

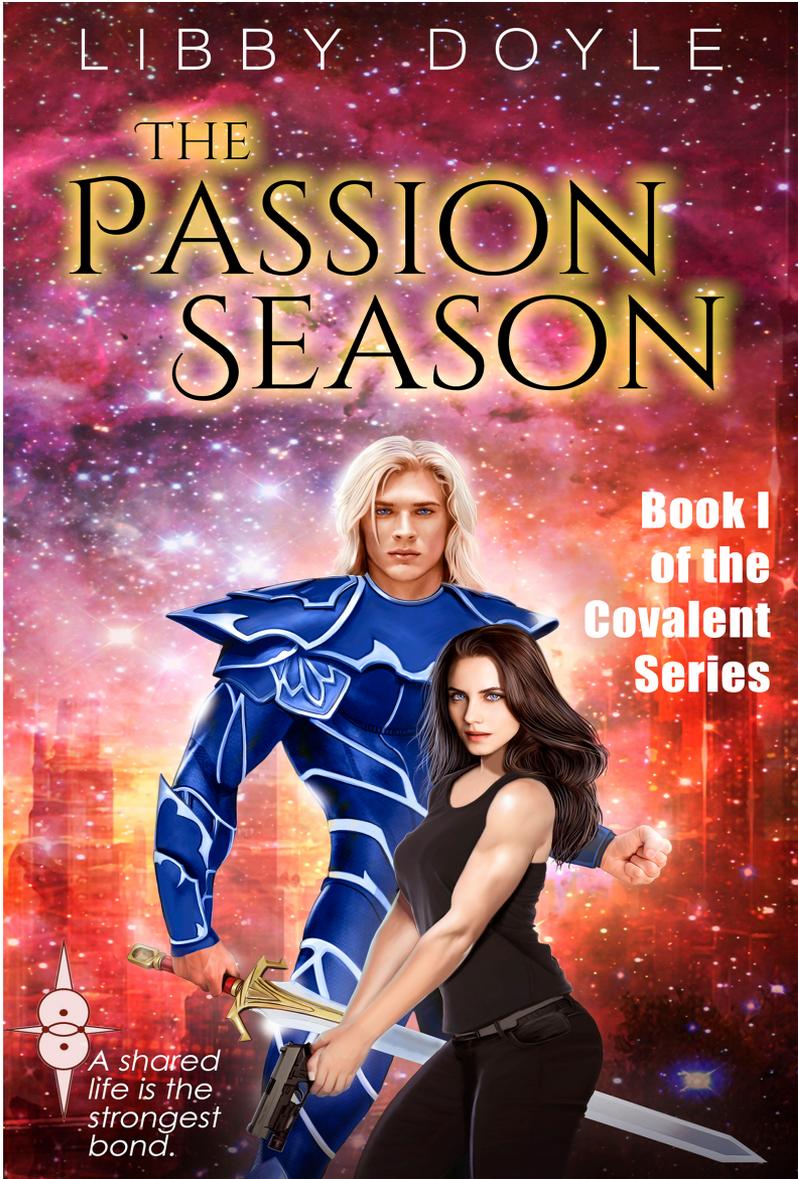
LIBBY DOYLE

THE
PASSION
SEASON

Book I
of the
Covalent
Series



*A shared
life is the
strongest
bond.*



THE
PASSION SEASON

Libby Doyle

This is a work of fiction.
Similarities to real people or events are entirely
coincidental.

THE PASSION SEASON

Book I of the Covalent Series

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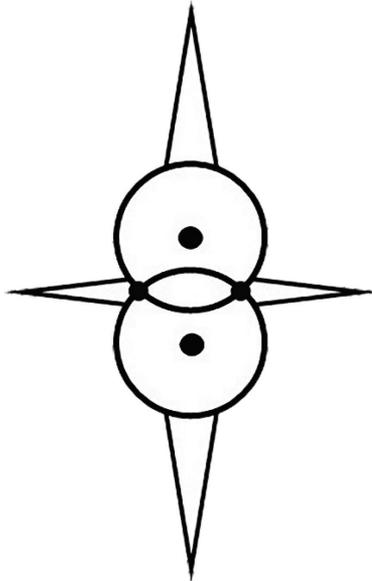
To my husband, whose patience is superhuman.

. . . I with thee have fixed my lot, certain to undergo
like doom; if death consort with thee, death is to me
as life[.]

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Covalent Bond

A bond in which one or more pairs of electrons are shared by two atoms to create a stable balance of attractive and repulsive forces.



COVALENT PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rainer (ry • ner) Barakiel (bah • rack • ē • el)

Pellus (pel • les)

Ravellen (ra • vel • en)

Abraxos (ah • brax • sōs)

Remiel (rem • ē • el)

Osmadiel (oz • mod • ē • el)

Camael (kam • ā • el)

Galizur (gal • ih • zer)

Yahoel (yah • hō • el)

Roan (row • ahn)

Kemuel (kem • ū • el)

Tariel (tah • rē • el)

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PROLOGUE



The stench, oh the stench. I smell it still, the same as when I found her in my chambers, her entrails strung across the lamps like shredded cloth. She was my mother. I loved her. Why did he kill her?

She had gone to him. As soon as I was old enough she left her home to be with him. How she must have suffered, every moment she denied herself so I would be shielded from his treachery. He was her mate, her match, but by the time she went to him, he was no longer the warrior she knew. In his presence, she could not withstand his will. She lured me there, to his kingdom of Destruction. I escaped him and he murdered her.

I killed her as surely as he did. She loved us and we killed her and now he draws me here, to this empty place, this Void. I feel him now, my father, gripping my mind with his terrible fever of power. Like sound that cannot be heard. Outside trying to get in. Inside trying to get out.

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Lip still quivering, wayward son? You disappoint me. Your mother was impure. I offered her rapture, yet she could not excise her desire to protect you. Spilling her blood was the most pleasure I ever got from her. You are not like her. I can feel your hatred, hard and sharp as a blade. I live inside you. Return to me and we will subjugate the realms. Return to me or die.

A rush of force. Voracious power. To submit would draw all things to me, pulverize them into a nothingness that only I can fill. Yet buried deep within me is something that I know. I do not understand it, but I know it. I do not belong to you, father. I do not. My Balance will hold. You will not wrest my love from me. Though it lives in pain, it is mine.



Covalent City, Age of Lucifer's Rebellion ***Phase 7816, Earthly Year 724***

Barakiel stood on the edge of the terrace trying to calm his mind. He watched citizens cross the Great Plaza far below and admired the mammoth gates of Covalent City, glowing amber within the pale granite of the city walls. Warriors patrolled the ramparts beneath thin towers of vermilion light. He envied them their duty.

Beyond the occasional flash of the city's protective barrier, the Stream glimmered sapphire on the horizon. He imagined losing himself in its electromagnetic storms,

which might be preferable to the fate the Covalent Council was to decide for him. As the son of the traitor Lucifer, he was an object of hatred and fear, too young to hold anything but a dim promise of power. He had no idea how to resist their pronouncement.

Perhaps they will execute me. That would be one way to ensure my father does not lay waste to their shining city.

The attendant showed Barakiel into the Council Chamber. His father had described it to him once. Told him how the thick, high pillars shimmered away and reformed, how the great table appeared as a reflecting pool yet was as solid as stone. His father said the Chamber was meant to be an expression of the Council's mastery over matter and energy. Then he laughed.

"Shallow tricks, that is all, by fools who have allowed comfort to make them forget what they are."

The attendant directed Barakiel to stand by the head of the table. He was addressed by Ravellen, a traveler Covalent of pale beauty, clothed in the crimson robes of the Council president.

"Welcome to our Chamber, Barakiel."

"Thank you, madam president, esteemed Council members." He bowed.

"We are sorry for the loss of your mother," Ravellen continued. "We are sorry you were unable to save her."

"She made her choice."

"And you? What would you choose?"

"To continue my training. Already, I fight as well as warriors double my age."

"We do not think this is possible. Your father obviously seeks your death or enslavement. He must see you as a threat."

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They think they know him better than I do. He tries to kill me because he loved me once.

“I know that,” Barakiel said. “But even when my mother lured me to him I was able to escape. I would ask the Council to have faith in me.”

“This is not a question of our faith in you.” Ravellen looked down, her lips set in a hard line. “When he left your mother’s body in your chambers, Lucifer revealed that he has the means to infiltrate the Realm. We have taken measures to stop him, but we do not believe we have seen his last attempt at an incursion.”

“My father had one or two of his minions sneak into the Realm with my mother’s corpse to cause me pain,” Barakiel said, keeping his posture rigid to give an impression of the confidence he did not feel. “It was hardly an attack. He never moved against the city when I was a child and far more vulnerable. I do not think he will challenge our stronghold now. I should be permitted to continue my training.”

Ravellen folded her hands before her, disrupting the table’s watery illusion to reveal hard granite. She looked at Barakiel as if he were a boy who had been horribly bullied at school, but who had no choice but to go back and face it again.

“When you were a child your father had lately been driven from the Realm. You know as well as I do his power has grown. Now that he has failed to make you his creature he will never stop trying to kill you, to crush your defiance.”

The Council Forces could prevent a full-scale siege, she explained, but violent incursions were another matter. Barakiel’s death might be their singular goal, but they would carry the threat of casualties. This was not a

risk the Council was willing to force on its citizens.

“So fight him. Go after him,” Barakiel said. “Destroy him before he can ever reach the city.”

The Council members exchanged glances. Abraxos, a thick-limbed warrior with a high shock of black hair, leaned forward in his seat.

“To safeguard you?” he asked, snorting rudely. “Ever since Lucifer brought the demons under his command, our forces have been challenged to keep him from the city gates. We are in no position to meet him in his own realm.”

“With time, he will only grow stronger.” Barakiel forced himself to look Abraxos in the eye. “We should attack him now.”

“We would not succeed.”

Fear bubbled in Barakiel’s mind. The Council members could be planning his death as surely as his father was, but he knew they were right. They hadn’t really defeated Lucifer and the Corrupted, the bloodthirsty Covalent warriors who joined him in his rebellion. The traitors fled to the Destructive Realm, where they were able to lick their wounds.

Not sure what they would find in that mysterious realm, the Council Forces didn’t pursue the traitors. This proved to be a mistake. Before long, Lucifer learned to control the demons, beasts that serve an impulse to obliterate everything in their path. He took the demons’ savage power and bent it to his own purpose, infusing it with strategy and intelligence.

Faced with such a foe, the Council had no care for Barakiel’s fate. He was a problem, nothing more. He lowered his head and took a slow, deep breath before he looked up to address Ravellen.

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“So what are you going to do with me?”

“We will send you to the Earthly Realm, somewhat out of your father’s reach,” Ravellen said. “He will attack you, I am sure, but his attacks will be bounded by physical and temporal laws. We believe you can protect yourself.”

“I will be alone. By the Council’s own declaration, our days of playing god in the Earthly Realm are over.”

“We will send a traveler with you. He will not always be there, but he will know at all times where you are. He will help you.”

“You mean he will mind me.”

“You say that like it is a bad thing. You are still an adolescent, Barakiel, even if you do not fight like one.”

“If I am to be banished for nothing I myself have done, pay me the courtesy of admitting you do not trust me.”

The Council members regarded him sternly but said nothing. Barakiel fancied he could see their brains working.

Just like his father. Why would we trust him? He is dangerous.

“So, who is this traveler?” Barakiel asked.

“His name is Pellus. He is quite skilled.”

“Well, plainly then, there is no reason to delay.”

“No. He is waiting for you on the terrace.”

The Council members rose to recite the Covalent Pledge. He knew they expected him to recite it with them.

We are Covalent.

We stand between Creation and Destruction.

To bond them, to bind them.

Our blood we pledge to this.

To Balance, preserver of life.

Barakiel didn't recite the pledge. He walked out.

Exiled. Sent to live among the humans with a minder. Ah, well, what does it matter? Nothing could be worse than what happened to me in my father's brutal realm.

A skilled traveler might allow Barakiel to visit his home, or at least let him journey through the cosmos. He paused in the anteroom to play out his racing thoughts. Almost everyone Barakiel knew well was a warrior. He'd been taught by a few scholars, but the other Covalent—travelers, healers, artisans, and quickeners—he'd known only in passing.

He called to mind what facts he knew. Covalent born with the talent to perceive the molecular composition of things studied for thousands of phases until they could predict the behavior of subatomic particles. They became travelers, able to move among the realms using rifts in the fabric of existence. Those who achieved mastery became adepts, the highest rank of traveler. These rare and powerful Covalent were able to manipulate the properties of matter and energy, to detect and alter the bonds that give structure to all things.

Barakiel's mother Yahoel had been close friends with a few travelers. She used to tell him stories of their exploits. In the ancient times, when the Covalent bonded the Creative and Destructive Realms to halt their expansion and bring them to Balance, myriad dimensions had burst in folds from the bonded realms. The travelers were tasked to explore them. Many were lost in the uncharted heavens, but many returned with valuable resources or tales of great beauty and power.

Eventually, the travelers discovered the humans in their lovely sphere. The Covalent openly visited the Earthly Realm, fascinated to learn of beings so like

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themselves but whose short lives were an expression of Creation transformed to Destruction. Primitive humans came to view them as gods or divine emissaries, but many Covalent were ill-behaved. Warriors of the Rising could not resist playing war games with the hapless creatures. Others enjoyed controlling the humans through sex or fear. Many Covalent lost Balance as the price of victimizing the weak. They grew sick and weak themselves. As a result, the Council outlawed all travel to the Earthly Realm. Thanks to the short lives of humans, the presence of the Covalent among them quickly receded into myth.

Now Barakiel was to be banished to their world, the attentions of this mysterious traveler his only link with home.

The traveler was standing by the terrace railing when Barakiel emerged from the anteroom. He was smaller than the warrior, dark-skinned, with hair the color of bark and wide-set eyes that glowed like moss in starlight. To Barakiel's surprise, he wore the black robes of an adept. Travel to and from the Earthly Realm with a single companion hardly required that level of skill.

"Hail, warrior," the adept said. "I am Pellus. I am to be your traveler."

"You are to be my minder."

"As you wish."

"So, am I to live in the wilderness alone, ripping out the livers of beasts for my supper and terrorizing the humans until I become legend?" Barakiel paced along the terrace. "Or perhaps I should make them love and worship me like the Covalent of times past."

Pellus sighed. "We more had in mind that you would live among them, as one of them."

“And how shall I pass as human? I am light-skinned and fair-haired. I am much larger than they are. I do not know any of their languages.” Barakiel looked out at the Stream. “I will be a freak.”

“I plan to place you near a pale, war-like people on fertile land near the northern sea. Most may reach only to your chest, but I do not think your size is so extreme as to be freakish.” Pellus spoke with a tone of gentle instruction. Barakiel wanted to shout at him.

“How you gain acceptance is up to you,” Pellus continued. “You may observe the humans for a time. I will teach you to conceal yourself. You are not a traveler, so your technique will be limited, but I can show you how to form a shield with your energy that will hide you from weak human eyes. You may stay concealed if you choose.”

“Yes, a life of isolation stretching before me for eons sounds just wonderful.”

“The Council warned me of your bitterness.”

“How nice of them.”

“I am sorry for what has happened to you, Barakiel,” Pellus said, a slight crease by his eyes all that revealed his discomfort. “I knew your mother. I saw her often until my duties kept me from the Realm. Though you do not remember, I have known you since you were born. As a Warrior of the Rising, you are a great loss to us. So young, but already I see how the energy pools at your feet. You could be a great leader, but you are not safe here.”

Barakiel stared at the adept for some time without really seeing him. He struggled to remain impassive. He did not want anyone to witness his fear.

“As if my safety is their concern,” he mumbled. “No matter. Let us go.”

By the time they reached Barakiel’s chambers,

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earthly clothes had been delivered. He donned the strange garments then packed his few belongings in a sling. He leaned his head against the cool stone wall then cast his eyes around the spartan rooms. He would not miss them.

They have been home to my nightmares as much as anything else.

“Have you ever passed through a rift?” Pellus asked.

“No.”

The adept explained that they would travel through one of the kinetic rifts, gaps in the fabric of existence that continuously appeared and disappeared, the perpetual breathing of reality. Only Covalent travelers could perceive and use these rifts.

“You are likely to find the experience disorienting, but do not worry. We will be bonded. Entangled. Where I go you must follow. You will feel it, but it is not intrusive. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Barakiel’s voice came out a croak.

In a hundred pulses, they stood before the rift, although Barakiel saw nothing. The adept grabbed his forearm and they passed inside. Dark energy blasted through him until he was not so much a body as a scattering of particles. But Pellus was there, the control at the edge of his awareness. Barakiel’s terror eased. Ripples of translucent color played across his mind like the blooming of ghostly flowers.

And they were through into the loamy air, hung with dew. Beneath his feet a thick carpet of green. Above his head a canopy gray that moved by virtue of some force he did not understand. His new home.