
CLAIMED BY THE BEAST

Alcyran Chronicles - Book Two

ANYA SUMMERS



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Eclipse Press' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

CHAPTER ONE

And the winner of the awkward duckling award goes to... Even in Ireland, surrounded by some of the most exquisite history in the world, Moira felt uncomfortable, as if she didn't truly fit in. Some of it was a residual, knee-jerk reaction from being the fat teenager. While she'd lost most of the weight during her senior year of high school, thank goodness, she was still the voluptuous, curvy member of the friendship triad with her two besties, Anna and Gemma.

The three of them had been the best of friends since freshman year of high school. They had all attended Wesleyan University together and been each other's roommates. Gemma was lithe with long blonde hair and always had guys drooling over her. Then there was cute, petite Anna, with the double Ds and tiny waist who, as the shortest member of their group—clocking in at five feet—was like a tiny ninja and had upon occasion been known to punch a guy in the junk if he got too handsy.

Between her two besties, at times Moira felt like an ogre walking through the fine china section of Macy's, liable to cause destruction in her wake merely by existing. At five foot eight, she was the tallest in the bunch and thicker than both her friends. It seemed no matter

how much she exercised or ate healthy, her body didn't want to be reed thin. Or, at least, thinner than it was, and while she could no longer be labeled as fat, there were some things a person never truly got over. She had been mercilessly teased in both junior high and high school over her appearance. Even though Gemma and Anna had tried to make her feel better, and defended her against their classmates, the malicious barbs had cut her heart into pieces just the same. Left indelible scars that Moira didn't know if she would ever fully get over. Not to mention, when her size mixed with her innate clumsiness, it made for rather awkward occurrences—like the guy she had just plowed into heading out of the pub. The poor guy had been lucky she was tipsy and not marching at full capacity, otherwise she would have flattened him like a pancake—and nearly did in her incapacitated state, with apologies spilling out of her mouth and embarrassment turning her face as bright red as her hair. He'd been kind and had laughed it off without a snide comment.

And yes, she'd expected a nasty zinger geared toward her size.

Because, let's face it, when your mother takes you to her therapist so she can discuss with them how much it upsets her that you're fat—in front of you—it leaves a mark. Her mom had done just that to her in high school. The residual shame and embarrassment from that event ran pretty deep. It was one of the reasons why Moira and her mom no longer spoke to each other. But really, was it any wonder she had body issues?

But she'd promised herself that this trip was going to be different. A vacation where she was going to shed the internal layers holding her back from experiencing life to its fullest. That was something she'd done when she had tipped the scales up over two hundred pounds. Held back. Not allowed herself to do all the things she wanted because she was a bigger girl.

Moira was proud of the strides she'd made since then, and was slowly coming to accept herself for herself, for who she was: a tall, curvy woman with a lot to offer. Whether her parents approved of her or not no longer mattered. She had stopped trying to please

them long ago, and focused on what made her happy. She was over taking on other people's judgements of her and accepting them as her truth.

Although, some days, she still felt like the fat girl who was overlooked and shunned as they threaded their way through the crowded streets. One who had been passed over in favor of her best friends. It wasn't their fault that guys didn't pay attention to Moira once they spied her girlfriends, or that that caused her body issues to surface. They were her issues, ones she kept trying to move past without much luck.

Dublin was stunning. When the Three Musketeers had contrived this trip last fall as a way to celebrate their graduation from Wesleyan, and Gemma had mentioned Ireland, Moira had jumped at the destination. Deep down she knew Anna had really wanted to go to the Bahamas, but she had sided with Gemma to convince her that Ireland was the place for them to go. Because in the Bahamas, they would be wearing bathing suits and skimpy clothes. And, truth be told, she was still extremely self-conscious about her body and showing it off.

It didn't matter that her stomach had shrunk until only the tiniest hint of a curve protruded, or that her arms and legs were toned, not flabby. She also had an over ample cleavage and wide, round hips that tended to give her an hourglass figure. By society's standards, she was still a big girl. The idea of displaying her body caused an unholy fear inside her that mingled with a fervent need to protect herself from the malice and snide comments she was certain would barrage her should she do something like wear a bathing suit in public. It spurred an insane urge within her to keep her body covered and hidden. Otherwise, she feared she would be laughed at and ridiculed, which tended to leave further gashes in her already tenuous and flimsy self-confidence.

Cue Moira jumping at Ireland as their vacation destination instead of the Bahamas. Because at least there she could wear jeans and cute tops that flattered her voluptuous figure, as she was

wearing now, that made her feel more confident instead of being exposed in a bathing suit on a beach. She shuddered at the thought.

The moment the plane had landed, Moira had felt an air of expectation blossom inside her. This trip was going to change everything for her—in a good way. She might even be reckless enough to find a guy non-repulsed enough by her size to finally experience sex. She was the only virgin in the trio, and that made her feel left behind. Not that it was a reason to have sex, but lately, she'd yearned for it, for the intimacy, to have a man look at her and want her—the former fat girl with body issues—and not be disgusted by her form but aroused by it.

Although some days she wondered if that was a more mythical fantasy than a unicorn that pooped glitter.

The thought of attending graduate school this fall with that moniker still attached made her want to hang her head in shame. Which was stupid and lame. Moira knew that, deep down. If she were honest, she was still a virgin because she was a romantic at heart. She teared up every time she read the Sullivan Ballou letter and so many more like it in her history studies. And it made her want a love that even the universe would bow down and be still for. Foolish and rather naïve of her, to be certain. It made her wish she had Gemma's exuberance and bubbly personality, or Anna's fierceness.

So, one of her goals for this trip was to lose her virginity. It didn't have to be true love to get the job done. Because the reality was, in this day and age, she was more likely to get hit by a bus than experience her first time with someone she loved.

Besides, Dublin was chock full of welcome pubs that brimmed with sexy Irishmen. Surely, she could find one reasonably attractive and intelligent man who would be more than happy to help her change her status, even if she was a larger gal. Maybe over here they weren't as body conscious as in the States.

Moira hadn't expected the beauty of this place to move her. Rolling hills of verdant green fields surrounded the city. Dublin was

jam-packed with tourists carting maps and cameras, businessmen in suits walking through the crowds talking on their cell phones, and locals carrying bags filled with produce or hurrying along to an appointment. This place teemed with colorful, vivacious life.

And the history—be still her beating heart.

It was a historian's playground. Everywhere she glanced were pieces of history, all telling a different story. They had gone to the library at Trinity College after lunch today and she had gotten to view one of the oldest and most famous books in history: the *Book of Kells*. Her fingers had itched to touch the ancient manuscript, which she knew was a big no-no. Then they'd gone on to Dublin Castle and the Medieval City with its Viking heritage.

When it came to history, Ireland was a dream come true.

The first day of their two-week adventure was in the books, and so far it had been outstanding. They had another day in Dublin before they traveled south to Waterford and Cork, then went on to tour the rest of the island. Their vacation was a celebration of their friendship before they each went their separate ways to graduate school next month—different graduate schools, in different parts of the country.

The last hoorah of the Three Musketeers before they were separated for the first time in eight years.

Any time Moira contemplated being at school without Gemma and Anna, her heart ached, and panic ensued. They were the reason why she hadn't been a total recluse throughout college. What would she do without them there every day, urging her to try things and having her back when it was up against a wall?

She did one of those hiccup-burps, and the flavor of her last Guinness roiled over her taste buds once more.

Tonight, they had done what any recent college grads would do. After a dinner of fish and chips at the quaint restaurant in their hotel, they had headed to the famous Temple Bar district to explore the nightlife. The place was suffused with people, locals and tourists alike, out for a good time. The cobbled streets were lined with pubs,

restaurants, and the occasional tattoo parlor. Because everyone knew that excessive drinking led to some interesting decision-making at one in the morning.

They had strutted through the streets lined with glowing street lights, and garnered more than their fair share of interested looks from cute guys. Although Moira knew it hadn't been her they'd been looking at, but Gemma and Anna.

Not that Gemma and Anna weren't used to the attention. Gemma, with her strawberry-blond hair in a high ponytail and denim skirt that ended at mid-thigh showing off her tanned legs. She drew members of the male sex in like a queen bee. They couldn't resist her lure.

And Anna with her sheet of raven hair that hung straight to her waist as she teetered on a pair of silver stilettos. Between her diminutive stance, double Ds, and heels, the men looked at her as if she were a tasty treat.

Male glances tended to slide over Moira and land on one of her best friends. It wasn't their fault. Gemma said it was her lack of confidence where men were concerned, and not her looks. But the little fat girl inside Moira didn't believe a word of it. Men were visual creatures and tended to look past her to a woman more aesthetically pleasing.

They trudged back to their hotel, a little buzzed and a lot happy. Moira slung an arm around Gemma's shoulders.

"What a way to begin our trip. I'd say the first night was a success." Moira hiccupped again. She should have declined that last Guinness. Her head was fuzzy. Her lips were numb. And she was craving a slinger from the diner near Wesleyan University.

"I second that motion," Anna said, balancing on her heels with an innate, catlike grace, despite the dubious amounts of Guinness they'd imbibed. Moira didn't know how she did it. For her, heels were akin to medieval torture devices. She would rather be comfortable than deal with blisters and aching feet. For walking around all day long, she preferred practical sneakers with lots of

arch support, and her sensible slip on sneakers in black were just that.

“All these streets look the same, don’t they?” Gemma asked, scanning the area.

Moira glanced around, shoving a strand of her red curls that obstructed her gaze out of her face. Her hair had a mind of its own and was constantly getting in the way. She’d chop it off, but short hair tended to make her face appear puffier. Wearing it long so it fell to her mid-back made her face look a bit leaner, which she was all for and then some.

They were standing at an intersection with three possible directions to take. The buildings that lined each avenue were made of murky, historical brick, with signs above the doorways for different businesses. The intersection was dimly lit with only one of the streetlamps illuminating the corner. It was so different from the radiant glowing walk in Temple Bar with its colorful establishments and well-lit lanes. How had they ended up so far away from the main hub?

Moira tried to create a map in her head with the precise location of their hotel in her Guinness-infused brain, and came up blank. They must have taken a wrong turn. But where and when, she hadn’t the foggiest idea.

The haze of one too many pints of Guinness, compounded with their long flight, had turned her brain into molasses. Figuring the way back to their hotel on the unfamiliar roads was like trying to decipher a cryptex without the word cipher—nearly impossible.

As she studied their options, the right lane looked most familiar. “I think it was this one we came down,” Moira said, and gestured with a fling of her arm toward the lane on the right. Granted, it could be the road paved to hell. She snickered rather drunkenly at her musings. It was a good thing no one ever saw inside her head.

They’d entered a section of town that was deserted; the crowds dispersed. There were three of them, so Moira wasn’t worried about their safety. Much. Getting lost was actually familiar territory and

blanketed her with a sense of comfort. For all her knowledge, she tended to get lost quite a bit. Then again, she'd been lost her whole life, it seemed. This situation made the end of their fabulous night feel like something out of a horror show with the dark streets surrounding them.

Moira figured that, if all else failed, she had the Uber app on her phone, and they could get someone to come ferry them back to their hotel. There was always a way out of a bad situation. That's what losing all that weight had shown her. So they weren't lost, they were on an adventure.

Anna shook her head and pointed toward a different road on their left. "No, this is the one we walked down. Don't you remember? We took a right out of the hotel lobby, walked to the corner intersection where Saint Stephen's Green is located, and took a left. Then did another right to head into Temple Bar. That street took us past the Molly Malone statue."

Anna was the least directionally challenged out of the group. But still, the street she pointed to didn't look familiar—not one bit. Not that that was saying much, because none of the streets were familiar. Maybe they should have sprung for a cab back to the hotel instead of walking. Moira reached into her purse to grab her phone, because if they couldn't even agree on a street to take, it was time to be practical and call in the big guns—an Uber driver.

"Are you sure?" Gemma asked, not convinced, her voice laced with uncertainty as she winced with concern.

If Gemma was freaked out, then Moira needed to sober the hell up quickly. Gemma didn't get freaked out, ever. She took charge, she conquered, she kicked butt. And Moira let her. She didn't want to be a leader or an icon or a business mogul like her father, she wanted to do work that satisfied her, and be happy.

At the flash of fear crossing Gemma's face, Moira's anxiety rose to Defcon 2.

Anna tilted her head, studying the options in front of them.

Then, with a nod, her raven hair shifting like a waterfall of inky black waves, she said, "I'm certain. That's the one."

"Then let's head that way," Gemma said, her brow furrowed in consternation.

Hopefully, it was the correct street that would lead back toward their hotel and was only a few more blocks. Moira hated to complain. Her feet were tired from all the walking they'd done. In fact, her entire body felt pushed to the extreme. Their plane had landed at six that morning from their overnight flight out of Dulles International Airport. When they'd arrived at their hotel, instead of taking a much-needed nap, they had deposited their luggage and gone exploring. Then they'd checked into their room, changed into their club wear, and had dinner before venturing forth into the exotic nightlife. The excitement of visiting a foreign country for the first time had been too exhilarating for them to relax.

And now she had imbibed a few beers. All Moira wanted to do at this point was call an Uber, get back to their hotel, and go horizontal for eight hours.

Their footsteps clicked against the pavement. Her body dragged with each step as they strode further with no sign that they were heading in the right direction. Panic rose with each step forward along the deserted lane. Heart pounding, Moira prayed she wouldn't have a panic attack. Dammit, their vacation was supposed to be a panic attack free zone. Her senses were on high alert, hyperaware of every sound. She was ready to call an Uber.

This was moronic.

It was then that she heard it. Great swooshing noises.

A *va-woop-woop-woop* made her think of propeller blades, but there was no engine motor humming along with it. What could it possibly be? Or was her overactive imagination playing tricks on her?

"Do you guys hear that?" Gemma asked, glancing behind them with concern on her face.

"I thought it was just me," Moira said, searching around for

where the sound was coming from. If anything, it was getting louder, closer. Her spine tingled in apprehension. “What do you suppose it is?”

“I don’t hear anything,” Anna said, looking up and down the street, her brow furrowed in concentration. “Clearly, this is not the way to the hotel. Sorry, guys. Maybe we should take that street coming up on the right. It should take us in the general direction of the hotel.” Then she raised her head and peered up at the darkness above the streetlamps. Moira was about to suggest they call an Uber but at Anna’s bloodcurdling scream, her heart leapt into her throat. Gemma jerked and followed her gaze up to the black, starry sky above. So of course, Moira had to look.

A scream tore from her throat. It was horrific. She wasn’t seeing this. It couldn’t be real. Her psyche rejected the possibility it could be there.

Beside her, Gemma shook her head as if she was trying to clear the spectral image from her own vision.

As Moira stared at the thing, all the texts she had read describing the devil flashed through her mind. Surely, *Dante’s Inferno* had been just the author’s imagination and not a factual accounting? Or had what he described been real, only everyone had chalked it up to fantasy? She pinched her arm. Hard. Hard enough to almost break the skin. Her eyes watered at the sharp bite of pain. But she wanted to make sure she hadn’t passed out and wasn’t having a nightmare. Yes, it was real. The freaking monster wasn’t a hallucination.

Holy shitballs!

Where had it come from? Why was it here? Why was it after them?

Its wingspan was wider than the street, a good twenty-five feet. It hovered directly above their heads. Great charcoal leathery wings flapped, generating a wind tunnel along the small cobbled road. Its body was massive. The thing had to be at least seven feet tall, with a broad

chest wider than a doorframe and bare of any artifice. Its arms were muscular and thickly formed, like those of the bodybuilders one saw at the gym. Moira would bet this thing could bench press a semi-truck. Its legs were thickly hewn like tree trunks, and covered in black material.

But then she noticed its hands. As if she wasn't already scared enough, a renewed, immobilizing terror shot through her. Its hands were enormous, each bigger than her head, and tipped with wickedly sharp claws. All the better to rip flesh—*her* flesh. Moira was surprised she didn't pee in her pants she was so terrified. Its face looked as if it was carved from granite with hard angles and two black horns curling at its temples. The thing's eyes flashed an inhuman silver.

It wasn't human.

Well, duh. Like I doubted that for a moment.

Run, damn you.

She screamed internally at herself. But her body was no longer responding to her commands. She froze as she gaped in horror. She trembled. Dread unlike anything she had ever known infused her. Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes and trailed down her cheeks.

What the fuck was it? And why was it hovering over their heads?

"Run!" Gemma cried. She grabbed Moira's and Anna's hands.

The touch jolted Moira's body into movement and her feet stumbled forward at the command. Where the hell had her damn survival instinct gone? If Gemma hadn't kicked it into gear, she would still be standing frozen in terror.

Gemma gripped her hand, dragging her along. She stumbled as they ran. Her breaths came out as cries on weak gasps. They had to find someplace to duck inside, away from the beast. If they could just find shelter, they would be okay. The monster wouldn't be able to follow them inside, would it?

Gemma took the turn Anna had suggested moments before.

Moira lifted her feet higher, running faster to make sure she kept up. With any luck, their hotel would be right around the corner.

Her hope bubble burst as they entered the lane. Their luck, apparently, was shit.

Terror gripped her soul. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a nightmare. Yet, it didn't stop her tears as they fell fast and furious. The street they'd taken wasn't an escape—it was a dead end. The big beast followed them from above. Its great wings stirred air currents and created a wind tunnel in the alley. Dust and rocks pelted them, stinging her face like an angry cloud of hornets.

She whipped her head back and forth, searching for a place to hide as they ran. She gulped in air, her lungs burning from the exertion. There was no way out. There was no doorway or window they could climb through to safety. All the windows were too high up for them to reach in time. Their footsteps slowed as they reached the dead end; a gray brick wall that was a good twelve feet high. There were no footholds or crevasses they could use to climb up over the wall, either. Besides, doing so would put them nearer the flying monster.

A dead end. Moira's brain tried to calculate their chances of escape, of getting out of this alive. She didn't like their odds.

"What are we going to do?" Moira gasped, frantically searching for a way out of their situation.

Anna whimpered. "I'm not seeing this. We're not here. We just had something put in our drinks, and we're back at the hotel. This is just a nightmare."

Gemma looked down the alley, a fierce scowl on her face. Then the *thing*, for Moira couldn't call it anything else, landed in the alley and blocked off their escape route. They were well and truly fucked. No way out. No help in sight.

They flattened their backs against the brick wall as the thing approached.

"Wake up. This is just a nightmare. Wake the fuck up!" Anna was hysterical.

Moira whimpered. Her fearful moans were deep and guttural. Was it going to hurt when it killed them? She prayed it would be quick and painless. That it wouldn't eat them alive bit by bit. Tremors wracked her frame. There was no way out. It wasn't a dream. This was as real as life and death could get. She tried to absorb some of Gemma's strength, wanting to face her demise with a modicum of defiant calm, but it was no use.

She hated that she was a blubbering wimp.

The creature approached. Its booted feet crunched over the pavement. What kind of monster wore leather boots? She pressed her lips together to contain the hysterical laugh that threatened to bubble up. It appeared to be male, judging by the lines of its chest flowing down to its groin. His large wings, even at rest behind him as he crept toward them, spanned the width of the alley and cut off any chance of escape. Their pointed tips dragged along the brick, scraping the stone. The sound was like nails down a chalkboard.

That's when things got even weirder. How was that even possible? Moira hadn't a clue. But they did.

They awaited their fate. Pressed against brick. The monster's glowing silver, otherworldly gaze stoked her terror. Moira couldn't help it. She sobbed. She wasn't ready to die. She had barely had a chance to live, a chance to explore the world around her. And now, all the hope and possibilities were going to be ended in a back alley far from home.

She was going to die a fucking virgin. There were so many ways in which that was wrong.

She rarely thought of her mom, because they weren't close, but right now she wanted her, and her dad too. Anna sobbed as well. Only Gemma looked like she wanted to murder the thing and fight back. But with what? They knew nothing about monsters, and Moira would bet the thing could rip them limb from limb without breaking a sweat.

At least they would go out together. Maybe not in a blaze of glory, but together.

Before she could tell her friends she loved them, the wall against their backs dissolved. *What the hell?* Although, maybe that was too simple a term. It melted. The bricks liquefied and dissolved into nothingness. Instead of stone behind them, a swirling black mass that resembled the inside of a tornado took its place.

The monster was close. He—it—picked up its pace to capture them. She didn't want to know what the creature had in store for them.

"Go," Gemma urged. Moira looked at her and beyond her to Anna, who had black streaks down her face from her mascara. As a unit they made the decision, their trust in each other solid. No matter what, they would help each other survive. Then, with a nod, one by one they stepped inside the black swirling mist.

She shrieked as she fell. At least, she thought she was falling, tumbling through air with nothing to stop her. Her body felt like it was being reshaped, compressed into a doughy ball and then stretched until her joints screamed in agony. She couldn't see. The gale force winds blinded her. Moira thought she heard Gemma and Anna's high-pitched screams nearby. But she wasn't certain. The moment they'd all entered the black mist their hands had been wrenched from hers.

It was like she was inside a pinball machine. Her body spun in a ricochet inside the pitch-black mass. She couldn't see anything, at least not long enough to determine what was happening to them. A loud booming rush filled her ears and stole the breath from her lungs.

Moira hit the ground and gasped at the sheer physical agony lancing through her body. She glanced around, frantic to find Gemma and Anna. She didn't see Gemma. But Anna was perhaps fifty feet away.

It was then that she heard it. The devil had followed them into the mist.

Anna's face was stricken with fear as the monster zeroed in on her.

“Run!” Moira screamed.

Its deafening roar shook the ground. Moira scrambled to her feet, prepared to go help her friend. But Anna shook her head and waved Moira away before she darted into the surrounding forest—in heels, no less.

The beast followed Anna with single-minded determination. Moira raced after them, desperate to save Anna. She had no idea where Gemma had landed. They could find her once Anna was safe, once they were both safe from the monster.

Branches slapped against her face as she ran behind them through the underbrush. At least she had taken a practical approach to her footwear tonight.

And then she spied Anna, trapped up against a large tree. Her scream was spine-tingling as the monster grabbed her in its arms and launched them both up into the sky.

“No!” Moira shouted, horrified at the tableau. How would she get Anna back?