

LINDSEY DEVIN



PRINCE  
— OF THE —  
DARK FAE

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# FOREWORD

Light some candles. Run a bath. Have something sweet. Come get lost with me in a place where love and magic reign supreme.

# PROLOGUE

## ISLA

The fae created the most elegant cages. There were no bars, no limits, because the two fae factions, Silvermoore and Ragalith, guarded and ruled all of Savaria. Who needed manacles or locks when a healthy dose of fear kept the locals in line?

Fear was especially useful in regard to humans. Here in Silvermoore, humans were tolerated at best. We provided services and kept our heads down and that, for the most part, kept us safe. According to the stories about Ragalith and their lawlessness, I should be grateful for what I had. I wouldn't be resentful of my station at all, probably, if my heart didn't feel like dried-out kindling. Grief had a way of rusting over even the most brilliant golds.

I'd suffered so much loss.

My father, taken by an injury two years ago. He'd been traveling from Silvermoore to Ragalith to sell some of our fabrics and see if he could bring home new ones to entice our fae patrons. His horse had spooked. At least, that's what the dark fae from Ragalith had told the messengers. We hadn't received his body until two weeks later, broken and already too ripe to know whether it had been an accident or something far more heinous. I'd been ten years old.

Then my mother, fresh in the ground less than a month ago from a simple illness wreaking havoc on a tired body. Magic could have saved her, but humans weren't allowed magic anymore. It was forbidden. And we certainly didn't hold a high enough station in court to curry that sort of favor.

Now I was making a fool not only of myself, but of my older sister, Lily.

I should be in the castle, assisting her with the dress fittings and designs, helping to keep the business my parents had carefully curated through years of hard work and avoiding the ire of the fae nobility. After all, dressing the

nobles of Silvermoore's light fae court was about the best job a human could manage in Savaria.

Instead, as we'd been escorted through the castle halls with their cavernous ceilings, pristine white walls, and lush, blue-velvet dressings, all I could think about was how my first venture into the castle was supposed to have been with my mom. She would have held my hand and winked at me discreetly as I gaped at the opulence.

Her absence haunted every echoing step and the tears had sprung out before I could swallow them down. What was worse? Crying in front of the fae? Or running?

I'd chosen to run, leaving Lily to fend for herself.

Most likely I'd doomed us both to poverty and scrubbing the soldiers' toilets.

I'd run, but you can't escape a cage, no matter how large and pretty.

The garden I was hiding in was just another cage. Goodness, but it was a riot of colors. The purples and blues of irises and asters weaved between thick, verdant roses bushes peppered with white roses like stars.

The fountain I was sitting next to was mammoth and impressive, the marble worked so smooth it looked more like cloth than stone. The statue in the middle was probably of some fae prince, his features so fine and sharp they were like glass. The figure was strong, lithe, the pinnacle of fae perfection—all grace and perfect lines.

And that was just an image wrought in stone. A true fae? They'd make the statue look like a chunk of boulder.

Shame prickled at my cheeks and heated the nape of my neck. At twelve, I was no longer a child, but I was hiding like one. The fitting today had been imperative, Lily had stressed. Mother's funeral had emptied our coffers, and if we were to eat and keep the shop open, we needed customers.

She must be fuming, apologizing to the fae for my behavior and cursing me under her breath.

I'd thought my tears had run dry, but the gut-clenching pull of guilt managed to refill the well.

*Stop this nonsense, I chided myself. Wash your face and go in and apologize. Kiss shoes if you must. Lily's been working to help you. You must help her.*

Gritting my teeth, I lifted myself, bent over the edge of the fountain and scooped the clear water to my face. It was cold and bracing, but smelled

sweet. I caught a few drops on my tongue and almost moaned. It was so much crisper than the well water back in town.

Scrubbing away any trace of tears, I peered into the surface, hoping I didn't look *too* terrible. A glint caught my eye.

Tilting my head, I leaned in closer, so close that the tip of my nose nearly dipped in. There was something in the water.

The pull of it was magnetic, and my blood seemed to hum. The hairs on my arms raised, and my spine straightened. I looked around me, scanning for guards, for courtiers, for *anyone* who might see what I would do next. But there were only the droning insects and the loud calls of the peacocks wandering through the garden's labyrinthine hedges.

Biting my lip, I pulled my sleeve up as high as it would fit around my slender arm and reached in. I gasped at the cold, wriggling my fingers and grasping and seeking along the bottom until—

There.

I grabbed at the object and pulled it out.

Only to wish I'd left it in the water. A golden pendant lay in my palm. It was beautifully made, the slender filigree masterfully rendered to create a design that probably looked like a fan or something to the fae. To my twelve-year-old mind, it was reminiscent of the head of a broom.

The chain which ran through it was so fine it was almost invisible. That is, until the sunlight caught it *just so*. It shone so radiantly I had to squint.

This necklace was far too fine, too beautiful, to be held by the likes of me. A commoner. A *human*.

*I'll just slip it back in the water.*

As I reached my hand out, the pendant heated. At first, it was warm and sweet, like the kiss of the summer sun, but then the heat bloomed *hot*, like the water we boiled for our dyes. I yelped, yet found myself clutching it tighter.

Which was when I saw it begin to glow between my closed fingers.

*Oh, no.*

It wasn't just a fine piece of jewelry. It was magic. Perhaps it was warning its owner that filthy, unworthy hands were trying to claim it. My stomach threatened to reject my breakfast.

Then, just as quickly as it had appeared, the heat vanished. Moreover, a sense of peace fell on me, wrapping around me like a blanket. I felt a connection to the necklace. A gentle and welcoming pull. It created a sense of peace within me and a feeling of ownership. Without thinking, I slipped the

chain over my head and pulled my hair out to cover it.

The pendant fell under the front of my dress, nestling next to my heart like it belonged there.

In that moment, being an orphan human child caged in a fae-ruled world no longer galled. I felt something almost like... hope? This world had taken everything from me, and I wasn't promised a happy ending. There was despair in me, much too great to bear, but having something so fine? It eased the burden.

It was like a treasure. A secret treasure.

Before I could nurture or pursue that thought, rough hands gripped my shoulders, fingers digging into my flesh like knives. Suddenly, I was yanked to standing and spun around.

A fae stood before me. Tall and strong and dressed in Imperial colors. My breath hitched at his beauty, but my stomach dropped at the empty, cruel black of his eyes.

“What are *you* doing here? These grounds are off-limits to humans.” His lips slid into a sneer that left my bowels feeling loose. “Perhaps you’ve come to play? A bit of hide-and-go-seek?”

Games with the fae weren't fun. Ever.

They were rumored to be deadly.

Swallowing hard, I shook my head. “No, I’m terribly sorry, I just got separated from my sister. I’m lost. Could you help me, please?”

His grin deepened. He might be a soldier or palace guard, but humans weren't worthy of being protected. When it came to humans, rules seemed made only to be broken. “I don't think so. I think you and I—”

“Isla, thank goodness!” Lily’s voice was too tight for someone experiencing relief. I clenched my fists, terrified that she’d now fall victim to the fae soldier. My sister was an older version of me, cut from almost identical cloth. Her pale blue eyes, a mirror to my own, were wide with panic. As she hurried over, her lavender court dress and auburn hair—darker than my own red locks—flowed as she moved. She wasn't alone.

Three fae noblewomen were waiting behind her. One was in a dress we'd created, the silver stitching on dark navy blue bringing an air of seductive night to the bright, sunshine-filled garden. It looked exquisite, but the loveliness of the woman wearing it was even more luminescent. Madame Visonte, wife of a duke who held the favor of the king and queen. Her daughter was behind her, hugging the skirts we'd labored on for days,



peeking out with sharp eyes.

The soldier eyed the courtiers and stiffened.

Lily didn't hesitate. She grabbed my hand. "We've been looking *everywhere* for you." The edge in her tone was no longer worry, but sheer frustration. I looked at my feet as she tugged me along. "I need your small hands to help with the final fitting. If Madame Visonte does not mind?"

I dared to glance up. The woman in our dress waved her hand in an unaffected manner. "For a gown as lovely as this, all trouble is forgiven. I don't mind... if we hurry this up." There was no missing the warning, and I nodded eagerly, desperate to please.

The women moved then, strolling along in such a smooth way it looked as if they were sailing. Their grace was decidedly inhuman. Another reminder of how different and less-than we were. Lily kept a firm grip on my hand, half-tugging me to follow them. I wanted to tell her about the pendant, but the moment had certainly passed.

Should I pull it out now?

A shiver skittered down my spine at all the horrible ways Lily and I could—and most likely would—be punished. It would have to remain hidden, even from my sister. A small part of me thrilled, unwilling to give up my one treasure.

As we walked, a crawling sensation played on my neck, like I was under scrutiny. We passed a door so quickly, I only caught the eyes of the dark-haired male fae leaning casually in a doorway.

Golden and ringed with red, the pupil so inky black that no light shone there. It was enough to fill me with dread.

Without thinking, I pressed a hand to my heart, over the pendant. Through the thick cloth of my dress, I felt it heat under his stare.

But when we turned a corner, all of it disappeared. The stare, the heat, the panic.

We were being given a second chance, something rare indeed. At least this was the court of the light fae. Though they were cruel, they provided ways for humans to avoid punishment, such as offering up pretty things they wanted. Our dressmaking skills had saved us, I knew, but there was no more room to step out of line.

I wasn't going to screw this up.

# THANE

## Thirteen years later...

The decor was a sumptuous that bordered on ostentatious, but the oily and dark colors more than suited my mood. The throne room was cavernous and yet, due to the black marble columns and floor and the inky paint on the ceiling and walls, it had a cave-like quality. Though I doubted many caves were furnished with red velvet couches and large, ornate, scarlet rugs.

Normally, the throne room was a place of comfort and power for me. Aside from being the seat of my family's power, the shadowed corners were perfect for whispers of gossip and stolen kisses. I would know, having kissed several blushing daughters of lords and ladies there. Those had been better days, when I was chasing panties rather than soldiers and mercenaries.

It was the room where my father, the king, kept court. Where *I* would one day keep court.

*That day can't come soon enough.*

His hundred-year reign was coming to an end, and I was all but shoving him out the door.

My father was a looming presence on his throne, an ornate chair carved from mahogany wood and cushioned in crimson silk. Several of my father's advisors and I were seated in chairs in front of him, circled around like children before a governess rather than the great minds of the land.

*He likes to lord over us, for sure.*

The Sage, my father's closest advisor, had been explaining border disputes for over an hour. All the villages along the border of our kingdom were being raided or encroached upon. Humans were being pilfered, stolen from their homes in the night, thus leaving us short on workers for the fields and trades the dark fae—my people—relied on.

“It’s a clear attack,” I snarled again, irritated that no one else seemed ruffled by this. “The Silvermoorians are pushing their way into our borders on purpose. They plan to shut us out of Savaria. We need to retaliate now.”

Father glared at me. His black hair was shot through with silver, though that was the only sign of his age. His face was like mine, unlined and sharp, our skin tawny and speckled with pale freckles, much like a deer’s hide. We were beautiful, our coloring deceptive. We were far more deadly than even the best-aimed antlers.

The fae lived long lives; Father had been king for a hundred years, but he’d been alive for much longer. He had fought and battled for the kingdom during the great divide. But time ignored no one, and our people were due for a change.

*I was ready for change.*

Golden eyes met mine and held my gaze in a silent challenge. Irritation twitched within me like a coiled snake. I knew my father viewed me as young, rash, and bloodthirsty. Only two of those things were true.

*I was never rash. Not since that one time, thirteen years before.*

“We don’t retaliate,” the king declared again, letting his stare drift away from me like I was nothing. “We opt for caution and diplomacy. The world already views us poorly. If we’re to keep our rule, we need to show restraint.”

“That’s bullshit.” It came out before I could bite back the words. Beside me, one of the advisors shifted away, perhaps fearing to get caught in any punishing crossfires. “Restraint? Caution? Call it what it is—weakness.” Why wouldn’t the world view us poorly? We were the kid on the playground getting shoved down, over and over, and not standing up for ourselves.

The world viewed us as lawless. Cruel. Yet, they didn’t fear us. I would show them the error in that. I would make everyone cower if it meant holding onto my kingdom.

Unlike Sage and Father, I visited the outlying villages. I’d seen the destruction the light fae soldiers left after their “visits.” There was a line between cruelty and barbarism, and they crossed it by miles. Not that my reports seemed to matter. How was it that I was a prince and yet my opinion was of so little value?

I’d been tutored in magic, in the histories, in battle strategy and diplomacy and more since I’d been able to talk.

I was an accomplished fighter with bow and sword and one of the best horse riders in the kingdom.

I spent my free time honing all my skills, ensuring I'd be cunning and swift and merciless to any who threatened my kingdom.

Only it wasn't my kingdom. Not yet.

"Prince Thane," the Sage said in that obnoxious, wizened, better-than-thou voice. I pictured thrusting a knife into his stomach and watching him die slowly as he clutched at his guts. "You weren't present when your father and I made the peace accords. You don't understand how necessary they were, and still are. We *must* keep with the accords."

I bristled, fists clenched in my lap. "Respectfully," I ground out, because he was unworthy of my respect, "but have you considered that the accords are the problem? That if you start a peace with an imbalance of land and power, then the foundation of peace is already doomed to collapse?"

When the kingdom had been split into the two factions, Silvermoore had received the lion's share of space. Ragalith, my kingdom? We had the richest portion. Our mountains were filled to the brim with gems and veins of precious metals. Our soil was dark and loamy and could grow anything in abundance. We might occupy less space on a map, but our coffers overflowed.

But that would only remain the case if we shoved those land-grabbing power hogs back into place.

The king pinched the bridge of his nose. "Be silent, Thane. The matter is finished. We will send Mara to the court at Silvermoore and question their motives for infringing on our borders. We'll smooth over any hard feelings. We'll seduce an ally or two over there to solidify our ties. End of discussion."

A storm raged in my heart, thick with thunder. I'd been taught from birth that Ragalithians were cunning and sharp, that the enemy never saw the knife until it was too late. Our magic was strong and plentiful and we took what we wanted, when we wanted it. Gluttony. Lust. Greed. Power. These were the supposed traits of the dark fae. So why the hell was my father choosing diplomacy now?

I was seething on the inside, but no one around could have fathomed the depths of my fury. I'd learned to keep my cards close to my chest and put on whatever face I needed to around my father. Unfortunately, he and Sage were immune to my magic. There'd be no persuading them with words alone.

My father had said "no," but all I heard was a challenge.

*And before long he'll be off the throne. I'll be on it, and I won't have to play these games any longer.*

I had plans for a secret weapon. Just because it had slipped from my grasp thirteen years ago didn't mean I wasn't still hunting for it. My plans demanded it—the final key to ensure my kingdom's greatness.

I would annihilate anyone who got in my way.

Irritation crawled under my skin like insects. It was the reaction I always had when the queen, my stepmother, was about to make her entrance. *Speak of the monster...*

Mara swooped into the throne room like she owned it, and I imagined she thought she did. I caught a twitch of irritation on my father's face before a smooth smile slid into place. "My love," he said. "We are still in the middle of a meeting."

The queen was quite beautiful, I'd give her that. Her skin was so smooth and pale it had a blue tint to it. Her eyes sparkled constantly—no doubt due to a glamour—and her pale lemon-colored hair fell in fine waves to her knees. That was where anything appealing about her ended.

The queen was a former Silvermoorian noble. She possessed all their haughtiness, their adherence to order, and their demands for perfection. Also, she hated me.

"You're discussing matters of the court, I assume," she replied with a well-timed shrug. "I have pressing matters regarding it as well. We've just received an invitation to a ball at King Eldritch's court."

A snarl rose in my throat but I managed to suppress it. King Eldritch and the court of the light fae were the very people threatening our realm. Why discuss dancing when we should be focused on destruction?

"I'll attend, of course," she said. "As representative."

*What a surprise.* My stepmother never missed a chance to dress up and gossip, especially if it meant she could return to her homeland. A representative indeed. Who knew what she'd promise away as she drank and laughed all night long? Moreover, it was a stab at me. As prince, it was my duty to attend these sorts of functions, no matter how much I resented it. She was undermining me, and I began to toy with all the ways I would pay her back.

"No."

I stiffened at my father's voice. He pointed to me. "Thane will go. We were just discussing how critical diplomacy is at the moment. If he's to be king, it's time for him to begin practicing. Further, it's an opportunity to find a wife, a task he's been far too lax with."

Oh, that absolute bastard. There was some dark joy to be found in seeing my stepmother's cheeks redden with indignation, but my mood curdled completely at the mention of the word *wife*. Then again, it was the word rubbing Mara raw as well.

Ragalith was officially ruled by both king and queen, with power distributed to both roles. I'd love to get rid of the idiotic tradition, but I wouldn't be allowed to be officially coronated until I had taken a wife. I'd rule with the advisors to make decrees official, and Mara would retain her power until I brought in a replacement.

As if a partner were necessary. It was backwards and ridiculous.

And one of the largest blocks to my plan.

If I had my ace, a wife wouldn't be necessary. I could simply persuade my father and the counsel to get rid of the stipulation. Then I could tell Mara to kill herself. As it was, I had no interest in a woman and no ace up my sleeve.

"I could accompany him," the queen was saying. "To make sure he chooses wisely. Love can make a man impetuous. And there are many families in Silvermoore that would be advantageous to marry into." Her gaze speared me, and my lip curled.

"I'm capable of choosing my own wife," I said stiffly. "I'm also capable of wasting time in the court of our enemies and flirting with the silly girls there. I'll be diplomatic as hell." Just to spite her, I began to clean my nails.

Mara's cheeks were no longer the only parts of her face that were red. In fact, the queen was looking a bit like a strawberry with immaculate eyebrows. Before she could splutter her reply, though, my father rose from his throne.

"Enough. I've said what I need to. Everyone is dismissed."

The queen was the first to exit, though not before she stared me down. I didn't flinch or bat a lash. Her red-slippered feet spun silently on black marble tile as she stalked out of the room. I watched her retreat with delight. The Sage and the other useless advisors followed soon after. I was moving my chair to the side for a servant to fetch it when my father said, "Wait."

Steeling myself, I turned and gave him a half-bow, just shy of mocking. Truly, I'd had more than my fill of the man. "Yes, Father."

His anger crackled in the air. "This is no joke, Thane. It isn't time for your schemes and tricks. While you are there, you will be the face of this court. A good impression is imperative."

"I'm not a fool," I hissed. Just because he and I differed on what

constituted a “good” impression didn’t mean I was a complete idiot. I could put on a show as well as any performer. I’d been practicing for years.

“No, you aren’t. That’s why I’m trusting you with this. But if you need something to sweeten the medicine, I believe you won’t be the only one searching for a bride. Prince Xavier is of age. I’m curious what kind of fae noble he’s hoping will be his queen... and how he’d react if said woman was seduced out from under him.”

It was a hint of the fae my father had once been. One who’d taken pleasure in making his enemies sweat. Seeing it now was a spear to my heart.

“Why, Father,” I said, intrigued and unwilling to let him see my pain, “I thought you wanted me on my very best behavior. And keeping those all-important accords in place.” Though, I had to admit, the idea of stealing Xavier’s playthings out from under him held monstrous appeal.

“I do want you on your best behavior, and keeping the accords is a command. But there’s nothing in the accords about future wives and some light-hearted competition.” There was a devious twinkle in my father’s eye. “Or not so light-hearted.”

Sometimes I wished he wasn’t like this. It would be so much easier if he were always aloof and, well, wrong about everything. Smiling, I inclined my head. “So be it. That will make the trip worth it, I suppose.”

“Just be sure to bring back a wife. That is, if you want to be king. I suspect it is something you do want quite a bit.” It was a taunt, clear as day.

Ah, there it was. He was back to being a mule. I clenched my teeth and forced a tight smile. “If there is someone worthy,” I managed.

“You won’t rule if you can’t even settle on a wife, Thane. Our kingdom requires two rulers. The queen has duties that must be handled, and our people require her presence. She’s a symbol of balance. I would not have married after your mother died were that not the case.”

He turned to leave, his cold shoulder a clear dismissal. Sighing, I made my retreat to my quarters. The truth was, I was always glad of a fresh chance to go to Silvermoore. The key—the ace—to my plans was hidden there. I could almost taste its power and the promise of what I could do once I had my hands on it.

But tasting alone didn’t feed a belly, and the promise of powerful aid wouldn’t give me what I needed.

As I neared my room, a figure brushed up behind me, a hood pulled low to disguise their face. I didn’t startle, the familiar smell of the person telling

me all I needed to know.

A whisper brushed past my ear. “I have a new plan. This trip will be the one, I’m certain.”

Of course, he already knew of the trip and had begun to set things in motion. It had been so long a hunt for both of us. And time was no longer on our side. If I didn’t have what I needed before the coronation, I’d need a wife. Otherwise I might as well not be king at all, for Mara and Sage would smother me out of ruling.

It was a preposterous and horrifying thought to consider.

I didn’t allow myself to hope, knowing better, but I still asked, “Then you’ve found it?”

“Not yet. But scrying showed this is the time it will reveal itself. Finally.” His hand rested on my shoulder. “Just think, in a week’s time, you could have everything you need.”

Hm. I hated the thought of a wife, of another obligation. If he spoke true and we found what we needed to boost my power?

I wouldn’t need a wife.



# ISLA

Pins were tucked between my tightly pressed lips and sweat dotted my brow. Lily and I were altering our fourth dress of the day and it wasn't even lunchtime yet. It was hard to be happy about so much work when hunger ate away inside me. My stomach growled, but I was forced to ignore it as I lifted the hem of the peach silk gown.

The fae wearing it was the sort of otherworldly beautiful that I'd long ago grown jaded to. Her skin shimmered with lavender scales, and her fingers were tipped with long, black claws. The peach gown clung to her slim frame, the back draped and loose to allow for free movement of her fine, leathery wings.

"Another inch," she demanded after seeing where I'd placed my first pin. Nodding, I made the adjustment. It was an odd length, one that would allow her bony ankles to be on display, but it didn't matter to me. She was paying for the gown and alterations, and we needed the money more than I needed to offer fashion advice.

The ball at the castle couldn't have come at a more fortuitous time for Lily and me. Our best loom was in desperate need of repair and our fabric stock was dwindling, so we had taken on all the orders we could in the hopes of gaining some financial security. Taxes had recently been raised on all humans living within the fae quarters of the village situated at the foothills of Silvermoore's castle—precisely where our shop and home were located. Were it not for our deep stocks of the fanciful gems, mirrors, and odds and ends the fae favored in their evening wear, we'd have been homeless months ago.

But we *did* have the accessories the fae craved and the patronage of several of the major noble families, thanks largely in part to the Visonte family—our pseudo-family. Though, I knew they viewed us more like pets

than adopted daughters. Pets who could work tirelessly for them and thank them for the privilege of it.

After sliding in my final pin, I looked up. “Does this satisfy?”

She twisted her hips this way and that, sliding her ankles out one at a time. Her large, red eyes narrowed as she scrutinized the gown. But then, to my immense relief, she smiled a sharp and toothy grin. “It’s perfect. The Sagehaunts have always been master tailors.” Her gaze slid over my face. “Impressive, considering you’re human.”

This was our life. Wow, they’d say. Look at how the human does tricks. How delightful.

Biting my tongue, I merely stood and gave a short curtsy. “We have your beauty to thank for the muse of creation.”

Her laugh was a high, chattering sound that plucked at my spine like frozen fingers. I barely registered the bell indicating the front door opening. “Flattery will get you everywhere,” she crowed before turning so I could assist her out of the gown.

“Everywhere *except* the ball,” a sharp, feminine voice said. My back stiffened but I didn’t falter in unlacing the gown. That voice—and its owner—had tormented me since Lily and I had been orphaned. She and her mother did, after all, view themselves as our saviors. “I don’t think Isla is stupid enough to even bother trying to attend.”

The worst of it was, they *had* saved us. After our parents’ deaths, we’d lost most of our original customers. The fae didn’t want to trust children with their fashion, not when fashion could make or break them in the court.

We ran out of money and were on the verge of losing the shop and our home.

Then, Madame Visonte swept in and paid off our debts. Now we owed her, and by proxy, her daughter. In addition to clothing them for next to nothing, we were paying off the debt one bit at a time. Most days it felt as if we’d never get out from under their heels.

“Welcome, Kyrie,” I called out. “I’m just finishing up, then I will show you what we’ve made for you.” It was a monstrous effort to keep my irritation out of my tone.

She made a noncommittal noise. “Don’t be long. I’m not someone you want to keep waiting.” There were two other fae with her, probably lesser nobles clinging to her status, but I didn’t bother to take note of them. Lily

would take care of them.

The peach silk slid from the shoulders of the fae I'd been helping. I held it clear as she stepped, naked, out of the gown. There was little modesty amongst the fae. I'd seen more than my fair share of naked bodies in our little dressmaking shop.

"My mother has spared no expense," Kyrie was saying in her lilting way. Her voice held all the sweetness of honey, but her words were always razor sharp. "Not that it matters. There won't be any competition at the ball."

My customer stepped daintily off the platform and pulled on her robe. "No competition? Kyrie, this ball is the largest event held in Savaria in *decades*. The entire realm has been invited. Light and dark, all ages, all ranks—even humans were invited! There will certainly be competition for the prince's eye."

Kyrie let out an unattractive snort. "Please. Quantity has little to do with quality. The prince will be choosing a bride, and I'm the obvious choice."

I stifled a laugh. The idea of anyone choosing to marry Kyrie seemed so far-fetched. *He'll only want her hand if he prefers nags.*

One of the ladies accompanying her tittered. "Ah, but the question is, which prince? I hear the Ragalithian prince will be in attendance, and he's of marrying age."

There was a stir amongst the customers in the shop. I caught Lily's eye. She smiled at me, but her eyes held the glazed look she had when she was in her creative zone, her mind whirling with ideas for gowns. None of what was being said was entering her brain. While I didn't share her talent, I did bring luck to the business. I was the one who stumbled upon the trinkets and knick-knacks which made our services desirable. Things we would have had to pay handsomely for always seemed to fall in my lap.

When you're a human and always on the brink of disaster, you take any good that comes your way and don't second-guess it.

Kyrie waltzed up to my platform and quickly disrobed. As much as her presence made me want to grumble, there was no denying her beauty. Kyrie had skin like her mother's—so white it was like fresh snow on a cloudless day. Burnished silver hair fell in thick curls to her lush hips. Kyrie's long legs ended in golden hooves that were painted in tiny, elegant designs. Her horns were thin and delicate, looking almost like the points of a crown where they jutted from her hair.

She *looked* like she could be royalty.

But beauty only went so far, and Kyrie reveled in being cruel. Like how, as I bent to help her step into the waiting fabric, she managed to step on my fingers and twist, grinding them under one hoof. I tried to swallow my cry, but a tiny squeak of pain escaped. Her violet eyes twinkled with delight.

Her mother's patronage was what had kept Lily and me from being homeless, what had kept us fed and brought in new customers while we learned to make it on our own. In the eyes of the land, the Visontes were like philanthropic kin to us. In reality, we were closer to indentured servants.

Every ounce of support we received from them seemed to deepen our debt.

As I flexed my injured fingers, I pulled up the fabric Lily had chosen for Kyrie and began fitting the gown. It was a pale green, looking like the first apples of the spring. It complemented the cool tones of her skin and brought out the violet in her eyes.

"The Dark Prince or Prince Xavier, it doesn't matter to me," Kyrie was saying to her friends. "I'm destined to be a queen. Although, Prince Xavier's powers are formidable, and I'd prefer not to move to Ragalith and live among the beasts. I'd accomplish more in Silvermoore."

*That* thought made my mouth sour. It was rumored Prince Xavier could manipulate emotions, that he was powerful enough to get all but the strongest fae to feel as he wished. Kyrie? So far as I'd witnessed, Kyrie could make people act as she wished if she had a bit of their blood. Like an anchor or a talisman.

It was an awful power to witness. It was worse when I had to pretend it affected me. Because I had two enormous secrets I'd been forced to keep over the years. One was the pendant I always wore—had worn for thirteen long years. Any window of returning it and not getting in trouble had long since closed. Now, I kept it as a good luck charm and because... well, having it near gave me an immense sense of comfort.

The other secret was one that could possibly land me in even more trouble than the stolen pendant: I was immune to the fae's powers.

During my childhood, Kyrie had licked blood from wounds she'd inflicted and ordered me to slap myself stupid. She'd ordered me to drink day-old milk. She'd asked me to fall down the stairs time and time again. All for her amusement.

And I'd done all of it, not because her magic held any sway, but because she couldn't know I'd felt *none* of her power. I'd willingly slapped myself

until my cheeks threatened to blister, spent days vomiting after ingesting spoiled milk, and limped through the bruises and sprains from countless tumbles.

“You’d be unstoppable,” one of the fae conceded. “Though the prince from Ragalith is rumored to be quite powerful as well. And I’ve heard he’s handsome.”

Kyrie lifted her slim shoulder in a shrug, screwing up the pin I was trying to place on the arm. “Prince Xavier’s handsome.”

“True, but think about all the things that go down in the Ragalithian court,” another teased. “The stories I hear about the sheer *debauchery*... I’ll bet the Dark Prince can make you feel things you’ve only dreamed of.”

All the customers giggled at that while I fought to keep my face neutral. The truth of it was, they were just boasting in the safety of the shop. The light fae often spoke about the dark fae, but it was in hushed voices and with fear. Not a day would go by without some new story of their cruelty and evil being passed around the village.

If the Silvermoorians were scared of them, I shuddered to think of just how awful the Ragalithians must be. My experience in Silvermoore had been loaded with fear of the light fae. The dark fae must be absolute monsters.

Silvermoore’s adherence to rules and appearances was a game I knew the rules to. It was merciless but survivable.

The stories that came out of Ragalith made surviving sound impossible.

*No, thanks. Did I despise being forced to dress nobles who’d rather spit on me than speak with me? Yes. Did I wish Kyrie would spontaneously combust? Absolutely. But I’d pick that over fae being able to use magic without restriction, and humans there as the entertainment. If she’d just stop moving, I could get her out of here.*

Each time my fingertips skimmed her soft skin was torture. With long, deep breaths, I tried to keep years of her hurts and torment from my mind. *Just make the dress.*

What it really boiled down to, though, was the reminder, over and over, that the Visontes had kept us in candles for light, food in the pantry, and enough materials to grow our business. I’d never say a thing to jeopardize that.

Not when there was a chance, albeit small, that I could help Lily be free of the debt.

“I don’t know,” Kyrie said. “I could teach him a thing or two, I imagine.

Besides, their court is the smaller court. Wild and uncouth. Whenever Aunt Mara visits Mother, she makes it sound positively heinous. Why would I settle for anything less than the best?"

Pulling a threaded needle, I began to stitch up one of the open sides at Kyrie's hip. Other fae had opted for voluminous, feathery dresses with layers upon floating layers. For Kyrie, though, Lily had known how the noblewoman would want to stand out. The dress we were making would show off every inch of Kyrie's form and danced on the edge of indecency.

"You're right, of course." One of her friends was already stepping out of the fluffy concoction Lily had pulled for her. "I'm just excited about the party. It's going to be wild."

"A little *too* wild, if you ask me." Kyrie sniffed. "Humans? May as well invite the goats and cattle while we're at it. If I wanted to party in a barn, then I would."

I bit my lip until the coppery taste of blood burst into my mouth. My fingers never stopped their nimble stitching. This was normal. After thirteen years, I should have mastered grinning and bearing it.

"Having them at court will make them forget their place," Kyrie continued, and I felt her hard stare on my skin. "They're to be tolerated at best. Including them will make them insufferable."

My heart ached within the fortress I tried to keep strong around it.

"Though," Kyrie mused before picking up a lock of my red hair and rubbing at it as if it were a stain. "Standing next to one as plain as this one will make me look all the more radiant. Could you ever imagine *anyone* noticing her?"

It was an accident. The needle slipped through the fabric too quickly, jabbing into Kyrie's hip. Her screech filled the room, and she jumped away from me. A tiny pinprick of red bloomed on the peachy surface of the fabric.

Pulse racing, I immediately dropped to my knees. "I'm so sorry. I'm very clumsy."

"You're more than clumsy," Kyrie hissed. "You're a complete waste of space. Give me the needle."

I closed my fist around the needle, hesitating.

"If you don't want me to absolutely ruin you, you will give me the needle," Kyrie warned through gritted teeth.

I sighed inwardly, knowing my imminent future held a world of pain. Hand trembling, I held the needle out to her.

Kyrie snatched it and jabbed it into one of my fingers before leaning in to taste my blood.

“Take this needle and stab yourself in the arm until I tell you to stop.” There was a weight to Kyrie’s words, and I felt the pendant warm where it was tucked between my breasts, most likely reflecting the heat of my anger.

My breaths came out in short snorts as I took the needle in hand. For a moment, there was an unexpected rush in me. Like the dry, bruised tinder of all the pain she’d caused me caught fire, bursting in a flash of fuming rage.

For that brief moment, I almost forgot Lily. I almost forgot to pretend.

I pictured jabbing the needle right into the soft flesh of her thigh.

Tears fell from my eyes and I let Kyrie think they were from the hurt and fear. I knew the truth. It was the anger that gave me the strength to lift the needle... and push it straight down into my arm. The pain was immediate and brilliant. My nerve endings screamed in protest as the injured muscle spasmed.

But I swallowed down any cry of pain. She could have my tears but I refused to show her my pain.

Again, I punched the needle into my arm. And again. Tiny rivulets of my blood trickled down, dropping onto the floor. Suddenly, Lily rushed over, panic flaring in her eyes. “Oh, please, Kyrie. I’m begging you, I need her arm functional if I’m to finish your gown for the ball.”

“You’re going to finish it?” Kyrie asked.

I stabbed myself again, my stomach threatening to revolt.

“Yes. Of course.” Lily was bowing over and over, trying and failing to keep the panic from her voice.

“Fine,” Kyrie huffed. “You can stop, Isla.”

With a gasp, I dropped the needle and cradled my arm to my chest. Knowing the fae’s patience was as thin as their kindness, Lily snapped at me. “Go help the other one.” I knew she was protecting me, but it didn’t make the cut of her words hurt any less. “And don’t prick her either, or I won’t ask them to stop next time.”

Lily also knew how to play the game.

Nodding, I slunk over to where she’d been fitting the second of Kyrie’s companions. Lily was smart. Hell, she was cleverer than I was when it came to adjusting to living under fae rule. She bowed and nurtured their pride and accepted their insults, and because of it, she was a bit of a pet.

A darling of the upper class.

*Look at how well she dances to our whims*, I was sure they thought. I wished I could fall in line as she did. Because of her ability to pacify, Lily had clients and a business. She was married, too, to a fine enough man named Jeremy, who worked as one of the castle's butchers.

Lily had a job, a husband, and the burden of a sister who managed to take up too much room and bring little to the table.

Sighing, I wrapped my wounded arm in some scraps of cloth to keep from bleeding on everything. Once bandaged, I began to tailor the dress to the sneering fae's body. She had horns like a goat and a small, swishy tail which made it a challenge to get the gown's fabric to lie just right at the back.

While I completed my task, Lily finished Kyrie's dress, adding some expensive flourishes I knew she wouldn't charge for to smooth over any lingering animosity from Kyrie. A snarl rumbled in my chest at the injustice of it, knowing that Kyrie was once again being rewarded and more was being taken from us.

Eventually, the remaining clients left, and Lily and I were alone in the shop, our backs aching and fingers numb.

"I'll clean up," I offered as penitence for the earlier incident. Guilt steeped in me like black tea because I'd been so close to giving away my secret. It wouldn't have just put me in danger; I could have hurt Lily, too. "You should go see Jeremy. Spend some time together before I come home."

Home was a small, two-room affair tucked into one of a few slums for humans who dared to live this close to the fae. Before Jeremy, Lily and I had shared the bed in one room and cooked and lived in the other. Now, they had the bed and I nestled close to the hearth for warmth.

No bed for me, no privacy for them.

"Thanks," Lily said. She moved close and rubbed my back. "Let me see the arm first."

My wounded arm throbbed, each pin prick playing its own painful melody as I stretched it out for her to inspect. She unwound the scraps of fabric and groaned. My skin was beginning to bruise, and the blood had dried to the fabric. The wounds had reopened when Lily pulled the fabric off.

"I'll get the salve." She sighed. How many times had this been her burden? Tending to a sister who couldn't stop earning Kyrie's punishment?

"Don't bother. It's fine. You know me, I always heal quickly. I'll cover my arms, but it was a small enough ordeal." *From an awful creature.*

Ignoring me, she tsked and went to get the salve anyway. I folded and



straightened excess fabric while I waited, knowing that arguing was futile. Lily and I took care of each other. We'd give all of ourselves for the other. If she wanted to use salve, then she was going to use it.

But when she came back, she didn't have the regular medicine in her hands.

"Don't be silly, Lily! These injuries aren't worth using the magic pot!"

When Lily had accepted that I was going to be Kyrie's toy to hurt, she'd scrimped and saved for a pot of salve that healed *everything*. It made the wound disappear, with no scarring, no unsightly discoloration. It was only for the most extreme hurts and worth more than most anything else we owned.

"It is," she said calmly. "Because you won't want those ugly wounds at the ball."

My mind hiccupped as I took in what she said.

"Um, I'm not going to the ball."

She unscrewed the lid and dipped a finger into the pot before I could stop her. Fingertip covered in goop, she gently dabbed and smeared it on my arm. The deep tingling sensation was immediate, and the pungent scent of herbs filled my nose.

Lily refused to look at me as she spoke. "You are. I've already made your dress. You can't let that fabric go to waste."

My mouth dropped open. "When did you have time?"

Lily only offered a sly wink. "You need to meet men," she said. "I've felt so much more secure since marrying Jeremy. I want that for you."

*You want me out so you can start a family.* I knew that wasn't all of it, but the thought remained. "I do plan to move out, Lily, I just need—"

"Don't worry about that. It isn't about the space. It's about me knowing you're safe and taken care of. Cherished and loved. Our lives haven't been easy." She looked pointedly at my arm, where no trace of the needle wounds remained. "You deserve a magical night. You deserve happiness."

"The ball is tomorrow night," I argued. "I know you have the dress, but what about all the other customers? I'll be delivering with you all day, and —"

"Already taken care of. Jeremy and I will be delivering, and we hired little Topher to help. Everything will be as it should. And *you* will have time to get ready. Now, in exchange for my excellent sisterly aid, I shall let you clean up tonight. But you aren't allowed to say no to the ball."

Lily squeezed my hand, then closed the pot of salve. I listened as she

gathered her things to leave. She was trying to help, I knew she was. And of course I was interested in the ball, because who wouldn't want a chance to be inside the castle like that? To eat the food and dance to the music?

But like all things fae, I saw it for what it was.

Just another reminder of my place. And how trapped I was in it.

## THANE

I'd been wearing a grimace for the days-long trip to the realm of Silvermoore. It didn't look so different from my home. There were more similarities than there were differences. Our castles had the same strong stone walls, tall spires, and elegant archways. The forests surrounding each castle were dense.

The same sun shone on both realms.

The same water fed our lakes and rivers.

But there were differences I didn't remember. The fields that should have brimmed with agriculture were sparser and lacking the deep, verdant colors of healthy plants. Blyth would point out diminished herds of sheep and cattle, the ribs sticking out of too-slim bovine bodies.

While I knew Ragalith had the richer land, Silvermoore shouldn't be looking so barren. The small clusters of thatch-roofed cottages that most likely housed their humans were also in poor shape. It was a rare sight for either Blyth or me to spot a body working in the fields.

Triumph, petty but true, drummed in my heart as I surveyed the diminished land. Silvermoore didn't deserve abundance. Yet, it also planted a seed in my mind that I didn't like. Each time I started to tend to it, to grow it into a fully realized idea, Blyth would distract me with talk of the ball, with scrying for what we sought, with patently chipper blathering that set my teeth on edge.

Blyth rode in the carriage with me. Despite my sour disposition, he'd spent the duration of the journey bouncing in his seat. All it had taken was some magical persuasion on my part and my father's soldiers had turned a blind eye to my companion.

As a human, Blyth wasn't considered a worthy escort. His presence was tolerated in the castle, but he was never acknowledged as someone of great

import.

As a wizard, he was in danger of execution within the light's territories. If they even suspected a human of harboring magic, that human would find their life cut quite short. This was one of many things weighing on my mind as we finally approached our destination.

*They love power until they have to share it*, I mused, tracing a fingertip along my bottom lip. We were in the line of hundreds of coaches heading for the castle. As a prince from the neighboring realm, I should have been escorted to the front of the line. Being forced to wait in my carriage was yet another slight.

One of so, so many.

That would change with this visit, though. While Blyth's magic was what leant him certainty, I had nothing more than a gut feeling to go on. But that gut feeling was intense. I felt drawn to the castle, a tug that I knew meant I'd get what I needed. Power would soon be within my grasp and *everything* would change.

"Ugh," Blyth said, peering out his window. "Look at them. Those *colors*."

Fae and humans alike milled alongside the carriages. Those who weren't nobility entered on foot. Or hoof, depending. The fae of the realm were primarily dressed in the court's colors—pale blues and whites and silvers. Antlers were tied up with ribbons, wings were painted in silvery swirls, and tails were braided through with hints of blue. The humans... well, I supposed they were dressed as fine as they could manage. Their clothing appeared clean, at least, though many of their smiles seemed pasted on.

This was one of the large differences between our territories. The dark realm may have less land, but we had far more humans. They offered up so many uses...

We drew closer, the noise of musicians and chatter filling the carriage. Twilight was near, the sky just hinting at a dusty rose color. "With any luck, we'll make it inside just as the party is ending," I sneered.

"You wish," Blyth teased. "You'd do anything to avoid all the attention you're about to get. Two eligible bachelors at one ball? I'm going to have to pry the women off you with a staff. Probably some of the men as well."

"I don't care about any of that." I stared at the open gates, at the soldiers in their livery ushering people in. Another time and I would have cared, making plans for as many dalliances and broken hearts as I could. But with

the end of my father's reign so close at hand, there was no time for anything but my plan. "I just want what's mine."

"Oh, you'll get it. And just think... you might even have some fun getting it."

I shot him a dubious look. Apparently, I had more of a reputation than I thought if Blyth was teasing me. "Doubtful. Please be sure to keep your true nature under wraps, Blyth. You losing your head here would be cumbersome."

He made an exaggerated bow. "I wouldn't dare be *cumbersome*."

Our carriage rolled to a stop. Guards were at their posts to keep the commoners and humans from getting too close to the fae who mattered. Someone opened our door, and I stepped out onto a thick, blue carpet that led from the carriage drop-off to the gargantuan front doors. The doors, carved wood and bolstered with steel, were thrown wide open.

The smell of bonfires and food and the hot press of bodies assaulted my nose, but I stepped aside so Blyth could exit. We were both dressed in the colors of *my* court. My tunic was the deepest black, with black diamonds sewn at random to catch the fire's light like stars. My pants were leather—warrior's pants—but newly made. No horse smell or road dust clung to them.

Despite representing my realm as royalty, I'd skipped wearing a crown. Better for mingling and persuading people if they didn't have a blatant reminder of my title staring at them from atop my head. To play with my hosts, I'd kohled my eyes, making them look darker and adding to my menace.

Blyth was in black as well, though his trimmings were in the deep red favored in Ragalith.

There was a line of other nobility in front of us, waiting to be welcomed by the king and queen. Throwing Blyth a wink, I decided to take his advice. Maybe I would have some fun.

Sidestepping, I took the steps to the entrance two at a time. The guards startled and began to protest before seeing Blyth's warning looks. In no time, I'd passed all the waiting nobility, tossing decorum out the window.

The king's mouth was pressed into a line so tight his lips disappeared and the queen didn't bother to hide her frown.

"Greetings, King Eldritch, Queen Eldritch," I purred as I bowed deep. "Thank you for hosting me at this most beautiful affair. It is an honor to be welcomed into your home. My father, King Raveclaw, sends his regards and

all of that.”

There was no doubt they *weren't* impressed. Stiff-shouldered, both inclined their heads toward me. “Yes. Your journey was uneventful?” the queen managed.

“It was fine,” I offered. “Though some of your roads are in disrepair. Happy to let you know.” That, and nothing else. I owed this kingdom nothing but retribution.

“Wonderful. And your guest?” Her cold gaze slid to Blyth.

“Manservant.” I looked at my fingernails. They were sharp enough to open her throat, should I choose to lash out. It was tempting. “He’s decent enough for a human, and under my protection.” They’d balk at his presence, but even they employed humans as servants. Extending my protection, though, was necessary. Humans might have been invited to the ball, but so far as I knew, no specific protections had been offered.

Blyth could protect himself, but he couldn’t let them know it.

“Hmm.” She and the king shared a look that I delighted in. They couldn’t get rid of me fast enough. Of course, I had no doubt that just because *they* wouldn’t be keeping eyes on me, it didn’t mean I wouldn’t be followed and observed by the palace guards. “Prince Thane, welcome. To you and your... guest. Be well and be merry.”

I smiled, showing my teeth, and sauntered in.

A hand grabbed at my elbow. A growl escaped me as I whirled, preparing to punish the person stupid enough to touch me. My fist remained at my side, however, when I saw who it was.

“Prince Xavier,” I grumbled. “Of course. Aren’t you supposed to be out sniffing between legs for a bride?”

The prince of Silvermoore grimaced. He and I were tall, even by fae standards. He wore his size like armor, his shoulders pulled back and his chest puffed out. His ears were long and pointed like mine, and I hated we had that, too, in common. Honey-brown hair curled at his temples and blue eyes like an angry sea tried to slice through me. As if he could make me cower.

He was dressed like an ass, his tunic covered in as many ribbons and frills as a noblewoman’s dress would be.

But Xavier was mean as hell and a wicked good fighter. I shrugged as if offering an apology.

“Thane.” He made my name into a curse.

“That’s me.”

His nostrils flared. “Just... remember the accords and the rules of the territory. Even guests can land themselves in trouble if they don’t take care.”

The accords again. Old rules made by old men who pretended they weren’t still enemies. The irony was, without the accords or Silvermoore’s grabs for power, I wouldn’t itch so much under the constraints. Hell, I might even have enjoyed my time in this realm if I didn’t see every inch of their callousness and cunning.

Rolling my eyes, I gave a lazy smile. “Why does everyone assume I’m out to make mischief?”

“Because we know you, Thane.”

*And I know you, Xavier.* He was most likely just as eager to replace his father as I was. I wondered how much of his father’s desire to encroach into Ragalith Xavier shared.

“Boo. You’re no fun. You need a wife, like, yesterday.” I leaned in and asked in an exaggerated whisper, “Is it true that in your realm no one fucks until *after* they’re married? Because if so, I don’t know how you’ve managed. No wonder you look so stiff.”

A wry smile graced Xavier’s face. “Were we to bed everyone like you do in *your* realm, our doctors would be hard-put to keep up with all the rashes and itches.” He darted a pointed look at my crotch.

I laughed. “Oh, Xavier. I’m sorry to hear that. We avoid the ointments and creams by not being disgusting. Besides, a little magic goes a long way when it comes to reducing risk while seeking pleasure. I’ll send you some tips as a wedding gift. Goodness knows your lady will be grateful.”

Before we could continue our banter, a woman approached us. Her horns were delicate and tall, her face thin, and her teeth pointed. I thought about the things she could do with that mouth and parts of my body and shuddered. *No, thank you.*

But she only had eyes for Xavier. “You look well this evening, prince.” Her voice was pitched lower than what sounded natural. I could’ve gagged. The trying-too-hard was rolling off her.

Xavier’s smile widened. “Mileena, you’re a vision.”

I could already see what would unfold. She’d bat her eyelashes and flirt until he asked her to dance. He’d take her around the floor for one or two songs. I didn’t like Xavier much, but surely he’d have better taste than her? Or perhaps he liked pain with his pleasure. In which case, more power to

him.

My dad's encouragement rang in my head, and while I was eager to start searching, I needed to play the game first.

Pouring some magic into my words, I bowed as I said, "I didn't know the light fae were hiding such beauties."

When I met her gaze, she was eyeing me warily and with some interest. I pushed harder, feeling my magic flow from me. "Mileena, was it? You're positively ravishing. I'm but a humble prince—"

At "humble," Xavier barked out a laugh. I ignored him. "But would you be willing to share a dance with me?"

Any attention she'd had for Xavier was now focused on me. My gifts of persuasion worked on most. Only exceptionally strong fae, like the royals, were immune. Currently, my magic had allowed me to successfully steal one woman from Xavier's attention. The first, I hoped, of many.

She blushed and held out a hand. I took it and led her to the dance floor, but not before twisting to wink at the prince as we left him behind. She hadn't even bothered to tell him goodbye.

My heart danced at the thunderstorms in his eyes.

The ballroom was an insufferable affair. White tile shot through with gold marbling covered the floor. There weren't as many dancers as I'd have thought, though it became clear that was because the humans and common fae who hugged the walls didn't know how.

Noble fae, however, swirled and preened on the dance floor.

Despite the state of the kingdom I'd seen while traveling through it, the castle was bedecked in complete opulence. Tables were weighted with food, with soldiers posted close by, shooting nasty looks at anyone but the lords and ladies who tried to get a decent serving.

With ease, I swept Mil... whatever-her-name onto the floor. Placing my hand scandalously low on her back, I pressed her close to me as we began to move. Her lips parted and her pupils dilated. Pink crept into her cheeks and, pulled in by my movement and magic, she soon moved against me in more of a writhing fashion than anything that could be called dancing.

I waited until her fluster hit a peak, then spun her away... and left her on the floor.

Glancing about the room for Xavier, I spotted him dancing with a woman with silvery skin and hair that looked like sea foam. Not my type in the least. But for the night, my type was anyone who wanted to seduce Xavier.



It took two quick comments and a perfectly timed twirl to steal her from him. The curl of Xavier's lip had me laughing. I *was* enjoying myself, though my purpose for being was never far from my mind. Blyth said it would reveal itself to me, but what did that mean?

Fae after fae, I danced with them and left them wanting, all the while searching for my ace.

Blyth finally interrupted me, his brow wrinkled. "I don't understand it. I don't feel it at all." Blyth had an innate link to magic that had helped him discover power early on, and that link should have enabled him to feel the source of power we were searching for, much like it had thirteen years before. Of course, he couldn't exactly use his magic now to seek it, not when we were in the middle of a territory known for their execution of wizards.

Frustration boiled within my chest. This couldn't be a bust. It *couldn't*. I'd never be able to stomach the attacks on my people and my father's insistence that we do *nothing* for much longer. "You said it would show itself," I hissed. A lovely girl reached out to touch my shoulder. I shot her a glare, causing her to slink away.

"I've been searching the castle as I'm able, sneaking along the servants' halls." Blyth scoured the walls, looking at all the posted guards. "But nothing resonates. I mean, we did lose it all those years ago, maybe they moved it—"

"They wouldn't have," I snarled, low enough so the words were just for him. "They're too conceited. They like to keep their reins clutched close. It's somewhere near the castle." It was exasperating to feel so close and yet have the answer continue to elude my grasp.

"You'll work on the soldiers," I said, making up my mind. "I'll have to try to use my powers on some of the upper nobles."

"Thane—" Blyth's tone was thin with warning. "It's too risky. If you get caught using your magic on nobility here again, and at a time like this—"

"I won't get caught. I've already been playing with Xavier's partners and no one has sensed a thing." I flexed my fingers, then opened them. "Besides, they all seem to expect me to be a naughty dark princeling. I'm just giving them a taste of what they want."

Blyth didn't like it, but I was getting desperate. A wife might get me the throne faster, but what I needed in order to move against Silvermoore was *power*. Too many of my father's supporters and generals heeded the accords. Getting them to mobilize would take more than a crown on my head.

Finally, King Eldritch entered the ballroom. He took a seat next to the

queen and others at a table laden with food, then watched the room and smiled like an idiot. The sheer nerve of him made my stomach turn. To look at him, at the lavishly decorated castle, at the food and music being offered to not only royals, but *any* who attended the ball?

He appeared to be a good king. For him, that image was everything.

But that perceived goodness came at a price. For the Silvermoorians, it was living under so tight a rule that even the smallest crimes could carry deadly punishments. It was beautiful and “safe” for everyone—as long as they followed the rules and paid exorbitant taxes. And “everyone” tended to only apply to the fae, particularly the nobles.

King Eldritch didn’t care about his image or goodness when it came to my people. Instead, he left scorched fields and decomposing bodies in his wake. Husks of villages and stolen citizens. He was a devourer, and he wouldn’t stop pushing the boundaries until he’d swallowed us all.

I was so intent on the king, on trying to push down my vitriolic hatred of him, I missed the halting of the music and the new, quiet murmurs of the court.

“No way,” Blyth whispered at my side.

The hairs on the nape of my neck stood on end and I slowly turned to see what everyone was gawking at. The many doors to the gardens around the room had been thrown open, allowing people and air to circulate freely.

Now, though, the room was hushed as a petite figure stood in one of the entrances.

Her gown caught the eye first. It was a deep purple, so dark it almost ventured into black. As she moved, the fabric and bits of scale sewn into it caught the light and cast an iridescent glow like a butterfly’s wings in sunlight. Hair, thick and crimson, fell around slim, pale shoulders.

My breath hitched. She was *stunning*.

The dying light of sunset fell behind her, casting a glow about her. With the sudden hush of the music and stillness of the people, she seemed to shrink into herself, twisting her hands in front of her.

With a jolt, I realized two things.

One, the gorgeous creature that had snared all of our attention was *human*.

Second, hanging from her neck for all to see, was a pendant I knew all too well. Thirteen years before, Blyth and I had infiltrated the castle and attempted to steal it, only to have it disappear from our grasp at the last

moment. There was no doubt it was the same necklace. It had been in my hands, only to disappear at the last moment. It was a talisman of deep magic, a pendant with a history, and it was the source of the power I so desperately needed.

And it was currently nestled on the bosom of a human.

# ISLA

If the hall's tile could split open and swallow me whole, I'd be okay with that. Truly, two birds with one stone. Lily and Jeremy would have the house all to themselves, and I'd never have to live with the knowledge that my shamefully late appearance had halted the ball.

Gazes crawled all over me and I couldn't move. What were they seeing? A human, certainly. I lacked the wings, the claws, the tail, the fur and scales and horns that marked one as fae. My skin was clear but plain, my looks beyond ordinary. Ugly, even, if I listened to a word Kyrie said at all.

I hated how much I listened to her.

Without thinking, I reached up and grasped at the pendant, only to feel the harsh burn of fear in my ears and cheeks. I'd forgotten to put it away!

*What a disaster tonight's been!* It had started with the dress. Lily had shown it to me and we'd argued. It was far more beautiful than anything we'd made for our clients. How could she possibly think it would be acceptable for me to wear it?

The fae were a vain race, and their ideas of beauty varied. But they did want to be beautiful, and they absolutely enjoyed one-upping each other... and punishing those who outdid them.

But Lily had been certain no one would be paying attention. *If only she could see me now.*

Then the horse didn't want to go, and then it wanted to go too quickly. By the time I'd made my way to the castle, the ball was in full swing. No one had been there to take my horse, though more likely, having seen I was a human, they'd ignored me. So, I'd stabled my horse, trying to keep the muck from the stall off the hem of my gown, and hoped to sneak in through the side.

"Why did the music stop?" a voice rumbled through the room.

I peered up and saw the king—the *king*—sitting at a table and watching all of this unfold. The instinct to run was bright as fresh lemon.

I kept my hand wrapped around the pendant. I'd meant to take it off and now I'd need to find a discreet place to remove it before anyone noticed. I'd kept this secret for so long, just for it to be outed because of my foolishness.

Trying not to rush, I made my way along the outer circle of the ballroom floor. The room was peppered with dresses I recognized, ones Lily and I had created and stitched and fussed over until the wearer agreed it was perfection. A thrill of pride rushed through me at seeing so much of our work in one place.

And I felt confident admitting that ours was some of the best work in the room.

I was almost certain I'd managed to fade into the crowd when a soldier appeared at my shoulder. "Miss, the king and queen would like to greet you."

*No!* Chewing on my lip, I tried to think of an excuse. I couldn't greet royalty with a stolen pendant around my neck! "Oh," I managed, sounding breathy. "I couldn't. I'm merely a human and a dressmaker. No one important."

The twist to the soldier's mouth suggested he was in agreement, but his hand wrapped firmly around my elbow. "They've welcomed each and every person of the realm this evening, and now they'd like to welcome you. Come."

It was an order, clear as day, and no matter how frantically I tried to come up with excuses, he led me to the dais. King Eldritch frowned as we approached, the crease between his eyes deep. Next to him, the queen sat, regal and resplendent, but her stare pierced through my hand as if she saw the pendant hidden there.

"Welcome," King Eldritch said, brow still furrowed. "You stand out. Should I know you?"

Heat prickled at my cheeks and I dipped in a curtsy. It was awkward with the one hand still clasped around the pendant. "No, sire. I am often at court to help clothe the nobles. My sister and I are dressmakers in the village."

"That would explain the gown you're wearing," the queen mused. There was ice in her tone.

*Lily should have known better!*

But I'd been the one to agree to wear it, hadn't I? And, if I were digging deeper into honesty, I loved the gown. I loved how it made me feel. Like this

one night, this one time in my existence, I could dress up and pretend to be free. Pretend to be someone else, someone who owned beautiful gowns and laughed with peers in castles.

Someone who didn't have to be afraid all the time.

"Yes, Your Highness. My sister made this dress for me." Lily had used luminescent scales I'd chanced upon when searching the woods for odds and ends. The fae were funny like that: a deadly mushroom might adorn a hairpiece if it was lovely enough; twigs could be crafted into art; and scales, probably from some fantastical serpent, turned my dress into a light show.

"She's quite talented," I rambled, not knowing a lick of etiquette or protocol. "And—"

At that moment, a large, hulking figure appeared beside me. I took a half-step back, in part just so I could look up. And up it was. The man towered over me. His tunic was made well in the colors of the court, though it was overdecorated, in my opinion, the many embellishments clashing. But there was no doubting the expense of the fabric and the sureness of his bearings.

The prince.

He turned his gaze down to me and my heart wedged itself in my throat. His eyes were blue and expressive, like lake water dancing on a windy day. "I don't believe we've met." He held his hand out to me.

Without thinking, I released the pendant to give him my hand. His fingers closed around mine as he brought my knuckles to his lips. More than the display startled me—I almost gasped at the way the pendant heated on my skin, like a warning.

I dipped another curtsy. "My name is Isla. Isla Sagehaunt."

My mind was spinning. How could this be happening?

"Well, Isla, I'm Prince Xavier. And you are looking quite lovely tonight."

Oh, but I'd have given anything to have Lily with me. Her talent wasn't just with the dresses, but in speaking to the nobility as well. She knew just how to charm them enough so they left us alone, and I usually stayed in the back, quiet. "Oh," I managed to squeak out. "Thank you. You look lovely as well, though someone went overboard with the trimmings, didn't they?"

It just slipped out, and I immediately wished I could take it back. I'd been looking at his face (some of the fae were so pretty it hurt) and his ornate tunic, and my mind—well, my mind was basically a useless bowl of porridge at that point. Because how was this happening? This wasn't my life.

And after what I'd just said to the prince, my life was sure to be over

sooner rather than later.

The prince leaned back, his eyebrows up. “Oh?” He looked down, running his hands along all the ribbons and piping and embroidery, as if taking notice of it for the first time. “I suppose you’re right.”

My hands flew to my mouth. “I’m so sorry. That was terribly rude.” Like every time with Kyrie, I waited for the impending punishment. I could only pray that no matter how mortifying it was, it would allow me to leave with all my limbs intact.

Instead, when I managed to look at the prince, he wasn’t smiling cruelly or motioning for the guards. He looked... perturbed, yes, but I had the strangest feeling it wasn’t due to what I’d said, but something I *wasn’t* doing.

It was then that the queen spoke again. “Isla, darling. Show me your necklace.”

Ah. So I hadn’t narrowly escaped maiming or death, after all. It was too late to hide it. I never should have dreamed of any life outside of the shop with my sister and my snug nesting area next to the hearth.

Steeling myself, I lifted my chin and folded my hands to keep them from shaking.

“It’s a remarkable piece,” the queen said, her eyes flashing as they locked onto the pendant. “Where did you get it?”

*From a fountain just outside of the castle. I found it in the water and have kept it close all these years.* “I believe I bought it at a traveling market,” I said, hoping the lie sounded better out loud than it did in my own head.

There was a pregnant pause. She was going to have me taken, and Lily would be hurt, and—

Prince Xavier stepped closer to me, close enough I could feel the warmth of his skin and smell the spicy, strange musk of his scent. “It’s just a necklace, Mother. The poor girl is frightened of us, I think.” There was a curdling feel to his words, as if they were weighted with something invisible and heavy. The words seemed to brush against my skin as he spoke and I shivered. He turned to me. “I’d be honored to dance with you, Isla.”

Dance with the prince? A commoner like me? I needed fresh air, or something to eat, or just five minutes to try to wake up from this dream-nightmare-dream loop I was stuck in. *Quick, think.* “I’d be the one honored, Prince Xavier. But if I may, I need to, um, excuse myself for just a moment?”

I may as well have slapped him, for the prince looked so stunned. There felt like little I could do to keep from making this situation worse each time I

opened my mouth. “Pardon?”

“I need to use the toilet, please.” It was the worst thing I could have said as an excuse and yet the only thing I could come up with that seemed at all reasonable enough to duck out from a dance with the prince of my realm.

His mouth moved a bit, as if tasting the words before he finally spoke. “Very well. I’ll come find you.”

With that, I moved away, the folds of my dress clutched in sweaty palms and my breath coming in tight, panicked pants. My first instinct was to run to the stables, hop on my borrowed horse, and rush back home, secure in my hearth nest and anonymity. Only, I’d told them my name and occupation. It would take little time for the fae to hunt me down. I needed a moment. Just a moment to myself so I could figure this out.

A staircase curled up one of the expansive sides of the ballroom, leading to a mezzanine where small clumps of fae and humans stood around and conversed. Long swaths of cloth had been draped around to create an illusion of privacy. Doors were flung open, revealing balconies.

Fresh air. It was all I could think about—which was how I missed breezing by Kyrie and her mother until the cut of her voice rang out. “You actually dared to show up.”

The words held a power all their own. Not like the magic Kyrie wielded in the shop, but the power that came from years of bullying and wearing me down. Her taunt teased through the air and I stopped, twisting toward her.

As her gaze dragged up and down my dress, there was no missing the hostility in them. But for appearances, her sneer never faltered.

“That dress is awful, Isla. Looking at it makes me doubt our loyalty to your sister. If *that’s* what the two of you come up with, I just may need a new seamstress. Don’t you agree, Mother?”

“I don’t. It’s breathtaking.” It did not sound like a compliment. Madame Visonte was looking at me as if I were filth on her shoe. “It certainly doesn’t bode well to know she and her sister would covet the best for themselves.” She took a small step toward me. “After all we’ve done for you. Why, we’re practically family. Who paid the rent on the shop until you could get back on your feet? Who gave you work, year after year, ensuring you weren’t living in a gutter? And this is how you repay us?”

She forgot to mention the constant, back-breaking work she’d demanded from us, the perfection she required in all tasks.

Her lip was curled. Kyrie was watching with fevered pleasure as her



mother tore me down. And, like always, there was little I could do about it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“You certainly didn’t, Isla. Do you remember when I saved you all those years ago at the fountain?” Madame Visonte’s words were sharp as knives.

Numb, I nodded. Of course I did. That memory was chiseled into me.

“I could have let them lock you up. Play with you. I could have walked away forever. There’s always another groveling human willing to take up the job. But I didn’t. I want you to remember that. To remember how much Kyrie and I do for you. And how much we could do *to* you if we felt betrayed.”

I swallowed down tears. How could I not just get a moment? I hadn’t been prepared to be noticed. Not by the king and queen, not by their son, and not by Kyrie and her mother. Just then, the pendant seemed to vibrate, my body no longer feeling like my own. Dizziness whooshed through me, and my tongue loosened before I could stop it.

My chin jutted out, and I squared my shoulders. “Find a new seamstress, then,” I suggested. “But our dresses were what drew all the attention to you at the autumn festival. And the spring as well. In fact, I seem to recall the gossip for all the major events has centered around what you were wearing... and had little to do with you.” I turned to Kyrie. “And there is no gown lovely enough to hide how ugly you are in your heart.”

She snarled, pink spots flaring on her pale cheeks. “Oh, Isla. You poor, stupid thing. The other humans around here know how to survive. How to fit in. But you? You seem to *provoke*.”

My hand flew to my mouth, like I could shove the words back in.

I wished for so many things in that moment. I wished my sister was with me. Or, if all my wishes could be true, my mother. If she were around, I’d never had needed to suffer Kyrie’s constant taunting and savage words. If my mother were there, I wondered whether I’d not feel so *little* in the presence of the fae. Mostly, I wished I knew how to shut my mouth.

On top of just insulting them, the prince was going to find me, he’d said. If Kyrie saw me dancing with him...

She would torment me.

It would be relentless.

And yet, I was tired of apologizing. My heart and limbs ached with the weight of all the groveling and pretending. I was just a human. Just a girl. I didn’t deserve to be punished for merely existing.

“I’m going to need some of your blood,” Kyrie said. “And by some, I

mean a lot of it. Let's see how well you can get blood stains out of your gown, shall we?" There was a skip in the moment as we each waited to see if her mother would stop her.

Madame Visonte said nothing, turning to sweep away. It was permission for Kyrie to do whatever she wished.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I grasped at my pendant, waiting for the strike. *I hope it's fast.*

"Bleeding a human so early in a ball is a bit of a faux pas for the Silvermoore court, isn't it? I rather thought you were above spectacles of that nature."

The voice seeped into me. Like smoke, the resonance swirled and eddied within. Shivering, my eyelids flew open. Kyrie was stiff and looked afraid. I hadn't thought she feared *anything*.

But as the owner of the voice stepped out from the shadows, I understood her fear.

He was stunning. All fae were beautiful, but this one? He was perfection. I'd never seen a face so sculpted, with high cheekbones and a razor for a jawline. Elegant, pointed ears stood out from curls as black as raven's wings. As I looked up, I realized he was as tall as the prince, but his size was used in a different way. Where the prince used his bulk to fill the space, this man slunk into his size. A knife in the dark. Poison in the wine.

Two horns curled around his ears and the back of his head like a ram's, but they were the ivory of bleached bone. His clothing drank in the night and only the smallest flashes of—oh, oh, no, were those *diamonds*?—kept the fabric from looking like a shadow. It was exquisitely made and I longed to touch it, to feel the stitching.

He was beautiful.

He was deadly.

It was far too long before I noticed that Kyrie had taken her leave. She'd run and left me to my fate. A fae who'd made Kyrie run. Gods.

His golden eyes struck a familiar chord in me, but that meant little to me. My heart rioted within my ribs, my stomach clenched so tight I feared it might shatter like glass.

He'd spoken of the Silvermoorian court like a stranger would, which could only mean he was visiting.

Oh. A Ragalithian. The fae of nightmares. I believed it, the chill radiating from him more biting than a winter's night. I was snared worse than any

rabbit.

He studied me in silence, taking my measure. I had no doubts I came up blindingly short in his estimation. Then, when my muscles were made of pins and needles from keeping completely still and I feared I might simply faint from the strain of it all, those golden eyes drifted straight to my pendant.

## THANE

Want snagged at me from the deepest depths within me. The urge to reach out and pluck the necklace from the human's delicate throat was almost too much to ignore. The best course would be to persuade her to hand it over. Less messy in front of all these Silvermoorian eyes.

The pendant flashed between her fingers. The woman had been grasping it on and off like a good luck charm. The question was, did she know what she had?

There was something arresting about her. Her smooth, creamy skin contrasted with the dark hues of the gown. In the low light, her red hair deepened to a vivid scarlet. Wide, blue eyes brimming with tears locked on me. The sapphire shade would have been striking were it not for the wet and red.

I smiled at her gently, as if she were a wary kitten. "I'm not planning on hurting you, dove," I cooed as I stepped closer to her. She moved a half-step back.

"You don't inspire much trust." Her gaze darted back and forth, searching for an escape route. As if I'd let her walk away with that pendant. I just needed to persuade her to hand it over. "You mentioned bleeding humans, I believe?"

I chuckled. To be truthful, using humans for bloodsport wasn't only a faux pas in Silvermoore. Ragalithians tended to ignore humans entirely now, rather than delight in their suffering. They provided much more to the realm when they were alive and not bleeding. "So I did. I was teasing. Tell me, what did you do to poke that beast?"

She froze. "Kyrie?"

"If Kyrie is the icicle bitch, then yes."

In a bewildering turn, the woman giggled. It came out in a small burst at

first, her face flaring as she realized what she'd done. Fascinated, I watched the contortions of her soft features as she wrestled through the fear, the humor, the confusion. The giggles ended in a snort that was... well, I didn't want to admit how endearing it was. Perhaps I'd danced too much and muddled my brain, because I never found anyone or anything endearing.

"What?"

She pressed her fingers to her lips, stifling the last of her laughter. "I've never heard Kyrie referred to as—"

"Icicle bitch? Queen Popsicle? Frigid Mistress?"

That did it. She dissolved into laughter again, bending at the waist and wiping tears from her eyes. There was a hum of satisfaction in my chest I didn't fully understand. Why was I working so hard to make a human feel better about her grievance with a fae? My goal was still hanging around her slim, attractive neck. Yet still I waited, not leaning into my power just yet.

"You're awful," she managed through bouts of giggling. She leaned closer and whispered, "I approve." The fear that had drenched her before seemed to have evaporated. The woman straightened again, lowering her hands to clasp them at her front. She was guarded but no longer resembled a cornered mouse. "Thank you for chasing them off. You are tonight's hero."

I rocked back on my heels. "I don't think I've ever been called a hero before in my entire life." The title certainly wasn't one I particularly aspired to. Not in the way people used it, at least.

"What do they call you, then?"

"Ass, cruel, impetuous, murderous, sly-tongued. Dangerous."

Some of the color she'd recovered in her cheeks faded quickly. "No, I meant, what's your name? I'm Isla Sagehaunt."

"Thane." After a moment's hesitation, I added, "I'm here with the prince's party. The entourage from Ragalith."

At that, she went paper white, and our joking camaraderie disappeared. She managed a quick curtsy, though she never looked away from me. Perhaps expecting a claw or a strike. Inwardly, I rolled my eyes. I didn't have time for cruelty at the moment, and not for someone like her who didn't deserve it. No, I was saving my cruelty for the inhabitants of this castle.

"Forgive me," she muttered.

I raised an eyebrow. "For what?"

She paused, uncertain. When anyone was unsure or off-balance, it made my magic that much more effective. It was time to stop playing around. I

grabbed at the chance. Pulling up magic from within, I weaved it into my intention. My magic was subtle. Much like Prince Xavier's, my magic was more influence than anything else. He could manipulate the emotions of his subordinates, steering them in whichever direction he wished.

I could persuade.

It didn't sound fancy, but I was powerful enough to persuade all but the strongest fae to walk off a cliff. I could persuade them to cut off their hand or stab their parents. My persuasion lasted for hours, sometimes even days after I used it. It came in handy, and I'd take it over fire manipulation or glamours any day.

Especially in situations like these.

When I spoke, I let my magic flow. "Where did you get the necklace? The pendant is unusual."

Now, her eyes would glaze over, her lips would part, and she would mumble how she came to possess it. She'd be primed for me to persuade her to give it to me. It would be shamefully easy, considering how hard I'd worked over the years to get that pendant.

Except her eyes *didn't* glaze over—they narrowed. Her lips pressed into a tight line like she was locking in a secret. Isla was not reacting like someone under my influence. A thin smile slid into place and she chuckled weakly. "You aren't the first to ask about it."

Oily fear slid through my veins. Confusion, too. Why wasn't she under my influence? Who else had been asking about it? I shouldn't have wasted time with idle chitchat.

"It's unique. We fae love unique things. But you didn't say where you got it. Where?" This time I pushed a hefty dose of my magic into the words, turning them into a command.

Her fingers clutched at it and she *lied*. "I bought it."

There was a resistance in the air, a sort of smoke deflecting my magic. I'd been trained to put up a shield in my mind to block any magic that might be wielded against it. This wasn't like that, though. It was as though a wall was around her and I couldn't get through.

The pendant was supposed to be an amplifier. What power of hers was being amplified? I needed Blyth, and I needed answers. More than that, though, I *needed* the necklace.

Somehow, this human was immune to my magic. "What are you?" I asked before catching the confusion in my voice. "I mean, what station?"

“I’m a commoner. Merely a dressmaker.” I could smell her fear, her anxiety filling the air with a sharp tang. That wasn’t a lie.

But no commoner would have been trained to resist fae magic. And a human at that? Nonsense. Only witches and wizards like Blyth could manage to resist, and not this strongly. So how was she subverting mine?

I looked her over again, searching for answers. What I saw were fine collarbones that accentuated narrow shoulders. Hair thick enough I could plunge my hands into and my fingers would be swallowed by the curls. Her mouth was small but plump, the lower lip jutting out like a dare. Isla was beautiful in a strange, human way, but I couldn’t sense anything magical about her.

I desperately wanted to know if she knew what she wore and clung to like a talisman.

She’d been bullied by fae. Probably for most of her life, based on the way she cowered and apologized and that ghastly exchange with the noble fae earlier. I hated having to add to her history, but clearly she’d found a way to survive this far. Although she’d loosed her tongue earlier plenty, being bold as brass to the bitch harassing her.

Still, a survivor, I decided.

She’d have to find a way to survive what I was about to do.

Faster than most eyes could follow, I reached out to snag the pendant, planning to yank it off and run.

But somehow—gods, *how?*—Isla was quicker and ducked out of reach. My nose itched with the singe of magic and when our gazes locked, her blue eyes glowed with a fire-like green. By instinct alone I put up a magical barrier within myself, prepared for... hells, I didn’t know what to prepare for.

Then, as quickly as it had happened, the magic disappeared. Isla’s eyes were blue again, a lovely sapphire, with no residual glow of green. She was staring daggers at me but I suspected she wasn’t aware of what had just happened.

I didn’t know what had happened. I’d been thwarted from my goal once more, and it was truly beginning to sting.

Just then, Prince Xavier decided to enact his vengeance. He swept up to the balcony, neatly angling his body just so between Isla and me.

“Isla, I’ve been looking for you,” Xavier said with a genteel smile. I could feel a small lick of his magic, a warmth he was directing at her. He was trying to manipulate her, much as I just had. *Good luck with that.* The small

amount of satisfaction I gained from seeing her lean away from him, confused, instead of falling for his power wasn't enough to pull me from the foul mood brewing inside me.

That mood darkened as he held out his hand to her. "If I'm not interrupting, I'd love that dance."

He was interrupting, and I wished we were at *my* court where decorum wasn't nearly so restrictive. I prepared to step in, so I could keep Isla to myself until I could figure out how to get the pendant, when she offered him a sweet smile and a small bow.

"There's no interruption," she said. "I'd be honored, Prince Xavier." She placed her hand in his, his fingers dwarfing hers. I seethed as he led her toward the stairs. For being a commoner and scared, Isla was adapting quickly to our ways.

As they made their way down, Isla glanced over her shoulder at me. Her brow was wrinkled as if something had puzzled her. *You and me both, dove.* I was trying to untangle what the hells had happened.

A waltz began to play as I slunk down the stairs, eyeing the dance floor. It wasn't hard to spot them. Like me, the prince towered over many of the fae. He swooped her around, the colors of his ridiculous clothing clashing with her gown. Isla was darkness and fire and the luminescence of night. He was the brash day, all white clouds and blue skies.

Ash coated my mouth as I studied their every move. She was relaxed in his hold and danced exceptionally well for someone who hadn't grown up in court. The gold of the pendant winked and shone in the candle flames and magic fae lights of the ballroom.

Isla tipped her head back, exposing her throat, and Xavier looked so intensely at her neck that I heard a growl, only to realize it had come from me. I couldn't let her out of my sight. Not until I got the pendant. And I certainly wouldn't let Xavier get in the way.

Storming onto the dance floor, I found one of the many partners I'd danced with and abandoned earlier. She gaped as I pulled her to me and moved us around the floor, angling to bring us nearer to Isla and Xavier. When the fae in my arms started to protest, I hit her with a large dose of my power. "You want to dance with me," I said. I wasn't even trying to be subtle anymore.

She sagged and stopped fighting the steps, moving with me instead.

The music reached a well-timed crescendo, priming the floor for partner



switching. Moving at a faster pace, I pulled in line near Isla and Xavier.

As the music shifted, so did the partners. Some eyelash-batting fae woman tried to jump in. Without thinking, I moved her aside and turned to find Isla already dancing with a new partner.

God, I hated balls.

I tapped on the shoulder of the male who'd partnered with Isla. With power streaming through me, I said, "I'm going to dance with her now." It was considered in poor taste to use one's power on other fae, but I was on a mission and tired of being thwarted.

He stepped aside, despite Isla's protests, and the music picked back up before it became a scene. With my hand on the small of her back, I pulled her close. She smelled like freshly washed linen and lavender. It was appealing; a breath of fresh air.

"You're being rude," Isla hissed. "This isn't Ragalith. We have rules and propriety here."

"Rules are made to be ignored." My mind flashed over all the pain, torture, and death my people had suffered at the hands of the light fae in complete disregard of the accords. And yet the kingdom viewed them as the "nice" ones. "Besides, you have the attention of royalty now."

The twist of words made me laugh. Her frantic search of the room ended when she saw Xavier. As if he were the only royal's attention she'd earned.

Her nose wrinkled. "If I'd known anyone would notice me at all, especially royalty, I'd have stayed home."

That caught me off guard. I wondered what she'd do if she knew she were dancing with another prince. There was a tingling in my hands where they touched her, in the places where our bodies brushed together. Her magic? I needed more information. "Oh? Most of the women here, and probably some of the men, I think, would love to be in your shoes. They're here explicitly to get princely attention."

Isla frowned. "I don't delude myself. I'm not marrying a prince. I'm a commoner *and* a human. I'm surprised we were even invited. There's nothing special about me." Our connection hummed inside me, and I wondered if she felt it, too. More likely she was causing it. Irritation grew like a weed in me.

I found myself studying her deep blue eyes again, marveling at how they reflected the light like jewels. Fear still swam in their depths, but she was also staring at me with interest and something I might almost interpret as a challenge. As if I had the answer to *her* question, rather than the reverse.

“Your pendant,” I said simply. We’d already established that she was immune to my magic. I might as well attempt a slightly more direct approach. “It’s special, I’d wager.”

Something flashed across her features, a worry deeper than I’d expected. Perhaps she did know what it was. Which meant the connection I felt with her was her doing. She was trying to manipulate me. “It’s just a necklace,” she said, but her shallow breaths and pink cheeks said otherwise. How dare she think she could evade me? How dare she use her magic on me?

“You’re lying. Why? Why not just tell me where you got it?” I squeezed her hand in mine until the fine bones ground together.

She gasped.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She bit her lower lip, like she was trying to button up before secrets came tumbling out. Her movements grew stiff, and she accidentally stepped on my toe as we danced. I loosened my hold, trying to plan my next move.

As frustrated as I was, as much as I burned to get my hands on the pendant, I was finding the dance—both in person and in wit—to be entertaining. Isla had the wariness all humans should have regarding the fae. There was an alertness to her, the springy reaction of a bunny who’d escaped from too many close calls.

There was more, though. She was denying me what I wanted. I’d spent my entire life as prince, yet time and time again my desires had been shut down. The more I tried to do something, to rise into my role, the tighter the shackles of the accords became.

But to have a human thwart me? It was a wholly new experience. Infuriating, yes, but intriguing. Was she brave, wielding her power against me and keeping me from what I wanted?

Or stupid?

It was the latter, I decided. She didn’t know who I was. Not yet. If she knew I was the prince of Ragalith, I doubted she’d be so bold. “You seem to value the pendant more than your life.” She needed to know that she was hovering in danger’s sights. “Do you believe it to be so important? And your life so insignificant?”

The music shifted, signaling that it was time to change partners, but I held her firm and close. Heat moved between us, slithering in the fraction of space between our bodies. There was a magnetism there, a push and pull, that I couldn’t ignore. My desire for the pendant was influencing me, stoking my

interest in her. “Isla,” I purred. “You’re a human, and you have something I want.”

Before she could react, someone moved to take her from me. I waved my hand in dismissal, not bothering to look at whoever it was.

Only, they didn’t leave. Instead, white gloved hands settled on her shoulders, and not one but two of the king and queen’s personal guards flanked her. The guards glared at me with derision, not bothering to hide how they felt about a dark fae, prince or not.

“The queen would like a word with the young lady,” they said.

Isla clung tighter to me. Her full lips were pressed into a tight, pale line, her nails digging into my tunic. A low heat pulsed once in my belly at the sting.

The soldiers pulled her out of my grasp with a firmness that bordered on rough. I reached for her but stopped when one of the guards reached casually to set his hand on the pommel of his sword. “Like we said, *Thane*”—my name came out as a curse, the omission of my title an insult—“the queen wants her. Now.”

My magic threatened to boil over, and I was about to unleash it when Blyth, appearing beside me, wrapped a hand around my elbow and squeezed it in warning. “Not like this,” he hissed. His gaze was locked on Isla’s neck.

Isla was frantic, her pulse leaping in her throat. She wasn’t doing what I’d expected her to do, though. The human wasn’t begging the soldiers to stop or seeking an exit.

She was staring hard at me, brows twisted in puzzlement. As they began to pull her away, her mouth dropped open. Isla looked at me as if she *knew* me. “Oh, god,” she said, “It was *you*. I saw you—”

The soldiers hauled her around and, with a host of curious onlookers, Isla was escorted away. I was left hanging, confused, wondering what she had been about to say, and filled to the brim with wrath.

It was the second time tonight the light fae had taken her—taken what I wanted—away from me.

My hands curled into tight fists at my side, sharp nails pricking into the meat of my palm.

I’d not let it happen a third time.

# ISLA

I'd spent most of my life dreaming of getting out of my home, the dressmaker's shop, and away from the hard labor of my day-to-day life. Now, I'd gladly give everything I owned if it meant being able to escape back to that same home and shop and a life of (mostly) anonymity.

Somehow, I'd snagged the attention of a dark fae who was probably as dangerous as he was beautiful—and he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Throughout our dance, he'd acted like a predator who'd caught his prey. Yet even when he'd tightened his grip, sending pain up my wrist, I'd felt safe in his arms—like his snide comments and physical intimidation were only for show, and I was actually worthy of being cherished. It had been a peculiar feeling, since I hadn't felt safe in... well, ever.

That kind of thinking was as dangerous as it was absurd. He wasn't simply a fae, but one from Ragalith. No good could come from having his attention.

Especially not when I was sure I'd had it before all those years ago. He was the fae I'd encountered in the garden the day I'd found the necklace.

Even so, I was in more danger now as the soldiers half-dragged me to Queen Eldritch. Caught between a dark fae and a queen...

My heart was trying to come up with a hundred flimsy reasons why I was receiving all this attention, but my brain already knew. I hadn't been the topic of conversation all night. My necklace had been.

If only I'd taken it off before coming.

If only I'd left it in the fountain.

And yet...

I managed to shake an arm free from one of the soldiers. He grunted with displeasure but allowed it as I was racing to keep up with their fast march without protest. Once freed, I gripped the pendant.

Thane had asked if I valued it more than my life.

My first thought had been to ask him if he was crazy. Who put more weight in a piece of jewelry than their own existence?

I couldn't deny, though, that I'd held onto it despite knowing I shouldn't. Being in possession of something so fine, so nice, only put me in more danger, but holding it always brought me a sense of peace and lent calm when I needed it most. Perhaps... perhaps it wasn't that I valued it more, but that I'd grown to value its presence *in* my life.

It was the only nice thing in my possession.

Actually, it was the *only* thing in my possession, the only thing that was just mine. I shared the shop and everything in it with Lily, and we were still paying off the Visontes. My bed wasn't even a proper bed, and I'd shared the proper one before Jeremy had arrived.

All I had were the memories of my parents, my sister's love, and the necklace.

Of *course* I valued it, then. Having it on me always eased my nerves when I needed it, bolstered my strength when the situation warranted it, and made me feel... whole. Like I was only complete when wearing it. However mistaken the means of getting it were, I'd come to think of it as mine, and the attention it was attracting set off cascading bursts of panic inside me.

Could I bear to lose it?

The king and queen were no longer in the ballroom. I was escorted deeper into the castle, marched down long, elegant halls with tall ceilings and paintings of fae nobility lining the walls. Tiny, magical balls floated above us, illuminating the way.

My nerves jangled as the heels of boots struck hard tile and sent echoes bouncing in my ears.

We turned this way and that until I felt lost, certain I was deeper in the castle than I'd ever been before. The weight of the stone and size of the keep pressed in on me. This was no place for humans.

The guards led me into a large room, though not quite the size of the ballroom, yet somehow more formal and intimidating. The ceiling was covered in gilded design, the molding creating the appearance of filigree in the rounded, vaulted space. I felt as if I'd been tucked into an extravagant jewelry box.

I bit back a crazed laugh at the image of the top popping open and being forced to spin around to the tinkle of music.

I was so frightened. I couldn't laugh. If I started laughing, or crying, or *anything*, I wasn't certain I'd be able to stop.

The floor was tiered. The guards moved me to the lowest tier. It was also the lowest part of the entire room. The tiles beneath me were worked in intricate patterns, lovely but cold. The sides of the room were carpeted, the white rug thick and pristine.

Two large chairs stood in front of me. Thrones.

I'd been brought to the *throne room*.

Nothing about this could be good. No part of me thought I'd been brought here to be commissioned for the royals' clothing. The air was as crisp and cool as it was expensive, and the room was *very* expensive.

The thrones were also gilded, the arms and backs carved to look like tree branches. Gold leaves spilled and fluttered from the branches, frozen in an organic nod to the forest and land from which the fae drew their power and connection.

There was a sharp rap as a door was flung open and the king and queen entered. The fur of their robes swished along the rug and tile as they made their way to the thrones. It was the only sound in the room. Well, that, and my heart pounding so hard it was probably audible.

I sank into a deep curtsy and held it, along with my breath.

"Rise," the queen commanded in a cool voice.

I did, willing my knees not to give out. A fae dressed in a long, blue robe stepped out from the side of the room and crossed to me. Knobs ringed the top of his forehead like stones lined up under his skin.

The fae's face was deeply lined and weathered, his skin a sort of blue-gray like ash. His eyes, though, were flashes of yellow that hinted at the sharpness of the mind within the older body.

I froze as he reached for the pendant. Unlike when Prince Thane had tried to snatch it, this was a slow inspection. It heated, almost to the point of pain, as he ran a finger over it. The stench of burning flesh hit my nose. But it wasn't my skin that was burning, it was his. And yet he didn't jerk his hand away. As he touched and inspected the pendant, those yellow eyes flashed silver.

Without a word, he turned and nodded to the queen.

Her face was set in grim stone. I wanted to cower from the judgment in her gaze. "Your dress is by far the loveliest gown we've seen tonight." Her tone had me holding my breath. "Those are Naga scales. The Naga do not

give them out often or willingly.”

*Naga?* I’d heard stories. There were always stories of strange fae who lived outside of the villages and towns. The stories were always about how terrifying they were—the fae other fae warned their children about. I’d known the scales were unique when I found them, but I’d had no idea what they were.

My breath came out in a shuddering exhale. The truth was all I could manage. “My sister is the seamstress. She surprised me with this gown. As for the scales, I found them in the woods, maybe eight months ago. At the river’s edge near where the ash and rowan trees grow densest. The scales were glittering beside the water and I... I collected them. I’d never seen anything so lovely.”

*Except the pendant.* It was still the prettiest thing I’d ever seen.

Although... For a brief moment, I thought that Thane’s beauty might rival even my beloved necklace.

“Hmmm.” The queen did not sound like she believed me. “You have to know that for a human to just stumble upon something so rare feels rather *convenient*.”

My pulse was flying and I knew my cheeks were flared red; I could feel the sharp prickle of heat in them. “How else would I have come across them?”

“Magic.” There was no warmth in the queen’s accusation. I squeezed the pendant hard enough for the metal to bite into my palm.

Shock rippled through me. What was she saying? I shook my head vehemently. “Humans don’t possess magic.”

At this, the queen stood from the throne and made a gesture to the blue-robed man. He hobbled away, but I didn’t dare look anywhere but at the regal, deadly fae stalking toward me. Her mouth was twisted in a cruel smile. “Correction: Humans *shouldn’t* have magic. How familiar are you with Savaria’s history?”

“Very little. There’s...” I swallowed hard. “There aren’t many opportunities for schooling for humans, my queen.”

Her heavy sigh had the force of a whip, a punishment meant to let me know how stupid she thought I was, like a lack of education was my fault.

“Long ago,” she said, “some humans were unhappy with the way the fae ruled.”

*I wonder why,* I thought dryly before wincing. Some fae could read

minds. I was immune to fae magic, but this was the queen of Silvermoore. I had no idea if that changed things.

If the queen could read my mind, she did not let on. I doubted I'd be standing here if she could. She'd already have all her answers and I'd already be locked away or worse. "Those humans stole magic. Witches and wizards, we called them. They discovered dark and awful ways to steal and manipulate power that wasn't theirs."

She spat each word at me like acid. "They managed to wield it and store it, even placing it into various relics. Objects no one would think to look at. But that stored magic was deadly and dangerous. With it, they attempted to overthrow the fae."

If this were any other situation, I would have been enthralled. The idea of humans fighting back was... well, it inspired. It helped to know I wasn't the only one who'd felt stifled, smothered by the oppression of fae rule.

"The fighting was terrible. Both sides lost staggering numbers of their populations. Fields were scorched and salted, orchards cut down, cattle and game slaughtered and left to rot in the wells and water that supplied our towns and cities."

She stood close to me now, near enough that I could smell her rose-scented perfume and see how her skin glittered as if embedded with tiny crystals. She brought a fingernail to her lip and tapped. Only it wasn't a nail. It was a claw, sharp and blackened.

It looked as sharp as a blade.

"Humans nearly destroyed this world with their nasty stolen magic and treachery. But we banded together with the dark fae and managed to put all of you in your place." The clawed finger moved from her lip to my face, tracing along my cheekbone. My stomach threatened to rebel.

To think we humans had been so close to causing the downfall of everything...

I now understood why the fae weren't particularly keen on us, and why they were so rigid in their rule. Who wouldn't try so stridently to protect their home? Yet this was the first time I was hearing of human's sordid history. If we didn't even know about it anymore, why were we still being punished? How long were we to be kept "in our place?"

"But you defeated the witches and wizards, right?" They must have, and if humans possessing magic had been eliminated, I could prove this was all a misunderstanding through logic.



“Yes. We defeated them and destroyed all their relics. All but one, which resisted every attempt made to unmake it.” That glacial stare dropped to my neck and rested on the pendant.

A lump the size of a boulder formed in my throat. There was no way. If this was one of those so-called relics, I’d know, right?

“I ask again. Where did you get this?”

What could I say? If she suspected it to be magic...I swallowed hard, my mind going blank. I was so afraid for myself, for Lily, that I blurted out a person who *couldn't* be hurt. “My mother gave it to me. Just before she died. I was only a child.”

Her hand struck like a viper, so quick I didn’t see it. I felt it, though, the instant flare of pain on my cheek. The wetness of blood dripped from where her claws had sliced through my skin with ease. I dropped to the floor, clutching the seeping wound. Tears sprang from my eyes, the salty liquid burning in the cuts.

“You are a liar,” the queen spat. “And a witch. Only a witch would be able to find Naga scales. A witch would entrance not one, but two princes under her spell. You found the pendant and stole it! Admit it.”

My flayed cheek and my sobbing made speaking difficult. My voice was thick. “I did lie. I’m sorry. Years ago I was here, at the castle, with my sister. My mother had only recently passed and I... I ran away and hid in one of the castle gardens. It—It was in a fountain! I pulled it out and—”

“That’s not possible. It’s been under lock and key, hidden. How could it have landed in a fountain?” The air around us shuddered with cold, as if her anger was whipping it into a blizzard. The burn of the chill numbed my skin, my fingers, my face.

There was no convincing her. “I’m not a witch, I swear! Here!” I reached behind my neck to pull the pendant off. Anything to escape the cold and her awful anger. “Have it!! You can have it back!”

My sheer terror made me clumsy. I tried and failed to pull it off, the clasp slipping and evading my numb and fumbling fingers.

A second set of shoes appeared next to the queen’s. Blurry-eyed and with chattering teeth, I looked up to see the old fae in the blue robe. He held an open book. “Look, my queen,” he said in a whisper, pointing to a page. Whatever the queen saw, she didn’t like it.

“Get up,” she commanded.

My stomach roiled and I rose on wobbly legs, keeping a hand pressed to

my wounded cheek, the blood flow having crystallized from her freezing anger. “I’ll give it back,” I said again weakly. It would break me to lose it, like I was losing my dearest friend. But giving it back might save my life—and Lily’s.

“No, you won’t.” Something like sympathy shone in his yellow eyes. “The necklace has bonded with you. It protects you. It won’t give you up.”

“Then she’s a witch,” the queen hissed. “We will kill her and get it back.”

The wizened fae shook his head slowly. “It is powerful. And it appears to have gotten lonely, my queen. I wouldn’t kill the being it bonded with. That kind of magic could create devastating retribution. Remember what happened to those who tried to destroy it.”

His warning made the queen blanch, her crystalline skin growing flat and pale.

“I’m not a witch,” I mumbled through snot-covered lips. “I’m not. I’m just a dressmaker.”

“Not anymore.” That came from the king, who’d been silent for the entirety of my ordeal. Now he stood. “No one will buy from a witch in our realm. None will speak with you, sell to you, offer you anything. We may not be able to kill you, but we shall not harbor you, either.”

He moved to the front and when he spoke again, his voice boomed, amplified by the acoustics of the room. “You’ve lived with the other humans by our grace. We protect you from the wilds. We offer you work. Your choice to take up magic is your undoing.

“You are banished from the realm of Silvermoore. You are not welcome in our lands. You may not partake of our food. You will not speak to any of our people. You may go and die alone, witch, and call it a mercy.” He pointed a finger and I caught a breath. “And should you wield that power against us, we’ll be forced to fight back. We’ll kill any humans in our lands. Do you hear me? If you attempt to retaliate, we’ll annihilate your race rather than risk another uprising. Their survival is dependent on you.”

My face was wet and my mouth dry. Banished? No more dress shop or home. I’d never see Lily again. Not if I wanted to keep her alive. Gods, not if I wanted to keep all humans alive. I couldn’t visit my parents’ graves. I’d always wanted to see the world, to be able to be more than just a dressmaker or a human. Now I’d be able to, but I’d be losing everything.

“My sister—” I began.

“Your banishment begins immediately. You’re to be removed this

instant.”

The guards who had escorted me grabbed me under my armpits. Their fingers dug into the soft flesh of my shoulders. As they started to drag me, someone new spoke.

In the confident, lazy tones of the powerful, Thane strode into the room and said “Ragalith claims ownership of Isla Sagehaunt. She is now mine and under the protection of my kingdom. Release her immediately.”

# THANE

I'd heard the whole thing, of course.

It had been nothing to persuade my way through the castle, following the guards who'd taken Isla away. She'd been hauled into the throne room, and I'd had to use a hefty bit of magic to suggest that the guards stationed outside go down to join the revelry.

There was a feeling of nostalgia that came from worming my way through this castle with nothing but my smile and magic clearing the way. The last time I'd been caught. If not for the distraction of the ball, I'd never have gotten so far and so close this time.

I'd waited. And I'd listened.

Isla was in over her head, that much was clear. Anyone with ears could hear she had no idea what it was she had. Relief flooded me at knowing she hadn't been trying to work power against me. It would be trouble enough to get her to hand over the pendant if she was clueless—if she'd known what she had...

Then Isla admitted to finding it in the fountain all those years ago, and I almost laughed from the awful irony of it.

At her words, I remembered her. A small, red-faced girl being herded like a naughty puppy with her sister. She'd looked at me, those blue eyes swimming with tears and surprise.

It had never occurred to me that she'd found the pendant.

Blyth and I had placed it in the fountain when we'd been caught where we shouldn't have been. We'd planned to come back and retrieve it, only to discover it had disappeared. I'd spent all this time thinking it was tucked away in the castle.

It had been in a silly human's hands all along.

When I heard that Isla was banished, I knew I needed to seize the chance.

The king and queen were foolish to kick her out. Silvermoorians always reacted too quickly, assuming violence the best way to get what they wanted. A human in possession of relic that powerful? They should have moved her into the castle. Coddled her and kept her happy. If they'd been smart, they would have kept their enemy close. It's what I would have done.

And now, it was what I planned to do.

Pushing into the room, I waited until King Eldritch was red-faced and swimming in his own self-importance as he made his proclamation.

When the guards made to remove her, I stepped in.

“Ragalith claims ownership of Isla Sagehaunt. She is now mine and under the protection of my kingdom. Release her immediately.” I relished the stunned silence that followed.

“That would be a mistake,” the king finally said, warning etched in every word.

I put my hands in my pockets and relaxed my shoulders. “Oh? She’s already been banished. What happens to her in my court is of no concern to you.”

Isla was still weeping. Her face was a bloody mess that caused something in my chest to jerk with fury. They'd hurt her. As I looked at her injury, I imagined how satisfying taking this court down would be. It had all the beauty and elegance on the surface, but its people were rotten at their core. The turmoil rolling off Isla was palpable. She didn't deserve this.

As long as she gave me what I desired, I'd ensure the rest of her days weren't miserable. It was the least I could do.

“Having a witch like that in your hands is a threat to our kingdom.” I could see the king wrestle with confronting his mistake. They'd assumed she'd be banished and dead within days, unable to survive the wilds with no source of food or shelter or protection. Which, to be fair, would probably have been the case.

There were fae and other creatures who'd rejected our rule. They lived lives of their own and didn't allow for trespassers. If Isla had been forced into that unclaimed wild, she'd have been slaughtered.

But, like always, Silvermoore and King Eldritch had discounted Ragalith. He'd forgotten about me.

I'd make sure they knew just how badly they screwed up. “If she was so important or dangerous, you should have kept her close. But I'm afraid there are no take-backsies for banishment.” I offered a condescending smile and

felt the heat of his magic and anger heighten. “I’ve claimed her, she’s mine, it’s done.” I let my power seep out with my commandment. It wouldn’t persuade or influence the royalty in the room, but they’d feel it and know I was not backing down.

A long silence stretched through the lavish throne room as King Eldritch and his court were forced to confront their mistake. The rules and law were binding. For him to undo it now would undo all of his control, which I would certainly exploit.

Finally, the king spat, “Give him the girl.”

The guards all but threw Isla at me. She stumbled, disoriented, and toppled against my chest. Without thinking, I wrapped an arm around her. Not to protect her, surely. I was merely... taking care that my property didn’t get any more marred than she already was. The tingle returned at the contact, but now I knew the pull for what it was—the pendant. There was no other explanation for the way my body hummed at her nearness.

“All right, dove, I think it’s time we make our exit.”

She mumbled pitifully through her fingers. “I’m not a witch! I don’t want to go with you!”

“I know you aren’t a witch. But you are my property now that you are banished from Silvermoore. As such, it is my duty to remove you from this place.”

“I’d rather die in the forest than be tortured by the dark fae.” It was whispered and even I heard the doubt in her words. But truly, she’d just been interrogated and wounded by the light court—what in the realms did she think I would do that could be worse?

It took immense effort to stifle my ire. My arm was still around her, but now I locked it in place, clutching her to me as I continued to walk forward, forcing her to trip and stumble along with me. “Currently, that is not a choice that is up for negotiation.”

We were almost out of the throne room when Xavier barreled toward us. He honed in on me, violence practically spilling off him. The Eldritches were as tedious as they were alike. “What’s the meaning of this?” he bellowed.

“Isla is coming home with me. She’s my new pet. I sure do hope my daddy lets me keep her,” I drawled, delighting in the fiery rage that burned in Xavier’s eyes.

“Like hell she is,” he growled. He made a swipe for her, trying to grab her from me, but his hand hit a field. A small part of me relaxed. The magic

of the accords was strange and old and I hadn't been entirely certain it would protect the exchange. After all, it didn't keep Silvermoore from ravishing my lands.

But my claim had now been validated magically as well as in convention—Isla was completely and totally mine.

“What the—” Xavier snarled.

“Your father banished her. For being a witch, of all things. How ridiculous.” I knew my casual tone was provoking Xavier. It was intentional. Gods, I hated everyone in this castle.

He ignored me and stared at Isla, as if trying to measure the truth of the situation. “She can't be a witch,” he said, though his eyes were scouring her like he could find her guilt written on her skin as bold as a birthmark.

I pointed to her necklace. “Ah, well—”

He took a step back, shying away from us. “That's a—”

“Magical relic? Absolutely. It has decided it belongs to Isla. Isla belongs to me. Ergo, the relic—”

“No.” He shook his head. “My father would never.”

“Save me,” Isla pleaded with Xavier in a whisper. “He's going to take me to his realm. I'm not a witch, I'll do anything—”

“Would you marry him? That might be the only way around the banishment, you know,” I teased, trying to hide my irritation. I hadn't been terrible to Isla. Not like the fae in Silvermoore had been. Yet here she was, begging to stay. As if I'd ever let her walk away while she possessed the pendant. Moving my focus to Xavier, I flashed him a wicked smile. “Would you marry her? A human? A commoner? Possibly a witch? Would your mumsy-wumsy and daddy-waddy allow that? It's so against the *rules*, you know.”

I leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, “And we know how you light fae are about rules.”

His jaw was clenched, the muscle on the side ticking. Prince Xavier had lost this battle. His father had, too. And in their defeat, they'd given me the key to win the war.

“Time to go, dove,” I said again. “I have huge plans in store for you.”

I may have had to drag her, kicking and screaming, from the castle. But success made each and every loud, cumbersome step feel like dancing.

# ISLA

**B**lood whooshed in my ears as the carriage sped and bumped along the road away from all I'd ever known. My heart was breaking, that last little bit that had remained intact after I'd lost my parents turning to ash.

I gripped the pendant, despite it feeling hot enough to sear my hand. But I needed the comfort it had always given me in hard times.

I'd come upon the pendant during my mourning and perhaps in some undefined way, my twelve-year-old mind had convinced myself my parents had sent it to me. As a gift to remember them. A family talisman of sorts. Oh, it had been pure, naive fantasy, but still...

The pendant had always made me feel protected and comforted.

Now it was the very thing which had lost me everything.

*Lily...*

And Thane. The brute—and liar—had dragged me out, stealing me from everything I loved. He was the *prince of Ragalith* and he'd said nothing to me about it! If the Ragalithians were as terrible as everyone said they were and he was their prince? I could only imagine the horrors in store for me.

The dark fae prince had tossed me into a large, stately carriage. He now sat across from me, his manservant—a human—next to him. They were speaking in a low, hushed rush, but I didn't listen. Fingertips to the window, I wept as we raced away from my sister.

From the town I'd grown up in.

All of it taken from me, in an instant.

To think that I'd struggled against the constraints of being a human in Silvermoore. I'd spent so much time and energy cursing the hovels humans were made to live in, the hard manual labor required of us, the constant bowing and scraping just to avoid catching the faes' attention. I'd thought it unfair.



I'd wanted to escape, just for a bit. Just to explore and not feel so nailed down to status and working relentlessly just to be able to eat. How stupid of me. No, it hadn't been great, but had it truly been so terrible? If I'd known what I was wishing for, would I have felt the same way?

"Well, dove," the prince said coolly, pulling me from my grief. "You are now a member of my court."

"I'm your property," I amended. Because the king and queen had cast me out like the contents of a chamber pot and the prince had claimed me like a copper he'd found on the street.

His nose wrinkled, as if the word property were distasteful, despite being the exact term he'd used when claiming me. "Property sounds so... I don't know. I'd prefer to think of you as a freshly made citizen of my realm. You've been reborn Ragalithian." This was spoken in a jovial tone, teasing and prodding at my vulnerable heart.

A citizen. Right. "You did say you had plans for me," I reminded him. "Let me guess. Torture? Pain? Will I be given to your hedonistic court for entertainment?"

I was pretending to be bold, hurling those accusations at him, but it was what I feared in my bones. We may not have had much education regarding the histories of Savaria, but all citizens, fae and human alike, had been told about the dark fae.

We knew they fornicated in public. In masses as well, shameless tangles of bodies seeking pleasure. Those stories had made my throat dry and my tummy feel funny. We were told story after story about how the humans of their realm were stolen from their houses at night and used for bloodsport at the castle. Hunts and torture and "entertainment" that left the humans praying for death.

We heard how they used magic on humans without care, forcing them to do all manner of tasks. Dancing until they collapsed from a burst heart. Cleaning a floor with their bare hands until the flesh had been sloughed away.

Bloody vision after bloody vision flipped through my mind, and I bit back my moan, afraid to show just how terrified I was would only goad them.

His servant burst into laughter. I leaned back in my seat, tucking away from the sudden and loud burst. "My goodness, Thane! Is this what they think of us?"

"Us?" Why—*how*—could a human be so casual with the prince?

“Apparently,” Prince Thane said wryly. “I admit I’m loving the idea of our hedonistic court. Meetings would make me much less cranky with some debauchery and entertainment mixed in.”

He was staring at me as he spoke, his golden eyes glinting with mischief. They hadn’t been golden on the dance floor when the guards had taken me away. No, then they’d been ringed with red, just for a moment. And I remembered them.

He tipped his head to the side, examining me. “You said something on the dance floor.”

My hands clasped together, tight. Was he thinking about the same thing as I was? “I said many things to you. None of which were an invitation to steal me from my home.”

Irritation rippled over his features. I couldn’t stop tracing the curve of his thick horns in the low light of the carriage with my eyes. The way they hugged his head and showcased the onyx curls and pointed ears. I wondered what they felt like. Thane frowned deeply. “I can’t steal something that isn’t owned. You were banished. Surely you know what that means?”

“I might have been able to convince them—”

“Stop being stupid, dove.” His tone was cutting and condescending.

Bristling, I shot back, “I’m not stupid and I’m not your dove,” then crossed my arms in front of me. It wasn’t to sulk; it was a way to protect myself. Make myself smaller. Yet, much like Kyrie, Prince Thane had a way of pushing my buttons. In fact, in the very limited time since I’d met him, he might actually be better than she ever was at it, because I found myself completely unable to not push back.

He looked dramatically over to his servant. “This is going to be the longest trip *ever*.” Then his focus was on me again. “On the dance floor, you sounded like you knew me. And I think I remember when we first met.”

There was a stutter in my chest as my heart tripped over itself. So, he was thinking of the same moment. “At the castle. Thirteen years ago.”

He nodded. “Yes. If only I’d known then what you’d found, neither of us would be in this situation. It wasn’t waiting there for you. You’ve caused quite the hiccup in my plans, you know.”

Sickness washed through me, sending a rush of nausea deep into my core. “You put the pendant in the fountain.” Of course, I’d known it wasn’t fate, or my parents, but during the time it had been mine, it had come to feel like a part of me. As if I’d been meant to find it.

“Yes. Blyth here and I had been on a bit of a mission for it. Sneaking, infiltrating, all the fun stuff. We almost got caught, too. We’d put it in the fountain to keep it safe, and when it wasn’t there later, well, it caused no small amount of frustration for me.” He was keeping his words light, but I felt every bit of his upset in them. This went well beyond an inconvenience. Whatever the pendant was, it was important to Thane.

Something else caught my attention. “Blyth? You refer to your servant by name?”

They both startled, then chuckled. The human shook his head. “I’m no servant. I’m Thane’s second-in-command, even if his father doesn’t acknowledge it. And I’m a wizard.”

At that, everything in me went cold. I’d narrowly escaped being killed for being suspected of being a witch. Now I was in the company of a cruel fae and a dark magic-wielding human. Any escape, any innocence I might have claimed, was being stripped away with each turn of the carriage’s wheels.

Swallowing hard, I knew I needed to make a decision. Human or not, Blyth was no ally. And each mile we covered was another nail in my coffin. In a last bid for my life, for safety, I said, “I’ll give it to you. Just let me go back to my sister.” I couldn’t be banished for something I didn’t have.

“Hand it over, then.” He held out his hand, fingers long and elegant as they wiggled impatiently.

They pair watched intently as I tried to slip it off my neck. Like before, I couldn’t. Only now there was no cold on overload or panic to account for the difficulties I experienced as I struggled. The necklace simply fell from my fingers and singed me, a quick little bite of pain, like a puppy warning me to back off. “It won’t let me.” My voice was choked as it struggled past the lump that hadn’t left my throat. I felt wetness on my cheeks and knew fresh tears were spilling.

“Here,” Blyth said, handing me a black handkerchief. “Clean up your face. Thane, really? Why is she covered in blood?”

“The queen struck me,” I mumbled. I held the cloth, afraid of putting it to the open wounds. The pain had disappeared long before. I was probably in shock, I knew, but as soon as I touched the ragged flesh, it would come again. “She opened my cheek with her claws.”

Thane reached out and grasped my chin gently, turning so my cheek was on display. At his touch, a shiver rippled down my spine, the same tingles from the dance floor alighting again. He took the handkerchief with his other

hand and dabbed at the skin. I held my breath, waiting for the spike of pain, but it didn't come.

"You're healed," he said slowly. "There's no wound."

"What?" My hand flew to my cheek and tentatively touched the flesh the queen had sliced through. I'd felt them earlier. I'd held the flesh together while pooled on the floor in agony. Of course, I'd also forgotten all about it as soon as the prince had claimed me, worried more for my future than the ruin of my face. That kind of injury shouldn't have been so easy to discard in my head, yet that's exactly what had happened.

The skin on my cheek was whole. Smooth and damp with tears, but whole nonetheless. Healed. "I don't understand. She left it like ribbons, I was —"

"The pendant." The wizard pointed toward the jewelry. "It's protecting you. That includes healing you quickly."

It had healed me. Warmth danced in my chest, and I felt hopelessly thankful for it. But if I didn't get rid of it, I wasn't sure what Thane would do. "I—I can't take it off. It won't let me."

The temperature in the carriage seemed to drop. All that dark, cold energy was coming from the prince. "I'll try, then." His words were a blast of glacial chill.

He reached for me and the pendant released a burst of heat, my body tensing as if ready to fight. I didn't know the first thing about fighting. With gritted teeth and effort, I let my hands drop and leaned forward. I didn't want to be close to him. I didn't want to feel his hands on me, to be made aware yet again of how his touch made me feel.

But I didn't want to belong to him, either.

The prince reached around my neck. His arms tickled at my neck and ears. It brought him close, so close. The hum and tingle increased until my eyes squeezed shut against it, my breaths coming in quick and shallow. Like then, I could smell his wild, spicy scent. Like cinnamon and something darker. Warm and enticing. And like before, there was a sense of safety. The exact opposite of what I should be feeling in his presence.

There were rumors of fae who used glamours and scents and magical enticements to lure humans close before the trap snapped shut. That had to be what was causing my reaction to him.

Heat pooled low in my belly as his fingertips feathered along the nape of my neck. It was impossible to ignore the intimacy. I'd never been touched by

a man like this. To know it was the Prince of Ragalith—

As soon as his fingers brushed the clasp, a sudden burst of sharpness exploded inside me, like a log popping in a fire. I stiffened, and the prince? He was thrown back, hitting his seat with a hard *whomp*.

Blyth was ogling the exchange like...well, like it was magic.

“What the hell did you do?” Prince Thane was vibrating with anger. A vein at his temple pulsed. Absurdly, the hard set of his face made him even more stunning.

“Nothing!” I held up my hands. “Truly.”

Blyth put a hand on the prince’s shoulder. He might be a wizard, and I should be running from him, but I was glad he was there, if only as a buffer between the prince and me. “The pendant isn’t just protecting you,” he said.

“The queen’s aid said it had bonded with me,” I offered. I had no idea what that meant. For my part, I knew how special it had become to me over the years. There was something strangely pleasing about the idea that my attachment was reciprocated.

Even if, at the moment, it was only getting me in more and more trouble.

“Ah.”

“Ah?” Prince Thane was staring at my neck like he could will the necklace to drop from my body. “Ah? What does that mean? We need it, Blyth, or—”

He didn’t get to finish. Blyth was smiling. I didn’t trust the smile or the twinkle in his eye. “We have it, Thane. It’s in our keeping. We just need to change our plans on how to use it.”

“We can’t use it as long as it’s *hers*.” There was thunder in his tone, an accusation that had me flinching away from him.

“So we make her *yours*.”

I clutched my dress between my fingers. I listened, not liking the direction the conversation was headed. “He’s already claimed me,” I said meekly. What other way could I possibly be more his?

“What are you talking about?” The prince seemed just as wary of Blyth as I was. There was little comfort in it, though.

“I’m saying you, dear prince, are about to kill two birds with one stone. You’re bringing home the pendant we’ve needed, and you’re bringing home a bride. Now you can be crowned and we can begin to enact our plan.”

Thane squeezed his eyes shut like he was in pain. For my part, my brain felt like pudding, trying to wobble and form itself around what Blyth had just

said. *Bringing home a bride.*

I wouldn't just be the property of a dark fae. I'd be married to one.

No.

*No.*

Without waiting, I reached for the door to the carriage, shoved it open, and leapt.

## THANE

What a gods-awful return trip. After I'd managed to grab Isla when she'd foolishly tried to leap from a moving carriage, Blyth and I had been forced to take shifts sitting next to her to keep her from any other stupid attempts at escape. And thanks to the pendant, I couldn't even magic her to sleep.

Sitting next to Isla had been its own slow torture.

For one, her petite body tucked nicely in next to mine. It was almost comforting, having the warmth of her pressed close against me. Even her scent was calming. The clean, fresh scent of lavender was a welcome change from all the overly sweet rose, jasmine, and orchid perfumes favored by the lords and ladies of the fae—both dark and light alike.

But my proximity to her had Blyth's suggestion hammering away inside my skull. A constant, beating drum. *Bride. Bride. Bride.*

He was crazy. I wasn't going to marry Isla. She was a human, first and foremost. Their lifespans were as short as the flight of a dandelion seed. Though, I mused, that would mean we'd only be married a short time. She'd perish before I approached middle age.

Furthermore, I was already going to have to fight with my father over claiming a woman Silvermoore viewed as a witch. King Eldritch had made it clear he considered it a provocation. So much for being on my best behavior.

By the time we'd finally rolled up to my home, I was sick of her closeness and all the frustrations we'd stumbled on in finally getting the pendant.

I'd left Blyth to tend to Isla, demanding he get her settled while also making it clear she would *not* try to escape or risk finding out just how awful a prince of Ragalith could be.

It had taken a long, hot bath and changing into comfortable clothes for me to begin to calm myself. But in old, broken-in leather pants and a plain white

tunic, I felt as at ease as possible. My father hadn't called for me yet, which meant he still didn't know about Isla.

Time was short, but I would fix this before he found out about her.

Blyth met me outside of my quarters. "She's very pretty," he said in lieu of greeting, his expression far too smug for my liking.

"Why does that matter?"

His eyebrows waggled. "Ah, you don't deny it."

"She's fine. For a human."

She was exquisite. I'd already spent too much time studying and memorizing the thickness of her lashes, which created the perfect frame for eyes like the sapphires in sunlight. Her frame was petite, but there was strength there, too. The muscles of someone who was used to working and taking care of herself.

And gods, Isla's hair. It was a waterfall of fire, so red it almost looked fae. It curled and tumbled in thick waves, an invitation for fingers to bury themselves within its depths.

"I'm a human and you've kept me around for quite some time." Blyth had fallen into step with me, using subtle gestures to lead me to wherever Isla was being kept.

"And you think it's because of your beauty?"

"Ha! I wish. I'm just saying you've never had issue with humans the way other fae have. It's curious it should matter to you so much now."

*Oh.* That had more to do with long hours in the castle library, poring over scrolls in the low candlelight, long after everyone else had gone to sleep. Discovering the root of truth and lie regarding the first days of Savaria's existence. Those midnight study sessions had been the catalyst for my vision of the future and my understanding of just how *wrong* things were.

"*You* are useful. Magical and clever."

"Isla seems clever enough, and you can't deny she's magical. She's more powerful than I could ever hope to be."

I threw him a grimace. "She doesn't know what she's got or how to use it. I need that power, Blyth, and marriage isn't going to bring it to me."

The wizard tilted his head, acceding my point. "No. But if she consents to being wedded, there's powerful magic in that connection. You'll both be bound to the land and the throne. You may share some of the relic's power just from that. And if you can seduce her and make her happy, then the relic might be willing to change over to you. Or to share the bond, at least."



Damn. *Damn*. It made sense, but in the worst possible way.

We stopped outside of some guest chambers in a far wing of the castle. “One moment, I locked her inside.” Blyth moved to the door and traced shapes with his fingers, twisting and folding them as he muttered under his breath. He was casting.

My magic was instinctual. Something primal that resided within me. I could move things, start small fires or chill a glass, and of course, there was my most powerful gift: persuasion. None of it required me to cast.

Blyth’s magic required spellwork and ritual, but it was also versatile. There were many things he could accomplish in greater quantity or efficacy than I, and I thought, not for the first time, how much the fae were missing out by trying to eliminate magical humans instead of working with them.

There was a *click* of the lock. I made to push the door open but Blyth stopped me.

He *knocked*.

“Come in.” Isla’s voice was dull and quiet. Dejected.

This was going to be much harder and tedious than I cared for.

Pushing open the door, we entered. The room was large and well-appointed. The bed was well crafted, a beautiful piece of art with a thick mattress and fine linens. There was a fireplace, though it wasn’t in use—the weather was still too mild for it.

Isla was seated in a chair next to a window that, I noticed with approval, was too slim for her to slip out of. Blyth was trying my nerves with his half-cocked plan, but at least he wasn’t a complete idiot.

Her face was red, eyes puffy and swollen, but at least she wasn’t crying right now. There’d been so much crying already.

“Good morning, Isla,” Blyth said cheerfully. Isla and I cringed simultaneously at his chipper tone. Apparently, I had one thing in common with the woman, and that was an aversion to morning people.

She lifted a single shoulder and let it fall. I couldn’t help but notice that she was still in the gown from the ball. Despite days of travel and, I supposed, her sleeping in it, the dress was still perfection. In the bright light of day, the purple of it was more visible, like the deep aubergine of an eggplant. Her skin looked like cream, pale silk, in contrast.

She should have been offered new clothes.

“I’ve been trying to take it off,” she said, her voice cracking. Her fingers drifted over the pendant. “Truly.”

“Try harder,” I replied bluntly.

Blyth shot me a scolding glance. “I don’t think it will leave you, even if you beg it to. It wants you to be happy, safe, and protected. It’s with you until that happens.”

“Or if I die.” It was spoken in such a flat, unfeeling way that my heart twitched. I’d asked her if she valued her life so little, but I’d been angry and caught up in trying to get what I wanted.

Did Isla truly feel so little about herself?

“Mmm, actually, I suspect if you were to die due to circumstances involving, say, the fae, the relic might seek retribution.”

She angled her head to stare at him, a clever glint shining there that I didn’t like. “So if I killed myself, would it hurt you? Prince Thane? King and Queen Eldritch?”

My tongue thickened in my mouth. *Careful, Blyth.* I didn’t know the extent of what something like the pendant could do on its own. I only understood its ability to amplify the power of its wielder.

“Most likely,” Blyth answered cheerfully. “Horribly, too. But without royalty, who would control the fae? Who would protect the rules that, in turn, keep humans safe? Who would be around to protect your sister?”

Isla blanched, her face made almost white in the sun’s rays streaming down on her.

Smart. Blyth might redeem himself, after all. Particularly if he could find an answer that didn’t involve marriage.

“Oh,” she managed, and the skin at her throat rippled as she swallowed hard.

“On the other hand,” Blyth continued, squatting in front of her and scooping up her hands like they were friends. “You could marry Prince Thane. I know he seems all scary and grumpy, but I promise his heart is as tender as a kitten’s.”

Isla glanced at me, incredulity washing over her features. I scowled at Blyth and began to make a list of all the ways I’d punish him. He was supposed to be my second, my most trusted, and currently he was making a case to be locked in the dungeons instead.

“But he doesn’t want to marry me, either.”

No, I didn’t. I didn’t have time for marriage. And gods, what had Blyth suggested? Seduction? If my powers worked on her, I’d persuade her into my bed that second if I thought it would get me the pendant. Once she was in my

sheets, I wouldn't need magic to convince her. I was confident in those skills all on their own.

But she was immune to my powers, and if I wanted that pendant...

"I don't *not* want to marry you," I said, my attempt at sounding kind falling miserably short. "I just hadn't planned on marrying anyone just yet."

She sniffled and angled herself toward me instead of the window. At least I had her attention. "Why do you want the pendant so badly?"

It was a fair question. Honestly, she should have been asking it sooner, though I supposed being terrorized by royalty probably took precedence in her mind. "You know what it is?" I asked, rather than answer outright.

"The queen said humans used it to store magic."

"That's right. The magic in that particular piece of jewelry is an amplifier. If someone like Blyth were to wear it, his spells would gain in scope and intensity. He'd be an unparalleled wizard. And if someone as powerful as myself had it..."

I could persuade the Silvermoorian armies to turn on their masters. I could boost the morale of my people, erasing hundreds of years of being cast as the villains. I could abolish petty feuds regarding who had the right to use magic and how and focus instead on making Ragalith safe. "I could right the injustices that have happened to my people," I said, offering up a small portion of the truth instead.

"What injustices?" Isla looked as if she thought very little of the possibility.

Black fury stole into my heart and I glided toward her until she cowered in her chair. "Shall I take you to see the burned husks of villages of my realm? Shall I show you the bones of Ragalithian children, carelessly strewn in salted fields? Those are some of the injustices I speak of, and I will not allow them to continue. But to do that, I need power."

I poked the pendant where it was nestled against her skin, prepared for the angry zap it sent through me.

Isla was pensive, her brows knitted together. I couldn't tell if she believed me, but she wasn't scoffing. "What would being married to you entail?"

Part of me appreciated that she was willing to approach this like the business negotiation it was. But truly, I had everything to offer her. Money, comfort, station. She'd be a damn queen. After her low station and harrowed upbringing, how was she not leaping at this?

Blyth shot me a look of warning. *Play nice.*

“Being married would make you a princess now and soon-to-be queen. My father is aging and the throne will pass to me soon.” Very soon, if I got what I wanted. “You’ll be expected to fulfill the queen’s duties. I’d arrange for a tutor for you, so you’ll know all that the job entails.”

There had been a horrified look plastered on Isla’s face as soon as I’d mentioned she’d be queen. Had she truly not made that connection?

“You’ll have wealth. Clothing. More food available than you could ever eat. You’ll never have to work again. You’ll have servants and a warm bed to sleep in each night—”

“With you?” This was asked in absolute terror.

Blyth, the ass, stifled a laugh. As for me, there was a soured heat in my belly that was too like embarrassment for comfort. She was beautiful, and I knew I wasn’t hard to look at. Was the idea of sharing a bed so truly awful?

My ego pushed out all the things I didn’t want to feel. Isla obviously didn’t understand how lucky she was that I’d claimed her when I did. She was lucky to be *alive*, and what was more, I was offering her the chance to rise in station. A staggering rise, at that, and practically unheard of. Yet she was treating me like a monster.

As long as she viewed me as an enemy, the pendant would remain out of reach. Damn it all.

Hmm. I was going about this the wrong way. It irritated me to no end that I was having to work so hard for this, but there simply wasn’t time for me to double down. I’d have to be more subtle now, play the game. And when we’d wed and I had what I needed, I’d never have to deal with Isla again. I’d ensure she was educated on how to be a proper queen, to keep her head down and mouth shut. We’d be free of each other, really.

No one said I had to love her. Just convince her she had nothing to fear from me. “No,” I said with compassionate ease. “You’ll not have to share my bed if you don’t wish to.”

The visible relaxation of her shoulders had me biting my tongue. I’d never experienced a challenge where I’d needed to work to make a woman *like* me.

“I don’t know anything about being royalty,” she admitted. “Won’t that be an issue? Won’t the fact that I’m a human be an issue? And what about my sister? Is she in danger?”

I dared to take a step closer to her. Blyth was still kneeling at her side. I wasn’t ready to get on my knees for her, but I did squat, putting me at her eye

level. “Etiquette can be taught. The fact that you’re human is unusual. And I suppose when you’re queen, you’ll have the power to bring your sister here. Unlike Silvermoore, you’ll find Ragalith more hospitable to humans... so long as you contribute.” I nodded to Blyth.

The space between her brows furrowed. “He’s a wizard, though. And we survived just fine in Silvermoore. Our business was one of the most sought after by the lords and ladies of the court—”

“Were you able to defend yourself against your popsicle friend? The one who demanded your blood? Would anyone have stopped her? Protected you from her? Would you say that is ‘surviving just fine’? Is survival truly what you consider good enough?” Each question landed like a blow, and I knew she’d experienced more harm in her past than she was letting on.

“Isla,” I pushed. “Were you able to travel? Were you asked to dine in fae homes? Do you have any fae friends?”

Those sapphire eyes glossed over with pain. “No,” she whispered. “We were only tolerated at the castle and in the company of the court when we were fitting them for clothes.”

I nodded slowly, knowing I had her hooked. “In Ragalith, the services humans provide aren’t merely tolerated. They are rewarded. We pay a fair share. We don’t force humans to live separately from the commoners.”

“What *do* you force them to do?” she asked, and I remembered the nonsense she’d espoused in the carriage.

I exhaled deeply. “I suppose you’ll need to see it to believe it, but humans aren’t forced to do anything. We merely ask that they contribute to the realm. There’s work, there’s pay, and there’s an expectation not to be belligerent asses. That’s all.”

To his credit, Blyth was helping this process by not only serving as a mediator but by being human. Oh, I was sure he had opinions about how, unless showing a modicum of magical skill, Ragalithian humans were still relegated to the fields and to service. Yet he knew as well as I did that they were allowed to own their farms and businesses, make and keep profits, and their taxes were the same as that of every other citizen.

“He speaks true,” Blyth said. The twitch of her lip suggested she didn’t believe us. We’d just have to convince her.

Her nose wrinkled and those blue eyes flickered with intelligence. “So, we’d marry and hopefully you’ll be able to get what you need from the pendant,” she said. “I’ll be... queen?” The word came out of her mouth like it

had been sticky and unwilling to fly free.

“Yes.”

“What if the pendant doesn’t cooperate? What if it won’t let me give it to you? Or what if it does? What will happen to me when I’m no longer bonded with it?” Where will I be if I don’t have anything you want anymore? Her true concern was threaded through every question.

Isla was proving to be cleverer than I’d thought. She had a quick mind and was unafraid of voicing her concerns. I admired those qualities, though if they continued or grew, it would become tedious. “I swear I won’t discard you when I get what I want.” I pitched my voice as smooth and sure as I could.

*Because you’re human. A commitment of fifty or so years of my life is a small price to pay for a kingdom.*

“I’ll need to think about it,” Isla said. A snarl loosed itself in my mind. What did she possibly have to consider?

Without my aid, she would remain a Ragalithian citizen. But if she thought I’d give her room and board without her acceptance, she was in for a severe disappointment. If she thought anyone would loan her capital to find a home, an inn, rent a space for a business, she’d find herself out of luck.

It was on the tip of my tongue to let her know just that when the door to Isla’s room was flung open. A stone lodged in my belly as the current queen—my stepmother—waltzed in, flanked by two attendants. A miasma of derision and suspicion surrounded her.

Isla withered under Mara’s terrifying stare. So much for her believing we were fine with humans.

“So it’s true,” the queen said. “You brought that home. Whatever for, Thane?”

Her mere presence riled me. My mother had been kind and intelligent. She’d been a cutthroat when needed and protected what was hers with ruthless determination. Now dead, she’d been replaced by a woman who also had ruthless determination, but only when it came to controlling the castle and all those who lived within its walls.

She kept that control with fear and exacting punishments. I’d been on the receiving end of those punishments until I’d come of age.

Yet no matter how many times she’d tried to beat me into submission, my spite and resilience had grown stronger. “You asked me to bring home a bride.” I smiled sweetly at her and gestured to Isla. “Here she is.”

Isla remained blessedly silent, not contesting this in front of my stepmother. I'd been banking on her ability to read the situation and it seemed she had.

"You can't be serious," the queen said with a short bark of a laugh.

"Oh?" I stood, knowing my height was intimidating, and took a step toward her. "And why would I joke about a matter such as this?" Each word slithered with challenge.

She stilled. Stared. "There's a rumor she was banished from Silvermoore."

"Oh, that's certainly true." I was cavalier on the outside, but inside I was murderous. She'd certainly gotten her information quickly. I wondered if she'd already told my father, or if this was a solo attempt at control.

"Then she can't be your queen, for I act as the conduit between both realms. You know that as well as I—she has to be able to move freely throughout the kingdom." It hadn't hurt that Mara was originally from Silvermoore. It had made her access to the other kingdom much more unfettered. Something I'd always remembered with doubt and mistrust.

"Also true, except there are always exceptions to banishment. If, say, one was in a high station *and* a member of another court..."

She sneered, once more staring at Isla as if looks alone could erase the girl from our castle. I wondered what made her steam the most. That Isla was a commoner, or a human, or so far outside Mara's circles that she couldn't be one of Mara's pawns. Most likely all three. "Your father won't be happy about this."

So, she hadn't told him yet.

"When is he happy about anything? I haven't seen him happy in over twenty years." Twenty years ago, my mother was still alive.

The queen knew that as well, and bright, angry circles burned high on her cheeks. "Fine. The wedding will be in a month's time."

After the coronation was supposed to occur. I wouldn't be crowned king until I married, and she'd have time to put her ducks in a row, time to hide them in such a way I'd have difficulty flushing them out.

"It will be in a week." I wasn't king yet, but I was prince of this realm. I wouldn't allow her to dictate the date of my wedding. Staring daggers at her, I rested a hand on my hip, the ring bearing my family's crest flashing in the light. "The wedding and coronation will occur on time. To try to deny me this now would be to earn my enmity. You had your moment of power, Mara, but

now it's over. Do not cross me, or you will regret it." Pure loathing dripped from each word, spiced with a smidge of my power. She'd feel the magic, even if she warded her mind against it. This was no idle threat.

My stepmother's anger sputtered and vibrated inside of her. She'd lose her grip on power if I was wedded. Which was fine by me. She never should have had it to begin with. "You'd rush the kingdom into accepting this? You'd start your rule with threats and disorder?"

"If that's what's necessary. Don't forget," I added with a grim smile, "this was *your* idea."

"My idea had been for you to find a Silvermoorian bride. Someone to continue fostering the bond between our peoples."

I knew what she'd intended. For me to find one of her connections, some noble fae bride who'd keep tabs on the Ragalith kingdom and report back. Who'd work to weave discord among our nobility, rendering us impotent in the face of outside threats. As if I was going to let that happen.

"Technically, I did find a Silvermoorian bride," I countered. "Isla is from Silvermoore. A week's time. No more."

"This is preposterous," she spat. But she had nothing, no way to defy me in this, so she turned and left, her sycophants in tow.

We were alone again and I felt the promise of a splitting headache behind my right eye. "Isla, that was my stepmother."

When I finally locked eyes with her, I could see Mara hadn't helped my case in the least. Isla was eyeing me with a wariness that bordered on manic.

It took effort to forcibly relax my shoulders and project a sense of calm. Mara had gotten under my skin, and it had been stretched thin to begin with. "She won't be the one who tutors you," I offered, attempting to sound jovial.

Isla's lips pressed tight. Then she shook her head slowly. "I don't think I can do this," she whispered.

Biting back my desire to snap, I managed to grind out, "I'm offering you queendom. Silvermoore offered you death. What, exactly, is it you don't think you can do?"

"Live like this."

I looked around the room, trying to understand what she was seeing. Tapestries, art, comfort, security. There was more space in this one room than I imagined she'd dwelt in before. Not once had she been harmed since I'd claimed her. She had food and shelter and wealth available and all she needed to do was say yes.



No. More than that. She needed to understand she was not in a place to say no.

As if taunting me, the pendant caught a bit of light and flashed.

“I’ll make you a deal, then, Isla Sagehaunt. You have one day to remain in my castle and under my explicit protection. One day to find if there’s any steel in you at all.”

Blyth was already moving toward me like he could stop the situation. “Thane—”

“One day to decide what it is you think you can do or not. If I don’t have a yes by the end of it, however, you cannot stay here.”

She blanched. “Where else would I go? You claimed me.”

“Ragalith claimed you.” My chin jutted out and I headed toward the door, sliding back into the snide and callous skin I wore so often. “You’re welcome to explore all of the kingdom, I suppose. Though how you’ll manage that would be entirely up to you. You’ll find no aid here.”

With that, I turned on my heel and stormed out, making time to slam the door in Blyth’s face as he attempted to follow me. I didn’t want to see him, the source of this marriage madness.

I certainly couldn’t look at her anymore. It had taken so much patience, time, and effort to get where I was. The pendant, close enough to touch and yet remaining locked out of my reach.

With the coronation drawing near, I’d use whatever means necessary to pick the lock and take what I wanted.

# ISLA

**B**lyth's attempts to calm me were wasted and eventually he got the hint and left.

Thane was awful.

The worst offense was the conversation before the queen had entered, when he almost had me believing him. He hadn't shown me any warmth—not by any measure. But it had felt as if the sharp tongue and careless ego might have been for show. For a little while, I'd started to believe that while I wouldn't be happy, I might be safe.

Then his stepmother had entered. Between her clear dismissal of me and the way he changed, growing barbed and hateful, I knew it had been a lie.

It didn't matter if Blyth told me it wasn't that bad. I knew what I'd seen. Thane was dangerous. He could lie and manipulate when he wanted to, and when he wasn't getting what he wanted?

The room had stank of his wrath and violence when he'd threatened the queen. The queen.

What good was a title to me if even it couldn't get me what I most needed?

I just wanted to feel safe.

Instead, I was alone in a deadly kingdom, with only one day to decide if I'd rather risk dying on my own terms or pretend I could survive on Thane's. If I agreed to his proposal, then I might have time to reach out and tell Lily what had happened to me.

An impossible choice. If I'd thought I'd lived in a cage before... This castle might be nicer than I expected, and while it was true that I hadn't been hurt or thrown into a dungeon upon arrival, the bars were there all the same.

I wasn't moving up in the world. The world was closing in on me.

A soft knock sounded at the door, a warning before it cracked open. I

raised myself onto my elbows just in time to see a head peek in.

“Hello?” A woman slid into the room and gingerly shut the door behind her. Her skin was a deep, dusky gray. Eyes of orange flashed at me, overlarge, with a thick fan of lashes on the top and bottom. Tiny nose and a small, rosebud mouth, though her lips were almost ebony. “May I come in?”

I wanted to snort and remind her I was a captive. But that wasn’t true. Not entirely, at least. I was both a captive *and* had the potential to be queen. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to wrap my mind around that. “Of course,” I said instead.

She stepped in. Her body was exceptional, with breasts and hips any woman—myself included—would envy. Her dress was of high quality, the black chiffon draped around her form. When she was still, it turned her into an amorphous thing. But when she moved...

The panels and chiffon clung just so to turn a shapeless body into something worthy of sculpture.

I sat up fully now and pulled my knees to my chest. “Hello,” I said hesitantly. Was this another of Thane’s tricks? Had he sent someone to scare me into accepting? Or perhaps it was Blyth, still attempting to convince me that life here wasn’t that bad.

The fae curtsied. “I’m Valerie. Your lady-in-waiting, Miss.”

Lady-in-waiting? For me? I was so tired. Despite knowing I’d slept in the carriage, it felt as if I’d been alert since first arriving at Silvermoore’s ball. My nerves were ragged from fear and worry. Perhaps it was naive, but Valerie exuded an air of honesty and, if I dared to believe it, kindness. I was in desperate need of some kindness. If it was a trick, so be it. I simply couldn’t keep up the paranoia a moment longer.

“Call me Isla, please.”

Valerie smiled, showing off a neat row of small, pointed teeth. “Isla it is. Blyth thought we could start with a tour. I’ll show you the castle, and from there, we can go on to the histories. We only have a week, and there’s a lot to learn.”

“A week until what?” Thane had said I only had a night to decide.

Her lips pursed. “Until the wedding?” She peered at me like I was daft.

Instead of being surprised, I shook with the effort not to throw something. Apparently, there was still some energy left in me, because anger flowed quick and easy through my veins. He’d given me a choice and assumed he knew what I’d choose. The bastard.

“Right,” I found myself saying. It wasn’t Valerie’s fault if he’d lied to her. Thane and Blyth would feel foolish when I said no.

Except I wasn’t certain I’d say no. Yes was sitting on the tip of my tongue, if only so I’d be able to send word to Lily. And because, even if it meant locking the door to my own cage, I wasn’t ready to die.

I was too tired to think about it anymore. Valerie was offering me something new and needed: information.

“I’m going to learn history?”

She let out a startled chuckle. “Of course. You’ll be the queen. You’ll need to know the history of Ragalith, its noble families, as well as the families of Silvermoore. I already pulled books for you to read—”

Valerie must have seen me flinch. “I’m sorry, is something wrong?”

Acid burned in my throat. “I don’t know how to read. Humans... we start working as soon as we’re able and there aren’t many vocations for us that require being able to read or write.” I wanted to cry. Of all the humiliation I’d anticipated experiencing, having to admit this flaw hadn’t been one I’d considered.

Her expression softened. “It’s just a skill, Isla. If you’ve been working since you were young, then you have skills. We’re only adding to it. Not being able to read is a hiccup, sure, but it doesn’t reflect badly on *you*.”

For a moment, I thought what this conversation would have been like if it had been Kyrie who’d discovered I couldn’t read. How different and terrible it would have been.

Nothing about this place made sense. It felt like a honey-coated trap. But when had I last tasted any sweetness at all? Perhaps the trap could be worth it.

I wiped my cheeks, checking for any errant tears. They were dry and I experienced a swell of pride. I’d been forced to adapt quickly after losing both of my parents. This was another situation that would require speedy adaptation. There wasn’t time for any more tears.

“Okay. What else?”

I glimpsed something akin to approval in Valerie’s gaze. “Tour, lessons. Bath and beauty. We’ll be fitting you for clothing this week as well—you need a new wardrobe. And at night I’ll teach you etiquette. Sound good?”

“So, I get to learn, I get to take regular baths, I get fancy clothing, and I get to spend time with you at night?”

Her grin widened. “That’s it.”

“I’m trying to figure out where the pain and torture and terror fit in.” Of course, I knew when it would. Most likely it would appear as soon as I was fully bound to Thane. But he’d also said he wouldn’t require much of me. The pendant, yes, but nothing else.

If I had Valerie, just one person I could count on, I could possibly hang on. To try to survive this situation as long and as well as I could. For all his arrogance, Thane had been right.

I was going to say yes.

My new lady-in-waiting—and, I hoped, friend—rolled her eyes. “We’re going to have to add lessons in that as well, I suppose. You aren’t squeamish, are you? Afraid of blood? Do you have any experience pulling fingernails or teeth out?”

Before I could do as much as swoon, Valerie laughed, high and bright like bells. “I’m *joking*, Isla. Come on. We have much to do.”



\* \* \*

When she said “tour the castle,” I’d assumed Valerie meant the areas of the castle I’d be allowed to see. But apparently, I was allowed to see the castle in its entirety.

My ballgown was beginning to grow stiff, but there was a strange comfort in having something familiar wrapped around me. Everything else around me was foreign and strange.

When Thane had pulled me from the ball, one of my slippers had fallen off. No one had noticed, so I padded along with bare feet, the hem of the gown covering my toes. Besides, I no longer had a home or my sister. Why not also be shoeless?

We walked along torch-lit hallways. She’d point to paintings of lords, ladies, and former royalty, dropping in bits of history as we went. I tried to stay focused on her words, but it was impossible. There was too much to see.

Everything was a contrast to the keep in Silvermoore. For every starched collar and perfect decor of the light, the dark favored loose and soft. The

soldiers weren't dressed in armor like the ones I'd been accustomed to in Silvermoore. Ragalith soldiers wore worn leather in blacks and dark browns. Those who had hair wore it long or shaggy. Wings and claws were on display, but that wasn't what made them intimidating.

There was something about the relaxed, easy confidence of the guards and soldiers which screamed that they knew what they were and the damage they could do. I stared at slumped or leaning figures at their posts and shivered.

The decor and guards weren't the only difference. True to Thane's words, I saw humans here and there, almost all in servants' garb. Instead of gaunt faces or scarred skin, they were smiling. They looked well fed and moved around with ease. There weren't *many*, but just seeing them at ease and healthy gnawed at me.

Valerie took me through the throne room. The tour through it was brief—I still had fear splattered in me from the last throne room I'd been in and I had no desire to linger. I cradled the cheek that had been wrecked as we walked through, still marveling at the healing power of my necklace.

We saw the kitchens; some of the branches where nobles resided when they stayed at the castles; the servants' quarters, which were much nicer than the dungeon-like rooms I'd anticipated—nicer, truly, than the home I'd shared with Lily and her husband.

“So as queen, you'll visit these areas a lot. A queen helps to manage the castle staff, helps plan and prepare for guests and balls and such.” Valerie was saying as we headed up a flight of stairs. They curved around, and small windows let in just enough light to see where to place our feet.

A door was open to the left. Valerie walked up and past, but I peeked inside.

And caught a male fae in a guard's garb on his knees, his face buried between the exposed thighs of a slight, winged woman, her dress hiked up to her waist. Her mouth was open, lips moving in silent pleas. Heat flared through me, made worse when the woman turned her head and spotted me watching.

She *winked* before reaching her hands down to press the male's mouth tighter to her.

I jumped when Valerie grabbed my hand and gently tugged me up and away. My tongue was thick in my mouth. It took several more steps before I was ready to speak.

“Valerie, they were—”

“Indulging,” she answered with a shrug. “It’s considered rude to stare if you weren’t invited to watch and don’t plan on participating.”

I shook my head fast, as if I could shake off what she’d just said. “But they weren’t in a bedroom! That was right out in the open!”

Valerie gazed at me in confused wonder. “They were out of the way, Isla. It might have been a bit much if we’d been forced to step over their bodies to proceed, but off to the side like that? Where’s the harm?”

Frozen in place, I forced her to wait. To be as brazen as that in Silvermoore would have been to invite the swift punishment of the king and queen. No one, not even the nobility, participated in such intimacy anywhere but behind closed doors. It simply wasn’t done.

“Are they married?”

“I doubt it. They might not even know each other’s names.”

Oh. *Oh*. What did a person even do with this sort of information? “So, anyone can just do...*that*...with anyone? Anywhere?” It was too much to handle without flushing, and my body seemed to steam from head to toe.

Delight twinkled in her orange irises. “For the most part. Royalty are expected to show a *bit* more restraint.”

My heart, which had been stammering within my ribs, grew steadier at that. “So I won’t be expected to—”

“Not if you don’t wish it. The royals rarely share partners. Not until an heir is present, at least. After that, it’s your body and your bedroom. Most noble marriages are strategic, not based on love. We understand that and allow for freedom. There’s only one rule here regarding sex.”

None of this conversation felt real. I wasn’t a child. I’d shared a home with newlyweds who, while Lily tried to be quiet and polite, were, well, married. But it was known that the intimacy shared by a husband and wife was a private thing.

Never to be discussed and certainly never put on display.

Now I’d not only witnessed strangers together, but Valerie was discussing intimacy—*sex*—like she was talking about the weather or the dinner menu.

“What’s the rule about, um...” The word stuck in my throat. “Sex?”

“All parties agree to it. Pleasure is never to be forced or demanded. But that’s it. After that, no rules.” She smirked and it was wicked. “You’re especially lucky, you know. It’s rumored Prince Thane knows his way around the female form.”

I swallowed wrong and began to cough and sputter. Valerie patted my back as I struggled to regain control. Finally, I croaked, “He’s had other lovers?”

“Haven’t you?” she asked in rebuttal, and I heard the mirth in her tone. I didn’t have to say the truth, my questions outed me as new to all of this. “I’m only half joking, Isla. But, apparently we need to add even more lessons in than I thought.”

With that, she wrapped an arm around my waist and we continued to make our way up.



\* \* \*

After a full day of walking and lessons, my feet and brain ached.

“I can’t move another step,” I moaned from the chair I’d curled up in. We were back in the room I’d stayed in. My room, I supposed, for the moment.

“We covered a lot of ground today,” Valerie agreed. “You’ll get used to it.”

The blisters on my toes disagreed.

Just then, the door to my room opened and a procession of servants entered. The first four were male, all working in tandem to carry the largest copper tub I’d ever seen between them. They moved to the largest open space in the room—the swath of carpet in front of the fireplace—and set down the tub.

With a bow to me, they left.

Following them was a line of women, each carrying a steaming bucket. As I stared, they poured bucketful after bucketful of water into the tub. My swollen, angry feet buzzed in anticipation.

When the tub was filled, all the women, save two, left. One held a basket filled with bottles. The other held a stack of fine linen cloth.

“Bath time,” Valerie said with cheer. From the way her nose twitched, I suspected she was looking forward to it as much as I was. It had been days and my dress was stiff with sweat and wear.



I groaned. I wanted the bath. But getting there required movement, and that wasn't something my body seemed interested in.

"Come on," she added indulgently, holding out a hand. I took it and let her pull me to my feet. Joints creaked and muscles protested, but she made quick work of the gown I'd been in for far too long. I noted that she took care with it, though, and loved her for it.

The pendant was the only thing I had that was just mine. But that dress was all I had left of Lily.

Valerie set it aside on the bed before helping me into the tub. I'd never been naked around anyone but Lily, so it was telling that I didn't bat an eye at it now. Maybe the dark fae court was beginning to rub off on me. Or maybe I was simply too tired to care.

My mind drifted to an image of the lovers in the staircase. Thank goodness the water was almost scalding and I could blame the reddening of my skin on it.

The water was heaven, and every muscle in my body rejoiced. Usually bathing consisted of a shared bucket between Lily and me, with fervent scrubbing in front of the fire. She would help me with my hair and I with hers. It was a thing of duty, never of pleasure.

This bath, however, was *pure* pleasure. My skin tingled at the heat and muscles I hadn't known were tight managed to relax. Valerie sat next to me, her smile ever-present. "See? Worth it."

"So worth it," I sighed in agreement.

The servant with the basket pulled a stool up behind me. I listened as she pulled out bottles and vials. Within seconds, the clean, pungent yet floral scent of lavender filled the steamy air. A lump of emotion formed in my throat. Lavender had been the scent my mother had loved best.

When her fingers began to work into my hair, I stiffened. "You don't have to do that," I said, reaching for my scalp. "You've done so much already."

"My lady," the maid said softly, "it's my job. And my pleasure. Your hair is so *red*. It's like you were made for this court."

She worked her fingertips determinedly along my scalp, massaging in the soap. Her comment triggered a tightness in my chest. Old wounds being reopened. My hair had been one of Kyrie's favorite things to tease me about.

There was an occasional orange-haired human, but for the most part, we were deemed too weak and pitiful to have color. Drab skin, boring hair, no

fun or defining features. Lily's auburn hair had just enough brown to keep her from being a target.

My red had turned me into easy pickings.

Kyrie had teased that I was a bastard with a fae father who wanted nothing to do with me. Sometimes she'd say the gods must have made my hair red to let every fae know how pitiful and awful I was. A scarlet mark against my character.

To hear it *praised*...

The women worked efficiently. My hair was soaped, oiled, and combed out. My skin was gently scoured, all the dust and sweat and stink of fear and travel scrubbed clean. My nails were filed and my skin rubbed with more of the lavender scent.

I don't know how they'd known it was my favorite, but having the scent surround me strengthened me and reminded me of my family. The sweeter floral scents popular in Silvermoore had never appealed to me.

When they finished, I was helped from the tub and wrapped in soft linen that seemed to kiss my skin as it wicked away the moisture. I had never experienced anything more decadent in my life.

My stomach rumbled, ruining the tranquil air in the room. I shot Valerie an apologetic smile. "I don't suppose food is next?"

"I'll get right on it."

Before she could, though, the door to my room was thrown open again, and I briefly wondered if, once queen, I could make it necessary for people to knock. The current queen stormed in, though, and my stomach flipped. I might not live long enough to become queen. Her face was like glass, smooth and beautiful and sharp. She pinned me with her stare and I felt like one of the animals that had been hunted and stuffed, preserved on the walls in Silvermoore's rooms.

Beside me, all three women dropped into a deep curtsy. I tried to do the same, but the linen was wrapped in such a way my legs were bound and all I could manage was a stiff, awkward bow.

"Thane is cursing us," she said, words flying at me like a whip. "There's mediocrity, and then there's *you*."

I kept my head lowered. My necklace was tucked into the front of the linen and I was grateful for the coverage. For some reason, I wanted to keep as much of myself hidden from this woman as I could.

Because I was focused on the floor, I saw her gold-adorned slippers as

she moved close. One fine claw caught me under my chin, lifting my face until I was forced to meet her stare. My insides quaked at the malice I found there.

“Understand one thing,” she breathed, “I am in charge here. Thane may play his games and dangle you around to taunt me, but I’m not taking the bait. You’re a human. A stupid one, at that. Let’s hope you’re smart enough to hear my warning. Stay. Out. Of. My. Way.”

A cough sounded behind us and I wanted to step free from her but found my body paralyzed.

A lithe fae stood in the doorway. Their feet brushed close to the floor, their wings were moving so fast I could hear the hum as they hovered there. “Prince Thane requests Lady Isla’s presence for dinner.” They offered a tilt of their head and then flew off.

The queen chuckled. “Well. Just think about what I’ve said.”

As if I could forget it. Like I could erase the sour feeling that remained after terror had inked itself into my bones. Today had been a trick. Once again, I’d fallen for the sweetness. Eagerly lapped up the honey.

The queen was reminding me of the trap. It was dangerous here. Deadly.

And I had no idea how to navigate it.

“Best to get her ready, my queen,” Valerie said. “With your permission, of course.”

The queen stepped away, her hand flicking the air in dismissal. “Fine. Let him play with his toy.” She turned toward Valerie and added in a tone that had my gut twisting, “Why don’t you dress her in the current court style. I’m sure Thane would appreciate it.”

Valerie paled but nodded. “As you wish it.”

Somehow, I had the impression I wasn’t going to enjoy what came next.

## THANE

There were candles on the table, the low flickering light showcasing plates of roasted meats, skillet-charred vegetables, baskets with steaming breads, and bowls of fruits. There were two place settings. Two glasses for wine.

I'd already drunk half a bottle while I waited.

I hated waiting almost as much as I hated Blyth for coming up with this dinner idea. He'd given me a spiel about minding my temper, about trying to encourage Isla to talk about herself, and—the kicker—reminding me to actually listen to her.

He was so caught up in his matchmaking plans that I was beginning to think he'd forgotten our purpose. I wasn't going to fall in love with Isla. I didn't have room for love in my life. My focus was on the future of my kingdom. Its security, its bountifulness, and its reputation.

None of those things required having feelings for Isla.

Yet she'd been on my mind for the entirety of the day. Every meeting I'd been forced to endure, each bout of sword practice, and throughout reading petitions and requests, I'd been sidetracked by thoughts of her.

What was worse, I couldn't decide what infuriated me more: that she was considering refusing me, or that I found myself drawn to the challenge of her. As if some part of me did want to get to know her better.

Ludicrous.

We were to be business partners. That would be best. It wouldn't be so terrible to be wed to her. Blyth wasn't wrong—Isla was stunningly beautiful, clever, and adaptable. All traits I admired quite a bit and which would carry her far in Ragalith.

So I would have a queen, but it wouldn't mean anything. Just another hurdle towards keeping Ragalith safe.

I waved my fingers and a shadow moved, a fae coming forth to refill my

glass. The deep red of the wine caught the light from the candles, shining a scarlet that reminded me of Isla's hair.

"Lady Isla has arrived," a voice called out. Without thinking, I stood and moved to pull out her chair, removing the calm image of power I'd intended to project by remaining in place.

Then she appeared and my fists stayed clenched for another reason entirely.

Despite the low lights in the room, she was radiant. Her skin was dewy and bright. Her cheeks were rosy, a furious blush that cascaded down her neck. Isla's hair had been braided up, showcasing her long neck and slim shoulders.

Gods, and her outfit.

The noblewomen of the Ragalith court loved provocative clothing. Our females knew the power their bodies had and used it to their advantage. Current fashion involved little more than a cloth circling the breasts and a skirt belted to the hips, one thigh slit almost to the waist.

Isla was wearing a breast binding made from the same fabric my tunic for the ball had been made of. The fabric drank in the light, the tiny black diamonds winking like burning stars. Next to that black, her skin was like milk in moonlight. I wondered if it would taste as sweet and creamy as it looked.

The skirt was a deep green, the forest at night. It reminded me of wild hunts and wolves crying to the moon. The color suited her, despite her clear discomfort of being shown off in such a way.

Stepping over to her, I held out my hand. "I wouldn't have thought you'd choose the stylings of my court so readily."

Her mouth pressed thin and tight. "It was chosen for me. By your mother."

"Stepmother," I corrected sharply. Isla winced and I wished I'd softened the word.

"Yes, well. She chose the outfit." She was stiff and looking over my shoulder, her jaw clenched. So my stepmother was going to try to interfere. To tear Isla apart before Isla stepped into her queendom.

I'd also taken fashion advice, putting on a long, navy coat over my tunic for dinner. I shrugged out of it now, enjoying being down to just a tunic. The stuffy formal clothes were my least favorite part of being royalty. That and having to suffer through my father, his wife, and his advisors as they drove

our kingdom to ruin.

“You look lovely,” I said, startled by how much I meant it. “And I wouldn’t mind staring at you in that outfit all evening. But you also look uncomfortable. May I?” I held my jacket wide. Her eyes flared, but Isla turned and stepped back, her arms slipping into the sleeves of the coat.

It swallowed her. Completely dwarfed her. It was cute, her petite body swimming in my clothes. Laughing to myself, I reached down to help her roll the cuffs of the arms high enough so her hands would be free to eat. “Better?”

Isla was still pink, but her mouth relaxed just enough to lift in a small smile. “Much. Thank you.”

“Shall we dine?”

I led her to the chair I’d pulled out for her. She was eyeing the food with such ravenous delight I realized we hadn’t stopped to feed her since she’d arrived. If she’d been a citizen of Ragalith, I’d never have let something like that go.

Because she was Silvermoorian? It had never crossed my mind.

I was going to have to get better if I wanted any chance of gaining the pendant’s powers.

“Go on. Eat,” I offered.

She dived in. It was clear Valerie had not covered dining etiquette yet. She was lifting and scooping from plates with abandon, using her hands at times to just pull hunks of meat off or tear bread.

Then Isla saw me watching her. She slowed, staring at her food, at the table, unsure of how to proceed. With care, she picked up a piece of bread and bit off the tiniest nibble. Next, she took her fork in hand and attempted a dainty bite.

She was trying to be formal. And failing miserably. This meal would take forever and go nowhere if I let it continue.

“Isla, eat however you please. There’s time enough for proper later. You must be starving.”

Despite my words, she hesitated. As if I were testing her. But her stomach must have won, because she began to dig in again. I experienced a strange pleasure in seeing her shuck aside decorum and simply feed herself as she needed. In many ways, that was more aligned with the spirit of Ragalith than all of the nobility’s formalities combined.

I sipped at my wine and ate sparingly, far too intrigued for anything else.

After her second plateful, Isla began to slow. One of the shoulders of my

jacket slipped down, exposing her collarbone. “Was today okay?” I asked, trying not to stare at her shoulder, at areas that begged for lips and teeth. “Is Valerie acceptable?”

Isla cleared her throat and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin before inclining her head. “Today was an education, for sure. And I adore Valerie.” As soon as she’d said it, she stiffened. “Please don’t take her away.”

“Why would I?”

“Because you want something from me. Because you’re the prince of the dark fae.”

“Which means I’d take something away from you that you desire?”

“You seemed willing to do whatever it took to get your way earlier, when you spoke with the queen.” There was a tremor in her voice. I’d been livid with Mara, but it hadn’t occurred to me that Isla would think me capable of that animosity toward her.

Of course, I should be capable of it. My fingernails scratched at the leather of my pants. No. I was capable, I just didn’t believe Isla worthy of that level of spite.

This was what I told myself.

“You haven’t done anything to deserve that.”

“But I could,” she guessed. “And then it would be true, wouldn’t it? All the rumors.”

“Did you see anything today to suggest that’s true? Torture and the like?”

There was a deeper flush that reached her ears that piqued my interest. “I didn’t see any of the torturing.” She was leaving something out. I could feel it.

“No torturing, but you saw something? Something that confirmed your worst fears about how awful and monstrous we are?”

Suddenly, Isla’s attention was everywhere but on me. She sucked in her lower lip. Teasing her was fun. Seeing her ridiculous responses to things she’d clearly never been exposed to.

“No,” she lied. “I didn’t see anything.”

Something she said earlier tickled at my mind. As I pulled it to the front, I wanted to laugh. *Hedonism incarnate*. We weren’t *that* terrible. But I could imagine what Isla saw that had her so shaken. “You saw someone fucking,” I said.

She leaned back in her chair as if she could dodge the statement. But I saw the sweat beginning to bead on her forehead and the wildness to her blue

eyes. “That’s an awful thing to say,” she managed.

“Which part is awful? The *fucking*?”

Isla’s hands flew to her mouth. “I can’t talk about this. Please.”

Disappointment chimed lightly in me. Teasing her was engaging. Yet... if I wanted to coax her over, I needed to listen. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But I feel I should warn you *that* is a sight that may prove common around here.”

Isla swallowed hard, picked up her wine glass, and drained it halfway in one go. “I’m sure I can grow accustomed to it.”

We let a few moments of silence sit with us, a welcome guest at a table of two who didn’t quite know what to do with the other.

It was Isla who shattered the quiet. “What do you say about Silvermoorians?”

*They’re cunning and callous. They’re greedy and hungry and don’t care who suffers. They, as a people, enjoy pulling the wings from things and watching them die. They take and take and never apologize.* “We say that they’re rigid assholes who care more about rules than what’s right,” I managed. “And that they hoard magic like it’s treasure instead of using it like a gift.”

“The rules part isn’t that far off,” she offered in a soft voice. Then she smiled at me, and something caught in my chest.

This wasn’t the direction I needed to be going in.

“Isla, I’d like to try to remove the pendant again.” I leaned back in my chair, fingers steepled below my chin. “Not because I dislike you or don’t wish to marry you, but our court can be difficult. It’s day one and you’ve been shocked by our ways and are uncomfortable in our clothing. Marriage would mean the rest of your life here. Witnessing this. Participating in it.”

The candlelight seemed to dim, her face shadowing with concern. But she nodded. “I’m not sure I belong here or understand the rules. And I’m never sure what’s the truth and what’s a trap.”

“That just means you understand the rules plenty. In this moment, I speak truth. I want to try to remove the necklace and I swear to you on my mother’s life, if it leaves you willingly, I will make sure you are compensated for the rest of your days. You would not need to remain here.”

It was my turn to drink deep as I tried to ignore the sliver of me that had latched onto the idea of marrying her not being appalling. Perhaps even



something I could enjoy. The glass clinked as I set it on the table, empty again. “May I try?”

“Will you still want me for a wife if it stays on?”

Would I want her? The idea played in my mind, for I knew truth was absolutely necessary in that moment. Just as the pendant kept her from being able to be persuaded, it may also let her know if I spoke falsely.

Truthfully, I was coming around to the idea of Isla, if only because she was so fresh and different from the courtiers I’d grown accustomed to. “I would still want to marry,” I said finally, “because I can’t afford to wait around for my own power as king to grow. I need the pendant’s aid.”

Isla looked far from convinced and cleared her throat. “It is difficult for me to trust all this.”

“Have you been mistreated? Hurt since you were here?”

Her eyebrow shot up. “Not in the way you think. But this world is so strange. My small life in Silvermoore was difficult, but I understood it. It was a trap I was born into. You’re offering me something that feels like a new trap, one I can’t truly prepare for, and you want me to walk in willingly.”

“How shall I convince you it isn’t a trap?”

If anything, her reticence was something I admired, as frustrating as the situation was. Isla was far smarter than I’d assumed. There was hope for her yet. More importantly, though, I needed her to say yes, and forcing the issue would do me no favors.

“I’m not sure. I know I should say yes. I don’t think I have much of a choice, really. What was it you said? If I don’t, I’m free to go, with no money and no connections?”

I had said that, hadn’t I? “If you say no, even at the altar, I’ll give you aid when you leave. So long as I can keep the pendant. And should you marry and I am able to wield the pendant as I need, I swear to you that we can take stock of your marriage and make sure you have whatever it is you need or want.”

It was far more than I’d have promised any other woman. Because any other woman would have been happy enough simply being queen.

“You wouldn’t kick me out? If I said no?”

My hands clenched, knowing she was teetering on the edge. “I would assist you, yes.”

“Okay.” There was no certainty in the word, but Isla’s gaze didn’t waver. “Okay, I’ll marry you. I think. For now, we’ll proceed that way. And you

may try to remove the pendant.”

Standing, I moved to her side. I pulled her chair out and offered her a hand. Isla took it, her palm small in mine. But not weak; there was a dexterity to her grip, strength, and deftness that no doubt came from years of labor.

We’d reached an agreement. All the anger and animosity I’d built up over the years had dissipated while next to her. I was used to people challenging me and forcing me to be cruel to get what I wanted. Isla wasn’t forcing my hand in such a way.

She’d taken my hand instead.

Standing this close to her, I could smell the lavender I’d requested. She smelled like fields and sunshine and the fierce determination to grow in abundance. It *fit* her.

It was hard to keep my magic suppressed. I was used to using it when I wanted something, and I wanted the pendant so badly I could taste it. But maybe it was defending Isla against the magic, not against me.

Slowly, I lifted my hands to cradle her neck. Tracing the fine links of the chain with my fingertips, I dragged slowly to her nape. Isla shivered, her mouth falling open. A quick glance down and I caught her nipples hardening like diamonds under the cloth wrapped around her breasts. Heat unspooled in my belly.

I brushed a thumb over the clasp, rubbing at the skin and curls that had escaped her braids. Isla’s skin was warm like sunlight and soft as velvet.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she leaned closer to me. There was a pull between our two bodies, like we were a conduit. The same feeling as when we’d danced. It was a heady thing and I pondered over the source.

With care, I lifted the clasp and made to unclip it, only to have a surge of power push through me. My muscles squeezed and clenched, pulled taut by magic. The power gripped me so hard I wanted to scream but couldn’t. My joints creaked and seemed to freeze over, but no pain. Not like there’d been in the carriage.

My heart began to race, pounding like it had to escape.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak. I was locked in with this, this sensation, this grip of power that threatened to overwhelm my senses.

Isla placed her hand on my chest. How was she not feeling this? How was she so unaffected? This close, there was no way she’d miss the rapid-fire pace of my pulse.

Her brows knit tight and she tilted her head and stared at me in wonder.

My gaze was snared by two brilliant green eyes, glowing and crackling with magic. Her face was smooth and without emotion, her skin luminous like the moon. Every inch of her screamed *power*.

*Please*, I begged, hating my mind for the weakness. Not that she'd hear it, but still. *Please, it's too strong*.

"I know," she said. "I'm...I can see you, Thane."

Isla spoke with wonder and without fear. Her irises seemed to dance and shift as if playing out scenes from a movie. I was terrified of what she was seeing.

"Oh, Thane. You're so lonely. And you crave power like it's air. But power can't fill empty holes and misusing it will make all your plans crumble. You'll need something else to save your people."

I tried to speak. I tried so damn hard. Not once in all of my life had I felt so completely helpless. I hated every second of it. I despised what she was saying, as if she were in my mind, my heart, and reading me like a book.

"We'll be a good team," Isla said with certainty. "I didn't understand...but now..."

She pushed herself up on tiptoes and pulled my face toward her. Her palms held my cheeks with firm but gentle warmth. Isla brushed a kiss to my forehead and time stopped. The hold froze everything, pausing me in that moment so that all I knew was the soft press of her lips on my skin.

It felt as though her kiss was etching itself into me.

Then she moved down and planted a kiss on my mouth. It was soft and warm, her lips slanting to fit mine. The exhalation of her breath tasted sweet, and a hunger stirred low in me, a squeezing need. The kiss was slow and searching, like she was trying to read my history through touch and taste.

I wanted to pull back.

I wanted to lean in and deepen it.

I wanted...

Suddenly, Isla began to shake and the magical hold released me. I gasped and barely managed to catch her as she sagged. Her body was limp in my arms, her eyes shut and moving rapidly under her pale lids.

*What in the hell was that?*

The cupbearer was standing close, gawping, as Blyth ran into the room. "What just happened?" he shouted. I did not appreciate that it came out as an accusation.

"I think the pendant just played a joke on me," I croaked. It hurt to speak,

my vocal cords still tight from the power.

I'd known the pendant would be powerful. But I'd never felt or experienced anything like *that*. Her words bounced around in the back of my mind. Something about how I had holes in me?

Only the one left by my mother's death, I thought. One made massive by my father tossing our kingdom to Silvermoore like a bone to a dog. Worse, he'd convinced the nobility and generals to go along with it. Yes, I'd be king. But it would take time to convince and rally the very people who paid for the troops and the taxes which supported the kingdom. I couldn't just sit on the throne and immediately make my will known and have it followed through.

Not without power. Power like that which had just seared through me and this mysterious human woman I held in my arm. It had hurt, but there'd been a connection there, a marrow-deep linking that went deeper than the tingling and tugs up until that point. I felt certain the pendant wanted us together, which had to mean it would share power, right?

It would be a challenge to learn how to wield it.

Her hair spilled through my fingers like flames as I cradled her head. Isla had seemed like a curse because she was bonded to something that should have been mine. Now, though, she was something new. A puzzle to solve.

"Take her to her quarters," I ordered. Blyth reached down and scooped Isla up. "Be careful with her," I warned.

His eyebrow shot up. "Oh?"

Scowling, I waved him off. "The pendant, stupid. It's feisty and I would hate to see you hurt because you aided her."

He suppressed a chuckle. "Uh huh. Sure."

He left with my future bride. The carrier of the saving grace for my people.

It had to be some sensation that remained from the pendant, but as Blyth carried her away, there was a yearning in me.

Well, that made sense. I'd never been so close to my desires coming to fruition.

# ISLA

I woke up with bizarre dreams slipping through my mind like water in cupped hands and a headache reverberating through my skull. I should open my eyes and get up, but I lingered, lying still, listening to the sound of my own breathing and acknowledging the ache in my chest. There had been something in the dream, a terrible understanding that had seemed vital, and yet nothing remained for me to ruminate on.

What had happened?

There was a surrealness to the soft bed, to the way my body hummed and buzzed. It became clear I wouldn't remember the dreams that left me feeling pangs of longing for... for something?

"You're awake." Prince Thane's voice waved away the remaining fog, anchoring me firmly in reality. A reality where I was sleeping in a bed, with him in the room.

"No, I'm not," I groaned, hoping he'd speak again so I could gauge how close he was.

"It's been three days, Isla. Our wedding is in two. I'd assumed you'd like to rise and learn how to be queen in the short time left."

That had me sitting bolt upright. The red canopy curtains were familiar, as was the furniture surrounding the bed. I was back in my room.

I was also in a full sleeping gown, not the slinky shreds of fabric they'd dared to call clothing. It should bother me more that I'd been naked and changed, but there were more pressing matters. Namely, a wedding in *two days*.

Thane was seated across the room, close to the fireplace. He looked regal, his clothing unrumpled and his gaze sharp. I found myself admiring the curve of his horns and elegant cheekbones. Another cause for relief. He hadn't been in here while I slept. Frowning, I swung my legs over the edge.

His gaze shifted to my exposed ankle and calf, then darted back up to my face. While he remained impassive in appearance, I felt the weight of his attention on me. Something had shifted, though. He was softer around the edges. I found I liked this version of him quite a bit.

Still. “Did you say three days? I’ve been asleep for three days? What happened?”

Interest danced in his golden eyes. “You don’t remember?”

My nose scrunched as I tried to. “We were eating together. I was wearing the most absurd outfit. You tried to take the pendant again?”

Thane’s face shuttered. “I *asked* you if I could attempt to remove it. No magic, no force.”

“Huh.” A beat later. “What happened?”

“The pendant made it clear that it would not be removed. Not yet, at least.” His tone was wire-tight. “Still, it was an enlightening attempt. You truly don’t recall?”

I didn’t. But something had remained. Not a memory, per se, but a sense of recognition? Of tenderness, even, for Thane. It felt as if I knew him, the real him. Though I couldn’t find any reason for the endearment. Certainly, he’d shown me two sides of his personality and it was frustrating to try to decipher which was real.

And yet...

I raised my fingers to my lips. There was a sensation there, like I’d kissed him. But I wouldn’t have. It was absurd. Perhaps my dreams had been even wilder than I’d thought.

Thane rose with the grace of the fae, the kind of otherworldly smoothness that could steal your breath away. “Valerie will be in soon. If you feel well enough, she’ll help you with your lessons again.”

My chest squeezed. He planned to leave. It would be wonderful to see Valerie again and certainly less emotionally frayed but...“Oh.”

My hands yearned to reach for him. I clasped them in my lap instead, not daring to move. What wasn’t he telling me? What had happened with the pendant? The world seemed to have tilted on its axis without my knowing how. “How long did you stay?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Thane stared into the fire, unmoving. The lines of him were lithe and strong. His shoulders broad, his chest strong. Long rangy arms that looked capable of long hours of swordplay. Slim hips and strong thighs. His profile was angular, his chin jutted out and fine.

I imagined kissing his chin, lips pressed to that soft, perfect point.

Then I shook my head. This was madness. Prince Thane was beautiful, yes. But I thought of the queen. Who knew how ruthless he was? Who knew how far he'd go or who he'd hurt to get what he wanted? I had suspicions.

It was dangerous enough to marry him for an alliance.

It could be deadly to fall for him.

He moved quickly, suddenly, and I jumped. Thane tossed a bundle. It flew through the air and landed with a soft *whomp* on the bedcovers next to me. A bound bundle of letters. "From your sister," he said as headed for the door.

I stared, then, understanding what had been said, scooped them up with sloppy desperation. *Lily*.

I was already tearing into one when Thane paused at the door. "Three days," he said, before walking out. I was only half listening, already looking at the pictures Lily had drawn for me.

She knew I couldn't read. She could, but only barely. Enough to run a ledger, mostly, and place orders for materials we needed. When we'd been children, we'd sometimes drawn for each other, creating enough of a "language" to send messages.

The papers I held were a mix of her drawings, but there were words there, too. My brow wrinkled. Why had she written anything? What had she written?

I was trying to decipher when Valerie arrived. From most of the sketches, I'd determined Lily was worried I was locked up. She was terrified of the dark fae, sure I was already being tortured by the Ragalithians. There were drawings that looked as if she were asking me if I could escape.

"You're crying." Valerie sank onto the mattress next to me and handed over a handkerchief. "What are these?"

Taking the proffered cloth, I dabbed at my cheeks. "Letters from my sister."

"I thought you couldn't read."

"Look." I handed her one. "She's drawn for me. There are words there, too, but those I don't know."

Valerie's face grew shuttered as she looked over the pile. When she'd viewed every letter, she speared me with her orange stare. "Your sister has a foul mouth. She's written all sorts of horrible suggestions for ways we fae can insert things into our bottoms."

My jaw fell open. “She didn’t.”

Valerie only nodded. “She must have assumed someone would try to read her correspondence and wanted to leave a special message just for them.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Please, don’t take it personally, she —”

“She sounds fun,” Valerie said with a grin. “I think I like her. Shall I help you write a return letter later?”

Well, damn. I needed the handkerchief a second time, mopping away the happy tears that started to flow at her offer. “That would be incredible.”

“Good. Now, let’s get you dressed. We have a lot to do.”

I scooted off the bed and allowed her to start pulling at the ties of my nightgown, helping me disrobe. “Like what?”

“Like picking out things for the wedding and getting you fitted for your dress.”

“Oh.” Hearing it didn’t make it any more real to me.

“Oh,” Valerie repeated, mocking me with a wink. “We’re going into town, obviously. You’ll get to see the village properly.”

Twisting, I stared at her. “I’m allowed out?”

“You’re our future queen,” she said, going to a large wardrobe. She spoke loudly, her voice carrying. “If you’re going to run, I suppose you should try it today. But if not...well, you live here now. You’ve been claimed by Ragalith and by Prince Thane. You’re allowed to come and go as you please.”

Valerie crossed back to me, holding a handsome dress of dark red linen, the simple cloth made daring by its rich dye. It was simple in its cut and design, but when she helped me slip it on, I found it to be soft as a cloud and almost as light. I fingered the fabric, marveling. We had nice fabrics in Silvermoore, but I’d only ever stitched them. I’d never worn them. They were for the nobility.

It might take my entire lifetime to get used to luxury.



\* \* \*



Three guards accompanied us to the village. When I'd first arrived, the curtains of the carriage had been pulled tight and I'd been too wrapped up in fear to sneak a peek.

As we made our way down long, winding paths, it became clear the guards weren't for anything more than looking official. Wildflowers sprang from the sides of the paths like confetti, bursting with color.

Valerie led me around a bend, and I saw the village. It was so much *denser* than I'd expected. In Silvermoore, our village had been cottages and buildings dotted around the main roads, but most of the nobility resided either in the castle or in their estates in the country. It was a busy village, but not large.

This was *large*. The buildings went up two, three stories and were pressed tight together. Fae and humans milled about the roads and alleys, their voices a clattering noise. Children ran and darted between legs, laughing and teasing.

The gaiety was so strange to witness that it took a while for my mind to catch up with what I was seeing. The variety of clothing alone was enough cause for gawking. Mixed and matched fabrics and embellishments were spattered through the crowds. There was no identifiable fashion trend, unlike the nobles I'd been used to clothing.

A riot of color and coverage. The fae themselves were just as wild, with horns and tails and wings galore. Everything was showcased, the diversity boggling. They pooled in crowds and weaved around vendors. Some shouted and argued while others teased or embraced.

I saw no soldiers posted about. No one standing around, ready to wrangle things back into order should it spin out of control.

"There are so many of you." I couldn't stop counting in my mind, only to lose track because of the constant shift and movement of day-to-day commerce. The common fae of Silvermoore didn't mingle and dawdle in the streets. The nobility took carriages everywhere, covered and veiled so they need not look at the rabble.

Valerie patted my shoulder. "We've got a large population here, for sure. But many of these are newcomers. Our borders haven't been safe for quite some time, and the towns and villages closest to the castles are being swamped by those trying to escape the dangers of the borders."

I wanted to ask her more about that. What was so dangerous that it threatened the fae? But before I could formulate my question into coherent

words, I noticed we were being followed. As we made our way onto the cobblestone street entrance, locals stopped what they were doing to pause and stare at us.

No, not at us. At me.

Children now danced around me, fingers brushing the swirling cloth of my skirt, their high, mischievous laughter making me smile. But I wanted to duck into the shadows, or have a hood, something to get me out of the spotlight, if only because of a lifetime of knowing that being noticed was never a good thing. It was only the curiosity I saw reflected in the faces around me that allowed me to rally.

Following Valerie closely, I took to watching my feet for fear of staring too much.

She tugged me into a shop, and I was instantly relieved to be away from the crowd outside. The smell was the first thing I noticed. Flowers. But not the carefully cultivated, heavily scented flowers I'd been used to in Silvermoore. These were fresh and bright. The colors grabbed my attention next. Not just purples and whites greeted me. The shop was a cacophony of color—oranges and reds vying with deep blues and pale yellows.

I reached out and brushed the petals of a flower I didn't recognize. "These are lovely," I murmured.

Valerie pressed a finger to her lip as she studied them. "Hmm. I like them as well. The red is like your hair. We should mix in some oranges and maybe some of the light green sprays over there."

"What are we mixing them for?"

She shot me a look that screamed *Are-you-serious* before answering. "Your wedding. Prince Thane already contacted the proprietors here to open a line of credit for the wedding. The coffers have been flung open for you. Whatever you'd like, you may order. We're just picking out the colors."

It was such a normal response, but I struggled to grasp it. Coasters flung open? I didn't know how to comprehend not having to count each and every copper piece. Furthermore, they were being opened for me. I was allowed to choose for my wedding, despite the circumstances which had led to it. "Um, right."

Again, I wondered which Thane was the real one. If it was the softer one, then why was his need for power so fierce? There was a tickle in my belly like I should know, but when I tried to grasp the thread, it disappeared.

"So, these are the ones you want?" Valerie pointed to the flowers we'd

been touching. There'd never been a time in my life when I'd planned a wedding, not even Lily's. Humans didn't have large ordeals. We didn't get special dresses or celebrations. You went to the town magister and he declared you married, then added the new relationship to the town's history.

So I had no clue what flowers to pick, or how I was supposed to act. I was still reeling from simply *being* here, plucked from the life I'd resigned myself to and plopped into the heart of the realm my people had lived in fear of.

But I needed to try. Thane had been there for me when I woke up. He'd brought me letters from my sister and it sounded as if I'd be able to write her back. I'd learn *how* to write her back. I wasn't cut off like I'd thought, and the difference that made...

It was everything.

He was the source of many biting comments and fear-filled moments. But he was also the person opening doors for me that I'd thought would be locked forever.

The least I could do was try to figure out my new role, my new home, and the things expected of me. *And try not to get killed while I do it.*

"I like the red. And the orange. But we should pick something that will make Prince Thane look good as well. Perhaps these?" I pointed to tight, small roses, their petals a rich burgundy. "What are these called?"

"Blood Drop roses." Valerie pulled a stem free. I liked how the small size of the buds somehow emphasized the depth of their color. They were roses that could disappear if you wanted them to, or punch out front and demand all of your attention.

Much like Thane, a man of shadows and power. "That's perfect," I said. "I want those."

"Excellent choice, Princess," came a voice from behind. I turned to see two lovely fae standing close, pleased grins on their almost identical faces. One male, one female (I thought, at least), with long, thin antlers that curved up and over their silvery hair.

"I'm not a princess," I argued.

They tipped their heads at the exact same time, like mirrors. "You will be, though. When you marry the prince. And soon you'll be our queen." They bowed simultaneously, deep and slow. When they rose, they added "We are Saleen and Heda, brother and sister and the owners of this shop. We're deeply honored by your patronage."

Brother and sister. The words sparked a pang in my heart that made me

long for Lily. “I used to work with my sister,” I said. “Lily.”

The one who’d tipped their head at “Saleen” smiled. “A lovely name, though we’re biased.”

Heda grabbed a bunch of lilies I hadn’t spied yet. They were a brilliant orange, covered in fiery spots. “Perhaps we can use these in the arrangements as well? As a nod to your sibling, a way to have her by your side on your special day?”

The lump in my throat was too large and cumbersome to swallow down. What was this? Where was this kindness coming from? These fae didn’t even know me! And yes, I supposed I was to be their queen, but I’d assumed the Ragalith people would share the same resentment Thane’s stepmother had.

I was a human, a commoner.

And they were generous enough to think of my sister? Of helping me feel like she was present on my wedding day?

Quickly, I dabbed away the tears threatening to spill. Concern skated across the twins’ features. “Did we overstep, my lady? If so, we apologize,” Heda said with another bow.

“No! No. I’m touched. I miss my sister and I am still adjusting to Ragalith. Your realm isn’t what I expected. Adding the lilies is a kindness I’ll always remember. I’m grateful. Thank you so much.”

Suddenly the shop, which had offered respite from the stares of the villagers, was stifling. I looked to Valerie, as panic threatened to overtake me. “Is there somewhere we could get a drink?”

She pressed her lips together in concern and nodded. “Of course.” She turned to Heda and Saleen. “I’ll send a messenger with the quantities. Will that work?”

“Of course.”

I was ready to run when Saleen touched my shoulder gently. I froze. “Take this with you. I hope having her close brings you comfort,” he said as he tucked one of the lilies into my hair.

Heda moved to me and pinned a spray of the Blood Drops on the front of my gown. “And take this. Keep the prince close to your heart. Both of you deserve it.”

It was too much. I tried to smile, but had to look away before I cried. Gods knew what they’d think, seeing their future queen weeping at their kindness. Valerie wrapped an arm around my waist like we were close friends and I leaned into her comfort. Outside, a small host of people waited.

Some pretended to be busy as soon as we stepped into the sunlight.

Others didn't bother to hide their curiosity.

Fortunately, Valerie pressed me forward gently, and we walked through with ease. She was smiling and saying hellos. I knew I should be doing something similar, but it was all I could manage at the moment to keep myself together.

Finally, she led me down a small alley and through a nondescript door. Inside was a near-empty space, with only five tables on the floor. There was a patron at a bar, drinking something from a horn, the barkeep, and a woman sweeping.

"Go. Sit," she ordered.

My feet carried me to a chair. I plopped down and watched as she ordered something at the bar. The bartender shot me one awed look, but then got to business. Valerie joined me.

"We're getting drinks," she said. "Strong ones, because you seem to need it. But we're also going to talk, because you've been strange today."

A startled giggle erupted from me. "Today's been strange for me."

We waited as the bartender brought over two glasses. Inside was a dark amber liquid, jewel-like inside the crystal. Valerie took up her glass and nodded to mine. "This is for sipping *only*. When I say 'strong,' I mean too much of this too quickly could knock a bugbear on its ass."

"Bugbears aren't real," I muttered, eyeing the liquid with slightly less enthusiasm.

"If you say so," Valerie teased before tasting her drink. I watched her. She truly did sip it, then set the glass down. Her face relaxed and the corners of her black lips lifted. "Ooph, that's good. It will take us at least an hour to finish this. We don't really *have* an hour, but you seem to need it. So we're taking it, and you're using it to get whatever's rattling around in your mind *out*."

I'd asked for a drink and she'd made it happen. I'd clearly needed space and Valerie had led me to the perfect place. It was dim inside, and quiet, and no one was staring. I was allowed to just sit for a moment.

The least I could do was honor her request.

First, though, I sipped. A flood of honeyed fire slipped over my tongue and singed its way down my throat. Spluttering, I set the glass down a bit too hard and some of the amber liquid sloshed onto the table. Part of me expected it to burn through the wood's varnish. "Goodness!"

Valerie was laughing lightly at me. “It’s probably good we are doing this practice run. Starfire will be served at the wedding for certain, and you will want to be prepared for it.”

Starfire. It felt like an apt name for the sweet gut punch of a drink. Already there was a loosening in my chest—and my tongue—as the warmth spread through me like dye through raw fabric.

“Did Thane tell you why I’m here?”

My lady-in-waiting shook her head. “No, but Blyth did. He said you were banished because they thought you were a witch.”

“Yes. It was absurd. I’ve never had a lick of magic in my life.” Now that I knew anything odd might have come from the pendant, my mind latched on to how all who knew of it had reacted. Something in me decided not to mention the pendant unless Valerie brought it up first. “If I’d had magic, why would I have stayed a seamstress, barely making ends meet?”

“Fae are impetuous when it comes to humans wielding magic,” Valerie admitted. “There’s some dark history there.”

Queen Eldritch had said as much. She’d used it to justify how humans were treated. Which, I supposed, was a good way to introduce why I was struggling so much. “I only discovered that at the time of my banishing. How humans had stolen and wielded magic in an attempt to decimate the fae.”

Valerie scoffed. “Oh, that. Half the time they were acting under the orders of the fae. No, that had been about territory. The accords were a way to stop the fighting. The Silvermoorians insisted that all the magic items humans used be taken and destroyed. They never could bear to share. As if the jewelry were the only ways humans could have magic.”

I was about to take another sip but stopped with the rim an inch from my lips, my forehead furrowing. “What? Humans don’t have magic.”

“Not many anymore, it’s true. But a few do. Blyth, for one. There are several witches and wizards in Ragalith’s army.”

She said it so casually. Witches and wizards. In the *army*.

The exact thing that had King and Queen Eldritch worried. “But they—I was banished just under suspicion of being a witch. They wanted to execute me first, but then—”

“Thank goodness Prince Thane claimed you when he did.” Valerie smirked. “He must have seen something special in you, Isla. I mean, he’s always one to poke and pester the light fae, but I’ve never seen him go so far out of his way for a woman before.”

A low heat stoked up in my belly. “I don’t think that’s why he saved me. And I’m still not sure I’ve been saved.”

A long moment went by. Valerie’s face twisted and contorted as she seemed to pass through a wide range of emotions. “Is that what your weirdness is about? Do you not want to marry the prince?”

The incredulity in Valerie’s tone would have been funny any other time. I took another sip. It was getting easier to swallow the heady liquid, and I liked how it freed up the tight places inside me. I wasn’t opposed to marrying Thane any longer, but I couldn’t scrub his ultimatum from my mind. That first day he’d given me twenty-four hours to choose him or nothing. “I don’t have a choice, Valerie.”

“Um, do you not remember our one rule regarding relationships? Consent *always* matters. If you don’t want to marry him, then don’t.”

“And go where? And do what? I’m banished in one kingdom. I have no money. No family.” I almost said *and I have something everyone wants*. “I’d be a beggar as soon as I said no.”

“Do you not like the prince?”

*No* was the answer I should have said. But it wasn’t entirely the truth. Tendrils of fondness wound themselves through me as I recalled finding him in my room, waiting for me to wake. Or the dinner we’d shared, where he’d spoken to me as if I were an equal and not simply a thorn in his side. He’d teased me and I’d enjoyed it. “I scarcely know him. I only know what I’ve heard about him, about Ragalith—and nothing here is making any *sense*.”

“Ha!” Valerie slapped the table, jostling our drinks. I noticed mine was substantially emptier than hers. All of my blood was a rush of warmth, like a breeze on a hot day blowing through every inch of me. “Now we come to the heart of it.”

“The heart?” My palm reflexively went up to guard my own heart, only to press against the roses there. The roses that reminded me of Thane.

“Like when we’d walked through the castle. Any time I take you somewhere, you look around like you’re searching for the bogeyman. Like any second the springs will shut tight and you’ll be trapped in some nightmare.”

My cheeks flamed at the accuracy of her words. “That’s because all I’ve ever heard is how awful the Ragalithians are. Cruel, lawless, selfish, gluttonous—”

“Wow,” Valerie deadpanned. “Incredible. Those self-righteous bastards.”

“Silvermoorians?”

“The very same.” Valerie appeared to be contemplating murder. “Look. I’m to tutor you in history, right? Let me give you a quick history on the origin of the fae. I think it may help clear some of the misconceptions you have. And then we *must* get to the dress shop. You of all people should know how inconvenient a tardy customer can be.”

I nodded and my brain felt as if it were sloshing inside my head. “Damn straight.”

Valerie’s mouth was quirked, like she was seeing me in a fresh light. “Okay. Super simple speedy version. Magic used to live in the trees, the bushes, the rocks, the water. Fae and humans were born into this world of magic. At first we were all the same. Dumb animals just learning to survive.”

I leaned in, elbows on the table. In all my years, it had never occurred to me to wonder at what had come before.

“There are *some* histories who say the dark fae lived in caves and built homes in the earth, while the light fae climbed up trees and resided in homes built in the branches. That the light and shadow from that affected our magics and we grew apart.”

Valerie took a sip of her drink and gesticulated with her free hand. “That’s nonsense. Fae, humans, we all lived and grew together. Learning to hunt. Learning to forage. And as we worked together, in time the magic all around began to be absorbed. Children were born with powers.” She sighed, lips pursing. “Powers that inevitably caused friction.”

The bartender brushed by our table, asking if we wanted another round. Made brave by the drink I’d been working on, I met his gaze and shook my head with a smile. Any more and I doubted I’d be able to stand up. Besides, I wanted to hear the story.

“That friction led to factions. Those factions led to fighting. We grew more advanced and more magical and we squandered it on greed. Now, imagine this happening for centuries upon centuries. The population of the factions grew. The magic of the earth faded, but the magic in the people grew. Now, power is important to control land, to control communities, to secure safety for all.”

“How did there come to be dark fae and light? How was Savaria created?”

Valerie pointed a clawed finger at me. “Clever. All the smaller groups began to join up, divided by one simple choice—how to wield magic. The



dark fae feel magic is not only intrinsic to our being, but to our partnership with the land. Our magic, our power should be used to keep the ground fertile, to keep people safe and happy, to keep the community flowing and prospering. We don't have rules or laws about the use of magic, just an understanding that it isn't to be used for harm."

I drained the last of my glass. "And the light?"

"The light fae believed that magic was for rulers alone, to keep the rest of the world under their thumb. The assumption was that commoners couldn't be trusted with magic. It was to be hoarded by those at the top. They made more and more rules and punished those who didn't adhere to them. The punishments were awful. They still are awful."

My mind buzzed. None of this aligned with anything I'd ever heard. But up until the past week, all of my knowledge had come from Silvermoore. And it had been a quite limited knowledge at that. One thing did line up: rules. Rules and punishment. Even the lesser fae, the non-nobility of Silvermoore, had been restricted heavily in their use of magic.

"And the humans?"

"Got caught between our two factions. Now, if you were a human back then—magical but short-lived compared to us, fragile in so many ways—which side would you pick?"

It didn't need an answer. I wasn't sure I could have said it out loud if I'd wanted to.

"Right. There you have it. Our big differences. We battled, long and hard. The country of Savaria was blistered and dying from all the fighting. The accords were made to save *all* of us. The accords divided the land and created truces which both sides are supposed to adhere to."

"But the humans—I mean, my family has lived in Silvermoore for as long as my mother and grandmother had known. Why wouldn't they run to Ragalith?"

Valerie shifted, uncomfortable. "Because while humans didn't have magic on their own strong enough to be equals in fighting, your kind are exceedingly smart and adaptable, Isla. And, sadly, there are jobs Silvermoorians feel too good to do. Farming, raising livestock, mining, and so on. They want your labor. The rumors are to keep you close and afraid."

"Rumors like the ones I grew up with," I muttered, understanding. "The cruelty, the blood thirst..."

The rumors had worked, too. My father had traded with Ragalith for

years up until his death and I'd been scared witless each time he left. His death hadn't been a shock, but instead felt like an I-told-you-so.

"Yes. And I'm sure some of it is true. There are rogue fae mercenaries, groups who haunt both realms and live by their own rules. Many of them aren't kind and could be the source of horrid stories."

I swallowed hard. This had been the entirety of my life. Mercilessly worked by Kyrie and her mother, trying to keep my head down because of the fear that it could always be worse. We could be kicked out to Ragalith. If none of that was true, then what did that mean for me? For my sister? "But it seems like it would be too difficult to cultivate and propagate such a lie! I mean, I truly thought I was doomed to pain and suffering when I was dragged here!"

"Weeds can be beautiful. They appear full, sometimes have the most vivid colors. It's the roots you don't see that creep out and take hold and smother out the plants you want. Suddenly, a few stray flowers in your garden have choked out all the food." She started to stand, brushing the front of her dress. "Both sides have weeds, Isla. Both sides have people who look unassuming, or stunning, or harmless, but the dark fae spend a lot of time trying to weed the garden. To keep it diverse and growing for all to share in. And we share our magic and our bounty, to entice everyone to do their part."

I rose, my legs wobbly as a colt's. My head and vision swam, but it was as much from what I'd learned as the Starfire blazing a path through my body. "And the light fae—the rulers of Silvermoore—are letting it spread."

"Oh, sweetheart, yes. They're sowing the weeds, trying to smother out everything else."

And Lily was still there. We started for the door and I stumbled. Valerie caught my elbow. "And now I'm delivering a drunk human for a dress fitting so she can marry a prince. I'm totally going to get reamed for this later, you know." We took a few more steps and I found my balance. Everything was smeared, ever so slightly, as if the world was a watercolor that had been splashed with a stray droplet.

The woman who'd been sweeping moved to open the door. I realized she was human, her skin a deep brown like she'd been kissed by the sun at her birth. Her eyes were gray and they studied me with kindness and curiosity. There was no sign of the hunted frailty of the few humans I'd known back home.

I smiled as Valerie steered me out in the fresh air.

We'd only made it a few steps when she jerked to a halt. "Should we bother with the dress? Do you plan on marrying Prince Thane? I know you don't think you have a choice, but in Ragalith, you do. You always do."

She was giving me an out. If it was Queen Mara, I'd be buckled at the knees and vomiting for fear of the wrong answer. Valerie had done more than given me a moment to breathe. She'd washed clean the windows so I could look at my situation clearly.

If I said no, she'd take me to the castle. She'd be there for me as I told Thane I couldn't go through with it.

My heart fluttered and skipped. There was a brush of emotions almost like memories. Loneliness, desperation, hope. I didn't think they just belonged to me.

"Let's go to the dressmaker," I said. "And I'll get fitted for my wedding dress."



\* \* \*

Hours later, my body was stiff from standing still and my head was beginning to thump in response to the faded Starfire. Even Valerie looked pooped as she sprawled in the dressmaker's shop while the final measurements and decisions were made.

I'd probably not been the best customer. Aside from being drunk, I was also overly curious about how they did their stitching. Where they got their cloth. I'd offered a lot of suggestions.

But the dress was going to be incredible and the human and fae team who'd worked with me were patient and inventive. There were some parts they begged to be left up to surprise, and maybe it was the drink, but I agreed to that.

*Surprise me. Everything else today has.*

I was finishing up the ties on the red linen dress when I turned to Valerie and asked, "Can we go home now?" I was fully whining. It was undignified and I didn't care.

“Please,” Valerie replied knowingly.

Dressed and ready, we headed back out into the twilight. If the city had been busy before, it was bustling now. Lights hung down every street, criss-crossing between roofs. The lights, brightened by magic, made it feel like stars were hovering just above our heads.

As we walked, I saw more and more evidence of magic being used freely. There was a fireworker making intricate designs in the air with his flames while younger fae whooped and clapped around him.

A band was forming on a corner, their instruments amplified by magic to send their foot-stomping, hand-clapping songs through the village.

All around, the people of Ragalith were smiling. Their shoulders and limbs were relaxed and they embraced in the streets, kissing cheeks, kissing foreheads, kissing lips. Sometimes those last kisses were more personal than a friendly greeting.

The enticing scent of meats cooking and fish frying floated through the air. It was, in short, a festival.

“Is this because of me?” I asked Valerie, thinking perhaps wedding celebrations were beginning early.

“You wish,” she joked, elbowing me in the side. Her black lips twisted into a teasing grin. “It’s like this most nights. Until it’s too cold to be out. Then we all huddle next to small fires, drink heated chocolate, and watch ice workers turn the snow into sculptures.”

We’d been moving slowly, dodging between other groups and clumps of fae and humans. I no longer had the instinct to shrink or skulk or try to disappear.

“What’s it like in Silvermoore?” Valerie asked, reaching out to grab a stick with some kind of meat on it. She handed it to me. Hot fat dripped on my fingers and I cried out, switching hands and popping the wound in my mouth. By the time my lips closed around it, the pain was gone.

The pendant at work again, I marveled. If anything, it felt as if it were growing stronger in Ragalith. Coming alive in the realm. I wondered what or who was causing it.

“Guards patrol the streets. There are parties, but they’re all at the castle or at a noble family’s home or townhouse. If humans or non-noble fae are there, it’s as servants and staff only. The streets are to be clear of traffic after dark. No magic is used to light the streets, so it isn’t safe or easy to travel at night.”

“I can’t believe they haven’t rebelled,” Valerie muttered.

I could believe it. We all knew the punishment for crossing lines. No one would risk that just to be out at night.

Just then, the sound of a child crying cut through the hum of the night. Without thinking, I headed toward the pained sobs. There, on a corner, was a small girl. She looked human, until I noticed the fox-like tail flicking behind her and the orange, furry ears peeking out from wild brown curls. I guessed her age to be around four.

Kneeling next to her, I asked, “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Her hands were cupped in front of her. She moved them toward me, the light catching the small wren twitching in her palms. It was alive, the eyes wide and chest pulsing with fear. One wing tried to flap.

The other was at an odd angle.

“My bird got hurt,” she sniffled. “Momma says we’ll have to let her sleep, but I know she means let my bird die. She’s my friend, though, and I don’t want her to die!”

The little girl’s voice cracked and a new wave of snot and tears poured down her face.

“I understand,” I said. “It can be scary to lose someone we love. I lost both my parents when I was young, and I wasn’t sure I was ever going to be okay.”

The girl sniffled hard, trying to suck everything back up. “And were you okay?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I wasn’t. But I know I love them and I know they loved me. That can’t ever be put to sleep. It’s always there.”

She nodded slowly. “I love her. She’s my best friend.”

I reached up for the lily, still tucked behind my ear. Pulling it free, I held out my other hand. “May I see her?”

Gingerly, the girl deposited the injured bird in my hand. I lay the lily next to it, not minding that the thrashing was starting to crush the petals. Reaching in softly, I began to stroke its head and feathers. “This flower makes me think of my best friend. I love her and miss her, too. Maybe she can help your bird be happy, you know?”

“Is she dead, too?”

“No. Just very far away.” That distance was a spear to my chest, and I let the sharp pain wash over me.

I was so focused on the bird and the girl, I almost missed the pulsing warmth of the pendant. But then the little fae pointed at my face. “Oh, your

eyes changed!”

My nose scrunched and I leaned back a bit. “It’s probably just a trick of the lig—”

“Bird!!” She cried out, this time in joy. In my palm, the small wren was on its feet, hopping along my palm. It scooted to the tips of my fingers and flew—its wing no longer broken—to land on the girl’s shoulder.

The little girl was dancing with joy. “Oh, thank you! You made her better!”

I’d have fallen back on my rump if Valerie hadn’t been there to help me up. She had an odd set to her features. “I thought you said you weren’t magic,” she accused.

Wanting to put distance between myself and the girl, I started toward the castle again. She kept in step as we marched at a quicker clip under the magic-lit streets. The cobblestones were smooth beneath my feet and I concentrated on each step, one after another, bringing me to the castle.

“I’m not,” I replied, mostly believing it. *I* wasn’t magic. I just wore a magic necklace. But it had never done anything like heal an injured animal. Gods, the first time I’d even experienced the magic was when my ruined face had healed.

Even then, I hadn’t trusted in the magic too much.

The walk back to the castle was faster than when we’d first approached the village, despite being predominantly uphill. This was entirely due to Valerie’s strong legs pumping and my breath-panting efforts to keep up.

As we crossed through the gates and into the keep, I glanced up the stairs and saw Thane standing at the top, hands on the railing. His golden eyes were locked on me.

Another memory glimmered in my mind unbidden, so close it was almost in reach. Ignoring the burn of my legs and lungs, I stayed with it, trying to remember. It was me, reflected in his gaze. My eyes glowing green. Getting larger as I moved in...

To kiss him.

## THANE

“**Y**ou’re distracted.”

Blyth was lounging in front of the fireplace in the receiving room of my quarters. Quarters that would soon be given to someone new, and I’d take over my father’s wing of the castle. It was a wing I’d spent many happy afternoons in as a child. I couldn’t recall the last time I’d visited as an adult.

It had to have been before he’d married Mara.

It still rankled, his insistence that the realm needed balance and that queen was necessary. And to pick *her* as queen? She’d been awful from the start, trying to reshape our kingdom into Silvermoore.

It had made my mother’s absence all the more painful.

Weddings were supposed to be happy affairs. But the more power you had, the higher you were in the realm? The less happiness factored into *anything*.

“I was thinking about my mother,” I admitted before going to the drink table to refill our wine glasses. There were plenty of servants in the castle, but I preferred to keep my own company in my own space. Besides, it seemed ludicrous to keep someone around solely to refill cups. At a dinner, certainly. But when two friends were drinking?

It would only have been a show of might, and I had no need of it.

My mother had died before Blyth and I’d met. In fact, it was likely her passing that led us to each other.

“Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Hm.” Sinking into the chair opposite his, I sipped at my wine to collect my thoughts. “My mother was from Ragalith. She was from a lesser house that had managed to produce extra yields in their fields before a particularly brutal winter. My grandfather raised her house up and married her to my father.”

“Gaining the favor and loyalty of a high-producing household was a wise move.”

I inclined my head in agreement. “But I think they may actually have loved each other. When I was young, dinners were always a family affair and filled with laughter. My mother was able to bend my father’s will with ease, and he doted on her. She was my world. All the lessons, all the tutors, all the time spent honing my skills was for him. Getting to know the people of Ragalith... that was for her.”

“We’ve been missing that for some time,” Blyth said dryly. I knew he was thinking of my stepmother. She never deigned to spend time out of the castle. Not unless she was traveling to *another* castle, or visiting high friends in their lofty homes.

“When my mother suddenly died, it was like the light in my father was turned off.” I drummed my fingers on my thigh, hating to recall that dark and lonely time. “That was when Silvermoore began to push boundaries. Before it had been a skirmish here and there, but nothing so direct as what has been happening. After Mother died, they took advantage.”

That had been when I’d met Blyth. He’d been a village’s wizard, using his magic to coax healthy births from livestock and keep fields fruitful. When I’d found him, though, he’d been standing in a barren field. His village already ash floating in the wind. Hollow-eyed and gaunt, I’d seen something in him that had stirred within myself.

He’d been with me ever since.

“Marriage was supposed to stop the attacks, you know.” I sneered. “A bride from light fae nobility. A Silvermoorian bride, meant to unite our peoples and reaffirm the accords.”

He sneered. “Yeah, that olive branch was poisoned.”

The new queen had swept in and begun to change the way we did things. She’d tried to enforce rules, laws about who could use magic and where. At least my father had stood up to *that*, telling her in no uncertain terms that she was a Ragalithian and would respect the values of his realm.

As for peace and the accords...

Well, that was when I’d begun to pursue answers. Answers to just how much of our land was being stolen or ruined. How many of our people were being captured or murdered. When I finally got my hands on the newest maps, I’d been appalled—we’d lost mass amounts of lands, some through deals my father had agreed to with the light fae.



Our kingdom's population was larger than that of Silvermoore, yet we had a fraction of the country's land and resources. Something else nagged at the deeper recesses of my mind. A question about the state of the Silvermoore lands we'd passed on our way to the ball.

"And you're thinking your wedding is, what? More like your stepmother than mother? Is that what has you living in your head?"

I rolled my head to toss him an indolent stare. "Shall I compare them?"

Blyth gestured with a hand and a cocky grin. "Please."

"Isla is a Silvermoorian," I stated.

"Incorrect. She's been banished and you claimed her. She's Ragalithian."

I snorted. Semantics were Blyth's favorite weapon when we were drinking and arguing.

"She's human."

"That should be a plus," he countered. "Because it means she isn't light fae."

"She's a commoner."

"She'll understand your desires for your people all the more, having lived outside the comforts of a castle and nobility for most of her life."

Stumped, I frowned at my wine. Blyth, enjoying our banter, decided to move to the offensive. "She's gorgeous, Thane. That hair? Those eyes?"

"Our current queen is beautiful. It doesn't make her less of an evil bitch."

He sighed. "Thane, really. Is Isla so awful that you're going to be all gloomy and doomy about the marriage? Because we can try to switch to *just* seduction. You don't have to tie yourself to her."

"I do if I want to take power away from *Queen* Mara after the coronation."

My father's time as king was ending and I needed the throne. I also needed Mara's conniving, shady self out of the way. If I had no queen, my stepmother would spend all her energy undermining me. Possibly worse. "There isn't time to find another bride. And..." I glared at him so he knew I *wasn't* giving him a win, just admitting a fact. "Isla is tolerable. She has something we need and has agreed to the terms. As far as business deals go, it is satisfactory."

Something I said must have struck Blyth wrong, because he was laughing and snorting, red wine dribbled from his nostrils. Disgusted, I threw him a handkerchief. "What?"

"She's tolerable? She's easy on the eyes, smart, kind, and holds a ton of

power around her neck. I imagine she'll be more than satisfactory. I'll bet even after you have the pendant in hand, you'll enjoy her company."

I raised my chin. "You shouldn't take that bet."

"Because you're determined to be surly?"

"Because only hours ago I heard a rumor that she healed a wounded bird today. Took it in her hands and a bird with a broken wing could fly after her touch. And that dinner... Blyth, you weren't there. The pendant, that magic? It held me captive. As if I were *nothing*. It... it reached into me. Saw me." It was a struggle to admit the weakness out loud, but Blyth was my closest ally. Which didn't lessen the ice that formed in my gut when I recalled how useless I'd felt.

And how completely seen.

Blyth set his wine glass aside. "The rumors about the bird... do you think they're true? Or just the people getting excited about their future queen?"

"True. This came from multiple sources. It made the townsfolk wild for her. I'd believe that she's capable of a lot more than she's let on."

"Damn." He rubbed at his face, scrubbing hard. "I knew they were bonded, but it's one thing when it was just protecting her. Now it's lending her magic? Or amplifying magic she already had?"

"Isla doesn't have magic," I said, though I was no longer truly certain. "She's acted as if all of this is new to her."

"It probably is. But I didn't think about... Thane, she's now living in a realm where magic can be practiced freely. Where it's celebrated in anyone who has it. God, I was stupid. It didn't do much for her in Silvermoore because it was protecting her. If she'd appeared to have magic, it may have suppressed it."

His concern clicked into place. I'd brought her here to take the pendant from her. If she was safe, and seduced and happy and all that mess, what need would she have for it?

But we didn't live in a realm where necessity was the end all and be all.

"You're going to need—" Blyth began, but stopped abruptly when the door to my chambers opened. Only one person had the authority to enter without knocking.

My father.

He stepped into the room, studying my decor and furnishings as if he'd never seen them and was judging me according to what was there. It didn't appear he judged them favorably. "I have two days to get you to call off this

wedding,” he said by way of greeting me.

“I suppose you have one day to try. One day and a night, if we’re being generous.”

That didn’t amuse him. There’d been a time when he hadn’t met everything I said with disdain. A time when he’d listened and laughed. A time so long ago. “Why her? She brings nothing to the marriage.”

*Oh, if only you knew.* If—no, when I was successful at wooing her, I’d have so much more power than he could ever have imagined. Mara would be out. The Sage and all the other crony advisors would be unable to stop me. Hells, I’d have them in my thrall and on my side. And Silvermoore would stick to their borders and pay reparations for all they’d destroyed.

All due to what Isla was bringing to the marriage.

“She’s Silvermoorian, so she has ties to the other kingdom and insights into its courts.”

My father scoffed. “She’s *banished*.”

“Well, she was banished as a commoner. She’ll be a Ragalithian queen, and they can’t banish her then. But you spoke endlessly of the value of a Silvermoorian wife when convincing me Mara was the right choice to slip into my mother’s shoes.”

He said nothing, but there was a storm brewing in his silence.

“She’s also a commoner, which will help us to connect with our people again. We’ve spent too much hiding behind our castle walls, Father, and I’m looking forward to the insight she’ll bring to the marriage. She’s kind and careful, a good listener, cautious when needed, and she’s one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen.”

I refused to look at Blyth while speaking. What had begun as reciting the points Blyth had told me regarding Isla’s virtues ended in something that tasted all too close to the truth.

“Thane.” My father pinched the bridge of his nose. “Gods, I thought you were joking. Trying to get a rise out of Mara and me. Mara is, by the way, completely furious and sees your choice as a direct slight.”

*Good.*

“But,” he continued, hand dropping useless to his side, “it sounds like you’re serious. Like you might even love her. I don’t understand it, but if she’s who you want, the wedding will happen. We haven’t seen a royal marry for love in... who knows how long. Even my love for your mother came after.”

Was this a pep talk? I had to bite my tongue from insisting I wasn't in love with Isla. Not if that was going to remove any last protestations.

Suddenly, my father seemed old. A century of wearing the crown had worn him down. He shuffled. The king *shuffled* in my room, uneasy and yet remaining.

"Was there something else?" After all, it was two nights before my wedding. I needed the time to do things other than convince my father Isla was the right woman for me while convincing Blyth she wasn't.

"The accords need to be upheld, Thane. I know you've disagreed with almost every decision I've made over the past fifty years regarding Silvermoore." His brows furrowed, as if trying to decide how much to say next. "But you have to believe all my decisions had reasoning behind them. When you're king, you'll discover things are more complicated than you think."

He'd never, not once in all my memory, asked me to see things from his point of view. My father, even when I'd still thought of him with love and affection, had always been sure. Certain in his rightness. And he never allowed anyone to contradict him.

Heat bubbled under my skin as I remembered all the times he'd dismissed my worries, shot down my ideas, time and time again, in front of generals and advisors.

In so many ways, he'd set me up to fail. All of his policies had become the status quo so that his generals, his advisors, and the nobility supported his position regarding the accords. They were so in line with him that simply putting the crown on my head would change little in our realm. Not without aid. It was why the pendant was necessary to ensure my plans went off without a hitch.

How *dare* he come in here and try to convince me, through almost-pleas, to stick to the accords? How dare he threaten me with "complications" and the hint that there were things I wasn't partial to?

After all this time?

A load of stones, heavy and uncomfortably, weighed down my gut. For all our fae posturing and bravado, was this what we were? What the dark fae were?

He wanted me to stick to the accords. But all this conversation had done was harden my resolve.

"I'll keep that in mind," I managed, though my tone rang bitterly in my

ears.

The king nodded and left. At least his shoulders were pulled back and straight, his posture still the posture of someone who'd led a kingdom for a hundred years.

As soon as we were alone again, Blyth slithered down his chair as if his body were made of limp vegetables. "That was crazy intense." He slid his gaze to me. "Should we talk about your defense of Isla?"

"No."

I was tired. I didn't want to talk about the wedding anymore. I didn't want to worry and agonize over the pendant, because I didn't think my heart could handle the idea that it might not work for me. There was no room inside me for Blyth's jokes and teasing, for his pressure on me to make Isla fall for me. I had enough of that pressure going already.

There was certainly no room to sit and stew on my father's impromptu visit.

"I'm leaving," I said finally.

"The kingdom? Runaway prince?"

"No, you ass. I have something for Isla. I was waiting to give it to her, but I find I need the excuse to avoid you and my father."

"Ooooooh," Blyth said with a wink. "An errand to see Isla. Prince Thane could use a servant, but no, he's got to hand deliver mysterious 'things' to his future bride. That sounds a lot like you got her presents, you know."

Walking to a side table, I grabbed the box I'd put there. "How much do you value your role in this kingdom, Blyth? How far do you think you can push before I decide to make the rumors about the dark fae a reality by using your body as an example?"

His eyebrows shot up in mock-upset. "I think I'll retire. I'm suddenly very tired." He didn't appear tired as he jumped out of the seat and practically skipped to the door. "See you tomorrow. Big day and all, lots to prepare."

"Get out."

He did, leaving me with a box in hand and having committed to visiting Isla. I *could* have a messenger bring the...well, the gift. For it was a gift. It wasn't like I had to give it to her personally. No one would force me to be near her, to inhale her wonderful scent, to try to earn soft smile after soft smile.

My lips pressed tight together, trying to erase the memory of the kiss that still played over my skin. I'd spent three days watching over her, making sure

she'd survive that incredible surge of magic, and doing everything I could to *not* think about the kiss.

For three days, I'd failed miserably. I'd stared at her parted mouth and dreamed of what a kiss would be like when I was in control of myself.

It was most likely the pendant and whatever magic it had worked on me. But I'd felt Isla leave the castle that morning and had been uncomfortable and pacing, nervous in my own skin, until I'd felt her return.

*Take her the damn gift and be done with it. You aren't feeling anything but nerves.*

That had to be it.

Just as I reached the door, there was another knock. A growl escaped from low in my throat. What could anyone possibly want *now*?

Yanking open the door, I found a wide-eyed servant. The young fae tipped their head and said, "Your guests have arrived, my lord. You... you said you wanted to be notified immediately."

Ah. Instead of renewing my confidence, this information made my insides nebulous and shaky. But I had asked for this and I knew it was a good decision. One which would certainly aid my plans.

"Very good. Where?"

"Waiting in the front hall. We've already taken the bags to the room requested, my lord."

"Excellent. I'll go welcome them. You've done well."

"Thank you, sire."

Steeling myself, I started toward where my guests were waiting, knowing full well that I'd need to brace myself for whatever would come. Just because something was the *right* step didn't mean it was the easy one.

Gods, I hoped Isla wouldn't be angry.

# ISLA

“A nnnd, *magic!*”

I waved my fingers at the candle flame on the table where Valerie and I’d shared dinner. My lady-in-waiting had long ago retired, encouraging me to do the same. As if anyone would be able to sleep after healing a bird with magic.

So far, though, I’d been able to replicate exactly *none* of the experience.

I’d tried to do magic on water, fire, the air, my food... I’d tried everything, with nothing to show for it.

I wondered what Thane would think if he knew what had happened with the bird. Surprisingly, I was eager to tell him about it. As if by having magic that showed itself, I could prove myself useful to him. Not just as the wearer of the pendant but perhaps as a partner as well.

There’d been time to think about that during the dress fitting. How it felt as if I knew him without having truly had the chance. But what I thought I knew, I liked.

There was also the unveiling of the fae’s history. Maybe it was bias, but I was inclined to believe Valerie’s version far more readily than Queen Eldritch’s. Never had I risked even thinking of being in a station high enough that I could change situations. It would have hurt too much to dream of changing the world when my world was tied up tight with threats and poverty.

I wasn’t tied up any longer. Marrying Thane could mean more than simply saving my skin. A myriad of possibilities fluttered in me like butterflies.

Despite the lateness of the hour, someone rapped at my door. I waited, expecting it to swing open and whoever it was to march in. When it stayed shut, I bit my lip and went to open it myself, unsure of who’d be in the hall while most of the castle slept.

Thane stood there, a box in his hands and something akin to nervousness on his face. Which couldn't be, he was a *prince*, what would he have to be worried about?

A form rushed out from behind him, a streak of auburn wind, before a body slammed into mine. Arms locked tight around me and I inhaled sharply from surprise, only to get a blast of lavender and rosemary. Lily's scent.

"Isla! Oh, Isla, Isla, Isla!"

My sister was screaming in my ear, her embrace threatening to send us both tumbling over. My *sister*.

Instantly, I locked my arms around her waist. "Lily!" I cried, fighting back tears. "Lily, Lily!"

We jumped up and down together, never letting go, spinning in circles as if we were young children again. Eventually, I grew breathless and forced myself to release her. "Oh, goodness, what are you doing here?"

That question sucked quite a bit of joy from Lily. She halted and moved to stand between Thane and myself. "I was invited," she said, but it sounded more like a challenge.

That was when Thane, who'd just witnessed our exuberant and *loud* reunion, stepped hesitantly inside my room. "I sent word that you'd like the presence of your family at your wedding. Some strings were pulled, and here she is."

My mouth was dry. Thane had worked to get Lily here? Our wedding was an agreement. A deal. Why would he care about something like my family?

*You know why.*

That same sensation again, like ice melting and revealing gems inside. Treasure that had been hidden and was being uncovered. "You did this for me?" My voice was scarcely louder than a whisper.

Thane inclined his head.

Lily lost none of her sharpness. "At least if I'm trapped here, it will be with you."

I let out a startled snort. Of course she'd think that. She thought she'd been lured here, and my loving, wonderful sister had come anyway. "Where's Jeremy?"

"He's been shown to our rooms. Or dungeon. Whichever. He came with me. He wanted to see you, too, Isla."

My throat worked hard. They shared the same prejudices I'd had of Ragalith, of its people and this place. And they'd come *anyway*, just for me. I



reached out and grabbed her hand, squeezing firmly. “We have a lot to talk about,” I managed.

“Before I leave,” Thane said, interrupting, “I have something for you.”

There was a flicker in my chest, bright and fast. “You have something *more* for me? More than my sister? Thane, for goodness’ sake, you’ve already given me so much!”

Was it me, or did he blush at that? It was shadowed in the low candlelight and his black hair was unruly, flopping forward, making it difficult to tell. I could have sworn there’d been pink on his cheeks.

“I’ve given you what was needed, Isla. Nothing more. Family for our wedding, a dress so you don’t have to wed in the nude, and flowers because I hear people love that sort of thing at weddings.”

“Wow,” Lily deadpanned. “Just... wow.”

“But,” Thane proceeded as if she’d said nothing, “it came to my attention that you lost one of your dress slippers when we left Silvermoore. I assumed you’d want shoes to match the wedding gown.”

I could have laughed. As it was, my only footwear was a pair of boots on loan from Valerie. Apparently a cobbler would have things made up in my size, but having something for the wedding hadn’t crossed my mind. When could it have?

“May I see them?”

A hungry shadow danced in his gaze. Thane motioned to a chair close by. “Sit,” he ordered. It came out as a soft rumble and I felt a tug deep in my belly.

Without questioning him, I went and sat. I was in my nightgown, and while it wasn’t exactly proper for him to see me in it, he’d already watched me sleeping. And in that scandalous outfit at dinner. Besides, I was starting to accept that propriety was a Silvermoorian trait. I wasn’t in Silvermoore any longer.

I watched with rapt attention as he got on one knee in front of me. His long, strong fingers pulled the top of the box off, exposing something nestled in swaths of silk. Thane reached in and slowly drew out a shoe.

My breath hitched.

It looked as if it were made of glass. But a deep, scarlet glass that caught the light and threw it back out in bursts of crimson brilliance. When he brought it closer, I realized it wasn’t glass, but the fabric was wrought so thin and fine it managed to be sheer. Some magic had molded it to fit a foot, to

hold its shape.

It was divine. I'd never seen anything like it.

"May I?" Thane's voice was low and gruff. He gestured to my foot. I tried to swallow but all I could do was offer a small, mute nod.

He touched my foot with those long fingers, and I stiffened. The soft pressure from the pads of his fingers, the warmth of his palm as he lifted and guided my foot to his knee was torture, but a kind of torture so sweet and deep I never wanted it to end.

He set my heel on his thigh. A strong, firm thigh that I wanted to touch, to test and see if it was just as powerfully built as it looked.

With gentleness that rivaled a butterfly's kiss, Thane slipped the shoe onto my foot. It fit as though made for me, only me. His hand swept up to my ankle, lightly prodding me to twist and turn the foot for his inspection.

Then his hand drifted higher, caressing my calf.

It was a struggle to breathe. The air between us was growing thick and air, air was a shrinking commodity. I didn't want to breathe air, though.

I wanted to inhale *him*.

He lifted his golden eyes to mine and they seemed gilded with heat. My tongue darted out and he watched as I licked a dry lower lip.

*Thane.*

A hum collected inside of me, making me think of the dinner, of him touching my neck.

*She's beautiful.* The thought came, unbidden and in his voice. But inside my head. *She's more beautiful than I deserve.* My voice caught and I wanted to argue, to tell him he deserved so much, when a wave of emotion slammed into me. Wanting, yes. A yearning so fierce I longed to cross my legs in search of relief.

But also sadness, deep as a river and flowing just as strong. These were Thane's emotions. He felt apologetic, anxious about something he hadn't even done yet, though I didn't know what. Thane's emotions were almost colors, and this last one was stained the color of my dress for the ball.

Deepest purple. Like a bruise.

"That's a great shoe," Lily said. "Super fancy."

Lily. *Lily.* Oh, my. My sister was in the room! She'd just watched the prince of Ragalith slip a shoe on my foot, caress my leg, and most likely witnessed my sudden desire for him because I couldn't possibly have felt it so strongly and not had it roll off me like raindrops for her to see.

Thane quickly removed the shoe and tucked it back into the box with its partner. I was just as fast in taking my foot from his thigh and far less elegant as I tucked my legs back under the nightgown.

“They’re perfect,” I forced out. What I wanted was to capture his face between my hands and tell him it would be okay. I wanted to touch that bruise inside of him and heal it.

I wanted to take him to bed and stay there for days. With him.

Thane and I rose at the same time, bringing our bodies unbearably close. He moved away first, heading straight for my door. “Lily, welcome. If you need anything, ask. Your husband is not in the dungeon, he’s in the rooms three doors down the hall. I’ll...” he cleared his throat, his eyes lingering on me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The door was almost shut before the last of his words reached me.

“That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

I turned to Lily, still trying to pull myself together after that surge of connection. The pendant was letting me see into his heart. It was protecting me, I decided, ensuring I wasn’t being deceived. But that connection wasn’t just giving me truth. No, it was awakening something unexpected in me.

Not exactly what I’d been expecting, either.

“Well,” I said, aiming for nonchalance, “they *are* really great shoes.”

She stared at me. I stared at her. Waiting.

Until we both fell apart, giggling. Lily’s laughter was painted with heavy shades of relief. “Oh, gods, Isla, I’ve been scared out of my mind! And just torn apart with guilt. I forced you to go to that ball. But what *happened*? How did you become claimed as the future queen of Ragalith?”

There was so much to tell her. I sank to the floor, digging my toes into the thick, soft carpet. Patting the spot beside me, I waited until Lily was curled up next to me. Our hands were clasped and our foreheads pressed together.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I said, drinking in the comfort of my sister’s presence. I’d been so fragile and thin without her. “It was mine, and it started thirteen years ago.”

“How so?”

“When I ran from you that day at the castle, remember? Mom had just died and you were going to teach me how to do the fittings there? I found something that day. A pendant.”

“The one you never take off?”

I snorted. Of course she knew. “I always wondered why you didn’t say

anything. I tried to keep it hidden, but we lived together.”

“I always assumed, well...” Lily laced her fingers through mine, playing with them. “It looked expensive. If you weren’t selling it or showing it off, I assumed it meant something to you. I’ve been desperate to know about it, but I suppose I felt you deserved to have a secret.”

The love I felt for her strained against my ribs. It wanted to explode out of me, not be contained within a cage like I had been for all my life. “I missed the chance to turn it in without consequence. And you’re right that it meant—means—something to me. But it’s also landed me in this situation.”

She pulled away, leaving a cold space where her body had just been, her gaze dropping to the pendant nestled between my breasts. “What do you mean?”

“There’s too much to explain. But it’s magic and it’s bonded to me and Prince Thane is...” *interested in having it for himself*. Which I knew to be true. But the flesh of my ankle and calf still felt hot where he’d touched it. Just hearing his name made my belly draw tight and eager. “He’s curious about the magic and has offered to help me with it.”

My sister’s face pinched. “By making you *queen*?”

“I know. I’m still wrapping my head around it.” I’d have to be somewhat honest if I was going to get her to understand. “He wants the power of the pendant. I tried to give it to him, but like I said, it’s bonded with me. So we’re marrying to share the power.”

“But queen of Ragalith, Isla.” Her voice was taut. “You’ll be trapped here. Forced into their awful ways.”

It took everything in me to stifle my chuckle. It was still fresh in my mind how scared and untrusting I’d been when I first arrived. “Lily, I’m still coming to terms with the fact that what we were told in Silvermoore about this place was false. Most of it, if not all of it.” *Well, there were those two fae in the staircase. And the kissing on the street*. “For the most part, I’ve been treated with kindness since I arrived. Clothed, fed, entertained. My lady-in-waiting, Valerie? You’re going to love her. She’s been teaching me so much.”

“Maybe she’s using magic to change your perspective. Alter your mind?”

Had I been this determined to assume the worst? “Oh. So, the pendant... I think it makes me immune to their magic.”

Now Lily scoffed. “What about all those times with Kyrie?”

“I was pretending. I was too afraid of what would happen if they knew

their magic couldn't touch me. It wasn't just about me, I had you to think about, too." The level of screwed-up that had been was no longer lost on me. The lengths I'd gone to in order to keep from being even more visible and putting Lily and myself at risk had been insane.

"But you hurt yourself! That was on purpose? Throwing yourself down stairs because she said so? Stabbing yourself with that needle? That's insane, Isla!"

"It was smart," I shot back, a bit harsher than I'd intended. "Look what happened as soon as the pendant was discovered. Lily, Queen Eldritch wanted to kill me. If not for the risk of retribution from the pendant, they would have. They banished me as a means of execution where hopefully their hands would remain clean. I couldn't have survived banishment! Thane saved my life when he claimed me. The dark fae have made a *home* for me."

Her lower lip quivered. "We had a home—"

We had a prison. But I wouldn't convince her of that in one night. All I could do was try to bring her around with patience and compassion. "One you can now share with Jeremy. No more trying to be quiet because I'm in the next room. After all, you've been married over a year! And maybe you'd consider moving here? Both of you could be close to me and I wouldn't worry so much about the king and queen punishing you."

My sister blanched. I understood, I did. But I wanted her close and protected. She and Jeremy could have a family in Ragalith. They'd be safer and freer here than back in Silvermoore. I couldn't force the issue, though, not yet, or she'd stay convinced that the dark fae had somehow bewitched me. I had her here, now, and I wouldn't be able to bear it if she left on bad terms.

Her blue eyes, so like my own, were pools of worry and sorrow. "We've been fine. No one has said or done anything to us. Isla, I don't want you to marry him. I don't want you trapped here."

*I've always been trapped. Here I can at least choose my cage.* "I know. And I can't tell you how happy I am that you came. How did you convince Jeremy to let you come?"

"He loves you, too, you know. He was just as worried. When the invitation for your wedding arrived, there wasn't a choice. It felt too strange to be true and we assumed it was a trick, but if I was going to have a chance to see you, even if it meant my death—" Lily choked up. A tear slipped down her cheek and I reached to brush it free with my thumb.

“I’d have done the same for you.”

“I know.” She managed a weak smile. “Well, here we are. In a kingdom we’d never wished to visit, preparing for a wedding we couldn’t have dreamed up if we’d tried. What should we do next?”

She was trying so hard for me. It meant the absolute world.

“Tomorrow is a large celebration day. A party, I think, before the wedding. We should sleep. Go to Jeremy and let him know neither of you can expect dungeons or torture any time soon. And then, tomorrow, I’ll show both of you around and see if I can’t sell you on Ragalith.”

“Are you sure you’re immune to magic? Because this all sounds ludicrous.”

Hugging her fiercely, I laughed. Just having someone familiar with me gave me strength. “You’ll see. Go to your husband,” I insisted. “Try to get some rest.”

She looked dubious at that, no doubt still waiting for the trap to spring. It was a feeling I’d shared with her, a feeling I should perhaps still share with her. Yet the magic, both from the necklace and getting to know Valerie and the place I now lived in, was working to relieve me of my fears. There was only so much I could do and, truth be told, my body and mind were quickly growing sluggish from exhaustion.

We kissed and hugged and I pointed her way.

Then I fell into my bed and thanked the gods for Thane’s thoughtful, generous gift of her presence.

I fell asleep with the memory of his touch on my leg.



\* \* \*

Valerie came to wake me, Lily on her heels.

“It’s going to be a long day,” she warned us. As before, the large tub was brought in, filled, and left for Lily and me to clean up in. Lily gawped at the size and efficiency of the servants. I was eager to soak in the luxury of the hot water.

It took her watching me strip naked and sink in, took her seeing how the maids scrubbed and soaped and oiled with gentleness, and even me getting out and wrapped up to dry for her to disrobe and hop in.

I almost laughed at her clear discomfort when the maids began to wash her. To be honest, I struggled with it, too, and the only thing that made it better was knowing I'd asked Valerie to make sure the help was well compensated for their kind assistance.

Secretly, I knew once I was queen I'd likely insist on bathing myself. I wasn't just capable of it, I wanted to. It felt too early to ruffle feathers, though.

Our hair was combed and squeezed with linens to speed the drying.

Valerie offered up several outfit options. I could go for something more modest, like the red linen dress I'd worn the day before. Or the skin-baring scraps that Valerie claimed were in fashion.

Turning to Lily, I asked, "Did you bring any sewing supplies?"

"Of course. I assumed if there was actually going to be a wedding and not blood and pain, you might need my help."

She still didn't sound sold on the idea that there *wouldn't* be blood and pain. I smirked but was inwardly grateful. "I have an idea for today, if you want to help."

With Lily's talented fingers and quick stitching, and Valerie's amused assistance, we created a new gown. Instead of the band of cloth that wrapped tight around my breasts, we'd created a short-sleeved crop top. The neckline was a wide scoop that hinted at my small, firm breasts when I moved but didn't allow direct line of sight down the front. A strip of my belly was exposed, but instead of the filmy, clingy skirt, we used the bottom half of a more traditional dress to create a full skirt.

It was hung from my hips, showing off my flat belly. I was filling out, looking softer than I ever had before, not as lean and nearly starved, and that was all thanks to being able to eat my fill of the rich foods offered to me here at the castle.

The color of the fabric we used and stole from other gowns was golden, like the yellow from when dawn has finally kissed the sky. My red hair looked more like fire than ever as it tumbled down my shoulders, the dark hues of the Blood Drops Valerie had woven through my hair only accentuating the fiery gleam.

Valerie slung a jewel-studded belt over the skirt, hugging my hipbones.

The belt buckled on one side and the soft leather ends fell to mix in with the folds of the skirt. On the other side was a sheath with a large knife in it.

“I don’t know anything about knives,” I protested.

“It’s only for show.” Valerie was making final, nitpicking adjustments to my garb.

“What kind of show?” My question emerged as a high-pitched squeak.

“There will be all sorts of nobility here,” Valerie replied, shining the large rubies that decorated the belt. “It is a warning that you are ours, protected and cherished.”

Lily chuckled darkly, as if Valerie were confirming all her worst assumptions. My lady-in-waiting snapped her face toward my sister, mouth turned down. “It’s not the dark fae we’re warning,” she added.

My sister had the decency to blush.

She dressed next, opting for a Silvermoorian style gown of green velvet. It was modest in its cut, but I knew Lily was probably screaming inside over the silver threading that made up the embroidery. We’d made hundreds of gowns like the one she was wearing.

We knew how much the materials cost.

Aside from my ball gown, we’d never expected to wear finery ourselves. It wouldn’t have served us well. Our clients demanded to look better and superior to any and all commoners.

Especially humans.

*They aren’t my clients anymore.* For once, it was a refreshing thought. Relief bloomed in me. I’d never have to see or cater to Kyrie and her like again.

By the time we were ready, the noise of the celebration was pouring into the castle from all the windows. Lily peeked out and shook her head. I knew she didn’t believe what she saw. Smiling, I grabbed her hand.

“Is Jeremy okay if I steal you for most of the day?”

She shrugged. “He’s still wary of leaving the room and I don’t want to worry him more. I’m all yours.”

With that, Valerie escorted us to the festivities.

The walk through the castle was fun and different this time, because I knew how Lily was seeing it. Only now the halls were busy, maids and manservants dashing back and forth. Some carried messages, others were hauling food, and some were simply greeting each other with kisses and embraces.



After all, they'd be allowed to celebrate, too.

"There are humans here," Lily whispered to me. She was walking so close it was difficult not to step on her hem. "In the castle."

"I know." I patted her hand where it clung to my other elbow. "They're welcome in the castle. Most work here. Several even have high positions in the court."

"Are they ensorcelled?"

"Um. No? Why would Ragalith waste magic on lifting humans up in rank? Wouldn't that be something we'd choose given the choice?"

Lily was chewing on her lower lip with an aggression that made me fearful for its state by the end of the night. Maybe they'd have magic salve here like we'd had at home.

"First stop," Valerie warned us. "Throne room. It will have many dignitaries and nobles. You don't have to speak with them if you don't wish to, but it is important to show your face and your confidence."

"Will Thane be in there?"

He'd been a constant presence in my mind since the encounter with the shoes the night before, and I'd yet to catch a glimpse of him. If this was all for our wedding, shouldn't I be spending the day with him?

Valeri shot me a knowing look. "Perhaps. It is typical for the king and queen to be seen separately as much as they are together. In Ragalith, this is to reaffirm your equality and position. Isla, you're considered the balance to Thane. A power in your own right."

A person of power? Me? People kept saying it to me, but it was difficult to believe it.

If I was the same person I'd been yesterday, I'd be choking on fear right now. Lifting a hand to tuck my hair behind my ear, I felt one of the small roses there. Thane's roses, as I'd come to think of them.

An ache that was becoming all too familiar grew within me. It was the understanding, deeper than words and, I believed, truer than anything I knew, that he would honor his side of our deal. And beyond that, he needed *me*. Not just my pendant. But me, Isla Sagehaunt, human and commoner. Thane might not know it, might even be hiding from that truth.

But the pendant was showing me what Thane wasn't ready to admit.

He needed more than power. He needed someone who truly had his back, who supported him, who would help him achieve his dreams.

I didn't understand our connection and sometimes it frightened me, this

pull I felt to someone so shadowed and ruthless. For the pendant had exposed that, too. The absolute lengths Thane would go to in order to get what he wanted.

If I tried to be his friend, his partner, at the least, maybe I could make sure those lengths didn't mean sacrificing the good in him for the good of his kingdom.

"Goodness," Lily said in surprise, "where are you in that head of yours, Isla?"

Valerie and Lily had been watching me while I'd given myself a mental pep talk. "Sorry. Just, you know, prepping for this."

Exhaling slowly, I nodded. "Okay. Let's get this party started."

Valerie covered her mouth. I suspected she was either hiding a laugh or a disapproving frown. If I had to bet, it was the former. Lily, on the other hand, was staring at me like I'd lost my mind.

But she wasn't going to let go of my arm, which meant she'd go where I went.

I entered the throne room with my chin lifted and shoulders pulled back.

Just like my time in the village, the occupants of the throne room stopped and stared as I walked around. Unlike the village, though, not every person was looking with curiosity. Many gazes were distrustful. I wondered which part of me they didn't like. The human part? The fact that I was from Silvermoore? That I was a commoner?

That they thought I was a witch?

None of it mattered, though. I accepted a cup of wine from a nearby fae. The server gave me a subtle wink and nod of approval. At least the castle staff were in my corner, most likely Valerie's doing. It was definitely reassuring.

The throne room was dark, despite the peak of daylight outside. Long, thick red curtains hung in front of the windows, shutting out natural light. Instead, candles and magic-lights lined the walls, the tables, the ceilings. Strings of lights like the ones in the village hung in lazy ropes from the rafters.

Couches and settees covered in black velvet were strewn around the room, dividing the large space into smaller, more intimate seating areas. Tables were interspersed on the space leftover on the floor, covered with plates of food and bottles of wine.

The only hints of formality were the intricate clothing worn by the nobles.

Rich cloths, jewels, feathers, and other trinkets adorned their garb. Wings had been painted in gold and silver paints. Tails jingled with gold bangles stacked from rump to tip. Horns had been polished until they shone like glass.

“This is nothing like home,” Lily whispered in wonder.

“I think I like it more,” I replied quietly.

There was a man who appeared human, wearing the robes of an advisor, standing to the side. I’d felt the weight of his stare from the moment we’d walked in. There was a dangerous vibe about him, something dark and distrustful. Between my breasts, tucked into my top, the pendant pulsed with heated warning.

Needless to say, I steeled myself and made my way straight toward him.

His eyebrows lifted as I approached, but he offered a polite nod. “You are Prince Thane’s betrothed,” he said.

I tipped my head in response. “I am, but you may call me Isla.”

“I suppose I’ll be calling you queen after the coronation.” He was stiff, choosing his words carefully.

Instead of feeling chilled or frightened, the warmth of the pendant, Lily at my side, and the memories of Thane gave me courage. “I suppose that’s true, but I prefer Isla in most situations. And you are?”

“I am called Sage. It is both the title and the name I respond to. King Raveclaw’s advisor.”

Ah. An advisor to a king about to be replaced. Naturally, he’d feel trepidation and dislike for a new queen. And king, perhaps. “Will you continue in that position when Thane ascends to the throne?”

There was an almost imperceptible jerk when I referred to Thane without his title. “I’d... like to,” he said slowly. “Thane and I have not seen eye to eye on many things. But I am close to his stepmother and have been loyal to his father. It would be, I think, beneficial for him to retain some of his father’s advisors. Perhaps you could help with that, Isla? Put in a good word for me?”

Did he think I had Thane’s ear? Or was he hoping I’d inadvertently deliver a warning? Because he’d lost any goodwill I might have had toward him when he’d allied himself with Queen Mara. And judging by how Thane responded to her, I doubted there was any love lost between the two.

No, the pendant’s warning had been correct. This man was no friend of Thane’s.

“I’ll be sure to pass word on to Thane,” I agreed, dropping the *good*.

“You’re most kind.” There was a sticky falseness to his words.

Smiling coyly, I simply said, “I really am.”

Pulling Lily with me, we walked away. My sister’s palm was cold and slick with sweat on my elbow, her fingertips digging into the skin. “What was that?” she asked when we’d gotten some distance from Sage.

“I think that was my first step into politics.” I let out a shaky exhalation of breath. “How did I do?”

“If I didn’t know you, I’d say you were born into this.”

“I’m realizing the benefits of learning quickly. But I don’t know if I want to continue to politic now.” I looked over my shoulder, glad to see Valerie behind us. “Can we go to the fun party now?”

Valerie’s eyes twinkled. “We can indeed.”



\* \* \*

We spent hours smiling and meeting the people in the village. Apparently, I was enough of a curiosity that several of the dark fae nobles had left the keep, following me into town. Valerie stayed close to me on one side, pointing out crests for families and giving brief descriptions of their status in court.

Lily, on my other side, was so interested in the stylings of the court that she managed to relax some. “I hate to admit it,” she mentioned at one point, “but the red and black have so many more variations and possibilities for design than the blue and white.” She even pointed to several nearby revelers. “And they’re so much freer with their fashion!”

It was nice to spend time with them. I knew I needed the lessons from Valerie, and I wasn’t sure how long Lily would stay. I felt as though I needed to soak up as much of her presence as I could, just in case.

But my attention?

It was all on Thane. Searching for him in the crowds. Listening for his name being dropped in conversations. This was a celebration of our wedding, after all, and I found myself disappointed that I wasn’t spending the time with him. He was to be my husband for the rest of my life. Was it so much to ask

for a chance to speak with him?

Lily and I accepted many cups of wine throughout the day, but I steered us both clear of Starfire. We tried hundreds of bites of various delicacies. Even the spices in Ragalith were bolder, some burning the tongue while others warmed. Salty, sweet, all of it was used with abandon.

The freedom of the tastes, the sounds, the dress, the smells.

*This* might be a cage, but if it was, I couldn't feel its bars. Nowhere I looked did anything hint at a lack of freedom or movement.

The sun was beginning to set, the moons already taking their place in the sky. Spurts of stars woke to shine as night went on popped here and there above us. The music grew in volume and intensity, and I found myself walking toward its source.

A large wooden platform had been erected in a cleared field. The band sat to the side, their flutes and lutes and drums shouting their lyrical song. On the platform, fae and humans whirled and stomped together.

There was a wildness to their dancing which I drank in, discovering my thirst for more.

No waltzes or careful bows. No courtly distance between partners, all prim and proper. The dance before me was a prayer, a worship, joy and exultation practiced through liberated movement.

And there—

My breath caught in my throat. Near the platform, Thane stood speaking to a small group of well-dressed fae. I saw their crests and the house names flitted through my mind. He wasn't smiling, but I noticed how he leaned in and paid attention, making sure each speaker felt listened to.

The sun's last rays caught him, casting oranges and reds around the dark cut of his silhouette. His pale skin was painted warm in the glow and something stirred in me. A memory of a kiss. His touch on my calf.

His heart, so bruised.

"Time to dance," Valerie cheered, interrupting my longing. My fingers flew to my cheek, trying to cover the flush I knew she'd already seen. Lily's small smile said she'd witnessed it as well.

"I've been on my feet all day." The words tumbled out in a rush. "And I don't know those dances. The last thing I should be on the night before my wedding is clumsy and foolish."

"If you want to endear the villagers to you right away, the best thing you can do is dance," Valerie argued. "It doesn't matter if you don't know the

moves, just listen.”

I did. And there, beneath the cascades of notes and throbbing rhythm, someone was calling out the steps. My gaze tracked the dancers, and sure enough, I heard the voice announce the next move a step before it occurred.

No wonder they could move and twirl and change partners with ease.

Lily surprised me by starting toward the platform and tugging at my arm. “You aren’t worried?” I called to her, having to speak louder the closer we got to the band.

“About what?” she shouted over her shoulder.

“Blood and pain and torture?”

Her shoulders shook with laughter. “Not anymore. Not from anyone who can dance like this and wear things like *that*.” She pointed to a nearby male fae. His shoulder blades jutted out, sharp and bony spires from his back. His skin looked like cracked leather, his teeth were long and yellowed. He should be terrifying.

Except he was wearing a red vest backward, so the opening at the back allowed his knobby shoulders to be unencumbered. He wore no pants, just a loose tie of cloth to cover what needed to be covered. And he was clapping and singing with such unadulterated enthusiasm I couldn’t help but grin.

Giving in, I allowed her to pull me onto the platform.

No one made room for us. No, they pulled us in, launching our spinning bodies into place. I found myself caught in the arms of a female fae, her horns curving around her ears like a ram’s. Her jaw was square and her arms thick and strong, but her hair fell like purple ribbons, soft and lovely.

That was all I noticed, because her strong hold was maneuvering me, twirling me, and lifting me into the air.

I squealed in surprise.

The moment I was set down, I was half spun and another partner grabbed hold. He was human and handsome in a sun-stained way, his teeth gleaming white in the twilight and his hair falling in corkscrews.

He nodded at me with intention, showing me the beat. Reminding me to listen.

It clicked, the words and the surging power of the music thrumming through my body, and suddenly my feet were moving and I found my center. Like before, I was twirled and, when it was time, tossed in the air again.

I expected it, though, and laughed from my belly as the air whipped through my hair.

A change in partners and—

The breath whooshed out of me. Thane's sure hand gripped my waist, his other gripping my hand. He wasn't smiling. He was staring, those golden eyes that seemed to glow in the sunset boring into me.

The heat of his body seared me and we spun together. His hips moved in tandem with mine, far closer than I'd been with the other dancers. Closer than I'd been with anyone in my life. I felt a hardness pressed to my stomach that made me dizzy.

Thane only half-heartedly spun and twirled me, pulling me back to him with a speed and intensity that left me breathless. Like he couldn't stand not touching me, even for a moment.

It was like the notes of the music had become my blood. His closeness was my heart, pushing the sound, the energy through me. Setting my body alight with the sheer pleasure of being alive. Of feeling so free.

When he tossed me in the air, his strength sent me soaring and, for a moment, I could almost imagine being fae.

It felt like I had wings.

The heady night and Thane's presence were making me dizzy. For so long, I'd thought the world was a cage, where the fae were the keepers of the key. In that moment with Thane, I wondered if he might be unlocking the door for me.

It sent a thrill through me.

Thane didn't release me to the next partner. Instead, he grabbed my hand and pulled, leading me from the platform. Stumbling and nervous, I followed, acutely aware of how his palm warmed mine. Acutely remembering the feel of his body.

Villagers and nobles alike smiled indulgently at us as Thane moved us down streets, their faces dusted with knowing. I wished I felt as sure and knowing as they did.

His long strides meant I had to half-run to keep up, but I did so gladly. I found that all my muscles were willing to work hard if it meant being close to him.

The crowds thinned. The streets became narrower until we were veering in and out of a lattice of alleys. Finally, my head spinning and my lungs protesting from the effort, Thane stopped.

I found my back pressed to a wall, Thane's hands braced on either side of my head. It was dark here, only the faintest fae-lights hovering near. I could

hear his ragged breaths, feel the sweet, moist whisper on my face.

“Where were you today?” I managed. In the dark, my hands found the front of his tunic and grasped at it. I only dared that, to hold his clothes, too afraid of what would come next if I reached for him.

“Avoiding you.”

I flinched. But those golden eyes never wavered and there, just perceptible, were red rings. The way he got when he was using magic or experiencing intense emotions.

Thane moved closer, close enough now that when he next spoke, his lips brushed my cheek with the lightness of a feather. “I couldn’t, though. I’ve followed you all day. I watched you piss Sage off. Every villager you smiled at, every sip of wine or taste of food, I was watching you. Wanting you.” His tone was rough as bark.

An electric shiver skipped down my spine. “I looked for you, too.”

“I know. I could feel it. Is it the pendant?”

I licked dry lips. “Is what the pendant?”

“This thing in me, this *drive*. I keep trying to resist it, to resist thinking of you, and yet... Isla, you’re all I think about. I don’t even know you and I can’t get you out of my head.”

I thought about what the pendant had shown me. How hollow Thane’s life had been. His drive was so singular and focused, with no room for love. And how it was slowly wearing him away. “It might be the magic,” I admitted. “I feel just as connected to you.”

He cursed, low and heated. His body pressed closer, wedging me so firmly to the wall that my toes lost purchase. One strong thigh nestled between my legs, against my molten core. I moaned, rocking on his thigh before I could stop myself.

His teeth found my earlobe. The sharp incisors bit in, holding me, hovering just on the edge of pain. My hands snaked around his neck, my fingers tangling in his hair. “Thane,” I whispered, not knowing what I needed but feeling deeply what I wanted. “Even if it’s the pendant, is that so awful?”

Could something that felt so good be bad?

Thane’s hips moved, his thigh rocking against me once more. There was no denying the large press of his desire.

I thought he’d kiss me then. I wanted him to scoop me up, wanted to wrap my legs around his waist. My hands itched to touch him. I wanted to feel him inside of me.



I didn't think he'd step back so quickly. I almost fell to my rump in an alley. If it weren't for the wall catching me, I'd have sprawled. The balmy air of the night managed to chill me in the absence of his heat.

"Yes," he ground out.

My voice was thick with tears of shock and hurt. "Yes, what?"

"The pendant making us feel this way and do these things. Yes, it is that awful."

Just like that, any hope of him unlocking the door slammed shut. Instead, it only proved something I'd persuaded myself to ignore. Marriage to him wasn't freedom; it was another cage. One smaller and more tightly locked.

A sob hiccupped out from my chest as Thane turned and left, his long strides carrying him away so, so quickly.

The night before my wedding, I sank to the ground in an alley and wept.

## THANE

The meeting with the general of my father's armies had been planned for days. It was one of the pivotal parts of my plan. The general had fought beside my father and witnessed the wars and the accords.

But he also had soldiers regularly informing him on the situation with borders, on how badly our lands were being consumed by Silvermoore.

Blyth had joined us. I brought him in on these meetings not only because he shared my vision and was my most trusted friend, but as a presence to remind my father's advisors that they were all replaceable.

Yet as Blyth and General Firta went over maps and Blyth explained our ideas, I could barely pay attention. My mind was consumed with Isla.

Seeing her dance, her smile and delightful infectious had called to me. But that's what it was, right? An infection. Planted by the pendant.

It was worming her under my skin.

It was the root of all of my daydreams, of when I pictured spending time with her. Talking to her over food or while walking the gardens. It was what made me dream of making her laugh. There was a light in her that seemed to balance me, to provide a much-needed anchor. I didn't want to think about that too much.

Worse, it was the source of torturous nights. Nights where I couldn't sleep without dreaming of touching her and tasting her.

I wanted the pendant's magic for myself and I'd sworn to do anything, to seduce Isla if necessary, to get it. And that damn magical relic was flipping the tables on me.

Anger should be the only thing driving me now. Yet even in this meeting, where I absolutely needed to be focused, I was thinking about her. Guilt and irritation coiled tight like snakes in my chest. And my irritation wasn't aimed at Isla or even her necklace, but at myself.

Because I had left her in that alley. I'd gotten scared and run from her, and her tear-streaked face was haunting me.

"You're right that it's been bad," General Firta said, sighing heavily and leaning away from the map. "And I never understood King Raveclaw's insistence that we not retaliate. But it wasn't my job to understand his wishes, simply to carry them out." He pointed to several recently attacked villages. "When we went to try to help, it was too late. But what's more, we saw the land changing as we rode through. You can see it on Silvermoore's side."

"What do you mean?" I snapped.

General Firta turned to me, glowering. "Their land is infertile. Barely producing grass in some places. Silvermoore isn't just trying to make their kingdom larger. They're attacking the farming villages almost exclusively."

I'd witnessed that, hadn't I? On the way to the ball and the night that had shifted my world forever. Silvermoore's land had felt barren.

"Do we have anyone in Silvermoore's court?" Blyth asked. "Someone willing to tell us what's happening? Because if there's a blight on their land, we can't afford for it to make its way here."

"Queen Mara is our best contact," the general replied with a frown. "She's assured me there's nothing to be concerned about."

I snorted and pinched the bridge of my nose. "I think we can assume the opposite. I wanted to protect our people when I became king. Now it sounds as if we need to protect the land, too. Because I'll be damned if I'm going to let whatever is screwing them over leach into Ragalith."

"The accords are delicate."

"I don't understand how Silvermoore is stomping all over the accords and nothing is being done about it!" I snapped back. "It was a pact and they're blatantly ignoring it. In my opinion, the accords ceased to have meaning the first time Silvermoore pushed our villagers out and took over that land."

Blyth rubbed at his temples. "So much for subtlety. General, now that you know Prince Thane's intentions, will you support him when he's king?"

There was a beat in the conversation that lasted too long for comfort. But then the general grunted. "Yes."

I didn't like the sound of that 'yes.' Firta spoke like a man making backup plans and hedging his bets. If I were to be efficient and act quickly to protect my people, I couldn't wait around to try to woo the damn general of my armies. It didn't help that the people who fed and armed his soldiers were on my father's side and deeply reluctant to push back against Silvermoore.

I'd have to persuade those reluctant voices to create a united front, and in order for that persuasion to be effective, I needed the pendant. The pendant bonded to the woman I'd treated so poorly.

Going through the motions, I shook hands with the general and said my thanks while Blyth escorted him out. We'd been at meetings like this all morning, feeling out the noble houses and their concerns regarding the borders and the accords. None of it had been reassuring.

When Blyth returned, he wasn't his usual peppy self. "Well, I suppose the good news is that we were right."

"About what?"

"About needing the pendant to amplify your persuasion."

I snarled hopelessly. "As if that's going well. The thing that rubs me the rawest, Blyth, is that I shouldn't have to need the pendant. What I want isn't motivated by greed or a need to dominate. I just want my people to be safe. I want them to be able to live contented lives and share in the fruits of their labor. I want Ragalith to be a place my mother would be proud of and my rule to be something she'd admire. Things went to hell after she passed, and I just want it restored.

"They see what's happening to Silvermoore! Firta just confirmed it. That risk alone should be enough to warrant an interest in protecting what's ours. Yet I need a magic amplifier to convince my armies?" I slammed my fist on the table, sending empty cups tumbling over. "It's bullshit."

Blyth rocked on his heels. "It's definitely not great. We have a plan, though, and it's as good a plan as any. Marry the girl, get the amplifier, save Ragalith." He rubbed at the stubble on his cheek. "Side note; you seem moodier than usual, and you're always moody."

"Ass," I grumbled, not bothering to take his bait. My wedding was today, I would have to bind myself to the woman I'd dumped in an alley. Not my finest moment by a long shot. In fact, it was in the top five worst moments. There was a solid chance that she wouldn't even show up, which was a possibility I couldn't bear to entertain.

My friend hovered. He wanted answers, but I didn't have any for him. I didn't have any answers for my own questions. In fact, I was so twisted with frustration, I was in danger of lashing out at anyone and everyone who spoke to me. He was counting on me to woo Isla, and I'd done the exact opposite. She'd been in my arms, willing, and I should have swooped in and secured her affection. Instead, I'd botched it.

Gods, I was a coward and an idiot.

“You should go visit your mother,” he said. “Before the wedding. I’ll handle the rest of the meetings. All the most important ones are over. Go to your mother’s grave, Thane, purge yourself of whatever it is that’s bothering you.”

“I have to get married in an hour,” I groused.

“You’re the prince. If I need to tell Valerie why things are running late, I will. But you’re going to convince absolutely no one that you’re happy about this wedding in your current state. I can almost see the little gray cloud hovering over your head.”

“I’ll go it if means getting away from you.” Standing, I pointed a finger at him. “Let Valerie know now, so Isla doesn’t worry.”

*She’s already got enough to worry about, thanks to my actions.*

I didn’t bother to wait for a response. It had been ages since I’d gone to my mother’s grave. The mere suggestion had made it a demand on my heart. Seeing the grave and talking to her would do me good. I hoped.

All the former kings and queens and their families were buried in a courtyard at the heart of the west wing of the castle, near my father’s quarters. It was a lovely place, with fruit trees and flowers and the open sky above.

When I found my mother’s grave, though, I wanted to scream. It was overgrown and untended. It was the queen’s duty to ensure this place, this garden, was well maintained. Mara hadn’t been content to simply replace my mother. She’d left her to disappear as well.

I fell to my knees and began yanking the weeds from the ground. Moisture from the soil soaked through the knees of my pants. After a few violent yanks, I realized I was pulling *everything* up. Underneath the weeds were shoots of flowers and herbs that had originally decorated the grave.

Sighing, I slowed my efforts and envisioned how I wanted the grave to look, how best to honor her.

“Mom, I had everything figured out. Become king, reclaim our kingdom, and protect our rights and traditions. It felt like a good plan, a necessary plan. We failed the Ragalithians at the borders. Horribly. Again and again, we failed to protect them, to keep them safe. So many innocent people died and we lost more and more land.”

Dark crescents formed under my fingernails as I worked. Sweat dripped down my temples. The hair nestled along my horns itched with it. “I had this

one purpose and it was enough. It had to be, because I didn't have you anymore. And without you, I haven't had Dad, either."

Small purple flowers, smaller than my pinkie nail, dotted the ground. Their color had been fading, the other weeds choking out the sun and stealing the resources. Now freed from that, I hoped they'd take root and flourish. Just in case, I sent a small pulse of magic into their roots, persuading them to dig in deeper.

"I didn't want to want anything else. I was going to give all of myself to Ragalith."

Now, instead of taking away, I began to find sprigs of thyme and lemon verbena. With my magic, I helped them grow the tiny, white, hungry roots they'd need to flourish and planted them around the purple flowers.

"Now, I want something. Someone. But how do I know if it's real? We have used our magic to manipulate and get what we want. Hells, my whole plan relies on me manipulating all of my armies with magic. Now that I might be in the tug of another's power, I feel helpless."

I placed pincushion moss and lichen-covered rocks. Those tiny purple flowers winked out at me behind dark green leaves. Even the shoots of grass added dimension and beauty. It created a lawless loveliness I thought she'd appreciate, yet there was a balance of color and size, with no one plant getting the lion's share of the resources.

"How did we get here?" I whispered. "How did Father let so much happen? His inability to act has shaped my entire life. And now I want something and it's impossible to believe I could really have it. I wish I knew why he's done what he's done."

I took a deep, shuddering breath, finally admitting the truth that had been poisoning me since she'd died. "I'm so angry at him. I think you would be, too. I'm furious and ashamed to have a coward for a father. It eats at me to hate him so much. And last night, I was a coward as well, and I'm sitting here afraid. Afraid I'll somehow, someday, turn out just like him."

A breeze swept over me, cooling my sweat-damp curls. Squeezing my eyes shut, I tipped my head back and let the sun warm my face.

In my mind's eye I saw Isla, her eyes green with power. But also Isla, timid and hopeful.

"You convinced me you wanted to marry the girl." My father's voice boomed across the courtyard, startling me. I jumped up, brushing off my clothes, though they were now so filthy that my efforts were fruitless. "Yet

here you are, instead of ready at the altar.”

“I just needed a moment. With her.” Despite my admission of hate, I only tasted sorrow at his approach.

“Funny. That’s why I’m out here, too.”

We looked at each other for a long time. His gaze dropped first, taking in the work I’d accomplished on her grave. “Unconventional,” he said, salt-and-pepper eyebrows lifting. “But somehow perfect. Your mom was wild and trusting. She meant everything to me.”

What could I say to that? I remained silent.

And, like my magic, it was almost as if my silence prompted him to open up more. “I failed her. I should have—” his voice caught, his throat bobbing as he swallowed hard. “You know why I agreed to your wedding? Because of her. Your mother was adamant that if you fell in love, I was to move mountains to make sure you had it. She loved me, and—” a few gasps of air as he fought his way through emotion, “—and she made sure I knew how much you deserved that kind of love, too. She was certain you’d need it.”

I’d wanted answers from him. For so long, I’d been desperate to understand his choices and motivations. There was a sudden feeling of lightness in the air, like in this stone-enclosed courtyard, under this late summer sun, I could ask him anything and he’d reveal the truth.

My mother’s words, though. She’d been certain I’d need love. I’d never thought so. Not once. Hell, I’d actively avoided it. So, I could stay here and ask my dad about Silvermoore.

But if I did, I might not be able to show up for Isla.

“I...I need to hurry. If I’m going to clean up and be ready in time.”

My father was still staring at my mother’s grave. He offered a small wave and I took one step, two, before turning and jogging away, knowing I might be leaving the answers I’d so desperately wished for behind forever.



\* \* \*

The wedding was in one of the many gardens surrounding the castle. The

particular one chosen was a secret favorite of mine. It was more greenery than flowers, almost a mini replica of a forest. It had been perfect for hiding and playing in as a child.

As a groom, I appreciated the nod to our history. The forest and trees and roots had given us power. As a future king with plans, I hoped its wild and unlawful nature—the vines allowed to grow long and tangled, the trees unpruned, the ferns spilling finger-like fronds over the paths—would remind the visiting light fae of who we dark fae truly were.

A force of nature.

The largest path of the garden had been lined with lights, their magic flickering like fireflies in the cool evening. It wasn't near dark, but the thick limbs and dense leaves made the path shadowed and sacred. An arch had been constructed of ash and had been carved with words of blessing. It had been decorated with roses of the deepest red.

Along the way, large pots filled with flowers created a sense of purpose. I admired the colors, the sunset and autumn hues that seemed to burst forth and brighten the space. How much of that had been Valerie?

Very little, my heart seemed to scream. The arrangements made me think of Isla.

Gods, but I was going to have to work for her forgiveness. It wasn't something I was familiar with. Despite it being a foreign concept, I knew it was necessary. We might still be operating under a deal. I'd have to struggle against the lure of the pendant. But that wasn't Isla's fault, and I swore I wouldn't take my frustrations out on her again.

If she'd have me.

Blyth sidled up to me as we waited under the arch. "You cut it close, friend," he whispered. "But you look less pinched and gloomy. Does that mean I was right?"

"You were right," I admitted. "But this is the only time I'll ever admit it. If you gloat, I'll cut off a finger."

He chuckled. People were making their way to the path. They lined up along it, each carrying a candle and a sprig of flowers. I knew many of the Ragalithian nobles here, and most of them I even liked, though they'd struggle when change came to our country.

Then there were the Silvermoorians. My skin crawled at the few nobles who'd deigned to show up with sneers on their faces. They were here to judge and report back, spies not even bothering to hide.



Naturally, Prince Xavier was there. Our gazes met and locked, and there was a thunderous fury scarcely hidden beneath the flat veneer of his face. Next to him—and hells, Isla would not be pleased—was the Ice Bitch. She practically glowed in our green and verdant garden with her pale skin and white hair and ostentatious gown. The way she clung to the crook of Xavier’s arm suggested she’d wormed her way into a future betrothal.

Poor bastard. Then again, they deserved each other.

It was Sage who made his way to the arch, my father and Mara behind him. The king and queen moved to the side, prepared to bring the wedding to order. Sage leaned in, “We still have some moments before the bride arrives.”

A claw of panic tightened my gut. Maybe Isla wouldn’t come. Maybe my poor behavior had chased her away, and she’d rather risk assassination or capture or banishment than marry me. “Is something amiss?” I asked carefully, facing Sage so none could read my lips. I’d not have anyone see any weakness.

“Would there be?” he asked instead. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Don’t start with me. Not here, not now.” I sharpened each word to a fine edge. “This is political. We can’t have the light view us as weaker than they already do.”

“On this, we can agree. Which is why the queen opted not to mention *who* you were marrying.”

“Silvermoore knows I claimed her. Who else do they think I’d marry?”

“To claim doesn’t mean to marry. A witch? Tonight will be an interesting affair, I think.” It sounded like Sage was a bit too excited to see the fallout this would start. Perhaps he and Mara hoped it would undermine my influence when I was crowned king.

Interesting, he’d called it. I didn’t want any more ‘interesting’ in my future. I wanted to make things right with Isla. We’d made a deal, a good deal. Based on the pendant’s ridiculous behavior, I suspected the chance of her being able to simply *give* me the power was narrowing. But Isla was tolerable.

More than tolerable, if I was being completely truthful with myself. She’d felt damn good pressed under me in the alley.

I suspected if we could work on sorting through the influence from the relic and our own feelings, Isla and I could find a companionable middle ground. Perhaps I wouldn’t need to take the power from her. She might even wield it for me.

As my wife.

*He deserves love.* That was my mother's wish. I wanted it to be true, but it wasn't possible. I couldn't give everything to my people, I couldn't protect and save them if I held part of myself back.

Music began to carry through the trees, and the murmuring under the guests began to quiet. Blyth patted my shoulder. "It's time."

My stomach flopped inside me, wiggling in anticipation. Time seemed to slow, the moments moving like taffy, stretching and growing along with my nerves. Turning, I searched for her. When I saw her, I was struck dumb.

Isla stepped onto the path, her sister at her side. Lily was lovely enough with her auburn hair and classic features. But I only had eyes for Isla.

Her gown was the deep gray of the clouds before a storm. Her hair was braided and fell down her back, a few loose curls framing her face. A diadem of fine gold sat on her brow, a ruby nestled in its center. It seemed to lend its brilliance to her hair, the red of it vivid and breathtaking.

With each step, the red shoes peeked out, their glass-like appearance jewel-like. They fit her perfectly, showcasing slender feet with high, elegant arches. Desire pooled in me as I remembered holding her foot and calf in my hand and how the touch had felt more intense than any I'd experienced with a woman before.

The pendant at her throat seemed to glow. Maybe it was just for me, a pulsing greeting. Or warning.

Illusions of small birds floated and flapped around her, but I heard the gasps of my people. They'd heard of her healing magic. The birds were a clever reminder of her power. I'd have to thank Valerie for it, for making Isla a presence to be reckoned with.

As she made her way closer, my body hummed. It pulled and buzzed, the anticipation moving through me like magic. All other thoughts and concerns and plans were stripped from my mind. All that remained was her.

Isla looked at the flowers in her hands, a curious mix of orange lilies, scarlet tulips, and those small, near-black roses peppered throughout. She wouldn't look at me, and my heart sank. But it meant she missed the ugly twist on Xavier's face and the appalled fury of his companion just before they turned and marched away.

Lily glowered at me as she handed Isla off to my waiting hand. It was impossible to focus, however. Because our skin touched and my heart seemed to explode within me, a chaotic beating ball of heat. When Isla finally looked

up at me, the sapphire blues flashed with wariness.

“You look... you *are* incredible,” I said, tongue thick and tripping in my mouth.

Isla only slightly tipped her head. Her mouth was painted red but she kept her lips pressed firmly together.

This wouldn't work. It was a hunch, a scratch at the back of my mind. We couldn't wed like this. I turned to Sage, who'd already puffed himself for proper pomp and officiant duties. “We need a minute,” I said.

“What?” His shrill tone was clear as a bell.

“I am taking a minute with my betrothed. Right now. You and everyone else can wait.”

Tugging on Isla's hand, I pulled her off the path, into the trees, leaving the confused mutterings of the courtiers behind us. Most of the fruit trees were past season, their boughs covered in leaves and a few sweet-smelling, overripe fruits.

When we were sufficiently far enough away, I released her hand and turned to face her. “You're angry.”

Her eyes flared green. Yeah, she was angry. The kind of magical pissed-off that spelled real trouble. There was a strange pressure and prickle in the air. Her magic, powered by her emotions, currently aimed at me. As she pinned me down with a cold emerald glow, I felt my hair and clothes begin to lift and pull. Like being on one of the battlements the moment before lightning and thunder and gale-force winds claimed the air.

Her power was as terrifying as it was enticing.

“I'm not angry.” Her arms folded in front of her chest, making it difficult to believe her. “I'm hurt.”

“I hurt you.” Despite every instinct in my body demanding that I run, I stepped closer to her and slowly untangled her arms, cupping her hands within mine. “I know I did. And I did it because I was scared. But in my cowardice I was cruel and I proved your fears about the dark fae correct.”

There was a flicker in the glowing green, a flash of blue. “You did. That was worse than if you'd just stuck me in the dungeon the first night.”

“Yes,” I agreed. There was no point in shirking from responsibility. “It was wrong of me. I didn't just make a mistake, I made a bad choice, driven by the wrong motivations.”

Blue slipped in and the green faded away. All that was left was Isla. Not the Isla I'd danced with in Silvermoore, though. That Isla had been a scared

mouse, skittish and tearful. It also wasn't the Isla from our first dinner, untrusting and wary.

This Isla was the woman who'd made a deal with an enemy, who'd listened and paid attention and kept an open heart and mind. Who'd danced with the fae at twilight, laughing and joyous and unafraid.

"I dreaded this, you know," I continued. "Being married in general, *having* to have a queen to rule. And worse, being forced to marry a stranger, a human, and a commoner just so I could get the one thing I needed."

Isla huffed. "Well, marrying you wasn't going to be a picnic for me, either, Thane. You are dark fae, sharp-tongued, and single-mindedly driven to the point of being blind to everything else. I was going to have to pretend to know what I was doing in a position with enormous amounts of pressure, married to a man who didn't like me, and estranged from my family and everything I know."

A muscle ticked at the corner of my mouth. "Poor us. Who thought this was a good idea?"

She laughed, small but genuine. "Blyth did. He's the one we should be truly pissed at. What an *ass*."

"I remind him of that all the time."

We paused, the space between us still crackling with nerves and uncertainty. Her hands were warm in mine, and I absentmindedly stroked my thumb along her knuckles. "I don't dread being married to you now." I squeezed her fingers tight. "I'm cautious of the pendant you wear. I still need its power. I'm certain of that now. But, like you said, I've been blind to places where I might need to adapt. You are one of those places. And I find it isn't horrible to consider having to adapt to you."

"You must charm so many ladies with that silver tongue." Her tone was so wry I cringed, but she winked. "I understand. I need you to know, though, the pendant isn't just affecting you. It's helping me to see and understand Ragalith. And you. Because of it, I find I don't dread being married to you, either. I hope this isn't too bold, but I think we could be good together. The pendant's magic is just showing us that."

A strange heat twitched to life within me at that. "I can't—won't—give up my plans. Protecting my kingdom is everything to me. There's no room for anything else."

Her eyes fluttered at that, hearing what I was really telling her. I didn't know how to be successful and have room for all of her.

“Okay.” She nodded once, then again, sharper. “Let’s stick to the deal then, shall we? With one caveat; we could, if you like, try to be friends.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’d really hate for you to think of me in the same way you think of your stepmother.”

My body squeezed and tightened, the sensation of Isla’s heat pressed tight to me and all the things I’d wanted to do to her. “There’s no chance of that, Isla. None.”

Her eyelids fluttered for a moment before she grinned. “Well, have we made everyone wait long enough?”

Isla laced her fingers through mine and led the way back to the altar, her resolve strong and decision made. Relief and wonder cascaded within me, down to my toes, making each step light. Never in a hundred years would I have considered myself lucky to be forced into a marriage of convenience.

But Isla made the situation better. Bearable.

Perhaps even something I could look forward to.

Sage looked ready to burst out of his skin in irritation when we made our way back to the arch. Lily hovered near Isla, only smiling after she’d seen something that satisfied her. My father frowned, and Mara, to my utmost delight, scowled. So many people who thought their opinions should matter to me, when the only one I actually cared about still held my hand.

“Shall we continue?” Sage asked loudly, not hiding that he was put out. A few of the fae tittered.

“Yes.”

Sage’s magic wrapped around us like ribbons. As he spoke the words that we repeated, that power tied us to our oaths.

“Do you each promise to honor this country?”

“We do.” Isla and I spoke in unison. Something cinched between us.

“Do you swear to act in Ragalith’s best interests?”

“We do.” The binding magic grew taut and thick. I felt the oaths sinking from me to the earth, a connection I couldn’t shake. When Isla’s gaze met mine, a jolt pierced through me, the connection between us, between Ragalith, an almost tangible thing. She squeezed my hands tighter and the corner of her mouth quirked up.

“Do you swear to protect its citizens, to rule with reason and intention?”

“We do.”

By the end of it, Sage’s magic was wrapped so tightly around us, my ribs ached from the pressure and Isla was making sharp, short inhalations.

There'd be no escaping those oaths. Not that I cared. I'd meant every word I'd promised. When I was crowned king, I'd make the same vows again.

Isla's eyes burned green as the pact was finished. Her own power was threaded through the ceremony and our vows. It was becoming familiar to me now, like a smell or a taste unique to her. Surely she felt it too, now. Knew the power she possessed.

And yet she stood, calm and certain. Harnessing and controlling a relic with more power than the fae had experienced in over a century.

She didn't think she had magic on her own, but for her to have that level of control... she might very well be a witch.

Perhaps that should bother me, but I couldn't find an ounce of worry inside me.

Gods, I might even admire it.

"You're bound to the kingdom, bound to rule together, bound to each other. The words have been spoken, the oaths made and witnessed. From now until your deaths, you're joined."

Isla smiled broadly.

It was only a moment later that I realized she'd been mirroring my own expression.

# ISLA

**M**y limbs were electric with magic. Thank the gods Valerie had warned me Sage would be using power to make our vows official, or I was certain I'd have panicked, the pendant would have reacted, and the ceremony would've ended in disaster.

As it was, it ended in a party. Unlike the previous celebrations, Thane never left my side. Starfire was passed out in small crystal glasses. This, too, Valerie had warned me of. The king raised his glass. "Prince Thane and his wife, Princess Isla!"

I gulped down the honeyed fire after hearing the title. Goodness. I was a *princess*.

The tall, dark man beside me, his face all angles and cutting beauty, smiled and sipped at his, nodding to those around us. His arm was looped around my back, his hand gently pressed to my hip. It felt more tender a touch than I would have expected.

He couldn't have known that, despite the deep pain his rejection had caused me, I would've married him anyway. My feelings were still vulnerable. Often my heart and body didn't feel like my own anymore, especially when he was near. The pull of him was like a whirlpool, sucking me in no matter how I thrashed against it.

The lights glittered fiercely, seeming to spread and smear in the sky as the Starfire hit my system with a bang.

I would have married him merely because the pendant had given me the means to understand him. In his heart, he was good. His devotion to his kingdom and his people was admirable. And I'd witnessed Ragalithians, common and noble, and learned what it meant to be dark fae. The sense of community and pride was worth protecting.

How different would my life and the lives of my family have been if we'd

been born in this kingdom rather than Silvermoore?

Another round of Starfire was passed out. My fingers fumbled with the stem of the glass. Thane raised an eyebrow and I felt my cheeks pink. This time the queen raised her glass. Beside me, Thane stiffened. "May your reign be less tumultuous than your childhood."

All around, fae and humans laughed. For them, it was a joke. I knew better. Gods, she was *awful*.

While others drank, Thane remained frozen. The pendant warmed. I had a feeling that even the toasts of the fae were tangled with magic and that we might be making a misstep by not drinking. I leaned in and whispered, "Less tumultuous, perhaps, but filled with peace," amending the queen's words.

He drank, relieved, and I joined in.

I'd initially agreed to marry him because I hadn't had any other options available to me that felt tangible and real. Now, I wanted to participate in the marriage, in the kingdom, to aid Thane. I'd put on the gown, allowed for the jewels and the hair and even the birds, knowing that even if he was cruel, I could sense in the deepest reaches of myself that he needed me.

Then Thane had stopped the ceremony, had made important people wait just so he could apologize. A dark fae prince saying sorry? There needed to be tales about it.

Our union was far from perfect. But his thumb brushing a tantalizing crescent on my hip, smoothing back and forth? It felt pretty damn good.

When the servants made their way through the crowds with yet another round of Starfire, Thane signaled to one and requested wine for Lily and me. A quick glance at my sister was enough to understand his motivations.

Her large blue eyes were glossed over. Jeremy had found her, clinging to her side. Both of them wore silly grins, their laughter loud and their hands all over the other. In front of everyone. They'd never acted like that before.

"Should I find them a room?" Thane whispered in my ear. My nipples tightened at the hot, wet heat of his breath on the sensitive shell.

"No," I managed. "No, they're fitting right in."

It wasn't an exaggeration. Two drinks of Starfire and the crowd of guests had thinned substantially. The garden suddenly offered many dark corners and hidden spots for people to disappear to.

Music started up, but it didn't quite drown out the rise of moans.

The guests who weren't off pleasure-seeking broke into smaller groups. Couches and pillows were placed all around. The lights, now blooms of



brightness to my drink-influenced gaze, spread out, dimming the garden.

Thane was beside me, and I found that in the middle of our wedding celebration, we were very much alone.

The hand on my hip squeezed. Suddenly, we were too close. Far closer than partners in a business arrangement had any right to be. He'd said there wasn't room for me in his plan, but his body language conveyed something entirely different.

Thane released his hold on my hip, only to slink his hand up my waist, his fingers trailing along my ribs. I wanted to lean into him. It was hot and my dress felt too tight. But that tender spot in my heart stopped me. I couldn't. I couldn't be lulled in again, only to be dropped and deserted. Who knew when he'd get afraid again? Or put up a new wall between us?

He might be my husband, but that didn't make us lovers.

"Thane," I said, forcing myself to sound blunt. The hand immediately disappeared and he stepped away, leaving a chill in its absence.

He, too, was under the influence of the Starfire. Those golden eyes were ringed with red. Pink was dusted across his cheeks. "Sorry," he said gruffly. "The atmosphere—"

Nearby, someone cried out in pleasure.

"This is very different from the weddings in Silvermoore," I teased, trying to regain composure.

"Ours are more fun."

There was no one around us anymore. Moonlight had inched over the garden, its silver touch illuminating rutting forms on the couches, against the trees, on the ground...

"Where's Lily?"

Thane quirked an eyebrow in a knowing look. I flushed, thinking of my sister and Jeremy someplace close by, wrapped up in each other under the wide-open sky. They were so very private at home.

"She'll hate me in the morning," I grumbled.

"Not if he does his job."

A thrilling shiver danced up my spine.

"This will be going on for a while," Thane said, probably in an attempt to distract me. "There's food in the main hall. Most likely the snottier envoys from Silvermoore are hiding there as well, too repulsed by our debauchery. Should we sneak something to eat and go hide in my chambers?"

The thought of being in his chambers with him...

I should refuse. We'd spoken truthfully, he'd told me what he was and wasn't capable of. This kingdom might not be what I'd expected and Thane even more so, but it was one thing to accept that I could relax and actually enjoy myself in Ragalith, and an entirely separate thing to relax with Thane.

If I relaxed, I'd get hurt. I didn't think there was any way to avoid that.

The night before, I'd been certain Thane was forcing me into a cage with this marriage. Now, though, I knew it wasn't true. I'd made this cage all on my own. At least I would find comfort in knowing I'd willingly locked the door.

"I don't think—" I started.

Just for a moment, a hair's breadth of a second, hurt flashed across his face. "We'll play a game. Eat. Let them think what they want, okay? But it feels strange to stand here and listen to everyone else fornicating at our wedding."

Heat flared through me like wildfire and I knew my entire body was scorched with red. We were, weren't we? Just standing in the middle of a garden currently being repurposed as a den of passion.

"Right. Okay."

Thane led me through a back way, sneaking us into the castle. We briefly caught a glimpse of Blyth's back, his face buried in Valerie's neck. For her part, my lady-in-waiting looked happy to have him there. I was so going to ask her about that later.

We stalked through the servants' halls of the castle. It was a delight to watch Thane tiptoe and cling to walls like a little boy, stealing glances and giving me furtive waves as if we were playing at being spies.

It had taken some maneuvering and one thrown apple (for distraction) to get around the main hall where the Silvermoorians were, indeed, waiting and collectively grumbling about the heathens all around them.

We managed to make plates of "stolen" meat pies, tiny cakes, buttered greens, and candy-roasted nuts before slipping away to his room.

I'd never seen his quarters, so I held my breath as he ushered me inside.

My room was lavish. But compared to Thane's quarters, it was small and simple. He had *rooms*. As in, multiple rooms. A room devoted exclusively to baths, it seemed. Another filled with clothes and boots. His bed was enormous, large enough for a horse to lie in should it feel the urge.

And books. Books *everywhere*.

"Yeah, it's okay," I said with a shrug. "I've seen better."

Thane tossed me a knowing look. “This won’t be mine for much longer. After the coronation, we’re both moving. The entire west wing holds our quarters.”

My mouth fell open and he laughed. Indignant, I lifted my chin high. “Look here, *Prince*, some of us never dreamed of being queens. I’m still adjusting to maids stubbornly refusing to let me bathe myself. Having entire rooms of a castle belong to me...”

His hard features softened and Thane led me to a large, plush chair in front of a fireplace. It was one of a pair and he took the other. Cushions as soft as clouds wrapped me up like a blanket as I settled in. The plate of food balanced precariously on my lap.

“I forget that, you know,” he said. “It makes me an ass. I assume everyone hopes to be a king or queen and dreams of it.”

That earned a snort from me. “Please. The most Lily and I dared to dream was possibly dressing the queen of Silvermoore one day.”

“I’d say that’s awful, but it’s Silvermoore.” Venom dripped from his words, the shift in his mood abrupt.

“You really hate them.”

“I have a lot to hate them for.”

“Just because they do things differently?” It wasn’t that I was judging. I’d been just as hateful of the dark fae when I’d arrived at Ragalith.

“They don’t just do things differently. It would be irksome if Silvermoore were merely fae with branches shoved up their asses. All pomp and pride. I’d even bite my tongue against their hoarding of power and magic and wealth at the top, with little spilling down to everyone else.”

I waited, knowing now that those things were true of my former home. I’d known it then, too, and had resented it. But I’d also swallowed it down without protest because I’d been taught it could be so, so much worse. If you compared awful to hellishly horrific, it was difficult to remember that awful still sucked.

“They’re never content, Isla. They have so much. You’ve seen it—the castle, the lands, the prosperity. The light fae have everything, but it is never enough for them. That’s what I hate them for. Because they’ll never stop oppressing, taking, hoarding, consuming.”

“You make them sound like a plague.”

He lifted one shoulder in acquiescence. “They are. I think they’re a plague on all of Savaria.” Something crossed his features, a flash of a hidden

thing being made somewhat clearer. I wondered what new connection to Silvermoore had just been formed in his mind.

We ate in silence, the warmth of the fire bordering on too hot due to the balmy summer night. The drink, the rich foods, and my fancy gown were catching up to me. Sweat collected at the nape of my neck.

Setting aside the plate, I tried to use pulling my legs up into the chair as a disguise for lifting and shifting the hem of my dress, exposing my legs. Thane watched my movements like a hawk.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “It’s a bit warm in here.”

“I can have someone come put it out,” he offered.

That would be an interruption. It would mean Thane leaving me, even for just a moment. Somehow it felt like if the fire went out, what we were sharing would be snuffed out as well. The right thing to do would be to say yes.

“No, it’s fine as long as you don’t mind a little leg showing.”

“I don’t. Especially not when it’s your leg.”

I opened my mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. How were we going to manage a lifetime of partnership if we kept dancing so close to danger? How was I supposed to keep my heart safe when he said things like that?

Worse, he set his plate aside and stood, moving closer to me. The chair kept me locked in as he sank to his knees in front of me. “You have something on your face,” Thane murmured, reaching up to stroke the corner of my mouth with his thumb. My skin tingled where he’d touched me and I gasped.

The connection between us was blazing, and briefly I worried I’d had more Starfire than I thought, because I wanted nothing more than to seek out his mouth. His golden gaze snared me. I melted in the heat of his eyes, metal gone liquid so it could be forged into something new.

*Oh.*

“Tell me something awful about yourself,” I blurted out, a last-ditch effort to avoid this thing brewing between us.

Thane frowned. “Why?”

“Because we’re married now. For the rest of our lives. I agreed to our deal but, let’s be real, I didn’t have a ton of options. I want to know who I’ve paired up with.”

“By learning something awful?”

I bit my lip and nodded. “Look, I’ve been here a week and every day has

been spent learning the good things about Ragalith. I mean, the bar was set low, so it wasn't difficult for me to be impressed."

"Does that mean you're disappointed that we're *not* cruel and terrible?"

"I'll admit that going a week without any beheadings just for fun or making a human eat until their stomach burst and what-not was a bit of a letdown," I joked. "But seriously. Tell me something true and awful about you."

He held me in his golden gaze for so long that I started to fidget.

"Okay. But you'll do the same. I want your answer after." Thane straightened and went back to his chair. "When I was a small boy I stole a maid's underclothes and hid them in Sage's pillow so everyone would think he was an old pervert."

"What!?" Giggling, I shook my head. "How is that awful? It was a prank!" And having met Sage, probably a well-deserved prank.

"It was awful because I expected people to be upset, but we're so casual about sex that no one thought twice about it. In fact, I think I recall the maid being flattered and willingly going to his chambers later."

Now we both laughed. I wiped a tear, imagining Sage's face as he pulled out a mysterious pair of undergarments.

"Now I see your awful reputation truly is deserved," I accused.

Thane winked. Then he sobered, growing thoughtful. "I will give you a better answer. You deserve that from me." I held my breath. He steepled his hands under his chin.

"Most nobles are taught from a young age how to block out magical attacks from other fae."

"What do you mean, attacks?"

"I mean that we're able to shield ourselves to avoid damage from fire or whatever. Magic to withstand physical attacks. But we're also taught to shield from mental attacks as well. Most nobility, in fact, have powers rooted in the mind instead of the physical world. Your pendant does this for you."

I thought about how frustrated Thane had seemed the night of the Silvermoore ball. "What's your power?"

"Persuasion. Which sounds harmless. I like that, the deceptiveness of it. Persuading makes it sound as if I'm simply good at changing someone's mind. But it goes so much further than that, Isla. For an untrained human or fae, I could talk them into murdering their entire family. Cutting off limbs."

The food in my stomach threatened to come up.

Thane kept speaking. “When I was young, I’d persuade my servants to bring me extra treats or let me stay up later than my bedtime. It was small, childish, harmless things. As I grew older, my power grew stronger. After that, it was convincing other boys to lose to me in sword practice. I didn’t think twice about it. I was using magic freely, the way I thought we were encouraged to do.”

His face shifted away from mine. Firelight flickered on his high cheeks and brow. “My father sent me out with a small battalion to a nearby noble household who were late on their payments to the crown. I think he meant for me to just find out why they were late.

“But I wanted to show off. I made that family invite me inside. Persuaded them to feed me. After eating their food and drinking too much of their wine, I persuaded the two daughters to fight each other for my favor. I made their parents watch.”

His voice had grown shaky. “It didn’t feel like harm, you see. I thought I was simply showing them how awful things *could* be. The girls were vicious, punching and kicking and biting. But also weeping and begging me over and over to make it stop.”

He covered his face with his hands and I wanted to crawl into myself and hide from the picture he was painting. But I’d asked for this, hadn’t I? So I was damn well going to hear it through.

“After too long, I released them from the magic hold. The father scrambled and found some coins he’d kept hidden and bid some of his servants to cart barrels of grain to the castle. Because of this, I returned, proud as a peacock. After all, I’d done more than my father had asked. I’d gotten the payment.”

I couldn’t help it. “What happened after that?”

“After that? A hard winter. One of the daughters and the mother perished from illness, though I’m sure their grain shortage and starvation didn’t help matters. My father learned of their passing and what I’d done.” A log in the fire popped and Thane flinched. “He ordered me to lower my shields for a month, and gave permission to anyone in the kingdom to use their magic on me. Some were, perhaps, too afraid. But not all.”

He turned his face back toward me. There was a haunted look in his eyes, his mouth a pale slash. “I learned that even when it seems like a small thing, *any* time I manipulate someone’s will, I cause them harm. It’s a terrible thing to have no control.”

I sniffled and realized I was crying. “I’m sorry that happened. It sounds awful.”

Thane’s laugh was like thrown stones, pelting and hard. “Oh, that wasn’t the awful thing, Isla. The awful thing, this big bad part of me you want to know, is that I never stopped. I spent that month being made to slap myself until I bruised, made to scrub the barracks floors and stand in freezing water for hours, and instead of learning a lesson, I still choose to use magic if it will get me what I want.”

“Oh, gods,” I whispered. Again, the night of the ball played out in my head. “You used your magic on me. Tried to, at least, in Silvermoore.”

“Yes.”

All the warmth had left me. My blood was chilled, and I shrank into the chair, away from him.

“I imagine you’re regretting that question.”

I did, and I didn’t. “I suppose that’s the source of the rumors, then. Mostly they’re small truths like that, tiny ways in which fae did something horrid, then growing like an avalanche as they’re told again and again.”

“We’re decent in Ragalith. Near the castle, especially. But there’s a price to our freedom and sometimes it comes in the form of pain. Cruelty. Accidents where bystanders are wounded or killed. Pranks can get out of hand. It’s difficult, because so rarely is it malicious, Isla. But as much as I hate it, there are some truths to the stories. Many of us choose magic because it’s the shortest and easiest route to getting what we want.”

I’d known about his heart. How devoted it was to his mission. Thane had risked inciting bad feelings between the courts just to get the pendant. He’d agreed to marry a stranger, just to get the pendant. Of course he’d use his powers if he thought it would help him further his goal.

This was what I’d married. These were now my people. I was to be their queen.

I couldn’t find fault in them, even if, perhaps, I should.

“My turn,” I said.

He waved his hand. “You don’t have to, Isla. It was a fair and clever question.”

“We made a deal and I’ll keep my end. I’m pretty sure there’s bad luck among the fae who don’t honor bargains.” Thane snorted at that, but I noted how he watched me carefully from under hair that had flopped forward.

“I’m selfish,” I said with finality. “Like persuasion, I’m sure it sounds

like little enough. And I'm very good at hiding it. But I am so deeply selfish, Thane. I knew I couldn't keep the necklace. I mean, come on, it's gold and beautifully crafted. No commoner would have jewels like this. I always told myself that things moved fast and I was young and when could I have given it back?"

Of course, my fingers were now holding the pendant, my thumb stroking its etched surface in memory.

"But I'd known I'd keep it the minute I pulled it from the water. My parents were dead, so I told myself I deserved *something* good. But if they'd been alive? I'd have kept it. I wanted something to be mine, and I put myself and Lily in danger each and every year I kept it. There were winters when it had been lean, but I wouldn't sell it for food. Jeremy could scarcely afford a wedding band for my sister. Did I help them? Offer to melt it down for gold to craft a ring? No."

"You're ridiculous," Thane said, surprising me.

"How so?"

"It's *magic*, Isla. You've never had a choice."

I shook my head vehemently. "No. I refuse to believe that. I mean, obviously it's magic, but I don't think it would keep me against my will. I think... I'm sure if I really wanted to, if I wasn't so desperate to have something that was special and just mine, Thane, I'd be able to take it off."

Because all those attempts, even with my life on the line? My heart hadn't been in it. My heart had clung to that one thing, had claimed it as mine.

Did he understand what I was saying? Did Thane hear my awful thing, underneath all the rest?

He could have had the pendant by now if I would just give it up.

"It seems," he said, but not before my heart thundered and my mind screamed for want of a response, "we are better matched than we thought. Our marriage, our partnership, if you will, is made up of two people willing to risk anything to protect what they care about."

Air whooshed out of me, leaving me suspended and breathless. That he could view it like that and find the similarities? That he didn't hold it against me?

It made me bold. "I like that. That we may be well matched. Thank you for that."

"Selfish and cruel," he mused. "It has a ring to it. I find myself wishing



my persuasion worked on you, Isla.”

“Oh? Why?”

“Because I’d convince you to lie with me tonight.”

How was it possible for all of my blood to drain and yet combust at the same time? I was floored and burning. “I wish that your powers would work on me, too. Then you could persuade me not to want you,” I admitted.

“But you do want me? Or is that the magic speaking?”

The previous night in the alley replayed in my head. The same desire ran rampant in my body. There was a demanding throb between my legs. “If it was the magic, would it be so awful?” The same question I’d asked then.

My mouth felt like sand.

“It should,” he snarled, though it wasn’t an angry noise. It sounded more like frustration. “But I find, at this moment, that I don’t particularly care.”

We launched at each other at the same time, colliding in front of the fire. Thane’s strong fingers snaked into my hair. The diadem clinked as it fell to the floor. His clawed fingertips scraped my scalp and I moaned into his mouth.

His *mouth*. Thane’s kiss was an attack. He devoured me, his tongue seeking to claim every inch. I wanted the same of him, seeking to taste him, to drink him in.

We were frantic in our need. My dress ripped as he pulled it from my shoulders. His shirt tore as I wrenched it open. We discarded our clothing in a flurry, the tatters of rich fabrics falling to piles on the floor. One, two of my shoes went sailing, striking the wall before falling to the floor.

Thane’s mouth was hot on my neck, his tongue tracing my throat and collarbone. I wrapped my arms tight around his neck, wanting him closer, as close as I could bring him, stroking along the hard ridges of his horns.

“It’s my first time,” I whispered. “Show me what to do.”

Thane slipped his hand between my legs and, oh, the touch was better than I could ever have dreamed. He stayed like that, kissing and nipping at my neck, my jaw, my lips, his talented fingers preparing me. By the time I was writhing and mewling in pleasure, I was past the point of being ready.

“Come here,” he groaned, his hands stroking my hips, my lower back, before gripping my backside. Strong fingers dug into my naked bottom as he grabbed, kneading flesh before lifting me.

He was inside me before we even found the bed. But we did find the bed. However, most of the night was not spent sleeping.

## THANE

I'd lain with my wife.

What an odd, intriguing thought.

Isla and I had been together every night since our wedding. Each of those seven nights, we made love until we ached, until our bodies demanded rest.

We weren't just together during the evenings, either. I found myself wanting her with me as soon as I finished my meetings. For every meal. Even when I read and tried to come up with strategies for when I was crowned, I often enticed her to sit nearby. Valerie and she would keep me company while Valerie helped Isla learn to read and write.

It was good that we were getting along so well, as Lily and her husband had refused to stay after the wedding. While I suspected it was due to some lingering embarrassment from their experiences after indulging in Starfire, Lily insisted it was because the shop still needed her. It was her parents' shop, she'd pleaded with Isla. She couldn't just leave it.

They'd promised to visit soon, but anyone with eyes could see how Lily's absence was difficult on Isla. It bothered me to see her hurting, so I endeavored to keep her occupied and as happy as I could.

Marriage was not what I'd expected it to be.

But my coronation was nearing. Meetings upon endless meetings had been scheduled. Nobles and generals and merchants all wished to discuss their lands, their plans, their wares—the reminder of my goals was like ice water dousing me.

There were times in those meetings when I could feel the reluctance of a particular individual. Perhaps it was a face they made or the way they'd say something, but I knew in my gut that when it was time for me to reclaim lost Ragalith land, they'd be a rut in the road.

Those were the times I remembered Isla's confession.

She believed she could take off the pendant. She could give it to me anytime she wanted.

We were, as we'd found, well matched. In and out of the bedroom. I appreciated her dry wit and her relentless teasing. I thought she was fond of me as well. It was so much better than we'd expected.

So why was she still wearing the pendant?

Could I ask her for it now? The levels of comfort between us grew each day. I knew how she liked her hair combed, the taste of her, the sound she made when I stroked the skin where her thigh met her bottom.

"You're brooding," she said as she joined me in the library. I'd just met with several nobles to discuss future tithes.

"I don't brood."

Isla was dressed in a black gown. Our colors were perfect on her. With her hair wild and down, she did, in fact, resemble a witch, a dark and seductive enchantress.

She seated herself on my lap, her weight welcome. She wiggled a bit as she kissed me, and I was forced to still her hips. "There's time for that later, but I am meeting with Blyth soon."

"We can make soon work," she said with a smile, leaning in to kiss me. I let her, relishing in the boldness of her kisses. She had come so far from the terrified, meek woman I had claimed that night in Silvermoore. She nipped at my lip and placed her hands on my shoulders. One of my palms settled between her breasts, feeling the flush of her skin and the uptick of her pulse.

And the pendant.

It pressed into my hand and I wondered, briefly, if I could take it now. Isla and I were bonded by magic to the land. She was safe and protected and, much to our surprise, happy. Would the pendant come now?

Carefully, I fingered it, lifting it from her skin. There was no shock. No power surge.

What came over me instead was a shield-hard need to protect. A sense of duty and, beneath it, doubt. Doubt about myself and the goals I'd set for my country.

I dropped it, sliding my hand to her waist.

What had that been about?

I broke off the kiss. "Truly, dove, I do need to meet with Blyth. The coronation is happening soon, and we need to plan on where half the Silvermoorian noble court will stay should they come to witness."

“Boo. But also, I might be hiding from Valerie right now. I was hoping you’d give me a reason to skip a few minutes of queen lessons. Instead, you’re just reminding me of how much I need to cram before they get here.”

“There you go.” I reached up and smoothed a thumb over her cheek. Her blue eyes shifted green, just for a moment. Her power was so strange. I didn’t understand it. I only knew that one way or another, I’d need it very soon.

“Knock, knock.” Blyth didn’t, in fact, knock. He simply strolled in as if he owned the place. “Isla, great to see you. I need to borrow your lover, if you don’t mind.”

“I mind terribly,” she said, but she stood, leaving my lap cool in her absence. “But I’ll forgive you.”

“You’re most generous.”

Isla patted his shoulder as she left. Blyth stared after her until finally turning to me, eyebrow arched. “On the lap? Thane, you dog.”

“She’s my wife. Perching on my lap is perfectly respectable.”

“I didn’t think you would have that sort of a wife.”

I pointed to the map, eager to change the topic. “So, you’ve surveyed the borders for me, checked with our alliances, and secured more help, right?”

His face grew somber as he pulled up a chair. “I surveyed new borders. Four villages wiped out, Thane. Four. All are now occupied by Silvermoorian commoners. And whatever is happening to Silvermoore’s land is seeping into ours. Numerous farmers stopped me to complain of seeds not taking root and produce spoiling before it’s left the vine. Our animals, too, are growing weak and sick.”

Four? In so little time? And the creep of whatever blight they suffered from...

We were close to the last harvest of the year. Every bit of food grown was necessary for sustaining my people through the winter. “They were only hitting one or two a year! It’s only been little over a month since their last attack and they wiped out *four only to put their own people there*? What are they doing? Why hasn’t my father said anything?”

“According to those alliances I checked, they seem to think you’re too busy playing with your new bride to notice. And I don’t know about the king’s silence, but are you truly surprised?”

I was. My father had seemed different since Isla’s arrival. There were times, like at my mother’s grave, when I suspected he would lower his walls for once and be the father I’d known as a child.

But those walls never came down, and now I was learning he might even be reinforcing them.

“I’m beginning to suspect, Blyth, that reclaiming our land and protecting our border may not be enough.” An idea simmered within me. It wasn’t something I’d have considered before, but necessity altered plans.

Blyth leaned over the map, moving around markers to show me the new lines of the kingdom. Ragalith was shrinking by exponential proportion and I was accepting that Silvermoore had plans that went beyond annexing a few farms.

“They want the entire kingdom.” I took a letter opener and stabbed it into the castle in the heart of Silvermoore. “There aren’t any accords. Look at that. Four gods-damned villages, Blyth.” A low ache settled in my lungs, my chest. I’d failed so many people *again*. “We won’t let them. I won’t allow it. Especially if they’re bringing that blight with them.”

“So what will we do? Your generals and the nobles are fickle enough over the idea of pushing back for what we’ve lost. If the crops look thin, they’ll be more concerned with preparing for winter than going on a military campaign. Are you starting to connect to the pendant’s power?”

I thought about that wave of protectiveness and doubt. Perhaps the pendant was testing my resolve? Either way, it wasn’t ready to share. Which meant Isla, my sweet and lovely wife, would have to let it go.

I would have to find a way to persuade her, once and for all, to remove the pendant. I’d need to ruminate on the how of it. But quickly, because between my imminent coronation and this power grab from Silvermoore, time was running out.

“The pendant won’t be a problem. I’m not connecting yet, but you know me. When I want something, nothing gets in my way.” Nothing and nobody.

Not even my wife.

# ISLA

“A picnic? Really?”

I was teasing Thane, but secretly, I was pleased and flustered that he'd arranged a lunch for us. A *date*. We'd ridden on horseback for the morning, through and then away from the castle grounds. Past the houses and businesses clustered around the bottom of the keep, and out into the grassy fields nearby.

Ragalith was a mountainous country, with vast stretches of rolling hillside. We rode around and then up one of the hills, its peak just high enough to be able to see the castle and the village from afar.

A large blanket awaited us, a basket filled with food set on it, and a bottle of wine chilling in a bucket of ice.

“A picnic. With you. I mean, I could take us back to the castle and ignore you as I meet with more people and prepare myself for a kingly life, and you can do whatever it is Mara does—”

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. “No thank you. I don't possess sufficient scariness and terror to storm around and ruin everyone's day. Valerie and I are working on my haughtiness and scathing tone, but I'm a slow learner.” I shrugged cheerfully.

“I hope you remain slow. Glacial, even. I don't know if I can handle another Mara.”

He helped me off my horse, his grasp firm around my waist. I loved how tall he was, how he moved me around with little effort. My thighs were sore from the ride and I moved around stiffly while Thane guided the horses to a nearby tree to tie them up.

I waddled back and forth until my blood flowed to my tight muscles and I believed I could sit down and actually get back up again. Thane was waiting for me, a wry tug at his lips. He passed me a glass of wine as soon as I was

comfortably seated.

The first sip was sweet and fruity, and a bubbling sensation tickled its way down my throat. “This is delicious!”

“It’s made at a vineyard that’s been producing wine for over two centuries. It’s rumored the bubbles come from them swimming naked in the vats as the grapes ferment.”

The thought of naked bodies stewing in the wine I had in my mouth had me spluttering and coughing. “Ew! Thane!”

His laughter echoed as it bounced around surrounding hills. “I’m joking, dove! Just joking.” But a seriousness settled over him in an instant. “Though this wine will become rare soon.”

“Why?” I took another sip and savored it, hoping he’d truly been joking.

“The vineyard has been overrun by Silvermoore. It was on our borders and their army swept in, killed off many of the workers and families who lived and worked the grapes. I don’t know if there’s anyone alive who remembers the original recipe.”

The swallow went down hard, like a lump instead of liquid. “What are you talking about?”

“That’s why I want the pendant, Isla. Silvermoore has been attacking and taking our land for years. They ignore the accords my father is so blindly devoted to. When I’m king, I plan on stopping them.”

My chest filled with all the emotions the pendant had shown me. Thane’s drive, his determination. His goal and his ruthlessness. It had also shown me how all of it was motivated by a desire to save and protect. But how far did that go?

“How would you use it?”

He leaned an elbow on one knee, surveying the land around us. “I’ve tried to feel out our generals and nobles about leading an army to defend our borders. They’re hesitant at best and patently against it at worst. As soon as I’m king, I’m going to order a march to the border and take back what’s ours. That order will need some persuasion to ensure it’s followed.”

A throb of magic moved through me, pushing at me. “And then?”

I was certain he was leaving something out.

“And then, what? I’ll erect a wall if I need to. Something to keep Silvermoore from thinking they can steal from us. Their land is dying, Isla. I’ve seen it, Blyth’s seen it—hells, it’s trickling into our land. I’ll not let our land suffer. We’ll keep all of them out and they can deal with whatever mess

they're in."

"Where does the pendant fall into all of this?"

Thane pinned me with a golden stare. "Not everyone will accept this, Isla. I doubt Silvermoore will simply return what they took willingly. And because of my father's lack of action, much of Ragalith is afraid to fight back. They believe the accords will protect them. I'll need to persuade them, to persuade the entire kingdom, that my way is the only way to stay safe. That level of persuasion can only be accomplished with an amplifier as potent as the one around your neck."

The air was sucked out of my lungs. The scale of what he was talking about... I knew his intentions were good. I heard it in his voice. It showed in the pride that filled his tone when he spoke about Ragalith and the disgust that dripped from his words when speaking about Silvermoore.

Yet it was one thing to protect, and another to leave an entire country to suffer. And that's what he was really saying, wasn't it? That we should only save Ragalith and leave all of Silvermoore to suffer?

Autumn would be upon us soon enough. A chilly nip was in every breeze. The forests that covered the mountains around us were a hodgepodge of reds, golds, and oranges. In Silvermoore, it would be time to harvest, to preserve crops and salt meats and buckle down for the winter. If their land was dying, how would they survive?

What would happen to Lily and Jeremy and all the people like them?

"You're quiet," Thane said.

"I'm thinking about what you told me the night of our wedding." My fingers absentmindedly fiddled with the pendant. "About how awful it had been to be subjected to other people's magic. You'd do that to so many of your people to keep them safe?"

"Absolutely."

My cage would grow crowded indeed if we followed through with this plan. It wasn't just the magical manipulation, either. I couldn't stop thinking about Silvermoore and their problems. "What's causing Silvermoore's problems? We never heard anything about that, though I'm not surprised. The court would never admit to failing at something."

"You doubt that it's happening? Because I saw the barren fields myself, Isla, and the thinned herds. Their land is dying."

"I believe you. I just want to know why?"

"Why does it matter? What matters is our land, Isla. Our people."



There was a hum in my chest, a vibration that bordered on discomfort. He was wrong, I could feel it. This wasn't the right solution. Blocking out Silvermoore and using magic to make it happen would end terribly for both kingdoms. Silvermoore might starve and Ragalith would never be able to love and trust a leader who'd steal their will from them. His heart was in the right place, but his plan?

It was wrong.

"I don't want to help with that, I don't think I can," I said. "I think we need more answers before making a move."

"You sound like my father! You swore to protect our people. That oath was made with magic." Red ringed his eyes and his jaw was clenched.

"So did you," I countered. "Your plan? It doesn't feel as if we'd be protecting them, though. Simply isolating them."

He cursed and got up. Thane's shadow fell over me as he loomed, blocking out the sun. "Isla, I need that pendant. I've been kind. I've been generous. I'm spending time with you. You have everything you could ever wish for. What more can you want? What will it take for you to give it to me?"

I didn't want to believe what he was saying. The marriage, short as it had been thus far, had felt real. I'd thought we were truly getting to know each other. The affection seemed to flow, authentic and sure, between both of us. Each morning I'd woken to the idea that despite all his protestations, he might have room inside him for love.

"You keep acting as if being queen is all I've wanted. That all I needed to be happy was wealth and rich foods and a comfortable bed!"

Thane threw his arms into the air, sunlight glinting off the curve of his horns. "What else is there?"

"Safety, Thane! Freedom! You keep mistaking walls and borders for safety. But walls and borders are a cage. You'd lock us all in with you and pat yourself on the back for doing a good job."

He snarled and grabbed at his hair. "You're wrong, Isla. I'm not locking everyone in with me--I'm locking out that which would hurt us. That is safety." There was a fevered quality to his argument that made the hair on my arms raise. When someone believed something so desperately, what chance did I have of convincing them otherwise?

"I don't know what it will take," I croaked, voice breaking on the lump in my throat. "But it will probably take trust, at the least, and right now I don't

trust you at all.”

He shut his eyes, squeezing them tight as if in pain. “Okay,” he sighed. “Fine. We’ll talk about this again, after there’s been time to think.” It sounded more like he thought I was the one who should be doing some thinking.

Which I absolutely would, just not in the way he wished.

He didn’t help me up from the blanket, simply went to the horses and untied them. He vaulted onto his own and cantered over, leading my horse. I winced and groaned as my body protested at standing again. Mounting my horse was almost a disaster without his help.

As soon as I was seated in the saddle, Thane urged his horse to run and I was left trying to keep pace and remain in a saddle that my body no longer liked.

We quickly reached the castle I’d started to think of as home.

But my heart remained, abandoned and forgotten like the half-drunk bottle of wine, on that hill.

# THANE

I'd dreamed of my coronation for years. In those fantasies, Blyth and I had managed to secure my people's support for my plan. Generals saluted me, encouraged that my strength and steel were finally in a place of power. My father would crown me and admit he'd been wrong and that I was the right choice for Ragalith, and would I please forgive him for the years he'd spent screwing everything up?

My fantasies for the coronation were childish, yes, but good. Something to look forward to. Even after shedding the immature naivete, I'd eagerly anticipated the exchange of power. I just wanted the ability to act, finally. To do what had needed to be done for too long.

Now I was about to be crowned and nothing felt right.

It *looked* right.

The throne room had been emptied of its furniture. The window dressings had been pulled open, filling the stone-walled space with light. Rugs had been removed, leaving the cool, black tile exposed, white marbling jaggging through the polished onyx like lightning.

My father and Mara were dressed in their finest garb— crushed red velvet capes draped behind them, black wool for his tunic and her dress, jewels dripping from necks and fingers. The crown sat neatly atop my father's head, his hair still more black than white. His face still youthful, yet somber.

Courtiers from both realms stood with backs straight and mouths hushed, witnessing as Sage offered his binding magic once more. He droned and made large gestures, adding to the feel of ceremony.

Blyth stood back but close, a comfort. He, after all, knew how much this meant to me.

And yet, as I knelt before my father, repeating the vows the Sage prompted, I felt no fluttery excitement or wave of relief. My argument with

Isla had stabbed at me with poisonous barbs. Her opinion had unexpectedly crushed me. I was disappointed, though I couldn't decipher whether that feeling was directed at her or at myself.

I curled my hands into fists, claws biting into my palm. Maybe I hadn't explained enough. If Isla knew more details about the atrocities committed by Silvermoore, then surely she'd share my vision?

My father cleared his throat and his voice boomed through the throne room. "A century of rule. During my reign, my kingdom has known both prosperity and frustration. We've experienced joy and grief. For a hundred years, I've done my best to maintain my oath. To keep the people of Ragalith safe."

It took effort not to let my disbelief show on my face.

"Now, the time has come for a new king. A new rule. I hope my son, Thane, will lead you with wisdom and courage. I hope he keeps his ears open and his heart calm. I hope he puts his people before his pride, seeks peace over possession, and protects that which he holds most dear. As we demand of all our kings and queens."

How he didn't choke on those words, I didn't know. I remained composed as my father lifted the crown from his head and took the two steps down to stand before my kneeling form.

"Welcome to your reign, King Thane Raveclaw."

The weight of the crown nestled in my curls, magic curling the metal to account for my horns, the band of gold settling into place. My breath caught for a moment as the final seeds of power settled into me. The magic that bound me to the throne and to my new role.

"Rise," my father said, and I could have sworn there was a catch in his voice.

Rising in a seamless motion, I turned to take in the room. There was an eruption of thunderous applause, bolstered by the stone of our walls. Smiles and frowns graced faces known and unknown.

But there was also a lethargy, a sadness I thought perhaps only I could sense. I turned and held out my hand. Isla, who'd stood so still throughout the ceremony she'd seemed to disappear, stepped forward and took my offered hand.

We stood together, receiving applause, but there was no joy. The smile on my face was plastered on. Her palm was cool and limp in mine.

I tried to be upset with her. For letting her sadness rain on the most

important day of my life. But I couldn't muster even a smidge of indignation. All I wanted was for her to look at me like she had before that dratted picnic.

As was customary after a coronation, Isla and I were seated on the thrones. Courtiers and nobles lined up to greet us and pledge obeisance.

I was prepared to settle in and be bored out of my mind when the first fae in the line stepped forward. I tensed.

Xavier stood before us, brow furrowed. Beside him was the cold bitch from the ball, the one who had planned on hurting Isla. The memory stirred something dangerous in me. She'd done harm to my wife.

"Congratulations, King Thane." Xavier's voice lacked any enthusiasm. It was a good thing I'd had so long to practice patience, because I wanted nothing more than to send him to the dungeons. But without the pendant's power, any attack I launched now would backfire hard.

"Thank you. I believe you know my wife, Queen Isla Sagehaunt." I gestured to Isla, who was rigid in her throne. She was gripping the arms tight enough that the whites of her knuckles shone.

*And yet she doesn't think I should fix this situation? Try to save others from living in fear?*

Xavier offered a quick smile and a polite incline of his head. "I'll admit I was peeved with you for taking her from our kingdom. We'd just danced the once and I had hoped for more."

I choked down a snarl.

"Though, I suppose I should be grateful. A witch in Silvermoore would never have been tolerated. Not by our rules and standards. It's fitting she found a place here." Xavier's smile grew teeth, shifting into something mean. "And I was able to meet my wife, Princess Kyrie Visonte, soon-to-be queen of Silvermoore."

All eyes were on us. My father and Sage were hovering, worry already slicking their brows. It stung to see just how many people expected me to screw it up. I'd never planned on screwing things up. No, I'd planned, and planned, and planned some more *solely* to be prepared for moments like this.

I'd prepared to be a king, damn it, and I'd prove it to everyone.

Especially to Isla.

I readied myself to retort when Kyrie spoke first. "Gods, Isla. You hid it so well. No one knew anything all those years."

"I didn't know about the magic," Isla said, and I wanted to praise her for having steel in her voice. There was none of the cowed, quaking human from

so long ago. “It was hidden from me as well.”

“Oh.” Kyrie laughed derisively. “No. I don’t mean that you’re a witch. That didn’t surprise me at all. It’s that you must have wine or gold or something between your legs, because there’s no other way a commoner like you could become queen. So truly, good luck to Ragalith and the both of you. It’ll need it.”

Anger lashed through me and I surged to my feet, prepared to hammer Kyrie with the full extent of my power and persuade her to take a step off the highest tower of the castle, but a magic net halted me.

Instantly, I recognized the power that held me in place. The pendant.

Eyes flaring bright green, Isla rose from her chair. In front of us, Xavier and Kyrie were pale and shaking, under the same hold as me.

“Kyrie,” Isla said calmly. “I didn’t need my mother’s position in court to be liked. I never had a hundred absurd dresses made in the desperate hope that I might be seen or marry well. I never had to drag around less attractive friends to try to make myself look better. You’ve spent your entire life striving for a marriage such as this. You’ve postured and manipulated, backstabbed and more to gain Xavier’s attention. And look at you. An entire lifetime of hard work ended in success. Congratulations.”

Isla took another step, her head tilted. “But Xavier only saw you when I’d been forced to leave. And I didn’t have to do *anything* to be noticed by not just one, but two princes. I was a commoner. A *human*. A dressmaker. And all I had to do was show up for a dance... and I also became queen.”

Isla’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Maybe you should have tried making what’s between *your* legs more appealing, then you wouldn’t have had to put so much time and energy into trying to make yourself into someone likeable.”

As suddenly as it had taken hold, the magic released. I wasn’t the only one sucking in air and recovering from the hold.

Prince Xavier was staring at Isla with a mixture of horror and intrigue, and the frigid bitch looked like she might shake apart from offense.

“Thank you for coming to my coronation,” I said brightly. “You are not required to stay. In fact, I’d encourage you to run home. My wife has made it clear you’re not welcome.”

There was no fight, no bluster, no exclamations of hatred. But everyone present saw Xavier and his wife turn and leave, Isla’s scorn haunting every receding footstep.

Ignoring the curious stares of the remaining people, I turned to Isla and

set my hands on her shoulders. Only then did I see how pale she was. “Dove —”

“I’m so sorry,” she squeaked. “I shouldn’t have done that in front of everyone.”

“I disagree. You handled yourself like an absolute *queen*. No one may come into your castle and speak to you like that. No one, not ever.”

Isla’s lower lip quivered, but she squared her shoulders and nodded once. Unable to stop myself, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. Perhaps Xavier and Kyrie’s provocation would be the key to getting her to understand. After all, *that* was exactly what I was fighting against.

“I’m sorry, King Thane,” Sage said nervously. “But there are still quite a few people remaining to pledge.”

Reluctantly, I released Isla. “Of course.”

We took our seat and the line proceeded.

Of course, after *that* show, I had enough on my mind to not be bored.

# ISLA

Kyrie's cutting words had been too much, sawing through the last of my decorum. The magic that had burst from me had ensnared them and allowed me to voice the words I'd kept deep inside for too long. But it had also proven exactly how powerful the pendant was.

No one in the throne room had been able to stop me.

Thane had seemed impressed, after. Proud of me in a way I so desperately craved. But it wasn't me he had been admiring. It was the pendant and the display of the power he so craved. My stomach twisted at the memory of his intense frustration when he'd asked me for the pendant.

I had refused him. And I would refuse him again.

It would be the final seal on a loveless marriage, for I knew he'd never forgive me this last bit of selfishness. It would be impossible to convince him that for the first time, my choosing to hold onto the relic wasn't for myself, but for him.

Despite his admiration at the coronation ceremony, Thane had basically vanished after, avoiding me as much as possible.

To keep myself from wallowing, Valerie and I had taken on the task of redecorating the king and queen's quarters. My new quarters.

There wasn't much I cared to add, but there was plenty I had removed. There were simply so many *things*—statues and ornate mirrors and rugs and art—and none of it meant anything to me. I suspected it didn't mean much at all to anyone, other than to be a display of wealth and power.

I kept the red curtains but added ties so I could open them each morning. This cage I had locked myself in came with a great view. I had the dense canopy removed from the bed and had new linens made in white along with a heavy black velvet coverlet.

These things and more, with Valerie's help, and I honestly didn't care



about any of it.

I missed Thane. Deeply. I missed the him he'd been before I'd shared my opinion on his plans. He'd been easier then, so generous in his affections and kindness. I missed the weight of his body on top of mine at night, his scent lingering on the pillows when I woke in the morning.

There was one room I hadn't touched yet. The king and queen's personal library. I imagined Thane would want to make decisions regarding the books and things there. It had seemed silly for me to even enter it, except Valerie was off fetching us some food and I could finally read. Not well yet, but words made sense to me now, and the new knowledge left me constantly hungry for more things to read.

Bored and curious, I stepped into the library. It was large but cozy. A ladder was propped against a shelf that ran the length of the wall, giving access to books placed at impossible heights. But my favorite part of the room by far was the small couch that had been strategically placed so the light of the sun could move across its surface for most of the day.

The perfect, well-lit reading nook.

Perhaps I would spend more time in here than I'd intended.

I browsed lazily through the books on the shelves. Some books were so old, the lettering on their spines had faded. Those I left alone, too afraid of their fragility to dare touch them. Most were histories, philosophies, and the like. One day, I might attempt to read it, but I was too slow a reader to stick with dense texts just yet.

There were many empty spots, the dust showing books *had* resided there but had since been moved. Naturally, the former king had tomes he wished to take with him to his new quarters.

After looking through several shelves, I was delighted to find a new section. It was much thinner than the others, with many books missing. But those that remained were storybooks. Some, to my heated joy, looked to be quite... descriptive.

I pulled a few of the books out, creating a stack in my arms that quickly became heavy. My delight lent me strength, though. I thought I had enough (more than enough) to start reading when another caught my eye. The book seemed to be misshelved, having been shoved haphazardly between books on gardening.

Intrigued, I took my stack to the couch, set them on a nearby table, and pulled the one off the top to page through. Instead of a fluttering of pages,

though, I discovered a packet of letters nestled within.

Chewing on my lip, I glanced around like I needed to verify I was on my own. Which was silly. Of course I was alone. But my gut told me I'd stumbled on something important. Nervous, I unfolded the letters and began to read.

It only took a few pages for me to realize exactly how important—and dangerous—these letters were.

*I need to find Thane.*



\* \* \*

Mara found me first. I was in a hallway, trying to remember the way to the throne room from the west wing.

And I was alone.

My blood froze as the queen stepped close. *No. Former queen. I'm the queen now.*

That gave me little comfort.

Her eyes twinkled in cruel delight. “Ah, yes. It occurred to me that we never got a chance to sit down and discuss your duties. I was rather busy trying to finish my own plans before the coronation, I’m afraid. Are you free right now?”

“Actually—”

“Good. Come with me.” Her clawed hand wrapped over my shoulder, digging into my skin in a subtle threat. What else could I do but go along, when there were letters condemning her stowed in the pocket of my skirt?

She led me to a small room. It was cozy, I supposed, and had a table set for tea. I was escorted to one chair and not so gently “encouraged” to sit. I clasped the edges of the seat so she wouldn’t see my trembling hands.

“I can smell your fear, you know,” Mara said as she sat in the other seat. She moved like a cat, with a careless grace that hinted at danger. At present, I was a mouse. “Why are you so afraid of me?”

“That might have a bit to do with your warning when I first came to the

castle.”

Mara tipped her head in acknowledgment as she poured our tea. I watched the dark stream as it cascaded into porcelain cups and wondered if the pendant could protect against poison. It wasn't a theory I was eager to test out.

“Not my finest moment, I agree. Most queens get a full century of rule, you see. But I'm the second wife and, I'm sorry to admit, I was angry at my reign being cut short.”

“And by a commoner.”

“Yes, that made it sting. A human commoner, at that. You'll have to forgive me for being rude.”

*I really don't.* My mouth stayed shut as she added sugar and cream, stirring both cups before pushing one toward me.

“I'm sure you've already begun the more banal tasks assigned to a queen,” Mara continued, picking up her cup and saucer. She moved so smoothly there wasn't a rattle. “The gardens, the decor, the food, the parties.” There was a quick quirk to her mouth that hinted at how little she thought of those tasks. A part of me was inclined to agree.

“But the queen has a vitally important role to play. That of liaison between the two kingdoms. We are the ears and the voice for our kingdom. There's a lot of back and forth, bringing news and spreading it, helping to smooth out edges and keep the king from making rash decisions.”

I thought about the contents of my pockets and wondered just how many “rash” decisions she'd prevented during her reign.

She looked at my untouched cup. “Drink.” Then, as if sensing my hesitation, she took a sip of her own tea, which had been poured from the same pot. Taking a deep breath, I picked up the cup and took a tiny, tentative sip. When nothing happened, I drank a bit more.

This seemed to please Mara happy because she relaxed slightly in her chair. “I'm originally from Silvermoore, did you know that? Just like you.”

“I know.”

“The adjustment between the two kingdoms hasn't been easy. In fact, if you'll permit me to be blunt, it's been impossibly hard. I grew up with rules and a way of life that kept everyone disciplined and safe. Order was necessary and the best way to ensure that order was to restrict magic. We no longer live in the old, wild days, and it's best for everyone if it is safeguarded.”

I knew what she spoke of well. In Silvermoore, magic was used to power lights and by soldiers, but it was never flaunted. Only the nobles had permission to use their powers as they pleased.

Ragalith must have been as much a surprise for her as it had been for me, with the magic pouring into lights, foods, music, the earth from any who had it. All were encouraged to contribute. The difference was, I'd found it endearing once I understood. Mara clearly hadn't.

"You know, my sister is Madame Visonte, and she's told me quite a bit about you. I'm going to confide in you, Isla. I'm taking a huge risk. But I want to believe you'll understand."

The letters felt like stones in my pocket. I didn't need her confidence. I already held the damning correspondence.

"Okay," I managed. "I'll listen."

"Think about the vows we had to make on our wedding days. It wasn't to love one another. We don't even swear fidelity. We don't so much marry the king as we do the country, and that magic is powerful. To try to break or cheat it would cause great pain and suffering."

This did give me pause. Thane was so certain his father was being a coward, but if his father made the decision to not fight back, time and time again, and wasn't hurt by that, it meant his father truly thought he was upholding his vows.

And it meant that everything Mara had done, she'd thought it was helping.

"I felt the magic," I answered, still trying to understand the depth of what was being said. "It scared me, but made me feel powerful as well. Earnest, I suppose, to do what I think is right."

She nodded in approval and pointed, delight painting her face bright. "That's exactly it. The fickle part is deciding *what* is right and *how* to protect your people." Mara's smile faded. "Some terrible things were done and I...I knew about them. I participated in some of them. But it was to help my people."

I took another sip of tea but it did nothing for the dryness in my mouth. "What things?"

"Thane's mother was killed. My father was the assassin."

My muscles froze. I'd read it in the letter but it shocked me to hear her confessing it. Without a hint of remorse. "Why?"

"Because he wasn't listening to the Eldritch's when it came to ruling his

kingdom. The dark fae traveling in our territory didn't do well under our rule. There were accidents and fights that left both sides frustrated and angry. The king was also tolerant of witches and wizards. Letting them live out in the open, using their magic, ignoring the fact that they'd almost wrecked everything."

As someone now long-used to being called a witch and having a fondness for Blyth, this point didn't sway me. But I thought I knew where it was going.

"We warned him. We tried to show him what our way provided. Silvermoore is wealthier, more stable, more productive. Our people don't starve. They don't worry about being caught in accidental magic misfires. They can sleep soundly knowing they have the protection of trained soldiers."

*I starved. I worried all the time, though I feared intentional magic. And the soldiers weren't a safety net. They were a warning.* She was also omitting the fact that now Silvermoore wasn't stable or more productive and starvation was a threat to all, including the nobility. What had they done to cause the land to reject them?

Mara didn't know what I was thinking and I decided to keep the ruse up. "When the king didn't listen," I guessed, "you followed through on a threat."

"Yes. It was awful, but he had to know how serious we were. And that no one, not even his family, would be safe if he kept making the wrong choice. Hard choices must be made, Isla, and the role of royalty is to bear the pain and consequences of those decisions."

Right. Gods, how was I going to handle this? What was Mara intending by giving me this information, knowing it could mean her death?

"Then you married King Raveclaw and became queen. The ears and the voice."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I did. And I reminded the king each time he was riled, each time he forgot what Silvermoore was trying to do—help Ragalith and us all—that he still had family that could be taken from him."

King Raveclaw had been held prisoner by the threats of Silvermoore. He'd been forced to watch as his land was devoured, his people harmed. He'd been forced to do nothing.

*"Do you each promise to honor this country?"*

The king had honored it by trying his best to keep a war from breaking out.

*“Do you swear to act in Ragalith’s best interests?”*

If they’d murdered Thane, the throne would have been ripe for the taking. He couldn’t risk that and needed to ensure Thane survived to rule.

*“Do you swear to protect its citizens, to rule with reason and intention?”*

Thane was a Ragalithian. The king had used reason to hide the truth from a son he perceived to be impulsive and reactionary. And if he’d let Thane die, he’d have failed to protect a citizen, knowing what he did about Silvermoore’s threats.

He had managed to keep his vows, no matter what it had cost him.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Mara watched me with keen intensity. “Because Silvermoore will unite the two countries. It’s being done slowly to keep citizens from panicking. A plan to minimize deaths and casualties. There are things Silvermoore need from Ragalith and, in return, we’ll provide the order and safety that’s lacking here. This is for the sake of all fae, as all of their lives matter.”

“And the humans, too,” I added.

“Yes, of course.” She didn’t sound as zealous with that. “Silvermoore wants to make Savaria stable. A force to be reckoned with.”

Thane had said they’d never be happy. Those last words—*a force to be reckoned with*—had implications that roiled in my gut. I could see the pattern unlocking. When Silvermoore didn’t have what they needed, what they wanted, they took it from somewhere else. If the blight spread, where else might their greedy eye land when food ran out?

“As queen, it’s your duty to help keep this transition as seamless as it can be. Against all odds, Thane seems to actually like you. I think he might even love you, given the way he stares all dreamy-eyed when you’re near him. You have the power to force his ear.”

If Mara was privy to our current disagreement and subsequent distance, she wouldn’t be so confident in my abilities. Thane didn’t handle rejection well.

“My tea is cool,” she muttered. “Our time is up. I’ll leave you with the other reason I’ve mentioned all of this. It’s a reminder that Silvermoore will do whatever it takes to finish this. No one is safe. Not kings, not queens, not sisters and brothers-in-law.”

Lily. She was talking about Lily.

Bile burned at the back of my throat. Mara got up from her chair. “Thank you for making time for me. As you can see, a queen’s duties are far more

important and complicated than I imagine you expected. But I believe you'll rise to the task, Isla."

## THANE

“**Y**ou can’t!” My father was scarcely able to remain in his seat. Nervous energy had him bouncing up and down, like he could rush forward and give the command to stop what I’d set in motion.

“I already have.”

The map was spread out on the table. The pieces representing our armies had changed places since my father had last seen them. Now they were lined at the border closest to Silvermoore’s castle.

After Kyrie and Xavier’s nasty display toward Isla, I’d spoken to Blyth. I refused to waste any more time. We weren’t just going to take back what was ours. We were going to ensure that Silvermoore would never overstep again.

As soon as it was agreed, Blyth sent word to the captains and generals. My army was already packed up and waiting for me at our chosen battlefield.

My father pressed his fingers to his temples, rubbing in small circles. “You don’t know what you’ve done. What they can do to you.”

“Dad, they’ve been terrorizing our entire kingdom. The interior villages are overrun with our people trying to escape the death that creeps at our borders. We’ve lost over a third of our farmlands, annexed by Silvermoore. How much longer can we wait? Until they’ve surrounded the castle? Until we’re all packed so tight in here, we can’t move? Until we’re praying they won’t bring the stones down on our heads?”

“There’s so much you don’t understand.” My father sounded weary all the way into his soul.

“Probably. I’m young. I’ve been ruling for less than a week. There’s plenty I don’t know. But I know what I need to do now, regarding this. Aside from their taking what isn’t theirs, something about Silvermoore is contaminating our country. I received reports from multiple farming communities just this morning, informing me that the crops have gone rotten.



The harvest is right around the corner! If we don't stop whatever blight Silvermoore brought to our lands, our people will starve this winter. I'm leaving in an hour to join the soldiers. I'd like you to stay here and run the castle while I'm gone."

There was no point in waiting. I kept my face in a neutral expression. I didn't want him to know how much this fight, so long in its duration, had wounded me. How it had diminished him in my view.

Blyth was waiting for me, ready to advance at my word.

I hadn't mentioned to Blyth that Isla was still holding fast to the pendant. Not all our soldiers had been mobilized, either, with a few in command rejecting my orders. If I pulled this off, they'd have to be dealt with later.

I had two choices. I could try to find a way to force it from her. Perhaps threaten Lily, or put on a huge show about how I was wrong and she was right and hope she'd hand it over willingly.

Or I could stop relying on the idea of the pendant.

Oh, there'd be grumbling. Maybe even a rebellion. But Blyth had traveled with the armies and I'd tasked him with spreading the word about what Silvermoore had done. He'd been sure to point out their dying lands and emphasize the threat to our own resources.

He'd taken the armies past the recently destroyed villages, pitching camp close enough so the men spent the night smelling the lingering stench of burned wood and flesh. It was a gamble, but I prayed that ordinary fae and humans, the ones who'd enlisted in the army of their own volition rather than joining with an honorific because of nobility, would see what was happening and want to fight.

What the nobility always seemed to forget was that, no matter dark or light, the commoners always outnumbered the nobles. Eventually, what they wanted *would* matter, and they'd find a way to let you know.

It would have been easier with Isla's cooperation.

But she'd been brilliant so far, stepping into her role of queen with fierce determination and patience. All the staff had been whispering about her thoughtfulness and efforts to make things better for everyone who worked in the castle.

I couldn't give up my goal. I had dedicated my life to it, spent every waking moment studying and listening and planning and waiting. All so I could do this one thing. Protect my people. So no, I wouldn't give it up.

But for her... for her I would change my plans. Her words had sunk into

me like unwanted medicine, slowly clearing years of infected anger and spite. I'd despised being subjected to other people's magic. Not being in control was hellish and upsetting. It had left me bruised inside for years after.

I'd thought my goal was worth it. Subjugation, using magic to get what I wanted as fast and easy as I could? Yeah, I'd compromised my morals *hard*. What were morals to a king, anyway?

Only everything. Our freedom had to come with a price, and that price was responsibility. Taking ownership of consequences.

I didn't think I could stomach the consequences of the pendant's power any more. Especially not if it caused Isla any more hurt than I already had. I needed to adjust and prepare myself for the possibility of failure, knowing that at least I'd have given it my best shot.

In my quarters, I grabbed a traveling cloak and strapped my sword to my back. The stables already had word to prepare horses for me and a few chosen men. We'd ride out and ride hard. The need to end this was a thirst I could no longer put off; it demanded to be quenched.

Someone waited outside my room. I paused when I saw it was Valerie.

"Leaving?" she asked, though it sounded an awful lot like an accusation.

"Yes. Tell Isla I'll return when it's finished."

"When what's finished, sire?"

Valerie had nerve, that was for sure. It was one of the reasons I'd chosen her to help Isla. At the time, I'd feared Mara would break Isla's spirit in a second without someone bold enough to defend the poor girl.

The dark-lipped, curvy fae in front of me had been more than up to the task. But it hadn't been needed; I'd underestimated my wife. Isla had been just fine on her own. Somehow she'd even managed to flourish, despite everything.

Despite me.

"She'll know. And tell her I'm sorry."

Valerie's lips pursed. "Absolutely not. I'm a lady-in-waiting, not a messenger for a lover's quarrel. If I start passing on sorries now, you'll never learn to do it yourself. Suck it up, Thane."

I stared at her, amazed at her daring.

But she wasn't wrong. So, I simply nodded and left her. My horse and men and destiny were waiting, and apologies would have to come after.

There was one more thing waiting for me at the stables.

Isla.

She was dressed for the road, her long black cloak keeping her body bundled and her red hair covered. Travel bags hung from her saddle, nestled on top of her horse's flanks. The reins were in her hand.

I stopped short. "What are you doing?"

She frowned. "Waiting for you. For ages, I'd like to point out." Before I could protest, she turned and awkwardly swung herself up into the saddle. My wife was many things, but a good rider was not one of them.

"You don't have to come. You could stay."

Isla stared at the horizon in the direction we'd be riding. Toward my army and toward Silvermoore.

"I know."

I didn't know what this meant. Was she going to give me the pendant? Would I use it if she did?

The only thing I could do was try to decide how I'd act while on the road. A stableboy approached with my steed, a large black stallion, dressed and ready to ride. Swinging up, I clicked my tongue and we were off.

The pace wasn't quite as ambitious as I'd planned. With Isla along, I slowed enough to allow her to keep speed as best she could. The wind whipped my hair and stung my eyes.

She'd decided to join me. I wasn't sure why, and I was damn well going to find out when we made camp, but as the sound of hooves striking ground filled my ears, my heart rejoiced that she was here.



\* \* \*

Camp was set up with the quick efficiency of men used to the road. Everyone moved, focused on their jobs. Well, everyone but Isla.

She went with the horses and a groom showed her how to remove their tack, wipe them down, and feed them. I let her do this while I went in search of someone to help set up her tent.

Only to discover that she hadn't brought one.

My insides knotted. That meant she'd be staying with me. While I was

king and could have brought a sizable tent, we'd packed light. Quarters would be close. My skin prickled in anticipation and worry. There was the possibility that she might not want to share a space with me.

I hoped she would, though.

I missed her.

Dinner was mostly silent, as we were all starving from riding hard for many hours. Simple food had been heated, doled out, and devoured in record time. Some of the men helped clean up while others sorted lookout shifts.

Isla had cleaned her bowl as well as any of us. She took her water cup, drained half, then used the remainder to clean her bowl and spoon, carefully packing them away after.

My eyes never strayed as she stood and went to each of the men to bid them good rest. Her posture was solid and strong, despite having spent so long riding. I knew she had to be in pain, that she wasn't used to any kind of distance on horseback.

Then Isla gave me one look, her eyes flashing green with a spurt of magic. My blood heated in response. She crawled into my tent and closed the flap behind her.

"Does this mean you're going to need to bunk with one of us?" a young guard teased.

Grinning, I shrugged. "To be determined. But I don't suppose you have any salve I could borrow?"

"Sure do. Always be prepared." He rummaged in his bag and tossed me a small clay pot. I caught it easily. The salve was potent enough I could smell its contents through the clay. Isla would either welcome me and my gift or kick me out.

*Time to find out which.*

Undoing the flap tie, I carefully crawled in. A small lantern cast light on the low, tight surfaces of my tent and warming Isla's face. She was lying on the pad and burrowed into the blankets, reading a small book.

"Reading is going well?"

The book shut with a *fwip*. "Sometimes. I find some reading delightful and others I don't have the stomach for."

There was something there, but I didn't think I was in a position to pry. "I come bearing a gift and a request. Which would you like first?"

"Request."

"May I share this tent with you? Or should I find a poor soldier to share

with?”

She perched up, resting her weight on her elbows. “I wouldn’t want to subject a soldier to that, but I suppose my answer depends on the gift.”

I held the clay pot out so she could smell its contents. “I figured your thighs might be sore. We have another day’s journey tomorrow and this will help.”

Silence hovered between us like smoke from a recently extinguished candle.

“Yeah, I guess you can stay.”

I tried to conceal my delight and relief, crawling all the way in and tying the flaps shut behind me. All that separated us from the rest of the realm was a tiny space made of tarp, rope, and birch sticks. Yet it felt like the whole world was just she and I in that small space.

“Shall I?” I indicated the pot again.

“Gods, yes, please.”

Isla pulled the mound of blankets off and lifted her dress. There wasn’t much light, but there was enough to see the swelling and bruising that had begun to form on her inner thighs.

Wordlessly, I opened the pot. The pungent sweetness of lavender and rosemary licked up my nose. Scooping a gob onto my fingers, I rubbed my palms together to warm it. Then, crouching so low my back ached in protest, I moved over her and worked the salve gently into her tenderized legs.

At Isla’s whimper, I lightened my touch, massaging slow, soft circles to ensure I got the salve across large swaths of soft skin. Her legs parted, her underclothes the only thin barrier keeping me from viewing her sweetest place.

The fabric of my pants stretched at my hardness.

“Why did you come?” I finally asked as I lifted my hips so I could roll her onto her belly. Isla’s bottom was already a deep, angry purple. She squirmed as I pulled her underclothes down, exposing her creamy flesh.

More salve. Warmed again. The gentlest touch I could manage to swirl and coat.

“Why didn’t you ask me to?” Her voice was muffled by her arms and pillow cradling her head. “You planned to leave me behind.”

“You didn’t want to give me the pendant.” The words fell like stones from my mouth, making me lighter. “I couldn’t persuade you to.”

“Immune to your magic, ass.”

“No. I mean, my reasoning couldn’t, either. What you said stuck with me. You’ve experienced life in both kingdoms. You’ve witnessed and learned about the good and the bad of each side. I was so certain that after exposing Silvermoore’s vile nature to you, you’d join me. But you didn’t. You... you were protecting them.”

She sighed as I began to knead more firmly, ensuring the salve would seep into the deeper tissue.

“At first that infuriated me. I couldn’t understand why you’d want to protect the fae who’d tormented you all of your life. But then it occurred to me that you were thinking like a queen. Thinking of the oaths we had taken. You wanted to protect *every* fae and human, no matter where they lived. Not just the ones who’d been kinder to you. And that struck me as the epitome of being a queen. You were a commoner, and you’re human, and you’re already the best ruler Savaria has seen in centuries.”

Isla twisted so she could look up at me. A big, beautiful smile lit up her face. “That’s all mostly true. You got one thing wrong, though.”

“Did I?”

“Mmhmm. I didn’t just do it to protect them. I did it to protect you. You’re going to live a long life, Thane. It terrified me to think there was a chance you’d be forced to spend all of it carrying around that regret and guilt.”

My heart was a bird, wings beating fervently in my chest. It soared in ways I hadn’t believed it could. Events in my past had broken its body. My mother’s death, the stark and disappointing change in my father. The lessons in cruelty and manipulation and the impossible weight of trying to fix everything on my own.

There was a story that still spread, each night, throughout my kingdom. A tale of a human, a woman, who’d stopped to see why a small fae girl was crying. When the woman learned it was the girl’s bird suffering, she’d understood the pet was something precious. She’d taken the bird with its broken wing and shared in the little girl’s pain. Then, with magic, she healed the animal.

The bird flew.

The relic that had bonded with Isla was an amplifier. Magic condensed into metal, crafted into something bordering sentience. It was powerful. Scary powerful.

But in the end, an amplifier didn’t have goals. It couldn’t scheme or

manipulate. I'd accused it of manipulating my feelings. Of endearing Isla to me in an attempt to keep her safe.

Amplifiers didn't work that way. I'd just been too blind with my desire for it to remember.

All it did was take the magic inside someone and intensify it. Strengthen it and give it direction.

My hands had paused in their work. I'd frozen as this realization hit me, one cheek in each palm. Isla wiggled, her eyebrow crooked in a question. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Just feeling stupid."

"Oh. Sorry?"

I laughed, a sudden rush of mirth that cascaded from me. Isla turned onto her back. I straddled her and laughed as she looked up at me with pure, wry amusement. When the last chuckles finally ebbed, she reached up and grabbed my face between her hands.

Her touch was soft and I leaned into it. "I'm very glad you decided to claim me and force me to marry you," she whispered.

"Even though I've bound you to me? Trapped you in marriage for the rest of your life?"

Isla pulled me closer, our noses just barely touching. "Yes. We'll work together to figure out how to open the door, though. We could both be free one day." Her nose wrinkled. "But you'll have to start listening to me. You shouldn't have made me queen if you didn't want my opinions."

"That seems fair. For what it's worth, I am sorry."

"It's worth quite a bit, actually." Her fingertips slid against the long shell of my pointed ear. "And we'll figure this out together, because you aren't wrong, Thane. Ragalith needs help. It just seems Silvermoore might need it as well."

She kissed me then, her lips soft and slanting against mine. The smell of salve was still heavy in the air, but underneath it was the fresh scent so uniquely her. Groaning, I deepened the kiss, slowly pressing her back to the pad. My pants were pulled down as we kissed. Her legs fell open and I settled between them, rocking my hips until she whimpered and clutched at me.

We tried to be respectful. Tried to stay quiet.

We failed completely.

No one in the camp got much sleep that night.

# ISLA

**B**attalions of soldiers lined the horizon. Behind me, our army stood, armored and weapons at the ready. Witches and wizards were interspersed between the ranks. None wielded power like in the old days, enough to wipe entire groups of soldiers from the field with one spell, but their magic bolstered our offense.

Flags whipped in the wind, the snap of them like the warning cries of carrion birds to come later.

The silver armor of Silvermoore soldiers gleamed in the early light. The day was cooler than it had been, a mist rising as the dawn began to kiss the dew-laden fields.

Xavier was on a white horse, his helmet in his hands. He stared at us across the battlefield, no emotion showing.

Unlike me. I was a riot of anxiety.

The ride to the battlefield had been illuminating. Knowing what to look for, I'd made sure to witness the state of the land as we traveled. It was even worse than I'd imagined. Where there had once been huge swaths of abundant fields, there were now patches of hard-packed dirt, sparsely dotted with yellowed and wilting plants.

The smell had met us next, stinking corpses of herd animals left to die and rot, their skin stretched tight around bones and flies congregating overhead.

Everywhere I turned, the air felt wrong. When Thane asked me about it, the best I could come up with was that the borders and land Silvermoore occupied seemed depleted.

Why was this happening here, but not in the heart of Ragalith? What was the difference that made feast for one land and famine for the other?

As much as I'd wanted answers, by the time we'd come to camp, with



thousands of soldiers milling around and the weight of battle ahead of us, I only had more questions.

Next to me, Thane took my hand. "It's traditional for us to meet in the middle and have a last chance discussion to try to prevent bloodshed." His face was set in stone. I knew how he imagined the discussion going. "Would you like to join me or stay here?"

"I'm with you all the way, love." Even if it felt as if my heart were clamoring up my throat in a bid to escape.

He pressed a swift kiss to my temple, arm secured around my waist. Thane's body was relaxed, which was impossible for me to understand considering the thousands of Silvermoorian soldiers ahead of us.

We had but a fraction of their numbers. It hurt to see how much Thane had been right about a lack of support. He was king and many of the nobility had ignored his demand, thus setting him up to fail. As much as I knew in my heart that using magic to persuade them wasn't the right choice, I wasn't ready to forgive their doubt.

If they'd had all the information I did, would they still have stayed behind?

Information about Mara and the blackmail Silvermoore had used to keep King Raveclaw under thumb. After making love, I'd shown the letters to Thane.

His rage had been a terrible, palpable thing.

I'd half expected him to race back to the castle and kill her. But to my surprise, he lay back and exhaled so deeply, I could hear just how much pain he'd been holding onto. "I don't know how my father did it," he finally admitted, staring at the top of our tent, my head nestled snugly into the nook of his shoulder.

"He had to live with her, knowing Mara had taken someone from him."

Without meaning to, my magic had begun to thrum inside of me. It allowed me into his mind and heart. What had started as a deep, purple bruise was beginning to fade to ochre and green. The signs of healing. There was still pain there, and the loss was a part of who he was, but I no longer sensed that acidic anger.

If he was upset now, Thane didn't show it. There remained the carefully cultivated facade of an uncaring royal. Strangely, it helped me stay strong.

Thane helped me up onto his stallion, then vaulted himself up behind me. The strength of him at my back was reassuring, and when we began to canter

toward the middle, my stomach didn't sour. Several soldiers fell in behind us. The crunch of dry leaves under hooves accompanied us.

Xavier and his companions trotted toward us. My grip on the horn of the saddle was lock-tight.

When we were close enough to not have to shout, Thane pulled the horse to a stop. It stomped but held.

"Your first action as king is to throw your kingdom away," Xavier said with a callous grin. "Fine. More for me to rule."

"Silvermoore had been a poison in my land for too long. No more." Thane waved to the desolate land we stood on. "Look at what happens to the land you rule. We won't let you ruin ours."

I fiddled with the pendant, finding comfort in the habit like so many times before. Xavier's stare dropped to it. "And you'll do that, I suppose, with your witch's power? If you do, you'll only reinforce everyone's fear about witches and wizards. Humans aren't meant to have magic. Remember what happened the last time humans played with what wasn't theirs."

Xavier pointed at me. "My mother told you, Isla. She told you what your people did and you're still willing to take up magic? If we'd been able to destroy that trinket around your neck, our kingdom wouldn't have suffered.

"This is why we do what we do." Now it sounded as if he were pleading with me. "The magic is burning away our land. We're trying to control it. But until we can master it, our people still have stomachs. Isla, surely you understand that."

"You're taking from Ragalith to feed your people," I repeated slowly.

Relief relaxed some of the hardness in Xavier's face. "Yes, exactly."

"Did it ever occur to you to just ask?" I understood Xavier's motivation, but what Silvermoore had done was unacceptable.

"Do you think Ragalith would have helped?" He said it with a derision that made my skin crawl.

"I'm sure Queen Mara could have influenced the outcome," I snapped, unable to help myself. "She's helped you out so far."

Xavier's features shuttered once more at her name. "I'm done talking to you. It was stupid to assume a human could understand."

"She understands more than we do," Thane said, his voice rumbling through me. "Isla has a gift for seeing to the root of problems. You'd do well to listen to her." Thane squeezed my waist in appreciation and reassurance.

Xavier scoffed. "I think not. She has appeal, I'll give you that, but Thane,

she's human. And a commoner. She shouldn't be on that horse and she should never have been allowed to hold onto that relic."

His scorn was cutting and I leaned back into Thane's body like I could hide from it.

"Your mistake," Thane drawled, wrapping an arm around me. "My win."

"It's the only thing you'll win." Xander waved his wand, gesturing to our smaller army. "You'll never beat me with that. Even with your witches and wizards. I'll give you one opportunity to make the right choice."

"Pass."

"Oh, I think you'll want to hear me out. Isla certainly will." There was a rabid delight radiating from Xavier that made me sick, yet I was hooked. What was he talking about?

There was movement in the ranks after one of the men accompanying Xavier waved a sword. The front lines of his army split and two forms were dragged forward, bound and stumbling. It was Lily and Jeremy.

Every muscle in me tensed. "Let them go," I said, letting power lace my voice. I hadn't intended to use the necklace's power in this way, but that was my sister.

"I'd settle down, Isla. If my men suspect I'm under your power, they have my leave to behead your sister and her husband."

Thane's rage was boiling. I could sense it through my own power and the way our wedding vows had linked us. There was worry in him, too, for Lily. That he worried for my sister... I could love him just for that.

And so much more.

But only if we survived this, which seemed increasingly unlikely. Had I doomed Thane and Ragalith with my reluctance to use the pendant?

"Let them go," I said again, but this time I was begging. "Please."

"Here's the offer. Isla, I will require you to give me your necklace. If you do that, we'll let all of you leave. Thane can go back as king, you his queen. You can take your humans and your paltry army with you. And maybe you can convince your kingdom to try to keep us out... but I doubt it." He laughed, low and dark. "At least I'm giving you a running start."

Thane bristled and started to dismount. I placed a hand on his thigh. "Stop." Twisting in the saddle, I reached back to cup his face. "I'll give him the necklace."

"No." His tone was flat, but his golden eyes were vivid and ringed with red.

“You said you weren’t going to use it.” We were almost whispering now, our eyes locked firm, as if the world had narrowed to encompass only the two of us. “What do you lose if I give it back?”

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. “It protects you, Isla. It’s what brought you to me and forced me to see you. I’d still be an egotistical ass without it and you’d be...” he stopped, licking his lips. “It protects you, Isla, and I can’t lose you.”

That magical bond between us tingled and hummed like music, warm like sunshine. I’d miss the connection to him, the deeper understanding of what made Thane tick. “It’s allowed me to cheat, Thane. We skipped a lot of the getting to know each other because it fed us the answers. That’s really what you’re afraid of—now you’ll have to spend oodles of time with me, talking and getting to know me.”

He tried to rally, to joke back. “That’s worse than being stomped on the battlefield today. Guess we better get ready for a fight.” But there was no laughter in his demeanor. His anxiety and worry were tangible.

“It’s time. I have to save Lily and Jeremy. We’ll find another way.”

He squeezed his eyes shut. “You made me promise to listen to you. I’m regretting it now.” When he looked at me again, I could see resolve there. He kissed me.

“Gods, what is taking so long?” Xavier said. “The answer is a simple yes or no.”

Thane slid off the steed, then helped me down. His hands stayed on me as much as possible, as if he could protect me himself just by touch.

“Come get the necklace,” I said, turning and lifting my hair.

Xavier heaved a dramatic sigh. “No. I’m not stupid. You’ll come with me to my camp and Lily will remove it. I’m not going to risk your magic going crazy here, and if you try something, your life will be forfeit.”

“She will not be going to your camp,” Thane snarled.

“Don’t be a fool. I’ll make a blood oath and everything.” Xavier pulled a knife from a sheath at his thigh and pushed the point into the pad of his thumb. Holding it out, we all watched as a shining drop of blood slid and dropped to the earth. The air crackled with magic as he said, “I swear that Isla Sagehaunt, her sister, and her brother-in-law shall all be given safe passage into my camp and, should they give me what I want, will be released safe and whole to King Thane Raveclaw.”

There was a pop as the oath took root.

“There,” Xavier added dryly. “Better?”

Not by a long shot, but it was as good as we were going to get. I squeezed Thane’s hand before bringing his knuckles to my lips. I kissed each one, my heart sounding a war drum in my chest. I was so terrified, I worried I wouldn’t be able to walk, but for Lily...

“I’ll come back to you.”

“You’d better. I’ll be right here.” He stared menacingly at Xavier. “You’ve sworn.”

The prince of Silvermoore merely rolled his eyes. One of his soldiers trotted their horse up and I found myself yanked up and into his saddle. The metal of his armor was unyielding and hurt as we trotted along with Xavier back toward his camp. Blood whooshed in my ears and I almost didn’t hear Lily’s scream for me.

We made our way through rows and rows of soldiers, weapons and armor gleaming in the sunlight. The hate for us seemed a miasma that I was forced to choke down with every breath.

There was a large tent toward the back. Once close, all dismounted. I was roughly pulled from the horse and a gauntleted hand grasped my elbow with bone-crushing force. The soldier pulled me into the tent after Xavier.

Inside were several tables and chairs. Various members of his army stood near maps and whispered to each other. Kyrie was nowhere to be seen.

After being roughly shoved into a chair, I clasped my hands in my skirts and willed myself not to shake in front of all the men. Xavier sat across from me, his legs sprawled wide. He stared, hard, as if he could pluck answers from me if he found where they were hiding.

Too much time passed, and I was sweating under that scrutiny when my sister was finally tugged into the tent. Lily’s face was red and swollen with tears, her eyes rolling like a spooked horse, but she didn’t look harmed. A bit of tension released in me at that.

“Lily, please go remove your sister’s necklace.” Xavier said it with an overload of sweetness, as if our lives weren’t in the palm of his hand.

Lily looked to me, confused. I nodded. “It’s okay,” I said.

She stumbled toward me after a soldier cut the bonds around her wrists. The skin there was red and raw and I ached to be able to smooth the salve onto her...and kick Xavier very hard between his legs for allowing her to be hurt at all.

Her hands shook as she reached behind my neck. Once, twice, they

fumbled with the clasp and I held my breath, afraid it wouldn't release for her.

"I'm sorry," she moaned.

"It's okay, Lily." I reached up and placed my hands on her shoulders. "He swore a blood oath to return us after this. Jeremy, too. Listen to me. This is okay."

As I spoke, I attempted something I'd never tried before; I tried to speak to the pendant in my mind.

*Hello.*

*Thank you for all you've done for me. I'm not sure I could have survived without having you close. Because of you, I managed to survive Kyrie, discover Ragalith, fall in love with its people, and marry a prince. I think I might love him, too.*

*But I have to stop holding on to you just for me. If I'm going to be queen, I need to learn how to do it on my own. With my own power.*

*You've been my closest friend.*

*But for the sake of everyone I care for, I need you to let go.*

Lily grasped the clasp and this time it remained in her pinched fingers.

*One last thing. I think you were trying to show me something about the land and this conflict. I never figured it out and I'm sorry. If Xavier tries to use you, would you show it to him? Maybe there's some good in him. Maybe he can help instead of making everything worse.*

That seemed unlikely, but it didn't matter. There was a soft clink and, for the first time in just over thirteen years, the necklace slid free from my neck.

Without its weight, I felt naked, too light, like a cloud barely holding its shape in the wind.

Xavier sat up straight, his mouth twisted into a nasty smile. He held out his hand and Lily reluctantly placed the relic in his palm. I swallowed hard, my stomach roiling. All I wanted was for Thane and my family to be safe, but seeing how Xavier's pupils dilated with desire at the necklace...

"I wasn't sure you'd do it," he mused before winking at me. "Smart girl."

He touched the surface of it with his other hand, probing the pendant. "I can feel its power," he muttered to himself. "A human shouldn't have been able to wield it. But a fae, strong and royal..."

He fastened the necklace around his neck.

My heart skipped a beat. A smile was tugging on his lips as a soldier started to speak and then—

The whole room popped and crackled, the air becoming a current of magic. Lily clung to me, burying her face in my shoulder. Stunned, I sat and held her close as the fae around me startled as Xavier began to scream.

His hands were buried in his hair, ripping at it. His eyes were wide and one began to drip blood like tears, the orb of it swelling like a grape trying to escape his skull. I looked away, unable to stomach it.

His soldiers fell around him, trying to get answers, to calm him down, to pull off the chain. They jerked their hands away each time one touched it and soon the smell of singed flesh permeated my nose.

It was chaos outside of the tent, with horses going wild and men shouting and cursing. The ground shook and rumbled with the heavily shod feet of man and animal scrambling around.

Finally, one of the fae reached for me and jerked me from Lily's arm, a knife at my throat. "Get it off him," he hissed.

Shoved to my knees next to the convulsing prince, I tried to ignore the pulpy mass that had been his left eye. The sheer volume of his cries threatened to shatter my ears, but I reached behind his neck. The thrashing made it difficult to find the clasp but when I did, it didn't stray. I unclasped it and pulled it off, my chest heaving with the effort.

The pendant hummed happily in my palm, but the blade remained at my throat, so I let it slip to the earth.

"If he's dead from your witchery," the fae seethed, "I'll make your death so slow and painful you'll howl louder than he did." The point of the knife nicked my neck, a pinprick of pain and the tickling dribble of blood the center of my focus.

"Don't." It was a wheeze, barely audible. But the knife moved ever so slightly away. "Don't," Xavier managed again. "Leave her. Get the men in order now."

There was a pause, a moment that bubbled and held with slow comprehension, before the soldier popped it by saying, "The men are attacking, sire. Like you said we should if you were hurt."

Thane. Oh, gods, Thane. He was waiting for me in the middle of the field. We'd feared for me, but he was in the midst of the danger. Belatedly, I realized Xavier's oath never mentioned not harming Thane.

My husband was fair game.

"Then find every person in charge and stop them. Use magic to shout if you need to."

“Magic, sire?”

At this, Xavier heaved himself off the floor, pressing one of his palms against his ruined eye. The other eye was sharp as it pierced the soldier. “Yes, magic. That’s an order. Use whatever you need, whatever it takes, to stop the damn battle!”

The soldier who’d threatened me wasn’t the only one to hear the order. Soon my hands were clapped over my ears as magically amplified voices shouted for everyone to stop.

Lily crawled to me, her ears covered and her body quaking. We huddled together, waiting for the noise and frenetic energy to stop.

It took too long, but the shouting slowed, then ceased. The ground wasn’t rumbling anymore. There were moans and normal-level cries of confusion and the clamor of metal, but it no longer sounded like the hell of battle.

Xavier managed to stand on wobbly legs. When he looked at me, his remaining eye was haunted. “Isla—”

Seizing my chance, I said, “I need to get to Thane. Now.”

He hesitated, took one look at the necklace on the floor, and shuddered. “I’m sorry,” he managed. “I didn’t know.”

“Xavier,” I pleaded. “Thane. He might be hurt.”

Finally, the prince nodded. “Take one of my horses. Your sister and her husband may do so as well.”

My body was too tight, a rope binding me to the dread of not knowing if Thane was okay, but I started to make my way out of the tent.

“Wait. Take the damn pendant.”

He stood a solid foot or more away from it, as if afraid to get too close. I didn’t ask questions. Snatching it up, I strung it around my neck as I walked out of the tent.

There wasn’t time to relish in the comfort of having it back. Lily trailed behind me. There was a horse, still saddled, stamping its feet and tied to a post. Hurrying, I began to free it so I could ride.

“Isla, don’t leave me here,” my sister sobbed.

“You heard him. You and Jeremy are free. But I have to get to Thane.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how to ride and I don’t know—”

It was hard, so damn hard, to swallow down my irrational anger. She was scared and in enemy territory. Lily had undergone her own ordeal and for that I was sorry. But there wasn’t time to teach her how to be resilient.

“Lily, listen. You can ride with me. But I’m going out there now and I



can't wait.”

My sister shied away for a second before making a clumsy effort to mount the horse. It took me shoving her up and some wobbles to get her in the seat. I followed with only a slight bit more confidence and grace. Once in the saddle, though, I pressed my heels into the horse's sides and we were off.

The thundering hoofbeats mirrored my rapid pulse. We were forced to maneuver around fallen bodies and confused clumps of soldiers. As I made my way through the Silvermoorian army, I saw the field. The Ragalithian army had been hurt badly, the numbers even fewer than before. Our flag rippled in the wind, and I found what I was looking for.

And what I was dreading.

An escort of soldiers, my soldiers, were lifting a body on a makeshift carrier. One pale, claw-tipped hand dangled over the side.

My scream ripped from my throat as I pulled the horse to a stop. Time stopped meaning anything, because one second I'd been riding and the next I was kneeling in the dirt next to Thane's body.

Tears spilled with abandon, splashing my dress, the earth, his beautiful and pale face.

No. No!

Clasping his limp hand in mine, I tugged it to my chest. “Thane,” I moaned, grief making the name a ragged cut. When I pulled his hand to me, his jacket fell open and revealed the bloody gash across his chest.

I almost dissolved at that moment. Almost.

I didn't, because the chest wasn't just wounded. It was moving. Thane was breathing, slow and labored, but breathing.

Alive.

Oh. *Oh, my love.*

Like the time with the bird, I let the grief move in me and through me. I'd almost lost him and that pain had been so raw and real it nearly destroyed me. But with it, I remembered the love. It was love, I knew for certain. Something tender and new, a fresh shoot from the earth. Still vulnerable and hungry, but with so much potential.

I wanted that potential. I needed to know what we could become, Thane and I.

Magic bubbled and flowed from me into him. I could picture it in my mind, a sharing of power, moving back and forth like blood through arteries, life-giving and warm. I willed Thane to heal.

He coughed.

Then laughed.

I froze at that. His deep, husky laugh boomed out of him and he sat up and stared at me, bewildered. “My dove, I just want to say none of that was in my plan.”

## THANE

**A** lmost dying? Wouldn't recommend it.

Finding a sassy, clever, adaptable wife? Now that I'd recommend in a heartbeat. In part because I had my wife to thank for every beat my heart made from the battlefield on.

Xavier had taken her from me, slipping a noose around our necks I knew she couldn't shrug out of. Sure, he'd made his blood oath. But that was only because he knew we'd be returning to Ragalith humiliated and weak.

It had only been buying time, but Isla's pain over her sister was so acute, it was as if it were my own. There was no way she could leave Lily in Silvermoore's hands. In hindsight, I'd been a fool to allow Lily and Jeremy to return in the first place.

Watching Isla disappear into the Silvermoorian camp had been the worst moment of my life. A hole tore open in me, and I hadn't realized how much I'd healed until her absence wounded me anew. Every nerve in my body was firing, insisting I chase after her, damn it all, and snatch her back to safety.

If Isla had taught me anything, though, it was that I needed to trust her, that forcing my way to get what I wanted wasn't the right choice. After all, I'd started this thinking I could solve everything on my own. I believed I only needed power, and the rest of it didn't matter.

Until she'd started to matter. Her opinion had mattered. And suddenly my plan of controlling everyone and everything had become flimsy and pathetic. The kind of juvenile planning my father had tried to warn me against.

So I trusted her. But not Xavier. I'd paced back and forth and agonized each and every second without her by my side.

Then the screaming had started and chaos erupted. The Silvermoorian soldiers startled and began to charge at us wildly. They lost their formations and waved their weapons, half-crazed.

And I was first in their line of sight.

Swinging up onto my horse had stolen valuable seconds. Wheeling my steed around and trying to charge back toward my army had taken more. They were running to meet the fray, and all I could hope was to reach them before the Silvermoorians reached me.

It was a close thing. Not wanting to run down my own soldiers, I jumped off at the last moment, rolled as I hit the ground, and came up standing. Blyth shadow-stepped next to me, his body blurred as the magic buzzed. He held a sword out to me and there was scarcely time to grab it before the opposing army was on us.

It was chaos. No one was leading. Everyone fought and slashed on instinct. Magic pulsed in the air as we sweated and fought and killed.

There were so many of them.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a Silvermoorian about to spear Blyth in the back. There wasn't time to reach him. My closest friend was about to die in front of me. Instinct drove my arm to hurl my sword through the air.

It sheathed itself in the soldier's chest, and he died with his spear in hand. I was left without a weapon, and that's when the slash came.

Darkness followed. It only allowed pain to exist. And there was pain, burning and excruciating as each inhalation stretched the wound that was undoubtedly slowly killing me.

Then there was more than the pain. There was magic. It was magic I knew and my body opened up to it with longing and relief. Isla. She was alive and she was there and me?

I was whole.

Whole and eternally grateful to the human who'd shown me power wasn't what I'd thought. Her power to heal, to help? It surpassed any of ours. Her power was what Savaria needed.

When I kissed her then, I tried to pour that understanding into her through touch.

The mess of the battlefield after that was terrible. I'd almost lost my wife and then my life, and all I wanted was to whisk her home and bury myself in her, reveling in our survival. Instead, since I was healed, I had to take charge.

Isla worked in batches, slowly healing the most critically wounded of both sides. She'd insisted, and I wasn't about to stop her, even if I questioned her sanity.

Blyth and I counted our troops and our dead. There were ceremonial

burnings for those we'd lost.

Finally, there was Xavier.

It was a shock to see him striding across the field, a bandage tied tight over one of his eyes. He was haggard but came up to me, weaponless and alone.

It didn't take long for him to say he'd managed what I had not—to get the pendant off Isla. But when I heard what happened after he tried to wield it, I was grateful a hundred times over for my failure.

It had shown him what was wrong with the land in a rather forceful way. His emotional manipulation had been amplified and turned against him. When he managed, through shaking words, to tell me, I understood everything. The last pieces fell into place.

The eye that had been destroyed had witnessed what would happen if Silvermoore continued to strip magic from its people and hoard it. That eye had seen a vision of a future with a land starved of magic. It had been awful enough to burn his eye out of his head.

His remaining eye had seen what would happen if magic were allowed to flow free again. To be used for the land and the people. They wouldn't need to steal our land if they'd loosen their control and share the gift the world had given all of us.

It was a lesson for us both. I now understood that walling off my borders hadn't been the answer. Just as Ragalith viewed the queen as a balance, so too was I understanding that there was a balance to all things.

It was only an inkling, a beginning of an understanding. Comprehension would take time and study and magic.

I was relieved to know my wife had a study aid hanging around her neck.

When all was said and done, things weren't settled entirely. There was a history of hurts, slights, and misinformation to untangle. But we were able to leave the battlefield and return to Ragalith with a sense of hope and a promise that Silvermoore wouldn't encroach on our land or hurt our people. Further talks—civilized ones—would soon commence.

I didn't hold the poisonous hate I had before. We'd return home and the real work, the hard work, would begin.

So yeah, almost dying wasn't great.

But Isla swore to use every trick and then some to make me feel better once we were in our bedroom at home.



\* \* \*

Mara.

She'd tried to escape and my father had decided to be useful and lock her up to await justice.

The throne room was different. *I* was different as I sat on my throne, my queen at my side. Many of the nobles surrounding us stood in support of my verdict, whatever I should choose.

Mara was in the center of the room, manacles shut around her wrists. She was made of steel, unflinching despite knowing how much harm she'd caused. Xavier had sent us a missive to give her upon our return, letting her know that he wouldn't save her from our justice.

Her screams of rage when she'd read it had been deeply satisfying.

"Sage, please list the crimes for all to hear," I said, waving a hand at my advisor. Oh, Sage wasn't a favorite. But until I could suss out his intentions, Isla suggested we keep him close. Remaining in his place of authority had done wonders for his attitude.

"Mara Raveclaw, formerly of Silvermoore, former queen of Ragalith, is guilty of the following crimes: espionage, blackmail, manipulation, treason, and regicide."

Mara's eyes narrowed. "I didn't murder the queen."

"But you aided it," Isla said, speaking firmly from my side. "You confessed as much to me. Having a hand in murder is just as damning as committing the act itself."

Mara shrugged. "I was doing as I swore—trying to help my people. You know the magic, you've felt it. I can't be guilty of anything but trying to help."

Cool anger iced over my heart. There wasn't a shred of remorse in her. She'd helped kill my mother, all so she could take her place and tear Ragalith apart from within. "Your help was toxic," I said, low and glacial. "You aimed to destroy and you know it."

"You're going to execute me," she spat. "This is a farce. Have your vengeance and be done with it."

I wanted to. I'd thought long and hard about what death would be most suitable for her. But Isla had been there, and her suggestion had been far more clever.

"Death would be easy. Instead, I sentence you to mending all that you've destroyed. You will work in the fields, helping to restore that which was lost. You'll work in the castle, getting a taste of the lives you so callously ordered about. You'll tend my mother's grave and make it a monument to the great lady she was."

"I'd rather die than be a slave," Mara replied, a tiny tremor of fear ringing out.

My smile twisted. I'd prepared for this. "You can refuse, of course." I signaled to Blyth, who stepped to Mara and handed her a knife. Around them, soldiers stepped forward, swords pointed at Mara.

There was nowhere for her to run.

The knife glinted in her hand. "What's this?"

"You said you'd rather die. Here's your choice. Take your life or accept my punishment."

The throne room was silent. There wasn't even the normal rustling of clothing as everyone waited, watching. With trembling hands, Mara held the knife up, aiming it at her heart. It shook violently and she stared at the sharp point.

It clattered to the floor and she sagged in defeat.

She was too fond of herself, in the end, to choose a clean and easy death. A part of me was disappointed. It would have been satisfying to see her corpse, to know her stain and threat had been removed from my palace.

But Xavier had given me his word; I wouldn't be attacking Silvermoore while he worked on change. We'd send food and support. In return, there'd be no assistance for Mara. She was exiled.

The guards pulled her from the floor and dragged her away. Her sobs echoed through the corridors for some time.

I looked at all of the lords and ladies gathered, then met my father's gaze. Isla's hand slipped into my own. "Does anyone have a problem with my justice? If so, speak now."

There was nothing. If anything, I spotted smiles lighting up amongst the gathered. Mara had collected enemies while queen, it seemed.

"You're free to go." I waved my hand and it was as if a dam burst, with words bubbling out and the lords and ladies beginning to move and

congregate, most likely to gossip and wonder at my choice. The Thane they knew would have strung her up in the center of the throne room, forcing all in attendance to witness her pain.

My father approached me. I nodded, giving him leave to speak.

“That was unexpected,” he said, nodding to where Mara had been pulled away.

“Do you disagree? You should have said something.”

“I... I will always regret, I think, not seeing her direct execution. But I’d been too cautious with her, too afraid, and it will be my shame for the rest of my life. I failed you and your mother.”

“You had no choice,” I said, finally admitting it. “I’m not sure I would have done anything different had I been in your place. I can see now, how much more you were trying to protect.”

Isla stood and patted my father on his shoulder. “You have no need for shame. Not in these halls and not with us.”

A lump formed in my throat and I coughed a bit, unwilling to show too much emotion while sitting on the throne. My father tipped his head in understanding. His own eyes shone with unspent tears. “You did well, King Thane.”

Isla cast her sapphire gaze on me. “You really did.”



# ISLA

The door to our old shop didn't creak when it swung open despite our long absence. Lily swished in, determined to collect anything of value she wanted to keep for the move to Ragalith. Thane's hand rested on my lower back, warm and sure.

"This is it," I said mildly as I stepped inside. I loved that he shadowed me, that he stayed close to my side. It had been a year since I thought I'd lost him and there was no shame in me needing him to be close to me. The reminder of his—of our—survival was a necessity.

He moved beside me, his hand slipping into mine. His head moved this way and that as he took in the shop my parents had started, the shop Lily and I had inherited.

I tried to imagine what he saw but couldn't. In every window, cubby, mirror, and chair there were memories that slammed into me. This was not a happy place for me. It was smaller than I remembered, and while it remained clean and tidy, I could see all the rough edges of the poverty Lily and I'd lived in.

"It isn't much." Some part of me felt a need to apologize, even though I understood that none of it was our fault.

"It's more than I expected, honestly." Thane moved to one of our many shelves, eyeing the bowls of trinkets and accessories we'd lined up according to color and flash. He reached into a few of the bowls and touched the pieces in wonder. "So much creativity bursts from all the corners. It's obvious the amount of work and pride you put into this place."

Warmth bloomed in my chest. "Oh, well."

"Damn straight," Lily said as she sorted through the trinkets, grabbing some of the rarer ones and placing them into one of the many bags she'd brought along. "If we didn't work hard, we wouldn't have clients."

“You humans are so resilient.”

Lily flashed him a genuine smile. Their relationship wasn't strong--they'd never be best friends. But in the year that she and Jeremy had resided with us in Ragalith, Lily had come around to Thane, and he to her. Jeremy had fallen in tight with Blyth. They were now preparing to move out of the castle and into a new home and start the business fresh in Ragalith.

With a fae apprentice to boot.

“Will I see your home as well?” Thane asked, his thumb gliding over my knuckles.

Lily answered for me. “Go on and take him. I'll be here awhile, and then Jeremy and I'll load up the cart and start heading back. You need to be at the castle soon, anyway. We'll see you at home.”

I adored her newfound confidence. Being in Ragalith had brought Lily to life, once she understood she didn't need to bow and be demure to stay safe. The new Lily was commanding and, if I was honest, a bit bossy. I loved it.

“Got it, boss,” I said with a cheeky salute.

Her eyes narrowed but the smile on her face never dropped. “If the queen of Ragalith wishes to work for me, I'll not turn her away.”

Thane rolled his eyes. “The queen of Ragalith has too many duties currently, even if she'd like to forget them.”

I stuck my tongue out at both of them. “The queen of Ragalith is standing right here.”

Thane and I chuckled as we walked out onto the street. In the crisp autumn air and under a clear blue sky, the small village I'd grown up in was shown in its fullest capacity. So much had changed in just twelve months.

For starters, the streets had people in them, loitering and smiling, buying and selling. Fae and human alike milled around. It wasn't crowded or festive in the same way the village back home was, but it was a stark enough difference that my heart lifted.

“The human quarter is this way.” As we walked, I made sure to keep my face lifted and my smile full. It took effort; the years of trying to hide and hunker ran deep. But Ragalith and the man at my side had done wonders toward helping me rewrite those instincts.

There were crews of men and women working on the upkeep of the homes and businesses, their wings and horns flashing in the sunlight. That was work that would have been shouldered by humans before, but now it was shared.

Whatever the pendant had shown Xavier had lit a fire under him, and it was evident in the change all around.

“I can’t decide if I wish you could see it the way it had been so I could play on your sympathies,” I teased.

“You don’t need that to have sympathy, my dove.” Thane looped his arm over my shoulder, pulling me close. We were the king and queen of another realm, safely strolling down a street in broad daylight. There were soldiers posted around for the community’s safety, but there was none of the bullying or censoring I had grown up with. “Anyone who’d met you back then would have known how difficult it was.”

Blushing and unwilling to sink into the bleakness of my past, I pointed to our old home. There were holes in the thatched roof and the door had been torn off. Lily had warned me that the Silvermoore soldiers had been destructive when they’d come to take Lily and Jeremy captive.

Before the sight could eat at my heart, Thane pointed to a small head covered in brilliant green hair ducking up and down in one of the windows. A heartbeat later, a fae who was clearly the child’s mother stepped out, visible, and chided him to keep cleaning—they couldn’t move in until everything had been repaired.

A fae family would reside in my old home.

Nervous, I approached, tentatively sticking my head through the open doorframe. “Hello?”

The fae woman startled, her wings snapping up as if poised for flight. “Hello.” Her brow was creased until she saw my crown, took in the fineness of my dress. “Oh. Oh,” she breathed, dipping into a curtsy.

“Please don’t,” I said softly. “I just wanted to peek inside. Are you moving in?”

She nodded but was too nervous to look me in the face. “We heard they’d relaxed the laws on magic. My husband is an artist, but he uses his power to shape the stone he works with. Now we’re hoping to live where there are people who could buy his work without fear of being turned in for how it was made.”

“I’m so glad he’s free to do so now.” I scanned the room before staring at the hearth. My nest of a bed was gone, but the floor was colored differently there, the bricks having avoided years of soot stains under the fabrics. “I used to live here, you know.”

At that, she blanched, her rust-colored skin paling. “I didn’t! We don’t

have to live here.”

“I don’t need the space. I’m happy you’ll have it. Would you do me a favor, though?”

“Anything, Your Majesty.”

My nose wrinkled at the title but I didn’t correct her. It wasn’t important. “Would you have your husband contact one of the Ragalithian ambassadors? I’ll leave a note to let them know I’d like them to view his work and purchase some art for our castle.”

Her eyes flared open but she nodded. Her son came crashing from Lily’s old bedroom, and I stole out quietly when she turned to scold him about being good around company.

Thane was waiting patiently, his face the epitome of wry amusement. “Are we going to give every poor artisan a boost now?”

“Most likely.”

He only laughed. “I ordered a carriage. We’re running a bit late, I’m afraid. The king and queen are waiting for us.”

I pursed my lips. Part of the idea of showing Thane around the lower parts of Silvermoore’s capital had been to avoid thinking about the meeting with the king and queen. Still, it was a duty and a necessary visit.

The carriage ride was far too quick, and we arrived at the large, white castle with its tall spires and blue and white flags all too soon.

Thane and I clasped hands and allowed ourselves to be escorted inside.

The interior hadn’t changed much from the last time I’d been here. The décor of the ball had been stripped away, of course, but the columns were still polished white marble, the rugs still immaculate in blue and white patterns. Everything was symmetrical, neat, and, in my humble opinion, stiff and formal.

“This makes me miss home,” Thane muttered under his breath. “It’s so stuffy here.”

With each step on the long walk to the throne room, I had to force down the rising fear in my chest. Bad memories couldn’t hurt me but that didn’t mean I wanted to recall them in detail. Thane took my hand in his and squeezed. Affection still wasn’t prevalent in Silvermoore.

...but we weren’t Silvermoorians.

Xavier and Kyrie were waiting in the throne room. I’d wager money meeting there had been Kyrie’s idea, an attempt to undermine me. There had been a lot of change since the battle, but not everyone approved of it.

King Xavier Eldritch rose from his throne and stepped forward without offering a hand to his queen. I felt the ripple of interest in Thane and willed him to be on his best behavior.

“Welcome,” Xavier said, extending a hand to Thane, who shook it. Then, to my shock, he offered a hand to me as well. His gaze slid to my neck.

The pendant was still there, humming with companionable power. We were bonded, after all. I didn’t miss Xavier’s shudder or the diamond-studded eyepatch that was now a part of his wardrobe.

“Thank you,” Thane said. “It’s been a lovely visit so far. Riding in was a delight as well. Your fields look good.”

“We’re trying.” Xavier gestured and servants quickly moved a small table to the middle of the throne room, along with four chairs and a plate with four wine glasses on it. I took a seat first, then a glass, and sipped. Xavier and Thane joined me.

Kyrie sulked on the throne a moment, the empty chair and waiting glass an invitation she had to choose to accept.

She did, flouncing over.

“Winter was difficult, as you know,” Xavier continued as if she had been at his side all along. “But with your help and magic, we managed to pull through the worst of it. Now it’s taking all our efforts to get back on our feet, but the magic is helping.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Thane offered. “Our winter was hard in a different way. The adjustment to the new accords was... slow.”

He was referring to the nobles who’d refused his orders for troops and aid, then tried to fight back on the new trade rules with Silvermoore. We’d been selling to them at a steep discount for the year, as well as sending aid for free when asked for.

The nobility didn’t enjoy that.

But Thane was able to persuade them, eventually, to start respecting his rule. He didn’t even have to use magic. Now, as Silvermoore was starting to reap the benefits of change, we would hash out new pricing and trades.

“I understand that deeply,” Xavier said, his eyes flicking to Kyrie imperceptibly. “We’ve also had some resistance, but it’s getting better.”

“Blyth informed me you still have a ban on humans using magic.” The easygoing nature of Thane’s tone was gone. “When will that change?”

Xavier held up his hands. “When I’m able? We’re still dealing with the disgruntled fae upset over allowing humans and fae to live in the same

quarters and be paid a fair wage.”

I felt Kyrie’s rush of anger before she lashed out, my pendant hot against my skin. “They should be grateful we allow them here at all,” she hissed to Xavier. “I don’t care what some trinket showed you. Some things are important, and order is one of them. Like ordering humans to be useful and not be leeches on society.”

With that, she jerked up from her seat and swept from the room, leaving only the buzz of her outburst behind. It tried to settle into my skin, to bring back the old fear, but I was shielded. My heart had grown strong.

Xavier slouched, looking perturbed and exhausted. “And I get to live with her for the rest of our lives,” he said, trying to joke but sounding defeated.

“The shackles are mighty, aren’t they?” Thane replied. “I thought I’d be able to get rid of this one”—he jerked a thumb at me—“because of a short lifespan. But Blyth has assured me that the pendant’s magic will keep her around for as long as I endure.”

“Hey!” I lightly slapped at his arm. “Don’t be an ass. You’re lucky to have me.” Turning to Xavier, I added softly, “I suppose the upside to a long lifespan is there is plenty of time for Kyrie to learn the error of her ways.”

Both kings snorted.

“I’m going to walk a bit,” I said, rising smoothly. “Please get all the boring king stuff out of the way in my absence.”

“Are you sure?” Thane tugged on my wrist, half-rising himself. “I can come—”

“Do you really believe I need you to protect me? One of us saved the other person’s life, I’ll remind you.”

He crashed back down in his seat with an exasperated sound, and Xavier laughed from his belly, loud and full. “Hells, Isla, I think you and your necklace saved all of Savaria. I’m more afraid for Kyrie than I am for you.”

With a wink, I left them to find my old enemy.

It wasn’t hard to find her. Her heated complaints echoed through the pristine marbled halls. Kyrie paced and raged at several ladies of the court in a sitting room. None of them looked particularly happy to be there.

She glared when I stepped in. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see if you were okay.”

Her laugh was brittle and ugly. “Why bother? Of course I’m not okay. You’ve ruined everything, Isla. The Xavier I married was strong, tough, and ruthless. Now he’s a one-eyed pushover, letting our kingdom go to hell.”

I could have pointed out that thanks to his efforts, there was food on her table. Thanks to Xavier's change, the villages of Silvermoore were starting to thrive. I didn't think any of that mattered to Kyrie, though.

"That's not what I meant. I meant are you feeling okay, with the baby and all?" I nodded to her flat belly.

A hush fell before she spluttered, "How could you possibly know that?"

Pointing to the necklace, I took a step toward her. "It's taken some investigation, but I had magic all along. Healing being one of my strongest powers. With the amplifier, I'm able to see more than what's on the surface. You're tired and vomiting your breakfasts. No wonder you're so cranky."

One of the ladies tittered until a cut of a stare stopped her. "The baby is fine," Kyrie hissed. "I'm fine. Your powers are an abomination."

There had been a time when just a wrong look from the woman would have made me feel small. Her words had withered me, had stolen the joy a child deserved to have in life. She was mean as hell, and cruel, and now she was queen.

I would always have to be careful around her.

But I was no longer small or withered. Grasping the pendant, I gently tugged at its power. The women gasped, and I knew my eyes had shifted to a vibrant green. "Healing is my primary skill, but with practice, I've gotten decent at foresight," I added.

Kyrie wrapped her arms around her stomach. "If you curse my child—"

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't need to curse a baby. It's already cursed to have you as a parent. But know this. Your child will grow up to uphold everything you hate. They will unite our lands, treat all with equality, and let magic flow through every citizen, human or fae. Your child will be the best of us."

Having said what I wanted to, I started to turn to leave. "Congratulations, Queen Eldritch."

I wasn't surprised to find Thane waiting for me outside the door. We both knew I didn't need him to shield me, but that didn't mean I didn't want him near. He shook his head as we began to walk toward the exit.

"Your talks went well?" I teased him, knowing he was itching to ask for details of my encounter.

"Very. Our ambassador will finish up the paperwork, but Xavier was amenable to all our requested changes. In exchange, he wants to ask for our aid in dealing with some of the factions of Silvermoore nobility who've been

going rogue. You know I'm all too happy to help hunt down light fae."

"You do delight in that," I admitted with a smile.

Outside, our carriage was waiting. It was probably a bit rude to leave so early, but Xavier had his hands full, and I had no desire to spend any more time in the castle. One day, I might be able to visit it and not cringe for the duration of my stay, but that day wouldn't come anytime soon.

Once we were settled and our carriage jostling us toward Ragalith, Thane smirked. I was curled on his lap, tracing my finger along one of his horns. Feeling the ridges under my fingertips relaxed me.

"So Kyrie is pregnant?"

"Mmhmm."

"That means Xavier will have an heir."

"It does." I suppressed a giggle, knowing where Thane's mind was wandering.

Sure enough, his lips found the hollow of my neck. He nuzzled there and heat built between my legs. "Maybe we should talk about having a baby as well."

Taking his hand in mine, I pressed it to my belly.

"Way ahead of you."

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# PRINCE OF THE DARK FAE

Lindsey Devin

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