

KENZIE KELLY



BRIMSTONE BORN

EMPYREAN BOOK 1

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Empyrean #1

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For Mom, who has given me enough love (and material) to write for a decade.

And for Jason, who lets me run wild and rarely complains about the numerous fend for yourself nights. The rock of my life without whom I'd be nothing. (He asked me to add that last part.)

For the big'un and the little'un, whose brilliant brainstorming kept the imagination fires burning.

ONE

RAINN GAVE SERIOUS side-eye to the two foot tall woman hovering midair in front of her. The rail thin, blue woman with wings who was staring at her.

Big green eyes in a cherubic face blinked. The creature's wings hummed like bees as they worked to hover her miniature frame a foot above the ground, her tiny toes dangling over purple flowers carpeting the ground like a bad 70's shag.

They were frozen for several seconds staring at each other before she spoke in a voice echoing like a thousand tiny bells. "Well, shit."

Rainn choked on a laugh and took a moment to regain her composure. "That pretty much sums up my thoughts on the matter."

A diminutive hand ran through stiff green hair which only made it stick out in different directions than before. "I guess I'm the welcoming committee."

"Welcoming committee to where?" Rainn glanced around but the monotonous landscape. Not to mention the whole blue woman with wings thing. She could pretty much rule out being anywhere she knew of—including earth. "What even are you?"

The small blue woman spread her arms wide and said, "This is Empyrean. I'm a Heather Pixie of the Seelie Court currently..." Waving her hands and dismissing herself, she finished abruptly with "my name is Fern."

She stuck out a small hand, which Rainn shook with one finger. "I'm Rainn, like the weather but with two N's'."

"Yes, I know." Said matter-of-fact as if it was obvious.

The pixie flew in a circle, inspecting the distance on all sides, for what Rainn couldn't guess. The field of flowers stretched in every direction, the sky an impossible blue and lacking a single cloud... or a sun for that matter. "How?"

That brought her back to give Rainn a quizzical look. "How what?"

Like an insect, Fern tilted her head, eyes going wide.

"How do you know my name? How did I get here? Where exactly is here?" Rainn stood and brushed off the back of her jeans. Her tan v-neck was splotched with purple where she'd fallen into the flowers and she was fairly certain she had crushed a number of them in her hair.

Fern took in Rainn's confused expression. "A topside undercover agent shoved you through the dimple. He was able to get me a message saying your name is Rainn and asking me to check on you. I've already said you're in Empyrean."

The pixie darted around her in a haphazard square while Rainn tried to absorb anything she'd been told. Fern returned to look her in the eye. "You look relatively unharmed. Can you walk?"

Rainn's head was spinning trying to figure out what the pixie was saying when a tiny blue fist smacked her in the nose. "Did you hit your head?"

Rainn rubbed at the tip of her nose and blew air at the pixie who whooshed backward and let out a screech.

Fern put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at Rainn. "Never do that again."

Rainn mirrored her posture and shot back, "Don't hit me again."

Little blue arms crossed over her chest and she looked away. Rainn swore she was pouting. "Fair enough. In my defense, I was losing you and you need to focus. Can. You. Walk?"

"I think so." Rainn took a few steps and a wave of dizziness and nausea knocked her to her knees. She hung her head and sucked air into her lungs trying to get her eyes to quit spinning and her stomach settled. Meanwhile a blur of buzzing blue and green flitted around her head. "Can you stop please? You're making it worse."

Fern settled in front of her, hands stabbing her hair in new directions every few seconds. Rainn wasn't sure that was any better, but at least she didn't have the urge to swat at her like a mosquito. With one last shaky breath, she stood, slowly. Three hesitant steps turned into a dozen as the dizziness subsided. "Okay, I think I'm good now."

Zooming straight up until she was eye to eye with Rainn, Fern studied her and then let out a sigh of relief. "Good, because you need to move and I need to disappear."

"Wait, what? You can't leave me here alone!" Rainn was barefoot, smudged with dirt and starting to panic. She reached for Fern, but the little thing zipped away and easily avoided capture.

"Don't panic!" Fern's melodic voice became a harsh screech commanding attention. "Look, I can't be seen with you and they'll figure out I'm missing any minute. I just came to make sure you made it safely. All you have to do is keep moving. I promise someone will come for you."

Before Rainn had time to object again, Fern disappeared from view. Taking a deep breath and pushing her hair back, Rainn started to walk. She hadn't gone more than 15 steps when Fern zoomed back and filled her vision. "Forgot this bit: Trust your instincts while in Empyrean. If something feels right, it likely is. The reverse is also true." Fern put her hands on Rainn's cheeks, stared into her eyes and added "this part's important—if you see me again, we never met. Got it?" Rainn nodded.

Between one blink and the next, Fern was gone again.

Rainn had no trouble trusting her gut. She'd found it was generally correct. When she'd gone against her instincts it wasn't good. Like going on a date with a gorgeous guy in college who ended up being an open mouth chewer. In this strange place, with nothing else to ground her, she'd have relied on it more even without the pixie's instruction.

She took a long slow look around. Fern said she was in Empyrean, but that meant nothing. She now knew she'd been pushed through a dimple to get here. Which was more useless information. As far as she knew that could be anything. Maybe a wormhole, or a rabbit hole.

She'd probably remember a tornado, so the likelihood of wicked witches and flying monkeys was low.

She let out a deep sigh and started walking. Tenderly since she was barefoot, but the ground was strangely soft, like peat moss but not wet. There were no landmarks to guide her, no way to tell if she was walking in a straight line or going in circles. "Tiptoe Through The Tulips" ran through her mind. At least I haven't lost my sense of humor.

She walked for what had to be forever, but could have been five minutes. No sun in the sky meant no shadows to gauge the passing of time. No trees, rocks, bushes—nothing to break the absolute sameness of it all. She sang songs and made up lyrics she couldn't remember. Pulling her long, dark hair into a knot which unwound in minutes she wished for a hair tie she didn't have. She wanted to stop several times in frustration, but kept moving.

Rainn stopped walking, trying to come up with a new game to keep her amused (having already counted her steps, talked to herself, and done an excellent impression of Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*). Startled out of her reverie by a sizzle and pop Rainn spun on her heel and promptly screamed blue bloody murder, clapping her hands over her mouth to stop the noise. She didn't even try to prevent herself from backing up, which she did with haste.

A massive dog stood in front of her. Not just massive—this thing was the size of a grizzly and looked just as deadly. Rainn wasn't super tall, she topped out just below five and a half feet, but this thing could look her in the eye without even stretching. Realizing it wasn't following her, or, you know, ripping her throat out, she stopped.

Was she supposed to stand up and make herself appear as big as possible? Or curl into a ball and get as small as she could? Remembering one was for dogs and the other for bears but no idea about a dog the size of a bear.

Don't run. That much was a smart idea for both. Calm down. Don't pass out from hyperventilating.

It sat down and she almost screamed again. Rainn congratulated herself when only a high pitched squeak emerged.

The bear/dog, —doar? —bog? Tilted its head and stared at her. She stared back. Its short fur was an impossible shade of midnight blue, so dark it was near black. If the pixie and the strange landscape hadn't done the trick, seeing this thing would have definitely cemented the fact she was no longer on earth. Its muscles shimmered like stardust. Floppy ears bracketed a boxy head and powerful jaws reminiscent of a pit bull. Its eyes were the silver of mercury and had no pupils. They were stars laid against the night sky of its fur.

It swiveled its head to the side, velvety ears perking up at something she couldn't hear. The animal seemed like a stain, a shadow in this bright place.

"Niiiiice Bog," she crooned in as soothing a voice as she could muster under the circumstances.

In response, its mouth fell open in a grin, black tongue lolling between stark white fangs. She couldn't decide if that was better or worse.

"Who's a pretty, totally not terrifying, Bog?" Adrenaline told every fiber in her body to run. She was in pretty good shape for the average twenty-something, but her brain recognized that as a horrible idea. She seriously considered it anyway.

She took a half step back. The Bog didn't move. After several more steps where it didn't rip her to shreds, she took a deep breath and started to calm down. As much as you could calm down facing an animal roughly four feet tall at the shoulder that outweighed you by about 500 pounds.

She didn't know how long they stood, staring at each other. Neither one moved. It sat there, its tongue out, looking like an extremely large, but mostly happy, dog. Balancing "not a threat" with "not prey either" was proving more difficult than you'd think.

They were in an old-fashioned standoff. High noon and she'd brought a knife to a gunfight. She steeled herself and shoved a hand out, palm up. "Here boy," she said with as much authority as she could muster. She didn't really want it getting closer, but thought trying to shoo it away was a really bad idea.

She stood unyielding when he moved, covering the ground between them with one step. Then he licked her. His tongue was cold, and wrapped almost all the way around her arm, leaving a trail of drool from wrist to shoulder. That done he sat down and gave her an expectant look.

Gross. She shook her arm and drool went flying. She got as much off as possible, transferring it to her jeans. Then she turned back to the bog.

And I will pet him and love him and name him George. It tilted its head at her nervous laughter. She weighed her options. Rainn was in Empyrean, which was god knows where, with no idea why. A blue pixie with wings told her to walk, someone would come for her. A massive blue dog appeared. Soaked her arm in drool. Either it was seeing if she tasted good, or it could help her somehow. After getting over the thing scaring the daylights out of her, instinct was telling her it was there to help.

"Alright then. Can you speak?" She figured it was worth a try. If this place and pixies existed, then it stood to reason a huge blue dog with silver eyes could speak. The bog cocked its head at her. "No then. Do you have an owner? Can you, uh... take me to your leader?" The bog gave her a slow blink.

"Was that a yes or a no? Blink once for yes, and twice for no." The bog stared at her. She stared at the bog. Rainn snorted in frustration. If she had gone through the rabbit hole into Wonderland, the least it could do was have talking bogs.

It stood up, swinging around quick enough to knock her on her butt. "Well, that's just rude." She stood back up and swiped at her pants. The bog had gone stiff as a board, and was staring at the horizon. That can't be good.

The bog growled, low and deep like far off thunder. Rainn took an involuntary step back. Yep, not good.

It turned its head to her again. Its eyes were swirling now, darker grays dancing in spirals through the mercury depths. Rainn was mesmerized.

Swinging its head back to the horizon she followed its gaze. Three somethings were moving toward them. No, not somethings... People riding horses. Wait, no. People who were horses. Of course there were centaurs. Sure. Why not? Pixies, dogs the size of small cars and now centaurs. What's next, zombies?

Apparently centaurs. Except for the one in front who had gotten close enough to see it actually was a person on a horse. He was squat and fat and Rainn spared a thought for the poor horse struggling with his weight. By contrast the centaurs were big and solid, their brown bodies like draft horses and their bare chests muscled with six-pack abs any gym rat would envy. They were moving at a good clip, heading straight for them.

Bog rumbled. It clearly didn't like whoever they were. Rainn swung her head back and forth between them and the bog. She took a step in their direction. The bog knocked her back. Yeah, he definitely didn't like them. She decided she trusted the bear sized dog who hadn't eaten her over three horse people who were giving her the creeps and getting close rather quickly.

"I'll stay behind you then." The ground swayed and her stomach flipped. Awesome. If they're friends, I'll puke on them. And if they're not, I'll be too dizzy to run.

Putting a hand out to steady herself, the bog stepped under it. She leaned into its neck and took deep breaths to stay upright. Her pants were dirty enough. "Good Bog." His fur was as soft as a chinchilla, his solid support comforting under her shoulder.

The dizziness passed but she stayed tucked up next to him. Her eyes refused to focus. Her struggling was rewarded with a searing pain in her chest.

"What the hell?" she croaked as she bent double. The bog whined, nuzzling her side. Lifting her eyes, he tilted his neck and she noticed a collar. It was black leather with writing burned on the surface in a language she didn't recognize. She spun it to see if there was anything she could make out. There wasn't. No tag, no buckle. An unbroken circle of leather adorned with script she couldn't identify.

The pain faded to a dull ache. The trio was only yards away now. Rainn grabbed the bog's collar to help her straighten up. He fell on his belly and nudged until she climbed on his back. Before she could blink, he made a sound between a bark and a roar, jumped several feet in the air and dove straight at the ground. Rainn passed out.

Rainn was lying on her stomach, something soft and hot shoved up next to her, softly snoring hot air into her armpit. She executed a languid stretch and snuggled back into the cocoon of sheets, pillows, and blankets. Wait, what?

Her eyes snapped open. Gone were the shag carpet flowers and vivid sky. Gone too were the trio who seemed hell bent on reaching her. They'd been replaced by a huge bed, piled high with soft fluffy things that made a body never want to leave. The bog was the weight at her side. He'd stretched out his back shoved next to her and his nose in her armpit. Even stretched out, there was plenty of room on the bed. She propped herself up and he cracked an eye at her before going back to sleep. Looking past him she saw rough cut stone walls and dark wooden floors. She rolled over to find a massive fireplace with flames chewing through what could be half a tree. A large wingback chair and ottoman sat at an angle in front, with some sort of fur thrown on the floor. Everything was oversize, like a giant lived here.

It took her a minute to realize there was a man in the chair. He didn't look like a giant. He was tall and would be a good head higher than her own five foot five, but certainly nowhere near giant. Even better, his eyes were closed. Otherwise it would have been awkward, with her gawking at him and all. He was leaned back, his legs stretched out on the ottoman and crossed at the ankles. His white button-down was hanging open, rumped around his waist, revealing a tightly muscled chest. The firelight highlighted every perfect dip and line. He had on black leather pants that should have been illegal. An open book, pages side down to hold his place, was resting in his lap. He was barefoot and his short black hair was wet, making him look like he'd just gotten out of the shower.

Rainn's eyes made the slow slide back to his face. He was totally and completely gorgeous.

And he was staring at her.