

THE AWAKENED
BEAUTY

KINDRA WHITE

THE AWAKENED BEAUTY

Kindra White



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Thank You

About The Author

Acknowledgement

Also By Kindra White

*To all of us that didn't need someone in bright and shining
armour to come save us, because we saved ourselves.*

After all, we are badassess.

The Twisted Fairy Tale Series



The Twisted Fairy Tale retelling series is not to be mistaken with the fairy tales we all know and love.

These retellings are raw, explicit and more twisted than the Mad Hatter's thoughts. Some dark, some bloody, some erotic and some even taboo. Filled with magic and little sprinkles of sweet. But don't despair, just like the original fairy tales, all these retellings will have their own

Happily Ever After.... or will they?

Author Note

Once upon a time..... Ahhh, alas, this is not *that* type of
fairytale

This is a dark retelling of Sleeping Beauty's story by
Giambattista Basile. It's a dark fantasy romance with explicit
content, dark elements and contains mature language. It's
needless to say that I wrote this story for a mature audience
only, 18 and older.

If you think this story isn't your cup of tea, then don't drink
it.

This tea might be too dark for you.

You have been warned. Proceed at your own discretion.

The tea is this dark:

Somnophilia

Sexual Assault

Signs of sexual assault

Thoughts of suicide

Killing Creatures

Dealing with trauma

Forced Captivity

Death by Fire

Violence

Violent sexual act

Degradation

The Eagle Eye Club

If you find a typo, let me reward you for your eagle eyed skills! E-mail the following to kindrawhiteauthor@gmail.com

- Screenshot (s) with the typo (s) highlighted or circled
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If you **are the first one to find** the typo (s), I'll send you one of my e-books* of your choice, for FREE!

The reason I'm doing this is that editing and proofreading are very expensive for an indie author. I use what is accessible to me at the moment and that is a good friend of mine. She helps me out with the edits and proofreading. Sometimes things can get overlooked and missed by both of us. I hope that The Eagle Eye Club can be a middle ground, instead of the typo (s) being reported to Amazon.

Thank you all for the support of indie authors.

Much love and appreciation,

Kindra

*Anthology and Collection excluded.

The Awakened Beauty Playlist

https://sptfy.com/The_Awakened_Beauty~s

This is the music I listened to when I was writing the story you are about to read.

1. Once Upon a Dream - Lana Del Rey (Maleficent movie)
2. Between Wind and Water - Hael
3. Runaway - Aurora
4. Castle - Halsey
5. Kingdom Fall - Claire Wyndham
6. Are you with me - Nilu
7. Reflections - The Neighbourhood
8. Howl - Florence + The Machine
9. Beneath Your Beautiful - Labrinth feat. Emili Sandé
10. Looked Up To You - Craig Wedren, Jefferson Friedman, Alex Shenkman

11. The Loneliest - Måneskin

12. Head Held High - Sera

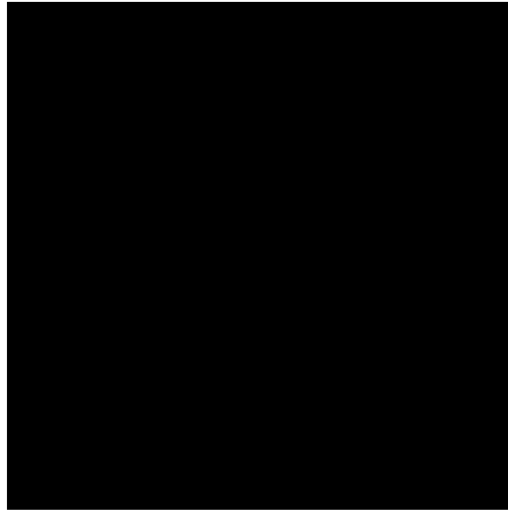
13. Empire - Ruelle

14. Luminary - Joel Sunny

“He who has luck may go to bed. And bliss will rain upon his head.”

~ Giambattista Basile~

Prologue



Deep in the enchanted forest was a cosy little cottage, made from big white stones and mortar. It had a yellow straw roof with a big, dark wooden door.

Back in the day when the King and Queen of House Briar Rose used to rule Briarwood Kingdom, the cottage radiated warmth and love. Welcoming everyone that wanted to rest their heads when passing through the forest, as a hunting party or just travelling to another Kingdom in the realm.

Alas, those days were long gone, ever since the Evil fairy, Mara, cursed the only child of the King and Queen, Princess Oriana.

Now, after what seems like a hundred years, the little cosy cottage was in decay. Despite their once beautiful shape, the

rose shrubs kept growing and climbing up all four walls, taking over the cottage.

There was no more yellow straw roof or big black wooden door to the once lovely cottage. All was gone with time, even the gorgeous Royal sigil embroidered little curtains behind the windows.

What no one knew was that this little, old, decaying cottage housed something more valuable than gold itself, as for within this cottage lies Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose. Cursed into a deep slumber. Never to wake up. With no protection but the wild roses and their sharp thorns.

However, on a beautiful sunny day, a regal-looking man in his hunting clothes with a black cloak, riding a white stallion, came upon the decaying little cottage on his way to his castle.

Man and steed looked proud. Power radiated from them both. A smile spread across his face as he was searching for a safe place to lay his head for the night. His journey back home was long, and the forest was full of danger after the sun had gone down for a man riding alone. Even for a proud and regal looking man.

After dismounting his steed and tying the reins on some low-hanging branch of one of the many trees that grew around the little cottage, he stood there, looking at the sad remains of the once gorgeous royal cottage.

He decided the little place would have to do. Taking out his sword, he made his way inside, through the rose bushes, sharp

thorns and plants. Looking around himself, it satisfied him that he made it through with some hours of sunlight to spare.

Putting his sword back into its elaborate, beautiful, sparkling, jewelled scabbard hanging from his gold embroidered belt, he adjusted his purple silk tunic under his cloak and entered the cottage to find a decent room to pass the night.

The scent of sweet roses surprised the man in the decaying little cottage. He was expecting the foul smell of rotting wood and decomposing plants and leaves. But no matter where he walked in the little house of white stones, he couldn't find any damp, fusty or musty smell. He only found the sweet roses' scent.

Even though the cottage had a pleasant odour, three flies kept buzzing around his head. The buzzing became more and more annoying the deeper into the cottage he went. Exploring the rooms along the way, he found only dust and cobwebs. He realised people had stopped using this place a long time ago.

He first came across a big open room on the left side of the entrance. By the look of the room it was clearly the kitchen, as he could see old rusted pots and pans scattered on the floor and one hanging on a wall and a split in half dusty chopping board.

He turned and left the kitchen undisturbed, as he continued his scout of the forgotten cottage. To his dismay, he found nothing of interest or value in the remaining rooms, until he

found himself standing in front of the last room, all the way in the back.

The man almost missed this room as it was hidden in the dark and surrounded by the same sharp thorny roses plants that took possession of this little place. This hidden room was the only one in the forsaken cottage that still had a door, which didn't look old or decaying.

Finding this room made the curiosity of the regal man grow much more than it already was. He wanted to know why only this room had a door and why it didn't look as old as the rest of the place.

As he took a step closer to the door, a light breeze caressed his face, like a lover's touch. However, the closer he got to the door, the harder it seemed for him to put one foot before the other. The light breeze transformed in a split second into a hard chilly wind, blowing him back to the way he came. The wind felt like an icy wall, impenetrable.

A tiny sly smile appeared on the man's face, as he understood he was dealing with magic. He knew objects could be imbued with magic to protect someone or things. His knowledge of magical protections and spells was because of his experiences with beings that dealt in magic or possessed magic themselves.

Because of dealings with magical beings and magic itself, he always had some magical trinkets on him that could break any spells he would encounter on his adventures, hunts, or diplomatic visits to other kingdoms.

He took a few steps back from the wooden door, and the wind seemed to die down, but he knew better. Rummaging in the pockets of his cloak, he got out an old-looking coin. He held the coin in front of him with both hands as he advanced toward the door again. And this time he was muttering some magical incantations *she* had taught him under his breath.

As he kept reciting the incantation and advancing toward the door, with one last strong whoosh, the icy wind wall disappeared and the man could reach the door to the mysterious room with no hindrance, except for the three annoying flies that were working on his last nerves.

With one hand waving around his head to get the flies to leave him alone, he opened the door to the room at last with his other hand. What was waiting for him on the other side of the door was nothing but a glorious prize, a prize befitting a *King*.

With eyes sparkling like a child in a candy shoppe, he walked over to the white with pink roses canopy bed in the middle of the room.

Everything in this room still looked new, not a dust mote or cobwebs insight. The little curtains with the old King and Queen of House Briar Rose crest on it looked as new, just like the day they had been hung. The room was airy and sunny. On a table in front of one window sat a vase with what seemed like freshly cut pink roses. The air in the room was crisp as the morning dawn.

Despite all of this, nothing in this room mattered to the man, as he only had eyes for the bed. Better yet, he only had eyes for the gorgeous jet black haired woman sleeping in it. She had flawless porcelain skin and an upturned little button nose. Her plump lips were exquisite with its lovely cupid's bow. She had long and dark lashes that touched the top of the apple of her cheek. Her long and luscious dark raven hair spread all over the pillow, creating the illusion that she was resting her head on a cloud.

Ohh, but what made the man almost salivate was her perfectly shaped breasts in her silky pink with gold trimming gown. The man couldn't take his eyes off her. From the moment he opened the door, her beauty captivated him.

To ordinary commoners that by any chance came by this place and found the sleeping woman wouldn't know who she was. But not him. Oh no, he knew exactly who she was.

She was the sleeping princess of House Briar Rose.

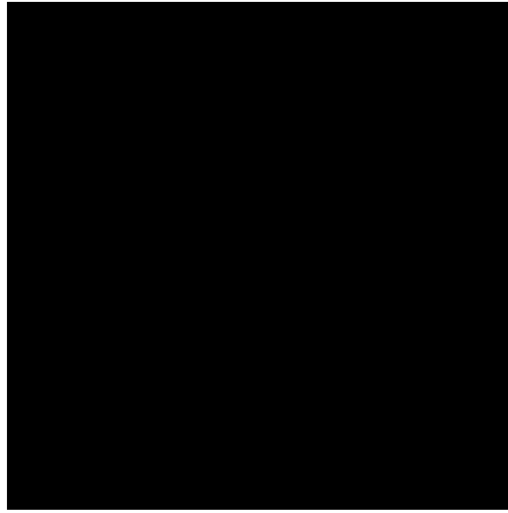
As he approached her, his thin lips stretched even more into an eerie smirk as malicious thoughts passed through his mind while he stood next to the bed. He admired the sleeping princess with malignant desire in his twinkling eyes as he contemplated what he wanted to do to her.

After the man had spent the night with Sleeping Beauty, for that was what he would call the princess until the day he would rot in hell. From then on, he would return with every new moon to the cottage to satisfy his perverse and evil needs.

On one of his visits, that would become his last. He did things to the sleeping princess that no sane, respectable man would dare to do to a woman, even if they had given their consent. He sucked on the poor sleeping princess' fingers, as he couldn't get enough of her taste. While he sucked each finger with fervour, something small and pointy pricked his tongue. Angrily, he spat out the thing that disturbed his enjoyment of *his* sleeping beauty.

By the next new moon, the man returned to his sleeping beauty, only to find her bed cold and empty. His sleeping beauty was no more. The princess of House Briar Rose had vanished, leaving no trace behind.

Awakened



Oriana

The feeling of a warm blanket lifting from my body made me squeeze my eyes and grunt as I missed the warmth and the peace in my body, leaving me slowly at the same time. I was suddenly rudely shaken by the dull throbbing pain that seemed to come from all over my body.

While keeping my eyes closed, I tried to figure out why I was in such pain and why the pain was all over my body. I let my mind go over my limbs one by one, starting with my arms, when a sharp pain coming from between my legs made me bolt right up in my bed as a rough gasp left my lips. I opened

my eyes in shock as that pain consumed all other throbbing pains.

Blinking in shock and feeling disoriented, I let my eyes adjust to the sunlight coming through the windows in the room. I attempted to figure out where I was and why I wasn't in my room in my castle. After a moment, I recognised the room I was in; it was my room in the little cottage my parents used to take me to when I was a little girl. *But why would they bring me here now? Where were they? And why was I in such pain?*

As I let my eyes go around the room, I noticed a lot of roses everywhere, filling the room with their elegant fragrance and colours. There were red, pink, white, yellow and even the rare black rose. In long vases on the windowsills or arranged into wreaths hanging at my door and at the windows.

I kept looking at the room all the while searching in my brain why I was here, in this cottage that we haven't visited in a long time, when my eyes landed on the brown spots all around me on the white floral sheet I'm laying on.

My eyebrows slowly knitted together and the skin of the corner of my eyes tightened as I looked down to decipher why there were brown spots all around my midsection and thighs.

Cocking my head to one side, I shifted my lower body slowly toward the headboard of the bed, all the while trying to understand the red brownish spots. Two things happened simultaneously. One, the sharp pain from earlier coming from between my legs, from my sex to be exact, transformed into an

indescribable pain which continued all the way up to my underbelly.

It made me wince and sucked in a sharp breath through my teeth as I grind them on each other to stop myself from screaming. And second, the horrible realisation that the red brownish spots are in fact blood splatters encrusted onto the sheet below me, my blood smeared all over the bed.

As I kept looking at the spots on my bed, the realisation struck as to why I was in this white room filled to the roof with roses.

The curse of the evil fairy, *Mara*.

With trembling hands, I moved the skirt of my dress further up my legs. I discovered that my entire royal dress was in tatters and also had blood spatters all over it. The straighter I sat in my bed and saw all the blood that was crusted onto my inner thighs, the horrific reality that someone had robbed me of my innocence while I was under the sleeping curse came crashing down on me like a sack of bricks.

When I moved to take a better look at my inner thighs, one of my breasts fell out of my torn bodice. With an unreal feeling, I looked down at my breast, hanging out of my dress as a lonely hanging ripe pear to be plucked, bare for everyone to see if there was anyone in my room.

As I looked closer to that one breast, I could see it adorned with blue- purplish spots. Some were already turning yellow, signalling that these particular bruises were healing. Upon

closer inspection of the bruises on my breasts, I could see teeth markings.

This time, I couldn't hold my horrified scream any longer as I jumped out of the bed. That is when I saw the bigger spot of reddish brown I was lying on. I looked around to see if someone was still here, to see if the one that did this was still here.

But to some relief, I couldn't see anyone. I was alone in the room.

My legs felt like trembling rubber. They were weak from being unused for a long time; they buckled, making me fall to the floor next to my bed as I screamed my lungs out, cursing the one that dared to defile me, the one that did this cruel thing to me. I thought that sadness and pain would paralyse me and fear would take over.

However, to my astonishment, fiery rage, and vengeance coursed hot through my veins until both found my heart and took root there. My desolate screams turned into a guttural roar while I clenched my hands into fists as my heated blood pounded in my ears.

Somehow, all the throbbing and sharp pains I felt were burnt away by my thirst for vengeance, by the desire to spill the blood of the one that had spilled mine. The desire to make Mara and the unknown person who abused my body pay for what they did gave me the strength to pull myself up, to figure out how I will exact my vengeance on them.

Holding up my bodice over my breasts, I stumbled around the room in search of clothes I could change into. As I was roaming the room, three flies came flying in, curiously they all had a different colour. One was pink, the other one was blue, and the last one was green. Before my mind could process what I just saw, they changed into these three fairy beings in a flash of light.

That was when I recognised them. They were my fairy godmothers, my guardians, charged with protecting me from the day I was born. I let out a mirthless laugh when the thought of them protecting me passed through my mind. *What a great job they did protecting you, the rage whispered in my ear.*

Shaking my head to get that little voice to stop, I needed to ask these three fairies about my parents, my people and about my kingdom. I needed to know how long I was under the curse and how it was lifted. Oh Gods, my head was so swarmed with questions that I didn't know where to start.

“Where are... who...” I croaked, my voice sounded strange to my ears. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Where are my parents? Go get them, please. Who lifted the curse?” Still holding my dress up, I slowly made my way towards them. I needed answers. I needed to know why they didn't protect me.

“And above all, why the hell didn't you three protect me?!” I hurtled the question at them, making all three wince simultaneously. Towering above them, I glowered, waiting for an answer.

“Princess Oriana, we...” The one dressed in pink began, her name kept eluding me as the fog of the curse gradually dissipated. I didn’t let her finish. I didn’t need them to go by protocol, I needed them to tell me what happened.

“Don’t Princess Oriana me. I need to know what happened. Tell me, who did this to me?” I let one hand go off my dress to gesture toward my body, moving my skirt upwards so they could see the bruises and the crusted blood between my thighs. All three of them looked away and shook their heads.

“Start. Talking. Now!” I demanded. I knew it would be hard for them to explain, but I needed to know. No matter how hard it would be for me to hear, I needed to know. All three looked at me with tears flooding their eyes and pity written all over their faces.

“Please forgive us princess, for we do not have joyous news about your parents, the king, and queen, nor do we have good news about your people and your kingdom.” The pink fairy spoke again as she tried to not look me in the eye while she spoke. I could see a single tear rolling down her cheek as the green fairy put her arm around her shoulders and squeezed. Their names were still shrouded in the residue fog of the curse in my mind.

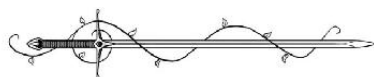
“Princess, what Hilda means to say is that, well... Uhm, your parents and your people are... Well, they are dead, turned to ashes. Your kingdom, Briarwood, as you remembered it does not exist anymore. And the sleeping curse had you in its

clutches for over a hundred years.” The fairy, dressed in blue, told me while she too had tears streaming down her face.

As I listened to her, explaining that everyone I ever loved is gone, dead and that my kingdom was no more, I brought my hands to my face and sat back down on the bed I just jumped off moments ago.

Why are my hands wet? Then comprehension dawned on me. I was crying too. Crying for my parents, crying for my people, crying because I was left all alone in a kingdom that no longer exists. All ripped away from me by the curse of an evil and jealous fairy.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and out of those clothes first, then some food in you, as you must be starving. After that, we will tell you all you want to know.” The one dressed in green said, all the while she kept the one in the pink dress, Hilda, close to her, gently patting her on the shoulder.



I didn’t know how Hilda, the pink dressed one, Frida, the blue dressed one and Tilda, the green dressed one made this possible, but they got me this bathtub and hot water to bathe. They even had soap smelling deliciously like wildflowers found in the forest. But not even these things couldn’t appease the rage that was taking over my mind and heart, while I sat there and scrubbed my entire body over and over again.

I didn’t know how long I was soaking and scrubbing myself in the bathtub, but the bathwater turned cold and seeped into

my bones, making my skin raise with goosebumps. Lifting my hand to get a hold of the edge of the bathtub to push myself out of the now freezing water, I noticed bite marks on my fingers. *Wasn't there a place on my body that whoever did this to me didn't abuse?*

Not bothering with the cold that surrounded me, I stood up and got out of the tub, and inspected my body. I was covered in bruises, yellowish, purplish and even dark blueish. The bruises varied in form too, from round and neatly arched in a row to scratches and bite marks.

I even found patches of round bruises with bite marks around them. After seeing my thighs, torso, and breasts covered in so many bruises, I was afraid to look at my sex. I let my hand hovered over my mound before I let it glide slowly over it, feeling for bumps. I let out a hiss as my fingers went over several smaller bumps that covered my outer lips, that immediately throbbed painfully.

“Thank the Gods and Goddesses, I didn't have the guts to look.” I said to myself in the bathroom. Taking a deep breath, and looking upwards, I gathered all the strength I had and pushed the physical pain away. I didn't have any use for it. I dried myself with the big fluffy towel the fairies got me, before walking back to my room and hanging it on an iron hook at the back of the bathroom door.

On my bed the fairies laid a black leather pants, a dark red tunic with gold buttons that ran from my right shoulder to my

left hip and a pair of dark red boots. It was as if they knew I couldn't and wouldn't wear a dress ever again.

While I was tying up the lace of one of my boots, the fairies came into my room. Frida was carrying a tray with lots of food. Fruits of all kinds, cuts of meat, and warm bread. Tilda had a silver pitcher with cold water and a silver cup.

“Come princess, eat. We will take care of you now that the curse has been lifted. It has been so long. The curse made it so that you would never go hungry or thirsty.” Hilda said as she magically conjured a small table and chair out of thin air. “But now that you have awakened, you need to nourish your body.” She continued talking while she tried to usher me toward the table and chair.

“I don't need you three to take care of me. Not now, after what has been done to me. When I needed you the most to take care of me, to guard me, you all failed me.” I replied to Hilda, all the while looking at all three of them. They bowed their heads in shame, acknowledging their lack of guarding me.

“But princess, we couldn't do much. We were also cursed to sleep, however the curse didn't work on us as we are fairies and not humans, and thus it made us into flies, rendering us useless.” Tilda said, her voice laced with guilt as she sat the pitcher of water and the cup on the table in front of me.

“Be that as it may, I don't need you to keep me here and take care of me. What I need from you three is for you to train me in magic and if it's in your powers, also in combat. I need your

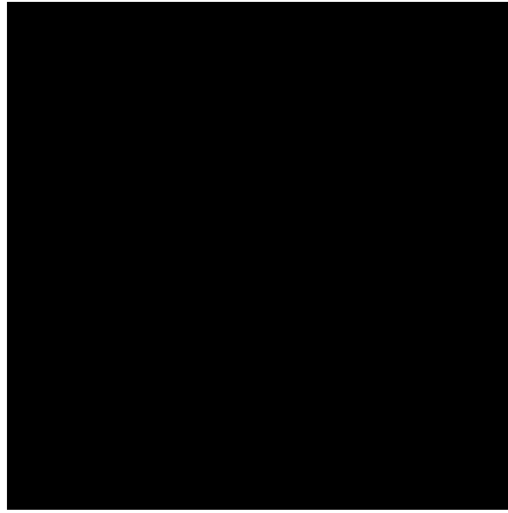
help and support to defeat the evil fairy, Mara.” I told them as I sat down at the table and popped a grape into my mouth. Until that moment, I didn’t know how famished I was. The purple grape exploded in my mouth, filling it with its delicious juices, coating my tongue in sweet nectar, making my stomach rumble.

Before I knew it, I was wolfing down the entire food platter and washing it all down with ice cold water from the silver pitcher. While I was eating, the fairies were in deep conversation and occasionally they would look at me and then continue talking among themselves.

When I finished the meal they had prepared for me, all three came and stood before me. They all looked nervous, but determination was clearly showing through their eyes.

“Princess Oriana, it saddens us to have to tell you this, but we can not teach you what you have asked of us. However, we can point you toward the one we certainly know can help you with your request.” Frida said as they all three looked at each other and smiled, pleased with what they just told me.

Three Gifts



Oriana

“P rincess Oriana, it’s not that we don’t want to teach you. We would love to teach you our magic. However, our type of magic can not be taught. It’s one we are born with.” Tilda said softly, but I sensed a heaviness weaved throughout her voice, weighing on her words. Her proud shoulders slumped forward slightly as she let herself sag against the bedpost, until she fully sat on the end of the bed.

I saw the struggle of wanting to help and not being able to help show on all three of their faces, and I still couldn’t accept

it. To learn magic was what I needed; I knew I needed magic to defeat Mara once and for all.

“Don’t call me Princess. I’m not a princess anymore.” I let out a breath that threatened to choke me, and I winced slightly the moment my voice reached my own ears. It sounded flat, monotone even. It was the start of me shedding away my status. *What good would it do me in my quest for revenge?* I walked away from them and stopped in front of one of the two windows in the room. With eyes burning and with a tightness growing in my chest as the knowledge that I had nothing left settled in my mind.

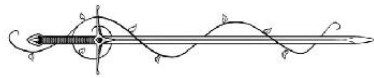
“Please, just Oriana from now on.” I said somberly, not looking back at them but staring out of the window, remembering better and happier times with my parents at this cottage when I was a little girl. I saw my little self giggling and running past the window, with my dad pursuing me. And when he caught me, he tickled me, making me writhe and let out screams of laughter. That scene unfolding in front of my eyes from many moons ago made my heart ache as a great sense of loss washed over me.

Closing my eyes, I tried to recall my mom’s voice or how her arms felt around my little body when she used to hug me while she kissed me on my hair. My hand went automatically to my black raven tresses as I ran my fingers through it, chasing after the long forgotten sensation of her lips on them. What got my tears falling uncontrollably over my cheeks was the realisation of never hearing her voice or feeling her arms around me ever again.

At that moment, my heart dissolved into a million pieces, yet I couldn't let myself follow my heart into that dark abyss and fall apart. *Not now.* I gathered what strength I had in me and wrapped my shattered heart and held it together with the fire of vengeance that was raging inside me. Or I might as well throw myself off the Orc's bridge in the Elder Forest and be done with all of this.

Vengeance was burning too hot through my veins to just let it all go, and follow my parents and people to wherever they may be. Opening my eyes, I raised my hand and touched the glass panel of the window as if I could touch that little girl running outside. I silently promised them all that I would make Mara pay for all the suffering she caused. And the one that did all the atrocities to my body, I wanted nothing more to see him bleed. I was out for his blood.

I took a deep breath, pushing the sadness down to be dealt with at another time, as I turned and looked at the three fairies. I was ready to take destiny into my own hands.



“You can't teach me magic, but you three are willing to send me off to Gods knows where unprepared, with nothing to defend myself along the way, to be taught by someone you three think is still alive after all these years?” I threw my hands in the air, frustrated with them for something they had no control over and with myself for being *royally* useless.

“I accept you can not help me with teaching me magic. But I would like to ask you three to help me find the one that did this to me.” I gesture with my hands over my body as I raised my chin toward the brown spots on the bed.

All three of their heads turned to follow where I pointed at. Their bodies stiffened when their eyes landed on the brown spots and knew what they were.

“Princ... Oriana, we are sorry we have been of little help to you. However, we can conjure things that will aid you on your journey to face Mara and to find the savage one that did this to you.” Hilda said as she gestured for me to sit back at the table. She called the other two to come stand beside her in front of the table.

“When you were born, we gave you three gifts; the gift of beauty, the gift of song and music, and the last one, we intended to give you the gift of grace. But because Mara interrupted us and cursed you, we used the third one to turn the deadly curse into a sleeping curse.” Hilda finished with a nod, the other two also nodded and stood tall next to her.

“And now,” Hilda looked at the other two as they all smiled at each other. “We have agreed to give you three gifts again.” All three had an expectant look about them. Frida got her wand out of her skirt and flicked her wrist graciously, and a square of dirt appeared before me on the table. On it were two footprints imprinted on the square of dirt.

“I found these outside your door in the corridor. They are from the one who...” Frida trailed off and didn’t finish her

sentence. She left the unspoken last words hang in the rose scented air. She gave me a tight-lipped smile as she nodded before she waved her wand again.

The square of dirt with the footprints transformed into a pair of black leather boots in front of my eyes. They were elegant. I didn't know simple, all black leather boots could look that regal. They were fit for a king.

“When the one that created the footprints touched the boots, they would light up and glow. Letting you know that the person touching them is the one that... well... uhm... did that to you.” Frida said as she pushed the boots towards me. They felt soft and strangely warm. As if they had been harvesting the warmth of the sun and calling out to be touched. I took a closer look at them and they were magnificently made.

“How am I supposed to convince anyone to try them on?” I asked Frida, while I held the boots now further away from me. Fear running through me that they would conjure the one that took liberties that weren't his to take to the middle of the room.

“Well, that is where *my* gift will assist you. My gift to you is the gift of persuasion.” Hilda said as she moved forward and sounded pleased with herself, with a gleam sparkling in her eyes. I was about to ask her how this gift was going to help me. She held a hand up, letting me know she wasn't done talking yet.

“The gift of persuasion will not grant you the power to make people do whatever you want them to do they themselves

wouldn't do under any circumstances. However, the gift will make people more open to *your* suggestions and requests." After she finished explaining, she was full-blown smirking at me while she raised her eyebrows.

She then waved her wand in my direction. Something flashed before my eyes while a weird sensation of something slick covered my tongue like honey dripping into my mouth and coated everything in its path. Ooh and the taste, it was nothing I had tasted before. It was sweet but spicy and sharp at the same time.

My lips curled up into a knowing smile while the tingles and the slick sensation on my tongue and my mouth died down. I felt more sure in my quest for revenge, now that I had this power of persuasion. I couldn't wait to use it, to find both Mara and the animal that dared touch me.

Some movement in front of me made me shove down the plans forming in my mind about getting those that wronged me. I blinked and focussed on the one who moved. It was Tilda. She was walking toward me. She went around the table to stop just mere feet in front of me.

"My sisters' gifts are powerful as they are helpful. I will also give you a powerful gift. This one will help you with defending yourself on your journey, as it will also aid you when the time comes for you to confront Mara." Her grin on her beaming face kept growing with each sentence that came out of her mouth, wider and wider. With her eyes wide and

glowing, she resembled the Cheshire Cat of a friend I had used to have when I was little.

The look was one of triumph and mischief.

Tilda didn't take out her wand and gave her wrist a flick. She used her hands and fingers. She waved and moved her hand to the rhythm of the incantation she was murmuring, her fingers danced like lovers, in unison.

This went on for some time. Sweat beaded her forehead, her eyes focussed on some invisible thing in front of her while she was working her magic on it. I felt a mighty power swirling around Tilda. It was like a wall of icy wind that hit me where I sat and held me away from her. Just when I thought she would fall on her knees of exhaustion, she clapped her hands together as she said some unintelligible word.

She looked at me and winked as she moved her hands slowly away from each other. Something long and dark, which seemed to have sharp edges, became visible. But I couldn't figure out what it was.

As Tilda stopped, I looked with amazement at the suspended black form in front of us both. I realised it was a long double-edged dark ebony sword. The sword gleamed and radiated power. *It called out to me.*

When Tilda locked eyes with me, the strong icy wind wall vanished and I noticed I could breathe again. I didn't realise I wasn't breathing up to that moment.

She closed the gap between us and bowed while holding the sword above her head, presenting it to me. As I took the sword from her, she stood up and had a look on her face as if she gave me one of her limbs.

As soon as my fingers curled around the leather wrapped handle of the ebony sword, a rush of immense power covered me, embracing me like a warm blanket. Strangely enough, the warmth of the power penetrated all the way into my heart and settled the raging vengeance fire that had taken deep root there earlier. It didn't take the feeling away, but it was more like a promise that the all-consuming fire would be set loose soon.

That is when I knew that Hilda, Frida, and Tilda had never failed me. They were always beside me to protect me and guide me. I couldn't contain the tears that rolled out of the corners of my eyes. A lifetime wasn't enough to thank them for all they have done and went through for me. I could never imagine how much they must *love* me.

“Because we can not teach you magic, I weaved some of our three combined magics into this sword for you. I made it so when you get to plunge it through the blackened heart of Mara, it will absorb all of her magic. Giving you the power to undo all the evil she has done and all the suffering she has caused.” Tilda explained while I examined the ebony sword. It felt light in my grip, but also felt unbreakable.

The black leather grip on the handle was a perfect fit for my hands. Bringing the sword closer to my eyes, I could see that

there were thorn vines and roses engraved on the blade on both sides.

“And the best part of the sword absorbing the power is you can use that magic to go back in time to start your life with your parents and people anew.” Tilda said as she put her hand on the side of my face with tenderness and smiled fondly at me. I couldn’t help but return the smile back. I turned and smiled at Hilda and Frida too.

Another long lost feeling made itself known in my heart, *hope*. I never thought I would feel hope again since I woke up from one nightmare and straight to another.

“And now for the direction to the one that can teach you the magic you are seeking.” Hilda began as she and Frida joined me and Tilda on the other side of the small table next to the foot of the bed.

“The one that we are sending you to that can help you is a fairy hunter... oh please don’t look like that, she is an evil fairy hunter. She goes by the name of Nimue The Huntress. You will find her at The Dragon’s Bones Tavern, just east of the borders with the Kingdom of Red Woods.” As she finished telling me about Nimue, she took something out of her dress pocket. It looked like a small worn out leather pouch.

“This magical pouch may look small but can hold many things for you. Such as the black boots and your sword. And because it’s so small, no one will think you are carrying anything of value in it.” Hilda grinned at me as she handed me

the tiny thing. I raised my eyebrows at her. I doubted that the boots *and* my sword would fit in this tiny thing.

I stood up and walked over to the bed to put the sword on it, to open the pouch. To my astonishment, the opening was wide enough for me to shove the pair of boots into it. Smiling, I picked up the sword from the bed and carefully slipped it into the pouch too. While quietly sending out a prayer that the sword won't cut the boots to ribbons in there.

After both gifts went into the pouch, as if the thing wasn't a tiny thing, I pulled the leather strings, closing it. I let the thing rest in the middle of the palm of my hand, weighting it. The pouch felt light and when I gave it a squeeze; it felt empty.

“How does this pouch work? I can't feel anything inside, not the weight of the boots nor the form of the sword.” I muttered as my eyes went wide and my brain tried to comprehend this magical pouch. “It feels like an empty old leather pouch and when I open it again, it looks empty.” I continued, still looking at the pouch with awe before tying the thing to the belt loop of my leather pants.

“Well, my dear, we imbue the pouch with more of our magic. Which gives it the power to conceal anything that is put in it. In the event you may come across robbers along the way. Only you know the pouch isn't empty.” Frida said, proudness laced her word while she stood tall with raised chin.

“I get the pouch is magical, which is why the things in it disappear. What I meant was, how would I get the things inside of the pouch out back again?” I asked, tilting my head

to the side, waiting for an answer, while I tried to figure it out myself.

“You open the pouch and think of the object you want to get from it and it will appear in your hands a few seconds after you open it.” Tilda explained with a toothy grin on her face. *Still reminding me of the Cheshire cat my friend had.*

After some demonstration of how the pouch worked and me trying it out too, we four walked out of the bedroom and out of the cottage. I hoped to never return here again. It pained me to think that, but I couldn't come back after all that happened to me here.

Once outside, I looked upward to take in the beautiful blue sky with its white fluffy clouds drifting around, shading the sun occasionally. The sun's bright rays warmed up my alabaster skin, making the hairs on my arm stand up. I was glad I grabbed an old-looking forest green cloak from the hook when I walked past it as we got outside. I took a deep breath of the fresh air, letting it wash away the stale air of lungs. Letting them fill up on fresh forest air.

“Oriana, our ways must part now. We can not go with you. This is your journey to take. You and you alone must walk it.” Hilda said as she hugged me and squeezed me a little tighter before letting go and stepped aside to give the others a chance to say their goodbyes too.

“Ohh, don't look sad, my beautiful girl. You don't need to worry about us,” Frida said while she tried to smooth the

frown that appeared between my eyebrows. She held my hand and pulled me in for a hug and a kiss on my forehead.

“Now that we are back to our feisty selves, we are going to restore this little cottage to its former glory while we wait for your happy return.” Tilda’s voice was filled with excitement and she had some kind of a spring in her steps when she walked over to me. She stood on her tippy toes as she held my face in her hands and kissed me twice, once on both cheeks. She held my face in her hands a moment longer before letting me go.

“And now is when you start your journey.” Hilda said, while the other two stood closer to her, on either side. All three were smiling like they had some kind of joke between them.

There I stood looking around and asking myself how long it would take me to get to the Tavern. I knew the cottage was in the middle of the Elder Forest and it would take me days or maybe weeks to get to the fairy huntress. But no matter how long it would take I would find Nimue and ask her to teach me.

“Did you think we would let you walk all the way to the border of Red Wood Kingdom? You are wrong.” Hilda’s voice came from behind me. I could swear these fairy godmothers of mine are also mind readers. I turned around to find them all standing there with those mischievous grins on their faces.

“We are your fairy godmothers after all.” Frida winked at me before she looked at her two sisters still with those grins on

their faces. Those grins made me wonder what kind of mischief they were thinking of.

“What is this about not letting me walk all the way to the border of Red Woods Kingdom? Did you get me a horse or carriage to take me there?” I asked while I was searching for the horse or the carriage. However, there was something hanging in the air, like electricity when a lightning storm was brewing in the distance.

“No Oriana, no horse or carriage, but three simple magic wands.” Tilda said while all three of them took out their wands. “We will send you as close as possible to the Dragon’s Bones Tavern, where you only would need to walk a few feet to get there.” Tilda was bouncing on the ball of her feet, eager to send me on my way.

“Thank you all three so much for everything. I promise when all is done, I’ll be back to find you.” As soon as I spoke the last word a bright light engulfed me. I felt tingles all over my body, from the crown of my head all the way down to my little toes. It felt as if ants were crawling all over me.

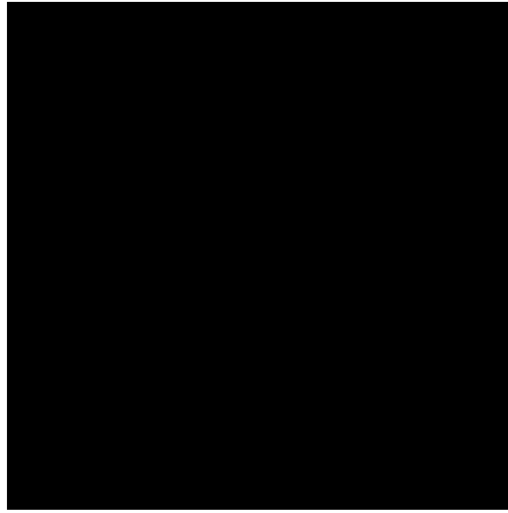
Just when I thought I couldn’t bear the sensation anymore, my ears popped and my feet slammed on to a dirt road. Shaking my head to get the last ant crawling sensation off my body, I raised my head and looked around. I found myself standing on an unknown road in the middle of a forest I didn’t recognise.

I kept looking and turning around, trying to orient myself, when I saw white smoke coming from a chimney in the far

distance. The corners of my lips pulled up as I straightened my cloak, touched the little pouch on my hip under my tunic, I started to walk toward the white smoke and chimney.

Toward creating a new destiny for myself.

The Fairy Hunter



Oriana

As I walked toward the building with the white smoke coming from its chimney, I hoped I was walking toward the right place and did not get myself lost in this part of the kingdom. *My kingdom, but not anymore.*

I had been walking for quite some time now, still keeping the white smoke and chimney as my guide in the hopes it leads me toward The Dragon's Bones tavern. The sun hung lower in the sky. It was making its way slowly to kiss the horizon good night, as its rays made the sky bloom with beautiful colours of

purple and pink mixed with dark and light blue. Luring the dusk to come out.

My mom used to say that to me when it was time for us to go back inside the castle after a day of visiting the people outside the castle walls. A sharp twinge in my heart made me sigh.

I sighed while looking upward, wishing this was a nightmare, one I would soon wake up from. To be surrounded again by my mum and dad and everyone I loved at one point. But alas, I knew better than to believe in *wishes* and *fairy tales*.

I wrapped my arms around my torso and doubled over as coldness descended all over my body. That had nothing to do with the forest air, making me shiver as the hollow feeling grew in my chest.

Lifting my head to drag in some fresh air to help keep the sadness at bay, I saw that the sun was almost touching the horizon. *The kiss good night*. Which meant that it would get dark soon, and I needed to get to that building quickly. Gods and Goddesses only knew what would come out of the forest when dusk fell.

“Ori, just breathe and keep calm. You are not in the woods of Red Wood’s Kingdom.” I told myself out loud as I let go of my torso and straightened up my spine, ready to continue my journey.

I was no fool. Even if this wasn’t Red Wood’s forest I was in, I was too damn close to the border of *that* kingdom for my comfort. As I made my way toward the building, I picked up

my pace. I kept looking around and behind me for anything that might jump out of the darkening forest and attack me.

I placed my hand on the pouch, just in case I needed my sword, as I pulled the hood of my cloak over my head with my other hand, and tucked my chin somewhat to my chest. I hoped that me using the hood would help shield me from prying eyes, if there was any lurking in the forest.

As I got to the building, I couldn't believe my eyes as I stood in front of it. Hanging askew on the left side of the building was a battered wooden board with the name of the tavern carved in it; The Dragon's Bones.

I made it.

The place looked greyish, but I suspect it used to have another colour, a nicer colour, in its better years. The windows were filthy with grime and only a few of them were possible to look through to see inside. As I peeked inside, the tavern seemed full of people enjoying themselves.

Now that I was here, about to enter, I couldn't move my legs to take those last steps that would take me inside. My heart was beating like the big bad wolf itself was after it. My stomach felt like it was rolling on itself while nausea had me in its grip. I turned around and grabbed the nearest post of the rickety fence that wrapped around the tavern to steady myself as I tried to control my emotions and thoughts.

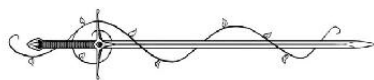
Thoughts of the huntress laughing at me for wanting to learn magic because I wanted to defeat Mara. Or worse, she was

working with Mara and was hunting for all the good fairies for her.

“Oh Gods, what am I doing? This is not me. I’m not one to cower from anyone or by anything. Come on Oriana, you got this.” I gave myself some cheering and an extra dose of confidence, which I pulled from somewhere deep before turning back to enter the tavern.

Shaking my hand, arms and legs, I let all the tension, negative thoughts and emotions roll off my back as I took a last deep breath, pulling my shoulders back and letting the hood of the cloak fall on to my shoulders.

Letting the air back out, slowly, I pushed the tavern door open.



The Dragon’s Bones was just what I had expected; full of rowdy and loud noises, lots of people drinking, mostly men. But there were some women that looked like they could drink the entire supply of alcohol that this place had and still keep a delightful conversation with anyone.

To my surprise, the tavern didn’t smell rank or sour, as I had imagined it would be. The scent in the tavern was pleasantly homely, with its burning wood scent coming from the big hearth in the middle mixed with the savoury aroma of food wafting from the kitchen next to the bar. The evocative scent brought me back to the castle kitchens, where I used to play a lot with the kids of the many cooks we had.

The tables closer to the door where I stood went silent as I stepped inside and gave a slight nod as I kept walking toward the bar. Some men tipped their hats or dipped their heads ever so slightly as I weaved my way through the packed with chairs and tables place.

The women, on the other hand, followed me with their eyes, assessing me. I could feel them on my back long after I had passed by their tables. One or two of them gave me a tight-lipped smile, but others just kept their faces straight as they openly gaped at me.

I tried to return a few smiles back, but the mood in the tavern didn't feel friendly. Tilting my chin a little more and with my back ramrod straight, I kept my steps sure as I strode toward the buxom woman behind the bar serving drinks.

I hope she's Nimue The Huntress.

“Hi ye darling, what can I get ye?” the buxom woman asked me while she was tapping beer into a tankard from a dark wooden barrel. She looked up, smiling as she waited for my reply, and continued to fill the second tankard with more beer.

“I... uhm... I'm looking for the fairy hunter, Nimue.” I replied, but just at the moment I said the fairy hunter's name, a fight broke loose behind me. Sounds of beer tankards clinking on the cobbled floor, people yelling and chairs scraping the floor.

I was just in time as I turned to look at what was going on. Quickly, I stepped aside as a chair flew past me and broke into

the sturdy wooden bar in the spot where mere seconds ago I stood talking to the buxom woman.

“Oye!! Take your drunk arses outside. Now!! Before I shoot at ye,” The buxom woman bellowed as she held a hunting rifle in her hands and looked annoyed as fuck at the two men that started the fight. “Come on, out with ye two. And I don’t want to see ye faces here again for two weeks. Don’t make me shoot ye, Earl. Go on, out, out!!” Still holding the rifle at the ready, she ushered them both out of the tavern.

I didn’t realise that the place went silent like a mouse, as if the entire place was holding its breath. After the bar woman closed the door, the whole place broke back to sounds of talking and laughter. Two guys came rushing out of the kitchen with a corn broom and a metal scoop. They cleaned the mess the two drunkards made and set the overturned chairs and table back to how they were supposed to be.

“Thanks boys. Now get back to the kitchen. We have some hungry people in here today.” She told the guys as she walked past them, coming back to her place behind the bar and hanging the rifle back on the wall behind her.

“Okay darling, don’t think I didn’t hear ye just now before those two arses fought each other. It’s always the same two.” She said, turning back to face me while shaking her head as she barked a laugh. “The one you are looking for is over there.” She smiled as she threw her head to the side and back as she gestured with her thumb to the same side, her head tilted.

Toward the darker corner in the back next to the bar.

I let my eyes scan the area she had gestured to. I couldn't see the person sitting at the table in the corner, as that part of the tavern was half covered in shadows. Almost no candles or lamps were lit in that part. The only thing that I could visually figure out was a bow on the table and some kind of sword that leaned against the chair next to the person sitting at the table.

“Thank you... uhm... sorry, didn't get your name.” I said to the woman behind the bar as I stood there looking at her, waiting. I knew I was stalling, but I wanted to know this woman's name. She looked like someone I would love to have in my corner. One corner of her lips curled up into a sly smile before she answered me.

“It's because I never gave it to ye, darling.” She winked and went back to tapping beer and serving the people in the tavern. Leaving me standing there wide eyed with my lips curled up into a smile at her reply.

I definitely will come back here.

With the last of my smile fading off my face, I marched toward the lonely table in the corner. I sent out a brief prayer to whichever Gods or Goddesses were listening.

I cleared my throat as I stood there at the table. The person never acknowledged my presence when I walked over to where they sat. But mostly because I didn't want to open my mouth and have no sound coming out.

“Are you the fairy hunter?” I asked, hating that my voice came out all squeaky and feeble. Cursing myself internally, I kept my chin up and shoulders back as I waited for the person to answer me. However, my pseudo bravado was short-lived as I got my reply.

“What can I do you for, love?” The reply came in a deep, rich male voice. The voice took me aback as I was expecting an older woman, that older woman being Nimue The Hunteress. Just as my fairy godmothers said. Not this man, whoever he might be.

“But... but... that can't be. You're supposed to be... a... a.” I couldn't get my words out, because of him not being who I thought I would meet, but also because when he leaned forward I got a good look at him. He was handsome. Flawless skin, no facial hair, strong jawline with a very masculine chin. He had a wider nose that gave his face a subtle, fierce appearance. He also had a scar parting his eyebrow above his left eye in two.

I thought it was because of the lack of candles and or lamps; It shrouded him in shadows, but now I see, he himself was of a deep brown complexion. I found his hue mesmerising.

“Spit it out, love. I'm supposed to be a what?” He asked, and I noticed his deep voice had a smokey edge to it as he cocked his head to the side. His midnight black eyes roamed all over my body and lingered longer on some parts than others while his tongue swept slowly over his plump bottom lip.

The movement of his tongue hypnotised me. I didn't realise I was frozen in place with my eyes stuck to his lips until he let out a chuckle and his gorgeous full lips turned upward in a playful smile.

“Uhm... a woman!” I blurred out, nervously. “You are supposed to be an older woman.” I continued, more confident, as I pushed the thoughts of his tongue and lips all the way to a dark and small corner of my brain.

“Don't know what to tell you, love. As you can see, I'm neither old nor a woman.” He said, with mirth sparkling in his eyes and an amusing smile still on his face as he rested both arms on the table, clasping his hands together.

“I'm looking for Nimue, the hunter of *evil fairies*.” I told him, trying to not let his gaze make me fidget and uncomfortable. I could easily get lost in his eyes. Which reminded me of two pools of molten black lava. They exuded fiery passion, and I wasn't ready to be engulfed in those flames. I knew my mind and body weren't ready for that yet.

“Ah, you came all this way looking for my big sister. I'm sorry, you came here for nothing. Nimue retired, long time ago.” He explained as he lifted his tankard to his lips and took a sip from it. “I'm Aurich, the new *fairy* hunter, love.” He slid his chair back, making it scrape the cobblestone floor as he stood. There he stood across from me, tall and broad as an oak tree, with thick and muscular thighs. With just a round table and a few chairs between us.

The image of him made its way to be permanently in my mind.

“You’ll have to do then, *Aurich*.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “I came here to find a fairy hunter to teach me how to use magic, and I’m not leaving without one.” I surprised myself by keeping my voice from trembling or squeaking, and it came out strong. As I drew myself up to my full height and widened my stance while I held his gaze. I refused to be the first to break eye contact.

Aurich just raised an eyebrow and leaned his right shoulder against a wooden pillar next to him. As he crossed his arms over his chest while not breaking eye contact either. This turned out to be fascinating.

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t help you, love. You know I can’t resist not helping a young gorgeous woman like yourself with many things.” He smirked as he pushed himself away from the pillar and advanced slowly toward me. Still not breaking eye contact. Which I found fascinating as I could see myself looking back at me from the depths of his obsidian eyes. I bit down a little hard on my bottom lip to dispel those treacherous thoughts of him forming in my mind.

“As I said, I’m here looking for a teacher to teach me how to do magic. Not to be helped with other things, whatever that may be.” I retorted and shifted my weight from my left foot to my right foot as I narrowed my eyes. He was getting under my skin but not in a good way. I could feel a headache coming on.

He slowly worked his way closer to me and I didn't like the proximity of his huge body invading my personal space.

“You better stop right there and keep your distance from me. I'm not looking for whatever you are thinking of.” I hissed at him as I raised my hand, palm outward to make him stop from getting any closer.

“And I thought you were here looking for some fun time, love. And if I'm being honest, you are not cut out to be my apprentice. You look like a pampered princess. I bet you never did a day of hard work in your entire life.” Aurich sneered at me as he got closer and in my face, I even felt his body heat radiating against my naked arm. His body heat made the hairs on my arm stand up as if his body were a magnet pulling my body by force to him.

“We all know that your type is good for one thing and one thing only.” He whispered smoothly in my ear. His warm breath fanned over my earlobe as a shiver curled down my spine as something in my underbelly ached with a need I didn't recognise.

What the fuck he meant by that?

“What did you mean when you say types like me are only good for one thing?” I asked him, still confused by his last remark. *Did he mean I was good to marry and to just sit on the throne and be pretty?*

“You gotta be kidding me, right? You can't be *that* innocent?” He threw his head back and laughed. His whole body was shaking with mirth at my expense. I stood there, still

not understanding what he meant and why *I* was so amusing to him.

“Please, stop it! Tell me why you are laughing like that? And I mean it when I said I didn’t know what you meant with “I’m good only for one thing”.” I repeated myself, mortified that I might have said something out of place to make him mock me so. Taking a step back, I fidgeted with the seams of my cloak, not daring to look directly at him.

However, his laughter and mockery of me made my annoyance at the situation grow. I took a deep breath as I closed my eyes and let my temper take over. I let go of my cloak while my hands clenched briefly as I made myself look at him. He gazed at me and he stopped laughing. I couldn’t tell what he saw on my face, but it had to be something significant that made him stop.

“It means that you are only good for a night of fuck, love.” He said with a half smile and elevated eyebrows as he snorted and rolled his eyes. I had to turn my head away, I couldn’t look at him anymore. Heat crept up my neck and onto my face as his words sank in.

“You are a horrible, horrible person and to think I thought you were... You know what, thank you for your time, *Aurich*, but I’ll be on my way now and I will take down the Evil fairy by myself, without your help.” I fumed as I clenched my fist, my head held high, prepared to turn to walk away from him. I didn’t want to be in his presence longer than was needed.

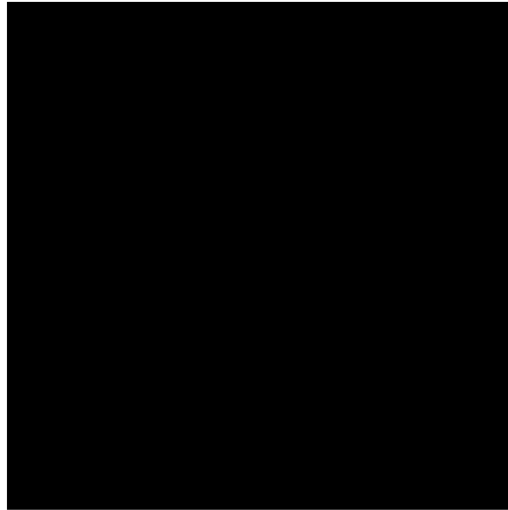
“Okay, okay, love. I might have been too blunt for you. And for that, my apologies. And to show you, I’m not that horrible of a person. I will let you in on a secret.” He leaned closer when he said that. A ghost of a smile lingered on his lips. With his index finger, he beckoned me closer.

“At the end of the dirt trail to the left of this tavern, you will find a clearing. In that clearing you will find a group of imps you could practise with.” He said quietly, well, as quietly as his deep voice could be. My eyebrows slowly knitted together as I saw his lips curled into a smirk. However, I said nothing as I pressed my lips together and let a forceful breath out of my nose.

“Thank you.” I curtly replied and turned my back to him and marched out of The Dragon’s Bones tavern. Not looking to say goodbye to the buxom woman behind the bar when I passed by her on my way to the door. I only wanted to put as much distance between me and that man, Aurich.

With the info about the imps, I set out to find and start practising with them.

Predicament



Oriana

“**W**hat did he think I was? I’m no *meretrix*, nor a *soiled dove of the night*.” I said to myself through gritted teeth while I stormed away from The Dragon’s Bones. *Why did I let him vex me so and get under my skin? And the fucking arse knew it. He fucking knew what he was doing.*

Stomping in the general direction *that pervert* indicated, I was determined to show him I didn’t need his magic teachings or his help. I could do this on my own.

I’m no damsel in distress.

However, I didn't get very far from the tavern. In my haste to get away from *him*, I forgot how late it was. I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. Night had fallen and brought the darkness with him. As I saw it, I had two choices: go back inside and ask the buxom woman for some sort of light and risk seeing that jerk again or I could try my luck in this darkness and hope for the best.

“The audacity of him to insinuate that I would... I... Argh.” I looked heavenward while I pinched the bridge of my nose and let out a breath, and hoped that my annoyance with *him* would also leave my body. Because I knew I had to go back into the tavern and ask for a lamp or something, otherwise I would get lost looking for the clearing and the damn imps. Yanking the door of the tavern open, I went back in.

I couldn't thank the Gods and Goddesses enough that the buxom woman gave me an oil lamp that I could use but mostly because Aurich wasn't at his table with a smirk etched on his face. Even though he got under my skin and made me furious with his lewd comments, somehow the vision of him licking his plump lips was branded into my brain together with his thick thighs.

I ran my fingers through my wavy, dark tresses while the vein at my left temple throbbed as I pushed another sinful thought about Aurich's lips and thighs out of my mind. Those thoughts would only distract me and I had to be focussed and prepared for when I encountered the imps I was looking for.

If my memory served me right, my mom used to tell me stories about imps, more like cautionary tales. She used to say that imps were these little mischievous beings that loved to play nasty tricks on people; like switching babies with changelings or confusing travellers and making them get lost in the woods.

I sat the oil lamp down on the ground as I adjusted my cloak and cleared my throat, but only managed to make a weird sound in the back of it as I made sure my thoughts wouldn't dwell on Aurich anymore. *I hate that my mind does whatever it wants regarding unholy thoughts about that pervert.* Picking up the oil lamp from the ground, I continued on my way to the clearing at the end of the dirt trail.

My head was somewhat clearer than when I started this little adventure in search of beings that may or may not play nasty tricks on me. Holding the oil lamp slightly higher and away from my face, I took in my surroundings as I made sure I wasn't lost.

It would have amused him to no end if I managed to get myself lost.

After what felt like I had been walking the entire night, I came to the end of the dirt road. It curved to the left, toward some bushes and tall trees that formed a green hedge. I heard some commotion and strange, high-pitched noises coming from behind the foliage, and noticed an orange glow as well. Most probably a fire was the source of that. I slowed down my pace and kept my footing light as I approached the hedge. As I

got closer, I lowered the lamp. I didn't want to alert whoever or whatever that was behind the trees and bushes of my presence.

I stopped just a few feet in front of a massive tree. I sat my lamp on the ground next to the trunk as I sneaked around it slowly, blending in with the shadows and darkness surrounding the area. However, as I got near more bushes, I could see an open space with what appeared to be a large group of little beings dancing around a big fire with a small blackened pot hanging above it.

Stealthily moving from one bush to another, I had a better view of the clearing. The dancing figures I observed must have been the imps that Aurich was referring to.

From where I was crouching, they were about twelve to seventeen inches high. Their skin seemed leathery as the shadow of the fire's flames danced on their bodies. They also had little horns, tails that ended in arrowhead shape and *were those wings on their backs?*

And to my astonishment, three of those imps were dragging a smaller creature with long, orange curly hair that cascaded around her face and between its gorgeous iridescent wings that looked like pale pink as they got to the edge of the fire. The closer they got, the feistier the little creature seemed to be. It dug its heels into the dirt and snapped at the hands of the imps with sharp, pointy teeth.

The poor little thing was all bound up, hands tied to its back, and they had tied a rope to its middle and were tugging on it to

make the creature walk. These imps were not friendly. And Aurich thought that they would help me with teaching me magic. I couldn't sit here behind the hedge as a coward and watch them mistreat that little creature and do nothing about it.

Just when I was about to jump out from behind the bushes, the imps dragged the little creature, turning away from the fire and the pot, and walked toward a tree closer to me. That was the chance I needed to help that poor little creature. It will be within my reach without the imps ever knowing I was here.

As soon as they dumped the creature against the tree and left, I took my chance to grab the little thing and bring it to safety with me. But what I failed to notice was the magnitude of the group of imps that were in the clearing. I thought I had hidden myself well until I stood up from behind the bushes and went for the creature.

Before I could take three steps toward the tree, a dozen imps appeared out of thin air and attacked me with little spears and their little swords. I kicked and stomped to get them away from my legs as I tried to get to the pouch on my belt, but more and more imps surrounded me. They even were jumping from the tree I was standing under.

They were coming from everywhere.

I finally got to the pouch and got the ebony sword out, after fidgeting with the drawstrings and keeping those damned imps away long enough to reach in the pouch to get it. I swung in every direction, hacking at imps and bushes alike while I kept

stomping on the ones trying to get my legs with their tiny swords.

When I ran my sword through the imps cutting off their heads, it felt like I was cutting through butter. The sound they made, like overripe fruit splattering to the ground as they fell, wasn't something I would likely want to hear any time soon.

The little devil imps caught on quickly that I could do a lot of damage with my sword, and that it had a nasty bite when it killed their fellow kin. However, that only enraged them more, which made them use their magic on me.

I blocked as many of their spells as I could with my sword, as it absorbed every little spell cast my way. I wished I could use magic on them or protect myself, because when I took my eyes off them to see where the bound little creature with the iridescent wings was, one of the imps' vile spells got me right in the chest and paralysed me from head to toe, like a block of ice.

I couldn't move anything. I could only feel how I fell backwards and hit my head on the hard dirt floor. Pain radiating from the back of my head toward my spine while I kept staring at the starry night sky. Unable to blink, the imps made quick work of tying me up to the tree where they had brought the other creature earlier.

Propped against the tree, I watched them conjure a bigger pot and hang it above the fire. I knew they were planning to eat the little creature and now I was being added to that menu

too. I had to think quickly on how to get not only the little creature next to me out of this predicament, but myself as well.

The muscles in my body were unfreezing. The spell they used was wearing off. I was rapidly thinking about how I was going to get out of this and save the creature when it hit me like a sledgehammer. It made my heart beat like drums, calling for battle in my chest, pumping adrenaline fast throughout my entire body. At that moment, I felt incredibly alert.

“But of course, how could I forget?” I would have hit myself on the forehead with my hands if they weren’t tied to my side. *How could I forget about my other gift?* This was the perfect setting to test it out and feel how it works. My tongue was already tingling and not because of the imp’s spell wearing off.

“Hey you, you little devil creature, could you come over here? Yeah, that’s right, come here. I want to talk to you.” With no effort on my part, my voice came out like smooth silk and as sweet as honey, while the corners of my lips pulled up to give the little devil creature a beaming smile. The tingling that was coating my tongue made my lips tingle, too.

“What do you want?” He gruffly asked. I winced at the sound of his voice. It was like stones grating against each other. I could see his gaze zero in on me as he focussed his attention on my lips. That is when I knew the power was working and I had to make full use of it if I wanted to live to see another day.

“What is your name?” I asked, looking to form some bond with this imp, hoping my power could entrap him better. I

could see it on his face he was fighting to keep it emotionless, but a smile clearly tugged at his lips.

This plan of mine will work. I could feel it in my fluttery guts.

“It’s Kyac, my name is Kyac.” He replied, with now a fat grin on his face, like he was happy to please me. That was a good sign. It was a fucking good sign. My powers were working. I just hoped it would keep working all the way through my plan. I didn’t know for how long I could maintain this.

“Well KEE-ack,” I tried to repeat the sound he made when he told me his name as best as I could. “If you and your fellow imps are going to eat me and this creature next to me, put some herbs into that big pot. You don’t want to eat your food bland, do you?” I beamed at him, like I was pleased to be eaten by them.

“You want us to taste at our best.” He shook his head while he mumbled something inaudible as he wrinkled his nose. “See, I know you and the others have good taste. And by the looks of it, you guys don’t have those types of herbs here. Oh darn, what a pity.” I continued while little Kyac leaned forward with glowing eyes, while he licked his lips before smacking them together. Most probably thinking of how we would taste with the added herbs.

“Don’t worry, I know where you guys can get all the herbs you want.” I whispered and jerked my head, gesturing for him to come closer. “You just need to gather all your fellow imps

and take the dirt road towards The Dragon's Bones tavern. In the tavern's kitchen, you will find all the fine herbs you'll need to cook us properly with." I gave him a knowing smile as I winked at him. He stood there, cocking his head to one side as he studied my face while he let the information sink in.

"What are you waiting for, KEE-ack? Go gather your fellow imps and be on your way to the paradise of all the herbs you guys can take." As I was blasting him with my powers, I could almost see it weave itself with my words as they reached his ears, making Kyac more acceptable to my idea of cooking me and the little creature with herbs and the need to go get said herbs at the tavern.

He was bouncing from foot to foot as he nodded with a wide grin on his face. His excitement made my heart beat faster as I knew if enough of them left I could try to persuade another one to let me and the little creature go.

"Come, brothers and sisters, I need you all to help me get all the herbs we need to cook our fresh meats with." I heard Kyac's grating voice booming across the clearing, calling all the other imps to him.

I could see a good portion of the imp group gathering their things and joining Kyac where he stood not far away from me. He yelled something and with countless popping noises; they disappeared one by one in front of my eyes.

I wished I could learn that magic trick. It could come in handy, but I knew I didn't have enough time to dwell on things

I can't have. I had to focus on the task at hand, getting me and the little creature out of here.

As I turned my head to the left, I could see the little creature sitting next to me against the tree. Based on its appearance, I guessed it was a female of its species, although I was unsure what species it was. I made a mental note to ask the creature about its species once I got us out of this situation.

To me, she looked like some kind of fairy. She had such beautiful and delicate features, her little nose was perfectly straight, ending in an upturned tiny point. Slanted eyes that were taking in everything that was happening around us. She had little pointy ears and those gorgeous wings of hers. They looked like moiré fabric.

“Don't worry, little friend, I'm going to get us out of here. Just a bit longer.” I whispered to her as I turned in search of more imps to wrap around my fingers. Squinting my eyes a little to see better through the dimming light, as the fire was getting smaller.

I didn't have to wait long. After a few more squinting gazes and fidgeting with the rope I was bound with, and almost crushing the little fae, another imp came up to me.

“What do you think you are doing, meat?” He barked at me as his forehead furrowed and he gave me a nasty glare. Narrowing his eyes, he stepped closer to me and poked me with his sword.

I let out a hiss as the sword pierced through my leather pants and into the flesh of my upper thigh. He snickered when he

heard me and knew he inflicted pain. I had to suck it up to implement the second part of my plan.

“I’m not doing anything.” I said as I raised my eyebrows and made my eyes bigger. “My right arm is itching, and I wanted to scratch it, but I can’t. Can you help me, please?” I tilted my head a little and batted my lashes while giving him one of my sweetest smiles.

That only made my situation worse. The little devil’s face contorted into something uglier than it already was. His bushy eyebrows slammed together and his tiny thin lips curled down in a grimace. But what made me pull back was the hatred and venom that his eyes had in them while he advanced toward me again.

“I will scratch nothing for you, *meat*.” He grabbed the rope they tied me with and yanked it to get me closer to his little ugly grey face and spat that last word at me, making me wince. He shoved me back against the tree as he made a horrible sound, holding his stomach while his body shook as he walked away from me. But stayed close by.

Oh Gods, that was a laugh.

I closed my eyes and summoned all my strength to persuade this little fucker. I need him under my spell to help me and the creature out of here. But there was no more tingling on my tongue, nor on my lips. I let out a string of profanity under my breath as I realised my *gift* can only be used once per situation.

I tried anyway. This time, I went with the not so flirty approach.

“Hey ugly, come here. Come and help me scratch this itch I have on my arm. It’s driving me crazy. Come on you little fucker, I need...” I stopped mid-sentence, as he turned and glowered at me. Before I could continue, he stomped his way to me. Sword in hand, ready to inflict pain again once more.

“You know what, *meat*. You talk too much, you are making me crazy.” He got to me, climbed over my left thigh and was standing then on both thighs. With a curled up lip, showing sharp rows of teeth, snapped his fingers.

I blinked and there I was, dangling above the bigger cook pot, getting roasted by steam from the boiling water and the fire underneath it.

“We can not wait any longer for Kyac to come back with the rest. We are hungry now, not later.” I half heard what he said as he gestured, showing me the other imps that were gathered around the fire and cook pot. I was more concerned with how close I was to the pot and fire than to know who was hungry and wanted to eat me.

“We are going to cook you now, *meat*.” He said and made a strange noise that sounded more like boulders colliding with each other than actual words coming out of his small, unattractive mouth. No sooner than the sound left his mouth, I fell toward the boiling water in the bigger pot.

The only thing I could do at that moment was, closing my eyes to brace for the impact with the scalding water and pain that certainly I would have to endure before being reunited with my mom and dad, wherever they might be. Amidst the

chaos in my mind, a single emotion consumed me, burning brightly and intensely: *regret*.

Regret of not finishing what I set out to accomplish, regret of not being able to avenge my father and mother and my people. Regret of not facing the vile human being that took advantage of my body when I couldn't protect myself.

Yet regret wasn't the emotion I wanted to die with in my heart. Accepting my fate, I let go of everything and just waited for what was to come while I fell into the imps boiling pot.

While I was accepting my fate and contemplating what I was leaving behind, I didn't pay attention to what was happening around me and what was happening in the clearing.

I realised I was taking a lot of time to make a splash into the boiling water and burn, when I felt powerful arms around my waist and a jolt of vibration ran through my entire body as the owner of those arms landed somewhere hard.

I opened my eyes to two pools of black molten lava that glistered looking back at me and plump lips curled into a smirk. While my body was being pinned against what felt like a wall of flesh and muscles. I couldn't control my lips as they parted to let a sigh escape, making *his* smirk widened.

“Thank you for making my job easier, *princess*.” He said with his dark gruff voice that was bathed with smugness. He took one of his arms away from my waist, to grab his sword and with his other hand still wrapped around my waist he shifted me to his left side while he kept me pinned close to him.

“ I could have handled it. Let me go.” I growled at him as he was deflecting the imps spells and attacking them back with his magic.

“Oh sure, of course you had it handled, *princess.*” He chuckled and patted me on my head, making me literally growl at him. Which clearly was humorously entertaining to Aurich as he let out a booming laugh.

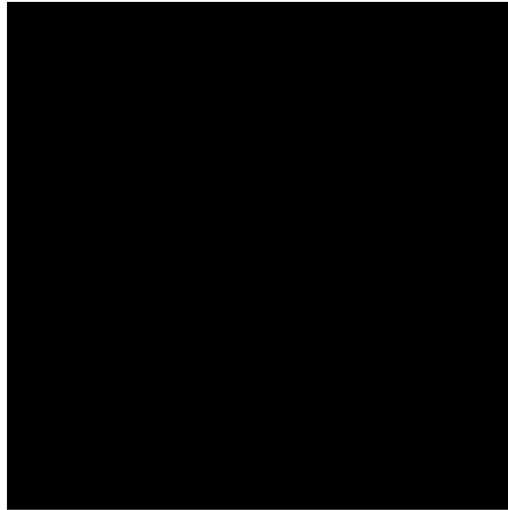
“Pay attention. I’ll show you how it’s done.” He turned us around and let go of me. The sudden twirl and no support of his muscular arm made me land on my ass with a gasp.

He winked at me and returned to fight the imps with spells and his sword. He made quick work of them in a matter of minutes. All the while, I sat there against the tree with the other creature still tied next to me.

Imp parts and imp’s bodies were scattered all around in the clearing, around the fire with the enormous cooking pot. Some of the little devils ended up in the pot themselves. After Aurich made sure that he got all the imps that were there, he strode back to me at the tree.

“And this is how it’s done, *princess.*” He said full of himself as he mocked and bowed to me with the same smirk he had when he caught me.

To kill or not to kill



Oriana

“Oh, come on, love. Don’t look at me like that.” He sniggered as he was untying the ropes from around me. “You have to admit, this was a good start to your training. Was it not?” He said as he got my hands free. For a moment I thought he was serious, but then I detected the mirth beneath his deep, smokey voice. And I knew he was messing with me.

“You, you... argh!” I let out a breath of frustration as I pushed myself from the hard and cold ground and stood up. “You sent me to these imps on purpose, didn’t you? Knowing what they would do to me. You arrogant son of a bitch.” I

snapped at him, poking him in the chest with my index finger, pushing him, making him take some steps back.

I was beyond pissed at him. The nerve to send me to this clearing, knowing what would happen when I encountered the group of imps. It infuriated me he was acting like he did me a favour by putting me in danger, and then had the audacity to gloat that he saved me.

Moving closer to him, invading his personal space, I tiptoed to be right in his face. “I almost got boiled and eaten because of your advice to come to this place and practise with the imps.” I growled, while I pushed myself to keep my face close to his on my toes as my calf muscles were burning and trembling from exhaustion.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest as he cocked his head to the side, looking down at me with that forever smirk plastered on his face. “Did you die, love?” He asked and lifted one of his eyebrows. “Did you learn anything from this?” He moved his face closer to mine, making me take a step back and stand on my feet instead of my toes.

“No, I didn’t die, but I could...” I replied, however he cut me off before I could finish my sentence.

“I don’t want to hear but. And you didn’t die, did you?” He repeated, as he gave me a genuine smile. “And by the looks of that all black sword stuck in that bush over there, you got some practice with your sword too. By the looks of the slain imps I saw scattered when I got here, you were doing well with it.” He jerked his head toward the bush right next to the

tree we were standing under, before he strode toward the bush and got my sword back, and handed it over to me.

“Thank you.” I mumbled as my hand closed around the hilt of my sword. “You weren’t bad yourself with your magic and fighting skills.” I remarked in a softer tone while not meeting his obsidian eyes. I had to admit he was good, more than good. He was excellent at using his magic. How he didn’t even have to utter a word to cast the spells he used on the imps.

“Look, I have to admit it was a shitty thing for me to send you out here the way I did. For that, I’m sorry.” He said as he rubbed the back of his neck. “However, I’m fucking impressed with how you handled yourself and how you tackled this misfortunate group of imps. You are no pampered princess after all, like I thought you were, love.” He raised his hand and stopped mid-motion, as if he didn’t know what to do with it and he kept it there, hanging between us. Like some sort of peace offering.

“If you still want me to teach you magic and how to fight, I’m willing to teach you.” He added, his hand still mid air between us as the corner of his eyes crinkled when the corner of his full lips curled into a wider smile, flashing pearl white teeth.

“Yes, I still want you to teach me magic and how to fight, but under one condition.” I said and also raised my hand but didn’t shake his yet, as I gave him a lopsided smile while I tried to figure out if he was being serious or not.

“And what condition would that be, love?” He chuckled while he raised both eyebrows as he studied my face. His eyes searched for something on my face until they landed on my eyes and he slightly nodded.

“That you stop calling me princess.” I told him and held his stare. I would not let his smouldering obsidian eyes make me back down now. He needs to see that I’m no delicate, pampered princess.

“Ok, love. I agree to stop calling you princess.” His dark, masculine voice made a shiver run down my spine as we shook hands. A smile tugged at his plum lips, making me wonder how they might feel against my own. Would they be firm and dominating or tender and forgiving?

I let go of his hand and turned away, forcing the thought of his lips from my mind as I recalled the small creature I had been attempting to rescue earlier. In just two strides, I reached the creature and began to untie the ropes that bound her tiny torso. Suddenly, Aurich’s hand gripped my shoulder, halting my movements. His touch caused me to flinch as my body instinctively recoiled from him.

“What do you think you are doing? You can not let it go free. We have to kill it.” He barked at me as he forcefully shoved me aside to reach the creature. I quickly regained my balance and stood between Aurich and the creature, preventing him from getting any closer to her.

“What does it look like I’m doing, Aurich? I’m freeing the little creature. What in the name of the Gods and Goddesses is

wrong with you that you want to kill her? You can't kill her. I won't allow it." I snapped at him before I snatched the creature up and cradled her in my palm. Despite her small size, she emitted a piercing screech that was incomprehensible to me. The noise resembled the unpleasant sound of metal scraping against glass.

"You must be joking, right? We have to kill *it!*" He hissed at me as he stomped some feet away and turned to glare at me. "Did you know the creature you are holding is a fairy?" Aurich demanded. "All fairies possess the potential to become evil. They only require a slight push to descend into wickedness." He huffed as he stormed back toward me with outstretched hands to take the little fairy from my hand.

Swiftly, I used the back of my hand to swat away Aurich's hands and spun around to retrieve my sword from its place against the tree. Ready to defend the fairy I was holding in my hand.

"Throughout my entire life, I have encountered fairies, and in my experience, they have always been pure, good, and willing to lend a helping hand when needed. So don't tell me they all are evil." I hissed back at him while I widened my stance and bent my knees a little as I held my sword at the ready. Growing up, my dad taught me something about sword fighting.

I wasn't about to let him kill her. He would have to kill me first.

Aurich let out a mocking laugh as his nose wrinkled in disgust, the sound filling the cold, crisp night air.

“The only way fairies are *pure, good and willing to help* is if you were a fucking *Royal!*” He spat the word royal at the end as if it was poison on his tongue. “If you aren’t of Nobel blood, you could be dying in front of them and they will not lift a finger to help you.” He swallowed hard and pursed his lips tightly before raising a hand and backing away. Eventually, he turned and made his way towards the fire, where he stood silently. Shoulders hunched forward with his hands shoved into his pants pockets, he stared at the dancing flames.

I wanted to go after him and tell him he was wrong. I have seen countless times how the three fairies had helped my people when they were in need. Not just royals, like me, as he said. But peasants and people of no ranks whatsoever.

Maybe if I told him who I was and what happened to me, he might change his mind about all fairies being evil. But I got the feeling no matter what I would tell him, he already had his mind made up about fairies.

Also, I didn’t know if I would ever be ready to talk about what happened to me while under the curse. The massive beast of sadness that was coiled around my heart tightened its grip, making me gasp for air. The sword slipped out of my hand as I clutched my cloak with the same hand and tried to slow down my erratic breathing.

And the important thing for me at that moment was to not get Aurich more upset with me, as I needed him to teach me his way of magic and refined my fighting skills. But I couldn't bear letting him kill the fairy, so I finished untying the fairy, and I set her free.

The little fairy fluttered around my head for a moment as she made those piercing screeching sounds again. "I don't understand you, little one." I said to the fairy as I held my hand open, palm up to her. She hovered for a moment above my hand before landing softly on it.

She beckoned me with her tiny index finger to come closer, smiling from pointy ears to pointy ears. I moved my hand closer to my face. I almost got my nose into her curly orange mane.

"My name is Elle Shimmerwings, a fairy from the Dawn Court," She introduced herself, her high-pitched voice filled with gratitude. "I cannot thank you enough, from the depths of my heart, for rescuing me from a dreadful fate tonight." With a curtsy and a smile that revealed rows of sharp teeth, she leaned in and gave me a gentle kiss on the tip of my nose. Then, in a burst of fragrant flower petals, Elle vanished into thin air.

"Oye!! *Princess*, please tell me you didn't just do what I think you just did. Tell me you didn't let the fucking fairy go?!" Aurich yelled at me, as he clenched his meaty hands into fists. Growling like a grizzly bear, he stomped his way toward me.

I stood there smiling, happy with myself that I did what I set out to do, save the little creature from being eaten. Aurich can have a hissy fit all he wants, but I don't give a rat's arse. My work here was done.

“Why are you smiling? There is nothing to smile about.” He yelled at me some more. His yelling and storming towards me didn't faze me. I just stood there smiling as I leaned my back against the tree and let out a gratifying sigh while I cock my head to the side. The beast of sadness in my chest let his iron grip of my heart lessen for a bit as warmth spread through my body.

“You fucking let her go. You should have let me...” He gave me a contemptuous look before shaking his head. “Why am I yelling at you? You don't even regret your actions one bit.” He threw his hands in the air and came to stand next to me and let out a forceful sigh. “You are going to get us both in so much trouble, aren't you, Oriana?” He said and I could hear him stifling a chuckle, which made me join him with my own chuckle. Because no matter how much I want to deny his words, I knew they were true spoken words.

Even though he called me a princess again, I wasn't upset by it. Maybe I deserved it that time, I thought as I shrugged and turned my head towards him with a ghost of a smile still on my face. At that moment, I was content with the warmth still blooming and coursing through my body.

“Come on, love. Let's set up camp.” He said as he lightly nudged me with his hips before striding toward some bushes

and disappeared. A moment later, he came back, leading two horses laden with stuff to the clearing.

After disposing of the scattered remains of the imps by throwing them into the fire, he proceeded to cover the pools of imp blood that had splattered across the clearing by shoving sand over them with his feet. Once he had cleaned up most of the mess, he set up camp for the two of us.

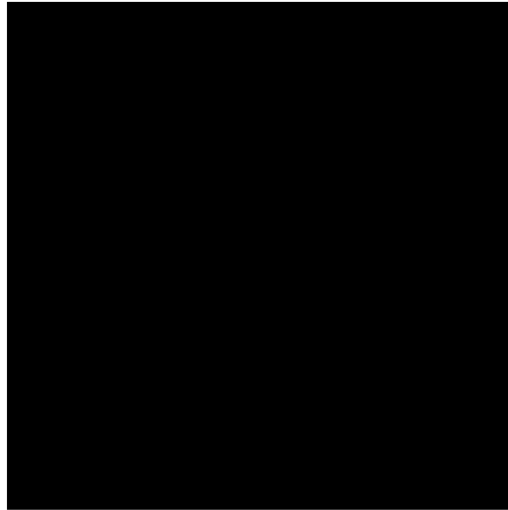
I couldn't stop smiling, despite all the mess and him sending me here to the imps, and him getting angry at me for letting the fairy go. I knew Aurich was a good man. But I couldn't understand why he had such a strong dislike for fairies and the Royals. What was so wrong about being a Royal, anyway?

I pushed myself from the tree and made my way to where Aurich was with the horses. I helped him finish making the camp, to sleep under the stars. Who would have thought, me sleeping on a pallet made of fur and a blanket on the ground outside?

Not me.

Shrugging with my smile fading away, I looked up to the night sky filled with shining stars, and I knew tomorrow would be brighter than today.

Training



Oriana

“Look mommy, look, I finally caught it.” I ran to the rose garden, where I knew my mother would be, holding a little lizard in my tiny hands. I was so excited that I finally had caught the little slithering creature. He was gorgeous, his shimmering emerald green scales looked like armour. One scale overlapping the other, giving him all the mobility he needed.

I was so enthralled by the little lizard and his scales shining on my skin, giving it a light greenish hue, that I didn't notice where I was going until I bumped into someone

“Look where you are going, little princess.” Someone said, with softly spoken words, yet the voice itself wasn’t friendly. It made the hairs on my arms stand up and it made me scared to look away from the lizard in my hands to see who I had bumped into.

“So the little princess wants the lizard more than to meet a powerful fairy?!” The same soft-spoken person said. This time, the voice was full of animosity. “Look at me princesssss!” The voice commanded as the soft words from just now changed to a shrill.

But I couldn’t.

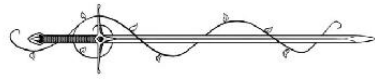
It frightened me to look at the one demanding my attention. I kept my eyes firmly on the little lizard in my hand, wishing to be anywhere else but here, standing in the corridor that leads to the rose garden.

“Look at me I said!” The voice repeated. This time, only ugly and harsh tones assaulted my little ears. Thin, long fingers that looked like talons shot forward and grabbed me by my chin and yanked my head up. I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to see who the venomous voice belonged to.

“I said look at me, look at the superior being that will devour you whole, princesssss.” As I opened my eyes and did what the voice commanded me to do, I let out a scream at the sight of the one holding my head up. In a fraction of a moment, the tall and gorgeous woman with golden, flowy hair like the sun transformed into a big and ugly beast, with wings as big

as ship sails, fangs longer than myself and a long snout that had smoke coming out of its nostrils.

The beast opened its mouth, ready to devour me as I screamed my lungs out some more.



“Oye, wake up, love. It’s time to start your training.” Aurich’s gruff voice intruded into my sleep as the cold rapidly seeped into my bones through my cloak, as he took the thick fur covers away from me. Making me grunt at him.

“Oh, grunting at me now, are we, love?” His dark, smokey voice had a playful edge to it as he grabbed my cloak and threw it open, exposing my half naked body to the chilly breeze, making me jump wide awake from the fur pallet.

I expected to find a smirk on his face and amusement dancing in his pitch black eyes as he got to see me half naked. But instead his eyes roamed over my naked thighs, as a flash of shock and then anger flicker across his face.

A line etched between his brows as his forehead furrowed. He huffed something unintelligible as he turned and marched away from me. Leaving me half kneeling on the pallet, not knowing what to do as I tried to figure out what happened.

After picking up my cloak from where Aurich had dropped it, I wrapped myself in it and went in search of him. I needed to find out what was troubling him, and more importantly, if I had done something to upset him.

I walked back to the tree we both were standing under last night, but he wasn't there. As I made my way towards the tree, I noticed the two horses he had brought with him grazing a few feet away behind the bushes next to the tree. Their dark hides glimmered under the soft light of the morning sun, with dew still glistening on the grass. They looked up at me lazily with their gentle eyes as they heard my footsteps approaching them.

“Hey you beautiful beast, do you know where Aurich is?” I asked the dark brown horse as I slowly approached him with my hand outstretched to rub him on his neck and shoulder. He gave me a curious look before he sniffed my hand. His breath was warm, and as I got closer to him, I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

He was a tall and majestic animal. His hide felt like silk under my fingers as rubbed his neck down to his shoulder. This reminded me of how I used to help the servants tend to the horses we had in the royal stables.

“Good boy.” I crooned as I kept rubbing his neck and shoulder, while wondering where Aurich could be and why he reacted that way. As I kept replaying what happened when he woke me up in my mind, the horse nudged on my arm with his head and so broke my train of thoughts about what transpired between Aurich and me.

“Would you like me to scratch your ear, boy? Would you like...” The sound of twigs snapping under approaching footsteps behind me made me go silent as I was petting the

horse. Slowly, I pulled my hand back and placed it on my waist, looking for the small pouch with my sword.

However, I forgot I didn't have my pants on, so there was no pouch on my pants-less hip. It was still tied to my pants, which remained on the pallet of furs. I tried not to let the notion that I was unarmed and half naked turned into panic. I could still run to the pallet and get my sword.

But before I could do anything, a firm hand grabbed me by the shoulder and turned me in one quick motion. There I stood face to face with a sullen Aurich.

“What do you think you are doing?” He asked. His deep, rich voice sounded taut with tension as if he was trying to hide his emotions, as he avoided looking at me while his eyes searched the surrounding area.

I stepped away from the horse and held my cloak tightly around my body as I looked at my shoeless feet. Heat spread from my neck upward to my cheeks and ears, as awareness was front and centre in my mind about me not having my pants on and being only dressed in my red tunic and undergarment.

“You walked away from me so suddenly after rudely waking me up, and I didn't know what made you walk away from me like that. I went looking for you, but then I found the horses here and I couldn't resist petting this one and here you are back and asking me what I'm doing.” I took a big breath of air after hastily explaining that I was searching for him.

“I’m sorry when I’m nervous, I ramble. A lot.” I shook my head. “Sorry.” I mumbled as I squeezed between Aurich’s body and the tree. I almost ran as I made my way back to the fur pallet. I was waiting for the sound of his chuckle to follow me, but it never did, only silence followed.

I hastily pulled my pants back up and got my boots back on my feet. My mind couldn’t help but dwell on Aurich’s odd behaviour. His abrupt change of mood and distant demeanour had left me feeling uneasy and confused. *Why the change in attitude toward me?* He seemed angry, but for the life of me, I couldn’t put my finger on what I could have possibly done to make him upset with me.

Just when I finished tidying up all the furs of our pallets, I saw Aurich at the imp’s pot that was still hanging above the fire. He was stirring the pot with a big wooden spoon while he threw things in it. After a few more stirring he brought the spoon to his mouth and tasted whatever it was he cooked.

He nodded and grabbed a wooden bowl and poured some white, gooey stuff from the pot into the bowl. When he was done filling it up, he sat it back on a boulder next to the pot as he grabbed a second bowl and filled that up too.

“Breakfast.” He bellowed in that deep baritone voice of his as he shot me a stare. I hastily made my way toward him. I didn’t want to make him more upset than he already was. As I got to him, he passed me the bowl and a smaller wooden spoon than what he used to stir the pot with.

“Eat.” He commanded as he scooted a bit and created some space next to him at the boulder, where he was leaning against. He looked at me for a moment, then started wolfing down what I assumed was breakfast.

My stomach agreed with his command to eat. It growled, loudly, which won me another quick stare from Aurich, but this time complete with an eyebrow lift. I tucked my chin to my chest as I closed the distance between me and Aurich.

While I leaned against the boulder next to him, I dared to look at the content of the bowl I was holding. To my surprise, it was a peasant breakfast. It was a thick porridge of rice boiled in milk with herbs and cubed dried meat that got softened by letting it boil with the rice and milk.

I haven't had this porridge since I was a little girl and played with the cooks' children early in the morning in the palace kitchen. My mom always let me eat with them when I asked. The memory brought a little smile to my lips and then I too dug in and wolfed the porridge down.

“Mmm, thish ish delicioussh...” I said as I took the first bite and the cubed salted meats melted on my tongue, followed by the sweet and sour of the herbs. But the rich and tasty fat of the milk completed the whole dish.

“Oh my Gods and Goddesses. I never had a more delicious peasant porridge like this in my entire life. Aurich, you are a talented cook.” I beamed up at him before continuing eating the breakfast. I even went for seconds, which got me another

raised eyebrow from Aurich and I could have sworn I saw the corners of his mouth twitch.

“Aurich, the breakfast was amazing. It brought back happy memories of my family and home. Thank you for that.” He grunted as he straightened his back. Not the reaction I was expecting, but I was glad I got something else than a frown or brooding stare. I picked up his bowl and spoon, put them together with mine as I wanted to go look for a stream or something to wash them.

“What are you doing?” He asked as he pushed away from the boulder and took the bowls from my hands. I pursed my lips and put a hand on my hips in response.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” I replied and tried to put as much sass into my words as I could. I knew he was upset, and I didn’t want to add to his bad mood. But to stop me from helping was another thing.

“It looks like you don’t know what you are doing. Did you see any stream or a well nearby, love?” He invaded my space as he towered over me, shrouding me in his shadow as he held me in place with his intense stare. I knitted my eyebrows and tilted my head as I noticed a flash in his eyes.

Was it anger, or was it possessiveness?

But whatever it was, it was fleeting and left me with a parched mouth and my body smouldering in its wake. As I cleared my throat, I had to take a step back. I knew if I stayed that close to him, I would have done some stupid thing that I would regret later.

“Where do you think you are going, love?” He was about to hold my hand to get me to stop, but he swiftly pulled his hand back. And mumbled an apology as he kept his eyes on something past my head.

“Okay, *Fairy Hunter*, what is your Gods and Goddesses damn problem?” I snapped at him. I was tired of tiptoeing around him, just in case I was the issue that had upset him. “Could you just please tell me why you’re treating me like I’m fragile or dying? What did I do this morning to deserve this, huh?” I exhaled and got back in his face. My blood rushing to my face, I didn’t care that my head would be a resemblance to a tomato.

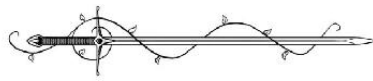
He stepped back, putting a sliver of space between us. His eyes lingered on my face before casting them down, but they only got to my thighs. And the muscles in his thick neck and his jaw flexed and unflexed as his paws of hands balled into a trembling fist on either side of his body.

Suddenly, the memory hit me. Aurich had seen me half-naked this morning, and I knew exactly what he had glimpsed. The images of my bruised thighs and the bite marks came rushing back, making my stomach churn and causing the porridge to threaten to come back up.

“I’m not ready to talk about... not now, not never.” I hissed, barely above a whisper, as I shook my head. He took a step closer, but I took a step back, keeping that sliver of distance between us.

“No! Don’t!” I held my hands up in surrender as I backed away from him. When I thought I had put a safe distance between him and me, I turned and ran into the wood surrounding us.

As I ran, I wished I was running away from the pain, from the knowledge of what they have done to me, while tears streamed down my face.



Aurich

“Shit, shit, shit.” I kept repeating as I saw her running towards the woods. *What have I done? Now I need to go after her, bring her back before she gets lost.* I couldn’t hold back my shock and anger when I saw her bare thighs covered in all those bruises and bite marks this morning.

What kind of savage does that to a woman? No woman deserves to be abused like that.

Setting my anger and the strange feeling of protecting her that wrapped my body and mind aside for the moment, I marched after her. I hoped she wasn’t fast and that I could get to her before I had to go into full-blown search party mode.

Maybe it was the favour of the Gods and Goddesses, or simply my luck, but I caught up with her fairly quickly. Oriana was doubled over, catching her breath, when I found her. I slowed down my steps, as I didn’t want to scare her and make her run away from me again. And we would be at this all day.

I didn't have the time to waste like that and I had to teach her how to use magic. She needed a lot in that area and I needed to make her sword fight perfect. I was glad to see her form, and that she had a good posture while wielding her sword.

"Hey love." I called out to her, trying to make my gruff voice as soothing as possible, while holding my hands up, palms facing outward as I kept waking up to her carefully. She drew herself up and turned towards me when she heard my voice.

She looked up at me, her eyes all watery and wide, with furrowed brows. Oriana slowly shook her head while holding a hand up again, warding me off, as she sent me a long, pained look before breaking eye contact.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry, Oriana. It's just when I took your cloak away, I wasn't expecting to see you like that." She winced and whimpered at my words. "Those bruises and marks on your body made my blood boil, and I wanted to kill the savage that did that atrocity to you." I made my way closer to her, but I knew I had to do it carefully and I had to mind my words. I didn't want to hurt her, I wanted to protect her and save her from all the pain that is now written all over her face and posture.

"I promise you, you don't have to tell me anything that you don't feel comfortable sharing or discussing about what happened. However, I want you to know that I'm here for you if you decide to confide in me." I dropped my hands as she

surprised me by turning swiftly, wrapping her hands around my waist, and laid her head against my chest.

“Thank you, Aurich.” Her muffled words came from my chest as she had her head buried there while her body shook and tears soaked through my cotton shirt. I couldn’t contain myself. I brought my arms around her as I held her tight against me and swore to the Gods and Goddesses that I would always protect her and kill the savage that brutalised her like this.

After the shaking of her body had calmed down and stopped, I dared to look at her as I caressed her inky-black tresses before I pulled her back to look at her. Her eyes were red and her face was blotchy. Her chin was trembling as she let go of me and covered her face.

She stood like that for a minute or two, inhaling deeply as she took her hands away from her face and let out a forceful breath. Oriana turned her head toward mine with a watery smile plastered on her lips and I could see determination forming in her blue eyes that were ocean-strong, with rays of bright sunlight radiating outward from her black pupil.

“Okay, love, are you ready for your magic lessons, or do you need more time?” Letting my lips curl up into my forever smirk, I cocked my head to the side, still holding her close. Her eyes gave her away. She liked the smirk. I would keep this smirk forever if it meant her happiness.

“Yes, yes, I am ready.” She replied as she lifted her face up towards mine. Her luscious, heart-shaped lips curved into a

genuine smile and her eyes lit up. I couldn't resist and leaned in a little, feeling her sweet, mouth-watering breath on my face, making me gulp the crisp air quickly while our eyes remained locked on each other.

I had to stop this, whatever this was, from growing further. Clearing my throat, I unwrapped my arms from around her and stepped a few steps back, adding some much needed space between us.

“Let's get back to camp and I'll start teaching you *my* magic.” I said and walked back to our camp. I couldn't stand there and wait for her. If I did, I would have pinned her to one of the trees surrounding us and ravaged those perfect lips of hers. However, I didn't think that was appropriate for me to do when she was that vulnerable.

Once we both were back at camp, I sat her down and began teaching her about magic. Before she could start using magic, she needed to know where it came from and how the ones using it could tap into its energy.

“In Briarwood, magic comes from the Arcane well deep in the heart of our realm. Like a heart, it pulses magical energies into the kingdoms surrounding it.” I said as I drew a map of the kingdoms as best I could. So she would know what I was talking about.

“But despite this, not all beings are equally capable of bending these energies to their will. Only two kinds of beings can control these energies, these powers; one that is born of royal blood, or one who is fae or is a fae descendant.” I paused

to give her some time to let this information sink in before I continued with the rest. I could see her trying to comprehend what I just told her. She kept moving her head back and forth in a nodding kind of way as she was mumbling something.

“In rare instances, there are individuals who possess an exceptional level of determination and strength, enabling them to bend magic to their will with ease and grace.” When she heard that, her head snapped toward where I stood and her eyes shone brighter than a falling star at night. It made me smile, as I knew she wouldn’t give up. No matter how hard it would get.

“And now the questions for all the gold in the realm. Which kind are you, Oriana? Fae descendant or just a human who wants to wield magic power?” I came up to where she sat on her fur pallet as I waited for her reply. She stood up with her hands on her hips and chin raised. Her sapphire eyes blazed with such determinations that it felt like I stood in the presence of Royalty. She radiated so much regality that it almost made me bow to her.

“I don’t know about the fae descendant thing, how I could be one. But one thing you need to understand is that I’m determined to learn and master magic.” Oriana replied, proudness and strength dripping from her words. She stood tall, legs spread wide with that gleam in her eyes and an all knowing grin on her face.

That was all I needed to know. She was committed and ready to learn.

I got her started on calling the magic to her and was surprised by how quickly she mastered it without breaking a sweat. After a few more practice rounds, we moved on to manipulating the energy to make it do what we wanted.

At first all she could muster was a red face and some feral growl coming from deep within her. However, as the sun made its way across the bright blue sky she got more confident and could create a small faint grey cloud that hovered above her open palm.

After some encouraging words and one or two challenging ones, Oriana had conjured a bigger grey cloud, which she used to extinguish the fire under the big black pot. Also, she could make it mist up, creating a cover barrier to hide or elude capture if necessary.

My chest filled with a sense of pride, and I couldn't help but smile. She had accomplished so much in such a short time. I never imagined she could call magic to her, let alone conjure two things in one afternoon.

As the sun got lower and the tree's shadows got longer, I made her stop. Oriana muttered a curse and bared her teeth in frustration as she urged the magic she had called upon to do more than just create mist and a small grey cloud capable of putting out a small fire.

"You have to stop, love. Otherwise you will be too exhausted to travel. Overuse of magic will only deplete you of your strength." I said to her as I put a hand on her shoulders to make her look at me.

“I can’t stop now, Aurich. We can’t afford to stop. I underestimated how much I needed to learn, but I have to do better. We need to keep training.” She almost growled at me while she shook my hand off her shoulder and went back to casting and conjuring spells.

“You did amazingly well for your first time, Oriana. I never thought you would be this good.” I held her now by both shoulders as I gently squeezed them as I looked deep into her eyes, hoping that she sees that I’m being honest about her wielding magic.

“I’m proud to be teaching you magic.” I commended her as I transformed my smirk into a satisfied smile while keeping eye contact with her.

“No, I need to master it. I need to be like you. You don’t understand, I need, I need...” She didn’t finish her sentence, but her voice was filled with tension as she took my hands off her shoulders for the second time. I saw her clenching her fists tight and I could only imagine her fingernails biting into her palm.

“Please Aurich, just a little more?” She asked, however her voice was laced with sweetness that tugged at my heart, urging me to comply with her request, and left me with a sensation of pins and needles crawling all over my body.

I didn’t know what it was, but I didn’t like that sensation at all.

“Oriana, stop! You need to stop. If you want me to keep teaching you, you need to listen to me when I say you have

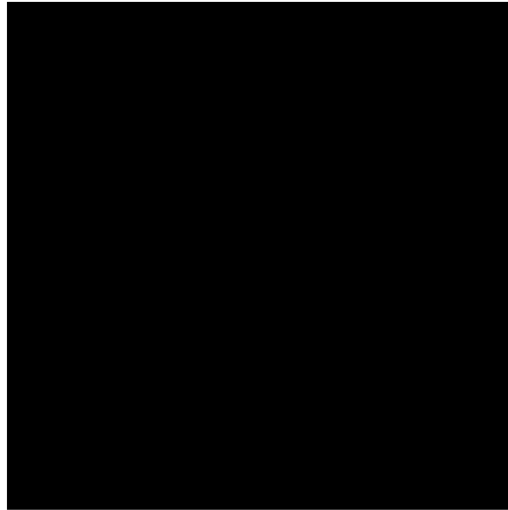
trained enough for today.” I walked away from her toward the pallets and dismantled mine.

“I can not stay here and keep teaching you. I have places to be, obligations to attend to. But, I tell you what, love. I’ll keep teaching you all the magic you want on the way. Also, making you better at sword fighting.” I said to her as I was rolling up the furs that made up my sleeping pallet. Preparing for our journey.

I never thought I would go on a job accompanied by a gorgeous woman like Oriana, who not only possesses sword-fighting skills but also managed to call forth magic and manipulate it to her liking in less than a day.

While I tried to get her to make haste with dismantling her pallet, I made sure she didn’t see how elated I was to have her accompany me. I just hope what was waiting for us in the next town wasn’t a big shock to her.

Thornton



Oriana

I never thought that my body would hurt this much. Even the hairs on my head were in pain. Yet, I couldn't stop training sword fighting and, most of all, I couldn't stop learning magic. I believed I had the ability to call the magic energy to me and command it to do as I wanted, which would be my much needed weapon to defeat Mara.

However, I was second guessing the certainty of that ability as each jolt of the horse and every bump on the road sent a shockwave through my bones, while my aching muscles in my

arms and legs screamed every time I had to tug on the reins to steer my horse to follow Aurich on this dirt road.

The muscle ache and the exhaustion took all my concentration to stay on the horse and to not fall into a deep sleep again, that I couldn't enjoy the serene view and atmosphere of the woods we were in.

It was all because of my stubbornness, and I hated that Aurich was right. Me pushing myself beyond my limits resulted in me having more aches and pains afterward.

One night when I was supposed to be sleeping and recovering from the brutal sword training we did during the day, where I got my ass handed to me on a platter, I stayed up all night. Working on mastering the magic, I called to myself. I succeeded that night in manipulating the magic into a larger grey cloud that could carry more water and douse a fire beyond a mere cooking flame.

I utterly and totally pushed my body to its breaking point that day and had to pay for it afterward. Which, of course, resulted in me being out cold for two days straight. I had to miss my training on both days and live the rest of my days knowing that I had to be taken care of like a baby by Aurich.

There was a bright side to me reaching my breaking point that night. I figured out how to conjure my ebony sword out of my little pouch without having it on my hip, or even opening it.

I found myself unable to stop smiling as my confidence in my ability to kill Mara someday kept growing.

“Oriana, stop your daydreaming, love. We are about to enter Thornton. I need you to be alert and focussed.” Aurich’s baritone voice got my attention back to the here and now as my eyebrows slammed together while I glanced around to see why he told me to be alert and focussed. *Did I miss something while we entered Thornton? Are we going to be attacked?*

“Aurich, what? Why are you telling me to... ugh... What in the Nine Kingdoms is that stench?!” I spluttered and gagged. I almost lost my breakfast when a wall of foul odour hit me flush in the face. One of my hands shot immediately to my face to cover my mouth and nose as I fought to keep my heaving stomach under control, while trying to breathe in air without getting that horrible putrid and rank odour into my lungs.

“Oh, for the love of the Gods and Goddesses, can you stop gagging? This is nothing. There are worse smells than this the further in the town you go. So start getting used to it.” Aurich stated and took a deep breath while smiling at me. “It’s going to be a long stay here.” He winked and continued to make his way deeper into the foul odoured town.

I followed him into the town. The foul odour was just a warning to what was waiting for me at Thornton. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The town was in such neglect and decay that you could actually see mould growing on the walls of the houses, well, what could pass as houses.

Small, square cottages with thatched roofs, some roofs with dry straw and others with water reeds. A closer look at the

house's wall, I found one of the reasons for the stench and the mould growing on them. They made the walls of wattle and daub. I couldn't believe that people still use these types of materials to construct their houses.

When my parents were king and queen of Briarwood Kingdom, they had all the houses that were made with these same materials torn down and reconstructed with better, cleaner, and healthier materials.

This was no way of living.

I made my horse trot to catch up with Aurich. "Why is the town like this? Doesn't the King or Queen of Briarwood take care of his or her subjects?" I asked as I let my horse fall back into a walk while I steered him next to Aurich. "Why does the ruler have the people live like this? In this poor state." I continued, still not believing what my eyes were seeing.

"I refuse to believe that the King or Queen and the rest of the royals treat their people like this. There must be a good explanation for this, why they are doing this. Royals are supposed to help and take care of their people. Kings and Queens are in service to the people." I remarked as I kept turning my head this way and that way, seeing how badly they cared for this town. Hoping to find the source of why the ones in power did nothing to make it better.

"Don't believe it all you want. This is all because of the so-called *King and the Prince*. Both of them don't give a fuck about their people. The only thing both of them care about is filling up their pockets and their *royal* chests full of gold." He

fumed, spittle built at the corner of his mouth as his eyes blazed with powerful emotion. He clenched his hands so hard around the leather rein of his horse that his knuckles cracked and turned white. I felt the world of hatred he had for the King and the Prince in his words.

He led us in silence after that to a cottage that looked cleaner than the others and also bigger. And by bigger I meant, the cottage had two rooms instead of the customary one room; I came to understand the other cottages were.

Aurich tied the reins of his horse to one of the poles of what remained of a wood fence in front of the little cottage and went inside. Leaving me outside with no instructions. I too got off my horse and tied the reins to the same pole and followed him inside.

As I walked in, I saw Aurich hugging a woman and then he shook hands with a gentleman standing next to the woman. Both had greying hair, they looked undernourished.

They had sunken eyes and hollowed cheeks, but despite their appearance, they beamed up at Aurich. The woman kept kissing his hands and telling him thank you repeatedly.

I couldn't wrap my mind around the wretched conditions this town was living in. The house I was standing in didn't have flooring, it was just hard dirt. No chairs, just a few tree stumps with some furs on it. As for lights, I saw some candles half melted or almost fully melted, here and there. And to top it off, the same stench from when we got to this town hung thickly in here too.

Fear froze me to the spot where I stood, for I was afraid that the sad beast I already carried around my heart would squeeze it harder and tear it apart. My eyes were already burning with tears that wanted to flow freely, but I had to hold them back. I couldn't let them see pity on my face, as I knew that was the last thing they would want.

How could the King let this happen? He had the power to not let his people go hungry or live in these conditions. Was this what had become of my beautiful and kind kingdom?

I made myself move. I couldn't just stand there like an outsider and look at the misery all around me. As I went to stand next to Aurich, I made sure to have my face free of emotions, yet I couldn't control my body's reaction to this situation.

My back went ramrod and the muscles in my body were tightening as I tried to not let them see my hands clutching at the fabric of my cloak. My feelings of being appalled and angry for their situation, caused by years of neglect and mistreatment, were an understatement.

“Oriana, this is Rhuon and Violet Ashworth. They try to manage this town as best as they can. And Violet is also the town's midwife.” Aurich introduced them to me as he continued. “I make it my business to come once or twice a month to Thornton and help them take care of the people here.” He smiled at the man, Rhuon as he said that.

“This lovely creature here is my new apprentice, Oriana.” As he gestured toward me, I gave a tight-lipped smile and a slight

nod in their direction. I extended my hand to shake theirs, forcing myself to maintain eye contact to avoid appearing pitiable. The ground suddenly seemed like a safer place to look, but I didn't want to appear uncomfortable in their home.

After Rhuon and Violet talked to us and explained how we could help them and what they needed from us, Violet prepared a peasant dish, not like the delicious meals that Aurich made with all the herbs and meat each day while we were travelling to this town. It was boiled barley in water with added salt, some limp purple carrots and a few greens.

I scrunched up my nose when Violet handed me the wooden bowl with the food, making her face fall as she saw me. Aurich's body tensed as his back went rigid and pulled his shoulders back. With furrowed brow and lips firmly tight together, he glared my way. I only had a second to see the muscle in his jaw twitch and him flaring his nostrils before I had to drop my eyes to the bowl in my hands. Cheeks burning with shame and wishing to be swallowed whole by the ground where I sat.

When we finished eating our lunch, Aurich said his goodbye as we made our way to the horses. Once outside, Aurich held me by one arm and backed me into one of the walls of the cottage. His beautiful obsidian eyes were hard and cold as he stepped closer to me.

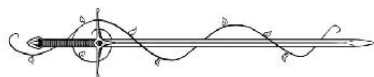
"I really started to believe you weren't spoiled and selfish after all the time we had spent together, yet you showed me just then the contrary in there. However, I'm a man of my

words. I will keep teaching you magic until you master it.” He growled at me, moving his face closer to mine. His lips almost touched mine. He leaned back and let go of my arm and took a deep breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and index finger, but he didn’t step away. He still had me trapped between his massive body and the wall of the house.

“If you could be patient for a while longer, we will get out of here soon. I know this place has a foul odour, but I can’t leave them without help.” He said, his gruff voice taking a softer tone than before. “If you like, we could set up camp outside the borders of the town, so you don’t have to breathe in the town’s stench.” He offered as he stepped back to make room for me to get back to the horses.

I nodded in response and headed towards the horses. Words failed me, and I couldn’t find a way to explain that I wasn’t spoiled or selfish. The reaction that flashed on my face when Violet handed me the bowl wasn’t what he assumed it was.

The knowledge that they had so little but were still willing to share it with us ignited a fierce anger within me, making the beast that was coiled around my heart roar in pain. I wanted to scream my frustration at him, but instead, I kept my silence and focused on how I could help the people of Thornton.



We have been almost a week now at Thornton. I still had difficulties breathing the nauseated, foul air and holding my

food down in this place. However, Aurich had kept me busy with bossing me around with chores that would make the lives of the people of this town easier.

He had me helping with the harvesting of vegetables and fruit, well, the little amount the people had to harvest. I also helped with the sorting of the food from worst, inedible to bad, barely edible to edible. The inedible ones Rhuon decided to give them to the few farm animals they had. The poor animals were skin and bones too, a reflection of how it was in the town.

I would get a well done or a good job from Aurich as he came by where I was busy helping, doing my part. We had little time to talk to each other. The routine was waking up at the crack of dawn and getting back to our fur pallets outside the borders of the town long after the sun went down. I was exhausted to the bone every night. I even declined magic training, which amused Aurich to no end.

As we helped, we reminded the people of Thornton that they had not been forgotten. That there were still good people in this kingdom that cared about them.

One night Aurich and I had to assist the men of the town to fight off bandits. They came in the middle of the night and wanted to steal the little these people had. They also attempted to kidnap a few girls and young women too.

It was a good thing that Aurich could do serious damage with his magic. He killed a few of them; the ones trying to take the girls and the women. I saw him decapitate one of

them with just a flick of his wrist and another one he snapped his neck with some whispered spell.

I helped with getting the rest of the bandits away from the small barn where the food for the entire town was, along with the animals. The bandits were already filling up their carts with the food the people of Thornton worked hard to cultivate. I stopped a fire from spreading with the little magic I had learned, extinguishing it by conjuring the grey cloud and letting the water pour from it.

This trip to Thornton was an eye opener for me, as I got to see how badly these people had it without the care and help of their King. It also made me see Aurich in a better light, not as the grumpy brute that didn't want to help me at first or the perverted creep I thought he was when I first met him.

He cared deeply for these people. He might be rough around the edges, but he has a heart of gold that might be soft from time to time. Ever since this revelation, I could now understand his reaction better when he saw my half naked, battered body or when he thought I didn't want the simple food on the first day.

Also, he is so loved here in this town which only added to his character in my eyes. How people talked about him, one would think *he* was their King. The thought of the King and Prince was only making me angrier at Mara. If it wasn't for her vile curse, I would have lived my life and left a legacy of love and compassion for my kingdom and its people that could have prevented these people from living like this.

“Oriana, can you help me and the other women prepare for the party we want to throw for Aurich tonight? I know we have little to spare, but we want to show him how much we appreciate and love him for all he does for us.” Violet asked me as she met me halfway on my way back from taking a bath at a lake north of the town, which I found on one of my hunting trips with Aurich.

“Sure I’ll help. Where do you need me?” I replied to her. She walked me toward Olga’s place, the baker, well it wasn’t as much of a bakery as it was just one of the cottages where Olga lives and bakes bread for the town, when she has the supplies to do so.

I spend the rest of the day in Olga’s cottage, sweating my ass off. By the time we finished baking the things Violet wanted for the party, I came out of Olga’s with my hair plastered to my face and in need of another bath at the lake.

I helped Olga get all the baked goods, there wasn’t much to the Ashworth’s cottage, as it was the biggest of the cottages and had a big backyard. As we got there, Violet and a few women were still getting things ready.

They had made decorations from wildflowers and the seamstress of the town had made little colourful triangle shaped flags and strung them together, which they hung outside in the garden on to some poles the men had erected that afternoon.

There were oil lamps hanging from each of them.

The oil lamps had coloured glasses that enfolded the flames, giving the garden a festive look like what my mom and dad used to do in the castle gardens every year to celebrate the people of Briarwood Kingdom. People from the entire kingdom came to the annual festival.

Just as I came back from my second trip to the lake, I saw people arriving at the Ashworth's. They all were smiling and in good spirits. It put a smile on my face. I was content with what I did here. I wished I could have done more.

“Hey, love. How are you holding up? I know I said we would stay in town for just a few days, but I couldn't leave them knowing there were more things to be done.” Aurich said as he came to stand next to me some feet away from Rhuon and Violet's cottage. “I promise I'll make it up to you. I'll teach you magic until *you* tell me to stop.” He then looked at me and gave me that crooked smile of his that I love on his gorgeous dark hue face.

“I like it here. I enjoy helping these people.” I smiled at Aurich, but at the same time I dared him to say something in the way I looked into his eyes. He raised his eyebrows and his smirk widened.

“Do you mean to tell me, love, that Thornton has grown on you with stench and all?” He shook with laughter till he had to wipe tears from his eyes. I harrumphed as I frowned at him, which made him erupt again in booming laughter.

“I'm glad to be amusing to you.” I sassed him while crossing my arms over my chest and didn't look his way. That made

him laugh even more, which eventually got me joining in his merriment.

“Come, love, let’s go celebrate with them. We all need a wonderful party to leave the worries, sadness and aches behind for a few hours.” He held his arm out so I could slip my arm through. We walked arm in arm toward the Ashworth’s cottage.

We danced, we ate, we drank fermented grape wine and mulled wine. I loved the mulled wine. It made me giddy and again Aurich was right. The party made me forget about my sorrows and sadness for a few hours.

But all that went out of the window when *he* arrived.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” A plummy voice came from the entrance of the cottage in a singsong manner, which had everyone go silent as Aurich cursed under his breath and moved to half stand before me. He had one of his hands on the dagger he had strapped to his back under his shirt.

Wayne



Wayne

“Don’t be nervous, my sweet little *dove*, Eliza. Now that you belong to my Royal *meretrices*, you will not want for nothing.” I said to my latest addition to my group of playthings. Holding her hand and guiding her to my sleeping chambers through countless corridors. Where we will have so much fun. Correction, where I will have my fun.

“I know you will take good care of me. I’m nervous because... well, what if I disappoint you, my Prince?” She started loudly, but ended with a whisper as she looked at me through lower lashes, as she smiled coyly.

Even though she seemed ready for what would happen, she was trembling. I cleared my throat to hide the tugs of the corners of my lips, as it thrilled me to be playing with my new and shining *meretrix* in a few moments. But I needed her to be relaxed and wanting.

“Eliza, did you know your name means pledged to the Gods and Goddesses?” I asked her as I opened the wooden door to my sleeping chambers. I stood aside to let her enter first.

“I would like to make a slight change to the meaning of your name, sweet little *dove* of mine.” Holding her hand, I twirled her around to face me. With my index finger under her chin, I held her head up and with my other hand, I brought one of her hands to my lips.

“From this day forward, your name will mean: pledged to Prince Vayne. To bring me joy whenever I need and desire it.” I gave her my sweetest smile as she blinked at me before trying to look away. I held her in place as I kissed her, devoured her.

While kissing her as she made those sensual little noises, I couldn't hold it in any longer. I bit into her bottom lip, drawing blood. It made her hiss and want to back up, to break the kiss that I turned from sweet and innocent to a wild and savaged one.

After I had my fill of her luscious lips, I let them go and took a step back to admire the swollenness. The part of her lip where I bit and broke the skin, a bit more swollen and redder than the rest.

Eliza was a vision.

But in my opinion she needed more markings adorning her body.

She swiped the tip of her tongue over her bottom lip and winced as she touched the tender spot on it. She gave me a shaky smile. “Does it pain you much, my *dove*?” I asked her, my voice honeyed with fake concern for her discomfort.

“No, Your Highness, I’m here to serve you.” She replied with her soft voice as she curtsied with a nervous smile and uncertainty in her eyes. *Oh my Gods and Goddesses, yes, just the way I like them, innocent and gullible.*

“Let’s get comfortable, shall we?” I grabbed her and pulled her into me, holding her there. I kissed and nipped her neck and collarbone, leaving angry red little spots behind as I made my way down toward her ample cleavage. She squirmed in my arms as she moaned. Her white silk robe fell to the floor as I unclipped it from her shoulders, exposing my mark on her right shoulder. I loved seeing my mark burned on my little playthings’ flesh.

“Undress me, Eliza.” I said with an edge of command to my tone. With trembling hands, she unbuttoned my silk shirt first and took it off, then she untied the strings of my pants and shimmied them down my legs. She lifted one leg, then the other, to get the pants off me.

When we both were naked, I placed my hand on the small of her back and gave her a gentle push toward the bed. We both

climbed in. As she rolled on her back on the bed, I pinned her to the mattress with my body as I locked eyes with her.

“Is this what you had expected, sweet little *dove* of mine?” I whispered in her ear before I licked her neck where a vein was pulsating. The blood and life of Eliza beating under my tongue made my cock harden instantaneously.

“Ever since I came of age and was chosen to be one of your meretrices, my Prince, I have been trained to satisfy your unique appetite for unconventional sex.” She said in a matter-of-fact tone, staring straight at me as she waited for me to break her and possess her body and soul.

And so I pounded into her hard and enjoyed my little *dove's* wet and juicy cunt as she screamed in pleasure and pain. We started on the ottoman and then I had her pinned to my chambers wall, while I kept ramming my royal dick into her pussy. Her whore cunt looked succulent, all red and swollen.

“Come on, you whore, make it worthwhile for me to come into your dripping wet and dirty cunt.” I grunted as I held Eliza by her wide hips and made her ride me faster and harder. We have been at it for hours now. She was all sweaty and red faced, but moaned like the whore that she was.

I like to break them in, mould them to my will.

All my whores bear my mark, somewhere on their bodies and on their souls. They were all mine. They have no chance to escape from me, their master and Prince. And this new one was no exception. Eliza already bore my mark on her voluptuous alabaster body, a *beautiful* purple-black and blue,

blooming swollen spot on her right shoulder where I, myself, branded her with the red, hot branding rod, which sported my royal crest symbol. The only thing she needed now was me embedded in her soul.

Deep into her body, just like my cock was buried in her squelching cunt, making her grunt and moan like a bitch in heat with every thrust of my hips. I slapped her meaty ass, made it jiggle before I pushed her off me and my bed as I made her go on all fours on the cold tiled floor.

She let out a squeak when her hot and exhausted body hit the floor. It only made my desire to possess her and break her grow even more. I wanted all of her, and that included all the little dissatisfied and wanton noises that came out of her swollen lips and especially all her screams. Those sweet screams of pure pain and desire that made my rock hard cock twitch with need.

“Now, my sweet little whore, I’m going to make you scream for me till your throat turns raw.” I positioned myself behind her and spread her ass cheeks as I spit on her puckered pink asshole. She let out a panicked whimper as she shot forward, trying to get out of my grasp. She knew what I was going to do to her.

“Stay still, my little soiled *dove*.” I commanded. “The more you resist your fate, the more painful it will be. I don’t mind, as your screams will be music to my ears, just as your heated moans are. But I don’t want you to faint on me.” I chuckled as her body became stiff with fear, waiting for her inevitable fate.

As I inhaled deeply, a shudder ran from my shoulders all the way to the small of my back. I needed to keep my desire under control. I didn't want to mangle my newest toy, not yet anyway.

“Do with me as you wish, my Prince. My body is yours.” She said, voice shaken with exhaustion. With my lips curled up, showing teeth, I positioned my throbbing cock head against her puckered hole as she let out another whimper.

“Ooh, yes. Whimper some more cunt, whimper all you want and make me take this second, tighter hole of yours harder.” I backed my hip a little. Just the tip of my cock was touching her before I rammed my shaft fully into her asshole in one move, making her scream her lungs out. Her screams for me to slow down were mixed with her moans of pleasure, as she begged me to continue, but at the same time she was telling me she was hurting.

However, I didn't stop. I sped up my wild thrusting into her. Harder and harder as she moaned and screamed some more. The muscle rings of her sphincter kept contracting around my iron-hard staff. It felt heavenly, her sphincter milking me. The dirty whore almost made me come twice. I leaned over her back and left her left shoulder, and parts of her left flank adorned with *my kind of love bites*. Her back looked *gorgeous* decorated with my teeth marks all over. Some even had little droplets of blood running down her flesh.

I let one of her hips go as I grabbed her fiery red hair and twisted it around my hand as I pulled her head back, making

her rear up as her full tits slapped against her chest on the rhythm I was taking possession of her little tight ass.

“Oh. Sweet. Little. Fuck. Dove.” Every word came out in a grunt with each single thrust as I kept ploughing her ass. “You don’t know how magnificent you are. I have adorned your back with my love bites, making my family crest shine gorgeously.” I grunted some more. It became harder and harder for me to hold back from spilling my seed in her hot ass.

Letting go of her hair, I slipped my cock out of her now widened butthole. I didn’t want to fill her up that way. I wanted to come into that filthy and raw throat of hers. But I also wanted to play with her pair of full, creamy, round breasts.

“Turn around and on your knees. Let me explore those luscious, milky tits of yours.” I said as I grabbed her tits and kneaded it hard till she gasped. “Mmm, they are heavy, just as I like them. They look ripe as juicy pears hanging from a tree.” I brushed the pad of my thumbs against her pink, pebbled nipples before letting her breasts I was holding abruptly go, just so I could see them slap against her body.

Eliza let out a mewling moan, just like the street cat in heat that she was. Her wet eyes shot up at me, with a mixture of pain and ardent desire burned into them. Holding her by her chin as my fingers closed on her cheeks, I pulled her to my pulsating cock.

“Open wide, my sweet little *dove*. Now you are going to suck me as you never had sucked before.” I bowed down so I could be right in her face as I continued. “You are going to make me come in this filthy little mouth of yours and you will spill none of my royal seed. Am I understood?” I kissed her on the tip of her little nose before letting her go.

“Yes, my Prince, as you command.” She said with a hoarse voice while she nodded and looked upward at me with her gorgeous bruised parted lips, ready for me.

“Now, take my waiting Royal cock into your mouth and show me how happy you are that you were chosen to serve me.” I laid my hand on top of her head as I pushed my hips forward and waited for her swollen lips to wrap around my length and sucked me dry.

I was ready to spill my seed into her raw throat when the heavy wooden door of my sleeping chambers flew open and one of my advisers came rushing in.

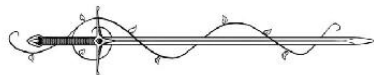
“My Prince, I humbly apologise, but you are required in the throne room. There is news from Thornton.” He bowed his head and stood there waiting at the doorway.

Without replying to my advisor I got my cock out of Eliza’s mouth as I looked down at her, while an idea occurred to me. It wouldn’t be what I wanted, but it was satisfying either way. “Be ready to be sprayed with my royal seed.” I wrapped my hand around my throbbing cock and pumped vigorously until I felt a tug behind my navel and my balls contracted on themselves.

I let out a feral growl as my hot seed made its way through my cock and splashed all over her face and dripped on her plump tits, covering them. I kept stroking my cock till the jerking and erratic movements of my hips slowed down and the last drop of my seed fell on her already covered with my thick and warm cum tits.

“Cedric, make sure that my newest *meretrix* gets cleaned up and brought back to my chambers to wait for my return. I’m still not done breaking her in. And ensure that she eats and drinks. She will need all her strength for when I get back.” I stepped around her, still on her knees. I caressed her on her bowed head as I walked toward my wash chambers to get myself cleaned up before going down to the throne room and hoping that it was the news I was waiting for.

And to my delight, it was.



“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” I said from where I stood in the entrance to the dump that was the cottage, making my voice rise and dip in mock happiness. Everyone in the shit shag went silent at the sound of my voice.

The one they called Fairy Hunter muttered something under his breath as he moved to half stand before a woman I never saw in this town before. Yet, she seemed familiar, as if our paths had crossed once before now.

His behaviour though, how peculiar. I cocked my head to the side as I studied the hunter and this unknown woman’s

mannerism toward each other. Trying to decipher the why of his defensiveness of the raven haired woman. I would get to that later. I had to deal with these scum of peasants. They needed to be taught a lesson, to not fuck with me again.

“Throw all the citizens of Thornton in the dungeons. I want them all punished for disobeying me and for wasting food and funds that should go to me. It all belongs to ME!” I demanded as I walked over to a table covered in baked pies and flipped the table, making the pies land on the dirty floor.

Laughing as I turned to the unison of gasps coming from behind me. That is what they get for thinking that they could eat whatever they want. *Wrong!!* They were so fucking wrong and I would punish them severely.

“I have decided from the goodness of my heart to spare some of you to be my *entertainment* in the Arena.” I continued, making all present go pale in the face as I leisurely made my way closer to the hunter and the woman. As I was about to say something more, out of nowhere I got soaked from head to toe with freezing cold water, making me spluttered and my blood boil.

“Which one of you shitty peasants dared to use magic on me, on your Prince!?” I raged as I shook my head to get my plastered hair out of my eyes, making water droplets fly in every direction in the cottage. I glared at every single face in that room, searching for the peasant that thought using magic would change my mind.

“Who did this?” I hissed through clenched teeth. I was about to gesture to my soldiers outside to storm this little shit cottage and kill all of them. It didn’t interest me the least that there were children there. The black haired woman stepped from behind the hunter and came to stand in front of me.

“I did it.” She said with her chin lifted and a sneer on her lips. “I thought dousing you with freezing water would make you cool off. You arse.” She crossed her arms over her chest and huffed with contentment for what she had done to me. I couldn’t let her treat me like a fool in front of my subjects, so I slapped her hard, so hard that her head whipped to the side.

She turned her head back slowly toward me. She uncrossed her arms and slapped me back. The slap was hard too, even though it didn’t make my head whip to the side as mine did hers, but where her hand made contact with my face, it stung like a motherfucker.

And to add salt to the wound, everyone present laughed, laughed at me for getting slapped by this woman. I will not tolerate disrespect from anyone, much less from a nobody like this woman.

I grabbed her by the nape off her neck and by doing so I also grabbed some of her hair by their roots as I yanked her by her head closer to me, making her stumble. With my other hand, I held her up. No one was laughing anymore. Especially the Fairy Hunter. He was fuming, which was fuel to my smugness. It made me tingle all over with righteousness and superiority.

“She is to be thrown in the dungeons too, with the rest.” I said loud and rough, while I pulled her even closer to me by her hair now, she cursed and locked her jaws. She would not let any sound of pain come out of those luscious, plump lips.

Those lips, I knew those plump, perfect lips with that perfect cupid’s bow. As I let my eyes get their fill of her body. Recognition of those delectable feminine curves and her soft round mounds that raised and fell with each breath she took dawned on me.

This woman with the inky-black hair was... Oh my Gods and Goddesses, she is my sleeping beauty.

The knowledge of having her here and in my grasp made my heart race and drum in my chest. I thought I had lost her forever. When I went back, as I always did every month with each new moon, I found her bed cold and empty. She had disappeared.

She was mine and mine alone. I left my mark all over her body.

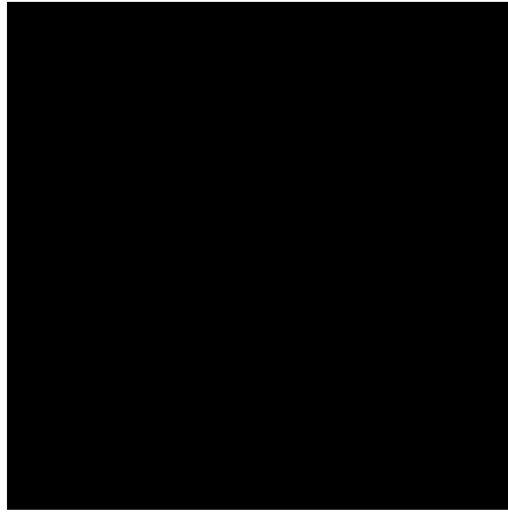
“You let her go, now!” The hunter growled at me as he advanced on us. “If you hurt her, even one hair on her head, you have me to deal with.” He finished as he stood, towering over me and *her*, with his hands on his back.

He didn’t scare me. To me, he was nothing but a mere insect waiting to be squashed under the sole of my royal boots. And finally, I had my chance to get rid of the Fairy Hunter once and for all.

“No one speaks to me like this and lives to tell about it. You will pay for your transgressions against me and the crown. I, Prince Vayne, sentence you to death.” I revelled in the widening of his eyes and the disbelief that appeared on his face.

“Death by decapitation. Here and now.” I declared and gestured for my guards to come in and execute my command.

Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose



Oriana

An audible collective intake of breath echoed from inside and outside the cottage. As if the house itself was holding its breath at that moment. I couldn't believe my ears what this pompous, ridiculous arse of a Prince had just said. Slowly but forcefully, I expelled all the breath out of my lungs as I processed what was about to happen.

A flush of heat spread from my neck upward, making my face warm and tingly, as the shock of Vayne's words transformed from disbelief into anger. With my focus sharpened on the situation we found ourselves in, I yanked

myself free from the prince's grasp, not caring about losing a few strands of hair.

With my chin raised high as all the muscles in my body tensed up, I turned to face the son of a bitch Vayne. I concentrated on my sword in the tiny pouch; I wanted nothing more than to run my ebony sword through his chest and see him fall and wet the dirt floor with his blood as he bled to death in front of me.

Amidst my haste to put an end to this insufferable prince and with my escalating anger raging internally, I forgot to call upon the magic energy before summoning my sword.

But before I could correct my mistake and call upon the magic's energy, a group of four guards came marching in, stomping with their shiny black leather boots as one grabbed Aurich by the neck.

He dragged him over to a tree stump and bent him over, while another guard took out his long sword out of its scabbard. They were ready to decapitate Aurich, as ordered by Prince Vayne. The guard wielding the sword raised it high above his head, prepared to swing and kill Aurich with it.

I couldn't bear to stand idly by and watch this injustice happen to Aurich, or anyone else. I refused to tolerate the cruelty of a so-called prince who bullies and kills *my* people simply because of his royal status, which, in truth, is nothing but a laughable facade.

Nothing but a false royalty.

The thing that Aurich hated the most, and in that moment, I knew why. I hated them too, hated that in this time the Royals have become these greedy vultures, preying on the weak with no empathy for their subjects.

I knew deep in my heart that I needed to stop this, not just the execution of Aurich. A man that slowly turned into more than just the man I first saw in the Dragon's Bone. For which I have butterflies swarming in my belly every time he looks at me with that smirk of his that I love so much.

But also for these kind people of Thornton and for all the rest of the people in Briarwood Kingdom, *my* Kingdom. They deserve better than this arrogant arse Vayne.

“STOOOOP! I ORDER YOU TO STOP!” I bellowed with all the strength and force I possessed at the guard that was about to swing his sword. My whole body was shaking with all the blind rage and hatred for what was happening as I walked up to the guards and Aurich. The pounding of my heart in my ears intensified as adrenaline surged through my veins, filling my blood with a rush of energy.

The two guards handling Aurich, both had a comical look on their faces as confusion and disbelief switched rapidly between each other on their faces.

They looked at me and then at Vayne, that was somewhere behind me. The one holding Aurich in a bend position over the tree stomp pulled him back up, waiting for an order of what to do with him.

Aurich locked eyes with me, and I could see the many questions swimming in those pools of black lava, burning to be uttered. The rest of the people were also looking at me as if I spontaneously grew a second head. And then at Vayne, waiting for the prince to order my execution, too.

However, that order never came to be. Instead, Vayne let out a mirthless laugh as he also made his way to the tree stomp. He turned slowly toward me, with eyes bulging, nose flaring, as he raised his chin while he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Who do you think you are to be ordering *my* guards to stop with their duties in that manner?” He sneered, and he glared at me as his eyes narrowed. I could see dark, malevolent desire glinting in his rat-like beady eyes. His entire face contorted with the evilness that lived in his blackened soul.

Taking a deep breath, I knew that my reply to Vayne would trigger strong reactions from everyone in the cottage, especially Aurich. Aware of the intense hatred he held for the royals and the fact that I hadn’t told him about my true identity, I braced myself for what would follow.

But I wasn’t afraid of the potential repercussions that might arise from this revelation. By unveiling my true self, I knew Aurich’s life would be spared, but it also meant losing him. At that moment, I didn’t care. If saving him meant he would hate me, then so be it. I couldn’t fathom this realm without his kindness and compassion towards others.

With another intake of the polluted air, bracing myself, I made myself known to everyone present.

“I am Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose, the rightful ruler of Briarwood Kingdom.” I announced clearly and loudly, answering Vayne’s question. Standing tall with my chin raised, I held Vayne’s gaze and smiled as I stood taller with a satisfied nod.

However, the power of speaking those words aloud, letting everyone know who I was, mixed with the feeling of being able to conquer the world, dissipated as quickly as it rose the moment I locked eyes with Aurich.

His obsidian eyes were burning with so much hate that I couldn’t maintain eye contact with him anymore. I couldn’t bear seeing his smirk, the smirk that made my stomach flutter every time I saw it turned into a thin white line.

His once joyous and kind face turned hard and cold. Despite the stabbing pain in my heart from knowing that he truly hated me. Yet the fact that he was alive and breathing provided some solace. Whatever comes after that wouldn’t matter. Aurich was alive.

As I tried to keep myself composed and to not let my emotion of loss take over, I could hear murmurs go around the cottage. Rising and falling as the waves in a tumultuous sea. Snippets of the murmurs reached my ears. “She is the sleeping princess.” Or “She is the cursed princess.” All around in the small space of the cottage, everyone’s eyes were on me, wide and mouths agape, some forming ‘o’s, while others whispered and exchanged hushed words.

While all this was going on I didn't even realise that Vayne came to stand next to me until he grabbed me by my arm and turned me so I could be face to face with him. Being so close to him with his dark aura and malicious intent written all over his pale face made me recoil from him. It amused him when I took a step back. His beady, rat-like eyes glinted wickedly.

“You are from royal blood.” Vayne said, as he glowered with tightness under his eyes while he tried to control his twitching hand as he reached to touch my face.

Was that jealousy I detected weaved through his words? Wasn't he from royal blood? How come was he the prince then? More questions kept forming in my head, the more I thought about what he said and the way he said it.

But I didn't have time to dwell on those questions. Ensuring the safety of the people of Thornton and Aurich was my priority. I was about to inform this insane prince that now that I had awakened and my true identity was known, I would restore my Kingdom to its former glory.

Before I could speak, Vayne presented me with a proposition that I knew I had to take for the sake of the realm.

“Princess Oriana, from the good of my heart.” He made a mockery of placing his hands on his heart as he continued. “I will let the people of Thornton stay here in this dump they call home. And also I'm willing to spare the Fairy Hunter's life and let him go free,” He sneered and gave a nod at the two guards still standing with Aurich next to the tree stump.

They immediately let Aurich go. The one that was holding him shoved him forward almost made him stumble on his own feet before he walked past me without even a glance in my direction, to go stand with Rhuon and Violet.

I made a move to go after him and to join him, Rhuon and Violet at the big table with the drinks and fruits, but Vayne stopped me as he held me firm by my arm.

“Uh,uh,uh. Where do you think you are going? Did you think I would let all of them and *him* go without me getting anything? Well, my dear Princess, in exchange for their lives you and I are to be wed.” He said, all smiles. But I could see his smile didn’t touch his eyes and no matter how much he tried to make his voice sound loving and happy, it all came out forced and fake.

I had to temper my rage and hatred for now, as I knew by giving myself over to Vayne the people of Briarwood would have a chance. I would make it my mission to change all the wrongs that have been done by these so called royals and bring my kingdom back to what it once was.

“I accept to marry you,” I replied without hesitation. For if I would take a minute to think what I was doing and saying I would summon my sword and killed myself right there and then. But if I killed myself, that wouldn’t be of help to no one.

“But I also have conditions of my own before I marry you.” I said, my voice all flat. Vayne burst into laughter, but that didn’t stop me. I continued, talking over his laughter as if he hadn’t interrupted me. It made him go red in the face.

“You and all the other royals have to listen to your subjects’ needs. Help them and take care of them. If you, Prince Vayne, agree to this, I will marry you.” I finished, pulling all the strength I could muster to not gag at the thought of being Vayne’s wife.

The grimace on Vayne’s face unhurriedly turned into a triumphant smile. An icy shiver ran from the raised hair on the back of my neck all the way to the small of my back. Leaving my skin in goosebumps in its wake.

I didn’t want to think about what was in store for me in my future with Vayne.

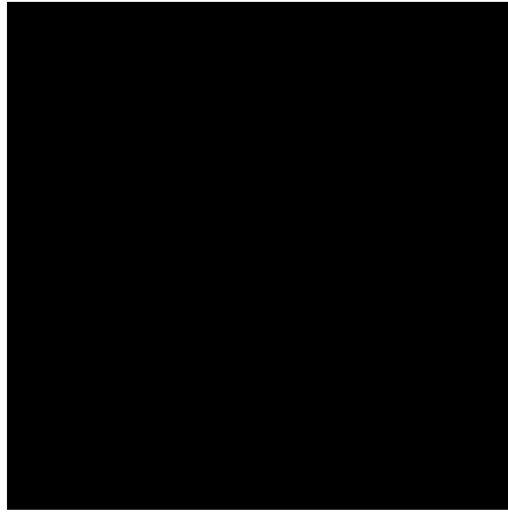
“Well, Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose,” Vayne said as he grabbed my hand and kissed it. “Let’s get to my castle and make the arrangements for our wedding. I want you to be my wife by tomorrow night.” He held me by my elbow and tugged me gently forward as he walked us both toward the entrance of the cottage.

“Royalty belongs with royalty. Not with these detestable low life peasants. Especially that half breed Fairy Hunter.” He sneered the last two words as we passed by Aurich, Rhuon, and Violet. He didn’t even look at them.

As Vayne dragged me with him, I mouthed a goodbye to all three of them but it was meant for Aurich. However he was so upset with me that turned his back to me as I walked out of the cottage.

My last memory of Aurich was his broad and stiff back getting smaller as he and I walked away from each other’s life.

The Castle



Oriana

During the entire ride in Vayne's carriage, I remained silent, not uttering a single word. Vayne, on the other hand, couldn't stop rambling about how my true royal blood would make him the most powerful man across all the kingdoms. He spoke relentlessly of his newfound authority as the new-to-be King of Briarwood, envisioning it as a stepping stone towards conquering the remaining eight kingdoms within the realm.

I had my arms clenched around my body as I tried to hold myself together. The lush greenery, with its lovely flowers on

either side of the road, passed me by in a blur as I looked at them without seeing. The only thing that I could see was Aurich's devastated face, when I declared who I was.

My heart thudded dully in my chest while I tried to hold back the heat behind my eyelids every time I closed them. As I tried to conjure Aurich's face, remembering our time travelling together. His handsome and kind face, that radiated joy each time he glanced my way.

As the horse and carriage carried me farther away from Aurich, the lump in my throat pulsed with a painful ache. I allowed my body to slump into the plush seat, seeking comfort from its softness. The interior of the carriage was a sight to behold, draped in luxurious purple fabric adorned with intricate gold embroidery, displaying a sigil that remained unfamiliar to me but at the same time not.

After what seemed like an eternity, the carriage abruptly came to a halt, causing my body to sway back and forth with its sudden motion. I did not know why we had stopped, nor did I care.

"We are here, *Princess*. Come, let's get you cleaned up and refreshed, ready to be mine by tomorrow." Vayne said as he stepped out of the carriage and held his hand up as he waited for me to get out of the carriage. I hated how the word princess sounded coming out of his mouth. I like it much better when... No, I had to stop my thoughts of *him*.

With the tightness and pain in my chest that I knew would never leave me until the day I die, I forced a smile on my face

and took Vayne's hand as I stepped out of the carriage.

“Welcome to my humble abode, my castle.” He expressed loudly with a honeyed voice, while he smirked darkly and puffed up his chest. He let go of my hand as he fussed with his clothes and stopped at every shiny object to check his own reflection in them.

It made me roll my eyes at him every time he stopped. He looked like a big, pompous goose. If only he cried like one, it would make the picture before me perfect. I had to stifle a laughter bubbling up in my throat as I could vividly see Vayne in goose form waddling before me in the royal clothes he wore.

But my sliver of joy at Vayne's expense was short-lived when he grabbed me by my hand and dragged me behind him once more.

“Come on *Princess*, keep up. There's so much to be done to make you presentable and beautiful for my wedding.” He looked at me with nothing but malice and darkness in his black, beady eyes, which reminded me of the rats in the garbage section of the castle kitchens where I used to live with my parents.

“Oh, but where are my manners?” He asked mockingly, as he brought my hand to his thin lips and brushed them onto my knuckles. “Our wedding. Ours not mine, ours not mine.” I heard him keep repeating to himself as we ascended the stairs toward the grand entrance of the grey bricked castle, with its large and tall towers, each at the four corners of the castle.

As we passed through the castle grounds, the silence was palpable, disturbed only by the echoing of our footsteps and that of the guards in their regal purple and gold uniforms. Strangely, there were no other souls to be seen. The absence of other people created an eerie atmosphere that seemed to envelop the entire castle, shrouding it in darkness and an ominous aura. Unlike the warmth and welcoming atmosphere of the castle I once called home with my parents, this place sent shivers down my spine.

It felt cold and distant.

The air inside the castle was stale, carrying the unmistakable scent of age and dust. It tickled my nose, making me want to sneeze. The entire entrance hall was draped in the same regal purple cloth adorned with golden embroidery, much like the carriage that brought me here.

My eyes were fixated on the same mysterious sigil that was in the carriage. Repeated across the walls was a creature that seemed to be a blend of a lizard and a slender dragon with its majestic wings wrapped gracefully around the sphere, perched atop the weathered wooden staff. Despite my sluggish mind still recovering from the effects of the sleeping curse, the sigil tugged at my memories, as if a faint voice whispered that I knew its significance all too well.

I was about to ask Wayne if the sigil was of his family, when a hunched over and bald man, whose clothes were less regal but you knew by looking at him he was someone important in

the castle, scurried our way. He seemed nervous as he kept his eyes low while he approached Vayne.

“My prince, welcome back. I’m... we are happy that you came back unharmed and well.” He made a low bow, his long and thin nose almost touched his shiny leather shoes. As he stood straight again, he continued, disregarding me completely.

“My prince, I’m so sorry to tell you this, but your father, the king, well he, he, he went to your sleeping chambers, knowing you were away and... he took Eliza for himself.” The man took a few steps back as he finished his sentence, but he wasn’t fast enough. From my left side, I saw a hand swiftly, like a snake striking the man in his face. The blow was hard enough that it made the man fall to the floor with his bottom lip parted in two and bleeding.

“WHY CAN’T HE STAY AWAY FROM MY MERETRICES?!” Vayne’s screams pierced the air, his eyes bulging with rage as spittle flew from his mouth. The sound echoed through the vast entrance hall. I felt relieved when he released his grip on my hand, focusing his fury on the man cowering before him.

The man on the floor seemed as small and defenceless as a curled-up baby, arms wrapped protectively around his head, seeking refuge from Vayne’s wrath. The atmosphere was tense, and I feared what might happen next.

“Get up! You worthless piece of shit. You work for me and not for that weakling that I call father.” He seethed through

gritted teeth as he grabbed the man by his elbow and hoisted him up by one arm unceremoniously. “You damn well know that if it wasn’t for me, he wouldn’t be king. Everything that fucking leech has is thanks to my sacrifices to *her*.”

Vayne looked at the man before him, taking in his appearance. With a gentle touch, he brushed the dust off the man’s clothes, and his eyes softened as he noticed the bloodied, split lip. Holding the man’s shoulders, Vayne drew a deep breath, his tense demeanour slowly giving way to a more relaxed stance. A sweet smile spread across Vayne’s face as he looked into the man’s eyes, their previous confrontation seemingly forgotten.

“Can you please take *Princess* Oriana to one of the chambers on the second floor of the east wing? And Cedric, don’t tell anyone that I have returned or that I have brought someone with me yet. I have to tell *her* first.” When Vayne said the word *her*, it was as if an icy chill crept over his body.

It made me wonder who this her was, and why did the mention of her made him act like that. But I didn’t have time to ponder or ask any question as Vayne was once again standing in front of me.

“*Princess*, Cedric here will take good care of you.” He turned and gave the man who he had moments ago hit a stern look. “Wouldn’t you, Cedric? Wouldn’t you take good care of my betrothed?” At the word betrothed, the man’s eyes grew enormous in his head. However, I think he knew better to not

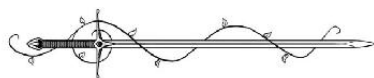
say anything about anything, so he wiped the surprised look off his face and smiled at Vayne as he nodded.

“Make sure she is comfortable. Send two maids to draw her a bath. I want her to smell delicious and be delectable. I want her radiant, for when I come to get her tomorrow for our wedding. Tell the same two maids that they are there to tend to her. Whatever she wants, they’ll do and get for her. Am I understood, Cedric?” Vayne instructed the man, named Cedric.

“I’ll see you tomorrow my slee... my princess. I can’t wait for us to be wed and I’ll become the rightful king of Briarwood.” He grabbed me by my chin in his hand and planted a crushing kiss on my lips. He let out a moan as I tried to get my face out of his grasp and away from his mouth.

“Feisty. I like it. Can’t wait to finally break you.” He let go of my face and his smirk didn’t make me weak in the knee or made butterflies flutter in my stomach, like Aurich’s did.

His words and smirk only made my stomach recoil and nauseated.



I was rudely awakened by the two maids Cedric assigned me yesterday. Both helped me clean up last night and forced me into a sleeping gown as they took away my clothes. The curvier one, Jetta was her name, kept mumbling about how filthy they were and also how unfit they were for a true royal Princess. She kept pestering me to get me into a sleeping gown until at last I surrendered.

As the morning light filtered through the curtains, I groggily opened my eyes to the unfamiliar sight of the opulent room I was in. The reality of what would be my new life as the true heir to Briarwood Kingdom sank in.

Gone were the simple days of freedom and anonymity spent with Aurich in the woods, now replaced by the weight of the unknown.

Jetta and her companion, Maris, hovered over me, their expressions a mix of curiosity and reverence. I couldn't help but feel like an imposter in this lavishly adorned room, knowing all too well the humble conditions in which most of my people from Briarwood kingdom lived.

“Morning princess, time for breakfast. And after that, Maris and I will come back to get you ready for the wedding later today.” She said as she kept taking away the covers and tried to get me out of bed. “Princess, please, I implore you to follow what I tell you. It's Prince Vayne's orders. Please, if he comes later for you and you are not ready ...” She let the rest of the sentence hang as she didn't look at me and kept throwing glances at the chamber door.

Finally, Jetta got me out of the bed and I sat at the table in the far corner of the room where a lot of food was waiting for me. Plates full of fish, fowl, meat and bread. All the freshly baked bread one could want. Various bowls with fruits such as *red apples*, juicy pears, and lots of berries. And to my astonishment, warm spiced wine to wash all that food down.

Even when my stomach rumbled, I couldn't bring myself to eat a single piece of the food in front of me. The thought of the people of Thornton living the way they have been living weighed heavily on my conscience. Making it impossible for me to indulge in this abundance and find any enjoyment in it.

I selected a loaf of bread and broke it into small pieces, which I then dipped into the warm wine. Slowly, I ate the soaked morsels, hoping the wine would numb the turmoil of emotions raging within me. However, despite devouring the entire loaf in that manner, but without the result I wanted. Instead, every emotion seemed heightened, and my thoughts were consumed by one person, Aurich.

After Maris and Jetta finally left the room, satisfied that I had eaten, I could relax for a bit and let all that had happened since yesterday sink in.

How that pompous prince Wayne interrupted the party, how I had to tell who I was to save Aurich. All I kept circling back to was the moment I said who I was and how Aurich reacted. A sharp pain in my heart made me let out a soft gasp as I closed my eyes, chasing after the image of Aurich.

Without really paying attention to how I had called upon the magic, I was practising what Aurich had taught me. I kept summoning my sword out of the small pouch without the need to open it or even have it physically on my person.

No matter how I planned to do it, I knew I couldn't give up. The people of the kingdom needed me. Even if it meant to be

with someone I didn't care for or loved. Even if it meant marrying that arrogant Vayne.

The gravity of the decision I took and the repercussion it came with hit me like a splash of icy water.

What have I done?

"I never should have strayed from what I had set out to do. Now Aurich was lost to me too. Oh Gods and Goddesses, I would never see his gorgeous dark face again, nor see his enchanted smirk. The sound of his warm baritone husky voice will forever be out of my reach." I lamented as I furiously tried to find a way out of the mess I worked myself into.

Feeling lost and overwhelmed, I found myself standing in front of the window in my room, overlooking the gorgeous rose garden. I let my head hang in my hands as tears flowed freely. Each droplet mirrored the pain in my heart, the regret that now weighed me down like an unbearable burden.

I had hoped that crying might somehow loosen the tight knot that had formed in my chest, making it hard to breathe every time I thought about how I would never see Aurich again.

At that moment, it became undeniable clear to me that all those times my stomach fluttered or when I blushed whenever I saw or spoke to Aurich, or felt his touch, were not mere fleeting sensations. Instead, they were intense emotions erupting within me, setting me ablaze from the inside out.

"I love him!" I blurted out, surprising myself with that revelation. How was I so blind that I didn't see it?

When all this farce business called wedding was done with, I promised myself that I would go look for Aurich and try my best to explain it all to him. And tell him how sorry I was for keeping my real identity a secret from him and that I loved him, but taking care of my people would forever take precedence and the love I have for him unfortunately would have to stay hidden and locked up deep in my heart.

I walked over to the canopy bed, with that promise shining bright in my heart, I reached for the small pouch under my pillow, where I hid and got it out. There was still one thing I had to do, even if going after Mara was an unachievable task. I still wanted to go after the animal that abused my body when I was under the sleeping curse. The thought of the one that did that to me was still walking and breathing out there revolted me. The vengeance beast that settled in my heart ever since I woke up was calling for, no, it was demanding retribution.

I took out the boots the three fairies gifted me. The boots felt light, and the black leather that it was made of was soft to the touch. It looked so regal, fit for a prince or a king. I could see my father wearing these types of boots. But I knew these boots weren't made for a great man; they were made to catch a coward of a man, an animal.

As I studied the boots, carefully planning how to track down the savage responsible for leaving the footprints these boots were made from, Vayne burst into my room.

“Why aren't you ready? The bishop is already here, ready to marry us, *Princess*,” He sneered at me as he advanced on me

with his forehead furrowed and rage flashing in his rat-like eyes. “Those stupid maids should have had you already in your gown, primed and looking beautiful for when you marry me. They will pay for that later.” He fumed. On his way to me, he grabbed the gorgeous white gown the maids had left hanging in the wardrobe. He almost tore the upper part away from the skirt in his rage filled haste

The gown had all these sparkling stone embellishments on the bodice. I couldn't help but wonder if those stones came from the dwarf mines in Everwinter Kingdom. I've heard captivating tales about those mines, where the realm's most exquisite and flawless stones were said to be unearthed.

“Vayne, can't we talk about this? I don't love you and certainly you can't possibly love me. Why not call it-” Vayne didn't give me a chance to finish what I wanted to say. He threw the gown on the bed next to me as he grabbed me by the arm brusquely and dragged me up from the bed. As his hand closed around my underarm, his hand brushed against the boots I still had in my hands, making them glow.

A bone chilling scream came out of my mouth as I tore my arm out of his grasp, letting the boots fall to the floor as I summoned my ebony sword. I didn't wait to see his reaction, as in one swift motion I brought down the sword on him, aiming to part his head in two like a ripe melon.

I was expecting the blade to run through him smoothly, from head to balls in half and me bathed in his warm blood that would spray and gush out of him like a red, gruesome

fountain. However, what in fact, happened was that my sword stopped mid swing, mere inches away from his sweating forehead as he cringed away from me with his arms covering his head.

Stopped by a big, black shield.

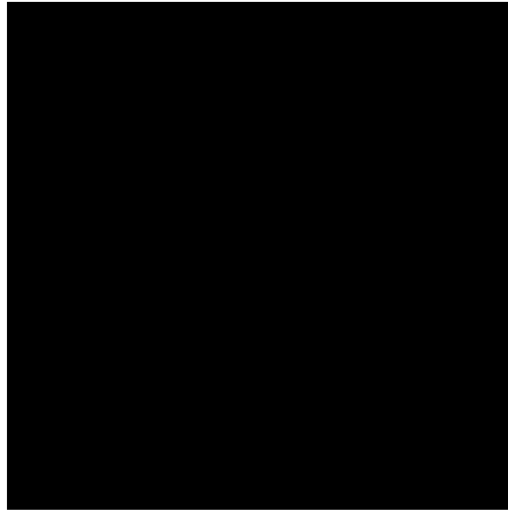
I couldn't believe my eyes. How could this infuriating prince stop my sword with magic? I thought Aurich explained that only humans with royal blood or fairies could use magic. But then I heard it, the eerie, high-pitched cackle coming from the direction of the door to my chamber.

With excruciating pain in my heart, I might have forgotten the sound of my mom and dad's voice. I might have even forgotten how their warm embrace and tender kisses felt on my skin, but that high-pitched cackle — oh, I would never forget it. It was seared into my memory, haunted me relentlessly in my cursed sleep, a constant reminder of the darkness that shrouded my past and robbed me of my future with my loved ones.

One name came out of my mouth in a mix of a gasp and a whisper.

“Mara.”

Mara



Oriana

“Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose, true ruler of Briarwood Kingdom, Your Highness.” Mara greeted in a soft and sweet voice, mockingly curtsying as she got closer. Her attention was fixated solely on me, almost trampling Vayne in her eagerness to get near me.

“But Princess, I thought you were dead, turned to dust ages ago. What a miracle and surprise to find you alive and well among us, your subjects.” She continued with her soft and sweet voice, feigning delight and relief that I somehow

survived the sleeping curse she put upon me almost a hundred years ago.

Mara got even closer to me and she dared to put her hands on me, however I had my sword ready to attack her and get over with this farce of happiness on her part of seeing me.

Instead, with a flick of her wrist, my arms went back to the side of my body, without me willing them to do so. She tsk tsked at me as she made her way to the same window I stood watching the garden this morning. Holding both hands on the small of her back. Her gown was of a dark purple colour with complex gold threads woven in intricate patterns. They ran from her breast all the way to the back forming the strange sigil I'd seen all over the place since I arrived here.

At that moment, a wave of memories flooded my mind, and suddenly, everything fell into place. It wasn't the sigil's intricate design that felt familiar, but rather the image of the slender dragon with its majestic wings wrapped gracefully around the sphere, perched atop the weathered wooden staff.

The dragon was hauntingly familiar; it was the same creature that had plagued my nightmares for as long as I could remember. In those unsettling dreams, Mara would transform into the fearsome dragon and try to eat me whole. Each time, I felt the overwhelming sense of dread that Mara's triumph was inevitable, and I was helpless against her powers.

However, now I wasn't frightened of her anymore. As I took a good look at Mara, she wasn't that tall and fearsome fairy I remembered from my childhood. She was rather on the thin

side. Her skin seemed to have some sort of sickly shine to it, and upon closer look, her skin looked translucent and frail. Like papyrus. A kind of paper that my dad used to get messages on from his friend, the Sultan of Azmarah, a faraway land outside our realm.

Despite all that I had observed of her, I knew I had to tread lightly with her. She might look frail, but she is a cunning, evil bitch. Who took everything from me and I didn't even know why she cursed me, but to be honest, I didn't care to find out why. I only cared for her to be gone from this realm and all other existing realms.

I wanted her dead.

“Now, now, Your Highness. Put that black sword of yours away, my dear, before you poke your eye out.” She turned around and pursed her lips. “Or is this black sword of yours intended to kill me, hmm?” She leisurely strode back to where I stood by the bed. As she passed by Vayne, she had her mouth set into a hard line as she glowered at him.

“I'm elated that you survived my sleeping curse and that you are here now in *my* castle. This all worked better than I thought. And here is why.” She half turned and was now giving Vayne a little bit of attention. She caressed him lovingly on his right cheek with the back of her boney hand. The pompous rat leaned into the caress as if they were lovers. I knew he was dying for her attention from the moment she walked into my chamber. The way he kept looking at her, almost pleading for her to acknowledge him.

“You see Princess, Vayne here.” She crooned his name as she took her hand away from his face and turned to give me her full attention. “Was and still is a very ambitious little man who wanted to be the ruler of all the realm. So he made a deal with me. Isn’t that true, Vayne?” She asked as she grabbed Vayne by his hair and pushed him towards me, making him stumble on his own feet.

“Yes.” Stammered Vayne as he tried not to fall on his knees before me while regaining his footing. I would be lying if I said it didn’t make me just a little happy to see him being manhandled, even if it was by Mara. They both deserve each other.

“That is a good boy.” Mara praised Vayne and pet him on the head as she continued. “Vayne’s deal with me was for title, kingdom, and the power to conquer the other kingdoms in the realm for the measly price of his firstborn.” She cackled her sinister cackle as she came near me and grabbed some of my hair and let it glide through her spider legs like fingers, making me suppress a shudder, having her touching me.

“Until now, there had been no one to assist him in fulfilling his side of the deal.” The corners of her mouth curled up into a smile. Yet her eyes were full of malice and hatred as she grabbed me by my chin and held me close as she looked into my eyes and spoke the words that chilled me to my bones.

“But now there are you, my dear Princess Oriana. Your first born with Vayne will be his payment for what I have given

him.” She raised her eyebrows and her smile grew into a wide grin as she let me go.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I would rather die a thousand painful deaths than give either of them my child. If they thought I would go along with this insane idea without a fight, they were fucking wrong.

“I’m not giving you both my first child. I’m not the one that made that deal with you.” I said to Mara before I turned my attention to Vayne. My blood was boiling, my body was tense with rage as I wanted nothing more to kill both so the realm would be free of their vile and evilness.

“You go marry one of the maids for all I care and get her to give Mara your promised first born. I will not go...” Mara laughed at me, stopping me mid sentence. She just kept laughing like the crazy bitch that she was.

“Do you think you have any say in this, *Your Highness*? You don’t. You are merely the vessel to carry out Vayne’s side of the deal. And because of your lineage, I will get a powerful baby to care for and raise as I see fit.” Mara just smiled her version of a sweet smile, but it was more a grimace than anything else. What she said and the look on her face made my stomach churn.

“Mara, the babies he will make with another woman from this castle will suffice as payment for his deal with you. You will not notice any difference. You will get a strong first born that will be easy to influence like you want. And let me go. I’m not good at giving away my firstborn.” I pleaded while

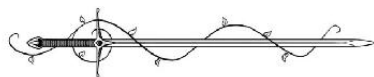
using the power of persuasion I got from my fairy godmothers. But the more I let the power flow to help me get out of this insane situation, the more weak and fatigued I felt.

“Oh, you think that a poorly gifted magical power of persuasion can defeat me? Common my dear princess, there is much more you have to learn.” She cackled as I felt weaker and black spots blocked my vision.

“Concede to your fate and I’ll stop draining you from your life essence.” She held my head in her hand so I couldn’t hit it against the bed as my body gave out.

“I concede, I concede. Stop!” I had to give in if I wanted to live another day to plan both their demise.

“Excellent choice Your Highness. Now go rest for an hour or two and then I will send the maid to help you get ready for your wedding. We wouldn’t want a bastard, would we?” She chuckled while she and Vayne left me leaning against my bed for support as they walked out of my chamber.



As I walked from the entrance of the rose garden to where Mara, Vayne, an older man with a crown, and another much older man stood, waiting for me to start the wedding, I couldn’t find it in me to admire the gorgeous garden.

The scent of the roses was another story which I couldn’t block. They transported me back to the rose garden we had at our castle. Where my mother would lose herself in tending to

the rose bushes. She was the happiest when she was between her beloved roses. She didn't want any of our gardeners to take care of the rose but herself.

When I was six or seven, she left me a scavenger map that would lead me to the rose garden and along the way she hid small gardening tools. So by the time I got to the garden, I could help her tend to the roses. From that moment on, she and I tended to the roses in our rose garden until Mara's curse hit.

In the surreal and nightmarish reality that I found myself in this rose garden that brought back happy memories of my mother and me, I found myself on the brink of a marriage I could never have fathomed in my wildest nightmares. The man I was about to marry was no prince charming; he was the vile and heartless abuser who had callously abused my body for his own sadistic pleasure while I lay defenceless under the sleeping curse. The curse that robbed me of life and subjected me to unspeakable horrors, leaving me utterly vulnerable to his cruel whims.

To make matters even more unbearable, the fairy who had cast this wretched curse upon me now loomed over the impending marriage, a grim witness to the tragic turn my life had taken. It was as if fate itself had designed this macabre event, pushing me to a union that defied all reason and hope.

If someone had dared to tell me that this would be my fate upon me waking from my cursed slumber, I would have dismissed their words as utter madness. The thought of willingly marrying my abuser and having the very being

responsible for my torment oversee the ceremony would have seemed like an absurd and grotesque joke. Yet, here I stood, forced to confront this dark and twisted fairy tale that defied all logic and reason.

“Ahh, there she is, my beautiful Princess Oriana, soon to be my wife and the future Queen of, well... nothing.” Wayne laughed and held out his hand for me to take it as my last steps took me to him. Wayne was beaming, making my stomach more nauseated as bile rose and burned my throat. His rat-like eyes were sparkling and his voice was light and airy. But I knew better. He was only happy because he achieved what he always had wanted. To be the king of Briarwood Kingdom and finally the power to have the realm all to himself.

As I placed my hand into his, he gripped it tightly, almost to the point of pain, and yet a smile adorned his face. But that smile sent a shiver down my spine as I recognized its ominous aura of it. It was the same smile he wore when he ordered the execution of Aurich at Thornton. A heavy feeling plummeted to the depths of my stomach as I stood there.

“My lovely... Mara.” He said and glanced over to where Mara was standing just behind me. “I know it’s customary to give a gift to the bride’s mother, but seeing that my bride doesn’t have a mother anymore. I’ll give you the gift.” He then gazed back at me with an intensity of pride and victory in his gleaming, beady eyes.

“Guards, bring forth the present for my mistress, Mara.” He thrust his chest out as his sinister smile became bigger and

showed a lot of his teeth. I could hear some shuffling and muffled sound coming from behind a high wall of greenery surrounding the garden. The sounds got closer and there was a third sound, a laboured breathing. But I didn't have time to figure out what the gift would be, as the guards were dragging a dark-skinned man by the chains he was bound by. He also had a blindfold on and he had a big dark bruise on his cheek.

The dark-skinned man was Aurich.

I made a move to go to him, but Vayne's hand clamped tighter around mine, holding me in place. I could feel the bones of my hand crushing against each other. My breathing sounded loud in my ear as my heart pounded in my chest, making it more difficult to breathe.

“Yes, yes, yes. Mara, my darling, I present to you the half breed, Fairy Hunter. As I already said, he is your gift. The gift is you get to kill him. I know how much you hate half breeds.” He laughed as Mara walked past me and went straight to where the guards were holding Aurich.

I desperately struggled against Vayne's tight grip, my heart pounding with a single purpose in mind. I had to reach Aurich, I couldn't let them take his life. Panic fueled my determination as I searched for any chance to break free. Then, in a split second, I spotted an opening and took it.

Summoning all my strength, I mustered a swift kick to Vayne's shin. The momentary distraction of him in pain gave me the opportunity to yank my hand from his grasp.

“Leave him alone!” I roared as I ran to put myself between Mara and Aurich with my arms outstretched. “If you dare touch one hair on his body, you’ll have me to answer to.” I growled at Mara, my anger overpowering any fear of her power as a fairy. I had seen her in my chambers, and it left me with a vivid image of decay rather than strength.

Despite her abilities, I couldn’t care less about her status. My only concern was saving Aurich. If given the chance, I would go to his rescue a thousand times over, no matter the risks. Mara just threw her head back and cackled like the deranged fairy that she was.

“Oh my sweet human child, do you really think your treats will stop me from killing that abomination of a halfling, do you?!” She shrieked, her features contorted into something ugly and malevolent. Her eyes changed from black to full jade green with a black slit where the pupil was supposed to be. Her fingers were bent like talons as her nails elongated into black pointy claws.

“Keep this up *princess*, I’ll let you rest for longer this time and I will fill that slumber with so many nightmares that if you ever should wake up from this one again. You wouldn’t be able to understand anything the same way again.” She hissed at me as she stood in front of me, fuming.

I refused to be intimidated by her, undeterred by her menacing words or her eerie half transformation. My resolve had never been stronger. She was nothing but a weak fairy. It

was evident that she craved power, a thirst that drove her to seek the firstborns of royal blood.

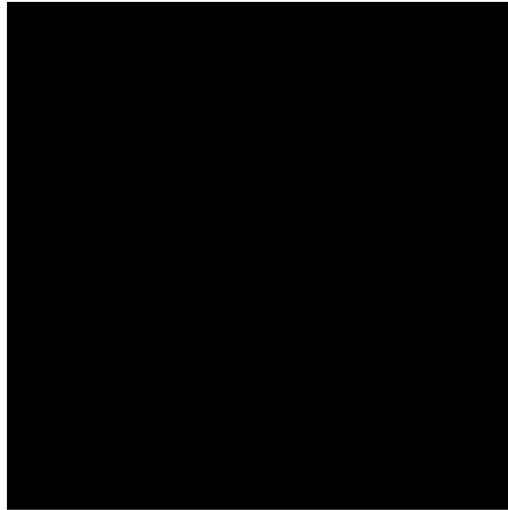
Aurich had taught me during our training, our pure royal blood possessed the extraordinary ability to absorb the magic that surrounded us. In fact, it could even connect to the primary source of all magic in our realm, known as The Arcanum Core.

The heart of all magic.

“I know you like to make deals.” I suppressed a smile as I knew that she couldn’t resist making deals. I lowered my arms while I cocked my head. “I want to battle you.” I had to put my hand up to stop her as she was about to reply, but I needed her to hear what I had to offer. I knew she would not resist and Aurich’s life would be spared again. I could hear Aurich behind me mumbling furiously, but I couldn’t let that distract me.

“As I was saying, I want to challenge you to a battle of powers. And here are my conditions. If I win the halfling as you called him and I go free to never to hear from you all again. But if you beat me in battle, I’ll marry Wayne and will give you not only my firstborn but ten in succession, but the Fairy Hunter goes free.” I backed away from Mara, but never took my eyes off her. And went to stand next to Aurich and took his blindfold off. As he adjusted to the sunlight, he looked at me and I could only give him the brightest smile I had and gave his hand a squeeze in the hopes he knew I would never abandon him.

Battle of Magic



Oriana

“**Y**ou foolish girl. Do you really think you have what it takes to best me in a magic battle? Did you forget I was the one that put you under the sleeping curse for almost a hundred years?” Mara retorted as she transformed back to her normal self. She raised an eyebrow and matched me with a cocked head as she openly stared at me while crossing her arms over her chest.

“Yes I can, and no I haven’t.” I drew myself up to my full height as my muscles tensed while I never broke eye contact with her. I wanted her to see that I meant what I said, and that I

wasn't afraid of her and I would do whatever it takes to save the man that I loved.

"I just need to know if you will accept my deal or not, that is all." I replied as smoothly as I could, praying to the Gods and Goddesses to not let my voice falter at that moment, while I dared to look swiftly at Aurich. He was staring intently at Mara with a furious gaze filled with hatred. His hands balled into fists, breathing fast. I needed this ordeal with these two to be over quickly so Aurich and I could regroup and come back to finish them.

"What do you say? Do you accept it? This can be a great opportunity to have all the true royal blood children you might want. If you accept and win, of course." I said to Mara, stepping away from Aurich to step into her personal space. There I stood, almost nose to nose, to her. The muscles of my ribs tightened, creating pressure at my core as I waited for her answer.

The frustration of her not answering me almost got the best of me. I was this close to summoning my sword. The maids might have dressed me in a big fluffy gown, but I had my small pouch on me, tied to my waist with a long piece of cloth I ripped from the bedding.

But then I realised, the more Mara took to give me her answer, the more time I had to analyse her for weaknesses on her body that I could use in the battle to my advantage.

"Oriana, you can't make this horrific deal with that evil fairy. My life is not worth your slavery to her. Please don't do it."

Aurich begged while chains rattled behind me as he came up behind me. I could feel his warm breath fanning over the back of my neck and shoulders.

It made things stir and coil in my lower belly that I never knew I could feel. I wished we were somewhere lost in the forest and that we could explore what all these feelings I had for him. And find out if he felt the same way about me. But alas, we were at this cursed castle with these vile beings.

“Listen to your friend the halfling, my dear. Are you sure you are ready to serve me, little princess?” Mara replied as her lips curled upwards, showing rows of jagged, sharp, pointy teeth. Thinking that would startle me, I smirked at Mara and turned my back on her, ignoring her and her words.

I knew that would make her furious, being disrespectful like that, and by doing so, it could give me some more advantage over her later in the battle. I hoped her thoughts would get so clouded with anger and frustration that she couldn't concentrate on the battle.

“Aurich, have a little faith in me. Have you forgotten who trained me?” I winked and smiled at him as I lifted my hand and gently caressed his uninjured cheek. He leaned into my hand, making it more difficult to resist the impulse to kiss him, even though it was what I truly desired. To feel his full lips against mine, devouring me.

His beautiful obsidian eyes were ablaze with so much emotion that it made me ache for him and left me unable to decipher his unspoken words. *Would he have kissed me back if*

I kissed him at that moment? Or would he reject me because of who I am and my title?

I slowly took my hand away as I shook my head slightly to get my mindset back on the battle ahead. I turned back to face Mara and closed my heart and mind to that part of the emotions that were front and centre since I discovered them, demanding my attention.

“Mara, are we doing this battle or not? I’m tired of waiting and playing with words. Let’s do this now.” I demanded, tired of waiting and allowing others to determine my destiny. I wanted to create my own path, even if it meant risking enslavement. Should that come to pass because I lost while securing Aurich’s freedom? So be it. Ideally, I would want to win the battle and get us both our freedom, but I was prepared to face any consequences to save Aurich’s life once more.

“Okay, princess. You have been warned, and you didn’t take heed. I hope you are prepared to give me all the babies you are going to make me.” Mara taunted, taking a few steps back, and then mockingly curtsied while releasing a maniacal cackle. Her laugh made the hairs on my body stand up while an icy shiver ran down my back, but I didn’t let it deter me.

As she stood up, Vayne went immediately to stand beside her, along with the old man wearing a crown, whom I presumed to be Vayne’s father. The other old man that accompanied them earlier was nowhere to be seen.

“Oriana, please, I’m begging you. Don’t do this. My life is not worth yours.” He implored as he fought against his

restraints. His gorgeous, warm baritone voice cracked as he spoke the last word. “And if you lose, I’ll die anyway. I couldn’t imagine living in a world where you aren’t a part of it.” He took a step closer to me. His lips were so close to mine that with every breath he took, I could feel the air taken from my own breath.

“It will be okay, Aurich. You’ll see.” I whispered as I tiptoed closer, gently cupping his face in my hands, and brought him closer to me, causing our lips to meet in a tender collision. It was the first time in my life that I kissed someone consciously, and the desire to do so was overwhelming. Giving in to the rhythm of his lips, I let him guide the movements as I tried to pour all my emotions into that single kiss. I hoped he would sense and understand the depth of my feelings, knowing that there was no other way I’d want it to be.

But just as the kiss between Aurich and me started to consume me entirely, I was abruptly pulled away from his lips as someone unceremoniously yanked me by my hair. The force was so great that it caused me to fall on my backside while my hair was still held tight and painfully in the person’s hand that pulled me away from Aurich, Vayne’s.

“Take your filthy hands off her!” Aurich growled as he made to come for me and Vayne, but the guards that were still in the rose garden with us all stopped him in his tracks.

“Vayne, my dear, I have to agree with the sentiment of the halfling. And not for the reason’s he may have, but because Princess Oriana of House Briar Rose is all mine.” Vayne tried

to say something, but Mara flicked her wrist and silenced him, making him choke on his words that bubbled in his throat to come out as she continued.

“The princess is more valuable to me than you will ever be, my *poor* Vayne. As she will serve me, so will you. You’ll have but one task. You’ll keep breeding her till I have my fill of all the royal blood babies that I want. And then, only then you will have her, at least what I left over of her.” Mara cackled as she caressed my face before helping me up to stand before her. She looked at me with hunger in her eyes. Not hunger for love, nor desire, but hunger for my powerful royal blood.

I couldn’t let any of these things affect me. My mind had to stay clear and ready to face Mara head to head in the magic battle. It wouldn’t be favourable to me or Aurich if I lost.

“Enough! If I lose, you will have the power to decide my fate. But for now, before we start this battle, I would love to have my old clothes back. I can’t move freely in this abomination of a gown.” I said to Mara, while I gestured to the garment I was wearing before turning my back once again to her as I walked unbothered back to where Aurich was held between the two guards.

Before I could even take my place next to Aurich, a gust of wind had me in its claws, lifting the dress off my body. But it all happened so fast that by the time the gust of wind subsided, I was fully dressed in my black leather pants, my red tunic adorned with its gold buttons, and my red boots.

“Let me make this one more time perfectly clear. Even if I lose, Aurich goes free. Am I clear? He. Goes. Free.” I repeated myself as I ran my eyes over everyone standing there. Making sure they understood what my bargain was with Mara. I sounded all confident. However, my heart was pounding in my chest as if it was trying to break free from my ribcage while my brain goaded it by bringing thought of doubt and uncertainty to the front.

“Oh Gods and Goddesses, what have I gotten myself into?” I mumbled as I let out a forceful breath to cover my words of self doubt. I knew expelling those words was as if I let the same thoughts out of my mind and only left strength and fearlessness behind.

“Shall we start, *Princess?*” Mara asked as she made the word princess sound sweet and airy. One would think she was talking to a loved one. And not asking if I was ready to win or lose a battle that would change my entire life and that of Aurich too.

I just gave her a stiff nod as I shook out my arms and hands, to ready my mind to enter a state of battle. While I closed and opened my hands repeatedly preparing for action. I didn’t know how Mara would start, but I knew how I had to end it.

In the blink of an eye, the air surrounding us changed from breathable to charged with tension as I stood ready opposite the frail-looking Mara. But I knew better to let her physical appearance fool me. She was a formidable fairy, an evil one, but a formidable one. I had to be careful and stay focused.

I fixed my eyes on Mara, heart pounding with a mix of healthy fear, determination, and strength. From the moment I struck the deal with Mara, I had been calling upon the magic from the Arcanum core. Ready for any surprise attacks by her.

Mara had a malevolent glint in her eyes as she took a step to her left, forcing me to mimic her so I could keep my eyes on her for her every move. She didn't know if I had powers or this magic battle was a ruse to elude her and Vayne. But I gave her no choice but to battle and see for herself if I had powers or not.

“You're just a princess, my dear. Just because you are a true royal, you think you have the power of magic to beat me with no proper training.” Mara taunted, her voice tinged with a sly grin. “What chance do you think you have against someone with centuries of experience with magic?” She kept taunting and snickering while circling the opening in the middle of the rose garden we found ourselves in.

I ignored the taunt as I steadied my breath and reached deep within myself to call upon the Arcanum core. I wanted to make sure I could call upon the magic and manipulate the one thing I could conjure; water. I raised my hands, palms outstretched, as a small pool of water materialised in front of me. It shimmered and swirled with magical energy.

A heavy intake of breath came from behind me. I didn't need to look to know it was Aurich. The sound of his amazement made me proud and cemented my belief that I could defeat

Mara all the way into my core. There was no way I could lose now.

Mara launched her attack. A barrage of tiny, razor-sharp leaves that whirled through the air toward me. Reacting quickly, I summoned a swirling torrent of water to create a protective barrier, deflecting the leaves harmlessly away.

“You’ll have to do better than that,” I retorted, my confidence growing.

Unimpressed, Mara narrowed her eyes at me, her fairy form emanating an aura of dark energy. She reached out, her hands trembling as she chanted an incantation. Suddenly, the ground beneath my feet shifted, and thorny vines erupted from the earth, seizing my feet and pulling me down back into the ground.

I let out an involuntary shriek as I tried to fight the feeling of getting smothered as the vines dragged me to the waist into the ground. The sensation of not getting enough air had me seeing black spots.

“No, no, no, no, this is not happening. Not to me and not today.” I told myself as I worked on controlling my breath. Instead of letting panic take over, I made myself relax and breathe steadily, concentrating on what I had to do to get myself out of this situation.

I gritted my teeth, refusing to be defeated so easily, focusing on the magic, drawing upon my connection to the water through the magic I had summoned. I could feel my arms were free. Mara didn’t direct the vines to bind them. With a swift

motion of my arms, I directed a powerful surge of water upward from deep within the ground, shattering the vines and so freeing myself and getting my feet firmly back on the ground.

But Mara wasn't done with her tricks. As I prepared for my next move, she unleashed a cloud of blinding pollen that engulfed the entire garden. The pollen cloud was so dense it made me cough and sputter, as breathing was difficult. The pollen obscured my vision too, making my concentration falter.

The panic I felt at that moment was nothing compared to what I felt with the vines. It was much worse. All my senses were gone. I couldn't see, hear, or breathe. I could only stay paralysed where I stood and wait for Mara to finish me off and enslave me.

Amid the chaos that was my brain, I heard Aurich's voice echo in it, reminding me of the lessons I had learned with him at the clearing next to the tavern and on our journey through the forest on our way to Thornton.

"Focus, Oriana. The power is within you. Believe in yourself." The husky baritone voice of Aurich came to me and wiped away the chaos in my mind and made it clear so I could focus once more.

With newfound determination, thanks to Aurich's ghost voice in my mind, I closed my eyes, blocking out the blinding pollen. I visualised the water element, calm and serene, and I reached out with my mind, searching for the presence of all

the surrounding water in the air, in the roses and even deep in the ground.

In an instant, the water obeyed my call, responding to my unwavering will. The droplets in the air gathered, swirling around me like a cyclone. I opened my eyes. I could breathe fresh air again as I unleashed the water imbued with magic I could summon.

A torrential downpour cascaded from the sky, dousing the pollen cloud and washing away the last traces of Mara's dark magic. As the raindrops fell, they intensified, forming icy shards that shot towards Mara with unyielding precision.

Mara's fairy form quivered under the onslaught as she let out a pained cry. But even in her weakened state, she refused to give up. With a last burst of energy, she conjured a magical shield to protect herself from my water assault.

The two magical forces clashed, but my resolve remained unshaken. Drawing upon the last of my strength, I channelled my remaining magic into a single, focused blast. I felt how the rage and hate that was deep embedded into my heart flowed freely through my veins to join the magic. Burning the sadness I had felt ever since I woke up, leaving only hope and love behind.

The water crashed against Mara's shield with incredible force, cracking the shield with an ear-splitting sound and sending her flying backward against some rose bushes close to where Aurich and the guards stood.

Exhausted but victorious, I stood amid the water-soaked rose garden, my breaths heavy. Mara lay defeated, her dark aura dissipating, leaving her looking more frail and vulnerable than ever.

I didn't wait and called upon my sword and stalked toward Mara. Locking eyes with her as she laid there in a puddle of mud with her arms raised to shield herself from me. Broken and all alone, as Wayne and his father were nowhere to be seen.

I had my ebony sword aimed at her heart, I only needed to run it through her and it would be all over.

“Princess Oriana, please have mercy. Spare me my life. Spare this old fairy her life, please sweet and kind princess. Don't kill me while I'm down and vulnerable.” Mara cried, her voice trembling as she tried to stand and slipped back into the puddle of mud. Her plea tugged at a string of my heart that I didn't know I had for her.

How could I be a good and kind Queen if I would stoop to her level and kill her in cold blood while she was half standing, half crouching on the soaking wet ground, defeated?

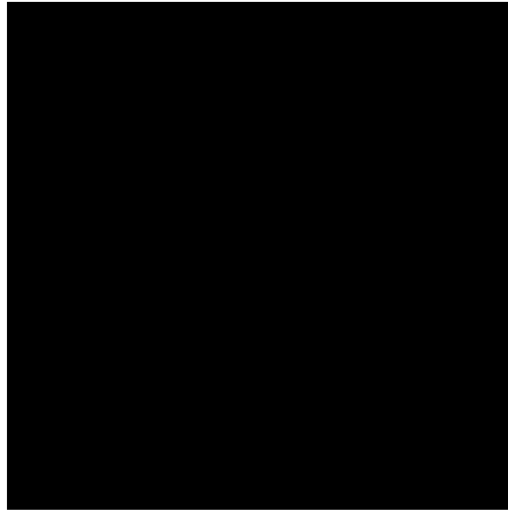
It was in that second of hesitation on my part that Mara saw her opportunity and struck like a snake that she was.

“Malanor calad, né rangar iirannor lorien sívaya síhaldor.” Mara's eerie voice sounded in my ear as she unleashed another curse, but this time, her target was Aurich, not me. Without a moment's hesitation, I acted on pure

impulse to save him, to save the man that I called a friend and maybe some day could be more.

I hurled myself between Aurich and the incoming curse, taking the full blast in my upper body. The last thing I heard was Aurich's piercing screams before everything turned dark, and I succumbed to another magical slumber.

Trust



Aurich

As I fought my way away from the guard, I kneeled at Oriana's side. With my hands in chains, I tried to get her head off the wet ground and onto my lap. But I couldn't manage it. Her head kept slipping from my hands every time I tried. Making me feel more useless than I already felt.

“Oriana, please wake up.” I kept repeating as I covered her body with mine, just in case someone would try to do her any harm as she laid there, cursed once more. My heart beating like a wild animal in my chest.

“Oh, isn’t this cute? You filthy Fairy Hunter trying to guard what is left of her. So sweet.” Vayne taunted as he walked past me and Oriana to go help that evil thing called Mara to her feet. I heard them talking, but their words were mere whispers in the wind, as I could only concentrate on Oriana and thinking of ways to get the curse lifted.

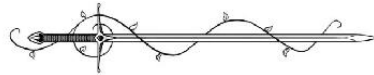
My magic wasn’t working anymore and even if I still had my magic, I wouldn’t try anything for fear that I could cause her more harm. Knowing Mara, how evil she was, I wouldn’t put it past her that whoever tried to lift this curse by magic would regret it.

As the sound of several approaching footsteps reached my ears, I instinctively pressed myself closer to Oriana’s body, determined to shield her from any potential danger, my own safety forgotten. The footsteps paused just before us, prompting me to cautiously raise my head and meet the chilling gaze of Vayne. Malice gleamed in his beady eyes as he held Mara up, her frail form looking as though it might shatter at the slightest touch.

“She is now useless to me. She will be executed tomorrow, together with you, Fairy Hunter.” He smirked down at me, then turned and looked at his guards. “Take them both to the dungeon and throw them into one of the cells down there.” Vayne ordered as he adjusted Mara’s weight on his side and kind of dragged her with him as he walked away, back to the castle. Where I knew the evil thing undoubtedly got tended to and would regain her powers back.

While their backs were getting smaller and smaller as they walked away from us, the guards grabbed me by my elbows, dragged me up and away from Oriana. I kicked and shoved against them to get back to Oriana, as another set of two guards grabbed her under her armpits and dragged her through the mud as if she were nothing.

“Be careful with her. Watch her head.” I yelled after the guards who had Oriana. Earning me some rather painful hits to the head from the guards dragging me too to the dungeon.



I almost lost it when I finally got to the dungeon to be thrown in the cell they had prepared for us. While the guards who were tasked to handle me were taking the chains of my hands, the other ones were trying to have their way with Oriana.

The scene unfolding before me, as they tried to disgrace her in my presence. It made my blood boil with rage within me, causing my vision to blur with a fiery red haze. I was ready to rip those guards limb by limb. No one would ever touch or treat Oriana like that while I still could draw breath.

As soon as my hands were free, I hit the guards on my left straight in the nose with my elbow and kicked the other one in the balls. Making them both fall to the ground as they groaned and rolled into themselves like when babies were born.

Leaving them on the ground behind me, I launched myself against the other two guards that were trying to get Oriana's clothes off. With a guttural roar, I punched one in the face,

breaking his nose as blood gushed all over his face and over me, painting my fist dark red.

I was about to finish him by bashing his head into the stone wall, I got hit in the head with something solid from behind. The blow made me see stars for a moment. That was the reprieve the other guard who hit me from behind needed to shove me first in the cell and then rolled Oriana hastily after me, closing the cell door swiftly.

“I’m glad you will be dead tomorrow by sunrise, Fairy Hunter. Both of you.” The guard spat and sneered at me from the other side of the cell door. I couldn’t care less about when we were going to be executed. Oriana was my only priority at that moment. My heart constricted painfully when I saw her body, lifeless on the dirty cobbled stone floor of the cell.

I fell to my knees next to her on the cell floor and checked her for any new bruises or cuts she might have gotten while those imbeciles were dragging her through the castle grounds.

I had to leave her where she was for a few seconds to rearrange the hay that each cell had for sleeping pallets. When it was the way I wanted for her to lie on, I went back and carried her in my arms to set her on the hay.

However, once I got to the hay pallet, I found I couldn’t bring myself to let her go. Despite being covered in mud and soaked through, she felt amazingly soft. Her scent was captivating. It reminded me of pink roses in full bloom during spring when I was a little boy and played outside our little

cottage with my sister, while our mother tended to her fruit and vegetable garden.

She was also cold to the touch, causing me to hold her even closer against my warm chest while settling on the hay. With her wet, dark hair against my lips, I whispered a prayer, longing for a miracle to come our way.

A miracle to save Oriana.

“Oriana, I’m so sorry, love, for getting angry at you when you revealed you were a royal to save my life back in Thornton. I’m sorry that I couldn’t keep you out of harm’s way.” I murmured to her as I kissed her cold forehead and then tightened my arms around her as my heart crumbled into a thousand pieces. They would have to kill us like this tomorrow, because I would never let her go.

I had difficulties breathing while simultaneously I wanted nothing more than to scream at my stupidity for getting angry about a secret that she had all the reasons in the world to hide.

I gazed down at Oriana’s face. My gaze lingered for an eternity. Looking at her flawless porcelain skin, upturned little button nose, and long and dark lashes that touched the top of the apple of her cheek. Her plump lips with its cupid’s bow, inviting me to press my lips against hers.

I etched her features into my memory, knowing that when tomorrow arrives, hers would be the last face I’d carry with me as I depart this world for good.

“Please, any Gods or Goddesses, any forces of good out there, hear my plea. Please help me save Oriana, help me save the woman I love. Don’t let her die like this, not knowing that I love and respect her. If someone needs to die tomorrow, let it be me, not her.” I kept repeating the same thing as a protective mantra while I rocked back and forth with Oriana in my arms, hoping with all my being that she would wake up.

This night would be the loneliest of my life. Even though I had her in my arms and could give her a million kisses, she was already gone where I couldn’t follow. My tears rolled hot and thick over my cheeks into her already wet hair. The only thing I wanted was to have her for just one more time so I could tell her I loved her.

As I closed my eyes and set my left cheek on her hair, I heard an annoying piercing screech coming from above my head. The noise was like the unpleasant sound of metal scraping against glass.

I swatted my hand over my head, hoping to get rid of the thing that was making the terrible noise. Then I saw a blur of orange past my eyes. While I followed the orange cloud of blur, it came to a stop at Oriana’s knee.

To my surprise, it was the tiny fairy from the imps clearing that Oriana saved. Smiling big and wide, showing her sharp pointy teeth. I could swear she was gloating. I didn’t care if that was the case. She was here and she could help save Oriana.

I would forever be in her debt if she succeeded.

“What are you doing here?” I asked the fairy as I did a poor job of keeping distrust out of my voice. I couldn’t help it. These beings can’t be trusted. Yet, I had to try to trust this one as there wasn’t any other that could save Oriana.

“You wished and longed for a miracle to save her, and here I am. But one thing I’m curious about is why didn’t you help her yourself? Why didn’t you save her with all that magic you possess? Ancient and powerful, I saw you use it against the imps in the clearing.” She cocked her head to the side as she glided down Oriana’s knee to her waist. She then crossed her legs, sat down, and stared at me expectantly.

“I couldn’t.” I said almost in a whisper as my voice carried the tone of shame and guilt as I replied, while I attempted to angle my body away from her. However, with Oriana in my arms, such a move proved nearly impossible. In defeat, I settled, embracing my vulnerability and allowing it to lie bare before the little fairy.

“Mara got word that Wayne had brought me to the castle, and where he was keeping me captive. She came to my cell to try syphoning my magic, but because of me being a halfling, she couldn’t. She got angry and bound my magic. I can no longer use my magic or cast any spells till the day I or Mara dies.” I told her, while I let my chin rest on Oriana’s head, waiting for what would come next. Sure of what the little fairy’s next question would be, I didn’t know if I was ready to answer *that* question.

“Why have you and your sister taken it upon yourselves to eradicate fairies? It seems like you two hold a strong aversion towards us?” The question caught me off guard, yet it demanded the same answer I was dreading. I had to answer this the same way, as if she had asked me why Mara couldn’t take my magic from me.

“Well, my little winged fairy, by the looks of it, it will be story time before miracle time. And seeing that we have the entire night for stories and then escape plans, I will enlighten you as to why me and my sister hate *your* kind.” I took a big breath as I shimmed back toward the wall to make myself comfortable with Oriana still in my arms. I couldn’t let her go, for if I did, it would be like I’m letting her down again. Merely the thought of not having her in my arms caused my heart to ache.

“It all started with our mother, whom we loved very much till the day she died far away from her kin, family, and kingdom.” I cleared my throat, hoping the tightening of my throat would ease so the words I have to say could pass freely through and out of my mouth.

“When our mother had come of marrying age, her parents arranged for her to get married into a good and well-known family in their circle. The wedding arrangement was supposed to be a joyous occasion for their entire kingdom.” I swallowed hard as the tightening of my throat has now converted into a knot, obstructing the words from coming out.

“The celebration was a three-day festival, lots of food, drinking, and dancing in honour of my mother’s betrothal. On the last night when her engagement was officially announced, her kingdom was attacked. The raiders had killed many people that night, almost half of the kingdom.” My voice had turned gravelly as I knew what was coming. Every time I thought about what happened to our mother, sadness, horror, and rage came to the forefront of my heart. But most of all, sadness, sadness for the pain our mother had to endure.

“A group of five males broke free from the group of raiders, my mother got captured by them and they... they....” I couldn’t get the words out. They were stuck in my throat, burning it, just like the bile that rose from my stomach on its way up to my mouth. But I had to force the words out, as I needed to finish the story, for my mother’s memory. The tiny fairy needed to know her story.

“They raped her. One by one, those five animals took turns and used our mother’s body for their carnal enjoyment. They did atrocious things to her in front of her parents, her betrothed, and his parents. And when they were finished abusing her and her body, they simply left. But if you thought that was the horrible part of this story, you are mistaken.” I pressed Oriana’s body to mine, as if she were my shield. Protecting me from the horrible upcoming part of our mother’s story. One that never should have happened.

“After all that, my mother went through that night. All of her kin, family, and betrothed had turned their backs to her. Banishing her from her home and own kingdom, as they

considered her tainted and broken. Our mother left and gave birth to us in a foreign kingdom. Without help from anyone, not even from her own kin, *the Fairies*.” as I got to the last word I could only spit it out of my mouth with all the disdain I held for that species. The eyes of the little fairy widened in astonishment, her mouth frozen in a perfect ‘O’ of surprise and understanding.

“Yes, our mother was the Banished Princess of Court Seelie, from Faeren Hollow Kingdom. The one that tainted the bloodline of your species by having me and my sister; the halflings, as your kind, loves to call us. Or, as the humans call us, half breeds.” I fought hard in that moment to not shed a tear as the sadness of my mom’s life story tried to take over. But I didn’t let it. I was proud to be her bastard son as I knew Nimue was also proud to be her bastard daughter. My mom was the sweetest, gentlest, and kindest being I have ever known. She never once talked ill of her family and the fairies of the Seelie Court while she taught us about our lineage.

“See, we do not fit in with the fairies as your species see us beneath you all because we are halflings and we do not fit in with the humans as they fear us, because we have magic.” At that moment, a flash of Nimue and me when we were little passed before my eyes. The time my mom tried to find a place for us to call home in the human kingdoms. But because my mom had pointy ears, high cheekbones and slanted eyes, they didn’t want her and her bastard half blood kids in their precious cities. They always turned us away because of what my mother was.

Yet, there was one kingdom that embraced my mother for who she was and provided her with all the necessities to raise us and gave her a place to call home; Briarwood Kingdom.

“Fairy Hunter, are you still here? Where did you go?” The little orange curly haired fairy asked in her high-pitched voice. The sound made me cringe as it assaulted my eardrums. I cleared my head of those images with a firm shake of my head and then turned to the little winged fairy to finish the story.

“Nowhere important.” I let out a breath as I organised my thoughts while I gave myself a moment to calm down as this last bit of the story gets to me every time.

“What most of your species don’t know till this day is that those five males that did that monstrosity to my mom were, in fact, a Prince from one of the nine Kingdoms, and his four noble knights. Royals that had to take care and safeguard their subjects.” My voice sounded bitter to my ears, because in a way I was bitter about not having avenged my mother’s honour. If it were up to me, I would have scoured every corner of the realm to find those five monsters and exacted the most horrific vengeance for their wrongdoing against our mother. But my mom made me promise her to not let what happened to her make me as evil as they were. She said that she got two precious things out of that painful ordeal, me and my sister.

“Because Royal human blood and Royal fairy blood have mixed to create us, our unique type of magic creates a barrier so no one can abuse it unless we give it freely. That is why Mara couldn’t get my magic. You also now know why my

sister Nimue and I hate your kind. And why we do hunt all of you excessively. Well, I hunt you all excessively. My sister hunts only the ones that turned evil.” I said matter-of-factly as I lifted my shoulders in a dismissive gesture, signalling the end of the story as I adjusted Oriana in my arms and laid my cheek once more on her head.

“I can’t undo what my kind did to your mom. What I can tell you is that I’m sorry they did what they did to her. And I understand better your aversion toward my kind, but we are not all the same.” The little winged fairy said as she bowed low, showing respect to me, as I had my mother’s royal blood running through my veins. When she came back up, she had a look of determination on her face. She marched up closer to me over Oriana’s stomach and climbed up her arm till she was standing on her shoulders.

“I can save her and you from this situation you are in. But for me to help, especially you, is that you have to trust me.” I shook my head when her words reached my ears. *Trust a fairy, never.*

“I know it is a lot to ask from you, Fairy Hunter, but to save her.” She gestures to Oriana. “You’ll have to make an effort to trust me. Do you think you can manage that?” She asked me as she looked at me with her piercing green eyes. I just noticed then that she had the same forest green-coloured eyes as my mothers. Somehow, seeing those eyes made me decide to try to trust her.

“Okay, I’ll try, but there is no guarantee that I will succeed in a few hours.” I replied as I moved Oriana more carefully to the middle of my chest so I could rest my left arm for a moment.

“I can work with that Fairy Hunter. I need you to...” I had to stop her. If I was going to trust her, I needed her to call me by my given name. Even though I wasn’t sure if trusting her was the right path to take. But I had to start somewhere.

“I’m sorry to cut you off. Could you call me by my name, Aurich? If I’m to trust you, let’s start by not calling me Fairy Hunter anymore.” It took all my willpower to not growl at her as I told her my name. Still shaking my head because I was putting my life and Oriana’s in the tiny hands of this thing, this orange curly haired fairy.

“That is fine, Aurich. Nice to meet you. I’m Elle, Elle Shimmerwings from the Dawn Court.” She introduced herself and bowed once more. “As I was saying just now, I need you to put the pair of boots on that she always carries with her.” Elle gestured to Oriana. Her request made me slam my eyebrows together as I saw no other pair of boots on Oriana, only the red ones she always wore.

Elle saw the confusion on my face and her lips curled upward into a mischievous smile before she flew off Oriana’s shoulder, landed on her right hip and tapped it. Instantaneously, a small leather pouch appeared on Oriana’s stomach.

“Take it. The boots I was referring to are in there.” She nudged the pouch with her tiny foot toward me. I followed her

instructions and picked up the leather pouch. However, the thing was too small to have anything bigger than a bean in it and also it felt empty.

“Are you sure? This small thing has a pair of boots in it? It feels empty.” As I bounced the empty pouch on my palm, before I picked it up and brought it closer to my face to take a closer look at it. The leather was worn out, and I still doubted that it contained a pair of boots.

Pursing my lips, I gave Elle a sceptical look.

“For someone that has been around magic and using magic his entire life, it’s a bit disappointing that you do not recognise a magical object.” She raised her eyebrows and doubled over as she let out a laugh that sounded just like tiny little twinkling bells. Her reaction to my lack of knowledge about this pouch made me want to swat the little, irritating fairy. Biting my lower lip to not say what I was thinking, I let her have her fun at my expense.

“Whoa, it’s been a long time since I laughed like that.” She said as she wiped the last tears coming out of her eyes as she caught her breath. “Open the pouch and think of a pair of leather boots. Just leather boots, no colour, not male or female boots, just leather boots.” Elle instructed. As she gestured for me to make a move on and think of the boots.

The moment I thought of the words ‘leather boots,’ a pair of simple, black leather boots appeared in my hands, causing the pouch to vanish. Blinking rapidly as I closed my mouth, I couldn’t take my eyes off the pair of boots in front of me.

“Put them on. I know they look like they won’t fit you, but please trust me and put them on.” She closed her eyes and pinched the tiny bridge of her nose between her thumb and index finger as she took a big gulp of air. As she exhaled, she opened her eyes again. “Just do as you are told. Please Aurich, trust me, this will work. But you have to do what I tell you.” She said a bit sternly as she put her tiny balled up hand on her waist while she stared at me, waiting for me to do as I was told.

“Okay, okay, no need to get testy.” I put the boots next to the hay palette where Oriana and I were. Standing up with her in my arms, I turned around and laid her back on the palette. My arms felt strangely light and empty without her nestled within them. I told myself that it would only be a brief moment while I put these stupid boots on.

To my astonishment, the boots fit. I couldn’t believe my eyes, what I saw on my feet once I finished putting them on. They transformed from simple looking worn out black leather boots to a magnificent pair.

The leather boots adorning my feet seemed to have been born from the looms of destiny itself. They appear to be crafted with unparalleled mastery to create a masterpiece befitting a monarch. The leather, rich and supple, seemed to whisper secrets of a distant Kingdom and promises of power.

Each step I took within the cell to test them out resonated with an air of authority. They embraced my feet in a snug and regal embrace. The surface of the boots had these intricate

embroidery, intertwining vines, and the sigil of the Seelie Court that told the story of me, my sister, and my mother's lineage. The hues were deep, a fusion of warm, earthy browns and rich, leafy greens, hinting at the tapestry of Faeren Hollow Kingdom woven into every fibre of the boots.

The boots were not mere footwear; they were an extension of my sovereignty, a manifestation of my birthright to one day rule the Seelie Court if they did not banish my mother that awful night.

Blinking the thoughts of me as a king away, I walked back to the palette and picked up Oriana again in my arms and sat back down on the palette with her shoulder and right side resting against my chest. I couldn't resist kissing her hair and forehead again, while regret took over. Regret for not declaring my love for her sooner, regret for letting my bitterness and hatred for royals get in the way of loving her the way she was meant to be loved.

Elle gave me a big smile and nodded as she fluttered toward the opening in the cell door and stood there like a tiny guard.

After a few hours of nightmarish dreams, Elle woke me up.

"I hear them coming down the stairs. Be ready and whatever you do, don't fight them. Let them take whatever they want." Elle said as she fluttered back to the hay palette. I gave her an incredulous stare. Who did she think she was to tell me to let them take whatever they wanted?

"What about Oriana? I will not let them mistreat her." With a serious expression, she stood there, with her gaze locked onto

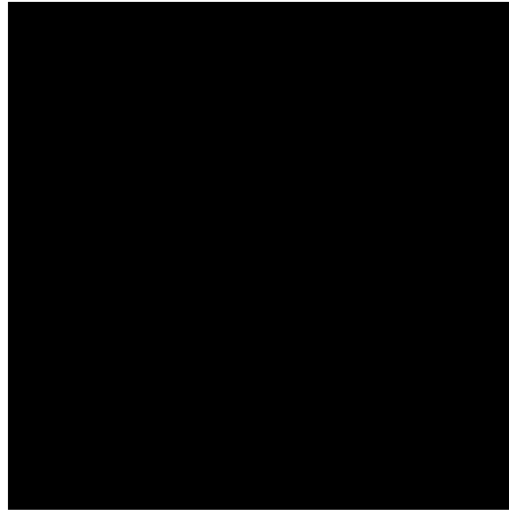
me, till I averted my eyes and looked down at Oriana, still cold in my arms as I leaned closer to her and I tugged her into me some more. I didn't want to stop holding her like that.

“I'm sorry I couldn't save you. Please forgive me.” I whispered and brushed my lips softly against hers, deepening the kiss, wishing her lips would dance with mine. I didn't know when I felt different towards her. But these feelings and emotions had taken root and continued to intensify the more time I had spent with her.

I moved my lips slowly from hers as I broke the kiss, missing the feel of her soft lips on mine as I stood up one more time and laid her down on the hay palette. Standing in front of Oriana blocking her from whoever came in, I waited for the guards to come get us. By the sound of their footsteps, they were almost here.

“Don't worry, I'll guard her for you. No one will touch her. I promise.” Elle quickly disappeared into Oriana's black tresses. I didn't have time to say anything else as the cell door swung violently open to reveal Vayne himself with four guards, ready to take me and Oriana to be executed.

The Final Stand



Aurich

“Don’t even think you are special half blood. I’m merely here to make sure these worthless guards don’t get beaten up by you again.” Wayne walked into the cell, all tall, chest puffed out. His head tilted slightly upward as he tried to look down on me. It only made him look ridiculous, as I was a head taller than him.

With one eyebrow raised, he continued. “You really are foolish, thinking you can still defend her? Until the end I guess, huh?” He gestured toward Oriana as he came closer to

me and her. But he stopped a few feet away from us and locked eyes with me.

“I have been waiting for so long for this day to arrive. Finally, I get to kill the famous Fairy Hunter. The one that keeps helping the poor people of this kingdom. The one that keeps saving them from becoming my entertainment.” He seethed, I could feel his rage in every single word he spoke. That made my lips curl into my signature smirk. It was a delight to know that I could anger him until the last seconds of my existence.

“And as an added bonus, I get to kill her too.” He matched my smirking as he leaned closer to me. His lips were just under my ear. Those words immediately made my mouth go dry and my blood boil. I wanted nothing more than to kill him where he stood.

“It’s a shame that she will be executed today.” He shook his head in mock sympathy as he took his time to back away from where I stood, but kept his eyes on me. “She was a fine piece of ass when she was under the first curse, hidden in that old cottage of her family in the middle of the enchanted forest. I had so much fun with her back then.” He gloated, his beady eyes twinkled with the malicious excitement of our upcoming execution, while the skin around his eyes wrinkled.

Before I could hit the son of a bitch, he turned and walked out of the cell as he snapped his fingers. Four guards barged in and held me back, like I was some kind of wild animal, as I roared my rage at Wayne’s back. No matter how hard I

struggled and tried to break free, there was no way I could get away from those four hulking guards to get to the piece of shit that was Vayne. It was like they had me in a lock that I just couldn't crack this time.

Meanwhile the guards forced me to bend at the waist, making me gaze upon the magnificent boots on my feet and the cobbled stone floor of the dungeon as they dragged me out of the cell.

Just a little more and all this will be over, I just need to trust Elle.

One of the guards hit me quite hard in my ribs, making me stumble and suck in air through my teeth. "That is for beating up my friends." He hissed close to my head as the others snickered.

"What are you four snickering about? Make haste. I want their execution done before I eat my midday meal. Take him to the arena, get him ready, and then you'll return to fetch the woman. And don't fool around this time, or you four will join them on the chopping block." He told the guards as if he was talking about the weather. Like our execution was merely an inconvenience to him. In the position my head was, I could only see his shoes as he turned and made the guards stop.

Vayne's hand filled my vision as he grabbed me by my cheeks to pull my head up so I could look at him. But mid pull he stopped and pushed my head to the side with such force that the bones in my neck cracked.

“Where did you get those boots?” He asked with envy dripping off each word. “Nevermind, take them off now and give them to me.” He ordered, while he took off his own boots. “Those boots aren’t for vermin like you, they are made for royals like me. They belong to me now. They should have been mine to begin with.” He snapped at me, while throwing his boots to the side.

The guards pulled me back by my elbows so I could stand normally again, but they didn’t let my arms go, they twisted them higher causing me to inhale air sharply through my teeth as the pain radiated from my shoulder blades all the way down to my hands.

Two of them had me held by my arms as the other two lifted my legs one by one to get the boots off my feet and pass them to Vayne.

I wanted to struggle and made it difficult for them to take the boots off me, but I kept hearing Elle’s voice, repeating the same thing over and over in my head; don’t fight them. Let them take whatever they want. So I went against my instinct and made myself relax and comply with whatever they wanted my body to do. I promised Elle I would try to trust her. But that didn’t stop the desire to jump Vayne and twist his little neck like a twig with my bare hands.

He was like a greedy thief eyeing a chest full of gold, his excitement knew no bounds as he jammed his feet into the boots in front of me. I leaned forward as far as the guards allowed me, not taking my eyes from the boots on Vayne’s feet

as my heartbeat increased, waiting for something to happen to Wayne.

But to my disappointment nothing happened except the boots glowed just for a few moments when Wayne touched them as he pulled them on and then they were the same boots they turned in for me last night.

“See half blood? They are made for royals like me, not abominations like you.” He bragged. “Let’s keep moving. I want to see his head rolling down the stage to the ground and landing in his own pool of blood.” He told the guards while smirking at me. His eyes were beaming with evil delight.

I closed my eyes, wanting to send a prayer to whoever would hear me, but I stopped. I had to believe in Elle, I had to trust her. Fairy or not, she was the only option I had at that moment.

Just as we took the last steps out of the dungeon and rounded the corner to make our way to the arena, the boots at Wayne’s feet started to glow brightly. The more he walked in them, the brighter they glowed.

“Half blood, what kind of black magic is this?” Wayne shrieked as smoke started to come off the magic boots. “Get them off me, get them off me, now. They are burning my feet.” Wayne tried to kick the boots off his feet but to no avail, the boots seemed to be glued to them.

“Aaaah! Make it stop, please make it stop.” Wayne kept screaming as he attempted to get the now flame engulfed boots off his feet. The flames grew from only his feet to all the way up to his waist.

“HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME, PLEASE. MERCY, MERCY, I’M BURRRGGG.” He kept screaming until his words were incomprehensible as he fought the burning flames licking his body.

Searing heat emanated from Vayne as the flames engulfed him. A guttural scream tore through his mouth, turning into a primal cry. His body recoiled into himself, every muscle tightening in response to the intense agony. His hands, once proud and steady, were now flailing wildly, swatting at the source of the torment, flames that were devouring his flesh.

I could only stare and send out a thank you to Elle for making me put those boots on, while the screams of Vayne invaded my ears as the flames kept burning him. The acrid smell of singed hair mixed with burned flesh invaded my nostrils, it made me gag and retch the content of my stomach.

Vayne’s body succumbed to the inferno’s ruthless assault. Tears welled up in his eyes, mixing with sweat and grime, tracing paths down his blistered cheeks as agony seized him, causing him to writhe and twist on the ground before me and the guards.

His breath came in ragged gasps. Fear, shock, and disbelief interchanged with each other on his blistered face as the reality hit Vayne that he was dying like a roasted rat. Not even his own guards would help him. They all stood frozen to the ground, watching him burn alive until he took his last breath.

Amidst the commotion and the crackling sound of the fire, a window of opportunity presented itself and I was no fool to

not take advantage of it. Seizing the moment, my gaze shifted from the roaring inferno of what was left of Vayne to the distracted guards. This was my chance to slip away, to escape their notice and return to Oriana.

Before I could take five steps, the guards snapped to their senses, unsheathed their swords, and encircled me. A deadly dance, ready to deliver me to the Gods and Goddesses.

My heart was racing like a werewolf in hunting season. The hair on my arms and on the nape of my neck raised as I faced off, swordless and magicless, against the four guards who barred my path back to Oriana.

“Where do you think you are going, Fairy Hunter?” The guard closest to me yelled as he slowly moved in on me. The air was heavy with tension. I narrowed my eyes as I assessed my opponents, calculating their movements and seeking weaknesses to exploit.

The first guard lunged forward with a fierce battle cry, his blade gleaming in the orange light of the flames the fire was still casting. My reflexes kicked in and made my body flow effortlessly into a defensive stance. Blood filled with adrenaline rushed through my body as I quickly sidestep, avoiding the swing of the guard sword.

As I turned back to my previous position, I countered with a swift movement of my hands, which landed them around the guard’s neck that ended in a sickening snap. The guard’s lifeless body crumpled to the ground, his neck broken.

I wasted no time and snatched the fallen guard's sword. My grip on the weapon was sure, my movements fluid and precise as I zeroed in on my next attacker. I parried a strike from the second guard, our blades sparking as they clashed. The guard's eyes widened in surprise as my skill became clear to him.

With a calculated thrust, I pierced through guard number two's defences; my blade finding its mark, it sank into his body like a warm knife through butter. The guard staggered back, clutching his wounded side, before collapsing in a pool of blood.

"Motherfucker!" I hissed through clenched teeth as a sudden searing pain jolted through my right arm. The third guard managed to land a shallow cut while I took a sec to catch my breath after killing the second guard.

Gritting my teeth, I pushed through the pain and retaliated. My blade sliced swiftly through the guard's parry with ruthless efficiency. The guard's eyes glazed over as he fell to the ground, his life extinguished.

I was breathing heavily, adrenaline burning hot in my veins, as I surveyed the carnage I had created. My senses were on high alert. I hadn't come this far to falter now.

I spun around, ready to face the fourth guard, only to be a fraction of a second too late. The fourth guard swung his sword in a deadly arc, so fast that he didn't leave any room for me to ward off his attack.

With my heartbeat pulsating in my throat and wheezing breaths, I closed my eyes as I prepared to feel the sword slice

through my flesh. Thoughts of the life I could have had with Oriana cruelly passed through my mind, taunting me in my last seconds of life.

However, the cold biting slice of the sword never came, nor the pain that would follow such a blow. Instead, the clanging sound of metal against something hard made me open my eyes, and what I saw made me break into an unrestrained smile, followed by laughter filled with relief and happiness.

A surge of warmth spread through my body, accompanied by the elated rhythm of my heart pounding in my chest. My stomach fluttered as the concerns and worries washed away from my mind. In that very moment, I only had eyes for the sole person capable of evoking such a whirlwind of emotions within me—joy, elation, and an indescribable connection all at once.

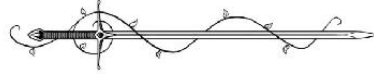
Oriana.

She stood not too far from me and the fourth guard, her hands outstretched, brow furrowed, and sweat dripping from her temple, fighting to protect me by parrying the guard's sword with a golden shield. Right then and there, my heart swelled twice its size with pride and love.

Oriana gave me a slight nod before she waved her hands back, sending the fourth guard flying back. As soon as the guard touched the ground, Oriana threw herself forward, rolling along the ground with her black sword in her hand, skillfully like an assassin. As the guard stood back from where his ass hit the ground, she was on her knees in front of him. In

one fluid movement, she swung her sword swiftly from left to right, slicing the guard in half at the waist.

Oriana stood back up as if she just finished shining the guard's boots and walked back toward me. The guard's face frozen in terror. Eyes bulging, a mouth falling open with blood dripping from his lips, the lights in his eyes dimmed. The top half of the guard slowly slipped off to the left side and fell to the ground with a dull thud in the growing pool of blood surrounding the lower half of the body on his knees.



Oriana

“I’m sorry I’m late to the party.” I said to Aurich as I winked at him. The adrenaline rush was still very present in my veins. I felt as if I had grown a few inches and was stronger. It was as if I could take on the entire realm.

“Sleeping in, I see.” Aurich chastised in jest as his lips curled into his melt my heart smirk. Stopping just a few feet away from him, I cocked my head and replied to him with my version of his smirk.

“No, my friend. This is what you call an entrance.” I chuckled as I tossed my hair back, letting it cascade over my shoulders while invading his personal space. Feeling confident, I rested both my hands on his chest and leaned in, tiptoeing to reach his luscious lips, yet keeping a mere inch of distance. His hot breath fanned over my lips, making me sweep my tongue over my bottom lip before gently biting it.

“You know you are playing with fire, *Princess*.” He looked at me as he held me in place by my chin, while his eyes roamed my face and landed on my lips. A deep, primal hum emanated from his chest, vibrating under my hands as he closed the gap between our lips.

As his plump lips crashed into mine, an electric tingle started deep in my core and spread throughout my body until it reached the unknown parts of my sex. Making things clench and unclench. I wondered what that was, as I never experienced feelings like this.

I followed his lead, letting my lips dance with his. He dipped his tongue between the seam of my lips, seeking passage to my warm mouth, making me gasp. Our tongues then wrestled for dominance as we both moaned into the kiss, savouring each other’s taste.

He snaked his other arm around my waist and tugged me closer into him. Moulding my body against his, I felt every single ridge and bump of his strong and toned body, especially a hard bulge just below his waist, poking into my stomach.

Too soon, his lips left mine, leaving me feeling bereft and wanting more of his sweet and silky lips. He moved his hand slowly from my waist and stroked my back all the way to my neck as he curled his fingers in my hair as he leaned his forehead against mine and let out a soft moan.

“I could hear you, Aurich. I could hear you talking to me the whole time. But because of the spell, I couldn’t open my eyes, move or speak.” I whispered as I moved one of my hands from

his chest to cup his cheek. The way he leaned into my touch made me let out a groan of happiness, a new sound to me.

“I was desperate to tell you that I felt the same way about you.” Our eyes were locked on each other, and I could see his dark pools of lava blazing with adoration with some other emotions that are all new to me. It made me smile as the kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered up a storm in my stomach. I made sure to not blink or look away when I utter the words that have been longing and burning in me to be let out.

“I love you.” I sighed and brought his lips to mine again. I softly brushed against his lips with mine before deepening the kiss. This time, he devoured my mouth as I let him claim me.

“Aww, what a happy and joyous moment. Princess Oriana declaring her love to the halfling.” Came the mocking voice of Mara, filled with venom from behind us. “She must truly love you, Fairy Hunter. Because only true love can break that second curse.” She cackled. In the safety of Aurich’s arms, I turned to confront her. She was advancing with a retinue of guards at her side, an ominous presence against the horizon.

Without wasting any time, I called upon the Arcanum Core, and its magic power surged through me, infusing me with both determination and an electric edge. With my focus sharpened and heart racing, I steadied myself for the impending confrontation.

“How sweet you are protecting him!” She mocked as she stopped at a pile of blackened, crumpled things covered in smouldering ashes I didn’t notice before. “I see Vayne has

been dealt with. Pity. How did *you* do that?" She asked, while pointing to the pile of ashes with one of her spidery fingers. Her question had me confused for a few seconds, as she was really interested in knowing.

"I have to disappoint you, I didn't do that and I don't know what happened to him." I raised my chin as I replied to Mara, while a burning curiosity also arose within me, wondering about the fate of that animal. Judging by who he was, he undoubtedly deserved whatever befell him, and more. I wished I was here when that happened, to see the one that abused me and took my innocence from me by force get his due. I hoped that he suffered horrendously.

"What happened to him is that he was too much of a greedy son of a bitch and a brute that deserved what he got." Aurich revealed darkly. "I'll tell you later what happened." He whispered in my ear as he tightened his arm around my waist possessively and took a small step back, taking me with him, away from Marra.

"Where do you think you two are going? You are both set to be executed, but seeing that Princess Oriana is awake and, well, I'll spare her life. Well spare is a too nice of a word, she will be mine to do whatever I want with her." She said as she snapped her fingers at the guards behind her. They immediately marched toward us. The atmosphere changed swiftly to one that crackled with tension in a blink of an eye as Aurich and I were ready for the confrontation.

“Kill the halfling and leave the princess to me.” She commanded the guards, as malevolent shadows cloaked her in their tendrils. The dark aura surrounding Mara was dripping with a mixture of malice and wickedness.

Aurich kissed me on the head before letting me go and picked his sword back up and grabbed another sword from the ground next to a dead guard and took a stand, waiting for the guards to attack him. I gave him a smile and a nod to let him know I was ready too.

As I faced Mara, I let my fingers dance gracefully in the air, while channelling the magic I had been calling upon since she arrived in the clearing outside the dungeon. A shimmering sphere materialised between my hands, pulsating with raw magic energy.

My magic surged through my royal blood in my veins, the force of magic that responded to my every command. I realised I was a master of the magic power I had summoned. I was confident that I could bend anything to my will and summon storms with a flick of my wrist.

At that moment I was aware of what I could do, I was determined to put an end to Mara’s reign of darkness in my Kingdom.

“Mara, it took you a lot of magic to keep me away from my parents, my people, and my Kingdom for a hundred years. I hope for your sake you still possess the same amount of magic to stop me from killing you today!” I growled at her as the fiery rage and the thirst for vengeance that were rooted in my

heart finally got their chance to be let loose. I couldn't hold my smirk back.

Mara's lips curled into a wicked smile as the tendrils of dark magic coiled around her like serpents. Her eyes glowed with an unholy light. With a lazy wave of her hand, the shadows around her seemed to come alive, twisting and contorting into menacing shapes.

"Well, Princess," Mara hissed, her voice dripping with evilness. "You may have bested me yesterday, little girl, but today I will show you the true extent of my power." Without another word, Mara launched the first attack, sending a barrage of shadowy projectiles hurtling toward me.

With a smile, I summoned a torrent of water from the air to intercept the dark projectiles. The water clashed with the shadows, hissing and sizzling as the two opposing forces clashed. Mara attacked with the same move as yesterday, and I was more than prepared for her.

I pushed back against Mara's assault. With the strength of magic surging through me, I sent forward a wave of water that crashed over her like a tidal force. It made Mara shriek with rage as she got drenched, her dark magic flickering and faltering. It filled me with more confidence seeing her magic falter.

With a guttural incantation, she summoned a swirling vortex of darkness that threatened to consume everything in its path. The vortex had already uprooted the trees surrounding the

clearing and sucked a few screaming guards that didn't join the rest in attacking Aurich behind me.

My heart raced as I felt the pull of Mara's dark vortex, but I stood my ground. I widened my stance and took a deep breath and then channelled the magic within into a colossal golden wall of protection.

I wished I had a chance to see behind me what was happening with Aurich. I could hear metal clanking and wet noises from people that got cut down. However, I couldn't stop to look for him as I needed all my concentration to defeat Mara.

The vortex of darkness collided against the bright golden wall, the impact resonating with a deafening roar. In that fleeting moment, it was as if the forces of darkness and light waged a relentless battle for supremacy. My muscles strained and trembled with each passing second, my very core channelling a torrent of energy to fortify the waning magic that upheld my shimmering barricade. Laboured breaths escaped my lips, a testament to my exertion and determination.

Slowly, but surely, the golden wall began to push back the vortex of darkness, inch by painful inch. To the way it came, as Mara's form wavered, her strength fading as my relentless assault continued.

My confidence grew stronger with each step I took forward to push the vortex back, the connection to the golden wall deepening as I tapped into the very essence of the Arcanum

core. With a last surge of power, the golden wall shattered the vortex of darkness, dispersing it into nothingness.

Mara staggered back, her breath ragged and her form flickering like a dying flame. With my chest heaving as I gulped down air to my lungs, I stepped forward. For a moment, a mixture of compassion and pity filled my heart. Yet, I knew what had to be done. Liking it or not, I had to do it.

With the connection to the Arcanum Core still intact, I raised my hands. My palms were glowing with an ethereal light as I summoned my black sword from the small pouch on my waist.

“I won’t let your darkness keep hurting people in my kingdom, Mara!” I roared as I marched up to her, where she laid on the ground in defeat, just like yesterday. She was trembling as she shifted back with one arm raised, palm facing me. But that didn’t stop me. When I got close to her, I pressed my sword to her chest, right on the spot where her heart was.

Mara’s eyes locked with mine, and for a fleeting moment, a hint of vulnerability shimmered within the malevolent fairy’s gaze. That tore at me, as I knew I didn’t have the luxury to give her a second chance.

“You know I have to do it.” I whispered to her.

With a quivering breath and trembling hands, while holding Mara’s gaze, I plunged the ebony sword through her blackened heart. The sword went right through her, as if she was a mere apparition. Mara wasn’t a mere mirage. She was very real, as dark red blood gushed out of her wound and filled her lungs

too while I kept pushing my sword all the way through her body.

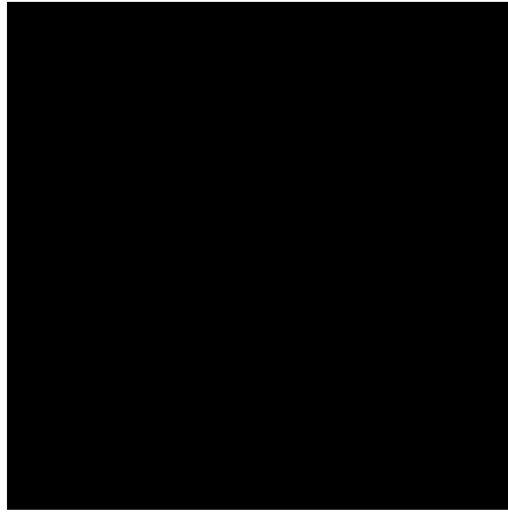
The clanking of swords and dying cries coming from way behind me stopped. An eerie silence engulfed the entire clearing, making the morning air heavy with anticipation for what would be the outcome.

I watched as Mara's eyes that were still locked on mine, closed as her body stilled and the gasps filled with blood stopped. My heart heavy with a mixture of sorrow and relief, I stood up and yanked my sword out of her body.

The battle was over.

With a last glance at the spot where Mara once stood but now lay in the pool of her own blood, I turned and walked away from the clearing. My steps filled with purpose and a renewed sense of hope for both my Kingdom and the realm. Now that Mara didn't exist anymore.

Epilogue



“Once upon a time, there was a sweet and kind princess that was cursed to sleep for a hundred years and would only wake up from true love’s kiss. But this is not that story. Oh, no, this story is about a fearless princess, who, when she woke up and found out that she was bereft of all and everyone she loved, swore revenge on the one who cost her all that pain. But we’ll have to finish the story some other time.” I smiled at the little girl looking back at me through the mirror. “You know we can’t leave people waiting for us. Even if we are the Queen and the princess.” I gave her a kiss on her hair, just like my mom used to do so many moons ago.

“But mommy, you promised you will tell me all about your adventures with daddy and how you got rid of the evil fairy, Mara, and that foolish prince Vayne.” She begged as she

turned around in her chair to look at me. Her bright cerulean eyes, like mine, were a beautiful contrast to her almond coloured skin. Her bouncy natural curls cascaded around her small face and all over her tiny shoulders.

“Talia, I know you want me to tell you that story all the time. But for now, you have to be content with the beginning of the story and have to wait until bedtime for me to finish it.” I smiled tenderly as I caressed her soft cheek before she stood up from her chair and threw her small arms around my waist and hugged me as hard as she could.

“I know mommy and I’ll be looking forward to bedtime today.” She let my waist go and stretched her arms up for me to pick her up. Holding her on my left hip, I walked with her in my arms to the throne room, where our friends and guests were waiting.

“Mommy, why don’t you wear dresses like me?” Talia asked in her soft, sweet voice while she leaned forward to look me in the eye. I rolled my eyes as I gave her a big smile. Ever since she could talk and had noticed that I do not dress in dresses, she has been asking. And I knew by heart what her reaction and her answer would be to my reply to her question.

“Because leather pants are more comfortable and more practical than being clothed in so many fabrics. Besides, if the Orcs or beasts from The Red Wood Kingdom would attack right now, I could defend you and the rest of our Kingdom without losing any time to change out of the dress.” I replied to her as I raised my chin and winked at her.

“You would look so beautiful in one, just like me, mommy.” Her lips curled up into a warm smile as her blue eyes gleamed with the thought of seeing me in a dress. As I exhaled, the same troubling thought I knew I would have with me forever passed through my mind; the image of waking up with my dress in tatters, stained with blood spots. How could I ever explain this to my little girl, the real reason behind my aversion to dresses? The dresses seemed to hold memories too heavy for me to carry into the light.

“Mommy, why do you look sad? Did my question about dresses make you sad?” Talia held me at my chin with her tiny hand and turned my face to her as she let her eyes roam my face. She was just like her father. She could read me like an open book. I tried to smile so I wouldn’t worry her about my past. But I failed as the corner of her mouth turned downward.

I stopped in mid-stride, gently adjusting her on my hip before holding her tiny hand to my face. I kissed her on her little nose, evoking a delightful giggle from her. Lost in the tendrils of my past, I was resolute. I would ensure that none of those shadows would ever touch my sweet, innocent Talia.

“Oriana, there you are. Your *husband* made me go look for you.” Said Elle exasperated as she flew in from one of the windows in the wall of the south wing of the castle. She flew directly to Talia and sat on her shoulder.

“Tell my husband, the King, that I’m on my way, fairy godmother Elle Shimmerwings.” I laughed as I saw Elle wrinkled her little nose and squinted her little eyes at me as

she smiled at me showing rows of sharp pointy teeth. She agreed to be Talia's fairy godmother, but I was never to call her that. I knew deep down she loved being called that.

It made me smile and filled my heart with happiness to remember how I met Elle. That awful night with the imps and with gratitude when she came to help Aurich and me out of the clutches of Mara and Vayne.

Aurich and Elle were still working on their relationship, but they were almost there and could truly say they were friends. Surprisingly, Aurich had asked Elle to teach him the ways of the Seelie Court. He believed that as the King of Briarwood, he needed to handle himself accordingly. It was fun and revealing to see how hard-headed both were and how they worked through their issues with each other. A testament to their species, no matter how they were brought up.

Elle nuzzled Talia under her ear, making her break into a torrent of giggles again before she flew off to the throne room to tell my husband that Talia and I were on our way. After five years of marriage to Aurich, it still felt weird to call him my husband.

As Talia and I neared the throne room's grand double doors, I set her down and adjusted her dress's skirt. The guards in white and gold uniform, adorned with House Briar Rose's crest on their jackets, gave me a court nod as they opened the doors and declared our entrance.

Smiling down at Talia as she smiled back at me, I held her hand in mine as we walked into the throne room. All voices

went quiet, only our steps on the white marble floor could be heard, as me and my precious daughter made our way to my handsome husband and her father.

I could see familiar faces in the crowd, Rhuon, and his wife Violet, and even the woman that was the baker of Thornton. After defeating Mara, the first thing we did was get all the towns and cities of Briarwood Kingdom back on their feet and help them become the beautiful town and cities I knew they could be.

We began with Thornton, the town where the transformation started. Every house has been renovated using better, cleaner, and healthier materials, like I knew my dad would have done. Each home now has running water, just like the castle's facilities. I have ensured that none of my subjects would ever endure poverty and misery again by holding court every week and listening to their troubles and coming up with solutions that would work and not just empty promises.

The entire Kingdom, people readily embraced me as their Queen, the sleeping princess of House Briar Rose. The rightful heir to Briarwood Kingdom. Their acceptance stemmed from the return of the Briar Rose lineage to the throne, as they believed that its presence guaranteed not just prosperity, but also the absence of hardships.

The sad beast that once was fueled by revenge and had my heart in its iron grasp was no longer. In its place, there was only joy and love. Seeing how my subjects were thriving and

how peaceful we all were interacting with each other only made my heart swell even more.

While Aurich's obsidian eyes found mine and locked onto them, his delectable plump lips curled into the smirk he knew I love and made me weak in the knees. The skin around his eye wrinkled as he made his way through our friends and guests to meet me and our daughter half way.

"Hi my gorgeous wife. I do not tire of saying those words." He beamed as he kissed me with a passion that took my breath away, which he too soon broke. Leaving me panting and wanting more.

"Too much, love? Can't handle a little fire from your King?" He teased in his husky voice as he heard me gasping while I tried to compose myself. Mischievousness was written all over his beautiful dark as ebony face. I knew what that glint in his eyes meant, but now wasn't the time or the place to indulge in those kinds of things.

"I'll handle your fire for you later, Your Majesty." I replied sensually as I covered our daughter's ears while I leaned in for another swift kiss, making him smile through the kiss.

Aurich picked up Talia and twirled with her, making her giggle and scream of joy. When they were done, he kissed her forehead and held my hand as we three walked toward the thrones waiting for us. We enjoyed the celebration with everyone present till the wee hours of the night.

However, in the middle of the festivities, I had to take Talia to her bedchambers as I promised her to finish the story. I

helped her change into her sleeping attire and get her into her bed. She laid in her bed, ready for the story. Before I could get to the part she loved, the one where I got rescued from the imps by her daddy, she was fast asleep. I kissed her on her forehead and caressed her small head as I stood up from the chair to leave her chambers.

“And they lived happily ever after.” I heard three voices behind me say in unison. I turned swiftly with my sword in hand, ready to defend my daughter. But to my surprise, three fairies were standing at the side of Talia’s bed, dressed in green, pink and blue.

Hilda, Tilda, and Frida.

My three fairy godmothers, all three smiling with open arms. I put my sword away as I ran up to them, also with an open arm. Pouring all my love for them in that one embrace.

My mind replayed the conversation between us when I returned to the cottage to tell them that I finally freed my Kingdom from all the evil and wickedness.

They had asked about my plans for the magic now embedded within my sword, the one Tilda created for me. It held the power to transport me back to my own time, reuniting me with my parents. A chance to lead the life denied to me due to the sleeping curse.

“I miss my mother and father, and the ache for the life I should have shared with them a hundred years ago is a constant presence,” I admitted, my voice laced with grief. “Yet, I’ve made the hard choice not to wield Mara’s

malevolent magic for this purpose, for two compelling reasons.” I held up my fingers, ticking off my points. “First, using her wicked sorcery to get my deepest desire would make me no different from Marra herself. Second, this is my present reality, one in which countless friends have become my chosen family, and most significantly, where my heart belongs. Here is where Aurich is.” A wide smile spread across my face as I concluded, a sense of belonging and purpose settling in that very moment.

That memory reminded me that no matter how much I hurt and longed for my parents, this is where I belonged, I was where I was supposed to be.

With my family that Aurich and I made.

“Now we can say they lived happily ever after.” I told them as happy tears rolled down my cheeks.

The End

Thank You

Dear Lovely Reader,

I hope you have enjoyed *The Awakened Beauty*. Thank you for taking the time to read my short story and if you enjoyed it or even if you didn't, it would mean a lot to me if you would leave me a review on Amazon. I highly appreciate your review as it helps others to find this and my other stories.

Thank you so much. Without you, the readers, this book wouldn't be possible. Looking forward to create more stories for you to fall in love with.

Happy Reading,

Kindra

About The Author



Fantasy/Paranormal romance author Kindra White is a mother of three and a wife. Born on the island of Aruba, she is an avid reader who took the plunge and started creating her own books to help break the stigma that women face. She currently lives in Enschede, The Netherlands, where when she's not bringing readers more books, she enjoys baking a killer cheesecake and taking care of her family.

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With this QR code or the link, you can find all my socials, my website, and a sign up form for my newsletter. Link: <https://linktr.ee/KindraWhite>



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And last but not least to you, **my dear lovely readers**, for choosing this story to read.

Also By Kindra White

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