the folder and found the cemetery shots, but those of the house and the barn were gone.

"It totally freaked me out. I called my friend, put her on speaker, and told her the pictures had vanished. She was shocked. She remembered seeing the buildings and taking the photos with me.

"I checked the Historical Society's site for our submission date, scrolled through all the images on my computer, and nothing. I dug out my backup flash drive. Still no photos of the house and barn. Just cemetery shots.

"It's like they were erased from everywhere. It's the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me," Sera finished.

I turned and looked back over the field, through all of the realms that overlapped in this spot. It was there, alright. She was telling the truth. The house and the barn just existed on a different plane.

"Has anyone else ever seen it, besides you, your brother and your friend?"

"Not to my knowledge."

“Here’s another weird thing,” said Claire. “We’ve come out here as a team both with Sera and without. And when she’s with us? We get all kinds of crazy activity with dowsing rods and meters. But when she’s not around...zilch.”

That wasn’t a good sign.



I’M sure the team thought I was nuts as I abruptly herded them all back into the vehicle with the excuse of a forgotten appointment. It wasn’t a lie—I definitely had a meeting to make as soon as possible.

Thankfully we were close to town, so it didn’t take long before I was back in my Jeep and heading home.

I pulled into the garage, closed the door and stepped straight into the portal I had set up between my apartment in town and my true home deep in the Sand Hills.

The one the humans didn’t know existed.

The second I stepped through, I sent out a mental message:
Talking Crow, I request your counsel.

His response came instantly.

Granted. Meet me at the stone circle.

I breathed a sigh of relief. *I appreciate the chance to exchange thoughts.*

I grabbed some libations, moved to the portal and stepped through, focusing my intention on the circle of stones that was hidden deep in the Chautauqua Sand Hills.

Talking Crow was already seated when I arrived.

“Tell me,” he said, his deep voice reverberating through the stones.

“One of the humans has a drop of fae blood in her lineage.”

“Ahh. And does she know what that means?”

“She does not. She is unaware that she has any fae blood at all”

“Interesting.”

“I need to keep her safe.” I tried to play it cool; tried not to sound agitated.

“Safe from whom, Bernard?”

“Just...safe. From all harm.”

“A tremendous request. One not without consequence.”

“I understand.”

“Our conversation is sacred within the circle of stones. Outside of it, you must work at hiding your desperation. No good can come of The Others discovering you have a weakness.”

“I wouldn’t call her a weakness. More like a desire.”

“In your case, your desire *is* your weakness. Have you not examined your feelings for this human?”

“I have not.”

“That is most unwise, Bernard. It will cause you many problems.”

Crap.

“Let us share your libations and determine what can be done. We will begin by confronting your feelings.”

A therapy session with a Bigfoot clan leader was not on my bingo card for this century, but here we are. On the other hand, opportunities like this almost never occur, so I was going to make the most of it.

I spoke of Sera, of how we met. Of what finding a part fae creature had meant to me, in this world of humans where I have felt so much the outsider. I spoke of how her laugh was infectious, her humor most disarming. Of how I avoided spending too much time around her, afraid I’d say the wrong thing, as I tended to do in this world full of stupid human rules.

By the end of my time with Talking Crow, I had gained an unequivocal amount of knowledge.

And realized I was well and thoroughly screwed.

But with knowledge comes power, and I now knew I had to

focus on locking my emotions down from those around me, especially any fae that might be lurking. Nowhere outside of the stone circle was safe.

Just as I was beginning to feel that I could breathe again, Talking Crow dropped a bombshell:

“I must warn you, Bernard, Cousin Dogman is in the area.”



AS FAR AS humans are concerned, Dogman is a relatively new player in the cryptid world. In reality, he's been hiding in the shadow of Talking Crow's people for centuries, much to their irritation. Bigfoot clans have long taken the blame for Dogman's evil deeds, despite being among the most peaceful of fae species.

Dogmen are their opposite: solitary, violent and insatiably bloodthirsty. Humans are a favorite snack, but those with fae lineage? Irresistible.

Luckily, unless they bleed, fae-blooded humans are invisible to The Others, myself included.

I wouldn't have known of Sera's ancestry at all if she hadn't cut her finger during an investigation. It was just a scratch, but the second her blood touched the air, I sensed it.

The world narrowed. Her scent hit me first—a rich, heady note layered with starlight and honey, so alien it cut through this human stink like music in a storm. Her blood shimmered faintly as it fell, glowing like spilled moonlight on stone.

I was beside her in an instant.

Pretending to bandage the wound, I did far more by sealing it shut before anything else took notice.

I had already admired her, but when I discovered she had a touch of fae in her, my attraction went into overdrive.

Love isn't something that the fae are known for. All of our relationships are transactional, especially the intimate ones.

Emotions aren't outlawed, but they are most definitely frowned upon. Emotions make you weak, vulnerable. No one can afford that in a world with such varying degrees of strength among its races.

As Changeling, I knew that better than anyone. I was eight years old when I had been trapped in Faery and I had grown up among them, taking on their magic and morality. Now, after centuries of living among The Others, I was much more fae than human.

The moment I got back to my apartment in town, I texted Sera.

BERNIE:

I've been thinking about your disappearing barn and pulled out some reference materials. Do you have time to meet up and discuss?

SERA:

Sure. I'm free if you want to stop by.

BERNIE:

Great! Be there in 10.

I threw together a charm bag that Sera would need to keep on her at all times. Even with a touch of fae in her blood, it wasn't enough to keep her safe. She had no access to the magic that came with it.

I grabbed a couple of books on the history of the area and was backing out of the drive in record time.



THE MOMENT I PULLED UP, I knew I was too late.

Sera was gone.

Her front door stood ajar, and I could hear music from inside. I stepped into the living room and honed in on the sound. Her phone sat on the coffee table. I turned it off, slipped it into my pocket then shifted my vision.

No blood had been spilled, otherwise it would have shone like moonlight. Good. That was good.

I inhaled deeply. There was a strange, musky odor that tickled my brain, and then it hit me.

Dog. I smelled wet, dirty dog.

FUCK.

I spun, searching for the tell-tale sign of a veil breach. Nothing. I stepped back towards the open front door—and there it was.

On the porch a dog-shaped footprint glowed.

He hadn't broken in. Sera had opened the door willingly.

She thought it was me.

Heartsick, I sliced through the veil and stepped into Faery.



I WAS ALREADY MOVING when I hit the ground, knowing the longer I took to reach Sera, the greater the likelihood of her being injured or worse would be.

Dead. Sera could be dead.

NO.

If even a single strand of her hair was harmed, that evil bastard would pay.

In a burst of speed, I crested a hill—and skidded to a stop.

The Dogman was facing my direction, eyes wide with disbelief as he pulled out the dagger that was buried to the hilt in his chest. Blood spurted from the wound and he dropped to the ground.

The creature that stood between us backed away from the dead fae, scanning the area like she was searching for something.

“Hey!” I shouted, sprinting down the hill. “Was there a girl with him? Is she okay?”

She whirled around to face me and I stopped cold.

It was Sera, but not.

Sera was beautiful, yet undeniably human.

This creature was absolutely, heartstoppingly magnificent.

It was Sera in fae form.

“Bernie?” she said, uncertainly.

“Yeah, it's me.” I approached her slowly. Warily. “You okay?”

“I...uh, yeah. I'm okay. I didn't think I was going to be, but then that..that *thing* brought me here, and...and when I tried to get my arm out of its grip, it *slapped* me, Bernie. It slapped me right in the face.”

Ah. That would have pissed her off.

“And you know me. You know I freaked out.”

I nodded.

“I...well, I slapped it back and I don't think it was expecting that.”

Probably not.

“It acted like it was going to come after me again, and I knew it would kill me. I saw a knife in its belt, so I grabbed it and...and I stabbed the fucker.”

“Yes, you did.”

“I can't believe how easy it was. It just slid right in.” She shook her head, the shock of what had happened beginning to set in.

I held out my arms. She immediately stepped into them, her familiar vanilla scent washing over me as I wrapped her in a fierce hug.

“It just slid right in, Bernie. Shouldn't it have been harder to do than that?”

She shivered.

“Sera,” I said, calmly.

“Yeah?”

“We need to get you away from here.”

“Okay. Wait—Bernie?”

“Yeah?”

“How did you find me?”

Because I knew this day could come and I put a tracking spell on you. Because you are the love of my life and I would die if anything ever happened to you.

“I, uh....”

I apported her phone into her back pocket.

“I tracked your phone.”

“Oh.” She reached for it without thinking.

A noise caught my attention—hers, too. Something was coming.

“We need to get moving,” I grabbed her hand and she followed without question.

I sliced cleanly through the veil and we stepped through together.



“I’M A FAERY?”

Seated in the stone circle, I nodded glumly.

“And that’s a bad thing why, exactly?”

I sighed. “Power corrupts.”

“You’ve got access to it, and you’re not corrupt.”

“I’m Changeling. There’s a difference. Plus, I’ve watched it twist good people into monsters. I don’t want that for you.”

She sat up straight, eyes sharp. “So you automatically think I can’t handle it?”

“It’s not that I don’t think you can, it’s that I *know* you can’t. You’re too kind. Faeries aren’t some cutesy little creatures. They run on an entirely different moral code. If you don’t change, you won’t last a day. I can’t let that happen.”

“Wow. Misogynistic much?”

My temper flared. “Look, you are this incredible person, Sera. Loving, gentle. Every second you spend in that realm will chip away at that. Access to magic will

change you. Being in the company of other fae will change you.”

I ran my hand through my hair.

“I happen to love who you are. You’re better than all of them put together.”

She blinked. “You love me?”

I froze.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Her face softened. “Good to know.”

I chanced a look at her.

“Because I love you, too.”

Crap.



WE STOOD before a large stone in an open field, not unlike where Sera had seen the disappearing barn.

“What is this place?”

“It’s the entrance to a realm where you’ll be safe.”

“You’re sure?”

“As sure as I can be, my love,” I said.

She smiled up at me, soft and radiant. “I could get used to hearing that.”

I knew better. Truly, I did.

But I kissed her anyway—long and hard.

She met me with a ferocity of her own and the world fell away until it was just this moment and the hum of magic threading between us.

My hands tangled in her hair, hers twisted in my shirt, and for one suspended heartbeat, I forgot the danger, the risk, what was coming. Everything but her.

When the kiss ended, we were both breathless. Eyes locked, undone. My greatest wish was to stay in this moment forever.

But my traitor of a brain was screaming at me to stop and I

gave my head a small shake, pulling myself back to the reality of our situation.

Wait. What was I doing?

Oh yeah, saving the girl who had just saved herself.

I cleared my throat and refocused, patted my pockets and drew out a small blade. “Faery blood is the key to this portal.”

Sera offered her hand without hesitation. I kissed it, then drew the blade across her palm. As her blood beaded, I pressed it gently on the stone.

A doorway shimmered into existence.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, her eyes glowing. I stepped to the side and gestured for her to enter and she crossed the threshold.

“Oh, wow, Bernie—is this place real?” She already seemed so far away. My throat tightened. My eyes burned.

Sera turned when she realized I hadn’t followed. “What are you waiting for? Come on!” She tried to come back through the portal to me, but was stopped short by the invisible barrier.

Confused, she placed both palms against it and tried to push, but it wouldn’t budge. She pounded it with her fist, trying to force the door open. It wasn’t until I pressed my own hand to hers on the other side that understanding flickered across her face.

“Bernie?” Her voice trembled. “Please come with me. I can’t do this on my own.”

“I can’t.”

Those were the hardest words I’ve ever spoken.

“You can’t?” Fear strained her voice. “No! What have you done?”

I merely stood, staring dejectedly at her, hand still on the barrier.

She cried, slamming her fists against the portal. “Why? Why can’t you believe I’ll still be good? Why are you doing this to me?”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “There are others like you in that realm. You’ll be safe there. You’ll be happy.”

She was sobbing. “You can’t leave me alone, you bastard! I’ll never forgive you! I hate you for this!”

She continued to cry and pound in vain as I simply stood and stared until the last bit of her blood was taken into the stone and the doorway faded.

Along with my Sera.



I’M NOT sure how long I stood in that field. Time moves differently in other realms and I could feel her in the wind, the scent of warm vanilla coming closer but then moving away, distracted by something. Or someone.

All I knew is that it wasn’t me, and that she was no longer her and a terrible weight dropped down on me, sagging my shoulders and stinging my eyes.

I felt a large, warm hand on my back and looked up, my sight blurred by tears.

My friend looked down upon me and radiated empathy and kindness, straight into my soul.

The shift was immediate. I stood straighter, my mind clearing. I took a deep breath and covered his hand with mine, in gratitude.

I knew my actions had been necessary, but that knowledge warred with what I desired.

“Sera,” I whispered.

I hated the sound of desperation in my voice.

“Force it down, cousin. No good can come from The Others catching the scent of your emotion. It will only bring you danger.”

Danger.

Rage burned through me, hot, white energy crackling at my fingertips. The hand on my shoulder gripped so tightly the pain shocked me, but it had the necessary effect.

I reeled the energy in and locked it deep inside, hidden from The Others. But still mine. Still reachable.

Knowing it was there made a difference.

I took a deep, cleansing breath and nodded to my friend.

Even with not being able to reach her...

Even if she hated me...

Just knowing Sera was safe was enough.

It would have to be.