



THE FAE OF THE FOREST

MOUNTAIN  
OF  
MIRRORS  
AND  
STARLIGHT

KATHERINE MACDONALD

**MOUNTAIN OF DREAMS AND  
STARLIGHT**

**A SNOW WHITE RETELLING**



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PART  
ONE  
THE MORTAL REALM







# 1

## THE PRINCESS OF FAERIE

**A** dawn of silver streaks and lavender clouds stretched out over the rolling fields, fooling Princess Aislinn, just for a moment, that they were going somewhere else. Somewhere bright and wondrous, exotic and inspiring—

Somewhere other than a cold mortal castle where everyone either feared or hated her.

Aislinn had been to the mortal world a few times before. She remembered it as stony and grey, a blank, dull place, where everything looked exactly the same, like an artist painting with only three colours but an oddly creative imagination when it came to shades of brown. The clothes were terrible. The attitudes to anything fae and interesting? Even worse.

Her stomach rumbled. They'd had a simple breakfast of venison and honeyed figs a few hours earlier, but that felt like a long time ago now, and the food awaiting her in Afelcarreg would likely not settle her hunger much. The mortals had a

way of cooking that seemed to suck the flavour from even the finest game.

She stopped her mount—a fine palomino stallion called Snapdragon—and paused over the hills, staring at the castle in the distance that was to be her prison for the next two weeks.

*Just two weeks, she reminded herself. You are immortal. In a century, this will be but a sneeze.*

But Aislinn was only nineteen years old, and time still moved slowly for her.

Her mother stopped shortly in front of her, glancing over her shoulder. Though there were nearly fifty years between them, Queen Juliana Ardenthorn looked little over twenty-five, the two of them passing more easily for sisters. Their faces were similar, though Aislinn bore flecks of green in her sea-blue eyes, and whilst both bore locks of thick brown hair, Juliana's was lighter and tawny, Aislinn's more chestnut red.

Although mortal-born, Juliana's ageing had slowed when she married Prince Hawthorn, now the King of Faerie, and whilst she still had the rounded ears and never healed as quickly as her subjects, she seemed far more fae than human.

“Nervous, daughter?” Juliana asked.

“I am rarely nervous,” Aislinn replied, glad that for all she couldn't lie, at least she wasn't forced into honesty. She *was* nervous, and she hated it. She just wasn't nervous *often*.

A blood-curdling shriek sounded from behind them, followed by a loud thunk and the braying of horses. The two

women turned; the royal carriage, whilst not under attack, had come to a sudden halt.

“Oh dear,” Juliana said, “the boys seem to have run into a spot of trouble, should we perhaps return to them?”

Aislinn knew her brother’s screams well enough to know he was not in any real danger. This was a surprise shriek, not an *oh-dear-I-appear-to-have-set-myself-on-fire-again* shriek, or an *oh-dear-mortal-peril* shriek. Sure enough, when the carriage door was wrenched back, it revealed nothing but Aislinn’s father and brother pressed at opposite sides of the box, and a small, frost-eared black cat sitting on the floor between them.

“Spirits,” Juliana said, rolling her eyes. “I thought you were being attacked.”

“Racing to my rescue again, wife?” said Hawthorn, blue eyes gleaming. “Some things never change...”

“I was more worried about him,” Juliana said, pointing to their son.

Beau climbed off the seat, brushing down his blue-green doublet. He looked a lot like their father, with a smooth face and sharp cheekbones, and the same deep-sea eyes, though his dark hair didn’t quite reach the raven-feather depths of Hawthorn’s. His appearance was softer too, and he had on more than one occasion—particularly when he was in a more feminine mood—been mistaken for a girl.

“I’m fine,” Beau said. “It’s just Hecate.”

He bent down to pick up the feline and slid back into his seat.

“You brought your *cat* with you?” Aislinn asked, wondering how she’d not noticed her for the past several days of their journey.

“Of *course* not!” Beau insisted, stroking behind her ears. “She must have... climbed into our luggage, or something.”

Juliana sighed. “Are we still sure that she’s a cat?”

Everyone paused. They were all quite certain that Hecate was not, in fact, a normal cat. For starters, she’d been around since Beau and Aislinn were children, and had always been old. She had a tendency to disappear for months on end and reappear as if nothing had happened. She also had a way of looking at you as if she were peering into the depths of your soul, but, as Hawthorn had pointed out many times before, a lot of cats did that.

Most likely she was some kind of cat-seelie hybrid, but as she seemed benign, and Beau was particularly fond of her, her presence was tolerated in the castle.

It was not the first time she’d joined them for a road trip. It was, however, the first time she’d remained undetected for so long.

“Is everything all right, Your Majesties?” came the voice of Miriam of Bath, Captain of the Guard, and Hawthorn and Juliana’s most trusted knight. Like Aislinn, she’d clearly learnt to detect the differences in Beau’s screams over the years of



loyal service. Her husband, Barney, had been their nanny growing up.

“Quite all right, Miriam,” Hawthorn returned. “It’s just the cat.”

“Again?” Miriam groaned. “Never mind. Shall I restart the procession?”

“One moment.” Hawthorn turned to Aislinn. “Trade places with me.”

“What?”

“I require your horse.”

“But *why*?”

“I wish to ride beside your mother in the starry-eyed manner of our youth. Perhaps she’ll even scowl at me for old times’ sake. Ah, there it is. Delightful.”

Aislinn groaned, but did as she was bid, dismounting and casting the reins in her father’s direction. It did no good to argue, especially on small matters, and she’d had the horse most of the morning.

She still grumbled under her breath as she climbed in the carriage, and the journey resumed.

Beau looked up at her, Hecate purring contentedly in his lap. “You seem cross. Do you want to stroke the cat?”

“I don’t want to stroke the cat, Beau!”

“What do you want, then?”

Aislinn sighed, slumping back in her seat. *Not to be going to the mortal world. Not to be preparing for endless parades and people either mocking me or walking on eggshells around me.*

Beau didn't get it, partly because he was a boy and a lot of the expectations of the mortal world didn't affect him, but also partly because he just didn't notice that sort of thing and liked people in general an awful lot more than anyone else in the family. People were never frightened of *him*—or if they were, it was never for long.

She sighed, leaning back in her seat, and staring wistfully out of the window. She wished she could transform into a bird and fly away from it all, but transforming was incredibly hard, difficult magic, and even though Aislinn was the future queen of Faerie, magic wasn't really her forte.

There was nothing to do but wait and wish.



Two hours later, the party arrived at the gates of Afelcarreg Castle, home of King Owen. It was, much like everywhere else, a place of stone and iron, leeches of colour, more prison than palace. No wonder the mortals decorated themselves with flashy jewels and gaudy patterns; the clothing of the courtiers was the one drop of colour waiting to greet them in the courtyard.

King Owen met them on the steps, as did the entirety of his staff. He was a portly gentleman with silver hair and a red

face, wearing crimson robes and a gold crown, both heavily embellished yet poorly crafted.

“King Hawthorn, Queen Juliana!” he said, greeting them as if they were old friends rather than tentative acquaintances. “You had a pleasant journey, I hope?”

“The weather was fair,” Hawthorn agreed. “Until recently.”

A thin drizzle had washed over the flagstones, turning them silver. Further introductions were delayed under the rush to get inside. Servants twittered nervously around the party, giving them a wide berth as they were led into the castle and escorted straight into the main hall, a room strung with banners. Despite the colour—and Aislinn’s half-fae eyes—it seemed impossibly gloomy.

They were seated at the head table, pewter plates hastily laid out in front of them. Aislinn wondered how long food would take. For all that mortals had so few years in which to live, everything seemed to take *so long* here.

“My children,” Hawthorn said, turning to introduce them properly. “My daughter Aislinn, and my son Beau.”

“Ah, the crown prince, I take it?” Owen said, ignoring Aislinn.

Hawthorn’s brow furrowed before Aislinn’s could. “Actually, Aislinn is our firstborn. She shall inherit the throne one day, so long as she wishes it.”

Owen raised an eyebrow. “Crown princess, eh? How peculiar. You’ll not hear me say a woman can’t rule, though.

My late wife managed it for many years.” He gestured to a tapestry nearby, where a dark-haired woman was rendered in thread. “My Gwyn,” he said. “Gone these six months past. Castle hasn’t been the same without her.”

“My condolences,” said Hawthorn.

Owen looked down, but only briefly. He finally looked Aislinn in the eyes. “You’ll be looking for a husband to rule alongside you, I expect?”

“I am in no rush,” Aislinn returned, hoping she didn’t sound too annoyed. Why were the mortal world so obsessed with marriage? She’d yet to visit a mortal castle and not be asked a similar question, or worse—have someone try to make her a highly unflattering offer. “I have centuries to play with, after all.”

The food arrived, but Aislinn found she had no stomach for it. She speared a piece of roast pork with her fork and held it there.

“And what will you fill those centuries with?” Owen smiled, as if he found the idea of a woman doing anything with her time a novelty.

“I fail to see how my time would be better filled by a *husband*.”

Owen laughed. “Sorry, Princess, I am merely unused to conversing with young, unmarried women—you *are* young, I take it? Hard to tell with the fae.”

“I am nineteen, Sire.”

“And what do fae girls of nineteen do, if not seeking husbands?”

“The same things fae boys do, only likely better.”

Beau made a slight snort of indignation, but it was quickly muffled.

“Aislinn is an excellent swordswoman,” Hawthorn interrupted, his voice laced with pride. “Although no match for her mother.”

“Yet,” Juliana added, flashing her daughter a wink.

“Swordswomen?” Owen said, eyes round. “My, my! How, er, unusual!”

“In Faerie, there are no such divisions amongst the sexes,” Hawthorn continued. “It has always been so. I’ve yet to think of a reason why it should be otherwise.”

Owen went very quiet for a moment after that, and the rest of the meal continued in relative peace. They were led away to their own chambers to rest, a cold and draughty set of rooms furnished in red and gold. The walls and ceilings were painted with leaves of ochre and crimson, though the plaster was cracked and peeling. Beau fixed a few of the cracks with his magic, the tears knitting back together beneath the soft glow of his fingers. Aislinn could do little things like that too, but it took her too long and never looked the same so she’d largely given up trying.

Bowls of water had been set out for them—lukewarm by now, of course. Heating water, at least, was easy enough. She

took off her travelling clothes and changed into one of the gowns she'd brought with her: billowing blue, printed with a forest scene of apples and deer and stitched with silver stars.

Beau sighed when he saw it. "Father tells me I'm not to wear dresses whilst we're here," he said. "A travesty."

"I'm sure you'll cope. You don't *usually* wear dresses."

"I like having my options open, though."

*Me too, Aislinn thought to herself, and I'd trade this dress for a doublet in seconds if it avoided all the awkward stares and conversations I am bound to encounter tonight.*

Their parents busy for a few hours with matters of state, the siblings busied themselves with inspecting their lodgings and trying out a mortal card game that had been set aside for them, but they couldn't work out the rules and the cards didn't seem to fulfil any function that they could see.

Eventually, a servant was sent to escort them down to dinner. He would not look either of them in the eyes, and whenever they met someone else on their journey, they swiftly turned and walked in the other direction.

Beau leaned in next to her ear. "Do you think they heard about the time we were in Pendle and you accidentally set fire to—"

"Ssh, Beau!"

He held up his hands.

The main hall was awash with courtiers when they arrived. A troupe of musicians had set up in the corner, singing a jaunty tune. Even they seemed to quieten when Aislinn and Beau entered the room, although they sparked up again when King Owen welcomed them and gestured to the table. Aislinn looked longingly across the room for another friendly face, but —

She froze.

She was still looking for *her*. Even after all this time.

Beau brushed the back of her hand, although he could sense it. “Pheasant?” he prompted. “The blackberry sauce is... not bad.”

“Your knights appear quite splendid,” Owen said loudly, drawing her attention. “I thank you for the demonstration, earlier. Do you keep much of a military, King Hawthorn? Or do you mostly rely on magic?”

Hawthorn paused, almost imperceptibly, selecting his next words carefully. The alliance with Owen was a new one—it did not do to show his hand too early. “We keep a balanced force,” he responded. “Magic and brawn both.”

In truth, Aislinn knew, their military forces were small. No one had dared invade Faerie in hundreds of years, although there were some among their subjects who believed the mortal world needed a reminder that they were something to fear.

*They don't need a reminder, Aislinn knew, every time we visit, I can see how terrified they are.*

Owen's gaze misted over, and for a moment, he stared at nothing.

"Your Majesty?" Hawthorn prompted. "Are you well?"

"I was just wondering if things might have been different if you'd been visiting six months ago, with all this extra power."

"Why?" said Beau, wiping blackberry sauce from his chin. "What happened six months ago?"

"My son was taken," Owen explained. "Right after my wife died."

The table went quiet.

"Taken?" Juliana asked eventually. "How? And by whom?"

"*Dwarves*," Owen hissed, as if the very word was filthy. "They fled to the northern mountains with my boy, Caerwyn. My soldiers gave chase, of course, but it was winter, and those dwarves are tricky devils. They led them on a wild goose chase until the path closed up with snow."

Aislinn couldn't imagine a world where a bit of snow prevented passage. Whilst magic was not one of her greatest skills, she could summon enough fire with a click of her fingers to burn through most things given time.

"Path opened up again a few months back," Owen continued, "but by then, they were long gone. I hoped, at first, that they would want to bargain with us—but we've had no word from them. I've had to come to terms with the fact he's probably dead."



Once more, silence settled over the table.

“You’ll pardon me, Your Majesty,” continued Hawthorn, “but had you done anything to anger the dwarves? I will admit I have not had many dealings with them.”

Owen shook his head. “None that I can think of. We knew there was a band of them living up in the mountains, but they’d never bothered us before.”

It was curious behaviour, Aislinn admitted, but much like her father, she didn’t know much about them. There were only a few dwarves living outside of their fortress—a great kingdom somewhere beneath Winter, one of the regions of Faerie—but no fae had set foot there for a century. There was some tentative alliance between them, but it mostly amounted to mutual neglect, an agreement to completely ignore one another.

Beau probably knew more, but he was currently feeding tiny strips of pheasant to the cat that had managed to crawl under the table.

“Interesting,” Hawthorn said, running a hand under his chin, “I wonder, King Owen... might you permit one of my party to examine the trail? I cannot promise anything will come of it, of course, but they might be able to discover *something*.”

Owen’s frown increased. “One of your party?”

“My daughter,” Hawthorn suggested. “She is our finest tracker, save perhaps her mother, and I prefer having her by my side, unless she’s dying for the hunt.”

“I am not dying for the hunt,” said Juliana, smiling.

Aislinn’s heart thumped. A chance to get out of here? To run wild and free, to track, to use her skills—

Owen blinked. “Are you sure, King Hawthorn? Skilled as you say she is, the mountains are no place for a young lady—”

Aislinn clicked her fingers, and flames burned at the tips. “What about young ladies who can summon fire on command?”

Owen’s eyes widened. “It seems I have underestimated you.”

Aislinn smirked, waving away her flames—which was just as well, she wasn’t sure how long she could keep that up. Beau was the magician in the family. She desperately, *desperately* wanted to warn the king not to make a habit of underestimating women, but she also knew that the point of this visit was to try and make allies, not enemies.

Aislinn didn’t have her father’s silver tongue or her mother’s confidence.

But she could find the King’s stupid son, if he was still alive. She could.

“It happens, my liege,” she said, forcing a smile, “but I assure you, I can do this. If your son is alive, I will bring him home.”



## 2

### A GATHERING OF WEAPONS

Shortly after making her declaration, a young gentleman in a red doublet caught Aislinn’s eye. He was handsome, in a rough, mortal sort of way. She’d had mortal lovers before. She was not immune to their broader, more developed bodies.

“Your Highness,” he said, coming over to the table, “I am Lord Osian of Aberdyfi. Would you care for a dance?”

Aislinn stared at him. “No.”

Hawthorn coughed, leaning towards her and whispering in her. “Our alliance is a tentative one, daughter. It does not do to insult our host’s guests.”

“He asked me to dance. I do not wish to. What am I supposed to say?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of a way.”

He slid back into conversation with King Owen, and Aislinn turned once more to Lord Osian. “But I will,” she said.

Osian smiled, holding out his hand, giving no indication that he’d overheard her interaction with her father at all. He pulled

her towards the dancers, and they fell into the step, following the movements of the others.

“You are very elegant, Princess Aislinn.”

“So is my brother,” she said. “Why don’t you ask him to dance next?”

Osian snorted. “Do you not care for compliments?”

“I do about some things.”

“Oh? Such as?”

Aislinn was in no mood to be ridiculed again as a woman who could wield a blade. “I do not wish to say.”

“Ha! I’ve heard about the fae’s inability to lie. I must say, it’s refreshing.”

Aislinn could think of nothing to say to that. Osian twirled her under his arm.

“Tell me, Your Highness, do you find me handsome?”

*Yes*, thought Aislinn, although that did not mean she had to like him. “Would it offend you if I said no?”

He laughed again, his eyes gleaming. “You are... delightful.”

The song drew to a lull, but Osian did not let go of her waist. Aislinn could flip him over in a second and have the blade she’d stashed beneath her skirts at his throat in three, but she heeded her father’s warning.

She gestured to an alcove nearby. Osian seemed only too happy to accompany her.

The minute they were out of view, she pressed him against the wall. He seemed to enjoy that, too.

He enjoyed it less when she let loose her glamour, her power snaking into his eyes, but by the time he realised that anything was amiss, he was under her thrall.

Her father had rules about glamouring mortals—laws even. He'd allowed her to learn because he felt that firstly it was a skill she should have for emergencies, and secondly because he knew nothing piqued curiosity so much as the forbidden. Aislinn, for the most part, avoided using it, and rarely had an opportunity where she considered it 'fair'.

She believed this counted.

"Tell me, Lord Osian," she started, "do you have any interest in courting me?"

"I do not," he replied, voice monotone, eyes glazed.

"Then why this foolish attempt to charm me?"

"I've heard that fae women are skilled lovers, and am keen to test the theory myself."

Aislinn raised an eyebrow. "I understand the curiosity, but I do not stand false flattery. Be upfront about your intentions in future. Good day, Lord Osian."

She released him from the glamour and ducked outside of the alcove, nearly bumping straight into Beau. "Ah," he said briskly. "I was just coming to check if..."

"If I needed rescuing?"

“Um...” Beau seemed to be searching for the answer that would least annoy her.

“I don’t need anyone to fight my battles for me.”

“Why not? You fight plenty of mine.”

“Only when you need me to.”

Beau sighed. “You’re allowed to let people help you, you know. It isn’t some sign of weakness—”

“People get hurt when they help me.”

“Ais—”

He reached out to grab her arm, but she shucked him off. “This dance bores me,” she said. “I’m going back to our chambers.”



Beau loved his sister probably more than anyone else in the whole world, but she could be a bit of an idiot at times. As soon as she had accepted the quest from King Owen, she wanted to race off without so much as a plan.

Their parents exchanged a worried look, the same one that came with a side of, “she gets it from your side of the family.”

Beau was inclined to believe it was a bit of both. Juliana’s eagerness for battle, Hawthorn’s desire to just get the job done quickly and surely, without necessarily thinking everything through. It was not the best combination, and somewhat

exacerbated by Aislinn's desire to get out of the castle as soon as possible.

"We've just arrived!" he said, following her back to their chambers. "Can you not just relax for one moment?"

"Hunting people is relaxing!"

"The fact that you genuinely think that is troubling."

Aislinn, not to be dissuaded, only agreed to delay the journey until tomorrow morning. He suspected she was still hungry, and, as much as she didn't want to admit it, knew that *some* planning had to take place beforehand. He made his way to the library as she sat in their room, stabbing the slices of blood-red meat she'd had sent up.

The library was a good idea. It was quiet and calm, there were a fair few volumes on the mountain and the forest around it, a decent map, and a couple of tomes on dwarves, too.

The rather attractive young librarian assisting him in his search proved a little distracting, however.

It was difficult to read through any of it thoroughly in the time that they had, but Beau had an excellent head for reading. He wasn't quite as good as their Aunt Aoife, who remembered everything she read as soon as she saw it, but he certainly had a gift for it. Aoife had taught him well.

He returned to their chambers in the evening, his notes carefully written up.

Aislinn was hurling knives into a hay bale when he arrived.

“What’s with the hay bale?” he asked.

Aislinn did not pause. “I wanted to throw them at the headboards but purposefully damaging our host’s furniture did not seem like the mark of a true princess.”

“So... a hay bale then?”

“It was the best I could do, but it’s nothing like stabbing *real flesh*.”

“I worry about you sometimes.”

Aislinn at last looked up. “What’s with the glasses?”

“Oh,” said Beau, blushing as he pressed the new spectacles up his nose. “Well, I went to the castle library to see what I could find about dwarves, and there was this *very* attractive librarian there. He looked so adorable in his spectacles I had to try out a pair for myself—”

“Beau—”

“Don’t I look dashing?”

Aislinn sighed. “Try not to crush on any more mortal men while I’m gone. They’re funny about that sort of thing here.”

“By ‘funny’ do you mean ‘terrible’? Because yes, yes they are.” He sighed, placing his hand on his heart. “I promise to only outwardly display affection for the women of court, although it feels like I’m shutting half of myself away.”

“Read a book. You’ll be fine.”

“That does tend to usually help...” Beau paused. “I could come with you, you know.”



“What?”

“To rescue the prince. I could come with you. I’m not *completely* useless in the field—”

“Who called you useless?”

“Umm? You? Several times.”

“I have no memory of this.”

“It was last week, Ais.”

Aislinn sighed, tossing her knife aside and throwing herself on one of the beds. She wriggled uncomfortably over the lumpy mattress. Beau didn’t blame her; mortal beds left a lot to be desired.

He flopped down next to her. It was just as bad as he imagined. “Are you trying to prove something by going alone?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything. I just want silence and the opportunity to stab something.”

“That does sound plausible.” He stared up at the fabric draped over the bed posts. “Strange that the dwarves would kidnap the prince.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, it’s not really their style. They’re short tempered, but an honourable people, from what I can gather.”

“No entire race can be completely honourable.”

“What’s the motive, then? Not greed, if they haven’t tried to ransom him.”

“Maybe they accidentally killed the brat and are just covering their tracks.”

Beau paused. “You don’t seem to be particularly concerned about the missing prince.”

“I don’t know him.”

“You don’t feel sorry for King Owen, losing his wife and son one after the other?”

“I don’t like him.”

“His sadness is real.”

Aislinn shrugged at this, rolling away from him—something she had a tendency to do when confronted with emotion. She bent down to pick her knives off the floor, examining each one as she did so. “Have you seen our parents?”

“They went to source you some rope for your journey. They may be some time.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Umm...” Beau grimaced, not particularly wanting to recall the conversation he’d overheard, “I believe Father said something about, ‘I’m considering asking you to tie *me* up, but that may not be a good idea, given how much I’ve annoyed you of late...’ It was followed by much glaring and giggling.”

Aislinn stared at him. “I may never use rope again.”



Juliana and Hawthorn reappeared an hour or so later, together with a large quantity of rope and several other pieces of equipment they thought would be useful.

“I bought you a new knife,” Juliana proclaimed, unsheathing it to show her the blade.

“It’s the same as *all her other knives!*” Beau hissed.

The two women snapped back that it was not, and Hawthorn rolled his eyes affectionately and whispered, “women” under his breath. Aislinn pretended not to hear.

“How can you stand it here, Mother?” she asked as Juliana helped her pack a small bag of supplies.

“I am an excellent queen and have mellowed in my old age.”

Aislinn blinked. “I only believe one of those things.”

Juliana beamed. “And you are right to.” She kissed her daughter’s forehead. “Try and get some rest tonight. You will need it in the morning.”

One by one, the family turned in for the evening, and silence descended over the castle in swathes of palpable darkness. Aislinn’s fae eyes made out more than the average mortal, but there was a pitchy quality to the nights in the mortal world that didn’t exist in Faerie, a graininess to the dark. The sheer *silence* didn’t help, either. In Faerie, someone or something was always awake, but here, there was nothing, and they were too far away from the forests to experience its night-time melodies.

Aislinn tossed and turned, but she could not sleep. The terrible quality of the beds didn't help.

Deciding that sleep was beyond her, at least for now, she got up, wrapped herself in her favourite cloak, and stepped into the hall.

Miriam was on duty outside, but she gave Aislinn nothing but a curt nod and a look of 'of course it's you' and said nothing. She was used to Aislinn sneaking out, and trusted that she wouldn't go far. Aislinn tiptoed along the stone, cape fluttering behind her like a pair of wings, and slipped into the main hall.

She turned her attention to the tapestries along the walls, to the ones depicting the reign of 'Good Queen Gwyn'. She was no warrior, by all accounts, but the court seemed to have respected her nonetheless, and mourned her death by illness still.

One of the tapestries depicted the birth of the prince, shown in a halo of gold light. Aislinn groaned; Faeries liked their royals well enough, but they never depicted them as *divine*. They were chosen by the earth and wind, their powers proof of their right, their ability to rule.

Aislinn really hoped she got better at magic by the time it came for her to take over, and thanked her stars she'd likely have centuries to practise.

One of the tapestries showed the prince as a young man—a thin, dark-haired, pale-faced creature, who looked like a harsh winter might finish him off. Aislinn wondered if the theory of

him expiring and the dwarves merely covering their tracks wasn't a good one. Oh well, at least it would get her out of the castle.

A light shone down the hall, and Aislinn turned to see a serving woman in her nightclothes, heading across the room with a candle. Their eyes met, and she stilled, looking like she wanted to bolt.

"Your Highness," she said eventually, dropping into a curtsy. "Can I help you at all?"

Aislinn frowned. "What are you doing up at this hour?"

"The king likes some company at night."

"Oh," said Aislinn, sensing she'd touched on a sensitive topic. Faeries rarely cared about sex or affairs, but she gathered mortals viewed things differently. It was best to appear modest in front of them. "I see."

"It isn't like that," said the serving woman, a bony lady with hair streaked with silver. "He just finds it difficult to sleep sometimes. He misses his wife."

Aislinn doubted that, because she doubted how much respect you could have for a woman if you didn't view their sex with the same reverence, but she said nothing.

"We all do," continued the servant.

"And the prince?"

The servant flinched, almost imperceptibly. "Yes, of course. Him too." She stared at his likeness. "He missed his birthday,"

she said quietly. "If he even saw it all." She pulled down her candle. "Will that be all, Your Highness?"

Aislinn nodded. The servant left. Aislinn stood for a while longer, staring at threaded faces, before eventually returning to her chambers. Sleep came slowly, but it did come, with dreams of woven deer and fabric trees and apples made of gemstones.



3  
THE PRINCE OF THE WOODS

The following morning, Aislinn's horse was saddled, and she made the last of her preparations with her family. Her father pulled her aside before she headed down to the stables, checking for an audience.

“Tread carefully, daughter,” he advised. “I have my doubts that these dwarves would have kidnapped the prince without cause. They're supposed to be a hardy, battle-loving bunch, but they have a strict code of honour. Something doesn't make sense here.”

Aislinn had been thinking the same, but personally she welcomed the chance to unravel the mystery. She remembered the servant girl flinching at the mention of the prince, before expressing fondness for him, and wondered if that was connected and which reaction was the lie. Beau would be better at this than her, but he hadn't been there to see.

Hawthorn remained quiet, chewing his lip. There was something else he wasn't saying.

“Speak your mind, Father.”

“I know this is the first mission you’ve been on since—”

“Father—”

“I’m sure you’d feel better going alone, but I would vastly prefer it if you took someone with you.”

Aislinn groaned. “No.” Taking someone else meant being responsible for someone else, opening them up to danger. She couldn’t watch out for them. She didn’t want to. “I’ll be faster by myself.”

“Faster is not safer.”

“Please, Father, I just need to get out of here and *hunt something*.”

“You do realise you are *rescuing* the prince, yes? Not hunting him? You are not your mother.”

“Of course—Wait, has Ma ever hunted a prince? Never mind, I don’t want to know the answer to that.”

“Shame. It’s a great story,” he remarked, somewhat wistfully. “Treasured memories—”

“I’m leaving now!”

“Take care, daughter. Don’t kill too many people.”

Aislinn grinned. She glamoured her cloak to something dull and boring that wouldn’t raise eyebrows as she rode through the town, and headed down to the stables.





The minute she was free of the castle walls, Aislinn felt as if a huge weight was rolling away from her, a levity that only increased the further away she was from it—from the castle, from the town, from mortals and their rules, from any pressures or responsibilities at all.

For a moment, even the mission didn't matter. She lifted the glamour from her cloak the moment she was free of the towns, and galloped through the fields with her cape splayed out like a pair of glittering dragonfly wings.

A princess of Faerie. No tool for mortals. A being, wild and free.

It took her most of the morning to reach the base of what the mortals called the mountains. Her home city of Acanthia stood beneath the shadows of the vast icy cliffs that marked the border of Winter; these slopes seemed more like steep, craggy hills. They were expansive, though, and no doubt far harder to traverse when covered with snow.

She followed the natural path up the side of the mountain, searching for signs of life, a trail that might lead her to the dwarves' hideout. It quickly proved more difficult than she'd anticipated, so she took out the map Beau had sourced for her and searched section by section. Most parts seemed wild and abandoned, claimed only by nature.

It was long, exhausting work, and she had to stop to rest several times, tired from the exercise or the sheer monotony of the task.

Snapdragon nudged her cheek as she bent to inspect markings in a tree trunk, deciding they were likely to be deer-made, not dwarven. She patted his nose, glancing at the sky. Nightfall was a couple of hours away.

Deciding to cover more ground before it grew dark, she headed north, deeper into the mountain range, into thick copses of trees that wove together like ebony threads beneath a sky alight with ribbons of gold and flame.

She closed her eyes, trying to call upon the magic of the forest, though it was a mortal one and didn't whisper to her like the forests of Faerie.

Still, something hummed inside her, a feeling she couldn't name, a hard tug against her heart.

It turned her towards the right.

Tracks in the mud ahead bore the imprint of a deer—possibly a stag, looking at the heaviness of prints. That didn't interest her; she'd caught the trail of several deer earlier in the day.

What *did* interest her were the tracks of large, heavy boots.

Aislinn slid off Snapdragon's back and went to inspect them closer.

Male, most likely, judging by the size. Could they be a dwarf's, too? They looked rather large for one, but she was fairly sure that, despite their short stature, dwarves were known to have large feet, and be quite heavy for their size.

She glanced behind her. There were no tracks leading up the mountain, and the nearest town in the other direction was miles and miles away, behind the peak. It seemed unlikely any human had come from that direction.

The tracks were fresh. Whoever made them was nearby.

Aislinn went back to Snapdragon and tied his reins to a nearby tree. She would be quieter on foot, and she needed the upper hand if she was to catch her prey.

Dwarves, she knew, were immune to glamours in general, but her cloak was spelled to shift in colour—not technically a glamour. She dulled the painted wings to a simple, forest green, pulled up her hood, and slunk down the path, keeping to the shadows of the trees until they branched out.

The tracks bent around a sharp incline of rock. Sounds of water ran behind it.

Aislinn inched closer, more carefully.

The mud gave way to stone, obscuring any printed tracks, but she refused to be deterred. They could easily pick them up again once the stone gave way. She kept moving, faster now, fearing she would lose them. She searched for flecks of mud along the pebbly road, upturned stones, bits of bent grass weaving between the rocks—

A stream ran alongside the path, obscuring the sound of her breathing. Ahead, a pool and a short waterfall appeared, and beside it... a large, grey, still shape.

The stag.

Aislinn approached, silent as wind, but the creature was obviously dead—a bolt clean through its neck. She bent down to inspect it.

It was still warm.

Whoever shot it was nearby.

She drew her dagger, but a large, heavy shape barrelled into her, knocking it out of her hand and rolling her over, arms and legs pinning her to the ground.

Her hood fell from her face, and her attacker blinked at her. Aislinn's heart beat wildly, like it was spinning out of control.

The face above her was far from unpleasant. It was a strong, warm face, with a jawline more square than the sharpness that dominated faerie features, with full lips pulled in an easy smirk. A tiny trace of fine, dark stubble dotted his chin, his skin had a soft, earthen tone—like one used to being out often in the sun. It was rough and smooth all at the same time, all earth and coal and velvet.

Aislinn disliked it almost as much as she enjoyed it.

“You're not a dwarf,” she said.

The tanned face stared back at her. “You're not a palace guard,” he said, looking at the dagger nearby. Evidently, it must have been like the ones they favoured.

“If only I could say your powers of observation are astonishing, but clearly, that is not the case.”

The man glared back at her, brow slightly furrowed. She wondered if it was her turn of phrase that confused him, the inability to state things outright.

He glanced at the side of her head, where her ears peeked through her hair. A gloved hand reached up to touch her ear cuffs, to examine whether the flesh beneath matched what the metal concealed.

His eyes widened when the cuff came away.

“*Fae*,” he whispered, scrambling to his feet. He drew his dagger between them.

“Oh, relax,” Aislinn said, climbing to her feet and readjusting her ear cuff. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

He did not seem convinced.

“I couldn’t say it if it wasn’t true!”

“Your kind has ways of twisting the truth. Maybe you don’t mean to hurt me. But there are many things you could do to me that wouldn’t hurt—”

“Fine, fine. I intend you no harm, complete stranger. I will not try to trick you, I will not attack you unless you attack me, I shall not manipulate or deceive or take any actions against you, at least until dawn tomorrow.”

He frowned, still brandishing his dagger. “That is... not comforting?”

“Always put a time limit on these things. I don’t know you, after all. I might need to take action against you another time. I

have to cover my bases.”

“Right...”

“I’m looking for a group of dwarves,” she said. “Have you seen any around here?”

He paused, only briefly. “What do you want with dwarves?”

“The rumour is that they kidnapped a prince. I’ve been sent to... well. I suppose I can’t share that.” Because even though Owen wanted him retrieved, her father was more interested in discovering the reason for his kidnapping in the first place. It would not help if this stranger reported Hawthorn’s interest in the dwarves to anyone else. He needed to make an ally of Owen, not an enemy.

“Can’t?” The man raised an eyebrow. “Or won’t?”

“I may have something of a joint mission.”

“*May?*”

“You’re a distrustful sort of chap, aren’t you?”

“Says the girl talking in riddles.”

Aislinn scowled. “Have you seen the dwarves or not?”

“No dwarves around here,” he said, jaw tightening. “Haven’t seen any for months.”

Aislinn narrowed her eyes. “You’re lying to me.”

“No, I’m not—”

“I’m accustomed to living with a liar, don’t insult me further. It won’t end well for you.” She moved forward,

picking up her sword.

“You said you wouldn’t attack—”

“I perceive your lie to be an attack on myself. I am allowed to defend myself in turn.”

“That’s—” He started backwards, falling over a tree root. Aislinn knocked the dagger out of his hand.

Truth be told, she knew she couldn’t hurt him, but he didn’t. And she could stand here until dawn, if she needed to.

His eyes flickered, and his gaze darted to the side.

Aislinn’s head turned, following his glance. The stag was *moving*, climbing to its feet with awkward, jerky movements, its neck hanging limply where the bolt had skewered it. White, empty eyes stared out of sunken sockets.

It was very obviously dead.

And still moving.

It charged towards her. Aislinn leapt out of the way, light as a cat, scampering up into a nearby tree. The stag rammed against the trunk, trees flurrying around it.

Aislinn plucked another dagger from her belt, dropped onto its back, and drove her second dagger into its spine.

It didn’t die. It didn’t even collapse, or flinch, or do *anything*.

It couldn’t feel pain.

It charged again, flinging Aislinn off its back. She rolled against the damp, earthy floor, skidding upright, diving for her

other dagger as it turned and staggered. She raced forward, slicing its side as she skidded past, but although half its insides spilled out, it didn't stop.

She'd heard of the undead before, but she'd never encountered them. It was one of the darkest magics in Faerie, prohibited by all. She'd half dozed off in the lessons that had mentioned them, assuming she'd never have to fight any.

She would just cut off its head. That tactic usually stopped anything.

*But how was it here in the first place?*

She turned back to the young man, but he was standing in complete shock, staring at the stag with his face frozen in horror.

He didn't even move when the stag turned to face him.

“Move!” she hissed.

He didn't.

The stag charged.

Without thinking, Aislinn dived between them, head filled with half-baked plans of conjuring a magic shield.

The stag reached them before the spell could even form in her mind, its massive antlers spearing her middle and driving her back against the stone.

Aislinn cried out, but the pain didn't reach her—not fully. All that reached her was this hot, explosive feeling, the desperate need to survive.



She sunk her dagger into its neck and wrenched through its muscle, until there was little more than spine connecting it to its body.

Still, it jerked forwards, its antlers burrowing deeper into her flesh.

She cried out then.

The young man rushed forward, sword in hand, and sliced the head away. It clung to Aislinn's middle as the body slumped against the ground, finally still.

Aislinn stared at it for two seconds, vision spotting, crisping away at the edges like paper in fire. A voice called to her—but she was already gone.

A decorative archway with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns. In the center of the arch is a large, bold number '4'. Below the arch, the title 'THE HOME OF THE DWARVES' is written in a stylized, serif font. The entire graphic is enclosed in a thin black border.

## 4 THE HOME OF THE DWARVES

**A**islinn's eyes opened beneath a wooden ceiling, her head groggy, eyes sticky with sleep. She tried to move, to sit up—

Pain lanced through her, forcing her back down.

She was accustomed to pain. A seasoned warrior. She'd broken half the bones in her body at one point or another.

But help was never far away. Someone was always there to patch her up afterwards. Her father, Beau, the court healer.

Well, aside from once.

That memory trembled inside her, worsening the pain. She rolled onto her side, trying to breathe through both—

“Steady, steady!” said a sharp, deep voice.

Aislinn looked up. At her side was a bronze-skinned dwarf, her silver-hair cut in a practical bob. She reached out to steady Aislinn with warm, calloused hands.

“What... what happened?” Aislinn asked, her mouth gummy.

“You got gored by a stag,” the dwarf replied. “You’ve been out of it all night and most of the day. Drink this.”

She handed her a tankard of rich, foul-smelling liquid. Aislinn wrinkled her nose. “What is this?”

“Medicine. It’ll help rebuild your strength. You lost a lot of blood, girly.”

Aislinn stared at the potion.

“If it were poison, I’d have dressed it up prettier.”

It was solid logic, and Aislinn was in too much pain to argue. She gulped it, choking on the stink, placing the tankard down when it was empty and waiting for it to work.

Nothing happened.

“I don’t... I’m not healing.”

“What, expecting instant results?” The dwarf laughed. “You fae! We’re *dwarves*, lass. Couldn’t do magic if we wanted to, and there’s no fancy fae plants around these parts, I tell you.”

Another dwarf appeared in the doorway, taller than the other one, not as old. She had charcoal hair, deep brown skin, and eyes as dark as pitch. Her throat bore three white scars across it.

“Ah, Flora,” she said, in a voice like honey and whiskey. “How’s the patient?”

“Alive and kicking, as you see.”

Aislinn stared at her, thoughts growing sharper. “Wait, where am I? There was a boy—and the stag, the stag was dead

but then it was—”

“Steady, steady!” Flora said. “The boy’s fine, lass. He brought you here. And as for where *you* are, well... you’re in our home. A cottage in the mountains. You’re safe enough here. Do no harm to us, and we’ll do none to you. Dwarven code.”

“And... the stag?”

The dwarves exchanged quick glances.

“You’re a faerie,” said the dark-haired one. “You never heard of the dead coming back to life?”

“Not without *reason*.”

“’Tisn’t ours to speculate,” Flora said, not meeting her eyes. “Or reveal.”

Aislinn took a deep breath. “Are you the dwarves that took Prince Caerwyn?”

Flora snorted. “That’s the rumour, is it?”

“My father doesn’t believe so.”

“Oh? And who’s your father?”

“King Hawthorn,” said Aislinn. “Ruler of all Faerie.”

The dwarves fell silent. They stared at each other solidly.

“Not quite *all* Faerie,” said the dark-haired one eventually. “One moment.”

They both stepped outside, closing the door behind them.

Aislinn took a moment to survey the rest of the room. It was a small, practical space, with a high-up window that let in four small squares of light. Shelves lined most of the space, filled with books and jars, stuff with herbs and potions. Drawings of medicinal plants were tacked to the walls. She rummaged through the drawers—clothes and bandages, needles with glass containers attached to them.

The last item was a surprise, but Aislinn recognised the rest—this was a healer’s study.

The door banged open again, and in walked another dwarf, the other two behind her. She was bronze-skinned with a head of fine silvery-brown curls, and her eyes were steel and amber. She looked to be in that gap between middle and old age, her face creased and fixed in something like a permanent scowl.

Their dwarven leader, without a doubt.

“I am Minerva Mountain-Cast,” the dwarf replied, her voice deep, as heavy as stone. She folded her arms across her chest, and Aislinn saw that the left one was made of metal. She tried not to stare. “This is my wife, Bellona Winterstone. She tells me your father is the King of Faerie?”

“I cannot lie,” says Aislinn. “It is true.”

“I hear the King took a mortal wife. Mayhap you inherited her false tongue.”

“She danced around the truth enough with Caer earlier,” Flora reported. “Or so he tells me. Seems unlikely she wouldn’t just lie if she could.”

“Look,” Aislinn continued. “I do not mean you any harm, and neither does my father. But King Owen is saying that you kidnapped his son—”

“Stepson,” Minerva corrected. “And we didn’t kidnap him. He ran away.”

Aislinn paused, taking all this in. “I... that’s not what... *why?*”

“Not for us to tell you, but he might.”

“Why would King Owen want him back—Wait.” Aislinn stilled again. She was missing something. Stepson. Caerwyn was his *stepson*. Yet he was still styled as prince—and she’d seen him wearing a crown in his portrait as a young boy.

King Owen had married the former queen. He wasn’t the rightful heir.

Caerwyn was.

And he’d just missed his birthday.

She hadn’t asked which one, but she had a sneaking suspicion it was twenty-one—the age that marked him as an adult in the mortal realm. A successor to the throne.

Not a boy. Not a boy at all.

And—if she had to guess again—she’d be willing to put money on the fact that Owen didn’t want him home.

He wanted him *dead*. He just needed to be sure.

“Um, Prince Caerwyn,” Aislinn began, “did he just turn twenty-one?”

“He did.”

“And is he... tall and tanned, with dark hair and rather well-muscled arms?”

Bellona bit her lip, hiding in a smile. “Yes.”

“So he’s—”

“The chap you tried to skewer earlier? Yes.”

Aislinn sunk into the pillow, burying her face.

“Don’t worry, pet, he didn’t take it too personally. Carried you here himself. Quite the image.”

Aislinn blushed. She was not accustomed to being carried, particularly by strong mortal men who... well. That hardly mattered.

“I need to report back to my father,” she said. “Let him know—”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Flora snapped.

“You won’t be in any—”

“It’s not us I’m worried about, lass. You’ve got a rather impressive hole in your middle. I won’t have you ruining the work I did of stitching you back together. I know you lot heal quickly, but you’ll be laid up here for at least three days unless you want to be crawling home.”

Aislinn winced, touching the thick bandages around her middle. She was unaccustomed to being told to rest, and despite what Flora said about fae healing, she took longer to heal than most. A downside of her mortal half.

She cursed the fact you couldn't heal yourself. She wasn't the best healer, but she'd be able to speed it up some. Beau had explained it to her once—how when you were injured, your energy was already taken up trying to heal the damage. You couldn't spend it elsewhere.

“Don't fret too much,” said Bellona, with a warm smile. “We're not terrible hosts. I'll wager you might even enjoy yourself.”



Even though moving felt like subjecting her abdomen to a white-hot cheese grater, Aislinn couldn't possibly comprehend lying in a bed for three days, and forced herself to move out of whatever passed for the medical bay not long after the other dwarves had left.

The main room of the cottage was a large, open space with a low ceiling. Most of it was taken up by the kitchen and the large table at the centre, but dozens of pantries, cupboards, desks and alcoves filled the rest of it. A workbench took up the whole of one wall, filled with gears and springs, deconstructed weapons, and scraps of iron in various sizes, all meticulously ordered. In the centre of the room was a small set of stairs leading to a loft above, where the dwarves must have slept. Did the prince sleep there too? Aislinn wondered. The steps and ceiling looked rather narrow and low for him. *Everything* was on the low and narrow side, actually—but why would it be anything else?



“You’re up!” said a cheery voice.

Aislinn turned towards the kitchen. A tiny dwarf emerged from a cupboard, whisking something in a large bowl. She was far smaller than the other three Aislinn had met so far, barely meeting her middle, and unlike the others she was as pale as a moonbeam, a ghost of spring. Flowers sat in the braids of her milk-white hair, offset by the periwinkle blue of her eyes. She looked almost like an elfin child, although Aislinn knew she was likely older than she was—dwarves could live for some six hundred to eight hundred years, but unlike fae, they were slow to age. Fae were much like humans for the first twenty-five years or so.

“Hello!” said the dwarf, setting down her bowl. “I’m Luna Tourmaline. I’m the cook!”

“I’m Aislinn Ardenthorn. The faerie princess.”

Luna smiled, her entire face bright. “So the others told me. Would you like to help me cook? I know you’re injured, so if you’re not up for it, it’s no matter—”

“Oh, no, please. Make me useful.”

Luna’s grin widened. “You sit there,” she said. “I’ll get you peeling.”

Another dwarf came in as Aislinn began with the apples. She introduced herself as “Fortuna Springshard, but you may call me Fort.” She was a small, battle-scarred warrior with short, cinnamon-coloured hair, brown skin and amber eyes. She had a pair of pistols strapped to either side of her thighs,

which she started cleaning at the table only to be shooed by Luna to the workbench. Her fingers moved quickly over the parts of her weapons, like someone used to sleight of hand. She reminded Aislinn of a fox.

“How many of you are there?” she asked.

“Seven dwarves,” Luna chimed, “and Caer, of course.”

“Are you... a family?”

Fort snorted, but Luna just smiled sweetly. “*All* dwarves are family,” she explained. “It is our way. None of us are blood relatives, though, if that’s what you’re asking, though Bell and Min are married.”

“Can you tell me what you’re doing on the surface?” It was rare to find dwarves in the mortal realm, though she’d heard of it happening. You might find them in parts of Faerie—usually integrated into other small communities, lest the rest of the world forget about them entirely.

“Yes,” said Fort and Luna in the same breath, and then grinned at one another, saying nothing more.

Aislinn thanked her stars that she didn’t have the same burning curiosity that Beau did—the lack of answers would drive him mad.

*Beau.*

Aislinn could still count the number of times she’d spent a night away from him, other than the two years she’d known before he was born, the years that she didn’t even remember.

The longest she'd ever been apart from him was when she'd been hunting that rogue giant with Cassandra—

And, well... that hadn't worked out.

Her midsection ached. How long would it take him to worry? Or her father. Hawthorn could be a bit... *dramatic* when it came to defending his family. Her mother would probably assume she could handle it, but even then...

"I don't suppose there's any way I could get word to Afelcarreg Castle, is there?"

Fort and Luna went quiet for a moment.

"We'd prefer not to let the King know where we are," said Fort shortly.

"I know you're probably worried about your family—" Luna offered, voice soft, "but—"

"I wouldn't tell them about you," Aislinn added. *Not by letter, anyway.* "I just need to let them know I'm safe. If I can't get a letter to them, maybe I could enchant a bird, or something—"

"Have to catch one, first," said Fort. "But we'll ask Diana, maybe."

"Diana?"

"Our hunter. She won't be too long now."

Aislinn set her mind to peeling the potatoes, trying not to move her middle too much. Fort and Luna both seemed to understand this, and set themselves down in places where she

wouldn't have to turn. Luna chatted merrily, teaching her a couple of dwarven ditties and giving her a lesson in folding dough. Fort retrieved her weapons for her—clean and newly polished.

“I'll need your word that you won't use these against us,” she said.

Aislinn promised. “I won't use these weapons or any others against you, unless first attacked or under threat of my life, at very least for the duration of my stay here.”

“Fair enough,” said Fort. “Useful, that—the not-lying thing. Makes things easier.”

“And harder. We're a naturally distrustful bunch.”

Fort shrugged. “Can we make you promise not to take Caer back against his will?”

Aislinn paused. She had given Owen her word, if he was alive, that she would bring him home. There was no time limit on that, but... “I won't take him back to Afelcarreg against his will,” she said, specific with her words. She could still take him elsewhere—halfway, maybe. Or she could get him to return willingly.

Although why would he want to?

Unless it was to murder his stepfather. She could help him do that, and still uphold her side of the agreement. If he was the rightful king, he might prove a better ally than Owen anyway. At least he hadn't objected to a woman being armed. Although, when he'd found out she was fae...

The sound of hooves followed by a loud bray came from the outside.

“My horse!” Aislinn tried to stand, but pain spiked through her.

The door opened. In walked Caerwyn, accompanied by the rest of the dwarves. Snapdragon pawed the ground in the yard behind him, tied up to a fence post.

“Princess,” he said, his features tight, “you seem to have lost your horse.”

Aislinn didn’t know why he was sneering at her title in such a way, and it erased any gratitude she might have felt for the safe return of her mount.

“*Prince*,” she returned. “I’d bow but I’m in pain and also I don’t want to.”

“Play nicely, children,” Minerva said, appearing behind her. “It’s almost dinner time.”

The dwarves immediately set to work laying out the table, each moving around the space like clockwork marionettes.

“I’m Diana,” announced one of the dwarves that had come in with Caerwyn and the others. Her dark brown skin bore patches of ink-blue, freckled white like snatches of starlight. Aislinn had never seen anything like it.

“Aislinn,” she repeated, wishing she could offer one of the mortal sayings— ‘it’s nice to meet you’ and ‘it’s a pleasure’ were far more polite, although rarely true. ‘It may be nice to

meet you, but I need more time to be sure' seldom sat well with people.

Diana passed Aislinn a plate and steered her into a nearby seat. Someone else got her a pillow.

"And, um, who are you?" Aislinn asked, turning to a bronze-skinned dwarf with hair like fire who was deconstructing something beside her.

"That's Magna, pet," Diana said, "but she doesn't speak with her tongue."

"Yeah, she's got better things to do," Bell added, passing her a gear that had sprung free. Magna snatched the gear from her fingers with the enthusiasm of a squirrel with a nut, and added it to her methodically organised collection. It seemed extremely important to her.

"Don't be worried if she doesn't look you in the eyes or ignores you for a while whilst she gets used to you. It's just her way."

Aislinn shrugged. "My Aunt Aoife rarely looks me in the eyes and she's known me my whole life. That's her way, too."

"Mortals would say she was a changeling," Caerwyn spoke up, looking Aislinn in the eye for the first time since his rude arrival. "A faerie child left in place of their own. I daresay that's not the truth?"

"Absolutely not," said Aislinn, leaving out that fact faeries absolutely did use to kidnap mortal children who caught their fancy in centuries gone by... they'd just never leave one of

their own in its place. Faerie children were considered far too valuable to abandon. Caerwyn already seemed wary of the fae and she wasn't going to give him more ammunition.

“Sit down, Caer,” Minerva instructed.

Caerwyn stilled. There was only one space left at the table; the seat next to Aislinn.

“But—” he started.

Minerva fixed him with a steely look, and he slid obediently into the space, tugging down the cuffs of his turned-up sleeves over his tanned, veiny arms.

Aislinn tried not to stare. Faerie arms were usually slender and willowy—they didn't look like that, didn't have tiny pink scars on them, like he'd been touched by flecks of fire. A few of her mortal acquaintances were more robust—and one of her oldest friends, a half-minotaur named Daisy. But Daisy was just *Daisy* to her—a warm, horned, grey-skinned presence that had been in life since she was born. She'd never once admired his arms before.

*Looked*, she told herself. *You've never once looked at his arms before.*

She tore her gaze away from Caerwyn's arms—now safely stowed beneath the frayed blue sleeves of his shirt—as a bowl was placed on top of her plate, accompanied by a hunk of fresh, crusty bread. A warm, lightly spiced scent wafted through her nostrils.

“Turnip and rabbit stew,” Luna declared, catching Aislinn’s look. “I do hope you like it.”

Everyone dug in immediately, dunking the bread into the food, slurping it up, demanding seconds. Whilst not as rich or fancy as anything back in Faerie, Aislinn had to admit the food was delicious.

“Eat everything on your plate,” Caerwyn whispered. “And feel free to ask for more.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s a dwarf thing. It’s rude to leave anything on your plate, and good manners to ask for more. They love feeding people. Just do it. It’s dwarf rule number three and four.”

“What’s one and two?”

“Um, drinking is good and braids are always in fashion? Look, I’m not sure they’re properly numbered, I just know to eat and drink when I’m told.”

The dwarves ate, and drank, and laughed as they did both, about everything and nothing in particular. From time to time, they’d turn to her, asking her questions about her life in Acanthia and what she liked to do for fun. Simple, kind, non-probing questions.

It almost felt rude to ask them about what they were doing here.

From what she could work out from their stories, they had all lived in Avalinth, the great dwarven stronghold beneath the earth, but had left it for undisclosed reasons and come here



some years ago. They'd taken Caerwyn in when he fled from the palace, even helping block up the path when King Owen sent guards after him.

Caerwyn was silent whenever the conversation fell to his origins, and he never elaborated on the details. Even the dwarves skirted over his role in the story, preferring to emphasise the action of the events.

“My mother caused an avalanche once,” Aislinn announced. “Flooded half of Winter, from the way she tells it.”

Aislinn paused in her tale, remembering that her mother spoke more of the action of that day too—largely to distract from the pain of having lost her oldest friend shortly after the mountains stilled.

“She sounds like a great warrior,” Minerva said stonily, as if she could read the thoughts that Aislinn wasn't speaking.

“She is.” *I hope I can live up to her legacy one day.*

One by one, the dwarves traipsed up to the loft. Diana and Flora stayed a while longer, helping Caerwyn set up a bed in one of the alcoves.

“You're in his,” Flora explained.

“He's welcome to have it—”

“You need rest, girl, if you are to heal. Caerwyn can sleep a little rougher for a few days. You don't mind, do you lad?”

Judging by Caerwyn's face, he clearly *did* mind, but he shrugged and went to bolt the doors.

The remaining dwarves headed upstairs, and silence quickly settled over the house.

“They fall asleep fast,” Caerwyn explained.

“Right...” Aislinn’s eyes drifted to her temporary accommodation. It felt too early to sleep, especially as she’d slept away half of the day, but she was equally unsure of how to spend the rest of the hours.

“Sleep well, Princess,” said Caerwyn, effectively dismissing her.

“You keep using my title, my name is Aislinn. *Ash-linn*. Spelt—”

“I know how it’s spelt. Your language was ours, once.”

“Given how old my language is, I suspect it is the other way around, and Aislinn is Irish, not Welsh.” ” Aislinn paused, waiting for a reaction that never came. “You don’t like the fae, do you?”

“I have my reasons to be wary.”

“Would you care to share any of them?”

“I would not.” His eyes drifted towards her door. “Make sure the window is shut fast,” he said. “It tends to bang in the wind, otherwise.”



5  
A DREAM AND A NIGHTMARE

In the dream, Caer was always small, a boy of maybe ten, not a man of twenty. There was something about his mother's illness that had rendered him senseless, made him feel like a child again, a helpless fawn in a forest of wolves.

His mother lay on the bed, her skin paper-thin, so white you could almost see through her. Her black hair had lost its lustre, grown brittle and grey, like the last clumps of charcoal after a fire. Only her lips retained any colour—blood red beneath the rough cracks.

He took her hand, fearful of crushing it. Her bones almost protruded the skin.

“Caer...”

She turned towards him, her chapped mouth moving into a smile. Her thumb brushed his knuckles, like she had done countless times throughout his childhood, singing him to sleep.

There would be no singing now. Her song had vanished long ago.

“My sweet boy...” she whispered, voice hoarse. “Why did you do this to your mother?”

Caer frowned. “Do? I didn’t—”

But suddenly his mother’s skin shrivelled from her bones, until she was no more than an animated corpse, a skeleton held together by threads of flesh. Her eyes sunk, her cheeks hollowed, her lips vanished leaving only a stark, hollow gap, which chattered as the world screamed around him.

*“Why did you do this, Caer?”*

Mother’s voice. Mother’s and not hers. Mother couldn’t scream or shriek like that—

The winds howled. The sun vanished. The air roared with emptiness. There was nothing in the world, no floors or walls, no sky or earth—nothing but Caer and the bed where his mother’s corpse wailed.

He woke in the dark of the dwarves’ cottage, heart pounding, almost hurting, his bed soaked with sweat.

Aislinn was hovering over him, pointy ears slicing through her unbound hair, shining like daggers in the shafts of moonlight. A cloud of something gold hovered around her, bright as flame—

He wanted to run from it.

A second later, it was gone, and his heart finally settled in his chest, quieter in her presence.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Caer breathed carefully, in and out, counting like Minerva had taught him during his first few nights. She was the only one of the dwarves who didn't always sleep soundly.

*“Think of something good,” she'd told him. “Something small. Concentrate on the details. Think of nothing else.”*

He'd had a wooden horse as a child—a tiny one he could carry in his pocket, made with real horse hair, its saddle painted apple-red. He concentrated on the slope of its neck, the softness of its mane, how black its eyes had once been.

The hold of the dream ebbed away.

“Fine, fine,” he said. “Just a nightmare—”

“You look hot—”

Her hand reached out to touch him, but he jerked back, heart thudding. Close. She was too close.

Aislinn pulled back her hand. “I can get one of the others, if you prefer?” she said, after a pause. “Flora, maybe?”

“I'm fine,” he insisted, despite the sweat clinging to his skin. “Don't waste your time trying to rouse the dwarves; they're heavy sleepers.”

The first few times he'd woken in the night, he had been certain he would wake them with his screaming, but no one had come until that night with Minerva when she'd already been up. He'd been tempted more than once to go to them since then. Most of them wouldn't have minded. Minerva certainly wouldn't, although her softness held a prickly quality. Luna, maybe, would want him to. She never seemed

annoyed by pain, never made anyone feel like they were inconveniencing her with their troubles.

But he wouldn't try. He could not wake them. They would not come.

"Go back to bed," he said, running his hands through his hair. "I'll be fine. I promise."

Aislinn did not move. She hovered by his side, and for one horrible moment, Caer thought she was going to reach out and touch him again.

She didn't, thankfully. She leaned back against the table, half-sitting.

Only when the distance grew did Caer realise that, foolish as it was, he'd wanted her to sit beside him. Her—anyone. Anyone warm and real.

"My brother and I would share our nightmares when we were children," she said. The soft quality of her voice startled him. He had not thought that there was any softness about Aislinn at all—she was dagger sharp, as tart as a gooseberry. But she looked and sounded softer in the moonlight, her skin silver in the dewy glow of the moon.

It was possibly just the lack of light, or his sleep-deprived mind playing tricks on him.

He cleared his throat. "Not anymore?"

"They got too real, the older we grew."

He understood that, and found himself wondering what she *did* dream of, the childish fantasies turned into grown-up nightmares.

“I once had a dream that I was a bee. I flew all over the castle, but then I got chased by the cat and Beau tried to swat me.”

Despite the nightmare still scratching at the corner of his mind, Caer found himself smiling. “Beau is your brother?”

She nodded.

“You’re close to him?”

“*Very*,” she said, as if confessing to some great secret. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“Secret’s safe with me.”

A pause rippled between them.

“Did you have that dream often?” he asked. “The bee one?”

“Hmm, a few times, yes. Mostly after we’d spent the day riding them.”

Caer paused, certain he’d misheard. “You’ve... ridden bees?”

“Giant ones, yes.”

“You’ve ridden a giant bee?”

“Ah huh.”

“You’re not just teasing me?”

“Me? Tease you?” She twirled a shining lock of auburn hair around her finger. “Does that sound like a thing I would do?”

“You’re very good at getting around the whole no-lies thing.”

She grinned, sly as a fox. “Much practice.” A yawn eased past her lips, and she stood up fully, glancing towards her door. “I suppose I ought to get back to bed...”

“Might be an idea.”

“If you wake again...”

“Yes?”

“Just... keep the noise down. I might have to do something unspeakably horrible if you do.”

He snorted, mostly at the use of the word *might*. An empty threat. “Goodnight, Aislinn.”

“Goodnight.”





## 6

### A WHISPER IN THE ROOM

It had been two full days now since Aislinn had left, and whilst Beau knew that it was foolish to start worrying so soon, he found he couldn't help himself.

“You don't look happy, son,” Hawthorn remarked that evening, whilst King Owen had stepped outside for fresh air. Juliana was examining the remains of the feast nearby, seeking out pastries. Beau wished he had the stomach to eat.

“I know.” He tried to sound light-hearted, “which is surprising, since I'm fairly sure I'm the happiest member of this family.”

Hawthorn blinked. “I'm happy!”

“Sure, you are now, but you still carry an air of only partially resolved childhood trauma.”

Hawthorn snorted. “How did you come to be so smart?”

“Not from you.”

Hawthorn grabbed his head and ruffled his hair aggressively. “Cheeky.”

Beau fought his way out of his father's arms—it had now turned into something more like a hug—and turned his attention to the rest of the room, searching for distraction. The court jester held his attention for all of maybe a minute.

“I'm worried about Ais,” Beau admitted.

“Your sister is a competent hunter. One of our finest,” Hawthorn said, as if he hadn't had a tracking spell placed on her the first three times she went out alone and had her privately followed, and as if Beau hadn't overheard him trying to talk her into taking someone with her.

He understood *why* she wanted to go alone, of course.

He just wished she understood why they really, really didn't want her to.

“I don't doubt her skills,” Beau insisted.

“What do you doubt, then?”

“I don't know. The world, I suppose.”

“That I understand.”

Some important courtier appeared shortly afterwards, and Hawthorn's attention was taken once more. Beau had no idea how the diplomatic relations were going; he had an interest, but Hawthorn always tried to keep him out of it. “It's not that I don't trust you,” he insisted. “I just rather want you to enjoy your youth. You're doing a poor job of it so far. Be wilder.”

Beau was not very good at being wild.

Finding himself incapable of relaxing, he decided to go to the library, determined to try and find a book to lose himself in. He started up the steps, passing by the king's room as he did so.

Someone was talking inside it.

He paused. Owen was supposed to be outside. He supposed it could be someone else—

Beau leaned against the door.

“It's all going fine, I assure you. We'll have him back in no time.”

It definitely *sounded* like Owen, but who was he talking to? And why had he had to sneak off to do so? There were no guards posted outside. Whoever he was speaking to, he didn't want anyone overhearing.

Wherever he went, guards followed. Why was the king sneaking around?

Beau listened more carefully, but he could not make out the voice of the other speaker.

“I know you're growing impatient. I am too. You are not the only one keen to see this through. The girl will find him, and if not, I am certain her father will go after her... You do not need to worry. I won't give him a choice.”

The room fell quiet for a moment.

“I understand,” said Owen's measured voice. “I will not let you down.”

Footsteps crept towards the door, and Beau bolted backwards, cramming himself into an alcove and casting a quick invisibility glamour with a flick of his wrists.

It wouldn't work on the fae, or a dwarf, or any mortal gifted with truesight—but it would work on Owen.

He swept past Beau with barely a pause.

No one exited the room after him.

Beau waited a while to be certain that no one was following, before remembering that he was invisible and it wouldn't matter. He crept out of his hiding spot and tried the door.

Locked.

Beau shook his head, almost fondly. What faerie prince couldn't unlock a standard mortal door with a bit of magic? It was a simple iron lock; easily fooled.

A few centuries ago, mortals had discovered that some of the lower fae had a weakness for iron and had built all number of things with it. No one had told them it didn't work on high fae. Beau pressed his fingers to the lock and pushed it with his magic, as real and clear to him as a muscle in his hand. He could feel each jagged edge of the lock mechanism just waiting to be sprung.

He forced it open. The lock clicked.

He stepped into the room.

No one was around. The windows were shut fast. He did a quick check of the room to see if there were any secret

passageways—behind the chimney breast, the tapestries, the ancient old mirror in the corner.

Nothing.

No one was here.

No one at all.



Aislinn was no stranger to nightmares, so she didn't bring up Caerwyn's the next day over breakfast. In any case, he seemed to be avoiding her gaze, or avoiding her entirely, come to think of it. He dismissed himself as soon as he had eaten to go work in the forge, taking Magna with him.

Diana readied herself for an expedition into the forest. Aislinn asked if she could try and catch her a bird to enchant with a message.

"Crows or ravens are best," Aislinn requested. "But any bird will do—"

"I'll try," Diana said, looking at Minerva for approval. "But I cannot promise anything."

One by one, the rest of the dwarves left to begin their daily tasks. There was wood to be gathered and chopped, stables to be mucked, traps to be set, gardens to be tended. Only Aislinn had nothing to do, condemned once more to the house after her bandages were changed, with instructions not to move too much.

That was easier said than done. As much as it hurt to move, not doing anything was far, far worse.

She couldn't believe she'd been gored by an undead stag.

She couldn't believe there had *been* an undead stag in the first place.

Or that no one else seemed concerned about it.

Luna had her helping out once more in the kitchen, but Aislinn made easy work of the few tasks she was able to accomplish—namely chopping and peeling vegetables.

“You're good with a knife,” Luna remarked.

“I'm effective,” Aislinn said, slicing a potato into chunks and trying not to imagine destroying her enemies.

Luna shrugged. “I'm just nipping into the woods to fetch some herbs. I won't be long.”

She took a basket with her and disappeared out the front door.

It took Aislinn all of five minutes to grow bored of the silence and to crawl to her feet, sucking in a sharp breath as her middle spiked. She didn't care.

She stepped outside the cottage, determined to check on Snapdragon. There were several outbuildings surrounding the main cottage, and Aislinn's first thought was how had they remained undetected for so long, until she realised that the grounds were surrounded by high, rocky walls, and that the main path down the slope was obscured by a sheet of water.

The waterfall. They were behind the waterfall.

Clever.

She located the stables easily enough and stepped inside, only to pause the second she entered.

Most of the stalls—save the last, where Snapdragon stood, and a few empty ones—were occupied by giant fluffy dogs in various shades of cream and honey.

She'd seen miniature versions of this breed in King Owen's court. It was a small, stout-legged creature with a bushy tail and pointy ears.

It was definitely *not* the size of a small pony.

“Vines and spirits!” Aislinn gasped.

Caerwyn looked up from the first stall, where he'd been busily brushing a furry belly. “I know they're—”

“Adorable!” Aislinn squealed, battling the urge to squeeze one of them, just in case they were more volatile than their appearances suggested. She turned to the first one, who wagged his tail at her expression. “Precious baby! Can I cuddle him?”

“Please don't.”

“Doesn't he like it?”

“No, he loves being petted, he just—”

Aislinn promptly ignored him, throwing her arms around the dog's neck and burying her face deep in his fur. He went



slack and rolled over to expose his belly, making the whole stable shake and half burying Caerwyn underneath him.

He let out a shriek.

“Sorry!” Aislinn said, ceasing her petting to assist him. “I didn’t mean—”

Caerwyn waved away her assistance, shaking himself free of both the giant dog and the armfuls of fur that came with being buried underneath one. “He has a tendency to flop when cuddled and break things. Last time he nearly broke my toes.”

“Oh, he doesn’t mean to hurt anyone, do you, you gorgeous boy?” Aislinn buried her hands in his neck once more. The other mounts wagged their tails in anticipation, banging against the stall doors. “What are they? I saw hounds like these at your father’s court, but—”

“These are wargis,” Caerwyn explained. “Dwarven mount of choice. This is Mace. Over there we have Crusher and Tori—Girth, Llamrei, Hengroen are out right now—and the one at the end there is Bob.”

“They are *so sweet*.”

Snapdragon snorted in his stall.

“You’re sweet too, Snap.”

Caerwyn’s mouth twitched into a smirk. “You like animals.”

“I am always intensely suspicious of people that don’t like animals, aren’t you?”

“Actually... yes.”

Aislinn smiled. “Apparently my father’s love of horses was one of the only things my mother liked about him to begin with.”

Caerwyn raised an eyebrow. “Do your parents not like each other?”

“No, they like each other quite a lot, actually, it’s rather disturbing.”

Caerwyn chuckled.

“Did yours get on?”

“I never knew my father,” Caerwyn admitted. “He died before I was born. My mother loved Owen, though, and he loved her. Too much, maybe.” His eyes glazed over, a lake in the shadow of a forest before a storm, no doubt caught in some painful memory.

Aislinn stilled, remembering the way Owen looked at Gwyn’s image, and Beau’s assertion that Owen’s pain was real. It didn’t quite match up with the picture the dwarves had painted of a man who wanted to murder his stepson, but it matched her gut feeling of the man.

Panting sounded outside, followed by cries of “we’re home!” and several of the dwarves bursting into the stables to return their fluffy steeds. All of them raced towards Caerwyn, but he pushed them off with kind words and gentle pats. She was surprised he could keep his gloves on—it was a warm day and Aislinn wanted to wind her fingers into their fur and never let go.

“Fraid the attempts to secure you some birds failed rather spectacularly,” Diana said, removing several avian corpses from her saddle bag, “but I’m sure we’ll find some use for these.”

“Oh,” said Aislinn, and then remembering her human-dwarven manners, added, “thank you.”

“Think nothing of it, girlie. We’ll see if we can do something else for you.”

Aislinn nodded, trying to shoulder her disappointment, and assisted with the unbuckling and brushing of the wargis. Although perfectly dog-shaped, they were calmer than most canines, not rushing about or clambering over their stalls. She hated to think of the destructive power of an *actual* giant puppy.

Wargis clean, everyone trooped back to the cottage where Luna was waiting for them with a steaming pheasant stew. A quick wash for themselves and everyone fell into rhythm again, clearing the table and laying out the plates. Dinner was filled with laughter.

Aislinn wasn’t used to having this number of people at the table and actually enjoying it. She tolerated courtly dinners, but it always felt more like playing chess than enjoying a meal. She liked eating with her family, but there were only the four of them. Very rarely did other people join who she could relax around. Aoife, of course, although she wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Miriam, Barney and Daisy, naturally. Grandpa Woodfern.

And Cassandra.

*No, Aislinn told herself. Not tonight, Cass. I'm enjoying myself.*

If Cass could hear her thoughts, she would probably have stuck out her tongue and laughed.

It helped to think of that.

After dinner was done and cleared away, Flora supplied Aislinn with a fresh draught of whatever passed for pain relief, which was just as well as her middle was beginning to ache.

The drugs made her drowsy, though, and within minutes she was struggling to keep her eyes open. Someone was playing a flute. Sweet, piping music swept through the room, transporting her to somewhere else. Music was a strange thing, she realised. An ordinary kind of magic. It shouldn't hold such power over her.

“Oh dear, looks like the young princess has fallen asleep,” said a gravelly voice.

The music stopped.

“Someone should put her to bed,” said a soft one.

“Let the boy do it.”

“Me?” Caerwyn's voice replied. “But—”

“We've strength lad, but there's no denying she's... awkwardly shaped. Far too long.”

“Keep your gloves on,” Bell said, as if sensing some unspoken argument.

Aislinn didn't understand why that was important, or why she couldn't open her mouth to protest, to insist she could carry herself. She certainly didn't understand the impulse to throw her arms around Caerwyn when he swept her into his arms, or why her hands balled into his clothes.

He inhaled sharply, holding his breath. The heat of him brushed her face.

She liked being against him, liked the shape of him, the broad, sturdy warmth. When was the last time she was carried like this?

*You don't like being carried,* she reminded herself. *You like being able to stand by yourself.*

But she liked this.

She was aware of being moved, of the journey being over far too quickly, of boots being removed and blankets folded over her.

"You're nice," she whispered, voice as muggy as her thoughts. "Warm."

Caerwyn sighed, hovering beside her. There was the ghost of a touch at her temple.

"It's best you don't remember that," he whispered.

Her hand reached out and grabbed his sleeve, pinning him above her as he tried to move away. She didn't want him to go. She felt like a child in the dark, and he was the lantern falling away from her.

“Thank you,” she responded.

“You’re welcome.”

Caerwyn slunk out of the room. Aislinn lay in her bed, not fully sleeping, her thoughts turning mushier. People moved upstairs. Someone helped Caerwyn unroll his bed.

“Caught some birds today,” Diana’s voice sounded. “Dead, unfortunately. No good for the princess. Thought they might be of use to you, though.”

Caerwyn went silent. After a long moment, Diana sighed. “Caer,” she whispered, “you cannot run from this forever.”

“I can try,” Caer hissed.

Aislinn’s thoughts folded inwards.



Another day had passed, and there had still been no word from Aislinn. Beau was growing desperate. He'd told his father about overhearing Owen's odd conversation, of course, but Hawthorn had brushed it off.

"People talk to themselves when they're nervous all the time," he'd said. "It could just be that he's a concerned father, desperate to have his son returned to him."

*Could. Might. Maybe.* His father wasn't fooling anyone. His latest declaration was the worst.

"Beau," he'd sighed exasperatedly, "your sister should be absolutely fine."

*Should.* Of course she *should*. Because she was a great hunter and strong and brave and it was unimaginable for anything to have happened to her.

"You worry too much, Beau," Juliana insisted, rubbing his furrowed brow with her thumb.

"No," Beau returned, "I worry *exactly the right amount*."

Even the handsome librarian and the books weren't helping to dispel his concerns, although it wasn't from lack of trying. He fell asleep surrounded by books, trying to read himself into exhaustion.

"Beau? Wake up."

Someone was shaking his arm. It didn't take much to rouse him—the lumpy beds seemed to dispel the deepness of pure sleep. Beau opened his eyes, blinking rapidly. "Father?"

"Get up," Hawthorn instructed.

"Why?"

"I want to try a locator spell on your sister."

Beau shot up. "I knew you were worried!"

"Ssh!" said Hawthorn, putting a finger to his lips. "You'll wake your mother, and she seems the only one of us who isn't worried, and I need her to continue like that so that I do not lose it altogether."

Beau nodded. "That seems right. I'll grab my cloak."

Locator spells were easy enough magic, especially for the King of Faerie, but the difficulty increased with the distance, and Hawthorn had already been in the Mortal Realm for several days. His powers were already weakened.

But with someone else to bolster them, and under the light of the moon, they ought to be able to manage it.

They pulled on glamours, tiptoed out of the castle, and descended out into the courtyard.



Hawthorn took several items out of his pack and laid them on the ground. Candles, crystals, a map. He lit the wicks with his fingers, tiny golden beads of magic dusting his fingers.

He could do most magic wordless and without ingredients, but it never hurt to use them to ground or bolster a spell, especially outside of Faerie. There were spells that Beau could do without words or objects, magic that sloughed off him, as instinctual as breathing, but there was much he had left to master. He dreamed of the days it flowed from him like rain from a cloud.

Hawthorn rolled up his frilly sleeves and held out his arms. Beau clasped his hands over his wrists, creating a circle. Hawthorn started to whisper. The quiet thrum of magic pulsed between them.

The crystals started to glow. Golden dust shimmered into life between them, drifting up the road towards the mountain, into the forests, up the slopes. They gathered over a lake and would go no further.

Hawthorn sighed, releasing Beau's arms. "Spells like this don't tend to stick where there are too many dwarves. Blast their magic-repellant hides." His fingers graced the pendant around his neck, the one Juliana had used to keep track of him, many decades ago. He'd never removed it, as far as Beau knew. He was probably wishing he'd given it to Aislinn now. "Still, at least we know she's fine—the lights wouldn't be so bright if she wasn't."

They packed up their equipment wordlessly and slipped back to their chambers, silent the whole way there. Beau knew his father was thinking, forming some kind of plan, he was just hoping he would share it with him.

The door closed behind them.

“Where in the world have you two been?” Juliana said, leaping out of nowhere.

Beau and Hawthorn jumped.

“Ah, um, trying to locate Ais with a spell?”

“And you didn’t tell me because...?”

“We didn’t want to worry you?”

“I’m already worried, Hawthorn!” Juliana blazed.

Hawthorn blinked rapidly. “You are?”

“Of course I’m bloody worried!”

Hawthorn continued to stare. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I’m the only member of this family that can lie—”

Beau coughed.

“—I’m the only member of this family who can lie convincingly and someone needed to stay calm while everyone else was panicking.”

Hawthorn paused. “I wasn’t outwardly panicking—”

Juliana raised an eyebrow.

“I am quite sure no one knew but you.”

“I knew,” Beau added.

“You don’t count!”

“Rude.”

“Honestly, darling,” Juliana said, tilting her head at her son, “your panic was quite obvious.”

Beau huffed, but said nothing. He went over to his bed and flopped down.

Juliana turned back to her husband. “Did you find her?”

“Rough location. Strong life force. She isn’t in any danger.”

Juliana chewed her lip. She knew as well as Beau did that things could change very quickly. “We need to go after her,” she said. “I don’t care if it messes things up with Owen. I don’t like this.”

“I know,” said Hawthorn safely. “Tomorrow. We’ll speak to him tomorrow.”



True to his word—or bound by it—Hawthorn spoke to Owen tomorrow at breakfast.

“My son and I tried a locator spell last night,” he said. “Aislinn appears to be fine, but it’s still concerning that she hasn’t yet made contact.”

Owen’s eyes twinkled. “A locator spell? Did it work?”

“Yes. Roughly.”

“Well, perfect. *Perfect*. I’ve just received a shipment from something I think might help with our little problem.”

Beau leaned closer, raising an eyebrow. “A shipment?”

“Something that might interest you,” Owen continued, still smiling. “I requested it before your visit, but their timing is fortuitous. A small force of unseelie monsters.”

Hawthorn’s face paled. Beau understood his reaction; the unseelie were considered separate from his subjects—but they were still technically fae. What were they doing here?

“They’ve allied with you?”

“They were... a gift from a friend.”

Beau’s stomach coiled. Vile as the unseelie could be—and dangerous, too—they were not *things* that could be gifted. Many of them were sentient—as alive as any fae, dwarf or mortal.

“I wasn’t aware you had friends who traded in unseelie,” Hawthorn said, voice measured.

Owen laughed. “I have many friends and many alliances, King Hawthorn. Please. Come inspect them after luncheon. I’m sure you’ll approve.”

“We shall see.”

Breakfast seemed to take an age to get through, a century before the plates were cleared away and the company dispersed, a millennia before Beau found himself alone with his parents once more. Both of them were very white-faced.

“He has unseelie at his disposal,” Hawthorn said. “If he charges in with them—it could be chaos. They’ll likely kill the dwarves and we’ll never understand their motives.”

“Not to mention the question of who *gave* them to him in the first place.”

Hawthorn ran his long-fingered hands down his face. “We need to tread carefully. We don’t want to lose Owen as an ally—or attack dwarven kind without motive. I don’t think we’ll be able to hold off Owen’s forces any longer, but we must get word to Aislinn and find out what’s going on—”

“I’ll go,” Beau said. “I’ll find her. I’m not terrible at tracking, and I might be able to use magic to help me when I’m nearby. Mother can say I left without your permission. Blame it on the impetuosity of youth, whatever—”

For a moment, both of his parents fell silent, their eyes meeting in wordless conversation. He knew they weren’t keen to send him off, too. But who else could they send? They didn’t have any other magic-users with them, no one who could sneak away unnoticed and who might be able to pick up her trail.

“All right,” said Hawthorn finally. “Juliana, my fearsome goddess of lies, would you kindly cover for us as I help our wayward son make his dramatic-yet-invisible escape?”



They crept down to the stables under the cover of glamour, compelling the guards and stablehands to look the other way as they found a suitable mount. No one but Hecate noticed them. She wound herself around their ankles.

Hawthorn had not yet uttered a simple word, other than the odd instruction for saddling the horse. He didn't even say anything about Beau not being the most confident of riders—even when he was astride the horse.

He placed his hand over Beau's on the reins.

“Father?”

“Take the cat,” Hawthorn insisted, scooping up the mog and dropping her onto the horse's rear. She found a narrow spot between two saddlebags and promptly curled up. “I think you'll need her.”

A horse, a cat and his wits. All he had against the mountains and group of dwarves. Beau hoped they were friendly.

He nodded at his father, his words unable to form.

“I won't be able to placate Owen for long,” Hawthorn said. “Maybe a day or two. Find a bird and get word to me as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And... stay safe.”

Beau smiled weakly. “I'll do my best.”

Hawthorn pulled him down awkwardly into his arms, so hard he almost fell off. He clapped his back. “You better,” he

said, and patted his horse out of the stall.



The giant's club was swinging, and Aislinn had lost all sensation. Time seemed to have blurred to an impossible speed, her body felt like rubber, and she had no notion of where all her limbs were. This monster was much, much faster than any she'd fought in training. Speed was the greatest defence you had with a giant.

Cass was still laughing, still cackling as she swiped and dodged. It was the only sound Aislinn was conscious of.

Until it stopped with a sickening crack.

Her father had told her once that a few times in his life, he'd been so overcome with fury that every sense narrowed to a pinpoint and he found himself in a fierce, dark rage, like an inferno in a haystack. Aislinn had no notion of what he meant, until that moment.

She did not remember what happened next, only waking up when the giant was dead and Cass...

And Cass—



Aislinn woke in Flora's study, still groggy from the effects of the potion, forgetting where she was for a moment and springing straight out of bed. Pain spliced through her, sending her crumpling to the ground with a sharp shriek.

Caerwyn came running, barging into the room. "Are you all right?"

Aislinn unscrunched her eyes, blinking rapidly. She wanted to say she was fine, but the words couldn't form. "I'll *be* fine," she said instead.

Caerwyn hovered nearby. He was only half dressed, his faded charcoal shirt only partially tucked in, shoeless and devoid of the gloves he usually wore. He fiddled with the beads on his necklace.

"Can you get up?" he asked, still standing over the threshold. He sounded like he'd rather do anything other than help her.

"Yes," she answered, words still laced with pain. She grabbed hold of the bed frame and pulled herself up.

"Should I get Flora—"

"If you know which pain draught is the one I'm supposed to be taking, there's no need to wake her."

"Right." He glanced up at the shelves, and then back at Aislinn, as if he were stepping into the cage of a wild animal.

"I don't bite," she told him. "Usually. Unless it's called for. Or asked for."

Caerwyn's cheeks reddened. "Not what I'm afraid of."

"I won't cast any faerie magic on you, either," she added.  
"Not unless—"

"It's called for, sure."

He stepped into the room, turning towards the shelves, still glancing at Aislinn like she was a wildfire he was turning his back on. He selected one of the jars quickly and thrust it down on the desk. "This one," he said, scurrying out of the room. "Don't take too much."

"Noted."

He hovered for a while longer, as if uncertain whether or not he should leave. Aislinn didn't understand his reluctance, or his indecision, as if he both hated to leave and longed to go. His fingers twitched against his beads again.

He left the room without another word, stalking back to his bed in the main room to finish dressing. He plucked a stray feather from the sole of his boot—a deep, black, raven's one.

*Ravens.*

She knew that meant something, that birds were important, that someone had said...

It was no good. Her thoughts wouldn't come.

She downed the potion, and started to dress.



It was still just before dawn when she exited her room, the cottage swamped with that bluish, ethereal light that came just before the sun. Caerwyn was nowhere to be found, but the sun called to her.

She stepped outside. Light broke through across the sky, yolk-gold, ribbons of rose and orange. It cracked across the rocks that hid the cottage from the world, sweeping across the dewy grass.

Without wasting another second, Aislinn sat down and shimmied off her boots, only half-mindful of her stitches, and sunk her feet into the ground.

Aislinn felt the rays and the damp soil in a way she imagined humans didn't—like butter against the soul. It spread deep inside her, a warm echo of magic. She had barely felt it since she felt Faerie, but she felt it now.

A thin rain danced through the faintest of breeze, making the sky blaze with a rainbow of colour. Her gaze turned to a silhouette high on rocks. Someone was standing there, their arms outstretched towards the sun.

*Caerwyn.*

He'd taken off his shirt, his tanned skin lit by tiny beads of gold light. She could not see his face, but there was a relaxed slope to his shoulders, an ease to him that she'd never seen before. Despite his broad, muscular form, he could almost have been one of the fae, living for the sun and moon, for the blessing of nature.

“He comes out here most mornings,” said a voice behind her.

Aislinn turned, finding herself face-to-face with Fort, the cinnamon-haired dwarf with the pistols and quicksilver smile.

“You’re up early,” Aislinn remarked.

Fort shrugged. “It feels like a lucky morning.”

Aislinn didn’t know what that meant. “Why does he come out here, do you think?”

“For the same reason you do. To feel.” Fort looked up at his silhouette. “For the same reason any of us do anything.”



Desperate to prove she was well enough to return to Afelcarreg, Aislinn overexerted herself after breakfast helping Luna clean up, ripped herself open again and was confined to her bed for the rest of the day, trying to recuperate.

She was not best pleased. She had never laid around doing nothing in her *life*. She had no idea what you were supposed to do. Luna kept the door open and spoke to her as she was going about her daily tasks, and found a couple of racy Dwarven romances for her at one point, which certainly helped.

“Are these yours?” she asked at one point.

“Ya-huh,” she chirped. “Brought them with me when I left Avalinth. They’ve kept me company many a night.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“Avalinth.”

Luna paused. “Yes,” she said. “I am content here—even happy, most of the time. I love the sky and the flowers and the animals—but Avalinth is like nothing else, and it is still home to me.”

“Why did you leave, then?”

“Because I would have missed the others more.”

Aislinn paused, wondering if now was the time to ask about *why* they all came to be here, or if the information would ever be offered.

“Besides,” Luna carried on, before she could form the question, “they would all have been hopelessly lost without me. Not one of them knows how to cook well or run a household.” She appeared in the doorway, brandishing a large bowl. “I’ve made a cake for later—would you like to lick the bowl?”



The next day, after an agonisingly long morning ‘taking it easy’ (and having blown through Luna’s saucy romances) Aislinn promptly declared she’d had enough and dragged herself to the stables to assist Caerwyn in caring for the wargis.

“You’re going to kill yourself,” Caerwyn remarked, expression stony.

“Death would be an adventure compared to the mind-numbing monotony of doing nothing for another day.”

“Do you ever slow down?”

“I’ll slow down when I’m dead!”

“You’ll be dead if you don’t slow down.”

“’Tis but a scratch.”

Caerwyn stared at her, eyes deep, as slick as river stones. “You were gored by an undead stag, Aislinn. There was... a lot of blood. If the homestead had been any further away...”

“Did I worry you?” she asked, certain she hadn’t.

Caerwyn did not reply.

“Wait, did I?”

“A little, perhaps.”

“We’d just met!”

“It is never pleasant to watch someone die.”

Aislinn stilled. “No,” she agreed, voice hushed, “it isn’t.”

She wondered who Caerwyn had lost, how many he’d watched die. She was almost certain he’d been there when his mother passed—almost certain *something* had happened that night—but his words spoke of multiple losses, of ones that hadn’t reached him quite so much and yet hurt him all the same.

It could be anyone, of course. Death happened all the time in the Mortal Realm. He could have watched dozens die.

An uncomfortable feeling squirmed inside her at the reminder of his mortality, the idea that he'd grow old and die within a fraction of her life.

*You hardly know him, she reminded herself, he's just the first mortal you've met outside of Faerie that has no chance of living an extended life. That's all.*

She wondered how the dwarves felt about it—whether they viewed him as one of them, or more a sort of pet they were fond of. He'd be dead before Luna got a single grey hair.

*Stop it.*

“Ouch!” Caerwyn pulled his hand back, thin droplets of blood spouting at his palm. He'd snagged it on a piece of equipment.

Aislinn reached forward, the same she'd do if Beau received an injury—intent on healing him up before he could fully feel the sting of it.

Caerwyn pulled away from her.

“I can heal you—” she started.

“Don't touch me,” Caerwyn said, jerking back further.

Aislinn held up her hands. “All right.”

Caerwyn turned, still clutching his hand, and left the stables.

Aislinn sunk to the floor beside Bob and wound her fingers into his fur. What was with Caerwyn? He seemed perfectly at

home with the dwarves, and some of the time when they were alone, he seemed at home with her, too.

And then others...

The door banged open again. "Caer?" Min called out.

Aislinn was about to answer when another voice said, "He's not here, we should be fine."

Bell. Min and Bell talking in rushed, hushed voices.

"What do you think?" Bell continued. "Should we ask the others?"

"I think it's unwise to stay here," Min answered. "I don't think the girl would betray us, especially if we explained things to her, but she can't lie, and Flora says she shouldn't be travelling yet. If someone comes for her—"

"No one's found us yet."

"Her father's the Faerie King. He'll find her."

Bell sighed. "You're sure about this? Going back to Avalinth?"

"It's the only place the boy will be safe."

"That's not what I asked."

A pause stretched between them, followed by the faint shuffling of feet.

"Min... it's all right if you're not ready to face her again."

Whistling sounded across the yard, and the door banged open shortly afterwards. "Ah, hello," said Caerwyn. "Did you



two need something?”

“No,” said Min. “Not right now. We’ll see you at dinner.”

They disappeared without another word. Caerwyn found Aislinn in the stall not long after. “What was that about?”

Aislinn, unable to lie but unsure about whether or not telling the truth was the right thing to do, ignored his question. “Have I done something to offend you?” she asked instead.

Caerwyn blinked. “What?”

“You seem uneasy around me. I should like to know why. Do you harbour some hatred towards the fae, or—”

Caerwyn sighed, running his hands through his thick hair. “My mother was ill for a long time before she died,” he explained. “My father—Owen—tried everything to heal her, eventually turning to a fae healer.”

Aislinn inhaled carefully. She already knew where this story was going. “It didn’t work.”

Caerwyn shook his head. “I think he just prolonged it. That wasn’t his fault, and it certainly wasn’t yours, but... all I saw of the fae was a man offering grand promises in return for my mother’s suffering.”

“I’m sorry,” Aislinn said.

“I thought the fae didn’t say sorry?”

“Well, my mother’s mortal, so...” She shook her head. It was true that her mother was mortal, but she was also the Queen of Faerie. She used her words much the same as they

did. Aislinn's childhood had been full of other mortals, though, and sometimes, *sometimes* there were no other words to use. "I am sorry for you. For the loss of your mother. For the pain she endured, for the false hope that was given."

"I'm sorry, too."

"For what?"

"For letting that first experience colour my perception of you."

"You are forgiven."

A brief smile passed between the two of them, and suddenly Aislinn knew that she ought to tell Caerwyn what she'd heard.

"You should know, when Min and Bell were in the stables just now... I overheard them talking."

"Oh?"

"They want to take you back to Avalinth."

Caerwyn paused, his face unreadable. "I see." He turned towards the wall, restacking equipment. "Why did you tell me?"

"A truth for a truth," she explained. "That is also the Faerie way."

Caerwyn nodded, his mouth pulled into that easy, irritating smirk. She didn't know why it annoyed her so—she certainly preferred it to the indifference.

"So, the fae don't like to apologise, or say thank you, and they can't lie... any other customs I should know about?"

“Did you hear the one about us bathing in the blood of our enemies or dancing under the full moon, entirely naked?”

Caerwyn’s eyes widened. “Umm... no?”

“Good, because it’s false.”

“Oh.”

“Mostly.”

His throat bobbed. “Which part?”

“I’ll let you know on the next full moon.”



# 10

## TWO PRINCES AND A PRINCESS

**B**eau should not have been surprised when he got hopelessly lost in the woods, and yet that's exactly what happened.

Actually, lost wasn't precisely correct. He knew the direction back to the castle. He also knew it was at least a day's ride away and he'd missed his father's deadline. All attempts to capture a bird to enchant had failed spectacularly and his tracking spells could pinpoint *nothing*. He didn't know if it was down to the dwarves' innate magiclessness, the fact he'd been too long outside of Faerie, or his own ineptitude.

"It can't be my ineptitude, can it?" he asked Hecate, who was dozing on the back of the saddle. "I'm really very good at magic."

Exhausted, and more than a little frustrated, he stopped to rest beside a stream. His spells often kept guiding him back to this spot, if they guided him anywhere at all, but he couldn't find anything. Nothing but a rather impressive bloodstain, which his senses told him was animal rather than human.

There was a slight tinge of magic to it, but nothing to cause any alarm. Maybe Aislinn had dispatched a creature here for her dinner. Or maybe it was something mildly unseelie. It wasn't unheard of to find a stray one living in the mountains, the offspring of some ancient coupling.

He sang a song to dispel his mood—something cheery. An old ballad of Alia's, the court bard.

*“The merfolk dance in the Summer seas,  
In Spring fae fly in the sweetest breeze,  
In Autumn they sing and rustle their leaves,  
And in Winter snow brings a king to his knees—”*

Beau stopped. Something was moving in his peripheral vision. He turned. For a second—a split second—he saw the flash of a tanned face surrounded by black hair, but a second later it seemed to have merged back behind the waterfall.

Beau shook his head, inclining his head towards Hecate, still staring at the wall of water. “Did you just see that, or am I officially losing it?”

Hecate meowed.

He turned to face her. “You're a lot of help.”

“Beau!”

Beau wheeled back. Standing on a narrow ledge on the other side of the river, next to the curtain of water, was Aislinn.

“Ais?”

Her face broke into a grin. She jumped into the river, Beau already scrambling towards her, not caring that his boots were filling with water.

*Aislinn, Aislinn!*

She was here. She was all right.

They embraced in the river, water sloshing about their ankles, hands tight in each other's clothes, holding each other for as long as it took to assure themselves the other was real.

It was a long time until they parted.

Beau punched Aislinn on the shoulder.

“Hey!” she said. “What was that for?”

“For worrying me!”

“That’s fair, I suppose.” She winced, but her hand went to her middle, not her newly punched shoulder.

“You’re injured?”

“I got gored by an undead stag. That’s why I couldn’t—” Her face scrunched up. “Running was a bad idea.”

Beau steered her back to the bank and helped her onto the ledge. The face from earlier—now attached to a rather attractive body—hovered nearby.

Beau’s hands went to Aislinn’s abdomen, pulling up her loose shirt and going to the bandages swathed around her middle. Aislinn handed him her knife.

He half-snorted. Typical of Aislinn, keeping a knife about her person even when she was injured and presumably safely

concealed somewhere.

He sliced open her wrappings, swiftly and carefully as he could, revealing ragged, marred skin beneath. “Holy vines, Ais—”

“I told you, I got—”

“Gored by an undead stag, yes. Where did that come from, by the way?”

Ais shrugged. He supposed they’d both seen stranger things. Still, here in the mortal world—

He shook his thoughts away, pressing his hands to Aislinn’s middle. She braced her hands against his shoulders, letting out a seething sigh as his magic slipped into her muscles and skin, knitting flesh back together until only shiny pink marks remained. They’d fade within the week.

Her companion’s eyes widened.

Aislinn inhaled, pulling down her shirt, and leapt up on the ledge, spritely as ever. Beau followed.

“This is Prince Caerwyn,” she explained, gesturing to her companion. “Caerwyn, this is my brother Beau.”

Beau blinked at Caerwyn. He had not been expecting someone so... well formed. “Oh my, you’re very pretty.”

Caerwyn blinked back. “Um, thank you?”

“He is not very—” Aislinn started, only the rest of the words got stuck in her mouth.

Beau beamed. “You’re trying to say he’s not pretty, and you can’t, can you?”

“Do be quiet, Beau.”

“Ha!”

“I hate you.”

“You should come with us,” Caerwyn said, cheeks tinged faintly with red. He pointed along the ledge, which Beau now saw led behind the waterfall, leading under the rock. Clever.

“Sure,” said Beau. “Wait—my horse. My cat!”

“You brought a cat with you?” Caerwyn asked, as Beau clambered back across the river to grab his mount’s reins. Hecate was already sitting on the saddle, cleaning her paws.

“I think so,” Beau remarked, dragging the horse across the river. “I’m not entirely sure.”

“That’s definitely a cat.”

“Is it?”

Beau tugged the horse onto the low part of the bank and pulled her up the path. She required lots of coaxing to get her through the cave, but Caerwyn took to the other side of her, whispering in her ear.

The tunnel under the waterfall quickly opened up to reveal a cottage nestled at the foot of a cliff, together with several outbuildings—a mill, a forge, a stable, a cowshed—all neatly spaced out beneath the shadow of the mountains.



“Ingenious,” said Beau, noting how the buildings merged with the wilderness, how they’d used the river to their advantage, how everything was planned and packed. “Really, quite lovely.”

“Hey, Beau?”

“Yes, sister dearest?”

“Thank you. For coming to get me.”

He shrugged. “You’d do the same for me.”

“True. I would have been quicker.”

Caerwyn tugged the horse away to the stable, letting out a low whistle to alert others of their presence. Within seconds, it seemed, half a dozen dwarfish faces had appeared out of nowhere.

“And who might this be?” said a steely-faced dwarf with a metal arm.

“This is my little brother Beau,” Aislinn explained. “I wish I could say he was an idiot, but he’s actually annoyingly smart. Also, he can lie, so watch out for that.”

“I *can* lie,” Beau said, grinning, “but I don’t usually.”

“That’s true,” Aislinn admitted. “He doesn’t lie even when you need him to, like all these times I got into trouble when we were children and he could have lied to get me out of it *but he didn’t*.”

“I don’t like to lie!”

“You did it to wind me up!”

“Well, not all the time...”

Aislinn glared.

“See! I can’t even lie now!”

The steely-faced dwarf snorted. “Oh yes, that’s your brother all right.”

She spoke as if she had some experience in the matter. “Do you have a brother?” Beau asked.

The dwarf went quiet. “No,” she said eventually, “no brother.”

“Oh!” a white-faced dwarf squealed. “A cat!”

Hecate slunk forward and wound herself around the speaker’s legs.

“Oh, you’re so adorable! Come with me, precious thing, we’re going to get you a saucer of milk.”

Beau watched her leave, stomach rumbling. Aislinn snickered. “Do you want a saucer of milk too?”

“I mean... if it’s on offer...”

The snow-white dwarf laughed. “Come on,” she said. “I’ve got plenty for you to eat.”



Beau was taken into the kitchen, where he recounted what had been happening back at the castle, together with his father’s

assertion that he would not be able to hold off an outright attack if they didn't return home soon.

The leader of the dwarves—Minerva—snorted. “We’ve set up magic repellant wards around the site. They shan’t find us here.”

Beau, whilst glad to hear it wasn't his own ineptitude, wasn't so sure. “Do the wards confuse magic, or just dampen it?”

“Just dampen, why?”

“Because our parents are the king and queen of Faerie and my mother is an expert tracker. I wouldn't be so sure.”

Minerva waved her hand, but he could tell she was thinking things over. Her wife nudged her shoulder. “Min?”

Minerva sighed, looking around the room. Her gaze finally settled on Caerwyn. “It's up to you, lad. It's your life on the line. But if you want to, the girls and I will escort you to Avalinth, the dwarven capital. The place is impenetrable. You'll be safe there, if we can get in.”

*Avalinth.* The dwarven city. Beau's mind hummed hungrily. Fae hadn't set foot in there for a century. He'd only ever heard stories of Avalinth. Was this journey open to everyone? He didn't even care why they were thinking of going—someone would explain to him in due course.

Caerwyn, though, looked less than thrilled by the prospect. His face had gone the colour of ash, and he looked around at every face on the table. “Will it be dangerous? Getting there?”

Minerva shrugged, like it was neither here nor there. “All journeys can be dangerous, pet. I wouldn’t let that affect your decision.”

“I can’t ask you to risk your lives for me.”

“You haven’t,” said Bell.

“We’re in no mood to see you killed, or dragged back to the castle,” added the dwarf with patches of ink-blue skin—Diana, if Beau remembered correctly.

“Or have the human king learn of our whereabouts,” added another. “There’ll be not a moment’s peace here if he does.”

“We’re with you, Caer. Whatever you decide.”

One by one, all the dwarves added similar sentiments, even the silent red-head one who communicated with her fingers nodding her approval.

“You don’t *all* have to come with me, you know.”

“Nonsense,” said Minerva. “Never go alone where you could go with company. Dwarven rule. All in this together.”

“I’m not a dwarf.”

“I know, lad, but we don’t hold it against you.”

Caer sighed, running his fingers through his hair. A long, quiet moment settled over the room. “All right,” he said finally. “Thank you.”

“Then it’s settled.” Minerva stood up, banging both fists—metal and flesh—against the table. Beau forced himself to resist the urge to ask her how her metal arm worked. “Luna,

cook up everything you can. Everyone else—pack. We leave at dawn.”



# 11

## THE NIGHT BEFORE DEPARTURE

No one had asked Aislinn or Beau what their plans were. It was too late to return to the castle tonight, and in any case, Aislinn couldn't return until the rest were safely on their way, in case Owen asked where they were. In fact, they probably shouldn't have shared their destination with her at all. How was she to keep this a secret?

"You should ask me never to reveal your whereabouts to anyone," she told Caer secretly, as she helped him care for the wargis that evening.

"What?"

"If Owen asks me, I need to be able to tell him 'I cannot say'."

"Won't he find that suspicious?"

"I'd rather he be suspicious than I place you in danger."

Caerwyn stopped brushing Mace and stared at her.

"I've grown rather fond of all of you," she added, softening the impact of her words. "Luna is especially lovely. I wouldn't

want anything to happen to her.”

“Well,” said Caerwyn, half-smiling. “I can understand that.” He bit his lip. “If I make you promise, what happens if he tries to force you to tell the truth?”

“Doesn’t matter how hard he tries, I won’t be able to do it. Most faeries make a ‘I promise nothing but the pain of death shall make me reveal your secret’ when promising to stay quiet. Just to be on the safe side.”

Caerwyn blinked. “I am not making you promise anything that places your life in danger.”

“I don’t mind, we’ll probably be heading back to Faerie soon ourselves—”

“That’s insanity, Aislinn, and I will not do it. What is it with you and the rest of the dwarves, so willing to risk your lives?”

“Maybe it’s your pretty face.”

Caerwyn raised an eyebrow.

“I said ‘maybe!’” *It is a very pretty face though...*

Caerwyn shook his head, and returned to brushing the wargi. “Your brother...” he said after a pause, “does he fancy men?”

“Why? Are you interested?”

“No, I just—”

“If you think that’s strange—”

“I know a lot of us mere mortals seem to have issues with that sort of thing, but frankly I’ve never seen why it’s anyone’s

business. I've also been living with Min and Bell for the better part of the year. I assure you, I've nothing against your brother."

"Oh. Good."

"I was merely curious."

"Well, it's not just men," Aislinn clarified. "Most faeries are rather fluid in that regard, although they tend to have preferences. Beau doesn't. He likes everyone. Usually very easily. It... doesn't often come to much, but the admiration is real. He hasn't had a single partner that's like the next."

"And... you?"

"What of me?"

"Where do your preferences lie?"

Aislinn went quiet for a moment. "I've dabbled here and there, but my preference is largely men."

"Right. Just curious."

For a while longer, they worked on the wargis, carefully, silently, Aislinn enjoying her newly healed body. It occurred to her, if she went home tomorrow, she'd likely never see such beautiful creatures again. Avalinth remained hidden to outsiders. She'd never stroke their fur or bury her face in their necks—

She'd never see Caerwyn again, either.

That thought bothered her more than it should, and she did not like it.



“I still have one issue,” she remembered, thinking of the promise she’d made to Owen. “I told your stepfather I’d bring you back. Promised, even. I also promised not to drag you back against your will. I didn’t give a time frame, luckily—”

Caerwyn laughed. “So, at some point in my life, you’ll have to hunt me down and do some exceptional convincing?”

“I suppose so,” she said.

“What were the exact words you used?”

“Um, I believe they were, ‘if your son is alive, I will bring him home to you.’”

“Well, that’s easily averted,” Caer said. “Since I am not biologically Owen’s son, and I no longer count Afelcarreg as my home.”

“Oh,” said Aislinn, mostly relieved and still slightly disappointed. “I suppose that’s right. What a useful distinction. Many lies have opened up to me.”

“Is that it? Crisis averted? Vow null and void?”

“I believe so, which is actually all that is required.”

Caer snorted. Aislinn went to clean out the brushes, parting the bristles with magic when the usual method failed her.

“How does magic work?” Caerwyn asked. “The way your brother uses it—”

Aislinn sighed, putting the brushes back and pulling on the end of one of her braids. She wondered if he’d noticed already how gifted Beau was with magic, and how much she wasn’t.

Even parting the bristles was fiddly and taxing. “All fae are capable of magic,” she explained, “but for some it’s much harder to wield. We have this extra well of energy we can draw on, but whenever we’re sick or injured, it’s muted—all your energy taken up trying to heal. Magic comes very naturally to some, wielded as easily as a third arm, but to others...”

“To you, you mean?”

Aislinn bowed her head. “I can do *some* magic,” she said. “The relatively simple spells... mild telekinesis, fire... just not much of it.” She avoided his gaze. “I know. A poor faerie queen, right?”

“I wouldn’t say so.” He paused. “What about mortals? Can they have any access to magic?”

Aislinn nodded, eager to be done with the conversation of *her* poor attempts at magic. “Sure. They don’t have a natural well of energy, but they can draw on other things—potions or charms, *maybe* the natural world around them, if they’re particularly talented. Usually not active magic though—the kind you can see.”

“Have you ever heard of mortals being born with powers?”

“More likely to be cursed,” Aislinn followed. “But sometimes, yes. Usually it means faerie ancestry. Maybe born on a special day under a special star.”

Caer blinked. “That can give a mortal powers?”

“On very, very rare occasions, sure. I’m no astronomer.”

“I see.” He ceased his brushing of Bob, fingers playing with his fur. She didn’t know why he didn’t remove his gloves, but when the warm leather brushed over her hands, she found she ceased to care. “I should probably say goodbye, or thank you, or something.”

“You don’t need to say anything,” she said, staring into those eyes again, two measured chips of flint, slick as rainwater. “I haven’t done anything.”

“You trusted us,” he said. “Trusted me. When you had no reason to—”

“Well, you didn’t leave me to be mauled by an undead deer, so that did win you some points.”

Caerwyn snorted. “It’s the little things.”

“Still no idea how that happened?”

“What?”

“The stag. Everyone is still acting like that’s perfectly normal.”

“Right.” Caerwyn’s hand fell away from hers. “We should get back inside. Luna’s no doubt cooked up a feast. Would be rude to be late.”

“Right.” Aislinn dropped her hand from the wargi’s fur, trying not to let the disappointment settle.

They cleared away the rest of the equipment and headed back inside. Luna appeared to have cooked up half the forest, the table heaving with stuffed game smothered in buttery

sauces—anything that might spoil on the journey. Aislinn wondered when she'd next sit around a table filled with this many people she actually liked. She missed her parents. She missed Aoife and Grandpa Woodfern and Miriam and Barney and Daisy and—

Cassandra. Her too. Always her.

She was fairly sure these moments with the dwarves and Caerwyn would haunt her in a similar way for some time yet, a ghost of good time. She would not remember the pain of this time in a few years, only the smell of Minerva's tobacco, Luna's roasted hazelnut stuffing and lightly spiced apple cake.

She took a moment to take it all in, to memorise the details. Minerva's arm tapping against the surface of the table, Magna's gears clinking in the corner. Bell's laugh, Diana's roar—the shine of her blue skin in the rosy lamplight. Luna's hair glowing, smelling faintly of fresh blooms and cinnamon. Flora's terse smile as she watched everyone enjoying themselves. Fort's fingers as they skimmed over cards, creating an ordinary, impressive magic that summoned a quiet thrill inside her.

And Caerwyn, his tanned face smiling at her over the spread, the soft waves of his hair curling over his dimpled cheeks, his veined, calloused fingers splayed around a pewter goblet.

*If I live forever, she vowed, I will take that image with me.*



**D**espite plans to leave at dawn, everything seemed to take far longer than it ought to. Luna refused to send them off without a proper breakfast, Diana insisted the wargis needed another good pampering before the journey, Magna insisted Minerva's arm needed another service, Flora refused to leave the garden in a state and wanted to make sure she had all the best cuttings, and Bell moved methodically through all the rooms, ensuring nothing important be left behind.

It was all too much faff for Minerva; the second Magna was done with her arm, she went to sit out on the porch by herself, smoking her pipe and lamenting digging into her tobacco supplies so early.

Aislinn felt similarly about the situation. She went and double-checked her own bags whilst Beau found himself a quiet spot to sketch in.

Fort was in the stable, stroking Snapdragon's muzzle. "Beautiful things, horses," she said. "We don't have them in Avalinth, though I'd seen them in pictures. Always liked going

into the towns and seeing them, though the people there look at you funny.”

Aislinn nodded. “Don’t they just?”

“The mortal world isn’t all bad,” Fort continued, “could do with some improvements, but...”

“Why did you come here to begin with?” Aislinn asked, not sure if she’d get another chance to. “I understand there’s some reason you left Avalinth, but to leave Faerie—”

“Well, it’s not like the magic of the land does much for us, does it!” she laughed, but it sounded hollow. “It was my idea, actually.”

“What?”

“You might have noticed that we all have our roles here. Leader, hunter, cook, mechanic—”

“It had not escaped my notice.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Fort explained. “I make good decisions when it seems like all we have are bad ones. Bell might be the strategist, but even she knows you can’t plan for everything. When we were weighing up our options, I’m the one that chose here.”

“But... why?”

Fort shrugged. “Aside from the fact that we’ve built a good place here... it just felt like where we were supposed to be.”

Aislinn chewed her lip, not meeting her gaze.

“Do you ever feel that?” Fort asked. “Do you ever feel like you’re in the place you’re supposed to be?”

“No,” Aislinn said, pausing longer than she meant to. *I have no idea where I’m supposed to be.*

Fort smiled. “You will,” she said, “and if not—you’re allowed to choose it. You’re allowed to choose the place that makes you happy.”

Aislinn swallowed. Since Cass’ death, even the places where she’d once been happy felt haunted.

Something thudded outside.

Fort frowned, glancing at Aislinn. They left the stables and hurried outside. Other dwarves appeared, too—all gazes turned towards the waterfall.

The ground rumbled. A horn sounded.

Aislinn stilled. She knew the sound. It was Miriam’s horn.

They were being sent a warning.

Minerva’s eyes widened. “Get the mounts,” she snapped. “Quickly now! Mags, Caer—get the last of the bags. Hurry.”

Luna and Diana sprung towards the stables. Magna cowered in Minerva’s shadow before scuttling off to the cottage after Caerwyn. The remaining dwarves banded together, pulling out axes, crossbows, pistols. They waited.

Beau reappeared by Aislinn’s side, tucking his notebook into his breast pocket. He met her gaze, and they nodded at each other. Aislinn drew her sword.

“We should glamour ourselves,” Beau whispered. “Make ourselves look like dwarves to Owen’s men. Avoid a diplomatic incident, and all.”

Aislinn wasn’t sure she could hold a glamour in the midst of battle, even with the help of her cloak—it was too much magic, too much concentration. She found most glammers easy enough to draw on, but to hold them—

“Can you...?” she started.

Beau sighed, waving his hands, soft, powdery magic settling over her. She couldn’t see it, of course, but she trusted it to work. “I guess that’s me out of the battle,” Beau said. “I can’t hold two *and* fight. Is that deliberate?”

“No,” said Aislinn, “but I do like keeping you safe.”

Beau muttered something under his breath, and retreated to the back line.

A lumpy, grey shape burst through the waterfall, followed by another, and three green-skinned, silken-winged creatures.

Two ogres. Three pixies.

And a dozen soldiers, all armed to the teeth.

Fort’s pistol cracked through the air. Bell’s crossbow fired. Minerva’s axe went flying. Aislinn dove forward, skidding under the ogre’s belly and slicing it across the thigh.

Some kind of explosion went off, dividing her from the others. It was all that kept them safe. She turned to dispatch



the limping ogre, but a hot burst of fire did the job for her, and a shield of light sprung up around her.

Aislinn looked up. Her father. Her father was here. “It’s a glamour,” he rushed, gesturing towards the flaming explosion. “It was all I could think to do to buy us some time. It won’t last long—and the Unseelie won’t be fooled.”

“Father...” she mumbled. It felt like years since she had seen him.

Hawthorn groaned under the weight of the multiple glamours and the shield. Sweat beaded his brow, his arms splayed out. “You’re all right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Any reason you didn’t return to the castle?” His arms buckled against the side of the shield. It would not last long with Minerva’s magic dampeners. Hawthorn must have been able to feel something.

“Yes,” Aislinn answered. “Caer—the prince—he can’t go back.”

Hawthorn grimaced. “‘Can’t go back, worth losing an alliance over, can’t go back’ or just ‘doesn’t really fancy it’?”

Aislinn was quite sure she’d never loved her father more than in that moment.

“Um, the former. Sorry.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be sorry. Your mother might be, that she married me.”

Juliana charged by, screaming as she decapitated a limping troll. “Ma’s in her element, and she loves you.”

“I know, and it still shocks me to this day, but her affections may wane if she’s forced to spend much longer with King Owen. No matter. What do you need me to do?”

“Create a distraction so I can get him to safety?”

“I can do that.” He moved his hand away from the shield, as if to dismiss it, but paused mid-motion. He lifted his hands to the back of his neck and removed this thorn pendant from around it, looping it over Aislinn’s head instead. The wooden thorn hummed against her chest, like another, separate heartbeat.

Aislinn could never remember her father being without it.

“So that we won’t lose you again,” he explained. “Your mother has the matching one. Take care, daughter mine.”

He dropped away his shield, and a blaze of *something* glittered around him. He was conjuring another glamour—something to confuse the mortals. Aislinn could see through it, whatever it was, but suddenly a bunch of soldiers were screaming.

Caerwyn hit the ground, wrapping his arms over his head. Aislinn launched forward, pulling him to his feet. He tried to fight her off. “What are you doing?” he screamed, knocking her back to the ground, “There’s a dragon!”

*A dragon? Really, Father?*

“No, there isn’t,” she assured him. “It’s a glamour. It’s not really there—”

“I can feel the flames—”

Aislinn seized his face. The panic in his eyes narrowed, almost worse than before. “It’s not there,” she repeated. “Trust me.”

“Caer!” Minerva hollered from the back of a wargi. “We need to move!”

Caerwyn nodded numbly, climbing to his feet.

“Stop!”

A soldier appeared, grabbing his middle and tackling him towards the ground.

“No—” Caerwyn rushed, half whimpering, “stop—”

“You’re all right, Your Highness, you’re safe now—”

“No—”

Aislinn barrelled into the soldier, knocking him backwards. The soldier rolled over her, his weight crushing. Aislinn fumbled for her weapons. She wouldn’t let him get the better of her. *Couldn’t.*

“Faerie witch!” the soldier hissed, pressing against her windpipe. “This is your doing. You put him under a spell—”

Aislinn choked, trying to claw at him, her feet grinding uselessly against the dirt. Darkness spotted in the corner of her eyes.

“Let go of her!”

Caerwyn grabbed his face, his hands gliding around his neck. The soldier's eyes glazed over, his gaze going numb and smoky. A grey, unhealthy hue bloomed across his skin, corrupting every patch of skin, like a fire ravaging a meadow. His hold on her slackened, his jaw going loose. He gaped at her with open eyes, listless, lifeless.

He looked... dead. Dead like the stag, like a body that had lain exposed on the ground for days, weeks even, swollen and bloated.

But he was still moving. Still moving and staring with ghostly, ice-white eyes.

Aislinn scrambled away, half a scream in her throat.

She had never, ever seen anything like this.

Caerwyn stared at his hands, and then, awfully, up at her.

He'd seen something like this before.

He'd *done* something like this before.

An axe sliced through the air between them, decapitating the soldier in an instant. Minerva raced forwards on her wargi, collecting her weapon, and circled around them like a dog herding sheep. "Come on!" she growled.

Caerwyn didn't wait. He raced forward, grabbing the reins of Beau's horse that Diana was holding out to him. The rest of the dwarves were hovering beside a small shed at the base of a cliff.

Aislinn ran with them.

The back of the shed had been cut away, revealing a sharp tunnel under the mountain. The horses whinnied, but the wargis charged ahead, and a few soft words from Caerwyn had them following. They plunged into the dark, a few pinpricks of light in the tunnel ahead guiding the way; some of the dwarves had lit torches.

“Stand clear!” Minerva bellowed.

Magna and Fort stood at the mouth of the tunnel, readying explosives. Everyone hurried forward.

The entrance collapsed. The tunnel rumbled. Stillness and a never-ending silence followed, punctuated only by the weak whimpering of the horses and the panting of the wargis.

“So...” Beau began, “did anyone else see Caer just... turn a soldier into an undead monster? Did you all know he could do that?”

The entire party blinked at him.

“Of course you did. But do you also know how *hard that is to do?*” He whipped out his notebook. “How long have you had these powers? When did they manifest? How do they work—”

“Beau,” said Aislinn silently, “Be quiet.”

“Oh, right, not really the time, is it? All right, then.” He sucked all his questions back in with a resigned sigh.

Aislinn glanced at Caerwyn, but he did not meet her gaze. He kept his eyes firmly screwed to the floor, fingers tight on the reins of Beau’s horse.

*“Have you ever heard of mortals being born with powers?”*

Caerwyn hadn't fled from the castle because his stepfather wanted him dead. He'd fled because he'd killed someone. Because he had powers he couldn't control, didn't know how to use or where they came from. And he'd stayed with the dwarves because they alone were immune to his touch.

Like Beau, she had questions. But she wasn't sure she wanted the answers.

“Come on,” said Minerva. “We've a lot of ground to cover. That cave-in won't hold them forever. We need to reach Faerie by nightfall.”



# PART TWO

THE ROAD THROUGH WINTER







13  
CONFESSIONS BENEATH THE STARS

At last, the tunnel opened into the crisp, cool air, and the boundary to Faerie glittered on the horizon, like shimmering smoke. There was a short break to refresh themselves, to double-check the gear they'd managed to collect in the struggle, and to douse the torches. Everyone climbed onto their mounts, Caerwyn taking Beau's horse, Beau sliding onto Snapdragon behind Ais.

Caerwyn had still not looked at her.

"*You* didn't know, did you?" Beau whispered in Aislinn's ear.

"Of course I didn't!"

"I did wonder about the gloves. Do you think it happens whenever he touches someone?"

Aislinn remembered grabbing his face, and the sheer panic that had blossomed there. There were other times, too, when their skin had skimmed. Nothing had happened.

She shook her head. "I just don't think he can control it."

What must that be like, she wondered, to risk killing someone every time you touched them? To not know, to have no power over yourself?

She did not want to think, and yet she found she could not stop herself.

Beau murmured something in sympathy.

“How do you think Father’s handling the situation?” she asked him, wanting to talk about something—anything—else.

“Hmm, probably something along the lines of, ‘it looks as if my children too have been kidnapped by dwarven insurgents’ and ‘I cannot recall precisely what occurred in the heat of battle’ and other such truth-dodging.”

“Sounds like him...”

Beau nodded. He leant against her back. “Ais?”

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

She froze. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Beau clucked disapprovingly under his breath, but said nothing more.

It was a silent party. Hardly anyone seemed to be in the mood to speak, any gaze caught not resting long, as if everyone were keeping some festering, guilty secret.

They were probably waiting for someone to ask the question—or Caerwyn to explain. Aislinn wasn’t sure who should speak first, but given that it was Caerwyn’s secret, and that

he'd just killed a guard—likely someone he'd known—it seemed better to give him time.

Scarcely a word was uttered until they reached the border.

“Well, this is it,” Minerva said. “No turning back now. Ready, lad? One and only trip to Faerie.”

Caerwyn stared at the cloud, which Aislinn wasn't entirely sure he could see. Many a mortal strayed accidentally into Faerie. They could return to their own world after—but they would never return to Faerie again. The doorway would slip through their fingers, as graspable as fog.

Caerwyn marched through, and the rest followed.

Aislinn took a deep, shuddering breath the second the shimmer washed over her, the whisper of magic brushing through the trees. The air felt different here—clearer, sharper, and the earth hummed ever-so-slightly beneath the hooves of her horse.

Beau took in a similar breath, and they held out their hands to the trees, the branches above them seeming to bow, twitching at their fingertips like the vines back home.

*Hello, I've missed you.*

“Ah,” said Minerva, with a sigh almost as hearty. “There's no denying it's nice here, but let's not dawdle. We've another hour of daylight.”



The forests of Autumn blazed beneath hazy sunlight, a dense carpet of red, magenta and pink. Colours that didn't seem to exist in the mortal world whispered against their faces. Caer revelled in it all. The faint masterpiece was a welcome distraction to the thoughts spinning through him.

He killed a man. Again. He knew him, too. Dafydd. He'd sparred with him before. He was excellent with a blade, fiercely loyal to the crown. He liked pastries and flirting with the cook's daughter.

But when he'd grabbed hold of Aislinn...

He took a deep breath. The first time his powers had killed, it had been an accident. This time... he'd wanted to hurt him. He'd been willing to kill him.

*But I didn't want to. I didn't want to!*

Aislinn hadn't looked him in the eye since. She was probably disgusted by him. Maybe this power was too dark, even for her. Maybe she was just furious at him for not telling her.

He wished she could lie to him. He felt he needed a lie, right now. It would be better than the truth.

But she did not ask. And he did not talk.



Diana went on ahead to catch some fresh game and managed to secure a couple of pheasants. The others found her just

before nightfall, setting up camp on a hill overlooking one of the many forests of Autumn. The sky had turned a dusky purple, the crisp leaves below a canvas of cold flame.

*Home.*

It seemed strange to think of going to Winter rather than back to Acanthia. Aislinn wondered if the dwarves were even expecting them to follow, or if they were being invited. At the moment they were heading in the same direction.

She did not want to ask.

After a supper of pheasants and flat, dense bread, courtesy of Luna, Minerva rolled her metal arm back in her socket.

“You all right, Min?” Bell asked.

“This arm is chafing something fierce,” she said, as she stripped off her armour and peeled back the clothing surrounding the limb. She took a small wrench from a belt pocket and unscrewed the bolts at her shoulder. Most of the arm fell away, save the port it was attached to, and the pauldron fitted over where her shoulder used to be. That had to be unbuckled by a leather strap, stretched across her chest.

Finally, most of the limb was removed from her body. The metallic port remained, welded to her flesh, the skin around it red and chafed.

Aislinn stared. She wasn't sure if she was unnerved by the damage, or impressed by it.

Minerva winced as Bell applied a lotion to the raw skin, Magna oiling the discarded arm as she did. She caught

Aislinn's stare.

"Tough doesn't mean you don't feel pain," she informed her. "Tough means you survive it."

"I'm not doubting your strength," Aislinn responded. "I just... I'm curious, I suppose. How the arm works, how—"

"How I lost the meat one, you mean?"

Aislinn swallowed. "Yes."

"Rogue golem attack in the deep. Thing got the arm in its mouth."

"She cut it off herself, rather than be eaten," Diana chimed in. "Or so the rumour is. She won't confirm."

Aislinn's eyes widened. "That's... impressive."

Minerva looked down, like it was not the word she would use. "It had to be done," she said.

Bell rubbed her hand against her neck, like her scars were burning, and all eyes turned back to the fire.

"So," said Beau, somewhat hesitantly, "I can't help but notice that Caer—"

Aislinn flashed him a dangerous look.

"—Does not have truesight."

Caerwyn stared at him for a long moment, as if he'd quite forgotten Beau could speak at all. "What's truesight?"

"It's something given to mortals so that they're immune to basic glamours, not so easily led astray, convinced of dragons

sailing overhead etc...”

“That might be useful...” he mused, stroking a finger under his chin. “How do you get it?”

Aislinn finally caught his gaze. “Easiest way would be for me to spit in your eye.”

“You are not spitting in my eye!”

“I can spit in your eye, if you prefer?” Beau offered.

“I will... pass, for now,” he said. “I daresay I won’t really need it in Avalinth.”

“Suit yourself,” said Beau, shrugging. “Who cares for a story? I know a good one about why no mortal can set foot in Faerie twice.”

It was quickly agreed that a story would indeed be welcome. Beau cleared his throat, took the drink that Luna poured for him, and settled into his spot.

“They say that a long, long time ago, a faerie prince fell in love with a mortal girl, and she ran away to faerie to be with him. But, as the years passed, she grew homesick and wanted to return. The prince agreed, and they set off immediately. Only, when they returned to her village, they found that whilst only a handful of years had passed for them, centuries had turned in the mortal world. Everyone the girl knew from her old life was dead. She was devastated, and all the love the faerie prince could heap on her world not plug up that wound. She died of a broken heart.”

“Oh, how sad.” Luna sighed.

Fort pursed her lips. “That doesn’t sound like it explains the barrier only letting you in and out once...”

“The story isn’t over yet. The prince grieved the girl like no one had ever grieved before, and wanted to follow her to the grave—but he found he could not, not yet. He could not bear the thought that the same fate might befall another hapless mortal. So he sought to change it. He travelled to the ends of the earth, pleading with the spirits and old ones. Finally, he found a way to tie the timelines between Faerie and the Mortal Lands together—at the cost of his own life.”

“Oh, I like that,” said Caer, at the same time that Luna sighed, “oh, that’s still very sad.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “Why would you like *that*?”

“Because he gets to be with his love again!”

“Some legends say so,” Beau continued. “Others say not. They say he became the barrier itself—that he hovers between life and death, that the sacrifice he made is to never be with her again at all.”

“Now, that *is* sad,” said Caer. “I like that less.”

“This is maudlin,” said Fort, piping in. “Let us have another tale—”

Diana brought out a set of pipes. Luna sang a sweet song. No one seemed in the mood for much more. Skies darkened, stars bled glitter. Beds were unrolled, a little ale was drunk, and one by one, all the dwarves fell asleep. They seemed to need more than humans or fae.



Caerwyn was still silent. Beau looked at Aislinn, and then jerked his head towards the prince. *Talk to him*, he mouthed.

He let out a loud yawn. “Well, that’s me done for the night,” he said, making a show of stretching, before he rolled over in his makeshift bed and started to snore.

Caer blinked at him in obvious disbelief. “Is he asleep?”

“Unlikely. He won’t take long, though. It’s been a... long day.”

“That it has.” Caer’s gaze fell to the boughs above, the spray of stars gleaming in his eyes. “It’s pretty, here. I don’t know what I expected. More thorns, perhaps. Something... frightening.”

“There’s plenty of that too, I assure you.”

A quietness spread between them, lifted only by the faint whispering of the wind and the sound of Beau’s fake snoring drifting into something far more natural. Caerwyn’s eyes stared at the campfire, dark and glossy.

“I suppose you have questions,” he said eventually.

“Many,” she admits. “But... I don’t wish to upset you.”

“Ask them,” he said, “although I cannot promise I will answer.”

Aislinn had been writing a silent list since she’d seen him kill the guard, and she forced them into order.

“So... you can raise the dead.”

“And kill them,” Caerwyn said, jaw tightly set. “Don’t forget that part.”

Aislinn hadn’t, but she didn’t think he needed reminding of that. “It came on... spontaneously? Recently?”

“Yes.” He swallowed. “After the death of my mother.”

Aislinn sensed that that was one area where her questions wouldn’t be welcome. She could not pick at that wound.

“And that’s why Owen wants you back?”

Caerwyn shrugged. “Contrary to what many may think, Owen has never coveted the throne, as far as I know. He didn’t want to stop me taking it. I imagine he’s rather more worried about the panic that will spread if it’s discovered that the Crown Prince can raise the dead.”

“We have a word for it, you know,” Aislinn said. “Necromancy. It’s rare—forbidden—magic. There’s a couple of Unseelie that have an affinity for it. I’d wager you’ve some fae ancestry some way back.”

Caer went quiet for a moment, eyes glistening. “Am I—am I still *human*?”

Aislinn took a deep breath, squeezing her fingers. She wanted to reach out and touch him and knew that that was a terrible, terrible idea. “You don’t have truesight. That’s something all fae are born with—even the halves. That suggests that, yes, you’re human.”

“Not that there’s anything bad about being fae—”

“You want to be who you’ve always thought you were. That’s not a slight against me. I understand.” She recounted her list. “You can’t control it, can you?”

Caer shook his head. “I’ve learnt to activate it on demand, thanks to Diana’s help, but I still can’t *stop* it. Any time I touch someone, I risk their lives.”

*How many?* Aislinn wanted to ask. *How many—and who?*

But the question was too cruel, too invasive, and did it matter? It didn’t change anything. All that it would do would force him to relive that moment.

“Any more questions?” he asked, when she remained silent.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “A part of me wanted to. But you can’t lie, and could be forced to tell someone. Many might covet these powers, though I fear them.”

“Did you think that I might?”

“Come again?”

“Did you think that I might fear *you*?”

He sighed. “Yes. I suppose I did.”

“Well, I don’t,” she said. “Just so you know. I am not afraid of you, and I’m not angry, either.”

Caerwyn snorted softly. “I used to hate the way that faeries could twist the truth, but now I’m starting to appreciate the honesty, too. It is nice to genuinely know you’re not afraid of me.”

“I understand that,” Aislinn said.

“*Why* aren’t you angry with me?”

“We’ve only known each other a week, Caer,” she said. “And for all that I’m stubborn and impulsive and prone to bouts of irrational anger... it’s completely fair not to want to spill your darkest secrets to someone you just met.”

Their gazes met, hanging together like the beads on the leather string around his neck. For a moment, Aislinn stood suspended, the air as fragile as glass.

“Well,” she said eventually, “goodnight.”

She moved towards her bedroll, but Caer’s hand reached out, pinching the cuff of her sleeve between his thumb and forefinger.

“Thank you,” he said, “for not being scared. For coming with us. You didn’t have to escort me. The dwarves would have gotten me here.”

Aislinn froze again, her eyes once more threaded to his. She was still no closer to naming the colour of his eyes, but in the light of fire they looked like old moss, shadowed and soft.

Why *had* she come with them? It would have been easier to go home with her father, but her first instinct—her only instinct—had been to follow the dwarves. To follow *him*.

“Well,” she said, spinning her impulses into acceptable truths, “I didn’t particularly fancy going back to your father and pretending to be some traumatised damsel incapable of looking after herself.”

Not a lie. He'd asked no question.

Caerwyn snorted. "Well, thank you all the same."

"You shouldn't say thank you. You owe me, now, Prince."

Caerwyn's face dipped closer, only a fraction. "I suppose I do," he said. His hand dropped away. "Goodnight, Ais."



The following morning, they ate a quick breakfast and packed up in record time, determined to make the most of the day. Minerva gave the siblings a quick look as they were readying their belongings.

“Well?” she said. “Coming with us?”

Beau and Aislinn exchanged glances. “If we’re allowed to?” asked Aislinn.

Minerva snorted. “The more the merrier.”

“They won’t imprison us for being fae, right?” Beau asked. “The dwarves and the fae have had a testy relationship since the Dwarven Uprising in the Year of Briar 866—”

“I’m aware of the history, boy, you’ll be fine. We dwarves don’t live as long as you. It’s ancient history.”

“Are you *sure*? Because—”

“Beau?” Aislinn threw the bedroll against his chest. “Shut up.”

“Yes, all right.”

Caer glanced at Aislinn as she climbed back onto her horse, half a smile spread across his face. She hoped that meant he was glad they were coming with them.

“I saw that,” Beau whispered in her ear. “And your blush, too.”

“You’ll see the ground, in a minute, when I chuck you off this horse.”

Beau squeaked. Unlike mortal threats, hers were binding. She’d once told him she’d drop him in the river if he pulled her hair again when he was barely more than a toddler, and he’d almost drowned. Aislinn, to her credit, did try her best to fish him out—she hadn’t *really* wanted to do it, she’d just... not had a choice.

He’d learnt young not to aggravate her.

They set off at a brisk pace. It was a pleasant, easy enough journey, especially with the mounts bearing the weight of the hills. They stuck to a long crest of them, over the forests.

“Better terrain,” Minerva explained. “No roads out here. The undergrowth is a nightmare on their tails.”

They stopped a few times to refresh themselves and rest their rides—especially poor Snapdragon, who was carrying two—but otherwise they spent most of their time moving. The company was brighter than before. Something about Aislinn’s talk with Caer last night seemed to have eased the entire party, and he didn’t seem to mind Beau’s plethora of questions which continued for the better part of an hour. If anything, he almost

appeared to enjoy that someone was fascinated by his powers rather than fearful of them.

Eventually, his questions subsided, and Beau's attention was claimed instead by the countryside around them. The Redwood was fading, magenta easing into browns and yellows. The air twitched with soft, dappled, earthy magic, the scent of warmth and rain. Aislinn wanted to swim in it.

"This is beautiful," Beau remarked, and then, half a beat later, "I miss Daisy."

"Who's Daisy?" Caer asked, appearing at their side.

"Our mutual best friend," Beau explained, still sad. Aislinn understood; Daisy would love it here, and they rarely went adventuring without him.

"Oh? What's she like?"

"She's a he."

"Daisy's a boy?"

"Half-minotaur, actually, if you're building a picture. Brilliant horns."

"Let me make sure I'm following," Caer started. "You have a best friend, who is a minotaur, and a man, called Daisy?"

"Half-minotaur."

Wind whispered through the trees.

"Well, I like it!" Caer clapped his hands together. "Tell me more of this minotaur fellow."



It was nice to talk about Daisy again, even if it was hard to talk about their shared childhood together without mentioning Cassandra. Beau was desperately skirting around her. Aislinn wished he wouldn't. It made it worse, somehow, like she only existed at the end, like her near two-decades of life didn't matter because of how early she quit it.

Finally, they made camp for the night. They drank their remaining ale, built the fire high, cooked a small boar Diana caught for them, and ate nuts roasted in herbs.

After the ale was drunk, and the food gone, Fort unrolled her pack and whipped out several packs of cards. "Right, ladymen and gentlefolk, who wants to continue our Wyverns and Wastelands campaign?"

"Ooh, me, me!" said Luna, clapping her hands and unwrapping the carefully bound decks of cards to deposit amongst their rightful owners.

"I'll get the figurines," Caerwyn said.

"You brought the figurines?" Minerva tutted fondly. "Wasting your packing space... though I can understand why."

Aislinn watched as he brought out eight tiny metal figures, each in the shape of some fae or dwarven character. She picked one up, admiring the detail. It was a sturdy dwarven blacksmith in perfect miniature. "These are beautiful," she said. "Where did you get them?"

"I, um, I made them," he admitted. "The dwarves taught me how to use the forge when I first arrived—"

“Boy has a knack for it,” Minerva remarked, voice warm. “Although he insists on making everything *pretty*.” She held up her hand, and Aislinn noticed for the first time that her smallest finger was engraved with a pattern of gems and axes.

“That’s exquisite,” Beau said, leaning forward to inspect it. When he leaned back, he whispered in Aislinn’s ear. “If you don’t want him, I’ll have him.”

Aislinn elbowed him in the side. “He won’t touch either of us. He *can’t*.”

“Oh, yeah, good point.” He paused. “So you’re saying you’ve *thought* about it—”

“I will hurt you.”

Beau shut up.

Aislinn turned her attention back to the others. They were double-checking their cards, and Fort was ‘catching them up’ by repeating what seemed to be some kind of epic quest to destroy an evil troll queen.

“So there we have it,” she concluded. “The weapon you seek is at the centre of the lake. Between it, and you—a sea-serpent, an ogre, and a sphinx. Your next move?”

“Bagpipes of Invisibility!” Bell declared.

“I love you, woman, but no. I vote the Stealth Flashbang.”

“Helm of Dutch Courage!” declared Luna. “Or the Towel of Galactic Protection—”

“Wrist-mounted Trebuchet!”

“Spurs of Inevitable Swagger—”

“Beards of Amazement! Definitely the Beards of Amazement!”

“I’m sorry,” Aislinn started, as Magna pressed a card that read ‘Ladle of Doom’ into her hand, “are you playing some sort of... role playing game?”

Minerva did not look up from her cards. “Aye, lass, what of it?”

“You could literally go out and kill a monster.”

“This is cleaner,” said Bell primly.

“Keeps the skills sharp,” added Diana.

“Good for morale,” Minerva informed her.

“I just think it’s fun!” declared Luna.

Aislinn stared at Caer. He shrugged. “I just like playing for the slim chance that I might beat them at something.”

“Want to join, lass?”

“No, it’s too late in the campaign to be introducing new characters,” Fort insisted, “and she doesn’t know how to play \_\_\_”

“She can just play as herself. Luna and Caer are.”

“I am not!” Luna declared. “I am the faerie healer, Luneria...”

“What she lacks for in imagination, she makes up for in heart,” Minerva said, not unkindly.

“And I’m a strong dwarven blacksmith by the name of Baerwyn Gearheart,” Caer added. “Totally different person.”

“Oh *fine*,” Fort insisted, throwing up her hands. “You have been standing hidden on the shore, debating your next move, when two half-fae siblings show up. One is a warrior, the other a magician and a scholar. You combine forces to reach your prize. Caer—explain the rules to them.”

She threw a handful of spare cards in their direction.

Caer scooted closer, stopping a little distance away. He explained the rules as the others squabbled over their next move and rolled strange, many-sided dice and complained that the ground was too bumpy. Aislinn was familiar with card games—her father had been playing with her since she was old enough to read the numbers—but this was something else entirely.

“I’m going to be honest,” Caerwyn said, “sometimes I think they’re making up the rules as they go. The whole thing seems ridiculously overcomplicated, but it is rather good fun when you get into it.”

“All right!” said Minerva forcefully. “Bell is using the Bagpipes of Invisibility to confuse the ogre. Diana’s using the Catnip Grenade on the Sphinx. Sea-monster is distracted by Luna using the Clip-on-Wings and Magna’s Ladle of Doom, and I’m paddling across the lake on my Inflatable Shield. Are we in agreement?”

An affirmative murmur followed, after which there was much dice rolling, cheering, laughing, and crying.

Things continued in this vein for another two hours at least, at which point Luna had fallen asleep on Caerwyn's lap, Magna beside her, and half of the rest of the party looked asleep in their seats.

One-by-one, the rest of the dwarves rolled off to bed. Caerwyn tucked Luna and Magna in himself, the others helping with removing their boots. He patted Luna's head as he pulled her cloak around her, lingering slightly on her soft, moonshine hair. He wasn't wearing his gloves. It had been too hot beside the fire.

"They do tend to sleep a lot, don't they?" Aislinn remarked, watching them as they dozed.

"Did you know," Beau started, "that the average dwarf sleeps ten to twelve hours, the average human eight, and although fae tend to mimic human sleep patterns, they can survive on as little as four with few ill-effects in the medium-to-long term?"

"No one likes a scholar, Beau."

"Interesting," said Caer, stroking a finger under his chin, "how many hours of sleep do you need?"

"Who, Ais? She needs her full eight or she turns into a grouchy monster. Haven't you noticed how short tempered she's becoming?"

Aislinn threw her flask at Beau's head. It connected with a sharp thunk.

“I probably deserved that,” he said, massaging his temple. “Goodnight, I suppose.”

He rolled over without another word. Aislinn started to pull off her extra layers herself, although she didn't feel tired. Contrary to Beau's assertion, she did not need as much sleep as a dwarf or even a mortal.

Caer pulled off his boots and thumbed his beads, his expression glassy beneath the starlight.

“Those beads,” Aislinn asked. “Did you make them yourself?”

Caer nodded.

“What do they stand for?”

“For everyone I care for,” he explained, counting them out. “One for each of the dwarves. One for my mother, and...” His hands stilled on the ninth. Aislinn had noticed before that they all had tiny symbols etched into them. This one, unless she was mistaken, held a tiny crown.

Owen.

“I'm not sure I want to ask,” she said, “but the other one...”

Lower down, half-hidden by his shirt, was another string of pure black beads.

Caerwyn paused, fingers skimming over them. “The lives I've ended,” he said. “I felt... I thought I better honour them, too. I'll have to add another one now, for Dafydd.”

“Dafydd?”

“The soldier I killed when...”

“Right,” she said. *When you saved me.*

“We seem to have turned morbid,” Caer announced. “I’d rather not go to bed on such a note.”

“Nor I,” Aislinn admitted. She turned her gaze upwards to the crystalline spray of stars, fine and bright as glittering dust. The moon hung like a pearl in a pot of ink.

“It’s a full moon,” Caer remarked. “I do believe you promised to tell me something on such an occasion.”

“Ah, yes, about the dancing and... blood bathing.”

“You lingered on blood bathing.”

“Did I?”

They shared a smirk.

“The blood bathing has been largely exaggerated,” Aislinn revealed. “The naked dancing under moonlight? Less so. It’s a common practice amongst some of the fae. It can enhance some of our magical energy.”

“Some? Not... you?”

Aislinn pursed her lips. “I may have... dabbled.”

“May?”

Aislinn went silent.

Caer smirked. “You’re a wicked tease.”

“I’m a wicked tease,” Aislinn repeated. “Oh, my, apparently I am.”

She looked back at the moon, again at the fire, and cast her eyes over their sleeping companions. No one was watching.

She climbed to her feet, and unbuckled her belt and boots.

“Umm... what are you doing?”

“Taking off my clothes,” she said. “Relax, I won’t get fully naked.”

She shucked off everything but her undergarments and the thin, filmy slip she kept beneath her shirt. Cool night air licked at her limbs, the soft, dewy ground sponging beneath her feet.

*You are a faerie, the wind seemed to whisper, nature given flesh.*

Aislinn started to dance. No matter that there was no music, that no one was dancing with her—the planet played for her, accompanied her every movement. Earth beat like drums beneath her footfalls, the wind piped through the trees. The blades of grass bent like strings.

She was as supple as a willow, as malleable as clay, and the moonlight was a fire, a cold ignition, deep, deep in her centre.

She twirled, and found Caer standing in front of her, stripped to his waist.

She stilled.

She was used to well-formed, flawless, smooth fae bodies. She was used to seeing groups of them wearing nothing at all. She was not used to *this*—toned, brown marble, softly rippling



pectorals, a light dusting of fine, velvety hair across his carved abdomen.

*Did he forge himself?* She wondered dimly. He looked like something that ought to come from a forge; beautiful and dangerous, flecked with scars.

It occurred to her she'd been staring at him for far, far too long. "The blacksmithing has been good for you," she admitted, her tongue thick as honey.

Caer smirked. That stupid, soft, wicked, rippling smirk. "The fighting has been good for you."

Aislinn could think of nothing to say to that, and hated that a blush rushed to her face instead of words.

Caer's gaze drifted towards the moon. "How does it work?" he said. "Can you feel it?"

Aislinn nodded. "Like a current in the water."

"I can't feel anything."

"Try dancing."

She faced him again, bending to the side, extending her arms in a circle. Caer followed, his sinewy body mirroring her instruction, glowing in the light of the moon. Aislinn increased her pace, movements sharper, slicker, a reed against the wind, a flame in the fire. Caer moved with her, never touching, but following, as perfect as if he'd been raised in the wilds of Faerie. Music pumped in their veins, invisible. Overflowing. Aislinn's insides heated.

She twirled and stopped shortly, inches from Caer's chest. Magic pulled inside her, part of her very marrow, her blood.

Caer's eyes widened, his chest panting. "You're glowing," he remarked.

Aislinn stared down at her hands, faint golden light shining through her veins. Her skin was the colour of moondust.

She raised her fingers, flexing them carefully, tips flickering with purple sparks.

"Is that supposed to happen?" Caer asked.

"Sometimes," Aislinn returned, her voice a whisper. She'd felt the thrum of magic stung with moonlight many times before, but this was the first time the absorption had become so physical. She raised a hand to Caer's chest, not touching, letting it spark against his skin.

Caer breathed deeply.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," he said, "not at all."

She splayed her fingers and moved her hands across his shoulders, down his arms. The magic rippled against him, stroking the taut muscles, the panes of his chest, coursing over the throbbing vein in his neck before vanishing like smoke, the remaining magic sinking under her skin.

Caer's breathing steadied. "Does it always feel like that?"

"What did it feel like?"

“Like sinking into a hot bath,” he whispered. “Like swimming in the deep in the heat of summer. Like fire rippling through your blood. Like all of that and more.”

Aislinn wondered, if she touched him now, if she would feel that too. She wondered why her heart was still hammering so hard against her ribcage.

“No,” she said, mouth dry, “it doesn’t always feel like that.”

Caer’s shadow cut across hers. On the ground, silhouetted by the firelight, they were touching. An inch between them was all. No more.

*We touched before, she realised. I grabbed his face. Nothing happened.*

“We should...” she started.

Caer stared at her, eyes black and glossy. His lips were parted slightly, and Aislinn was quite sure she had never seen a mouth look so soft or perfect before. She wondered what his stubble felt like.

And other parts of him.

“Put on our clothes and go back to bed?” he suggested.

“Yes,” she said, even though that felt like the opposite she should be doing.

*The bed part sounds nice, though...*

If she’d known that grabbing his face might be the only time she’d ever touch him, she’d have held on for longer. She’d have savoured the feeling of his skin beneath hers...

She wondered what the rest of him felt like, how warm that soft, solid body would feel...

“You’re not moving,” Caer commented, still staring at her.

*I can't.* “Right,” she said quickly, and shook her head. Waves of chestnut red cascaded over her shoulder. “Bed. Sleep. A good idea.”

She seized her shirt from the mossy ground and plunged it over her head, as if the extra clothing would cover up her thoughts. She marched to her bedroll without looking back, aware that Caerwyn was still standing there beneath the moonlight, that he only moved once she was settled under her blanket.

They should say goodnight. They should say *something*.

But goodnight was too small and fleeting and everything else monumental or ridiculous. So Aislinn stayed silent.

And so did he.



Caerwyn was raised to be king. From his earliest moments, the words were whispered over his cradle. He could never remember a time when he didn't know his future. His fate.

“Eat your food, Your Highness. A king must grow big and strong.”

“Concentrate on your lessons, Prince Caerwyn. A king must have an education.”

“Ignore those other children, Your Highness. A king must know his place, and the place of others.”

All his life, Caerwyn did exactly as he was told. He listened and learned and ignored the others his own age, even when all he wanted to do was run across the courtyard with them and dive into the piles of hay. Each season would bring a new kind of torment. In spring, he'd watch them skip round maypoles, make daisy chains in the grass, slip outside the castle walls and run off to the fields and forests, free and unrestrained. In summer they'd splash in fountains and streams, lie in the

shade, laugh in the sun and whisper long in the evenings. When autumn came, they'd race around to beat back the cold and build enormous piles of leaves to jump in. Even winter never seemed to dampen their spirits, and Caerwyn would watch enviously from the castle as they drew pictures in the frost and made men of snow when the cold weather swept through the land. He felt he'd give up everything for a chance to join them.

But he was not allowed to complain. Loneliness was the price of the greatness he was told would be his one day.

And yet sometimes, during his lessons, his gaze would fall outside the walls of the castle, to the mountains in the distance, and his heart beat so madly in his chest it felt like a sickness. He'd dream of running away to them. On his rare excursions out of the town, on hacks and hunts, he'd ignore his game and skirt to the edge of the wilderness, wondering what it would be like to live a life out there. It felt more natural, that way of life. Each time he journeyed back, the shadows of the castle walls closed in on him like the lid of a casket. It was harder to breathe there. *Everything* was harder there, and no matter what anyone told him, Caerwyn couldn't help but feel like this life was not meant for him at all.

Meanwhile, the mountains sang, beckoning him with a call like the siren-music of old.

But he never let himself do more than dream. He was a prince, after all. He had expectations, rules, responsibilities. He ate well and lived in luxury and paid for that with freedom.

He knew it was more than a fair exchange, but he also didn't know hunger, and sometimes, *sometimes* he thought he might have preferred it.

He never told anyone. How could he? He didn't have true friends, noble children few and far between and rarely in his life long enough to form attachments, and he was discouraged from dallying with the common folk. He could not tell the servants, knowing how insulting his dreams might be, and his mother...

His mother. He could tell anything to her, but not that. Not his wish to run away from it all. Not when that would mean leaving *her*.

In his twentieth year, when she fell ill, the servants and ladies twittered and whispered that she'd always been of weak and frail disposition, an assertion that made no sense to Caerwyn. His mother had held a kingdom after the death of her husband, had maintained peace without having to marry him off as a boy, had stayed beside him whenever he was sick as a child, never leaving him for a moment, had her own brushes with illness, sure, but had attended every royal event, every joust and festival, every dance even when she never left her throne. The few times she was bed bound, she always rose again.

Until, one day, she didn't.

To begin with, he thought nothing of the servants' remarks. His mother wasn't frail. His mother was stronger than anyone. She would overcome this. She would.

Only she didn't. She grew weaker and paler, as still and scrawny as a scarecrow. He'd look at her emaciated body and want to stuff life back into her. Only he couldn't. He didn't have that power.

Others did.

When Owen suggested sending for a faerie healer, none of his council backed him. Magic was unnatural, death was not. The Queen was only a woman. They already had an heir. If Owen was lonely after her death, she could easily be replaced. Maybe the next one would give him children of his own.

"I already have a child of my own!" Owen spat, and then, with a darkness Caerwyn had never seen before, barked at everyone to leave. "Not you, Caer," he said, as everyone else slunk away. "For it is your opinion alone that I care for."

Caerwyn stayed, pinned to the spot. Before Owen married his mother, he'd been Lord Cadwaladr, his mother's most trusted advisor. He'd watched over him since he was a boy, picking him up when he fell, instructing him to listen to his mother... and quietly loving her from afar. He told him stories about his father and the man he was and the person he would have wanted Caerwyn to be. Some stories didn't help. Most did.

"What say you, Caer?" Owen asked, staring out at the mountains that now, more than ever, Caerwyn wanted to run away to. Anything to avoid witnessing what was about to happen next. "No one else seems to be with me. Should I call on a faerie? I've heard of one not far away."



“What will they ask for?”

Owen shrugged his shoulders. “Does it matter?”

And Caerwyn found himself in perfect agreement. It did not matter what the faerie wanted. He felt like he would pay any price.

The faerie was summoned. He was a slender, sharp-faced, pointy-eared creature with hair like sunlight sheathed in mist. He looked exactly like Caer had imagined a faerie looking, and he moved like he was made of water, his voice river-soft.

“You may call me Rowan,” he instructed.

He made no promises of a miracle cure, only that he would try his best to save the Queen. Human diseases, he said, were frequently untouchable by faerie magic, but there were things he could try—potions and wards to fight whatever ailed her. Mercifully, he did not ask for more than gold and jewels—things that were easy to part with.

“Did you expect blood-letting?” he asked when Caerwyn frowned. “The still-beating hearts of seven virgins? A lifetime of tears?”

Caerwyn gritted his teeth. “Something like that.”

“Those things have their value, as does everything,” Rowan replied. “But in the land of men, gold has value, and I will have it.”

Rowan told them nothing of where he came from, no tales of Faerie save the ones they already knew. He was a silent

presence in the main hall, but sometimes Caer heard him singing—singing to his mother in that slippery, melodic voice.

He eased her pains. Her skin regained its lustre. Her hair even started to thicken again. There were days—whole, wonderful, beautiful days—when she was well enough to sit outside with the sun on her face, and Caerwyn thought she might be getting better.

And then there were days when she couldn't move, when she couldn't speak for groaning, when none of the faerie's magic would touch her.

“There must be something you can do—” Owen begged him.

“I may have a back-up plan,” Rowan whispered in the corner of the room. “Something we can do if worse comes to worst.”

Caerwyn didn't hear his reply. He was too busy holding his mother's hand. It felt like a handful of twigs inside his.

He barely slept. He barely ate. Each time he nodded off, he woke up with a hard jolt, wondering if she was still there, if today was the day his mother died, the hour.

In his worst moments, he almost wanted her to go. At least then, she wouldn't be in pain. At least then, he wouldn't have to wait and watch with her, halfway to Hell.

But he feared the world without her in it more.

When he was alone, he begged her not to go. Begged her to stay with him. Told her he wasn't ready.

When he had company, he realised how selfish that was.

Little by little, something ate away at him, too, as surely as the festering disease taking her.

It didn't matter if he wasn't ready, if she was.

"It's all right, Mama," he said to her one morning, as the weak sun rolled on another pain-filled day. "I'll be all right, if you need to go. I'll be as strong as you were when you lost Father."

His mother turned to him, half a smile in her ghostly cheeks, and uttered the first word she'd managed in days.

"*Stronger*," she said hoarsely.

But she didn't go. She continued in her silent agony, too weak to cry out, to move. She shrivelled away to nothing, clinging barely to life, sustained by the faerie's magic and Owen's refusal to let her go.

If the illness didn't kill her, Caerwyn was sure it would kill him. He could not stand to watch this much longer. What was even the point? She was a skeleton stitched together by pain.

"Do you not think..." he started carefully one evening, not meeting Owen's eyes, "that she's suffered enough?"

Owen dug his fingers into the arms of his chair. "She will endure," he said. "She has to. Just a little longer. Rowan says he has a plan, has people out looking for something that could help us—"

*Could.* No absolutes, no certainties. Caerwyn wanted to believe there was hope, but hope now felt like a thing that happened to other people. He couldn't remember the shape of it.

But he could remember his mother's. Her small, fragile shape, and pain the only certainty of her existence.

"Owen," Caerwyn begged, voice grating, "please. This isn't right."

"You want her to die, boy? Is that what you want?"

"No," Caerwyn said, his voice trembling. He felt like a boy again, the world a dark, scary thing, and he an ant beneath the boot of a giant. "I just don't want her to suffer. I don't want to watch—"

"Then *leave!*" Owen spat. "Go somewhere else. Return when it's over. No one is making you stay!"

But how could Caerwyn leave? How was that ever a possibility?

He could have pulled rank, of course. He could have insisted. His mother was queen, he was the crown prince. Owen had no right to order him.

But Owen was the only father he had ever known, and right now... his only parent.

He caved. He returned to his mother's bedside. He prayed, he stayed. He turned empty with sleeplessness.

One morning in the faint bluish light, she opened her hollow eyes and looked at him. Too weak to speak, and yet he knew she was channelling all her energy into that look—that last, desperate plea.

She wanted it to be over.

Caerwyn didn't know if he could do it. He'd never harmed another human being before, never hurt anyone he loved. What was he supposed to do? Take the pillow from the bed and smother her with it?

He couldn't bear to think of it, couldn't bear to press it to her face, to think of her bony limbs flailing beneath him, moving for the final time, her life snuffed out by the life she'd given.

He couldn't do it.

But he had to help her. *He had to.*

He clenched her hand, wishing he could suck her pain away, to draw out her life like he was sending it somewhere, not extinguishing it.

Something fell over him, like a dark, snappable cloud. He felt like thunder was rolling overhead. A pull, a tug, a hard, twisted knot unlatched inside him.

The veins in his mother's hands blackened. Her skin turned grey. All at once, the spark in her eyes vanished, turning milky white. Her entire body trembled, then stilled.

She was dead. She was definitely, completely dead.

So why was she still moving?

Caerwyn stumbled backwards, screaming, alerting the guards posted outside. The ladies-in-waiting jolted awake, shrieking at the sight of Her Majesty rising from the bed, struggling towards Caerwyn with her mouth hanging open, like she planned to devour him whole.

“What sorcery is this?” one of the guards asked.

“I... it was me,” Caerwyn muttered numbly, confused about everything but that. Somehow, he’d done this.

“What?” the guard ceased his arm. “This is nonsense, Your Highness—”

His mother’s corpse stepped towards him, and the second guard ran her through.

Caerwyn screamed again. *Don’t hurt her*, he wanted to yell, even though he knew that was ridiculous, pointless. His mother was beyond hurting. His mother wasn’t here anymore.

But her corpse continued to move, sliding down the sword.

“The head!” shrieked one of the ladies-in-waiting. “Take off her head!”

The guard holding Caerwyn dropped him, drawing his sword. He sliced the neck straight from her shoulders, and the Queen’s head rolled over the flagstones and landed on the rug nearby.

Her nose brushed against the pattern of bears and crowns—the same pattern Caerwyn had followed with his fingers as a

tiny child, naming each of the animals and counting them one-by-one as his mother praised his efforts.

Caerwyn turned, and vomited over the floor.

“Steady now, Your Highness,” said one of the guards. “The monster is defeated.”

But that wasn't true, wasn't right, because the only dead thing here was his mother, and Caerwyn was the one who had made her that way, and he was still alive.

He clambered to his feet, moving towards the door. The other guard shouted out, and suddenly there were hands on him, trying to hold, to soothe, to stop—

He didn't know their intentions. All he knew was that he wanted them *gone*.

And suddenly, their voices vanished, replaced by awful, gurgling sounds. Their hold slackened, their jaws falling from their faces like snake's.

The ladies started screaming again.

Caerwyn regained just enough of himself to seize a fallen sword, and cut them through too. Their heads rolled against his mother's.

He stared at their vacant, empty eyes for a minute that held the weight of a century, the screams of the ladies-in-waiting ringing in his ears like distant bells.

And then he started to run.

He would never remember how he got out of the castle, how he secured a horse, how he managed to navigate towards the mountain or whether some angel guided his path or some demon ensured his torment continued. The forests called to him, but no longer with the song of freedom.

The next truly conscious thought he had was falling from his horse, and waking in a cottage filled with dwarves, screaming for a mother who would never, ever answer him back.

A mother he'd killed.





16  
MEMORIES BY MOONLIGHT

Caerwyn bolted upright in the forest, half screaming, barely breathing.

“Caer!” someone hissed. “Caer, it’s all right, it was a dream.”

*Aislinn.*

Only she was wrong. It wasn’t a dream, but a memory. Sweat rushed from his skin at the starkness of it.

Aislinn hovered nearby, as if unsure where to put herself. Her hands glossed over him. “Are you—”

“I killed my mother.”

Aislinn did not still, barely even paused. “I know.”

Caer froze, looking up at her. Had one of the dwarves told her? He’d babbled out the whole story, the night he’d come to them, but they’d seemed to understand this wasn’t something he wanted to share—

“The others didn’t tell me,” Aislinn went on, reading his hesitation. “I just took an educated guess. Your powers... the

way you fled the castle... the timing..."

"I didn't... I didn't mean to."

"I know that, too."

The softness and surety of her words didn't reach him, only his desperate need to explain.

"She was just in such pain, and I wanted it to be over, and, and something happened, and then it *was* over, and it wasn't, because she didn't stay dead, she came back, and the guards tried to stop me and I—"

"Ssh, ssh," Aislinn said, inching closer. "It's over now."

She couldn't say 'it's all right.' She couldn't pat his hand like Minerva had when he'd told the others and tell him it was fine. Because it wasn't. Her tongue knew the shape of a lie.

"Caer?"

He couldn't look her in the eye. He couldn't look at her and he couldn't hold her and he wanted to. He wanted to so badly. But the thought of her skin turning grey, her eyes white, the thought of twisting her—

She dropped his blanket over his shoulders and hugged his back. "This is all right, isn't it?" she whispered. "It has to be skin-on-skin?"

He swallowed, desperately hoping that assumption was correct. He'd never hurt anything he wasn't directly touching, and although he'd reanimated the already-dead without contact, he'd never killed anything without physical contact.

This was safe. It had to be. If it wasn't, if he couldn't latch onto anything, he thought he might slip away entirely.

"Yes," he said, voice hushed, "this is all right."

"Follow my breathing," Aislinn instructed. "If you can. Breathe with me."

Caer followed her instruction, breathing in.

"Hold," she whispered, "and out again. That's it."

Her chest rose against his back, her heartbeat thumping in time to his. It was something to hold onto, something solid and warm.

Gradually, his breathing slowed.

"Thank you," he said.

Her hands were wrapped around his middle, close to the parting of his shirt. Not too close.

He wanted to take one of those hands and squeeze it, wanted to link his fingers into hers and not let go. It would anchor him further.

"I'm all right now," he told her, although regretted his words a moment later when she slipped away from him.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

She sat in front of him, her cloak drawn around her shoulders, gleaming in the whispery, quiet light of the fire. Her seafoam eyes were locked on him, bright and brilliant, still and piercing. They held a strange quality to them, like she was

trying to peer into his soul, while at the same time being calm and restrained, as if trying to tell him she was more than happy to sit in silence until he sent her away. He could not explain it another way.

“A secret for a secret,” she said eventually. “It is the faerie way.”

“Come again?”

“You feel exposed, do you not? Weakened by your confession, although you are not?”

His jaw tightened. “Yes.”

“Then you shall have a piece of my armour, too,” she said. “A trade to even the balance.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I killed my best friend,” she interrupted. “That’s... that’s actually not true. I didn’t kill her like you killed your mother. But I made the decisions that led to her death. And I had to watch her die. It was a lot more my fault than your mother was yours—my decisions led to her death, not some accident of birth or unknown power I had no hope of controlling.” She paused. “I can’t tell you that it will get better. People keep telling me that it will, that time will heal all... but I’m a faerie and they expect me to live forever. I think that might be a lie we believe. I’m not even sure I want to move past it. It feels like it would be dishonouring her. The guilt keeps her with me.” Another pause, longer and harder. “I know that’s not how she’d want me to live. I know she’d want me to kill the

monster that killed her and move on with my life, telling everyone I ever met how hilarious she was and praising and cursing her name. But in the end, it doesn't help, knowing what she would want. She's not here to want it."

Caer paused. Her eyes had turned away from him, turned away from everything, like she could see past branches and fire and starlight to nothing but the blackness they were made from. The tips of her fingers had seared the grass below. He wasn't sure she was aware of it.

"And did you?" he asked, the words struggling to form.

"Did I what?"

"Kill the monster that killed her."

Aislinn lowered her head. "Yes."

"I can't kill the monster that killed my mother."

"Do you need to be told that wasn't you?"

"I—"

"You are not a monster, Caer. I wouldn't be able to say it if it wasn't true."

"You wouldn't be able to say it if you didn't *believe* it. That's not quite the same thing."

"Well, my opinion ought to count for something, at least. I've met a lot of monsters, and I'm very hard to impress."

"I've impressed you?" Caerwyn raised an eyebrow. "How did I do that?"

Aislinn stared at him, her eyes doe-wide. He preferred the face she made when she was slightly annoyed, but he liked this one too.

He liked all of her faces...

“I’m actually not entirely sure,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I figure it out.”



They set off again at first light, merry as the day before, although the air was turning harder and chillier. They were not far from Winter now. A day, two at most—Aislinn wasn't sure. Bell was in charge of the map.

In all her expeditions before, Aislinn had never trusted another person enough to navigate for her. Cass used to tease her about it mercilessly.

“What do you think is going to happen if I have the map, just for a little while?”

Aislinn didn't doubt Cass' skill, but she could not surrender the map. She had to be the one holding it, to know where they were going.

“You could walk us into a bog, perhaps.”

“Yes, because I don't have eyes. Or ears. Or a *nose*.”

It was only now Aislinn wondered if it wasn't a trust thing at all, but a way to only blame herself if things went wrong, to relieve one more person of the burden of responsibility. She

was to be queen one day, after all. Of course she should lead. Of course she should take the fall.

She wondered why she'd so easily surrendered to the dwarves. It was likely just the sensible thing to do—they knew the way, and she did not.

From time to time, Caer met her gaze, but she did not hold it for long. It was hard to have a conversation with Beau literally breathing down her neck, and several times she opted to go on foot just to have a little more space to move. Once or twice, she scurried up to the treetops and hopped along the boughs and branches, shaking off the memory of her injury. She was not made to be chained to the ground.

Sometimes, she caught Caer watching. She tried not to enjoy that too much.



Caer was quite sure he'd never enjoyed anything as much as he enjoyed watching Aislinn move through the forest like something between a leaf and a cat, a creature made of air. She could scuttle up the tree so fast he swore she almost levitated. He'd seen acrobats before and marvelled at their skill, but Aislinn seemed more water than flesh and muscle. She didn't leap, she soared. She made a mockery of whatever force pinned them to earth, flitting through the undergrowth like a bird, her cape trailing behind her like the wings of a butterfly.

It was impossible to look away.



“I can see you staring,” said Beau pointedly, a grin spread across his face.

“It’s an impressive feat.”

“She is,” said Beau, still smiling. “But is that the only reason you’re staring?”

“I—”

“Oh, this is very amusing,” said Minerva.

Fort pulled her wargi in closer. “More amusing than that time we told Caer that skipping was the easiest way to get around the forest?”

Caer’s cheeks heated. “I was really fast and you know it!”

A laugh passed through the party, deep and rippling. Aislinn dropped down from the boughs and slipped back onto her horse. Beau decided this was the perfect opportunity to stretch his own legs, although he kept to a steady pace beside the party, not flitting through the trees.

Caer gazed at Aislinn like a painting of water, unsure of whether he wanted to dive into it, or stand back and safely admire from a distance. He knew she didn’t consider herself as magically gifted as her brother, but there was something different about *her* magic. It rolled off her like dew from the morning leaf. It was natural, beautiful, wondrous to behold. No matter how wild and dangerous she was, no matter the power that trembled in her wake, her magic was not so thunderous. Her power was all her own.

He'd never liked magic before now. Never appreciated it or seen the value in it, the wonder.

It was decidedly growing on him now.



That evening, as they made camp, and Caer was off looking for firewood, Beau sidled up to Aislinn and whispered in her ear.

“Did something happen between you and the prince last night?”

Aislinn blushed. “That is absolutely none of your business.”

Beau clapped his hands, grinning. “That’s a yes, then.”

Aislinn glanced around her, checking no one was listening in. “We... might have done a moon dance.”

“Naked?”

Aislinn pursed her lips. “Not quite.”

“And?”

“It was... magical.”

“They’re supposed to be.”

“No, I mean... It was *really* magical. No quiet hum. It was dripping from my fingertips.”

“Hardly surprising. You’re the future queen of Faerie. You’re supposed to feel magic more than the rest of us.”

“But I don’t, Beau. I never have. I feel more than nothing, but nothing like what Father talks about, or you...”

Beau cocked his head. “Are you having a moment of doubt?”

“Maybe.”

“Are you genuinely thinking that I would make a better queen than you?”

“You’d be a king, Beau.”

“I could be queen!” he said indignantly. “I could be the best queen that ever was!”

“That’s rather what I’m afraid of. Not that you’d be great, because you would be, and I would *want* you to be, but... I’m afraid that I won’t be good enough.”

“Magic doesn’t make a monarch!” Beau insisted. “I’d be terrible! I’d definitely get lost in a book and miss council meetings, or start asking personal questions to some visiting dignitary, or accidentally cut off someone’s head whilst trying to knight them, or—”

“Beau, you’re seventeen. I think you’ll grow out of it.”

Beau snorted. “You’re only nineteen,” he said, “and unless Mother makes good on her promise to murder Father, I reckon we’ll have him for a few centuries yet. You’ll be queen one day, but you don’t have to be queen *yet*. ”

“That was extremely mature.”

“I have my moments.” He nudged her shoulder. “So, you and Caerwyn, then...”

Aislinn shook her head. “We are *not* going there!”

“Why not? I thought we agreed you had plenty of time to fool around?”

“We did not, and I have better things to do than moon over some stupid mortal prince with ridiculously muscular arms and a soft, sullen mouth...”

“How can a mouth be sullen?” said Caer, appearing behind her, arms full of firewood.

Aislinn jumped. “How can you move so silently?”

“I wouldn’t say my mouth is sullen. Devilishly handsome, maybe. I’ll take the soft part. And my arms are agreeably muscular, I must say.”

“I, er, I, you’re not—” Aislinn’s mouth stalled. She coughed out another few horrid sounds, emulating a cat retching up a hairball.

Caer stared on, bewildered. He turned to Beau. “Is she all right?”

Beau just grinned. “She’s trying to find something to say that isn’t a lie and failing miserably. Probably something like ‘I hate you both’ or ‘I will end you’ but she *can’t*.”

“I will find something horrible to do to you, Beau. Mark my words. If you say one more thing—”

“Ooh, better stop now. She will actually be held to that.”

Caer ignored him, still looking at Aislinn. His gaze kept on her as he bent down to add the logs to the fire. She could not shake it. She did not want to.

Beau took out his notebook and started to sketch. He drew the party huddled around the fire beneath the large, near-full moon. He drew Caer's figurines and Minerva's arm. He drew hands on cards and a brown finger of flesh tucked into a finger of metal. He drew Diana and her patches of inky skin, and Luna with her hair like moonshine.

Aislinn had always been jealous of Beau's ability to do that, to immortalise a moment with the flick of a pencil, the way he could rend memory to paper. Such a skill was beyond her. Although she wouldn't have traded her talent with weaponry for her talent with a paintbrush, she envied him all the same.

"What are you drawing?" Luna asked, looking up after her character was immobilised for three turns. "Oh! It's me! I look so pretty."

"You *are* that pretty, Luna."

Luna beamed. "You're so kind to say so."

"You're so kind to *exist*."

Caer snorted. He'd elected to opt out of the game tonight to service their weapons. He sat beside Aislinn in the glow of the campfire, sharpening Minerva's axe. Aislinn tried not to focus too hard on how his fingers rested against the blade, or how the veins in his arms flexed as he worked.

“They seem to be getting along,” he told her. “Do you think there’s something going on there?”

“I don’t think so. Whenever Beau fancies someone, he tends to either be over-the-top flirty or painfully awkward. There is no in-between.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“What are you like, when you like someone?”

*Oh, you know, I fixate on certain parts of their body and stare at them from a distance, imagining them in a number of compromising positions and calling their mouth ‘sullen’.*

“Usually I just go up to them and invite them back to my room. That works rather well at getting my point across.”

“Oh,” said Caer, a little sadly.

“Not always, though.”

“Are you avoiding answering the question?”

“Yes.”

They turned away from each other, smiling.

*He must know, she thought, after overhearing me with Beau. He must know I find him attractive. Why doesn’t he ask outright?*

*Why don’t you?*

Because it didn’t matter if she found him attractive. It didn’t matter if he found *her* attractive, if every touch risked her life.

*He could get control of his powers,* whispered another voice.

*Before we reach Avalinth?*

*It doesn't need to be by then. You have forever.*

*He doesn't.*

Caer was mortal. Even within Faerie, he'd still age, and inside the walls of the dwarven kingdom, where magic was muted, he might not even have that long.

She shook her head. It was foolish to contemplate such things. She'd been attracted to people before. It would fade.

It had to.

Caer cocked his head. "Are you all right?"

She wanted to say 'fine' but found that she could not. Mercifully, however, she was tired. "Exhausted," she admitted. "I think Beau was right about me needing eight hours. Too many late nights. Maybe... maybe I should lie down."

"All right," said Caer, still frowning. The dwarves, usually first to fall asleep, were still wide awake.

Aislinn slithered into her cold bed roll and turned to stare at the stars. She tried not to think about the moon dance, of the colour of his skin in the silken light, the feel of the magic pressing between them or the way his dark lashes fanned beside the campfire.

When the noise of the rest of the party died down, she tried not to think about how he was doubtless lying awake a few

feet away, staring up at the sky, and for reasons she couldn't explain—or didn't want to—she wanted more than anything to crawl out of her bed and sit beside him, talking until the night turned to dawn.



The day that Cass had died had dawned like any other, the quest feeling no different from the dozens of others they had been on. Ogres stealing mortals, sirens sinking ships, a rogue dragon in the mountains—even at eighteen and nineteen respectively, it felt like they had seen it all.

They'd been called to the Spring Court after receiving reports of a giant destroying some hamlets to the north. They had fought giants before. It wasn't supposed to be dangerous, or no more than they were used to.

Daisy got bitten by a snake on the way there. It was venomous, but Beau applied the anti-venom and had no concerns about his recovery. The giant's tracks were leading to a nearby village. They didn't want to delay.

“Go on without me,” Daisy insisted. “I mean, come back when you're done, don't abandon me forever, but please go kill the giant and make sure he doesn't hurt anyone else.”

“All right,” said Cass.

Daisy pouted. “You could at least *pretend* to be considering it...”



It made sense. They shouldn't delay. More could die if they did.

But Aislinn didn't want to take Beau with them if it was just the three of them. Four was a better number. Four meant three of them could look out for Beau. If it was just the three of them...

She and Cass would do better alone. She wouldn't have to watch out for him. His magic was still weak from a combat point of view anyway. That was part of the point of bringing him along—so that he could practise, not die.

She made him stay with Daisy. She said that it was safer for everyone, that Daisy could do with him, that it was just a giant, nothing they hadn't handled before.

Beau argued, and huffed, and cried, and finally relented.

They went alone.

And Cass died.

It would be months before Aislinn was even ready to listen to the idea that it wasn't her fault, and to this day, it would bubble back up uninvited, whispering in her ear that she had killed her best friend, that she had failed as a leader, that she had failed at *everything*.

She could not be queen. She could not even protect her best friend.

She'd thrown herself even more into training afterwards, sparring until her hands bled, practising her healing skills until

she passed out, crying in frustration when her magic failed her, again and again.

Only sheer stubbornness kept her alive—stubbornness and the memory of Cass’ disapproving face. *Avenge me, bitch, and move on!*

She’d done one. The second was a permanent journey that Aislinn wasn’t sure she’d ever finish.

But she’d try. She had to.



She woke long before dawn, in the deepest part of the night, breathing heavily. Someone else was awake by the fire.

“Caer?” she said hopefully.

“No such luck,” Fort replied. “It’s just me.”

“What are you doing up?”

Fort shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I usually sleep well, but tonight I can’t seem to. It’s no matter. Girth here can carry me tomorrow if I need to sleep.” She patted the back of the wargi she was resting against. He rolled towards her at the motion, stuffing his massive head in her lap. Fort smiled, turning her gaze towards the sky. “Seems a shame to sleep on nights like this, anyway. Almost seems wasteful.”

Aislinn followed her gaze, and found herself inclined to agree. A speckled spray of stars shone against a swirling sky of black, blue, purple and pink. She had no memory for

constellations or reading the stars, but what did that matter? Each diamond glittered regardless of its name.

She wished Caer was awake. She hardly knew why, only somehow his presence would add to this, like the honey between layers of pastry.

“Don’t wake him,” Fort said, snapping Aislinn from her thoughts.

“I wasn’t going to—how did you *know*?”

Fort smiled. “Your gaze dropped towards him. I’m not a fool. But best let the boy sleep. I don’t think he often rests well.”

Aislinn’s gaze drifted fully to his sleeping form, his face turned away from her, his slumbering form still. “How do you know?” she asked. “About the nightmares? You all seem to sleep so soundly—”

Fort shrugged. “After what he’s been through, how could it be otherwise?”

Aislinn nodded. “Were you having a nightmare, too? Is that why you’re awake?”

“I was dreaming of Avalinth,” she said, “but it was covered by a cloud. And then I dreamed of sleep itself. A strange dream to wake from. I rather liked it.”

“Do you need company?”

She shook her head. “Sleep, young highness. I think you will need it.”



18  
A RUMBLE IN THE GLADE

*Thunk. Thud. Rumble.*

Aislinn jerked out of sleep, awaiting the inevitable clash of thunder.

It didn't come. Only the slow, hissing snarl of the wargis.

“What's happening?” Beau murmured beside her, voice thick with sleep. “Is it going to rain?”

Aislinn glanced at the clouds, but there wasn't a whisper of grey among them. This wasn't nature.

Several of the wargis shot to their feet. Two barked. Fangs snapped.

Aislinn grabbed her sword.

Caer was up already, reaching for his own. He kicked his bedroll into the bushes. Beau stumbled to his feet, shaking the others. “Wake up!” he hissed. “Come on!”

Caer let out an ear-piercing whistle. A few of them mumbled.

The rumbling got closer.

“Come on!” Aislinn spit. All three of them were tugging at them now, Caer rougher than all of them, more desperate. “Beau—” Aislinn snapped. “Healing magic.”

Beau nodded, understanding. He pressed a hand to Luna’s temple, sparks prickling beneath his fingertips. She woke in an instant, grabbing her rolling pin. “What’s happening—”

Aislinn wasn’t listening. She and Beau moved over the rest of them, forcing them to wake. They fumbled for weapons, Minerva shouting out orders.

“Stay close!” she bellowed quietly. “Stay together!”

The trees in the distance started to move. A great, lumbering shape headed towards them, bending trunks like toothpicks.

Aislinn saw it seconds before the others, and froze.

A giant.

It crashed into the glade, grinning from ear to ear, the earth thundering beneath it. “Dwarves,” he drooled, eyes bright, mouth cavernous. “Tasty, tasty dwarves. Fae, too, and a nice, juicy mortal. A feast. A feast!”

He let out a sound half like a roar, half like a crow.

And other shapes in the distance started to move.

“*Scatter!*” Minerva commanded.

The dwarves split, Beau with them, but Aislinn remained, pinned in place.

Even as the giant moved.

Even as it roared.

Even as it ran.

No thoughts came, only dim and paralysing fear. Stark, shapeless. Crushing.

A hand wrapped around her arm and yanked her into the trees, shoving her against a trunk so hard the breath in her lungs leapt.

“Are you all right?”

*Caer.*

Somehow, Aislinn found her voice. “Cass was killed by a giant.”

Caer paused. “Your friend.”

“Yes.”

His jaw tightened. “Then you know how to kill these things.”

Aislinn’s resolve strengthened. “Yes,” she agreed. *And I know I’m not going to let them kill us.*

Caer lifted his sword. “Tell me what to do.”

Aislinn ducked as a splintered tree came soaring overhead, dragging Caer to the floor with her. The other two giants had reached the glade now, tearing up the oaks, roots and all, using them to clear the rest of the forest. The dwarves had divided, separating between the three of them, the wargis circling them too, yapping and biting. One let out a painful whimper as a trunk struck its back.

Beau stood away from the others, hands splayed, vines twisted at his command, wrapping around the legs of one of the giants. His assault paused at the sound of the wargi, eyes darting in its direction.

“Beau!” Aislinn hissed. “Stay focused!”

Beau nodded, his throat trembling.

Aislinn turned to Caer. “They’re resistant to most magic, and their flesh is too thick for our weapons to do much damage—except at their weak points. Namely, the base of their necks.”

“Necks,” Caer muttered. “How are we reaching those... that winged cape of yours doesn’t actually allow you to fly, right?”

Aislinn half snorted. “No,” she said, “but keep the one Beau’s working on distracted, and I’ll find a way.”

“Understood,” Caer said. He fixed her with a look, mouth half open, like he wanted to say something else—and then disappeared.

Aislinn didn’t waste a second. She vaulted towards the giant, skidding across the ground, avoiding another massive swing. She flipped onto vines behind it, and Beau—seeing what she was doing—lifted the roots at her command, allowing her to scramble through the air up to its neck.

A slash wouldn’t be enough. She grabbed hold of the back of its collar with her left hand and moved to plunge her blade at the base of its spine.

An enormous hand reached over to grab her. Its, or another's, she couldn't tell. She swung back down, dodging beefy fingers, as a rain of bolts skewered the sky, hitting the hand and embedding itself in the giant's back.

It roared, grappling for the bolts, but Aislinn seized one and used it to springboard onto the hand and scurry back to the base of its neck.

This time, nothing stopped her.

This time, she struck true.

The giant started to sag. There was no time for any relief, any pleasure in the kill. One of the others let out a roar, flinging a trunk in her direction. Caer let out a yell—

Roots leapt out of the ground, wrapping around the trunk and yanking it out of the way before scuttering back to the underground like startled mice.

Beau stood behind them, braced against the air, panting hard.

The second giant charged towards him.

Minerva leapt into the way, taking the brunt of the attack with her metal arm. A loud *clang* shot through the glade, followed by a hiss of pain. Bell let out another hailstorm of bolts; Fort fired her pistol.

The glade was alive with motion, a startling cacophony of noise and steel and blood. Aislinn didn't know where to look, where to move. She pirouetted out of the way of each



oncoming attack, dodging fallen debris and the stampede of giants' feet.

She had to get to Beau, she had to.

At the same time, her mind was conscious of other members of their party, the ones that might also be struggling to defend themselves. She'd never seen Luna brandish anything but a rolling pin, and Magna—

Where was Magna?

An explosion went off in the trees, followed by the howl of the third giant, and a snatch of red hair as Magna bolted out from under the rising smoke.

The giant fell with a thud that shook the forest.

Half of the dwarves descended upon it, the remaining half launching themselves at the final one as Aislinn swept under its arms and grabbed Beau, steering him as far away as she dared.

"I'm fine," he insisted, "Ais, really—"

Aislinn swept over his body, squeezing his shoulders, his arms, stopping at a thick red patch on his shoulder.

She ripped open his doublet.

"It's just a scratch," he insisted. "And I liked that doublet."

Aislinn fretted and frowned, pressing her palm to his wound until it glowed white-hot and golden magic seeped from her fingers. She stuffed the blood back into his body, knitting his flesh back together, healing him just enough. Finished, she

withdrew her hand and half slapped him on the cheek—a mad tapping motion, like the furious thump of a rabbit’s leg.

“Don’t lie to me!”

“Sorry,” he murmured, and slumped against her.

She steered him towards the ground. He was conscious, but exhausted. He’d been attacked before a full night’s rest. He wasn’t used to battle, and he’d been using his magic to battle a *giant*.

“Stay here,” she insisted, “unless something tries to squish you.”

“Noted...” he drawled.

Aislinn raced back into the fray.

The last giant was still upright, its body riddled with holes and bolts, barely pinpricks. Even the dagger wedged in its thigh barely seemed to bother it. Nothing bothered it until Minerva took her axe in her good arm and swung it into the base of its neck.

The giant stumbled.

“Timber!” someone cried.

The dwarves shot out of its path. Caer tried to follow them, his foot catching on one of Beau’s vines. Aislinn skidded towards him, tugging at the foliage, but it flexed with residual magic, getting tighter and tighter...

The giant swayed closer.

“Move!” Minerva hissed.

Aislinn glanced back at the giant. It was close, too close, its body sagging, jaw slack. They were right in its path. No shield she could conjure would stop it. They needed to get out, to vanish, to sink beneath the earth—

Caer pinched a lock of her hair. “Ais,” he whispered, “you should—”

She shook her head. No. Not again. Not him. Not *anyone*.

*I am the future queen of Faerie. I will not die here. This land is mine. This person—*

The giant stumbled again. Something rushed through her—a feeling of being ripped from her skin, of the world vanishing to a pinpoint, of being sucked away. Noise flared in her eardrums. Sensation knifed through her.

And finally, mercifully, all went black.



# 19

## CARDS IN THE CLEARING

**B**eau screamed, hurtling towards the fallen giant and reaching into the earth once more with his magic, forcing up roots to lift the monster. His body shuddered and strained, the roots not strong enough, *Beau* not strong enough.

It was hard to lift anything you wouldn't have had the strength to do manually. For some magic-users, impossible. But Beau was a prince of Faerie, and Aislinn was his sister.

She couldn't be gone. She couldn't be. Even if she'd felt the full force of the giant's weight, if there was just a scrap of life left in her, he could heal her. He could.

Magna pulled at his sleeve, but he paid her no heed, even as his muscles strained beneath the giant's weight, his temple close to exploding.

"Lad—" Minerva started.

When he ignored her again, she moved towards the giant's corpse and levered her axe underneath it, prying its body up one-handedly, her metal arm loose in its socket.

Slowly, the other dwarves limped forward, aiding her, pushing up with roots until the colossal body gave way and rolled to the side.

Aislinn wasn't under it. Neither was Caerwyn.

Beau stared, head still pounding. He was sure, he was absolutely sure—

Magna continued yanking on his sleeve.

“What?” he asks.

Her fingers twitched into shapes and gestures, only a few of which Beau understood. Something about vanishing. He knew that much.

“I can't... I don't understand.”

“She's saying...” Luna translated. “They vanished... under... a black sheet? Or a black sheet that looked like a door?”

*A black sheet. A door.*

Portalled. Aislinn had opened a portal.

Beau sunk to the ground, energy expunged. Flora rushed forward, pulling something out of her bag and lifting it up to his lips. He drank, though he wasn't sure what it was. Couldn't taste it, couldn't feel it.

Portal magic was a skill that precious few possessed. He knew his father could do it—rarely, under great care. It took him hours until he could refill his energy enough to create another one. The first time Hawthorn had done it, he'd only

managed it because he'd just ripped the magic from an evil fae. He'd still almost passed out.

And Aislinn... Aislinn's magic energy reserves weren't as high as his. Not by half.

*She's with Caer, a voice reminded him. Wherever she's transported them to, she isn't alone.*

He prayed she'd had the sense to transport them back to Acanthia, but given her desperation and panic—and the fact that the further away a destination was, the harder it was to portal there—he didn't think it was likely.

“She can't be too far away,” he muttered, the rest of the dwarves still crowded around him. “She wouldn't be able to—she's nearby.”

He stood up abruptly, his head spinning. It felt like a ball of lead on a column of rubber.

“Steady, steady,” Flora chided, grabbing his elbow and forcing him back to the floor. “Just rest for a bit. Save your strength.”

Hecate appeared from nowhere, winding her way around Beau's legs. She hopped onto his lap and Beau squeezed her, burying his face in her fur. His breathing started to slow.

The horses had run off, as had one or two of the wargis, but he was impressed that she'd stayed. Most cats would have vanished.

“Is everyone all right?” Minerva asked, glancing around the ruined glade. “Confirm your survival, and report your

injuries.”

“Your arm is hanging off, dear,” Bell pointed out.

“Only the metal one. Are you fine?”

Bell sighed. “Alive, a few cuts, nothing major.”

“I’m all right,” Luna reported. “I stayed out of it, mostly.”

“Sensible.”

“I live,” added Diana. “Broken fingers. Bruised ribs.”

“I’ll get to you,” Flora responded. “I’m fine. Mags?”

She nodded, not looking at anyone, already searching through the wreckage to retrieve her things.

“Fort?” Minerva called. “Has anyone seen Fort?”

They all shook their heads.

A coldness rippled through the glade. They split off, diving into the trees, searching beneath the fallen giants and a body of one of the wargis. They called her name. Beau, unable to stand, prayed for her answering call, however weak, however faint. Just a little bit longer, and he’d be able to heal her. Just a little bit...

“I’ve found her,” said Minerva, voice stony.

The others turned to her still, stalwart shoulders. She stood beside a fallen tree.

Fort was not beside it. For the longest time, Beau wasn’t even sure what Minerva was talking about. She was mistaken. No one was there.

He followed Minerva's gaze down to the forest floor, past the leaves and broken boughs. A hand reached out beneath the branches, bent and crushed, cards splayed out beside it.



They took Fort's body to another glade, away from the carcasses of the giants that would rot and wither, and buried her beneath the boughs of a tree. Beau was unable to help them build a grave with magic, but he felt that they wouldn't have wanted him to assist anyway. This was something they wanted to do for her.

The last thing that they would ever do for her.

They spoke only a few words as they lowered her into the ground. They seemed to be beyond words right now. Minerva told her to rest, Magna spoke a few words with her fingers, and everyone else cried. At the end, they all drew their daggers, and offered the earth a single drop of blood from the back of their hands.

"Our blood to the earth that holds you," Minerva whispered, as Bell helped her with her offering. "May you carry it with you. May it protect your grave. Return to the stone, sister."

Beau watched the spectacle and felt a similar grief for this stranger that he had felt when Cass died. Once more, he had not seen it, once more, he had not been able to help. There was no telling if Fort had died immediately. If he'd seen it, if he'd been more aware of everything that was happening, he could



have gotten the tree off of her. He could have healed her. He could have—

*Could, could, could.*

He would never know.

They did not rest for long afterwards, no longer than it took to treat injuries, collect belongings, and remove Minerva's ruined arm when Magna declared it was too damaged to fix in the field. It was decided it was best to keep moving towards Winter, hoping that Aislinn would have transported them somewhere closer, not further away. Both she and Caer knew the rough direction. They would head that way too.

One by one, all the remaining wargis trickled back. They found Snapdragon's body to the north. He'd taken an injury to his left flank and fled until his body collapsed, the mighty mount that had been Aislinn's trusted stead for almost five years. There was nothing to be done. They salvaged belongings from the saddles, and plodded onwards.

Beau's horse they never found at all.

The slopes of Winter glittered in the distance when they decided to rest for the night. Beau stared back into the trees, thinking of all that they left behind.



20  
A TALE OF THE FIRST WITCH

An awful, wrenching, sucking sensation dragged Caer from the glade and spat him out elsewhere, gripping tightly onto Aislinn. Roots were still twined around his ankles, but sliced off after a few inches, like they were butter against a blade. Caerwyn glimpsed them dangling as they raced through *nothing*.

Leaves whipped around them, followed by an icy, devastating chill—

They hit a rocky floor.

Caer bolted upright, scrambling away from Aislinn. “Ais!” he rushed.

She wasn’t moving.

*No, no, he hadn’t—he couldn’t—*

He didn’t think her skin had touched his, but it was hard to be sure of anything. And if he *had* touched her, she’d still be moving, just... as something else.

She lay on the ground, inert and pale, as frosty as the stone at the mouth of the cave she'd portalled them to.

Caer crawled towards her, watching her chest.

She wasn't breathing.

*No, no, no...*

His own breath started to mount, pressing against his heart, crawling into his throat, his nose. His chest speared with pain, like his own heart wanted to stop. She couldn't be dead. She couldn't be.

He was sure her brother could restart a frozen heart. He'd even seen Luna heal a bird once, that had flown into a window and seemed to be dead. She'd massaged its chest until it came back to life.

"It's not magic," she assured him, as it flew away. "just science. Don't tell Diana I let it go."

But Caer didn't know what she'd done, and Aislinn's heart was wrapped inside her chest, too hard for a human hand to reach—

But maybe not human magic.

*Don't do it, said a voice inside him. You could kill her.*

*If I don't, I think she might already be dead.*

He parted her shirt, and slid his palm against her still, warm chest. He'd brought Diana's birds back to life. He could do this.

*Don't come back as anything else, he prayed. Just yourself.  
Just come back as yourself.*

He was a necromancer. He had control of the dead.

“Come back,” he willed, pressing against her chest. He mimicked the beat of a heart, imagining its sound. *Come back. Beat. I command you.*

Nothing.

*Ais. Please. Come on.*

Her chest remained as solid as ice.

He placed his forehead to hers, still pressing against her heart, his own juddering in his chest like it was cracking under the pressure. She was the frozen lake, and he the rock rolling over it.

*Come on, come on, come on!*

Something thumped against his palm.

“Ais?”

*Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum.*

Her eyes, barely open, flickered. She half smiled at him, her pallor still pale, but not grey.

“We’re all right,” she said. “We’re alive.”

Caer yanked his hand away from her before he could do something to erase what he’d just done, and collapsed against her middle, dissolving into noisy, guttural sobs.

She was alive. She was all right. He hadn’t hurt her.

“You’re all right,” she said weakly, “it’s all right, Caer.”

He couldn’t respond, and when her hand came up and drifted into his hair, he didn’t pull away from her touch.



Aislinn fell asleep within seconds, but her breathing was steady and even, her heartbeat too. Caer tucked her cloak in around her and sat in the corner of the cave, watching her carefully and trying not to count her breaths.

It was cold in the cave, and he’d not had his cloak buckled whilst he slept. He rolled down his sleeves and rubbed his palms together, but it did little to guard against the bitter cold. He pressed himself into the vines that lined the back of the cave. Strange that living things should exist here, although these looked petrified with age. He supposed he should be grateful that she’d managed to transport them to a cave, rather than leaving them exposed to the elements.

Perhaps it wasn’t luck. Perhaps it was some faerie magic he didn’t understand, teleporting them to the nearest safe place. He was sure he’d heard something like that, maybe from Rowan—how the magic of Faerie would race to protect its queen.

Or future queen.

He wondered what that would feel like, to be truly chosen by the land, rather than shoved into the throne when no one really wanted you there. Of course, it could just be a lie faeries

had concocted, a tale that became truth. They could whisper a lie if they believed it.

Eventually, the cold and silence grew too much, and he ventured out of the cave into a world of thick, dense snow. It was near midday and there wasn't much wind, but it was still a hard, penetrating, biting cold, the type that squirmed into your marrow. He could see the borders of the Autumn Forests in the distance, could see the snow lifting from the banks, but it was too far away to travel without proper clothing and equipment, too far to go leaving Aislinn unaccompanied.

He jogged down to a small copse of trees and snapped off a few branches. It would be hard to make a fire without the flintstones or matches that the dwarves used, but he had little better to do. One of Diana's first lessons had been teaching him how to make it without the usual equipment.

"I don't see how I'm ever going to need to know how to do this," he'd scoffed.

"The thing about knowledge," Diana had replied, ignoring his tone, "is that you never know when you're going to truly need it until you do."

He'd grumbled in response, but listened nonetheless, even if he shouted and cussed until his fingers bled whilst trying to do it.

But he'd done it. And he could do it again.

He trudged back to the cave. Halfway there, his eyes fell on a colossal dent in the snow, like a magnificent ancient lake had

been frozen over, now no more than a slope in the snow. He couldn't think of what else it would be, and yet, as he walked closer, another feeling overtook him, deep and dark, more icy than the world around him.

It was like walking over a graveyard.

He shook it away and went back to the cave, beginning the long and arduous process of making a fire. It was a fine distraction. It kept him from worrying about the others. Most of them had still been standing when the last giant fell, but he couldn't remember all of them. Luna's white face had been nowhere to be seen.

"Be safe," he prayed, rubbing his hands beside the trembling sparks of the fire. "Just be safe."

Aislinn stirred a short while later.

"Hey," he said. "How are you feeling?"

She bit her lip, like she didn't want to reply. "Weak," she said. "I need to rest more. I could be... I don't know how long... it might be days—"

"It's all right," he said. "We're alive. We'll manage."

"Where are we?"

"A cave in Winter, I think," he explained. "Not far from the Autumn border."

"I'm cold."

"I'm starting a fire."

Aislinn shivered, raising her fingers, and then promptly put them back down. The action alone seemed to have exhausted her. “We should, um...”

“Huddle together for warmth in the meantime?”

“Yes,” she said, too tired to nod.

“I don’t want to hurt—”

“We risk freezing to death or we risk you killing me. One is less likely than the other and far, far more comfortable...”

Caerwyn considered it for a moment, as sparks finally sprung from his attempts. He waited a while, making sure the fire was starting. It would take some time before it was properly burning, and it was so, so cold...

He scooted to Aislinn’s side, pulling open her cloak and slipping under, careful not to touch her skin. A few seconds ticked by.

“Put your arms around me,” she instructed.

Caerwyn did, although the action felt very strange to him. It had been a long time since he’d held a woman this way. Ice cold though the air was, Aislinn’s warm breath brushed against his arms, making the hairs prickle. Even her hair seemed warm; like soft embers.

“We should probably talk,” he said. “If you’re up for it?”

Aislinn murmured against him. “My mouth seems to be the one part of me that’s working.”

“All right,” he continued. “What should we talk about?”



“Tell me about your mother,” Aislinn asked. “If you want to.”

Caer *did* want to. For months, he’d kept all talk of her away, but he’d thought about her often, all the time. He hated how her death seemed to have stretched into the two decades of the life they’d shared beforehand, like the disease had rotted those memories too.

But those memories—those memories were more her, more real, than the last ones.

“My mother was brave and warm,” he told her. “People liked to say she was frail, but I never saw that. She held a kingdom alone after the death of her much-beloved husband, birthed a child who never saw his father. She smiled when she was sad, until she was happy.” He paused. “She never vanquished any dragons, but I think she was the toughest person I knew.”

“Even tougher than Minerva?”

“Yes,” he said. *Maybe as tough as you.*

“It’s easier to be tough when you’re born that way,” Aislinn agreed. “Minerva feels like she might have been, but who knows? Sometimes toughness is armour.”

“Is it with you?”

Aislinn paused. “I’m not sure. I’ve been wearing it so long I don’t know where it begins and I don’t.”

“I can understand that.” He took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Your friend, Cass. Tell me about her.”

“I don’t know where I’d begin.”

“At the start,” he told her. “How did you meet?”

“I don’t know,” Aislinn admitted. “Children are rare in Faerie. As such, whenever there are royal children, it’s tradition for any other children in the capital—no matter their station—to be educated alongside them. That’s actually how my parents met, and it’s how I met Cass. She was mortal—the daughter of a merchant from Summertown. Nobles from the rest of Faerie sent their children to Acanthia too, but I didn’t care about any of them. By the time I was old enough to know what a friend was, I already had her. Her, and Daisy, and Beau. The royal four, they called us.”

“I am sensing you got into mischief.”

“*So much mischief.*” Aislinn laughed. “I think Cass was probably the instigator, but I was just as bad. Beau and Daisy were the sensible ones—although they rarely told on us. We got into all sorts of trouble, laying mortal traps for our least favourite school teachers, abandoning lessons to swim in the lake... unleashing the monsters we were supposed to be studying. Once, we transformed a barghest into a mouse. It’s like a giant spiky dog-bear thing.”

“Sounds like transforming it into a mouse wasn’t a bad idea.”

“Yeah... the spell didn’t stick long. It destroyed a fair chunk of Master Mayhew’s room when it transformed back.”

Caer laughed. “You were *wild*.” He paused. “When did that change?”

“What?”

“You. There are moments when I see that in you—that wildness. But you seem more serious now. Did that happen when Cass—”

Aislinn shook her head. “That may have solidified it, but I started to wise up a bit when I hit sixteen. People started to court me, you see. Never mind how young I was, how many centuries I had for romance—they wanted a piece of whatever glory might be coming my way, wanted to take advantage of my youth, hoped to elicit a promise out of me that I could be kept to in the future.” She stopped for a moment. “My father took me aside once, told me that he knew all about love, how it could make someone feel like it was forever no matter how implausible that truly was. To begin with, I was surprised—because he and my mother always seemed so very painfully *forever* that it was sometimes difficult to look at.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He smiled and said something like, ‘I knew your mother all of my life, and it took me years to realise I loved her, and even longer to know that yes, it is her, no matter what. You should take years too, daughter. Do not let anyone take advantage of you.’”

Caerwyn froze, wondering if his next question was appropriate. “And did you?” he asked carefully.

“Oh, I dallied with the pursuits, indulged them if it suited me, but I made no promises, no vows, no bargains. If anything, I learned to play *them*.”

She paused, and he wondered what other thoughts were swirling inside her—what things she hadn’t said. It sounded lonely, that way of being. It sounded like something he knew all too well.

“I’ve had similar problems myself,” he confessed, “but being unable to ever go back on my word... that’s an entire new dimension. I cannot imagine how difficult that must have been.”

Aislinn shrugged as best she could. “Cass helped. She made the whole thing endurable, reminded me that I had decades, years to settle down in, that I wasn’t missing anything in the meantime. And I absolutely and totally believed her.”

“And then?”

“Then... she wasn’t there anymore. And the years and decades seemed empty without her.”

Caerwyn sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Aislinn said nothing.

“It’s awful,” he continued, “but I think you were lucky to have her. I think I would have traded loneliness for pain, for the joy of having a friend like her.”

Aislinn paused. For a while, he wondered if she’d fallen asleep again. “I think she was worth it too.”



Hours passed. Caer roasted the roots over the fire. They were tough and unsavoury, but they staved off the hunger. Even Aislinn managed to eat a little, but not much. She slept most of the time, waking periodically for whispered exchanges before falling back to sleep. He walked about the cave as she slept, sat by the fire for a bit more, and sometimes—*sometimes*—came to rest beside her.

Never for long, not while she was sleeping. And never touching her.

He couldn't remember ever watching someone sleep before, other than his ailing mother. He certainly couldn't imagine being *fascinated* by it. It was just sleep, after all. But there was something pleasant in the slow rise and fall of her chest, the way the shadows danced across her pale cheeks, the slopes and curves of her face, the dark glow of her auburn hair. It made him wish he was a painter or a poet. He was a decent hand at the forge, but he didn't think he'd have much luck rendering her in the hilt of a blade.

Caer paused in his thinking, fingers brushing his beads, wishing he could scrub out his thoughts. What was he *doing*, wanting to paint a sleeping woman?

What was he doing wanting to paint a sleeping woman that he couldn't touch?

Aislinn stirred again. She smiled at him in a way that must have been laced with magic—he could feel it in his insides. They exchanged a few pleasantries before she whispered, “We should try and send a signal.”

“Do you think you’re up for that?”

“Definitely not. But you are.”

Caer frowned at her, certain he’d misheard. “I... can’t do that.”

Aislinn laughed. “You couldn’t walk and talk when you were born, and yet you can do those now.”

“All right, but it took a long time to master those—”

“Caer, you can raise the dead, you can send a signal.”

“Good point.” He waited. “How do I do that?”

“Go to the mouth of the cave. Imagine yourself sending a signal—a tower of light, or something—and throw it into the sky. Use the word *signum*.”

“That easy?”

“Should be.”

He paused for another moment. “What’s with the words and the objects? Rowan used all sorts when trying to heal my mother, but Beau and you do plenty without saying anything.”

“Hmm, I suppose it’s a bit like how chefs add extra ingredients to improve the flavour or strength of a dish,” she explained. “Or how you learn to trot before you gallop. Words in spells are actions, directions, a way to draw the magic to

you when you're learning how to use it, or to strengthen something more complex."

"I see. I don't suppose there's any objects here I could use?"

Aislinn smiled. "There's always the fire, but you might not want to use that. You could accidentally set yourself alight if you don't know what you're doing."

Caer gulped. "I will refrain from using the fire."

He headed to the mouth of the cave, Aislinn cackling lightly under her cloak, a sound that warmed him more than the flames he passed.

He held out his hands. They were hard and calloused, not like Aislinn's—long fingered and elegant, no matter their experience with a blade. They did not look like the hands of a magician.

But Aislinn said that he could do it, and she was relying on him.

He would not fail.

He'd practised bringing back creatures with Diana's help. He already felt that thread of magic, that quiet tug. It had always felt dark to him, like a stone on his shoulders. It was hard to imagine bending it into something else.

But it was there.

He took a deep breath, followed by another. He counted stars. He thought of that moment in the moonlight with

Aislinn, the pulse of magic rippling across his body. He remembered the sensation. He imagined light.

Something sparked across his palms, a thin, whispery ribbon of light. Caer's heart leapt. It vanished, scurrying away like a frightened mouse.

He took another breath, undaunted, and called it back again. He made it brighter, pushing back into the flimsy thread.

It was like he had another muscle, another limb he'd never noticed, never used until now.

*“Signum.”*

He threw the light into the air. It soared into the sky, exploding into pieces of glittering dust.

For the first time, Caer wasn't scared of his powers. For the first time, they amazed him.

“Damn,” he said, “I really wish I'd known how to do that before I blistered my fingers starting the fire.”

“Your fingers are blistered?” Aislinn raised her head from the ground. “Let me see—”

“Even if you had the energy, I wouldn't let you heal me right now. It has to be skin-on-skin, right?”

Aislinn bit her lip. “I'd still like to see.”

Caer came towards her side, sliding down to her level. He put his hand next to hers. The initial sting had gone, now, and he'd picked out all of the splinters, but the redness remained.

“They look sore,” Aislinn remarked.



“I’m fine.”

“Liar.” She inched her hand closer, almost touching, not quite. Warmth seemed to hum from the tips of her fingers, spreading through his skin. His insides squirmed, imagining those hands in other, more intimate places.

He leapt up to throw another log on the fire, and stood by the mouth of the cave for a moment, cooling himself down.

“I have heard, in Faerie, that there are mortals that can do magic,” he said, partly just to say something—anything. “Witches.”

Aislinn rolled onto her back, the whisper of a sigh escaping her. “You heard correctly. Their magic is different from ours, though. It doesn’t come from the earth, doesn’t flow naturally through them. They harness it through spells and potions and objects.”

“That sounds... dark?”

“It can be. Most are benign, though. There’s a council of witches dedicated to ensuring they don’t abuse their power... although in Faerie that’s kind of hard to judge.”

“Am... am I a witch now? I sent that signal—”

“You have to do it more than once, and it’s more of a career choice than an innate talent.”

“Right,” he said, panic flattening. “How did the first witches come to be?”

Aislinn smiled. “Sit down, and I shall tell you.”

Caer obliged.

“Closer.”

Cheeks heating again, he did as commanded.

Aislinn cleared her throat. “No one quite knows how the first witches were born—they have been around almost as long as Faerie, their tale lost to legend. Some say the first one was a mortal servant, wronged by her master, who learned a secret art of magic in order to enact revenge. Others say she was once a faerie who committed a horrible crime against Titania, the First Queen of the Faeries, and was stripped of her natural magic and found a way to replace it. However she came to be, it is clear that she went to the mortal world and taught the women there her art.”

“Only the women? Can men not wield magic like that?”

“They can, but apparently she found more women there in need of just revenge—women powerless that needed power to survive. The First Witch said to be wary of mortal men with power—and what they will do to keep it.”

“That sounds... entirely fair,” Caer remarked. His mother had dismissed a lot of greedy, even violent lords from her service over the years. She’d never had much more than thieving problems with the ladies in her service—and most of the time, there was a reason they were driven to such lengths. The motives of the male counterparts were rarely so pure.

“What happened to the First Witch?” he said. “After she had her army?”

“Army?” Aislinn shook her head. “Most tales agree she had her revenge in some fashion, but bringing mortals into Faerie wasn’t part of it. They were just there to... live, I think. Or maybe warn those in charge that although mortals weren’t fae... they were far from powerless. I think it was a good lesson. There have been periods in our history when we have not been kind to mortals... times when they were drugged and beaten and enslaved. It is good to remember they can defend themselves.”

Caer paused for a moment. He knew the stories well, and although it wasn’t pleasant to have Aislinn confirm them, at least she sounded repulsed by them.

“Can a mortal ever become fae?” he asked her. “If a fae can be stripped of their magic and immortality, can the reverse happen?”

“There are very few cases of both,” Aislinn explained, “although my mother is perhaps the most recent case. She still looks mortal, she can still lie... but she’s barely aged since the day she married my father, she has command over certain magics... Faerie knows its queen.”

“You speak of Faerie as if it is alive.”

“It *is*,” she insisted. “All the world’s alive, but in Faerie, you can feel it. My home—the palace of Acanthia—is occupied by sentient vines.”

“Sentient *vines*?”

“Yes. They used to rock us to sleep when we were children and carry messages for us between our rooms. We thought everyone could use them that way when we were little, but apparently not.”

Caer blinked, taking this in. “You said your mother became fae when she married your father. Does that always happen?”

Aislinn shook her head. “Admittedly, she’s the first mortal consort so there’s no comparison, but apparently she and my father did something else that day. They share each other’s hearts.”

Caer paused, frowning. “In the literal or metaphorical sense?”

“Both? I think? Neither one of them has been able to explain it to me, but he was dying and she—”

“Your father was dying on his wedding day?”

“It wasn’t his wedding day until afterwards.”

Caer frowned harder.

“It’s a long story.”

Caer smiled. “I don’t have anywhere else I need to be. Do you?”



Aislinn told him her parents’ story until the sky was black and inky, and the fire almost worn away to embers. She drifted off

beside him, and he scooted backwards to avoid rolling over and touching her in the night.

He was sure, at first, still basking in the faint glow of the fire, that he would be warm enough to last the night. He tucked his hands into his arms and rolled onto his back on the bed of leaves he'd made for them both. It did little to help with comfort, but it stole away some of the cold from the stone.

For an hour or two, it worked.

He woke later, surrounded by a cold so hard that it clawed at his chest. The fire had long since gone out. His fingers felt frosty, his nose numb.

Half without thinking, he inched towards Aislinn, to the only source of warmth he had.

*I'll just rest for a moment, he told himself. I'll just warm up and crawl back out. Or I'll pace around the cave, keep moving. I won't sleep here. I won't...*

He warmed his hands beneath the cloak, another breath dusting his fingers. She was so close to him. In the pale, faint light of the moon, she looked like a marble sculpture, a deity that men would bow beneath.

But the deity was soft and warm, and not as frightening as she had once been, but human and breakable and real.

He couldn't remember why she'd frightened him—why any tales of the fae had.

And he could not remember why he was supposed to leave her side.



21  
A REUNION IN THE SNOW

**A**islinn woke early as dawn rose over the carpet of glistening snow, filling the cave with pale, bluish light. Caer was beside her, so close that his breath brushed her temples, his body warm in stark contrast to the still, icy air.

She forced her fingers together and brought them up to her face. They still felt numb, but at least she could move them. She rolled tentatively onto her side, her hand hovering next to his face, over his warm, parted lips...

*Do not think about his lips.*

She inched backwards, but dared not remove herself from the heat, not even when another, deeper one was stirring inside her.

She ought to have been worried, stranded here in winter, unable to move, at risk of freezing or starving, but although she was worried for the others, she had no fears for herself. She felt oddly safe here, exposed and vulnerable though she was.

She glanced once more at Caer. Doubtless he had something to do with that feeling. She wished she didn't know that, wished she *didn't* feel this safe, wished she had some way of pushing him away from her that was as easy as inching back. Her father had kept a book of insulting nicknames for her mother to try and ease the hold Juliana had over him. She'd always thought that strange until now.

But those words were like his knives, the only defence he had against her, and now more than ever Aislinn wished she had a blade in her hand—a weapon to slay her desires.

Caer's eyes flickered. He immediately shivered, groaning into the cloak, before opening his eyes. He looked at her like he'd half forgotten where they were.

Aislinn smiled, glad she'd moved back a little. "Prince."

"Princess." His mouth twitched into that irritating, sinful smirk. "Why are you smiling?"

"Why are *you*?"

"You first."

"I was thinking of giving you a nickname," she revealed, grateful that had been the thought he'd woken on. No need to reveal the other ones. "Why were *you* smiling?"

"Easy. I'm looking at you."

Aislinn considered flicking on a quick glamour to hide her blush, although she suspected it was far too late. "What does 'Caerwyn' mean?"

“Blessed, or love, or *fair*. Apparently, when I was born, I was as ‘pale as the moonbeam I was born under.’”

“Hmm... Prince Fair isn’t working for me.”

“You could always call me ‘love’.”

Aislinn rolled over, the heat increasing. She hated how he could switch from bashful to flirtatious in an instant, and hated how her body reacted to it. Why couldn’t she think of a barb to shoot back?

“I notice you’re not saying ‘never’...”

“Oh, shut up.”

Caer sat up, stretching, and went to poke the fire. It did absolutely nothing. She watched him staring at his fingers, as though debating trying to summon fire. “What does ‘Aislinn’ mean?”

“Dream,” she admitted. “My parents have a thing about them.”

The insufferable smile spread further across his dimpled cheeks. “Princess Dream has a certain ring to it.”

“It does not.”

“Hmm. Darling Dream, maybe? Fair Nightmare?”

“You’re starting to sound like my father, and I hate it. I’m sorry I ever began this.” She pulled herself into a sitting position, hugging the cloak to her body. The fabric still held his heat, like an imprint in the ground. “Do you really think I’m ‘fair’?”



“You’re beautiful, Aislinn, and well you know it.”

Aislinn stared at him. He was right—she did know it, but there was something different in hearing it from him. Even in the land of faeries, she’d seldom heard it spoken with such candour. Bards had written about her beauty in ballads, potential suitors had proclaimed it in their fancy speeches—but it had an air of falseness to it, of a word used by someone who didn’t fully understand its meaning. And her lovers... her lovers had avoided using it altogether, as if any attempts at flattery might see them impaled.

“What do you want?” he asked her, as if sensing how flustered the word had made her and throwing them both an escape rope. “From life, I mean? What does Dream dream of?”

“Right now? A hot bath and a comfortable bed wouldn’t go amiss.”

He smirked. “Think bigger.”

She pursed her lips. “You first.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’d like to touch people again without being afraid.”

Aislinn swallowed. She had not expected that answer—she had expected mortal lies and casual indifference, or dreams of wealth and women and happiness. Not a dream that ought not to have been one—experiencing something that he should never have had to ask for.

“Ah, a life without fear,” she said, as casually as she could manage. “How we all dream of that.”

“And what do you fear, Aislinn Ardenthorn?”

“Many things,” she replied. “Powerlessness and power. That I may never be good enough to be queen. That I am a poor faerie. That I am too human. That I am not human enough. I’m afraid of being more and less than I am, and—” *I am afraid of being lonely. Of never having what my parents have. Of finding no one who accepts my fears, who shares them. I’m afraid I will have everything I want and still not find it enough—or that I will lose it altogether.*

Caer angled his face towards hers. “What do you want, Aislinn?”

*You, she thought. I want you.*

The reality of that confession struck her like a wave, cracking at her stony exterior. How much did she want him? How much could that crack widen? “At the moment, something that I cannot have,” she replied, “and cannot tell you.”

“Why not?”

“An excellent question.”

“A poor answer.”

“Caer,” she whispered. “I... I want to tell you, but...”

“But?”

“I am afraid to.”

Caer didn't push it. "I'm going to see if I can find some more firewood... and anything that passes for food. Are you hungry?"

Aislinn nodded. "That's probably a good sign, right? And look!" She held up her hands. "Actual movement!"

"Excellent," he said, his grin soft. "I expect to see you standing up when I return."



Aislinn forced him to take the cloak, which he did reluctantly, and she whiled away the time until he returned by stretching out her limbs. Her entire body felt like rubber and lead. At least her head wasn't pounding anymore, and the supply of snow helped keep her hydrated.

Rest, water and food—the three things required for her to return to full strength. She wasn't so exhausted now, which was a sure sign she was healing, but it also made resting more difficult as she was intimately aware of how uncomfortable she was, and how cold.

And whatever food Caer managed to find, she knew it wouldn't be enough.

*Caer.*

The sound of his name had changed in her mind, clear as a bell, crystal as water. She loved and hated the sound, like she loved and hated most things about him... the soft canter of his

voice, those dark, liquidus eyes, the way the veins in his hands moved when he fiddled with the beads on his necklace.

No wonder she'd wanted a nickname to use as defence.

Caer returned after about an hour with an armful of firewood and a handful of berries and nuts. It staved off the hunger, but only just. She doubted there would be much more to be found in this barren place, and Caer couldn't risk going further without freezing to death.

She was still in no condition to travel.

"Help me up," she said to Caer when she was done with their meagre breakfast.

Caer could not have looked more shocked if she'd grown wings. "I don't have my gloves on me."

"I'll grab your arms," she said. *I'll grab your arms and I'll try not to think about them.* "Just... get down here."

Caer crouched down and held out his forearms. Aislinn latched onto him, bracing against muscle, fingers grazing his elbows. Her plans not to think about the considerable muscle against her palms failed.

Her legs wobbled, but she pulled herself upright, only to sag a moment later.

Caer caught her around her waist, holding her against his body. Warmth rushed through her.

"You all right?" he whispered, his soft gaze intense. It slid down to her bones.

She was aware of every muscle holding her up, the entire, unwavering strength beneath her quivering body. He might as well have been an oak. But oak trees weren't warm. They didn't harbour smooth, silken skin, or soft smiles, or stupid dimples or—

“Ais?”

“I'm... not hurt,” she said, hauling herself up again.

“You looked ready to faint.”

“I wasn't.”

“Should I let go?”

“I, um...” *I don't want you to.* “I should...” *I need to learn to stand again.* “I think I can manage...” *I'm scared of letting go.*

Caer moved back, hands still outstretched as though to catch her at any moment. She took a few wobbling steps, and slowly lowered herself back down to the floor. She smiled tiredly at him. “Be back to decapitating ogres in no time.”

Caer slid down the floor beside her. He tugged on a lock of her hair, moving it behind her ear, careful not to touch her skin though his hands lingered at her pointed tips. “I don't doubt it for a moment.”

They huddled beside the fire and chatted about little and nothing—the colour of the sky, memories of playing in the snow as a child, stories of youth. She told him of the all-season gardens of Acanthia, how autumn would blend into winter, and snow would merge with meadows.

“I think I should like to visit Acanthia some day,” Caer remarked.

“No reason why you can’t. You won’t be a prisoner in Avalinth. When you gain control of your powers—”

“*If* I gain control of them.”

“I prefer ‘when’.”

“Of course you do.”

She cleared her throat. “When that happens, there’s no reason you can’t come to the capital. Although, you’d probably want to return to the mortal world, and if you do that...”

“I can’t come again, can I?”

Aislinn shook her head. “The way opens only once for mortals.”

“But not your mother, right?”

“No, she gets a free pass. Queen of Faerie, and all. The land knows her.”

Caer pursed his lips. “Well, I suppose I don’t need to return home *immediately*,” he continued. “There’s not a great deal in Wales to tempt me.”

“You’re the heir to the throne.”

Caer shrugged. “I’ve never really cared for it. I was secretly glad when Owen married my mother and became the almost de-facto king... it took the pressure off me. Gave me more

freedom than I'd ever had before. I rather hoped he might continue."

Aislinn paused, thinking of the Owen she knew, the king she didn't feel he was.

"I know you don't much care for him," Caer continued, "and I don't mean to discredit your dealings with him, especially as you've seen him most recently, but he was not that man to me."

"He... he wasn't *that* awful," Aislinn admitted, "there was just... something about him I couldn't put my finger on."

"Fair enough." Caer sighed.

A whistle sounded through the air, distant, but sharp.

They both froze.

"Caer!" called a voice, followed by another.

"Aislinn!"

*Beau.*

She tried to struggle to her feet, forgetting the jelly-like quality of her legs, and almost fell flat on her face. Caer, halfway out of the cave, stopped to steady her.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "Go."

"You're sure—"

"*Go!*"

Caer sped out of the cave, his feet crunching against the snow. Aislinn pulled herself towards the entrance, clinging to

the walls. She spied the party coming up the hill, the dwarves and Beau atop the wargis—grinning as they beheld him. Minerva galloped up the incline first, spewing snow behind her mount's paws, shuddering to a halt a few feet in front of Caer.

“Caer,” Minerva said breathlessly. “Get down here.”

“What? Why—”

She marched towards him without another word, grabbing his shirt and tugging him downwards into a crushing, one-armed hug. Her metal one, it appeared, had been removed.

“Oh,” said Caer, relaxing, “that's why.”

Beau reached Aislinn's side next and hugged her so hard she thought her ribs might break. She sagged against him, strength depleted.

“You all right?”

“I think I nearly broke myself accidentally teleporting.”

“Which is *insane*, by the way,” Beau remarked, taking her hands and breathing some magic into them—just enough to slice off a bit of her exhaustion whilst keeping himself stable. “I didn't believe it, at first.”

The other dwarves had finally caught up. Bell went to Caer's other side and squeezed his shoulder. “I know her affectionate voice and her I-want-to-beat-you voice sound similar, but—”



“I still want to beat him,” Minerva snapped, releasing him only to clip the back of his head. “Only for *worrying* us so much.”

“I wasn’t worried,” said Bell.

“Me neither,” added Flora.

“I was!” said Luna, diving into his waist.

Despite the protestations that many of them weren’t worried in the slightest, Caer found himself in the middle of a hug between six dwarves.

Aislinn froze, doing a quick headcount.

Six.

There were six.

“Wait,” Caer said, voice half trembling, “where’s Fort?”

The silence gave the answer.

“No,” he said, “no, she can’t be—”

“It was quick, lad. And we buried her well. She would not want us to mourn. We’ll toast to her memory as soon as we have the ale. Give her a full send off.”

Aislinn froze. She had not known Fort well, but she had made her laugh in the brief time they spent together. Like the rest of the dwarves, she had seemed invincible. And Caer... Caer had loved her. He loved them all.

“This is my fault,” Caer muttered, eyes glazed, “this whole expedition is because of me—”

Minerva shook her head. “Fort knew the risks, still bet on the right wargi, and was killed *not by you*, but by a fallen tree. This is not your guilt to bear.”

Luna came up to his side again and wove her fingers into his. He squeezed them tightly, but did not look convinced.

“Come,” said Minerva, “you must be famished. Let’s get this fire going again. Diana caught us a deer on the way here.”



As good as it was to have company again, they were quieter than before, more sombre, their smiles not as real, not as wide as before. Aislinn sat by the fire as they recounted their journey into Winter, and how their signal had steered them in the right direction.

Fort had not been the only loss; one of the wargis and both of the horses were gone.

*Snapdragon*, Aislinn realised, chest tight.

“We couldn’t have taken him into Winter anyway,” Bell said sagely. “The snow would have been too much for him.”

That was doubtless true, but he’d have had a chance in Autumn, maybe, running wild and free... he deserved that much. Deserved more.

He’d been such a good horse. She’d barely ridden another since he became *hers*.

Tears leaked down her cheeks, and she tried her best to swallow them. A dwarf had died. She shouldn't be more cut up about a horse.

Yet the thought that she'd never ride him again, that he'd never press his velvety muzzle to her cheek, never snicker at her or beg for apples or kick his stall or do anything again, ever, wouldn't leave her.

Beau squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Ais."

She nodded, unable to say it was fine.

Renewed by real food, Beau's magic, and a bit of one of Flora's tinctures, Aislinn found herself awake long after the dwarves were fast asleep. She lay across Beau's lap, half dozing as he redid the braids which had grown a bit tangled over the past couple of days. He declared himself exhausted after doing the last, and promptly slunk off to his bedroll. They were all packed into the cave like a barrel of fish, barely an inch between them. They'd decided to set up a watch, after being caught out before. "I thought we'd be safe in Autumn," Minerva had hissed. "Damn fool that I am. I've grown complacent in the cottage. No more!"

Caer had volunteered to go first. He did not look tired. He sat by the dwindling fire at the mouth of the cave, staring stonily out at the gloom. He'd barely spoken since he heard of Fort's death, other than to volunteer for watch duty.

Aislinn stood to move to her own bedroll, but paused, tugged to his side. She sat down again, close as she dared. Not speaking.

“Are you going to tell me it wasn’t my fault?” he asked, not looking at her.

“It *wasn’t* your fault,” she confirmed, “but I’m not sure that I wouldn’t think exactly as you are now, if the situations were reversed.”

For another moment, they sat in silence.

“Cass’ death,” he asked her. “You said you blamed yourself. Why?”

Aislinn paused. Even now, she didn’t like to recall it. “I didn’t take enough people with me,” she said. “I ought to have. But we wanted to go alone. It was her decision too, but I had the final say. I should have found others to join us. I should have taken Beau.”

“Beau?”

“He wanted to come, but he was so young... barely field trained. I thought he’d be a liability. But the truth is, if he’d been there... he could have healed her. She could still be alive.”

Caer finally turned to her, but she didn’t meet his gaze. She felt his eyes on her, soft and alarmed. “Or Beau could be dead,” he said. “You might have lost them both.”

“I know that now,” she replied, “but that *could* remains. The what if. I don’t think about it all the time, not anymore. I know we don’t get to know the other courses. I do, and yet...”

Caer sighed. “How did you move past it?”

“I’d like to say that I leant the truth of Minerva’s words—that Cass knew the risks, that it was her decision, not mine. I don’t think I truly did, though. I just tried to become the sort of person worthy of such a sacrifice. The first time I saved a life after her death, I felt better. Like I’d earned back my place here.” She stopped. Caer’s eyes had gone dark and glassy, staring into the fire—Caer, who had yet to save a life, and had ended plenty.

“For what it’s worth,” she continued, “I’m sad that Fort’s gone, but I’m glad that you’re still here.”

Caer turned to face her again, gaze bright, burning. His eyes swirled like pools of starfire. She could not read his expression, not fully, but pain flickered there behind a veneer of gratefulness.

Without another word, he closed the gap between them and buried himself in her arms.

His head fell against her chest, his arms tight around her. His tousled waves brushed her nose and chin. The scent of him shuddered inside her, all woodsmoke and pine and snow. She wanted to trail her nose down to the contours of his neck and kiss him there, inhaling the richness of his skin.

He tried to pull back. “We shouldn’t—”

“You aren’t touching my skin,” Aislinn assured him, gripping him tighter, “you’re fine. We’re fine.” She couldn’t imagine, in that moment, anything worse than having to release him. She wanted to roll him back against the floor and

twin his breath with hers and let her hands roam under his shirt, exploring the firm, silky muscles beneath...

Maybe she *should* release him. It would do no good to cling to those thoughts. They couldn't touch, they couldn't—

*I think I'd risk it.*

One of the dwarves rolled over, snoring loudly.

They pulled back, but the spell wasn't fully broken. They were still sitting far too close.

“Caer,” Aislinn whispered.

“Ais.” He raised a hand, and—very carefully and avoiding all contact with her skin—tucked a strand of hair behind the pointed tip of her ear, the tiniest piece that Beau hadn't braided back. There was barely any point to the action, yet it sent shivers through her.

“What happened to your ear cuffs?” he asked.

“I think I left them behind at the cottage.”

“We should get you some more when we reach Avalinth.”

“I'm not sure they'll have elf ear cuffs in stock...”

“I'll make you a pair.” His face hung beside hers, far too close and far too far away.

Something glinted in the distance—a single torch or flame.

Aislinn squinted through the dark. The flame was moving, getting closer, surrounded by a marching shadow. Her eyes tried to adjust to the dark, half-mortal and not quite fae enough.

“Douse the campfire,” she hissed.

“What?”

“Do it!”

They picked up handfuls of snow and hurled them at the flames, great scoops of it until the fire snuffed out. Aislinn turned back towards the solitary flame in the distance.

It was an army, marching up the hill in the dark. Mortal, by the looks of their shields. They bore the crest of Afelcarreg.

“Wake the others,” she told him. “I think we’re under attack.”



“Again?” Caer said, groaning as he turned towards the nearest dwarf and shook her roughly. For once, all of them were easy to rouse—of course they were. Grief had a way of slicing through sleep.

*Fort, Fort, Fort.*

“How far out are they?” Minerva asked, approaching the mouth of the cave.

“Difficult to guess,” Aislinn said. “But they’re moving slowly. I estimate we have around ten minutes.”

Extinguishing the light had bought them some time, but the army still had their bearings. They wouldn’t charge uphill, though, and not from such a distance—they would want to conserve their energy for the fight. If they could just sneak away...

“Saddle up,” Minerva instructed. “Quickly now!”

They fumbled around in the dark, reaching for blankets and bags and bedrolls, stuffing everything onto the backs of very



confused wargis. The moon offered little illumination. They were all almost blind.

All apart from Aislinn and Beau, who flitted around the cave like wind, whispering directions, working three times as fast.

“What’s our plan?” Flora asked.

“Avoid a fight, if we can,” Minerva rushed. “The entrance to the tunnel isn’t far away.”

“We’re in the dark.”

“*They* aren’t,” she said, jabbing a thumb at Aislinn and Beau.

“Ooh!” said Beau, grabbing Caer’s arm, “that gives me an idea. Hold on.”

He squared up to Caer, doing something with his hands Caer couldn’t quite make out, and then whispered a word and blew in his face.

It was like someone had lit a tiny lantern in the back of the cave, the illumination faint but the difference immeasurable.

“Won’t last long, alas,” Beau explained. “Shame I can’t do the same for our dwarven friends.”

Caer thanked him, his gaze falling to Aislinn. Her bottom lip pouted, as if she were sorry she hadn’t thought of it first.

The dwarves clambered up onto their wargis. Aislinn leapt to the front of the procession, grabbing the reins of one. Beau

took the back. Caer hovered in the middle, glancing down the slope.

The army was gaining. There were so many of them—

“Don’t look,” Beau said. “Keep your eyes ahead.”

“Wargis will be faster than whatever they have,” Minerva assured him. “Come on.”

Caer appreciated her confidence, but several of the wargis were now carrying two. He had one to himself, but wargis were bred for smaller riders. They could not speed as usual.

He said nothing as they charged through the snow in a long line, trusting in the vision of their fae friends and the wargis that were following them, Minerva hissing rough directions in Aislinn’s ear. Bell occasionally offered her wisdom, but Caer soon realised how ridiculous this was—Minerva trying to lead in this darkness. It had been years since they’d come this way, the landmarks few and changeable. No wonder she’d wanted to wait until morning.

Caer glanced behind them. The army was gaining fast. They were going to reach them...

His eyes searched once more for Aislinn, either for the distraction, or because he was always searching for her now. The first thing his eyes searched for when he woke up. The voice he moved towards in the dark. The thing his gaze was threaded towards whenever they were moving.

*It won’t work,* reminded another voice.

But even though there were a myriad of reasons why it was terrible to even entertain the idea, all of them were eclipsed by the terrifying and pressing possibility of something happening to her, of nothing ever happening at all.

She was still weak from teleporting. She would not last long in a fight. Beau had been sharing his energy with her—he wouldn't hold out long, either. Minerva was still missing her metal arm. Luna was no fighter, Diana had a minor injury—

They couldn't afford to fight.

“Min?” whispered Bell. “Can you see the path?”

“No,” she admitted. “It's been covered by snow.”

Beau moved to the front of the line. “You're sure?”

“I wish I was,” she said. “All I can say is that I *think* it's here. Under all... this.” She gestured to the pile of snow in front of her.

Beau sighed, cracking his knuckles. “Well, all right, then.”

He held out his hands, and the snow started to rumble and churn, blown by some invisible force. Layers peeled away, snowflakes blurring around them.

Caer barely looked as Beau burrowed. His eyes were too busy staring at the army marching, getting closer and closer. Aislinn hovered in the middle of the line, seeing it too, looking like she wasn't sure whether to assist her brother or draw her sword. Caer wasn't sure she had enough strength for either.

None of them did.

He chanced a look back at Beau's efforts—he hadn't yet hit rock. The army was getting closer and closer...

The chill from earlier passed over him, raking down the back of his neck.

The bodies. The bodies in the snow.

Caer charged forward, ignoring Aislinn's cry for him to stop. He yanked on Crusher's reins and spurred him forward, snow churning beneath them. He stopped on top of the sunken pit of snow and skidded to a stop.

The army paused, as if stunned by his actions, before moving again.

Caer dug deep into the snow with his powers, imagining it like a monstrous, tentacled thing, invisible tendrils burrowing past the snow to the bodies beneath. He felt them like stones in his boot, hard, sharp lumps of *nothing*.

Which he could turn into *something*.

It was like ripping apart a flimsy cushion, like the bodies were made to have life stuffed back into them, like it was easy. *Natural*.

A giant fist shot through the snow, followed by an ugly, monstrous body, creaking and groaning with ice as it crawled upright. Others followed—all monsters, horns and lumps and wings and fists that resembled clubs. All they had in common was their iced-over eyes.

*This isn't right*, Caer thought, as the monsters stumbled towards the army, bent, twisted bodies limping through the

snow. *No one should have this power.*

The first of the giants met the army, taking out two riders with a single swing of its arm. The horses whinnied. Something cracked, and Caer hated himself more than ever.

It wasn't enough. Several of the men saw the onslaught coming. They diverged, sweeping around, still charging, still moving. Caer plunged his powers into the snow again, deeper and further. Another wave raced up, another army charged.

For once, they ignored him. For once, they almost seemed to listen—all moving towards the army.

All except one.

One, tall, broad-shouldered, oddly human man, whose gaze seemed fixed on Aislinn.

*Aislinn.*

“Caer!” She stumbled towards him through the snow, abandoning the others, grabbing his arm. “Come on!”

Caer moved, but he could still feel the gaze of the undead mortal on his back, in a way he couldn't explain. It was like his eyes weren't his any more. His entire body stiffened, lead-like, heavy.

He sank to his knees.

Crusher pressed his face to his, but he couldn't feel it. Aislinn screamed his name, but the sound came out like a distinct echo.

Something was pulling him down.

Caer let it.



Aislinn didn't stop screaming until Bell and Diana reached Caer's side and hauled him onto Crusher's back.

"Get to the front!" Minerva bellowed. "Help your brother!"

Something swooped behind her. Aislinn turned, meeting a half-dead creature, sword slack at his side. He opened his mouth, but she kicked him in the stomach, sending him sprawling back in the snow.

She didn't finish him, didn't stop to think why he hadn't used his sword—she just ran.

Beau stood in a tunnel of ice, still burrowing. Aislinn grabbed his arm, strengthening his power, letting him borrow from her, and *pushed* with him.

*Come on, come on, come on!*

They shredded through the stone until they hit something hard—hard, and rock, and iron.

A door.

Minerva barrelled ahead of them, fingers moving over etchings, pressing a series of pebbles until the door swung inwards. “Get in, get in!”

They raced into the tunnel, wargis yapping, snow sliding inwards in a small tsunami. Magna and Diana dived through the door, but it wouldn’t shut, the hinges frozen, the force of the snow too great.

Beau sprang backwards, leaning into the air and yanking down a carpet of snow to conceal the entrance.

Finally, everything fell silent.

As soon as she’d gathered enough breath, Aislinn sprinted to Caer’s side. “Is he all right? *Is he all right?*”

“Aye, he’s fine, lass,” Flora said, checking him over. “Just exhausted too much of his power. You should have seen the condition he was in when he came to us. Half dead on his horse, he was.”

Aislinn paused, before her legs wobbled and almost gave out from underneath her.

“Steady, steady on,” said Bell, as Luna appeared at her other elbow. “Let’s get you onto a wargi.”

“We can’t rest yet,” Minerva insisted. “I know we need it—but we need to put some distance between us and the soldiers.”

“You think they’ll get through all that snow?” Beau asked, panting against the wall.



“I think I’m not risking it. Get yourself onto a mount, lad. You look like you’re about to faint too.”

“I’m all right.”

“You won’t be, if you don’t take the rest you can get. Come on, now. You’ll be harder to lift if you pass out.”

Beau sighed and relented, and the party set off into the tunnels. They were strangely lit, with veins of red-gold crystal running through the rock. Every so often, they widened, occasionally diverging. Once or twice, they stumbled upon ancient markings, drawings on the walls of long-ago battles, golems of the deep, dwarven tales of courage and, at one point, a mortal knight on horseback with flaming hair.

“What happened to Caer’s horse?” Aislinn asked. “The one he fled on?”

Silence echoed around the tunnels.

“He killed it,” Minerva said. “Accidentally, of course. Furred animals were immune to his touch. The beast startled during a storm. Caer tried to calm it, and... well. He’s been careful, since.”

“Too careful,” Bell whispered.

Luna stared at the floor. “Half the time he’s even scared to touch us, even though he knows we’re immune. Just a reaction, I think. Spends so long skirting around touching the living he’s forgotten how to embrace it.”

Aislinn had seen before the way he seemed to scoot around people, the way his hands stayed firmly by his sides... and the

way he'd sometimes cling to the accidental touches of the dwarves, like he'd forgotten the feel of skin.

If nothing else changed whilst he was in Avalinth, she hoped that that did—that he grew used to touch again.

Although she couldn't deny the tightness in her chest when she thought of who he might be touching.

A while later, they broke to rest. By Aislinn's approximation, it was still the middle of the night, but the battle had left the party famished. Someone plucked a couple of giant, spiky, snail-like gastropods off the cave walls. They were edible once cooked, though even Luna's magic did little to make them palatable.

“Lesser spotted tunnel slurg,” Diana explained, seeing Aislinn struggle to chew one down. “Not the tastiest critter, but it'll keep you going.”

“I think I'd rather die,” Beau said, looking like he was going to be sick.

The dwarves chuckled at his discomfort.

Caer lay nearby on a bed they'd made for him, utterly still. He'd been still for hours, his face unnaturally pale, only the slight rise and fall of his chest to show he was alive. She'd given up asking the others if he was all right.

Watching him fall...

She had thought Cass' death had been the worst thing that ever happened to her. She was sure that no matter how long she lived, that no moment would steal the edge from that one.

But this had come close.

*It's going to get worse.*

It was scary enough to make her want to flee, to turn back up the tunnel and plunge into Winter once more, alone, exposed—but free of him and the growing spell he had her under. And yet... how could she? How could she turn away? She wasn't a rabbit in a snare, but an animal welcomed to the hearth, staring into the fire, trying to work out if she was destined to roast above it or bask in its glow.

“What happens when we reach Avalinth?” Aislinn asked. *How long will we be permitted to stay? Will they even let us in? Will Caer definitely be safe there? Will I get to say goodbye?*

*I need, I need, I need to say goodbye. I need to go.*

*I don't want to.*

The party went quiet for a little while. “We petition the Dwarven Queen to offer Caer sanctuary,” said Minerva, as if it were a simple matter.

“And if she doesn't?”

“I'm fairly sure she will.”

“Why?”

“Because she's my sister.”

Aislinn blinked.

“*What?*” said Beau.

“You're a royal?”

Minerva scoffed. “I’m in somewhat of a self-imposed exile, but yes, I was.”

Beau took out his notebook. “How does the dwarven monarchy work?” he asked, pen in hand. “I understand that, much like ours, it’s an inherited thing, but I recall something about three trials?”

“Aye. There’s the de-facto heir of the firstborn, based solely on the fact that there can be decades or even centuries between children and it’s wise to train someone for the role in the meantime, but siblings and cousins can challenge the right to rule by defeating them in combat.”

“Dwarves duel for the throne? Ooh, I like that! Ais, maybe we should—”

Aislinn glared at him. “Do you want the throne?”

“No, not remotely.”

“Then why—”

“I want the *drama*.”

Aislinn stuffed a bit of cave-snail in his mouth, making him gag.

“Point taken, you win. I concede.”

Aislinn turned back to Minerva, who was staring misty-eyed into the fire. “Did your sister duel you for it?” she asked.

“Aye, she did.” She rolled her empty shoulder back.

“That’s... not how you lost your arm, is it?”

“No. No, it isn’t.”

“Right. You’re still on good terms with her, then?”

Diana coughed. Luna’s eyes looked everywhere but her. Flora puffed on her pipe.

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly.”

“Then why would you ask her for help?”

Minerva frowned. “For *him*, of course,” she said, gesturing to Caer. “Why else?”

Aislinn’s eyes drifted once more to Caer’s form, and she found herself understanding Minerva’s words exactly. *For him. Of course. Everything for him.*

Luna yawned loudly. A few of the rest of the party followed suit.

“We should sleep,” Minerva declared. “Who’s on watch?”

“I’ll take the first watch,” Beau offered. “I find myself somewhat awake.”

“You just want to stay up to make notes on the wall etchings,” Aislinn said.

“Yes, and?”

“Scholar.”

“Uneducated cave troll.”

Aislinn feigned hurt, clutching her hand to her chest, but snorted with laughter a second later.

One by one, the dwarves nodded off. Aislinn stayed up with Beau for a while, watching him make his notes, unable to

sleep, to calm her thoughts.

Caer had still not yet woken. She knew that made sense, given the lack of sleep, the time of day, and the exhaustion of his powers. How many hours had she slept after she teleported? She'd not given much thought before as to how it must have felt for him to watch her, to be alone...

Beau sighed, closing his book and coming to sit beside the fire.

“You should rest, Ais.”

She shook her head. “Not now. Not while he’s... Not now.”

Beau sighed. “It’s his arms, isn’t it?”

Aislinn snorted. “His stupid arms and his stupid face and his stupid, stupid eyes and his stupid lips and the less-than-stupid stuff that comes out of them.”

“So all of him, then, basically?”

“Yes, all of him.”

Beau sighed again, more dramatically before, scooted round to sit in the bedroll next to hers. “I think I’m about done for the night,” he announced. “Can you take the next watch?”

Aislinn nodded. “Not going to try to convince me to rest again?”

“It seems a rather hopeless business.”

“You mean pointless?”

“I said what I said.”

Aislinn exhaled, turning to look at the rocky ceiling, trying to imagine stars and feeling only the weight of the mountains crushing down on her. “Do you think I’m being foolish?”

“I think you are a person that doesn’t fall easily, and even though it may be a terrible idea to fall for a mortal prince who’s the heir to another throne and currently can’t even touch you and will probably have to remain underground for years honing his powers—I think maybe it might be worth it?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And at the end of the day, does it even matter if it hurts? Isn’t the other possibility worse—nothing ever happening, ever? Aren’t you far more likely to regret the paths not taken?”

Aislinn thought back to the moment when the cottage had been attacked, to the way she had followed the dwarves, not understanding why.

Maybe she did, now.

She nudged Beau’s shoulder. “When did you get so wise?”

“Me? I’ve always been wise. I’m literally the wisest one out of the two of us by *miles*—”

“That is not how you measure wisdom.”

“Wisdom is not a word, and thus, my point is proved.” He leaned over and flicked her forehead. “I’m sleeping now, sister dearest. Goodnight.”

Aislinn waited for a while until she thought he was asleep, and then rolled upright and crept towards Caer's sleeping form, settling herself down beside him. He looked oddly serene when he was asleep, his smooth brow unfurrowed.

She brushed back a lock of hair from his face. "I won't touch you," she told him, "even though I really, *really* want to. Even though I think you want me to. I just... I'm not afraid of you, Caer. Afraid *for* you, maybe. But... if that's the price I pay for being next to you, I think it's worth it."

She stayed beside him, watching, gazing, thinking of little but the shape of his face and the lines of his features until her thoughts turned to little more than mush. A while later, his eyes opened, and he broke into a smile that made her heart leap. "Hey," he said. "Where—"

"In a tunnel on our way to Avalinth. We're safe here."

"Well, we must be if you can say it..." He tried to glance around. "Is everyone—"

"We're fine," she said shortly. "Everyone is fine."

"Good. That's... good."

"Caer, what you did earlier, resurrecting all those bodies..."

Caer's smile dropped. "Yes?"

"It was... impressive."

The smirk blossomed again. "Impressive, was it?"

"Yes."



He looked around, eyes glancing over the sleeping bodies of the rest of the party. “Your magic doesn’t work when you’re drained, right?”

“Right.”

“The same should be true for me, shouldn’t it?”

Aislinn’s heart skipped a beat. Her mouth went dry. If his magic was tapped out, they could touch. If they could touch, they could...

Granted, he was too weak to manage much, but at this rate she thought she might explode at the touch of his hand.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“I don’t suppose there’s something around here that I could test my theory on, is there? A rodent, maybe—”

“How about a large snail?”

“Perfect.”

Running far more quickly than was probably necessary, Aislinn rushed further down the tunnel, where the spiky snail-like creatures from earlier were slurping through the dark. She prised one off the wall and scurried back to Caerwyn’s side.

His eyes widened as she approached. “What on Earth is *that?*”

“Doesn’t matter right now. Can you kill it?”

“I’m not entirely sure I want to touch it at all...”

Aislinn batted her eyes.

Caerwyn sighed, and reached over to touch it, cringing as his fingers touched the slimy underbelly. His face crinkled, like he was trying to push his power into it.

But nothing happened. The snail remained alive, slowly wriggling its long, slimy body.

Caer pulled back his hand. Aislinn returned the snail to the wall. She came back to his side, heart pounding, unsure of where to put herself now that *everywhere* was an option.

“I have spent a lot of time imagining which part of you I would touch first,” Caer whispered.

“A lot of time?” Aislinn arched her brow. “We have not known each other long.”

Caer raised a hand, fingers uncurling over the tip of her pointed ear. “You have occupied far too many of my thoughts.”

Aislinn pressed her hand to Caer’s cheek. He let out another sigh as her palm flattened against his skin, edged with something like a whimper.

“If it helps,” she told him, voice breathy, “you have occupied far too many of mine, too.”

She lay her free hand against his chest, half of her fingertips brushing the warm, solid panes of his skin. His own hand came up to cup hers, and Aislinn felt as if the world had vanished around them, like she was the final thread in a tapestry and he the fabric. The moment was a needle, pinning them together.

Their faces inched closer.

After this, it would not be so easy to move away from him. After this, it would be difficult to untangle. After this, it would hurt.

*Let it, then,* Aislinn whispered to her thoughts. *For he is worth it all.*

Something cracked along the tunnel—from the darkness they'd come from. Three of the wargis woke with a start, growling, teeth bared.

Aislinn pulled out her dagger, jumping to her feet. “Halt!” she said. “Who goes there?”

“What’s happening?” said Beau thickly, stirring in his bed. “Are we being attacked again? Ah!”

A large, lumpy shape stepped out of the dark. Aislinn’s eyes widened. It was the undead soldier from earlier, the one with the broad shoulders and the head of thick, dark hair. The one who had approached her, but not attacked her. His skin was pale grey and marbled, his eyes leached of colour, but his muscles were still firm, his face still chiselled, with little but his ghostly pallor and his bloodstained clothing to show he was dead at all.

He looked oddly familiar...

“Peace!” he said, his voice rough and hoarse but unmistakably human. “I mean you no harm!”

Caer gasped. “You... you can talk.”

The soldier nodded, as if this was obvious. Aislinn realised that beneath the blood and dirt, he was wearing a white-and-gold uniform that marked him as a knight of Acanthia, although the design wasn't a recent one. Her father liked to change them every decade or so.

She lowered her sword. "You tried to talk to me earlier. During the fight."

"I thought you were someone else. A friend of mine, but I see now that I was incorrect."

"Who?"

"Juliana," he said. "You look like her. Juliana Ardencourt."

Aislinn froze. Juliana hadn't gone by *Ardencourt* in fifty years. "Who are you?"

"Dillon," he said. "My name is Dillon Woodfern."



“I’m dead, aren’t I?” Dillon continued, when he was met with nothing but silence. “I look dead. I look quite dead, actually, but feel very alive. How did that happen?”

Aislinn pointed numbly towards Caer, still lying on the floor, wide-eyed. “He can bring back the dead,” she explained.

“Not... not like *that*, though,” Caer mumbled.

“Like what?” asked Dillon.

“Um... sentient. You should be so, so...”

“Oh,” said Dillon, like he was brought back from the dead every other day, “well, here I am!”

Hecate, who had been sitting beside the fire all this time, slunk forward and started to wind around Dillon’s legs. The wargis, meanwhile, had decided this person was no threat, and promptly settled back down again.

“I’m sorry,” Aislinn said, gathering her thoughts, “You’re Dillon Woodfern? *Ser* Dillon Woodfern?”

Dillon blinked. “I was never a knight—”

“You got it, um, well... posthumously.”

“Right,” he said. “Because I died.”

“Yes.”

“How... how long ago—”

“Fifty years,” Aislinn responded, thinking of the statue in the gardens and the dates printed below. Her mother stopped every time she passed it. Aislinn had made him flower crowns as a child and climbed into his broad arms to place it on his head. She’d thought the statue itself was Dillon until she was old enough to understand.

It was only stone, a monument to the icy, unmarked grave the real Dillon lay in, somewhere in the depths of Winter.

Until Caer had pulled him out again.

“Fifty years,” Dillon breathed. “My father then, I take it—”

“Grandpa Woodfern? He’s still around. Retired five years ago but keeps his cottage on the grounds. He’s old, mind, really old, but, you know, alive.”

“You call him Grandpa?”

“Well, we don’t have any grandfathers and he doesn’t have any grandchildren so we asked him one day if we could call him grandpa when we were little and it just... stuck.”

“He... he’s been well? Lead a good life?”

“Taught me how to ride himself.” Aislinn paused, his face growing more real to her, his presence sharpening. This was *Dillon*, her mother’s oldest friend. Grandpa Woodfern’s son.

The empty seat at the table. The one they spoke about as if expecting him to come home, only they knew he never would.

Only now, he *could*.

“He told me about you,” Aislinn went on. “A lot. Mother too. They both spoke about you all the time.”

“Right,” Dillon paused, eyes even more glazed than before. They were darker than most of the dead, a ghost of the brown of his father’s, like a painting behind a layer of cobweb. “Your mother is—”

“Juliana Ardencourt. Well, Arderthorn, now.”

Dillon smiled weakly. “She finally realised it, then? She and Hawthorn? He’s... your father?”

“This is *insane*,” Beau gasped, finally finding his voice. “Wait until Mother hears—can I examine you?”

“Beau!” Aislinn hissed. “Not the moment! Dillon, er, Ser Woodfern—”

“Dillon is fine.”

“Would you like to sit down?”

“I... I don’t think I need to,” he said. “I don’t feel like I need to.”

“Fascinating.” Beau came forward, brandishing his notebook. “I’ve never heard of such a thing before—”

Dillon blinked. “You look like Hawthorn but you sound more like Aoife.”

“Don’t,” Aislinn warned. “The library practically raised him.”

Caer started breathing hard, his breaths short and ragged. Aislinn bent down beside him, steadying him against her. “Caer—”

“I’ll get him something,” Beau said, disappearing into Flora’s saddlebags. The dogs, thankfully, had all gone back to sleep, and none of them minded as he poked around the bags.

He came back with a vial of something that he held up to Caer’s lips. “Breathe,” he said, laying a palm against his chest. Light rayed beneath his fingertips. “Just breathe.”

Caer’s breath slowed. He swallowed the potion, and seconds later, sunk back into sleep.

Dillon stared at him. “Is he all right?”

“This has been a hard day for him,” Aislinn explained, forcing herself not to smooth back his hair. “He’s never brought back anyone so... *whole* before.”

“Any idea why that might be?” Beau asked, hovering around his elbow.

“Um... I’m afraid not.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was at this quarry, filled with Unseelie. Juliana—your mother—was there. We’d flooded the place with snow, and then—Ladrien. He... he stabbed me.”



Aislinn stilled. She'd heard versions of this story before, but their mother always skipped over the details.

"I don't remember anything else. Nothing. Nothing at all. Just... waking up in the snow and crawling towards the fight. Digging through the snow to follow you down here. I was sure you were Juliana and well... I didn't know where else to go. I thought we were still in the fight..."

He finally fell down on the floor, slumping in a heap, but there was no relief to the action. "Vines and spirits," he whispered.

"Do you need a drink?" Beau offered, holding up the dregs of Caerwyn's potion.

Dillon took it, but the tincture dribbled out of his mouth. "I... can't swallow."

"Interesting." Beau made a note. "What else—"

"Beau!" Aislinn admonished. "This *still* isn't the time!" She turned back to Dillon. "I'm sorry, Ser—Dillon. My brother is usually the more empathic one, but sometimes his curiosity does get the better of him."

"I—thank you."

"I'm Aislinn," she said, "crown princess of Faerie."

He smiled at her. "You look so much like your mother."

"Should we..." Beau glanced around him, "wake the others?"

Aislinn shook her head. “This night has seen enough interruptions. Let them sleep.”

“I can keep watch, if you like,” Dillon suggested. “I don’t think I need to sleep.”

Aislinn and Beau exchanged glances. “You’re just going to sit here all night by yourself after just coming back from the dead?”

“Why not? It’ll give me some time to process.”

“That’s a fair point,” Beau concluded.

“Won’t you be a bit... lonely?”

“I’m sure I can handle it.”

Aislinn once more did not feel like sleeping. She wished it was her sensibilities reminding her that it was not a good idea to leave an undead man they’d just met in charge of their overnight safety—what if his sentience was only temporary? What if it was all a trick?—but the main reason was simple: she did not want him to be alone.

“I’m not sure I feel like sleeping at the moment,” she announced. “I certainly feel I could stay up for a bit longer.”

“Me too,” said Beau. “How strange.”

Dillon smiled.

For at least another hour, while Hecate dozed in Dillon’s lap, they spoke with him beside the dwindling fire, telling him about how the Unseelie King who’d killed him had been defeated, and what had happened afterwards—how their

parents had married, how the Queen had granted him knighthood, how his statue was erected beside the lake in the gardens and they'd clambered over it as children. They told him the stories everyone had shared of him, how their mother spoke of him frequently, how his father had taught them how to ride, how Miriam had referenced him all the time when teaching them how to fight.

“It was all, ‘by the time he was fourteen, Dillon Woodfern could carry a wounded horse on his back with a broken leg! Another sack of flour, Princess Aislinn!’”

“It was a miniature pony,” Dillon insisted, “and my leg was only sprained.”

“Did you help Mother tie Father’s hair to his bedpost?”

“I was merely a lookout.”

“What about the time she stole *all* of his clothes and flung them out of the high tower.”

“Please,” said Dillon shuddering, “don’t remind me of that time. He walked around naked all day, proclaiming how apparently someone was *desperate* to see him naked.”

Beau and Aislinn howled.

The stories seemed to ease Dillon somewhat, and, eventually, they could hold off sleep no longer.

“We can trust him, right?” Beau whispered as they rolled into their beds.

“Hard not to, isn’t it? This is *Dillon Woodfern*. He was Mother’s Cass.”

Beau conceded, and shortly after, they both fell asleep.

They woke to the dwarves screaming.



“U<sup>n</sup>dead! *UNDEAD!*” someone was screaming.

Aislinn opened her eyes. Half of the dwarves were up, brandishing weapons, the other half just rising. The wargis cocked their heads, surprised by all this commotion.

The dwarves were advancing on Dillon.

*Dillon.*

Aislinn leapt to her feet, springing between them, Beau tripping over his bedroll as he struggled to follow.

“Stop!” Aislinn called. “He’s fine, he’s safe!”

Minerva held up her axe, holding off the attack. “Are you sure, lass? Because he looks—”

“I know,” Dillon said, “but I’m not going to attack, I promise!”

Luna gasped, lowering her rolling pin. “You can talk!”

“Yes, quite well, thank you.”

“We went through all this last night,” Aislinn explained. “We don’t know why he’s so, um, alive, but he is, and we know him—he’s a knight of Acanthia, and a close friend of our mother’s.”

The dwarves all exchanged glances, and then dropped their weapons to the floor. “Well, if you say so.”

“Fascinating,” said Flora, coming forward. “I’ve never... quite extraordinary. Do you mind if I—”

“I took a few notes last night,” Beau said, untangling himself and coming forward with his notebook. “I didn’t do a full examination—”

“He is standing *right there*,” Aislinn said, glowering.

“It’s all right,” Dillon said. “An examination might be a good idea, actually. It might give us some answers. I don’t mind.”

Flora and Beau exchanged the look of excited children being offered a barrel full of sweet treats.

“I’ll get my bag,” Flora announced.

“I’ll get my pen!”

They dragged Dillon off into a secluded corner of the tunnel behind a pile of rocks and started tearing off his clothes. They fell in a crumpled heap beside them. Luna crept forward, holding up the knight’s tabard, stained with brown blood and sporting a large hole in the stomach. She swallowed.

“I’m going to fix this before I start on breakfast,” she said.  
“Unless we’re all famished?”

They all shook their heads. “Need firewood anyway,” Bell said.

“And I fancy something other than snail this morning,” Diana announced. “Let me see if I can find something. Caer? Are you up for a hunt?”

Caer’s eyes were still rooted on the cluster of rocks behind which Dillon stood. He had not yet uttered a single word. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

He climbed gingerly to his feet, testing his weight. Aislinn reached out to steady him, but he shrugged her off. “We probably shouldn’t—” he said. “I can probably... I think I have my powers back now.”

“Right,” she said, stepping backwards and ignoring the pang of disappointment. She ought to be *glad* he’d recovered.

“We won’t be long,” said Diana. “Or I hope not. Someone rustle up some firewood.”



Aislinn assisted with the finding of fuel to burn and returned to the party after a brief sojourn in the tunnels, finding a small station nearby which had some furniture she could hack up. She came back to the campfire to find Dillon sitting beside it, almost naked as Luna worked on his clothes.

Flora was stitching up the wound in his abdomen.

“We tried magic,” Beau explained, as Aislinn stared at the scene, “but it didn’t work.”

“This is purely for cosmetic reasons,” Flora mumbled.

“My guts were hanging out, good doctor,” Dillon said. “It was a bit disconcerting.”

Aislinn hovered over him. “How are you doing?”

“Um, well, decidedly glad for my mortal lies, I have to say, but I think I’m doing all right, all things considered.”

Aislinn bent down and squeezed his shoulder. It was as cold as ice, grey as deerhide. She tried not to stare.

“All done!” Luna declared, holding up his clothes. The dark stain remained, although her stitching was meticulous. “I, er, couldn’t do anything about the blood...”

“It’s fine,” Dillon said, in the same way Aislinn’s mother did whenever she was trying to hide her true feelings. She wondered if it was a mortal thing, although Aoife never spoke like that, nor Aunt Iona. He said it *exactly* like her, in a way that was hard to pin.

“Here,” Beau said, taking the garments from Luna’s grip. He waved his hands over the stains, drawing out the darkness until only muddled white remained. He handed the uniform to Dillon. “Arise, Ser Dillon,” he said. “Knight of the Realm.”

Dillon smiled. “Thank you,” he said.



Stitching done, he pulled the clothes over his head and finished dressing himself. Luna got to work cooking the weird, rodent-like creatures Diana had procured. Aislinn was sure it wouldn't be much better than slurg, but it would, at least, not be slurg.

The dwarves swapped pleasantries with Dillon as the meal was coming along.

“So, Dillon,” Bell started, “where are you from?”

“Acanthia,” he explained. “Fifty years ago, apparently.”

“And you were a knight?”

Dillon shook his head. “Palace guard, for the most part—assistant stablemaster before then.”

“Good profession,” Minerva said, as if mucking out horses far outweighed the honour of being a knight.

Bell raised an eyebrow as if trying to say “*really, dear?*” without insulting their guest.

“Anyone can be brave for a short amount of time,” Minerva said, reading her look. “Much harder and more honourable to make a slow, honest living, in my opinion.”

“That’s her way of saying she’s terrible at mucking out the stables.”

“I have one arm, woman!”

“You *know* that’s not the reason.”

“I have one arm and a pair of eyes that just *don't see dirt.*”

Bell pursed her lips. “Pampered princess.”

“Filthy ruffian.”

They leaned over their plate of roasted cave-rodent and nuzzled their noses together.

“How long have you been married?” Dillon asked, smiling softly.

“Oh, fifty years?” Minerva said.

“Fifty-seven,” Bell corrected. “But we were on-and-off for a couple of decades before that.”

“Why was that?” Dillon asked.

“I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a queen,” Bell said. A pause followed, like this was some great confession. “I was her general before that.”

“The General That Never Fought,” Diana followed. “That was what they called her.”

“Not as an insult,” Minerva added. “She was just smart enough to almost always have a way out of the conflict before it began.”

“Also why it took you so long to convince me to marry you.”

“Our marriage has been peace and sunshine and roses, woman. I don’t know what you’re on about.”

Beau shared a look with Aislinn. “They’re as bad as our parents.”

“I think it’s sweet.”

Beau doubled back. “Are you sure you’re the real Aislinn?”

“Beau—”

“The real Aislinn would *never* say that. Come on. I need a look of disgust.”

Aislinn glared.

“That’ll do.”

Minerva and Bell ceased their soft glances and nuzzling and turned instead to their plans for the day.

“Are we far from Avalinth?” Beau asked.

Bell shook her head. “Half a day’s journey, all being well. We should be sleeping in proper beds tonight.”

Aislinn let out a little squeak. “Sorry,” she said, “I’m just... super excited about the prospect of sleeping in a real bed again.”

“Alone?” Beau queried.

Aislinn shoved him very hard in the ribs. Caer, thankfully, was still staring at Dillon from afar and didn’t seem to be listening.

“Yeah, I deserved that,” he said, massaging his side. “Please continue, gentlefolk.”

“A few hours’ journey is all,” Bell continued. “With adequate resting.”

“Unless Aislinn wants to teleport us there?”

“Um,” Caer started, finally looking up, “she nearly died the last time, so she’s not doing that ever again.”

Aislinn narrowed her eyes. “Are you telling me what to do?”

“You are welcome to tell me not to risk my life doing foolish things whenever you wish.”

“That’s a fair point, I will do that, continue.”

“Well,” said Minerva, slapping her hand on her thigh, “shall we pack up?”



The dwarves insisted that Caer and Aislinn ride on the wargis, certain that neither of them could be fully recovered by now. Aislinn at last felt like her body was her own again—a tired, stretched version, but her own nonetheless—yet conceded to the ride because she suspected Caer would not want to ride alone. They kept a steady pace at the back of the party, the others taking turns on the remaining mounts. Beau was at the head behind Minerva, talking to Dillon.

Caer had yet to take his eyes off him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’ve never brought someone back *whole* before,” he admitted.

He’d said as much the night before, but Aislinn understood now what he wasn’t quite saying. “You’re worried that the others you brought back might have been sentient too, that your mother...”

Caer swallowed. “Most of them it was very clear that they weren’t *them* anymore, but maybe that’s not always the case. Mother was too weak to speak when she died, when she came back...” Silver rimmed his eyes, and for a moment, everything about him tightened. Aislinn reached across and pinched his sleeve, tugging him back to the present. “I might never know, right? Why I have these powers and why Dillon came back like himself and the others didn’t. I might never know what these powers can do. I should just... I should just learn to live with that, right?”

Aislinn barely hesitated. “If it matters to you, I swear I shall do everything in my power to find out the answers to your questions, and if none can be found, I shall be an ear for the rest of your life.”

Caerwyn stared at her. “Dangerous for you to make such a vow.”

“I don’t know,” Aislinn said, half under her breath, “I’d make worse ones.”

Caer looked at her sharply, as if she’d just made another, more dangerous confession, one that had obliterated all thought. He said nothing. Silence whistled in the space of words.

Finally, Aislinn spoke. “I’ve figured it out, by the way.”

“What?”

“Why you impressed me. I said I’d tell you if I figured it out, so I have to.”

“Oh?” he said, arching an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“Before we met, I’d painted a picture of you in my head of a spoiled mortal prince who couldn’t say boo to a goose, and yet you were smart enough to get a drop on me the moment we met. You didn’t like fae and I didn’t like mortals, but you weren’t afraid of me. You challenged me. And even when you must have been afraid of hurting me, when you had good reason to suspect the fae weren’t trustworthy, you helped me. I know precious few people that are as tough as they are good. So... that’s why.”

Aislinn clenched her jaw, trying to hold the last part in, but Caer’s cocky smile almost unravelled her. “Is there something else?”

Aislinn unlatched her jaw. “I’m also impressed by your incredible physique and your entire face and it’s extremely irritating and distracting but *I really didn’t want to tell you that.*”

Caerwyn barked a laugh and quickly stifled it. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I just... Look, if it helps, you really impressed me too... with your humour and skill but also how insanely beautiful you are. You’re a little alarming at times.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I just... I really wish I could touch you right now.”

“Oh?” Aislinn arched an eyebrow. “And what part would you touch?”

Caerwyn coughed, loudly and abruptly, causing the people in front to turn and stare at them.

“Sorry,” he spluttered, “just... dust in my throat.”

“Let us know if you need a break, lad,” Minerva said.

“I’m *fine*.”

Aislinn smirked in her saddle.



They stopped an hour or two later to refresh themselves when they reached an underground river. Blue-green crystals lined the walls, making ripples of light dance across the rock. The whole place hummed with still, pale colour.

“Beautiful,” said Beau, as he whipped out his notebook to make a few quick sketches, mumbling something about how he wished he brought paint. Dillon and Luna stared over his shoulder, gasping as he printed the scene with a few flicks of his pencil.

Aislinn lay back against the wall.

The wall moved.

She leapt up, drawing out her dagger. Caer leapt too. “What is it?”

She stared at the wall. It was made of petrified vines, but underneath, something was stirring. Something long and thin...

It slithered out like a snake, eyeless, bark-skinned. No animal. A vine—grey and wooden, but alive.

Aislinn holstered her dagger. “Hello,” she said, leaning forward to greet it. “You’re a long way from home.”

“Home?” Caer queried.

“I told you about the vines in Acanthia, didn’t I? They once ran through the whole of Faerie.”

“By the looks of things, they still do.” Beau put down his book and came over to inspect them. They hummed beneath his fingers. Aislinn could feel it too. They were alive as the ones back home, the ones they used to whisper messages through.

“Beau,” she started, “if these vines *do* go all over Faerie, do you think they could get a message to our parents?”

Beau shrugged. “It’s possible. We’ve never tried sending messages outside the palace, though.”

“We’ve never had to.”

“Fair point.”

Aislinn lay the tip over her palm. “Please,” she whispered, “find our parents. Let them know we’re safe and where we are.”

“Should we mention Dillon?”

“How would we explain that?”

“Good point.”

The vines didn’t carry precise words, more feelings and ideas. They’d used them growing up to play games of hide-and-seek, following a quiet tug to secluded hiding spots. They



could sense how the sender of a message felt, perhaps gain a sense of what they wanted them to do—*let's make mischief, come find me, I don't want to sleep alone tonight*—but whole sentences were beyond that. They couldn't pack Dillon's return into them.

Dillon headed over with Luna, eyes widening at the vines.

"The vines..." he whispered, crouching down beside them.

"Must have been a while since you've seen them, I imagine."

"No..."

"What?"

He shook his head. "It's no matter," he said. "Think nothing of it."

Minerva whistled from the bank of the river. "Ready to move, children?"

"Are we children?" Beau queried. "I feel like we are not."

"I'm nineteen," Dillon offered. "Give or take fifty years..."

"I'm twenty-one," said Caer.

"I'm thirty-three," announced Luna.

Aislinn snorted. "I think *you* might be the only child, Beau."

"Oh... whatever."

"Minerva's over five hundred. I think we all seemed like children to her," Luna explained, passing the reins of one of the wargis into Caer's hands before turning to her own mount.

Dillon tried to help her up, but the wargi instinctively crouched down to her level.

“Are you really thirty-three?” he asked, trying to hide his actions.

She nodded. “Dwarves age slowly.”

“Out of interest,” he said, “does that mean you’re thirty-three, *thirty-three*, or more... younger?”

“Does it matter?”

“Um...”

“She’s teasing you,” Beau said. “She’s basically our age.”

“*Our* age, maybe,” said Aislinn with a grin, “not yours, Baby Beau.”

“Stop making me into a baby!”

A chuckle passed through the group as they headed further up the tunnel. They were spacing out, now, entering huge caverns and ancient outposts. Buildings carved from rock eased into view, bits of broken furniture protruding from the stone. Glass littered some of the rivers, but it had been there for so long that barnacles had started to grow on it.

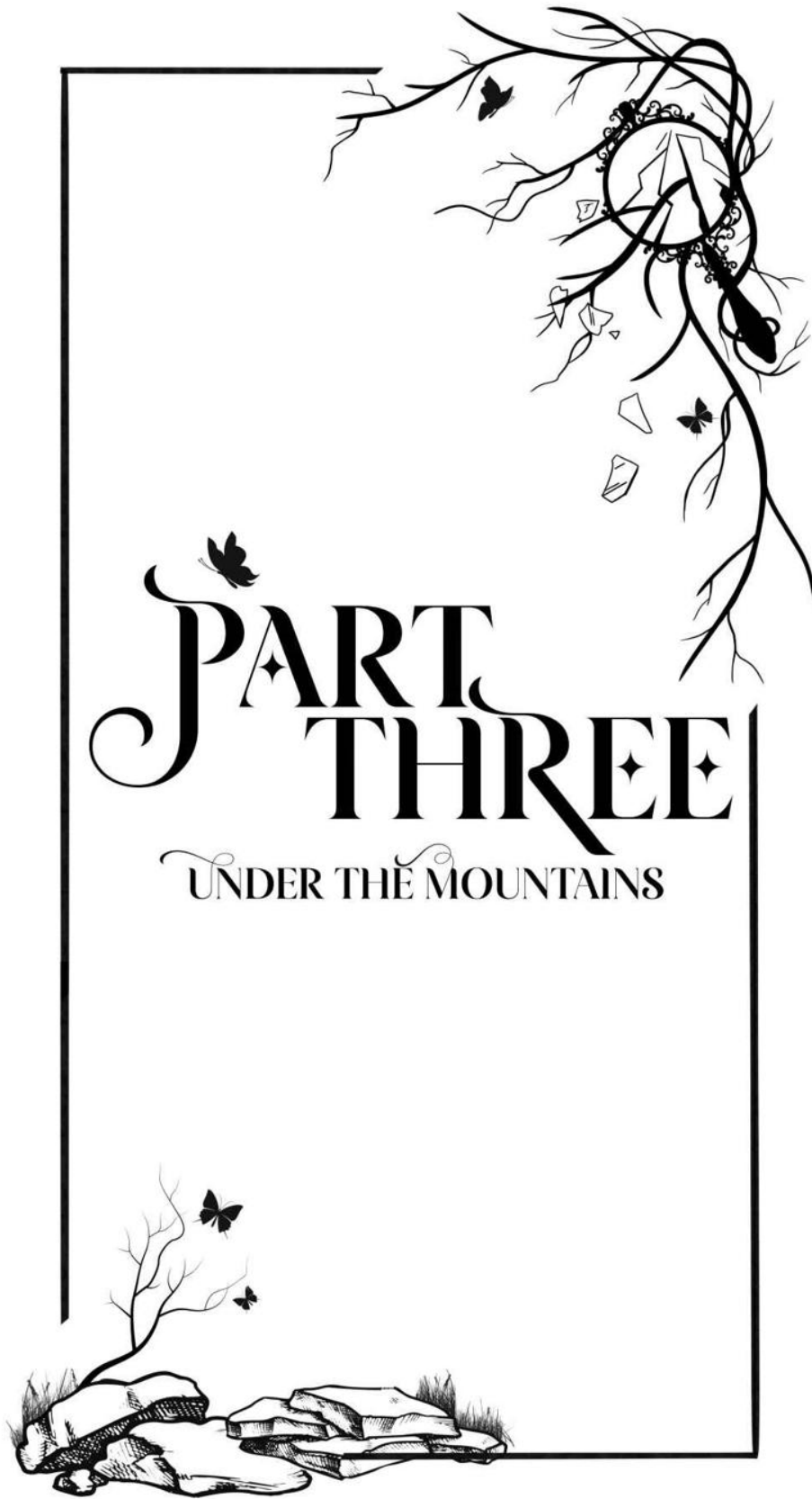
From time to time, they’d pass a burial mound. Some of the pebbles making the graves were etched with names—all long since worn out.

“The dwarves haven’t seen external conflict in a millennia,” Bell explained. “Since the sky-sickness outbreak back in the Coal Age, 166. We stopped manning these outposts centuries

ago—no one came down here who wasn't escorted by a dwarf.”

Beau squeaked, awed by the honour.

“Not long now, little princeling,” Minerva said, jerking with her head. “Behold—the doors of Avalinth.”



PART  
THREE  
UNDER THE MOUNTAINS





**A**islinn had heard tales of the Great Doors of Avalinth. They were thought to be the largest doors in existence. Rumour had it that the dwarves once had a bet with the Spring Court over who could build the largest entrance. The Spring Court's were taller and made of woven branches and blooming flowers, but without magic to hold them together they could not support themselves.

These doors were carved from the mountain and almost as ancient, their locks and hinges now rusted over. They stood at the end of a tremendous cavern, the road, once smooth red brick, now blackened and crusted. Huge chunks were missing in places, which the wargis deftly avoided.

It looked abandoned, like nothing living could possibly lurk behind the monstrous doors.

“A question,” said Beau, “but how are we getting in? Do we just... knock?”

Minerva chuckled. “As if anyone would hear you, lad.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Bell walked up to the side of the door, her hand disappearing behind a concealed alcove. She yanked on something, grunting and groaning, and a much smaller door opened up inside of one of them.

Everyone dismounted. Minerva stood at the entrance, pausing.

“Min—” Bell started.

Minerva shrugged, and plunged inside.

Aislinn heard Beau’s gasp before she stepped through after him. Light danced everywhere inside this colossal rectangular space—from sconces on the walls, from immaculately cut fire pits, from the crystals embedded in the ceiling that mimicked the stars. Another great set of doors stood at the other end, but between them stood dozens of statues. Dwarves milled about between them, looking up as the party entered—a few turning to whisper amongst themselves.

Aislinn did not hear them. She was too busy staring at the statues as they passed, admiring the way stone had been carved to resemble rippling fabric.

It was why fae invited mortals into their homes, why mortality, however brief, was treasured. There was something inherently more valuable about beauty made by hand—a magic beyond magic.

“This is amazing,” Beau whispered.

“The Hall of Heroes,” Bell explained. “I know mortals have their gods and fae their monarchs and spirits, but if we pray,

we pray to the heroes of old.”

“Do dwarves believe in an afterlife?” Caer asked.

Bell shrugged, like the question was neither here nor there. “Yes, and no,” she explained. “We believe that our souls are returned to the stone and fire, to forge new life—be it living or steel. We may be the sound of a newborn’s cry or the spark that forges a sword. Who is to say.”

It was a sentiment not far from the fae’s, and Aislinn found she rather liked it. She moved through the rest of the hall, admiring the other heroes. Despite the name, a large quantity of them weren’t warriors. There were doctors and blacksmiths, politicians and merchants. People who had wrought great changes or brought about advancements in arts and sciences.

There were occasional warriors, of course. Augustus Barrowsmith the Relentless who fought off a troll uprising, Caesaria Olestone the Undaunted who explored the deepest levels of the Underground, and—

“Whoa,” Beau said, stopping in his tracks, “this one looks like you, Ais.”

Towards the end of the hall was the statue of a mortal woman on a low pedestal—possibly to compensate for her height. She did, indeed, look much like Aislinn, although she thought she looked more like her mother.

She glanced at the placard.

*Cerridwen the Brave.*

Aislinn froze, certain she was misreading.



*Cerridwen Ardencourt, a mortal knight of faerie, led a dwarven battalion against a golem uprising in the Silver Age, 457. She single-handedly destroyed Brutus Greysirite, the creator of the golems, and saved an entire stronghold from annihilation.*

Aislinn glanced back at Beau, whose eyes were widening.

Minerva stood behind them. “Ah, yes, Cerridwen. Fine warrior. Last human or fae we ever had down here. Heck of a woman.”

“You knew her?”

“Fought beside her in the uprising. Bell too.”

“And you didn’t think to maybe mention it?”

“Why would I?”

“Um,” said Beau, “because Aislinn looks just like her and her name is Ardencourt?”

Minerva blinked back. “All you human-fae look the same to me.”

Beau groaned. “That’s our *grandma*.”

“Your grandma?” Minerva arched an eyebrow. “Ha! Fancy that.”

“That’s all?”

Minerva shrugged. “I had no idea you were related. You said your name was Ardenthorn and I’ve no idea how fae or mortal names work.”

“How do dwarven last names work?”

“For the most part, children carry the name of one of their parents—usually *tir* or *dir* added to the end for ‘son’ or ‘daughter’. But most will gain a new name as they grow—Gearheart for an inventor, Highcliff for the location of their forge, maybe Axeblade for a fearsome warrior—some nobles might keep a family name, though. How does it work for fae?”

“There’s a ranking system amongst the noble houses,” Aislinn explained. “You take the name of the highest-ranking one. Except the royal family—they had no surname, until us. My parents merged my mother’s surname of Ardencourt with thorns that symbolise the royal family.”

“And the common folk?”

“Surnames are usually hereditary. Most couples pick one to go by. Some choose a new one or keep their own. You can gain another, like you say. Our grandmother lived in Autumn when she first came to Faerie and took the name of Ardencourt when she moved to the capital. She had quite the reputation. Our grandfather used her name after they married. He’d grown up in the mortal realm. I don’t think he’d had a surname, there.”

Aislinn did not know much about either of her grandfathers. Hawthorn had barely had a relationship with his, but Markham Ardencourt had raised his daughter largely by himself. There were moments when Juliana would recall him, some sweet memory of training with him as soon as she was old enough to hold a sword... and then the sweetness would wash away.

He'd died in the Unseelie King's attempt to overthrow Queen Maytree, but it wasn't lingering grief that prevented Juliana from talking about him—or at least, that's the conclusion they'd drawn over the years.

They had given up asking, eventually.

“Well, you learn something new every day,” said Minerva. “But come on, let's not dawdle further. It's still a fair trek to the palace, and I doubt we'll get the wargis on the tram.”

“Tram?” Beau frowned. “What's a tram?”

“You'll see.”

The party marched forward, and the great stone doors at the other end swung open into the city of Avalinth.

The sound hit them first; an endless pounding hum, merged with the noise of a thousand voices all talking at once. Aislinn stared in disbelief at the scene ahead of her.

She had seen etchings of Avalinth before in history books—hundreds of years out of date. They had depicted Avalinth as a place carved entirely out of stone and hard, solid edges.

Part of this remained. There were still pillars the size of houses holding up a colossal ceiling, the buildings were still straight and solid. But the rest...

Horseless carriages bustled through the streets, following tracks in the ground and lines overhead. Great moving platforms shuddered and jerked in the side of the cliffaces, offering transport to the dozens of other structures protruding out of the rock—the layers upon layers of roads and levels. An

enormous clock hung from a ceiling veined with red lines. Lights stood suspended on iron poles, and all around them was the constant clickety-clack of clockwork and the grinding of gears.

Avalinth was a clockwork city.

Beau, for once, was too awestruck to take out his notebook. He stayed firmly in place until a dwarf came by on a two-wheeled contraption, yelling at him to “watch it!”

Bell yanked him out of the way. “Look lively, lad.”

Beau let out a string of unintelligible words. Luna patted his arm.

Aislinn turned behind her. If Beau was surprised, the look on Caerwyn’s face was beyond description. He looked like he’d been hit in the face with a frying pan.

Aislinn tugged on his sleeve. “Are you all right?”

“This... isn’t what I expected.”

“No, me neither.”

“There are carriages without horses.”

“So I see.”

“How do they *work*?”

Aislinn, who had no idea, just shrugged. How was any of this possible without magic?

“Welcome to Avalinth,” Flora said, barely concealing her grin. “City of science.”



They made their way through the straight, wide streets of Avalinth at the pace of snails, Beau constantly running off to stare into shop windows and letting out countless amounts of squeaks and gasps. They had shops in Acanthia, of course, but not like *this*. Entire buildings offered floor after floor of clothing—lace to leather, mesh to metal. There were giant apothecaries lined with jars and tinctures in rainbows of colour. Shops that sold only springs to gears or traps. There were blacksmiths that specialised purely in axes or armour or arrowheads, wares arranged in terrific displays like pieces of artwork. There were shops selling jewellery and crystals and flowers—because even buds bloomed beneath the strange, warm veins of light—although not a single one of the flowers looked like anything Aislinn had seen before. Some petals looked like gemstones, some leaves like scraps of copper. She had to stop several times to admire them, just to ensure they were real.

She had never, ever seen anything like this.

“This is unreal,” Caer breathed, eyes saucer-wide as he stared almost hungrily at a shop selling tiny clockwork animals. A small horse composed entirely of bronze and gears galloped across the window display.

*Does he like it here?*

*Does he hate it?*

Which answer did she prefer?

Of course she wanted him to like it. Of course she didn't want him to feel trapped here. But if he loved it too much...

He would never want to leave.

Minerva chuckled under her breath, like a patient grandmother surrounded by excited children. "Come on, young 'uns. We've a way to go yet."

They left the bustling streets behind, navigating over tram lines and through crowds and passed strange, three-wheeled contraptions propelled along the streets by some sort of pedal.

Ahead of them, at the end of the cavern on the highest point, stood a castle of gold stone surrounded by thick, stout walls. It looked carved out of the mountain itself.

"Impressive," Beau whispered. "How does one breathe down here?"

Flora pointed to vents high up on the ceiling. "Pumps fresh air in from the agricultural levels."

"You have *agricultural levels*? What grows there? What's your main produce—"

Flora laughed, humouring Beau's questions as they walked. The noise of the city quietened once they drew closer to the castle and away from the market districts. The houses grew taller and grander, although Aislinn noticed a few buildings with giant cracks, inlaid with gems and obsidian.

Luna caught her staring. “Dwarven custom,” she said. “We never tear down anything. Something that’s been broken and restored is more valuable than that which is new.”

“A lovely sentiment,” said Caer, his face frozen in something that more resembled horror, “but there’s a pillar over there inlaid with what just seems to be gold plaster.”

“Aye, lad,” Minerva said, “what of it?”

“Patching up a pillar does not seem like the best of ideas.”

“Ah, we’re stubborn that way.”

“Stubborn is another way of saying foolish.”

The dwarves glared at him. Luna clutched her hand to her chest. Flora whispered an apology to the stone and the ancestors that had carved from it.

“It’s another way of saying *strong*,” Minerva tutted. “Scars tell a story, lad—whether rendered in flesh or stone. Why would you want to hide that?”

“I have no objection to the aesthetic,” he argued. “Just to the possibility of being *dead*.”

“It’s not as bad as you might think,” said Dillon.

Aislinn bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. Beau and Luna did not quite manage it. Caer still looked mildly horrified.

Finally, they arrived at the great palace of Avalinth. Wide, tall steps led up to the front of an even wider entrance—a

colossal metal door sandwiched between two towers. Guards lined the entrance in gleaming armour, barring their passage.

It was the first time they had seen any security since their arrival. Evidently, the dwarves did not fear invasion.

“Halt!” said one of them. “Who goes there?”

“Are you blind, Rufus?” Minerva snapped. “It’s me, Minerva.”

“Minerva?” The guard squinted, others giving them the same appraisal. Several eyes widened. “Why, I hardly recognised you! You’re—”

“Filthy, yes, I know. We’ve had quite a journey to get here. Would you let us in? Tell my sister I wish to see her.”

The guards exchanged glances, but ultimately shrugged. Rufus led the party past the main gate, into the wide, sparse gardens of blue grass and manicured hedgerows.

“We should stable your wargis,” Rufus declared, several servants appearing out of nowhere to assist them. Aislinn found herself strangely reluctant to hand over the reins; she’d been beside them for so long now.

Hecate, who had been dozing on the back of one of the wargis, leapt up and started hissing, staring at the threshold of the palace.

“Wait,” said Bell, halting. “The barrier that nullifies magic begins here.”

Minerva paused. “What of it?”



“What about Dillon?”

“What about him?”

“Oh!” Beau clasped a hand to his mouth. “He must run on magic, right? So if he steps through the gate, there’s a chance he could...”

Dillon swallowed inaudibly. “I think I’ll wait outside, just to be safe.”

“A wise idea,” Minerva declared.

“Well, of course it is,” Bell said, pursing her lips. “It’s *mine*.”

Minerva scanned through the servants attending to the wargis, searching for someone to assist. She located a dark-bearded, middle-aged dwarf with particularly elaborate braids dotted with sparkling silver clasps.

“Ah, Jasper—” she started, “yes, it’s very good to see you too—this is Dillon, he’s an undead mortal.”

“Hello!” said Dillon, waving.

“We’re worried that taking him into the palace will render him the usual kind of dead. Would you mind finding him somewhere comfortable to exist whilst we’re inside?”

“Doesn’t have to be too comfortable,” Dillon added, “I don’t feel so much any more.”

Jasper blinked at him for a long moment before breaking into a polite smile. “Of course!” he said. “Come this way. We’ll find space for you in the stables.”

Dillon followed, glancing backwards only once. His gaze lingered a little longer on Luna.

“He’ll be *fine*,” Minerva insisted. “Jasper’s a good chap.”

The cat slunk off after them, ignoring Beau’s pouts of ‘traitor.’

“Come on,” Bell insisted. “Not long now.”

Aislinn followed the others through the great steel gates. As she passed the threshold, a brief, sharp coldness washed over her, like someone had torn off a layer of clothing. Beau gave a long, hard shudder, staring at his fingers. He shook them like he was trying to summon fire.

“Odd,” he said. “I didn’t think I’d miss it.”

Aislinn’s eyes shied towards Caer, to the hand dangling at his side. “I don’t,” she whispered.

Beau jogged up to Bell’s side, ignoring Aislinn’s remark and the direction of her gaze. “How can you repel magic *without* magic?” he asked.

“The walls around the palace are lined with crystal,” Bell explained. “Dampens magical power. Place enough close together, and it creates a shield. Very valuable stuff.”

“Fascinating. Do you think...”

Beau’s voice trailed off, or perhaps all sound had. Everything seemed to have narrowed to the slow swing of Caer’s hand.

*I could take it, Aislinn realised. I could slip my own into his, right now. Nothing would happen.*

But suddenly the touching of hands seemed too extreme, too monumental, and there were so many people around—

The guards stopped shortly ahead of them, and Aislinn realised they'd reached the entrance to the throne room. Two dwarves in gold guarded the entrance, halberds crossed. They unlocked their weapons as the others approached, and the guards lining the corridor performed something like a dance, a clashing of steel and stomping of feet.

“Hail, Minerva Mountain-Cast, Sister to the Queen!”

“Hail!” the rest responded.

They parted in a solid, swift moment, their bodies clapping back into position.

The throne room opened before them.

Like the rest of the city, it was made of finely cut stone, but painted bronze and red. A tiled floor gleamed like molten gold. At the end of the room stood a shining throne, stretching to the enormous ceiling, and upon it sat a woman in blue and purple, a long panelled train running down the steps in the pattern of stained glass. She wore her silver-brown hair in elaborate braids, the huge spikes of her crown woven through it, framed by a large ruff stitched to her collar.

“Hail, her Great Majesty, Queen Venus, Monarch-Under-The-Mountain.”

When she rose to her feet, everyone sank into a bow—including Aislinn. It was automatic. Overwhelming.

The queen's shadow sank closer.

“Arise, sister,” she beckoned.

Aislinn looked up into the face of Queen Venus, and her stomach dropped.

The dwarven queen was Minerva's twin.



## 27 THE DWARVEN QUEEN

Queen Venus was an exact, polished version of Minerva, her creases smoothed by impeccable cosmetics, her lips red and full, her brows coloured, her thick, glossy hair wound and braided. Minerva was a stone cut from the earth, Venus the sparkling gem.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Aislinn had assumed the two must have had decades between them, even a century. She thought there must be a huge gap between them to have aided whatever chasm existed there now... because she could not imagine leaving Beau, could not imagine anything he could ever do that would not have her forgiving him eventually.

And Beau was just her brother. But a twin...

“Arise, sister,” Venus repeated, “did you not hear?”

Slowly, Minerva rose to her feet, the rest of the party following. Venus smiled at them all. “I did not think I would see you again, but to return after just a few years—with two

fae and a mortal in tow—you must have quite the story for me, no?”

“Indeed, we have.”

Venus smiled again, and swept back to her throne. She clicked her fingers, and servants sprang forth, bringing chairs and tables, frothy tankards of ale and biscuits. They were relieved of their weapons and forced into plush seats. Aislinn tried to relax, but the loss of her blades stung, much like the harsh, approving gaze of the queen.

“Allow me to introduce Aislinn, crown princess of Faerie, and her brother, Prince Beau.”

Venus raised a manicured brow. “Bringing the crown princess of Faerie into our hallowed halls, sister. A bold move indeed. I do hope there is a good reason for such rashness.”

“There is,” said Minerva, which made Aislinn squirm in her seat. Truly, there *was* no good reason why she was here. She hoped she hadn’t damaged Caer’s suit before he’d even had a chance to explain.

“I will make any vow you need me to make,” she explained, “my brother too. Anything you wish to ensure we do not reveal the secrets of your kingdom to those that might cause it harm. Any vow outside of death.”

No need to mention Beau could lie. They could surely keep that to themselves.

Venus nodded, seemingly convinced. “Very well, Princess.”

“But she is not why I am here,” Minerva continued, gesturing to Caer. “This is Caerwyn. A mortal prince. He has the ability to resurrect the dead. An ability he cannot fully control, and that others would kill him for—or use him. We seek protection for him, and nothing more.”

Venus’ eyes widened. “The ability to resurrect the dead?”

“As *undead*,” Bell insisted, words forceful. “They don’t come back whole.” Her mouth remained open for a moment, as if she was thinking about explaining the exception Dillon created, but for whatever reason, thought better of it.

“Fascinating,” said Venus. “I should like to see this prince’s power in action.”

“No,” said Caer, rushing to his feet, “I’m not going to kill anyone—”

“Have no fear, mortal prince,” Venus said, raising a hand. “I meant some common animal, not a dwarf or human or fae. You can hardly expect me to shelter you in my halls without knowing a little more about your power, can you?”

Caer swallowed and sat back down, muttering apologies.

Venus relaxed back in her seat. “This really is a most interesting day. I’ve never met a mortal with such power before. Do we know how he came by it?”

“We do not, save that he seems to have been born with it.”

“Aeron, what do you think?”

A shadow slunk forth from the corner of the room, a tall, gangly figure. He was dressed in long blue robes, hemmed and etched in dwarven style, but the similarities ended there. He was reed-slim, pale and pointed, a shard of moonlight over a midnight lake. His long black hair flowed freely down his back, and silver cuffs glinted on the tips of his ears.

Fae.

“A very interesting plea indeed, My Queen. I have scarce heard of such a thing before. I would encourage you to think it over, however. The boy may have his enemies.”

“That is true.”

Venus turned back to the others, but Aislinn’s gaze was still rooted on this *Aeron* character. She had not expected to see any fae here, let alone one dressed in dwarven robes, advising Minerva’s sister, and calling another monarch his *queen*. She supposed he owed no loyalty to her father or mother, but his being here was... strange, to say the least.

“This is Aeron Lightbringer,” Venus explained, seeing the gazes rooted upon him. “He has been my advisor down here for some years now. I trust him in all manner of things.”

Aeron gave a slight bow, barely more than a tilt of his head. “My ladies, my lords,” he said.

It ought to be ‘Your Highnesses’ but Aislinn decided that this was not the time to push it. Perhaps the dwarven etiquette he’d adopted was different from theirs.

*What was he doing here?*



Venus looked over them, gaze like cut glass. “I am inclined to grant your request for sanctuary, but I require some time to think it over. Please, rest tonight, and tomorrow I should like a show of the boy’s abilities.”

A noise sounded along the corridor, followed by the shouting of the guards. “Hail, Prince Tiberius!”

A young dwarf—perhaps of Luna’s age—arrived at the entrance, red-faced and out of breath. He was taller than most Aislinn had seen so far, with the same bronze skin as Minerva and Venus, and same brown hair not greyed by age. He even walked like Minerva—like his body was more stone and steel than skin and flesh.

“Aunt Minnie?” he said, his face breaking into a wide, cheerful smile. “Some of the servants said—I didn’t dare believe—I can’t believe you’re here!”

He stood forward with such speed that Minerva barely had time to stand before he had thrown his arms around her.

Slowly, Minerva raised her arm and patted him on the back.

He pulled away. “What happened to your arm?”

“Smashed it on the way here.”

“We shall have to get you a replacement—”

“It’s no bother lad, really.”

“We shall have our finest craftsmen see to it,” Venus said stonily. “But please, Tibe, unhand your aunt. She’s had a long journey.”

Tiberius did not seem to have heard her. “I can’t believe you’re back. What brings you here? Are you staying for long? Are you staying for *good*?”

“Slow down, darling. You’re ignoring our other guests.”

“Aunt Bell!” Tiberius said, still not listening to his mother and apparently only now noticing there were other people in the room. He flung himself at every dwarf at the table, gripping Luna so hard he nearly lifted her off his feet.

He turned to Aislinn, stopping shortly. “I... forgive me, but I do not believe we’ve met.”

“I am Aislinn,” she said, dropping in a polite bow. “Crown Princess of Faerie.”

“Tiberius,” he said, still staring at her. “Crown Prince of Avalinth.”

Caer coughed. “This is Prince Caer,” she announced. “And my brother, Beau.”

“A pleasure, a pleasure.” He scanned the rest of the room. “Where’s Fort?”

A hush fell over the rest of the room. “Fort died on the journey, a few days ago,” Bell explained. “‘Twas a good death, quick and clean. She did not suffer.”

“And she lived gloriously until then,” Minerva added. “We have yet to see her off properly. Perhaps you will join us then?”

Tiberius swallowed, eyes shining. “I would be honoured.”

“Tiberius,” the queen said again, tone icy. “Our guests need rest. It is getting late.” She clicked her fingers again, and the servants scurried back into the room, sweeping away empty tankards and helping the party onto their feet... whether or not they wanted it.

Venus met Minerva’s eyes as they were escorted from the room. They nodded at each other—curtly, formally.

“Until tomorrow, sister.”



After they were dismissed from the throne room, an aide escorted them all to the guest wing—a long corridor of plush rooms hidden behind golden doors so divine and intricate that Caer paused for a long while at his, studying the intricate detail and dreaming of being able to create something so fine.

Some of the dwarves made a retreat from the palace, intent on visiting old friends and family in the city, whilst others, thoroughly exhausted, slunk immediately into their chambers.

Caer felt simultaneously exhausted and also like he couldn't possibly sleep at all.

He had no idea if Venus would grant his request to stay. He had no idea what she was doing with a fae advisor. He had no idea what would happen to him if she said no.

He didn't even know if he *wanted* to stay. Everything was incredible but also utterly unfamiliar.

He wished Aislinn was here. He knew that was silly. She was only a few doors down. He could go to her now, he

could...

He gulped. He'd watched her face as she passed over the barrier, watched something leave her shoulders. He could feel a fragment of it, too. His powers wouldn't work here. They were safe to—

It was too much. He couldn't. He didn't even know how he'd start that conversation.

He sighed, drifting over to a corner of the room separated by a large screen. Behind it, cut into the floor, was a rectangular bath. Two taps hung over the side.

Caer frowned. The dwarves had a similar contraption in their cottage that pumped up water from the nearby stream. He didn't know quite how it worked so efficiently, but he'd been meaning to ask. He couldn't work out why this one had *two*, though. Perhaps it was just to aid in filling it up faster?

He had no way of heating the water, but that hardly mattered. A cold bath might be just what he needed.

He turned on both taps, full blast.

He gasped. One was hot.

*Hot water from a tap!* What would these dwarves think of next?

He turned his attention to a basket beside the bath, which held a selection of vials and bottles, all holding shimmering, creamy liquid. He sniffed one of them gingerly—it smelt of honey and apples and cider and spice.

He added some to the water, his eyes widening as it conjured up bubbles. How was this possible without magic?

He didn't question it, stripping off immediately and sinking beneath the soft, foamy waters. It was like bathing in liquid silk.

Maybe Avalinth wasn't so bad after all.

After a thorough and very long soak, Caer emerged from the bath. He found a robe hanging on the back of his door and crawled into it. It was the softest, finest thing he had ever touched, although it only came down to his knees. A small tray of refreshments had been laid out for him; salted meat, a dense, nutty cheese, hot rolls and a few slices of crystalised fruit together with a tankard of honey-mead. The flavours were sharper and sweeter than his usual fare, but simple enough to be familiar. The dwarves were excellent hosts.

He lay down on the plush bed and tried to sleep. It evaded him, of course. The effects of the bath trickled away the longer he tossed and turned. Niggling fears and doubts crept in instead.

He shook his head. He had to see her.

His clothes had been ferreted away, which was somewhat irritating, as all he could find in their place was a nightshirt that must have been long on a dwarf, but didn't cover nearly enough of him. It would be unthinkable to visit a lady's chambers in such attire back home.

It was unthinkable to visit her chambers at all.

He forced down his fears; faeries were seldom bothered by such things.

He stepped out into the corridor and went past two doors before he realised a flaw in his plan—he had no idea which door was hers.

He sighed, running his hands through his hair, and paced down the corridor, dimly hoping the right one would jump out at him. Nothing did. This was stupid, foolish—

“May I be of some assistance, young prince?”

Caer jumped, spinning round to find Aeron beside him, his impossibly smooth black hair now draped over his shoulder in a loose braid. He’d changed his robes, ready for bed, but he still looked far too elegant and poised. Aislinn and Beau both held a similar kind of beauty, like the glint of dawn over beads of dew, but it didn’t seem as otherworldly or as *tidy* as Aeron’s beauty. He was living marble.

“I, um...” Caer stuttered on his words, wondering if he wanted help from this stranger, or if he could bear to let anyone know he was searching for Aislinn. “I’m all right.”

“Lost your way to your chamber?”

“Yes,” Caer said, glad for the lie.

Aeron moved towards his door, gliding as silently as wind across the surface of a pond. He held out an impossibly smooth hand. “Here you are.”

“I thank you.”

“If you require anything else during your stay here, just ring the bell in your room,” Aeron insisted. “My Queen’s servants shall attend you.”

He turned away, but Caer called after him. “How is she your queen?” he asked. “When you’re—well, um...”

“I have sworn allegiance to no king or queen of Faerie,” he replied, his careful, measured words oddly familiar, though Caer knew they’d never met before. He would never forget a face like his. “Thus anyone can be my queen, or my king, if I so desire.”

*Who are you? Caer wondered. What are you doing here?* There was much he wanted to ask, but Aeron’s gaze pierced through him, and his courage shrivelled up a second later.



Minerva had imagined her return to Avalinth a hundred times in a dozen different ways. When she had left, and the great steel doors had closed behind her, she’d been certain she would never return. It felt like a relief to be gone, and after she got used to the strangeness of the sky, she decided she enjoyed the world above. For the first few months, a part of her expected to float up and away into that vast, empty space. The stone was not there to hold her anymore.

But the sensation of weightlessness left her, and after they had settled in the cottage, the boredom started to set in. She kept it at bay for years, focusing on improving the homestead,



helping Magna with her inventions, hunting game with Diana, keeping the kitchen stocked and the garden tended and playing whatever crazy new game Fort came up with. She liked their pace of life, she liked the smell of the air and sounds of the forests and the sweet simplicity of life.

And yet, despite it all, she longed for home. She missed the constant whirl of the city, the dozens and hundreds of faces she'd left behind, the rumble of the deep, the call of adventure.

And Venus. She missed her too. How could she not? She saw her face every time she looked in the mirror. Different as they were, they were two halves of a whole. Rare to have dwarven siblings close in age. Rarer still to have them twinned. There were no others like them.

“There will *never* be any like us!” Venus would claim constantly, usually when she was planning coordinated outfits for them for the latest courtly occasion. Always different, never the same, but something complimentary. Dresses of iron and copper, blue and magenta, moon and sun. Minerva wore whatever her sister wanted.

In all other respects, Venus followed her. On her few excursions into the deep, she listened to her every instruction. In classes, she looked to her for guidance, for explanation. She never bore her any ill-will for being first in line, nor hinted that she planned to challenge her. Because she never, ever wanted that life.

Not until...

Minerva shook that memory, old and painful. What did Venus' reasons matter, anyway?

She'd been surprised to find her so formal upon her return. In most of her imaginings, when she thought about going back, she imagined finding Venus either still furious, or completely forgiving. Not... cold. Distant. Not after all this time.

But there she was on the throne of their ancestors, a young relic, spouting orders like a true queen... making an alliance with a fae advisor. Minerva definitely needed to know more about *that* development.

A knock on the door stirred her from her revelry. "Minnie? Can I come in?"

*Tiberius*. At least he hadn't changed, or grown to blame her in her absence. Although he had *grown*. He was a man, now. He'd been a boy only close to one when they left. Dwarves aged slowly, and the difference should have been minute, but Minerva could still see it. Bell too.

"O' course you can," she announced, as the door slid open and his grinning face appeared in the gap. So like his mother. So like *her*.

And Clay, too.

"Hello," he said, still beaming ear to ear. He held up a metal arm. "A spare," he explained. "In case you wanted one."

Minerva smiled, pulling him into the room properly and wrapping her arm around him. He smelled good—warm and

earthy and distinctly *Tiberius* in a way that was difficult to pin to words. “I prefer your arms,” she whispered into his curls.

“Well, I’m not about to lend them out...” he said, squeezing her tightly. “Not long-term, anyway.”

Bell came forward and wrapped her arms around them both, and they stood there for a long, long time.

“How have you been?” Bell asked him, when they eventually parted. “Tell us everything.”

“Shockingly, there is little to say. Avalinth is the same as always. Old Evans retired. Jemina’s leg finally gave out and she consented to have it replaced with a clockwork one. Patrick died, I’m sorry to report—but he was old and it was quick. Oh! Marcel and Felix got married. Don’t think anyone saw that happening.”

“And you, lad?”

“What about me?”

“What have you been up to?”

“I’ve been the same as ever, except without you lot,” he said. “Truly. Nothing important has happened whilst you’ve been gone.”

Minerva met Bell’s gaze. It seemed highly unlikely. “What about this Aeron chap?” she asked. “He’s new.”

“Aeron? He’s been here for years.”

“And how did he get here?”

“A patrol found him in the tunnels. He was researching the outposts. I don’t think he expected to find the city at all, but he’s been an excellent advisor. His knowledge of plants surpasses even Flora’s, and he’s led several successful expeditions into the Deep. Reclaimed one of the mining levels.”

“Is that so?”

“But enough about him!” Tiberius clapped his hands together. “Tell me about the world above, and the Mortal Realm! Tell me about the sky. Name the colours. Do clouds really look like they do in the books? How many stars are there now? What are the animals like? Aeron worked with Master Hadriana to build a replica horse in clockwork, but—”

“Slow down, boy!” Minerva said, clapping his back. “That’s too many questions.”

“You’re right,” he said, “and you must be tired. Just tell me about Prince Caerwyn.”

Minerva flinched. Why would Tiberius want to know about him? “What would you like to know?”

“Whether or not I’ve been replaced.”

Minerva laughed, the fear dissipating. “I can have two nephews, Tibe.”

“Is he your nephew, though? Am *I*?”

“Your mother will have your treacherous tongue.”

Tiberius paused, chewing the inside of his cheek. “You know once, when I was a child, I was asked to draw a picture of my parents. I drew all four of you. I didn’t really understand what an aunt was, back then. Still don’t. At least not what other people think of as aunts.”

Minerva’s chest heated, and she fought the urge to pull him once more into her arms. She wasn’t sure she’d have the strength to let him go again. It had been far, far too long. She felt the same, of course. He’d always been more than her sister’s child. But there was such fear to loving a person so much.

She wondered if he wasn’t wrong about Caer. Perhaps she had been seeking to plug up a wound when he came to her. Perhaps.

She didn’t think anyone could replace Tiberius. She also didn’t like the idea that Caer could be a replacement.

Bell squeezed Tibe’s shoulder when she couldn’t. “We’ve missed you.”

Tiberius beamed. “I’ve missed you, too. Tremendously.” He squeezed her around the waist, a difficult task given his height, but it made him look like a boy again—young and carefree. When he finally pulled back, he seemed to have lost years. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, scooting towards the door.

Minerva smiled, Bell’s hand sliding around her back. “Tomorrow.”



**A**islinn lay on the comfiest bed in all of existence, exhausted out of her mind, and found she couldn't sleep. She'd spent an hour soaking in the tub, scrubbing every trace of their journey from her skin. She'd basked in front of the fire, drinking ale and devouring every morsel that had been left out for her. She'd even—almost reluctantly—thumbed through a few of the books on the bookcase in the corner.

The tawdry romances had been a bad idea.

Now, she lay in her bed, tossing between layers of soft linen, dreaming of hands that weren't there and soft sullen lips and eyes the colour of forest lakes.

She sighed. It would do no good.

She rolled out of the bed, wrapped herself in a robe, and headed out into the corridor. The castle was quiet. Evidently, the dwarves did not believe them worthy of guarding—or perhaps it was a sign of the trust they placed in one another. Everyone did seem rather relaxed here, like the guards were

mostly for decoration. She'd almost been surprised when their weapons were seized.

Not that the lack of a weapon would stop her if she'd chosen violence, but she supposed it did make it harder.

Placing all thoughts of fighting aside—at least for the time being—Aislinn hopped along to the end of the corridor, and stopped.

Which one was Caer's door again? He was one of the first to be placed, but there had been so many others milling around... was it the first, or the second door?

She hovered by the second, waiting, wondering what she would say if she was wrong. Perhaps she could pretend she was looking for Beau. Never mind that she knew full well he was right next to her. How could she phrase that? 'Oh, you're not Beau! Do you know where he is?' Yes. That would work, that would work just—

But what if Caer *did* answer? What was she going to say to him?

This was ridiculous. She should just turn back now before—

The door clicked open. Aislinn's heart flared, half panic, half relief—until Prince Tiberius walked out, closing the door behind him.

He walked straight into her.

"Ah, hello," said Tiberius, smiling broadly. "Didn't mean to bump into you there. Just dropping off Minnie's new arm. Bit

silly, really, since she's hardly going to sleep with it on, but still... Did you need them for anything?"

"I—no."

"Right."

"Your craftsmen made fast work of the arm."

"It's just a spare until Magna gets into the forge. Half surprised she isn't there already. She'll probably start taking apart the temporary one tomorrow at breakfast, telling us how wrong it is."

Aislinn liked that he could understand Magna, that he'd come so late to give Minerva an arm. There was none of his mother's frostiness in him.

"Are you all right?" he asked, after her silence continued. "Your chambers are comfortable, I hope? You're not in need of anything?"

Aislinn shook her head. "The accommodations are most excellent. It has been a long time since I've experienced such a comfortable bed." *I just wish I could sleep in it.*

"Perhaps you would like a tour?" Tiberius offered.

Aislinn stumbled, searching for her words. "Oh, um, I—"

"Forgive me, you are probably tired and seeking for a way not to appear impolite. I have disturbed your rest. Another time, maybe."

He escorted her back to her door—he apparently knew where everyone's was—and bid her goodnight. Aislinn



couldn't bring herself to leave again. Caer was probably already fast asleep. She didn't want to disturb him.

Even when she so, so badly wanted to be disturbed herself...

She sunk into her bed, the space crisp and cold despite the warming pan that had been placed between the sheets.

All night, she waited for a knock at her door, for a touchable presence, an ember made human.

But it did not come.

He did not come.



The following morning, Caer had every intention of somehow, eventually, finding a moment to be with Aislinn. He wasn't sure quite what he'd do with that moment, but needed it to happen regardless.

Unfortunately, he overslept, waking to a maid at the door, informing him that breakfast was nearly over and would he prefer something was brought to him instead?

Caer catapulted out of bed, fell into his clothes, and rushed out of the door.

The maid blinked at him, leading him to the dining hall, where the dwarves sat together with Queen Venus.

And her son. He was seated next to Aislinn, telling her something that was apparently hilarious. She was laughing

quite a bit.

Caer sank into the last remaining seat and dug into the breakfast laid out on platters in the centre of the room—a coarse, dense bread, a thick pad of butter, more slices of fruit and a thin, crispy meat which was rather delicious and tasted like it was coated in honey. He washed it all down with a mug of some kind of spiced cider.

He wondered at what fruits it was made from, and how it was grown. By the looks of things, Avalinth had remained untouched by the outside for a number of years.

He looked up, feeling a pair of eyes on him, and saw Aeron lurking in the shadows.

Untouched by anyone—apart from him.

“Morning,” said Beau, leaning across him to pour another tankard. “Sleep well? You were up late.”

“Like a rock,” Caer admitted.

“Your hair is all stuck up at the back.”

“It’s *always* stuck up.”

“Well, now it’s less adorable. Here.” He whipped a comb out of his sleeve and attacked the tangles at the back of Caer’s head with deft, careful fingers.

“How long has everyone else been up?” Caer asked, as Beau worked through his hair.

“At least an hour. Ais a bit longer.”

“How long has she been talking to Prince Tiberius?”

“Does it matter?” said Beau, returning to his seat with a broad smirk.

“No.”

“Liar...”

Aislinn continued speaking to Tiberius for the rest of the meal, only glancing up once and giving Caer a short smile. It wasn't nearly enough.

He chewed on another loaf of bread, fury in every bite.

Eventually, an aide came to Queen Venus' side, and she clapped her hands. “My tailors have informed me they think they have found something suitable for each of our taller guests,” she proclaimed, her nose wrinkling slightly at their muddy appearances. Caerwyn hadn't thought much of it, not seeing an alternative, but they hadn't had a change of clothes in quite some time. The rest of the party were kitted out in fresh, new garments, their armour varnished and shirts pressed. Luna was wearing a particularly fetching dress of green and yellow, studded with silk flowers. It looked like she'd rolled in a meadow.

“I suggest you sojourn to your rooms for a fitting,” Venus continued. “We shall arrange for Prince Caerwyn's demonstration before noon.”

Caerwyn's stomach clenched. He hated using his powers at the best of times, only grudgingly following Diana's suggestion with the birds because he hoped it might get him some control. But to take a life simply to prove a point...

He had no other choice.

“Of course,” he said, steeling his features.

For what felt like the first time, Aislinn looked up and truly, really, met his gaze. He could not read it.

Beau leapt to his feet. “New clothes? Sign me up!”



Back in his room, Caer found himself surrounded by tailors. He was shoved behind a screen and forced to change, which seemed completely pointless seeing as all of them descended upon him as soon as he was free from his garments, snatching up his discarded clothes for laundering and forcing him into a loose shirt of midnight blue, billowing at the sleeves and buttoned at the cuffs. It was as soft as a spring breeze.

The trousers came next, obsidian black, almost shining, and a pair of polished boots so fitting he wondered if they hadn't measured his old ones during the night. Finally, a waistcoat was placed over the shirt, blue and black and silver, embroidered with a pattern of stags and trees and apples. Quick adjustments were made there and then.

The door creaked open.

“Caer?”

Aislinn's voice. His skin prickled at the sound of his name on her lips. He wondered if there would ever come a time when he grew used to it.

He realised he likely would not, and his heart clenched at the thought.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to... are you dressed yet?”

“Almost?” he said, glancing at one of the tailors for any indication. They nodded. “Apparently yes.”

Within seconds, the screen was pulled away, and they began the arduous task of cleaning everything up.

Aislinn stood on the mosaic floor, in a soft blue gown that looked half like armour, half like the wind—a fitted bodice over a fine, billowing skirt, with metallic shoulders and delicate sleeves. Her shining hair had been partially braided, the rest running down her back, red and copper and mahogany in the light of the lamps.

She blinked at him. “What is it?”

He realised he’d been staring for quite some time. “You look good in a dress,” he said hastily. “You look good in everything, actually, but *particularly* good in that.”

Aislinn smiled. “Thank you. You’re looking rather dashing yourself.”

It seemed strange to Caer that he’d never seen her in a dress, that he’d likely seen her in barely anything other than her travelling clothes in the entirety of the time he’d known her. It felt like so much longer than it had been. He had this sudden desire to see her in more clothes, in more ways—in enough that it felt like he’d known her forever.

His chest tightened at the thought that that was unlikely to happen. As soon as Venus granted him sanctuary—and she was sure to once she saw his powers—Aislinn would likely be returning to the world above. Venus had been welcoming so far, but she would not want the future queen of Faerie under her roof for much longer, the peace between their people being tentative at best.

He wondered when she would leave.

He wondered if he would see her again.

He wondered why, even though he knew it was too dangerous, he didn't want to leave her side.

Aislinn frowned, tilting her head. "Are you all right?"

*Take me with you to Faerie. Let me follow you forever. Do not let me leave your side.*

"I'm fine," he said.

Aislinn stepped closer, sliding a hand across his chest. The slightest groan eased past his lips at her touch, and he bent his head towards her, forehead skimming hers.

"You are not," she said, "and if there was anything I could do to make this easier for you, I would do it. I think I would do almost anything for you, Caer—"

"Ah! Princess Aislinn, you're here too!" said a cheery voice.

Caer leapt back. Prince Tiberius was standing at the door. He swallowed a groan.

“There’s still a little while before the demonstration,” Tiberius went on. “I rather thought you wouldn’t like to be sitting stewing in your chambers.”

“Quite right,” Caer said tartly, forcing himself not to look at Aislinn. *I was rather hoping to be doing something other than ‘stewing’...*

“I thought perhaps a tour?”

“That’s very kind of you,” Aislinn said.

Tiberius smiled wider. “You look lovely.”

Aislinn bowed her head, nodding her thanks.

“You look splendid too, Prince Caerwyn, but the princess looks particularly fetching.”

“I agree,” said Caer, unable to fully unclench his jaw.

Tiberius did not seem to notice. He stepped out into the corridor, holding out his arm.

Aislinn moved forward, but Caer’s hand reached out and caught her sleeve—an action of habit. He didn’t need to do that here. He could touch her here.

He let go, and grasped her fingers instead, clutching onto them tightly as they slipped into the corridor. “Just for a moment,” he said. “It helps.”

Aislinn squeezed them back.



“We keep all our guest rooms on this side of the palace,” Tiberius explained, as he guided them through the gilded halls. “Affords excellent views over the gardens, although the best is through the throne room...”

He led them down the corridors, nodding at the guards and servants they passed, pointing out portraits of heroes and monarchs, busts of historical figures. Once they reached the throne room, he headed towards the windows that lined the side of the wall, and opened the doors there. They led to a polished stone balcony stretching out over the blue-green lawns. Manicured flower beds and sculpted hedgerows glittered beneath the bright light of the crystals.

“Beautiful,” Caer agreed.

“My thanks. Although don’t lean over the side—the barrier doesn’t extend past this point.”

Aislinn frowned. “It doesn’t?”

Tiberius shook his head. “The barrier works by using an extremely rare crystal poured into the foundations of the palace, a natural magic dampener, that nullifies it completely with enough thickness in a perfect line. They wanted to stretch it to the outer walls, but they didn’t have enough, and there were concerns that the outside walls themselves were too exposed—someone could just dig down and destroy it.”

“Fascinating,” said Aislinn. “We ought to have taken Beau.”

“Oh, I took him last night,” Tiberius admitted. “He couldn’t wait, it appears.”



“That sounds like Beau...”

They walked back into the throne room.

“The throne is cut from stone from the depths of the Deep,” Tiberius explained. “Inlaid with gems and gold, as per tradition. It was crafted by Stonemaster Albina, some three thousand years ago.”

Caer blinked. *Nothing* in Wales was that old—save the ground itself.

“She also crafted the first doors to the vault behind the throne—but that’s out of bounds to outsiders, I’m afraid. Our crypt, however, is not.”

He led them to a set of stairs at the corner of the room, which led to a monumental crypt beneath with tall, vaulted ceilings. It was every bit as opulent as the throne room above. “You keep your dead beneath the throne?” Caer queried.

Tiberius nodded. “They have earned their place here.”

He talked them through the kings and queens of old, their advisors, treasured servants and great generals. He spoke of funeral rites, of artwork and stonemasonry, drawing attention to detail and divulging interesting stories about damaged effigies and the tales of the resting bodies beneath. Crypts and graveyards had always given Caer a strange, unsettling feeling. He’d thought it perfectly normal, growing up, assumed that everyone felt that cold, pulsing ripple when stepping amongst the dead. It was only now he understood that

that had always been his power, sleeping beneath the surface. Always there. Waiting.

He did not feel that here. Maybe it was the light-heartedness and reverence offered to the resting, but more likely it was simply the effect of the barrier.

He liked it. He *needed* it.

He had to pass this test.

Tiberius paused beside a tomb in the centre of the room, dripping with crystals and flowers. It looked newer than the rest, judging by the quality of the stone. It was inlaid with gold and obsidian. Tiberius made a gesture with his hand, touching head to heart, before pressing his fingers to the effigy.

“My father,” he explained. “Clay Goldsbane. May the stone hold his spirit.”

“I’m sorry,” Caer said. “I lost my mother six months ago.”

Tiberius nodded in sympathy. “He has been gone some seven years now. My memories now are fond rather than sad. I hope you someday feel the same.”

Caer nodded, unable to speak. His chest tightened uncomfortably. He wondered what tomb Owen had ordered for his mother, and if he would ever get to see it. His mind flashed with the memory of her death, her head rolling across the floor

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Aislinn seized his arm. “You’re here,” she whispered, as Tiberius kindly turned away. “You’re here, and so am I. It happened, it’s over. It’s gone.”

He supposed, if she could say it, then it must be true.

An aide coughed from the staircase, and all thoughts—both good and bad—vanished completely. “We are ready for you, Your Highness.”



# 30

## A DARKENING OF POWERS

Outside in the palace gardens, a crate filled with wriggling, hairless rodents wobbled and writhed. Caer tried to focus on them, and not the dozens of people that had turned up for the event. He had not expected it would be such a spectacle, but Venus seemed to have dragged every noble in the city out for the day, and all the servants had been summoned too.

“Well?” she echoed from her seat in the stands. “Is there a problem?”

He wanted to tell her he was unused to an audience, but he didn’t like how that confession made him look. He was a prince, after all. This was his world—pageantry and display. He’d partaken in many a public event before.

But he didn’t feel like he was *partaking* here. He felt more like a creature on display, a great bear in a cage to be ogled at. He’d seen great animals in cages before, seen them forced to fight for the amusement of others. Caer had never been able to take enjoyment in something that caused pain.

Were the people here amused by this? Or were they here out of curiosity—or worse, fear?

He wasn't sure he could do this.

But his eyes fell to Aislinn's face, and somehow, after that, he knew he could.

“None, Your Majesty. Just give me a moment.”

He bent down and lifted one of the creatures from the box. He was glad they'd chosen an ugly, rat-like thing. It ought not to have made a difference, but it looked enough like a common pest that his guilt was assuaged somewhat. No one would mourn this wretched thing.

Unlike the men he'd killed.

His beads felt heavy against his neck. He was still missing one. He had not forgotten.

Caer took a deep breath, feeling down inside him for that power, that quiet, pulsing tug that had been muted within the walls of the palace.

He felt it now, felt it like water against a dam.

He let it break.

The rodent slumped his hand, and toppled to the floor.

Venus let out a clap. A few others joined in, gasping and twittering.

“Amazing!” she declared. “Now... bring one back.”

Caer sighed, picking up another. He'd barely learned to master *just* killing them with Diana before he'd left the

cottage. If anything, this was easier—like dabbing a candle rather than extinguishing it. His power almost didn't want to kill. It wanted them to rise again.

The power was a separate thing, not his. It would never be fully *his*. No matter how hard he practised.

He reached out again with his tendrils of magic, as real to him as a separate limb, and dabbed at that light inside the rodent. The creature greyed and stilled, only for a few seconds whilst Caer drained the life from it, and then rose again, a scuttling, pulsating *thing*.

Caer dropped it in revulsion.

The crowd gasped. A few even screamed. It scuttled forward, driven towards the noise.

A guard leapt forward and speared it through the middle. It squirmed on the edge of the blade, twisting manically, not bleeding.

There were a few more cries and sounds of disgust.

“Get its head!” Diana called. “Take off its head!”

The guard lowered her spear towards the ground and another one came forward to slice off its head. What little of the blood that came out was black and oily.

“Impressive, young prince,” Venus continued. “Can you do several at once?”

Caer gritted his teeth, wishing he didn't know the answer to that one. He thought of Dillon, and the other bodies in the

snow. The ones he hadn't even had to touch. "Yes."

Venus leaned forward. "Show me."

Caer swallowed, hovering over the cage. Five of the beasts remained, wriggling against the bars. Could he kill them without touching them? The others had already been dead...

And yet he'd felt their bodies anyway, felt the echo of them under the earth...

He could always feel it.

He held out his hand. He thought about how Aislinn had spoken about magic, the way that nature had a pulse. He felt only a whisper of something beneath the trees, but the lifeforce of these things rippled beneath him now. He could even feel a ripple of it from the crowd, muted and faraway, like covered by a thick layer of something. He could not harm them, mercifully.

He tensed his fingers. For some reason, that helped, tying a physical action to the power winding through him. He watched their bodies still, their eyes cloud over.

They leapt out of the box.

Shrieks went up as they hurtled across the ground. The guards darted after them, but they were too quick, too sudden. Caer sprung forward, a silent, 'no' on his lips. He had no idea what these creatures could do if they bit someone, if their bite was infectious.

He did not want to find out.

He flung out his hand. “*Stop.*”

The creatures stilled, straining against his grip. He felt their pulse beneath his hands, as if tied to them by invisible strings.

He flicked his wrists, like snapping the head of a bird.

They fell down dead.

Minerva was on her feet. So were most of *his* dwarves. So was Aislinn.

He’d never done that before.

Venus clapped her hands, dispelling the silence that had settled over the crowd. “Most impressive,” she said. “But these are just rodents. Perhaps something larger—”

She clicked her fingers, and a guard walked forward with a wargi.

Caer froze. “No,” he said.

“You can’t do it?”

“I *can* do it. I won’t.”

“And if I refuse to shelter you if you do not?”

“Then I will leave. I’d rather take my chances elsewhere than be forced to kill without reason. You have seen a show of my powers. You know what I can do. What others might *make* me do. There is no need for me to kill further.”

Venus smiled, rising to her feet. “An excellent answer, Prince Caerwyn. Well done. You have passed my test.”

“Test?” Caer frowned.



“What *test*?” Minerva snarled.

“Oh come, dear sister. There’s no need for that. Let’s have some refreshment, shall we? The poor boy looks a bit unsteady on his feet.”

Caer felt more than unsteady—he felt like he wanted to be sick. Some horrid combination of using his powers and what he’d just been forced to do.

“Caer.”

He looked up, Aislinn was standing beside him. Her lifeforce flared inside her like a beacon, bright and dazzling.

He could snuff it out like a candle.

He staggered backwards.

Magna and Diana were behind him, with their soft, muted pulses, armoured and safe. Safe from him. They dragged him into a seat.

Aislinn stayed where she was. “You won’t hurt me,” she said, as the others disappeared to find him something to drink.

“You don’t know that—”

“I could hurt you,” she said. “Do you trust that I won’t?”

“It’s not like that—”

“You can feel my lifeforce, can’t you?”

He nodded numbly. “How did you—”

“You’re looking at everyone like I looked at the forests, the first time I felt it.”

“Will it... will it stop?”

“If you make it.”

“I don’t know how to.”

“It’s like closing your eyes,” Aislinn insisted. “Your power is just another sense. Don’t use it.”

“I... I can’t...”

“Breathe,” she said. “Breathe, and *think*. Imagine it’s your hand. You’re in control. You can do this, Caer.”

Caer took a deep, steadying breath, followed by another. He closed his eyes. Somehow, that helped—it was one less sense to overwhelm him. He thought about how he’d used his hands to direct his power before, and tightened them into fists now.

He kept breathing.

*You can do this, Caer.*

Aislinn couldn’t lie. Those weren’t just words she was spouting—she truly, genuinely believed he could.

So he would. He *had* to.

He imagined a wall surrounding her, an armour that protected her like the ones the dwarves seemed to have naturally. He squeezed his hands tighter, like they could dislodge his own thoughts.

Her radiance began to dim. *Everything* began to dim.

He opened his eyes. Aislinn stood ahead of him. “Better?”

He nodded his head. “Have you ever been overwhelmed by your powers?”

“Once or twice, yes. I mastered the art of shutting them out fairly early on. Maybe that’s why I’m no magician. Easier to fight with a blade. More—”

“Control.”

She paused. “Yes.”

Diana came back with a steaming mug of ale, Luna bringing some refreshments behind her. The dwarves crowded round him, patting his back and praising his efforts. Minerva, however, was nowhere to be seen.

Aislinn slunk away into the crowd.



Aislinn disliked nerves. She’d made a fine effort over the years of conquering her own, usually by focusing on the task at hand and training so well beforehand she was too exhausted to think or so rehearsed she knew she had the confidence to succeed.

She was not used to feeling nervous for other people, nor like she’d like to pummel those *making* them nervous.

Watching Caer in that painful mockery of a test was different.

She believed Venus’ reasoning, but she also had seen the hunger in her eyes, her intense fascination with Caer’s powers,

and how she seemed oblivious to his discomfort. When it was over, Aislinn wasn't sure if she wanted to punch the queen or run to Caer.

But when he'd swayed, she'd hurtled over like an arrow loosed from a bow.

Now that he was all right, the need to punch Venus remained.

She tried to challenge her inner Hawthorn on her way to the throne room, tried to think of a more diplomatic way to say, 'I really want to stab you and if you try anything like that again I just might' but nothing came.

Maybe she would just stab her.

Venus wasn't in the throne room. Neither was Minerva.

Aislinn retraced her steps. They must have found a room closer to the gardens. She crept backwards through the halls, searching.

Voices sounded along the hall.

Aislinn slowed her pace and crept towards the door. It was open, just a fraction, a guard posted outside. He did not stop her from approaching.

"That was cruel, Venus," came Minerva's voice. "Needless."

"I needed to know what sort of person I'd be harbouring within my walls."

“If you think I would bring anyone here who threatened our city in any way—”

“Sister,” said Venus softly, “you have been gone for ten years. I really don’t know what you think any more.”

“Caer is *good*, Ven! He has a pure heart, and I will not have you harm him—”

“What makes you think I want to hurt him?”

“Petty revenge? I don’t know.”

“Revenge? For what?”

“*You know what.*”

“But, as you said, Sister Dearest, you did nothing wrong. Why would I want to hurt you?”

There came the sound of scraping furniture, of something smashing.

“You can hate me every day for the rest of your life if it makes you feel any better,” Minerva seethed, “but if any harm comes to the boy from your doing—”

“You’ll do what? Kill me?”

“I will make you wish I had.”

“How can you say that to your own sister? Your flesh and blood?”

“I lost flesh and blood for the family I chose, Ven. I am not afraid to do so again.”

Footsteps sounded towards the door. Aislinn leapt away, scuttling out of sight as Minerva barged out of the room. Venus came to the door. “I am returning to my chambers. Send Aeron. See that we are not disturbed.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

Aislinn waited until everyone had moved away before creeping out again. She was glad Minerva had seen to her sister, yet it didn’t fully expunge her own rage. What was she to do now? The dwarves were still milling around the gardens, but Caer wasn’t among them. He must have headed back to his chambers.

She headed after him, rapping lightly on the door.

“Come in.”

She entered. Caer was sitting near the window, trying to look relaxed, but his gaze was screwed tightly on the pavillion where he’d been forced to perform.

“Hey,” she said.

He looked up. “Hey.”

Aislinn swallowed, all words vanishing. “Are you all right?” she asked finally. “What Venus asked you to do—”

He waved it away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I was all ready to throw you over the back of a wargi and charge home to Faerie with you.”

He snorted softly. “Perhaps not the best place for me to be... the no-touching rule still applying.”

“We’d sort something out,” she said. “I’m just letting you know... in case it doesn’t work out here, but you don’t want to go back to the mortal world. Faerie is still safer. More understanding. I’d... I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. Or because of you.”

Caer swung his legs off the seat, and stepped towards her. “I appreciate that.”

Aislinn’s mouth went dry. “I um, heard Minerva on the way here, talking to Venus. Really giving her an earful. She seems quite fond of you.”

Caer smiled, stepping closer. “I can’t imagine why,” he said, grin broadening. “Can you?”

“I—” Aislinn’s breath stalled in her chest. She couldn’t say *no*. She couldn’t say no and he knew it. “I can imagine a few reasons,” she said, her mouth feeling papery.

“If you try really hard?”

“Maybe,” she said. “What do you want me to say?”

Caer raised a hand to her cheek and cupped it, fingers warm and lingering against her skin. She wanted to weld his flesh to hers, to keep him there forever. His touch was lightning.

“I don’t want you to say anything,” he said, his voice a hushed whisper. “Not right now.”

Aislinn angled her face towards him, her eyes fixed on his lips, to the dark space between them. They were parted ever-so-slightly, and his breath tingled across her face.

She leaned upwards—

“Ah, there you are, lad,” said Minerva, rounding the corner through the still-open door. Aislinn jerked back, wishing she could melt into the shadows. “I thought we better do a quick gathering before we all split up for the night. You know. For Fort’s sake.”

“Right,” Caer said, voice tight. He was leaning against the wall Aislinn had vanished from.

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “Not interrupting something, am I?”

“No. Not at all.”

Minerva snorted and turned to look at Aislinn. “Good job I asked him and not you, right?”

Aislinn blushed. *A very good job indeed.*





31  
A QUEST TO THE DEEP

They headed down to the crypt, where the rest of the party had gathered. A few others were there as well—a handful of faces Caer didn’t know, along with Prince Tiberius. Venus, Caer noted, was nowhere to be seen.

He kept close to Aislinn’s side as the others crowded round a stone that had been etched with Fort’s name and date of birth, and the inscription *‘the luckiest dwarf we knew. May the stone hold what we cannot.’*

She’d been one hundred and eleven years old. He tried to take some comfort in the years she’d had, but that was not old for a dwarf. Not at all. There had been much life left for her.

*Not your fault*, he told himself, as his thoughts turned dark.  
*Not your fault, not your fault—*

Aislinn seized his hand.

“I have many a truth I can whisper to you if you need it,” she said, her voice unwavering. “Or... I can just do this. You need only ask.”

Caer wasn't sure he could speak at all, so he clutched tightly to her fingers in answer.

"Are we all here?" Minerva asked. "Not waiting on anyone?"

There was a murmur of confirmation, and Minerva nodded. One by one, dwarves came forward and lit candles around the stone, the crystals in the rest of the room dimming.

"Fortuna Springshard," Minerva began. "A fine woman. A force of nature. An excellent friend. A light in our lives from her first breath until her last. There was never a situation she couldn't make funny in some way, never a darkness she couldn't dispel, if only a little. It seems impossible that she should not be with us now. I keep expecting her to pop up with some wise-cracking remark. But she will not. So I must imagine her voice instead. I will imagine it, I think, until the end of my life, and if she haunts me, so be it. It is a worthy price to pay for being her friend."

Minerva's voice trailed off, though her expression remained set, jaw tight. Bell got up next, listing a long spiel about Fort's life, where she was born, her family, her childhood in Avalinth. Others spoke after her, listing their tales of her, their fond remembrances. Caer couldn't speak his—how she was the first person to make him laugh again after he came to the cottage.

His fingers played with her bead on his necklace. She would stay there forever.

Someone came round with mugs of ale. They were passed out; Fort was toasted to. Flora wept silently throughout the entire event, but she smiled when Luna suggested what Fort would be saying now, if she was here. Everyone came forward with their suggestions, and suddenly almost everyone was laughing and crying and drinking, and a party of sorts began in the crypt itself. An old dwarven hymn was sung, and then bawdy music began to play. Some people danced, others payed their final respects and left. Minerva came round and handed everyone a few coins to go and have fun in the city.

Caer crept away to a corner, trying not to cry and failing rather miserably.

Aislinn appeared at his side.

“Sorry,” Caer wept, trying to wipe away his tears. “You must think—sorry.”

“Why are you apologising?”

“Because, well...”

“Is crying some sort of slight in the mortal world? I have not heard of this. In Faerie, we always cry at death.”

“But you’re...”

She raised an eyebrow. “Say it.”

Caer paused. “Mortal men aren’t supposed to cry.”

Aislinn fixed him with a stare that suggested she was considering throwing him out of a window for saying something so utterly ridiculous. “An entire gender isn’t

supposed to cry? How is that... I don't understand. Are your emotions attached to your genitalia? I'm sure I was told that mortal and fae anatomy is virtually the same—”

Despite everything, Caer found himself laughing. She looked so serious and so genuinely perplexed and she was absolutely right; it was ridiculous.

Aislinn waited until his laughter had subsided, leaning back against the wall beside him. “I think I wept for about a week when Cass died, once it hit me. Then on-and-off for days. Weeks, months after, it would still double me over.”

“Did you have an audience for your tears?”

“Sometimes. Not most of the time. I don't like other people to see me like that.”

“Weak?”

“*Vulnerable*. I... don't like people knowing how I'm feeling. For someone in my position, it can be exploited. I don't think feelings are a weakness, I just enjoy the comfort of my shield. I find it easier to function beneath it. Does this make any sense?”

“Perfectly,” he said. “Does that shield ever get a little hard to bear by yourself?”

“Have you *seen* the party I'm currently travelling with?”

Caer laughed.

“Yes,” she said, with a starkness that took him by surprise, “it has, in the past. I am learning that the weight is better

shared.”

She moved away from him, back towards the others. “Ais?”

“Yes?” she said, her voice fringed with hopefulness.

Caer took a moment to steady his breathing. “You can cry in front of me any time. I hope you never have to cry again in your life, but if you do... I want you to come to me.”

Aislinn turned, holding his gaze, her expression wide and unreadable. For a moment, he thought she might never speak at all.

Then she walked forward, took his chin lightly in her fingers, and tugged his cheek towards her lips, kissing the tears that lingered there.

Her touch shivered through him, like lightning made of petals—soft and monumental.

Aislinn pulled back. “Come to my room tonight,” she whispered. “You can cry if you want, but I rather hope we shall find more to fill the time.”

Half a smile flickered in her cheeks, but the rest of her face was serious as stone. Caer’s hand drifted over her waist, as if hoping to pin her there. But if he grabbed her now, would he be able to let go?

He was spared the answer by a knock at the door. An aide appeared, summoning them to the throne room.

Venus wanted to see them.



Leaving their tankards and candles behind with the remaining mourners, the group trailed up the stairs back into the gilded throne room for their audience with the dwarven queen. Venus sat on the throne, skirts of gold and bronze arranged in perfect pleats down the shimmering steps. She looked like she'd been moulded from sheets of metal.

Aislinn half-wished Beau would make a sketch. She wouldn't say no to a gown like this once she became a queen herself.

"I have reached my decision," Venus said, her voice quietly booming through the hall. "I shall grant sanctuary to Prince Caer, if, and only if, you complete a favour for me first."

Minerva pursed her lips, the fingers of her borrowed metal hand clenching. "What kind of favour?"

"I want you to go into the Deep and retrieve an item for me."

Minerva's lips thinned even further. "What kind of item?"

"A mirror," Venus continued. "One of great value. It is rumoured to predict the future... amongst other things."

Minerva shook her head. "No. Buried things should stay buried. Our ancestors left it in the Deep for a reason."

"Our ancestors left it there because they did not understand it, and did not have the technology to use it. Our ancestors also

slept in the dirt and rode around on giant rodents—should we do that, too?”

“Magic is dangerous, Ven—”

“I am well aware of the dangers, sister. And yet you would leave this boy in my care, a boy no doubt wanted by his people. I need to know something of what might happen if we are to defend ourselves. If his stepfather comes for us—”

“He will not.”

“You cannot know that. The Mirror does.”

Caer stepped forward, but he did not look at Venus. “I don’t want to put you in any more danger because of me,” he said.

Minerva smiled. “Sweet of you, boy, but there’s more to it than that.”

“How?” he asked. “How is there?”

Aislinn turned towards Aeron, standing silently by the side of his queen, his face fixed in a mask of rigidity. “You,” she said, “you told the queen of this mirror, yes?”

“I did.”

“How did you learn of its existence?”

“The dwarves keep excellent records—some in ancient fae, a language which I am familiar with, and they are not. Queen Venus wishes to keep her people safe. I suggested this as a way of ensuring that.”

“Do you want it for yourself?”

“I cannot deny I am fascinated by its properties, but I have no plans to use it for ill.”

Aislinn paused, reading each word, checking it for a lie. “Do we have your word that it shall never be removed from Avalinth?”

“I’d confine it to the palace walls, if I could, but we shall have to take it outside at least to test its powers—”

“An answer,” Aislinn said, voice tight.

Aeron went quiet. “I shall not remove it from Avalinth,” he said, as if the words pained him. “Nor shall I allow anyone else to do so. The mirror will remain here, under the care of myself. I shall not use it for any nefarious purposes. You have my vow.”

For a moment, the room was quiet.

“We shall talk it over,” Minerva said, and turned back to her sister. “May we have some time to think it over?”

Venus nodded. “Take a day. No more.”

“You shall have our answer by tomorrow morning.”

The party swept out of the room and into the chamber that Minerva and Bell shared.

“We can’t honestly be thinking about getting it for them, can we?” Beau said. “I don’t like the idea of hidden mirrors. They sound... well, like you said. Some things should stay buried.”

“Except Dillon,” Luna added.



“Obviously except Dillon. But scary ancient magic mirrors? Definitely them.”

“Where’s your sense of curiosity, Beau?” asked Aislinn slyly.

“It’s hiding behind my desire to stay alive.”

“I’m with Beau,” Caer said. “This is nonsense. All this parading around and jumping through hoops—all for what?”

“To ensure your safety, lad.”

“But I’m not worth it!” Caer shouted. “All of this—Fort—going into the Deep—I’m not worth it!”

The room stung with silence.

*You are to me*, Aislinn whispered internally, wishing she could find the strength to speak. *You are absolutely worth it to me.*

Minerva spoke first. “Caer,” she said, “I understand your reservations. Truly, I do. But if we don’t do this, then Fort’s death was in vain—”

“I can’t lose another one of you. I can’t.”

“I understand that, too. But the thing is, you don’t get to decide what *we* think is worth it. You don’t get to decide about how we feel about you. And are you ready, really, to go back into the world? What will you do? Go home and be hunted? Ask Aislinn’s family to grant you sanctuary, and spend years avoiding human touch?”

Caer's eyes circled to Aislinn. In that moment, she knew she could not ask him that, knew more than ever what she'd be condemning him to. He'd be alive, yes, but at what cost?

"I didn't think so."

Caer swallowed, eyes cast to the floor. "I wish I could promise you all not to do anything stupid for my sake."

Minerva snorted. "Aislinn alone can make that vow," she said sagely. "And somehow, I don't think she will."



All in all, Dillon Woodfern thought he was adjusting rather well to being dead. Knowing his father was still alive, that a good part of his life hadn't withered in the years he'd been gone, helped. Knowing that Ladrien, the Unseelie King, hadn't taken over in the years he'd been gone helped too.

Decades. He'd been *dead* for *decades*. This was Faerie, so doubtless not much had changed in that time, but still, it was a long time to be...

*Dead.* He was dead.

Perhaps he wasn't coping as well as he thought.

Joining a group of dwarves on a mission had been a wise idea. Having something to focus on stopped his mind from wandering too much... although the nights when everyone was sleeping and he wasn't invited a lot of time for intrusive thoughts. He'd never known such silence. In Faerie, there was always someone awake, some revel happening in the gardens of the palace he'd served.

He sighed, thinking longingly of the few times he and Juliana were on duty together, the jokes they would make about the prince they were guarding.

Who she'd married.

This hardly surprised him. One of the last conversations he'd ever had with Juliana—his last conversations he'd ever had *period*—had been trying to convince her to realise that perhaps she had feelings for him. He'd known for years about Hawthorn's affections for Juliana... largely because the young prince had a habit of getting morosely drunk on her days off and had, on more than one occasion, confessed that he found her to be 'an exceptional woman and infuriating beauty with a range of unquestionably fantastic talents'. These confessions were swiftly followed by a threat and an instruction never to tell her any of this.

Although Dillon had liked Juliana a great deal himself, he was happy that they'd found each other. It was strange. He remembered his death. He remembered his last thoughts being of *her*, of wishing they could have been more to one another, but although all of that should have felt like yesterday to him, it did feel like years had passed between then and now—like Juliana was a childhood crush he'd long surpassed.

His death, too, didn't haunt him in the way he felt it ought to. Ladrien sneering as he pulled out the knife sparked no fear. There was a muted distance between then and now.

Where had he been in all that time?

Mortals believed in gods and a heavenly plain above the clouds, a rest for the worthy. Fae believed that souls became energy—that they fed the flowers, whispered in the air, transformed into magic itself. But if that was the case, how had he come back?

He was no magician, but he was sure that ought to have been impossible. Beau—who seemed far more knowledgeable about such matters—certainly seemed to think it was.

“Hello!” sounded a cheery voice from the doorway of the room Jasper had found for him—a tack room attached to the stables. Whilst they were populated entirely by giant dogs rather than horses, Dillon found the scent of hay to be very comforting. The cat had been helpful too. She reminded him of one that used to lurk around the stables when he was a boy, although she was doubtless dead and gone by now.

His chest warmed at the face beaming up at him. It was Luna, the smallest of the dwarves, now out of her travelling clothes in a soft lilac dress stitched with blue flowers, holding a large basket of steaming baked goods.

“I brought you some muffins.”

“That’s so kind of you,” he said, taking the basket. A sweet, warm scent drifted through his nostrils. How odd he could still see and hear and smell even when taste and touch were largely alluding him. “But... I don’t need to eat.”

Luna clapped her hands to her mouth. “I am so sorry! I completely forgot. Let me take those away—”

“You don’t need to do that. Have one yourself. I quite enjoy the smell.” *And the company.*

Luna smiled, settling herself down on a nearby hay bale, her small feet skimming the ground. She dug into one of the muffins, but her face didn’t brighten in the way he expected. Her periwinkle eyes looked red and stuffy.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Luna blinked. “Do I not look it?”

“Your eyes. They look... forgive me. I thought you might have been crying.”

Luna looked down. “We lost someone,” she explained, “on the journey here. We finally had time for a funeral of sorts. It was... difficult for us all. But necessary.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dillon, with an earnesty he couldn’t quite fit into words. “What was your friend like?”

“Funny, mostly,” Luna said. “And I think we all thought she was a little bit invincible because of it. But humour can’t protect you forever.”

“Agreed,” Dillon responded. “It certainly makes life worth living, though.”

“She did. She... she really did.”

“If you’d rather not talk about her—”

“I *do* want to talk about her,” Luna said fiercely, “but I also don’t want to wallow. I want to go out and hit the town and dance and drink and be merry—”

“Well, by all means, don’t let me stop you.”

“Will you not come with me?”

Dillon froze. “Won’t I stick out a bit?”

“I’m not sure there’s much we can do to disguise your height...”

“I was thinking more about the undead part.”

“Oh, right!” She paused. “Are you really worried about that?”

“I don’t want to alarm anyone...”

“Hmm. Right. Yes. All right. Stay here.”

Luna raced out the door, leaving her basket of muffins. She was gone for several minutes. Dillon supposed it took a long time to navigate the palace. He was just beginning to think she’d forgotten about him when she burst back into the room with a bag filled with cosmetics.

“These should do the trick!” she said, holding up a sponge. “May I?”

Dillon consented, feeling nothing as she seized his face and started to paint, and desperately wishing he could.

“Took me a while to find a foundation that looked anything like your skin-tone. Dwarves don’t tend to make it so pale.”

“You are an exception, I take it?”

“Yup!” she beamed, brushing over his cheeks, his eyelids, his lips. She was very close to him. Too close. And although

his body couldn't feel, something fluttered across his insides—a ripple that sounded like her name.

*Luna. Luna. Luna.* A whisper through the trees on a starry night. *Luna.*

It was almost enough to make his heart start beating. “Did it really not occur to you that walking around as I was might be a terrible idea?” he asked, as she started on his hands.

“Umm, not really,” she said, her brow wrinkling in embarrassment. “I think I stopped noticing after the first few hours.”

“Quick adjustment period.”

“Dwarven speciality,” she admitted.

“I think it might just be a Luna one.”

Her white cheeks flushed with pink. “Are all knights as flirty as you are?”

“I wasn't—I'm not... I was just trying my hand at a compliment—”

“Oh,” said Luna, sounding a little downcast.

“I mean, I'm not averse to flirting in general. Or, you know...”

“I know?”

“I'm not averse to flirting with you. If... you're not averse.”

Luna smiled. “I am not.”



Dillon was quite sure he would have blushed if he could. “Are you sure?” he asked. “I am a bit dead—”

“You seem alive enough to me.”

Their eyes caught for a moment, and Dillon felt a little like a flag being hoisted, like there was nothing he could do but stand there, staggering in the wind.

Luna bit her lip.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I wish I could help you,” she said. “I really, really like helping people, but I don’t think there’s much I can do to help you, and now that I’m saying that, I’m worried I’m making your problems mine, like I’m complaining that you have them and how it affects me, which is very unfair—”

“Luna,” said Dillon, cupping her flailing hands, “you *are* helping me.”

Her body stilled. “Right,” she said. “Of course.”

She pulled his hands away from her to inspect her work. He hoped they weren’t too cold, or hard, or *dead*. He had no idea what he felt like to others and he wasn’t sure he wanted to ask.

“There we go,” she said, as she finished smoothing cream into his hands. “Not much we can do about your eyes, alas, but folk will probably just assume they’re normal, for a mortal.” She paused. “Your eyes. What colour were they?”

“Brown.”

Luna smiled. “I like brown.”

Dillon swallowed—or at least, he thought he did. “I like blue.”

Luna tidied up her equipment, gathered up her muffins, and seized Dillon’s hand. “Come on.”

They walked out of the stables together, Luna offering a muffin to everyone she met. No one refused. Everyone waved cheerily, no one mentioning Dillon or his crude appearance. It made a certain degree of sense; he’d been sitting in the stables for only a day, and during that time he’d seen all manner of dwarves—dwarves with clockwork legs or metal hands, ones with giant lenses attached to their eyes or contraptions over their ears or limbs. Everyone was different here. Difference was not a thing they stared at.

“I wonder if we’ll see any of the others,” Luna mused, as they slid out of the palace and into the wide, stony streets. “I think most of them will be heading out...”

“Not all of them?”

She shook her head. “Flora will stay in, I think. She’s older and has never quite had the drive we do. Plus... there isn’t really anyone apart from us she knows, anymore. We’re the only family she has. The downside of living so long.”

Dillon paused, amazed at his heart’s capacity for tightness even when it wasn’t beating. He’d imagined he wouldn’t live for very long, not like this—but what if the reverse was true? What if he lived forever in this unfeeling body, watching everyone live and die around him?

Luna placed her hand on his arm. “That won’t happen to you.”

“I don’t imagine that’s a great deal of comfort to Flora,” he said. “But thank you.”

A moment of quiet passed between the two, before Luna grabbed his hand again, beaming. “Enough sadness,” she said. “Come on! I’m going to show you a true dwarven party.”



**M**inerva informed Venus that they would complete her quest, and made preparations to leave the next day.

“So soon?” Aislinn queried.

“No time like the present. I don’t know about you, but I can’t relax much while I’ve something hanging over me.”

Aislinn was inclined to agree, but in this case...

“Why? You have something you need to do?”

Aislinn’s very insides felt like they were blushing, a sensation almost sickening.

“I am in no hurry...”

Minerva smiled, as if reading her thoughts. “See it done tonight.”

*Caer.*

If anything was to happen—it needed to be tonight.

Aislinn paced about her room after everyone had split off to go into the city for one last night of fun, wondering how to go

about it. She'd never, ever been so nervous about seduction before. Why was she nervous now? Especially when she wanted it so badly, wanted to take him in her arms and unwrap him, layer by layer, exploring every one of those glorious muscles with her tongue...

The thought made her belly heat, sent ripples of warmth riding through her centre.

She splashed her face with cold water. She was smarter than this, smoother. She was the crown princess of Faerie, not a simpering schoolgirl.

Someone knocked at her door.

"Come in," she said.

Caerwyn strode into the room, looking as unfairly handsome as ever. His smile sliced through her. Nerves spiralled from stomach to chest, battling against the overwhelming urge to slam the door shut and smash him against the wall.

It would certainly get her point across. Direct. Effective. Little room for misinterpretation—

"Evening," he said, in the voice that made her heart soar and centre whimper.

She swallowed. "Good evening."

"It's our last night in Avalinth," he said. "At least, for a little while."

"So it would seem."

“We should—”

“Definitely.”

“—go and explore the city.”

Aislinn blinked. “Come again?”

“The city. We should go out there and see it. Spend some of this coin Minerva has given us.”

“You want to... go outside?”

“Yes,” he said. “What did you—”

*He’s either deliberately trying to infuriate me, is the most idiotic person I’ve ever met, or he’s trying to court me,* Aislinn realised, and searched his eyes for the answer. Formal or restrained courtship was unusual for faeries, but she’d read a few mortal romance books of her mother’s and she knew that *some* people liked to take things slowly...

There was no dishonesty in Caer’s tone. And he *was* mortal. She should probably honour his traditions.

Even if she felt she’d explode if she didn’t have him soon.

“All right,” she said. “Let me grab my cloak.”

Caer smiled from ear to ear, and she knew she’d made the right decision.

After all, they had all night.



Avalinth was a city of light, the streets alive and bustling even at this late hour. Somehow, it still cast the illusion of one of the midnight markets of Faerie. There was a feeling of fireflies and moonlight and darkness, even with the clicking of gears and humming of clockwork. It shone like a vat of glitter.

“How does the light work, I wonder?” Aislinn asked, as they wandered through the streets, now keeping a regrettable distance between them.

“Apparently, there’s some kind of river of lava flowing behind the crystal... they control the flow so that it changes intensity. I asked Bell about it earlier.”

“You like it here, don’t you?”

“I admit it’s growing on me. I’m still very uncertain about Venus and Aeron, but this place—it’s fascinating. I want to know how all of it works.”

She could see him here, see him amongst the forgers and the masters, learning his craft, sharpening it, perfecting it. He wouldn’t be lonely, wouldn’t be isolated. He’d *enjoy* it.

And she wanted him to enjoy it.

She just wanted to be there whilst he did.

But she couldn’t stay here, even if Venus allowed it. She needed the sky and the earth and the trees and the wind.

She thought he might miss those things too.

Caer pulled on his gloves and wove his fingers into hers. “Come on,” he said. “There’s a dance to join.”

He pulled her onto a wooden platform in the centre of the streets. A band played a loud, jaunty tune. Caer and Aislinn fell into step with the rest of the dancers, twirling in circles, hopping and hooting and laughing. At one point, the dwarves started throwing each other in the air. No one was strong enough to do that to Aislinn, so Caer gathered her in his arms and flung her upright.

It took a long time for him to lower her back to the ground, and even longer to let go.

She felt like she'd risk her life to kiss him now.

His eyes flickered behind her. "What on earth is that?"

It was some kind of brightly coloured spinning dwarven contraption, composed of fantastical model creatures suspended on golden poles that moved up and down to music. A bystander called it a carousel.

There was no question of whether or not they were trying it. They crammed themselves onto a magnificent horned wargi the colour of sunset and rode until their pockets were light and their hearts lighter, and their sides hurt from laughing too much.

They moved through the foodstands, crammed with roasted nuts, buns of sizzling meat, hard, glazed pieces of fruit and some bright pink cotton-like substance that melted on their tongues and tasted like pure honey. They examined every morsel, played at every booth. There were games of strength, of precision, of agility—games of knocking things down with balls or bolts, of whacking mechanical worms as they jumped



out of holes, of hitting discs that could measure force. They played everything, tasted everything, tried everything, and danced until they collapsed by the side of a fountain. It glowed with copper light.

“Who needs magic, right?” said Caer, catching his breath.

Aislinn paused. “You don’t like magic very much, do you?”

Caer opened his mouth, and then promptly shut it again, clearly thinking.

“I’m sorry,” Aislinn said, before he could respond. “That was insensitive of me.”

He frowned. “How so?”

“If my first encounter with magic had been it failing to heal my dying mother, and then bringing her corpse back to life, I don’t think I’d like it very much, either.”

Caer stared at her. “My dislike of magic doesn’t affect how I feel about you or your magic,” he said, tripping over the words. “I don’t think anything could. I just...” He ran his hands through his hair. “I wish I’d met you sooner.”

“You wish I’d been your first encounter with magic?”

“I wish you’d been my first a lot of things, actually, but honestly... I just wish I’d met you sooner. I would like more days of knowing you.”

Aislinn’s mouth went sandpaper dry. She wanted more than anything else in the world to close the gap between them. Vines, she wanted more than that. She wanted to grab fistfuls

of his hair and tear off his shirt and throw him backwards into the water and—

Her breath started to increase. *What was the matter with her?*

Caer frowned. “Are you all right?”

“I’m very... hot,” she said, fanning herself with her hand. “It’s very warm here, isn’t it? So very... very... warm.”

Caer’s frown deepened, but his mouth turned upwards, as if he wasn’t sure whether or not he should laugh.

“I shall fetch some refreshment,” he said. “Stay here.”

She watched his broad shoulders as he disappeared into a nearby tavern, before turning back to the fountain and splashing herself thoroughly. She felt almost dizzy with sensation, her thoughts still spiralling with the thought of all the things she wanted to do to him.

And he was being *so sweet*. Why hadn’t she just been able to focus on the words? Why hadn’t she been able to return the sentiment, her thoughts honeyed over instead?

She took a few moments to try and steady her breath, but nothing seemed to be working. It was like drowning in lava.

“Evening, sister!” Beau staggered towards her, coming out of *Horns and Hoes* with a tankard in hand and lipstick smeared across his face—his or someone else’s, she wasn’t entirely sure. “How fares it?”

“Fine evening, brother. Enjoying yourself?”

“You know, I rather am. That establishment over there has a truly fine collection of horns.”

“Is that so?”

“How’s your evening going?”

Aislinn looked across at the space she last saw Caer. She seized Beau’s tankard and downed it.

“That well, hmm?”

“Caer is being unbelievably sweet and all I want to do is rip his clothes off, smother him in honey, and lick every inch off with my—”

“Oh,” said Beau, eyes widening.

“Oh what?”

“You’re, um...”

“Oh,” said Aislinn, with sudden realisation. “Oh, oh. Oh no.”

Female faeries, being infertile creatures, only had a small gap of fertility around once a year. Sometimes the Beltane rituals could trigger an extra one, but more often than not they simply brought that period forward.

Aislinn, being half fae, had two.

Two short windows, every year, when she wanted to bone anything that moved.

“It’s not a big deal,” Beau insisted. “Just tell him. Cast a few fertility spells. Have the best sex of your life.”

“I can’t cast a fertility spell inside the palace, Beau!” She’d been willing to risk it for one night, the chances being so slim. But if she was in heat...

*No, no, NO!*

“Hmm. That’s a good point. Well, you should still tell him. Let him know why you’re being so...”

Aislinn looked up, and saw Caer leaving the tavern. Not thinking, she leapt up from her spot and hid under a deserted market stall. She couldn’t face him. Not like this.

“Or hide under a table,” Beau continued. “Of course. What a marvellous solution.”

“Beau?” Aislinn could hear the frown in Caer’s voice. She stared at the points of his shining boots, praying she could go undetected whilst guilt quivered in her gut. “Have you seen Ais?”

“Um... so... funny story... I *have* seen her, and I know where she is, but—”

Caer sighed. “She’s hiding from me, isn’t she?”

“Look, Caer,” started Beau, his words slurred but soft, “it’s a bit complicated, and not quite my place to explain, but...”

Another sigh eased past his lips. “If you see her again, please tell her to speak to me? I’ll come by her room later.”

His boots turned, and he disappeared back into the crowd.

*Her room, her room, her room.* The one place he absolutely could not go—not whilst she was like this.

“Well, Ais,” said Beau, once Caer had vanished completely, “you heard the man.”

Aislinn crawled out from underneath the table, her eyes prickling. “I can’t... I can’t explain this to him!”

“Are you crying?”

“HOW IS THAT A HELPFUL OBSERVATION?”

“Sorry, sorry!”

“He’s cautious enough around magic as it is...” Aislinn sniffed.

“I’m not sure being in heat counts as magic... animals do it all the time.”

“ARE YOU COMPARING ME TO AN ANIMAL?”

“No, not me!”

Aislinn dabbed at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “I’m a freakish monster.”

“Some people are into that,” Beau remarked absent-mindedly. “But you’re not a freak, Ais. Whatever you do or don’t want to do tonight... he’ll understand.”

Aislinn nodded, battling against her tears. She’d go back to her room. She’d have a cold bath, get control of herself. She’d explain this to him, calmly and rationally.

“Want me to come with you?”

Aislinn shook her head. “Please go and enjoy your night.”

Beau shrugged, waiting just a second before disappearing back into *Horns and Hoes*.

Aislinn began the walk back to the palace alone.

This was monstrously, stupidly unfair. To curse her with being in heat now, with the one person she wanted to do it with in a place where she couldn't cast any contraception spells... and did she really want their first time together to be a frenzied panic? Sex in heat was intense and quick and animalistic. She'd had it before. She remembered that, in the moment, it had felt like the best thing ever, only for the memories of it to be dulled the morning afterwards, hazy with lust.

That wasn't what she wanted. Not with him.

She forced herself to think of snow and cold showers and mud and other unpleasant things, but her mind kept conjuring up beasts to be slayed in these icy landscapes, with a handsome young prince helping her with the kill, their lips locking together over steaming bodies and tumbling into softly lit caves and making love in the firelight whilst the world crisped around them—

*Stop it, stop it, stop it—*

“Oof!”

She stopped, startled. Tiberius was standing in front of her.

“We really must stop meeting like this,” he said, smiling at her.

Aislinn couldn't return that smile. Frustration pinged against her insides. Frustration, and... heat.

She swallowed. Tiberius had a lovely face, chiselled like marble, and his shoulders were strong and broad...

His smile dropped. "Are you all right?"

"I, um... I can't really..."

"The mortal prince hasn't done anything to upset you, has he? I saw the two of you heading out earlier—"

"He hasn't... no," she said firmly. "Caer is a perfect... Caer is *perfect*." She was amazed at her capacity for truth, that such a thing could even be considered true. No one was perfect.

*It's not a lie if you believe it.*

"Right," said Tiberius, still looking very confused. Aislinn sniffed some more. "Let's get you into your room," he said, opening the door. He steered Aislinn towards the bed and sat her down, turning to the dresser to fetch her a goblet of wine and leaving the door ajar.

Tiberius pressed the goblet into her hand and sat down beside her. He offered her his handkerchief, a silky black scrap of fabric embroidered with a pattern of gemstones.

"Can I fetch someone for you?"

"I just want to be..." She stopped, realising she *didn't* want to be alone, that actually, yes, she did want someone with her. *Caer, Caer, Caer.* She wanted him.

And he wasn't here.

But he was coming. He said he was. She just needed to calm down before he got here.

She tried to focus on the taste of the wine, rich and fruity, like cherries and velvet. It was soft. Warm.

Like Tiberius, whose body was next to hers, radiating heat, with his muscled shoulders and soft-looking lips and stubbled chin...

“Princess Aislinn?” Tiberius prompted, “are you all right? You and the prince—”

“Please,” Aislinn told him, “I don’t want to talk about him.”

*Don’t want to talk and don’t want to think... I might explode if I do.*

“Is there anything I can do?”

Aislinn’s eyes stayed fixed on his lips. “Yes,” she said, swallowing. *Help me, help me, free me, free me. Make this stop!*

Her lips came within a fraction of his before she jerked herself away, cursing under her breath and leaping to the other side of the room.

Tiberius stared at her, still rooted on the bed. “I am exceptionally confused right now.”

“I’m in heat!” she wailed. “Faeries—oh, spirits, how do I explain—”

“I am, er, familiar with the concept,” Tiberius explained. “I’m quite well read—”



“You are?” Aislinn hid her face behind her hands. “I’m so sorry. I’m just not thinking clearly—”

“That’s fine!” Tiberius said. “But I really feel like perhaps I should just... go?”

“That would be best.”

Tiberius bowed his head. “Well, good night then, Princess. Um, sleep well?”

He headed off without another word, closing the door behind him.

Aislinn threw herself down on her pillow and screamed. It was more effective than sobbing. She took off half of her clothes and tried to see to herself, hoping that would help calm her down before Caer came.

He didn’t come.

She paced around the room. Her weapons were still being held elsewhere, but there was a blunt ceremonial sword mounted on the wall that was good for practice. Swinging around a blade was a good antidote to most things.

Caer still hadn’t come.

She went to knock on his door, just to be certain she hadn’t misheard, but he wasn’t there.

She returned to her own chamber.

Someone knocked on the door.

Aislinn raced to open it, only to find Beau standing there with a box. “Supplies!” he said, oddly gleefully. “I found an

apothecary. Got you some rags for when the bleeding begins, some kind of painkiller, sweets, and in the meantime... this tincture which is supposed to be quite ‘calming’—”

Aislinn seized the vial and took a long sip.

“—She did say not to have too much.”

Aislinn groaned, throwing herself down on the bed and curling up a tight ball. Beau passed her one of the boiled sweets.

“He hasn’t come.”

“What?”

“Caer. He didn’t come.”

“I can fetch him—”

“He isn’t in his room.”

“Right.” Beau paused. “Hug?”

“Please.”

Beau climbed into the bed and wrapped his arm around her, saying nothing. A few minutes ticked by, punctuated only by her slow sucking, winding the sweet down to a sliver. The potion trickled through her, as did Beau’s simple, steady presence.

“I think I’m all right now,” Aislinn whispered.

“Good to hear,” he said, shuffling out of the bed. “I’m next door if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Think nothing of it. Sleep well, Ais.”



Caer thought he was having the best night of his life. Everything was new and strange and wonderful. He'd never tasted food like this before, never heard music of this quality, never thrown a girl into the air or ridden on the back of a mechanical wargi.

It was perfect. Wonderful.

And Aislinn was there, Aislinn with a grin like fire, her body swaying against his, her skin so, so close...

And even if he couldn't touch her right then, the palace was nearby. They would go back afterwards and...

And do whatever she let him do.

God, he wanted her—wanted her with an ache that priests would call a sin and yet faeries had no qualms with.

She wanted him too. He was sure of it. But then...

*“I just wish I'd met you sooner. I would like more days of knowing you.”*

Something about that utterance had unnerved her, and broken the spell the evening had cast. He'd watched her dodge an honest answer, spluttering around the truth.

He'd tried to shake it off, but when she disappeared... What was he supposed to think?

He took a short walk to try and clear his head, to try and imagine what was going through hers, but he failed on both accounts.

*Talk to her, a voice said. She can't lie to you. Just give her a chance to explain.*

Summoning every fraction of courage he had, and mentally preparing himself for the worst of answers, he set back off towards the palace, heading for Aislinn's room.

Her door was ajar.

He crept forward, hand outstretched for the usual polite knock...

His eyes fell towards the bed. Aislinn and Tiberius sat upon it, her head bent towards his.

Caer's stomach plummeted. He stepped away, quietly, unnoticed. A part of him wanted to burst in and demand an explanation, but the rage didn't come—only an awful, devastating dread, like his insides turning to metal.

His mind spun back through every interaction they'd had, every word she'd uttered in his favour. She'd told him she'd liked him, they'd almost kissed in the tunnel, and yet, yet...

Her compliments tended towards praising physical attributes, and even when they hadn't... you could admire someone's skills without desiring them much outside of the bedroom. Did she only want to bed him? Had he frightened her off with his words? Backed her into a corner where there was no way of uttering any falsehood to keep up the ruse?

His heart beat in his chest, like walls were closing in around him, like he was a bear being forced into an acorn. He could barely breathe.

He staggered back into his bedroom and closed the door.

This wasn't happening. It wasn't all some game to her. It wasn't true.

*What other explanation is there?*

Why was she even here, if she didn't care about him? There was nothing to keep her here—

But he knew how much she loved a hunt, a mission, a quest. And she had her suspicions about Aeron and the Mirror. Of course she wanted to see this through. He was just a verse in a ballad, a passing dalliance.

Honestly, why did he expect more? They couldn't *be* more, after all. He had to stay here and master his powers, and she had to go off and live her life and rule Faerie and be magnificent and triumphant—a queen for the ages. It was foolish to suspect it could be anything other than a night.

His throat tightened, and he gathered fistfuls of his hair as he sank into bed.

He would have done anything for that night.

*It's better it ends here, a voice told him. It could never have worked. A little pain now, to avoid more later on.*

*You're a fool, Caer, said another, much stronger voice. You don't deserve her. You don't deserve happiness at all.*

It was no wonder that when he finally slept, his dreams were dark and frantic, and he woke more than once calling for her in the dark.



Caer was not at breakfast the following morning. Diana said he'd headed into town to get a few last minute supplies. Unwilling to put off the task any longer, Aislinn decided to head off after him.

"Don't be long," Minerva warned. "We want to leave in a couple of hours."

Aislinn nodded. She was still in heat—would remain so for another two days unless copulation was successful—but Beau's mix of potions seemed to be taking the edge off, as did the cold bath and a bit of self-care following. It had dulled it all to an irritating buzz.

The market was busy despite the hour, and she couldn't see Caer anywhere. She did pass by a stall selling gloves, and stopped to admire them, thinking of how he'd tugged on his the night before to dance with her.

Unfair, really, when she was the only one at risk. Why did he have to take precautions by himself?

She admired a pair of light, paper-thin gloves, soft and supple as real human skin. They were the wrong size for her, of course.

“Can I help you at all?” asked the glove maker.

Aislinn turned. She was slim, for a dwarf, with white hair and even whiter eyes. Eyes that stared at nothing.

“I, um, quite fancied the look of these gloves, but they’re too small for me.”

“Hand them over.”

Aislinn did so. The glove maker turned them over in her hands. “A fine fabric,” she agreed. “Doesn’t need lining. I can make you a pair from scratch.”

“We’re leaving in a couple of hours—”

“I work fast, lass, with my machine here, and today’s a slow day.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Put out your hands.”

Aislinn did as instructed, laying them flat against the paper lining the counter. The glove maker traced around them quickly, deftly, in an ink that left a raised pattern.

Aislinn wondered how a blind tailor worked. She noted that the measuring tape was lined with textured knots, and supposed the fabrics must be identifiable in a similar way. Or perhaps she had an assistant. It seemed rude to ask either way. Blindness was rare in Faerie although not unheard of. It was



hard to heal eyes too ravaged by time or disease, but most things could be cured if they were attended to soon enough, and she'd heard tales of witches trading in eyes before, or even replacing healthy ones to imbue folk with the sight of a hawk.

The glove maker tutted under her breath as she lifted Aislinn's hands away, pinching the fingers. "Why have your hands got to be so big?"

"Why's your mouth got to be so rude?" said Aislinn, before she could stop herself.

The glove maker barked a laugh.

"I mean, um—" Aislinn started, unable to finish.

"Can't say sorry because you aren't, hmm?"

"No."

"You must be the faerie lass they're talking about."

"I must be."

"Off to the Deep, they say."

"Word travels fast."

"Well, I hope the gloves serve you well there, girl. Best of luck. That'll be four drahma for the rush order. I'll send them up to the palace before you leave. Have no fear."



Back at the palace, Aislinn found Caer in the throne room, examining maps with Bell and Minerva, trying to chart their

best path towards the place where the mirror was rumoured to be located. She tried to catch his eye, but it seemed like he was deliberately avoiding her, and she lacked the courage to go up and speak to him with an audience. She would rather fight a cave troll.

Fighting actually sounded like a really good idea right now.

Her bags packed, and with nothing else to do until Minerva gave the order, she located the armoury, found a few blunt weapons, and swung them around for a while until her thoughts turned narrow with the illusion of battle. The exercise dulled her rapid pulse, satiated the thrumming heat inside her. Not completely, but enough.

*Enough, enough, enough.*

Before long, Beau came to find her.

“Might have known you were here,” he said. “We’re ready.”

They met the others by the gates to the palace, an aide appearing out of nowhere with her commissioned gloves, wrapped in paper. She thanked him, and tucked them into one of the bags on her wargi’s saddle. Dillon was there too, and her stomach twisted with the thought that in the past two days, she’d barely spared a thought for him.

“Dillon,” she said, “I should have been to see you. Have you been all right—”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I’ve been staying in the stables. Perfect place for me. And Luna’s been keeping me company.”

Aislinn smiled, her guilt lessening. She was glad he was accompanying them again.

“All present and correct?” Minerva asked, doing a quick headcount. “I once again remind you that this venture is not to be undertaken lightly—”

“Aye, which is why we’re going with you!” Flora declared, smoking on her pipe. “Safety in numbers. You know this.”

Minerva nodded. “Aye. I do. Well. Best be getting on with it, then. To the deep, sisters and friends!”



Aislinn’s eyes did not leave Caer’s back as they made their way through the city towards the entrance to the Deep. He was conversing loudly with Luna with what felt like false cheer.

He still hadn’t met her eyes.

This couldn’t wait.

She glanced at Beau, nodding towards Caer.

“Oh, you want to speak to him?”

“No, I *want* to fade away into nothingness and avoid ever having this conversation, but sadly, I think I have to do this.”

“Well, all right then.”

Beau charged forward between the two of them, so fast that Hecate almost fell off the back of his saddle, and interrupted the conversation with barely an apology. Caer glared, forced behind him.

Next to Aislinn. “Hi,” she said, drawing level with him.

Caer didn’t meet her gaze. “Hi?”

“I need to explain last night to you.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I’m in heat.”

“What?”

“Heat,” she said, cheeks on fire. “It happens to faerie women once a year. Me, twice. Being half-mortal. It’s when —” Her eyes brimmed with hot, angry tears. Vines, this was embarrassing.

“I know what being in heat means, Ais.”

Aislinn sniffed. “I’m out of control and I hate it. I just... I couldn’t explain it to you last night, and I hate that too. I panicked when I realised and ran away. I’m...” She took a shuddering breath. “I’m really, really sorry.”

Caer turned his face towards her, and met her gaze for the first time. “I went to your room.”

“You did? But I—”

“You had company.”

Aislinn’s face burned. “You... you saw me with Tiberius?”

He nodded.

“Oh, Caer, I’m so sorry. He just found me in a state and walked me back to my room.”

“You kissed him.”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I came close. But I didn’t want to kiss Tiberius. I wanted to kiss you. But I didn’t want to stop there, and I didn’t want that to be our first time, partly because of the risks and partly because... it’s different when you’re in heat. It isn’t the same. I didn’t want that for us.” She dabbed at her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve just said sorry three times, Faerie.”

“And I meant each one of them.”

Caer leaned across and tugged on her sleeve. “So, you didn’t want to kiss the prince?”

“No.”

“You wanted to kiss me.”

“Very much so.”

“You didn’t run away because you didn’t like me.”

“*Never.*”

“You’ll be held to that now, Faerie Princess.”

Aislinn swallowed. “I don’t mind.”

Caer sighed, half laughing. He ran a hand through his hair. “I really wish you’d told me all this back at the palace.”

“Me too,” she admitted. “Although... possibly a bad idea.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m still in heat. Be difficult for me to keep my hands off you.”

Caer's throat bobbed. "God," he said, "I... really want to kiss you right now."

Aislinn held out a gloved finger. "Later?" she suggested.

He wrapped his finger around hers. "It's a promise."



The entrance to the Deep was as grand as the entrance to Avalinth itself, another colossal door of stone and iron, set deep into the rock on the outskirts of the city. The doors opened to reveal a long, dark tunnel, with another smaller door at the end. It opened onto an empty, square room, devoid of doors or windows.

Caer frowned, as did the rest of the mortals and faeries.

The rest of the party filed in.

"What?" said Minerva, noticing their hesitation.

"Where are we going?" Caer asked.

"Down."

"But... how?"

"It's a lift, boy. We used to have staircases leading to the various levels, but the problem was that most of the monsters worked out how to use stairs. They haven't learned to operate the lift, yet."

Caerwyn stared at her. "I'm really not enjoying the use of the word *yet*."

Beau leant towards him. “Same.”

“Come on, boys,” said Aislinn, striding forwards, “what’s the matter? Scared?”

“Yes,” they both replied.

“For very, very good reason,” Beau added.

Aislinn snorted. “That’s what makes it so exciting.”

She turned her back and squeezed into the lift.

“Your sister,” Caerwyn remarked to Beau, as Dillon followed next, “is really something.”

“She is.” Beau paused. “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you, and make it look like an accident.”

For what felt like a full minute, Caerwyn stared at him, very grateful when he remembered that Beau could lie and would not be held to that. “And if she hurts me?” he asked eventually, *which seems far more likely*.

“I like you, but I’m not hurting my sister for you. Maybe one of the dwarves will. Or all of them. They seem rather fond of you.”

*Too fond*, Caer thought, at the same time feeling warmed by the remark. They *were* fond of him, and he felt like he’d want to hurt whoever hurt them, too, but Fort had died because she cared about him, and he didn’t enjoy the idea that others might, too, before this was over.

He supposed that was the risk with caring about anyone.

“Come on, lads,” Minerva urged. “You’re holding us up!”

Beau squeezed on next, leaving just enough room for Caer and his wargi, which wagged its tail and panted happily as he urged it forward, as if the Deep were nothing more than an ambitious walk.

The doors closed shut behind them. Bell pressed something on the wall—a button next to descriptions of the various different levels. There were farms and fields, lakes and mines, one named simply ‘the Forest’—and others that looked like names of towns.

‘The Deep’ was the last level.

The room—*lift*—gave a sudden lurch.

Caer gasped, a hand reaching out to steady himself, and found himself gripping Aislinn’s arm.

“Are you all right?” she said, leaning across.

“Fine,” he replied, only half lying. “This is just... strange.”

“Strange for me, too,” she said, and slipped her gloved hand into his.

“Where did you get the gloves?”

“Had them made for me,” she said. “Yours must get uncomfortable from time to time.”

“Maybe. Still worth it, though.”

Aislinn squeezed tighter.

The lift took a while to descend. Minerva said it was best to go slow, that descending too quickly often made people ill—



even the hardiest of dwarves. It seemed an age before it finally stilled, and the doors slid open.

Beau gasped. He wasn't the only one. Dillon offered a curse under his breath, too, followed by a low whistle.

The party shuffled out. Caer stood where he was, utterly amazed.

He'd expected pools of fire and brimstone, rock and lava as far as the eye could see, a horrible, palpable heat.

All that he'd got right was rock.

Everything else was blue and purple. Crystals clung to the rocks and the ceilings, vines and flora blooming beneath the faint, dusky glow. Rivers of clear translucent water ran through the caverns, luminescent fish striking through the current. Butterflies of pure light hummed along the stone.

“Ooh, look, moon thistles!” said Flora, running over to examine a nearby plant, a spiny, leafy thing with a white centre that shone like snow. “Haven't seen these in a while, great for—”

“If anyone sees any mushrooms, let me know!” said Luna. “There's a lovely nutty one with a purple sheen. Goes lovely with—”

Minerva sighed. “Stay together,” she warned. “And stay sharp.”

“This is *beautiful*,” Beau sighed, his eyes lined with silver.

Aislinn wrinkled her nose. “Are you crying?”

“I’m going to run out of paper...”

“Don’t let the prettiness fool you, lad,” Minerva warned.  
“We’ve a long way to go yet.”



Venus watched the group leave from the highest point of the palace, her eyes rooted on the party as they traipsed through the wide, narrow streets, and finally disappeared behind the row of houses.

How many times had she watched them go before?

A part of her had wanted to walk with them, to stay by Minnie's side until she descended, as she'd done a hundred times before. She'd gone with her, once or twice, but she wasn't made for the Deep, for the dark and the danger and dirt. That was always more Minerva's calling.

And Clay's.

She'd been terrified, when she asked him to marry her, that he'd refuse—that he'd say he wasn't made for a life in the palace, that he belonged in the Deep.

“Of course I belong there,” had been his response, “but I belong with you, too. I can belong to two places, Ven. Two places—and one person. Yes, Venus Mountain-Born, I will marry you.”

Clay had never given up the Deep, and she had never asked him to. For decades afterwards, he'd go down into the depths, sometimes on missions, sometimes to visit his hometown, sometimes with Minerva and sometimes just *because*. Because it called to him. Because he had to answer.

Venus had never understood, but that didn't matter. Clay didn't understand why she felt the need to wrap herself in spiky, bejewelled clothes, either. Understanding was different from acceptance, and they accepted each other wholeheartedly for who they were. She never loved him any less for his wildness and crass humour, and he never loved her any less for being afraid of the Deep and determined to cover her life in beautiful things.

The first time she'd shared her fears with him, he'd kissed her eyes and told her, "you are no less beautiful for your fears, but you are more beautiful for sharing them."

She'd fallen in love with him all over again in that moment.

It was one of the joys of their constant separation, how the loss would sweeten the return, how they'd spend weeks getting to know each other again with all the giddiness of the first time. Sometimes, she almost looked forward to his departure, knowing how grateful she'd be for the return.

Until the day he didn't come back.

No more departures, no more returns. Just emptiness where Clay had once been and love transformed to grief with nowhere to go.

Nowhere to go.

That was what life without Clay was like. Stagnant and still, a broken tram on the tracks. Nothing moved, nothing changed. Everything that brought her joy, that used to make her laugh and smile, withered and died in her presence.

Years now, and that feeling had never altered.

Until Aeron appeared.

*Lightbringer.* That was his name. It was like the Stone had brought him to her, some guiding force. Here to bring her back to the light, with promises that ought to have been impossible —

But they weren't. She'd seen it for certain now, with the arrival of the young prince. It could be done. It had to be.

She was worried about Minerva, of course. Not just about what would happen to her in the Deep, not just because everything was depending upon her returning with the Mirror, but because it was clear she cared about the boy, and despite everything, Minerva had never wanted to hurt her. These past few days with her in the palace, she'd wanted to tell her everything, wanted to throw off her jewels and crown and lie with her in their petticoats staring at the ceiling, talking of everything and nothing. She wanted to bury the years between them.

But she couldn't risk Minnie turning her back on her and refusing to follow the plan, prizing this prince above Clay, above her sister, above her kingdom.

Venus sighed, turning away from her view of the city, and wandered through the halls, down towards the throne room, to the vault behind the seat. She glided past meaningless jewels and towers of coins, to a glass coffin at the end of the room.

She placed her hand against the lid, thinking little of the person still inside.

*Soon*, she promised.

Minnie would understand. She had to.



## 36 CAVE CATS AND BEASTS

The first day in the Deep passed calmly, almost pleasantly. It was a slow ride through the caverns and tunnels, the way rocky and perilous. Rock falls and underground floods had marred the path, and it could take hours to find themselves back on the main track, having gained little in the way of actual progress.

“Rest whenever it’s safe,” was one of Minerva’s main rules for surviving in the Deep. “Don’t push yourself. You never know when it might be safe to sleep again.”

They spoke of the monsters they were likely to encounter. Rogue golems, later on, dwarven-made rock men, left over from a rebellion many centuries ago. Ogres, likely. Maybe sluaghs or demonic bats. By far the worst seemed to be the description of ‘cave cats’—vicious, feline creatures that could shred you apart in seconds.

Caer was quite sure some of the creatures were exaggerated.

They stopped for the night in one of the smaller caverns, tucking themselves away in an alcove out of sight. Diana had

caught some sort of small, boar-like creature earlier, which Luna flavoured with herbs she'd gathered on the journey. They saved their ale, water being in abundance here, and swapped stories and played pipes until they began to feel tired.

There was no need to set up a watch—Dillon offered to do it all.

“Doesn't seem fair,” Luna remarked, “leaving you by yourself.”

Dillon shrugged. “Seems silly to deprive people of sleep who need it.”

Caer, Aislinn and Beau stayed up a while longer after the others had gone to bed. Caer knew Aislinn felt responsible for Dillon in some way, which was strange as she was not the one who brought him back. He'd asked her about it earlier in the day, but she'd struggled to explain it.

“I think, perhaps, I just feel the need to make sure he gets home safely.”

Caer could understand that, although he couldn't deny he was jealous that Dillon, who had been dead for fifty years, had a home to go back to when all of this was over, whereas Caer knew, with a finality he could not explain, that his time at Afelcarreg was over, that he would never return to the cottage again either, and that while he was fascinated by Avalinth and the possibilities it held, it didn't feel like home to him either. He wanted that anchor almost as much as he wanted—

*Aislinn.*



Their promise to each other had not left his mind, but neither had his doubts or fears. What would happen afterwards, when they went their separate ways?

The following morning, they breakfasted quickly and resumed their journey. They passed an old mine and wasted a bit of time seeing if the carts were still in operation—though Bell teased they spent more time answering Caer’s questions of how anything could move without something pulling it. Not long after, they came to an entrance to a tunnel and found a deep set of stairs. Sounds echoed from below.

Caerwyn breathed carefully, remembering what Minerva had said about why they used lifts now.

Thankfully, nothing disturbed them during the descent, and they exited the tunnel below into another cavern, lower than the previous one. There were parts where Caerwyn had to duck.

It took a while before it started to widen, but Caer’s fears didn’t abate. Noises continued to scuttle about the stone. He tried to focus on more pleasant things, like the colours in the plants clinging to the walls, or the steady *drip, drip* of the underground river.

He was still staring at a patch of reeds when they parted and out tumbled a small pointy-eared creature covered in black fur. It looked rather like a cat, with larger eyes and slightly disproportionate limbs—a tail almost twice the length of an ordinary feline, and longer legs that ended with bigger paws.

“Hello,” he said. “Where did you come from?”

The creature blinked at him, then smiled at him in its cat-like way. Its mouth dropped open.

A mouth full of rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth.

It lunged for Caer, sinking into his arm and biting hard. Caer hissed, grabbing it by the neck and tugging it, the fangs going deeper and deeper into his flesh—

“Cave cats!” Minerva called. “Look alive!”

Another dozen of the creatures streamed out of the undergrowth, weapons drawn just in time. The creature didn’t budge from Caer’s arm, even after Aislinn hurled a fireball at it and singed its tail.

“Kill it, Caer!”

“Trying to!”

“Use your powers!”

It was so obvious Caer could kick himself, but his powers were not his default reaction. He wasn’t used to using them in a fight, not on purpose. There was too much going on, too much noise—

The creature thrashed, biting down harder. Another leapt up and sank its fangs into his shoulder.

He pressed his power into the first, and flicked his wrists like he’d done with the rodents. Its slack body hit the ground.

He moved to the second. Touch, he found, was infinitely easier. The life forces of his companions flared up around him, beacons in the gloom—Aislinn, Beau, *Dillon*.

He knew that was odd, and Dillon's pulse even felt different to him, like another shade of a colour he couldn't name, but there was no time to focus on that. No time for anything.

Something rumbled along the corridor, shaking stalactites from the ceiling. A few of the cave cats paused in their assault as something thundered into view—a great, grey, lumpy shape, like a giant and boulder squished together.

“Ogre,” someone whispered, in case he wasn't sure.

The ogre grinned at the party before him and swung his massive club, dividing stone from the ceiling. Minerva swung under his arm, searching for a gap in his rough armour, hissing out instructions. Caer was still focused on the cave cats.

“Look out!” someone hissed.

A stalactite smashed to the ground in front of him, blasting one of the cats. Aislinn let out another cry. “Beau!”

Beau was moving along the edge of the river, the cats prowling towards him. With each one he took out with a blast of fire, another one lunged closer. He was disappearing into the dark, into the tunnel, the entire ceiling shaking above him. Aislinn raced towards him, Dillon too—

Caer saw the stone swing seconds before it dislodged. Dillon didn't. He was standing right in its path—

Caer reacted instinctively, holding out his hand, tugging on the thread he'd felt before with the rodents, like Dillon was tied to him. He yanked hard, pulling him back.

Dillon splashed into the stream, gasping up at Caer as he hauled him back onto his feet, eyes wide with shock.

They didn't speak. They turned their backs together, preparing for another onslaught of cats.

Beau had disappeared. The tunnel shook again. Aislinn flung her hands towards the ceiling, grunting beneath the weight of the stone. Vines unfurled around the walls, reeds bent upwards, locking together, weaving upwards in an effort to assist. Caer searched blindly for something to do, anything —

It wasn't enough.

The tunnel fell.



It took Beau's eyes a few desperate seconds to adjust to the gloom. A few desperate seconds of fighting off cats in the unfathomable dark, hearing them hiss, feeling them clawing at his skin.

He was breathing too hard to scream. He was bleeding too hard to *think*.

The second he could see, he started firing off fireballs, scorching the ones clinging to his skin until their bodies fell to the floor, writhing and shrieking. Vines, there were so many—a tide of them, a black sea of fur and fangs.

Something else snarled in the distance.

The cats stilled, hair stiffening on the back of their necks. Beau froze, breath in his throat. Waiting.

Something crept forward out of the tunnel, long and large. It had the body of a water dragon, elongated and narrow, but covered in thick, dark fur, and crowned with horns. A thin, matted mane hung around its head and neck, and its eyes glowed like amethysts in the tangible dark.

It lunged at the cats, swiping them away, biting their bodies in two if it caught them in its mouth and spitting them away. Its talons were like knives. Again and again it slashed and bit, until the walls were coated in blood.

A droplet drifted down Beau's cheek. He shuddered beneath it, but he could not move.

Only once all the cave cats were dead did the monster turn its sights on Beau. It prowled forward on its great legs, a shimmer of scales in the pads of its furred feet.

It sniffed at him, its hot breath dusting his cheek.

But it did not attack.

The tunnel entrance shuddered and shook, fallen boulders moving away, vines crawling back to the rock as light pooled into the cave. Aislinn scrambled inside, screaming his name and drawing her sword.

“Beau—”

“Don't!” He held up his hand to shield the creature from his sister. She—for he felt instinctively she *was* a she—took one final look at him, and bolted off into the dark.

The tunnel turned quiet and still once more.

Aislinn turned towards him. “What was *that*?”

“I don’t know,” he whispered. He had never, ever seen anything like her.

Aislinn put her arm around him. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get back to the others.”



Aislinn raced back through the shallow stream, Beau fast behind her. Back in the main cavern, the few remaining cave cats had been finally expunged. The ogre was staggering, still swinging, blood pooling down his legs. Magna and Diana unravelled a spool of rope, looping it round its ankles. It fell with a resounding *thud* that shook the cavern, sending down another shower of rock.

Aislinn put up her hands to catch it, spearing the stones with vines. Beau rushed to assist her as the dwarves clambered onto the back of the ogre and stabbed it through the neck. It took an age to dig down into its flesh and do enough damage to mortally wound it.

It took even longer to die, shuddering and groaning until it did.

Finally, it slackened, its breathing withering away to nothing.

The dwarves slid from its inert body. Aislinn and Beau let go of the ceiling. The party gathered, panting hard.

“Cave cats,” Caer said. “Cave *cats*. You called those things cave *cats*. Those things were not cats. They were fucking predators!”

“Language,” said Minerva.

“All cats are predators,” Bell said pointedly, helping Flora unload the healing supplies. “You’d do well to remember it.”

Hecate wound her way around Caer’s legs, blood gleaming in her fur. The look she gave him was smug.

“I’m onto you,” Caer said, whilst rooting through his pockets to see if he had any salted meat for her. Aislinn giggled.

“Injuries,” said Minerva. “Report.”

One by one, the party reported their cuts and scrapes. Dillon, whose wounds didn’t bother him, and some of the others with the least amount of injuries, were sent to round up the wargis and calm them down. Aislinn and Beau healed each other instantly and helped see to them. Wargis, thankfully, were not resistant to their magic.

Unlike ogres, giants and dwarves.

“Are there any other creatures my magic is unlikely to work on?” Caer asked. “I should probably know before I risk my life trying to end them.”

“Trolls,” said everyone almost at once.

“And golems,” added Bell, with a look at Minerva.

There was a general murmur of agreement.

Aislinn glanced around the party as they cleaned wounds and bandaged themselves up. Three of Bell’s fingers had been crushed in the fight, there were a lot of bites and bruises—some no doubt to scar forever. She wished she was able to help them, and couldn’t help but marvel at their sheer determination. Nothing seemed to hamper them for long. Their attitude seemed to be, “Stitch it up, swig of painkiller, mug of ale, someone help her with her bedroll and mind-over-matter.”

She turned to Caer, whose shoulder was being cleaned by Flora. A bit of his flesh was missing.

“Don’t suppose I can convince you to let me heal that for you, can I?”

“Prolonged contact with your skin? Not the best idea.”

Aislinn swallowed. “It must hurt.”

“Not as much as hurting you.”

“Could I—” she stopped.

“What?”

“You can’t hurt me when you’re sleeping. If you’d give me permission...”

“Well, as long as you’re not staying up late to do it...”

Aislinn pursed her lips, biting back a smile. “No promises.”





Dillon sat by the side of the circle. He didn't need to sit—he felt like he could stand forever—but with all of the party sitting and most of them only up to his waist when they were standing anyway, he felt somewhat self-conscious. The wargis were all healed and settled now, his fingers were too clumsy to be of much more assistance, and he was at a loss for what else to do.

He needed to speak to Caer about how he'd managed to control him during the battle. He wasn't entirely sure what he was going to say—indeed, he was grateful Caer had saved him—but... they should talk about it.

Finally, Caer finished talking to Aislinn.

Dillon lumbered towards him. “Thank you,” he said. “For getting me out of the way.” He didn't want to think about what would have happened if his body had been broken by falling debris but his head remained intact. Would they have severed it in an attempt to put him out of his misery, or dug him out and scooped him onto a wargi in the hope of finding some way to fix his soupy form? Either option wasn't fun to think about.

“Don't mention it,” Caer said, not quite meeting his gaze. “If I crossed some sort of line—”

“Please, always assume I don't want to be squashed beneath falling stones.”

“Right.” Caer paused. “How did it feel, when I controlled you?”

“Odd.”

“Odd?”

“I can’t feel much, I don’t have a better way of explaining it.” Dillon stilled. “Do I have a life force? Or do I feel like those other dead things—”

“No,” Caer said. “I mean—yes. You have a life force inside of you. Not armoured, like the dwarves, and not quite Beau and Aislinn’s, either. It’s like it’s a different colour.”

“Can you control Ais and Beau?”

He shook his head. “I could... I could snuff them out, if I wanted to, but otherwise...” He ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

Dillon’s chest tightened. It could not be easy for Caer, raised with no magic, struggling under the weight of powers no one really understood... powers that meant he couldn’t even touch the girl he—

“Practise on me.”

Caer looked up. “What?”

“You need to learn how to control your powers, right? Practise on me. At very least, you should learn how to control the dead you keep bringing back.”

Caer stared at him. “I... don’t want to kill you again.”

Dillon shrugged. "I would rather stay alive, if I could, but for all we know... I'm living on borrowed time. I think I'd like to do some good whilst I'm still here."

Caer looked down at his feet. "I'm not so sure I'm worth it."

"Ais thinks you are," Dillon said quickly.

"You seem oddly close to her given that you only just met."

Dillon smiled. "Jealous?"

"I am not going to answer that."

Dillon laughed. "I'm not interested in her that way, I assure you, but... I don't know. I feel *something* towards her. Same with Beau. Maybe they just remind me of their parents. I just feel like I already know them." It was akin to the tug he'd felt when Caer's magic had pulled at his body. That thread, that connection.

Caer nodded. "All right," he said. "Thank you."

Minerva called him away to help with something, and Dillon once more found himself alone. He returned to sit beside the wargis. Flora was still patching someone up, which was fine, but he'd be lying if he said his wounds weren't bothering him. His arm was shredded and he thought a bit of his cheek might be hanging off. He dabbed at it, trying to make it stick back in place.

Luna appeared beside him, brandishing a needle and thread. "Let me."

"You can do stitches?"

“I don’t usually like doing them on people because, well, it hurts them, but...” She swallowed. “You’re not in pain, are you?”

“No,” he said, his throat equally tight.

She ran her fingers down his cheek, pinching his flesh together. “Can you feel anything at all?”

“Pressure, I suppose,” he explained. “It’s like being wrapped in too many layers of clothing. Everything feels like hard sponge.”

Luna nodded, though she couldn’t know what that was like. No one could.

He supposed, on that note, he and Caer were rather alike.

Luna began stitching him. He half wished he could feel it, just to feel anything—to feel the tips of her fingers against his skin. He wondered how long he could stay in this half-body before the lack of sensations really started to get to him.

“Are you all right?” Luna asked him.

*I want to feel you.* “I’m fine. You?”

“I’m rather good at staying out of the fight.”

“Smart decision.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not calling me weak or silly for not wanting to fight. For not chastising me for coming down here when I’m no great warrior like the others.”

Dillon shrugged. “Everyone has their strengths. Magna doesn’t seem like a great warrior, either, or Flora—but they’re invaluable members of the group. You are too.”

Her white cheeks flushed. Vines, she was beautiful. He wondered if Beau had drawn a picture of her yet and whether or not he’d be prepared to part with it. He’d like to take something with him if he survived long enough to return to Acanthia.

“I miss home,” he said, half to himself.

Luna nodded, finishing with his cheek and pulling his arm into her lap. “Then tell me about it.”



After refreshments and a decent rest, the party packed up and continued on their way. The crystals turned red, the foliage following, giving the caverns the impression of fire. Great blooms littered the tunnels, leaves of crimson and scarlet, and the water was filled with floating blooms that crackled on the surface under the crystal lights, their pollen gooey and golden.

“Fire lilies,” Flora explained. “They’re edible—taste like honey. Good for binding wounds, too.”

A small stop was required to pick a few. Beau took sketches as Aislinn dipped her fingers into the sticky pollen, and tried not to moan. It was as sweet as promised, but with a heat that coursed through her and did absolutely *nothing* to help the quivering feeling still gnawing at her insides.

“Are you all right?” Caer asked, sensing her distress.

Aislinn jumped in the water to save herself from answering.

Minerva tutted. “I hope you’re not expecting us to wait for you to dry off.”

“Certainly not,” said Aislinn, climbing out and half-wishing she could just go back and drown herself. “I would hate to cause a delay.”

The discomfort as she crawled back onto her saddle was a welcome distraction, as were a few more creatures that marred their way—all easily disposed of or carefully avoided.

Aislinn had long since lost track of time, but she thought it was probably evening or late afternoon. Only Minerva, Bell and Flora seemed to be carrying watches.

A small settlement came into view ahead of them—something between a fortress and a town—walled and towered and cut from the stone. It was abandoned now, the gates hanging from their hinges, crates and carts smashed in pieces through the main street.

Minerva stopped to stare at a sign hovering over the old inn. It had been slashed through, but still swung lightly in whatever passed for a breeze down here—a dull, empty echo.

Bell placed a hand on her shoulder. “We don’t have to stay here.”

Minerva shook her head. “Best place for us. Easy to defend. Caer, Dillon, Diana—see if you can barricade the gates. Flora—check the other exits. Luna—inn. See if there’s anything left. Young highnesses—stable the wargis.”

Everyone split up whilst the remaining few did a quick patrol to ensure they weren’t shutting anything in with them.

They met back at the inn: a bare, broken room composed of rounded edges and a hundred shades of brown.

Luna was already cooking in the kitchen while Minerva and Bell righted tables and chairs, making the room as presentable as possible.

“Good news!” Minerva declared. “Most of the beds upstairs are still very functional. Proper mattresses tonight, folks!”

This was met with a resounding, if slightly forced, cheer.

“And there’s ale in the cellar!” Luna called from the kitchen.

This cheer was considerably louder.

They split once again, some going to relieve the wargis of the remaining loads, others to set up the beds, Minerva to double-check the barricade, some to assist in the kitchen. No one seemed in the mood to continue the Wyverns & Wastelands campaign, but Diana started up a game of cards. Dillon cleaned out tankards and poured out ale, chatting to Luna as she cooked. Beau drew in the corner. Everyone was doing something.

Everyone, thought Aislinn, except Minerva.

As soon as she returned from her patrol, she took a seat by the hearth, saying little as she stared into the flames. Her metal fingers tapped against her armrest.

Her mood continued much through dinner—a sweet stew of cave frabbit and fire-lilies that Luna received much praise for, from everyone apart from Minerva, who only murmured a



half-hearted thanks. She drank more than she usually did, and laughed less.

Eventually, Aislinn could stand it no longer.

“What happened here?” she asked.

The room fell quiet. Beau looked up from his book. Caer met Aislinn’s gaze, but shrugged, just as confused as she was.

Minerva sighed—a sigh of years, of a tale she knew she had to tell, but had been putting off for far, far too long. “Decades ago—almost a century now—I came across this place when it was a small but thriving town, full of good, hearty dwarves,” she began, her eyes still foggy and far away. “I met a man named Clay Goldsbane. He was rough and rude, coarse as nails and tough as old boots... and he was the greatest friend I ever had—save this one, of course.” She gestured briefly to Bell, a weak smile passing between them.

The others stilled their game of cards, listening in. Beau folded away his sketchbook. Dillon, cleaning in the kitchen, finally rejoined the rest of the group.

“Clay and I were friends for years,” Minerva went on. “He’d accompany me on expeditions into the Deep, and we’d drink ourselves silly whenever we returned. One day, he announced that he’d like to go to Avalinth and see it with his own eyes—even if it was only the once. I was all too happy to take him there, although I suspected he would hate it—hate the noise and the endless hubbub and the great gears and the constant movement.

“But he didn’t. Clay fell in love with the place almost the moment he saw it... and he fell for Venus, too, just as quickly, just as surely. I’d never seen two people less alike or more in love. They married, and a few years later, there was Tiberius. Our mother was still queen, then, and we were free to live pretty much entirely as we pleased. We raised the boy together, the four of us. He felt almost as much our son as he was theirs.

“Then, a few years ago, our mother died. Not entirely unexpectedly, but quicker than we thought. I was poised to be her successor. Venus had never shown any interest in the throne, nor did she then. But I knew after I took it, that there would be no gallivanting off into the Deep, that I would be expected to remain in Avalinth. I was ready to do it—but I wanted one last hurrah. I set off with a small party to deal with a rogue golem. Bell and Clay accompanied me.

“But the golem was too wild and unpredictable—bigger than we could ever have imagined. It caused a cave-in, killing most of our party... and setting off a pack of beasts. One slashed Bell’s throat straight through before the golem lifted me off the ground by the arm.”

Her shoulder twitched at the confession, and Aislinn sucked in a breath.

“I watched her bleeding on the ground, and knew, if someone didn’t get to her soon, she was going to die. And behind her... Clay lay crushed by rubble.

“There’s no cutting into a golem. You can smash it, but my axe wasn’t doing the job. So I took it to my arm instead, tied the end off with my belt, and pressed my remaining hand to Bell’s wound. We both held on just long enough for the relief party to arrive.

“Clay didn’t. If I’d been able to get to him, to free him from the rubble before it crushed him entirely, perhaps he would have lived, but I didn’t. I had an opportunity to save him, or my wife. I chose her, as most would have done. I cannot regret that. That does not mean it was an easy choice. People forget that I loved Clay, too. He had been my friend for centuries. And I had to watch him die.”

She paused in her story, the firelight flickering in her eyes.

“Returning to Avalinth without him was the hardest thing I have ever done. Venus’ screams nearly shattered the stones. Telling Tibe his father wasn’t coming back... I would have traded another limb to have avoided it.

“After I recovered, I was fitted with a metal arm. I was still prepared to take the throne and was resolved to never fight again. I was shocked when Venus decided to challenge me. Shocked, and hurt. She wanted to punish me, see—like I wasn’t already doing that myself.

“There are three trials one needs to best to win the dwarven throne; a test of logic, a test of diplomacy, and a test of combat. I beat Venus in the test of logic, but when the combat came... Ordinarily, I would have bested her with ease, but I’d barely recovered from the loss of the arm and was still getting

used to the metal one... I wasn't at my best. When she beat me in that..." She swallowed, pausing in her tale. "I don't think I wanted to win. I'd never coveted the throne, and suddenly, here was something Venus *did* want. If it gave her any kind of satisfaction at all... I'd give it.

"There's no rule that says the loser of the trials has to leave Avalinth, but I could not stay there. I couldn't stay and watch my sister freeze into a former version of herself. I could not stay and let her hate me more."

"But," Aislinn interrupted, her voice quiet, "it wasn't your fault. What happened—"

"I know," said Minerva, "I know that. I think she does too. It just... it didn't matter. I was the one who wanted to go, the sister Clay chose to follow... and the one that couldn't choose him in the end. I couldn't stay and watch the place where he wasn't. I needed to go."

"And we weren't going to let her go alone," added Diana, looking up from the table. "Terrible, see, at doing what we're told."

Minerva smiled. "My relief party. They didn't stay quite as far away as they ought to have."

"We're stubborn like that," agreed Flora.

"Magna wasn't with us, or Luna," Diana continued. "But Magna said she wasn't letting Min go without a mechanic, and Luna—"

"I said they'd starve without me."

“She wasn’t wrong,” said Minerva.

A laugh passed around the room.

“Every time we encountered an enemy on our journey, Min would yell ‘protect the cook!’”

“It’s good advice.”

“For which we’re all grateful,” added Dillon.

“If we hadn’t starved, we’d have survived, but we’d have been miserable, which is frankly a worse fate,” Minerva agreed. She downed her tankard. “Ah, well, that’s enough of that. I think I’m ready for bed. Bell?”

“I’ll be right there, dearest.”



Most of the dwarves headed upstairs not long afterwards, leaving ‘the young ‘uns’ to themselves. Luna fell asleep in front of the fire and had to be carried upstairs by Dillon, which was difficult given his height and the low rafters of the inn. Even Caer had to duck in places.

Dillon came downstairs having deposited Luna safely in one of the beds, and the four of them conversed a little longer in the low light of the fire. Aislinn polished her weapons. Beau sketched. Dillon and Caer sparred out in the street and practised the latter’s powers.

Beau slunk upstairs before they returned.

They chatted a little longer beside the hearth, until Aislinn started to yawn.

“Go sleep,” Dillon insisted. “I know what you’re doing, and I appreciate it, but it isn’t necessary.”

“Do you know what he means, Caer?”

“Haven’t a clue, Ais.”

“See, Dillon? Caer says he hasn’t a clue.”

“Hilarious,” he said dryly. “A beautifully-dodged truth, Your Highness. Now, to bed with you.”

“I definitely outrank you.”

“I will tell your mother.”

Aislinn stood up. “I am doing this because I like you, not because of that threat.”

“Noted.”

She patted him on the shoulder as she passed, trying not to stare at the ragged mess of Dillon’s cheek, knowing it would never heal. She pinched Caerwyn’s sleeve and beckoned him to follow her.

She was half asleep as she traipsed up the stairs, her head heavy with exhaustion and senses hazy with ale, unsteadier than she’d normally be. Her foot caught on one of the steps, sending her sprawling. Caer hit her back, catching himself on stairs before he could topple forward, his mouth in her hair.

Aislinn giggled, inching round to face him.

“You all right?” he asked.

His face was inches from hers, his breath warming her face. “Fine...”

He stood up, offering her his elbow. Aislinn clambered back to her feet and scooted up the stairs.

Most of the space on the upper level was taken up by a series of beds, all now occupied, and a couple of private

rooms. Caer pushed open the door to one, inspecting the occupants. “Taken,” he announced, turning to the second. “This one’s free...” He scrunched his forehead. “Umm... Ais? Can you check this one? I think my weak mortal eyesight is playing tricks on me.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s only the one bed.”

Aislinn peered inside, making out the outline of one large bed. “What of it?” She crawled inside, too tired to think of much but crawling into the sheets.

Caer was still looking around, as if hoping another bed would pop out of nowhere. Aislinn had no idea where the bedrolls were, or any spare bedding. She was too hazy to care. What was the issue?

“They did this on purpose.”

Aislinn shucked off her boots and belts. “They were drunk and not thinking.”

Caer’s eyes widened as she wrestled out of her trousers, keeping nothing on but her loose shirt and undergarments. His gaze screwed into the floorboards. “I will, of course, take the floor.”

“Because I’m a delicate female?”

“Because I’m the one that can kill you in your sleep.”

Aislinn laughed. “Sure. Let’s pretend I’m not capable of that too.” She looked at the bed. “Are you a wriggler?”



“No, but—”

“Take the left. It’s daft for anyone to sleep on the cold floor when there’s a mattress available. We’ll put some blankets or something in between us.”

“If you’re sure—”

“Sure I don’t want either one of us to be cold all night long and grumpy all of tomorrow? Pretty sure. Get in.”

Caer swallowed, but went around to the other side of the bed. He took off his boots and belt, but kept on everything else, bunching up one of the blankets between them.

Aislinn tried not to laugh at his discomfort, reminding herself of where it came from. “We were closer in the cave.”

“We would have frozen to death there.”

*Sometimes not touching you feels like freezing to death,* she thought dimly.

“Did you say something?”

“Did I? I was hoping that was my inside voice.”

Caer barked a laugh. “I... don’t like not being able to touch you, either,” he said, after a pause.

Aislinn rolled towards him. “Have you tried making a list of where you’ll touch me when we return to the palace?”

Caer’s gulp was audible. “I may have done.”

“I have quite the list too.”

“Oh?” his voice warbled. “Care to share it?”

“And ruin the surprise?”

“Cruel, torturous creature.”

“I can be...”

Caer turned towards her. She traced the edges of his profile with her gaze, committing the outline of him to memory. She imagined the feeling of his skin beneath hers, of his body pressed to her flesh. Her centre tingled—with the residue effects of heat or just his presence in general, she couldn't be sure.

She could feel his breath on her again. Her own seemed to clamber towards him, begging to braid with his. Vines, her entire body felt like it was vibrating beneath his gaze.

Maybe it was just as well she couldn't kiss him. Because if she kissed him... how would she ever disentangle herself?

“Ais?” Caer prompted. “Your stare is very loud.”

Aislinn swallowed. “I was thinking it was just as well I can't kiss you.”

He frowned. “How so?”

“Because if you ever kissed me, I think I'd fall in love with you, and if I fell in love with you, I don't think I'd ever stop. I think that would be it for me, that love would reign over me as I reigned over Faerie. I would love you all your life and all my life after... long after you were dust.”

For a long moment, Caer stared at her, eyes large and soft, all honey and whiskey. “If it were my life at risk, I'd definitely

be kissing you right now.”

“What if I’m all right with risking it?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah,” she said, turning her gaze towards the ceiling, “I understand that.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Because if it was your life you were risking, I wouldn’t want to do it either.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “I... don’t know where we go from here.”

She leaned back towards him. “I don’t think you’ll hurt me. When you’ve used your powers before, you’ve always been stressed, terrified—”

“You think I’m not now?”

She pressed a hand against his chest, keeping to the fabric of his shirt. His heart thumped against her fingers. “Want to feel mine?”

His hand drifted over her breast, skimming against the cloth. “God, I wish I could touch you.”

She was half-tempted to command him, to glamour him into doing it. Maybe her power was stronger than his, and she could command him into control.

But making someone do something against their will was abhorrent... even if she knew he wanted it too. It would not be fair. She would not do it.

“Caer...” she whispered, her words brushed with longing.

Half her name, a desperate, murmured, yearning sound followed from him, and then his mouth was over hers and all at once they were kissing. His lips moved against her, hot and claiming, his hands drifting to her waist, against her back. Her own wrapped around his neck, pooling into his hair. She wanted to inhale him. To consume him. His kiss was wildfire.

This was foolish, reckless, stupid. She knew all this and she didn't care. It was worse to be away from him. It *hurt* not to touch him. Gods, she needed this. Needed him—all of him.

“Ais...” he murmured against her neck.

“Don't stop,” she said, aware of the whimper in her voice, “please.” *Please don't stop. Don't ever stop. Touch me like this forever.*

His tongue pressed against hers, his body hot. The flesh of their stomachs slid together. She needed more hands, more tongues, more teeth—more ways to explore him, hold him, mark him.

For he was hers and she was his in a way she had belonged to no one and never would again. He tasted of woodsmoke and earth and sweat. Of a scent that slashed through her like a thunderstorm. Heat coiled inside her. She raked her hands down his back—

He shuddered with pain, letting out a low hiss.

“I'm sorry—” she started.

He pulled away, breathing hard, his soft, sullen mouth parted. Her chin felt raw without his lips on hers.

“We can’t,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Aislinn knelt up in bed. “You were controlling it,” she said. “You’re fine. I trust you.”

Caer shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Really, truly I am. But I can’t risk it. I can’t risk *you*.”

Aislinn swallowed, her senses returning. He was right. Of course he was right. If the situations were reversed she’d build up a wall between them before risking his life.

But her soul felt flayed without his body to rest against.

She hugged her shirt to his chest, and rested her head against his bowed back, mindful of the wound. She wanted to tell him it was all right, but the words wouldn’t form in her mouth. “I understand,” she said. “We’ll resume this back in the palace.”

She got up from the bed.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll squeeze in with Beau. He won’t mind. We used to share all the time when we were little.”

“Right.”

She moved towards the door.

“Ais?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t hate me, do you?”

Ais froze, stung by his words. “No one who truly knows you could hate you, Caer, and certainly not me. I hate what has been done to you. I hate the circumstances that keep us apart. But you? Never.”

She paused at the door, waiting for him to say something else, but he did not, and eventually she walked away.



Caer lay in the dark room staring at the ceiling for some time after Aislinn left, wishing there was a cold river he could jump into—either to calm himself down or drown himself, he wasn’t fully sure.

How could he have been so *reckless*? He could have killed her. Never mind the haziness of the ale dampening his senses, he could still feel her on his skin like fire. That kiss... God, that kiss...

Caer had kissed women before. He hadn’t kissed anyone like *that*. He’d fallen into her like they were made of the same flesh, like he’d erupt if he didn’t have her. It still felt like that, a volcano, a comet, a spool of unravelling silk.

He could not get free of her. He doubted he ever would.

*If you ever kissed me, I think I’d fall in love with you, and if I fell in love with you, I don’t think I’d ever stop.*

How was he ever going to survive her?



“Caerwyn...” a voice called. “It’s time to come home, son.”

Caer opened his eyes. Owen was standing before him, a hand on his arm. He was back in Afelcarreg, in the hall, seated on a throne. He tried to move, but great iron manacles sprung up around his wrists and ankles. He strained against them.

“Don’t move, Caer,” Owen said. “Don’t struggle. You’re home now.”

*Home, home, home.* Nothing about this place was home. Home was firelight and laughter and shiny cards beneath his fingers, the feel of the forge, the whisper of a woman’s smile.

Minerva’s hearty chuckle. Diana’s laugh. Luna’s baking. The sound of Magna tinkering in the corner...

And Aislinn. Aislinn’s face and voice and presence.

Aislinn. All her.

He couldn’t stay here. He had to get back.

“Owen,” Caer cried. “Please. Let me go. I can’t stay here.”

“Go, boy? Go where?”

Outside, a voiceless wind howled. There were no streets, no houses, no fields or mountains—nothing. A dark fog hovered over everything, a living cloud.

Something rumbled inside it, and yet Caer couldn’t shake the feeling that it was utterly empty. The sound of nothing.

It echoed inside his chest.

“There is nowhere to go,” Owen whispered. “And you are king now. You must lead these people.”

Caer turned to look down into the hall. Guests were arranged on the tables, dressed in finery. They all turned their heads towards him...

They were shrunken, fleshless skeletons, held together with scraps of skin. Wordless, chattering maws gaped at him, empty eyes stared.

A hand clutched his arm, paper-thin, a parody of skin.

“You are our king, Caerwyn,” Owen’s voice came from inside his bony mouth. “You have to rule us now.”

Caer’s heart screamed in his chest. “No,” he breathed, “no, I don’t want this.”

Owen’s hand grew tighter. “Don’t worry, boy. You’re not alone. A king must have a queen, after all...”

He pointed a long, skeletal finger at a figure at the end of the hall, a bride in a gown of moths, red hair tumbling down over grey, rotting skin. Her ribcage lay exposed, her heart still pumping in her chest.

“What’s the matter, Caer?” said Aislinn’s voice from the corpse’s hollow mouth. “Haven’t you always held my heart?” Her claw-like hand lifted to the bloody organ and plucked it from her body, holding it out to him. “It’s yours, Caer. It’s always been yours.”



Caer bolted upright in bed, half screaming, covered in sweat. His heart raced.

*A dream a dream a dream, only a dream.*

But like all the others, its claws had sunk in deep. He could still feel his stepfather's fingers digging into his skin...

And suddenly Aislinn was there, steadying his arms, telling him to breathe and holding his face with her bare hands, her touch slicing through shadow, through thought, through reason —

Her heartbeat pulsed around her, her lifeforce overwhelming.

He bolted away from her, scurrying to the other side of the room. “No, no, you can't touch me, you can't—”

“All right,” Aislinn said, stopping shortly in front of him, palms bared. “I won't. I won't, I promise, I just... I want to.”

“I don't want to hurt you.”

Aislinn swallowed. “And I don't want you to hurt.”

He looked down, and saw the wound on his arm had been healed. She'd come back like she said she would, even after...

He swallowed, grabbing fistfuls of his hair, curling inward like an injured animal.

“I hate you having to see me like this.”

For a moment, Aislinn was silent. Of course she was. She couldn't lie. She couldn't say she didn't mind—of course she did.

She turned towards the bed and picked up one of the blankets. “I hate it too,” she admitted, making Caer’s heart tremble. “I hate that you are hurting. I hate that I can’t fix it like I can fix your skin...” Her fingers tightened around the blanket. “But I hate more that you think I care. That you would prefer to suffer in silence.”

She came towards him, holding out the blanket, and draped it over his shoulders.

“I have nightmares too,” she said. “Usually about Cass. Sometimes about other things. Failure. Death. Losing control.” She tightened the blanket around him, and slid beside him, not quite touching. “I’m not saying that my trauma competes with yours or even that I know what that’s like, I’m just saying... I understand being afraid. I understand not wanting others to see that part of you, and... maybe we’re both wrong? It shouldn’t be so terrifying to admit we’re terrified.” She swallowed. “I’m embarrassed by my own failings, but yours... I don’t even see them as failings. I just see them as a part of you. Silly to hold you in better regard than I hold myself, but... there you go.”

Caer inhaled. “I don’t know,” he said, not meaning a word of it, “I am fairly spectacular.”

Aislinn laughed, a sound that could break apart thunder. “But it makes sense, what you’re saying. Because I hold you in higher regard than I hold myself. Higher than anyone, actually.”

A pause, solid and insubstantial as shadow, stretched out between them.

“Well, don’t tell Minerva,” Aislinn said eventually. “She might have your head. Insubordination and all.”

“I think ‘crown princess’ outranks exiled former one.”

“Are you going to tell her that?”

“Absolutely not.”

She nudged his shoulder, before scooting upright and collecting something from the pocket of her discarded trousers. She came back to him, tugging on one of her gloves. She held out her hand. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Are you staying?”

“If you’ll let me. Beau’s a wriggler anyway.”

She guided him back to the bed and slid them both under the covers, making a half-hearted barricade between them, still holding his hand over it.

“You’ll overheat,” Caer told her.

“It’s worth it,” she said. “*You’re* worth it, Caer. I know you doubt it. I know *why* you doubt it. I know I would too, if I were you. But I’m afraid I would do quite a lot for you, and you’re just going to have to accept that.”

Caer breathed, her words brushing against his chest. “All right,” he said, wishing more than everything he could hold her, a want that could break apart stone. “All right.”



# 39

## A MONSTER IN THE DARK

The following day, they descended down another level into caves that glimmered with obsidian and deep, bubbling pits of tar. Everything seemed sharper here, the rocks pointed like blades and shining like steel, and the slightest movement echoed like thunder.

“Stay alert,” Minerva warned, as steam spurted beneath the floor. “There’s a lot of trip hazards, and if you fall... you may not get back up.”

Luna’s wargi deftly leapt out of the way. “This is fun,” she said, her voice high and trembling. “Beats monsters, right?”

The rest of the dwarves groaned. “Why would you say that?” Flora hissed. “Inviting trouble! Honestly!”

“I’m trying to be optimistic!”

“Surely you can’t invite trouble just by speaking it?” Beau queried.

The dwarves turned to glare at him.

“Apparently, I am mistaken.”

Yet, despite Luna's slip-up, nothing happened for most of the morning. No one slipped or fell, and, when the terrain became less treacherous, any monsters they encountered gave them a wide berth.

They stopped to rest in a cave around midday—Aislinn was once more relying on the others to keep time—before resuming their quest. A few hours later, they came across another ruined settlement—little more than a few stony huts and a crumbled wall around them. Much of the stone had melted beneath a steady drip of water, the rock resembling wax.

It was not an ideal rest spot. “We’ll press on,” Minerva insisted.

They crept onwards, into a cavern almost pitch-black. Even Aislinn's eyes struggled to adjust, and she imagined Beau's were not much better. Only a thin, narrow light protruded into the dark, illuminating the faintest of shadows.

“Min?” Diana asked. “Should we light the torches?”

Minerva stilled. “No,” she said. “They’ll be like a beacon. Trust in the wargis. Aislinn, Beau—would you take the lead?”

They whispered their acceptance, creeping forward towards the head of the party. Hairs stirred on the back of Aislinn's neck, pricked like the brush of a needle. Something scurried along the walls.

They were not alone.

The party moved forward, silently, carefully, the ears of their mounts flat against their heads. Aislinn could sense hers wanting to growl, but holding it back, as if even he knew it would invite danger.

Beau was whispering under his breath, a spell to ward off danger. It might work with something minor, but the energy to repel anything larger...

Aislinn swallowed.

Something stepped into the light, something with large, padded feet.

Aislinn drew her breath; a few others did too. "What is it?" Minerva asked.

The light sharpened around the silhouette, and Aislinn hissed at everyone to stop. It was the size of a shire horse with the body of a lion. A thick, tangled mane sprouted around its grotesquely human face, housing wide eyes and a mouth full of fangs. Thick, leathery wings protruded from its back, and its body ended in a long, barbed tail, like that of a scorpion's.

"Manticore," Aislinn announced.

The party sucked in its breath.

"Winged?" Bell asked.

"Yes."

"Has it spotted us?"

"I don't think so."

Silence followed.

“Can we avoid it?” Minerva asked.

Aislinn stared at the ground, and the shaft of light ahead depicting the end of the cavern. “Maybe,” she said. Everything was so difficult to guess in this light. “I’m not sure. Beau?”

“I think so.”

“We should evade,” Minerva said. “In this light... it’s too risky.”

“I’ve got the anti-venom!” Flora whispered.

“Enough for all our mangled corpses?”

“Ah—no. Fair point.”

“Lead us,” Minerva urged them.

Aislinn nodded, realising after the action that that was widely unhelpful in the dark, but the words were stuck in her throat. The wargis understood, creeping forward after her. She was not used to this, used to guiding this many people. She’d never led a party of so many, and certainly not so many she cared about.

“*Steel yourself,*” came the words of her parents, overlapping with the faint, familiar tones of Miriam, her mentor, the captain of the knights.

She could not fail them. She would not.

She stuck as close as she could to the walls, though the wargis shirked from them and the rock *moved*. Not rock. Scuttling, wriggling insects as large as her face—but she dared not look for long.

Onwards, they marched, slow and careful. The light inched closer.

They were not yet past the manticore.

A crack sounded behind her, followed by a yelp. Luna let out a soft cry.

Aislinn spun round; the wargi's paw had disappeared into an empty steam hole, the rock giving way as easily as tissue paper.

Aislinn hissed under her breath. She glanced at the manticore. Its face had turned towards the noise, but there was no recognition, not yet. Its eyesight was not as good as hers.

She gestured at Beau to keep the group moving and slid from her saddle, back to Luna.

“It's all right,” she whispered, “stay calm.”

The rest of the party carried on moving, all apart from Dillon, who had dismounted to assist even though he had no idea what was going on. Aislinn whispered instructions in the dark as they tugged at the wargi's paw, inwardly cursing with every word uttered.

The manticore was getting closer.

“Get Luna off,” she said finally. She didn't want to abandon the wargi, but they couldn't risk Luna's life over it. Caer would never forgive himself. Aislinn would never forgive *herself*.



Dillon nodded, hands reaching for her, helping her out of the saddle. They walked forward as Aislinn tried once more in vain to free the wargi.

It let out a slow, desperate whimper.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered back, “I’m so sorry.”

A terrific crash clanged through the cavern. Aislinn’s gaze spun towards it—Dillon and Luna had both fallen through the floor.

The manticore lunged.

Luna screamed. A massive paw rose up. Dillon twisted in the hole, covering Luna’s body with his own. Claws raked down his back. Aislinn raced towards them, but the wings flared out, knocking her to the ground.

“Dillon!” Luna screamed.

The manticore yanked him out of the hole and bit into his shoulder, only to spit him out a second later. Aislinn streamed forward, yanking Luna out of the ground, turning just in time to meet another swipe with her blade.

“Ais!” Beau raced towards her, the others standing in the line, glancing sightlessly at the scene before them, weapons raised, unable to act.

Beau skidded to a stop in the middle of the space, and flung his hands up into the air.

“*Luminous,*” he breathed.

Light erupted from his fingers like a flare, shooting up into the centre of the cavern...

And straight into the hundreds of bats sleeping there.

The second that it took them to react seemed to stretch into an age. Aislinn's vision went everywhere at once, to the horror on Beau's face, to the dismay of the dwarves, to Luna, scrambling through the shattered floor, and the Dillon, standing beneath the monstrous maw of the manticore, his arm torn halfway from its socket.

Aislinn charged.

The bats charged, too.

Beau slid into battle, conjuring a carpet of fire and flinging into the air like an enormous scythe, dividing the manticore from the cloud of bats.

Arrows flew. Aislinn sprang into action, slicing along the manticore's belly. The razor-sharp tail whipped round before she could thrust, slamming her against the ground.

Fire flailed above, the flare fading. Beau could not keep this up forever.

The tail came again, stinger at the ready. Dillon flung himself against it, holding tightly. Aislinn scrambled to her feet, grappling for her sword.

The fire vanished. The enormous wings shook.

Diana's grapple sprung out of nowhere, wrapping around a singular paw. She swung the chain around a pillar and pulled,

holding it in place.

Darkness blinked in and out, illuminated only by the faint pulse of Beau's next burst of fire, each growing dimmer and longer between attacks. There were too many bats, too many *things*...

The manticore strained against its bonds, sending down showers of rock. Aislinn swerved out of the way of its wings and paws, slicing where she could, diving when she could not. She could not get to its belly.

Caer arrived at her side, tearing through one of the wings. A second later, darkness came again. She heard Caer cry as the manticore batted him away, sliding into the dark.

She skidded towards him. He was unhurt, but his eyes stared sightlessly at the black ceiling. He could not see in this dark. He should not have come.

*"Visio nocturna,"* she whispered, and blew in his eyes.

A simple, ancient spell for night vision. It would not last long. Aislinn didn't have the power for it or any of the ingredients that might tether the spell to him for longer.

But it was better than nothing, and she could not help the others.

She raced back to the manticore, Dillon still holding on for dear life, and vaulted onto its back while Caer kept it occupied. It struggled, trying to buck her off. Desperate, she drove her sword into its flank. Not a killing blow, but if she could remove it—

The creature roared. It finally flung Dillon off its tail. The barb shot forward—

Caer leapt up, seizing the tail in his hands. “Move!”

Her sword was stuck fast. Another jerk and she flew to the floor, landing awkwardly on her arm. She dived for Caer’s sword, but a huge paw swiped her to the ground. It held her there, her throat pinned between two giant claws.

The huge, fanged face hovered over her.

Aislinn struggled, hands moving between her neck and her body, searching for the rest of her blades, refusing to give up.

She couldn’t reach them. She couldn’t *move*. She was going to—

The creature’s eyes rolled back in its sockets, and it slumped to the floor.

Aislinn scrambled free. Caer stood at the end of the monster, still holding its tail, panting hard. Caer who’d raced into battle, blind as he was, to grab a venomous tail.

She walked towards him as the others finished off the bats and gathered their weapons. “Why did you do that?” she asked.

Caer winced, breathing carefully. “I’m afraid I would do a lot worse, for you, and you’re just going to have to accept it.”

Aislinn leaned forward, resting her head against his shoulder, her arms grazing his back, only slightly, as if a

stronger action might shatter them completely. “All right,” she said. “All right.”

Dillon came back holding two of the wargis. The others were trickling back, hopping out of the way of the scuttling creatures on the floor.

“We can’t dawdle here for long,” Minerva said swiftly. “Looks like the manticore was keeping some other nasties at bay. Have we got the wargis?”

“One’s dead,” reported Dillon, voice careful.

Minerva groaned, too stressed to be sad. “Luna, double up with Magna. No, don’t complain at me, Mags, you’re the lightest. Come on.”

Aislinn turned back to Caer, resting against the wargi Dillon had given him. “Can you get up by yourself?”

“I think so.” He dug his foot into the stirrup and swung, each muscle taut. His skin gleamed with the effort. Aislinn inched forward, hand on his saddle instead of his fingers. “I’m fine,” he insisted.

The scuttling increased. There was no time to argue. The others were already racing out of the cavern. She scrambled up onto her own mount and charged after them, keeping her eyes on Caer the entire time. There was another wound in his shoulder, and he was obviously in pain—masking it because they could not stop.

She wanted to. She wanted to stop them all so badly. She wanted to tear open a portal and take him somewhere safe and

never let him leave that place again, no matter the cost. No matter if it meant he hated her, or never learnt to control his powers, or they could never touch again.

But of course, she did not.

They rode through caverns, past tar pits, over bridges so brittle each step was treacherous, slowing only when they had to, trying to put as much space as possible between them and their enemies. Aislinn's heart stayed in her throat, and her gaze on Caer. He sat rigid in his saddle like a piece of coiled wire.

Finally, they halted. Minerva pulled them into the first cave she could find, skidding the wargis to a stop and belting out instructions to erect some kind of barricade.

“Are we safe now?” Caer asked, voice shaking.

Bell looked around. “Ought to be. Why do you ask?”

“I might have a slight problem...” he said, and swayed on his feet before pitching forward into Aislinn's arms.

She screamed his name as the others rushed forward, sliding him to the ground, his body buckling. Aislinn's hands went towards his shirt, peeling it away from his skin. He cried out as her hands touched him—from fear or pain, it was impossible to tell.

“Caer, Caer, tell me where it hurts—”

“Back,” he moaned. “Stung.”

Aislinn rolled him over with the help of the others. A large, swollen mark pulsed beside his spine, oozing liquid.

Aislinn paled. “I can heal—”

“It’s poisoned,” Flora said, stopping her hand. “Don’t.”

She pressed her fingers to the wound. Caer started to thrash.

“Stand aside, lass,” said Minerva, “If the manticore venom doesn’t kill him, killing you might.”

Someone pulled her aside. Someone warm and tall and familiar whose voice she knew better than her own. Beau. He gripped her arms, trying to force her into a hug, whispering soft, stupid lies in her ear.

“It’s going to be fine.”

*You don’t know that.*

“Don’t worry.”

*I have to.*

“He’ll be all right, Ais. He will be.”

*He has to be. He has to be. He has to be.*

He convulsed on the floor, his head in Minerva’s lap, the others holding him down as he thrashed. Flora hovered over him, trying to administer anti-venom. His skin was covered in a ghastly sheen of sweat.

*I should be there, she realised dimly. I should be the one holding him.*

She knew something was wrong. She’d seen it in his face. She’d just believed him when he said he was fine. She didn’t think it was this bad. She should have known. She should have felt it.

Flora squeezed the anti-venom into the wound using a long needle. Caer screamed.

*Stop it, stop it, you're hurting him!*

She turned her eyes away from the wound and what Flora was doing, focusing on his face. His awful, beautiful, contorted face.

He rolled over and vomited on the ground.

“Caer!”

Luna stroked back his hair. The convulsing slowed to a steady shiver. Flora continued her work on the wound, puss and blood oozing onto the ground.

Caer still screamed.

Aislinn wrenched forward from Beau's grip, yanking on her gloves. She crushed down on her knees and seized Caer's hand.

Never more had she wanted to be able to lie.

*You're all right, Caer. You're going to be fine.*

“Caer,” she said, as steadily as she could. “Look at me. *Look at me.* Don't think about anything else. You have to be all right, do you hear me? *You have to be.*”

A faint flicker of recognition passed across his eyes, and then he slumped once more, sickeningly still.

Aislinn glanced at Flora.

“Quick,” she said, “whilst he's out. Seal this.”



Aislinn leaned over and pressed her hand to the mangled wound, and sealed it shut. Flora pressed her fingers to Caer's neck, and sighed. "He's going to be fine."

Aislinn let out a quiet shriek and collapsed into Caerwyn's middle, bawling her fingers into his shirt as he was rolled over onto his back. She dissolved into bitter, choking sobs.

Someone tugged on the end of her hair.

"Ais," Caerwyn breathed, and promptly passed out again.

"Well," said Minerva after a pause, looking older than Aislinn remembered, "that seems like enough excitement for one day. Let's set up camp."



They made up a bed for Caerwyn, cleaned him up, and moved him carefully into it. Aislinn held his hand almost the entire time, not leaving his side, not even when dinner was offered. She picked at the offerings Beau brought to her side, but barely had the stomach for food.

"You won't do him any good by starving yourself, girl," Minerva chided.

"I know this, but my body does not. How are *you* managing to eat?"

"Dwarves!" came a muffled, food-filled chorus.

"We can eat through *anything*," Luna explained.

Magna made a motion with her hands, Diana translating.  
“And sleep through it, too.”

A laugh passed around the campfire, but it felt like it was missing a voice—even two.

Bell yawned. “Well, I think I’m ready to settle.”

“Me too,” declared Minerva.

One by one, the rest of the dwarves followed suit, falling into their bedrolls. Luna stayed up the longest, chatting to Dillon over the campfire, their heads bent curiously together. Beau stayed up too, trying to keep Aislinn calm without trying to let on that’s what he was doing, and failing largely at both. Aislinn still appreciated the gesture.

Eventually, he and Luna both gave up and sunk into slumber.

“He may not wake,” Dillon told her, when silence had overtaken everyone else. “I can keep watch. I’ll wake you if he —”

Aislinn shook her head. “I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to.”

Dillon smiled. “I can understand that.”

“Have you ever...” she started, but then stopped abruptly. “Never mind.”

“Have I ever kept vigil over someone before? No. Watched your mother do it, though. You have the same... ferocity.”

“That’s a compliment, right?”

“Oh, most definitely.”

Aislinn could see why her mother had been friends with Dillon. She could see why *she* would be friends with him, too. He reminded her a bit of Daisy.

She wondered what life would be like when Dillon returned to Faerie. Would they be able to return him to full life, or would he spend the rest of his existence trapped like this? What if Caer's powers had a limit, or an expiry date? What if Dillon only had a little bit of extra time and they were wasting it on this mission—

“You look worried,” Dillion interrupted.

“How irritating. I was hoping to keep my thoughts to myself.”

“I apologise then, for noticing them.”

“I don't want to worry you.”

“I'm already worried,” he said, which was all the confirmation she needed. He went quiet for a moment, staring into the embers of the fire. “Will you tell my father, if I die again? Will you tell Juliana?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Do you want to?”

“I don't want you to be a secret. I'd like them to know that I had the chance to meet you, to give your story an epilogue, but...”

“But?”

Aislinn swallowed. “I don’t want you to have an epilogue, Dillon. Or not this one. The one you’re worried about. I think you deserve a better ending.”

Dillon sighed. “So did Cerridwen.”

Aislinn paused. “How do you know about... what *do* you know about my grandma?”

Dillon frowned, brows tightly burrowed. He squinted, like the thought he had was escaping him. “I... I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Something... something happened to her...”

“Did my mother tell you—”

“No,” he said, still frowning, “no, she didn’t, but...”

“Dillon?”

Caer stirred behind her, and all thoughts of anyone else—everything else—were quickly abandoned. She heard Dillon getting up behind her, moving away to give them a semblance of privacy.

“Caer?”

“What angel hovers over me? What celestial beauty showers upon me—”

Aislinn barked a teary laugh. “Well, I was going to ask if you’re all right, but you clearly must be.” She pressed a gloved hand to his cheek. “How are you feeling?”

Caer raised a hand to her face, his fingers skirting over her skin until they rested on a loose lock of hair. “Pretty good, all

things considering.”

“I healed your wound, but there may still be some lingering effects of the venom. Flora might know more—”

Caer caught her sleeve. “I don’t want Flora.”

Aislinn stilled. “Right.”

She grabbed his hand in both of hers, kissing the top of her own knuckles in lieu of his. “I’m going to lie down on you now,” she said, “very carefully. Try not to move.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She slotted herself against him, resting her head against his chest. Her fingers skimmed his bandages, flirting with his skin, daring herself to claim just a tiny fraction of him. She held back, breathing in the scent of him instead—dirt and sweat and *Caer*.

“I hate how much I like you,” she whispered.

“That’s a shame,” he said, his hand winding through her hair, twirling the ends through his fingers. “Because I rather like how much I like you.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Terrified,” he admitted. “I still like it, though. Don’t you?”

“No,” she said, “yes. I don’t know. Apparently, I can both hate and like it.” She paused. “Not you, though. You I only like. It might be easier if I didn’t, but...”

“Not as much fun?”

“How can you sound so cocky in your present state?”

“You think I’m cocky?”

“You definitely have your moments.”

“Am I supposed to pretend I’m not attractive? Would you prefer me demure, princess? Swooning in your presence?”

“I would prefer you at full strength, back in the palace, where I can safely rip off all your clothes.”

Caer’s throat bobbed.

“That silenced you, I see.” She angled her face towards him. “I don’t suppose... your magic is tapped out right now, is it?”

Caer shook his head. “I’m tired, but... I can still feel it, you know?”

“I do,” she said. “Sleep, if you’re still tired.”

“But you—”

“Will stay here until you’ve nodded off and scoot back to my own bed.” She nodded a few feet away. “Right over there. Not far.”

“Right,” he said. He squeezed her tightly, and then his arms loosened. “Ais?”

“Yes?”

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”



*I think I'm falling in love with you.*

She'd wanted to tease him, to play on the word 'think', to smile and say, "Why, you're not already there?" but the words hadn't come. Her delight couldn't be feigned.

And thankfully, before he could wonder at her silence, he'd fallen back to sleep.

His confession haunted her most of the night and well into the morning as they packed up to leave. She didn't know why it hovered around her like a ghost, why she felt more dread than pleasure. Hadn't she said almost the same, just the night before?

But it was harder hearing it from him. Everything was growing stronger and less reversible by the day.

She caught his eyes over breakfast, but he'd only smiled at her. *Say you didn't mean it*, she wanted to say. *Say it was the effects of the potions Flora plied you with. You are mortal. Lie to me.*

Because one of them needed to. One of them needed to be able to pretend this was little more than friendship with a side of attraction if they were to survive this.

*You can't have me forever*, she told whatever force held her in its snare. *You can't. I have much to do after we say goodbye. I am more than what I feel.*

Beau sidled up to her as they mounted the wargis. “Caer seems to be doing well.”

“Flora’s skills and a bit of faerie magic seemed to have worked wonders.”

“So it appears.” Beau chewed his lip. “And how are *you* doing?”

“I wasn’t hurt.”

“I don’t have much experience in the romance department... well, not to this degree, as I am, by all accounts, an excellent lover—”

“Really didn’t need to know that Beau, thanks.”

“But watching someone you care for in such pain... can’t be easy. I don’t imagine you’re all right just because he seems to be.”

Aislinn swallowed. “But he’s always in pain,” she said. “I think he will be until he doesn’t feel like his powers own him any more. And there is nothing, *nothing* I can do about that, not even be there for him because...” She sighed, her words aching. “I have never been so unsure in my life. Never this uncertain. I don’t even know what’s the truth.”



Her mother told her that sometimes—only sometimes—she envied the ability to only speak the truth. She said it would have been harder to lie to herself that way. Aislinn was not so sure, and she did not want to trial the truth by attempting to speak it.

*I hate this I hate this I hate him.*

Beau shrugged. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Beau!”

“What?”

“That’s so unhelpful!”

He threw up his hands. “I’m seventeen!” he declared. “I’m sorry I’m all out of wisdom to spout! You’re the older one!”

They both exhaled loudly, and then started to snigger.

“Sorry,” he added. “But, what I mean to say, is... I believe that you will figure it out. You’re smart, and brave... and a whole load of other things I’m embarrassed to admit about my sister. Also, I’m a romantic, and this deserves a happy ending.”

Aislinn smiled at him, and turned to watch Caer’s back.

*But what if it doesn’t have a happy ending? What if it just has an ending? What if our future holds nothing but pain?*



Caer sucked in his breath as they descended down into another level where the rock glittered like gold and entire caverns lit

up like halls of gemstones. Parts of the ceiling were ink-black, veined with blue-purple and studded with white, giving it the appearance of starlight.

“Crystal,” Bell explained, as they plodded through. “Largely worthless—pretty though. Good for building.”

There were underground cathedrals, a beauty that felt strange to be carved by nature’s hand alone. It made Caer understand how fae could worship the world like the mortals worshipped gods, made him want to drop to his knees in prayer.

“Look alive, lad,” Minerva called. “You’re walking your wargi into a wall.”

Caer murmured an apology and steered his mount back on track, finding himself almost shoulder-to-shoulder with Aislinn. They hadn’t really spoken to each other since last night. Normal conversations were becoming something harder and harder to have. He felt like every time they spoke she snipped off a bit more of his soul, and he didn’t want to give her that power with an audience around them.

After dark, when they were alone, he was defenceless.

He did not mind as much as he used to. Aislinn could strip off all his armour. She could strip off *everything*.

The back of his neck heated at the thought.

He really hoped they found the Mirror soon and got back to Avalinth quickly.

He drew up next to Bell. “How much longer until we reach our destination?” he asked her.

Bell consulted the map. “Hard to say,” she said. “There’s no precise location. Aeron believes it to be *somewhere* on the floor beneath this one, but the exact location is non-existent. Could be there by tomorrow, could be exploring for a week. Who knows!”

Caer groaned, but then his thoughts stilled, focusing on the Mirror in a way they had not done for several days. Keen as he was to get back, was this really the right call?

“Bell,” he said, “this mirror...”

“What of it?”

“I can’t help but worry that, no matter what he said, this Aeron person will use it for nefarious means.”

Bell snorted.

“I mean it—”

“Well, of course he does,” Bell continued. “This fae appears out of nowhere and starts advising Venus that she needs a secret mirror buried in the deep? It’s very suspicious.”

“So why are we getting it? I didn’t have to stay there—”

“How are we going to find out his plans unless we bring it back?”

Caer blinked. “Why are we giving him the potentially dangerous mirror?”

“The Mirror is hard to get, not impossible. He would have found a way that didn’t use us. This way, we get a front row seat. What’s the seventh dwarven proverb?”

“Um, drinking is good?”

Bell narrowed her eyes. “No.”

“Braids shall never go out of fashion?”

“Try again.”

“Teasing Caer is the funniest of all past times?”

Bell chuckled. “Good guess. No. The seventh dwarven proverb is, ‘keep your friends close—’”

“And your enemies closer. Of course.”

Bell leaned across and ruffled his hair. “Fancy you thinking your old Aunt Bell wouldn’t have thought this through.”

“You aren’t *that* old, Bell—”

“I’m three-hundred-and-ninety-nine.”

“Right. Keep forgetting.”

“And far from daft.”

“I’m sorry I ever doubted.”

She shot him a wink, and then urged her wargi forward to join her wife at the tail end of the party. Caer’s gaze drifted, as it had a habit of doing, towards Aislinn, conversing ahead of him with Luna, giggling conspiratorially. He watched the creases of her mouth when she laughed, the sway and shimmer

of her hair, the way she sat, the curves of her against the saddle...

He shook his head. The sooner they got back to Avalinth, the better.



A while later, they passed by a series of steaming pools. The crystals glimmered against the still waters like a dark rainbow, casting coloured shadow along the rocky walls. Crystal flowers bloomed on the surface, filling the cavern with the scent of honey and wildflowers.

“Oh, yes, hot springs!” Diana hooted. “Who votes we should rest here for the night?”

“It’s barely afternoon...” Minerva grumbled.

“Rest whilst you can!” Flora said pointedly. “And the boy looks like he could do with a break.”

“I’m fi—” started Caer, but stopped abruptly when he saw the faces turned towards him. “I mean, ‘ow’. Yes. A break. Definitely. Without it, I may not survive the night.”

“Excellent,” said Diana. “Show of hands?”

Everyone apart from Minerva shot their hands into the air. She sighed. “It seems I am outvoted. Very well. Ladies, shall we take the bigger one at the end? For the sake of the mortal men in our group. Dwarves aren’t really fussed about such things.”

The women headed off, and the boys turned to the pool in front of them, quickly stripping off with a clatter of buckles and swords. Caer tried not to think about Aislinn removing her clothes as he sunk into the blissful water.

“Divine,” sighed Beau, sliding in after him and drifting to the other side of the pool. Dillon followed after, a little sheepishly. He sunk into the water until only the mottled skin of his neck and shoulders was visible. Great, ragged stitches protruded from his chest, across his shoulder, and down his back. Caer had some dim memory of the manticore chomping down on him. He’d bear those marks forever. They wouldn’t even be able to take out his stitches. How much more of this could he endure and still survive? How much would he want to?

Caer kept his distance from both of his companions. “Wouldn’t want to risk unaliving you,” he said. “Um, again, in your case, Dillon.”

“I may not be the smartest person, but I know that ‘unaliving’ is not a word.”

“Believe me, it fits.”

Caer stretched out against one of the rocks, flexing his aching muscles. Beau looked at him, and then down sharply, hugging his legs to his body.

“Maybe I should have bathed alone...” he murmured.

A purr sounded from across the pool. Caer glanced up, and saw Hecate seated on one of the rocks, staring at them all. She

was a very odd feline, utterly nonplussed by all the battle going on around them, even more relaxed than the battle-reared wargis.

“I’m not sure I like that cat,” he remarked.

Beau pouted defensively. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s not exactly cat-like... She looks at you like she knows things.”

“You aren’t very familiar with cats, are you?” He shook his head. “Enough about her, anyway. I think it’s time to tease Dillon about Luna.”

Dillon looked down into the steamy water, and Caer was sure, if he had a normal, functioning heart, he would have been blushing.

“She’s as sweet as the muffins she makes,” he mumbled.

“You can’t even taste her muffins,” Beau said, frowning.

“It doesn’t matter. They’re the sweetest, bestest muffins ever.”

“Bestest is not a word.”

Dillon snorted softly.

“What?” Beau frowned.

“I can’t remember if you remind me of neither of your parents or both of them. Correcting grammar though... that’s something they both used to do when we were at school together. I remember they once corrected mine at the same

time and they were both *so angry* about it. It was probably one of the first things they ever had in common.”

“It’s so strange that that was just a few years ago for you.”

“You’re telling me.”

“But back to Luna,” Beau prompted. “Anything going on there?”

Dillon did not meet his eyes. His body seemed to shrink in the water. “I’m not sure I’m in a good position to court her with... you know.” He shrugged his massive, mottled shoulders. “I can’t even touch her. Or, you know, I can, but I can’t feel it. And it might be unpleasant for her to be with someone so... dead.”

Beau went quiet for a moment, before skirting a little closer. “If it helps, you don’t *smell* dead,” he said. “And I’m sure we could cast some very tangible glamours when we’re back in Faerie. If you wanted. I’m not sure what we can do about the not being able to feel business but... it’s not a hopeless situation. Nothing is.”

Dillon nodded glumly, but Caer could tell he didn’t fully believe him. Even a spark of hope still felt marred by difficulties. True happiness seemed unlikely.

“Did I tell you that Aoife composed a ballad in your honour?” Beau continued, voice bright.

Caer had no idea who Aoife was, but Dillon’s eyes shone at the name. “She did?”



“Very stirring. Very moving. How did the chorus go again? *Ser Dillon he was brave and true, a knight of the heart, through and through. It took a king to bring him down, and now—*”

“*He’s buried beneath the ground,*” Dillon finished.

Beau blinked. “Did Aislinn tell you?”

Dillon shook his head. “No. No, she didn’t, but... I know it. I’ve *heard* it.”

“How is that possible?”

“I... I saw her...”

Dillon rubbed his temples, as if trying to squeeze out a thought. His body began to shake. He pitched forward in the water. Beau sprang from his spot, hauling him upright, where his body thrashed and foamed in the water, eyes white and rolling.

*It’s happening, Caer thought, fears fracturing, we’re finally losing him.*



Dillon floated in a dark, warm place. It was like he was lying at the bottom of the lake in summer, watching the light drift in dabbled shafts from above. He had done this before, long ago, with someone by his side. He couldn’t remember her name. It didn’t matter.

Nothing mattered anymore. Pain wasn't even a word. All he knew was that he was safe, and he wasn't alone. Even his own name didn't seem to matter, but something still stirred inside him when he heard the court bard sing of 'Dillon the brave, loyal and true'. He watched a girl with tawny hair lay flowers on a statue of a person he thought he knew. Her hand was tight in the arm of an older man, whose features matched the one made of stone.

"I miss him," said the girl. "Is that rude of me to say when he was your—"

*Son*, Dillon realised. *He was your son. I was your—*

No, he was not anything now. He was everything and nothing.

"No, lass," said the man, his mouth fixed in a worn smile, "I'm glad you miss him, too."

Years passed in the blink of an eye, decades eclipsing into seconds. He saw a hundred moments in the palace, a hundred balls and revels and dances, a thousand patrols. He saw tournaments and tears and laughter.

So much laughter.

The tawny-haired girl had two children with a dark-haired prince, two happy babies that ran about the castle, shrieking and laughing and beating each other with wooden swords from the minute they could hold them. He—*they*—rocked their cradles when they slept, made them hammocks from their limbs, shielded them during games of hide-and-seek.

When their hands reached out to touch them, they could feel again. The touches of the prince and princess were sunshine and rainstorms.

*We are yours, and you are ours. We are one.*

Names were spoken in the castle, but they need not matter to the consciousness that Dillon had become. People were more colours and shapes and feelings—not words. Words didn't matter.

They watched the children grow, watched their triumphs and failures, watched them fight and laugh and make up and do it all over again. They wiped tears from their cheeks, blanketed them from grief.

*Ours, ours, ours to protect.*

Dillon had seen it all. Every moment in Beau and Aislinn's life. He had been there.

In the walls, in the earth—he had been there.

In the *vines*.



Dillon spluttered up in the water. Aislinn was there, holding his head. Beau's hands hovered over him. Luna's too, warming his chest. She was the closest thing he came to feeling anything.

“Steady there,” said Beau, breathing a sigh of relief as Dillon righted himself. “We thought we might have lost you

for a moment.”

“I was there.”

“Come again?”

“In the castle. I was there in the castle, watching you grow up.”

Aislinn and Beau blinked at him. So did everyone else.

“I know it sounds impossible, but I was there. I remember the songs that Aoife would sing to you, the colour of your childhood blankets, how you named your first sword *Blackbriar*, that you had a stuffed horse called Mr—”

“All right, that’s enough!” said Aislinn, stepping away.

Caer raised a shaking hand. “I would really like to know about Aislinn’s stuffed horse,” he said, “but I would also like to know: what on Earth is going on here?”

“I was in the vines,” Dillon explained. “I was there, I was part of them, and I wasn’t alone.”

Silence followed, punctuated only by the steady drip-drip of the water. The cat meowed from the rocks.

“The vines,” said Aislinn eventually.

“Yes.”

“You were... in them?”

“Yes.”

Beau pursed his lips. “Most people think the vines hold the soul of Titania, the First Queen,” he said. “Or a part of it.

What if it's more than that?"

"You think that every soul in Faerie—"

Beau shook his head. "No," he said. "Maybe not *every* one. But what did Father say he buried Dillon in?"

Aislinn's eyes widened. "The *vines*," she said. "They didn't just preserve your body, they preserved your soul, and when Caer's magic woke your body, it joined you back together." She clapped her hands to her mouth. "You were truly there? The whole time?"

He nodded.

Her eyes gleamed. "I'd hug you, but I'm a bit naked right now."

Dillon suddenly realised that they were *all* a bit naked right now. The water covered everyone up to the chest, but that was still... a lot of naked bodies in fairly close proximity.

And Luna's.

He was very grateful he was no longer capable of blushing, even if that also meant he was incapable of other, considerably more fun things that required a rush of blood.

"I had a dream like this once," said Beau, who, unlike the others, was making no attempt to hide himself beneath the water. "My sister wasn't in it, though."

Aislinn's lip wrinkled. "Beau?"

"Yes?"

"Stop talking."

“Right. Yes. Very good.”

Minerva coughed. “I think this is probably a good time to return to our pools and get dressed again. Are we in agreement?”



Their sojourn in the hot springs cut short, Minerva insisted they fit in a few more hours of travelling, and they set off once again before setting up camp in a small, easily defensible cavern. They had long since run out of settlements and houses, and Aislinn could not shake the feeling that they were very, very deep indeed.

She kept glancing over at Dillon as they sat around the campfire. He seemed to have recovered from whatever had overtaken him in the pools, but the revelation that Dillon had been in the vines, watching their lives for their entire childhoods, was bewildering to say the least.

No wonder she'd felt drawn to him. It was more than her parents' stories. It was the feeling of familiarity and home that his presence brought. She'd always been connected to the vines. Of course she was connected to him.

Something crept into the entrance of the cave. Aislinn stiffened, but paused when she beheld the creature—a small, round, tubby thing with large amber eyes and a mane of firelight. It looked like a bear cub dipped in flames.

She whispered for the others.

“Lava lion!” cried Luna, clapping her hands in glee. “Oh my, it’s *so cute!*”

“Is it dangerous?” Aislinn asked.

“Completely benign,” Bell reported. “Usually very friendly, too. Come here, little fellow. Have a gnaw on this bone.”

The creature crept into the circle, winding its way through people’s legs on its journey towards the offering. The flames licked at Aislinn’s fingers as it passed, warm and tingling, largely aesthetic—a way to ward off predators, not damage them.

It grabbed the bone from Bell’s outstretched fingers and scooted back, tumbling into Caer’s legs like an overgrown kitten.

The party laughed.

Caer bent down to pet it, fingers twirling round its curved ears and tickling under its chin. The lava lion swiped, no doubt thinking he meant to steal its food.

Caer’s hand spasmed. The lava lion went out like a light, as quickly as a flame in water. Its body slumped to the floor, grey and still—

But only for a few seconds.

Then, it started to move, its limbs flexing, back surging—

Bell launched forward and skewered it through the neck, twisting her blade until the head popped off.

Finally, all fell still, like sound had been leached from the world.

Caer got up and marched off.

Every eye in the space turned to the floor. Diana removed the corpse. Luna started offering people freshments.

Aislinn's eyes could still make out Caer standing out there in the dark, his back turned towards the fire.

She followed him, not slowing until she reached his side, until they stood perfectly still beside one another, staring out into the dark cavern below.

"I didn't mean to hurt it."

"Of course you didn't."

"It just slipped out—"

"I know."

"With the manticore I was able to control it. It didn't even come back. I've been practising with Dillon and I *still can't keep it in.*"

"It's not your fault."

"It's too big for me," he said. "I just... I can feel it. Like it wants to spring out, all the time. It's a monster in my chest. I'm never going to be able to control it. I'll have to stay in Avalinth forever."

Aislinn's throat trembled. "You can't. You can't stay there. Not forever."



“No? And why not? I love the dwarves. They’ve been a second family to me. Avalinth is safe and exciting. I can find a master blacksmith to teach me the trade. There’s no reason I can’t be perfectly happy here.”

Aislinn swallowed. “You love other things, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like... like the sky,” she whispered, “like horses, and the smell of fresh grass and flowers... like real stars and fresh air and the sun, Caer. You deserve more than earth and stone.” She paused, gathering her thoughts, unable to accept that Caer would never be able to go outside again. “I’ve seen you out there, Caer. I’ve seen the way you are outside, the way you breathe more easily in the woods, the way your shoulders relax in the sun... You deserve to sleep each night beneath a sky of stars, and all the jewelled ceilings in the world are less than you are worth. This... this desire to stay here forever... you’re trying to punish yourself. I know why. I understand why. But I wish I could make you see yourself as I do. I wish I could make you believe that you don’t deserve this.”

Caer swallowed. He turned towards Aislinn, bringing his face so close to hers that she could count every fleck of light in those starry eyes of his. “How am I supposed to avoid kissing you after you say something like that?”

His breath brushed against her cheek, and she angled her lips towards his—only to kiss cold air a second later.

“But I must, Ais, I must.”



The next day, with Caer still quiet and Aislinn wishing there was something she could do, they descended down onto the final level.

The place where their map ran out. No dwarf had ventured below this. There were no more stairs, no whispers of mines or carts or technology of any kind. No settlements, no outposts.

Nothing.

It was like descending into the night sky, only a sky devoid of stars. A stormy, silent dark. The stone was blue and veined with black and purple. The foliage had disappeared, replaced instead with giant thorn-like plants, the thorns as shiny as patent leather and wide and sharp as scythes, glassy and obsidian. No one spoke, as if fearful of their own echoes. Not a whisper passed between them for the longest of times.

“I don’t usually say this,” Minerva said eventually, “but it’s time to spread out. First rule: stay within yelling distance.”

She and Bell briefly convened to set up a clear plan in order to search the caverns quickly, thoroughly and safely. Aislinn

knew they had the right idea, but the quietness of this particular set of tunnels had a permanence to it. She could hear nothing. When was the last time she had been somewhere without the steady *drip-drip* of water or the sound of something breathing or scuttling nearby?

Not since they entered this place. So why was it so silent now?

They split up into twos, searching every cavern, every nook and cranny. They expected the entrance to the Mirror's hiding place to be concealed, else it would surely have been found by now.

"If I was hiding a mirror of dubious origin," Beau said, as he quietly blasted apart another rock, "I wouldn't bother putting it in a grand chamber or a temple or some such. I'd just plonk it in the ground and bury it, leaving it completely unmarked."

"Your mortal side is showing," Aislinn remarked, "no faerie or dwarf would dump it so unceremoniously. It doesn't make for a good story."

Beau launched into a tirade about what made a good story and how his plan made perfect sense and how if he *was* a villain, he'd be the best one that ever was, but Aislinn was barely paying him any attention. Her mind was focused on finding the mirror, unable to dislodge her conversation with Caer yesterday.

He needed them to find this. He needed to be able to stay in Avalinth.

A part of her had been hoping that they wouldn't find it, that he would have to leave, that they'd be able to find something in Faerie that could block his powers, but after his confession last night... she wasn't even sure such a thing existed. There was something *other* about Caer's powers, something she'd never heard of before.

Something, she realised with a sinister ripple, that was never supposed to exist.

They reconvened with the others at the allotted time and progressed further into the dark.

Luna sang a song as they marched. Aislinn imagined she was trying to dispel the quiet, but the tune seemed to amplify it, the melody as haunting and echoing as a ghost.

*“Fathoms below in the depths of the stone*

*Lives a mirror, best left alone*

*More than darkness lives inside*

*Leave it alone if you wish to survive*

*Mirror, Mirror, way down deep,*

*What ancient secrets do you keep?*

*No one knows*

*No one knows...*

*Far below*

*Far below...”*

Her words hung in the air for an age after she sang, hovering like tendrils of frost. For a long while, no one dared to speak.

“You’ve a beautiful voice,” remarked Dillon finally.

“Thank you!” She beamed. “Although I’m now wondering if that was the best choice. Maybe a little ditty or a ballad about—”

“Hey look!” said Beau, voice forced with cheer. “Vines!”

He pointed to a desecrated curtain of foliage so bleak and grey, Aislinn initially mistook them for rocks. Frowning, Aislinn dismounted and went over to touch them. They were as quiet and still as the stone.

Dillon appeared behind her, reaching over her shoulder.

“Feel anything?” she asked.

“Yes,” Dillon said. “Not much, but it’s strange for me to feel anything, so...” He turned back to the others, gaze settling on Caer. “Want to try bringing something else back to life?”

“Rarely,” Caer admitted, swinging from his saddle, “but I’ll give it a try.”

He walked over towards them and placed his fingers against the calcified bark, brow furrowed. The veins on his arms strained. Aislinn gripped his shoulder, her other hand still against the bark, Dillon’s too. Something throbbed beneath her palm, hard and rumbling.

The bark crumbled, flaking away from the rock. Bright green sparked beneath it, vines curling outwards, racing over Aislinn's body like an over-excited puppy.

“Well, hello!” she said, gently batting them away. “Nice to see you too!”

The vines trembled towards Beau, too, and Dillon, and—inexplicably—Caer, in the same way they clambered over Aislinn.

Aislinn had asked her mother once, when they'd started talking to her, if it had only happened when she'd ascended to the throne or if it had occurred before then, when she'd married Hawthorn.

“They knew I was their future queen that day,” she'd admitted. “But they'd been trying to talk to me a long time before then, I just didn't know how to listen.”

Aislinn wondered what the vines knew about Caer.

“Touching as this is,” Minerva remarked, leaning towards them on the back of her wargi, “does this little exercise serve a purpose?”

“Possibly,” said Aislinn.

A vine snaked around her head.

*We're searching for something,* she said, pushing her thoughts outwards, casting an image of a mirror.

Several of the vines recoiled.

*Please,* she continued. *It's important.*

The vines coiled instead around Caer, as if understanding that he was the thing she was trying to protect, and trying to judge whether or not he was worthy. Caer's eyes flickered, and he stared at her as if searching for instruction.

"It's all right," Aislinn assured him. "They won't hurt you."

The vines twirled all round him, around every strong limb, his broad back, his excellent face, before scurrying away, flicking towards Aislinn, as if approving of her choice.

"Will you help us?"

The vines moved, bursting out of the recess and racing along the floor. Everyone not on a wargi leapt into their saddles, charging after them as they hurtled through stone.

Deep, deep, deeper into the dark they went, over rivers and through caverns that could have swallowed Acanthia whole. The dark thickened. Beau summoned lights and whispered spells. Onwards and onwards, deeper and darker...

Until the vines slowed, creeping under a wall of cracked rock.

Bell went to inspect it first. It was round, brown rock, covered in a thin sheen of moss.

"Can we blast through it?" Diana asked.

Magna was already fiddling with her explosives, her eyes sparkling gleefully.

"Bell?" Minerva prompted. "Can we blast through it?"

"I could try—" Beau said, moving forward.

The rock shifted. Bell bounced back.

“Did Beau—” squeaked someone.

“Did the vines—”

Rock showered from the ceiling.

“Move!” hissed Bell.

“Is it a cave-in—”

“It’s no rock fall,” Bell said, leaping on the back of her wargi and the wall rumbled and shook. “It’s a golem.”

Aislinn froze as a giant emerged from the rock. She’d heard tales of golems and seen their likenesses in the tunnels and murals—great creatures of rock, forged in the shape of dwarves. She’d known they were a bit bigger, that they’d been made to fight, to crush.

She had not expected them to be this big. Her entire body could have been crammed into its hollowed-out arm.

It was massive. Monstrous. Horrific. As large as a giant and as unconquerable as stone.

Her wargi leapt out of the way as the golem stumbled forward, dripping with moss and shards of rock. The wargi bolted, following the others as they charged across a narrow bridge, Beau shattering it the second everyone was across.

They weren’t trapped—there were a dozen platforms they could jump across on, but they were out of reach of the golem.

At least for now.



It picked up a boulder and hurled it towards them. Minerva urged them around a corner, cramming them into a cave.

“Now, who remembers anything about the Golem Rebellion?” she asked, as rocks showered from the ceiling.

Beau’s hand shot into the air. “Ooh, I do, I do! The Golem Rebellion was started in the Silver Age, year 446. The lead conspirators were a dwarf named Brutus Greysirite and a fae sorcerer called—”

The party stared at him.

“I am now realising that question was probably rhetorical and I am wasting time.”

“Golems,” Minerva explained, “are dwarf-made creatures. Virtually indestructible. Their flesh is stone and earth. But to make that work, they needed the help of a sorcerer. Like all beings, they have a core, in their case a crystal which functions as their heart and contains the magic they need to exist. Damage that, and the golem is just a pile of rock again.”

“So... where *is* this crystal?”

“Brutus was clever,” Minerva explained. “He built three different types of golem, storing the crystal in either their mouth, back or chest. Makes it much harder for them to defeat in battle if you have to check each spot.”

“Oh, this isn’t going to be hard at all.”

“The good news is I know this one doesn’t have its core in its mouth.”

Beau frowned. “How do you know that?”

“I got a good look at it when it tried to eat my arm.”

Aislinn paled. “It’s *that* golem?” she asked. “How can you be sure?”

“I recognise the marks of my axe in its fist.”

“Lovely,” said Beau. “Question—why do golems eat flesh if they don’t need to eat?”

“Because they’re programmed to,” Bell explained. “Or because it’s the closest thing they will get to being human. We don’t fully know.”

A loud whimper squashed the conversation. Caer moved from his spot, staring out from behind the rock. “Mace,” he reported. “He isn’t dead—just injured. But he’s going to struggle to move away—”

“Right, right, quick plan—” Minerva hastily scribbled out instructions in the dirt. “Bell, Diana, you hold its attention. Luna, get the wargis somewhere safe. Flora, stay vigilant. Drag us out if you need to. Beau, heal Mace, and then get back out. I want you to fire at its face—keep it busy. Mags, you’re with me on the legs. Caer, the front, Ais, the back. Dillon—are you all right to be a human shield?”

Dillon placed his hand to his chest. “It is my honour to be mangled on behalf of any one of you.”

“Not *too* mangled, please,” Luna whispered. “Not that I would mind. Or... or anyone. No one would mind. I just... I

don't want you to get mangled." She pulled up her sleeves and hid behind her hands.

"That was so disgusting, I think the stone is blushing," Minerva said, staring at her. "Let's move out."

Aislinn skidded back into the tunnel, leaping over the platforms, a hail of arrows surging over her, along with Beau's fire. The golem's black eyes stared upwards. She slid under its legs, Caer not far behind her, his greatsword clashing against its chest.

Minerva and Mags hacked at its legs. They chipped off little, but they kept its focus, dodging out of the way of its massive swings. Aislinn threw away her sword and whipped out two daggers, scurrying up its back and locking her legs around its neck. She plunged her daggers into the grooves in its stony skin, searching for any opening.

The golem swung, trying to jerk her off. "Anything?" she called to Caer.

"Hard—to—tell—"

She searched every crack, driving her blades as deep as they would go. Nothing.

She leapt off, rolling against the floor, narrowly missing a massive stomp.

The golem's great fist came sailing through the air. Dillon caught it against his chest. A crack sounded.

"Dillon!"

“I’m fine,” he grunted.

Aislinn dashed forward, sliding back under the golem’s legs. Beau had blasted another fireball—straight into its mouth. She drove her daggers into its chest, along every cranny—

One sank deeper than the others.

She pressed her second blade into it, and levered a panel free.

Bright, hot light emanated from within.

The golem’s core.

She poised to strike, but the golem shook her free, letting out a long, soundless roar—a wail of the rock. Aislinn fell to the floor with a hard thud. A colossal stone foot rose above her, but she rolled out of the way, the ground shaking in her wake. A spool of wire shot out of nowhere, tangling around its legs.

“Pull!” Diana shouted.

Every dwarf swamped the space, like ants on a carcass. Everyone took control of a limb, pinning it, holding it. Minerva looped a rope around its massive neck, holding it as it grunted and groaned in that wretched, wordless way.

“Now, Caer!” Minerva hissed.

Caer didn’t need to be told twice. He thrust his blade deep into the cavity and twisted.

The crystal shattered.

The golem fell.

Silence flew through the tunnel, endless and unyielding. Minerva stared at the fallen monster, now no more than dirt and stone and dust.

Bell touched her shoulder. There did not seem to be any words she could utter.

“Well,” said Minerva. “No point in hanging around, is there? If no one’s injured, I suggest we go investigate the tunnel it was guarding.”



If Minerva felt in any way disappointed that the golem that had no doubt haunted her dreams for years had been disposed of in a matter of minutes, she did not show it. She didn’t show *anything*, although Caer noticed her rubbing her shoulder when no one was looking, and Bell sticking unusually close to her side as they descended into the dark, holding each other’s hands.

Caer wondered if he would ever experience something as simple as holding someone’s hand as they walked, afraid of less because they were there beside him. He wondered what he’d trade for such a pleasure, what evils he’d commit if he went too long without human contact.

*You can touch the dwarves,* a voice reminded him. *There will be hundreds of people in Avalinth you could befriend.*

But they would not be Aislinn.

*You can't do this, he told himself yet again, you can't fall for someone you've only known for a few weeks. Not like this. Not this badly. Not someone who you might never be able to be with, not in the way you want.*

And yet he wasn't sure he could stop, wasn't sure he could do anything to stop the tide now that it was crashing on the shore. He wanted to be with her. He wanted to whisper to her in the dark and dance with her in the day, to spar with her, weapons and words, to make her a bouquet of flowers and an engraved blade to go with it.

He wanted to drown inside her kiss, exist inside her bed.

He moved forward, and caught the edge of her sleeve. He could make out little in the dark, but he thought her face turned towards him, and he imagined she was smiling.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up into a wide, round cavern. Caer could still see little apart from a faint purple light, but as they crept out further onto a narrow pathway, sconces blazed to life—thin plumes of blue flame on spindly, black sconces.

The party stilled.

The cavern was almost a perfect circle, a dome beneath the earth. Shiny black thorns ran through the walls, sharp as glass, obsidian-dark. They crackled like lightning against the purple skin of the stone.

The narrow pathway ended shortly before them, dissolving into a lake that's waters shone, blue-black, impossibly still. There was no boat, but ahead of them, on a tiny island in the

centre of the lake, stood a black-framed mirror surrounded by thorns.

“I maintain that burying it would have been a much better idea,” Beau said, largely to himself. “But I do have to admire the aesthetic.”

They left the wargis on the bank and moved towards the water’s edge. “Ideas?” Minerva asked. “Is the water even safe to swim across?”

Beau held his hand out over the lake. A shudder passed through him. “That’s not water.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know. But I’d advise against swimming in it.”

“Then what do we do?”

Bell looked around her. “We could go back to one of the other caverns. Salvage some wood. Build a raft.”

Everyone groaned with the thought of the extra time it would take, Magna’s fingers speaking of hours and the equipment they’d need. Caer was in no mood to prolong this, his mind twisting desperately between the thought of *let’s just go, let’s forget about it, and we’re so close now. So close.*

“Wait,” said Beau. “There’s something in the water. Hold on.”

He inched forward over the lake, holding out his hands, fingers splayed. He flicked his wrists, the water trembling beneath him, parting, churning.

Aislinn seemed to understand what he was doing. She stepped beside him, stretching out her arms, both groaning beneath the weight.

Somehow, Caer felt it too—the feeling that this water wasn't water, that it did not want to bend to the might of two faerie royals, but relinquished its spoils nonetheless.

The lake parted. A small boat rose to the centre, black and shiny.

Magna and Bell hurried forward to inspect it, identifying a small hole in the hull, easily patchable even with their limited resources.

“No oars though,” Minerva commented.

“Oars?” said Beau, flicking the not-water beneath his hand again. “Where we're going, we don't need *oars*.”

Magna and Bell set to work fixing the boat. The others hung back, muttering and murmuring.

“Not enough room on the boat for us all,” Minerva deduced. “How many do you think it'll take to lift the Mirror?”

“Doesn't look too heavy,” said Bell, glancing up. “Send the giant just in case.”

Dillon stepped forward. “I'm going to assume that's me.”

It was quickly decided that Dillon would go across with Caer (also for lifting purposes) as well as Aislinn and Beau (for rowing purposes) and Minerva (for leading ones). The repairs to the boat completed, the five of them set off. The



remaining members of the party stayed on the shore, their forms shrinking as Beau and Aislinn buffeted them across.

Caer's attention turned to the water. He understood what Beau meant, the otherness of the inky water below, the strange, dark sheen to it. But something else stirred in him too, and the more he stared at the lake, the more he wanted to slip silently into it...

The boat stopped moving on one side, making it drift. Aislinn had stopped paddling. "Caer?"

He tore his gaze away from the water. "It's nothing," he promised.

But even as he spoke, he knew that was a lie. There was something there. More than something—and whispers of old memories twitched at his ears as they rowed across the lake. The laughter of other children in the courtyard of Afelcarreg. His mother singing. Her screaming for him.

And, inexplicably, a voice that sounded like Aislinn's, calling out words he didn't think he'd ever heard her speak.

*"He will be all that you want and more. So much more ."*

The island grew closer. Before long, the boat reached the shore. They filed out one by one, Caer resisting the urge to hold his hand out to Aislinn. He stopped himself just in time.

They trudged up to the Mirror.

Beau was the first to notice something was wrong. "Wait," he said, increasing his speed. He jogged up the steps.

Aislinn frowned. “What is it?”

“It’s... it’s not there.”

“What?”

“The Mirror. It’s—it’s empty.”

To prove it, he plunged his fist into the centre.

Caer’s stomach dropped. Nothing happened. There was no glass to shatter.

“It’s just a frame.”

Minerva came up behind him. “It’s been smashed? Taken?”

Beau shook his head. “I don’t think so...” he said, running his finger over the empty frame. Unlike everything else in the room, there was no shine or shimmer to it. It was entirely, endlessly black, incapable of holding light. “There would be shards, glassy residue... something. This is almost like... like it was never there to begin with.”

“A decoy?” Minerva suggested.

“Why wouldn’t you make your decoy more mirror-like?” Aislinn pointed out. “Would take longer to realise it wasn’t real. Especially if you were a non-magic using dwarf.”

“Good point.”

Caer’s eyes slid out across the lake, now calm and still again, black as tar, smooth as—

“Glass.”

Aislinn came up to his shoulder. “What?”

“It’s the Mirror,” he said. “The lake—it’s the Mirror.”

Minerva made a sound of protest, but Aislinn and Beau went very still and very quiet.

“You can feel it too, can’t you?” he whispered.

Aislinn nodded. Beau turned back to the Mirror, to the short plinth it was resting on. He took out a handkerchief and rubbed away at the dirt. A few, faint pictures appeared in the stone, showing the dwarves delivering the Mirror down into the deep and enlisting the help of a team of fae sorcerers to change it from glass into water, dispelling its power.

A whole team of sorcerers.

“Does it say what the Mirror does?” Caer asked, almost afraid of the answer.

Beau shook his head. “Only that people had used it for evil, and that both fae and dwarves deemed it too dangerous.”

Caer stared out at the water.

“Should we be doing this?” Dillon asked. “I’m not sure I like the idea of anything so magical it had to be *changed* rather than destroyed.”

“Unless they thought that one day someone might need to use its power for good...” Aislinn offered. “Magic is supposed to be neutral—it’s how we use it that defines us.”

Dillon did not look entirely convinced, but Beau and Minerva were both staring out at the lake, as if the curiosity was parching them.

Caer understood the feeling. Somehow, he needed this mirror returned to physical form. *Needed* it.

“Can we even put it back together?” Dillon asked, still sounding dubious. “Last I checked, we didn’t journey here with half a dozen fae sorcerers.”

Beau glanced at Aislinn, some silent conversation passing between the two of them.

“I’m no sorcerer,” she said.

“You’re the future queen of Faerie, Ais. You have access to powers others will only ever dream of.”

“But I’ve never done anything like this.”

“Me neither,” Beau admitted. “But I understand the theoretics. It’s magic. Almost anything is possible. And this mirror... it *wants* to return to its natural state. I do not think it will require much of a nudge.”

Aislinn inhaled. “All right,” she said. “Let’s get the frame down.”



They dislodged the frame from its stand and the thorns around it, and took it onto the boat. Beau insisted on attempting the spell from the centre of the lake, hoping the natural circle would aid them. And, in any case, it would be harder to transport the Mirror all the way across the empty lake. Closer

to the other side, at least the others could help them get it up again.

They rowed back towards the centre, taking it slowly, careful to avoid using too much of their magic. Aislinn was already conscious of how much she'd used today, and Beau much more—although his reserves were deeper. When they stopped, they took a few moments to meditate, and ate a couple of the hard, dwarven biscuits they'd stashed about their person. It gave the illusion of energy, if nothing else.

“Ready?” Beau asked her.

Aislinn nodded, taking his hands.

The effect was instantaneous. Beau's hands latched onto her forearms, twisting into her flesh. His head snapped backwards. Hers did, too. She stared up at the ceiling, but somehow her gaze went elsewhere, *everywhere*—down to the bottom of the lake and everywhere else it touched.

The water pulsed beneath her. She could feel every atom of it, every particle. It surged around them, screaming, joining, tearing at their flesh though she knew it wasn't even touching them. The water clawed through the air, spiralling around them, pooling into the frame sandwiched between their outstretched arms.

Aislinn wanted to break away, to grab her sword, to fight it. Her body burned beneath the strain. A scream rose inside her, but her jaw locked shut. She couldn't move.

*Don't let go, Beau's hold seemed to say. Whatever you do, don't let go.*

Did he have any control over this? Aislinn had expected to *do* something, to be twisting the water into shape, but it felt like the other way round, like she was the one being twisted and torn, like the water was the one controlling her.

Controlling, and draining. It licked at her marrow like fire.

*Stop. Stop, please—*

Dimly, above the screeching of the water, she heard Caer screaming.

“Stop this! Stop it, it's hurting her—”

But the water didn't. It *couldn't*. It needed to be whole again.

It whirled down into the frame, whistling and roaring, clicking together, a thousand, a million tiny black shards clicking together, transformed by the might of magic.

Finally, mercifully, it was over.

Aislinn fell backwards into Caer's arms.

“Ais!” he called, voice coarse.

She blinked up at him, feeling flayed to her bones. She wanted to reassure him she was fine, but the words wouldn't leave her mouth.

She clutched his gloved fingers hard. “Don't worry,” she whispered.

Caer smiled, a broken, tear-filled expression. “No promises there.”

“I’m fine,” said Beau, from the other side of the boat. “Care to wipe my brow, sweet Dillon, and cry tears of relief all over me?”

“Umm, I’ll pass, if I may. Besides, from this angle, you look far too like your father.”

Beau picked himself up, as if the observation were some frightful insult. He stared down at the Mirror, at the smooth, pitch-black depths of it.

Aislinn stared too, and ice stared back, as sharp and painful as metal.

Caer breathed deeply, as if he could feel it too.

Aislinn crawled to her knees, taking off her cloak. Beau stopped her before she could cover it.

“What? What is it?”

He pointed to the frame. A thin band of silver writing had appeared just above the glass.

“Can you read it?” she asked him.

“It’s... very old.” He admitted. “*Very* old. Definitely says something about seeing into the future. And then... ‘*ask and you shall know.*’”

Aislinn crept forward. Whatever assurances Aeron had given, she wasn’t handing over the Mirror without testing it

first. She pressed her hands against the glass. It rippled beneath her fingertips like water.

“Mirror, Mirror, on the plinth,” she whispered, “what awaits us in Avalinth?”

She saw them bringing the Mirror home, to much fanfare and rejoicing. A great feast was held. Music sang in her ears. She saw herself dancing with Caer, saw him taking her hand and pulling her back to her room. The door opened, their mouths collided—

She pulled back her hand. “Anyone else see that?”

“See what?”

“Excellent.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “It worked?”

“Yes. Showed me the future.” She glanced at Caer. *I hope.*

“Well, that’s comforting.” Minerva clapped her hands together. “Cover it, lass. Just in case. Then let’s get out of this place. We’ve still a long journey back.”





PART  
FOUR

RETURN TO AVALINTH





Their journey back through the Deep was uneventful, almost devoid of any monsters. Aislinn knew she ought to be pleased with that, but she almost felt like the monsters were avoiding them, like there was something about the object they now carried that sent them scurrying. The cloak—and the spells Beau cast on it as soon as he’d regained his energy—should have muted its influence, but sometimes, late at night, Aislinn swore she still heard it, pulsing like a heartbeat in the dark.

Sometimes, she caught Caer staring at it.

They hadn’t spoken much on the journey back. Either he was trying to control himself, or he was merely too exhausted. Minerva pushed them much harder this time, determined to get back to Avalinth as quickly as possible.

Aislinn wasn’t sure she shared her desire. She wasn’t sure it was wise to take it back.

*Aeron said he wasn’t going to use it for ill, Aislinn told herself, searching his words. “I shall not remove it from*

*Avalinth. Nor shall I allow anyone else to do so. The mirror will remain here, under the care of myself. I shall not use it for any nefarious purposes. You have my vow.*”

It ought to be safe. It could never be used against her people.

So why did it fill her with dread?

Aislinn missed Caer—missed him, and the closeness that had thickened between them. Strange to miss someone in front of you, but there it was.

“Are we nearly there yet?” Beau asked after they traversed another endless flight of stairs.

Minerva glanced over her shoulder. “We should get there before nightfall.”

“Oh, yay! No more nights of pretending to be asleep so that the lovebirds can talk?”

Aislinn stilled. “I’m sorry?”

“We like to sleep, girl, but not that much.”

“Beau!” Aislinn said. “Were you in on this?”

“I might have been.”

“You lied to me! You said that dwarves needed twelve hours sleep—”

“I didn’t lie. I merely misinformed you.”

She glared at him.

“Don’t tell me you’re not a little impressed.”

Aislinn did not let up her glare, but as soon as Beau moved away, her gaze turned instead to Caerwyn. She imagined running her hands along those broad shoulders of his, slipping her hands under his clothes...

It had been days since she'd been out of heat—her bleeding had trailed off yesterday—and yet being around him conjured much the same effect.

Was he feeling it too? Is that why he couldn't meet her gaze?

Despite Minerva's predictions, it took longer than expected to traverse a cavern which had seen a recent rock fall. They'd been pushing themselves for days and, despite the promise of proper beds, Minerva called it a day when Luna fell asleep on the back of her wargi and almost slid from the saddle. They set up camp, all falling asleep as soon as their beds were unrolled.

Even Aislinn was exhausted enough to sleep, although she woke long before the dwarves. Dillon was posted at the mouth of the cave, Caer seated not far away by the remains of the fire. He'd taken a branch they hadn't got around to burning and was whittling away at it.

"What are you making?" Dillon asked.

"Another bead," Caer admitted, holding up his necklace. "One for each of the people I truly care about."

"Who's this one for?"

"Maybe it's for you, Dillon."

Dillon laughed. “I think it will be a while before the rest of them wake. Want to practise controlling the dead?”

“If you’re sure?”

Dillon nodded. Aislinn decided not to announce her return to consciousness, instead curling into her bedroll and letting the boys practise. It turned into a sparring match in the end, which she watched through half-closed lids, marvelling at the way Caer sprung across the rocks, surprisingly agile for someone of his size. There was raw power in his swings, and his skill was clear—thoughtful, precise, the moves of someone who had practised hard and carefully.

She wanted to meet those swings, meet the rest of him, too  
—

Her mouth turned dry at the thought.

Finally, the rest of the party rose. A quick breakfast was had, they refreshed themselves in a nearby stream, packed up, and headed off.

A few hours later, they reached the doors to the lift. It seemed a strange end to the journey, the doors so small compared to the colossal ceilings of the Deep below. The doors back into the city were a more fitting welcome.

They all paused there, unconsciously, silently—not moving, not speaking, not questioning.

*There is still time to turn back, the stone seemed to whisper.  
Pretend you never found it.*

But Aislinn remembered Caer's words, his palpable fear of his powers breaking out of him, and found she could not turn back.

She didn't know what guarded Minerva's decision, but she imagined it was much the same.

They dismounted at the gates of the palace, Dillon taking all of the wargis apart from Crusher and Mace, who were carrying the Mirror between them. Hecate scooted off too, having apparently had enough of their company.

The rest of them trudged forward along the gilded corridors.

"Where's the fanfare?" Beau asked. "There ought to be fanfare."

Aislinn nodded, but it did not feel like a celebration. It felt like they were marching into a funeral.

A set of knuckles brushed against hers, before a hand slid against her palm, clutching it tightly. Aislinn looked across; Caer was holding her hand, his eyes still facing forward.

She squeezed him right back.

Finally, they reached the throne room. Announcements were made. Venus was already there, in a gown encrusted with emeralds, Aeron lurking by her side in robes of white. She leapt up as they entered.

"Did you find it?" she asked.

Minerva nodded. Bell and Flora went to the Mirror, hauling off Aislinn's cape and setting it upright. Caer shrank back, like

the Mirror could burn. A dark energy pooled into the room, sharp as wind.

Aeron and Venus stared at it.

“At last,” Aeron said, fingers brushing against the frame, “such a beauty.”

Aislinn swallowed. “Your Majesty,” she prompted, “we have done as you asked.”

“You have indeed.” Venus turned to the party, her smile radiant. “Prince Caerwyn, my home is yours. You may stay here for as long as you wish, under our protection.”

Caer breathed a sigh of relief. Minerva clapped his back. Several of the others came forward to congratulate him or murmur words of approval.

“I trust it was a successful journey?” Venus asked, finally checking their party for missing members.

Minerva nodded. “A few hiccups, but no significant losses.” She paused. “We killed the golem, Ven. The one who...”

Venus’ eyes widened, but then her face quickly softened. “I see. Well. That’s good,” she said, as if the death of the creature responsible for the death of her husband meant nothing to her. She turned back to the Mirror. “We should have a feast tonight to celebrate your triumphant return, and perhaps a ball in a few days’ time to formally welcome Prince Caerwyn into our home. Until then, I suggest you rest—I daresay you’ve earned it.”



There was a general murmur of agreement. They left the Mirror where it was and traipsed back to their rooms. Caer seized Aislinn's hand again before they parted. "Can I come to your room tonight?" he asked, his voice a hushed whisper.

Aislinn turned towards him, to the serious, desperate expression in his eyes, the furrow in his brow.

She leaned forward until their breaths were mingling. If she kissed him now, she ran the risk of taking him right here in the hallway.

"How could I refuse such a request?" she said, mouth twitching into a smile.

"Are you trying to truth-dodge?"

"No!" she said, leaning forward and tugging on the strings of his shirt. "Come to my room tonight, or..."

"Or...?"

"Or I shall come to yours. It's a vow, now. Or a threat. I'll have to see it through."

Caer's throat bobbed. "I will... see you then, then."

"I look forward to it."

She slipped into her room, all coyness dropping from her expression the second the door closed. She ran to the bath and turned on the taps, tearing off her clothes and disappearing into the foamy waters before it was even full. She scrubbed away at the days of sweat and dirt and blood, massaging every pore, detangling the mess that was her hair. Finally, she

crawled out, patted herself dry, and dragged herself into the silk robe that had been left out for her.

She lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to think of anything other than what would be happening in a few hours and why they'd agreed to wait in the first place. She should have pulled him into the bath with her, heaved off his clothes herself, sponged that dirt from his skin as she slid on top of him...

A knock sounded at the door. Her heart lifted expectantly, before she realised that she knew that knock—Beau.

“So, don't get too mad at me—” he said as she opened the door.

“What did you do? Wait, I'm usually the one saying ‘don't get mad’. Oh no. This must be serious—”

Beau held up his hands. “Relax,” he said, “no one's in any danger.”

“Oh, excellent.”

He took a small brown bottle out of his breast pocket. “Dwarven tonic that guards against conception. Take before or after, within a twenty-four-hour window. As spells don't work here.”

Aislinn stared at the bottle.

“Did I overstep?”

“No,” she said, taking the bottle, “you didn't overstep.”

“Then—”

She threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you.”

“I’ve got your back,” he said, squeezing her middle. “Always. Now... have fun. But use the tonic. I’m not ready to be an uncle yet.”

Aislinn laughed. “And I am *definitely* not ready to be a parent.”

Young parents were very unusual amongst the fae—most wouldn’t see a child in half a century or more unless they were trying particularly hard. Her own parents were considered young (not yet fifty when they’d conceived) although she understood it had been easier for them due to Juliana’s mortal fertility. Beau, apparently, had been a welcome Beltane accident.

Aislinn wanted a child at some point—but not now, even if the thought of *Caer’s* child made her a little giddy, a plump little dark-haired child with rosebud lips and eyes a colour she couldn’t name.

She shook the thought away before the impracticalities could strike her.

Beau said goodnight, and whispered away down the hall.

Aislinn closed her door and placed the bottle on her nightstand, throwing herself down on the bed and drowning in the pillows. She felt nervous and giddy, insides quivering with the thought of what awaited her tonight, senses heightened and hazy.

Someone knocked on the door again.

“Yes?” she called out, expecting it to be Beau again with some final words of wisdom.

Caer walked into the room. He hovered in the threshold, Aislinn bolting up in bed. He was still damp from his bath, his freshly laundered shirt clinging to every glorious inch of him. He wasn't even wearing a belt, his trousers hanging loosely at his hips.

“Hi,” he said. He glanced back towards the door. “May I—”

“Close it,” she instructed.

By the time the door had clicked shut, Aislinn had bolted over the room. Caer barely had time to turn before she'd thrown herself at him. Their mouths collided in a blast of heat that she felt down to her toes. Dizziness overwhelmed her, his kisses intoxicating. She wanted to climb into his mouth. Caer murmured something into her, but she couldn't hear, her mind focusing on all the places she wanted to touch him.

He rolled her against the wall, panting hard, his hands working down her back, gathering at her spine. His chin glided against hers.

She pulled back, grinning. “You shaved.”

His cheeks heated, but her eyes were mostly captured by the dimple there, and the red, blurred quality of his parted lips. “It seemed appropriate.”

She skimmed her fingers over the impossibly smooth skin. “I quite like the stubble,” she admitted.

Caer groaned. “I’ve been told that it can be chafing if one kisses for too long.”

“Thinking ahead, are you?”

His eyes glinted. “Perhaps.”

She slid her hands over his cheeks and down his neck. “Fae men can’t grow beards, you know. This is new to me.” Her fingers stopped at his collar bones, noticing his necklace. “You’ve added a new bead,” Aislinn remarked, turning the wooden bauble towards her. She made out a newly etched swirl, slashed through with something that looked like a thorn.

Caer’s throat bobbed. “This is just a temporary one.”

“Oh? Until what?”

“Until I find the time to render you in a more suitable material. Obsidian, perhaps.” He pulled a lock of her hair. “Amber. Garnet.”

“How long did it take the others to work their way onto here?”

“Oh, a few months, at least.”

“You’ve barely known me—”

“I know you,” he whispered. “I know you in the way one knows the shape of their limbs though they’ve never thought to memorise them, in the way they recognise a scent they’ve known once in childhood, the way they know the sea and sky and the stars above them—changing and constant, endless and immortal. I know you, Aislinn Ardenthorn.”

“That was... poetic.”

“Do you doubt me?”

Aislinn swallowed. “I am not accustomed to letting myself believe in good things when there is any room for doubt,” she whispered. “But yes, I believe you, Caerwyn of Afelcarreg. Spirits haunt me if there ever comes a time when I do not.”

“Will that actually happen, now you’ve said it—”

“Kiss me, fool, before I change my mind.”

Caer’s dimples deepened, his crooked smile making her weak in the knees. “I was intending to savour you, you know. I had the kiss all built up in my head...”

“I’ve had enough of sipping you when I’m dying of thirst,” Aislinn said, trailing kisses along his jaw, “but if you wish to demonstrate... I can hold myself back.”

Caer pulled away from her, swallowing his smile and schooling his face into something more placid. He took her hands, collecting them in his and kissing her knuckles softly. “I was going to start like this,” he said, and then stroked back a lock of her hair, fingertips lingering against her skin, brushing the pointed tip of her ear. “Then I was going to do this,” he said, leaning his forehead against hers, as if offering up a silent prayer, a plea to remember every second that would follow with the clarity of crystal. “And then this...”

At last, his mouth found hers again. Her lips parted for his, his tongue exploring hers. It was like wildfire, like battle. Her

arms slid around his neck, her body liquid against his as the kisses descended down her throat.

“What happens next?” she breathed.

Caer grinned against her skin. “I didn’t dare imagine too much more. Seemed rather... presumptuous.”

“Well, I imagined plenty!”

Aislinn gripped the back of his hair, steering him towards the bed, the both of them laughing as they fell down together, Aislinn on top. He stared up at her, eyes wide and black, bright and luminous as hot coals.

She peeled off his shirt. Her mouth went dry. Her fingers skimmed past lightly bronze muscle, hardly daring to touch. “I am going to lick every one of these,” she told him.

“I am not going to stop you.”

She placed her mouth to his neck and let her tongue travel down his body, stopping to explore every muscle, every hard curve of him, punctuating her journey with kisses, occasionally returning to that perfect, glorious mouth of his. She’d kissed people before, kissed men and women and creatures that he could only dream of, but she’d never known it be like this before, like she wanted to inhale him, drown in him, her thoughts spiralling with every second.

She’d experienced sex before too, she’d dabbled in love—but she’d never felt anything like this, the desire to marvel at every dimple in his skin, to commit every part of him to memory. She wanted her touches to absorb him.

She stopped at his hips, hands on his trousers, searching for permission.

Caer sat up, shifting to the end of the bed, as if trying to hide how desperately aroused he was.

“Do we have anything to worry about?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Children or... other things?”

Aislinn pointed to the small bottle beside her bed. “Turns out dwarves have non-magic ways of guarding against such things, thankfully.”

“Ah. Terrific.”

“You seem nervous. Are you all right?”

“I have something to tell you.”

“What? Like it’s your first time?”

Caer stilled.

Aislinn blinked. “Is it?”

“So, in the mortal world—”

“You said you wished I ‘*was your first of many things*’! All suave and cocky-like! And you’re insanely attractive! What was I supposed to think—”

“I was trying to be all smooth, I’m sorry!”

Aislinn threw up her hands. “No,” she said, “this is on me. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed anything.”



Caer went quiet for a moment. “Things are different in the mortal world,” he explained. “There’s no guard against children or disease. It is wise to be careful. Of course, offers have been there, and I’ve some experience in some other areas, but every time I’ve come close to the act itself, the consequences—especially for her—have prevented me from going ahead with it.”

Aislinn bent against him. “You’re a good man, Caer.”

“I rather think considering the consequences of your actions should be the bare minimum,” he said, “but thank you.” He paused, searching her face again. “So... still want to go through with this?”

“I do. Do you?”

Caer’s throat trembled. His lips came up to hers again. “More than I have ever wanted anything ever before in my life.” His hand slid to the front of her robe, playing with the ribbon that held it together. “May I?”

Aislinn nodded, finally feeling beyond words.

He peeled it away, shucking it from her shoulders, until it pooled around her feet.

She wasn’t wearing anything else.

Caer’s eyes widened into liquidous pools.

“I know I’m not as buxom as most mortal women—”

“Are you seriously questioning how much I like you? Right now?”

“Yes,” she said. “Maybe. No. I just—why *do* you like me?”

“Putting aside your radiance,” he said, cupping her face, “you are brave—” he kissed her neck, “and strong—” another kissed brushed her jaw, “and fearlessly fearful, and funny, and *good*, and—”

His lips brushed the thin, flat planes of her stomach, and he inched her towards the bed, moving her legs over his taut, wide shoulders, and bringing his mouth so close to her centre that she felt his breath inside her. She quivered in anticipation, thoughts turning to liquid as he kissed her *there*, working at her middle with expert attention as her fingers balled into the sheets and she cried out, shattering there with his head between her legs.

“Experienced in some areas, you say?” she managed, her voice hoarse.

Caer grinned wickedly, climbing up onto the bed, his body a cage over hers.

“My turn,” she whispered, going for his trousers.

Caer shook his head. “No,” he said, “if it’s all the same to you. I want to be inside you. I’m breaking with the want, Ais. Please.”

Aislinn smiled as she shucked off his trousers and guided him back towards her, helping him find her entrance. He slid into her, gasping.

“You’ll... let me know? If I... do anything wrong?”

“Well,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady, “I can’t exactly lie...”

She tilted herself towards him, taking one of his hands and whispering instructions in his ear as they began the slow, steady climb together. His body was everything she dreamt it would be, but the other parts, the feeling of entanglement, like his skin could reach her soul—how could she possibly have imagined that?

She came again seconds before him, splitting into spiralling, fragmented thoughts, words turned to slush. He’d set her nerves aflame with every tiny, perfect motion, every attention to detail. When he collapsed against her damp breast, his breathing hard and heavy, she didn’t know whether she wanted to ask him to go again or gather him in her arms and never, ever let him go.



43  
METAL TURNED TO LACE

C aer watched Aislinn lying against his chest. Her fingers had not yet left his skin. His own were brushing down her arm, drawing lazy circles on her back, his lips close to her forehead. He wanted to colour every inch of her with his fingertips, memorising every sweet, soft curve of her, every dimple, every line.

He was equally sure that he didn't want to move, that he wanted to stay pressed against her forever, locked away in this room where time had no meaning. There was something about her that blurred all other thoughts, all other cares and realities. For a moment as steady as the heart beating under hers, he forgot tomorrow.

And then, all too suddenly, he remembered.

“This can't be it,” she whispered.

“What?”

“I don't want this to be a one-time thing or a short-term thing. I don't want it to end when I have to leave.”

Caer inched upwards, only slightly, his heart flickering with hope. Aislinn's face turned to face him. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"I'm saying... can we try this? Maybe I can bargain with Venus to stay here longer. Perhaps we could strike a diplomatic deal, name me as fae ambassador or something. Even if she won't agree long-term, perhaps I can still visit. Perhaps I can learn to master teleporting. I know it might take you years to master your powers, but so what? I'm going to live forever. Your ageing will be slowed here, too. I think... I think I'd rather wait for you for decades than let you go now."

Her eyes flickered with something like nerves, like she was certain he was going to say that it was foolish, silly, that it would never work.

He knew there were plenty of reasons why it might not. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't afraid that he'd be holding her back. She deserved more freedom, the chance to be with anyone she wanted, *whenever* she wanted. Maybe he deserved that freedom, too. There were thousands of dwarves here, after all, hundreds of people he could be with, freely and easily—

But they weren't her. No one would ever be her.

Aislinn. Who for some deep, inexplicable reason, wanted him too.

"You mean that?" he asked.

Aislinn sat up, sliding her hands into his and holding his fingers tightly. "I think I mean that more than anything else I

have said in my entire life.”

Caer vaulted up, grabbing her and rolling her back into the bed. He kissed her, hard and hot and heavy, his hands sliding down her body.

“Is that a yes?” she asked, trying not to laugh.

“God, yes,” he said. “I wish I couldn’t lie. I wish I could make some kind of vow that I could be held to—”

Aislinn caught his face in her hands. “I will believe whatever you say.”

“I am secretly a unicorn.”

“Very funny.”

“I have my moments.” He rested his head against her, feeling the heat slide out of her. “I’m yours,” he whispered. “For as long as you want me.”

*I think I will want you forever and a little bit after that, too.*

Aislinn kissed him, which saved him from speaking those words, fearful of shattering the fragility of this moment, as if it would be unable to bear the weight of what he really wanted to say.



They stayed in the room for the next few hours, ringing for food at one point and dining on the bed. They made love again and dozed in the afternoon, a warm tangle of limbs. Aislinn admitted that she was unused to this; she rarely let her lovers

stay the night, but she felt like she would fight anyone who wanted to remove Caer from her bed. He blushed at the thought, quite certain he wanted her to stay in his arms forever, preferably naked.

She couldn't stop touching him. He couldn't stop touching *her*. His fingers went everywhere, his touches long and languid.

They were very late to the feast.

"Your drawstrings are undone," Minerva commented, when he took a seat beside her.

Caer's hands went to his chest. "No, they're not."

"Not those ones."

His cheeks heated, and he fought the desperate urge to slide beneath the table. Aislinn caught his gaze, however, grinning with barely concealed laughter, and he found himself held there.

The feast was a relatively small affair—the six dwarves, Aislinn, Caer and Beau, Venus and Tiberius—

And Aeron, by Venus' right hand side, smiling contentedly like the cat with the cream.

"Have you tried out your new mirror yet?" Caer asked, trying to sound placid.

"I have examined some of its minor functions, yes," Aeron replied, neatly sipping his spiced wine.

"And its other ones?"

“Require a little more preparation.”

“Will you share its findings with us?”

Aeron blinked. “Why, of course, Your Highness. Why would I not?”

Caer turned back to the food, trying to be satisfied. He hoped he was wrong about Aeron—or at least that Bell and Minerva knew what they were doing.

The excellent spread proved a welcome distraction. There were half a dozen stuffed birds, all lightly spiced and oozing with fruits and nuts. Gold plates of sliced, salted vegetables accompanied them, oozing with butter. There were dense, flat breads and thick, creamy cheeses. Caer couldn't name everything, but everything was delicious. It was finished off with quinces and honey and sparkling, cool cider.

After the meal was finished, music was played. Cards were dished out. Everyone seemed too tired for dancing. Luna snuck off early, no doubt to visit Dillon in the stables. He and Aislinn didn't linger for long after. She took his hand and dragged him back to her room, shoving him up against the wall.

When they finally slept, it was with his head resting against her breast, and all worries obliterated beneath the steady, unfathomable warmth of her heartbeat.

The next morning, Caer woke before Aislinn, kissed her brow, and left her a note saying he was going into town. Hard as it was to leave her bed, he wanted to embrace life in



Avalinth, and he didn't feel like he could truly settle in until he did what he'd promised himself he would do—find a master to teach him the trade.

There was no shortage of blacksmiths in the town to inquire with, but most of them were not in the market for an apprentice. They were, however, more than happy to point him in the direction of the next business that might be. Caer spent the better part of the morning moving from forge to forge.

Finally, he found someone. A burly, red-haired fellow with a metal leg that whirred slightly as he moved.

“I might have an opening,” he said. “If you can prove yourself.”

Caer glanced at the weapons on the wall. “I can make you a sword—”

The dwarf snorted. “Anyone can make a sword, and I can tell by the burns on your arms you've plenty of experience with a forge. No, I want you to make me something with a little more... beauty.”

“Beauty?”

“Never underestimate the importance of beauty when selling, lad. Besides, I have a side business in jewellery-making. Look!” He parted his long red locks, displaying a pair of twinkling silver earrings. “There's a bunch of scrap metal over there,” he said, dropping his hair back into place and pointing to a nearby workbench. “Take as long as you need.”

The scrap was arranged into immaculate piles, sorted into buckets and pots of gears, wires, thin seats, thicker plating. Everything was organised by colour as well as type. Caer took a while to hold several of the pieces, hoping for inspiration to strike. He sketched a few designs on a supply of paper he'd been given, wishing he had Beau's skill with a pencil and wondering if it would be cheating to go back to the palace and ask him for help.

He decided it *would* be cheating, and he wanted to face this challenge by himself.

He took some of the wire and started to bend it, teasing it with a pair of tweezers until it resembled a pointed, curved shape, reminiscent of Aislinn's ears.

A thought struck him.

He pulled out several more pieces of silver and started bending and curling, welding parts together with the help of the forge. He made a few errors. He had to restart a couple of times, not satisfied with where it was going. Doing the second one was a nightmare, but he wanted a perfect match—and the opportunity to prove his success wasn't a one-off.

Finally, he presented the finished project to the blacksmith: two perfect ear cuffs in a fine, delicate design, metal turned to lace.

The blacksmith whistled approvingly, modelling one in front of his mirror. "These are dainty little things! Some mortal fashion?"

“Fae,” Caer admitted. “I hope that’s all right.”

“Fashion is fashion, lad. Spent a lot of time in the fae realm?”

“Only a few days. I just saw something like these once and wanted to copy them.”

“Copied from memory after only seeing them once? Impressive. If my apprentice isn’t back by the end of the week, the job’s yours.”

Caer’s chest deflated. “You’ve already got an apprentice?”

“Aye, but he hasn’t shown up for work for a few days.”

“You aren’t worried about him?”

“He’s been talking for ages about taking one of these blades and going to the Deep to become a monster hunter. Looks like he finally did it.”

Caer smiled. “I’ll be back at the end of the week.”

“Aye, you do that. Might even take you on if Juno comes back! You’ve a good eye for design.”

Caer thanked him profusely. The blacksmith returned his ear cuffs, and Caer headed back to the palace with them safely stowed in his pocket. He found Aislinn back in her room, reading a book and wearing nothing but a loose shirt that left her creamy thighs on full, wonderful display.

The grin she flashed at him when she looked up made his knees weak and other parts of him turn much, much harder indeed.

She abandoned her book and skipped towards him, throwing her hands around his neck and drawing his lips to hers. The kiss was light by Aislinn's standards, yet still hard to pull away from.

"Have fun in town?" she asked.

"Productive. I think I found a blacksmith to apprentice myself to, and look—" He held up the ear cuffs. "For you."

Aislinn's smile turned soft as she reached out to take them, turning to her mirror to admire them as Caer slid his arms around her middle.

"They're beautiful, Caer."

"So are you."

"I used to think you didn't like my ears."

"I've yet to find a part of you that I dislike, but ask me after a few years. Maybe I'll have come up with something by then."

Aislinn turned to kiss him, and, still grinning, they fell back towards the bed.



For the next few days, they existed inside this wonderful, perfect bubble, shook by nothing, disturbed by no one. They barely left Aislinn's room, which was becoming so much like *his*, Caer wondered if he'd be permitted to remain in it after she left.

But he didn't want to think about that.

"I'll ask Venus at the ball," Aislinn said. "Maybe I should speak to Minerva, first. I'm sure she'd be happy to help us." She caught his face in her hands, as if she could sense his thoughts. "I'm not going anywhere yet, Caer. I promise."

He supposed he should be glad for that promise, but although she couldn't break it, he knew someone else could force her too.

Venus could still say no.

Happily, the apprentice didn't return, which secured Caer the position with the blacksmith. He'd start the day after the ball. Caer was in no mood to leave Aislinn's side, but he liked the idea of returning to the forge. Aislinn, too, was anxious for battle. They found themselves in the castle armoury at one point, permitted to spar as long as they were chaperoned. Fighting with Aislinn turned out to be such fun that they tumbled back into her chamber having worked up quite the sweat, and plunged themselves into the bathtub together.

"This can't end," Caer whispered into her neck, "I won't let it."

And Aislinn, unable to lie, just told him that she'd fight to be with him for as long as she could.



44  
THE UNEXPECTED VISITOR

**B**eau was having a splendid time. He always enjoyed a revel, and whilst the dwarven ball seemed a little tame compared to the displays at home, there was no denying the dwarves were excellent hosts and the feast was a fine affair. The music was grand, the company hilarious, the food hearty, and—

And Aislinn was smiling again, twirling in Caer's arms, like her cheeks might break with happiness. He wasn't sure he'd seen her so happy since before Cass' death, wasn't sure he'd seen her so happy *ever*.

Sure, the relationship was far from ideal as Caer had to remain here, at least for the time being, but he trusted they'd find a way to make it work. Perhaps a lover who couldn't be with her all the time would suit Aislinn, with her fierce independence. He knew their mother quite enjoyed time away from their father, even if she enjoyed coming home to him that much more. Their father had a tendency to mope whenever she was gone, and spend undue amounts of time with them in the meantime, sharing embarrassing stories.

Beau very much hoped that Aislinn did not become like that.

Caer moved away from Aislinn to get them some refreshments, and her eyes fell towards Beau. She came over, still grinning, dropping beside him on the pillows.

“Good evening, brother mine.”

“It certainly is.” He finished his drink and grinned at her, just as wildly.

“Having a good night?”

“Exceptional.” He placed his goblet on a nearby table, eyes scanning the room for any of their comrades. Instead, his eyes fell on a wrinkled old woman in the corner. Despite the finery around her, she was wearing a withered old dress stitched together with bits of lace and crow feathers and faded sequins, all black. Her cobwebby hair was wrapped around her head in an elaborate braid that looked like she’d been wearing it for several days.

“No...” he whispered, his stomach plummeting.

“What is it?”

“It’s Mabel.”

Mabel was a witch who resided mainly in Acanthia. She was responsible for the pendants that had been of great assistance to Hawthorn and Juliana half a century ago—one of which Aislinn was currently wearing around her neck—and the king and queen had great respect for her. Beau did too, but she did have a habit of showing up right before things

*happened*. A troll insurgence. An unpredicted avalanche. The rampage of a dangerous giant that would kill one of his best friends.

Aislinn followed his gaze. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Is that Minerva she’s talking to?”

Beau realised she was right. Minerva was seated beside her, a tankard of ale clutched in her iron grip, laughing as if they’d known each other their entire lives.

Beau marched over, Aislinn following.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Mabel turned towards him. “It’s good to see you too, Prince Beau.”

Aislinn switched on a smile. “Do you two know each other?”

“Oh, Minnie and I go way back!” Mabel cackled.

“I thought no outsider had set foot in Avalinth for over a hundred years—”

“No *fae* has set foot in Avalinth during that time,” said Mabel, “but I don’t count, as you know. That being said, it has been a long while, hasn’t it dear?”

“Too long, too long!” Minerva chuckled into her drink.

“But... but... *why* are you here?” Beau asked.

Mabel shrugged. “I just fancied a change of scenery.”



“We both know that is not the answer.”

The two women both laughed, before Minerva climbed to her feet. “I best try and find my sister. She’s been curiously absent all evening. I’ll catch up with you later, Mab.”

“*Mab?*” Beau said, aghast. “*Minnie?*”

“You seem surprised that I have friends, Young Prince.”

“I’m surprised that you’re here. And also the friends part, yes. But mostly surprised that you’re here. Also worried. You’re always turning up right before *things happen*.”

Mabel chuckled again, as if this were all a great game to her. “You say my appearance heralds disaster, Young Prince... and yet you are still alive. I just like to be where the action is.”

“There’s going to be action here? I thought we were supposed to be safe here. Aislinn, she said—”

“She’s teasing you, just ignore her.”

“I can be teasing you and still be right.”

Beau froze. “I really, really don’t like you.”

There seemed to be no end to Mabel’s laughter, but now even Ais was laughing, clapping her hand around his back and sidling off, back to Caer’s side.

Beau knew he ought to return to the party, but he wasn’t quite sure he was ready to let this go. His eyes were rooted on Mabel still, and he noticed a faint glittery quality to her clothes—like the type associated with a glamour. That ought to have been impossible. Beau was immune to all but the strongest of

glamours—and certainly should have been immune to any cast by a simple witch, no matter her power—and glamours weren't supposed to work inside the castle at all.

“Are you doing magic?”

Mabel's eyes flickered, her smile dropping, just for a second. “How on Earth would I accomplish a thing like that?”

“I don't know. That's why I'm asking.”

Mabel chuckled. “You're a smart one, little prince, I'll give you that.”

“I am very smart,” Beau agreed. “I might even be as smart as you one day, if I live so long.”

Mabel's eyes gleamed. “Oh no, little prince, no one will ever live as long as me.”

Beau blinked at her, bewildered. “Who—*what*—exactly are you?”

“I may tell you one day. I may not. I haven't decided yet.”

“Great. Can you tell me how you're doing magic here?”

“I am the greatest witch that ever lived. You can glamour me on that.”

“Something tells me, that even if we stepped outside the palace walls, you'd still have ways of dispelling any and all glamours.”

“There you go again with that intelligence, prince,” she said, patting his face like an affectionate grandma. “Hold onto it. It'll serve you well.”



Aislinn went back to Caer's side, took the plate of food he'd found for them both, and dragged him into an alcove to devour it. Her skirts spilled around them. The tailors had done a good job with her gown—it was a deep sea blue that matched her colouring perfectly—but it wasn't as fluid or as graceful as the glistening gowns of Faerie.

For a moment, she felt a pang at the idea that it might be a long time before Caer saw her in a true Faerie dress. She supposed she could pack one for the next time she visited... whenever that would be.

*No, no. Don't think about that. Not tonight.*

She still needed to talk to Venus, but she'd disappeared after opening the dance, and Aislinn hadn't seen her since.

“What are you thinking about?” Caer prompted.

Aislinn crossed her bare ankles over his legs and plucked the fruit in his outstretched fingers directly into her mouth with her tongue. Caer stared at her, leaning over to kiss the juice from her chin. It had the bitter, sweet tang of a grape, but soon she could taste nothing but his lips.

“You're driving me wild,” he breathed into her mouth.

“Steady,” she said, placing a hand to his chest. “We are not in a private space, and this is not Faerie. We can't couple out in the open.”

Caer's eyes opened. "Fae actually do that? I assumed it was rumour."

"Are you horrified or curious?"

"Um, a little of both?" He looked around them, a sinful smirk flirting across his cheeks. He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. "I'd definitely take you here if I could."

*Spirits and vines and creatures of the Deep—I'd let this man ruin me.*

She swallowed, mouth dry. "If social protocol allowed it, I'd tear off your clothes and use you as a plate."

"We could go back to your room..."

"Later," she said, and stood up abruptly. "But not *much* later."

"Where are you going?"

"I need a drink. Stay here."

She needed a drink. A drink, and a cold bath. And him. Oh, vines, she needed him. Needed to take him back with her to Acanthia and whisper mortal lies in his ear, promises she could not make. She needed him to warm her bed and hold her heart and stay beside her because the rest of the world felt like the Deep without him—her future a dark cavern of monsters.

*I can't leave him I can't leave him I can't.*

Her gaze drifted once more to Mabel, sitting by the corner of the room, near to the windows stretching onto the balcony. Mabel who knew more about magic than her, and who sat

quite alone right now. Minerva had not yet returned with Venus.

It was worth a shot.

“I should like to ask you something, if I may,” she said, approaching her again.

Mabel did not look up from her goblet. “Go on.”

“Are there items that can dampen magical powers?”

“You know there are, dearie.”

“What about more than dampen? More... bind entirely?”

Mabel looked up. “You are thinking of the prince.”

It did not surprise Aislinn in the least that Mabel knew about him. He was probably quite the talk of the town, and even if he wasn't... Mabel would know. She always did.

“Yes.”

Mabel nodded, chewing her lip. “I could create a charm to dampen most people's abilities, given the right ingredients. To put a block on them entirely... difficult, but not impossible.”

“Then—”

Maybe shook her head. “Not his, though. It's taking an entire palace to contain him as it is, and still, they press against the barriers... I could not press that into an object. I do not think anyone could. His powers are too much, too powerful. Too... dark.”

Aislinn shook her head, her heart plummeting. “No. Caer is *good*.”

“He is, his powers aren’t. His powers were never supposed to exist.”

“He is *not* his powers.”

“No,” Mabel agreed. “He is not, from what I can see. I suppose we ought to be thankful for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can you imagine what might happen if anyone *else* had got their hands on such a power? The damage they could have wrought—the armies they could have raised? And yet these powers came to a boy who didn’t want them, who tried everything to avoid using them—who only ever willingly used them for good.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I hear things, Princess, and my ears travel far.”

Aislinn wondered at the power Mabel had that she was able to sense Caer’s powers even underneath the barrier, to know what she did without any examination, but she knew better than to press it. Mabel was not fae, she was capable of lying, and it did not do to piss her off. She’d once cursed Beau with donkey ears for a perceived slight when he was eight years old. They’d both learnt from that experience.

She thanked the witch for her time, and went to find something to drink. The ale was far too weak for her. Her gaze sought out Venus again, but she was still nowhere to be seen.

*She has to let me stay. She has to.*

Aislinn sighed, taking two tankards, and returned to Caer, half-tossing them aside and leaping on him instead.

“Well, hello,” Caer said when she pulled back, grinning from ear to ear, “did you miss me?”

“No,” she replied. *But I will. I will, I will, I will! I’ll miss you so much I fear I will break from it.* She tugged at his hands. “Come with me.”

Caer’s eyes gleamed. “Anywhere,” he replied. “Always.”

*Liar.*

She led him by the hands out onto the balcony. It was quieter here, not as raucous. Something was amassing on the lawns below—a demonstration for later, perhaps—but she paid it no heed. She was with Caer, after all. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Dropping away from him, Aislinn leant against the stone railing, fingers trailing above the gardens. She felt a glimmer of where the barrier ended and her magic flickered back, just for a second.

“Ais?” Caer asked, his fingers gracing the skin of her back.

She turned around, pulling him against her, bringing her mouth to his. The slow, languid glide of his lips set tiny ripples of heat down to her bones. She didn’t want to stop, or open her eyes, or face the next second without him.

But she needed to breathe. She needed to move.

She pressed away from him, standing up on the baluster.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I want to try something.”

She scooted back until the heels of her soft slippers almost trod air. Caer’s eyes widened, and he flinched forward.

“Relax,” she said. “You know I have the balance of a cat.”

“I know I’m terrified of you getting hurt.”

Aislinn bent down and kissed him. “I am very hard to break.”

In bones, at least. The rest of her broke fairly easily. *He* could break her easily.

She straightened up again and held up her arms, letting waves of glamour twirl across her torso, down her legs, dusting the gown in jewels and gold until it twinkled like dusk—sunset and starlight forged in fabric. It made her hair shine, reddened her lips, made her eyes glitter and her skin glow.

Caer stared, mesmerised.

“Come back down,” he whispered.

“The glamour will fade.”

“You won’t.”

Aislinn smiled, leaping into his outstretched arms. His broad shoulders wrapped around her as the glamour sloughed from her body. She stared down at his eyes. “I should give you truesight.”

Caer lowered her to the ground. “Will you still be able to conjure pretty glammers for me?”



*“I will,”* Aislinn said. “But it’ll be harder for others to do so. For some, impossible. And you should be able to detect it. You’ll still be susceptible from glamours being cast on you though—the type that compels you to do as you’re bid. You’ll need to wear rowan berries to ward off that—”

“Not sure I’ll need all that surrounded by dwarves, but sure. Are you going to spit in my eyes?”

She tilted his face towards hers. “I was going to kiss them. Hold on...”

It was not as romantic as she imagined, Caerwyn squirming under the quick lick of her tongue, and they both collapsed into giggles afterwards.

A gong sounded from inside the throne room.

Caer groaned. “That sounds important. I suppose we should go back in.”

They walked back arm-in-arm. The noise of the celebration fizzled away, save for a handful of very drunken dwarves. A loud trumpet signalled the arrival of Venus, who swept up to her throne, silencing everyone. Not a soul moved.

“Friends, comrades, allies and citizens,” she announced, “it feels like decades since we have had something to celebrate, and yet I hope in the days and weeks ahead, we shall have much to celebrate indeed. But first, a toast to my brave sister, and a warm welcome to Prince Caerwyn, who is to be our honoured guest here.”

A loud cheer went up, followed by the clanking of goblets and tankards. Venus raised her hand afterwards, and silence fell once more. She looked over to her guards, one of whom nodded. Aislinn noticed for the first time that Aeron was not among them, nor had she seen him at all tonight.

“But before all that, we’ve arranged a demonstration for you in the grounds. Guards, show the guests to the gardens!”

The guests formed an orderly line towards the doors, but Aislinn, Caer, and the entirety of Minerva’s band were hurried to the balcony instead—customary for honoured guests, to have a better view.

The garden had been well lit, now, sconces of bright flame marking out the manicured lawns and sculptures of steel and brass.

At the centre was the Mirror, illuminated by candlelight, the glass swirling like ink or smoke.

Caer twitched by Aislinn’s side. A hushed whisper fell over the crowd. The blackness in the Mirror continued to swirl.

Aeron stepped forward, calling upwards to the balcony. His voice boomed unnaturally. “Citizens of Avalinth, this mirror is a gateway—one I hope to utilise to bring you fortune beyond your imaginings.”

Aislinn glanced at Beau. *Gateway?* she mouthed. Aeron had definitely said it showed the future. He *did*. What did he mean by gateway?

Beau shook his head, his eyes wide and fearful.

Aislinn turned back to the scene below.

“For too long, Avalinth has been cut off from Faerie,” Aeron continued. “Separated, fearful, neglected—ignored. But no longer. This Mirror can transport us almost anywhere, and... it can bring our allies to us.”

Another murmur, louder than before, raced through the crowd. Aeron turned to the Mirror, whispering words underneath his breath. The blackness of the Mirror pulled away, tendrils of smoke streaking out of it—

Caer started panting, breathing hard, almost doubling over. Aislinn reached out to steady him, wanting to cry out, but somehow her voice was lodged in her throat, terrified into submission by the Mirror’s raging power.

The smoke cleared. The glass turned crystal—reflecting a courtyard in another castle, miles and miles away.

Afelcarreg.

“It... it can’t be,” Caer gasped.

“Come forward, my king,” cried Aeron. “Come, and be welcome.”

Aeron held out his hand. A face appeared in the glass, followed by a body—a portly, red-faced body, robed and crowned.

King Owen stepped through the glass.



45  
FLIGHT FROM THE PALACE

The dwarves gasped. Most of them would never have seen magic before, or would have gone so long without seeing it it would have felt like a distant memory to them, a fairytale told to children.

And yet Aeron had opened a portal right into Avalinth.

And let in a human king.

And his small army, following him one by one, arranging themselves on the grass.

Aislinn looked to Minerva for direction, but her eyes were rooted on the display below. Aislinn's gaze moved to Venus instead. She could not possibly be permitting this—

But Venus only smiled.

“No,” Aislinn said, marching towards her, her hands going for her hip although no sword swung there. “You gave us your word. You said you’d protect Caer from his father—”

The guards' halberds darted towards her, but Venus held up her hand. “I’m sorry,” she said, “But I made other promises

long ago.”

Minerva snarled at her sister. “This ridiculous charade—it was all for nothing?”

“Not *nothing*,” Venus said, her voice oddly sweet. “We needed someone to go and fetch the Mirror. Aeron couldn’t do it alone, not even with all his power. It could have taken decades to convince enough faeries to help us, but then two fae royals just waltzed right in...”

“You couldn’t have known they would agree to help you—”

“That’s what I said, when Aeron first suggested it, when Owen first told us that the royal family had come to visit. But he also told me that King Hawthorn would do anything to free his children... and he has no power here. If you hadn’t agreed to get it yourself, I would have held them here until he agreed.”

“My father would never—” Aislinn started, but then she stopped, because she couldn’t finish her words.

Because they would be lies.

Hawthorn was a great ruler—fair, just, cunning, benevolent. But he had just one weakness:

His family.

*Them.*

Venus smiled.

“And how does Owen fall into this?” Minerva asked, gaze dark.

“We share a common goal,” she said. “The annihilation of the fae, and our loved ones back beside us.”

Caer shuddered, his breathing still tight. “You can’t mean... no. She wouldn’t want this.”

Minerva shook her head. “You can’t bring back the dead, Ven. Not as they were.”

“Mother,” said Tiberius, stepping forward for the first time, his features pale and shaking. “This is... no.”

Venus paid him no heed. “He’s already brought someone back. He’s shown me. He says we’ll need the Mirror’s full power to bring Clay back, since his body is no more than bones, but he’s proven it can be done—”

“If you’re talking about Dillon, there were extenuating circumstances.”

Venus frowned. “Who is *Dillon*?”

Aislinn froze. Had they genuinely, in all that had happened, forgotten to mention *Dillon*? Had news of the undead knight not reached Venus’ ears?

*We never brought him into the palace. He met up with us later. Unless a servant mentioned it to her directly—*

Minerva snarled again. “You’re telling me that this Aeron has already brought someone back?”

“Yes. And he can bring back Clay, too. And Queen Gwyn. Exactly as they were. All he needs...” A hush fell over the party, and her eyes fell hungrily to Caer.

Aislinn stepped in front of him. “No.”

“Oh, my dear, what choice do you have?”

“This process,” Min started, jaw tight, “will it kill him?”

“Most likely,” she agreed, “but maybe not. It might just drain him of the power he should never have had in the first place.”

“Then respectfully, I will have to decline.”

“Min,” said Venus, her voice unusually soft, “come. This is for *Clay*. Clay for a boy you’ve only known a few months.”

“And how long did it take you to realise that you loved Clay?”

Venus went silent.

“I thought so.”

Venus stepped towards her. “Min, think about this. You’re outnumbered. You’re unarmed. You don’t have a choice.”

The guards closed in around her. Aislinn looked desperately towards the balcony railing. If there was any kind of distraction, she could get there. A few seconds was all she needed.

Minerva caught her eyes. Aislinn nodded.

“The odds have often been stacked against us,” Minerva admitted. “And never more so than now. But foolish, dear sister, to think I come anywhere unarmed.”

She extended her metal arm, winding a tiny lever in the elbow, and a blade shot from her wrist. She plunged it into the

soft underbelly of one of the guards, wrenching away her weapon and flinging it towards Bell.

The guards were armed—but they weren't in full armour. It was hot, it was a ball, they were supposed to look the part.

They were exposed.

Aislinn raced towards the baluster, leaping up onto the smooth stone and summoning fistfuls of fire.

She could not do magic inside the castle.

But she could fling fireballs inside it.

Beau understood her tactic in seconds. He vaulted up after her, summoning a hot carpet of flame. Their party hit the floor just in time as he swept over the balcony, covering anyone not pinned to the floor.

Venus scuttled back inside, hissing and cursing.

More guards broke into the room.

“Stop!” Prince Tiberius raced forward, holding up his hands. “Don't hurt them!”

“Guards, ignore the Prince!” Venus screamed from the throne room. “Take him away, and catch the others!”

Leaving Beau to handle the fire, Aislinn scanned the gardens, searching for a way out. They were swamped with spectators and guards—dwarf and mortal. They were beyond outnumbered. It would be a massacre.

They had to get out.

*Think, think.*



The others scrambled for weapons as Beau's heat raged overhead, picking off any guards foolish enough to move towards them. Aislinn spied other forces marching into the castle, determined to defend their queen. Beau couldn't fight them forever. There were too many of them.

*So make it less.*

How to incapacitate hundreds of people—when many of them were just innocent bystanders? How to get out of here when a fall from this height was certain to seriously injure, if not kill, most of their party? If only it were dark—

Dark.

*Dark.*

Of all the people here, only three of them could see in the dark, and she didn't think Aeron would be much of a threat on his own. The crystals that lit most of Avalinth had been muted for the party. The sconces were all that remained.

“Beau!” she hissed. “Can you cast a darkness spell?”

Beau stopped firing, only for a moment. “Right now?”

No. Not right now. Because she still needed to figure out how to get everyone out of here. Through the castle was out of the question. Beau likely couldn't keep up the spell for that long, and, blind or not, dozens of heavily armed soldiers were headed towards them. Everyone else would be blinded.

*Think, think.*

Something brushed against her ankle. Aislinn looked down, and realised half the castle was coated in thick, tangled ivy. Not quite like the vines at home—but close enough.

It was nature, it was a plant, it was part of Faerie.

And she was the future queen.

She grabbed Caer's arm and held him over the railing, whispering the vision spell in his eyes. It would not hurt to have at least one more person see where they were going. "Come with me," she said.

Caer didn't question it. She pushed him away from her.

"Now!" she hissed to Beau.

His fire ceased. He took a long, deep breath, closing his eyes.

"*Nox*," he whispered.

A dark, glittering cloud swept over every light, covering the gardens, the balcony, the entire castle, in thick, palpable blackness.

Aislinn could still see, just. She could see the soldiers tripping over one another, the courtiers below shrieking and running for cover, scrambling about as if the dark were a monster.

Aislinn summoned her reserves of magic, and commanded the ivy to bend to her will. It wrapped around Caer's middle first, directing him to the ground. He held out his hands as Beau directed the others into the arms of the waiting vines,

despite a few muffled protests. Finally, Aislinn grabbed Beau and they leapt down themselves, rolling onto the dense, soft ground.

“Hold onto each other!” she barked. “Follow us!”

They formed a line, guiding their blinded comrades through the dark. Venus could be heard far behind them, shrieking into the blackness.

“Stop them! Stop them, they are getting away!”

Only Aeron turned towards them. He ignited his own fireball, but Aislinn rose up a bank of earth to greet it, ushering the others onwards until they reached the walls. She and Beau dove into the rock like it was made of putty, clawing it apart until there was space enough to force the others through it, and closed it up behind them as best they could.

Beau’s darkness spell had extended in the streets of Avalinth, but it was spotting at the edges, growing murky like pond water. They raced forwards, hardly knowing where they were going. The Deep? No, too obvious, too closed in. Back to the gates? To Acanthia? Too obvious. They had no mounts. Their enemies would soon catch up to them.

“Wait!” Luna cried, voice trembling. “We have to go back—Dillon!”

Dillon. Aislinn could have kicked herself. Dillon, sitting in the palace stables, likely wondering what on earth was going on.

“No,” said Minerva. “We can’t go back there. Not yet. It’s too dangerous, but he’ll be fine. You heard my sister—she didn’t even know about him. He’ll be safe there for a while. We won’t.”

Luna took a deep, shuddering breath, but said nothing. Her large eyes blinked in the murky dark. “All right,” she said, sounding the least ‘all right’ Aislinn had ever heard a person be.

“Where are we going?” asked Flora. “I hope someone has an idea.”

“Downtown,” Minerva announced. “We’ll find an abandoned building to squat in. Hopefully our fae friends can summon up a few spells to keep us concealed there—because they will come looking. Come on. It’s still a fair walk.”



Thankfully, most of the streets were clear as the party made their way to the downtown area Minerva described. Unlike the market area, these streets were near deserted at this hour, and the few people out kept to themselves. Bell located a tumbling-down townhouse and picked the lock, the party shuffling inside and collapsing in a pile on the floor as Beau sealed it again with magic and drew out protection symbols over the boundaries.

The actions around everything went unnoticed by Caer. His breath was tight in his throat, his thoughts muddled and hazy.

Exhaustion pooled into his marrow.

He took a brief look around the house. Most of the downstairs was taken up by a single room. The furniture remaining was broken or threadbare, belongings scattered over the floor. Empty boxes, smashed pots, faded paper and torn books. Little to aid them.

What had just *happened*?

Beau finished carving out his spells. “I’m not sure how well they’ll guard against Aeron’s magic,” he said. “But it should hold him off for a while... unless he’s secretly got an army of fae sorcerers, too.”

It seemed unlikely. Whatever Aeron’s plans were, he’d done his best to avoid collecting a force that used any magic at all. Strange. Could he honestly be plotting against the fae? What were his motives?

He had to be behind it, didn’t he? This couldn’t be Owen’s doing. Not the Owen that Caer knew. He’d always been wary of the Fae—what mortal wasn’t?—but to outright plot their *annihilation*... why? He’d never been as distrustful of Rowan as Caer had been—

*Rowan.*

Caer leant against the wall, the truth staggering. “He’s the healer that was trying to save my mother,” he said quietly. “I thought I recognised him before. That’s how he forged an alliance with Owen. He must have worn a glamour when he visited us...” He paused. “I think he let my mother die,” he

continued. “I think he wanted her dead to motivate Owen into forging this alliance. I heard him say he had a back-up option.” He paused again, breathing hard. “You can’t bring back the dead, right? Not without... extenuating circumstances. Like Dillon’s soul being trapped in the vines.”

The room fell silent. No one would meet his gaze—no one but Aislinn.

“That’s my understanding,” she said. “Dillon is the first case I’ve ever heard of.”

“The soul remains attached to the body for a little while after death,” Beau continued. “It allows for resuscitation. But once that connection is severed... no. It shouldn’t be possible. Not unless the soul was contained somewhere else.”

“Mother’s wasn’t,” Caer said slowly. “Clay’s couldn’t have been either.”

“And yet Aeron is claiming to have done it...”

Aislinn sighed, shaking her head. “I don’t understand it,” she said. “He *lied*. He straight up *lied*. How did he do that?”

“Does that part matter?” said Minerva. “He’s poisoned my sister’s ear. He has two armies on his side, and a Mirror he believes he can use to resurrect the dead. How’s your father’s army looking, girl? You think he can take on all that?”

Aislinn swallowed. Caer didn’t know much about the Fae military, but he imagined it was sparse, relying on magic to bolster its ranks, and its fearsome reputation to ward off external invaders. They were not ready for war. But the

dwarves, though—they were built for it, and with Owen’s army behind them—

“This is my fault,” said Aislinn. “I used the vines to help us find the Mirror. I helped return it to its form.”

“I helped too,” Beau admitted. “This isn’t all on you.”

“No, lass.” Minerva shook her head. “You aren’t to blame for this. We might have sped up Aeron’s plans somewhat, but he’d have found a way to get to it eventually. And we’re the ones that agreed to the quest, even though we knew he was up to no good.”

“I shouldn’t have come here,” Caer whispered. “This—all of this—is because of me.”

Minerva snorted. “Actually, son, you’re the least to blame out of any of us. You’ve told us not to act on many an occasion, and we’re the ones that haven’t listened.”

Magna tugged on her sleeve, making several elaborate hand gestures, too quickly for Caer to understand. His eyes felt heavy, like his entire brain was trying to sponge out of his sockets.

“Yes, yes, I know you warned us too!”

Magna rolled her eyes, slumping back.

“Still—” Caer began.

Minerva shook her head. “You. You are obsessed with taking the blame, obsessed with shouldering things that aren’t

yours to shoulder, when all you ever did to anyone was be born. You are an arrow, Caer—not the archer.”

Caer swallowed. “Someone is responsible for this.”

Minerva shrugged. “Perhaps. Aeron seems a good target for it right now. But sometimes, son, there is a lot of bad in the world and no one to blame. Life doesn’t owe you an easy ride. But you find the right people to ride it with you, and even the hard times will be endurable. You’ll see.”

“You still think we’re going to survive this?”

“I think we’ll give it our best shot.”



They set to work searching the house for anything useful. Most of the stairs had rotted away, but Aislinn and Beau were able to scramble up there and find a few blankets and a couple of mattresses that weren’t too mouldy. No one dared start a fire in case the smoke gave away their location.

“Luna?” Minerva called at one point. “Any luck in the kitchen?”

“Um... I found a rolling pin.”

“Terrific. Three spears, two halberds, firepower we can’t use inside the castle, one blade fused to my arm, and a rolling pin. Yes, we can definitely take back a kingdom with that.”

“Don’t forget audacity,” Bell intervened. “We’ve plenty of that.”



“We can’t fight with audacity, Bell!”

“Have you tried? Very effective.”

Minerva stared at her wife. “You’re trying to make me laugh. It won’t work.”

Bell shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

Aislinn appreciated the attempt at humour, but as Luna returned to add the rolling pin to their pile of assets, her laugh fell short. Caer was still sitting by the side of the room, his face unusually pale, his eyes dark. He hadn’t looked right since Aeron had used the Mirror.

She sat down beside him, but he jerked away from her. They were outside the walls now. She was not safe from him. She should have been prepared for this, and yet those few days she’d spent tangled up inside his arms had made her forget their reality.

She had not expected it to sting this much. It was not natural to sit so far apart.

A few days. What if that was all they had? No one had come up with any viable plan, yet—

Caer coughed, his breath hard. He groaned, streaking his hands down his face.

Aislinn frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Probably just exhausted from everything that’s happened today, you know?”

He offered her a weak smile, but it looked forced and laboured. Beads of sweat gathered at his pores.

Aislinn raised her hand to his forehead, but he jerked away again. “You can’t—”

She grabbed Luna’s nearby hand and placed it to his head instead. “Does he feel hot to you?”

Luna’s eyes widened. “Caer, you’re burning up.”

“Flora!”

Flora came stumbling over to inspect him, putting her hand to his head, looking at his mouth, taking his pulse. “Could be a mortal case of the sniffles,” she surmised.

“I don’t... get sick...” Caer said, his voice crackling.

“*All* mortals get sick.”

“Not me,” he insisted. “My mother said that’s why I was blessed... *‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, Caer...’*”

Flora patted his arm. “Mortals are liars, boy, and I think you might be delusional. Lie down. Rest. We’re not going anywhere for a bit.”

It was a testament to how wretched he was feeling that Caer did not argue. He slumped against the cold stone floor, moving only once when Luna gave him something to use as a pillow. He didn’t react at all when Aislinn draped a blanket over him.

“Flora,” she said, when she decided he was probably asleep, “dwarves can lie too.”

Flora paused. The rest of the room carried on with their muted conversations, discussing the next best course of action. “Could just be a mortal illness, like I said,” she responded. “The boy’s been through a lot and dragged this way and that, exposed to who knows what. Just let him rest, girl. Ain’t nothing we can do about anything at the moment.”



It was late—very late. Eventually, Minerva announced the best course of action was for everyone to try and get some sleep. “Everything looks better in the morning,” she said, but her grim expression did not match her optimism.

Aislinn took the first watch. She felt beyond sleep. Caer lay on his side, coughing intermittently, radiating heat. She’d tried to heal him, or at least ease his symptoms, but mortal illness had a habit of clinging to their fragile bodies and was not so easily expunged.

She had not thought of Caer as breakable before—not even during the manticore poisoning. After her initial fear had worn off, she’d been certain he’d recover.

Beau had tried to heal him too, but to no avail. “His heart feels weird,” he’d remarked.

That did not sound promising.

Something Aeron had done with that Mirror had unlocked something in him. She thought about what Venus had said, how they needed Caer to bring their plans to fruition. She

remembered the tendrils of smoke that had escaped when the Mirror had first been activated.

It was like something was calling to him.

She paced about the room for a bit, double-checking the spells, staring out into the street. She tried to read the discarded papers on the floor, but couldn't make out any of the words. The weapons couldn't be sharpened. She missed her own.

And Dillon, too. He'd always been there during the night before.

She hated herself for leaving him behind. She kept reliving their escape in her mind, finding ways of getting to the stable. Everything seemed possible in hindsight.

Finally, she went over and sat next to Caer. He was so hot, and every cough made her insides ache. She placed her hand to his chest, and felt that same crackle Beau did, like a tear in his heart.

Her eyes turned back towards the window. She could still see the outline of the castle, the castle where all their answers lay, along with their missing companion.

“You're thinking about doing something foolish, aren't you?”

Aislinn jumped. Luna was sitting up, staring at her. “I, um... it might *not* be foolish—”

“You can't say it isn't, can you?”

Aislinn shook her head.

“It’s all right,” Luna said. “I’m thinking of doing something foolish, too.”

Aislinn frowned, not understanding her meaning.

“Dillon,” Luna said. “He’s still in the palace grounds. I hope. Maybe. I don’t... I don’t know.”

Aislinn paled. She wasn’t sure how many people knew about Dillon or where he was staying, but she hoped he had the good sense to stay hidden.

“I’m going to go back to the palace,” Aislinn announced. “I’ll be faster on my own. I need to see the Mirror again, figure out what’s going on with...” She glanced across at Caer.

“Take me with you,” Luna said.

Aislinn shook her head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Ais, how many times did we run into trouble in the Deep?”

“Um, many times. Many many times.”

“And how many times did you see me get hurt?”

“That—that is a very fair point.”

Luna gave a mock bow. “I am very good at staying out of trouble.”

Aislinn took a deep breath. “Fine. But as a lookout only. And I go into the palace alone.”

“Agreed.” Luna looked around her. “We shouldn’t leave them without a look-out.”

“I know,” said Aislinn, groaning. She shook Beau’s shoulder. He was the only one who *might* not give them a hard time. “Beau, dearest, can you wake up? I’m about to do something very stupid and I need you to cover for me.”

Beau moaned something under his breath and shifted into an upright position, already scowling. “I’m going to hate this, aren’t I?”



Aislinn and Luna made their way through the silent streets of Avalinth in a couple of cloaks Aislinn had stolen from a seedy tavern—one of the only places open this time of night. She’d wanted to pilfer a dagger as well, but she couldn’t see any easily accessible, and it wasn’t worth drawing any more attention to herself. Her height and the dress did not help with blending in.

Sticking to the shadows did. Usually she could glamour herself all but invisible, but before she’d even begun to learn magic, Juliana had taught her how to hide in the shadows, how to creep with the stealth of a cat. She used to creep up on her father, startling him half to death, and once even crept into the war room during an important meeting. She still remembered his scowl when he discovered her under the table, like he didn’t know whether to be proud or angry.

Father... how she’d like to see him now. Either of her parents would know what to do, she was sure.

Instead, all she had was a sawn-off halberd, stuffed into a makeshift belt, and an albino dwarf who for all she said was good at staying out of trouble, had the footfall of a giant. Her moonlight skin did not help her to blend in.

They reached the outside of the palace walls. The gates were heavily patrolled, but Aislinn located a spot on the walls where there looked to be a blindspot. She found a nearby plant to give them a boost, and they tumbled into the gardens.

Sensibly, someone had turned up the crystals, and the place was flooded with light. Soldiers both mortal and dwarf patrolled the grounds.

They were on the wrong side for the stables, and Aislinn couldn't chart a clear path. There was an open window on this side of the palace, however. High up—but not too high for her.

She calculated her best course of action. She could get into the palace, find some better weapons, inspect the Mirror, and maybe find a mortal soldier by himself to glamour into helping her. Or threaten, since the magic was out. Yes, that worked. Perhaps she could even get him to inspect the stables himself if she got him outside the barrier...

She paused, gathering her courage, and explained her plan to Luna.

“Stay here,” she instructed. “Hide in that bush there. Whistle if you think someone's spotted me.”

“All right,” she agreed.



“One more thing.” Aislinn cleared her throat. “I shall not reveal the location of our safehouse, not even on pain of death.”

Luna blinked at her. “Big vow.”

“Necessary.” If she was caught, she wasn’t revealing where the others were. She would rather die.

She imagined Caer would rather die than wake up and realise what she’d done, but she hoped he wouldn’t have to. She glanced down at Luna.

“Are you even armed?”

Luna pulled back her cloak. “I’m carrying my rolling pin.”

“Right.” Aislinn stared back at the wall. “Please try not to get caught.”

“I’ll do my best.” She paused, and then threw her arms around Aislinn’s middle. “Don’t die in there. Find something to help him.”

Aislinn wanted to swear that she would, but she couldn’t, not even for this. Caer needed her to come back. She needed to *come back*.

*I’ll be fine*, she told herself, unable to speak it. *I have to be*.

She patted Luna’s back, pulled away from her, and darted up the side of the palace, swift as string and rubber, not stopping until she reached the window and slid inside.

It was a grand bedroom on the other side of the palace from where she’d been staying. She wished she was closer to her

room. Good as the soft-soled slippers were for leaping up buildings, her boots would be much better in a fight. It seemed unlikely she'd be able to avoid one forever. She scanned about the room, searching for anything else that might be useful—a dagger, a proper belt—anything.

A soft snore alerted her to the presence of someone on the bed, thankfully fast asleep. Excellent. She took a few minutes to rifle through the drawers. All the clothes were the wrong size, of course, but a belt with a fine silver buckle was fairly quickly located, and a better cloak than the one she'd stolen—longer, almost hiding her skirts which she'd slashed at the knee to allow for easier movement.

She found a chest in the corner filled with weapons. *Perfect*. She discarded the broken halberd and took two daggers instead, buckling them to her belt. They didn't have the reach of a sword, but it was easier to move with them.

The snoring stopped.

Aislinn paused, flattening herself against the wall. Even if the dwarf woke, they wouldn't be able to see her in the dark. If she stayed quiet—

“Who's there?”

Her heart hammered in her throat.

The dwarf turned to a dial beside his bed, and the crystal lights flooded the room. Aislinn bolted from her spot, pinning the dwarf to the bed before he could even move, dagger against his throat.

Prince Tiberius stared back at her. “Aislinn,” he gasped.

Aislinn did not release her hold. “I like you, Prince, but I will run you through with your own dagger if I suspect for even a second that you will endanger my mission.”

Tiberius put up his hands. “I’m not going to fight you,” he said. “And I don’t think I’ll stop you, either. What’s going on? My mother’s gone mad, she’s talking about bringing back my father—”

“It can’t be done.”

Tiberius tightened his jaw. “I thought that, too, but Aeron’s brought back someone else.”

“Who?”

“One of the heroes. It doesn’t really matter. I’ve seen her; it’s real.”

Aislinn shook her head. “I don’t know what you saw, but Aeron is a liar. I don’t know how, but he is.”

Tiberius swallowed. “I... I think I believe you,” he said. “I don’t really want to, but I do. Will you believe me? I don’t want to go to war, Aislinn.”

“Don’t fancy ruling over Faerie some day?”

Tiberius shook his head. “There is but one certainty of war—that people will suffer. I’m greatly interested in improving relations between our kingdoms but... not like this. Emphatically no, in fact.”

Aislinn released her grip, just a fraction. After the lies of the day, she was reluctant to trust anyone, but Tiberius *had* objected to his mother's plans when he'd first heard of them. She wanted to believe him. She did.

She inched back. "Where's the Mirror?"

"If you're hoping to smash it, I don't think that will really solve all our problems. Owen's had an army transported through it and—"

"I don't need to smash it. I need to examine it." She was fairly certain that such an object couldn't be smashed—or the dwarves and their fae allies would not have had to transform it.

Tiberius frowned. "Examine it? Why?"

She pursed her lips. "Caer's sick," she explained. "The Mirror... it's doing something to him. I need to find out what."

Tiberius sat up. "Ah, is that right, *Princess I-don't-want-to-talk-about-the-prince?*"

"Don't tease. Please. He's really—" She took a deep breath. "Just tell me where to find the Mirror."

"In the vault, behind the throne room," he said.

"The vault?"

"Aeron realised that there must be other areas in the palace where the barrier was weak. He quickly chiselled an alcove into the back of the vault."

Aislinn groaned. He'd stored it in a place where it could be magic, and yet no one could use it. Smart. *Evil*.

She'd definitely do exactly the same thing, but still. "How heavily is it guarded?"

"Two or four."

"I can take two or four."

Tiberius grimaced. "Um, what are the chances of you being able to do that without killing them, *and* without alerting more? Because I know most of those guards. They aren't under Aeron's thrall, they probably don't want a war either—they're just loyal to their queen and want to go home tomorrow with a few coins for their families."

Aislinn sighed. "Why did you have to be so moral?"

"You're moral too," he said, smiling. "You're just scared and angry and not thinking clearly."

Aislinn scrambled off the bed, sliding her borrowed daggers back into place. She hated feeling so out of control, hated the feeling of being willing to do anything for someone. Hated knowing she *would*.

"Have you got any less murderous ideas?"

Tiberius pulled on a robe. "How about the simple, 'guards, guards, there's someone in my room!'"?

Aislinn nodded. "That's a good plan. Hold on."

She went back to the window and leaned out of it, distorting a few of the plants in the flowerbed below to look like they

were twisted by magic. Luna jumped below when the bush she was hiding in moved, but Aislinn held up her thumbs, indicating that everything was all right.

“Should lend some credence to the idea,” she explained to Tiberius. “Why did you leave the window open anyway? Seems like a terrible idea given the circumstances.”

Tiberius looked at the floor. “Minerva knows which room is mine,” he said. “It was all I could think to do that might help her back into the castle.”

“You’d let your rampaging aunt in here?”

“She’s the only one who can challenge Mother,” he explained. “Most people won’t want a war—and she’s just broken her word. She promised Caerwyn safety. A broken promise can be grounds for usurpation amongst the dwarves. We do not take it lightly.”

“I can’t imagine Venus would take such an attempt lightly, either.”

“No,” he agreed, still staring at the floor. “She wasn’t always like this, you know. My father’s death—it changed her.”

Aislinn could understand how such a thing would. She did not want to imagine the version of herself without Caer in the world. But she also didn’t think that excused her actions, or Owen’s. She thought if she was willing to go this far, someone ought to stop her.

“I won’t hurt your mother if I can avoid it,” she promised him. It was all she could manage—a promise that gave her leeway.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, is there anything else you need? My cloak looks rather good on you, I must say.”



Mercifully, Tiberius’ room was located quite close to the throne room. Aislinn slipped into another he assured her was empty, and waited there whilst he ran into the room and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Guards, guards!” he yelled. “There’s someone in my room!”

Footsteps thundered down the hall. Aislinn waited until they’d passed before sneaking out, silent as a whisper. She moved towards the door behind the throne, following Tiberius’ instructions. It was a huge, metal door, iron in nature—constructed, no doubt, on the belief it harmed the fae. Half right, of course. It harmed the lesser ones. But Aislinn was a princess of Faerie and no metal could affect her unless it was fashioned into a weapon.

There was no keyhole, just a heavy lock with four small, numerical dials. Tiberius had given her the code earlier, but it took longer than she would have liked to open it. She wondered how long it would take before guards were sent back to the post.

She hoped no one asked how she had gotten in if she was caught; she did not want to throw Tiberius under the cart. She should have threatened him for the digits, even falsely. It would still give her a lie to wield.

Finally, the lock sprung open, and she stepped into the room.

Aislinn sucked in a breath. The room was cavernous—almost half the size of the throne room itself. The ceiling was lower than the rest of the palace, but it was stacked to the vaulted points with piles of gold and gems, mountains of jewels and crowns, gilded statues, weapons forged in gold and inlaid with stones the size of a baby's fist. A dragon couldn't boast of a bigger horde.

At the back of the room, in a crudely cut hole in the wall, was the dark, gleaming mirror.

Aislinn approached carefully, eyes held on this treasure above all others. The black waters of the glass murmured, whispering like waves on a shore. It almost had a voice.

She could hear it calling to her.

“Tell me what you are,” she begged it. *Tell me what you've done to him.*

Something sharp pressed into the back of her neck.

“Tell me what *you* are,” said the voice attached to it, “before I run you through.”

Aislinn swallowed, her breath tight in her throat. She supposed she ought to be grateful the person seemed to have



come alone—although she must be skilled indeed to have snuck up on her.

“I’m disarming,” Aislinn said, moving to unbuckle her weapons.

“Turn,” instructed the woman. “Slowly. I will have your word, Faerie.”

“I shan’t promise to not fight back,” Aislinn said, “but I will turn slowly, and not attack you whilst I do so.”

Carefully, gradually, Aislinn turned, kicking away her weapons. Not too far out of reach. Just in case.

She met her attacker’s eyes, and the breath rushed out of her. The sword in her assailant’s hand shook, her eyes widening. She saw it too. Recognised something.

The woman with her blade to Aislinn’s throat was Cerridwen Ardencourt.

Aislinn’s grandmother.



*A*eron has brought someone back already. One of the heroes.

Aislinn had assumed it would be one of the dwarven heroes—because why wouldn't she? But Cerridwen was one of them, too. And a recent one, by their history. Someone they would remember.

It shouldn't be possible.

*But what if her body was preserved, like Dillon's was? In the vines—or somewhere else?*

Juliana had never told her what had happened to her mother, only that she was dead. She'd been told not to talk about it. Cerridwen was spoken about in the same way the dwarves sung her praises, like she was a legend of old. Only occasionally would Juliana speak of her like she had ever been a real person.

*Curse you, Mother.*

"You," she said.

Cerridwen frowned. “Who are you?” she demanded. “Why do you look like—”

“Like you?” she said. “Or like your daughter?”

Cerridwen trembled, but she did not let go of her sword. “How do you know about Juliana?”

“Because my name is Aislinn Ardenthorn. I am the daughter of Prince Hawthorn, now King, and Juliana Ardencourt. I’m your granddaughter.”

Cerridwen shook her head. “No. No, he said Juliana died, that it had been centuries—”

*Of course he’d say that. If he only brought her back to prove her power to the others, he’d need her on his side, need her to believe there was nothing to go back to.*

“It’s been almost seventy years, for you,” Aislinn explained. “But I assure you, my mother is very much alive, and the Queen of Faerie.”

Cerridwen did not let go of her weapon. “Aeron tells me one thing, you another. You both look like fae. How am I supposed to know who to believe?”

Aislinn swallowed. She should have been expecting this. She would be wondering the same thing herself. “You used to sing her a song,” she said, *“I saw a sweet and seemly sight, a blissful bird, a blossom bright, that morning made and mirth among—”*

“That’s an old mortal ditty. Anyone could have told you that.”

“Her best friend was Dillon. He’s here with us, hiding in the stables—” She *hoped* he was hiding in the stables— “He didn’t see you come in. He’ll back up my story—”

“You could have told him anything in the meantime, and how am I to know if this person really *is* Dillon? He was but a child when I last saw him.”

It was a fair point. Aislinn wracked her brain, trying to remember something—anything—that might help her, but Juliana had only been three when Cerridwen had supposedly died, and her memories of her had been minimal. She’d had so little to pass on—

Her other grandmother, though, the Dowager Queen, had more. Like Juliana, she had been reluctant to talk about her dead friend, as if speaking of her was painful, but one year on Hawthorn’s birthday, she’d scooped up Beau and Aislinn as their parents danced, and told them that today was also the anniversary of the couple first meeting—not that either remembered. Hawthorn had been only an hour or two old.

“You were with Queen Maytree when she gave birth to her son.”

“Many people were with her.”

“My mother came in crying for you not long after he was born. It was just the four of you, then. You were her friend. She gave your daughter truesight. It was such an impropriety to ask, that Maytree only ever told Juliana... and she told us.”

“Us?”

“Me and my brother. Beau.”

The sword finally lowered. “You’re telling the truth.”

“Yes.”

“Juliana lives?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re... my granddaughter.”

Aislinn smiled. “Yes.”

A great commotion sounded in the halls, and Aeron barged into the room, flanked by guards. Cerridwen raised her sword again, pressing it once more to Aislinn’s throat, eyes blazing.

Aeron’s eyes locked onto Aislinn, and the first quiver of fear appeared.

*He knows, she realised. He knows she’s my grandmother, knows what’s at stake if she realises it, too.*

He’d taken a huge risk bringing her back. There *must* have been something special about the manner in which her body was preserved. He’d not had another option.

“Ah, Cerridwen, ever the knight, I see,” he said coolly. “You appear to have caught an interloper. Has she said anything at all?”

Cerridwen snorted. “With my blade to her throat? No. She hasn’t had the chance.”

Aeron’s eyes narrowed. He stared at Aislinn. “Is that true?”

Of course he'd check with her, and how could Aislinn reply unless she didn't answer at all? Even saying nothing was enough of a clue...

She paused. She didn't have to answer him, as long as whatever she said next was the truth.

She turned to Cerridwen. "You're my—" she started.

Aeron launched forward, slamming his hand against her mouth. He knew what she was about to say, knew he couldn't risk giving her the opportunity to speak at all. If he was thinking clearly, he'd have her interrogated later on. But she'd bought herself some time.

"Take her away," he instructed the guards. "Gag her, lest her silver tongue deceive you all."

A few of the guards looked amongst themselves, perhaps wondering why someone that could only speak truth needed to be gagged.

"Were you listening?" Aeron replied. "Take her to the dungeons. Do not let her speak. She can offer you all sorts of temptations; do not give her the opportunity."

Aislinn put on a show of struggling as they yanked her to her feet, only stopping once they exerted real force. She could not afford to be injured.

She let herself be dragged away, casting one final, desperate look at her grandmother, and hoped she knew what she was doing.



The guards took Aislinn to the dungeons, stashed her weapons, and tossed her into a cell.

“Aislinn!”

A crystal-clear voice cried out to her. Aislinn looked up. Luna.

*Oh no, no, no, no—*

They raced forward to embrace one another.

“I’m sorry!” cried Luna. “The garden was swarming with guards. I tried to hide, but they started searching the bushes—”

She dissolved into noisy tears. Aislinn wished she could comfort her, but everything she could think to say was a lie.

“Don’t worry, Luna,” said one of the guards—the one that had been more gentle with Aislinn on the way down— “I’m sure everything will be fine. Her Majesty isn’t going to hurt you. She just needs the Prince.”

Luna’s tearshot eyes blazed. “I’m not going to be fine if anything happens to him, Pollux! This is madness! Do you really want to go to war?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then stop this!”

Pollux looked down at the floor. “I can’t,” he said. “I’m sorry...”

Luna dissolved into sobs once more, and Aislinn held her tightly, halfway there herself. But she couldn't cry, not yet. If she did, she didn't think she'd stop.

And she needed to think. *Think.*

There was always a way out. Always. Her mother had taught her that. She didn't need magic. There would be another way. She just had to stay alive long enough to figure it out.

The door at the top of the stairs barged open, and Aeron marched into the room. He glared at the two of them through the bars. "Separate," he instructed.

"Who are you?" Aislinn asked. "Why are you doing this?"

"Oh no, little princess, I'm not telling you anything."

He clicked his fingers, and the guards marched into the room. Aislinn tried to fight them, but there were too many. Chains fastened around her wrists, dragging her to the wall.

"Where's the Prince?" Aeron demanded.

"I made a vow," Aislinn said. "I shall not reveal the location of my comrades, not even on pain of death."

Aeron laughed. "Of course you did," he said. "But I am not sure the dwarf can be held to such promises..."

He turned towards Luna, who quaked beneath his massive shadow. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"No," Aislinn whimpered, "don't—"

But she could not stop him. She could offer him nothing.



Luna wouldn't say anything to begin with. She'd hold on for as long as she could. But eventually, she'd speak.

After her voice turned hoarse with screaming.

*Tell him,* Aislinn wanted to scream. *Don't let him hurt you.*

But she couldn't speak that, either. She needed Luna to hold on for as long as possible. In case—

In case what?

Minerva didn't have the forces to rescue them, and she wouldn't race in without considering her options. No one was coming for them.

Aeron plucked a dagger from his belt, and placed it to Luna's cheek. Blood bubbled at the tip.

"Please," Luna whispered, not looking at Aeron, as if she knew her pleas were pointless, but at Pollux behind him.

His throat wobbled. "Just tell him, Luna."

"Yes, Luna," said Aeron, pressing the blade deeper. "Do tell."

Luna cried out. Aislinn roared—

The dungeon door barged open and in blazed Cerridwen Ardencourt, Dillon behind her. They flew down the steps. One of the guards dived at Dillon, but he grabbed the spear in his massive hands and swung them round until they collapsed into their comrade. Pollux held up his hands, refusing to fight.

"Free her!" Dillon barked at him.

Pollux went for the keys. Cerridwen slammed against Aeron, knocking the dagger from his grip.

“You *lied!*” she hissed. “My granddaughter—my family!”

“I lie to everyone,” Aeron sneered. “Don’t take it too personally.”

Footsteps sounded along the corridor. Pollux grappled with Aislinn’s chains. More guards pooled into the room. Luna wriggled free, grabbing their weapons from the chest they’d been stashed in and tossing Aislinn’s daggers back towards her. Aeron slammed his elbow into Cerridwen’s middle and scurried up the steps. She screamed out, but he did not stop.

Dillon thundered towards the entrance, knocking over dwarves and mortals, tossing them over his shoulders like bags of flour and paving the way for the rest of them.

They reached the hallway. More guards were still coming. It was an endless tide.

Dillon took the lead, barreling towards them, knocking several off their feet. Aislinn and Cerridwen followed his lead, aiming for legs where they could—hurting, not killing. Tiberius’ words still thumped in Aislinn’s ears.

Someone finally tackled Dillon to the ground. The guards swarmed round him, hacking at him with their weapons.

“Let him go!” Luna roared.

She swooped in with her rolling pin, smacking against heads and kneecaps in a frenzied blur, eyes blazing. She was like a rabid animal, too fast, too quick for Aislinn to even see.

She didn't stop until every guard had rolled away from Dillon.

For a split second, the corridor was silent.

Dillon stared at her, this moon-coloured dwarf, her rolling pin wet with blood. "I think I'm in love with you," he rushed.

More cries came, a rallying for battle.

"Over here!" called a voice.

Tiberius, still in his nightclothes, opened up a door in the side of the wall. "Come—quickly!"

No one wasted time arguing with him. They bolted into the space, following him in the dark. "This passageway should take you outside the castle walls," Tiberius explained.

"If your mother finds out you helped us—" Aislinn started.

"Ah, she's my mother, what's she going to do? It might open up a meaningful discussion about her current methods."

"Good luck with that."

"I will need it."

They carried on in the dark, sounds of shouting still reverberating through the stone. The passageway seemed to shake with it.

Eventually, light opened up ahead, leading to a waterway and an iron grille locked by yet another code. Tiberius punched it in and they found themselves in a shallow river.

"I should get back," he said.

“Thank you,” Aislinn said.

Tiberius clutched his chest. “Thanks from a Faerie. I am honoured. I look forward to claiming the favour. Your hand in marriage, perhaps.”

“Very funny.”

“I am, alas, only teasing. I know your heart is spoken for.”

Aislinn’s insides twisted. *Caer*. She still hadn’t managed to find out anything about what was ailing him.

“Go,” Tiberius said. “May the heroes watch over you... living and dead.”

He pulled the grille shut and disappeared back up the tunnel.

There were still guards in the streets, and the party stuck out like monsters with their tall forms and blood-streaked clothing. Dillon was a torn-up mess. They dared not dally long, moving swiftly through the streets until they could move no longer, and paused to catch their breath in an empty alley.

Luna turned to Dillon. “Get down,” she said.

Dillon, thinking they were under attack, hit the floor. Luna laughed, and pulled him into a sitting position. “We’re safe,” she assured him.

“Then why did I need to get down—”

She grabbed his shirt and slammed her mouth against his. “I love you, too,” she said when they parted. “Now let’s find somewhere to patch you up.”

Dillon climbed numbly to his feet, a lopsided smile spread across his face. His hand stayed firmly in Luna's.

They had almost reached the downtown area when a large, booming voice echoed from the palace gates, amplified by magic.

"Aislinn Ardenthorn!" Aeron called. "Return the prince by tomorrow evening, or face the consequences."

Aislinn tried to ignore him, keeping her head down and slinking forwards.

"The boy is dying, isn't he?"

Aislinn stilled.

"Don't listen to him," Luna hissed. "He can lie. We know he can."

*Maybe, thought Aislinn, but I don't think he's lying about this.*

"The Mirror is calling to him. It wants his powers. He can survive the loss of them—maybe. But he won't if you don't bring him back within two days."

The voice vanished.

"Come on," Luna urged her. "If there's anything we've learnt today, it's that we shouldn't do anything by ourselves."



**B**eau immediately sprang into Aislinn's arms as she entered, his fingers balling into her clothes, slightly trembling, giving the impression of a much smaller person. He did not say anything for a long time.

Aislinn patted his back. "I'm all right," she assured him.

"Did you find anything out?"

"Not about the Mirror or Caer, but..." She pulled out of his arms, gesturing to the people behind her.

Beau hugged Dillon too, before turning to Cerridwen and stopping.

He took a step back. "Um... Ais... why does this stranger look like our grandmother?"

Cerridwen laughed. She reached out and patted Beau's cheeks. "Why do these complete strangers look like my grandchildren?"

"Are you... is she... What happened in the castle?"

“An excellent question,” said Minerva, rising from her makeshift bed. “And one I would love to hear.”

Cerridwen frowned. “Minerva?”

“Cerridwen.”

“You’re missing an arm.”

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“The rumours were somewhat exaggerated... although not greatly.”

Minerva nudged Bell with her metal arm. “Wake up, my dear. It’s time for a story.”



Beau watched his grandmother with intense fascination as she described her tale. Her death, she explained, was still hazy to her—but she remembered fighting with her husband, and falling. The next thing she knew, she was waking up in a glass coffin in the dwarven vault, being spoon-fed lies by Aeron.

Their mother had told them about their grandmother’s death, but Beau wondered if that was really true. If Cerridwen had even the slightest bit of life in her when stored in the coffin, then resurrecting her would always have been a possibility. With the help of the Mirror...

Like Dillon, he suspected she was an exception.

So whatever Aeron was planning to do with the Mirror, he strongly suspected it didn’t involve Clay or Gwyn—or Venus

and Owen.

Aislinn and Luna recounted their side of the story, and finally told him about Aeron's warning—that Caerwyn didn't have long to live.

She glanced over at his sleeping form. He had not woken at all whilst Beau had been watching over him, and that was probably for the better. His face was horribly pale—almost grey.

“Do we believe him?” Minerva asked.

Aislinn shrugged. “Can we afford not to?”

“I don't understand it. He was fine all the time we had the Mirror in our possession on the journey back.”

“It was wrapped in my cloak, though,” Aislinn continued. “I might have delayed the reaction, I don't know. Or perhaps it only fully woke when Aeron used it in front of him... when he brought Owen through it.”

Cerridwen placed a hand on Aislinn's shoulder. “We'll figure something out, child. Have no fear. Go lie down with him now. You must be exhausted.”

Aislinn smiled weakly, and pulled out one of the makeshift beds, bringing it as closely as she dared to Caerwyn's sleeping form. She stroked his hair back from his face, and Beau wondered once more how she could stand this, to be so close to him and not be able to touch.

He yawned. “If it's the same to everyone else, I'd like to sleep too.”



“And me,” said Luna. “Just for a little bit.”

“Take as long as you need,” Minerva instructed. “Although don’t be surprised if we’ve all starved to death by the time you wake.”

“I can make some breakfast before—”

“Luna,” said Minerva softly, “sleep.”

They all lay down, too exhausted to care about moth-eaten blankets or empty bellies. Beau tossed for a little bit. Flora and Bell, the dwarves most likely to blend in, went out to search for food. Diana and Magna fortified the weapons with bits they’d found from upstairs. Minerva scribbled on paper, setting up broken furniture to resemble models. Dillon kept watch by the window.

Cerridwen sat on the floor not far from Beau, occasionally meeting his eyes whenever he opened them.

“Not tired?” he said eventually.

“It appears I have spent the last seventy years sleeping.”

“Fair point.”

Cerridwen paused. “Can I ask...” She shook her head. “Never mind. You’re trying to sleep.”

“Trying, and failing to. What’s on your mind, Grandma?”

Cerridwen prickled at the sound of the name, and he wondered if it was too soon. He had no idea what else he was supposed to call her.

“Juliana,” she whispered, “is she happy?”

Beau smiled into the stuffed sack he was using as a pillow. “I think I’d use the words ‘fierce, terrifying, and a force to be reckoned with’ before describing our mother as ‘happy’, but yes, she is. She’s a great queen, and a loving mother... and she and our father are still disgustingly in love with one another.”

Cerridwen shook her head. “Juliana and Hawthorn. What a thought. They must have quite the love story.”

Beau shuffled closer, arm still wrapped around his makeshift pillow. “I’m sure they’d be happy to tell it to you—once we get out of here.”

Cerridwen’s gaze turned towards the window, and he knew she was wondering if that was even possible. “And you?” she asked, even more quietly. “Are you happy?”

“When I’m not afraid for my life? Usually.”

Cerridwen walked over to him and pulled the cloak around his shoulders. “Sleep,” she said, as if she saw through everything, knew how afraid he was, how terrified, how lost and angry and sad and confused. For Aislinn, for Caer, for Dillon—for himself. For all of them living on borrowed time, unsure if they’d live until tomorrow. “It’s all right to be afraid.”

*But when, Beau wondered, was it all right to show it?*



Aislinn slept, but the sleep did not feel restful. She dreamed she was lost in a forest filled with fog. Caer was screaming her

name—but she could not find him. She started to run, her hair whipping back and forth, half blinding her.

She ran straight into Aeron.

“You,” she hissed. “What do you want from us?”

Aeron smiled, and said nothing. He pushed her back. Aislinn fell to the floor, but the earth had been replaced by glass.

It shattered beneath her, and she fell down, down—

Into the dark.



Someone was shaking her awake, someone rough and grey-haired. Flora.

Aislinn bolted upright, grabbing her arms. “Caer—” She twisted towards him.

Flora patted her arm. “He’s all right,” she insisted. “Or at least, no worse. Get up. Something’s going on at the gate.”

Aislinn blinked. “*What’s* going on?”

Flora shrugged. “Couldn’t get close enough, but I think another party has arrived at the gates. They’re demanding entrance.”

Aislinn shot up. It must be a significant number if they were being barred entrance—or else Aeron had increased security in the last few days. The latter made more sense.

But for more outsiders to be coming at this time...

Had their parents really got their message?

Her heart leapt, but she reined it back, refusing to be hopeful. She scrambled for her knives and cloak.

“Stick to the shadows,” Minerva started from her seat on the floor. “You still stick out like a—”

Aislinn couldn't stick to the shadows, not during the day, when there were too many people, when time was of the essence. Instead, she shot up a nearby house instead, leaping over the rooftops, sliding towards the great gates. Guards were lined up, not letting anyone pass.

Aeron was making his way through the streets, flanked by dwarven guards. Whoever was on the other side, he didn't want them to know about the mortal soldiers in the city.

Aislinn slowed, waiting behind a chimney breast. She had a good view of the scene, and the noise carried well.

Beau caught up to her just as Aeron reached the door. “Vines,” he panted, “would it kill you... to slow down... just a little...”

Aislinn held up her hand for quiet, as Aeron ordered the doors open and dropped into a low bow. “My apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Majesties,” he said. “We've had reason of late to be cautious. I am Aeron, emissary to the Queen.”

*Majesties?*

A small procession stepped through the doors. At the head of it were Juliana and Hawthorn.

Aislinn's heart leapt, and it took all of her restraint not to bolt from her spot and race right towards them. Her parents. Her parents were here. If she could just get to them, speak to them, explain what was happening—

Beau squeezed her trembling hand, and she held on for dear life as her parents gazed around Avalinth in awe, before settling on the fae in front of them.

“We did not expect to find one of our own in such a place,” Juliana said. “No doubt you have some tale as to how you came to be here.”

“We all have our tales, Queen Juliana,” Aeron said, half-smiling. “I'm sure you have one as well as to how you came to be here.”

“No games, fae,” Juliana continued. “We come in search of our children. We know they are here.”

“Of course. Your children were fine and healthy when I saw them yesterday. Won't you come with us back to the castle?”

All the relief in Aislinn's heart plummeted. *No, no, it's a trap!* If her parents got beyond the magical barrier, they'd be defenceless. Aeron was choosing his words so carefully, too, acting like he was incapable of lying—no doubt to keep up the illusion for anyone not in the know already.

Why wasn't Hawthorn saying anything? Usually he was always the one talking, their mother weighing up the many

ways to escape or kill people as he did. But today he seemed silent, his shoulders unusually tight beneath his furred cape.

Aislinn frowned. His shoulders seemed broader than before—and was he taller, too?

“Very well,” Juliana said coolly. “Lead the way.”

Aeron held up his hand. “I’m afraid we have a strict no weapons policy in the castle,” he said. “Would you mind disarming yourselves?”

“Not a problem,” Juliana said, sounding unusually cheerful for someone being forced to give up her weapons. She took out a dagger from beneath her cape, and the rest of their party made a show of disarming themselves, too.

Finally, Hawthorn spoke. “That is all we have,” he said, his voice sounding rusty, unnaturally deep—not like her father at all. Was he all right? Had something happened to him? “We carry no more weapons, and you have my word that we shall not attack in any way, unless we are attacked first. Please. Take us to our children.”

The party started to move.

*No.*

Aislinn had to get their attention. That part in itself wasn’t too hard—she could just send up a flame. But she couldn’t let *Aeron* know where she was. They needed to avoid another fight if they possibly could, especially in these packed streets. Half of Avalinth had flooded here to see the faerie procession, children amongst them. It was too dangerous—

Aislinn jumped to the next roof, trying to get Juliana's attention. Their mother could lie, feign something, or even just ready herself for a battle when they reached the palace and the crowds thinned.

But she never looked up.

Desperate, Aislinn slid to the floor, keeping her head low enough to pass for a dwarf but high enough that maybe, *maybe* someone would notice her.

*Look here, she thought desperately. Look here!*

They wound through the streets and crowds, following the procession, searching for a gap, a small platform, a way to alert them without causing a scene. Beau was trying to, but he was taller and ganglier and conscious of his size.

*Come on, come on!*

A tram cut across them, blocking them from sight. Aislinn froze as it shunted along the street, gathering her breath. It was taking too long. They were going to lose them—

A hand touched her shoulder, yanking her backwards. Aislinn reacted instinctively, grabbing the arm and trying to flip the person over her, but her assailant seemed prepared, dropping out of her grip and pressing her to the stone wall of the alley.

A black hood fell down.

The King of the Faeries held her in his grip.



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PLANS AND REUNIONS

Aislinn’s eyes widened. “Father? What are you... you were just... how—”

Without another word, Hawthorn dived forward and pulled them both into a fierce hug. “I’m so glad to see you two.”

Beau made a soft, non-committal sound. His cheeks were wet when they parted. Hawthorn smiled, brushing his tears away with his thumbs. “Are either of you hurt?”

They shook their heads.

“Good. What’s going on?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Aislinn said. “*Long* to explain. How did you find us?”

“The vines,” Hawthorn said. “Led us right to the gate. And *these*,” he said, pointing to her pendant, and the flower one he had around his neck, “led me here.”

“But who was that standing next to Mother?”

“Do you know one thing that both dwarves and fae have in common?” he asked smugly. “They always expect tricks to be



magic. We dressed up Miriam to look like me with a wax mask. I don't imagine they'll be able to keep up the ruse for long, but it got them into the city."

"I take it they're all armed?"

Hawthorn grinned. "To the teeth."

"They shouldn't go into the palace," Aislinn said. "They've an army there—" She started to move, still determined to warn them.

Hawthorn grabbed her arm. "Miriam and your mother know what they're doing. They are quite experienced in matters of warfare and espionage. Now, are you alone here? Is there somewhere we can go? Tell me everything."



Aislinn and Beau had just reached the end of their tale when they arrived back at the safehouse. Hawthorn had listened patiently throughout, not chiding them for any poor decisions and only occasionally stopping them to say things like, "Dillon's *alive?*" and "Cerridwen *too?*"

He offered a brief overview of what he had been doing—initially smoothing things with King Owen and then politely making their way back across the border to 'assist with the search' for their missing children. Once they reached Faerie, however, Hawthorn had heard the vines calling to him—carrying the message they'd given. Aislinn's pendant had

helped with locating her, but it was the vines who had revealed the location to Avalinth's tunnels.

"I wonder why they have never done so before now," Beau mused. "Many a monarch must have wanted to discover the city."

Hawthorn shrugged. "We can control the vines, but I do not think they submit to us without their freewill. I think we belong to them more than they belong to us."

This certainly matched with Dillon's revelations about them, but they had no time to discuss it further—they were back at the safehouse.

Dillon unbarred the door and let them in. "Hawthorn," he said, staring dumbly. "I mean, sire. Prince. My liege?"

"Dillon!" Hawthorn threw his arms around him. "Terrific to see you! Looking a little worse for the wear, but no matter. Juliana will be delighted—"

"Juliana?" Cerridwen came racing forward. "Is she—"

"She's here, Ser Cerridwen," Hawthorn began, "but engaged at present with a little business at the castle—"

Cerridwen bolted for the door. Hawthorn stood in her way. "You Ardencourt women!" He sighed exasperatedly. "You're all exactly the same! Always racing off into danger, never thinking things through—"

"My daughter—"

“Is most excellent at looking after herself, and also doesn’t know you’re alive. I think seeing you standing in the midst of battle might be somewhat of a distraction for her, don’t you?”

Cerridwen relented, standing down. The door was finally shut behind them.

“Also, hello,” Hawthorn said, dropping into a bow, the lacy cuffs of his silk shirt flopping artistically at his wrists. “Delightful to meet you, mother-in-law, dearest. I hope the children haven’t been too much trouble.”

Cerridwen blinked at him, clearly lost for words, and didn’t find them before Minerva came forward to introduce herself. The others followed, one by one, although Aislinn barely noticed. Caer was still asleep, and she found it hard to concentrate on anything but the uneven rise and fall of his chest. At least he seemed to be sleeping soundly.

“Your Majesty, Mr Faerie King, Sir,” asked Luna quietly. “I don’t suppose—your magic being the greatest that there is—you could, um, try healing Dillon?”

Hawthorn looked back at him, his expression grim. Someone had obviously tried to stitch him back together after his escape from the palace, but he now looked more thread than flesh.

“I can certainly give it a try!” he said, and steered him into a nearby seat so he could reach his face. Light radiated from his palms... but the flesh below made no attempt to knit back together.

Hawthorn sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I could weave you a glamour, of course, but it wouldn’t help much with the present company.”

Dillon’s jaw tightened, almost imperceptibly. Luna’s fingers laced into his. “I don’t care what you look like,” she told him, and leant across to kiss his cheek.

“*None* of us do,” added Beau. “Although I won’t be kissing you.”

A light, forced chuckle spread through the room. It was true that no one cared, but Aislinn imagined Dillon did... and worried more if this spell, or his body, would last.

She tugged on her father’s sleeve.

“What about him?” Aislinn asked, gesturing to Caer in the corner.

Hawthorn’s gaze sharpened. “The Prince, I take it?”

“Yes,” Aislinn said shortly. “And my, um—”

“Aislinn’s beloved.” Beau grinned. “They’re head over heels for each other, Father. It’s brilliant.”

“You left that part out of your tale, daughter.”

She narrowed her eyes. “It wasn’t relevant.”

Hawthorn clutched his chest, as if she’d just uttered a great insult. “Romance is always relevant, daughter! Why—”

“Father,” said Aislinn, “please.”

Hawthorn’s expression sobered. “Very well, let’s see what I can do for him.”

They went over to Caer's makeshift bed, Aislinn brushing back his hair. He murmured under her touch, eyes half opening.

“Caer, darling, my father is here. He's going to try and see if he can help you.”

“Your father?” Caer blinked blearily, struggling into a sitting position. “Hello, sir, lovely to make your acquaintance —”

“Settle down, chap, there's a good fellow. No need to strain yourself.”

“You shouldn't... you shouldn't touch me...”

“I've been informed of your powers, but I doubt you can do much in your present state. Let me help you. For Aislinn's sake, if not your own. She's apparently rather fond of you.”

“It's dangerous...”

“Son, I am the King of Faerie. The only thing I'm afraid of is my wife.”

He placed his hands to Caer's chest and head, pressing his power into him, grunting under the strain. It was like he was fighting against something, sucking something away. Colour flocked back to Caer's skin, but his breathing increased, until both he and Hawthorn pulled away, gasping.

Aislinn steadied Caer, mindful of not touching his skin.  
“Caer?”

“I’m... I’m all right...” he said, pulling himself into a sitting position.

Aislinn rested her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes.

“That’s as good as I can manage,” Hawthorn announced, flexing his hands. “I don’t think I cured anything—just delayed it. I’m afraid whatever predictions Aeron spouted about the Mirror wanting to claim you are likely true.”

Caer stared at him, jaw tight.

“But you can just fix him again—” Aislinn insisted.

Hawthorn shook his head. “Not forever. I’m not even sure it will work again. That power, Ais—you don’t know what it feels like.” He met Caer’s gaze. “You truly don’t know where you got them from?”

He shook his head. “They manifested when my mother died, but... it feels like they were always there. I can’t explain it.”

“No,” said Hawthorn, his expression unreadable. “Me neither.”

Luna came around handing out food—hunks of dense bread packed with herbs. Flora must have bought it at the market earlier, or stolen it. Aislinn bit into it hungrily; it had been a long time since she’d had anything to eat.

Hawthorn moved away to talk to Minerva, no doubt trying to learn more about the current situation. Aislinn leant against Caer’s shoulder, breathing in the scent of him, wishing she

could take his hand. She missed her gloves in a way she hadn't expected.

"So... that's your father," Caer said, nudging her gently.

"It is."

"He seems nice."

"He has his moments."

"Is it me, or is that lady your grandmother?"

Aislinn laughed, and quickly caught him up on what had been happening. His face paled when he heard Aeron's ultimatum. "I'm not going back to him," he said. "No matter what he says. No matter what he does. He can't have these powers. I don't care if it kills me—"

"Caer—"

"Promise me, Ais. Whatever we come up with, you won't make me go back to him."

"Cae—"

*"Please."*

Aislinn took a deep breath, knowing how much this meant to him, and how much he needed to hear it. "I won't make you go back," she said, tears lining her eyes. "Even if it kills *me*."

Caer exhaled. "Thank you."

Aislinn couldn't respond. If he died because of that promise—if she had to live with that for the rest of her life—she didn't know how she was expected to continue. She hated him for that almost as much as she—

A horn sounded outside, followed by the sounds of fighting not far off.

“Ah,” said Hawthorn, as if the sounds of chaos were a pleasant lullaby to him, “that must be my wife.”

Cerridwen bolted out of the door.

“And my mother-in-law, racing to join the fray.”

Aislinn stood up. She glanced back at Caer. “Have you got the strength for a fight?”

He stood up, catching one of the halberds Minerva was tossing out. “Let’s find out.”

It was a faerie answer if there ever was one, but Aislinn didn’t press it. She could sense how much he wanted to follow. She knew how much she’d hate being left behind, how she’d drag herself through anything to be by his side.

She ran out into the street.



It was never easy to keep up with Aislinn, but the tightness in Caer’s chest made it even more impossible than usual. Whatever Hawthorn had done to him had helped, but he still felt like an iron hand was resting against his lungs.

He fought through it, racing after her, jabbing at anything that tried to stop them.

He could use his powers on the mortal assailants—a few of them had joined the fray—but he didn’t want to. Not if he had



another choice.

Over a dozen guards and soldiers had surrounded Juliana in an alleyway. She was easy to spot in her green and gold armour, but even without it, he would have recognised her as Aislinn's mother. There was a distinct resemblance between the two that extended even as far as the way they cut down their enemies.

Cerridwen's swings were similar, too.

Three guards leapt out of the alleyway and charged towards her. Caer paused to kick one down, but she urged him forward.

“Get to Juliana!”

Hawthorn was already there. He stood calmly in the shadows, twirling thorns through the floor with a lazy flick of his fingers, capturing guards by twining the vines round their limbs and holding them in place while Juliana whirled around the space, dispatching them one by one.

“My beloved doombringer,” Hawthorn sighed, largely to himself. “Isn't she magnificent?”

Aislinn ran by, knocking over a guard and ramming his face into the floor, vaulting up in time to take out another with a well-placed kick to the ribs.

Caer inhaled. “The women of your family are really something.”

Hawthorn slapped his back. “Aren't they just? I'm so glad you agree.”

He turned to take out another influx of soldiers arriving at the other end of the alleyway, weaving vines across the opening in a black, thorny cobweb. Caer's eyes widened, twitching under this display.

"Mother!" Aislinn called.

Caer wheeled around. Most of the guards were dead, unconscious or contained, but a few still remained standing. Juliana and Aislinn blurred through the air, lightning-fast, a whirl of blades. Their backs snapped together, their movements mirrored.

"Get down!" Juliana hissed.

Not even questioning it, Aislinn hit the floor and rolled away. Her mother swung her blade towards her opponent, but he caught the blade in his hands.

"Juliana," said Dillon.

Juliana froze. She did not withdraw her blade. Neither did she attempt to strike again.

"You're not him," she said finally, eyes unmoving, face hard despite her shining eyes.

"I assure you," he followed, "I am." He dropped his hands away, but she kept the sword pointed at his throat.

"The last thing you said to me," she said, "as we were lighting the rockets. What were we talking about?"

"You and Hawthorn," he said steadily. "I was trying to get you to admit that you liked him, and that he was worth liking."

“You did?” Hawthorn piped up from the side. “Oh, Dillon, thank you. I knew I always liked you. I’m really sorry about that time I—”

Juliana dropped her sword, her hands shaking.

“It’s you,” she breathed. “It’s really you.”

She bolted straight into his arms, burying herself in his neck. “I missed you,” she whispered, half sobbing. “You’ve no idea how much I missed you.”

“I have some idea. There’s a lot to explain.” He pulled away from her. “Come. There’s someone else you need to meet.”

“More important than you?”

“I would say so,” he said, smiling.

“Who—”

“Julie,” said a voice from the other end of the alley—a voice like strangled strings, like a beautiful instrument poorly played. “Juliana.”

Juliana turned, her eyes widening. She looked to Aislinn for confirmation, some proof that she was seeing who she was really seeing. Aislinn, however, could only nod.

Juliana did not bother asking how this was possible, or why Cerridwen looked so alive when Dillon didn’t. She took a tentative stretch towards her, hand outstretched, like a child learning to walk for the first time.

Cerridwen clutched onto that hand, and the arm that followed, and then the two collided in the alleyway, a mass of

arms and tears and a strangled, sobbing voice, over and over,  
“I’m here, baby. I’m here.”



They returned to the safehouse where Juliana was apprised of everything, and they finally sat down to discuss their options.

“Our troops are now dispersed about the city,” Juliana explained, and placed a shiny coin on the makeshift table Magna and Diana had constructed from bits and pieces they’d salvaged in the house. “Awaiting further instructions.”

The dwarves stared at the coin. “Does it do something?” asked Bell.

Juliana smiled. “There’s an inscription around the side. If I alter this one, the rest of them change too. They also grow hot or cold depending on how close a person is to their target.”

“Oh, I like that!”

Minerva thumbed her chin. “You say ‘troops’, but how many are we talking about?”

“Ten,” Juliana admitted. “We thought we’d never get more than that through the doors. They are highly armed, however.

Some have magic, some do not.”

“I should like a list of their attributes.”

“You shall have it.”

Hawthorn rapped his fingers against the table. “I’ve managed to slow down whatever was happening to Caerwyn, which is our only advantage at present—it means we don’t have to meet Aeron at the appointed time. We can strike earlier, or later.”

“He is likely anticipating an earlier attack,” Minerva suggested.

“But the longer we wait, the longer he has to plan, too,” Bell added.

Hawthorn sighed. “I wish Miriam was still pretending to be me. She’s much better at this war-planning stuff. I’m going to explore this roomy hovel and clear my head.”

He walked towards the rotten steps, shaking his head at the state of them, and placing his hands to the floor. Branches wove through the cracks in the tiles, winding upwards towards the remains of the stairs, joining them back together. Tiny buds bloomed in the bannisters.

“Show-off,” Juliana said, not looking up.

Hawthorn shot a rude gesture in her direction, then glanced at Aislinn and signalled for her to follow. She headed after him, following his shadow as he moved from room to room, checking the place out.

Finally, he came to a disused bedroom at the back of the house and closed the door behind them.

“Father?” she questioned.

Hawthorn moved towards the empty hearth, resting his hands against the mantelpiece, and then again to the window, as if searching for somewhere comfortable to put himself.

“You’re making me nervous,” she added. “We’re on the brink of war downstairs and *you’re* making me nervous.”

“I’m nervous myself,” he explained. “I have an idea—a terrible idea, but an idea—and I really don’t know if I want to share it with you.”

“Father, don’t make me threaten to torture you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“I’ll tell Mother.”

Hawthorn exhaled. “There is a chance,” he started, “that no matter what we do, the other side is going to get the upper hand, and Caerwyn is going to be taken.”

Aislinn’s stomach dropped. A sensation gripped her, like being plunged into a pool of ice. That couldn’t happen. She wouldn’t let it happen—

Hawthorn came forward, taking her shoulders. “We are going to try everything we can to avoid that,” he insisted. “But we are outnumbered greatly, our magic won’t work within their walls, and I suspect this Aeron chap has still got a trick or

two up his sleeve. If he gets hold of Caerwyn, there may not be a lot we can do.”

“No—”

“There might be something *you* can do, however.”

Aislinn stilled. “What?”

Hawthorn sighed. “Now, here comes the part I don’t like—”

“Just *tell me!*”

“There may be another option,” Hawthorn said, “a fallback, as it were. But it depends.”

“On what?”

“If you feel forever about him.”

Aislinn’s throat bobbed. “And if I do?”

“We could try sharing his heart with you. Being part fae might offer him some more protection, might help you get him back if he’s taken, might help him survive the process. But it’s a risk. If—”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, he’s forever. Yes, I’ll do it.”

Hawthorn’s jaw tightened.

“You think I’m foolish, don’t you? That it’s too soon. You knew Mother for years—”

“I could have fallen for your mother in a day if I’d had a sensible bone in my body when we met and she’d been a little



less stubborn.”

Aislinn blinked at him. “You—you told me when I was younger that I should take my time, that it could take years to fall in love—”

“Yes, forgive me for telling my sixteen-year-old daughter to be careful when it came to making decisions that could affect the entire kingdom. It wasn’t bad advice—it still isn’t—but you aren’t a child anymore, and you have been careful. Too careful, one might even say.”

Aislinn glared at him a little longer, before her face softened. “That cannot be true. About Mother.”

“And yet I can speak it.” His hands ran down her arms and clutched her fingers. “I don’t doubt love, and I don’t doubt you, little dream. Never will.”

Aislinn took a deep breath. “I’ll ask Caer.”

Someone came up the stairs, rapping on the doors until they found them. “We’ve got half a plan,” said Diana. “If you want to come down and hear it?”



“We attack after their deadline,” Minerva said, metal fingers splayed across the makeshift table. “By several hours. Let them think Caer has decided to sacrifice himself for the greater good, or that we’ve decided to sneak off to the Deep. The doors are no doubt tightly patrolled right now, but if it’s safe

enough, we might want to consider a mock attack there. At least we have the benefit of magic at that end of the city.”

“Noted,” Hawthorn said, nodding.

“When the attack comes, we split into two groups. One of us attacks the front directly as a diversion. The rest of us go through the waterways.”

“Here’s an idea,” said Beau, “why don’t we *all* go that way?”

“It’s not enough to get in. We have to get the soldiers *out*. And if my sister has learnt Tiberius helped us in any way, she’ll have changed those locks and will be patrolling it like crazy.”

“Maybe we should consider two stealth parties,” Flora added. “We have the right number. One through the waterway, the other towards the balcony?”

“An excellent idea. Fae folk, over the balcony. You’re more agile like that. We’ll take the waterway route.”

Minerva leaned over the crudely constructed model of the castle. She whispered to Caer to hand her another counter. “Wyverns,” she said, holding up one, “you will be positioned here at the front, led by Queen Juliana.” She held up another. “Sirens—that’s mainly dwarves—we’re here in the waterways. Fae folk, and Caer, you’re the Rogues, going over the top.”

There was a murmur of understanding. “Wyverns, draw all the attention you possibly can to the gates and gardens. Sirens, we’re going to sneak into the castle and try and draw anyone

from the throne room. Rogues, get into the vault, get that Mirror out, and *seal it*.”

“Once we’re in possession of the Mirror, we’re hoping Aeron might agree to bargain with us,” Bell continued. “We have no intention of doing so.”

“We’re putting an arrow through his neck,” Diana said, holding up a crossbow Aislinn recognised as one of fae-make. Juliana must have brought it with her. “I take it no one has a problem with that?”

“It’s hardly going to make the diplomatic position more precarious,” Hawthorn said. “Technically, he’s one of the Fae. Venus might take offence, but we aren’t going to kick up a fuss about it.”

“Once Aeron is down, we’re hoping his forces might surrender,” Bell went on. “Or at least call a ceasefire. Venus and Owen will lose what they were hoping to gain.”

“And Owen?” asked Caer quietly, “will you kill him?”

The table went quiet for a moment. “Unless he gets in our way, we shall try to spare him,” Hawthorn said eventually. “I cannot promise anything if he gets in our way.”

Caer nodded. Aislinn reached out to pinch his sleeve, knowing how much the answer pained him. Did Owen know the ceremony would likely cost Caer his life? It seemed unlikely.

“What happens in the event that neither Venus nor Owen concede?” Caer asked, avoiding her gaze.

Another palpable silence passed across the table. “Then we fight,” Minerva concluded. “Until the last person standing.”

The odds were hard to calculate. Aislinn had no idea how many soldiers Owen had managed to bring with him through the Mirror, or how many dwarves Venus had at her disposal. Meanwhile, even with the knights Juliana and Hawthorn had brought, they had less than two dozen.

Even with magic, even with taking out the Mirror... the numbers could not be on their side.

Minerva placed her fists against the table. “Well, we’ll iron out the final points later,” she said. “For now, everyone get some rest. Spend some time with your loved ones. Sharpen some weapons. Save your strength, though—we’ll need it for tomorrow.”

Flora climbed to her feet. “I’ll go and see if I can find us some food.”

“Oh!” said Luna. “I should come too—”

Flora shook her head. “I’m the least noticeable of any of you. Even Bell’s too recognisable. But a haggard old dwarf like me? No one thinks twice.”

“She has a point,” said Beau.

Flora nodded, collecting a battered basket from the side of the room, and slipping out into the streets.

Aislinn looked to Caer, and angled her head towards the stairs. If she didn’t ask him soon, she was afraid she’d lose her

nerve. She led him into one of the upstairs rooms and shut the door behind them.

“I know I told you I would never force you to go back,” she said, “and I meant it. But we need to talk about the possibility that we might not have the choice. Unless... you’re willing to stay here?”

Caer snorted. “Minerva tried that one on me earlier. You can imagine my response.”

“That you still feel responsible for all this and can’t stand idly by whilst we risk our lives on your behalf, even though it would be sensible to stay away from the creepy Mirror that wants to eat you?”

“I might have thrown a few curses in there, but yes. That’s the gist.”

Aislinn half laughed, half sighed. “It’s a terrible idea for you to come with us, you know?”

“I know,” he said. “Are you going to talk me out of it?”

“I’d like to. But I also know that if the situations were reversed, I’d be crawling to your side before I let you go without me.”

He smiled. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“My father has a... fall back option, as it were. In case everything goes terribly, terribly wrong, and Aeron captures you, and forces you to go into the Mirror.”

Caer raised a black brow. “I’m listening.”

“Do you remember I told you that my parents shared a heart?”

“Vaguely.”

“It’s something the fae are capable of... at least, strong ones. You can share your heart with someone else, allowing them to live if their own is damaged, often granting them a portion of your powers. It’s rare—exceedingly rare. It doesn’t often work, for one. The connection needs to be... pure. Strong. The ceremony itself doesn’t carry many risks, but it’s irreversible, and there’s always the fear that if one dies, the other will too. I’m... willing to do it, though. It’ll give you a fighting chance if the Mirror takes you, might even prevent you from expiring if we don’t manage to sever its hold on you tomorrow.”

Caer stared at her, taking all of this in.

*He won’t do it*, she realised. He wouldn’t do it because he didn’t want anyone to risk themselves for him, even a little, even though she already felt she’d die if he did.

“How does the ceremony work?” he asked.

Aislinn’s heart leapt. “I’d lead it. I’d need to touch you, preferably on your chest. My father explained it to me a few years ago—”

“We’d have to touch?” he said, his eyes widening. “I don’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

“And I don’t want to watch you die, so suck it up.”

Caer snorted weakly. “Ais...this kind of spell, this bond... it’s forever. We won’t be able to break it.”

“What if I don’t want it broken?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“Even if we can’t be together unless we’re in some dwarven stronghold? It might be hard to rule Faerie from there...”

“I won’t be queen for a long while yet,” she whispered. “I hope. And we might be able to find a way. And if we couldn’t... yes. Still then. It wouldn’t be easy, but if you’re in, I’m in. Five flimsy decades or five centuries. I’ll take whatever of you you’re willing to offer me.”

“And what if it’s everything?”

She looked up at him, his eyes glassy and close. She could feel the warmth of him next to her, the ghost of his weight—and the weight of his words—falling into her. “I... really want to kiss you now.”

“If we need to touch for the ceremony, it might as well be on the lips, right?”

She moved closer. He inched back.

“I hate risking your life like this every time.”

“I feel like I risk everything every time we touch anyway,” she told him. “Risk unravelling completely, burning up, falling into a void. I don’t care as much as I used to.” She reached out to touch his face. “Today or a thousand years from now, I want to die touching you.”

Caer shuddered beneath her touch, eyes rimmed with silver. His hands slid to her face, breath rapid, like a horse getting ready to bolt. Aislinn held him steady.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I think I might have forgotten to say it, but—”

Aislinn slammed her lips against his, thoughts blurring, unravelling under the soft, perilous pressure of his mouth. “I love you, too,” she murmured into him. “My heart is already yours.”

Her hand fell to his chest, fingers skirting his skin. Caer took a deep breath.

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

He nodded.

Hot, white light started at her fingertips. Aislinn forced the feeling outwards, deeper, feeling her own chest burn, like a hot knife in butter. Her magic dug into his chest, passed his ribs. His heart thumped beneath bone and skin and muscle, golden and—

Scarred.

*No.*

She pressed deeper, unwilling to give up, but it was like a wall had shot up between the arrow and the target. She could not get at it.

*No, no.*



Her magic hammered at the wall, at the *nothing* that coated a part of Caer's heart. Hers beat fast and hard, like it was trying to break out of her chest and join his.

But it couldn't. Her heart wanted to be his, but his...

She couldn't reach it.

"Ais," Caer whispered, "Ais, stop—"

"I won't!" She strained again, groaning, panting, her lungs aching, her chest raging. She had to give him this, she wouldn't let him go unprotected—

"Ais!" Caer pulled away from her, clutching his chest. The force sent her spiralling to the floor, gasping.

Caer stared down at her. "Did it work?"

"No," she said, voice trembling. "It didn't. I just... I couldn't..." She pulled herself to her feet, not looking at him. "This is my fault. It's because I'm only half fae, because I'm rubbish at magic—"

Caer moved to clutch her arms, but could find only flesh. His hands hovered nearby. "Or it's because of my stupid, rotten heart. We don't know."

"I know that your heart's *not* rotten, that it's the loveliest heart I've ever known, that I..." Aislinn leant against his chest and sniffed into his shirt. "There's nothing wrong with your heart," she whispered, desperate to claim it. *Not in the ways that matter*. She traced a finger over it, not touching.

"Will you ever stop blaming yourself for everything?"

“Will you?”

“Fair point.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so, so sorry, Caer.”

“I’m not,” he said. “At least you won’t be in any danger, now.”

“I’m in more danger than ever!” Her throat went raw. “It’s already over for me if something happens to you, don’t you understand? I might as well die when you die because I’m dead anyway!”

“Ais, you’re going to live forever—”

“And I’ll miss you every second of it!”

Caer stilled, his jaw tight. Without another word, he drew Aislinn into his arms, his hands on her back, shielded by her hair. “A dangerous vow to make, Princess. I wouldn’t want you held to it. I’d prefer you to be happy.”

“I can’t make that vow,” she murmured against his chest. “So please don’t ask it of me.”

“I won’t, cariad. I promise.”

She wasn’t familiar with the word, but she liked how it sounded, lilting and soft. “Cariad,” she started, “what does it mean?”

“Darling,” he said, “beloved. *Dearest*.”

“It’s prettier, the way you say it.”

“Then I shall whisper it to no one else,” he promised. “For as long as I live, I am yours. And you are mine, Ais. We don’t need a spell to prove it.”

*Maybe, she thought. But I might need one to keep you here.*



They slept, they ate, they planned. Juliana contacted the knights in the city and informed them of the plan. Caer practised his magic on Dillon. Hawthorn and Beau flexed their magic. Flora pilfered supplies. Aislinn sparred with anyone that would have her, before collapsing in the corner to sharpen knives. Her mother joined her, and they both said nothing as they worked.

Time sped forward, slowly, endlessly, exponentially.

Aeron's deadline loomed.

The company lapsed into silence.

They had been filling their time with preparation, refusing to look at the time, to stop, to think, to wonder if they'd ever see the dawn again or if they should say something to their loved ones. Aislinn had caught Luna talking to Dillon, lamenting the fact she couldn't go and see her family for fear they might turn them in.

"I don't *think* they would," she'd whispered, voice hoarse. "But I know we can't risk it."

No one wanted to risk it—no one wanted to risk saying anything that might sound like goodbye.

Minerva's metal fingers strummed on the table.

"You know," said Bell brightly, "we haven't played a game of Wyverns and Wastelands in a while. I'm sure I could come up with a simple campaign, if anyone is interested?"

Minerva looked at her like she'd gone mad. "We don't have any cards."

"We can make them up."

"Make them up! Fort would be furious."

"I have a few," Luna admitted. "I, um, kept my favourites on me. Well, actually, *her* favourites. But... mine too, now." She pulled a small stack out of her boots. "I've enough for one each?"

Minerva snorted softly. Her fingers stilled. "Hmm. High likelihood of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?"

Bell's spur of the moment campaign was as silly and underdeveloped as it should have been, and the majority of the cards provided absolutely no help to anyone. Yet, somehow, their characters kept persevering through the Bog of Unending Stench, and although most of the laughter was forced, some of it wasn't.

The deadline came and went, missed by most of them. Time trickled onwards.

And Caer grew weaker. He tried to hide it from the rest of the group, but Aislinn could tell. There was something in the slope of his shoulders, the hollows of his eyes. Her father's magic was wearing off, leaving him exhausted. She knew the fever would come back again soon, making it almost impossible for him to fight. She was tempted to say nothing, to wait until he was too weak to follow them, but how could she take that choice away from him? How could she face him after that if they both survived?

He dismissed himself to go and get a drink from the kitchen, and Aislinn got up to follow him.

"We need to go soon, don't we?" she whispered to him.

Caer nodded. "I'm sorry."

Aislinn pulled the drawstrings of his shirt. "Mortals apologise too much," she said. "For all sorts of things that are not their fault."

"You apologise to me all the time."

"That's because I love you, and I mean it." She patted his chest, and went to move away to get ready.

"Ais?"

"Yes?"

"Was there a moment?" he asked. "A moment when..."

"When I fell in love with you? Or when I knew?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. “It was like watching the sunset,” she told him, “and never being quite sure when it was night, until you looked up and found yourself surrounded by stars.”

He smiled. “You’re quite the poet.”

“I am *not*. I am a warrior, loyal, brave and true.”

“I think you can be those things and a poet also.”

She smiled. “Was there a moment for you?”

“Yes,” he replied. “All of them.”

“You are *so suave*.”

He grinned. “I have my moments.”

Aislinn sidled back towards him. “When this is all over, I’m going to drag you into the nearest bedroom, and fuck you so hard you go dizzy.”

Caer spluttered, an action that quickly turned into a cough. Aislinn initially mistook it for embarrassment, but there was something beneath it, harder—a sound that grated against her bones.

“Steady,” she said, sliding a hand to his chest. “We need to keep up appearances. I’ve promised not to leave you behind, but I don’t think Minerva’s beyond tying you up for your own good.”

Caerwyn leaned against her as the coughs subsided, smiling as soon as he could. “Does your protection not extend to fighting dwarves on my behalf?”

“Not *that* one.”

Caer laughed. “Wise.”

She went back to the table. “It’s time,” she said.

Minerva looked up from her cards, her eyes darting briefly to Caer. “All right. Let’s move out.”





The groups were divided. There was no darkness to hide them, no cover of night. Minerva had grown used to the turn of the sun in the World Above, grown to like the change, the silence of the night. She rather liked it.

There was no quiet now, no silence. She and her merry band made their way through the streets with their hoods drawn up, blending in with the crowds. From time to time, she looked up and saw Juliana and one of her knights, sliding across the rooftops. It was the best way to the palace if they wanted to remain undetected.

The waterway entrance was unguarded—at least from the outside. Minerva had expected this. The exit was a closely guarded secret, known only by the members of the royal family and a few key members of staff. Venus would not want to draw attention to it by placing a guard there. The entrance was not under the protection of the barrier, and magic could make quick work of it.

That did not mean she'd not guarded it from inside.

Minerva took a deep, steadying breath. She could hear the sounds of battle coming from the palace entrance. The diversion was underway.

She dialled in the code.

The door swung open.

The dwarves descended into the dark. It was the first time in a long while it had been just them, and the group felt unbalanced with only the six—no Fort, no Caer. Dillon was with Juliana and the others at the gate, Aislinn, Beau and Caer with the Rogue team.

Even if they all survived today, she doubted it would ever be just the party again.

*No time for sentimentality*, a voice reminded her. *Just get in.*

Bell nudged her arm with her own, more for comfort than anything else, reminding Minerva of everything she had to lose. She quickened her gait, barrelling forward, axe at the ready.

The quietness increased. The sounds of battle grew distant and far away.

Would it be this easy? Maybe Venus hadn't caught on that this way had already been used for an escape. Maybe she'd forgotten about it herself, or assumed the code had been changed over the years.

*Maybe, maybe, maybe.* The words thumped around Minerva's ears like a second, fragile heartbeat.

The steps up to the palace appeared ahead.

Cautiously, Minerva moved up them, metal fingers tracing stone. Strange that the palace should feel all at once familiar and strange to her—hers and not hers, all at the same time.

*You are mine, Stone,* she whispered, in the same way she imagined the Fae spoke to the forest. She may not be able to bend the rock to her will, but that didn't make it any less hers—or her any less its. The Stone willed her forwards, and if the spirits had bodies or existed in the slivers of dust, they came with her too.

She pushed open the door, and stepped into the corridor.

No one stopped them. A dull, distant roar sounded from the direction of the gates. The diversion was working.

“Quickly,” she called down to the others. “To the throne room—”

A door opened up ahead of them, and a dozen guards raced out in perfect formation, spears and shields at the ready. Minerva raised her axe for the charge, but before she could strike, another door opened behind, and a dozen more filed out.

Sandwiched. Surrounded. Too many—

“Retreat,” Minerva hissed. “Retreat!”

They started back down the stairs, but Diana let out a cry from the back—another set of guards had blocked off the steps.

No one attacked. No one moved. The guards because they didn't need to, and the dwarves because it would be a bloodbath.

*No.*

Minerva's eyes went everywhere at once, searching for a weak spot, an unguarded corner, a chandelier to be brought down, a distraction to be caused, a person to appeal to—

But there was nothing, and every guard was armoured, faces concealed. Strangers.

She looked at Bell, but for the first time, her eyes gave her no relief, no plan, no way out of this.

Her calloused, brown fingers reached out for her metal ones. Minerva couldn't feel them, but she clutched onto them all the same, hard and tight as she dared.

“Out fighting, then?”

Bell adjusted her stance, bringing up her crossbow. “To the end, dearest.”

Before they could act, the guards parted, and Venus stepped forward. She was dressed in armour of shining gold, placed over a gown of peacock blue. Impractical for battle, but nevertheless intimidating.

“Sister,” she said, “place down your axe. There is no need for death.”

“You are the one that has invited death into our home, Venus.”

“I have invited *life*. You’ll see. One day you will thank me.”

“I will *never* thank you for this.” She raised her axe, and for the first time, Venus’ eyes flickered with apprehension, like she doubted her own resolve.

Could Minerva do it? Harm her own sister? Even now? Even for the boy—

Venus stepped forward. “You cannot harm your own reflection.”

Minerva didn’t waver. “You and I were never made of glass,” she replied. “We are more and less than shadows and light.”

Venus raised a hand. Her guards readied their weapons. For a moment, Minerva swore she felt Bell’s fingers in hers.

“Stop!” said Flora, diving into the space between the sisters. Her eyes sought Venus out, hands appealing. “Remember our deal, Venus. You have broken others, but you swore—”

The blood in Minerva’s body ran cold. Her ears rang, certain they’d misheard.

*A deal? What deal?*

“I have not forgotten,” Venus replied coolly, “I am in no mood to hurt anyone, but if she resists—”

“Flora,” Minerva whispered, her voice sounding like someone else’s, “what have you done?”

“I’m sorry, old friend,” Flora answered, not meeting her in the eyes, “but I did what I had to do.”



Caer stumbled across the rooftops, wondering how Aislinn was able to navigate them so easily, to slide across tiles as slick as butter in a pan. Even Beau and Hawthorn seemed to be struggling to keep up with her, stopping several times to bend the stone of the walls into bridges across the houses when they knew they couldn't make the jump. It was effortless, the way they commanded the stone, as simple as walking was to a sprinter.

He was grateful for the bridges, and for the slower pace they were taking. He half suspected Aislinn was hoping to get to the palace before all of them and haul the Mirror outside before he could get anywhere near it.

But she slowed as they approached the walls of the palace, resting behind a chimney and waiting for the others to catch up with her. The knights had spent some time watching the walls beforehand, pinpointing a place where the guard presence was likely to be overlooked.

It was towards the end of the wall, where the walkway ran towards the solid stone at the very end of the enormous cavern. Lookout towers were perched periodically along the wall, but it did not end with one. A guard had been placed in the remaining spot, but, like most people forced to stay in a small area for a long period of time, he was pacing up and down.

The party dropped down into the street and crossed to the other side, hugging the wall. Only Cerridwen remained, giving the signal for when the guard turned. Hawthorn nodded at Aislinn, who took a running jump into his outstretched hands. He threw her into the air. She caught the edge of the wall and deftly swept over the other side.

Beau went next, then Cerridwen told them to stop as the guard turned back.

They waited. Caer tried not to think about Aislinn on the other side, and hoped the forces had all been diverted to the main gate.

Cerridwen signalled once more for them to move. This time, Hawthorn summoned vines to assist Caer getting up to the top, which was just as well, as he was almost certain he couldn't have made it anyway, even if he was at full strength. His chest felt tight.

He half stumbled across the walkway, sucking in his breath, and tumbled off the other side.

Beau and Aislinn reached out to grab him and yanked him behind a bush.

*"Are you all right?"* Aislinn mouthed.

Caer nodded, not that he was. But he wasn't hurt. He could move.

Finally, Cerridwen and Hawthorn dropped down, neither breaking a sweat. Caer had no idea how Cerridwen managed it. It made sense that Hawthorn could—he radiated with a

whispery, inhuman energy. But Cerridwen was mortal, and fully mortal, too, not enhanced by sharing her heart with a faerie like her daughter was.

“How do you do it?” he asked, gesturing to the entirety of her.

Cerridwen smiled. “Practise, young prince. I am older than I look.”

Mortals aged slower in Faerie, he remembered. Perhaps that was something to look forward to if they didn’t die tonight—that even if he couldn’t share Aislinn’s heart and live like one of them, he’d have longer than he originally anticipated. He might not be allowed to stay in Avalinth anymore, but maybe something could be done about his powers—

Somehow, eventually.

*Five flimsy decades or five centuries.*

He’d love her for all of it, even if he could touch her for none of it.

If they survived today.

A shot of fire went up from the main gate—the display from one of the fae knights. Most of the soldiers were already there, and the ones standing by turned towards it.

Aislinn raced forwards, carving a path through the grounds. The others followed, sticking to the shadows as well as they were able, until they reached the balcony.



Once more, the others hopped inside, or vines were created to help the ascent, fizzling out as soon as they reached the baluster. Caer ascended last, feeling the barrier clamp down on his powers the second he passed over it.

The party slipped into the throne room, but Caer grabbed Aislinn's arm. It was the first time he'd been able to touch her freely in two days, without being terrified he was going to hurt her.

It might be the last time.

He pulled her mouth to his. "In case there isn't another opportunity."

Aislinn's eyes glistened. "If I could lie, I'd promise you there'll be another opportunity, that we'll share more kisses than there are stars in the sky. Innumerable. Uncountable."

"Such a shame you can't lie."

"A shame indeed." Her fingers ghosted his chin. Her lips brushed his once more. "Until the end," she said, drawing her weapon.

*And perhaps even after that.*

They followed the others into the throne room. A handful of guards were posted by the door. Cerridwen had downed two before they even turned. Aislinn took out another, Beau struck a fourth, and the fifth was left for Caer. He choked them into unconsciousness.

Another set sprung forth from behind the throne, spears at the ready. Two were mortal—men Caer knew from home.

“We don’t have to fight,” he told them.

One hesitated. Caer tried to place him. He was a young man—no older than he was. “Rhys, right?” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you. I want to let you go back to your family in one piece.”

The other guard was not so cooperative. “For the king!” he declared, and raced forward.

Caer barrelled into his middle, tackling him to the floor. He grabbed the hand holding the spear and smashed it to the floor. His helmet tumbled off. Caer whipped a dagger from his belt and placed it against the man’s chin.

“Your loyalty is commendable,” he said, “but Owen isn’t worth dying for.” Caer wondered, if he was fae, whether he’d be able to speak those words. Once upon a time, he would happily have died for his stepfather.

Once.

“Where is *your* loyalty?” the knight spat. “He’s doing this for your mother!”

“You can’t bring back the dead,” Caer insisted. “Not as they were. You knew my mother, yes? Would she approve of this?”

The knight paused. “Disloyal brat—”

A spear shot through his eye socket. Caer scrambled back as the man writhed and flailed and finally stilled, like a spider in flame.

Cerridwen yanked out the spear. “We don’t have time for reason,” she said. “Come on.”

The other guard had vanished. He could have run for help or been one of the other bodies piled in the room—Caer didn’t wait to check. He followed the others to the vault door, Aislinn inputting the code.

It swung open into the vault of Avalinth, a treasure trove like something out of legend. Caer half expected a dragon to appear out of nowhere. He could have spent days exploring the horde, but the Mirror held his focus with its dark, gleaming presence.

The party inched closer. Beside it was a glittering coffin made of glass.

“My prison and my sanctuary,” Cerridwen remarked, her fingers skimming over it. “I am still not sure how I came to be in it.”

“Markham traded a witch for it,” Hawthorn said, a name that clearly meant something to everyone else. “He tried desperately to keep you alive. Even more desperately to get you back. It cost him his life.”

“I see,” Cerridwen remarked, voice placid. “Thank you for telling me.”

Hawthorn approached the Mirror first, putting a hand to its frame, as if not daring to touch the glass. He sucked in a deep, solid breath. The glass rippled.

“What *are* you?” Hawthorn whispered, as if it were some wild, mystical beast.

“Can you seal it?” asked Cerridwen.

“I think so. If we can just get it out...”

Hands came forward to pry it from the wall, but Caer couldn't bring himself to touch it. A wave of nausea crashed over him. His head felt like a cannonball was inside his skull.

Something clicked behind him, and smoke streamed into the room, filling the space with thick, choking fog. Shouting raced through it, the noise of swords being drawn—

“Run, Caer!” Aislinn hissed beneath her breath. “Hide!”

Caer rolled away, diving behind a pile of coins. Steel clashed against steel. He heard someone cry out—Beau?

*Not Aislinn. Not her.*

He wanted to run, to get to her, but he couldn't tell right from left. His lungs were burning. He could barely breathe as it was—

The sounds of fighting continued. Someone rushed an instruction, only to be cut off with a muffled scream. Fire hissed against the floor, extinguished. Chains were dragged across the tiles, dislodging streams of coins.

The sounds of resistance silenced.

And the smoke started to clear.

Caer leaned out as well as he was able. Aeron stood in the centre of the room, flanked by guards. Everyone else was in

chains—Cerridwen, Hawthorn, Beau... Ais. They stared up at their captors with wild, furious eyes.

Aeron walked forward like a swan over water, extending a long, narrow-fingered hand under Hawthorn's chin. He tilted his face towards him. "My, my, the mighty King of the Faeries," he said, grinning. "Not so all-powerful in here, are you?"

He clicked his fingers, turning to the guard holding Beau, who pressed his finger to a wound in his arm, twisting it until he cried out.

Hawthorn lashed out in his chains. "I don't know who you are, but if you hurt my children—"

"I don't care about your children," Aeron hissed, "I just want the boy. The mortal prince. Where is he?"

"We missed your deadline," Hawthorn spat. "Where do you *think* he is?"

"I think, most likely, you managed to do something to him to delay the call of the Mirror, but I can't imagine you'd be so stupid as to bring him with you, would you?"

Aislinn promptly burst into tears. "Monster," she sobbed. "You don't know what it was like, how much he suffered... He made me promise that I wouldn't make him go back, even if, even if..."

She trailed off into noisy, guttural sobs.

"You killed him," Beau added for good measure.

Aeron's expression flickered. Caer tried to remember—had they told him about Beau's ability to lie? Aislinn hadn't stated anything that confirmed his demise, but her performance was impressive.

Cerridwen—who was closest to Caer's hiding spot—tugged on her chains gently. "Please," she said, so quietly that no one but the two mortal guards holding her could hear her, "don't hurt me. Let me go."

Caer frowned. He didn't know Cerridwen well, but this meekness didn't seem like her.

"Please," she carried on. "I'm just mortal—same as you. I don't have any special powers."

The guard scoffed, snorting at his friend who held the other side of her chains, and turned back to watch Aeron.

He'd seized Aislinn's face.

"Is he dead?" he screamed at her. "Is he truly dead?"

Aislinn carried on sobbing.

Aeron righted himself. "Prince Caerwyn," he said, "if you're here, then reveal yourself, or I will kill her."

"No!" Hawthorn hissed, struggling in his chains.

A guard kicked him in the stomach.

Caer stilled. *No, not her. Don't you dare.*

His immediate instinct was to crawl out of his space and give himself up. He couldn't let anything happen to her.

But if he went, he knew that Aeron would use the Mirror's power to wipe out the fae. If he went, hundreds or thousands of people were going to die.

His people. Minerva's people. *Aislinn's*.

And he'd be condemning her to watch.

How would that be saving her? How would that be doing her any favours?

Exhaustion crawled at his bones. Whatever Hawthorn had done to save him was fading fast, now. He didn't think he had much time left. If he stayed here undetected a little longer...

Minerva was still coming. Maybe the day could still be won.

Just he and Aislinn wouldn't be a part of it.

"No?" said Aeron. "Have it your way."

A dagger flashed, and before Caer could even understand what was going on, Aeron slashed Aislinn's throat.



Caer had no doubt that if Hawthorn had been in control of his powers, the roar he let loose would have shattered the room. It was the sound of a monster, of grief personified, as sharp and crushing as an avalanche.

It was the sound that Caer's chest was making, though his mouth remained soundless.

Hawthorn launched forward in his chains, but the soldiers dragged him back, kicking him over and over. Hawthorn barely seemed to notice. His hand was still reaching for Aislinn.

She was still bleeding, her throat a ragged, pulsing mess, her eyes wide and circling.

Beau was screaming, Hawthorn still struggling, Aislinn still moving.

And Caer was watching, pinned in place, unable to move.

This wasn't happening.

This *couldn't* be happening.



Cerridwen yanked the chains from her captors. She looped them around one of their necks and flipped over, gripping the other with her thighs and squeezing until they both slackened. The chains still wrapped around her wrists, she flung them at one of the guards holding Hawthorn, before picking up a stray axe and decapitating another one.

Hawthorn sprung free.

“Get her out of here!” Cerridwen yelled.

Hawthorn grabbed Aislinn off the floor and pelted towards the door.

*The barrier.* If he could just get her across it, he could heal her—

Aeron made a move to follow them, but Cerridwen threw the chains around his ankles and forced him to the floor. Another guard reached out to grab her—

Finally, Caer found the strength to move, crashing into his back so hard they both went sprawling to the floor.

“The Prince!” hissed Aeron hungrily.

Cerridwen smacked him in the back of the head, just as Beau staggered free.

“Go, go!” she yelled at them both. “I’ll handle this one.”

Caer struggled upright, his chest tight. Beau raced ahead of him as Cerridwen battled the remaining guards. He forced himself forward, summoning the residuals of his strength.

*Aislinn, Aislinn, Aislinn—*

He fled the room. Hawthorn was out on the balcony, the railing half torn apart by the platform of branches rising from the gardens. Aislinn was nestled at the centre of them, Hawthorn's hands at her throat.

The blood was everywhere. All over the floor, the branches, her dress. How much blood could still be in her?

“Beau!” Hawthorn screamed. “Help me!”

Beau's hands cupped her neck. Light radiated around them. Caer crawled closer as flesh knitted back together.

She still didn't move.

He dragged himself onto the platform.

Outside of the barrier, he could see her lifeforce... a fading, dribbling thing.

“Her heart's not beating,” Hawthorn whispered, “come on, darling. Come on. Come back.”

*You have to come back, Caer thought desperately. You have to.*

He clambered towards her, pressing his palm over her chest. He had done it once before, he could do it again now.

*This heart is mine, Ais. I will have it.*

He pushed all of his strength, all of his power, into her body. He imagined his heart as an object that could be cut and shared, given away.

*All yours, Ais. It always was.*

Something throbbed beneath his hand, and her lifeforce flared back, bright and blinding.

She shot up, gasping for breath.

Alive. Definitely alive.

She grabbed her neck, eyes widening at the blood on her chest. “Father, what—”

Hawthorn yanked her into his arms, and Beau folded over both of them. Caer hung back, no strength to move, panting hard.

Arms fastened around his shoulders, dragging him backwards. He kicked out, but he couldn't fight. He'd used the last of his strength on her.

Aislinn screamed, scrambling off the platform. Hawthorn and Beau followed, not thinking, not considering what they'd lose as they stepped over the barrier—

And Venus' forces swamped them.

What felt like her entire army spilled into the room. Minerva was there too, bound and chained, the others beside her. Within seconds, Hawthorn, Beau and Aislinn were among them.

“Don't kill them,” Aeron said, stumbling out of the vault, bruised and bloodied but alive. Cerridwen followed, wrapped in chains, spitting out blood. “I want them to see this.”

“Caer!” Aislinn screamed. “Don't do this!” she hissed, as Aeron had them dragged towards the vault once more. “Please.

I'll do anything—”

“You know, I believe you will,” Aeron said, smiling despite the bloody gash in his cheek. “But unfortunately, Princess, there’s absolutely nothing you can give me.”

Aislinn’s gaze darkened. “I’ll kill you,” she said. “I vow it. I’m getting out of here, and I’m going to kill you.”

Aeron laughed. Through the crowds, Owen appeared, white-faced, haggard. He caught Caer’s gaze.

“You’ll be all right, son,” he said. “You’re strong. You’ll survive this. And we’ll have your mother back.”

Venus snorted derisively, as if Owen was a fool if he still thought that.

Caer wanted to curse him—to curse anyone, everyone—but he no longer had the strength to speak. He was hauled backwards—into the coffin that had once housed Cerridwen.

“A precaution,” Aeron explained. “In case your mortal body doesn’t survive the journey.”

Caer frowned. Where was he going? Owen and all his men had stepped through the Mirror perfectly—

Hands forced him back. The lid of the coffin sealed around him.

The last thing he saw was Aislinn screaming his name.



The moment the coffin vanished in the black waters of the Mirror, a sharp blast blew across the room, knocking everyone off their feet. Aislinn was blown into a thick pile of coins. She felt the impact of the metal, and nothing else. For a moment, she was weightless, senseless. Noise vanished.

When at last sensation returned, and she staggered to her feet, she found Hawthorn and Beau already righting themselves, no doubt their advanced healing giving them the extra edge. Aeron was moving too, bleeding, but moving.

Something pulsed inside her.

Magic.

The blast—it had damaged the barrier.

Hawthorn realised it too. He summoned a wave of fire over the room, burning anyone able to stand, and Aislinn used her own more limited skills to unlock her manacles.

She raced towards the Mirror. The blackness rose up to greet her.

She cast one final, desperate, hesitant look around the room—and caught her father's gaze. He looked at her with an expression of horror, mingled with that of quiet, dreadful understanding. He knew why she had to go. He would not stop her.

She took a deep breath, and plunged into the Mirror.



Greyness flickered around her, like walking through a fog. There was nothing real here, nothing palpable. Even the floor beneath her felt like air.

Whispers echoed around her. Cries. Voices. A thousand, a million words and people, merged and meshed together.

*“How could you!”*

*“You promised!”*

*“You’ll regret this.”*

*“Stay with me.”*

*“Not my baby. Please, not my baby.”*

*“Your heart is mine.”*

*“Titania’s thorny tits, do you ever stop—”*

*“I fear I may always love you.”*

*“You were mine, once.”*

*“You aren’t horrified, are you?”*

*“You talk a lot.”*

Aislinn ran forward. From time to time, she thought she saw something—figures or shapes, swirling through the mist, but they were no more than phantoms made of shadow.

“Caer!” she called. “Where are you?”

But he couldn’t answer. Because even if he was alive, he was trapped inside that coffin.

Aislinn placed a hand to her chest. He *had* to be alive.

Something lurked in the fog, something dark and shapeless. It had no voice, no form. It was everywhere and nowhere. She could feel it rumbling, as surely as she felt magic in the air—but this was something else, something *other*. A cold, dark opposite.

“What are you?” she asked.

Her own voice echoed back.

*What are you, what are you, what are you?*

When you looked in a mirror, how deep did the reflection go? How long did this place go on for?

“You will let me find him,” Aislinn told the void. “Let me find him!”

When nothing happened, she started sweeping the clouds, slicing through shadow. She would not let this defeat her.

But how could she fight herself out of here?

Aislinn paused, taking a deep breath. This monster would not be defeated by steel or by force. It was a thing of magic. It would be defeated by magic.

And for however much it was never her strength, she couldn't falter now.

*I can bend the wind, make the leaves dance, shape the earth, command fire. You have no power over me.*

She closed her eyes, imagining herself in a forest, imagining the feeling of the earth beneath her feet and the wind in her hair. Home. All of Faerie was.

And so was Caer.

“Give him to me.”

For the first time, the rumble thundered, and almost the shape of words came back, warning her that she could not do that.

“I am the future queen of Faerie,” said Aislinn, “and yes I can.”

The darkness flared against her, fighting back, making the fog howl and scream. Aislinn let it wail, flung herself into that force, soaked in it, *revelled* in it.

She had space enough for magic. She was a vessel of it. Maybe this was why she’d never been able to master it, because she was built to have space to take on more.

*More, more, more!*

She drank it, stored it, breathed it. It was hers to command, hers to wield. She heard her father say power was intoxicating before, but this was more than that. It was drowning and flooding the world. It was setting a forest on fire while you danced beneath a tree. She wanted to bathe in its glory, inhale it, sing to it.

*Mine!*

A face danced in the mist, a memory, a feeling—a soft murmur of starlight.

Something else was hers. Something she wanted far, far more.



She clenched the magic within her, and let the rest of it fall away.

“Caer,” she said, when she could form words again. The sound spread like ink on a page, no longer her own voice. “Take me to him.”

The fog rolled away.

She found herself in the forest of Autumn, beside the glittering barrier. It looked like it had always done when she passed over it, but it felt different—like it had a heartbeat.

She remembered Beau’s story about the fae prince who loved a mortal, and wondered, maybe, if it had some truth to it.

Aislinn held out her hand. “Take me to him.”

The scene swirled, launching her forward and spitting her out on a hard, stone floor.

Slowly, Aislinn climbed to her feet, her ears ringing, her skin spongy and numb. She was in a room that looked familiar to her—a sparse room in a castle. The walls were newly plastered and daubed with red and ochre leaves, in a style that seemed all at once familiar and utterly alien to her.

Afelcarreg? What was she doing here?

“*Caer.*”

A scream sounded in the distance. Aislinn blasted out of the room. A maid ran past her, giving her a curious look but deciding she wasn’t worth the questions at the moment. The

world seemed strange and misty, like she wasn't there at all, although the maid's reaction suggested otherwise.

She drew on a glamour just in case, making herself as invisible as the wind, and flitted through the castle until she reached a chamber packed with people.

On the bed sat a thin, pale, dark-haired woman.

Queen Gwyn. *Caer's* mother.

A dozen people crowded around her, murmuring over a tiny, limp, dark-haired newborn on the bed, still slick from childbirth.

It wasn't moving.

*Caer* wasn't moving.

One of the women picked him up.

"No!" Gwyn howled.

"Your Majesty," said the midwife, "the child will not live."

"Give me my baby!"

"Your Majesty—"

"Leave us!" the queen screamed. "Get out of this room."

One by one, every courtier, every advisor, every servant left, until all that remained was Queen Gwyn, holding the barely breathing body of her baby son.

And Aislinn. Aislinn stayed too.

He was still alive, she knew that much. There was a faint spark of life in him. She could feel it like it was a flame about

to be snuffed out.

Gwyn held his tiny body to her chest, smoothing his dark hair, still brushed with blood. “You cannot die, my precious boy, you will not. Your body is tiny, but it holds the heart of a dragon.”

Aislinn believed it. She’d seen it. She’d seen all that Gwyn saw in him now. But how could this be, when his body was so miniscule that a mere whisper of wind looked like it would carry him away?

Aislinn hovered over him, waiting for a miracle, for those eyes to open, for that mouth to cry.

But nothing happened.

*There’s something wrong with your heart,* Hawthorn had told him.

And suddenly, Aislinn understood why the ceremony hadn’t worked. She understood what was different about his heart. Why she hadn’t been able to give him a part of hers.

Because she already had.

Caerwyn had grown up with it. It had saved his life as a baby.

And condemned him too.

Because Aislinn was still radiating with the magic she’d taken from the mirror, buzzing with it, and she already knew, no matter how hard she tried, when she did what she was about to do, a part of it was going to latch onto Caer.

And the Mirror was going to want it back.

It lived beyond time and space. It bent the rules of life and death. Always in its history had she been supposed to come here, and take its power, and give it away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. But there was no other choice.

The queen gasped. “Is there someone there?”

Aislinn mentally kicked herself. She had not thought to spell her voice. “Be not afraid,” she whispered back, “I am here to help. Your son will not die, Gwyn, I promise you. He will live. He will grow. He will be all that you want and more. So much more.”

She placed her hand to his still, silent chest. His body was so small, so frail. Her whole hand swamped it. *Come on, Caer. Breathe for me.*

Her own heart swelled in her chest, like a giant, monstrous thing. It banged like a drum, a beat calling for an answer. Aislinn thought of how Caer had described the pulse of other people, how hers lit up like a beacon. She imagined it like a physical thing she could dislodge, divide as easily as butter.

Light splayed from beneath her fingertips. An ache grew in her chest, so hard and hot she wanted to cry out. It was like someone cracking her ribcage in two.

But she did not let go. She would not stop.

Until Caer’s chest moved.

The light faded. Aislinn stared down at him. For a moment, all was still and quiet. He was still pale, still silent—

His lips blossomed bright red, the rest of his limbs turning plump and pink, and his mouth opened in a wide, toothless ‘o’.

He started to cry.

“Thank you,” Gwyn cried, clutching him to her chest, but then her attention turned fully to the child in her arms. “You are blessed, my darling boy, and blessed I shall name you.”

*Cursed*, Aislinn realised. She had cursed the man she loved, cursed him as an infant just so she could meet him.

*I hope you don't hate me for this*, she whispered.



Aislinn was back inside the Mirror, back inside the void, missing the powers she'd taken—but it didn't matter. Caer had her heart, and she his. She knew where to find him.

She fled through the fog until it rolled away, and a glass container appeared in the middle of nowhere. Smoky tendrils pulsed around it, still searching for an entrance; the Mirror had not yet taken his powers. Aislinn could still feel them shaking inside him. Whatever she'd sucked from the Mirror, it still remained inside Caer's body, through the shapeless, limitless fog of time.

She knew he wanted his powers gone, but she also didn't know where he began and they ended, didn't know how to

remove them without hurting *him*.

But it didn't matter. With his powers or without, they would find a way to be together. She had not come this far to lose him now.

She lifted the lid, brushing the hair from his eyes.

“Wake up, Caer.”

He did not move. The tendrils snaked towards him, licking at his skin. If he didn't wake up, if she couldn't get him out soon...

Aislinn shook him. “Come on,” she said. “I brought you back, once. You've saved me twice. You are not allowed to stay here. I forbid it.”

He remained motionless inside the coffin. Smoke gathered around them both. They pulled at his body, snagging at both of them.

Aislinn bent towards him. “You have my heart, Caer. You've always had it. From the moment you drew breath, my heart beat alongside yours.” *Mine, mine. From your first breath to my last.* “So wake up.”

She pressed her lips to his in a final, desperate attempt, her eyes closed and flushed with tears. It could not end like this. It wouldn't.

“I love you, Caer.”

Caer's eyes flickered open. “I love you, too, cariad.”



54  
THE FINALE

Caer shot out of the Mirror inside the unlatched coffin, outside in seconds, Aislinn behind him. He hit the hard stone floor of the vault. The room was swamped with people, fae, dwarf, and mortal, all fighting each other. Tiberius had arrived, and more dwarves seemed to be fighting against their former allies. It was impossible to tell who was winning.

Aislinn wasted no time in finding a blade and racing back into the fray, but Caer paused, thinking.

There were so many dead. And below them, sleeping in the crypts... more dead, too.

His powers were back. The barrier was out, and something else wriggled beneath his skin, light and bright and burning.

The Mirror was supposed to take his powers. He wondered if the reverse wasn't actually true.

"Ais," he said, "can you crack the floor?"

Ais didn't ask why. She slammed her fists against the tile, fissures exploding at her touch.

A section of floor slid into the crypt below, a tidal wave of gems and gold. Many screamed, scrambling for the exit, their protests cut short under the crushing weight of the treasure.

Caer flung out his power into the mass of bodies. Tombs cracked, headstones shattered, and bodies crawled out of the room.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Many scrambled for the crypt entrances, running from skeletal claws and gaping maws. Caer stood on a broken tomb, watching his creations. It was like he could see through every eye, could direct each one that remained with his sight. *Only the dwarves*, he ordered, *but spare these precious few. Spare as many as you can.*

Through the ruin, Caer spied Owen, looking on in horror. It occurred to Caer that his stepfather hadn't witnessed his powers first hand, or at very least, not like this. He stared at the newly resurrected body of one of his soldiers.

"They're dead," he muttered, "they're actually dead—"

An arrow soared past Caer's head. He leapt from his platform, searching for cover, a weapon, something. A soldier towered over him, sword swinging—

Owen leapt forward, intercepting the blade. He pushed the soldier back. Aislinn dived towards him, slicing the back of the soldier's legs. She moved on to another.

Caer stared at Owen. He was not usually one for involving himself in battle.



“It’s true, isn’t it?” Owen asked, staring around at the chaos. “She genuinely can’t come back?”

Caer looked down, shaking his head. “Whatever Aeron told you, or showed you... it wasn’t the truth. He can *lie*.”

Owen opened his mouth like he wanted to protest, but quickly shut it again. “I’m sorry,” he said instead. “I just... I so desperately wanted—”

Another figure rose up behind him, but Caer raced forward, knocking them to the ground and grabbing their face, snuffing out their lifeforce.

Something pulsed inside him. A hard, painful tug.

He turned his attention to the Mirror.

It was still calling him.

“Caer?” Owen asked.

“If you ever considered me your son—or if you care enough to see this ended—call off your men,” Caer told him. “I need to get to the Mirror.”



Minerva sliced through another opponent, trying not to look at their face. There were no strangers in Avalinth, and she couldn’t afford to recognise any of them.

Her iron fist was wet with blood—blood of enemies, blood of friends.

*Damn you, Venus.*

She searched for her sister amongst the madness, searched for her own face, but it rested first on the familiar shining red cloak and gold clasp of an old friend.

No, not shining. Not any more. Ragged and fading, shining only with the glint of fresh blood.

Her eyes fell to his face. Rotten skin, sunken, milk white eyes, bones visible beneath his armour.

Clay.

His sightless gaze had tightened on a figure in the corner of the room.

Venus.

She stared back, face slack with horror, and bolted from the room.

The thing that had once been Clay followed.

So did Minerva.

Venus fled from the crypt into the corridors below, the train of her cape blazing behind her. Someone—maybe herself—had tried to slash it through. It was impractical for battle. Holding her down.

She careened into a room. Clay lost interest in his quarry and turned another corner, in pursuit of someone closer. Minerva followed her sister.

“Venus!” she called. “Call off your people! Stop this madness!”

“He promised me...” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “He promised me he could bring him back... he said it could be done... healthy and whole... he promised...”

“He *lied*, Ven. He’s lied to everyone.”

“No. He can’t. He wouldn’t. Not about this. Clay... Clay can’t be gone... he isn’t gone...” Her eyes stared up at the walls around them, at the glares and glances of their numerous ancestors, staring down at her.

For the first time, Minerva wondered if Venus’ coveting the throne hadn’t been to do with revenge at all, if it had all been to do with getting Minerva out of the way instead, and giving Venus the power she needed to do *something* to bring Clay back. She’d always been more interested in magic than Minerva, interested in its potential...

“No!” Venus screamed. “This... this is your fault!”

“*My* fault?” Minerva stammered. “How is any of this *my* fault? I didn’t kill Clay, Venus. I’d have sacrificed another arm to bring him home.”

“You left him there!” Venus shrieked. “You saved Bell instead of him!”

“You would have done the same!” Minerva yelled back. “Don’t think for a second you wouldn’t have. You would have let her die, and we would have mourned her together. I would have understood!”

“We could have brought him back...”

“No, we couldn’t. It can’t be done, Ven. Not once the soul is elsewhere.”

“The Mirror is a gateway,” Venus said. “Aeron told me. We could reach in there and get him back. We just needed the boy to give up his powers. Make the Mirror whole again. But you wouldn’t let us. One boy, for Clay. One boy for our kingdom.”

*He’s worth ten kingdoms*, Minerva thought, but couldn’t bring herself to say. “Look around,” she urged her. “*This* is our kingdom. *This* is what your actions have wrought. Half your people have sided with your son. *Clay’s* son. Is this what he would have wanted? Is this what *anyone* wanted?”

Venus looked down at her feet, tears sponging from her eyes. She let out a long, guttural sob, and charged.

Tiberius launched himself out of nowhere, taking her blade to his shoulder. He groaned, knees hitting the floor.

“Tibe!” Minerva was at his side in a second. “What were you thinking—”

“I’m all right.”

Venus pulled back her sword, staring at the tip. The look of horror was akin to the one she’d given Clay’s remains.

There was once upon a time when Minerva knew her better than anyone, when they didn’t need words to talk, where they seemed like the only two people in the world, their thoughts existing inside one another.

It had been decades since Minerva had heard her sister’s unspoken thoughts, but she thought she heard them now.

*What have I done, what have I done, what have I done?*

She turned on her heels, staggering into the corridor.

“Ven!”

She turned back to Tiberius, her hand against his wound. “I’m fine,” he said. “Go after her.”

Minerva raced after her. Venus was in no state to fight. Her mind wasn’t her own—it hadn’t been for a long time, even before Aeron sunk his claws into it. Grief was the monster that had poisoned her, and Minerva kicked herself for not having seen it, for not having fought harder, for leaving her, leaving Avalinth.

If she’d stayed, if she’d been the queen she’d always promised to be, none of this would have happened.

*No what ifs.*

Minerva stumbled after Venus as she staggered down the corridors, half laughing, half sobbing, cutting down anyone who stopped her—friend or foe.

She stalled only when the familiar red cape appeared, and Clay’s haggard face turned towards her.

She didn’t move when he approached. She dropped her sword, and opened her arms.

Clay’s body slammed against her, and tore into her shoulder.

“Ven!”

Minerva launched forward, but Venus wasn’t even screaming. She stared up at Clay and smiled, even as he

clawed at her flesh and chomped at her neck.

“I just... wanted... to see you... again.”

Minerva swung her axe across the thing-that-was-Clay’s throat, and sent his head spiralling down the corridor.

She sunk to Venus’ side.

Blood pulsed from her shoulder, from her throat, from her head. Her eyes circled upwards, her mouth still smiling.

Minerva took her sister’s hand. It was smooth and scarless, softer than she could ever remember hers being, but once—a long, long time ago—they could have been *her* hands.

She squeezed it tightly, and Venus’ eyes met hers, just once more, just for a moment.

“It’s all right, Ven,” Minerva said, “you’ll see him again soon.”



The Mirror pulsed with darkness, tendrils of smoke crawling through the air. Aislinn spied Caer battling towards it, Owen at his side, but her gaze caught on Beau, flinging out fireballs, his back entirely undefended.

She raced towards him, wishing she had a bow, something to throw—

A spear rose in the arm of an undead warrior.

“Beau!” she screamed.

A black shape shot from the shadows in a blur of fur, straight into the face of a warrior.

“Hecate!”

Beau turned, spitting fire at the creature’s ankles as Hecate swiped at its face, shredding grey skin like slivers of paper. Aislinn skidded towards them, slicing the head off at the neck. Hecate sped off into the dark.

Beau stared at Aislinn. “You nearly got her tail.”

Aislinn groaned as she snapped her back against his. “Priorities, Beau.”

She decapitated another foe, Beau flinging out fistfuls of fire around them like whips. She’d lost sight of most of her family. This was a terrible position, blind, unsheltered. She could see so little of the vault or the throne room...

But she spied someone. A thin, bleeding person in white robes, scuttling away like a spider.

Aeron.

She remembered her vow. It pulsed inside her like a thread.

Aeron dragged himself across the debris, through the ruined vault, towards the stairs.

“Go,” said Beau, knowing exactly what she was thinking, “I’ll be fine.”

Aislinn nodded, wishing there was time to squeeze his hand, to utter some final word of wisdom or silly remark. But there was no time to do anything but trust him.

She raced after Aeron, into the throne room. Injured as he was, it wasn't hard to catch up with him.

“Aeron!” she screamed.

He turned, launching a fireball in her direction, trying to crack the floor. His attacks were weak, desperate. One hand clutched his bleeding side. Aislinn fired back, stronger than ever, her flames infernos next to a candle.

Aeron dodged, rolling, staggering, still moving, crawling towards the balcony. He grasped hold of the baluster.

Aislinn cornered him. “What are you?” she asked. “How can you lie?”

Aeron snorted. “Idiot princess,” he laughed, “to have been fooled so easily. Yes, I am fae—but you never asked what else I was, too.”

Aislinn froze, realising what should have been obvious to her from the start. “You're part mortal.”

Aeron grinned, his teeth bloody. “Don't rub it in.”

“But I don't understand. Why would you want to annihilate the fae—”

“Because you are *weak*,” he continued, “and misguided, and you have forgotten the old ways. I would have used the Mirror to remind you. I would have saved everything.”

“You're mad.”

“I'm *right*,” he said. “Mark my words, Future-Queen-of-Faerie, you will come to regret your choices. The old ways are



coming for you.”

Aislinn summoned a fireball in hand. “Then I’ll fight them, too.”

Aeron’s grin was frightening. “We’ll see.”

He tumbled over the edge.

Aislinn dived. Something cracked. She stared over the balcony, Aeron’s body smeared on the concrete below, surrounded by dozens of others. His eyes stared sightlessly at the crystal veined ceiling.

She stared at him for a long while, certain that he couldn’t be dead, that he wouldn’t have done this...

And then climbed off the balcony, heading slowly towards him. She kept expecting him to move, or for his body to transform into something else, explode into fire.

But he did nothing. He lay like a crumbled statue.

Aislinn reached his side, nudging the body with her foot. He still didn’t move.

She drove her sword through his ribcage. Just to be sure. Just to be safe.

*I told you I would kill you, she hissed to herself. I just wish I’d been able to make it hurt more.*



Caer stood in front of the Mirror, hands outstretched towards it. The tendrils fastened around him, but he held firm. He

knew what it wanted. He was prepared to give it.

Owen stood beside him with some of his men, fighting anyone that dared come near him, but the numbers were dwindling. People were standing down.

He'd lost sight of most of the others. They'd vanished from view.

He was alone. Just him and the Mirror.

The room shook. Power pulsed in his veins. The glass swirled and trembled, leeching him dry.

*You can have my magic, Caer told it. You just can't have me.*

The tendrils brushed against his chest, like ice against his heart. The entire world was screaming. The Mirror didn't seem able to know what were his powers, and what was *him*.

*You are not your powers.*

Arms slid around his waist. He felt a head pressed against his shoulder blades, holding him tightly.

*Aislinn.*

"It wants me," he told her.

Aislinn squeezed him tighter. "Doesn't it understand that you're mine?"

*Mine, mine, mine.*

His chest blazed with sensation, fighting off the darkness, pushing it out of him. The tendrils receded. Something cracked in his centre, a hard, dense pain—the sensation of something leaving his body, something being torn away.

He slumped down on the floor.

The room continued to shake, the dark waters tumultuous. Smoke blazed around the frame. For a moment, Caer was sure that he'd failed, or that it didn't matter at all—the Mirror had its power back. That living magic had unlatched itself from him and grown into a titan, a free, feral being.

Maybe Caer had been tempering it, holding it back.

Maybe giving up his powers had been the worst thing he could have done.

He clutched hold of Aislinn, trying to read her face, hoping she had a final suggestion.

But she just stared back at him, her face frighteningly pale.

The armies stood still around them, faces frozen, weapons slumped in their hands. All gazes fell towards the Mirror and the thrashing, shadowy tendrils all around it.

Through the crowd, the only moving figure in the room, came King Hawthorn, parting the smoke with his hands, his body straining like it was bracing against a snowstorm. He staggered forward, hands moving, arms arching, a display between a dance and a fight.

The shadows whipped against him, clawing at his skin, but a single flick of his finger slashed through tendrils like butter.

Again, the Mirror roared, smoky tentacles lashing through the air. It pulsed and hissed and crashed, licking at the undead warriors, inciting them to action.

Hawthorn flung out another hand, and knocked dozens to their feet to be finished off by the bystanders.

Juliana raced ahead of him, sword and shield blazing with light, clearing him a path until he reached the Mirror, and Hawthorn snuffed out the last of the shadows.

The glass flickered, shrinking before its enemy, and let out a sound between a sigh and wail—like the call of wind through the mountains, ancient and alone.

It had no choice. The Mirror bowed beneath the weight of the Faerie King, shrivelling, churning, an insect in flame.

Until finally... all was still.



Hawthorn breathed deeply, staggering slightly, his hands still outstretched towards the Mirror. The glass stared back, smooth and still. “A cloak, or something,” announced the King of Faerie. “To cover this monstrosity. I think we’ve all had enough of looking at it.”

Someone moved forward to offer up theirs. Minerva arrived with a wounded Tiberius, barking orders at people to stop. No one was fighting any more. Everyone was still.

Caer looked up at Aislinn, sliding a hand to her cheek. “My powers are gone,” he said. “They’re gone, Ais, I—”

Aislinn’s mouth fell to his, and she kissed him like she’d drown if he moved away. He was all right. They were alive. She could touch him. It was all over—

“Ais?” Juliana appeared behind her, Beau at her shoulder. Aislinn bolted from Caer’s side to run into her arms, Hawthorn folded himself around the family and pulled in Cerridwen, too. They were all here. All safe.

Juliana inched back, holding out her hand to Caer. “I’m not usually a hugger,” she admitted. “But today I think I might make an exception.”

“She really isn’t,” Hawthorn said, mostly to himself. “The things I’ve had to do to secure hugs from her in the past. Begging, grovelling, prostrating myself...”

“Because you want to!” Juliana hissed. “Mainly because you enjoy telling this not-lie.”

“It feeds your fearsome, cold-hearted reputation, my lamentable doom. I’m thinking of you.”

“Of course you are.”

“I’m always thinking of you...”

Aislinn pulled Caer into the centre before Hawthorn could add the word ‘naked’ to the end of this sentence. She inhaled the scent of him, still not quite certain that he was really here, that they’d really done it.

“Has anyone seen Hecate?” Beau asked.

A sharp scream cut through the embrace. Luna was on the ground, cradling Dillon’s head. The rest of him was horribly still.

“Help!” she cried. “He just... he just fell—”

Aislinn scrambled over, Caer following. Her parents—mercifully unhurt—raced over too, Beau as well.

“This is my fault,” said Caer. “The magic I gave up. It was the only thing keeping him alive. I didn’t think—”

“Doesn’t... matter...” said Dillon, almost smiling.

“How can you say that?” Luna asked.

“It was worth it. Coming back. It was worth it. Just for this. Just for you...”

Tears ran down Luna’s cheeks, splashing against his ruined, perfect cheeks. “This isn’t fair,” she protested.

Juliana came up to her side and took Dillon’s hand. “It wasn’t fair the first time. You should not be doing this to me again, you stupid fool. What am I to tell your father?”

Before any answer could be given, Cerridwen appeared. “Get him in the coffin.”

“What—”

“The coffin. Now. Do it.”

No one argued. Caer, Hawthorn, Juliana and Aislinn all grabbed a limb and lifted, carrying him over to the other side of the room whilst onlookers assisted with the lid. They sealed him inside, the glass frosting over.

Everyone stared at Cerridwen.

“What now?” asked Juliana.

“I... I’m not sure,” said Cerridwen. “It was all I could think of. The Mirror is sealed, and if we unseal it again—”

“There are other ways,” Juliana said darkly, as if she wished she didn’t know. “Dark ways. Ways that my father tried to... But Dillon...”

She didn't need to finish the sentence. Dillon wouldn't want them to do it, and they all knew it. But to leave him in there forever, just a spark inside a husk...

"It doesn't have to be a dark way," said Mabel, appearing out of nowhere. She swept into the room in her cobwebby skirts, the only person inside it who wasn't splashed with blood and sweat.

"What are you—" Juliana started. "Never mind. Tell us later. Explain now."

"It takes life to create life," Mabel continued. "That is why, no matter our advances, bringing a child into the world will always carry dangers for the mother—to remind us of the consequences. The price."

"We can't sacrifice someone to bring Dillon back," Juliana insisted. "He'd hate it."

"What about if the soul was willing?" Mabel asked. "Content to blend back into the vines, as he once was?"

Juliana frowned. "Content to... what are you talking about?"

"And how do you know that?" said Aislinn.

"I know everything, dear, that's the point." Mabel took a deep breath. "If there was such a soul, it could be done. With my magic—maybe his." She looked at Hawthorn. "But where would we find—"

"I'll do it," said Cerridwen.



“Mother! No—”

“My darling girl, *yes*.”

Juliana’s gaze was silver. Aislinn had never known her mother back down from a fight in her life, but she could see her resolve crumbling now, her desire to have her own mother—to *know* her for the first time—melting beneath her desire to hold her friend again.

And to bring him home. Since the moment they met, Aislinn had felt that need. For her mother, it must have been unbearable.

Tears streamed down Juliana’s cheeks. “He won’t thank you for this.”

Cerridwen grabbed Juliana and held her. Over her shoulder, her gaze settled on Luna. “Yes, he will.”

A gathered silence whispered through the room. Luna looked up at Cerridwen, and placed her hand to the coffin housing Dillon’s sleeping form. “He’ll be safe in there for a while?”

Cerridwen nodded. “I was there for seventy years.”

Luna bowed her head. “Let’s not do it here,” she said. “Not yet. No more death today. You deserve this victory as much as anyone else.”

Cerridwen placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll take him home,” she told her. “Back to Acanthia. I cannot deny that I want the chance to see it again—to see everyone. Just for a little while.”

Hawthorn nodded. “We’ll set off as soon as we’re able. But for now...” He faced the rest of the room. “Who’s in charge here?”

Owen came forward, clutching a wounded arm. “I am, in part, King Hawthorn,” he admitted. “I have told my soldiers to stand down. I will see no more bloodshed today, and make whatever recompense I can. I am sorry for the role I have played in all of this.”

Hawthorn stared him down, before marching over, seizing his arm, and healing it with his magic. “Your quarrel with me is over,” he said, “providing you have no intention to invade Faerie?”

Owen shook his head. “Your power may frighten me, but I never cared for land. It was only my wife I wanted.”

Hawthorn nodded. “Go back through the barrier,” he said. “Take all of your men with you. You shall not come into Faerie again—not by any means. I will not interfere with your politics again, although your stepson might. Speak to him, and see that you make amends with the dwarven queen before you leave.”

“I am the dwarven queen now,” said Minerva, stepping forward, “unless my nephew wishes to challenge me?”

“I do not,” said Tiberius, although there was no humour in his eyes. They stared downwards, and Aislinn wondered what had happened to his mother during the battle—what had happened to both of them. There would be time enough for the

full story later, she had no doubt, but that was one part of the tale she was not too eager to hear.

“I pardon all the players in this sorry affair,” Minerva declared. “Aside from the main one, if he can be found.”

“Aeron is dead,” Aislinn announced.

A thin smile flushed Minerva’s cheeks. “Then let us have no more talk of politics tonight. The wounded need healing. The dead need burying. And that Mirror—”

“Needs to go back to the Deep,” Hawthorn agreed. “But not tonight.”

He waved his hands, and the floors started to knit back together, great chunks of rock soaring into the ceiling, connecting with the floor above. One by one, every tile, every pebble, every gemstone rolled into its proper place, leaving only the tombs empty.

“I would not wish to mislabel anyone,” he said. “Some things are better done by hand.”



Slowly but surely, the wounded were tended to, and the dead removed to the gardens until a formal burial could be arranged. Aislinn herself assisted with the healing of the mortal soldiers, although her magic did not extend to the dwarves.

Venus' body was retrieved and placed in Clay's tomb along with what remained of him, until a stonemason could craft a new one for the both of them. Tiberius came to sit beside her for a while, not speaking. Aislinn didn't think any words would help.

Aeron's body was burnt immediately, out of concern it might be desecrated, and also, possibly, the fear that he might somehow come back to life. Aislinn wondered if she should have tried harder to take him in alive—it seemed strange that a person who could orchestrate a conflict between three kingdoms should be so easily killed.

But in the end, he was as ordinary as the rest of them. He stood no chance against steel and stone.

The wounded dwarves were removed to a hospital outside of the palace walls, and Flora went with them without so much as a word to the others. It was hours before someone explained to her what happened in the waterway.

“What? But why—why would Flora do that?”

The dwarves just shrugged. “She has not yet explained.”

“Why isn't Minerva more furious?”

“She is,” Bell explained. “She just has more important things to do.”

They sealed the Mirror inside the vault, only temporarily, along with Dillon's coffin. It seemed strange to place him there amongst the treasures of the dwarves.

“He should be here,” Aislinn remarked, “celebrating with us.”

Caer kissed her head. “We’ll celebrate later,” he assured her. “Back in Acanthia.”

“You’re... coming to Acanthia with us?”

Caer smiled. “You sound surprised.”

“I just thought you might need to... the mortal world... your kingdom—”

Caer shook his head. “I’ve no interest in ruling,” he said. “I’ve already spoken to Owen. I’ve told him to go back and tell everyone I’m dead. I don’t think anyone will challenge his rule.”

Aislinn blinked at him. “But don’t you want to go home?”

Caer caught her face in his hands. “*You’re* my home, Ais. I don’t want to be anywhere that’s not right at your side.”

Aislinn breathed a huge sigh of relief, and her thoughts smiled at the idea that she’d set out on this quest with the sole purpose of bringing home a wayward prince. This wasn’t exactly what she’d envisioned.

She placed her hand against his neck, fingers brushing his beads.

Caer swallowed. “I’ve lost track of the number, now. I’m not sure how to—”

Aislinn closed her hand around his fingers. “I lost count a long time ago,” she said. “It’s the life we lead. I know you

want to honour those you've hurt, but you were never those powers. I don't think you're any less of a good person if you let them go."

"I don't think I've made it right, yet." Her hand moved over his heart. "You have the heart of a fae, Caer. You always have. You'll have centuries to save lives in, to do wonders with. And I shall help you do them."

She still had to tell him what had happened in the Mirror—what had really happened. She told her father about it earlier as they were sealing the Mirror away in the vault, just in case that changed his mind about how to handle it. He'd been surprised about the Mirror's powers, but he remained adamant in his decision to lock it away. "Some things are better off buried, Daughter," he'd said. "The dwarves knew that. Our fae ancestors knew it too, when they helped them seal it away the first time. Your sweetheart knew it too, when he gave up his powers. He knew no one should use them."

Aislinn had had to agree.

Caer frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I have something to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

She glanced around them. "Not here," she said, and led him back to the room she'd been using before her abrupt departure. It didn't look like anyone had been in it for the last few days. The bed was unmade and her belongings still where she'd left them.

“So,” Caer started, “what did you want to tell me?”

Aislinn took a deep breath, and told him. Caer was silent throughout, and she couldn't muster the strength to look at him. What if this changed everything? What if he hated her for the choice she'd made?

Silence descended once she'd finished her tale.

“Say something, Caer.”

“It was you,” Caer whispered, “all my life, that feeling I was missing something, that my life was meant to be lived outside the walls of Afelcarreg... it was you.”

“Caer,” Aislinn said, “you seem to be missing the point that your powers—everything that happened with your mother, the people you killed—that was me, too.”

“Ah,” he said, “right. Well, I suppose so, but... you did it to save me, so try not to wallow too much. If you want forgiveness, I won't give it—it isn't needed.”

She swallowed. “There's also the question of whether or not your affections for me might have been... led, somewhat, by the fact you were already sharing my heart.”

Caer shook his head, smiling. “No,” he said, “because you weren't sharing mine. Although it might explain why I was able to bring you back after your heart stopped, why I felt like my own would stop if yours did.” He brought his face closer, resting his forehead against hers, cupping her face. “Cariad,” he said, “my heart was yours when I gave it. No time-bending magic created my affection for you.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Absolutely.”

“Then help me out of these clothes.”

Caer grinned, although his mouth dropped slightly when his hands moved towards her dress. It was still covered in blood. His fingers trembled against her throat.

“When Aeron cut you—”

She caught his hand. “I’m all right, Caer.”

“I should have tried to—”

“No,” she said, “you shouldn’t. And I’m glad of it. Love isn’t just about doing the crazy, self-sacrificing shit. It’s about knowing what the other person would want you to do. It’s about knowing the big wants and the little ones.”

“You sound like quite the expert on love. Should I be jealous of any past paramours?”

“No,” she said. “It’s only ever been you, for me. In the ways that matter.”

Caer smiled. His fingers dipped to the sleeve of her dress, and he slowly peeled it off her shoulder.

“I’d... really like a bath before we begin,” Aislinn admitted.

Caer’s grin was wicked. “I’d really like to join you.”

They walked towards the tub and turned on the taps, trading light kisses as they thumbed through scented oils and lotions, rubbing tiny, lazy circles over wrists and shoulders and necks.



Aislinn had been dreaming about this bath all day. She'd wanted to step away before now, to be clean and fresh when she pulled him into her bed and made good on her promises, but she couldn't bring herself to separate from him for any longer than was strictly necessary.

And anyway, she was going to be dirty and blood-covered and smelly at some point in their lives together. She shouldn't have to be embarrassed. She certainly didn't care about his present condition.

It was fun scrubbing the dirt from his skin, fun lathering soap through his hair, sponging suds down his chiselled torso, letting the sponge dip beneath the water, letting her hands explore his body while his roamed hers.

They didn't make it to the bed. At least not the first time. The first time, Aislinn climbed onto his lap, slipped easily into position, and rode him to a climax so quickly he barely took a breath between.

"We're going again," he said, as he lifted her out of the bath.

"I should hope so."

"I've got to do my part."

"I was thinking more that I haven't yet fucked you until you've gone dizzy."

Caer's cheeks flushed. His throat bobbed. He dropped Aislinn onto the sheets. "You've a filthy mouth, Princess."

"Does it offend your delicate sensibilities, Prince?"

“Nothing about you offends me.”

He splayed her out on the bed and dipped to her middle, his tongue dipping to her centre, working in tight, tiny spirals until her thoughts turned nebulous.

“Vines, spirits and stone,” she cursed. “I’m supposed to be the one making you go dizzy.”

“Should I stop?”

“No,” she said. “Don’t you dare.”

He paused to let her gather her thoughts before resuming his attentions, drawing her in and out of perfect, suspenseful bliss. He followed every instruction, but he seemed to know the exact, torturous time—the way to build her to a crescendo.

She clutched at the sheets as he worked inside her, before finally it was all too much. She flipped him onto his back and drove him inside her, repeating the same, torturous action—bringing him close to the brink before drawing back.

She made him beg.

He made her beg, too.

When at last they came together, and collapsed into the damp sheets, breathing hard, Aislinn found the world had been unravelled and remade. At the centre of everything was Caer, who’d held her heart long before they ever met.

And would hold it until the end of their long, long lives.



It took several days before Minerva could bring herself to move from the guest chamber she'd been assigned and into the royal suite. Bell had been the one to convince her in the end, reminding her that the people needed to feel like she was going to stay. Minerva was not happy about it. She'd asked for all of Venus' belongings to be removed before she did so, but later that day she found herself seeking them out.

She ignored the piles of dresses and jewels and went instead to a box marked 'miscellaneous'. It was filled with odd bits of seemingly no value—cheap hairpins, tattered books, faded handkerchiefs and a rusty dagger with Venus' name engraved on the blade.

Minerva had the matching one hanging at her waist. It was one of the few things she'd taken with her.

At the bottom of the box were two faded ragdolls in their likenesses. Minerva had tried to throw her own away when she'd grown out of dolls, but Venus had wailed and insisted it be kept.

And she had kept it. She'd kept them both for over three hundred years, even though most of the stuffing had fallen out and their felt skin had turned threadbare.

Tiberius found her there a little while later, and they'd both sobbed until their throats were hoarse.

"Don't leave," he whispered at the end.

"How could I?" she said, and patted his head. "You're stuck with me now, lad, but I should warn you—I'll be retiring at some point. I want to enjoy a bit of my life."

"You can enjoy it on the throne."

Minerva shrugged. "I was made for a life of adventure."

"Who was it that said 'the best monarchs are those that do not want it'?"

"I don't know, but they sound smart."

There was much to do in Avalinth in the meantime. The dead were buried now, although Venus' funeral had yet to be held. Owen and his men were preparing to move out. Hawthorn and his family, too, would be gone within the week.

And Caer with them.

She sighed. Nothing stayed forever.

"What are you going to do about Flora?" Bell asked.

Minerva tensed. She had delayed punishing her, partly due to the other business requiring her attention, and partly because she couldn't stand to think about it. Flora had attached

herself to the hospital after the battle, and Minerva would not remove her whilst she was useful.

But the dead were dead, now, and those healing could be helped by others.

“I suppose it’s time. I shall visit her this afternoon.”

“You will not,” Bell said. “You are queen, now. She should come to you.”



Flora was summoned to the throne room later that day. It felt wrong to be sitting on the throne, staring down at the woman she’d known her entire life, who’d gone from tutor to advisor to friend to... to this wordless thing they now were.

And yet Minerva knew she would never be able to forgive her, not fully.

Flora stared up at her, her wrinkled face a perfect mask of civility.

“Am I to be executed?” she asked, as if the answer were neither here nor there. “Treason against the queen, and all?”

“I wasn’t queen when you turned on me,” Minerva said placidly. “So no. All you are guilty of is betrayal.”

To this, Flora said nothing.

“Why did you do it?”

“The odds were stacked against us.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Venus only wanted her family back, Min. She agreed that she would spare the rest of you. I did what I thought was best.”

“Caer could have died.”

“The boy’s strong,” she said. “I had my hopes that he would live. I don’t much care for the wars of mortals and fae. They could kill each other for all I cared.”

“This doesn’t sound like you.”

Flora sighed. “Do you know why I came with you to the mortal world?”

“You said you had no one left in Avalinth.”

“That’s right. No one. No family. Everyone I’d ever cared for was dead and gone, and the few remaining leaving. A simpler life, Bell said. No monsters. I thought I’d get to live out the remainder of my life amongst friends, that I’d never have to see another die. And then you decided we’d have to come back here, for a boy we barely knew.”

“You didn’t have to come with us.”

“How could I not?” She shook her head. “I’d been friends with Fort for a century, and she died. She died, and we carried on, like we always do, like death isn’t a festering thing we carry in our hearts. No more, I promised myself—if there was any way to prevent it.” A silence stretched out between the two of them, as long and as painful as Minerva had ever known any silence between them to be. “What will you do with me?”

Minerva sighed. “Owen will be heading back to the mortal world, soon. The long way round, since the Mirror is broken. I’m going to ask him to take you back to the cottage. You’ll get your wish, Flora. You’ll never have to watch another person die. You’ll never have to watch anyone do anything ever again.”

“Banishment, then?”

“Yes.”

Flora nodded. “I won’t argue.”

“Do you regret it?”

“I regret that we cannot be friends. I regret that my actions had no bearing. I do not regret trying to save you.”

Minerva dropped her gaze, and eventually, Flora took it as her cue to leave.

“Do you regret it?” she asked from the doorway.

“Regret what?”

“Conceding to Venus. You must know this would never have happened if you’d been queen instead of her.”

Minerva shook her head. “I am trying to give up on wondering the ‘what ifs’,” she said, flexing her metal hand. “I suggest you do the same.”



Owen quit Avalinth two days later, Minerva’s officials having drawn up treaties ensuring that he would never again set foot

in Faerie, nor order anyone to do so. Minerva was confident he would keep his word. His actions were motivated by fear and grief, and his lessons appeared to have been painful ones.

And he loved Caer. Anyone could see that. Minerva was inclined to think that anyone who loved that boy had good in them.

At the end of the week, he left too. “Don’t be a stranger,” she told him. “I will be chained to the city for some time, but I expect to see you back here before the year is out.”

“Of course,” he said. “Where else would I learn blacksmithing? Mortal and fae have nothing on dwarven-make.”

“Good lad,” she said, tugging him downwards to ruffle his hair. “I knew you were a dwarf at heart.”

Caer blushed at the compliment, and turned to look behind him. Aislinn and Beau were saying their goodbyes to the others.

“Why did you and the others try to push Ais and I together?” he asked.

“Aside from the begrudging-yet-obvious-chemistry the two of you share and how ludicrously fun it was to mess with you, we rather hoped it might motivate you to try and learn how to control your powers—if you could find someone worth risking it for.”

“That was the worst part, though,” he explained. “She was worth risking anything *but that*.”



Minerva patted his shoulder. "It worked out though."

"That it did." He paused again. "Min?"

"Yes, boy?"

"I never expected to have another mother again," he said.  
"And I still don't. But I'm glad I've got you."

"Aye," she said, "that'll do it." She pulled him down into her arms, and the two held fast there for some time. "I don't profess to know the secrets of the stone and soul, but if your mother sees you now, I know she'd be as proud of you as I am."



**A**s a final parting gift, Minerva gave the party a pair of wargis. Aislinn waxed lyrically about returning to Wales one day and bringing the mounts with them, riding about the countryside on a pair of giant dogs, her wing-like cape splaying out behind her.

“It’ll terrify all the mortals,” she announced.

“And yet you sound delighted about doing it,” Caer said.

The group headed back to Acanthia in fine spirits, though Caer and Aislinn took the ‘long route back’, riding on ahead of the others and then disappearing for a couple of days. They did not tell anyone what happened during their excursion, although Beau noted the absence of Caer’s death-beads and everyone noticed that Aislinn had given Caer the nickname of ‘Snow’. They did not share the reason, though frequently giggled whenever someone asked.

When the main party arrived back in Acanthia, they immediately summoned Albert Woodfern and explained the situation and reunited him with his son’s sleeping form.

Cerridwen remained adamant in her promise to him, but asked to be given two weeks—two weeks with her own family, and the letter her husband had written to her before he died.

No one would ever read or hear its contents, but she asked to be buried with it in the vines beneath the castle.

Albert initially objected to Cerridwen's plans, but he did not take much persuading. Even Juliana stopped trying to talk her into delaying it eventually, choosing instead to focus on those remaining days. They were filled with laughter and adventures and feast and celebrations. For two weeks, it felt like there was never a quiet moment, everyone constantly pulled from one revel to the next. Maytree was summoned out of retirement in the Summer Isles, and gave her old friend such a greeting that a bard composed a ballad on the spot.

"I'm sorry," Aislinn told Caer at one point, "this isn't quite the peace and quiet we probably deserve right now."

"I did not think life with you would be particularly peaceful anyway," Caer admitted. "And we will have time for peace and quiet later."

And they would. Time for peace and quiet, for travelling, for adventures and revels and sparring and sunsets. Time for *everything*.

The only one who did not have time was Cerridwen, but she did not seem keen to extend it—only to use the days she did have as much as possible. In the two weeks that she'd granted herself, she taught Beau a few sword moves he was 'desperately lacking', gave Aislinn a few lessons she was all

too willing to learn from, and taught Juliana all the songs she couldn't quite remember. She recounted their three years together in as much detail as she could, told her stories of her life in the mortal world, and even imparted the specifics of her courtship with her father.

“I understand that he did not lead an honourable life after I died,” she said, “but all the years he was honourable—and the ones where he loved you—those count for something, too.”

Juliana said nothing to that, though her eyes lined with silver.

“I wish we had more time,” Aislinn told her.

Cerridwen patted her head, looking, for a moment, like the older, silver-haired grandmas of mortal tales. “No one ever has enough of that,” she said. “Though you might, with your Caer, and Juliana with her Hawthorn. What grandmother could ask for more?”

On the final day, everyone gathered in the bowels of the great Faerie palace, in the great vine-filled crypt where the bodies of the kings and queens lay beneath the earth. A small, quiet party, just the family, Luna, Albert and Mabel.

“You don't have to do this,” Luna sniffed. “We can wait a little longer.”

Cerridwen smiled. “Dillon has waited long enough,” she said. “And Albert does not have forever. Every day I spend here robs him of another day with his son.”

“But you deserve so many more with your daughter... she can't be happy about this.”

“There may have been some sobbing, promises of violence, adamant declarations of using someone else, but... this is the right thing. She knows it too. I know I look young, but I'm old, for a mortal. And what I desire above all else I can never have again.”

“What's that?”

“To see my daughter grow up. Maybe, if I'm lucky, and I exist amongst the vines after my demise, I'll get to see my grandchildren and great grandchildren instead.”

“It won't be the same.”

“Nothing is.”

Luna sniffed. “I'm naming my firstborn Cerridwen.”

Cerridwen smiled. “I think Dillon would approve of that.”

She lay down in the vines, and Mabel and Hawthorn conducted the spell. Juliana held her mother's hands, whispering words too soft to hear. Caer clutched Aislinn's hand throughout.

Afterwards, he would tell her that he'd had no idea that death could be peaceful, and that he'd be blessed indeed if he met an end like that one.

“Not for a long while yet,” Aislinn told him.

With her family around her, Cerridwen slipped away, and although there was no way to be sure she was there, the vines

seemed to murmur when she joined them.

Dillon woke a few minutes later, whole and healthy and *glowing*.

“Luna?” he said, blinking rapidly. “*Father?*”

Juliana explained everything as Albert wept bitterly in his son’s neck.

“I can feel you,” Dillon whispered, as if, in this world of magic and wonder, it was touch that he found the most surreal, the most incredible. “*I can feel you.*”

Aislinn clutched Caer’s hand still, awaiting her turn in a long line of people waiting to hold Dillon, and smiled as the tears dripped down her cheeks. “Welcome home.”



Aeron flew through the icy winds, black wings sailing out behind him, carrying the Mirror in his claws. It had taken far, far too long to sneak out of Avalinth, disguised as one of Owen's soldiers. Glamours didn't work on dwarves, but *shapeshifting* did, and it had been easy enough to take on the guise of one of the wounded. That idiot fae prince had healed him himself.

He'd survived leaping off the palace balcony, quickly transforming one of the other bodies to resemble himself and scurrying into the bushes to pull on his own disguise, all the while trying not to bleed out. It had not been easy. It had been too close.

Luckily, he'd already had a copy of the Mirror made long before the battle, constructed based on records and finalised quickly once the Mirror was in his possession. He'd always known he'd be taking it out of Avalinth, and Venus, for all her faults and her willingness to sacrifice the mortal prince, wanted to keep her word in that regard. She knew the Mirror was too powerful to leave.

He'd killed the maker of the false mirror, killed him as soon as the job was done and configured his body into bones which he fed to the palace wargis. The replica was now safely 'stored' in the Deep below. With the seal King Hawthorn had placed on it, Aeron was sure no one would ever know the difference.

The seal was regrettable, admittedly. Aeron had no hopes of removing it himself. He was only young, after all.

But if there was one thing he'd learned from his father, it was patience.

The turret of his father's keep pierced the white skies. He slowed his flight, sliding into the powdery snow and shucking off his draconic form for something more fae.

Ladrien, the exiled king of the Unseelie, met him at the doors. Years in exile had not altered his proud form. He was as polished and straight-backed as ever, his horns gleaming, his black hair smooth as water.

His fathomless eyes gleamed at Aeron's presence. "Do you have it?"

Smiling, Aeron dropped into a deep bow. "Yes, Father," he said. "We've found it at last."



**To be continued...**



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you love the finished product!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**B**orn and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine “Kate” Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as “the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood“.

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and eight years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there’s a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She currently lives in Devon with her manic toddler, in a charming Victorian terrace.

“Mountain of Mirrors and Starlight“ is her 19th novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website at [www.katherinamacdonaldauthor.com](http://www.katherinamacdonaldauthor.com) to be notified of new releases and free review copies!