



S.L.PRATER

† KING †  
OF  
TRICKSTERS



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King of Tricksters

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# Contents

*Content Warning*

**Chapter 1**

**Chapter 2**

**Chapter 3**

**Chapter 4**

**Chapter 5**

**Chapter 6**

**Chapter 7**

**Chapter 8**

**Chapter 9**

**Chapter 10**

**Chapter 11**

**Chapter 12**

**Chapter 13**

**Chapter 14**

**Chapter 15**

**Chapter 16**

**Epilogue**

*Glossary of Common Terms*

*Also by S. L. Prater*

## Content Warning

This book is very naughty and was written for adults. It contains foul language, bloody fantasy violence, sex work, and numerous sexually explicit scenes between consenting characters. A glossary of common terms is available as needed at the back of the book.

# Chapter 1



## (Rain)

Night fell around Rain, and her wounds—new and old—awoke in the damp darkness. She couldn't see her trees. Couldn't find her feet. Couldn't decipher what was up and what was down. The sky—where even was the sky? It was starless, a muddy, murky swirl of black. She couldn't find—

*Rain!* Bernard's voice pierced her mind and she jerked awake, unaware she'd fallen asleep. Her fingers dug into the gravel beneath her. Slowly, her thoughts caught up with the rest of her.

She was in a cave, prone on the hard ground with her cheek pressed to the gravel.

She'd lost too much blood. Death haunted her, its ghost cooling her skin. Her limbs trembled as she fought to shift her weight. Her heart thumped sluggishly in her breast. Memories of the last few moments whirled about, seeking purchase in her mind.

Teeth gritted, Rain's fingers made claws against the stones. That dragae Dusan had knocked her down, so death could fucking wait. She coughed trying to take a deep breath, and the wound at her side throbbed. The scarred skin at her throat was tight and hot.

*Oh, thank the gods,* Bernard panted, his voice quiet and tense through the link of their souls. *You blacked out and I thought—*

*I'm here,* Rain reassured him. *Bernard? Are you all right? You sound far away.* His shadow form continued to cool her body, covering and filling her, but he felt thinner, less present.

*I've given you some of my life force ... the same way you so often share yours with me.* He was too quiet. She had to strain to hear him.

*No, Bernard!* Alarm made her sluggish pulse surge. *I don't think you should do that. You don't have blood to give me.*

*I think ...* He hesitated. *I think I could give that piece of your soul back. An immortal soul is a powerful thing. You'd recover then and—*

“No!” The words broke through her dry lips, kicking up more dust. She fought to lift her head, to glare at his misty form, ignoring how it made her dizzy. *Don't you dare, Bernard! You hear me? That's yours! You keep it!*

Dragae voices reached her then. Dusan and the blood mage shouted at one another.

“I'll have no part of this,” the blood mage roared. Rain struggled to peer over at him. Her head felt like a lead weight. His bald scalp gleamed in the dragon-fire torchlight behind him. It illuminated the cave walls and a crumbling archway.

“Then leave!” Dusan fired back, still favoring the leg Rain had run through with her dagger. The sounds of rushing water

echoed about the chamber, and the scent of damp was thick in her nose.

Out of habit, she tried to reach for one of her blades, but her belt was empty. It was like missing a limb, not having her daggers with her. Her fingers curled into fists.

“Divine Terra take you,” the blood mage cursed. “King Yaga will not be pleased when the duke he wants at his side is mate-sick and dying. The Lunar Court will be in useless shambles.”

“I did as I was commanded!” Dusan’s bulky chest puffed out.

“Bah.” The smaller blood mage batted a hand at him. “On your head be it.”

Dusan made a crude gesture with his fingers, and the blood mage stormed off through the archway. The dragae turned. Rain went still as the dead.

*What are you going to do?* Worry pitched Bernard’s voice high.

Dusan’s steps were slow and heavy. Rain’s muscles tensed, readying for him. Penny’s wooden charm, the smooth piece of wood the mortals called a memory flat, was a warm reassurance in her palm, tied loosely to her wrist by a strip of delicate leather. She squeezed it tight for luck and held her breath, casting up a quick prayer to her friend, begging for strength in the way her mortal family had taught her. She

received no sign that Penny was listening, but she believed with her whole being that she was, and it gave her comfort.

Dusan stopped by her feet, looming over her. He kicked her boot.

She kept still.

He rounded on her cautiously, his steps grinding against the rocks loudly. He planted his bulky boots by her head. With the flat of his foot, he nudged her cheek, smearing it with grit. She remained motionless. Then he drew back his leg as if he planned to stomp on her.

As he shifted his weight forward, Rain pounced. She caught him off-balance, throwing a quick strike at the underside of his knee. Using his weight against him, she wrapped her arms about his legs and helped him fall. Dusan went down hard. He tried to catch himself, landing on his wrists with an audible thud and a grunt of pain.

*Yes!* Bernard cheered her on.

Rain rolled up Dusan's body, catching his injured wrist and ripping it toward her stomach. Mercilessly she bent his hand back, and his cries filled the chamber, a cacophony of sound against the echo of rushing waters.

Rain planted her legs, one across his broad chest, the other over his neck. She pulled his arm up between her thighs and twisted it at the elbow. With all her might, she clutched his wrist to her breast, trapping the arm in an unnatural position.

Dusan screamed, and his boots pedaled at the ground, scattering rocks, casting up a great cloud of dirt.

“Gods! Oh gods,” he moaned.

*Don't let him go!* Bernard shouted, and his shadow form expanded, enveloping the dragae.

Rain gritted her teeth, nostrils flaring. The Penny charm burned hot wedged between her and Dusan's bent wrist. She kept the arm bar tight while Bernard warmed around them.

“Don't drain him dry,” Rain warned her familiar. “I made a blasted bargain with this bastard, remember? I vowed to let him live.”

*I don't think it counts if I kill him.* Bernard no longer sounded so quiet. He'd grown thicker and darker in his shadow form while Dusan blanched.

“I don't want to find out the hard way you're wrong!”

*You need his blood more than he does right now. I can take what you're owed and let him live if you insist.*

Rain's pulse climbed. Her body warmed, but Dusan's shouting had drawn too much attention. There were voices and clattering footsteps in the cavern. More dragae. More soldiers. More than she could handle in her weakened state. Torches flickered in the draft stirred up by the rush of their approach.

Dusan had sliced open her throat and stabbed her side with iron. Bernard had sealed the wounds, but magic didn't work on the metal and could never cure her fully. As her heartbeat grew stronger, the iron poisoning coursed through her, a

molten misery. She was weak and growing weaker with every rasp of breath through her burning lungs. By sheer stubborn will, she kept hold of Dusan, kept his arm twisted at the elbow, kept her legs pinning his wriggling body to the stones.

No matter how she struggled, it wouldn't do to let her enemies know she was outmatched.

“Come and get me, you sons of bastards!” she shouted through gritted teeth. “My blade craves more of your lizard blood!”

Bernard's laughter was a welcome sound in her head. *I'll rip their throats out*, he said gleefully. *Soon you'll have more blood than you know what to do with! So come on, you fiends! You may send us to the next life, but we're taking you with us!*

Gushing water and heavy footsteps vanished, replaced by a sharp ringing that made Rain wince.

*Bernard, my hearing! I've lost it!* She squinted in the dark as a dull buzz filled her ears.

*Thank the gods! It's alright*, he soothed. *I sense your mate. He's near.*

*My mate!* Relieved tears pricked her eyes. Around her, stones lifted into the air and hovered there. The scent of incense—divine moon magic—melded with the smell of dank water and mold.

*He's taken our hearing with his mage magic. Don't fight him. Let him speak death into our enemies' ears.*

Rain gasped, so relieved, her next breath was a sob. Beneath her, Dusan trembled. His eyes were wide, the whites showing and glowing in the dim light. His mouth opened as though he were screaming. And then he went still beneath her.

*You can let him go,* Bernard said.

*I'm trying to.* Rain's muscles had gone rigid. Her blood was too hot, burning through her limbs. Her arms shook, and her stiff fingers wouldn't obey her commands.

She caught movement in her peripheral, lifting her chin just as a towering shadow moved into the cavern. Torches illuminated slivers of silvery skin. Immediately, she recognized the tall frame, the curves of his velvety antlers, the long sure strides beneath a billowing cloak.

Her mate.

Another sharp ring in her ears and her hearing returned. Water flowed in some distant place. The dragae were silent, a piercing quiet that belonged only to the dead. Then the rocks returned to the cavern floor in a clattering chorus.

"I've come to rescue you," Night said, taking in her position atop the dragae, amusement in his gaze, "and here I find you, in the process of saving yourself."

"Night," she panted, pain infused in the word.

He moved quickly then, humor gone in a flash, moonlight eyes glittering in the dark like one of the wild things of the forest.

Dropping to his knees beside her, he laid a hand on her wrist. “You can let him go.”

“I can’t.” Her lungs hitched. She tried to swallow. The scar at her throat burned like hellfire.

Night rubbed his thumbs firmly over the swelling joints of her fingers, loosening them. It hurt, but it helped. She dropped the dead dragae’s wrist, then her mate untangled her from the corpse. He lifted her to her feet easily, tucking her under his arm. His touch made her weary bones ache, but she was glad to be with him.

“I have you.” He let out a shaky breath. “I have you, and I’m not letting go.” He gave her one of his broken smiles, his lips pulling at the scar tissue in the corner of his mouth, and a sense of peace momentarily drowned out the welling ache of the poison flooding her insides. Connection buzzed between them, their blooming bond rejoicing. His gaze scanned her injuries, the scar at her throat, the wound at her side, and he frowned. “And I wish I could kill them all again for you. Stars above, once wasn’t nearly enough.”

“How did you find me?” she whispered, laying her heavy head against his shoulder.

“Sora Yaga,” he explained. “I’m to tell you that she no longer owes you a boon.”

Bernard solidified from a dark mist into a shadowy cat form. He stood on the chest of the dragae and nosed at his face. Dusan’s dead eyes lay open, his lips slack and pale. Bernard went searching through his clothing with his paws

until he freed Rain's elven dagger. The immortal blade glittered green and gold in the low light. He caught it between his teeth and pulled it loose.

Night helped Rain bend so she could accept her familiar's offering. Glad to be reunited with it, she patted Bernard on the head, then tucked the immortal blade into her belt for safekeeping.

*I hope the scavengers find Dusan's corpse and rip him to pieces,* Bernard said, bottlebrush tail standing straight up behind him like an exclamation point. *And I hope he feels every nibble in the next life. He deserves no less for hurting my family.*

Rain smiled weakly down at him. His claws were out, and his hair stood on end. He was being adorable again, but she didn't dare tell him that.

*He's lucky you didn't get a chance to rip his throat out,* she said instead, bracing her weight against her mate.

Bernard's tail gave a proud little flick. *Lucky indeed.*

"I've gotten turned around rushing in through the winding tunnels," Night confessed.

"Bernard always knows the way," Rain said, fighting to keep pain out of her words. Her joints were stiffening by the second. Losing the battle against her will, she melted into her mate's side. She tried not to think of the long grueling days ahead of her. Not even moon magic could help her now.

She'd suffered iron poisoning before, but she couldn't remember the worst of it. A kindness on her mind's part. It occurred to her she'd rather suffer iron poisoning with her mate than be healed not knowing where he was. The bond thrummed beside her heart, glad to be with him, whatever the circumstances.

Bernard swiped at Dusan's chin with his claws for good measure. Then he leapt down to lead the way through the caves.

## Chapter 2



(Night)

**G***et to her. Get to her. Get to her.*

The words had banged around inside Night's head. He continued to feel the echoes of his panic in the unsteady thrum of his pulse. His heart had threatened to seize. It hurt in a manner he'd never felt before. The moment the witch Sora arrived in her strange moving hut to summon him, the organ had been caught in a death vice, threatening to erupt in his breast.

Now Rain was alive and at his side, but he still couldn't get his pulse to calm. The danger didn't feel completely gone. He sensed it hovering around her person like a phantom. Though she attempted to push through it, she was clearly in pain. His nocturnal eyes could make out the lines of tension around her mouth and edging her narrow chin. Her white hair was sticky and dry like straw, caked with dirt and blood. A new jagged scar marred her slender throat, and her voice was huskier out of her damaged voice box. Her bloody shirt was torn wide at the side, the flesh there pink and swollen.

Anger churned in his belly, and his nostrils flared. He made himself focus, following the bounding familiar through the winding tunnels toward their escape, taking note of the

sounds of rushing water growing ever louder the closer to the mouth of the cave they came. He could tend to Rain properly in the way their bond wanted—the way he wanted—when they were safe.

The growing scent of dragon blood magic—ash and brimstone—stung his nostrils. He'd caught pieces of it in the marsh outside the cave, miles south of River Row, as he followed the Eventide. The land on both sides of the river there was called Bloodmire. A great battle had once been fought in those wetlands between the Seelie and the Unseelie.

Sora had warned him dragae soldiers had hauled his mate off. When he'd caught the scent of their magic, he'd used the smell of ash to find the cave, ready to fight death herself if he had to.

Now he smelled it again, fresh embers, and his pace slowed.

Bernard stopped ahead of him. Hunkering down, his ears went back, and he growled a warning low in his throat. The winding tunnels sloped upward. They were underground currently. Night held his breath to listen.

Whereas the moon magic Night knew best was useful for controlling the body, dragon blood magic favored the earth. Dragaе mages too were tricksters, deadly and powerful, transforming into half-reptilian creatures with poisoned fangs and sharp claws. His mind conjured up an image of such a creature and made him shiver. The ground rumbled under his

feet. Night clutched Rain to him, but she whimpered, like his touch hurt her, so he loosened his grip.

A loud crack rent the air, blood magic splitting stone. The sound of water rushing into the tunnels grew deafening. Up ahead, the torchlights snuffed out one at a time, throwing lengthening shadows down the cave corridor.

Night turned on his heels, ready to pull Rain after him in a race against the waves, but the waters found them quickly. They crashed together. Rain was knocked from his arms and swallowed up by a climbing icy flood. Reaching for her, Night cried out seconds before the tunnel filled from floor to ceiling and he too was pulled under. The press of water sent him spinning head over heels.

He couldn't see.

Even his nocturnal eyes needed at least the tiniest bit of light to aid his vision, usually provided by the stars or the moon. Under the water, deep in the cave, the blackness was total. He scrambled forward, kicking his legs and waving his arms, searching the heavy darkness for his mate.

*Get to her. Get to her. Get to her.*

He touched something. Rocks. Mud. His antlers scraped against stone. He shouldered out of his cloak to ease his movements, then shucked his boots. He felt someone in the dark.

Not his mate. The skin was scale-like, and the body was too broad. He shoved aside one of the dragae corpses, then

another.

*Get to her. Get to her. Get to her.*

Faint light appeared, an iridescent ball of bright blue.

And a fish? A strange fish swam amongst the dead.

He spotted Rain floating before him, a corona of blue haloing her small frame. She held her last breath trapped in her cheeks. Her movements were desperate and jerky and getting her nowhere fast. Her eyes were wide, searching for an escape. Night sped toward her and caught her around the middle. She stilled momentarily in his arms. He used the power of his long legs to propel them forward, toward the large fish. The creature was a ghoulish thing with needle teeth and flailing fins.

Bernard.

The trickster familiar had turned himself into some strange sea creature with a luminescent lure that protruded from his head. The current tried to push them back, but Night trusted that Bernard knew best. He followed after the familiar, pulling his mate beside him, using the walls of stone to leverage them forward, knocking aside the floating dead that barred their path. Rain did her best to aid their movement, paddling with her arms and legs, but her injuries slowed her. Bernard barreled through corpses, leading the way.

Night let out a partial breath through his nose, sending a cascade of bubbles up before his eyes. His lungs were burning.

He glanced back at his mate, who let out the breath trapped in her cheeks.

The bond thrummed frantically through him. *She isn't going to drown*, he told himself. He had her now, and he wasn't letting go of her. His fingers found hers and threaded through them tightly. He jerked her after him, pumping his legs, ignoring how they too burned.

When he glanced at her next, her eyes closed and her legs stilled. *Fuck, fuck, fuck*. A ring of icy panic cinched his chest.

Gritting his teeth, Night pulled her faster, winding through the tunnels, shoving against the current, cursing the damning press of water and the dead who made barriers to thwart them. Lights brightened ahead, and hope bloomed within him. Night surged out of the mouth of the cave into blistering sunlight. He broke through the surface of the waters with a gasp, dragging his mate up beside him.

Rain spluttered, struggling to find her footing. Water poured in rivulets down her face and out of her nostrils.

“We’re alive,” Night groaned, pushing wet snowy hair out of her eyes.

“Just barely,” Rain coughed. Droplets of murky water hung on her lashes. He wiped them clean with his thumbs, his jaw set. The bond continued to pump anxiously through his veins, compelling him to touch as much of her as he could. Rain laid her hands on his chest for balance, panting.

Bernard's ghoulish fish face appeared by Night's elbow. Then the familiar evaporated into a shadowy mist before returning to his cat form on the bank. He yowled at them, pawing the air.

"Bernard smells blood magic," Rain interpreted. "A powerful trickster is about. I saw him. He's bald and heavily scarred. Bernard believes he's a full-blooded dragon, and though I hate to admit it, I'm in no fit state for another fight. We need to hurry."

Like the gods, ancient dragons were the direct descendants of the divines. Neither should be trifled with if one valued their life. Night didn't intend to tarry. The late autumn cold was piercing, and his mate needed care. If the circumstances were different, god-like or not, he'd track the dragon down. Better to have one less enemy.

Rain stumbled out of the water, shivering and holding herself around her middle. "I'm not sure how much longer I can stay standing. You'll have to carry me."

Night heaved her onto the dry ground, the grass made brittle with frost. He pulled off his wet stockings and shucked his soaked vest. Then he scooped her up into his arms. Cold bit at the skin of his exposed feet. His hair dripped a trail of icy wet down his neck.

He turned to Bernard, his breath misting before him. "Help me keep her warm."

The familiar shook dry, then burst into a smog, rising to cover Rain before shifting into a large fur blanket.

“Night ... it’s bad,” she warned, her voice strained and muffled under the fur. “I might not—”

“You’re going to make it,” he insisted, jaw tightening. He hefted her away from the bank toward the trees. Branches and limbs moved before him, clearing the way for their mistress. He’d always known Rain was something special. Now the trees declared it, paying her homage. The sight was a humbling one. “You’ve lost blood, I take it?”

Considering the placement of her new scars and the stains on her clothing, she’d lost a considerable amount, but they could fix that.

“The blade was tipped in iron,” she said.

“Damn it all.” Night wanted to kill the drage soldiers again, slower this time. He shifted her weight up higher on his chest, and she whimpered. Rain clung to him with fingers that were twice their usual size, the pads red and blistering. Her skin usually held a golden tint. Now it was pale and pink.

The old cut on his lip from Queen Isla had scarred, but it hadn’t been severe enough to taint his blood. The injury his father had given him in childhood was another matter. He remembered what iron poisoning had felt like—a molten torment that led to days of sickness while the poison slowly ebbed from his body. It had been the worst fever of his life, and he’d only had the one injury. By the divines, what would happen to his mate with so many piercing wounds? The scar at his temple throbbed sympathetically.

She'd recovered from it before, he consoled himself. An iron weapon had penetrated her belly in the first war. She'd managed then. He pulled the furs tighter around her, willing her to do it again, to survive again, to be as strong as he knew she could be.

His feet stung. The wet cold turned his toes numb, but Sora's hut wasn't far. It had dropped him off nearby and now sat crooked in a copse of pine trees, covered in blue butterflies. It awaited his arrival, straightening as they approached, the windows shuttering and unshuttering. The door fell open, and a blast of hot air smelling of brimstone hit them. He welcomed the dragon heat. It chased away the numbness in his toes and dried his clothes so they were damp rather than soaked.

Night carried Rain inside, ducking beneath the lintel so that his antlers fit. Bernard morphed from the fur into his mist form and trailed them in. Night was immediately greeted by another familiar, a small black dragon perched atop a wax-wood table, wings spread wide. Bernard transformed into a small fuzzy cat and joined her on the table. They sniffed at each other, getting reacquainted.

“Masha,” Night said wearily. “Where is your mistress?”

Masha flapped her leathery wings and made a sound like an angry bird.

The inside of the hut was more expansive than it appeared from the outside, adorned in fine dark wood and rustic furnishings. It smelled of cooked mushrooms and dried herbs. Masha glided off the table toward the massive hearth, which

was flanked by two doors. She coughed a black flame into the hearth, and the fire doubled in size. Before the hearth lay a collection of heavy furs and a billowy armchair. Night stepped over to them, leaving footprint puddles in his wake.

He sunk into the plush seat, hugging Rain to his chest. She whimpered a little, but her eyes remained squeezed shut. Her skin was impossibly hot to the touch, nearly smoldering, but her teeth chattered. Bernard bounded down from the table to help Night gather more furs, dragging them closer with his teeth. Night covered Rain until she stopped shivering.

Finally, the door behind him opened and Sora appeared. Her thick yellow hair was tied up, displaying her horns: four short, spiked bone-horns that protruded from her crown. Her stern blue eyes quickly scanned the scene. She said nothing, only pulled the apron of a servant over a lady's velvet dress and began boiling a kettle of water for tea.

A question burned on Night's tongue, hotter than his mate's fever, but he couldn't bring himself to ask it. He took Rain's hand in his. The skin around the bed of her nails was swollen. She twitched in her sleep, as though even that tender touch had hurt her.

Fear fisted in his throat. "Sora," he rasped. He waited until the witch's eyes met his. "I need to know if she's dying."

Sora's lips pressed together. Her penetrating gaze moved over the bundle of furs. Then she exchanged a long look with her familiar. Masha's forked tongue flicked through the air.

"Iron?" Sora guessed.

“A lot of it,” he choked.

“She’s strong. She’ll survive,” she said softly. The kettle screeched, and she brought it out of the hearth, her dragae skin immune to the fire’s heat. Night dared to hope ... then the witch finished her thought. “But she’ll want to die.”

## Chapter 3



### (Rain)

Rain dreamt of pain. A burning sun blazed overhead, so bright she shaded her eyes with her hands. Beneath her, sun-bleached steps wound away, too far down for her to see where they ended.

Some part of her mind was aware that she was sleeping and that, for the moment, sleeping was better than waking. But her body was hot, baking in a sun that insisted on hovering too close no matter how far down the steps she traveled.

She continued onwards, eager to escape the blistering heat, alone for a time. Then a woman materialized just in front of her, long and lean, with golden skin and familiar amber eyes. Rain was suddenly young, only ten years old. The woman had long chestnut hair that fell nearly to her knees, and she dressed in a flowing silk robe. Her ears were rounded like a mortal's, though no one looking at her would doubt she was something otherworldly.

“You can't keep following me,” her mother said, and Rain peered up at her pleadingly.

Even at ten, she was already an excellent tracker. Her mother could try to leave her again, but she'd find her once more. The trees would lend her their eyes to help.

Her mother—Divinia, Rain suddenly remembered her name—smiled brightly. “I know what you’re thinking, but you have to stay here.”

Rain lowered her lashes, a lump growing in her throat. “When will I see you again?”

“I know this is hard, dear one, but as a kindness to you and to all of my children, when I leave, I stay gone.” She dropped a gentle hand on Rain’s shoulder, and her touch felt as light as a shadow. “I promise not to interfere in your life moving forward. I promise never to give you false hope. Your talents are many. If you set your mind to it, you could probably find me, but I think you won’t.” Another bright smile. “Your sisters need you too much.”

*Sisters.* The word rang in Rain’s head like a struck gong. She tried to picture them in her mind but couldn’t.

She didn’t want to be kept from her mother’s bright smiles and gentle touches. Rain wanted her hugs and her fairy stories. But duty steadied her feet. She watched her mother leave down the never-ending set of bleached stone stairs until she was nothing but a chestnut speck in the distance. Then the ground rumbled, and the steps splintered. A bottomless hole stretched before her.

Rain peered into the new swirling darkness and saw war.

Fae killing fae, Seelie striking down Unseelie amidst a storm of blood and cries, the clink and rasp of metal striking metal loud in her ears. Her trees were burning. A massive

dragon with gleaming black scales filled the starry sky, blowing fire across her forest.

The jagged scar that marred her belly throbbed. Tenderly cupping her old wound, Rain shook her head. “I don’t want to see that.”

The vision melted away into the dark pit. Then the sun was too hot again. Sweat beaded her flesh. She sucked dry air through her teeth.

Rain awoke screaming, her voice husky from her scarred windpipe.

“More ice,” Night barked.

The room swam before her. As it came into focus, she recognized the lofted ceiling, the opulent space. The large, too-soft, mushy bed beneath her. She was home.

And she was burning.

Erikson, the blue-haired advisor, handed his brother more ice from a cart, and Night packed it around Rain as she gritted her teeth and thrashed. A cool compress brushed her cheeks. Rain blinked her eyes to further clear her vision. Margot held her hand, her cool fingers too tight across Rain’s sore knuckles, pinning it to the bedding, and Rain was so weak even a mortal could manage to keep her there, stopping her from striking out desperately. Margot’s dark curls were tied up tight, and her face was lined with worry.

Bernard lay at her feet in his cat form, his gaze sharp and black as pitch. *You were alone the last time*, he said, like

they'd had this conversation before and recently. *You aren't alone this time.*

*I can't do it.*

*Of course you can. Don't be foolish.*

Susan brought the wet compress across her face, the vein in her forehead made prominent by her stress. Her blue eyes rounded with concern. "How long has Rain been like this?"

"A fortnight," Night grumbled, his eyes red-rimmed, his face unshaven. Long blue-black hair fell in unkempt layers around his angular features.

*I need you to drink what they give you, Bernard said, then they'll let you go back to sleep.*

*Bernard ...*

*I'm not going to kill you.*

*I'm on fire!*

He chuckled. *You wouldn't kill me either if the situation was reversed.*

*I would if you were on fucking fire! In fact, I kind of want to kill you right now for refusing me ...*

*Drink, he commanded. Then back to sleep you go.*

Susan brought something to her lips. The ceramic clinked gently against her teeth when she tried to turn away. Margot's hand came up to brace the side of her face. Rain swallowed with a reluctant groan. Broth hit her dry throat, and her stomach churned.

“There’s our girl,” Margot cooed, stroking back her hair.  
“Drink it down.”

Rain pressed her lips together and shook her head. Agony left her legs twitching and had her heels digging into the mattress. Her skin burned, her insides were molten, her gut was an inferno, her blood was lava. It was a wonder she didn’t turn to ash right there. She squeezed Margot’s hand.

“Drink,” Susan said sternly.

Rain opened her mouth and sipped. She swallowed a broth that had little taste or texture, then water that was so cold it made her teeth ache. She wanted more of the water, but when they gave it to her, her stomach knotted, and she thought she might vomit.

“More,” Susan insisted after giving her a moment to recover.

Rain drank it all. Night opened a jar that released an earthy fragrance and set the glass down beside her head. He took her hands and slathered something creamy and greasy onto the flesh around her nails, her knuckles, and elbows. Whatever it was, it tingled through the skin at her joints pleasantly. Swiping more onto his thumb, he wiped it across her cracked lips. It numbed her mouth and tasted bitter.

“No more,” she begged. Though gentle, his touch hurt.  
*Bernard ...*

*I’m still not going to kill you.*

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart,” Night whispered.

She didn't need to be told twice.

\* \* \*

Time had become a relative thing. Rain had no concrete concept of how much passed, vaguely registering when Night would wake her to put her into clean nightclothes or hold her while the maid freshened the bed linens.

Rain's eyes cracked open. Sunlight filtered in around the curtains. Her mouth was parched. She smacked her lips together, realizing her head wasn't on a pillow. She was propped up in Night's lap. With a wooden spoon, he dribbled soup into her mouth. She drank it down and allowed him to feed her more.

She wanted to ask him what time it was, but her mouth hurt too much, the scar tugging at her neck as she swallowed.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he said, leaning over her, his breath warming her scalp.

He was sad. She didn't want him to be sad, and she tried to tell him so, but her words were muffled and incoherent, and her throat throbbed.

Rain struggled to stay awake. Exhaustion swept over her and pulled her back under again, then once more she rose groggily to the surface. Time had passed again, but not much, she deciphered. Her head was still pillowed in her mate's lap.

"I need to do something for you," she choked, her words running together in a muffled rush of syllables. "The bond wants it." She hadn't fed him or made anything for him in

ages. Her fingers ached to do those things, instincts making her restless.

Somehow he understood her. “Get better. That’s all you need to do for me.”

Night held a fragrant jar open in his hand. Gently, he applied the cream over her cracked lips, and that was heaven. One at a time, he lifted her hands, holding them loosely, rubbing more of the substance into the joints of each of her fingers, the skin around her nails, then her wrists and elbows. She watched him, their bond expanding sweetly beside her heart.

A cool compress relieved the pain in her neck. Still her body simmered, but her pain was considerably less. He opened the neck of her nightshirt and started on her shoulder, kneading the top of her arm, pressing the ache out of the ball joint with light strokes before sleep took her once more.

\* \* \*

When Rain’s eyes cracked open next, she was surrounded by her family, and they were bickering amicably.

Margot sat beside her, tucked in amongst the pillows, holding Rain’s hand in her lap, gently rubbing her thumb across her knuckles. Susan stood down at the foot of the bed where Bernard lounged, scratching absently behind his ears.

“I can’t make head or tail of it,” Margot said. “If a witch is an immortal with a familiar, then what is a familiar?”

Susan shrugged her shoulders. “A familiar is a ... familiar.”

“But what *are* they?” Margot protested.

Susan threw her hands into the air. “An immortal? I don’t sodding know. Ask Rain when she’s better.”

“But I’ve tried before,” Margot huffed. “She spouted off about beings with blood magic and bargains, and I couldn’t make sense of any of it ...”

“What I want to know,” Susan said, smoothing down Bernard’s neck fur while he purred enthusiastically, “is why this one is always a cat. If I could change my form at the blink of an eye, I’d spend my days as something much fiercer and nothing with fleas. Like a dragon or a crocodile ...”

Bernard promptly stopped purring.

Rain was lulled back to sleep by the soothing rumble of their familiar voices.

## Chapter 4



(Night)

It was another week before Night's mate showed improvement. Rain no longer screamed out in pain or cried when touched. She ate and drank more often. When she opened her eyes and spoke, her words were lucid. The intensity of her fevers lessened.

Guilt ate at Night at every sign of her suffering. He'd promised her safety at his side when he proposed to her.

*Divines forgive me.* He'd failed her.

If she no longer wanted to honor their agreement, he'd understand. He could hardly blame her. The thought that she might now change her mind bit at him, a gnat that hovered out of reach in the back of his thoughts. One he tried to swat away, but soon after it would appear again to torment him.

Rain still had a while to go before she was fully recovered. Time dragged on as he watched her struggle. During the days, Night slept fitfully, usually upright in a chair beside her, listening for her to awaken, to need something. She wasn't strong enough to stand on her own just yet. When the moon rose, he tended to her. He fed her. He bathed her. He carried her to the lavatory across the hall. He clothed her. He was strict about who was allowed to assist with her.

The courtesans Susan and Margot were a blessing, especially when the sun was up or he had to tend to his estates. There had been times when Rain was so lost in the throes of her suffering that she needed a firm hand. Night didn't have it in him to be firm with her. Susan and Margot never balked, bullying her into eating and drinking.

Night read to Rain out of the books from his library she'd left in a stack. Histories and genealogies, mostly Seelie and Unseelie. When she struggled with discomfort, he read her fairy stories instead. Those seemed to distract her best.

When she was unwell and sleeping, she often cried out during her fever dreams. Divinia was a name frequently on her lips. Night recognized it. The nature goddess was favored by the elves in their old tales.

That evening, with Divinia on his mind, Night sat at her bedside and read Rain the story of *The Dragon and the Minstrel*. It was a favorite of hers. Bernard slept on his back at her feet, his paws twitching in the air. Usually, he paced and fussed at her side. It was a good sign when Bernard slept. It meant that Rain wasn't in distress.

Night balanced the leatherbound storybook in his hands, but his weary eyes barely took in the passages. He didn't need the words on the pages anyway; he'd read this particular story to her so often he knew it by heart. He kept glancing at his mate, comforted by the healthy golden hue that had returned to her cheeks. As glad as he was that she was improving, he

feared she would soon recover fully and announce her wishes to depart from him.

“Divinia was as beautiful and wild as the forest she called home,” he began, and Rain’s chest rose and fell slowly, the soothing cadence of the familiar tale already working its magic on her. “The dragon king longed for the goddess. He courted her with the rarest treasures from his hoard and earned her favor. After a time, she bore him a daughter. It is not in a goddess’s nature to linger in one place for long. Even for the sake of their child, she would not stay with the dragon. Her attention wandered until it was captured by another and then another ...”

A light knock interrupted his reading. Night lowered his book and canted his head to see who it was.

Erikson cracked the door and peered through before letting himself inside. “It’s urgent,” he said softly, gray eyes bouncing to Rain asleep on the bed before taking in his brother in the armchair.

Night sighed. “It always is.”

Erikson scratched an uneasy hand through his blue hair before continuing. “Queen Isla sent formal notification that she’s raising tariffs.”

“Which ones?”

“All of them. But she invites you to her palace to discuss a compromise. Word has reached her that your betrothed is of Seelie descent. She’d like to meet her and—”

“No,” Night said firmly, closing the book in his lap with a thump.

“I assumed you’d say that, and I’ve already prepared a message declining her offer in the most diplomatic way possible ... King Yaga sent word as well. He’s playing a very different game.” Erikson grimaced.

Night braced himself. Mention of the dragon king made his neck hot, stirring up his rage and his feelings of guilt over what his mate had endured. The gnat was back, buzzing in his head.

When Erikson didn’t immediately reply, Night rubbed at the bridge of his nose, eager to have the matter over with. “Well?” he prodded. “What’s he playing at?”

“Yaga sent word that he’s cutting his tariffs in half. A gift to soothe tensions after the ‘mishap’ involving your mate.”

Night’s lip curled and his knee began to bob. “Mishap? Divine blood, if the Lunar Court were any larger, I’d destroy him right now and salt the earth where the mountains once stood! *Mishap*. Fuck him.”

Erikson straightened the lapels of his waistcoat, looking uneasy. “We must respond, brother. The fae frey at the borders demand action. The human lords worry openly about the fate of their estates. We cannot continue to ignore and evade or decline invitations.”

“My king,” Rain rasped in her sleep, her voice roughened by her scar.

Night's gaze snapped to her vulnerable form. She looked small and frail there buried in the covers in the large bed, her snowy hair a splash of white across his pillows. He hoped whatever dream she was having, it was a pleasant one.

Night opened his mouth to answer his brother, but she spoke again. "My king," she said more firmly. "Take the empty throne." Her lashes fluttered but her eyes remained closed.

Night's pulse stuttered. He wanted to reach for her hand, to take it firmly in his, but his limbs went oddly weak at his sides. He'd been pondering the empty throne since she took ill. Knowing his partner felt the same way he did was as startling as it was reassuring.

"That would be one way to respond, of course." Erikson's chuckle lacked humor. "An action which would most certainly plunge the Lunar Province into war with both the Tree Court and the Mountain Court. Such a thing would be absolute madness."

"Complete madness," Night muttered. He chewed on his cheek for a moment before adding more softly, "Necessary madness. Overdue madness." All things he'd known needed to be done, but he hadn't felt ready to put in place. Not while the partner he'd chosen fought for her life in a bed.

"Night ..." Erikson's voice pitched high. "You can't just charge ahead without thinking this through."

"I've given it every thought every night I've sat here in this chair. I think I've always known what was needed. I've

known it since the title passed to me ...” Glancing at Rain, he crossed one leg over the other. “I just didn’t want that to be the only answer.”

“You left the throne empty for good reason.” Erikson gestured broadly as he spoke. “Tariffs are better than bloodshed—your words on the matter, in case you’ve forgotten. In one move, you’ll declare yourself the enemy of both the Seelie and the Unseelie. The Lunar frey and the human lords will panic. There will be unrest! They want answers and action but ... gods, not this!”

“Not all will panic.” Rain’s eyes slitted open so only a sliver of amber shone through. “Some will rejoice that their Frey Magis is finally the King of Night.”

“Few,” Erikson insisted. “Most will think he’s lost his fucking mind.”

“The choices before me are stand with the Seelie, stand with the Unseelie, or stand for my court. I choose my court.” Night thrummed his fingers against the book in his lap. “Schedule my coronation, brother,” he said after a beat. “The throne is empty no more. Tariffs on the Lunar Province end today.”

“Divines’ mercy,” Erikson muttered. He left the room in a huff. The door shut with a click. His retreating footsteps echoed down the hall.

“Sweetheart,” Night called gently, “are you still awake?” He reached across the bed and found her hand. It was so small, the nails cleaned and buffed. Her dainty fingers laced loosely

through his, the skin gilded against his gray. He'd tended to her nails himself earlier in the day. Their blooming bond had liked that.

Rain's breathing was slow and even. He'd lost her to slumber.

Night sighed. Leaning over her, he dropped a kiss on her brow. She smelled like the little white autumn flowers she used in her soaps, and he filled his nose up with her.

Lightly he traced the scarring at her throat with his thumb. His next breath shook in his chest. "I'm so sorry," he said into her hair.

She stirred under him. "Stop that."

Night straightened. "Did I hurt you?"

Rain shook her head jerkily, eyes pinched shut. "Stop apologizing to me. You do it a lot. I'm usually too tired to tell you not to, but I think it every time."

Night blinked the sting out of his gaze before responding. "I made a vow to you. I promised if you helped me, no one would hurt you, but—"

"You promised no one would hurt your bride," she said with a yawn. "I'm not your bride. Not yet. So you've broken no vows to me. Anyway, it was a silly thing to promise anyone in a time of war. I free you from your foolish vow."

Night had to shut his eyes to stop them from welling. His throat burned. Lost for words, he laid his forehead against hers, the fae sign of deference and affection. The curve of his

antlers brushed against her scalp. That small voice, the gnat of a voice, had been so certain that after she recovered, she'd want to be freed from their agreement. She'd never wanted a marriage of convenience anyway. She never wanted war.

But Rain was too good and noble to abandon him in his time of need, too loyal not to finish what they'd started together. The louder voice in his head had expected no less from the warrior woman he'd come to know, but the confirmation humbled him all the same.

He nuzzled her temple with his nose, then asked one more time, "Will you marry me, Rain?"

Her gaze opened fully, and there was fire and steel and certainty in those amber depths. "Yes, of course."

He pressed his lips briefly to hers. "There will be no fae feast," he explained when he pulled away. "No great production. If you want something like that later on, I'll—"

"I don't need those things ... I just want my family to be there ..."

"Then they'll be there." He squeezed her fingers. "I'm going to marry you quickly and privately, and then there's urgent work to be done. I'll have to leave as soon as the ceremony ends. I need to visit the barons at our borders. I need confirmation about their loyalties and to ease their worries as I remove mages from their houses to add to our armies. And I need to go and put a blasted crown on my head."

Rain lifted her hand out of his. It trembled. She touched his jaw, the pads of her fingers scratching lightly against his stubble. “I want to help you.”

“You will. I’ll return as soon as you’re well enough, then bring you with me to my next stop. And then ...”

“Then war.”

\* \* \*

The day of their wedding, it snowed. The sun hadn’t yet set when Rain stirred beside Night in their bed. Weak light filtered in through the cracked curtains that shielded the balcony windows. Snow fell in fat flakes.

“Take me outside,” she asked softly. “I’m tired of this room. I want to feel the sun on my skin again.”

She couldn’t yet stand for long on her own. When Night hesitated, she pressed her lips to his. After that, he could deny her nothing.

Bleary-eyed and weary, he helped her dress. He put her in her new coat and kid-skin gloves and wrapped her in a thick blanket. Her illness made her even more sensitive to the weather. She was shivering before they reached the doors.

Night carried her to the courtyard. Bernard followed them at a distance. He was not as enthusiastic as Rain about the first snow, poking at it tentatively with his front paws from the gate.

Night's boots crunched through fresh pillows of powder on the way to the old oak tree. Rain shared encouraging words with the little saplings she'd planted that fall. Despite the weather, they continued to flourish, daring to sprout bright green leaves out of season. Above them, dusk loomed closer.

"Hello old friend," Rain said to the oak. She removed her glove and brushed her hand tenderly down the bark, and the tree shuddered contentedly.

Night stared at her. It came as no surprise to him that his sweet mate would take the little energy she had to spare and use it to bring comfort to another living thing. In that moment, seeing her wide smile, the snowdrops gathering in her hair, her nose and cheeks pinkened by the cold, he wished fairy stories were real.

He felt a stirring in his chest then, and his lungs hitched. The bond that had once thrummed in his breast had settled, no longer beside his heart but *in* it and pumping through it. Their connection expanded rapidly, filling his lungs, pulsing through his veins, pebbling his skin from his hairline to the ends of his toes. Night had expected his instincts to calm, the urges to complete the rituals to fall mute. They had to a degree. He no longer felt any itchy agitation under his skin, no longer felt a burning possessiveness that tried to steal his reason.

But he hadn't anticipated that his lungs would now have a new motivation for filling, his heart a new reason for beating ...

Stars and moon above, he'd never been more terrified.

Rain turned in his arms to peer up at him, and he knew she'd felt it too. She gave him a small smile, releasing the tree to stroke a gentle finger down the side of his face, her touch a warm contrast to the snowflakes that landed and melted on his cheek.

*It's all right,* she said, and his pulse jumped. Her words reverberated through his very soul. The shock of it nearly made him drop her. Correcting himself, he tightened his hold and schooled his expression. She chuckled.

“Our bond has settled.” His words released a blast of air that fogged in the cold.

*It has. You look startled, but you have nothing to be afraid of.* She stroked his cheek again with the back of her hand.

“You’re supposed to be the one who’s scared of bonding,” he said sheepishly.

*My love for you cured me of the compulsion. I don't want you to fear me, Night.*

“My very soul is exposed to you now. That’s worth some trepidation, I think.” He tried to smile to take the edge out of his words, but it didn’t hold.

*It's a lovely soul.* Her fingers skimmed down the lapel of his coat. He wanted to kiss those fingers and sit her down and run far away from her all at the same time. *But I refuse to be content with just your soul.*

Night’s chest tightened. “Greedy,” he teased.

She picked at one of the buttons on his mage coat, a crescent-shaped bit of brass. *Night, when you're finally ready to give me your heart, I promise you I'm going to take very good care of it.*

A thrill shot down his spine, and the hairs on his arms rose. His mate was a lovely little creature.

A lovely and terrifying little creature.

## Chapter 5



### (Rain)

**I**t was an old elven tradition that two betrothed share a bath together before their ceremony. Or at least, that's what she told her intended, her true mate.

Then Rain admitted she was being loose with the word "tradition". She was old. She wanted to take a hot bath with him. There were hardly any other elves left in the world to contradict her ... Shouldn't she be allowed to decide what was tradition?

Night granted her request with one of the broken smiles that had made her fall in love with him. While the tub was brought in, Bernard fled the two sweethearts in favor of the kitchen's ice box.

The water was almost too hot. Rain sat in the tub in front of her mate, cradled by his long legs while he washed her hair. It was tempting to communicate with him through the link of their bond, but she'd seen the distress it had caused him outside. She'd had time to grow accustomed to it with Bernard, so she wouldn't push him on this.

To fill the silence, she made conversation about her newest research. "Your guard Arne has mage connections within the Seelie Tree Court. I had him fetch some books for me." Rain

tipped up her chin and closed her eyes so Night could rinse her hair using a ceramic pitcher.

The heat of the water stole the ache from her joints. She liked the idea of becoming a wife but didn't look forward to leaving the bath. Her discomfort always found her quickly outside of the soothing water. Her joints would stiffen and try to lock, and the pain would become deep and penetrating.

"I take it you're still on a mission to learn more about our enemies?" Night mused.

Rain blew water off her lips and brushed the stray rivulets from her cheeks. "I am. There were interesting passages about the start of the first war and references to a Seelie king."

"Queen Isla's father, King Lennox Thornbrush," Night guessed, refilling the pitcher from the tub waters.

"No. The same writings mention the elven king's death at the hands of the 'evil dragon Yaga'." She paused to guide a stream of water away from her eyes. "And I know the events described in the text occurred during the reign of Queen Isla..." She chewed her lip, pondering her next words. "I'm developing a new theory about Row, the one they called the queen's favored. He keeps coming up."

Night stiffened beside her. "Hm. You said before you thought he might be her mate."

"What if he was her *husband*? What if they married quickly before heading off to war together? That sounds familiar, doesn't it? The Seelie Tree Court was made up of two

groups all those centuries ago: elves and fae. Apparently this Row had great ties to the elves, and he was called ‘the one the dragon feared most’. It would have been an advantageous match for Isla, who was reeling and in need of allies after Yaga assassinated her father.”

He lowered the empty pitcher onto the carpet. “It does sound familiar ...” Shifting in the water, he put his nose in her hair and breathed deeply. The gesture sent a pleasant shiver down Rain’s neck. “Unless the scribes made the error intentionally and the ‘king’ is actually referring to Isla. Mortal scribes have terrible ideas about gender. They view a queen as less than a king. It wasn’t uncommon for some matriarchs to force the mortals to make the error on purpose, demanding the respect they were owed.”

“That’s possible, but the error, if it is one, appears to be widespread ... That would indicate that their mating was quick and then they married so privately most historians outside the Tree Court knew nothing about it. If I’m right, they really do bear a striking resemblance to us, don’t they? Brought together by politics, wedded quickly and privately, forced to fight in a war ...”

She hadn’t meant to allow the hint of worry to change the pitch of her voice. But she didn’t want their fate to be hers, didn’t want history to repeat itself. She didn’t want to lose her soon-to-be husband. Were he to die, they would be reunited quickly—the mate sickness would see to that—but there were fates worse than death.

Like separation. *Long* separations.

Rain found his hand under the waters and linked their fingers. “We’re not exactly the same ... I would do far worse than Isla to anyone who hurt you, Night. Anyone who even contemplates taking you from me will suffer under my dagger. No one would survive me.”

A satisfied grunt rumbled deep in his throat. “It does things to me when you vow violence on others in my name.”

“What things?” she asked shyly, her cheeks heating.

Night rolled his hips. Rain felt the delicious press of his growing erection against the curve of her ass.

“Oh?” She leaned back against him. “*Those* things ... I like those things ...”

His arms encircled her, pulling her tight against his chest. “Would you do something for me?” He spoke in her ear, heating the sensitive tip.

“Yes?”

Night brushed his lips over her temple. One of his hands skimmed down her stomach, rippling the water before disappearing below it. “First, get better.”

Rain’s stomach swooped. “I’ll work on that.”

“And while you’re getting better, prepare for my return,” he said, his voice roughened to gravel as his fingers trailed lower.

Rain's heart took off at a sprint, pounding against the cage of her ribs. Cheeks burning, she parted her thighs for his exploration. "Prepare how?" She braced herself, gripping his knees on either side of her.

"I'll show you ..." Gently, he spread her delicate folds, thumbing the bud of nerves at her crest. Rain's hips jerked, and her toes curled against the bottom of the tub with a squeak. He teased her slowly. With his other hand, he covered her breast with his large palm. Her nipples hardened to pebbles. He flicked them with his thumb, a sensation she felt in a pull behind her navel.

Rain held her breath, watching the motions of his fingers through the distortion of the waters.

Night leaned back, tugging her higher up his chest, his throbbing cock pressed between them. "When I return, I'm going to take you on your side, like this." He shifted his weight so that his length teased the crease of her ass. "On the bed or on the floor or out in the snow if you'd like ..."

Rain let out the breath she'd been holding. "The bed. I've gotten used to it. I'm practically a pampered princess now."

"Pampered *queen*," he said, chuckling, and the vibration of it sent more pleasing tremors down her neck and spine. "The bed it is, then."

He captured her wrist and brought her hand between her thighs, encouraging her to mimic his movements. She did so uncertainly at first. As her strokes grew in confidence, he found her slit and pressed a finger inside her entrance.

Head back on his shoulder, Rain moaned her encouragement. His languid plunges grew steadily more deliberate. Then he added a second digit.

He stretched her with his fingers, dragging his touch blissfully along the walls of her channel while she pleased herself. Her hips jerked in little movements that sent waves crashing against the sides of the tub.

Languidly, he removed his touch. Rain felt the loss of him and sighed.

“Prepare for me,” he instructed.

Rain slipped her fingers inside her body the way he’d shown her, working deeper. He helped her chase after her release with gentle pressure against her crest. Then his touch trailed up her belly, lingering around the scar at her navel.

“I would repay the one who gave this to you a thousand deaths if I could,” he whispered.

She was beyond the point of articulation, or she’d tell him it did things to her too when he vowed violence in her name.

Night palmed her breasts and left sucking kisses along her shoulder and neck, kisses that marked her skin deliciously. She hoped the marks lasted. She wanted to look at them later and remember this base feeling, this hunger that made her belly clench. His lips found her ear, heating the sensitive point with a hot wet flick of his tongue. His kisses were messy and wild. At times she felt his teeth and his tongue. Every little nibble pushed her higher.

He shifted, creating a brief separation. She felt him fisting his shaft, the motion of his fingers brushing the small of her spine. He pumped himself in time with her rapid strokes against her tightening flesh. Rain closed her eyes and imagined him entering her, his hips flexing, his breath in her ear, the weight of him, the intoxicating motion, the climbing pressure.

He grunted when he climaxed. The sudden jerk of his hips, the hot release lacing up her spine, brought Rain to her peak. The bliss was all-encompassing. Her back bowed and her head lolled.

“Well,” Night said, sounding breathless and pleased with himself, “now we both need another bath.”

\* \* \*

They married at midnight in their bedroom. Night offered to honor elven tradition—true elven tradition—and wed her under a tree in the daylight, but their brief visit outside that morning was all her weary bones could stand of the cold, and their bath had left her content.

They dressed in crisp dark robes and wedded the Lunar way, surrounded by hundreds of thick blue candles lit with a magical fire that smelled like incense. They stood on a rounded quilt fashioned to look like the moon and the sun coming together beside their marital bed. Her family was there: Margot and Susan held hands, and Bernard sat at their feet between them in his cat form, his tail curled tightly around

him. At her wrist, Rain clutched Penny's memory charm, knowing in her heart that *all* of her family was with her now.

The ceremony was performed by a mage and a magistrate. Erikson signed as witness and so did Bernard. His paw print was added to the formal document. Margot and Susan signed as well at Rain's insistence.

All of her family were to sign, she'd instructed.

The mage Arne, a towering fae with a leathery tail, sang softly to the Divine Night on their behalf. The magistrate, a middle-aged mortal, pronounced them husband and wife. First, they came together in the fae fashion, holding hands at the wrists. Night bent low, touching his brow and the velvet curve of his antlers to her forehead.

With the last of the strength she had, Rain rose up on her toes and kissed Night, the mortal way.

Margot whooped enthusiastically and Susan cheered at her side. Rain collapsed into her mate, and he held her upright against his chest, a broken smile on his face.

*Bernard?* Rain was careful to aim her thoughts at her familiar so that Night would not hear her and be startled. *Are you crying?*

Bernard sniffled at her. *No.*

*Of course not,* she said kindly. *You're a fierce and powerful demon.*

*Precisely,* he squeaked. *Any sentimentality I may be feeling is simply the influence of the piece of your soul inside me. That*

*is all ...*

*Yes, of course.* She grinned, knowing full well that could not be, for although it felt wonderful to be married to her mate, she was not feeling sentimental. Dread plagued her. She was tired, and she was weak. Her husband had to leave her now, and she would not be able to travel with him, would not be able to watch his back as he watched over hers in a time when such a thing was most needed.

Her family left the room, trailed by Erikson and the magistrate. Arne blew out all of the candles with a dash of moon magic before closing the door behind them.

Rain buried her face in her husband's chest, trying to will her legs to strengthen. Night hugged her tight, then helped her to the bed.

Her eyes burned. "I'm so tired of being tired."

"I know you are," he said, pulling back the covers for her.

Slowly she slipped under them, crumpling back against the pillows with a heaving sigh. "All I do is sleep and dream strange dreams. How could I possibly want to sleep more? Especially right *now*."

Night bent low and kissed her nose. "You're sick. But you'll be fully recovered before you know it, and there will still be plenty of war left for you to fight."

Rain yawned wide, stretching her jaw. "Go and get your crown." He turned to leave her, but she stopped him, grabbing at his sleeve. That simple movement jolted her joints and made

them ache. She winced. “Wait a minute. Please stay just a bit longer.”

His silver eyes crinkled at the corners. The room was dark, nothing but the moon beyond the balcony to light the way. He looked glorious in his fine silk, showered by starlight, skin a luminous silver. “I’ll stay until you fall asleep.”

“Talk to me,” she begged. “I don’t care about what. I just like the sound of your voice.”

As she drifted, he recited *The Dragon and the Minstrel*. Long before the great dragon was slain and the fae minstrel was separated from his true mate, she fell asleep.

Hours later, she jerked awake. The room was cold and quiet. She was alone.

Rain wept.

\* \* \*

The monotony of sleeping and lounging and reading, eating a little, then sleeping some more was broken up by a visit from Susan and Margot. Rain clutched Penny’s memory flat in her palm as Arne held the bedroom door open for them. The charm felt hot to the touch. She wondered if Penny was just as excited as she. The girls closed in around her armchair with a wheeled cart of goods.

They brought her soup and tea humans made to encourage healing, and they were well-dressed. The soft, bright fabrics alone would have cost a great deal. It brought out the warm

undertones in Margot's skin and accented Susan's creamy complexion. It pleased her to see that they were doing so well.

The tea had a strong acidic taste that was not to Rain's liking, but she wouldn't dare reject their gifts, drinking it down with lots and lots of honey as she asked after them.

Susan spoke excitedly, "We're selling the tavern and buying a large house on Main Street."

"How wonderful." Rain balanced her cup on the arm of her chair, glad it was empty. "That's a good street, I take it? What sort of house?"

"It's an excellent street. A wealthy one not far from the best clubs and pubs and the Row's theatre." Margot's grin turned wicked. "It'll be a house of ill repute and every vice known to man. Susie's already bought the license. The distillery we added to the tavern made it worth a small fortune, so we'll own our new residence outright."

"Ill repute ..." Rain frowned at her teacup.

"See there, I told you, Margot," Susan grumbled. "Rain still has her heart set on rescuing us from our ways and turning us respectable."

"Well, no ..." Rain sputtered, taken aback. "Not exactly ... I just ... I want you both safe and happy, is all."

Margot grabbed her wrist and pumped it once affectionately. "We are safe and happy, silly."

"We're not Penny, love," Susan said gently. "Our life wasn't for her, but she had little else to choose from. That

happens sometimes. She was a gentle thing, our lovely little book worm, but we're cut from different cloth. Margot and I do what we do because we're good at it and we enjoy it. We're entrepreneurs."

"And we aren't children," Margot stressed. "Even if you're older than our great, great, great, great ... you get the idea."

Cowed, Rain's lashes lowered. "I see ..."

Susan sighed. "There's one of two ways a person usually looks down their nose at us. The first is by thinking we're evil. They treat us as though our hearts are black or—"

Rain scooted to the edge of the armchair. "I don't think that for a second! In all the Row, there are no nobler hearts than what beats in your chests."

"In our glorious chests ..." Margot gave her generous cleavage a playful little shake, and Susan grinned at her.

"The other way they look down on us," Susan said more gently, smile gone, "is they pity us. They think we're desperate and in need of saving. Admittedly, we've counted on you from time to time as you have on us, but that's how it is on Dimmet Street. That's why we're getting out of there. Pity's the one you struggle with, love. It comes from a good place. We know that, but it hurts all the same."

Margot sat on the arm of Rain's chair, beside her teacup, nodding her silent agreement.

"I ..." Rain wanted to protest, but she remembered what it had felt like when Night had assumed she was desperate and in

need of saving. It had incensed her. She'd quickly put him in his place. Now here she was doing that same thing to two women she cherished. "I'm so sorry. I know you're not children. I know humans mature differently. I know you're strong. I wish I knew what else to say ... Your house is going to be the grandest in all the Row. I know it is. Of course, you're fine businesswomen."

Her vote of confidence seemed to cheer them. They talked to her excitedly about their plans for moving and decorating and hiring more girls. Then they fed her soup which thankfully tasted and smelled much more appetizing than the tea. She didn't want them to leave just yet, but Susan's sharp eyes noticed she was getting tired.

Rain stopped Susan with a hand on her arm, encouraging her to hang back as Margot headed for the door. Reaching out made her joints ache, but the pain was duller now, she noted. Perhaps the bitter tea had helped. "We're all right, I hope?"

Susan patted her knuckles affectionately. "Of course we are. We're family, and nothing will change that. We don't have to agree all the time, either. You and I, we'll still be like sisters."

*Sisters.* The word rattled about in her mind. Rain released her. Margot and Susan left together, bickering pleasantly over their packing schedule.

A tiny flash of memory filtered through Rain's thoughts from somewhere deep in the heavy fog of her mind, a dream she'd had before but had forgotten upon waking. In it she was

much younger, a child of ten years. Her hand was pressed to a tree, gathering silly messages that made her younger self erupt into giggles. And then she laid her brow against the trunk, sending messages back.

Messages to someone she couldn't remember, someone precious to her. Grabbing at those memories was like grasping at mist. The harder she reached, the quicker they dissolved.

## Chapter 6



(Night)

Night pulled back the fabric curtaining the carriage windows and peeked out. It had been a long ride lasting all night and most of the morning. Erikson sat across from him in the cold cabin space. Heated bricks warmed their feet, and heavy blankets kept the blood pumping in his legs. The snow had stopped. A thin layer of it coated the ground, turning it white, sharpening the sun's rays so that it was nearly impossible for him to gaze out for very long.

Eyes watering, he closed the curtains once more. It wasn't much farther to the center of the province where Castle Maldrom towered above the Lunar villages below. Night did not look forward to seeing the turrets and stones he'd once called home. He kept it heavily staffed and in pristine condition, but he never stepped foot in it, preferring the estate that had belonged to his parents instead. The slate walls of Maldrom were far too haunted.

"Erikson," he said, scratching the scarring at his mouth, "have you ever been in love?"

Across from him, his brother rested with his head back and his top hat in his lap. He sat up then, cocking a blue brow. "What sort of strange question is that, Lord King?"

Night's nose wrinkled. "I'm not even the king yet."

"Bah." Erikson set his hat on the cushion beside him, then pulled his quilt up to his chin. "The freys and the mages are going to place a circlet on your head in just a matter of hours. I might as well get used to saying it, just as you'll need to get used to hearing it ... And yes, I've been in love before. Haven't you?"

"Our father was not a paragon of affection," Night said, and Erikson agreed with a grunt, "and though my mother was honorable, she was not exactly the warmest of women. Admittedly, there have been times when I've experienced feelings I am unable to explain without using that word, but I'm not convinced I would even know what real love looked like."

"My mortal mother died giving birth to me," Erikson reminded him. "She quite literally gave her life for mine. That's what it looks like, brother."

Night blinked at him for a time. Sometimes his brother was rather eloquent—one of the many reasons he'd made him an advisor.

"But why do you ask?" Erikson said, pulling him out of his wandering thoughts. "About love, I mean?"

Night let the top of his blanket fall to his lap. "I've never had need of it before ... But then ..."

"Then what, Frey Magis?" Erikson's casual use of the antiquated informal address for a great fae lord reminded

Night of Rain and made him smile.

If love was putting someone before everything else, he'd have to be dreadful at love. Night didn't want to be dreadful at anything, but the options before him seemed rather stark. Either he was a good king who continued to put his court first, or he loved his mate.

But what about duty? What of his responsibilities? What sort of king wouldn't put their court first?

"Never mind," Night said, flopping back against the cushions. "Forget I said anything."

"It's already forgotten." Erikson closed his eyes and sighed, settling in for another nap.

Night gazed at him for a moment, his brother's rounded cheeks tense, his long sideburns bristling. "Gods, even in sleep you look stressed."

Erikson's eyes snapped back open. "You named me as your heir," he reminded him.

Night chuckled. "I see. That's what this panic is all about."

"Inheriting a dukedom is one thing ... but a kingdom," Erikson grumbled. "Sacred stars save us all if I ever have to wear that blasted crown."

"I don't intend to die, you know. Seeing as how we're both immortal and all, it's a real possibility you won't ever have to."

“You’re about to start a *war*. Death is also a very real possibility,” Erikson drawled, crossing his arms over his chest, rumpling his quilt. “If you do rudely decide to die, at least do it after you get us out of the mess you’ve made, will you?”

“I’m stirring up the trouble,” Night agreed, “but it’s Rain who’s going to fix it. It’s her you should save your pleas for.”

Erikson’s gaze widened. “You have an awful lot of faith in your witch—wife, I mean ... Duchess. Apologies. I’m still not used to it. The ceremony happened so fast and all ... Stop looking at me like you’re thinking about plucking my eyes out, please.”

“I’m not going to pluck your eyes out,” Night growled. The carriage went over a rough patch, and his grumbling was momentarily drowned out by heavy wheels rumbling over rocks.

“Well, thank the divines for small mercies,” Erikson said, bracing himself as the carriage bounced.

“I’m going to rip your arms off and beat you with them, is what I’m going to do to you.” Night glowered. His brother continued to underestimate the passion Rain inspired in him. Erikson desperately needed to tread more carefully. Their blood tie wouldn’t save him or anyone else from Night’s desire to see his wife treated well.

His brother rolled his eyes. “If it wasn’t just you and me in here, I would have addressed her properly.”

“We’re alone and you’re already calling me Lord King and Magis,” he grumped. “You had better very quickly wrap your head around the fact that she’s about to be your queen and she’s *already* your duchess.”

“Queen consort,” Erikson said, glancing down at a patch on his quilt. He pointedly rubbed out a wrinkle.

Night’s hands made fists in his blanket, and Erikson slunk farther down in his seat, creating what little space he could in the crowded cabin.

“I mean no disrespect. It’s just a lot to get used to, brother. You quite literally plucked her from the forest a few weeks ago, and now we’re making her queen of the Lunar Court. I don’t doubt your instincts, all right? I understand that you have good reasons for needing a warrior at your side dressed in daggers, someone to help intimidate the masses into submission, and I won’t pretend that I’m not impressed with all she’s overcome already. First with that giant, then in her sickbed fending off iron poisoning that would have killed a lesser person ten times over ...”

“But?” Night ground his teeth audibly.

“No buts.” Erikson’s knee began to bob, making his quilt tremble. “Or maybe there’s a small but.” Freeing his arms, he pinched his fingers together in demonstration. “Very small.”

Night shifted one of the bricks between his feet. It had gone cold. He fantasized momentarily about hitting his brother with it. “Go on. If you dare.”

“If I tell you, are you going to rip my arm off and beat me with it?”

“If you don’t get on with it, yes,” Night said through his teeth. “Looks like you’re doomed either way.”

“You know how I tend to worry. It’s my job to be concerned about everything. To see problems before they come and try to solve them as best I can. To advise you as best I can.” Erikson crossed one leg over the other, mulling his words. “She’s Seelie,” he confessed.

“Ah, there it is. The truth at last.” Prejudice was the answer after all. Night had suspected as much. It continued to surprise him, the emphasis people placed on where a person was born and who their family was, as though it dictated all attributes of one’s character. If that were true, Night would be a drunk bastard.

“How much do we really even know about her?” Erikson mused.

“She’s elven. Most of her culture has been swallowed up by fae and mortals or erased entirely. She hardly has a people anymore, and she’s been living in my province longer than you’ve been alive, alone in the woods trying to preserve what little remnants of their way of life is left. I know everything I need to know about her. That should be enough for you.”

“It is ... mostly, it is ... Still, I worry.”

“Well, stop it,” Night barked.

\* \* \*

Castle Maldrom sat at the top of a steep hill, surrounded by looming slate walls of impenetrable stone. Night and his mage guards stopped at a village at the foot of the hill to trade out the horses and bulky carriages for heavier beasts and sleighs to conquer the snow and slush.

Night wasn't familiar with all of the guards who accompanied them. Elayna, his captain, had called so many in from the Eventide's outposts that most were strangers to him, but as they worked with the drivers and stable hands to ready the horses, one in particular caught his attention.

Night assumed at first that he was seeing things. His eyes were overwhelmed by the blistering sunlight and reflective snow. They were unreliable. He moved into the shadows to have a better look. The mage across the way, chatting up a stable hand, was bald and scarred. His guard tunic was new and slightly oversized, like it hadn't been tailored to his body as was customary—the sleeves a bit too long, the shoulders a bit too wide. Night squinted at the mage. Then he saw it again, the thing that had attracted his gaze earlier. The mage's skin steamed gently in the cold, a subtle shimmer, there for a moment and gone in a blink.

*Spy.*

This mage's glamour was slipping. Night's nostrils flared. On the breeze, he caught the faintest hint of ash and brimstone—dragon blood magic. He'd smelled the same scent in the caves he'd pulled his mate out of. His hands wanted to make fists. He steadied them and schooled his expression.

The spy must have felt his attention because he looked over then. Night raised a hand in greeting. Tentatively the bald mage returned the gesture.

Night sent Erikson off with two mages he knew well. He joined Elayna in a smaller sleigh alone, dismissing the driver. They hung back as the group headed off up the steep incline toward the castle.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong, or do I have to guess?” Elayna spoke quietly, adjusting her leather gloves so she could gather the reins. It began to snow again. Fresh powder collected in her magenta hair and around her curled horns.

Night took the reins from her. He clicked his tongue and set the horses off at a slow pace. “The bald mage with the scars,” he said quietly.

Elayna was a practiced soldier and always sensible. She was subtle as her bright youthful gaze searched the sleighs ahead of them. “I see him.”

“Do you know him?”

“I don’t. He showed up with the outpost recruits yesterday.”

“He’s a dragon.”

Elayna’s eyes rounded a fraction. She worked her throat. “Full dragon? Not dragae?”

“His glamour slipped earlier,” Night explained. “He’s a young dragon if he can’t work such simple magic

continuously.”

“It would be better to take care of him before we’re inside the castle.” The scent of incense infused the air, Elayna calling moon magic to her with her will.

Night pulled back on the reins, slowing the horses further. “If he’s here to spy, we’re just as likely to learn something from him. He doesn’t know we’ve caught him yet.”

“What would you like me to do?”

Night felt the weight of her gaze on the side of his face, and he sensed no fear in her. “Be a better trickster than he is. Keep your eye on him always. Never underestimate him. Be careful to share only misinformation in his vicinity. If he becomes a threat, pull your mages around you and kill him swiftly. When you think his usefulness is through, summon me. I’d like to speak plainly with the dragon before we destroy him.”

“I can do that.” She turned to him, a hint of a smile in the corner of her mouth. “Lord King.”

## Chapter 7



### (Rain)

Rain rose before sunset. The manor, accustomed to keeping to a nocturnal schedule, was still quiet. She dressed and pulled on boots that felt like lead weights. Bernard accompanied her as she forced herself to take a long grueling walk up and down the halls of the second floor.

She needed to get stronger.

Her thighs burned and sweat beaded on her brow. She thought about the coronation she would soon miss. It would occur at dusk in accordance with Lunar traditions. She fed her distress at missing something so important into every labored stride. Rain was determined never to miss another thing.

She had to get better, and she needed to do it *now*.

*I think it's time for a break*, Bernard said. He raced ahead, a ball of bounding black fur. Then he sat back on his haunches in front of her, his tail thumping defiantly against the hardwood.

Rain limped closer, her hand outstretched, ready to catch herself against the wall should she need to. "I'm all right. I can do another lap."

*You don't look all right.*

*I'm all right*, she snapped, too winded to use her voice again. Her right knee had locked. She tried to loosen it and fell forward. Tucking her chin, she turned the fall into an ungraceful roll, lessening the impact on her smarting joints.

Bernard jogged up to her, tail snapping side to side. *Told you so. I'll go fetch Arne.*

“No, don't fetch him just yet,” she grumped. “I can get up. It's good for me to work my muscles. I can't lie around in a mushy bed forever ... Just give me a minute.” Rain planted her hands beneath her and attempted to roll onto her side. She was successful on the second try. Then with a great heaving breath, she shoved up to her feet.

*Rain!*

His warning came too late. She'd stood too quickly. Her blood pressure plummeted, and stars popped before her eyes. As the darkness consumed her, she felt her body crumpling.

\* \* \*

Rain dreamt of pain. The sun was in the sky, burning too close to her skin, heating her scalp to an uncomfortable degree. She hurried down a set of never-ending, sun-scorched steps, shielding her eyes as best she could.

Then the ground began to rumble. Rain dropped to a crouch, clinging to the stones as the stairs opened before her, revealing a massive pit. Out of the swirling darkness, the sounds of war roared deafeningly. A dragon breathed fire. Brimstone and ash coated the air.

“I don’t want to see that!” she shouted, and the images evaporated into the blackness.

A woman appeared beside her, seated on the steps, someone familiar. From a deep dark place in her mind, a place not unlike the pit, recollection sprang to Rain.

Divinia smiled brightly, and Rain’s chest went tight. She reached out for her mother, fingers grazing a fold of her silk robe, surprised when she didn’t dissolve before her like a mirage.

Rain blinked up at the goddess. “You’re really here?”

“You’re dreaming, dearest. I’m a figment of your imagination. I’m not *really* anywhere.”

Rain’s heart sank, but out of the corner of her eye, she continued to study her mother. She was unchanged, unaged, her skin golden and unlined under a lush sweep of chestnut hair. A beautiful woman with a brilliant smile and a gentle demeanor, but one who always grew bored much too quickly. One who never stayed put for very long. Not for anyone.

Not even for her daughter.

Rain wasn’t convinced that her mother wasn’t truly there beside her, but she couldn’t decipher if that was wishful thinking on her part. It soothed something inside to think that her mother cared just enough to watch out for her even occasionally, despite what she’d vowed.

“The answers you seek are all right there in front of you.” Divinia gestured broadly at the pit that marred their way.

Rain dared a glance at the black mass. The scent of ash burned her nostrils, and she grimaced. The sound of steel striking steel clashed somewhere far away, deep in the hole.

And all of it, the pit, her mother ... It all felt so familiar. “How many times have I been here before?”

“Many, many times,” Divina said.

Rain tried to stand. Her legs trembled and she plopped back down again. “If I do what I don’t want to do ... will I get better?”

“No,” Divinia said solemnly. “But you’ll remember how you healed the last time. You need to remember, dearest. You can’t keep hiding from it all.”

“But ...” Rain wetted her chapped mouth with her tongue and swallowed. She leaned out, peeking over the lip of the pit. “All of my pain and fear is in there.” A shiver rippled down her spine.

Divinia nodded solemnly. “Every considerable bit of it.”

Rain sat back on her haunches and stole a deep breath through her nose.

“There’s another choice, of course. Another way to rid your body and soul of its many injuries.” Divinia shifted in closer, bare feet peeking out of the bottom of her robe. Her nails and the veins at her wrists and ankles were as lush and green as a forest floor. “You could feed the pit the rest of your pain, all of your new memories, and start over once more.”

Rain thought immediately of Penny and her grief, the molten agony of her iron poisoning, the dagger cut across her windpipe, the gouge wound in her side. All things she'd like to throw away and never think about, but then ... Rain made a fist, searching for the memory flat. The charm wasn't there with her.

She thought of Penny's sweetness and her laughter. Of Night reading to her in the forest, of his broken smiles, of their bond. She thought of her family, her long walks with her Bernard, of all the many things she could never throw away, and her fist tightened.

"No." She shook her head. "No, I won't do that to them."

Divinia smiled, a serene display of bright pearly teeth. "Then you understand what you have to do ... Would you like my help?"

Rain nodded, eyeing the mouth of the hole with trepidation. "I'm too afraid to do it on my own."

"All right then." Divinia placed a firm hand high on Rain's back between her shoulder blades. "Ready? One, two—"

Rain dug her feet in. "Wait! I need a moment!"

"You'll never have enough moments, dearest."

Her mother shoved her headlong into the pit. Rain plummeted through the consuming darkness, screaming.

\* \* \*

Rain jerked awake, consciousness slamming back into her aching body, sending a shockwave through her nerves. Her back bowed and her teeth gritted.

The mage Arne hovered over her, a bulky blur. Rapidly, she blinked him into focus. His voice came slowly to her, sounding far away, though he appeared close enough she could reach out and touch him.

“Your Highness?” One of his large calloused hands swallowed up her shoulder. He shook her gently.

Bernard appeared in her peripheral, bottlebrush tail at full alert. *Are you back with us? You got yourself a nasty bump on the head. You’ve got to stop doing that to me. My black heart can’t take it.*

Rain touched the side of her face and felt the swelling. The skin around her eye was tender and tight.

“I’m going to heal you, my queen. Just lie back now.” Arne brought his fingers together, cupping them into a shape to mimic the moon.

*My queen*, he’d said. Apparently dusk had come and gone. She wasn’t a duchess anymore, and no one else but her realized she wasn’t just a queen either. Rain’s head was too full. She stared beyond Arne at the ceiling, trying to process it all:

Sisters.

Clashing metal.

Her trees were burning ...

Rain felt frozen there, pegged down to the floor by the weight of her memories. *Gods above*, there was so much blood. So much fire and ash. She could taste it on the back of her tongue, embers clogging her throat. She could smell the metallic tang, see the crimson stains, feel the hot slick on her hands and under her fingernails.

She'd fought for her life, fought with her stubbornness. Fought and won ... She was alive. She was back and her sisters needed her ... but now she was stuck there on the floor, useless to anyone.

*I wish you'd say something.* Bernard nosed at her cheek. *You were out cold for nearly an hour. You're making me nervous.*

Her lashes fluttered. She was too overwhelmed to form words just then. Moon magic tickled her nose, and the tenderness around her eye faded away to nothing. In the backdrop of her mind, she was somewhere else—someone else. If she opened her mouth, she was likely to start screaming.

“If our lord king knew I let anything happen to you ...” Arne’s face blanched. “I’d rather not think about it. Let’s get you back to bed, Your Highness.” He pulled her to her feet. She leaned against his side, bracing her steps with his weight.

There were too many thoughts to process at once, but one shouted at her the loudest, and finally she found her voice. “I need you to take me outside. Take me to the courtyard.”

“Now, Your Highness?” Arne asked, incredulous. “You’ve had a nasty fall. A lie down would be best, I think.”

“Now,” she said firmly.

Bernard followed close enough that his tail brushed her legs. *What are you up to?*

She didn’t have it in her to explain. Not just yet. She felt like she was holding herself together by the tips of her fingernails. The ache in her joints demanded her attention the loudest. She needed to be better. Her family needed her at full strength. She’d keep herself together for them.

Finally, she’d remembered how to get better, remembered who she was and exactly all that she was capable of. With that, a sinking fear sent a wave of cold coursing through her, and the consequences of what she now understood became heavy boulders shoving down her shoulders. She clung to Arne, doing her damndest to keep a full-blown panic at bay.

Arne helped her out to the moonlit courtyard where low gas lamps made diamonds in the fresh snowfall. He pulled off the outer jacket of his mage uniform and draped it over her smaller frame, then at her request, he stayed by the gates.

“I can take it from here,” she reassured him. Her legs were shaky, but she was confident she had enough strength in them to make it the last yard to the old oak tree. Bernard stuck with her, hopping between the shallow boot prints she left in the snow.

Rain laid her palms on the trunk, testing the ridges of the bark, then she rested her brow against the oak and breathed deep. “I need your help again, old friend.”

Just like she used to when she was a little girl, she sent a message off to the one she cherished. *Sister, we have a great, great deal to discuss.* Rain sent through an image of the Penny tree: the gilded bark and the bright autumn leaves deep in the forest just outside River Row. *I need you to meet me here in two days at sunset. Come alone.*

Finished, Rain had one last favor to ask of the tree. It was a large favor, one with consequences that fed the weight on her shoulders. Biting her lip, she ran a finger between the ridges in the trunk coaxingly. “I need to share my pain with you,” she warned. Magic could not heal iron, but with her affinity, she could share a great many things with her trees.

The oak rattled its leaves and heated beneath her touch, exchanging its energy with her. It would do this for her, for its friend.

For its *goddess*.

A tear slid down Rain’s cheek. She brushed it away. “Thank you.”

Hugging the trunk, Rain opened herself up, baring her soul. She shared her pain with the old oak the same way she’d shared her message, gifting it her aching joints and poisoned blood. She fed the bark her discomfort, her fevers, her weakness. She gave it her tiredness, her lack of appetite, her vulnerabilities. All of it.

She hesitated then. She could share the rest of her pain with the saplings. The old oak could only handle so much.

The tree rattled its leaves at her.

It would do this for her, for its goddess, but it didn't want any other trees harmed. She would tend to the saplings always, she vowed, and they would grow big and strong.

Beneath her fingers, the tree began to blacken. The dark rot spread down the bark like spilled ink, gathering in the exposed roots. The trunk went hard and dry. As the tree slowly turned gray, limbs sagging, Rain felt her strength return. Her heavy sigh misted in the cold. The golden hue of her skin was luminous in the lamplights. She flexed her fingers, testing their strength. Her legs were as sturdy as tree trunks beneath her now.

“Thank you,” she whispered. Then with a knot lodged in her throat, she watched the old tree wither and die.

## Chapter 8



### (Rain)

Rain told Bernard about everything the pit had dredged up. A desire for vengeance beat in her heart, hot and wild, for each family member lost and all the elven people gone. And for her Penny. As she spoke she clutched the memory charm to her heart.

There were many dead, but the one responsible was the same: King Yaga. Seated at the foot of her bed, tail swatting nonchalantly at the covers as she bared her suffering, Bernard said nothing, just listened. When Rain reached the end, the urge to cry had her chin trembling. She buried her face in her hands.

Bernard padded over to her and laid a gentle paw on her lap. *I know what you're thinking. Stop it.*

Rain couldn't bring herself to form the words. *Night won't understand. He's—*

*He's so emotionally constipated I'd like to bite him right in the ass sometimes.*

Surprised laughter burst from Rain's chest. *He's not ... He's just scared. It's uncharted territory for us. He has good reason to be frightened. I don't blame him.*

*I blame him enough for both of us, then,* Bernard said. *He may be constipated from time to time, but he's also a man of good instincts. Those instincts brought him to you. He'll continue to trust them, I'm certain of it.*

“I wish I was certain of it,” she muttered.

*Go to bed. You'll feel better about everything in the morning. You're overdue for a good deep slumber without the pain of iron poisoning. Make the most of it.* Bernard turned and hopped down onto the floor.

“Where are you going?” Rain asked as she pulled back the covers. Sunrise was hours away still, but his suggestion felt like an excellent one. Her bones were as weary as her soul.

*I'm hungry. Don't wait up.* He slunk out of the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him. Rain suspected it wasn't just a snack he had on his mind. Of late, Bernard had developed an interest in more than the ice box. One of the kitchen staff had recently had a baby. He found the mother and child fascinating and visited them often in the scullery. Apparently, he liked tiny little people. Bernard was just as surprised at this revelation as she was. Rain made him swear that he had no interest in the babe's fingers or toes before she'd allowed him to indulge in this new habit.

Alone, she dressed in a night rail, blew out the candles, and settled in. Almost immediately, sleep fled from her. Her brain wouldn't stop turning.

She felt a sudden shift in the bond. It moved through her veins, cold then hot. Her heart clenched before speeding out of

control. She sat up in the dark, startled, her hand clutching at her breast.

*Rain?* The uncertain voice in her head, rich as warmed honey, could belong only to her mate.

“Night?” she asked aloud, forgetting herself. *Night? Are you nearly home already?*

*I’m still at the castle, but I wanted to try. I wanted to speak to you. It’s strange ...*

Rain’s smile split her face so wide her cheeks hurt. *It takes some getting used to. Bernard and I can only communicate from a short distance. He’ll be jealous when I tell him.*

Night’s chortle was melodic. It filled her up with longing. She sunk back against the pillows, wishing he was beside her.

*How are you feeling?*

*Better,* she insisted. Then she bit her lip. There was so much to tell him, but she needed to do it in person, needed to see his face and weigh his expressions. *I’m healed. I’m ready. You can come and collect me now. I can help you.*

*Truly? That’s remarkable.*

*A miracle,* Rain agreed. *A gift from the gods.* Her next breath shuddered out of her, and her throat went suddenly dry.

*You sound upset.*

Rain stole a calming breath. *It’s hard to be away from you.* A half-truth.

*I know, he soothed. I hate it too. One more day of banquets, another of travel, and then I'm all yours.*

Rain worked her throat, blinking the sting from her eyes. *Good*, she choked. It was impossible to keep her feelings out of her thoughts, but she did her best to dull them.

His voice lowered to gravel. *Now that you're well, have you prepared for me?*

Her pulse fluttered in her throat and between her legs. She recalled their bath together, and muscles low in her belly trembled. *I have. It's not nearly as enjoyable without you, though.*

*You have me now*, he growled, and the seductive sound had her squeezing her thighs together. *Prepare for me.*

*If you'd like ...*

*I would like. Take all your clothes off.*

Rain's face burned. *All right*, she said, chewing on her cheek. It felt strange doing something like that in a room all by herself. She'd attempted to find her release once just after he left. The act had her feeling uncertain and missing him more.

*Rain*, he said sternly, *get out of your clothes.*

A giggle broke through her lips. *How do you know I haven't already?*

*I know my shy little mate well. Take all of them off and lie atop the covers.*

Lip trapped between her teeth, her neck and cheeks heated.  
*I have to lock the door first ...*

*Hurry now.*

She clamored out from under the covers, feet rasping over the carpets. Rain locked the door, tested the knob, then hurried back to the bed. She undressed quickly, stepping out of her drawers, pulling her night rail off over her head, leaving them in a neat pile on the floor. Then she slid to the center of the mattress, a thrill of excitement causing her stomach to swoop.

*It's chilly,* Rain said, resting her arms across her middle, feeling the puckered scar that marred her navel.

*That's perfect,* Night cooed. *Let that cool winter air brush over your skin. Feel it on your lips, your neck, your breasts ...*

Rain's nipples hardened. His words—a seductive purr—pebbled her skin.

*Place your thumb in your mouth.* He waited. Captivated, Rain did as she was instructed. *Suck hard.*

She wet the pad of her thumb, the pull of her mouth unexpectedly erotic alongside his coaxing words.

*Be gentle with yourself,* he said. *Flick your wet thumb over your nipples. Pretend it's my tongue.*

She did as he said, and her knees came up, her feet resting flat-footed beneath her. Her sensitive nipples puckered further under her attention.

*Do it again ...* He guided her through teasing the tender parts of her: her throat, her ears, her breasts, her belly, until she was well and truly flustered. The cleft of her body grew tight and hungry for attention.

*Now*, he groaned, and Rain imagined him gripping his cock with his fist, treating himself just as attentively. More delicious heat curled through her abdomen. *Stroke your pretty pussy for me.*

She rubbed the pearl of nerves between her thighs until her toes curled into the bedding. *It's so much better when you're here*, she huffed. Her efforts felt stumbling without him.

*Close your eyes*, he grunted. His next words were breathless, *I am there, sweetheart. I'm always with you now. And desperate to be inside your heat. How many fingers am I using?*

*Two*, she whispered.

*Very good.*

*And your tongue.*

*Yes, wicked girl*, he panted. *Now three fingers.*

Rain worked herself, spreading her thighs wide until she could slip a third finger inside. When she'd managed it, she told him with pride, and his praise filled her chest and sent her soaring.

*I can sense your nerves holding you back*, he told her. *You worry that you won't please me, but you always please me, darling. When I see you next, I'm going to fuck the timid right*

*out of you. You'll never doubt you're good enough at this ever again, not when you can feel how hard you make me deep inside you.*

Rain moaned, too lost in sensation to form words. Her release enveloped her, and her hips rocked in a jerking rhythm. Night's virile grunt echoed in her head. She felt awash with him, his release and hers twining together and vibrating through their bond. Content, she spread her limbs out across the bed like a sunning starfish, soaking in the bliss.

*Come back to me,* she whispered.

*As fast as I can,* he vowed.

There was much for her to do, but the problems that had made her mind race held no power over her in that moment. Rain re-dressed, unlocked the door, and climbed under her covers. She pulled them to her chin and fell fast asleep.

\* \* \*

As Rain readied to travel late the following evening, Arne insisted he would accompany her. Though her recovery was remarkable, he wasn't convinced she should be alone. All Rain had to do to discourage him was to mention the witch Sora Yaga by name, and color drained from the mage's large face. He promptly changed his tune. Suddenly, it was ideal for her to have her privacy.

Rain traveled with Bernard to the witch's hut, deep in an overgrown meadow, not far from the arm of the Eventide. After vowing to help hang laundry, chop vegetables, and

complete an assortment of other chores, the door opened for her. Once inside, Rain felt the hut shudder and shake as it lifted onto its chicken feet.

Instead of getting straight to work, the fellow witch sat down with her at the wax-wood table and poured them both a coffee liqueur from a clear decanter. It made the room smell like vanilla and orange rinds. Sora's flaxen hair and horns were hidden beneath a silk bonnet. A bright burgundy dressing gown flowed around her long frame.

Outside the windows, the world whirled by. The hut lumbered along on its chicken feet through tall grass made bright by a setting orange sun. The pasture was untouched by winter's frost, full of blue butterflies and wild fae flowers. Seated at the table, Rain could no longer feel any of the hut's movements.

"What brings you to my humble home?" Sora poured a short glass for her familiar, who hovered near her elbow, and pushed it in front of the little dragon. Masha thanked her mistress with a flap of her scaled wings and a birdlike squawk.

Rain held her full glass between her hands, peering around at the inside of the hut. "Your home *is* rather humble, isn't it? Not at all what I would expect of a dragon hoard."

Sora's smile was full of sharp teeth. "What if I told you most of the floorboards are concealing piles of gold wyvern coins?"

Rain grinned. "That sounds more like it. But what of the other floorboards?"

Beside the table, Bernard pawed at the wood, testing it with his claws.

“Lifting the wrong one would be a deadly mistake,” Sora replied, holding her glass under her nose, scenting it. “The wrong floorboard will eat you right up.”

Bernard froze, then canted his head to the side to stare wide-eyed at Rain. *Now she tells me*, he grumped.

Rain repressed a laugh. The house settled with a great rumble, and a hot breeze blew across Rain’s neck, like a belabored breath. Bernard leapt into her lap with a nervous yowl.

“Is that why you’re here? To question me about my hoard?” Sora swirled her glass. The spinning amber liquid caught in the firelight and cast sparkles about the room’s dark interior.

“I came to see if I could interest you in an exchange of information.” Rain tasted her drink. It was creamy and fragrant with bitter undertones. Not at all unpleasant. She risked a more generous swallow. “If you’re willing, that is. I’ll agree to more chores if I must.”

Sora’s brow furrowed. “What could you possibly want to talk about with me?” Masha had finished her cup, and Sora lifted the decanter to refill it.

“Divinia,” Rain said. “Your mother.”

Sora missed the cup, splashing droplets of the liqueur onto the tabletop. “How do you know my mother?”

“She is also my mother,” Rain said quietly.

Masha licked up the spilled droplets with a forked tongue.

Sora met Rain’s eyes over her familiar’s serpent-like neck. She set aside the decanter, wiping her hands down the front of her dressing gown. She sniffed. “The Seelie put a great deal of stock in blood ties. I do not share such sentiments. If you’re waiting for some kind of declaration of eternal bond from me, then I’ll have to disappoint you. That’s not how the Unseelie do things.”

Rain waved her words away. “Not at all.” She stole another generous swallow and set the glass near the edge of the table for Bernard. “I came to do all the declaring myself.”

Sora arched a yellow brow. Bernard peeked over the table and sniffed the drink, intrigued.

“You’ll get no sentiment out of me,” Sora warned.

“I wasn’t counting on any.” Rain shrugged. “That’s not why I’m here. I came because I have a great deal of unfinished business I need to make right, and not a lot of time to do it in. So I’ll speak plainly. You are my sister. My blood. My dagger, should you have need of it, is yours from now until I breathe my last.”

Sora’s blue eyes, dark and deep as the ocean at midnight, rounded. After a moment, her gaze sharpened suspiciously. “What do you want from me?”

“I want a sister.” Rain tipped her glass back so Bernard could have a drink. He seemed to like it, lapping at it with

growing urgency, which was no surprise. He liked consuming most things.

“I told you,” Sora grumped, “I’m not like the Seelie. I’ve no interest in gossiping and giggles, hugging or braiding your hair or whatever else it is sisters do with each other ... In fact, if you annoy me enough, I’m just as likely to eat you.”

“I don’t want you to braid my hair.” Though she wouldn’t have turned down a firm hug. She’d had an overwhelming last couple of days. Rain craved family now and always—the larger her family, the better. But that wasn’t all she’d demand of Sora. “When the day comes that you’d like help freeing your mate from your father’s hoard, I intend to aid you. As I said, my dagger is yours.”

The house let out a hiss, and another hot breath stirred Rain’s hair. Unsettled, Bernard abandoned her lap for the tabletop, his haunches raised.

Sora blinked at her. “How could you possibly know any of that?”

“*The Dragon and the Minstrel*,” Rain explained. “I read a great deal of fairy stories.”

“The oral traditions are woefully inaccurate.”

“They are most of the time,” Rain agreed. “But they’re helpful all the same when paired with a large library of history books for corroborating things. The oral traditions often hold what was forgotten or missed. They are the reason I know I have a sister in you, the reason that many, many years ago, I

came to the Lunar Province during the great war trying to get to you after you turned spy for the Seelie Tree Court. I was thwarted, however.”

“Thwarted how?”

Rain bit her lip, measuring her words. “I died and lost all my memories.”

“You *died*? Gods, that’ll do it.” Chuckling, Sora extended her glass. “You are quite the witch, Rain, I’ll give you that. If there’s one thing the Unseelie respect, it’s death and those who conquer it.”

Rain raised her glass, clinking it against Sora’s before taking a swallow. The smooth liqueur warmed her scarred throat. “I made it here now. A few centuries late, but I’m here.” She pulled her elven dagger from the leather sheath at her hip, and she laid it on the table. The gilded engravings stood out stark in the firelight. “I’ll help you, Sora, because not only are we blood, but our needs are the same.”

A flicker of emotion swam in the witch’s eyes. Then her mouth went tight, and the flicker snuffed out like a candle caught in a gale. “You need King Yaga dead.”

“He killed my father. He came to him as a trickster disguised as a man, then he turned into a great dragon right before my eyes and bit his head off. He destroyed entire villages of elves, engulfing them in his fire. Then he took my Penny from me ...” Rain’s gaze dropped to her blade on the table. It needed sharpening, and she needed to not think about

what she'd just described. "With or without you, I'm going to kill him, but I'd certainly rather do it with you."

Masha chittered excitedly at that, spreading her ebony wings wide.

Sora laid a calming hand on the familiar's long-scaled neck. "I won't do anything that risks my true mate. I can't help you in the way you want me to. I can't go charging into the mountains at your side. We have an understanding, my father and I." Sora peered at the door to the left of her hearth. "I stay out of things, and he allows me to continue to visit with my mate. We ignore each other, and no one gets hurt."

"You'd allow your mate to be imprisoned forever?"

"No," she growled. "Not forever." Her long pale neck flushed.

"You know a great many things I don't. You can still help me," Rain insisted, "and your father need not ever know."

Sora considered her, her head at a tilt. Gently, she patted her familiar's back. "Dragons have a saying about something that seems too good to be true. We call it death in disguise. Like my floorboards."

"But you've also got treasure under your floorboards."

Sora's lip quirked. "That I do."

Rain attempted to change tactics. Remembering who she was came with advantages. Her former self was much better at words, much more convincing. "Are you familiar with the tale of *The Three Knights*?"

“More fairy stories?” Sora downed her drink in two big swallows and a gasp, like she needed the liquid courage. Empty, she plopped it down. “Yes. I’ve heard of that one.”

Rain sighed. “Unfortunately, I’ve found no evidence that the goddess Rae and her Vanir mate are more than a fiction, but there’s another person featured in that tale. She is the one I’m most interested in. The one they call Baba Yaga.”

“My ancestor,” Sora said. “What of her?”

“I need to know what happened to Baba.”

Sora scratched her nails lightly down Masha’s scales. The dragon leaned into her mistress’s passive affection. “According to dragon legend, eventually she grew tired of her existence and became one with the mountains. Now she is neither alive nor dead.”

“Those same legends claim she killed a great dragon, one as powerful as the old gods,” Rain said. “That’s what I’m most interested in.”

“She destroyed her husband, the first Unseelie king, and took his crown. Your silly stories would have you believe she did it with some sort of magical spear.” Sora flourished her fingers sarcastically. “Cursed by a thousand witches, forged in dragon fire by a thousand demons. What a bunch of nonsense.”

Rain’s stomach dropped. “Then there is no weapon that could kill a dragon?”

“If you want to kill a dragon, I recommend destroying their heart or severing their head—or both, just to be certain.” Sora picked at a spot on the table, pondering. “There was something that Baba used to conquer her powerful husband ... Whether that weapon was a spear or a sword or a fucking stick, I don’t know. It could be a great many things. Dragon hoards are vast, and Baba was one of the very first dragons made by the divines. Hers would be greater still.”

“Could you get me inside this hoard? If you can get inside your father’s to see your mate, then surely you have a way ... ?”

“The opening to Baba’s hoard is in the Rasika Mountains beyond Hell.” Sora chortled at the face Rain made. “What’s wrong? Hell is only a few weeks’ ride south, after all. Assuming you could make your way across the rivers of molten lava, then the lake of fire, and assuming the demons that call it home don’t consume you on sight, I’m sure you could find the entrance to Baba’s hoard somewhere amongst those perilous rocks.”

*The demons would devour you whole well before they bothered to ask you any questions, Bernard cautioned. Most of them aren’t as charming as I am.*

“Fuck ...” Rain’s stomach plummeted farther.

“Luckily, I know a better way.” Sora’s eyes glittered. She glanced over her shoulder at the door behind her before settling back in her chair. “Keep your dagger for now. You won’t need it while you complete your chores.”

\* \* \*

Rain liked doing things for Sora. It was the Unseelie way, but it did something for the feelings of worry that kept trying to tie her stomach up in knots. Kinship was nothing without actions for the Unseelie. Loyalties were proven and earned, not given freely—a boon for a boon. She respected Sora's ways, even if she was a little tired of laundering skirts and hanging them on a line in front of the hearth. The witch had an absurd number of dresses in various styles and colors and fabrics, and she was particular about how they were handled. The lye soap began to chap Rain's hands. Still, she persisted, returning the next evening to offer her services and her dagger once more.

Afterward, they shared a heavy meal that Sora prepared in a large pot: a creamy, meaty gravy served over flaky bread, beside a vegetable soup stuffed with potatoes, mushrooms, and leeks. The soup was consumed from a shared bowl on the table between them, brought to their mouths with small cups rather than spoons—another Unseelie tradition.

As sunset neared, Rain's heart stuttered and she promptly lost her appetite. She had another meeting planned, one that hardened her stomach. She'd hardly slept that day, unable to turn her mind off about it. She'd woken Bernard twice from a deep slumber to discuss it with him all over again. He was patient with her—the first time.

Bernard and Masha chased each other under the table, fighting over a potato skin.

“When do you plan to return?” Sora asked. She’d spoken casually enough, but her hands twisted in her apron uncertainly.

Rain stood from her chair, arms spread wide.

Sora frowned at her. “What are you doing ... ? That’s not necessary—I could still eat you! I’d rather—”

Rain hugged her so tightly Sora coughed. She did not return the hug, but her tense body softened slightly, and her cheek rested briefly on Rain’s shoulder.

Rain patted her back and released her quickly. A kiss was a traditional Seelie farewell, but she wouldn’t push her luck. Not when Sora had all those sharp teeth. “I’ll return when you invite me. Come on, Bernard ...”

“Invite you?” Sora’s brow furrowed.

“You know where I live. Bernard,” she called more sternly. He had the potato skin between his teeth and was shaking it at Masha. Grumbling, he dropped the skin and slunk toward the door. “Thank you for the meal,” Rain said, repressing a smile.

Pink blooming in her pale cheeks, Sora didn’t reply.

Rain’s boots crunched through fresh snow, carrying her across the meadow. Hardy Lunar butterflies trailed behind her, immune to the cold. Bernard batted at the ones that swooped in too close. When they reached the tree line, the kaleidoscope of butterflies lost interest in them, swarming as a group back toward their favorite fae flowers.

Rain lowered her hood. Penny's tree wasn't far, and her heart kicked against her ribs. She found the memory flat tied to her wrist, and she pumped it once for reassurance.

The closer they came to the oak, the warmer the air grew, and snow melted in a circular path around the immortal tree. Similar living trees kept the Seelie lands temperate year-round. Memories of that familiar heat made her homesick.

The Penny tree's towering green and gold bark glinted in the moonlight, visible from several yards away. Large paw prints trailed off deeper into the forest, and two sharp, yellow eyes studied her from the shadows. They belonged to a massive white tiger, a Seelie mount adorned in fine leather armor.

Rain spotted its rider, and her feet froze to the ground.

A cloaked figure stood facing the Penny tree, peering up at its lush auburn leaves from beneath a rich, fur-lined hood.

*Go on*, Bernard encouraged her.

Rain's pulse jumped. As she moved in closer, the cloaked woman turned. They stared at one another for a long moment, the visitor's face shadowed. Rain chewed her lip, having forgotten all the words she'd prepared.

"You came," Rain said finally.

Queen Isla lowered her hood. Her features were sharply defined, favoring their elven father, her ears tall and so long the pointed ends protruded from the long fall of ashen hair that curtained her pale face. Her eyes were a bright blue, darker

than Rain remembered, but she had aged many centuries since she saw her sister last.

“It’s really you,” Isla choked. Though her expression seemed stern, Rain knew her best. “Row,” she rasped.

“I go by a different name now.” Rain glanced down at her familiar. Bernard sat at her feet, his tail curling possessively around her leg. “When I met my friend here, I’d lost much of my former self.” She indicated her familiar with a dip of her chin. “I was hurting, and it was raining. I reminded him of the rain because I cried often then. He likes the rain, and he likes me, so he named me after it.”

“You’ve been here all this time?” Isla crossed her arms over her chest, warming herself. “Row—Rain ... If I had known ...”

“You would have come for me.” Rain worked her throat. “I know.”

“I thought you were dead ...”

“I *was* dead.” Rain laughed without humor. She crossed to the Penny tree and laid her hand on its green and gilded bark. It warmed under her palm. “The Night King took my life and gave me to this tree in the vain hope of appeasing Yaga and securing peace in his court. But I can be very stubborn.”

Isla chuckled at that. “Don’t I know it.”

“Instead of giving myself fully to the tree, I demanded it bring me back.” Rain leaned against the trunk. Her limbs had gone heavy. “My death was hard, Isla, and resurrection is even

harder. It's shocking and painful. The nightmares were the worst of it ... My life would flash before my eyes over and over again, and you know as well as I how very bloody my life had been. I gave my memories away for peace and quiet, shoved them down into a pit and didn't let myself think about them ever, until they'd plummeted out of my reach."

Isla moved to her side and laid a hand on her shoulder, her grip firm. "I don't blame you, sister. Sun above, I'm just glad you're here. All can be well again. Come back with me now. You can tell me the rest on the way."

Rain knew she'd say that, had prepared for it, and had sensed when it would come. Still, it shattered her heart. She'd forgotten her home, but there it was now, in her sister, peering back at her so full of hope. "There is a new King of Night."

Isla's eyes flashed, like an ice storm over the ocean. "He cannot keep you here! You belong with me, your kin."

Rain swallowed. "He's my true mate."

Isla rocked back a step like she'd been struck. "The duke \_\_\_"

"My king. My true mate," she gasped. "I love him."

"Godsdamn ..." Isla rubbed roughly at her mouth, and Rain wondered if she remembered the scar she'd given him. "What a fucking mess."

"I cannot come back with you. I have to stay here and ..."  
Rain closed her eyes. She couldn't bring herself to say it.

"I can't see you again," Isla guessed, her tone icy.

“You know why,” Rain whispered.

Movement in Isla’s cloak stole her attention. A tiny fairy with gossamer wings and leather clothing wriggled out from Isla’s pocket, then took flight. Large black eyes were prominent in a diamond-shaped face. Her skin was rosebud pink, and the scent of fruit and wildflowers—the scent of fairy blood magic—trailed her. She had talons instead of feet, and long ebony nails. As she flew, she grew from the size of a thumb until she was about as big as a boot. Wings fluttering, she came to perch on Isla’s shoulder. Head cocked, she examined Rain.

“This is Mya.” Isla gestured to the fairy. “After I received the news that you ...” Her lips went tight. Unable to bring herself to say the words, she pressed on. “After my soul was torn in two, I sought Mya out and we made a bargain. With her help, I avenged you on the Lunar Court.”

“You scarred my innocent mate in more ways than one,” Rain said quietly.

Isla bit her lip hard. “Had I been the one to die, would you have done things differently?”

“Differently, yes.” Rain bowed her head. She wasn’t proud of the truth. The desire to avenge her bloodline was the reason they’d given Yaga the war he wanted in the first place. “I think you know I would have done *worse*. I wouldn’t have let any of them survive.”

Isla smiled, vindicated. “Of course you would have. The King of Night will just have to come to understand—”

But Isla didn't see, had no idea of the depth of Rain's feelings for Night, nor the fury that still burned inside her mate. "I won't do that to him. Not when the very sight of you would bring him pain." Rain knew something of pain, knew how memories could press on one's chest, restrict the lungs, and grab at one's heart until it was an agony. She understood how memories could steal one's peace and haunt one. She'd never put Night through that. Even for her beloved kin.

This would have to be the last time she'd see her sister. The notion made her eyes and throat burn. Rain could almost see the words fighting for purchase on Isla's tongue, her lips barely moving, making no sound.

"I don't want to fight," Isla said finally, a catch in her voice. "Is that it, then? You're alive, but I'm supposed to go back to pretending you're not?"

Rain didn't want to fight either. Heart threatening to burst, Rain took her little sister in her arms, touching her brow to hers. She had the scent of the sun on her and eucalyptus and mint. Rain breathed her in, holding her in her lungs.

"I missed you," Rain rasped, and the fog made by her sister's sob cooled against her cheek. Tears swam in Isla's cold gaze. "Even when I couldn't remember you, my soul felt your absence. I was incomplete, broken in pieces. I'm so sorry I let myself forget. I wasn't there when you needed me, but I'm going to finish what we started. For you and for father, I'm going to remove Yaga's head from his scaled shoulders, and your court and mine will finally have true and lasting peace."

“You’re a queen now too,” Isla said, realization dawning.

Rain pressed a kiss to her brow and released her, stepping back to give her space. It was strange, being with someone shorter than her. She’d grown accustomed to others towering above her in the Lunar Province. “That I am.”

Rain’s stomach dropped. She was queen ... for now. She intended to tell her mate the truth. He would not take it well. He might even become suspicious of her. Had he known who she was, he’d never have chosen her. Their true mate bond could never be undone, but their wedding—those were annulled with ease. He was the king. She was his consort. He could cast her aside ...

There were fates worse than death for a true mate.

Bile rose in the back of her throat. She would tell him. It was the right thing to do. He deserved to know, but stars above, she wished there was some other way. This was the very last thing he wanted—a permanent tie to his enemy, the woman who’d forced him to bloody his hands on his own kin. Escaping his enemies was why he’d chosen Rain in the first place. Now he’d have to abandon any hope he harbored for vengeance.

He’d have to let go of the enemy whose head Rain had promised to sever ...

She would do her best to help Night see that her commitment to him remained unchanged. She’d pray to the gods and sing to the divines that he didn’t take himself away from her before her task was finished.

And if he did ... Well, he'd kidnapped her first, hadn't he? He hadn't played fair at all when he courted her. If he couldn't be reasoned with, then perhaps she wouldn't play fair either.

## Chapter 9



### (Rain)

**H**ome at last, Rain re-lived the final farewell she and her sister had exchanged. Isla had mounted her tiger slowly, methodically, more words ready on her tongue—words she'd already said—but it was clear Rain wouldn't change her mind. The quiet pad of the tiger's massive paws over the frosted forest floor, the way Isla turned back and stared at her, icy eyes pleading, the way her body grew smaller and smaller before finally vanishing between the dark trees ... it would haunt her. She would dream of that moment.

Rain was so lost in her head and distracted, the next ten hours blurred by. The sun would rise soon. She felt a familiar stirring in the bond and sensed her mate was nearly home. To have reached her already, he must have pushed the horses hard. Gods, she wanted to be excited about that, but trepidation restricted her lungs and quickened her pulse.

She'd readied for bed absently but a moment ago. Gazing down at her night rail, Rain wondered if she should hurry and change. As a quick compromise, she pulled on a dressing gown. The simple silk added a touch of elegance but did absolutely nothing for her nerves. If anything, she was wound up even tighter now.

Bernard perched in the window alcove, his fuzzy tail draping off the sill. He watched her wringing her hands.

There was a commotion in the manor. The first hints of sunrise were upon them, and the halls echoed with sounds of moving staff and excited voices. Rain would have greeted her husband at the door, but dread kept her in hiding.

What would he do when she told him the truth? Her words could cause him pain. He might doubt her motivations. His trust in her would falter.

Would he see her as the enemy now?

That was how the Seelie would have taken the news. The kin of your enemy was also your enemy. Sora had been spared suspicion during the war only because of her blood connection to Rain. Blood trumped everything always.

*Are you sure you don't want me to stay with you?* Bernard offered again.

*I'm sure. Go on.*

He crossed the room, claws catching gently on the carpets, then hesitated by the door before letting himself out. It wouldn't be long now until Night finished with the staff downstairs and came looking for her.

The soft footsteps of an immortal sent Rain's heart into a gallop. Her husband stopped just outside the door, casting shadows under the frame. He knocked twice, waiting politely for her to answer. Rain hovered beside the nightstand, too

many words on her tongue to formulate a response. Her robe gathered around her, a pool of creamy silk.

The door cracked open. Night leaned inside, taking in her frown with a furrowed brow. He ducked the lintel, careful of his antlers, and closed the door behind him. His face was drawn. He'd already unbuttoned the lapels of his waistcoat. It hung open.

Gods, he'd grown more beautiful somehow while he was away. His blue-black hair was wind-tossed, sleepy gray eyes glittering in the low candlelight. A hesitant smile curled up the scarred corner of his mouth, and Rain's belly clenched.

She swallowed. "If I had something very, very important I needed to tell you ..." Working her throat once wasn't enough. She tried again, glancing behind her at the bed. "Would you want me to tell you now or ... after?"

Night's long strides ate up the distance between them, and her lashes fell sheepishly. He stood so close she could feel the heat of him warming her front. "Is someone dying?"

Rain fisted the silk at her sides. "Well, no, but—"

His mouth claimed hers, forcing back her chin, hands burying in her hair. "Tell me after. Definitely after," he said against her lips, and they shared a heavy breath.

A little whimper escaped her. It was the last of her resolve. She wanted him too, needed him, come what may.

The truth could wait.

His kisses were all heat. She felt gloriously feasted upon, her blood warming her from the inside out. She grew increasingly lightheaded and weak in the knees as he tugged at the lacing that cinched the front of her dressing robe and freed her of it. It floated to the floor like an ethereal shroud, pale silk pooling on the carpets, leaving her in nothing but a thin night rail.

He fought with his own clothes, and Rain stood on her tiptoes, not being helpful in the slightest. She was too distracted by his exposed skin, peppering his throat and jaw in feathery kisses that made him groan. The sound came from somewhere deep in his throat, and her eager thighs pressed together.

Like a gift, he bared more of his silvery skin to her. She showered his flesh with attention, kissing his chest, running her nose down his sternum, greedily filling her palms with him. He pushed her onto the bed with his body, the embrace of his weight a heady thing that didn't last nearly long enough. She whined when he rolled off her, onto his side.

"I'm here," he soothed, his arms enfolding her from behind.

Rain leaned into him, shifting her weight, finding nothing against her body but more gloriously bare skin. She moved until the curve of her ass pressed to his hardening erection. Delicious heat pooled between her legs.

Their connection simmered through her, raising gooseflesh on her skin. He opened the neck of her night rail, pulling free

the lacing with a few firm tugs. Reaching inside, he explored her breasts, teasing the nipples to pert peaks. He raked the hem of her garment up to her waist. She opened for him, and his fingers trailed down over her drawers, seeking her heat. Finding her center, he made gentle circles over the slit in the cotton.

The air cooled her skin, a contrast to his hot touch. His persistent teasing pulled another wicked moan from her lips. He played with her until the fabric covering her sensitive flesh was damp.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, his voice coarse as gravel.

“Always,” she murmured, shoving down her drawers and kicking free of them.

Night eased her farther onto her side, her lower back flush with his abdomen, lining their bodies up together. With a hand on her thigh, he helped her open her legs, rubbing his length along the tender furrow of her sex. His other hand cupped her neck, the pressure of his fingertips gentle and sure.

Rain guided him inside her. He moved with slow grace, stretching her deliciously. She tensed at the invasion. Spread so wide, the sensations were overwhelming, the pressure great, but not painful.

“We can stop,” he whispered, holding his position.

She shook her head. She didn’t want to stop. Not ever. She wanted all of him.

“You’re not breathing.” His smile was clear in his voice. Rain released the air trapped in her lungs, exhaling deeply. “Like this, darling.” He showed her how to shift her hips if she wanted less of him, and how to pull her knees up toward her chest when she wanted more.

Night rolled into her, once, then twice, each thrust careful and shallow, rocking her against the bedding. The pull of his cock along her inner walls was exhilarating. The vibration of his movements reverberated up her body and sent her climbing.

She pulled her knees up to her chest, taking as much as he’d give her, but it wasn’t enough.

“Night,” she breathed.

“More?”

“Yes!”

Night pulled out and rolled her onto her stomach. He straddled the back of her thighs, his big hands cradling her waist, then he lifted her hips. “Like this for more pressure, more depth.” He pushed her lower back down so her stomach was flat on the bed. “Like this for less.”

Rain lifted her hips, and Night groaned his appreciation. He kneaded her backside, palming her curves. He was inside her a moment later, sinking in so deep her eyes rolled back in her head. Leaning forward, he nuzzled his nose into her shoulder, his breaths gusting down her spine. His body, lean and broad-shouldered, pressed her into the bedding. Her

fingers curled around the sheets as he bucked his hips with steadily growing urgency.

The wet slap of their flesh was lurid and thrilling. When it was more than she could take, she slowly lowered her hips and enjoyed the grind of his body into hers, the erotic invasion that sent her spiraling.

“My sweet mate,” he purred.

Raw emotion burned in her throat. Her eyes stung. She was too overstimulated to find her own release, but she craved his.

“I want to feel you spend inside me,” she begged.

Night’s thrusts became more deliberate, his breaths turning to gasps. He whispered her name when he came. She felt his release echoing through the bond, and satisfaction flooded her. Still pulsing within her, he collapsed over her. He kissed her shoulder, then buried his nose in her neck, breathing her in as though he could consume her that way.

Rain wanted him to stay there. She enjoyed the embrace of his weight, but he moved too quickly, shifting onto his side.

“Are you sore?” he asked drowsily. “We could have a bath.”

“I’m not.” She curled up against him and nuzzled into his chest, not wanting to leave there, savoring the magic of the moment. He smelled like her, the scent of her soaps and lotions perfuming his warm skin. He smelled like salt and his favorite old books, the starch in all his shirt collars, the ink

from the pen he often carried in his waistcoat pocket. The scent of a brisk winter night wind clung to his hair.

He smelled like home.

It would be too easy to settle there and let sleep take her. Their problems could wait for another day ... But she knew herself, knew she'd find an excuse to prolong the inevitable, and the truth ate at her. It stole her peace.

“We need to talk,” Rain said, fisting the sheets that he'd pulled up over them.

“Later?”

“No, now.” She hated destroying the drowsy bliss between them, but there were a great many things he needed to know. Things that clotted her throat and made her eyes sting. Not looking at him, she hurried out of bed and found her dressing robe. Adding the extra layer like armor, she slipped it back on, working the fastening with shaking fingers.

Night studied her for a time, then slowly he left the bed, letting the sheet fall away. He walked naked into the dressing room, all lean height and powerful shoulders, prowling with the sleek grace of a panther.

Even Row, more practiced with words, was tongue-tied. Overwhelmed, Rain fell to her knees at the foot of the bed, waiting for him with her heart in her throat.

Night returned wearing a dark blue robe trimmed in velvet. He tied the front cord, shoulders tense. “What is this?”

Incapable of holding his questioning gaze for very long, her eyes fell to the carpets. “I’ve missed you,” she managed, sounding breathless.

“I’ve missed you too.” His bare feet appeared on the square of carpet she studied.

“As I healed, the memories of my past life returned to me.” She forced out a shuddery breath, grabbed hold of her courage, and pushed on. “There is so much to share with you, I’m not certain where to begin ...”

Night was close enough now that she had to tilt her chin all the way back to peer into his face. Tension bracketed his scarred mouth. “Why are you on your knees?”

Her lashes fell. “Because you’re my king, and I don’t want you to ever think otherwise.”

Tenderly, his fingers touched the crown of her head, moving briefly through the white strands. “Why would I think otherwise?”

Rain licked her lips. “I’m the daughter of Divinia, a goddess of nature. Sora Yaga is my sister.” She paused to let her words sink in.

His head canted to the side. “I’ve always suspected there was more to you. It doesn’t bother me that you aren’t fae, if that’s why you’re worried, and Sora is a trusted advisor. You’re like the Vanir. That’s to be celebrated. Not a reason for fear.”

Rain wrinkled her robe, bunching her hands. He fell silent then, allowing her to continue.

“I am the bastard daughter of King Lennox Thornbrush, of the Immortal Trees.”

The breath caught in Night’s throat.

Courage faltering momentarily, Rain pressed on. “I’m the one the dragons feared most. They spoke of me only in whispers. I am their retribution. I’m the warrior called Row, and if you wish it, I’ll win you this war. I’ll make you high king of all the Faelands.” The silence was deafening. Rain gulped. “If you wish it, I’ll pledge myself to you using bargain magic. On my life—”

“Isla is your sister,” he said, voice as cold as the winter wind that frosted the windows.

Rain dared to look up at him. He was wearing one of his trickster masks, the calculating politician, and his expression gave nothing away, but his hand, the one that had just so sweetly trailed through her hair moments ago, scrubbed at the scarring at his lip.

“She is.” Rain adjusted her weight on her knees, working the building tension out of her thighs. “There is little I wouldn’t accomplish for you if you wanted it, only I beg you to relieve me of the vow I made ... regarding Isla’s head. What she did to you was wrong and is worthy of your desire for vengeance, but she is my kin.”

His feet left the square of carpet in her peripheral. He began to pace, one side of the room to the other, his strides long and quick. “But how? The history books all describe Row as a man. You suspected Row was a king last we spoke, a mate to Isla, even.”

“When the elven Tree Court united with the Seelie fae through the marriage of the elven king and the Seelie queen, the fae brought with them many mortals. Your guess about the forced error was right. The mortals were clever and inventive, and they made good scribes, but they had strange ideas about gender.” Rain frowned at the carpet, remembering. “They still seem to think their men are stronger and of more value than their women. I would not allow them to address me or speak about my sister as though we were less than.”

“Following your orders, they marked you as a man in the common tongue? And Isla as a king?”

Rain nodded glumly. The ensuing silence rang in her ears. “Night, I’m so—”

“Don’t apologize to me,” he snapped. The trickster mask slipped then, leaking pain onto his handsome face. His cheeks went ruddy, and his eyes narrowed. The speed of his pacing increased.

Emotion clotted her throat. “My feelings for you, my commitment to you and our marriage, is unchanged now and always—”

“Are you going back to her?”

“No,” she said firmly.

“Good,” he growled. “Good,” he said again more quietly. “She can never know. She believes you’re dead, or she’d use this against my court. This is what she’s always wanted. A way to further her agenda here. I wish her to continue in the belief that Row is dead.”

Rain sighed. She wanted to be honest with her mate, but, gods, she wished she didn’t have to be ... “Isla knows.”

He stopped pacing, putting his back to her. His chin fell and his shoulders slumped. “You told her ... You told her *before* you told me.”

Rain bit her lip, selecting her words carefully. “We had unfinished business, she and I ... And I was not in a hurry to cause you pain ...”

Night raked his fingers through his hair. He glanced over his shoulder at her, and his eyes softened briefly. In that moment she caught a glimpse of the mate she knew, and hope thrummed in her chest.

“Stand up,” he said gruffly. Rain hesitated. He crossed to her and extended his hand. “Stand up,” he said more gently.

Rain placed her fingers in his.

Grip brutal, he pulled her up to face him, chest to chest. “The queen of the Lunar Court kneels for *no one*. Understand?”

Rain’s knees tried to buckle. She braced herself against him. “Then I’m still your queen?”

“You and no other.” His words did not match his tone. They were brusque and unfriendly, and her stomach knotted. Still, she clung to hope.

Her hand in his, she placed it over her navel. “You once wished you could kill the one who gave me this scar.”

Night’s jaw set. His fingers flexed along her belly, feeling the puckered wound under the robe. “Apparently, I already had.”

Her eyes slid shut. “I’m sorry—I know you don’t want me to apologize, but I’m so sorry all the same ... I can’t bear the thought of hurting you. I can’t stand the idea that you might be suspicious of me now, might think you don’t know me or worry that I’ve tricked you somehow. Night, I swear I didn’t know. My memories were gone from me, far out of my reach.”

“I believe you. Rain—Row ...” A line deepened between his eyebrows. “What am I supposed to call you now?”

Her smile was tight-lipped. “I still feel very much like Rain. Your Rain.”

The corner of his mouth lifted a fraction, but his eyes were dark and calculating. “Isla can *never*—”

“I told her to stay away. She knows I live and where I stand—who I stand beside. If she attempts to start trouble in response to you ending tariffs and taking the throne, she knows who she’ll be fighting against.”

“I relieve you of your vow.” Night made a flippant gesture, waving his hand.

Rain was relieved, but then ... did he still plan to kill Isla? She nearly asked him but decided there was no point in asking a question she already knew the answer to. Of course he wanted her dead. She'd bent his mind. Bloodied his hands. Scarred his face.

“You need not give me the head of your kin,” he continued. “And I don't want to create a new throne and become high king over all the Faelands. I'm not like Yaga. I just want my court to survive this mess. That's all I've ever wanted.” He glanced at her. *And you*, his eyes said. *I wanted you.*

Wanted. Not want.

She'd changed everything with the truth, she was sure. Dread surged through her veins. The bond between them fell oddly still. This was supposed to be their moment, their wedding night continued. They were together at last, ready to share a time of bliss before waging war, and she'd ended that time in the cruelest way possible.

He stood so close to her, and yet he'd never felt farther away. Her stomach hardened.

“This distance I sense between us now, it's not what I want.” Rain swallowed. “I love you, Night. I'm always going to love you. I know this has to be too much to take in all in one moment, but please ... *please* come back to me soon ...”

A muscle in Night's cheek flexed. His next exhale was long and slow. Then he pressed a firm, chaste kiss to her

forehead and marched for the door. “I need to speak with Erikson.”

“Night—”

“If you’re tired, don’t wait up for me. I’ll be a while.”

He stepped through the door and was gone.

\* \* \*

Bernard let himself inside soon after, but Rain wanted to be alone. Grumbling about emotionally constipated men, he slunk out of the room.

Drained to her core, Rain removed her dressing gown and climbed under the covers. The toll of the conversation with her husband had taxed her so thoroughly that she fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

Her dreams were vivid and bright and nonsensical. Vaguely she was aware that she’d taken over the entirety of the bed, thrashing this way and that, sending pillows to the floor. Waking for a moment, she adjusted under the blankets, feeling another pang of dread that the place beside her remained empty. Sunlight filtered in through the edges of the heavy curtains.

Movement in the bed roused her from the brink of slumber. The body that slipped in behind her and pressed against her back was long and hard and hot.

Her husband.

“Night?” She blinked in the dark.

His arms came around her, sturdy and warm. His chest was bare at her back. “You moaned my name in your sleep.” His voice in her ear sent a tremor through her that ended between her thighs.

“I didn’t realize I still spoke in my sleep. Not now that our bond is settled.” Needing to be certain he was real, and not the manifestation of one of her vivid dreams, she found his wrist in the dark and squeezed it.

“You still speak.” His breath heated the shell of her ear. “And the sounds you make are absolutely wicked.”

“Night, I—” She tried to turn, but he stopped her, tightening his hold around her waist.

“Let’s not talk about wars and memories or anything else right now. Go back to sleep.”

She nodded, her cheek rasping against the fabric of her pillow. If he needed time to adjust, she could give him that.

The worries of tomorrow tried to flutter through her mind, attempting to steal her peace. But those worries had no power over her in her husband’s arms. She fell asleep and had no more dreams.

\* \* \*

Rain awoke in bed alone. The purple and yellow hues of dusk ignited the velvet curtains. She had just enough time to wonder where her husband had gone before Night returned fully dressed in finery fit for a king. A royal sash of midnight blue cut across his breast. It brought out the similar highlights in his

hair. The collar and lapel of his brocade jacket was decorated in gold filigree. A gilded circlet rested on his brow. Trailing him, a mortal servant pushed a service cart stuffed with their breakfast.

Night sat with Rain at the corner table in an armchair, but he ate very little. His fingers constantly rubbed the scar at his mouth. He held a message in his gloved hand, something handwritten that he kept glancing at, turning this way and that between his long fingers.

Rain hoped he'd share it with her, but when he didn't, curiosity wriggled under her skin. "What's that about?"

Night stiffened. He was quiet for a moment longer, lashes lowered. "It's a matter I must urgently tend to. Captain Elayna sends for me. I must go to her."

Rain poured a steaming cup of tea, then helped herself to a plate of bacon. Slowly she tore the meat into thinner pieces, not eating any of it. "I'll tend to it with you," she said cautiously.

"I would like you to stay here."

Rain dropped the bacon. It hit the ceramic plate with a splat. The distance between them, the gap that she'd sensed before, the gap she'd hoped their bond had sewn back together in some ways, was still there gaping at her. "You said we were to do these things together once I was recovered. I'm recovered. You're to take me with you."

Night scratched at his neck, pulling down the cravat at his throat. “I did say that.”

“And?”

His political trickster mask was back, and she wanted to claw it right off his handsome face. “There have been new developments since I said those things.”

“Developments.” She enunciated the word acidly. “You are referring to my past? My identity?”

“And your family,” he said sourly. “News that the renowned warrior Row is not dead will not remain a secret long. Especially since you’ve already shared it freely with another. Some of the lords will not be pleased. There are matters I will need to attend to without you, especially in the south along the Eventide where the view of the Seelie Tree Court is more unfriendly. They still remember the battle of Bloodmire there. Many Lunar mages died.”

Rain ground her teeth. “Died at the hands of King Yaga. Not the Seelie.”

Night straightened his cuffs, pulling his sleeves even, avoiding her eyes. “They aren’t fond of him either. It was a Seelie and Unseelie war that led to those deaths. They blame them both.” His gaze came up to meet hers head on. “As do I.”

Rain’s lips pressed together. She did not want to fight with her husband. She never wanted to fight with him, but Row would have liked to throw a teacup at his head just then. Rain was tempted by the idea. He was putting down boundaries

between them, and she wanted to rip all of those boundaries apart.

It hurt. A pinprick in her heart that made her want to lash out at him. She could point out that she'd tried to convince the former King of Night to open his borders to her. He'd refused and they'd had no choice but to watch as the dragons slaughtered the mages guarding the edges of their territory.

Was that what Night wanted now, to fight? Was he trying to pick at her?

The time they'd spent in bed together had been ... she didn't have words to describe it. It was exactly what she'd wanted, exactly what they'd both needed, like the lid being taken off a pot before it could boil over, but apparently it and the promise of more wouldn't magically fix everything. It frustrated her that it couldn't work that way, that the bond and great lovemaking wouldn't automatically bring them straight to the same page, all troubles forgotten, all obstacles surpassed.

Night stood up, pausing to fuss once more with his sleeves and a loose cufflink. He rounded the corner table without another word, heading for the door.

Rain didn't know what to say. Fortunately, Row had a few ideas.

"You forgot to kiss me goodbye," she said sternly. "You *always* kiss me goodbye."

Night froze at the foot of the bed, shoulders tense. “I suppose I did forget ...”

As he turned, Rain sprung from her chair and rushed him, knocking him onto the mattress. She followed him down and pinned him there. A knee in his shoulder, she sat high on his chest. He struggled for a moment, his boots slipping on the carpets, the prongs of his curved antlers stabbing at the bedding.

“Have you gone mad?” Surprise gave way to aggravation. His features pinched.

Rain grinned down at him. “My kisses are non-negotiable, Your Highness. Let this be a lesson to you.”

His expression softened, a light brightening his silver eyes. He stilled under her, returning her grin with one that was full of mischief. She bent low, scooting down his body to brush her lips over his nose.

“I’ll show you kisses,” he grumbled. Catching her around the waist, he tossed her to the side and sent her bouncing on the bed.

Laughing, she attempted to scramble free of him, but he caught her ankle and dragged her back down. He covered her body with his and stole a kiss, silencing her giggles with the firm press of his lips.

When he pulled back, Rain clung to his shoulders, her breathing labored. “If you insist on running away from me now, I’ll allow it,” she said, a warning in her tone. “I’ll give

you your space. You've earned it with all you've been through. But continue much longer with this silliness, and I'll come for you, Lord King. You're all mine now, and I won't play fair."

"I didn't know we were playing a game," he said, and he rubbed his nose affectionately against hers. "I'll be back, my queen, in two days. Three at the most. Stay out of trouble."

## Chapter 10



(Night)

One word had shot through Night's mind the moment his mate revealed that she was in fact Row the renowned Seelie warrior:

*Trap.*

He'd been tricked. He'd been caught. It was all a ruse.

But his instincts had brought him to Rain, and there was nothing he trusted more than them. Slowly his reasoning had returned to him. He knew this woman. He believed her words. And yet a part of him felt betrayed still, despite knowing that the sensation was not tied to logic. If he believed Rain, then all was not lost. If her words were true, then she hadn't betrayed him at all. She'd simply forgotten the truth, and after all she'd endured, of course she had. He didn't need to see the scars on her body to understand why.

None of it was her fault. She was as much a victim of the war as he was.

And yet that gnat of a voice was back, warring against his instincts. He had been determined to avoid war at all costs before he'd courted the shy forest witch. Now here he was, true mated to his enemy's sister, preparing to do battle. He couldn't deny that her influence had helped him change

course. She'd warned him she wasn't the harbinger of peace that he'd longed for. Erikson's voice was loud in his head as well. He'd only courted Rain a short time. What if he was wrong about her?

Whatever he felt for her, his court must always come first.

Night rubbed a hand down his face. And what sort of horrible king did it make him if he didn't always want his court to be first? The bond beating in his breast absolutely revolted at the idea of leaving her behind.

Logic reminded him that it hadn't been Rain that had changed his plans. It was the murder of his uncle, generations of crippling tariffs, and giants terrorizing the city of River Row. It was dragee soldiers abducting his true mate and attempting to murder her to manipulate him ... For too long his court had endured threats from every side.

War was the way ... but could Rain truly stand with him against all others when family was what mattered the very most to her?

His heart and his head fought with one another, and his instincts played magistrate. And the whole thing made him weary down to his very soul. Now that he knew the truth about Rain, he needed time away from her to figure out his head and his heart before they tore him apart.

Elayna had sent him a note by messenger. It arrived first thing that evening: *His usefulness has ended. Meet us in the hills outside Maldrom where the main road forks, tomorrow after the midnight meal.*

He wanted to bring Rain with him down south to resolve the matter of the young dragon spy, but that grating voice in his head taunted him. Row the warrior, famous for slaughtering dragons, would make the perfect ally in this task.

*But what if, it kept saying. What if you're wrong? What if she's always known? What if the Seelie now have the Lunar Court exactly where they've always wanted it?*

*Trap.*

Night waited in the parlor for his carriage to be readied and a fresh team of horses to be fetched. His team from the evening before had more than earned their rest. He stood by the fireplace, watching the embers crackle and snap, when his brother entered the room.

Erikson pulled the dual doors shut behind him. His shuffled, half-mortal steps were quieter than usual. Night had poured his heart out to him the previous evening until late in the morning. The strain of those worries was etched on his brother's rounded face.

"Before you go, I've a matter to discuss with you." Erikson pulled a slip of parchment out of his jacket. It appeared important, stamped with a magistrate's seal in the corner.

"What is this?" Night took it from him. Scanning it quickly, he felt the blood leave his face. It was a form of annulment. It detailed an accusation that the queen consort had signed the certificate of marriage with a false name. Rain was in truth Row Thornbrush.

Erikson's fingers twitched anxiously at his sides. His back was rigid as a post. "I want you to have all your options, brother. She is your true mate—that complicates things, of course. You care for her, but you don't have to be wedded to her. You don't have to hand her the powers of a queen over your people. Simply sign it, and I'll see to the rest."

Night glowered over the top of the paper. His fingers tightened, wrinkling the form. "I won't cast her aside."

"You don't have to," Erikson soothed. "Keep her. Keep her safe here as your lover and mate. But you need not wed her. You're planning to leave her here already. Clearly you see the sense in keeping her out of the politics, knowing the threat she poses."

In his mind, Night tore the paper in two. He balled up the parchment and chucked it into the flames, which crackled as they consumed it. A part of him wanted to do exactly that. But he couldn't bring himself to follow through.

He folded it up into a tight square and tucked it away in a pocket inside his jacket. "She's my queen. Her and no other." The words tasted like ash on his tongue. He meant them, but guilt was already working its way through him.

"You're leaving her here, but you won't annul the wedding? What's your plan, then? To keep her in a limbo of your choosing until the war is over?" Erikson pinched the bridge of his nose. "Should you change your mind, just sign the paper and let me know. I'll take care of the rest."

“No more papers,” Night growled. “Not without talking to me first.” His hand hovered over his pocket, the fire calling to him once more.

*But what if?*

What if his mate that valued family above all others was then swayed by that family? He wanted to trust Rain, but he could never trust Isla. Erikson’s concerns weren’t completely invalid, the gnat of a voice noted.

There was a commotion in the hall. The underbutler argued in genteel tones with the gruff voice of another man whom Night recognized.

“I don’t bother with polite trivialities when it’s urgent, you mortal fool. Get out of my way.” There was a lilt to his accent—a frey from the north. The humans had named him Malcolm the Mad Marquess.

Malcolm stormed through the doors, dressed as a warrior of old, his wild white hair tied back in a knot, an impressive double-handed sword on his back and a curved dagger at his hip. His coloring was light, and his ears were long and pointed like his Seelie mother, but the small antlers and the lion’s tail swishing behind him displayed his Lunar heritage.

“Frey Magis,” he greeted, with a small bow of his head and a fist held over his heart. The bow was not low enough to be considered appropriate for a king, but Malcolm *never* bothered with polite trivialities, despite his claim to only discard them in times of urgency. Night was more amused than offended.

“Frey Malcolm,” Night said, and the corners of his mouth tugged up at the look of dumbfounded aggravation on the underbutler’s face. The mortal servant gaped at the room in exasperation, before remembering himself and tending to the doors, granting the lords their privacy.

Malcolm got straight to the point, as was his custom: “Frey Dagrún’s estate has neighbored mine for centuries. I visit often. Now he’s missing.”

Erikson’s eyes widened. “You’re sure?”

Malcolm cocked a sarcastic white brow. “I certainly wouldn’t be here terrorizing the king’s staff if I wasn’t.”

“A baron missing so close to the Seelie border,” Erikson thought aloud. “Perhaps Queen Isla plans to play a game of ransom.”

Malcolm shook his head. “There have been no attempts made by the Seelie to cross the Eventide. I trust my mage patrols. They’d tell me otherwise. This wasn’t the Tree Court’s doing.”

Erikson eyed him narrowly. “And we’re to believe you have no bias in a matter where the Seelie are concerned? They’re half your family.”

Malcolm’s cold stare could have lowered the temperature in the room. Instead of responding to Erikson’s slight, he straightened to face his king. “I won’t take my men off the border. Not given the current climate. I’d like the assistance of the crown to address the problem swiftly.”

“Then you know where the baron is?” Night guessed.

“Not where, but I know who’s likely responsible: the estate advisor Jacobson. I’ve never trusted him. He’s always been too ambitious and the baron too trusting. I’ve warned Frey Dagrún about him before. Last I visited, Jacobson claimed his lord had gone traveling and hadn’t shared his destination or when he’d return. That’s not like him. I wasn’t allowed to stay long, and his daughters appeared frightened. They wouldn’t speak with me. I’ve known all three of them since they were babes.”

“I would accompany you myself if I wasn’t about to leave to tend to a crucial matter elsewhere,” Night said. His first instinct was to send his capable wife. Rain would get along well with the Mad Marquess. He would respect her—an old warrior with a reputation of downing a giant singlehandedly—over the political prowess of his brother. The issue would be resolved quickly ... but still the gnat was there, pestering him. “My brother will accompany you with two of my household guard. Erikson, see that the baron is returned safely.”

Malcolm nodded his head in agreement, a grimace on his face like he’d just tasted something sour.

Erikson bristled as well. Neither liked it, but it was the only solution that brought Night any reassurance. Erikson would represent the crown, and he was a capable negotiator. Night’s guard were made of good strong people like Malcolm. They were not mages—the mages were needed at the borders—but those who remained of his house were capable men and women. Soldiers loyal to the Lunar Province.

Soldiers he had far too few of.

\* \* \*

Night made good time despite the weather, returning to the area just outside Maldrom, where the land was wild and rolling, dotted in green hills topped with thick snowcapped forests. A quiet place to dispatch a spy with low chance of an innocent happening by.

The hour just after the midnight meal was a clever choice. Dragons were not nocturnal and could not see as well in the dark.

The hills came into view just as the rain picked up outside the carriage. Melting snow had made the roads soggy and slowed their travel.

The carriage lurched to a halt, horses whinnying, and Night was nearly thrown from his seat. He leaned out the window, ready to make demands, but the words clotted on his tongue.

Up ahead, blocking the road, was a carriage of Lunar make. It sat flat in the dirt, the wheels crushed, the horses gone. His pulse thudded in his ears.

Night tossed off his blanket and scrambled out to investigate. Members of his guard followed in the carriage behind him, but he motioned for them to stay put. If he needed to speak death into another's ears, it wouldn't do to have them close enough to hear it.

“Get inside the cabin,” he told the mortal driver. The driver climbed down without complaint and did as he was told.

The closer Night came to the stranded carriage, the stronger the smell of brimstone and ash in the air.

“Elayna?” he called.

No answer. Night made a crescent shape with his hand, calling moon magic to him. Incense warred with the smell of blood magic. He jerked open the door.

His keen eyes spotted two bodies in mage uniforms, both propped back on the seat, their heads missing. A quick scan revealed they were men. Neither were his captain. Night breathed a prayer of thanks to the Moon Mother. He cared for all of his mages, but he’d known Elayna since she was a fledgling fae with just a promising connection to the divine.

“Lord King!” The sharp cry came to him from the hill in the distance. Elayna’s voice.

He spun, searching for her. A figure stood at the top of the hill, near the tree line.

“It’s not a young dragon!” she cried.

Shadows lengthened from out of the trees, reaching for his captain. A long tail stretched out from between two towering pines, thick and muscled like a great serpent, covered in gold and black plated scales.

“Elayna!” Night screamed in warning.

She turned and froze. The tail wrapped about her waist and dragged her back into the trees, deep into the shadows.

Night sprinted for the hill, so much moon magic pouring from him that the ground splintered underfoot. He could take Elayna's hearing. He could speak death into this spy's—

The scent of brimstone burned his nose so hot and thick there was no mistaking it. This was no young dragon, indeed. Night had been fooled, bluffed by the other player, and he'd laid his cards incorrectly. The spy had shown himself on purpose, a trickster, and Night had walked right into his trap. Speaking death into the ear of a god-like dragon would do no good other than to teach the ancient beast the sacred words.

“Fuck,” Night hissed.

Inside the trees, moonlight filtered between the swaying branches. Raindrops slipped through the canopy, wetting down his hair. The snow-covered pines were thick, their shadows tall, but his eyes were keen.

Night cupped his hands between him and peered through them, searching for a glamour. Natural glamour magic left a glittering essence on the forest floor.

“Moon and stars,” Night breathed. The coiled tail became visible between his cupped fingers. He followed it. It appeared never-ending, wrapping between the trees, draping the branches like a great snake. Just above him rested one of the clawed feet.

Elayna lay pinned to the ground under the weight of the great tail. Her mage uniform was soaked through with rain and mud. He knew of only one dragon so large and old. Night lowered his hands and stepped under the nearest pine tree on the outskirts of the central clearing.

“King Yaga,” he greeted, smoothing his expression and straightening his spine. “If you wanted to speak with me, this was a very peculiar way to go about it.”

“Peculiar,” the dragon purred in his hard accent, his voice so dark and deep it turned Night’s blood to ice water, “yes, but much more fun this way.”

“It was clever,” Night admitted, hiding a tremor in his hands by stuffing them in his pockets, “letting your glamour slip while I was looking.”

He spotted the dragon’s head then, high in a pine tree, his serpent-like body curling up the trunk. His large face resembled the man Night had seen before, the spy: bald and scarred. The glamour shifted and shimmered, revealing scales instead of scars. In place of a bald head was a crown of sharp curling horns, there for a moment, then gone. The face snapped back into focus with an unnaturally wide smile full of razor-sharp teeth. The scent of blood magic clotted in Night’s throat, making it difficult to breathe through his nose.

“Were you there, at the caves near Bloodmire?” Night asked. The scent of ash was familiar.

“I was there. Watching. Waiting. One of my loyal mages escaped the caves just before you arrived. It displeased me that

they would risk killing you with mate-sickness against my orders. I came to preserve your mate, to preserve you, but you'd already reached her. I took the mage's blood and skin as penance, and then I wore him for a time."

"Don't pretend you were doing me any favors." Night's fingers bunched into fists inside his pockets.

"I simply wanted to meet your mate ... and keep her for a century or two. However long it might take to help you see reason. And I wished to attend your coronation, since rudely I was not invited. I thought my mage's form would be more acceptable. I was right. Though, it disappointed me greatly that you did not bring your mate. I've heard so much about her, and I still haven't had a chance to meet her."

Night scoffed, and his breath misted in the cold. Yaga *had* met Rain, Night thought. Yaga didn't know it yet, but his powerful mate was the warrior he'd once feared most. In that black moment, Night regretted leaving her behind. Alone he wouldn't dare attempt to take on such an ancient god-like being, but with his capable mate at his side, he might now have one less enemy. "I don't think that was all you wanted."

"Would you like to know what my people call you, Lord Night?" Branches crackled above Night's head as the great dragon shifted his weight. "They call you the king of tricksters."

Uneasy, Night moved two paces farther into the clearing. Rain dampened his hair. "I think we both know who the true king of tricksters is."

Yaga's deep chuckle rumbled the ground beneath his feet. More branches cracked and splintered. Snow fell in heavier clumps from the trees the dragon had draped himself over. "You flatter me."

"It wasn't meant to be a compliment," Night drawled.

Another snap in the branches above, and a great limb came hurtling toward him. Night had just enough time to raise his arms over his head to protect his face. The branch stopped in the air, turned a fraction, and fell away from him, pummeling the ground.

The scent of rotten oranges wafted toward him, a blood magic he was unfamiliar with. Night glared up at the dragon, certain he was being toyed with.

Elayna grunted in pain. Night stopped himself from looking at her. He'd carefully cultivated a reputation in his court for being ruthless, had successfully frightened the fae into order. That reputation would be known to Yaga and was his best bet at keeping his captain alive. Yaga couldn't know he cared for her. He'd kill her right there in front of him, or worse: he'd take her with him, a card to be played against him later.

"I grow tired of the cold and wet, Yaga. Speak plainly."

"You and I are in this budding war for all the same reasons. We need not be enemies."

"You just ripped the heads off two of my mages. A strange way to start an alliance," Night growled.

“I killed them easily—a reminder that I’m not someone whom you want to make an enemy of. A reminder that you don’t want me in your province. Ever.”

Night shook his head. “We are not in this war for the same reasons. I have no desire to rule the Faelands. I don’t seek more power than what’s owed to me by right.”

“Little king,” Yaga purred in his hard mountain accent, “if you think that’s what I want, then you haven’t been paying attention.”

Night blinked rain out of his eyes. His hair hung in damp ribbons along his face. Words fought for purchase on his tongue. “You speak in riddles and half-truths.”

“Let me try using smaller words. I want what *you* want.” Yaga’s lips stretched unnaturally around ghoulish teeth. “Revenge.”

Night shook his head, at a loss. “Revenge for what?”

Yaga had the leer of a deadly viper. “My love. My goddess.”

Night had read the story of the *Dragon and the Minstrel* enough times to suspect he now understood the answer. “Divinia,” he whispered. “You blamed Thornbrush for taking her all those centuries ago. Is that why you bit his head off?”

“The elves took her from me,” Yaga grumbled. “Not just Thornbrush. All of them. They seduced her away with their little romantic stories about her beauty and goodness. I cared not whom she lay with, as long as she came back to me. But

then she went to the elves, made them hers, and she stopped coming home.”

Night’s nostrils flared. “You had an entire people annihilated for worshiping a goddess with their stories?”

“I destroyed their beloved living trees, took their homes, killed their kin. Then I had them bred out. Mortals are good for that. They reproduce like rabbits.” He sighed. “But you’re wrong again, little king. I didn’t bring an entire people to ruin because they worshiped a goddess. I ruined them because Divinia *loved* them.”

“You’re just a great big child throwing a tantrum over a toy he was forced to share.”

“Isla must die. She took your kin from you, made you slaughter him with your own hands. Isla’s throne must fall.” The queen’s name quivered in his throat, more snarl than word. “Isla is your enemy. Our vengeance is shared. We are the *same*.”

“I won’t join you.”

Yaga chuckled deep in his throat. “They all say that in the beginning, but that is the beauty of immortality: plenty of time to change your mind. And anyway, I plan to handle Isla on my own.”

“Sacred stars,” Night grumbled. “Then what do you want from me, Yaga?”

“I want your complacency,” he purred. “I want you to continue to do as you have always done. I’ll secure vengeance

for both of us.”

Night turned his words over, searching for the trap. This wasn't anything like he'd come to expect from the dragon king.

“I want you to stay out of it,” Yaga rumbled on. “Stay in your court, cling to your pretty new wife, and know peace. You are powerful. You will be useful one day when I have need of you, but I knew I'd never get you to bow to me. It's not in a king to bow. Even a little king.”

“You'll just be back later to finish us all off,” Night said.

“Make a bargain with me now and our peace shall be eternal.”

Night scoffed.

“Make a bargain with me, and my soldiers will never set foot or claw in the Lunar Province ever again. I bear no ill will toward your court. I never have. Your tariffs are a trifle I care nothing about. Keep your little crown. Cling to your little province. Have your peace. Forevermore.”

Clouds parted overhead. The rain stopped and the clearing brightened. Moonlight ignited the dragon's black and gold scales.

A cold wind bit at Night's cheeks. “You'll talk out of both sides of your mouth. You'll try to trap me.”

Yaga laughed. “Of course I will, but you're the king of tricksters. Surely *you* of all people could make a deal with me beneficial. Protect your court here and now. And all you have

to do is *nothing*. Or do I need to remind you why you don't want me in your province? Do I need to show you once more what it'll be like to make an enemy of me with this mage here?"

Branches broke and splintered. Elayna whimpered.

Night didn't turn to look at her. A muscle in his cheek twitched. "She failed me. Do as you wish with her." Face placid, he spoke his words with cold calm. "I'll consider your offer, but you'll get no bargain out of me today."

"I'm not a patient dragon," Yaga warned.

Night turned and walked out of the clearing.

"Little King!" Yaga snapped. "We're not finished!"

"I am." He kept walking.

"Night!" Yaga roared.

Elayna screamed. Gritting his teeth, Night pressed on. He made it to the foot of the hill when Yaga spoke next.

"Very well then, you spoilsport. We'll talk again. *Soon.*"

Yaga pulled his glamour around him, his great tail vanishing from the trees. Night could see nothing except the shifting of the branches, the swaying pines, followed by the beating of his great wings as he took to the air. Night cupped his fingers together and peered through them, spotting the great ancient beast in all his plated glory.

He was a horror to look upon, unfurling in a never-ending spool of heavy scales, sharp horns, and deadly claws. His

wingbeats sent a current of icy air blasting through the trees, scattering snow and loose branches.

Night waited until Yaga was nothing but a speck of gilded black in the distance before he sprinted back into the clearing. He fell to his knees at Elayna's side. "Can you move?" he asked.

"Nothing's broken." Elayna lay panting, arms crossed over her chest, the ends of her horns digging into the mud on either side of her head. She was so mud-splattered, her magenta hair appeared dank and brown. "I think you just saved my neck, Lord King."

"One small victory," he said bitterly.

## Chapter 11



**(Rain)**

**R**ain trained out in the courtyard early in the morning. She'd normally be asleep soon, but her body craved activity and missed being in the sunlight. She was tired of reliving her disagreement with Night, tired of feeling angry about being left behind. Seeking a distraction, she practiced with an elven bow, dressed in heavy leathers and a long cloak. Using her affinity with the living wood in the weapon, she grew the limbs with a command and took shots at a great distance from the target. Bernard sat on her boots, not liking the feel of the snow and slush between his paws.

*I would like to have a child soon, he said.*

Surprised, Rain's next shot missed center. "To eat?"

Bernard hissed at her. *No! To keep.*

"Can demons ... do that?"

*I don't want to do it the demon way. Forging in hellfire hurts. I don't want to hurt my child. I think I'll try it your way.*

Rain stared down at him, mouth agape. She fingered the fletching of her next arrow from the quiver dangling at her hip, at a loss for words. "Bernard, how is it you believe babies are made 'my way,' exactly?"

He groomed himself, licking his black paws and smoothing back the fur behind his ears. *Aren't your babies baked in an oven? It's what I've gathered from visiting the mother in the scullery. I'm not sure of the ingredients though. Meat? Blood? Squishy bits?*

“Oh dear,” Rain groaned.

*And how long do you bake them for? And at what temperature? Must I add hair? I'd prefer that my baby remained bald. Less fuss that way.*

“Bernard, when women refer to their ovens, they're talking about their womb.” She patted her stomach. “Not an actual oven.”

*Womb? Where would I get one of those? Why are you looking at me like that? Don't you think I'd make a good parent?*

Rain stammered out a few more syllables before pulling her mind back together. “Of course you'd make an absolutely excellent father or mother ... or both. There's no doubt about it. It's just that—”

Her words were interrupted by movement at the gate. Rain had never been more relieved to see a complete stranger, even an irritable-looking one armed to the teeth. Arne trailed after the stranger, grumping something about manners and tradition and begging him to wait in the parlor.

His request went ignored.

The stranger, a man dressed in a warrior's leather armor with white hair, small antlers, and a tail like a lion dragging behind him, stomped into the courtyard, unabated. "My queen, I must speak with you."

Rain lowered her bow but kept an arrow nocked, just in case. "Arne, who is this man?"

"Frey Malcolm of—" Arne began.

Malcolm finished for him, "The Mad Marquess of Reedholm. My estate is up north, half a day's ride by horse, Your Highness. I was dispatched by the king to attend to an urgent matter with his brother, Lord Erikson, yesterday evening."

"Erikson has not yet returned," Rain noted, concern lowering her voice.

Malcolm sighed. "I've noticed. My neighbor, Frey Dagrún, has gone missing. Erikson was tasked with seeing to his aid. I attempted to support him as I'd been instructed by the crown to do so, only Erikson has trouble looking past my white hair and long ears." He pointed to the sides of his head where the ends of his sharply pointed ears broke through his unruly hair. Elven ancestry grew Seelie ears longer than their fae cousins. "I was dismissed before we even reached the manor to speak with the man I believe is responsible."

"I see." Rain nodded, unsurprised. Erikson wore his fears about the Seelie and Unseelie on his sleeve. "And now he is also missing."

“Correct, my queen. Frey Dagrún is still lost and his daughters still frightened. Either I need a better rescue party, or I’ll have no choice but to call my mages off the borders to fix this mess.”

“Keep your mages right where they are.” Rain returned the arrow to the quiver on her hip and slung the elven bow over her shoulder. “I’m your better rescue party, Frey Malcolm. Please, lead the way.”

\* \* \*

Rain shared the marquess’s carriage, a bulky vehicle with dark ornate carvings. Shadowed beings—demons and phantoms—decorated the walls alongside billowy jet-black cushions. Bernard lounged across her lap, and the mage Arne followed by horse. Travel was slowed by the poor weather, as melted snow had made the roads soggy. It would take longer than expected in such conditions to reach the country manor belonging to Frey Dagrún and his daughters.

“Bernard is a peculiar name for a demon,” Malcolm noted casually, rubbing at his scruffy chin. It hadn’t seen a razor in at least a day.

Rain scratched behind her familiar’s ears. “His true name is Berdemos.”

*You said it wrong again,* Bernard grumbled.

She rubbed his belly in apology. “I never pronounce it correctly in my accent. I started calling him Bernard, and he liked that.”

*Bernard has a dignified ring to it that suits me.*

Malcolm appeared amused. At Rain's request, he explained the situation and his suspicions about the ambitious estate advisor, Mr. Jacobson, in a concise and ineloquent fashion, pulling no punches and cursing often.

Rain liked him and his ineloquent manner.

Absently she smoothed down the fur along Bernard's back, listening. Sunlight poured in from a side window. Malcolm cast a formidable shadow that stretched across the cabin, a peculiarly dark shadow which Bernard seemed to intentionally avoid touching. Twice now, Rain was certain she'd caught the shadow moving despite Malcolm remaining quite still. This man wasn't a mage, however. She sensed no divine connection in him, and his ancestry was an interesting mixture of Lunar and Seelie.

"These are strange times we're living in," she said, encouraging further conversation.

"All due respect, my queen, but it's about damn time things got strange." Sitting forward, Malcolm rested his forearms on his knees.

"What do you mean?"

"The duke shouldn't have left the throne empty as long as he did," Malcolm stated bluntly.

Rain's spine went as rigid as one of her arrows in the quiver leaning against the door. Her husband was no longer a duke, nor was it Malcolm's place to pass judgment on his king,

and the marquess damn well knew it. Row's first instinct was to hurt him for disrespecting her husband, but Rain sensed the slip was intentional. A test of her loyalties, perhaps.

"You seem like a useful man, Frey Malcolm," she said, glowering. There—his shadow lifted his hand again, but Malcolm remained leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

"I am useful, my queen." The corners of his indigo eyes crinkled.

"There are too few useful men currently, and so I will refrain this time from hurting you for addressing your king inappropriately. Do it again, however, and I will carve the name Frey Magis in your sword arm for you."

Malcolm's smile stretched broadly. "That would be most unforgettable, Your Highness. I beg your pardon. But you've got nothing to worry about where my loyalties are concerned. Our Frey Magis knows I'm not just some layabout Lunar lord. It's the only reason he tolerates my bad behavior."

Rain glanced at his misbehaving shadow. It was facing the wrong direction. "If you're not a layabout, what is it that you are exactly?"

His lip curled up smugly. "My mother was Seelie, from the forests just on the other side of the river Eventide, but my father was Vanir. A demi-god of shadows."

Her gaze bounced back to his shadow again. It had moved more blatantly this time, sitting back on the cushion, lounging. "Fascinating."

“May I ask what you plan to do once we arrive? No offense to his lordship, but Erikson has likely made matters worse.”

Rain repressed a smirk. She tried very hard for her husband’s sake not to openly dislike Erikson. To his credit, he was a useful man most of the time and loyal to his brother. “Are you familiar with the Battle of Bloodmire?”

“Certainly. That legendary bloodbath was one of my favorite bedtime stories as a young lad. First the dragons attempted to flank the Seelie troops by trespassing on Lunar lands. The mages protected what was theirs and were slaughtered by the fierce creatures with fire and snapping jaws. My father always did an excellent impression of the dragon’s jaws with shadow forms on my bedroom ceiling ... What dragons remained crossed to continue their plan to flank the Seelie, but the Seelie were ready for them, and the dragons were war-weary. The trees swallowed them up, it’s said. And the warrior they feared most shredded them with daggers and iron.”

“Yes. *I* was ready for them,” Rain said, and Malcolm’s eyes flashed, intrigued. “They were younger dragons and fewer in number, but reinforcements were coming so I needed to act swiftly. I made an epic example of their lizard hides for the drage reinforcements to find and despair. Disheartened, they were easy to dispatch next. I learned a great many things from Bloodmire. Most importantly, when you wish to make a lesson of someone, do it in the bloodiest way possible. If this

Mr. Jacobson has in fact gone rogue, he'll be the last in the province to do so.”

“My queen,” he said, awe in his voice. “I think you and I are going to get along just fine.”

She smiled at him.

Rain hadn't slept yet that day, accustomed to a nocturnal schedule, so she napped on the way, pulling her cloak up around her. Malcolm provided a winter blanket lined in fur. Sleeping upright and getting tossed about on rough terrain were not conditions for restful slumber, but little sleep was better than none.

Malcolm roused her when they arrived.

Outside her window, muddy pasture led to a steep hill. The river Eventide rippled in the distance. Rain spotted the thick, lush forests of the Seelie Provinces just on the other side. Frosted, muddy earth, and the leafless trees of the Lunar lands seemed drab in comparison. A pang of homesickness hardened her stomach. There would be no winter snow amongst those trees, only warmth and comfort.

She wondered after her sister Isla, not for the first time, then pushed the thoughts away. Nothing good would come from indulging such a compulsion. Only sadness.

“Stop the driver up here,” Rain said, peering out the window.

The manor at the bottom of the hill sat adjacent to a copse of birch and pine trees. Made of stone and steel and steep

gables, the country estate had a broad face full of diamond-paned windows. As the carriage pulled to a stop, Rain watched two footmen head up the hill to greet them. Both were stocky and mortal.

*I need an arrow*, Rain told Bernard.

Bernard sniffed at the full quiver leaning against the cabin door. *You have lots of arrows.*

*I need you.* She smiled coaxingly down at him. As she explained her plan, he evaporated into a smog. Filtering into her open palm, he became a long arrow with a black shaft, gray fletching, and a razor-sharp obsidian tip that gleamed wickedly. *Thank you.*

*If you want to reward me later, I prefer my cheese aged and my wine chilled.*

As the footmen reached the top of the hill, the first called to her. “This is the home of our lord, Jacobson. You are trespassing here.”

Rain exited the carriage, bow slung over her shoulders, Bernard-arrow in hand. “I am your queen, Rain of House Night. Please inform Lord Jacobson that I wish to speak with him immediately.”

The estate advisor was no lord, of course, but based on the marquess’s suspicions, he had an ego that needed to be stroked and then crushed. Malcolm came to stand beside her, arms folded. With the great sword on his back, casting a massive, unnaturally dark shadow down the hill, he was an impressive

sight. Arne moved in closer on horseback, looking appropriately menacing.

The footmen nodded their heads, appearing suspicious and put out. They retreated back down the hill just as slowly as they'd arrived. Once inside, it took them a long time to summon their new master, and there was a loud commotion in the house before the one called Jacobson stepped outside.

He was dressed like a lord in a frock coat that did not fit, with thick leather gloves and a flintlock pistol in his fist. Small feathery wings fluttered at his back. He wore a top hat on his head over long hair the color of honey.

Pistols had been outlawed nearly a century ago, the risk of death by iron too great to the immortals, but it was well known that a few likely lingered about the provinces. Rain's keen eyes picked up evidence of rust along the antique barrel. It was unlikely anyone would be able to practice much with such a weapon. They were loud, and ammunition would be hard to come by.

So *that* was how he'd taken over the manor, Rain mused. Fae were frightened of the iron weapons invented by the mortals. Pistols and rifles could be harnessed to deadly effect in great number, but an old, poorly maintained weapon did not intimidate her. Though he would be able to fire a shot off faster than she could loose an arrow, pistols were dreadfully inaccurate, especially at this great distance. With Rain at the bow and Bernard as the arrow, they would not miss.

*Are you ready?* she asked her familiar.

*I only hope he doesn't taste like farts,* Bernard said.

*Make these men fear you, my fierce friend. Make an example of this one that none of them will ever forget.*

Bernard cackled viciously.

“Mr. Jacobson,” Rain called down. The cold bit at her nose, and she sniffed. “It’s my understanding that Lord Dagrún and Lord Erikson have gone missing, and that you are the man in the know about both.”

“I am in the know,” he shouted. Then Jacobson started in on his demands without hesitation, waving his pistol about. “My family has worked these lands longer than that thief Dagrún and his ilk. I’ll have my new home secured by nothing less than bargain magic between me and the king himself, patents of nobility will be issued and—”

“Mr. Jacobson,” Rain tried again, cutting him off. “You will be given no quarter for your terrible crimes. Free your captives now, and your execution will be swift and your death more noble.”

Mr. Jacobson blinked up at her with owl-like eyes. His feathery wings fluttered anxiously at his back.

Rain listened briefly while he waved his flintlock pistol in his thick gloved hand, making further demands for titles and privileges. “The duke named himself king. If that’s all it takes, why can’t I name myself baron? My family has just as much connection to the Vanir as the baron has.”

“Your king occupies a throne that is his by right and by birth. You took ruthless advantage of the frey who trusted you.” Rain pulled her bow off her shoulders. Bernard was a little heavier than the arrows she was accustomed to. She made adjustments as she fitted him into place. “Grow,” she shouted, and the limbs stretched the string taut. She would need the added length to make the distance.

Her shout startled Mr. Jacobson. He pulled the trigger, and the ball flew from the barrel with a great crack and a small spark. The ball lodged itself deep in the hill, casting up a tiny wall of mud. He’d missed by a very wide margin.

Malcolm burst out laughing. His shadow bent at its dark waist, overtaken by silent mirth. “Better reload quickly, you cad.”

Rain pulled the string to her cheek, kissed it for luck, and let it loose.

Bernard whistled through the air and met his mark deep in Mr. Jacobson’s gut with an echoing thud. Jacobson staggered and blinked, and then Bernard transformed. He erupted into the form of a great black wolf, ripping Jacobson in two, soaking himself in a shower of blood and viscera.

Bernard snarled and howled, and the screams and gasps from the house did their part. If anyone thought to challenge them now, they reconsidered quickly with one look at the fierce demon before them. One of the men who played guard at the door ran for it. Bernard went after him, bounding

excitedly, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. He chased the former footman off toward the trees.

Malcolm sent his shadow inside to investigate. After several minutes, the shadow slipped back out from under the door and crawled up the hill.

“Your Highness,” he said admiringly as the shadow reached him, “there will be no further efforts made to stop me inside. If you’d like to wait in the carriage, I’ll see to the prisoners. Do call off your demon, though, if it pleases you. I don’t want him to frighten Dagrún’s daughters.”

*Come here, Bernard.*

He came when called, charging back through the trees covered in even more blood, tongue still lolling happily, reeking of sulfur.

*Unless you want a bath, you’ll need to change back.*

Bernard whined in his wolf form. *You are the biggest wet blanket sometimes.* Then he broke into a mist, and the blood scattered across the frosted dirt beneath him. He returned to his cat form, perching on her boots to avoid chilling his paws.

Malcolm lumbered down the hill to see to the prisoners. The winter wind picked up, so Rain hefted Bernard back to the carriage. Arne left his horse to keep watch over them. He was a formidable-looking guard. It often amused her that the mage’s insides were so much softer than his intimidating outsides, but she was grateful to her husband for selecting him to guard her. She liked having a mage with big strong arms, a

love of poetry, and a habit of singing when he thought no one was around to hear him.

An hour later, Erikson came to visit her carriage. He looked worn, his usually immaculate appearance more disheveled than she was accustomed to seeing from him. His top hat had a dent in the side, and his cravat was a crinkled mess. Before opening the door to the carriage, he bowed so low his top hat fell from his head. He let it roll around on the ground, dirtying the felt.

Rain realized he was waiting on her to welcome him inside. She invited him eagerly, masking her irritation with him by concentrating on the terrible ordeal he'd likely endured. First, he had to chase after his hat which was now actively rolling down the hill. Bernard laughed at him boisterously, but as Erikson couldn't hear it, she allowed it. Soon after, Erikson returned and joined her in the carriage, looking more ruffled but no worse for wear. He sat across from her, his full cheeks pink from exerting himself.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

*I hope you're hurt*, Bernard added.

“I'm not, my queen,” he said, his voice low and humble, eyes downcast.

“Have you had food and drink?”

“They kept us in a cellar for a day and a half with little to eat or drink.”

“You are safe now,” she told him. Then Rain pushed open the door and asked Arne to fetch food and water.

Several minutes later, Malcolm returned to the carriage with Arne, carrying bread and a flask of water. Erikson bowed low to the marquess, muttering a string of thanks and apologies as he accepted the offerings.

His expression of gratitude seemed quite genuine. His face colored further when he dared to meet Rain’s eyes. “I am forever in your debt, Your Highness. Thank you for coming for me.”

“You are my brother,” she said with a shrug. To the Seelie, doing anything less for family was absolutely out of the question. “Of course I came for you.”

When Erikson left with his guard, Rain prepared to depart as well, but Malcolm had another idea. He opened a compartment in the back of the carriage where a luggage chest was kept. Inside were extra blankets for the journey, as well as two deep goblets covered in etchings of shadows and phantoms, tucked in beside a rich collection of wines.

Rain frowned at the bottles but managed to compose herself before the marquess noticed. He brought the goblets and the wine into the cabin as the driver stirred up the horses.

“A job well done should be celebrated,” Malcolm said, clinking his full goblet against Rain’s.

Not wishing to be rude, she forced down a quick sour sip and then gave the rest to Bernard, who lapped at the wine

spiritedly.

Malcolm crossed his legs in front of him and drank slowly. His shadow slumped against the cushion at his side as though it were pouting. Rain wondered if it wanted a drink.

“You must banquet at my home, Your Highness, and consider staying with me for a time. I want to hear more about Bloodmire and your adventures during the war.”

Rain could see no reason why she shouldn't accept. Her husband was busy elsewhere, and at the moment he was committed to not making use of her. Well then, she'd make good use of herself. “It is elven custom to bring a great gift when invited to stay at someone's home. What would you like, Frey Malcolm?”

“There's only one thing I like.” He smiled around his goblet. “Women.”

“What sort of women?” she asked, amused. She was accustomed to the crass nature of warriors and unbothered by it.

“Tall women. Short women. Mortal, immortal ... All women, really.” His grin was wolfish.

“I know women,” Rain said, thinking of her girls. “I will come to your home and stay as you have asked, and I will bring with me two of the very best courtesans the Lunar Province has to offer.”

“I will have a gift for you as well, then.” Malcolm took a long thoughtful swallow. “What would my queen like?”

Rain's nose wrinkled. "While I'm visiting, I would like you not to make me drink any more wine."

Malcolm's rumbustious laughter rumbled through the cabin.

## Chapter 12



(Night)

Night tended to his dead and then slept the day away fitfully in the modest hall of a frey who had been reluctant to send his house mages to the borders. Night knew when a firm hand was needed, but in this case, he sensed this baron, whose tenants were frightened farmers, needed to be treated gently. He spent time with the frey, taking a long meal with his family, answering his many questions. Before the meal ended, the frey had agreed to send all of his mages and to await further orders. The victory felt like a hollow one.

He wondered often about his wife's feelings. She'd appeared hurt, even in her more playful moments. Did she feel abandoned by him now? He may have wounded her deeply, and the longer they were apart, the more such a blow might fester.

In the carriage early in the evening the next day, he was finally on his way back home to his mate. His shoulders had never felt so heavy before, and only two Lunar deaths rested upon them now. How much worse would it be soon? How many hundreds? Thousands? He closed his eyes, and with his mind, he reached out to his wife, to his only source of comfort.

*Rain?*

Her voice came to him immediately, riddled with concern.  
*Is my husband well?*

*Just weary. I miss my mate. My bed is cold without her, and the days have grown longer.* Head back on the cushion, eyes shut, he imagined she was seated beside him as he told her about his run-in with Yaga.

*What if he'd hurt you? Or taken you?* Rain was quiet for a long moment. *If I had been with you ...*

*I know. I thought the same,* he confessed. *Yaga is not expecting his worst enemy to still be alive, let alone facing him on a hill full of her trees. He'd have been caught off guard and potentially outmatched.*

Another long, quiet pause where nothing filled his ears but the sound of the carriage wheels rocking over frozen earth.  
*Your brother is returned home safe and sound now.*

Night's eyes opened. He sat up. *Did his attempts at negotiating with the rogue estate manager go poorly?*

Rain's laugh lacked any mirth. *How would you feel about it if I let Bernard snack on one of his fingers?*

*That bad, eh?* Night scrubbed a hand across his freshly shaven chin.

*He cast Malcolm off because of his mixed heritage the second he had a chance and got himself ransomed. I handled the matter without gold. Mr. Jacobson was made an example of. No one will dare try that again. Not in the province of the Bloody Queen of Night.*

He chuckled. *Is that what they're calling you now?*

*Only Malcolm is. Bernard hopes it will catch on.*

*Thank you.* Night exhaled slowly, his heavy shoulders rising and falling. Left and right, he was making wrong choices. He'd been making wrong choices since they placed that circlet on his head. First with the spy, then with leaving his wife at home, and again regarding the missing lord. In Fortuity, every wrong move lost the player a hand of cards. In war, it was a life. Because of his wife, he narrowly escaped losing many others and with them, the confidence of his people. *Where are you now?*

*If my dear husband wants to know my whereabouts, he should take me with him. He'd always know where I was, then.*

*You're upset.* Night sighed. A small flicker of her feelings came to him through the bond. It was like a knife wound to his chest. He sucked in a breath.

Rain didn't respond. He cursed, then sang a prayer of speed to the Moon Mother, urging the horses on. Night found the folded-up parchment in the pocket of his brocade jacket, the document that would annul his wedding. He was done with making wrong choices. He should have thrown it into the fire the second his brother gave it to him.

He ripped the document to shreds and chucked it out the carriage window.

The horses' speed did increase, but the terrain was rough, and the carriage threw a wheel. Night climbed out of the

lopsided cabin to assist, and as he conversed with the driver and helped calm the horses, the carriage lurched on its own. Blood magic filled his nose, a strange scent of rotten fruit, so sickly sweet he grimaced.

Hands in fists, Night summoned enough magic to shake the ground and make the very stars seem briefly to brighten in the sky.

“Your Highness?” the driver called. “Was that your doing? I was sure we’d thrown a wheel.”

Night hurried around the carriage. His guards in the vehicle behind climbed out of their cabin, unawares. The wheel which had lain on the side of the road when he’d exited the carriage was repaired and back in its place.

Night scratched at his hair, perplexed. “We did throw a wheel.” His nostrils flared, searching for the blood magic source. “Have you any fruit or flowers on you?”

The mortal driver shook his head. “No, Your Highness. Not on me. I haven’t any food at all.”

“Do you smell that?” Night wafted the air toward his nose, the scent barely there. A mortal would not be able to smell blood magic at all.

The driver sniffed. “I smell nothing, Your Highness. Just the winter air.”

Night lost the scent himself. It had dissipated in the wind. He searched the horizon, the road, the trees with a desperate glance. Someone was definitely toying with him. Yaga? He

cupped his fingers together and peered through them. There was no evidence of glamour anywhere in or around the carriage, including the wheel that had miraculously repaired itself.

Flustered, Night had no choice but to climb back in and resume his travels.

He had a wife waiting for him. An angry one. He wouldn't dare leave her waiting long.

\* \* \*

Night made it home. He charged inside his manor just after sunrise, ignoring the ritual of the shrines and the pleasantries he usually shared with staff. The underbutler was there to collect his coat and gloves. Night brushed by him, hurrying for the stairs.

His chambers were cold and empty, the bed meticulously made. His heart plummeted into his boots.

*Rain?*

He knew she'd heard him. She had to have, but she said nothing. Night checked the courtyard and the libraries. The staff knew she'd gone with the Marquess of Reedholm to address a situation in the north, but not when she'd be back. Night ordered a fresh set of horses be fetched and a new driver readied first thing before dusk.

He'd known she'd get on well with Malcolm, an old warrior like her. Night struggled to smother the flicker of jealousy that flared within him, not because he worried his

wife would ever consider being unfaithful, even if Malcolm had a dreadfully rakish reputation. The marquess would never betray Night like that, and neither would Rain. Both were too noble.

But what if she'd found a new partner to wage war with? That thought incensed him even more than the possibility of either of them finding the other attractive. He'd acted foolishly, showed himself as distrusting at a time where commitment was most needed, and pushed her into the shield arm of another soldier. If she wanted someone else to fight at her side, he had no one to blame but himself.

Well, he wouldn't stand for it, even if it was his fault.

Malcolm could go kidnap his own warrior witch.

With every fiber of his being, he wanted to ride on, to be with her, to reclaim his partner, but he was spent. Taxed to his limit and worn down by the sun burning brightly outside, he sunk into bed. Reaching for Rain's pillow, his hand brushed the old blouse she kept hidden beneath it. Penny's blouse. His throat went raw.

*I wish you peace as you slumber, wife. Dream of me while I dream of you,* he told her. With that, he drifted off to sleep, eager to see her face again, even if it was just a vision of her.

\* \* \*

He awoke before dusk and ate a small meal in the parlor while he waited on his horses.

Erikson joined him there, hovering reluctantly by the doors, his hands tucked sheepishly in his trouser pockets. “Have you heard the news? Frey Dagrún is returned.”

“No thanks to you,” Night groused, his mouth full of bread. The food was good, but the fact that his wife wasn’t there feeding it to him the way their bond enjoyed made him cranky.

Erikson’s gaze fell to the floor. “Indeed,” he said. His tongue played at the inside of his cheek for a moment. “If you’re going to your bride, I have something I’d like for you to take to her, if you’re willing. I had it fetched by a messenger. It arrived first thing at dusk.”

“You know where she is, then?”

“Mad Malcolm’s estate in Reedholm,” Erikson said. “He invited her to stay for a few days and to feast with him. Her reputation is growing. First the giant and now this last bloody display. The freys admire her. The mortal lords trust that she will defend their titles and keep order. Those who do not yet love her will fear her as word spreads.”

Night dunked his bread in his meaty soup, bit it off, and swallowed it down. “Malcolm’s estate was high on my list of places to check.” He turned in his chair. “What am I bringing to her?”

Erikson plucked a small silver circlet from his pocket. The craftsmanship was delicate. It caught in the firelight and burned the color of molten metal. “A queen should have her crown. I had it sent from Maldrom’s vault.”

Night worked his next bite down carefully. It was too hot. “A queen should. It’s a kind gesture. She’ll appreciate it because she’s a kind woman.” *Not because you deserve it*, his tone implied.

Erikson sighed. “I made an error. I’m sorry, and I told her so.”

“Your prejudice is unbecoming, and it reflects poorly on us both.” Night waved him over and accepted the circlet. It was cool to the touch. He examined the woven metal more closely. “But I admit I do at times forget that what family I’ve lost, you have also. Nevertheless, we cannot hold the actions of one against the whole.”

“I won’t doubt your instincts again, brother ...” Erikson bowed low. “Frey Magis.”

That was the great difficulty, wasn’t it? Doubt. He was finished with the emotion. The gnat-like thoughts could go straight to hell. “Doubt me all you like. But never doubt her.”

\* \* \*

The fresh horses made excellent time. The weather was clear and bright, and he arrived just after the midnight meal. Frey Malcolm’s estate was circled by massive steel gates and tall willow trees. He could hear the ruckus of the party inside as the horses pulled up to the carriage house.

Night didn’t wait on his guard, charging for the doors, which opened for him promptly after one sweeping look from the footman at the royal sash across his breast and the circlet

on his head. His coat and gloves were taken. A butler was fetched from the main hall.

The older mortal bowed low to the ground. “Your Majesty,” he said, prominent nose aimed at the floor, “we are honored. Shall I announce you?”

“I don’t want to disrupt the festivities, but please quietly let the host know I’m here.”

Night trailed the butler to the main dining room. A second set of heavy doors parted briefly. He glimpsed a full table, guests in finery, laughter, and the clatter of cutlery. The scent of wine filled his nose. At the head of the long table sat the Mad Marquess flanked by two lovely courtesans Night recognized: Susan and Margot. They were dressed like queens in long silk gloves and piles of billowy skirts.

He did not, however, spot his wife amongst them. His foot began to tap impatiently. He might well lose his mind if she’d departed for elsewhere already. Or what if they’d passed on the road and he hadn’t even known it? He had half a mind to never let her out of his sight again.

Malcolm slipped out into the hall then, and Night stopped his foot tapping with some effort. The host was dressed in a dinner jacket with a silk cravat and matching cuffs. His wild hair was gathered in a queue, tied by a leather thong.

“Frey Magis,” the marquess greeted in his lilting northern speech. “If I’d known you were coming, we’d have waited for you before starting the meal.”

Night straightened the crescent buttons on his waistcoat, attempting to appear levelheaded. “Is my wife here?”

“She is.” His smile stretched broadly as Night let out a whoosh of a breath. On the floor, accentuated by the gaslights, the marquess’s shadow crossed its arms impatiently.

“Those women with you,” Night warned, “they are important to your queen.”

Malcolm chuckled. “She already told me. If I am anything less than a gentleman to either of them, she’ll rip my prick off and cast it into the Eventide.”

They shared a laugh.

“You’d be wise to believe her words,” Night cautioned.

“Oh, I believe her. I’d believe any threat your bloody bride made.” Malcolm clapped him on the shoulder with the familiarity of an old friend. “You’re a lucky bastard.”

“I am. Now, tell me where my bloody bride is.”

Malcolm scratched at his chin. “She asked a lot of questions about my library. Seemed most intrigued about my books on cursed weapons. After the meal finished and the drinking and revelry began, she slipped out.”

“Excellent. Point me in the direction of your library.”

\* \* \*

Night felt his connection to his mate licking up his pulse the closer to the library he came. He *knew* even before he pushed

open the door how close she was. Slipping inside, he found her immediately in the wide, crowded room.

Other than the ceremonial robes they'd worn at their wedding, Night had not yet had the pleasure of seeing his wife in finery. She usually wore clothing that was loose, functional for fighting, and layered to cover her scars. Her dark gown sparkled. Her white hair was pinned up in an elegant knot and powdered to glitter in a similar fashion to her dress. He enjoyed the view of her neck. The bodice was simple and boned, leaving her arms and shoulders bare. Her scars were on display, something she normally didn't allow, and each of them made his warrior woman even more striking. He grinned at the elven dagger that hung at her waist, the one thing out of place in her ensemble.

Black skirts cascaded down her limber legs, and they shimmered like she was wearing stars. He admired her for a time, watching her roll the ladder along the bookcases. She danced up the rungs with the grace of a hunting leopard, her steps light and sure and so soft he couldn't hear her movements aside from the gentle rasp of her skirts against the wood.

She turned then with a telling smile, like she'd always known he was there, like she'd been waiting for him to arrive. Their bond rejoiced, sending a wave of contentment through him, a wave he knew she felt as well.

His pulse beat so hard he couldn't hear. The rush of his blood was too loud in his ears. His legs ate up the distance

between them in long, eager strides. He maneuvered beneath her, holding the sides of the ladder to keep the wheels from shifting while she stretched to reach a volume that interested her.

“You aren’t shouting at me,” he noted.

Turning slightly, Rain arched a brow at him. “Do I shout at you often?”

“Not really ... No, you’re much more likely to stab a person quietly, aren’t you?” He eyed her dagger with playful suspicion.

Smile broad, her attention returned to the shelves. “I’m not going to stab you. I love you too much ... even when you’re an ass.” She sighed, her bare shoulders drooping. “I know you don’t believe in love, Night, but I’d like it if you believed in me.”

“I do,” he said firmly. “I really do.”

“You had better.” Her smile warmed him from the inside out. He hadn’t realized how much the winter chill still clung to him until that moment.

“Where’s Bernard?” he asked.

Rain pulled a book out far enough to examine the cover, then slid it back in before moving on to the next. “Bernard wants a baby.”

“To eat?”

Rain laughed, her hand falling to her stomach to cup the scarring that always smarted when she was so robustly amused. “No, silly man. At home there is a woman on staff with a baby. He’s hoping he’ll find one here at the manor. He likes to look at them. They fascinate him. He says he’d like to have one.”

“Have a baby?” Night’s brows arched. “Can he do that?”

“I’m convinced he can do whatever he puts his mind to, so prepare yourself.” She chuckled. “You’ll be an uncle soon.”

“Is he going to steal a child, then?” Night wondered. “How do demons make children?”

Rain paused on the ladder, pondering. “I’d rather not think about it.” She peered down at him, ruffling her skirts coyly. “What do you think of my dress? I picked this one because it reminded me of your smile. They both have starlight in them.”

He took his time gazing at her, and as his eyes dragged down her body, her neck flushed. “You’re stunning,” he said, voice huskier than it had been a moment before.

“It’d look better on you,” she teased. “You make everything you put on pretty.”

Night’s mouth quirked. “Are you flirting with me, wife?”

She grinned over her shoulder. “I think I am. I’m getting proficient at it too, if I do say so myself.”

He laid a hand over her foot, feeling the supple leather of her black slipper, trailing a thumb along the delicate bone of

her ankle. “Very proficient.” Then his hand glided up her leg, over her silk stockings, under her skirts.

Her cheeks bloomed a pretty pink. “What are you doing?”

“Flirting back.” He cupped the gentle curves of her ass over the cotton of her drawers. Then he pointed at a random book without even looking at the title. “I think that’s the one you want, there.”

Rain moved down a rung to inspect it more closely. “A book on economics? No, I’m looking for a text about cursed and magical weapons.”

“Perfect,” he purred, but he was no longer talking about books. She’d moved closer and was now at a more ideal height, her hip in line with his face. Night lifted her hem and pulled it over his head, the skirts tented by his short, curved antlers.

“*Now* what are you doing?” Her voice wobbled with restrained mirth.

“Trying on your dress.” Hands on her hips, he turned her so that she was forced to sit back against the ladder. “What do you think? Do I make it prettier?”

Amusement vibrated through her. Her voice lowered. “Someone will see you.”

“No one will come in here,” he soothed. “There’s no wine to be had in here.” Night pressed a kiss to the juncture of her thighs, over her drawers.

“Someone might,” she said weakly. Despite her voiced concerns, her thighs spread for him. She balled up her skirts along her waist, uncovering his head, and she peeked down at him, cheeks rosebud pink.

He licked her, wetting the lacy cotton at the slit there, and when she gasped, his cock jerked behind the fall-front of his trousers. Rain braced herself, gripping the base of his antlers. He unfastened her garters and let her stockings fall. Then he slid her drawers down below her knees, seeking more of her. Night ran his nose through the white curls at the peak of her thighs. He lapped at her again, spreading her folds with the flat of his tongue.

“*Stars*,” she gasped. “It feels so good when you’re wicked ...”

“You taste like a goddess,” he said against her flesh. He savored her with enthusiasm, sucking at that quivering bud of nerves until her legs tremored. “I should have recognized you immediately for what you are.”

“Night,” she warned, gripping him tighter, “I’m going to fall.”

“You’re not.” His fingers dug into either side of her waist. “I’ve got you. I’ve always got you.”

“Oh gods ...” Her fingers fluttered over the sensitive base of his antlers at his crown, and his cock hardened to granite.

“You taste too wild and dangerous to be just fae, just a witch.” He lapped at her, one slow deliberate lick after

another. “I really should have known. My little goddess.”

He teased her with his tongue until she cried out her release, crumpling against the ladder. Easing her into his arms, he brought her down, holding her to his chest. She panted there, her cheek pillowed against his lapel.

“I owe you an apology,” he murmured.

Rain’s lashes fluttered. Her amber eyes were glossy and bright in the gaslights. “I think you just gave me one, but if you’d like to give me another, I won’t stop you.”

Night nuzzled into her hair. She smelled like vanilla and fairy stories and hope. “Do you want another release or another apology?”

“Oh, I won’t turn down either.”

Night glanced around the crowded room, his hands cupping her hips. He wanted inside her, but he couldn’t just bend her over, couldn’t just press her against the nearest wall and bury himself deep like he longed to. Not yet, anyway. There’d be plenty of rutting like animals later when she was ready, he was sure. That wouldn’t be how he handled his mate now, not while she was still growing accustomed to physical intimacy.

Oh, but he’d savor the thought of bending her over for another time ...

He spotted a leather wingback chair in a dusty corner, and his fingers dug eagerly into her sides. “Are you still feeling shy, sweetheart?”

“Not at the moment,” she said with confidence, despite her cheeks turning scarlet. “Why?”

“Well, if you’re feeling shy, you can sneak me off to your room, but if you’re *not* feeling shy ...”

She followed his gaze to the chair. Then her eyes returned to his, wider than before, and she swallowed. “What if I’m too loud? Someone will hear me.”

“Oh, I fully intend to make you loud. If you’re not too loud, then I’m not doing it right.”

Giggling, she hid her face, briefly touching her brow to his chest. “I think I’d like to try the chair,” she whispered into the fabric of his waistcoat like she was telling it a naughty secret.

He’d been hoping she’d say that. He tugged her toward the chair, as overeager as a fledgling fae. Their bond beat against his ribcage in raucous encouragement.

Night plopped down onto the cushion and watched with rapt attention as she shucked her drawers and one of her petticoats. The chair was well-padded, and as he helped her straddle his lap, her knees sunk in deep. More giggles spilled from her lips at the squeaks and squawks the furniture made as the wood settled. He loved the sound of her joy, adored the high color rising from her chin to her hairline.

He opened the fall front of his trousers with some difficulty, and then he allowed her skirts to drape over them, spilling over the arms of the chair. She kept looking behind her, checking the door. He caught her chin, brought her eyes

back to his, her lip trapped between her teeth. He rubbed a thumb across it in gentle admonishment, freeing the poor tortured thing, eager to give it some sweet attention of his own.

“Should I ... ?” she breathed, a line forming between her brows. “Do I just ...”

“Ride me,” he said hoarsely. Her weight shifted, bringing her wet heat so close to his length that he grew even more achingly hard. He slipped a hand down between them, fisting his shaft, positioning it where it longed to be.

Brow furrowed in adorable concentration, she lowered herself onto him. “Like that?”

“Stars, yes,” he moaned, holding her waist, helping her move up and down. “Just like that. That’s perfect, darling.”

He showed her how to roll her hips, how to rub her sensitive cleft along his shaft until she was panting and soaking him in her sweetness. He helped her until she found a pace and rhythm she liked. She took over soon after, bouncing with increasing confidence. Rain pulled down the neckline of her dress, freeing her breasts before returning her hands to his shoulders, clinging to him for balance.

“Fuck,” he said on a long exhale, eyes drinking in all that golden skin, bathing in the scent of vanilla and her tangy pleasure. She was getting so good at this kind of play, and he loved teaching her, though really she was teaching him too. While he guided her, he discovered what she needed, what she liked.

The learning was half the fun.

He lost himself in her heat, buried in sensations, in taste and smell and the feel of her skin against his, the grind of her hips, the way her tight body milked him. He captured a nipple in his mouth and suckled there for a while, basking in how it made her just as loud as he wanted her, her moans filling his ears. Her nails dug into his shoulders.

Each of her whimpers went straight to his tightening balls. When she cried out, he hoped the whole house heard her pleasure. He wanted it to last, to drag it out longer, but they'd been apart and she was so sweet, so wet for him, so eager. Her beautiful breasts were slightly swollen, the nipples taut and dark, pink from his teasing and glossy from his tongue. They bounced with her movements, and her tight pussy squeezed him just right.

When he spent inside her, the smugly satisfied smile that curled her lips turned his insides molten.

She was lovely.

She was his partner.

And he wasn't going to fuck it up this time.

## Chapter 13



### (Rain)

The next day, Rain and Night joined Malcolm at dusk for their breakfast meal. The dining hall was a wide room with arched ceilings, decorated in oil paintings of constellations and dark oases. Her king headed the table, but he'd pulled Rain's chair especially close so they could share a plate. It was a ritual they didn't usually practice in company, but their separation had made them both impatient to get back to the bonding habits they cherished.

Malcolm never once commented on it, even as Rain fed her husband fresh fruit out of her palm. That surprised her. She hadn't thought the old warrior was capable of decorum. After he reassured her that her friends Susan and Margot were in excellent condition and had decided to sleep in late, the marquess regaled Rain with stories of her mate when he was a much younger man.

"I knew him before he was the Night," Malcolm explained.

Rain had known that the name Night was a title. She was familiar with the Lunar tradition of stripping their leadership of their given name when they became Frey Magis, but now her curiosity was stoked, an ember that burned in the back of her mind.

“His uncle sent him to me to learn the sword when he was still a fledgling,” Malcolm said, chuckling at the memory. He drank ale with his breakfast, the smell of hops strong around him. He spoke well, but his eyes were glassy and his movements slower than the previous day. He lacked his usual natural grace—the impact of his overindulgences from the night before. “Your mate was my worst student,” he told her, “and yet *somehow* he won every blasted match I set up for him.”

Night chortled behind his coffee cup.

“You cheated,” Rain accused her husband, a smile in her voice.

“He’d never admit it, but he absolutely did cheat, the trickster rat.” Malcolm spoke with fondness, and Night seemed not to mind, but Rain’s hackles rose.

‘Rat’ was a derogatory term amongst the Seelie, usually reserved for the worst sort of people, those evil enough to betray their own kin. Malcolm couldn’t speak of the king in such a way, whatever their familiarity. Her teeth ground together, and she grabbed for the elven dagger at her belt.

Night reached under the table, staying her hand with a gentle touch along her knuckles. *Don’t stab him, sweetheart. Not just yet, anyway.* He smirked at her. *He’s goading you.*

Her lips pursed. *I’ve warned him once already about the way he talks to you.*

*I do so love it when you're violent for me, but in this case, it's unnecessary. Besides, if you stab him, he'll just enjoy it.*

She glanced at Malcolm, then met Night's eyes. Both men appeared equally amused.

"*Frey Magis.*" She stressed the words, glowering at the marquess. "I'll still carve it in your sword arm."

"One thousand apologies, Your Highness," Malcolm drawled, "but I'm a little too drunk to behave like a gentleman just now."

Night set aside his coffee. "Ha. The Mad Marquess doesn't behave well even when he's stone-cold sober."

"True." Malcolm saluted the king with his mug and took another hearty swallow.

"Why are you called the Mad Marquess of Reedholm?" Rain asked.

A shadow crossed over Malcolm's eyes. It was there one moment, then gone so fast Rain thought she might have imagined it.

"Simple, my queen," Malcolm said cheerfully, plopping down a now empty cup and snapping his fingers for a footman to refill it. He leaned across the table like he was preparing to tell a great secret. Rain scooted in to hear him better. "They call me that," he said, lowering his voice, "because I'm completely *mad.*"

Rain and Malcolm shared a smile.

*His father was known as 'Mad Maker',* Night shared, his touch on her hand moving to stroke her wrist. Under his fingers, her pulse jumped. *His shadows could rob a person of their sanity. His father is gone. It's a sensitive subject,* he cautioned.

She understood entirely what it was like to lose a father, and so she let the matter drop without further comment.

\* \* \*

Rain spent the next hour readying to depart for home. She had run into a small obstacle, however. She lay on her stomach on the rug of the guest chambers, dressed in her leather training gear and her traveling cloak, lifting the bed skirt to peer underneath.

Bernard had pressed himself to the back wall, his black form blending in well with the shadows.

“You can't stay under there forever,” she grumbled. “We're leaving.”

He laid his face down over his paws, ears flat against his head. *I'm immortal. I can literally stay anywhere I choose forever.*

The door opened, and Rain shifted her weight to look up at her husband.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, moving farther into the room.

She blew ashen hair out of her face with an exasperated exhale. “Bernard wanted to know where babies came from. I finally told him. Now he won’t get out from under the bed. He says the world is too horrid a place.”

Raucous laughter lit up Night’s handsome face. He hunkered down beside his wife, his back to the mattress.

*Gods, Bernard groaned, are the two of you going to try to make a baby right now?*

“No.” Rain swatted at Night’s knee to quiet him. “Bernard, you have to come out of there. You’re being silly.”

“Hm.” Night scratched at his chin, the callouses on his fingers scraping against his stubble. “If he’s willing to come out, I bet I could persuade the marquess to share a generous portion of peppered cheese for the ride home.”

“Yes,” Rain said encouragingly. “And a bottle of chilled wine from a vintage you like.”

*I’m not saying that will work ... Bernard’s head lifted. But I’m also not saying it won’t work.*

“When we finally get home,” Rain said, her tone measured, “I hoped to go for a nice long walk through the trees. It’d be such a shame to have an adventure without you.”

Bernard’s eyes, inky black and glossy, rounded. *You’d go without me?*

“If I had to. I’m certainly not staying under this bed for the entirety of *my* immortality.”

Night pressed his lips together, poorly repressing his amusement. A chortle slipped out.

Bernard's eyes slitted. *Tell the emotionally stunted one, I heard that. And if he isn't careful, I'm going to bite him hard right on his left buttock.*

Rain nudged her husband's knee. "You're hurting his feelings," she whispered.

*I heard that too,* he groused.

It took several more promises of food and wine and long walks, just the two of them, before he relented to exiting his hiding place. He wouldn't be sharing a carriage with them, he declared. Not alone and not while they kept staring at each other with the moon in their eyes. It was for the best, since Night refused to vow to keep his hands to himself on the way home.

Outside the manor in the fading sunlight, amongst the horses and carriages, Rain instructed Arne to escort Margot and Susan back home. Bernard transformed and took to the air, black wings pushing him higher into a dusky purple sky. Rain's friends were chipper, still a little intoxicated from the evening before, and substantially wealthier as they climbed into the cabin with a little extra help from Malcolm.

"Be nice to Arne, ladies," she told her friends with a grin. "But not *too* nice."

The mage's cheeks went bright red. He averted his eyes, managing somehow to make his bulky size smaller against the

cushions.

Margot slung an arm through his, sliding in next to him. “We’re always nice. Aren’t we, Lord Malcolm?”

The marquess blew them both a kiss. “The nicest.”

Susan waved farewell and pulled the door shut. As the carriage moved through the gates and down the path, out of sight, chaos ensued.

The surrounding trees began to stir and shake. A horn sounded, sharp and distinct, demanding attention. Six white tigers mounted by six Seelie warriors galloped through the gates, still parted for the exiting guests.

The warriors wore crowns of willow branches on their heads, a symbol of coming in peace. Additional branches covered their fronts and backs. Dagger sheaths hung empty at their hips. They kept their eyes down as they spread out along the grounds.

Rain cursed as a tiger she recognized, bigger than the others and covered in leather armor, separated from the group. A cloaked and hooded woman rode on its back, a willow branch clutched in her hand.

Isla.

Night stood stock-still beside Rain, his back as straight as a gate post, his mouth parted, eyes wide. Then his hands made fists.

“Well fuck,” Rain panted.

“You’re trespassing!” Night said, his tone crisp and calm, but his fists began to quake at his sides.

Isla halted her tiger and dismounted in one smooth movement. She pulled back her hood, revealing a crown of woven willow branches. Then she opened her cloak, her expression cold, as she displayed her lack of weapons.

“King of Night,” she greeted with a short bow. Kings and queens did not bow to one another, and although her expression remained tense, it was clear she was taking pains to be respectful. “My visit will be quick.”

Night spun on his host so fast Malcolm slid back a step. “How did she know I was here?”

Malcolm spluttered, taking a moment to find his words. “Lord King, *I* didn’t know you were going to be here. Only say the word, and I’ll have them off!”

“Not even I knew when you’d arrive,” Rain said quietly, brow pinched. So how had Isla known?

Night turned back toward his enemy, his shoulders taut. Anger rolled off him in waves, puffing his chest.

Rain stepped in front of him. “Sister,” she said, and she felt Night stiffen at her back. “You have to leave. You have to leave *right now*.”

Isla sniffed. “I’d like you both to know I’ve just returned one entire year’s worth of Lunar Court tariffs to honor the new king and his queen. We can’t pay back all that is owed immediately, but—”

“Go,” Rain hissed.

A flash of emotion cut through Isla’s cold ocean stare, there and then gone. She glowered at Night. “If you continue to keep her from me, your mate will grow to hate you.”

“Isla ...” Rain growled.

In one graceful movement, Isla pulled back her cloak and slid onto her tiger. She clicked her tongue and pulled on the reins, turning the beast. Peering over her shoulder, she stared into Rain’s eyes, pleading with her.

Rain’s gaze fell to the frosted grass. She didn’t look up again until they were gone, the quiet padding of the great tigers’ paws ghosting across the lawn.

Night’s face was white with rage.

Rain reached for him with her mind. *Are you all right?*

He winced at their connection, but his fists stopped quivering. *We’re leaving now, and we’re not stopping until we’re home.*

She nodded her agreement.

The nearness of the tigers had made the horses uneasy. The driver took his time steadying them as Night and Rain boarded, her husband coming down hard on the bench seat across from her. His knee bobbed, his body full of tension, his nails biting into his palms at his sides.

Rain unfolded one of the quilts to lay over him and froze.

There, nestled in the blankets, was a piece of fruit, a Seelie mango about the size of a large egg, green at the center and colored in hues of pink and red at the ends. Rain let out a shaky breath and lifted the fruit. The skin was soft and full of memories. How had her sister managed to sneak it into the carriage?

“Rain?” Night frowned at her. “What is that?”

Seelie mangoes were smaller but sweeter. They grew in the center of the Seelie provinces where the living trees were denser, the climate warmer and more humid. Rain tested the ripeness, squeezing it, remembering. Remembering Isla’s laughter before she had to become the hard warrior queen. Remembering her playfulness before she had to carry the weight of an entire court on her slender shoulders.

Rain would use her affinity with nature to bring her the best mangoes. She brought her one every year, even during war time. They would eat it together, then visit the old elven lands. Lands still blackened and covered in ash from dragon fire. They would plant the mango seed, and Rain would make it grow from seed to sapling, her powers stronger with her sister so close. Elves were always more powerful together than alone.

Rain cradled the fruit in her arms. Unable to answer her husband’s barrage of questions with a lump growing in her throat, she burst into tears. She tried to stifle them, bending forward to hide them in her arm, but they trailed down her cheeks and off her nose.

“Rain.” Night’s voice softened. He tossed the blanket over her shoulders.

“I’m so sorry,” she hiccupped.

He wrapped her up and sat her on his lap, confined to him in the quilt. The bond hummed in her chest, responding to their contact. The carriage pulled forward, picking up speed, leaving the shadowed willow trees of Reedholm behind them.

Rain buried her face in his neck, squeezing the little mango between them. “I’m so sorry she hurt you.”

Night shushed her, running fingers soothingly through her hair and down her back.

*Was Isla right?* he asked, his voice somber and quiet in her mind, and Rain sensed he didn’t have it in him to use his words.

She lifted her head and wiped her eyes. “No,” she said firmly. “I could never hate you. I just get homesick sometimes.”

*You miss her.*

*Of course I do.*

The cabin was quiet for most of the ride home. Rain couldn’t bear to leave things this way between them. Not after they’d made so much progress the evening before.

“It occurs to me,” she said, feeling a thrill as her husband rested his chin in her hair, “that I don’t know your name.”

He tensed under her. “Of course you do.”

Rain sat up. “But I don’t. Night is a title.”

“It’s customary for the Lord of the Lunar Court to be stripped of his names. And thank the gods for that. My parents gave me two lousy names. The first is an utter mouthful. The second is a pretentious mortal name.”

She played with his crescent buttons, plucking at them, drawing his eyes. “Well, now I’m even more curious.”

Night encouraged her to rest against him, placing his chin back in her hair. “And I’m all right with you being curious for the remainder of our immortal lives.” There was a smile in his voice.

“Phillius,” she guessed.

“No,” he snorted.

“Triton.”

“Absolutely not, but I’d prefer that one to the one my parents gave me.” Night fished something out of his pocket. “I nearly forgot to give you this.”

The circlet in his hand was silver and finely made. A fae crown. “Oh?”

Night laid it over her hair. “You don’t have to wear it all the time, but Erikson wanted you to have it, along with his apologies.”

“But he already apologized. This wasn’t needed.” She was touched by the gesture all the same. Her fingers found the

center of the circlet. The metal was cool across her brow.  
“Does Erikson know your real names?”

He eyed her. “Don’t bother. He’s sworn to eternal secrecy.”

“Garmond,” Rain tried.

Night’s rumble of laughter was answer enough. Between her guesses, the quiet that occasionally filled the cabin for the rest of the ride home felt amicable.

\* \* \*

A message awaited Rain when they arrived at the manor. A footman delivered it to her in the wide foyer with the white stone walls and domed ceiling. The note smelled like brimstone. She unfolded it and read:

*You’re invited – Sora*

Rain was road-weary and emotionally drained, but she was eager to see Sora, the desire to be near her kin nearly overwhelming. She imagined Night would enjoy some time with his own thoughts as well after the day they’d had. A light snowfall had started on the way home. Rain had found it hypnotic, watching it fall lightly in the starlight.

With a match, she lit the incense at the altar of the Divine Night. Then she kissed her husband and promised not to be gone long.

By air, Bernard had arrived at the estate before them. He joined her in his cat form. They promptly left together for the meadow, not far from the arm of the Eventide. The moon was

full, a butter yellow smudge in a cloudy sky. The snow fell in fatter and fatter flakes, powdering the ground. By the time they made it to the lush pasture dotted with sturdy fae flowers, Rain's toes were numb, and Bernard was complaining about the wet between his paws.

Sora's strange hut shuddered as Rain neared, shaking slush and a kaleidoscope of blue bird-sized butterflies off its thatch roof. The door opened for her immediately, as if it had been waiting for her to arrive. Sora appeared on the threshold, indigo eyes frantic, face lined. Her dragae skin steamed in the cold. She looked like she hadn't slept in some time. Her velvet dress was wrinkled.

"My mate is gone," she said, then promptly disappeared inside.

Rain trailed after her. "Gone?" She paused by the door, shaking the snow from her hood and kicking it off her boots. Eyeing the floorboards suspiciously, she hesitated, nervous she shouldn't be kicking a thing that could decide to bite her. Her next steps farther inside were tentative. She kept on her tiptoes. The door slammed itself shut behind her, making her jump.

Bernard scampered toward the hearth, warming himself by the fire. Masha greeted him from the armchair, flapping her scaled black wings.

"My father has done this before," Sora grumbled from beside the table. She glared at the door on the left of her hearth. "Sometimes he likes to remind me of what *could*

happen if I act against him again, but he's never kept my mate from me this long. My father wants something, but instead of saying so, he'll hold onto my mate until I come looking for him, and absolutely nothing good will come from that."

Rain pointed at the door. "Is that ..."

Sora nodded. "The entry point to my father's hoard. Family hoards are connected to one another. If you are strong enough, you can open the door and enter."

Rain lowered her voice. "Can he hear us through it?"

"No. Just as we cannot hear him."

Rain sighed, relieved. "Can he get inside your hoard? Could he force himself in here, right now?"

"Not while I'm in it," Sora said, and Rain suspected that was why she so rarely left it, a safety precaution.

Sora pulled a dark shawl off the back of a wax-wood chair and draped it over her shoulders. On the table before her sat an unruly pile of long matches scattered around an oil lantern. "I will take you to the hoard of Baba Yaga. You will fetch the weapon that she used to kill her husband."

"Now?" Rain's eyes rounded.

"Your dagger is mine," Sora reminded her.

Rain's hand went to the hilt in question on her hip. "Of course it is, but we don't know what I'm looking for. I tried searching the histories for special weapons, but I haven't found anything about one useful for killing ancient dragons."

Sora struck a match and lit the lantern. The scent of burning lard wafted through the room. “I’ve thought about that.” She shook the match out to extinguish it and dropped it. The floorboard parted under her feet, devouring the used match with an audible crackle and crunch before sliding back into place. “My grandmother wouldn’t want just anyone getting their hands on a weapon that could be turned on her. Whatever it is, it’ll likely be guarded by traps and her familiars.”

Rain’s eyebrows rose. “Baba had more than one familiar?”

“Ancient dragons are god-like. Her soul is vast. She could have any number of familiars, I reckon.” Sora lifted the lantern. The metal handle squeaked. “Pay attention to what they appear to be guarding. If it’s a weapon, you’ll know it’s of value to us.”

Sora hefted the lantern to the door on the right of the hearth. She twisted the doorknob and jerked it open. Rain glimpsed a windowless stone room lit by gas lamps. At its center was an elaborate pile of shoes, hat boxes, folded dresses, and even more shoes stacked as tall as the ceiling. Sora slammed the door shut a moment later.

“Wrong room,” she muttered.

Rain’s mouth curved up in a half smile. “Was that ... ?”

Sora glared over her shoulder. “I like shoes—wipe the judgment from your face. I’m a dragon. There are far worse things to collect than shoes.”

“Certainly,” Rain said, sucking in her cheeks to make her mouth behave. “Far worse things ... Do you sleep on them? On your piles of treasure?”

Sora rolled her eyes. “Of course not.”

Rain rounded the table and came to her side. “It’s just that I didn’t see a bed in there,” she teased. “Although I couldn’t see much beyond all those shoes.”

“It’s in there,” Sora barked. She shook the knob, turning it twice until it clicked like the inner workings of a clock. This time when she opened the door, the stone room was gone. A corridor stretched before them as far as the eye could see. Countless doors flanked either side. The ceilings were arched, and the floors were made of a glossy hardwood painted in dark barbaric swirls. A lantern similar to the one Sora carried hung above each lintel. Most of them were out, their wicks black and cold, but enough burned brightly that Rain could see ahead.

She considered sending Night a message with her thoughts, letting him know what she’d learned and what they were up to, but she decided he’d had enough after Isla’s unexpected visit, a visit she felt hopelessly guilty for, and she’d only made it worse sobbing all over him in the carriage. She didn’t want to stress him further. She could handle this and would tell him all about it later. He deserved to rest.

“What is this place?” she asked. Their footsteps echoed in the quiet. Bernard and Masha trailed them.

“The hoards of my bloodline. The ones with lit fires are still living.”

Rain felt a kinship with her then, beyond what they had by blood. So few of the lanterns still burned. Rain knew what it was like to have little family left.

Sora led them for a time, her steps hurried. The door she finally stopped in front of was larger than the others, the frame decorated in carvings of lunar butterflies. The lantern light was dim but not gone.

“Baba Yaga?” Rain guessed. “Why butterflies?”

“Grandmother Mountain and I have a lot in common with butterflies. Perhaps someday I’ll show you ... You’ll need this.” Sora set down her lantern and fished inside the pocket of her dress. Whatever she pulled out, it was small enough to fit in her fist. She extended it. “Go on,” she urged. “It’s not going to bite you.”

Rain held out her hand. Sora dropped what looked like a large diamond into her palm. Turning it over, she found it was a bright green scale on the other side. The strange bauble glowed brightly and was hot to the touch, nearly too hot to hold comfortably.

“I captured a piece of my soul,” Sora explained. Masha squawked at that, the sound like a bird in distress. Sora shushed her. “In order to remove things from the hoard of a dragon that remains alive, you must leave something of greater value as a trade.” She shrugged her shoulders. “My mother is a goddess. My father is an ancient dragon. A piece of my soul

should be more than worthy enough for whatever you must take.”

Rain held the precious thing gingerly. She was not unfamiliar with souls. She’d given a piece of hers to Bernard, after all. Still, this sort of magic made her uneasy.

Sora snorted at her. “It’s not fragile. Only I can break it.”

Rain closed her fingers over it, and it made her flesh glow, like she’d trapped an ember there. “Are you sure about this?”

“Wouldn’t have given it to you if I wasn’t. My father is up to something, and we need to be ready for him.” Sora turned to Baba’s door and grasped the ornate knob in both hands. The dull glow from the lantern over the lintel ignited her flaxen hair and sharp bone-like horns. “I’ll get you inside, but then you’re on your own. I’ll wait by the door for you to return. Be careful. Baba does not share my sunny disposition.”

Sunny was not at all the way Rain would have described the witch, but she made no comment. Perhaps amongst dragons, she was sunny. “We’d have better luck finding this weapon if you looked with me.”

“Dragon hoards are full of traps and dangers.” Sora shook her head slowly. “I won’t risk my mate. If anything happens to me, he’s doomed to a slow death.”

Rain frowned. “But you’ll risk me and mine?”

“Yes,” Sora said without remorse. Bernard yowled grumpily at that. Sora tightened her grip on the knob. Her

hands shook, and she gritted her sharp teeth. Then with a grunt, the knob turned, and the door swung open.

Rain stepped over the threshold with Bernard shadowing her into the outside ... Only it wasn't the outside. Her boots rasped against grass that wasn't grass. The space before her reminded her a little of the meadow Sora's hut favored, but the sky was dingy and gray, and at its center, an orb burned that couldn't seem to decide if it was a sun or a moon. It glowed purple, casting a dusky hue over the meadow. The grass was unnaturally thick and soft, like carpet.

"Return in two hours," Sora said. "It isn't good to linger long in a hoard that does not belong to you." With that ominous warning, she slammed the door shut.

*That woman terrifies me down to my core,* Bernard confessed.

The frame of the door remained in place, surrounded by shrubs that weren't shrubs. The branches stirred in a warm humid breeze that felt and sounded like a hoarse breath.

"Well," Rain said, readying her dagger, "you wanted to go for a nice long walk, just you and me. Let's have that walk."

Rain stepped through knee-deep grass, Bernard bounding beside her. The pasture ended in a dense forest. Rain felt the pull of a familiar heat and paused to examine the strange trees more closely.

"Bernard, I think I feel—"

*Run!* Bernard burst into a shadow form, hovering ghost-like at her shoulder. Rain sprinted through the trees, her heart stuttering out of control. A grisly scream rent the air, followed by another. Rain dared a glance behind her.

Shrouded phantoms rose out of the tall grass and dropped from the trees, floating like vapors. They hurtled toward them, ethereal limbs extended. Their slits for mouths hung open, shrieking.

*Keep going. They can't hurt a demon like me, but they'll whisper madness in your ears!* Bernard expanded beside her. *Come and get me, you tosspots!* He threw himself like a misty net at the first few phantoms, and they slowed to investigate him. But others were undeterred. They sped after Rain, flying between the trees, their vaporous shrouds flapping around their ethereal bodies, gaining on her.

Rain lowered her head and sprinted on toward that familiar heat, arms and legs pumping, thighs burning.

*Yes*, her instincts were right. There they were: towering living trees. The protectors of the elves from all soulless, wicked things. She spotted their gilded bark, their lush, colorful leaves. Rain threw herself at the nearest living tree. Gasping for breath, she hugged its trunk and felt its welcoming warmth. At her back, the phantoms abruptly careened away, frightened off by the brilliant essence of the sacred trees. The forest stirred at her nearness, their collected heat so comforting, so familiar.

She hadn't been in the midst of so many immortal trees since she was a child. The sensation was enough to make her knees weak. The great Baba Yaga must have seen their worth and collected them into her hoard. Here, the strange grass was greener and thicker, the air fresher.

*Bernard?*

*I'm here.* Bernard floated in beside her. The trees groaned at his demonic presence, but they did not reject him. Though a demon, he was not soulless, for he carried within him a small piece of elven soul, a small piece of Rain.

*There're more phantoms than I could count,* he warned, transforming beside her boot into his cat form. He shook out his hair until it stood out in a poof. *They aren't familiars, but they definitely serve Baba.*

“Stars, they won't make getting out of here easy.” Rain studied her surroundings, remembering Sora's suggestion that she find what the familiars and traps were guarding. It couldn't be the trees themselves. If they had the power to kill an ancient dragon, the elves would already know it, and anyway, she already had one of those weapons.

Rain explored with Bernard at her side and her dagger at the ready in her fist. Bernard nosed at a plaque he found low on the trunk of the nearest tree.

*Immortal Tree.* He spotted another that said the same. Stepping over exposed roots, Rain found another, smaller tree with thin, spindly branches.

Not a living tree.

Hanging off the ends of the limbs were diamonds, clinging like tiny little teardrops. The tree was labeled at its base: *Hell Tree*.

*Bernard?*

*Demons keep diamond trees on the outskirts of hell. Foolish mortals visit them, desperate for wealth. While they attempt to get rich, the demons feed on them. Very, very few make it out alive.*

“Then it’s bait? Not a weapon?”

*Not a weapon.*

Rain heard a stirring in the bramble on her left. She readied for a fight, sinking low on the balls of her feet. The scent of rotten fruit wafted to her. Blood magic. Bernard’s hair stood on end.

Something small and dark flew from the bramble, launching itself at Bernard. Bernard hissed and pawed at it and missed. The little thing knocked him on his side. Rain dropped to her knees to help him, and then the sound of his laughter echoed in her head and steadied her dagger arm.

*It’s a fairy child, Bernard said excitedly. And she’s precious! Just look at her!*

Rain *was* looking at the strange little creature, and ‘precious’ was not at all the word she would have chosen to describe the ghoulish girl. The fairy was small enough to fit into Rain’s palm, with black, veined wings like a bat. Her

wings thrummed at high speed, keeping her afloat just above Bernard's head. Her eyes took up a large portion of her angular face. Black and bulging like a bug, they blinked up at Rain.

The fairy smiled, revealing needle-like teeth. She was dressed in flower petals. Her thin hair was blue-black, and her feet were curved into dark talons.

“Cappa cap rant atta,” the fairy squeaked.

“What language is that, Bernard?” Rain asked quietly.

*One of her very own making. She's completely feral,* he said admiringly. *I want to keep her.*

“Oh dear,” Rain groaned.

*She's a familiar. I can hear the thoughts she sends me.*

Rain dropped her dagger into its sheath and leaned forward onto her hands, bringing her face closer to the two of them. “Ask her if she's guarding something. Ask her about weapons.”

Bernard asked her their questions. The fairy clicked and clacked her made-up words at them. Then she climbed onto his back, took hold of the scruff at his neck, and kicked her heels like she was goading a horse. “Hiss, hiss,” she called, patting his head. “Otta wat. Hiss, hiss.”

*This way,* Bernard said proudly.

They circled back the way they'd come. The fairy child led them to a narrow path lined with loose stones. It opened into a

clearing with a fountain that was dry and covered in lichen. The fountain was labeled *Fountain of Souls*.

“Bernard?” Rain asked.

*No idea, he said, but let’s not touch it.*

A large cauldron was sunk into the ground, not far from the fountain. It was labeled *Strange Pot, not for cooking*. Beyond the fountain, a narrow hut sat crooked in the grass. The windows were shuttered. The sign on the door read *Death to All Who Enter Here*.

*Definitely do not touch whatever that is,* Bernard said.

Beside the hut, hanging from the low branch of a living tree, was a little bird house. It was labeled as well.

*Fairy Child, birthed on a battlefield.*

“Hm,” Rain said wearily. “Is this our new friend’s home?”

Bernard turned big glossy eyes on her. *Please can I keep her?*

“Oh dear ...” Rain groaned. “I don’t know, Bernard.”

*She was born on a battlefield. She could be the perfect blessing for a warrior like you.*

Rain eyed the fairy. The little being was entertaining herself by tugging on Bernard’s ears. “Or she could be an unruly child of death and destruction.”

A fairy child birthed in a field at harvest *could* be a blessing to a farmer. But they could also be that farmer’s ruin, a plague or famine. Fairies were rare. Fairy children rarer.

Both were powerful, but as fairy children couldn't control how their abilities manifested, they were just as often dangerous.

*Yes, she could be death and destruction,* Bernard said admiringly. The fairy chattered happily to him on his back. *But she's all alone here and bored. Her mistress left her, and she's never coming back. We can't leave her to fend for herself. She's just a little itty-bitty child.*

“She’s probably older than you are!”

*It's not Clapa's fault fairies take so long to mature.*

*Gods,* she had a name now. Rain groaned so loudly she startled a group of birds out of the nearest tree. “I suppose we can't just leave ... Clapa here ... Not if she's all alone.” She knew exactly what it was like to feel alone. That was not a fate she'd wish on anyone.

Clapa got distracted by Bernard's ears again and forgot momentarily that she was supposed to be taking them to weapons. Bernard too got distracted, racing off at the fairy's insistence because she wanted to go faster. Rain eventually stumbled upon the weapons on her own. The first stuck out of the ground, covered in mud, the shaft aged and worn, made of dark mountain metals. It too had a plaque of its own on the ground beside it:

*Obsidian Spear.*

It wasn't alone. Leaning against a living tree with red leaves was a recurve bow made of dark wood, a quiver of obsidian-tipped arrows, and a dagger. Rain plucked the spear

out of the ground, testing its weight. She was immediately disappointed. The weapon didn't feel like anything special. She didn't sense any magic in it at all, or in any of the other items. And which one should she take?

Bernard rolled in the grass with the little fairy, who tickled his belly with her black claws, jabbering at him merrily.

“Ask Clapa which one,” Rain insisted, using the spear point to gesture at the other weapons.

Bernard sighed, annoyed at the interruption of their playtime. Rain could hear his words to the fairy child, but not how she responded. Then his head lifted toward her. *She insists they're all weapons.*

“Well, I know that, but which one will help me kill Yaga?”

*She says all of them.*

“All of them? Well, all right, then.” Rain crossed to the nearest living tree. Its leaves were dense and a vibrant blue color. She removed the precious piece of soul from the inner pocket of her cloak, and she laid a hand on the gilded and green bark. “This belongs to my sister,” she told the tree. “Would you please take care of it for me?”

The branches shook and the roots rumbled beneath her. She laid the shimmering scale down at the base of the trunk, and the roots shifted to encompass it.

Rain touched her brow to the bark. “Thank you, friend.”

Debt paid, Rain gathered the weapons. The bow, she slung over her shoulder alongside the new quiver. They were of

decent make, but she'd prefer an elven one for distance. The recurve would require her to fire from a position much closer to the great dragon than she wanted to be. The dagger, a simple serrated piece, she tucked in her belt. The spear, she walked with. It would slow her, carrying such a heavy, lumbering thing around. She wondered how she'd fare when it came time to sprint away from the phantoms.

*Stars*, and the gods-damned thing might not even be magic or cursed or useful at all. But Rain could think of only one sure way to find out. She'd have to shove it inside a dragon. Teeth gritted, she thought of her Penny and her father, of her people and their homes burned to ash. She looked forward to trying each of the weapons out on Yaga's hide.

"If Clapa comes with us, Bernard," Rain scolded as they retraced their path back to the edges of the living forest, "then she is wholly and completely *your* responsibility. If she is in fact a harbinger of death and destruction, *you're* the one who will have to make her mind."

Clapa lounged on Bernard's back, her little arms crossed behind her head.

*You aren't going to help me at all? Bernard grumbled. You'd make me parent her all by myself?*

"I mean, of course I'll help. As much as I can."

"Hiss, hiss?" Clapa said, pulling on his ear, demanding his attention.

*This is your Auntie Rain*, Bernard explained.

“Rat?” Clapa attempted, her toothy smile startling in her little angular face.

*Rraaain*, Bernard tried again.

“Raaaaat,” Clapa chorused.

While they had their elocution lesson, Rain pleaded with the living trees to create a path, bringing them as close to the doorway as possible. Stretching their limbs, they were able to make safe passage through the forest, as far as the edges of the meadow.

From their new positioning, standing together between the stretched limbs of two immortal trees, they could see the door.

Rain lifted the spear in both hands, balancing it across the front of her body. “The way out isn’t far.”

*Neither are they*, Bernard warned. *I’ll show you.*

He transformed into a black mist, which the fairy found delightful. She followed him, clapping her hands, her little bat wings a fluttering blur on her back. The moment Bernard crossed the tree line and into the meadow, the shrieking started. The phantoms flew up out of the grass.

*We need a different plan*, Bernard said.

Rain buried the spearhead in the dirt at her feet. She removed the bow and quiver and sat them beside her. “My sister will come for me,” she said. Then she squatted down amongst the extended branches of the living trees to wait.

*Sora was very honest about her priorities.*

“She’ll be here,” Rain insisted. And if she wasn’t, she’d reach out to her mate. He’d come for her. She hunkered down, absorbing the comfort of the sacred trees and contemplated taking a much-needed nap.

\* \* \*

Rain sucked in a slow breath and wondered if she was actually breathing. Was it even air in the space all around her? Inside this magical dragon hoard, was anything real at all? Was she even real? Sora had warned her it wasn’t wise to linger inside a hoard she didn’t belong in. She was a trespasser here, and it was beginning to weigh on her mind, pulling it in strange directions.

Time had crawled past, but it was impossible to tell how much. The strange purple oval in the sky never moved. An eternity might have slogged by for all she knew.

“She’s not coming for me,” Rain grumbled.

*Told you so.* Bernard lay next to her on a pile of leaves, exhausted. Clapa leaned against him, using his furry belly as a pillow.

With a great sigh, Rain thought of her husband, picturing him clearly in her mind: his long lean build, his broken smile, his short antlers. *Night?*

She felt him before she heard him. Their connection sent a shiver through her, and her pulse raced.

*Rain? Everything all right, sweetheart? You’ve been gone a while.*

*Everything is not all right. I—*

The door opened. Sora filled the frame, tall and elegant in her velvet dress, her flaxen hair falling over her shoulders. Their eyes met across the distance.

*Rain? What's wrong?* His panic raised the hair on her neck and arms. She shook the sensation off.

*I ... I need to know what your real name is,* she told her husband, and after a moment, she sensed his amusement. *Archibald?* she guessed.

*No,* he said with a laugh. *That's not it.*

“Phantoms!” Rain cried in warning to Sora as the dragon princess entered the hoard. Jumping to her feet, Rain grabbed up the new weapons as fast as she could.

Sora crossed into the pasture and stood on a small mound, surrounded by wildflowers that weren't wildflowers. Shrieking erupted, echoing through the meadow. The phantoms flew up out of the grass, hurtling toward their new target. But Sora seemed unimpressed. Rain sprinted for the door, Bernard and Clapa just ahead of her.

“Sora!” Rain screamed, worried for her kin. The phantoms were closing in on the witch.

Sora opened her mouth and roared. Her jaw unhinged like a snake's, dropping wide. She blew a ball of black flame out of her mouth, torching the meadow before her. The phantoms caught in the blast were incinerated to ash. The others scattered, screeching and wailing.

Bernard sprinted across the threshold with his fairy on his back. Rain tossed the heavy spear after them and turned, waiting on her sister. Mouth now firmly shut, Sora's face had bleached of color. She moved off the mound on unsteady legs, wobbling like the ground was shifting under her feet.

Rain caught her before she collapsed. She smelled strongly of ash and brimstone. Her lips smoked, the skin cracked and dull around her mouth.

“Breathing fire in this form is hard on my body,” Sora explained.

Rain tucked her sister's arm over her shoulder and walked her through the door. It slammed shut behind them on its own.

\* \* \*

Inside Sora's hut, Rain sent her familiar off into the snowy night with his new fairy companion. She reached out to her husband with her mind:

*Is your true name Nigel?*

Night's familiar low chuckle warmed her blood. *Thank the stars, no.*

*Bernard is on his way back. He's bringing a friend. Don't be alarmed.*

*Don't be alarmed?* Night's teasing voice filled her head. He felt close to her, though she knew he wasn't, like she might turn around and he'd be sitting there at Sora's table. A smile

came to her instinctively, filling her cheeks. *You realize of course that I'm now extremely and irrevocably alarmed?*

Rain laughed. *Well don't be, I said. He's extremely fond of her so you'll have to let him keep her.*

*Stars, did he steal a baby?*

Rain bit down on her lip. *No. You'll see. I'll be home soon to explain.*

Rain stayed behind to care for Sora, whether the dragae princess wanted her to or not.

“I'm fine. Nothing a stiff drink won't fix.” Sora lay prone on the furs before the hearth.

Rain was sure her coloring was still wrong. Masha hovered over her mistress, equally concerned. Rain made tea, adding a generous helping of clear alcohol to the mixture at her sister's insistence. It was Seelie custom to sing for one who was unwell, but Rain only knew one dragon song, so while Sora sat in the furs, nursing her cup, Rain made herself comfortable in the armchair and sang softly to her about the dragon who brought an end to a great war after destroying her tyrant husband.

*The war has ended, the chorus repeated, return to your homes and be glad. The war has ended, the strongest dragon reigns.*

“You sing offkey,” Sora grunted, “but I appreciate the thought all the same.” She set aside her cup and lay back down, closing her eyes.

Rain chuckled, unoffended by her sister's blunt nature. The song had her thinking about the woman, the goddess, who'd taught it to her. Her mother used to sing that same tune to Rain when she was sad or unwell. "Do you ever wonder if Divinia sees us? She could. A powerful goddess like her, she could look in on us if she wanted, don't you think?"

Sora opened one of her eyes briefly. "Perhaps. Perhaps she's watching us right now. Well, just in case that's true ..."  
Sora made a crude gesture at the ceiling with her fingers.

Rain's burst of laughter made the scar at her throat and navel twinge. "Do you worry what will happen to your people after we bring down your father? The throne of the Mountain Court should not sit empty."

Sora's tight-lipped smile faded away, worry deepening the lines around her mouth. "I do worry about them sometimes. Then I drink, and the worries, they fade away," she teased.

"The strongest dragon will take the throne," Rain prodded. Daughter of an ancient dragon and a goddess—who could be more powerful than Sora?

"I need my mate back," she said solemnly. "That's my only concern now."

"We'll get him back," Rain vowed. "I need time to practice with the new weapons, and then I have some ideas." She sighed, suddenly tired. "My husband isn't going to like them, and convincing him it's the best way will take more time as well."

“Do your ideas involve the Seelie queen?” Sora guessed.

Rain nodded reluctantly, and then she explained her plan in detail.

## Chapter 14



(Night)

**A**fter spending a week at home with the feral little fairy, Night came to the conclusion that he quite liked having little ones about. Clapa laughed easily and often. The sound, like tinkling bells, was infectious. She had a love of tricks and mischief, which added needed levity to days that would otherwise be full of plotting and stress. And watching the demon Bernard try to make her mind was greatly amusing, watching Rain attempt to help even more so.

It was early evening. The velvet bedroom curtains were pulled back, revealing a dusky sky beyond the balcony. Night readied for his day while his wife finished her breakfast at the corner table. Fading sunlight turned the clouds lavender, bathing his wife in a soft glow. Tired smudges shadowed her eyes.

He liked having littles around as long as their care was none of his responsibility, he amended, glancing over at Bernard, who was still out cold from exhaustion, on his back on the floor beside their bed, paws twitching in the air. The fairy in question remained asleep in the dressing room. She'd been given a silk pillow to rest on, but she'd decided to make her nest inside one of Night's old shoes instead.

Seated on his bed, Night moved to slip his foot into one of his tall boots, but something wriggled inside it. He jerked his foot back and turned it over. A frog flopped out onto the rug.

Rain sniggered.

“Why is it always a frog she puts in my boot?” he asked. The frog made a mad dash under the bed.

“It’s not always a frog,” Rain said, hiding her smile behind a teacup. “Sometimes she fills it with rocks.”

The fairy in question floated out of the dressing room then, her thin blue-black hair a messy mop on her little diamond-shaped head, her large eyes sleepy. She wore a night rail Rain had fashioned for her out of a silk handkerchief. Clapa visited with Rain first, helping herself to the drops of freshly squeezed orange placed in a saucer for her.

“Anta Rat,” she greeted his wife in her tiny sing-song voice.

Rain’s returning smile was luminescent. Bernard stirred at the sound of his fairy’s voice. He blinked blurrily about the room, his fur standing up in strange places. Night assumed that Clapa had stuck something sticky all over him. Either the demon hadn’t noticed yet, or he hadn’t the energy to do anything about it. Lumbering over to his mistress, he hopped onto Rain’s lap and shared her plate. Rain made a face at the strange, matted patches in his dark fur.

Clapa came to visit Night next. She perched up on his shoulder, the long talons of her feet sticking in his shirt.

“You can’t stay there,” he warned her. “You tied tiny little knots in my hair the last time I let you sit up there.”

“Ren amma mat,” she protested, clicking and chirping her displeasure. The irritated flutter of her wings tickled his ear.

Bernard yowled and hissed. He leapt from the table to bound to the center of the room, his hair standing on end. Rain jumped to her feet, her expression grave.

“What’s the matter?” Night stared between them.

Rain crossed to him swiftly. “Clapa told Bernard she doesn’t think it’s fair she can’t stay on your shoulder when the *other* fairy does.”

Night’s blood went cold. “What other fairy?”

“Exactly!” Rain’s hands balled into fierce little fists. “Bernard, ask her if the fairy is there right now.”

Clapa answered in more chirps, leaving Night’s shoulder to climb up his antlers.

“Mya,” Rain said through gritted teeth. “You rat.”

“Raaaaat,” Clapa chanted.

“Don’t bother trying to hide now,” Rain scolded. “We’re onto you.”

Night had the urge to dust off his shoulders, but he waited, searching them for signs of an intruder, his head snapping side to side, which Clapa thought was great fun, swinging on his antlers. A fleck on his right shoulder captured his attention. It grew to a spot. The spot expanded into a tiny fairy the size of

his thumb with gossamer wings and sharp features. When she'd reached the size of his arm, Rain caught her around the middle, plucking her from the air.

"*You're* the reason Isla knew my husband was in Reedholm," she accused.

The fairy's gossamer wings buzzed irritably like a swarm of agitated bees.

Night thought of the many times he'd smelled blood magic, that scent like rotting citrus. The tree branch that had nearly crushed him near Maldrom, suddenly moving away from him. The broken wheel that had repaired itself. The mango that had appeared in their carriage. That scent had continued to taunt him, constantly reminding him of the deal Yaga had proposed.

How dare Isla spy on him in such a fashion, never mind the small little magical favors done along the way. The audacity of that witch. It galled him. But whatever surprise he felt, the shock and rage on his wife's face was gratifying.

He believed Rain when she said she wouldn't leave him to go back to her sister. He believed her when she said she'd never hate him for keeping them apart, and yet ... that gnat of a voice was there, ready to remind him of how important family was to her.

The bond hated denying her anything. Her tears in the carriage over that blasted mango had nearly crushed his heart to mush.

Rain shook the fairy gently. “Tell Isla if you ever come back here to spy, I’m going to rip off each of your fingers and feed them to my demon.”

Bernard hissed his enthusiastic agreement, and for once, the little gnat of a voice in Night’s head had nothing to say.

Mya’s wings drooped, but she returned Rain’s defiant stare.

Rain marched the fairy out to the balcony and dropped her onto the stone rim. “Go back to your mistress.”

Chin up defiantly, the fairy took to the skies, shrinking as she rose higher.

“Is she really gone?” Rain asked, looking at Bernard.

Climbing from one of Night’s antlers to the other, chirping in her made-up tongue, Clapa confirmed the intruder had left. Night dug a reward out of his nightstand, a silver, star-shaped cufflink that had lost its pair. The little fairy accepted it with excited chatter and a flutter of her bat-like wings.

Clutching it to her heart, she zoomed back into the dressing room to add it to the other random household trinkets she hoarded like treasures in the borrowed boot she slept in.

\* \* \*

After Night finished with his first meeting of the evening, he took tea on the balcony, watching as his wife trained with her new weapons under the glow of starlight and Lunar lamps.

Arne assisted her. The snow had melted, turning the courtyard into a muddy wasteland.

Rain practiced with her daggers near the dead oak. Night had wanted to clear out the old tree, but his mate had insisted that it be left standing. She'd done something to it with her will, she explained. It would remain always. She wanted to remember its sacrifice in that way, like a tombstone. When she entered the courtyard and when she left it, she would pay homage.

Rain struck out with her new serrated dagger. Arne missed the block, catching the blade in his arm. Cursing, Rain dropped the dagger and reached for him.

Arne pressed his sleeve against the wound. The cloth turned crimson. "It's all right," he gasped. "I'm all right. I can heal it." His cheeks went ruddy.

Night sensed the mage had fallen hard for his wife some time ago. And this was just fine, because he also appeared quite terrified of her, which in Night's opinion made him the perfect man to watch her back. The mage would do anything for her, including sacrifice himself, and he was much too honorable to act on his feelings.

Rain laid a friendly hand on Arne's bulky shoulder. Their size difference was stark—he dwarfed her. "You bled for me, Arne," she said warmly.

His face brightened in color. He was as red as a beet now, and the leathery tail at his back swished side to side coyly. "I suppose I have." His uncertain laugh misted in the cold.

She patted his arm high above the injury. “That makes you my brother.”

“Is that a Seelie custom?”

She shook her head. “No. But it’s my custom.”

Night smiled behind his teacup. His wife was always gathering new family members.

Watching Rain prepare for her battle with Yaga had become a regular part of his day. It wasn’t just for the pleasure of it, though there was pleasure to be had. It soothed him to see how fluidly she moved with a weapon, even ones that were strange to her. In these trying times, he needed regular reminders of what he already knew: his mate was an exceptional warrior.

Instinct had selected her for him. Originally, he’d thought she’d help him avoid war, which was a silly thing to expect from a warrior, in retrospect. He knew differently now. Rain was going to save them all, but it wouldn’t be through peace ...

A prickle of cold dread shot through his heart. He rubbed at the sensation, trying to stifle it. She was a gifted warrior—a goddess, he reminded himself—but he couldn’t stop thinking about the sheer size of that ancient dragon, the endless tail draped through those trees, the sharp teeth, the heady magic.

And Rain appeared so small down below.

At that moment, Bernard charged into the bedroom, jumping from place to place like he was chasing an invisible

mouse, looking frantic.

“Is Clapa hiding again?” Night guessed. When the fairy was irritated with her demonic custodian, she’d shrink herself so small she was invisible to the eye. Apparently, this also made it difficult for the demon to sense her. To Clapa it was all great fun, of course.

Bernard dove under the bed, searching.

From the service cart, Night poured a fresh cup of hot water and set it aside, a temptation he’d learned Clapa had trouble ignoring. While Bernard searched through the bedding, Night watched the cup. Soon a fleck appeared inside it. It expanded slowly. Clapa bathed herself in the steaming water, stretching to rest the tips of her talons along the rim.

“She’s here, Bernard,” Night said, leaving the balcony to set the teacup on the carpet inside, where it was warm.

Bernard stalked over to the teacup, growling.

“Hiss, hiss,” Clapa sang merrily.

Bernard did not appear amused.

“Thank you, Clapa,” Night told the little fairy, the prickle in his chest lessening. “I needed the reminder that even very little people can cause a great deal of havoc.”

She chirruped at him contentedly.

\* \* \*

Just before the midnight meal, Night coaxed his wife upstairs for a bath. He helped her undress, needing to fill his hands

with her. Her leathers were mud-caked and soggy. He peeled them off her, setting them aside in a bucket he'd had brought up from the scullery.

“When you convinced me to end my training early,” Rain said, a smile in her voice, “I assumed you planned to have your way with me, but you seem contemplative now. I think I’ve misread you.”

“I have a lot on my mind, but let’s not take having my way with you completely off the table, please.” He helped her shoulder out of her jerkin. It hit the bottom of the bucket with a heavy thud.

“What’s on your mind?” She loosened the buttons at the sides of her trousers.

Night grasped the hem of her shirt and began rolling it up her body, revealing golden skin marred by pale scars. He tried not to think of how soft and fragile her skin felt under his hands, how easily it would tear under a dragon’s claws. “Yaga.”

“Sora is coming with me to take his head. We are a formidable pair,” she said soothingly, information he already knew. “You’ll move with your mages to the border near Bloodmire to draw soldiers out of the mountains.” More information he already knew. He sensed he wouldn’t like the rest, and he waited for it impatiently. “But I fear the Lunar Court standing alone won’t be enough to clear the way for me, and it’ll be dangerous for you and your mages ...”

Her hesitation spoke volumes. A muscle in Night's jaw ticked. "The Lunar Court is full of tricksters. We will make our armies appear vast. All of the soldiers will come out of the mountains to contend with us."

"What if the Mountain Court attacks first and calls your bluff? What if they cross the Eventide and lay waste to all of you by their sheer numbers?" She ducked her chin so he could pull her shirt off over her head.

"We will stand firm until your task is done, come what may, and I don't believe they'll cross. They fear me and what my magic can do to them. They will hesitate, and those who do not, my mages will paralyze and send sinking to the bottom of the river." Balling up the linen, he discarded it in the bucket with heat. "But we *won't* do this beside the Seelie queen."

"I'm not asking you to embrace Isla as family. You could be separated by thousands of people for all I care. I just simply need you to let her and her armies *stand* there—"

"I won't allow her in my lands," he said sternly. "She and her armies are not welcome here. They will come claiming one thing, then do another."

"That is not what will happen. Everything is different now."

"It has happened before," he hissed.

"Would you at least speak to Sora about this? As one of your advisors, she thinks—"

"My answer is no."

Rain grumbled something under her breath that sounded like ‘stubborn man’ followed by the creative place she’d like to stick a dagger. He let her grouse without comment, removing the last of her clothing. With a hand on the small of her back, he helped her step into the steaming tub.

Night sat in the chair beside her and washed her the way their bond liked, first her fingers and hands, the creases of her palms, the gentle bones of her wrists. He took his time appreciating her. Then her elbows and underarms. Her feet and her dainty toes were next, which never failed to make her squirm and giggle a little.

He took his time with her hair, knowing she was still ruminating on her plan, fixating on things he didn’t like. He could almost feel her brain buzzing under the pads of his fingers.

Finished, Rain leaned back against the rim, lowering farther into the tub so that the rippling water came up to the scar on her throat. Her clean white hair floated around her shoulders. “Yaga must die,” she said firmly. “It all ends with him. You agree with that, at least, don’t you?”

Night rolled his shirt sleeves farther up his forearms, considering his words. “King Yaga is a force of wickedness. A disease. The sort that no good king would ever allow to fester beside his kingdom.”

“Then we agree.”

But Night wasn’t finished. “The offer he made me, the bargain I told you about, continues to be a constant temptation

for me. It's a bargain no good king would consider. Yet I find my mind drifting there in my quiet moments." He reached into the water, found her hand, and held it. "What I feel for you makes being a good king impossible, Rain. Because what's right and good for my people isn't what's best for my wife."

She laced her fingers with his. "You aren't a bad king."

"I am," he insisted. "I've watched you practicing with that damn spear, and all I can think about every time is how sending you to battle a dragon is right for everyone else *but* you. And then I think about how badly I want to trade their wellbeing for yours. All of them. Each and every soul counting on me—I would rather put swords in their hands to spare you that spear. I'm a terrible king, Rain, with a wickedly selfish heart."

Her eyes misted. She blinked rapidly to clear them. "You're *still* not a terrible king. Because you're going to let me do what's best anyway." Emotion throttled her voice.

He was such a clueless fool to ever think that when the bond settled, his heart would do the same. The bond had certainly settled, but his admiration for her had only grown, his need for her with it. It had terrified him, that need, but now the idea of being without her was the most horrifying of all.

Love was not a fairy story.

It was her, his sweet Rain. He was looking at love. Talking to it. Bathing it.

He lifted her hand out of the water and kissed her knuckles. “Promise me once more that you’ll take very good care of my wicked heart,” he whispered.

Her eyes welled. “Your kind heart is my most favorite thing about you. Of course I’ll cherish it always.”

Then he pulled her from the bath water, laid her out across the plush towels, and had his way with her.

\* \* \*

Night took his dinner in the parlor. Sunrise was only a few short hours away, and Rain usually spent this time plotting with Sora, so it surprised him when she came to join him instead.

She pulled the double doors shut behind her. Stopping at the fireplace to warm her hands, she watched the flames crackle and spit. Then she crossed to him and took a seat at the bar at his side. “Maximillian,” she guessed.

Night laughed. “That’s not my name.”

“Humphrey?”

He was quiet.

Rain’s eyes rounded. “Gods, your mean parents named you Humphrey, didn’t they?”

He lifted his glass of milk, chortling. “No.”

“Come with me tonight.”

Night shook his head, grinning at her shameless persistence. “You already know I won’t.”

“You’ve trusted Sora’s advice for ages now. If you’d listen to anyone, it’s her. And if you don’t, if even she can’t make you see reason, then and only then will I accept your answer. Why won’t you—”

“Because I don’t want her to change my mind.” He sipped at his glass of milk, then set it aside. Night pushed noodles around in the beef broth with a spoon. “I don’t want anyone changing my mind on this.”

Rain took the yeast roll from his plate and broke it, using more force than necessary, pulverizing the center to crumbs. Gentling her touch, she fed him a small piece. Their bond warmed his blood. The next chunk she offered, he took out of her palm. Her skin tasted like dew and salt and Rain. He wanted to have his way with her again, despite the fight he sensed brewing between them, the calm before a storm—perhaps even because of it.

“Sora knew you’d say no again,” Rain said, a bite in her tone. “She told me I’d have to be clever to get you to her.”

Night chuckled. “This is not about being clever. The matter is settled. You must accept my answer.”

“You didn’t accept my answer when I turned down your marriage proposal multiple times. When you’re angry with me later,” Rain said cryptically, “I want you to remember that you kidnapped me twice while we were courting.”

“What are you going on about?”

Rain leaned in, melding her body to his side. She fisted her hands in the collar of his shirt and kissed him hard. Distracted by the hot press of her lips, he felt the tickle on his arm too late. Breaking away, he spotted Bernard in the form of a small black spider, scurrying down his sleeve, then a sharp pressure in his wrist over his pulse.

The room went fuzzy. His wife's voice sounded far away, and darkness clouded his vision.

\* \* \*

Night awoke seated in an overstuffed armchair before a hearth so large he could stand in it. His right hand, which rested across his chest, smarted, and the fingers tingled with numbness. He touched the light swelling near his wrist and remembered being bitten—bitten by a demon spider he was going to send straight to hell the next time he saw him ...

He called moon magic to him easily and healed his wrist.

*You're in trouble*, he told his wife through the connection of their soul. The little coward didn't respond, but he knew she heard him. Slowly he climbed to his feet, testing the strength of his legs. The floor rocked beneath him, the hut rising on its chicken feet outside. After a moment, the fog of his mind registered that he was in a familiar place: Sora's hut. He turned to find the wax-wood table occupied.

Sora, he expected to see there, but she wasn't alone.

Isla stared back at him, icy gaze sharpened on his person beneath a woven circlet of branches, her slender arms folded

over her middle. She occupied the chair opposite the dragae princess, a steaming teapot, saucers, and assorted ceramic cups between them. Draping her shoulders was a cloak made of butter-soft leather in a warm brown, the craftsmanship of the elves.

“Since the two of you know each other, I won’t bother with introductions.” Sora stood up, tucking a billowy dressing gown in around her long legs. “Don’t bother trying to leave. Either of you. My hoard won’t let you.”

Isla’s pale brows rose toward her ashen hair line. “Where are you going?”

“To sleep. I’ll see you in a few hours. Unless you both kill each other, that is. Either way, goodnight.” Sora shuffled over to the door on the right of her hearth. Masha scampered after her, and they exited together into a windowless stone room that Night could only see a sliver of before the door snapped shut.

Night stared at Isla for several heartbeats, nothing but the crackle of the fire for company. “Where’s your fairy spy?”

“She’s not a spy. She’s a guardian,” Isla said through her teeth.

“Where is she?”

“Around.”

“I want to know where.”

Isla rolled her eyes. “Currently, she’s making a vial of fairy wine, which I plan to gift to Row—Rain. She’s going to need

it to amplify her abilities if she wishes to face Yaga ... In case you're wondering, Rain doesn't know I'm here. My overprotective sister will be very upset when she finds out Sora ambushed you with me."

"Then I look forward to the moment she finds out," Night growled. He took a breath. He didn't like to let his opponents see his emotions so plainly. It put him at a disadvantage. He unclenched his fists and straightened out of a fighting crouch.

"Would you sit, please?" She sighed when Night hesitated. "Mya is not here, and even if she were, you are safe from any mind-bending magic we possess by your true mate bond. I'm the one in danger here, if we're being plain. You need only speak death in my ears, and who could stop you?"

"Tempting ..."

"Besides, the Seelie would never do harm to their kin. Like it or not, you are now my kin, which is why I sent a guardian to watch over you."

Night grimaced. "We are not, nor will we ever be, kin. You murdered my—"

"Because he murdered *mine* first!" Isla barked. Leaning forward in her chair, she bit back her next response, sucking a steadying breath through her nose. "He murdered her, Lord Night," she said more gently. "Whatever tale you've been told about oaths and vows and peace, whatever story you may have read in altered history books, the trickster you called uncle tricked and murdered a woman we both love."

Several heartbeats passed in silence. The house groaned. Outside the windows, a starlit meadow swooped by. Inside Night, a war raged, one fueled by feelings of loyalty and curiosity and pain.

Moments later, he dropped into the chair Sora had vacated. “Tricked?” The word felt raw leaving his mouth.

Isla pushed an empty cup at him. “After the Battle of Bloodmire, Yaga and I made a bargain to remain in our kingdoms for 250 years in exchange for peace and sparing Sora. Sora had already escaped to the Lunar Court by that time, and Rain didn’t want her harmed after the deed she had done for us.”

“What deed? I know she was a spy. I know not what she accomplished for the Tree Court.” Night grasped the kettle handle with a folded-up bit of terrycloth. He poured tea into his cup. The steam turned Isla hazy for a moment.

“She convinced her half-brother, the Duke of Mount Rasika, to send the reinforcements to the swamplands in the southernmost region around the Eventide *late*. Because of that —”

“—Rain was able to destroy them all at Bloodmire.”

Isla nodded. She grasped her cup between two small hands but did not drink it. She stared into the liquid, remembering. “The former Night King knew we were engaging in peace talks, knew that Sora was a negotiating point. He invited Sora to his castle in Maldrom and kept her there. The bargain I made with Yaga applied to Rain as well, but she was not yet

back in the Seelie lands. She detoured into the Lunar Province to fetch her sister, because once she returned she'd be unable to leave for 250 years. The Night King made her believe he would help her." Her jaw clenched.

"How do you know what occurred?" Night asked gruffly. The tea smelled earthy and floral. Its scent curled around him, a gentle enticement.

"Letters. First from Rain, then Sora, and later from your uncle. I'd let you read the letters, but they did not survive my anger. He didn't like what he felt he had to do to my noble sister. He wanted atonement." Isla's nostrils flared. "Eventually, I gave it to him."

At her words, the scar at his lip throbbed sympathetically. Night took a long hot swallow of his tea. The burn soothed his dry throat. "Rain hasn't spoken of any of this ..."

Isla's mouth quirked. "She wouldn't. She won't ever say anything if she thinks it'll hurt someone she loves. My sister loves fiercely."

He wrapped his hands around his teacup, soaking up the warmth of the ceramic through his fingers. He needed that warmth, for he sensed he didn't want to hear more. "Tell me what happened next."

"He met with my sister in a fortress near Bloodmire. She did not know he had Yaga in his ear. The losses he suffered in the border skirmish, the mages taken by the dragons, they frightened him. Yaga frightened him. He wanted no part of the Seelie and Unseelie war."

“Yaga is terrifying.”

Isla smiled. “And yet, he feared my sister.”

Night grinned at that. “I wish I could be there when he sees her next and realizes.”

“As do I.” Her face fell then. “Yaga wanted one thing in exchange for leaving the Lunar Court in peace.”

“Row,” Night guessed.

“Row.” Tears turned Isla’s dark blue eyes glassy. They reflected the firelight. She sucked back a shaky breath and pressed on. “The dragon required that his most feared enemy die slowly. Iron in the gut. The nonsense about refusing to bow was all rumor and gossip to make the story seem more romantic. Anyone would have given in to such torture otherwise. Even my sister.”

Night’s eyes squeezed shut for a moment. Memories flooded him of Rain screaming her mother’s name, clawing at the scars at her throat, lost to a fever dream.

Isla sipped her tea, then continued, voice cracking. “Do you have any idea how many days it would take to kill a goddess slowly with iron? He had to keep putting the blade back in. And I could do *nothing*.” She gripped her cup so hard her knuckles went white. “He thought naming a city River Row after her would fix everything.”

Under the table, Night’s knee began to bob. “I won’t pretend that I don’t understand your anger or your thirst for revenge ... But you took more from me than my uncle and

aunt that day.” Absently, his hand went to the scar at his mouth. He rubbed at it.

“I know.” Her voice shrank. She worked her throat. “It is one thing to wrong an enemy the way I wronged you, quite another to hurt one’s brother. Hurting one’s family is an unforgivable thing to my people. It isn’t done.”

“I wasn’t married to your sister then.”

Isla shook her head. “It matters not. You are now my kin.”

“I am your victim,” he spat. “You need not have included me in your vengeance at all.”

“I could have killed him myself, but I wanted you, the heir, to fear me. It was either that or kill you too, but I didn’t wish to end the line of Night. I sought only to punish your uncle in the worst way I could imagine. Killed by one’s kin—I couldn’t think of anything more appalling.”

Night’s knee bobbed faster. His pulse quickened. “When I look at you, all I see is my uncle and his blood on my hands. He’s using his last breath to absolve me of what I’ve done and begging me to protect his mate. You’re there, making me cut myself.”

Isla flinched, a fine crack in an otherwise cold and regal mask. “I know I can’t atone for what I did to you, but I would like to try.”

“You’re right. You can’t atone for it. That’s a stain that won’t ever go away. Just like my uncle could never atone for what he did to Rain.”

Isla's tongue played against her cheek for a time. Then she leaned forward across the table and met his eyes. "It is elven tradition that when our ruler tires of this existence, they end their life with honor and are given to the trees. As our souls pass on to walk through the stars, our essence, our magic, continues here, fortifying the strength of our people, creating new living trees."

Night listened without interruption. He lifted a metal saucer and added honey to his tea.

"When my time has come," she continued, "when I'm ready to move on, would you like to be the one who drives the dagger through my heart? You could use whichever tool you'd like to get the task done. Something serrated or iron-tipped, maybe dull and rusty ..."

Night's lashes lifted to study her face. To his surprise, he found her expression quite serious. "I would like that," he said.

"Good." Isla nodded. "It's settled then. When my time comes, you will deliver me into the next life. But for now, I beg you to help me show the mountains the one thing they've been fighting to prevent all these centuries: the Lunar Court and the Tree Court standing together side by side against them."

"The sight of us will draw every soldier out of the mountains," Night admitted.

"Regarding the remaining tariffs we owe—"

“Keep them,” he said gruffly, and a line formed between Isla’s eyebrows. He found her surprise satisfying. “The Lunar Court needed to atone for the life they stole, but that’s over now.”

Isla nodded, her expression contemplative. “The war can finally be finished, Lord Night. There can finally be a true and lasting peace in the Faelands.”

“This is not forgiveness. I do not accept you. I will let your soldiers stand beside mine along the Eventide this once, but there will never be open borders between us. You will never be permitted to come and go as you please. After tonight, I do not wish to look upon you until the time comes that my services and the dagger of my choice are needed.”

“We have an understanding.” She extended her hand, and Night shook it.

\* \* \*

The hut settled in the meadow with a loud groan that rumbled the floorboards. Sunlight filtered in through the windows. Night lounged in the armchair, watching and waiting.

Rain appeared, treading through the tall grass, Bernard loping behind her, Clapa riding on his back. A smile spread Night’s cheeks.

“Told you she’d come early,” Isla said, pouring herself another hot tea and adding generous dollops of honey. “She can’t help herself.”

Sora brewed coffee at the hearth. “You were right,” she relented.

The door to the hut fell open, and Rain slid inside, pulling back the hood of her cloak. Her wide eyes found Isla and narrowed to slits. Bernard and Clapa bounded in after her, and the hut filled with the scent of sulfur and hell.

“What have you done?” Rain accused, hurrying to Night’s side. “What’d they do to you?”

Night chortled into his tea. “I’m fine,” he said, lowering it back onto the arm of his chair. Clapa floated to his side, examining his teacup. “Not for bathing,” he told her. She frowned up at him.

“We’ve come to an agreement,” Isla said.

Rain spun on her sisters, jabbing a finger at the Seelie queen and the dragon princess accusingly. “I told you I didn’t want Isla here! Not with him!”

“I heard you. I just didn’t care,” Sora said. She waved the steam off her coffeepot, then plopped it down on the table atop a cozy made of quilted linen. “Your mate needed to be made to listen.”

“So I made him listen,” Isla said.

They grumbled at each other for a time. Night didn’t much like being discussed as though he wasn’t sitting right there. Rain’s hand went to the hilt of her dagger.

He reached out, touching her arm. Soothingly, he rubbed his thumb over the bone of her wrist. “As much as I love your

instincts to be violent on my behalf, we truly have come to an agreement.”

Jaw clenched, Rain released the hilt. She met his eyes, her gaze searching his. *It was just supposed to be Sora here. You're sure you're all right?*

*I'm sure.*

*I won't kill them, she explained, but I'm not opposed to cutting them a little.*

*Unnecessary this time.* Night chuckled. “Or at least, Isla and I have come to an agreement. I’ve been waiting all morning to ambush Sora.”

Sora craned her neck, one yellow brow arched. “What are you talking about?”

Isla scooted forward in her chair, intrigued.

“Our plan is set for taking down your father, but we haven’t discussed what happens after,” Night said.

Sora poured herself a large mug of coffee, then moved to the counter, grabbing a decanter of clear liquor. “What happens after is inconsequential. We go our separate ways to live our separate lives. The end.”

“The mountain throne cannot be left empty,” Night said.

Isla and Rain exchanged a look.

“Sometimes,” Sora grumped under her breath, “I think I’d have been better served if I simply ate all of you the moment

you showed up outside. That's what my grandmother would have done. There's wisdom in that."

"The King of Night makes an excellent point," Isla said. Masha climbed onto the table beside her, nosing at the teacups, hunting for leftovers. Isla poured tea for her.

Sora added a generous helping of liquor to her coffee. She swirled the cup to stir it. "I have many half-brothers. Not all of them are so terrible."

Isla snorted at that.

"The strongest dragon must rule," said Rain.

Night stared Sora down. "You and I don't have an agreement until I know who will be ruling the kingdom that borders mine. I won't trade one tyrant for another, and the only dragon I trust is you."

Sora lifted her mug and drained it in three gulps. "We waste time talking while my mate suffers. No more deals. No more training. No more plans. I'll take the damn throne, but I demand action!"

"Time is needed to move armies," Isla said.

"Five days," Sora grumbled. "I want my mate five days from now and not a moment after!"

"*Now*," Night said, and Clapa chirped excitedly as she came to perch on his shoulder, "we all have an agreement."

## Chapter 15



### (Rain)

**O**n the way back to the manor, Rain kept stealing glances at her husband's face.

He caught her looking and slipped his hand into hers. *You're still in trouble*, he told her.

*Don't you even think of lecturing me. You kidnapped me while we were courting. Twice.* At her side, Clapa rode Bernard's back, tugging gently on his ears. Bernard glanced at their interlocked fingers and made a gagging noise.

Rain rolled her eyes. *Oh, stop that already. All I did was kiss him before.*

*I was trapped in your hellish pocket while the two of you smushed your squishy bodies together!* Bernard hissed at her snickering.

"Hiss, hiss," Clapa sang.

When they reached the manor, a footman took their cloaks. Rain let Clapa light the incense at the shrine of the Divine Day. Then the fairy returned to Bernard's back, waving the extinguished match like a broad sword. Making silly rhyming noises, she clucked her tongue to the beat of a made-up song.

Night took Rain by the arm, his grip tight. “Bernard, you’ll want to make yourself scarce,” he warned.

*Ack.* Bernard sprinted away, out of the foyer, down the corridor.

“Wheeeeeeee!” Clapa cheered.

*Exactly how much trouble am I in?* Rain asked her husband as they climbed the stairs. It was well past their usual bedtime, but she felt restless rather than exhausted.

He was quiet for a moment. Then his mouth tugged up at the scarred corner. “You owe me an apology at least, I think.” He opened their bedroom door for her and held it.

She stepped through, her stomach tightening with excitement. Heat filled her cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

He closed the door at his back, threw the lock, and started on the fastenings of his waistcoat. “You don’t look sorry.”

“I don’t feel sorry,” she confessed with a smirk. “But did you want me to apologize the way you did in Reedholm?” Her gaze drifted down his person, stopping at the building bulge in the fall front of his trousers. A thrill went through her, warming her blood.

His crooked smile made her belly swoop. “I insist on it.”

Rain started to sink to her knees.

Night caught her arm again, stopping her. “The Bloody Queen of Night kneels for no one.” He walked her back toward the bed.

\* \* \*

Rain slipped in and out of slumber, her cheek pressed to her husband's chest, their bare legs tangled together amongst the blankets. Sunlight set the velvet curtains aflame, and she wondered what time it was.

“Are you still awake, little one?”

Her husband's sudden question surprised her. His breathing had seemed so steady, but now he spoke to her clearly like he'd been awake all along.

“I'm having trouble staying asleep,” she said.

“Can I help?” His long fingers caressed her back, alighting on her hips and then sliding up to her shoulder blades, lingering on each scar and the divots in her ribs along the way. A low throb built between her legs. She nuzzled into his neck, encouraging his touches on her exposed flesh.

Emotion balled in her throat. She hated those moments when goodbye loomed closer, and all she wanted was to cling to him, to make it all last just a bit longer. But in a few hours, they'd be pulled in separate directions with much to do and prepare. He'd be traveling, gathering his mages. His fingers raked comfortingly through her hair.

She wouldn't see him again. Not until ... not unless ...

Rain worked her throat. “Would you make love to me like it's the last time?”

Night's fingers fisted tightly in her hair. “Don't say that.”

Lifting her chin, she stared into the silver pools of his eyes. “It *won't* be the last time. Of course it won't,” she soothed. “In this life, or in the stars—whatever happens, I'll find you again. But right now, I want you to love me like it's the last time you'll ever touch me.”

He brushed his lips over her brow, her nose, and her chin. “One last time, then,” he whispered as he rolled her onto her back and fitted himself between her thighs.

She was ready for him, but he took his time with her, always tender, always so patient as he stroked her until his fingers were soaked.

“Night,” she panted, “I know you've already said the words I've longed to hear in your own sweet way, but could you—”

“I love you,” he whispered.

Rain's head went back. She moaned at the ceiling, his declaration washing over her, turning her skin to gooseflesh.

The press of his erection along her sex made her flush with desperation. Her body moved with a will of its own, trying to draw him where she needed him, but Night seemed committed to making it all last forever and then a bit longer still, and she gloried in it.

Goodbye was far away, out of reach, trapped in some distant place, and she was climbing, chasing that sweet ecstasy at the peak.

His kisses were languid. He tasted her lips—first the top, then he nibbled at the full bottom one until it swelled gently. His tongue worked inside her mouth, tasting every contour, every hollow. She swept hers across his teeth. He sucked on it gently. Her toes curled and her eyes rolled back.

The worries of tomorrow had no power over her in her mate's arms. Not in that space, pinned under his lean body, where not even war could touch her.

“I want you to say it again when I come,” she said breathlessly.

“I'll say it as many times as you like.” He spoke against her lips.

And when he finally sunk deep inside her, drawing a moan from her lungs, her worries grew weaker still.

“I love you,” he repeated.

Her fingers raked through his hair. “Gods above, Night ...” She hummed his name deep in her throat, chasing bliss.

“I. Love. You,” he said, punctuating every thrust, and when she came apart, he whispered it one more time before finding his own release.

Goodbye was nowhere to be found.

\* \* \*

Days later, under a cloudy afternoon sky, Rain walked with Bernard to Sora's hut. The time had finally come, and she was eager to be off. It was an unseasonably warm day, but at Sora's

suggestion, she'd brought her heaviest cloak. It was a lot to carry with all of the obsidian weapons, and Bernard was too distracted to be helpful.

He followed at her feet, his fur standing on end. *Did you tell Erikson about Clapa's feeding schedule?*

"I told him twice. You were there," Rain reminded him, breathing heavy.

*And does he know about the boot she prefers to sleep in?*

"I gave it to him. She's in excellent hands, Bernard. He's going to spoil her rotten. She'll like that."

He whined low in his throat. *She didn't like being left behind.*

"Parenting is hard and goodbyes harder still," Rain commiserated. "But she can't come with us. It isn't safe."

*Yes, yes, of course you're right.*

Sora's hut had moved. It sat crooked in the center of the meadow, and the dragae princess stood beside it, barefoot, dressed in nothing but a shift, her flaxen hair braided over her shoulder. In her hand, she extended a glass vial full of a liquid flecked with gold.

Fairy wine.

*Don't look at me, Bernard said, I'm not going over there to get it. I'm not convinced Sora won't decide to eat me.*

Rain snorted. She crossed the meadow and took the offering, tucking it into the satchel at her hip, under her heavy

cloak. Sweat beaded her brow, but they'd be in the air soon, and she'd be grateful for the layers. Masha joined Bernard. Her familiar turned into a little dragon, appearing nearly indistinguishable from the other. Masha nipped at him in a friendly fashion.

“Are you ready?” Sora asked.

Rain returned to her original place in the grass, Bernard behind her, his leathery tail curling anxiously around her leg. “Is it time I learned what you have in common with butterflies?”

Sora nodded, her sharp smile short-lived. “Keep your distance while I cocoon. Don't come close until it's finished.”

“How will I know it's finished?” Rain asked.

Sora laughed. “Oh, you'll know.”

She entered her hut. The door snapped shut and the shutters pulled closed. A great hush fell over the meadow. Rain could hear the whisper of the butterflies flapping their bird-like wings and the arm of the Eventide babbling in the distance. A warm breeze tickled her neck.

The hut groaned and the air filled with the stink of brimstone. The shutters opened and shut again. It rose up on its great chicken feet, the claws elongating, digging into the earth, throwing clots of mud and flowers behind it like an agitated horse.

*Moon mother's knickers*, Bernard gasped.

The chicken legs thickened and then burst into great green scales that caught the sunlight. The thatch fell from the roof in heaps, revealing more ocean-colored scales. The hut expanded. Wings burst from the windows, and more clawed feet stretched out of the sides.

It grew and grew, until the hut was gone. Sora grew so much that Rain and Bernard had to hurry back closer to the tree line.

*Gods*, she was magnificent, covered in heavy plated scales, a dragon so immense in size she filled the meadow. At Rain's back, the trees shook nervously.

"Sister," Rain said, wonderment in her voice, "you're beautiful."

Sora's big head swung around. "I know."

Her booming voice shook the ground. Her serpent-like tail coiled behind her, and her long snout opened, revealing a smile full of sharp teeth the size of broadswords. Four bone-like horns curled off the crown of her head.

She was glorious, and now Rain fully understood what she had in common with butterflies.

\* \* \*

Sora flew fast and high, their familiars just behind her. Rain rode seated ahead of her wings, using the tendons and cartilage and the base of the wings for footholds. The plates of Sora's scales created slots for Rain's fingers to cling. She studied the sensitive sinew of the wings, memorizing dragon weaknesses.

The wind whipped so hard across Rain's face, she had to pull up her hood and tie a handkerchief over her mouth and nose, all the way up to just under her eyes. She kept her head turned down, seeing little of the ground below, until Sora slowed and the air warmed.

"What is it?" Rain asked. She had to shout to be heard.

"I thought you might like to see this," Sora purred, and then she spread her wings wide, and they glided toward the earth, the ground growing closer every moment. Forests became more distinct. The river Eventide came into focus, the dark waters moving rapidly.

And there, in massive rows as far as her eyes could perceive, were the armies of the Seelie and the Lunar Court. Seelie warriors were mounted on their tigers, mortals on horseback carrying illegal rifles, mages dispersed between them. Horns sounded and drums beat so loud Rain felt them in her chest.

A great roar broke out, a deafening cheer.

"The Bloody Queen of Night," they chanted, and a thrill coursed through her, igniting in her veins.

Sora's chuckle vibrated through the plates under Rain's legs. "Well, give your audience what they want."

Rain laughed. She'd tied the obsidian spear to her back. She freed it then and held it high overhead. Sora's dragon war cry boomed impressively. Another deafening roar pummeled

them from every side, and then Sora beat her wings and they were climbing once more.

*I love you*, Night said, his voice a reverberation Rain felt in her soul. She couldn't begin to find him in that massive crowd. Sora's wings pumped harder, and the people below grew smaller, but Rain looked for him anyway.

*I'll come back to you*, she vowed.

*In this life or in the stars, I'll wait for you*. Drawn by their bond, she found him then, surrounded by his mages. He looked tall and regal, and all-powerful, capable of anything. Still, her heart lurched at their separation, stealing her peace. She stared after him until he was a shrinking blur in the distance, willing him to stay well, to survive whatever onslaught the mountains might soon throw at him.

The armies of the mountain court weren't far now. They marched, a sea of soldiers. They'd heard those war cries. Soon they too would line the Eventide. War was a breath away, and she had one last chance to end it.

The Unseelie lands were vast, made up of five provinces, each greater than the Lunar Court's single province. A herd of unicorns galloped across the plains below them, chased by centaurs. Trolls and giants meandered about in a rocky basin. It was hours before they reached the mountains.

The sight of those snowcapped peaks stole Rain's breath. They flew over jewel-toned waterfalls and densely populated mountainside villages. Evening was upon them, dusk not far off, when they finally reached the heart of the Mountain Court.

The heart was a deep valley circled by a vast system of caves and archways. Sora slowed to a glide, then lowered them into one such cave. They landed with a great thud that rattled the ground and tossed up walls of sand on either side. The ground beneath them was flagstones and soot, the air musky and dry. Lava pools lit the tunnels inside.

*Smells like home*, Bernard said as Rain slid off her sister's back. Sora led the way while Masha and Bernard flew low to the ground, flanking Rain. Rain stretched her legs and readied her spear, removing the makeshift tie she'd added to fasten it to her back. She left the rope behind.

As they walked, the sound of flowing water grew louder, the darkness thicker, but Rain's eyes were keen.

"Remember," Sora said, "a serious injury will keep him from hiding beneath a glamour. Wings and eyes are most sensitive. Don't waste your time battling against his scales. They won't crack under your dainty fists."

Rain nodded, her senses sharpening. The tips of her fingers and toes tingled with anticipation.

And then a voice, so low and deep her skin pebbled, filled the tunnel. "What a formidable band of misfits," Yaga crooned. His words seemed to come from all sides, from the very rocks themselves. "Daughter, have you come to visit me?"

"You know why I'm here," Sora growled.

“Your little mate is well,” Yaga said, and the walls shook. Pebbles and soot rattled down onto the flagstones. “If you’d like him to remain as such, turn back now.”

“I’m not going anywhere without him. He’s your prisoner no longer,” Sora said, her pace quickening. Rain jogged to keep up, Bernard and Masha just behind her.

“A bargain, then,” Yaga said, sounding amused. “The life of your companions for your mate.”

Sora snorted. “I might not win in a fight against my companion, and then my mate dies with me. Fuck off, father.” She charged ahead.

“Very well. I give you your mate, and all you have to do is agree to leave. Immediately. You and your filthy familiar, and if you choose to come back later, I’ll deal with you then.”

Sora stopped. Her big head swung around. “You understand, don’t you, sister?”

Rain gritted her teeth. “I may understand, but I don’t have to like it!”

*She’s abandoning us?* Bernard’s voice pitched high. Masha protested, spitting a black flame in the air.

“On my life,” Sora shouted, charging forward, “the moment my mate is safe in my claws, my familiar and I will leave the mountains—”

“Leave the Unseelie lands *immediately*,” Yaga growled. “Not when it suits you, and not just the mountains. You’ll leave my lands, promptly.”

Rain's heart plummeted into her boots. The tunnels forked. Two archways dumped into a great opening. She threw off her cloak, needing to be lighter.

“On my life,” Sora started again, “the moment my mate is safe and alive in my claws, my familiar and I will leave Unseelie land immediately.”

The Unseelie lands were vast. It would take her hours to return, if she cared to return at all. Rain and Bernard were well and truly on their own with no time to spare. At any moment, war could break out at the Eventide.

They needed to end this now.

Rain shucked her satchel next and her extra daggers, not allowing herself to dwell on the loss. She readied her bow and quiver, checked that she had her elven dagger and the serrated obsidian weapon on her hip. The spear was too heavy. She'd leave it for now.

Yaga's laughter turned her blood to ice. “On my life,” he purred, sealing the bargain magic.

Rain dug out the vial of fairy wine from her satchel and handed it down to Bernard. He took it in his mouth, his teeth clinking against the glass. *Be ready.*

He nodded his narrow head at her.

Sora had put distance between them. Rain sprinted to catch up, leaving Bernard behind.

The tunnel opened into a vast, circular space, dotted in archways. A starry sky glittered above. The ground was

uneven flagstones, buried in sand and soot, and her boots struggled to find sure footing. She was envious of Sora's great claws and many legs. Sora ran, her vast tail swaying and propelling her forward.

Rain nocked two obsidian arrows and jogged in closer.

Yaga made himself known then. Covered in black and gilded scales, he'd blended into the ground, but his big head lowered, and he opened his eyes. Two large yellow pools shimmered below a crown of curling horns. Yaga was so long he could wrap around his daughter twice and still have tail to spare.

Rain's bowels quivered. Her skin went cold. Nostrils flaring, she raced on, struggling to keep up with her sister. Masha flew ahead, squawking angrily, fire and smoke puffing from her snout. Sora growled and spat at her.

They were arguing. Masha had a score to settle, and Sora was ruining it, Rain guessed.

There, just under Yaga's massive, veined wing, lay a man, pinned to the flagstones. A Lunar fae, long and lean, he had a mane of bright red hair and short antlers. He was unconscious, prone on the ground.

Rain didn't wait for her sister to reach her mate. She aimed and fired at Yaga's sensitive eyes. Big and yellow, they made an easy target. The arrows whistled through the air.

Yaga lowered his head. The arrows broke against his large plated scales.

*Well, that was depressing,* Bernard moaned in her mind.

Rain cursed in old elvish and nocked another arrow.

Yaga laughed at her. His tail unfurled. The scaled, leathery thing was even longer than she'd realized. It hurtled toward her.

“Bloody Queen of Night,” Yaga said, “where is your husband? Did he send you to fight his battle for him? Is this the way of the fae?”

Rain ignored the goading. She kept the beast busy, firing arrows at his eyes, dodging the deadly end of his tail.

Sora took flight, gliding toward her mate, front claws extended. Rain ducked another swipe of Yaga's whip-like tail. Masha flew in. Small and fast, she sliced at Yaga's back. Just before Sora could scoop up her mate, she stretched out her neck, her long jaws locking around sensitive tendons at the base of Yaga's wing. Those sword-like teeth dug in deep.

Yaga roared at her, his breath hot enough to fill the cavern with heat and brimstone. Sora snatched up her mate in her claws and spun in the air. Masha took one last swipe at tender tendons, and Yaga's roar transformed into a screaming wail. The wing went limp. Red and black blood oozed from the wound. He snapped his jaws at Sora. Smaller and faster, she dodged him easily. Clutching her mate to her broad chest, she rose higher, the beats of her wings stirring the sand into a gale. Masha reluctantly followed.

“He won’t be able to fly, Row,” Sora called down. “Hurry.” And then Sora and her familiar flew off, disappearing into the clouds.

“Row?” Yaga thundered.

Bloodlust chased the cold from Rain’s veins. Anger curled in her chest, and her anger had names and faces. In her mind, she pictured the villages of her childhood turned to ash. Her father, dead, her Penny ... Rain slung her bow over her shoulder and unsheathed her elven blade.

“Row!” she shouted like a war cry. “I am the one your dragons used to whisper about. They feared saying my name would call me to them like a phantom! They were right! And tonight, I’ve come for you!”

Yaga’s laugh was cruel and mirthless. “I will crush you, Row, and then bury you where no roots will find you. You and your magic will pass from this world, remembered by no one. There are none of your trees here.”

“There are no trees here,” she agreed.

His tail struck like a viper. Rain leapt onto the thick base, hanging on to him with her thighs. She raised her elven blade high over her head.

“That’s why I brought a tree of my own.” Rain shoved the blade down between the plates of his scales. “Grow,” she screamed.

Another jerk of powerful coiled muscles and she was thrown off. But she was not just Rain, not just the Bloody

Queen of Night. She was Row, a goddess of nature, and she remembered all that she was capable of. The living tree in her blade grew and stretched and sprouted steel-tipped roots. Her bones too. They were as solid and strong as a proud tree trunk, and though it hurt when she hit the flagstones, she recuperated quickly.

She was as solid and strong as the oak that had given up its life for her, and she would not let that sacrifice be in vain.

The elven blade pierced through thick hide, delved through muscle and sinew, and came out the other side, cracking through scaled plates with an audible pop.

“Grow,” Rain shouted, sitting up, her head heavy. The blade dug through stone, rooting deep. It tunneled through ash and sand, sprouting more and more roots, burying itself deeper still. Rain could feel it moving and growing, like it was rooting in her too, strengthening her.

Yaga jerked and tugged and fought with his tail, but the tree continued to sprout into the ground, unyielding. Yaga’s yellow eyes rolled back, his head lowered, and his jaw dropped. He sucked in a hollow breath.

Black flames poured from his mouth.

Rain leapt to her feet and sprinted for safety, diving back into the cave she’d entered through. Black flames ate at her clothing and bit at her flesh. Fire caught the ends of her hair.

Rain cried out, dashing through the tunnel. Free of the flames, she dropped to the ground and rolled, extinguishing

the fire that clung to her.

*I've got you.* Bernard was there, smelling of rotten fruit and leaves and hell. He was a dragon as black as the shadows, but he was no longer small. Full of fairy wine, he was as big as a house. He blocked the flames with his scaled body, shielding her. Another gust of enraged fire shot around them. The air was so hot, Rain had to hold her breath to keep from charring her lungs.

Bernard scooped her up in his claws and beat his wings. Gliding through the weaving tunnels, they took their time learning the many corridors of caves. The tunnels were built in a hub-and-spoke pattern, all leading into that great basin where Yaga sat, angry, his tail pinned to the earth.

Rain had an idea. A mad one, but it would get them where they needed to be, closer to those sensitive yellow eyes. Then he'd be trapped and blind. She climbed onto Bernard's back. His neck was as thick as two horses, fueled by fairy wine that wouldn't last forever. She squeezed his broad neck between her legs and readied her bow, nocking it with two arrows from the quiver at her hip.

Flapping his wings hard, he flew them out of an archway opposite the great dragon. Yaga roared and spat his fire, but Bernard dodged the flames, his buffeting wings protecting Rain from the heat.

Bernard flew for Yaga's head, his claws extended. Yaga opened his mouth wide, ready to bite them with teeth as long and jagged as spears.

Just before they met with the dragon king's fangs, Bernard transformed into a great mist, and Rain was airborne. Gliding through the air, she aimed her arrows and fired. Both bolts struck true, burying deep into Yaga's right eye. Blood and water poured from the damaged socket. His wail was ear-piercing.

“That was for Penny, you fucking—”

The dragon tossed his head, and Rain was knocked aside, sent hurtling toward the cavern wall. She hit hard, with a crunch that reverberated up through her bones and blasted the air from her lungs. Then she plummeted toward those unforgiving flagstones below.

Freefalling, Rain dropped her bow and pulled the serrated dagger. Holding it with both hands, she stabbed at the wall, slowing her descent. The blade tip broke, but she caught herself, digging at stone, slowing her fall. Rocks bit at the flesh of her hands and the side of her face, but the friction burns were better than breaking her legs.

The bow had snapped in two against the flagstones. She searched for her familiar on the ground. Her stomach churned. Something was wrong.

“Bernard?” she called. His shadows haloed the dragon's head.

Yaga breathed deep, and the shadows shrank and thinned.

“Bernard!” She screamed. She sprinted for the base of his long tail and climbed the scaled plates, Yaga's body shivering,

muscles coiling beneath her. “Let him go!”

She dove for that injured wing, bringing her broken blade down through the leathery sinew.

Yaga cried out, shaking his great head. His injured eye remained closed, but it was no longer bleeding. He was healing himself. His busted wing snapped back into place, and Rain was batted off his back with his claws. She landed in the sand, air once again knocked from her. Rain rolled to her feet, dodging his pounding claws.

*There.* On the flagstones, Bernard lay in his tiny, vulnerable cat form, his coat a lighter gray than normal.

*Bernard?*

He was silent as she ran for him, but she felt the pulse of his life through the connection of their souls. It was faint. “Bernard!” She grabbed him up in her arms and ran for the caves.

Yaga blew fire after her, filling the cavern and the tunnels with an inferno.

Her familiar stirred in her arms. She hefted him back to the place where the tunnels forked, back where she’d left her cloak and satchel, and she laid him in the cloak. She took up the heavy spear. Her heart hammered against the cage of her ribs, and the bones felt so fragile. Her sweat was ice on her soot-stained skin.

More black fire and brimstone filled the caves. She was just out of their reach, but she was alone. Truly and completely

alone.

Bernard stirred, but he could not lift his head. And then something moved in her satchel, sliding out the leather lip. Rain focused her eyes. The small something grew and expanded into a tiny fairy.

“Clapa!”

“Hiss, hiss?” Clapa flew to Bernard, holding his head between her tiny, clawed hands, trying to lift it.

“He’s going to be all right,” Rain told the fairy. “You’re not supposed to be here, Clapa! It isn’t safe!”

“Hiss, hiss,” she said sadly. She tried to rouse Bernard, patting his face and nose.

*Clapa?* Bernard’s voice was strained. His eyes blinked open.

*Bernard, what happened?*

*I tried to consume Yaga, to drain his lifeforce, but he was so much stronger than me. Clapa, no!*

Clapa screeched, her claws elongating at her sides. Wings flapping fiercely, the fairy grew as big as a boot and went hurtling toward the mouth of the cave.

“Come back here!” Rain rushed after her, spear in hand. The heavy thing slowed her.

“Hiss, hiss!” Clapa shouted like a war cry. Her claws and talons grew even more. The ebony things glittered menacingly in the starlight.

Yaga lowered his big head and laughed. His wing was fully healed, his eye healing. Rain pumped her legs as fast as she could to keep up with the fairy, but Clapa was tiny and so swift, and Rain was exhausted. Her lungs were full of ash, and her muscles burned.

Yaga brought a great clawed hand up, like he was going to squish the little fairy flat.

Rain shouted a warning. Clapa stopped and turned, her black nails bared. Rain threw her body over the little fairy as Yaga's hand came down. They were smacked to the ground. Rain's head hit the flagstones, and stars burst before her eyes.

"Anta Rat," Clapa said, her wispy limbs shaking with rage. The fairy wriggled out from under Rain and turned her talons on the great dragon. Yaga's hand came down again. This time her jet nails ripped through those scaled plates.

Amazed, Rain righted her spear and stabbed up into the gap the fairy's claws made in the dragon's hide. "Now go back to the caves, Clapa!"

The dragon groaned and shook out his injured hand. Clapa flew up toward his face, her bat-like wings a blur at her back.

"Forta Hiss, hiss!" she yelled.

"No!" Rain screamed.

The dragon opened his massive maw.

"Clapa!"

Yaga's jaw snapped shut and Clapa was gone.

*Nooooooooooooo!* Bernard's desperate cries rang in her head.

"Oh gods, no!" Rain moaned.

Yaga dropped his jaw and breathed his wicked fire. The spear in her hands was too heavy. She threw it to escape the blaze. Some of the fire found her. It bit at her arms and melted her leathers to her flesh in painful patches on her legs. Throat burning, she dashed for the safety of the caves.

Rain found Bernard in the dark. He'd limped his way closer to the mouth of the tunnel. He was so distraught he was having trouble keeping his form. He was a cat, then he was a thin cloud, nothing but mist in her arms. He was a collection of feathers and fur, and then he was a cat again. He didn't smell right—like smoke instead of sulfur. He was barely there and fading.

Rain cradled him to her chest, to the thrumming beat of her heart. "Stars above, I'm so sorry. So, so sorry. I tried to get to her." Her nose stung, and she swiped at it.

*She wasn't supposed to be here,* he kept repeating. *She wasn't ...*

He was so faint, so thin. Something glowed in his chest where his heart should have been. The piece of Rain's soul was the size of a drop of water. She'd made it from one of her tears all those centuries ago when she'd needed a friend so desperately. It looked like a diamond on one side and was green like an oak leaf on the other.

*Take it back, Bernard said. I'm no use to you. Take it and be strong and kill that fucking dragon.*

A good queen would take back that piece of soul. Rain knew not where the thought came from, but there it was, loud in her mind, taunting her. A good queen would let nothing stand in the way of doing what was best for her people.

Yaga must die. The war must end here.

Row's voice.

Row was a mighty warrior queen, strong enough to do what needed done. Blood ties mattered most, and her kin had been murdered. She had a duty to make that right, a duty to save the lives of thousands now. That tiny piece of soul was her ticket to make sure that happened. It would fuel her, give her the strength of Row, the warrior who'd shredded apart the dragons at Bloodmire.

She was retribution.

Rain reached the fork in the tunnels. She found her cloak with her boot, and she wrapped Bernard in it. Her satchel was there, two more blades inside. They were simple daggers, but they were sharp. She took them, holding the hilts so tight her knuckles went white. Penny's memory charm dangled from her wrist.

She sighed. Rain was absolutely fine with being a terrible queen.

Tears made rivulets on her cheeks. She struggled for breath, too overwhelmed to speak aloud. Her nose ran. *I'm*

*going to kill that fucking dragon, but I'm not taking that piece of soul because it isn't mine anymore. It belongs to you, Berdemos.*

*You pronounced it wrong, he said fondly, his voice breathy and weak. Even in your head, you pronounce it wrong.*

*She wiped her face with her leather sleeve. We're going to walk through the stars together for the rest of forever. You and me and Clapa and Penny and Night. My sweet family. So cling to that piece of soul, Bernard.*

*I'll cling to it, he vowed.*

Rain marched for the opening of the cave. Yaga cackled at her, and his amusement shook the cavern. She wanted to rip his tongue out, wanted to cut his beating heart from his chest. Her rage was a living thing now, volatile and molten and growing, and like the roots of a tree, it grounded her.

*My darling love, my heart, she said to her mate, I have only two daggers left and no way home. I'm taking Yaga down with me.* She wiped tears and soot from her face to clear her vision. There was only one way before her. She'd have to get dangerously close. The dragon's mouth and eyes were her target. That's where she was headed, and any death blow she delivered would likely end her life. Even if she survived that somehow, she wouldn't survive a trip through dangerous enemy-filled mountains.

*I'll find you in the stars, sweetheart.* Night's voice, as rich as warmed honey, reverberated through their bond. It fueled her.

Rain exited the caves through the archway at the dragon's back. His tail remained pinned, the living tree crawling its way farther up his impossibly long body. She kept to his back where he couldn't breathe his fire, charging up the snake-like column, climbing plated scales. He twisted and turned, trying to throw her off, but she dug in with her daggers and held firm.

She made it as far as his great wings. He beat them in quick succession, creating such a gust, she was thrown from his back. She hit the flagstones with a resounding thud. Yaga grabbed her up in his clawed hand, squeezing her so tight she gasped, and her vision went hazy.

She thought of Penny, and she prayed to her because she was about to die the same way, about to be crushed, about to have her bones snapped like twigs. She was alone.

*No, not alone*, she amended, and she thanked Penny for being there with her, finding the memory flat with her thumb against the hilt of her dagger.

The dragon's battle cry rattled through the cavern. Rain looked up at Yaga. His grip had loosened, and his gaze was skyward.

The battle cry hadn't come from him.

Sora had returned.

## Chapter 16



### (Rain)

Rain hardly believed her eyes. It didn't make sense. Even if Sora flew at her fastest, she couldn't have come back already, not for hours still. The bargain magic should have drained her soul and blood. She should be dead.

Yaga's fist tightened.

Rain pictured herself not as sweet, fragile Penny, but as the Penny tree. Strong and solid and immortal. Rain had a will unmatched by death, a death she felt haunting her once again, cooling her flesh. She willed her bones to be as powerful as that trunk. Slowly she wriggled an arm free of the dragon's grip.

Masha sailed in, diving at Yaga's face, spitting fire and smoke, darting in and out. He snapped his jaws at her, trying to catch her in his teeth. Rain wedged her dagger into the soft flesh around his claws, and his hand opened. She went plummeting.

Sora swooped in and caught her in her talons.

"How?" Rain demanded.

"I headed for the nearest body of water large enough to fit me. Though still within the Mountain Court, I was technically

no longer on Unseelie *land*. The bargain lifted, I left my mate and flew back.”

Rain readied her daggers. “Drop me on his back above his wings.”

Sora turned wide, gliding low. Wind whipped in Rain’s face. When Sora released her, Rain’s stomach lurched. She landed high and used the momentum of the fall to fuel her strike, bringing those sharp blades down. In one quick swipe, she severed Yaga’s wing. Hot dragon blood spurted against her chest, soaking her. Her grip slipped in all that wet, and she fell to the flagstones. The impact resounded up her bones, lessened by the leathery remains of the torn wing.

Rain covered her ears to block out the worst of Yaga’s screams. The ancient dragon bucked his head. Masha was relentless, diving for his eyes, hissing fire. He tried to swipe at her with his claws, and Sora was there, blocking the strike with her large body. Rain slipped in his blood, trying to find her footing. His other wing was her next target, but Yaga was slowing. He pawed at his chest, moaning.

Yaga lurched forward, a gurgling cry rolling out of his mouth. Then the dragon was falling. He landed on his side, his remaining wing bent beneath him.

Rain made her way out of the blood, battered and bruised and burned and confused. A plate high on Yaga’s chest flexed and thumped, and then split in two. Clapa emerged covered in black dragon blood, her claws dripping.

“Hiss, hiss!” she cried.

“Hiss, hiss!” Rain echoed, amazed. Was she dreaming right now? Could this be real? *Bernard, Clapa’s alive!* Laughter spilled from her lips, a manic sound that made her entire body ache. *All those damned weapons, and all along Baba’s familiar was the weapon. Your child just clawed out of the dragon’s stomach after destroying his heart!*

Bernard gave a great whooping cheer, and Rain cheered with him. *A child of death and chaos indeed, he said fondly. She is in so much godsdamned trouble, though! Grounded to her boot for ages. Not even the divines can spare her. I don’t even care that she just saved all of the Faelands from a tyrant, how dare she scare me like that ...*

Rain opened her arms, and Clapa flew into them.

“Anta Rat! Ma beeta meep mar!” Clotted blood clung to her hair and clothing. Rain embraced her, mess and all. The fairy chattered on in her sweet and silly gibberish. Rain would have kissed her if she wasn’t covered in so much filth.

Sora landed on the flagstones beside them, shaking the ground. “Don’t celebrate just yet. Not until we’ve separated his head from his shoulders. Then you can sing and dance all you like.”

But there was something else she had to do before she’d celebrate or help sever any heads. Rain closed her eyes and reached out to her mate.

*It’s over. It’s done. I’m coming back to you.*

\* \* \*

Sora flew Rain over the mountains and the plains. Bernard had been hurt, but it was nothing hearty amounts of ancient dragon blood couldn't fix. He flew behind them in the form of a dragon as big as a house and as black as midnight. Masha, fueled similarly by ancient Yaga blood, was sent to fetch Sora's mate.

Rain was curious about the red-haired Lunar fae she'd caught glimpses of, but when she asked after him, Sora snarled overprotectively. Rain let the matter drop quickly. Dragons were notoriously possessive beings.

Apparently ancient dragon blood tasted like farts, though, and Bernard hadn't stopped complaining yet. While they flew, Rain was able to convince him not to ground Clapa to her boot for the rest of her life. Cold at that altitude, the heroic little fairy hid in Rain's thick hood, underneath her hair.

When the shimmering waters of the Eventide came into focus, Rain's pulse thumped out of control. Sora hadn't explained what she planned to do to send the soldiers back to the mountains. They glided lower, slowing their pace. The air warmed, and Rain dropped the kerchief that protected her face, searching the masses for her mate.

Sora began to sing. Her booming dragon voice was beautiful. Rain recognized the old dragon song immediately.

*The war has ended, the chorus repeated. Return to your homes and be glad. The war has ended; the strongest dragon reigns.*

The war had ended before it'd begun. No soldiers had crossed the Eventide, and the mountain forces were already retreating.

Sora landed them in a clearing near the swamps of Bloodmire. The cheers were deafening, and Rain's throat immediately clogged with feelings.

*Where are you?* she called to her mate.

*I'm here.*

Sora growled and stomped, and the excited masses that had hurried through the trees to greet them kept their distance. Clapa slipped out of Rain's hood to investigate Bernard's new form. Rain dropped down to the forest floor.

Night emerged from the trees, and Rain ran into his open arms.

"Why are you crying, sweetheart?" He held her tight against his solid chest, and he smelled like wilderness and wood smoke and incense.

"I don't have any idea how to put my feelings into words," she confessed. She was overwhelmed, and the tears had snuck up on her entirely. "But please take me home."

He pressed his brow to hers. "Gladly."

## Epilogue



**(Rain)**

Rain waited for her husband to awaken, hovering beside the bedroom curtains, eager to part them to reveal her surprise. He lay on his back, the ends of his antlers pressing into the pillows, one arm propped behind his head. His chest was bare, and a sheet covered the lower half of his body.

Growing increasingly impatient, she cleared her throat.

His moonlight eyes slitted at her. Slowly, his lips curved upward at the corners. “What are you doing all the way over there?” he asked, his voice low and dreamy. “Come back here and warm my bed.”

“I have something to show you, and it’s positively the most romantic thing I’ve ever done, or ever will do.”

He sat up, scratching a hand down his chest and stretching. “Most romantic? Well, you certainly have my attention.” He fetched his robe and slung it over his shoulders, tying it loosely.

Rain was practically vibrating with excitement by the time he finally made it across the room. “Ready?” she asked.

Grinning, he nodded.

She threw the curtains wide. Night opened the doors and stepped out onto the balcony. Rain studied the side of his face, elated when his silver eyes went big and round. Below them, standing nearly as tall as the withered old oak tree, was the head of the ancient dragon: Yaga.

Night blinked at it for several long minutes without speaking. “Well ... it certainly is romantic.”

Rain crossed her arms proudly over her chest. “I thought so.”

He chortled nervously. “It’s also incredibly disturbing.”

“Disturbing?” She looked at it again, head cocked. No, she was quite certain it was romantic.

“It has eyes, Rain,” he explained. “Or at least, it has one good dead eye, and it’s looking right at me.”

“Well,” she said, chuckling, “I suppose something can be two things, can’t it?”

Night wrapped his arms around her middle and dropped a kiss in her hair. “Yes, two things. Romantic and utterly disturbing.”

“I thought it was a nice gesture.” She waved a hand at it, pouting at him. “Something to remind you of the lengths that I would go to for you, and something to frighten away your enemies, all at the same time.”

He kissed her brow, soothing away her urge to pout. “I have you to frighten away my enemies. I don’t need a giant dragon head.”

“Hm. Maybe it’ll look better on the walls of Castle Maldrom?”

“An excellent idea, or any other place far from here. Let’s make that happen right away.”

Rain stroked her chin. “Sora owes me a great many boons still. I made her vow them to me as penance for leaving me during the battle, so I don’t mind asking her to move it again.”

“Serves her right,” he teased. With a gentle tug on her arm, he guided her back inside, and then he yanked the curtains closed.

Rain smirked at his enthusiasm. “I’ve given you a gift. I’d like you to give me something in return.”

Night linked their fingers together. “Name it, and it’s yours.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you said it that way.” Her voice wobbled with the urge to laugh. “I want you to tell me your names. Your true names.”

Night sucked a breath through his teeth like he’d been injured. “You tricked me.”

“I did not.”

“You did, you vixen. You tricked me.” Pulling her closer, he nuzzled her neck, tickling her with the stubble along his jaw. “Very well, my Bloody Queen of Tricksters. I’ll tell you.” He took a dramatic breath that made Rain roll her eyes. “Arcturus Kimberleigh.”

Rain burst into a fit of giggles. “Oh ... but those aren’t so bad,” she insisted.

He cocked a blue-black brow at her. “Then why are you laughing?”

“Because ... Arcturus and Kimberleigh, well, they are a mouthful, and they’re so ... pretentious.”

“And see, not even your sweet voice can save either of them,” he purred.

Rain pressed herself flush against him, slipping a hand under the fold of his robe to stroke his broad chest. Her palm found the thud of his heart and she planted it there, soaking up the thunderous pulse through the pads of her fingers. “But what if I use my *wicked* voice to say your names?”

“You might be onto something there,” he said, and his broken smile sent her heart galloping out of control. “Now, come and make love to me like it’s the very last time.”

\* \* \*

Winter came and went, and Rain was glad to see the cold go.

She awoke hours before sunset to walk amongst her trees with her Bernard, Clapa riding on his back, wings aflutter. It felt good to feel the warm rays on her skin. The ground was still damp from a recent spring rain, and excitement made her steps light and quick.

Sora had flown in the day before. Every few weeks, she would take a brief holiday from court to visit the meadow she

loved and to spend time with Rain, though she never admitted aloud that Rain was the reason for her frequent trips.

Rain knew it anyway.

Although initially very protective over her mate, Sora had finally allowed Rain to meet the Lunar minstrel, Bragi. He dressed in a fashion that was over a century old. He had an easy smile and a sunny disposition. He made Sora laugh like she was a much younger dragon. They'd share a meal with Rain, then Bragi would play a song on his violin that put tears in Sora's eyes.

Rain was on her way to visit with them again early that evening, but as she neared the edges of the meadow, the sounds of arguing reached her, and she slowed to a halt. Bernard came to a stop at her ankle.

Peering between the trees, she found Sora and her mate shouting at each other. They stood in the tall grass in front of Sora's hut, bellowing so loudly they scared nesting birds out of tree branches and sent butterflies soaring off their flowers. Rain's first instinct was to give them their privacy—she could return another time—but their shouting grew louder still.

*Should we do something?* Bernard asked.

Rain shrugged. The two mates spoke in the mountain tongue, Bragi with a thick Lunar accent, and Rain had no idea what either were saying.

Clapa cheered, amused by the escalating battle of wills.

Rain was about to turn them all away, when the fighting grew so impassioned she worried they'd come to blows. Bragi's big hands were in fists. He towered over the smaller witch. Sora's claws were extended, and her face was red, like she might spit fire at any moment. Rain stepped out of the trees to intervene.

Suddenly the two lovers were kissing. Cleaved to one another in a passionate embrace, they fell together into the grass.

"Gods," Rain breathed, covering her eyes as bits of their clothing were discarded. Cheeks flaming, she turned back for the forest. "Bernard, we should— Bernard?"

He was already gone.

After hiking a safe distance deeper into the forest, she met up with Bernard again, who had Clapa in tow. They continued their walk in peace, and although Rain made no mention of what they'd seen, Bernard occasionally made gagging noises like he had a hairball caught in his throat. Only, Bernard never had hairballs.

He didn't actually have any hair.

Fortunately, that was not the only visit Rain had planned for the day. Hours later, as they circled back toward her favorite spot in the forest, heat from the Penny tree filled her with welcoming warmth. The sight of the cloaked woman before her made her warmer still.

Isla turned to greet her, one foot resting on the root of the great oak. Her long ashen hair unspooled from her hood, and her palm pressed affectionately on the bark of the gilded tree. “This one is very special. I like its energy, sweet and youthful.”

Rain smiled. “She was a very special person.” She found the memory charm tied to her wrist, and she rubbed the flat circular piece of wood between her fingers fondly.

Isla took her in with a curious look, her expression softening. “A friend of yours?”

“She was like a daughter to me,” Rain confessed.

Isla brushed her fingers between the ridges of the bark. “Then I am very sorry indeed that I didn’t get to meet her.”

“She would have liked you,” Rain said.

Isla’s pale brows lifted. “Really?”

“Well ... she liked everyone.”

Isla laughed. “I want to do something special for my niece. Did she have a favorite flower?”

Rain pondered the question for a moment, breathing in the lush spring air, thinking fondly of the auburn-haired girl with her nose always in a book. “She liked all pretty things. She had a smile like sunshine and a heart of pure gold. Her name was Penny.”

“Perfect,” Isla said. She opened her cloak, and Mya flew out of her pocket. The pink-skinned fairy was the size of a

finger. Mya pulled handfuls of something out of her leather clothing. She sprinkled what looked like wispy bits of plant seed about the base of the tree. Isla stooped low, pressing her fingers into the dirt. Green stems sprang from the earth, and little star-like white flowers bloomed, smelling of vanilla. Sweet autumn clematis sprouted in a neat, rounded bed beside the immortal tree.

The Thornbrush family flower.

Tears welled in Rain's eyes. The memory flat warmed between her fingers, and the Penny tree shook its auburn leaves contentedly. "Penny would have liked that," she said, her voice breaking.

Isla shifted her weight onto one knee and peered up at her sister. "I hope your mate knows how grateful I am that he's allowing me to visit with you here."

Rain gave her a watery smile. "He would want me to tell you he isn't doing it for you."

Isla's returning grin was impish, and for a brief moment, she looked less like the regal queen and more like the playful girl Rain remembered. "I'm grateful all the same."

"Me too."

"When he sent a Lunar mage to serve as a guardian in my court, I admit I was suspicious at first," Isla said, and Rain chuckled at the memory. "But then the mage informed me her job was to ensure that no harm befalls me that would deprive the Night King of his chance to use a dagger on me." Isla rose

out of her crouch, dusting dirt from her hands on the front of her cloak. “Is it strange that his efforts to preserve me so that he can one day in the distant future kill me makes me ... fond of him?”

“If it’s strange,” Rain said, “then it’s a peculiarity we share. Perhaps it’s a hereditary trait.”

Rain spent hours with her sister and looked forward to hours more next month, when she would travel to the Seelie side of the Eventide to visit Isla and her trees. They parted ways after the sun had set.

During the walk home, night fell around them. The old woods awoke. As the darkness enveloped Rain and her friends, the shadows glinted like the skies above, filling with the blinking eyes of the wild things.

Clapa hummed nervously at the sight of all those hungry gazes.

*Don't worry, Bernard reassured her, they know we're not prey. They just like to watch our Rain to know where she is. Animals have good instincts, and they wisely fear the goddess of tricksters.*

The End

\* \* \*

It would mean the world to me if you'd leave a review. Thank you for reading! Rain and Night's story has ended, but there's a new trickster in town. Check them out at

<https://mybook.to/wantonwitch>.

## Glossary of Common Terms

**Witch** – An immortal who gifted a piece of their soul to another immortal in exchange for service or companionship.

**Familiar** – An immortal with blood magic who accepts a piece of soul from another in exchange for powerful abilities such as shape-changing and the ability to escape death. The following magical beings are capable of utilizing blood magic: dragons, fairies, and demons.

**Trickster** – A being who can change their form with magic.

**Frey** – A fae lord.

**Frey Magis** – A fae great lord or king.

**Ardis** – Old elven term of endearment meaning husband-mate or groom.

**Lausat** – Old elven term of endearment meaning wife-mate or bride.

**Will** – The power of one’s connection to the divines built on the user’s inner strength.

**Divines** – Holy creators including the Divine Day, Divine Night, and Divine Terra.

**Gods** – The direct descendants of the divines.

**Vanir** – Demi-god descendants of the Divine Night and fae, ancestors of the Lunar Court.

**Seelie** – A hybrid race of immortals made up of the descendants of elves and fae. The Seelie live in the northernmost provinces of the Faelands, in lush forests and woodlands, where the temperature is kept warm by the abundance of immortal trees. The Seelie are ruled by the Tree Court, and Isla Thornbrush is their queen.

**Lunar Court** – The fae descendants of the Vanir. They live in the central-most province of the Faelands bordered by the great river, the Eventide, ruled by the Duke of Night.

**Unseelie** – A hybrid race of immortals made up of the descendants of dragons and trickster fae. The Unseelie live in the mountains and valleys in the southernmost provinces of the

Faerlands, ruled by the Mountain Court. The ancient dragon Yaga is their king. The Mountain Court is also inhabited by a great many magical creatures, including fairies, giants, trolls, brownies, goblins, centaurs ...

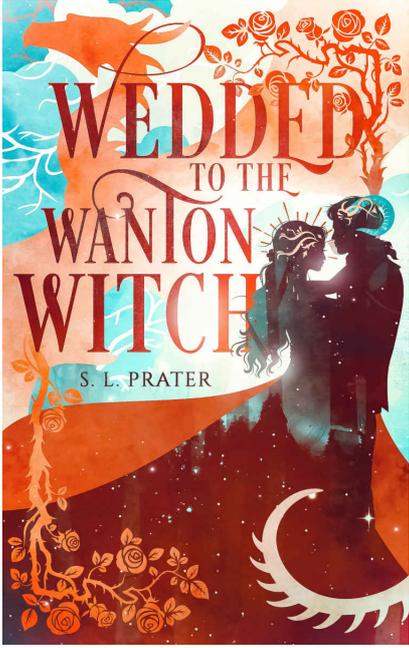
**Glamour** – Magic that occurs naturally without access to the divines.

**Mage** – An immortal with a connection to the divines, able to summon divine magic and cast spells with it.

**Blood Magic** – A magic system made by trading life force for spellcasting.

**Bargain Magic** – Magic cast by an agreement made between two immortals, powered by the bargainers' soul and blood. Death is certain for those who fail to comply with the terms of the bargain.

Also by S. L. Prater



### **The bargainer ...**

Just like the fae of legend, Jonas Moen makes advantageous deals no desperate soul can turn away. A talented trickster, he's amassed such great wealth he's rumored to have more gold than the king himself. But there's one thing he's yet to acquire: a fae lord's title. Born a commoner, he continues to be denied entry to the best the Lunar Court has to offer.

If he can secure the hand of a titled woman, he'll finally have it all. First, he'll need to find a lady desperate enough to ignore his humble parentage and his wicked character.

### **The wanton witch ...**

Years ago, Lady Frances Aaberg sacrificed her reputation for a man she thought she loved, only to lose it all, including a piece of her soul. Now a desperate witch, she'll do what's needed to save her family from financial ruin, even if that means entertaining the offer of a marriage of convenience from the wicked bargainer himself.

Jonas Moen is distractingly handsome and his penchant for dry sarcasm is admittedly amusing, but Frances makes it clear that anything more than a business arrangement between partners is not an option. She entertains his offer of matrimony but resists when a mate bond begins to blossom between them. The last time a man promised her the world, she lost everything.

Only a fool would trust the wicked Bargainer with their heart ...



S. L. PRATER

## **A Recipe for Disaster: Malicious Magic, Shifting Political Powers, and a Forbidden Love**

<https://mybook.to/streetwitch>

Marnie is a gifted witch—but magic has a mind of its own. Left unrestrained, it will always misbehave. When a demonic curse threatens Lord Bran, a man she's loved since childhood, Marnie uses her abilities to save him.

After years of suppressing their feelings—knowing the relationship is prohibited by the Church of the Cloth—the two succumb to their passion. Her growing power triggers a dangerous political war—and their relationship is doomed before it begins.

Now the couple must decide whether to keep their love a secret or face imminent persecution ... knowing they may not survive.