



FAR KING OF IRONHELM
BOOK ONE

CHAINED



FATE

VERA RIVERS

CHAINED BY FATE

FAE KING OF IRONHELM: BOOK 1

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Fae King of Ironhelm Book One

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CONTENTS

Vera Rivers Books

1. Zephy.
2. Cade
3. Zephy.
4. Cade
5. Zephy.
6. Cade
7. Zephy.
8. Zephy.
9. Cade
10. Zephy.
11. Cade
12. Zephy.
13. Cade
14. Zephy.
15. Cade
16. Zephy.
17. Cade
18. Zephy.
19. Cade
20. Zephy.
21. Cade
22. Cade
23. Zephy.
24. Cade
25. Zephy.

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CHAPTER I

ZEPHY

Maywin shivered as the transport car teetered its way through the blackened roads, closer to our destination. She was outwardly exhibiting my inner emotions perfectly, but doing a much worse job of hiding them. Maywin liked to think herself a picture of stoicism, but in truth, my maid and closest confidant wore her expressions on her sleeve as nakedly as a newborn puppy. It wasn't hard to know what she was thinking.

In the blanketing darkness, I could barely make out Maywin's face. The accent lights on the windows were our only illumination. But I did nothing to rectify this.

I could have asked Maywin to turn on her cell phone flashlight, the device a point of envy for me. Hers was an old model, lest I try to sneak a peek of the world beyond the forbidden concept known as "the internet." My parents had kept me sheltered from the outside world, so my experience with life had been learned at home through private tutors and thick encyclopedias.

These back routes were darker, bleaker, and scarier than the highway we had taken from Carrottrove, this part of the kingdom foreign to me. The drive from Carrottrove to the capital city of Ironhelm took eight hours with no traffic, and I was sick of being in the armored SUV.

We'd passed the bustling downtown area of Ironhelm City thirty minutes ago, and the farther we traveled toward the palace, the signs of civilization became sparser. Except for the

odd house or random business that flew by under Rufus' heavy foot, I could make out little in the night.

Still, it would have been nice to have more light, so I had something to look at.

Instead of asking Maywin to use her phone's flashlight, I could have opted for something even more dramatic to change the grim atmosphere inside the car.

What if I brought the sun out right now? I mused, with a hint of mischievousness. Pulled it out over the entire blasted kingdom and confused everyone so badly that they didn't notice if I escaped?

It was a tempting thought, but one I wasn't sure I could manage, even if I dared go through with it, which there was no way I would. As delicious as the thought was, I wasn't nearly that impulsive—no matter what my father, Nikkoli, claimed about me to any potential suitors.

And there had been a flock of them over the years. Fated to the Alpha King of Ironhelm or not, my parents couldn't hide the fact that they had borne a pretty kid, no matter how much they tried to keep me hidden from the world beyond. Word of my existence was bound to catch wind in a town as small as Carrotrove, despite their best efforts.

All my parents could do was scare off my suitors when they came knocking and remind me of my duty to our kingdom, Ironhelm.

Father only warned potential suitors about my impulsiveness to keep them from showing any interest in me, I reminded myself. We couldn't have any males looking in my direction when my fate is with the King, could we?

And the truth was, I wasn't sure I wanted to run off—not yet, anyway. My curiosity about the Alpha King of Ironhelm had been years in the making. Scurrying off before I met him face to face would be a waste.

“Are you cold?” Maywin asked, sitting forward against the beige leather to study my face more closely.

I smirked lightly, glad for the encompassing blackness around us, despite the irritating stage lighting around the wide windows of the traveling car. I was able to hide my sour expression well this way. Not that I was upset with her, but she was the only one in sight, and therefore apt to get the brunt of my annoyance.

“I’m not the one shuddering,” I reminded her bluntly.

Maywin withdrew, blinking in embarrassment, and I was instantly contrite. She wasn’t shivering from the cold.

“Are you mad at me?” Maywin asked, and I blushed, suddenly mortified by my behavior, hearing the nasty cut of my tone.

“No, Maywin,” I mumbled, realizing how horribly I was acting. “Of course not. You’re my only friend now. Thank you for coming with me from Carrotrove. I know that couldn’t have been an easy decision for you.”

“That’s not true, miss. I didn’t think twice when your mother suggested it.”

I offered her a warm smile, believing her words, and my head turned toward the window again. I peered out at the odd shapes on the landscape, none of them familiar now in the sporadic spacing of the streetlights. Not that I would have recognized them in the more consistent city lights, either. The entire terrain was strange and unfamiliar. It didn’t even feel like we were still on the continent of Mystara, much less in the country of Ironhelm.

How much longer until we reached the castle? I was restless from the lack of movement, and I needed to stand up to get my blood circulating again.

“You’ll make lots of new friends at the palace,” Maywin reassured me with her usual optimism.

Sometimes I wasn’t sure if she said these things because she was paid to keep up the charade or because she was born so naturally perky. Both thoughts irked me equally at that minute. Again, my petulance had nothing to do with Maywin

—or with anger. It was a defense mechanism to keep me from fully breaking down.

None of this is Maywin's fault. You're lucky she's here with you, I snapped at myself. *If you keep barking at her like you are, you'll end up without anyone at all.*

And that was true. I was so fortunate that Maywin had chosen to come when she could have stayed in Carrottrove where the weather would be a lot more stable without me around.

She had been given the option of remaining in my mother's employ, but I didn't blame Maywin for agreeing to be my escort. My mother, Sabine, could be a royal bitch.

But Maywin had to be second-guessing her decision now as the magic-protected and heavily armored SUV rolled over a bridge covering a gassy swamp and into a bleak, flat land. Where was Rufus driving us? I hadn't heard the GPS squawk in a while. I wondered if he was lost, but I didn't ask.

"I'm sure Ironhelm City will be full of interesting things to do," Maywin went on, forcing a note of excitement that I was sure she didn't feel. "It's a new adventure for both of us."

"I don't want to make friends in Ironhelm City," I grumbled, grinding my teeth, my shoulders rolling uncomfortably. Despite the cushy leather seats, I was sick of driving and wanted to stretch my legs. "I was happy in Carrottrove."

That wasn't a complete lie. I had been happy enough.

"I'm sure the King is wonderful," Maywin intoned.

"Is there a script you memorized?" I teased, pretending to look her over for one. "Can I get in on this play you're in?"

Maywin tittered nervously. "No, of course I haven't been given a script, but you must admit that you're lucky to be marrying the most eligible bachelor in Ironhelm."

I pursed my lips together.

She acts like this was a decision borne of love and affection.

“I wouldn’t say I’m lucky. My parents wanted me out of Carrotrove, which is why they arranged the marriage. My magic was wreaking havoc on the crops.” I was only half joking, but Maywin stared at me pityingly.

“I don’t think that’s why this marriage was arranged,” Maywin murmured softly.

“I know why this marriage was arranged,” I mumbled, heat surging to my face. “This union was determined before I was a twinkle in my father’s eye.”

I didn’t need Maywin telling me about the ways of the world and what I needed to do to protect my family’s honor, but it was convenient that I had been packed up and shipped off during a bad time in our small farming town.

Even though the marriage had been destined since my birth, I knew my parents were relieved to get rid of me. The latest floods in my city had been devastating, but I swore I didn’t have anything to do with the rains... this time.

The vehicle slowed, and we craned our necks to peer forward, sensing that we had finally arrived at our destination. Maywin gasped as my eyes popped. Even in the staunch darkness, the sight of Ironhelm Place was breathtaking from the distance.

The palace loomed like a fortress against the black of night, the building itself glistening like an ebony chalet in the clouds. Even though the palace was still technically in Ironhelm City, although it was on the outskirts, I couldn’t see the skyline of the city center.

“Is that it?” I heard myself choke, the palace appearing through a thick night fog. “Is it floating?”

The haze cleared, and I was immediately embarrassed, realizing that it had just been a trick of the darkness, a mirage of the odd lighting and my frayed nerves.

“I think so, Miss Zephyrine. I can’t think of what else it could be,” Maywin replied breathlessly. “But I don’t think it’s floating.”

“This is Ironhelm Place,” Rufus agreed from the driver’s seat, his dusky profile facing me as he nodded, chauffeur cap falling partially over his thick, bushy eyebrows.

“What does one king need with so many rooms?” I sputtered, both awed and offended by the obstinate waste of space. “We could fit all of Carrottrove and half of the Cattails in those halls alone!”

“Maybe he has a big staff?” Maywin suggested weakly, knowing that her words didn’t make the King look any better to me.

I glanced at her, wrinkling my nose in disgust. “For what? One fae king? What can he possibly need so much for? He’s obviously spoiled and wasteful. That’s the only reason for this display. To show off.”

Am I determined to hate him? Is that what this is?

Another bout of contrition washed through me, but there was no one to apologize to this time.

The car drew toward the front of the fortress, and tingles ran down my spine, my hand immediately reaching for Maywin’s.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so rude to you all day,” I whispered, all of my previous fortitude dispersing as we crossed the long, stone bridge which crossed a canal and led to the entrance of the palace.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I’m grateful to be at your side,” Maywin reassured me, squeezing my hand. “You’re understandably nervous, but I’m sure this will be a wonderful experience.”

Guards manned the towers on either side of the extension, and my anxiety mounted. My childhood home was the largest in the county, but nothing could have prepared me for the opulence of the structure before me. I wasn’t used to royal life, even though I had grown up as a noblefae.

Still, I thought the palace would be closer to the hustle and bustle of the city. This area of Ironhelm seemed even more remote than Carrottrove.

I was used to living in a remote area, but I had to admit that seeing the downtown area Ironhelm City, even if I only saw it from the window of the SUV, exhilarated me. Before this morning, I'd only ever left the county I grew up in one time.

I'd only heard about the wonders of the city, with skyscrapers that pulsed with vibrant energy. From towering billboards and neon signs that hung like constellations to quaint storefronts, the city's heart throbbed with the promise of innovation and possibility.

But I wouldn't be living in the city center. I was going to be living in a palace surrounded by nature. Looking at the palace felt like I was stepping back in time.

Gulping back the stone in my throat, my eyes searched the front of the palace for signs of the King, but he didn't appear.

Instead, a flock of liveried staff lined themselves against the drawbridge, one by one, until the vehicle finally slowed to a complete stop. Suddenly, the tiredness I'd felt dissipated, and I wanted the drive to go on forever. I had never been so uncomfortable in my own skin.

With sweaty palms, I waited impatiently for Rufus to open the door and let me out, a part of me longing to scramble out the other side and dart into the unknown beyond. But that insurmountable curiosity remained.

Who was this powerful fae king I was destined to marry? What did he look like? I was really going into this blind because of my sheltered life. I'd never even seen a picture of my future husband.

Finally, Rufus came around, offering me a reassuring grin that did nothing to alleviate my out-of-control pulse. I accepted his leather-gloved hand and stepped out, Maywin at my side. Smoothing out the front of my A-line dress, I shifted the belt around my waist and offered the group a timid smile of greeting.

A middle-aged fae with milky white eyes stepped forward, startling me on sight. She seemed to be looking through me as

she stood in front of me, sniffing the air around me. I glanced at Maywin again, wondering if I should help her, her seemingly sightless stare unnerving me greatly. My hand fell to the side of my dress, and suddenly, I felt ridiculously overdressed among the servants, despite the occasion.

“Zephyrine, the First Fae of Carrotrove, King Cade welcomes you to Ironhelm Place,” she intoned like she was reading from a projection.

I glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see a hologram at my back, but of course, nothing was there. My head swiveled back toward her, taking in her bizarre, bored greeting.

Was *she* a hologram?

“Uh... thank you. I’m glad to be here,” I offered weakly, unsure of what else to say.

She continued as if I hadn’t said anything at all. “We hope you enjoy your home here in Ironhelm Place as you prepare to become queen.”

“I—”

“There is much to be done before the ceremony,” she rambled on.

My eyes grew wider, and I looked helplessly at Maywin, who shrugged. Rufus kept his head down, chauffeur cap hiding his growing smirk of amusement.

“O-okay,” I offered encouragingly. “Like what?”

“When King Cade has his twenty-fifth birthday, your union ceremony will take place... assuming he finds you suitable for the cause,” she concluded.

“I—what?” I sputtered, half bemused, half disgusted.

The blank-eyed female gazed at me—no, *through* me now.

Was she blind? Could she see me?

She certainly seemed to be staring directly at me, gauging my reaction, and making me distinctly uncomfortable in the process.

Didn't they have healers for her eyes here?

"What part didn't you understand?" she demanded with more force than I was accustomed to.

"I..." I looked around for a sign of the King, but all I saw were waves of red and black, the servants in their matching uniforms staring straight ahead, none of them daring to look me in the eye. Maywin pressed herself closer to me, her wariness palpable.

This place was weird.

"I *understand* all of it," I finally managed to say, finding my voice. "I'm just absorbing what you said."

"What's there to absorb?" she asked flatly. "I believe I laid it out quite plainly."

"Well, I suppose I'm absorbing the romance of it all," I muttered sarcastically.

Maywin stifled a snort as Rufus covered his mouth entirely. At least my servants found me charming. My greeter didn't crack a smile.

"Have your servants bring your baggage, and ours will take you to your room," she went on as if I had said nothing at all.

My jaw slacked as I realized the King wasn't coming to meet me. The King had sent his... housekeeper?

"Who are you?" I asked, indignation flooding me. "Why am I hearing all this from you and not King Cade himself?"

A cold, mirthless smile touched her lips. "I am Grisella. King Cade asked me to meet you upon arrival."

"Okay, but *who* are you?" I insisted. "Are you the head of the household or a concubine or what?"

The staff gawked at my rudeness, Grisella raising an offended eyebrow. Her nails dug into the flesh of my arm.

"Miss..." Maywin breathed.

The smile never wavered from Grisella's lips, but the temperature in the courtyard dropped another five degrees as her steely white eyes hardened toward me, confirming what I had suspected: she wasn't blind at all.

"I wear many hats in this palace, as you'll come to find out. Concubine, however, is not one of them. Feel free to ask me for whatever you need. *If* I can accommodate you, I'll try."

That didn't sound promising at all.

"Where is the King?" I wanted to know. "He's not coming to meet me?"

My voice took an annoying twang that bothered me.

"King Cade has his hands full running Ironhelm. He will send for you when he has time," Grisella replied, as if that answered any of my questions. Then she turned away.

"No!" I growled. "I didn't travel all this way to be locked in a room like a mail-order pet—"

"Miss," she interjected firmly, her head swiveling, those eyes seemingly fixed on me now to send chills of apprehension down my spine. She most certainly could see, despite the milky, blank stare. It unnerved me to the core. "I understand that you are new to the kingdom and unaccustomed to how things work in these parts. But I really must ask that you abide by King Cade's orders. Shall we go? The staff has other matters to attend to tonight, and I would rather not stand here arguing all evening."

Snapping her fingers, the staff all fell away to do whatever bidding she had lined up for them, and I stared helplessly after her as she marched toward the door. At the threshold, she paused to look at me in exasperation. "I suggest you come along, or you'll lose your way. There are many twists and turns to this palace."

"I have a good sense of direction," I told her, frowning slightly. "And magic to guide me. You don't need to worry about me."

But again, Grisella didn't seem to hear me—or more likely, wasn't listening.

“Come on, miss,” Maywin whispered in my ear. “Let’s do what she says. She doesn’t seem like the type to antagonize.”

Every fiber of me wanted to argue, but what choice did I really have but to follow her? In reality, I was exhausted. The long travel had taken its toll on me, and the indignation had drained me of the rest of my passion. The idea of a soft bed wasn’t so bad.

I turned to Rufus and gestured for my driver to collect my bags from the trunk of the SUV before reluctantly following Grisella.

Tears of frustration burned in my eyes, but I blinked them away furiously. I wasn’t about to let anyone see me cry, regardless of how defeated I felt at that moment. It shouldn’t have surprised me that the King hadn’t been there to greet me. He didn’t want me any more than I wanted to be there, it seemed.

This truly was a perfect match. We already despised each other.

Through the monstrosity that King Cade called home, I followed Grisella. Maywin was still firmly on my elbow, but I barely felt her there as my body grew numb. With every step we took deeper into the shadowy corridors, a piece of my soul slipped away.

It wasn’t that the palace was just big—it was massive, with ceilings that hurt my neck to see when I peered upward. Skylights punctured intricately decorated ceilings, dappling gold, silver, and crystal chandeliers dangling haphazardly without rhyme or reason. The wainscotting reeked of endless labor, etched in pretty designs from eras past.

It oozed of history and some kind of sadness, a melancholy echoing through the creaking wood, like ghosts reaching out from the past to warn me.

This was my future, my soulless, dead home. Hopefully the palace was equipped with the modern conveniences I was used to.

My eyes took in the expressionless eyes of the portrait figures who graced the walls, staring down at me as if to judge my actions as we headed through the maze of paths. Grisella hadn't been joking about the maze. I already wasn't sure if I'd be able to find my way back to the front door without enacting some kind of locator spell if I had to. I would never learn my way around that building. Nor did I really want to in that moment.

"Who designed this place?" I muttered sardonically to Maywin.

It had been a rhetorical question, but Grisella felt obliged to answer it.

"Ironhelm Place was built by King Cade's great-grandfather, thirty times removed," she answered. "Of course, back then, Ironhelm was hardly the kingdom it was today, and King Sergio had great aspirations for what would become the greatest country in Mystara. He single-handedly designed a simple lodging for his family of eight, and as his family grew, so did the building."

My breaths began to escape in short, uneven rasps, and I offered Maywin another nervous look, but before I could comment on the size of the structure, a massive staircase fell before us. I almost gasped, the sight of it paralyzing me. I'd never seen such an ostentatious display. To my shame, I was moderately afraid of it, the sight of so many stairs, winding toward another set and then another beyond—they seemed a journey to nowhere.

"It was his grandson, Ellison, who started on the second floor, and Ellison's son, Augustine, who created the third. Other kings have added to it over the centuries," Grisella went on, oblivious to my shock of the stairs.

She continued up the steps, and I glanced back at Rufus, who had broken a sweat with my bags. Maywin offered to take one from him, but he shook his graying head, and we trailed after the guide.

"You will find touches of everyone who ever lived within these walls if you look," Grisella told us. "Once you live in

Ironhelm Place, you cannot help but become a part of her. You, too, will leave your mark—if the King finds you suitable for queendom.”

I shivered again, terrified by the idea that King Cade may send me back, but I didn’t want Grisella or anyone else to see my fear.

What would happen if he did refuse me? What about the blood oath that was sworn between our ancestors?

“Are you coming?” Grisella called from halfway up the stairs, and I swallowed my reservations to follow her, keeping Maywin close.

“Unsettling,” I heard Maywin whisper, and I exhaled, relieved that she was on my side.

I wasn’t imagining it. Thankfully, Grisella stopped talking during the rest of our travels down the long second-floor hallway.

Abruptly, Grisella stopped in front of a set of double doors, throwing them open without a pause.

“These will be your rooms,” she explained, stepping back.

Through my peripheral vision, I saw Rufus exhale in relief, setting my overfull bags down as he caught his breath after such a long trek. He panted lightly and wiped the sweat from his wrinkled brow. Poor guy had carried all my worldly possessions with him. I wouldn’t have blamed him for dropping on the spot. I wondered why he hadn’t used his magic to transport them, but I reasoned that he was trying to prove his worth in front of Grisella.

“You should have all that you need here,” Grisella said without crossing over the threshold. “There is a closet with linens, a full bathroom with all the amenities—jets, steam shower, the like. A television hooked up to every streaming service you can imagine. A fully stocked bar, should you need a libation, and an intercom to call for room service. It connects directly with the kitchen. Coraline or Heddy will take care of you right away, depending on who’s on shift.”

Grisella stepped back from the bathroom door to point at three connecting rooms. “There are three adjoining rooms for your servants. I see that you’ve only come with two, but should you take a liking to one of the King’s staff or security, they can take on the third room.”

She stared at me like she was expecting a smile or a tip for service. Instead, I shook my head.

“Is there a problem, miss?” she asked, not bothering to hide her exasperation with me.

“Room service?” I repeated. “You want me to... to just stay in my room?”

Grisella shrugged indifferently. “You may do as you please. I am merely reiterating what King Cade has told me to tell you. However, you have seen the size of the palace, and we do not have the means to host a search and rescue party for you every night. Should you find yourself lost, you may find yourself lost for quite some time. You have been warned.”

“I have magic, just like anyone else,” I whispered, suddenly very afraid.

Grisella smiled coldly again. “I’m sure you do, but that doesn’t mean much here.”

My mouth fell open in utter shock, blood draining from my cheeks. “Is that a threat?” I choked, blinking.

She returned my stunned look, and I realized that I may have misread her in my state of fatigue. “Certainly not. You’ll be the Queen of Ironhelm... potentially. I wouldn’t think of it.”

Confused but exhausted, I turned to look at Maywin, who appeared just as conflicted as me.

Was she threatening me? Or was I merely being paranoid and defensive?

I had been determined to loathe Ironhelm Place since birth, after all. It was a fair assumption to think that everything about it was a threat—even if Grisella was truly looking out for my best interests.

“When will I see him?” I asked, unable to keep up with what was happening. It was all too much for me now.

“Who?” Grisella asked.

I stared at her, suddenly feeling as though I were in some kind of silly comedy theater.

“The King!” I almost sobbed. I was beginning to feel like a puppet, manipulated for entertainment value.

“As I said, you will see him when he sends for you. I have no schedule for that as of this moment. We do as our king asks—not the other way around.”

Shaking my head, I sighed and nodded, knowing there wasn’t much else I could do.

“Fine,” I muttered. “Great.”

“Will there be anything else?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Very well. Good night.” Grisella pivoted and left the three of us alone in my new living room as I struggled to steady my breaths.

“This is beautiful,” Maywin offered in her usual bright way. “We have all the creature comforts we need. No expense was spared, that’s for sure.”

“It’s a gilded prison,” I muttered, upset. In my state, I slammed the door too hard unintentionally. Rufus jumped, and I eyed him apologetically. “I’m sorry. You can go to your room, too, Rufus. Thank you for getting us here in one piece.”

“Of course, miss. It’s always a pleasure to serve you.”

I couldn’t even muster a smile.

“Off you go,” I sighed.

Gratefully, he hurried off to do as I ordered, leaving me alone with Maywin, and I sank onto the huge, canopied bed in the center of the bedroom. I couldn’t deny that the bedroom was very pretty and much brighter than the rest of the palace with full windows, although what they overlooked, I couldn’t

tell at that time of night. If I craned my neck around, I could make out the palest hint of a glow around the side of one of the palace walls, but my view offered me nothing but the brilliant blanket of stars overhead.

Maybe in the light of day, I'll find this more appealing, I reasoned, but I didn't have high hopes for that thought. I'd had twenty-one years to prepare myself for this very moment, and so far, it had been anti-climactic.

"I can't believe he didn't want to meet with me when I arrived," I muttered, more to myself than Maywin.

My personal maid perched cautiously at my side and took my hand.

"It's late," she said softly. "Maybe you'll meet him tomorrow. Maybe he was overwhelmed by the idea of meeting you. Don't forget that this is just as new to him as it is to you. He probably needs some time as well."

I managed a small grin, finally. I waved my hands, and my hair fell loose from the elegant updo I'd spent hours doing—without the use of magic—hoping to offer a good first impression to my future husband. Now, my black hair fell in waves around my shoulders as Maywin helped to unzip my dress at the back.

"Perhaps," I mumbled, but I had a terrible, gnawing feeling about what was to come.

"Does something feel off to you?" I asked Maywin.

"Do you mean like some sort of darkness?" she asked, putting my exact thought into words.

I nodded.

"I think it's just a new place for both of us," she said. "We will get used to it."

I wasn't convinced she believed her own positive attitude.

The dark feeling had been growing in my stomach ever since my parents had informed me that it was finally time to ship me off to Ironhelm Place, and now, I thought the ominous feeling might consume me whole.

This is my fate, though, and I had to suck it up. Someone had to keep the family's honor afloat.

CHAPTER 2

CADE

I adjusted my tie for the third time, scowling at my reflection in the mirror as Grisella stood patiently behind me, waiting for me to get it right. I had to be driving her crazy with my inability to tie a proper knot even after all these years.

“Shall I, Alpha?” she offered in her formal way, extending her hands.

My azure eyes glittered in the glass as I yanked the garment out from around my neck and threw it aside, snorting. “No. These things are pretentious as all hell. Why are you insisting on them for the coronation? I never wear one in real life. I want to connect with the kingdom, not look like a pompous ass.”

Grisella maintained her stoic expression, unperturbed by my outburst.

“Ties are regal and traditional,” she reminded me, her tone even. “Every alpha king has always worn one upon his acceptance of the crown. I don’t need to remind you about the importance of upholding traditions, Alpha. The kingdom expects it.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to face her, running a hand through my hair as I flopped unceremoniously onto the stool, dropping an ankle over my knee to grin up at her. “Seeing as I’ve basically been king for the past decade, do we really need to go through all this? Do you really think a stupid choking piece of silk around my neck and a party is going to change

anything? It's all going to be the same after the ceremony, anyway. It's all a waste of money and time. We have more important things to do, don't we?"

Grisella returned my look without flinching.

"Despite what the rest of the kingdom—and household—may call you, Alpha, there are formalities to uphold, and for good reason. And legally speaking, you are not king yet."

I didn't like Grisella reminding me so damn often, but she wasn't wrong. And it wasn't just the coronation ceremony that I needed to endure. I had to get through the wedding, too. The damn wedding.

And turning twenty-five. The trifecta of agony.

I'd managed to put it out of my mind for so long, it had half crept up on me. I swallowed a groan, as if the thought physically pained me.

"And Zephyrine?" I asked, grimacing as her name left my lips. Saying it was as embittering as hearing it had been all my life.

"What about her?"

"Is she settled in, then?" I asked with a hint of impatience.

I felt like Grisella was purposely drawing out the conversation about her.

"Oh, yes. She only came with two servants, a driver and a maid, last night, and according to security, they haven't left their rooms since they arrived."

I frowned, bothered by the revelation. "They haven't left their suites at all?"

Grisella nodded, looking proud of herself. "I may have suggested it was in Miss Zephyrine's best interest to remain in her suite and not wander too far."

My scowl deepened, and Grisella stared at me expectantly.

"What?" I asked the housekeeper... if that was the right title for her.

I wasn't sure what to call Grisella, exactly. 'Housemaid' didn't seem fitting, as she was so much more than that. 'House manager' was also not entirely correct, although she did rule Ironhelm Place with a precision I found impressive. She had worked for my parents and grandfather, though she did not seem old enough to me for such a tenure. I trusted her expertise in household matters entirely, but she did wear on my nerves on occasion.

IN MY HOUSEHOLD, there weren't many males around. The trusted household staff was mostly comprised of females, who tended to try my patience with far more speed than even the bickering faeries who dominated my cabinet of high-ranking officials every day.

My cabinet, the Council of Ministers, remained fairly silent, and I envied their ability to stay out of the drama that the household staff could drive into the palace walls without even trying. A friend once told me that the female staff were all trying to mother me since I was orphaned in my teens. I considered it more smothering than nurturing.

I peered at Grisella's pinched expression in the glass, waiting for her to spit out whatever was on her mind. "Grissi, what do you have to say?"

She shrugged. "She seems... resistant to change."

Her phrasing intrigued me, and my eyebrow shot up.

"What the hell does that mean?" I demanded, worry starting to take hold.

Grisella flashed me a tense smile. "Nothing that can't be handled, Alpha. You will tame her in no time, I'm sure."

I grunted and returned to scowling at my reflection. "That's all I need on my plate right now. Training a new pet."

"You have a very competent staff to help you, Alpha."

I snorted again, and Grisella turned to leave, but I called out to stop her. "Hey, don't let her stay in her suite for too long."

“Alpha?”

“Let her explore and get some air, at the very least. Go for a swim in the pool or something. The last thing I need is a bride on the verge of a mental breakdown before the ceremony. Think of how that will be perceived.”

“I *was* thinking of the optics! We know nothing about this fae. Her parents apparently kept her very sheltered, for obvious reasons. She has no internet presence, no backstory to speak of. It was in hers and everyone else’s best interest to keep her from roaming,” Grisella protested. “But it’s best if you leave female issues to the females.”

“No,” I disagreed. “In fact, I want her fully prepared for palace life. She should be fully immersed in what’s happening—know what she’s getting into. I don’t want some doe-eyed fawn wandering around, bumping into the furniture.”

Grisella’s head cocked to the side. “You will still have your final approval of her suitability, Alpha.”

I stared at her through the reflection of the mirror, wondering if she actually believed that or if she was just appeasing me. She genuinely seemed to think that was the case.

Don’t they understand that a blood oath means certain destruction and loss of the kingdom? I have to marry this unknown fae from the sticks, or a dark spell will fall upon us.

“Give her free run of the palace, Grisella,” I insisted. “In fact...”

A plan began to take hold of me, a slow grin forming over my mouth, and I felt my eyes brighten. “In fact, let’s get her more involved.”

“I’m sorry, Alpha, I’m not sure I understand what that means...” Grisella hemmed worriedly.

“It means that she will need etiquette training among other classes—ones that I will handle myself.”

Grisella gawked at me openly, an expression of discomfort painting her whole face.

“Alpha?”

I nodded vehemently, suddenly liking my idea better as it manifested. “Yes. This is perfect, but no one in the palace can know,” I went on, the scheme fully taking shape in my mind. “I’ll meet her as a servant, watching her, getting to know who she is. I’ve never had a chance to meet her, you know? This entire arrangement was brought to me as a child, but we’ve never met one another.”

Grisella gawked at me, dumbfounded.

“But to what end?” she questioned.

“I’ll get an understanding of who she is—who she really is. It’s only fair that I prepare the kingdom for what’s coming in their queen. But to do that, I have to get to know her first. And if I meet her as a servant, not as the King, I will get to know who she truly is. She won’t be trying to impress me.”

I smiled smugly, proud of myself for coming up with such a clever ruse. Grisella seemed to disagree. “Is that wise, Alpha?”

I grunted. “It’s better than going in blind, marrying some fae I was promised to before I was born,” I retorted, an unbidden bitterness at my father resurfacing. It wasn’t his fault any more than it had been the generations before him. It was the way of the realm, and if I wanted to truly claim my kingdom, I’d have to marry this noblefae from Vegetableville or wherever she’d come from.

“There’s a reason that blood oath betrothals are kept distant, Alpha,” Grisella warned. “Marriages grow with the years. Not knowing one another beforehand has a certain appeal.”

I jeered loudly and rudely, relishing the expression of disgust on Grisella’s face.

“I won’t change my mind. I’m doing this. I’m introducing myself to Zephyrine as a servant, and we’ll go from there. You can tell a lot about someone by the way they treat the help, you know.”

“You don’t say,” Grisella muttered under her breath.

A scoff in the doorway ended our conversation abruptly, and my chest tightened as I realized Stralia had been listening, her beautiful face screwed as she stared at me accusingly. A surge of guilt shot through me as my gaze fell on her porcelain face. She was paler than usual.

How much of that did she hear?

“You’re dismissed, Grisella,” I told the servant. “Remember what I said about the fae.”

“Don’t you mean your fiancée?” Stralia corrected, stalking toward me as Grisella bowed and hurried out before my long-time lover could say something that might embarrass her.

Grisella had witnessed her fair share of our fiery arguments, and I didn’t blame her for scurrying out.

“Stralia...” I told her warningly. “Not now. I have enough shit to deal with.”

“If not now, then when?” she demanded, her clear, verdant eyes flashing hurtfully. “You always put me off, and I never get a chance to speak with you when I need to.”

I rose from the vanity and approached her, extending my arms to lay on her trembling shoulders.

“We’ve talked about this,” I reminded her softly but firmly. “You’re acting like you didn’t know Zephyrine was coming.”

“Why now, Cade?” she implored me, her bottom lip sticking out deliciously, tempting me to bite at it.

I licked my own lips, refraining in the moment. I sensed that Aradia was nearby, even if my enchantress wasn’t showing herself.

She’s keeping a closer eye on me now that Zephyrine is here, I realized with annoyance, raising my head to look for the enchantress. But Aradia still did not appear.

“See? You’re not even looking at me now, and I’m right in front of you!” Stralia complained.

I refocused my eyes on Stralia, tipping her head back toward me. Brushing long strands of platinum blonde from her

shoulders, I peered into her eyes sincerely.

“Just because I’m married doesn’t change our arrangement,” I whispered, hoping that Aradia couldn’t hear me.

Fat chance on that, I mocked myself. Aradia heard everything, and *I* was going to hear an earful for this conversation. But for the moment, I needed to reassure Stralia that everything was fine, even if I didn’t believe it myself.

Stralia’s face brightened some, but a shadow lingered. “You say that, but we both know that’s not true. If your new little fae girlfriend finds out about this, about us—”

“Now you’re just being difficult,” I sighed, cutting her off and dropping my arms. “What do you want me to do, hm? I’m the damned king. I have obligations to the kingdom, to Ironhelm. Stop playing the victim and be a part of the solution for once.”

Stralia gawped at me.

“You’re marrying someone else! You’re supposed to love me! How am I supposed to just ‘get over it’?”

I swallowed a loud groan. I loved Stralia, but sometimes, I wondered if it wasn’t an affair borne more from pity than genuine affection. We had been companions for so long; it was hard to know exactly how I felt about the beautiful, blonde fae who had always just been there. In some ways, I likened her more to a rescue kitten I had taken in.

“Cade, call this all off. Send that little bitch back to the middle of nowhere where she belongs,” Stralia begged, the tone of her voice grating on my nerves.

I hated it when she did this.

“I have no say in that,” I grumbled, hating this repetitive fight. It was old and irritating, partially because it reminded me of how little power I had in the grand scheme of things. “What do you want me to do? Forfeit my crown? Bring Ironhelm to its knees and divide the kingdom? If I give up my crown for you, the other three kingdoms of Mystara will certainly try to invade and claim this land for their own

kingdoms. What would happen to the faeries of Ironhelm? I have a responsibility to protect them.”

She frowned, a look of uncertainty coloring her eyes. “That will never happen.”

“That’s exactly what will happen,” I contradicted her.

“I would still love you if you didn’t have your crown,” she mumbled. “We could rebuild if it came to that, get rid of that stupid blood oath. Or we could run off somewhere—”

I groaned so loudly that she stopped herself.

“Stop it!” I barked, my annoyance growing. “You’re just rambling now. You know, this is more than just about you and me. This is about Ironhelm. They need a king—me. I am their king. That’s not in dispute.”

She pouted deeper and looked back at me.

“The kingdom would still follow you,” Stralia insisted with far too much optimism. “If you sent that fae away, they would follow you if you married someone else—or no one at all.”

I snorted and whirled around, suddenly very tired of her presence.

“You’re naïve if you believe that. There was a blood oath, a treaty, Stralia. Stop acting like you don’t know what’s at stake here—”

“Don’t be a fool, wench,” Aradia barked, finally showing herself. Apparently, she had heard enough, too. “Keep your distance if you know what’s good for you—and for Cade, not to mention the kingdom.”

Stralia scowled at Aradia, who returned her glare with just as much malice. They’d never liked each other, and the arrival of this Zephyrine was only going to make matters more tumultuous. But I was secretly grateful that Aradia had arrived to end this discussion with Stralia. It saved me from looking like the asshole. Again.

“Ah,” I muttered, ambling toward my bed. “How nice of you to make an appearance—especially when I could sense

you hanging around for the last fifteen minutes. You should work on your invisibility.”

The enchantress ignored my comment and continued to fixate on Stralia.

“You *will* stop sneaking into his bedroom, Stralia,” Aradia told my lover, but now Stralia ignored the redheaded elder and pressed herself to my side more tightly, as if I could protect her if Aradia decided to end her at that moment. Not that the enchantress would dare without my order. But Stralia’s nearness melted my resolve, her words chipping away at me.

Stralia didn’t let up. “Cade, you know you don’t want to marry this fae. Send her back to where she came from. We can resume our lives as they were before. We were so much happier. At least send her back for a while. There’s really no need to rush this wedding, is there?”

I hesitated, tempted by her words. Maybe if I had a bit more time to get accustomed to the idea...

“You can’t!” Aradia hissed, flying toward us, her heels tapping on the floor, gown swooshing. “And you’re both idiots if you believe it. There is a time for everything, and now that Cade is turning twenty-five, he’ll be crowned and needs a queen. Zephyrine cannot and will not be ‘sent back,’ you dumb fool! Stop filling his head with these ridiculous ideas!”

The glimmer of hope in me faded with Aradia’s reality check. I didn’t think that Stralia really believed her own words, either, but we had been together since we were children, orphaned as teens, the aftermath of the War of Sorrows ravaging the kingdom with illness.

Stralia’s father, her only living parent at the time, had taken his own life when he was too weak to move on, his magic depleted with a sickness. Feeling inadequate and unable to care for Stralia, he had seen no other way.

My parents had fallen victim to the secondary plague that had swept through the palace at an alarming rate, killing thirty percent of the staff as well.

Stralia and I had found solace in each other's arms, despite our difference in status. We had grief in common, and predictably, our relationship had turned physical.

But we had both known this day was coming from the start. The blood oath had been ingrained in me since I could understand words. And now that Zephyrine was here, there was nothing anyone could really do about it.

Stralia scowled, but she purposely turned her back to Aradia, facing me imploringly. I cupped her face tenderly and smiled. "Nothing will change between us," I vowed.

Aradia hissed again, shooting a charge of electricity between us to push us apart, but I anticipated her move and blocked it with a shield of magic. The force bounced back and hit the mirror, shattering it into pieces. Stralia jumped, but I didn't flinch as Aradia scowled deeply, clearly irked by our open display of affection.

"At least wait on your adultery until after the wedding. If Zephyrine catches you, there will be no marriage, and no marriage means no crown," the enchantress reminded me.

Sighing, I allowed my hand to fall away from Stralia's cheek. "The fae isn't coming in here," I retorted sharply, hating the way Aradia could so freely come and go as she did, catching my most intimate thoughts and actions. But as an enchantress, she had powers that the rest of us did not, and she wielded them as unsparingly with me as she had with my father and grandfather.

Enchantresses live far too long, I thought, and not for the first time. Why don't they just die at a normal age like the rest of us?

Aradia had to be over a hundred years old already and still didn't look like she was going anywhere for a while.

But I silently agreed that I would have to be more careful. Aradia was rarely wrong. That's why she was the enchantress for our kingdom and not busking in an alley in Ironhelm City.

"I'm not going to change my habits because of her," Stralia grumbled stubbornly.

I held up my hand as Aradia opened her mouth to unleash another earful.

“It’s not going to be forever,” I promised. “But until the wedding—”

“NO! Cade, come on!” Stralia begged.

“Shh!” I implored her, but I maintained my firmness. “You can’t keep coming here at night anymore, not with Zephyrine in the palace now. Aradia is right. We have to be careful—at least until after the wedding is over. It’s just a few more weeks.”

Stralia stared at me as if I’d sprouted a second head. “What about what you just said about things being the same as always?” she sputtered.

“After the wedding and coronation,” I reassured her.

I reached for her hands and squeezed them as Aradia grunted rudely. I ignored her and drew my lover in for a kiss. “But for now, you have to stay away. Will you do that for me, babe? Please?”

She returned my embrace eagerly as Aradia turned away, muttering something I couldn’t hear under her breath.

“All right,” Stralia agreed when we parted. “But hurry up. I don’t like this.”

“Me neither,” I reassured her. “We’re moving as fast as we can.”

Smacking her ass through her work uniform, I ushered her out the door. “I’ll text you when I get a chance.”

She glanced at me over her shoulder, her green eyes hooded. “I wish there was a way to break this promise. Are you going to have children with her and have the same curse on their heads?”

I shuddered inwardly at the thought, but cast it aside. “You’re really overthinking this, Stralia. Come on, be a good girl, and get back to work. I’ll text you.”

“A video call would be better,” she suggested coyly, winking.

“I’ll see what I can do,” I lied.

I closed the door and turned to Aradia, who shot out her hands to engage the lock where she stood.

My smile faded. “Did you really need to crash in on her like that? You must know that talking to her that way doesn’t work.”

“Someone needed to set her straight, and it didn’t seem like you were going to, *Alpha*.”

The sarcasm in the enchantress’ voice didn’t sit well with me, but Aradia had been in the palace longer than anyone else. I had to respect her wisdom—even if I didn’t always agree with her.

“I *was* setting her straight,” I insisted, heat rising to my cheeks. “But Stralia can be very delicate. She needs to be handled with care.”

“I hope for your sake that Zephyrine is made of way more grit than that,” Aradia chirped. “I would see about those wedding arrangements sooner rather than later. I have a sense that things will not go as planned if you wait too long.”

I swallowed a thickness in my throat. “As soon as the fae is ready to undertake her role as queen, we will go forward with the plans.”

Aradia bowed, but her wise eyes told me that she didn’t believe my excuse at all. She knew me too well and saw I was holding off, not because I was worried about Zephyrine, but because of myself.

CHAPTER 3

ZEPHY

We'd been sitting in the ballroom for almost fifteen minutes, waiting for this trainer already, and I grew more irritated with each passing minute. That wasn't surprising—I'd been nothing but annoyed since we arrived. My hands twitched dangerously, longing for something to do.

On a whim, I gathered a small gust of wind floating in from one of the open windows to collect the dust bunnies, hiding in the remote corners of the ballroom, and swept them into a tornado frenzy, making them dance and Maywin giggle.

"Stop that, miss!" she chided me through her snickers, and I allowed the dirt to settle, the wind slowing as I dropped my hands.

"This is stupid," I groused again at Maywin, who darted her eyes nervously toward the door of the grand ballroom. "I don't need lessons on how to behave as a noble. This Axel isn't going to teach me anything I don't already know. And to set me up with a male trainer, on top of everything else? Are they purposely trying to insult me?"

Maywin wrung her hands in her lap in front of her, smoothing her skirt like she wanted to shush me, my voice rising an octave with each complaint, but I refused to keep it down.

"You should probably do whatever the King asks of you," Maywin told me softly. "He probably thinks it's for your benefit. Don't you want to be the best queen you can be for Ironhelm?"

I wasn't sure that I did, but I didn't bother to burden my already over-wrought friend with the thought.

"It's still ridiculous," I insisted, folding my arms over my bosom and tapping my foot impatiently, the sole of my running shoe squeaking against the freshly waxed floors. "Where is he, anyway? Didn't Grisella say ten o'clock? He's almost a half hour late! This is bull—"

As if on cue, heavy footsteps reverberated from the hallway, cutting off my curse word, and I raised my head to greet the trainer with annoyance. But when he appeared, my heart stilled, the sight of him shocking me for inexplicable reasons. For half a second, time fizzled, and I found myself staring at his face, an odd sense of familiarity overtaking me as my gaze locked on his brilliant cobalt eyes. The olive of his skin and the darkness of his hair only enhanced the dazzle of his intense irises, which bored into my soul as they met mine. As if I'd released a lightning strike, my body twitched, heat rushing through me to settle in the center between my legs, but I didn't dare move.

He towered over me by at least six inches, possibly more, but it was difficult to tell for sure from the distance between us.

"Axel?" I stuttered, forcing myself to speak, shame overtaking me for the intense, physical reaction I had toward him.

He smirked, the mirth barely touching his eyes, but there was an unmistakable glint of interest there, even though he was trying desperately to hide it. His stare lingered on me, twisting my stomach.

Or maybe I was reading too much into it.

"Yes," he replied shortly. "We have a lot to cover. Let's get started."

More embarrassment washed through me at the way he was speaking to me, but I reminded myself that I was the superior here, even if he was the male. I was going to be queen, and he had no right to speak to me like I was the

underling. Forcing my stare away, I glanced at my companion and exhaled, regaining my composure.

“This is Maywin,” I introduced the maid, eager to take the scrutiny off me, but Axel didn’t look at my servant.

He continued to stare at me, causing my insides to wither and twist again.

He shouldn’t be staring at me like that. And I shouldn’t be looking at him, either. Why is he being so freaking bold? What’s wrong with him?

Again, he smirked at me as if to challenge his stare, and I managed to find my voice this time.

“Are we going to do this or what?” I asked, struggling to find my confidence again. His grin broadened, and he ambled toward me with far too much cockiness.

“Eager, are we?” he asked, circling me like a tiger with its prey. His action made me both defensive and submissive in unison. “Let’s see what they teach the little faeries of Carrottrove.”

While I quivered inside under his boldness, I threw my head back to glower at him. I sniffed the air around him, trying to get a sense of his power, but he stepped out of range before I could gain any real handle on what he was capable of.

He was good.

But I was better.

“I just want to get it over and done with,” I mumbled, tightening my arms defiantly at my chest. I suddenly felt as though I was holding myself up. I caught Maywin’s confused expression, her own thoughts as conflicted as my own, apparently. “Although honestly, I don’t even know what this is all about. I’ve been training for this role since I could walk.”

“I suppose we’ll see about that,” he replied, sounding unconvinced.

“Yes, I suppose we will,” I retorted, unsure if I was flustered or excited—or both.

His presence was confounding me, making me jumpy and agitated—but I wasn't sure if I liked it or abhorred it.

“Very well,” Axel agreed, nodding toward the massive dining hall table. “We'll begin with basic dining etiquette.”

I stopped in place, turning my head toward one of the tables, blinking.

“What?”

He gestured toward the plated surface, and I snickered.

He couldn't be serious! Did he think I was brought up in a cave?

“I thought that this was going to be more... hands on,” I explained, careful to check my tone.

“You'll be allowed to use forks. In fact, I rather insist on it.”

This had to be a joke. Was it a joke?

Axel moved toward the table, and I swallowed my question, accepting the humiliating task at hand. It was part of my duty now if I was going to be queen. I'd have to do many unpleasant and mortifying tasks that I had no interest in performing. This was my wretched life now.

To my surprise, Axel held out my chair to seat me first, and I relaxed slightly, nodding in thanks as I perched tentatively at the edge of the heavily cushioned seat. Axel took his own seat and unfolded his napkin.

“Are you familiar with which silverware to use for each course?” he asked.

I stared at him dubiously, and he returned my expression innocently.

“Are you?” he asked again, and I realized he was genuinely waiting for a response.

Gritting my teeth, I nodded curtly. “Yes.”

“Good. There will be a quiz later.”

I stared at him, waiting for him to laugh, to show that he was kidding, but he snapped his fingers, and from the hall, a maid hurried through.

“Yes... Al... yes...?” she squeaked, shifting uncomfortably.

She didn't seem to know where to look, a fact that I found odd. She darted quick glances at Axel, then me, back to him, and then to the floor, her cheeks flushing crimson. She seemed ill-at-ease, as though it were her first day on the job and she had no idea what she was doing.

“Bring the soup,” he instructed.

“Yes, Al—” She stopped herself. “Yes.”

Axel shot her a scathing look, and she turned purple under his look before almost sprinting out of the ballroom as I again glanced at Maywin. We stared after the servant, and Maywin shrugged, but I couldn't shake the sense that something was entirely amiss about the whole situation.

A small, awkward silence fell over the table, and I shifted my weight as I waited for Axel to fill it. When he didn't, I decided to open the conversation.

“So, what do you do here when you're not enlightening future queens on how to use a butter knife?” I asked dryly.

His lids popped, and he gawked at me. I returned his baffled stare.

“What?” I demanded. “What's wrong?”

“Oh, no,” he said, shaking his head vehemently. “No, no. This won't do.”

Glancing back at Maywin, I frowned, utterly perplexed. “What won't do?” I asked, baffled.

“Don't you understand what you're doing here? What a queen's purpose is?”

“Like I've said, I've been training for this role my entire life. Do not insult me.”

“You will be the Queen of Ironhelm and potentially mother to the next king of Ironhelm.”

“So I’ve been told,” I breathed nervously, the thought of becoming a mother slightly terrifying.

“Surely you know there are certain requirements expected of you?” Axel pressed pointedly, staring me too intently in the face, as if willing me to understand what he was saying.

Heat curled up the back of my neck and washed over my face, staining my cheeks crimson.

Was he talking about... in bed?

“I’m aware of what’s expected of me,” I rasped, darting my gaze down toward the table.

“Are you sure about that?” Axel insisted. “Because it doesn’t seem that way to me. You seem to be taking this entirely too lightly.”

“Have I done something wrong?” I asked, sure that I couldn’t have. I’d only just gotten there. I hadn’t even had the opportunity to use the improper spoon.

Was this fae on drugs? Maybe he was high.

“You are supposed to treat our sessions as if I am the King,” Axel told me flatly. “I can’t sign off on our lessons until I am confident that you fully understand what’s expected of you.”

Unsure of how to respond, I simply stared at him.

“*Do* you understand?” he growled.

“Again, I’m not clear on what you’re getting all bent out of shape about,” I snapped, his pretentiousness beginning to wear on my nerves.

I had heard just about enough of his drivel for one morning. He was just a servant, too, talking to me like I was some bum he’d picked up off the street to transform.

Axel splayed his large, beautiful hands over the table, and I found myself oddly fascinated with them—until he spoke again.

“You will not speak to me unless I address you first.” For half a second, I thought I had misheard him.

“Pardon me?” I asked slowly.

He did not just say that.

“You should not speak unless you are spoken to first,” he said again, enunciating every word like I was an idiot.

I burst out laughing, thinking he was joking. Apparently, he wasn’t—which only made me laugh harder.

“Is something amusing?” he barked, his cheeks flushing red.

The laughter died on my lips, and I blinked several times, the reality of this clown show hitting me. “Oh. You’re serious. You’re really freaking serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. Your role as queen is to adhere to the whims of your husband, the King. You should predict all his moods, his wants, his desires—”

“His trips to the bathroom?” I quipped.

Axel’s face darkened as Maywin gasped behind me. She didn’t utter my name, but in my head, I heard her pleading with me to stop and behave. I couldn’t help myself.

“Is this a joke to you?” Axel hissed.

“I’m really hoping that this is *your* poor idea of a joke,” I retorted sharply. “You’re talking to me like we live in the dark ages, so if that’s what he expects, he will need to find someone else. Oh... but wait, he can’t, can he? He’s stuck with me, and I can tell you with complete certainty that I will not be *adhering to the whims* of the King. If the King wants another maid, he can hire twenty. He doesn’t need a wife for that. He can get all the prostitutes and servants that money can buy.”

Axel’s expression went black. “If you don’t know the difference between a queen and a prostitute, then you’re in the wrong place.”

My mouth twisted into a sneer of contempt, and I rose to my feet, hands curling into fists over the table.

“And *you* would be wise to remember that I am *your* future queen, *Axel*,” I spat back.

His leer grew, but he wasn't amused in the least, a fact dictated by the crimson stain spreading over his cheeks. “Which is exactly the reason that I am trying to educate you, *miss*. Your role is to cater to your king. The sooner you figure out how to do that, the better off Ironhelm will be for it.”

I scoffed loudly. “I cater to no one,” I said as Maywin released a sound that resembled a whimper of distress. “Just because I am queen does not automatically make me the King's toy. If that's what he's expecting, I'll pack my things and head home to Carrottrove today. I should have seen this coming from a fae who lives in a palace with forty rooms and a village full of staff. King Cade is clearly never satisfied.”

Axel's jaw slacked. “Your parents should have prepared you better for your position,” he growled. “But it seems you know nothing about the ways of nobility.”

“You leave my parents out of this,” I whiplashed. “I would have thought that a servant would have better sense than to question my authority. Do you have anything of value to offer me, or should we consider today's lesson complete?”

I shook inside but refused to show this self-righteous ass that his presence was making me woozy.

Axel also rose, his gorgeous eyes blazing with malice. At that moment, the maidservant turned the corner with two bowls of soup in her hands, but she froze in place to see the magic pulsating between us. Blood drained out of her face.

A heartbeat passed, and Axel finally relented, releasing a massive breath.

“Maybe we should take some time to collect ourselves,” Axel suggested coldly. “You look like you could use some more rest.”

“What a wonderful idea, *Axel*,” I retorted sarcastically. “Come along, Maywin.”

Without waiting for his response, I whirled around, and with my head held high, I stormed out of the ballroom,

Maywin rushing after me.

“Oh, Miss Zephyrine, why did you antagonize him like that?” my maid squeaked, the terror in her voice palpable.

I stopped abruptly and looked at her, shaking my head.

“Why do you care? He’s nobody, Maywin. He shouldn’t be talking to me like that in the first place. It doesn’t affect you at all.”

“Maybe not, but he must be someone important if he was given such an important task.”

“Or the King thinks so little of me he they threw me with any asshole he could find,” I muttered furiously.

“You can’t really pack up and leave,” Maywin whispered, her eyes flying around as if the walls all had ears. “Your parents... The oath...”

“Maywin, don’t worry,” I told her with far more confidence than I felt. “Nothing is going to happen because I put some jerk in his place.”

“If you say so.”

I pursed my lips and continued forward through the hallway, unsure if I was heading in the right direction or not. It wasn’t like Maywin to contradict me, but her nervousness was tangible. I didn’t really care where I was going. I just wanted to put distance between myself and Axel... and his magnetic, infuriating energy.

“Please, slow down,” Maywin panted from behind me.

I continued to storm through the palace, the rubber soles of my shoes absorbing in the hallway runners. This place was really in desperate need of some modern décor. Everything about this place was stifling. Between my new *home* and the expectations of my behavior as queen, I felt like I’d been thrown back in time. This wouldn’t do, and I wouldn’t tolerate being treated like my only role in life was to serve some pompous, conceited king.

“Even if that is what the King expects of me, Axel should have more reverence for his future queen,” I insisted, talking

myself through what had happened.

Maywin continued to be my sounding board, as always.

“What if he reports your behavior to the King?” Maywin whispered, voicing my own inner dread.

I gnawed on the inside of my cheeks, but I didn’t slow my gait.

“I hope he does,” I replied haughtily, although I didn’t really mean it. “Maybe that will encourage King Cade out of his hiding place finally.”

Several more turns and steps found us at yet another set of stairs, not the ones that had originally taken us up and then down to the ballroom, but we used them, anyway. Eventually, we would orient ourselves... I hoped.

Or else, Grisella really would end up sending that search party for us.

For a moment, I allowed my mind to wander, envisioning myself lost on the upper floors of the palace for days until Axel valiantly burst through a door to carry me out in his arms as I struggled to live.

No! No, not Axel! King Cade. I don't want Axel. I can't think like this.

I didn’t even like Axel. He was just another thorn in the Ironhelm rosebush.

“I hope the King shows himself soon,” I muttered, more to myself than Maywin. “Him keeping his distance like this isn’t helping matters at all.”

“In the meantime, Axel isn’t so difficult to look at,” my maid whispered.

I whipped my head around, and she blushed furiously, lowering her eyes. I pursed my lips together to keep from laughing, pivoting my head back before she could see it.

“Maybe next time, you should stay in your room,” I suggested, barely swallowing a giggle. “I wouldn’t want you to lose control of yourself.”

Maywin guffawed, and we both continued through the maze of halls.

It took us almost an hour, but we found our way back to our suite of rooms. Maywin and I refused to use magic to orient ourselves, relying only on our instincts. When we arrived, we both retreated to our respective rooms.

But I was certain that both Maywin and I were having exactly the same thoughts about the same infuriating trainer in our respective beds, each pleasuring ourselves in precisely the same way as we lulled ourselves into sleep.

Yet as I drifted off, spent and guilty, I couldn't suppress the pangs of loneliness that swept through me. I was homesick for Carrotrove already.

Maywin was wrong. There was no way I was making friends in Ironhelm City.

CHAPTER 4

CADE

I was almost hyperventilating when I sent for Aradia, my palms sweating. I had come remarkably close to blowing my own cover in the ballroom with Zephyrine, her mouth in dire need of silencing... with mine?

I shook off the incredible attraction I'd felt toward the startling beautiful fae, her alarmingly good looks taking me aback. I hadn't been expecting her to be so fucking hot, the image of her soulful dark eyes still burning in my head. Nor had I expected her to have such a fiery personality.

It took me a full minute to recognize that my pulse was pounding from the desire I felt toward my future queen, and not simply because of her surly attitude—although that didn't help my hardening cock at all. I was furious.

Who the hell does she think she is, talking to me like that?!

I quickly reminded myself that she had no idea that I was the king, or that she was supposed to be showing me any respect, but that shouldn't make a difference. She was still promised to marry *a* king. She had to know her proper place and what was expected of her role. She couldn't just walk around lipping off to anyone like a party girl on a Friday night.

I bit on my lower lip so hard, I tasted blood, refusing to let the overwhelming attraction I had for the stunning, smoldering beauty overtake my better judgment. So what if she had huge, doe-like eyes that would melt butter on impact? That long, shimmering, black hair and curved but firm body was of no consequence to me, pouty lips or not. It would take more than

good looks to be an effective queen, and Zephyrine was displaying none of the qualities that I knew the kingdom needed—I needed.

I paced around, willing my erection to diminish, Zephyrine's deceptively innocent doe eyes luring me into a reverie. I could have lost myself in the depth of the deep, submissive darkness forever.

Maybe that was part of her charms. I hadn't figured out her unique magic yet. Could seduction be one of her powers?

Was she part enchantress?

Swallowing, I dug my hands into the depth of my pockets to readjust my dick as Aradia resurfaced in the bedroom in front of me. I couldn't let Aradia or anyone else see me all hot and bothered.

"What is it?" the enchantress asked, reappearing in a solid state in front of me.

"I won't be marrying her," I informed her bluntly. "And I can't believe no one bothered to do their due diligence on her beforehand."

Aradia's mouth curled into an amused grin, her crystalline eyes glittering. Dust motes danced in the sunrays of my massive bedroom, catching over the strands of her crimson hair.

"Would it matter if they had?" she asked indifferently. "You'll marry her, regardless."

I scoffed, shaking my head. "I don't think so! She's rude and has absolutely no place in a palace. Putting her in front of the kingdom is a terrible idea."

Aradia raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

I got the distinct impression she was mocking me, and my fangs flared up, drawing her back at the sight. It wasn't often that my wolf form sprung forward without notice, but my patience was on its end after the experience with Zephyrine.

"Forgive me, Alpha," Aradia muttered, bowing her head, but was her contrition sincere? There was a little too much

informality in the palace for my liking sometimes. We would need to tighten the reins around here. Things had grown too lax with me running things from such a young age. Maybe that was part of the problem.

“She’s just not... queenly enough. She basically laughed in my face when I informed her of her duties,” I retorted, my fangs retracting.

“Her parents and guides should have trained her for what’s upcoming,” Aradia commented, unbothered by my insistence.

“If they have, she has either ignored them, or they have failed miserably,” I insisted.

My enchantress looked at me oddly.

“What skills does she lack? I haven’t met her directly, but from what I’ve observed, she seems capable enough.”

“She refuses to wait on me!” I blurted out.

Aradia frowned slightly. “That’s not entirely her position, though, Alpha. She is supposed to be your partner, not your servant.”

I scowled, feeling the throb of my fangs again. “I don’t *need* a partner, Aradia. I’ve been getting along just fine on my own for the last ten years.”

She raised her fiery crown of hair to meet my eyes directly. “The conditions of your throning are not in my hands, Cade. I can only tell you what you already know. You must marry this fae as per the laws of the land, laid out well before you were born. Zephyrine of Carrotrove will be your queen, or you will not be king. Ironhelm will be lost to you with the dark curse, dissolving the entire kingdom. War will ensue, and the other three kings of Mystara will probably fight over Ironhelm. That is the oath. There is no circumventing it.”

“There has to be a way that the oath can be rewritten,” I muttered slowly, my mind racing. “No one has ever seriously looked into it.”

Aradia stared at me. “We have discussed this before. Perhaps you don’t recall.”

Of course I remembered it. I had thought of loopholes and fantasized about ways out for months leading up to Zephyrine's arrival. I didn't want to marry a stranger. Stralia had always been the only one I'd ever wanted for longer than a month or two, and I'd never really considered the possibility of marrying her, either.

I'd run the kingdom just fine on my own. Why would I need anyone else now? These ridiculous rules were archaic and should have been changed eons ago.

My veins bubbled even before Aradia recited what she'd already told me in the past.

"A blood oath can only be broken by the previous generations," Aradia went on, but I held up a hand to stop her.

I was stuck in this idiotic union because my father hadn't bothered to undo the mess that my great-grandfather had created.

"And there are no provisions for if the fae is crazy? Or unworthy of being queen?" I challenged. "What then?"

"Is that the case?" Aradia asked in her infuriatingly wise way, which told me that she knew more than I did.

"Have you spent any time with her?" I spat back. "She has no intention of doing what she's told. She seems to think she can do whatever she wants."

"Have *you* spent any time with her?"

I glowered at the enchantress. "You're not a parrot, Aradia," I barked. "You're supposed to be an advisor."

Unlike the others in the kingdom, Aradia could never be unnerved by me, no matter how angry I got. It infuriated me.

"I find it very hard to believe that you would have been matched with a queen who wasn't sent to empower you, just as your mother empowered your father, and your grandmother, your grandfather."

I tensed at the mention of my lost family. "Maybe they had a better vetting process back then," I offered caustically.

“Zephyrine of Carrotrove will make as worthy a queen as your mother did to your father—if you allow her the opportunity,” Aradia promised, and while I didn’t let her see it, I took a small comfort in that reassurance.

The enchantress had rarely—if ever—steered me wrong. But after spending the small amount of time I had with Zephyrine, I was finding it hard to be open-minded about her. Simultaneously, the idea of spending more time with the dark-haired, doe-eyed vixen *was* very appealing in its own way.

I drew in a steadying breath. “Fine,” I grumbled, turning away to recompose myself. “I’ll give her another opportunity. But I really suggest that someone sit down with her and explain what she’s doing here, too.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Aradia agreed brightly, like the whole issue had been put to rest with my conceding. “Maybe you’re right. She may not have been fully educated about what is expected of her. Perhaps all she needs is a proper talk.”

Aradia paused where she stood, and I glanced over my shoulder at her. “What is it now?”

She offered me a pleasant smile. “You may want to approach her with more kindness, Cade. She is new to the city, after all, and likely on the defensive for it. It can’t be easy for her to have uprooted her entire life, either.”

I wanted to jeer at the idea, but instantly, a stab of guilt sliced through me as I realized Aradia was right. Zephyrine had left her family behind to come to Ironhelm City and marry a stranger with only two staff members to show for it. I’d been so wrapped up in my own anger about the situation, I hadn’t paused to think about her indignation. No wonder she’d come in swinging as she had.

I swallowed my protest.

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that she’s not willing to bow to her king,” I muttered, refusing to accept Zephyrine’s full attitude.

“If you say so, Cade.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll give her another opportunity to prove that she’s worthy of the position,” I agreed begrudgingly.

“You always were a fair and just leader. That’s why Ironhelm respects you.”

“Stop buttering me up, Aradia,” I growled, falling ungracefully onto my bed.

I opened my mouth to have her send Stralia in but changed my mind at the last second. Stralia suddenly didn’t appeal to me.

“Is there anything else, Alpha?” Aradia asked expectantly, using my formal title.

“No,” I told her. “That’s all for now.”

With a spin on her heel, she swirled away, creating a small tornado and disappearing into a puff of smoke, leaving me alone in my suite, staring up at the intricately decorated ceiling overhead.

I’d had years to contemplate this conundrum, but now that it was directly in front of me, it had never really been as serious to me.

Zephyrine really was delicious. She would make beautiful children.

I couldn’t deny that the princes she bore would be striking. The idea of consummating our marriage made me harder than my crown jewels. My hand slid over the front of my pants to readjust my wanting cock at the thought of Zephyrine in the bed beside me.

But first, the wayward noblefae would need to be trained into submission.

“What are you doing?”

My eyes darted toward the doorway, and I scowled, causally pulling my palm away from my crotch.

“Stralia, what did I tell you about this?” I growled, sitting up on the bed. “You can’t just pop in anymore.”

She rushed toward me, her face pleading. “You can’t honestly expect me to just stay away, Cade!” she breathed. “I waited until Aradia left, but look at me and tell me now that we’re alone that you want me to keep my distance. I don’t believe it.”

I stared into her imploring face, a smidgen of pity overcoming me, but that was all I felt in that moment toward her.

“You’re being careless,” I grumbled, unhinging her hands from mine. “It’s not about want, Stralia. It’s about what’s best for the kingdom.”

Her mouth slacked, and she gaped at me. “We’re best together! You don’t believe that anymore?”

“Stralia...” I told her warningly. “You always knew I was promised to someone else. I don’t need this right now.”

Her hands dropped, and she straightened her curvaceous body, the folds of her work uniform spilling over the swell of her breasts. “You don’t need me?”

“Stop being like this. That fae is already proving to be a pain in my ass. Please don’t add to my problems by being one, too.”

Stralia hung her head apologetically and stepped back, folding her hands in front of her. “I’m not trying to cause you problems, Cade,” she mumbled. “I just want to be sure of my place in your heart.”

“You know where you stand with me,” I insisted. “That won’t change.”

Happily, she lifted her head and met my eyes. “You promise?”

I grimaced, not liking this emotional chokehold she was putting me in. “Stralia, this really isn’t the time, and you shouldn’t be here. Stop coming around unannounced. I have no idea where Zephyrine has found herself in the palace. Grisella warned her not to wander, but now that I’ve met her, I don’t think she’s likely to take that advice.”

Stralia's face shifted. "You've met her?" she echoed, inching closer, her green eyes narrowing.

I cringed inwardly, realizing my mistake. I shouldn't have said anything to her.

"I'm training her under the guise of being a servant," I explained. There was no point in lying. Eventually, Stralia was going to find out what I was doing, anyway; the staff was well known for their ability to gossip. "She doesn't know who I really am. I wanted to get a handle on her personality."

"And?" Stralia demanded suspiciously.

I eyed my long-standing lover, realizing just how different Zephyrine was, not only physically, but in demeanor as well. I shrugged off the mental comparison.

"She'll need more training before she takes the crown," I remarked dryly, but evasively.

I couldn't give Stralia any hope—there was none to give her. In no world could Stralia ever be queen, nor could I imagine her bearing my children, lovely as she was. As the daughter of a stable hand, it had never been in the cards, regardless of my personal opinion. Ironhelm wouldn't accept it.

"Oh, my poor darling," Stralia moaned, cupping my face worriedly. "How are you ever expected to keep this up?"

"It's for the good of the kingdom," I insisted, ducking out of her embrace. Her touch was annoying me. "Stralia, go now, please, and don't make me tell you again. Am I making myself crystal clear when I say don't come back to my suite if I haven't asked you to be here?"

Visibly upset, she allowed her arms to fall to her side, and she nodded.

"Yes, Alpha," she mumbled, blinking rapidly. "I-I'm sorry."

She hurried out of my chambers, and I swallowed a groan, my erection still half-formed, but I no longer knew who it was for.

Nothing a cold shower wouldn't solve, I decided. Then I could figure out what to do about the petulant queen-to-be.

CHAPTER 5

ZEPHY

I refused to sit around the suite after I found my bit of solace in fantasy. I didn't call on Maywin, either. I sensed her nerves were far too frayed for me to collect her on my unsanctioned tour of the palace and left her to rest as I peeked out into the hallway and peered through the corridor to ensure I wasn't being spied on. I couldn't attest to the security cameras—which I couldn't see but was sure lurked in every corner—as I stepped back into the hall. My hand slipped around my neck to embrace the compass that hung between a pewter chain, which my mother had given me before leaving Carrotrove, her words still echoing in my mind as I tried to keep an inconspicuous pace.

“Why me, Mom?” I could hear myself plaintively wailing like I was a girl of five and not a fully grown woman. “Why can't the King find someone else to marry?”

“This is the way of the world, sweet,” my mother had sighed, the regret in her tone palpable. “It is how things are done. I shouldn't have to explain it to you at your age.”

“I don't want to marry a stranger!”

“Sometimes we make sacrifices for the betterment of Ironhelm, Zephy. This is our kingdom, the strongest of the four kingdoms of Mystara, in my opinion. You should be honored to be marrying such a powerful alpha king,” she insisted. “You must put aside your childish wants and desires and remember that you have your own power to contribute to this world.”

I thought of my abilities, my eyes narrowing, but she shook her head before I could ask. “You must never display your unique magic to anyone,” she warned. “Not even the Alpha King of Ironhelm—unless you’re sure you can trust him.”

It had been then that my mother, Sabine, had slid the tiny silver compass into my hand and closed my fingers tightly around it. “And if you ever feel like you’re losing your way, look at this for guidance.”

“What is it, Mom?”

“You don’t know a compass when you see one, sweet?” she chuckled, but the smile didn’t meet her smoldering dark eyes, so akin to my own. “My own mother gave it to me the day that I married your father, and her mother gave it to her.”

“What is it for?”

“Hope and peace,” she replied dryly.

“Did it help?”

My mother had cupped my face. “It led me to you, didn’t it, Zephy?”

Now, my fingertips trailed over the intricate outer casing of the compass as I carried on through the dreary halls of the palace, unsure of what I was doing. Direction was needed, but I was sure that my mother’s compass wasn’t going to give it to me.

Maybe I shouldn’t have gone out in the first place. It had probably been in my best interest to remain where Grisella had said, but rule-following had never been my best trait, and if I was going to be queen of this place, I’d better get to know it.

But simultaneously, I could not shake the mounting element of dread formulating in my gut as I ventured further from my suite, as if danger lurked around every corner, urging me back.

Don’t be dumb. I have nothing to worry about. I’m going to be the damn queen, no matter how much they try to scare me. No harm will come to me, and on the off chance I was

faced with danger, I can take care of myself. I've been training since toddlerhood.

That was the mantra I led with as I continued my exploration through the massive walls, eager to learn about the ancient structure which was now my home.

The shock of it had not worn off yet. I had not fully come to terms with the idea that I would never again sleep in my warm, bright room in the manor house outside the city where the quacking ducks woke me with annoyance every morning.

Were there animals here? I couldn't hear a thing beyond the thickness of the original stone walls, painted over with modern plaster.

"Miss, are you lost?" a baffled voice asked as I turned yet another corner. I undoubtedly was by this point, but when I stared up at the impossibly tall, cadaverous looking being in a servant's uniform, I didn't give him the satisfaction of knowing the truth.

"I'm looking for the King," I announced boldly.

The butler appeared ready to faint with my announcement.

"The King can't just be... entered on," he sputtered. "I could tell him that you're looking for him."

I rolled my eyes. I'd expected that kind of response. I really was not going to see him until the wedding, it seemed.

"Never mind," I muttered. "Where's the kitchen?"

He shifted his weight, apparently battling with my request.

"I could have something brought to you. Let me see you back to your room."

"No," I said firmly. "I'll see myself to the kitchen. Just point me in the direction."

Tangibly uncomfortable now, the pale butler looked over his shoulder as if begging for rescue, but when no one came to his aid, he held up a bony finger to point toward a staircase I hadn't noticed before. "That will lead you directly to the main floor and into the kitchen."

“Thank you,” I chirped, spinning to skip away, my long hair bouncing across the middle of my back.

I felt him watching me until I descended the stairs. But as I neared the bottom, I slowed my gait, my hand curled around the banister as I listened for sounds below. I was in no mood to defend my presence to more staff. To my relief, I heard very little noise below, and cautiously, I entered, peering around the corners to take in the sight of the oversized room with awe.

It was at least four times the size of the kitchen in our manor house, with four stoves and two fridges. The stainless-steel countertops were bare but for wooden bowls overflowing with fresh fruit, and I hurried toward one to snatch a grape from its stem and pop the green oval into my mouth, savoring the sweetness with half-closed eyes.

Sighing, I leaned back against the counter and reached for another, sliding myself onto the surface.

“Coraline will have a full-on meltdown if she sees you on her countertops like that—queen-to-be or not,” a familiar voice informed me flatly.

Gasping, I whipped my head toward the doorway, where Axel lounged cockily at the threshold. For a moment, I could only take in his arrogant handsomeness, my face flushing.

Quickly, I found my voice. “Who is Coraline?” I asked, again stunned at how my body reacted to the trainer’s nearness.

His presence infuriated and attracted me in unison, conflicting me in the strangest way.

“The head cook. She runs this kitchen like an armory. She won’t take kindly to you sneaking her food, either,” Axel informed me bluntly.

Embarrassed but refusing to show it to Axel, I casually slid off the countertop, swallowing.

“I haven’t met her yet,” I replied, unable to think of anything else to say as he ambled closer.

“Have you made an effort to meet anyone?” he challenged.

I threw my head back defiantly. “I’ve met you, haven’t I?”

An amused smirk touched his lips, and to my surprise, he ambled toward the countertop and pulled his own grape off the stem to eat.

I frowned. “You just said—”

“I know what I said. I’m willing to accept the consequences of my actions. Are you?”

I met his steadfast gaze, heat creeping up into my cheeks as I felt like he was asking me a loaded question. He stood too close, and I couldn’t bring myself to step away, his earthy, masculine scent overtaking me like it had had before.

This was wrong.

It took every fiber of my being to turn away from him, the intoxication of him weighing down my legs as I pretended to fixate on the fruit again.

“I don’t know what you’re babbling about,” I told him sharply. “What consequences? Taking fruit that I can rightfully eat?”

He made a sound that emitted like a snicker, but I didn’t dare look at him, lest I was unable to look away. His magnetism flipped through my gut, and I hated and loved it, the conflict driving me crazy.

“Have you had time to consider what I said to you?” Axel asked as I struggled to get my mind centered.

“About what?” I asked, genuinely confused.

He grunted like I was purposely being difficult.

“About your role as queen. What else?”

I raised my head and stared at him haughtily. “I thought I was pretty clear on my stance there.”

“Remind me,” Axel pressed, and I bristled.

What was wrong with him? How does the King allow him to preen around like this?

I reasoned he got away with more because he was a male, but I still had much to learn about the ways of Ironhelm, it seemed.

“I will be the King’s partner, not his servant. He has enough of those.”

“And what makes you think that you are qualified to be his partner?” Axel scoffed.

My temper flared at his mockery, and I folded my arms over my chest. “This is a matter I would rather discuss with King Cade, not his underlings,” I retorted firmly. “I should see myself back to my suite. My maid is waiting.”

“Is she?”

I paused in mid-pivot and eyed him warily. “What does that mean?”

“It seems to me that no one is much looking for you, Zephyrine.”

My mouth fully dropped open, color draining out of my cheeks entirely as anger flooded me. “How dare you call me by my first name!” I choked furiously.

He shrugged, unfazed by my ire, and his lack of reaction only fueled more of my passion.

“You will need to learn to control that temper of yours if you hope to be a successful queen,” he informed me, infuriating me more. “The King won’t like that attitude. Trust me.”

“I will have a more respectful staff when I am queen!” I fired back. “And hopefully, the King won’t bring out this attitude in me.”

He burst out laughing, appreciation lighting his lovely azure irises. “Touché, *miss*.”

I relaxed slightly when he didn’t use my first name again, but sweat had broken out under my hairline, and my heart pounded in my chest as I fought to collect my bearings.

He’s upsetting me, I decided. That’s why I’m so flustered.

But as I again found myself locked in on his beautiful face, I knew it was much more than that.

“I have to go,” I muttered, whirling around.

“We have more training to do,” he called out after me. “We will resume tomorrow.”

I didn't justify his words with an answer as I rushed toward the back stairs and up the way I came, willing my rushing pulse to slow.

I would ask Grisella to find me another trainer. Axel wouldn't do. He was insubordinate and rude. In fact, I'd have him terminated immediately.

I couldn't imagine spending another minute in the same room as him. I just didn't trust myself around him.

CHAPTER 6

CADE

“Alpha, I have a rather delicate situation to discuss with you,” Grisella informed me at breakfast.

I laid my tablet down and peered at her, my eyebrow raised.

“What is it?”

The housekeeper shifted her weight uneasily and stared at the floor.

“It’s really... I don’t know how to address this—”

“Spit it out, Grissi,” I groaned. “I have a full day ahead of me.” I tapped on the tablet as proof of my busyness.

Grisella inhaled and blurted out her concerns. “Miss Zephyrine would like to terminate Axel.”

In my mind’s eye, I pictured Zephyrine’s gorgeous but petulant face, defiantly demanding such a ludicrous ask, and I started to laugh, the sound reverberating off the walls and startling the nearby servants as they stared at me, shocked. It was such an unfamiliar sound emanating from my lips, but what other reaction could I possibly have?

“Alpha?” Grisella mewled.

I held up a hand until I had finished my chuckling and sniffed.

“Does she now?”

Grisella sighed. “Pretending to be a trainer was not a good idea.”

“On the contrary,” I argued. “Now I know exactly who Zephyrine of Carrottrove is and how she treats the help.”

Grisella frowned. “Oh... I don’t think that’s true, Alpha. I’ve had no complaints from any of the staff. She doesn’t seem to take issue with anyone other than... Axel.”

Again, Grisella grimaced, her inability to separate me from Axel further amusing me, and I snickered again.

“It’s a shame that the King happens to like Axel, and Miss Zephyrine’s request is denied,” I informed Grisella. “I wish I could be there when you tell her that.”

“I’ll inform her, Alpha,” Grisella mumbled.

“In fact, cancel my meeting with the Council of Ministers. I’ve decided to move up my training with my wife-to-be this morning.”

“Of course, Alpha,” Grisella squeaked, sounding pained.

That little spitfire truly does need to be broken. She’s going to need all the extra attention I can give her, I thought firmly.

I ignored the little whisper that asked me if that wasn’t the only reason I was moving up the appointment. All I had ever cared about was the good of Ironhelm, and if it meant schooling some sheltered fae into queendom, so be it.



I WAS in the ballroom before Zephyrine, but I smelled her coming, my wolf instincts enacted as I waited. My eyes trained on her face as she entered, half-hoping to relish in her disappointment when she saw that “Axel” hadn’t been fired.

To my surprise, her luminous, russet eyes glowed brighter when they fell on me before she could feign disappointment.

“Oh,” she muttered, turning away. “You’re still here.”

“Were you expecting someone else?” I drawled, rising from the table, half amused that she wasn’t hiding the fact she had tried to have me fired.

“I just wasn’t expecting you,” she replied shortly.

I realized that her maid wasn’t with her and commented on it.

“I decided to spare Maywin the agony of all this,” she informed me, and my irritation with her almost outweighed my attraction again.

“Should I report your lack of interest to the King?” I asked coldly.

“I’m getting the sense that the King doesn’t much care what I have to say,” Zephyrine replied shortly. “Not that I find it surprising.”

I peered at her speculatively, debating whether to pursue the comment or not. She made the decision for me, her cheeks flushing crimson as she realized what she’d said, and she filled the small silence.

“Are we doing this or not?”

The fire in her that had originally bothered me so much at our first meeting didn’t irk me this day. I found myself oddly drawn to her defiance, despite knowing it was counterproductive to her position. And I couldn’t seem to shake the hard-on, sitting fully erect in my pants.

“What did you mean by that?” I asked.

Zephyrine blinked once. “By getting on with it? I want to be over and done with this ‘session’ already. I despise them, in case I wasn’t clear.”

In spite of myself, I started to grin at her bluntness, but I managed to hide the smirk.

“No... that you’re not surprised the King doesn’t care what you have to say.”

She laughed hollowly. “Are you a therapist now?” she taunted.

“Do you need a therapist?” I countered.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. “I have to think that you don’t talk to the King this way.”

“You’d be surprised,” I replied lightly.

She turned away from me, her olive cheeks still stained pink in a delicious way. I licked my lips when she wasn’t looking, my steps inadvertently drawing me closer toward her. I was inexplicably tempted by her, but I didn’t fight it, the pull of her pheromones enticing.

“You must know that a queen should be submissive to her king,” I pressed.

“I know what he wants from me,” she snapped angrily, whirling around. “I get it, all right?”

I drew back slightly, catching a whiff of melancholy in her tone. “What do you want from me, Axel?”

This time, I didn’t hide my tongue as it jutted out from my mouth to wet my lips, and I caught her gaze following the tip. Embarrassment stained her complexion crimson.

“As discussed before, you will need to learn to speak only when spoken to.”

“That’s bullshit,” Zephyrine quipped almost before I’d finished speaking, and I grimaced, shaking my head.

“You will do what you’re told or quickly find yourself out of the public eye in short order, Zephyrine!”

In my irritation, I was forgetting my role as her trainer, but I didn’t care. Her dark irises flashed.

“Again, you’re forgetting who you are!” she hissed back at me. “I am about to be your queen! Show me some respect!”

Groaning loudly, I flopped unceremoniously onto the floor and draped my ankle over the other. “Pretend I am King Cade,” I invited her. “And I’ll pretend you’re Queen Zephyrine, okay?”

She started to shake her head, but I held up a hand. “That’s the only way this is going to work.”

She was shaking with frustration, but to her credit, she managed to swallow whatever it was that threatened to spill from her lips.

“I don’t think that the King would be so informal with his wife,” she muttered, perching on the edge of one of the dining chairs.

I smothered a smirk. “I suppose you’ll find out soon enough. He may call you Zephy... or My Queen.”

Zephyrine’s eyes bugged at both suggestions, and it took everything in me not to laugh fully aloud. I had to turn away and cough lightly.

“Your role is to sit at my side and predict my needs,” I continued, tilting my head back toward her.

“I can’t take you seriously when you’re sitting there like that, a servant on the ground, barking orders as you are. This is ridiculous,” she blurted out.

“You can’t speak to your king that way, My Queen,” I informed her flatly.

Her cheeks paled. “Stop it!” she grunted, rising. “I’m not doing this with you. Maybe you’re into some kinky role-playing bullshit, but I refuse to do this!”

“I am your king, My Queen. You must—”

“STOP IT!” Zephyrine cried, tears filling her eyes. “I-I’m not doing this. I’ve been humiliated enough. I won’t do this.”

She whipped around to storm from the ballroom, but I was on my feet before she could escape, grabbing her arm, and she gasped in surprise at my touch. Wrenching herself out of my grasp, she gawked at me.

“You can’t touch me,” she whispered.

But there was no anger in her tone. Her complexion was ashen, hands trembling.

“Marrying the King of Ironhelm is humiliating to you?” I demanded, anger burning through me at the insult.

She backed away, shaking her head. “You wouldn’t understand,” she muttered.

“Try me,” I insisted as she dropped her eyes.

Biting on her luscious lower lip, a black strand of hair fell over her cheek, and Zephyrine blinked rapidly, as if to keep tears of frustration from falling.

“You don’t really care, Axel.”

“I’m asking, aren’t I?” I growled. “Tell me.”

Slowly, she raised her head and looked at me, surprise coloring her face as she realized I was serious.

“I’m not humiliated to marry a king—of course not. I... I’ve just... I don’t even know who he is or what he looks like. I’ve basically been locked in my manor house my whole life, sheltered from the public. I’ve never had any say in my future. It’s always been prophesied for me. And it’s clearly no different here. And here you are, someone who is supposed to respect me, and you’re treating me like a child.”

I snorted loudly, and Zephyrine scowled deeply before I could explain my response.

“I told you that you wouldn’t understand,” she muttered, spinning away. “I’m done here.”

I let her go, watching as she slipped through the open doorway of the ballroom. But this time, I felt an unexpected kinship toward her.

Oh, I understand you better than you think, My Queen, I mused silently, a strange disappointment overtaking me in her absence.

I silently willed her back, but after several minutes, she did not return, and I had no choice but to resume my royal duties and face the reality of my kingdom as I went to deal with my Council of Ministers.



I WAS BEGINNING to get a headache with all the noise, the voices overlapping as one male outvied another for the floor.

“Isola needs more money than Candaline,” Sepher yelled out. “That should be the number one concern!”

“Isola? Absolutely not! Candaline is growing exponentially, and the plumbing system is a hundred years old. They’ve built ten new high-rise buildings this year, and the infrastructure needs some major revamping,” Yasmir bellowed over him.

I cracked down on the gavel when the court officer made no move for order, my gaze shooting daggers at everyone in view.

“Did you act like zoo animals when my father was on the throne, too?” I demanded, as I always did, relishing their looks of contrition when they reclaimed their seats. “Ironhelm is robust in resources. She has been for a long while and we will always allot the proper funding when needed. Why are we always having the same tired arguments?”

“Emotions are running high as we draw closer to your coronation, Alpha,” Hampstermeyer blurted out.

For as obnoxious as he was, I could always count on the Minister of Serafina to speak his mind. He was guileless.

“Why?” I laughed nonchalantly, even though the words troubled me somewhat. “Nothing will change once my title officially changes from prince to the Alpha King of Ironhelm. You’ve all called me king for over a decade as it is.”

Nervously, the ministers exchanged a look amongst themselves, and I leaned forward, sniffing the air to feel the problem. “Well?”

“Your union with the fae from Carrotrove, Alpha,” Hampstermeyer said, frankly. “We don’t know anything about her.”

I groaned, having predicted this already. My Council of Ministers had never faced big changes with any grace.

“I will have my queen well under my control,” I promised them. “And Ironhelm will run as she always has. Stop your fabricated battles and focus on the upcoming coronation. We have a party to plan, yes?”

“Hear, hear, Alpha.”

Slapping my gavel down, I dismissed the ministers and collected my tablet from the pulpit. The cabinet dispersed, and Ryland stepped to my side covertly.

“A word, Alpha?”

“Should I be worried?” I grunted, eyeing my long-time friend and confidant.

Ryland was technically not an official advisor, but he did have ears lower to the ground than most as the head of my Royal Guards.

Ensuring that we were alone, Ryland jumped into it without any preamble.

“The polls are in about the new queen, and they appear to be favorable despite the fact that no one knows much about her. I would recommend more PR for her, however. The numbers could be better.”

“That’s not what they’re making it sound like in here.”

“The numbers don’t lie. I know you don’t like to keep an eye on social media, but the territory is curious about Zephyrine of Carrotrove. No one can find much about her or her family, which makes her seem evasive, like she’s hiding something. It would be good to get her face out there.”

I balked at the notion. “What kind of PR?” I asked warily, the idea of exposing Zephyrine churning my stomach for reasons I couldn’t quite understand.

“Any kind, I suppose. We are aware she is from Carrotrove. What does she look like? They want to blend your faces together in apps and see what your children will look like.”

I fully shuddered at the disparaging thought, but Ryland shrugged. “This is the kind of stuff that’s on the public’s mind and should be addressed before the coronation. Otherwise, you’ll have tabloids digging through and finding unflattering angles to present.”

I gnawed on the insides of my cheeks, thinking of the unrefined noblefae I had on my hands. Zephyrine was hardly

in a state to be making public appearances, but I could not keep her hidden forever, either. I thought about what she'd told me, her life in Carrottrove, sheltered and removed.

Ryland was right.

"She just got here. She's getting used to the kingdom," I said slowly, but an idea was growing on me.

"I understand that, Cade, but she'll need to come out sooner or later," Ryland pressed, losing all sense of formality now that everyone was out of earshot.

"I heard you," I grumbled, my mind racing.

It wasn't just a matter of Zephyrine being visibly prepared to handle the media. Would she be willing to nod and smile and address questions properly?

I'm going to have to sit down with her again, I realized, and excitement burst through me at the thought. Shocked, I stuffed it back down with the rest of my turbulent emotions and reminded myself to focus on what was important.

The kingdom.

That was the only consistent thing in my life. Everything else could disappear in a heartbeat. That I knew all too well.

CHAPTER 7

ZEPHY

Grisella announced that Axel wanted another meeting that evening, and I started to refuse.

“I only met with him this morning!” I argued, shaking my head. “This is too much! He’s not teaching me anything at all!”

“I think you should meet with him,” Grisella said evenly.

That’s her way of saying I have no choice but to go, I realized miserably.

“Am I even going to meet King Cade before the wedding?” I asked Grisella before she left me alone in my bedroom.

“I... don’t... I’m not sure what the King’s plans are.” Her stutter was odd, but I didn’t put much thought into it.

“And if you did, you wouldn’t tell me, would you?” I muttered.

“Eight o’clock, in the ballroom,” Grisella replied, answering nothing as I closed the door.

I stalked toward the adjoining door and knocked.

Immediately, Maywin answered, looking flustered. “Has something happened? Do you need me?” the maid asked worriedly.

“I have to meet with Axel—again,” I groaned, opening my door to allow Maywin inside. “I don’t want to be alone with him. He’s...”

I trailed off, unsure of the words I had for him. The fact was, I didn't dislike him as much as I had at first. The problem was, I liked him too much, and that was part of the reason I didn't want to be near him. I didn't trust myself around him, and as the future queen, this was no way to start my tenure.

What if I told Grisella that I had an attraction to Axel? Would that get me a new trainer? Or would that get me beheaded?

I shuddered at the thought.

"Is he abusing you?" Maywin asked.

I stared at her for a moment, a spark of an idea forming inside my head. I could lie and say that Axel had behaved inappropriately toward me. That would ensure I never saw him again. But it also might endanger Axel, and I couldn't knowingly put the trainer in a bad position because of my own discomfort.

Shame flooded me at the dark thought. Why would I ruin a fae's life because I couldn't keep my emotions under control? No. There had to be another way to deal with this.

Maybe I could just come clean with Axel and explain how I feel.

I had noticed him looking at me in the same way I had snuck glances at him. It was only a matter of time before one of us did something that would ruin both of our futures. I had to put an end to it.

But what if he told the King?

Or was that why Axel had called this meeting this evening? Maybe he was beating me to the punch.

"You'll come with me tonight," I told Maywin.

She paled and shook her head. "I... I can't tonight," she croaked, her knees physically buckling.

I gaped at her. Never had Maywin ever refused me.

"What?!"

“I... there is a meeting of the... a call of all house staff... Grisella...” she babbled, looking pained. “Oh, I’ll see if it can be rescheduled—”

I held up my hand. “Slowly now. What is it?”

Maywin inhaled deeply. “Grisella has called a meeting of all staff to prepare for the upcoming changes in the palace. She expects Rufus and I to be in attendance.”

“That’s tonight?” I demanded incredulously.

Was this a coincidence, or was this purposely planned at the same time as my “training session”?

And now I was getting paranoid. I’d be stark raving mad by the time my tenure as queen was done in Ironhelm.

“Yes, miss, but if you need me—” Maywin sputtered.

“No,” I interjected with a sigh.

I didn’t need to interrupt Grisella’s tightly held scheduling nor get on her bad side any worse than I already was. I would make my meeting with Axel quick and abrupt. I would need to make it clear to him tonight that our sessions couldn’t continue, not anymore. I was going to be queen, and he was... well, I wasn’t sure what he was, but he could not have any part of my life going forward.

Grisella would have to find me a new trainer if they insisted on these bizarre sessions—whatever purpose they served—and I would have to forget that Axel ever existed.

“You go to this staff meeting and do whatever Grisella tells you,” I sighed. “It’s important that we fall into the routine of this household.”

“Maybe the King will be at this staff meeting tonight,” Maywin offered with her usual optimism.

The idea bothered me more than I let on. If King Cade showed himself to my staff before he did me, I would be incredibly irate to hear it.

“If he does, I don’t want to hear about it,” I muttered. “Go back to your room and get ready. I’ll deal with my own

evening.”

Maywin retreated to her room, and I sat before the vanity, picking up a silver-handled brush to drive through the black tresses of my mane, my eyes staring blankly back at me in the glass.

What do you want from me, Axel? Why am I so nervous about tonight?



I WAS the first to arrive at the ballroom, the chandeliers flickering on the lowest setting, creating a shimmering glow as the only illumination along the mural-covered walls as I entered. The ambiance reeked of romance and did nothing to calm my shattered nerves.

I smoothed my hands over the front of my skirt, the hairs raising at the base of my neck as if someone were watching me, but in this low light, it was impossible to tell if I was being uneasy or if my senses were accurate.

Rubbing my hands over my arms, I ambled closer to the center of the room, looking around for any signs of Axel or anyone else.

Isn't it odd that they would allow Axel to train me without a chaperone? I thought, although not for the first time.

Of course, I didn't know the rules of Ironhelm all that well, but gauging from what Axel had told me about what the King expected, they weren't that different from Carrottrove. Being raised as the future queen, I was provided a chaperone for all my interactions with males. Why, then, was I not constantly guarded where Axel was involved?

He must have had a closer connection to the King than I was told. That would also explain why he wasn't so easily fired when I'd tried to get rid of him.

Which made my attraction toward him so much worse now that I thought about it.

His footsteps caught my attention, and I whirled to confront him.

“This is highly inappropriate,” I informed him tersely, even before he appeared. “At this hour...” I trailed off when he showed his handsome face, his expression tired. “And I only just saw you this morning.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Something has changed since this morning. You are going to be required to make public appearances now.”

My well-crafted speech to him flew out of my mouth and out one of the cathedral windows as darkness enveloped us. He drew closer to me, his face taut in concentration.

“I-I don’t understand,” I sputtered. “What do you mean?”

“The residents of Ironhelm want to know who their queen will be, Zephy,” he murmured absently. The nickname struck a chord in my heart, and for the first time, I didn’t take defense to his flippancy. “You will need to start interacting with the media and making public appearances. Is that something you can do?”

He stared at me, and I read the imploring note in his eyes. I waited for a fight to bubble inside me, but one didn’t rise.

“I... yes. Of course,” I replied. “That’s... that’s a part of my expected duty.”

Relief flooded his face, and he smiled. “I thought you would argue with me,” he admitted. “Have you done public speeches before?”

I shook my head, a small wave of panic overcoming me. “Not really.”

“They can be nerve-wracking,” he admitted. “Especially when everyone is judging your every move.”

My brow furrowed. “You say that as if you speak from experience. I thought you knew everything about everything already.”

His smile faded and his shoulders squared. “I’m trying to help you, miss,” he said curtly. “But if you don’t think you

need my assistance—”

I reached for his arm apologetically. “I do,” I told him quickly. “I’m sorry. I’m nervous, too. This is all new to me, Axel. I’ve been thrust into a new world, and it sounds like you’re warning me that the faeries of Ironhelm won’t like me.”

He looked at my hand, and I quickly dropped my fingers, my face on fire as I realized my hasty movement. Backing away, I folded my hands in front of me, avoiding his steadfast gaze, grateful for the low light around us.

“No, I said they’re judging you. But that’s something you should get used to as queen. No matter what you do, good or bad, every move will be judged. You will never be able to please everyone. In the end, you must always remember that it’s only what’s in the best interest of the kingdom that matters.”

I lowered my eyes. “What about what we want?” I mumbled, momentarily forgetting that Axel wasn’t my king, and that I wasn’t his queen.

For half a second, in the dimness, I was just a conflicted fae suffering an existential crisis.

“We?” he echoed, his voice husky and curious.

I didn’t dare look up. “Does it matter what any individual wants, or is it always for the good of Ironhelm?”

Axel exhaled deeply. “It’s better that way,” he muttered. “Others come and go. The realm is always the realm.”

My head jerked back, and I met his gaze evenly. “You don’t believe that!” I cried, shocked to hear it.

His hand reached out to brush a stray strand of dark hair away from my face, and I inhaled sharply.

“Yes,” he replied honestly. “I do believe that. The kingdom is all there is to fight for. Everything else will abandon you.”

His words broke my heart, and when he leaned in to kiss me, I almost didn’t stop him, to show him that we were worth fighting for. But before his mouth could touch mine, I gasped and pulled away, shaking my head vehemently.

“No!” I choked, extending my hands as if he were contagious. “No! I-I’m engaged to the King! Are you out of your mind?”

Axel’s mouth twisted into a frown, his blue eyes shooting heavenward as he mouthed a curse. He didn’t even appear flustered by my refusal, confusing me more.

“Axel, we can’t—you can’t—this is the last time we’re meeting like this. I—I can’t continue to see you. I won’t. I don’t care what anyone says. This is... I can’t!”

“Zephyrine—”

“No!” I interrupted, refusing to let him smooth-talk me. “I... I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel this attraction between us, too, but I will not betray the King, not now and not ever. This is my duty, my fate. I’m sorry, but I won’t see you again.”

Axel exhaled with a grunt of annoyance. “Sure you will,” he replied.

I frowned, angered by how lightly he was taking the situation, how cockily he was behaving.

“I can tell that you’re connected to the King in some fashion, but no matter how close you are, he can’t be happy you attempted to seduce his bride,” I growled, intending to scare him into agreement.

Axel laughed, shocking me further.

“Is this amusing to you?” I demanded, aghast by his actions.

I backed away, but he made no move to come closer.

“A little,” he replied. “You’re correct—I *am* connected to the King. I am closer to him than anyone else in the kingdom.”

I shook as I read the threat in his words. Swallowing, I tried to find words, to backpedal and tell him that my attraction had been based on loneliness, not reality, but his next statement poured ice water into my veins.

“I am so connected to King Cade because we are one and the same,” Axel continued.

I stared at him blankly, wondering if perhaps he was insane. It would not be the first time a mad relative had latched onto a ruler.

Oh, what had I done?

“What are you saying, Axel?” I whispered, my eyes darting all over hoping a servant might amble by, but of course, they were all at the meeting that night.

I was truly on my own.

Axel laughed again and stepped toward me. “There is no Axel, Zephyrine. I’m your betrothed, Cade, the future Alpha King of Ironhelm. There never was an Axel. It was just a ruse to see who you truly were.”

CHAPTER 8

ZEPHY

I continued to stare at him, unmoving, unflinching, as his words sunk into my psyche. He waited for me to react, but I wasn't certain how to respond.

"W-what?" I finally sputtered.

Was that the truth, or was he truly crazy? Or was this a test?

Axel shrugged. "It's true," he insisted. "I didn't want you to put on a show for me, so I came to you as a servant."

I suddenly found it very difficult to breathe, my hand reaching out toward the table to steady myself.

"It was the only way for me to be sure I was seeing the real you," he said unapologetically.

And what about me?! I wanted to yell at him. When did I get to see the real you?!

I said none of the things I was thinking, the reality of it all bearing down on me like a lead weight. "You could have given me a warning, a hint..." I choked, my mind racing back to the bluntness of my words from the start, humiliation dizzying me until I couldn't stand.

"That would have defeated the whole purpose, Zephy," he sighed. "It's better this way. Now I know who you really are."

I struggled to breathe, unable to look at him as I buried my face in my hands. "The entire household knew!"

“They were following my orders,” Cade agreed. “You can’t fault them for that.”

“No, I’m sure they enjoyed the laugh at my expense,” I mumbled, swallowing thickly.

I managed to rise to my feet and stand before my fiancé. I curtsayed shakily, and he groaned.

“Don’t...”

“Forgive me, *Alpha*,” I begged, the world swirling around me. “I never would have spoken so openly or rudely if I’d known. Clearly.”

“Again, that was kind of the point, Zephyrine,” he replied sarcastically, and I cringed, peeking at him under my eyelids. “You started with all these silly formalities.”

I was discombobulated and mortified. I couldn’t think in the wake of this new revelation. I wanted to flee and hide in one of the many unexplored rooms on the third floor, hiding myself away until no one bothered to look anymore.

“May I be excused, Alpha?” I whispered, willing myself not to break down. I was sure if he didn’t let me go, my legs would give way right in front of him.

“Really? You’re just going to run off now?”

I clamped my mouth shut, but kept my eyes trained on the floor. Without moving or speaking, I waited for him to give orders.

“Oh, for all the gods’ sake,” Cade barked. “You’re dismissed, then, if you’re going to turn to stone. I was hoping we could have a proper conversation now that the truth was out, but...”

He said some other words after, but I heard nothing but the agreement to let me go.

“Thank you, Alpha.” I curtsayed again and tripped over my own feet, racing toward the hallway, my sneakers squeaking on the polished wood.

Inside my room, I buried myself in the bed with the soft, silk duvet over my head until I heard Maywin and Rufus return to their respective rooms.

“MAYWIN!” I cried out, unable to move from my bed.

Almost immediately, my maid appeared at the foot of the bed, concern coloring her face.

“What is it?” she asked, worry etched over her face. “Are you sick? Should I call for a healer?”

Barely lowering the blanket to look at her, I whimpered. “The King is Axel. Axel is the King,” I blubbered.

Maywin remained in place, her head cocked to the side curiously. “Miss?”

“He was playing me for a fool!” I exploded, throwing the blankets aside to spring to my knees, the entire sordid story springing from my lips. “Axel isn’t a real trainer at all. It was the King all along, pretending to be a commoner!”

Maywin gawked, an odd smile touching her lips. “That’s kind of romantic, isn’t it?” she asked slowly.

Appalled, I shook my head vehemently. “It most certainly isn’t!” I spat. “How can lying to your fiancée be romantic? He enlisted the entire palace to go along with it, and now I feel as if I’ve gone crazy! If he can spin such an elaborate façade so early on, what else is he capable of doing?” I paused and balked. “Did you know?”

“No! No, of course not. I would have told you.”

I believed her. Sighing, I flopped back on the bed. “I feel like such an idiot.”

Maywin’s smile faded, and she nodded compassionately. “I understand, miss, and you’re right. It is a little bit cruel.”

I relaxed, knowing that Maywin was on my side. Exhaling, I sank back onto my buttocks to make room for my maid on the bed, and she sat on the edge, her mouth forming a thin line thoughtfully.

“Did he say why he did it?” she asked tentatively, as if she worried that I might break down with the question.

I sniffed and nodded. “He claimed that he wanted to know the ‘real’ me, that if he had come as himself, I would have pretended to be someone I’m not.”

“Was he wrong?”

I frowned at my maid. “Are you justifying his actions?”

“No,” she assured me. “But I can understand, in his disillusioned way, why he may have thought it was a good idea...”

She trailed off and pursed her lips again, causing my eyes to narrow. “What is it?”

“Nothing, miss.”

“Don’t lie to me, Maywin. I’ve had about enough of those as I can take right now.”

“I’m not lying, but I don’t want to cause you more stress, either.” I stared at her expectantly, and she sighed deeply. “I heard some talk at the meeting tonight, but I’m not sure what to make of it.”

My skin prickled with apprehension. “What sort of talk? About me?”

“No... not exactly. It’s about King Cade and... well, his past.”

Interest and dread twined inside me as I leaned closer. “What about his past?” I pressed. “What did you hear?”

“It was all gossip—”

I cut her off. “Maywin, I’m not asking you to go around spreading rumors, but if it pertains to the fae I’m about to marry, I think I should know everything there is to know, don’t you?”

“Only if the rumors are true,” Maywin insisted uncomfortably.

I smiled weakly at her. “I know you’re not a gossip, Maywin, and that you don’t go around spreading stories. But if you have heard about something that affects me, I would like to know what it is.”

She bit on her lower lip and stared at the bed, picking at threads of the bedcovers before opening her mouth again.

“The King was orphaned quite young—something that you already knew,” Maywin mumbled slowly.

“Yes, of course. His parents died when he was barely fifteen, if I recall,” I replied. “Yet he still managed to run the kingdom with the help of his advisors. He was legally unable to claim his official title until his twenty-fifth year, however.”

“Yes...” Maywin agreed, but I stopped my historical analysis as I realized that she was not leading to any of that. “But he wasn’t ever really alone.”

My eyebrows shot up, but Maywin appeared to have drifted off in thought. For half a moment, I thought she was concocting a spell in her mind. Impatiently, I lifted my hands.

“Maywin...” I prompted gently. “What does this have to do with the King?”

She exhaled as if my question pained her, but when she met my eyes, she fell out with it immediately.

“There’s a servant, a maid. Stralia. She works here in the palace,” Maywin explained. “She’s been here for years.”

“What about her?”

Maywin drew in a sharp breath and blurted out what she had been holding off saying all along. “It’s believed that the King is in love with her, and he has been for years.”

Wind knocked out of my lungs again.

It was more than I could handle for one day. I fell fully back against the pillows, blinking rapidly.

“That’s vicious gossip!” I countered immediately.

Maywin balked, and I instantly felt shame.

“I’m sorry, May. Forgive me. I’m not accusing you of lying. I’m sure you’re not. I-I’m just stunned to hear it. I didn’t mean it.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything, miss. You’re right. It is most likely gossip.”

“Tell me exactly what you’ve heard about this Stalia—”

“Stralia,” she corrected me, and I whimpered lightly.

I believed it more every time Maywin spoke.

“Did you see her yourself?” I pressed. “Was she at this meeting?”

“Yes. I figured out who she was, but I didn’t ask any questions.”

“Nor should you have,” I agreed, nodding. “That’s very wise, Maywin. What part of the palace does she work in? Whose maid is she?”

“I don’t know. Possibly the King’s?”

I had never seen a single servant near Cade, except for the one serving us soup during our first training session. Thinking back, that maid kept wanting to call him “Alpha.” I saw something wrong that day and didn’t figure it out!

More humiliation burned my cheeks. He had already fooled me into believing that he was a servant himself.

“Was she pretty?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“She doesn’t hold a candle to you, Miss Zephyrine,” Maywin reassured me, but I could tell that the answer was affirmative.

Of course King Cade had a beautiful mistress. And why wouldn’t he? The darkness that I had felt from the moment I’d come to the castle was in full force. I hated the feeling.

“Miss, even the manor house in Carrotrove was full of endless chatter. You must know that bored servants have nothing better to do all day than make up stories,” Maywin said. “Imagine how much worse it must be in a palace of this size.”

“That’s not a comforting thought, Maywin,” I told her dryly, but I did manage a smile for her. “Thank you for bringing this to my attention, but I do think I should get my rest now. I was informed tonight that I am expected to make public appearances soon. I can’t do that if I’m not well-rested.”

“You will undoubtedly impress them,” Maywin promised me, rising from my bedside. “Should I make something to help you sleep?”

I started to refuse, but changed my mind at the last minute. I would need all the help I could get to achieve slumber that night. There was no way the demons rushing through my mind would permit a moment of peace after what I’d learned that day.

“Yes, please,” I agreed. “But not too much.”

“Yes, of course.”

Maywin returned to her room to make her special tea, and I lay on the bed, staring straight up at the ceiling in dismay.

All of those feelings I had felt toward Axel were no longer forbidden. The kiss I had fended off was mine for the taking if King Cade presented it again. But if he was in love with another, could I really accept his lips on mine? And why was he trying to kiss me if he loved another?

I have to stop creating problems in my own mind, I barked at myself.

I should have never allowed Maywin to tell me what she’d heard. I was better off not knowing. It was exactly what she had warned: gossip. I would not let it eat away at me now when I had so much more to think about. I refused to feed into it anymore.

But all the same, I couldn’t wait to down the sleepy tea and block out my hammering, anxious heart. Tomorrow was a new day, and we would all start fresh, without lies and rumors and pretenses.

Tomorrow, I would go directly to the Alpha King and truly get to know him the way I had wanted from the start.

CHAPTER 9

CADE

Despite my intentions to keep Stralia at bay, I found myself missing my friend's companionship. We'd known each other's company for so long, it was hard to cut her off cold turkey. She was thrilled when I sent for her the following morning, relieving her of her work duties.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away," she breathed, stripping off her clothes before the door secured in her wake.

My eyes bulged as I realized she had misconstrued my invitation.

"Stop!" I ordered her, freezing Stralia's pale hands against the buttons of her work uniform. "I didn't call you here for... that."

Utter confusion crossed her face as I gestured toward the chess board in my sitting room, and she blinked several times. "You've called me here to play chess?" she questioned, failing to hide her disappointment.

"Do you still remember how to play?" I asked. "It's been a long time since we played."

"Of course I remember," she growled, re-buttoning her shirt and stomping petulantly toward the board. "Is this some kind of tease, Cade? Can't we at least watch a movie or something if you don't want to fuck?"

Annoyed, I shook my head and took my place at the black pieces, my eyes narrowing at her crassness. "It's not a tease. I just haven't played in a while. You can watch a movie by

yourself in your room anytime, but you need two people to play chess...”

“Okay,” she mewled contritely, sliding onto the cushion opposite me. “I’m having a difficult time accepting my new role as merely your servant. And honestly, it’s been years since I played.”

The same was true for me, and perhaps that’s what I had been thinking, inviting her to play now, reclaiming the hint of our innocence, the memory of a better time. It was already going swimmingly.

“You will never just be a servant to me, Stralia,” I promised her. “We’ve grown together, seen the trials and tribulations of orphanhood. I would never forget our history, even if we can’t be together for now.”

Unexpectedly, she reached for my hand. “For now? Is it only temporary?” she whispered, her verdant eyes boring into mine.

Gently, I withdrew my palm, offering her a taut smile. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. You know what’s at stake.”

“The kingdom. Always the kingdom,” she grumbled, withdrawing her own hand with anger.

She slammed her queen’s pawn forward two spaces and stared at me defiantly, but before I could move my own opening, Grisella knocked on my door.

“Forgive the intrusion, Alpha,” she mumbled, her cheeks pink with embarrassment.

“What is it, Grisella?” I asked, glaring at her. “I told you I didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Miss Zephyrine is in the hall and refuses to leave until she’s spoken with you directly. I-I tried to tell her that you didn’t want to be disturbed, but she’s quite insistent.”

A peculiar sensation of bittersweetness tickled my gut, and I avoided Stralia’s accusing stare.

“Get rid of her!” Stralia ordered Grisella, but I shook my head, even as the housekeeper ignored my lover.

Grisella wouldn't take orders from Stralia, regardless.

“No. Let her in,” I ordered Grisella.

Both females gawked at me. Stralia whimpered and slapped a hand against the chessboard as Grisella began to cough nervously.

“Is that wise, Alpha?”

“She knows that Axel was a ruse now,” I explained. “It's all right. Let her in, Grisella.”

“As you wish, Alpha.”

Grisella turned away, and Stralia continued to stare at me accusingly. “Why did you tell her who you were? You said you wouldn't!”

Stralia's whining was beginning to wear on my already frayed nerves.

“She's smarter than I thought,” I replied evenly, a small smile touching my lips at the memory of how Zephyrine had rejected my kiss as Axel.

As infuriatingly outspoken and stubborn as she was, loyalty was not going to be an issue with the new queen. And that counted for something with me.

The door reopened, and Zephyrine entered. Dressed in a sleeveless, silky camisole that accented her creamy complexion, the ivory of the material made her small but full breasts strain against the fabric, her shapely hips curved against the snug-fitting hold of her casual dark jeans. She curtsied deeply before me, and I rolled my eyes.

“That's hardly necessary, Zephy,” I informed her and enjoyed the shade of scarlet my words turned her cheeks. Stralia clucked her tongue, and I nodded toward the blonde witch in front of me. “Allow me to introduce Stralia.”

Again, Stralia made a sound that told me she was displeased with the introduction, but my gaze was fixed on

Zephyrine, whose pupils dilated at the mention of Stralia's name.

I suppose she's heard about Stralia by now.

We'd never been discreet about our affair previously, and in hindsight, I probably should have been, but there wasn't much I could do about staff chatter now. Zephyrine was bound to learn about Stralia sooner or later.

"Stralia, this is Miss Zephyrine, the First Fae of Carrotrove and our future queen," I went on.

Stralia made no move to rise and show Zephyrine respect by way of bow or curtsy, even as I shot her a scathing look.

I stood to greet Zephyrine, but as I did, I could not help but compare the dark beauty to the fair stable worker's daughter who had been my companion for over a decade. Zephyrine radiated next to Stralia, her exoticness smoldering to pale the blonde and wash her out, even though they stood several feet apart. My body fully turned toward Zephyrine, my response to her automatic.

"What brings you here this morning, My Queen?" I asked teasingly.

"I-I didn't realize you had company," Zephyrine mumbled, her discomfort palpable. "I can come another time."

"That's a fine idea," Stralia agreed smugly, folding her arms defiantly over her chest to glare openly at Zephyrine.

I was aghast that my friend would behave so poorly—and right in front of me. Another feeling bubbled up, too—one I didn't expect.

Anger.

I felt angry at Stralia for speaking to Zephy with such contempt.

Stralia was going to be a problem, I realized, the fact slapping me suddenly. I should have foreseen it, but perhaps I had chosen to ignore it. Or hoped it would just go away on its own.

Zephyrine turned to leave, but my voice rang out like whiplash. “The future queen leaves for no one, Stralia,” I hissed. “*You* can leave.”

Shock overtook Stralia’s face as she stared at me, and I snapped my fingers twice, ordering her up from the chessboard. Through my peripheral vision, I caught Grisella’s shocked expression, but I ignored it as Stralia glowered back at me.

“Now, Stralia,” I told her, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She jutted her small chin outward and rose, taking an extravagant, exaggerated bow. “As you wish, Alpha,” she purred. “You are the king, after all.”

“And she will be queen,” I growled back pointedly, my eyes boring into hers. “You *will* show Miss Zephyrine the respect she is owed.”

Stralia scoffed openly, averting her eyes as she stormed out of my suite and into the hallway, leaving me alone with Grisella and Zephyrine.

“Do you require me for anything else, Alpha? Miss?” Grisella squeaked, clearly eager to be on her way.

“No, Grisella. That will be all.”

Grisella could not get out fast enough, and Zephyrine stared after her helplessly.

“You didn’t need to send everyone away,” she said worriedly.

“You’re going to be queen,” I reminded her dryly.

“So they keep saying,” Zephy replied with just as much wryness.

I raised my eyebrows. “You don’t believe it?”

She met my gaze evenly. “I know that it will depend on you. If you decide against it, the marriage won’t take place.”

I inhaled deeply and laughed mirthlessly. “I think we both know that’s not an option, don’t we?”

“That’s not the way everyone is making it sound, Alpha.”

“Can you... Just call me Cade when no one is taking notes, okay?” I begged her, gesturing for her to sit.

Biting on her lower lip, she offered me a tentative smile. “I can try.”

“And don’t put too much stock into what everyone is saying to you, Zephy. They’re paid to protect me and this kingdom. They want to keep you unnerved and off balance, almost like a hazing ritual, but we both know the terms of this coronation. A blood oath was sworn. Our families are bound for the security of Ironhelm. We have to get married. There’s no choice—for either of us. Not if we don’t want to spend the rest of our lives living out in a cave somewhere because we lost the kingdom.”

Miserably, Zephyrine hung her head. “That doesn’t seem like a really solid foundation for a marriage,” she muttered.

“They’re as good reasons as any,” I replied, as if by rote.

It was the same line that Aradia had fed me for as long as I could remember, and now, I was just spinning it back to anyone who asked.

She smirked lightly, raising her head, but I got the sense she didn’t say what was really on her mind.

“I really didn’t mean to interrupt your game.”

“You will be queen,” I told her again.

“Why do you keep saying that?” she asked with a small, nervous laugh. “I know. You don’t have to convince me... I mean, not really.”

“You should try to remember that in every part of your life here.”

She stared at me blankly, and I realized she didn’t understand what I was trying to say. “You shouldn’t let anyone speak to you the way Stralia just did.”

Her blush fully painted her cheeks now, and she visibly gulped as she looked away. “She’s your friend.”

“And you will be my wife. Assert yourself,” I instructed. “No one has any respect for a weak queen. There are no friends, only subjects.”

Zephyrine eyed me like she wasn't sure she bought into my spiel, and an awkward silence fell between us. I glanced back at the chessboard.

“It looks like I've lost my gaming partner for the day. Do you play?”

Her head jerked back up, and she nodded slowly. “I'm not very good,” she admitted. “But I know the basics.”

“There's only one way to get better,” I replied cordially, gesturing for her to sit down. “Shall we?”



DESPITE ZEPHYRINE'S claims of ineptitude, she proved to be a worthy chess opponent, and I found myself thinking harder with her than in any game I'd ever played with Stralia.

Once more, I was comparing the two in my mind, but I couldn't bring myself to feel guilty about it. It was impossible not to notice the stunning differences between my feisty would-be queen and my ever-complaining companion, who never quite seemed satisfied with her place in life.

“Why do you keep looking at me like that?” Zephyrine asked me finally, and I shook my head as if to rub off the intense scrutiny I was inadvertently subjecting her to.

“Like what?”

“Like you're putting me under a magnifying glass, and I might be caught on fire in the sun's rays in a moment.”

I laughed and moved my knight, nodding for her to go, but she maintained her hold on me.

“I'm just wondering if you're using magic to beat me,” I lied, my mind on other matters.

Her smile was genuine now, pleased. “I’m not beating you, though.”

“But you could if you wanted.”

“I don’t cheat, Alpha,” she informed me, and I ignored the bullet of shame shooting through me.

She meant the game, but I knew she took that mantra to everything she did in life. She’d proven as much to me when “Axel” had tried to kiss her.

I can’t continue with Stralia. The unbidden thought came seemingly from nowhere, but it didn’t faze me in the least.

Still, I cast it aside for the moment.

“Have you trained in combat?” I asked.

The question took her by surprise.

“Of course,” she replied. “Hasn’t everyone?”

“Good,” I said. “Then I forfeit this game and declare you the winner.”

“Why? You’re winning.”

“Not anymore,” I teased. “I just lost. I’d much rather do some training today. It’s beautiful outside. Don’t you think that’s a much better idea?”

Zephyrine frowned. “I’m not sure,” she replied honestly. “Will I be training with you or with Axel?”

I sighed. “Are you still angry about that?”

“I’m not sure,” she said again, and I appreciated her honesty.

Maybe she wasn’t such a brat. Maybe she was just too honest for her own good.

“We can work it out in combat training,” I proposed. “Get suited up, and let’s see what you’re capable of.”

Worry crossed over her face, and I was intrigued.

“Unless you’re afraid of a small challenge?” I asked, waiting eagerly for her response.

It was the right thing to say.

“I’m afraid of very little,” Zephyrine said boldly, jumping up from her place. “But I won’t require any suits for my training.”

“Well then, I look forward to seeing what you can do,” I chortled, a burst of heat rushing through me at the prospect of wrestling with her.

My pants tightened between my legs as Zephyrine scrambled eagerly to her feet, and I again realized how badly I wanted to possess her.

Soon, I mused. Soon, she will be all mine.

CHAPTER 10

ZEPHY

Our combat sessions became a daily occurrence, which I looked forward to every morning. They were much more productive than the silly “etiquette” meetings that “Axel” had arranged when I’d first arrived. Moreover, I enjoyed them because I was really getting to know the King on a personal level.

Seeing Cade shift into his wolf form when we fought and danced through the endless courtyards exhilarated me.

Some faeries could shift into other creatures, and all the kings of Mystara carried the blood of a wolf. When I’d first learned this as a child, the thought of marrying a wolf shifter terrified me. And I guess that terror never really subsided, even as I grew into an adult.

But at least I knew what I was dealing with. Cade didn’t know about my unique magic.

I could never have prepared myself for seeing Cade in his wolf form for the first time, which happened during our first combat training session.

I’d watched the transition with pure awe. Slowly, his form seemed to blur, the edges of his silhouette dancing like shadows. My breath caught in my throat as I watched, every fiber of my being tingling with a mixture of fear and wonder. In a matter of moments, the Alpha King of Ironhelm transformed before me, his body elongating and shifting, his features melding into a creature of myth and legend.

The dark gray of his fur glistened like quicksilver in the moon's embrace, and his eyes burned with an ancient, wild intensity. Every line of his beast's body exuded power and strength, a primal force that sent shivers down my spine. As he stood there, a magnificent and untamed wolf, I could feel his presence resonating through the very air around us.

Every time I saw Cade in his wolf form, I was nearly brought to my knees.

HE WAS MUCH STRONGER, faster, and more powerful, but I was quickly becoming accustomed to his moves and learned to block and avoid when I couldn't defend and attack. Then he would learn my defenses and counter them with his moves. We constantly grew and played, the intensity mounting each day.

Sometimes we fought in the rose gardens, bounding through the thorns until I was forced to run and jump higher than I'd ever pushed myself before. Other times, we took to water combat, sparring underwater through the massive pool to challenge each other. I grew to identify his movements both in his fae and shifter forms, but I didn't show him the extent of my own powers yet. My mother's warning always crooned in the back of my head, reminding me of the harm I could cause.

"You're holding back," he complained a week after we'd started.

"How would you know?" I retorted, diving in to trip him as we pranced about the rock gardens.

My surprise blow landed. Cade tumbled and fell to the grass, rolling and collecting himself immediately, landing on his feet. I blinked, shocked that I had gotten him, but he appeared unperturbed by the hit.

"Call it instinct," he replied. "Why don't you show me what you can do?"

I couldn't deny that Cade was growing on me more every day, but to trust him with a secret that only my parents and Maywin had known for twenty-one years was not an easy feat

—especially when Cade still hadn't committed to a date for the wedding yet.

I offered him a smile and downed him again, causing him to laugh. "I'm more concerned with my big public appearance this weekend," I informed him, changing the subject. "Do you think I'm ready for the gala?"

Cade lowered his guard, dropping his arms and righting his stance. I stood straight, our sparring paused for a moment as he brushed bits of grass and straw off my clothing. Again, his nearness and subtle but masculine scent sent shivers through me from head to toe. He hadn't shifted into his wolf form that day, which meant he was still fully clothed, but I had seen what his body looked like beneath the expensive clothing now, the shifts always leaving him nude and vulnerable. I was glad he wasn't naked in front of me now, or else I wouldn't have had the courage to admit my own insecurities.

"You are going to win over their hearts the same way you've won over mine, Zephy," he promised me. My chest swelled as I read the sincerity in his eyes. "You just need to be yourself and speak from your heart."

"I don't know any other way to speak," I admitted.

He laughed. "Isn't that the truth?"

I cocked my head to the side. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He cupped his hand under my chin and tipped my head back toward him. "It means you are the most guileless being I've ever met, My Queen. You don't know any other way to be."

A shiver ran through me as his lips lingered inches from mine, and my breath caught.

"Y-you hardly know me, Cade," I whispered, trying to turn away, but he held me in place, forcing me to look into his eyes.

"I thought we were changing that."

“And Stralia?” I blurted out, unable to keep the question that had been weighing on me for the week since I’d learned about her.

Cade drew back, caught off guard by the query. “What about her?”

“What is your history with her?”

His jaw tightened, azure irises darkening to cobalt as he studied my face. “Have you been honing into the staff gossip?” he asked.

“Are you the staff? Because I’m asking you,” I replied simply. “I did hear some rumors, but now I’m asking you about their veracity.”

Cade inhaled so deeply, I was surprised he didn’t take the air from my lungs with him, but he didn’t fall away from me.

“The war orphaned a lot of children,” he informed me flatly.

I had been sheltered from the aftermath of the War of Sorrows, which had ended when I was eleven years old, but my father often recalled the death toll and the lost children. But I still did not understand what one thing had to do with the other until Cade elaborated.

“Stralia was orphaned during the war and remained in the palace, eating scraps, and not really collecting a paycheck until I realized what was happening about six months later. I hadn’t realized she was living as she was, and I immediately put her on the payroll as a maid. She became my friend—a very close friend—and sometimes lover.”

My brow knit into a vee as he looked away, my gut tightening as I caught the falsehood in his words. She had to be more than his *sometimes lover*. I tried to circumvent the jealousy washing in waves around me.

He was watering it down for my benefit.

“I care very much for Stralia, but she has always known that I would marry, and we would not be together. It wasn’t a secret.”

“She may have known it, but she doesn’t like it,” I muttered, unwilling to let the explanation stand.

“Stralia is not, nor will she be, a problem,” Cade said forcefully. I wanted so much to believe him, his face still so close to mine. “You’ll see.”

He turned fully toward me now, his eyes gleaming in the afternoon sunshine, breath warming my face. “And if you continue to assert yourself as I’ve shown you, you’ll realize that you won’t have these petty fears to overcome, either.”

I scoffed, but he silenced my dubiousness with a long, sweet kiss, capturing my heart directly in my throat. His hands cupped around my face eagerly as my lids fell closed, the scent of his masculinity overtaking me as it had from the first moment I’d met him. All the doubts which had plagued me evaporated, and suddenly, a crack of lightning flashed above us, a whirlwind storm cloud pouring rain over both of us to drench us with a flash flood.

Choking and sputtering, Cade drew back in shock, but I tittered, unfazed by the abrupt turn of weather, and he realized then that I was the one responsible for the blast of rain.

“*You* did this?” he guffawed, wiping the ever-pouring water from his face. I raised my hand and ended the sudden storm, the sun returning to dry us as quickly as the water had soaked us. “That’s your unique magical gift? You can control the weather?!”

I shushed him, looking about furtively, but as always, we were alone in the courtyard, the servants leaving us to our sparring as they always did. “It’s a secret.”

“But why?” Cade demanded, his head raised toward the sky in disbelief, searching for the storm clouds which had fully disappeared now, revealing only the bright, blinking sunshine overhead. “Why would you hide this?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, hugging my arms against my breasts, feeling very exposed at that moment.

Cade’s gaze traveled back toward me, his stare softening. I shivered under his look, my cheeks pinkening. This wasn’t the

way I wanted to show myself to him.

“My parents have always warned me about sharing my unique abilities with anyone, and I believed them,” I explained.

“It’s a very special power to possess,” he said, wrapping his arm protectively around me. “Your parents likely wanted to keep you safe from poachers or kidnappers. They were wise to keep your talents hidden, but once you are queen...”

He beamed, as if the possibilities appealed to him. I wasn’t sure I shared in his enthusiasm and said as much.

“We’re not even sure if the kingdom is going to like me, Cade,” I reminded him quietly. “Let’s not tell anyone else about my magic yet.”

“No, of course not,” he promised. “But you’re worried about nothing. After you deliver your speech at the gala, you’ll have everyone eating out of the palm of your hand. Once we have their approval, this will just be the icing on the cake. You’ll see.”

I wished I shared in his confidence, but I couldn’t bring myself to feel the same amount of excitement that he seemed to anticipate. Perhaps it was all too much, too fast for me, or maybe it was the mental image of Stralia’s dirty look when I had interrupted the chess game all those days earlier. Whatever the reason, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Cade was planning for a future that we didn’t quite have yet.

And I still wasn’t sure that he was being honest about his feelings about Stralia entirely, either.

I’ll tell Maywin to keep her ear to the servants, I vowed. If she hears anything about Cade and Stralia, I’ll confront him right away. In the meantime, I intend to savor this budding... romance?

I blushed at the simplicity of it, but maybe that’s precisely what it was, and I was only creating my own problems to avoid the butterflies attacking my gut.

“Come along, My Queen,” Cade said, shattering my reverie. “It’s time for dinner, and I’m starving. Shall we?”

“Yes... My King,” I replied, and Cade chortled, pulling me closer.

“Now you’re getting into it, Zephy. You’re a quick study, aren’t you?”

CHAPTER II

CADE

“Aren’t you getting cozy with your little wifey?”

I whirled around, a scowl piercing my jaw, when Stralia again appeared in my suite. How the hell did she keep getting in there so stealthily? I reminded myself that she’d been doing this for years and, therefore, had tricks that I hadn’t considered before now.

Sighing heavily, I glowered at her, folding my arms over my chest as she approached. I tried to ignore her, maintaining the displeased expression on my face.

“How many times do I have to tell you that you can’t just show up here anymore?” I barked, my patience with her fully expiring now. “This isn’t a game, Stralia.”

“What’s the matter, Cade? Are you afraid that your little wifey might learn that you really love me?”

She sashayed toward me, her hands extended, and I realized she wore nothing but a sheer nightgown, revealing nubile curves beneath the sheathing. Once upon a time, they would have dissipated all of my anger, but now, they only irked me more, and I looked away, my cheeks reddening in dismay.

“Stralia—”

“And the way you spoke to me in front of her!” she went on, placing her open palms on my face. “I almost believed you myself.”

I pushed her away, anger rushing through me. “Have you completely lost your mind?” I snapped. “Get out, and don’t come back here! The next time you pull something like this, I’ll have you removed from the palace. I might even have you banished.”

I didn’t like speaking to her this way. We had been so close at one time, and it was possible that I even loved her. But she knew the gravity of the situation, and still, she continued to go against my wishes. Looking at her now, I had no romantic feelings toward her at all. I didn’t want anything to continue between us.

Stralia gawked at me, her face twisting as she recognized the truth in my words. “You wouldn’t have me banished!”

“I told you that I don’t know what is happening since Zephyr arrived. You’ll ruin everything if you continue with this nonsense!”

“My love for you isn’t nonsense!” she shot back, her eyes glistening. “Don’t you love me anymore?”

“Stralia, I don’t want to hurt you,” I said, not fully knowing what to say.

“So don’t hurt me, Cade,” she begged. “Promise me that I am the only one you will ever love.”

“I can’t do that, Stralia,” I told her. “I care about you. I really do. But we can’t continue with any sort of romantic relationship now or in the future.”

Stralia’s eyes narrowed. “Do you really mean that?”

The question weighed on my gut like a rock, but before I could respond, there was a knock on the door, and I inhaled sharply, knowing it was Zephyrine calling on me for our training date.

“Dammit!” I swore, knowing that Stralia’s presence was not apt to be well received by my future wife. “Stralia...”

She smirked lightly and shrugged, unbothered by my discomfort. For half a second, I contemplated pretending that I wasn’t there, but I refused to reduce myself to that level. I

scowled at the blonde and stalked toward the door, casting Stralia a warning look.

“I’ll be right out,” I informed Zephyrine, poking my head out.

She smiled at me warmly, and my chest tightened at her beauty, but as her lips parted to answer, I felt a brush of movement behind me, and Stralia joined the conversation.

“I’m just leaving,” she cooed sweetly.

I watched Zephy’s face change into confusion, then shock, and then anger. I whirled around to confront Stralia, but the fae had already pushed past me to make her way into the hallway. I cringed as Zephy’s eyes took in her skimpy attire.

“Miss Zephyrine,” Stralia drawled, offering an exaggerated curtsy toward Zephyrine before vanishing down the hallway.

Accusingly, my bride-to-be stared at me, but without a word, she spun around to leave.

“Zephy—”

“It’s all right,” she rasped, not looking back.

I grabbed at her arm, and she tried to wrench away, but she was no match for my hold as I yanked her into the privacy of my suites. The last thing I needed were more rumors circulating among the staff by catching us arguing.

“Let me go!” she shouted, the emotion in her voice cracking me.

I closed the door with my free hand and shook my head.

“Not until you listen to me,” I replied evenly. “It’s not what you think.”

“I think you had a half-naked fae in your suites. Are you saying I dreamed that?” she retorted.

“I mean that nothing happened between Stralia and me.”

Zephyrine snorted in disbelief, folding her arms over her chest. “You lied to me about her. You *are* still involved with her!”

“I didn’t lie!” I shot back. But I willed myself to calm down. Stralia and I did have a past, and I had been dishonest with Zephy when I introduced myself as Axel when we first met. She had good reason to question me. “She came to me unexpectedly. I told her to leave.”

“Yes. It looks like you were trying very hard to get her out.”

I glowered. “Sarcasm isn’t a good look on a queen.”

“Adultery isn’t a good look on a king!”

We glared at one another for a moment, and I was forced to draw in a breath before the matter could escalate. “I understand why you’re upset, Zephyrine, but you’re wrong about what you believe happened here. Why would I have a mistress here when I knew you were coming?”

Her face softened slightly. “Maybe because you’re a cruel sadist?”

My jaw tightened. “Is that what you think of me?”

She dropped her chin, but she didn’t answer.

“I asked Stralia to leave, but she is having a difficult time accepting that she is no longer the main focus of my attention.”

Furtively, Zephyrine snuck a glance at me, and I offered her a taut smile. “Yes. I’m saying that you are, Zephy.”

She blushed and looked away again.

“You may not know me well, but I think you know me well enough to know that I’m not a sadist. I don’t have any intentions of hurting you.”

“I don’t know that. I know you’ve already lied to me once,” she blurted out.

I tensed at the reminder. “And I explained why. I wanted to know the real you.”

“And I don’t know the real you because of your little ploy.”

Sighing, I nodded, reaching for her hand. “I can see why you feel that way, but I haven’t hidden any of myself from you, Zephy. What you see is what you get.”

She lifted her head and peered at me.

“Does that worry you?” I half-joked, but I was genuinely afraid of the answer.

“I’m not sure yet,” she admitted, but I could see that her guard was lowering. “You told me that you and Stralia were friends, that she wasn’t a problem—”

I leaned in and silenced her worries with a long, deep kiss, but halfway through, she stopped me. “You can’t quiet my concerns by distracting me, Cade,” she murmured, her luminous eyes pleading.

“That’s not my intention, My Queen,” I reassured her. “I was only trying to comfort you.”

She swallowed. “I’m not comforted. I’m worried that this will continue.”

My fingers stroked her face, and she exhaled, her lids dropping as she succumbed to the pulsating sensation of our connection.

“There is nothing to continue because it’s as I said before—there is nothing happening between Stralia and me. In fact, just before you arrived, I told her under no uncertain terms that if she arrives in my suites again, she will be escorted from the palace permanently.”

I waited for Zephyrine to show pleasure at my declaration, but sadness overtook her face.

“Zephy... I want this to work between us,” I insisted. “But if you are going to look for problems at every turn—”

“I can’t help it if they’re in front of me at every turn!”

I grinned, unable to resist reacting to her snappiness. My palms cupped her face fully now, and I drew her into a kiss again. This time, she didn’t resist in the least, and a wave of desire washed through me. I lifted my lips to nuzzle my mouth against her ear and whispered softly.

“You have nothing to worry about,” I vowed. “Not with me.”

Once again, my lips crushed to hers, and I felt the last of her resolve slip out of the oblong windows of my suite, her arms encircling my waist eagerly.

CHAPTER 12

ZEPHY

Electrifying bolts rushed through me as the tip of Cade's tongue prodded through my open lips. The doubts I had about him and Stralia lingered, but they were impossible to confront with the power of his body pressed against me.

My own mouth responded, sucking back gently, his eyes closing in sync with mine, our embrace growing tighter on both ends. I felt him release a sigh, the friction of our tongues urging his movements, and he grew more aggressive. Suddenly, I found myself pinned to the mattress of his bed, on my back.

I gasped, staring up at him as he lifted his head and bit his lower lip.

Was this allowed? Could I do this?

I had no illusions about what was expected of me once we were married, but beforehand? Could I give myself to the King like this? Did it sully our union in some way going forward? This was not something any tutor had ever taught me in preparation for queenhood.

It didn't matter. My reservations melted away, dissolved as Cade's lips fell onto mine again to rouse yet another torrent of heat through my small frame.

My arms linked up around the base of his neck to tease the thick strands of dark hair, and he instantly relaxed his intense kisses as if my touching his head calmed him. His hold became gentler, the kisses lighter as they lifted to explore my cheek and neck. Goosebumps painted my flesh, and it felt as

though Cade explored every one of them along the way, searching every pore with his mouth and tongue, leaving no part of me neglected.

His nose nuzzled into every crevice, escalating the foreign but sweet sensations overcoming me, my grip on his hair tightening inadvertently as he lowered himself over the curve of my throat. My head bucked backward to allow him access, a soft shiver rushing through me over and over again.

“My Queen,” he whispered in a voice so low, I almost didn’t hear him.

Oh, how that had annoyed me the first time he’d said it, but now...

Is he only doing this to distract me? A sensible, irritating voice of sensibility rang through my mind, but I silenced it, fully closing my eyes as I arched up more, guiding him along the buttons of my dress, toward the swell of my breasts.

His hands cupped them, exploring the taut, hard nipples, teasing them before exposing them to the open air. I wriggled against the material to free myself and let him see me in all my nakedness. I was fully ready for whatever he wanted to do to me, the pulsating between my legs growing more intense with each second.

I moaned when he latched onto my right breast, heat spiking through my entire form, my legs rising to wrap around him, drawing him closer. It was then that I felt the bulge of his thick, hard cock, as ready for me as I was for him. I let out another groan of pleasure, Cade’s lips fixating harder as his hands reached beneath me to cup my ass, drawing me upward. I released my hold on his hand to free him of his clothing restraints, my self-control fully diminished now.

But just as I unbuttoned his pants, he released my nipple, strong fingers replacing his hands, blue eyes boring into me as my own popped open.

Resting his chin on my breastbone, his breaths uneven, he offered me a jagged smile. “I’ve wanted to do this from the moment I first saw you,” he confessed.

I couldn't find the words to respond, the excitement building inside me preventing me from speaking coherently, but he didn't require a reply as his face continued along the flat of my stomach, fingers curling around the hem of my panties to pull them away ruthlessly.

I propped myself on my elbows, baffled by the turn of events.

What was he doing?

His face buried along the center of my thighs, spreading me fully, and I wanted to stop him, but curiosity and an intense desire for him to continue prevented me from speaking my mind aloud. When his mouth found the cleft between my thighs, I cried out, shocked and aroused, stunned by the action.

Any time I had dared to sneak a moment of pleasure to myself in the quiet of my room, it hadn't prepared me for what Cade was doing at that moment.

"What are you doing?" I whimpered.

My excited utterance did nothing to slow his deep, delving laps, and my yelps of pleasure didn't diminish as he dove deeper.

"Cade!" I gasped, falling back against the mattress.

If I had quivered before, my body fully shook now, fingers clutching to the sheets of his bed for some kind of grounding. His hands dug further into my ass, raising me up to immerse himself fully inside me, like he had been there before. My knees locked around his head, but if he noticed, he made no effort to move them.

My groans became louder, more impassioned with the strokes of his tongue. His movements got harder and faster against the throbbing nub of my center, and when he inserted a finger inside me, I could hold out no longer. I shrieked, turning my head one way and the other, allowing my release to spill from my body. But Cade didn't move away, continuing to lick and suck my clit, and I felt yet another climax build inside me.

"Oh..." I whimpered. "It's happening again."

He chuckled, the vibration only encouraging the release, and the second came much faster than the first, leaving me quaking and sweating when Cade finally raised his head up to meet my gaze once more.

“You are truly sublime, Zephy of Carrottrove,” he rasped, sliding back up my body, his weight crushing into me.

But that was hardly what I noticed as I reached eagerly for him. The thickness of his erection poked against me, sliding slickly over my soaked middle, my tender core sensitive but so ready for him.

His mouth crushed to mine again, and I raised my legs up to lock my feet around his hips, his pants having slipped off entirely while he went down on me. My hips bucked upward to encourage him in me, and he backed up to look at me as I panted.

“Have you...?” he asked quietly.

I swallowed, shaking my head, and he smiled, placing another soft kiss on my lips.

“I won’t hurt you,” he promised.

I didn’t respond, but I arched up toward him again, begging him to take me with the movements alone. He didn’t need any more encouragement.

I shouldn’t have been surprised by the way he filled me, but having no frame of reference, I screamed out, my hands clutching to the rippled muscles of his shoulders. I tensed, expecting pain much worse than it was.

“Are you all right?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I mewled. “Don’t stop. Please!”

“Shh,” he urged me, slowing his movement to ease his way inside me softly. “Just relax.”

His advice was sound. As my legs eased against him, he finished filling me, and I cried out again, clinging to him desperately as if holding on for life. But now, it wasn’t so painful, and Cade was a tender lover.

Instantly, he fell into a deep, penetrating rhythm, which took me a long moment to find on my own, the fusion of painful pleasure keeping me from the sync as my palms sweated, and I fought to catch my grip against his smooth skin.

His thrusts were deep and long, each one stealing my breath. He was locked inside me, my walls drawing him in for more, but soon, the pain gave way to full pleasure, and I was on my way to my third orgasm, my nails digging into his flesh.

This moment—whatever was happening between us—felt right.

We moved together in a perfect rhythm, our bodies intertwined as one. The pleasure was intense, and I was barely able to stay conscious, as surges of ecstasy ripped through me. The intensity built until it reached its peak, and I felt myself starting to come undone.

“I will do this every night with you, My Queen,” he swore, and the prospect only made me wetter.

“I can’t wait,” I squeaked back, meaning it.

I wanted nothing more in that moment than to be in Cade’s bed every single night, as his queen.

His cock grew hotter and larger inside me, a grunt falling from his lips.

“Are you ready for me, Zephy?” he growled, pounding against me until I felt as though I were part of the mattress itself.

“Yes, My King,” I mewled, holding fast to him and closing my eyes, on the brink of coming again.

My climax came crashing down like thunder, the intensity overwhelming me. My body felt as if it was floating, the sensations pounding through me couldn’t be contained in my own skin. Wave after wave of intense, blissful flutters raced through every nerve.

With a final groan, hot streams spurted into me, and Cade clung to me, our bodies closer than they had ever been.

His orgasm seemed to go on forever, but when he had finally finished, he lay at my side, breathing heavily as he stared at the ceiling overhead, hands folded over his chest as he struggled to collect himself.

Warily, I peeked at him, sure that he would order me out of his chambers like he would a concubine or whore. I waited for the feelings of shame to overcome me as I realized I had not held onto my honor and kept myself until marriage.

He could change his mind about marrying me, I thought, sickened by my impulsiveness.

“Are you all right?” Cade asked suddenly, turning to prop his head up on an open palm, his body spread vertically across as he looked at me. “You’re very pale.”

“I-I’m a bit shaky,” I admitted.

It wasn’t a lie.

“I’ll have Grisella fetch you a concoction—”

“No!” I interjected quickly, causing Cade to frown. I cleared my throat quickly. “I’ll be fine. I just need a minute.”

He continued to stare at me expectantly. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong, Zephy.”

I finally turned fully to look at him, thoughts of Stralia dancing in my head despite what we had just shared.

“I... I don’t want to be thrown out like yesterday’s news,” I informed him tersely.

Cade returned my look, his face hardening at the analogy. “Did someone discard you?”

Embarrassed, I pulled the duvet over my naked body, suddenly feeling very vulnerable. “Not yet.”

Understanding filled Cade’s eyes, but he maintained a slightly irritated expression. “But you’re worried that I’ll get bored with you,” he said coldly.

I fixated on the sheet in front of me, but Cade did not let me look away as he sat up straight. “You are going to be my

queen,” he told me, an odd flatness to his voice. “I’m not throwing you away, Zephy.”

My heart fluttered nervously.

“Are we really going to get married?” I asked worriedly.

“That is why you’re here, isn’t it?”

I nodded, wishing I didn’t have the need to ask so many questions, but my nature forbade me from stifling my curiosity. I needed to look closely at his face and read the answer in his brilliant blue irises.

“I don’t know what you’re worried about exactly, Zephyrine,” Cade grumbled, sounding annoyed that I had implied he was going to call off the whole wedding now. “I meant what I said. I am looking forward to spending every night at your side.”

My head jerked up hopefully, but as I looked at him, his expression remained drawn, as if his words didn’t quite match his true feelings.

“Will you be announcing the date of the ceremony soon?” I breathed, addressing the elephant in the room.

Cade bobbed his head. “I had intended to do that after the gala and your speech,” he informed me, sending shockwaves of relief through my core. “You really should work on your patience, Zephy. I’ve heard it said that it’s some kind of virtue.”

“I have other virtues,” I quipped.

Cade reached for me, pulling me close against his body to kiss me softly.

“Yes,” he agreed, curling his muscular frame against mine and once more eliminating all of my concerns. “You certainly do. I can’t wait to learn every last one of them.”

I savored the feeling of being in his arms for the moment, my eyes closing as he held me.

I must stop overthinking this. I have found a kindred spirit in Cade—a lover and a friend. This is precisely what I’d hoped

for.

It was all going to work out in the end, after all. I had nothing to worry about.

CHAPTER 13

CADE

The more time I spent with Zephyrine, the more I realized that she truly was a good fit for my wife. Aside from being a powerful fae, she could potentially command the respect of the kingdom—if she learned to tone down her impulsiveness. And that was something I was sure I could assist with.

She had come to me as a virgin as well. It had been expected, but I hadn't genuinely believed that was what I'd be getting. Now I had been her first, her only, and she truly belonged to me. The thought rushed shivers through me, arousing me in the most sporadic and inopportune times. I couldn't stop catching whiffs of her in all corners of the palace as I went about royal business, distracting me on occasion.

“Alpha, did you hear me?” Ryland asked, shattering my latest reverie.

Guiltily, I looked up and stared at the faces that belonged to the Council of Ministers. I'd almost forgotten where I was in the moment, my mind locked on the naked perfection of Zephy's form.

“Of course I heard you,” I lied. “You're arguing about the budget. Again.”

“It's not an argument!” Yasmir cried out, and I was relieved that I'd guessed right. I hadn't really been listening. “You're not allotting the proper funds where they need to go!”

“Didn't we agree that this would wait until after the coronation?” I grumbled. “I'm getting a little weary of

rehashing the same irritating argument every single meeting.”

“Apologies, Alpha,” Hampstermeyer called out, standing from his place in the queue. “May I inquire about the gala tonight?”

Unexpectedly, I tensed.

“What about it?” I demanded, leaning forward in my chair.

The fae offered me a gold-toothed smile.

“I’ve heard Miss Zephyrine will make an address. Is that true?”

I sat back, my pulse racing for reasons I couldn’t identify.

“It is. A large reason for tonight’s event is to formally introduce Miss Zephyrine of Carrotrove to the kingdom of Ironhelm.”

“Will she speak?” Sepher called out.

My head moved toward him, my eyes narrowing. There was a shift in the atmosphere as Zephyrine’s name came about, one that I didn’t easily identify, but it troubled me.

“I just confirmed that she will make an address,” I replied slowly, my gaze darting about to read the faces of my cabinet. Some of them exchanged looks I didn’t understand, while others nodded approvingly. “Is there something I should know?”

A deep silence fell over the room, and I glanced at Ryland, who stood at my side, staring perfectly straight ahead.

“If I find out that someone is withholding information about the future queen...” I allowed my threat to hang over them, but even so, no one spoke, and I had no choice but to allow the Council of Ministers to continue without another discussion of Zephyrine, but the questions about her weighed on me well after the meeting was over.

I pulled Ryland aside to ask about it. “What was that about?”

“What?” he asked, genuinely confused.

“Why were they asking about Zephyrine?”

Ryland chuckled. “Everyone is curious about your queen-to-be, Cade. She’s been here for weeks, and no one has seen much of her. There are theories running rampant on the internet about her, but the longer she stays in, the more intrigue surrounds her. Coupled with the fact that you had Stralia reassigned to the north wing...”

More tension stiffened my shoulders. “What does Stralia have to do with anything?”

Ryland’s eyebrows raised. “Cade, we’ve been friends since we were kids. I know Stralia, too, remember? You don’t have to pretend with me that you two haven’t been lovers all along.”

I bristled at the blunt reminder. I would rather have the subject of Stralia never come up again. “Zephyrine and I will be married soon. Stralia and I are friends now—a mutual decision.”

“Does Stralia know that?”

My eyes became slits. “What is she saying?” I growled. “Is she causing problems?”

Ryland balked and shook his head. “No... no, I don’t know,” he sputtered quickly. “I’m just saying that you two have history. You can’t just walk away from that because of an arranged union. Putting Stralia in another part of the palace isn’t going to put her out of your life. If you really wanted that, you would have banished her from Ironhelm.”

Aghast, I gaped at him. “I’m not banishing Stralia from Ironhelm!” I growled. “I still care about her, even if we can’t be together. She’s not a child, Ryland. She’s always known that this day was coming.”

The fae hung his head in contrition. “I’m not trying to rile you up, Cade,” he promised. “You were just asking about what the others were saying.”

I stared at Ryland, unspeaking, as I tried to unearth what he’d said.

“Are you suggesting that Stralia is going to cause problems for Zephy?” I croaked worriedly.

It was a thought I’d had myself, after all.

But Ryland’s eyes popped. “No! Not at all!” he protested, shaking his head. “I’m saying that the kingdom waits with bated breath to see how this drama unfolds.”

I moaned. “Doesn’t everyone have more important things to worry about than the lives of the royals?” I demanded.

“Probably,” Ryland replied with a dry chuckle. “But it’s so much more entertaining to follow your lives.”

Grimacing, I headed out of the cabinet, back into the palace to prepare for that night’s gala.

I’m surrounded by a bunch of children, I grumbled silently. They should all be ashamed of themselves.



I WAS INEXPLICABLY nervous as I descended the main stairs toward the ballroom, taking note of every detail along the way. There was a heaviness in the air, but it was unattainable. I couldn’t quite place it and reasoned that I was the one causing it.

The liveried staff wore their formal red and black uniforms for the affair, each in a line on either side of the double hall, awaiting my instructions. But under Grisella’s guidance, there was not much to tell them. As always, Grisella had done what she was supposed to do, and the common areas were enchanting and fully prepared for the impending guests.

“Is everything satisfactory, Alpha?” Grisella asked anyway, and I nodded.

“Where is Zephyrine?”

“She is already in the ballroom, Alpha.”

I made my way toward the center of the main floor, Grisella and Ryland stalking after me silently. I hadn’t been

able to shake the sense of uneasiness all day, and even as I found nothing wrong with my surroundings, my gut warned me of impending issues.

As Father used to say, "If you look for trouble, you're apt to find it." Let sleeping dogs lie, Cade. There's nothing to see here.

I paused before the intricate double doors, smoothing the front of my tuxedo jacket before Ryland stepped forward to release the handle and allow me inside. The ballroom was aglow with dragonflies, their zipping lights swirling to enhance the dim ambiance as the orchestra prepared for the evening.

Instantly, my gaze fell on Zephyrine, her flowing gown of crimson spilling over the marble floors, her back to me. Her dark hair was piled into a complicated style atop her head, kept in place by pearl combs that popped like stars in the night over her ebony crown. She peered out of the full, arched windows, overlooking the courtyard and into the night sky. Her maid, Maywin, stood at her side, whispering quietly, their voices not quite reaching me until I neared them.

Abruptly, they both turned, and my breath caught a moment, the swell of Zephyrine's cleavage against the silken material of the gown increasing my blood pressure substantially.

"Alpha!" Maywin choked, shocked by my sudden arrival. She dipped into a curtsy as Zephyrine straightened herself to face me.

"My King," she greeted me.

I smiled warmly at the pair.

"So much for being fashionably late," I remarked dryly. "We're the first to arrive. That's cause for a drink, I believe."

I turned to find a servant, but I didn't have to look far. A tray with two goblets arrived before I fully pivoted. Picking up a stem, I handed one to Zephy and extended my arm toward her.

She accepted my arm and the drink, allowing me to guide her toward the head of the room where our thrones sat on a podium.

“Are we really supposed to sit up there all night?” she asked worriedly.

“You’ll get used to it,” I promised with a chuckle.

“I don’t think I will.”

I cast her a sidelong look, wondering if she was right. I had been born into this life, after all. She was being thrust into it, and I needed to give her time to get used to it.

“I suppose we’ll see, won’t we?” I remarked, leading her up the short flight of steps. “Has your speech been vetted properly?”

“I think so. Aradia approved it with some changes, but I’m not sure...”

“You should trust her. She’s a very good enchantress. She’s been an advisor to the kingdom for over a century.”

Zephyrine didn’t comment, but I could see that she was having a difficult time trusting anyone.

Impulsively, I reached for her hand and squeezed it gently. “This is all going to take some getting used to, but you will find your way eventually, just as I did.”

“That’s easy for you to say. This is all you’ve ever known.”

No. Once, I knew much more than this, but it was stolen from me.

I was saved from answering as the ballroom doors again opened and a small flock of guests began to enter.

“Let the festivities begin,” I commented wryly, and Zephyrine grimaced lightly.

“I don’t suppose you know a spell for opening the floor to swallow me whole, do you?”

“I do,” I replied, squeezing her hand again. “But you’ll be hard-pressed to get it out of me.”

“Spoilsport,” Zephyr muttered with a sigh.

I laughed and kissed her cheek. “You’ll do wonderfully. I’m right here by your side. You’re going to knock them dead.”



BUT FOR ALL of Zephyrine’s reservations, she handled the gala with decorum and class, her conversation polite, her discussions non-confrontational. It was almost as if she had slipped into a completely different personality, a comment I made to Aradia when I caught her later in the evening.

“Have you been working with her?” I asked, watching Zephyrine in admiration. “She’s demure and sweet. I hardly recognize her as the same fae who was ready to wreak havoc upon her arrival.”

“Maybe you simply haven’t given her the opportunity to prove herself in any meaningful way,” the enchantress chided me.

Guiltily, I nodded in agreement. I silently vowed not to underestimate Zephyrine again. Excusing myself, I went to her side and guided her away.

“It’s time for your speech,” I informed her. “Are you ready?”

“No,” she sighed. “But I’ll do it, anyway.”

“That’s the spirit.”

I helped her back toward the throne stage and called the gala to attention. When the band had stopped playing music and the conversation diminished, I began.

“As you’re aware, I will be celebrating my twenty-fifth birthday in a week’s time. As per Ironhelm law and tradition, I will officially be crowned king upon my marriage to an appropriate queen—in this case, Zephyrine, First Fae of

Carrotrove, as contracted in the blood oath between our forefathers a long while before either one of us was even conceived.”

I looked at Zephyrine, who looked magnificent under the spotlights from above, and she managed a weak smile. “I was very fortunate that Miss Zephyrine was not born a troll or siren, but a beautiful, spirited fae who has already captured my attention and will undoubtedly steal your hearts. Miss Zephyrine would like to speak a few words. Zephy?”

I turned to offer her my hand, and Zephyrine took it, rising from her throne to smooth out the front of her crimson gown with her other hand. I caught the beads of nervous sweat on her face as she looked into the sea of faeries, swallowing thickly. “Thank you all for honoring me here on this lovely night,” she began. “As you know, I hail from Carrotrove...”

Out of the corner of my eye, a flash of movement caught my attention, and then a heap of snarling fur came rushing toward us. Someone screamed, and my primal instincts took over as the bear shifter’s teeth sunk into Zephyrine’s extended arm as she warded off the attack.

My body morphed into my wolf form, hind legs springing into action, claws latching onto the back of the grizzly as my own fangs dug hard and deep into his throat, pulling ruthlessly.

A feral groan of agony filled the ballroom, overtaking the shrieks of terror. Red sprayed the thrones as everyone began to flee in all directions, but I did not let go. I continued to rip at the attacker, ensuring his throat was fully in my mouth. Warning blasts emanated from the guards’ guns, and a cloud of blue magic erupted over the light of the crystal chandeliers.

I didn’t take note of who had released the spell, the bear in my paws gargling. He swung around, swiping his massive paws. But my claws remained deep in his flesh, the life seeping out of him until he finally succumbed to his brutal injuries, collapsing on the ground at Zephyrine’s feet.

The din in the ballroom reached a fever pitch, but I could focus on nothing but the blood pouring from Zephyrine’s arm, the dazed look on her pale face stopping my heart. Her

complexion was an unhealthy opaque, the blue hue only enhancing the eeriness of her state.

Finally releasing the bear, I rushed toward her, urging her silently to climb onto my back. In a haze, she seemed to comprehend my instructions, and the moment she was on me, I fled the gala, bumping past the hysterical guests in the process. All I could think about was getting Zephy to safety.

CHAPTER 14

ZEPHY

I barely remembered getting back to my suite on Cade's back. Shock consumed me, a fog overtaking my mind as the walls of the palace whizzed past me.

It was a miracle I was able to hold on to him at all, but when my head began to clear, I lay on my bed, Cade's naked fae form over me, his eyes closed as his lips moved. It took several minutes before I was able to make sense of what he was saying.

"W-what happened?" I mumbled, twisting my head one way, then the other.

"Shh!" he ordered me without opening his eyes, his hands still extended over my body without touching.

My gaze fell toward my bleeding arm, and suddenly, the horrific memory of what had just occurred came rushing back to my mind in a torrent. The rush of the massive bear, the terrifying feel of my flesh breaking as the attack came for me, the ultimate knowledge that my life was going to end right then and there.

A low wail of horror fell out of my mouth, popping Cade's eyes back open again.

"Are you in pain?" he demanded, crouching to my side, his red-streaked hands reaching for my face. "Shh, it's all right, Zephy. I'm here. You're safe now."

The cry trailed off, and I buried my face in his bare shoulder, tears falling down my face.

“Why?” I moaned. “Why did he do that? Who was he? I didn’t do anything to him!”

“He’ll never hurt you again. No one will ever hurt you; I swear it,” he growled, his words only making me cry harder.

I struggled against my overwhelming emotion, wiping my eyes.

“Who was that?” I demanded again. “Why did he come after me?”

“Never mind that now,” Cade told me firmly. “Let me look at your arm.”

Begrudgingly, I sat back and allowed him to study the wound, the sight of it churning my stomach.

“Call on Maywin. She’ll create a salve,” I mumbled, the dizziness returning.

“There’s no need to call her in,” Cade informed me, placing his hands over my puncture wounds and abrasions.

Immediately, I felt the pulsating heat of healing fire through my veins, and I gasped as I felt the flesh bind back together. Blinking, I gawked at him.

“You’re a healer!” I choked, pulling my arm back to look.

“So are you,” he replied lightly, turning away in embarrassment.

“Not like this!” I insisted. “You’re a sage!”

“No,” he said quickly, casting me a warning look. “And don’t go around advertising my skillset.”

My lips parted as I realized that, like my ability to alter the weather, he had kept his healing magic under wraps as well.

“I don’t think you’re being trafficked,” I said, again staring at the place where the bear had taken a chunk out of my arm. “Why do you keep it a secret?”

The marks were entirely gone, and I could barely believe my eyes.

“I’m more concerned about others conflating my talents with dark magic,” he explained.

I scoffed. “You’re the king!”

“More the reason for them to create a scandal. Please, Zephy, don’t say anything.”

“I won’t,” I promised him. “I wouldn’t.”

Our eyes locked, and his face relaxed, his arms falling over my shoulders.

“You scared me for a minute there.”

“Who was that?” I asked for a third time, my head still fuzzy. “Why did he come after me?”

Cade shook his head. “I don’t have an answer for you, Zephy, but there are always anarchists who lurk on the edges of society, looking to cause civil unrest, particularly during times of political change.”

“That’s not reassuring in the least,” I muttered, sinking back on the bed.

“You must know I won’t allow anything to happen to you.”

I stared up at him, hearing the sincerity of his statement, and he gnawed on the insides of his cheeks as if he was surprising himself with his own proclamations.

“It’s the alpha’s job to protect his palace,” he rushed on, and I smirked lightly.

I sat up again and reached for his face, pulling him toward me. “Whatever the reason, I’m very grateful that you were there for me, Cade. If you hadn’t been—”

“Don’t think like that,” he interjected fiercely. “It was a horrible fluke thing—and it won’t happen again. We will increase your security, and I won’t leave your side.”

My heart skipped at his promise, our lips inches apart.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “It should have never happened in the first place.”

I started to deny that he had any fault, but he leaned forward to kiss me into silence, and I eagerly accepted his kiss, my arms encircling his neck readily. I didn't want his guilt or contrition, but I did want him. I thought about little else but Cade these days.

"You should rest," he mumbled unconvincingly, but I shut him up with my own deeper kiss, my tongue jutting into his mouth to stop him, my pull dragging him toward me on the bed.

His fingers released the combs from my hair, sending a shiver down my spine as his bare skin touched that of my arms. My long tresses fell over the curves of my body, his fingers moving to unzip my dress.

Cade pulled back slightly, his blue eyes shining with something I couldn't easily identify, but when he spoke, I understood what it was I saw.

"I was terrified when he came for you," he admitted breathlessly. "I thought I was going to lose you."

Startled by his confession, I merely stared back at him, unsure of how to respond in any way but physically.

My mouth crashed back to his again, and without allowing our mouths to part, I overtook him, straddling his naked form, but he didn't resist. His hands encircled my waist, finally free to wriggle my billowing, crimson dress free from my body to make me as naked as him. The feel of his bare hands against my nude back instantly relieved me, draining the last of my fear from my body.

This was strange for me, sprawled over him, but simultaneously, it felt natural, my hips gyrating against him, relishing the bulge of his thickness against the warmth of my own center. Cade's palms slid around the front of my body, his hands freely cupping my now naked breasts, the dress discarded on the floor beside my bed.

I sighed with contentment, even as his fingers tweaked roughly at my nipples, my rocking growing harder as his erection grew beneath me. His mouth broke the kiss first,

finding my cheek and then my ear, his hot breath only arousing me more. The fusion of his mounting passion and knowing that he genuinely cared for my well-being made me heady. He had been worried about me. I had read it all over his face.

“You’re safe,” he mumbled, his mouth falling against the curve of my neck, and I pulled his head lower, arching my back to expose my breasts to his waiting lips. He took to the right one, licking the taut skin slowly before latching on and sending a thousand shivers through me.

My grip on his head tightened, forcing his kisses to increase in tension, urgent but tender, each suckle of his lips drawing another surge of heat through me. My buttocks rose, and his hand moved lower to slide my panties aside.

His thumb immediately located my pulsating clit. I cried out once, my eyes closing, and my tooth fell into my bottom lip.

“Are you ready for me already, My Queen?” he rasped.

I couldn’t find my voice to respond, but the question was rhetorical. He knew I was. Still, he didn’t stop his little game of driving me wild, leaving me in position on top of him, my frame quivering restlessly now as he raised my passions higher.

Releasing one hand from his hair, I slid another to his engorged shaft and stroked in time to his caress, savoring his groan as I did. He pulled his head back and stared at me, a fusion of fire and desire lighting his beautiful eyes.

“I’m going to take you, *My Queen*,” he muttered hotly.

I nodded, still unable to speak, and without further encouragement, he slipped inside me, once again stealing my breath. His movements were gentle this time, his hips moving slowly so as not to hurt me in the aftermath of what I had endured, but his fingers had already brought me so close to the brink, I couldn’t take the lack of momentum.

Our eyes locked again, and he grabbed for my neck, pulling me toward him. I strained to hear his words.

“You’re mine, Zephy. All of you,” he rasped. “Those lips, hips, breasts—no one is ever going to take you from me.”

Pressing my chest to his mouth again, I set him back, setting the pace myself, my hips grinding against him as he met my breasts with his tongue.

The pleasure was building from my core, a spark that grew with each push and pull of our bodies.

“Oh, Zephy,” he groaned, his thrusts deepening, his length fully filling me. I cried out, a palm falling onto the mattress for support as he grew harder inside me. “You’re so beautiful.”

The intensity of his words and touches sent sparks through my body, my breathing coming faster as I moved with him. I could feel the pleasure reaching its peak within me and then spilling over into blissful exhaustion, into contentment and warmth that engulfed us both.

I didn’t slow my movements. Resuming his kisses, his hands clasped my bottom, driving me down, and I again moaned, his teeth closing around the tense flesh of my nipple in the process.

I closed in around him, sucking him to me, my breaths caught, sweat forming in my every pore.

“Gods!” I yelped, feeling yet another orgasm mount, but Cade’s moans of pleasure overrode mine.

“Fuck,” he growled, hands digging ruthlessly into the bare skin of my rear, holding me down until I truly could not breathe. “Oh, Zephy, you’re so tight. You feel so good.”

My eyes fell shut, and I allowed myself to succumb to the second climax, as he also reached his heights. We exploded in unison, my hot gush sliding over his hardness as he streamed into me. His mouth fell off my breast, and I fell onto his chest, releasing the sheets, his body still quivering in conjunction with mine.

“I’ve got you, Zephy,” he whispered, his hands stroking my hair as I struggled to find my bearings. “I won’t let you go. You’re safe.”

He said all the right things, all the things I needed to hear and wanted to hear, and I truly believed him.

Sliding to the side, I remained under his strong arm, finally collecting myself, head buried in his bare shoulder.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” Cade told me, but I heard the strain in his voice. “What happened here tonight won’t happen again.”

I didn’t move, my fingers trailing over the perfect lines of his sculpted chest. “You can’t promise that.”

“I am promising you that. That shifter was clearly some rogue asshole. I’ll get to the bottom of whoever he was and why that happened, but I want you to rest easily. Guards will be stationed outside of your rooms from now on. You’ll have security everywhere you go if I’m not with you.”

I finally raised my head and stared at him in dismay. “That sounds awful,” I told him, upset by the prospect. “I don’t want to feel like a prisoner, Cade.”

“It’s for your own safety, My Queen.”

I pursed my lips, stifling the argument, but Cade seemed to read it in my eyes, anyway. “It won’t be forever,” he added. “Just until I can guarantee that there will be no more attempts on your life.”

I dropped my head back to his chest, listening to the steady, secure sound of his heartbeat. “If you think that’s best, Cade.”

“Your safety is the most important thing to me, Zephy. You are the future of Ironhelm... my future. I will kill anyone that ___”

He didn’t finish his thought, but he didn’t need to. The notion struck terror in my heart. Could there be more threats to my life? And would they succeed next time?

CHAPTER 15

CADE

I waited until Zephyrine was fast asleep before untangling myself from her arms and retreating to the palace corridors. The chaos had died down, except for the fact that no one had seen me, and the palace staff were going out of their minds wondering what had happened.

When the guards finally set eyes on me, relief overtook the excitement.

“You can’t just disappear after something like that, Cade!” Ryland exploded when I reappeared in the ballroom. “The entire security team is searching the kingdom for you.”

“I was ensuring that Zephy was safe, thus doing your job for you.” I stared at him forcefully until he looked away in embarrassment. “I want to see all the security footage, and I want extra cameras installed around Zephy’s quarters. I want guards protecting her at all hours. I’ve already got someone there for the first shift, but I’m putting you personally on the task of making sure she’s guarded.”

Ryland agreed, and I looked around the now empty room. The bear shifter’s corpse had been removed, much to my chagrin. “Where is he?”

“He’s been brought to the morgue for an autopsy. We’re trying to figure out what happened,” Ryland explained. “Maybe he was cursed.”

“Who was he?”

“A carpenter from the village,” Ryland replied. “He has no record to speak of and isn’t known to authorities.”

I frowned at the revelation, but Aradia materialized before I could pepper Ryland with any other questions.

“There you are!” the enchantress called, a coy expression on her face.

I fully suspected she had already known where to find me before she caught me there, but had wisely left me alone with Zephyrine.

“Here I am,” I agreed. “What do we know about this attack? Who was the bear?”

“A carpenter—”

“I don’t care what he does for work,” I snapped impatiently. “I want to know why he did it. Why would anyone come for Zephyrine unprovoked? She hadn’t even addressed the kingdom yet. There was no reason for anyone to come after her like that!”

“He was a fae,” she offered, shrugging as if that information was useful to me in any respect. Most of the kingdom’s population was faeries, except for the odd witch and warlock.

“And?”

She raised her ancient shoulders again and cocked her head toward me.

“There’s dark magic involved here,” Aradia explained.

I paled at the suggestion. “What is that supposed to mean, Aradia?”

“I can’t say for certain. But I can sense the dark magic in the air still. It lingers. Can’t you feel it, Cade?”

“It can’t be from Leonid,” Ryland said quickly.

“Leonid?”

“The fae,” he offered, sating my confusion. “The bear.”

I grimaced and looked from the Royal Guard to the enchantress. “Tell me what’s going on here. I need to give Zephyrine some answers, so she can sleep at night.”

Aradia gave me a pleased look, which I ignored as I turned my full attention back toward Ryland. “Put your best guards on Zephyrine now. A compilation of muscle and magic to fend off future attacks.”

“I’ll encase her in a shroud to keep her safe,” Aradia offered. “But depending on how strong this dark magic is and how many are involved, I can’t be sure the shroud will hold.”

Aradia stared at me, waiting for me to approve, and I nodded my assent, but Zephy’s earlier complaint weighed heavily on me. She didn’t want to feel like a prisoner in her new home, and I didn’t want her to feel like one, either. We needed to find the source of this unprovoked action and nullify it immediately. It unsettled me in the worst way to think that something terrible could have happened to her if I hadn’t been there to stop it.

“We’ll find out why it happened,” Aradia reassured me. “Miss Zephyrine will be as protected as you.”

I said nothing but bobbed my head again, curtly.

“I want to speak with Leonid’s family,” I told them.

“He has no family,” Ryland informed me. “He was alone.”

My frown deepened. “Did he have ties to dark magic at all?”

Ryland and Aradia exchanged a glance and shook their heads.

“Not that we’ve found so far,” Ryland replied.

“Keep looking. Something like this doesn’t just happen out of nowhere. If he’s a loner, maybe he has a manifesto. Maybe he’s always harbored resentment toward the royals. You know how some of these things go.”

“A full investigation is underway as we speak, Cade,” Ryland promised me, and I believed him.

But it still wasn’t good enough.

“Keep me updated,” I told them, spinning away.

“Where are you going?” Aradia asked, sounding surprised at my departure.

“Back to Zephyrine. I don’t want her to wake and be alarmed.”

“That’s a good idea,” Aradia agreed. “Reassure Miss Zephyrine that she is safe.”

I snorted loudly. “If I hadn’t been there...” I growled at her.

“We wouldn’t have let anything happen to her,” Ryland protested, and my eyes narrowed slightly as I looked at him.

Would he have reacted if I hadn’t? It didn’t seem as if anyone else moved when Leonid attacked.

I shoved the unpleasant notion out of my mind and exited the ballroom, making my way toward Zephyrine’s suite again. I was on high alert now. Dark magic or not, no one was going to get to my queen again. I’d personally see to that.

CHAPTER 16

ZEPHY

“I hate this,” I complained in a low voice to Maywin.

My maid gave me a sympathetic look, trailing after me in the gardens, three huge guards behind her, two in front of me.

“It’s for the best,” she replied. “There hasn’t been any more trouble since that terrible night at the gala.”

“Maybe that fae was just... I don’t know, cursed or something,” I sighed, wishing the post-mortem results would come through faster.

I was tired of waiting for answers about why Leonid had come after me. According to an investigation conducted by the Royal Guards, they discovered that he shared a house with three other tradesmen, who all called him hardworking and tenacious.

No one considered Leonid anything but a quiet and pleasant soul who wouldn’t hurt a fly, let alone attack a queen. They had been shocked to hear he was tangled in dark magic and begged to be left in peace.

He’d had no logical reason to be at the gala at all, and how he had managed to slip through security was also under investigation. But so far, it appeared as though Leonid’s actions were isolated, and he acted on his own. Although, apparently, the attack was completely out of character for him.

None of this was comforting to me in any way.

“All this security is overkill,” I insisted, flopping onto one of the cabana chairs by the pool. “It’s impossible to relax when there are five sets of eyes watching my every move.”

Slipping off my robe, I noted that all the guards turned away respectfully, keeping their backs to us, but one, Jasper, cast sidelong glances at Maywin expectantly, like he was waiting for her to strip off her work uniform, too.

I sprawled my tan legs in front of me, dropping my head back against the back of the angled chair.

“I’m getting accustomed to the guards,” Maywin admitted, her gaze back toward Jasper.

My eyebrows shot up in vague amusement, but I made no comment as I realized perhaps my servant had developed a small romance right under my nose.

At least one of us is enjoying this madness. There’s some silver lining.

I couldn’t complain too much, however. In the wake of the attack, Cade had spent every possible moment with me, his worry palpable.

He didn’t want to leave me alone, and I savored his companionship, even though it was for the wrong reasons.

Maywin began to unpack the picnic basket she had brought along. I nodded toward the guards again.

“Offer them something to eat and drink, too,” I suggested. “They’ve been in the hot sun all day.”

Maywin’s face brightened. “Thank you, miss,” she said happily, rising to speak privately with Jasper, and I grinned at the sight.

I turned away to stare at the still waters of the pool, debating whether or not it was warm enough for a swim yet, the early morning hours still bearing a mild chill to the air. Inhaling the succulent summer air deeply, a small movement caught the corner of my eye. Tension sprang me forward in my seat, my sunglasses falling to the bridge of my nose, and my lips parted to call out, but the words died there when the figure

emerged from the shrubbery beyond the poolside, her finger pressed worriedly to her candy-pink lips.

Glancing behind me, I noted that all the guards were now distracted by Maywin and her picnic basket, and I slowly rose, inching toward the blonde-haired fae lingering in the bushes.

Careful to move slowly and casually, I finally wandered discreetly to where Stralia hid.

“What are you doing sneaking around like this, Stralia?” I hissed, again looking over my shoulder, sure we’d be found, but Maywin was distracting the males well enough at the moment to buy me some time.

“Forgive me, miss,” she told me, curtsying without irony or malice for once. She kept her eyes trained on the ground when she straightened. “I’ve been trying to get you alone for days, but it’s impossible with all the guards around you.”

Alarm spiked through my veins, and I stepped back. “Why?”

“Oh!” Stralia’s head jerked up, embarrassment coloring her cheeks. “I just wanted to speak with you. I’m sorry. That sounded threatening, didn’t it?”

I swallowed and kept my distance.

“Miss, what are you doing over there?” Maywin called out, and I was sure the gig was up.

Stralia ducked back into the shrubbery, shaking her head vehemently. “Please, don’t tell anyone I’m here. If the Alpha King hears about this, he’ll banish me for sure this time, and I just wanted to have a private word. I wouldn’t have come to you when guards surrounded you otherwise.”

I made a split-second decision, believing her in the heat of the moment, and whirled around to address Maywin.

“Stay where you are!” I ordered my servant as the security team started toward me. “I’m... just getting a closer look at the flowers over here.”

In unison, everyone stopped in their tracks.

They looked at one another and remained in place as I stepped back into the shrubs with Stralia.

“Please, don’t tell anyone about this,” she begged.

“Cade won’t banish you, Stralia,” I told her. “He cares about you.”

I spoke the words evenly, keeping my own sentiments out of the statement. As much as their relationship still bothered me, I couldn’t discount their history. “Is that why you’re here? You’re worried that he’s going to ask you to leave?”

“I-I can’t...” She inhaled and twisted her fingers nervously. “Could we talk tonight? Just you and me? Alone, without guards breathing down my neck?”

“I don’t see how,” I replied honestly. “I have guards with me constantly.”

Stralia looked around nervously, sweat popping over her brow as if she could sense the guards closing in.

“You could leave through Maywin’s room—or even better, through Rufus’ room. Just sneak through the adjoining doors and come to meet me.”

Again, I was struck with concern, but Stralia seemed to read my worry. “I won’t take much of your time, and we can meet in an open space—as long as it’s private. You say that Cade won’t banish me, but you underestimate how much he loves his kingdom. He sees me as a threat, and I don’t blame him. I was acting like a fool when you got here. It was hard for me to let him go.”

“Miss?” Maywin’s voice was too close now, and I decided on the spot as Stralia turned to flee, the panic on her face tangible.

“Meet me in the greenhouse at eight o’clock,” I suggested, letting her run off before Maywin could catch her.

I knew my maid wouldn’t say anything about her being there, but I also respected Stralia’s concern, despite the rocky start we had gotten off to.

“Eight o’clock,” Stralia repeated, rushing away as I pivoted back to steer my servant away.

“Are you all right?” Maywin asked worriedly as I emerged from the shrubs.

“Of course,” I panted, avoiding her inquisitive gaze. “Did you feed the guards?”

I led her toward the waiting basket, my heart pounding.

What could Stralia possibly want with me? And should I really meet her alone?

After the way she had treated me when we’d first met and what had happened at the gala, I had no reason to believe that Stralia had anything but nefarious intentions, arranging for a private meeting that Cade was not aware of.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Maywin breathed. “You’re very distracted.”

I turned to Maywin and exhaled.

“I have something to tell you,” I informed her bluntly. “But you have to swear not to tell anyone unless I don’t return tonight.”



STRALIA’S ADVICE TO duck the guards proved sound. I snuck out of Maywin’s room without alerting the guard stationed in front of my room, stealing along the shadows of the corridors toward the back doors where a few staff still remained.

I had learned that whoever manned the security cameras didn’t do a very diligent job, particularly not in the late evening hours, when the activity in the palace was minimal and streaming new episodes of their favorite shows was much more enticing. It was easy to avoid detection when the camera guards assumed that the important faeries were under flesh guard, and I took full advantage of that.

Several times, I stopped to wait for chattering butlers and maids to pass, once for a pair to stop making out, until I was

finally outside in the crisp, sweet night air, rushing silently in my favorite running shoes toward the greenhouse. Wearing a dark tank top and matching shorts, I hoped I blended in with the landscape, even against the accent fairy lights which laced through the trees of the pear orchards where the greenhouse sat.

If I were caught, I intended to fib and say I had gone to the kitchen for a snack or out into the yard for a quick run to unwind. There was only the sound of chirping crickets and tireless cicadas motoring endlessly to witness my evening rendezvous.

The moon's pale halo guided my way, and my senses were on high alert when I stood at the threshold of the greenhouse, my pulse roaring in my ears. I didn't trust Stralia, and I asked myself why I was doing this, but I had seen a naked desperation in her eyes earlier that made me want to hear her out.

Maywin knew where I was.

And I was fully prepared to wreak a full tornado on her or anyone else if they dared cross me that night.

"Stralia?" I whispered loudly. "Are you here?"

"Miss." The tall, platinum blonde fae appeared along the rows of green, her work uniform stained with the day's chores as she again curtseyed formally.

"You really don't have to do that," I muttered, embarrassed. "I'm not the queen yet."

"But you will be soon," she reminded me, ambling closer, her vivid eyes studying my face closely. "You should get used to others bowing before you. And I could use the practice. It's been a while since I've had to do it."

I stood in place, unsure of what to make of her tone. It didn't feel threatening, but how could I be sure? The gala hadn't felt threatening, either.

"Again, I apologize for the secrecy," Stralia sighed. "But if the King finds out that I asked for this meeting, he really will be furious. He wants me to leave you both alone."

I started to shake my head in denial.

“That’s not true, Stralia. Cade told me that he cares for you still,” I insisted. “He wouldn’t be mad that you were speaking to me. I think he’d want us all to be friends... if it were possible.”

She kept a safe distance and showed no signs of aggression, her head low, hands folded in front of her. I sensed no one else among us.

Was it safe to relax?

“He’s reassigned me to the worst part of the palace,” Stralia informed me. “The north wing is where the oldest servants go to die. He wants me out of sight and mind now. He’s punishing me—and probably rightfully so.”

I gawked at her, refusing to accept that, but Stralia offered me a wry half-smile. “I don’t blame him,” she added quickly. “I wasn’t being fair when you got here. He warned me to stay away, and I couldn’t do it. I... I should have, but...”

She swallowed thickly and looked down again. My heart sank, the sadness in her tone hitting a truthful note inside me.

“We’ve been so close for so long,” she went on. “I suppose I loved him even before our parents died, as little girls do love their princes. He was always so charismatic and full of life.”

A faraway look overtook Stralia’s eyes, and my gut twisted uncomfortably. “But I always knew what we had was going to come to an end. And I thought I could handle that. I mean, I told myself I could, but...” She shrugged. “The reality was something else, I guess.”

“I don’t think Cade wanted his life to be this way, either,” I murmured, unsure of what to say to placate her. There wasn’t a handbook for this kind of situation. “Neither of us knew each other when I came here.”

“But you know one another now,” Stralia replied, forcing a smile onto her lips and meeting my eyes before quickly darting her gaze away. “And I’m sure you can see why I am in so much pain, being apart from him.”

I stared at her. “I don’t know what it is you want from me, Stralia,” I breathed honestly.

She balked at my statement, her clear, emerald eyes popping in shame.

“Nothing!” she proclaimed quickly. “I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable or beg you for a favor. I just wanted you to understand that I never meant you any disrespect...”

She inhaled. “It wouldn’t have mattered who you were, you understand. It wasn’t you that I took issue with. It was the whole situation.”

“I get it, Stralia,” I agreed.

She visibly gulped and again lowered her eyes. “I really don’t want anything from you except for you to know that it’s not personal and that I don’t hate you. Although...” She inhaled again, and I stared at her expectantly, my neck tensing again.

Here it comes...

“If you can... maybe you could have him reassign me from the north wing. I swear to keep my distance from you both. I won’t cause any trouble. I’ve learned my lesson,” she babbled. “I just want to be back with my friends, in the place where I’ve always known. I’ve already lost Cade. I don’t want to lose the rest of my support system.”

Sympathy for her overwhelmed me, but it had little to do with her job placement.

She’s still very much in love with Cade. If not for this arranged union, she would likely have married him. Life is so unfair sometimes.

“I have no say in Cade’s decisions, Stralia,” I told her softly. “I can barely see myself around the palace as it is.”

“No—yes, I understand,” she mumbled, her cheeks flaming red now. “I—please, forget this meeting ever happened. I’m sorry I disturbed you.”

“You didn’t disturb me,” I corrected her, reaching for her hand gently, stepping closer. “I’m glad you came to me, and I’m sorry that you’re suffering. I will never stand in the way of your friendship with Cade. Never. These circumstances... they suck, to say the least. But you and Cade have history. I’m not an ogre. You were friends before I got here.”

Her chin lifted, and she met my eyes with wonder. “Really, miss? Do you mean that?”

“Of course,” I replied, mildly offended that she would think otherwise. “I am the one who’s new to the kingdom. My arrival shouldn’t upset the balance of things—even though I’m well aware how much it has.”

“You’ll make a good queen. The King is lucky to have you.”

More shame washed through me when she squeezed my hand and released it. “You should probably get back before someone notices you missing and they send the entire Royal Guard and Council of Ministers out looking,” she said. “Thank you for meeting with me and being so discreet.”

“You can call on me anytime, Stralia,” I reassured her. “Maybe one day, you’ll even consider *me* a friend.”

She smiled, her crystalline eyes glimmering in the moonlight. “I would like that very much.”

I returned the gesture to her hand and held her gaze a second longer, my heart breaking for her and for Cade at that moment.

How unfair for them both, I thought after I bid Stralia goodnight and retreated to my suites, a heavy blanket of despair falling over me. *If not for the blood oath, if not for me showing up here and disrupting everything, Cade and Stralia would be together.*

I couldn’t deny that the entire situation gave me an uneasy, jealous feeling, but I trusted Cade, and none of this was Stralia’s fault. I had to put my personal feelings aside and be the bigger person here.

I found Maywin pacing her room frantically when I walked back inside. She almost collapsed with relief to see me. “Miss Zephyrine!” she croaked. “I-I was just about to send for someone.”

“I wasn’t gone that long, Maywin,” I chided her.

Sheepishly, my servant shrugged. “It felt like a long time. What happened?”

I sat in the single chair next to her bed, and she immediately fell to my feet, peering up at me expectantly, like a child waiting on a bedtime story.

“She’s been reassigned to work far from the King and me—in the worst part of the palace. She came to ask me if I’d help her get back to her old placement.”

Maywin frowned lightly, shaking her head. “She works in the north wing,” she replied. “It’s not so bad there.”

“It’s bad enough if she’s removed from the only life she’s ever known because of me,” I insisted. “I suspect that she and the King have always been in love and would have been together if not for me.”

“Oh, but miss, that’s not your fault,” my servant told me passionately.

“Maybe not,” I sighed. “But it doesn’t make me feel any better about keeping two souls apart who want to be together.”

“You didn’t send her to the north wing. You don’t have any reason to feel guilty,” Maywin pressed. “And it’s really not so bad there. I’ve been. It’s just a bit more work than the rest of the palace, and it’s not as used. It sounds like she just doesn’t want to work as hard.”

“Even so...” I mumbled.

“King Cade won’t be happy if he learns that Stralia went behind his back to guilt you like this,” Maywin said with uncharacteristic sharpness. My head jerked up, and my eyes narrowed.

“And who would tell him?” I challenged.

My maid lowered her chin. “Not me, of course.”

“I’m trusting you and telling you because you are my only friend in this place, Maywin. You are the only one I can speak to freely. Please, don’t abuse my confidence.”

“I would never!”

Sighing, I sank back, dropping my neck to stare up at the ceiling, my mind racing.

“I can’t marry the King if his heart belongs to another. It’s not right on any level.” It pained me to speak those words aloud, but they were true. And yet...

“What can you possibly do about it?” Maywin asked worriedly. “You are bound to this marriage, just as King Cade is.”

Her question would play over and over in my mind for the rest of the night, because I really had no answer. What else could I do but accept my fate and embark on this pretend union of misery while my husband and his true love resided under the same roof, unable to be together?

Or worse, they would be together, and I would be made a fool for it.

A dozen awful scenarios ran through my mind, clouding the euphoria that had blinded me in the aftermath of being with Cade.

“You should discuss your concerns with the King,” Maywin suggested tentatively, but I had already asked him about Stralia, and he had not told me the truth. I couldn’t raise the subject again without betraying Stralia’s trust.

“I’m going to go to bed, and maybe watch a movie to get my mind off of all of this,” I announced, standing. “Remember, not a word of this to anyone—not even Jasper, Maywin.”

My servant blushed furiously. “I would never!”

“I believe you,” I reassured her, reaching for the door handle of the adjoining room. “Good night.”

But as I let myself into my own suite, sleep was the last thing on my mind. Suddenly, I wanted to rush off into the night and run home to Carrotrove, where my life had been so much simpler. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option anymore. My parents wouldn't take me back knowing I had broken my engagement to Cade. It would only spell disaster for the future of both our families—and Ironhelm—if I did.

I was truly stuck in a terrible predicament without escape, and for all of my magical abilities, I had no idea how to fix it.

CHAPTER 17

CADE

I didn't notice that Zephy had been avoiding me until two days later. I had dismissed her rescheduling of our training sessions and dinner plans as anxiety following the attack, and I had been so consumed with the details of learning what I could about Leonid and his intentions that I didn't delve into it.

But when she canceled our third dinner, I frowned and looked at Grisella, who delivered the message again.

"Is she sick or something?" I asked worriedly.

"Not that I'm aware of, Alpha."

"Where is she now?"

"In her suite with her maid. But I don't think she wants to be disturbed."

I smirked at the housekeeper. "Have you forgotten whose palace this is, Grisella?"

"Of course not," she mumbled. "I'm merely relaying Miss Zephyrine's wishes."

The words perplexed me more. The last time I'd seen Zephy, she had been responsive and loving.

Did something else happen that she's not telling me?

It was the only explanation I could think of, and it flew me out of the dining room toward the second floor in record time. I knocked once, and Maywin answered, her face draining of color when she saw me on the other side.

“Where is Zephyrine?” I demanded.

“Oh... Alpha...” she sputtered, tripping into a curtsy. “I—we weren’t expecting you.”

“It’s all right, Maywin.” Zephy appeared, ushering her servant away, and I stared at her face, my chest tightening with affection as I realized how much I’d missed her.

I immediately reached for her, but she drew back, allowing me inside where Maywin stood, shifting her weight uncomfortably.

“That will be all, Maywin,” Zephyrine told her. “You’re dismissed for the night.”

Uncertainly, Maywin looked at Zephyrine, confusing me more, but she didn’t argue and headed toward the adjoining door.

Again, I reached for her, but Zephy held back, turning away from me. Startled, my arms dropped.

“Zephy, what’s wrong?” I asked. “Has something happened? Something new?”

She didn’t face me, but I saw her shoulders draw back as if she was gathering her breath.

“It’s not fair to you, the way this happened,” she blurted out, still not looking at me. Confused, my eyebrows knit into a vee.

“What are you talking about, Zephy?” I implored her, stepping closer to gather her in my arms.

She resisted slightly but didn’t fully pull away this time.

Finally, she looked at me directly. “This marriage. You don’t have to go through with it, Cade.”

Baffled, my arms dropped, but just as quickly, I realized where it was coming from, and I pulled her back into my embrace.

“You don’t need to worry, Zephy,” I swore. “I meant what I said about protecting you. I did it before, and this thing with

Leonid—it was a random act of violence. Things like this won't happen all the time. I promise you.”

She tipped her head back and met my eyes, her expression not remotely relieved. “That’s not what I mean, Cade.”

My frown deepened. “What *do* you mean?”

“I mean...” She again drew in a breath before blurting out her innermost thoughts. “If you have feelings for someone else, it’s not fair for you to commit yourself to me. We can find a way out of the blood oath. You owe it to yourself to pursue your true love.”

I cocked my chin to the side to study her, a sense of shame overtaking me. “I swear to you, Stralia is not—and never has been—my true love. I know I wasn’t fair to you when you first arrived here,” I told her huskily. “That wasn’t your fault. You weren’t at all what I expected, and that’s a good thing, Zephy. Ironhelm is better for it—and so am I.”

Finally, Zephyrine’s face softened, but her eyes remained darker than usual, and I cupped her face tenderly to draw her closer.

“You don’t believe me?” I asked quietly. She swallowed and tried to look away, but I held her in place. “Do you?”

“This wasn’t fair to you,” she mumbled.

“What wasn’t?”

“I—me, coming here to complicate your life...” She seemed confounded as I pulled her closer, her arguments dying on her lips.

“You’re my partner now, Zephy,” I insisted. “You’re here to make my life easier, not more difficult.”

She lifted her head back and opened her mouth, presumably to protest again, but I stopped her with a kiss to the top of her head. “Shh,” I urged, pulling her fully into my arms. “Whatever doubts you’re having are unfounded. You’re going to make an amazing queen.”

The feel of her tiny form against mine sent a surge of heat through my body, a burst of heat through my cock. Slowly, she

melted against me, her vulnerability arousing me more as I identified each curve of her body. I felt as though I recognized them all already, the lines of her body so familiar and yet exciting simultaneously.

She didn't resist me in the slightest, pulling her head back to allow my mouth to touch hers, the kiss beginning slowly and softly at first, her eyes closing. A small sigh fell from her lips, the hotness of her breath fueling my desire. The memories of every one of her moans and cries suddenly flooded my mind, and I needed to possess her right then and there.

Without warning, I seized her shoulders, dancing her back against the wall of her suite, my embrace growing more heated. At first, she didn't respond, the surprise of my action catching her off-guard, but when I snaked my arm down around her ass, yanking her small waist toward me, she instantly pushed back against me, as ready as I was.

You couldn't let me go any more than I could let you go, I thought, my tongue touching hers, our mouths crushing together.

Pulling back slightly, I rubbed my face against her, inhaling her succulent scent, the sweetness of her lips lingering on mine as I found her ears. She liked this, I knew, and as my free hand rubbed over the front of her breast, my nose felt the burst of gooseflesh around her neck.

Small pants of pleasure fell from Zephy's mouth when I worked the buttons of her dress, freeing her body of the garment, my mouth still working at the flesh of her neck and ears.

Holy shit. She wasn't wearing panties.

One hand remained on her bottom, the other locating the cleft between her legs, and Zephy moaned happily. Unsurprisingly, she was already wet and ready for me.

Propping her harder against the wall, massaging her ass, I traveled along her collarbone, my fingers still teasing her

center. Zephy gasped aloud, a cry following when I inserted a finger inside her. My thumb toyed with her throbbing nub.

“Oh, Cade...” she groaned.

“What is it, My Queen?” I rasped without stopping. “What would you like?”

She didn’t answer, so I didn’t stop, my digits working furiously until her knees buckled against me, her body quivering, but I held her in place. Her arms encircled me for balance, and her climax spilled over my hands.

“Good girl,” I whispered, slowly withdrawing my hands to unfasten my pants.

She released my neck, her hands falling on my waist, eyes gleaming in a haze as my pants fell to the floor. She bit on her lower lip and stared down at my tumescent shaft, her tongue jutting out as if she wanted to taste it, but I placed her hand on me instead.

My hips rocked against her, our bodies falling into an even rhythm as she stroked me, a low, guttural sound emanating from the back of my throat. I buried my face in her shoulder, forcing myself not to release, not like that. My hand again slid into her center, and Zephy yelped with pleasure.

Her fingers curled more tightly around my cock, and my movements grew more frenzied, making my climax inevitable. My own breaths escaped unevenly, and I freed myself, staring at her as she again took in my massive erection, licking her lips suggestively. She wanted to taste me—it was written all over her face, but that was for another time.

Right now, I needed to take her in the worst way—before it was too late. There would be plenty of time for us to try new things later.

I added one more finger inside her, and Zephy cried out. “Please, take me,” she begged, her eyes pleading. “Stop teasing me. I need you inside me.”

I nodded slowly, kissing her lips sweetly. “Your wish is my command.”

I thrust two more times into her, certain I could coax another orgasm from her, but when she didn't come for me, I pulled my hand back, spinning her around to face the wall.

Her hands splayed over the surface, dark hair spilling along her naked back as I spread her apart. She peered at me in shock over her shoulder, eyes wide and partially afraid, but I leaned forward to kiss her again.

“You can trust me, Zephy,” I growled.

“I do,” she promised.

Standing back, I pulled her perfect, tiny cheeks apart and slid my shaft over the hot nectar of her center. She gasped again, my teasing movements only enhancing her desire.

“Please!” she begged. “No more—”

She didn't have a chance to finish her plea as I pushed inside her, cutting her off. I pinned her to the wall, my hands falling over hers. She tried to turn her head again, but my cheek pressed into hers, forbidding her from moving in any direction. My hot breath in her ears sent more gooseflesh through her body, but I could barely feel that against the walls of her center closing around me, drawing me higher toward my release.

She mewled, bucking back against me, driving me wilder, and my jerks grew harder, faster, and out of control. My fingers dug into the tender skin of her waist.

“I-I'm exploding!” Zephy yelped.

And it was truly all I needed to hear.

Her hot juices spilled against me, and I sighed with contentment, allowing myself to enjoy my own orgasm in unison.

My forearm tightened around her waist, drawing her fully back against me, and Zephy's body buckled beneath me. But I didn't let her fall, even as I let myself go.

Together, we quivered against the wall of her suites, afraid to move an inch, lest we both crumble into a pile of mush.

After a minute, Zephy tittered lightly. “You’re crushing me, Cade.”

I also chuckled and rose off her, straightening my shaking body. “Sorry.”

Shyly, she turned to look at me, scooping her dress from the floor. I followed her lead, searching for my own clothing.

“Cade...”

I turned to look at her curiously.

“Are you sure that I’m who you want?” she asked timidly.

I frowned, wondering where all this had come from.

“I realize that you don’t know me very well, Zephy, but I like to think that you know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t act as if everything was all right if it wasn’t.”

She nodded, turning away, but I saw her bite on her lower lip as she shimmied into her sundress and turned toward me to button it. “Do you mind?”

I chortled, reaching for the clasp. “I suppose I should get used to doing these kinds of things, shouldn’t I?”

She eyed me through her peripheral vision, but she didn’t respond. Instead, she asked me a question.

“Has there been any update on the post-mortem with Leonid? Was he cursed? Rabid?”

I tensed at the mention of the bear shifter. “I haven’t heard anything yet, but I’ll go check right now.”

I finished buttoning the buttons and turned her to face me, my expression impassioned. “I won’t let anything happen to you, Zephy. I hope you believe that.”

“I believe that,” she agreed.

“Good. Then stop worrying about Leonid or anything else. You have the best security in the palace. It’s even better than mine.”

Her silence disturbed me, but I didn’t dwell on it. She was right; I did need to follow up on Leonid and find out if there

was a real threat still hanging over the palace—and my queen.

CHAPTER 18

ZEPHY

Silently and behind Cade's back, I had Stralia reassigned from the north wing to the east wing. It was still out of Cade's view, but it was the place she knew best, and she was grateful for the change.

Maywin was aghast when she found out what I'd done.

"The King put her there for a reason," the servant warned me. "He won't like being undermined."

"She's miserable in the north wing, and it's my fault that she's there," I insisted. "She's still out of the way."

Maywin didn't argue my decision, but it was written on her face that she thought the move wasn't a good one. I'd been unable to shake my guilt since my discussion with Stralia. Cade had managed to assuage my fears about him, but Stralia's feelings toward him still lingered in my mind. She didn't deserve to have her life turned upside down because of something beyond all of our control.

"No one needs to know about Stralia," I told Maywin firmly. "Cade doesn't get involved in the staff's gossip. He likely won't even hear about it."

"I will pray to all the gods that this doesn't backfire on you. Your heart is in the right place."

I hoped so, too, but when I dismissed her and turned in for the night, I found it impossible to sleep. For all the closeness that had occurred between Cade and me, he still hadn't set a date for the wedding, even though his birthday had passed now.

Cade was officially twenty-five and therefore eligible for the throne—if he married. We had celebrated his milestone birthday together, and he refused to make a big deal about it. We binged a new true crime series, shared a small cake, and then had wild, passionate sex until the wee hours of the morning.

It was much more intimate than the large celebration that was originally planned, and he'd told me the night was perfect.

But still, I had no idea when the wedding would take place, and it wasn't a conversation that I wanted to rouse with everything that was going on.

This was how I spent my nights now, lying awake, worrying about what was to come. It wasn't what I wanted for my future.

Tomorrow, I have to speak with him about the wedding. He has to commit or let me go.

Knowing that it was bound to be yet another sleepless night, I swung my legs over the side of the mattress and located a pair of slippers tucked beneath the bed. Wrapping my long tresses into a loose, unfastened bun over my head, I found a robe and crept toward Rufus' room, prying open the door softly.

My driver's soft snores met my ears, and I exhaled with relief. I didn't want to explain to him why I was using his room as an escape, but Stralia's advice to avoid the security guards had proven sound over the past weeks, and while there had been no further threats, the security remained posted in front of my suites, much to my chagrin.

Cade would not hear about having them dismissed.

“Leonid wasn't cursed, but Aradia is convinced that there is dark magic lurking in the palace,” he had insisted. “You will have enhanced security for now. This is not up for discussion.”

“And how long will that be?” I had demanded in exasperation.

“As long as it takes,” Cade replied.

Closing my door at my back, I honed on my fae senses to guide me through the darkness of Rufus' room toward his door, careful not to wake him. I bumped into the chair next to his bed, and the snoring stopped abruptly, causing me to freeze in place as Rufus stirred in his bed, but to my relief, he didn't wake.

I remained in place to be sure, but after a moment, I saw that he wasn't about to get up, and I continued toward the door, pausing to look in the hallway. The guards were not visible from Rufus' door, and I headed in the opposite direction of my suite toward the back stairs, leading into the kitchen.

A stroll in the night air would do me good this evening. I contemplated visiting Cade's room, but the hour was late, and I didn't want him to wonder how I had managed to evade my guards.

No. A walk will do tonight. Tomorrow, I will visit with Cade.

I should have had Maywin make me a sleepy tea concoction before she turned in for the night. Going forward, I would ensure she made one for me every night until I could be trusted to sleep on my own—or at least until Cade and I were married. If we ever did get married.

Careful to listen for any noises in the palace, I made my way to the main floor and out through the back of the kitchen, but it seemed that the entire household had retired hours earlier. I was the only one still up at that hour, my thoughts keeping me from ever truly enjoying a proper night's sleep in the walls of Ironhelm.

Will that ever change? Will I ever feel fully at home here, even if Cade does decide to pick a date for the wedding?

These were the kinds of questions that kept me up and would continue to keep me up, it seemed.

Moonlight gleamed off the night blooms, their petals outstretched to the blue-black skies, the shooting stars overhead raining down in a meteor shower as they did most

nights. But I was too lost in thought to notice the beauty of the darkness.

For a moment, I found myself wondering what my mother was doing at that moment. Surely, she would also be asleep, like the rest of Carrotrove and Ironhelm, but a sense of nostalgia pierced through me as I missed my home and parents. As exciting as this adventure had been, the affection I had for Cade growing every day, the palace was still not my home. Instinctively, I reached for the compass hanging from my neck, but it didn't give me the guidance that my mother had promised.

They'll come for the wedding, too, I reminded myself, brushing aside the melancholy before I could wallow in any regrets. *I just need to be patient.*

A tingle of cold air rushed down my spine suddenly, and I whirled around, the hem of my robe swirling at my ankles.

"Who's there?" I rasped out. "Show yourself!"

But no one materialized, and I stood in the gardens with bated breath, my pulse thudding dully in my ears for a moment.

Slowly, I backed toward the palace, gaze darting around the courtyard, the stupidity of my actions seizing me in a torrent. What had I been thinking, dodging my guards? They had been assigned to me for good reason.

"Hello?" I called out again. "Is someone there?"

Only silence met my plaintive call, but the presence was overwhelming now, and I choked slightly as the night's darkness crept in around me. Without warning, I turned to flee, knowing intuitively that I was in danger.

One of my slippers fell off as I stumbled, and another whoosh of air encircled me, the cold permeating my soul.

I batted around myself, fear overtaking my primal instincts, the inability to see my attacker more terrifying than the attack itself.

Is this a dream? Am I dreaming?

The black tornado whirled around me, consuming me fully, and spun me off my feet, a cry emitting from my mouth, but it froze there as the puff of ebony closed against my throat.

Evil radiated in this cloud, and I fought with my senses to react, to use my own magic and counteract whatever it was that was happening.

They waited. They've been watching and waiting for me to be alone. All this time.

The hold on my windpipe closed tighter, my body elevating against the whirlwind, lifting me higher into the night sky. My hands swung out, hoping to reach onto something—a cloud, the moon, anything—to hold, but the effort was futile. My assailant was nothing more than a spell, not a physical being. Someone guided it, but the cloud itself was not alive, despite the way it was murdering me.

I kicked violently against it, my breaths squeezing out of my lungs. Black and red spots danced in front of my eyes as I ascended higher. I willed the weather, calling to it, summoning it as life dissolved.

“STOP!” someone howled from below. “LET HER GO!”

I struggled to focus on the caller below. I was already losing consciousness.

“Call for Aradia and the King!” the guard shouted, and suddenly, the courtyard was alive with commotion. Floodlights and sirens wailed, voices shouting in all directions.

As the last of my sight slipped away, my eyes closing as the air escaped fully from my body, the apparition released me, and I began to fall. In my half-conscious state, I saw the turret fall past me, the balconies, and then I was in a sea of pure ebony nothingness.

But no one could possibly survive a fall like that.

I'm dead. I've died, I thought, and that was all there was.

CHAPTER 19

CADE

I sat up abruptly, cold sweat dripping down my face. My head whipped wildly around in the darkness of my suite, but even when I recognized no danger, my pulse refused to return to normal.

Throwing the covers aside, I leaped from the bed, willing myself to calm down.

It was just a nightmare, I told myself, but I hadn't had one of those since I was a child, since the war. If it had been, I couldn't recall any of the details, and a heaviness clutched my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I couldn't accept the simple explanation, not when the feeling wouldn't shake and only appeared to build the longer I kept my eyes open, the remnants of sleep fading away to nothingness.

I was fully alert now, sniffing the air. Danger hung around me, but I couldn't identify it easily, and I stalked toward the door, my hand on the knob when Aradia appeared before me.

"CADE!" she bellowed, confirming all my fears even before she gave me the details of her hysteria. "Come at once!"

"Zephy!" I breathed, knowing without her saying. The enchantress nodded once, gesturing with her head for me to follow, and I rushed after her, my throat closing. "What happened?"

"I don't know," Aradia admitted. "There's a curse on the palace."

“No!” I challenged her, rushing after her. “You enacted a shroud around her. She had guards—”

“She evaded the guards, and the shroud didn’t hold. I warned you that the magic was dark, and that there were too many forces at play.”

I stopped in my tracks to stare at her balefully, suspicion clogging my veins. “You should have done more!”

“There’s no time for this right now,” Aradia told me urgently. “She’s in a bad way.”

“Who was it? Have they been stopped?”

“I can’t say.”

“You can’t or won’t?” I insisted, starting after her again.

“I can’t. I don’t know. It was a spell, not a being. It took her and...” Aradia trailed off, her words making little sense. “She’s in a bad way.”

Dread overcame me, but I didn’t fire off the litany of questions that filled my mouth. It was clear that the enchantress genuinely had no answers for me, and pushing her would get me nowhere.

“Is she alive?”

“For now.”

That was not reassuring, but it made me move faster than I’d ever moved in my life.

Through the maze of halls we continued, twisting and turning until we ended up in the back gardens where a flock of guards made a circle.

“Clear the way for the Alpha King!” Aradia called out.

Immediately, the guards stepped aside, the fear of me and contrition in their faces tangible. But my gaze was fixated on the crumpled figure on the ground. My stomach sank into my shoes as I sprinted to Zephy’s side. Dropping to my knees, I picked up her pale cheeks, my head swinging wildly toward the onlookers.

“What happened?” I screamed. “How did this happen?”

“I don’t know, Alpha. When I found her, she was caught in a black cloud. She was only released when I called out.”

I wasted no time collecting Zephy in my arms and rising with her half-breathing body, racing from the courtyard toward the palace.

“Secure the perimeter!” I shouted at the guards. “Control the threat!”

I didn’t look back to see if they were obeying my instructions as I sprinted forward, building my inner healing power as I ran. Every step I took, I felt Zephyrine slipping more away from me.

Aradia kept stride with me, but I forbade her from following.

“You will protect this palace!” I growled at her, sweat breaking out over my brow. “Why was she harmed? How did the shroud get permeated?”

“I don’t know, Cade, but this dark magic is powerful and —”

“I don’t want excuses!” I whiplashed, my eyes glued to Zephyrine’s waxy complexion. I was losing her, and the thought terrified me.

My steps quickened, and I was flying through the long halls of Ironhelm Place toward the medical bay. When I looked again, Aradia had vanished, but my focus was not on the enchantress.

“Zephy,” I murmured, urging the fae back into consciousness as I laid her on one of the gurneys. “Wake up now.”

She didn’t move, her breathing shallow and thready. The last of her life hung in the balance, and I knew what I had to do. Closing my eyes, I extended my hands over her abdomen, willing all my healing energy forward. But in my current state of upset, it was difficult to will my abilities forward, and my fangs extended in lieu of my curative prowess.

I shook my hands, my eyes opening, and a tremor rushed through Zephy's slender frame, alarming me.

"Oh, no, no, you don't," I growled, touching her face. "Don't you leave me!"

She struggled to breathe, but her chest strained, the twist of her body from the fall mangling her form and twisting my heart at the sight. Again, I forced myself to fixate only on the life slipping away in front of me. I didn't need anyone to tell me that I was running out of time, that Zephy's life hung in the balance, and I couldn't afford to let the panic inside me overwhelm me. I had to summon all of my remedial power and cure her before it was too late.

Again, I spread my palms over her, closing my eyes and clearing my mind, willing my fangs back into my gumline.

You will not die, not under my watch, Zephyrine. You will heal and wake, and we will conquer this threat together. But first, you have to wake up.

Slowly, painfully, I felt the surge of electricity formulate in the base of my gut, the bolts of warmth shooting out through my fingertips toward Zephy's shattered body.

My mouth began to move silently, the old words spilling from my lips voicelessly as I summoned the old gods to my calling, willing them to my aid in saving her.

How could this have happened on my watch? Why didn't I see the danger lurking here?

The distraction swayed me from my task, and I forced myself back on track, knowing that every second I wasted, Zephy fell further into the abyss of darkness from which I couldn't retrieve her.

"You can't leave me, Zephy," I coaxed her, dropping my pulsating hands over her clammy flesh. "You're stronger than this. You must fight against the darkness."

I willed her awake, my strength surging into her body, my pleadings reaching a fever pitch inside me. Guilt and sorrow combined to combat my efforts, but I fought them off,

knowing they would only be counterproductive to what I was trying to do.

My knees weakened with the thrust of my power against her, every bolt of energy emitting from my hands draining me more, but they seemed to have no effect on Zephy, who showed no signs of improvement from the moment I had laid her in the medical bay.

“Dammit!” I cursed, losing my focus again, sweat pouring down my face as I again mustered all my will to save her. “Zephyrine, open your eyes. Open your eyes, dammit. Look at me!”

From somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard a commotion breaking out in the palace, but I couldn’t mind that now. If I couldn’t wake Zephy up, nothing else would matter.

“I won’t fail you. I promised to protect you. Don’t make me a liar, Zephy,” I begged her. “Don’t you leave me.”

Inhaling sharply, I squeezed my lids closed and willed help from all the spirits I could locate, but the shroud of heaviness was palpable. Aradia had been right; there was a blanket of black magic all around us, creeping in to suffocate me now.

I wouldn’t let it take Zephy. It would have to take me first.

With the last of my momentum, I exuded the remainder of my healing into her body, hoping that it would be enough, but exhaustion overtook me then, stealing the last of my life force in the process. My body collapsed against Zephy’s, all of my energy depleted.

I opened my mouth to beg her awake again, but the feat required too much out of me. Even parting my eyelids proved too much, and I simply lay sprawled over Zephy’s unmoving form.

Fuck! I’ve failed, I thought miserably. I’ve failed us both. I’ve lost her. It’s over.

Dizziness overcame me, blackness enshrouding my fatigued mind, body, and soul. But as I fell into my own unconsciousness, devoid of all that made me, I thought I felt Zephy move beneath me.

“Zephy!” I tried to call out, but the word stuck in my throat.

It was too much, and I had no choice but to allow the blackness to fall over my mind, the exhaustion fully taking me. I had no way of knowing if I had imagined the motions beneath me or not. I was powerless now that I had transferred all in me to Zephy in hopes that I had made some small effect on her well-being.

Nothing mattered but her, my future queen.

CHAPTER 20

ZEPHY

In my dream, I swam in an ocean of pure black. As a girl, my father had once taken me out on a trip to the Julian Sea, with waves that rushed higher than the tallest boats and waters that turned jade with the winds. I later realized that he had only taken me on that journey to control the weather and keep the waves from capsizing the vessel, but in this dream, I couldn't stop the water from washing over my head no matter how hard I tried. Here, my powers were absolutely useless.

"Zephy, come back to me!" I heard Cade call me, but as I treaded through the overwhelming waves, I couldn't see his face.

"Cade!" I called back.

Water filled my lungs, causing me to cough and sputter, my arms flailing wildly against the torrent. Something nudged my legs, grabbing at me to pull me down, but strong arms grabbed at my armpits, yanking me back up.

"Stay with me," Cade pleaded, as I tipped my head back to look at him. Still, I couldn't see him, although his voice was in my ear.

"Help me!" I pleaded. "I can't get out!"

"Don't you leave me," he told me, his voice losing strength, his grip on me sliding away. "Zephy..."

His words faded away, and I was back in the ebony waters, struggling, until suddenly, abruptly, my eyes popped open.

A gasp shuddered my entire body, my head turning to take in the unfamiliar surroundings. A weight on my stomach confused me, but I couldn't move at first, confusion and pain obstructing me.

"C-Cade?" I sputtered in the low light of the strange room.

Inherently, I knew I was still in the palace, the stone walls unmistakable, but I had never been in this odd medical facility with the IV bags lined at my side. Machinery blinked and beeped around me as I blinked several times, lifting my throbbing head, and saw him passed out on my stomach. Suddenly, the flood of memories pinned me back down to the bed. The storm tornado that had lifted me up and dropped me to my death, the choking darkness that had undoubtedly been unleashed to kill me.

"Cade, Cade!" I whimpered, pushing on him gently, but he didn't stir, and I struggled to understand why he was lying there like that. His listless form pinned me to the gurney as I whipped my head around, looking for anyone else to help us.

"Oh, what did you do?" I whispered, understanding how I had managed to survive while he clung to life.

"Cade," I begged, trying futilely to lift his head, but in my weakened state, I was in no shape to move his weight. "Cade, wake up, please!"

He remained in place, his breathing deep and slow, each breath scaring me more.

I put my hands on his head, stroking his hair tenderly, but I couldn't shake the feeling of evil that clung to the walls of the palace as we lay in place like sitting ducks, waiting for the darkness to finish us off. I had to find us assistance.

Where were the healers? The nurses? Where were the Royal Guards?

"Help!" I called out. "Help us!"

A small moan escaped Cade's lips, and hope sprung into my heart as I realized that he was not dead. "Cade!"

Very slowly, he raised his head, his azure eyes hazy and unfocused as he stared at me. “Zephy!”

Relieved tears flooded my eyes, and I cupped his face, drawing him to me for a sweet kiss. “You fool!” I choked, sniffing. “I-I thought you were dead.”

“Now you know how I felt seeing you in the courtyard. What were you thinking? Why did you shake your guards?”

Shame overwhelmed me, and I hung my head. “I didn’t think there was danger anymore,” I whispered. “I had no idea that they were just watching, waiting...”

“It’s all right,” he told me tenderly, straightening himself, but the effort appeared to take everything out of him. “All that matters is that you’re all right now.”

Every move he made seemed exaggerated to me, and it was plain to me that he was drained as he struggled to right himself.

“Come on,” I urged him. “Let’s go somewhere safer. That spell—the danger...”

I wasn’t sure what to call it, but I could feel it swirling around us, and with both of us in such a bad state of physical distress, it wasn’t where I wanted to be.

“Yes,” he agreed, standing, but the moment he did, he fell back to the bed, shaking with the effort.

“Oh, Cade,” I whispered, my eyes huge. “Wait here. I’ll get us help. The guards—”

“The guards are securing the perimeter. Aradia thinks the threat still remains.”

“It does. I can feel it, can’t you?”

He reached for my hands and shook his head. “All I feel right now is relief that you’re unharmed,” he croaked, swallowing thickly.

Again, I blinked, emotion clouding my vision as I touched his cheek with my hand.

“You gave me everything you had to heal me.”

He managed a weak smile. “It was nothing,” he joked lightly, but I didn’t return his smile. “I’m going for help, Cade. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

Unsteadily, I rose, guiding Cade to the bed in my place. He wanted to resist, but he couldn’t, his energy fully depleted after spending it all on me. I leaned over to kiss him again gently, my hair falling over his face to curtain us both.

“I’ll be right back,” I reassured him. “Rest and gather your strength—”

“ZEPHY!”

I whirled around as his eyes popped, the shadow overtaking me as it had in the courtyard. But this time, my reflexes kicked in, and I dove out of the way, my pulse roaring in my ears as the blanket of black overtook Cade instead.

He sat up, using the last of his functions to half-shift into his wolf form, baring his fangs against the faceless entity, but he had little power now. That didn’t stop him from trying to fend off the power that consumed the medical bay.

Cade hissed, but the darkness swirled around him as it had me, and a burst of fury rushed through my veins.

No! It won’t take him! I won’t let it.

Without any regard to my health or personal safety, I rushed toward the cloud, determined to stop it.

“No, Zephy!” Cade growled through his snout, but his body hadn’t fully shifted, his weakness apparent.

His call refocused the entity’s attention on me, the swirl swooping in on me. But I was ready, every step I took filling me with more anger.

“Come on,” I urged the force. “You want me. Come and get me.”

With that, I turned to run from the bay, silently hoping that the blackness would follow me. I glanced over my shoulder, and to my relief, I saw the smoky trail following.

My heart thudding in my throat, I fled, weaving down through the halls, dodging, and calling out mockingly until I was again at the back doors, where I could have proper control of the elements.

“MISS?!”

Somewhere in the palace, someone was calling out to me, but I couldn't reply. I had a limited window to handle this monster and draw it away from Cade. The memory of how it had almost killed me tickled the back of my mind, but I didn't let it fester. If I didn't lead it away from Cade, it would certainly finish him.

“Come on,” I hissed, bursting back into the night, my legs wobbling, but I steadied myself, all of Cade's power burning through me in unison. “Come and get me!”

A rush of air followed me outside, but as I turned, I commanded the clouds to gather, rousing a torrent of rain and lightning to spill from the sky, blocking myself from the force of blackness.

I felt its confusion, the spell weakening against my own magic, but I refused to let it recover from the surprise. Instantly, I set loose a tornado, countering the whirlwind cloud before it could move in. Through my peripheral vision, I saw a flock of guards and Aradia rush out of the doors, and I fell back to allow them in to capture the diminished curse as I collapsed to the ground.

“Miss!” Maywin cried, falling to my side.

I staggered to my feet, brushing her off. “I'm all right,” I promised, watching as the guards and Aradia worked to contain the dark spell. I canceled my own weather-fueled spells and backed away from the scene with my maid, my body shaking.

“Oh, thank all the gods,” Maywin whimpered. “There's so much chaos in the palace right now. I thought...”

I offered her a taut smile but continued through the halls. “I'm fine. I need to get to Cade. Find us guards to escort us back to his suites and to stand guard.”

“I don’t want to leave you, miss.”

“It will be fine, May,” I promised. “We need the guards. Please.”

Swallowing, she nodded warily, but I could see it pained her to leave my side. She was so loyal to me. I was lucky to have Maywin on my side, but she was no warrior.

“I’ll be right back. Please, don’t go anywhere until I return. There is something happening in the palace, and no one can explain it.”

“Be careful, Maywin,” I murmured, but I was less concerned about my servant than I was about my king.

We parted ways, and I found Cade where I had left him, half-conscious on the gurney, his breath still uneven. He had changed back into his mortal form, his face pale and gaunt. He did not look well, and all I could think of was bringing him to the security of his rooms.

“We need to get you to your suites, Cade,” I told him softly, sitting him up. “Do you think you can walk with me?”

He nodded, but I didn’t have much faith in his assertion. The moment he stood, his knees buckled.

I let him lean on me, and together, we moved with painful slowness toward the door. Each step seemed to cause him agony, and it hurt me that I had no way of carrying him the way he had carried me.

“Come on, Cade,” I whispered encouragingly. “We’ll be safe soon.”

“What is going on out there?” he muttered, raising his handsome head to home in on the commotion beyond the walls.

“That’s a matter for when you’re stronger,” I told him firmly. “The guards have contained the spell, and Aradia is enacting another shroud over the palace.”

“A lot of good the first one did.”

I said nothing as we crept along, my senses on high alert, but as I guided him toward the back stairs, the heaviness of the black spell seemed less now. The worst of it had diminished—at least for the moment.

“I will kill whoever is responsible for this,” Cade vowed, doubling over to collect his breaths, and I stopped to rub his back, enacting what little healing I could muster back into him. The back-and-forth trade of our powers had only served to weaken us both, but I was sure that between the two of us, we could make it upstairs and regain our strength.

“A matter for another time,” I murmured. “Come on.”

Maywin finally did find us with a small herd of guards, but not before I had managed to bring Cade to his suite of rooms. I ordered them to stand outside and keep watch, closing us inside as I tucked him into the center of his round bed.

“Rest now,” I ordered him, stroking his face, and he fell into an immediate sleep, knowing that he was not going to be hurt with me at his side. I waited until I was sure he was deeply asleep before rising from his bedside.

As exhausted as I was, too, I wouldn't rest until my king had woken, and I was sure he had fully recovered from all he had gone through to save me. It was bound to be a very long night.

CHAPTER 21

CADE

Never in my life had so much of me been taken in one sitting. I didn't know how Zephy had managed to lead me up to my suites, but like the true queen she was, she had taken charge and guided me to safety. It hadn't been my intention to fall asleep. However, my body gave out under all the exertion, and I had no choice but to give it what it needed.

When I opened my eyes, dawn filtered in through the partially opened curtains, and Zephy sat rigidly on the mattress, her hand in mine. Her eyes were trained on the wall over my head, her mind clearly lost on other matters, giving me an opportunity to study her smoldering beauty without her knowing. Even in her clear state of fatigue, she had never looked more beautiful, her soulful eyes rife with concern as a thousand thoughts danced through her head.

A cool compress sat on my forehead, a fact I didn't notice immediately, but as I turned my head, it fell to the side.

"Oh!" Zephy gasped, her face warming as I moved. "You're awake."

"I didn't intend to fall asleep," I admitted sheepishly.

"Hush now," she told me chidingly. "You should rest more. You've only been asleep for a few hours."

"I don't need more sleep," I promised, sitting up without effort.

Relief colored her face as she read the truth in not only my words, but my actions as well.

“Don’t push yourself,” she urged, placing her hands on my chest to lay me back. “You’re still recovering your strength. They wanted to move you into medical, but I thought you’d be more comfortable here.”

“You thought right.”

She took the cloth and leaned over, dipping the compress in a bowl of water at her feet before laying it back on my head. I didn’t stop her, my head cocking to stare at her.

“*You* should rest,” I told her sternly. “Where are the servants? The guards?”

“I told everyone to stay out,” she informed me flatly. “I didn’t want anyone in here.”

A fission of affection rushed through me at her words, but I wasn’t sure that her motives were strictly loving.

“Because you don’t trust them?”

“In part,” she agreed. “But also because I wanted to take care of you myself.”

“You’re doing a fine job of that.”

She half-smiled and turned away. “I’ll send for some soup and a healer,” she suggested, but before she could stand, I put my hand on her arm.

“I mean it, Zephy. You need to get some rest, too.”

“I will rest when I’m sure you’re better,” she replied stubbornly. I chuckled dryly, and she eyed me. “What’s amusing?”

“I’d almost forgotten how headstrong you can be.”

“Have you?” she asked lightly. “Then perhaps we haven’t been spending enough time together.”

“No,” I agreed, pulling her closer. “Not nearly enough.”

My lips brushed against hers, and she eagerly but gently returned my kiss, her bright eyes shining as we pulled away. “I was terrified of losing you,” she told me, sounding

embarrassed. “You didn’t have to do what you did to save me.”

“Yes,” I corrected her. “I did. I couldn’t think of anything but saving you. Seeing you like that, Zephy...”

I shuddered at the recollection, and Zephy kissed me again, dismissing the notion. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Nor would I want to.”

She stroked my face and untangled herself from me, rising toward the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked worriedly.

“I told you—you need to eat something, and a medic should look you over.”

“No medic,” I told her, and she agreed.

“Just soup then.”

I tried to hide my disappointment at her leaving me, but when she opened the door, she didn’t go far. I heard her speaking to someone in the hallway before closing it again and returning to my side.

“I thought you were going,” I told her, grateful that she had stayed.

“I’m not leaving your side until you are fully recovered,” she insisted. “Did I not make that clear to you?”

I stared at her in wonderment. “Thank you, Zephyrine.”

“You have nothing to thank me for,” she mumbled in embarrassment. “It is my duty... in a way.”

I pushed myself up the rest of the way, and she adjusted the pillows around my back, but I caught her arm and yanked her toward me, stopping her from fussing. “You have gone beyond your duty to me.”

She gave me a wry smile and again unhooked herself from me.

I cocked my head in confusion. “Why do you keep pulling away?”

A hot blush tinged her cheeks. “I’ve been wearing the same filthy pajamas since the attack,” she explained. “I’d like to return to my room to shower and change. I honestly hadn’t expected you to wake yet.”

A small laugh fell from my lips, her self-consciousness tickling me.

“No,” I said suddenly.

Her dark eyebrows raised up. “Well, it doesn’t have to be this minute, Cade. I only meant—”

“No, I mean... I have a much better idea.”

She eyed me expectantly. “Oh?”

“Bring some of the servants with you when you go,” I said slowly. “And when you come back, bring all your belongings.”

She blinked uncomprehendingly. “What?”

“I’d like you to move in here with me,” I proposed. “Permanently.”

Shock colored her lovely features, her full mouth parting, but no words came out.

“I swear, I’ll take proper care of the bathroom. I won’t leave dirty towels on the floor or clog up the sinks with hair, and I don’t snore... or I don’t think I do, anyway, but no one has ever really had the guts to tell me if I do.”

I grinned at her, and a small giggle escaped Zephy’s mouth as a smile overtook her face.

“Do you mean it?” she asked, dumbfounded.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have suggested it if I didn’t.”

“I know, but...” She stared at me, and I began to chuckle.

“Are you worried that I’m not in my right mind now after what happened?”

“The thought did cross my mind.”

I extended my hands toward her, and this time, she didn’t pull away, our noses inches from one another.

“I am thinking the clearest I ever have right now, Zephy. I want you here, at my side, always. Every morning and every night—and all the hours in between. Please, go get what you need, and I will have someone bring the rest of your things.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and hugged me tightly, kissing my cheek in the process. “Yes, My King. I would love to move in here with you.”



ZEPHY PROVED to be a wonderful nursemaid. After a hearty meal of hot soup and fresh, homemade, buttered bread, I was feeling almost as good as I had been before the entire affair. We still waited on word of the source of the attack from the safety of my suites, but the guards produced no news, and Zephy and I remained cocooned in our little nest, knowing that no immediate danger lurked for the moment.

But as the afternoon came and went, Zephy grew antsy, and eventually, she left to gather her belongings, as we had discussed.

“I’m going to see if there is any word about what’s happening. Maywin said there was chaos earlier.”

“Don’t go looking for trouble,” I urged her firmly. “Just stay put. Aradia will come the moment she has news.”

“It’s been hours,” Zephy complained.

“Just bring your things, and if there isn’t any news by tonight, we’ll go together,” I promised.

Begrudgingly, Zephy agreed, and by late afternoon, she had the servants bring her trunks into my room. I helped her find closet space for her many dresses, pants, and blouses, her swords and potions lined in dressers with mine.

“You don’t take up much room,” I teased.

“Is that a complaint? I can be more demanding if you want.”

“No,” I reassured her. “I’ve never shared a room with anyone before.”

She turned and looked at me oddly, a question burning there, but she didn’t ask it.

She still has her suspicions about me, I realized. It was up to me to dispel any of her delusions over time.

“I’ll send out for dinner,” Zephy announced, closing the last of her trunks. “And then we’re going to look for Aradia.”

I nodded reluctantly. It was what we had agreed to, after all, but before she could turn for the door again, I gathered her in my arms.

“I’m glad you came here, Zephyrine from Carrottrove.”

She grinned, tilting her head back to meet my eyes. “I’m glad to be here, Alpha King Cade.”

“I’m not Alpha King yet, no matter what they call me,” I reminded her huskily. “But once we’re married...”

She dropped her eyes, her smile fading slightly, and I suddenly understood.

She’s been hearing that since she arrived.

My hand cocked to her chin, pinning her face up to meet my eyes again. “We are getting married,” I informed her, frankly. “I’m prepared to set a date.”

Hope sprung into her eyes, but she tried to hide it. “As always, Cade, your timing is off,” she teased. “Let’s discuss wedding plans after we figure out if we have a more pressing problem on our hands, yes?”

I shook my head. “These attacks are obviously meant to distract us from the coronation. That’s why they’re happening now. We won’t let them prevail. We will go ahead and plan this wedding—regardless of what kind of threat is lingering over our heads.”

Zephy drew in a breath, excitement filling her eyes, but as she opened her mouth to answer, a whoosh of air pushed us apart, and Aradia materialized in the suite in front of us.

“Hold that thought,” my enchantress sighed. “I’ve got some news for you first.”

CHAPTER 22

CADE

I had been feeling stronger under Zephy's tender care, but seeing the enchantress in our suite depleted me of some of my energy. I had almost managed to forget the outside in the bubble I had created with Zephy. Now, there was no ignoring whatever was happening in the kingdom.

"Is there trouble?" Zephy demanded, ready for battle, her foot halfway toward the door, but I held out a hand to stop her. I knew Aradia well enough to sense that if she needed us, she would have come much sooner.

"There is," Aradia agreed. "But it's under control for the moment."

"What does that mean?" Zephy asked worriedly, and I cast Aradia a scathing look.

I wished she hadn't shown up like this to alarm my queen when all was going so well. I had only just gotten Zephy into a place of peace, her things placed nicely among mine, her shoulders relaxing now that she saw she had a place at my side.

"The spell that attacked you both has been contained," Aradia offered quickly, catching my wary expression.

"I should hope so," I said coldly. "Why didn't the shroud work on Zephy? Why was she attacked when you claimed you had protected her?"

Through my peripheral vision, I noted how Zephyrine moved closer to me as if she were looking at Aradia with suspicious eyes. But I couldn't bring myself to think of the

enchantress in such a way. Aradia cared too much for the kingdom to bring strife and suffering upon it. She had been the one who was the most adamant about me marrying Zephy.

But was that part of her plan all along?

I loathed this paranoia and forced myself to focus on what Aradia was saying. I only had my advisors, after all. Second-guessing them was not going to serve me well.

“There is a deep root of black magic running through the palace,” Aradia explained. “It’s not one fae working against you, but a group—it’s the only explanation as to why the shroud didn’t hold to protect Miss Zephyrine. I did warn you about all that when I enacted the shroud, Cade. It was not a sure thing, depending on what we were up against. This is definitely a worst-case scenario.”

Zephy and I exchanged a worried look. “What are you saying, Aradia?” I asked quietly, although I believed I understood.

“I am powerful—the most powerful enchantress in the kingdom. It’s why you have me here. But I am no competition for a mob of black fae magic,” Aradia admitted. “There is a group at work here, and we need to unearth them from hiding.”

“How could something like that happen?” I insisted. “This isn’t something that starts overnight. This was planned, plotted. There had to be whispers.”

“Perhaps,” Aradia agreed.

“You’re supposed to have ears everywhere,” I pressed. “How do you not know?”

“I’m working on it, Cade,” Aradia grunted, exasperated both with my tone and presumably with the lack of progress.

“Then I suggest you get to that!” I sputtered, alarmed by this turn of events. “Who would do this? Why?”

“I think we know why,” Zephy interjected softly, sitting on the edge of the bed as if her breath had been stolen. “They don’t want me as their queen.”

“This won’t stand!” I insisted. “I don’t care what needs to be done. We will move forward with this union, this marriage.”

“You need to tread carefully,” Aradia warned. “You don’t want to antagonize them.”

I scoffed loudly and looked at Zephy, studying her worried face. But when she met my eyes, I read the gleam of determination there. “Zephy, what do you say about this?”

She pursed her lips together and raised her head to look at me. Energy sizzled between our gazes, and my pulse immediately slowed. For the first time, I recognized the calming effect that Zephy had on me by merely meeting my eyes.

“You are the Alpha King of Ironhelm,” she told me fiercely. “You won’t be commanded by a group of cowardly faeries who won’t even show themselves. They can’t even fight in the flesh. They enact spells and fight from a distance!”

A stab of pride surged through me as I smiled at her, every word hitting a proper note with me. “And you are my queen,” I replied, just as confidently. “If they think that they can stop that from happening, they’re sorely mistaken.”

“Cade—” Aradia muttered warningly, but I turned to her with fire in my eyes.

“Are you suggesting that I just roll over and let them do what they’re doing?”

The enchantress shook her head slowly. “I’m suggesting that you keep an eye out because this group is not messing around. Whatever is happening here is calculated and might be growing under our noses.”

“Then you have work to do, don’t you, Aradia?” I told her firmly. “Get to the bottom of it and stop trying to deter us from taking them on.”

Aradia nodded once, but I thought I caught a gleam of appreciation in her eyes as she bowed and vanished, leaving Zephyrine and me alone again.

Zephy rose and ambled toward me, worried. “I know you said all that in front of Aradia, but maybe we should keep a lower profile until we have a better handle on what’s going on.”

“No,” I said firmly, seizing her shoulders. The movement shocked her, and she blinked as I drew her toward me, my nose inches from hers. “You will be my queen. In fact, this has only swayed me to move up the timeline. I want to make this happen faster now.”

Her eyes brightened, but I still read the hesitation. “I don’t want you to do it out of spite, Cade.”

“I’m doing it out of love, Zephy. You were meant to be my queen, and these assholes, hiding behind magic and spells, won’t stop it from happening. Let’s get to planning this. We’ve held off long enough. We should have been married by now.”

She smiled and embraced me tightly, but when we withdrew, she eyed me, a question in her dark irises.

“What is it, Zephy?”

“Do you suppose that Aradia might have something to do with what happened?” she breathed, looking over my shoulder as if she expected the enchantress to appear again. “She seems to want us to wait.”

I shook my head vehemently. “Aradia’s loyalty is only to Ironhelm. She doesn’t take personal sides or play favorites and has been here for over a century. She has never had a complaint, nor does she have anything to gain from creating chaos among us.”

Zephy didn’t look convinced. “But she was supposed to protect me.”

“Along with the guards that you shook off,” I reminded her gently. Guilt overtook her face, and I again pulled her into my arms. “This isn’t a matter of blame. I’m just stating the facts. No one being is a fortress on their own. We must all work together in order to protect the kingdom, now so more than ever, it seems. I don’t believe that Aradia had anything to do

with your attacks, but we won't discount anyone or anything. We'll keep an eye on everyone, just to be sure."

Zephy buried her face in my chest and held herself close. "Then who will help me plan for this monstrosity of a wedding?" she teased lightly, and I laughed.

"Don't you worry, My Queen. We will manage somehow."

Yet as I reassured Zephy with all my words of confidence, I couldn't be sure I was guiding her properly.

I'll double the security, and we will make sure to find who's responsible for this treasonous act. They will pay the price. I promise.

But I said none of this aloud to Zephy. I didn't want her to think of anything but our future together.

CHAPTER 23

ZEPHY

The next week was bittersweet. I remained on pins and needles as I moved through the palace walls, this time ensuring that the fairy guards remained securely at my back, no matter where I went.

Maywin refused to leave my side for the first few days.

“Can’t my room be moved closer to yours?” she begged every day. “You’re too far away if you need anything in the night.”

“I don’t need anything in the night, May,” I insisted with a laugh. “And the King has all the servants he needs to do my bidding.”

It was the wrong thing to say. My maid was perturbed by the idea that she was being replaced until I finally spoke to Cade about moving her closer to our suite of rooms.

“She’s very attached to you,” Cade teased. “Am I going to have competition for your affections when we’re married?”

I laughed and shrugged. “I supposed that’s between the two of you to work out. There are enough of my affections to go around.”

Cade’s eyes darkened playfully. “Speak for yourself, My Queen. I will not be sharing my affections with anyone else.”

“I’m grateful that I have Maywin here with me,” I admitted. “It was lonely at first when I came.”

He brushed a hand against my cheek lovingly. “I won’t ever allow you to feel lonely again,” he vowed, and my chest

fluttered.

Could he be my mate?

It wasn't the first time I'd wondered. Over the past days, especially since I'd moved into his rooms, I'd felt closer to Cade than ever before. At the beginning, I thought it might have been the bonds of trauma, but as the danger wore off and the black magic spell seemed to diminish under the planning of the wedding, I realized that I was fully connected to him in a way that I felt in my soul.

I talked to Maywin about it as she moved into her new room, closer to the king's room.

"What do you know about soulmates, Maywin?" I blurted out. The maid eyed me in confusion.

"The same as anyone else, miss," she replied. "That two souls are bonded together beyond time and space, their connection so strong that they are inevitably brought together."

"Yes, but..." I hesitated. "What does it feel like?"

Maywin paused to wipe a drop of sweat from her cheek and face me. "I wouldn't know, miss. I've yet to meet mine—assuming that a maid can ever have a soulmate."

I frowned in dismay at the notion. "Everyone has a soulmate," I sputtered, aghast that she would think otherwise. "Love has no class standing."

A slow, pleased smile formed on Maywin's lips. "Do you really believe that?"

"Yes, of course! A noblefae is not more important—or more deserving of happiness—than a fae like you."

"I hope you're right. I've been spending a great deal of time with one particular guard..."

"Jasper?" I suggested lightly.

Maywin's cheeks paled. "How did you know?"

"I have eyes, Maywin," I teased. "And I've seen how he looks at you, too."

Instantly, red replaced the white of her complexion, and my servant hung her head, dark strands of hair falling from her loose chignon. “He’s very handsome.”

“And he would be lucky to have you, May,” I told her honestly. “But you have to help me plan *my* wedding first. Is that a deal?”

“Of course!”

Laughing, we finished unpacking Maywin into her new room, much closer to me now, where we could spend more hours poring over the plans for the upcoming ceremony, which was only a few weeks off now.



CADE HELPED WHERE HE COULD, but the Council of Ministers and kingdom kept him occupied, leaving me mostly in charge of wedding preparations. I enlisted as many of the female servants as I could to my aid, but the truth was, there was a lingering concern about their trustworthiness.

Over time, I began to accept Cade’s words about Aradia’s honesty. She debriefed us daily on what the search was uncovering throughout Ironhelm—which admittedly was not much.

“We still don’t have a source for the spell, but there haven’t been whispers of another attack,” the enchantress offered optimistically. Her words didn’t do much to appease either Cade or me. We were undoubtedly thinking the same thing, although neither of us spoke the words aloud.

Maybe they’re just waiting for the wedding to attack again.

But I refused to let myself get sucked into the worst-case scenario. We had the best in the kingdom working to protect us, and now, we were on high guard. I wouldn’t let my wedding day be foiled by spiteful beings.

Two nights before the ceremony, I curled into Cade’s arms, exhausted from a full day, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“We’re almost King and Queen of Ironhelm,” he murmured.

“I know,” I yawned, nuzzling into his neck. “Although I don’t know if I’m going to be all right being apart from you tomorrow night. It’s been so long since I’ve slept on my own.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Maybe we should forget about the tradition and sleep together the night before the wedding,” he suggested.

I raised my head and propped it on his chest. “Aren’t we constantly being warned about going against tradition?” I sighed. “You must know that Aradia will have something to say about that if we do.”

He grimaced and kissed my forehead. “Nothing is going to stop me from wedding you tomorrow, regardless of what Aradia or anyone else says,” he insisted.

I snuggled back against him, pleased to hear his confidence, but I hadn’t doubted him.

“One night apart won’t kill us,” I promised.

“Are you sure? We haven’t tried it yet,” he joked.

“I suppose we’ll find out, won’t we?” I hesitated to remind him. “My parents will be here tomorrow.”

His embrace tightened around me, and I held him closer, my heart quickening with excitement despite my tiredness.

“I can’t wait to meet them officially.”

“They will adore you,” I promised.

“I adore you, Zephy.”

Two more days until I am Queen of Ironhelm, I thought happily, my eyes closing as my fingers curled around the curve of his chest. I just wanted to savor the happiness of that moment forever.

CHAPTER 24

CADE

I waited for feelings of nervousness or concern to overtake me the next morning when I woke up, knowing that this would be my last day without a queen at my side. It seemed silly, considering that Zephy had been with me so much. She had basically become another extremity, but legally and officially speaking, this was going to be it.

I should have been nervous or had doubts about it, but when I looked at Zephy's still sleeping face beside me, I was filled with nothing but overwhelming adoration for her, and I knew that I wanted nothing more than to spend the rest of my days at her side.

"I'm meeting with the cabinet this morning, My Queen," I whispered softly in her ear. "I won't see you again until the ceremony tomorrow."

Blinking, Zephy opened her eyes and stared up at me sleepily, a slow smile forming over her lips. "Is it morning already?"

I nodded, brushing a sweet kiss over her full mouth, which she returned eagerly, her arms reaching out to pull me back toward her. Laughing, I crashed down toward her, feeling her breath escape her as my weight fell onto her, holding her in place, but that didn't stop her from wrapping her ankles around my waist.

"You'll make me late for the Council of Ministers," I warned her, not really caring. I half-hoped she dragged me into

a love-making session, and we stayed in bed all day, forgetting about the world entirely.

“They can’t start without you, anyway,” she reminded me, raining kisses over my face and neck.

“That’s very true,” I agreed, returning her affection.

For a moment, we rolled around in the bed until Aradia interrupted us with her unceremonious entry. We groaned in unison.

“Haven’t you heard of announcing yourself?” I snapped at the enchantress. “This won’t suffice when we’re married. Actually, this doesn’t suffice now.”

“Apologies,” Aradia replied without sounding the least bit contrite. “I’ve just received a call that Miss Zephyrine’s parents are close.”

Zephy moaned again, this one even more pained than the last as she untangled herself from me, our earlier foreplay forsaken at the mention of her parents.

“All right,” she sighed. “I’ll get their room ready. Gods forbid if it isn’t perfect when they arrive.”

Displeased, I cast Aradia another dirty look, but the enchantress had already retreated to the walk-in to assist Zephy in packing her overnight bag.

“Don’t forget to pack everything you need for today and tomorrow,” Aradia instructed. “You can’t return here until after the ceremony.”

“I know,” Zephy grumbled as I, too, moved to start the day with some disappointment.

I had hoped for a few more minutes together before parting ways.

But before I could see myself out the door, Zephy cornered me by the threshold and peered up at me.

“The next time I see you, it will be at the rehearsal dinner,” she reminded me.

I offered her a half-smile. “I know. And then we won’t be able to spend the night together.”

She pouted lightly. “You should change the law,” she told me, and I raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps I will do that today in the cabinet meeting!” I suggested.

“You have enough to do without changing the laws today!” Aradia piped in from behind us, and I rolled my eyes.

“Mind your business, Aradia,” I growled, but the enchantress was not perturbed by my warning. I lowered my voice to ensure the enchantress didn’t listen. “You do know where to find me if it gets to be too unbearable,” I went on softly.

Zephy’s smile grew. “I have a strong suspicion that my mother will be keeping an even closer eye on me than Aradia,” she admitted. “But my parents do need to sleep sometime.”

“Good to know!” I laughed, kissing her forehead, and bid them both goodbye, making my way into the hallway where the staff was already in full working mode, preparing for the upcoming festivities. The charged excitement was palpable, and it was barely dawn.

Inhaling, I smiled internally. It was going to be a busy day, but the end result would be fully worthwhile.

The day had finally come.

I was going to be the official Alpha King of Ironhelm.



“ALL OTHER MATTERS ARE IRRELEVANT TODAY,” I informed the cabinet as opening addresses were concluded. “Our only focus over the next two days is that of the wedding. I don’t need to tell you how displeased I was about the security breach.”

“That wasn’t our doing, Alpha!” Yasmir cried, paling as if I’d personally insulted him. “This is the act of some cowardly sub-group.”

A murmur of consensus rocked through the floor, but I wasn't moved by their proclamations.

“And it happened under all of your noses,” I grumbled. “I find it hard to believe that you knew absolutely nothing about this.”

“Alpha, we have all been questioned by the Royal Guard and cleared. If we hadn't been, we wouldn't be here,” Hampstermeyer reminded me.

“I'm well aware of the steps that have been taken,” I barked. “That doesn't mean that I'm satisfied that the threat has been eliminated. Someone has come after my bride-to-be and this kingdom. An attack against Zephyrine is an attack against me.”

A soft pause grew heavy as they struggled for a proper response that wouldn't anger me more.

“But surely the risk has been diminished now, Alpha?” Sepher insisted, looking hastily from fae to fae for reassurance.

“I'm counting on each one of you to ensure that's so, because if anything goes wrong tomorrow, I will hold you personally responsible,” I warned them. “A threat like that should have never transpired under your noses in the first place.”

They didn't like my words, but they understood them clearly. “I will not tolerate a single mishap tomorrow. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Alpha,” came the collective response.

“Very good. In that case, the cabinet is adjourned. I have a union to prepare for, after all.”

I beamed and rose as Ryland took my side, waiting for the cabinet to file out.

“Was I too hard on them?” I asked the head guard.

He chuckled. “Not hard enough. It's good for them to be on alert. The Council of Ministers has been working day and

night to figure out who was responsible for the attack. The more eyes we have on this, the better.”

He paused and delicately added, “It’s no secret that we’re concerned that something else might be planned for tomorrow as well.”

A shiver of concern rushed through me, but I dismissed it. “Have there been rumblings? Have you heard anything?”

“No! No, of course not, or you would have been the first to know of them, Alpha.”

“Then I think we’ve driven this group back under the rock from which they’ve come. That doesn’t mean I still don’t want to know who they are, but for now, I think we can take comfort in knowing that they have been properly subdued.”

Ryland nodded, and together, we marched out of the now-empty meeting room, parting ways in the main hall.

A din of noise indicated that visitors had arrived at the main entrance, and I skillfully avoided the encounter. There would be plenty of time to meet Zephyrine’s father and mother at dinner, after I had properly dressed and bathed for the occasion. I intended to wow them with my first impressions, not in the rushed arrival process.

Quietly, I ducked around the back stairs, pausing in the kitchen to meet with the cooks and check on dinner preparations.

“Is everything ready for the rehearsal dinner tonight?” I asked Heddy, who bowed too deeply and almost knocked himself off balance. Righting himself, he stood abruptly, and I swallowed a smile.

“Oh, yes, Alpha! The dinner will be most extravagant for Miss Zephyrine and her father! The menu will consist of the finest farming of Ironhelm—”

“I’ve seen the menu, Heddy, thank you,” I interrupted before the cook could start on one of his infamous tirades that could go on for hours if I let him. “I just want to make sure that everything is perfect.”

“It will be, Alpha, I swear it! And a taster will be present to ensure that all the food is safe.”

I paled at the suggestion, my eyes widening.

“You’ll have the taster be discreet,” I urged Heddy, thinking of what Nikkoli and Sabine might say to know such measures were necessary.

I didn’t want them to worry that their daughter was in bad hands.

“Of course, Alpha. There’s no need for anyone to see her.”

I glanced around the kitchen. “Where is Coraline?”

He bowed again. “I’m not sure, Alpha. Should I find her?”

I shook my head. “No. It’s not necessary. I’m just used to her tyranny in the kitchen during events like this. Carry on.”

“Yes, thank you, Alpha. Thank you.”

Contented with the arrangement, I retreated up the back steps and headed toward my suites, excitement filling me in contemplation of the upcoming night.

There was still time for a nap ahead, and then it was time for dinner.



MY NERVES CALLED for a glass of port before I succumbed to my nap, but I hadn’t accounted for the sheer exhaustion of the past weeks to catch up with me as the quiet of the suites overtook me, and I drifted off.

The afternoon fell away, and night was upon me before I knew what was happening.

“Cade!”

The gentle rocking of my shoulder stirred me awake. I stared in confusion at Aradia’s unblinking blue eyes.

“Wake up! You’ll be late for the dinner! Everyone is gathering downstairs!”

Aghast, I sprung up in the round bed and looked around the dark suite, mortified. “Am I late?”

“Not yet, but you will be if you don’t hurry. Miss Zephyrine is growing anxious because no one has seen you,” the enchantress informed me, spinning away. “You don’t want to leave your bride or her sire waiting on the eve of her union.”

She vanished as I scrambled to get myself ready, shaking the remnants of sleep away from me, embarrassed but relieved that Aradia had come searching for me before I had further humiliated myself.

With as much speed and care as I could muster, I dressed, but as I hurried toward the door, before I could lay a hand on the knob, it flew inward, driving me backward. I inhaled sharply, expecting to see Zephy, accusing and flustered, but the reality startled me worse.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded, flabbergasted.

Stralia slipped inside and shut the door, backing me up as guilt flooded my entire body. I hadn’t thought about my lifelong friend in weeks, not since I’d banished her to the north wing, where I had put her out of sight and therefore out of mind. It had been the best solution for everyone. It ensured that Stralia still had a home, but that she was not in direct contact with anyone intimately involved with me.

“I can’t visit my old friend on his last night as a prince?” she asked sweetly, cocking her head to the side. In the darkness, her green eyes glowed like embers against the shadows, her white-blonde halo eerie. She seemed like a ghost in that lighting, and she creeped me out slightly. I found it odd that I had once been so attracted to her.

“Stralia, I explained to you that it’s over, and you continued to cross boundaries. You shouldn’t be here—in more ways than one,” I growled, moving past her, but with lightning-fast reflexes, her hand whipped out, and she grabbed at me.

“Don’t! Wait!”

I stopped, gritting my teeth. “Stralia, I’m already late for the rehearsal dinner,” I told her. “I don’t have time for,” I gestured wildly at her, “whatever this is.”

“This is me confronting you finally,” Stralia informed me, her voice etched in pain. “How can you seriously go through with this, Cade?”

I blinked, my arm lowering as I stared at her. “What is this, Stralia? What are you doing?”

“What am *I* doing? What are *you* doing?” she demanded. “You love *me*! You have always loved *me*! This marriage—it’s not what you want. I keep waiting for you to come to your senses, but you’re actually going to go through with it. For what? The good of the kingdom?”

She scoffed in disbelief.

“Yes!” I replied sharply. “Yes, and you always knew that it was going to happen this way. Are you having a breakdown? Coming here like this?”

“Are you? You would give up our love for this senseless marriage?”

My face softened as I peered at her twisted expression, and I realized that she had never really accepted what was going to happen, despite the fact that we had always prepared for it.

“It’s not senseless, Stralia,” I told her, stepping closer to touch her face. “I’m in love.”

Stralia’s eyes bugged, and she started to shake her head, but I didn’t let her speak as I shushed her gently.

“It’s true. I believe that we’re mated. I feel it inside me and that it will come to fruition. You must accept it, Stralia, because it is the only way for us to move on—both of us.”

Stralia released a gasp and snaked her neck forward to kiss me, catching me off guard. I fell back, disgusted and annoyed. “What is wrong with you?” I growled. “Did you not hear what I just said?”

“I heard you! I just don’t believe you!” she wailed, stomping her foot. “A lifetime, we’ve been together. You barely know this fae! You can’t love her already!”

“And yet I do. We are getting married tomorrow, Stralia. She will be my queen. What you and I had is over. Please. Do not come here again, or I will be forced to eject you from the palace. I don’t want to do that.”

I didn’t give her the opportunity to respond as I flew out of the suite, determined to leave Stralia and my old ways behind me forever. Stralia was the past. Zephyrine, my queen, was the future. And she was waiting for me.

CHAPTER 25

ZEPHY

I *can't believe he's late to the dinner*, I thought, hurrying through the corridor toward our shared suites.

I couldn't bear the thought of sitting down at the heavily decorated tables without Cade at my side, my parents staring at me reprovingly, as if I had something to do with the reason my fiancé was not there on time.

I looked for Aradia first, but the enchantress was conveniently absent. As I hurried through the long corridors, I heard the low tones of Cade's voice filter into the hallway. I slowed my gait, realizing that he was not alone.

I suppose that answers my question as to where Aradia is also, I mused, making my way to the slightly ajar door. Yet as I closed in on the rooms, I froze in my tracks, the words coming into my ears as my eyes took in the scene through the crack in the door. It was not the enchantress collecting Cade.

My eyes took in the scene in disbelief, my heart filling my throat to smother the cry that wanted to fall from my lips.

Cade stood with Stralia in his arms, in our room, the very room which he knew that I would not be returning to that night.

"It's not senseless, Stralia," Cade said huskily, his hands stroking her face. "I'm in love."

My heart leaped into my mouth, my knees buckling as Cade continued, speaking the words of my worst nightmares.

“It’s true. I believe that we’re mated. I feel it inside me and that it will come to fruition. You must accept it, Stralia, because it is the only way for us to move on—both of us.”

My head drew back, tears filling my eyes as she answered his proclamation with a deep kiss. Dizziness swept over me, and I stumbled forward, gasping as I fumbled to escape my own eyes.

How could I have been so blind? How could I have not seen that this was happening the whole time under my nose?

I couldn’t see the dimly lit hallways in front of my face, servants passing me by as the guards remained in my stead, at a healthy distance. They had no reason to know what I had witnessed, but it was only a matter of time before someone realized that I was falling apart at the seams and came to figure out what was going on.

I had to compose myself, but how? How could I after what I’d just seen?

“Miss, are you all right?”

Maywin appeared at my side, and I stared at her blankly. She reached for my arm, and I allowed her to take it, steadying me.

Think, Zephy.

I couldn’t return to the dinner. I couldn’t look at my parents, at Cade—if he showed up at all. Maybe he would leave with Stralia right then and there. My knees shook violently.

“Miss Zephyrine! What’s wrong?!” The alarm in Maywin’s voice snapped me back to reality. I had to get out of public view.

“I don’t feel well,” I told her, breathing heavily. “I need to lie down a moment.”

Maywin’s eyes widened. “Everyone is waiting in the grand ballroom.”

“Everyone can wait a moment longer, Maywin,” I told her firmly. “They’re already waiting on the King, aren’t they?”

Maywin simply stared at me.

“Come back to my room with me.”

“As... as you wish, miss.”

She turned to Jasper, who stood nearby, waiting for my next move, and informed him that we would be along momentarily, filing me back to the temporary suite adjacent to my parents' room for the night.

I collapsed almost immediately onto the bed, and Maywin rushed to my side with a glass of water from the bathroom. “What is it?”

I shook my head, unable to tell her or anyone else, my humiliation paramount. How could I tell her that I'd been so willfully blind to their relationship? It was too shameful to explain to anyone, even my closest confidant.

I've been standing in their way. Cade has always wanted to be with Stralia and has done his best to love me, but his heart truly belongs to her. This isn't anyone's fault but our ancestors', who thrust this damned oath on us.

I couldn't fault him for how he felt. My heart was broken, but the blame wasn't his or hers. They had a long history, one that I had only disrupted with my arrival.

“What can I do?” Maywin begged me. “The King will be concerned about you, not to mention your parents.”

The mere thought of looking Cade in the face after what I had just witnessed made my stomach twist and turn in ways I couldn't get under control.

“No!” I gasped, sitting up, another swirl of wooziness overcoming me. “You...”

I pursed my lips and shook my head. “You... you need to go and buy me some time. I can't have anyone come searching for me, not yet.”

Maywin stared at me in utter confusion. “I don't understand.”

“I—I just need to collect myself,” I said, thinking quickly. “It’s all too much excitement. If you can offer me half an hour or an hour, I should be fine. But you must think of something to keep anyone from looking in on me. Maywin, I’m trusting you to do this. I don’t want to embarrass myself on the night of my rehearsal dinner.”

Maywin stared at me, worry creasing her brow. “If you’re sick, I can call for a healer—”

“I’m not,” I reassured her. “It’s nerves. Maywin, I don’t often command you, but I must insist.”

Maywin visibly swallowed and nodded. “Yes,” she agreed. “I’ll do my best to see that you aren’t bothered.”

“Do better than your best. Make sure I’m not disturbed.”

Nodding, Maywin bowed and backed away, but she paused, a glint of sadness in her eyes. “Is there anything I can do for you before I go?”

I stared after her, my heart sinking as I looked at her loyal, trusting face.

“No, Maywin. Thank you for being such a kind, faithful friend to me.”

“Miss—”

“Please go now, Maywin. I don’t want to tell you again.”

I turned my back on her and listened for the door to close before sitting upright and rushing toward the computer desk. I began typing as fast as my fingers would allow.

My One True Love, King Cade, I began, tears welling in my eyes as I began. By the time you read this letter, I will be on my way out of Ironhelm. Please don’t come looking for me. It’s not what your heart desires, after all.

Streaks slipped down my cheeks in slow, zigzagged patterns, dripping off my chin to land on the smooth, mahogany surface, blotting the waxed wood unevenly, but I didn’t wait for them to dry as I stood, smoothing the front of my fine gown of ruby red.

There wasn't enough with me in this room for any kind of trip, but I would make do with what I had, hastily grabbing my overnight bag and throwing in the clothes and toiletries I had in my possession. Then, cracking a window, I slipped a leg outside, relishing the cool summer air on my hot, upset cheeks.

The orchestra played lively from the grand ballroom, my escape not yet an inkling on anyone's mind. By the time anyone was the wiser, I would be in the open country backroads in one of Cade's long-forgotten cars, heading north or east or west—but not south, because I couldn't go home to Carrotrove now. My parents would never forgive me for this. Ironhelm would never forgive me, either.

I would have to become someone else now, someone not tied to the King of Ironhelm and his kingdom. I would rebuild and start fresh.

And try to leave my shattered ego and heart behind.



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