

THE FAE OF THE FOREST

MOUNTAIN
OF
MIRRORS
AND
STARLIGHT

KATHERINE MACDONALD

MOUNTAIN OF DREAMS AND STARLIGHT

A SNOW WHITE RETELLING

IT

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Cover Design by Rebecca F Kenney (RFK designs)

Chapter headings: Elisha Bugg (Inkwolf designs)

ISBN: 9798373658546

Follow author at:

Twitter: @KateMacAuthor

Instagram: Katemacdonald89

Tiktok: @Katemacauthor

Website: Katherinemacdonaldauthor.com



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PART ONE
THE MORTAL REALM

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1

THE PRINCESS OF FAERIE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nervous, daughter?" Juliana asked.

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

A blood-curdling shriek sounded from behind them, followed by a thump and the braying of horses. The two women turned; the royal carriage, whilst not under attack, had come to a sudden halt.

"Oh dear," Juliana said, "the boys seem to have run into a spot of trouble. Should we perhaps return to them?"

Aislinn knew her brother's screams well enough to know he was no

n—andreal danger. This was a surprise shriek, not an *oh-dear-I-appear-to-have-been-hermyself-on-fire-again* shriek, or an *oh-dear-mortal-peril* shriek. Sure enough, when the carriage door was wrenched back, it revealed nothing but Aislinn, this father and brother pressed at opposite sides of the box, and a small eared black cat sitting on the floor between them.

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

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

g more “I was more worried about him,” Juliana said, pointing to their son. Beau climbed off the seat, brushing down his blue-green double hair, looked a lot like their father, with a smooth face and sharp cheekbones, the same deep-sea eyes, though his dark hair didn’t quite reach the married feather depths of Hawthorn’s. His appearance was softer too, and he had them more than one occasion—particularly when he was in a more femininened far—been mistaken for a girl.

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

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

t lie, at “You brought your *cat* with you?” Aislinn asked, wondering how she noticed her for the past several days of their journey.

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

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

Everyone paused. They were all quite certain that Hecate was not, in trouble, normal cat. For starters, she’d been around since Beau and Aislinn children, and had always been old. She had a tendency to disappear in any months on end and reappear as if nothing had happened. She also had

...ve-set-of looking at you as if she were peering into the depths of your soul, enough, Hawthorn had pointed out many times before, a lot of cats did that. Aislinn's Most likely she was some kind of cat-seelie hybrid, but as she was calm, frost-benign, and Beau was particularly fond of her, her presence was tolerated in the castle.

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

...aming. "Is everything all right, Your Majesties?" came the voice of Miriam Bath, Captain of the Guard, and Hawthorn and Juliana's most trusted advisor. Like Aislinn, she'd clearly learnt to detect the differences in Beau's scent. Hever the years of loyal service. Her husband, Barney, had been their friend since they were children, and growing up.

... raven- "Quite all right, Miriam," Hawthorn returned. "It's just the cat."

... had on "Again?" Miriam groaned. "Never mind. Shall I restart the procession?"

... e mood "One moment." Hawthorn turned to Aislinn. "Trade places with me for a moment." "What?"

"I require your horse."

"But *why*?"

... ie'd not "I wish to ride beside your mother in the starry-eyed manner of our youth. Perhaps she'll even scowl at me for old times' sake. Ah, there you are. It must be delightful."

Aislinn groaned, but did as she was bid, dismounting and casting a glance in her father's direction. It did no good to argue, especially on small roads. In fact, she'd had the horse most of the morning.

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

... l a way Beau looked up at her, Hecate purring contentedly in his lap. "You're a good girl."

but, across. Do you want to stroke the cat?"

"I don't want to stroke the cat, Beau!"

seemed "What do you want, then?"

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

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

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

There was nothing to do but wait and wish.



of youth.

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

King Owen met them on the steps, as did the entirety of his staff. He was a portly gentleman with silver hair and a red face, wearing a crimson robe and a gold crown, both heavily embellished yet poorly crafted.

you seem

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

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

king me A thin drizzle had washed over the flagstones, turning them silver.

introductions were delayed under the rush to get inside. Servants trotted nervously around the party, giving them a wide berth as they were led into the castle and escorted straight into the main hall, a room strung with banners. Despite the colour—and Aislinn’s half-fae eyes—it felt impossibly gloomy.

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

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

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

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

Owen raised an eyebrow. “Crown princess, eh? How peculiar. You may hear me say a woman can’t rule, though. My late wife managed it for twenty years.” He gestured to a tapestry nearby, where a dark-haired woman was rendered in thread. “My Gwyn,” he said. “Gone these six months past. The castle hasn’t been the same without her.”

yard. “My condolences,” said Hawthorn.

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

“I am in no rush,” Aislinn returned, hoping she didn’t sound too arrogant.

Why were the mortal world so obsessed with marriage? She'd yet to
Imortal castle and not be asked a similar question, or worse—have someone
try to make her a highly unflattering offer. “I have centuries to plan
after all.”

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

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

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

Owen laughed. “Sorry, Princess, I am merely unused to conversing
front ofyoung, unmarried women—you *are* young, I take it? Hard to tell what
als hadfae.”

“I am nineteen, Sire.”

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

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

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

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

u’ll not “Yet,” Juliana added, flashing her daughter a wink.

r many “Swordswomen?” Owen said, eyes round. “My, my! How, er, unusu-

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

Owen went very quiet for a moment after that, and the rest of the
ie eyes.continued in relative peace. They were led away to their own chambers
rest, a cold and draughty set of rooms furnished in red and gold. The
moyed.and ceilings were painted with leaves of ochre and crimson, though

visit aplaster was cracked and peeling. Beau fixed a few of the cracks with someonemagic, the tears knitting back together beneath the soft glow of his light. Aislinn could do little things like that too, but it took her too long and she looked the same so she'd largely given up trying.

Bowls of water had been set out for them—lukewarm by now, of course. Heating water, at least, was easy enough. She took off her travelling dress and changed into one of the gowns she'd brought with her: billowing and printed with a forest scene of apples and deer and stitched with silver silks.

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

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

"I like having my options open, though."

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

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

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

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

"Ssh, Beau!"

He held up his hands.

The main hall was awash with courtiers when they arrived. A tree

with his musicians had set up in the corner, singing a jaunty tune. Even they
fingers. to quieten when Aislinn and Beau entered the room, although they spa
d never again when King Owen welcomed them and gestured to the table.

looked longingly across the room for another friendly face, but—
course. She froze.

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

ig blue, Beau brushed the back of her hand, although he could sense it. “Phe
stars. he prompted. “The blackberry sauce is... not bad.”

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

Hawthorn paused, almost imperceptibly, selecting his next words ca
ublet in The alliance with Owen was a new one—it did not do to show his h
ound to early. “We keep a balanced force,” he responded. “Magic and brawn b

In truth, Aislinn knew, their military forces were small. No one ha
; busied invade Faerie in hundreds of years, although there were some amor
d game subjects who believed the mortal world needed a reminder that the
and the something to fear.

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

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

“Your Majesty?” Hawthorn prompted. “Are you well?”

ime we “I was just wondering if things might have been different if you
visiting six months ago, with all this extra power.”

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

oupe of “My son was taken,” Owen explained. “Right after my wife died.”

seemed The table went quiet.

rked up “Taken?” Juliana asked eventually. “How? And by whom?”

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

asant?” Aislinn couldn’t imagine a world where a bit of snow prevented passage.

Whilst magic was not one of her greatest skills, she could summon lightning and fire, and she could summon hellfire with a click of her fingers to burn through most things given time.

ich of a “Path opened up again a few months back,” Owen continued, “but by the time they were long gone. I hoped, at first, that they would want to bargain with us. They refused. I had to come to terms with them. I hope your father’s probably dead.”

oth.” Once more, silence settled over the table.

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

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

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

Beau probably knew more, but he was currently feeding tiny snails.

pheasant to the cat that had managed to crawl under the table.

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

Owen’s frown increased. “One of your party?”
“My daughter,” Hawthorn suggested. “She is our finest tracker, perhaps her mother, and I prefer having her by my side, unless she’s needed for the hunt.”

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

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

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

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

Owen’s eyes widened. “It seems I have underestimated you.”
Aislinn smirked, waving away her flames—which was just as well, she wasn’t sure how long she could keep that up. Beau was the magical family. She desperately, *desperately* wanted to warn the king not to repeat his habit of underestimating women, but she also knew that the point of this trip was to try and make allies, not enemies.

Aislinn didn’t have her father’s silver tongue or her mother’s confidence, but she could find the King’s stupid son, if he was still alive. She could do this. “It happens, my liege,” she said, forcing a smile, “but I assure you I will do this. If your son is alive, I will bring him home.”

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A GATHERING OF WEAPONS

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

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

Aislinn stared at him. “No.”

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

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

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of a way.”

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

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

dancers, and they fell into the step, following the movements of the other

“You are very elegant, Princess Aislinn.”

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

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

“I do about some things.”

“Oh? Such as?”

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

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

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

arm.

doublet

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

of way.

Yes, thought Aislinn, although that did not mean she had to like

r, more

“Would it offend you if I said no?”

Osian of

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

The song drew to a lull, but Osian did not let go of her waist. Aislinn

flip him over in a second and have the blade she’d stashed beneath her

at his throat in three, but she heeded her father’s warning.

“Our

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

host’s

accompany her.

?”

The minute they were out of view, she pressed him against the wall

seemed to enjoy that, too.

and once

He enjoyed it less when she let loose her glamour, her power snaking

his eyes, but by the time he realised that anything was amiss, he was

her thrall.

at he’d

Her father had rules about glamouring mortals—laws even. He’d ordered

words the

her to learn because he felt that firstly it was a skill she should have

emergencies, and secondly because he knew nothing piqued curiosity much as the forbidden. Aislinn, for the most part, avoided using it, and had an opportunity where she considered it 'fair'.

She believed this counted.

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

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

"Then why this foolish attempt to charm me?"

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

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

She released him from the glamour and ducked outside of the doorway, nearly bumping straight into Beau. "Ah," he said briskly. "I was just wondering if you could check if..."

"If I needed rescuing?"

"Um..." Beau seemed to be searching for the answer that would annoy her.

"I don't need anyone to fight my battles for me."

"Why not? You fight plenty of mine."

"Only when you need me to."

Beau sighed. "You're allowed to let people help you, you know. It's not some sign of weakness—"

"People get hurt when they help me."

"Ais—"

He reached out to grab her arm, but she shucked him off. "This

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

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

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

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

"What's with the hay bale?" he asked.

Aislinn did not pause. "I wanted to throw them at the headboard, but purposefully damaging our host's furniture did not seem like the mark of a true princess."

"So... a hay bale then?"

"It was the best I could do, but it's nothing like stabbing *real flesh*."

"I worry about you sometimes."

Aislinn at last looked up. "What's with the glasses?"

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

"Beau—"

"Don't I look dashing?"

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

"By 'funny' do you mean 'terrible'? Because yes, yes they are." He placed his hand on his heart. "I promise to only outwardly display at

proved afor the women of court, although it feels like I'm shutting half of
away."

at they "Read a book. You'll be fine."

good as "That does tend to usually help..." Beau paused. "I could come with
I saw it, you know."

"What?"

written "To rescue the prince. I could come with you. I'm not *completely*
in the field—"

"Who called you useless?"

"Umm? You? Several times."

rds but "I have no memory of this."

irk of a "It was last week, Ais."

Aislinn sighed, tossing her knife aside and throwing herself on one
beds. She wriggled uncomfortably over the lumpy mattress. Beau
blame her; mortal beds left a lot to be desired.

He flopped down next to her. It was just as bad as he imagined. "I
trying to prove something by going alone?"

is nose. "I'm not trying to prove anything. I just want silence and the oppo
res, and to stab something."

in his "That does sound plausible." He stared up at the fabric draped over
posts. "Strange that the dwarves would kidnap the prince."

"Why's that?"

"Well, it's not really their style. They're short tempered, but an hon
n gone people, from what I can gather."

"No entire race can be completely honourable."

sighed, "What's the motive, then? Not greed, if they haven't tried to ransom

fection "Maybe they accidentally killed the brat and are just covering their

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

“I don’t know him.”

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

“I don’t like him.”

useless “His sadness is real.”

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

“They went to source you some rope for your journey. They may be a little late of the time.”

“I didn’t see them.” “Why do you say that?”

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

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



ourable

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

to him.”

tracks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

a large could be Miriam was on duty outside, but she gave Aislinn nothing but a cold look and a look of ‘of course it’s you’ and said nothing. She was used to sneaking out, and trusted that she wouldn’t go far. Aislinn tiptoed along

low her stone, cape fluttering behind her like a pair of wings, and slipped into the main hall.

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

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

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

One of the tapestries showed the prince as a young man—a third of his age, a pale-faced creature, who looked like a harsh winter might find him inoffensive. Aislinn wondered if the theory of him expiring and the dwarves covering their tracks wasn't a good one. Oh well, at least it would get him out of the castle.

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

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

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

"The king likes some company at night."

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

nto the “It isn’t like that,” said the serving woman, a bony lady with hair s
with silver. “He just finds it difficult to sleep sometimes. He misses his
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“We all do,” continued the servant.

“And the prince?”

The servant flinched, almost imperceptibly. “Yes, of course. Him too.” She stared at his likeness. “He missed his birthday,” she said quietly. “If he even saw it all.” She pulled down her candle. “Will that be all, Your Highness?”

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



3

THE PRINCE OF THE WOODS

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

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

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

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

“Speak your mind, Father.”

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

“Father—”

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

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

“Faster is not safer.”

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

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

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

“Shame. It’s a great story,” he remarked, somewhat wistfully. “Try to remember these memories—”

“I’m leaving now!”

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

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



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

For a moment, even the mission didn't matter. She lifted the glamour if youher cloak the moment she was free of the towns, and galloped through fields with her cape splayed out like a pair of glittering dragonfly wings. A princess of Faerie. No tool for mortals. A being, wild and free. It took her most of the morning to reach the base of what the mortals called the mountains. Her home city of Acanthia stood beneath the shadow of vast icy cliffs that marked the border of Winter; these slopes seemed like steep, craggy hills. They were expansive, though, and no doubt far easier to traverse when covered with snow.

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

It was long, exhausting work, and she had to stop to rest several times, tired from the exercise or the sheer monotony of the task. A snapping dragon nudged her cheek as she bent to inspect markings in the ground, deciding they were likely to be deer-made, not dwarven. She paused, nose, glancing at the sky. Nightfall was a couple of hours away.

Deciding to cover more ground before it grew dark, she headed deeper into the mountain range, into thick copses of trees that wove together like ebony threads beneath a sky alight with ribbons of gold and flame. She closed her eyes, trying to call upon the magic of the forest, though she was a mortal one and didn't whisper to her like the forests of Faerie. Still, something hummed inside her, a feeling she couldn't name, tugging against her heart.

It turned her towards the right.

ur from Tracks in the mud ahead bore the imprint of a deer—possibly
ugh the looking at the heaviness of prints. That didn't interest her; she'd cau
s. trail of several deer earlier in the day.

What *did* interest her were the tracks of large, heavy boots.
s called Aislinn slid off Snapdragon's back and went to inspect them closer.
s of the Male, most likely, judging by the size. Could they be a dwarf's, too
d more looked rather large for one, but she was fairly sure that, despite the
r harder stature, dwarves were known to have large feet, and be quite heavy f
size.

ing for She glanced behind her. There were no tracks leading up the mounta
quickly the nearest town in the other direction was miles and miles away, beh
p Beaupeak. It seemed unlikely any human had come from that direction.

ed wild The tracks were fresh. Whoever made them was nearby.

Aislinn went back to Snapdragon and tied his reins to a nearby tr
l times, would be quieter on foot, and she needed the upper hand if she was t
her prey.

1 a tree Dwarves, she knew, were immune to glamours in general, but he
tted his was spelled to shift in colour—not technically a glamour. She dul
painted wings to a simple, forest green, pulled up her hood, and slun

l north, the path, keeping to the shadows of the trees until they branched out.

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

ough it Aislinn inched closer, more carefully.

The mud gave way to stone, obscuring any printed tracks, but she
a hard to be deterred. They could easily pick them up again once the stor
way. She kept moving, faster now, fearing she would lose them. She s

a stag, for flecks of mud along the pebbly road, upturned stones, bits of bent light through the weaving between the rocks—

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

They? The stag.

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

It was still warm.

Whoever shot it was nearby.

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

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

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

Aislinn disliked it almost as much as she enjoyed it.

“You’re not a dwarf,” she said.

The tanned face stared back at her. “You’re not a palace guard,” he replied, gaveling at the dagger nearby. Evidently, it must have been like the one he favored.

“If only I could say your powers of observation are astonishing.”

it grassclearly, that is not the case.”

The man glared back at her, brow slightly furrowed. She wondered nothing was her turn of phrase that confused him, the inability to state things one, grey. He glanced at the side of her head, where her ears peeked through her hair.

A gloved hand reached up to touch her ear cuffs, to examine whether the flesh beneath matched what the metal concealed.

lead—a His eyes widened when the cuff came away.

“*Fae*,” he whispered, scrambling to his feet. He drew his dagger behind his back.

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

He did not seem convinced.

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

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

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

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

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

“Right...”

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

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

“The rumour is that they kidnapped a prince. I’ve been sent to...”

suppose I can't share that." Because even though Owen wanted it retrieved, her father was more interested in discovering the reason outright kidnapping in the first place. It would not help if this stranger revealed her hair. Hawthorn's interest in the dwarves to anyone else. He needed to make her the of Owen, not an enemy.

"Can't?" The man raised an eyebrow. "Or won't?"

"I may have something of a joint mission."

between "May?"

"You're a distrustful sort of chap, aren't you?"

ear cuff. "Says the girl talking in riddles."

Aislinn scowled. "Have you seen the dwarves or not?"

"No dwarves around here," he said, jaw tightening. "Haven't seen months."

to hurt Aislinn narrowed her eyes. "You're lying to me."

—"No, I'm not—"

to trick "I'm accustomed to living with a liar, don't insult me further. It would irritate me for you." She moved forward, picking up her sword.

' "You said you wouldn't attack—"

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

over my "That's—" He started backwards, falling over a tree root. Aislinn kicked the dagger out of his hand.

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

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

Aislinn's head turned, following his glance. The stag was in the well. It climbing to its feet with awkward, jerky movements, its neck hanging

ed him where the bolt had skewered it. White, empty eyes stared out of
for his sockets.

ported It was very obviously dead.

an ally And still moving.

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

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

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

It couldn't feel pain.

any for It charged again, flinging Aislinn off its back. She rolled against the
earthy floor, skidding upright, diving for her other dagger as it turned
stagged. She raced forward, slicing its side as she skidded past
although half its insides spilled out, it didn't stop.

n't end She'd heard of the undead before, but she'd never encountered them
was one of the darkest magics in Faerie, prohibited by all. She'd half
off in the lessons that had mentioned them, assuming she'd never
defendfight any.

She would just cut off its head. That tactic usually stopped anything
nocked *But how was it here in the first place?*

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

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

"Move!" she hissed.

oving, He didn't.

; limply The stag charged.

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

The stag reached them before the spell could even form in her mind, massive antlers spearing her middle and driving her back against the stone wall. Aislinn cried out, but the pain didn't reach her—not fully. All that mattered was this hot, explosive feeling, the desperate need to survive.

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

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

She cried out then.

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

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

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She cried out then.

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

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



4

THE HOME OF THE DWARVES

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

Pain lanced through her, forcing her back down.

She was accustomed to pain. A seasoned warrior. She’d broken 1
bones in her body at one point or another.

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

Well, aside from once.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Medicine. It’ll help rebuild your strength. You lost a lot of blood, girl. Drink it.” Aislinn stared at the potion.

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

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

Nothing happened.

“I don’t... I’m not healing.”

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

Another dwarf appeared in the doorway, taller than the other one, older. She had charcoal hair, deep brown skin, and eyes as dark as pitch. Her throat bore three white scars across it.

“Ah, Flora,” she said, in a voice like honey and whiskey. “How is your patient?”

“Alive and kicking, as you see.”

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

“Steady, steady!” Flora said. “The boy’s fine, lass. He brought you here. And as for where *you* are, well... you’re in our home. A cottage in the mountains. You’re safe enough here. Do no harm to us, and we’ll do the same for you. Dwarven code.”

of it all “And... the stag?”

The dwarves exchanged quick glances.

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

girly.” “Not without *reason*.”

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

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

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

“My father doesn’t believe so.”

“Oh? And who’s your father?”

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

We’re The dwarves fell silent. They stared at each other solidly.

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

They both stepped outside, closing the door behind them.

, not as Aislinn took a moment to survey the rest of the room. It was a ch. Herpractical space, with a high-up window that let in four small squares of

Shelves lined most of the space, filled with books and jars, stuff with w’s theand potions. Drawings of medicinal plants were tacked to the wall rummaged through the drawers—clothes and bandages, needles with containers attached to them.

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

ou here. The door banged open again, and in walked another dwarf, the ot in thebehind her. She was bronze-skinned with a head of fine silvery-brown none toand her eyes were steel and amber. She looked to be in that gap b

middle and old age, her face creased and fixed in something like a permanent scowl.

ne dead Their dwarven leader, without a doubt.

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

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

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

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

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

“Stepson,” Minerva corrected. “And we didn’t kidnap him. He ran away small, Aislinn paused, taking all this in. “I... that’s not what... *why?*”

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

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

s was a King Owen had married the former queen. He wasn’t the rightful heir. Caerwyn was.

her two And he’d just missed his birthday.

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

manent Not a boy. Not a boy at all.

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

leep, as He wanted him *dead*. He just needed to be sure.

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

Bellona “He did.”

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

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

“So he's—”

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

Aislinn sunk into the pillow, burying her face.

er does “Don't worry, pet, he didn't take it too personally. Carried yo himself. Quite the image.”

way.” Aislinn blushed. She was not accustomed to being carried, particul strong mortal men who... well. That hardly mattered.

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

ain. She “You'll do no such thing,” Flora snapped.

was still “You won't be in any—”

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

Aislinn winced, touching the thick bandages around her middle. S it wasunaccustomed to being told to rest, and despite what Flora said ab alm. Ahealing, she took longer to heal than most. A downside of her mortal h

She cursed the fact you couldn't heal yourself. She wasn't the best

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

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

nuscled



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

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

"You're up!" said a cheery voice.

Aislinn turned towards the kitchen. A tiny dwarf emerged from behind a cupboard, whisking something in a large bowl. She was far smaller than the other three Aislinn had met so far, barely meeting her middle, and unlike the others she was as pale as a moonbeam, a ghost of spring. Flowers said she was a healer,

once—braids of her milk-white hair, offset by the periwinkle blue of her eyes to heallooked almost like an elfin child, although Aislinn knew she was likely than she was—dwarves could live for some six hundred to eight hundred years, but unlike fae, they were slow to age. Fae were much like humans the first twenty-five years or so.

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

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

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

“Oh, no, please. Make me useful.”

Luna’s grin widened. “You sit there,” she said. “I’ll get you peeling.” Another dwarf came in as Aislinn began with the apples. She introduced herself as “Fortuna Springshard, but you may call me Fort.” She was a battle-scarred warrior with short, cinnamon-coloured hair, brown slumberously amber eyes. She had a pair of pistols strapped to either side of her back, which she started cleaning at the table only to be shooed by Luna to a workbench. Her fingers moved quickly over the parts of her weapons, low for someone used to sleight of hand. She reminded Aislinn of a fox.

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

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

“Are you... a family?”

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

“Can you tell me what you’re doing on the surface?” It was rare

es. Shedwarves in the mortal realm, though she'd heard of it happening. You
ly olderfind them in parts of Faerie—usually integrated into other
undredcommunities, lest the rest of the world forget about them entirely.

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

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

Beau.

ou like Aislinn could still count the number of times she'd spent a night
it's nofrom him, other than the two years she'd known before he was be
years that she didn't even remember. The longest she'd ever been apa
him was when she'd been hunting that rogue giant with Cassandra—

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

roduced Her midsection ached. How long would it take him to worry?
a small,father. Hawthorn could be a bit... *dramatic* when it came to defend
kin andfamily. Her mother would probably assume she could handle it, b
thighs,then...

to the “I don't suppose there's any way I could get word to Afelcarreg C.
ns, likethere?”

Fort and Luna went quiet for a moment.

“We'd prefer not to let the King know where we are,” said Fort shor

“I know you're probably worried about your family—” Luna c
voice soft, “but—”

ly,” she “I wouldn't tell them about you,” Aislinn added. *Not by letter, any*
f that'sjust need to let them know I'm safe. If I can't get a letter to them, n
could enchant a bird, or something—”

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

1 might “Diana?”

small “Our hunter. She won’t be too long now.”

Aislinn set her mind to peeling the potatoes, trying not to move her at onetoo much. Fort and Luna both seemed to understand this, and set their down in places where she wouldn’t have to turn. Luna chatted in curiosityteaching her a couple of dwarven ditties and giving her a lesson in dough. Fort retrieved her weapons for her—clean and newly polished.

“I’ll need your word that you won’t use these against us,” she said. it away Aislinn promised. “I won’t use these weapons or any others again or, unless first attacked or under threat of my life, at very least for the duration frommy stay here.”

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

Or her “And harder. We’re a naturally distrustful bunch.”

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

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

ffered, Although why would he want to?

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

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

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

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

“Princess,” he said, his features tight, “you seem to have lost your head.” Aislinn didn’t know why he was sneering at her title in such a way that erased any gratitude she might have felt for the safe return of her mourning.

“*Prince*,” she returned. “I’d bow but I’m in pain and also I don’t want to waste you.” “Play nicely, children,” Minerva said, appearing behind her. “It’s time for dinner.”

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

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

“Aislinn,” she repeated, wishing she could offer one of the mortal words that didn’t take— ‘it’s nice to meet you’ and ‘it’s a pleasure’ were far more polite, and Diana’s words rarely true. ‘It may be nice to meet you, but I need more time to be alone.’ Diana had seldom sat well with people.

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

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

“That’s Magna, pet,” Diana said, “but she doesn’t speak with her tongue.”

“Yeah, she’s got better things to do,” Bell added, passing her a gear. The gear had sprung free. Magna snatched the gear from her fingers with a

enthusiasm of a squirrel with a nut, and added it to her method of the organised collection. It seemed extremely important to her.

up to a “Don’t be worried if she doesn’t look you in the eyes or ignores you while whilst she gets used to you. It’s just her way.”

orse.” Aislinn shrugged. “My Aunt Aoife rarely looks me in the eyes and, and it known me my whole life. That’s her way, too.”

it. “Mortals would say she was a changeling,” Caerwyn spoke up, “I want to.” Aislinn in the eye for the first time since his rude arrival. “A faerie child almost in place of their own. I daresay that’s not the truth?”

“Absolutely not,” said Aislinn, leaving out that fact faeries absolutely moving use to kidnap mortal children who caught their fancy in centuries gone by—they’d just never leave one of their own in its place. Faerie children were considered far too valuable to abandon. Caerwyn already seemed wary of the pink-blue, fae and she wasn’t going to give him more ammunition.

ing like “Sit down, Caer,” Minerva instructed.

Caerwyn stilled. There was only one space left at the table; the seat was taken by Aislinn.

lthough “But—” he started.

ie sure’ Minerva fixed him with a steely look, and he slid obediently into the seat, tugging down the cuffs of his turned-up sleeves over his tanned, veiny forearms. Aislinn tried not to stare. Faerie arms were usually slender and willowy—they didn’t look like that, didn’t have tiny pink scars on them, like he had when he’d been touched by flecks of fire. A few of her mortal acquaintances were muscular and robust—and one of her oldest friends, a half-minotaur named Daisy, was no exception. “Daisy was just *Daisy* to her—a warm, horned, grey-skinned presence that had been in life since she was born. She’d never once admired his arms before.” *Looked*, she told herself. *You’ve never once looked at his arms before*

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

And she's "Turnip and rabbit stew," Luna declared, catching Aislinn's look. "I hope you like it."

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

What she did "Eat everything on your plate," Caerwyn whispered. "And feel free to ask for more by...for more."

And she were "What? Why?"

Why of the "It's a dwarf thing. It's rude to leave anything on your plate, and it's manners to ask for more. They love feeding people. Just do it. It's dwarf number three and four."

Next to "What's one and two?"

"Um, drinking is good and braids are always in fashion? Look, I'm sure they're properly numbered, I just know to eat and drink when I'm in a space. The dwarves ate, and drank, and laughed as they did both, and everything and nothing in particular. From time to time, they'd turn to Aislinn—asking her questions about her life in Acanthia and what she liked to do. It'd been fun. Simple, kind, non-probing questions.

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

Why. But From what she could work out from their stories, they had all known that they had Avalinth, the great dwarven stronghold beneath the earth, but had left before. They'd come here for undisclosed reasons and come here some years ago. They'd taken Caerwyn with them.

beneath when he fled from the palace, even helping block up the path where he had been. Owen sent guards after him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re in his,” Flora explained.

“He’s welcome to have it—”

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

Judging by Caerwyn’s face, he clearly *did* mind, but he shrugged and bolted the doors.

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

“They fall asleep fast,” Caerwyn explained.

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

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

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

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

e in the “Given how old my language is, I suspect it is the other way arou

Aislinn is Irish, not Welsh.” ” Aislinn paused, waiting for a reacti
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“I have my reasons to be wary.”

“Would you care to share any of them?”

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

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5

A DREAM AND A NIGHTMARE

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

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

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

“Caer...”

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

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

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

Caer frowned. “Do? I didn’t—”

But suddenly his mother’s skin shrivelled from her bones, until she more than an animated corpse, a skeleton held together by threads of light. Her eyes sunk, her cheeks hollowed, her lips vanished leaving only a hollow gap, which chattered as the world screamed around him.

“*Why did you do this, Caer?*”

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

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

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

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

He wanted to run from it.

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

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Caer breathed carefully, in and out, counting like Minerva had taught him during his first few nights. She was the only one of the dwarves who always sleep soundly.

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

this to He'd had a wooden horse as a child—a tiny one he could carry in his pocket, made with real horse hair, its saddle painted apple-red. He'd concentrated on the slope of its neck, the softness of its mane, how beautiful it was no eyes had once been.

of flesh. The hold of the dream ebbed away.

a stark, "Fine, fine," he said. "Just a nightmare—"

"You look hot—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only when the distance grew did Caer realise that, foolish as it was,

in his wanted her to sit beside him. Her—anyone. Anyone warm and real.
ed. He “My brother and I would share our nightmares when we were ch
lack itsshe said. The soft quality of her voice startled him. He had not thou
there was any softness about Aislinn at all—she was dagger sharp, as t
gooseberry. But she looked and sounded softer in the moonlight, h
silver in the dewy glow of the moon.

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

He cleared his throat. “Not anymore?”
refer?” “They got too real, the older we grew.”

He understood that, and found himself wondering what she *did* dr
't wastethe childish fantasies turned into grown-up nightmares.

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

ht with Despite the nightmare still scratching at the corner of his mind, Cae
once tohimself smiling. “Beau is your brother?”

Minerva She nodded.

maybe, “You’re close to him?”

anyone “Very,” she said, as if confessing to some great secret. “Don’t tell a
“Secret’s safe with me.”

∴ A pause rippled between them.

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

“Hmm, a few times, yes. Mostly after we’d spent the day riding ther
horrible Caer paused, certain he’d misheard. “You’ve... ridden bees?”

. “Giant ones, yes.”

∫. “You’ve ridden a giant bee?”

as, he’d “Ah huh.”

“You’re not just teasing me?”

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

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

her skin She grinned, sly as a fox. “Much practice.” A yawn eased past her lips.

she stood up fully, glancing towards her door. “I suppose I ought to go to bed...”

“Might be an idea.”

“If you wake again...”

“Yes?”

beam of, “Just... keep the noise down. I might have to do something unspeakable if you do.”

at then I He snorted, mostly at the use of the word *might*. An empty

“Goodnight, Aislinn.”

she found “Goodnight.”

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anyone.”

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“You’re not just teasing me?”

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

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

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

“Might be an idea.”

“If you wake again...”

“Yes?”

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

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

“Goodnight.”



6 A WHISPER IN THE ROOM

It had been two full days now since Aislinn had left, and while he knew that it was foolish to start worrying so soon, he found he could help himself.

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

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

Hawthorn blinked. “I’m happy!”

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

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

“Not from you.”

Hawthorn grabbed his head and ruffled his hair aggressively. “Cheer

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

"I'm worried about Ais," Beau admitted.

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

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

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

st Beau
couldn't

"I don't doubt her skills," Beau insisted.

"What do you doubt, then?"

whilst

"I don't know. The world, I suppose."

ing the
had the

"That I understand."

nce I'm

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

esolved

Beau was not very good at being wild.

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

ky."

Someone was talking inside it.

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

ed into Beau leaned against the door.

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

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

id, as if Wherever he went, guards followed. Why was the king sneaking arc
rent out Beau listened more carefully, but he could not make out the voice
ard himother speaker.

“I know you’re growing impatient. I am too. You are not the only o
to see this through. The girl will find him, and if not, I am certain he
er to. will go after her... You do not need to worry. I won’t give him a choic

The room fell quiet for a moment.

“I understand,” said Owen’s measured voice. “I will not let you dow

Footsteps crept towards the door, and Beau bolted backwards, cra
himself into an alcove and casting a quick invisibility glamour with a
rthorn’s his wrists.

lomatic It wouldn’t work on the fae, or a dwarf, or any mortal gifted with tr
to keep—but it would work on Owen.

er want He swept past Beau with barely a pause.

r.” No one exited the room after him.

Beau waited a while to be certain that no one was following,
library, remembering that he was invisible and it wouldn’t matter. He crept ou
e steps, hiding spot and tried the door.

Locked.

Beau shook his head, almost fondly. What faerie prince couldn’t u
ould be standard mortal door with a bit of magic? It was a simple iron lock
fooled.

A few centuries ago, mortals had discovered that some of the lower
a weakness for iron and had built all number of things with it. No c
/why hadtold them it didn't work on high fae. Beau pressed his fingers to the l
/hoveverpushed it with his magic, as real and clear to him as a muscle in his ha
could feel each jagged edge of the lock mechanism just waiting to be s
ound? He forced it open. The lock clicked.

e of the He stepped into the room.

No one was around. The windows were shut fast. He did a quick c
ne keenthe room to see if there were any secret passageways—behind the c
r fatherbreast, the tapestries, the ancient old mirror in the corner.

e.” Nothing.

No one was here.

n.” No one at all.

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He forced it open. The lock clicked.

He stepped into the room.

No one was around. The windows were shut fast. He did a quick check of the room to see if there were any secret passageways—behind the chimney breast, the tapestries, the ancient old mirror in the corner.

Nothing.

No one was here.

No one at all.



7 A STABLE FULL OF WARGIS

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

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

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

"I'll try," Diana said, looking at Minerva for approval. "But I promise anything."

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

That was easier said than done. As much as it hurt to move, nothing was far, far worse.

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

She couldn't believe there had *been* an undead stag in the first place
Or that no one else seemed concerned about it.

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

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

“I'm effective,” Aislinn said, slicing a potato into chunks and trying
imagine destroying her enemies.

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

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

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

She stepped outside the cottage, determined to check on Snap
There were several outbuildings surrounding the main cottage, and A
first thought was how had they remained undetected for so long, u
—”
realised that the grounds were surrounded by high, rocky walls, and
cannot
main path down the slope was obscured by a sheet of water.

The waterfall. They were behind the waterfall.

Clever.

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

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

She'd seen miniature versions of this breed in King Owen's court. I

small, stout-legged creature with a bushy tail and pointy ears.

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

“Vines and spirits!” Aislinn gasped.

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

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

“Please don’t.”

“Doesn’t he like it?”

“No, he loves being petted, he just—”

Aislinn promptly ignored him, throwing her arms around the dog’s neck and burying her face deep in his fur. He went slack and rolled over to bury his belly, making the whole stable shake and half burying Aislinn underneath him.

He let out a shriek.

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

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

“Oh, he doesn’t mean to hurt anyone, do you, you gorgeous boy?”

Aislinn buried her hands in his neck once more. The other mounts wagged their tails in anticipation, banging against the stall doors. “What are they? I saw mounts like these at your father’s court, but—”

“These are wargis,” Caerwyn explained. “Dwarven mounts of choice.”

is Mace. Over there we have Crusher and Tori—Girth, Llamrei, Hengr
out right now—and the one at the end there is Bob.”

“They are *so sweet*.”

shing a Snapdragon snorted in his stall.

“You’re sweet too, Snap.”

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

ed. She “I am always intensely suspicious of people that don’t like animals
s baby!you?”

“Actually... yes.”

Aislinn smiled. “Apparently my father’s love of horses was one of t
things my mother liked about him to begin with.”

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

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

expose Caerwyn chuckled.

aerwyn “Did yours get on?”

“I never knew my father,” Caerwyn admitted. “He died before I wa

My mother loved Owen, though, and he loved her. Too much, mayb
an—” eyes glazed over, a lake in the shadow of a forest before a storm, no
ie giantcaught in some painful memory.

ne. “He Aislinn stilled, remembering the way Owen looked at Gwyn’s ima
: nearlyBeau’s assertion that Owen’s pain was real. It didn’t quite match up v
picture the dwarves had painted of a man who wanted to murder his s
Aislinnbut it matched her gut feeling of the man.

eir tails Panting sounded outside, followed by cries of “we’re home!” and
houndsof the dwarves bursting into the stables to return their fluffy steeds.

them raced towards Caerwyn, but he pushed them off with kind wo
e. This

open are gentle pats. She was surprised he could keep his gloves on—it was a hot day and Aislinn wanted to wind her fingers into their fur and never let go.

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

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

“Think nothing of it, girlie. We’ll see if we can do something else for you.” Aislinn nodded, trying to shoulder her disappointment, and assisted the dwarves with the unbuckling and brushing of the wargis. Although perfectly dog-like, they were calmer than most canines, not rushing about or clambering over their stalls. She hated to think of the destructive power of an *actual* puppy.

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

No doubt Aislinn wasn’t used to having this number of people at the table, but she was actually enjoying it. She tolerated courtly dinners, but it always felt more like playing chess than enjoying a meal. She liked eating with her family, but there were only the four of them. Very rarely did other people join with her, and she could relax around them. Aoife, of course, although she wasn’t much of a conversationalist. Miriam, Barney and Daisy, naturally. Grandpa Woodrow and several others. And Cassandra.

All of a sudden, Aislinn told herself. *Not tonight, Cass. I’m enjoying myself.*

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

a warm It helped to think of that.

go. After dinner was done and cleared away, Flora supplied Aislinn ularly,” fresh draught of whatever passed for pain relief, which was just as wel out I’m middle was beginning to ache.

The drugs made her drowsy, though, and within minutes sl anners, struggling to keep her eyes open. Someone was playing a flute. Sweet, music swept through the room, transporting her to somewhere else. or you.” was a strange thing, she realised. An ordinary kind of magic. It sh ed withhold such power over her.

shaped, “Oh dear, looks like the young princess has fallen asleep,” said a g ng overvoice.

il giant The music stopped.

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

na was “Let the boy do it.”

nselves “Me?” Caerwyn’s voice replied. “But—”

out the “We’ve strength lad, but there’s no denying she’s... awkwardly : Far too long.”

ole and “Keep your gloves on,” Bell said, as if sensing some unspoken argu ore like Aislinn didn’t understand why that was important, or why she c ily, but open her mouth to protest, to insist she could carry herself. She c who she didn’t understand the impulse to throw her arms around Caerwyn w h of as swept her into his arms, or why her hands balled into his clothes.

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

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

out her *You don’t like being carried*, she reminded herself. *You like being stand by yourself.*

But she liked this.

with a She was aware of being moved, of the journey being over far too c
l as herof boots being removed and blankets folded over her.

“You’re nice,” she whispered, voice as muggy as her thoughts. “Wa
re was Caerwyn sighed, hovering beside her. There was the ghost of a touc
, piping temple.

Music “It’s best you don’t remember that,” he whispered.
ouldn’t Her hand reached out and grabbed his sleeve, pinning him above he
tried to move away. She didn’t want him to go. She felt like a child
gravelly dark, and he was the lantern falling away from her.

“Thank you,” she responded.

“You’re welcome.”

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

shaped. “Caught some birds today,” Diana’s voice sounded. “Dead, unfortu
No good for the princess. Thought they might be of use to you, though
ment. Caerwyn went silent. After a long moment, Diana sighed. “Cae
ouldn’t whispered, “you cannot run from this forever.”

certainly “I can try,” Caer hissed.

when he Aislinn’s thoughts folded inwards.

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face.

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8

THE PRINCE SETS OFF ON A JOURNEY
WITH HIS CAT

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

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

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

"Beau," he'd sighed exasperatedly, "your sister should be absolutely *Should*. Of course she *should*. Because she was a great hunter and brave and it was unimaginable for anything to have happened to her."

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

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

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

books, trying to read himself into exhaustion.

“Beau? Wake up.”

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

“Get up,” Hawthorn instructed.

“Why?”

“I want to try a locator spell on your sister.”

Y Beau shot up. “I knew you were worried!”

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

Aislinn. hearing Beau nodded. “That seems right. I'll grab my cloak.”

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

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

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

l strong Hawthorn took several items out of his pack and laid them on the table. er. Candles, crystals, a map. He lit the wicks with his fingers, tiny golden sparks of magic dusting his fingers. d brow

He could do most magic wordless and without ingredients, but it never occurred to him to use them to ground or bolster a spell, especially outside of Faerie. spell his were spells that Beau could do without words or objects, magic that slipped by

off him, as instinctual as breathing, but there was much he had left to
He dreamed of the days it flowed from him like rain from a cloud.

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

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

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

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

The door closed behind them.

out into "Where in the world have you two been?" Juliana said, leaping
nowhere.

ground. Beau and Hawthorn jumped.

n beads "Ah, um, trying to locate Ais with a spell?"

"And you didn't tell me because...?"

ver hurt "We didn't want to worry you?"

. There "I'm already worried, Hawthorn!" Juliana blazed.

oughed Hawthorn blinked rapidly. "You are?"

"Of course I'm bloody worried!"

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

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

clasped Beau coughed.

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

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

up the Juliana raised an eyebrow.

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

tend to “I knew,” Beau added.

hides.” “You don’t count!”

used to “Rude.”

is Beau “Honestly, darling,” Juliana said, tilting her head at her son, “you
at least was quite obvious.”

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

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

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

aim. Juliana chewed her lip. She knew as well as Beau did that things

change very quickly. “We need to go after her,” she said. “I don’t

out of messes things up with Owen. I don’t like this.”

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



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

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

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

“Yes. Roughly.”

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

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

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

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

“What were they doing here?”

“They’ve allied with you?”

“They were... a gift from a friend.”

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

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

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

“We shall see.”

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

seems to “He has unseelie at his disposal,” Hawthorn said. “If he charges them—it could be chaos. They’ll likely kill the dwarves and we’ll understand their motives.”

“Not to mention the question of who *gave* them to him in the first place.” Hawthorn ran his long-fingered hands down his face. “We need to be careful. We don’t want to lose Owen as an ally—or attack dwarves without motive. I don’t think we’ll be able to hold off Owen’s forces longer, but we must get word to Aislinn and find out what’s going on—before it’s too late.” “I’ll go,” Beau said. “I’ll find her. I’m not terrible at tracking, and I can be able to use magic to help me when I’m nearby. Mother can say I’m a werewitch without your permission. Blame it on the impetuosity of youth, will you, Mother.”

For a moment, both of his parents fell silent, their eyes meeting in conversation. He knew they weren’t keen to send him off, too. But would they send? They didn’t have any other magic-users with them, and Beau was the only one who could sneak away unnoticed and who might be able to pick up her trail—just in case. “All right,” said Hawthorn finally. “Juliana, my fearsome goddess, would you kindly cover for us as I help our wayward son make his dramatic, yet-invisible escape?”

Hawthorn.



They crept down to the stables under the cover of glamour, compelling the guards and stablehands to look the other way as they found a suitable hiding place. No one but Hecate noticed them. She wound herself around their ankles. Hawthorn had not yet uttered a simple word, other than the odd instruction for saddling the horse. He didn’t even say anything about Beau not be-

in withmost confident of riders—even when he was astride the horse.

I never He placed his hand over Beau's on the reins.

“Father?”

ace.” “Take the cat,” Hawthorn insisted, scooping up the mog and dropp
o treadonto the horse's rear. She found a narrow spot between two saddleb:
en kindpromptly curled up. “I think you'll need her.”

ces any A horse, a cat and his wits. All he had against the mountains and g
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hateveror two. Find a bird and get word to me as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Father.”

wordless “And... stay safe.”

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

no one Hawthorn pulled him down awkwardly into his arms, so hard he
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most confident of riders—even when he was astride the horse.

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

“Father?”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, Father.”

“And... stay safe.”

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

Hawthorn pulled him down awkwardly into his arms, so hard he almost fell off. He clapped his back. “You better,” he said, and patted his horse out of the stall.



9

THE BREAK OF DAWN

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

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

Until it stopped with a sickening crack.

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

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

And Cass—

potion, “Noted.”

of bed. He hovered for a while longer, as if uncertain whether or not he
a sharp leave. Aislinn didn’t understand his reluctance, or his indecision, as if

hated to leave and longed to go. His fingers twitched against his beads

He left the room without another word, stalking back to his bed in th
she was room to finish dressing. He plucked a stray feather from the sole of h

—a deep, black, raven’s one.

harcoal *Ravens.*

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

ounded It was no good. Her thoughts wouldn’t come.

She downed the potion, and started to dress.

l of the



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

as if he She stepped outside. Light broke through across the sky, yol
d for.” ribbons of rose and orange. It cracked across the rocks that hid the
from the world, sweeping across the dewy grass.

ss—” Without wasting another second, Aislinn sat down and shimmied
boots, only half-mindful of her stitches, and sunk her feet into the grou

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

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

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

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

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

"You're up early," Aislinn remarked.

Fort shrugged. "It feels like a lucky morning."

Aislinn didn't know what that meant. "Why does he come out here, think?"

"For the same reason you do. To feel." Fort looked up at his silver

"For the same reason any of us do anything."

gold,
cottage



Desperate to prove she was well enough to return to Afelcarreg, she overexerted herself after breakfast helping Luna clean up, ripped herself again and was confined to her bed for the rest of the day, trying to recapture the echo of *life*. She was not best pleased. She had never laid around doing nothing. She had no idea what you were supposed to do. Luna kept the door

ly blaze and spoke to her as she was going about her daily tasks, and found a
t rocks of racy Dwarven romances for her at one point, which certainly helped

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

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

an ease “Do you miss it?”

orm, he “Miss what?”

for the “Avalinth.”

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

“Why did you leave, then?”

“Because I would have missed the others more.”

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

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



Aislinn

lf open The next day, after an agonisingly long morning ‘taking it easy’ (and
perate blown through Luna’s saucy romances) Aislinn promptly declared sh
g in her enough and dragged herself to the stables to assist Caerwyn in caring
or open wargis.

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

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

Stop it.

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

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

Caerwyn pulled away from her.

“I can heal you—” she started.

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

Aislinn held up her hands. “All right.”

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

Aislinn sunk to the floor beside Bob and wound her fingers into
What was with Caerwyn? He seemed perfectly at home with the dwarves
and some of the time when they were alone, he seemed at home with her
lie. She And then others...

certain The door banged open again. “Caer?” Min called out.

losses, Aislinn was about to answer when another voice said, “He's not here
same. should be fine.”

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

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

of his “I think it's unwise to stay here,” Min answered. “I don't think
ife. would betray us, especially if we explained things to her, but she can't
mortal and Flora says she shouldn't be travelling yet. If someone comes for her
led life. “No one's found us yet.”

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

him as Bell sighed. “You’re sure about this? Going back to Avalinth?”

before “It’s the only place the boy will be safe.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

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

outing at “Min... it’s all right if you’re not ready to face her again.”

Whistling sounded across the yard, and the door banged open in injury—afterwards. “Ah, hello,” said Caerwyn. “Did you two need something?”

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

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

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

his fur. Caerwyn blinked. “What?”

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

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

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

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

er—” “I’m sorry,” Aislinn said.

“I thought the fae didn’t say sorry?”

“Well, my mother’s mortal, so...” She shook her head. It was true that

mother was mortal, but she was also the Queen of Faerie. She used her
much the same as they did. Aislinn's childhood had been full of
mortals, though, and sometimes, *sometimes* there were no other words
left. "I am sorry for you. For the loss of your mother. For the pain she endured
the false hope that was given."

shortly "I'm sorry, too."

"For what?"

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

in the "You are forgiven."

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

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

"Oh?"

harbour "They want to take you back to Avalinth."

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

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

Caerwyn nodded, his mouth pulled into that easy, irritating smile.
ing. "It didn't know why it annoyed her so—she certainly preferred it
indifference.

sn't his "So, the fae don't like to apologise, or say thank you, and they can
a many other customs I should know about?"

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

Caerwyn's eyes widened. "Umm... no?"

that her "Good, because it's false."

r words “Oh.”

f other “Mostly.”

to use. His throat bobbed. “Which part?”

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

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mies or

“Oh.”

“Mostly.”

His throat bobbed. “Which part?”

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

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10

TWO PRINCES AND A PRINCESS

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

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

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

Exhausted, and more than a little frustrated, he stopped to rest by a stream. His spells often kept guiding him back to this spot, if they guided him anywhere at all, but he couldn't find anything. Nothing but an impressive bloodstain, which his senses told him was animal rather than human. There was a slight tinge of magic to it, but nothing to cause alarm. Maybe Aislinn had dispatched a creature here for her dinner.

maybe it was something mildly unseelie. It wasn't unheard of to find one living in the mountains, the offspring of some ancient coupling.

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

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

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

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

sed his Hecate meowed.

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

't know “Beau!”

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

zing on “Ais?”

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

Aislinn, Aislinn!

rather She was here. She was all right.

er than They embraced in the river, water sloshing about their ankles, han
ise any in each other's clothes, holding each other for as long as it took to
ner. Or themselves the other was real.

a stray It was a long time until they parted.

Beau punched Aislinn on the shoulder.

allad of “Hey!” she said. “What was that for?”

“For worrying me!”

“That’s fair, I suppose.” She winced, but her hand went to her mid-her newly punched shoulder.

“You’re injured?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I told you, I got—”

“Gored by an undead stag, yes. Where did that come from, by the way?” already Ais shrugged. He supposed they’d both seen stranger things. Still, he’d never seen anything like this in the mortal world—

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

Her companion’s eyes widened.

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

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

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

Caerwyn blinked back. “Um, thank you?”

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

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

“Do be quiet, Beau.”

“Ha!”

“I hate you.”

“You should come with us,” Caerwyn said, cheeks tinged faintly with embarrassment.

He pointed along the ledge, which Beau now saw led behind the wall, revealing a narrow passage leading under the rock. Clever.

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

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

“I think so,” Beau remarked, dragging the horse across the river. “She’s a cat. She’s entirely sure.”

“That’s definitely a cat.”

“Is it?”

Beau tugged the horse onto the low part of the bank and pulled her up the path. She required lots of coaxing to get her through the cave, but C

spritely took to the other side of her, whispering in her ear.

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

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

“Hey, Beau?”

“Yes, sister dearest?”

“Thank you. For coming to get me.”

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

“True. I would have been quicker.”

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

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

“This is my little brother Beau,” Aislinn explained. “I wish I could tell you he was an idiot, but he’s actually annoyingly smart. Also, he can lie, so I’m not going on the out for that.”

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

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

“I don’t like to lie!”

“You did it to wind me up!”

“Well, not all the time...”

Aislinn glared.

cottage “See! I can’t even lie now!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I mean... if it’s on offer...”

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

n.



say he

watch Beau was taken into the kitchen, where he recounted what had been happening back at the castle, together with his father’s assertion that they would not be able to hold off an outright attack if they didn’t return soon.

ed him

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

Beau, whilst glad to hear it wasn’t his own ineptitude, wasn’t so sure about the wards confuse magic, or just dampen it?”

“Just dampen, why?”

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

Minerva waved her hand, but he could tell she was thinking things she shouldn’t have aHer wife nudged her shoulder. “Min?”

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

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

Caerwyn, though, looked less than thrilled by the prospect. His fantasy of a life of quietude forgone the colour of ash, and he looked around at every face on the table. “It might be dangerous? Getting there?”

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

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

“You haven’t,” said Bell.

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

“Or have the human king learn of our whereabouts,” added another.

“There’ll be not a moment’s peace here if he does.”

“Do you have any other ideas?”

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

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

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

“I’m not a dwarf.”

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

t to, the Caer sighed, running his fingers through his hair. A long, quiet r
place unsettled over the room. “All right,” he said finally. “Thank you.”

“Then it’s settled.” Minerva stood up, banging both fists—metal ar
dn’t set—against the table. Beau forced himself to resist the urge to ask her h
Was this metal arm worked. “Luna, cook up everything you can. Everyone else-
king of We leave at dawn.”

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” added

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mother.

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

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

“Then it’s settled.” Minerva stood up, banging both fists—metal and flesh—against the table. Beau forced himself to resist the urge to ask her how her metal arm worked. “Luna, cook up everything you can. Everyone else—pack. We leave at dawn.”



11
THE NIGHT BEFORE DEPARTURE

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

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

"What?"

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

"Won't he find that suspicious?"

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

Caerwyn stopped brushing Mace and stared at her.

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

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

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

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

“I don’t mind, we’ll probably be heading back to Faerie soon ourselves.”
“That’s insanity, Aislinn, and I will not do it. What is it with you
rest of the dwarves, so willing to risk your lives?”

too late
t return
y were.
r at all.
she told

“Maybe it’s your pretty face.”

Caerwyn raised an eyebrow.

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

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

“Why? Are you interested?”

“No, I just—”

“If you think that’s strange—”

“I know a lot of us mere mortals seem to have issues with that
thing, but frankly I’ve never seen why it’s anyone’s business. I’ve always
living with Min and Bell for the better part of the year. I assure you
nothing against your brother.”

impact of
ppen to

“Oh. Good.”

“I was merely curious.”

“Well, it’s not just men,” Aislinn clarified. “Most faeries are rather
that regard, although they tend to have preferences. Beau doesn’t. F

his lip. everyone. Usually very easily. It... doesn't often come to much, tell the admiration is real. He hasn't had a single partner that's like the next."

"And... you?"

faeries "What of me?"

al your "Where do your preferences lie?"

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

"Right. Just curious."

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

She'd never see Caerwyn again, either.

"Your That thought bothered her more than it should, and she did not like i

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

sort of Caerwyn laughed. "So, at some point in my life, you'll have to h so be end down and do some exceptional convincing?"

ou, I've "I suppose so," she said.

"What were the exact words you used?"

"Um, I believe they were, 'if your son is alive, I will bring him h you.'"

fluid in "Well, that's easily averted," Caer said. "Since I am not biolc Ie likes Owen's son, and I no longer count Afelcarreg as my home."

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

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

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

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

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

at home Aislinn sighed, putting the brushes back and pulling on the end of her braids. She wondered if he’d noticed already how gifted Beau was with face magic, and how much she wasn’t. Even parting the bristles was difficult and taxing. “All fae are capable of magic,” she explained, “but for some it’s harder to wield. We have this extra well of energy we can draw on whenever we’re sick or injured, it’s muted—all your energy taken up by the wound she’d to heal. Magic comes very naturally to some, wielded as easily as a thief with a sword. But to others...”

a time “To you, you mean?”

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

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

Some to Aislinn nodded, eager to be done with the conversation of her brother’s attempts at magic. “Sure. They don’t have a natural well of energy, but they can draw on other things—potions or charms, *maybe* the natural

ited. “Around them, if they’re particularly talented. Usually not active magic
d up to—the kind you can see.”

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

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

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

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

“I see.” He ceased his brushing of Bob, fingers playing with his f
one of didn’t know why he didn’t remove his gloves, but when the warm
as with brushed over her hands, she found she ceased to care. “I should proba
dly and goodbye, or thank you, or something.”

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

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

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

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

latively “Still no idea how that happened?”

ded his “What?”

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

ave any “Right.” Caerwyn’s hand fell away from hers. “We should get back

Luna’s no doubt cooked up a feast. Would be rude to be late.”

r poor “Right.” Aislinn dropped her hand from the wargi’s fur, trying no
ut they the disappointment settle.

l world They cleared away the rest of the equipment and headed back insid
appeared to have cooked up half the forest, the table heaving with

though game smothered in buttery sauces—anything that might spoil on the j
Aislinn wondered when she'd next sit around a table filled with thi
people she actually liked. She missed her parents. She missed Ao
s, yes. Grandpa Woodfern and Miriam and Barney and Daisy and—
special Cassandra. Her too. Always her.

She was fairly sure these moments with the dwarves and Caerwyn
haunt her in a similar way for some time yet, a ghost of good time. She
not remember the pain of this time in a few years, only the si
ur. She Minerva's tobacco, Luna's roasted hazelnut stuffing and lightly spice
leathercake.

bly say She took a moment to take it all in, to memorise the details. Minerv
tapping against the surface of the table, Magna's gears clinking in the
s again, Bell's laugh, Diana's roar—the shine of her blue skin in the rosy lan
ig.” Luna's hair glowing, smelling faintly of fresh blooms and cinnamon.
—” terse smile as she watched everyone enjoying themselves. Fort's fin
hat did they skimmed over cards, creating an ordinary, impressive mag
summoned a quiet thrill inside her.

And Caerwyn, his tanned face smiling at her over the spread, t
waves of his hair curling over his dimpled cheeks, his veined, ca
fingers splayed around a pewter goblet.

If I live forever, she vowed, I will take that image with me.

inside.

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ot to let

e. Luna

stuffed

game smothered in buttery sauces—anything that might spoil on the journey. Aislinn wondered when she'd next sit around a table filled with this many people she actually liked. She missed her parents. She missed Aoife and Grandpa Woodfern and Miriam and Barney and Daisy and—

Cassandra. Her too. Always her.

She was fairly sure these moments with the dwarves and Caerwyn would haunt her in a similar way for some time yet, a ghost of good time. She would not remember the pain of this time in a few years, only the smell of Minerva's tobacco, Luna's roasted hazelnut stuffing and lightly spiced apple cake.

She took a moment to take it all in, to memorise the details. Minerva's arm tapping against the surface of the table, Magna's gears clinking in the corner. Bell's laugh, Diana's roar—the shine of her blue skin in the rosy lamplight. Luna's hair glowing, smelling faintly of fresh blooms and cinnamon. Flora's terse smile as she watched everyone enjoying themselves. Fort's fingers as they skimmed over cards, creating an ordinary, impressive magic that summoned a quiet thrill inside her.

And Caerwyn, his tanned face smiling at her over the spread, the soft waves of his hair curling over his dimpled cheeks, his veined, calloused fingers splayed around a pewter goblet.

If I live forever, she vowed, I will take that image with me.

The graphic features a large, stylized number '12' in a serif font, centered within a semi-circular arch. The arch is intricately decorated with black silhouettes of thorny branches, leaves, and several small butterflies. Below the arch, the title 'A TOUCH OF DEATH' is written in a decorative, gothic-style serif font. The 'O' in 'TOUCH' contains a small cross symbol. The entire graphic is set against a plain white background.

12

A TOUCH OF DEATH

Despite plans to leave at dawn, everything seemed to take far more time than it ought to. Luna refused to send them off without a breakfast, Diana insisted the wargis needed another good pampering before the journey, Magna insisted Minerva's arm needed another service, Diana refused to leave the garden in a state and wanted to make sure she had the best cuttings, and Bell moved methodically through all the rooms, ensuring that nothing important be left behind.

It was all too much faff for Minerva; the second Magna was done with her arm, she went to sit out on the porch by herself, smoking her pipe and lamenting digging into her tobacco supplies so early.

Aislinn felt similarly about the situation. She went and double-checked her own bags whilst Beau found himself a quiet spot to sketch in.

Fort was in the stable, stroking Snapdragon's muzzle. "Beautiful horses," she said. "We don't have them in Avalinth, though I'd seen them in pictures. Always liked going into the towns and seeing them, though the people there look at you funny."

Aislinn nodded. “Don’t they just?”

“The mortal world isn’t all bad,” Fort continued, “could do with improvements, but...”

“Why did you come here to begin with?” Aislinn asked, not sure if she’d get another chance to. “I understand there’s some reason you left Aislinn but to leave Faerie—”

“Well, it’s not like the magic of the land does much for us, does it?” Aislinn laughed, but it sounded hollow. “It was my idea, actually.”

“What?”

“You might have noticed that we all have our roles here. Leader, healer, cook, mechanic—”

“It had not escaped my notice.”

“I’m the lucky one,” Fort explained. “I make good decisions when it comes to things like all we have are bad ones. Bell might be the strategist, but even she can’t plan for everything. When we were weighing up our options, it was you, Flora, the one that chose here.”

“But... why?”

Fort shrugged. “Aside from the fact that we’ve built a good place here, it just felt like where we were supposed to be.”

Aislinn chewed her lip, not meeting her gaze.

“Do you ever feel that?” Fort asked. “Do you ever feel like you’re not in the place you’re supposed to be?”

“No,” Aislinn said, pausing longer than she meant to. *I have no idea what I’m supposed to be.*

Fort smiled. “You will,” she said, “and if not—you’re allowed to choose. You’re allowed to choose the place that makes you happy.”

Aislinn swallowed. Since Cass’ death, even the places where she’d

been happy felt haunted.

h some Something thudded outside.

Fort frowned, glancing at Aislinn. They left the stables and hurried out if she'd Other dwarves appeared, too—all gazes turned towards the waterfall.

valinth, The ground rumbled. A horn sounded.

Aislinn stilled. She knew the sound. It was Miriam's horn.

it!" she They were being sent a warning.

Minerva's eyes widened. "Get the mounts," she snapped. "Quickly! Mags, Caer—get the last of the bags. Hurry."

hunter, Luna and Diana sprung towards the stables. Magna cowered in Miriam's shadow before scuttling off to the cottage after Caerwyn. The remaining dwarves banded together, pulling out axes, crossbows, pistols. They waited. It seems Beau reappeared by Aislinn's side, tucking his notebook into his belt. I knowspocket. He met her gaze, and they nodded at each other. Aislinn drew her sword. ns, I'm sword.

"We should glamour ourselves," Beau whispered. "Make ourselves look like dwarves to Owen's men. Avoid a diplomatic incident, and all."

ere... it Aislinn wasn't sure she could hold a glamour in the midst of battle with the help of her cloak—it was too much magic, too much concentration.

She found most glammers easy enough to draw on, but to hold them—

in the "Can you...?" she started.

Beau sighed, waving his hands, soft, powdery magic settling over her. I wherecouldn't see it, of course, but she trusted it to work. "I guess that's me the battle," Beau said. "I can't hold two *and* fight. Is that deliberate?"

oose it. "No," said Aislinn, "but I do like keeping you safe."

Beau muttered something under his breath, and retreated to the back. 'd once A lumpy, grey shape burst through the waterfall, followed by another.

three green-skinned, silken-winged creatures.

Two ogres. Three pixies.

outside. And a dozen soldiers, all armed to the teeth.

Fort's pistol cracked through the air. Bell's crossbow fired. Minerva went flying. Aislinn dove forward, skidding under the ogre's belly and it across the thigh.

Some kind of explosion went off, dividing her from the others. It y now! that kept them safe. She turned to dispatch the limping ogre, but a hot l fire did the job for her, and a shield of light sprung up around her.

nerva's Aislinn looked up. Her father. Her father was here. "It's a glamo nainingrushed, gesturing towards the flaming explosion. "It was all I could t aited. do to buy us some time. It won't last long—and the Unseelie w ; breastfooled."

ew her "Father..." she mumbled. It felt like years since she had seen him.

Hawthorn groaned under the weight of the multiple glamours a es lookshield. Sweat beaded his brow, his arms splayed out. "You're all right:

"Yes, but—"

e, even "Any reason you didn't return to the castle?" His arms buckled aga tration.side of the shield. It would not last long with Minerva's magic dam

Hawthorn must have been able to feel something.

"Yes," Aislinn answered. "Caer—the prince—he can't go back."

ier. She Hawthorn grimaced. "Can't go back, worth losing an alliance ove e out ofgo back' or just 'doesn't really fancy it'?"

Aislinn was quite sure she'd never loved her father more than moment.

: line. "Um, the former. Sorry."

ier, and He shook his head. "Don't be sorry. Your mother might be, t

before. "It's not there," she repeated. "Trust me."

Ma's in "Caer!" Minerva hollered from the back of a wargi. "We need to move
Caerwyn nodded numbly, climbing to his feet.

wane if "Stop!"

do you A soldier appeared, grabbing his middle and tackling him towa
ground.

"No—" Caerwyn rushed, half whimpering, "stop—"

dismiss "You're all right, Your Highness, you're safe now—"

ack and "No—"

's head Aislinn barrelled into the soldier, knocking him backwards. The
separaterolled over her, his weight crushing. Aislinn fumbled for her weapo
wouldn't let him get the better of her. *Couldn't.*

"Faerie witch!" the soldier hissed, pressing against her windpipe. "C
has theyour doing. You put him under a spell—"

Aislinn choked, trying to claw at him, her feet grinding uselessly
aroundthe dirt. Darkness spotted in the corner of her eyes.

nortals. "Let go of her!"

inch of Caerwyn grabbed his face, his hands gliding around his neck. The s
eyes glazed over, his gaze going numb and smoky. A grey, unhealt
Aislinnbloomed across his skin, corrupting every patch of skin, like a fire rav
/that aremeadow. His hold on her slackened, his jaw going loose. He gaped
ere's awith open eyes, listless, lifeless.

He looked... dead. Dead like the stag, like a body that had lain exp
the ground for days, weeks even, swollen and bloated.

ere—" But he was still moving. Still moving and staring with ghostly, ic
eyes.

se than Aislinn scrambled away, half a scream in her throat.

She had never, ever seen anything like this.

“Come on!” Caerwyn stared at his hands, and then, awfully, up at her.

He’d seen something like this before.

He’d *done* something like this before.

“Come on!” she growled. An axe sliced through the air between them, decapitating the soldier instant. Minerva raced forwards on her wargi, collecting her weapons. She circled around them like a dog herding sheep.

Caerwyn didn’t wait. He raced forward, grabbing the reins of Beau’s horse that Diana was holding out to him. The rest of the dwarves were huddled beside a small shed at the base of a cliff.

Aislinn ran with them.

The back of the shed had been cut away, revealing a sharp tunnel under the mountain. The horses whinnied, but the wargis charged ahead, and a few words from Caerwyn had them following. They plunged into the darkness against pinpricks of light in the tunnel ahead guiding the way; some of the dwarves had lit torches.

“Stand clear!” Minerva bellowed.

Magna and Fort stood at the mouth of the tunnel, readying explosives. Everyone hurried forward.

The entrance collapsed. The tunnel rumbled. Stillness and a never-ending silence followed, punctuated only by the weak whimpering of the horses and the panting of the wargis.

“So...” Beau began, “did anyone else see Caer just... turn a soldier into an undead monster? Did you all know he could do that?”

The entire party blinked at him.

“Of course you did. But do you also know how *hard that is to do*?” he whipped out his notebook. “How long have you had these powers? W

they manifest? How do they work—”

“Beau,” said Aislinn silently, “Be quiet.”

“Oh, right, not really the time, is it? All right, then.” He sucked questions back in with a resigned sigh.

er in an Aislinn glanced at Caerwyn, but he did not meet her gaze. He kept l on, and firmly screwed to the floor, fingers tight on the reins of Beau’s horse.

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

’s horse Caerwyn hadn’t fled from the castle because his stepfather want overing dead. He’d fled because he’d killed someone. Because he had pov

couldn’t control, didn’t know how to use or where they came from. A

stayed with the dwarves because they alone were immune to his touch.

nder the Like Beau, she had questions. But she wasn’t sure she wanted the a

ew soft “Come on,” said Minerva. “We’ve a lot of ground to cover. That

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Aislinn glanced at Caerwyn, but he did not meet her gaze. He kept his eyes firmly screwed to the floor, fingers tight on the reins of Beau’s horse.

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

Caerwyn hadn’t fled from the castle because his stepfather wanted him dead. He’d fled because he’d killed someone. Because he had powers he couldn’t control, didn’t know how to use or where they came from. And he’d stayed with the dwarves because they alone were immune to his touch.

Like Beau, she had questions. But she wasn’t sure she wanted the answers.

“Come on,” said Minerva. “We’ve a lot of ground to cover. That cave-in won’t hold them forever. We need to reach Faerie by nightfall.”



PART TWO

THE ROAD THROUGH WINTER

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A decorative archway with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns. The number '13' is prominently displayed in the center of the arch. Below the arch, the title 'CONFESSIONS BENEATH THE STARS' is written in a stylized, serif font. The entire graphic is rendered in black on a white background.

13

CONFESSIONS BENEATH THE STARS

At last, the tunnel opened into the crisp, cool air, and the bound Faerie glittered on the horizon, like shimmering smoke. There was a short break to refresh themselves, to double-check the gear they'd managed to collect in the struggle, and to douse the torches. Everyone climbed onto their mounts, Caerwyn taking Beau's horse, Beau sliding onto Snap behind Ais.

Caerwyn had still not looked at her.

"*You* didn't know, did you?" Beau whispered in Aislinn's ear.

"Of course I didn't!"

"I did wonder about the gloves. Do you think it happens when he touches someone?"

Aislinn remembered grabbing his face, and the sheer panic that blossomed there. There were other times, too, when their skin had skinned. Nothing had happened.

She shook her head. "I just don't think he can control it."

What must that be like, she wondered, to risk killing someone even if you touched them? To not know, to have no power over yourself?

She did not want to think, and yet she found she could not stop herself. Beau murmured something in sympathy.

“How do you think Father’s handling the situation?” she asked, wanting to talk about something—anything—else.

“Hmm, probably something along the lines of, ‘it looks as if my captives too have been kidnapped by dwarven insurgents’ and ‘I cannot recall precisely what occurred in the heat of battle’ and other such truth-dodging.”

“Sounds like him...”

Beau nodded. He leant against her back. “Ais?”

“Yes?”

“Are you all right?”

She froze. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Beau clucked disapprovingly under his breath, but said nothing more.

It was a silent party. Hardly anyone seemed to be in the mood to hold any gaze caught not resting long, as if everyone were keeping some feigning guilty secret.

They were probably waiting for someone to ask the question—or Caelan to explain. Aislinn wasn’t sure who should speak first, but given that she’d just killed a guard—likely someone who knew Caerwyn’s secret, and that he’d just killed a guard—likely someone who knew—it seemed better to give him time.

Scarcely a word was uttered until they reached the border.

“Well, this is it,” Minerva said. “No turning back now. Ready, ladies, for our only trip to Faerie.”

Caerwyn stared at the cloud, which Aislinn wasn’t entirely sure he could see. Many a mortal strayed accidentally into Faerie. They could return

ry timeown world after—but they would never return to Faerie again. The d
would slip through their fingers, as graspable as fog.

elf. Caerwyn marched through, and the rest followed.

Aislinn took a deep, shuddering breath the second the shimmer
d him, over her, the whisper of magic brushing through the trees. The
different here—clearer, sharper, and the earth hummed ever-so-
childrenbeneath the hooves of her horse.

t recall Beau took in a similar breath, and they held out their hands to the tr
ging.” branches above them seeming to bow, twitching at their fingertips
vines back home.

Hello, I've missed you.

“Ah,” said Minerva, with a sigh almost as hearty. “There’s no deny
nice here, but let’s not dawdle. We’ve another hour of daylight.”



e.

o speak,

stering, The forests of Autumn blazed beneath hazy sunlight, a dense carpet
magenta and pink. Colours that didn’t seem to exist in the mortal
whispered against their faces. Caer revelled in it all. The faint mast
aerwyn was a welcome distraction to the thoughts spinning through him.

t it was

ie he’d He killed a man. Again. He knew him, too. Dafydd. He’d sparred w
before. He was excellent with a blade, fiercely loyal to the crown. H
pastries and flirting with the cook’s daughter.

d? One But when he’d grabbed hold of Aislinn...

He took a deep breath. The first time his powers had killed, it had l
accident. This time... he’d wanted to hurt him. He’d been willing to ki

e could

to their *But I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to!*

doorway Aislinn hadn't looked him in the eye since. She was probably disgusted by him. Maybe this power was too dark, even for her. Maybe she was furious at him for not telling her.

washed He wished she could lie to him. He felt he needed a lie, right now. Lying felt better than the truth.

slightly But she did not ask. And he did not talk.

eyes, the

like the

Diana went on ahead to catch some fresh game and managed to score a couple of pheasants. The others found her just before nightfall, setting camp on a hill overlooking one of the many forests of Autumn. The sky turned a dusky purple, the crisp leaves below a canvas of cold flame.

Home.

It seemed strange to think of going to Winter rather than back to Autumn. Aislinn wondered if the dwarves were even expecting them to follow. If not, they were being invited. At the moment they were heading in the same direction.

piece She did not want to ask.

After a supper of pheasants and flat, dense bread, courtesy of Minerva, she rolled her metal arm back in her socket.

"You all right, Min?" Bell asked.

"This arm is chafing something fierce," she said, as she stripped off her armour and peeled back the clothing surrounding the limb. She took out a wrench from a belt pocket and unscrewed the bolts at her shoulder. The arm fell away, save the port it was attached to, and the pauldron

isted byover where her shoulder used to be. That had to be unbuckled by a
was juststrap, stretched across her chest.

Finally, most of the limb was removed from her body. The metal
t wouldremained, welded to her flesh, the skin around it red and chafed.

Aislinn stared. She wasn't sure if she was unnerved by the dam
impressed by it.

Minerva winced as Bell applied a lotion to the raw skin, Magna oil
discarded arm as she did. She caught Aislinn's stare.

“Tough doesn't mean you don't feel pain,” she informed her. ‘
ecure a means you survive it.”

ting up “I'm not doubting your strength,” Aislinn responded. “I just... I'm c
sky had I suppose. How the arm works, how—”

“How I lost the meat one, you mean?”

Aislinn swallowed. “Yes.”

canthia. “Rogue golem attack in the deep. Thing got the arm in its mouth.”

w, or if “She cut it off herself, rather than be eaten,” Diana chimed in. “O
e same rumour is. She won't confirm.”

Aislinn's eyes widened. “That's... impressive.”

Minerva looked down, like it was not the word she would use. “It ha
Luna, done,” she said.

Bell rubbed her hand against her neck, like her scars were burning,
eyes turned back to the fire.

off her “So,” said Beau, somewhat hesitantly, “I can't help but notice that C
a small

Aislinn flashed him a dangerous look.

Most of “—Does not have truesight.”

n fitted Caerwyn stared at him for a long moment, as if he'd quite forgotte
could speak at all. “What's truesight?”

leather “It’s something given to mortals so that they’re immune to basic glamours so they’re not so easily led astray, convinced of dragons sailing overhead etc...”

lic port “That might be useful...” he mused, stroking a finger under his chin. “Do you get it?”

age, or Aislinn finally caught his gaze. “Easiest way would be for me to look directly into your eye.”

ling the “You are not spitting in my eye!”

“I can spit in your eye, if you prefer?” Beau offered.

“Tough “I will... pass, for now,” he said. “I daresay I won’t really need to look into Avalinth.”

curious, “Suit yourself,” said Beau, shrugging. “Who cares for a story? I’ll tell you a good one about why no mortal can set foot in Faerie twice.”

It was quickly agreed that a story would indeed be welcome. Beau took a sip from his throat, took the drink that Luna poured for him, and settled into his chair.

“They say that a long, long time ago, a faerie prince fell in love with a mortal girl, and she ran away to faerie to be with him. But, as time passed, she grew homesick and wanted to return. The prince agreed, and they set off immediately. Only, when they returned to her village, they found that instead of a handful of years had passed for them, centuries had tu passed in the mortal world. Everyone the girl knew from her old life was dead. She was alone and alldevastated, and all the love the faerie prince could heap on her world rumbled away up that wound. She died of a broken heart.”

laer—” “Oh, how sad.” Luna sighed.

Fort pursed her lips. “That doesn’t sound like it explains the barrier—letting you in and out once...”

in Beau “The story isn’t over yet. The prince grieved the girl like no one had ever grieved before, and wanted to follow her to the grave—but he found h

amours, not, not yet. He could not bear the thought that the same fate might befall another hapless mortal. So he sought to change it. He travelled to the ends of the earth, pleading with the spirits and old ones. Finally, he found a way to weave the timelines between Faerie and the Mortal Lands together—at the cost of his own life.

“Oh, I like that,” said Caer, at the same time that Luna sighed, “oh, still very sad.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “Why would you like *that*?”

“Because he gets to be with his love again!”

“Some legends say so,” Beau continued. “Others say not. They say that the barrier became the barrier itself—that he hovers between life and death, that the only sacrifice he made is to never be with her again at all.”

“Now, that *is* sad,” said Caer. “I like that less.”

“This is maudlin,” said Fort, piping in. “Let us have another tale—”

Diana brought out a set of pipes. Luna sang a sweet song. No one could stay in the mood for much more. Skies darkened, stars bled glitter. Before the sun rolled, a little ale was drunk, and one by one, all the dwarves fell and they seemed to need more than humans or fae.

Caerwyn was still silent. Beau looked at Aislinn, and then jerked his head towards the prince. *Talk to him*, he mouthed.

He let out a loud yawn. “Well, that’s me done for the night,” he said, not making a show of stretching, before he rolled over in his makeshift bed and started to snore.

Caer blinked at him in obvious disbelief. “Is he asleep?”

“Unlikely. He won’t take long, though. It’s been a... long day.”

“That it has.” Caer’s gaze fell to the boughs above, the spray of stars and evergleaming in his eyes. “It’s pretty, here. I don’t know what I expected to find. I could thorns, perhaps. Something... frightening.”

t befall “There’s plenty of that too, I assure you.”

ends of A quietness spread between them, lifted only by the faint whispering
y to tie wind and the sound of Beau’s fake snoring drifting into something fa
cost of natural. Caerwyn’s eyes stared at the campfire, dark and glossy.

“I suppose you have questions,” he said eventually.

ly, that’s “Many,” she admits. “But... I don’t wish to upset you.”

it?” “Ask them,” he said, “although I cannot promise I will answer.”

Aislinn had been writing a silent list since she’d seen him kill the
say heard she forced them into order.

hat the “So... you can raise the dead.”

“And kill them,” Caerwyn said, jaw tightly set. “Don’t forget that pa

Aislinn hadn’t, but she didn’t think he needed reminding of that. “

on... spontaneously? Recently?”

seemed “Yes.” He swallowed. “After the death of my mother.”

ls were Aislinn sensed that that was one area where her questions woul
asleep.welcome. She could not pick at that wound.

“And that’s why Owen wants you back?”

his head Caerwyn shrugged. “Contrary to what many may think, Owen ha
coveted the throne, as far as I know. He didn’t want to stop me taki
ie said, imagine he’s rather more worried about the panic that will spread
ed and discovered that the Crown Prince can raise the dead.”

“We have a word for it, you know,” Aislinn said. “Necromancy. It’s
forbidden—magic. There’s a couple of Unseelie that have an affinity
I’d wager you’ve some fae ancestry some way back.”

of stars Caer went quiet for a moment, eyes glistening. “Am I—am I still *hu*

l. More Aislinn took a deep breath, squeezing her fingers. She wanted to re
and touch him and knew that that was a terrible, terrible idea. “Yo

have truesight. That's something all fae are born with—even the halve
g of the suggests that, yes, you're human."

ar more "Not that there's anything bad about being fae—"

"You want to be who you've always thought you were. That's not
against me. I understand." She recounted her list. "You can't control
you?"

Caer shook his head. "I've learnt to activate it on demand, th
guard, Diana's help, but I still can't *stop* it. Any time I touch someone, I ri
lives."

How many? Aislinn wanted to ask. *How many—and who?*

art." But the question was too cruel, too invasive, and did it matter? I
It came change anything. All that it would do would force him to relive that m

"Any more questions?" he asked, when she remained silent.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked him.

dn't be "I don't know," he said. "A part of me wanted to. But you can't
could be forced to tell someone. Many might covet these powers, th
fear them."

s never "Did you think that I might?"

ing it. I "Come again?"

l if it's "Did you think that I might fear *you*?"

He sighed. "Yes. I suppose I did."

s rare— "Well, I don't," she said. "Just so you know. I am not afraid of y
y for it. I'm not angry, either."

Caerwyn snorted softly. "I used to hate the way that faeries could t
man?" truth, but now I'm starting to appreciate the honesty, too. It is
ach out genuinely know you're not afraid of me."

u don't "I understand that," Aislinn said.

as. That “Why aren’t you angry with me?”

“We’ve only known each other a week, Caer,” she said. “And for I’m stubborn and impulsive and prone to bouts of irrational anger a slightcompletely fair not to want to spill your darkest secrets to someone y l it, canmet.”

Their gazes met, hanging together like the beads on the leather anks toaround his neck. For a moment, Aislinn stood suspended, the air as fr sk theirglass.

“Well,” she said eventually, “goodnight.”

She moved towards her bedroll, but Caer’s hand reached out, pinch t didn’tcuff of her sleeve between his thumb and forefinger.

oment. “Thank you,” he said, “for not being scared. For coming with u didn’t have to escort me. The dwarves would have gotten me here.”

Aislinn froze again, her eyes once more threaded to his. She was lie, andcloser to naming the colour of his eyes, but in the light of fire they ough Ilike old moss, shadowed and soft.

Why *had* she come with them? It would have been easier to go hor her father, but her first instinct—her only instinct—had been to foll dwarves. To follow *him*.

“Well,” she said, spinning her impulses into acceptable truths, “I particularly fancy going back to your father and pretending to b ou, andtraumatised damsel incapable of looking after herself.”

Not a lie. He’d asked no question.

wist the Caerwyn snorted. “Well, thank you all the same.”

nice to “You shouldn’t say thank you. You owe me, now, Prince.”

Caerwyn’s face dipped closer, only a fraction. “I suppose I do,” l His hand dropped away. “Goodnight, Ais.”

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The following morning, they ate a quick breakfast and packed in record time, determined to make the most of the day. Minerva gave her siblings a quick look as they were readying their belongings.

“Well?” she said. “Coming with us?”

Beau and Aislinn exchanged glances. “If we’re allowed to?” asked Aislinn. Minerva snorted. “The more the merrier.”

“They won’t imprison us for being fae, right?” Beau asked. “The dwarves and the fae have had a testy relationship since the Dwarven Uprising of the Year of Briar 866—”

“I’m aware of the history, boy, you’ll be fine. We dwarves don’t care as long as you. It’s ancient history.”

“Are you *sure*? Because—”

“Beau?” Aislinn threw the bedroll against his chest. “Shut up.”

“Yes, all right.”

Caer glanced at Aislinn as she climbed back onto her horse, half spread across his face. She hoped that meant he was glad they were

with them.

“I saw that,” Beau whispered in her ear. “And your blush, too.”

“You’ll see the ground, in a minute, when I chuck you off this horse

Beau squeaked. Unlike mortal threats, hers were binding. She’d or him she’d drop him in the river if he pulled her hair again when barely more than a toddler, and he’d almost drowned. Aislinn, to her did try her best to fish him out—she hadn’t *really* wanted to do it just... not had a choice.

He’d learnt young not to aggravate her.

They set off at a brisk pace. It was a pleasant, easy enough j especially with the mounts bearing the weight of the hills. They stu
l up in
ave the long crest of them, over the forests.

“Better terrain,” Minerva explained. “No roads out here. The under
is a nightmare on their tails.”

Aislinn. They stopped a few times to refresh themselves and rest their
especially poor Snapdragon, who was carrying two—but otherwis
spent most of their time moving. The company was brighter than
lwarves
g in the Something about Aislinn’s talk with Caer last night seemed to have ea
entire party, and he didn’t seem to mind Beau’s plethora of questions
continued for the better part of an hour. If anything, he almost appe
live as enjoy that someone was fascinated by his powers rather than fearful of

Eventually, his questions subsided, and Beau’s attention was c
instead by the countryside around them. The Redwood was fading, n
easing into browns and yellows. The air twitched with soft, dappled,
magic, the scent of warmth and rain. Aislinn wanted to swim in it.

a smile
coming “This is beautiful,” Beau remarked, and then, half a beat later, ‘
Daisy.”

“Who’s Daisy?” Caer asked, appearing at their side.

“Our mutual best friend,” Beau explained, still sad. Aislinn under-
stood. “Daisy would love it here, and they rarely went adventuring without her.”

Caer told “Oh? What’s she like?”

Beau was “She’s a he.”

To Caer’s credit, “Daisy’s a boy?”

Beau, she’d “Half-minotaur, actually, if you’re building a picture. Brilliant horns.

“Let me make sure I’m following,” Caer started. “You have a best friend
who is a minotaur, and a man, called Daisy?”

Beau’s journey, “Half-minotaur.”

Caer’s look to a Wind whispered through the trees.

“Well, I like it!” Caer clapped his hands together. “Tell me more about
your growthminotaur fellow.”

It was nice to talk about Daisy again, even if it was hard to talk about
rides—shared childhood together without mentioning Cassandra. Beau
saw she theydesperately skirting around her. Aislinn wished he wouldn’t. It r
before.worse, somehow, like she only existed at the end, like her near two-c
used theof life didn’t matter because of how early she quit it.

As which Finally, they made camp for the night. They drank their remaini
pared tobuilt the fire high, cooked a small boar Diana caught for them, and a
of them. roasted in herbs.

Beau claimed After the ale was drunk, and the food gone, Fort unrolled her pa
nagentawhipped out several packs of cards. “Right, ladymen and gentlefol
s, earthy wants to continue our Wyverns and Wastelands campaign?”

“Ooh, me, me!” said Luna, clapping her hands and unwrappi
“I misscarefully bound decks of cards to deposit amongst their rightful owner

“I’ll get the figurines,” Caerwyn said.

“You brought the figurines?” Minerva tutted fondly. “Wasting space... though I can understand why.”

Aislinn watched as he brought out eight tiny metal figures, each the shape of some fae or dwarven character. She picked one up, admiring the detail. It was a sturdy dwarven blacksmith in perfect miniature. “That’s beautiful,” she said. “Where did you get them?”

“I, um, I made them,” he admitted. “The dwarves taught me how to forge when I first arrived—”

“Boy has a knack for it,” Minerva remarked, voice warm. “Although he insists on making everything *pretty*.” She held up her hand, and Aislinn noticed for the first time that her smallest finger was engraved with a design of gems and axes.

“That’s exquisite,” Beau said, leaning forward to inspect it. When he leaned back, he whispered in Aislinn’s ear. “If you don’t want him, I’ll wash him.”

Aislinn elbowed him in the side. “He won’t touch either of us. He can’t for decades.” “Oh, yeah, good point.” He paused. “So you’re saying you’ve never thought about it—”

“I will hurt you.”

Beau shut up.

Aislinn turned her attention back to the others. They were double-checking their cards, and Fort was ‘catching them up’ by repeating what seemed to be some kind of epic quest to destroy an evil troll queen.

“So there we have it,” she concluded. “The weapon you seek is hidden in the centre of the lake. Between it, and you—a sea-serpent, an ogre, and a sea serpent. Your next move?”

“Bagpipes of Invisibility!” Bell declared.

g your “I love you, woman, but no. I vote the Stealth Flashbang.”

“Helm of Dutch Courage!” declared Luna. “Or the Towel of C
l in theProtection—”

ing the “Wrist-mounted Trebuchet!”

ese are “Spurs of Inevitable Swagger—”

“Beards of Amazement! Definitely the Beards of Amazement!”

use the “I’m sorry,” Aislinn started, as Magna pressed a card that read ‘L
Doom’ into her hand, “are you playing some sort of... role playing gar

ugh he Minerva did not look up from her cards. “Aye, lass, what of it?”

Aislinn “You could literally go out and kill a monster.”

pattern “This is cleaner,” said Bell primly.

“Keeps the skills sharp,” added Diana.

hen he “Good for morale,” Minerva informed her.

’ll have “I just think it’s fun!” declared Luna.

Aislinn stared at Caer. He shrugged. “I just like playing for the slim
in’t.” that I might beat them at something.”

thought “Want to join, lass?”

“No, it’s too late in the campaign to be introducing new characters
insisted, “and she doesn’t know how to play—”

“She can just play as herself. Luna and Caer are.”

necking “I am not!” Luna declared. “I am the faerie healer, Luneria...”

ed to be “What she lacks for in imagination, she makes up for in heart,” M
said, not unkindly.

; at the “And I’m a strong dwarven blacksmith by the name of B
sphinx.Gearheart,” Caer added. “Totally different person.”

“Oh *fine*,” Fort insisted, throwing up her hands. “You have been s
hidden on the shore, debating your next move, when two half-fae s

show up. One is a warrior, the other a magician and a scholar. You can use magical forces to reach your prize. Caer—explain the rules to them.”

She threw a handful of spare cards in their direction.

Caer scooted closer, stopping a little distance away. He explained the rules as the others squabbled over their next move and rolled strange, magical dice and complained that the ground was too bumpy. Aislinn was familiar with card games—her father had been playing with her since she was a child—enough to read the numbers—but this was something else entirely.

“I’m going to be honest,” Caerwyn said, “sometimes I think the game is making up the rules as they go. The whole thing seems ridiculous and overcomplicated, but it is rather good fun when you get into it.”

“All right!” said Minerva forcefully. “Bell is using the Bag of Tricks for Invisibility to confuse the ogre. Diana’s using the Catnip Grenade to distract the Sphinx. Sea-monster is distracted by Luna using the Clip-on-Win chance. Magna’s Ladle of Doom, and I’m paddling across the lake on my Invisibility Shield. Are we in agreement?”

An affirmative murmur followed, after which there was much dice rolling, cheering, laughing, and crying.

Things continued in this vein for another two hours at least, at which point Luna had fallen asleep on Caerwyn’s lap, Magna beside her, and half the rest of the party looked asleep in their seats.

Minerva One-by-one, the rest of the dwarves rolled off to bed. Caerwyn tucked Luna and Magna in himself, the others helping with removing their boots. Caerwyn patted Luna’s head as he pulled her cloak around her, lingering slightly over her soft, moonshine hair. He wasn’t wearing his gloves. It had been his habit of standing beside the fire.

“They do tend to sleep a lot, don’t they?” Aislinn remarked, watching

combineas they dozed.

“Did you know,” Beau started, “that the average dwarf sleeps ten to hours, the average human eight, and although fae tend to mimic human rulespatterns, they can survive on as little as four with few ill-effects y-sidedmedium-to-long term?”

familiar “No one likes a scholar, Beau.”

was old “Interesting,” said Caer, stroking a finger under his chin, “how many of sleep do you need?”

they’re “Who, Ais? She needs her full eight or she turns into a grouchy n ulouslyHaven’t you noticed how short tempered she’s becoming?”

Aislinn threw her flask at Beau’s head. It connected with a sharp thump of “I probably deserved that,” he said, massaging his temple. “Good on thesuppose.”

igs and He rolled over without another word. Aislinn started to pull off her flatablelayers herself, although she didn’t feel tired. Contrary to Beau’s assertion did not need as much sleep as a dwarf or even a mortal.

rolling, Caer pulled off his boots and thumbed his beads, his expression beneath the starlight.

th point “Those beads,” Aislinn asked. “Did you make them yourself?”

f of the Caer nodded.

“What do they stand for?”

tucked “For everyone I care for,” he explained, counting them out. “One for orts. Heof the dwarves. One for my mother, and...” His hands stilled on the htly onAislinn had noticed before that they all had tiny symbols etched into too hotThis one, unless she was mistaken, held a tiny crown.

Owen.

ing them “I’m not sure I want to ask,” she said, “but the other one...”

Lower down, half-hidden by his shirt, was another string of purple twelvebeads.

in sleep Caerwyn paused, fingers skimming over them. “The lives I’ve ended in this said. “I felt... I thought I better honour them, too. I’ll have to add another now, for Dafydd.”

“Dafydd?”

by hours “The soldier I killed when...”

“Right,” she said. *When you saved me.*

monster. “We seem to have turned morbid,” Caer announced. “I’d rather not bed on such a note.”

ink. “Nor I,” Aislinn admitted. She turned her gaze upwards to the crystal night, a spray of stars, fine and bright as glittering dust. The moon hung like a lantern, a pot of ink.

an extra “It’s a full moon,” Caer remarked. “I do believe you promised to do something on such an occasion.”

“Ah, yes, about the dancing and... blood bathing.”

glassy “You lingered on blood bathing.”

“Did I?”

They shared a smirk.

“The blood bathing has been largely exaggerated,” Aislinn revealed. “Naked dancing under moonlight? Less so. It’s a common practice among some of the fae. It can enhance some of our magical energy.”

ninth. “Some? Not... you?”

o them. Aislinn pursed her lips. “I may have... dabbled.”

“May?”

Aislinn went silent.

Caer smirked. “You’re a wicked tease.”

the black “I’m a wicked tease,” Aislinn repeated. “Oh, my, apparently I am.”
She looked back at the moon, again at the fire, and cast her eyes over
ed,” her sleeping companions. No one was watching.

her one She climbed to her feet, and unbuckled her belt and boots.

“Umm... what are you doing?”

“Taking off my clothes,” she said. “Relax, I won’t get fully naked.”

She shucked off everything but her undergarments and the thin, fil
she kept beneath her shirt. Cool night air licked at her limbs, the soft
at go to ground sponging beneath her feet.

You are a faerie, the wind seemed to whisper, nature given flesh.

stalline Aislinn started to dance. No matter that there was no music, that
pearl in was dancing with her—the planet played for her, accompanied her
movement. Earth beat like drums beneath her footfalls, the wind
tell me through the trees. The blades of grass bent like strings.

She was as supple as a willow, as malleable as clay, and the moonlight
a fire, a cold ignition, deep, deep in her centre.

She twirled, and found Caer standing in front of her, stripped to his
She stilled.

She was used to well-formed, flawless, smooth fae bodies. She was
d. “These seeing groups of them wearing nothing at all. She was not used
mongst—toned, brown marble, softly rippling pectorals, a light dusting of
velvety hair across his carved abdomen.

Did he forge himself? She wondered dimly. He looked like something
ought to come from a forge; beautiful and dangerous, flecked with scar

It occurred to her she’d been staring at him for far, far too long
blacksmithing has been good for you,” she admitted, her tongue tasting
honey.

” Caer smirked. That stupid, soft, wicked, rippling smirk. “The fight
er their been good for you.”

Aislinn could think of nothing to say to that, and hated that a blush
to her face instead of words.

Caer’s gaze drifted towards the moon. “How does it work?” he said
you feel it?”

my slip Aislinn nodded. “Like a current in the water.”

t, dewy “I can’t feel anything.”

“Try dancing.”

She faced him again, bending to the side, extending her arms in a
no one Caer followed, his sinewy body mirroring her instruction, glowing in t
r every of the moon. Aislinn increased her pace, movements sharper, slicker,
l piped against the wind, a flame in the fire. Caer moved with her, never to
but following, as perfect as if he’d been raised in the wilds of Faerie.

ght was pumped in their veins, invisible. Overflowing. Aislinn’s insides heated

She twirled and stopped shortly, inches from Caer’s chest. Magic
waist. inside her, part of her very marrow, her blood.

Caer’s eyes widened, his chest panting. “You’re glowing,” he remar
used to Aislinn stared down at her hands, faint golden light shining thro
to *this* veins. Her skin was the colour of moon dust.

of fine, She raised her fingers, flexing them carefully, tips flickering with
sparks.

ing that “Is that supposed to happen?” Caer asked.

rs. “Sometimes,” Aislinn returned, her voice a whisper. She’d felt the
g. “The of magic stung with moonlight many times before, but this was the fi
hick as the absorption had become so physical. She raised a hand to Caer’s ch
touching, letting it spark against his skin.

ing has Caer breathed deeply.

“Am I hurting you?”

rushed “No,” he said, “not at all.”

She splayed her fingers and moved her hands across his shoulders
d. “Can his arms. The magic rippled against him, stroking the taut muscles, th
of his chest, coursing over the throbbing vein in his neck before va
like smoke, the remaining magic sinking under her skin.

Caer’s breathing steadied. “Does it always feel like that?”

“What did it feel like?”

circle. “Like sinking into a hot bath,” he whispered. “Like swimming in th
he light in the heat of summer. Like fire rippling through your blood. Like all
, a reed and more.”

uching, Aislinn wondered, if she touched him now, if she would feel that t
. Music wondered why her heart was still hammering so hard against her ribcage

l. “No,” she said, mouth dry, “it doesn’t always feel like that.”

l pulled Caer’s shadow cut across hers. On the ground, silhouetted by the fi
they were touching. An inch between them was all. No more.

ked. *We touched before*, she realised. *I grabbed his face. Nothing happen*

ugh her “*We should...*” she started.

purple Caer stared at her, eyes black and glossy. His lips were parted sligh
Aislinn was quite sure she had never seen a mouth look so soft or
before. She wondered what his stubble felt like.

And other parts of him.

e thrum “Put on our clothes and go back to bed?” he suggested.

rst time “*Yes*,” she said, even though that felt like the opposite she sho
est, not doing.

The bed part sounds nice, though...

If she'd known that grabbing his face might be the only time she touch him, she'd have held on for longer. She'd have savoured the feel his skin beneath hers...

She wondered what the rest of him felt like, how warm that soft body would feel...

"You're not moving," Caer commented, still staring at her.

I can't. "Right," she said quickly, and shook her head. Waves of cold cascaded over her shoulder. "Bed. Sleep. A good idea."

She seized her shirt from the mossy ground and plunged it over her head as if the extra clothing would cover up her thoughts. She marched away without looking back, aware that Caerwyn was still standing beneath the moonlight, that he only moved once she was settled under the blanket.

They should say goodnight. They should say *something*.

But goodnight was too small and fleeting and everything else more light, or ridiculous. So Aislinn stayed silent.

And so did he.

led.

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tly, and

perfect

ould be

If she'd known that grabbing his face might be the only time she'd ever touch him, she'd have held on for longer. She'd have savoured the feeling of his skin beneath hers...

She wondered what the rest of him felt like, how warm that soft, solid body would feel...

"You're not moving," Caer commented, still staring at her.

I can't. "Right," she said quickly, and shook her head. Waves of chestnut red cascaded over her shoulder. "Bed. Sleep. A good idea."

She seized her shirt from the mossy ground and plunged it over her head, as if the extra clothing would cover up her thoughts. She marched to her bedroll without looking back, aware that Caerwyn was still standing there beneath the moonlight, that he only moved once she was settled under her blanket.

They should say goodnight. They should say *something*.

But goodnight was too small and fleeting and everything else monumental or ridiculous. So Aislinn stayed silent.

And so did he.



Caerwyn was raised to be king. From his earliest moments, the words were whispered over his cradle. He could never remember a time he didn't know his future. His fate.

“Eat your food, Your Highness. A king must grow big and strong.”

“Concentrate on your lessons, Prince Caerwyn. A king must have education.”

“Ignore those other children, Your Highness. A king must know his place and the place of others.”

All his life, Caerwyn did exactly as he was told. He listened and he ignored the others his own age, even when all he wanted to do was run across the courtyard with them and dive into the piles of hay. Each winter would bring a new kind of torment. In spring, he'd watch them skip rope, dance maypoles, make daisy chains in the grass, slip outside the castle walls and run off to the fields and forests, free and unrestrained. In summer they'd splash in the fountains and streams, lie in the shade, laugh in the sun and whisper secrets in the evenings. When autumn came, they'd race around to beat back the

and build enormous piles of leaves to jump in. Even winter never seemed to dampen their spirits, and Caerwyn would watch enviously from the castle walls as they drew pictures in the frost and made men of snow when the cold winds swept through the land. He felt he'd give up everything for a chance to see them.

But he was not allowed to complain. Loneliness was the price of the greatness he was told would be his one day.

And yet sometimes, during his lessons, his gaze would fall out the castle walls of the castle, to the mountains in the distance, and his heart would pound madly in his chest it felt like a sickness. He'd dream of running away with them. On his rare excursions out of the town, on hacks and hunts, he'd take his game and skirt to the edge of the wilderness, wondering what it would be like to live a life out there. It felt more natural, that way of life. Each time he journeyed back, the shadows of the castle walls closed in on him like the lid of a casket. It was harder to breathe there. *Everything* was harder there, no matter what anyone told him, Caerwyn couldn't help but feel like he was not meant for him at all.

Meanwhile, the mountains sang, beckoning him with a call like the music of old.

But he never let himself do more than dream. He was a prince, after all, with his own expectations, rules, responsibilities. He ate well and lived in luxury, but he paid for that with freedom.

He knew it was more than a fair exchange, but he also didn't know what he was missing, and sometimes, *sometimes* he thought he might have preferred it.

He never told anyone. How could he? He didn't have true friends, his children few and far between and rarely in his life long enough to form attachments, and he was discouraged from dallying with the common

med to He could not tell the servants, knowing how insulting his dreams might be to his mother...

weather His mother. He could tell anything to her, but not that. Not his wish to join away from it all. Not when that would mean leaving *her*.

In his twentieth year, when she fell ill, the servants and ladies whispered of the death of her husband, had maintained peace without having to marry a boy, had stayed beside him whenever he was sick as a child, had her own brushes with illness, sure, but she never left her throne. The few times she was bed bound, she always gained.

the lid Until, one day, she didn't.

re, and To begin with, he thought nothing of the servants' remarks. His mother was stronger than anyone. She would overcome this. She would.

e siren- Only she didn't. She grew weaker and paler, as still and scrawny as a scarecrow. He'd look at her emaciated body and want to stuff life back into all. Heher. Only he couldn't. He didn't have that power.

ury and Others did.

When Owen suggested sending for a faerie healer, none of his nobles backed him. Magic was unnatural, death was not. The Queen was a woman. They already had an heir. If Owen was lonely after her death, noble could easily be replaced. Maybe the next one would give him children to form a new line.

on folk. "I already have a child of my own!" Owen spat, and then, with a d

ight be, Caerwyn had never seen before, barked at everyone to leave. “N
Caer,” he said, as everyone else slunk away. “For it is your opinion al
1 to run I care for.”

Caerwyn stayed, pinned to the spot. Before Owen married his moth
red and been Lord Cadwaladr, his mother’s most trusted advisor. He’d watch
ssertion him since he was a boy, picking him up when he fell, instructing him t
fter the to his mother... and quietly loving her from afar. He told him storie
him off his father and the man he was and the person he would have wanted C
, never to be. Some stories didn’t help. Most did.

but had “What say you, Caer?” Owen asked, staring out at the mountains th
n when more than ever, Caerwyn wanted to run away to. Anything to
rys rose witnessing what was about to happen next. “No one else seems to l
me. Should I call on a faerie? I’ve heard of one not far away.”

“What will they ask for?”

mother Owen shrugged his shoulders. “Does it matter?”
ne this. And Caerwyn found himself in perfect agreement. It did not matt
the faerie wanted. He felt like he would pay any price.

ly as a The faerie was summoned. He was a slender, sharp-faced, point
ick into creature with hair like sunlight sheathed in mist. He looked exactly lil
had imagined a faerie looking, and he moved like he was made of wa
voice river-soft.

council “You may call me Rowan,” he instructed.

only a He made no promises of a miracle cure, only that he would try his
ath, she save the Queen. Human diseases, he said, were frequently untouch
n of his faerie magic, but there were things he could try—potions and wards
whatever ailed her. Mercifully, he did not ask for more than gold and
arkness—things that were easy to part with.

ot you, “Did you expect blood-letting?” he asked when Caerwyn frowned
one thatstill-beating hearts of seven virgins? A lifetime of tears?”

Caerwyn gritted his teeth. “Something like that.”

er, he’d “Those things have their value, as does everything,” Rowan replied
ed overin the land of men, gold has value, and I will have it.”

o listen Rowan told them nothing of where he came from, no tales of Faer
s aboutthe ones they already knew. He was a silent presence in the main h
aerwynsometimes Caer heard him singing—singing to his mother in that s
melodic voice.

at now, He eased her pains. Her skin regained its lustre. Her hair even str
avoidthicken again. There were days—whole, wonderful, beautiful days-
be withshe was well enough to sit outside with the sun on her face, and C
thought she might be getting better.

And then there were days when she couldn’t move, when she c
speak for groaning, when none of the faerie’s magic would touch her.

er what “There must be something you can do—” Owen begged him.

“I may have a back-up plan,” Rowan whispered in the corner of the
y-eared“Something we can do if worse comes to worst.”

ke Caer Caerwyn didn’t hear his reply. He was too busy holding his mother’
ter, hisIt felt like a handful of twigs inside his.

He barely slept. He barely ate. Each time he nodded off, he woke up
hard jolt, wondering if she was still there, if today was the day his
best todied, the hour.

able by In his worst moments, he almost wanted her to go. At least th
to fightwouldn’t be in pain. At least then, he wouldn’t have to wait and wat
l jewelsher, halfway to Hell.

But he feared the world without her in it more.

1. “The When he was alone, he begged her not to go. Begged her to stay with him. Told her he wasn’t ready.

When he had company, he realised how selfish that was.

d. “But Little by little, something ate away at him, too, as surely as the fever disease taking her.

ie save It didn’t matter if he wasn’t ready, if she was.

all, but “It’s all right, Mama,” he said to her one morning, as the weak sunlight slipped, on another pain-filled day. “I’ll be all right, if you need to go. I’ll be as strong as you were when you lost Father.”

arted to His mother turned to him, half a smile in her ghostly cheeks, and said—when the first word she’d managed in days.

aerwyn “*Stronger,*” she said hoarsely.

But she didn’t go. She continued in her silent agony, too weak to move. She shrivelled away to nothing, clinging barely to life, sustained by the faerie’s magic and Owen’s refusal to let her go.

If the illness didn’t kill her, Caerwyn was sure it would kill him. He couldn’t stand to watch this much longer. What was even the point? She was a skeleton stitched together by pain.

’s hand. “Do you not think...” he started carefully one evening, not meeting Owen’s eyes, “that she’s suffered enough?”

o with a Owen dug his fingers into the arms of his chair. “She will endure,” he said to his mother. “She has to. Just a little longer. Rowan says he has a plan, has people looking for something that could help us—”

en, she *Could*. No absolutes, no certainties. Caerwyn wanted to believe that she could hold on with hope, but hope now felt like a thing that happened to other people. She couldn’t remember the shape of it.

But he could remember his mother’s. Her small, fragile shape, and the way she

with him. Only certainty of her existence.

“Owen,” Caerwyn begged, voice grating, “please. This isn’t right.”

“You want her to die, boy? Is that what you want?”

“No,” Caerwyn said, his voice trembling. He felt like a boy against a world a dark, scary thing, and he an ant beneath the boot of a giant. “I don’t want her to suffer. I don’t want to watch—”

“Then *leave!*” Owen spat. “Go somewhere else. Return when it’s our strong one is making you stay!”

But how could Caerwyn leave? How was that ever a possibility?

He could have pulled rank, of course. He could have insisted. His mother was queen, he was the crown prince. Owen had no right to order him.

But Owen was the only father he had ever known, and right now he had no one to cry out, only parent.

He caved. He returned to his mother’s bedside. He prayed, he stayed, but the room turned empty with sleeplessness.

One morning in the faint bluish light, she opened her hollow eyes and looked at him. Too weak to speak, and yet he knew she was channeling her energy into that look—that last, desperate plea.

She wanted it to be over.

Caerwyn didn’t know if he could do it. He’d never harmed another person, he said, being before, never hurt anyone he loved. What was he supposed to do? He pulled the pillow from the bed and smothered her with it?

He couldn’t bear to think of it, couldn’t bear to press it to her face, to see her bony limbs flailing beneath him, moving for the final time, to feel her go. He snuffed out by the life she’d given.

He couldn’t do it.

But he had to help her. *He had to.*

He clenched her hand, wishing he could suck her pain away, to die her life like he was sending it somewhere, not extinguishing it.

Something fell over him, like a dark, snappable cloud. He felt like rain, the was rolling overhead. A pull, a tug, a hard, twisted knot unlatched inside. “I just... The veins in his mother’s hands blackened. Her skin turned grey once, the spark in her eyes vanished, turning milky white. Her entire body trembled, then stilled.

She was dead. She was definitely, completely dead.

So why was she still moving?

Caerwyn stumbled backwards, screaming, alerting the guards outside. The ladies-in-waiting jolted awake, shrieking at the sight of his Majesty rising from the bed, struggling towards Caerwyn with her mouth hanging open, like she planned to devour him whole.

“What sorcery is this?” one of the guards asked.

“I... it was me,” Caerwyn muttered numbly, confused about everything and that. Somehow, he’d done this.

“What?” the guard ceased his arm. “This is nonsense, Your Highness. His mother’s corpse stepped towards him, and the second guard stepped through.

Caerwyn screamed again. *Don’t hurt her*, he wanted to yell, even though he knew that was ridiculous, pointless. His mother was beyond hurting. His mother wasn’t here anymore.

But her corpse continued to move, sliding down the sword.

“The head!” shrieked one of the ladies-in-waiting. “Take off her head!”

The guard holding Caerwyn dropped him, drawing his sword. He sliced her neck straight from her shoulders, and the Queen’s head rolled off the flagstones and landed on the rug nearby.

raw out Her nose brushed against the pattern of bears and crowns—the pattern Caerwyn had followed with his fingers as a tiny child, naming thunder the animals and counting them one-by-one as his mother praised his effort to him. Caerwyn turned, and vomited over the floor.

. All at “Steady now, Your Highness,” said one of the guards. “The more the body defeated.”

But that wasn't true, wasn't right, because the only dead thing here was his mother, and Caerwyn was the one who had made her that way, and he was still alive.

posted He clambered to his feet, moving towards the door. The other side of the door was open, and he shouted out, and suddenly there were hands on him, trying to hold his mouth to stop—

He didn't know their intentions. All he knew was that he wanted his mother *gone*.

ling but And suddenly, their voices vanished, replaced by awful, gurgling sounds.

Their hold slackened, their jaws falling from their faces like snake's heads.

is—” The ladies started screaming again.

ran her Caerwyn regained just enough of himself to seize a fallen sword, and he cut through them through too. Their heads rolled against his mother's.

though He stared at their vacant, empty eyes for a minute that held the weight of centuries, the screams of the ladies-in-waiting ringing in his ears like bells.

And then he started to run.

id!” He would never remember how he got out of the castle, how he seized the horse, how he managed to navigate towards the mountain or whether the angel guided his path or some demon ensured his torment continued. The forests called to him, but no longer with the song of freedom.

e same The next truly conscious thought he had was falling from his hor
each ofwaking in a cottage filled with dwarves, screaming for a mother who
forts. never, ever answer him back.

A mother he'd killed.

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The next truly conscious thought he had was falling from his horse, and waking in a cottage filled with dwarves, screaming for a mother who would never, ever answer him back.

A mother he'd killed.

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16

MEMORIES BY MOONLIGHT

Caerwyn bolted upright in the forest, half screaming, barely breathing. “Caer!” someone hissed. “Caer, it’s all right, it was a dream.”
Aislinn.

Only she was wrong. It wasn’t a dream, but a memory. Sweat rushed down his skin at the starkness of it.

Aislinn hovered nearby, as if unsure where to put herself. Her eyes glossed over him. “Are you—”

“I killed my mother.”

Aislinn did not still, barely even paused. “I know.”

Caer froze, looking up at her. Had one of the dwarves told her he’d babbled out the whole story, the night he’d come to them, but they’d never understood this wasn’t something he wanted to share—

“The others didn’t tell me,” Aislinn went on, reading his hesitation and taking an educated guess. Your powers... the way you fled the castle... the timing...”

“I didn’t... I didn’t mean to.”

“I know that, too.”

The softness and surety of her words didn't reach him, only his deep need to explain.

“She was just in such pain, and I wanted it to be over, and, and something happened, and then it *was* over, and it wasn't, because she didn't stay—she came back, and the guards tried to stop me and I—”

“Ssh, ssh,” Aislinn said, inching closer. “It's over now.”

She couldn't say ‘it's all right.’ She couldn't pat his hand like Mine when he'd told the others and tell him it was fine. Because it was her tongue that knew the shape of a lie.

“Caer?”

hing.

He couldn't look her in the eye. He couldn't look at her and he couldn't hold her and he wanted to. He wanted to so badly. But the thought of her turning grey, her eyes white, the thought of twisting her—

ed from

She dropped his blanket over his shoulders and hugged his back. “It's all right, isn't it?” she whispered. “It has to be skin-on-skin?”

: hands

He swallowed, desperately hoping that assumption was correct. He'd never hurt anything he wasn't directly touching, and although he'd reanimated already-dead without contact, he'd never killed anything without physical contact. This was safe. It had to be. If it wasn't, if he couldn't later do anything, he thought he might slip away entirely.

? He'd

seemed

“Yes,” he said, voice hushed, “this is all right.”

. “I just

e... the

“Follow my breathing,” Aislinn instructed. “If you can. Breathe with me.”
Caer followed her instruction, breathing in.

“Hold,” she whispered, “and out again. That's it.”

Her chest rose against his back, her heartbeat thumping in time to his. It was something to hold onto, something solid and warm.

Gradually, his breathing slowed.

“Thank you,” he said.

Her hands were wrapped around his middle, close to the parting
nethingshirt. Not too close.

He wanted to take one of those hands and squeeze it, wanted to l
fingers into hers and not let go. It would anchor him further.

“I’m all right now,” he told her, although regretted his words a r
rva hadlater when she slipped away from him.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded.

She sat in front of him, her cloak drawn around her shoulders, glea
ouldn’tthe whispery, quiet light of the fire. Her seafoam eyes were locked c
er skinbright and brilliant, still and piercing. They held a strange quality to
like she was trying to peer into his soul, while at the same time beir
‘This isand restrained, as if trying to tell him she was more than happy to
silence until he sent her away. He could not explain it another way.

“A secret for a secret,” she said eventually. “It is the faerie way.”

“Come again?”

“You feel exposed, do you not? Weakened by your confession, a
ch ontoyou are not?”

His jaw tightened. “Yes.”

“Then you shall have a piece of my armour, too,” she said. “A t
n me.” even the balance.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I killed my best friend,” she interrupted. “That’s... that’s actually r
o his. ItI didn’t kill her like you killed your mother. But I made the decisions
to her death. And I had to watch her die. It was a lot more my fault th

mother was yours—my decisions led to her death, not some accident or unknown power I had no hope of controlling.” She paused. “I can’t tell you that it will get better. People keep telling me that it will, that time will heal all... but I’m a faerie and they expect me to live forever. I think I might be a lie we believe. I’m not even sure I want to move past it. It would be like it would be dishonouring her. The guilt keeps her with me.” A moment pause, longer and harder. “I know that’s not how she’d want me to live, telling everyone I ever met how hilarious she was and praising her name. But in the end, it doesn’t help, knowing what she would want. She’s not here to want it.”

Caer paused. Her eyes had turned away from him, turned away from everything, like she could see past branches and fire and starlight to the blackness they were made from. The tips of her fingers had seen the grass below. He wasn’t sure she was aware of it.

“And did you?” he asked, the words struggling to form.

“Did I what?”

“Kill the monster that killed her.”

Aislinn lowered her head. “Yes.”

“I can’t kill the monster that killed my mother.”

“Do you need to be told that wasn’t you?”

“I—”

“You are not a monster, Caer. I wouldn’t be able to say it if it wasn’t true.”

“You wouldn’t be able to say it if you didn’t *believe* it. That’s not quite the same thing.”

“Well, my opinion ought to count for something, at least. I’ve met your monsters, and I’m very hard to impress.”

of birth “I’ve impressed you?” Caerwyn raised an eyebrow. “How did I do t
m’t tell Aislinn stared at him, her eyes doe-wide. He preferred the face sh
me willwhen she was slightly annoyed, but he liked this one too.

ink that He liked all of her faces...

It feels “I’m actually not entirely sure,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I f
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“I’ve impressed you?” Caerwyn raised an eyebrow. “How did I do that?”

Aislinn stared at him, her eyes doe-wide. He preferred the face she made when she was slightly annoyed, but he liked this one too.

He liked all of her faces...

“I’m actually not entirely sure,” she said. “I’ll let you know if I figure it out.”

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17

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

They set off again at first light, merry as the day before, although it was turning harder and chillier. They were not far from Winter day, two at most—Aislinn wasn't sure. Bell was in charge of the map.

In all her expeditions before, Aislinn had never trusted another enough to navigate for her. Cass used to tease her about it mercilessly.

“What do you think is going to happen if I have the map, just for while?”

Aislinn didn't doubt Cass' skill, but she could not surrender the map had to be the one holding it, to know where they were going.

“You could walk us into a bog, perhaps.”

“Yes, because I don't have eyes. Or ears. Or a *nose*.”

It was only now Aislinn wondered if it wasn't a trust thing at all, but to only blame herself if things went wrong, to relieve one more person of the burden of responsibility. She was to be queen one day, after all. Of course she should lead. Of course she should take the fall.

She wondered why she'd so easily surrendered to the dwarves. It was likely just the sensible thing to do—they knew the way, and she did not.

From time to time, Caer met her gaze, but she did not hold it for long. It was hard to have a conversation with Beau literally breathing down her neck, and several times she opted to go on foot just to have a little more space to move. Once or twice, she scurried up to the treetops and hopped along the boughs and branches, shaking off the memory of her injury. She was glad she was not made to be chained to the ground.

Sometimes, she caught Caer watching. She tried not to enjoy that too much.

the air
now. A



Caer was quite sure he'd never enjoyed anything as much as he enjoyed personwatching Aislinn move through the forest like something between a leopard and a cat, a creature made of air. She could scuttle up the tree so fast he swore she was a little almost levitated. He'd seen acrobats before and marvelled at their skills, but Aislinn seemed more water than flesh and muscle. She didn't leap, she soared. She made a mockery of whatever force pinned them to earth, moving through the undergrowth like a bird, her cape trailing behind her like the wings of a butterfly.

It was impossible to look away.

"I can see you staring," said Beau pointedly, a grin spread across his face.

"It's an impressive feat."

"She is," said Beau, still smiling. "But is that the only reason you're staring?"

"I—"

It was “Oh, this is very amusing,” said Minerva.
Fort pulled her wargi in closer. “More amusing than that time we to
long. It that skipping was the easiest way to get around the forest?”
er neck, Caer’s cheeks heated. “I was really fast and you know it!”
pace to A laugh passed through the party, deep and rippling. Aislinn droppe
ong the from the boughs and slipped back onto her horse. Beau decided this
was not perfect opportunity to stretch his own legs, although he kept to a stea
beside the party, not flitting through the trees.
hat too Caer gazed at Aislinn like a painting of water, unsure of whe
wanted to dive into it, or stand back and safely admire from a distar
knew she didn’t consider herself as magically gifted as her brother, b
was something different about *her* magic. It rolled off her like dew fi
morning leaf. It was natural, beautiful, wondrous to behold. No matt
enjoyed wild and dangerous she was, no matter the power that trembled in he
eaf and her magic was not so thunderous. Her power was all her own.
ore she He’d never liked magic before now. Never appreciated it or seen th
kill, but in it, the wonder.
ap, she It was decidedly growing on him now.
flitting
ike the



That evening, as they made camp, and Caer was off looking for fir
; face. Beau sidled up to Aislinn and whispered in her ear.

“Did something happen between you and the prince last night?”

Aislinn blushed. “That is absolutely none of your business.”

Beau clapped his hands, grinning. “That’s a yes, then.”

Aislinn glanced around her, checking no one was listening in. "I'd Caermight have done a moon dance."

"Naked?"

Aislinn pursed her lips. "Not quite."

and down "And?"

was the "It was... magical."

dy pace "They're supposed to be."

"No, I mean... It was *really* magical. No quiet hum. It was dripping from her fingertips."

nce. He "Hardly surprising. You're the future queen of Faerie. You're supposed to feel magic more than the rest of us."

rom the "But I don't, Beau. I never have. I feel more than nothing, but nothing like what Father talks about, or you..."

r wake, Beau cocked his head. "Are you having a moment of doubt?"

"Maybe."

ie value "Are you genuinely thinking that I would make a better queen than you?"

"You'd be a king, Beau."

"I could be queen!" he said indignantly. "I could be the best queen ever was!"

"That's rather what I'm afraid of. Not that you'd be great, because you would be, and I would *want* you to be, but... I'm afraid that I won't be good enough."

"Magic doesn't make a monarch!" Beau insisted. "I'd be terrified to definitely get lost in a book and miss council meetings, or start asking personal questions to some visiting dignitary, or accidentally bumping someone's head whilst trying to knight them, or—"

"Beau, you're seventeen. I think you'll grow out of it."

“We... Beau snorted. “You’re only nineteen,” he said, “and unless Mother good on her promise to murder Father, I reckon we’ll have him for centuries yet. You’ll be queen one day, but you don’t have to be queen

“That was extremely mature.”

“I have my moments.” He nudged her shoulder. “So, you and Ca then...”

Aislinn shook her head. “We are *not* going there!”

ig from “Why not? I thought we agreed you had plenty of time to fool around

“We did not, and I have better things to do than moon over some used to mortal prince with ridiculously muscular arms and a soft, sullen mouth

“How can a mouth be sullen?” said Caer, appearing behind her, ar ing like of firewood.

Aislinn jumped. “How can you move so silently?”

“I wouldn’t say my mouth is sullen. Devilishly handsome, maybe. I the soft part. And my arms are agreeably muscular, I must say.”

you?” “I, er, I, you’re not—” Aislinn’s mouth stalled. She coughed out few horrid sounds, emulating a cat retching up a hairball.

en that Caer stared on, bewildered. He turned to Beau. “Is she all right?”

Beau just grinned. “She’s trying to find something to say that isn’t a ise you failing miserably. Probably something like ‘I hate you both’ or ‘I w oe goodyou’ but she *can’t*.”

“I will find something horrible to do to you, Beau. Mark my words ple! I’d say one more thing—”

asking “Ooh, better stop now. She will actually be held to that.”

cut off Caer ignored him, still looking at Aislinn. His gaze kept on her as down to add the logs to the fire. She could not shake it. She did not wa

Beau took out his notebook and started to sketch. He drew th

Caer makeshuddled around the fire beneath the large, near-full moon. He drew a few figurines and Minerva's arm. He drew hands on cards and a brown figure. "yet." flesh tucked into a finger of metal. He drew Diana and her patches of skin, and Luna with her hair like moonshine.

Caerwyn, Aislinn had always been jealous of Beau's ability to do that, to immortalise a moment with the flick of a pencil, the way he could rend memory to paper. Such a skill was beyond her. Although she wouldn't have traded her talent for anything with weaponry for her talent with a paintbrush, she envied him all the same. "What are you drawing?" Luna asked, looking up after her character was immobilised for three turns. "Oh! It's me! I look so pretty."

Caerwyn full "You *are* that pretty, Luna."

Luna beamed. "You're so kind to say so."

"You're so kind to *exist*."

Caerwyn'll take Caer snorted. He'd elected to opt out of the game tonight to service the weapons. He sat beside Aislinn in the glow of the campfire, sharpening another Minerva's axe. Aislinn tried not to focus too hard on how his fingers felt against the blade, or how the veins in his arms flexed as he worked.

"They seem to be getting along," he told her. "Do you think there's something going on there?"

Caerwyn'll end "I don't think so. Whenever Beau fancies someone, he tends to be either over-the-top flirty or painfully awkward. There is no in-between."

Caerwyn. If you "And you?"

"What about me?"

"What are you like, when you like someone?"

Caerwyn he bent *Oh, you know, I fixate on certain parts of their body and stare at them from a distance, imagining them in a number of compromising positions while they're partycalling their mouth 'sullen'.*

Caer's "Usually I just go up to them and invite them back to my room. They're rather well at getting my point across."

of inky "Oh," said Caer, a little sadly.

"Not always, though."

ortalise "Are you avoiding answering the question?"

paper. "Yes."

r talent They turned away from each other, smiling.

same. *He must know, she thought, after overhearing me with Beau. He must be. I find him attractive. Why doesn't he ask outright?*

Why don't you?

Because it didn't matter if she found him attractive. It didn't matter if he found *her* attractive, if every touch risked her life.

He could get control of his powers, whispered another voice.

ce their *Before we reach Avalinth?*

rpening *It doesn't need to be by then. You have forever.*

s rested *He doesn't.*

Caer was mortal. Even within Faerie, he'd still age, and inside the valley there's the dwarven kingdom, where magic was muted, he might not even hang on long.

ither be She shook her head. It was foolish to contemplate such things. She had been attracted to people before. It would fade.

It had to.

Caer cocked his head. "Are you all right?"

She wanted to say 'fine' but found that she could not. Mercifully, he was tired. "Exhausted," she admitted. "I think Beau was right about needing eight hours. Too many late nights. Maybe... maybe I should go down."

t works “All right,” said Caer, still frowning. The dwarves, usually first asleep, were still wide awake.

Aislinn slithered into her cold bed roll and turned to stare at the star. She tried not to think about the moon dance, of the colour of his skin in the light, the feel of the magic pressing between them or the way his dark hair fanned beside the campfire.

When the noise of the rest of the party died down, she tried not to think about how he was doubtless lying awake a few feet away, staring up at the sky, and for reasons she couldn't explain—or didn't want to—she tried more than anything to crawl out of her bed and sit beside him, talking to her if he the night turned to dawn.



The day that Cass had died had dawned like any other, the quest fee was different from the dozens of others they had been on. Ogres stealing from the walls of the city, sirens sinking ships, a rogue dragon in the mountains—even at eight and nineteen respectively, it felt like they had seen it all.

They'd been called to the Spring Court after receiving reports of destroying some hamlets to the north. They had fought giants before, but it wasn't supposed to be dangerous, or no more than they were used to.

Daisy got bitten by a snake on the way there. It was venomous, but he applied the anti-venom and had no concerns about his recovery. The tracks were leading to a nearby village. They didn't want to delay.

“Go on without me,” Daisy insisted. “I mean, come back when you're done, don't abandon me forever, but please go kill the giant and make sure it doesn't hurt anyone else.”

to fall “All right,” said Cass.

Daisy pouted. “You could at least *pretend* to be considering it...”

rs. She It made sense. They shouldn’t delay. More could die if they did.

e silken But Aislinn didn’t want to take Beau with them if it was just the t
k lashesthem. Four was a better number. Four meant three of them could look
Beau. If it was just the three of them...

o think She and Cass would do better alone. She wouldn’t have to watch
p at thehim. His magic was still weak from a combat point of view anywa
wantedwas part of the point of bringing him along—so that he could pract
ig untildie.

She made him stay with Daisy. She said that it was safer for everyo
Daisy could do with him, that it was just a giant, nothing they hadn’t l
before.

Beau argued, and huffed, and cried, and finally relented.

ling no They went alone.

nortals, And Cass died.

een and It would be months before Aislinn was even ready to listen to the ic
it wasn’t her fault, and to this day, it would bubble back up un
a giant whispering in her ear that she had killed her best friend, that she had f
fore. It a leader, that she had failed at *everything*.

She could not be queen. She could not even protect her best friend.

at Beau She’d thrown herself even more into training afterwards, sparring u
giant’s hands bled, practising her healing skills until she passed out, cry
frustration when her magic failed her, again and again.

you’re Only sheer stubbornness kept her alive—stubbornness and the mer
sure he Cass’ disapproving face. *Avenge me, bitch, and move on!*

She’d done one. The second was a permanent journey that Aislinn

sure she'd ever finish.

But she'd try. She had to.



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She woke long before dawn, in the deepest part of the night, br
heavily. Someone else was awake by the fire.

“Caer?” she said hopefully.

“No such luck,” Fort replied. “It’s just me.”

“What are you doing up?”

Fort shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “I usually sleep well, but to
can’t seem to. It’s no matter. Girth here can carry me tomorrow if I
sleep.” She patted the back of the wargi she was resting against. He
towards her at the motion, stuffing his massive head in her lap. Fort
turning her gaze towards the sky. “Seems a shame to sleep on nights li
anyway. Almost seems wasteful.”

Aislinn followed her gaze, and found herself inclined to agree. A s
spray of stars shone against a swirling sky of black, blue, purple an
She had no memory for constellations or reading the stars, but what
matter? Each diamond glittered regardless of its name.

She wished Caer was awake. She hardly knew why, only someh
presence would add to this, like the honey between layers of pastry.

“Don’t wake him,” Fort said, snapping Aislinn from her thoughts.

“I wasn’t going to—how did you *know*?”

Fort smiled. “Your gaze dropped towards him. I’m not a fool. But
the boy sleep. I don’t think he often rests well.”

Aislinn's gaze drifted fully to his sleeping form, his face turned away from her, his slumbering form still. "How do you know?" she asked. "About nightmares? You all seem to sleep so soundly—"

Fort shrugged. "After what he's been through, how could it be otherwise?"

Aislinn nodded. "Were you having a nightmare, too? Is that why you're breathing awake?"

"I was dreaming of Avalinth," she said, "but it was covered by a blanket. And then I dreamed of sleep itself. A strange dream to wake from. I don't like it."

"Do you need company?"

"Tonight I need to sleep." She shook her head. "Sleep, young highness. I think you will need it."

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he rolled
smiled,
like this,

peckled
his pink.
did that

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Aislinn's gaze drifted fully to his sleeping form, his face turned away from her, his slumbering form still. "How do you know?" she asked. "About the nightmares? You all seem to sleep so soundly—"

Fort shrugged. "After what he's been through, how could it be otherwise?"

Aislinn nodded. "Were you having a nightmare, too? Is that why you're awake?"

"I was dreaming of Avalinth," she said, "but it was covered by a cloud. And then I dreamed of sleep itself. A strange dream to wake from. I rather liked it."

"Do you need company?"

She shook her head. "Sleep, young highness. I think you will need it."



18

A RUMBLE IN THE GLADE

Thunk. Thud. Rumble.

Aislinn jerked out of sleep, awaiting the inevitable clash of the wargis. It didn't come. Only the slow, hissing snarl of the wargis.

"What's happening?" Beau murmured beside her, voice thick with sleep. "Is it going to rain?"

Aislinn glanced at the clouds, but there wasn't a whisper of grey. This wasn't nature.

Several of the wargis shot to their feet. Two barked. Fangs snapped. Aislinn grabbed her sword.

Caer was up already, reaching for his own. He kicked his bedroll into the bushes. Beau stumbled to his feet, shaking the others. "Wake up!" he barked. "Come on!"

Caer let out an ear-piercing whistle. A few of them mumbled.

The rumbling got closer.

"Come on!" Aislinn spit. All three of them were tugging at them now, rougher than all of them, more desperate. "Beau—" Aislinn said.

“Healing magic.”

Beau nodded, understanding. He pressed a hand to Luna’s temple, prickling beneath his fingertips. She woke in an instant, grabbing her pin. “What’s happening—”

Aislinn wasn’t listening. She and Beau moved over the rest of the group, forcing them to wake. They fumbled for weapons, Minerva shouting orders.

“Stay close!” she bellowed quietly. “Stay together!”

The trees in the distance started to move. A great, lumbering shape towards them, bending trunks like toothpicks.

Aislinn saw it seconds before the others, and froze.

A giant.

under.

It crashed into the glade, grinning from ear to ear, the earth thundering beneath it. “Dwarves,” he drooled, eyes bright, mouth cavernous. “Tasty dwarves. Fae, too, and a nice, juicy mortal. A feast. A feast!”

1 sleep.

He let out a sound half like a roar, half like a crow.

among

And other shapes in the distance started to move.

“*Scatter!*” Minerva commanded.

The dwarves split, Beau with them, but Aislinn remained, pinned in

into the

Even as the giant moved.

hissed.

Even as it roared.

Even as it ran.

No thoughts came, only dim and paralyzing fear. Stark, she was crushed. Crushing.

w, Caer

A hand wrapped around her arm and yanked her into the trees, shoving her against a trunk so hard the breath in her lungs leapt.

napped.

“Are you all right?”

Caer.

sparks Somehow, Aislinn found her voice. “Cass was killed by a giant.”

rolling Caer paused. “Your friend.”

“Yes.”

f them, His jaw tightened. “Then you know how to kill these things.”

ing out Aislinn’s resolve strengthened. “Yes,” she agreed. *And I know I’m going to let them kill us.*

Caer lifted his sword. “Tell me what to do.”

headed Aislinn ducked as a splintered tree came soaring overhead, dragging her to the floor with her. The other two giants had reached the glade now, up the oaks, roots and all, using them to clear the rest of the forest. The dwarves had divided, separating between the three of them, the remaining circling them too, yapping and biting. One let out a painful whimper. “Tasty, trunk struck its back.”

Beau stood away from the others, hands splayed, vines twisted in command, wrapping around the legs of one of the giants. His assault ended at the sound of the wargi, eyes darting in its direction.

“Beau!” Aislinn hissed. “Stay focused!”

place. Beau nodded, his throat trembling.

Aislinn turned to Caer. “They’re resistant to most magic, and their armor is too thick for our weapons to do much damage—except at their weak point. Namely, the base of their necks.”

apeless. “Necks,” Caer muttered. “How are we reaching those... that winged one of yours doesn’t actually allow you to fly, right?”

ing her Aislinn half snorted. “No,” she said, “but keep the one Beau’s worried about distracted, and I’ll find a way.”

“Understood,” Caer said. He fixed her with a look, mouth half open.

he wanted to say something else—and then disappeared.

Aislinn didn't waste a second. She vaulted towards the giant, sliding across the ground, avoiding another massive swing. She flipped onto her back behind it, and Beau—seeing what she was doing—lifted the roots in a protective command, allowing her to scramble through the air up to its neck.

I'm not A slash wouldn't be enough. She grabbed hold of the back of its neck with her left hand and moved to plunge her blade at the base of its spine.

An enormous hand reached over to grab her. Its, or another's, she could see. Aislinn swung back down, dodging beefy fingers, as a rain of bolts started tearing the sky, hitting the hand and embedding itself in the giant's back.

It roared, grappling for the bolts, but Aislinn seized one and used it as a springboard onto the hand and scurry back to the base of its neck.

This time, nothing stopped her.

This time, she struck true.

The giant started to sag. There was no time for any relief, any plea for mercy. One of the others let out a roar, flinging a trunk in her direction. Aislinn let out a yell—

Roots leapt out of the ground, wrapping around the trunk and yanking it out of the way before scuttering back to the underground like startled rats.

Beau stood behind them, braced against the air, panting hard.

The second giant charged towards him.

Minerva leapt into the way, taking the brunt of the attack with her head and cape arm. A loud *clang* shot through the glade, followed by a hiss of pain.

Fort fired her pistol, sending out another hailstorm of bolts.

The glade was alive with motion, a startling cacophony of noise and blood. Aislinn didn't know where to look, where to move. She pirouetted, like a dancer, dodging bolts and claws.

out of the way of each oncoming attack, dodging fallen debris and the kiddy-stampede of giants' feet.

to vines She had to get to Beau, she had to.

at her At the same time, her mind was conscious of other members of the party—the ones that might also be struggling to defend themselves. She'd never seen Luna brandish anything but a rolling pin, and Magna—

ie. Where was Magna?

couldn't An explosion went off in the trees, followed by the howl of the third giant and a snatch of red hair as Magna bolted out from under the rising smoke.

The giant fell with a thud that shook the forest.

and it to Half of the dwarves descended upon it, the remaining half laying themselves at the final one as Aislinn swept under its arms and grabbed him, steering him as far away as she dared.

"I'm fine," he insisted, "Ais, really—"

asure in Aislinn swept over his body, squeezing his shoulders, his arms, stopping. Caera thick red patch on his shoulder.

She ripped open his doublet.

aking it "It's just a scratch," he insisted. "And I liked that doublet."

nice. Aislinn fretted and frowned, pressing her palm to his wound until it glowed white-hot and golden magic seeped from her fingers. She stuffed the glowing light back into his body, knitting his flesh back together, healing him just enough. Finished, she withdrew her hand and half slapped him on the cheek—Bell's tapping motion, like the furious thump of a rabbit's leg.

"Don't lie to me!"

and steel "Sorry," he murmured, and slumped against her.

ouetted She steered him towards the ground. He was conscious, but exhausted. He'd been attacked before a full night's rest. He wasn't used to battling

and the he'd been using his magic to battle a *giant*.

“Stay here,” she insisted, “unless something tries to squish you.”

“Noted...” he drawled.

For party, Aislinn raced back into the fray.

Never seen The last giant was still upright, its body riddled with holes and bolts
pinpricks. Even the dagger wedged in its thigh barely seemed to be

Nothing bothered it until Minerva took her axe in her good arm and
slammed it into the base of its neck.

Like. The giant stumbled.

“Timber!” someone cried.

Leaping The dwarves shot out of its path. Caer tried to follow them, but
he caught Beau, catching on one of Beau's vines. Aislinn skidded towards him, tugging
at the foliage, but it flexed with residual magic, getting tighter and tighter...

The giant swayed closer.

Leaping at “Move!” Minerva hissed.

Aislinn glanced back at the giant. It was close, too close, its body
swayed, jaw slack. They were right in its path. No shield she could conjure would
stop it. They needed to get out, to vanish, to sink beneath the earth—

glowed Caer pinched a lock of her hair. “Ais,” he whispered, “you should—

the blood She shook her head. No. Not again. Not him. Not *anyone*.

enough. *I am the future queen of Faerie. I will not die here. This land is mine*
—a madperson—

The giant stumbled again. Something rushed through her—a feeling
being ripped from her skin, of the world vanishing to a pinpoint, of
sucked away. Noise flared in her eardrums. Sensation knifed through her
waisted. And finally, mercifully, all went black.

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19

CARDS IN THE CLEARING

Beau screamed, hurtling towards the fallen giant and reaching i
earth once more with his magic, forcing up roots to lift the n
His body shuddered and strained, the roots not strong enough, *Be*
strong enough.

It was hard to lift anything you wouldn't have had the strength
manually. For some magic-users, impossible. But Beau was a pr
Faerie, and Aislinn was his sister.

She couldn't be gone. She couldn't be. Even if she'd felt the full f
the giant's weight, if there was just a scrap of life left in her, he cou
her. He could.

Magna pulled at his sleeve, but he paid her no heed, even as his r
strained beneath the giant's weight, his temple close to exploding.

"Lad—" Minerva started.

When he ignored her again, she moved towards the giant's corp
levered her axe underneath it, prying its body up one-handedly, her me
loose in its socket.

Slowly, the other dwarves limped forward, aiding her, pushing the roots until the colossal body gave way and rolled to the side.

Aislinn wasn't under it. Neither was Caerwyn.

Beau stared, head still pounding. He was sure, he was absolutely sure. Magna continued yanking on his sleeve.

"What?" he asks.

Her fingers twitched into shapes and gestures, only a few of which he understood. Something about vanishing. He knew that much.

"I can't... I don't understand."

"She's saying..." Luna translated. "They vanished... under... a black sheet? Or a black sheet that looked like a door?"

A black sheet. A door.

Portalled. Aislinn had opened a portal.

Beau sunk to the ground, energy expunged. Flora rushed forward, pulling something out of her bag and lifting it up to his lips. He drank, though he wasn't sure what it was. Couldn't taste it, couldn't feel it.

Portal magic was a skill that precious few possessed. He knew his own limitations—he could do it—rarely, under great care. It took him hours until he could muster up his energy enough to create another one. The first time Hawthorn had used it, he'd only managed it because he'd just ripped the magic from an enemy. He'd still almost passed out.

And Aislinn... Aislinn's magic energy reserves weren't as high as his. They were cut by half.

She's with Caer, a voice reminded him. Wherever she's transported to, she isn't alone.

He prayed she'd had the sense to transport them back to Acanthos, given her desperation and panic—and the fact that the further away

up with destination was, the harder it was to portal there—he didn't think likely.

"She can't be too far away," he muttered, the rest of the dwarves— crowded around him. "She wouldn't be able to—she's nearby."

He stood up abruptly, his head spinning. It felt like a ball of lead column of rubber.

h Beau "Steady, steady," Flora chided, grabbing his elbow and forcing him the floor. "Just rest for a bit. Save your strength."

Hecate appeared from nowhere, winding her way around Beau's leg and blackhopped onto his lap and Beau squeezed her, burying his face in her hair. His breathing started to slow.

The horses had run off, as had one or two of the wargis, but she was impressed that she'd stayed. Most cats would have vanished.

pulling "Is everyone all right?" Minerva asked, glancing around the ruined glade. "Confirm your survival, and report your injuries."

"Your arm is hanging off, dear," Bell pointed out.

s father "Only the metal one. Are you fine?"

ld refill Bell sighed. "Alive, a few cuts, nothing major."

done it, "I'm all right," Luna reported. "I stayed out of it, mostly."

vil fae. "Sensible."

"I live," added Diana. "Broken fingers. Bruised ribs."

is. Not "I'll get to you," Flora responded. "I'm fine. Mags?"

She nodded, not looking at anyone, already searching through the wreckage to retrieve her things.

"Fort?" Minerva called. "Has anyone seen Fort?"

ia, but They all shook their heads.

away a A coldness rippled through the glade. They split off, diving into the

it was searching beneath the fallen giants and a body of one of the wargis called her name. Beau, unable to stand, prayed for her answerin es still however weak, however faint. Just a little bit longer, and he'd be able her. Just a little bit...

id on a "I've found her," said Minerva, voice stony.

The others turned to her still, stalwart shoulders. She stood beside back to tree.

Fort was not beside it. For the longest time, Beau wasn't even su gs. She Minerva was talking about. She was mistaken. No one was there. fur. His He followed Minerva's gaze down to the forest floor, past the leav broken boughs. A hand reached out beneath the branches, bent and c he was cards splayed out beside it.

l glade.



They took Fort's body to another glade, away from the carcasses of the that would rot and wither, and buried her beneath the boughs of a tree was unable to help them build a grave with magic, but he felt that wouldn't have wanted him to assist anyway. This was something they to do for her.

The last thing that they would ever do for her.

They spoke only a few words as they lowered her into the ground gh the seemed to be beyond words right now. Minerva told her to rest, Magn a few words with her fingers, and everyone else cried. At the end, t drew their daggers, and offered the earth a single drop of blood from t of their hands.

ie trees,

s. They “Our blood to the earth that holds you,” Minerva whispered, as Bell
ig call,her with her offering. “May you carry it with you. May it protect you
to healReturn to the stone, sister.”

Beau watched the spectacle and felt a similar grief for this stranger
had felt when Cass died. Once more, he had not seen it, once more,
a fallenot been able to help. There was no telling if Fort had died immedi
he’d seen it, if he’d been more aware of everything that was happer
re whatcould have gotten the tree off of her. He could have healed her. H
have—

ves and *Could, could, could.*

rushed, He would never know.

They did not rest for long afterwards, no longer than it took
injuries, collect belongings, and remove Minerva’s ruined arm when
declared it was too damaged to fix in the field. It was decided it was
keep moving towards Winter, hoping that Aislinn would have tran
e giants them somewhere closer, not further away. Both she and Caer knew the
e. Beau direction. They would head that way too.

at they One by one, all the remaining wargis trickled back. They
wanted Snapdragon’s body to the north. He’d taken an injury to his left flank a
until his body collapsed, the mighty mount that had been Aislinn’s
stead for almost five years. There was nothing to be done. They sa
l. They belongings from the saddles, and plodded onwards.

a spoke Beau’s horse they never found at all.

they all The slopes of Winter glittered in the distance when they decided to
he back the night. Beau stared back into the trees, thinking of all that they left

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20

A TALE OF THE FIRST WITCH

An awful, wrenching, sucking sensation dragged Caer from the air and spat him out elsewhere, gripping tightly onto Aislinn. Roo was still twined around his ankles, but sliced off after a few inches, like the butter against a blade. Caerwyn glimpsed them dangling as they fell through *nothing*.

Leaves whipped around them, followed by an icy, devastating chill—
They hit a rocky floor.

Caer bolted upright, scrambling away from Aislinn. “Ais!” he rushed.
She wasn’t moving.

No, no, he hadn’t—he couldn’t—

He didn’t think her skin had touched his, but it was hard to believe anything. And if he *had* touched her, she’d still be moving, just something else.

She lay on the ground, inert and pale, as frosty as the stone at the mouth of the cave she’d portalled them to.

Caer crawled towards her, watching her chest.

She wasn't breathing.

No, no, no...

His own breath started to mount, pressing against his heart, crawling up his throat, his nose. His chest speared with pain, like his own heart was about to stop. She couldn't be dead. She couldn't be.

He was sure her brother could restart a frozen heart. He'd even seen a healer heal a bird once, that had flown into a window and seemed to be dead. He had massaged its chest until it came back to life.

"It's not magic," she assured him, as it flew away. "just science. Do you want Diana I let it go."

But Caer didn't know what she'd done, and Aislinn's heart was wailing inside her chest, too hard for a human hand to reach—

But maybe not human magic.

Don't do it, said a voice inside him. *You could kill her.*

If I don't, I think she might already be dead.

He parted her shirt, and slid his palm against her still, warm chest. He had brought Diana's birds back to life. He could do this.

Don't come back as anything else, he prayed. *Just yourself. Just come back as yourself.*

He was a necromancer. He had control of the dead.

"Come back," he willed, pressing against her chest. He mimicked the sound of a heart, imagining its sound. *Come back. Beat. I command you.*

Nothing.

Ais. Please. Come on.

Her chest remained as solid as ice.

He placed his forehead to hers, still pressing against her heart, his chest juddering in his chest like it was cracking under the pressure. She y

frozen lake, and he the rock rolling over it.

Come on, come on, come on!

ng into Something thumped against his palm.

anted to “Ais?”

Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum.

n Luna Her eyes, barely open, flickered. She half smiled at him, her pal
l. She’d pale, but not grey.

“We’re all right,” she said. “We’re alive.”

on’t tell Caer yanked his hand away from her before he could do something t
what he’d just done, and collapsed against her middle, dissolving into
rapped guttural sobs.

She was alive. She was all right. He hadn’t hurt her.

“You’re all right,” she said weakly, “it’s all right, Caer.”

He couldn’t respond, and when her hand came up and drifted into h
he didn’t pull away from her touch.

t. He’d



ne back

Aislinn fell asleep within seconds, but her breathing was steady and ev
heartbeat too. Caer tucked her cloak in around her and sat in the corne
cave, watching her carefully and trying not to count her breaths.

he beat

It was cold in the cave, and he’d not had his cloak buckled whilst h
He rolled down his sleeves and rubbed his palms together, but it did
guard against the bitter cold. He pressed himself into the vines that li
back of the cave. Strange that living things should exist here, althoug
looked petrified with age. He supposed he should be grateful tha

his own

was the

managed to transport them to a cave, rather than leaving them exposed to the elements.

Perhaps it wasn't luck. Perhaps it was some faerie magic he didn't understand, teleporting them to the nearest safe place. He was sure he'd heard something like that, maybe from Rowan—how the magic of Faerie Lore could be used to protect its queen.

Or future queen.

He wondered what that would feel like, to be truly chosen by the crown rather than shoved into the throne when no one really wanted you there. Of course, it could just be a lie faeries had concocted, a tale that became true. They could whisper a lie if they believed it.

Eventually, the cold and silence grew too much, and he ventured out of the cave into a world of thick, dense snow. It was near midday and there was a lot of wind, but it was still a hard, penetrating, biting cold, the type that squirmed into your marrow. He could see the borders of the Autumn Kingdom in the distance, could see the snow lifting from the banks, but it was too far away to travel without proper clothing and equipment, too far to go alone. Aislinn unaccompanied.

He jogged down to a small copse of trees and snapped off a few branches. It would be hard to make a fire without the flintstones or matches the dwarves used, but he had little better to do. One of Diana's first lessons had been teaching him how to make it without the usual equipment.

"I don't see how I'm ever going to need to know how to do this," he scoffed.

"The thing about knowledge," Diana had replied, ignoring his tone, "is that you never know when you're going to truly need it until you do."

He'd grumbled in response, but listened nonetheless, even if he'd

d to the and cursed until his fingers bled whilst trying to do it.

But he'd done it. And he could do it again.

didn't He trudged back to the cave. Halfway there, his eyes fell on a colossal heard in the snow, like a magnificent ancient lake had been frozen over, it would more than a slope in the snow. He couldn't think of what else it would be and yet, as he walked closer, another feeling overtook him, deep and more icy than the world around him.

ie land, It was like walking over a graveyard.

ere. Of He shook it away and went back to the cave, beginning the long and arduous process of making a fire. It was a fine distraction. It kept him from worrying about the others. Most of them had still been standing when the giant fell, but he couldn't remember all of them. Luna's white face had been there, but it wasn't nowhere to be seen.

pe that "Be safe," he prayed, rubbing his hands beside the trembling spark of the forest fire. "Just be safe."

too far Aislinn stirred a short while later.

leaving "Hey," he said. "How are you feeling?"

She bit her lip, like she didn't want to reply. "Weak," she said. "I can't rest more. I could be... I don't know how long... it might be days—"

that the "It's all right," he said. "We're alive. We'll manage."

ons had "Where are we?"

"A cave in Winter, I think," he explained. "Not far from the / border," he'd said.

"I'm cold."

"is that "I'm starting a fire."

Aislinn shivered, raising her fingers, and then promptly put them down. The action alone seemed to have exhausted her. "We should, un-

“Huddle together for warmth in the meantime?”

“Yes,” she said, too tired to nod.

“I don’t want to hurt—”

“We risk freezing to death or we risk you killing me. One is less likely than the other and far, far more comfortable...”

Caerwyn considered it for a moment, as sparks finally sprung from his attempts. He waited a while, making sure the fire was starting. It would take some time before it was properly burning, and it was so, so cold...

He scooted to Aislinn’s side, pulling open her cloak and slipping his hands from careful not to touch her skin. A few seconds ticked by.

“Put your arms around me,” she instructed.

Caerwyn did, although the action felt very strange to him. It had been a long time since he’d held a woman this way. Ice cold though the air was, the brush of Aislinn’s warm breath against his arms, making the hairs on his skin stand. Even her hair seemed warm; like soft embers.

“We should probably talk,” he said. “If you’re up for it?”

Aislinn murmured against him. “My mouth seems to be the one part of my body that’s working.”

“All right,” he continued. “What should we talk about?”

“Tell me about your mother,” Aislinn asked. “If you want to.”

Caerwyn *did* want to. For months, he’d kept all talk of her away, but in the autumn he thought about her often, all the time. He hated how her death seemed to stretch into the two decades of the life they’d shared beforehand, how the disease had rotted those memories too.

But those memories—those memories were more her, more real, than the memories of his backlast ones.

“My mother was brave and warm,” he told her. “People liked to...”

was frail, but I never saw that. She held a kingdom alone after the death of her much-beloved husband, birthed a child who never saw his father, and she smiled when she was sad, until she was happy.” He paused. “She’s likely vanquished any dragons, but I think she was the toughest person I knew.”

“Even tougher than Minerva?”

“Yes,” he said. *Maybe as tough as you.*

“It’s easier to be tough when you’re born that way,” Aislinn said.

“Minerva feels like she might have been, but who knows? Son of a duke, toughness is armour.”

“Is it with you?”

Aislinn paused. “I’m not sure. I’ve been wearing it so long I don’t know where it begins and I don’t know when it ends.”

“I can understand that.” He took a moment to gather his thoughts. “Tell me about her.”

“I don’t know where I’d begin.”

“At the start,” he told her. “How did you meet?”

“I don’t know,” Aislinn admitted. “Children are rare in Faerie. A tradition for any other children to be educated alongside them. Whenever there are royal children, it’s tradition for any other children to be educated alongside them.”

“Actually how my parents met, and it’s how I met Cass. She was mortally wounded, the daughter of a merchant from Summertown. Nobles from the rest of the kingdom have sent their children to Acanthia too, but I didn’t care about any of them. Like the time I was old enough to know what a friend was, I already had her. F

Daisy, and Beau. The royal four, they called us.”

“I am sensing you got into mischief.”

“So much mischief.” Aislinn laughed. “I think Cass was probably the instigator, but I was just as bad. Beau and Daisy were the sensible ones.”

leath of although they rarely told on us. We got into all sorts of trouble, laying
er. She traps for our least favourite school teachers, abandoning lessons to s
e neverthe lake... unleashing the monsters we were supposed to be studying
w.” we transformed a barghest into a mouse. It’s like a giant spiky d
thing.”

“Sounds like transforming it into a mouse wasn’t a bad idea.”

agreed. “Yeah... the spell didn’t stick long. It destroyed a fair chunk of
netimes Mayhew’s room when it transformed back.”

Caer laughed. “You were *wild*.” He paused. “When did that change?
“What?”

t know “You. There are moments when I see that in you—that wildness. I
seem more serious now. Did that happen when Cass—”

. “Your Aislinn shook her head. “That may have solidified it, but I started
up a bit when I hit sixteen. People started to court me, you see. Never
how young I was, how many centuries I had for romance—they w
piece of whatever glory might be coming my way, wanted to take adv
s such, of my youth, hoped to elicit a promise out of me that I could be kept t
n in the future.” She stopped for a moment. “My father took me aside once, t
That’s that he knew all about love, how it could make someone feel like
al—the forever no matter how implausible that truly was. To begin with,
Faeries surprised—because he and my mother always seemed so very p
. By the *forever* that it was sometimes difficult to look at.”

ier, and “What did he say to that?”

“He smiled and said something like, ‘I knew your mother all of r
and it took me years to realise I loved her, and even longer to know t
bly the it is her, no matter what. You should take years too, daughter. Do
ones—anyone take advantage of you.’”

Caerwyn froze, wondering if his next question was appropriate. “/ swim in you?” he asked carefully.

Once, “Oh, I dallied with the pursuits, indulged them if it suited me, but dog-bear no promises, no vows, no bargains. If anything, I learned to play *them*.”

She paused, and he wondered what other thoughts were swirling inside—what things she hadn’t said. It sounded lonely, that way of being. Mastersounded like something he knew all too well.

“I’ve had similar problems myself,” he confessed, “but being un-”
“I never go back on my word... that’s an entire new dimension. I cannot imagine how difficult that must have been.”

Aislinn shrugged as best she could. “Cass helped. She made the thing endurable, reminded me that I had decades, years to settle down to wisdom. I wasn’t missing anything in the meantime. And I absolutely and utterly mindbelieved her.”

“And then?”

“Then... she wasn’t there anymore. And the years and decades went on in the empty without her.”

Caerwyn sighed. “I’m sorry.”

Aislinn said nothing.

“It’s awful,” he continued, “but I think you were lucky to have her. Painfully, I would have traded loneliness for pain, for the joy of having a friend like her.”

Aislinn paused. For a while, he wondered if she’d fallen asleep again. Any life, think she was worth it too.”

That yes,

not let



And didHours passed. Caer roasted the roots over the fire. They were too unsavoury, but they staved off the hunger. Even Aislinn managed to eat a little, but not much. She slept most of the time, waking periodically to whisper exchanges before falling back to sleep. He walked about the camp on one side as she slept, sat by the fire for a bit more, and sometimes—*sometimes*—he would sit on the ground to rest beside her.

Never for long, not while she was sleeping. And never touching her. He wasn't able to. He couldn't remember ever watching someone sleep before, other than his mother. He certainly couldn't imagine being *fascinated* by it. He was just sleep, after all. But there was something pleasant in the slow rise and fall of her chest, the way the shadows danced across her pale cheeks, the curve of her nose, the in, that and curves of her face, the dark glow of her auburn hair. It made him think he was a painter or a poet. He was a decent hand at the forge, but he didn't think he'd have much luck rendering her in the hilt of a blade.

Caer paused in his thinking, fingers brushing his beads, wishing he could scrub out his thoughts. What was he *doing*, wanting to paint a sleeping woman?

What was he doing wanting to paint a sleeping woman that he couldn't touch?

I think Aislinn stirred again. She smiled at him in a way that must have been like magic—he could feel it in his insides. They exchanged a few pleasantries before she whispered, “We should try and send a signal.”

gain. “I “Do you think you’re up for that?”

“Definitely not. But you are.”

Caer frowned at her, certain he'd misheard. “I... can't do that.”

Aislinn laughed. “You couldn't walk and talk when you were born, but now you can do those now.”

gh and “All right, but it took a long time to master those—”

o eat a “Caer, you can raise the dead, you can send a signal.”

ally for “Good point.” He waited. “How do I do that?”

he cave “Go to the mouth of the cave. Imagine yourself sending a signal—
—came of light, or something—and throw it into the sky. Use the word *signum*

“That easy?”

“Should be.”

han his He paused for another moment. “What’s with the words and the c

It was Rowan used all sorts when trying to heal my mother, but Beau and
and fall plenty without saying anything.”

o slopes “Hmm, I suppose it’s a bit like how chefs add extra ingredients to i
wish he the flavour or strength of a dish,” she explained. “Or how you learn

’t think before you gallop. Words in spells are actions, directions, a way to d
magic to you when you’re learning how to use it, or to strengthen sor
e could more complex.”

leeping “I see. I don’t suppose there’s any objects here I could use?”

Aislinn smiled. “There’s always the fire, but you might not want
ouldn’t that. You could accidentally set yourself alight if you don’t know what
doing.”

n laced Caer gulped. “I will refrain from using the fire.”

a few He headed to the mouth of the cave, Aislinn cackling lightly un
cloak, a sound that warmed him more than the flames he passed.

He held out his hands. They were hard and calloused, not like Aisl
long fingered and elegant, no matter their experience with a blade. T
not look like the hands of a magician.

and yet But Aislinn said that he could do it, and she was relying on him.

He would not fail.

He'd practised bringing back creatures with Diana's help. He already had that thread of magic, that quiet tug. It had always felt dark to him, like a shadow on his shoulders. It was hard to imagine bending it into something else. But it was there.

He took a deep breath, followed by another. He counted stars. He remembered that moment in the moonlight with Aislinn, the pulse of magic running across his body. He remembered the sensation. He imagined light.

Something sparked across his palms, a thin, whispery ribbon of light. Caer's heart leapt. It vanished, scurrying away like a frightened mouse.

He took another breath, undaunted, and called it back again. He felt it grow brighter, pushing back into the flimsy thread.

It was like he had another muscle, another limb he'd never noticed before. He used it until now.

“*Signum.*”

He threw the light into the air. It soared into the sky, exploding into a shower of glittering dust.

For the first time, Caer wasn't scared of his powers. For the first time, he was amazed by them.

“Damn,” he said, “I really wish I'd known how to do that before I burned my fingers starting the fire.”

“Your fingers are blistered?” Aislinn raised her head from the ground. “Let me see—”

“Even if you had the energy, I wouldn't let you heal me right now. I don't want to be skin-on-skin, right?”

Aislinn bit her lip. “I'd still like to see.”

Caer came towards her side, sliding down to her level. He put his hand next to hers. The initial sting had gone, now, and he'd picked out all the

ady feltsplinters, but the redness remained.

a stone “They look sore,” Aislinn remarked.

. “I’m fine.”

“Liar.” She inched her hand closer, almost touching, not quite. A thought seemed to hum from the tips of her fingers, spreading through his skin. Rippling insides squirmed, imagining those hands in other, more intimate places.

He leapt up to throw another log on the fire, and stood by the mouth of the light cave for a moment, cooling himself down.

. “I have heard, in Faerie, that there are mortals that can do magic,” he made it partly just to say something—anything. “Witches.”

Aislinn rolled onto her back, the whisper of a sigh escaping her lips, never heard correctly. Their magic is different from ours, though. It doesn’t come from the earth, doesn’t flow naturally through them. They harness it through spells and potions and objects.”

o pieces “That sounds... dark?”

“It can be. Most are benign, though. There’s a council of witches dedicated to ensuring they don’t abuse their power... although in Faerie that’s hard to judge.”

listered “Am... am I a witch now? I sent that signal—”

“You have to do it more than once, and it’s more of a career choice than innate talent.”

“Right,” he said, panic flattening. “How did the first witches come to us?” Aislinn smiled. “Sit down, and I shall tell you.”

Caer obliged.

“Closer.”

is hand Cheeks heating again, he did as commanded.

l of the Aislinn cleared her throat. “No one quite knows how the first witch

born—they have been around almost as long as Faerie, their tale legend. Some say the first one was a mortal servant, wronged by her who learned a secret art of magic in order to enact revenge. Others Warmth was once a faerie who committed a horrible crime against Titania, the Queen of the Faeries, and was stripped of her natural magic and found to replace it. However she came to be, it is clear that she went to the end of the world and taught the women there her art.”

“Only the women? Can men not wield magic like that?”

he said, “They can, but apparently she found more women there in need of revenge—women powerless that needed power to survive. The First Witch said to be wary of mortal men with power—and what they will do to keep it. “That sounds... entirely fair,” Caer remarked. His mother had dismissed a lot of greedy, even violent lords from her service over the years. She had much more than thieving problems with the ladies in her service. Most of the time, there was a reason they were driven to such lengths. Indicated motives of the male counterparts were rarely so pure.

kind of “What happened to the First Witch?” he said. “After she had her army?” Aislinn shook her head. “Most tales agree she had her revenge in some fashion, but bringing mortals into Faerie wasn’t part of it. The more than a just there to... live, I think. Or maybe warn those in charge that a mortal weren’t fae... they were far from powerless. I think it was a lesson. There have been periods in our history when we have not been mortals... times when they were drugged and beaten and enslaved. It is to remember they can defend themselves.”

Caer paused for a moment. He knew the stories well, and although it wasn’t pleasant to have Aislinn confirm them, at least she sounded reasonable by them.

lost to “Can a mortal ever become fae?” he asked her. “If a fae can be stripped of their magic and immortality, can the reverse happen?”

she said “There are very few cases of both,” Aislinn explained, “although the Firstmother is perhaps the most recent case. She still looks mortal, she could be a waylie... but she’s barely aged since the day she married my father, and she has a mortal command over certain magics... Faerie knows its queen.”

“You speak of Faerie as if it is alive.”

“It *is*,” she insisted. “All the world’s alive, but in Faerie, you can’t die. My home—the palace of Acanthia—is occupied by sentient vines.”

“Sentient *vines*?”

“Yes. They used to rock us to sleep when we were children and passed messages for us between our rooms. We thought everyone could understand that way when we were little, but apparently not.”

Caer blinked, taking this in. “You said your mother became fae when she married your father. Does that always happen?”

Aislinn shook her head. “Admittedly, she’s the first mortal converted, but there’s no comparison, but apparently she and my father did something together in that day. They share each other’s hearts.”

Caer paused, frowning. “In the literal or metaphorical sense?”

“Both? I think? Neither one of them has been able to explain it to me. She was good when she was dying and she—”

“Your father was dying on his wedding day?”

“It wasn’t his wedding day until afterwards.”

Caer frowned harder.

“It’s a long story.”

Caer smiled. “I don’t have anywhere else I need to be. Do you?”

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Aislinn told him her parents' story until the sky was black and inky, fire almost worn away to embers. She drifted off beside him, and he rolled backwards to avoid rolling over and touching her in the night.

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He was sure, at first, still basking in the faint glow of the fire, would be warm enough to last the night. He tucked his hands into his pockets and rolled onto his back on the bed of leaves he'd made for them both. The leaves were a little to help with comfort, but it stole away some of the cold from the night.

sort so
ng else

For an hour or two, it worked. He woke later, surrounded by a cold so hard that it clawed at his cheeks. The fire had long since gone out. His fingers felt frosty, his nose numb.

me, but

Half without thinking, he inched towards Aislinn, to the only source of warmth he had.

me, but

I'll just rest for a moment, he told himself. I'll just warm up and go back out. Or I'll pace around the cave, keep moving. I won't sleep until I'm dead.

me, but

He warmed his hands beneath the cloak, another breath dusting his face. She was so close to him. In the pale, faint light of the moon, she looked like a marble sculpture, a deity that men would bow beneath.

me, but

But the deity was soft and warm, and not as frightening as she had been, but human and breakable and real.

me, but

He couldn't remember why she'd frightened him—why any tales of monsters had.

me, but

And he could not remember why he was supposed to leave her side.

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21

A REUNION IN THE SNOW

Aislinn woke early as dawn rose over the carpet of glistening snow, filling the cave with pale, bluish light. Caer was beside her, so close that his breath brushed her temples, his body warm in stark contrast to the still, icy air.

She forced her fingers together and brought them up to her face. They felt numb, but at least she could move them. She rolled tentatively on her side, her hand hovering next to his face, over his warm, parted lips...

Do not think about his lips.

She inched backwards, but dared not remove herself from the heat of his body, even when another, deeper one was stirring inside her.

She ought to have been worried, stranded here in winter, unable to move, at risk of freezing or starving, but although she was worried for the future, she had no fears for herself. She felt oddly safe here, exposed and vulnerable though she was.

She glanced once more at Caer. Doubtless he had something to say about that feeling. She wished she didn't know that, wished she *didn't* feel that

wished she had some way of pushing him away from her that was as
inching back. Her father had kept a book of insulting nicknames
mother to try and ease the hold Juliana had over him. She'd always
that strange until now.

But those words were like his knives, the only defence he had again
and now more than ever Aislinn wished she had a blade in her hand
weapon to slay her desires.

Caer's eyes flickered. He immediately shivered, groaning into the
before opening his eyes. He looked at her like he'd half forgotten who
were.

Aislinn smiled, glad she'd moved back a little. "Prince."

; snow, "Princess." His mouth twitched into that irritating, sinful smirk. "V
o close you smiling?"

t to the "Why are *you*?"

"You first."

ey still "I was thinking of giving you a nickname," she revealed, grateful t
nto her been the thought he'd woken on. No need to reveal the other ones
were *you* smiling?"

"Easy. I'm looking at you."

eat, not Aislinn considered flicking on a quick glamour to hide her blush, a
she suspected it was far too late. "What does 'Caerwyn' mean?"

o move, "Blessed, or love, or *fair*. Apparently, when I was born, I was as '
others, the moonbeam I was born under.'"

nerable "Hmm... Prince Fair isn't working for me."

"You could always call me 'love'."

lo with Aislinn rolled over, the heat increasing. She hated how he could
his safe, from bashful to flirtatious in an instant, and hated how her body react

easy as Why couldn't she think of a barb to shoot back?

for her "I notice you're not saying 'never'..."

thought "Oh, shut up."

Caer sat up, stretching, and went to poke the fire. It did absolutely n
nst her, She watched him staring at his fingers, as though debating trying to s
and—a fire. "What does 'Aislinn' mean?"

"Dream," she admitted. "My parents have a thing about them."

cloak, The insufferable smile spread further across his dimpled cheeks. "F
re they Dream has a certain ring to it."

"It does not."

"Hmm. Darling Dream, maybe? Fair Nightmare?"

Why are "You're starting to sound like my father, and I hate it. I'm sorry
began this." She pulled herself into a sitting position, hugging the cloa
body. The fabric still held his heat, like an imprint in the ground. "I
really think I'm 'fair'?"

hat had "You're beautiful, Aislinn, and well you know it."

. "Why Aislinn stared at him. He was right—she did know it, but the
something different in hearing it from him. Even in the land of faeries
seldom heard it spoken with such candour. Bards had written ab
lthough beauty in ballads, potential suitors had proclaimed it in their fancy sp
—but it had an air of falseness to it, of a word used by someone who
pale as fully understand its meaning. And her lovers... her lovers had avoide
it altogether, as if any attempts at flattery might see them impaled.

"What do you want?" he asked her, as if sensing how flustered th
had made her and throwing them both an escape rope. "From life, I
switch What does Dream dream of?"

ed to it. "Right now? A hot bath and a comfortable bed wouldn't go amiss."

He smirked. “Think bigger.”

She pursed her lips. “You first.”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’d like to touch people again without being afraid of anything. Aislinn swallowed. She had not expected that answer—she had expected common mortal lies and casual indifference, or dreams of wealth and womanly happiness. Not a dream that ought not to have been one—except for something that he should never have had to ask for.

Princess “Ah, a life without fear,” she said, as casually as she could manage. “We all dream of that.”

“And what do you fear, Aislinn Ardenthorn?”

“Many things,” she replied. “Powerlessness and power. That I may never be good enough to be queen. That I am a poor faerie. That I am too weak to her. That I am not human enough. I’m afraid of being more and less than I am. Do you and—” *I am afraid of being lonely. Of never having what my parents have. Of finding no one who accepts my fears, who shares them. I’m afraid to have everything I want and still not find it enough—or that I will never be together.*

“s, she’d” Caer angled his face towards hers. “What do you want, Aislinn?”

“out her” *You, she thought. I want you.*

“speeches” The reality of that confession struck her like a wave, cracking at her face. “o didn’t exterior. How much did she want him? How much could that crack hold using “At the moment, something that I cannot have,” she replied, “and can you.”

“ie word” “Why not?”

“mean?” “An excellent question.”

“A poor answer.”

“Caer,” she whispered. “I... I want to tell you, but...”

“But?”

“I am afraid to.”

l.” Caer didn’t push it. “I’m going to see if I can find some more fire
xpected and anything that passes for food. Are you hungry?”

en and Aislinn nodded. “That’s probably a good sign, right? And look!” S
iencing up her hands. “Actual movement!”

“Excellent,” he said, his grin soft. “I expect to see you standing up
. “How return.”



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Aislinn forced him to take the cloak, which he did reluctantly, and she
away the time until he returned by stretching out her limbs. Her enti
felt like rubber and lead. At least her head wasn’t pounding anymore,
supply of snow helped keep her hydrated.

Rest, water and food—the three things required for her to return
strength. She wasn’t so exhausted now, which was a sure sign s
healing, but it also made resting more difficult as she was intimately a
how uncomfortable she was, and how cold.

And whatever food Caer managed to find, she knew it wouldn’t be e
Caer.

The sound of his name had changed in her mind, clear as a bell, cr
water. She loved and hated the sound, like she loved and hated most
about him... the soft canter of his voice, those dark, liquidus eyes, t
the veins in his hands moved when he fiddled with the beads on his ne

No wonder she’d wanted a nickname to use as defence.

Caer returned after about an hour with an armful of firewood and a
of berries and nuts. It staved off the hunger, but only just. She doubted
wood...would be much more to be found in this barren place, and Caer could
going further without freezing to death.

he held She was still in no condition to travel.

“Help me up,” she said to Caer when she was done with their
when I breakfast.

Caer could not have looked more shocked if she’d grown wings. “
have my gloves on me.”

“I’ll grab your arms,” she said. *I’ll grab your arms and I’ll try not to*
about them. “Just... get down here.”

Caer crouched down and held out his forearms. Aislinn latched on
re body bracing against muscle, fingers grazing his elbows. Her plans not to
and the about the considerable muscle against her palms failed.

Her legs wobbled, but she pulled herself upright, only to sag a r
to full later.

Caer caught her around her waist, holding her against his body. V
ware of rushed through her.

“You all right?” he whispered, his soft gaze intense. It slid down
enough. bones.

She was aware of every muscle holding her up, the entire, unw
ystal as strength beneath her quivering body. He might as well have been an o
t things oak trees weren’t warm. They didn’t harbour smooth, silken skin,
he way smiles, or stupid dimples or—

cklace. “Ais?”

“I’m... not hurt,” she said, hauling herself up again.

“You looked ready to faint.”

handful “I wasn’t.”

ed there “Should I let go?”

n’t risk “I, um...” *I don’t want you to.* “I should...” *I need to learn to stand.*
“I think I can manage...” *I’m scared of letting go.*

Caer moved back, hands still outstretched as though to catch her meagre moment. She took a few wobbling steps, and slowly lowered herself down to the floor. She smiled tiredly at him. “Be back to decapitating me ‘I don’t in no time.”

Caer slid down the floor beside her. He tugged on a lock of her hair, *to think* moving it behind her ear, careful not to touch her skin though his fingers lingered at her pointed tips. “I don’t doubt it for a moment.”

to him, They huddled beside the fire and chatted about little and nothing, *o think* colour of the sky, memories of playing in the snow as a child, stories of youth. She told him of the all-season gardens of Acanthia, how *o think* moments would blend into winter, and snow would merge with meadows.

“I think I should like to visit Acanthia some day,” Caer remarked.

Warmth “No reason why you can’t. You won’t be a prisoner in Avalin. When I gain control of your powers—”

to her “*If* I gain control of them.”

“I prefer ‘when’.”

avering “Of course you do.”

ak. But She cleared her throat. “When that happens, there’s no reason you can’t come to the capital. Although, you’d probably want to return to the world, and if you do that...”

“I can’t come again, can I?”

Aislinn shook her head. “The way opens only once for mortals.”

“But not your mother, right?”

“No, she gets a free pass. Queen of Faerie, and all. The land knows I
Caer pursed his lips. “Well, I suppose I don’t need to return
l again.immediately,” he continued. “There’s not a great deal in Wales to tempt

“You’re the heir to the throne.”

at any Caer shrugged. “I’ve never really cared for it. I was secretly glad
lf backOwen married my mother and became the almost de-facto king... it took
g ogrespressure off me. Gave me more freedom than I’d ever had before. I
hoped he might continue.”

er hair, Aislinn paused, thinking of the Owen she knew, the king she didn’t
s hands was.

“I know you don’t much care for him,” Caer continued, “and I don’t
ing—theto discredit your dealings with him, especially as you’ve seen his
ories ofrecently, but he was not that man to me.”

autumn “He... he wasn’t *that* awful,” Aislinn admitted, “there was
something about him I couldn’t put my finger on.”

“Fair enough.” Caer sighed.

then you A whistle sounded through the air, distant, but sharp.

They both froze.

“Caer!” called a voice, followed by another.

“Aislinn!”

Beau.

u can’t She tried to struggle to her feet, forgetting the jelly-like quality of her
mortal and almost fell flat on her face. Caer, halfway out of the cave, stopped
steady her.

“I’m fine,” she assured him. “Go.”

“You’re sure—”

“Go!”

her.” Caer sped out of the cave, his feet crunching against the snow. Minerva homepulled herself towards the entrance, clinging to the walls. She spied that “coming up the hill, the dwarves and Beau atop the wargis—grinning beheld him. Minerva galloped up the incline first, spewing snow behind whenmount’s paws, shuddering to a halt a few feet in front of Caer.

ook the “Caer,” Minerva said breathlessly. “Get down here.”

I rather “What? Why—”

She marched towards him without another word, grabbing his shoulder and tugging him downwards into a crushing, one-armed hug. Her metal gauntlet, which had appeared, had been removed.

’t mean “Oh,” said Caer, relaxing, “that’s why.”

n most Beau reached Aislinn’s side next and hugged her so hard she thought her ribs might break. She sagged against him, strength depleted.

just... “You all right?”

“I think I nearly broke myself accidentally teleporting.”

“Which is *insane*, by the way,” Beau remarked, taking her hand and breathing some magic into them—just enough to slice off a bit of exhaustion whilst keeping himself stable. “I didn’t believe it, at first.”

The other dwarves had finally caught up. Bell went to Caer’s other side and squeezed his shoulder. “I know her affectionate voice and her I-very-often-beat-you voice sound similar, but—”

er legs, “I still want to beat him,” Minerva snapped, releasing him only to pop up behind the back of his head. “Only for *worrying* us so much.”

“I wasn’t worried,” said Bell.

“Me neither,” added Flora.

“I was!” said Luna, diving into his waist.

Despite the protestations that many of them weren’t worried

Aislinn's lightest, Caer found himself in the middle of a hug between six dwarves of the party. Aislinn froze, doing a quick headcount.

as they Six.

and her There were six.

“Wait,” Caer said, voice half trembling, “where’s Fort?”

The silence gave the answer.

“No,” he said, “no, she can’t be—”

“It was quick, lad. And we buried her well. She would not want to be mourned. We’ll toast to her memory as soon as we have the ale. Give her a send off.”

Aislinn froze. She had not known Fort well, but she had made her life count during the brief time they spent together. Like the rest of the dwarves, she seemed invincible. And Caer... Caer had loved her. He loved them all.

“This is my fault,” Caer muttered, eyes glazed, “this whole expedition because of me—”

Minerva shook her head. “Fort knew the risks, still bet on the right side. He and she were killed *not by you*, but by a fallen tree. This is not your guilt to bear.”

Luna came up to his side again and wove her fingers into his. He squeezed them tightly, but did not look convinced.

“Come,” said Minerva, “you must be famished. Let’s get this fire going again. Diana caught us a deer on the way here.”

clip the



As good as it was to have company again, they were quieter than before, more sombre, their smiles not as real, not as wide as before. Aislinn

in the

es. the fire as they recounted their journey into Winter, and how their sig steered them in the right direction.

Fort had not been the only loss; one of the wargis and both of the were gone.

Snapdragon, Aislinn realised, chest tight.

“We couldn’t have taken him into Winter anyway,” Bell said sagel; snow would have been too much for him.”

it us to That was doubtless true, but he’d have had a chance in Autumn, or a fullrunning wild and free... he deserved that much. Deserved more.

He’d been such a good horse. She’d barely ridden another since he l augh *in hers*.

she had Tears leaked down her cheeks, and she tried her best to swallow t dwarf had died. She shouldn’t be more cut up about a horse.

lition is Yet the thought that she’d never ride him again, that he’d never p velvety muzzle to her cheek, never snicker at her or beg for apples or l t wargi, stall or do anything again, ever, wouldn’t leave her.

bear.” Beau squeezed her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Ais.”

queezed She nodded, unable to say it was fine.

Renewed by real food, Beau’s magic, and a bit of one of Flora’s ti e going Aislinn found herself awake long after the dwarves were fast asleep.

across Beau’s lap, half dozing as he redid the braids which had grow tangled over the past couple of days. He declared himself exhausted doing the last, and promptly slunk off to his bedroll. They were all into the cave like a barrel of fish, barely an inch between them.

before, decided to set up a watch, after being caught out before. “I thought v i sat by safe in Autumn,” Minerva had hissed. “Damn fool that I am. I’ve complacent in the cottage. No more!”

nal had Caer had volunteered to go first. He did not look tired. He sat
dwindling fire at the mouth of the cave, staring stonily out at the gloom
: horsesbarely spoken since he heard of Fort's death, other than to volunt
watch duty.

Aislinn stood to move to her own bedroll, but paused, tugged to h
y. "TheShe sat down again, close as she dared. Not speaking.

"Are you going to tell me it wasn't my fault?" he asked, not looking
maybe, "It *wasn't* your fault," she confirmed, "but I'm not sure that I w
think exactly as you are now, if the situations were reversed."

became For another moment, they sat in silence.

"Cass' death," he asked her. "You said you blamed yourself. Why?"
hem. A Aislinn paused. Even now, she didn't like to recall it. "I didn't take
people with me," she said. "I ought to have. But we wanted to go a
ress hiswas her decision too, but I had the final say. I should have found ot
kick hisjoin us. I should have taken Beau."

"Beau?"

"He wanted to come, but he was so young... barely field trained. I
he'd be a liability. But the truth is, if he'd been there... he could have
nctures,her. She could still be alive."

She lay Caer finally turned to her, but she didn't meet his gaze. She felt his
vn a bither, soft and alarmed. "Or Beau could be dead," he said. "You mig
ed afterlost them both."

packed "I know that now," she replied, "but that *could* remains. The wh
They'ddon't think about it all the time, not anymore. I know we don't get t
ve'd bethe other courses. I do, and yet..."

grown Caer sighed. "How did you move past it?"

"I'd like to say that I leant the truth of Minerva's words—that Cas

by the risks, that it was her decision, not mine. I don't think I truly did, then. He'd just tried to become the sort of person worthy of such a sacrifice. The sheer fortune I saved a life after her death, I felt better. Like I'd earned back my life here." She stopped. Caer's eyes had gone dark and glassy, staring into her side.—Caer, who had yet to save a life, and had ended plenty.

"For what it's worth," she continued, "I'm sad that Fort's gone, but I'm glad that you're still here."

Caer turned to face her again, gaze bright, burning. His eyes swirled with pools of starfire. She could not read his expression, not fully, but she saw a flicker there behind a veneer of gratefulness.

Without another word, he closed the gap between them and buried his face in her arms.

His head fell against her chest, his arms tight around her. His fingers brushed her nose and chin. The scent of him shuddered inside her—woodsmoke and pine and snow. She wanted to trail her nose down the contours of his neck and kiss him there, inhaling the richness of his skin. He tried to pull back. "We shouldn't—"

"You aren't touching my skin," Aislinn assured him, gripping him. "You're fine. We're fine." She couldn't imagine, in that moment, anything worse than having to release him. She wanted to roll him back against the floor and twin his breath with hers and let her hands roam under his shirt, exploring the firm, silky muscles beneath...

Maybe she *should* release him. It would do no good to cling to her. No thoughts. They couldn't touch, they couldn't—

I think I'd risk it.

One of the dwarves rolled over, snoring loudly.

They pulled back, but the spell wasn't fully broken. They were still

ough. Ifar too close.

he first “Caer,” Aislinn whispered.

y place “Ais.” He raised a hand, and—very carefully and avoiding all contact with her skin—tucked a strand of hair behind the pointed tip of her ear, the piece that Beau hadn’t braided back. There was barely any point to the gesture, but I’m yet it sent shivers through her.

“What happened to your ear cuffs?” he asked.

led like “I think I left them behind at the cottage.”

ut pain “We should get you some more when we reach Avalinth.”

“I’m not sure they’ll have elf ear cuffs in stock...”

himself “I’ll make you a pair.” His face hung beside hers, far too close and far away.

tousled Something glinted in the distance—a single torch or flame.

her, all Aislinn squinted through the dark. The flame was moving, getting closer to the surrounded by a marching shadow. Her eyes tried to adjust to the darkness, but she was mortal and not quite fae enough.

“Douse the campfire,” she hissed.

tighter, “What?”

nything “Do it!”

inst the They picked up handfuls of snow and hurled them at the flames: his shirt, scoops of it until the fire snuffed out. Aislinn turned back towards the flame in the distance.

o those It was an army, marching up the hill in the dark. Mortal, by the look of their shields. They bore the crest of Afelcarreg.

“Wake the others,” she told him. “I think we’re under attack.”

l sitting

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the tiniest
action,

far too

closer,
k, half-

s, great
solitary

books of



“Again?” Caer said, groaning as he turned towards the nearest and shook her roughly. For once, all of them were easy to kill, of course they were. Grief had a way of slicing through sleep.

Fort, Fort, Fort.

“How far out are they?” Minerva asked, approaching the mouth of the cave.

“Difficult to guess,” Aislinn said. “But they’re moving slowly. I estimate we have around ten minutes.”

Extinguishing the light had bought them some time, but the army started to lose their bearings. They wouldn’t charge uphill, though, and not from a distance—they would want to conserve their energy for the fight. They could just sneak away...

“Saddle up,” Minerva instructed. “Quickly now!”

They fumbled around in the dark, reaching for blankets and bedding, stuffing everything onto the backs of very confused warg hounds. The moon offered little illumination. They were all almost blind.

All apart from Aislinn and Beau, who flitted around the cave like whispering directions, working three times as fast.

“What’s our plan?” Flora asked.

“Avoid a fight, if we can,” Minerva rushed. “The entrance to the isn’t far away.”

“We’re in the dark.”

“*They* aren’t,” she said, jabbing a thumb at Aislinn and Beau.

“Ooh!” said Beau, grabbing Caer’s arm, “that gives me an idea. Hold

He squared up to Caer, doing something with his hands Caer couldn’t make out, and then whispered a word and blew in his face.

It was like someone had lit a tiny lantern in the back of the cave—illumination faint but the difference immeasurable.

“Won’t last long, alas,” Beau explained. “Shame I can’t do the same for our dwarven friends.”

Caer thanked him, his gaze falling to Aislinn. Her bottom lip pouted as if she were sorry she hadn’t thought of it first.

The dwarves clambered up onto their wargis. Aislinn leapt to the front of the procession, grabbing the reins of one. Beau took the back. Caer held the middle, glancing down the slope.

The army was gaining. There were so many of them—

“Don’t look,” Beau said. “Keep your eyes ahead.”

“Wargis will be faster than whatever they have,” Minerva assured them. “Come on.”

Caer appreciated her confidence, but several of the wargis were carrying two. He had one to himself, but wargis were bred for smaller loads. They could not speed as usual.

He said nothing as they charged through the snow in a long line, true

the wind, the vision of their fae friends and the wargis that were following Minerva hissing rough directions in Aislinn's ear. Bell occasionally her wisdom, but Caer soon realised how ridiculous this was—Minerva tunnel to lead in this darkness. It had been years since they'd come this way landmarks few and changeable. No wonder she'd wanted to wait morning.

Caer glanced behind them. The army was gaining fast. They were going on." reach them...

It's not quite His eyes searched once more for Aislinn, either for the distraction because he was always searching for her now. The first thing he'd done, he'd searched for when he woke up. The voice he moved towards in the darkness thing his gaze was threaded towards whenever they were moving.

It won't work, reminded another voice.

But even though there were a myriad of reasons why it was terrible idea, as if to entertain the idea, all of them were eclipsed by the terrifying and possibility of something happening to her, of nothing ever happening in front of her. She was still weak from teleporting. She would not last long in the snow. Beau had been sharing his energy with her—he wouldn't hold out either. Minerva was still missing her metal arm. Luna was no fighter had a minor injury—

They couldn't afford to fight.

He said to her. "Min?" whispered Bell. "Can you see the path?"

"No," she admitted. "It's been covered by snow."

Beau moved to the front of the line. "You're sure?"

"I wish I was," she said. "All I can say is that I *think* it's here. Under this." She gestured to the pile of snow in front of her.

Beau sighed, cracking his knuckles. "Well, all right, then."

g them, He held out his hands, and the snow started to rumble and churn, bl
offeredsome invisible force. Layers peeled away, snowflakes blurring around
a trying Caer barely looked as Beau burrowed. His eyes were too busy str
ay, thethe army marching, getting closer and closer. Aislinn hovered in the
it until of the line, seeing it too, looking like she wasn't sure whether to as
brother or draw her sword. Caer wasn't sure she had enough stren
going to either.

None of them did.

tion, or He chanced a look back at Beau's efforts—he hadn't yet hit roc
is eyes army was getting closer and closer...

rk. The The chill from earlier passed over him, raking down the back of his
The bodies. The bodies in the snow.

Caer charged forward, ignoring Aislinn's cry for him to stop. He
to even on Crusher's reins and spurred him forward, snow churning beneath th
ressing stopped on top of the sunken pit of snow and skidded to a stop.

it all. The army paused, as if stunned by his actions, before moving again.
a fight. Caer dug deep into the snow with his powers, imagining it
it long, monstrous, tentacled thing, invisible tendrils burrowing past the snow
, Dianabodies beneath. He felt them like stones in his boot, hard, sharp lu
nothing.

Which he could turn into *something.*

It was like ripping apart a flimsy cushion, like the bodies were n
have life stuffed back into them, like it was easy. *Natural.*

A giant fist shot through the snow, followed by an ugly, monstrou
er all...creaking and groaning with ice as it crawled upright. Others follow
monsters, horns and lumps and wings and fists that resembled clubs. *A*
had in common was their iced-over eyes.

own by *This isn't right*, Caer thought, as the monsters stumbled towards them. bent, twisted bodies limping through the snow. *No one should have been ruling at power.*

middle The first of the giants met the army, taking out two riders with a single swing of its arm. The horses whinnied. Something cracked, and Caer fought for himself more than ever.

It wasn't enough. Several of the men saw the onslaught coming and diverged, sweeping around, still charging, still moving. Caer plunged back. The powers into the snow again, deeper and further. Another wave ran, and another army charged.

neck. For once, they ignored him. For once, they almost seemed to list as they moved, moving towards the army.

yanked All except one.

em. He One, tall, broad-shouldered, oddly human man, whose gaze seemed to be fixed on Aislinn.

Aislinn.

like a "Caer!" She stumbled towards him through the snow, abandoning her horse to the others, grabbing his arm. "Come on!"

imps of Caer moved, but he could still feel the gaze of the undead mortal looking back, in a way he couldn't explain. It was like his eyes weren't his any more. His entire body stiffened, lead-like, heavy.

nade to He sank to his knees.

Crusher pressed his face to his, but he couldn't feel it. Aislinn screamed his name, but the sound came out like a distinct echo.

ed—all Something was pulling him down.

All they Caer let it.

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Aislinn didn't stop screaming until Bell and Diana reached Cael and hauled him onto Crusher's back.

"Get to the front!" Minerva bellowed. "Help your brother!"

Something swooped behind her. Aislinn turned, meeting a ha creature, sword slack at his side. He opened his mouth, but she kicked the stomach, sending him sprawling back in the snow.

She didn't finish him, didn't stop to think why he hadn't used his s she just ran.

Beau stood in a tunnel of ice, still burrowing. Aislinn grabbed h strengthening his power, letting him borrow from her, and *pushed* with

Come on, come on, come on!

They shredded through the stone until they hit something hard—ha rock, and iron.

A door.

Minerva barrelled ahead of them, fingers moving over etchings, pre series of pebbles until the door swung inwards. "Get in, get in!"

They raced into the tunnel, wargis yapping, snow sliding inward in a small tsunami. Magna and Diana dived through the door, but it wouldn't budge. The hinges frozen, the force of the snow too great.

Beau sprang backwards, leaning into the air and yanking down a curtain of snow to conceal the entrance.

Finally, everything fell silent.

As soon as she'd gathered enough breath, Aislinn sprinted to Caerwyn's side. "Is he all right? *Is he all right?*"

"Aye, he's fine, lass," Flora said, checking him over. "Just exhausted from using much of his power. You should have seen the condition he was in when he came to us. Half dead on his horse, he was."

r's side

Aislinn paused, before her legs wobbled and almost gave out from underneath her.

half-dead

"Steady, steady on," said Bell, as Luna appeared at her other elbow. "I'll get you onto a wargi."

l him in

"We can't rest yet," Minerva insisted. "I know we need it—but we need to put some distance between us and the soldiers."

word—

"You think they'll get through all that snow?" Beau asked, panting against the wall.

is arm,

"I think I'm not risking it. Get yourself onto a mount, lad. You look like you're about to faint too."

l him.

"I'm all right."

ird, and

"You won't be, if you don't take the rest you can get. Come on, lad. You'll be harder to lift if you pass out."

assing a

Beau sighed and relented, and the party set off into the tunnels. The tunnels were strangely lit, with veins of red-gold crystal running through the rock walls. So often, they widened, occasionally diverging. Once or twice, they st

ds in upon ancient markings, drawings on the walls of long-ago battles, go
i't shut, the deep, dwarven tales of courage and, at one point, a mortal kn
horseback with flaming hair.

arpet of “What happened to Caer’s horse?” Aislinn asked. “The one he fled
Silence echoed around the tunnels.

“He killed it,” Minerva said. “Accidentally, of course. Figured
’s side. were immune to his touch. The beast startled during a storm. Caer
calm it, and... well. He’s been careful, since.”

sted too “Too careful,” Bell whispered.

hen he Luna stared at the floor. “Half the time he’s even scared to touch u
though he knows we’re immune. Just a reaction, I think. Spends
it from skirting around touching the living he’s forgotten how to embrace it.”

Aislinn had seen before the way he seemed to scoot around peop
. “Let’s way his hands stayed firmly by his sides... and the way he’d sometime
to the accidental touches of the dwarves, like he’d forgotten the feel of
need to If nothing else changed whilst he was in Avalinth, she hoped that t
—that he grew used to touch again.

against Although she couldn’t deny the tightness in her chest when she tho
who he might be touching.

ook like A while later, they broke to rest. By Aislinn’s approximation, it w
the middle of the night, but the battle had left the party famished. So
plucked a couple of giant, spiky, snail-like gastropods off the cave
1, now. They were edible once cooked, though even Luna’s magic did little t
them palatable.

ey were “Lesser spotted tunnel slurg,” Diana explained, seeing Aislinn stru
. Every chew one down. “Not the tastiest critter, but it’ll keep you going.”

umbled “I think I’d rather die,” Beau said, looking like he was going to be si

lems of The dwarves chuckled at his discomfort.

ight on Caer lay nearby on a bed they'd made for him, utterly still. He'd be
for hours, his face unnaturally pale, only the slight rise and fall of his c
on?" show he was alive. She'd given up asking the others if he was all right

Watching him fall...

animals She had thought Cass' death had been the worst thing that ever ha
tried toto her. She was sure that no matter how long she lived, that no momen
steal the edge from that one.

But this had come close.

is, even *It's going to get worse.*

so long It was scary enough to make her want to flee, to turn back up the
and plunge into Winter once more, alone, exposed—but free of him
ple, thegrowing spell he had her under. And yet... how could she? How co
es clingturn away? She wasn't a rabbit in a snare, but an animal welcomed
'skin. hearth, staring into the fire, trying to work out if she was destined t
that didabove it or bask in its glow.

"What happens when we reach Avalinth?" Aislinn asked. *How lo
ught ofwe be permitted to stay? Will they even let us in? Will Caer definitely
there? Will I get to say goodbye?*

vas still *I need, I need, I need to say goodbye. I need to go.*

omeone *I don't want to.*

e walls. The party went quiet for a little while. "We petition the Dwarven Q
o makeoffer Caer sanctuary," said Minerva, as if it were a simple matter.

"And if she doesn't?"

iggle to "I'm fairly sure she will."

"Why?"

ick. "Because she's my sister."

Aislinn blinked.

“*What?*” said Beau.

“You’re a royal?”

Minerva scoffed. “I’m in somewhat of a self-imposed exile, but was.”

Beau took out his notebook. “How does the dwarven monarchy work?”
“I understand that, much like ours, it’s an inherited throne, but I recall something about three trials?”

“Aye. There’s the de-facto heir of the firstborn, based solely on birthright, but that there can be decades or even centuries between children and it’s not uncommon to tunneltrain someone for the role in the meantime, but siblings and cousins can challenge the right to rule by defeating them in combat.”

“Dwarves duel for the throne? Ooh, I like that! Ais, maybe we should challenge her.”
Aislinn glared at him. “Do you want the throne?”

“No, not remotely.”

“Then why—”

“I want the *drama*.”

Aislinn stuffed a bit of cave-snail in his mouth, making him gag.

“Point taken, you win. I concede.”

Aislinn turned back to Minerva, who was staring misty-eyed into the distance.
“Did your sister duel you for it?” she asked.

“Aye, she did.” She rolled her empty shoulder back.

“That’s... not how you lost your arm, is it?”

“No. No, it isn’t.”

“Right. You’re still on good terms with her, then?”

Diana coughed. Luna’s eyes looked everywhere but her. Flora puffed up her pipe.

“I wouldn’t say that, exactly.”

“Then why would you ask her for help?”

Minerva frowned. “For *him*, of course,” she said, gesturing to Caer. “Yes, I else?”

Aislinn’s eyes drifted once more to Caer’s form, and she found herself not understanding Minerva’s words exactly. *For him. Of course. Everything I do is for him.*

Luna yawned loudly. A few of the rest of the party followed suit. “We should sleep,” Minerva declared. “Who’s on watch?” “I’ll take the first watch,” Beau offered. “I find myself somewhat awake at night.” “You just want to stay up to make notes on the wall etchings,” Luna said.

“Yes, and?”

“Scholar.”

“Uneducated cave troll.”

Aislinn feigned hurt, clutching her hand to her chest, but snorted with laughter a second later.

One by one, the dwarves nodded off. Aislinn stayed up with Beau while, watching him make his notes, unable to sleep, to calm her thoughts by the fire. Caer had still not yet woken. She knew that made sense, given the time of day, and the exhaustion of his powers. How many times had she slept after she teleported? She’d not given much thought before, but now how it must have felt for him to watch her, to be alone...

Beau sighed, closing his book and coming to sit beside the fire.

“You should rest, Ais.”

She shook her head. “Not now. Not while he’s... Not now.”

Beau sighed. “It’s his arms, isn’t it?”

Aislinn snorted. “His stupid arms and his stupid face and his stupid eyes and his stupid lips and the less-than-stupid stuff that comes from him.”

“So all of him, then, basically?”

“Yes, all of him.”

Beau sighed again, more dramatically before, scooted round to sit on the bedroll next to hers. “I think I’m about done for the night,” he announced. “Can you take the next watch?”

Aislinn nodded. “Not going to try to convince me to rest again?”

“It seems a rather hopeless business.”

“You mean pointless?”

“I said what I said.”

Aislinn exhaled, turning to look at the rocky ceiling, trying to imagine the weight of the mountains crushing down on her. “Do you think I’m being foolish?”

“I think you are a person that doesn’t fall easily, and even though it is a terrible idea to fall for a mortal prince who’s the heir to another throne, you currently can’t even touch you and will probably have to remain under his thumb for years honing his powers—I think maybe it might be worth it?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. And at the end of the day, does it even matter if it hurts? I think the other possibility is worse—nothing ever happening, ever? Aren’t you fairly likely to regret the paths not taken?”

Aislinn thought back to the moment when the cottage had been attacked the way she had followed the dwarves, not understanding why.

Maybe she did, now.

She nudged Beau’s shoulder. “When did you get so wise?”

, stupid “Me? I’ve always been wise. I’m literally the wisest one out of the
out of us by *miles*—”

“That is not how you measure wiseness.”

“Wiseness is not a word, and thus, my point is proved.” He leaned
and flicked her forehead. “I’m sleeping now, sister dearest. Goodnight
t in the Aislinn waited for a while until she thought he was asleep, and then
pounced. upright and crept towards Caer’s sleeping form, settling herself down
him. He looked oddly serene when he was asleep, his smooth
unfurrowed.

She brushed back a lock of hair from his face. “I won’t touch you
told him, “even though I really, *really* want to. Even though I think you
me to. I just... I’m not afraid of you, Caer. Afraid *for* you, maybe. E
ne star that’s the price I pay for being next to you, I think it’s worth it.”

Do you She stayed beside him, watching, gazing, thinking of little but the s
his face and the lines of his features until her thoughts turned to little
may be than mush. A while later, his eyes opened, and he broke into a smile
one and made her heart leap. “Hey,” he said. “Where—”

ground “In a tunnel on our way to Avalinth. We’re safe here.”

“Well, we must be if you can say it...” He tried to glance around
everyone—”

sn’t the “We’re fine,” she said shortly. “Everyone is fine.”

are more “Good. That’s... good.”

“Caer, what you did earlier, resurrecting all those bodies...”

asked, to Caer’s smile dropped. “Yes?”

“It was... impressive.”

The smirk blossomed again. “Impressive, was it?”

“Yes.”

two of He looked around, eyes glancing over the sleeping bodies of the rest of the party. “Your magic doesn’t work when you’re drained, right?”

“Right.”

ed over “The same should be true for me, shouldn’t it?”

.” Aislinn’s heart skipped a beat. Her mouth went dry. If his magic rolledtapped out, they could touch. If they could touch, they could...

l beside Granted, he was too weak to manage much, but at this rate she thought her browmight explode at the touch of his hand.

“Yes,” she whispered.

u,” she “I don’t suppose there’s something around here that I could test my magic on. You wanton, is there? A rodent, maybe—”

but... if “How about a large snail?”

“Perfect.”

happened of Running far more quickly than was probably necessary, Aislinn moved further down the tunnel, where the spiky snail-like creatures from the cave were slurping through the dark. She prised one off the wall and scurried to Caerwyn’s side.

His eyes widened as she approached. “What on Earth is *that*?”

nd. “Is “Doesn’t matter right now. Can you kill it?”

“I’m not entirely sure I want to touch it at all...”

Aislinn batted her eyes.

Caerwyn sighed, and reached over to touch it, cringing as his hand touched the slimy underbelly. His face crinkled, like he was trying to put power into it.

But nothing happened. The snail remained alive, slowly wriggling in its slimy body.

Caerwyn pulled back his hand. Aislinn returned the snail to the wall. She

it of the back to his side, heart pounding, unsure of where to put herself next. *everywhere* was an option.

“I have spent a lot of time imagining which part of you I would want first,” Caer whispered.

“A lot of time?” Aislinn arched her brow. “We have not known each other long.”

Caer raised a hand, fingers uncurling over the tip of her pointed ear. “You have occupied far too many of my thoughts.”

Aislinn pressed her hand to Caer’s cheek. He let out another sigh, his palm flattened against his skin, edged with something like a whimper.

“If it helps,” she told him, voice breathy, “you have occupied far too many of mine, too.”

She lay her free hand against his chest, half of her fingertips brushing his skin, warm, solid panes of his skin. His own hand came up to cup hers, and she felt as if the world had vanished around them, like she was the final thread in a tapestry and he the fabric. The moment was a needle, pinning them together.

Their faces inched closer.

After this, it would not be so easy to move away from him. After this, it would be difficult to untangle. After this, it would hurt.

Let it, then, Aislinn whispered to her thoughts. *For he is worth it all.* Something cracked along the tunnel—from the darkness they’d been pushed from. Three of the wargis woke with a start, growling, teeth bared.

Aislinn pulled out her dagger, jumping to her feet. “Halt!” she said. “Where does it go, long, goes there?”

“What’s happening?” said Beau thickly, stirring in his bed. “Are we being attacked again? Ah!”

ow that A large, lumpy shape stepped out of the dark. Aislinn's eyes wide was the undead soldier from earlier, the one with the broad shoulders and touchhead of thick, dark hair. The one who had approached her, but not a her. His skin was pale grey and marbled, his eyes leached of colour, though other muscles were still firm, his face still chiselled, with little but his pallor and his bloodstained clothing to show he was dead at all.

r. "You He looked oddly familiar...

"Peace!" he said, his voice rough and hoarse but unmistakably human as he meant you no harm!"

Caer gasped. "You... you can talk."

o many The soldier nodded, as if this was obvious. Aislinn realised that looking at the blood and dirt, he was wearing a white-and-gold uniform that marked him as a knight of Acanthia, although the design wasn't a recent one. He Aislinn liked to change them every decade or so.

read in She lowered her sword. "You tried to talk to me earlier. During the fight with them

"I thought you were someone else. A friend of mine, but I see now you was incorrect."

"Who?"

this, it "Juliana," he said. "You look like her. Juliana Ardencourt."

Aislinn froze. Juliana hadn't gone by *Ardencourt* in fifty years. "Who are you?"

l come "Dillon," he said. "My name is Dillon Woodfern."

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. "Who

e being

ened. It
and the
ttacked
but his
ghostly

man. “I

beneath
ced him
r father

fight.”
v that I

Who are



“I ’m dead, aren’t I?” Dillon continued, when he was met with :
but silence. “I look dead. I look quite dead, actually, but fe
alive. How did that happen?”

Aislinn pointed numbly towards Caer, still lying on the floor, wid
“He can bring back the dead,” she explained.

“Not... not like *that*, though,” Caer mumbled.

“Like what?” asked Dillon.

“Um... sentient. You should be so, so...”

“Oh,” said Dillon, like he was brought back from the dead every oth
“well, here I am!”

Hecate, who had been sitting beside the fire all this time, slunk f
and started to wind around Dillon’s legs. The wargis, meanwhi
decided this person was no threat, and promptly settled back down aga

“I’m sorry,” Aislinn said, gathering her thoughts, “You’re
Woodfern? *Ser* Dillon Woodfern?”

Dillon blinked. “I was never a knight—”

“You got it, um, well... posthumously.”

“Right,” he said. “Because I died.”

“Yes.”

“How... how long ago—”

“Fifty years,” Aislinn responded, thinking of the statue in the garden and the dates printed below. Her mother stopped every time she passed it. She had made him flower crowns as a child and climbed into his broad chair to place it on his head. She’d thought the statue itself was Dillon until she was old enough to understand.

It was only stone, a monument to the icy, unmarked grave the real Dillon lay in, somewhere in the depths of Winter.

nothing
el very Until Caer had pulled him out again.

“Fifty years,” Dillon breathed. “My father then, I take it—”

e-eyed. “Grandpa Woodfern? He’s still around. Retired five years ago but he has his cottage on the grounds. He’s old, mind, really old, but, you know, a

“You call him Grandpa?”

“Well, we don’t have any grandfathers and he doesn’t have any grandchildren so we asked him one day if we could call him grandpa when we were little and it just... stuck.”

ier day, “He... he’s been well? Lead a good life?”

forward
le, had
in. Dillon
would. “Taught me how to ride himself.” Aislinn paused, his face growing real to her, his presence sharpening. This was *Dillon*, her mother’s friend. Grandpa Woodfern’s son. The empty seat at the table. The one she spoke about as if expecting him to come home, only they knew he wouldn’t.

Only now, he *could*.

“He told me about you,” Aislinn went on. “A lot. Mother too. The

spoke about you all the time.”

“Right,” Dillon paused, eyes even more glazed than before. The darker than most of the dead, a ghost of the brown of his father’s painting behind a layer of cobweb. “Your mother is—”

ens and “Juliana Ardencourt. Well, Arderthorn, now.”

Aislinn Dillon smiled weakly. “She finally realised it, then? She and Hav arms toHe’s... your father?”

she was “This is *insane*,” Beau gasped, finally finding his voice. “Wa Mother hears—can I examine you?”

! Dillon “Beau!” Aislinn hissed. “Not the moment! Dillon, er, Ser Woodfern “Dillon is fine.”

“Would you like to sit down?”

“I... I don’t think I need to,” he said. “I don’t feel like I need to.”

t keeps “Fascinating.” Beau came forward, brandishing his notebook. “I’ve alive.” heard of such a thing before—”

Dillon blinked. “You look like Hawthorn but you sound more like A ve any “Don’t,” Aislinn warned. “The library practically raised him.”

a when Caer started breathing hard, his breaths short and ragged. Aislin down beside him, steadying him against her. “Caer—”

“I’ll get him something,” Beau said, disappearing into Flora’s sadc g moreThe dogs, thankfully, had all gone back to sleep, and none of them mi ; oldesthe poked around the bags.

ne they He came back with a vial of something that he held up to Caer e never“Breathe,” he said, laying a palm against his chest. Light rayed bene fingertips. “Just breathe.”

Caer’s breath slowed. He swallowed the potion, and seconds late ey bothback into sleep.

Dillon stared at him. “Is he all right?”

“This has been a hard day for him,” Aislinn explained, forcing her fingers to smooth back his hair. “He’s never brought back anyone so... before.”

“Any idea why that might be?” Beau asked, hovering around his elbow. “Um... I’m afraid not.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was at this quarry, filled with Unseelie. Juliana—your mother—there. We’d flooded the place with snow, and then—Ladrien. He—”

“stabbed me.”

Aislinn stilled. She’d heard versions of this story before, but they always skipped over the details.

“I don’t remember anything else. Nothing. Nothing at all. Just... me never up in the snow and crawling towards the fight. Digging through the snow to follow you down here. I was sure you were Juliana and well... I didn’t know where else to go. I thought we were still in the fight...”

He finally fell down on the floor, slumping in a heap, but there was a moment of relief to the action. “Vines and spirits,” he whispered.

“Do you need a drink?” Beau offered, holding up the dregs of Caelle’s ale. “No, thank you.”

Dillon took it, but the tincture dribbled out of his mouth. “I... I’ll swallow.”

“Interesting.” Beau made a note. “What else—”

“Beau!” Aislinn admonished. “This *still* isn’t the time!” She turned to

Dillon. “I’m sorry, Ser—Dillon. My brother is usually the more energetic, but sometimes his curiosity does get the better of him.”

“I—thank you.”

“I’m Aislinn,” she said, “crown princess of Faerie.”

He smiled at her. “You look so much like your mother.”

“Should we...” Beau glanced around him, “wake the others?”

Aislinn shook her head. “This night has seen enough interruptions. They need to sleep.”

“I can keep watch, if you like,” Dillon suggested. “I don’t think I’ll sleep.”

Aislinn and Beau exchanged glances. “You’re just going to sit here tonight by yourself after just coming back from the dead?”

“Why not? It’ll give me some time to process.”

“That’s a fair point,” Beau concluded.

“Won’t you be a bit... lonely?”

“I’m sure I can handle it.”

Aislinn once more did not feel like sleeping. She wished it weren’t her responsibility reminding her that it was not a good idea to leave an undead they’d just met in charge of their overnight safety—what if his sentry was only temporary? What if it was all a trick?—but the main reason was she did not want him to be alone.

“I’m not sure I feel like sleeping at the moment,” she announced. “I can certainly feel I could stay up for a bit longer.”

“Me too,” said Beau. “How strange.”

Dillon smiled.

For at least another hour, while Hecate dozed in Dillon’s lap, they sat back with him beside the dwindling fire, telling him about how the Unseelie witch who’d killed him had been defeated, and what had happened afterward—how their parents had married, how the Queen had granted him knighthood, how his statue was erected beside the lake in the gardens and

clambered over it as children. They told him the stories everyone had of him, how their mother spoke of him frequently, how his father had taught them how to ride, how Miriam had referenced him all the time when they were young. Let them know how to fight.

“It was all, ‘by the time he was fourteen, Dillon Woodfern could ride a wounded horse on his back with a broken leg! Another sack of flour, I know, Aislinn!’”

“It was a miniature pony,” Dillon insisted, “and my leg was sprained.”

“Did you help Mother tie Father’s hair to his bedpost?”

“I was merely a lookout.”

“What about the time she stole *all* of his clothes and flung them out of the high tower.”

“Please,” said Dillon shuddering, “don’t remind me of that time when a mad man walked around naked all day, proclaiming how apparently someone was *desperate* to see him naked.”

Simple: Beau and Aislinn howled.

The stories seemed to ease Dillon somewhat, and, eventually, they fell asleep. “Hold off sleep no longer.

“We can trust him, right?” Beau whispered as they rolled into their beds.

“Hard not to, isn’t it? This is *Dillon Woodfern*. He was Mother’s Captain.”

Beau conceded, and shortly after, they both fell asleep.

They woke to the dwarves screaming.

the King

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“**U**ndead! *UNDEAD!*” someone was screaming.

Aislinn opened her eyes. Half of the dwarves were brandishing weapons, the other half just rising. The wargis cocked heads, surprised by all this commotion.

The dwarves were advancing on Dillon.

Dillon.

Aislinn leapt to her feet, springing between them, Beau tripping a bedroll as he struggled to follow.

“Stop!” Aislinn called. “He’s fine, he’s safe!”

Minerva held up her axe, holding off the attack. “Are you sure? Because he looks—”

“I know,” Dillon said, “but I’m not going to attack, I promise!”

Luna gasped, lowering her rolling pin. “You can talk!”

“Yes, quite well, thank you.”

“We went through all this last night,” Aislinn explained. “We don’t know why he’s so, um, alive, but he is, and we know him—he’s a kn

Acanthia, and a close friend of our mother's."

The dwarves all exchanged glances, and then dropped their weapons on the floor. "Well, if you say so."

"Fascinating," said Flora, coming forward. "I've never... extraordinary. Do you mind if I—"

"I took a few notes last night," Beau said, untangling himself and moving forward with his notebook. "I didn't do a full examination—"

"He is standing *right there*," Aislinn said, glowering.

"It's all right," Dillon said. "An examination might be a good idea actually. It might give us some answers. I don't mind."

Flora and Beau exchanged the look of excited children being handed a barrel full of sweet treats.

"I'll get my bag," Flora announced.

"I'll get my pen!"

They dragged Dillon off into a secluded corner of the tunnel behind a cluster of rocks and started tearing off his clothes. They fell in a crumple beside them. Luna crept forward, holding up the knight's tabard, stained with brown blood and sporting a large hole in the stomach. She swallowed.

"I'm going to fix this before I start on breakfast," she said. "Unless you're all famished?"

They all shook their heads. "Need firewood anyway," Bell said.

"And I fancy something other than snail this morning," Diana announced.

"Let me see if I can find something. Caer? Are you up for a hunt?"

Caer's eyes were still rooted on the cluster of rocks behind which he stood. He had not yet uttered a single word. "Yeah," he said. "Sure."

He climbed gingerly to his feet, testing his weight. Aislinn reached out to steady him, but he shrugged her off. "We probably shouldn't—" he

can probably... I think I have my powers back now.”

s to the “Right,” she said, stepping backwards and ignoring the p
disappointment. She ought to be *glad* he’d recovered.

quite “We won’t be long,” said Diana. “Or I hope not. Someone rustle u
firewood.”

coming



d idea, Aislinn assisted with the finding of fuel to burn and returned to the par
a brief sojourn in the tunnels, finding a small station nearby which ha
furniture she could hack up. She came back to the campfire to find
ferred a sitting beside it, almost naked as Luna worked on his clothes.

Flora was stitching up the wound in his abdomen.

“We tried magic,” Beau explained, as Aislinn stared at the scene,
didn’t work.”

d a pile “This is purely for cosmetic reasons,” Flora mumbled.

d heap “My guts were hanging out, good doctor,” Dillon said. “It wa
ed with disconcerting.”

s we’re Aislinn hovered over him. “How are you doing?”

“Um, well, decidedly glad for my mortal lies, I have to say, but I th
doing all right, all things considered.”

ounced. Aislinn bent down and squeezed his shoulder. It was as cold as ice,
deerhide. She tried not to stare.

Dillon “All done!” Luna declared, holding up his clothes. The dar
remained, although her stitching was meticulous. “I, er, couldn’t do a
about the blood...”

l out to

said. “I

“It’s fine,” Dillon said, in the same way Aislinn’s mother did whenever she was trying to hide her true feelings. She wondered if it was a mortal sin, although Aoife never spoke like that, nor Aunt Iona. He said it exactly as he meant it, in a way that was hard to pin.

“Here,” Beau said, taking the garments from Luna’s grip. He washed his hands over the stains, drawing out the darkness until only mud remained. He handed the uniform to Dillon. “Arise, Ser Dillon,” he said. “Knight of the Realm.”

Dillon smiled. “Thank you,” he said.

Stitching done, he pulled the clothes over his head and finished dressing himself. Luna got to work cooking the weird, rodent-like creatures Dillon had procured. Aislinn was sure it wouldn’t be much better than slurg, but it would, at least, not be slurg.

The dwarves swapped pleasantries with Dillon as the meal was served along.

“So, Dillon,” Bell started, “where are you from?”

“Acanthia,” he explained. “Fifty years ago, apparently.”

“And you were a knight?”

Dillon shook his head. “Palace guard, for the most part—a stablemaster before then.”

“Good profession,” Minerva said, as if mucking out horses far outweighed the honour of being a knight.

Bell raised an eyebrow as if trying to say “*really, dear?*” without insulting their guest.

“Anyone can be brave for a short amount of time,” Minerva said, looking at her look. “Much harder and more honourable to make a slow, honest man in my opinion.”

ver she “That’s her way of saying she’s terrible at mucking out the stables.”

I thing, “I have one arm, woman!”

tly like “You *know* that’s not the reason.”

“I have one arm and a pair of eyes that just *don’t see dirt*.”

ved his Bell pursed her lips. “Pampered princess.”

l white “Filthy ruffian.”

ie said. They leaned over their plate of roasted cave-rodent and nuzzled their noses together.

“How long have you been married?” Dillon asked, smiling softly.

lressing “Oh, fifty years?” Minerva said.

ana had “Fifty-seven,” Bell corrected. “But we were on-and-off for a couple of decades before that.”

“Why was that?” Dillon asked.

coming “I wasn’t sure I wanted to be a queen,” Bell said. A pause followed this was some great confession. “I was her general before that.”

“The General That Never Fought,” Diana followed. “That was what I called her.”

“Not as an insult,” Minerva added. “She was just smart enough to assist—always have a way out of the conflict before it began.”

“Also why it took you so long to convince me to marry you.”

veighed “Our marriage has been peace and sunshine and roses, woman. You know what you’re on about.”

nsulting Beau shared a look with Aislinn. “They’re as bad as our parents.”

“I think it’s sweet.”

reading Beau doubled back. “Are you sure you’re the real Aislinn?”

: living, “Beau—”

“The real Aislinn would *never* say that. Come on. I need a look of d

Aislinn glared.

“That’ll do.”

Minerva and Bell ceased their soft glances and nuzzling and turned to their plans for the day.

“Are we far from Avalinth?” Beau asked.

Bell shook her head. “Half a day’s journey, all being well. We should be sleeping in proper beds tonight.”

Aislinn let out a little squeak. “Sorry,” she said, “I’m just... super about the prospect of sleeping in a real bed again.”

“Alone?” Beau queried.

Aislinn shoved him very hard in the ribs. Caer, thankfully, was still at Dillon from afar and didn’t seem to be listening.

“Yeah, I deserved that,” he said, massaging his side. “Please proceed, like gentlefolk.”

“A few hours’ journey is all,” Bell continued. “With adequate restin at they “Unless Aislinn wants to teleport us there?”

“Um,” Caer started, finally looking up, “she nearly died the last time almost she’s not doing that ever again.”

Aislinn narrowed her eyes. “Are you telling me what to do?”

“You are welcome to tell me not to risk my life doing foolish things I don’t whenever you wish.”

“That’s a fair point, I will do that, continue.”

“Well,” said Minerva, slapping her hand on her thigh, “shall we proceed?”



isgust.”

The dwarves insisted that Caer and Aislinn ride on the wargis, certain neither of them could be fully recovered by now. Aislinn at last felt instead body was her own again—a tired, stretched version, but her own none —yet conceded to the ride because she suspected Caer would not want alone. They kept a steady pace at the back of the party, the others taking would be on the remaining mounts. Beau was at the head behind Minerva, tall Dillon.

excited Caer had yet to take his eyes off him.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’ve never brought someone back *whole* before,” he admitted.

staring He’d said as much the night before, but Aislinn understood now v wasn’t quite saying. “You’re worried that the others you brought back continue, have been sentient too, that your mother...”

Caer swallowed. “Most of them it was very clear that they weren g.” anymore, but maybe that’s not always the case. Mother was too v speak when she died, when she came back...” Silver rimmed his eye ime, so for a moment, everything about him tightened. Aislinn reached across pinched his sleeve, tugging him back to the present. “I might never right? Why I have these powers and why Dillon came back like hims thing the others didn’t. I might never know what these powers can do. I just... I should just learn to live with that, right?”

Aislinn barely hesitated. “If it matters to you, I swear I shall do eve k up?” in my power to find out the answers to your questions, and if none found, I shall be an ear for the rest of your life.”

Caerwyn stared at her. “Dangerous for you to make such a vow.”

“I don’t know,” Aislinn said, half under her breath, “I’d make worse Caer looked at her sharply, as if she’d just made another, more da

ain that confession, one that had obliterated all thought. He said nothing. like her whistled in the space of words.

etheless Finally, Aislinn spoke. "I've figured it out, by the way."

t to ride "What?"

ing turns "Why you impressed me. I said I'd tell you if I figured it out, so I ha

king to "Oh?" he said, arching an eyebrow. "Go on."

"Before we met, I'd painted a picture of you in my head of a mortal prince who couldn't say boo to a goose, and yet you were enough to get a drop on me the moment we met. You didn't like fae didn't like mortals, but you weren't afraid of me. You challenged me what heeaven when you must have been afraid of hurting me, when you ha k mightreason to suspect the fae weren't trustworthy, you helped me. I

precious few people that are as tough as they are good. So... that's whi 't *them* Aislinn clenched her jaw, trying to hold the last part in, but Caer's weak to smile almost unravelled her. "Is there something else?"

es, and Aislinn unlatched her jaw. "I'm also impressed by your incoss and physique and your entire face and it's extremely irritating and distract : know, *I really didn't want to tell you that.*"

self and Caerwyn barked a laugh and quickly stifled it. "I'm sorry," he : should just... Look, if it helps, you really impressed me too... with your hum skill but also how insanely beautiful you are. You're a little alarr rying times." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I just... I really wish can be touch you right now."

"Oh?" Aislinn arched an eyebrow. "And what part would you touch Caerwyn coughed, loudly and abruptly, causing the people in front e ones." and stare at them.

ngerous "Sorry," he spluttered, "just... dust in my throat."

Silence “Let us know if you need a break, lad,” Minerva said.

“I’m *fine*.”

Aislinn smirked in her saddle.



ive to.”

spoiled They stopped an hour or two later to refresh themselves when they
e smart an underground river. Blue-green crystals lined the walls, making rip
e and I light dance across the rock. The whole place hummed with still, pale c

ie. And “Beautiful,” said Beau, as he whipped out his notebook to make
d good quick sketches, mumbling something about how he wished he brough
I know Dillon and Luna stared over his shoulder, gasping as he printed th
y.” with a few flicks of his pencil.

s cocky Aislinn lay back against the wall.

The wall moved.

credible She leapt up, drawing out her dagger. Caer leapt too. “What is it?”

ing but She stared at the wall. It was made of petrified vines, but unde
something was stirring. Something long and thin...

said. “I It slithered out like a snake, eyeless, bark-skinned. No animal. A
our and grey and wooden, but alive.

ning at Aislinn holstered her dagger. “Hello,” she said, leaning forward to ;

I could “You’re a long way from home.”

“Home?” Caer queried.

?” “I told you about the vines in Acanthia, didn’t I? They once ran t
to turn the whole of Faerie.”

“By the looks of things, they still do.” Beau put down his book an
over to inspect them. They hummed beneath his fingers. Aislinn coul

too. They were alive as the ones back home, the ones they used to v messages through.

“Beau,” she started, “if these vines *do* go all over Faerie, do you thi could get a message to our parents?”

Beau shrugged. “It’s possible. We’ve never tried sending messages the palace, though.”

reached “We’ve never had to.”

ples of “Fair point.”

colour.

e a few

it paint.

e scene

Aislinn lay the tip over her palm. “Please,” she whispered, “fi parents. Let them know we’re safe and where we are.”

“Should we mention Dillon?”

“How would we explain that?”

“Good point.”

The vines didn’t carry precise words, more feelings and ideas. They them growing up to play games of hide-and-seek, following a quiet secluded hiding spots. They could sense how the sender of a messa perhaps gain a sense of what they wanted them to do—*let’s make m come find me, I don’t want to sleep alone tonight*—but whole sentenc vine—beyond that. They couldn’t pack Dillon’s return into them.

greet it. Dillon headed over with Luna, eyes widening at the vines.

“The vines...” he whispered, crouching down beside them.

“Must have been a while since you’ve seen them, I imagine.”

“No...”

hrough

“What?”

d came He shook his head. “It’s no matter,” he said. “Think nothing of it.”

l feel it Minerva whistled from the bank of the river. “Ready to move, childr

“Are we children?” Beau queried. “I feel like we are not.”

whisper “I’m nineteen,” Dillon offered. “Give or take fifty years...”

“I’m twenty-one,” said Caer.

nk they “I’m thirty-three,” announced Luna.

Aislinn snorted. “I think *you* might be the only child, Beau.”

outside “Oh... whatever.”

“Minerva’s over five hundred. I think we all seemed like children”
Luna explained, passing the reins of one of the wargis into Caer’s
before turning to her own mount. Dillon tried to help her up, but the
ind our instinctively crouched down to her level.

“Are you really thirty-three?” he asked, trying to hide his actions.

She nodded. “Dwarves age slowly.”

“Out of interest,” he said, “does that mean you’re thirty-three, *thirty*
or more... younger?”

’d used “Does it matter?”

: tug to “Um...”

ge felt, “She’s teasing you,” Beau said. “She’s basically our age.”

ischief, “*Our* age, maybe,” said Aislinn with a grin, “not yours, Baby Beau.”

es were “Stop making me into a baby!”

A chuckle passed through the group as they headed further up the
They were spacing out, now, entering huge caverns and ancient or
Buildings carved from rock eased into view, bits of broken fi
protruding from the stone. Glass littered some of the rivers, but it ha
there for so long that barnacles had started to grow on it.

From time to time, they’d pass a burial mound. Some of the
making the graves were etched with names—all long since worn out.

ren?” “The dwarves haven’t seen external conflict in a millennia,
explained. “Since the sky-sickness outbreak back in the Coal Age, 1

stopped manning these outposts centuries ago—no one came down here
wasn't escorted by a dwarf."

Beau squeaked, awed by the honour.

"Not long now, little princeling," Minerva said, jerking with her
"Behold—the doors of Avalinth."

to her,"

his hands

and wargi

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y-three,

,

tunnel.

outposts.

furniture

had been

pebbles

," Bell

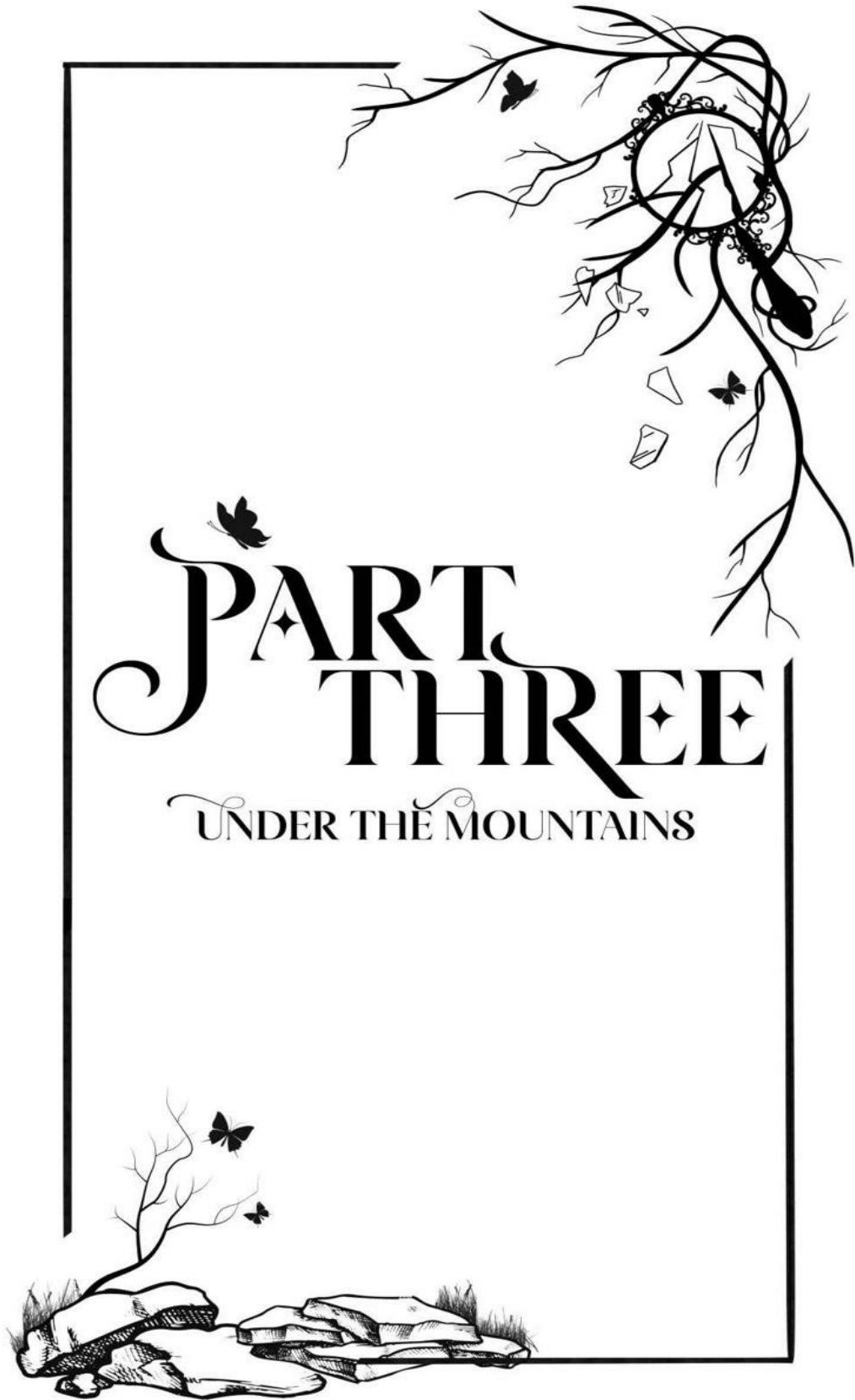
66. We

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“Not long now, little princeling,” Minerva said, jerking with her head. “Behold—the doors of Avalinth.”

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PART
THREE
UNDER THE MOUNTAINS

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Aislinn had heard tales of the Great Doors of Avalinth. The thought to be the largest doors in existence. Rumour had it that dwarves once had a bet with the Spring Court over who could build the largest entrance. The Spring Court's were taller and made of woven branches and blooming flowers, but without magic to hold them together they could not support themselves.

These doors were carved from the mountain and almost as ancient as the locks and hinges now rusted over. They stood at the end of a tremendous cavern, the road, once smooth red brick, now blackened and crusted with chunks were missing in places, which the wargis deftly avoided.

It looked abandoned, like nothing living could possibly lurk behind those monstrous doors.

“A question,” said Beau, “but how are we getting in? Do we just knock?”

Minerva chuckled. “As if anyone would hear you, lad.”

“That’s what I thought.”

Bell walked up to the side of the door, her hand disappearing behind the concealed alcove. She yanked on something, grunting and groaning until a much smaller door opened up inside of one of them.

Everyone dismounted. Minerva stood at the entrance, pausing.

“Min—” Bell started.

Minerva shrugged, and plunged inside.

Aislinn heard Beau’s gasp before she stepped through after him. He danced everywhere inside this colossal rectangular space—from scones on the walls, from immaculately cut fire pits, from the crystals embedded in the ceiling that mimicked the stars. Another great set of doors stood at the end, but between them stood dozens of statues. Dwarves milled between them, looking up as the party entered—a few turning to whisper amongst themselves.

Aislinn did not hear them. She was too busy staring at the statues as they passed, admiring the way stone had been carved to resemble rippling fur.

It was why fae invited mortals into their homes, why mortality, in a brief, was treasured. There was something inherently more valuable in the beauty made by hand—a magic beyond magic.

“This is amazing,” Beau whispered.

“The Hall of Heroes,” Bell explained. “I know mortals have their gods, fae their monarchs and spirits, but if we pray, we pray to the heroes of our world.”

“Do dwarves believe in an afterlife?” Caer asked.

Bell shrugged, like the question was neither here nor there. “Yes, and just... she explained. “We believe that our souls are returned to the stone and forge new life—be it living or steel. We may be the sound of a newborn or the spark that forges a sword. Who is to say.”

It was a sentiment not far from the fae’s, and Aislinn found she rather

behind it. She moved through the rest of the hall, admiring the other heroes. , and at the name, a large quantity of them weren't warriors. There were doctors, blacksmiths, politicians and merchants. People who had wrought changes or brought about advancements in arts and sciences.

There were occasional warriors, of course. Augustus Barrows, Relentless who fought off a troll uprising, Caesaria Olestone the Unicorn. Lightwho explored the deepest levels of the Underground, and—
aces on “Whoa,” Beau said, stopping in his tracks, “this one looks like you, d in the Towards the end of the hall was the statue of a mortal woman on the other pedestal—possibly to compensate for her height. She did, indeed, look about like Aislinn, although she thought she looked more like her mother.
whisper She glanced at the placard.

Cerridwen the Brave.

as they Aislinn froze, certain she was misreading.
abric. *Cerridwen Ardencourt, a mortal knight of faerie, led a dwarven band however against a golem uprising in the Silver Age, 457. She single-handedly about destroyed Brutus Greysirite, the creator of the golems, and saved a stronghold from annihilation.*

Aislinn glanced back at Beau, whose eyes were widening.
ods and Minerva stood behind them. “Ah, yes, Cerridwen. Fine warrior old.” human or fae we ever had down here. Heck of a woman.”

“You knew her?”
nd no,” “Fought beside her in the uprising. Bell too.”
fire, to “And you didn't think to maybe mention it?”
rn's cry “Why would I?”

“Um,” said Beau, “because Aislinn looks just like her and her mother liked Ardencourt?”

Despite Minerva blinked back. “All you human-fae look the same to me.”

ors and Beau groaned. “That’s our *grandma*.”

t great “Your grandma?” Minerva arched an eyebrow. “Ha! Fancy that.”

“That’s all?”

with the Minerva shrugged. “I had no idea you were related. You said you
launtedwas Ardenthorn and I’ve no idea how fae or mortal names work.”

“How do dwarven last names work?”

Ais.” “For the most part, children carry the name of one of their pa

1 a lowusually *tir* or *dir* added to the end for ‘son’ or ‘daughter’. But most w
k mucha new name as they grow—Gearheart for an inventor, Highcliff

location of their forge, maybe Axeblade for a fearsome warrior—some
might keep a family name, though. How does it work for fae?”

“There’s a ranking system amongst the noble houses,” Aislinn exp

“You take the name of the highest-ranking one. Except the royal fa
*attalion*they had no surname, until us. My parents merged my mother’s surr
*indedly*Ardencourt with thorns that symbolise the royal family.”

1 *entire* “And the common folk?”

“Surnames are usually hereditary. Most couples pick one to go by
choose a new one or keep their own. You can gain another, like you s
r. Lastgrandmother lived in Autumn when she first came to Faerie and t
name of Ardencourt when she moved to the capital. She had qu
reputation. Our grandfather used her name after they married. He’d gr
in the mortal realm. I don’t think he’d had a surname, there.”

Aislinn did not know much about either of her grandfathers. Hawth
barely had a relationship with his, but Markham Ardencourt had rai
name isdaughter largely by himself. There were moments when Juliana woul

him, some sweet memory of training with him as soon as she was old to hold a sword... and then the sweetness would wash away.

He'd died in the Unseelie King's attempt to overthrow Queen Mayt it wasn't lingering grief that prevented Juliana from talking about him or nameleast, that's the conclusion they'd drawn over the years.

They had given up asking, eventually.

"Well, you learn something new every day," said Minerva. "But carents—let's not dawdle further. It's still a fair trek to the palace, and I doubt we'll gain the wargis on the tram."

for the "Tram?" Beau frowned. "What's a tram?"

the nobles "You'll see."

The party marched forward, and the great stone doors at the other end of the plain swung open into the city of Avalinth.

The sound hit them first; an endless pounding hum, merged with the same of a thousand voices all talking at once. Aislinn stared in disbelief at the scene ahead of her.

She had seen etchings of Avalinth before in history books—hundreds of years out of date. They had depicted Avalinth as a place carved entirely out of stone and hard, solid edges.

Part of this remained. There were still pillars the size of houses holding up the colossal ceiling, the buildings were still straight and solid. But the rest was gone. Horseless carriages bustled through the streets, following tracks

ground and lines overhead. Great moving platforms shuddered and jerked along the side of the cliff faces, offering transport to the dozens of other streets carved into the rock—the layers upon layers of roads and levels. A enormous clock hung from a ceiling veined with red lines. Light

enough suspended on iron poles, and all around them was the constant clicket of clockwork and the grinding of gears.

ree, but Avalinth was a clockwork city.

—or at Beau, for once, was too awestruck to take out his notebook. He firmly in place until a dwarf came by on a two-wheeled contraption, at him to “watch it!”

ome on, Bell yanked him out of the way. “Look lively, lad.”

re’ll get Beau let out a string of unintelligible words. Luna patted his arm.

Aislinn turned behind her. If Beau was surprised, the look on Cae face was beyond description. He looked like he’d been hit in the face frying pan.

ner end Aislinn tugged on his sleeve. “Are you all right?”

“This... isn’t what I expected.”

ie noise “No, me neither.”

f at the “There are carriages without horses.”

“So I see.”

reds of “How do they *work*?”

rely out Aislinn, who had no idea, just shrugged. How was any of this p without magic?

ding up “Welcome to Avalinth,” Flora said, barely concealing her grin. “st... science.”

in the

rked in

uctures

els. An

s stood



They made their way through the straight, wide streets of Avalinth at t of snails, Beau constantly running off to stare into shop windows and out countless amounts of squeaks and gasps. They had shops in Acan

y-clackcourse, but not like *this*. Entire buildings offered floor after floor of c
—lace to leather, mesh to metal. There were giant apothecaries lined w
and tinctures in rainbows of colour. Shops that sold only springs to g
stayedtraps. There were blacksmiths that specialised purely in axes or arm
yellingarrowheads, wares arranged in terrific displays like pieces of artwork
were shops selling jewellery and crystals and flowers—because eve
bloomed beneath the strange, warm veins of light—although not a sin
of the flowers looked like anything Aislinn had seen before. Some
erwyn’slooked like gemstones, some leaves like scraps of copper. She had
: with aseveral times to admire them, just to ensure they were real.

She had never, ever seen anything like this.

“This is unreal,” Caer breathed, eyes saucer-wide as he stared
hungrily at a shop selling tiny clockwork animals. A small horse coi
entirely of bronze and gears galloped across the window display.

Does he like it here?

Does he hate it?

Which answer did she prefer?

ossible Of course she wanted him to like it. Of course she didn’t want him
trapped here. But if he loved it too much...

City of He would never want to leave.

Minerva chuckled under her breath, like a patient grandmother surr
by excited children. “Come on, young ‘uns. We’ve a way to go yet.”

They left the bustling streets behind, navigating over tram lin
through crowds and passed strange, three-wheeled contraptions pr
he pace along the streets by some sort of pedal.

l letting Ahead of them, at the end of the cavern on the highest point, stood
thia, of of gold stone surrounded by thick, stout walls. It looked carved out

nothingmountain itself.

with jars “Impressive,” Beau whispered. “How does one breathe down here?”
ears or Flora pointed to vents high up on the ceiling. “Pumps fresh air in fi
nour oragricultural levels.”

. There “You have *agricultural levels*? What grows there? What’s you
n budsproduce—”

gle one Flora laughed, humouring Beau’s questions as they walked. The r
e petalsthe city quietened once they drew closer to the castle and away fr
to stopmarket districts. The houses grew taller and grander, although Aislinn
a few buildings with giant cracks, inlaid with gems and obsidian.

Luna caught her staring. “Dwarven custom,” she said. “We nev
almostdown anything. Something that’s been broken and restored is more v
mposedthan that which is new.”

“A lovely sentiment,” said Caer, his face frozen in something tha
resembled horror, “but there’s a pillar over there inlaid with what jus
to be gold plaster.”

“Aye, lad,” Minerva said, “what of it?”

to feel “Patching up a pillar does not seem like the best of ideas.”

“Ah, we’re stubborn that way.”

“Stubborn is another way of saying foolish.”

ounded The dwarves glared at him. Luna clutched her hand to her ches
whispered an apology to the stone and the ancestors that had carved fr
ies and “It’s another way of saying *strong*.” Minerva tutted. “Scars tell a st
opelled—whether rendered in flesh or stone. Why would you want to hide tha

“I have no objection to the aesthetic,” he argued. “Just to the possib
a castlebeing *dead*.”

t of the “It’s not as bad as you might think,” said Dillon.

Aislinn bit her lip to stop herself from laughing. Beau and Luna quite manage it. Caer still looked mildly horrified.

Finally, they arrived at the great palace of Avalinth. Wide, tall steps led to the front of an even wider entrance—a colossal metal door sandwiched between two towers. Guards lined the entrance in gleaming armour, their passage.

It was the first time they had seen any security since their journey from the north. Evidently, the dwarves did not fear invasion.

“Halt!” said one of them. “Who goes there?”

“Are you blind, Rufus?” Minerva snapped. “It’s me, Minerva.”

“Minerva?” The guard squinted, others giving them the same appraising look. Several eyes widened. “Why, I hardly recognised you! You’re—”

“Filthy, yes, I know. We’ve had quite a journey to get here. Would you let more of us in? Tell my sister I wish to see her.”

The guards exchanged glances, but ultimately shrugged. Rufus led the party past the main gate, into the wide, sparse gardens of blue grass and manicured hedgerows.

“We should stable your wargis,” Rufus declared, several servants appearing out of nowhere to assist them. Aislinn found herself still reluctant to hand over the reins; she’d been beside them for so long now. Flora, Hecate, who had been dozing on the back of one of the wargis, looked up and started hissing, staring at the threshold of the palace.

“Wait,” said Bell, halting. “The barrier that nullifies magic begins here, doesn’t it?”

Minerva paused. “What of it?”

“What about Dillon?”

“What about him?”

“Oh!” Beau clasped a hand to his mouth. “He must run on magic, right?”

did not if he steps through the gate, there's a chance he could..."

Dillon swallowed inaudibly. "I think I'll wait outside, just to be safe."
"A wise idea," Minerva declared.

"Well, of course it is," Bell said, pursing her lips. "It's *mine*."

Minerva scanned through the servants attending to the wargis, searching for someone to assist. She located a dark-bearded, middle-aged dwarf with particularly elaborate braids dotted with sparkling silver clasps.

"Ah, Jasper—" she started, "yes, it's very good to see you too—Dillon, he's an undead mortal."

"Hello!" said Dillon, waving.

"We're worried that taking him into the palace will render him the kind of dead. Would you mind finding him somewhere comfortable while you let whilst we're inside?"

"Doesn't have to be too comfortable," Dillon added, "I don't feel satisfied the any more."

Jasper blinked at him for a long moment before breaking into a smile. "Of course!" he said. "Come this way. We'll find space for you and your servants' stables."

Dillon followed, glancing backwards only once. His gaze lingered longer on Luna.

"He'll be *fine*," Minerva insisted. "Jasper's a good chap."

The cat slunk off after them, ignoring Beau's pouts of 'traitor.'

"Come on," Bell insisted. "Not long now."

Aislinn followed the others through the great steel gates. As she passed the threshold, a brief, sharp coldness washed over her, like someone had pulled a layer of clothing. Beau gave a long, hard shudder, staring at his fingernails. "Soshook them like he was trying to summon fire."

“Odd,” he said. “I didn’t think I’d miss it.”

“.” Aislinn’s eyes shied towards Caer, to the hand dangling at his side. “I don’t,” she whispered.

Beau jogged up to Bell’s side, ignoring Aislinn’s remark and the direction of her gaze. “How can you repel magic *without* magic?” he asked.

“The walls around the palace are lined with crystal,” Bell explained.

“Dampens magical power. Place enough close together, and it creates a shield. Very valuable stuff.”

“Fascinating. Do you think...”

Beau’s voice trailed off, or perhaps all sound had. Everything seemed to have narrowed to the slow swing of Caer’s hand.

I could take it, Aislinn realised. I could slip my own into his, right? Nothing would happen.

But suddenly the touching of hands seemed too extreme, too monumental and there were so many people around—

The guards stopped shortly ahead of them, and Aislinn realised they had reached the entrance to the throne room. Two dwarves in gold guard armor, halberds crossed. They unlocked their weapons as they approached, and the guards lining the corridor performed something like a dance, a clashing of steel and stomping of feet.

“Hail, Minerva Mountain-Cast, Sister to the Queen!”

“Hail!” the rest responded.

They parted in a solid, swift moment, their bodies clapping back to their original positions.

The throne room opened before them.

Like the rest of the city, it was made of finely cut stone, but painted white and red. A tiled floor gleamed like molten gold. At the end of the room

a shining throne, stretching to the enormous ceiling, and upon it sat a
side. “In blue and purple, a long panelled train running down the steps in the
of stained glass. She wore her silver-brown hair in elaborate braids, th
irections spikes of her crown woven through it, framed by a large ruff stitched
collar.

plained. “Hail, her Great Majesty, Queen Venus, Monarch-Under-The-Moun
eates a When she rose to her feet, everyone sank into a bow—including Ai:
was automatic. Overwhelming.

The queen’s shadow sank closer.

med to “Arise, sister,” she beckoned.

Aislinn looked up into the face of Queen Venus, and her stomach dr
ht now. The dwarven queen was Minerva’s twin.

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a shining throne, stretching to the enormous ceiling, and upon it sat a woman in blue and purple, a long panelled train running down the steps in the pattern of stained glass. She wore her silver-brown hair in elaborate braids, the huge spikes of her crown woven through it, framed by a large ruff stitched to her collar.

“Hail, her Great Majesty, Queen Venus, Monarch-Under-The-Mountain.”

When she rose to her feet, everyone sank into a bow—including Aislinn. It was automatic. Overwhelming.

The queen’s shadow sank closer.

“Arise, sister,” she beckoned.

Aislinn looked up into the face of Queen Venus, and her stomach dropped.

The dwarven queen was Minerva’s twin.



Queen Venus was an exact, polished version of Minerva, her skin smoothed by impeccable cosmetics, her lips red and full, her hair coloured, her thick, glossy hair wound and braided. Minerva was a stone from the earth, Venus the sparkling gem.

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Aislinn had assumed the two had had decades between them, even a century. She thought there might be a huge gap between them to have aided whatever chasm existed there because she could not imagine leaving Beau, could not imagine anything she could ever do that would not have her forgiving him eventually.

And Beau was just her brother. But a twin...

“Arise, sister,” Venus repeated, “did you not hear?”

Slowly, Minerva rose to her feet, the rest of the party following. She smiled at them all. “I did not think I would see you again, but to return just a few years—with two fae and a mortal in tow—you must have quite a story for me, no?”

“Indeed, we have.”

Venus smiled again, and swept back to her throne. She clicked her fingers and servants sprang forth, bringing chairs and tables, frothy tankards and biscuits. They were relieved of their weapons and forced into places. Aislinn tried to relax, but the loss of her blades stung, much like the approving gaze of the queen.

“Allow me to introduce Aislinn, crown princess of Faerie, and her brother Prince Beau.”

Venus raised a manicured brow. “Bringing the crown princess of Faerie into our hallowed halls, sister. A bold move indeed. I do hope there is a good reason for such rashness.”

“There is,” said Minerva, which made Aislinn squirm in her seat. There was no good reason why she was here. She hoped she hadn’t done anything to ruin Caer’s suit before he’d even had a chance to explain.

“I will make any vow you need me to make,” she explained, “myself included. Anything you wish to ensure we do not reveal the secrets of our kingdom to those that might cause it harm. Any vow outside of death.” No need to mention Beau could lie. They could surely keep their secrets themselves.

Venus nodded, seemingly convinced. “Very well, Princess.”

“But she is not why I am here,” Minerva continued, gesturing to Aislinn. “This is Caerwyn. A mortal prince. He has the ability to resurrect the dead. An ability he cannot fully control, and that others would kill him for—him. We seek protection for him, and nothing more.”

Venus’ eyes widened. “The ability to resurrect the dead?”

“As *undead*,” Bell insisted, words forceful. “They don’t come back whole.” Her mouth remained open for a moment, as if she was thinking

fingers, explaining the exception Dillon created, but for whatever reason, it was of a better of it.

she seats. “Fascinating,” said Venus. “I should like to see this prince’s power in harsh action.”

“No,” said Caer, rushing to his feet, “I’m not going to kill anyone—brother,” “Have no fear, mortal prince,” Venus said, raising a hand. “I mean a common animal, not a dwarf or human or fae. You can hardly expect Faerie shelter you in my halls without knowing a little more about your power. A good you?”

Caer swallowed and sat back down, muttering apologies. Truly, Venus relaxed back in her seat. “This really is a most interesting demonstration. I have never met a mortal with such power before. Do we know how he can do it?”

brother “We do not, save that he seems to have been born with it.”

of your “Aeron, what do you think?”

A shadow slunk forth from the corner of the room, a tall, gangly figure that was dressed in long blue robes, hemmed and etched in dwarven style, but the similarities ended there. He was reed-slim, pale and pointed, a sliver of moonlight over a midnight lake. His long black hair flowed freely down his back, and silver cuffs glinted on the tips of his ears.

the dead. Fae.

—or use “A very interesting plea indeed, My Queen. I have scarce heard of anything before. I would encourage you to think it over, however. The boy does not have his enemies.”

she back “That is true.”

g about Venus turned back to the others, but Aislinn’s gaze was still rooted on Aeron character. She had not expected to see any fae here, let alone

thought dressed in dwarven robes, advising Minerva's sister, and calling the monarch his *queen*. She supposed he owed no loyalty to her father or to the dwarf king, but his being here was... strange, to say the least.

"This is Aeron Lightbringer," Venus explained, seeing the gazes of the dwarves upon him. "He has been my advisor down here for some years now. He has helped me in all manner of things."

Aeron gave a slight bow, barely more than a tilt of his head. "My lords, can my lords," he said.

It ought to be 'Your Highnesses' but Aislinn decided that this was time to push it. Perhaps the dwarven etiquette he'd adopted was different from theirs.

What was he doing here?

Venus looked over them, gaze like cut glass. "I am inclined to grant your request for sanctuary, but I require some time to think it over. Please return here tonight, and tomorrow I should like a show of the boy's abilities."

A noise sounded along the corridor, followed by the shouting of the guards. "Hail, Prince Tiberius!"

A young dwarf—perhaps of Luna's age—arrived at the entrance, red with surprise and out of breath. He was taller than most Aislinn had seen so far, with the same bronze skin as Minerva and Venus, and same brown hair not greyed with age. He even walked like Minerva—like his body was more stone and iron than skin and flesh.

"Aunt Minnie?" he said, his face breaking into a wide, cheerful grin. "Some of the servants said—I didn't dare believe—I can't believe I'm here!"

He stood forward with such speed that Minerva barely had time to breathe before he had thrown his arms around her.

another Slowly, Minerva raised her arm and patted him on the back.

mother, He pulled away. "What happened to your arm?"

"Smashed it on the way here."

rooted "We shall have to get you a replacement—"

. I trust "It's no bother lad, really."

"We shall have our finest craftsmen see to it," Venus said stonily. "Please, Tibe, unhand your aunt. She's had a long journey."

Tiberius did not seem to have heard her. "I can't believe you're back. What brings you here? Are you staying for long? Are you staying for *good*?"

ifferent "Slow down, darling. You're ignoring our other guests."

"Aunt Bell!" Tiberius said, still not listening to his mother and apparently only now noticing there were other people in the room. He flung himself at every dwarf at the table, gripping Luna so hard he nearly lifted her from the floor.

He turned to Aislinn, stopping shortly. "I... forgive me, but I don't believe we've met."

"I am Aislinn," she said, dropping in a polite bow. "Crown Princess of Avalinn."

with the "Tiberius," he said, still staring at her. "Crown Prince of Avalinn."

eyed by Caer coughed. "This is Prince Caer," she announced. "And my lord Beau."

"A pleasure, a pleasure." He scanned the rest of the room. "Where's the girl?" A hush fell over the rest of the room. "Fort died on the journey, a few days ago," Bell explained. "It was a good death, quick and clean. She didn't suffer."

o stand "And she lived gloriously until then," Minerva added. "We have yet to bury her off properly. Perhaps you will join us then?"

Tiberius swallowed, eyes shining. “I would be honoured.”

“Tiberius,” the queen said again, tone icy. “Our guests need re getting late.” She clicked her fingers again, and the servants scurried into the room, sweeping away empty tankards and helping the par their feet... whether or not they wanted it.

y. “But Venus met Minerva’s eyes as they were escorted from the room nodded at each other—curtly, formally.

κ. What “Until tomorrow, sister.”

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Tiberius swallowed, eyes shining. “I would be honoured.”

“Tiberius,” the queen said again, tone icy. “Our guests need rest. It is getting late.” She clicked her fingers again, and the servants scurried back into the room, sweeping away empty tankards and helping the party onto their feet... whether or not they wanted it.

Venus met Minerva’s eyes as they were escorted from the room. They nodded at each other—curtly, formally.

“Until tomorrow, sister.”

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After they were dismissed from the throne room, an aide escorted all to the guest wing—a long corridor of plush rooms hidden golden doors so divine and intricate that Caer paused for a long while studying the intricate detail and dreaming of being able to create something so fine.

Some of the dwarves made a retreat from the palace, intent on visiting friends and family in the city, whilst others, thoroughly exhausted immediately into their chambers.

Caer felt simultaneously exhausted and also like he couldn't possibly do anything at all.

He had no idea if Venus would grant his request to stay. He had no idea what she was doing with a fae advisor. He had no idea what would happen to him if she said no.

He didn't even know if he *wanted* to stay. Everything was incredibly new and also utterly unfamiliar.

He wished Aislinn was here. He knew that was silly. She was only doors down. He could go to her now, he could...

He gulped. He'd watched her face as she passed over the barrier, v something leave her shoulders. He could feel a fragment of it, to powers wouldn't work here. They were safe to—

It was too much. He couldn't. He didn't even know how he'd st conversation.

He sighed, drifting over to a corner of the room separated by screen. Behind it, cut into the floor, was a rectangular bath. Two tap over the side.

Caer frowned. The dwarves had a similar contraption in their cotta d them pumped up water from the nearby stream. He didn't know quite behind worked so efficiently, but he'd been meaning to ask. He couldn't w e at his, why this one had *two*, though. Perhaps it was just to aid in filling it up nething

He had no way of heating the water, but that hardly mattered. A cc might be just what he needed.

ing old He turned on both taps, full blast.

, slunk He gasped. One was hot.

ly sleep *Hot water from a tap!* What would these dwarves think of next?

He turned his attention to a basket beside the bath, which held a se of vials and bottles, all holding shimmering, creamy liquid. He sniffed no idea them gingerly—it smelt of honey and apples and cider and spice.

ppen to He added some to the water, his eyes widening as it conjured up b

ble but How was this possible without magic?

He didn't question it, stripping off immediately and sinking bene soft, foamy waters. It was like bathing in liquid silk.

Maybe Avalinth wasn't so bad after all.

y a few After a thorough and very long soak, Caer emerged from the bath. He found a robe hanging on the back of his door and crawled into it. It was the softest, finest thing he had ever touched, although it only came down to his knees. A small tray of refreshments had been laid out for him; salted butter, dense, nutty cheese, hot rolls and a few slices of crystalised fruit tart that with a tankard of honey-mead. The flavours were sharper and sweeter than his usual fare, but simple enough to be familiar. The dwarves were excellent hosts.

As he hung He lay down on the plush bed and tried to sleep. It evaded him, of course. The effects of the bath trickled away the longer he tossed and turned, until Niggling fears and doubts crept in instead.

How it He shook his head. He had to see her.

Work out His clothes had been ferreted away, which was somewhat irritating. What he could find in their place was a nightshirt that must have been lorded over by a dwarf, but didn't cover nearly enough of him. It would be unthinkable to see a lady's chambers in such attire back home.

It was unthinkable to visit her chambers at all.

He forced down his fears; faeries were seldom bothered by such things.

He stepped out into the corridor and went past two doors before he realised a flaw in his plan—he had no idea which door was hers.

One of He sighed, running his hands through his hair, and paced down the corridor, dimly hoping the right one would jump out at him. Nothing happened. This was stupid, foolish—

“May I be of some assistance, young prince?”

With the Caer jumped, spinning round to find Aeron beside him, his impetuous, smooth black hair now draped over his shoulder in a loose braid. Aeron had changed his robes, ready for bed, but he still looked far too elegant.

ath. Hepoised. Aislinn and Beau both held a similar kind of beauty, like the
was the dawn over beads of dew, but it didn't seem as otherworldly or as
1 to his Aeron's beauty. He was living marble.

meat, a "I, um..." Caer stuttered on his words, wondering if he wanted he
ogether this stranger, or if he could bear to let anyone know he was search
er than Aislinn. "I'm all right."

xcellent "Lost your way to your chamber?"

"Yes," Caer said, glad for the lie.

course. Aeron moved towards his door, gliding as silently as wind acr
turned surface of a pond. He held out an impossibly smooth hand. "Here you

"I thank you."

"If you require anything else during your stay here, just ring the
3, as all your room," Aeron insisted. "My Queen's servants shall attend you."

ing on a He turned away, but Caer called after him. "How is she your quee
to visit asked. "When you're—well, um..."

"I have sworn allegiance to no king or queen of Faerie," he repl
careful, measured words oddly familiar, though Caer knew they'd ne
ings. before. He would never forget a face like his. "Thus anyone can be my
realised or my king, if I so desire."

Who are you? Caer wondered. What are you doing here? There wa
wn the he wanted to ask, but Aeron's gaze pierced through him, and his c
ng did shrivelled up a second later.



ossibly
l. He'd
ant and
Minerva had imagined her return to Avalinth a hundred times in a
different ways. When she had left, and the great steel doors had closed

glint of her, she'd been certain she would never return. It felt like a relief to be
tidy as and after she got used to the strangeness of the sky, she decided she could
the world above. For the first few months, a part of her expected to fall
lp from and away into that vast, empty space. The stone was not there to help
ing for anymore.

But the sensation of weightlessness left her, and after they had seen
the cottage, the boredom started to set in. She kept it at bay for
focusing on improving the homestead, helping Magna with her inventions
oss the hunting game with Diana, keeping the kitchen stocked and the garden
are.” and playing whatever crazy new game Fort came up with. She liked
pace of life, she liked the smell of the air and sounds of the forests
bell in sweet simplicity of life.

And yet, despite it all, she longed for home. She missed the constant
en?” he of the city, the dozens and hundreds of faces she'd left behind, the rush
the deep, the call of adventure.

ied, his And Venus. She missed her too. How could she not? She saw her
ver me every time she looked in the mirror. Different as they were, they were
queen, halves of a whole. Rare to have dwarven siblings close in age. Rarer
have them twinned. There were no others like them.

s much “There will *never* be any like us!” Venus would claim constantly,
courage when she was planning coordinated outfits for them for the latest
occasion. Always different, never the same, but something compelling
Dresses of iron and copper, blue and magenta, moon and sun. Minerva
whatever her sister wanted.

In all other respects, Venus followed her. On her few excursions in
a dozen deep, she listened to her every instruction. In classes, she looked to
behind guidance, for explanation. She never bore her any ill-will for being

gone, line, nor hinted that she planned to challenge her. Because she never
enjoyed that life.

float up Not until...

old her Minerva shook that memory, old and painful. What did Venus'
matter, anyway?

ttled in She'd been surprised to find her so formal upon her return. In most
years, imaginings, when she thought about going back, she imagined finding
attentions, either still furious, or completely forgiving. Not... cold. Distant. Not
tended this time.

ed their But there she was on the throne of their ancestors, a young relic, s
and the orders like a true queen... making an alliance with a fae advisor. Min
definitely needed to know more about *that* development.

nt whir A knock on the door stirred her from her revelry. "Minnie? Can
mble of in?"

Tiberius. At least he hadn't changed, or grown to blame her in her a
ier face Although he had *grown*. He was a man, now. He'd been a boy only c
ere two one when they left. Dwarves aged slowly, and the difference should
still to be minute, but Minerva could still see it. Bell too.

"O' course you can," she announced, as the door slid open and his g
usually face appeared in the gap. So like his mother. So like *her*.

courtly And Clay, too.

mentary. "Hello," he said, still beaming ear to ear. He held up a metal a
a woresspare," he explained. "In case you wanted one."

Minerva smiled, pulling him into the room properly and wrapping l
into the around him. He smelled good—warm and earthy and distinctly *Tiber*
her for way that was difficult to pin to words. "I prefer your arms," she wh
first in into his curls.

er, ever “Well, I’m not about to lend them out...” he said, squeezing her
“Not long-term, anyway.”

Bell came forward and wrapped her arms around them both, and the
reasonsthere for a long, long time.

“How have you been?” Bell asked him, when they eventually parted
t of herus everything.”

; Venus “Shockingly, there is little to say. Avalinth is the same as always
after allEvans retired. Jemina’s leg finally gave out and she consented to
replaced with a clockwork one. Patrick died, I’m sorry to report—but
poutingold and it was quick. Oh! Marcel and Felix got married. Don’t think
Minervasaw that happening.”

“And you, lad?”

I come “What about me?”

“What have you been up to?”

bsence. “I’ve been the same as ever, except without you lot,” he said.
close toNothing important has happened whilst you’ve been gone.”

ld have Minerva met Bell’s gaze. It seemed highly unlikely. “What about
Aeron chap?” she asked. “He’s new.”

,rinning “Aeron? He’s been here for years.”

“And how did he get here?”

“A patrol found him in the tunnels. He was researching the outer
rm. “Adon’t think he expected to find the city at all, but he’s been an excellent
advisor. His knowledge of plants surpasses even Flora’s, and he’s led
her armsuccessful expeditions into the Deep. Reclaimed one of the mining levels
ius in a “Is that so?”

ispered “But enough about him!” Tiberius clapped his hands together. “Tell
about the world above, and the Mortal Realm! Tell me about the sky

tightly. the colours. Do clouds really look like they do in the books? How many are there now? What are the animals like? Aeron worked with Hadriana to build a replica horse in clockwork, but—”

“Slow down, boy!” Minerva said, clapping his back. “That’s too fast. Tell me questions.”

“You’re right,” he said, “and you must be tired. Just tell me about your old Caerwyn.”

Minerva flinched. Why would Tiberius want to know about him? “Would you like to know?”

“Whether or not I’ve been replaced.”

Minerva laughed, the fear dissipating. “I can have two nephews, Tiberius.”

“Is he your nephew, though? Am I?”

“Your mother will have your treacherous tongue.”

Tiberius paused, chewing the inside of his cheek. “You know once, when I was a child, I was asked to draw a picture of my parents. I drew all of them. I didn’t really understand what an aunt was, back then. Still don’t know. At least not what other people think of as aunts.”

Minerva’s chest heated, and she fought the urge to pull him once more into her arms. She wasn’t sure she’d have the strength to let him go again after he’d been far, far too long. She felt the same, of course. He’d always been a postman, like her sister’s child. But there was such fear to loving a person so much. She wondered if he wasn’t wrong about Caer. Perhaps she had been seeking to plug up a wound when he came to her. Perhaps.

“She didn’t think anyone could replace Tiberius. She also didn’t have the idea that Caer could be a replacement.”

Bell squeezed Tiberius’s shoulder when she couldn’t. “We’ve missed you.”

Tiberius beamed. “I’ve missed you, too. Tremendously.” He squeezed

ny stars around the waist, a difficult task given his height, but it made him look like a Masterboy again—young and carefree. When he finally pulled back, he saw that he had lost years. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, scooting towards the door. “Tomorrow.”

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Prince

“What

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around the waist, a difficult task given his height, but it made him look like a boy again—young and carefree. When he finally pulled back, he seemed to have lost years. “Tomorrow, then,” he said, scooting towards the door.

Minerva smiled, Bell’s hand sliding around her back. “Tomorrow.”

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Aislinn lay on the comfiest bed in all of existence, exhausted out of her mind, and found she couldn't sleep. She'd spent an hour soaking in a hot tub, scrubbing every trace of their journey from her skin. She'd been sitting in front of the fire, drinking ale and devouring every morsel that had been brought out for her. She'd even—almost reluctantly—thumbed through a few books on the bookcase in the corner.

The tawdry romances had been a bad idea.

Now, she lay in her bed, tossing between layers of soft linen, dreaming of soft hands that weren't there and soft sullen lips and eyes the colour of deep lakes.

She sighed. It would do no good.

She rolled out of the bed, wrapped herself in a robe, and headed down the hallway into the corridor. The castle was quiet. Evidently, the dwarves did not consider her or her party worthy of guarding—or perhaps it was a sign of the trust they placed in one another. Everyone did seem rather relaxed here, like the guards

mostly for decoration. She'd almost been surprised when their weapon seized.

Not that the lack of a weapon would stop her if she'd chosen violence she supposed it did make it harder.

Placing all thoughts of fighting aside—at least for the time being—hopped along to the end of the corridor, and stopped.

Which one was Caer's door again? He was one of the first to be placed there had been so many others milling around... was it the first, or the second door?

She hovered by the second, waiting, wondering what she would say if it was wrong. Perhaps she could pretend she was looking for Beau. Never that she knew full well he was right next to her. How could she phrase it? "Oh, you're not Beau! Do you know where he is?" Yes. That would work. That would work just—

But what if Caer *did* answer? What was she going to say to him?

This was ridiculous. She should just turn back now before—

The door clicked open. Aislinn's heart flared, half panic, half relief.

Prince Tiberius walked out, closing the door behind him.

He walked straight into her.

"Ah, hello," said Tiberius, smiling broadly. "Didn't mean to bump into you there. Just dropping off Minnie's new arm. Bit silly, really, since she's going to sleep with it on, but still... Did you need them for anything?"

"I—no."

"Right."

"Your craftsmen made fast work of the arm."

"It's just a spare until Magna gets into the forge. Half surprised she's there already. She'll probably start taking apart the temporary one tomorrow."

ns were at breakfast, telling us how wrong it is.”

Aislinn liked that he could understand Magna, that he’d come so
ice, but give Minerva an arm. There was none of his mother’s frostiness in him

“Are you all right?” he asked, after her silence continued. “Your ch
Aislinn are comfortable, I hope? You’re not in need of anything?”

Aislinn shook her head. “The accommodations are most excellent
ed, but been a long time since I’ve experienced such a comfortable bed.” *I jus
second could sleep in it.*

“Perhaps you would like a tour?” Tiberius offered.
y if she Aislinn stumbled, searching for her words. “Oh, um, I—”
er mind “Forgive me, you are probably tired and seeking for a way not to
se that? impolite. I have disturbed your rest. Another time, maybe.”

l work, He escorted her back to her door—he apparently knew where eve
was—and bid her goodnight. Aislinn couldn’t bring herself to leave
Caer was probably already fast asleep. She didn’t want to disturb him.

Even when she so, so badly wanted to be disturbed herself...
—until She sunk into her bed, the space crisp and cold despite the warmi
that had been placed between the sheets.

All night, she waited for a knock at her door, for a touchable prese
nto youember made human.

s hardly But it did not come.

He did not come.



he isn’t The following morning, Caer had every intention of somehow, eve
narrow finding a moment to be with Aislinn. He wasn’t sure quite what he’d

that moment, but needed it to happen regardless.

late to Unfortunately, he overslept, waking to a maid at the door, informing him that breakfast was nearly over and would he prefer something was brought in for him instead?

Caer catapulted out of bed, fell into his clothes, and rushed out of the room. The maid blinked at him, leading him to the dining hall, where the dais was set with Isat together with Queen Venus.

And her son. He was seated next to Aislinn, telling her something that was apparently hilarious. She was laughing quite a bit.

Caer sank into the last remaining seat and dug into the breakfast laid out on the appearplatters in the centre of the room—a coarse, dense bread, a thick slab of butter, more slices of fruit and a thin, crispy meat which was rather different from anyone's and tasted like it was coated in honey. He washed it all down with a glass of some kind of spiced cider.

He wondered at what fruits it was made from, and how it was grown. The looks of things, Avalinth had remained untouched by the outside world for a number of years.

He looked up, feeling a pair of eyes on him, and saw Aeron lurking in the shadows.

Untouched by anyone—apart from him.

“Morning,” said Beau, leaning across him to pour another tankard. “You were up late?”

“Like a rock,” Caer admitted.

“Your hair is all stuck up at the back.”

“It's *always* stuck up.”

“Well, now it's less adorable. Here.” He whipped a comb out of his pocket and attacked the tangles at the back of Caer's head with deft, careful fingers.

“How long has everyone else been up?” Caer asked, as Beau
ng him through his hair.

ught to “At least an hour. Ais a bit longer.”

“How long has she been talking to Prince Tiberius?”

ie door. “Does it matter?” said Beau, returning to his seat with a broad smirk

lwarves “No.”

“Liar...”

hat was Aislinn continued speaking to Tiberius for the rest of the mea

glancing up once and giving Caer a short smile. It wasn't nearly enough
l out on He chewed on another loaf of bread, fury in every bite.

pad of Eventually, an aide came to Queen Venus' side, and she clapped her

delicious “My tailors have informed me they think they have found something
mug off for each of our taller guests,” she proclaimed, her nose wrinkling slightly

their muddy appearances. Caerwyn hadn't thought much of it, not seen
wn. By alternative, but they hadn't had a change of clothes in quite some time

le for a rest of the party were kitted out in fresh, new garments, their
varnished and shirts pressed. Luna was wearing a particularly fetching

g in the of green and yellow, studded with silk flowers. It looked like she'd rolled
meadow.

“I suggest you sojourn to your rooms for a fitting,” Venus continued
“Sleep shall arrange for Prince Caerwyn's demonstration before noon.”

Caerwyn's stomach clenched. He hated using his powers at the
times, only grudgingly following Diana's suggestion with the birds because

he hoped it might get him some control. But to take a life simply to
point...

is sleeve He had no other choice.

ngers. “Of course,” he said, steeling his features.

worked For what felt like the first time, Aislinn looked up and truly, really, gaze. He could not read it.

Beau leapt to his feet. “New clothes? Sign me up!”



Back in his room, Caer found himself surrounded by tailors. He was behind a screen and forced to change, which seemed completely p
il, only seeing as all of them descended upon him as soon as he was free fr
h. garments, snatching up his discarded clothes for laundering and forci
: hands. into a loose shirt of midnight blue, billowing at the sleeves and butt
suitable the cuffs. It was as soft as a spring breeze.

The trousers came next, obsidian black, almost shining, and a
ghtly at polished boots so fitting he wondered if they hadn’t measured his o
eing an during the night. Finally, a waistcoat was placed over the shirt, bl
ne. The black and silver, embroidered with a pattern of stags and trees and
armour Quick adjustments were made there and then.

g dress The door creaked open.

led in a “Caer?”

d. “We Aislinn’s voice. His skin prickled at the sound of his name on her l
wondered if there would ever come a time when he grew used to it.

best of He realised he likely would not, and his heart clenched at the thought

because “Yes?”

prove a “I just wanted to... are you dressed yet?”

“Almost?” he said, glancing at one of the tailors for any indication
nodded. “Apparently yes.”

met his Within seconds, the screen was pulled away, and they began the task of cleaning everything up.

Aislinn stood on the mosaic floor, in a soft blue gown that looked like armour, half like the wind—a fitted bodice over a fine, billowing skirt with metallic shoulders and delicate sleeves. Her shining hair had been pulled into a braid, the rest running down her back, red and copper and mahogany, catching the light of the lamps.

She blinked at him. “What is it?”

He realised he’d been staring for quite some time. “You look good in a dress,” he said hastily. “You look good in everything, actually, particularly good in that.”

Aislinn smiled. “Thank you. You’re looking rather dashing yourself.” It seemed strange to Caer that he’d never seen her in a dress, though he’d likely seen her in barely anything other than her travelling clothes the entirety of the time he’d known her. It felt like so much longer than it had been. He had this sudden desire to see her in more clothes, in more ways than enough that it felt like he’d known her forever.

His chest tightened at the thought that that was unlikely to happen. As long as Venus granted him sanctuary—and she was sure to once she showed her powers—Aislinn would likely be returning to the world above. Venus had been welcoming so far, but she would not want the future queen of the world under her roof for much longer, the peace between their people tentative at best.

He wondered when she would leave.

He wondered if he would see her again.

He wondered why, even though he knew it was too dangerous, he wanted to stay on her side.

arduous Aislinn frowned, tilting her head. “Are you all right?”

Take me with you to Faerie. Let me follow you forever. Do not let me fall like your side.

rt, with “I’m fine,” he said.

artially Aislinn stepped closer, sliding a hand across his chest. The slightest y in the eased past his lips at her touch, and he bent his head towards her, for skimming hers.

“You are not,” she said, “and if there was anything I could do to make it easier for you, I would do it. I think I would do almost anything for you, but—”

“Ah! Princess Aislinn, you’re here too!” said a cheery voice.

.” Caer leapt back. Prince Tiberius was standing at the door. He swallowed at he’d groan.

in the “There’s still a little while before the demonstration,” Tiberius went on, rather thought you wouldn’t like to be sitting stewing in your chambers—

ays—in “Quite right,” Caer said tartly, forcing himself not to look at Aislinn, *rather hoping to be doing something other than ‘stewing’...*

As soon “I thought perhaps a tour?”

saw his “That’s very kind of you,” Aislinn said.

us had Tiberius smiled wider. “You look lovely.”

Faerie Aislinn bowed her head, nodding her thanks.

being “You look splendid too, Prince Caerwyn, but the princess is particularly fetching.”

“I agree,” said Caer, unable to fully unclench his jaw.

Tiberius did not seem to notice. He stepped out into the corridor, but he didn’t touch his arm.

Aislinn moved forward, but Caer’s hand reached out and caught her

—an action of habit. He didn't need to do that here. He could touch her
ie leave He let go, and grasped her fingers instead, clutching onto them tight
they slipped into the corridor. "Just for a moment," he said. "It helps."

Aislinn squeezed them back.

it groan

orehead



ake this "We keep all our guest rooms on this side of the palace," Tiberius explained
u, Caer as he guided them through the gilded halls. "Affords excellent views of
gardens, although the best is through the throne room..."

He led them down the corridors, nodding at the guards and servants
owed a passed, pointing out portraits of heroes and monarchs, busts of historical
figures. Once they reached the throne room, he headed towards the wall
that lined the side of the wall, and opened the doors there. They looked
it on. "I polished stone balcony stretching out over the blue-green lawns. Many
s." flower beds and sculpted hedgerows glittered beneath the bright light
1. I was crystals.

"Beautiful," Caer agreed.

"My thanks. Although don't lean over the side—the barrier doesn't
past this point."

Aislinn frowned. "It doesn't?"

looks Tiberius shook his head. "The barrier works by using an extremely
crystal poured into the foundations of the palace, a natural magic barrier
that nullifies it completely with enough thickness in a perfect line
wanted to stretch it to the outer walls, but they didn't have enough, and
holding were concerns that the outside walls themselves were too exposed—so
r sleeve could just dig down and destroy it."

r here. “Fascinating,” said Aislinn. “We ought to have taken Beau.”

ghtly as “Oh, I took him last night,” Tiberius admitted. “He couldn’t
appears.”

“That sounds like Beau...”

They walked back into the throne room.

“The throne is cut from stone from the depths of the Deep,” T
explained. “Inlaid with gems and gold, as per tradition. It was cra
lained, Stonemaster Albina, some three thousand years ago.”

ver the Caer blinked. *Nothing* in Wales was that old—save the ground itself

its they “She also crafted the first doors to the vault behind the throne—but
historical out of bounds to outsiders, I’m afraid. Our crypt, however, is not.”

indows He led them to a set of stairs at the corner of the room, which l
ed to a monumental crypt beneath with tall, vaulted ceilings. It was every
nicured opulent as the throne room above. “You keep your dead beneath the th
Caer queried.

t of the Tiberius nodded. “They have earned their place here.”

He talked them through the kings and queens of old, their a
treasured servants and great generals. He spoke of funeral rites, of
: extend and stonemasonry, drawing attention to detail and divulging inte
stories about damaged effigies and the tales of the resting bodies b

Crypts and graveyards had always given Caer a strange, unsettling
ly rare He’d thought it perfectly normal, growing up, assumed that everyone f
npener, cold, pulsing ripple when stepping amongst the dead. It was only
: They understood that that had always been his power, sleeping beneath the s
id there Always there. Waiting.

omeone He did not feel that here. Maybe it was the light-heartedness and re
offered to the resting, but more likely it was simply the effect of the ba

He liked it. He *needed* it.

wait, it He had to pass this test.

Tiberius paused beside a tomb in the centre of the room, dripping crystals and flowers. It looked newer than the rest, judging by the quality of the stone. It was inlaid with gold and obsidian. Tiberius made a gesture with his hand, touching head to heart, before pressing his fingers to the effigy. “My father,” he explained. “Clay Goldsbane. May the stone hold his spirit.”

“I’m sorry,” Caer said. “I lost my mother six months ago.”

Tiberius nodded in sympathy. “He has been gone some seven years.”

My memories now are fond rather than sad. I hope you someday find peace.”

Caer nodded, unable to speak. His chest tightened uncomfortably. “What tomb?” wondered what tomb Owen had ordered for his mother, and if he would ever get to see it. His mind flashed with the memory of her death, her head rolling across the floor—

Aislinn seized his arm. “You’re here,” she whispered, as Tiberius turned away. “You’re here, and so am I. It happened, it’s over. It’s gone.” He supposed, if she could say it, then it must be true.

An aide coughed from the staircase, and all thoughts—both good and bad—vanished completely. “We are ready for you, Your Highness.”

felt that

now he

surface.

verence

rier.

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30

A DARKENING OF POWERS

Outside in the palace gardens, a crate filled with wriggling, rodents wobbled and writhed. Caer tried to focus on them, and dozens of people that had turned up for the event. He had not expected it would be such a spectacle, but Venus seemed to have dragged every rodent from the city out for the day, and all the servants had been summoned too.

“Well?” she echoed from her seat in the stands. “Is there a problem?”

He wanted to tell her he was unused to an audience, but he didn’t like that confession made him look. He was a prince, after all. This was his pageantry and display. He’d partaken in many a public event before.

But he didn’t feel like he was *partaking* here. He felt more like a cubs on display, a great bear in a cage to be ogled at. He’d seen great animal cages before, seen them forced to fight for the amusement of others. Caer never been able to take enjoyment in something that caused pain.

Were the people here amused by this? Or were they here out of curiosity or worse, fear?

He wasn’t sure he could do this.

But his eyes fell to Aislinn's face, and somehow, after that, he couldn't.

"None, Your Majesty. Just give me a moment."

He bent down and lifted one of the creatures from the box. He wasn't sure they'd chosen an ugly, rat-like thing. It ought not to have made a difference, but it looked enough like a common pest that his guilt was somewhat alleviated. No one would mourn this wretched thing.

Unlike the men he'd killed.

His head felt heavy against his neck. He was still missing one. He'd forgotten.

Caer took a deep breath, feeling down inside him for that power, that hairless pulsing tug that had been muted within the walls of the palace.

He felt it now, felt it like water against a dam.

He let it break.

The rodent slumped his hand, and toppled to the floor.

Venus let out a clap. A few others joined in, gasping and twittering.

"Amazing!" she declared. "Now... bring one back."

Caer sighed, picking up another. He'd barely learned to master *just* them with Diana before he'd left the cottage. If anything, this was easier.

It was like dabbing a candle rather than extinguishing it. His power almost wanted to kill. It wanted them to rise again.

The power was a separate thing, not his. It would never be fully his, no matter how hard he practised.

He reached out again with his tendrils of magic, as real to him as a shadow—limb, and dabbed at that light inside the rodent. The creature greyed and stilled, only for a few seconds whilst Caer drained the life from it, and then it rose again, a scuttling, pulsating *thing*.

new he Caer dropped it in revulsion.

 The crowd gasped. A few even screamed. It scuttled forward, towards the noise.

as glad A guard leapt forward and speared it through the middle. It squirmed, the edge of the blade, twisting manically, not bleeding.

suaged There were a few more cries and sounds of disgust.

 “Get its head!” Diana called. “Take off its head!”

 The guard lowered her spear towards the ground and another one had not forward to slice off its head. What little of the blood that came out was and oily.

at quiet, “Impressive, young prince,” Venus continued. “Can you do so once?”

 Caer gritted his teeth, wishing he didn’t know the answer to that question. He thought of Dillon, and the other bodies in the snow. The ones he had had to touch. “Yes.”

 Venus leaned forward. “Show me.”

 Caer swallowed, hovering over the cage. Five of the beasts remained killing wriggling against the bars. Could he kill them without touching them easier—others had already been dead...

 And yet he’d felt their bodies anyway, felt the echo of them under his feet on the earth...

his. No He could always feel it.

 He held out his hand. He thought about how Aislinn had spoken of magic, the way that nature had a pulse. He felt only a whisper of something beneath the trees, but the life force of these things rippled beneath his hand then. He could even feel a ripple of it from the crowd, muted and far away, covered by a thick layer of something. He could not harm them, merci

He tensed his fingers. For some reason, that helped, tying a physical drive to the power winding through him. He watched their bodies still, the cloud over.

They leapt out of the box.

Shrieks went up as they hurtled across the ground. The guards darted at them, but they were too quick, too sudden. Caer sprung forward, a smile on his lips. He had no idea what these creatures could do if they bit someone if their bite was infectious.

He did not want to find out.

He flung out his hand. “Stop.”

The creatures stilled, straining against his grip. He felt their pulse in his hands, as if tied to them by invisible strings.

He flicked his wrists, like snapping the head of a bird.

They fell down dead.

Minerva was on her feet. So were most of *his* dwarves. So was Aislinn. He’d never done that before.

Venus clapped her hands, dispelling the silence that had settled over the crowd. “Most impressive,” she said. “But these are just rodents. I want something larger—”

She clicked her fingers, and a guard walked forward with a warg.

Caer froze. “No,” he said.

“You can’t do it?”

“I *can* do it. I won’t.”

“And if I refuse to shelter you if you do not?”

“Then I will leave. I’d rather take my chances elsewhere than be forced to stay, like kill without reason. You have seen a show of my powers. You know me fully.”

l action can do. What others might *make* me do. There is no need for me
air eyes further.”

Venus smiled, rising to her feet. “An excellent answer, Prince Ca
Well done. You have passed my test.”

ed after “Test?” Caer frowned.

nt, ‘no’ “What *test*?” Minerva snarled.

me one, “Oh come, dear sister. There’s no need for that. Let’s have
refreshment, shall we? The poor boy looks a bit unsteady on his feet.”

Caer felt more than unsteady—he felt like he wanted to be sick
horrid combination of using his powers and what he’d just been forced
beneath “Caer.”

He looked up, Aislinn was standing beside him. Her lifeforce flared
her like a beacon, bright and dazzling.

He could snuff it out like a candle.

nn. He staggered backwards.

Magna and Diana were behind him, with their soft, muted
ver the armoured and safe. Safe from him. They dragged him into a seat.

Perhaps Aislinn stayed where she was. “You won’t hurt me,” she said, as the
disappeared to find him something to drink.

“You don’t know that—”

“I could hurt you,” she said. “Do you trust that I won’t?”

“It’s not like that—”

“You can feel my lifeforce, can’t you?”

He nodded numbly. “How did you—”

orced to “You’re looking at everyone like I looked at the forests, the first tin
what it.”

“Will it... will it stop?”

to kill “If you make it.”

“I don’t know how to.”

Caerwyn. “It’s like closing your eyes,” Aislinn insisted. “Your power is just sense. Don’t use it.”

“I... I can’t...”

“Breathe,” she said. “Breathe, and *think*. Imagine it’s your hand. You have some control. You can do this, Caer.”

Caer took a deep, steadying breath, followed by another. He closed his eyes. Somehow, that helped—it was one less sense to overwhelm him. He thought about how he’d used his hands to direct his power before he tightened them into fists now.

He kept breathing.

You can do this, Caer.

Aislinn couldn’t lie. Those weren’t just words she was spouting. She truly, genuinely believed he could.

So he would. He *had* to.

He imagined a wall surrounding her, an armour that protected her like the others the dwarves seemed to have naturally. He squeezed his hands like they could dislodge his own thoughts.

Her radiance began to dim. *Everything* began to dim.

He opened his eyes. Aislinn stood ahead of him. “Better?”

He nodded his head. “Have you ever been overwhelmed by your power?”

“Once or twice, yes. I mastered the art of shutting them out fairly easily.”

Maybe that’s why I’m no magician. Easier to fight with a blade. More control.

“Control.”

She paused. “Yes.”

Diana came back with a steaming mug of ale, Luna bringing

refreshments behind her. The dwarves crowded round him, patting his head and praising his efforts. Minerva, however, was nowhere to be seen. Aislinn slunk away into the crowd.



Aislinn disliked nerves. She'd made a fine effort over the years of controlling her own, usually by focusing on the task at hand and training herself beforehand she was too exhausted to think or so rehearsed she knew she had the confidence to succeed.

She was not used to feeling nervous for other people, nor like she'd been pummeled those *making* them nervous.

Watching Caer in that painful mockery of a test was different.

She believed Venus' reasoning, but she also had seen the hunger in his eyes, her intense fascination with Caer's powers, and how she was oblivious to his discomfort. When it was over, Aislinn wasn't sure she wanted to punch the queen or run to Caer.

But when he'd swayed, she'd hurtled over like an arrow loosed from a bow.

Now that he was all right, the need to punch Venus remained.

She tried to challenge her inner Hawthorn on her way to the throne room, tried to think of a more diplomatic way to say, 'I really want to stab you if you try anything like that again I just might' but nothing came.

Maybe she would just stab her.

Venus wasn't in the throne room. Neither was Minerva.

Aislinn retraced her steps. They must have found a room closer to the gardens. She crept backwards through the halls, searching.

some

is back Voices sounded along the hall.

Aislinn slowed her pace and crept towards the door. It was open
fraction, a guard posted outside. He did not stop her from approaching

“That was cruel, Venus,” came Minerva’s voice. “Needless.”

“I needed to know what sort of person I’d be harbouring within my

quering
way—”
so well

she had
“Sister,” said Venus softly, “you have been gone for ten years. I
don’t know what you think any more.”

l like to
“Caer is *good*, Ven! He has a pure heart, and I will not have you ha
l like to ___”

“What makes you think I want to hurt him?”

in her
“Petty revenge? I don’t know.”

seemed
“Revenge? For what?”

if she
“*You know what.*”

“But, as you said, Sister Dearest, you did nothing wrong. Why v
want to hurt you?”

from a
There came the sound of scraping furniture, of something smashing.

“You can hate me every day for the rest of your life if it makes y
any better,” Minerva seethed, “but if any harm comes to the boy fro
e room,
doing—”

ou and
“You’ll do what? Kill me?”

“I will make you wish I had.”

“How can you say that to your own sister? Your flesh and blood?”

to the
again.”
“I lost flesh and blood for the family I chose, Ven. I am not afraid t

Footsteps sounded towards the door. Aislinn leapt away, scuttling

sight as Minerva barged out of the room. Venus came to the door, just returning to my chambers. Send Aeron. See that we are not disturbed.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.”

Aislinn waited until everyone had moved away before creeping out of the walls.” She was glad Minerva had seen to her sister, yet it didn’t fully expunge her anger in any own rage. What was she to do now? The dwarves were still milling about the gardens, but Caer wasn’t among them. He must have headed back to his chambers.

She headed after him, rapping lightly on the door.

“Come in.”

She entered. Caer was sitting near the window, trying to look relaxed, but his gaze was screwed tightly on the pavillion where he’d been performing.

“Hey,” she said.

He looked up. “Hey.”

Aislinn swallowed, all words vanishing. “Are you all right?” she asked finally. “What Venus asked you to do—”

He waved it away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I was all ready to throw you over the back of a wargi and charge them with you.”

He snorted softly. “Perhaps not the best place for me to be... the touching rule still applying.”

“We’d sort something out,” she said. “I’m just letting you know... it doesn’t work out here, but you don’t want to go back to the mortal world so Faerie is still safer. More understanding. I’d... I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. Or because of you.”

Caer swung his legs off the seat, and stepped towards her. “I ap

. “I am that.”

’ Aislinn’s mouth went dry. “I um, heard Minerva on the way here, to Venus. Really giving her an earful. She seems quite fond of you.” t again. Caer smiled, stepping closer. “I can’t imagine why,” he sai nge her broadening. “Can you?”

around “I—” Aislinn’s breath stalled in her chest. She couldn’t say r k to his couldn’t say no and he knew it. “I can imagine a few reasons,” she s mouth feeling papery.

“If you try really hard?”

“Maybe,” she said. “What do you want me to say?” ed, but Caer raised a hand to her cheek and cupped it, fingers warm and li rced to against her skin. She wanted to weld his flesh to hers, to keep hi forever. His touch was lightning.

“I don’t want you to say anything,” he said, his voice a hushed w “Not right now.”

e asked Aislinn angled her face towards him, her eyes fixed on his lips, to t space between them. They were parted ever-so-slightly, and his breath across her face.

ome to She leaned upwards—

“Ah, there you are, lad,” said Minerva, rounding the corner thro the no-still-open door. Aislinn jerked back, wishing she could melt into the sh

“I thought we better do a quick gathering before we all split up for th in case You know. For Fort’s sake.”

. world. “Right,” Caer said, voice tight. He was leaning against the wall Aisl happen vanished from.

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “Not interrupting something, am I?”

preciate “No. Not at all.”

Minerva snorted and turned to look at Aislinn. “Good job I asked I talkingnot you, right?”

Aislinn blushed. *A very good job indeed.*

d, grin

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Minerva snorted and turned to look at Aislinn. “Good job I asked him and not you, right?”

Aislinn blushed. *A very good job indeed.*

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They headed down to the crypt, where the rest of the party had gathered. A few others were there as well—a handful of faces Caer didn't know, along with Prince Tiberius. Venus, Caer noted, was nowhere to be seen.

He kept close to Aislinn's side as the others crowded round a stone that had been etched with Fort's name and date of birth, and the inscription: *luckiest dwarf we knew. May the stone hold what we cannot.'*

She'd been one hundred and eleven years old. He tried to take comfort in the years she'd had, but that was not old for a dwarf. No. There had been much life left for her.

Not your fault, he told himself, as his thoughts turned dark. *Not you, not your fault—*

Aislinn seized his hand.

"I have many a truth I can whisper to you if you need it," she said, voice unwavering. "Or... I can just do this. You need only ask."

Caer wasn't sure he could speak at all, so he clutched tightly to her hand in answer.

“Are we all here?” Minerva asked. “Not waiting on anyone?”

There was a murmur of confirmation, and Minerva nodded. One by one the dwarves came forward and lit candles around the stone, the crystals, and the rest of the room dimming.

“Fortuna Springshard,” Minerva began. “A fine woman. A force of nature. An excellent friend. A light in our lives from her first breath until her last. There was never a situation she couldn’t make funny in some way, and in the darkness she couldn’t dispel, if only a little. It seems impossible that she should not be with us now. I keep expecting her to pop up with some cracking remark. But she will not. So I must imagine her voice instead. I imagine it, I think, until the end of my life, and if she haunts me, so be it. A worthy price to pay for being her friend.”

gathered.
I don’t know,

Minerva’s voice trailed off, though her expression remained set, jaw

1.

Bell got up next, listing a long spiel about Fort’s life, where she was born, her family, her childhood in Avalinth. Others spoke after her, listing their own memories of her, their fond remembrances. Caer couldn’t speak his—how she was the best person to make him laugh again after he came to the cottage.

me that
on ‘the

e some
t at all.

His fingers played with her bead on his necklace. She would stay with me forever.

ir fault,

Someone came round with mugs of ale. They were passed out; Fort and Luna toasted to. Flora wept silently throughout the entire event, but she stopped when Luna suggested what Fort would be saying now, if she were here.

aid, her

Everyone came forward with their suggestions, and suddenly everyone was laughing and crying and drinking, and a party of sorts began to form in the crypt itself. An old dwarven hymn was sung, and then bawdy songs began to play. Some people danced, others payed their final respects a

fingers

Minerva came round and handed everyone a few coins to go and have by one, the city.

Caer crept away to a corner, trying not to cry and failing rather miserably. Aislinn appeared at his side.

“Sorry,” Caer wept, trying to wipe away his tears. “You must be the last sorry.”

“Why are you apologising?”

“Because, well...”

“Is crying some sort of slight in the mortal world? I have not heard of it. In Faerie, we always cry at death.”

“But you’re...”

She raised an eyebrow. “Say it.”

Caer paused. “Mortal men aren’t supposed to cry.”

Aislinn fixed him with a stare that suggested she was considering throwing him out of a window for saying something so utterly ridiculous. “Are you a man? The first gender isn’t supposed to cry? How is that... I don’t understand. Are there any emotions attached to your genitalia? I’m sure I was told that mortal anatomy is virtually the same—”

Despite everything, Caer found himself laughing. She looked so genuinely perplexed and she was absolutely right; it was ridiculous. Aislinn waited until his laughter had subsided, leaning back against the wall beside him. “I think I wept for about a week when Cass died, on and off for days. Weeks, months after, it would still do my eyes in.”

“Did you have an audience for your tears?”

“Sometimes. Not most of the time. I don’t like other people to see that.”

“Weak?”

“*Vulnerable*. I... don’t like people knowing how I’m feeling. For so
rably. in my position, it can be exploited. I don’t think feelings are a weak
just enjoy the comfort of my shield. I find it easier to function better
think—Does this make any sense?”

“Perfectly,” he said. “Does that shield ever get a little hard to let
yourself?”

“Have you *seen* the party I’m currently travelling with?”
of this. Caer laughed.

“Yes,” she said, with a starkness that took him by surprise, “it has
past. I am learning that the weight is better shared.”

She moved away from him, back towards the others. “Ais?”

“Yes?” she said, her voice fringed with hopefulness.

Caer took a moment to steady his breathing. “You can cry in front
of anyone any time. I hope you never have to cry again in your life, but if you
ever want you to come to me.”

Aislinn turned, holding his gaze, her expression wide and unreadable.
a moment, he thought she might never speak at all.

Then she walked forward, took his chin lightly in her fingers, and
pressed his cheek towards her lips, kissing the tears that lingered there.

Her touch shivered through him, like lightning made of petals—s
ince it hit monumental.

Aislinn pulled back. “Come to my room tonight,” she whispered. “You
cry if you want, but I rather hope we shall find more to fill the time.”

Half a smile flickered in her cheeks, but the rest of her face was serious
like stone. Caer’s hand drifted over her waist, as if hoping to pin her there
he grabbed her now, would he be able to let go?

He was spared the answer by a knock at the door. An aide appeared, summoning them to the throne room.

“Yes, I know. Venus wanted to see them.”

Heath bit



near by

Leaving their tankards and candles behind with the remaining mourning group trailed up the stairs back into the gilded throne room for their audience with the dwarven queen. Venus sat on the throne, skirts of gold and silver arranged in perfect pleats down the shimmering steps. She looked like a statue, in the way she had been moulded from sheets of metal.

Aislinn half-wished Beau would make a sketch. She wouldn't say she'd wear a gown like this once she became a queen herself.

“I have reached my decision,” Venus said, her voice quietly booming through the hall. “I shall grant sanctuary to Prince Caer, if, and only if, you complete a favour for me first.”

Minerva pursed her lips, the fingers of her borrowed metal hand clenched. “What kind of favour?”

“I want you to go into the Deep and retrieve an item for me.”

Minerva's lips thinned even further. “What kind of item?”

“A mirror,” Venus continued. “One of great value. It is rumored to be able to predict the future... amongst other things.”

Minerva shook her head. “No. Buried things should stay buried. Our ancestors left it in the Deep for a reason.”

“Our ancestors left it there because they did not understand it, and we do not have the technology to use it. Our ancestors also slept in the dirt and mud around on giant rodents—should we do that, too?”

peared, “Magic is dangerous, Ven—”

“I am well aware of the dangers, sister. And yet you would leave t
in my care, a boy no doubt wanted by his people. I need to know sor
of what might happen if we are to defend ourselves. If his stepfather
for us—”

“He will not.”

ers, the “You cannot know that. The Mirror does.”

udience Caer stepped forward, but he did not look at Venus. “I don’t wan
bronze you in any more danger because of me,” he said.

e she’d Minerva smiled. “Sweet of you, boy, but there’s more to it than that

“How?” he asked. “How is there?”

no to a Aislinn turned towards Aeron, standing silently by the side of his
his face fixed in a mask of rigidity. “You,” she said, “you told the q
ooming this mirror, yes?”

if, you “I did.”

“How did you learn of its existence?”

nching. “The dwarves keep excellent records—some in ancient fae, a la
which I am familiar with, and they are not. Queen Venus wishes to k
people safe. I suggested this as a way of ensuring that.”

“Do you want it for yourself?”

ured to “I cannot deny I am fascinated by its properties, but I have no plan
it for ill.”

d. Our Aislinn paused, reading each word, checking it for a lie. “Do we ha
word that it shall never be removed from Avalinth?”

did not “I’d confine it to the palace walls, if I could, but we shall have to
nd rode outside at least to test its powers—”

“An answer,” Aislinn said, voice tight.

Aeron went quiet. “I shall not remove it from Avalinth,” he said, and his boywords pained him. “Nor shall I allow anyone else to do so. The mirror remains here, under the care of myself. I shall not use it for any new purposes. You have my vow.”

For a moment, the room was quiet.

“We shall talk it over,” Minerva said, and turned back to her sister. “Do we have some time to think it over?”

Venus nodded. “Take a day. No more.”

“You shall have our answer by tomorrow morning.”

The party swept out of the room and into the chamber that Minerva and Bell shared.

“We can’t honestly be thinking about getting it for them, can we?” Minerva said. “I don’t like the idea of hidden mirrors. They sound... well, like a bad idea. Some things should stay buried.”

“Except Dillon,” Luna added.

“Obviously except Dillon. But scary ancient magic mirrors? Dealing with them.”

“Where’s your sense of curiosity, Beau?” asked Aislinn slyly.

“It’s hiding behind my desire to stay alive.”

“I’m with Beau,” Caer said. “This is nonsense. All this parading around and jumping through hoops—all for what?”

“To ensure your safety, lad.”

“But I’m not worth it!” Caer shouted. “All of this—Fort—going into the Deep—I’m not worth it!”

The room stung with silence.

You are to me, Aislinn whispered internally, wishing she could find the strength to speak. *You are absolutely worth it to me.*

is if the Minerva spoke first. “Caer,” she said, “I understand your reservation will Truly, I do. But if we don’t do this, then Fort’s death was in vain—”

efarious “I can’t lose another one of you. I can’t.”

“I understand that, too. But the thing is, you don’t get to decide what you think is worth it. You don’t get to decide about how we feel about you.”
: “Mayare you ready, really, to go back into the world? What will you do? Go back and be hunted? Ask Aislinn’s family to grant you sanctuary, and spend your life avoiding human touch?”

Caer’s eyes circled to Aislinn. In that moment, she knew she could not let Minerva andhim that, knew more than ever what she’d be condemning him to. If he stayed alive, yes, but at what cost?

” Beau “I didn’t think so.”

ike you Caer swallowed, eyes cast to the floor. “I wish I could promise you that I would do anything stupid for my sake.”

Minerva snorted. “Aislinn alone can make that vow,” she said.
: “And somehow, I don’t think she will.”

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ind the

Minerva spoke first. “Caer,” she said, “I understand your reservations. Truly, I do. But if we don’t do this, then Fort’s death was in vain—”

“I can’t lose another one of you. I can’t.”

“I understand that, too. But the thing is, you don’t get to decide what we think is worth it. You don’t get to decide about how we feel about you. And are you ready, really, to go back into the world? What will you do? Go home and be hunted? Ask Aislinn’s family to grant you sanctuary, and spend years avoiding human touch?”

Caer’s eyes circled to Aislinn. In that moment, she knew she could not ask him that, knew more than ever what she’d be condemning him to. He’d be alive, yes, but at what cost?

“I didn’t think so.”

Caer swallowed, eyes cast to the floor. “I wish I could promise you all not to do anything stupid for my sake.”

Minerva snorted. “Aislinn alone can make that vow,” she said sagely. “And somehow, I don’t think she will.”



All in all, Dillon Woodfern thought he was adjusting rather than being dead. Knowing his father was still alive, that a good part of his life hadn't withered in the years he'd been gone, helped. Knowing that his father, Ladrien, the Unseelie King, hadn't taken over in the years he'd been gone, helped too.

Decades. He'd been *dead* for *decades*. This was Faerie, so doubtless much had changed in that time, but still, it was a long time to be...

Dead. He was dead.

Perhaps he wasn't coping as well as he thought.

Joining a group of dwarves on a mission had been a wise idea. Having something to focus on stopped his mind from wandering too far, and although the nights when everyone was sleeping and he wasn't invited to the garden of time for intrusive thoughts. He'd never known such silence. In the past, there was always someone awake, some revel happening in the garden palace he'd served.

He sighed, thinking longingly of the few times he and Juliana were together, the jokes they would make about the prince they were guarding. Who she'd married.

This hardly surprised him. One of the last conversations he'd ever had with Juliana—his last conversations he'd ever had *period*—had been trying to convince her to realise that perhaps she had feelings for him. He'd known for years about Hawthorn's affections for Juliana... largely because the prince had a habit of getting morosely drunk on her days off and on more than one occasion, confessed that he found her to be 'an exceptional woman and infuriating beauty with a range of unquestionably fine talents'. These confessions were swiftly followed by a threat of instruction never to tell her any of this.

Although Dillon had liked Juliana a great deal himself, he was happy that they'd found each other. It was strange. He remembered his death, remembered his last thoughts being of *her*, of wishing they could have more to one another, but although all of that should have felt like yesterday, it did feel like years had passed between then and now—like he was a childhood crush he'd long surpassed.

His death, too, didn't haunt him in the way he felt it ought to. Sneering as he pulled out the knife sparked no fear. There was a distance between then and now.

Where had he been in all that time?

Mortals believed in gods and a heavenly plain above the clouds, a Faerie, the worthy. Fae believed that souls became energy—that they fed the fire whispered in the air, transformed into magic itself. But if that was true, how had he come back?

He was no magician, but he was sure that ought to have been impossible.

on duty Beau—who seemed far more knowledgeable about such matters—coming. He seemed to think it was.

“Hello!” sounded a cheery voice from the doorway of the room Jason had with found for him—a tack room attached to the stables. Whilst the stables were populated entirely by giant dogs rather than horses, Dillon found the stables a very comforting. The cat had been helpful too. She reminded him of one that used to lurk around the stables when he was a boy, although that one was doubtless dead and gone by now.

His chest warmed at the face beaming up at him. It was Luna, the servant of the dwarves, now out of her travelling clothes in a soft lilac dress and a headscarf with blue flowers, holding a large basket of steaming baked goods.

“I brought you some muffins.”

“That’s so kind of you,” he said, taking the basket. A sweet, warm scent drifted through his nostrils. How odd he could still see and hear and taste and touch when taste and touch were largely alluding him. “But... I don’t have time to eat.”

Luna clapped her hands to her mouth. “I am so sorry! I completely forgot. Let me take those away—”

“You don’t need to do that. Have one yourself. I quite enjoy the company. *And the company.*”

Luna smiled, settling herself down on a nearby hay bale, her smile softening as she skimmed the ground. She dug into one of the muffins, but her face lit up in the way he expected. Her periwinkle eyes looked red and swollen. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Luna blinked. “Do I not look it?”

“Your eyes. They look... forgive me. I thought you might have been crying.”

certainly Luna looked down. “We lost someone,” she explained, “on the way here. We finally had time for a funeral of sorts. It was... difficult for her, but necessary.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dillon, with an earnesty he couldn’t quite fit into the scent of “What was your friend like?”

“Funny, mostly,” Luna said. “And I think we all thought she was a little high she invincible because of it. But humour can’t protect you forever.”

“Agreed,” Dillon responded. “It certainly makes life worth living, the smallest.” “She did. She... she really did.”

“If you’d rather not talk about her—”

“I *do* want to talk about her,” Luna said fiercely, “but I also don’t want to wallow. I want to go out and hit the town and dance and drink and be in the scent—”

“Well, by all means, don’t let me stop you.”

“Will you not come with me?”

Dillon froze. “Won’t I stick out a bit?”

“I’m not sure there’s much we can do to disguise your height...”

“I was thinking more about the undead part.”

“Oh, right!” She paused. “Are you really worried about that?”

“I don’t want to alarm anyone...”

“Hmm. Right. Yes. All right. Stay here.”

Luna raced out the door, leaving her basket of muffins. She was gone several minutes. Dillon supposed it took a long time to navigate the maze. He was just beginning to think she’d forgotten about him when she came back into the room with a bag filled with cosmetics.

“These should do the trick!” she said, holding up a sponge. “May I?”

Dillon consented, feeling nothing as she seized his face and started

journeypaint, and desperately wishing he could.

r us all. “Took me a while to find a foundation that looked anything like your
tone. Dwarves don’t tend to make it so pale.”

words. “You are an exception, I take it?”

“Yup!” she beamed, brushing over his cheeks, his eyelids, his lips
little bit was very close to him. Too close. And although his body couldn’t
something fluttered across his insides—a ripple that sounded like her r
rough.” *Luna. Luna. Luna.* A whisper through the trees on a starry night. *Luna.*

It was almost enough to make his heart start beating. “Did it really
occur to you that walking around as I was might be a terrible idea?” he
wanted to ask as she started on his hands.

she merrily “Umm, not really,” she said, her brow wrinkling in embarrassment
“I think I stopped noticing after the first few hours.”

“Quick adjustment period.”

“Dwarven speciality,” she admitted.

“I think it might just be a Luna one.”

Her white cheeks flushed with pink. “Are all knights as flirty as you?”

“I wasn’t—I’m not... I was just trying my hand at a compliment—”

“Oh,” said Luna, sounding a little downcast.

“I mean, I’m not averse to flirting in general. Or, you know...”

“I know?”

one for “I’m not averse to flirting with you. If... you’re not averse.”

palace. Luna smiled. “I am not.”

ie burst Dillon was quite sure he would have blushed if he could. “Are you
he asked. “I am a bit dead—”

” “You seem alive enough to me.”

urled to Their eyes caught for a moment, and Dillon felt a little like a flag

hoisted, like there was nothing he could do but stand there, staggering
ur skin-wind.

Luna bit her lip.

“What is it?” he asked.

ps. She “I wish I could help you,” she said. “I really, really like helping peo
i’t feel, I don’t think there’s much I can do to help you, and now that I’m sayi
ame. I’m worried I’m making your problems mine, like I’m complaining t
na. I have them and how it affects me, which is very unfair—”

ally not “Luna,” said Dillon, cupping her flailing hands, “you *are* helping me
e asked, Her body stilled. “Right,” she said. “Of course.”

She pulled his hands away from her to inspect her work. He hop
ient. “I weren’t too cold, or hard, or *dead*. He had no idea what he felt like to
and he wasn’t sure he wanted to ask.

“There we go,” she said, as she finished smoothing cream into his
“Not much we can do about your eyes, alas, but folk will probab
assume they’re normal, for a mortal.” She paused. “Your eyes. What
are?” were they?”

“Brown.”

Luna smiled. “I like brown.”

Dillon swallowed—or at least, he thought he did. “I like blue.”

Luna tidied up her equipment, gathered up her muffins, and seized I
hand. “Come on.”

They walked out of the stables together, Luna offering a mu
sure?” everyone she met. No one refused. Everyone waved cheerily, i
mentioning Dillon or his crude appearance. It made a certain degree o
he’d been sitting in the stables for only a day, and during that time he
g being all manner of dwarves—dwarves with clockwork legs or metal hand

g in the with giant lenses attached to their eyes or contraptions over their limbs. Everyone was different here. Difference was not a thing they sta

“I wonder if we’ll see any of the others,” Luna mused, as they sliced through the palace and into the wide, stony streets. “I think most of them are heading out...”

ng that, “Not all of them?”

hat you She shook her head. “Flora will stay in, I think. She’s older and has quite had the drive we do. Plus... there isn’t really anyone apart from me.” knows, anymore. We’re the only family she has. The downside of living long.”

ed they Dillon paused, amazed at his heart’s capacity for tightness even though others wasn’t beating. He’d imagined he wouldn’t live for very long, not like this but what if the reverse was true? What if he lived forever in this unchanging hands.body, watching everyone live and die around him?

oly just Luna placed her hand on his arm. “That won’t happen to you.”

colour “I don’t imagine that’s a great deal of comfort to Flora,” he said. “Thank you.”

A moment of quiet passed between the two, before Luna grabbed his hand again, beaming. “Enough sadness,” she said. “Come on! I’m going to show you a true dwarven party.”

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Minerva informed Venus that they would complete her quest, and preparations to leave the next day.

“So soon?” Aislinn queried.

“No time like the present. I don’t know about you, but I can’t relax while I’ve something hanging over me.”

Aislinn was inclined to agree, but in this case...

“Why? You have something you need to do?”

Aislinn’s very insides felt like they were blushing, a sensation sickening.

“I am in no hurry...”

Minerva smiled, as if reading her thoughts. “See it done tonight.”

Caer.

If anything was to happen—it needed to be tonight.

Aislinn paced about her room after everyone had split off to go to the city for one last night of fun, wondering how to go about it. She’d never been so nervous about seduction before. Why was she nervous

Especially when she wanted it so badly, wanted to take him in her arms and unwrap him, layer by layer, exploring every one of those glorious muscles with her tongue...

The thought made her belly heat, sent ripples of warmth riding through her centre.

She splashed her face with cold water. She was smarter than a cat and smoother. She was the crown princess of Faerie, not a simpering schoolgirl.

Someone knocked at her door.

“Come in,” she said.

Caerwyn strode into the room, looking as unfairly handsome as ever. His smile sliced through her. Nerves spiralled from stomach to chest, but she fought against the overwhelming urge to slam the door shut and smash him against the wall.

It would certainly get her point across. Direct. Effective. Little room for misinterpretation—

“Evening,” he said, in the voice that made her heart soar and her knees whimper.

She swallowed. “Good evening.”

“It’s our last night in Avalinth,” he said. “At least, for a little while.”

“So it would seem.”

“We should—”

“Definitely.”

“—go and explore the city.”

Aislinn blinked. “Come again?”

“The city. We should go out there and see it. Spend some of the money Minerva has given us.”

“You want to... go outside?”

ms and “Yes,” he said. “What did you—”

muscles *He’s either deliberately trying to infuriate me, is the most idiotic I’ve ever met, or he’s trying to court me,* Aislinn realised, and searched hereyes for the answer. Formal or restrained courtship was unusual for but she’d read a few mortal romance books of her mother’s and she knew in this, some people liked to take things slowly...

girl. There was no dishonesty in Caer’s tone. And he was mortal. She probably honour his traditions.

Even if she felt she’d explode if she didn’t have him soon.

er. His “All right,” she said. “Let me grab my cloak.”

battling Caer smiled from ear to ear, and she knew she’d made the right decision against After all, they had all night.

om for



centre Avalinth was a city of light, the streets alive and bustling even at the hour. Somehow, it still cast the illusion of one of the midnight markets of Faerie. There was a feeling of fireflies and moonlight and darkness, even the clicking of gears and humming of clockwork. It shone like a vat of

“How does the light work, I wonder?” Aislinn asked, as they walked through the streets, now keeping a regrettable distance between them.

“Apparently, there’s some kind of river of lava flowing behind the crystal... they control the flow so that it changes intensity. I asked Beirne about it earlier.”

his coin “You like it here, don’t you?”

“I admit it’s growing on me. I’m still very uncertain about Veronika and Aeron, but this place—it’s fascinating. I want to know how all of it works.”

She could see him here, see him amongst the forgers and the *person* learning his craft, sharpening it, perfecting it. He wouldn't be hed his wouldn't be isolated. He'd *enjoy* it.

And she wanted him to enjoy it.

She just wanted to be there whilst he did.

But she couldn't stay here, even if Venus allowed it. She needed should and the earth and the trees and the wind.

She thought he might miss those things too.

Caer pulled on his gloves and wove his fingers into hers. "Come said. "There's a dance to join."

He pulled her onto a wooden platform in the centre of the streets. played a loud, jaunty tune. Caer and Aislinn fell into step with the res dancers, twirling in circles, hopping and hooting and laughing. At on the dwarves started throwing each other in the air. No one was strong to do that to Aislinn, so Caer gathered her in his arms and flung her up

It took a long time for him to lower her back to the ground, ar longer to let go.

She felt like she'd risk her life to kiss him now.

His eyes flickered behind her. "What on earth is that?"

It was some kind of brightly coloured spinning dwarven cont composed of fantastical model creatures suspended on golden pol moved up and down to music. A bystander called it a carousel.

There was no question of whether or not they were trying it crammed themselves onto a magnificent horned wargi the colour of and rode until their pockets were light and their hearts lighter, and the hurt from laughing too much.

They moved through the foodstands, crammed with roasted nuts, l

masters, sizzling meat, hard, glazed pieces of fruit and some bright pink cotton candy, a substance that melted on their tongues and tasted like pure honey. Aislinn examined every morsel, played at every booth. There were games of skill, games of precision, of agility—games of knocking things down with balls of clay, of whacking mechanical worms as they jumped out of holes, of hitting targets that could measure force. They played everything, tasted everything, and danced until they collapsed by the side of a fountain that glowed with copper light.

“Who needs magic, right?” said Caer, catching his breath.

Aislinn paused. “You don’t like magic very much, do you?”

Caer opened his mouth, and then promptly shut it again, clearly thinking of the point of the conversation. “I’m sorry,” Aislinn said, before he could respond. “That was insensitive of me.”

He frowned. “How so?”

“If my first encounter with magic had been it failing to heal my mother, and then bringing her corpse back to life, I don’t think I’d like magic much, either.”

Caer stared at her. “My dislike of magic doesn’t affect how I feel about you or your magic,” he said, tripping over the words. “I don’t think a wizard could. I just...” He ran his hands through his hair. “I wish I’d met you sooner.”

“You wish I’d been your first encounter with magic?”

“I wish you’d been my first a lot of things, actually, but honestly... I wish I’d met you sooner. I would like more days of knowing you.”

Aislinn’s mouth went sandpaper dry. She wanted more than anything in the world to close the gap between them. Vines, she wanted more of

ton-likethat. She wanted to grab fistfuls of his hair and tear off his shirt and
7. Theyhim backwards into the water and—

trench, Her breath started to increase. *What was the matter with her?*

or bolts, Caer frowned. “Are you all right?”

ig discs “I’m very... hot,” she said, fanning herself with her hand. “It’s very
g, triedhere, isn’t it? So very... very... warm.”

tain. It Caer’s frown deepened, but his mouth turned upwards, as if he was
whether or not he should laugh.

“I shall fetch some refreshment,” he said. “Stay here.”

She watched his broad shoulders as he disappeared into a nearby
king. before turning back to the fountain and splashing herself thoroughly. S
ensitivealmost dizzy with sensation, her thoughts still spiralling with the tho
all the things she wanted to do to him.

And he was being *so sweet*. Why hadn’t she just been able to focus
7 dyingwords? Why hadn’t she been able to return the sentiment, her th
: it veryhoneyed over instead?

She took a few moments to try and steady her breath, but nothing
:l aboutto be working. It was like drowning in lava.

nything “Evening, sister!” Beau staggered towards her, coming out of *Hor*
net youHoes with a tankard in hand and lipstick smeared across his face—
someone else’s, she wasn’t entirely sure. “How fares it?”

“Fine evening, brother. Enjoying yourself?”

.. I just “You know, I rather am. That establishment over there has a tru
collection of horns.”

ng else “Is that so?”

re than “How’s your evening going?”

Aislinn looked across at the space she last saw Caer. She seized

l throw tankard and downed it.

“That well, hmm?”

“Caer is being unbelievably sweet and all I want to do is rip his clot smother him in honey, and lick every inch off with my—”

y warm “Oh,” said Beau, eyes widening.

“Oh what?”

n’t sure “You’re, um...”

“Oh,” said Aislinn, with sudden realisation. “Oh, oh. Oh no.”

Female faeries, being infertile creatures, only had a small gap of tavern, around once a year. Sometimes the Beltane rituals could trigger an ex She felt but more often than not they simply brought that period forward.

ught of Aislinn, being half fae, had two.

Two short windows, every year, when she wanted to bone anything on them moved.

oughts “It’s not a big deal,” Beau insisted. “Just tell him. Cast a few spells. Have the best sex of your life.”

seemed “I can’t cast a fertility spell inside the palace, Beau!” She’d been w risk it for one night, the chances being so slim. But if she was in heat..

ns and No, no, NO!

–his or “Hmm. That’s a good point. Well, you should still tell him. Let him why you’re being so...”

Aislinn looked up, and saw Caer leaving the tavern. Not thinking, sl ily fine up from her spot and hid under a deserted market stall. She couldn’t fa Not like this.

“Or hide under a table,” Beau continued. “Of course. What a mar solution.”

Beau’s “Beau?” Aislinn could hear the frown in Caer’s voice. She stared

points of his shining boots, praying she could go undetected while
quivered in her gut. “Have you seen Ais?”

hes off, “Um... so... funny story... I *have* seen her, and I know where she
—”

Caer sighed. “She’s hiding from me, isn’t she?”

“Look, Caer,” started Beau, his words slurred but soft, “it’s
complicated, and not quite my place to explain, but...”

Another sigh eased past his lips. “If you see her again, please tel
fertility speak to me? I’ll come by her room later.”

tra one, His boots turned, and he disappeared back into the crowd.

Her room, her room, her room. The one place he absolutely could
—not whilst she was like this.

ng that “Well, Ais,” said Beau, once Caer had vanished completely, “you
the man.”

fertility Aislinn crawled out from underneath the table, her eyes prickl
can’t... I can’t explain this to him!”

lling to “Are you crying?”

. “HOW IS THAT A HELPFUL OBSERVATION?”

“Sorry, sorry!”

n know “He’s cautious enough around magic as it is...” Aislinn sniffed.

“I’m not sure being in heat counts as magic... animals do it all the ti

ie leapt “ARE YOU COMPARING ME TO AN ANIMAL?”

ce him. “No, not me!”

Aislinn dabbed at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “I’m a f
vellous monster.”

“Some people are into that,” Beau remarked absent-mindedly. “But
l at thenot a freak, Ais. Whatever you do or don’t want to do tonight.

st guilt understand.”

Aislinn nodded, battling against her tears. She’d go back to her room, but she’d have a cold bath, get control of herself. She’d explain this calmly and rationally.

“Want me to come with you?”

A bit Aislinn shook her head. “Please go and enjoy your night.”

Beau shrugged, waiting just a second before disappearing back into the hallway. *and Hoes.*

Aislinn began the walk back to the palace alone.

This was monstrously, stupidly unfair. To curse her with being alone, not going, with the one person she wanted to do it with in a place where she couldn’t cast any contraception spells... and did she really want the time they had together to be a frenzied panic? Sex in heat was intense and quite animalistic. She’d had it before. She remembered that, in the moment of it, it felt like the best thing ever, only for the memories of it to be dull and hazy the morning afterwards, hazy with lust.

That wasn’t what she wanted. Not with him.

She forced herself to think of snow and cold showers and mud and other unpleasant things, but her mind kept conjuring up beasts to be slayed in icy landscapes, with a handsome young prince helping her with the kill. “Lips locking together over steaming bodies and tumbling into softly lit rooms and making love in the firelight whilst the world crisped around them—

Stop it, stop it, stop it—

“Oof!”

She stopped, startled. Tiberius was standing in front of her.

“You’re really must stop meeting like this,” he said, smiling at her.

.. he’ll Aislinn couldn’t return that smile. Frustration pinged against her

Frustration, and... heat.

room. She swallowed. Tiberius had a lovely face, chiselled like marble, to him, shoulders were strong and broad...

His smile dropped. "Are you all right?"

"I, um... I can't really..."

"The mortal prince hasn't done anything to upset you, has he? I see you're *Hornstwo* of you heading out earlier—"

"He hasn't... no," she said firmly. "Caer is a perfect... Caer is perfect."

She was amazed at her capacity for truth, that such a thing could be considered true. No one was perfect.

There she was. *It's not a lie if you believe it.*

Her first "Right," said Tiberius, still looking very confused. Aislinn sniffed and more. "Let's get you into your room," he said, opening the door. He led her, it had Aislinn towards the bed and sat her down, turning to the dresser to fetch the goblet of wine and leaving the door ajar.

Tiberius pressed the goblet into her hand and sat down beside her. He offered her his handkerchief, a silky black scrap of fabric embroidered with a pattern of gemstones.

In these "Can I fetch someone for you?"

Well, their "I just want to be..." She stopped, realising she *didn't* want to be it, that actually, yes, she did want someone with her. *Caer, Caer, Caer* — she wanted him.

And he wasn't here.

But he was coming. He said he was. She just needed to calm down. He got here.

She tried to focus on the taste of the wine, rich and fruity, like cherries. It was soft. Warm.

with his He didn't come.

She paced around the room. Her weapons were still being held elsewhere but there was a blunt ceremonial sword mounted on the wall that was for practice. Swinging around a blade was a good antidote to most things. Caer still hadn't come.

She went to knock on his door, just to be certain she hadn't misheard. He wasn't there.

g. Help She returned to her own chamber.

Someone knocked on the door.

She raced away, Aislinn raced to open it, only to find Beau standing there with a vial. "Supplies!" he said, oddly gleefully. "I found an apothecary. Got you some confusedrags for when the bleeding begins, some kind of painkiller, sweets, and a little meantime... this tincture which is supposed to be quite 'calming'—"

"Aislinn seized the vial and took a long sip.

"—She did say not to have too much."

Aislinn groaned, throwing herself down on the bed and curling up. Beau passed her one of the boiled sweets.

"He hasn't come."

"What?"

"Caer. He didn't come."

"I can fetch him—"

"He isn't in his room."

"Right." Beau paused. "Hug?"

"Please."

Beau climbed into the bed and wrapped his arm around her, but she saw nothing. A few minutes ticked by, punctuated only by her slow s

winding the sweet down to a sliver. The potion trickled through her
ewhere, Beau's simple, steady presence.

is good "I think I'm all right now," Aislinn whispered.

gs. "Good to hear," he said, shuffling out of the bed. "I'm next door
need anything."

ard, but "Thank you," she said.

"Think nothing of it. Sleep well, Ais."



a box.
u some
d in the
Caer thought he was having the best night of his life. Everything w
and strange and wonderful. He'd never tasted food like this before
heard music of this quality, never thrown a girl into the air or ridden
back of a mechanical wargi.

It was perfect. Wonderful.

a tight
And Aislinn was there, Aislinn with a grin like fire, her body s
against his, her skin so, so close...

And even if he couldn't touch her right then, the palace was nearby
would go back afterwards and...

And do whatever she let him do.

God, he wanted her—wanted her with an ache that priests would ca
and yet faeries had no qualms with.

She wanted him too. He was sure of it. But then...

"I just wish I'd met you sooner. I would like more days of knowing y

saying
ucking,
Something about that utterance had unnerved her, and broken the s
evening had cast. He'd watched her dodge an honest answer, spl
around the truth.

, as did He'd tried to shake it off, but when she disappeared... What supposed to think?

He took a short walk to try and clear his head, to try and imagine what it would be like if you were going through hers, but he failed on both accounts.

Talk to her, a voice said. She can't lie to you. Just give her a chance to explain.

Summoning every fraction of courage he had, and mentally preparing himself for the worst of answers, he set back off towards the palace, looking for Aislinn's room.

Her door was ajar.

as new He crept forward, hand outstretched for the usual polite knock...

, never His eyes fell towards the bed. Aislinn and Tiberius sat upon it, hunched on the floor, bent towards his.

Caer's stomach plummeted. He stepped away, quietly, unnoticed. A part of him wanted to burst in and demand an explanation, but the rage didn't waning—only an awful, devastating dread, like his insides turning to metal.

y. They His mind spun back through every interaction they'd had, every compliment she'd uttered in his favour. She'd told him she'd liked him, they'd kissed in the tunnel, and yet, yet...

all a sin Her compliments tended towards praising physical attributes, and not when they hadn't... you could admire someone's skills without desiring much outside of the bedroom. Did she only want to bed him? Did he frighten her off with his words? Backed her into a corner where there was no way of uttering any falsehood to keep up the ruse?

pell the uttering His heart beat in his chest, like walls were closing in around him, as if he was a bear being forced into an acorn. He could barely breathe.

He staggered back into his bedroom and closed the door.

was he This wasn't happening. It wasn't all some game to her. It wasn't true.
What other explanation is there?

hat was Why was she even here, if she didn't care about him? There was no way to
keep her here—

ance to But he knew how much she loved a hunt, a mission, a quest. And she had to
her suspicions about Aeron and the Mirror. Of course she wanted to get through.
paring through. He was just a verse in a ballad, a passing dalliance.

reading Honestly, why did he expect more? They couldn't be more, after all. She
had to stay here and master his powers, and she had to go off and live her life
and rule Faerie and be magnificent and triumphant—a queen for the ages. It was
foolish to suspect it could be anything other than a night.

er head His throat tightened, and he gathered fistfuls of his hair as he sat up in
bed.

part of He would have done anything for that night.

't come *It's better it ends here,* a voice told him. *It could never have worked out
little pain now, to avoid more later on.*

y word *You're a fool, Caer,* said another, much stronger voice. *You don't deserve
almost her. You don't deserve happiness at all.*

It was no wonder that when he finally slept, his dreams were delirious and
even frantic, and he woke more than once calling for her in the dark.

ing them

Had he

ere was

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His throat tightened, and he gathered fistfuls of his hair as he sank into bed.

He would have done anything for that night.

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C aer was not at breakfast the following morning. Diana said he'd into town to get a few last minute supplies. Unwilling to put task any longer, Aislinn decided to head off after him.

“Don't be long,” Minerva warned. “We want to leave in a couple hours.”

Aislinn nodded. She was still in heat—would remain so for another days unless copulation was successful—but Beau's mix of potions seemed to be taking the edge off, as did the cold bath and a bit of self-care following had dulled it all to an irritating buzz.

The market was busy despite the hour, and she couldn't see anywhere. She did pass by a stall selling gloves, and stopped to admire thinking of how he'd tugged on his the night before to dance with her.

Unfair, really, when she was the only one at risk. Why did he have precautions by himself?

She admired a pair of light, paper-thin gloves, soft and supple human skin. They were the wrong size for her, of course.

“Can I help you at all?” asked the glove maker.

Aislinn turned. She was slim, for a dwarf, with white hair and even eyes. Eyes that stared at nothing.

“I, um, quite fancied the look of these gloves, but they’re too sn me.”

“Hand them over.”

Aislinn did so. The glove maker turned them over in her hands. ‘ fabric,” she agreed. “Doesn’t need lining. I can make you a pai scratch.”

“We’re leaving in a couple of hours—”

“I work fast, lass, with my machine here, and today’s a slow day.”

headed
off the

“If you’re sure.”

“Put out your hands.”

Aislinn did as instructed, laying them flat against the paper lin
uple of
counter. The glove maker traced around them quickly, deftly, in an i
left a raised pattern.

er two
med to
wing. It

Aislinn wondered how a blind tailor worked. She noted that the me
tape was lined with textured knots, and supposed the fabrics n
identifiable in a similar way. Or perhaps she had an assistant. It seem

e Caer
e them,

to ask either way. Blindness was rare in Faerie although not unhear
was hard to heal eyes too ravaged by time or disease, but most thing
be cured if they were attended to soon enough, and she’d heard t

to take

witches trading in eyes before, or even replacing healthy ones to imb
with the sight of a hawk.

as real

The glove maker tutted under her breath as she lifted Aislinn’s
away, pinching the fingers. “Why have your hands got to be so big?”

“Why’s your mouth got to be so rude?” said Aislinn, before she cou

herself.

whiter The glove maker barked a laugh.

“I mean, um—” Aislinn started, unable to finish.

all for “Can’t say sorry because you aren’t, hmm?”

“No.”

“You must be the faerie lass they’re talking about.”

“A fine “I must be.”

ir from “Off to the Deep, they say.”

“Word travels fast.”

“Well, I hope the gloves serve you well there, girl. Best of luck. Th
four drahma for the rush order. I’ll send them up to the palace befo
leave. Have no fear.”



ing the

ink that

Back at the palace, Aislinn found Caer in the throne room, examin

with Bell and Minerva, trying to chart their best path towards the plac

asuring the mirror was rumoured to be located. She tried to catch his eye

must be seemed like he was deliberately avoiding her, and she lacked the cou

ed rude go up and speak to him with an audience. She would rather fight a cav

d of. It Fighting actually sounded like a really good idea right now.

s could Her bags packed, and with nothing else to do until Minerva gave th

ales of she located the armoury, found a few blunt weapons, and swung them

ue folk for a while until her thoughts turned narrow with the illusion of batt

exercise dulled her rapid pulse, satiated the thrumming heat inside h

hands completely, but enough.

ld stop *Enough, enough, enough.*

Before long, Beau came to find her.

“Might have known you were here,” he said. “We’re ready.”

They met the others by the gates to the palace, an aide appearing nowhere with her commissioned gloves, wrapped in paper. She thanked and tucked them into one of the bags on her wargi’s saddle. Dillon was too, and her stomach twisted with the thought that in the past two days she barely spared a thought for him.

“Dillon,” she said, “I should have been to see you. Have you been a —”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I’ve been staying in the stables. Perfect place for you. And Luna’s been keeping me company.”

Aislinn smiled, her guilt lessening. She was glad he was accompanying them again.

“All present and correct?” Minerva asked, doing a quick headcount. “Once again remind you that this venture is not to be undertaken lightly.”

“Aye, which is why we’re going with you!” Flora declared, smoking her pipe. “Safety in numbers. You know this.”

Minerva nodded. “Aye. I do. Well. Best be getting on with it, then. Deep, sisters and friends!”

the troll.



in order,

Aislinn’s eyes did not leave Caer’s back as they made their way through the city towards the entrance to the Deep. He was conversing loudly with her. Notwith what felt like false cheer.

He still hadn’t met her eyes.

This couldn’t wait.

She glanced at Beau, nodding towards Caer.

“Oh, you want to speak to him?”

“No, I *want* to fade away into nothingness and avoid ever having a conversation with him, but sadly, I think I have to do this.”

“Well, all right then.”

Beau charged forward between the two of them, so fast that Hecate fell off the back of his saddle, and interrupted the conversation with a full apology. Caer glared, forced behind him.

Next to Aislinn. “Hi,” she said, drawing level with him.

Caer didn’t meet her gaze. “Hi?”

“I need to explain last night to you.”

“You don’t need to—”

“I’m in heat.”

“What?”

“Heat,” she said, cheeks on fire. “It happens to faerie women once in a while. Being half-mortal. It’s when—” Her eyes brimmed with angry tears. Vines, this was embarrassing.

“I know what being in heat means, Ais.”

Aislinn sniffed. “I’m out of control and I hate it. I just... I couldn’t explain it to you last night, and I hate that too. I panicked when I realised I was fading away. I’m...” She took a shuddering breath. “I’m really, really sorry.”

Caer turned his face towards her, and met her gaze for the first time. “I went to your room.”

“You did? But I—”

“You had company.”

Aislinn’s face burned. “You... you saw me with Tiberius?”

He nodded.

“Oh, Caer, I’m so sorry. He just found me in a state and walked me
my room.”

ng this “You kissed him.”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t. I came close. But I didn’t want
Tiberius. I wanted to kiss you. But I didn’t want to stop there, and I
almost want that to be our first time, partly because of the risks and partly bec
arely anit’s different when you’re in heat. It isn’t the same. I didn’t want that :

She dabbed at her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve just said sorry three times, Faerie.”

“And I meant each one of them.”

Caer leaned across and tugged on her sleeve. “So, you didn’t want
the prince?”

“No.”

“You wanted to kiss me.”

a year. “Very much so.”

ith hot, “You didn’t run away because you didn’t like me.”

“*Never.*”

“You’ll be held to that now, Faerie Princess.”

explain Aislinn swallowed. “I don’t mind.”

and ran Caer sighed, half laughing. He ran a hand through his hair. “I real
you’d told me all this back at the palace.”

ime. “I “Me too,” she admitted. “Although... possibly a bad idea.”

“Why’s that?”

“I’m still in heat. Be difficult for me to keep my hands off you.”

Caer’s throat bobbed. “God,” he said, “I... really want to kiss yo
now.”

Aislinn held out a gloved finger. “Later?” she suggested.

back to He wrapped his finger around hers. "It's a promise."



to kiss
I didn't
cause...
for us." The entrance to the Deep was as grand as the entrance to Avalintl
another colossal door of stone and iron, set deep into the rock on the o
of the city. The doors opened to reveal a long, dark tunnel, with
smaller door at the end. It opened onto an empty, square room, de
doors or windows.

Caer frowned, as did the rest of the mortals and faeries.

to kiss The rest of the party filed in.
"What?" said Minerva, noticing their hesitation.

"Where are we going?" Caer asked.

"Down."

"But... how?"

"It's a lift, boy. We used to have staircases leading to the various
but the problem was that most of the monsters worked out how to use
They haven't learned to operate the lift, yet."

ly wish Caerwyn stared at her. "I'm really not enjoying the use of the word
Beau leant towards him. "Same."

"Come on, boys," said Aislinn, striding forwards, "what's the
Scared?"

"Yes," they both replied.

"For very, very good reason," Beau added.

ou right Aislinn snorted. "That's what makes it so exciting."

She turned her back and squeezed into the lift.

“Your sister,” Caerwyn remarked to Beau, as Dillon followed n really something.”

“She is.” Beau paused. “If you hurt her, I’ll kill you, and make it lo an accident.”

1 itself, For what felt like a full minute, Caerwyn stared at him, very gratefu utskirts he remembered that Beau could lie and would not be held to that. “An another hurts me?” he asked eventually, *which seems far more likely.* void of

“I like you, but I’m not hurting my sister for you. Maybe one dwarves will. Or all of them. They seem rather fond of you.”

Too fond, Caer thought, at the same time feeling warmed by the They *were* fond of him, and he felt like he’d want to hurt whoever hurt too, but Fort had died because she cared about him, and he didn’t er idea that others might, too, before this was over.

He supposed that was the risk with caring about anyone.

“Come on, lads,” Minerva urged. “You’re holding us up!”

levels, Beau squeezed on next, leaving just enough room for Caer and his e stairs. which wagged its tail and panted happily as he urged it forward, a Deep were nothing more than an ambitious walk.

yet.” The doors closed shut behind them. Bell pressed something on the v button next to descriptions of the various different levels. There wer matter? and fields, lakes and mines, one named simply ‘the Forest’—and oth looked like names of towns.

‘The Deep’ was the last level.

The room—*lift*—gave a sudden lurch.

Caer gasped, a hand reaching out to steady himself, and found gripping Aislinn’s arm.

“Are you all right?” she said, leaning across.

ext, “is “Fine,” he replied, only half lying. “This is just... strange.”

“Strange for me, too,” she said, and slipped her gloved hand into his
ok like “Where did you get the gloves?”

“Had them made for me,” she said. “Yours must get uncomfortab
il whentime to time.”

d if she “Maybe. Still worth it, though.”

Aislinn squeezed tighter.

of the The lift took a while to descend. Minerva said it was best to go sl
descending too quickly often made people ill—even the hardest of d
remark.It seemed an age before it finally stilled, and the doors slid open.

rt them, Beau gasped. He wasn’t the only one. Dillon offered a curse un
tjoy thebreath, too, followed by a low whistle.

The party shuffled out. Caer stood where he was, utterly amazed.

He’d expected pools of fire and brimstone, rock and lava as far as
could see, a horrible, palpable heat.

; wargi, All that he’d got right was rock.

s if the Everything else was blue and purple. Crystals clung to the rocks
ceilings, vines and flora blooming beneath the faint, dusky glow. Ri
wall—a clear translucent water ran through the caverns, luminescent fish
e farmsthrough the current. Butterflies of pure light hummed along the stone.

ers that “Ooh, look, moon thistles!” said Flora, running over to examine a
plant, a spiny, leafy thing with a white centre that shone like snow. “I
seen these in a while, great for—”

“If anyone sees any mushrooms, let me know!” said Luna. “Th
himself lovely nutty one with a purple sheen. Goes lovely with—”

Minerva sighed. “Stay together,” she warned. “And stay sharp.”

“This is *beautiful*,” Beau sighed, his eyes lined with silver.

Aislinn wrinkled her nose. “Are you crying?”

“I’m going to run out of paper...”

“Don’t let the prettiness fool you, lad,” Minerva warned. “We’ve
le fromway to go yet.”

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Aislinn wrinkled her nose. “Are you crying?”

“I’m going to run out of paper...”

“Don’t let the prettiness fool you, lad,” Minerva warned. “We’ve a long way to go yet.”

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Venus watched the group leave from the highest point of the palace, her eyes rooted on the party as they traipsed through the wide, open streets, and finally disappeared behind the row of houses.

How many times had she watched them go before?

A part of her had wanted to walk with them, to stay by Minnie's side as she descended, as she'd done a hundred times before. She'd gone down once or twice, but she wasn't made for the Deep, for the dark and the cold and dirt. That was always more Minerva's calling.

And Clay's.

She'd been terrified, when she asked him to marry her, that he'd refuse, that he'd say he wasn't made for a life in the palace, that he belonged in the Deep.

"Of course I belong there," had been his response, "but I belong with you too. I can belong to two places, Ven. Two places—and one person. Venus Mountain-Born, I will marry you."

Clay had never given up the Deep, and she had never asked him decades afterwards, he'd go down into the depths, sometimes on m sometimes to visit his hometown, sometimes with Minerva and son just *because*. Because it called to him. Because he had to answer.

Venus had never understood, but that didn't matter. Clay didn't und why she felt the need to wrap herself in spiky, bejewelled clothes, Understanding was different from acceptance, and they accepted eac wholeheartedly for who they were. She never loved him any less wildness and crass humour, and he never loved her any less for being of the Deep and determined to cover her life in beautiful things.

The first time she'd shared her fears with him, he'd kissed her ey
ace, her
narrow told her, "you are no less beautiful for your fears, but you are more b
for sharing them."

She'd fallen in love with him all over again in that moment.

It was one of the joys of their constant separation, how the loss
de until
ith her,
danger sweeten the return, how they'd spend weeks getting to know each othe
with all the giddiness of the first time. Sometimes, she almost looked t
to his departure, knowing how grateful she'd be for the return.

Until the day he didn't come back.

No more departures, no more returns. Just emptiness where Clay ha
efuse—
d in the been and love transformed to grief with nowhere to go.

Nowhere to go.

That was what life without Clay was like. Stagnant and still, a brok
ith you,
n. Yes, on the tracks. Nothing moved, nothing changed. Everything that brou
joy, that used to make her laugh and smile, withered and died in her pr

Years now, and that feeling had never altered.

Until Aeron appeared.

to. For *Lightbringer*. That was his name. It was like the Stone had brought
missions, her, some guiding force. Here to bring her back to the light, with
sometimes that ought to have been impossible—

But they weren't. She'd seen it for certain now, with the arrival
of a young prince. It could be done. It had to be.

either. She was worried about Minerva, of course. Not just about what
might happen to her in the Deep, not just because everything was dependin
on her returning with the Mirror, but because it was clear she cared ab
out a boy, and despite everything, Minerva had never wanted to hurt her

Over the past few days with her in the palace, she'd wanted to tell her every
thing and wanted to throw off her jewels and crown and lie with her in their pe
acefully staring at the ceiling, talking of everything and nothing. She wanted
to relive the years between them.

But she couldn't risk Minnie turning her back on her and refusing to
do what she would plan, prizing this prince above Clay, above her sister, above her kidn
aper again. Venus sighed, turning away from her view of the city, and wa
nted to go forward through the halls, down towards the throne room, to the vault behind t

She glided past meaningless jewels and towers of coins, to a glass c
abinet at the end of the room.

And once She placed her hand against the lid, thinking little of the person still
there. *Soon*, she promised.

Minnie would understand. She had to.

When tram
sight her
presence.

Lightbringer. That was his name. It was like the Stone had brought him to her, some guiding force. Here to bring her back to the light, with promises that ought to have been impossible—

But they weren't. She'd seen it for certain now, with the arrival of the young prince. It could be done. It had to be.

She was worried about Minerva, of course. Not just about what would happen to her in the Deep, not just because everything was depending upon her returning with the Mirror, but because it was clear she cared about the boy, and despite everything, Minerva had never wanted to hurt her. These past few days with her in the palace, she'd wanted to tell her everything, wanted to throw off her jewels and crown and lie with her in their petticoats staring at the ceiling, talking of everything and nothing. She wanted to bury the years between them.

But she couldn't risk Minnie turning her back on her and refusing to follow the plan, prizing this prince above Clay, above her sister, above her kingdom.

Venus sighed, turning away from her view of the city, and wandered through the halls, down towards the throne room, to the vault behind the seat. She glided past meaningless jewels and towers of coins, to a glass coffin at the end of the room.

She placed her hand against the lid, thinking little of the person still inside.

Soon, she promised.

Minnie would understand. She had to.



36

CAVE CATS AND BEASTS

The first day in the Deep passed calmly, almost pleasantly. It was a ride through the caverns and tunnels, the way rocky and perilous falls and underground floods had marred the path, and it could take hours to find themselves back on the main track, having gained little in the actual progress.

“Rest whenever it’s safe,” was one of Minerva’s main rules for survival in the Deep. “Don’t push yourself. You never know when it might be sleep again.”

They spoke of the monsters they were likely to encounter. Rogue goblins; later on, dwarven-made rock men, left over from a rebellion many centuries ago. Ogres, likely. Maybe sluaghs or demonic bats. By far the worst to be the description of ‘cave cats’—vicious, feline creatures that could tear you apart in seconds.

Caer was quite sure some of the creatures were exaggerated.

They stopped for the night in one of the smaller caverns, hiding themselves away in an alcove out of sight. Diana had caught some

small, boar-like creature earlier, which Luna flavoured with herbs gathered on the journey. They saved their ale, water being in abundance and swapped stories and played pipes until they began to feel tired.

There was no need to set up a watch—Dillon offered to do it all.

“Doesn’t seem fair,” Luna remarked, “leaving you by yourself.”

Dillon shrugged. “Seems silly to deprive people of sleep who need it.”

Caer, Aislinn and Beau stayed up a while longer after the others had gone to bed. Caer knew Aislinn felt responsible for Dillon in some way, which was strange as she was not the one who brought him back. He’d asked her earlier in the day, but she’d struggled to explain it.

“I think, perhaps, I just feel the need to make sure he gets home safe.”

Caer could understand that, although he couldn’t deny he was jealous of Dillon, who had been dead for fifty years, had a home to go back to when his time at Afelcarreg was over, whereas Caer knew, with a finality he could not explain, that he would never return to the island again either, and that while he was fascinated by Avalinth and the possibilities it held, it didn’t feel like home to him either. He wanted to anchor almost as much as he wanted—

Aislinn.

Their promise to each other had not left his mind, but neither had his doubts or fears. What would happen afterwards, when they were separated on separate ways?

The following morning, they breakfasted quickly and resumed their journey. They passed an old mine and wasted a bit of time seeing if they were still in operation—though Bell teased they spent more time answering Caer’s questions of how anything could move without something pushing it.

Not long after, they came to an entrance to a tunnel and found a deep
ce here, stairs. Sounds echoed from below.

Caerwyn breathed carefully, remembering what Minerva had said
why they used lifts now.

Thankfully, nothing disturbed them during the descent, and they ex
t.” tunnel below into another cavern, lower than the previous one. They
ad gone parts where Caerwyn had to duck.

It took a while before it started to widen, but Caer’s fears didn’t
about it. Noises continued to scuttle about the stone. He tried to focus on
pleasant things, like the colours in the plants clinging to the walls,
ly.” steady *drip, drip* of the underground river.

He was still staring at a patch of reeds when they parted and out tur
/hen all small pointy-eared creature covered in black fur. It looked rather lik
in, that with larger eyes and slightly disproportionate limbs—a tail almost tw
cottage length of an ordinary feline, and longer legs that ended with bigger paw
nd the “Hello,” he said. “Where did you come from?”

The creature blinked at him, then smiled at him in its cat-like v
mouth dropped open.

A mouth full of rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth.

It lunged for Caer, sinking into his arm and biting hard. Caer
it their grabbing it by the neck and tugging it, the fangs going deeper and deep
his flesh—

“Cave cats!” Minerva called. “Look alive!”

Another dozen of the creatures streamed out of the undergrowth, w
swering drawn just in time. The creature didn’t budge from Caer’s arm, eve
lling it. Aislinn hurled a fireball at it and singed its tail.

“Kill it, Caer!”

“Trying to!”

“Use your powers!”

It was so obvious Caer could kick himself, but his powers were default reaction. He wasn't used to using them in a fight, not on p
ited theThere was too much going on, too much noise—

The creature thrashed, biting down harder. Another leapt up and s
fangs into his shoulder.

He pressed his power into the first, and flicked his wrists like he'
n morewith the rodents. Its slack body hit the ground.

He moved to the second. Touch, he found, was infinitely easier. T
forces of his companions flared up around him, beacons in the g
nbled aAislinn, Beau, *Dillon*.

He knew that was odd, and Dillon's pulse even felt different to hi
rice theanother shade of a colour he couldn't name, but there was no time to f
vs. that. No time for anything.

Something rumbled along the corridor, shaking stalactites from the
vay. ItsA few of the cave cats paused in their assault as something thunder
view—a great, grey, lumpy shape, like a giant and boulder squished to
“Ogre,” someone whispered, in case he wasn't sure.

The ogre grinned at the party before him and swung his massiv
per into dividing stone from the ceiling. Minerva swung under his arm, search
a gap in his rough armour, hissing out instructions. Caer was still focu
the cave cats.

“Look out!” someone hissed.

A stalactite smashed to the ground in front of him, blasting one of t
Aislinn let out another cry. “Beau!”

Beau was moving along the edge of the river, the cats prowling t

him. With each one he took out with a blast of fire, another one closer. He was disappearing into the dark, into the tunnel, the entire not hisshaking above him. Aislinn raced towards him, Dillon too—
urpose. Caer saw the stone swing seconds before it dislodged. Dillon did was standing right in its path—
sank its Caer reacted instinctively, holding out his hand, tugging on the thre felt before with the rodents, like Dillon was tied to him. He yanke 'd donepulling him back.

Dillon splashed into the stream, gasping up at Caer as he hauled hi
The lifeonto his feet, eyes wide with shock.

loom— They didn't speak. They turned their backs together, preparing for
onslaught of cats.

m, like Beau had disappeared. The tunnel shook again. Aislinn flung her
ocus ontowards the ceiling, grunting beneath the weight of the stone. Vines u
around the walls, reeds bent upwards, locking together, weaving upw
ceiling, an effort to assist. Caer searched blindly for something to do, anything
ed into It wasn't enough.
ogether. The tunnel fell.

e club,
ing for
ised on
It took Beau's eyes a few desperate seconds to adjust to the gloom.
desperate seconds of fighting off cats in the unfathomable dark, hearir
hiss, feeling them clawing at his skin.

he cats. He was breathing too hard to scream. He was bleeding too hard to th
The second he could see, he started firing off fireballs, scorching t
clinging to his skin until their bodies fell to the floor, writhing and sh
owards



lunged Vines, there were so many—a tide of them, a black sea of fur and fang ceiling. Something else snarled in the distance.

The cats stilled, hair stiffening on the back of their necks. Beau n't. Hebreath in his throat. Waiting.

Something crept forward out of the tunnel, long and large. It had the head of a water dragon, elongated and narrow, but covered in thick, dark fur and hard, crowned with horns. A thin, matted mane hung around its head and neck. Its eyes glowed like amethysts in the tangible dark.

It lunged at the cats, swiping them away, biting their bodies in two. It caught them in its mouth and spitting them away. Its talons were like another. Again and again it slashed and bit, until the walls were coated in blood.

A droplet drifted down Beau's cheek. He shuddered beneath it, but his hands could not move.

Only once all the cave cats were dead did the monster turn its side towards Beau. It prowled forward on its great legs, a shimmer of scales in the air—its furred feet.

It sniffed at him, its hot breath dusting his cheek.

But it did not attack.

The tunnel entrance shuddered and shook, fallen boulders moving and vines crawling back to the rock as light pooled into the cave. Beau scrambled inside, screaming his name and drawing her sword.

A few "Beau—"

"Don't!" He held up his hand to shield the creature from his sister. She for he felt instinctively she was a she—took one final look at him, and then ran off into the dark.

The tunnel turned quiet and still once more.

Aislinn turned towards him. "What was *that*?"

s. "I don't know," he whispered. He had never, ever seen anything like
Aislinn put her arm around him. "Come on," she said. "Let's get
1 froze, the others."



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ghts on

pads of

away,

Aislinn

. She—

l bolted

Aislinn raced back through the shallow stream, Beau fast behind her. In
the main cavern, the few remaining cave cats had been finally expunged.
The ogre was staggering, still swinging, blood pooling down his legs. Mag
Diana unravelled a spool of rope, looping it round its ankles. It fell
resounding *thud* that shook the cavern, sending down another shower of
stones.
Aislinn put up her hands to catch it, spearing the stones with vine
rushed to assist her as the dwarves clambered onto the back of the ogre.
The ogre stabbed it through the neck. It took an age to dig down into its flesh
enough damage to mortally wound it.

It took even longer to die, shuddering and groaning until it did.

Finally, it slackened, its breathing withering away to nothing.

The dwarves slid from its inert body. Aislinn and Beau let go
of the ceiling. The party gathered, panting hard.

"Cave cats," Caer said. "Cave *cats*. You called those things cave
cats. Those things were not cats. They were fucking predators!"

"Language," said Minerva.

"All cats are predators," Bell said pointedly, helping Flora unload
her healing supplies. "You'd do well to remember it."

Hecate wound her way around Caer's legs, blood gleaming in her
hair. The look she gave him was smug.

her. “I’m onto you,” Caer said, whilst rooting through his pockets to see if he had any salted meat for her. Aislinn giggled.

“Injuries,” said Minerva. “Report.”

One by one, the party reported their cuts and scrapes. Dillon, whose wounds didn’t bother him, and some of the others with the least amount of injuries, were sent to round up the wargis and calm them down. Aislinn and Beau healed each other instantly and helped see to them. Wargis, though they were not resistant to their magic.

Unlike ogres, giants and dwarves.

“Are there any other creatures my magic is unlikely to work on?” asked. “I should probably know before I risk my life trying to end them.”

“Trolls,” said everyone almost at once.

“And golems,” added Bell, with a look at Minerva.

There was a general murmur of agreement.

Aislinn glanced around the party as they cleaned wounds and bandaged themselves up. Three of Bell’s fingers had been crushed in the fight, and there were a lot of bites and bruises—some no doubt to scar forever. She was able to help them, and couldn’t help but marvel at their determination. Nothing seemed to hamper them for long. Their leader seemed to be, “Stitch it up, swig of painkiller, mug of ale, someone help with her bedroll and mind-over-matter.”

She turned to Caer, whose shoulder was being cleaned by Flora. A piece of his flesh was missing.

“Don’t suppose I can convince you to let me heal that for you, can I?”

“Prolonged contact with your skin? Not the best idea.”

Aislinn swallowed. “It must hurt.”

“Not as much as hurting you.”

ae if he “Could I—” she stopped.

“What?”

“You can’t hurt me when you’re sleeping. If you’d give me permiss

whose “Well, as long as you’re not staying up late to do it...”

ount of Aislinn pursed her lips, biting back a smile. “No promises.”

inn and

nkfully,



Dillon sat by the side of the circle. He didn’t need to sit—he felt like h
stand forever—but with all of the party sitting and most of them onl
?” Caer
n.” his waist when they were standing anyway, he felt somewhat self-cor
The wargis were all healed and settled now, his fingers were too clums
of much more assistance, and he was at a loss for what else to do.

He needed to speak to Caer about how he’d managed to control him
the battle. He wasn’t entirely sure what he was going to say—indeed,
ndaged grateful Caer had saved him—but... they should talk about it.
t, there

wished Finally, Caer finished talking to Aislinn.

r sheer Dillon lumbered towards him. “Thank you,” he said. “For getting
attitude of the way.” He didn’t want to think about what would have happene
help her body had been broken by falling debris but his head remained intact.
they have severed it in an attempt to put him out of his misery, or d
A bit of out and scooped him onto a wargi in the hope of finding some way to
soupy form? Either option wasn’t fun to think about.

?” “Don’t mention it,” Caer said, not quite meeting his gaze. “If I
some sort of line—”

“Please, always assume I don’t want to be squashed beneath
stones.”

“Right.” Caer paused. “How did it feel, when I controlled you?”

“Odd.”

ion...” “Odd?”

“I can’t feel much, I don’t have a better way of explaining it.”
stilled. “Do I have a life force? Or do I feel like those other dead things

“No,” Caer said. “I mean—yes. You have a life force inside of you
armoured, like the dwarves, and not quite Beau and Aislinn’s, either. I
it’s a different colour.”

e could “Can you control Ais and Beau?”

y up to He shook his head. “I could... I could snuff them out, if I wanted
conscious. otherwise...” He ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know how to
sy to be it.”

Dillon’s chest tightened. It could not be easy for Caer, raised v
during magic, struggling under the weight of powers no one really unders
he was powers that meant he couldn’t even touch the girl he—

“Practise on me.”

Caer looked up. “What?”

me out “You need to learn how to control your powers, right? Practise on
d if his very least, you should learn how to control the dead you keep bringing

Would Caer stared at him. “I... don’t want to kill you again.”

lug him Dillon shrugged. “I would rather stay alive, if I could, but for
to fix his know... I’m living on borrowed time. I think I’d like to do some good
I’m still here.”

crossed Caer looked down at his feet. “I’m not so sure I’m worth it.”

falling “Ais thinks you are,” Dillon said quickly.

“You seem oddly close to her given that you only just met.”

Dillon smiled. “Jealous?”

“I am not going to answer that.”

Dillon laughed. “I’m not interested in her that way, I assure you, don’t know. I feel *something* towards her. Same with Beau. Maybe that Dillon remind me of their parents. I just feel like I already know them.” It was—” to the tug he’d felt when Caer’s magic had pulled at his body. That you. Not that connection.

It’s like Caer nodded. “All right,” he said. “Thank you.”

Minerva called him away to help with something, and Dillon once found himself alone. He returned to sit beside the wargis. Flora was to, but patching someone up, which was fine, but he’d be lying if he said his explain weren’t bothering him. His arm was shredded and he thought a bit cheek might be hanging off. He dabbed at it, trying to make it stick with no place.

stood... Luna appeared beside him, brandishing a needle and thread. “Let me

“You can do stitches?”

“I don’t usually like doing them on people because, well, it hurts but...” She swallowed. “You’re not in pain, are you?”

me. At “No,” he said, his throat equally tight.

back.” She ran her fingers down his cheek, pinching his flesh together. “Can you feel anything at all?”

all we “Pressure, I suppose,” he explained. “It’s like being wrapped in too many layers of clothing. Everything feels like hard sponge.”

Luna nodded, though she couldn’t know what that was like. No one else. He supposed, on that note, he and Caer were rather alike.

Luna began stitching him. He half wished he could feel it, just anything—to feel the tips of her fingers against his skin. He wondered

long he could stay in this half-body before the lack of sensations but... I started to get to him.

hey just “Are you all right?” Luna asked him.

was akin *I want to feel you.* “I’m fine. You?”

thread, “I’m rather good at staying out of the fight.”

“Smart decision.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

re more “For what?”

was still “For not calling me weak or silly for not wanting to fight. I woundschastising me for coming down here when I’m no great warrior l t of hisothers.”

back in Dillon shrugged. “Everyone has their strengths. Magna doesn’t seer great warrior, either, or Flora—but they’re invaluable members of the e.” You are too.”

Her white cheeks flushed. Vines, she was beautiful. He wondered s them, had drawn a picture of her yet and whether or not he’d be prepared with it. He’d like to take something with him if he survived long en return to Acanthia.

Can you “I miss home,” he said, half to himself.

Luna nodded, finishing with his cheek and pulling his arm into l o many “Then tell me about it.”

could. OceanofPDF.com

to feel
ed how

long he could stay in this half-body before the lack of sensations really started to get to him.

“Are you all right?” Luna asked him.

I want to feel you. “I’m fine. You?”

“I’m rather good at staying out of the fight.”

“Smart decision.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not calling me weak or silly for not wanting to fight. For not chastising me for coming down here when I’m no great warrior like the others.”

Dillon shrugged. “Everyone has their strengths. Magna doesn’t seem like a great warrior, either, or Flora—but they’re invaluable members of the group. You are too.”

Her white cheeks flushed. Vines, she was beautiful. He wondered if Beau had drawn a picture of her yet and whether or not he’d be prepared to part with it. He’d like to take something with him if he survived long enough to return to Acanthia.

“I miss home,” he said, half to himself.

Luna nodded, finishing with his cheek and pulling his arm into her lap. “Then tell me about it.”



After refreshments and a decent rest, the party packed up and continued on their way. The crystals turned red, the foliage following, giving caverns the impression of fire. Great blooms littered the tunnels, in shades of crimson and scarlet, and the water was filled with floating blooms that crackled on the surface under the crystal lights, their pollen glowing golden.

“Fire lilies,” Flora explained. “They’re edible—taste like honey. Good for binding wounds, too.”

A small stop was required to pick a few. Beau took sketches as she dipped her fingers into the sticky pollen, and tried not to moan. It was as sweet as promised, but with a heat that coursed through her and an absolutely *nothing* to help the quivering feeling still gnawing at her insides.

“Are you all right?” Caer asked, sensing her distress.

Aislinn jumped in the water to save herself from answering.

Minerva tutted. “I hope you’re not expecting us to wait for you to do

“Certainly not,” said Aislinn, climbing out and half-wishing she could go back and drown herself. “I would hate to cause a delay.”

The discomfort as she crawled back onto her saddle was a distraction, as were a few more creatures that marred their way—albeit disposed of or carefully avoided.

Aislinn had long since lost track of time, but she thought it was past evening or late afternoon. Only Minerva, Bell and Flora seemed to be carrying watches.

A small settlement came into view ahead of them—something between a fortress and a town—walled and towered and cut from the stone. Abandoned now, the gates hanging from their hinges, crates and barrels smashed in pieces through the main street.

Minerva stopped to stare at a sign hovering over the old inn. It had been slashed through, but still swung lightly in whatever passed for a breeze here—a dull, empty echo.

Bell placed a hand on her shoulder. “We don’t have to stay here.”

Minerva shook her head. “Best place for us. Easy to defend. Caer, Diana—see if you can barricade the gates. Flora—check the other exit—inn. See if there’s anything left. Young highnesses—stable the warg

Everyone split up whilst the remaining few did a quick patrol to make sure they weren’t shutting anything in with them. They met back at the inn: a broken room composed of rounded edges and a hundred shades of brown.

Luna was already cooking in the kitchen while Minerva and Bell set out tables and chairs, making the room as presentable as possible.

“Good news!” Minerva declared. “Most of the beds upstairs are still functional. Proper mattresses tonight, folks!”

This was met with a resounding, if slightly forced, cheer.

uld just “And there’s ale in the cellar!” Luna called from the kitchen.

This cheer was considerably louder.

elcome They split once again, some going to relieve the wargis of the rer
l easilyloads, others to set up the beds, Minerva to double-check the barricad

to assist in the kitchen. No one seemed in the mood to continue the W
robably& Wastelands campaign, but Diana started up a game of cards.

l to becleaned out tankards and poured out ale, chatting to Luna as she c

Beau drew in the corner. Everyone was doing something.

ween a Everyone, thought Aislinn, except Minerva.

It was As soon as she returned from her patrol, she took a seat by the
d cartssaying little as she stared into the flames. Her metal fingers tapped aga
armrest.

ad been Her mood continued much through dinner—a sweet stew of cave
e downand fire-lilies that Luna received much praise for, from everyone apa

Minerva, who only murmured a half-hearted thanks. She drank more t
usually did, and laughed less.

Dillon, Eventually, Aislinn could stand it no longer.

s. Luna “What happened here?” she asked.

is.” The room fell quiet. Beau looked up from his book. Caer met A
ensuregaze, but shrugged, just as confused as she was.

a bare, Minerva sighed—a sigh of years, of a tale she knew she had to tell,
wn. been putting off for far, far too long. “Decades ago—almost a century

rightedI came across this place when it was a small but thriving town, full o
hearty dwarves,” she began, her eyes still foggy and far away. “I met

ill verynamed Clay Goldsbane. He was rough and rude, coarse as nails and t
old boots... and he was the greatest friend I ever had—save this

course.” She gestured briefly to Bell, a weak smile passing between th

The others stilled their game of cards, listening in. Beau folded a sketchbook. Dillon, cleaning in the kitchen, finally rejoined the remaining group.

“Clay and I were friends for years,” Minerva went on. “He’d accompanied me on expeditions into the Deep, and we’d drink ourselves silly when Dillon returned. One day, he announced that he’d like to go to Avalinth and see it with his own eyes—even if it was only the once. I was all too happy to have him there, although I suspected he would hate it—hate the noise and the endless hubbub and the great gears and the constant movement.

“But he didn’t. Clay fell in love with the place almost the moment he set foot on herit... and he fell for Venus, too, just as quickly, just as surely. I’d never seen two people less alike or more in love. They married, and a few years later their first child was Tiberius. Our mother was still queen, then, and we were free to do as we pleased. We raised the boy together, though he was their son as much as ours. He felt almost as much our son as he was theirs.

“Then, a few years ago, our mother died. Not entirely unexpected, but quicker than we thought. I was poised to be her successor. Venus had never shown any interest in the throne, nor did she then. But I knew after I’d seen Avalinth that there would be no gallivanting off into the Deep, that I would be expected to remain in Avalinth. I was ready to do it—but I wanted to see the world, and I had a hunch I’d find it. I set off with a small party to deal with a rogue golem. Bell and I went now—accompanied me.

“But the golem was too wild and unpredictable—bigger than what I’d ever thought a manever could be. It caused a cave-in, killing most of our party before it set off a pack of beasts. One slashed Bell’s throat straight through, and the golem lifted me off the ground by the arm.”

Her shoulder twitched at the confession, and Aislinn sucked in a breath.

way his “I watched her bleeding on the ground, and knew, if someone didn’t get to her soon, she was going to die. And behind her... Clay lay crushed by the axe.”

“There’s no cutting into a golem. You can smash it, but my axe wasn’t strong enough to do the job. So I took it to my arm instead, tied the end off with a rope, and pressed my remaining hand to Bell’s wound. We both held on just long enough for the relief party to arrive.

“Clay didn’t. If I’d been able to get to him, to free him from the rubble before it crushed him entirely, perhaps he would have lived, but I didn’t have an opportunity to save him, or my wife. I chose her, as most would have done. I cannot regret that. That does not mean it was an easy choice. I never forget that I loved Clay, too. He had been my friend for centuries. And it was later, to watch him die.”

She paused in her story, the firelight flickering in her eyes.

“Returning to Avalinth without him was the hardest thing I have ever done. Venus’ screams nearly shattered the stones. Telling Tibe his fatherly, but coming back... I would have traded another limb to have avoided it.

“After I recovered, I was fitted with a metal arm. I was still prepared to take the throne and was resolved to never fight again. I was shocked when Venus decided to challenge me. Shocked, and hurt. She wanted to punish me last seen—like I wasn’t already doing that myself.

“There are three trials one needs to best to win the dwarven throne: a test of logic, a test of diplomacy, and a test of combat. I beat Venus in the test of logic, but when the combat came... Ordinarily, I would have bested her... and ease, but I’d barely recovered from the loss of the arm and was still using the metal one... I wasn’t at my best. When she beat me in that.

swallowed, pausing in her tale. “I don’t think I wanted to win. I’d rather have lost.”

't get to covet the throne, and suddenly, here was something Venus *did* want. It gave her any kind of satisfaction at all... I'd give it.

wasn't "There's no rule that says the loser of the trials has to leave Avalint my belt, could not stay there. I couldn't stay and watch my sister freeze into a permanent long version of herself. I could not stay and let her hate me more."

"But," Aislinn interrupted, her voice quiet, "it wasn't your fault. It happened—"

didn't. I "I know," said Minerva, "I know that. I think she does too. It just didn't matter. I was the one who wanted to go, the sister Clay chose. People follow... and the one that couldn't choose him in the end. I couldn't stay and I had to watch the place where he wasn't. I needed to go."

"And we weren't going to let her go alone," added Diana, looking up at the table. "Terrible, see, at doing what we're told."

er done. Minerva smiled. "My relief party. They didn't stay quite as far away as they shouldn't have."

"We're stubborn like that," agreed Flora.

ared to "Magna wasn't with us, or Luna," Diana continued. "But Magna stayed when she wasn't letting Min go without a mechanic, and Luna—"

ish me, "I said they'd starve without me."

"She wasn't wrong," said Minerva.

er; a test A laugh passed around the room.

er test of "Every time we encountered an enemy on our journey, Min would order with 'protect the cook!'"

getting "It's good advice."

.. She "For which we're all grateful," added Dillon.

I never "If we hadn't starved, we'd have survived, but we'd have been miserable, which is frankly a worse fate," Minerva agreed. She downed her tea.

nt. If it“Ah, well, that’s enough of that. I think I’m ready for bed. Bell?”

“I’ll be right there, dearest.”

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“Ah, well, that’s enough of that. I think I’m ready for bed. Bell?”

“I’ll be right there, dearest.”

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Most of the dwarves headed upstairs not long afterwards, leaving young ‘uns’ to themselves. Luna fell asleep in front of the fire and had to be carried upstairs by Dillon, which was difficult given his height and the low rafters of the inn. Even Caer had to duck in places.

Dillon came downstairs having deposited Luna safely in one of the beds and the four of them conversed a little longer in the low light of the fire. Aislinn polished her weapons. Beau sketched. Dillon and Caer sparred in the street and practised the latter’s powers.

Beau slunk upstairs before they returned.

They chatted a little longer beside the hearth, until Aislinn started to yawn. “Go sleep,” Dillon insisted. “I know what you’re doing, and I appreciate it but it isn’t necessary.”

“Do you know what he means, Caer?”

“Haven’t a clue, Ais.”

“See, Dillon? Caer says he hasn’t a clue.”

“Hilarious,” he said dryly. “A beautifully-dodged truth, Your Highness. Now, to bed with you.”

“I definitely outrank you.”

“I will tell your mother.”

Aislinn stood up. “I am doing this because I like you, not because of the threat.”

“Noted.”

She patted him on the shoulder as she passed, trying not to stare at the ragged mess of Dillon’s cheek, knowing it would never heal. She pulled Caerwyn’s sleeve and beckoned him to follow her.

She was half asleep as she traipsed up the stairs, her head heavy with exhaustion and senses hazy with ale, unsteadier than she’d normally be. Her foot caught on one of the steps, sending her sprawling. Caer hit her, catching himself on stairs before he could topple forward, his mouth open.

Aislinn giggled, inching round to face him.

“You all right?” he asked.

His face was inches from hers, his breath warming her face. “Fine...”

He stood up, offering her his elbow. Aislinn clambered back to her feet and scooted up the stairs.

Most of the space on the upper level was taken up by a series of bedrooms, now occupied, and a couple of private rooms. Caer pushed open the door, inspecting the occupants. “Taken,” he announced, turning to the next door. “This one’s free...” He scrunched his forehead. “Umm... Ais? Check this one? I think my weak mortal eyesight is playing tricks on me.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“There’s only the one bed.”

ghness. Aislinn peered inside, making out the outline of one large bed. “V
it?” She crawled inside, too tired to think of much but crawling i
sheets.

Caer was still looking around, as if hoping another bed would pop
of thatnowhere. Aislinn had no idea where the bedrolls were, or any spare b
She was too hazy to care. What was the issue?

“They did this on purpose.”

at the Aislinn shucked off her boots and belts. “They were drunk a
pinchedthinking.”

Caer’s eyes widened as she wrestled out of her trousers, keeping
y withon but her loose shirt and undergarments. His gaze screwed in
be. Herfloorboards. “I will, of course, take the floor.”

r back, “Because I’m a delicate female?”

1 in her “Because I’m the one that can kill you in your sleep.”

Aislinn laughed. “Sure. Let’s pretend I’m not capable of that to
looked at the bed. “Are you a wriggler?”

“No, but—”

.” “Take the left. It’s daft for anyone to sleep on the cold floor when tl
feet andmattress available. We’ll put some blankets or something in between u

“If you’re sure—”

eds, all “Sure I don’t want either one of us to be cold all night long and gru
door toof tomorrow? Pretty sure. Get in.”

second. Caer swallowed, but went around to the other side of the bed. He t
an youhis boots and belt, but kept on everything else, bunching up one
e.” blankets between them.

Aislinn tried not to laugh at his discomfort, reminding herself of v
came from. “We were closer in the cave.”

What of “We would have frozen to death there.”

nto the *Sometimes not touching you feels like freezing to death*, she thought

“Did you say something?”

out of “Did I? I was hoping that was my inside voice.”

edding. Caer barked a laugh. “I... don’t like not being able to touch you,
he said, after a pause.

Aislinn rolled towards him. “Have you tried making a list of where
nd nottouch me when we return to the palace?”

Caer’s gulp was audible. “I may have done.”

nothing “I have quite the list too.”

nto the “Oh?” his voice warbled. “Care to share it?”

“And ruin the surprise?”

“Cruel, torturous creature.”

“I can be...”

o.” She Caer turned towards her. She traced the edges of his profile with her
committing the outline of him to memory. She imagined the feeling
skin beneath hers, of his body pressed to her flesh. Her centre tingled
ere’s atthe residue effects of heat or just his presence in general, she coul
s.” sure.

She could feel his breath on her again. Her own seemed to c
mpy alltowards him, begging to braid with his. Vines, her entire body felt like
vibrating beneath his gaze.

ook off Maybe it was just as well she couldn’t kiss him. Because if she
of thehim... how would she ever disentangle herself?

“Ais?” Caer prompted. “Your stare is very loud.”

where it Aislinn swallowed. “I was thinking it was just as well I can’t kiss yo
He frowned. “How so?”

“Because if you ever kissed me, I think I’d fall in love with you, and I’d dimly fell in love with you, I don’t think I’d ever stop. I think that would be me, that love would reign over me as I reigned over Faerie. I would love all your life and all my life after... long after you were dust.”

either,” For a long moment, Caer stared at her, eyes large and soft, all hot whiskey. “If it were my life at risk, I’d definitely be kissing you right now.”
“What if I’m all right with risking it?”

“I’m not.”

“Yeah,” she said, turning her gaze towards the ceiling, “I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. Because if it was your life you were risking, I wouldn’t want either.”

He ran his hands through his hair. “I... don’t know where we go here.”

er gaze, She leaned back towards him. “I don’t think you’ll hurt me. When I used your powers before, you’ve always been stressed, terrified—”

l—with “You think I’m not now?”

dn’t be She pressed a hand against his chest, keeping to the fabric of his shirt. Her heart thumped against her fingers. “Want to feel mine?”

clamber His hand drifted over her breast, skimming against the cloth. “God, if it was I could touch you.”

She was half-tempted to command him, to glamour him into doing what she wanted. Maybe her power was stronger than his, and she could command his control.

But making someone do something against their will was abhorrent. She would not do it if she knew he wanted it too. It would not be fair. She would not do it.

“Caer...” she whispered, her words brushed with longing.

and if I Half her name, a desperate, murmured, yearning sound followed from her mouth and then his mouth was over hers and all at once they were kissing. I love you moved against her, hot and claiming, his hands drifting to her waist, her back. Her own wrapped around his neck, pooling into his hair. They wanted to inhale him. To consume him. His kiss was wildfire.

Now.” This was foolish, reckless, stupid. She knew all this and she didn’t want to be away from him. It *hurt* not to touch him. Gods, she needed him—all of him.

“Ais...” he murmured against her neck.

“Don’t stop,” she said, aware of the whimper in her voice, “please.” *Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop. Touch me like this forever.*

His tongue pressed against hers, his body hot. The flesh of their stomachs slid together. She needed more hands, more tongues, more teeth—more to explore him, hold him, mark him.

For he was hers and she was his in a way she had belonged to no one else and never would again. He tasted of woodsmoke and earth and sweat. Of passion that slashed through her like a thunderstorm. Heat coiled inside her. His raked her hands down his back—

He shuddered with pain, letting out a low hiss.

“I’m sorry—” she started.

He pulled away, breathing hard, his soft, sullen mouth parted. Her chest raw without his lips on hers.

“We can’t,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Aislinn knelt up in bed. “You were controlling it,” she said. “You’re not... eventrust you.”

Caer shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Really, truly I am. But I can’t risk you.”

om him, Aislinn swallowed, her senses returning. He was right. Of course His lipsright. If the situations were reversed she'd build up a wall between againstbefore risking his life.

ir. She But her soul felt flayed without his body to rest against.

She hugged her shirt to his chest, and rested her head against his care. Itback, mindful of the wound. She wanted to tell him it was all right, neededwords wouldn't form in her mouth. "I understand," she said. "We'll this back in the palace."

She got up from the bed.

Please "Where are you going?"

"I'll squeeze in with Beau. He won't mind. We used to share all t omachswhen we were little."

re ways "Right."

She moved towards the door.

one and "Ais?"

a scent "Yes?"

er. She "You don't hate me, do you?"

Ais froze, stung by his words. "No one who truly knows you cou you, Caer, and certainly not me. I hate what has been done to you. I l circumstances that keep us apart. But you? Never."

hin felt She paused at the door, waiting for him to say something else, but not, and eventually she walked away.

e fine. I



I can't Caer lay in the dark room staring at the ceiling for some time after left, wishing there was a cold river he could jump into—either t

he wash himself down or drown himself, he wasn't fully sure.

How could he have been so *reckless*? He could have killed her. In the mind the haziness of the ale dampening his senses, he could still feel his skin like fire. That kiss... God, that kiss...

Caer had kissed women before. He hadn't kissed anyone like *that* but she had fallen into her like they were made of the same flesh, like he'd erupted and she hadn't have her. It still felt like that, a volcano, a comet, a spool of unravelling silk.

He could not get free of her. He doubted he ever would.

If you ever kissed me, I think I'd fall in love with you, and if I fell in love with you, I don't think I'd ever stop.

How was he ever going to survive her?



"Caerwyn..." a voice called. "It's time to come home, son."

Caer opened his eyes. Owen was standing before him, a hand on his shoulder. He was back in Afelcarreg, in the hall, seated on a throne. He tried to remember the taste of home but great iron manacles sprung up around his wrists and ankles. He struggled against them.

"Don't move, Caer," Owen said. "Don't struggle. You're home now." *Home, home, home.* Nothing about this place was home. Home was the firelight and laughter and shiny cards beneath his fingers, the feel of the forge, the whisper of a woman's smile.

Minerva's hearty chuckle. Diana's laugh. Luna's baking. The sound of Aislinn Magna tinkering in the corner...

And Aislinn. Aislinn's face and voice and presence.

Aislinn. All her.

Never He couldn't stay here. He had to get back.

her on "Owen," Caer cried. "Please. Let me go. I can't stay here."

"Go, boy? Go where?"

t. He'd Outside, a voiceless wind howled. There were no streets, no hou
pt if hefields or mountains—nothing. A dark fog hovered over everything, a
pool ofcloud.

Something rumbled inside it, and yet Caer couldn't shake the feeling
was utterly empty. The sound of nothing.

in love It echoed inside his chest.

"There is nowhere to go," Owen whispered. "And you are king no
must lead these people."

Caer turned to look down into the hall. Guests were arranged on the
dressed in finery. They all turned their heads towards him...

They were shrunken, fleshless skeletons, held together with scraps
Wordless, chattering maws gaped at him, empty eyes stared.

his arm. A hand clutched his arm, paper-thin, a parody of skin.

to move, "You are our king, Caerwyn," Owen's voice came from inside h
strained mouth. "You have to rule us now."

Caer's heart screamed in his chest. "No," he breathed, "no, I don
r."
this."

ne was Owen's hand grew tighter. "Don't worry, boy. You're not alone.
of the must have a queen, after all..."

He pointed a long, skeletal finger at a figure at the end of the hall,
und of in a gown of moths, red hair tumbling down over grey, rotting sk
ribcage lay exposed, her heart still pumping in her chest.

"What's the matter, Caer?" said Aislinn's voice from the corpse's

mouth. “Haven’t you always held my heart?” Her claw-like hand lifted the bloody organ and plucked it from her body, holding it out to him. “It’s yours, Caer. It’s always been yours.”

Caer bolted upright in bed, half screaming, covered in sweat. His eyes were closed, his face pale.

A dream a dream a dream, only a dream.

But like all the others, its claws had sunk in deep. He could still feel the pain of his stepfather’s fingers digging into his skin...

And suddenly Aislinn was there, steadying his arms, telling him to stop and holding his face with her bare hands, her touch slicing through his pain. Youth through thought, through reason—

Her heartbeat pulsed around her, her life force overwhelming. He bolted away from her, scurrying to the other side of the room. “You can’t touch me, you can’t—”

“All right,” Aislinn said, stopping shortly in front of him, palms braced against his skin. “I won’t, I promise, I just... I want to.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Aislinn swallowed. “And I don’t want you to hurt.”

He looked down, and saw the wound on his arm had been healed. He didn’t want to come back like she said she would, even after...

He swallowed, grabbing fistfuls of his hair, curling inward like an animal. A king animal.

“I hate you having to see me like this.” For a moment, Aislinn was silent. Of course she was. She couldn’t say she didn’t mind—of course she did.

She turned towards the bed and picked up one of the blankets. “I’m hollow too,” she admitted, making Caer’s heart tremble. “I hate that you are l

d to theI hate that I can't fix it like I can fix your skin..." Her fingers tig
s yours,around the blanket. "But I hate more that you think I care. That you
prefer to suffer in silence."

is heart She came towards him, holding out the blanket, and draped it o
shoulders.

"I have nightmares too," she said. "Usually about Cass. Sometime
feel hisother things. Failure. Death. Losing control." She tightened the
around him, and slid beside him, not quite touching. "I'm not saying t
breathetrauma competes with yours or even that I know what that's like, I
hadow,saying... I understand being afraid. I understand not wanting others
that part of you, and... maybe we're both wrong? It shouldn't be so te
to admit we're terrified." She swallowed. "I'm embarrassed by m
No, no,failings, but yours... I don't even see them as failings. I just see the
part of you. Silly to hold you in better regard than I hold myself, but.
ared. "Iyou go."

Caer inhaled. "I don't know," he said, not meaning a word of it
fairly spectacular."

Aislinn laughed, a sound that could break apart thunder. "But it
. She'dsense, what you're saying. Because I hold you in higher regard than
myself. Higher than anyone, actually."

injured A pause, solid and insubstantial as shadow, stretched out between th

"Well, don't tell Minerva," Aislinn said eventually. "She might ha
head. Insubordination and all."

lie. She "I think 'crown princess' outranks exiled former one."

"Are you going to tell her that?"

hate it "Absolutely not."

urting. She nudged his shoulder, before scooting upright and collecting sor

ghtened from the pocket of her discarded trousers. She came back to him, tugging one of her gloves. She held out her hand. "Come on," she said. "Let's go back to bed."

ver his "Are you staying?"

"If you'll let me. Beau's a wriggler anyway."

s about She guided him back to the bed and slid them both under the blanket making a half-hearted barricade between them, still holding his hand over that my "You'll overheat," Caer told her.

'm just "It's worth it," she said. "You're worth it, Caer. I know you doubt it to seeknow *why* you doubt it. I know I would too, if I were you. But I'm terrified I would do quite a lot for you, and you're just going to have to accept that on my own Caer breathed, her words brushing against his chest. "All right," he said, wishing more than everything he could hold her, a want that could not be there apart stone. "All right."

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from the pocket of her discarded trousers. She came back to him, tugging on one of her gloves. She held out her hand. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

“Are you staying?”

“If you’ll let me. Beau’s a wriggler anyway.”

She guided him back to the bed and slid them both under the covers, making a half-hearted barricade between them, still holding his hand over it.

“You’ll overheat,” Caer told her.

“It’s worth it,” she said. “*You’re* worth it, Caer. I know you doubt it. I know *why* you doubt it. I know I would too, if I were you. But I’m afraid I would do quite a lot for you, and you’re just going to have to accept that.”

Caer breathed, her words brushing against his chest. “All right,” he said, wishing more than everything he could hold her, a want that could break apart stone. “All right.”

A decorative graphic for a chapter title. It features a large, stylized number '39' in a serif font, centered within a semi-circular arch. The arch is adorned with intricate, black, vine-like scrollwork and floral patterns. Several small, delicate butterflies are scattered around the arch, some appearing to fly. The background consists of thin, bare tree branches extending from the sides. Below the arch, the title 'A MONSTER IN THE DARK' is written in a smaller, elegant serif font, with decorative flourishes at the beginning and end of the line.

39

A MONSTER IN THE DARK

The following day, they descended down another level into caverns that glimmered with obsidian and deep, bubbling pits of tar. Even the air seemed sharper here, the rocks pointed like blades and shining like steel. The slightest movement echoed like thunder.

“Stay alert,” Minerva warned, as steam spurted beneath the floor. “There are a lot of trip hazards, and if you fall... you may not get back up.”

Luna’s wargi deftly leapt out of the way. “This is fun,” she said, her voice high and trembling. “Beats monsters, right?”

The rest of the dwarves groaned. “Why would you say that?” Flora asked. “Inviting trouble! Honestly!”

“I’m trying to be optimistic!”

“Surely you can’t invite trouble just by speaking it?” Beau queried.

The dwarves turned to glare at him.

“Apparently, I am mistaken.”

Yet, despite Luna’s slip-up, nothing happened for most of the morning. No one slipped or fell, and, when the terrain became less treacherous,

monsters they encountered gave them a wide berth.

They stopped to rest in a cave around midday—Aislinn was once relying on the others to keep time—before resuming their quest. A few days later, they came across another ruined settlement—little more than stony huts and a crumbled wall around them. Much of the stone had melted beneath a steady drip of water, the rock resembling wax.

It was not an ideal rest spot. “We’ll press on,” Minerva insisted.

They crept onwards, into a cavern almost pitch-black. Even Aislinn struggled to adjust, and she imagined Beau’s were not much better. A thin, narrow light protruded into the dark, illuminating the faint shadows.

“Min?” Diana asked. “Should we light the torches?”

Minerva stilled. “No,” she said. “They’ll be like a beacon. Trust me, wargis. Aislinn, Beau—would you take the lead?”

They whispered their acceptance, creeping forward towards the hearth party. Hairs stirred on the back of Aislinn’s neck, pricked like the blunt needle. Something scurried along the walls.

They were not alone.

The party moved forward, silently, carefully, the ears of their mounts hissed against their heads. Aislinn could sense hers wanting to growl, but he held back, as if even he knew it would invite danger.

Beau was whispering under his breath, a spell to ward off danger. I can work with something minor, but the energy to repel anything larger...

Aislinn swallowed.

Something stepped into the light, something with large, padded feet. Aislinn drew her breath; a few others did too. “What is it?” Minerva

The light sharpened around the silhouette, and Aislinn hissed at ev

to stop. It was the size of a shire horse with the body of a lion. A
e more tangled mane sprouted around its grotesquely human face, housing wi
w hours and a mouth full of fangs. Thick, leathery wings protruded from its ba
t a few its body ended in a long, barbed tail, like that of a scorpion's.

melted "Manticore," Aislinn announced.

The party sucked in its breath.

"Winged?" Bell asked.

i's eyes "Yes."

Only a "Has it spotted us?"

itest of "I don't think so."

Silence followed.

"Can we avoid it?" Minerva asked.

t in the Aislinn stared at the ground, and the shaft of light ahead depicting
of the cavern. "Maybe," she said. Everything was so difficult to guess
d of the light. "I'm not sure. Beau?"

ish of a "I think so."

"We should evade," Minerva said. "In this light... it's too risky."

"I've got the anti-venom!" Flora whispered.

ints flat "Enough for all our mangled corpses?"

lding it "Ah—no. Fair point."

"Lead us," Minerva urged them.

t might Aislinn nodded, realising after the action that that was widely unhe
the dark, but the words were stuck in her throat. The wargis unde
creeping forward after her. She was not used to this, used to guidi
many people. She'd never led a party of so many, and certainly not s
asked. she cared about.

everyone "Steel yourself," came the words of her parents, overlapping with th

A thick, familiar tones of Miriam, her mentor, the captain of the knights.

de eyes She could not fail them. She would not.

ck, and She stuck as close as she could to the walls, though the wargis
from them and the rock *moved*. Not rock. Scuttling, wriggling insects
as her face—but she dared not look for long.

Onwards, they marched, slow and careful. The light inched closer.

They were not yet past the manticore.

A crack sounded behind her, followed by a yelp. Luna let out a soft

Aislinn spun round; the wargi's paw had disappeared into an empty
hole, the rock giving way as easily as tissue paper.

Aislinn hissed under her breath. She glanced at the manticore. Its f
turned towards the noise, but there was no recognition, not yet. Its e
the end was not as good as hers.

s in this She gestured at Beau to keep the group moving and slid from her
back to Luna.

“It's all right,” she whispered, “stay calm.”

The rest of the party carried on moving, all apart from Dillon, w
dismounted to assist even though he had no idea what was going on.
whispered instructions in the dark as they tugged at the wargi'
inwardly cursing with every word uttered.

The manticore was getting closer.

lpful in “Get Luna off,” she said finally. She didn't want to abandon the wa
erstood, they couldn't risk Luna's life over it. Caer would never forgive h
ng this Aislinn would never forgive *herself*.

o many Dillon nodded, hands reaching for her, helping her out of the saddl
walked forward as Aislinn tried once more in vain to free the wargi.

ie faint, It let out a slow, desperate whimper.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered back, “I’m so sorry.”

A terrific crash clanged through the cavern. Aislinn’s gaze spun to the side, shirking—Dillon and Luna had both fallen through the floor.

The manticore lunged.

Luna screamed. A massive paw rose up. Dillon twisted in the air, covering Luna’s body with his own. Claws raked down his back. Beau raced towards them, but the wings flared out, knocking her to the ground. Aislinn cried.

“Dillon!” Luna screamed. The manticore yanked him out of the hole and bit into his shoulder, spitting him out a second later. Aislinn streamed forward, yanking Luna down to the ground, turning just in time to meet another swipe with her blade.

“Ais!” Beau raced towards her, the others standing in the line, gazing sightlessly at the scene before them, weapons raised, unable to act.

Beau skidded to a stop in the middle of the space, and flung his hat into the air.

“*Luminous,*” he breathed.

Light erupted from his fingers like a flare, shooting up into the ceiling of the cavern...

And straight into the hundreds of bats sleeping there.

The second that it took them to react seemed to stretch into a lifetime. Aislinn’s vision went everywhere at once, to the horror on Beau’s face, to the dismay of the dwarves, to Luna, scrambling through the shattered floor. Dillon, standing beneath the monstrous maw of the manticore, his eye torn halfway from its socket.

Aislinn charged.

The bats charged, too.

Beau slid into battle, conjuring a carpet of fire and flinging into the

an enormous scythe, dividing the manticore from the cloud of bats.
wards it Arrows flew. Aislinn sprang into action, slicing along the man
belly. The razor-sharp tail whipped round before she could thrust, sla
her against the ground.

e hole, Fire flailed above, the flare fading. Beau could not keep this up fore
Aislinn The tail came again, stinger at the ready. Dillon flung himself ag
nd. holding tightly. Aislinn scrambled to her feet, grappling for her sword.

The fire vanished. The enormous wings shook.

only to Diana's grapple sprung out of nowhere, wrapping around a singul
i out of She swung the chain around a pillar and pulled, holding it in place.

Darkness blinked in and out, illuminated only by the faint pulse of
lancing next burst of fire, each growing dimmer and longer between attacks
were too many bats, too many *things*...

ands up The manticore strained against its bonds, sending down showers c
Aislinn swerved out of the way of its wings and paws, slicing wh
could, diving when she could not. She could not get to its belly.

entre of Caer arrived at her side, tearing through one of the wings. A secon
darkness came again. She heard Caer cry as the manticore batted him
sliding into the dark.

an age. She skidded towards him. He was unhurt, but his eyes stared sightl
e, to the black ceiling. He could not see in this dark. He should not have cor
ior, and "*Visio nocturna*," she whispered, and blew in his eyes.

his arm A simple, ancient spell for night vision. It would not last long.
didn't have the power for it or any of the ingredients that might tet
spell to him for longer.

But it was better than nothing, and she could not help the others.

air like She raced back to the manticore, Dillon still holding on for dear li

vaulted onto its back while Caer kept it occupied. It struggled, trying to get her off. Desperate, she drove her sword into its flank. Not a killing blow if she could remove it—

The creature roared. It finally flung Dillon off its tail. The bat leapt forward—

Caer leapt up, seizing the tail in his hands. “Move!”

Her sword was stuck fast. Another jerk and she flew to the floor, landing awkwardly on her arm. She dived for Caer’s sword, but a huge paw caught her to the ground. It held her there, her throat pinned between two claws.

The huge, fanged face hovered over her.

Aislinn struggled, hands moving between her neck and her body, searching for the rest of her blades, refusing to give up.

She couldn’t reach them. She couldn’t *move*. She was going to—

The creature’s eyes rolled back in its sockets, and it slumped to the floor.

Aislinn scrambled free. Caer stood at the end of the monster, still holding its tail, panting hard. Caer who’d raced into battle, blind as he was, to get away, venomous tail.

She walked towards him as the others finished off the bats and grabbed their weapons. “Why did you do that?” she asked.

Caer winced, breathing carefully. “I’m afraid I would do a lot worse to you, and you’re just going to have to accept it.”

Aislinn Aislinn leaned forward, resting her head against his shoulder, her hair grazing his back, only slightly, as if a stronger action might shatter completely. “All right,” she said. “All right.”

Dillon came back holding two of the wargis. The others were terrified, and back, hopping out of the way of the scuttling creatures on the floor.

to buck “We can’t dawdle here for long,” Minerva said swiftly. “Looks like now, but Manticore was keeping some other nasties at bay. Have we got the war-

“One’s dead,” reported Dillon, voice careful.

rb shot Minerva groaned, too stressed to be sad. “Luna, double up with me. No, don’t complain at me, Mags, you’re the lightest. Come on.”

Aislinn turned back to Caer, resting against the wargi Dillon had landed him. “Can you get up by yourself?”

swiped “I think so.” He dug his foot into the stirrup and swung, each muscle on giant His skin gleamed with the effort. Aislinn inched forward, hand on his hip instead of his fingers. “I’m fine,” he insisted.

The scuttling increased. There was no time to argue. The other arching already racing out of the cavern. She scrambled up onto her own mount, charged after them, keeping her eyes on Caer the entire time. The wargi had another wound in his shoulder, and he was obviously in pain—massive pain on the floor. because they could not stop.

holding She wanted to. She wanted to stop them all so badly. She wanted to grab a open a portal and take him somewhere safe and never let him leave the cavern again, no matter the cost. No matter if it meant he hated her, or never let her control his powers, or they could never touch again.

But of course, she did not.

rise, for They rode through caverns, past tar pits, over bridges so brittle each was treacherous, slowing only when they had to, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and their enemies. Aislinn’s heart stayed in her throat, and her gaze on Caer. He sat rigid in his saddle like a piece of wire.

rickling Finally, they halted. Minerva pulled them into the first cave she could find, skidding the wargis to a stop and belting out instructions to erect sor-

like the of barricade.

gis?” “Are we safe now?” Caer asked, voice shaking.

Bell looked around. “Ought to be. Why do you ask?”

Magna. “I might have a slight problem...” he said, and swayed on his feet pitching forward into Aislinn’s arms.

l given She screamed his name as the others rushed forward, sliding him ground, his body buckling. Aislinn’s hands went towards his shirt, pe the taut. away from his skin. He cried out as her hands touched him—from saddlepain, it was impossible to tell.

“Caer, Caer, tell me where it hurts—”

s were “Back,” he moaned. “Stung.”

unt and Aislinn rolled him over with the help of the others. A large, swolle re was pulsed beside his spine, oozing liquid.

sking it Aislinn paled. “I can heal—”

“It’s poisoned,” Flora said, stopping her hand. “Don’t.”

to tear She pressed her fingers to the wound. Caer started to thrash.

at place “Stand aside, lass,” said Minerva, “If the manticore venom does earnt to him, killing you might.”

Someone pulled her aside. Someone warm and tall and familiar voice she knew better than her own. Beau. He gripped her arms, tr ch stepforce her into a hug, whispering soft, stupid lies in her ear.

h space “It’s going to be fine.”

. in her *You don’t know that.*

f coiled “Don’t worry.”

I have to.

ld find, “He’ll be all right, Ais. He will be.”

ne kind *He has to be. He has to be. He has to be.*

He convulsed on the floor, his head in Minerva's lap, the others holding him down as he thrashed. Flora hovered over him, trying to administer venom. His skin was covered in a ghastly sheen of sweat.

Before *I should be there*, she realised dimly. *I should be the one holding him*

She knew something was wrong. She'd seen it in his face. She didn't believe him when he said he was fine. She didn't think it was this bad. She should have known. She should have felt it.

Fear or Flora squeezed the anti-venom into the wound using a long needle. He screamed.

Stop it, stop it, you're hurting him!

She turned her eyes away from the wound and what Flora was doing, focusing on his face. His awful, beautiful, contorted face.

He rolled over and vomited on the ground.

"Caer!"

Luna stroked back his hair. The convulsing slowed to a steady thrash. Flora continued her work on the wound, puss and blood oozing onto the ground.

Caer still screamed.

Whose Aislinn wrenched forward from Beau's grip, yanking on her gloves. She crushed down on her knees and seized Caer's hand.

Never more had she wanted to be able to lie.

You're all right, Caer. You're going to be fine.

"Caer," she said, as steadily as she could. "Look at me. *Look at me*. Don't think about anything else. You have to be all right, do you hear me? *You have to be.*"

A faint flicker of recognition passed across his eyes, and then he stopped moving, once more, sickeningly still.

holding Aislinn glanced at Flora.

er anti- “Quick,” she said, “whilst he’s out. Seal this.”

Aislinn leaned over and pressed her hand to the mangled wound. She sealed it shut. Flora pressed her fingers to Caer’s neck, and sighed. “It’s just going to be fine.”

ad. She Aislinn let out a quiet shriek and collapsed into Caerwyn’s arms, bawling her fingers into his shirt as he was rolled over onto his back. Caer dissolved into bitter, choking sobs.

Someone tugged on the end of her hair.

“Ais,” Caerwyn breathed, and promptly passed out again.

doing, “Well,” said Minerva after a pause, looking older than she remembered, “that seems like enough excitement for one day. Let’s get back to camp.”



shiver.

into the

They made up a bed for Caerwyn, cleaned him up, and moved him carefully into it. Aislinn held his hand almost the entire time, not leaving his side even when dinner was offered. She picked at the offerings Beau brought her side, but barely had the stomach for food.

“You won’t do him any good by starving yourself, girl,” Minerva chided.

“I know this, but my body does not. How are *you* managing to eat?”

“Dwarves!” came a muffled, food-filled chorus.

. Don’t

ou have

“We can eat through *anything*,” Luna explained.

Magna made a motion with her hands, Diana translating. “And I’ve lumped through it, too.”

A laugh passed around the campfire, but it felt like it was missing—even two.

and, and Bell yawned. “Well, I think I’m ready to settle.”

. “He’s “Me too,” declared Minerva.

One by one, the rest of the dwarves followed suit, falling into middle,bedrolls. Luna stayed up the longest, chatting to Dillon over the ca ck. Shetheir heads bent curiously together. Beau stayed up too, trying to Aislinn calm without trying to let on that’s what he was doing, and largely at both. Aislinn still appreciated the gesture.

Eventually, he and Luna both gave up and sunk into slumber.

Aislinn “He may not wake,” Dillon told her, when silence had overtaken ev set upelse. “I can keep watch. I’ll wake you if he—”

Aislinn shook her head. “I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to.”

Dillon smiled. “I can understand that.”

“Have you ever...” she started, but then stopped abruptly. “Never m

arefully it, though. You have the same... ferocity.”

ide, not “That’s a compliment, right?”

ught to “Oh, most definitely.”

ided. Aislinn could see why her mother had been friends with Dillon. Sh see why *she* would be friends with him, too. He reminded her a bit of I

She wondered what life would be like when Dillon returned to Would they be able to return him to full life, or would he spend the res existence trapped like this? What if Caer’s powers had a limit, or an d sleep date? What if Dillon only had a little bit of extra time and they were it on this mission—

“You look worried,” Dillion interrupted.

a voice “How irritating. I was hoping to keep my thoughts to myself.”

“I apologise then, for noticing them.”

“I don’t want to worry you.”

“I’m already worried,” he said, which was all the confirmation she needed. He went quiet for a moment, staring into the embers of the fire. “Will you tell my father, if I die again? Will you tell Juliana?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Do you want to?”

“I don’t want you to be a secret. I’d like them to know that I had a chance to meet you, to give your story an epilogue, but...”

“But?”

Aislinn swallowed. “I don’t want you to have an epilogue, Dillon. Not this one. The one you’re worried about. I think you deserve a better ending.”

Dillon sighed. “So did Cerridwen.”

Aislinn paused. “How do you know about... what *do* you know about your grandmother?”

Dillon frowned, brows tightly furrowed. He squinted, like the thought he had was escaping him. “I... I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“Something... something happened to her...”

“Did my mother tell you—”

“No,” he said, still frowning, “no, she didn’t, but...”

“Dillon?”

Caer stirred behind her, and all thoughts of anyone else—everything she had been thinking about—were quickly abandoned. She heard Dillon getting up behind her, moving away to give them a semblance of privacy.

“Caer?”

“What angel hovers over me? What celestial beauty showers upon me?”
Aislinn barked a teary laugh. “Well, I was going to ask if you’re a fairy, but you clearly must be.” She pressed a gloved hand to his cheek. “How do you feel? Do you need anything?”

Caer raised a hand to her face, his fingers skirting over her skin and resting on a loose lock of hair. “Pretty good, all things considering.”

“I healed your wound, but there may still be some lingering effects from the venom. Flora might know more—”

Caer caught her sleeve. “I don’t want Flora.”

Aislinn stilled. “Right.”

She grabbed his hand in both of hers, kissing the top of her own knuckles instead of his. “I’m going to lie down on you now,” she said, “very carefully.” Try not to move.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She slotted herself against him, resting her head against his cheek. His fingers skimmed his bandages, flirting with his skin, daring herself to lean against just a tiny fraction of him. She held back, breathing in the scent of him instead—dirt and sweat and *Caer*.

“I hate how much I like you,” she whispered.

“That’s a shame,” he said, his hand winding through her hair, twirling the ends through his fingers. “Because I rather like how much I like you.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

“Terrified,” he admitted. “I still like it, though. Don’t you?”

“No,” she said, “yes. I don’t know. Apparently, I can both hate and love you.” She paused. “Not you, though. You I only like. It might be easier if I could love you, but...”

“Not as much fun?”

ne—” “How can you sound so cocky in your present state?”

ll right, “You think I’m cocky?”

low are “You definitely have your moments.”

“Am I supposed to pretend I’m not attractive? Would you pre
til theydemure, princess? Swooning in your presence?”

“I would prefer you at full strength, back in the palace, where I can
s of therip off all your clothes.”

Caer’s throat bobbed.

“That silenced you, I see.” She angled her face towards him. “
suppose... your magic is tapped out right now, is it?”

nuckles Caer shook his head. “I’m tired, but... I can still feel it, you know?”

refully. “I do,” she said. “Sleep, if you’re still tired.”

“But you—”

“Will stay here until you’ve nodded off and scoot back to my ow
st. HerShe nodded a few feet away. “Right over there. Not far.”

o claim “Right,” he said. He squeezed her tightly, and then his arms lo
of him “Ais?”

“Yes?”

“I think I’m falling in love with you.”

ling the

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like it.”

didn’t,

ffer me

n safely

I don't

n bed.”

osened.



40
A VISION IN THE HOT SPRINGS

I think I'm falling in love with you.

She'd wanted to tease him, to play on the word 'think', to say, "Why, you're not already there?" but the words hadn't come. Her couldn't be feigned.

And thankfully, before he could wonder at her silence, he'd fallen sleep.

His confession haunted her most of the night and well into the morning they packed up to leave. She didn't know why it hovered around her like a ghost, why she felt more dread than pleasure. Hadn't she said almost the same, just the night before?

But it was harder hearing it from him. Everything was growing solid and less reversible by the day.

She caught his eyes over breakfast, but he'd only smiled at her. *It didn't mean it, she wanted to say. Say it was the effects of the potion I plied you with. You are mortal. Lie to me.*

Because one of them needed to. One of them needed to be able to
this was little more than friendship with a side of attraction if they
survive this.

You can't have me forever, she told whatever force held her in it.
*You can't. I have much to do after we say goodbye. I am more than
feel.*

Beau sidled up to her as they mounted the wargis. “Caer seems to b
well.”

“Flora’s skills and a bit of faerie magic seemed to have worked won

“So it appears.” Beau chewed his lip. “And how are *you* doing?”

“I wasn’t hurt.”

“I don’t have much experience in the romance department... well
this degree, as I am, by all accounts, an excellent lover—”
pleasure and
delight

“Really didn’t need to know that Beau, thanks.”

“But watching someone you care for in such pain... can’t be easy.
back to
imagine you’re all right just because he seems to be.”

Aislinn swallowed. “But he’s always in pain,” she said. “I think he
ning as
until he doesn’t feel like his powers own him any more. And there is r
r like a
nothing I can do about that, not even be there for him because...” She
lost the
her words aching. “I have never been so unsure in my life. Nev
uncertain. I don’t even know what’s the truth.”

Her mother told her that sometimes—only sometimes—she env
trouger
ability to only speak the truth. She said it would have been harder t
say you
herself that way. Aislinn was not so sure, and she did not want to t
s Flora
truth by attempting to speak it.

I hate this I hate this I hate him.

Beau shrugged. “You’ll figure it out.”

pretend “Beau!”

were to “What?”

“That’s so unhelpful!”

s snare. He threw up his hands. “I’m seventeen!” he declared. “I’m sorry
what I out of wisdom to spout! You’re the older one!”

They both exhaled loudly, and then started to snigger.

e doing “Sorry,” he added. “But, what I mean to say, is... I believe that y
figure it out. You’re smart, and brave... and a whole load of other thi
ders.” embarrassed to admit about my sister. Also, I’m a romantic, and this d
a happy ending.”

Aislinn smiled at him, and turned to watch Caer’s back.

, not to *But what if it doesn’t have a happy ending? What if it just has an e
What if our future holds nothing but pain?*

I don’t



will be Caer sucked in his breath as they descended down into another level
nothing, the rock glittered like gold and entire caverns lit up like halls of gem
sighed, Parts of the ceiling were ink-black, veined with blue-purple and studd
er this white, giving it the appearance of starlight.

“Crystal,” Bell explained, as they plodded through. “Largely wort
pretty though. Good for building.”

ied the There were underground cathedrals, a beauty that felt strange to be
o lie to by nature’s hand alone. It made Caer understand how fae could wors
rial the world like the mortals worshipped gods, made him want to drop to hi
in prayer.

“Look alive, lad,” Minerva called. “You’re walking your wargi wall.”

Caer murmured an apology and steered his mount back on track, I’m allhimself almost shoulder-to-shoulder with Aislinn. They hadn’t really to each other since last night. Normal conversations were be something harder and harder to have. He felt like every time they spou willsnipped off a bit more of his soul, and he didn’t want to give her that ngs I’mwith an audience around them.

eserves After dark, when they were alone, he was defenceless.

He did not mind as much as he used to. Aislinn could strip off armour. She could strip off *everything*.

ending? The back of his neck heated at the thought.

He really hoped they found the Mirror soon and got back to A quickly.

He drew up next to Bell. “How much longer until we rea destination?” he asked her.

l where Bell consulted the map. “Hard to say,” she said. “There’s no 1stones. location. Aeron believes it to be *somewhere* on the floor beneath this c ed with the exact location is non-existent. Could be there by tomorrow, co exploring for a week. Who knows!”

hless— Caer groaned, but then his thoughts stilled, focusing on the Mirror in they had not done for several days. Keen as he was to get back, w carved really the right call?

ship the “Bell,” he said, “this mirror...”

s knees “What of it?”

“I can’t help but worry that, no matter what he said, this Aeron pers use it for nefarious means.”

into a Bell snorted.

“I mean it—”

finding “Well, of course he does,” Bell continued. “This fae appears spokennowhere and starts advising Venus that she needs a secret mirror burie comingdeep? It’s very suspicious.”

oke she “So why are we getting it? I didn’t have to stay there—”

t power “How are we going to find out his plans unless we bring it back?”

Caer blinked. “Why are we giving him the potentially dangerous mi

“The Mirror is hard to get, not impossible. He would have found all histhat didn’t use us. This way, we get a front row seat. What’s the :
dwarven proverb?”

“Um, drinking is good?”

valinth Bell narrowed her eyes. “No.”

“Braids shall never go out of fashion?”

ch our “Try again.”

“Teasing Caer is the funniest of all past times?”

precise Bell chuckled. “Good guess. No. The seventh dwarven proverb is
me, butyour friends close—”

ould be “And your enemies closer. Of course.”

Bell leaned across and ruffled his hair. “Fancy you thinking your o:
n a wayBell wouldn’t have thought this through.”

vas this “You aren’t *that* old, Bell—”

“I’m three-hundred-and-ninety-nine.”

“Right. Keep forgetting.”

“And far from daft.”

son will “I’m sorry I ever doubted.”

She shot him a wink, and then urged her wargi forward to join her

the tail end of the party. Caer's gaze drifted, as it had a habit of
towards Aislinn, conversing ahead of him with Luna, g
out of conspiratorially. He watched the creases of her mouth when she laugh
d in the sway and shimmer of her hair, the way she sat, the curves of her aga
saddle...

He shook his head. The sooner they got back to Avalinth, the better.



ror?"

l a way
seventh

A while later, they passed by a series of steaming pools. The
glimmered against the still waters like a dark rainbow, casting c
shadow along the rocky walls. Crystal flowers bloomed on the surface
the cavern with the scent of honey and wildflowers.

"Oh, yes, hot springs!" Diana hooted. "Who votes we should rest l
the night?"

"It's barely afternoon..." Minerva grumbled.

, 'keep
could do with a break."

ld Aunt
"I'm fi—" started Caer, but stopped abruptly when he saw the faces
towards him. "I mean, 'ow'. Yes. A break. Definitely. Without it, I n
survive the night."

"Excellent," said Diana. "Show of hands?"

Everyone apart from Minerva shot their hands into the air. She sig
seems I am outvoted. Very well. Ladies, shall we take the bigger on
end? For the sake of the mortal men in our group. Dwarves aren'
fussed about such things."

wife at

doing, The women headed off, and the boys turned to the pool in front of
jiggling quickly stripping off with a clatter of buckles and swords. Caer tried
ied, the think about Aislinn removing her clothes as he sunk into the blissful w
inst the “Divine,” sighed Beau, sliding in after him and drifting to the other
the pool. Dillon followed after, a little sheepishly. He sunk into the
until only the mottled skin of his neck and shoulders was visible.
ragged stitches protruded from his chest, across his shoulder, and down
back. Caer had some dim memory of the manticore chomping down on
He’d bear those marks forever. They wouldn’t even be able to take
crystals
stitches. How much more of this could he endure and still survive
coloured
much would he want to?

, filling Caer kept his distance from both of his companions. “Wouldn’t
risk unaliving you,” he said. “Um, again, in your case, Dillon.”
ere for “I may not be the smartest person, but I know that ‘unaliving’ is
word.”

like he “Believe me, it fits.”
Caer stretched out against one of the rocks, flexing his aching n
Beau looked at him, and then down sharply, hugging his legs to his bo
; turned “Maybe I should have bathed alone...” he murmured.

may not A purr sounded from across the pool. Caer glanced up, and saw
seated on one of the rocks, staring at them all. She was a very odd
utterly nonplussed by all the battle going on around them, even more
hed. “It
than the battle-reared wargis.

e at the “I’m not sure I like that cat,” he remarked.
t really Beau pouted defensively. “What’s wrong with her?”
“She’s not exactly cat-like... She looks at you like she knows things
“You aren’t very familiar with cats, are you?” He shook his head. “]

f them, about her, anyway. I think it's time to tease Dillon about Luna."

l not to Dillon looked down into the steamy water, and Caer was sure, if h
ater. normal, functioning heart, he would have been blushing.

side of "She's as sweet as the muffins she makes," he mumbled.

e water "You can't even taste her muffins," Beau said, frowning.

Great, "It doesn't matter. They're the sweetest, bestest muffins ever."

own his "Bestest is not a word."

on him. Dillon snorted softly.

out his "What?" Beau frowned.

!/? How "I can't remember if you remind me of neither of your parents or
 them. Correcting grammar though... that's something they both use
want to when we were at school together. I remember they once corrected min
 same time and they were both *so angry* about it. It was probably one
s not a first things they ever had in common."

 "It's so strange that that was just a few years ago for you."

 "You're telling me."

muscles. "But back to Luna," Beau prompted. "Anything going on there?"

dy. Dillon did not meet his eyes. His body seemed to shrink in the water
 not sure I'm in a good position to court her with... you know." He sh
Hecate his massive, mottled shoulders. "I can't even touch her. Or, you know
l feline, but I can't feel it. And it might be unpleasant for her to be with someone
relaxed dead."

 Beau went quiet for a moment, before skirting a little closer. "If i
you don't *smell* dead," he said. "And I'm sure we could cast some
tangible glamours when we're back in Faerie. If you wanted. I'm n
:." what we can do about the not being able to feel business but... it'
Enough hopeless situation. Nothing is."

Dillon nodded glumly, but Caer could tell he didn't fully believe he had a spark of hope still felt marred by difficulties. True happiness unlikely.

"Did I tell you that Aoife composed a ballad in your honour?" continued, voice bright.

Caer had no idea who Aoife was, but Dillon's eyes shone at the "She did?"

"Very stirring. Very moving. How did the chorus go again? *Ser Dillon was brave and true, a knight of the heart, through and through. It took both of us to bring him down, and now—*"

"He's buried beneath the ground," Dillon finished.

Beau blinked. "Did Aislinn tell you?"

Dillon shook his head. "No. No, she didn't, but... I know it. I've heard it." "How is that possible?"

"I... I saw her..."

Dillon rubbed his temples, as if trying to squeeze out a thought. He began to shake. He pitched forward in the water. Beau sprang from his perch. "I'm hauling him upright, where his body thrashed and foamed in the water, rugged white and rolling.

"It's happening, Caer thought, fears fracturing, we're finally losing her, I can't remember her name so..."



It helps,

Dillon floated in a dark, warm place. It was like he was lying at the bottom of the lake in summer, watching the light drift in dappled shafts from above. He had done this before, long ago, with someone by his side. He couldn't remember her name. It didn't matter.

ve him. Nothing mattered anymore. Pain wasn't even a word. All he knew v
seemed he was safe, and he wasn't alone. Even his own name didn't seem to
but something still stirred inside him when he heard the court bard
" Beau'Dillon the brave, loyal and true'. He watched a girl with tawny h
flowers on a statue of a person he thought he knew. Her hand was tight
: name. arm of an older man, whose features matched the one made of stone.

"I miss him," said the girl. "Is that rude of me to say when he was y
 Dillon he Son, Dillon realised. *He was your son. I was your—*

k a king No, he was not anything now. He was everything and nothing.

"No, lass," said the man, his mouth fixed in a worn smile, "I'm g
miss him, too."

Years passed in the blink of an eye, decades eclipsing into seconds.
ard it." a hundred moments in the palace, a hundred balls and revels and da
thousand patrols. He saw tournaments and tears and laughter.

So much laughter.

is body The tawny-haired girl had two children with a dark-haired princ
is spot, happy babies that ran about the castle, shrieking and laughing and
er, eyes each other with wooden swords from the minute they could hold them
they—rocked their cradles when they slept, made them hammocks fro
im. limbs, shielded them during games of hide-and-seek.

When their hands reached out to touch them, they could feel aga
touches of the prince and princess were sunshine and rainstorms.

We are yours, and you are ours. We are one.

ttom of Names were spoken in the castle, but they need not matter
ove. He consciousness that Dillon had become. People were more colours and
ouldn't and feelings—not words. Words didn't matter.

They watched the children grow, watched their triumphs and f

was that watched them fight and laugh and make up and do it all over again
matter, wiped tears from their cheeks, blanketed them from grief.

sing of *Ours, ours, ours to protect.*

hair lay Dillon had seen it all. Every moment in Beau and Aislinn's life.
it in the been there.

In the walls, in the earth—he had been there.

our—" In the *vines*.



lad you

Dillon spluttered up in the water. Aislinn was there, holding his head.

He saw hands hovered over him. Luna's too, warming his chest. She was the
thing he came to feeling anything.

nces, a

"Steady there," said Beau, breathing a sigh of relief as Dillon
himself. "We thought we might have lost you for a moment."

ce, two

"I was there."

beating

"Come again?"

1. He—

"In the castle. I was there in the castle, watching you grow up."

m their

Aislinn and Beau blinked at him. So did everyone else.

in. The

"I know it sounds impossible, but I was there. I remember the sor
Aoife would sing to you, the colour of your childhood blankets, he
named your first sword *Blackbriar*, that you had a stuffed horse called

"All right, that's enough!" said Aislinn, stepping away.

to the

Caer raised a shaking hand. "I would really like to know about A
stuffed horse," he said, "but I would also like to know: what on Earth i
on here?"

shapes

failures,

1. They “I was in the vines,” Dillon explained. “I was there, I was part of the I wasn’t alone.”

Silence followed, punctuated only by the steady drip-drip of the water. He hadcat meowed from the rocks.

“The vines,” said Aislinn eventually.

“Yes.”

“You were... in them?”

“Yes.”

Beau pursed his lips. “Most people think the vines hold the soul of the First Queen,” he said. “Or a part of it. What if it’s more than that?”

Beau’s closest “You think that every soul in Faerie—”

Beau shook his head. “No,” he said. “Maybe not *every* one. But what if my Father say he buried Dillon in?”

righted Aislinn’s eyes widened. “The *vines*,” she said. “They didn’t just preserve your body, they preserved your soul, and when Caer’s magic worked on your body, it joined you back together.” She clapped her hands to her mouth. “Were you truly there? The whole time?”

He nodded.

igs that Her eyes gleamed. “I’d hug you, but I’m a bit naked right now.”

ow you Dillon suddenly realised that they were *all* a bit naked right now. The water covered everyone up to the chest, but that was still... a lot of bodies in fairly close proximity.

Mr—” And Luna’s.

aislinn’s He was very grateful he was no longer capable of blushing, even as going also meant he was incapable of other, considerably more fun things that required a rush of blood.

“I had a dream like this once,” said Beau, who, unlike the other

em, and making no attempt to hide himself beneath the water. “My sister was
though.”

er. The Aislinn’s lip wrinkled. “Beau?”

“Yes?”

“Stop talking.”

“Right. Yes. Very good.”

Minerva coughed. “I think this is probably a good time to return
pools and get dressed again. Are we in agreement?”

Titania,



hat did Their sojourn in the hot springs cut short, Minerva insisted they fit in
more hours of travelling, and they set off once again before setting u
in a small, easily defensible cavern. They had long since run
reserve settlements and houses, and Aislinn could not shake the feeling th
ce your were very, very deep indeed.

1. “You

She kept glancing over at Dillon as they sat around the campf
seemed to have recovered from whatever had overtaken him in the po
the revelation that Dillon had been in the vines, watching their lives f
entire childhoods, was bewildering to say the least.

w. The

f naked

No wonder she’d felt drawn to him. It was more than her parents’
It was the feeling of familiarity and home that his presence brought
always been connected to the vines. Of course she was connected to hi

if that

gs that

Something crept into the entrance of the cave. Aislinn stiffened, but
when she beheld the creature—a small, round, tubby thing with large
eyes and a mane of firelight. It looked like a bear cub dipped in flames

rs, was

She whispered for the others.

It wasn't in it, "Lava lion!" cried Luna, clapping her hands in glee. "Oh my, it's so cute!"
"Is it dangerous?" Aislinn asked.

"Completely benign," Bell reported. "Usually very friendly, too. Look at this little here, little fellow. Have a gnaw on this bone."

The creature crept into the circle, winding its way through people's legs on its journey towards the offering. The flames licked at Aislinn's fingers, but she didn't notice, too enraptured to be surprised. The heat was not so painful as it should have been, but it was not to be surprised, warm and tingling, largely aesthetic—a way to ward off predators without damaging them.

It grabbed the bone from Bell's outstretched fingers and scooted away, tumbling into Caer's legs like an overgrown kitten.

The party laughed.

Caer bent down to pet it, fingers twirling round its curved ears and under its chin. The lava lion swiped, no doubt thinking he meant to eat out of Caer's hand.

Caer's hand spasmed. The lava lion went out like a light, as quickly as a flame in water. Its body slumped to the floor, grey and still—

But only for a few seconds.

Then, it started to move, its limbs flexing, back surging—

Bell launched forward and skewered it through the neck, twisting his body until the head popped off.

Finally, all fell still, like sound had been leached from the world.

Caer got up and marched off.

Every eye in the space turned to the floor. Diana removed the corpse and started offering people freshments.

Aislinn's eyes could still make out Caer standing out there in the distance. She turned back towards the fire.

She followed him, not slowing until she reached his side, until the

cute!” perfectly still beside one another, staring out into the dark cavern below

“I didn’t mean to hurt it.”

“Come “Of course you didn’t.”

“It just slipped out—”

legs on “I know.”

ers as it “With the manticore I was able to control it. It didn’t even come back. I’ve been practising with Dillon and I *still can’t keep it in.*”

“It’s not your fault.”

d back, “It’s too big for me,” he said. “I just... I can feel it. Like it wants to come out, all the time. It’s a monster in my chest. I’m never going to be able to control it. I’ll have to stay in Avalinth forever.”

tickling Aislinn’s throat trembled. “You can’t. You can’t stay there. Not forever.”

steal its “No? And why not? I love the dwarves. They’ve been a second family to me. Avalinth is safe and exciting. I can find a master blacksmith to teach me the trade. There’s no reason I can’t be perfectly happy here.”

Aislinn swallowed. “You love other things, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like... like the sky,” she whispered, “like horses, and the smell of earth and bladegrass and flowers... like real stars and fresh air and the sun, Caer. You deserve more than earth and stone.” She paused, gathering her thoughts, unable to accept that Caer would never be able to go outside again. “I’ve seen you out there, Caer. I’ve seen the way you are outside, the way you breathe. Lunamore relaxes easily in the woods, the way your shoulders relax in the sun. You deserve to sleep each night beneath a sky of stars, and all the joys of the world are less than you are worth. This... this desire to stay here forever... you’re trying to punish yourself. I know why. I understand.”

She stood

n. why. But I wish I could make you see yourself as I do. I wish I could
you believe that you don't deserve this."

Caer swallowed. He turned towards Aislinn, bringing his face so close
hers that she could count every fleck of light in those starry eyes of his
am I supposed to avoid kissing you after you say something like that?"
ck. I've His breath brushed against her cheek, and she angled her lips toward
—only to kiss cold air a second later.

"But I must, Ais, I must."

spring
able to

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ever."
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oughts,
ve seen
breathe
... You
swelled
to stay
erstand

why. But I wish I could make you see yourself as I do. I wish I could make you believe that you don't deserve this."

Caer swallowed. He turned towards Aislinn, bringing his face so close to hers that she could count every fleck of light in those starry eyes of his. "How am I supposed to avoid kissing you after you say something like that?"

His breath brushed against her cheek, and she angled her lips towards his—only to kiss cold air a second later.

"But I must, Ais, I must."

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41
THE MIRROR

The next day, with Caer still quiet and Aislinn wishing there was something she could do, they descended down onto the final level. The place where their map ran out. No dwarf had ventured below. There were no more stairs, no whispers of mines or carts or technology of any kind. No settlements, no outposts.

Nothing.

It was like descending into the night sky, only a sky devoid of stars, stormy, silent dark. The stone was blue and veined with black and red. The foliage had disappeared, replaced instead with giant thorn-like plants with thorns as shiny as patent leather and wide and sharp as scythes, glass and obsidian. No one spoke, as if fearful of their own echoes. Not a word passed between them for the longest of times.

“I don’t usually say this,” Minerva said eventually, “but it’s time to get out. First rule: stay within yelling distance.”

She and Bell briefly convened to set up a clear plan in order to search the caverns quickly, thoroughly and safely. Aislinn knew they had the right

but the quietness of this particular set of tunnels had a permanence to it that she could hear nothing. When was the last time she had been somewhere like this? The steady *drip-drip* of water or the sound of something breathing or something moving nearby?

Not since they entered this place. So why was it so silent now?

They split up into twos, searching every cavern, every nook and cranny. They expected the entrance to the Mirror's hiding place to be concealed, but it would surely have been found by now.

"If I was hiding a mirror of dubious origin," Beau said, as he blasted apart another rock, "I wouldn't bother putting it in a grand chamber or a temple or some such. I'd just plonk it in the ground and bury it, leaving it completely unmarked."

"Your mortal side is showing," Aislinn remarked, "no faerie or elf would dump it so unceremoniously. It doesn't make for a good story."

Beau launched into a tirade about what made a good story and how his plan made perfect sense and how if he *was* a villain, he'd be the best character ever was, but Aislinn was barely paying him any attention. Her mind was focused on finding the mirror, unable to dislodge her conversation with Beau from yesterday.

He needed them to find this. He needed to be able to stay in Avalintia.

A part of her had been hoping that they wouldn't find it, that he wouldn't have to leave, that they'd be able to find something in Faerie that could help him with his powers, but after his confession last night... she wasn't even sure if anything like that existed. There was something *other* about Caer's powers, something she'd never heard of before.

Something, she realised with a sinister ripple, that was never supposed to exist.

it. She They reconvened with the others at the allotted time and progressed without into the dark.

cuttling Luna sang a song as they marched. Aislinn imagined she was trying to dispel the quiet, but the tune seemed to amplify it, the melody as haunting and echoing as a ghost.

cranny. *“Fathoms below in the depths of the stone*

ed, else *Lives a mirror, best left alone*

More than darkness lives inside

quietly *Leave it alone if you wish to survive*

hamber *Mirror, Mirror, way down deep,*

aving it *What ancient secrets do you keep?*

No one knows

dwarf *No one knows...*

Far below

ow his *Far below...”*

one that Her words hung in the air for an age after she sang, hovering like mist and was of frost. For a long while, no one dared to speak.

th Caer “You’ve a beautiful voice,” remarked Dillon finally.

h. “Thank you!” She beamed. “Although I’m now wondering if that was the best choice. Maybe a little ditty or a ballad about—”

would “Hey look!” said Beau, voice forced with cheer. “Vines!”

d block He pointed to a desecrated curtain of foliage so bleak and grey,

such as initially mistook them for rocks. Frowning, Aislinn dismounted and nothing over to touch them. They were as quiet and still as the stone.

Dillon appeared behind her, reaching over her shoulder.

osed to “Feel anything?” she asked.

“Yes,” Dillon said. “Not much, but it’s strange for me to feel anything at all.”

further so..." He turned back to the others, gaze settling on Caer. "Want
bringing something else back to life?"

ying to "Rarely," Caer admitted, swinging from his saddle, "but I'll give it a
aunting He walked over towards them and placed his fingers against the c
bark, brow furrowed. The veins on his arms strained. Aislinn grip
shoulder, her other hand still against the bark, Dillon's too. Som
throbbled beneath her palm, hard and rumbling.

The bark crumbled, flaking away from the rock. Bright green s
beneath it, vines curling outwards, racing over Aislinn's body like a
excited puppy.

"Well, hello!" she said, gently batting them away. "Nice to see you i

The vines trembled towards Beau, too, and Dillon, and—inexplic
Caer, in the same way they clambered over Aislinn.

Aislinn had asked her mother once, when they'd started talking to h
had only happened when she'd ascended to the throne or if it had o
tendrils before then, when she'd married Hawthorn.

"They knew I was their future queen that day," she'd admitted. "But
been trying to talk to me a long time before then, I just didn't know
was the listen."

Aislinn wondered what the vines knew about Caer.

"Touching as this is," Minerva remarked, leaning towards them
Aislinn back of her wargi, "does this little exercise serve a purpose?"

id went "Possibly," said Aislinn.

A vine snaked around her head.

We're searching for something, she said, pushing her thoughts ou
casting an image of a mirror.

anything, Several of the vines recoiled.

t to try *Please*, she continued. *It's important.*

The vines coiled instead around Caer, as if understanding that he 'a try.' thing she was trying to protect, and trying to judge whether or not alcifiedworthy. Caer's eyes flickered, and he stared at her as if searched hisinstruction.

nothing "It's all right," Aislinn assured him. "They won't hurt you."

The vines twirled all round him, around every strong limb, his broad sparkedhis excellent face, before scurrying away, flicking towards Aislinn over-approving of her choice.

"Will you help us?"

too!" The vines moved, bursting out of the recess and racing along the ably—Everyone not on a wargi leapt into their saddles, charging after them hurtled through stone.

ier, if it Deep, deep, deeper into the dark they went, over rivers and tccurredcaverns that could have swallowed Acanthia whole. The dark thi

Beau summoned lights and whispered spells. Onwards and onwards, t they'dand darker...

how to Until the vines slowed, creeping under a wall of cracked rock.

Bell went to inspect it first. It was round, brown rock, covered in sheen of moss.

on the "Can we blast through it?" Diana asked.

Magna was already fiddling with her explosives, her eyes sparkling gleefully.

"Bell?" Minerva prompted. "Can we blast through it?"

twards, "I could try—" Beau said, moving forward.

The rock shifted. Bell bounced back.

"Did Beau—" squeaked someone.

“Did the vines—”

was the Rock showered from the ceiling.

he was “Move!” hissed Bell.

ing for “Is it a cave-in—”

“It’s no rock fall,” Bell said, leaping on the back of her wargi and tumbled and shook. “It’s a golem.”

d back, Aislinn froze as a giant emerged from the rock. She’d heard t
1, as ifgolems and seen their likenesses in the tunnels and murals—great ci
of rock, forged in the shape of dwarves. She’d known they were a bit
that they’d been made to fight, to crush.

e floor. She had not expected them to be this big. Her entire body could hav
as theycrammed into its hollowed-out arm.

It was massive. Monstrous. Horrific. As large as a giant
throughunconquerable as stone.

ckened. Her wargi leapt out of the way as the golem stumbled forward, d
deeperwith moss and shards of rock. The wargi bolted, following the others
charged across a narrow bridge, Beau shattering it the second everyc
across.

1 a thin They weren’t trapped—there were a dozen platforms they coul
across on, but they were out of reach of the golem.

At least for now.

arkling It picked up a boulder and hurled it towards them. Minerva urge
around a corner, cramming them into a cave.

“Now, who remembers anything about the Golem Rebellion?” she
as rocks showered from the ceiling.

Beau’s hand shot into the air. “Ooh, I do, I do! The Golem Rebelli
started in the Silver Age, year 446. The lead conspirators were a dwarf

Brutus Greysirite and a fae sorcerer called—”

The party stared at him.

“I am now realising that question was probably rhetorical and I am out of time.”

“Golems,” Minerva explained, “are dwarf-made creatures. Very indestructible. Their flesh is stone and earth. But to make that work you needed the help of a sorcerer. Like all beings, they have a core, in their chest, a crystal which functions as their heart and contains the magic they need to exist. Damage that, and the golem is just a pile of rock again.”

“So... where is this crystal?”

“Brutus was clever,” Minerva explained. “He built three different types of golem, storing the crystal in either their mouth, back or chest. Makes it a bit harder for them to defeat in battle if you have to check each spot.”

“Oh, this isn’t going to be hard at all.”

“The good news is I know this one doesn’t have its core in its mouth,” Beau frowned. “How do you know that?”

“I got a good look at it when it tried to eat my arm.”

Aislinn paled. “It’s *that* golem?” she asked. “How can you be sure?”

“I recognise the marks of my axe in its fist.”

“Lovely,” said Beau. “Question—why do golems eat flesh if they don’t need to eat?”

“Because they’re programmed to,” Bell explained. “Or because it’s the closest thing they will get to being human. We don’t fully know.”

A loud whimper squashed the conversation. Caer moved from behind the rock, staring out from behind the rock. “Mace,” he reported. “He isn’t dead, but he’s going to struggle to move away—”

“Right, right, quick plan—” Minerva hastily scribbled out instructions.

the dirt. “Bell, Diana, you hold its attention. Luna, get the wargis some safe. Flora, stay vigilant. Drag us out if you need to. Beau, heal Mags, then get back out. I want you to fire at its face—keep it busy. Mags, with me on the legs. Caer, the front, Ais, the back. Dillon—are you airtually to be a human shield?”

Dillon placed his hand to his chest. “It is my honour to be mangled on your behalf of any one of you.”

“Not *too* mangled, please,” Luna whispered. “Not that I would mind or anyone. No one would mind. I just... I don’t want you to get mangled.” She pulled up her sleeves and hid behind her hands.

“That was so disgusting, I think the stone is blushing,” Minerva said, staring at her. “Let’s move out.”

Aislinn skidded back into the tunnel, leaping over the platforms, arrows surging over her, along with Beau’s fire. The golem’s black eyes stared upwards. She slid under its legs, Caer not far behind her, greatsword clashing against its chest.

Minerva and Mags hacked at its legs. They chipped off little, but they kept its focus, dodging out of the way of its massive swings. Aislinn threw her sword and whipped out two daggers, scurrying up its back and yanking its legs around its neck. She plunged her daggers into the grooves in its skin, searching for any opening.

The golem swung, trying to jerk her off. “Anything?” she called to Caer. “Hard—to—tell—”

She searched every crack, driving her blades as deep as they would—just nothing.

She leapt off, rolling against the floor, narrowly missing a massive section in the wall. The golem’s great fist came sailing through the air. Dillon caught it

ewherehis chest. A crack sounded.

ce, and “Dillon!”

you’re “I’m fine,” he grunted.

all right Aislinn dashed forward, sliding back under the golem’s legs. Be
blasted another fireball—straight into its mouth. She drove her daggs
gled onits chest, along every cranny—

One sank deeper than the others.

d. Or... She pressed her second blade into it, and levered a panel free.

ngled.” Bright, hot light emanated from within.

The golem’s core.

ra said, She poised to strike, but the golem shook her free, letting out
soundless roar—a wail of the rock. Aislinn fell to the floor with a ha
hail ofA colossal stone foot rose above her, but she rolled out of the w
ck eyesground shaking in her wake. A spool of wire shot out of nowhere, t
ier, hisaround its legs.

“Pull!” Diana shouted.

ey kept Every dwarf swamped the space, like ants on a carcass. Everyon
w awaycontrol of a limb, pinning it, holding it. Minerva looped a rope ar
lockingmassive neck, holding it as it grunted and groaned in that wretched, w
ts stonyway.

“Now, Caer!” Minerva hissed.

Caer. Caer didn’t need to be told twice. He thrust his blade deep into the
and twisted.

uld go. The crystal shattered.

The golem fell.

stomp. Silence flew through the tunnel, endless and unyielding. Minerva s
againstthe fallen monster, now no more than dirt and stone and dust.

Bell touched her shoulder. There did not seem to be any words she could utter.

“Well,” said Minerva. “No point in hanging around, is there? If you had injured, I suggest we go investigate the tunnel it was guarding.”



If Minerva felt in any way disappointed that the golem that had haunted her dreams for years had been disposed of in a matter of minutes, she did not show it. She didn't show *anything*, although Caer noticed her touching her shoulder when no one was looking, and Bell sticking unusually close to her side as they descended into the dark, holding each other's hands.

Caer wondered if he would ever experience something as simple as holding someone's hand as they walked, afraid of less because there was someone there beside him. He wondered what he'd trade for such a pleasure if he had to. He wondered what evils he'd commit if he went too long without human contact.

You can touch the dwarves, a voice reminded him. *There will be hundreds of people in Avalinth you could befriend.*

But they would not be Aislinn.

You can't do this, he told himself yet again, *you can't fall for someone you've only known for a few weeks. Not like this. Not this badly. Not someone who you might never be able to be with, not in the way you want.*

And yet he wasn't sure he could stop, wasn't sure he could do anything to stop the tide now that it was crashing on the shore. He wanted to be with her, to whisper to her in the dark and dance with her in the day, to make her a bouquet of flowers and a sword, to make her a sword and an engraved blade to go with it.

e could He wanted to drown inside her kiss, exist inside her bed.

He moved forward, and caught the edge of her sleeve. He could m
o one's little in the dark, but he thought her face turned towards him,
imagined she was smiling.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up into a wide, round cavern. Cae
still see little apart from a faint purple light, but as they crept out furth
a narrow pathway, sconces blazed to life—thin plumes of blue fl
o doubt
spindly, black sconces.

tes, she The party stilled.

rubbing The cavern was almost a perfect circle, a dome beneath the earth
close to black thorns ran through the walls, sharp as glass, obsidian-dark
crackled like lightning against the purple skin of the stone.

uple as The narrow pathway ended shortly before them, dissolving into
y were that's waters shone, blue-black, impossibly still. There was no bc
e, what ahead of them, on a tiny island in the centre of the lake, stood a black-
mirror surrounded by thorns.

indreds “I maintain that burying it would have been a much better idea,” Be
largely to himself. “But I do have to admire the aesthetic.”

They left the wargis on the bank and moved towards the water’

omeone “Ideas?” Minerva asked. “Is the water even safe to swim across?”

omeone Beau held his hand out over the lake. A shudder passed through

“That’s not water.”

hing to “What is it?”

ith her. “I don’t know. But I’d advise against swimming in it.”

to spar “Then what do we do?”

and an Bell looked around her. “We could go back to one of the other c
Salvage some wood. Build a raft.”

Everyone groaned with the thought of the extra time it would take out Magna's fingers speaking of hours and the equipment they'd need. Caer and hein no mood to prolong this, his mind twisting desperately between the thought of *let's just go, let's forget about it, and we're so close now.* So Caer could "Wait," said Beau. "There's something in the water. Hold on."

Caer inched forward over the lake, holding out his hands, fingers splayed on the water. He flicked his wrists, the water trembling beneath him, parting, churning. Aislinn seemed to understand what he was doing. She stepped beside him, stretching out her arms, both groaning beneath the weight.

Shiny. Somehow, Caer felt it too—the feeling that this water wasn't water. They did not want to bend to the might of two faerie royals, but relinquish their spoils nonetheless.

The lake parted. A small boat rose to the centre, black and shiny. Magna and Bell hurried forward to inspect it, identifying a small wooden hull, easily patchable even with their limited resources.

"No oars though," Minerva commented.

"Oars?" said Beau, flicking the not-water beneath his hand again. "If we're going, we don't need *oars*."

Magna and Bell set to work fixing the boat. The others hung back, muttering and murmuring.

"Not enough room on the boat for us all," Minerva deduced. "How do you think it'll take to lift the Mirror?"

"Doesn't look too heavy," said Bell, glancing up. "Send the giant case."

Dillon stepped forward. "I'm going to assume that's me."

It was quickly decided that Dillon would go across with Caer (for lifting purposes) as well as Aislinn and Beau (for rowing purposes).

d take, Minerva (for leading ones). The repairs to the boat completed, the
aer was them set off. The remaining members of the party stayed on the shore
seen the forms shrinking as Beau and Aislinn buffeted them across.

o close. Caer's attention turned to the water. He understood what Beau meant
otherness of the inky water below, the strange, dark sheen to
played. something else stirred in him too, and the more he stared at the lake, the
ng. he wanted to slip silently into it...

de him, The boat stopped moving on one side, making it drift. Aislinn had
paddling. "Caer?"

; that it He tore his gaze away from the water. "It's nothing," he promised.

shed its But even as he spoke, he knew that was a lie. There was something
More than something—and whispers of old memories twitched at his
they rowed across the lake. The laughter of other children in the court
hole in Afelcarreg. His mother singing. Her screaming for him.

And, inexplicably, a voice that sounded like Aislinn's, calling out with
didn't think he'd ever heard her speak.

"Where *"He will be all that you want and more. So much more ."*

The island grew closer. Before long, the boat reached the shore. The
g back, out one by one, Caer resisting the urge to hold his hand out to Aislinn
stopped himself just in time.

v many They trudged up to the Mirror.

Beau was the first to notice something was wrong. "Wait," he
just in increasing his speed. He jogged up the steps.

Aislinn frowned. "What is it?"

"It's... it's not there."

also for "What?"

es) and "The Mirror. It's—it's empty."

five of To prove it, he plunged his fist into the centre.
e, their Caer's stomach dropped. Nothing happened. There was no glass to s
"It's just a frame."

ant, the Minerva came up behind him. "It's been smashed? Taken?"
it. But Beau shook his head. "I don't think so..." he said, running his fing
ie more the empty frame. Unlike everything else in the room, there was no s
shimmer to it. It was entirely, endlessly black, incapable of holdin
stopped "There would be shards, glassy residue... something. This is almost
like it was never there to begin with."

"A decoy?" Minerva suggested.
g there. "Why wouldn't you make your decoy more mirror-like?" Aislinn
ears as out. "Would take longer to realise it wasn't real. Especially if you
yard of non-magic using dwarf."

"Good point."
ords he Caer's eyes slid out across the lake, now calm and still again, black
smooth as—

"Glass."
ey filed Aislinn came up to his shoulder. "What?"

inn. He "It's the Mirror," he said. "The lake—it's the Mirror."

Minerva made a sound of protest, but Aislinn and Beau went very s
very quiet.

ie said, "You can feel it too, can't you?" he whispered.

Aislinn nodded. Beau turned back to the Mirror, to the short plinth
resting on. He took out a handkerchief and rubbed away at the dirt.
faint pictures appeared in the stone, showing the dwarves deliver
Mirror down into the deep and enlisting the help of a team of fae sorc
change it from glass into water, dispelling its power.

A whole team of sorcerers.

shatter. “Does it say what the Mirror does?” Caer asked, almost afraid to ask for an answer.

Beau shook his head. “Only that people had used it for evil, and the other fae and dwarves deemed it too dangerous.”

Caer stared out at the water.

“Should we be doing this?” Dillon asked. “I’m not sure I like the idea of something so magical it had to be *changed* rather than destroyed.”

“Unless they thought that one day someone might need to use its power for good...” Aislinn offered. “Magic is supposed to be neutral—it’s how we use it that defines us.”

Dillon did not look entirely convinced, but Beau and Minerva were staring out at the lake, as if the curiosity was parching them.

Caer understood the feeling. Somehow, he needed this mirror returned to its physical form. *Needed* it.

“Can we even put it back together?” Dillon asked, still sounding doubtful. “Last I checked, we didn’t journey here with half a dozen fae sorcerers.”

Beau glanced at Aislinn, some silent conversation passing between them.

“I’m no sorcerer,” she said.

“You’re the future queen of Faerie, Ais. You have access to powers that other sorcerers will only ever dream of.”

“But I’ve never done anything like this.”

“Me neither,” Beau admitted. “But I understand the theoretics. It’s almost anything is possible. And this mirror... it *wants* to return to its original state. I do not think it will require much of a nudge.”

Aislinn inhaled. “All right,” she said. “Let’s get the frame down.”

of the



That both They dislodged the frame from its stand and the thorns around it, and onto the boat. Beau insisted on attempting the spell from the centre lake, hoping the natural circle would aid them. And, in any case, it was harder to transport the Mirror all the way across the empty lake. Close to the other side, at least the others could help them get it up again.

They rowed back towards the centre, taking it slowly, careful to use no more magic than necessary. Aislinn was already conscious of how much she'd used today, and Beau much more—although his reserves were still substantial.

When they stopped, they took a few moments to meditate, and ate a couple of the hard, dwarven biscuits they'd stashed about their person. It gave them a small illusion of energy, if nothing else.

“Ready?” Beau asked her.

Aislinn nodded, taking his hands.

The effect was instantaneous. Beau's hands latched onto her forearms, twisting into her flesh. His head snapped backwards. Hers did, too. She looked up at the ceiling, but somehow her gaze went elsewhere, *everywhere*—to the bottom of the lake and everywhere else it touched.

The water pulsed beneath her. She could feel every atom of it vibrating. It surged around them, screaming, joining, tearing at their clothes, though she knew it wasn't even touching them. The water clawed through the air, spiralling around them, pooling into the frame sandwiched between their outstretched arms.

Aislinn wanted to break away, to grab her sword, to fight it. He burned beneath the strain. A scream rose inside her, but her jaw locked.

She couldn't move.

Don't let go, Beau's hold seemed to say. *Whatever you do, don't let*

Did he have any control over this? Aislinn had expected to *do* something, to be twisting the water into shape, but it felt like the other way round. She was the one being twisted and torn, like the water was the one controlling her.

Controlling, and draining. It licked at her marrow like fire.

Stop. Stop, please—

Dimly, above the screeching of the water, she heard Caer screaming “Stop this! Stop it, it's hurting her—”

But the water didn't. It *couldn't*. It needed to be whole again.

It whirled down into the frame, whistling and roaring, clicking together, a thousand, a million tiny black shards clicking together, transformed into a might of magic.

Finally, mercifully, it was over.

Aislinn fell backwards into Caer's arms.

“Ais!” he called, voice coarse.

She blinked up at him, feeling flayed to her bones. She wanted to tell him she was fine, but the words wouldn't leave her mouth.

She clutched his gloved fingers hard. “Don't worry,” she whispered.

Caer smiled, a broken, tear-filled expression. “No promises there.”

“I'm fine,” said Beau, from the other side of the boat. “Care to wince your brow, sweet Dillon, and cry tears of relief all over me?”

“Umm, I'll pass, if I may. Besides, from this angle, you look far better than your father.”

Beau picked himself up, as if the observation were some frightful thing. He stared down at the Mirror, at the smooth, pitch-black depths of it.

Aislinn stared too, and ice stared back, as sharp and painful as metal go. Caer breathed deeply, as if he could feel it too. Aislinn crawled to her knees, taking off her cloak. Beau stopped her and, like she could cover it.

“What? What is it?”

He pointed to the frame. A thin band of silver writing had appeared above the glass.

“Can you read it?” she asked him.

“It’s... very old.” He admitted. “Very old. Definitely says something seeing into the future. And then... ‘ask and you shall know.’”

Aislinn crept forward. Whatever assurances Aeron had given, she either, handing over the Mirror without testing it first. She pressed her hands by the glass. It rippled beneath her fingertips like water.

“Mirror, Mirror, on the plinth,” she whispered, “what awaits Avalinth?”

She saw them bringing the Mirror home, to much fanfare and rejoicing. A great feast was held. Music sang in her ears. She saw herself dancing with Caer, saw him taking her hand and pulling her back to her room. They opened, their mouths collided—

She pulled back her hand. “Anyone else see that?”

“See what?”

“Excellent.”

Minerva raised an eyebrow. “It worked?”

“Yes. Showed me the future.” She glanced at Caer. *I hope.*

“Well, that’s comforting.” Minerva clapped her hands together. “Class. Just in case. Then let’s get out of this place. We’ve still a long way back.”

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PART FOUR

RETURN TO AVALINTH

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THERE AND BACK AGAIN

Their journey back through the Deep was uneventful, almost devoid of any monsters. Aislinn knew she ought to be pleased with that, almost felt like the monsters were avoiding them, like there was something about the object they now carried that sent them scurrying. The cloak the spells Beau cast on it as soon as he'd regained his energy—should have muted its influence, but sometimes, late at night, Aislinn swore she still felt it, pulsing like a heartbeat in the dark.

Sometimes, she caught Caer staring at it.

They hadn't spoken much on the journey back. Either he was trying to control himself, or he was merely too exhausted. Minerva pushed them harder this time, determined to get back to Avalinth as quickly as possible.

Aislinn wasn't sure she shared her desire. She wasn't sure it was worth taking it back.

Aeron said he wasn't going to use it for ill, Aislinn told herself, so she believed his words. "I shall not remove it from Avalinth. Nor shall I allow anyone else to do so."

to do so. The mirror will remain here, under the care of myself. I shall use it for any nefarious purposes. You have my vow.”

It ought to be safe. It could never be used against her people.

So why did it fill her with dread?

Aislinn missed Caer—missed him, and the closeness that had existed between them. Strange to miss someone in front of you, but there it was.

“Are we nearly there yet?” Beau asked after they traversed another flight of stairs.

Minerva glanced over her shoulder. “We should get there before nightfall.”

“Oh, yay! No more nights of pretending to be asleep so that the loathsome can talk?”

void of
but she
nothing
k—and
ld have
ll heard

Aislinn stilled. “I’m sorry?”

“We like to sleep, girl, but not that much.”

“Beau!” Aislinn said. “Were you in on this?”

“I might have been.”

“You lied to me! You said that dwarves needed twelve hours sleep—”

“I didn’t lie. I merely misinformed you.”

She glared at him.

“Don’t tell me you’re not a little impressed.”

ying to
n much
ible.
wise to

Aislinn did not let up her glare, but as soon as Beau moved away, he turned instead to Caerwyn. She imagined running her hands along the broad shoulders of his, slipping her hands under his clothes...

It had been days since she’d been out of heat—her bleeding had started yesterday—and yet being around him conjured much the same effect.

arching
me else

Was he feeling it too? Is that why he couldn’t meet her gaze?

Despite Minerva’s predictions, it took longer than expected to traverse the cavern which had seen a recent rock fall. They’d been pushing themselves

all notdays and, despite the promise of proper beds, Minerva called it a day. Luna fell asleep on the back of her wargi and almost slid from the. They set up camp, all falling asleep as soon as their beds were unrolled. Even Aislinn was exhausted enough to sleep, although she woken before the dwarves. Dillon was posted at the mouth of the cave, Caer is. not far away by the remains of the fire. He'd taken a branch they had endless around to burning and was whittling away at it.

“What are you making?” Dillon asked.

“Another bead,” Caer admitted, holding up his necklace. “One for the people I truly care about.”

“Who’s this one for?”

“Maybe it’s for you, Dillon.”

Dillon laughed. “I think it will be a while before the rest of them want to practise controlling the dead?”

“If you’re sure?”

—” Dillon nodded. Aislinn decided not to announce her return to consciousness, instead curling into her bedroll and letting the boys practice. It turned into a sparring match in the end, which she watched through closed lids, marvelling at the way Caer sprung across the rocks, surprising her gaze as agile for someone of his size. There was raw power in his swings, and that skill was clear—thoughtful, precise, the moves of someone who had practised hard and carefully.

—” She wanted to meet those swings, meet the rest of him, too—

Her mouth turned dry at the thought.

Finally, the rest of the party rose. A quick breakfast was had, and they refreshed themselves in a nearby stream, packed up, and headed off.

A few hours later, they reached the doors to the lift. It seemed a

y when end to the journey, the doors so small compared to the colossal ceiling saddle. Deep below. The doors back into the city were a more fitting welcome. They all paused there, unconsciously, silently—not moving, not speaking long not questioning.

seated *There is still time to turn back*, the stone seemed to whisper. *Preternatural* in't got never found it.

But Aislinn remembered Caer's words, his palpable fear of his breaking out of him, and found she could not turn back.

each of She didn't know what guarded Minerva's decision, but she imagined much the same.

They dismounted at the gates of the palace, Dillon taking all of the apart from Crusher and Mace, who were carrying the Mirror between wake. Hecate scooted off too, having apparently had enough of their company.

The rest of them trudged forward along the gilded corridors.

"Where's the fanfare?" Beau asked. "There ought to be fanfare."

urn to Aislinn nodded, but it did not feel like a celebration. It felt like the ctise. It marching into a funeral.

h half- A set of knuckles brushed against hers, before a hand slid against her risingly clutching it tightly. Aislinn looked across; Caer was holding her hand and his eyes still facing forward.

ho had She squeezed him right back.

Finally, they reached the throne room. Announcements were made. was already there, in a gown encrusted with emeralds, Aeron lurking side in robes of white. She leapt up as they entered.

d, they "Did you find it?" she asked.

Minerva nodded. Bell and Flora went to the Mirror, hauling off A strange cape and setting it upright. Caer shrank back, like the Mirror could l

s of the dark energy pooled into the room, sharp as wind.

Aeron and Venus stared at it.

“At last,” Aeron said, fingers brushing against the frame, “such a beautiful day.” Aislinn swallowed. “Your Majesty,” she prompted, “we have done what you asked.”

“You have indeed.” Venus turned to the party, her smile radiant. “Caerwyn, my home is yours. You may stay here for as long as you wish, under our protection.”

Caer breathed a sigh of relief. Minerva clapped his back. Several others came forward to congratulate him or murmur words of approval. “I trust it was a successful journey?” Venus asked, finally checking in them for missing members.

Minerva nodded. “A few hiccups, but no significant losses.” She said, “We killed the golem, Ven. The one who...”

Venus’ eyes widened, but then her face quickly softened. “I see that’s good,” she said, as if the death of the creature responsible for the death of her husband meant nothing to her. She turned back to the Mirror. “You should have a feast tonight to celebrate your triumphant return, and perhaps in a few days’ time to formally welcome Prince Caerwyn into our court. Until then, I suggest you rest—I daresay you’ve earned it.”

There was a general murmur of agreement. They left the Mirror and traipsed back to their rooms. Caer seized Aislinn’s hand again as they parted. “Can I come to your room tonight?” he asked, his voice a whisper.

Aislinn turned towards him, to the serious, desperate expression in his eyes, the furrow in his brow.

She leaned forward until their breaths were mingling. If she kiss

now, she ran the risk of taking him right here in the hallway.

“How could I refuse such a request?” she said, mouth twitching
auty.” smile.

as you “Are you trying to truth-dodge?”

“No!” she said, leaning forward and tugging on the strings of hi
“Prince“Come to my room tonight, or...”

u wish, “Or...?”

“Or I shall come to yours. It’s a vow, now. Or a threat. I’ll have t
l of thethrough.”

l. Caer’s throat bobbed. “I will... see you then, then.”

ng their “I look forward to it.”

She slipped into her room, all coyness dropping from her express
paused.second the door closed. She ran to the bath and turned on the taps, tea
her clothes and disappearing into the foamy waters before it was ev
. Well.She scrubbed away at the days of sweat and dirt and blood, massagin
ie deathpore, detangling the mess that was her hair. Finally, she crawled out
or. “Weherself dry, and dragged herself into the silk robe that had been left
rhaps aher.

r home. She lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling, trying to think of a
other than what would be happening in a few hours and why they’d ag
where itwait in the first place. She should have pulled him into the bath w
i beforeheaved off his clothes herself, sponged that dirt from his skin as she
hushedtop of him...

A knock sounded at the door. Her heart lifted expectantly, befi
i in hisrealised that she knew that knock—Beau.

“So, don’t get too mad at me—” he said as she opened the door.

ed him “What did you do? Wait, I’m usually the one saying ‘don’t get m

no. This must be serious—”

Beau held up his hands. “Relax,” he said, “no one’s in any danger.”

“Oh, excellent.”

He took a small brown bottle out of his breast pocket. “Dwarven tonic guards against conception. Take before or after, within a twenty-foot window. As spells don’t work here.”

Aislinn stared at the bottle.

“Did I overstep?”

“No,” she said, taking the bottle, “you didn’t overstep.”

“Then—”

She threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you.”

“I’ve got your back,” he said, squeezing her middle. “Always. Now. Ring off fun. But use the tonic. I’m not ready to be an uncle yet.”

Aislinn laughed. “And I am *definitely* not ready to be a parent.”

Young parents were very unusual amongst the fae—most wouldn’t patted child in half a century or more unless they were trying particularly hard. Down parents were considered young (not yet fifty when they’d conceived) although she understood it had been easier for them due to Juliana’s fertility. Beau, apparently, had been a welcome Beltane accident.

Aislinn wanted a child at some point—but not now, even if the thought her, *Caer’s* child made her a little giddy, a plump little dark-haired child with rosebud lips and eyes a colour she couldn’t name.

She shook the thought away before the impracticalities could strike home. Beau said goodnight, and whispered away down the hall.

Aislinn closed her door and placed the bottle on her nightstand, then herself down on the bed and drowning in the pillows. She felt nervous. Oh

giddy, insides quivering with the thought of what awaited her tonight, heightened and hazy.

Someone knocked on the door again.

“Yes?” she called out, expecting it to be Beau again with some final hour-of wisdom.

Caer walked into the room. He hovered in the threshold, Aislinn bolted in bed. He was still damp from his bath, his freshly laundered shirt clung to every glorious inch of him. He wasn't even wearing a belt, his trousers hanging loosely at his hips.

“Hi,” he said. He glanced back towards the door. “May I—”

“Close it,” she instructed.

By the time the door had clicked shut, Aislinn had bolted over the bed. Caer barely had time to turn before she'd thrown herself at him. Their bodies collided in a blast of heat that she felt down to her toes. Didn't see a overwhelmed her, his kisses intoxicating. She wanted to climb inside. Her mouth. Caer murmured something into her, but she couldn't hear, he received) focusing on all the places she wanted to touch him.

He rolled her against the wall, panting hard, his hands working down her back, gathering at her spine. His chin glided against hers.

She pulled back, grinning. “You shaved.”

His cheeks heated, but her eyes were mostly captured by the dimple and the red, blurred quality of his parted lips. “It seemed appropriate.”

She skimmed her fingers over the impossibly smooth skin. “I quite like your stubble,” she admitted.

Caer groaned. “I've been told that it can be chafing if one kisses you and long.”

“Thinking ahead, are you?”

, senses His eyes glinted. “Perhaps.”

She slid her hands over his cheeks and down his neck. “Fae me grow beards, you know. This is new to me.” Her fingers stopped at his wordsbones, noticing his necklace. “You’ve added a new bead,” Aislinn returning the wooden bauble towards her. She made out a newly etched thing upslashed through with something that looked like a thorn.

linging Caer’s throat bobbed. “This is just a temporary one.”

rousers “Oh? Until what?”

“Until I find the time to render you in a more suitable material. Or perhaps.” He pulled a lock of her hair. “Amber. Garnet.”

“How long did it take the others to work their way onto here?”

room. “Oh, a few months, at least.”

mouths “You’ve barely known me—”

zziness “I know you,” he whispered. “I know you in the way one knows them into hisof their limbs though they’ve never thought to memorise them, in their mindthey recognise a scent they’ve known once in childhood, the way they know the sea and sky and the stars above them—changing and constant, own herand immortal. I know you, Aislinn Ardenthorn.”

“That was... poetic.”

“Do you doubt me?”

e there, Aislinn swallowed. “I am not accustomed to letting myself believe in things when there is any room for doubt,” she whispered. “But yes, I like theyou, Caerwyn of Afelcarreg. Spirits haunt me if there ever comes a time when I do not.”

for too “Will that actually happen, now you’ve said it—”

“Kiss me, fool, before I change my mind.”

Caer’s dimples deepened, his crooked smile making her weak in the

“I was intending to savour you, you know. I had the kiss all built up in my head...”

“I’ve had enough of sipping you when I’m dying of thirst,” Aislinn remarked, trailing kisses along his jaw, “but if you wish to demonstrate... I could swirl myself back.”

Caer pulled away from her, swallowing his smile and schooling his face into something more placid. He took her hands, collecting them in his, kissing her knuckles softly. “I was going to start like this,” he said, absently stroking back a lock of her hair, fingertips lingering against her skin, before he pointed the tip of her ear. “Then I was going to do this,” he said, leaning his forehead against hers, as if offering up a silent prayer, a plea to remember every second that would follow with the clarity of crystal. “And then this.”

At last, his mouth found hers again. Her lips parted for his, his tongue exploring hers. It was like wildfire, like battle. Her arms slid around his, his body liquid against hers as the kisses descended down her throat.

“What happens next?” she breathed.

Caer grinned against her skin. “I didn’t dare imagine too much. It seemed rather... presumptuous.”

“Well, I imagined plenty!”

Aislinn gripped the back of his hair, steering him towards the bed, then they were in good luck of them laughing as they fell down together, Aislinn on top. He stared at her, eyes wide and black, bright and luminous as hot coals.

She peeled off his shirt. Her mouth went dry. Her fingers skimmed lightly over his bronze muscle, hardly daring to touch. “I am going to lick every inch of these,” she told him.

“I am not going to stop you.”

She placed her mouth to his neck and let her tongue travel down his

o in mystopping to explore every muscle, every hard curve of him, punctuated
journey with kisses, occasionally returning to that perfect, glorious moment
n said,his. She'd kissed people before, kissed men and women and creatures
an holdcould only dream of, but she'd never known it be like this before, I
wanted to inhale him, drown in him, her thoughts spiralling with
his facesecond.

his and She'd experienced sex before too, she'd dabbled in love—but she'd
nd thenfelt anything like this, the desire to marvel at every dimple in his
rushingcommit every part of him to memory. She wanted her touches to absorb
ing his She stopped at his hips, hands on his trousers, searching for permission
number Caer sat up, shifting to the end of the bed, as if trying to hide
his..." desperately aroused he was.

tongue "Do we have anything to worry about?" he asked.

is neck, "What do you mean?"

"Children or... other things?"

Aislinn pointed to the small bottle beside her bed. "Turns out dwarves
i more.non-magic ways of guarding against such things, thankfully."

"Ah. Terrific."

"You seem nervous. Are you all right?"

he both "I have something to tell you."

ed up at "What? Like it's your first time?"

Caer stilled.

ed past Aislinn blinked. "Is it?"

ery one "So, in the mortal world—"

"You said you wished I '*was your first of many things*'! All such
cocky-like! And you're insanely attractive! What was I supposed to do
s body, "I was trying to be all smooth, I'm sorry!"

ing her Aislinn threw up her hands. “No,” she said, “this is on me. I’m
outh of shouldn’t have assumed anything.”

that he Caer went quiet for a moment. “Things are different in the mortal
like she explained. “There’s no guard against children or disease. It is wis
1 every careful. Of course, offers have been there, and I’ve some experience i
other areas, but every time I’ve come close to the act itself, the consec
d never—especially for her—have prevented me from going ahead with it.”

skin, to Aislinn bent against him. “You’re a good man, Caer.”

b him. “I rather think considering the consequences of your actions should
ion. bare minimum,” he said, “but thank you.” He paused, searching h
le how again. “So... still want to go through with this?”

“I do. Do you?”

Caer’s throat trembled. His lips came up to hers again. “More than
ever wanted anything ever before in my life.” His hand slid to the fron
robe, playing with the ribbon that held it together. “May I?”

es have Aislinn nodded, finally feeling beyond words.

He peeled it away, shucking it from her shoulders, until it pooled
her feet.

She wasn’t wearing anything else.

Caer’s eyes widened into liquidous pools.

“I know I’m not as buxom as most mortal women—”

“Are you seriously questioning how much I like you? Right now?”

“Yes,” she said. “Maybe. No. I just—why *do* you like me?”

“Putting aside your radiance,” he said, cupping her face, “you are bi
ive and he kissed her neck, “and strong—” another kissed brushed her jav
ink—” fearlessly fearful, and funny, and *good*, and—”

His lips brushed the thin, flat planes of her stomach, and he incl

sorry. Itowards the bed, moving her legs over his taut, wide shoulders, and b
his mouth so close to her centre that she felt his breath inside h
world,” quivered in anticipation, thoughts turning to liquid as he kissed he
e to be working at her middle with expert attention as her fingers balled i
n some sheets and she cried out, shattering there with his head between her leg
quences “Experienced in some areas, you say?” she managed, her voice hoar
Caer grinned wickedly, climbing up onto the bed, his body a ca
hers.

l be the “My turn,” she whispered, going for his trousers.

er face Caer shook his head. “No,” he said, “if it’s all the same to you. I wa
inside you. I’m breaking with the want, Ais. Please.”

Aislinn smiled as she shucked off his trousers and guided him
I have towards her, helping him find her entrance. He slid into her, gasping.

t of her “You’ll... let me know? If I... do anything wrong?”

“Well,” she said, struggling to keep her voice steady, “I can’t
lie...”

around She tilted herself towards him, taking one of his hands and whi
instructions in his ear as they began the slow, steady climb together. H
was everything she dreamt it would be, but the other parts, the fee
entanglement, like his skin could reach her soul—how could she p
have imagined that?

She came again seconds before him, splitting into spiralling, frag
thoughts, words turned to slush. He’d set her nerves aflame with eve
ave—”perfect motion, every attention to detail. When he collapsed against he
v, “and breast, his breathing hard and heavy, she didn’t know whether she wa
ask him to go again or gather him in her arms and never, ever let him g
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C aer watched Aislinn lying against his chest. Her fingers had not touched his skin. His own were brushing down her arm, drawing lazy circles on her back, his lips close to her forehead. He wanted to colour every inch of her with his fingertips, memorising every sweet, soft curve of her, every pore, every line.

He was equally sure that he didn't want to move, that he wanted to stay pressed against her forever, locked away in this room where time had no meaning. There was something about her that blurred all other thoughts, all other cares and realities. For a moment as steady as the heart beating in hers, he forgot tomorrow.

And then, all too suddenly, he remembered.

"This can't be it," she whispered.

"What?"

"I don't want this to be a one-time thing or a short-term thing. I don't want it to end when I have to leave."

Caer inched upwards, only slightly, his heart flickering with Aislinn's face turned to face him. "What are you saying?" he asked.

"I'm saying... can we try this? Maybe I can bargain with Venus here longer. Perhaps we could strike a diplomatic deal, name me ambassador or something. Even if she won't agree long-term, perhaps still visit. Perhaps I can learn to master teleporting. I know it might take years to master your powers, but so what? I'm going to live forever. Ageing will be slowed here, too. I think... I think I'd rather wait for decades than let you go now."

Her eyes flickered with something like nerves, like she was certain going to say that it was foolish, silly, that it would never work.

He knew there were plenty of reasons why it might not. He'd be lying, said he wasn't afraid that he'd be holding her back. She deserved freedom, the chance to be with anyone she wanted, *whenever* she wanted. Maybe he deserved that freedom, too. There were thousands of dwarves after all, hundreds of people he could be with, freely and easily—

But they weren't her. No one would ever be her. Aislinn. Who for some deep, inexplicable reason, wanted him too. "You mean that?" he asked.

Aislinn sat up, sliding her hands into his and holding his fingers tightly. "I think I mean that more than anything else I have said in my entire life."

Caer vaulted up, grabbing her and rolling her back into the bed. He held her, hard and hot and heavy, his hands sliding down her body.

"Is that a yes?" she asked, trying not to laugh. "God, yes," he said. "I wish I couldn't lie. I wish I could make some kind of vow that I could be held to—"

Aislinn caught his face in her hands. "I will believe whatever you say."

I hope. "I am secretly a unicorn."

"Very funny."

to stay "I have my moments." He rested his head against her, feeling the heat as she faded out of her. "I'm yours," he whispered. "For as long as you want me."

as I can *I think I will want you forever and a little bit after that, too.*

to make you Aislinn kissed him, which saved him from speaking those words, forever. Your shattering the fragility of this moment, as if it would be unable to bear the weight of what he really wanted to say.

he was



ng if he They stayed in the room for the next few hours, ringing for food at one end and dining on the bed. They made love again and dozed in the after-dream warm tangle of limbs. Aislinn admitted that she was unused to this; she wanted to let her lovers stay the night, but she felt like she would fight anyone who wanted to remove Caer from her bed. He blushed at the thought, quite sure he wanted her to stay in his arms forever, preferably naked.

She couldn't stop touching him. He couldn't stop touching *her*. His hands went everywhere, his touches long and languid.

ghtly. "I They were very late to the feast.

," "Your drawstrings are undone," Minerva commented, when he took her beside her.

kissed Caer's hands went to his chest. "No, they're not."

"Not those ones."

ne kind His cheeks heated, and he fought the desperate urge to slide beneath the table. Aislinn caught his gaze, however, grinning with barely contained laughter, and he found himself held there.

y."

The feast was a relatively small affair—the six dwarves, Aislinn, C Beau, Venus and Tiberius—

at slide And Aeron, by Venus' right hand side, smiling contentedly like with the cream.

“Have you tried out your new mirror yet?” Caer asked, trying to arful of placid.

near the “I have examined some of its minor functions, yes,” Aeron replied sipping his spiced wine.

“And its other ones?”

“Require a little more preparation.”

“Will you share its findings with us?”

ie point Aeron blinked. “Why, of course, Your Highness. Why would I not?”

noon, a Caer turned back to the food, trying to be satisfied. He hoped e rarely wrong about Aeron—or at least that Bell and Minerva knew what the ne who doing.

certain The excellent spread proved a welcome distraction. There were dozen stuffed birds, all lightly spiced and oozing with fruits and nut fingers plates of sliced, salted vegetables accompanied them, oozing with There were dense, flat breads and thick, creamy cheeses. Caer couldn't eat everything, but everything was delicious. It was finished off with quin k a seat honey and sparkling, cool cider.

After the meal was finished, music was played. Cards were dish Everyone seemed too tired for dancing. Luna snuck off early, no d visit Dillon in the stables. He and Aislinn didn't linger for long aft ath the took his hand and dragged him back to her room, shoving him up aga ncealed wall.

When they finally slept, it was with his head resting against her bre

Caer and all worries obliterated beneath the steady, unfathomable warmth of her heartbeat.

The next morning, Caer woke before Aislinn, kissed her brow, and left a note saying he was going into town. Hard as it was to leave her, he longed to embrace life in Avalinth, and he didn't feel like he could settle in until he did what he'd promised himself he would do—find a blacksmith to teach him the trade.

There was no shortage of blacksmiths in the town to inquire with, but few of them were not in the market for an apprentice. They were, however, more than happy to point him in the direction of the next business that might interest him. Caer spent the better part of the morning moving from forge to forge.

Finally, he found someone. A burly, red-haired fellow with a metal apron over his tunic. He was whirred slightly as he moved.

"I might have an opening," he said. "If you can prove yourself."

Caer glanced at the weapons on the wall. "I can make you a sword—half a dozen." The dwarf snorted. "Anyone can make a sword, and I can tell by the look on your face you've plenty of experience with a forge. No, I want something more beautiful. Make me something with a little more... beauty."

"Beauty?"

"Never underestimate the importance of beauty when selling, lad. Ever."

"I have a side business in jewellery-making. Look!" He parted his lips, displaying a pair of twinkling silver earrings. "There's a bucket of scrap metal over there," he said, dropping his hair back into place. She pointed to a nearby workbench. "Take as long as you need."

The scrap was arranged into immaculate piles, sorted into buckets and boxes of gears, wires, thin sheets, thicker plating. Everything was organized by type and colour as well as size. Caer took a while to hold several of the pieces,

of her for inspiration to strike. He sketched a few designs on a supply of paper that had been given, wishing he had Beau's skill with a pencil and wondering if he would be cheating to go back to the palace and ask him for help. He decided it *would* be cheating, and he wanted to face this challenge truly himself.

He took some of the wire and started to bend it, teasing it with a pair of tweezers until it resembled a pointed, curved shape, reminiscent of Aunt Estelle's most treasured earrings.

A thought struck him.

He pulled out several more pieces of silver and started bending and curling, welding parts together with the help of the forge. He made several more leg pieces, but he had to restart a couple of times, not satisfied with where they were going. Doing the second one was a nightmare, but he wanted a perfect one—and the opportunity to prove his success wasn't a one-off.

Finally, he presented the finished project to the blacksmith: two perfect leg pieces in a fine, delicate design, metal turned to lace.

The blacksmith whistled approvingly, modelling one in front of his eyes. "These are dainty little things! Some mortal fashion?"

"Fae," Caer admitted. "I hope that's all right."

"Fashion is fashion, lad. Spent a lot of time in the fae realm?"

"Only a few days. I just saw something like these once and wanted to make a few more of them."

"Copied from memory after only seeing them once? Impressive. If your apprentice isn't back by the end of the week, the job's yours."

Caer's chest deflated. "You've already got an apprentice?"

"Aye, but he hasn't shown up for work for a few days."

"You aren't worried about him?"

er he'd "He's been talking for ages about taking one of these blades and g
ng if itthe Deep to become a monster hunter. Looks like he finally did it."

Caer smiled. "I'll be back at the end of the week."

ange by "Aye, you do that. Might even take you on if Juno comes back! Y
good eye for design."

pair of Caer thanked him profusely. The blacksmith returned his ear cuff
islinn'sCaer headed back to the palace with them safely stowed in his poc
found Aislinn back in her room, reading a book and wearing nothin
loose shirt that left her creamy thighs on full, wonderful display.

ng and The grin she flashed at him when she looked up made his knees wa
e a fewother parts of him turn much, much harder indeed.

it was She abandoned her book and skipped towards him, throwing her
t matcharound his neck and drawing his lips to hers. The kiss was light by A
standards, yet still hard to pull away from.

fect ear "Have fun in town?" she asked.

"Productive. I think I found a blacksmith to apprentice myself to, a
mirror.—" He held up the ear cuffs. "For you."

Aislinn's smile turned soft as she reached out to take them, turning
mirror to admire them as Caer slid his arms around her middle.

"They're beautiful, Caer."

to copy "So are you."

"I used to think you didn't like my ears."

. If my "I've yet to find a part of you that I dislike, but ask me after a few
Maybe I'll have come up with something by then."

Aislinn turned to kiss him, and, still grinning, they fell back towa
bed.

going to



For the next few days, they existed inside this wonderful, perfect world, unshook by nothing, disturbed by no one. They barely left Aislinn's forge, which was becoming so much like *his*, Caer wondered if he'd be permitted to remain in it after she left.

But he didn't want to think about that.

"I'll ask Venus at the ball," Aislinn said. "Maybe I should speak to Minerva, first. I'm sure she'd be happy to help us." She caught his face in her hands, as if she could sense his thoughts. "I'm not going anywhere yet. I promise."

He supposed he should be glad for that promise, but although she could break it, he knew someone else could force her too.

Venus could still say no.

Happily, the apprentice didn't return, which secured Caer the position of the blacksmith. He'd start the day after the ball. Caer was in no mood to go to Aislinn's side, but he liked the idea of returning to the forge. Aislinn was anxious for battle. They found themselves in the castle armoury, permitted to spar as long as they were chaperoned. Fighting Aislinn turned out to be such fun that they tumbled back into her arms, having worked up quite the sweat, and plunged themselves into the forge together.

"This can't end," Caer whispered into her neck, "I won't let it."

And Aislinn, unable to lie, just told him that she'd fight to be with him as long as she could.

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44
THE UNEXPECTED VISITOR

Beau was having a splendid time. He always enjoyed a revel, and the dwarven ball seemed a little tame compared to the disphome, there was no denying the dwarves were excellent hosts and this was a fine affair. The music was grand, the company hilarious, the atmosphere hearty, and—

And Aislinn was smiling again, twirling in Caer's arms, like her happiness might break with happiness. He wasn't sure he'd seen her so happy before Cass' death, wasn't sure he'd seen her so happy *ever*.

Sure, the relationship was far from ideal as Caer had to remain at least for the time being, but he trusted they'd find a way to make it work. Perhaps a lover who couldn't be with her all the time would suit Aislinn and her fierce independence. He knew their mother quite enjoyed time away from their father, even if she enjoyed coming home to him that much more. Their father had a tendency to mope whenever she was gone, and she spent large amounts of time with them in the meantime, sharing embarrassing stories.

Beau very much hoped that Aislinn did not become like that.

Caer moved away from Aislinn to get them some refreshments, and her eyes fell towards Beau. She came over, still grinning, dropping beside the pillows.

“Good evening, brother mine.”

“It certainly is.” He finished his drink and grinned at her, just as will

“Having a good night?”

“Exceptional.” He placed his goblet on a nearby table, eyes scanning the room for any of their comrades. Instead, his eyes fell on a wrinkled woman in the corner. Despite the finery around her, she was wearing a withered old dress stitched together with bits of lace and crow feathers and faded sequins, all black. Her cobwebby hair was wrapped around her head in an elaborate braid that looked like she’d been wearing it for several days.

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“No...” he whispered, his stomach plummeting.

“What is it?”

“It’s Mabel.”

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ies.

Mabel was a witch who resided mainly in Acanthia. She was responsible for the pendants that had been of great assistance to Hawthorn and his family half a century ago—one of which Aislinn was currently wearing around her neck—and the king and queen had great respect for her. Beau did too, and he did have a habit of showing up right before things *happened*. It was the cause of the insurrection. An unpredicted avalanche. The rampage of a dangerous giant that would kill one of his best friends.

Aislinn followed his gaze. “What’s *she* doing here?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Is that Minerva she’s talking to?”

Beau realised she was right. Minerva was seated beside her, a tan ale clutched in her iron grip, laughing as if they’d known each other

and herentire lives.

him on Beau marched over, Aislinn following.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded.

Mabel turned towards him. “It’s good to see you too, Prince Beau.”

dly. Aislinn switched on a smile. “Do you two know each other?”

“Oh, Minnie and I go way back!” Mabel cackled.

ing the “I thought no outsider had set foot in Avalinth for over a hundred ye

led old “No *fae* has set foot in Avalinth during that time,” said Mabel, “but

aring acount, as you know. That being said, it has been a long while, hasn’t it

ers and “Too long, too long!” Minerva chuckled into her drink.

head in “But... but... *why* are you here?” Beau asked.

ys. Mabel shrugged. “I just fancied a change of scenery.”

“We both know that is not the answer.”

The two women both laughed, before Minerva climbed to her feet.

try and find my sister. She’s been curiously absent all evening. I’ll c
onsiblewith you later, Mab.”

Juliana “*Mab?*” Beau said, aghast. “*Minnie?*”

und her “You seem surprised that I have friends, Young Prince.”

but she “I’m surprised that you’re here. And also the friends part, yes. But

A trollsurprised that you’re here. Also worried. You’re always turning u
ant thatbefore *things happen.*”

Mabel chuckled again, as if this were all a great game to her. “Your
appearance heralds disaster, Young Prince... and yet you are still alive
like to be where the action is.”

“There’s going to be action here? I thought we were supposed to
kard ofhere. Aislinn, she said—”

er their “She’s teasing you, just ignore her.”

“I can be teasing you and still be right.”

Beau froze. “I really, really don’t like you.”

There seemed to be no end to Mabel’s laughter, but now even *A* laughing, clapping her hand around his back and sidling off, back to side.

Beau knew he ought to return to the party, but he wasn’t quite sure *ars—*” ready to let this go. His eyes were rooted on Mabel still, and he *nc* I don’t faint glittery quality to her clothes—like the type associated with a *gl* dear?” That ought to have been impossible. Beau was immune to all *l* strongest of glamours—and certainly should have been immune to a *a* by a simple witch, no matter her power—and glamours weren’t *supp* work inside the castle at all.

“Are you doing magic?”

“I best Mabel’s eyes flickered, her smile dropping, just for a second. “*F* atch up Earth would I accomplish a thing like that?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I’m asking.”

Mabel chuckled. “You’re a smart one, little prince, I’ll give you that

“I am very smart,” Beau agreed. “I might even be as smart as you *o* mostly if I live so long.”

p right Mabel’s eyes gleamed. “Oh no, little prince, no one will ever live as me.”

say my Beau blinked at her, bewildered. “Who—*what*—exactly are you?”

e. I just “I may tell you one day. I may not. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Great. Can you tell me how you’re doing magic here?”

be safe “I am the greatest witch that ever lived. You can glamour me on tha

“Something tells me, that even if we stepped outside the palace you’d still have ways of dispelling any and all glamours.”

“There you go again with that intelligence, prince,” she said, patting his face like an affectionate grandma. “Hold onto it. It’ll serve you well.”

Ais was

Caer’s



Aislinn went back to Caer’s side, took the plate of food he’d found for both, and dragged him into an alcove to devour it. Her skirts spilled over them. The tailors had done a good job with her gown—it was a deep shade of blue that matched her colouring perfectly—but it wasn’t as fluid or as graceful as the glistening gowns of Faerie.

For a moment, she felt a pang at the idea that it might be a long time before Caer saw her in a true Faerie dress. She supposed she could pack one for the next time she visited... whenever that would be.

No, no. Don’t think about that. Not tonight.

She still needed to talk to Venus, but she’d disappeared after opening the dance, and Aislinn hadn’t seen her since.

“What are you thinking about?” Caer prompted.

Aislinn crossed her bare ankles over his legs and plucked the fruit from his outstretched fingers directly into her mouth with her tongue. Caer stared at her, leaning over to kiss the juice from her chin. It had the bitter, sweet taste of a grape, but soon she could taste nothing but his lips.

“You’re driving me wild,” he breathed into her mouth.

“Steady,” she said, placing a hand to his chest. “We are not in a private space, and this is not Faerie. We can’t couple out in the open.”

Caer’s eyes opened. “Fae actually do that? I assumed it was rumour.”

“Are you horrified or curious?”

the walls,

ing his “Um, a little of both?” He looked around them, a sinful smirk across his cheeks. He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. “I’d de take you here if I could.”

Spirits and vines and creatures of the Deep—I’d let this man ruin m

or them She swallowed, mouth dry. “If social protocol allowed it, I’d tear c clothes and use you as a plate.”

around “We could go back to your room...”

ea blue “Later,” she said, and stood up abruptly. “But not *much* later.”

ceful as “Where are you going?”

efore “I need a drink. Stay here.”

for the She needed a drink. A drink, and a cold bath. And him. Oh, vir needed him. Needed to take him back with her to Acanthia and v mortal lies in his ear, promises she could not make. She needed him to her bed and hold her heart and stay beside her because the rest of the ing the felt like the Deep without him—her future a dark cavern of monsters.

I can’t leave him I can’t leave him I can’t.

t in his Her gaze drifted once more to Mabel, sitting by the corner of the near to the windows stretching onto the balcony. Mabel who knev tared at about magic than her, and who sat quite alone right now. Minerva had et tang returned with Venus.

It was worth a shot.

private “I should like to ask you something, if I may,” she said, approach again.

” Mabel did not look up from her goblet. “Go on.”

” “Are there items that can dampen magical powers?”

” “You know there are, dearie.”

” “What about more than dampen? More... bind entirely?”

flirting Mabel looked up. “You are thinking of the prince.”

definitely It did not surprise Aislinn in the least that Mabel knew about him. It was probably quite the talk of the town, and even if he wasn’t... Mabel knew. She always did.

off your “Yes.”

Mabel nodded, chewing her lip. “I could create a charm to dampen people’s abilities, given the right ingredients. To put a block on someone entirely... difficult, but not impossible.”

“Then—”

Maybe she shook her head. “Not his, though. It’s taking an entire palace to contain him as it is, and still, they press against the barriers... I could whisperpress that into an object. I do not think anyone could. His powers are so warm, so much, too powerful. Too... dark.”

A world Aislinn shook her head, her heart plummeting. “No. *Caer* is *good*.”

“He is, his powers aren’t. His powers were never supposed to exist.”

“He is *not* his powers.”

A room, “No,” Mabel agreed. “He is not, from what I can see. I suppose we can be more to be thankful for that.”

not yet “What do you mean?”

“Can you imagine what might happen if anyone *else* had got their hands on such a power? The damage they could have wrought—the armies they could have raised? And yet these powers came to a boy who didn’t want them. He tried everything to avoid using them—who only ever willingly used them for good.”

“How do you know all that?”

“I hear things, Princess, and my ears travel far.”

Aislinn wondered at the power Mabel had that she was able to sense

powers even underneath the barrier, to know what she did with
He was examination, but she knew better than to press it. Mabel was not fae, s
would capable of lying, and it did not do to piss her off. She'd once curse
with donkey ears for a perceived slight when he was eight years old.
both learnt from that experience.

en most She thanked the witch for her time, and went to find something to
n them The ale was far too weak for her. Her gaze sought out Venus again,
was still nowhere to be seen.

She has to let me stay. She has to.

ilace to Aislinn sighed, taking two tankards, and returned to Caer, half-
uld not them aside and leaping on him instead.

are too “Well, hello,” Caer said when she pulled back, grinning from ear
“did you miss me?”

’ “No,” she replied. *But I will. I will, I will, I will! I'll miss you so
fear I will break from it.* She tugged at his hands. “Come with me.”

Caer's eyes gleamed. “Anywhere,” he replied. “Always.”
e ought *Liar.*

She led him by the hands out onto the balcony. It was quieter here
raucous. Something was amassing on the lawns below—a demonstra
ands on later, perhaps—but she paid it no heed. She was with Caer, after all. N
y could else seemed to matter.

m, who Dropping away from him, Aislinn leant against the stone railing,
nem for railing above the gardens. She felt a glimmer of where the barrier enc
her magic flickered back, just for a second.

“Ais?” Caer asked, his fingers gracing the skin of her back.

She turned around, pulling him against her, bringing her mouth to h
: Caer's slow, languid glide of his lips set tiny ripples of heat down to her bon

out any didn't want to stop, or open her eyes, or face the next second without
she was But she needed to breathe. She needed to move.

d Beau She pressed away from him, standing up on the baluster.

They'd "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I want to try something."

o drink. She scooted back until the heels of her soft slippers almost trod air.
but she eyes widened, and he flinched forward.

"Relax," she said. "You know I have the balance of a cat."

"I know I'm terrified of you getting hurt."

-tossing Aislinn bent down and kissed him. "I am very hard to break."

In bones, at least. The rest of her broke fairly easily. *He* could br
to ear, easily.

She straightened up again and held up her arms, letting waves of g
much Itwirl across her torso, down her legs, dusting the gown in jewels ar
until it twinkled like dusk—sunset and starlight forged in fabric. It m
hair shine, reddened her lips, made her eyes glitter and her skin glow.

Caer stared, mesmerised.

, not as "Come back down," he whispered.

tion for "The glamour will fade."

Nothing "You won't."

Aislinn smiled, leaping into his outstretched arms. His broad sh
fingers wrapped around her as the glamour sloughed from her body. She stare
led and at his eyes. "I should give you truesight."

Caer lowered her to the ground. "Will you still be able to conjure
glamours for me?"

is. The "I will," Aislinn said. "But it'll be harder for others to do so. For
es. She impossible. And you should be able to detect it. You'll still be sus

him. from glamours being cast on you though—the type that compels you to do what you’re bid. You’ll need to wear rowan berries to ward off that—”

“Not sure I’ll need all that surrounded by dwarves, but sure. Are you trying to spit in my eyes?”

She tilted his face towards hers. “I was going to kiss them. Hold on. It was not as romantic as she imagined, Caerwyn squirming under a quick lick of her tongue, and they both collapsed into giggles afterwards. A gong sounded from inside the throne room.

Caer groaned. “That sounds important. I suppose we should go back to work.”

They walked back arm-in-arm. The noise of the celebration fizzled out as they saved for a handful of very drunken dwarves. A loud trumpet signal heralded the arrival of Venus, who swept up to her throne, silencing everyone. No glamour moved.

“Friends, comrades, allies and citizens,” she announced, “it feels like for the first time in decades since we have had something to celebrate, and yet I hope in the weeks ahead, we shall have much to celebrate indeed. But first, a warm welcome to my brave sister, and a warm welcome to Prince Caerwyn, who is to be honoured here.”

A loud cheer went up, followed by the clanking of goblets and tankards. Venus raised her hand afterwards, and silence fell once more. She turned over to her guards, one of whom nodded. Aislinn noticed for the first time that Aeron was not among them, nor had she seen him at all tonight.

“But before all that, we’ve arranged a demonstration for you in the pretty grounds. Guards, show the guests to the gardens!”

The guests formed an orderly line towards the doors, but Aislinn, Caerwyn, and some of the entirety of Minerva’s band were hurried to the balcony in a completely customary for honoured guests, to have a better view.

to do as The garden had been well lit, now, sconces of bright flame marking manicured lawns and sculptures of steel and brass.

u going At the centre was the Mirror, illuminated by candlelight, the glass s like ink or smoke.

..” Caer twitched by Aislinn’s side. A hushed whisper fell over the der theThe blackness in the Mirror continued to swirl.

ds. Aeron stepped forward, calling upwards to the balcony. His voice b unnaturally. “Citizens of Avalinth, this mirror is a gateway—one I l in.” utilise to bring you fortune beyond your imaginings.”

d away, Aislinn glanced at Beau. *Gateway?* she mouthed. Aeron had definitel led theit showed the future. He *did*. What did he mean by gateway?

t a soul Beau shook his head, his eyes wide and fearful.

Aislinn turned back to the scene below.

els like “For too long, Avalinth has been cut off from Faerie,” Aeron cor he days“Separated, fearful, neglected—ignored. But no longer. This Miri toast totransport us almost anywhere, and... it can bring our allies to us.”

be our Another murmur, louder than before, raced through the crowd. turned to the Mirror, whispering words underneath his breath. The bl

nkards.of the Mirror pulled away, tendrils of smoke streaking out of it—

looked Caer started panting, breathing hard, almost doubling over. Aislinn i st timeout to steady him, wanting to cry out, but somehow her voice was lo her throat, terrified into submission by the Mirror’s raging power.

in the The smoke cleared. The glass turned crystal—reflecting a court another castle, miles and miles away.

aer, and Afelcarreg.

stead— “It... it can’t be,” Caer gasped.

“Come forward, my king,” cried Aeron. “Come, and be welcome.”

out the Aeron held out his hand. A face appeared in the glass, followed by
—a portly, red-faced body, robed and crowned.

swirling King Owen stepped through the glass.

crowd.

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Aeron held out his hand. A face appeared in the glass, followed by a body—a portly, red-faced body, robed and crowned.

King Owen stepped through the glass.

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45

FLIGHT FROM THE PALACE

The dwarves gasped. Most of them would never have seen magic or would have gone so long without seeing it it would have felt distant memory to them, a fairytale told to children.

And yet Aeron had opened a portal right into Avalinth.

And let in a human king.

And his small army, following him one by one, arranging themselves on the grass.

Aislinn looked to Minerva for direction, but her eyes were rooted to the display below. Aislinn's gaze moved to Venus instead. She could possibly be permitting this—

But Venus only smiled.

“No,” Aislinn said, marching towards her, her hands going for her sword although no sword swung there. “You gave us your word. You said you would protect Caer from his father—”

The guards' halberds darted towards her, but Venus held up her hands in apology, “Sorry,” she said, “But I made other promises long ago.”

Minerva snarled at her sister. “This ridiculous charade—it was nothing?”

“Not *nothing*,” Venus said, her voice oddly sweet. “We needed someone to go and fetch the Mirror. Aeron couldn’t do it alone, not even with his power. It could have taken decades to convince enough faeries to help them, but then two fae royals just waltzed right in...”

“You couldn’t have known they would agree to help you—”

“That’s what I said, when Aeron first suggested it, when Owen first told me that the royal family had come to visit. But he also told me that Hawthorn would do anything to free his children... and he has no power here. If you hadn’t agreed to get it yourself, I would have held them before he agreed.”

“My father would never—” Aislinn started, but then she stopped, and she couldn’t finish her words.

Because they would be lies.

Hawthorn was a great ruler—fair, just, cunning, benevolent. But just one weakness:

His family.

Them.

Venus smiled.

“And how does Owen fall into this?” Minerva asked, gaze dark.

“We share a common goal,” she said. “The annihilation of the fae, and our loved ones back beside us.”

Caer shuddered, his breathing still tight. “You can’t mean... I wouldn’t want this.”

“I’m not sure I can.” Minerva shook her head. “You can’t bring back the dead, Ven. Not if they were.”

all for “Mother,” said Tiberius, stepping forward for the first time, his face pale and shaking. “This is... no.”

one to Venus paid him no heed. “He’s already brought someone back all his shown me. He says we’ll need the Mirror’s full power to bring Clay us, but since his body is no more than bones, but he’s proven it can be done—

“If you’re talking about Dillon, there were extenuating circumstances.”

Venus frowned. “Who is *Dillon*?”

told us Aislinn froze. Had they genuinely, in all that had happened, forgotten King mention *Dillon*? Had news of the undead knight not reached Venus’ ears? power “We never brought him into the palace. He met up with us later. Until servant mentioned it to her directly—

Minerva snarled again. “You’re telling me that this Aeron has because brought someone back?”

“Yes. And he can bring back Clay, too. And Queen Gwyn. Exactly were. All he needs...” A hush fell over the party, and her eyes fell hungrily on he had Caer.

Aislinn stepped in front of him. “No.”

“Oh, my dear, what choice do you have?”

“This process,” Min started, jaw tight, “will it kill him?”

“Most likely,” she agreed, “but maybe not. It might just drain him of power he should never have had in the first place.”

and our “Then respectfully, I will have to decline.”

“Min,” said Venus, her voice unusually soft, “come. This is for Clay.” She for a boy you’ve only known a few months.”

“And how long did it take you to realise that you loved Clay?”

as they Venus went silent.

“I thought so.”

features Venus stepped towards her. “Min, think about this. You’re outnumbered. You’re unarmed. You don’t have a choice.”

κ. He’s The guards closed in around her. Aislinn looked desperately towards the balcony railing. If there was any kind of distraction, she could get them out of here. A few seconds was all she needed.

is.” Minerva caught her eyes. Aislinn nodded.

“The odds have often been stacked against us,” Minerva admitted. “It’s often been more so than now. But foolish, dear sister, to think I come unarmed?”

Unless a She extended her metal arm, winding a tiny lever in the elbow, and a shot from her wrist. She plunged it into the soft underbelly of one of the guards, wrenching away her weapon and flinging it towards Bell.

The guards were armed—but they weren’t in full armour. It was hot as they a ball, they were supposed to look the part.

grily to They were exposed.

Aislinn raced towards the baluster, leaping up onto the smooth stone, summoning fistfuls of fire.

She could not do magic inside the castle.

But she could fling fireballs inside it.

1 of the Beau understood her tactic in seconds. He vaulted up after her, summoning a hot carpet of flame. Their party hit the floor just in time as he swept across the balcony, covering anyone not pinned to the floor.

y. Clay Venus scuttled back inside, hissing and cursing.

More guards broke into the room.

“Stop!” Prince Tiberius raced forward, holding up his hands. “Don’t hurt them!”

“Guards, ignore the Prince!” Venus screamed from the throne room.

numbered him away, and catch the others!”

Leaving Beau to handle the fire, Aislinn scanned the gardens, searching for a way out. They were swamped with spectators and guards—down here. Amortal. They were beyond outnumbered. It would be a massacre.

They had to get out.

Think, think.

l. “And The others scrambled for weapons as Beau’s heat raged overhead, anywhere off any guards foolish enough to move towards them. Aislinn spies forces marching into the castle, determined to defend their queen. A blade couldn’t fight them forever. There were too many of them.

of the *So make it less.*

How to incapacitate hundreds of people—when many of them were innocent bystanders? How to get out of here when a fall from this height was certain to seriously injure, if not kill, most of their party? If only it were

one and Dark.

Dark.

Of all the people here, only three of them could see in the dark, and she didn’t think Aeron would be much of a threat on his own. The crystals monitoring most of Avalinth had been muted for the party. The sconces were dim, but some remained.

“Beau!” she hissed. “Can you cast a darkness spell?”

Beau stopped firing, only for a moment. “Right now?”

No. Not right now. Because she still needed to figure out how to get everyone out of here. Through the castle was out of the question. Beau couldn’t keep up the spell for that long, and, blind or not, dozens of armed soldiers were headed towards them. Everyone else would be blind.

Think, think.

Something brushed against her ankle. Aislinn looked down, and a yard and half the castle was coated in thick, tangled ivy. Not quite like the vine at home—but close enough.

It was nature, it was a plant, it was part of Faerie.

And she was the future queen.

She grabbed Caer's arm and held him over the railing, whispering a light-throwing spell in his eyes. It would not hurt to have at least one more person. Beau where they were going. "Come with me," she said.

Caer didn't question it. She pushed him away from her.

"Now!" she hissed to Beau.

His fire ceased. He took a long, deep breath, closing his eyes.

"Nox," he whispered.

A dark, glittering cloud swept over every light, covering the garden, the balcony, the entire castle, in thick, palpable blackness.

Aislinn could still see, just. She could see the soldiers tripping over each other, the courtiers below shrieking and running for cover, scrambling and shouting as if the dark were a monster.

Aislinn summoned her reserves of magic, and commanded the ivy to do her will. It wrapped around Caer's middle first, directing him to the ground. He held out his hands as Beau directed the others into the arms of the waiting vines, despite a few muffled protests. Finally, Aislinn grabbed Beau and they leapt down themselves, rolling onto the dense, soft ground.

"Hold onto each other!" she barked. "Follow us!"

They formed a line, guiding their blinded comrades through the darkness. A heavy thud could be heard far behind them, shrieking into the blackness.

"Stop them! Stop them, they are getting away!"

Only Aeron turned towards them. He ignited his own fireball, but realisedrose up a bank of earth to greet it, ushering the others onwards until vines attached the walls. She and Beau dove into the rock like it was made of clawing it apart until there was space enough to force the others through and closed it up behind them as best they could.

Beau's darkness spell had extended in the streets of Avalinth, but the spotting at the edges, growing murky like pond water. They raced forward so hardy knowing where they were going. The Deep? No, too obvious. Back to the gates? To Acanthia? Too obvious. Their enemies would soon catch up to them.

"Wait!" Luna cried, voice trembling. "We have to go back—Dillon!"

Dillon. Aislinn could have kicked herself. Dillon, sitting in the stables, likely wondering what on earth was going on.

"No," said Minerva. "We can't go back there. Not yet. It's too dangerous, but he'll be fine. You heard my sister—she didn't even know about her brother. He'll be safe there for a while. We won't."

Luna took a deep, shuddering breath, but said nothing. Her large eyes blinked in the murky dark. "All right," she said, sounding the least 'at all' to bend Aislinn had ever heard a person be.

"Where are we going?" asked Flora. "I hope someone has an idea."

"Downtown," Minerva announced. "We'll find an abandoned building where Beau's friends can summon up a few spells to help us. It's concealed there—because they will come looking. Come on. It's still dark."

the dark.



Aislinn Thankfully, most of the streets were clear as the party made their way through the downtown area Minerva described. Unlike the market area, these streets were mostly empty, near deserted at this hour, and the few people out kept to themselves. Through it, located a tumbling-down townhouse and picked the lock, the party slipped inside and collapsing in a pile on the floor as Beau sealed it again with magic. He then drew out protection symbols over the boundaries.

Forwards, The actions around everything went unnoticed by Caer. His breath was ragged, his throat tight, his thoughts muddled and hazy. Exhaustion pooled in his chest. He had no margin for error.

He took a brief look around the house. Most of the downstairs was missing, replaced by a single room. The furniture remaining was broken or thrown away. Palace belongings scattered over the floor. Empty boxes, smashed pots, faded scrolls, and torn books. Little to aid them.

Caer's eyes widened. What had just *happened*?

Beau finished carving out his spells. "I'm not sure how well they'll hold against Aeron's magic," he said. "But it should hold him off for a while. Unless he's secretly got an army of fae sorcerers, too."

It seemed unlikely. Whatever Aeron's plans were, he'd done his best to avoid collecting a force that used any magic at all. Strange. Could he be plotting against the fae? What were his motives?

He had to be behind it, didn't he? This couldn't be Owen's doing. Owen that Caer knew. He'd always been wary of the Fae—what if he wasn't?—but to outright plot their *annihilation*... why? He'd never been so distrustful of Rowan as Caer had been—

Rowan.

Caer leant against the wall, the truth staggering. "He's the healer trying to save my mother," he said quietly. "I thought I recognized

y to the before. That's how he forged an alliance with Owen. He must have
ts were glamour when he visited us..." He paused. "I think he let my mother c
as. Bell continued. "I think he wanted her dead to motivate Owen into forgi
uffling alliance. I heard him say he had a back-up option." He paused
1 magic breathing hard. "You can't bring back the dead, right? Not with
extenuating circumstances. Like Dillon's soul being trapped in the vine
ath was The room fell silent. No one would meet his gaze—no one but Aisli
into his "That's my understanding," she said. "Dillon is the first case I've
heard of."

is taken "The soul remains attached to the body for a little while after death,
adbare, continued. "It allows for resuscitation. But once that connection is seve
d paperno. It shouldn't be possible. Not unless the soul was contained som
else."

"Mother's wasn't," Caer said slowly. "Clay's couldn't have been eit
ll guard "And yet Aeron is claiming to have done it..."
while... Aislinn sighed, shaking her head. "I don't understand it," she sai
lied. He straight up lied. How did he do that?"

best to "Does that part matter?" said Minerva. "He's poisoned my sister's
onestly has two armies on his side, and a Mirror he believes he can use to re
the dead. How's your father's army looking, girl? You think he can
Not the all that?"

mortal Aislinn swallowed. Caer didn't know much about the Fae military,
been as imagined it was sparse, relying on magic to bolster its ranks, and its fe
reputation to ward off external invaders. They were not ready for war.
dwarves, though—they were built for it, and with Owen's army behind
hat was—

ed him "This is my fault," said Aislinn. "I used the vines to help us f

worn a Mirror. I helped return it to its form.”

lie,” he “I helped too,” Beau admitted. “This isn’t all on you.”

ing this “No, lass.” Minerva shook her head. “You aren’t to blame for th
again, might have sped up Aeron’s plans somewhat, but he’d have found a
thout... get to it eventually. And we’re the ones that agreed to the quest, even
es.” we knew he was up to no good.”

nn. “I shouldn’t have come here,” Caer whispered. “This—all of t
ve ever because of me.”

Minerva snorted. “Actually, son, you’re the least to blame out of an
,” Beau You’ve told us not to act on many an occasion, and we’re the or
ered... haven’t listened.”

ewhere Magna tugged on her sleeve, making several elaborate hand gestu
quickly for Caer to understand. His eyes felt heavy, like his entire br
her.” trying to sponge out of his sockets.

“Yes, yes, I know you warned us too!”

id. “He Magna rolled her eyes, slumping back.

“Still—” Caer began.

ear. He Minerva shook her head. “You. You are obsessed with taking the
surrectobsessed with shouldering things that aren’t yours to shoulder, when
take onever did to anyone was be born. You are an arrow, Caer—not the arch

Caer swallowed. “Someone is responsible for this.”

, but he Minerva shrugged. “Perhaps. Aeron seems a good target for it righ
arsome But sometimes, son, there is a lot of bad in the world and no one to
But the Life doesn’t owe you an easy ride. But you find the right people to
id them with you, and even the hard times will be enduring. You’ll see.”

“You still think we’re going to survive this?”

ind the “I think we’ll give it our best shot.”



is. We
way to
though
his—is

They set to work searching the house for anything useful. Most of the things had rotted away, but Aislinn and Beau were able to scramble up the walls to find a few blankets and a couple of mattresses that weren't too mouldy. No one dared start a fire in case the smoke gave away their location.

“Luna?” Minerva called at one point. “Any luck in the kitchen?”

y of us.

“Um... I found a rolling pin.”

ies that
res, too

“Terrific. Three spears, two halberds, firepower we can't use inside the castle, one blade fused to my arm, and a rolling pin. Yes, we can defeat the enemy and take back a kingdom with that.”

ain was

“Don't forget audacity,” Bell intervened. “We've plenty of that.”

“We can't fight with audacity, Bell!”

“Have you tried? Very effective.”

Minerva stared at her wife. “You're trying to make me laugh. It won't work.”

blame,

Bell shrugged. “Worth a shot.”

all you
er.”

Aislinn appreciated the attempt at humour, but as Luna returned to the side of the room, her laugh fell short. Caer was still sitting on the side of the room, his face unusually pale, his eyes dark. He hadn't been like this right since Aeron had used the Mirror.

ht now.
blame.
ride it

She sat down beside him, but he jerked away from her. They were trapped against the walls now. She was not safe from him. She should have been prepared for this, and yet those few days she'd spent tangled up inside his arms had made her forget their reality.

She had not expected it to sting this much. It was not natural to sit apart.

A few days. What if that was all they had? No one had come up with a viable plan, yet—

Caer coughed, his breath hard. He groaned, streaking his hands down his face.

Aislinn frowned. “Are you all right?”

“Probably just exhausted from everything that’s happened today. I don’t know?”

He offered her a weak smile, but it looked forced and laboured. Blood sweat gathered at his pores.

Aislinn raised her hand to his forehead, but he jerked away again. “I can’t—”

She grabbed Luna’s nearby hand and placed it to his head instead. “Does it feel hot to you?”

Luna’s eyes widened. “Caer, you’re burning up.”

“Flora!”

Flora came stumbling over to inspect him, putting her hand to his forehead, looking at his mouth, taking his pulse. “Could be a mortal case of sniffles,” she surmised.

“I don’t... get sick...” Caer said, his voice crackling.

“All mortals get sick.”

“Not me,” he insisted. “My mother said that’s why I was blessed... *doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, Caer...*”

Flora patted his arm. “Mortals are liars, boy, and I think you might be delusional. Lie down. Rest. We’re not going anywhere for a bit.”

It was a testament to how wretched he was feeling that Caer did not

t so farHe slumped against the cold stone floor, moving only once when Lu
him something to use as a pillow. He didn't react at all when Aislinn d
with anyblanket over him.

“Flora,” she said, when she decided he was probably asleep, “dwar
own hislie too.”

Flora paused. The rest of the room carried on with their
conversations, discussing the next best course of action. “Could ju
y, youmortal illness, like I said,” she responded. “The boy’s been through a
dragged this way and that, exposed to who knows what. Just let him re
eads ofAin’t nothing we can do about anything at the moment.”

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1. “You

. “Does

s head,
of the

. ‘*what*

ight be

t argue.

He slumped against the cold stone floor, moving only once when Luna gave him something to use as a pillow. He didn't react at all when Aislinn draped a blanket over him.

“Flora,” she said, when she decided he was probably asleep, “dwarves can lie too.”

Flora paused. The rest of the room carried on with their muted conversations, discussing the next best course of action. “Could just be a mortal illness, like I said,” she responded. “The boy's been through a lot and dragged this way and that, exposed to who knows what. Just let him rest, girl. Ain't nothing we can do about anything at the moment.”

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It was late—very late. Eventually, Minerva announced the best course of action was for everyone to try and get some sleep. “Everything’s going to be better in the morning,” she said, but her grim expression did not make her words sound optimistic.

Aislinn took the first watch. She felt beyond sleep. Caer lay on his back, coughing intermittently, radiating heat. She’d tried to heal him, or at least ease his symptoms, but mortal illness had a habit of clinging to their bodies and was not so easily expunged.

She had not thought of Caer as breakable before—not even during the manticores’ poisoning. After her initial fear had worn off, she’d been confident he’d recover.

Beau had tried to heal him too, but to no avail. “His heart feels like it’s about to stop,” he’d remarked.

That did not sound promising.

Something Aeron had done with that Mirror had unlocked something in Caer. She thought about what Venus had said, how they needed Caer to

their plans to fruition. She remembered the tendrils of smoke that escaped when the Mirror had first been activated.

It was like something was calling to him.

She paced about the room for a bit, double-checking the spells, staring into the street. She tried to read the discarded papers on the floor but couldn't make out any of the words. The weapons couldn't be sharpened, she missed her own.

And Dillon, too. He'd always been there during the night before.

She hated herself for leaving him behind. She kept reliving their escape in her mind, finding ways of getting to the stable. Everything seemed predictable in hindsight.

Finally, she went over and sat next to Caer. He was so hot, and his rough looks made her insides ache. She placed her hand to his chest, and she felt the same crackle Beau did, like a tear in his heart.

Her eyes turned back towards the window. She could still see the outline of the castle, the castle where all their answers lay, along with their only companion.

"You're thinking about doing something foolish, aren't you?"

Aislinn jumped. Luna was sitting up, staring at her. "I, um... it might be foolish—"

"You can't say it isn't, can you?"

Aislinn shook her head.

"It's all right," Luna said. "I'm thinking of doing something foolish, Aislinn frowned, not understanding her meaning.

"Dillon," Luna said. "He's still in the palace grounds. I hope. Maybe he won't... I don't know."

Aislinn paled. She wasn't sure how many people knew about Dillon.

at had where he was staying, but she hoped he had the good sense to stay hidden.

“I’m going to go back to the palace,” Aislinn announced. “I’ll be for my own. I need to see the Mirror again, figure out what’s going on with it.” She glanced across at Caer.

or, but “Take me with you,” Luna said.

ed. She Aislinn shook her head. “It’s too dangerous.”

“Ais, how many times did we run into trouble in the Deep?”

“Um, many times. Many many times.”

cape in “And how many times did you see me get hurt?”

ossible “That—that is a very fair point.”

Luna gave a mock bow. “I am very good at staying out of trouble.”

l every Aislinn took a deep breath. “Fine. But as a lookout only. And I go to the palace alone.”

“Agreed.” Luna looked around her. “We shouldn’t leave them without a look-out.”

missing “I know,” said Aislinn, groaning. She shook Beau’s shoulder. He was the only one who *might* not give them a hard time. “Beau, dearest, can you cover for me? I’m about to do something very stupid and I need you to cover for me.” Beau moaned something under his breath and shifted into an awkward position, already scowling. “I’m going to hate this, aren’t I?”



too.”

Aislinn and Luna made their way through the silent streets of Avalir. A couple of cloaks Aislinn had stolen from a seedy tavern—one of the few places open this time of night. She’d wanted to pilfer a dagger as well.

illon or

den. she couldn't see any easily accessible, and it wasn't worth drawing attention to herself. Her height and the dress did not help with blending with..." Sticking to the shadows did. Usually she could glamour herself invisible, but before she'd even begun to learn magic, Juliana had taught her how to hide in the shadows, how to creep with the stealth of a cat. She had used it to creep up on her father, startling him half to death, and once even to enter the war room during an important meeting. She still remembered his expression when he discovered her under the table, like he didn't know whether to be proud or angry.

Father... how she'd like to see him now. Either of her parents would know what to do, she was sure.

Instead, all she had was a sawn-off halberd, stuffed into a makeshift bag, and an albino dwarf who for all she said was good at staying out of trouble. Her moonlight skin did not help her to blend in.

They reached the outside of the palace walls. The gates were heavily patrolled, but Aislinn located a spot on the walls where there looked like a weak blindspot. She found a nearby plant to give them a boost, and they tumbled into the gardens.

Sensibly, someone had turned up the crystals, and the place was lit with light. Soldiers both mortal and dwarf patrolled the grounds.

They were on the wrong side for the stables, and Aislinn couldn't find a clear path. There was an open window on this side of the palace, high up—but not too high for her.

She calculated her best course of action. She could get into the palace through the window, find some better weapons, inspect the Mirror, and maybe find a mortal soldier to help her. Or threaten, since the magic would be hard to glamour into helping her. Or threaten, since the magic would be hard to glamour into helping her.

ly more Yes, that worked. Perhaps she could even get him to inspect the
g in. himself if she got him outside the barrier...

all but She paused, gathering her courage, and explained her plan to Luna.
ight her “Stay here,” she instructed. “Hide in that bush there. Whistle if yo
he used someone’s spotted me.”

ept into “All right,” she agreed.

s scowl “One more thing.” Aislinn cleared her throat. “I shall not rev
er to belocation of our safehouse, not even on pain of death.”

Luna blinked at her. “Big vow.”

d know “Necessary.” If she was caught, she wasn’t revealing where the
were. She would rather die.

ift belt, She imagined Caer would rather die than wake up and realise wha
trouble, done, but she hoped he wouldn’t have to. She glanced down at Luna.

l in. “Are you even armed?”

heavily Luna pulled back her cloak. “I’m carrying my rolling pin.”

to be a “Right.” Aislinn stared back at the wall. “Please try not to get caught

umbled “I’ll do my best.” She paused, and then threw her arms around A
middle. “Don’t die in there. Find something to help him.”

flooded Aislinn wanted to swear that she would, but she couldn’t, not even f
Caer needed her to come back. She needed to *come* back.

chart a *I’ll be fine*, she told herself, unable to speak it. *I have to be.*

owever. She patted Luna’s back, pulled away from her, and darted up the
the palace, swift as string and rubber, not stopping until she reach
ce, find window and slid inside.

ldier by It was a grand bedroom on the other side of the palace from wher
was out. been staying. She wished she was closer to her room. Good as the so:
slippers were for leaping up buildings, her boots would be much bet

stablesfight. It seemed unlikely she'd be able to avoid one forever. She searched about the room, searching for anything else that might be useful—a dagger, a proper belt—anything.

A soft snore alerted her to the presence of someone on the bed, that she thought fast asleep. Excellent. She took a few minutes to rifle through the drawers. All the clothes were the wrong size, of course, but a belt with a fine metal buckle was fairly quickly located, and a better cloak than the one she'd worn—longer, almost hiding her skirts which she'd slashed at the knee to allow for easier movement.

She found a chest in the corner filled with weapons. *Perfect*. She discarded the broken halberd and took two daggers instead, buckling them to her waist. They didn't have the reach of a sword, but it was easier to move with than a sword.

The snoring stopped.

Aislinn paused, flattening herself against the wall. Even if the dwarf was awake, they wouldn't be able to see her in the dark. If she stayed quiet—

“Who's there?”

Her heart hammered in her throat.

The dwarf turned to a dial beside his bed, and the crystal lights flooded the room. Aislinn bolted from her spot, pinning the dwarf to the bed before he could even move, dagger against his throat.

Prince Tiberius stared back at her. “Aislinn,” he gasped.

Aislinn did not release her hold. “I like you, Prince, but I will run through you with your own dagger if I suspect for even a second that you are endangering my mission.”

Tiberius put up his hands. “I'm not going to fight you,” he said. “I wouldn't think I'll stop you, either. What's going on? My mother's gone to the afterlife in a flash talking about bringing back my father—”

scanned “It can’t be done.”

agger, a Tiberius tightened his jaw. “I thought that, too, but Aeron’s brought someone else.”

unkfully “Who?”

rawers. “One of the heroes. It doesn’t really matter. I’ve seen her; it’s real.”

e silver Aislinn shook her head. “I don’t know what you saw, but Aeron is I don’t know how, but he is.”

o allow Tiberius swallowed. “I... I think I believe you,” he said. “I don’t want to, but I do. Will you believe me? I don’t want to go to war, Aislinn

scarded “Don’t fancy ruling over Faerie some day?”

er belt. Tiberius shook his head. “There is but one certainty of war—that hem. will suffer. I’m greatly interested in improving relations between kingdoms but... not like this. Emphatically no, in fact.”

f woke, Aislinn released her grip, just a fraction. After the lies of the day, she reluctant to trust anyone, but Tiberius *had* objected to his mother’s when he’d first heard of them. She wanted to believe him. She did.

She inched back. “Where’s the Mirror?”

ded the “If you’re hoping to smash it, I don’t think that will really solve fore he problems. Owen’s had an army transported through it and—”

“I don’t need to smash it. I need to examine it.” She was fairly certain such an object couldn’t be smashed—or the dwarves and their faun you would not have had to transform it.

ou will Tiberius frowned. “Examine it? Why?”

She pursed her lips. “Caer’s sick,” she explained. “The Mirror... it’s “And I something to him. I need to find out what.”

ie mad, Tiberius sat up. “Ah, is that right, *Princess I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-prince?*”

“Don’t tease. Please. He’s really—” She took a deep breath. “Just
ht backwhere to find the Mirror.”

“In the vault, behind the throne room,” he said.

“The vault?”

“Aeron realised that there must be other areas in the palace wh
a liar. I barrier was weak. He quickly chiselled an alcove into the back of the v

Aislinn groaned. He’d stored it in a place where it could be magic,
t really no one could use it. Smart. *Evil.*

nn.” She’d definitely do exactly the same thing, but still. “How heavi
guarded?”

people “Two or four.”

en our “I can take two or four.”

Tiberius grimaced. “Um, what are the chances of you being able to
she was without killing them, *and* without alerting more? Because I know i
s plan those guards. They aren’t under Aeron’s thrall, they probably don’t
war either—they’re just loyal to their queen and want to go home to
with a few coins for their families.”

all our Aislinn sighed. “Why did you have to be so moral?”

“You’re moral too,” he said, smiling. “You’re just scared and an
ain that not thinking clearly.”

e allies Aislinn scrambled off the bed, sliding her borrowed daggers ba
place. She hated feeling so out of control, hated the feeling of being
to do anything for someone. Hated knowing she *would*.

s doing “Have you got any less murderous ideas?”

Tiberius pulled on a robe. “How about the simple, ‘guards, guards,
out-the-someone in my room!’?”

Aislinn nodded. “That’s a good plan. Hold on.”

tell me She went back to the window and leaned out of it, distorting a few plants in the flowerbed below to look like they were twisted by magic. She jumped below when the bush she was hiding in moved, but Aislinn held up her thumbs, indicating that everything was all right.

ere the “Should lend some credence to the idea,” she explained to Tiberius. “I don’t want a revolt.” “did you leave the window open anyway? Seems like a terrible idea given the current circumstances.”

Tiberius looked at the floor. “Minerva knows which room is mine. I’ll do it myself if it is said. “It was all I could think to do that might help her back into the castle.”

“You’d let your rampaging aunt in here?”

“She’s the only one who can challenge Mother,” he explained. “I don’t want a war—people won’t want a war—and she’s just broken her word. She promised to do that for Caerwyn safety. A broken promise can be grounds for usurpation and the death of most of the dwarves. We do not take it lightly.”

want a “I can’t imagine Venus would take such an attempt lightly, either.”

narrow “No,” he agreed, still staring at the floor. “She wasn’t always like that. I know. My father’s death—it changed her.”

Aislinn could understand how such a thing would. She did not want to be hungry and imagine the version of herself without Caer in the world. But she also didn’t think that excused her actions, or Owen’s. She thought if she was willing to get back into this far, someone ought to stop her.

willing “I won’t hurt your mother if I can avoid it,” she promised him. It was a promise she could manage—a promise that gave her leeway.

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, is there anything else you need? My mother says there’s looks rather good on you, I must say.”

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Mercifully, Tiberius’ room was located quite close to the throne

Aislinn slipped into another he assured her was empty, and waited

whilst he ran into the room and screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Guards, guards!” he yelled. “There’s someone in my room!”

Footsteps thundered down the hall. Aislinn waited until they’d

before sneaking out, silent as a whisper. She moved towards the door

the throne, following Tiberius’ instructions. It was a huge, metal door,

nature—constructed, no doubt, on the belief it harmed the fae. Half r

course. It harmed the lesser ones. But Aislinn was a princess of Faerie

metal could affect her unless it was fashioned into a weapon.

There was no keyhole, just a heavy lock with four small, numeric

Tiberius had given her the code earlier, but it took longer than she

have liked to open it. She wondered how long it would take before

were sent back to the post.

She hoped no one asked how she had gotten in if she was caught;

not want to throw Tiberius under the cart. She should have threatened

the digits, even falsely. It would still give her a lie to wield.

Finally, the lock sprung open, and she stepped into the room.

Aislinn sucked in a breath. The room was cavernous—almost half t

of the throne room itself. The ceiling was lower than the rest of the

but it was stacked to the vaulted points with piles of gold and

mountains of jewels and crowns, gilded statues, weapons forged in g

inlaid with stones the size of a baby’s fist. A dragon couldn’t boa

bigger horde.

At the back of the room, in a crudely cut hole in the wall, was the gleaming mirror.

Aislinn approached carefully, eyes held on this treasure above all else in the room. The black waters of the glass murmured, whispering like waves on a shore, and there almost had a voice.

She could hear it calling to her.

“Tell me what you are,” she begged it. *Tell me what you’ve done to me.* Something sharp pressed into the back of her neck.

“Tell me what *you* are,” said the voice attached to it, “before I run you through.”

Aislinn swallowed, her breath tight in her throat. She supposed she should be grateful the person seemed to have come alone—although she was not skilled indeed to have snuck up on her.

“I’m disarming,” Aislinn said, moving to unbuckle her weapons.

“Turn,” instructed the woman. “Slowly. I will have your word, Faer.”

“I shan’t promise to not fight back,” Aislinn said, “but I will turn my back and not attack you whilst I do so.”

Carefully, gradually, Aislinn turned, kicking away her weapons. She moved as far out of reach. Just in case.

She met her attacker’s eyes, and the breath rushed out of her. The size of her assailant’s hand shook, her eyes widening. She saw it too. Recognized something.

The woman with her blade to Aislinn’s throat was Cerridwen Arden, Aislinn’s grandmother.

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*A*eron has brought someone back already. One of the heroes.
Aislinn had assumed it would be one of the dwarven heroes because why wouldn't she? But Cerridwen was one of them, too. A recent one, by their history. Someone they would remember.

It shouldn't be possible.

But what if her body was preserved, like Dillon's was? In the void somewhere else?

Juliana had never told her what had happened to her mother, only that she was dead. She'd been told not to talk about it. Cerridwen was spoken of the same way the dwarves sung her praises, like she was a legend. Only occasionally would Juliana speak of her like she had ever been a person.

Curse you, Mother.

"You," she said.

Cerridwen frowned. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Why do you look like—"

“Like you?” she said. “Or like your daughter?”

Cerridwen trembled, but she did not let go of her sword. “How do you know about Juliana?”

“Because my name is Aislinn Ardenthorn. I am the daughter of King Hawthorn, now King, and Juliana Ardencourt. I’m your granddaughter.”

Cerridwen shook her head. “No. No, he said Juliana died, that it had been centuries—”

Of course he’d say that. If he only brought her back to prove her presence to the others, he’d need her on his side, need her to believe there was no going back to.

“It’s been almost seventy years, for you,” Aislinn explained. “But I know you, my mother is very much alive, and the Queen of Faerie.”

heroes—
And a Cerridwen did not let go of her weapon. “Aeron tells me one thing and another. You both look like fae. How am I supposed to know what to believe?”

nes—or
that she
about in
of old.
1 a real
Aislinn swallowed. She should have been expecting this. She was wondering the same thing herself. “You used to sing her a song,” she said. “*You saw a sweet and seemly sight, a blissful bird, a blossom bright, that never made and mirth among—*”

“That’s an old mortal ditty. Anyone could have told you that.”
“Her best friend was Dillon. He’s here with us, hiding in the stables—”
She *hoped* he was hiding in the stables— “He didn’t see you come in here—”
back up my story—”

“You could have told him anything in the meantime, and how do you know if this person really *is* Dillon? He was but a child when I last saw him—”
It was a fair point. Aislinn wracked her brain, trying to remember something—anything—that might help her, but Juliana had only been

when Cerridwen had supposedly died, and her memories of her had been minimal. She'd had so little to pass on—

Her other grandmother, though, the Dowager Queen, had more to say. Prince Juliana, she had been reluctant to talk about her dead friend, as if speaking her name was painful, but one year on Hawthorn's birthday, she'd scooped up Aeron and Aislinn as their parents danced, and told them that today was the anniversary of the couple's first meeting—not that either remembered. Aeron had been only an hour or two old.

"You were with Queen Maytree when she gave birth to her son."

"Many people were with her."

"My mother came in crying for you not long after he was born. It was the first time she saw the four of you, then. You were her friend. She gave your daughter the name of the first king, you know. It was such an impropriety to ask, that Maytree only ever told Juliana, and she told us."

"Us?"

"Me and my brother. Beau."

The sword finally lowered. "You're telling the truth."

"Yes."

"Juliana lives?"

"Yes."

"And you're... my granddaughter."

Aislinn smiled. "Yes."

A great commotion sounded in the halls, and Aeron barged into the room flanked by guards. Cerridwen raised her sword again, pressing it once more against Aislinn's throat, eyes blazing.

Aeron's eyes locked onto Aislinn, and the first quiver of fear appeared on his face. *He knows, she realised. He knows she's my grandmother, knows who*

id been *stake if she realises it, too.*

He'd taken a huge risk bringing her back. There *must* have been something special about the manner in which her body was preserved. He'd been looking for another option.

Up Beau “Ah, Cerridwen, ever the knight, I see,” he said coolly. “You appear to have also caught an interloper. Has she said anything at all?”

Numbered. Cerridwen snorted. “With my blade to her throat? No. She hasn't had a chance.”

Aeron's eyes narrowed. He stared at Aislinn. “Is that true?”

Of course he'd check with her, and how could Aislinn reply unless she just didn't answer at all? Even saying nothing was enough of a clue...

Insight. She paused. She didn't have to answer him, as long as whatever she said... and next was the truth.

She turned to Cerridwen. “You're my—” she started.

Aeron launched forward, slamming his hand against her mouth. He knew what she was about to say, knew he couldn't risk giving her the opportunity to speak at all. If he was thinking clearly, he'd have her interrogated immediately. But she'd bought herself some time.

“Take her away,” he instructed the guards. “Gag her, lest her silver tongue deceive you all.”

A few of the guards looked amongst themselves, perhaps wondering if someone that could only speak truth needed to be gagged.

In the room, “Were you listening?” Aeron replied. “Take her to the dungeons. Do not let her speak. She can offer you all sorts of temptations; do not give her the opportunity.”

Numbered. Aislinn put on a show of struggling as they yanked her to her feet. She *hat's at* stopping once they exerted real force. She could not afford to be injured.

She let herself be dragged away, casting one final, desperate look
nothing grandmother, and hoped she knew what she was doing.

not had



pear to

The guards took Aislinn to the dungeons, stashed her weapons, and
her into a cell.

had the

“Aislinn!”

A crystal-clear voice cried out to her. Aislinn looked up. Luna.

ess she

Oh no, no, no, no—

They raced forward to embrace one another.

he said

“I’m sorry!” cried Luna. “The garden was swarming with guards. I
hide, but they started searching the bushes—”

e knew

She dissolved into noisy tears. Aislinn wished she could comfort
everything she could think to say was a lie.

portunity

“Don’t worry, Luna,” said one of the guards—the one that had been
gentle with Aislinn on the way down— “I’m sure everything will be fine
later on. Majesty isn’t going to hurt you. She just needs the Prince.”

ater on.

tongue

Luna’s tearshot eyes blazed. “I’m not going to be fine if anything happens
to him, Pollux! This is madness! Do you really want to go to war?”

ng why

“Well, no, but—”

“Then stop this!”

Do not

Pollux looked down at the floor. “I can’t,” he said. “I’m sorry...”

her the

Luna dissolved into sobs once more, and Aislinn held her tightly, holding
there herself. But she couldn’t cry, not yet. If she did, she didn’t think

at, only

stop.

’d.

And she needed to think. *Think.*

at her There was always a way out. Always. Her mother had taught her that she didn't need magic. There would be another way. She just had to stand long enough to figure it out.

The door at the top of the stairs barged open, and Aeron marched into the room. He glared at the two of them through the bars. "Separate them," he instructed.

"Who are you?" Aislinn asked. "Why are you doing this?"

"Oh no, little princess, I'm not telling you anything."

He clicked his fingers, and the guards marched into the room. Aislinn tried to fight them, but there were too many. Chains fastened around her wrists, dragging her to the wall.

"Where's the Prince?" Aeron demanded.

"I made a vow," Aislinn said. "I shall not reveal the location of the Prince, but I will protect my comrades, not even on pain of death."

Aeron laughed. "Of course you did," he said. "But I am not sure that you can be held to such promises..."

He turned towards Luna, who quaked beneath his massive shadow. Tears spilled from her eyes.

"No," Aislinn whimpered, "don't—"

But she could not stop him. She could offer him nothing.

Luna wouldn't say anything to begin with. She'd hold on for as long as she could. But eventually, she'd speak.

After her voice turned hoarse with screaming.

Tell him, Aislinn wanted to scream. Don't let him hurt you.

But she couldn't speak that, either. She needed Luna to hold on for as long as possible. In case—

In case what?

at. She Minerva didn't have the forces to rescue them, and she wouldn't
ly alive without considering her options. No one was coming for them.

Aeron plucked a dagger from his belt, and placed it to Luna's cheek
into the bubbled at the tip.

te," he "Please," Luna whispered, not looking at Aeron, as if she knew he
were pointless, but at Pollux behind him.

His throat wobbled. "Just tell him, Luna."

"Yes, Luna," said Aeron, pressing the blade deeper. "Do tell."

nn tried Luna cried out. Aislinn roared—

wrists, The dungeon door barged open and in blazed Cerridwen Arde
Dillon behind her. They flew down the steps. One of the guards d
Dillon, but he grabbed the spear in his massive hands and swung then
of my until they collapsed into their comrade. Pollux held up his hands, refu
fight.

e dwarf "Free her!" Dillon barked at him.

Pollux went for the keys. Cerridwen slammed against Aeron, knock
7. Tears dagger from his grip.

"You *lied!*" she hissed. "My granddaughter—my family!"

"I lie to everyone," Aeron sneered. "Don't take it too personally."

Footsteps sounded along the corridor. Pollux grappled with A
g as she chains. More guards pooled into the room. Luna wriggled free, grabbi
weapons from the chest they'd been stashed in and tossing Aislinn's c
back towards her. Aeron slammed his elbow into Cerridwen's mid
scurried up the steps. She screamed out, but he did not stop.

as long Dillon thundered towards the entrance, knocking over dwarv
mortals, tossing them over his shoulders like bags of flour and pav
way for the rest of them.

race in They reached the hallway. More guards were still coming. It
endless tide.

. Blood Dillon took the lead, barreling towards them, knocking several o
feet. Aislinn and Cerridwen followed his lead, aiming for legs whe
er pleascould—hurting, not killing. Tiberius’ words still thumped in Aislinn’s

Someone finally tackled Dillon to the ground. The guards swarmed
him, hacking at him with their weapons.

“Let him go!” Luna roared.

She swooped in with her rolling pin, smacking against heads and ki
ncourt,in a frenzied blur, eyes blazing. She was like a rabid animal, too f
lived atquick for Aislinn to even see.

1 round She didn’t stop until every guard had rolled away from Dillon.

ising to For a split second, the corridor was silent.

Dillon stared at her, this moon-coloured dwarf, her rolling pin w
blood. “I think I’m in love with you,” he rushed.

ing the More cries came, a rallying for battle.

“Over here!” called a voice.

Tiberius, still in his nightclothes, opened up a door in the side of th
“Come—quickly!”

islinn’s No one wasted time arguing with him. They bolted into the
ng theirfollowing him in the dark. “This passageway should take you outs
daggerscastle walls,” Tiberius explained.

dle and “If your mother finds out you helped us—” Aislinn started.

“Ah, she’s my mother, what’s she going to do? It might ope
es andmeaningful discussion about her current methods.”

ing the “Good luck with that.”

“I will need it.”

was an They carried on in the dark, sounds of shouting still reverberating t
the stone. The passageway seemed to shake with it.

ff their Eventually, light opened up ahead, leading to a waterway and an icro
re theylocked by yet another code. Tiberius punched it in and they found ther
ears. in a shallow river.

l round “I should get back,” he said.

“Thank you,” Aislinn said.

Tiberius clutched his chest. “Thanks from a Faerie. I am honoured
neecapsforward to claiming the favour. Your hand in marriage, perhaps.”

ast, too “Very funny.”

“I am, alas, only teasing. I know your heart is spoken for.”

Aislinn’s insides twisted. *Caer*. She still hadn’t managed to fi
anything about what was ailing him.

et with “Go,” Tiberius said. “May the heroes watch over you... living and d
He pulled the grille shut and disappeared back up the tunnel.

There were still guards in the streets, and the party stuck out like m
with their tall forms and blood-streaked clothing. Dillon was a torn-up
ie wall. They dared not dally long, moving swiftly through the streets until the
move no longer, and paused to catch their breath in an empty alley.

space, Luna turned to Dillon. “Get down,” she said.

ide the Dillon, thinking they were under attack, hit the floor. Luna laugh
pulled him into a sitting position. “We’re safe,” she assured him.

“Then why did I need to get down—”

n up a She grabbed his shirt and slammed her mouth against his. “I lo
too,” she said when they parted. “Now let’s find somewhere to pat
up.”

Dillon climbed numbly to his feet, a lopsided smile spread across h

through His hand stayed firmly in Luna's.

They had almost reached the downtown area when a large, booming grille echoed from the palace gates, amplified by magic.

“Aislinn Ardenthorn!” Aeron called. “Return the prince by tonight evening, or face the consequences.”

Aislinn tried to ignore him, keeping her head down and slinking forward.

“The boy is dying, isn't he?”

. I look Aislinn stilled.

“Don't listen to him,” Luna hissed. “He can lie. We know he can.”

Maybe, thought Aislinn, but I don't think he's lying about this.

“The Mirror is calling to him. It wants his powers. He can survive without them—maybe. But he won't if you don't bring him back within two days.”

The voice vanished.

“Come on,” Luna urged her. “If there's anything we've learnt today that we shouldn't do anything by ourselves.”

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His hand stayed firmly in Luna's.

They had almost reached the downtown area when a large, booming voice echoed from the palace gates, amplified by magic.

"Aislinn Ardenthorn!" Aeron called. "Return the prince by tomorrow evening, or face the consequences."

Aislinn tried to ignore him, keeping her head down and slinking forwards.

"The boy is dying, isn't he?"

Aislinn stilled.

"Don't listen to him," Luna hissed. "He can lie. We know he can."

Maybe, thought Aislinn, *but I don't think he's lying about this.*

"The Mirror is calling to him. It wants his powers. He can survive the loss of them—maybe. But he won't if you don't bring him back within two days."

The voice vanished.

"Come on," Luna urged her. "If there's anything we've learnt today, it's that we shouldn't do anything by ourselves."



48

VISITORS AT THE GATE

Beau immediately sprang into Aislinn’s arms as she entered, his balling into her clothes, slightly trembling, giving the impression of a much smaller person. He did not say anything for a long time.

Aislinn patted his back. “I’m all right,” she assured him.

“Did you find anything out?”

“Not about the Mirror or Caer, but...” She pulled out of his arms, getting to the people behind her.

Beau hugged Dillon too, before turning to Cerridwen and stopping.

He took a step back. “Um... Ais... why does this stranger look like my grandmother?”

Cerridwen laughed. She reached out and patted Beau’s cheeks. “Why do these complete strangers look like my grandchildren?”

“Are you... is she... What happened in the castle?”

“An excellent question,” said Minerva, rising from her makeshift throne. “And one I would love to hear.”

Cerridwen frowned. “Minerva?”

“Cerridwen.”

“You’re missing an arm.”

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“The rumours were somewhat exaggerated... although not greatly.”

Minerva nudged Bell with her metal arm. “Wake up, my dear. It’s t
a story.”



Beau watched his grandmother with intense fascination as she descri
tale. Her death, she explained, was still hazy to her—but she reme
fingersfighting with her husband, and falling. The next thing she knew, s
on of awaking up in a glass coffin in the dwarven vault, being spoon-fed
Aeron.

Their mother had told them about their grandmother’s death, bu
wondered if that was really true. If Cerridwen had even the slightest bi
sturingin her when stored in the coffin, then resurrecting her would alway
been a possibility. With the help of the Mirror...

Like Dillon, he suspected she was an exception.

ike our So whatever Aeron was planning to do with the Mirror, he s
suspected it didn’t involve Clay or Gwyn—or Venus and Owen.

Why do Aislinn and Luna recounted their side of the story, and finally to
about Aeron’s warning—that Caerwyn didn’t have long to live.

She glanced over at his sleeping form. He had not woken at all whil
ift bed.had been watching over him, and that was probably for the better. F
was horribly pale—almost grey.

“Do we believe him?” Minerva asked.

Aislinn shrugged. "Can we afford not to?"

"I don't understand it. He was fine all the time we had the Mirror possession on the journey back."

"It was wrapped in my cloak, though," Aislinn continued. "I might have delayed the reaction, I don't know. Or perhaps it only fully woke when I used it in front of him... when he brought Owen through it."

Cerridwen placed a hand on Aislinn's shoulder. "We'll figure something out, child. Have no fear. Go lie down with him now. You're exhausted."

Aislinn smiled weakly, and pulled out one of the makeshift beds, but she lay down as closely as she dared to Caerwyn's sleeping form. She stroked his hair and he was back from his face, and Beau wondered once more how she could stand to be so close to him and not be able to touch.

He yawned. "If it's the same to everyone else, I'd like to sleep too."

"And me," said Luna. "Just for a little bit."

"Take as long as you need," Minerva instructed. "Although don't be surprised if we've all starved to death by the time you wake."

"I can make some breakfast before—"

"Luna," said Minerva softly, "sleep."

They all lay down, too exhausted to care about moth-eaten blankets and empty bellies. Beau tossed for a little bit. Flora and Bell, the dwarves who were most likely to blend in, went out to search for food. Diana and Magna fortified their weapons with bits they'd found from upstairs. Minerva scribbled on the walls setting up broken furniture to resemble models. Dillon kept watch by the window.

Cerridwen sat on the floor not far from Beau, occasionally meeting his eyes whenever he opened them.

“Not tired?” he said eventually.

“It appears I have spent the last seventy years sleeping.”

“Fair point.”

Cerridwen paused. “Can I ask...” She shook her head. “Never
You’re trying to sleep.”

“Trying, and failing to. What’s on your mind, Grandma?”

Cerridwen prickled at the sound of the name, and he wondered if it
must be soon. He had no idea what else he was supposed to call her.

“Juliana,” she whispered, “is she happy?”

Beau smiled into the stuffed sack he was using as a pillow. “I think
the words ‘fierce, terrifying, and a force to be reckoned with’
and this, describing our mother as ‘happy’, but yes, she is. She’s a great queer
loving mother... and she and our father are still disgustingly in love with
another.”

Cerridwen shook her head. “Juliana and Hawthorn. What a thought
must have quite the love story.”

Beau shuffled closer, arm still wrapped around his makeshift pillow
sure they’d be happy to tell it to you—once we get out of here.”

Cerridwen’s gaze turned towards the window, and he knew she
was wondering if that was even possible. “And you?” she asked, even
as most quietly. “Are you happy?”

“When I’m not afraid for my life? Usually.”

Cerridwen walked over to him and pulled the cloak around his shoulders
by the “Sleep,” she said, as if she saw through everything, knew how afraid

how terrified, how lost and angry and sad and confused. For Aislinn
his Caer, for Dillon—for himself. For all of them living on borrowed time,
unsure if they’d live until tomorrow. “It’s all right to be afraid.”

But when, Beau wondered, was it all right to show it?



mind.

Aislinn slept, but the sleep did not feel restful. She dreamed she was in a forest filled with fog. Caer was screaming her name—but she could not hear him. She started to run, her hair whipping back and forth, half blinding her.

was too

She ran straight into Aeron.

“You,” she hissed. “What do you want from us?”

Aeron smiled, and said nothing. He pushed her back. Aislinn fell onto the floor, but the earth had been replaced by glass.

I’d use
before

It shattered beneath her, and she fell down, down—

, and a

with one

Into the dark.



t. They

Someone was shaking her awake, someone rough and grey-haired. Flora bolted upright, grabbing her arms. “Caer—” She twisted to look at him.

Flora patted her arm. “He’s all right,” she insisted. “Or at least, no more. Get up. Something’s going on at the gate.”

Aislinn blinked. “What’s going on?”

Flora shrugged. “Couldn’t get close enough, but I think another party arrived at the gates. They’re demanding entrance.”

Aislinn shot up. It must be a significant number if they were being denied entrance—or else Aeron had increased security in the last few days. The latter made more sense.

But for more outsiders to be coming at this time...

Had their parents really got their message?

Her heart leapt, but she reined it back, refusing to be hopeful. She scrambled for her knives and cloak.

“Stick to the shadows,” Minerva started from her seat on the floor. “Still stick out like a—”

Aislinn couldn’t stick to the shadows, not during the day, when there were too many people, when time was of the essence. Instead, she shot up a house instead, leaping over the rooftops, sliding towards the great hall. Guards were lined up, not letting anyone pass.

Aeron was making his way through the streets, flanked by dwarven soldiers. Whoever was on the other side, he didn’t want them to know about the soldiers in the city.

Aislinn slowed, waiting behind a chimney breast. She had a good view of the scene, and the noise carried well.

Beau caught up to her just as Aeron reached the door. “Vines,” he said. “Would it kill you... to slow down... just a little...”

Aislinn held up her hand for quiet, as Aeron ordered the doors opened. He dropped into a low bow. “My apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Majesties,” he said. “We’ve had reason of late to be cautious. I am an emissary to the Queen.”

“Majesties?”

A small procession stepped through the doors. At the head of the procession were Juliana and Hawthorn.

Aislinn’s heart leapt, and it took all of her restraint not to bolt for the spot and race right towards them. Her parents. Her parents were here. She could just get to them, speak to them, explain what was happening—

Beau squeezed her trembling hand, and she held on for dear life. Her parents gazed around Avalinth in awe, before settling on the fae in front of them.

“We did not expect to find one of our own in such a place,” Juliana said. “You have some tale as to how you came to be here.”

“We all have our tales, Queen Juliana,” Aeron said, half-smiling. “I have one as well as to how you came to be here.”

“No games, fae,” Juliana continued. “We come in search of our children. We know they are here.”

“Of course. Your children were fine and healthy when I saw them yesterday. Won’t you come with us back to the castle?”

All the relief in Aislinn’s heart plummeted. *No, no, it’s a trap!* If her parents got beyond the magical barrier, they’d be defenceless. Aeron’s view of choosing his words so carefully, too, acting like he was incapable of anything, no doubt to keep up the illusion for anyone not in the know already.

Why wasn’t Hawthorn saying anything? Usually he was always talking, their mother weighing up the many ways to escape or kill people and he did. But today he seemed silent, his shoulders unusually tight beneath his furred cape.

Aeron, Aislinn frowned. His shoulders seemed broader than before—and taller, too?

“Very well,” Juliana said coolly. “Lead the way.” Aeron held up his hand. “I’m afraid we have a strict no weapons policy at the castle,” he said. “Would you mind disarming yourselves?”

“Not a problem,” Juliana said, sounding unusually cheerful for someone being forced to give up her weapons. She took out a dagger from beneath her cape, and the rest of their party made a show of disarming themselves,

as her Finally, Hawthorn spoke. “That is all we have,” he said, his voice so front of rusty, unnaturally deep—not like her father at all. Was he all right something happened to him? “We carry no more weapons, and you have said. word that we shall not attack in any way, unless we are attacked first. Take us to our children.”

’m sure The party started to move.

No.

children. Aislinn had to get their attention. That part in itself wasn’t too hard could just send up a flame. But she couldn’t let *Aeron* know where she was. They needed to avoid another fight if they possibly could, especially in the packed streets. Half of Avalinth had flooded here to see the faerie procession. If her children amongst them. It was too dangerous—

on was Aislinn jumped to the next roof, trying to get Juliana’s attention lying—mother could lie, feign something, or even just ready herself for a battle. they reached the palace and the crowds thinned.

the one But she never looked up.

people as Desperate, Aislinn slid to the floor, keeping her head low enough to be out of sight for a dwarf but high enough that maybe, *maybe* someone would notice.

Look here, she thought desperately. Look here!

was he They wound through the streets and crowds, following the procession searching for a gap, a small platform, a way to alert them without causing a scene. Beau was trying to, but he was taller and ganglier and conscious of his size.

Come on, come on!

someone A tram cut across them, blocking them from sight. Aislinn froze. She hunched along the street, gathering her breath. It was taking too long. They were going to lose them—

ounding A hand touched her shoulder, yanking her backwards. Aislinn
it? Had instinctively, grabbing the arm and trying to flip the person over her,
ave my assailant seemed prepared, dropping out of her grip and pressing her
Please. stone wall of the alley.

A black hood fell down.

The King of the Faeries held her in his grip.

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A hand touched her shoulder, yanking her backwards. Aislinn reacted instinctively, grabbing the arm and trying to flip the person over her, but her assailant seemed prepared, dropping out of her grip and pressing her to the stone wall of the alley.

A black hood fell down.

The King of the Faeries held her in his grip.

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49

PLANS AND REUNIONS

Aislinn’s eyes widened. “Father? What are you... you were just _”

Without another word, Hawthorn dived forward and pulled them into a fierce hug. “I’m so glad to see you two.”

Beau made a soft, non-committal sound. His cheeks were wet when he parted. Hawthorn smiled, brushing his tears away with his thumb. “Neither of you hurt?”

They shook their heads.

“Good. What’s going on?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Aislinn said. “*Long* to explain. How did you find us?”

“The vines,” Hawthorn said. “Led us right to the gate. And *these*,” he pointed to her pendant, and the flower one he had around his neck, “*here*.”

“But who was that standing next to Mother?”

“Do you know one thing that both dwarves and fae have in common?” Hawthorn asked smugly. “They always expect tricks to be magic. We dressed Miriam to look like me with a wax mask. I don’t imagine they’ll be able to keep up the ruse for long, but it got them into the city.”

“I take it they’re all armed?”

Hawthorn grinned. “To the teeth.”

“They shouldn’t go into the palace,” Aislinn said. “They’ve an army with them—” She started to move, still determined to warn them.

Hawthorn grabbed her arm. “Miriam and your mother know what they’re doing. They are quite experienced in matters of warfare and espionage. Are you alone here? Is there somewhere we can go? Tell me everything... how



... how

Aislinn and Beau had just reached the end of their tale when they returned to the safehouse. Hawthorn had listened patiently throughout. “Are you hiding them for any poor decisions and only occasionally stopping to say things like, “Dillon’s *alive*?” and “Cerridwen *too*?”

He offered a brief overview of what he had been doing—smoothing things with King Owen and then politely making their way across the border to ‘assist with the search’ for their missing children. When they reached Faerie, however, Hawthorn had heard the vines calling to him, carrying the message they’d given. Aislinn’s pendant had helped locate her, but it was the vines who had revealed the location to Avon’s tunnels.

“I wonder why they have never done so before now,” Beau mused. “A monarch must have wanted to discover the city.”

on?" he Hawthorn shrugged. "We can control the vines, but I do not think we should submit to us without their freewill. I think we belong to them more than we are able to belong to us."

This certainly matched with Dillon's revelations about them, but there was no time to discuss it further—they were back at the safehouse.

Dillon unbarred the door and let them in. "Hawthorn," he said, "I mean, sire. Prince. My liege?"

"Dillon!" Hawthorn threw his arms around him. "Terrific to see you. They're looking a little worse for the wear, but no matter. Juliana will be dead. Now,—"

"Juliana?" Cerridwen came racing forward. "Is she—"

"She's here, Ser Cerridwen," Hawthorn began, "but engaged at the moment with a little business at the castle—"

Cerridwen bolted for the door. Hawthorn stood in her way. "Ardencourt women!" He sighed exasperatedly. "You're all exactly the same. Always racing off into danger, never thinking things through—"

"My daughter—"

"Is most excellent at looking after herself, and also doesn't know how to stay alive. I think seeing you standing in the midst of battle might be somewhat of a distraction for her, don't you?"

Once Cerridwen relented, standing down. The door was finally shut behind them.

"Also, hello," Hawthorn said, dropping into a bow, the lacy cuffs of his silk shirt flopping artistically at his wrists. "Delightful to meet you, my in-law, dearest. I hope the children haven't been too much trouble."

"Many" Cerridwen blinked at him, clearly lost for words, and didn't finish before Minerva came forward to introduce herself. The others followed.

ask they by one, although Aislinn barely noticed. Caer was still asleep, and she had an they it hard to concentrate on anything but the uneven rise and fall of his chest. At least he seemed to be sleeping soundly.

they had “Your Majesty, Mr Faerie King, Sir,” asked Luna quietly. “I don’t see how—your magic being the greatest that there is—you could, um, try to get him staring at Dillon?”

Hawthorn looked back at him, his expression grim. Someone had obviously tried to stitch him back together after his escape from the castle, but he now looked more thread than flesh.

“I can certainly give it a try!” he said, and steered him into a nearby room where he could reach his face. Light radiated from his palms... but the flesh in the present made no attempt to knit back together.

Hawthorn sighed. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I could weave you a glamour if you like.” “You course, but it wouldn’t help much with the present company.”

the same! Dillon’s jaw tightened, almost imperceptibly. Luna’s fingers laced in his hair. “I don’t care what you look like,” she told him, and leant across to kiss his cheek.

you’re “None of us do,” added Beau. “Although I won’t be kissing you.” what of A light, forced chuckle spread through the room. It was true that Caer didn’t care, but Aislinn imagined Dillon did... and worried more if this scar behind his body, would last.

She tugged on her father’s sleeve.

is of his “What about him?” Aislinn asked, gesturing to Caer in the corner.

nother- Hawthorn’s gaze sharpened. “The Prince, I take it?”

“Yes,” Aislinn said shortly. “And my, um—”

d them “Aislinn’s beloved.” Beau grinned. “They’re head over heels for each other, Father. It’s brilliant.”

e found “You left that part out of your tale, daughter.”

nest. At She narrowed her eyes. “It wasn’t relevant.”

Hawthorn clutched his chest, as if she’d just uttered a great
suppose “Romance is always relevant, daughter! Why—”

healing “Father,” said Aislinn, “please.”

Hawthorn’s expression sobered. “Very well, let’s see what I can
ne hadhim.”

palace, They went over to Caer’s makeshift bed, Aislinn brushing back h

He murmured under her touch, eyes half opening.

seat so “Caer, darling, my father is here. He’s going to try and see if he c
1 belowyou.”

“Your father?” Caer blinked blearily, struggling into a sitting p
our, of “Hello, sir, lovely to make your acquaintance—”

“Settle down, chap, there’s a good fellow. No need to strain yoursel
nto his. “You shouldn’t... you shouldn’t touch me...”

kiss his “I’ve been informed of your powers, but I doubt you can do much
present state. Let me help you. For Aislinn’s sake, if not your own
apparently rather fond of you.”

no one “It’s dangerous...”

pell, or “Son, I am the King of Faerie. The only thing I’m afraid of is my wi

He placed his hands to Caer’s chest and head, pressing his power in
grunting under the strain. It was like he was fighting against som
sucking something away. Colour flocked back to Caer’s skin, |
breathing increased, until both he and Hawthorn pulled away, gasping.

Aislinn steadied Caer, mindful of not touching his skin. “Caer?”

or each “I’m... I’m all right...” he said, pulling himself into a sitting positio

Aislinn rested her head against his shoulder, closing her eyes.

“That’s as good as I can manage,” Hawthorn announced, flexing his hand. “I don’t think I cured anything—just delayed it. I’m afraid with the predictions Aeron spouted about the Mirror wanting to claim you are true.”

Caer stared at him, jaw tight.

“But you can just fix him again—” Aislinn insisted.

Hawthorn shook his head. “Not forever. I’m not even sure it will work again. That power, Ais—you don’t know what it feels like.” He met Aislinn’s gaze. “You truly don’t know where you got them from?”

He shook his head. “They manifested when my mother died, but... like they were always there. I can’t explain it.”

“No,” said Hawthorn, his expression unreadable. “Me neither.”

Luna came around handing out food—hunks of dense bread packed with herbs. Flora must have bought it at the market earlier, or stolen it. Aislinn dove into it hungrily; it had been a long time since she’d had anything to eat. Hawthorn moved away to talk to Minerva, no doubt trying to learn about the current situation. Aislinn leant against Caer’s shoulder, breathing in the scent of him, wishing she could take his hand. She missed her glow the way she hadn’t expected.

“So... that’s your father,” Caer said, nudging her gently.

“It is.”

“He seems nice.”

“He has his moments.”

“Is it me, or is that lady your grandmother?”

Aislinn laughed, and quickly caught him up on what had been happening. His face paled when he heard Aeron’s ultimatum. “I’m not going to...”

his hands. him,” he said. “No matter what he says. No matter what he does. He will have these powers. I don’t care if it kills me—”

He likely “Caer—”

“Promise me, Ais. Whatever we come up with, you won’t make me go back to him.”

“Caer—”

It will work “*Please.*”

Caer’s Aislinn took a deep breath, knowing how much this meant to him, and how much he needed to hear it. “I won’t make you go back,” she said, tearing up. “Even if it kills *me.*”

Caer exhaled. “Thank you.”

Aislinn couldn’t respond. If he died because of that promise—if she had to live with that for the rest of her life—she didn’t know how she was going to continue. She hated him for that almost as much as she—

A horn sounded outside, followed by the sounds of fighting not far off. “Ah,” said Hawthorn, as if the sounds of chaos were a pleasant lullaby. “That must be my wife.”

Cerridwen bolted out of the door.

“And my mother-in-law, racing to join the fray.”

Aislinn stood up. She glanced back at Caer. “Have you got the street cleared for a fight?”

He stood up, catching one of the halberds Minerva was tossing out. “I’ll find out.”

It was a faerie answer if there ever was one, but Aislinn didn’t press the matter. She could sense how much he wanted to follow. She knew how much she needed to be by his side, how much she’d drag herself through anything to be by his side.

She ran out into the street.

le can't



me go It was never easy to keep up with Aislinn, but the tightness in Caer made it even more impossible than usual. Whatever Hawthorn had done to him had helped, but he still felt like an iron hand was resting against his lungs.

nd how He fought through it, racing after her, jabbing at anything that tried to hurt them.

s lining He could use his powers on the mortal assailants—a few of them had joined the fray—but he didn't want to. Not if he had another choice.

had to Over a dozen guards and soldiers had surrounded Juliana in an alleyway. She was easy to spot in her green and gold armour, but even without her powers she would have recognised her as Aislinn's mother. There was a striking resemblance between the two that extended even as far as the way they moved down their enemies.

llaby to Cerridwen's swings were similar, too.

Three guards leapt out of the alleyway and charged towards her. She paused to kick one down, but she urged him forward.

ngth for "Get to Juliana!"

Hawthorn was already there. He stood calmly in the shadows, throwing thorns through the floor with a lazy flick of his fingers, capturing guards by twining the vines round their limbs and holding them in place while they whirled around the space, dispatching them one by one.

it. She "My beloved doombringer," Hawthorn sighed, largely to himself. "I'd hate to see you on the other side. How magnificent?"

Aislinn ran by, knocking over a guard and ramming his face into the wall, vaulting up in time to take out another with a well-placed kick to the ribs.

Caer inhaled. “The women of your family are really something.”
Hawthorn slapped his back. “Aren’t they just? I’m so glad you agree.”
He turned to take out another influx of soldiers arriving at the other end of the alleyway, weaving vines across the opening in a black, thorny curtain.
Caer’s eyes widened, twitching under this display.
“Mother!” Aislinn called.

Caer wheeled around. Most of the guards were dead, unconscious or lying on the ground, but a few still remained standing. Juliana and Aislinn moved through the air, lightning-fast, a whirl of blades. Their backs snapped to the rhythm of their movements mirrored.

“Get down!” Juliana hissed.
Not even questioning it, Aislinn hit the floor and rolled away. Her hands swung her blade towards her opponent, but he caught the blade in his left hand.
“Juliana,” said Dillon.

Juliana froze. She did not withdraw her blade. Neither did she attack. Caer struck again.

“You’re not him,” she said finally, eyes unmoving, face hard despite the shimmering eyes.

“I assure you,” he followed, “I am.” He dropped his hands away, but kept the sword pointed at his throat.

Juliana “The last thing you said to me,” she said, “as we were lighting the candles.”
“What were we talking about?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”
“You and Hawthorn,” he said steadily. “I was trying to get you to realize that you liked him, and that he was worth liking.”

“You did?” Hawthorn piped up from the side. “Oh, Dillon, thank you.”

the floor, knew I always liked you. I'm really sorry about that time I—"

bs. Juliana dropped her sword, her hands shaking.

"It's you," she breathed. "It's really you."

a." She bolted straight into his arms, burying herself in his neck. "I
end of you," she whispered, half sobbing. "You've no idea how much I
obweb.you."

"I have some idea. There's a lot to explain." He pulled away from

"Come. There's someone else you need to meet."

ious or "More important than you?"

blurred "I would say so," he said, smiling.

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"Julie," said a voice from the other end of the alley—a voice like st
strings, like a beautiful instrument poorly played. "Juliana."

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Cerridwen clutched onto that hand, and the arm that followed, and t
but she two collided in the alleyway, a mass of arms and tears and a str
sobbing voice, over and over, "I'm here, baby. I'm here."

rockets.

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knew I always liked you. I'm really sorry about that time I—”

Juliana dropped her sword, her hands shaking.

“It’s you,” she breathed. “It’s really you.”

She bolted straight into his arms, burying herself in his neck. “I missed you,” she whispered, half sobbing. “You’ve no idea how much I missed you.”

“I have some idea. There’s a lot to explain.” He pulled away from her. “Come. There’s someone else you need to meet.”

“More important than you?”

“I would say so,” he said, smiling.

“Who—”

“Julie,” said a voice from the other end of the alley—a voice like strangled strings, like a beautiful instrument poorly played. “Juliana.”

Juliana turned, her eyes widening. She looked to Aislinn for confirmation, some proof that she was seeing who she was really seeing. Aislinn, however, could only nod.

Juliana did not bother asking how this was possible, or why Cerridwen looked so alive when Dillon didn’t. She took a tentative stretch towards her, hand outstretched, like a child learning to walk for the first time.

Cerridwen clutched onto that hand, and the arm that followed, and then the two collided in the alleyway, a mass of arms and tears and a strangled, sobbing voice, over and over, “I’m here, baby. I’m here.”



50

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

They returned to the safehouse where Juliana was appri everything, and they finally sat down to discuss their options.

“Our troops are now dispersed about the city,” Juliana explained placed a shiny coin on the makeshift table Magna and Diana had cons from bits and pieces they’d salvaged in the house. “Awaiting instructions.”

The dwarves stared at the coin. “Does it do something?” asked Bell.

Juliana smiled. “There’s an inscription around the side. If I alter th the rest of them change too. They also grow hot or cold depending close a person is to their target.”

“Oh, I like that!”

Minerva thumbed her chin. “You say ‘troops’, but how many talking about?”

“Ten,” Juliana admitted. “We thought we’d never get more th through the doors. They are highly armed, however. Some have magi do not.”

“I should like a list of their attributes.”

“You shall have it.”

Hawthorn rapped his fingers against the table. “I’ve managed to hold down whatever was happening to Caerwyn, which is our only advantage present—it means we don’t have to meet Aeron at the appointed time. We can strike earlier, or later.”

“He is likely anticipating an earlier attack,” Minerva suggested.

“But the longer we wait, the longer he has to plan, too,” Bell added.

Hawthorn sighed. “I wish Miriam was still pretending to be much better at this war-planning stuff. I’m going to explore this room and clear my head.”

He walked towards the rotten steps, shaking his head at the state of the house and placing his hands to the floor. Branches wove through the cracks between the tiles, winding upwards towards the remains of the stairs, joining the structure together. Tiny buds bloomed in the bannisters.

“Show-off,” Juliana said, not looking up.

Hawthorn shot a rude gesture in her direction, then glanced at Aislinn, who signalled for her to follow. She headed after him, following his shadow as he moved from room to room, checking the place out.

Finally, he came to a disused bedroom at the back of the house and closed the door behind them.

“Father?” she questioned.

Hawthorn moved towards the empty hearth, resting his hands against the mantelpiece, and then again to the window, as if searching for something that would be comfortable to put himself.

“You’re making me nervous,” she added. “We’re on the brink of disaster downstairs and *you’re* making me nervous.”

“I’m nervous myself,” he explained. “I have an idea—a terrible idea—an idea—and I really don’t know if I want to share it with you.”

slowly “Father, don’t make me threaten to torture you.”

staring at “You wouldn’t dare.”

no. We “I’ll tell Mother.”

Hawthorn exhaled. “There is a chance,” he started, “that no matter what we do, the other side is going to get the upper hand, and Caerwyn is going to be taken.”

She’s Aislinn’s stomach dropped. A sensation gripped her, like being pulled into a pool of ice. That couldn’t happen. She wouldn’t let it happen—

Hawthorn came forward, taking her shoulders. “We are going to do everything we can to avoid that,” he insisted. “But we are outnumbered in the great hall, our magic won’t work within their walls, and I suspect this man back there has still got a trick or two up his sleeve. If he gets hold of Caerwyn there may not be a lot we can do.”

“No—”

inn and “There might be something *you* can do, however.”

was he Aislinn stilled. “What?”

Hawthorn sighed. “Now, here comes the part I don’t like—”

l closed “Just *tell me!*”

“There may be another option,” Hawthorn said, “a fallback, as it were, if it depends.”

inst the “On what?”

ewhere “If you feel forever about him.”

Aislinn’s throat bobbed. “And if I do?”

of war “We could try sharing his heart with you. Being part fae might offer you some more protection, might help you get him back if he’s taken, might

lea, but him survive the process. But it's a risk. If—"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, he's forever. Yes, I'll do it."

Hawthorn's jaw tightened.

what we "You think I'm foolish, don't you? That it's too soon. You knew
ing to befor years—"

"I could have fallen for your mother in a day if I'd had a sensible
plunged my body when we met and she'd been a little less stubborn."

Aislinn blinked at him. "You—you told me when I was young
to try should take my time, that it could take years to fall in love—"

mbered "Yes, forgive me for telling my sixteen-year-old daughter to be
; Aeron when it came to making decisions that could affect the entire king
erwyn, wasn't bad advice—it still isn't—but you aren't a child anymore, a
have been careful. Too careful, one might even say."

Aislinn glared at him a little longer, before her face softened. "That
be true. About Mother."

"And yet I can speak it." His hands ran down her arms and clutched
fingers. "I don't doubt love, and I don't doubt you, little dream. Never

Aislinn took a deep breath. "I'll ask Caer."

ere. But Someone came up the stairs, rapping on the doors until they found

"We've got half a plan," said Diana. "If you want to come down and h



for him "We attack after their deadline," Minerva said, metal fingers splayed
ght help the makeshift table. "By several hours. Let them think Caer has dec

sacrifice himself for the greater good, or that we've decided to sneal the Deep. The doors are no doubt tightly patrolled right now, but if i enough, we might want to consider a mock attack there. At least we h benefit of magic at that end of the city."

"Noted," Hawthorn said, nodding.

Mother "When the attack comes, we split into two groups. One of us atta front directly as a diversion. The rest of us go through the waterways."

bone in "Here's an idea," said Beau, "why don't we *all* go that way?"

"It's not enough to get in. We have to get the soldiers *out*. And if m r that Ihas learnt Tiberius helped us in any way, she'll have changed those lo will be patrolling it like crazy."

careful "Maybe we should consider two stealth parties," Flora added. "W dom. Itthe right number. One through the waterway, the other towards the bal

nd you "An excellent idea. Fae folk, over the balcony. You're more agile li We'll take the waterway route."

cannot Minerva leaned over the crudely constructed model of the cast whispered to Caer to hand her another counter. "Wyverns," she said, l hed herup one, "you will be positioned here at the front, led by Queen Julian will." held up another. "Sirens—that's mainly dwarves—we're here waterways. Fae folk, and Caer, you're the Rogues, going over the top.' d them. There was a murmur of understanding. "Wyverns, draw all the a ear it?" you possibly can to the gates and gardens. Sirens, we're going to sne the castle and try and draw anyone from the throne room. Rogues, g the vault, get that Mirror out, and *seal it*."

l across "Once we're in possession of the Mirror, we're hoping Aeron might to bargain with us," Bell continued. "We have no intention of doing so

ided to "We're putting an arrow through his neck," Diana said, holdin

crossbow Aislinn recognised as one of fae-make. Juliana must have
t's safeit with her. "I take it no one has a problem with that?"

ave the "It's hardly going to make the diplomatic position more prec
Hawthorn said. "Technically, he's one of the Fae. Venus might take c
but we aren't going to kick up a fuss about it."

cks the "Once Aeron is down, we're hoping his forces might surrender," Be
on. "Or at least call a ceasefire. Venus and Owen will lose what the
hoping to gain."

y sister "And Owen?" asked Caer quietly, "will you kill him?"

cks and The table went quiet for a moment. "Unless he gets in our way, w
try to spare him," Hawthorn said eventually. "I cannot promise anythin
/e havegets in our way."

lcony?" Caer nodded. Aislinn reached out to pinch his sleeve, knowing how
ke that.the answer pained him. Did Owen know the ceremony would likely co
his life? It seemed unlikely.

le. She "What happens in the event that neither Venus nor Owen concede'
holdingasked, avoiding her gaze.

a." She Another palpable silence passed across the table. "Then we fight," M
in theconcluded. "Until the last person standing."

' The odds were hard to calculate. Aislinn had no idea how many :
ttentionOwen had managed to bring with him through the Mirror, or how
ak into dwarves Venus had at her disposal. Meanwhile, even with the knights
get intoand Hawthorn had brought, they had less than two dozen.

Even with magic, even with taking out the Mirror... the numbers cc
it agreebe on their side.

." Minerva placed her fists against the table. "Well, we'll iron out tl
g up apoints later," she said. "For now, everyone get some rest. Spend son

brought with your loved ones. Sharpen some weapons. Save your strength, though we'll need it for tomorrow."

arious," Flora climbed to her feet. "I'll go and see if I can find us some food. offence, "Oh!" said Luna. "I should come too—"

Flora shook her head. "I'm the least noticeable of any of you. Everyone will want to go. I'll be too recognisable. But a haggard old dwarf like me? No one thinks twice about me. My presence here is a mystery." "She has a point," said Beau.

Flora nodded, collecting a battered basket from the side of the rock and slipping out into the streets.

Aislinn looked to Caer, and angled her head towards the stairs. She was wondering if he didn't ask her soon, she was afraid she'd lose her nerve. She led him into the upstairs rooms and shut the door behind them.

"I know I told you I would never force you to go back," she said, but Caer meant it. But we need to talk about the possibility that we might not have a choice. Unless... you're willing to stay here?"

Caer snorted. "Minerva tried that one on me earlier. You can imagine my response."

"That you still feel responsible for all this and can't stand idly by while we risk our lives on your behalf, even though it would be sensible to stay away from the creepy Mirror that wants to eat you?"

"I might have thrown a few curses in there, but yes. That's the gist."

Aislinn half laughed, half sighed. "It's a terrible idea for you to corner me, you know?"

"I know," he said. "Are you going to talk me out of it?"

"I'd like to. But I also know that if the situations were reversed, I'd be crawling to your side before I let you go without me."

He smiled. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

ough— “My father has a... fall back option, as it were. In case everything
terribly, terribly wrong, and Aeron captures you, and forces you to go
” “Mirror.”

Caer raised a black brow. “I’m listening.”

1 Bell’s “Do you remember I told you that my parents shared a heart?”

ie.” “Vaguely.”

“It’s something the fae are capable of... at least, strong ones. You
om, and share your heart with someone else, allowing them to live if their
damaged, often granting them a portion of your powers. It’s
If she exceedingly rare. It doesn’t often work, for one. The connection
into one being... pure. Strong. The ceremony itself doesn’t carry many risks,
irreversible, and there’s always the fear that if one dies, the other will
“and I’m... willing to do it, though. It’ll give you a fighting chance if the
ave that takes you, might even prevent you from expiring if we don’t manage to
its hold on you tomorrow.”

fine my Caer stared at her, taking all of this in.

He won’t do it, she realised. He wouldn’t do it because he didn’t
wilst we anyone to risk themselves for him, even a little, even though she already
y away she’d die if he did.

“How does the ceremony work?” he asked.

Aislinn’s heart leapt. “I’d lead it. I’d need to touch you, preferably on
ne with chest. My father explained it to me a few years ago—”

“We’d have to touch?” he said, his eyes widening. “I don’t want you
hurt because of me.”

I’d be “And I don’t want to watch you die, so suck it up.”

Caer snorted weakly. “Ais...this kind of spell, this bond... it’s forever
won’t be able to break it.”

ig goes “What if I don’t want it broken?” she asked, her voice trembling.

into the “Even if we can’t be together unless we’re in some dwarven stronghold might be hard to rule Faerie from there...”

“I won’t be queen for a long while yet,” she whispered. “I hope. I might be able to find a way. And if we couldn’t... yes. Still then. It won’t be easy, but if you’re in, I’m in. Five flimsy decades or five centuries, you can take whatever of you you’re willing to offer me.”

own is “And what if it’s everything?”

rare— She looked up at him, his eyes glassy and close. She could feel the weight of his hands on her, the ghost of his weight—and the weight of his words falling into her. “I... really want to kiss you now.”

will too. “If we need to touch for the ceremony, it might as well be on the Mirrorright?”

to sever She moved closer. He inched back.

“I hate risking your life like this every time.”

“I feel like I risk everything every time we touch anyway,” she told him. “I don’t want to risk unravelling completely, burning up, falling into a void. I don’t feel that way any more, but I’ve already felt much as I used to.” She reached out to touch his face. “Today or a thousand years from now, I want to die touching you.”

Caer shuddered beneath her touch, eyes rimmed with silver. His hands were on her face, breath rapid, like a horse getting ready to bolt. Aislinn held her breath, steady.

u to get “I love you,” he whispered. “I think I might have forgotten to say it, but I love you.” Aislinn slammed her lips against his, thoughts blurring, unravelling in the soft, perilous pressure of his mouth. “I love you, too,” she murmured. “My heart is already yours.”

Her hand fell to his chest, fingers skirting his skin. Caer took a deep

“Are you ready?” she asked him.

hold? It He nodded.

Hot, white light started at her fingertips. Aislinn forced the And we outwards, deeper, feeling her own chest burn, like a hot knife in butt ouldn’t magic dug into his chest, passed his ribs. His heart thumped beneath b ies. I’ll skin and muscle, golden and—

Scarred.

No.

warmth She pressed deeper, unwilling to give up, but it was like a wall had vords—between the arrow and the target. She could not get at it.

No, no.

he lips, Her magic hammered at the wall, at the *nothing* that coated a part of heart. Hers beat fast and hard, like it was trying to break out of her ch join his.

But it couldn’t. Her heart wanted to be his, but his...

ld him. She couldn’t reach it.

care as “Ais,” Caer whispered, “Ais, stop—”

ousand “I won’t!” She strained again, groaning, panting, her lungs achi chest raging. She had to give him this, she wouldn’t let him go unprote

nds slid “Ais!” Caer pulled away from her, clutching his chest. The force s eld him spiralling to the floor, gasping.

Caer stared down at her. “Did it work?”

but—” “No,” she said, voice trembling. “It didn’t. I just... I couldn’t. g underpulled herself to her feet, not looking at him. “This is my fault. It’s l red into I’m only half fae, because I’m rubbish at magic—”

Caer moved to clutch her arms, but could find only flesh. His breath hovered nearby. “Or it’s because of my stupid, rotten heart. We don’t l

“I know that your heart’s *not* rotten, that it’s the loveliest heart I’ve known, that I...” Aislinn leant against his chest and sniffed into his shirt, feeling “There’s nothing wrong with your heart,” she whispered, desperate to hear. Herit. *Not in the ways that matter.* She traced a finger over it, not touching his skin and “Will you ever stop blaming yourself for everything?”

“Will you?”

“Fair point.”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry, Caer.”

“I’m not,” he said. “At least you won’t be in any danger, now.”

“I’m in more danger than ever!” Her throat went raw. “It’s already so dangerous for Caer’s sake if something happens to you, don’t you understand? I might as well die when you die because I’m dead anyway!”

“Ais, you’re going to live forever—”

“And I’ll miss you every second of it!”

Caer stilled, his jaw tight. Without another word, he drew Aislinn into his arms, his hands on her back, shielded by her hair. “A dangerous vow, my dear, Princess. I wouldn’t want you held to it. I’d prefer you to be happy and protected—” “I can’t make that vow,” she murmured against his chest. “So please, just ask it of me.”

“I won’t, my dear. I promise.”

She wasn’t familiar with the word, but she liked how it sounded, lilted softly. “Cariad,” she started, “what does it mean?”

“Darling,” he said, “beloved. *Dearest.*”

“It’s prettier, the way you say it.”

“Then I shall whisper it to no one else,” he promised. “For as long as I live, I am yours. And you are mine, Ais. We don’t need a spell to prove it.”

ve ever *Maybe, she thought. But I might need one to keep you here.*

is shirt.

o claim

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s I live,

Maybe, she thought. But I might need one to keep you here.

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They slept, they ate, they planned. Juliana contacted the knights city and informed them of the plan. Caer practised his magic on Hawthorn and Beau flexed their magic. Flora pilfered supplies. sparred with anyone that would have her, before collapsing in the cc sharpen knives. Her mother joined her, and they both said nothing worked.

Time sped forward, slowly, endlessly, exponentially.

Aeron's deadline loomed.

The company lapsed into silence.

They had been filling their time with preparation, refusing to lool time, to stop, to think, to wonder if they'd ever see the dawn again or should say something to their loved ones. Aislinn had caught Luna tal Dillon, lamenting the fact she couldn't go and see her family for fe might turn them in.

"I don't *think* they would," she'd whispered, voice hoarse. "But I ki can't risk it."

No one wanted to risk it—no one wanted to risk saying anything that would sound like goodbye.

Minerva's metal fingers strummed on the table.

"You know," said Bell brightly, "we haven't played a game of War and Wastelands in a while. I'm sure I could come up with a simple card game if anyone is interested?"

Minerva looked at her like she'd gone mad. "We don't have any cards."
"We can make them up."

"Make them up! Fort would be furious."

"I have a few," Luna admitted. "I, um, kept my favourites on me, but... actually, *her* favourites. But... mine too, now." She pulled a small stack of cards from the top of her boots. "I've enough for one each?"

Dillon. Minerva snorted softly. Her fingers stilled. "Hmm. High likelihood of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?"

Aislinn. Bell's spur of the moment campaign was as silly and underdeveloped as they should have been, and the majority of the cards provided absolutely no challenge to anyone. Yet, somehow, their characters kept persevering through the trials of Unending Stench, and although most of the laughter was forced, some of it wasn't.

κ at the The deadline came and went, missed by most of them. Time moved on onwards.

if they And Caer grew weaker. He tried to hide it from the rest of the group, but Aislinn could tell. There was something in the slope of his shoulders and the hollows of his eyes. Her father's magic was wearing off, leaving him exhausted. She knew the fever would come back again soon, making it almost impossible for him to fight. She was tempted to say nothing,

now we

it might until he was too weak to follow them, but how could she take that away from him? How could she face him after that if they both survive

He dismissed himself to go and get a drink from the kitchen, and Vyvern got up to follow him.

campaign, “We need to go soon, don’t we?” she whispered to him.

Caer nodded. “I’m sorry.”

ds.” Aislinn pulled the drawstrings of his shirt. “Mortals apologise too she said. “For all sorts of things that are not their fault.”

“You apologise to me all the time.”

Well, “That’s because I love you, and I mean it.” She patted his chest, and he nodded to move away to get ready.

“Ais?”

Good of “Yes?”

“Was there a moment?” he asked. “A moment when...”

ed as it “When I fell in love with you? Or when I knew?”

no help “Yes.”

he Bog She shook her head. “It was like watching the sunset,” she told him, “I never being quite sure when it was night, until you looked up and you were yourself surrounded by stars.”

trickled He smiled. “You’re quite the poet.”

“I am *not*. I am a warrior, loyal, brave and true.”

up, but “I think you can be those things and a poet also.”

ers, the She smiled. “Was there a moment for you?”

ng him “Yes,” he replied. “All of them.”

king it “You are *so suave*.”

to wait He grinned. “I have my moments.”

Aislinn sidled back towards him. “When this is all over, I’m going

choice you into the nearest bedroom, and fuck you so hard you go dizzy.”
ed? Caer spluttered, an action that quickly turned into a cough. Aislinn i
Aislinn mistook it for embarrassment, but there was something beneath it, ha
sound that grated against her bones.

“Steady,” she said, sliding a hand to his chest. “We need to k
appearances. I’ve promised not to leave you behind, but I don’
much,” Minerva’s beyond tying you up for your own good.”

Caerwyn leaned against her as the coughs subsided, smiling as soo
could. “Does your protection not extend to fighting dwarves on my bel
id went “Not *that* one.”

Caer laughed. “Wise.”

She went back to the table. “It’s time,” she said.

Minerva looked up from her cards, her eyes darting briefly to Ca
right. Let’s move out.”

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l found

to drag

you into the nearest bedroom, and fuck you so hard you go dizzy.”

Caer spluttered, an action that quickly turned into a cough. Aislinn initially mistook it for embarrassment, but there was something beneath it, harder—a sound that grated against her bones.

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Caerwyn leaned against her as the coughs subsided, smiling as soon as he could. “Does your protection not extend to fighting dwarves on my behalf?”

“Not *that* one.”

Caer laughed. “Wise.”

She went back to the table. “It’s time,” she said.

Minerva looked up from her cards, her eyes darting briefly to Caer. “All right. Let’s move out.”



The groups were divided. There was no darkness to hide them, not of night. Minerva had grown used to the turn of the sun in the Above, grown to like the change, the silence of the night. She rather liked

There was no quiet now, no silence. She and her merry band made way through the streets with their hoods drawn up, blending in with the crowds. From time to time, she looked up and saw Juliana and one of the knights, sliding across the rooftops. It was the best way to the palace if you wanted to remain undetected.

The waterway entrance was unguarded—at least from the outside. Minerva had expected this. The exit was a closely guarded secret, known only to a few members of the royal family and a few key members of staff. Venus did not want to draw attention to it by placing a guard there. The entrance was not under the protection of the barrier, and magic could make quick work of it.

That did not mean she'd not guarded it from inside.

Minerva took a deep, steadying breath. She could hear the sounds coming from the palace entrance. The diversion was underway.

She dialled in the code.

The door swung open.

The dwarves descended into the dark. It was the first time in a long time they had been just them, and the group felt unbalanced with only the six—no Caer. Dillon was with Juliana and the others at the gate, Aislinn, Bane, and Caer with the Rogue team.

Even if they all survived today, she doubted it would ever be just them again.

No time for sentimentality, a voice reminded her. *Just get in.*

Bell nudged her arm with her own, more for comfort than anything, reminding Minerva of everything she had to lose. She quickened her pace, barreling forward, axe at the ready.

The quietness increased. The sounds of battle grew distant and far away. Would it be this easy? Maybe Venus hadn't caught on that this was a trap already been used for an escape. Maybe she'd forgotten about it here, assuming the code had been changed over the years.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. The words thumped around Minerva's ears, second, fragile heartbeat.

The steps up to the palace appeared ahead.

Cautiously, Minerva moved up them, metal fingers tracing stone. It felt like that the palace should feel all at once familiar and strange to her—hers, not hers, all at the same time.

You are mine, Stone, she whispered, in the same way she imagined she spoke to the forest. She may not be able to bend the rock to her will, but it didn't make it any less hers—or her any less its. The Stone will

of battleforwards, and if the spirits had bodies or existed in the slivers of du
came with her too.

She pushed open the door, and stepped into the corridor.

No one stopped them. A dull, distant roar sounded from the direction
while itgates. The diversion was working.

to Fort, “Quickly,” she called down to the others. “To the throne room—”

eau and A door opened up ahead of them, and a dozen guards raced out in
formation, spears and shields at the ready. Minerva raised her axe
ie partycharge, but before she could strike, another door opened behind, and
more filed out.

Sandwiched. Surrounded. Too many—

ing else, “Retreat,” Minerva hissed. “Retreat!”

er gait, They started back down the stairs, but Diana let out a cry from the
another set of guards had blocked off the steps.

way. No one attacked. No one moved. The guards because they didn’t r
/ay hadand the dwarves because it would be a bloodbath.

self, or No.

Minerva’s eyes went everywhere at once, searching for a weak s
s like aunguarded corner, a chandelier to be brought down, a distraction
caused, a person to appeal to—

But there was nothing, and every guard was armoured, faces cor
StrangeStrangers.

ers and She looked at Bell, but for the first time, her eyes gave her no re
plan, no way out of this.

the Fae Her calloused, brown fingers reached out for her metal ones. M
but thatcouldn’t feel them, but she clutched onto them all the same, hard and
led hershe dared.

st, they “Out fighting, then?”

Bell adjusted her stance, bringing up her crossbow. “To the end, dea

Before they could act, the guards parted, and Venus stepped forward. She was dressed in armour of shining gold, placed over a gown of peacock feathers. Impractical for battle, but nevertheless intimidating.

“Sister,” she said, “place down your axe. There is no need for death.

perfect “You are the one that has invited death into our home, Venus.”

for the “I have invited *life*. You’ll see. One day you will thank me.”

a dozen “I will *never* thank you for this.” She raised her axe, and for the first time Venus’ eyes flickered with apprehension, like she doubted her own res

Could Minerva do it? Harm her own sister? Even now? Even for the

Venus stepped forward. “You cannot harm your own reflection.”

back— Minerva didn’t waver. “You and I were never made of glass,” she

“We are more and less than shadows and light.”

need to, Venus raised a hand. Her guards readied their weapons. For a moment Minerva swore she felt Bell’s fingers in hers.

“Stop!” said Flora, diving into the space between the sisters. Her hands outstretched, she besought Venus out, hands appealing. “Remember our deal, Venus. You cannot break others, but you swore—”

The blood in Minerva’s body ran cold. Her ears rang, certain she had misheard.

A deal? What deal?

lie, no “I have not forgotten,” Venus replied coolly, “I am in no mood to harm anyone, but if she resists—”

Minerva “Flora,” Minerva whispered, her voice sounding like someone speaking in a tight space “what have you done?”

“I’m sorry, old friend,” Flora answered, not meeting her in the eyes

did what I had to do.”

rest.”

rd. She

ck blue.



Caer stumbled across the rooftops, wondering how Aislinn was navigate them so easily, to slide across tiles as slick as butter in a pair of shoes. Beau and Hawthorn seemed to be struggling to keep up with her, so she had to stop several times to bend the stone of the walls into bridges across the gaps. It was when they knew they couldn't make the jump. It was effortless, the way she commanded the stone, as simple as walking was to a sprinter.

He was grateful for the bridges, and for the slower pace they were moving at. He half suspected Aislinn was hoping to get to the palace before all the guards could and haul the Mirror outside before he could get anywhere near it.

But she slowed as they approached the walls of the palace, resting by a chimney and waiting for the others to catch up with her. The knight spent some time watching the walls beforehand, pinpointing a place where the guard presence was likely to be overlooked.

It was towards the end of the wall, where the walkway ran towards a solid stone at the very end of the enormous cavern. Lookout towers were perched periodically along the wall, but it did not end with one. A guard had been placed in the remaining spot, but, like most people forced to stand in a small area for a long period of time, he was pacing up and down.

The party dropped down into the street and crossed to the other side, hugging the wall. Only Cerridwen remained, giving the signal for the guard to turn. Hawthorn nodded at Aislinn, who took a running jump and caught the knight's outstretched hands. He threw her into the air. She caught the edge of the wall and deftly swept over the other side.

,” “but I

Beau went next, then Cerridwen told them to stop as the guard turned. They waited. Caer tried not to think about Aislinn on the other side, hoping the forces had all been diverted to the main gate.

Cerridwen signalled once more for them to move. This time, Hawthorn summoned vines to assist Caer getting up to the top, which was just above the houses. Even as he was almost certain he couldn't have made it anyway, even if he topped full strength. His chest felt tight.

He half stumbled across the walkway, sucking in his breath, and topped off the other side.

Beau and Aislinn reached out to grab him and yanked him behind a taking. "Are you all right?" Aislinn mouthed.

Caer nodded, not that he was. But he wasn't hurt. He could move.

Finally, Cerridwen and Hawthorn dropped down, neither breaking a sweat. Caer had no idea how Cerridwen managed it. It made sense that Hawthorn could—he radiated with a whispery, inhuman energy. But Cerridwen was mortal, and fully mortal, too, not enhanced by sharing her heart with Hawthorn like her daughter was.

"How do you do it?" he asked, gesturing to the entirety of her.

Cerridwen smiled. "Practise, young prince. I am older than I look."

Mortals aged slower in Faerie, he remembered. Perhaps that was something to look forward to if they didn't die tonight—that even if he couldn't share Aislinn's heart and live like one of them, he'd have a better chance than he originally anticipated. He might not be allowed to stay in Aislinn's room anymore, but maybe something could be done about his powers—

Somehow, eventually.

Five flimsy decades or five centuries.

He'd love her for all of it, even if he could touch her for none of it.

ed back. If they survived today.

de, and A shot of fire went up from the main gate—the display from one of knights. Most of the soldiers were already there, and the ones standing withornturned towards it.

as well, Aislinn raced forwards, carving a path through the grounds. The was followed, sticking to the shadows as well as they were able, until reached the balcony.

umbled Once more, the others hopped inside, or vines were created to help ascent, fizzling out as soon as they reached the baluster. Caer ascended bush, feeling the barrier clamp down on his powers the second he passed over.

The party slipped into the throne room, but Caer grabbed Aislinn's hand. It was the first time he'd been able to touch her freely in two days, and he was sweating, being terrified he was going to hurt her.

withorn It might be the last time.

en was He pulled her mouth to his. "In case there isn't another opportunity."

a faerie Aislinn's eyes glistened. "If I could lie, I'd promise you there'll be an opportunity, that we'll share more kisses than there are stars in the sky. Innumerable. Uncountable."

"Such a shame you can't lie."

at was "A shame indeed." Her fingers ghosted his chin. Her lips brushed his cheek more. "Until the end," she said, drawing her weapon.

longer *And perhaps even after that.*

avalinth They followed the others into the throne room. A handful of guards were posted by the door. Cerridwen had downed two before they even reached the throne. Aislinn took out another, Beau struck a fourth, and the fifth was left for dead. He choked them into unconsciousness.

Another set sprung forth from behind the throne, spears at the ready.

were mortal—men Caer knew from home.

the fae “We don’t have to fight,” he told them.

ling by One hesitated. Caer tried to place him. He was a young man—n
than he was. “Rhys, right?” he said. “I don’t want to hurt you. I war
others you go back to your family in one piece.”

til they The other guard was not so cooperative. “For the king!” he declar
raced forward.

help the Caer barrelled into his middle, tackling him to the floor. He grab
ed last, hand holding the spear and smashed it to the floor. His helmet tumb
er it. Caer whipped a dagger from his belt and placed it against the man’s ch
arm. It “Your loyalty is commendable,” he said, “but Owen isn’t worth dyin

without Caer wondered, if he was fae, whether he’d be able to speak those

Once upon a time, he would happily have died for his stepfather.

Once.

” “Where is *your* loyalty?” the knight spat. “He’s doing this for
another mother!”

he sky. “You can’t bring back the dead,” Caer insisted. “Not as they wer
knew my mother, yes? Would she approve of this?”

The knight paused. “Disloyal brat—”

is once A spear shot through his eye socket. Caer scrambled back as th
writhed and flailed and finally stilled, like a spider in flame.

Cerridwen yanked out the spear. “We don’t have time for reaso
ls were said. “Come on.”

turned. The other guard had vanished. He could have run for help or been
or Caer. the other bodies piled in the room—Caer didn’t wait to check. He fo
the others to the vault door, Aislinn inputting the code.

ly. Two It swung open into the vault of Avalinth, a treasure trove like sor

out of legend. Caer half expected a dragon to appear out of nowhere, but the Mirror held his focus on the older, dark, gleaming presence.

The party inched closer. Beside it was a glittering coffin made of glass. “My prison and my sanctuary,” Cerridwen remarked, her fingers skimming over it. “I am still not sure how I came to be in it.”

“Markham traded a witch for it,” Hawthorn said, a name that clearly meant something to everyone else. “He tried desperately to keep you alive, but he died more desperately to get you back. It cost him his life.”

“I see,” Cerridwen remarked, voice placid. “Thank you for telling me what happened for.” Hawthorn approached the Mirror first, putting a hand to its frame, and then the others, daring to touch the glass. He sucked in a deep, solid breath. The glass was cold.

“What *are* you?” Hawthorn whispered, as if it were some wild, unknown beast.

“Can you seal it?” asked Cerridwen.

“I think so. If we can just get it out...”

Hands came forward to pry it from the wall, but Caer couldn't help himself to touch it. A wave of nausea crashed over him. His head felt like a cannonball was inside his skull.

Something clicked behind him, and smoke streamed into the room, filling the space with thick, choking fog. Shouting raced through it, the noise of swords being drawn—

“Run, Caer!” Aislinn hissed beneath her breath. “Hide!”

Caer rolled away, diving behind a pile of coins. Steel clashed against stone. He heard someone cry out—Beau?

Not Aislinn. Not her.

He wanted to run, to get to her, but he couldn't tell right from left.

ere. Helungs were burning. He could barely breathe as it was—
us with The sounds of fighting continued. Someone rushed an instruction,
be cut off with a muffled scream. Fire hissed against the floor, exting
ass. Chains were dragged across the tiles, dislodging streams of coins.
imming The sounds of resistance silenced.

And the smoke started to clear.

y meant Caer leaned out as well as he was able. Aeron stood in the centre
e. Evenroom, flanked by guards. Everyone else was in chains—Cer
Hawthorn, Beau... Ais. They stared up at their captors with wild,
ie.” eyes.

is if not Aeron walked forward like a swan over water, extending a long, r
rippled.fingered hand under Hawthorn’s chin. He tilted his face towards him
nysticalmy, the mighty King of the Faeries,” he said, grinning. “Not so all-p
in here, are you?”

He clicked his fingers, turning to the guard holding Beau, who pres
finger to a wound in his arm, twisting it until he cried out.

t bring Hawthorn lashed out in his chains. “I don’t know who you are, bu
t like ahurt my children—”

“I don’t care about your children,” Aeron hissed, “I just want the b
, fillingmortal prince. Where is he?”

oise of “We missed your deadline,” Hawthorn spat. “Where do you *think* he

“I think, most likely, you managed to do something to him to delay
of the Mirror, but I can’t imagine you’d be so stupid as to bring hi
st steel.you, would you?”

Aislinn promptly burst into tears. “Monster,” she sobbed. “You don
what it was like, how much he suffered... He made me promise
eft. Hiswouldn’t make him go back, even if, even if...”

She trailed off into noisy, guttural sobs.

only to “You killed him,” Beau added for good measure.

quished. Aeron’s expression flickered. Caer tried to remember—had they talked about Beau’s ability to lie? Aislinn hadn’t stated anything that confirmed her demise, but her performance was impressive.

Cerridwen—who was closest to Caer’s hiding spot—tugged on her chain of the gently. “Please,” she said, so quietly that no one but the two mortal guards holding her could hear her, “don’t hurt me. Let me go.”

furiously Caer frowned. He didn’t know Cerridwen well, but this meekness seemed like her.

narrow- “Please,” she carried on. “I’m just mortal—same as you. I don’t have any special powers.”

powerful The guard scoffed, snorting at his friend who held the other side of the chains, and turned back to watch Aeron.

used his He’d seized Aislinn’s face.

“Is he dead?” he screamed at her. “Is he truly dead?”

t if you Aislinn carried on sobbing.

Aeron righted himself. “Prince Caerwyn,” he said, “if you’re here, reveal yourself, or I will kill her.”

“No!” Hawthorn hissed, struggling in his chains.

is?” A guard kicked him in the stomach.

the call Caer stilled. *No, not her. Don’t you dare.*

m with His immediate instinct was to crawl out of his space and give himself up. He couldn’t let anything happen to her.

’t know But if he went, he knew that Aeron would use the Mirror’s power to hunt out the fae. If he went, hundreds or thousands of people were going to die.

His people. Minerva’s people. *Aislinn’s.*

And he'd be condemning her to watch.

How would that be saving her? How would that be doing her any fa
old him Exhaustion crawled at his bones. Whatever Hawthorn had done
ned hishim was fading fast, now. He didn't think he had much time left. If he
here undetected a little longer...

of chains Minerva was still coming. Maybe the day could still be won.

guards Just he and Aislinn wouldn't be a part of it.

"No?" said Aeron. "Have it your way."

s didn't A dagger flashed, and before Caer could even understand what wa
on, Aeron slashed Aislinn's throat.

ave any

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of her

re, then

self up.

to wipe

die.

And he'd be condemning her to watch.

How would that be saving her? How would that be doing her any favours?

Exhaustion crawled at his bones. Whatever Hawthorn had done to save him was fading fast, now. He didn't think he had much time left. If he stayed here undetected a little longer...

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Just he and Aislinn wouldn't be a part of it.

"No?" said Aeron. "Have it your way."

A dagger flashed, and before Caer could even understand what was going on, Aeron slashed Aislinn's throat.

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Caer had no doubt that if Hawthorn had been in control of his paws, the roar he let loose would have shattered the room. It was the sound of a monster, of grief personified, as sharp and crushing as an avalanche.

It was the sound that Caer's chest was making, though his mouth remained soundless.

Hawthorn launched forward in his chains, but the soldiers dragged him back, kicking him over and over. Hawthorn barely seemed to notice. His hand was still reaching for Aislinn.

She was still bleeding, her throat a ragged, pulsing mess, her eyes wide and circling.

Beau was screaming, Hawthorn still struggling, Aislinn still moving.
And Caer was watching, pinned in place, unable to move.

This wasn't happening.

This *couldn't* be happening.

Cerridwen yanked the chains from her captors. She looped them around one of their necks and flipped over, gripping the other with her thigh.

squeezing until they both slackened. The chains still wrapped around her wrists, she flung them at one of the guards holding Hawthorn, before picking up a stray axe and decapitating another one.

Hawthorn sprung free.

“Get her out of here!” Cerridwen yelled.

Hawthorn grabbed Aislinn off the floor and pelted towards the door.

The barrier. If he could just get her across it, he could heal her—

Aeron made a move to follow them, but Cerridwen threw the chains around his ankles and forced him to the floor. Another guard reached to grab her—

Finally, Caer found the strength to move, crashing into his back. He and Aislinn, they both went sprawling to the floor.

“The Prince!” hissed Aeron hungrily.

Cerridwen smacked him in the back of the head, just as Beau started to move. He remained free.

“Go, go!” she yelled at them both. “I’ll handle this one.”

Caer struggled upright, his chest tight. Beau raced ahead of him. Cerridwen battled the remaining guards. He forced himself forward, summoning the residuals of his strength.

Aislinn, Aislinn, Aislinn—

He fled the room. Hawthorn was out on the balcony, the railing held together by the platform of branches rising from the gardens. Aislinn was at the centre of them, Hawthorn’s hands at her throat.

The blood was everywhere. All over the floor, the branches, her face. How much blood could still be in her?

“Beau!” Hawthorn screamed. “Help me!”

Beau’s hands cupped her neck. Light radiated around them. Caer could

and her closer as flesh knitted back together.

picking She still didn't move.

He dragged himself onto the platform.

Outside of the barrier, he could see her lifeforce... a fading, dying thing.

"Her heart's not beating," Hawthorn whispered, "come on, darling, come on. Come back."

You have to come back, Caer thought desperately. You have to.

He clambered towards her, pressing his palm over her chest. He had done it once before, he could do it again now.

This heart is mine, Ais. I will have it.

He pushed all of his strength, all of his power, into her body. He inserted his heart as an object that could be cut and shared, given away.

All yours, Ais. It always was.

Something throbbed beneath his hand, and her lifeforce flared back to life and blinding.

She shot up, gasping for breath.

Alive. Definitely alive.

She grabbed her neck, eyes widening at the blood on her chest. "What—"

Hawthorn yanked her into his arms, and Beau folded over both of them. Caer hung back, no strength to move, panting hard.

Arms fastened around his shoulders, dragging him backwards. He tried to get out, but he couldn't fight. He'd used the last of his strength on her.

Aislinn screamed, scrambling off the platform. Hawthorn and Beau followed, not thinking, not considering what they'd lose as they stepped over the barrier—

And Venus' forces swamped them.

What felt like her entire army spilled into the room. Minerva was the bound and chained, the others beside her. Within seconds, Hawthorn, Ribbling and Aislinn were among them.

"Don't kill them," Aeron said, stumbling out of the vault, bruised. Come bloodied but alive. Cerridwen followed, wrapped in chains, spitting blood. "I want them to see this."

"Caer!" Aislinn screamed. "Don't do this!" she hissed, as Aeron had done dragged towards the vault once more. "Please. I'll do anything—"

"You know, I believe you will," Aeron said, smiling despite the gash in his cheek. "But unfortunately, Princess, there's absolutely nothing you can give me."

Aislinn's gaze darkened. "I'll kill you," she said. "I vow it. I'm getting out of here, and I'm going to kill you."

, bright Aeron laughed. Through the crowds, Owen appeared, white and haggard. He caught Caer's gaze.

"You'll be all right, son," he said. "You're strong. You'll survive this. We'll have your mother back."

'Father, Venus snorted derisively, as if Owen was a fool if he still thought that Caer wanted to curse him—to curse anyone, everyone—but he no longer had the strength to speak. He was hauled backwards—into the coffin that once housed Cerridwen.

kicked "A precaution," Aeron explained. "In case your mortal body doesn't survive the journey."

l Beau Caer frowned. Where was he going? Owen and all his men had already overthrown the Mirror perfectly—

Hands forced him back. The lid of the coffin sealed around him.

The last thing he saw was Aislinn screaming his name.

ere too,

1, Beau



The moment the coffin vanished in the black waters of the Mirror, a blast blew across the room, knocking everyone off their feet. Aislinn was blown into a thick pile of coins. She felt the impact of the metal, and she knew she was hurt. For a moment, she was weightless, senseless. Noise vanished.

When at last sensation returned, and she staggered to her feet, she saw Hawthorn and Beau already righting themselves, no doubt their adrenaline-fueled healing giving them the extra edge. Aeron was moving too, bleeding but still moving.

Something pulsed inside her.

Magic.

The blast—it had damaged the barrier.

Hawthorn realised it too. He summoned a wave of fire over the barrier, burning anyone able to stand, and Aislinn used her own more limited magic to unlock her manacles.

She raced towards the Mirror. The blackness rose up to greet her.

She cast one final, desperate, hesitant look around the room—and she saw her father's gaze. He looked at her with an expression of horror, mingled with that of quiet, dreadful understanding. He knew why she had to go. He could not stop her.

She took a deep breath, and plunged into the Mirror.

stepped



Greyness flickered around her, like walking through a fog. There was no real here, nothing palpable. Even the floor beneath her felt like air.

Whispers echoed around her. Cries. Voices. A thousand, a million and people, merged and meshed together.

a sharp

“How could you!”

nn was

“You promised!”

nothing

“You’ll regret this.”

e found

“Stay with me.”

lvanced

“Not my baby. Please, not my baby.”

ng, but

“Your heart is mine.”

“Titania’s thorny tits, do you ever stop—”

“I fear I may always love you.”

“You were mine, once.”

“You aren’t horrified, are you?”

“You talk a lot.”

e room,

skills to

Aislinn ran forward. From time to time, she thought she saw some figures or shapes, swirling through the mist, but they were no more than phantoms made of shadow.

caught

“Caer!” she called. *“Where are you?”*

ed with

But he couldn’t answer. Because even if he was alive, he was dead inside that coffin.

e would

Aislinn placed a hand to her chest. He *had* to be alive.

Something lurked in the fog, something dark and shapeless. It had no voice, no form. It was everywhere and nowhere. She could feel it run through her as surely as she felt magic in the air—but this was something else, something *other*. A cold, dark opposite.

“What are you?” she asked.

nothing Her own voice echoed back.

What are you, what are you, what are you?

words When you looked in a mirror, how deep did the reflection go? How did this place go on for?

“You will let me find him,” Aislinn told the void. “Let me find him!”

When nothing happened, she started sweeping the clouds, slicing through shadow. She would not let this defeat her.

But how could she fight herself out of here?

Aislinn paused, taking a deep breath. This monster would not be defeated by steel or by force. It was a thing of magic. It would be defeated by magic.

And for however much it was never her strength, she couldn't falter.

I can bend the wind, make the leaves dance, shape the earth, control fire. You have no power over me.

She closed her eyes, imagining herself in a forest, imagining the feel of the earth beneath her feet and the wind in her hair. Home. All of Faerie was here—

And so was Caer.

“Give him to me.”

For the first time, the rumble thundered, and almost the shape of the monster came back, warning her that she could not do that.

trapped “I am the future queen of Faerie,” said Aislinn, “and yes I can.”

The darkness flared against her, fighting back, making the fog howl and scream. Aislinn let it wail, flung herself into that force, soaked in it, and she had no idea what it was.

She had space enough for magic. She was a vessel of it. Maybe that's why she'd never been able to master it, because she was built to handle more.

More, more, more!

She drank it, stored it, breathed it. It was hers to command, hers to
She heard her father say power was intoxicating before, but this was
now longer than that. It was drowning and flooding the world. It was setting a fire
while you danced beneath a tree. She wanted to bathe in its glory
” it, sing to it.

through *Mine!*

A face danced in the mist, a memory, a feeling—a soft murmur
starlight.

defeated Something else was hers. Something she wanted far, far more.

magic. She clenched the magic within her, and let the rest of it fall away.

now. “Caer,” she said, when she could form words again. The sound spread
command on a page, no longer her own voice. “Take me to him.”

The fog rolled away.

elling of She found herself in the forest of Autumn, beside the glittering ba
e was. looked like it had always done when she passed over it, but it felt different
like it had a heartbeat.

She remembered Beau’s story about the fae prince who loved a mortal
e words wondered, maybe, if it had some truth to it.

Aislinn held out her hand. “Take me to him.”

The scene swirled, launching her forward and spitting her out on
owl and stone floor.

revelled Slowly, Aislinn climbed to her feet, her ears ringing, her skin spor
numb. She was in a room that looked familiar to her—a sparse roc
his was a castle. The walls were newly plastered and daubed with red and ochre
e space in a style that seemed all at once familiar and utterly alien to her.

Afelcarreg? What was she doing here?

“Caer.”

o wield. A scream sounded in the distance. Aislinn blasted out of the room. His moreran past her, giving her a curious look but deciding she wasn't worried on questions at the moment. The world seemed strange and misty, like a dream, but she wasn't there at all, although the maid's reaction suggested otherwise.

She drew on a glamour just in case, making herself as invisible as a breeze, and flitted through the castle until she reached a chamber packed with people.

On the bed sat a thin, pale, dark-haired woman.

Queen Gwyn. Caer's mother.

A dozen people crowded around her, murmuring over a tiny, limp, dead-looking newborn on the bed, still slick from childbirth.

It wasn't moving.

Caer wasn't moving.

Carrier. It One of the women picked him up.

erent— "No!" Gwyn howled.

"Your Majesty," said the midwife, "the child will not live."

tal, and "Give me my baby!"

"Your Majesty—"

"Leave us!" the queen screamed. "Get out of this room."

a hard, One by one, every courtier, every advisor, every servant left, until only the queen remained was Queen Gwyn, holding the barely breathing body of her only grandson.

om in a And Aislinn. Aislinn stayed too.

leaves, He was still alive, she knew that much. There was a faint spark of life in him. She could feel it like it was a flame about to be snuffed out.

Gwyn held his tiny body to her chest, smoothing his dark hair, still slick with blood. "You cannot die, my precious boy, you will not. Your father will find a way to bring you back to me."

A maidtiny, but it holds the heart of a dragon.”

Orth the Aislinn believed it. She’d seen it. She’d seen all that Gwyn saw like she now. But how could this be, when his body was so miniscule that a whisper of wind looked like it would carry him away?

As the Aislinn hovered over him, waiting for a miracle, for those eyes to open with that mouth to cry.

But nothing happened.

There’s something wrong with your heart, Hawthorn had told him.

And suddenly, Aislinn understood why the ceremony hadn’t worked, dark-understood what was different about his heart. Why she hadn’t been able to give him a part of hers.

Because she already had.

Caerwyn had grown up with it. It had saved his life as a baby.

And condemned him too.

Because Aislinn was still radiating with the magic she’d taken from the mirror, buzzing with it, and she already knew, no matter how hard she tried when she did what she was about to do, a part of it was going to leave with her in Caer.

And the Mirror was going to want it back.

all that It lived beyond time and space. It bent the rules of life and death. . . . Her baby in its history had she been supposed to come here, and take its power and give it away.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. But there was no other choice.

f life in The queen gasped. “Is there someone there?”

Aislinn mentally kicked herself. She had not thought to spell her name. Crushed “Be not afraid,” she whispered back, “I am here to help. Your son’s body is

die, Gwyn, I promise you. He will live. He will grow. He will be all that
in him want and more. So much more.”

a mere She placed her hand to his still, silent chest. His body was so soft
frail. Her whole hand swamped it. *Come on, Caer. Breathe for me.*
pen, for Her own heart swelled in her chest, like a giant, monstrous thing. It
like a drum, a beat calling for an answer. Aislinn thought of how Caer
described the pulse of other people, how hers lit up like a beacon
imagined it like a physical thing she could dislodge, divide as easily as
ed. She Light splayed from beneath her fingertips. An ache grew in her chest
able to hard and hot she wanted to cry out. It was like someone cracking her
in two.

But she did not let go. She would not stop.

Until Caer's chest moved.

The light faded. Aislinn stared down at him. For a moment, all was
from the and quiet. He was still pale, still silent—

he tried, His lips blossomed bright red, the rest of his limbs turning plump and
ch onto and his mouth opened in a wide, toothless ‘o’.

He started to cry.

“Thank you,” Gwyn cried, clutching him to her chest, but the
Always attention turned fully to the child in her arms. “You are blessed, my
lover, and boy, and blessed I shall name you.”

Cursed, Aislinn realised. She had cursed the man she loved, cursed
an infant just so she could meet him.

I hope you don't hate me for this, she whispered.

her voice.

will not



hat you Aislinn was back inside the Mirror, back inside the void, missing the she'd taken—but it didn't matter. Caer had her heart, and she his. She nall, somewhere to find him.

She fled through the fog until it rolled away, and a glass co banded appeared in the middle of nowhere. Smoky tendrils pulsed around aer had searching for an entrance; the Mirror had not yet taken his powers. on. She could still feel them shaking inside him. Whatever she'd sucked fr ; butter. Mirror, it still remained inside Caer's body, through the shapeless, li hest, so fog of time.

ribcage She knew he wanted his powers gone, but she also didn't know w began and they ended, didn't know how to remove them without hurti

But it didn't matter. With his powers or without, they would find a be together. She had not come this far to lose him now.

was still She lifted the lid, brushing the hair from his eyes.

“Wake up, Caer.”

id pink, He did not move. The tendrils snaked towards him, licking at his ski didn't wake up, if she couldn't get him out soon...

Aislinn shook him. “Come on,” she said. “I brought you back en her You've saved me twice. You are not allowed to stay here. I forbid it.”

darling He remained motionless inside the coffin. Smoke gathered aroun both. They pulled at his body, snagging at both of them.

him as Aislinn bent towards him. “You have my heart, Caer. You've alwa it. From the moment you drew breath, my heart beat alongside yours. *mine. From your first breath to my last.* “So wake up.”

She pressed her lips to his in a final, desperate attempt, her eyes clo flushed with tears. It could not end like this. It wouldn't.

“I love you, Caer.”

powers Caer's eyes flickered open. "I love you, too, cariad."
e knew

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ontainer
it, still
Aislinn
om the
imitless

here he
ng *him*.
way to

in. If he

, once.

d them

ays had
" *Mine*,

sed and

Caer's eyes flickered open. "I love you, too, cariad."

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54

THE FINALE

Caer shot out of the Mirror inside the unlatched coffin, out seconds, Aislinn behind him. He hit the hard stone floor of the room. The room was swamped with people, fae, dwarf, and mortal, all fighting each other. Tiberius had arrived, and more dwarves seemed to be fighting their former allies. It was impossible to tell who was winning.

Aislinn wasted no time in finding a blade and racing back into the fight. Caer paused, thinking.

There were so many dead. And below them, sleeping in the crypts. More dead, too.

His powers were back. The barrier was out, and something else was burning beneath his skin, light and bright and burning.

The Mirror was supposed to take his powers. He wondered if the legend wasn't actually true.

“Ais,” he said, “can you crack the floor?”

Aislinn didn't ask why. She slammed her fists against the tile, the floor exploding at her touch.

A section of floor slid into the crypt below, a tidal wave of gems ar
Many screamed, scrambling for the exit, their protests cut short un
crushing weight of the treasure.

Caer flung out his power into the mass of bodies. Tombs c
headstones shattered, and bodies crawled out of the room.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Many scrambled for the crypt entrances, running from skeletal cla
gaping maws. Caer stood on a broken tomb, watching his creations.
like he could see through every eye, could direct each one that remain
his sight. *Only the dwarves*, he ordered, *but spare these precious few
as many as you can.*

side in
e vault.
ng each
against
soldiers.
Through the ruin, Caer spied Owen, looking on in horror. It occu
Caer that his stepfather hadn't witnessed his powers first hand, or
least, not like this. He stared at the newly resurrected body of one

ray, but
.. more
—
“They’re dead,” he muttered, “they’re actually dead—”
An arrow soared past Caer’s head. He leapt from his platform, se
for cover, a weapon, something. A soldier towered over him, sword sv

riggled
on to another.
reverse
Owen leapt forward, intercepting the blade. He pushed the soldie
Aislinn dived towards him, slicing the back of the soldier’s legs. She

reverse
battle.
Caer stared at Owen. He was not usually one for involving hin

fissures
genuinely can’t come back?”
“It’s true, isn’t it?” Owen asked, staring around at the chaos

Caer looked down, shaking his head. “Whatever Aeron told y

id gold showed you... it wasn't the truth. He can *lie*."

der the Owen opened his mouth like he wanted to protest, but quickly
again. "I'm sorry," he said instead. "I just... I so desperately wanted—
racked, Another figure rose up behind him, but Caer raced forward, knocking
to the ground and grabbing their face, snuffing out their life force.

Something pulsed inside him. A hard, painful tug.

ws and He turned his attention to the Mirror.

. It was It was still calling him.

ed with "Caer?" Owen asked.

. *Spare* "If you ever considered me your son—or if you care enough to s
ended—call off your men," Caer told him. "I need to get to the Mirror.

irred to

at very

: of his

Minerva sliced through another opponent, trying not to look at the
There were no strangers in Avalinth, and she couldn't afford to recognize
of them.

arching

vinging

Her iron fist was wet with blood—blood of enemies, blood of friend
Damn you, Venus.

r back.

moved

She searched for her sister amongst the madness, searched for her
face, but it rested first on the familiar shining red cloak and gold clasps
old friend.

1self in

No, not shining. Not any more. Ragged and fading, shining only with
glint of fresh blood.

3. "She

Her eyes fell to his face. Rotten skin, sunken, milk white eyes
visible beneath his armour.

you, or

Clay.



His sightless gaze had tightened on a figure in the corner of the room
shut it Venus.

” She stared back, face slack with horror, and bolted from the room.

ing them The thing that had once been Clay followed.

So did Minerva.

Venus fled from the crypt into the corridors below, the train of h
blazing behind her. Someone—maybe herself—had tried to slash it t
It was impractical for battle. Holding her down.

She careened into a room. Clay lost interest in his quarry and
see this another corner, in pursuit of someone closer. Minerva followed her sis

” “Venus!” she called. “Call off your people! Stop this madness!”

“He promised me...” she said, her voice little more than a whisp
promised me he could bring him back... he said it could be done...
and whole... he promised...”

ir face. “He *lied*, Ven. He’s lied to everyone.”

ise any “No. He can’t. He wouldn’t. Not about this. Clay... Clay can’t be
he isn’t gone...” Her eyes stared up at the walls around them, at the
ls. and glances of their numerous ancestors, staring down at her.

er own For the first time, Minerva wondered if Venus’ coveting the throne
p of an been to do with revenge at all, if it had all been to do with getting M
out of the way instead, and giving Venus the power she needed
with the *something* to bring Clay back. She’d always been more interested in
than Minerva, interested in its potential...

” “No!” Venus screamed. “This... this is your fault!”

, bones “My fault?” Minerva stammered. “How is any of this *my* fault? I dic
Clay, Venus. I’d have sacrificed another arm to bring him home.”

“You left him there!” Venus shrieked. “You saved Bell instead of hi

n. “You would have done the same!” Minerva yelled back. “Don’t this second you wouldn’t have. You would have let her die, and we would mourned her together. I would have understood!”

“We could have brought him back...”

“No, we couldn’t. It can’t be done, Ven. Not once the soul is elsewhere. “The Mirror is a gateway,” Venus said. “Aeron told me. We could go through there and get him back. We just needed the boy to give up his powers to the Mirror whole again. But you wouldn’t let us. One boy, for Clay. Clay turned for our kingdom.”

ter. *He’s worth ten kingdoms*, Minerva thought, but couldn’t bring her to say. “Look around,” she urged her. “*This* is our kingdom. *This* is where Heactions have wrought. Half your people have sided with your son. *Clay* healthy Is this what he would have wanted? Is this what *anyone* wanted?”

Venus looked down at her feet, tears sponging from her eyes. She let out a long, guttural sob, and charged.

gone... Tiberius launched himself out of nowhere, taking her blade to his shoulder. He groaned, knees hitting the floor.

“Tibe!” Minerva was at his side in a second. “What were you thinking? You hadn’t...” “I’m all right.”

Minerva Venus pulled back her sword, staring at the tip. The look of horror on the blade was akin to the one she’d given Clay’s remains.

magic There was once upon a time when Minerva knew her better than she could now, when they didn’t need words to talk, where they seemed like the only people in the world, their thoughts existing inside one another.

It hadn’t kill It had been decades since Minerva had heard her sister’s unspoken thoughts, but she thought she heard them now.

im!” *What have I done, what have I done, what have I done?*

lk for a She turned on her heels, staggering into the corridor.

ld have “Ven!”

She turned back to Tiberius, her hand against his wound. “I’m fi
said. “Go after her.”

ere.” Minerva raced after her. Venus was in no state to fight. Her mind
each inher own—it hadn’t been for a long time, even before Aeron sunk hi
s. Makeinto it. Grief was the monster that had poisoned her, and Minerva
One boyherself for not having seen it, for not having fought harder, for leavi
leaving Avalinth.

rself to If she’d stayed, if she’d been the queen she’d always promised to b
at youof this would have happened.

y’s son. *No what ifs.*

Minerva stumbled after Venus as she staggered down the corrido
et out alaughing, half sobbing, cutting down anyone who stopped her—friend

She stalled only when the familiar red cape appeared, and Clay’s h
oulder. face turned towards her.

She didn’t move when he approached. She dropped her sword, and
ng—” her arms.

Clay’s body slammed against her, and tore into her shoulder.

ror was “Ven!”

Minerva launched forward, but Venus wasn’t even screaming. She
anyone, up at Clay and smiled, even as he clawed at her flesh and chomped
ly twoneck.

“I just... wanted... to see you... again.”

spoken Minerva swung her axe across the thing-that-was-Clay’s throat, a
his head spiralling down the corridor.

She sunk to Venus’ side.

Blood pulsed from her shoulder, from her throat, from her head. Her hands circled upwards, her mouth still smiling.

“Heaven,” he said. Minerva took her sister’s hand. It was smooth and scarless, softer than she could ever remember hers being, but once—a long, long time ago, it wasn’t could have been *her* hands.

She squeezed it tightly, and Venus’ eyes met hers, just once more, in that kicked-a moment.

“It’s all right, Ven,” Minerva said, “you’ll see him again soon.”



“None

The Mirror pulsed with darkness, tendrils of smoke crawling through the air. Aislinn spied Caer battling towards it, Owen at his side, but her gaze was on Beau, flinging out fireballs, his back entirely undefended.

She raced towards him, wishing she had a bow, something to throw. A spear rose in the arm of an undead warrior.

“Beau!” she screamed.

A black shape shot from the shadows in a blur of fur, straight into the path of a warrior.

“Hecate!”

Beau turned, spitting fire at the creature’s ankles as Hecate swiped her face, shredding grey skin like slivers of paper. Aislinn skidded toward the creature, slicing the head off at the neck. Hecate sped off into the dark.

Beau stared at Aislinn. “You nearly got her tail.”

Aislinn groaned as she snapped her back against his. “Priorities, Beau.” She decapitated another foe, Beau flinging out fistfuls of fire around her like whips. She’d lost sight of most of her family. This was a

her eyesposition, blind, unsheltered. She could see so little of the vault or the room...

han she But she spied someone. A thin, bleeding person in white robes, s—theyaway like a spider.

Aeron.

just for She remembered her vow. It pulsed inside her like a thread.

Aeron dragged himself across the debris, through the ruined vault, t the stairs.

“Go,” said Beau, knowing exactly what she was thinking, “I’ll be fi

Aislinn nodded, wishing there was time to squeeze his hand, to utte final word of wisdom or silly remark. But there was no time to do a the air. but trust him.

caught She raced after Aeron, into the throne room. Injured as he was, it hard to catch up with him.

— “Aeron!” she screamed.

He turned, launching a fireball in her direction, trying to crack th His attacks were weak, desperate. One hand clutched his bleedin he face Aislinn fired back, stronger than ever, her flames infernos next to a car

Aeron dodged, rolling, staggering, still moving, crawling towa balcony. He grasped hold of the baluster.

d at its Aislinn cornered him. “What are you?” she asked. “How can you lie

s them, Aeron snorted. “Idiot princess,” he laughed, “to have been fooled sc Yes, I am fae—but you never asked what else I was, too.”

Aislinn froze, realising what should have been obvious to her fr u.” start. “You’re part mortal.”

id them Aeron grinned, his teeth bloody. “Don’t rub it in.”

terrible “But I don’t understand. Why would you want to annihilate the fae—

throne “Because you are *weak*,” he continued, “and misguided, and you
forgotten the old ways. I would have used the Mirror to remind you. I
cuttlinghave saved everything.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m *right*,” he said. “Mark my words, Future-Queen-of-Faerie, you
come to regret your choices. The old ways are coming for you.”

towards Aislinn summoned a fireball in hand. “Then I’ll fight them, too.”

Aeron’s grin was frightening. “We’ll see.”

ne.” He tumbled over the edge.

er some Aislinn dived. Something cracked. She stared over the balcony, at
nythingbody smeared on the concrete below, surrounded by dozens of other
eyes stared sightlessly at the crystal veined ceiling.

wasn’t She stared at him for a long while, certain that he couldn’t be dead,
wouldn’t have done this...

And then climbed off the balcony, heading slowly towards him. She
e floor. expecting him to move, or for his body to transform into something
g side. explode into fire.

idle. But he did nothing. He lay like a crumbled statue.

rds the Aislinn reached his side, nudging the body with her foot. He still
move.

!?” She drove her sword through his ribcage. Just to be sure. Just to be s
o easily. *I told you I would kill you*, she hissed to herself. *I just wish I’d been
make it hurt more.*

om the



—”

you have
Caer stood in front of the Mirror, hands outstretched towards it. The
I would
fastened around him, but he held firm. He knew what it wanted. I
prepared to give it.

Owen stood beside him with some of his men, fighting anyone that
you will
come near him, but the numbers were dwindling. People were standing
He'd lost sight of most of the others. They'd vanished from view.

He was alone. Just him and the Mirror.

The room shook. Power pulsed in his veins. The glass swirl
trembled, leeching him dry.

Aeron's *You can have my magic, Caer told it. You just can't have me.*

ers. His The tendrils brushed against his chest, like ice against his heart. The
world was screaming. The Mirror didn't seem able to know what was
that he
powers, and what was *him*.

You are not your powers.

he kept Arms slid around his waist. He felt a head pressed against his side
ing else, blades, holding him tightly.

Aislinn.

"It wants me," he told her.

I didn't Aislinn squeezed him tighter. "Doesn't it understand that you're mine
Mine, mine, mine.

safe. His chest blazed with sensation, fighting off the darkness, pushing it
able to him. The tendrils receded. Something cracked in his centre, a hard
pain—the sensation of something leaving his body, something being
away.

He slumped down on the floor.

The room continued to shake, the dark waters tumultuous. Smoke
around the frame. For a moment, Caer was sure that he'd failed, or

tendrils didn't matter at all—the Mirror had its power back. That living man
He was unlatched itself from him and grown into a titan, a free, feral being.

Maybe Caer had been tempering it, holding it back.

it dared Maybe giving up his powers had been the worst thing he could have
g down. He clutched hold of Aislinn, trying to read her face, hoping she had
suggestion.

But she just stared back at him, her face frighteningly pale.

ed and The armies stood still around them, faces frozen, weapons slumped
hands. All gazes fell towards the Mirror and the thrashing, shadowy
all around it.

e entire Through the crowd, the only moving figure in the room, came
ere his Hawthorn, parting the smoke with his hands, his body straining like
bracing against a snowstorm. He staggered forward, hands moving
arching, a display between a dance and a fight.

houlder The shadows whipped against him, clawing at his skin, but a single
his finger slashed through tendrils like butter.

Again, the Mirror roared, smoky tentacles lashing through the air. It
and hissed and crashed, licking at the undead warriors, inciting t
ie?" action.

Hawthorn flung out another hand, and knocked dozens to their feet
t out off finished off by the bystanders.

, dense Juliana raced ahead of him, sword and shield blazing with light, c
ng torn him a path until he reached the Mirror, and Hawthorn snuffed out the
the shadows.

The glass flickered, shrinking before its enemy, and let out a
blazed between a sigh and wail—like the call of wind through the moor
: that it ancient and alone.

gic had It had no choice. The Mirror bowed beneath the weight of the Faeri
shrivelling, churning, an insect in flame.

Until finally... all was still.

done.

l a final

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tendrils

e King

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sound

untains,

It had no choice. The Mirror bowed beneath the weight of the Faerie King, shrivelling, churning, an insect in flame.

Until finally... all was still.

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Hawthorn breathed deeply, staggering slightly, his hand outstretched towards the Mirror. The glass stared back, smug and still. “A cloak, or something,” announced the King of Faerie. “To combat the monstrosity. I think we’ve all had enough of looking at it.”

Someone moved forward to offer up theirs. Minerva arrived with the wounded Tiberius, barking orders at people to stop. No one was fighting more. Everyone was still.

Caer looked up at Aislinn, sliding a hand to her cheek. “My power gone,” he said. “They’re gone, Ais, I—”

Aislinn’s mouth fell to his, and she kissed him like she’d dreamt he’d moved away. He was all right. They were alive. She could touch him all over—

“Ais?” Juliana appeared behind her, Beau at her shoulder. Aislinn stepped from Caer’s side to run into her arms, Hawthorn folded himself around her family and pulled in Cerridwen, too. They were all here. All safe.

Juliana inched back, holding out her hand to Caer. "I'm not us hugger," she admitted. "But today I think I might make an exception."

"She really isn't," Hawthorn said, mostly to himself. "The things I to do to secure hugs from her in the past. Begging, grovelling, pro myself..."

"Because you want to!" Juliana hissed. "Mainly because you enjoy this not-lie."

"It feeds your fearsome, cold-hearted reputation, my lamentable doc thinking of you."

"Of course you are."

"I'm always thinking of you..."

ls still
oth and
ver this
Aislinn pulled Caer into the centre before Hawthorn could add th
'naked' to the end of this sentence. She inhaled the scent of him, s
quite certain that he was really here, that they'd really done it.

"Has anyone seen Hecate?" Beau asked.

with a
ing any
Dillon's head. The rest of him was horribly still.

"Help!" she cried. "He just... he just fell—"

vers are
raced over too, Beau as well.

n if he
. It was
keeping him alive. I didn't think—"

"Doesn't... matter..." said Dillon, almost smiling.

i bolted
und the
"How can you say that?" Luna asked.

"It was worth it. Coming back. It was worth it. Just for this. J
you..."

Tears ran down Luna's cheeks, splashing against his ruined,

ually acheeks. “This isn’t fair,” she protested.

Juliana came up to her side and took Dillon’s hand. “It wasn’t fair t
’ve hadtime. You should not be doing this to me again, you stupid fool. What
stratingtell your father?”

Before any answer could be given, Cerridwen appeared. “Get him
r tellingcoffin.”

“What—”

om. I’m “The coffin. Now. Do it.”

No one argued. Caer, Hawthorn, Juliana and Aislinn all grabbed a li
lifted, carrying him over to the other side of the room whilst on
assisted with the lid. They sealed him inside, the glass frosting over.

ie word Everyone stared at Cerridwen.

still not “What now?” asked Juliana.

“I... I’m not sure,” said Cerridwen. “It was all I could think of. The
is sealed, and if we unseal it again—”

radling “There are other ways,” Juliana said darkly, as if she wished she
know. “Dark ways. Ways that my father tried to... But Dillon...”

She didn’t need to finish the sentence. Dillon wouldn’t want them t
nhurt—and they all knew it. But to leave him in there forever, just a spark i
husk...

y thing “It doesn’t have to be a dark way,” said Mabel, appearing out of no
She swept into the room in her cobwebby skirts, the only person inside
wasn’t splashed with blood and sweat.

“What are you—” Juliana started. “Never mind. Tell us later. I
just fornow.”

“It takes life to create life,” Mabel continued. “That is why, no ma
perfectadvances, bringing a child into the world will always carry dangers

mother—to remind us of the consequences. The price.”

the first “We can’t sacrifice someone to bring Dillon back,” Juliana insisted
am I to hate it.”

“What about if the soul was willing?” Mabel asked. “Content to be
1 in the into the vines, as he once was?”

Juliana frowned. “Content to... what are you talking about?”

“And how do you know that?” said Aislinn.

“I know everything, dear, that’s the point.” Mabel took a deep bre
mb and there was such a soul, it could be done. With my magic—maybe hi
lookers looked at Hawthorn. “But where would we find—”

“I’ll do it,” said Cerridwen.

“Mother! No—”

“My darling girl, yes.”

Mirror Juliana’s gaze was silver. Aislinn had never known her mother bac
from a fight in her life, but she could see her resolve crumbling no
: didn’t desire to have her own mother—to *know* her for the first time—
beneath her desire to hold her friend again.

to do it, And to bring him home. Since the moment they met, Aislinn had t
inside a need. For her mother, it must have been unbearable.

Tears streamed down Juliana’s cheeks. “He won’t thank you for this
owhere. Cerridwen grabbed Juliana and held her. Over her shoulder, he
: it who settled on Luna. “Yes, he will.”

A gathered silence whispered through the room. Luna looked
Explain Cerridwen, and placed her hand to the coffin housing Dillon’s sleepin

“He’ll be safe in there for a while?”

ttter our Cerridwen nodded. “I was there for seventy years.”

for the Luna bowed her head. “Let’s not do it here,” she said. “Not yet. N

death today. You deserve this victory as much as anyone else.”

“He’d Cerridwen placed a hand on her shoulder. “We’ll take him home,” she said to her. “Back to Acanthia. I cannot deny that I want the chance to see it and back to see everyone. Just for a little while.”

Hawthorn nodded. “We’ll set off as soon as we’re able. But for now I faced the rest of the room. “Who’s in charge here?”

Owen came forward, clutching a wounded arm. “I am, in part, Hawthorn,” he admitted. “I have told my soldiers to stand down. I will not shed more blood today, and make whatever recompense I can. I am sorry for the role I have played in all of this.”

Hawthorn stared him down, before marching over, seizing his arm and healing it with his magic. “Your quarrel with me is over,” he said, “provided you have no intention to invade Faerie?”

Owen shook his head. “Your power may frighten me, but I never could have done otherwise. It was only my wife I wanted.”

Hawthorn nodded. “Go back through the barrier,” he said. “Take your men with you. You shall not come into Faerie again—not by any means. I will not interfere with your politics again, although your stepson may feel differently. Speak to him, and see that you make amends with the dwarven queen when you leave.”

“I am the dwarven queen now,” said Minerva, stepping forward, “and my nephew wishes to challenge me?”

“I do not,” said Tiberius, although there was no humour in his eyes. He stared downwards, and Aislinn wondered what had happened to him during the battle—what had happened to both of them. There would be time enough for the full story later, she had no doubt, but that was one part of the tale she was not too eager to hear.

“I pardon all the players in this sorry affair,” Minerva declared. she told from the main one, if he can be found.”

again— “Aeron is dead,” Aislinn announced.

A thin smile flushed Minerva’s cheeks. “Then let us have no more ...” Hepolitics tonight. The wounded need healing. The dead need burying. A Mirror—”

t, King “Needs to go back to the Deep,” Hawthorn agreed. “But not tonight. I see no He waved his hands, and the floors started to knit back together. Sorry for chunks of rock soaring into the ceiling, connecting with the floor above by one, every tile, every pebble, every gemstone rolled into its proper place, and leaving only the tombs empty.

avoiding “I would not wish to mislabel anyone,” he said. “Some things are done by hand.”

ared for



all of Slowly but surely, the wounded were tended to, and the dead removed means. gardens until a formal burial could be arranged. Aislinn herself assist might. the healing of the mortal soldiers, although her magic did not extend before dwarves.

“unless Venus’ body was retrieved and placed in Clay’s tomb along with remained of him, until a stonemason could craft a new one for them. Tiberius came to sit beside her for a while, not speaking. Aislinn s. They think any words would help. mother

be time Aeron’s body was burnt immediately, out of concern it might be desecrated, and also, possibly, the fear that he might somehow come t of the life. Aislinn wondered if she should have tried harder to take him in a

“Asides seemed strange that a person who could orchestrate a conflict between kingdoms should be so easily killed.

But in the end, he was as ordinary as the rest of them. He stood no talk of against steel and stone.

and that The wounded dwarves were removed to a hospital outside of the walls, and Flora went with them without so much as a word to the other.

.” was hours before someone explained to her what happened in the water, great “What? But why—why would Flora do that?”

ve. One The dwarves just shrugged. “She has not yet explained.”

r place, “Why isn’t Minerva more furious?”

“She is,” Bell explained. “She just has more important things to do.”

e better They sealed the Mirror inside the vault, only temporarily, along with Dillon’s coffin. It seemed strange to place him there amongst the treasures of the dwarves.

“He should be here,” Aislinn remarked, “celebrating with us.”

d to the Caer kissed her head. “We’ll celebrate later,” he assured her. “I’ll be with you in Acanthia.”

ed with “You’re... coming to Acanthia with us?”

l to the Caer smiled. “You sound surprised.”

h what “I just thought you might need to... the mortal world... your kingdom.”

both of Caer shook his head. “I’ve no interest in ruling,” he said. “I’ve spoken to Owen. I’ve told him to go back and tell everyone I’m dead. I didn’t think anyone will challenge his rule.”

Aislinn blinked at him. “But don’t you want to go home?”

ght be Caer caught her face in his hands. “You’re my home, Ais. I don’t want to be anywhere that’s not right at your side.”

back to live—it Aislinn breathed a huge sigh of relief, and her thoughts smiled at them.

in three that she'd set out on this quest with the sole purpose of bringing
wayward prince. This wasn't exactly what she'd envisioned.

chance She placed her hand against his neck, fingers brushing his beads.

Caer swallowed. "I've lost track of the number, now. I'm not sure
palace—"

hers. It Aislinn closed her hand around his fingers. "I lost count a long tim
rway. she said. "It's the life we lead. I know you want to honour those you'
but you were never those powers. I don't think you're any less of
person if you let them go."

"I don't think I've made it right, yet." Her hand moved over hi
' "You have the heart of a fae, Caer. You always have. You'll have cent
ig with save lives in, to do wonders with. And I shall help you do them."

asures of She still had to tell him what had happened in the Mirror—what ha
happened. She told her father about it earlier as they were sealing the
away in the vault, just in case that changed his mind about how to ha
back in He'd been surprised about the Mirror's powers, but he remained ada
his decision to lock it away. "Some things are better off buried, Dau
he'd said. "The dwarves knew that. Our fae ancestors knew it too, wh
helped them seal it away the first time. Your sweetheart knew it too, v
m—" gave up his powers. He knew no one should use them."

already Aislinn had had to agree.

I don't Caer frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I have something to tell you."

"I'm all ears."

want to She glanced around them. "Not here," she said, and led him back
room she'd been using before her abrupt departure. It didn't look like
he idea

home ahead been in it for the last few days. The bed was unmade and her belongings still where she'd left them.

“So,” Caer started, “what did you want to tell me?”

Aislinn took a deep breath, and told him. Caer was silent throughout she couldn't muster the strength to look at him. What if this choice she'd made a year ago, everything? What if he hated her for the choice she'd made?

Silence descended once she'd finished her tale.

“Say something, Caer.”

“It was you,” Caer whispered, “all my life, that feeling I was missing something, that my life was meant to be lived outside the walls of Afelcarreg... it was you.”

“Caer,” Aislinn said, “you seem to be missing the point that your position really everything that happened with your mother, the people you killed—them, Mirrorme, too.”

“Ah,” he said, “right. Well, I suppose so, but... you did it to save me from trying not to wallow too much. If you want forgiveness, I won't give it—forgiveness, needed.”

She swallowed. “There's also the question of whether or not when he affections for me might have been... led, somewhat, by the fact you were already sharing my heart.”

Caer shook his head, smiling. “No,” he said, “because you weren't mine. Although it might explain why I was able to bring you back after your heart stopped, why I felt like my own would stop if yours did.” He brought his face closer, resting his forehead against hers, cupping her face. “Caer said, “my heart was yours when I gave it. No time-bending magic involved. My affection for you.”

“If you're sure...”

ongings “Absolutely.”

“Then help me out of these clothes.”

Caer grinned, although his mouth dropped slightly when his hands out, and towards her dress. It was still covered in blood. His fingers trembled hanged her throat.

“When Aeron cut you—”

She caught his hand. “I’m all right, Caer.”

“I should have tried to—”

missing “No,” she said, “you shouldn’t. And I’m glad of it. Love isn’t just all of doing the crazy, self-sacrificing shit. It’s about knowing what the person would want you to do. It’s about knowing the big wants and the powers—ones.”

hat was “You sound like quite the expert on love. Should I be jealous of a paramours?”

me, so “No,” she said. “It’s only ever been you, for me. In the ways that matter—it isn’t Caer smiled. His fingers dipped to the sleeve of her dress, and he peeled it off her shoulder.

ot your “I’d... really like a bath before we begin,” Aislinn admitted.

ou were Caer’s grin was wicked. “I’d really like to join you.”

They walked towards the tub and turned on the taps, trading light kisses sharing they thumbed through scented oils and lotions, rubbing tiny, lazy circles over your wrists and shoulders and necks. Aislinn had been dreaming about this brought day. She’d wanted to step away before now, to be clean and fresh with Mariad,” pulled him into her bed and made good on her promises, but she couldn’t created bring herself to separate from him for any longer than was strictly necessary.

And anyway, she was going to be dirty and blood-covered and snuggled at some point in their lives together. She shouldn’t have to be embarrassed

certainly didn't care about his present condition.

It was fun scrubbing the dirt from his skin, fun lathering soap through his hair, sponging suds down his chiselled torso, letting the sponge dip and pull against the water, letting her hands explore his body while his roamed hers.

They didn't make it to the bed. At least not the first time. The first time Aislinn climbed onto his lap, slipped easily into position, and rode him to climax so quickly he barely took a breath between.

"We're going again," he said, as he lifted her out of the bath.

It about "I should hope so."

He other "I've got to do my part."

He little "I was thinking more that I haven't yet fucked you until you've become dizzy."

His past Caer's cheeks flushed. His throat bobbed. He dropped Aislinn onto the sheets. "You've a filthy mouth, Princess."

He utter." "Does it offend your delicate sensibilities, Prince?"

He slowly "Nothing about you offends me."

He splayed her out on the bed and dipped to her middle, his tongue curling to her centre, working in tight, tiny spirals until her thoughts turned numb.

"Vines, spirits and stone," she cursed. "I'm supposed to be the one who gets dizzy."

He les over "Should I stop?"

He bath all "No," she said. "Don't you dare."

When she He paused to let her gather her thoughts before resuming his attack, wouldn't drawing her in and out of perfect, suspenseful bliss. He followed her instruction, but he seemed to know the exact, torturous time—the perfect tempo to build her to a crescendo.

He ed. She She clutched at the sheets as he worked inside her, before finally it

too much. She flipped him onto his back and drove him inside her, re-
ugh his the same, torturous action—bringing him close to the brink before c
beneath back.

She made him beg.

st time, He made her beg, too.

im to a When at last they came together, and collapsed into the damp
breathing hard, Aislinn found the world had been unravelled and rem
the centre of everything was Caer, who'd held her heart long before th
met.

And would hold it until the end of their long, long lives.

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too much. She flipped him onto his back and drove him inside her, repeating the same, torturous action—bringing him close to the brink before drawing back.

She made him beg.

He made her beg, too.

When at last they came together, and collapsed into the damp sheets, breathing hard, Aislinn found the world had been unravelled and remade. At the centre of everything was Caer, who'd held her heart long before they ever met.

And would hold it until the end of their long, long lives.

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It took several days before Minerva could bring herself to move from the guest chamber she'd been assigned and into the royal suite. Bell had been the one to convince her in the end, reminding her that the people needed to feel like she was going to stay. Minerva was not happy about it. She'd wanted for all of Venus' belongings to be removed before she did so, but the day she found herself seeking them out.

She ignored the piles of dresses and jewels and went instead to the box marked 'miscellaneous'. It was filled with odd bits of seemingly no value: cheap hairpins, tattered books, faded handkerchiefs and a rusty dagger with Venus' name engraved on the blade.

Minerva had the matching one hanging at her waist. It was one of the few things she'd taken with her.

At the bottom of the box were two faded ragdolls in their original form. Minerva had tried to throw her own away when she'd grown out of them, but Venus had wailed and insisted it be kept.

And she had kept it. She'd kept them both for over three hundred years even though most of the stuffing had fallen out and their felt skin had become threadbare.

Tiberius found her there a little while later, and they'd both sobbed until their throats were hoarse.

"Don't leave," he whispered at the end.

"How could I?" she said, and patted his head. "You're stuck with me for the rest of your life, but I should warn you—I'll be retiring at some point. I want to live a bit of my life."

"You can enjoy it on the throne."

Minerva shrugged. "I was made for a life of adventure."

"Who was it that said 'the best monarchs are those that do not want to rule'?"

"I don't know, but they sound smart."

There was much to do in Avalinth in the meantime. The dead were being buried now, although Venus' funeral had yet to be held. Owen and his men were preparing to move out. Hawthorn and his family, too, would be gone by the end of the week.

And Caer with them.

She sighed. Nothing stayed forever.

"What are you going to do about Flora?" Bell asked.

Minerva tensed. She had delayed punishing her, partly due to the business requiring her attention, and partly because she couldn't stop thinking about it. Flora had attached herself to the hospital after the battles. Minerva would not remove her whilst she was useful.

But the dead were dead, now, and those healing could be helped by the living.

"I suppose it's time. I shall visit her this afternoon."

"You will not," Bell said. "You are queen, now. She should come to you."

l years,
l turned



ed until Flora was summoned to the throne room later that day. It felt wrong sitting on the throne, staring down at the woman she'd known her entire life who'd gone from tutor to advisor to friend to... to this wordless thing now were.

ie now, And yet Minerva knew she would never be able to forgive her, not if she enjoyed a
enjoy a Flora stared up at her, her wrinkled face a perfect mask of civility.

“Am I to be executed?” she asked, as if the answer were neither here nor there. “Treason against the queen, and all?”

it’?” “I wasn’t queen when you turned on me,” Minerva said placidly. ‘
All you are guilty of is betrayal.”

buried To this, Flora said nothing.

n were “Why did you do it?”

within “The odds were stacked against us.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Venus only wanted her family back, Min. She agreed that she would spare the rest of you. I did what I thought was best.”

“Caer could have died.”

e other “The boy’s strong,” she said. “I had my hopes that he would live. I don’t
tand to much care for the wars of mortals and fae. They could kill each other
tle, and cared.”

“This doesn’t sound like you.”

others. Flora sighed. “Do you know why I came with you to the mortal world?”

“You said you had no one left in Avalinth.”

you.”

“That’s right. No one. No family. Everyone I’d ever cared for was
and gone, and the few remaining leaving. A simpler life, Bell said
monsters. I thought I’d get to live out the remainder of my life a
g to be friends, that I’d never have to see another die. And then you decide
ire life, have to come back here, for a boy we barely knew.”
ng they

“You didn’t have to come with us.”

“How could I not?” She shook her head. “I’d been friends with Foc
ully. century, and she died. She died, and we carried on, like we always
death isn’t a festering thing we carry in our hearts. No more, I pr
ere nor myself—if there was any way to prevent it.” A silence stretched out b
“So no. the two of them, as long and as painful as Minerva had ever known
silence between them to be. “What will you do with me?”

Minerva sighed. “Owen will be heading back to the mortal world
The long way round, since the Mirror is broken. I’m going to ask him
you back to the cottage. You’ll get your wish, Flora. You’ll never
watch another person die. You’ll never have to watch anyone do a
ever again.”

would “Banishment, then?”

“Yes.”

Flora nodded. “I won’t argue.”

I don’t “Do you regret it?”
for all I

“I regret that we cannot be friends. I regret that my actions had no b
I do not regret trying to save you.”

Minerva dropped her gaze, and eventually, Flora took it as her
ld?” leave.

“Do you regret it?” she asked from the doorway.

“Regret what?”

as dead “Conceding to Venus. You must know this would never have happened. No you’d been queen instead of her.”

mongst Minerva shook her head. “I am trying to give up on wondering the world we’d live in,” she said, flexing her metal hand. “I suggest you do the same.”



part for a Owen quit Avalinth two days later, Minerva’s officials having done, like promised treaties ensuring that he would never again set foot in Faerie, no one between anyone to do so. Minerva was confident he would keep his word. His own any were motivated by fear and grief, and his lessons appeared to have been painful ones.

l, soon. And he loved Caer. Anyone could see that. Minerva was inclined to think that anyone who loved that boy had good in them.

to take At the end of the week, he left too. “Don’t be a stranger,” she told have to will be chained to the city for some time, but I expect to see you back here nothing before the year is out.”

“Of course,” he said. “Where else would I learn blacksmithing? Most of the fae have nothing on dwarven-made.”

“Good lad,” she said, tugging him downwards to ruffle his hair. “You were a dwarf at heart.”

earing. Caer blushed at the compliment, and turned to look behind him. Beau and Beau were saying their goodbyes to the others.

cue to “Why did you and the others try to push Ais and I together?” he asked

“Aside from the begrudging-yet-obvious-chemistry the two of you have and how ludicrously fun it was to mess with you, we rather hoped it

ened if motivate you to try and learn how to control your powers—if you could find someone worth risking it for.”

e ‘what “That was the worst part, though,” he explained. “She was worth anything *but that*.”

Minerva patted his shoulder. “It worked out though.”

“That it did.” He paused again. “Min?”

“Yes, boy?”

awn up “I never expected to have another mother again,” he said. “And
r order don’t. But I’m glad I’ve got you.”

actions “Aye,” she said, “that’ll do it.” She pulled him down into her arms,
re been two held fast there for some time. “I don’t profess to know the secret
stone and soul, but if your mother sees you now, I know she’d be as p
o think you as I am.”

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“I never expected to have another mother again,” he said. “And I still don’t. But I’m glad I’ve got you.”

“Aye,” she said, “that’ll do it.” She pulled him down into her arms, and the two held fast there for some time. “I don’t profess to know the secrets of the stone and soul, but if your mother sees you now, I know she’d be as proud of you as I am.”



As a final parting gift, Minerva gave the party a pair of wargis. A waxed lyrically about returning to Wales one day and bring mounts with them, riding about the countryside on a pair of giant dragon-like wing-like cape splaying out behind her.

“It’ll terrify all the mortals,” she announced.

“And yet you sound delighted about doing it,” Caer said.

The group headed back to Acanthia in fine spirits, though Caer and Aislinn took the ‘long route back’, riding on ahead of the others and disappearing for a couple of days. They did not tell anyone what happened during their excursion, although Beau noted the absence of Caer’s beads and everyone noticed that Aislinn had given Caer the nickname ‘Snow’. They did not share the reason, though frequently giggled when someone asked.

When the main party arrived back in Acanthia, they immediately summoned Albert Woodfern and explained the situation and reunited with his son’s sleeping form. Cerridwen remained adamant in her pro-

him, but asked to be given two weeks—two weeks with her own family to read the letter her husband had written to her before he died.

No one would ever read or hear its contents, but she asked to be allowed to keep it with her in the vines beneath the castle.

Albert initially objected to Cerridwen's plans, but he did not take long to be persuaded. Even Juliana stopped trying to talk her into delaying, eventually, choosing instead to focus on those remaining days. The days were filled with laughter and adventures and feast and celebrations. For two weeks it felt like there was never a quiet moment, everyone constantly pulling one another into one revel to the next. Maytree was summoned out of retirement on the Summer Isles, and gave her old friend such a greeting that a bard composed a ballad on the spot.

Aislinn
ing the
ngs, her

"I'm sorry," Aislinn told Caer at one point, "this isn't quite the peaceful quiet we probably deserve right now."

"I did not think life with you would be particularly peaceful anyway," Caer admitted. "And we will have time for peace and quiet later."

Aislinn
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And they would. Time for peace and quiet, for travelling, for adventures and revels and sparring and sunsets. Time for *everything*.

The only one who did not have time was Cerridwen, but she did not
keener to extend it—only to use the days she did have as much as possible
the two weeks that she'd granted herself, she taught Beau a few sword
he was 'desperately lacking', gave Aislinn a few lessons she was
willing to learn from, and taught Juliana all the songs she couldn't
remember. She recounted their three years together in as much detail
could, told her stories of her life in the mortal world, and even imparted
specifics of her courtship with her father.

"I understand that he did not lead an honourable life after I died," she said.

ily, and “but all the years he was honourable—and the ones where he loved those count for something, too.”

buried Juliana said nothing to that, though her eyes lined with silver.

“I wish we had more time,” Aislinn told her.

e much Cerridwen patted her head, looking, for a moment, like the older, ying ithaired grandmas of mortal tales. “No one ever has enough of that,” sl y were “Though you might, with your Caer, and Juliana with her Hawthorr weeks, grandmother could ask for more?”

ed from On the final day, everyone gathered in the bowels of the great in the palace, in the great vine-filled crypt where the bodies of the kings and posed alay beneath the earth. A small, quiet party, just the family, Luna, Alb Mabel.

ace and “You don’t have to do this,” Luna sniffed. “We can wait a little long

Cerridwen smiled. “Dillon has waited long enough,” she said. “And r,” Caer does not have forever. Every day I spend here robs him of another d. his son.”

entures “But you deserve so many more with your daughter... she can’t be about this.”

ot seem “There may have been some sobbing, promises of violence, a ible. In declarations of using someone else, but... this is the right thing. She k l movestoo. I know I look young, but I’m old, for a mortal. And what I desire all too all else I can never have again.”

’t quite “What’s that?”

l as she “To see my daughter l grow up. Maybe, if I’m lucky, and I exist a rted the the vines after my demise, I’ll get to see my grandchildren and grandchildren instead.”

he said, “It won’t be the same.”

you— “Nothing is.”

Luna sniffed. “I’m naming my firstborn Cerridwen.”

Cerridwen smiled. “I think Dillon would approve of that.”

She lay down in the vines, and Mabel and Hawthorn conducted the silver-Juliana held her mother’s hands, whispering words too soft to hear. He said. clutched Aislinn’s hand throughout.

1. What Afterwards, he would tell her that he’d had no idea that death could be peaceful, and that he’d be blessed indeed if he met an end like that one.

Faerie “Not for a long while yet,” Aislinn told him.

queens With her family around her, Cerridwen slipped away, and although she was no way to be sure she was there, the vines seemed to murmur with her. joined them.

ger.” Dillon woke a few minutes later, whole and healthy and *glowing*.

l Albert “Luna?” he said, blinking rapidly. “*Father?*”

ay with Juliana explained everything as Albert wept bitterly in his son’s neck.

“I can feel you,” Dillon whispered, as if, in this world of magic and happywonder, it was touch that he found the most surreal, the most incredible. *can feel you.*”

damant Aislinn clutched Caer’s hand still, awaiting her turn in a long line of people waiting to hold Dillon, and smiled as the tears dripped down above cheeks. “Welcome home.”

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Aeron flew through the icy winds, black wings sailing out behind him, carrying the Mirror in his claws. It had taken far, far too long to get out of Avalinth, disguised as one of Owen's soldiers. Glamours didn't work on dwarves, but *shapeshifting* did, and it had been easy enough to take the guise of one of the wounded. That idiot fae prince had healed him himself.

He'd survived leaping off the palace balcony, quickly transforming the other bodies to resemble himself and scurrying into the bushes to hide in his own disguise, all the while trying not to bleed out. It had not been as easy as it had been too close.

Luckily, he'd already had a copy of the Mirror made long before the original was constructed based on records and finalised quickly once the Mirror was in his possession. He'd always known he'd be taking it out of Avalinth, and for all her faults and her willingness to sacrifice the mortal prince, he would keep her word in that regard. She knew the Mirror was too powerful to let go.

He'd killed the maker of the false mirror, killed him as soon as the job was done and configured his body into bones which he fed to the palace.

The replica was now safely 'stored' in the Deep below. With the seal Hawthorn had placed on it, Aeron was sure no one would ever know the difference.

The seal was regrettable, admittedly. Aeron had no hopes of removing himself. He was only young, after all.

But if there was one thing he'd learned from his father, it was patience.

The turret of his father's keep pierced the white skies. He slowed his sliding into the powdery snow and shucking off his draconic form for something more fae.

Ladrien, the exiled king of the Unseelie, met him at the doors. Yet his exile had not altered his proud form. He was as polished and straight-tusked as ever, his horns gleaming, his black hair smooth as water.

His fathomless eyes gleamed at Aeron's presence. "Do you have it?"

Smiling, Aeron dropped into a deep bow. "Yes, Father," he said. "I found it at last."



To be continued...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of book-loving parents, Katherine “Kate” Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as “the key to good writing is an unremarkable childhood“.

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger siblings on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and eight years of teaching English in her belt, Macdonald thinks there’s a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She currently lives in Devon with her manic toddler, in a charming Victorian terrace.

“Mountain of Mirrors and Starlight“ is her 19th novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website www.katherinamacdonaldauthor.com to be notified of new releases and review copies!

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