

DARK CARESS • BOOK THREE



THE CURSED  
KING

RICHARD AMOS

# THE CURSED KING



RICHARD AMOS

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# PART I

# Stars

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# Chapter One

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I ran through the dark forest with the former Tuatha queen, hunting dark fae who tried to run from me. My boots crunched in the snow, flakes from the trees sprinkling quietly on my head.

This creature would not escape me, especially after ignoring its new king's command to halt when it darted from its hiding place behind a fallen log. I could have stayed in my carriage, let the creature run away, continue with my quest.

I was in no mood for easy.

Speaking of easy, I could snare my prey with magic, enchant it to come and face me without the need for this hunt. It wasn't too far ahead, its breathing loud enough to be a song for the forest. Yet I enjoyed hunting, the sensation of my heart racing, the ache in my chest from the burning cold of the air. The distraction both brought me.

Distraction from *him*.

Kormac.

The human. A man I had come to grow fond of, despite him initially being my enemy. At first, I'd been attracted by his handsome exterior, drawn to his roughness wrapped in

masculine beauty. A morbid curiosity, lusting after a man I should hate and did hate. A soul bond forced us together, tempered our mutual loathing, saw us through a journey to Winter to meet my destiny. I believed we would face a becoming together in the land of snow and dark fae—the latter a term for any fae from the north.

But the human and I were not meant to be, not beyond the taking of power, the awakening of my dark caress—the caress of the Tuatha, the lost blood.

Kormac was gone, killed by my hand, an action forced by Brigid, a darkling now a floating head acting as my counsel. I had taken his undying essence, that ability now mine. I was already immortal from being Sidhe fae but could die by the sword. Kormac's gift changed that, gifting me with true eternal life.

*My gift giver...*

Along with this powerful immortality, I also wielded silver magic. As the new Tuatha king, my power nurtured the lands of Winter. Restored them, brought life back with the added power of the undying magic.

Winter was waking up from its curse, ready for revenge with me at the helm. I just had to unite my people. It had been a long time since Winter had a Tuatha monarch.

*I am of Tuatha blood...*

The blood passed through time, through generations, dormant until it awoke in me. The first Tuatha born in centuries, my strange features not of a regular Sidhe fae a result of the blood.

Tuatha. King.

*Heartbroken...*

I was heading south to meet the giants of Winter. The giants, according to Brigid, would be great weapons in my impending war with the rest of the world and would also help in my quest for unity.

As I moved across the snowy landscape, I did my best to unite the creatures of this realm I encountered to my cause. Promised to give them back the strength to rise up and take revenge upon the rest of Faerie.

Faerie would yield. Those who refused would be destroyed.

Vengeance would be mine, it would be Winter's after so long being cursed by the uniting of seed and shadow magic.

Faerie would bend the knee to a new king and a new dawn.

I paused at the edge of a clearing, lingering in the shadows of the trees, listening to the rustle of bracken on the other side, the snapping of twigs.

Snow fell from a sky shimmering dark purple hues into the clearing, already covering the dark fae's footprints. A luminous full moon ignited the forest in silvery light, the first time a moon so bright had kissed the ground in centuries.

Thanks to me.

“What is it, Your Majesty?” Queen Orla wondered.

The last Tuatha queen of Winter before the end of the Tuatha, now my soldier, a powerful creature in black armor like mine, skin as pale as the snow at my feet, hair as black as onyx. Her eyes were twin orbs of midnight—the black eyes of the Tuatha fae we shared.

Beside her, the preceding King Eoghan. A handsome man of rich, dark brown skin, long curly black hair, and wide,

Tuatha black eyes. Slain in battle centuries ago, alive again.  
Returned to life by my new power.

*Kormac...*

I closed my eyes against the horrible memory of me driving the silver shard into him. The memory tried repeatedly to trip me up, to break me. My feelings for him had been changing, blooming into something new, something I wanted to explore.

I was robbed of that.

*Kormac...*

Taken from me.

Not mine to have. A companion, a diamond within the gloom. A creature of hidden layers I'd unpeeled, seen something better than the sum of his parts. Seen a man who'd slithered inside me, soul bond and more, a man who made me see things differently.

Because of Brigid, he was gone.

When this was done, I would find a way to obliterate her. I kept her alive for now because of her usefulness. She would not have her body, though.

I sniffed the cold air. "A strange scent," I said. "Smoke with the smell of wet soil. As if it isn't what I think it is."

"Smokeless fire," Queen Orla said.

"A jinn," King Eoghan added. "I should have known." He and the queen took it in turns to breathe in the smell.

"It certainly is smokeless fire," the queen offered. "They are dangerous creatures. Always keen to bargain, always slippery."

“Slippery?” I questioned.

“They grant wishes for heavy prices, one that serves their interests more than the one making the wish.”

“Will they make decent soldiers?” I wondered.

“I’m not entirely certain, Your Majesty,” King Eoghan answered. “In my day as Tuatha monarch, I did not deal with them. There were too many stories of wishes gone wrong.”

“Their groves are to the west,” Queen Orla said. “Close to the mountains bordering Autumn. They never stray too far from them. Yet these are new times, not like the years of my reign.”

They certainly were.

“Tell me a story,” I commanded. “One of a wish gone wrong.” I angled my head to the side, my eyes on the clearing, the king and queen there in my periphery.

“One that always stayed with me was of the human who wanted a golden touch,” the former king said. “To turn anything he landed his hands on to gold, thus granting him untold wealth. He wanted to take the gold to Spring and strike deals with the Gentry fae, given their proficiencies with metal. Build a new life for his family, leave his Tuatha masters for good.” A brief pause. “He, along with his wife, were servants to a Tuatha fae in the east of Winter, working within a manor as groundskeeper and maid. They had one son.”

“Did this take place within your reign?” I asked.

“No, Your Majesty. Much before my time.”

“I see. I gather the *anything* part of this tale is to be taken literally?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. He went west to the jinn groves and made his wish. At first, the human made golden apples, such small things becoming glittering wonders. Until he picked up his child and turned him gold, killing him. Then his wife, then all food, everything. His master cast him out, and he starved to death alone, his body found on the banks of a river.”

River... Much like my brother, Daire. He was slain at Acorn River near Kormac’s village Riverleaf after he... after he crossed a line. Killed helpless children, and a pregnant woman in cold blood.

Let him rot in the seven hells.

“How unfortunate for that poor man,” I said, taking a step forward. “But fascinating. The jinn could be valuable weapons in the war to come.” I felt my lips spreading ever so slightly into a smile, parted by invisible threads. “Think of the chaos they could bring, the false hopes they could give the enemy.”

“Though much too dangerous for us,” Queen Orla said. “The same chaos could be—”

I held up my hand to silence her.

She knew to keep her mouth shut when I made that move. The queen might be alive, but she was also long dead, her power diminished.

“I appreciate your counsel,” I said. “And I hear your concern. Regardless, I still want to speak to this creature.”

“That is your prerogative, King Valance,” she responded.

Why was this jinn wandering a forest so far from home?

Slippery...

Wishes...

One wish to bring *him* back...

There, an invasive thought wreathed in hope. I could have him back in an instant, wish for him to return, to be the Kormac before I killed him. But what would be the consequence? The human with the golden touch's price was obvious from the outset. Wishing a man I cared for back from the dead would come with complications. I would need to be careful how I worded things, look out for pitfalls, talk through the details with the jinn until the wish became perfect.

I wanted Kormac back—an alive and healthy Kormac with nothing changed. Almost like a reverse in time to how he was, how we were, but without going back.

Ah, could that be the consequence? Going back in time? Was that even possible? Could magic do it with the right push and pull?

Certainly not me, my silver magic was a force of enchantment and summoning, feeding Winter. I could conjure things to life, things that existed in reality—summon them from my mind into existence. Being of Sidhe blood, which still remained within, I retained my skills as a seed sorcerer with an affinity for the earth element. I could call to earthly things, so long as they were around me, command them to bend to my will. Like the trees and the dirt, now extending to the snow and ice and winds of Winter. A growing and blending of my power into something great, but nothing like wishes. Nothing to change the course of fate.

“How can jinn make wishes come true?” I asked. “They are dark fae. They use a weaker form of silver magic than mine, do they not?”

Any creature of Winter with the proclivity for magic—namely darklings—used silver magic in some form.

“A wish is an enhancement,” the croaky, aged voice of Brigid filled my ears.

A chill beyond the cold of the forest licked across my skin. “I thought I told you to wait in the carriage.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty. I was concerned.”

“Were you now?”

“Always, My King.”

“Concerned enough to disobey my orders?”

“Do you require my counsel on the jinn?”

I glanced at her pale, lined face, her silver eyes the only vibrant thing about her. She blew a strand of greasy gray hair out of her eyes.

“Did I ask for it?” I countered her question.

“They are dangerous,” she responded with no regard for my authority. “They might be of lesser power than a Tuatha monarch, but they’re the most dangerous of the dark fae. Let the jinn run back to the west. Wishes are not for you.”

I loathed the sound of her voice, and her being right. My hatred for her, for her serious manipulation, forced me to push against her—no matter how foolish that push might be.

The last thing I wanted was to be her puppet, even if her strings still weighed heavy upon me.

*One day, darkling. One day...*

I drew my sword and broke from the trees, moving quickly across enchanted snow—enchanted by me, so we didn’t sink into its deepness.

“Your Majesty!” the floating head cried.



I held back a laugh at her panic.

*What's wrong, darkling? Did you not plan for the jinn? Are you worried I'll wish away your schemes?*

The king and queen joined me without protest, falling in line as they should with their new king.

We charged through the thick bracken on the other side of the clearing, snow bursting upward from the force of our impact. I brushed flakes from my eyes, delighting in the distant squeak of the terrified jinn.

Harder and faster, leaping over fallen trees, churning up the snow. Focused on my target, my curiosity an inferno in need of constant fuel.

There...

There it was.

I unleashed my power, silver ribbons tearing from my fingertips. They snapped and whipped like snakes on the trail of their prey. I felt the jolt in my bones, the snagging of the silver ribbons around a solid body. The jinn screamed, my run slowing to a walk.

Now it was mine, magic sliding deep into flesh, into blood, into bone. The jinn resisted, trying to fight back against the enchantment to halt, failing miserably.

“Be still,” I whispered into the dark, snowy forest. “You’re mine now.”

The creature stilled.

Stood between two trees, a beam of moonlight drowning its body, snow falling on its head. The jinn’s yellow eyes fell on me. It was a small thing, no bigger than three feet. Thin, most of it covered in gray fur from some skinned animal that

dragged in the snow. Its face resembled the texture of rough bark, its skin a faint blue tone—the color of cold lips.

The jinn hissed. “Stay back!” It spoke in a soft male voice, somewhere close to a baritone yet not quite.

It stank of that soil-like smoke.

“You would ask your king to stay back?” I said, sheathing my sword.

Those pupilless yellow eyes widened. “King?”

“Yes. Your king,” I replied. “Did you miss the change in Winter’s air?”

The heavy lines of his forehead twisted, splitting into something resembling a frown. “You’re him? The new Tuatha?”

“Yes.”

“The living old blood.”

“That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

“Your Majesty. I apologize for my insolence.”

“Good. Now tell me why you are so far from home.”

## Chapter Two

---



**T**here is no death here.

My name is Titus, and I'm an angelus, not a human living in the realm of Faerie. Kormac is a false name given to me in a life I was called to serve.

That was over now.

Angelus were called from beyond the stars to serve the whims of many realms. Whispers through the stars, prayers of desperation, our servitude coming in many guises. To help guide a destiny, to hold the hand of the dying—some even called us angels sent by God.

There are many gods throughout the intricate web of existence. An endless stream of realities, of magic, of lives and technology and faiths.

As my Titus memories began to return, I once again knew so much information beyond my twenty- eight years as a human living on Faerie. Some realms used the internet, drove vehicles, were so advanced when it came to technology. Some realms were dying, some without magic or technology at all. Some we were never called to at all.

With one foot still in Faerie, I struggled, spending most of my time as a ball of energy in my green and blue glass room at the Sky Palace. I liked to float at the window and watch the many towers of the same-colored glass, filling up with information while holding onto my false human desires, the developing emotions I felt for Prince Valance.

Olivia, my angelus friend, told me they would fade, that I'd be me again.

It would be easier for everything to go, for my mind to be wiped clean of him. But he sat in my chest, close to my heart as a strange flutter. After everything we'd been through, the hate that'd burned so brightly, things began to change into something more caring, something warmer.

And then I 'died,' my mission complete. I was meant to serve his destiny, nothing more. Now he would be on the path of revenge, ready to burn down the world.

Hellpiss!

I still held onto that exclamation.

Olivia came to see me often, or I bumped into her in the corridors of blue and green outside my room. I did remember being her friend, spending many days in the meadows outside of the Sky Palace, along with other angelus. When we weren't being called, we studied the threads of existence, we waited. We lived peacefully. In this tiny pocket of skies and meadows beyond the stars, just outside the web of everything, there was no war, no disease, no pain.

Ending my memories of Faerie would reset me to my former peaceful state because we were made from peace, carved by Many Hands over by the crystalfalls.

Many Hands. The maker. A god if such a word were relevant here. Only, nothing stood above anything in Fatumstellae.

*Valance...*

The sun rose as it did every morning, promising a day of sunshine. No rain or snow or wind, only lovely warm days and nights, the skies always picture-perfect with various blues during the day and inky hues adorned with stars at night.

I missed the rain, the snow, even the cold—anything that changed this endless loop of warmth. Hells, I even missed violence, the adrenaline of a battle, the stench of dirt and blood, the weight of a weapon, the crunch of bone.

I sighed, watching the sun's rays sparkle on the glass towers.

The sooner I forgot, the sooner I could be Titus again.

*No...*

*Not again...*

The rest of my kin were working to fix me, to restore my physical form and restore my stolen undying power. Without it, I would stay a floating ball of green and blue light.

The old woman wasn't supposed to take that, apparently. But then, wasn't it part of Valance's destiny for him to have it?

Gods, destiny was complicated.

I knew I was supposed to be of a humanoid, male body. Not this ball. The real me. Back to serve a realm again if required, live a life of eternal life and joy.

My bedroom door opened. This was my room, filled with a bed and things for a physical body, hidden from me at the

moment.

Olivia entered the room, floating in as a ball of light. Her actual form was hidden because I only saw angelus as balls of light while I waited to be fixed, despite my understanding.

It would be nice to have limbs again.

“How are you today?” the green and blue ball asked.

“I remembered a different calling today,” I said.

Truth. Before Faerie, I went to help Cleopatra meet her destiny, to meet Marc Anthony, and follow the path leading to her destruction. Her heart called to me, and I went to her as her lover.

“I was once Marc Anthony,” I said.

“That’s a good sign,” she responded, floating over to the window. “You have one of the best views here.”

She liked to remind me of this every other day. I failed to see how tower tops constituted a great view. I’d rather be facing the edge of the Fatumstellae, looking down at the sea of stars instead of this.

I never corrected her, though. Angelus didn’t correct kin, didn’t hurt or upset or cause drama.

How I longed to see a bar fight in the tavern of Riverleaf, usually involving my father.

Not *my* father.

Kormac’s father.

Kormac didn’t exist.

*But he does. I am him...*

*I want to be him again...*

My skin, my lips, my senses, my cock, my desires, the taste of Valance on my tongue, the exquisite sensation of burying my hardness deep inside him.

*Written in the stars...*

“Titus?” Olivia said, her voice richly melodious. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, thank you. Just thinking.”

“About Faerie?”

“Yes.” I was always honest because there were no such things as lies here.

“And Cleopatra?”

“Yes.”

“It is all helping you understand what you are.”

“Yes.”

“I’m so happy you’re coming back to us, Titus. This is excellent progress. Soon you will be ready for a visit to Many Hands.”

“Do you have any idea when that might happen?” I asked.

“Soon.”

She said the same thing yesterday.

“I can’t wait,” she added. “You’re going to be my best friend again.”

*I want to be... to be back with him.*

But there was no way back, only this new forward. This return to myself I didn’t want.

*Valance...*



*I miss you...*

## Chapter Three

---



A sprinkling of snow fell on my head, shaken loose by a bird flapping in the branches. I brushed away the flakes slithering down my forehead, waiting for the yellow-eyed creature to answer me.

“I was stolen from my groves, Your Majesty,” the jinn answered at last. “The thief brought me here to save a family from sickness. A human woman from the south of Winter. She died before she could make her wish, her body some miles to the east. I’m trying to get home.”

I watched the jinn watch me, waiting for more to fall from his tiny mouth.

“Your carriage frightened me, so I ran,” he added. “I thought you were here to do the same, take me somewhere to be your wishing slave.”

What an interesting term. “Our paths have crossed unintentionally. I presumed you were another rebel I had to whip into servitude or death.” I tilted my head to the side. “Clearly, I made a mistake.”

“I want to go home, My King. More than anything.”

“There is no place like home.”

Mine was gone, lost to Florent and Lasair. The Summer Palace, my place of birth. So far away, so beyond my reach. My mother still slept there, unmoving since the death of my sister Jehanne's death.

Did she still live? Had my enemies put her to the sword?

"You don't want a wish granted, My King?" he asked.

"I have no desire to bargain with you."

"I can—"

"Stop," I cut him off. "There will be none of that talk here."

A blue tongue poked out of his mouth, licking at his thin lips. "But you do, Your Majesty. I can feel it."

A shiver passed through me. Could this creature see into my thoughts, my darkest desires?

"Do not question the king," Orla snapped. "Or I will take your tongue."

The jinn recoiled, his lips curling into something like a fear-wrapped snarl. "Apologies. I didn't mean to offend."

"There is no offense," I said, placing my hand on Orla's shoulder. "I want no anger here." I had enough for all of Faerie. "But do not say anything like that again."

I granted the jinn some movement, allowing him to bow respectfully.

The king and queen flanked me, waiting to kill. If I gave them the order, they would tear him limb for limb.

"I have another question, if you would permit your king," I said.

He lifted his head. “I will answer any questions you have, Your Majesty.”

“Can you wish yourself home?” I asked.

The jinn released a soft sigh. “Jinn are unable to benefit from wishes.”

“That’s not true,” Brigid joined in, floating up to my right. “You might not be able to wish for things, but you always come out of your bargains winning.”

“The price of a wish gives us nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, you—”

I grabbed the old woman by her greasy hair, hauling her upward to face me. She croaked, her eyes bulging. “Be quiet.”

“But—”

“If I hear your voice again tonight without asking to, I’ll hollow you out with my bare hands.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw the jinn recoil.

“Apologies, Your Majesty,” the hag squeaked.

“I’ll let *those* words pass, seeing as you were groveling.” I released her, letting her float behind me.

Whether she was a head or whole, the darkling was dangerous. I took her counsel, yet I trusted her as much as a cornered viper.

The jinn unnerved me. It may be as weak as twigs, small, but its power was greater than mine. It could change so much or so little, undo everything. Even turn back the hands of time.

*With one wish...*

“It is best we leave this here,” I said, firmly deciding I wanted nothing to do with this creature.

Which meant Kormac stayed dead and gone.

Forever.

Movement in the trees, the heavy crunching of snow, the breaking of twigs. Approaching noises from every corner, no stealth taken, no care of sneaking in unnoticed. These brutes wanted me to know they were coming now.

And they wanted me dead.

A smile crept to my lips as I drew my sword. I’d play with them, let steel kiss steel until I grew weary of this nonsense and either slayed them or sent them back to Winter Keep to be suitably tortured into bending the knee. Or destroyed.

Silver magic danced through me, awaiting my command.

*Not yet...*

The first centaur burst from the trees brandishing a spiked maul, its red eyes blazing against his fair, rosy complexion. Its top half was constructed from throbbing muscles, the bottom that of a brown horse. He stank of sweat and shit.

Centaur. Rebels, the lot of them, along with the elves of the north. They often joined forces, like now, the elves firing arrows at us.

A pity. Back in Summer, I enjoyed the cock of many a male elf.

With my magic, I called to the snow and the wind, summoning a powerful cyclone to enclose us, the elven arrows failing to break through.

“Those dreadful rebels,” I muttered, walking toward the spinning white.

“Your Majesty!” King Eoghan cried.

“Stay where you are,” I returned. “I want you safe, not hurt by some rebel arrow. That would be a distasteful way for you to leave me.”

He froze to the spot, his eyes burning into my back. He’d sworn to protect me, to be by my side in this war against Florent and Lasair. Because I had brought him back, poured life into him and the lands again, he offered me his loyalty, swearing to protect me.

But it was he who required protection, lacking my solid immortality. It would be a pity for him to be felled by an arrow. He wouldn’t die, for my magic would heal him. That didn’t change my not wanting to see him die, albeit temporarily.

*There is only one who should be by my side...*

The wind and snow parted for me, an icy curtain. I ran through, bringing my blade up to deflect an arrow. I laughed as I ducked three more, cut through another two before they reached me.

A centaur charged at me, hooves surprisingly light on the snow, taking a hefty swing of its heavy weapon. I met it with my sword, the crunching impact rattling my bones.

Again, I laughed.

“False king!” the male centaur spat.

“Your breath is worse than death,” I countered.

“I’ll rip your head off and shit down your neck.”

Could he do that? Would I simply regrow my head and vomit up his feces?

An interesting thought.

I summoned more snow, commanding it to strike him in the face. The puff of cold white sent him staggering backward. His red eyes closed. He howled, clawing at them, cursing my name.

I shook my head, deflecting another arrow. “To think I have saved these lands. Where is the respect you owe me?”

“No respect for a false king!” a few voices barked.

A second centaur, a female, tried her luck. I spun, light of foot even in the snow, landing on my right knee, the centaur’s maul missing my head. I drove my sword into her guts, pushing until it burst out of her back.

She squealed, blood oozing from between her bared, black teeth.

“How does that feel?” I whispered.

She groaned, her hands trying to gain purchase on my blade.

I summoned snow and wind to form a smaller, violent cocoon around us.

“We’re all alone now,” I said. “I do enjoy privacy parleying with my enemies.” I shook my head. “But this isn’t a parley, is it? This is foolishness on your part. A terrible disrespect.”

“I—”

“What?” I leaned forward, sliding the deadly-sharp blade in a little more. “Tell me?”



“I... I will never...” The vile creature couldn’t finish her sentence.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?” I said.

Another groan, a gargling sound in her throat.

“This is exactly what happens to those who try to defy me,” I said. “To deny my sovereignty. You will learn your lesson today, and others will learn after you until it soaks into those tenacious skulls.”

I began to twist the sword, the screams from the centaur drawing my lips into a wider smile. More blood ran free as her guts were torn, red eyes wide in horror.

“A lesson to be learned for all of Faerie,” I added, finishing the full turn of the blade. “Do you understand?”

The centaur screamed in my face, trying to say something. Instead, she managed a nasty cough, spitting blood in my face.

“Disgusting.” I dragged the sword upward, slowly, making sure she felt every second of her dying moments. The steel carved through flesh and bone, so sharp it was as if the creature was made from the softest of butters.

I reveled in her screams, in the gore, until eventually, I reached her head. With one final, brutal upward push, I cut through her skull. Her two halves parted, falling to the snow as I released our cocoon and charged back into battle.

There would be no return to life here.

“No!” a male centaur cried over his fallen comrade.

More centaurs came from the trees, joined by the tall, arrow-firing elves. I’d enjoyed my fill of violence, ready to continue with my journey south.

“Enough of this,” I said to myself, summoning the moisture from the snow, drawing up an army of floating droplets.

I enchanted them to grow, to become spears of ice. Sharp and deadly, formed by the coldest of hearts.

*My heart is empty and cracked.*

*I am done with my heart.*

I deflected more arrows, met the blade of another centaur.

And then the ice flew. The spears struck each target in the eye, no creature standing a chance to defend themselves against such vicious speed. Not a single one of them wore a helmet, and so in went the ice, sending them dead into the snow.

As easy as that.

Fighting Florent and Lasair would not be so simple.

The protective snowy cyclone around my companions dropped as I cleaned my sword of blood in the snow.

“Your Majesty!” the old woman and the two former monarchs seemed to chorus as one.

I sheathed my blade, rolling my shoulders. The silver magic tingled in my bones, licking at my strength. I was nowhere near to being spent yet, thank Danu. That little display hardly broke a sweat.

“Are you all right?” Orla asked, coming to stand before me, her black hair fluttering in the breeze.

“I’m fine,” I responded. “Please don’t worry.”

I saw Eoghan inspecting the bodies with the jinn close to him.

Brigid floated closer, her eyes boring into me.

“Is there a problem?” I demanded.

“I am marveling at your skill,” she responded. “You are a gifted sorcerer.”

“I suppose I am,” I said, eyes finding crimson flowing from the head of a beautiful male elf, staining the snow.

Always blood.

Always death.

Forever violence.

*Because that is how things must always be. And I have always been a vessel for death.*

“We’re leaving,” I said.

Crunching in the snow, the jinn coming to stand to my left.

I looked down at him. “What is it?”

“What about me, Your Majesty?” Wide, yellow eyes implored me. “Please, may I go home? I’ve been away from the matriarch far too long.”

“Matriarch?”

“We always have a matriarch who takes the throne of our clan. I miss her so much.”

“And I’m sure she misses you,” I answered.

He nodded. “Please, can I leave for home?”

This was it, the time to make a decision. Did I send this jinn on its way or change my mind and make a deal with him?

“You may go,” I said, turning my head to the stars beyond the thick canopy of leaves above.

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Using my magic again, I summoned the trees to my command, just like the old version of me would. Only, this time my greater power snapped heavy branches, enchanting them to transform and take on a new shape.

The sounds of a carpenter’s workshop filled the forest, and before long, a wooden sleigh rested upon the surface of the snow. Fit for any jinn.

Pouring more magic into it, I placed an enchantment upon it.

“This is yours now,” I explained to the jinn. “Climb aboard and tell it where you want to go.”

“Really, Your Majesty?”

I nodded, sweat now beading on my brow. “Yes. Now go. Be safe.”

“Thank you... Thank you for your generosity, Your Majesty.” He bowed. “I will not forget this.”

I waved him away, gazing upward once more.

*I’m sorry I cannot save you from death...*

How I wished he would answer me.

## Chapter Four

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**T**itus.

A popular angelus everyone flocked to. The best friend of Olivia, an angelus who enjoyed games of chess and backgammon, watching the stars at the edge of the Fatumstellae, so happy here, never especially curious about the worlds beyond unless I had to be. Yes, I was always professional, always took great care and interest in my tasks. But other than that, give me the sunshine and moonlight and the days swimming in happiness with my friends.

Until now.

I also remembered where to find every key to every room in the Sky Palace, how to look into the other worlds, even how to communicate with them. All I had to do was play along now and be fixed, pass the tests and get back to Valance.

I could do it. I just had to hold firm in my convictions.

Titus was back but changed. And there was no going back to the old me because Kormac swam inside me, was me, with Valance holding his hand.

*I want his hand in mine again...*

I waited for a while before approaching Olivia. I had to be sure this wasn't a surge of Kormac, his dying breath.

*I am Kormac.*

*I am Titus.*

*I am new.*

Angelus weren't sexless when it came to male and female characteristics. I was male but without sexuality. I possessed a glass cock, when not a ball of light, yet it was purely ornamental, as were vaginas and buttocks. They came in use for when we went on jobs, like on Faerie, part of our assimilation into respective cultures.

We were also completely hairless as angelus.

Would my cock feel pleasure when Many Hands put me back together? Would my physical restoration wipe Kormac away or keep his appetites close?

My thoughts and speech were muddled between the human and the angelus. The knowledge confused Kormac, and the many human desires enticed Titus.

Olivia returned. I moved into action, offering her my best performance.

“Do you remember the day we built the diving board at Orchard Lake?” I asked.

A beautiful spot with crystals the shape of apples growing on the trees of the orchard on its north bank.

“Titus?” she said.

“It had such a spring to it.”

The ball of light that was Olivia glinted, hovering forward.  
“Did you really just say that to me?”

“I did. I remember everything.” I explained various details, other memories of the fun times. Like when we decided to pluck some crystals from the orchard and make ourselves fly with their special, fun magic. What a great day if you enjoyed that sort of thing.

My childhood in Riverleaf, though dark at times, was made of better memories. A collage of joy and sadness carried through into my adulthood and darker times. The endless war between seelie and unseelie, my friend Ren and I making that perilous quest to attack Summer on Lasair’s orders.

It still hurt knowing I’d never see Ren’s face again.

Everything here seemed so frivolous and empty of feeling other than endless laughter and happiness. It seemed so vacuous in the light and shadow of a whole other life lived.

Olivia didn’t need to know that.

“Oh, Titus! I really want to hug you!” she exclaimed.

“You will. We will.”

*There’s only one I want to hug...*

“Let me speak to someone.”

“Marcus?” I said.

“You remember him?” she cried.

Obviously. Why would I recall the lake and flying around and not our leader?

“I do,” I responded politely.

“I’ll be back. This is a wonderful development.”

She whistled her trademark tune, some lovely melody she linked to Christmas—a period at the end of a year some other worlds celebrated with presents and food and lights and the



birth of a boy called Jesus. Not a Faerie custom or practice, but there was a similar festival in the December months in my home country of Autumn. One of food and singing and too much ale.

*My home...*

*Here...*

*There...*

*Wherever he is...*

Could Valance be my home? We weren't... What were we? Before I'd left him, things were changing, and not only because of the soul bond. There were real feelings there. I still felt them, still held onto the change. We'd been through so much together, seen the hurt from many sides.

I had to see him again.

Olivia returned with a ball of light almost identical to us, though slightly bigger.

Marcus was the tallest angelus in existence.

It happened then, more truth sliding into place. The balls of light stretched, quickly sprouting limbs and a head, two naked bodies of green and blue glass standing side by side. Male and female, Marcus well over six-and-half feet tall.

"Titus," Marcus's deep tone greeted me. "Olivia has just shared the good news."

"Thank goodness I'm back," I answered cheerily.

Marcus probably trumped me in popularity. I suppose, given his position as leader, everyone would love him most. He kept us together, our strength in all things. And I loved him

as I loved every angelus with all of my glass heart, a happy-go-lucky creature beyond the stars so full of joy.

Hellpiss! I wanted to be sick.

Marcus's glass head bopped several times in a nod. "So, let's get you to Many Hands. Are you ready to be complete?"

*I'm ready to run...* "Yes."

"I can't wait!" Olivia cried.

"Then follow me."



FLOATING through endless green and blue corridors, passing games rooms and libraries, workshops, I listened to happy sounds, wishing they would shut up.

So many memories, so much of a life here I didn't want to go back to.

Olivia skipped beside me the whole way to the exit. As we stepped into the brilliant sunshine, she burst into loud humming.

Marcus, a few feet ahead of us, chuckled and hummed along with her.

*By the gods! Make it stop!*

I joined in, though. I had to make them believe Titus was back for good.

They skipped across rolling meadows as white birds flew in the blue skies. Olivia took Marcus's hand, and they ran to a single tree shedding pink, glass blossoms. They twirled around it, humming and full of joy.

“He’s back with us!” Marcus sang.

“Back for us to hug and love!” Olivia followed up with a new line.

Together: “Our brave soul. Never to be beaten, never to be lost. Our Titus! Our Titus!”

A terrible song drowning in hellpiss.

I laughed, thanking them for their kind tribute.

Marcus stood before me, his glass chest rising and falling. “Everything will be okay.”

Olivia draped herself over him. “It really will be. No matter what that terrible old woman did to you by taking your undying essence, things will be put right.”

The old woman. She’d seen us here, called to us for help. Abused the system somewhat.

“They really will be,” our leader added.

We carried on across the meadows, up and down the sloping greenery, until we reached the river.

Olivia bent to the clear blue water with sparkling crystals adorning the riverbed. She scooped up some water and threw it in the air. I didn’t know why, but it seemed incredibly funny to her.

The river flowed from north to south—from the crystalfalls to the edge of Fatumstellae where it fell into the stars, joining them to light up the many night times of the universes.

Marcus led us north, more dancing along the riverbanks. Singing and endless fucking happiness Titus would love so much.

Should I see Kormac as a curse rather than a goal? Remove him, remove this dark caress of my own? Be at one with my true nature again?

Marcus dove into the river, Olivia jumping up and down with glee. Her clapping rang like a spoon striking a wine glass. Just like Tara did at Riverleaf tavern whenever she wanted to make a drunken speech about anything that came to her mind after too much wine. Usually close to the tavern's closing time.

I liked Tara. Always dressed in her musty, yellow-dyed fur coat, sat on her favorite stool at the bar. Wine and those greasy fried potatoes she loved. She liked to tell stories of her youth, how she once saw a dragon, and how the best wine always came from Summer, even if the seelie court and the Sidhe fae were all bastards. She would follow up any seelie talk with a spit and a curse, then offer me some of her food.

Dad liked her too.

Kormac's dad.

My dad.

Marcus surfaced with a crystal, water sluicing down his glassy form. He held it aloft, the stone glittering in the sunlight. The refracted light cast a rainbow on the grass.

“Pretty!” Olivia cried. “What shall we do with it?”

“Save it for later.”

Olivia nodded, giggling with her hand over her mouth.

Ah, a secret shared between us.

Marcus looked at me, tapping the crystal with his right index finger. “Are you sure you're ready for Many Hands?”

“More than ready.” *I’d kill to have arms and legs again.*

“I’m glad. I’ve really missed you. We all have.”

As he said that, a group of eight angelus came running toward us. Leaping in the air like gazelles, singing and laughing. They stopped to greet me, to praise my return. All friends of mine, all irritating.

More of Kormac lingered within me than Titus. This shouldn’t irk me. This laughter of mine shouldn’t be an act.

After an endless tirade of happiness, we moved on and reached our destination.

Many Hands lived beside crystalfalls under the open skies. They had their bed and their five work benches, a tower of tools, and a row of other beds for newly made angelus.

A tall humanoid figure of no discerning male or female characteristics, their eight arms and hands worked tirelessly to create us, shaping us from the glass that fell with the crystals over the falls.

The Making Glass always sat in the drop pool, never moving downstream with the rest of the crystals. Many Hands would pluck the glass from the water, take the oblongs to their workbench and begin their mastery.

It was an impressive sight to watch those hands create life. I watched them once make an angelus, sprinkle her with crystal dust, infusing her body with the undying power I’d lost.

Many Hands was working on a new angelus

“Hello there, Titus,” they said. “It is good to see you back with us.”

“It’s good to be back,” I replied.

While Many Hands was angelus, they weren't as joyous as the rest of us. They had a serious duty to perform, the only one who could do it, and, so their personality reflected that seriousness.

A balm against this relentless onslaught of elation.

Many Hands put down their tools, the figure on their workbench half complete. "Are you ready to be fixed, Titus?"

"I'm ready."

"Then come over here." They walked over to an empty wooden bench, the dark surface spotlessly clean.

I floated over to hover above the surface.

Many Hands took some Making Glass and a tool to grate across its surface. Fine dust fell through me, leaving a warm tingle as it passed.

Many Hands picked up a crystal, grating some of that next.

Particles landed within me, becoming solid kernels. Hard and warm, they moved, calling to my solid body.

*Come back to us, they said. Be whole. Be Titus.*

Many Hands continued their work, releasing more and more Making Glass and crystal dust onto me, muttering the words only they ever spoke or understood. Their special gift working through me, bringing me back.

Magic.

What magic did Valance have now? What kind of king had he become?

"Are you okay?" Many Hands asked as more kernels latched onto me.

"I'm fine, thank you."

Piece by piece, inch by inch, I became Titus in body. First, my head formed above the ball of light, Olivia gasping as she saw me. Then my neck and shoulders, my chest, stomach. My arms followed, my two friends, dancing with glee.

After what I assumed to be an hour, I lay on the table, my glassy spine pressing into the wood.

Whole again.

“By the—” I cut off a Kormac saying. “I’m back.”

I flexed my fingers, wriggled my toes. Sat up, stretching my arms above my head.

“No more ball of light,” I said.

“You can’t have your undying power back yet,” Many Hands said.

I turned to face them.

“But give it time,” they added. “This is a long journey to a full recovery.”

“At least I’m solid again,” I responded.

“Exactly, Titus. And that is cause for great celebration.” Their delivery was flat, empty of feeling.

“Party!” Olivia cried, taking me by the left hand.

“Yes!” Marcus cried, taking my right hand.

They jumped up and down, planning an entire nighttime event within minutes. Even Many Hands was in full agreement.

Fine. Let them have a party. It would provide a decent distraction for me to sneak off and plan my escape.

## Chapter Five

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**D**eeper into the night, the jinn and the rebels miles behind us, the moon ready to give way to the sun, the king and queen slept before the campfire within another forest clearing. They looked so peaceful, wrapped in their furs, nestled under the small shelter built from deerskin and wood they set up every night. They insisted on building them every night rather than me making us something with my magic. Three shelters for three bodies, Brigid sleeping in the carriage.

I sat out in the open on a log, my legs crossed at the ankles. Sleep was the last thing on my mind, too much spinning inside my skull.

The fire burned low, running out of heat. I watched it slowly fade away, thinking of everything that had happened from the moment I'd been cursed with Berserker blood by the late Ren, the loss of my friends Boyd and Maeve, my father's death, my position as part of the Rosestar dynasty. Once the Crown Prince, heir to the Faerie Throne, set to be the most powerful fae in existence, that future robbed from me.

My family then betrayed me, licking the boots of Lord Florent and Spring now that the Gentry fae wielded a weapon of iron fire. But through the darkness, Kormac had been by my

side. He'd saved my life. He'd seeped his way into my... into my soul.

What was he? Who had he been to give me his gift, to stop me from dying?

*Not only written in the stars but from beyond them...*  
Brigid had said.

Now I would never know.

*Unless you wish for it...*

I picked up a stick half buried in snow and prodded the fire, embers flaring with the charcoal.

This wishing nonsense didn't help. The best thing for that thinking was for it to be sealed away, buried deep, never to be shown the light again.

Kormac was gone. There was no coming back. Vengeance remained the road forward, the one and only objective.

*Wish...*

Another thought came to me, another idea for a wish.

Wipe out Faerie, the ambitions of Florent and Lasair, of every living being. Tear down the skies, rip out the mountains, dry up the seas and lakes and rivers, leave nothing behind. Including me.

Be done with everything.

Only, that wasn't satisfying in the slightest. I had to hear the screams of my enemies, earn my revenge. Taking an easy path to victory with a mere few sentences wouldn't suffice. I wanted the stench of fire and blood, the breaking of bones, the images of defeat.

Musing on the past was for the weak. I was tired of being weak, of the defeat, of boots planted on my head. The time had come for my rising, for a new dawn in this wretched realm.

King Eoghan grunted in his sleep, snoring lightly for a few moments before falling into silence.

These two monarchs wanted their turns to deal out death, too. Their own axes to grind now they'd been given this second chance.

Together, we would march.

Together.

Together.

Together.

*We should be together, Kormac. Side by side, exploring these new feelings...*

*Are we meant to be more than companions?*

“We will never know,” I muttered to the dying fire.

“Your Majesty?”

A sensation like a tarantula crawling across my skin. “What is it, Brigid?” I refrained from turning to face her, happy with my eyes on the orange glow of the embers.

“I wanted to check on you,” she answered.

“There is no need. Go back to sleep.”

“I can't sleep. I'm worried about you.”

I folded my arms. “Why?”

“I always worry for my king. You've been through so much.”

“Because of you.”

“Because of destiny. Because you were meant to do this. Your dark caress is—”

“You made me kill the human.”

“He wasn’t human. Not really. From beyond the—”

“Stars,” I finished for her. “A vessel to serve me and my kingdom. That doesn’t lessen the hurt, Brigid. It never will.”

She floated closer, appearing to my left. “I’m sorry, Your Majesty. But I had to act when your dark caress called. If I could have done things differently, I would have. In a heartbeat. But I acted within my skill, within the power I had.”

“Splitting yourself apart,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Feeding me morsels of information, tantalizing me to move farther north.”

“For you. For the greater good.”

I couldn’t stop the escape of the responding chuckle. “What an interesting statement.”

“I—”

“Who is it you want dead? Some long-living rival? Did someone kill your family?”

“Your Majesty—”

“There must be a motive here, Brigid,” I interjected before she could simper. “I’ve given this some great thought, wondering why a darkling would be so desperate to have a new Tuatha king. Of course, it is obvious. What darkling wouldn’t want the chance to fight those who crushed their lands, took away their power? I would. I understand that completely. Yet there is more to this. I can feel it wafting off

your little skull. And I have no idea who you are, other than an old woman with a lust for shrimp.”

“Your—”

“Speak,” I commanded. “Tell me your story.”

“I—”

“Tell me, or I will crush your face into the embers.”

Her eyes widened, her lips quivering. “I... May I sit beside you?”

Strange for a head to sit anywhere. “You may.”

She lowered to my left side, landing on the snow-dusted log. “Aren’t you cold sitting on this, Your Majesty?”

I’d warmed my patch with magic. “Concern yourself with your story only.”

She sighed, looking up at me. “Is there anything else I can do to please you? My story is—”

“Why are you so hesitant? What are you hiding?”

Another sigh. “You are already a wise king.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment?

“You are correct in your thinking,” she continued. “I have been deeply hurt, betrayed by the love of my life. She... She did this to me.”

“Did what?”

“Aged me, cursed me with shadow magic. Took everything from me.”

I sat up, staring down at her. “Who did this to you?”

“Your grandmother.”

## Chapter Six

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**A**s night fell once again, the Sky Palace's ballroom became a riot of activity.

Crystals hanging from strings were strewn everywhere, constantly changing color. Occasionally they would pulse and open like flowers, releasing clouds of gold and silver glitter.

The glass floors were covered in it, a twinkling carpet under my feet. Angelus scooped it up, threw it in the air, danced under the crystals, singing my praises.

A gathering of crystals, resembling a bunch of pretty grapes glued to the wall, filled the room with music from various realms. Heavy on bass, sometimes shrill, often frenetic, designed to move the body. I played my part, dancing with old friends, pretending to enjoy myself. Even performed a few classic dance moves from decades ago—moves that'd made me popular.

My friends erupted into applause, relieved to see me being Titus.

“This is amazing!” Olivia declared, grabbing me by the forearms. “It's been so long since we had a party. Do you remember my last one?”

How could I forget? There were parties for everything, all of the time. The one she was talking about had been to celebrate her return from a job.

Marcus danced past us, twirling and laughing. He reached for our hands, and we joined him. Hopped together in a ring, our brethren clapping along.

Many Hands might have fixed my body, but my soul remained Kormac. Titus was there, but not strong enough to reclaim this glass shell as his own.

How hellpissing strange to talk about myself like that.

How strange to think *hellpiss* in this body.

As the night wore on, I began to plan my escape. The unrelenting music provided plenty of distraction. Every angelus was packed into the ballroom now, locked in euphoria.

Meter by meter, I wove through them, stopping to hug or dance, making my way closer to the door and freedom.

Eventually, I made it, hurrying down a corridor. My first stop would be Room 289, one of three hundred key rooms within the palace.

Two crystals exploded glitter over my head when I reached the first set of stairs. I jumped back, startled.

“Easy there!” an angelus said, running past me.

At least she didn’t ask me where I was going.

Visiting key rooms required Marcus’s permission because it was polite to always tell your leader things. Secrets were terrible things that didn’t exist here in our Sky Palace.

Titus always obeyed that rule, agreed wholeheartedly with it. Respected Marcus so much, admired an angelus who could



command such love, such order without resorting to any terrible methods.

Like a king's tyranny.

Three more crystals released glitter—they really were hung in every corner of the palace—before I reached Room 289.

To enter, a tapping pattern had to be performed on the handle. I knew it because Marcus trusted me with it.

*Misplaced...*

*Poor Marcus.*

*Poor Olivia.*

Ignoring my Titus guilt, I tapped the pattern, humming it in my head until the lock clicked open. I hurried inside, taking the green key off the hook. It was the only thing in the cramped, bare room.

With it in hand, I hurried to the east of the palace, acclimatized to the glitter explosions, not encountering another angelus on my way.

Thank the gods!

*Gods...*

I reached Whisper Room 3 in the tallest tower of the palace's east wing, pausing by the door. One of five rooms to observe the realms from, this was the only one to offer the whispering crystals to help with destiny without going into the world.

I had to see *him*, to try and speak with him before I made my final move to escape.

Thinking about leaving terrified me. It wouldn't be as easy as this, requiring breaking into Marcus's room and the chest containing the key to the Depart Room, which sat in the lowest part of Sky Palace.

Marcus had to give his approval, open the exit door for all called angelus. Not one of us had run away, or jumped into the sea of stars without a call.

I'd be the first to do it.

The first to break the rules.

The first to...

...to fall.

Whispering Room 3 was covered in crystals, each one a cylinder sticking out of the walls and ceiling. Like organ pipes after an explosion, haphazard and of different lengths, each one shimmering with iridescent light.

At the back of the room, nestled within crystals, was a glass desk and chair, a huge screen above it. A touchpad sat on the desk, ready to be directed.

Closing the door behind me—locking it with the key—I hurried to the chair and immediately started to work the pad. I traced a finger across the glass surface, scrolling through the file icons on the screen, searching for Faerie.

“Where are you?” I said to the glaring screen.

Faerie wasn't the only Faerie. Close to it, within another reality, sat a different version. There were still the lands of Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, but they circled one enormous ocean. The realm pressed against a version of Earth, and a realm healing itself, closed off from everyone and

everything—including angelus. But it whispered a word to me, and I was sure it said *siren*.

As fascinating as that might be, I moved on, eventually finding the Faerie I'd lived in as Kormac.

*Me...*

I looked down on a world of four continents and a splattering of islands. Summer to the east, Spring in the south, Autumn to the west, and Winter to the North.

How small it looked from here.

A realm of war and danger.

I couldn't wait to go back.

To the far east, beyond the vast ocean, the realm shifted into a place without fae.

The human realm—the one where Kormac's kind drifted into Faerie from. My ancestral home.

*Kormac's...*

*Mine...*

I opened more files connected to this realm, finding the *occupants* section. Names of humans and fae in alphabetical order by surname, their destinies locked. Marcus had the passcode to access them. I wasn't interested in any of it, only finding *him*. In changing things.

Destiny wasn't set in stone, often changeable. Sometimes we failed to push our charges correctly toward fate, or they simply resisted it and found a different path. When that happened, an angelus must step aside unless the new path called them to walk it.

Rosestar, Valance. Prince of Summer, heir of the Faerie Throne. Third-born son of King Oberon and Queen Shavon. Twenty-six years of age.

I tapped his name, leaned in to speak into a shard of crystal rising out of the desk. It curved toward me, waiting.

“Show him to me.”

The screen flickered, the map of Faerie coming closer and closer, zooming into the Winter continent. The southern part. Snow and trees, a cold place, a pin prick of light manifesting.

*Him.*

The screen zoomed in closer, showing more detail until it revealed a forest clearing and a dying campfire.

I saw him, my heart fluttering.

Strange. Hearts do not flutter in angelus chests.

*Changed...*

*Broken...*

The head of the old woman sat beside him, talking. Head? How was she a head?

He looked down at her, his silver hair tied back, listening intently. I ordered the screen to focus in closer.

Flawless, not one mark on that pale complexion.

Look at those lips.

Look at those obsidian eyes.

Look at that beauty.

I reached out toward the screen, wishing it was a portal for me to slip through. It looked so cold there. Although he didn't

so much as shiver, I wanted to hold him and shield him against the freezing wind and snow, have his body on mine.

When the old woman's head finally floated away, I angled my mouth closer to the desk crystal and tried my luck.

## Chapter Seven

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“My grandmother?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood to attention, disturbed by a chill beyond the snow and wind.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Before she ascended the throne for her hundred years.”

Sidhe fae monarchs were given a century to rule before being forced to step down for the next in line unless they were slain. Queen Dovelar Rosestar stepped down for my father, and he wanted to give way to my elder brother first or my sister second. Instead, he'd lost the two children he'd favored most, left with his one disappointment.

Me.

I tried to swallow, my lungs remembering to draw breath they probably didn't need. “You... You and the queen?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I'm sorry. I never wanted you to know this tale.”

I rubbed my neck, the chill replaced by a throbbing ache. “This isn't possible. How... I... I don't understand.” My mind was overrun with ivy choking my capacity to think clearly. “Did you...” I struggled. “Did you really... Did I mishear?”

“I wandered Faerie for many centuries looking for love. A darkling knows long life like a Sidhe and a Tuatha. I was searching for that one person who would understand me.”

I sat back, listened as the sky slowly lightened toward dawn.

“Many lovers, many times broken-hearted. Many women, human and fae. With Winter long dead, any purpose I might serve out of reach, I hunted with my heart. One day, on a Summer beach close to the Sidhe mounds, I saw her running through the waves. Hair as silver as yours, ever so sleek, her eyes a radiant blue, her luminous pale skin as radiant as moonlight. A true beauty she has gifted you with.”

Without the vibrant, colorful eyes of the Sidhe. But we did share the silver hair of our kind.

“My heart stopped, heat pooling in my belly,” the old woman continued. “I knew the Sidhe fae were beautiful beyond compare, even more so than Tuatha fae, I must admit. Her eyes sparkled as they met mine, and I approached her, sweaty and dirty from my travels and another failed relationship. This time with a mermaid, an exhausting time of sexual ferocity—the mer really are rampant creatures. I enjoyed her for a while until I realized I was nothing but a sexual toy for her. I left the mermaid in Spring, heading for Summer, deciding on the north of the continent, contemplating my return to Winter.”

“Until you met my grandmother,” I said.

“Yes, Your Majesty. We fell in love quickly, in secret. I would hide in the woods near the mounds, even found myself an abandoned cottage there. Turned it into a home. She would come to me when she could escape. To make love, to talk, to fall deeper in love. We planned on running away.”



“Impossible.”

A deep, lamenting sigh. “I know. She was destined to be queen, set to marry your grandfather and take over from her father. But I lived in hope she would choose me over Prince Aidan, that our love would be enough. Until it wasn’t.”

I never met my grandfather. He was killed battling Fomorian fae many years before my birth.

“What happened?” I asked when she fell into a drawn-out silence.

Her gray tongue traced her lips. “Things began to shift, her behavior erratic. One moment she wanted to kiss me. The next, she was anxious, angry. Paranoid even.”

“I suppose a queen-in-waiting would be scared of having her illicit affair discovered.”

“Yes. I tried to placate her, to make things better. But she spiraled into fear, started to blame me for turning her head from her path to queenhood.”

“I see.”

“A deep shame, regret. It drove her to take steps against me.” A long, heavy sigh. “She came to me one night in a heavy cloak, most of her face hidden inside a hood. I’ll never forget the darkness, how foreboding it was. She wasn’t Dovelar anymore, but a creature from a nightmare with a pretty face.”

Exactly how I thought of my wretched grandmother.

“She told me she hated me for what I did to her. That she would always hate me and blame me for cursing her with feelings for me. In return, she would curse me.” A shaky breath to pause with. “A man entered my cottage, a Fomorian

fae. A shadow sorcerer. Before I could react to him, he put his curse upon me. Aged my body inside and out. I tried to resist with my magic, failed to do so. His curse was potent and permanent.”

“She worked with the enemy,” I said.

“She did.”

I wasn’t entirely shocked by her working with the other side. She was still doing it.

“You can’t ever lift this curse?” I asked.

“No.”

“Should I try?”

“No. It will not break as long as I draw breath.”

“I took your head from your body,” I said. “Shouldn’t that have tricked the curse into thinking you died? You have no lungs.”

“Clearly not, My King.”

“What if I kill you now? I can bring you back as I have everything else?”

“I will return to draw breath, though. Thus cursed again.”

I felt my forehead crease. “Do you think that will happen?”

“We can try, but it will only waste time.”

Honestly, despite her story, I wanted her to remain just a head. At least for now.

I nodded, listened to the rest of her tale.

“After they cursed me, the shadow sorcerer took me away from Summer in a boat. Dumped me in the northern reaches of Autumn. And so, I wandered farther north, back into my

homeland, until the hope of you came, when I saw beyond the stars and knew I could change the world.”

I remembered what she'd said to me... *And then you were born with your 'cursed' appearance, and the roses bloomed pink, and I read destiny within the stars. I knew hope had returned.*

“Kormac was sent to you, to aid you, part of your destiny,” she said, his name on her lips setting my blood to run cold.

“So you've said,” I replied.

“I saw him, I saw you, and—”

“Enough. I don't want to hear any of *that* again.”

Written in the stars, destined to be together until I took his life.

What a vicious knife in the dark.

I directed the conversation away from *him*. “Do you mean to kill my grandmother?”

“I'm not sure what I want to do, Your Majesty.”

And I wasn't sure whether to be angry or on her side. She wanted revenge, had used Kormac and me. Yet she'd also led me to gain the power to bring down my enemies. Precisely why she would not be reunited with her body anytime soon. It was being stored in the lower dungeons of the Winter Keep, buried under snow, filled with my life-giving magic.

*Kormac's magic...*

If my grandmother were any sort of decent fae who loved her grandson, who didn't turn on him and leap into the bed of the enemy, I would be repulsed by Brigid's lust for vengeance against her. Sadly, the former queen wasn't the kind of

grandparent to offer love to anyone but herself. Possibly her dead son, her other grandchildren. But never me. She'd loathed me from the day I was born, the child without the true markings of the Sidhe fae. Cursed, as she liked to call me, as the Summer court often whispered.

"Is this the truth, Brigid?" I asked.

"I swear by Danu and the human's gods, the past, the future, and the present."

"That's a lot of swearing."

"I wouldn't lie to you, King Valance. I want the best for you, for Winter. I want to see you take the Faerie Throne and shape this world under your rule. Things must change. This silly, endless war between the seelie and unseelie courts has to end. Break it, be the one and only court to swear allegiance to." She lifted off the log by a few inches. "I believe in whatever vision you decide upon."

"And that is a lot of faith," I answered.

"I know. But you're of the Tuatha blood. You have brought Winter back to life. Just look at the sky. It will soon be dawn. The sun hasn't touched these lands since Winter was broken. Now the dark fae can enjoy it again, see the days move by rather than pass time in the endless stagnated twilight that was before."

Queen Dovelar and Brigid. Interesting, very interesting. A terrible tale, my grandmother forever showing herself to be a vile woman.

"My motivations weren't and aren't all about Dovelar, only part of it," she added. "You are my purest focus. I want you to be king. Your grandmother is insignificant within the grander scheme of things."

The old woman was clearly heartbroken, which I could use to make my grandmother pay, to suffer.

“Listen to me, Brigid,” I said. “If I discover this story to be false, I will make you suffer in ways you cannot imagine.”

“I understand. Every word is true, Your Majesty. I hated telling you, but I want you to understand me better.”

“Good. I’m glad you did tell me.” What was this sensation tickling my soul? Sympathy for the dark fae who’d manipulated me?

“May I say something else?” she asked.

“You may.”

“I’m deeply sorry for the loss of Kormac,” she said. “Even if I knew what had to happen to give you his power, for you to feed it back into Winter. I should have—”

“Enough.” My voice was loud, startling an owl into flight on the other side of the clearing. “We are done with this.”

“As you wish, Your Majesty.” She went to float away.

“Wait.”

She stopped. “My King?”

“Maybe I’ve been too harsh with you,” I said, the words dirty on my tongue. “I will never forgive you for how things unfolded, but I also thank you for this power. For your belief in me. You have saved me on many occasions.”

“Your Majesty...”

“You said I would face my destiny here in the north, and I did, no matter how painful.” I drew in a long, agonizing breath.

*Kormac...*

“I want to reward you in some capacity,” I continued. “Not with the return of your body, not yet. But I want you to have my grandmother.” I stood up, brushing snow from my cloak. “If she survives the end of the war, then she is yours. I won’t touch her. I don’t want to see her face if I can help it. But I do want to know that she suffers. She has to. What she did to you isn’t insignificant, and neither is her betrayal of me and our family name. Do what you will with her, if the opportunity arises. My only request is you don’t kill her, not for a long time. I want every hour of every day to be agony. Death is too good an escape. Do you accept this?”

She smiled at me, revealing her broken, rotting teeth. “With my deepest thanks, My King.”

I nodded, tearing my eyes away from her grizzly appearance. “We leave as soon as the sun rises. If you require more rest, take it now. We have a big day ahead of us.”



AS THE SUN broke over the horizon, the fire now dead, something came upon the bitter wind. A soft, warm sound.

A whisper. Familiar. Masculine.

Calling to me...

My name...

*“Valance...”* it said.

I looked to the sky, pink hues flooding the purple.

*“Valance...”*

My skin prickled with anticipation, with a hint of fear. I listened. I longed for the voice a third time.

*“Valance...”*

I got to my feet, reaching for the heavens with one hand as if I could suddenly touch them, pluck that voice from the air.

“Is that you?” I asked.

*“Valance...”*

“Kormac?” I wondered. “Are you talking to me?”

The voice didn’t respond, didn’t come again as the sun rose higher.

“Kormac?’ I tried again.

Nothing. My imagination playing tricks on me, a punishment for not sleeping.

*Kormac is gone.*

*Forever.*

I had to accept that.

## Chapter Eight

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I tried, I really did. But every time I spoke more than his name, the connection to Valance faded.

Because this wasn't how Whisper Room 3 should be used—not to communicate to a man I desperately wanted to kiss again. It was meant for influence, for providing help. Consequently, all he heard was his name.

Fucking hellpiss!

Regardless, I tried again and again until he stopped hearing me, the man and woman sleeping beneath those shelters waking up as the sun came up.

“Valance!” I cried, tempted to yank the desk crystal out and scream into it until my voice shook the realm of Faerie.

Something strange happened then, something completely mystifying to an angelus.

A tear rolled down my left cheek. An actual hot tear as my heart ached. Then another, a third, a fourth until liquid dripped off my chin.

Heartache and tears?

I really was changed beyond repair.



VALANCE.

He wouldn't leave my mind.

Valance.

How incredible he'd looked there in the clearing.

Valance.

My prince.

Alone in my room, moonlight spilling across the glass floor and my hard body, I looked down at myself. At my impending hardness, at this new change in my body. My decorative cock ached at first, a painful throb as the glass let out a series of strange cracking sounds.

I went to touch it, holding back as a flush of green and blue light ignited the shaft and the balls.

A laugh burst from my lips as I watched it grow, the pain giving way to throbbing lust. My cock was a light in the darkness, sticking outward as it had done many times as Kormac, ready for stroking.

"Hello," I greeted it, feeling utterly ridiculous.

Tentatively, I reached down to touch it. My glassy fingers lightly connected to the glass shaft. A thousand licks of pleasure ran up and down my spine.

With my other hand, I reached for my balls. Cupped the hard glass, kneading them as I liked to do when alone on my pallet on cold Autumn nights, thinking of warmer climes and hotter bedrooms.

Kormac's pallet...

My pallet...

I tried a stroke, curling my hands around the shaft and gently pulling back the foreskin. A strange sight. No skin rolled because there was no flesh, yet it felt just like a tug on my cock, a kneading of my balls, and the same moan came out of me as part of this self-pleasure.

I glanced at the door. Should I continue? If Olivia or Marcus walked in, they would be horrified. An angelus using his body like this? How awful. How wrong. They'd undo me again, try something else to cleanse me of my Kormac life.

The risk didn't stop me. I stroked myself, needing more, hungry for the climax. Especially when I thought of him, my beautiful prince. His lustrous silver hair, his pale flesh, how incredible it felt to bury my fleshy Kormac cock inside him and listen to his breath flutter as I plowed into him.

My strokes were harder, faster, more desperate. I grunted, playing with my glass balls as I took myself closer to the edge.

Valance.

Valance.

Valance.

This was for him, for me. A prelude. I would use my cock with him again. Touch every inch of his skin, let him touch me. No glass, but flesh and desire, lost in each other and the pleasure of our joining bodies.

*I'm coming, Valance.*

*I'm coming.*

I swallowed a cry, my glass balls a strange blend of pain and vibrations I recalled from the many times I did this as Kormac—by my own hand or by someone else's. Shards of

glittering glass exploded from the tip of my cock, tiny little particles littering the floor like the crystal's glitter. They scattered, rang out in a series of clinking, pretty sounds.

“By the gods!” I declared.

Pleasure. Incredible, strange pleasure for this body.

A knock at my door.

Fuck.

“Titus?” Olivia called from the other side. “Are you okay?”

“One moment!”

Gods! The glass seed was everywhere. How could I clean it in time? If I didn't open the door, she'd come in. There were no secrets, after all. She had no reason not to come in because Titus would not be up to anything like this.

Never.

Never.

Never.

I hurried to the door, pulling it open, and quickly slipping out.

I bumped into her. She staggered backward, letting out a surprised yelp.

“Titus? What's wrong?” She gathered herself, taking me by the shoulders.

“Nothing,” I replied a little too loudly.

She leaned to the side, looking at my door. “Are you sure?”

“I’m very sure. I just needed to take a break from the party.”

Eyes back to me. “Oh. Is it too much for you?”

“No.”

“I’m so sorry. We should’ve waited, given you time. You’re still adjusting. I—”

I cupped her chin, silencing her with my familiar Titus move. “I love my party, Olivia. Please don’t worry. I’m fine. I’m so happy.”

“Are you sure?” she asked softly.

“Yes. Really.” A crystal burst behind us. She spun to giggle at it, releasing me.

“As long as you are,” she added.

“Come on, let’s go back and dance.”

I took her hand, running through the corridors back to the ballroom with heat in my groin, hungry for more of it.

## Chapter Nine

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## VALANCE

**L**istening to my body, I eventually slept dreamlessly inside the carriage.

I awoke curled up on one of the cushioned benches when the snow horses stopped, the rocking motion no longer a soothing vibration.

Queen Orla was the first face I saw.

“Your Majesty,” she said, bowing her head in greeting.

King Eoghan did the same as I sat up.

Brigid sat silently between them, offering me a warm yet terrifying grin.

“Is it still morning?” I asked. Thick, dark purple curtains were drawn across the carriage windows. Only a hint of sunlight glowed around the edges.

“Early afternoon,” Orla answered. “Did you sleep well?”

I yawned, stretching my arms above my head. “To a fashion. I needed the rest.”

The two former monarchs nodded in agreement.

“Anything to report?” I asked.

“No,” Orla answered. “It has been a journey lacking in rebels and jinn.”

“Thank Danu for that.”

Did I still thank the blessed goddess for anything? Did she have her hand in this journey of mine?

I brushed the question aside, opening the curtains. Bright sunlight kissed my face, straining my eyes for a few moments.

“Incredible,” Orla said. “Every time I see sunlight, I can never quite believe it.”

“Indeed,” I answered.

The landscape had changed. We no longer wove through forests but open, snowy planes dotted with tall mountains on the horizon. Smoke curled into the sky from some of those distant monoliths.

“We are approaching giant territory, My King,” Eoghan said. “First, we come to the bridge over Winter Fire where a troll will await payment for crossing.”

I sat forward, my elbows on my thighs, chin resting on clasped hands. “A toll from a troll?”

“Winter is a land of tolls and trolls, especially when it comes to bridges. Often there are dark fae living under them or waiting on one side. The bridge into giant country has always been guarded by a troll.” He frowned. “Attempts to cross are usually met in bloody ends.”

“And not for the troll,” Orla contributed.

I leaned back, considering this. “That ends today. At least when we arrive.”

They both nodded.



I looked to Brigid. “What do you say?”

“I say play this carefully, Your Majesty,” she offered.

“My first instinct is to kill this troll if it dares to ask a toll of me,” I said. “Yet I know that will not endear me to the giants.”

I could make them all my slaves if I wanted. Force them to fight by enchantment. But that thought sat heavy, a repugnant idea. I wanted their loyalty because I’d earned it, not forced it out of them. And my ego needed to be fed with their love—my royal ego.

However, the dark fae had to understand I did not suffer any denial of my power.

*Is that not a sign of the power corrupting you already?  
Your word or no word at all?*

Wonderful. I always enjoyed contradicting ideas in my head.

I knew I was one step away from enslaving Winter, or burning it along with the rest of Faerie. How awful would ruling a world of charred earth and smoke-choked skies be? Did I need living bodies around me? Should I keep Faerie for myself, wander alone and forever mourn the loss of everything?

What a terrible idea.

*Is it?*

It took two more hours until the landscape began to shift. The mountains snaked closer, working their way from the horizon to cut off the snow planes ahead of us. Before long, they towered above us, monstrous and snow-covered, warning travelers to go no further.

But the most fascinating change was the addition of a river flowing alongside the mountains. I first spotted it a mile back, only for it to disappear. Now it showed itself once again within a small valley acting as a moat to the mountains. Pearlescent water, steam curling from its surface, radiating incredible heat. The base of the mountain and the edges of the valley were free of snow because of it.

“Winter Fire?” I asked.

“Yes,” Orla answered. “The warmest thing in these lands. A river of milky fire.”

“It is liquid pearl.”

“Yes.”

We reached a gray stone bridge, a simple crossing with no sides to the structure.

“This is it,” Eoghan said. “The crossing.”

Standing on this side of the bridge, watching our every move, was a terrifying figure. Huge, well over seven-feet tall, pale green skin stretched over his frame, black fur covering his crotch, his feet, and shoulders. The troll held up an enormous gray axe. Pale blond hair flickered in the wind, icy blue eyes locked on me.

“Halt!” he bellowed as we got too close, his booming voice echoing high in the mountains.

I stopped, my companions flanking me. “Hello, there.”

The troll stared.

“Hello?” I tried again. “May we speak?”

“You is the new king?” the troll said.

“I am. Please stand aside and allow me to cross.”

“I gots orders, Majesty. Lord Cullen says none can cross unless they pays in bones.”

“Bones?”

The troll sniffed, wiping his bulbous nose on the back of his wart-covered hand. “Giants, they loves some bones. It’s the marrow, Majesty. Tastiest thing to them.”

“And what about trolls?” I asked.

“We likes the bloody meat of hares, Majesty?” He patted his swollen belly. “Delicious.”

“I see. What is your name?”

“I’m Declan.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Declan.”

“Same, Majesty. Same.”

“We have a problem.”

He stared at me.

“I’m not sure I want to pay the toll,” I continued. “Especially a bone price.”

“That’s the rules, Majesty. Lord Cullen likes his rules.”

“Does he?”

Declan nodded slowly.

“Interesting. So do I.”

The troll cocked a bushy eyebrow. “You has to pay, King. No one gets away with it. You don’t, you goes into Winter Fire.” He juttet a thumb at the water.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, Majesty.”

“I have no bones to pay.”

He looked between us. “I see lots of bones here.” His gaze lingered on Brigid. “How you living?”

“Because I allow her to live,” I said.

Eyes back to me. “You—”

I held up a hand, and he shut his mouth. “I have a question for you, Declan.”

He nodded.

“Did life return to these parts? Was there anyone or anything dead that came back to you or Lord Cullen that is precious?”

His left foot kicked at the ground. “Winter Roses. They came back to us. No bloom for centuries. Always waited.” A sniff. “They grow on the mountains, on the other side.” He pointed behind him. “Petals make Rose Creams, a treat for all of us. Can’t get them anywhere but here. But that was a long time ago when the old queen lived.”

Orla bristled beside me.

“Lord Cullen is so happy to see them,” he added. “Says it’s like we living in the glory days of his grandpa.”

“I see,” I said. “A treat from ages past has returned. I would like to try one of these Rose Creams.”

“Pay the toll.”

I offered the troll my sweetest of smiles. “Ah, but you are missing the point. Because of me, your Winter Roses grow again. I poured life back into these lands, an energy far greater than any Tuatha monarch has done before.”

Declan’s expression was blank.

“This is a new age. A new beginning for all of us. I must speak with your lord, not waste time with these silly rules.”

“But rules are rules.”

“Indeed they are. And I can take away the life that flows into your lord’s precious roses.”

“But—”

“No, no. I’m done here. If you want to stick with this rule, you are welcome to.”

“He will hurt me if I don’t, Majesty.”

“Then I will wait.”

I closed my eyes, becoming one with the life-giving side of my magic. It ran through the earth beneath my feet, swirled in the air, as far as the clouds, in that steam coming off the river.

Through the mountains to the other side. Ah, yes. Roses growing in the snow as high as halfway up the mountains. Returned after so long.

“Goodbye for now,” I whispered.

I felt them wither and die. Every single one.

Moments later, a roar boomed from within the mountains like thunder. I opened my eyes to meet it, watching a flock of startled birds fly across the pale violet sky.

“I think I got his attention,” I said.

The troll swallowed heavily, glancing behind him. “What happened?”

“You will see, Declan. You will see.”

# Chapter Ten

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The morning after the party, I ran in the meadows. I played more of my Titus role. And the more I did, the more I rejected it. The old me wasn't coming back. There was no hope for that old life, but there was for Kormac's.

My decision to return to Faerie had been set in stone.

Now to implement my escape.

Another party had been planned for this evening. Everyone enjoyed last night so much they didn't want the fun to end. In fact, Marcus suggested the next seven nights be one party after another.

As the celebrations got underway, so would my plan.

Get to Marcus's room and break into his chest. Take the key to the Depart Room, jump into the stars.

It sounded easy, but dread pooled in my guts—a very Kormac feeling.

I danced with Olivia for a while. There was guilt there, over the rejection of our friendship. She had been a great friend, the best one of all angelus. But not now, not after so much change within me. We could never go back to our carefree days. She could never understand my new

complexities. She'd reject them all, beg Many Hands to do something. Turn me into a ball of light again, say it was too soon for me to be whole again.

*Goodbye, Olivia, I told her silently. Titus is dead.*

As I skipped with Olivia across the dancefloor, I thought about my impending fall back to Faerie. It wouldn't kill me, even without the undying power. The stars carried angelus down safely. But would it hurt?

*Who cares?*

A worthy price to pay.

Was Valance a worthy man to do this for? After everything he'd done, the absolute hate and disgust... and the passion, the tenderness, the suffering he'd endured, the other side of him shown to me, how we were growing closer and...

Yes. He would be worth it. I wanted more of him. I wanted him to be okay, to succeed, to have a chance at life. Maybe I cared too much, but I still cared. And that was enough for me. Prince Valance Rosestar ran through my blood, a beautiful taint never to be cleared.

*I'm coming, Valance...*

Olivia moved from me to Marcus, and I made my exit the same as I did last night. Weaving through glass bodies, heading for Marcus's room with a million apologies lingering on my tongue. Glitter exploding overhead, fear overwhelming. Up stairways, dashing down corridors, ready to betray. Time seemed to slow, my limbs moving through invisible sludge.

*I'm doing this...*

*I'm doing this...*



I came to Marcus's door. Without hesitation, I hurried inside. His door was always unlocked because of angelus trust.

*I'm so sorry...*

His room was much the same as mine, but bigger, with a cloudy glass chest resting on a glass table. This glass wasn't blue or green but white and thick. I touched its lock, caressing the keyhole. I had no idea where Marcus's key was because I didn't need to know.

No key required.

I picked up the heavy chest, held it above my head. This was it, the moment the path ahead allowed for *no* turnarounds.

I counted to three and threw the chest into the floor as hard as I could.

A loud crash, the chest cracking along with the glass floor beneath it. I picked it up again, struck the same place repeatedly. Fissures spread across the floor from the crack I'd made. Shards of glass fell from the chest, spidery damage across its surface.

A few more hits, and it'd be open. Four more, to be precise. It burst open on its right side, the key falling out along with more shards, hitting the floor with a shrill clang. I dropped the chest and scooped up the white glass key.

By the gods! The damage to the floor! Those fissures reached as far as the walls, the main crack a small crater.

"I'm sorry," I said, heading for the door.

Time to move quickly.

The door opened before I reached it, Marcus filling the doorway.

“Hellpiss!” I bit out.

“Hellpiss, Titus?” he said, folding his arms. “What are you doing?”

“I...” What could I possibly tell him?

“Well?” His eyes assessed the damage, the key in my hand.

“I...”

“You’re trying to leave,” he answered for me. “Why?”

“I have to go back.”

“But your job is done. And you need to be healed properly. Why would you want to go back there?” He gasped in realization. “No. Not that fae prince.”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I have to see him.”

“You’re deeply corrupted.”

“Let me go.”

Marcus took a step forward. “I’m so sorry you’re sick, Titus. We were wrong to give you back your body. But we can make it right. We can go to Many Hands now.”

“No.”

“We can. That terrible old woman hurt you deeply with her meddling. If only we’d seen she wanted your undying.” He shook his head. “Things will be okay. You will be fully Titus and forget everything about that realm and what you did there.” He took another step forward. “You are an angelus, not a human. You are Titus, my friend. Kormac is dead, nothing but a job you did and did well. Now you must heal.” He opened his arms to me.

I was tempted to drop the key, to run into his embrace and get the help I needed.

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

I tried to speak, losing my voice.

“Come, Titus. Come to me.”

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

“Titus? Please. Let me help you. We can’t lose you. We love you.”

Still no voice.

“Think about what you would be leaving behind if you fall through the stars like this. What if you fade for good? What if there is no coming back?”

“Am I the first to want this?” I asked.

“If you go, you will have forsaken your duty.”

“Am I the first?” I asked again.

He nodded. “You are. But I hope you won’t go through with it.”

Why did he have to come here? “I have to go, Marcus. You don’t understand.”

“Then talk to me.”

“I’m not Titus anymore. I’m Kormac.”

“No. You’re not a human.”

“I touched myself,” I went on. “I indulged in human pleasure last night. This cock is functional. I feel things only a

human can feel. The old woman has changed me, but so has Valance Rosestar. He is my destiny.”

“No, he is not,” Marcus responded calmly. “He has his own destiny you helped him meet. You are not part of it now because it is done, even if corrupted.”

“How do you know?”

He didn’t have an answer.

“We were written in the stars,” I added.

“Yes. You were.”

“So—”

“Because that is part of your job, nothing else. There is no romantic destiny here. Valance was meant to be a Tuatha king, to discover his dark caress and follow that path. Once he reached that, your role in his life ended.”

“No!” I barked. “You don’t know anything. This isn’t over. He is still my destiny.”

“Titus!” he snapped back. “It’s over. Forget him, forget the pollutants in your system. I’m taking you to Many Hands right now. I won’t lose you to this. You deserve so much better than —”

I charged at him, my body acting of its volition. My fist came up and collided with his face so hard I cracked his cheek. He fell backward in surprise. I jumped over him, running for the Depart Room.

“Titus! No!” he called after me.

This was it now. There would be no second chances. If Marcus caught up to me and overpowered me, all would be

lost. Many Hands would trap me as a ball of light, and eventually, Kormac would be extinguished.

Kormac had to live.

I had to hold Valance again.

That certainty drove up my speed, taking me to the Depart Room quicker. Down, down, down, deep into the bowels of Sky Palace.

“Titus!” Marcus’s voice was distant, but he’d soon catch up to me, probably with extra help.

I made it to the door. Key in the lock, pushing it open. Once inside, I slammed it closed and locked it again. These doors were hard to break down, so I’d bought myself some time.

The Depart Room was small, big enough for about six angelus bodies. Empty of furniture, a second door of milky glass directly ahead of me. Unlocked.

Pushing down on its glass handle, I pulled it open to reveal the sea of stars beyond it. The firmament twinkled, seemed to ripple like the surface of a sea of water. Golden and white fire at once, a beautiful place to take a dive.

With one leap, everything would change forever. The first angelus to leave. The first angelus to forsake his duty. Would they speak of me? Would they remember me? Would they wipe me from our history?

A heavy bang on the door behind me.

“Titus!” Marcus’s voice.

“Please!” Olivia was there too. “Stop this and come out.”

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

I didn't answer.

“Titus!”

Their voices blended into one, a distant hum. No matter how much they pleaded, how hard they slammed their fists into the door, my mind was set on the stars.

Jump.

Jump.

Jump.

Goodbye to Titus.

I counted to three and leaped into the firmament, whispering, “Take me to him.”

# Chapter Eleven

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VALANCE

It didn't take long for a human to arrive on the bridge. A woman of dark brown skin dressed in white furs, boots clicking on the stone as she approached.

She seemed rather shocked to be out here.

"And who might you be?" I asked as she stopped beside the troll.

"I speak for Lord Cullen, Your Majesty." She bowed her head respectfully.

"But do you have a name?" I countered.

"Shea. Human servant to his most gracious lord."

"Very good, Shea. Now speak for your lord."

She cleared her throat, straightened her spine. "My master requests your presence immediately, without delay and without the need for a bone toll."

Lord Cullen knew I'd take his precious roses from him permanently if he refused me.

The troll grunted, stepping aside.

"I'm pleased to see his lordship is amiable."

Shea licked her lips. "Please follow me, Your Majesty."



“Thank you.”

*Take down this mountain. Show this giant there is only one here to be feared, to make such requests.*

*Only one true power...*

Tempting, yet not an action I wanted to take. Yet. Winning the giants over naturally would win more hearts than hate. I wanted hearts.

*Hearts in my palms, blood running down my arms as they beat their last...*

*You should...*

*Take them all...*

*Make them scream.*

I silenced my inner fury, that seductive voice, and crossed the bridge, following Shea with Orla and Eoghan behind me, Brigid floating beside me. The heat of Winter Fire was a pleasant relief from the cold.

“I’m so glad to be here,” the old woman said. “This is it, a key moment in the way forward for you, Your Majesty. You will see.”

“Indeed,” I said, glancing back at the troll. He watched us leave, silent with confusion on his face.

Poor thing. The rules he held so close were now upside down. He would have to get used to more of it from this moment on. At least as far as I was concerned. These old rules and laws were nothing but dusty and irrelevant.

We followed a rocky path cutting through the mountains, a slow trek behind Shea. She kept her head facing forward, never looking back, never saying anything to me. So, I took in

the steep slopes either side of me, terrifyingly high, unnerving in their closeness. The path was narrow, only wide enough for two to walk side by side. Orla flanked me, Eoghan behind me. Of course, there was room for Brigid to float close to my left shoulder.

Silence, only the wind and the occasional tumbling of small rocks down the slopes. It was warm here due to Winter Fire, not much snow on either side of this valley. I felt through the ground with my magic, finding an offshoot spring running beneath us from the main river, bubbling upward into the mountains, flowing in the direction we were headed.

Eventually, the valley opened into a vast expanse of land ringed with mountains. I barely saw the furthest ones in the distance, so many miles away. But those towering above me were the highest I'd ever witnessed in all my years.

“By Danu...” I breathed.

And they weren't the only mountains here.

“The giants, Your Majesty,” Brigid spoke softly, nervousness in her tone.

At a guess, I would suggest these men and women stood at around twenty feet in height, maybe even taller than that. Honestly, I had no idea. They were huge, came in various skin colors, all of them hairy, every single specimen carved from intimidating muscle with enormous hands and strong jawlines. No clothing, their bodies completely exposed to the elements. The hair must provide some insulation, though there were so many bubbling Winter Fire springs around, releasing steam and warmth, I considered stripping off myself. This must be the warmest place in Winter, feeling much like a day in Summer.

I removed my cloak, the heat too much for my thick clothing. “Incredible.”

My eyes discovered more of this place. Lush patches of green, flower beds, and areas for growing crops, animals grazing in other parts, ringed in by fences. Trees with fruit, humans bathing in the springs, more trolls, mud huts with straw roofs for the smaller folk, huge cave entrances fit for a giant to stomp through. A gathering of life, a functioning society cut off from the rest of Winter.

That society paused, all eyes on us strangers standing at the top of a sloping path.

I smiled.

A giant approached, the ground shaking as he walked. Copper-skinned with magnificent silver hair and a thick beard to match, his enormous cock and balls swinging, he came to a stop before the path, looming over me. His amber eyes were menacing slits, an angry pink scar under his right eye.

“Lord Cullen, I presume,” I opened pleasantly.

He opened his mouth, a hot wind rushing out of it. By Danu, his teeth were extraordinary and incredibly white.

“The new king of Winter,” he said.

His voice boomed, assaulting my ears. I winced, gritting my teeth in response.

“A pleasure to meet you,” I responded, craning my neck.

“The king who took my roses.”

“In order to get your attention,” I replied. “And *I* returned those roses to you in the first place.”

A rumble, a growl. “I suppose you did. You have my thanks and my plea to give them back.”

“When I’m ready, I will.”

“Why are you here, Your Majesty? To flaunt your power? To make threats?”

“I’m here to speak with you.” My neck began to ache from looking up.

“Why?”

“I want you to join me in my war against my enemies.”

“That’s your business, King. Not mine.”

What a miserable creature. “Oh, but it is the business of Faerie’s that Lord Florent and Lasair are stopped. They cannot be king and queen, and they cannot be allowed to rule this realm.”

“But you can?”

“Yes. I can.”

He turned his massive head to look at a nearby, fair-skinned female giant. “You’re sore you lost your turn to inherit the Faerie Throne.” He faced me again. “The politics beyond Winter do not interest me, Your Majesty. We have lived a long time away from such poison, survived the curse that broke most of this continent.”

“But Winter is part of Faerie,” I said. “And so are you, My Lord. They will attack here. They will want complete dominance over every land, over every sea. Times are changing. You must understand that.”

A sigh, a blast of wind from his mouth, whipping up my hair.

“We don’t want war,” he said.

“But war is coming.”

His bushy eyebrows knitted together. “And you took away the roses to illustrate your point? Follow you, or you will take more?”

My neck couldn’t take anymore. I rolled it, along with my shoulders, then summoned the rocks beneath me. They cracked and trembled, bending to my will. Came out of the earth as a platform, rising until I stood eye-level with the giant lord.

“Much better,” I said.

He backed away a few steps, the female giant coming closer.

“What did you do?” she asked, her green eyes taking in every inch of the new rocky structure I’d built.

“My neck hurt,” I answered, rubbing the back of it.

“You summoned the earth to do that?” she added.

“I did. What’s your name?”

“Lady Fia. Wife of Lord Cullen.”

“King Valance Rosestar.” I bowed to her. I then bowed to her husband. “I have not come here to threaten you but to ask you to join me. Because war is coming, whether you want to admit it or not. You will have to fight for this lovely haven, for your place in the world. Spring has acquired terrible power of iron fire.”

“A terrible thought,” Lady Fia said.

“A terrible truth,” I answered. “The toxicity of iron will kill everything.”

Lord Cullen growled. “And what about your new power?”

What a tenacious giant. “It can do many terrible things and many good things. I only wish to use it to end the impending madness and give Winter life.”

*Do you?*

*Burn it all. Scorched Faerie and dead seas. Nothing left. Leave no life. Deny it, be the antagonist of every heartbeat.*

“But you wanted to show off,” Lord Cullen retorted. “By giving and taking, which to me is a sign of a heavy lust for power.” He shook his head. “We’ve enjoyed years without a Tuatha monarch such as those beside you. They always presented problems, wanted to rule us with iron fists, to build settlements here. Desecrate this land. So much blood has been spilled, so much war has stained the south.” Another growl down at the former fae king and queen. “This is the beginning of history repeating itself. We will lose in the end, though. Because of your greater magic. You will want to take and take and take, unable to stomach our self-governance when your power finally rots you to the core.”

*If you live to see any of those things...*

“I understand you are king,” he continued, “what you have done by pouring life back into Winter. But that doesn’t entice me to bend the knee. It doesn’t change anything. It simply makes you more dangerous.”

*Then I will force your fucking knees to the ground before I take your head!* “Is there anything I can do to convince you that the bloody history will remain in the past?”

“No.”

“A very certain answer.”

“The hurt runs too deep.”

“I’m sorry.”

He looked to Lady Fia. They linked their giant hands.

How sweet.

“If war is coming here, we will fight,” Lord Cullen said.  
“But only if it threatens us.”

“It will, in time.”

“Can’t you destroy it with a snap of your finger?” Lady Fia wondered.

I shook my head. “I can do significant damage with my magic, but I need help. Winter must unite. Do you not want revenge for being a forgotten realm, even if you survived the curse?”

I already knew how Lord Cullen would answer.

“We have no loyalty to anywhere beyond these mountains,” he said.

“I see.”

And so, I searched for something to use. This far-reaching expanse held many whispers, many bones, much blood seeped into the soil. The long-dead, giants and humans, animals and trolls, even one or two darklings. Slaughtered in battle by Tuatha, armies of the former kings and queens. A terrible betrayal against one’s own kind. I understood the hurt, the resistance. I would feel the same. I did feel the same after my own family abandoned me, from my grandmother to my cousins, all turning to the other side, not a single one of them jumping to my defense. Even my late father wanted me dead before I... before I killed him.

I licked my lips, seeing beyond, prying deeper. Should life pour deeper into this warm earth, the long-dead would return. I could call upon the fallen to be a gift for these giants. That would help my cause.

Wait...

What was that? What were those bones even bigger than a giant's? I closed my eyes, my blood humming as it reached the skeleton.

Tail.

Wings.

Talons.

Jaws so mighty they could bite Lord Cullen's head off with one snap.

*Dragon...*

Ancient beast, lost to a time when Faerie was young, the four continents still joined as one. A land of fire and smoke, of savage beasts, of wild fae and violent storms and earthquakes. A simpler time of basic savagery. No politics, no complex power plays. Only blood and death and sex.

Above the world, dragons dominated the skies. Nested in these mountains, died here, battled here.

Now was the time for their return.



## Chapter Twelve

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KORMAC/TITUS

**T**hrough stars and darkness, I fell. Spinning and spinning, glassy angelus shell breaking apart, peeling away like a man skinned alive.

Losing Titus.

Gaining Kormac.

The fall burned me, hurt like it shouldn't, a different plunge into an old life. A corrupted soul, a dying creature from beyond these stars.

Goodbye...

Goodbye...

Goodbye...

Nothing but the dark now, the pinprick of Faerie below me. Closer. Closer.

Burning.

Agony.

Closer still, the pinprick growing in size, opening up to me as a flower to the sun.

*Valance...*

*I'm coming, Valance.*

# Chapter Thirteen

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VALANCE

**L**ife flowed outward in heavy streams, drowning the bones and the earth, plucking souls from the hands of long death, from the mysteries of the afterlife. Defying time and nature, dragging bodies up and out. Free to breathe the air again, to hear the sounds of Winter, feel the heat of the springs.

*Come back. Come back. Come back.*

If only this power could call to my lost Kormac, return him to his life that was stolen.

“Cullen!” Lady Fia cried. “What is this?”

A boom, the earth exploding. Giants climbing from the dirt, the other species following. Incredibly loud shrieks of surprise, new voices declaring who they were, that they had come back because of a new king.

Some cheers.

Some horror.

*Dangerous, they claimed. The new king is dangerous.*

*Yes. Yes, I am.*

My attention, however, remained focused on the ultimate prize. There were other dragons deeper down, huge yet smaller than this queen. It would take the last of my energy to bring her back before I collapsed. I could feel it coming, the spending of my power. I would need a brief rest before I could continue as normal. Such was the price of using magic.

For now, the queen was enough dragon for me.

Her bones tremored, sang a clickety-clackety song back to me. Flesh began to thread across them, tendons spinning like wool on a loom. Piece by piece, her body reformed from her veins to the tiniest of cells until her thick, black scales covered her in hard armor. Purplish hues filled the black, giving the scales a strange oily appearance. Then her eyes, twin amethyst fires blazing, found me.

*Come back, my beautiful one. Be mine.*

Smoke from her jaws, the promise of fire in her belly.

*Come to me...*

Her talons tore through the darkness below, churning the earth. She forced her way upward, an incredible force, a magnificent beast.

*Be mine...*

My eyes shot open as she burst into the sky, earth exploding around her. Bodies jumped back, more shock, more awe, more of that horror. Running and panic as the shimmering black-purple beast roared in the sky, her vast wings beating at the air.

My body waivered, ready to fall.

A mighty roar tore from the dragon as she swooped and dipped, circling.

*Be mine...* I called weakly.

In a display of her mighty power, she released flames into the air. A furious stream of fire licked at clouds so beautiful, so magnificently golden.

“What have you done!” Lord Cullen cried as I fell to my knees on the platform.

“I have... I have given more life.”

The dragon roared.

“The old ones,” I heard Lady Fia say. “My love, these are the old ones.”

I tried to cling to myself as the platform lowered, my power diminishing.

“King Valance has given us the old ones!”

Who said that? It didn't sound like Lady Fia.

My vision blurred, my hearing muffled.

“Your Majesty!” Orla? Eoghan?

“Fading,” I whispered. “Fading.”

I tumbled into coldness, my body freezing yet still tied to the world by a frayed thread. Aware of being alive yet pushed off somewhere to the side.

Frozen.

Waiting.

## Chapter Fourteen

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KORMAC

I landed naked in the snow, the cold biting my feet, the tops of my shins submerged.

Naked and human, olive skin and chest hair and a cock of flesh shrinking in the icy conditions.

Kormac again.

I shivered, wrapping my arms around me. Where was I? Yes, I'd returned to Winter, but where exactly? This was a clearing in a forest, and there was sunlight on my back.

Daylight? Sun? Did the sun rise and fall in Winter?

That didn't matter right now. My only concern was to find shelter and warmth.

My fall hadn't gone exactly to plan. Yes, I'd been returned to Winter, but not to Valance's side. I blamed that on my rebellion against the angelus, on everything being so different.

I grew tired of those hellpissing thoughts, of the constant repetition inside my brain telling me things were changed. Fine. I'd received the message. I didn't need to keep reading the parchment.

A screen. Angelus liked to read things on screens.

No screens here. Parchment and scrolls and quills dipped in ink wells. A land without other technologies, not built for *those* things. And certainly not instruments built for Kormac's mind.

Titus was fading but not dying. Would he?

Kormac *would* die if I didn't act now, though.

I ran through the snow into the trees, pushing through the burning cold against my skin. Deer scattered. Birds fluttered in fright. I collapsed, the cold too much for my mortal flesh.

Shit. I hadn't thought this through, made another mess. I'd die here on my hands and knees, my heart already slowing, my breathing too labored with mist puffing from my mouth.

I tried to get up. If I tracked a deer, I could kill it and skin it to wear it for warmth. Only, I had no weapons, no strength to make it happen.

*I have to fight...*

Over and over, I pushed myself to get up, losing feeling in my fingers and toes, the cold spreading through my body.

*I'm sorry, Valance...*

What a cruel twist of fate to bring me back here only to stop my journey dead in its tracks. Was this the stars punishing me for denying my true nature?

Would I be hauled back up there to be a ball of light, trapped in my room never to be solid again?

*Please...*

My face hit the snow as I begged for a miracle.

*Please...*

Goodbye to Titus.

Goodbye to Kormac.

# Chapter Fifteen

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**I**t wasn't long before I surfaced from the frozen state of magical exhaustion. A fleeting moment, less than an hour to be restored. No haziness, simply a switch from one state to another as swiftly as clicking my fingers.

I blinked up at a thatched ceiling, sat up in a bed of straw and furs, this room incredibly warm. I'd been aware of being moved, though not quite sure of where to.

Now I had my answer.

Sliding off the bed, I stretched my limbs. A hut with dry mud walls and full of little trinkets—ornaments carved from stone and wood. An earthy scent tickled my senses, along with the heady smell of cooking meat.

Another room joined this one through a doorway to my left. I peered inside to see a cauldron bubbling on an open fire, some kind of stew cooking within.

A human woman swathed in furs protected by an apron stirred it with a wooden spoon.

“Smells delicious,” I said.

She startled, almost dropping the spoon. “Oh!” She smoothed down her apron, taking a bow. “Your Majesty.

You're awake."

"I am. I—"

I heard a rumble outside.

Her head snapped to the closed wooden door, her throat bobbing. "Dragon."

Ah, yes. I'd brought a dragon back to life.

"If you would excuse me," I told the woman. "I must see the fruits of my labor." It wasn't funny, but I found myself chuckling as if a jester had said it with a hilarious spin.

I missed the court jesters from my childhood. My father had put a stop to them after the last one told a particularly salacious joke that scandalized the Summer court.

My brother Daire and I found it hilarious even if no one else did.

I hated thoughts of my brother, the evil scum. He had no right to encroach on my mind, to be anywhere near my heart like days of old. My love for him wasn't welcome anymore after hearing of the monster he'd been. I might be many things, but even I harbored strong morals when it came to certain actions. He had crossed a terrible line, and he deserved the death he'd faced.

Crushing memories of a life so far removed from me now, I stepped outside into the shadow of the dragon. I looked up, sunshine glowing around her marvelous edges, her wings resting on the ground as wide as many ship sails. Her long neck curved downward, positioning her jaws and pretty eyes close to me.

A low rumble emitted from her colossal body.

Lord Cullen and Lady Fia stood beside her, a few feet away, their eyes on me.

“Good to see you back on your feet, Your Majesty,” Lord Cullen said. “How are you?”

“I feel like myself again,” I answered. “How is our latest addition?”

The dragon lifted her head, tilting it slightly to the side inquisitively.

“All of our new additions are confused, happy, ready to fall in line behind you,” Cullen answered.

I faced the lord of the giants. “Is that so?”

“You have performed a miracle, King Valance.”

“I suppose I have.”

“We will march with you.”

A nice, sudden surprise. There was no other choice for him, though, when such a display of power unfolded before his eyes.

“Thank you, My Lord,” I said.

He glanced at the dragon, her nostrils flaring. “There is no other choice.”

“There are always choices.”

“Yes, there are. But you gave us back so much from so long ago. That both frightens me enough to follow you and equally marvels me.”

“I don’t want you to be frightened,” I answered. “I want us to fight together. To change the world. Give Winter back what it has lost, send ripples of fear across Faerie before our

enemies choke us. Because they will, and they are *our* enemies. Make no mistake about that.”

A heavy sigh from the giant. “I only wish there was another way.”

*Wish. There could be one wish...*

“So do I, Lord Cullen. So do I.”

*The end of all things with one wish...*

The dragon growled as her head reached the ground, her head its own kind of mountain to me. I reached a tentative hand toward her. A rumble tremored through her body, her eyes narrowing into contented slits.

My hand connected with her rough, warm scales. She released what could only be described as a purr wrapped in a rumble, closing her eyes fully, pushing ever so gently into my touch. That tenderness surprised me for such a huge beast.

*Are you mine?* I asked her.

One eye opened, a penetrating stare diving deep into my soul. Ancient heat and understanding between us. She lowered her whole body to the ground, presenting the ridges of her spine to me.

*We can fly?*

More purring.

She was mine. She was grateful for another chance at life in a different time.

Giants and humans and the creatures of these mountains gathered around us. Lord Cullen came the closest. My work, the force of my power on display.

I looked up, waiting for him to speak.



“We’re yours, Your Majesty.” He went down on bended knee, his subjects following. The ground tremored from all the giants kneeling before their king.

“Thank you,” I said.

“We will march to Winter Keep. We will spread the word through every corner of the lands our feet touch. They will know our new king is for us, is for a new dawn. Winter will be behind you, Your Majesty. You will know the hearts of the dark fae, of every creature who breathes the cold air.”

“And the rebels?”

“They have no power.”

“I will fly the skies of Winter with this dragon, show the dark fae the one and only path.”

He nodded, getting up. “Before you know it, your army will be ready.”

This filled me with wicked hope. With my magic, a dragon, and an army, a tide of fury was about to be unleashed upon Faerie.

I smiled up at the giant. “Thank you, My Lord. I—”

A disturbance in the skies, something alarming my magic. Winter whispered to me that something was coming, something from beyond, not of this world.

*What is it?*

A jolt, a landing. This thing landed in snow, a thing of flesh. I staggered backward, a painful twinge in my heart.

A thing...

A human...

A human from the stars.

Kormac?

Grabbing hold of the dragon, I used her thick scales as rungs on a ladder, making my way up to her spines. I threw a leg over the bone closest to her neck, taking hold of the curved triangular shape. Its rough surface allowed for good purchase.

“Fly,” I commanded, sharing with her the direction of this fallen human.

My heart pounded in my chest like a dozen Spring blacksmith hammers, my skin flush with a nervous energy

*Is it you?*

“March now!” I called down to my new subjects. “We will meet again at Winter Keep!”

“Your Majesty!” Orla cried.

“Go with them! I will see you soon!”

“What’s happened?” Brigid asked, floating up beside me.

“Go!” I snapped at her.

“But—”

“I have something to take care of. Alone. Meet me at the keep. Do not question my order.”

She didn’t, floating away.

The dragon roared, stretching her wings. With two heavy beats of that thick bone and skin, she took to the air, carrying us above the mountains within seconds.

I glanced down at the retreating ground, at the bodies.

*Is it you?*

## Chapter Sixteen

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I managed to get to my feet for a few seconds before I fell on my back, the cold on my spine sucking the air from my lungs.

*I'm dying...*

*I'm dying...*

*I'm—*

What was that sound? Wings?

I couldn't move to see, the deep snow my coffin.

*I'm dying...*

Were those the wings of death? Some said the gods came on winged beasts to carry the dead away to the next life.

*I'm not ready...*

A roar. A landing, the ground shaking. Something big. A winged beast to take me away. What would I do in the afterlife with all this unfinished business? I suppose every dying person said these things. There wasn't enough time, life was cruel, all that hellpiss.

Unless I was going back to Fatumstellae.

*I'm sorry, Val—*

“Kormac?”

My heart stopped for a fleeting moment, then pumped a rush of heat and strength through my veins.

Did I just hear... No. Was it? Was it him?

A body wading through snow, someone coming closer.

“Kormac?” the voice called again.

Another jolt, surprise attacking my sense. “Val... Valance?” I tried, my voice more delicate than a whisper.

He appeared beside me, kicking snow onto my chest as he slammed to a halt. His silver hair billowed across his face, his dark gaze wide as it fell upon me.

“By Danu!” he cried, falling beside me. “Kormac! Oh, Kormac!” He pulled me up into his arms, pressing my face into his chest. “You’re freezing. You’re naked!” He bellowed that last part.

He scooped me out of the snow with liquid grace, the heat of his body a welcome reprieve, hurrying through the trees and snow toward a monster.

“What...” I struggled.

“A dragon,” he said, breaking into the clearing the beast waited in.

It turned its head to watch, lowering itself as if waiting to be climbed on.

“Are you...” I was going to pass out. A dragon? A real dragon? This wasn’t possible. None of it. Valance and a dragon weren’t here, not in reality. This was the death creatures come to take me away, to make my journey as pleasant as possible.

I left Valance's arms, floating up toward the dragon on a bed of silver light. I gasped at the sudden change, looking for my prince.

He climbed the dragon quickly, taking a seat on its back before I floated down to him. He removed his cloak and caught me from the air, wrapping the material around me as I landed in front him, my back against his chest. One arm locked around my chest, his hair falling across my shoulders.

"You're safe now," he breathed into my ear, shivers racing across my skin.

The heat of the dragon's body quickly got to work against the cold, everywhere tingled with the sensation of thawing.

"Is this..."

"This is real," he said softly.

The dragon roared, making me jump.

Valance held onto me tighter.

The beast took to the sky, my head spinning from the speed of this change. Valance here, me still alive in Kormac's body.

My body.

"I'll find us somewhere warm, and we can talk." His voice shook as he spoke. It sounded like there was a lump in his throat.

"You're really here?" I asked into the bitter wind rushing past us.

"I'm here," he whispered back.

## Chapter Seventeen

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## VALANCE

**I**t took everything I had to not fall off the dragon, to collapse at the mercy of my rising emotions.

Confusion. Shock. Joy. They were a storm in a harbor, churning the seas into violent waves with me trapped within them.

Kormac was alive, here with me again, shivering under my cloak, in need of heat and shelter.

At first, I asked the dragon to take us straight to Winter Keep without stopping. However, I quickly came to realize the warmth Kormac needed was a pressing requirement. So, I commanded her to land on the eastern edge of the forest. As she did, I thought of the first time we'd fucked in that place of the hot baths Brigid had conjured for us after crossing the White Wastes.

I summoned a wooden building to life, filling it with a hot pool, a large bed, and candles, adding towels, food, clothing, anything useful I could drag into this time and space.

I floated Kormac off the dragon's back, climbing down to catch him at the bottom. I'd been used to him carrying me, performing his duties as my protector. It felt strange to hold his muscled body like this, draped in my cloak.



My eyes were hot at his presence, the dark caress within confused by this return. His loss fueled my anger, my quest for revenge, deeply tangled in the confusion of my heart and mind. Without him, I wanted to wish away the pain, to destroy the world, to succumb to the dark temptations of my inner voices.

But now he was with me once again.

I carried him into the beautifully warm shack with walls made of logs, a plush carpet underfoot. A hot pool steamed to my left, a large bed with welcoming softness to my right. I lay him down on the bed. He shivered, curling into a ball. I joined him, curling around him, pouring more magic into the blazing fire within the hearth close by.

Smoothing his chin-length, wet brown hair, I spoke gently, silent tears running down my cheeks. "You came back to me."

"I... I..."

"Don't speak right now. Rest. Get warm."

He shivered, pushing his spine into me.

His earthy scent, blended with the cold, enveloped me. I enjoyed the smell, that rugged human aroma.

"I came back for you," he said weakly. "I came back."

Silent tears broke free. I held him closer, drifting through a dream. What did I say? What did I do other than hold him?

"Thank you," I eventually answered.

"For what?"

"For coming back."

"I... I'm so tired."

I wanted to kiss the back of his neck. “Then sleep. You’re safe with me.” A statement that once wouldn’t have been true, now as solid as the toughest stone.

Keeping him safe called to my every instinct. He was a man to be protected at all costs, to be held and nurtured and hidden from those who wished to harm him.

Now that I had him back, I would never let him go.

But was he really here? Was this me dreaming, my body somewhere else waiting to wake up to my grief?

Only time would tell.



MERCIFULLY, I didn’t wake up from any dream. Kormac snored in my arms, his exhausted body enveloped in sleep. I enjoyed every breath, every moment he wriggled against me. He never turned to face me, always on his side. He wasn’t as restless a sleeper as me. I would drift off in one position, only to awaken tangled in sheets at some completely different point on the bed.

Sleep was the last thing on my mind.

I stroked his hair, waiting, praising Danu for the gift in this bed I had conjured.

After around six hours, I wasn’t entirely sure, he stirred. A groan, a yawn, he turned his beautiful body, facing me. He smiled, stroking my shoulder, his eyelids heavy with waking.

“Morning,” he said. “Is it morning?”

“It’s evening,” I answered.

“How long did I sleep for?”

“Six hours or so. It seemed like you needed it.”

Another yawn. “I really did.”

By Danu, those lips, that stubbled olive face. “How are you feeling?”

“Dirty.”

“Oh?”

He propped himself up on an elbow, looking behind me. “I really need to get into that bath.”

“Would you like anything to eat?” I heard his stomach rumble.

“Is there food here?”

“If you want there to be.”

He glanced at the ceiling of logs. “Reminds of the first time... you know.”

“I know.”

He grinned. “What food do you have?”

“What food do you want?”

“I can have anything I want?”

“Of course.” I touched his side. “*Anything.*”

He licked his lips, his gaze boring into mine.

Whatever he wanted, whatever that muscular human body desired, he could have it. I was his grape on the vine, primed with juice, ready for plucking to fulfill his appetites.

“Spiced eggs and bacon,” he said.

I swallowed. “Pardon?”

He sat up, running a hand over his face. “Spiced eggs and bacon. It’s a popular Autumn breakfast. If you can. Please.”

I sat up, ignoring the hardness between my legs. “Of course.” Why did my voice sound higher?

“Are you okay?” he wondered, cocking his head to the side.

I nodded, swinging my legs off the bed. “Spiced eggs, bacon, and... what else?”

“Hot goat’s milk.”

I conjured a table, a dark wooden oval. The food appeared on silver plates, the steaming milk in a silver mug. A chair followed, then another.

“Can I sit with you?” I asked.

“Please do. Are you eating?”

*There is only one thing I want to eat...* “Not just now.”

We sat together, Kormac tucking in heartily.

“This is just like home!” he declared.

If only this shack could be our home, our safe space for as long as he could stand me in his presence.

*He came back for me...*

After his food and milk, he told me his tale of life beyond the stars.

I almost fell off my chair. “Such a place exists?”

“Yes. I lived this whole life, serving destinies,” he said. “I thought I’d forget all about it when I came back here. But the memories are still in here.” He tapped the side of his head. “I

don't think they're going anywhere. Unless they fade over time."

I couldn't believe this. "An angelus."

"That's right."

"Watchers. Servants." I swallowed. "Incredible."

He nodded. "But I prefer being human."

I preferred it, too.

"Then you were from the stars," I said.

"I was. We... We were written there, like the old woman said." He frowned. "Strange, isn't it?"

"Extremely." Other worlds, other existences. Creatures of glass watching, coming to aid lives. I believed him, no question. But it sat heavy like too much beef in the gut, a struggle to digest.

I conjured myself a sizzling steak like I used to enjoy in my childhood, vibrant green broccoli astride it.

"That looks delicious," Kormac said.

I conjured one for him. "Try it."

He didn't complain, tucking in. "By the gods," he said with his mouth full. "This is amazing."

"I know."

Once we consumed our food, he wanted to know my story.

"What happened after I died?" he asked.

My heart twinged. "I'm so sorry, Kormac. I'm so sorry I did that to you."

"You were manipulated. You had to."

I shook my head. “If I would have seen it coming, I would have done everything to stop myself.”

“But I’m here now.” He reached across the table, taking my hand.

I couldn’t handle his azure eyes on me.

I looked away. “I can’t...”

“You *can*, Valance. I’m here. What happened isn’t your fault. It never will be.”

I returned my eyes to his. “How can you say that?”

“Because it’s true. I know you would never hurt me.”

“I did, though. Before the soul bond. When I took your tongue.”

He shrugged. “And what?”

“And if it wasn’t for the magic, I could have hurt you more.”

He leaned further across the table, sliding his hand up my arm. “Do you think I’m innocent in this? I traveled to Summer to hurt you, remember? Because I believed you were the ultimate evil. But you’re not. So, it took magical intervention for me to see that, but I *really* see that now. You’re... You’re you, and you confuse me and make me feel things I never thought I would for a seelie prince. But here we are, my hand on you, us sharing food after you held me into the night.”

I struggled to formulate a response.

“We’ve changed, Valance. Our eyes are open. Everything has shifted to this point. And I like it, even if I had to die briefly.” His forehead creased. “Though I didn’t actually die. Not in the traditional sense.”

I chuckled lightly. “You say such sweet things.”

“They’re true. We learned lessons about each other. We saw the reality beneath the surface. Actually thought for ourselves rather than following hate, things put in our heads by years of war and stupid doctrine.” His hand returned to my hand. “I really do forgive you for everything.”

Warmth, so blissful, so precious. It sang within and without, forced me up out of the chair. He stood to meet me as I hurried around the table, taking him into my embrace. Held him, fought the rising sobs.

“Oh, Kormac...” I breathed.

“Do you forgive me?” he asked.

“Of course I forgive you. Let it be water under the bridge.”

“This feels right.”

It did, a burden lifted. The past could never be forgotten, a stain in time, but forgiveness and moving forward were virtues not many could attain. I never believed I held the capacity to forgive, yet here I was, my slate clean.

“We have bridges,” he said.

I laughed against him. “We do.”

“Thank the gods.”

“You really do smell rather dirty.”

“Told you.” He broke our embrace, stripping off his clothes without care.

My cheeks flared with heat as I watched his nakedness hurry over to the pool. He dipped a toe into the milky, perfumed water.

“Perfect,” he said and stepped in, his body swallowed up to his neck as he submerged himself. “Gods, this is bliss. Come and join me.”

“Join you?”

“If you want to.”

Casting aside my unusual bashfulness, I stripped and submerged my body in the water.

It really was bliss.



WE LEANED against the same edge of the pool, sat on an underwater ledge. I told him my story, the whole journey from his death to finding him in the snow.

“That’s incredible,” he said, pawing at the surface of the water. “How does it feel to have so much power inside you?”

“Wonderful, terrifying. It isn’t without its complications.”

“What isn’t complicated?”

I nodded. “Such is life, I suppose.”

“You’re a survivor, Valance.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Well, yes.” He wriggled his eyebrows. “I’m the oxygen to your fire.”

“Careful now, let us not become too self-inflated.”

“I’m only speaking the truth.” He winked, then his expression turned serious. “So, do you want me to call you Your Majesty now? I keep using your name and—”

I stopped him. “Call me Valance. I like it.”



He puffed out his cheeks, released a long breath. “Okay.”

“Why did you think I’d want you to use official titles?”

“Because you’re a king now—on the cusp of becoming the one and only king at that.”

“Meaning what?” I questioned.

“I just wanted to be respectful.”

“That’s very kind but not required. Not from you.” I pushed a loose strand of hair off my forehead. “From everyone else, I demand it.”

“So you should. Make them fall in line. But don’t think I don’t respect you.”

I smiled. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Is it hard being king?”

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. “Do you know what I often dreamed of as a child?”

“Changing the subject, are we?”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine. Did you dream about how many treats you could steal from the Summer Palace kitchens?”

I offered him my best glare. “Besides that.”

He chuckled. “Tell me.”

“Love,” I replied, his smile dropping. “At least when I turned fourteen or so. I dreamed of a charming man sweeping into my life on horseback, there to take me away to some faraway place where he would be my husband, and I his, the rest of Faerie shut outside of our perfect existence. I even gave him a name.”

The corners of Kormac's lips twitched. "This was a real dream, man?"

"Of course. Noah, I called him. A handsome man of dark brown skin, hair so black it was obsidian, eyes a rich honey gold."

"Sounds handsome."

"He was, and he rode a steed to match his hair." I sighed. "But we never made it to a faraway land, the dream only ever progressing from our meeting to the horse charging north."

"I'm sorry, Valance."

I was sick of *that* word. "What for?"

"For not getting what you wanted."

"It was just a dream."

He sidled closer to me, his elbow touching mine. "It doesn't matter. You still deserve to get what you want."

I angled my head, so I faced him more directly. He mirrored my movement. "What about your dreams, Kormac?"

He leaned closer suddenly, steam curling between us. "What about them?"

I watched his lips, his tongue running across them.

"Did you..." I trailed off from the closeness of him, the heat of the water doing things to my body.

My cock grew firm once again.

A crackling, potent energy rose between us. My cheeks flushed again, the tingling heat spreading down to my neck, flooding all of me.

“Kormac...” Water dripped off the ends of his hair, sparkling in the candlelight.

“Shouldn’t we be getting back to your keep?” he whispered.

That was the last thing on my mind, and clearly his, too.

“Soon,” I said. “First, I want to make sure you are feeling better.”

He smiled. “How are you going to do that?”

## Chapter Eighteen

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Valance stood up, water cascading down his slender body in a glistening waterfall. His cock was firm, right there, and ready for the taking. He pushed his fingers through his hair, pulling it back, holding it there. He watched me watch him, a wicked smile bringing even more beauty to his already magnificent features.

“I think there is more we can do to warm you up,” he intoned, his voice rich with sexual promise.

A pleasurable growl rumbled in my chest. “You know me so well.”

My inhibitions were down, my soul free of the bond that’d held us together for so long. This was me and him, no magic, just two men feasting their eyes on each other. And Valance was the most bountiful feast in Faerie. Tales of his beauty traveled the realm, fed the lusts of men and women alike. And he was here with me, fruit waiting to be plucked from the tree.

I stood up, exposing my body to him, the firmness between my legs pointed at him. He smiled, releasing his hair. It cascaded across his shoulders as silver silk. He stepped forward, excitement rising in my chest at his movement.

“Look at you,” he said.

He placed his hand on my chest, curling a tuft of my chest hair with his little finger, licking his delicious lips as he did.

Heat rushed from the tip of my shaft to my balls, then back again. Primed, ready for whatever came next.

I breathed in deeply, the anticipation an incredible cocoon forming around us. Our cocks were close to touching, the tips mere inches apart.

As much as I wanted to take him, throw him down and spread his ass wide, drive my cock as deep as it would go, I restrained myself. I wanted every touch, every second to count. To surrender to our bodies, let them take us to where we both wanted to go.

I licked my lips as he stepped closer, his cock bumping mine.

“They meet again,” he said.

I chuckled at the stupidity of his comment. “Silly.”

“Sometimes I like to be silly.”

He touched me, his palm kissing my chest, his fingers splayed. I shivered under his soft skin there, his fingers teasing more of my chest hair.

Our cocks twitched together, rubbing with gentle friction.

I took him by the back of the neck, stepping even closer until our bodies were almost flush together. He moaned, pushing into my touch. With my other hand, I slid my way to his pert buttocks, claiming myself a hearty handful.

He laughed at my squeeze, gnawing on his bottom lip.

My desire flared, the need to do more than touch on the verge of taking over. But I massaged his neck, his ass cheek,

enjoying his moans, how his hand slowly moved down to my stomach with the promise of moving lower.

“Oh, Kormac...” he breathed.

I pulled him in for a kiss, our lips clashing with exquisite, sudden fury. My tongue forced its way into his mouth. He nipped my lip gently, driving me wild. I kissed him harder, taking control. Crushing myself to him, both hands on his ass.

He liked me to dominate him.

“Yes...” he breathed into me.

Blistering, lips practically bruising as they wrestled. Devouring, pushing so much heat into my balls and cock. My shaft rubbed harder against his, our groins grinding together in a frenzied dance.

I had to take him.

I had to fuck him.

I ran a finger between his ass cheeks, remembering the warmth of that place. A nice crevice for my fingers, a better one for my cock.

He broke the kiss, pulling back. He cupped my balls.

I gasped as he tugged.

“Are they heavy with seed?” he asked.

A surprising question but one with an easy answer. “You know they are.”

He tugged some more, taking my cock in his other hand. He rolled the skin back, moaning. “It does this inside, doesn’t it? Exposes that wonderful head as you thrust back and forth.” He rolled his thumb over the sensitive flesh, sending a shudder to my toes and back again.

“Gods...”

“Do you like that, Kormac?”

“So much.”

“Better inside?”

“Yes...”

“Do you want to be inside me?”

“Ah...”

“Mmmm... I like this leaking stickiness.”

“Ah...” From my balls to the head of my cock, he stole my ability to speak with his teasing. Even my asshole contracted.

“So much of it.” He released my cock, bringing his fingers to his lips. Licked the sticky liquid from the tips.

“Fuck.”

He returned his hand. “You taste incredible.”

“Ah...”

He released me again, this time reaching behind him. “Mmmm... Why don’t you... Mmmm... Why don’t you fuck me right now?” He followed that last part with a growl.

It was the boot to kick down the door and jump into pure, raging lust.

A growl of my own burst from my throat. I grabbed him, pulling him up onto my hips. He wrapped his legs around me in servitude, immediately understanding. He might hold this new strength, but I still had mine. He remained light, a flower in my brutish hands.

A diamond flower.



“Yes!” he cried as I positioned my cock to his asshole.  
“Fuck me.”

I spat on my fingers, using it as a lubricant. Slicking my cock, I kissed him, balls throbbing.

He locked his hands behind my neck, wiggling against my cock, his own hardness rubbing against me. I felt stickiness leak onto my skin.

I kissed him for it.

“Kormac...”

I thrust into him, my cock curving round as it filled him.

“Yes...”

I held him by the hips and pumped, my rhythm fast and needful from the outset. The softness was over, the time for pounding upon us. He moaned, tilting his head back, his hair a wet, silken curtain hanging behind him.

This wasn't enough. I needed to be deeper.

I twirled him around me, my cock popping out. I lowered him to hang over the edge of the pool. He looked back, his hair falling across his face. Watching me enter him again. With one foot on the ledge beneath the water, the other on the pool floor, I drove into him again, fingers digging into his hips.

Flesh slapped water and flesh, the rose-scented bath spraying droplets into my face, all up his back.

I spanked him, growling. “You feel so fucking good.”

“So do you...” he gasped.

I fucked him harder, slapped his backside until his moonlight skin flushed red. Pounding, pounding, pounding, his muscles tightening around my cock.

“Oh, yes! I’m...” He cried out his orgasm, criminally hidden beneath the water. But enough to drive me to the point of no return.

“Fuck, Valance! Fuck!”

It started in my balls, rising to the root of my cock, exploding up my shaft. I released myself into him, shuddering, toes curling, body slumping forward as the heat bloomed.

“Oh, fuck!”

“Oh, yes...” he responded. “Oh, yes...”

Valance pushed me back, a pop ringing underwater as my cock left him. He came at me, almost sending me to my ass as cum continued to leak from the end of my cock, my legs weak from pleasure.

He kissed me, hands in my hair.

“Valance...” I tried. “I need to...” He grabbed my cock, smearing cum into his palm. It hurt from over-sensitivity but felt so good.

“Valance...”

“Fuck me again.”

“But—”

“Take a moment and fuck me again.” He kissed me, releasing my cock.

I held him, kissing him right back, joined with him there in the magical shack, standing in the never-cooling water.

It didn’t take long for me to recover, for us to fuck again. This time on the bed, his hair twisted in my hand, his back arched as I pounded the pleasure out of him.

I got to see it explode all over the bed sheets.

A truly beautiful sight.



WE LAY CURLED UP TOGETHER, naked beneath the sheets. He stroked my face. I ran my fingers up and down his smooth back.

“That was wonderful,” he said.

“Absolutely.”

“My body feels so good.”

“Not worn out?” I wondered.

“Tired and happy.”

“You’re welcome.”

Valance and I in bed together, drifting in the new, strange waters of our relationship. Now the euphoria began to fade, a sense of unease came over me. This wouldn’t last. Something or someone would upset this sensation. A vicious world waited outside these log walls, so it was up to us to enjoy these moments for as long as possible.

“I don’t want to leave here,” he said with a yawn.

“Neither do I.”

As nice as this was, what did it mean for us now? Where did we go from here?

*Try not to spoil it with thinking.*

I decided to listen to myself, pulling him closer. He curled a leg around me, wiggling close so our groins touched. But we didn’t fuck again. Instead, we held each other into sleep, drifting away into a dreamless, happy place.

# Chapter Nineteen

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**H**olding onto the Tuatha king, the bitter wind in my hair, I enjoyed the spectacle of riding on a dragon's back.

We'd slept for a couple of hours before Valance said we had to go. He conjured us new clothes, kissed me some more, told me so many times how happy he was to have me back.

I told him the same. And I meant it.

My skin still tingled from his touch, ready for more. As thrilling and unbelievable, as this dragon-riding experience was, it didn't compare to being in bed with Valance.

Seven days had passed since our reunion. We were now on our final day of his tour of Winter. Every night, when his rousing of the Winter folk was done, we'd fuck. He liked me to give him my cock, to submit to me in any position I desired.

Gods, this fae was insatiable, and I loved it.

How far I'd come from hate to this. My lusts might be up, but so was the confusion.

What did this mean?

I shuffled forward, pushing my crotch into his lower back. He angled his head in response, hitting me with a smoldering glance over his shoulder.

I smirked back at him.

Let this be sex. I was happy to stay in this place for now, not having to think about the constant rising feelings drowning our past, exposing a future of new possibilities. The hurt he'd caused me still plucked at me like strings on a harp, but I'd hurt him. We'd both acted as we saw fit. Both did the 'right' thing for our respective causes.

Both flawed. Both right. Both wrong.

*Where is this going?*

Let it be sex, but not too much distraction. There was a hellpissing war coming, a reality we had to face. We'd have to talk about it back at Winter Keep tonight. There were important details to go through.

The dragon took us down in a terrifying rush. I bellowed. I laughed. I held on tight. She cut across snow fields, curling back upward, diving toward a distant village where bodies ran and screams were heard.

This was all part of Valance's plan for his tour. Visit these villages, some of them returned from the dead, and talk to the dark fae, the humans, everyone who lived there. Get them on his side, ask them to march with him.

From village to village, he gave great speeches of courage, of the new dawn to come. I stood by his side, some calling me the King's consort. I hated that title at first, but I took it.

Why not be a consort to such an amazing king?

*Amazing?*

"Are you with me?" he would cry in each village, at each cave or forest where dark fae gathered.

And they were with him, for the most part. There were still the rebels wandering the lands, but support for King Valance grew by the hour, swallowing up any dissenting views. The march of the giants helped, too, the word spreading like wildfire.

Brilliant. Terrifying.

I was... I was proud. He'd found his destiny, took it by the balls, and wrangled it into shape.

I wrapped my arms around him after the dragon landed at the final village in the east of Winter. Rested my head against his shoulder, holding him close.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Just give me a few moments.”

“Anything you want.”

Closing my eyes, I enjoyed his solidness, the heat of the dragon, and the beautiful Winter sunshine. Lost in a world of him and me, nothing else mattering.

I...

I...

*I'm so happy to be here with you again.*



THE VILLAGE CHIEF, a tall purple-skinned fae with radiant white hair, hugged the king rather than bow or kneel to him. And he embraced her, smiling as he patted her back. What a kind gesture to not scold her for doing things differently.

I stood close by, giving them their space. Around me, the village hummed with activity. Arms were taken up, many loud

voices baying for war and love for the king, spouting hatred for Florent and Lasair.

Were they on the Faerie Throne yet, married and wearing heavy crowns?

Fucking Lasair. The Fomorian fae had been my leader, a woman I looked up to more than anyone in my life. I believed in her cause, took every single word from her mouth as truth. She'd sent me and Ren off to Summer, both of us determined to make her proud. But she ended up being my enemy, hunting me across Faerie. Yes, I'd had to run with Valance because of the soul bond, but she... She was now Lord Florent's puppet. Sold her soul to him for power. The Lasair I knew would never lower herself to marry a spoiled brat such as him.

Maybe I never truly knew her, then. Maybe this was her goal all along.

I shuddered at the thought of her giving him a child, and at the thought of him and Valance together. After all, if things were different, Valance would have married him in accordance with his father's deal with Spring and the Gentry fae.

What a nightmare to even consider Lord Florent touching that luminous skin, kissing those lips. Gods, he was the most unworthy creature on Faerie to take Valance Rosestar to bed.

*Just listen to yourself!*

I was certainly Valance-drunk, and still full of memories of Titus. My escape from Fatumstellae flashed behind my eyes.

Hellpiss!

Those memories held no power, even if they didn't fade. Would I ever forget the realm beyond the stars?



I rubbed my forehead, thinking too much about our enemies, my past, my lusts. Gods, I needed a tankard of cold ale.

“Thank you for everything, Your Majesty,” the chief said, holding Valance’s hands.

I stopped thinking and listened to them talk.

This village had starved to death ten years ago. No food would grow. No meat could be found within fifty miles. The woods were dead and empty of life. Some left to try and escape to the coast for fish. Some even tried to cross into Summer or Autumn. Most stayed here, loyal to their chief, who was determined to turn things around.

Valance brought her and the other snow-buried bodies back to life. And he would do it again and again, his army constantly undying. They were impossible to kill, impossible to defeat. This war would be over quickly. Then what? Valance the king of the world, me by his side? What exactly did our future hold? Royal engagements? Fancy balls? Sex?

*More...*

Done with the chief, Valance turned and walked over to me. “We’re done.” He took my hands now. “Are you ready to go?”

I nodded, doing something that took me by surprise. I lifted his right hand to my lips. Planted a kiss on his cool knuckles.

He smiled, cocking his head to the side. “What’s this?”

I struggled to speak for a moment. “I... I don’t know.” I gave him his hand back. “I really don’t know.” Heat bloomed in my cheeks.

He chuckled lightly. "I enjoyed it."

Our eyes connected, my chest tightening. "I..." What was I about to say? "I'm ready when you are."

I was sure that wasn't it...

His smile dropped. "Then let's go," he said.

## Chapter Twenty

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I leaned on the balustrade of my balcony, draped in fine silk, the luxurious material blissful on my naked skin.

A crescent moon nestled itself into a dark purple sky, the stars its twinkling friends. The dragon flew across it in her endless circling as dark fae arrived by the hour, setting up camps around this castle on the hill and the surrounding city of Snowdell. So many lights, so many fires. So many voices.

Tonight, we celebrated. A ball for our army, spreading from within these walls to the encampments and the streets of the city. Everywhere. Tomorrow, I would meet with Lord Cullen, with every single leader of the various dark fae who'd come here to discuss our strategies. On the fifth day from this night, the war would begin.

*I'm coming for you all...*

Movement behind me, hands finding my hips.

“What are you doing?” Kormac asked, his voice tickling the back of my neck.

I liked his breath there, everywhere. I wasn't sure what any of this meant between us, only that I was relieved to see him

alive, to have him share my bed. He warmed my soul like no other, keeping the dark temptations at bay.

*For now...*

“Enjoying the fresh air,” I answered him.

His fingers curled in my silk dressing robe, bunching the material up to the top of my thighs. Cool air licked at my skin.

“What are *you* doing?” I asked. “I thought you were meditating.”

A wonderful use of time. I longed to adopt such a practice to soothe my mind and body. He said he would teach me his techniques.

For now, he responded to my question with his body, dropping to his knees, pushing my legs apart. He soon brought heat to me, parting my buttocks with his fingers and sliding his tongue inside.

I moaned, taking hold of the balustrade with both hands, bending over to grant him more room to explore me.

He reached around as he licked and slurped, taking my cock into his hand. Stroking, thumb rubbing the tip.

“Oh...” I panted. “Oh, Kormac.”

He buried his face into me, his other hand tugging at my balls. Fucked me with his tongue. His tongue! No lover had ever managed to perform such an act on me before so skillfully. Different from a cock, a much wetter experience as silky as my garments.

I tried not to scream my orgasm as I burst in his hand. He stood up, spinning me to face him as my pleasure tore out of me into his palm, decorating his forearm. He brought his sticky fingers to his mouth, lapping at my seed.

Nervously, I laughed, a little uncomfortable at watching him *eat* me like that.

Then he painted his lips as if applying rouge and kissed me. I whined in surprise at my saltiness in his kiss.

He stopped. “Sorry. I got carried away.”

I licked my lips, puzzled yet excited at the same time. Such a messy kiss, such an intimate, strange thing.

I pulled him back to me, reveling in it. My cock throbbed, staying hard, ready for more of him.

*You’re a naughty human...* my inner voice purred.

Breaking the kiss, I dropped to my knees on the cold floor and took his hardness into my mouth. Holding onto his firm buttocks, I rocked my head back and forth, his tip striking the back of my throat.

I gagged, taking a breath and a pause.

He stroked my hair. “You don’t have to...”

“Give me a moment.” I relaxed further, caressing his shaft with my fingertips.

He groaned, his toes curling.

I took my break to enjoy the aesthetics of his lower body. The powerful thighs, the dark hairs on his legs, his beautiful forest of pubic hair, that wonderful olive skin. He was built for fighting and fucking, hewn from brutality and sexual magnificence.

His stamina was incredible, his thirst for sex unquenchable. Every night we fucked, unable to sleep without it. Our lust smothered any real discussions we could have

about our future, and I didn't care. We were in a better place now, and I didn't want to spoil it with reality or words.

My consort. My lover. Let us keep it at that.

The doubt, the anxiety, they were irritating lurkers trying to trip me up. I did my best to ignore them.

Relaxed enough, I took him back into my mouth, closing my lips around him.

"You feel so good..." he breathed.

This time, I didn't gag, his balls bouncing on my chin as I fucked him in my own way. He dug his fingers into my scalp, moaning toward a climax. He spilled down my throat in hot gushes, driving himself into me in those final moments.

I drank every drop until the well ran dry.

"That was an interesting turn to the evening," I said, getting to my feet.

He cupped my chin, shivering. "I couldn't help myself."

"You're cold. Get back inside. The balconies of Winter are not the best places to be naked."

"I'd beg to differ, Your Majesty." He winked at me.

"Get inside before your lips turn blue. We have to get ready for the ball."

He nodded and turned his back on me. I watched him saunter through the billowing drapes, his backside a feast for my eyes. Would he allow me to explore it with my tongue? Return the favor?

It looked the perfect fit for my face.



NO MORE SEX TOOK PLACE.

We shared a bath to warm and clean ourselves, keeping our hands occupied with soap and combs. Afterward, he dressed in a magnificent white and silver tunic with a matching, long jacket. His tight breeches were white and piped silver, too, his boots leather and black, coming up to his knees. He looked spectacular, a far cry from his brown leather armor.

I stood before a tall mirror as he helped me lace up my purple corset with the silver laces.

“Tighter,” I commanded him with seduction in my voice, my cock firm at every pull.

I watched his reflection hesitate.

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“No.”

“Then make it tighter.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I like the bite,” I replied.

“What about breathing?”

“I can breathe just fine.”

He frowned. “Does this turn you on?”

“Yes. I’m hard, Kormac.” I nodded down to the bulge in my black breeches.

“Oh.” He licked his lips, grinned.

“You can slice me free later.”



Another mischievous grin. “Oh.”

“Yes. Now pull, my friend.”

*Friend?*

He obeyed, tugging the laces until the corset constricted me enough to hurt yet please. My cock threatened to burst at the exquisite juxtaposition. I moaned, closing my eyes for a moment.

“There,” he said, tying the final lace in place.

I opened my eyes and smiled at him through the mirror, my ribs suitably crushed. Yes, he could certainly cut me free later. Lace by lace. Or not. He could leave the corset on and tear my bottom clothing from me, fuck me with all his might.

*Yes...*

Turning to face him, I took him by the shoulders. “Thank you. I appreciate your help. Shall we?” I offered him my hand.

He took it, allowing himself to be led to the ballroom.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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**W**inter Palace was decorated with silver and purple ribbons hanging from the ceiling, floating lanterns to match, candles flickering within them. Every inch of the building glittered with fine decoration. Even some pink rose arrangements in ornate vases were dotted around to symbolize Valance.

Another party, though this wasn't one any angelus would throw.

We reached the ballroom, Valance leading me toward a newly erected dais rising above a throng of bodies applauding him. Regal fae dressed in fine clothes, every single one of them immaculate. Fae of the restored Winter Court.

An orchestra of human musicians waited silently beside the dais, brandishing harps and violins, one of them sitting at a fine white piano.

Valance took to the dais, beckoning me to join him. I did, clearing the two steps in one movement. I moved to stand behind him, keeping my eyes off the stares of the congregation. As much as we were all on the same side, the dark fae and the Tuatha lords and ladies made me uneasy.

Because of Winter's history, the old tales of a desire to bring eternal winter to Faerie, of tyranny and cruelty.

Was that where Valance was headed?

The applause continued until Valance lifted his arms. Silence fell over the crowd so thickly it felt like the room had plunged into some strange existence.

“Thank you, everyone,” Valance finally cut through the silence, his tone clear and powerful. “This is an important night, a celebration of the darkness to come. It seems an odd thing to say, as is celebrating war an odd thing to do. Yet this is it. We are on the precipice of change. This is Winter's chance to rise, to assert ourselves into the world under my rule. The past is now the past. The old desires dead. What is alive is the need for change, the need for revenge. From the darkness of war, we can bring a new light, a world of hope, of progress.”

I shivered hearing that. Would that happen? Could it? Valance held the dark caress of the Tuatha inside him. What would it mean? How much hope could he offer before he dragged Faerie into his tyrannical grip? If he even had a grip like that.

The conflict within me stung like a tumble into a bed of roses, thorns biting flesh. I wanted to be here with him, to help him. To see him take his revenge. But not at the expense of the world.

Maybe I could hold him back, keep him from losing himself to his dark caress.

“In a matter of days, we will attack those who wait at our borders,” he said.

What? The borders? He hadn't mentioned anything about that.

It seemed I wasn't the only one taken by surprise.

I cursed myself for not talking about the war with him back in his bedroom, like I'd planned. Instead, I'd been thinking with my cock yet again.

Valance took a pause, let the gathered whisper, his eyes terrifyingly dark—far darker than normal.

“They're waiting,” he said, halting those whispers, “at the edge of northern Autumn. Trying to cross the trenches to scale the mountains. Brave darklings and shades keep watch as my magic prevents entry. But I cannot sustain it forever. We must repel them. And we will, within a few days.”

Wouldn't I have noticed him using his magic to help at the border?

“We must march now, Majesty!” a man cried.

Valance shook his head. “Not yet.”

“What about the eastern border at the Bridge of Stars?” a woman asked.

The Bridge of Stars once linked Winter and Summer, crossing the violent sea between them. It was long destroyed.

“They cannot cross the water,” Valance answered. “It is far too dangerous for anyone. Though, let us not be complacent in that.”

More whispers.

Valance silenced them. “We will defeat the enemy, have no doubt about that. Spring may wield metal and this weapon of iron fire, but they don't have life on their side.” He smiled.

“Be run through with a sword. I will get you back on your feet. Burn to death from being struck by a flaming arrow—I will correct the horror. There can be no defeat for Winter here. Trust me.”

I shivered again. He and his army would be unstoppable. I had to make sure he didn't lose himself.

*Can you?*

“Tonight, we feast, we dance, we celebrate our impending victory. There will be pain, there will be suffering, and there will be glory. Be fearful, but do not fear death. I will not fail you.” The smile on Valance's face brought smiles to the gathered.

They erupted into applause as Valance offered me his hand.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my throat dry.

“The first dance to officially open our celebrations,” he said. “Don't you remember?”

I did. We'd had this conversation in his room—the only one before lust took over. “Yes...”

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing. Let's... let's dance.”

Our fingers interlocked. “Thank you,” he responded. “I chose a musical piece my mother used to enjoy.” He led me off the dais. “It's called ‘As We Kissed in Summer Rains’.”

The applause died down as we reached the center of the ballroom, our hands breaking apart momentarily. The congregation formed a circle, giving us space to dance.

My stomach twisted into knots. Was I really about to dance with the Tuatha king?

“You can lead,” he whispered.

I certainly could. I slipped my right hand in his, placing my left hand on his hip.

He felt so warm.

Every eye in the room bore into us. A hushed silence, a build of anticipation so thick it was almost a breeze, then the violin started the first chords of the song. A beautiful yet lamenting sound, followed by the piano and harp.

I’d learned to dance in Riverleaf. Lasair taught me behind the tavern one warm afternoon.

Autumn was a country of rain and plenty of cold, though nothing like here. But there was also plenty of beautiful weather throughout the year. Sunshine and blue skies with crisp air in the lungs. The perfect days. On a day like that, Lasair showed me how to dance because she’d been in that kind of mood. A break from her hard stance and permanent seriousness.

I just couldn’t understand her thinking in this business with Florent.

“How are you feeling?” Valance asked as we twirled within the circle of bodies.

“I’m fine.” I steadied myself, keeping hold of him.

Soon, all thoughts on Lasair were crushed. The sway of Valance’s hair, the twinkle of the candlelight in his obsidian eyes, everything about him took my breath away. I could dance all night with him, never leave this ballroom. I felt like I was floating, moving across clouds.

“You’re good at this,” he said.

“So are you.”

He smiled, enough to make my knees want to go weak.

*So beautiful...*

How did we get to such a lovely moment, the prince and me?

*King...*

I spun him, pulling close, noses almost touching. Kiss him? Take him on the dancefloor?

*Don't be stupid!*

We broke apart, him spinning me this time. I laughed, feeling like a silly angelus. There was something about dancing that made a mind and body soar into a giddy freedom.

Valance stopped, his hands sliding to my hips. Gently, he pulled me a little closer. “Are you ready to walk?”

Another surprise? “Walk?”

“I thought we could walk through the city and the encampments. Show ourselves off some more.”

“You mean show yourself? I’m not important.”

“Please don’t say that. None of his would’ve happened without...”

“My sacrifice.”

“I’m sorry.”

My forehead ached. “Don’t be.”

“But I am.”



I kissed his hand, happy gasps drifting from the crowd.  
“I’ll walk with you.”

The crowd cheered their king, following us through the grand ballroom door into the corridor, out into the freezing night as the dragon roared in the sky to join in.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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**T**he cheers from the giant encampment were thunderous and rather splendid. I waved at them as they bowed and waved back, their tall fires burning on the snowy landscape alongside the city of Snowdell.

*Look at them, every single creature here to unite with me.*

“Behold the king and his consort!” a giant cried.

Kormac tensed beside me.

“You really struggle with that term, don’t you?” I asked.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just strange.”

“I understand. But you are befitting of such a title, Kormac. It is not a terrible thing or a dirty word.”

He nodded, saying nothing.

*Angelus...* the word rang in my head. This was a detail that would never lose its incredible shock. But that didn’t matter now. He was here and human and by my side. His presence was the only thing that mattered.

“You didn’t say anything about the enemy at the borders,” he said. “That you were using magic to keep them out. How is that affecting you?”

How wonderful his concern. “I’m fine, Kormac.”

“But you—”

“I’m managing it. Everything will be fine.”

“But your magic tires out eventually.”

“I’m being careful,” I countered. “As soon as the march begins, our troops reaching the border, I can ease my magic from flowing there.”

“That’s...” He sighed deeply. “I’m scared for you.”

“There is no need to fear.”

“Of course, there is,” he said, a bite in his tone. “There’s always something or someone to fear.”

We walked the road curving toward the city. Dark fae lined the road on either side, waving and cheering. There were so many of them around, the former serene silence of this once-buried city long gone.

“I want to eradicate the fear,” I responded to my companion.

“What about being the thing to fear?”

“Apart from that.”

“So, you want to be feared?”

“Yes.” I stopped, taking him by the upper arms. “There has to be fear when ruling an entire realm, Kormac. Without it, I have no power. But that doesn’t mean I’ll be unfair or cruel. I want peace as much as I do blood. But blood comes first. It must.”

“I know...” he answered weakly. “But does everyone have to pay in blood?”

*Yes...* “No.”

We walked onward.

“What about Riverleaf?” he asked.

“What about it?”

“Is it safe?”

“Do you want it to be safe?”

“Yes. It’s my home.” His next sigh came out as a deep, sorrowful moan. “I know you have to do what you have to. I know you have to kill Lasair because, well, I want her dead, too. But I’m still trying to get my head around being on your side.”

Could there ever be trust here? Any real feelings beyond lust? We were denying the inevitable—that we were just too different to be anything more?

“I understand,” I replied. “You don’t have to be part of this fight.”

“But I want to.”

“I’m leaving the decision with you. However, I will do what is necessary to win this war.”

We reached the end of the road, walking through the giant archway at the entrance to this place of snow-dusted cobbles and buildings built of strange brown and silver stones. Smoke drifted from chimneys, the candles of the street lanterns in their sealed glass domes beautiful sentinels along the streets. Bakeries were open, baking wonderful-smelling treats. Men and women cooked meat on spits outside, others sold purple and silver flags marked with pink roses, while children offered the crowds fresh mulled wine. So much life in so little time,

the city blooming as it once would have before Winter's defeat centuries ago.

"This is what I want," I told Kormac. "When the darkness rolls back, this is what I want to see."

*No... I want to see ashes...*

Our eyes met, and he smiled. "A nice dream."

"Soon to be reality."



I WANDERED the city streets with Kormac for hours, greeting so many well-wishers, so many new soldiers for my army. I explored the various encampments beyond Snowdell, delivering a similar speech to the one I gave in the ballroom. Weapons beat shields. Voices cried my name into the night.

On our way back to the keep, the dragon landed in the snowfields to the north of the castle. I headed over to her, the magnificent beast lowering her head as I approached. She purred, growled, and awaited my touch.

"How are you?" I asked, stroking the scales on her head. "Did you enjoy your flight?"

A soft growl in response, her eyes closed.

"Soon, we will fly to victory," I said.

After long moments of stroking, Kormac waiting a few feet away, I returned to my chambers in need of warmth and my soft bed.

Kormac closed the door behind us, locking it with the key. "Are you flying straight to Spring?"

I faced the mirror, caught his gaze in the reflection. “It has crossed my mind as a possibility. Destroy the nexus of power.”

He nodded, saying nothing.

“We must destroy them at the root,” I said. “Unless they surrender, of course.”

“You’d accept that?” he questioned.

“Somewhat. Florent and Lasair would have to die. I am, however, willing to listen to those who followed them should they offer me fresh allegiance.”

Another nod.

“I’m not a monster, Kormac.”

*For now...*

“I was thinking of Róisín and how she helped us even though she hated you.”

It was my turn to nod.

I loved the sound of his voice, how much care poured out of him. For Faerie, for his friend, and his village. For me.

“I have no quarrel with Róisín or your home, Kormac.”

“That’s good.”

“Would you help unlace me, please?” I asked.

He came over.

If he weren’t here, I’m not sure how much longer I would have convinced myself I could show restraint, that I wouldn’t burn everything down.

Yet I genuinely wanted the joy on display in Snowdell, to see peace throughout the world. I might have taken pleasure in

violence and torture, but I also took pleasure from happiness, celebrations, and the smell of baking bread.

Of late, I didn't understand myself. Poisoned by revenge, by my past, yet soothed by my one-time enemy, the only thing in my life that made sense, that put a real and true smile on my face.

I couldn't imagine a life without him again. Not after this, not after the warmth always pooling in my belly.

Kormac reached for my laces with calloused fingers.

"Cut them," I said. "That was the plan, wasn't it?"

A delightful grin. "Yes, Your Majesty." He drew a dagger hidden in a sheaf at his hip, positioning it at the bottom of the run of laces. "Ready?"

"Yes." It would be nice to have feeling in my ribs again.

He cut upward, the corset instantly relinquishing its grip. It fell off me, landing softly at my feet, exposing the white dress shirt beneath.

A quiver of excitement traveled up my spine. His touch would soothe my thoughts, quiet everything down.

"Cut through the shirt," I whispered into the mirror, watching him watch me.

"But it's such a nice—"

"Cut it."

"If you say so." A cocked brow. "I know I'd rather see your skin anyway."

My heart fluttered, almost winding me.

As Kormac put the blade to the silk, a commotion came from outside.



My head snapped in the direction of the sound, my boots carrying me to the balcony.

“What’s going on?” Kormac asked, following.

I leaned over the balustrade to see dark fae dragging two figures across the snow.

“I’m not sure,” I said.

I returned to the room, finding my long silver cloak from the large wardrobe. I flung it over my shoulders, fastening the string and amethyst broach at my neck.

A pounding on my door. Kormac darted for it, turning the key and pulling the door open.

“I must speak with His Majesty.” It was Orla.

“Enter,” I called.

She swept into the room, deep lines creasing her forehead. “Your Majesty.” She bowed. “We have captured a spy and a rebel.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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## VALANCE

**D**eep beneath the snow, a Gentry fae and an elf of Winter were locked in dank cells lit by the fire of two torches fixed in sconces. No moonlight or daylight touched any inch of this darkness.

A Gentry fae with hair of vibrant red and fair, freckled skin looked up at me. He wore copper metal armor, no need for the strong yet weaker elven leather armor I favored.

The stone cell was terribly cold. He shivered, his shoulders hunched.

Good.

Beside him, a female elf didn't shiver, her blue eyes filled with determined rage. She even had the bad manners to spit at my feet as I entered the cell with Orla and a human guard.

Kormac remained in my chambers. I didn't want him to see this, for him to be reminded of the things I'd done to him beneath Summer Palace.

Orla smacked the elf across the face with the back of her hand. She spun to the side, cracking her head on the wall.

“Cunt!” the rebel screeched, hand over her cheek as she sat back up.

“One more word, and your tongue is mine,” Orla warned.

The elf hissed but said no more.

I folded my hands before me. “I wasn’t expecting to see a Gentry fae just yet.”

The spy who’d snuck into Winter with the aid of the elf simply stared at me.

“At least not until the battlefield.” I kept my voice calm, sweet.

No response.

“Well?” I said. “Do you care to explain why you’re here in Winter without permission of its new king?” By Danu, what an arrogant lilt creeping into my tone.

“He was carrying this, Your Majesty,” Orla said, holding up a strange metal instrument. A steel thing fashioned into a slender tube affixed to a handle. There was what looked like a small lever within an arc of metal joining the two parts together.

“What is this?” I asked the fae. “A new Spring creation?”

Brave, shivering silence met me.

“I admire your loyalty to your leaders, but it is in your best interest to start talking.”

“Point the barrel at your face and pull—”

Orla kicked the rebel elf in the face for having the audacity to speak. The back of her head cracked on the floor, eliciting a wail from her wretched mouth.

“Interesting indeed,” I said. “Is it a weapon?”

No answer from the Gentry fae.

I shook my head. “And this is where I lose my patience.” I folded my arms across my chest. “I am going to assume you have knowledge of my use of torture? If not, I can only suppose you have lived a very sheltered life.”

“Answer your king!” Orla barked.

I lifted a hand to keep her at bay. “No need. Our guest will answer.”

The elf laughed, snorting. “Guests, are we?”

“You could say that,” I responded. “I like to think you are.”

I readied my magic.

“Can’t bring yourself to call us what we are, eh?” the rebel added. “Prisoners of the false king.”

I smiled, keeping my attention on the fae. “Orla?”

“Yes, My King?”

“Bring me her tongue.”

The Gentry fae’s eyes darted to his left as the rebel elf screamed.

Orla rushed the creature.

“No! Please! No! Cunts! You’re nothing but cu—”

Orla, through a cloud of agonized screams and limbs thrashing against stone, took the tongue of the rebel.

“Much better,” I said, silver magic glistening on my fingertips.

The spy’s wide eyes were a delight, though he still didn’t offer any information.

Not to worry. Nothing a little enchantment wouldn’t cure.

I hit him in the chest with bursts of silver light. He jolted backward, wracked by a series of convulsions before he got to his feet at my command.

“You’re very tall,” I said.

I saw the struggle in his face, the thick sheen of sweat on his brow. “I... I...”

“Tell me why you’re here and what this metal instrument is.”

“I came on the orders of Queen Lasair,” he said.

“Queen, you say?”

“Yes. They were wed four days ago.”

“That didn’t take long. And no invite for me.”

“It was a private affair at Spring Keep.”

“I’m sure it was.” Married already. How sickening. Had they consummated their marriage already? Would some evil spawn slither into existence within nine months’ time? What a terrifying prospect, the continuation of their united bloodlines.

“I...”

“You will continue with what you were saying,” I pushed.

“I’m renowned at the Spring Court for my skills in stealth. Her Majesty wanted me to sneak into Winter with this gun and shoot you, see if it was easy to kill you or not with one bullet. Return to her and give her my report.”

Strange words to me—gun and bullet. “Explain what these words mean.”

The Gentry fae obeyed. “The forges of Spring have created a new weapon. A gun. Made of metal, it is designed to fire small pieces of metal known as bullets at high speeds. To kill,

to maim. I'm not privy to all aspects of the design, yet I know they are highly effective. King Florent has ordered for many more to be made, with a priority on those which fire iron bullets."

Iron being the deadliest of metals to all fae not of Gentry blood. Non-Gentry could handle steel weapons, touch copper and tin and other metals, but not forge things or do anything with them.

Iron killed, poisoned us simply by touching it. Which made the Gentry the most dangerous of fae for their resistance to it.

Guns. Bullets. Yet more innovations from the metal-proficient scum. "How interesting. You came to kill me."

"Yes. Or hurt you."

"I'm sure an iron bullet would hurt me."

"Yes."

"Do you know how many of these guns are in existence?"

"Twenty so far."

"That's a very specific number."

"Ten for the Autumn border, ten for Spring Keep. More will come."

The Autumn border. Those fae wielding them there would be destroyed first. I'd seek them out from the skies, command the dragon to burn them alive.

"Is there anything else you need to tell me?" I asked.

The enchantment attacked him within and without, forcing every sliver of truth out of that vile Gentry mouth.

"I'm sad to have failed," he answered.

“I’m sure. Is Lasair tucked away with her new king, or is she here with you?”

“She’s at the border.”

But of course. She loved war.

“I hate you,” he added further. “I’ve always hated you from your time as prince up to now. All we ever heard was how beautiful and dangerous you were, how Lord Florent was so lucky to be chosen as your betrothed. Every time I saw you on royal visits to Spring or had to endure any tale or song about you, I wanted to vomit. You sicken me. Everything you are, everything you’ve ever had has been handed to you without question. I’m sad you’re not dead and now the king of the Tuatha. You deserve a thousand deaths.”

His sentiments were echoed outside of Winter, I was sure. I could sense Orla wanted to hurt him, bark some warning into his face.

But we were done here.

“Do we have any oil?” I asked, already knowing the answers.

Barrels of the nasty black ooze were kept even deeper than these cells, used sparingly. The Tuatha fae harvested it from the permafrost in the northern reaches of Winter, storing it for emergencies after they discovered its flammability centuries ago.

Thank Danu they did.

“Yes,” the guard answered. “Shall I get some, Your Majesty?”

“If you would, thank you.”



As he left to do his duty, we waited in silence. I'd gathered all the information I needed. If there were more, the enchantment would've dragged it out of the Gentry fae.

The guard returned with a barrel and an oil can. He proceeded to remove the torches from the cell, handing one each to Orla and me. Then he filled up the can from the barrel.

The rebel elf moaned while the Gentry held his silence, the enchantment gone. But he couldn't hide his terror as the guard poured oil throughout the cell, throwing it to splatter the walls as well as on the prisoners. The rebel hissed and spat crude words, the Gentry's eyes and mouth firmly closed as the black ooze ran down his face.

I loathed oil. The acrid stench hit the back of my throat, assaulting my nostrils.

"You're both so cold," I said when the job was done, stepping out of the cell. "I hate to see you shiver like this. My home is a place of great warmth I want you both to experience."

The guard slammed the door of crisscrossed bars closed, locking it.

"What... What are you doing?" the Gentry fae asked. He got up, slowly walking toward the bars.

"I'll let you take a guess," I answered.

The elf screamed.

Realization struck the spy. "No..."

"Yes." I pushed my torch through the bars. It landed in the oil-drenched cell beside the Gentry fae's feet.

*Whoosh!* Fire spread across the floor in seconds, engulfing both prisoners, licking up the walls. Now they both screamed,

charging the bars, desperate for respite from such agony.

I kept my distance, watching them scramble, their screams piercing my ear canals, their pleading pitiful.

*This could be Faerie. All of them burning, all of them learning.*

The stink of their burning flesh filled the corridor, worse than the toxic smell of the oil. I kept the fire and the smoke contained in the cell with an enchantment, a special condition just for them, protecting the corridor.

Their screams stopped as they fell to the ground, the flames and smoke dying away at the command of my magic.

“What do you want to do, Your Majesty?” Orla asked.

I drifted into a numb space, my focus on the charred, smoking flesh. There would be more of this, so much more. Fire in the hills, smoke curling into the skies to drown the sun and the moon. Bodies in the seas, oceans, rivers, the soil soaked in blood.

*Because it has to be this way...*

I blinked, breaking my gaze from the corpses. “Bring them outside to the dragon. I have a message to send.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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I paced the room, ordered to wait in Valance's chambers until he returned.

When would that be? What was he doing with the spy and rebel? Torture? Had he made a new version of his orchid garden here?

The dragon roared, the beating of her wings like a drum. I hurried to the balcony, watching her take flight with Valance on her back.

I rubbed my eyes, unsure I saw his billowing silver hair for a moment. But it was him, vanishing into the distance on the beast.

"What are you doing?" I spoke to the air.

I went to the door, yanking it open to be greeted by Brigid. I jumped back, going into a battle stance.

"What's going on?" I asked her, straightening up.

"I'm not sure," she answered.

"You're not sure? Aren't you his advisor now?"

If she could shake her head, she probably would have. "A title I wish held more power." She licked her dry lips. "No one

is telling me anything.”

“He just flew out of here on dragon back.”

“I’m not blind.”

I offered the hag my best scowl. “Get out of here.”

“I wanted to check on you.”

“Why? You’re the one who—”

“Yes, yes. I know. I’m sorry about everything. I did it for —”

I cut her off this time. “Save it. Just save it.”

“You don’t believe in your king? In your lover?”

“He has so much power,” I said softly.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

She made me uneasy. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“How does this end?”

“He told you how it ends, Kormac. In peace. In change.”

“Right. But what happens then?”

“We live in the new world, the old ways broken. This is his destiny you helped to shape.”

“I—”

“And now you get to be his lover.”

“I—”

“I had to make this happen, Kormac. I had to make sure you, or another of your kind, was called.”

“You shouldn’t have looked that far beyond the stars.”

“But I did. It is done. And you can still be part of his destiny, help him to be happy after he has lost so much. He missed you tremendously.”

*I missed him too...* “I’m worried about him.”

“As am I.”

“You only care about power.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Yes, Kormac. How observant of you.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“Then don’t cast aspersions at me.”

“Can you blame me? You manipulated—”

“I helped you. I kept you as safe as I possibly could. Yes, I wanted Valance to claim his power, to bring the Tuatha back through way of your angelus gift. But does that mean I didn’t care about him or you? No. But believe what you will. I made mistakes. I underestimated your bond. How many times must I be sorry?”

I didn’t know how to answer that.

“I want what’s best for him and now for you,” she said.

“Until you stick the knife in my back.”

She rolled her watery eyes. “You sound like a petulant child.”

My hands curled into fists. Oh, to punch that floating, withered ball. But then, what good would that do? She’d been right to call me a child.

I unfurled my tightly balled fingers. “I’m done with this conversation.”

“As am I. I only wanted to see you were all right.”

“I will be when Valance comes back.”

“Me too.” She floated away, and I closed the door.

Checking on me? I didn't trust her, no matter what she said.

Locking the door, I went to the balcony to await my lover's return.

I laughed to myself. Lover. Valance. Some would call me lucky. I'd call it a strange turn of events, and incredibly satisfying.

*Hurry back, Valance.*

*Please.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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## VALANCE

**T**he dragon flew across the mountain range dividing the north of Autumn from the west of Winter.

As we crested the snowy peaks, we cut through heavy, dark rain clouds, the temperature shifting from freezing to a different, warmer kind of chilliness.

My dragon roared, breaking through the clouds within seconds. The land changed from white to a lush, dark wet green laden with the fires of encampments.

Enemy encampments.

As we lowered toward the ground in the drenching downpour, horns rang out, soldiers cried up at the monster in the night sky.

The dragon roared in response, shooting a stream of fire from her jaws in warning.

Lights scurried about below. I expected an onslaught of arrows, of spears fired from the plethora of heavy artillery below.

None came.

My dragon landed at the edge of the three deep trenches dividing the mountains and the land. She roared into the army

facing us, all manner of weapons drawn. As one, they backed away from her terrifying boom.

The encampment was large and sprawling, an incredible set up of soldiers drawn from Autumn, from Spring, even from Summer. I recognized some elves who used to stand guard at Summer Palace. Now traitors, now unworthy to look me in the eye.

I slid off the dragon who needed a name, boots landing on sodden grass. Pushing my wet hair out of my face, I enchanted my cargo to come with me from the dragon's back.

The bodies of the spy and rebel elf.

“Lasair!” I yelled above the rain.

The beast behind me emitted a rumble from deep in her core as the two charred bodies came to sit either side of me.

“Lasair!” I called again.

The soldiers parted, making way for the copper-skinned woman dressed in Spring copper armor, her dark braids dripping water. Her scarlet Fomorian eyes were fires in her head as she strode across the grass, wielding one of those gun instruments with no fear in her steps.

*We meet again...*

She came to a stop, flanked by two soldiers also holding guns—one Gentry, one Fomorian.

“Valance,” she said, considering the bodies beside me. “I gather you’re returning something?”

“A couple of trespassers.”

Her eyes fell on the dragon. “Thanks to your new friend, I gather?”

“Oh, no. Thanks to me.”

She cocked her left eyebrow, still showing no fear. “Is this a tactic to scare me into retreat?”

“I suppose it is, Your Majesty.”

She smirked. “I see you’ve heard the wonderful news.”

“Is it wonderful?”

“It is for me, Your Majesty,” she responded mockingly. “A better prospect for Florent than being married to you.”

“I’m sure.” *I’m also sure I’m better in bed than you...*

I kept that thought to myself.

“This is a warning,” I said. “A sign of things to come if you don’t yield now.”

“Yield to you?”

“Yes. We can avoid war if you bend the knee and drop your weapons. Is this what you want for your followers?” I gestured to the burned bodies. “Because this is their future if they resist me. A storm is coming upon you, Lasair. One you cannot escape.”

“I see.”

“I know you do. You’re no fool.” *Even if you did willingly marry that vile Spring lord.*

She wiped rainwater from her eyes with the back of her free hand. “I think you underestimate the power of our armies, Valance. You may have awoken Winter and acquired this dark caress so many now speak of, but you’re still only one continent. We are three now, the might of Spring, Summer, and Autumn. It should be you bending the knee, not making threats with the murdered bodies of my warriors.”

What an arrogant fae. “And your iron fire?”

“You should fear it, Valance.”

I came here considering talks, to stop a war. Bringing these bodies was supposed to be a deterrent to help with moving forward, a fear tactic as she suggested. Clearly, talks were an impossibility. I no longer harbored a desire to enter into them, considering the arrogance on her face, the army at her back.

Lasair understood the language of war, nothing else. And so, that is all there would be.

“There is room in Faerie for one king,” she said. “And he doesn’t stand before me.”

She lifted her gun and a mighty crack boomed.

Pain. Pain in my left shoulder as I spun through the air, landing on my front. My face smacked wet grass, extra agony in my teeth, my jaw, my nose.

But the pain in my shoulder...

Iron. A small, deadly piece of iron. Instantly, my magic took hold of it, forcing the invader out of my body.

Lasair used her gun again, riddling me with many more of those awful bullets.

And then the chaos unfolded.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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## VALANCE

**T**he dragon's deafening roar shook the ground beneath me. She took to the sky, her wings so powerful a burst of wind rolled my body closer toward Lasair.

Silver magic healed me, the grip of death unable to gain purchase on me. Iron pushed out of my body, leaving behind a nausea my magic worked to diminish.

Guns. Iron. There was too much power in the enemy's hands.

I sat up as the dragon unleashed a torrent of fire into the army. It exploded in radiant fury as she swept across the plains, engulfing the masses easily.

*Aeveen. That will be your name...*

Lasair roared, snatching the gun from the Gentry beside her as her Fomorian soldier fired at Aeveen.

"Damn you!" she bellowed between every crack.

Those bullets appeared to be useless against Aeveen's scales.

Good.

I got to my feet, enchanting Lasair and her flanking companions, forcing them to face me.

She visibly struggled, her army screaming and burning behind her.

I took a few steps forward. “What did you think would happen here?”

“Your death!” she spat back.

“Then you are a fool.”

Her arms moved, her own gun now pointing at her head. Again, she seemed unafraid, angry more than anything else.

“You’ll never win,” she seethed.

“Tell me, Your Majesty,” I said. “What happens to a head when a gun fires a bullet so close?”

I made the Fomorian soldier show me his weapon. His skull exploded, spraying brain and bone and blood everywhere.

“Hmmm,” I folded my arms, stroking my chin mockingly. “I need to see that again.”

My magic forced Lasair to point her gun at the Gentry, pressing it into his temple.

“Please—”

The Gentry fae’s words were cut short as the gun blew his head apart.

“One more time,” I said.

Once again, Lasair turned her weapon on herself. “This changes nothing.”

“Oh, but it does. It leaves you no head.”

“Florent will—”

She killed herself, her powerful, assertive face exploding in a spray of pink and red. Her strong, fighter body sprawled in the mud. As simple as that. No need for my army, only my enchantments and my dragon.

No. This wasn't even a quarter of the forces of the united continents. As much damage as Aeven and I could deliver, we were only two and my magic's limitations were to be adhered to. My soldiers had to sweep the lands, the fire and magic of me and my dragon to be saved for pulling apart the heart of power.

I smiled as the meadow engulfed in a raging inferno of ten-foot flames, the rain unable to fight back against it.

Come a week from now, everything would be new.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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Valance returned as dawn began to break. I waited in the bedroom for him, standing by the door.

He smiled as he saw me standing there. His hair was frizzy and damp, filthy with what looked like dirt and ashes, smears of it on his pretty face, too.

I grabbed him as he closed the door, pulling him close. “What happened? You stink of smoke.”

He told me, breaking free of our embrace.

Dead? Lasair dead? I couldn’t believe it. “You did what?”

“I tried to offer peace. Lasair rejected it.”

“So you destroyed her army.”

“A small portion of it.”

Oh, gods. The shadows in his eyes, the menace in his body language. He stood so straight, so still. So fucking tense. His chest barely moved. I’d seen him angry many times, the worst of it being when he suffered from the berserker curse.

This was different. This was cold, somewhere so far away I wasn’t sure if I could reach him.

“Valance?” I tried anyway, taking his hands in mine.  
“Breathe. Please, breathe.”

The dark pools in his face snared mine. He drew a deep breath, releasing it slowly.

“And again,” I said.

He responded with deep breaths, repeating the pattern until his shoulders sagged.

“Find a calming place,” I whispered. “Imagine a well...”

I practiced meditation a lot. I envisioned my thoughts as rocks being thrown into a well—those thoughts I didn’t want to weigh me down.

“Come and sit on the bed with me,” I said.

He did.

“The well,” I continued. “I’m there, too. Within woodland, somewhere far away from everyone else. Only you and the trees, a quiet place. Are you there?”

“I am.”

Mine was in an autumnal wood, the golds and reds a wondrous fire in the trees on such a sunny day. I walked to the well, carrying my rock of Lasair, the good and the bad memories of my once leader.

She was gone.

She was really gone.

Another part of my past crumbled into ruin.

I left the well behind, dragging myself back into the opulent room of purple and silver, hot tears running down my face.

Shit.

Valance noticed, turning his body to the side. “I’m so sorry, Kormac. I know you had history with her. But—”

I brought a finger to his lips. “No. She’s... Whatever friendship we had is in the past. Her being dead is a shock, that’s all. I didn’t expect it, not yet.”

“It obviously hurts you,” he said. “You’re crying.” He caught a tear with the back of his left little finger. “She did mean something to you.”

“Once.”

“It’s okay to be angry with me.”

“Is that what you want?” I questioned.

“No. Of course not.”

“Because I’m not. I’m sad, but I’m not angry with you. I’m angry at her for her choices. But I made those same choices before...before us. I could have been slain by dragon fire myself because without you, without our soul bond, I would’ve followed her.”

He reached out and stroked the side of my face, gently rubbing his knuckles across my stubble. “I know.”

“Don’t you feel so confused by everything?”

“Every hour of the day.”

I lay back on the bed, my mind exhausted. The well wouldn’t be sufficient to aid my worries.

“I’ll leave you to rest,” he said, getting up. “You need some time alone.”

I sat back up. “Where are you going?”

“To take a long, hot bath.”

“Can I join you?”



WE SAT side by side in the steaming pool in the bathing room. No sex, no touching. Just us and the steam, allowing the heat to work on our bones and muscles.

Valance raked his hands through his wet, silver hair after a long stretch of pleasant silence.

Until the screams from outside changed that.

Valance launched himself out of the bath with me right behind him. He slammed, naked, into the balustrade.

“No!” he cried.

A strange beam of metallic fire blazed across the dawn sky, heading straight for Winter Keep.

Iron fire.

The enemy’s retaliation.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## VALANCE

I summoned my magic, drawing on the snow and ice and rocks to become an enormous barrier around the palace, spreading outward to protect as much of the encampments and the city as I could.

*No death here. Remember that...*

The iron fire crackled on its approach, its shimmering, coppery green heatwaves blurring the sky around it.

I created separate protection for Kormac, trapping him inside a cocoon of magical snow.

“Valance!”

“I’ll fix this!” I yelled back at him.

Breaking off another piece of magic, I sent an icy storm to meet the metallic fire. It hit, swallowing the destructive force. A mighty hiss, a pop, the crackling intensifying. The iron broke through my storm, larger, hissing with steam.

“Fuck!” I bellowed, sending another spinning storm into it.

Closer, closer. So much closer.

*You can heal the victims...*

That might be the truth, but I would rather not spend my magic on such a task yet.

My fault. I brought this to my army, to this place. I should have stayed away, waited until the march. Not goad the enemy with bodies and Aeveen, killing Lasair.

I tried an enchantment, an attempt to turn the deadly thing away.

It failed. The blazing iron resisted me, sent waves of pain into my chest. Even my power wasn't strong enough against the might of this iron fire.

Closer. Closer.

I braced myself, pouring as much magic into my protection as I could.

*They will live...*

Would they?

A brilliant explosion of light, the ground trembling as if braced for the impact, a chorus of panic tearing its way to my ears.

The weapon struck.



## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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KORMAC

**T**he explosion swallowed sound, tore through the icy cocoon. Heat and deadly force crashed into me, sending me spiraling through the air.

I hit a wall, blind to everything, only feeling my skull meet brick. Blood running, fire and pain...

...so much pain.

Burning.

Burning.

Dying.

Flesh melting from bone. Helpless. Broken. Agonizing heat pushing me toward the cold embrace of death.

## Chapter Thirty

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VALANCE

**I**ron fire scorched my naked skin. Did not melt it, all my power drawing back into me to protect myself.

The acrid stench of burning bodies again, a thick metallic cloud of smoke, the ground giving way beneath my feet.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

I hit solid darkness, my legs screaming in agony.

A second explosion, another wave of iron fire.

Deeper.

Deeper.

Through rock and dust and snow.

Deeper.

Deeper.

Deeper.

## PART II

Wish

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# Chapter Thirty-One

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I dreamed of happy days, of laughter and friendship. Maeve and Boyd and I linking arms, striding through the Summer Palace gardens, taking the steps down to the beach and the gentle waves of Summer Ocean. A beautiful, hot day perfect for swimming.

We loved to swim, a special ritual we always tried to fulfill whenever we had the time.

One day, as we bobbed in the warm salty water, watching the setting sun, Maeve wondered how far away the human realm to the east of here might be.

“Why do you even care?” Boyd responded.

“Aren’t you curious?” she said, glancing between us.

“No,” we both said together, splashing each other as we laughed.

“I’m being serious!” Maeve cried.

“Why?” I questioned. “I’d imagine it’s a dirty place.”

“Dirty?”

“Yes. Full of fleas and diseases. You know what some of the human quarters in the cities are like.”



“I suppose. But don’t you ever wonder?”

Boyd snorted, diving underwater.

“I wonder about a lot of things,” I answered. “Never about the human realm.”

“Oh.”

“Where did this come from?” I asked.

Boyd resurfaced.

“I’m not sure. Strange curiosity?”

“More like morbid curiosity,” Boyd countered.

Maeve rolled her eyes, then splashed him in the face.

The conversation ended there, a series of splash fights and chasing each other along the beach followed until the moon took to the sky. A carefree time in my sixteenth year, a time firmly away from the brutality of curses, loss, and so much power.

Power...

I’d lied to Maeve that day. I had been curious about the land beyond Faerie, as I’d always been curious about humans. How short and delicate their lives were. How vulnerable. Their fleeting existences always seemed so tragic, so cruel. For those humans who didn’t align themselves to the unseelie court, I always offered kind words, my respect. They served us well, provided us with wonderful healing potions.

Human.

Kormac.

Yes. Kormac. The human who changed everything. The human who’d piqued my sexual interest, then simply my interest. A man I wanted to know, to see... to see again.

Not human.

Angelus.

Kormac.

Fire.

Iron fire.

“Kormac!” I managed to yell as I exploded from unconsciousness into darkness and smoke.

I choked on the overwhelming cloud, its thickness attacking my lungs, stinging my eyes and throat.

*Kormac...*

I heard nothing, only muffled sound and a fading ringing in my ears. But I knew I was trapped beneath debris, on my knees and naked in the dark, unable to stand.

Kormac.

Iron fire.

Lord Florent had retaliated.

Anger flared, igniting my magic. I commanded the debris release me as black leather armor magically wrapped itself around me. Rocks and stones moved, sliding away, rising upward. Before long, a sunny haze broke through the darkness—the sky smothered in toxic smoke.

Debris continued to move, revealing more of the landscape to me. I coughed, calling upon the wind to blow away the smoke. As it cleared, I hurried up a series of rocks in the formation of stairs, pausing at the top.

A sea of death and fire on snow spread out before me. Bodies burned in iron flames, blood ran through the white as rivers of red for as far as I could see. The city of Snowdell

burned, the encampments destroyed. My stronghold was a complete ruin, Winter Keep nothing but piles of rocks, no sign of life.

I cleared more smoke and searched for Kormac in the chaos.

“Find him,” I told my magic.

It dove through rubble, searching, searching. Finding fading life, the struggles of the injured desperate to be free. The fear, the death, the horror. Iron fire had destroyed so much so quickly.

*I'll make it right. But first...*

“There!” I cried.

I commanded him to be free, buried under so much rock. The ruins gave way for him to rise from the depths as a smoldering skeleton, nothing about him resembling Kormac.

“By Danu!” I gasped, bringing him to me.

He drifted through the air, dead and empty of himself.

Had he returned beyond the stars? They would never let him be free again.

From above, Aeveen roared. She had survived! I saw her fly, release another booming roar.

Kormac came to rest at my feet. I fell beside him, laying a hand on his hot bones.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Magic began to bathe him in a beautiful silver light tinged with blue and green. His stolen power working through him, returning his skin to healing bones.

His azure eyes opened. So lovely, so wide. Next, his hair, the brown tresses winding down his cheeks like happy snakes. Inch by inch, he became himself again. The hairs of his chest, the muscles, every inch I'd kissed or touched or feasted upon with eyes and hands hungry for him.

Back to me.

“Kormac...” I breathed.

He sucked in air, his back arching, eyes a flutter of blinks.

“I'm here,” I said, lifting his head to rest on my lap. “You're alive. You're alive.”

“Val-Valance?” a raspy voice drifted from those incredible lips.

“Yes. I'm here.”

“What... Gods....”

“Try not to worry for now.” He might be alive and healing, but the magic had a lot more work to do. Though iron wasn't deadly to humans like it was to fae, toxins still polluted his blood. This particular iron wasn't some ordinary metal. It was designed to destroy. In fact, vestiges of it still tingled across my skin.

While my magic worked through him, it failed to hurt him. Eventually, the iron would diminish, and he would be himself again.

“I have to get you to shelter,” I said.

Danu, the air stank of destruction.

I picked him up, his weight nothing to me now, where once his bulk would have been far too heavy for me to carry.

“Valance...” he struggled.

I conjured clothing for him—thick furs to keep him warm.

“Don’t talk. Rest.” I gave him more magic.

How many more would need this same treatment? It would take considerable effort to fight the iron, to heal a vast number of dead. Judging by the scale of destruction everywhere, I would not be marching my army anytime soon.

While iron fire spread in every direction, the living tried to save each other. I spotted giants lending a hand, other survivors trying their best to help.

No building, from what I could see, stood anymore. Nowhere safe to take Kormac.

I made my way down an incline of debris, trying to think of a direction, some type of plan. Make him a shack here? No. I wanted him further away.

Brigid appeared.

“Your Majesty!” She floated closer. She seemed unhurt, dark smudges from the smoke and ash on her left cheek. “Are you okay?”

“I need shelter for Kormac.”

“Is he—”

“He’s fine. But, as you can see, he’s cold and struggling.” I explained the iron poison to her. “Are you affected?”

“No, My King.”

“Do you feel well?”

“Yes. I managed to avoid the blast. I wasn’t in the keep, anywhere near the city or the encampments.”

“Then where were you?” Sneaking? Plotting against me?

“I was north of here, wandering the snow plains,” she answered. “I like to wander, to feel the cold air on my face. It helps me think.” She looked behind me. “I wish there was something I could do.”

*Wish...*

“Have you seen Orla and Eoghan?” I asked.

“No. I’m sorry, Your Majesty.”

“They must be dead. I have...” I swallowed, anger bubbling. “I have much work to do. But first, I must take care of Kormac.”

It came steady and quickly, my inner rage. The dark caress, vicious voices whispering my next course of action.

*Not now.*

*I have to heal the...*

*I have to...*

*I have to...*

*Take your revenge.*

Yes. I wanted vengeance. For me, for Winter, for this sick man in my arms.

Just look at him. So hurt, so weak. Just look at what the enemy had done here.

With each step, my fury consumed me. It needed to rage, to respond to this attack. Healing my warriors would have to wait while I retaliated.

“Consequences,” I muttered.

“Sorry, Your Majesty?” Brigid asked from my right.

“What did you say?” I asked, her voice taking me by surprise—as if I’d forgotten she was there.

“I was wondering what you’d said, My King.”

“I see.”

“I’m thinking there might be time for a new strategy after such...” Her voice drifted away, nothing but a soft hum I didn’t care for. But she was right, a different strategy was certainly in order.

But Kormac first.

I called to Aeveen as I carried my lover clear of the destruction. She flew down to meet me, purring in her unique dragon way, offering her back.

“Your Majesty?” Brigid said.

“I have to find him somewhere. You’ve wandered these lands. Talk to me.”

“There might be somewhere, but it is at least twenty miles east of here.”

“Tell me,” I demanded.

A building collapsed somewhere in the city, the sound throwing further fuel on my rage.

“There is an old castle once belonging to Orla’s lover.”

The former monarch had no official consort during her time in power. She preferred the freedom to enjoy men as she saw fit, committing her life to no single Tuatha fae.

“Pierce was her favorite lover,” the floating head continued. “Orla cared for him so much. She built a special place just for him, just for them. It is still habitable, though full of dust, I would assume.”

“Then we go there,” I said. “Thank you, Brigid. Will you wait here, see if you can find Orla and Eoghan?”

“Of course, My King.”

“Tell them to head for the castle should they be alive. If they are dead, then no matter for the time being.”

“I will, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you.” I sent Kormac up to Aeveen’s back with an enchantment, climbing after him.

“Be safe, Valance!” Brigid called over the boom of the beating dragon wings.

From above, the destruction looked so much worse. A stain upon Winter, a wound that would take all of me and more to heal.

*Curse you, Florent.*

*Curse you into death and beyond.*



## Chapter Thirty-Two

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**T**he castle sat atop a mound of snow, a tall structure of gray stone, grubby windows, and four turrets. Even with the brilliant sunshine of the day, I could see candlelight flickering within that dirty glass.

Aeven landed at the foot of the mound, immediately taking to the skies again. There were deer in the woods nearby, a dense sea of evergreen firs east of the keep.

“Don’t take too long,” I said, her roar and wings drowning out my voice.

But I knew she heard me, that she would be back as soon as she’d tasted the hot blood of the deer she craved.

“Come,” I told Kormac, taking him into my arms.

“I can walk...”

“I would rather carry you.”

“But—”

“Don’t argue with me, human.”

He smiled. “The king has spoken.”

“He has.”

So fragile in my arms, struggling against the poison. I poured more of my magic into him, his breath a trembling release in response.

“Everything will be fine,” I added as my rage continued to rise.

*They could have killed him.*

*My fault...*

*My fault...*

*They will pay...*

I carried him up a newly cleared path snaking up the mound. The heavy oak door opened as we drew closer, two humans dressed in fine silver robes awaiting us.

The two women bowed to me, offering soft greetings.

I stopped, shifting Kormac’s body slightly in my grip. “Are you servants to this household?”

“Yes,” the tallest of the women answered. “We are two of eight. There are four humans, two elves, and two brownies also on hand to take care of your needs.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “You brought us back to life.” They both bowed their heads. “We will forever be grateful for the gift you have given.”

“Is Pierce in residence?” I asked.

“No, Your Majesty. He left two days ago to ponder his new life.”

“I see.”

With that, the elves and the brownies she had spoken of appeared behind her, offering their gratitude.

“May we come in?” I wondered.

“But of course!” the woman who seemed to be the spokesperson said, panicked. “I do beg your pardon, My King. I do not mean to keep you waiting in the cold. We will prepare a feast for you, draw you a bath, any wish you have is ours to fulfill.”

*Wish...*

“I’m not staying,” I responded. “But my companion here will be. He needs shelter and food. To recover.”

They all seemed to notice Kormac then, despite him being on display in my arms.

“The fire in the sky,” a human male said as the servants stepped aside.

“Yes.”

The hallway was a fair size, the walls a burnished gold rather than gray, giving the space a somewhat lovely warmth. Every inch, from the gilded framed paintings of landscapes to the grand diamond chandelier, gleamed with cleanliness.

“What is your name?” I asked, my attention on a curved wooden staircase.

“Siobhan, Your Majesty. May I show you to a room?”

“Please do.”

I followed her through the warm golden corridors, past so many of those landscape paintings. I paused before a portrait of a Tuatha, a welcome break in the theme.

“Queen Orla,” I said, looking up at the former monarch standing outside this castle, gazing into the distance. Her hair blew behind her in the wind, captured so beautifully by the artist. The colors were vibrant yet not overwhelming,

complementing the ornate copper-like frame which stood out amongst all the gold.

“Painted by my master many centuries ago,” Siobhan answered.

“It’s lovely.”

“As is she.”

*This is not the time to appreciate art.*

Siobhan walked on.

“You can put me down now,” Kormac said.

“Not until we reach the room.”

He groaned.

“Here,” Siobhan said, reaching a door at the far end of the corridor. “This is the finest room in the castle.”

The door opened into a large room of gold and copper décor as if everything was carved from fire and light. Flames danced in a hearth flanked by two vertical windows. A bed awaited a weary body, a bathing room attached. There were books crammed into a tall shelf, two vases of white lilies on polished oak tables.

“A fine room,” I said. “Thank you, Siobhan. If you could please leave us.”

“Of course,” she bowed, leaving quickly and quietly.

I put Kormac down on the bed. He immediately sat upright, sliding to the foot of the bed, clutching at his sweaty forehead.

“Lay down,” I said. “Rest.”

“No...” He looked so pale. “I can’t stay here.”

“You can and you will. You’ll be safe—”

“No!” he barked. “Nowhere is safe now. Not after *that*.”  
He closed his eyes, his body trembling.

I sat with him, rubbing his back. “This is the safest place for you to be while I...” I hesitated, a wave of confusion affecting my fury.

“While you what?” he asked. “Retaliate?”

I removed my hand from his back, getting to my feet. “I have to... I have to...” The confusion ebbed, raw feelings dominant again. “The damage they have done must be answered.”

“They were...” He struggled, swaying from side to side. “They were responding to you.”

“And that makes it just?”

“I didn’t... I didn’t say. But what...” He wiped at his mouth, drawing in a painful-sounding breath.

I returned to the bed, giving him more of my healing. “Please rest, Kormac.”

“I can’t...”

“You can. You must.”

“I’m worried about you,” he responded. “What you’re about to do.”

“I’m about to end this.”

Yes. End it. Embrace this rage. Let it carry me toward victory. Destroy the heart of the enemy, never mind this ridiculous gathering of an army. I may have believed I needed one, but I only ever needed myself. My power. It would be enough.

Wouldn't it?

My hands shook. My left leg bobbed.

"My destiny is to change the world," I said.

"But..." A groan, a wince. "But you... You can't just go... Please..."

"Kormac..."

"Don't leave me here."

"I have to... I have so much to do. Clear up this terrible mess Florent has made. That *I* have made."

"Valance?" Kormac's deep voice was a sound I liked to wrap myself in.

It didn't stop me from getting up to pace back and forth. Nor did it cool the ever-rising rage.

I had to get out of this castle. But could I leave Kormac behind? What if something happened to him again? What if he —

"You didn't return to the realm beyond the stars." I stopped my pacing, meeting his blue gaze.

"I don't know why," he said. "I don't know what... I can't remember anything apart from waking up in the ruins."

"Maybe because you are different this time," I offered.

"Please don't leave me here," he pleaded.

My limbs were tense, my chest tight. "Rest will help you heal better."

"I can't rest unless I know you're okay."

"Impossible, as you said. The danger of our lives is more profound than it ever has been before. Florent holds so much

power over us, and I cannot stand for it. What comes next? A third wave? A fourth and fifth until Winter is nothing but iron and ashes. I wasn't given this power to allow that to happen to these lands or to you. Florent will not rule Faerie. I will. It is mine, and I will crush..." A pause, sinking into determined fury. "I will crush all who resist me. For they are the enemy and support the barbaric use of iron fires."

"Valance..."

"Do not try and talk me out of this."

"I'm not."

"Good. Now rest."

"Where are you going?"

"To end it, as I said."

"But—" My guts throbbed with guilt as I cast a sleeping enchantment on him.

He yawned, eyelids drooping before closing. He fell gently backward, emitting soft snores. I went to him, pulling him up the bed and tucking him under the thick, silky sheets.

I smoothed back his hair, leaned in to kiss his forehead.

"You will see this is the right path," I whispered. "Let me give you a world without this terror."

By Danu, he looked so sickly, so pallid. But I knew he would wake to fighting health.

"See you in the new dawn, Kormac."

I swept out of the room, calling the servants to the main hall.

"I want his every need attended to," I ordered them. "He is special to me."



“We will care for him with everything we have,” Siobhan replied with a bow.

“Good. Thank you so much. Now I must leave.”

“Good luck, Your Majesty.”

Two humans opened the door, both offering their well wishes.

I thanked them and hurried down the path, the cold air a shock after the warmth of the castle.

How I would love nothing more than to turn back and return to Kormac. Lay by his side, see him through his healing sleep. Kiss him when he woke, hold him close.

His closeness was unlike any other body I’d held to mine, something special.

The man who changed my heart.

Who hurts because of Florent.

Aeven returned from her feeding, ready for flight.

“Did you eat well?”

I took her constant purring as a yes.

“I’m pleased for you. Now let us fly south. We have much work to do.”

## Chapter Thirty-Three

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**W**hen I woke up, I felt so much better. Cured. But that didn't change the heavy ball weighted in my chest.

Valance was gone.

My fingers dug into the windowsill as I watched the skies, praying for his return. Helpless, unable to do anything.

“Sir?” A woman's voice asked behind me.

I didn't turn around. “What is it?”

“Is there anything we can get you?”

“A spell strong enough to bring King Valance back here?”

“If only I could, sir.”

There had to be something I could do to stop this. He was spiraling into untethered rage, heading for gods only knew what chaos. And I'd let him slip away. I hadn't done enough to stop him. I should've argued more, chained myself to him, anything to pull him back from this madness.

But I'd failed.

“I'm supposed to protect you...” My breath steamed up the window as I spoke.

Maybe once I did, when we were connected by the soul bond. But not now.

“Sir?” the woman said again.

“Yes?”

“There is someone here to see you?”

I turned around, taking a sharp breath at the shock of the floating head.

“Hello, Kormac,” Brigid said.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

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## VALANCE

**I**t took until the next dawn to arrive back at the giant haven within the mountains. Aeveen landed carefully, avoiding the few remaining humans left to attend things in the absence of everyone else.

I ignored the genuflections, rolling my shoulders to prepare for my next step.

Silver magic bloomed in my hands, cascading through the air to pool at my feet. It spread like a thick ooze, slowly seeping into the ground.

“Find me another,” I said.

The magic got to work.

Buried deep, a graveyard of ancient dragons. None as big as Aeveen, all worthy of resurrection. But only one could be called back for the time being. My magic had to stay in fighting shape to see this through.

Which one. Which one.

*You...*

A male dragon slithered out of the earth. Different to Aeveen, more serpent-like with a coiled body of blue and

silver scales, eight small wings on either side of its form to carry him into the air.

Still a fire-breather, still just as deadly.

*I'll call you Cyrus.*

The dragons met in the air, Cyrus's body slithering around Aeveen, the two of them roaring, connecting. Friends.

I climbed back onto Aeveen once their bonding was complete, grateful to be able to sit. The resurrection didn't deplete me completely, but the break between here and Spring would serve me well.

And so, we flew farther south, my dragons and I, to obliterate the heart of the enemy.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

---





“**W**hat are you doing here?” I asked as a rumble vibrated the soles of my feet.

Something from outside. Another attack?

I spun to face the window, seeing a large figure running toward the keep. “Lord Cullen?”

“Yes,” the old woman said. “He is here to help you, as am I.”

I faced her again. “Help me how?”

“Remember that I can use silver magic, too.” She showed me her terrifying grin. “Remember all the wonderful things I did for you?”

Was this where she wanted me to get on my knees and praise her hellpissing name?

I folded my arms and nodded. “How are you going to use your magic this time?”

The rumbling stopped. I glanced behind me, the giant’s face filling the window.

“Hello, Consort,” he said, his voice rattling the glass.

I waved behind me, focused on Brigid.

“I can enchant Lord Cullen with the skin of a seal,” she said, “and make him quick of foot. He can take you south, swim you to Spring. You can ride on his back.”

“I like this idea,” the giant agreed.

“You can do that?” I asked.

“Yes. And not only that, I will conjure you clothes of seal skin, too. So you stay nice and dry.”

Gods, I hated her grin, her rotten teeth.

“How long will this magic last for?” I asked.

“As long as it has to,” Brigid replied.

“Until I am slain?” Lord Cullen questioned.

“Indeed, so try not to die.”

The boom of his laugh penetrated my bones.

Silver strands of magic floated around the base of Brigid’s head. “You must leave now.”

“It’s not too late?” I asked.

“That remains to be seen.”

Silver magic hit me, wrapping me in swirling ribbons. My clothes quickly changed into a body-hugging suit of oily skin, only leaving my head exposed. Every contour of my body was on display, from my stomach to the shape of my cock. It was like being naked.

*I’d like to see Valance in one of these...*

“You are now protected,” Brigid said.

I turned to look at the giant, smothered in a new oily skin, built for full water submergence.

“This will really work?” I said.

“It is all we have,” Brigid responded. “Now go. I will see you soon.”

“What are you going to do?” I wondered.

“Help us much as I can. Now leave.”

I didn’t hesitate, running through the castle, ignoring the panicked calls of the servants. They wanted me to stay, to be safe and warm here. To wait for the king.

Being safe and warm wouldn’t help me or Valance right now.

Lord Cullen waited at the edge of the slope, bent down to offer me his shoulders. I leaped onto his back, clambering up to settle into a slight dip in his collarbone. The perfect seat.

“Onward we go, Consort.”

*Don’t call me that!*

He charged across the snow, heading south.

## Chapter Thirty-Six

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**I**t took two days to reach Autumn. A long flight of cold winds, rain, and the raging ocean below. The water seemed to reflect my anger, my frustrations at the slow crawl of time.

I considered enchanting myself to move from one place to another within seconds but stopped myself. Even the thought of such a spell hurt my insides, instinct telling me it would be far too dangerous even for an undying creature like me.

Undying did not mean a lack of suffering.

My body thrummed with potent vengeance, ready to bring the end. I hungered for the coming destruction as if it were a thick, blood-rich steak.

Up ahead, the north of the continent of Autumn came into view. Smoke billowed toward the azure morning sky. The Gentry forges, working hard to produce more weapons for their new king.

*I hope you are hurting over Lasair, Florent.*

Once again, my instincts told me he probably wasn't. What did he really care about his queen? Nothing. She was nothing but a tool, much like I would have been if I'd married him.

Florent wanted nothing more than power, to perch his buttocks on the Faerie Throne.

As I approached the northern shore, bells rang out to sound the alarm. I imagined the faces of those below, horrified by two dragons coming toward them.

There, the metals boxes—the tops of the underground forges—spewing smoke from chimneys, an army of tiny specs running around outside on the vibrant green grass, getting inside those gray structures for shelter.

A network of railways connected around twenty of those forges, an industrial stain not seen anywhere else on Faerie. They were scars on this world, a result of too much intrigue, too much ingenuity I at once loathed and harbored some jealousy of. What a fascinating and terrifying thing metal could be.

Images of Kormac dead came to me in endless reminders. Below, in these forges, the skills were there to make that happen again and again. This wretched continent could make his life a series of endless agonies where I gave him life, and they took it away again. The rest of our endless days spent trapped in a morbid circle we could never be free of.

Life and death.

Death and life.

That's what they wanted, what they would do. There were monsters down there.

Just as there were monsters up here.

Upon my command, Aeven and Cyrus descended, roaring as they plunged toward the forges. I roared with them, air whipping at my face.

Aeven unleashed her flames first, swooping over five forges, engulfing each one in a vicious stream of fire. It burned through metal, scorched the earth. Done, she curved away, ready for the next five.

Cyrus took his turn, his fire swallowing three forges.

The screams, the bells, the series of explosions. Balls of fire spat upward, with each boom, carrying with it great plumes of smoke.

Aeven destroyed another six, Cyrus another three. Their fire spread quickly, destroying the surrounding greenery as a flood of heat. Gentry fae, humans, whoever worked down there were all consumed by the onslaught. Before long, the bells died, and the remaining forges were wiped out.

“Well done!” I called over the chaos to my magnificent beasts.

They roared in unison.

And we continued south.



I SPARED VILLAGES, towns, shepherds in their fields, the lives of the normal folk just wanting to make a living, to exist as happily as they could. A moment of conscience I would soon take away should they try to fight me. The moment an arrow was fired or I heard that unmistakable crack of a gunshot, I would kill without discrimination.

Only fear and bells rang from below as we swooped over the lands.

*Let them look. Let them tremble.*

Spring Keep was a different story. Anyone within or around it would be destroyed. The last time I'd been inside that terrible place, my family gathered there with the Autumn lords, the courtiers, a plethora of scum under one roof to doom me.

*You all die today.*

The journey to the southern coast of Autumn took no time at all, the sun still in the sky when I spotted gray and black of the metal and rock keep, its lower half embedded into the cliff it stood atop. It was a cube shape with two tall and symmetrical towers, fires burning at the top of each.

The bells of Spring Keep rang, Gentry fae gathered in a sea of glinting copper armor and an arsenal of weapons ready to take me down.

Three elaborate canons pointed at the sky, copper filigree swirls adorning them. The conduits of the iron fire?

Voices. The call of 'fire!' and three coppery green beams that had destroyed Winter Keep hurtled toward me, fizzing and spitting its flare for destruction.

All three missed.

I laughed and Aeveen's first burst of fire broke the cannons.

The resulting explosion was unexpected, an enormous ball of copper-green fire tearing upward. My dragons wailed as iron fire crashed into them, the heat incredible even for them.

Thrown from Aeveen's back, I hurtled through the air, consumed by the fire myself. It burned through the leather armor quickly, then my skin, reducing me to smoldering bone. It took my voice, my capacity to scream. Rendered me living pain as I plummeted toward the angry waves of the sea.



## Chapter Thirty-Seven

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**A**s I hit the water, my skeleton fracturing and hissing as cool met hot, my undying power instantly got to work healing me. The pain was incredible for a few seconds before the coldness of the water numbed it.

I sank into the depths, the currents surprisingly calm below the churning surface. Waited to return to myself, for my flesh to knit back over my bones. What now? Get to land and restore my dragons?

Yes. Bring them back to life and go home. And then...  
And then what?

*March.*

Was that enough? This all seemed very easy, the forges gone, Spring Keep obliterated. Would it now be as simple as my armies marching across Faerie to secure my power, to change the world?

Rage still blazed within me. It required more blood, more destruction before it even came close to satisfaction.

Florent's death would help. I focused on that wonderful outcome, floating through the water. I cast an enchantment on my lungs to allow me to breathe underwater. Drowning, like

everything else, wouldn't kill me. Still, I'd rather not have to deal with it along with everything else.

Above, the surface shimmered with sunshine, the fires of the burning keep. Such a beautiful day for death.

Something sharp hit me in the chest as I became whole again, so hard it pushed me through the water.

What in Danu's name...

A pearlescent, conical shell jutted out between my ribs. Strange black veins pulsed through it, fading within seconds. A cool sensation colder than the sea sank into my body, slithering through my veins. Nausea took over, breaking my breathing enchantment, tormenting my stomach, my head. Blistering pain burst in my temples, searing across my forehead, spreading to my jaw. I gagged on saltwater, choking, vomiting blood, choking again. Caught in an awful loop of drowning and heaving, I thrashed, trying to get to the surface.

I saw them then, five creatures cutting through the water toward me. Three mermaids, two mermen. Four of them held more of those shells.

A mermaid pulled her arm back and threw her shell at me. It tore through the water with terrifying speed. Trapped in my drowning, I had no time or strength to avoid it. It hit me in the stomach, releasing cold poison into me.

Poison. The mer had poisoned me.

This was Florent's idea. It had to be. Which meant he still lived, or the mer were also on his side. Of course, they would want revenge after I slaughtered so many of their kind, thanks to my berserker curse.

And I would do it again if I could.

It didn't take long for darkness to consume me.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

---



I woke to the smell of meat and freshly baked bread, of sweetness. Traces of poison remained in my veins, diminishing. I blinked at a familiar window full of moonlight and stars.

Night again.

“By Danu...” I groaned as I returned to the world, completely, fully flesh and dressed in the armor I’d been wearing before the iron fire explosion—restored by my magic without any conscious involvement from me.

My eyes fell upon a grand table laden with enough food to feed a city for a week. Fruit, meat both hot and cold, bread, pastries, and many bottles of red wine. A table I’d sat at many times in my life within an opulent room of pink and gold, a place for breaking my fast, for lunches and dinners.

The dining room of Summer Palace.

At the head of the table, sat in an enormous chair once reserved for my father, Lord Florent sucked on a chicken bone. Grease ran down his chin, every bite a disgusting smack of his lips.

A man of fair skin and the red hair of the Gentry fae, his curly tresses reaching his waist, he wore swaths of yellow robes piped with black and threaded with diamonds, each of his fingers sparkling with pretty rings.

His presence turned my stomach.

I sat opposite him, tied to a smaller chair my mother once occupied by heavy iron chains. The metal bit into my skin with burning teeth. My magic erupted from my fingers, enchanting the chains to break.

They dropped off, hitting the highly polished wooden floor with a heavy clatter.

Florent looked up from his food. “Do you have to be so noisy?”

I glowered at the scum, scraping the chair back and getting to my feet. “Do you have to be so stupid?”

My head swam, my chest aching. My magic was there but fractured by the poison’s presence.

“Chains will not hold me,” I said.

“But poison will keep you neutered for a little while.”

“I see you have brought the mer to your side.”

“The mer understand power, the way forward,” he answered. “They also hate you, and they know how to find sea creatures with a poison strong enough to contain a powerful Tuatha king.”

He tore into another chicken leg with his teeth.

“Such arrogance,” I said. I picked up a bread roll with no intention of eating it, somewhat dizzy from the poison.

He smirked, finishing his mouthful. “Is that all you have to say? How about your remorse for destroying Spring Keep and the forges or the terrible damage you have brought to my homeland?”

“I could ask the same of you for your attack on Winter.”

“Isn’t this your home?” He swung an arm out, sweeping it back and forth. “You are of Summer, not Winter. Oh, my mistake. Your blood is odd.” He picked up a serviette and dabbed at his mouth. The fabric still had my father’s initials embroidered in pink upon the white.

“I—”

He cut me off. “Is that where your allegiances lie now? A creature of Winter, no longer a fae of the seelie court or—”

“There is no seelie or unseelie court now,” I interjected.

“Is that so?” He leaned back in the chair. “What is there?”

I crushed the roll in my palm. “You tell me.”

He smiled, eyes on my hand. “Well, you are correct about the end of seelie and unseelie. It is a silly, ancient divide now irrelevant in this new age. You could say it has held back progress for too long.”

“Yet you were prepared to marry into royalty to continue such a tradition,” I countered.

“I was. But things have changed.”

“They certainly have.”

He regarded me for several moments as I paused halfway along the table, resting my hip against it. There was no fear in his eyes or posture where there should be. Arrogance and pride would do that, painting a shell to hide the reality within.



Somewhere beneath his façade, there was fear.

“There is no place in this world for the old ways,” he finally spoke. “I can move Faerie forward, even without Lasair by my side. I can change so much, make life better for everyone. Undo the rotten wheel your family protected for so long.”

I plucked a grape from a gilded bowl, crushing it between finger and thumb. Juice trickled down my knuckles.

“Is that going to be my head?” he asked, laughing.

“Too easy,” I responded.

He nodded. “I see your rage, Valance. Your power. That is precisely why you are not fit to rule. An unhinged Tuatha king is a tyrant, nothing more. You know the histories of Winter and the Tuatha fae, how necessary it was to have crushed them all those centuries ago.”

“A tyrant? Unlike you with your iron fire?” It was my turn to laugh. “You will rule by fear and death. Nothing more.”

“So will you.” He cocked an eyebrow, no more smiles on his face. “Your time is over, Valance Rosestar. You cannot win, no matter the greatness of the magic you wield.”

I picked up another grape. “Oh, Florent. My once future husband. How delusional you are. There is no stopping me. There is no future for you. Your keep is broken, and this palace is about to come down on your head.”

“The place you once called home?”

“Yes.”

Still no fear. “Such is the will of a tyrant.”

*And the will of the betrayed...* I didn't give him that response.

"Haven't you committed enough murder?" he added.

"Clearly not while you continue to steal the air from this room."

This comment restored his smirking. "Such a wicked tongue. But pointless. There is no winning this war you have started, Valance."

"My war?"

"You marched your troops to—"

"To meet *your* waiting troops," I cut him off. "Do not try and lay blame at my feet, you pompous bastard. You wanted to get inside Winter. Don't try to pretend otherwise."

"I suppose you're right."

"That isn't a supposition but a fact."

"Though you made the first strike, did you not?" He picked up some cake, slavering it with butter. "I may have marched my troops to your borders, but you unleashed your dragon's fury upon them and killed my dear queen." He took a bite, seemingly unbothered by Lasair's death.

Just as I thought.

"And you sent your spies to kill me with your guns," I returned.

He spent a long time chewing the cake, bobbing his head as if to music. Seemed alarmingly calm for a man who'd lost his seat of power. Although, Summer Palace appeared to be fulfilling that role for him now.

*Where is that fear?*

*Kill him now...*

“Were you impressed with our new invention?” He dabbed at his mouth with the same serviette as before. “

*Time to die.* “No.”

“Because you have no vision, that’s why.”

“I have plenty of vision.”

“For destruction.”

Maybe he was right.

“Your mother is still alive,” he said, completely changing the subject, twisting my stomach into wicked knots.

“She—”

“She sleeps still,” he added. “Please don’t worry, Valance. I have no interest in hurting her. I’m more curious to see if she will stop breathing one day. Or will she spend her Sidhe immortality trapped in whatever world it is she finds herself within?”

*Mother...*

I unleashed my magic on him, holding him in an invisible grip. Silver ribbons slithered around him, his eyes wide.

*There is that fear...*

“This is where you end, Florent.”

My grandmother hurried into the room suddenly, crashing through the doors and dragging something in with her by a leash.

“What are—”

I stopped, stunned by the sight of the jinn I’d sent west now on the end of that leash. An iron collar around his neck,

his blueish flesh covered in red rashes and welts.

“Say it!” Florent squeaked as my magic relinquished its grip.

My stomach roiled at the sight of her. Staring at me as I stared at her, reunited once again.

“Grandmother...” I said.

Seeing her here, being under the command of Lord Florent felt so wrong, no matter my hatred for her.

“Valance...”

The jinn didn't even struggle, painfully subservient. I noticed bruises on his face and arms, a cut under his bottom lip.

Jinn. Why was the jinn here?

“I...” My grandmother hesitated.

“Say it!” Florent screamed

“I wish for the magic of King Valance and for him to be returned to his previously cursed state!” she cried, breaking out of the daze we'd both stumbled into.

No.

No.

No.

Was this real or some effect of the poison?

“As is wished, so it shall be done,” the jinn responded, offering me a sorrowful gaze.

This *was* real.

“You stupid bitch!” Florent roared. “It was supposed to be mine!”

A wish for him—either from his mouth or from hers. But she'd betrayed him as she'd done me. The former queen always schemed, always looked for weakness. She may have bent the knee to Florent, but she would've searched for a means to destroy him. It gave her the ruthless reputation she wore with pride even after she abdicated the throne to my father.

Her laughter raked across my soul as silver magic began to leave me. It drifted across the space between us, glittering rivers in the air.

Florent yelled for his guards, slamming his fists into the table, cursing my grandmother with every expletive he could muster.

As soon as the first drop of magic entered her, Queen Dovelar cast her first enchantment.

“Be seated and still, Florent,” she commanded.

His body slammed into the chair. He wailed, unable to move.

“And silent,” my grandmother added.

No.

No.

No.

“At last, I return to power,” she said. “Power I never should have lost.”

Her pretty blue eyes flooded with shadows.

No.

No.

No.

I collapsed to my knees, empty of silver magic, returned to the Valance I'd been before reaching Winter. Did that mean... Oh, Danu. The berserker curse. It returned, a thick, terrible thing created by shadow magic.

"No..." I breathed.

"Yes," my grandmother said. "How wonderful to see you on your knees where you belong."

"Why..." I struggled to speak. "Why have you done this?"

"We could all ask similar questions, Valance. Such as why you think you deserve this power. Why you think you have the right to govern Faerie above a woman with skill such as me."

"You had your time," I countered. "The rules—"

She hurried toward me, striking me hard across the face, the force throwing me to the side. My left shoulder took the brunt of me landing hard on the floor. My teeth slammed together, face burning from her attack.

I pushed myself back up to my knees, looking up at her.

She grabbed me by the chin, squeezing hard. "Look into my eyes, dearest grandson. See the power within them. Feel the power in my touch."

"Stolen power..." I breathed.

I expected another slap. It didn't come.

She smiled, the swirling darkness in her eyes a terrifying storm. "Words cannot harm or hinder a queen such as I."

I'd failed Winter. The promise of victory was now dead from one simple wish. Because of my actions, because of the cruel nature of fate.

*I'm sorry...*

*I'm sorry, Kormac.*

Kormac. I had to be with him, to have him near to fill this hole in my soul. Too far away, hurting too much to not have him by my side.

The soul bond had returned, and it called to him.

My previously cursed state...

Tears rolled down my cheeks, my pining for him overwhelming. But he was in Winter, so far away.

No. He wasn't. He was coming. Coming closer, closer, closer.

"Kormac..." I said, not meaning to give his name voice outside of my thoughts.

"The human?"

I kept quiet.

"Oh, my poor Valance." She released my chin. "You cry pretty tears." She flexed her fingers, glittering specs of silver falling from her long, elegant nails. "Do you mourn his cock?"

I refrained from responding, calling to Kormac deeply within.

*I need you...*

*I need you...*

*I need you...*

I had to get out of here.

But my grandmother had other plans. With her new magic, she cast an enchantment on me. It struck me in the face, forcing my mouth open for a few seconds.

"A gift for my darling grandson," she intoned.

“I...” The curse, the rage. It rose to the surface, taking me over. The room around me began to spin. Waves of sickening dizziness overcame me. My skull filled with terrific agony.

Shadows drowned my vision in nightmares, dreadful horrors swimming in my blindness. I clawed at them, wanted them dead.

Potent fury.

No...

Yes...

*Kill the nightmares.*

*They have to die.*

*Blessed Danu. Please save me from this or send another angelus to aid me back to myself.*

*Kill.*

*Kill.*

*Kill.*

My pathetic prayer wasn't answered.

“As you succumb to your berserker rage,” my grandmother continued, “I want you to think about this palace, about those who live within it. Your family, *our* family. The servants, the elf guards, the human guards, those you have slept with who remain here, every single breathing soul you can think of. Kill them.”

“I can't...”

“You can and you will, my darling grandson. Kill. Them. All. Crave their blood. But above everyone else, think of your mother. Think of tearing her flesh from bone, of offering her the same fate you bestowed upon your poor father.”



No.

No.

No.

“While you clean this royal house, I will head for Winter to meet my new subjects. They will see what a real leader is. The grandmother, not the vile grandson. Farewell, Valance. I’m sure someone will stop your rampage well before you reach your mother.”

All she ever wanted was for me to suffer.

“You will make a pretty corpse,” she added. “I’m sure the stench of your decay will be as perfume.”

If there was anyone so cruel, so evil in this world, it had to be her. More than Lasair, more than Florent. Only my late brother matched her in such dark stakes.

Florent.

The berserker rage finally pushed me into a pit of fury, a crimson curtain falling across my reason, obliterating my mental strength. I saw the shape thrashing in the chair, trapped in place. Screaming. Nothing but a nightmare out to get me. I had to kill him, tear apart this realm of fear.

Blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Kill.

Kill.

Kill.

I surged forward, and blood and death and screams followed as I ran and ran and ran, screaming, tearing the nightmares away.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

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**W**hat was left of Spring keep burned, the rest of it smoldering on the edge of the cliff. Most of the land close to the keep smoked, completely scorched and stinking of iron fire.

“Are we too late?” I said to the giant as we bobbed in the waves.

It’d taken two days to get here, and only because of Cullen’s magical speed.

“I do not know, Consort.”

“Valance!” I called, standing on the giant’s back.

There was no sign of him, no sign of anyone or anything. Life wasn’t here.

“What do we do?” I asked. “What the fuck do we do?”

The giant swam around some more, ducking his head beneath the surface to search for our king.

“There is nothing,” he said. “Only death and ruin.”

Anguish threatened to break me. He couldn’t die, so he had to be somewhere.

“Valance!” I cried. “By the gods! Where are you?”

*Wait...*

“Summer!” I yelled. “He must have gone to Summer. Hellpiss! What do you think?”

“I think we should head there immediately,” Lord Cullen answered.

I sat down, the giant shooting and leaping across the water once again like the massive seal he was. Seawater sprayed my face, adding to my already-drenched hair. But I felt no cold, remained dry everywhere else. This suit kept me warm, kept me safe the entire journey. And it would continue to do so as we headed for Summer.

*Hold on, Valance.*

*Please hold on.*

# Chapter Forty

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**M**y eyes opened as a balmy evening breeze licked at my face. Open drapes at a large window billowed, moonlight flooding the bedroom I found myself in.

Slumped against a wall, blood on my tongue, on my hands, all over me. Time passed, maybe some days, sun and moon, death and fury.

Because... Because of me. The bits of skin under my fingernails were from the slaughter I'd undertaken in Summer Palace. Killing so many because of my curse.

I sat up straighter, rubbing the back of my neck. My limbs ached, as did my heart. It called for Kormac, the bond requiring his presence like air to lungs.

*He is close...*

Was he? Was the sensation of him coming for me nothing but wishful thinking?

“Where am I?” I said aloud, slowly getting to my feet.

This was an opulent room, red and gold. A room at the top of the tallest tower of Summer Palace—Sovereign Tower.

My mother lay on her bed, locked in her wide-eyed slumber. Her silver hair pooled beneath her, her skin still as

lovely as moonlight, her chest rising and falling as it always did. The words of my grandmother echoed in my mind, telling me to think of my mother so I'd kill her once and for all.

If I managed to get this far. And I had. Only my mother was alive. I must have passed out before I tore her apart.

I listened for voices, for any hint of commotion outside the door. Nothing. Only the night's breeze and the rolling waves of Summer Ocean.

My clothes were saturated with blood, my pale skin drowning in scarlet.

How many dead? How much rage had I inflicted upon my home? I couldn't open that door to find out. If I stayed in here, I wouldn't have to. But that was a dream made of lace. At some point, I would have to leave.

"Mother?" I said.

As always, she showed no signs of life.

"Oh, Mother," I continued, walking over to be by her side. She was so beautiful, so regal even in this state. "I wish you could hear me." I went to take her hand, remembering the blood and skin tainting mine.

She was another family member not having much care for the runt of the litter that was me. But at this moment, I wanted her to wake up. To break the surface of her grief over my sister's death, to say something loving to me.

Sorrow rolled over me. I had no family, no blood relatives on my side. They all offered their love and loyalty in other directions, never mine. And, by Danu, it hurt. I wanted the love of my family in that moment. To hear those three magical words in my ear, to know I wasn't alone.



“Why can’t you wake up, Mother?” I asked.

Her breathing was as soft as her features.

“I need you, even though you were never really within my reach.” I shook my head. “But that doesn’t just change my love for you. I will always carry you in my heart, dream of a day when you hold me, when you tell me I’m not the burden on this family I have always been made to feel.” A long, heavy sigh. “Please wake up and start being *my* mother. I’m your only child left now. *We* are the only ones left. Let’s take this opportunity to rebuild, to retain what is left of the Rosestar name. Come on, Mother. See me. Open your heart to me like you did for Jehanne, even for Daire. I’m begging you. Please wake up.” Tears once again. “Please.”

But nothing changed, not even a flutter in her eyes. My mother would never return from this. She would only fade or spend her eternal life in her bed. Never changing. Never being mine.

“I’m so alone,” I whispered, staring down at her.

“You’re not alone.”

I spun to see *him*, my heart racing.

The soul bond seemed to have forgotten itself for a moment or was cloaked by my pain. Either way, it failed to alert me to Kormac’s presence in the doorway just as my ears had failed to pick up on the sound of the door opening.

The soul bond sang with joy, filling me with relief, with a special form of happiness.

“You’re here?” I said.

“I’m here, Valance.”

I ran to him, falling into his huge human arms. I didn't need the return of the soul bond to make me hold him like this.

"Oh, Kormac..." I whined, sobbing into the crook of his neck. I clawed at his cold, oily clothing. "What are you wearing?" I didn't surface from his neck.

"Don't worry about it now," he soothed, stroking my back tenderly.

I pulled my face away from his neck, my hands on his shoulders. "I lost it all. My grandmother... She wished me..." It took me a few moments to find the words to tell him what'd happened.

His sapphire eyes widened for the briefest of seconds before he took my face in his rough hands. "We can fix this. We can find a jinn and wish your power back."

"But the consequences..."

"We have no choice."

Were there consequences for my grandmother?

"She's heading for Winter," I said.

"Then that's where we're going."

I looked back at my mother. "I think I may have killed the jinn like everyone else." I faced him again. "Did you see anyone alive?"

"No. I'm sorry."

I shook my head. "How... How did you get here?"

"Brigid helped me." He explained his journey, his strange clothing, the giant's transformation. "Lord Cullen is waiting in the water to take us back. Come on, there's nothing left for us here."

Eyes back to my forever sleeping mother. She would never tell me she loved me more than anything, that she was sorry she didn't tell me more often. That we could make up for wasted time, be mother and son.

I closed my eyes. "No. There isn't."

Kormac's fingers curled into mine. A beautiful sensation, the callused pad of his thumb caressing my thumb.

"Come on," he whispered. "Let's make this right."

# Chapter Forty-One

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**T**here was so much blood, so much carnage in the palace. Everywhere we stepped, fragments of my destruction painting the walls, the floor, the ceiling.

*By Danu...*

I stopped by my bedroom to gather some fresh clothes and wash the blood from me quickly. Some of it lingered in my hair, the metallic stench searing my nostrils and setting my stomach to an acidic roll. But at least most of it was gone, my fresh black elven armor free of gore.

I retrieved a sword and some daggers from my weapons chest. Avoiding the mirror, I threw a long black cloak over my shoulders in preparation for our journey north. I tried to use my silver magic, testing the waters in case this was all nothing but a terrible nightmare.

My seed magic came to the forefront, whispering to a potted flower over by the window. There was no trace of silver magic.

“Then it’s real,” I muttered to myself.

I opened the bedroom door. Kormac was waiting in the corridor, keeping watch, his broadsword drawn. So strong, so

magnificent.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s been so quiet out here.” He started to walk.

I followed him, shivering at the silence within the palace. It didn’t seem like a royal household full of life but a place of death, its largeness closing in on me. Rejecting me, hurt by my wrath and carnage.

*I’m sorry...*

Eventually, we reached fresh air. Thank Danu! The palace was cloying and too hot. The clean sea air in my lungs was a welcome reprieve.

I didn’t look back as I followed Kormac down to the beach. If I looked back, the pain would be too much. I’d left the palace before. I could do it again. Only, this time it seemed much more final as if too many lines had been crossed for me to ever have the right to go back, let alone look upon its splendor again.

Carefully, I navigated the steep stairwell down to the shore. I saw Lord Cullen lying in the shallows, his big amber eyes on me. Waves bounced off his huge chin.

I hated to be so defeated, so weak. I should be summoning my inner strength to fight onward, determined to regain my power with a wish from a jinn. But what would that bring? What consequences would come to strike me down for asking such a thing?

Wasn’t being the Tuatha king part of my destiny, though? Would a wish be free of a price, seeing as it would be the correcting of destiny’s course?

My head throbbed with too much thought.

“Hello, Your Majesty,” the giant greeted me. “I am glad to see you well.”

“Thank you, Lord Cullen. For waiting, for coming here.”

“Of course.” He turned his body to position himself on all fours, offering his back. “Climb aboard.”

We did, Kormac helping me.

“We will stop at an island for you to rest, Your Majesty,” the giant said. “Unlike Kormac and I, you will not be so waterproof. There is a place we passed on our way here.”

“Do you know I’ve lost my magic?” I asked.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“How?”

“I saw that woman leave here on the back of a giant eagle. She crackled with the magic that always came from you—a special kind of energy. I knew then something terrible had happened here.”

“I’m sorry,” I breathed. “I failed you.”

Kormac explained the wish as the giant swam out into deeper waters.

“I see,” he said after a sickening silence.

“I can’t fulfill my promise to you or the dark fae.” My shame burned so cruelly.

“You still can,” the giant responded. “There is always hope. You have shown me by giving us back so much.”

My chest ached. “I wish I could...” I couldn’t finish my sentence.

Kormac wrapped his arms around me, pulling my spine to rest against his chest.

“I’m here,” he said, Lord Cullen picking up speed. “We will do this together, just like last time.”

“You died last time.”

“I won’t let it happen again.”



## Chapter Forty-Two

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**T**he next morning, we reached the island Cullen and I passed on the way here. A tiny thing exposed to the elements, a stone house at its center. A robust, gray building standing strong.

Valance had taken as much as he could of the journey and needed to rest. He'd done well.

I hurried the prince inside, the giant waiting for us in the water.

“I will patrol,” he said as I paused by the door.

“Thank you.”

The giant dove into the depths.

There were no windows in the house, darkness engulfing us as I closed the door.

“Hellpiss!” I hissed, opening the door again to let sunlight and bitter sea winds inside again.

“There's dry kindling and a hearth here,” Valance said. “Things to make a fire.”

I went over to light the fire quickly, an expert in such things.

“I’m sorry I lost my power,” he whispered, sliding down the wall beside the hearth. So defeated, so broken. “I’m so sorry.”

As soon as the fire took, I hurried over and closed the door, returning to put my arm around the sobbing fae.

“I failed everyone. I let her... I let the enemy...” He buried his face into my shoulder, breaking down completely. “Now she...”

I cradled his head. “It’s okay, Valance. It’s okay.”

His rage had gotten the better of him twice now. Both with terrible consequences. But in this moment, he didn’t need reminding of that. He needed me to soothe him

The soul bond reached to him, the connection as warm as those rising flames in the hearth.

“I’m here now,” I said.

As the fire grew, more light painted his pretty face. He was grubby, in need of a bath and lots of sleep. He looked up at me, the firelight dancing in his dark eyes.

“Gods, you’re so beautiful,” I couldn’t help saying. His fine, sharp features were heightened, brought even closer to the surface than before.

I traced my thumb across his lips, under his eyes. “I thought I’d lost you.”

He moved so quickly, straddling me before I could blink. Gazing down on me, his hair falling forward to flank his face.

“Valance?”

He took my face in his cool, soft hands and kissed me. I gasped in surprise, hard in seconds. He bore down with his

ass, grinding into me as our lips wrestled.

“Fuck me,” he begged. “I really need you to fuck me.”

He stood, removing his clothes quickly, tossing them into the shadows. He stood there naked, more firelight playing across the lines of his slender body. So hard, his cock twitching. I sat forward, rolling my fingers around it. Kissed the tip, stroked him, sent my other hand to cup his left ass cheek.

“Taste me...” he whispered.

This wasn't dealing with the problem, talking through his anguish. But my cock ached to be free, my mouth whet with the desire to be filled with his beautiful girth.

I took him in my mouth, my other hand leaving his cock to knead his other ass cheek. Bobbing my head, lips sliding back and forth, tongue teasing salty liquid from his slit, this was all I needed. A dream come true to taste him, to feel every inch of my prince.

My king.

My fingers inched closer to his hole, his cock pulsating in my eager mouth. Freeing one hand, I rubbed at my hardness through my skin-tight seal garment, desperate to plant it somewhere else.

He pulled out of me.

I gasped for breath. “What's wrong?”

“I need you naked. Now.”

Immediately, I obliged, getting to my feet and stripping. Throwing my clothes into the shadows to join his.

I grabbed him, spinning him around so his ass pressed against my cock. Kissed his neck, played with his cock, his swollen nipples.

“I wanted you to climax down my throat,” I said between lapping at his skin.

He moaned. “Do whatever you want to me. Just take me away from the pain.”

To avoid the problem...

“I’m yours, Kormac,” he added. “Use me up.”

There was a bed of rushes on the other side of the room, next to a set of stairs. The light of the fire just about reached it, as did the heat. A woolen sheet covered the mattress, providing enough protection against scratchiness.

I scooped him into my arms, carrying him over to the bed. Lay him down. He bent his legs at the knee, two pale arches, then spread them for me. I climbed between them, kissing his thighs. Really cloistered myself in there.

I returned to his cock, moving my head up and down, now hungry for his juices.

Fingers curled into my hair. “Oh, Kormac.”

I teased his hole with a finger, sucking harder and harder, my beastly desires rising again. He had the power to call to my animalistic side, that basic state of blood and lust. And he loved it, loved me to ravage him with my cock or whatever I decided to use.

Gods, he tasted so good, filled me so perfectly. His foreskin was rolled back, his head exposed. I loved the feel of it on the edge of my mouth, on my tongue.

“Oh, yes...” he moaned. “Oh, yeah.”

I stroked his warm hole, probed it, my own cock on the edge of exploding just thinking of being inside him again.

“Kormac...” he breathed. “I’m... I’m...”

His cock pulsed, his thighs closing around my head.

“I’m...”

He burst down my throat, hot and delicious.

“Kormac!” he cried, crushing me with his thighs, his back arching. “Oh, Kormac!”

I didn’t stop sucking him until every last drop was spent.

“Fuck...” he wheezed, freeing me from his thigh grip.

I wasn’t done.

Using my spit, I fucked him with my fingers, spitting on my cock as I teased him. In and out, making his back arch again.

Look at him squirming for me, because of me.

“Oh, yes...” he moaned. “Fuck me. Fuck it away.”

We were definitely talking after this.

## Chapter Forty-Three

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## VALANCE

I loved the way Kormac's eyes sparkled in the firelight as he climaxed. I loved the way his cock throbbed inside me, how it released so much of his seed. How his lips fell to mine, his moans seeping into my mouth as he shuddered the rest of himself into me. And I loved how pleasure became a powerful wind, whipping me up into heady clouds. I climaxed again as he did, stroking myself to a second state of bliss from his pounding. Exploding all over my hands, making such a sweet mess.

It didn't take long for the pleasure to fade, for him to be holding me from behind as the pain returned to attack me.

I tried to get him to fuck me again, but he refused, insisting we talk.

At least it was warm in this house, our bodies shielded from the howling wind outside.

"I made a terrible mistake, Kormac," I finally said. "I've ruined everything."

"You did lose your head," he replied. "But your grandmother would've made that wish regardless."

"Then is it my destiny to fail?"



“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“I hate this, Kormac. I hate everything about it.”

He kissed the back of my neck. “We can fix it. Just because she has the power, she doesn’t have your army. You had to win the dark fae over. Now she has to do the same.”

“Do you think so?”

“I have to hope.”

I turned to face him, resting my forehead to his. “I don’t want a throne, Kormac. Not really. All I’ve wanted is a quieter life than the one I was born into. I love luxury. I love palaces. But they are only riches, not richness. They don’t offer nights of conversation and lovemaking, exploring the world together. Holding the hand of your beloved, watching the sun rise and set. I want those things. I want a better life. But I can’t have that. Not without pain.” I sighed against him. “My friend Maeve used to talk about exploring the human realm, asked me if I ever thought about it. I did, many times. Now I think it sounds wonderful. Somewhere new, somewhere that isn’t Faerie.”

“Valance...”

“I’m sorry, Kormac. I don’t know what to do. I’ve let you down.”

He planted a soft kiss on me. “You haven’t let me down.”

“I couldn’t stand it, seeing you dead again, knowing Florent and his ilk wanted to hurt you, to take you from me again. Deny you a future with their toxic weapons. I couldn’t have that. As soon as I saw you dead again, I knew what I had to do. My reason died.”

“I... I think...”

“Kormac?”

He blew out a breath. “Hellpiss...” There was a struggle going on behind those eyes of his.

“What is it?”

“I think... I think I love you, Valance.”

I froze, stunned by his words.

“Shitting hellpiss!” he hissed. “Oh, gods. I’m sorry, I—”

I kissed him. “I think I feel the same.” My heart became a drum, sending its beat all the way into my throat. “I... I do. I.. I love you, too.”

He blinked at me, sitting up. “Do you really?”

“I do. Do you?”

“Yes. I know it’s strange, but I’ve fallen for you. Really, really fallen for you.”

After everything I’d done, I shouldn’t be smiling, should not meet this wave of happiness head-on. But I did. I let it crash into me, take me with it.

“Oh, Kormac. I’m in love with you. I cannot live without you.”

The soul bond enjoyed that statement very much.

And so did I.

“From the stars,” I added.

His hands traced my chest, fingers exploring the inches of my slender frame. I watched his journey under the shimmering firelight, greedy lust back in his eyes.

“In love with me,” he said.

“Yes.”

“I’m in love with you.”

He smiled, then bent to kiss my ribs. His tongue slipped from his mouth, drawing circles across my flesh.

My body erupted in gooseflesh, my back arching slightly in response to his wet touch, to the bristly caress of his stubble.

“Do you like that?”

“Yes.”

He licked and kissed, then sucked on my skin. A slight tingle of pain melded with pleasure. I giggled at the sensation.

“It’s been a while since I’ve received a love bite,” I said.

He tapped the redness he’d marked me with. “There are plenty of them in your future.” He caressed the side of my face. “Because we’re going to make ourselves a future. Whenever you’re ready, when you’ve taken as much of a break here as you need, we’re going to fight. For us. For more love bites.”

I sat up and pulled him to me. Holding me so tightly. “You really were sent to change my life.”

“You’re welcome, my sexy prince.”

I chuckled. “I like that.”

“It’s true.”

Steely fury took hold of me. “I’m ready to fight.”

## Chapter Forty-Four

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Winter's south coast formed in the distance, my body still singing with so many warm and pleasant sensations.

Declaring my feelings like that to Valance had changed things, as it would. Made me feel so different.

There was something special about us. I'd finally welcomed my once-sworn enemy into my heart.

Yes, that was very, very special indeed.

I held him to me as we made the last miles of our journey, never wanting to let him go. Whatever the future held, I'd be there with him. Every single step of the way. I just had to make sure there was a future waiting for us.

There were many, many bodies on the beach. Living bodies. Dots from this distance, but clearly an army.

Lord Cullen slowed down to speak. "I will find us somewhere else to land."

A beam of silver light rushed across the waves, striking the giant within seconds. His body shimmered with silver magic, coming to a stop as he tried to turn east.

"Enchanted," Valance said behind me.

Lord Cullen began to swim to shore.

Shit.

Did we dive into the freezing water and try for... for where? There was nowhere else. I could swim for it, sure, but not Valance. He'd soon succumb to the brutal water.

*He can die now...*

What to do. What to do. I had to figure something out to make sure our future happened.

But we reached the shore, Lord Cullen beaching himself halfway up the sand. We held on tight as he rocked, a series of heavy jolts trying to shake us off his back. Then he was still, breathing heavily, offering no words.

Where the snow-pattered sand met the thick snow of land, an army of dark fae gathered. Darkling and giants, humans and elves and other smaller creatures. They lined up behind Queen Dovelar, their new leader glistening with silver magic.

She smiled, opening her arms. "Welcome home."

*Fuck you...* I didn't speak, sliding off the giant's back. I waited for Valance, catching him as he came down.

"I am impressed by your tenacity to survive, Valance," she said. "If I cared enough, I would say I was proud."

Valance walked up the beach toward her, as cold and closed off as the bitter wind.

"I'm beginning to think you being alive is far more interesting than you being dead," she added.

I was beginning to think we should've risked traveling around Autumn, coming at Winter from the west. After all, it was the west we wanted for the jinn groves. But the Autumn

armies were rich in my homeland and would also patrol the waters with ships.

Hellpiss to all of this.

I followed Valance.

“Yes, much more interesting,” the queen said.

How Valance tolerated her voice, let alone her abuse, for all those years was a testament to patience.

Queen Dovelar chuckled as Orla and Eoghan stepped out of the army, coming to flank her on either side.

Valance stopped then. “You even snared them?”

“But of course,” she replied. “Everything here is mine now. Winter, the dark caress, all of these bodies. Including you and that human. You are mine to do with as I wish, and I’m considering your futures as we speak. Do I keep you close, teach you a lesson in how to wield power and take over a world? Or do I kill you on this beach?” She folded her arms. “Give me a moment.”

Orla and Eoghan laughed, a ripple of laughter spreading through the congregation.

You had to give it to the former seelie queen—she moved quickly. Which only meant she had some serious enchantments pumping through her army. Good. That meant her magic would burn down quickly. I only hoped it would do so within the next two minutes.

The new Tuatha queen unfolded her arms. “I’ve made my decision.” She snapped her fingers. Orla and Eoghan stepped forward, drawing their swords.

I immediately drew mine. Valance followed.

“Try not to lose your temper, sweet grandchild,” Dovelar said. “I would hate for you to tear your beloved human limb from limb.”

“Fuck you!” I bit out.

She laughed. “Such big words for a tiny creature.”

Orla and Eoghan kept coming.

“Kill them,” Dovelar commanded. “Make it—”

Brigid flew over the heads of the army so quickly, I wasn’t sure it was her at first. When her teeth sank into the queen’s neck in one savage bite, I knew for sure it was her.

“You!” Dovelar wailed.

Orla and Eoghan charged, eating up the last meters of space between us. I jumped in front of Valance, meeting Orla’s downward strike. But Valance spun away from me, his steel clashing with a stab from Eoghan—a stab aimed at my side.

And so, we broke away into our own fights. Sword meeting sword, a dance of life and death. My brutal, heavy strikes—something else taught to me by Lasair—weren’t enough to throw Orla off. She barely sweated as she spun and parried with me while my brow dripped with sweat.

*Don’t falter now!*

Orla’s strength was incredible, her speed breathtaking. She reminded me of Valance’s liquid grace in a swordfight, only much deadlier. I kept up with her, using my skills to the edges of their limits. Keeping myself alive, never once gaining the advantage.

Occasionally, I caught sight of Valance fending off Eoghan but couldn’t spend enough time watching to get a sense of how he was faring.



Parrying a downward strike, my wrists aching from the fighting, I went to spin. But Orla kicked my legs out from under me. I went down, slamming into frozen sand. Before I could leap back up or defend myself, Orla's blade broke through my chest, bursting through my back into the sand.

Cheers. A scream from Valance. My vision blurred, air sucked out of me in shock.

Orla pulled the sword out, bringing it back down again, straight into my heart.

## Chapter Forty-Five

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No.

No.

No.

This was not happening. The sword inside Kormac wasn't real—not the first or the second time. He hadn't come back to me to die. And he wouldn't die. The soul bond lived between us once again. He would have his undying power back, everything returned to before my dark caress. I hadn't thought of it before, but it had to be true.

Didn't it?

Something was wrong. Terribly, terribly wrong. The soul bond snapped, stinging my heart. My head spun, bile burning the bottom of my throat. I only just deflected a jab of Eoghan's sword in time.

No.

No.

No.

How could this be happening?

The army gave a round of applause to the queen.

“One down!” she cried.

Fury, once again, sunk its claws into me. I began to sink into a terrible berserker rage, losing myself to horror. I tried to resist, desperate to hang onto my mind because it would end me. My grandmother wouldn't allow me to kill her army. She'd put me down the moment I surged toward her dark fae.

Kormac is dead.

No. He wasn't dead. He couldn't be. Any moment now, he'd get up and fight back, get the better of Orla.

He had to be okay

He had to—

My grandmother screamed. Eoghan paused, turning his head to witness the commotion. I drove my sword through the back of his neck, then cut to the side. His head rolled, half hanging off his neck by the remaining flesh. He fell to the sand.

Immediately, I rushed Orla, also distracted by the queen's screaming.

Leaping through the air, releasing a scream of my own, I brought my sword down on the former queen's head, steel cleaving through her face down to her neck. Bloody spurted as I yanked my blade free, and she went down into the sand like the former king.

Loyal before my grandmother's enchantments or not, I didn't care. She hurt Kormac, and Eoghan tried to hurt me. That meant death for them.

I dropped to be beside my... my love. He lay in a pool of blood, eyes wide and staring at the Winter sky.

“Kormac?” I touched his cold face. “Wake up, Kormac.”

My grandmother continued to scream.

I glanced her way, saw her body lifting in the sky. Silver magic crackled around her, a vicious aura of lightning clawing at the air.

A new twist I didn't care about. All I wanted was to see this man blink, for him to tell me he was fine.

"Come on, Kormac," I whispered, blocking out the growing chaos behind me. "You can't die. Show me your undying power."

But there was nothing but death in those lovely eyes.

My tears splashed his cheeks as reality sunk deep into my bones.

"I won't accept this," I said. "I won't have you die on me, Kormac. Please. Please. Please. Please—"

A presence above me.

I looked up to see Brigid with something familiar in her mouth—another of those silver shards used to kill Kormac the first time.

She lowered, letting the shard fall from her mouth to land beside me.

"Hurry, Valance," she said. "Take the shard, take back your power. This is your only chance before she destroys everything."

I looked away from the shard, back into the dead eyes of my love. And I did love him, which was as strange as it was true. These feelings were unlike any I'd ever experienced before. Too beautiful to lose now.

"Wake up," I begged him.

“Please, Valance,” Brigid tried. “Dovelar cannot handle the dark caress. It wasn’t meant for her. The magic is out of control. You have to stop her.”

“Kormac...” I stroked his face.

“Valance! Please!”

She could scream and rage and plead all she wanted. I wasn’t moving from his side. Not now. Not after everything.

“Valance!”

“It’s over,” I said.

“Valance! She’s—”

A crack of thunder silenced her. I looked back as silver lightning tore through the army of dark fae, searing through their bodies. Ripping them in half, burning them to ash, their heads exploding—all manner of violent death from equally violent magic.

With every burst of lightning, more died, or the ground split open. She really would destroy the world, or at least this beach.

Hadn’t I considered doing the same thing myself?

“This is how it has to be,” I added.

“Don’t say that! Fight! Please, Valance! Fight!”

There was no fight left in me. I wanted Kormac. If I couldn’t have him, what care did I have for Faerie? I was exhausted, done with everything.

“You can’t do this,” Brigid said, so close to my ear. “I didn’t go through all this for you to fail.”

“And I didn’t go through all this to end up with nothing.”

“If you don’t stop her, there will be so much nothing.”

My grandmother’s body erupted in silver light, a radiant sphere expanding outward.

“She will kill us all!” Brigid screamed.

“Then so be it. I’m ready.”

“I’m not! Think of me. Think of the promises you made.”

“Consider them broken,” I replied.

“You spoiled little shit!” she spat. “Why you were ever considered worthy of the dark caress is beyond me. A rotten, pampered bastard who deserved death many times over.” She literally spat, a globule of phlegm hitting the side of my face.

I wiped it away before it could drip onto Kormac’s face.

She may have done so much to give me my power, to save my life, but I had no care. All I cared about was lying dead before me, my hands on his cold skin. There was nothing left to fight for. If it wasn’t my grandmother doing this, I’d be doing it myself.

“I’m sorry, Brigid,” I said as the ground shook.

Lord Cullen appeared above us, throwing himself down into a protective ball.

An explosion.

Silver light ripped across the sky, unleashing relentless bolts of lightning. Over and over, they struck land and sea, a million claws to bring the end.

I spread myself across Kormac, my cheek on his. Held him close as I prepared to meet my death.

## Chapter Forty-Six

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**M**arcus and Olivia pinned my glass body to the wall. I struggled against them, trying my best to break out of their hold.

“Calm down!” Marcus barked, not the cheery angelus I left behind.

At least I wasn't a ball of light.

“Let go of me!” I yelled. “I have to get back there!”

“Calm down!”

“Why am I here? Why now?” I bellowed.

Why hadn't my undying power been restored if the soul bond had? And why hadn't I come here when the iron fire killed me?

All questions I kept screaming at them.

“We don't know why,” Olivia responded, her voice raised. “We clearly failed to understand the mechanics of destiny.”

I took a breath, halting my struggle. “Isn't it our job to understand?”

“Maybe we were wrong.”

What did that mean? What did any of this have to do with destiny? Fall in love only to have it ripped away? Escape this place for nothing?

“I’m sorry, Titus,” Marcus said, loosening his grip on me. “I wish I had some answers. It seems destiny is for us to serve, not to understand.”

Wish. A wish brought everything down.

“It’s over for *that* Faerie,” Olivia added. “It’s... It’s burning.”

With trepidation, and me promising to behave, they took me to Whispering Room 3 to look down on the dying world.

“No...”

Smothered in silver embers, no part of its natural color left for me to see. Burning. Burning. Burning.

“Valance... Is he... Is he dead?”

“We don’t know,” Marcus answered.

But how could he be alive within such a blaze?

*I love you, Valance. I only wish we’d been given a chance.*

## Chapter Forty-Seven

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## VALANCE

I crawled out from beneath the smoldering corpse of the giant. Most of him had been burned away down to the bone, hints of silver magic shimmering dimly in the remaining flesh before dissipating.

He'd been big enough to keep the killing magic off me but not enough to protect himself.

Around me, the beach was a blend of silver ashes and snowy sand, deep cuts scoring the ground. The sky drowned in thick, silver clouds, the sun and the sky lost to the constant rolling of the cloud.

Brigid floated out from under the giant to face me. "It's all gone."

Kormac remained dead, those eyes still open and devoid of life.

In that moment, I couldn't stand it. I stepped around the giant to take in more of the beach and the surrounding land, anything to not look down upon my lost one.

Ruined. Everyone dead, trees burning or felled, more deep gouges in the frozen earth.

Silver ash fell in place of snow, delicate little puffs landing harmlessly on my cheek.

“She changed Faerie,” I said.

“She destroyed it,” Brigid responded, floating with me. “There’s nothing left.”

“Do you think it’s only Winter?”

She didn’t answer me, floating over to a struggling body.

My grandmother.

I followed the old woman in quick strides. Within moments, I stared down at the broken body of the former queen.

Her eyes met mine, blinking between obsidian and her usual blue—a blue nowhere near as wonderful as Kormac’s.

“Valance...” she struggled.

The magic within her worked hard to try and heal her, tried to repair the hole in her left cheek exposing her jawbone, the open wound in her chest, the terrible burns all over her arms and legs.

But it struggled, hurting her as much as it helped.

“It was never meant for you,” I said. “Or Lord Florent. It is *my* power.”

Brigid floated away to return moments later with the silver shard. She dropped it at my feet. “Take it, Valance. Make things right.”

I glanced at the shard, staring at the inanimate thing that had changed my life. An instrument of taking, crafted by the first darklings many centuries ago.

*Hello, silver thief...*

“Valance...” My grandmother wheezed. “Please...”

“Please, what?” I said, still focused on the shard.

“Let me... let me try again.”

Only one choice presented itself to me here. The magic may not be for my grandmother, and she may be trapped in this undying state, but it didn't mean she wouldn't try again. Find a way to get to her feet, to somehow make me suffer again.

I picked up the shard.

“Valance...”

“Grandmother.”

“Have mercy...”

“Like the mercy you have shown me over the years?” I countered.

“Please...”

I plunged the shard into her chest, drawing the power from her. She thrashed violently as the magic leached out of her and sank into me once again.

I staggered back, dropping the shard as the power became one with me.

“Your Majesty?” Brigid asked, drifting close.

I held out a hand, asking for a moment as the magic settled. The berserker curse broke once again.

*A return to me...*

I straightened, composure restored. The first thing I did was send my undying energy to Kormac. It did nothing. He was lost to me. Again.

*Are you an angelus again? Will you return a second time?*

My broken heart numbed, as if my body were conditioned to such pain now.

The undying power did, however, bring my grandmother back. She sat up, gasping for air. Her coughing pleased me greatly.

Brigid glanced between us. “What are you doing?”

“Giving you a gift,” I replied.

I restored Brigid’s body, taking in mind the curse that had aged her. Undid it, returned her to her youth. Her skin flushed into a beautiful copper, her hair becoming long, glossy black waves. Time turned back before my eyes, everything about her making her stand tall. I conjured her some purple armor with silver trim, a decent sword and shield to complement it.

My grandmother got to her feet, clearly panicked. “Brigid!”

The not-so-old woman examined herself. “I don’t believe it.”

“Neither do I,” I said. “Especially after the insults you threw at me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, darkling. You’ve done enough to help, no matter how twisted you are. I want to repay you.” I looked to my wretched grandmother. “She still lives, so she can be yours.”

Queen Dovelar tried to run.

I enchanted her to halt.

“No!” she cried. “No, Valance! You can’t do this to me!”

“Enjoy your reunion,” I said to Brigid. “Make every second count.”

My grandmother’s terrified wails were delicious dessert for the ears.

Brigid bowed, thanking me. “I will.”

“This is where we part ways. Forever. I do not want to see your face again.”

“I understand.”

I watched Brigid force my grandmother to walk beside her as they both left my life, vanishing into the ruin of Winter.

Turning to face the water, I tried to restore Kormac again.

Nothing.

I brought Lord Cullen back instead.

He stood up with a roar, stretching his bulging muscled limbs above his head.

I kept my eyes on him, not the dead body trying to draw my attention.

*Come back to me, Kormac. Please...*

“Your Majesty,” Lord Cullen said. He took in his surroundings. “The world... Is it over?”

“I think so.”

He noticed Kormac. “Oh, no.”

“Don’t worry, My Lord. I will make things right again. I will give you back your wife, your home. All you have to do is return to your haven in the mountains and wait.”

“Your Majesty?”



“Walk back. Live your life. Enjoy your Winter Rose Creams.”

“And you, My King?”

I closed my eyes, reaching into the soil with my magic, touching the sea, the skies. Faerie, my world, was hurting. A dead world of ashes brought upon it by the madness of my grandmother.

“I will walk alone. I will heal the world,” I answered the giant.

“I can’t leave you alone.”

“You can and you will. This is my duty as king, not yours. You have done enough for me. Now go and be happy. Be free.”

My inner darkness held no voice, at least not much of one anymore. No vengeance lived within, only a desire to fix the wrongs. Everything had changed. My old plans dead. This was to be the future now.

I faced the sea, the waves tainted with silver light as much as everything else. I would clean that tainted water, every drop of it on Faerie.

“Goodbye, Lord Cullen.”

“Your Majesty...”

It took him a while to accept my request, but eventually, he made his walk home, leaving me to my tears on the beach.

No matter how hard I tried, Kormac would not come back to life.

And so, my tears took an age to relent.

## PART III

Heart



## Chapter Forty-Eight

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## VALANCE

**M**y boots crunched charred bone, releasing silver dust into the air. Another corpse breaking underfoot to remind me of everything lost. I poured life into it, the final piece of Winter revived.

Dark fae and humans came to life, fell into genuflection. Thanked me, blessed me, praised me. They wanted to walk with me, follow the king who saved their continent again. But I told them no, as I had everyone else who wanted to form a caravan with me.

The last thing I wanted was worshippers. I only wanted to walk in peace.

It had been six long weeks since I'd buried Kormac in a beautiful woodland not far from the beach where he'd died. I restored it back to snowy health, deer clambering to their hooves once again, fleeing when they saw me.

I wove him a blanket of dark blue cotton adorned with silver stars. I thought he would like that, wanted to ask him to be sure.

He remained dead.

I'd cleaned him, kissed his forehead, his cheek, then covered his lovely face for the last time.

"Goodbye, Kormac," I'd said. "I will make you proud."

I now found myself in the west of Winter, not far from the jinn groves, indicated by bushes of pretty purple berries and the strange smell of smokeless fire. So close to wishing, so close to change.

*Wish him back...*

The temptation thrummed wildly in my soul, yet the word *consequences* rang true in my head. Look at the mess my grandmother made from her wish. If I wished for Kormac's life back, what horror would follow?

No. I would heal the rest of Faerie, then disappear. I wanted no part in the politics, of dangers in seeking the throne's power. Where I would vanish too, I'd have to decide when my job was done.

"Autumn next," I told myself.

Once Winter was healed, Autumn it was.



I SPENT two years walking and healing Faerie. A day to break it, two years to mend it. Creation might be wonderful, but destruction held all the power.

I considered returning my dragons, deciding to leave them in the past where they belonged. As much as I missed them, they were tied to so much pain I didn't want to face.

On my journey, I met many fae, many humans, not staying long enough to form any relationships with them. I gave them

their second chance at life, took away the ashes and the damage done to their lands. If they tried to follow, I hid myself in magic or enchanted them to forget me.

By the time I reached the south of Autumn, I liked the idea of forgetting so much, I used it on everyone. I infected everything, including animals, so it would spread back the way I'd come.

I wanted to be forgotten.

When I reached Spring, I contemplated leaving the keep and the forges as ruins. Progress on the scale the Autumn lords had made was terrifying, damaging to the fabric of Faerie. Progress was to be both celebrated and feared.

I restored the forges and the keep in the end but added a layer of forgetting to the enchantment there. The Gentry fae could continue to use metals to forge swords and spears, similar weapons. But not iron fire, and not guns. They were to forget those developments, to never remember the plans of crafting them again.

How long before that came apart, I didn't know. For now, it was nice to think of at least a temporary solution to *that* problem.

By the end of my walk, I came full circle to Summer Palace. Under the brilliant sun, I collapsed on Rosestar Hill, my former home of golden turrets and spires restored to splendid glory.

I basked in the heat of the day, remembering time spent on this hill with Maeve and Boyd. Remembering the first time I'd seen Kormac in the forest just beyond this hill. A horrible time with the seeds of love buried deep, it turned out.

It hurt so much to think about him. But I did, every single hour of the day. No matter how much I tried not to.

My magic closed itself off for a while, resting as a flower at night. I lay still, waiting for it to return, happy to be in this spot as my world blurred.

Movement. Words. Darkness.

What was happening?

I was... I was being moved away from the hill. Who did the voices belong to?



SOUNDS OF WOOD ON WOOD, bellows, the soft crackle of fire outside of this shell I found myself in. Upside down, stinking of dust and damp, dirty white cloth cocooning me. My limbs were bound tightly with rope, my magic waking from its rest.

“Shouldn’t we do something else?” a man asked. “I’m worried.”

“Don’t be such a child,” a woman replied. “We’re good here.”

“He’s a Sidhe, though. We’ll hang for this or worse.”

“Don’t worry.”

“And a strange looking Sidhe.”

They didn’t remember me, but they knew what I was. To a fashion.

“He’ll taste really good, no matter his looks,” the woman answered. “That’s some special meat on those pretty bones.”



Were humans fond of eating fae? Had they taken a leaf from goblin books?

“Ugh... I don’t know.”

“You heard what the goblins said about the power of fae meat. It’ll make us strong, give us magic.”

Ah, so there were goblins involved.

“But we have to save them some,” the man said.

“Yes.”

Dealing with goblins would only lead to suffering—namely boiling to death in their cauldrons and filling their bellies.

“We really need some power,” the man added with a shaky voice.

“What better than a Sidhe fae?” the woman responded.

Would this world ever move on from murder and death? Was I healing something that would only spiral into war again, find a route back to guns and iron fire?

*Then undo your work...*

Ah, there it was, my darkest of voices.

As quietly as I could, I broke the bindings at my wrists first, then my ankles. I enchanted the fabric to open just enough to give me sight of the two siblings.

Dirty and pale, sharing messy brown hair, his hair long and tangled, hers short and greasy, they stood by a growing fire in the middle of a clearing. Dressed in battered brown leather armor, stinking to the heavens of shit and sweat, they were clearly siblings.

A fire during a Summer day was absurd, though they wanted it for cooking.

They had brought me somewhere deeper into the forest. Halfway between Summer Palace and the White Wastes, I deduced from feeling the air, taking in the forest's essence around me.

The foolish humans talked beside the fire, their backs to me, the woman poking at the fire with a stick.

“Everything is going to be amazing,” she said.

Silently forcing my prison to unfurl, my feet landed on the soft forest floor. I stalked forward, nostrils overwhelmed with their stench.

Forever violence. Forever death.

*I give, and I take away.*

I killed him first, snapping his neck within a heartbeat. His body fell forward into the fire, quickly catching alight.

The sister screamed, swinging her stick at me. It burned on the end. I dodged her easily, grabbing her by the head.

“You have no respect for life,” I said, my voice a soft whisper.

Her eyes were wide with delicious fear, and she reached desperately for her left pocket.

I broke her neck before she could draw a blade from that pocket, tossing her body into the fire to join her wretched brother.

After they were charred, I ended the fire.

A bluebird flew past me, landing on a branch close by. It chirped, a second bird joining it to chirp back.

“I can’t be the master of this world,” I told the little feathered creatures. “This isn’t what I want. I cannot stand more death and decay.”

What I wanted was oblivion.

## Chapter Forty-Nine

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## VALANCE

I gave Faerie back its memories of me, of the horrors of my grandmother. As it moved forward into new politics, I kept myself invisible. I hid in the very north of Winter, spending months alone in an abandoned cottage on the rough coastline.

Brutal and beautiful at once, this northern reach wasn't for the faint-hearted, those in love with softer living. Like the Prince Valance of old, a child of Summer. He'd have died many deaths here.

One windy night sat before my fire, I came to a decision.

I set off that same night to implement it.



WEEKS LATER, after yet another slow walk through these lands, I reached the western Winter forest with the purple berry bushes and the stench of smokeless fire. The moon was new and full in the sky, casting its magnificence down on everything. The berries sparked in the milky glow, the snow a carpet of diamonds.

Between the berry bushes, a path wound through the trees. I followed it.

Tonight, this pain ended.

Those berry bushes lined the path all the way to the addition of small candles about halfway along. They flickered inside small glass domes, their light dull under the glow of the moon.

Eventually, the winding path opened up into a grove of fir trees, tall and evergreen, dusted with snow. Huts built of mud with thatched roofs nestled between the trees, firelight dancing in their windows. They reminded me of the human homes at Lord Cullen's mountain domain, only much smaller. I would have to duck considerably to get inside.

A campfire burned further back in this tiny village, small figures hunched around it with sticks held over the flames, chatting quietly.

Jinn.

I made myself visible, gazing up at the stars. At peace with my decision.

*I must do this...*

A female jinn stepped out of a hut, striding toward me with a male in tow. The same male I'd tried to send home, the one who granted my grandmother's wish.

He'd survived.

The female jinn came to a stop before me, taller than the male jinn but not by much. She was blueish with wispy white hair, many bangles decorating both of her thin arms.

"Hello," she said in a whispery voice. "Your Majesty." She bowed her head. "May I begin by welcoming you to our humble grove and thanking you for giving it back to us. For

giving us life again. We will always be grateful for this, more than we can ever express.”

I folded my arms, other jinn gathering around to see me.

“May we offer you food and wine? Let us make you—”

“No,” I cut in. “I’m happy to stand here.”

She seemed slightly taken aback by my words. “Of course, Your Majesty.”

“Are you the jinn matriarch?” I questioned.

“Yes. I am Lorien, mother to Oliver.” She gestured to the jinn beside her. “Thank you for trying to help him.”

“There is no need to thank me.”

She nodded. “May I ask why you are here, Your Majesty?”

I drew a deep breath, flashes of Kormac behind my eyes. “I seek your power.”

Her bangles jangled as she lifted her arms. “A wish?”

“A wish.”

She held up a finger. “Tell me what it is, but do not make the wish until you have explained it to me. Wishes are dangerous things.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Would you like to sit and talk?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine here.” I glanced back at that lovely night sky, the stars.

*Are you there? Are you happy?*

“I want death, but I know I can’t have that. Should I undo my life, Faerie will pay. I cannot have that. However, I can have permanent slumber. Oblivion.”

Lorien waited for more.

“I can sleep deep within Faerie, left alone, left without dreams or thoughts or memories. There as a vessel to fill the world with my magic forever, never to surface, never to be disturbed.”

She released a long breath, mist trailing from her mouth. “Is that really what you want, Your Majesty?”

“More than anything. I cannot live in this world anymore, not as a fae, not as a man. I want to help it, yet take nothing from it. That may seem cowardly, too easy. But this pain is too much for my soul. And I’m aware many carry an incredible amount of pain in their lives. I also know how much pain I have caused, the things I have done. I know what I am, what I could be, what I have been.” I closed my eyes, casting my mind back to my orchid garden, to the torture I’d inflicted. To the hurt I’d caused Kormac.

I didn’t deserve his love or his touch. He was from the stars, made from beauty, a gift to fulfill my destiny. He was far too precious for the likes of me.

“You have also given Faerie a new chance,” she said.

“And will continue to do so if the wish will allow it. Which brings me to the consequence.”

“There is always a price, Your Majesty.”

“What exactly would it be? Do you know?”

“You can never come back of your own accord,” she said. “Without thought, trapped below, there will be no capacity for you to regret, to be anything other than Faerie’s vessel. Which is what you want.”

No going back. “It is.”



“And you are happy to never have a chance to change your mind?”

“That is the price.”

“It is.”

“Then so be it.”

“No, Majesty!” Oliver cried. “Please don’t do this!”

“Silence!” the matriarch snapped at him.

I smiled, giving no response. It was nice he cared, that he felt anything for his king. But any effort was paper against fire. There would be no changing my mind.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like some food before you leave us?” Lorien asked. “You are more than welcome to sit and eat with us, drink with us.”

Many jinn heads nodded as one.

“That’s very kind, but it is time,” I said.

She nodded, sadness in her eyes. “Very well. Begin your wish whenever you see fit. Repeat what you told me with ‘I wish’ before it.”

Silence.

One more look at the stars, clearing my throat.

*Goodbye, Kormac. This is where I leave my memories of you, here in this grove. Be at peace beyond those stars...*

“I wish to sleep deep within Faerie,” I spoke. “To be left alone, left without dreams or thoughts or memories. There as a vessel to fill the world with my magic forever, never to surface, never to be disturbed.”

“Valance!”

What?

“As is wished, so it shall be done.” She clapped her hands together, the sound thundering in my head.

He ran into the grove, alive again.

“Kormac?”

Was that really him?

But the magic of the wish took me away, undid everything that was me, turned me into a blank slate, carrying me down into the dark to fulfill my duty.

# Chapter Fifty

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I stood with Many Hands in the Depart Room, facing the sea of stars.

“We really do not understand destiny and its many loopholes,” they said.

“Not even you?” I wondered.

“Certainly not.” They placed three of their hands on my shoulders. “I thought you would never remember us when you fell, would never come back here again. Yet here you are, Titus again with your undying power intact and your destiny awaiting you.”

It turned out, even angelus could be changed, could fall onto a new path. We weren't one-dimensional beings, for the most part. Okay, so we were most of the time outside our jobs. I was the first to be changed, but Many Hands didn't think I would be the last.

“Existence is complicated,” they'd said before coming here.

And they were right. I couldn't explain the many layers of why this was happening, only that I was meant to be down there with Valance. Again. We were meant to turn hate into

love, to be together. Maybe the old woman made that happen with her actions, or maybe it was something deeper than that.

As Marcus had said, we were to serve destiny, not to really understand it.

“Valance fixed the world,” I said again for the hundredth time.

What an achievement. What a miracle.

A fourth hand joined the other three. “You helped him do that.”

“Along a twisted path.”

“But a path all the same.” A fifth hand stroked my glassy head. “Whenever you are ready to jump, take your leap.”

“This isn’t goodbye,” Olivia said, standing in the doorway. “We don’t know what will happen next, if you will come back here again.”

“I like the uncertainty,” Marcus added from behind her.

They were different, less rolling joy, more open to darker and deeper things, to more confused feelings. It didn’t make Fatumstellae a darker realm, only one with more thought beyond parties and frolicking in fields. We enjoyed complex conversations now, talked about our jobs, the messiness of emotions angelus weren’t privy to.

My friends wanted to change, to be better versions of themselves.

It was from those conversations we started to hear whispers from Faerie, a voice calling my name. Prayers from a broken heart, the voice’s master unaware of its pleading.

Valance.

Always Valance.

I went over to hug my friends again, enjoying the last of our glass bodies connecting.

“I’ll miss you so much,” Olivia said. “Again.”

We’d become closer than ever before.

“Me too,” Marcus added.

“You both take care,” I responded, giving them one last hug.

“And you.” Marcus slapped my back. “Live a good life down there.”

“I will.” I returned to Many Hands, facing the stars again. “I’m ready.”

“Then jump, Kormac.”

That was the first time any of them didn’t call me Titus.

“Make your jump.”

I did, landing naked in a grove of fir trees with huts and jinn everywhere.

“...or memories. There as a vessel to fill the world with my magic forever, never to surface, never to be disturbed.”

That was him! What was he saying to that jinn?

“Valance!” I called.

“Kormac?”

He blinked out of sight.

I ran forward, nudity be damned. “What happened?”

“The consort?” a male jinn said.

I glared at him, then at the female with the bangles. “What did you do to him?”

“Are you Kormac the Consort?”

“Just Kormac,” I growled. “Where is he?”

“I’m terribly sorry.”

My stomach rolled. “What happened?”

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Please answer me.”

She sighed, explaining his wish to me.

It took every ounce of strength for me not to faint. “He did what?”

“His heart was broken, his grief too much for him,” she said. “He wanted peace, so he wished for it.”

“Then undo it.”

“I can’t undo it,” she responded. “But you can.”

“Then I—”

“Wait. Do not wish yet.”

My stomach continued to roll, my heartbeat a series of painful flutters. “I have to have him back right now.”

“I’m sure,” she said. “But you have to be careful with wishes. There is always a price.”

I ran my hand through my hair as a jinn appeared with a long fur cloak. It dragged in the snow, too long for her short stature. She offered it to me, and I took it, throwing it around my body. A male jinn offered me boots. I took those, too.

“Do you cater to many humans?” I asked.

“It is good to be prepared for all visitors,” the matriarch answered.

“What about Valance?”

“Talk to me, but do not wish. What do you want?”

“I want him back, of course.”

“How?”

“By him being here.”

“And then what? What do you want your life to be like with him? A consort to a king?”

What else would there be? “I...”

*“I don’t want a throne, Kormac. Not really. All I’ve wanted is a quieter life than the one I was born into. I love luxury. I love palaces. But they are only riches, not richness. They don’t offer nights of conversation and lovemaking, exploring the world together. Holding the hand of your beloved, watching the sun rise and set. I want those things. I want a better life...”*

“What kind of life...” I said.

“Yes.”

What kind of life for him and me?

“But remember, there will be a price,” the jinn said.

“Can you tell me what it is?”

“Tell me your wish—without wishing for the moment.”

“I need to think.” Pressure built in my skull.

“Would you like food and wine?” she asked.

“No, thanks. I’m fine here.”

“As was he.”



“What?”

“King Valance said the same thing. He was fine standing right there.”

That made me smile as much as hurt.

*Think. Think. Think.*

“I want us to have a happy life together, free from the hellpiss of Faerie politics. Something new, a life of exploring and love. Quieter, freer. But he has to be king, doesn't he? He has to give his power to Faerie. Without it, the world dies.”

“That's correct.”

“Then I can't wish for that. I have to bring him back and let him be king.”

The matriarch stepped forward. “Is that what you want? What you think he would want?”

“My first suggestion would appeal to him more.”

“Then you should have that.”

“But—”

“May I suggest you mention you would like to be bonded through life when you speak your wish?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have come again from the stars,” she said. “Written to be here with him. It would be good to be bonded to him for when I tell you the price.”

“The soul bond?” I questioned.

“Yes. Add it to those words you told me, again without wishing, and then I will explain.”

I did as she asked.

She clasped her hands together, interlocking her fingers under her chin. Her bangles jingled like pretty bells as she did. “Valance can indeed come back to live that life with you, but without his magic. It must stay in the deep, keeping Faerie alive.”

“Okay.”

“It will leave him Sidhe again, bonded to you as you once were. Safe from harm, protected by your undying you have returned with.”

Many Hands had managed to give it back to me. “You know about my undying power?”

“I don’t keep my head in the snow, Kormac. My home may be small, but my mind is enormous.”

That kept my lips together.

“There is more of a cost,” she said.

“What?”

“If you want to be free of Faerie’s politics, Valance cannot be here. He is Valance Rosestar, king-in-waiting. He has a better claim for the Faerie Throne than anyone. He must step aside, allow for a new spoke to the wheel.”

“Take away his birthright?”

“Yes.”

Should I make the choice for him? I know he didn’t want the throne, but wasn’t that up to him?

“Leave Faerie?”

*The human realm...*

*“My friend Maeve used to talk about exploring the human realm, asked me if I ever thought about it. I did, many times.*

*Now I think it sounds wonderful. Somewhere new, somewhere that isn't Faerie."*

"And Faerie will be okay with his power buried like that?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I don't know what to do."

"Take your time, Kormac. There is plenty of food and wine if you need it."

She really wanted me to eat and drink. But I refused again, running the only two options I really had through my mind. If I returned him to be king, how miserable would he be? If I gave him a different life, would he hate it? Blame me?

Why couldn't I just have him back without this hellpiss?

*Because you came too late...*

*Because you're meant to be his destiny again...*

"Gods..." I breathed. "This is hard."

No response. The jinn matriarch couldn't make this decision for me. She'd presented the details, the price, and now it was up to me.

"What about the price for making him king again?" I said.

"He can never be anything but the king, to have much of anything else outside of his duty."

"Not even me?"

"As much as he can, but not fully. Such is the price of absolute power."

"That's terrible."

"Isn't it?"

“It makes the choice easier.”

No answer.

“I’m still thinking.”

“As I said, take your time,” she answered. “There is no rush.”

Only, for me, there was. The more time I spent, the longer I endured without him. I didn’t come back here again to see him blink away, to feel this ache for him every hellpissing second. He should be in my arms, our hearts reunited again. Acting on the feelings we’d confessed to each other, exploring what they meant.

By the gods.

By the stars.

By all the hellpiss in existence.

“I’m ready to make my wish.”

“Then speak, Kormac.”

# Chapter Fifty-One

---



VALANCE

I blinked into the snowy grove, surrounded by jinn again.

“What—”

Kormac sucked any future words from my throat, setting my heart on fire.

There he stood, dressed in a brown fur cloak and heavy leather boots, his lips curved in a smile, his eyes radiant.

“Valance...”

I couldn't speak, couldn't think. Was this a trick?

“It's really me,” he said as if reading my mind. “I'm really here.”

Still, words failed me.

He'd died. I'd failed him. He'd died, and I'd wished myself to be...

Hot tears rolled down my cheeks, twin waterfalls with no sign of drying up. It hurt so much to see him, enraged me, and filled me joy. Was this another part of the price Lorien failed to enlighten me on? Would my oblivion come with this painful addition?

I'd been tricked by the jinn, falling for her words, for the apparent kindness she'd show me by sharing the price of my wish with me.

Only, the light snowfall breaking through the firs wasn't a dream. The flakes landed cold and real on my cheeks, the song of the night birds not plucked from a nightmare, the icy breeze of Winter not conjured from my imagination.

I was really here in the jinn grove.

And Kormac was really standing there.

Frozen, muscles unable to react, the tears still hot and heavy, I managed to say, "You're really here..."

He came to me quickly. Wrapped me in his arms, crushing me to his fur-swaddled chest. So tight, so loving. His own tears broke free.

"Valance," he said. "I'm so happy to see you."

He broke his hold, taking hold of my face.

I gazed into his blue eyes, stunned by his touch, by this reality. "But how?"

He kissed me so softly yet deeply, our joining of flesh igniting every nerve, every inch of happiness.

The relief of him almost took my legs out from under me.

We kissed for a long time, lost in each other until our bodies required air.

I wiped his tears with my fingers as he wiped mine, my smile so wide it almost hurt.

"I love you..." I whispered.

He rested his forehead to mine. "I love you. But..." His smile dropped. "But I have to tell you what happened."

Ah, yes. The reason for being here, not buried deep.

“I...” He struggled, licking his lips. “I made a choice... For you. For us. I hope you don’t hate me for it.”

I stroked his hair as he told me of his wish, of the new life to come.

“Say something,” he tried as silence fell between us.

No more being king. Faerie would have to find a new leader, a whole new dynasty to take the throne. No more Tuatha destiny or silver magic. No more war. No more heart full of vengeance.

Only hope.

“Hope...” I whispered.

“What was that?”

I looked him in the eyes, stroking the side of his face with the back of my hand. “You’ve given me hope.”

“Valance...”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“I suppose I was just doing my angelus duty,” he answered.

I fell into his arms again, sobbing with relief, with happiness I never thought I’d feel again.

He was here and alive. We had a chance at a future together. A real future.



## Chapter Fifty-Two

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**H**e was happy. Even though he sobbed into my fur cloak, he was truly happy. I'd given him something good, not more hurt.

"We do have a chance," I said. "But you're okay with the price?"

"Yes."

"Really? You're happy to leave Faerie behind?"

"As long as I'm with you," he answered, voice muffled in my cloak.

I smoothed his hair. "This will be a big change."

He surfaced, sniffled. "I wanted change."

"What about the throne?"

"It's not my problem anymore. I've put this world back together. Let everyone else do the rest."

Gods, he was so beautiful. So perfect.

"When shall we leave?" he asked.

"As soon as we can. I just want to start our new lives."

“Pardon me,” Lorien said, stepping close. “But please do fill your bellies before you go anywhere. I’m concerned you’re not properly nourished.”

“Please!” Oliver cried.

I laughed. Valance laughed, slipping his arm around my waist.

“Of course,” my fae lover answered. “I am rather famished after so much wishing.”

I nodded in agreement.

Lorien clapped her hands together, her bangles chiming. “Wonderful! Let us celebrate this lovely occasion. Just wait until you try the wine we have.”

“Something tells me our heads will pound in the morning,” I said.

Valance kissed my cheek. “I’ll make it all better.”

The matriarch led the way into a hut, other jinn following. There was so much meat and cheese and bread. Plenty of fruit and wine, even dancing when jinn picked up instruments and began to play rowdy songs. A celebration to end all other celebrations.

The next morning, our heads did pound.

Two weeks later, we set sail for our new life.

# Chapter Fifty-Three

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## VALANCE

**T**he last trace of Faerie faded into the horizon, blurring into a line indicating distant land. Fading out of my life forever.

I stood with Kormac at the back of our ship, sailed by magic, all part of the wish.

Sailing to the human realm.

I rested my head on his shoulder. “Goodbye, Faerie.”

“Goodbye,” he said. “How are you feeling?”

“Terrified. Excited.”

“Me too.”

There were no maps, no humans on board to tell us much about this new realm. Humans who drifted into Faerie didn't remember much of their homeland. Only a scattering of things. Not even my angelus lover knew any details beyond its existence in the far east.

I couldn't wait to learn of them for myself.

Leaving Faerie didn't come without emotional struggles. After all, the realm was my home, the place I expected to live and die within. Yet I was glad to leave it behind after

everything that'd happened. The thought of existing there now seemed exhausting, untenable. A realm no longer for me.

Seagulls flew overhead, heading back toward my motherland. I watched the white bodies go, swallowed into the horizon.

“So,” Kormac said. “This is love, is it?”

I chuckled. “What are you talking about?”

“The butterflies in my belly.”

“You have butterflies?”

“Your fault, My Prince.”

I winced. “I’m no prince.”

“You’re mine.” He nudged me with his hip. “Not the cursed prince or the scary Sidhe fae prince from my past. He’s long dead, the real you shining bright. The one I fell in love with, the one who makes me smile, who gives me these butterflies.” He turned his body to the side. “The pretty man wrapped in nightmares who turned out to be a dream come true.”

I blushed, nervous under his regard. “Stop.”

“Who would have thought we’d be so in love?”

“Not me.” I touched his lips with my fingertips. “Thank goodness we were pleasantly surprised.”

“Absolutely, My Heart.”

“Your Heart?”

“Always.”

Our lips met, the magic from flesh on flesh as potent as it had been the first time we’d kissed.

What a strange web fate weaves. Sometimes, it is wonderful to be caught within its silk.

“Dance with me,” he said, taking my hand.

“Pardon?”

“Dance with me.” He offered me a sheepish, delightful grin.

“With no music?”

“We don’t need music.”

“No?”

“No.”

I took his hand, my palm singing under his touch as it always did.

A hand on my waist, his eyes full of softness just for me. “Ready, My Heart?”

“I’m ready, My Darling.”

He wrinkled his nose, giggling. “Darling?”

I jabbed him lightly in the side. “Is there a problem?”

He shook his head and twirled me across the deck. “I like being your darling.”

We danced to the music of the waves, the sea air, the call of seabirds flying overhead. Drifting in our own patch of paradise.



AFTER WEEKS OF SAILING EAST, we finally arrived at a sprawling port city. A mass of buildings, tall and short, in all manner of colors spread out before me, climbing a hill. From

the deck, I heard the busy sounds, took in all sorts of scents—from the acrid to the pleasant.

The air was as hot as Summer, the sky a magnificent blue. The sea breeze was the only relief we had. I'd removed my cloak hours ago.

“We're here,” I whispered. “We're really here.”

My insides were a tangle of knots, the fear of the new overripe.

Kormac took my hand. “Take a breath, Valance. If you need the well, go to it.”

A few deep breaths, and his skin on mine, calmed me somewhat.

Our ship settled itself in the harbor, dropped a gangplank onto the large jetty with a loud boom. Humans gathered around it, welcoming us to the city.

A tall woman with short blonde hair and radiant brown skin, dressed in white and blue striped clothes, seemed to be in charge.

“Hello, there,” she said in a tongue we both understood.

“Hello,” Kormac answered.

“I'm Harbor Master Katherine,” she responded. “I wasn't expecting your arrival. Are you traders?” She watched me for a few long beats. “Oh. You're fae?”

I tensed. “You know of the fae?”

“Yes. Sometimes your kind come from the west, seeking something new. Much like humans set off in the direction of Faerie.” She smiled. “We've had quite a few fae come here for new beginnings.”



Kormac brushed the back of my hand with his.

“You have?”

She nodded.

“Humans forget this realm when they head to my motherland,” I said. “Will I forget Faerie?”

She folded her arms. “They forget?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone who comes here from Faerie remembers things about that world.”

“They do?”

She nodded again. “No fae or returning human has ever forgotten Faerie. Though returning humans is rare. You’re the first one I’ve seen in ten years.” She gestured at Kormac.

“In fact, there is a tavern dedicated to fae tales as told by fae,” she added, pointing at the line of buildings in the harbor, all squeezed together as if fighting for space. “Emerald Glove, if you’re interested. The stories are always entertaining, but I don’t like the sound of Faerie. No offense.”

“None taken,” I answered.

There must be something in Faerie’s air to cause the memory loss and something here to reverse it.

I didn’t really want to think about it too deeply, relieved to not have my memories removed. As many horrors as I’d faced back home, my memories were part of the fabric of me. Mine.

I moved closer to Kormac, our hips bumping.

“Welcome to Cuttlestone City,” Katherine said. “Please head for that white building there.” She pointed to a small, narrow building at the end of the jetty. “You will be granted

asylum, given official papers, as well some money and a room to help you begin your lives. It's a loan, so you will have to find jobs in the city to pay it back."

That did not sound like a system I wanted to be part of. I wasn't work-shy, but I also didn't want to be stuck in this city.

"Cuttlestone is a welcoming place, though not without its perils. Like anywhere in the world." She shrugged. "Avoid the western quarter at night and be wary of pickpockets around the harbor. Other than that, I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you," Kormac said, squeezing my hand.

"May we help with your luggage?" she asked, smiling at our joined hands.

I'd forgotten about our luggage, so overwhelmed with this welcome and the information.

*I can't stay here...*

"We can keep it safe for you while you sort things out," she added.

"Then yes, please," Kormac answered.

"It will cost you five silver—after you receive your money, of course."

"Thank you," I said, my voice shaky.

Other humans dressed in the same blue and white stripes hurried onto our ship, not at all concerned of it having sailed itself.

Kormac and I headed for the white building to be met by a friendly, red-faced, bald gentleman with an incredibly curly mustache. He did as Katherine had said—gave us money, parchment we both signed to officiate our lives here. He told

us we would have to wait a few hours for a room, to go out and get a feel of the city.

“I wasn’t expecting this,” I said to Kormac as we stepped back outside.

“Neither was I. Are you okay?”

“I... I think so. Overwhelmed.”

He kissed my cheek. “Come on. Let’s look around.”

Did he want to live here? I would follow him if this was what he really wanted. Only... Only I couldn’t...

By the gods!

Cuttlestone was packed with life, of humans and the odd fae. So much noise, so much to see. It frightened me. I’d been to cities in Faerie many times, but this was different. I wasn’t here as a prince with an army of guards around me or any form of diplomatic power. I was a stranger in a strange land.

As we wandered the cramped streets, weaving through markets, passing bakeries and taverns and shops, I made sure to keep close to Kormac. Once again, he became my protector, our soul bond infused with his undying power. He would keep me safe, alive.

*I can’t stay here...*

Should I say something?

After a few hours, I relaxed as best as I could, and embraced the energy of the city. Sampled foods from stalls, the fashions, the trinkets expertly made, everything this place had to offer. Even saw a Gentry fae kissing a human down a small alleyway. But I still didn’t want to stay here.

*Tell him...*

*What if I disappoint him?*

Kormac purchased a few books, some parchment and ink, and a couple of human realm maps from a stall.

“This will help us,” he said, handing money over to a human woman.

There were some humans who eyed me warily, who whispered to one another. Sometimes kind, sometimes not.

“Valance?” Kormac said as we turned into a quiet, cobbled street.

“Yes?”

“This isn’t for us, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

He took my hands in his. “Jobs in the city, assimilating into this busy life. Taking a room.” He shook his head. “We didn’t come here for that.”

“No.” I smiled, relieved.

“We want adventure. We want to explore these lands.”

“We do.”

He lifted my hands, kissed each of them in turn. “Then let’s make that happen.”

We returned to the white building and handed back the money, keeping five silver and making a promise to send the shortfall later.

The cheerful man was surprised but happy with the arrangement.

“You can have a good life in the city,” he tried.

“No, thank you,” Kormac and I said together, laughing as we left.

We paid Katherine and took what we needed from our luggage. Weapons sheathed, clothes, and some food into our generous sacks. Easy to carry for our journey ahead.

“Would you like to buy the rest?” Kormac asked the harbor master.

What a great idea.

After a peek at the fine silks and some jewelry I’d brought with me, she paid us handsomely for the rest of our things.

“Thank you,” Kormac said, pocketing the bulging coin purses. He faced me. “We’re set, My Heart.”

We went to pay back the mustache man. Once again, he was surprised and happy. He tried to get us to stay, but we refused him.

A pretty human woman entered, distracting him. He pulled on his mustache, his eyes bulging. We were no longer relevant.

“I can’t see it happening,” Kormac quipped under his breath.

“You never know,” I said. “Just look at us.”

“True.” He kissed my cheek.

Hand in hand and free, we headed east through the city toward the limits of this noisy place.

“This is so exciting,” I proclaimed, more relief flooding me. I would wilt being trapped in Cuttlestone. That wasn’t the life I wanted. Thank Danu Kormac had said what I couldn’t.

“I can’t wait to see what happens next,” my human love said.

We kissed again on the edge of the city, facing rolling green meadows, roads with traders moving back and forth, humans on a walk on a fine day.

A whole world waiting for us to meet it.

“Ready?” he asked, squeezing my hand.

“More than ready.”

Kormac and I would be fine. We would be glorious. Bonded once again, this time gladly and so full of love, we were on a path toward happiness and adventure. I was more than sure shadows would lurk along the edges of that path. Such is the price of living. But our love would be the light to chase them away.

After all, we were written in the stars.

The End



DEAR READER,

Thank you so much for reading *The Cursed King*, and the rest of the *Dark Caress* series. It's been a crazy, dark journey, but Valance and Kormac finally reached their happy ending. I'm going to miss them so much.

Saying goodbye to characters is always so hard. Sniff.

To stay in the loop with all the latest news, come join my [Facebook Reader Group \(Richie's Round Table\)](#). There you will find updates, giveaways and good old chit chat (and cake).

If you fancy grabbing yourself a couple of FREE short stories, then go ahead and sign up to my [Free Newsletter](#).

You can also follow me on [Amazon](#), [Bookbub](#), and my other socials [HERE](#).

Okay, I'm to make some coffee and devour cake.

Thank you again.

Sending so much love.

Richard xxx

## Also by Richard Amos

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### **Coldharbour Chronicles**

Winter Rising

Winter Shadows

Winter Fire

Winter Blood

Winter Twilight

### **Dylan Rivers Chronicles**

Siren's Debt

Siren's Call

Siren's Heart

Siren's Destiny

### **Jake and Dean Investigations**

The Christmas Bones

The Charms of Death

The Divine Roses

### **Four Moons**

First Moon

Chaos Moon

Dead Moon

Silver Moon

Christmas Moon (A short story)

### **Fallen Fire**

Reborn

Requiem

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### **Hellhound Shifters**

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Night Tricks

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Night Trials

Night Tremors

Night Treasures

### **Necromancer Rising**

Death Eternal

Death Enraptured (April 28<sup>th</sup>)

### **Demon Heart**

Shadow & Silk (August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

### **Standalone Urban Fantasy Fairy Tale Novel**

Spirit of Snow

## About the Author

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Richard Amos is an author from England who is constantly lost in the worlds he writes about, and the ones in the queue yet to be written. He also has more books in his house than anything else and is never without a book (and chocolate) in his hands when he's not writing. He's a proud nerd who loves to dance. Hard.

In a former life, he was definitely a merman.

Richard writes kick-ass MM Fantasy and Urban Fantasy, all with good doses of action, adventure, and romance.