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Amber V. Nicole is an author who works full time helping animals as a vet assistant. When she isn't working she is dreaming of far-off places with dragons, magic, and swords. She loves a good villain and plans to tell many stories showcasing them in the spotlight.

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By Amber V. Nicole

The Book of Azrael
The Throne of Broken Gods
The Dawn of the Cursed Queen

THE DAWN OF THE CURSED QUEEN

GODS & MONSTERS

BOOK THREE

AMBER V. NICOLE



HEADLINE
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First published in the United States in 2024 by Rose & Star Publishing

First published in Great Britain in 2024
by HEADLINE ETERNAL
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 0354 1456 7

Map design by Dewi Hargreaves.

Character artwork by @elizianna.the.one

Typeset in 10/13 pt Crimson Text by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

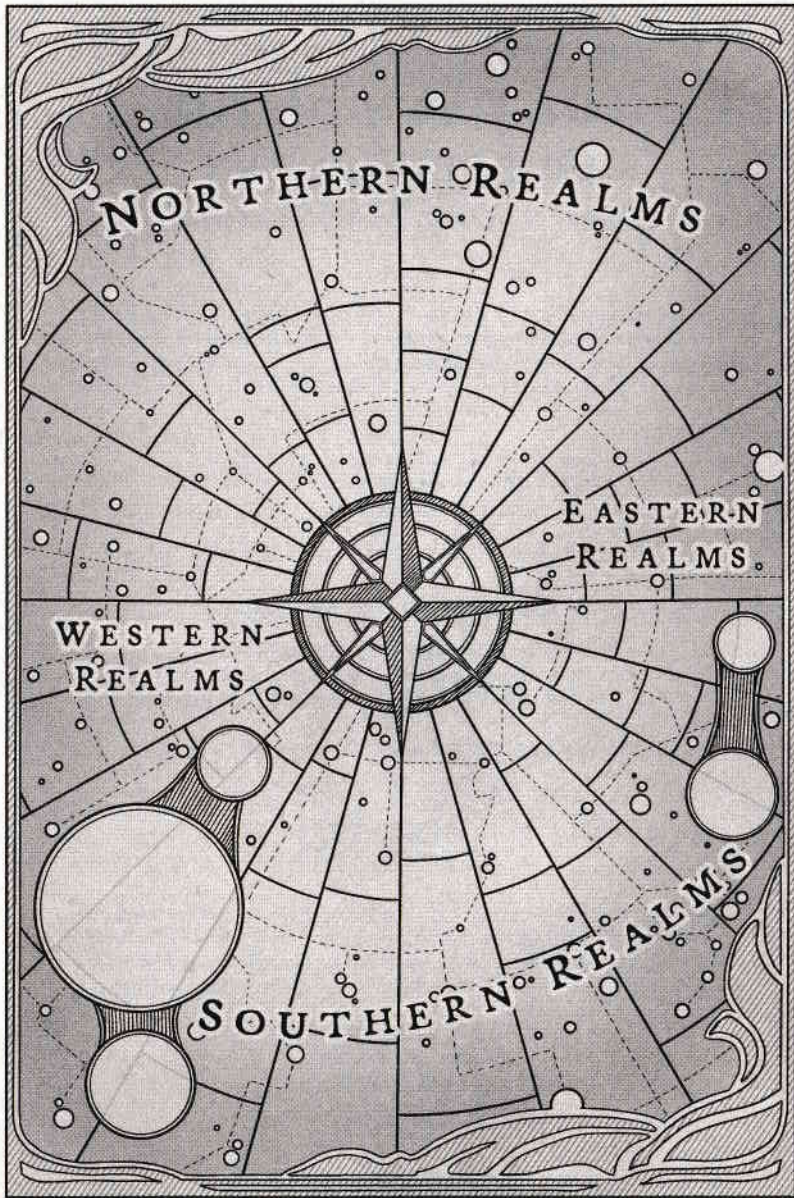


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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.headlineeternal.com
www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

THE DAWN OF THE CURSED QUEEN



Previously on—

No, I'm kidding. Logan showed me this show one time where they do funny recaps, and yeah . . . anyway.

You know those times when you're relaxing after a long day? You put your feet up, thinking life can't get any better? No? Yeah, well, me either. I thought I'd experienced the worst thing that could happen the day Rashearim fell. The world I knew crumbled, and my family was torn apart. I thought, it can't get worse, right? Xavier would have slapped me if I'd said that aloud, but man, did I think it.

Samkiel, our king and loyal . . . You know what? I can't even say loyal because that bastard left us for . . . I'm getting ahead of myself. Anyway. You think you know a guy, right? We'd partied together, fought side by side, and even fucked in the same room. Don't make that face. It is necessary to blow off some steam after battle, and we had fought together in several fucking wars. When you get so desperate for a release that you no longer care your friend is across the tent, then we'll talk.

Anyway, we'd spent hundreds of years with Samkiel before Rashearim fell. After that, he changed, but I'd be a liar if I said it hadn't started long before. It had all begun with the change in Unir. Honestly, I should have paid closer attention. To everyone.

Samkiel deserted us after the destruction of Rashearim. He left us instructions on maintaining the rest of the worlds and then disappeared for centuries. Then the fucker shows back up with a super hot—and I mean quite literally will-burn-your-face-off—girlfriend.

Everything changed with Dianna, and I mean everything. She didn't just scorch a path of destruction across the world to avenge her fallen sister, but she burned so damn bright she revealed secrets buried within our family and ourselves.

Xavier, Imogen, and I were stationed on the remains of Rashearim, completely unaware that Samkiel had not only come back but was working with our archnemesis, the Ig'Morruthen—see hot girlfriend above. Apparently, they were searching for a relic. But all of it went to shit, and Dianna lost the one person she loved. Then, she tried to kill us all in her devastation and grief. It was no joke. I quite literally held my own guts in my hands.

Samkiel, always the hero, was able to break through that crazy shell of hers. He even remade his home and hid her, keeping her safe from the council. Those shady bitches wanted her head. Sure, maybe I was sleeping with one of them as a distraction from what I was feeling for my best friend, but everyone has problems, right? Anyway, let me get back on topic.

Dianna, as fierce and loving as she is—don't tell her I said that—was not the worst thing in the world, not by a lot. Apparently, her maker, Kabitch—sorry, my pen slipped—Kaden had a plan far grander than any of us suspected, and none of us knew it wasn't him at the helm.

I thought I knew pain. The day Xavier told me he was dating someone made me want to claw my eyes out, but when I found out how horribly we had all been betrayed, it was devastating. Faced with the reality that Vincent, a man I considered my damn blood, had been working with Kaden, sent my world spinning again. He lied, manipulated, and turned my family into perfect, uncaring, unfeeling soldiers.

Once more, I thought that was the worst that could happen until Kaden dangled Xavier as bait to lure me in. I offered to come willingly, to give up not just my physical freedom but the freedom of my mind. I would join them as long as we could stay together, but Kaden had other plans. We were all dumb enough to believe we knew all the secrets the gods harbored. But none of us were prepared to face the all-powerful children Unir had hidden away. Locked away for ages, they were finally free and intent on blood and revenge.

Yeah, you heard me right. Papa Unir was not just getting hot and sweaty and making one kid. No, no, he had three. Three hell-bent children set on making Samkiel and all of us pay dearly for his crimes.

Although, technically, the jury is still out on how they were created. I don't remember Unir sneaking around the palace with different partners like Samkiel. I knew of his amata Zaysn. She was cool and a complete badass who could make Unir cry with a look. I doubt she'd let any affairs fester, but I am getting off topic again. Why do people entrust me with these things?

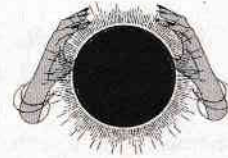
I know, I know, you're all really concerned about me. I get it. And, well, I guess you'll have to wait and see what happens with me. But I can say that everything is different now. Completely different.

I assumed we would always come out on top. It was arrogant of me, yes. We fought for what was good and just in the world. Despite that, we all failed fucking miserably. Not only did we lose, but we lost our home again. I still have nightmares of watching the remains of Rashearim burn, of seeing Samkiel beaten and bound on the floor. Now, his power spills across the sky, the last remnants of him. Nismera reigns over the realms, and we are all trapped beneath her rule now. I thought we had experienced the worst, but I was wrong. So fucking wrong.

I know Dianna is still out there. I know she will want retribution for Samkiel's death, and a part of me hopes she burns this whole fucking thing to the ground. If I must die a fiery death at her hands . . . I just hope I go with my Xavi.

Cameron



ONE
CAMILLA

I beat at Vincent's shoulder, fighting against his grip as he dragged me through that damned portal. It sealed behind us, the sound slicing through the air. Vincent released me with a shove, and I stumbled before finding my footing. I brushed my hair out of my face and shot him a glare before looking around. We hadn't arrived in another darkened dungeon or cave but a city of light. I squinted, my eyes struggling to adjust to the sunlight piercing through the clouds.

People continued on their way, talking and laughing, utterly unfazed by the soldiers that had suddenly appeared. A city of tall buildings constructed of various pale stones was spread out before us. Overhangs, balconies, banisters, and roofs were littered with hanging florals, adding cheerful pops of color. Clean, bright cobblestone streets wove through the city, all seeming to lead to a large, open center. Small flying creatures with double sets of wings flew across the hazy pink sky, calling to each other. It looked peaceful and happy, an entire city living in harmony. For a moment, I could believe this was paradise. But then the thickly armored general appeared at my side, and I remembered this was not paradise, not in the least.

"Take her to the palace. Nismera will need us all there for the convergence."

My head snapped toward Vincent and the tall, winged, feather-covered general near him. The general sneered at me before taking flight, and the rest of us walked forward, following Vincent.

The walk, or more so drag, felt as if it took forever. I tried to remember every alleyway, dip in the road, and building because I planned to find a way to get out. I would find a place to hide and leave this damned city as soon as I could. My throat bobbed as I wondered where I would go. I knew nothing of this realm or this world, and I had no friends or allies.

My feet skittered on the ground as the glistening cobblestones changed to a smooth, sleek surface. My head reeled as a large, breath-taking stronghold appeared before us. The palace gleamed nearly white in the sun, a pearl amongst bright gems. I had to tip my head all the way back to see the top. Spires, partly obscured by clouds, pierced the sky. Every winding line, curve, and window whispered wealth, but the whispers turned to screams of horror when you knew what those prestigious doors harbored.

Vincent's grip tightened on me, interrupting my gawking. My head swiveled toward him, but he wasn't glaring at me for once. He was looking at the palace as I was, and his jaw hardened with apprehension. Even covered in armor, I saw his muscles flinch. He glanced at me and realized he had revealed more of his thoughts than he intended. His eyes went blank again, and he shook his head before pushing me forward.

"Move." Vincent's voice was gruff and filled with anger, as if I were the one that made us stop. The generals towering over us may buy his act, but I saw the crack in the armor he hid behind so well.

Vincent was afraid.

TWO

VINCENT. ONE WEEK LATER



I scooted across the long rumped bed, picking up my pants and stepping into them as the water from the bathroom shut off.

Steam cooled and spread in tendrils, attempting to escape the beast it had just cleaned. My eyes roamed, looking for a distraction and catching on the intricate shell sitting on the carved dresser.

My head tilted. "You kept this?"

"Yes, it's yours or what's left of the first piece of armor I gave you. I told you I have missed you, pet," Nismera purred from behind me, the floral scent of bommsberries coating her skin. It was another attempt to hide the lethal creature beneath. She may not have had horns, scales, or fangs, but a beast made of light was still a beast.

I watched from the corner of my eye as she ran her hand through the ends of her silver hair, separating the pieces that had curled around one another.

Pet. Always a pet. I wondered if that was truly how she saw me, but I knew the answer. Missed me was a loose term. Nismera never loved like others, never cared like others. She used what she had, and when she could no longer use it, she eradicated it.

I turned as she walked across her room, my eyes following her naked, lean-muscled form as she grabbed her garbs off the large, claw-foot chair. I watched without a hint of lust or longing, not craving her

as I once had eons ago. What I'd done in this room with her had been out of survival, duty, and perhaps a belief that I deserved it. Maybe I did deserve her after the way I had betrayed my family. I swallowed the bile rising in my throat, refusing to reveal the disgust I felt for myself.

"What of me now?"

She spun, zipping up the side of her shirt. "You will assume your position as if you never left. The High Guard of the legion, Hectur, will be demoted. He was merely keeping your spot occupied while you dismantled Samkiel and The Hand, anyway."

The Hand. The way she said it made it sound like a curse. Guilt ate at my gut, causing it to roll, and I swallowed my apprehension. "It will cause an uproar, I am sure."

Nismera smiled as she jumped and wiggled, sliding into the sleek dark pants before buttoning them and sitting on the bed. She slipped on steel-heeled boots and met my eyes. "There will be none. Anyone who disagrees will be strung up like a new flag outside the stone walls that border this city. They will fly high as a warning to anyone who dares challenge me."

I nodded, knowing she meant every word. The scent of decaying flesh lingered in the air. I had smelled it the second the portal closed.

She was on her feet and beside me in a flash. A single finger ran under my chin, turning my gaze back toward hers. She wore that famed three-skulled cape around her shoulders, the hollow eyes mocking me even here.

"Worry not, pet. You were Samkiel's second for so long. Maybe you forgot your place is and will always be by me."

I shook my head. "I never forgot."

"Good." Her finger curled beneath my chin, and even though it was but a small, simple digit, I could feel the power beneath her touch. I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that with one flick, she had the strength to fling my head off my shoulders and toss it across the room as if it were nothing, as if I were nothing. I knew I was nothing to her.

"I also have your room prepared. You are in the east wing, top floor."

I swallowed, trying to hide my satisfaction. The east wing was far

from her large rooms here on the west. Excitement thrilled through me that I'd at least have my own place.

"You will accompany the witch to and from her station."

My excitement died.

"Pardon me, my liege?" I asked, trying to mask the bitterness I felt.

Nismera clamped the large, circular pin that held her half-cloak to her shoulder, her legless beasts engraved into the metal. "Which part was hard for you to understand?"

"The witch."

"Camilla is a magnificent power source, my only one since Santiago proved useless. I need her to repair an ancient artifact of mine, but I do not trust her. You, I trust. You will accompany her to and from unless I need you, then I will ask the other guards. Your room shall be across from hers. I need to make sure she follows my rules. Too much freedom given to any beast, and they assume they can roam freely." Her smile was as cold and empty as any abyss.

"Yes, my liege." I forced a smile to match, even though I loathed this plan of hers.

Her hand dropped as she smiled at me. "Now go mingle with the other generals below. I need you to be cordial with your legion. I have other things I need to address."

I simply nodded, and she left the room.



MY BOOTS ECHOED OFF THE CREAM AND GOLD STONE FLOORING, TINY specks dancing beneath my feet as I walked. It was a sign of royalty, something this whole city reeked of. Nismera was king of all twelve realms now and wanted to make sure everyone knew it. As I walked out of her chamber and toward the lower foyer, I was met with bowing and downcast eyes. The wardrobe assigned to me had too many tassels and chains, and I did not care for any of it. Nismera loved power displays. She always had. Power was all that mattered to her. Every piece of furniture and glass column was hand-crafted and placed how she liked it. All of it was as gaudy and wild as she was.

Laughter and hollering sped down the long, wide corridor, reminding me of the family I had condemned. I moved toward it, my chest clenching.

I pushed the large, thick, chiseled doors open, the music and laughter dying. All eyes shifted my way. The hall was almost as large as the main entranceway, with long wooden tables hugging the walls. There were chairs hidden in almost every corner and a staircase lined with jewel-encrusted tapestries.

A long table held a feast. Battered and dirty generals sat in various spots. Some watched me with food hanging out of their mouths, others with cups held to their lips, forgetting to swallow. They stared at me with two sets of eyes, others with four or more. Some had tentacles where arms and legs should be, and others with wings, large and thick, jutting from their backs. I didn't see any of Grimlock's reptilian horde, but I assumed they wanted answers on why their general went with Nismera and Isaiah and did not return.

A throat cleared as a burly troll, cloaked in furs and leathers, stood and raised a glass the size of my head. "Welcome, our High Guard of the legion, Vincent."

My lip curled at the loud, boisterous display, my ears ringing as everyone cheered. The troll who shouted moved from the back of the room, making his way to me before clasping a hand on my shoulder and shoving the massive drink into my hands.

"Come, sit with us."

"Who are you?" I asked, brushing his hand off.

"My name is Tedar, Commander of the Eighth Legion."

Maybe it wasn't just generals in here.

He led me toward a large seating area in a dim corner of the room. I went because I had nowhere else to go. The chair he plopped into fit him, but its match almost swallowed me whole. The liquid in my glass sloshed to the side, spilling some on my hand. I leaned forward and placed it on the center of the table before wiping my hand on my pants and leaning back. Laughter and chatter filled the room once more as Tedar leaned toward me.

"You're a legend now, you know that? Every whisper among realms speaks of what you did, and now you are High Guard?" He whistled

between thick teeth. "You're above every commander and general now. They'll hate it."

"You don't."

"Gods, no. There are only six High Guards now, including her brothers, so less responsibility for me. You and your legion will always go first into battle now."

My brows lifted. "Battle? I don't think so. I think we will just follow orders."

"Say what you want, but the sky bleeds silver now. The World Ender is dead, and The Hand of Rashearim now walks around blindly, listening to every demand like a whipped hound. There are, and will always be, those who jump at the bit when the largest power player exits the field, and guess who just did?"

I swallowed, trepidation burning in my throat. He was so callous, so joyful for what I did, and I felt grimier than sludge upon a boot. I reminded myself that I had no choice. He did not know my will was Nismera's will. I shook my head as Tedar rambled on.

"... I have to say it's such a relief. No one ever thought he'd die. That's gotta feel amazing for you. You did it. You helped."

My stomach rolled. I had avoided looking toward the sky since then, especially at night when his power seemed to mock me, begging for answers. My chest tightened, and the air suddenly became far too tight.

"I serve my king now, as she wishes. Nothing in the world has the power to rival Nismera now," I repeated.

Tedar leaned forward, drawing attention to a large, chipped tusk as he smirked. "Not from what I heard."

My brow ticked up, and I scanned the room, noting a few generals glaring our way, speaking in low tones amongst themselves. "And what did you hear?"

Tedar leaned closer as if to whisper. "Listen, everyone talks, and after they cleaned up the massacre in the East, everyone knows now."

My face scrunched in confusion. I had heard nothing of this. "The East? What happened in the East?"

"The World Ender had a lover and not just a fling like in his past. They say she is a beast made of flame and hate, and she followed you lot back. His beast. The female Ig'Morruthen."

Dianna. He meant Dianna.

I nodded and sat up a bit straighter as he rambled on, the sounds of this room fading into the background.

That power radiated from the doorway, the same as his father, and I didn't need to turn to know Samkiel was leaning against the doorway of the foyer. I rubbed my wrist, shaking my head.

"Let it go."

"Is that any way to speak to your future king?"

I heard the concern in his voice.

"Future. You still have to surpass your father."

Heavy boots echoed as he entered, his battle armor encompassing him entirely, that damn sigil cape flowing behind him. It's the same one his father wore every damn council meeting.

"Why do you let her—"

I cut him off, spinning to face him. "I don't let her do anything."

His eyes widened a fraction, and he watched me carefully as he said, "You can join Logan and me. My father wishes for me to have my own kingsguard even though that will not be the name you claim."

A snide snort left my lips as the large curtains blew near the opened expanse of a window.

"I decline, future king."

"Why will you not let me help you?"

I glanced toward the door as if I could see her watching me, waiting.

"Vincent."

His voice snapped me out of the trance I had fallen into.

"Why do you always wish to help so many?" I asked. "What's in it for you? You are destined to rule this realm and everyone in between. You don't have to pretend to be benevolent. They will lick the dirt from your boots, regardless."

Samkiel shrugged, lifting a single shoulder, his hair curling around the shoulder of his armor. "I just want a better realm, a better world. This one is kind of shit, and I am over egotistical gods."

"Respectfully, I feel like yours is a mirror."

His lips quirked. "Mine is bearable."

I believed him. I believed he wanted something more, something better, even if the world he saw was only a fantastical dream spun by oracles.

"Even if I participated and won, she would never let me leave. Her claws are too deep, my prince."

His eyes shifted, the silver glow similar to Unir's and Nismera's. "You let me worry about her. Just come, try, and meet the others. There is no harm in that."

Harm. He didn't get it. No one did, but against all reason, I nodded. He said nothing else before he left, and I stared at that empty expanse of a doorway. He said try, and try, I would.

The memory faded as the roaring and whooping came back, glasses slamming against each other and tables. The generals from across the cosmos, all vicious and vile, cheering and celebrating his death. All of them know her next move will be to liberate the realms. She had taken and converted the most cruel and deadly for her reign, and now, nothing would stop her. Nothing ever could, so what choice did I ever have?

Samkiel was a light. He promised peace and change, and I had helped snuff it out. A part of me hoped I burned in lassulyn for eternity for it. Another part of me knew Dianna would hunt me, hunt us all like she did for her sister. I would be lying if I said I wouldn't welcome it.