



A KISS OF SHADOW

COURT OF STARLIGHT AND DARKNESS

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LINSEY HALL

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COURT OF STARLIGHT
AND DARKNESS BOOK 2

LINSEY HALL



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Sia

Someone was following me.

I was sure of it.

Dain and I walked along the forest path toward my friend Meria's apartment in the capital city, but we weren't alone. I sensed someone lurking amongst the trees behind us. The night was lovely and calm, cooled by a faint ocean breeze. The clouds overhead foretold the arrival of the witch with the deathly magic, but I was certain there was also someone following me.

Had she arrived already?

No. The clouds hadn't changed, and no one had said anything.

The threat came from someone else.

Yesterday afternoon, I'd won the crown of the Court of Starlight and Darkness.

Today, I was sure that someone didn't want me to be queen.

Why else would I have gotten a stalker so soon?

I listened carefully, blocking out the sound of the singing night birds to see if I could hear someone in the woods. I heard a rustle and spun around, searching the cobbled path behind me. The huge trees cut out the light of the

stars and moon, and it was too dark to see details

“What is it?” Dain turned to look.

I peered into the darkness, then shook my head. “Nothing. I’m going crazy.”

“Going?”

I laughed and punched him lightly on the shoulder. “Oh, shut up.”

I was fairly certain that Dain liked me more than he should, considering I was going to marry his best friend and king. So far, he’d been good at keeping his feelings to himself. I hoped that by treating him as a brother, it would keep the boundaries in place.

I was soon to be queen, after all. And though I wasn’t marrying the king because I loved him, I didn’t need the complications of another guy looking at me with heat in his eyes. The king already did that enough, and I was busy staring right back at him.

Except, we hated each other, and he refused to touch me.

That didn’t stop him from haunting my dreams, though. Hot, sweaty dreams that kept me up at night.

All in all, that was enough complication for one life. Dain needed to stay firmly in the friend zone.

I drew in a deep breath and continued down the path.

Why was I freaking out about a stalker?

I probably had PTSD from the death match to become queen. A totally reasonable explanation. Anyone would be jumpy.

Hell, I’d thought I was human until last week. I hadn’t even been back to my crappy apartment in Seattle yet. Thank God I never kept a full fridge.

We reached the edge of the forest, and I spotted the capital city on the cliffs overlooking the sea. Meria had moved there yesterday after the competition.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured. Tall stone buildings climbed up the hill, their windows glowing like golden jewels. They were all shapes and sizes—

round, square, octagonal. Curved staircases rose up the sides of some of the buildings to provide access to higher floors.

A true fairytale kingdom.

And I was its queen.

Wild.

“It’s one of the prettiest cities in all the fae kingdoms,” Dain said. “Come on.” He led me up the path. We passed a guard shack on the way onto the main road. Two guards stood outside, their stony faces inspecting us as we passed.

“Is it really dangerous enough to need guards?” I whispered once we’d gone past him.

Dain shrugged. “Probably not. King Lore killed our main enemies years ago.”

“The Northern Fae.”

“Exactly. But there is always the possibility of a threat from another kingdom. Especially now we have a queen.”

“What? Why?”

“You make us more powerful.”

Ha. If only I understood my power. I was able to draw strength and protection from the stars, but I didn’t know why. I was supposed to keep my trap shut about the fact that I was a witch, though. So I did.

We kept climbing toward the top of the city. As we walked, we passed shops dedicated to selling all kinds of goodies. Food, drink, clothing, and weapons. A particularly inviting bookstore caught my eye, with its golden light and colorful tomes.

I lingered, looking through the windows.

“We can come back when they’re open,” he said.

“I guess I can, can’t I?” I’d been confined while I’d been part of the competition to become queen, but now I was the lady herself.

Whatever that meant.

All I knew was that I was supposed to defeat some evil witch with death magic.

I shivered.

That was the part of the gig I wasn't looking forward to.

Fortunately, we'd reached Meria's building. It was on the very last row, located right on the cliff that plunged down into the sea. The apartment was in a prime spot, and she'd gotten it as a consolation for not winning the competition. The king no doubt felt bad for making her risk her life.

He should.

I looked up at the narrow, four-story building. It was built of a creamy stone that glittered faintly under the lights of the streetlamps. Stone vines climbed up the corners, a beautiful detail that I'd never see in the human world. One of the windows on the top floor opened and Meria leaned out, her golden braid flopping over her shoulders and a grin on her face.

She waved. "Hey, stranger. Come on up."

"I'll wait here for you," Dain said.

"Thanks. I need some girl time." I let myself in through the beautiful wooden door and climbed the stairs. There was only one door at the top, and Meria swung it open as I reached it.

"Hey!" She threw her arms around me, and relief rushed through me.

"You're not mad at me?" I hadn't seen her since I'd defeated her in the competition, so I wasn't sure where she stood on the issue.

She pulled back. "I'm bummed about my family, but of course not. I know you did everything you could to help me win."

I nodded. "I'll find a way to get them back. I promise."

"Yeah." Her tone was doubtful.

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe you'll try, but it's impossible unless they're related to royalty."

They'd been banished for reasons unknown to me, and Meria had been hoping to get them back into the kingdom by becoming the queen. I'd tried to

help her, but none of it had gone as planned.

“Don’t worry about it.” She tugged on my arm. “Come in and have a drink.”

I followed her in but didn’t listen to her admonishment not to worry about it. *Of course* I worried about it. But I could sock it away and try to deal with it at another time. Maybe she could become my blood sister or something. Magic could make anything happen, right?

Meria led me into a pretty apartment with golden wood floors and white walls. There wasn’t much furniture—just an emerald-green couch and a table with two chairs—but it had so much potential.

“It’s beautiful.” I spun in a circle.

“Yeah, not a bad consolation prize.” She went to a door and entered another room, returning a moment later with a bottle of wine and two coffee mugs. “Come on, let’s sit on the balcony.”

I joined her on the small balcony that overhung the sea. About fifty feet below, the waves crashed on the rocks. If I’d had a problem with heights, it would have been an issue.

Instead, it was gorgeous.

I looked up at the sky, where a sliver of moon was surrounded by the stars. I breathed in deeply, feeling their magic flow into me.

Meria handed me a glass of wine. “How are you holding up?”

“Barely. I think a dark shadow has been following me.” The words sounded crazy leaving my lips.

“Like a stalker?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think it’s the witch with deathly magic?” She looked to the right, where the dark clouds hovered.

I shook my head. “I don’t think she’s here yet, or the clouds would be closer. I think it’s someone else.”

“Makes sense. You’re queen now. Wouldn’t be surprised if someone

wants you off the throne. You're an outsider who's hiding her ears."

I wasn't actually hiding my ears, but both Meria and I were the only ones who knew that. The other fae assumed I was using magic to conceal my pointed fae ears because I'd lived in the human world. The truth? I wasn't fae at all. If others found out, they'd hate having an outsider on the throne.

"Maybe someone else knows what I am," I said. The idea sent a shiver through me.

"I hope not. They won't like having a witch as queen."

"Neither will Lore."

"Lore, is it?"

I blew out a breath. "Is it weird I call him by his first name?"

"Maybe not in the human world. But amongst the fae, it's pretty personal."

"Well, we're going to get married." I leaned back against my chair. "In name only, of course."

"But he can touch you. And he can touch *no one* else. That's got to be pretty intense."

Our only kiss had been enough to melt my brain, but I didn't mention it. Better to change the subject. "Yeah. I just wish I knew who my parents were. That's what started this whole thing. I got a tip that I'd find my parents at the Dark Forest." The bar hadn't been the human biker bar I'd thought it was. Instead, it was a hidden fae bar. "But I didn't find them. I got kidnapped and taken here."

"So you're thinking your parents must be magical."

"Yep. I think they're the answer to all my questions. And I want to find them. Not just to understand my magic, but to know where I come from. It's been eating me up inside."

She gripped my hand, and I took comfort from her touch. "I can help you."

"You've got to be busy."

“Not too busy to help a friend.” She frowned, then sipped her drink. “But I think you’re going to need more than just me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you could get answers from the Truth Teller, but I don’t know how to reach her.”

Annoyance shot through me at the thought of the seer who had appeared at the end of the competition and declared me the winner.

“We just need to find her.” Meria stood up and looked over the balcony to the right. “But you’re not going to like how we do it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Evelyn.”

“She knows where the Truth Teller is?” Evelyn had been our primary competition in the fight to become queen. She’d started out as a real bitch. She might still be one, but when the competition had nearly killed Meria and me, she’d helped us. So she wasn’t a monster, at least. And I usually liked bitches.

“I heard her talking about it,” Meria said. “The Truth Teller told her to come to the competition. So she did.”

“And yet, she didn’t win.”

Meria shrugged. “Maybe she was meant to compete for another reason. There’s a lot to be gained from being a competitor.” She gestured to the beautiful apartment around her. “Like a fresh start.”

“Does Evelyn also have an apartment?”

“On this very street. Let’s go see if she’ll help us.”

“Now?”

“No time like the present. And you want to know, right?”

“Desperately.” So desperately that I didn’t mind bugging Evelyn late at night.

With any luck, she wouldn’t bite my head off.

Lore

I stared blindly at the book in front of me. I'd selected it in an attempt to keep my mind off of Sia.

It hadn't worked.

She hadn't left my thoughts since the competition yesterday.

It was killing me.

Next to me, Wolf rumbled low in his throat. I rubbed his head.

"Someone's coming, eh?"

He rumbled again, and I heard the footsteps in the hall. A moment later, a knock sounded at the door. I turned, welcoming the distraction.

Thank fates.

"Come in."

Vusario entered my study. The seer was dressed in a cloak the color of blood. Dark shadows hung beneath his black eyes. "My lord."

"Vusario. What do you need?"

"I've come to discuss arrangements to go to the High Court for your wedding."

"We're not going. You know the High Court is full of backstabbers and

threats. We'll do the wedding here."

Shock flashed across Vusario's face. "That's unheard of. The marriage will be more powerful with the support of the other members of the High Court. You need them."

"No, I don't. I need is to fulfill the prophecy and defeat the witch with the deathly magic. The High Court doesn't play into it."

I hated the damned High Court. The leaders of each of the fae kingdoms had a seat, me included. And though there were alliances to be found there, it was more common to find a knife in your back.

Especially since Sia was now queen. She wielded a power we didn't understand, and my spies suggested there was at least one member of the High Court who would like to see her dead.

The idea of her death made me break out in a cold sweat.

"Of course the Council plays into it," Vusario said. "Are you willing to risk war with them by violating the terms of the alliances we've formed?"

"They can be dealt with. No one would rise against us. Not after what I did to the Court of the Northern Fae." I still occasionally felt guilt over the harshness of my vengeance. I'd killed anyone who had resisted, and many had. Their court had shattered afterward, and those left had moved far away.

Some said the extent of my vengeance had been too much, and there were times I agreed.

In the middle of the room, Vusario shifted on his feet, a frown creasing his brow. It was more emotion than he usually showed.

"Sire, we must attend."

"Why are you so insistent about this?"

"The witch with the deathly magic will be there."

His words sent a bolt of shock through me. "What?"

"The vision just appeared. It's what I was coming to tell you. I was just so shocked that you weren't already planning to go."

"Why would she be there?" The witch wasn't fae.

“I do not know. But if we go, we can apprehend her before she arrives here.”

This changed everything.

I couldn't argue with his logic, and the appeal was too great. I could still vividly remember the devastation caused by the Court of the Northern Fae when they'd decimated one of our outlying villages. The images still haunted me.

I couldn't let the dark witch do the same—not if I could stop her before she arrived.

“Fine. We'll go. But we'll bring guards.” A lot of them. I'd have them watching Sia's back every minute of the day. If anything happened to her, I'd have their heads.



Sia

Meria led me down the stairs and onto the street. I nodded at Dain, who waited in the shadows of a doorway in a nearby alley.

“Evelyn lives in the building two doors down,” she said.

We stopped in front of a red door set in a building made of slightly darker stone than Meria's. The stonework on the side was of flowers instead of vines, but it was just as beautiful.

“Evelyn,” Meria shouted.

“Seriously?” I asked her. “That's how you get her attention? You're going to wake the neighborhood.”

“It's not like we're on comms charm terms,” she said.

I touched the golden earring at my earlobe. Meria had given it to me, and it was a bit like a cellphone that connected directly to her through magic. We

were definitely not that close with Evelyn.

“Evelyn!”

A window on the third floor opened and Evelyn’s head popped out.

“Keep your pants on!”

“Can we come up?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t let you die back on that miserable chessboard, but that doesn’t mean I want to have coffee with you.”

“How about wine?” Meria held up a bottle. I hadn’t seen her grab it, but it had been a smart move.

Evelyn gave her an appraising look. “Fine. I’m the door on the right.”

We went through the red door and climbed the stairs. The door was already open, and Evelyn stood inside. Her dark hair was pulled up in a messy knot and she wore a ridiculous large T-shirt with a cartoon bird on it. *Flock You*, it read.

This was how Evelyn dressed in private?

She’d always been so meticulously put together when I’d seen her before.

“What?” She looked down at her shirt. “It’s cool.”

“Yep.” I just nodded. I needed her help, so I didn’t want to piss her off. And anyway, I kind of liked the fact that Evelyn was a weirdo.

“Come on.” She gestured for us to follow her into a kitchen with a round wooden table. The ceiling was painted black, with silver constellations dotting the surface. It was gorgeous.

“Got cups?” Meria asked.

“Yeah.” She retrieved some juice glasses from a cupboard and set them down.

Meria filled the cups with the dark ruby liquid, then passed them around and raised hers, “To surviving the competition.”

We clinked.

“To losing,” Evelyn said.

She didn’t sound upset. “You okay with that?”

She nodded. “Fate said I had to compete. So I did my best. The fact that I didn’t win was meant to happen. My magic grew a bit as a result, and I got this nice apartment, so I’m happy.”

“That’s very...emotionally healthy.”

She grinned. “Yeah. I like to win, so I took it seriously. But now that it’s over, I can get on with my life. You’re the one who has to marry that stone-cold bastard.”

“He is hot, though,” Meria said.

I blew out a breath, not yet ready to talk about Lore with her.

“So, why are you here?” Evelyn asked.

“We need to see the Truth Teller. I heard you know how to get to her.”

She nodded. “She’s the one who told me I had to compete.”

“Can you take us?” I asked.

She sipped her wine. “I’m going to need more info.”

“Why?”

“Because I have to know that you *really* need to see her. I’m not about to annoy one of the most powerful people in the realm because you want to know what the weather’s going to be on your wedding day.”

I scowled at her.

“You’ve got to trust me if I’m going to trust you,” she said.

Okay, that was fair.

I shared a look with Meria, who nodded. Evelyn was a pain in the ass, but she had honor. Sometimes, you could just tell with a person.

“I’m looking for my parents.”

“It’s more than that.” Evelyn pointed to my ears. “What’s the deal with those? Why are you hiding them?”

“I’m not.”

“Um, yeah, you are.” Annoyance flickered in her gaze. “I can see that

they're rounded."

"I'm not fae."

Her eyes widened and her jaw slackened. "You're not...wait, what?"

"Not fae."

"Not possible. You were chosen to compete. You *won*." She drew in a breath. "We have to have a fae queen. This can't be right. Maybe you don't know you're fae."

"My magic comes from the stars."

"Shit." She whistled out a low breath. "You're serious."

"Very."

She laughed. "I can't believe I lost to a witch. The king *hates* witches. Hell, we all hate witches. Ever since the prophecy was laid down."

"Well, maybe I'm not a witch." Hope echoed in my voice.

"You're a witch," Meria said. "But a good one. There are plenty of good witches, Evelyn."

"Yeah, yeah. Just not the one who is supposed to arrive and decimate us all." Understanding dawned on her face. "Maybe that's why you won. Only a witch could defeat a witch."

That logic worked for me, though I still had no idea how in hell I was going to win against someone with deathly magic.

"I don't know much about my magic or who I am," I said. "But I think my parents might know. I just have to find them."

"And you want the Truth Teller to locate them for you."

I nodded. "Pretty much. I've been looking for them for years because I wanted to know who they were. But now I have a real reason to find them. I'm hoping they can help me figure out what I am and how I'm supposed to defeat the witch."

"So you'd be helping us for all the fae," Meria said. "It doesn't just benefit us."

Evelyn nodded. "I'm starting to see that." She dropped her head back and

groaned. “But I can’t believe I know this secret now. By law, I’m supposed to tell the king something like this.”

Fear iced my spine. “Will you?”

“No.” She glared at me. “Of course not. I’m on your side.”

“Really?” Surprise flashed through me. I was pretty sure I saw some of it in her eyes, too.

“Girls gotta stick together. And I do think you’re a good person who will try to do her best by us. Hell, you’re not even one of us, and you agreed to stay and try to kill this super witch.”

“Yeah, I’m not looking forward to that.”

“I don’t blame you. I wasn’t excited about it either.” She stood. “Let me change, and I’ll take you to the forest.”

Relief rushed through me.

Evelyn left the room, and Meria and I looked at each other.

“I can’t believe that worked,” I said.

“I can’t believe Evelyn is actually cool.”

“Of course I’m cool,” Evelyn shouted from the other room. “I also have excellent hearing. And call me Eve.”

I grinned. It was crazy, but I felt like maybe I was making another friend. Two friends, which was two more than I had back in the real world. All I had to do was survive to enjoy them.

Sia

Evelyn took us to the portal on the beach. Now that we were no longer competitors, we were allowed to move freely through the kingdom. Dain had parted ways with us when we'd reached the path back to the castle, and from there, it was just the three of us girls.

Frankly, I was surprised the king didn't have a guard on me.

Until I spotted one lurking on the path behind us. I frowned and turned to look at him. He wore the palace uniform and carried a long sword at his hip.

"I see the king has his eye on you," Eve said.

"Do you think that's who has been following you?" Meria asked.

"No. Definitely not." Right? "I was sure they were dressed in darker clothes. This guy isn't hiding, either. The shadow following me is a major lurker."

"You've got someone following you?" Eve asked.

"Yeah." I described what I'd seen as I'd gone through the woods.

"Sounds shady," she said. "But I'm not surprised. You're queen now, and you're new. Some people are going to object."

"But I'm supposed to save their asses!" I still wasn't keen on fighting a

mysterious super witch, but the Truth Teller had made it clear what would happen if I didn't—devastation. So I was going to do it. That should at least keep the townsfolk from trying to murder me.

“Could be someone from another kingdom,” Eve said.

“How did they get in? Isn't this place protected?” I asked. During the competition, it had seemed like the kingdom was safe from outsiders.

“It is,” Meria said. “And we're well hidden. But fae are cunning and determined. I wouldn't be surprised if a few could find their way in.”

I grimaced.

“Fortunately, we're at the portal, and we'll leave your stalker in the dust,” Eve said. “For now.”

It was a small comfort.

We'd reached the pebble beach where the portal was located. It shimmered with a silver glow, a spot in the air that appeared disturbed. The guard who monitored the portal stepped aside to let us pass, but the one who had been following us raced to catch up.

“You cannot leave,” he called, still about forty feet away.

“Watch me.” I grabbed Eve's hand and dragged her to the portal. She was the one who knew the way, so I had to go through with her. “Get me out of here so I feel like I have at least a little freedom.”

“Roger that.” She grabbed Meria's hand and we stepped through the shimmery silver air.

The ether sucked us in and spun us around, twisting us through space in a way that made my stomach lurch. When it spat us out on solid ground, I stumbled, clutching my belly. “I'll never get used to that.”

“Probably not,” Eve said.

“A little too honest sometimes, Eve.” I'd been hoping she'd tell me I'd be fine in no time.

“Yep. Now come on.” She started forward, and I followed. Meria caught up and stuck by my side.

The portal had ejected us onto a grassy hillside. The sun shined overhead, and a faint breeze carried the scent of wildflowers. In the distance, a massive oak tree reached for the fluffy white clouds.

I craned my neck to see the top. “Whoa, that’s big.”

“Yep.” Eve nodded. “Biggest and oldest in the world, thanks to the spirit who lives within it.”

“And she’s the Truth Teller?”

“The one and the same.”

“It’s amazing,” Meria said. “Never thought I’d see it.”

“Anyone can come,” Eve said.

“But not everyone knows the way,” Meria said. “And I never had any question worth asking. But maybe...”

“Your family?” I asked.

“Yeah. Maybe there’s another way to get them back.”

I hoped so because I was pretty sure my “blood sisters” plan wasn’t going to work.

“One question at a time, ladies,” Eve said. “I can bring you back, Meria. But the seer doesn’t like to be disturbed, so we need to keep it minimal on this first visit.”

I frowned and looked at Meria. “It’s not fair that I got the crown *and* I get to go first to ask about my family. You’ve got a missing family, too.”

“Maybe not, but you’re the one with mysterious magic that needs explaining so you can defeat the super witch. So you should go first.”

“I agree with her,” Eve said. “We’ve all got a lot invested in you not screwing this up.”

I gave a weak laugh, but she was right. I really needed to not screw this up.

Decided on our course of action, we approached the tree in silence. Eve stopped about fifteen feet away, and we did the same. The tree leaves rustled in the breeze, and the sight of the ancient oak made awe rise within me. It

was so big that my mind could hardly comprehend it.

“What next?” Meria whispered.

“Patience,” Eve said. “She knows we’re here. She just needs to decide if she’s going to show herself.”

I drew in a deep breath, vowing to wait patiently.

That lasted all of two seconds.

Come on, come on.

Finally, magic shimmered on the air. It felt like rough bark and smelled of leaves. A ghostly figure appeared at the trunk of the tree, her form ephemeral and vague. She was semi-transparent and her face was featureless, but the power that emanated from her was enough to shake my bones.

“Queen Sia. Why have you woken me from my slumber?” Her low voice carried on the breeze.

My friends stepped back, leaving me front and center as the Truth Teller approached.

Did she sound annoyed to be awoken? Just the idea of her being annoyed made *me* annoyed.

“You’re the one who got me in this damned situation, so yes, I’ve woken you up. I need answers.”

Eve sucked in a breath behind me, and I could almost feel her cringing. Maybe she had a point, and I was being a bit rude.

“Sorry.” I inclined my head. “I’m just on edge.”

“You should be. There are threats approaching you from every direction.”

I blew out a breath. That confirmed the stalker I’d seen in the shadow.
“What can you tell me about them?”

“To be wary. There is danger coming from within the kingdom and without. There are ones who want what you have, but you must not let them take it from you.”

The damned throne was turning into a lot of trouble.

“But that’s not why you’re really here, is it?” she asked.

“No. I’ve been looking for my parents for years. I never knew them, and I wanted to. But now it’s become more pressing. I have magic I don’t understand, and I’m hoping they can explain it to me.”

“I do not know who they are, but I do know the answers you seek can be found at High Court Palace. Look for the woman with the violet eyes.”

“Violet eyes? Is that all I have to go by?”

“It will be very obvious. You can trust her. You are safe when you are with her.” With that, she began to disappear back into the trunk of the tree.

“Wait!” I reached out, but it was too late. “Damn it!” I spun around, wanting to scream my frustration to the sky.

“That was pretty good, actually,” Eve said. “You got some concrete stuff out of her.”

“You call that concrete?”

“Compared to some of her other messages, yes.”

“What is High Court Palace?”

“It’s the seat of power for the High Court, which is made up of the fae royalty of each kingdom. You technically now have a seat.”

“Is there a ruler of the court?”

“No. Everyone is equal, and the palace itself is a neutral location where they can all meet.”

“And one of them knows about my parents.”

“That’s what it sounds like to me,” Eve said.

Everything was falling into place. “I thought it was a mistake that I was sent to a fae bar to find my parents, but maybe it was all meant to be. My contact was human, though.”

“Or so you thought,” Eve said.

“They could still be human,” Meria added. “Just bespelled by someone. Fate works in mysterious ways.”

“Annoying ways.” I wanted better answers.

Eve gestured for us to follow her back to the portal. “Let’s get out of here

before the Truth Teller decides we've overstayed our welcome.”

As Meria and I followed her back to the portal, I couldn't help but look back at the massive oak tree.

Was I seriously taking life advice from a tree?

Looked like it.



Lore

I stood at the window of my library, overlooking my kingdom. Wolf stood by my side, tall enough to see out the window, too. The dark clouds that had hovered at the horizon were nearly to us, signaling the arrival of the witch with the deathly magic.

She was the greatest threat my people would ever face, and she'd arrive any day now. The thought made a grim sort of anticipation well in my gut.

It was nearly time.

I wanted her to come. This threat had been hanging over us for too long. But soon, it would be over. I still didn't know what role Sia was meant to play, but I'd be there to protect her.

Just the idea of her in danger made my gut twist and my skin chill. I'd never felt like this for anyone, and I despised it.

As if she'd heard me speaking of her, I caught sight of her walking up the path toward the castle. Her red curls blew in the wind, and it was impossible not to imagine how soft they might be.

I tried to look away, but it was impossible. Whenever she was in my vicinity, I was entirely distracted by her. It was dangerous.

A knock sounded at the door.

Vusario.

Only he knocked with that specific rhythm.

“Enter.”

He stepped inside. “I am sorry to disturb you, my lord. But I thought you might want to know that Sia has been to see the Truth Teller.”

“What?” Surprise lanced me.

“I do not know what she asked, but the Truth Teller did appear to her.”

I didn’t care about her questions. She knew all the truths I knew. I cared about the fact that she’d left the safety of the kingdom.

I whirled back toward the window and looked out, searching for her.

She was gone.

Already inside the castle?

I heard Vusario depart but didn’t turn to acknowledge it.

Damn it.

Sia was going to drive me insane.

I turned and left the library, stalking toward our quarters. The two bedrooms were next to each other, and I cursed myself every hour of the day for putting her so close to me.

It took me a few minutes to reach her bedchamber. The library was on the far side of the castle, in the opposite direction of the stairs that led to the second floor. When I arrived at her door, it was shut.

I knocked, my knuckles rapping a little too hard on the wood.

The door swung open, and suddenly she was right there, standing far too close. Her scent wrapped around me, flowers and honey. I breathed in deeply, unable to help myself. The weakness made me angrier. With her. With myself.

“You went to the Truth Teller,” I said, unable to look away from the brilliant green of her eyes. The freckles on her nose looked like a constellation of stars, and the sight was riveting.

I hated the way my soul seemed to wake up when I was around her. I felt so alive it was almost painful. So frustrated and tight. How the hell was a

man supposed to live like this?

“I needed a little truth.” She glared up at me, not stepping back. I was nearly looming over her, but she wouldn’t give ground.

The result was that we stood almost chest to chest, so close we nearly touched. The tension between us was electric.

All I could think of was her lips. How they had felt against mine.

Finally, I found some words. “It’s too dangerous to leave the castle grounds.”

“I won’t be kept prisoner any longer.”

“It’s for your own good.” The words rumbled out of me, driven by anger and desire. They were a heady combination, and it was impossible to take my eyes away from her lips.

If she’d shown any fear, I’d have stepped back.

Instead, her gaze heated and fell to my own lips. She drew in an unsteady breath, and the sight made something tighten inside me.

“Sia.” The word was low. Harsh.

This was why I’d avoided her since the competition had finished yesterday. I couldn’t resist her, and I *had* to.

Her brow furrowed and she stepped back, whirling to stride into the middle of the room.

The space between us broke the spell, and I drew in a ragged breath. I blew it out on a silent exhale, trying to gather the tattered shreds of my self-control.

She scared the shit out of me.

There’d never been anyone like her, and I’d never had such a compelling reason to keep to myself.

It was the eve of the dark witch’s arrival, and I needed my wits about me if I were to defeat her deathly magic.

“I haven’t seen you since the competition,” she said. “Thought you were ignoring me.”

I had been. “It’s a union in name only.”

“That works for me.” She turned to me, and I could see the truth reflected on her face. I squashed the mild disappointment that rose within me. “But I still need to know what’s going on. I’ve only been in your realm a few days, and now I’m a ruler of it. There should be an introductory class, or something.”

“Introductory class?” I stared at her, stupefied.

“Yeah. Get someone to explain the hows and whats to me of being a queen.”

“I—” Fates. Maybe she had a point. “I can get Vusario to do that.”

“No. I don’t like him.”

Neither did I, but her vehemence surprised me. Worried me. “Did he do something to you?”

“No. He just creeps me out.”

“All right. Someone else, then. But in the meantime, we need to discuss the wedding.”

“What, like colors and flowers? I wouldn’t think you’d care.”

“I don’t. But we must go to the High Court Palace for the ceremony.”

“Really?” Excitement flared on her face.

I hadn’t taken her for one to be impressed by posh ceremony, but I didn’t actually know her. “Yes. It’s how it’s done.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d care about things like that.”

“I don’t. But we’re going because Vusario has foreseen that the witch with the deathly magic will be there.”

She looked toward the window where the dark clouds hovered, her face going pale. “Really? I thought she was coming here.”

“She will. But if we have this chance to defeat her away from my—our—territory, it will be safer for the people.”

Her jaw tightened, and she nodded. I wasn’t sure what the Truth Teller had shown her, but it had thoroughly convinced her to stay and help defeat

the witch.

I respected that about her. Immensely.

She drove me crazy in many ways, but her desire to protect my people was something I couldn't ignore.

"You're right," she said. "Better to do it away from here. Is she on the High Court?"

"No. The High Court is only made of rulers of the other fae kingdoms. She is someone else entirely. I don't know how she'll get into the palace, but someone with her power will find a way."

She shivered. "When do we go?"

"Tomorrow."

Her brows jumped up. "That's soon."

I nodded. "Better to finish it quickly. You may choose two ladies in waiting."

"What, like royalty?"

"You are royalty."

A wry laugh escaped her. "Good point. But it's weird, still."

She wasn't wrong there. All of this was weird.

"We will leave at eight." I turned and left, needing to get out of there before I went to her and...

No. I couldn't think about what I'd do if I got close enough to touch her.

Sia

The next morning, I waited on the train tracks with Meria and Eve. I'd had dinner alone in my room and hadn't seen Lore since we'd spoken last.

It had been for the best.

The distance hadn't kept me from thinking of him, though. I hated how much time he spent in my head. I needed to start charging him rent.

Or get a therapist.

"I can't believe I agreed to this." Eve's words snapped me out of my train of thought.

I turned to her. We'd all ridden together in a carriage to the train station located several miles from the castle. It was an ugly day, with a misty rain that filled the air like a bad omen.

"It'll be dangerous, you'll love it," Meria said.

Eve shrugged. "Fair point."

I'd chosen the two of them because they were two badass bitches who would fight at my side. I needed the backup. And I was beginning to like Eve as much as I liked Meria. She was prickly, but good at heart.

"Thanks again," I said. "I need the support."

“Sure thing.” Eve smiled. “Never been to the High Court Palace before. Looking forward to it.”

“Same,” Meria said. “Lots of intrigue there, from what I hear.”

“And the best gossip,” Eve said.

“I wouldn’t think you’d care about that,” I said. She didn’t strike me as the type.

“There’s no television in the fae realm. Of course I care about gossip. There are only so many live-action plays one can watch. Especially when the actors are so bad.”

Meria laughed. “True story.” Her gaze met mine. “It’s one of the reasons everyone in the kingdom finds it so believable that you were living amongst the humans and hiding your ears. Their realm sucks on many levels, but it’s also got some good stuff.”

I reached up to my rounded ears. The story that I was hiding them had worked for a while, but... “They’re going to start wondering soon, though.”

Eve nodded. “I’ve already heard people whispering about it. You’re here now. You’re about to be officially crowned queen at the wedding. It’s strange that you’d still hide them.”

“Once she defeats the witch with the deathly magic, she’ll be a hero. No one will care that she’s a—”

Eve grabbed Meria’s arm, cutting off her words. She tilted her head toward the end of the station platform.

Lore had arrived. Wolf stood by his side.

We’d been accompanied by a team of a dozen castle guards, but they’d stood far enough away not to hear our conversation. Lore traveled only with Vusario and Dain, confident in his ability to protect himself.

He looked magnificent in his midnight cloak. The deep, colorless fabric made his silver hair almost glow, and the perfection of his bone structure was enough to make me need to look away. I’d once thought he was so handsome that looking at him was like looking at the sun, and I still felt that way. I

didn't think I'd ever get used to it.

The dark shadows in his eyes were the only imperfection, but I thought they made him more intriguing. Everything about him was intriguing. It was impossible not to be drawn in by the quiet intensity of him. The pain that lurked inside him made me want to try to fix him, and everyone knew how that kind of thing turned out.

Badly.

Only idiots tried to fix broken men.

He didn't yet know that I was a witch, though. And given his kingdom's hatred of witches, it would be ideal if I kept it to myself. Meria was right, after all. Once I got rid of the evil witch, no one would care that I was one, too.

He strode up to us, his cloak blowing in the wind. The faint breeze had increased, almost as if his presence had stirred up the weather. The rain drops glittered on his shoulders like diamonds.

The platform had only a small covering, and he was forced to join us. Wolf stayed at his side. I had a feeling Lore would have stood farther away if given the chance. As it was, he stood only ten feet from me. His winter-forest scent was impossible to ignore, and I felt like I was extra sensitive to it. My heart raced, and my skin heated.

Get it together, nerd.

"Will it be a private train?" I asked, unable to bear the silence. I also wanted to know what we were in for.

"No, though we will have a private car," he said. "The train will travel through the different fae kingdoms, picking up royalty from each. Once everyone is aboard, it will arrive at our destination."

"Which is where?"

"A palace hidden deep within Central Europe."

"Europe?" Surprise flashed through me, along with excitement. I'd done so little traveling that going anywhere was exciting, but Europe was top of

the list. “But how are we getting there on a train? There’s an ocean.” A thought occurred. “Actually, there’s water between your island realm and the mainland too.”

“Magic,” he said, his gaze on the tracks that disappeared into the distance. “Each kingdom conceals the exact location of its castle and capital city. That’s why this station is so far from ours. The other stations will be like that as well. The train provides a safe way to transport everyone to the High Court Palace.”

“Why don’t we just transport there?” It was so convenient for other things.

“There are no traditional portals there,” Lore said. “The High Court Palace is a neutral zone. As such, it contains many of our most important relics and books. We agreed long ago that the palace should only be visited by multiple delegates at a time. Hence, the train. If there was a portal directly there—or if we knew exactly where the palace was located—then someone could sneak in.”

“Is everyone really so dangerous and mistrusting amongst the fae?”

“Yes.” Meria, Eve, and Lore all spoke at the same time.

“Right, then.” I’d really need to get my head in the game. “So no one knows exactly where the palace is located?”

Finally, he looked at me. The eye contact made energy zing through me.

“You have a lot of questions, you know that?” he said.

“Yep. Will you answer them?”

His jaw tightened slightly, but he didn’t look terribly annoyed. “There used to be two stewards of the palace. They were neutral parties belonging to no court, and they knew where it was. But they disappeared about twenty years ago.”

“Disappeared?”

“Killed or run off, we don’t know. They just disappeared.”

“Strange.” A low rumbling caught my attention, and I turned to look

down the tracks. A steam locomotive rumbled toward us, its white plume drifting back on the breeze. Shiny green and gold paint decorated it, making it look like the most perfect model train I'd ever seen.

"It's beautiful," I breathed.

"It needs an upgrade," Lore said. "I agree with the logic behind it, but it is too slow."

"Too slow?" I turned to look at him. "How long will we be on it?"

"Two days. We are at the outer edges of fae kingdoms and are therefore first to board. We need to pick up everyone else."

I blew out a breath, hoping I'd at least get a few good views from the windows.

The train rumbled to a stop in front of us, and several people in green and gold uniforms jumped off. They hurried to the back of the station where we'd left our luggage.

"This way." Lore gave Wolf a rub on the head and started toward the train. The animal stayed behind as Lore climbed on. Everyone seemed to hold back long enough for me to go first. Was it a royalty thing?

I frowned and looked back at Meria, eyebrows raised. She shrugged.

Whatever.

I followed him onto the train.

I could handle being close to Lore. No problem. It wasn't like there was insane sexual chemistry between us or anything.

Ha.

We'd entered directly into a car that looked like a fancy living room. There were large leather chairs and wooden tables, along with bookshelves and paintings on the walls. A narrow hall at the back led deeper into the car, presumably into bedrooms.

Lore took one of the chairs, lounging with the deadly grace of a panther.

I sat next to him, looking out the window to see Wolf trotting off the platform. "He doesn't come with you?"

“Doesn’t like the train.”

Fair enough. It didn’t seem suited to a nearly feral animal. “Tell me more about the High Court. I get the impression there’s more to the story.”

He nodded. “I thought you’d catch on to that.”

As everyone else filed into the car and took their seats, Lore spoke. “There are many arguments amongst the different fae courts. When we arrive, it’s likely we’ll face danger from rivals.”

“The Court of the Northern Fae?” I remembered him mentioning the long-standing war with them.

“No. They are scattered.”

Right. They’d decimated one of his villages, and in return, he’d killed so many of them that their court had moved away from their territory. Yikes.

“So other people hate you as well?”

He shrugged. “Not like the Northern Fae did. But your arrival has been prophesied for a long time. When we are joined, we will be twice as powerful as I ever was alone. That will cause an imbalance.”

“And the other courts won’t like that.” I frowned. “But how the hell am I supposed to tip the scales in favor of us being more powerful?”

“You have incredible magic, Sia. Magic we don’t fully understand yet.” His gaze searched mine. “I think you should tell me more about that.” His eyes moved to my ears. “And why you still hide your ears. There is no need now that you are here.”

Shit. I’d been keeping my hair down so as not to wave it in anyone’s face that I looked different. But the rain had made me pull my hair back.

There was no way for me to explain. “I’m more interested in the arguments with the other courts. I’m sure someone has been following me since I won the competition. I keep seeing a dark shadow stalking me. Could it be someone from another court?”

He frowned. “Yes. But I don’t like that they are on our land.”

“Are spies common?”

He nodded. "I have them in other kingdoms as well. But I'd thought I'd done a better job of protecting our borders."

Good. I'd distracted him from my ears.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" Anger buzzed within me. "I'm sick of being a pawn."

"You are queen, not a pawn. And you should have told me of the stalker."

I growled. "You know what I mean. I never wanted this. I only agreed because the Truth Teller showed me how many people would die if I didn't."

He sighed, but acknowledgement shined in his eyes as he nodded. "You are correct. And I owe you my gratitude. For the last three hundred years, my only goal has been to protect my people. Because fate works in mysterious ways, I now need a queen for that. But you didn't have to agree. I respect and appreciate you for that."

The genuine emotion in his voice shocked me. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I shut it, knowing I had to look like a fish.

"When this is all over, I will help you return to whatever life you choose," he said.

"I...really?"

He nodded. "It's not fair that you should be forced to stay here."

I studied him. I wasn't sure he really cared about fair. Not when it came to protecting his people. Once he was done with me and I'd done my bit, he wanted me gone. I knew he didn't want to be married to me, so it was stupid that I felt stung.

My mind raced with what was to come. "So we have two days on this train as all the other royalty board for the journey to High Court Palace."

"Yes."

"Which means if one of them sent my stalker, the danger will be on this train."

"Hence the guards." He nodded toward the contingent of uniformed fae who stood near the door.

“I think we should use this opportunity to ferret out the threat and get rid of it before we arrive. If the witch with the deathly magic is really meant to be there, then we need all our attention focused on her.”

He thought for a moment, then nodded. “Agreed. But I will do it. I don’t want you putting yourself at risk like that.”

“Worried I’ll get offed before I can defeat the witch?”

His jaw tightened, but all he said was. “Yes.”

“But I can help.”

“*You* will stay with the guards. I’ll take care of it.” He rose and stalked away.

What the hell?

I blew out a breath. That had gone...

Weirdly.

I’d gotten a lot of information, but we’d gone at each other like badgers. And he didn’t want my help finding whoever threatened us?

I would be *good* at that. I’d proved in the competition that I could sneak around and get answers. And yet, he didn’t want my help. Was it some kind of misplaced protective instinct?

No. That was crazy.

He disappeared through the door to another car, the flick of his dark cloak the last thing I saw.

Sia

Since Lore wasn't willing to discuss the threat with me, I talked about it with Meria and Eve. I needed a plan, after all. What I didn't need was him.

We'd found a spot in the casual dining car and ordered coffee and pastries. It was a gloriously opulent place that looked straight out of the 1920s, with dark wood trim and navy papered walls. The large windows provided a view of magnificent snow-covered mountains as the train rumbled down the tracks. The heavy wooden tables and velvet padded chairs were mostly empty, giving us enough privacy that I could lay out my plan.

When I finished, I looked at them expectantly.

"So let me get this straight," Meria said. "You want to play train detective and find out which fae court sent your stalker."

"Then you want to kill them before they kill you," Eve added.

"Pretty much." I grimaced at the idea of killing someone. "Though I'd rather just have them thrown in prison."

"Either way, they're out of your hair." Eve nodded. "I like this plan."

I sipped my coffee and mulled over what was coming next. "Do you guys have any idea which courts might be a threat?"

“The Irish,” Eve said. “Maybe the Mountain Fae, too.”

“How do you know that?” Meria asked.

“Gossip.” She grinned. “I told you earlier that I loved it.”

“Thank God for that,” I said. “When will they get on?”

“At least one of them should get on the train today,” Eve said. “Along with two other courts, which we shouldn’t rule out either. Just because I’ve got my ear pressed to the ground doesn’t mean I’m getting good stuff. It could all be crap.”

“Gotcha.” I nodded. “Suspect everybody.”

“Pretty much.” Eve grinned, then shoved half a pastry into her mouth and chewed.

“You *really* aren’t what I thought you were,” I said, remembering the staid woman that I’d met at the competitions.

“That was my game face,” she said. “Now that I’m no longer trying to be queen, I don’t have to act like one.”

“Lucky bitch.”

She grinned like the cat who’d stolen the salmon off the counter.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Meria said to me. “I’ve seen how you look at the king. You don’t hate him.”

“I don’t hate how he looks. But the rest of him...” Actually, I didn’t think I hated that either. But it was easier to pretend I did.

The door at the end of the car opened, and the king stepped inside. He’s taken off his cloak, and the dark clothing that he wore underneath made him look like an assassin.

Dain entered behind him.

Both men scanned the room, their gazes stopping as soon as they landed on me. I drew in a low breath. It felt like sitting beneath the heat of the sun.

They took the table closest to the door, both looking away from me.

Somehow, I still felt the force of their attention. Awareness sizzled through me, impossible to ignore.

“Now *that’s* interesting,” Eve whispered, her voice so low I could barely hear her.

“What?”

She scoffed but lowered her voice so they couldn’t hear. “Don’t play dumb. They’re *both* into you.”

“No, I mean—no, of course not.”

Meria and Eve exchanged looks.

“Fine.” I raised my hands in front of my chest in defeat. “Maybe you’re right. A little bit. But Dain is just a friend, and you know how the king is. Won’t touch anybody.”

“*Can’t* touch anybody. There’s a difference,” Meria said. “But he can touch *you*. And that’s a pretty big deal.”

“I refuse to let it be.”

“Good luck with that,” Eve said.

I glanced back at the two men. They were deep in conversation, but there was still an intense awareness sparking on the air. I was aware of Dain in the same way I’d been aware of a cute guy at the mall when I was a teenager.

Lore, though...

That was something else entirely. As if we were two planets, pulled together by gravity so strong we couldn’t fight it.

The train rumbled to a stop, and I looked out the window to see a beautiful station covered in pristine white snow. The platform was protected by an open-air structure with a sharply peaked roof made of ornately carved dark wood. Beneath it, a contingent of six fae waited.

The queen was immediately obvious, and somehow familiar. She was so beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her, and her ice white gown sparkled so brightly that I wondered how she managed to stand beneath the weight of that many gemstones. But when she moved toward the train, it flowed effortlessly around her. Her pale blond hair was swept up in a graceful bun, and her blue eyes sparkled with intelligence.

“Whew,” Eve whistled. “Has she got her shit together or what?”

“No kidding.” I watched, awed, as she climbed onto the train. She’d be entering the car we were sitting in.

When she appeared, a wave of magic rolled over me like a cold snap of air that smelled of fresh snow.

As she glided through the train car, she moved with such grace that she appeared to be floating. She passed right by me and my friends but stopped at the king’s table.

As she inclined her head toward him, I realized why she’d looked so oddly familiar.

She was a female version of Lore. Cold, beautiful, precise.

I couldn’t hear their murmured conversation no matter how hard I tried.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“Queen of the Mountain Fae,” Eve said. “Notoriously ruthless, and possibly interested in your crown.”

“Wait, what?” I felt my jaw slacken. “She wants Lore?”

“We tell you she wants to be queen of another kingdom, and you assume she’s got the hots for your man?” Eve asked.

Ah...shit. That had been exactly what it sounded like. “He’s not my man.”

“Sure, he’s not,” Meria said.

Unable to help myself, I glanced at him.

He’d looked away from the queen and was staring right at me, the faintest frown on his face. He’d heard.

I turned back to my friends and hissed, “Be quieter! He heard that.”

“Good,” Eve whispered. “It would do him some good to shake up his life. Everything has been the same for too long, with him always in control. He needs a challenge.”

“Whatever, let’s get back to the queen who wants to expand her kingdom.” That had to be her primary interest in my crown. Lore looked too

much like her. Dating her would be like dating himself.

Although, judging by her impeccable attire, she might be pretty vain. Perhaps she wanted to date herself, and he was the next closest thing. The fact that he could help expand her territory was just a bonus.

“All right, suspect number one is the Queen of the Mountain Fae.” I looked over at her just in time to see her slap Lore across the face.

“And with a bang,” Eve said.

“What the hell?” Unwelcome anger surged inside me. How dare she do that? And why the hell did I care? Lore deserved it, no doubt. I’d had plenty of reasons to want to hit him.

But that was me, and this was her.

“Someone is feeling a little territorial, hmm?” Meria murmured.

“Oh, stuff it.” I watched the queen stalk away, determined to get to the bottom of this.



By evening, two other contingents had arrived. I’d spent the rest of the day in the sitting room of our car with Meria and Eve, enjoying the view. No one else was in the room. Whether they were in their private quarters or one of the other public cars, I had no idea.

I couldn’t help but think of Lore, of course. And the ice queen.

I shook the thought away and looked out at the view, trying to distract myself. Every time we transported to another realm, sparkling silver magic filled the air outside the train. There was a slight lurch, and we were suddenly in another location.

We went from the snowy mountains of the Canadian Rockies to the deserts of Southwestern America. The last kingdom for the day was one in French wine country. We arrived as the sun was setting in a brilliant display of oranges and reds. It lit up the rolling hills of the vineyard like a painting.

Beautiful chateaus climbed up the hillsides in the distance, and I whistled low. “What a place.”

“Makes you want some wine,” Meria said.

“I know the perfect place to get some,” Eve said. “There’s a bar car. I saw it on my exploration earlier. The bartender said you can order anything in the world, and they can provide it.”

I pointed to the grape vines outside. “Wine from those grapes?”

She smiled. “I think we should find out.”

I nodded. “It will be a good place to scout out the new arrivals, I bet. Everyone likes a drink in the evening. And I bet they all want to catch up.”

“You’re right on that,” Eve said. “I’m not the only fae who loves gossip, and this is prime territory to get some.”

We’d already had dinner brought to our car about an hour ago, so we could head straight for the drinks. I stood and moved toward the door.

“Hang on, there,” Eve said. “Where do you think you’re going?”

I turned around. “To the bar car?”

“Dressed like that?” Meria asked, her brows raised.

I glanced down at my emerald-green trousers and the matching vest and billowy top that I wore. The outfit was similar to what I’d worn during the competitions, so when I’d found it in the closet in my room, it had seemed appropriate. I looked like a proper fae huntress and everything.

Frowning, I looked up at them. “It’s a no?”

“Definitely a no.” Meria stood. “Come on. I’ve got just the thing for you.”

I followed her to the sleeping compartment she shared with Eve, a space so tiny we had to squeeze in shoulder to shoulder. Meria pulled a sparkling sapphire dress out of a bag. When she unfurled it, the fabric flowed like water over her hands.

“Whoa, you had that in there?” I asked.

She nodded. “Did you not pack formal wear?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I didn’t pack. One of the castle staff did it for me.”

“Well, presumably you’ve got some in your luggage, then,” Meria said. “Until you unpack, I think you should wear this.”

“It’s not too much?”

“Did you see the ice queen this afternoon?” Meria asked.

“Fair point.” I took the dress, adoring the smooth feel of the silk in my hands. “What are you two wearing?”

“Something similar,” Meria said. “Red, though. Shorter.”

“Black,” Eve said. “Like my heart.”

I laughed. “You guys just have gowns lying around? I didn’t give you any notice for this trip.”

They both nodded.

“Of course,” Eve said.

“Yep.” Meria nodded. “We fae enjoy beautiful things, and we definitely dress to impress at events like this.”

I looked down at the cloth in my hands. “I’ll definitely impress in this, then.”

“Good.” Meria grinned. “Use your assets as a distraction, and you’ll be ahead of the game. Fae men are as simple as human ones when it comes to a pretty woman.”

“I hope you’re right.” I squeezed my way toward the door. “I’ll get dressed and join you. Not enough room in here for three.”

“Take these.” Meria shoved silver heels at me, and I took them.

“See you in the living room,” Eve said.

My sleeping compartment was at the end of the car, right next to Lore’s. There was a door that connected them, but I hadn’t dared open it. The space itself wasn’t much bigger than Meria and Eve’s had been, and it was filled with a two-person bed and two small chairs. A stack of leatherbound chests sat in the corner.

It had to be the luggage that the maid had packed for me, but there was no

need to look inside it right now.

Quickly, I shucked off my clothes and pulled the dress over my head. It had thin straps that showed my shoulders and collar bones. The fabric flowed smoothly over my curves, draping down to the floor. When I turned around to look at my back in the mirror, I saw only an expanse of pale skin bisected by my bra.

I grimaced. “Well, there goes my bra.”

As I unhooked it—and thanked my lucky stars for my small chest—I couldn’t help but marvel at my life.

How the hell had this become my reality?

Magic and kings and gowns and trains through the French countryside. I’d gone from hustling in the gig economy in Seattle to *this*.

I looked out the window, surprised anew to see a rambling stone ruin only a hundred yards away. A castle or monastery, most likely. I’d never even seen a European ruin, and now I was doing so in a silk dress that had to cost more than my rent.

If I woke up and found this had all been a crazy dream, things would make more sense.

Until then, I was going to enjoy what I could.

A quick glance in the mirror revealed that I looked all right. My red curls concealed my rounded ears, and that was the most important thing.

I swung open the door and stepped forward, nearly colliding with the massive body that stood right in front of me.

Lore.

His hand was raised to knock, but he lowered it, his gaze dropping to my dress. Heat flared within his sapphire irises, and his jaw clenched.

“Where are you going?” There was a rasp to his voice that made a shiver run through me.

He wanted me.

It was written all over his face.

Worse, I wanted him right back. The tension between us was insane—a combination of desire and anger and mistrust and odd loyalty. Because I *did* feel loyal to him, even if I didn't like him much. I couldn't help it. And all of it made me feel like I was going to explode.

I needed to get out of there before I pulled him into the room and down onto the bed.

"I'm going to get a drink with my ladies-in-waiting." Hearing the words come out of my mouth was crazy. *Ladies-in-waiting*. What a life.

But it was better than telling him I planned to snoop around for the identity of the person who wanted me off the throne. He'd just growl about it being too dangerous and lock me in my sleeping compartment.

He frowned.

"You can't expect me to sit in my room all night." I shoved by him, and he let me.

Still, I heard the hard breath he dragged into his lungs. Knowing that I affected him like that made heat pool inside me, and I drew in a shuddery breath.

"Sia." His voice caught me like a fish on a line, and I turned, unable to help myself.

"Be careful." His gaze was shadowed. "I've got guards watching you, but still... The fae are cunning. Especially the ones on this train. It's how they keep their thrones."

I nodded, wondering if he'd follow me to the bar car to keep an eye on me himself.

I wanted him to if I were being honest.

I didn't like everything about him—especially the fact that he was a ruthless royal who had killed dozens of people over his long life—but I couldn't help but want to be near him.

Crazy.

"I'll be careful." Before he could say anything else, I turned and walked

down the narrow corridor toward the sitting area where my friends were waiting.

They were beautiful in their dresses. Meria looked like a princess, her blond hair shining. Eve, with her dark hair and midnight dress, looked like the sexy villain in a Bond movie.

Merebeth, the healer, lounged in one of the chairs with a book. She waved idly but didn't look up from the pages.

Meria grinned at me. "That dress looks even better than I expected."

"Thanks for the loaner."

"Oh, don't worry. I'm going to want to poke around in your royal luggage as repayment."

"Have at it."

"I'll remember you said that." She turned and headed through the door. "Come on, now. The party waits for no one!"

Lore

I lasted ten whole minutes before I followed Sia to the bar car. Though I'd put my best guards on her, I still couldn't relax. The idea that something might happen to her was all I could focus on.

This kind of distraction was intolerable. There was no way that I could be a good ruler as long as I was obsessed with her.

Once the witch with the deathly magic was defeated, we would go our own ways. She, back to the human world and whatever she did there. And me, back to the cold comfort of my self-control.

I saw no one as I cut through our private car and entered the casual dining car. It was empty, and I made my way quickly into the next car. Fortunately, it was my destination.

Everyone else's, too, apparently. The bar car was crowded with fae, all dressed in their finest. None looked a fraction as good as Sia. The thought annoyed me as I searched for her.

The car itself was ornately decorated with dark wooden walls and crimson wallpaper. Carvings of flowers and leaves bordered the windows, and it was dark enough outside that the windows reflected the scene within

the car like mirrors.

People stood at the long wooden bar where two staff members poured drinks and mixed cocktails. My gaze glided over everyone in the room, stopping only when I found Sia.

She stood at the edge of the bar, the light gleaming off her red curls and her face turned up in a smile for the man in front of her.

Prince Gabriel.

I hadn't spoken to him in years, but he was an inveterate scoundrel. His gaze kept dipping low toward Sia's body, and though most of her was blocked by the crowd, I knew exactly what she looked like in that dress.

I'd nearly choked when I'd seen her standing in the doorway. The blue silk had clung to every curve the way that I wanted to, revealing just enough of her creamy white skin to make the blood heat in my veins.

In my entire life, I'd never seen anyone as beautiful as she. Everything about her drew my attention and lit up my senses. She was different than most of the fae I knew. Softer.

And yet strong as iron when she needed to be.

The contrast was heady.

And now she was out amongst the other fae, welcoming their attentions.

My jaw clenched.

When had I become such a troglodyte?

I didn't own her. This jealousy was ridiculous.

I drew in a deep breath and looked for a quiet table. I spotted one on the far side of the car, tucked into the corner. I headed toward it, keeping far away from Sia. If her scent got into my lungs one more time, my self-control might snap.

I didn't even want to contemplate what I'd do if that happened.

The secluded table was perfect. I had no desire to speak to anyone, but I did want to be able to keep an eye on Sia. The better plan would be to leave and let my guards handle it, but there was no way in hell I could do that.

As soon as I took the seat in the corner, a uniformed server appeared. “What may I get you, Your Highness?”

I felt the faintest grimace tug at the corner of my lips. I despised the pomp and circumstance of the High Court. “Whiskey.”

“Of course.” The man melted into the shadows.

While I waited for the drink, I forced myself to look at other people in the room besides Sia. She would send my brain into an endless rabbit hole of desire if I let her.

I’d known most of these fae for decades. Many of the other rulers were extremely long lived like I was, including Prince Gabriel. He was looking at Sia like he wanted to eat her, and it made me want to throw him off the train.

“My lord?” Vusario’s voice cut through my focus, and I looked up at him, equal parts grateful for the interruption and annoyed. “May I join you?”

I nodded. “Fine. You can tell me what you’ve learned of the people on the train.”

I’d set Dain on the trail of finding the person who threatened Sia, but Vusario had been tasked with using his inner sight to scout for dangers. I prayed he’d found something useful.

He sat and leaned forward, his voice low. “I believe the Irish could be a threat.”

“The Irish? Tell me more.”



Sia

I stared up at the fae prince, wondering if I could kick him in the balls without anyone noticing.

He’d probably notice, though.

In fairness, that was the point. But he was driving me crazy. If it wouldn't get me in trouble, I'd totally do it. He kept looking down at my non-existent cleavage as he droned on and on about stag hunting in the forests of France.

I'd hoped he'd have some good gossip about the other people on the train, but all I'd gotten from him was that he definitely wasn't a threat. He was too obsessed with himself and stags to worry about me.

"Oh, Sia!" Meria appeared at my side, her hand on my arm. "I'm so glad I found you. I need your help." She smiled at the prince. "My apologies, Your Highness."

"I—"

She dragged me away before he could finish.

"Meria! That can't have been good."

"He'll forget," she whispered. "Prince Gabriel is beautiful but surprisingly slow witted for fae royalty."

"It's his father who is king though, right?" My gaze found the man standing on the other side of the room, his cunning gaze inspecting the crowd.

Now *that* dude could be a threat.

"Yeah. And let's just say that crown won't be passed down."

"No surprise. We can definitely rule the prince out. Too busy chasing deer through the woods to care about our Court becoming more powerful."

Meria found a spot by the other end of the bar, and we tucked ourselves in between two groups. I'd noticed Lore as soon as he'd walked into the room, but he'd ignored me in favor of a table in the far corner. My new location meant I could barely see him

Good. Maybe it would help me focus.

Unlikely.

I was like a bat, with my own special echolocation that could tell me exactly where Lore was at any time. I hated it.

"I haven't gotten much," Meria whispered. "Eve might be having some

luck, though.” She nodded toward the corner, where Eve was leaning against the wall with a man who looked old enough to be her grandfather. He was one of the rare older fae that I’d seen, and though he was handsome for his age, he still had one foot in the grave.

It didn’t keep him from looking down Eve’s dress, though.

“Ugh. Men are the worst.”

Meria followed my gaze to the spectacle and nodded, then whispered, “These ones, especially. They’re royalty, so they’re used to getting whatever they want. Makes them act like boors.”

Lore wasn’t like that, though. He wanted me—I could feel it in the heat of his gaze. But he never stared at my boobs like some slack-jawed fae yokel.

Okay, maybe that was a bit harsh. Prince Gabriel was nowhere near a yokel. But the point remained. These dudes had a bad habit of taking up real estate with their eyes.

“Can I get you anything?” A smooth, female voice sounded from behind us, and I turned to see the pretty bartender waiting with an expectant smile.

I hadn’t actually gotten to order a drink yet. When I’d arrived, Gabriel had gotten me some kind of cocktail poured from a fountain in the middle of the car. Everyone had been drinking it, so I’d tried it, too. It had tasted like heaven itself, but I still had my heart set on wine from the fields we’d seen.

I pointed to the window. “Is wine from those grapes a possibility?”

The bartender winked. “*Anything* is a possibility.”

I raised my brows. “Mozzarella sticks?”

Next to me, Meria choked. “Did you just ask for mozzarella sticks?”

I shrugged. “She said anything was possible, and I’ve only been eating fancy fae food here.”

The bartender smiled. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Within minutes, I had a glass of chilled white wine and a plate of fried mozzarella sticks. I inhaled deeply. “Oh, that smells divine.”

“Let me try.” Meria picked one up.

“Not so dismissive now, are you?”

“I mean, look at them.” She held it up. “It’s salty, cheesy, crunchy perfection.” She bit into it and sighed. “You’re a genius, Sia. A woman with brains like yours deserves to be queen.”

I laughed. “It’s easy to win you over.”

“With mozzarella sticks? Yes.” She sighed and popped the second half into her mouth. “I’ve only ever had them once, on a trip to the human world. I can see why you liked it there.”

“The food was good, that’s for sure.” I ate my snack, sharing it with Meria as we scanned the crowd. It was surprising how well the wine complimented the fried cheese, and I had to make a point not to drink too much. There was danger here, and the last thing I needed was to end up under a table.

When the ice queen arrived, I drew in a breath. She’d changed into a white gown made of netting and diamonds, her hair flowing down her back in meticulous platinum waves.

“She looks like the combined gene pool of every supermodel on earth,” I whispered.

“Everyone else seems to agree.” Meria glanced pointedly at all the men in the room.

They’d all turned to look at her. Unable to help myself, I glanced at the king.

And found his eyes directly on me.

I drew in a harsh breath.

He didn’t care about the ice queen. It was like he didn’t even see her.

Instead, he looked at me.

And she looked at him.

“Well, this is a sticky triangle,” Eve whispered at my side.

I had no idea how she’d appeared without me noticing, but the spell that the ice queen had cast on the crowd had broken. I could no longer feel Lore’s

gaze on me.

Which was a good thing. Definitely.

I turned to pick up my wine glass right as it was knocked over by the man next to me.

“Sorry, sorry!” he said as I jumped back to avoid the wine dripping off the bar and onto the floor. “Let me get you another one.” He turned to catch the attention of the bartender and raised a hand.

I hadn’t seen much of his face, but he’d looked like any one of the attractive staff that traveled with the fae royalty.

“Hello.” The feminine voice rushed over me like cool water, and I turned, leaving the man to finish sorting out my drink.

The ice queen stood in front of me, easily six inches taller than me. I looked up at her, feeling like a squat little troll in front of a goddess. At least I had my friends flanking me.

“Hi.” I smiled, unsure of what to say. *How are you?* Nah. I settled on my name. “I’m Sia.”

“I’m aware.” She didn’t introduce herself, which was fine. I knew who she was.

“So you’re the new Queen of the Court of Starlight and Darkness.”

“Not yet.”

“No.” She smiled, and there was something there that made me shiver. “Not quite yet. But your wedding will be spectacular, I’m sure.”

Was I seriously talking about my wedding with my intended’s ex? Because that’s what she had to be. What else could that slap have been about?

“Yep.” I nodded. “Probably going to be pretty great.” The man who’d spilled my glass of wine handed me another, and I thanked him. For the briefest moment, it seemed like he might try to join the conversation.

Then the ice queen smiled at him with shark teeth, and he hurried off. I sipped my wine, watching him go.

When she turned to smile at me, I realized I couldn't take it anymore. Sure, I was able to sneak around in a crowd to get info, but subtlety in awkward situations had never been my strength.

"Are you Lore's ex?" I asked. "That was a pretty intense conversation you were having earlier today."

"His ex?" She laughed. "What a human term. And the fact that you're interested. Jealous, even. How quaint."

"Oh, I'm not jealous." I smiled. "I was thinking if you wanted him, you could have him in the evenings. It's more of a business arrangement for us." I'd chosen the most shocking thing I could think of to throw her off guard, and it worked.

She laughed. "Aren't you a surprise."

"Just here to please." I sipped the wine. The direct approach seemed best. It was obvious from the keen look in her eyes that she was too cunning for me to talk circles around. "Seriously, though. Why did you slap him? Do I have to worry about you coming after me?"

She sighed and tilted her head as she studied me. "No, actually. I won't be telling you what that slap was about, only that he deserved it. But I won't be coming after you. And I have no interest in expanding my kingdom as some speculate." She looked around the room, clearly searching for someone. "I've got other prey in mind."

"Oooh, now that's some gossip."

"Gossip that I won't be sharing. *Yet.*" She smiled. "But it was nice to meet you. I wanted to take the measure of the new Queen of the Court of Starlight and Darkness, and I must say I'm not disappointed."

I curtsied, giving her an ironic smile. "Glad to be of service."

"Oh, you serve only yourself, I am sure." She said it like it was a compliment.

"And my court."

Her brows rose. "But not the king."

“No. Definitely not.”

She nodded. “I like you.”

“Then give me a heads-up. Who here might *not* like me?”

She looked around, her lips pursing. “Any number of people, to be honest. Tomorrow, the Irish Court will arrive. I’d keep an eye on them.”

I could sense the truth in her words—perhaps part of my magic? No matter what it was, I believed her. “Thanks.”

“Good luck.” She turned and disappeared through the crowd.

We had misinterpreted the ice queen earlier today because she wasn’t a threat to me. Whoever she was looking for, though...

They weren’t going to be as lucky.

Eve whistled low. “That didn’t go the way I expected.”

“No, but she’s as fabulous as she looks, that’s for sure,” Meria said. “I think you might have an ally, Sia.”

“Good. Because I’m going to need one.”

“Shall we keep hunting?” Eve asked.

Meria nodded. “I’ve got my eye on someone who looks like they might have loose lips. I’ll see you guys later.”

Eve and Meria split off, and I leaned against the bar, sipping my wine as I looked through the crowd.

Who should I talk to next?

There was a quiet woman sitting near the window on the far wall. She sipped a glass of red wine as she watched the crowd. I recognized myself in her—someone who stuck to the edges. A wallflower.

Perfect.

That kind of person always knew things. It was easy to see what people were hiding when they didn’t notice you.

I started toward her, weaving my way through the crowd. As I neared her, I began to feel a bit fuzzy headed.

Whoa.

I hadn't had that much to drink, had I?

The spinning increased, and it took everything I had to stay on my feet.

Shit.

I wasn't drunk.

I'd been poisoned.

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Sia

My heart raced as I searched for help. My movements were sticky slow, and it felt like I could barely move my head as I looked for members of my court.

The only people I saw were unfamiliar. Meria and Eve had disappeared into the crowd. I thought Lore might still be at his table, but it was all the way on the other side of the room. I wouldn't make it that far. Not if I had to weave my way through the packed crowd. And I didn't want people seeing that I was inebriated. It was a sign of weakness I didn't want to show.

Merebeth, the healer.

She was probably still reading in the sitting room in our private car. I was closest to the exit that led to our quarters. All I had to do was get through the empty dining car.

I could do it.

I drew in a shuddery breath, stumbling toward the door. I was pretty sure I looked normal, even though it felt like a slow, rumbling earthquake was going off inside me.

I breathed slowly, making my way through the doors and into the dining car. It was quiet inside, the air still. I was halfway through the car when I

realized it was empty.

Shouldn't there at least be a staff member or something?

Shit. Maybe I shouldn't have chosen this route.

Nerves tugged at me. I might have misjudged this.

I sucked in a deep breath, hoping the oxygen would help keep me conscious as I staggered toward the end of the dining car. Our private car was through the other door. *Almost there.*

When the figure appeared to my right, I was almost unsurprised.

I turned, readying myself to attack.

The man wore a cloak that concealed his face. He gripped my biceps with a strong arm and yanked me forward.

“Hey!” I lashed out, trying to slap him as I drew my sword from the ether.

The blade never appeared in my hand. I tried again, but the poison screwed up my coordination.

He dragged me toward a door at the side of the car, yanking me out onto a tiny smoking patio. The wind whipped by, cold and harsh. I sucked in a breath. It cleared my head enough that I could think a little straighter.

I screamed as loud as I could, the shriek harsh in my throat.

Come on! Someone, hear me.

He wrestled me toward the railing. I tugged, trying to break free, but the poison weakened me. When he slammed me against the railing, I gasped. It took everything I had to slam my knee up between his legs, but he barely flinched.

He gripped my upper arms and pushed me out over the railing. The cold metal pressed into my lower back as my feet left the ground.

Shit.

He was going to throw me overboard. Panicked, I thrashed. Overhead, the stars gleamed brightly. I looked up at them, feeling their power flow through me.

It was the only way.

Even with the poison in my system, I could still feel the magic. I drew on their light, letting it fill me with strength. As it did, I felt the strangest pull coming from him. It made my stomach turn. It was almost as if he were drawing on my magic. Was that even possible?

I didn't want to find out. If I could hit him with enough of it, I could get him off me. So I let the starlight fill me up. When I felt like an overflowing cup, I let it blast toward him.

He tumbled backward, releasing me. The lack of contact sent me backwards.

No.

I was already too far over the railing.

Gravity pulled me over the side. I scrambled for a handhold. Everything happened too slow and fast, all at once. The world was a blur, the poison dimming my vision.

But one thing was clear.

I wasn't going to make it.

The wooden railing slipped out of my weak grasp.

I was a dead woman.

Then a strong hand gripped my wrist and pulled me back up onto the train. I was too blinded to see who it was, but the scent made it clear. Winter forest.

Lore.

“Stay here.” He tucked me into the corner of the outdoor patio.

I pressed my back to the wall, sucking in air as I tried to get my senses back online.

Through the haze of my vision, I saw him fighting the man who'd tried to kill me. It looked like Lore was trying to take him alive—probably to question him. Otherwise, he'd have already won the fight.

The man was skilled, though. He stayed just out of Lore's reach, taking punches but avoiding being captured. When Lore managed to grab his neck

with an ungloved hand, the man shrieked from the pain of Lore's cursed touch. He jerked away, moving so quickly that he tumbled over the railing and disappeared.

I gasped.

"Damn it," Lore cursed.

He leaned over and looked down. From my vantage point, I couldn't see the landscape near the train. Were we on a bridge?

With my blurry vision, it was too hard to tell.

Lore turned from the railing and bent down, scooping me up into his arms with a gentleness that took my breath away. He strode back into the dining car, clutching me close.

His face was set in stern lines of worry, his eyes dark with concern. When we reached the sitting room of our car, he turned to Merebeth, who still sat in the chair by the window.

Through the foggy haze of my mind, I heard the roughness in his voice when he spoke. "She's been poisoned. Save her. *Please.*"

Did he...care?

It sounded like it.

"Put her on the couch," the healer said.

He treated me like I was made of glass, laying me down with a gentleness that made a fist squeeze my heart.

No one had ever treated me like that before.

The healer leaned over me, her features blurry. She hovered her hands over my head, then my chest, her magic swelling on the air, bringing with it the scent of candles and herbs.

"Definitely poison." She frowned. "I'll be right back."

She disappeared, and I searched for Lore, unable to move my head far. He was my rock in the storm, and I clung to his presence as the waves battered me.

He wouldn't let anything bad happen to me.

I'd heard it in his voice.

It helped calm the fear that made my heart race.

I'm not going to die.

I tried to reach out for his hand, but all I managed was a halfhearted twitch of my wrist. His hand gripped mine. He wore no glove since he'd taken them off during the fight, and the warmth of his bare skin made a shuddery breath escaped me.

“You'll be fine,” he said. “I won't let anything happen to you.”

As if he'd read my mind.

I closed my eyes, unable to keep them open any longer.



Lore

I stared at Sia, fear snaking through me. The slithery bastards tightened on my lungs, squeezing until it was an effort to breathe.

She was too pale, her skin too cold.

What had that bastard given her?

And who had they been?

I had no idea. The three contingents already on the train weren't on the top of my threat list.

Apparently, I had to rework the list.

They could be partnered with a court that I already considered a threat. That was the most likely scenario. It would throw the suspicion off the other court.

The healer returned, and thoughts of vengeance fled my mind.

“Is she going to survive?” Cold chilled me as I asked.

The healer said nothing as she knelt by Sia's side and raised a tiny vial of

shimmery silver liquid to her lips. “This is a powerful, all-purpose antidote. I’m not sure what she was been poisoned with, so it’s our safest option.”

I held my breath as she dripped the potion between Sia’s lips. Sia swallowed, sputtering slightly, then lay still.

The snakes tightened around my heart.

Her color improved, and the breath whooshed from my lungs. “That’s a good sign, right?”

The healer nodded. “Indeed. I can’t guarantee anything, but I’m hopeful.”
I’m hopeful.

I hadn’t felt hopeful in centuries. I still didn’t. She could feel it for the both of us, and perhaps it would be enough if fate cared about that kind of thing.

“That’s all that can be done,” she said. “I drew some of it from her system with my magic, but she’s going to need to rest to let the antidote work effectively.”

Helplessness dragged at me, and I loathed it. The only thing I could do was sit by her side and make sure she was safe while she healed.

Carefully, I lifted her up. She felt too light in my arms. Insubstantial. I focused on the color returning to her cheeks like a lifeline as I carried her to my quarters. I kept the lights dim as I entered the small space.

As gently as I could, I laid her on the bed and removed her shoes. A soft blanket was folded over the base of the mattress, and I covered her.

Once she looked comfortable, I frowned. It was odd to take care of another. I’d only ever taken care of Wolf, and his requirements were just a bowl of meat and a scratch on the ears.

This was vastly different.

It felt odd, but almost good. Like an ill-fitting coat on a cold day.

When she was tucked into bed, I made sure there were guards outside our car. I’d stay awake and be the last line of defense, but I had to take every precaution where she was concerned.

Once the guards were posted, I took the chair next to the bed. She lay quiet on the mattress next to me, and I couldn't help but look at her every three seconds, wanting to make sure her chest still rose and fell.

I looked down at my ungloved palm. I couldn't let go of the memory of her flesh against mine while I'd held her hand.

Fates, what had become of me?

I dragged a hand through my hair, frustration making me restless. Trapped.

I wanted to be anywhere but here. Anywhere I could think of something else besides how afraid I was that she would die.

But I couldn't go. There wasn't a chance in hell I'd leave her side when she was like this. I'd rather be tethered to her in pain than free anywhere else.

So I leaned back and tried to calm my breathing, wishing that Wolf were here.



Sia

Consciousness tugged at me.

No.

I was too tired. There was no way I could get up and face the day.

A rustling sound from my left made me twitch.

Someone was there.

There was never anyone else in my apartment.

A tiny shot of adrenaline gave me enough energy to open my eyes.

I blinked, confused.

Where the hell was I?

The tiny room was dimly lit and *moving*.

I could feel the rumble, like we were in a big car.

No, a train car.

It all rushed back to me.

I was in the fae realm, riding a magic train to my wedding to a fae king.

I turned to the left and saw Lore. He sat in the chair next to me, his gaze on the door. He must have felt me looking because he turned to meet my gaze. The worried crease between his brows deepened. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay.” I croaked like a frog.

“Here.” He picked up a glass of water from the table. “Let me help you.”

“I can do it.” I struggled to sit.

He gave me a few seconds to try on my own before he helped me, his hands gentle on my skin. The memory of the man gripping my arms and trying to force me over the side of the train car made my stomach pitch.

I’d almost died.

I drew in a deep breath. Focus. I needed water, and to get myself together. Then I could ask questions.

Lore helped me drink, and the tenderness with which he treated me made my heart clutch. When I was finished, I settled back against the cushions and looked at him, searching his beautiful face for the reason he was here.

All I saw was worry.

“It’s late,” he said. “There are hours yet before dawn. You should go back to sleep.”

“Why are you helping me?”

He frowned, hesitating. “We didn’t catch the person who tried to kill you.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

“It’s what I answered.” He raised his brows. “I assume you’re interested in that as well?”

“I am.” And it was clear he wasn’t going to discuss why he was playing

nursemaid, so I let it drop. “We lost him over the side, right?”

He nodded. “Right into a ravine. He’s dead. Body probably lost.”

“Good riddance.” I wanted information about my attacker, but I wanted him dead more. The feeling of hanging over the side of the train would haunt me for the rest of my life. I shivered.

“Are you cold?”

“No. Just— freaked out.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I didn’t point out that something already *had* happened. He was well aware.

“Do you know who poisoned you?” he asked.

I shook my head, then stopped when pain pierced me. “No. I was stupid and drank wine I didn’t see poured, though. I was distracted by the Queen of the Mountain Fae, and when a man handed me a glass, I drank it.”

“What did he look like?”

“Um, dark-haired. Yellow eyes. Not sure what he was wearing. Something blue, I think.”

“We’ll find him. Do you think the Queen of the Mountain Fae was trying to distract you?”

I thought back. “No. It’s possible, but I doubt it. I’m pretty good at reading people, and she seemed legit. I think he just took advantage of an opportunity.” Another thought occurred. “It might not even have been him. The female bartender poured me a drink, but she could have spiked the bottle. I didn’t see her open it.”

Lore nodded. “We’ll find both of them.”

I was so tired and achy that I was grateful he was taking care of this. I closed my eyes as he raised his wrist to his mouth and spoke into a comms charm. “Dain? Come to my quarters.”

A knock sounded on the door almost immediately.

From beside me, I heard Lore rise. I opened my eyes in time to see him

open the door to Dain. The other man tried to see around Lore, but I only caught the briefest glimpse of his concerned face.

“Is she all right?” His low voice echoed with worry.

“She’ll survive. But we need to find who poisoned her.”

“I’m on it. Just tell me what they look like.”

Lore gave him the description, and I couldn’t help but marvel at the fact that two incredibly powerful, handsome men were on my side to protect me.

How had this become my life?

I didn’t think I’d ever stop marveling over it.

When Lore finished giving instructions to Dain, he shut the door and returned to the side of the bed, sitting down. “Dain will find them. In the morning, we’ll question them. Until then, sleep.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “Why am I in your sleeping compartment?”

“It’s safest.”

“No safer than my own car. I’m fine on my own.” I wasn’t though—tonight had proved that. I also wasn’t stupid enough to reject his protection.

But a little demon inside me wanted to push him for more information about how he felt. Because he hadn’t had to bring me to *his* car. He could have put me in my own and watched over me there.

It was becoming a habit with him, bringing me into his space—space that I knew he guarded intensely. There were entire laws in his kingdom about not intruding on his floor of the castle.

“I’m going to my car,” I said, starting to sit up. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

His jaw tightened. “If you do, I’ll just follow you.”

“What? And sit up all night over there? You’ll be a wreck in the morning.”

“I don’t need sleep as much as other people do.” He leaned back against his chair. “Go to sleep, Sia.”

I was tired enough that I could no longer argue, and I didn’t want to. I

hadn't gotten my answers, but I didn't feel like I was leaving the conversation empty-handed, either.

He cared enough to sit here with me. To protect me.

Exhausted, I slumped down onto the bed. The train's rumbling motion lulled me to sleep, but it was a fitful slumber. Nightmares of the attack made me jerk awake more than once, the memory of the ground rushing by below me enough to chill my skin.

In the quiet dark of the train car, I looked over at Lore. He still sat in the chair, his head back against the wall and his eyes closed.

"I can feel you looking," he said.

Not asleep, then.

As if he would ever let his guard down.

"Nightmares," I said.

His jaw tightened. "I'd take them from you if I could."

"There's enough room in this bed for two." The words shocked me. They'd come out of my mouth before they'd checked in with my brain. "For sleeping, I mean."

"I'm fine here."

"I'm not." My voice came out smaller than I'd expected. Of all the dangerous things I'd done in the last few days, the attack had really done a number on me.

Perhaps because I hadn't chosen to walk into it, like I'd chosen to walk into the competition. I'd been dragged into the danger this time.

Because someone hunted me.

I shuddered.

Lore stood, then lowered himself to the bed beside me. He lay stiff as a board, but that didn't stop me from rolling over and putting my head on his shoulder, my arm over his chest. His arm wrapped around me, pulling me closer.

Immediately, comfort rushed over me.

He was so strong and warm and *here*.

Everything about him felt perfect. Like he was the only puzzle piece in the world that would fit me.

I was the only puzzle piece in the world that fit *him*. It was a heavy thought. For centuries, his touch had caused pain to everyone he met.

Except me.

His arm tightened on me, as if he couldn't help it.

I smiled.

He might not admit it, but he cared.

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Sia

Sunlight streamed across my face, too bright in front of my closed eyelids. I squeezed them tighter and rolled over. It was too damned early, and I just wanted to bury my face in the silk sheets.

Wait, silk?

I didn't have silk sheets.

My heart thudded. I turned on my back and opened my eyes just in time to see Lore's back disappear as the door to the tiny room shut behind him.

Yep. Still on a train.

And last night had really happened. Shit. Someone tried to kill me.

Lore had spent the entire night holding me. He must have waited until I started stirring, then made his getaway.

Probably didn't want to talk about it.

Fine by me. I didn't want to talk about it, either. I'd temporarily lost my mind last night and decided that it would be a great idea to snuggle the Ice King.

Insanity.

But part of me didn't believe that. Not for a second.

It had felt amazing.

Not just because he was strong and looked like a god. But because there was something just so *right* about being in his arms. Dain was also strong and looked like a god, but I knew without a doubt I wouldn't feel the same if he held me.

There was just something about Lore.

And I was going to have to ignore it. The last thing I needed was to become distracted by him. My damned life was at stake here. One slip-up, and I'd go under the train wheels so quickly I wouldn't realize it had happened.

I left his room and went into my own, using the connecting doors so I didn't run into the guards that were surely outside in the hall. It didn't take me long to find a change of clothes in the trunk that had been packed for me. It was easy to find an outfit of trousers and a fitted top that would be good for fighting if things went south again. I needed a shower, but that would have to wait.

I needed to see Meria and Eve.

Thank God for comms charms. I pressed a finger to my ear and said, "Meria? You there?"

"Yes. Where are you? We missed you last night when you went to bed."

"Ah, about that..."

"Yeah?" Worry echoed in her tone.

"Can we meet for breakfast?" My stomach was roiling with the slightest nausea. Food could help settle me. It felt like a hangover from hell, but I hadn't had enough to drink for that to be the case.

The poison. Of course.

"Sure. We'll see you in the dining car right next to ours."

The one I'd nearly died in. Perfect. My eggs would taste even better since I'd confronted my mortality there.

I disconnected from Meria and opened the door slowly, wanting to give

anyone on the outside enough time to step back. There were two guards standing in front of the doors, and they tilted their heads to me as I left.

There was no one else in the sitting room, but the dining car was nearly full. Fae sat around nearly every table, each of them dressed in what they probably considered casual wear. There were too many beautiful fabrics and examples of fine embroidery for it to be truly casual, though.

I spotted my friends about halfway down the car and hurried to meet them. They sat at a small table near the window, coffee and juice already laid out in front of them.

“Oh, thank God.” I reached for a cup of coffee as I sat, lifting it with almost too much enthusiasm. I barely managed not to spill on myself as I took a gulp. The caffeine was desperately needed.

“You all right?” Eve frowned, looking me up and down.

“Honestly, my brain feels like a potato that’s been electrified into sentience.”

“Like Frankenstein’s monster?”

“Exactly. I’m the Frankenstein of the vegetable world.”

They laughed.

Dain appeared at the other end of the car, taking a seat where he could see me easily.

My guard had arrived. There were probably more scattered throughout the dining room if I knew Lore. Gratitude welled within me.

“Can we get some food?” I asked. “I think I need something to settle me.”

“Already ordered,” Meria said. “After all those breakfasts in the competition, I know what you like.”

“You’re a hero.” I could have hugged her.

“I want to know what happened last night,” Eve said.

Before I could answer, the food arrived. Thank God. I needed the sustenance and the time to gather my thoughts. Meria had ordered me a pile of bacon and eggs with a side of fruit. It couldn’t have been more perfect.

As I shoveled food into my mouth—really unbecoming behavior for a queen—I spotted a woman on the other side of the dining car. She was a few tables down, and her gaze was glued to me.

I looked away, then glanced back.

Yep. Still looking.

She had the usual fae beauty that everyone in this realm possessed. Her dark hair was swept back from her face, and her violet eyes glittered with intelligence.

Hang on.

She had violet eyes, just like the Truth Teller had told me about. She'd been right—the woman's eyes were unmistakable. She was the one I was supposed to ask about my parents.

“Who is that?” I whispered. “Other side of the room, three tables back. Wait a minute before looking.”

Eve and Meria's brows rose.

“Describe her,” Eve said. “Looking back is too obvious.”

“Dark hair, violet eyes. Thirtyish. Beautiful, of course, in a stern way.”

“Violet eyes? Like the Truth Teller mentioned?” Meria asked.

“Yep.”

“Not sure who she is,” Eve said, “but I know who you're talking about. I saw her when we came in.”

“Same,” Meria said. “Clueless about her identity, though.”

“I'm going to go talk to her.”

Meria grabbed my hand before I got up. “Wait until the crowd in the car thins. It'll be easier to have an honest conversation with less of an audience. We're stuck on the train, so you're not going to lose her.”

She had a point. I nodded.

“You've eaten enough that you look at least mostly alive,” Eve said. “So spill. It sounds like something happened last night.”

I turned my attention from the violet-eyed woman. I'd seek her out after I

updated my friends.

“Something definitely happened.” I relayed the events of the previous evening, making sure to keep my voice low enough that no one could hear.

Their eyes widened, and both grimaced when I got to the part where I nearly died. I left out the bit about Lore sleeping next to me. There was no way I wanted to unpack that with my friends right now. We had more important things to focus on.

“So Dain is trying to find the culprit?” Eve asked.

“He probably already did, since he’s at the other end of this car.”

“Probably going to get you when you’re done eating, so you’d better finish the story,” Meria said. “And slow down on that bacon.”

“That’s like asking me to chop off a limb.”

“It’s for a good cause.” Meria’s tone was deadpan. “Avoiding a heart attack.”

“Fair point.” I finished the story, then leaned forward. “It’s got to be one of the courts that got on the train yesterday, right?”

“Unless they’re in league with one that is getting on today,” Eve said. “I’d say that’s just as likely. Neither of the courts who boarded yesterday would have the guts or resources to lead a charge like this on their own. The only likely candidate is the Queen of the Mountain Fae, and we agreed she wasn’t a threat.”

My gut has always been good, and I trusted it. “I still believe that.”

“The rest of the courts will get on today. We can do some snooping,” Eve said. “Though I doubt we’ll get lucky enough to overhear someone laying out their dastardly plan.”

“You never know,” Meria said. “Bad guys get cocky. Men, especially.”

The woman with the violet eyes was still looking at me, and I found it impossible to look away. When she raised her hand to wave me over, excitement flared.

The gesture had been so subtle that I wouldn’t have clocked it if I hadn’t

been so interested in her.

But she'd definitely waved me over.

"The woman wants to talk to me," I whispered. "I'm not waiting any longer."

"Fair enough," Meria said. "But be careful."

"I will. But don't forget the Truth Teller said I'd be safe with her."

"Yeah, but still... Don't eat or drink anything."

"Oh, I learned my lesson." I rose and made my way over to her, skirting around tables and avoiding the stares of the other fae. They weren't shy about making their interest known, that was for sure.

As I neared her table, I caught sight of Dain's frown. I ignored him and sat. "Yes?"

She smiled, and it was impossible to read the emotion in her eyes. "I have the answers you seek, but I cannot share them here, where it is so public."

Excitement thrummed. "Do you mean—"

She raised a hand, cutting me off. But I had to know.

I held up a hand to shield my lips from the view of others and mouthed the words, *my parents?*

Annoyance flashed in her eyes, but she nodded.

Holy shit.

"I will contact you at a better time. I only called you over to make sure you would look for my signal. When the time comes, be ready." She rose and swept away from the table.

I watched her go, my heart thundering. A clue. A lead.

Thank God.

Dain rose from his seat nearby and sat across from me. "What was that about?"

"Nothing important. Did you find the person who poisoned me?" I kept my voice low, hoping the question would distract him. I might be able to trust him, but until I was sure, I couldn't risk it.

It didn't distract him—the flash in his eyes made that clear—but he answered my question anyway. “We found the bartender, but not the yellow-eyed man.”

“He could have been the one who went over the railing.”

“That's what I think.”

“He seemed so...mild mannered.”

“He would have been good at hiding who he really was. The best assassins use their personas to deflect interest.”

The train rumbled to a halt, arriving at a station in the woods. The large trees looked almost familiar. “Are we in Estonia?”

Dain nodded. “Same forest in which you defeated the Külmking.”

I shivered at the memory, watching the six fae who stood on the platform. The king was immediately noticeable. He didn't wear a crown or ostentatious clothing, but the aura of power around him was unmistakable.

I looked back at Dain. “Do you think it's possible that whoever attacked me was colluding with one of the other courts boarding the train today?”

“I think it's possible.” He watched the Estonian king get on the train.

I followed his gaze, realizing that the king was entering at the bar car, which was right next to this one. He appeared in the doorway to the dining car, then walked toward me and stopped by the table.

I frowned. Why would he want to talk to me?

He bowed. “I would like to extend my sincerest appreciation for the gift you bestowed upon our people by defeating the Külmking.”

“Of course.” I nodded, hoping I looked queenly enough.

“Should you have need of a favor, you can turn to us.”

“Thank you.” I nodded toward Meria, who still sat at the table on the other side of the room, her gaze on me. “She was integral to killing the Külmking. The blond woman, I mean.”

The king turned to look at her, interest lighting in his eyes. “Then I shall extend my thanks to her as well.”

We said our goodbyes, and I watched him walk off. When he stopped at Meria's table, I looked at Dain. "So, the bartender. Did you question her?"

"No. We were waiting for you. Are you ready?"

I nodded. "Let's do it."



Lore

When Sia walked through the door to the staff's quarters, I forced myself to look away from her.

Last night had been...incredible.

I hadn't touched another person in so long that simply lying with her had been a surreal pleasure that had burned itself into my memory. It felt like *she* was burned into me, her touch a permanent mark on my skin.

I hadn't moved the entire night, not wanting to dislodge her as she slept. Guilt had snaked through me every now and again. I shouldn't be allowed to feel such pleasure.

Not after what I'd done.

And yet, I couldn't force myself to move. I'd clung to every moment of my time with her, not wanting it to end.

Next to me, the bartender shifted in her seat. The moment pulled me back to the present, away from my memories of the evening.

Fates, I was losing my mind.

Dain and Sia sat across from us. The bartender scowled. "What am I doing here? His Royal Highness wouldn't say."

"Hi, I'm Sia." She smiled.

The bartender frowned. "I'm Kira. What am I doing here?"

"I was poisoned last night," Sia said.

I watched Kira intently, trying to pick up on any sign that she was involved with the attack.

“Not at my bar,” Kira said. “And you look all right.”

“I almost wasn’t. While I was incapacitated, a man tried to throw me off the train.”

Kira paled. “Really? That’s—crazy.”

“I thought so, too.” Sia frowned at her. “So you had nothing to do with it?”

“No.” Kira dragged a hand through her hair. “Why would I?”

“You’re in league with whoever wants Queen Sia dead.” My tone was clipped. Harsh.

The bartender flinched.

“Be nice,” Sia muttered.

“No.” It was her life we were talking about. I wouldn’t pull any punches. “You poisoned her wine before you gave it to her so that she’d be an easier mark.”

Anger flashed in Kira’s eyes. “I did *not*.”

“I believe you,” Sia said.

“Good.” Kira still sounded angry. “Because it’s the truth. And I don’t appreciate these baseless accusations.”

“They aren’t baseless,” Dain said. His tone was kinder than mine had been. “There were only two people who handed Sia a drink, and you were one of them.”

She heaved a sigh. “Well, I didn’t poison her drink.”

“Did you see the dark-haired man with the yellow eyes?” Sia asked.

She frowned. “Bright yellow eyes? A bit weird, right?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“Did he order a glass of wine from you?” she asked.

“He did. Same as what you ordered. Took it and walked away without a word.”

“Did you see him hand it to Sia?” I asked.

“No. I was busy with another customer. But I did keep an eye on him for the rest of the night because I thought he was a little odd. He left shortly after he ordered the wine.”

“Which way did he go?”

“Through the dining car.”

I looked at Sia. “That could be him, then.”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

“He did speak to a man with pale gold hair and a dark cloak,” Kira said. “It was very brief, and I have no idea what they said.”

“A man with pale gold hair and a dark cloak?” I frowned. That could be any number of fae. Pale hair was common among our kind, and I didn’t remember what people had been wearing last night. I never paid any attention to clothing, but apparently, I should.

“I’ll look for him,” Dain said.

“Thank you,” Sia said to Kira. “I really appreciate it.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t die from a glass of wine that came from my bar.”

Sia smiled wryly. “Me, too.”

Sia

After our talk with Kira, I spent the rest of the morning in the sitting room of our train car with Eve and Meria, watching the gorgeous scenery and discussing what would happen when we arrived at the palace. Eve and Meria told me everything they knew about court life, and though I was paying close attention, I still couldn't help but keep an eye out for Lore.

He was nowhere to be seen, though—probably off hunting for the pale-haired man—but there were three guards on the other side of the sitting room.

“So, that’s some of what you need to know about court life,” Eve said. She’d just finished thirty minutes of monologue on the subject.

“I’ll never remember all that,” I said.

“I know, it’s a lot,” Meria said. “Backstabbing and alliances and just general bitchiness. But knowing it will help you navigate.”

“I think Sia can hold her own on the bitchiness front.” Eve winked.

I laughed. “I’m definitely going to have to toughen up if I want to make it through this, but yeah. I can hold my own there.”

The train slowed, and I looked out the window. Glorious green hills rolled beneath a blue sky dotted with fluffy white clouds. Yellow flowers

waved in the wind, and a few lone oak trees sat atop the hills.

“This is beautiful,” I said.

“Ireland.” There was a wistfulness to Meria’s voice, but when I looked at her, she glanced away.

I socked the information away for later because she clearly didn’t want to answer any questions now.

A pretty station appeared on my side of the train. It was built of stone and thatch, with massive flower baskets hanging from the walls. A rainbow of blooms tumbled toward the ground, where a fluffy white sheep chewed on them.

“Wow.” I breathed the word.

“Yeah, the Irish always know how to do it right,” Meria said.

“Watch out for them, though.” Eve nodded toward the people on the platform. As usual, they were all beautiful. It was just the nature of being fae. But there was something a little...*more*...about these fae.

“What’s with them?” I asked. “They look different.”

“Their court is underground in another realm,” Eve said. “Underhill, they call it. They’re different from all the other fae in the world—like one gene off or something.”

“I’m not sure if that’s how it works,” Meria said.

“Duh, but I don’t know how else to describe it.” Eve shrugged. “Watch out for them. They consider themselves to be the original fae, first of the species. Makes them cocky. Also makes them want to be the most powerful.”

“So they could have a problem with me becoming queen.”

“If they think it makes the Court of Starlight and Darkness more powerful, then yes.”

“They’d be stupid if they didn’t realize that,” Meria said. “And they’re not stupid.”

“No, they’re definitely not.” That was more than evident as I watched them climb onto the train. There was an intelligence in their eyes that

bordered on otherworldly—as if they could see more than I could. I catalogued them in my mind as a definite threat. “Tonight we’ll have to see if we can talk to them.”

Eve nodded, but Meria looked away again.

Yep, there was something there. It was her business until she chose to share it, though. I trusted her to have my back, and I had hers. It was all that really mattered.

An hour later, we went back to the dining car to see if there was anyone we could talk to. Unfortunately, it was empty.

“The others must be having lunch in their own cars,” Eve said.

“Damn.” I sat, my stomach rumbling. “Maybe they’ll come later. Let’s hang out.”

“And eat.” Meria grinned.

“Definitely eat.”

The kitchen delivered an assortment of specialty sandwiches and salads that made my mouth water just to look at them. I was halfway through a mozzarella and tomato sandwich when I realized there was a small piece of paper sticking out from beneath my plate.

My heart thundered as I pulled it free.

“What’s that?” Eve asked.

“Something important.” My hands trembled as I unfolded it. There was no way it was coincidence.

There were only a few words written on the paper.

Meet me at the last car. I can give you what you seek.

I blew out a breath. It had to be answers about my parents. This must be the violet-eyed woman’s way of contacting me with a private place to talk.

I handed the message over to my friends, who read it silently.

“You want to go?” Meria asked.

“Definitely.”

Eve looked toward the guards who sat on the far side of the car. “Do we bring them?”

“No way. They’ll scare off the woman.”

“You’re sure it’s her?” Meria asked.

“Who else?”

“The person who wants you dead.”

“Good point.” I weighed the risks and found them to be worth it. “I can go alone.”

“Hell no,” Meria said.

“If it’s dangerous—”

“Then we’ll go with you.” She glared. “I’m not scared to go. I just wanted to lay out all the possibilities.”

“I’m with Meria on this,” Eve said. “We all go. If it is an ambush, the three of us will be together. We can take whatever comes at us.”

Her confidence was far from empty. I’d seen what we’d accomplished in the competition to become queen. We could handle any threat. And if it was bigger than us, it would cause such a ruckus the guards would come running.

“When?” Eve whispered.

“ASAP, I think.” I shot a quick look toward the guards. They were focused on their lunches. “We’ll say we’re resting. Then we’ll sneak out.”

“How, though?” Meria said. “They’ll be standing outside your door.”

I chewed on my lip, thinking back to the layout of the private car. Knocking the guards unconscious wasn’t a good option, so we’d have to be sneaky.

“We go out our windows and climb onto the roof, then head to the back that way.”

Meria’s brows rose. “You watch too much TV.”

“You have no idea.” I looked between them. “You in?”

“Hell, yeah,” Eve said.

“Me, too.” Meria grinned. “Sounds dangerous. Therefore, fun.”

“Good.” I popped the last bite of sandwich in my mouth. “I’m ready when you are.”

They quickly finished their sandwiches, then we rose and headed back toward our car. The guards hurried to get up.

“We’re just going to go rest,” I said. “Stay.”

“Can’t do that.” The guard nearest me had the open, trusting expression of someone who hadn’t been lied to much in his life.

Good.

“Thanks.” I smiled, genuinely grateful for their protection. It was getting in the way of this endeavor, but I could get around that. I needed them all the other times.

My friends and I made our way toward our rooms. They went into theirs, and I headed a little farther down the train car and into mine. As soon as the door shut, I went to the window and opened it. Cool wind rushed over me as I looked out at the mountains surrounding the train. They were close enough that they provided excellent perspective for how fast we were going.

Really freaking fast.

Suddenly, this idea seemed insane. Just because I’d done wildly dangerous things since I’d arrived here didn’t mean that I was qualified to do *this*.

Except, there were answers about my parents at the other end of the train. I had to get them.

And anyway, I kept developing crazy skills when the need presented itself. I’d never been a sword fighter in my life, and yet I had talents that shocked the hell out of me.

Why wouldn’t the same apply to climbing onto the roof of the train?

The logic was a little iffy, but it was all I had.

It helped that Meria stuck her head out the window of her quarters a moment later and grinned at me.

Ready? she mouthed.

I nodded and sucked in a deep breath, then hoisted myself out the window.

Oh shit.

The wind was a hell of a lot stronger out here, and my hands were immediately sweaty from fear. I clung to the top of the window, my legs still inside the car. Memories of last night flashed in my mind—the man shoving me over the side, the ground rushing by beneath me.

No.

I was in control here. It was just me, and I wasn't poisoned. Meria was making quicker progress, and the sight inspired me.

You can do it, nerd. I sucked in a deep breath, then scrambled out the window. Fortunately, there were decorative brass bars on the top of the train that I could use as a handhold. I dragged myself up, swinging a leg over the railing and onto the top of the car.

When I'd finally made it, I lay face down on the roof, clinging to the metal as the wind rushed over me. Panting, I tried to catch my breath.

“You okay?” Meria's voice sounded to my left, and I looked up.

She'd belly-crawled toward me, her face bright with excitement.

“Yeah. Just scarier than I expected.”

“You almost died last night in a really similar situation, so I can't say I'm surprised. But you've got this. You're the freaking Queen of the Court of Starlight and Darkness, for fate's sake.”

“Thanks.”

Eve reached us. “Ready?”

“Yeah. No way in hell I'm doing this on two feet, though.” I turned around on my belly and began to crawl toward the next car.

“Can't argue with that.” Meria joined me, staying low to the roof.

I had to get to my feet long enough to jump to the next car—something I *never* wanted to do again—but I was back on my stomach a moment later.

As I crawled across the train, my confidence grew. I could do this. By the time we reached the last car, my fear had mostly dissipated. I was more interested in what I might find.

Fortunately, there was an open-air platform on the caboose. Meria, Eve, and I lowered ourselves onto it and peered through the windows.

“Empty.” I frowned.

“Maybe they aren’t here yet,” Meria said.

“Maybe.” I opened the door and slipped inside, the sudden quiet almost disorienting after the roaring wind on top of the train.

The entire car was a sitting area, with small couches and chairs clustered around little tables. Red velvet covered most of the cushions, and the dark wood walls gleamed from the sunlight streaming through.

I walked through the quiet train car, my heartbeat loud in my ears. “Shouldn’t the person who sent the note be waiting for us?”

“Unless it’s a trap,” Eve said.

“Uh, guys.” Meria’s voice sounded worried, and I turned to look at her.

She stood at the window, pointing upward. “Does that look like a landslide to you?”

I hurried over and looked up. Dust plumed overhead, obscuring the mountain. Boulders tumbled out of it, rolling faster down the slope.

“Shit.” They were coming right at the train. “We won’t make it out of here in time.”

“Take cover.” Meria dragged me toward the largest couch in the room.

Eve joined us, and we flipped it over to cover ourselves. I wedged myself beneath the cushioned velvet as the train began to shake, boulders slamming into it.

Eve, Meria, and I gripped hands as glass shattered and metal screeched. My heart lodged in my throat.

An enormous crash sounded as the car flipped on its side. I tumbled over, slamming into the window. The glass had shattered on the ground below, and pain flared where it cut me. Dust billowed, so thick that I couldn't see two inches in front of my face.

Coughing, I pulled my shirt up over my face and tried to breathe shallowly.

"Meria!" I choked. "Eve!" Someone was pressed up against me, their body warmer than the cool air surrounding me.

"I'm here," Meria croaked.

"You okay?"

"Mostly. You?"

"Yeah. Where's Eve?"

"Eve!"

There was no answer.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The dust was clearing enough that I could make out vague shapes. The couch had tumbled to the side, but it had blocked the worst of the rubble that had crashed through the window.

"Good thinking on the couch." I staggered upright. "Eve!"

A groan sounded from a few feet away, and I hurried toward it. Eve lay underneath the couch and rubble, blood dripping from her temple.

Panic lodged in my heart, and I knelt at her side, careful not to shake her. "Eve. You're okay. Wake up."

Her eyelids fluttered open, her lips tightening in pain. Her breath rattled as she spoke. "This sucks."

"I've got a healing potion." Meria pulled a little vial from her pocket.

"Not sure that's going to do it." Eve coughed, blood appearing on her lips.

No, no, no.

Didn't that mean internal bleeding?

“It’ll be enough.” Meria sounded confident as she lifted the vial to Eve’s lips, helping her drink.

Almost immediately, her breathing improved. The wound at her head began to close.

“It might not fix you up all the way,” Meria said. “But you’ll live.”

“Thank you.” She heaved a shuddery sigh. “Now get me the hell out of here.”

We dug at the rubble, clearing off the larger rocks that kept her trapped. The sight of them made my stomach turn. They’d been falling so fast...

We were lucky we’d gotten to her in time.

Worry for Lore pierced me. Had he been injured in the rockslide?

I couldn’t think about that right now. I needed to focus on helping Eve. It was all I could control from right here, and it was important.

By the time we reached the last of the rocks, Eve was able to help us push them off of her. The pink had returned to her cheeks, and though her lips were still tight with pain, it looked like she wouldn’t be dying on us anytime soon.

Relief rushed through me.

It didn’t last long, though. This was all on me. Eve had almost died because I’d been tricked by the note.

A trap.

I shivered, shoving the thought away. “Let’s get out of here.”

Eve looked up, and I followed her gaze. The train was on its side, so we could either go through the broken windows above or the doors on either end.

“Let’s try the doors.” Meria scrambled over rocks and fallen furniture, reaching the back door, and grunting as she pulled at it. “Stuck.”

“I’ll try the other.” I hurried to it, leaving Eve to catch her breath. The rocks shifted beneath my feet as I climbed over the pile of rubble toward the door. As soon as I saw it, I knew we were screwed. The entire thing was buried in rocks. “It looks like we’re going up.”

“On it.” Meria grabbed a chair and propped it on top of some the debris, wedging the legs in with some rocks.

I helped, gathering smaller pieces of furniture to stack them into a climbable tower. Once it was big enough, I started up. The pile of rock, wood, and velvet shifted precariously as I ascended, and I slowed. The ground beneath me was littered with glass and pieces of metal, and I couldn’t afford to fall on them.

At the top, I found that the windows had shattered, leaving jagged edges on all sides. I grimaced as I tried to find a safe way to climb out. At least the air was fresh up here. The wind had carried the dust away, and I searched for any sight of the rest of the train.

Two cars in front of us had been crushed, and the rest of the train was nowhere to be seen.

Meria popped her head up next to mine. “What’s the deal?”

“I think the rest of the train wasn’t hit and it kept moving. It was probably too hard to stop it.”

“It’ll be back.” She searched the area around us. “We should get out and wait for it.”

Something thudded next to us. I jerked, turning to see an arrow protruding out of the wall of the train, just six inches from Meria’s head.

“Shit!” I ducked down. “Ambush.”

Sia

My heart thundered as I scrambled down the pile of furniture, following Meria to the safety of the train car. I could hear the arrows thudding into the side of the train car above us. One flew right by my head and lodged itself in a velvet settee.

When we reached the bottom, I turned to Eve. She gripped the arm of one of the chairs, supporting herself. With a grimace, she said, “So, that’s bad news.”

“They wrecked the train, and now they’re here to clean up.” Meria glowered at the windows above. “Do we have any weapons besides my bow and arrows?”

“I’ve got my sword,” I said.

“I’ve got daggers.” Eve looked around. “But we’re sitting ducks down here.”

“We need to get out and take cover in the woods,” Meria said. “But they’ve got eyes on the top of the train car, and we can’t get through the doors on the ends.”

“I can use my illusion to create some cover for us,” Eve said. “Not a lot,

though, so we'll have to be fast."

I nodded. "Let's do it."

"I'll go first," Eve said.

"Hang on." I grabbed a small wool doormat that lay crumbled amongst the rubbish and handed it to her. "You'll need this for the broken window."

"Thanks." Eve tucked it into her shirt, then climbed onto the pile of furniture, her movements a little shaky. I got below her to make sure she didn't fall, and we ascended slowly to the windows.

Magic shimmered on the air as we neared them, and I shivered.

"We're essentially invisible to them, but not for long," Eve said. She placed the door mat over the broken glass edge of the window and climbed up. I followed her onto the top of the tilted car, searching the area around us for the threat.

Mountains rose tall on my right, thick with trees that provided cover for our attackers. I still couldn't see them but swore I could sense them lurking amongst the shadows.

Meria joined us on the top of the train, silently inspecting our surroundings. She pointed downhill. "The attackers are coming from up the mountain, so let's go that way."

I nodded. Meria and I helped Eve climb down from the train. She insisted she was fine, but she was still a bit slow. We skidded down the rubble that tumbled away from the side of the train car and into the forest on the lower side of the tracks.

The scent of evergreens and rich dirt filled the air, hopefully enough to cover our scent. I drew it into my lungs, loving being in nature despite the danger.

I'd never been meant to live in Seattle, I realized. This was the land for me.

"Let's find cover." Meria set off into the woods.

Eve and I followed. I stayed behind her, and her speed improved as we

moved deeper into the woods.

Rustling sounded from behind us, and I turned to see a man in the distance. For the briefest second, he was so perfectly lined up between the trees that I could see he wasn't one of ours.

Then he disappeared.

"They're following us," I whispered.

"I'm almost out of magic," Eve said. "Can't hide us much longer."

"Save it." Meria pointed to a cave in the distance. "So you can conceal that."

We raced toward the cave, taking cover inside the dark, cool interior. Eve collapsed onto the ground and drew in a shuddery breath, her magic swelling on the air. "This is the last of it for a while."

A faint glowing light shimmered at the mouth of the cave. It obstructed our view of the forest, making it look like it was underwater. I could barely make out the shadows that were the trees and bushes.

"From the outside, it just looks like more rock," Eve said.

Panting, we all sat.

"Lore will come for us," I said.

"Definitely." Meria nodded. "But will he find us before they do?"

"We've got ten minutes left on my magic," Eve said. "Maybe a little less. I'm barely keeping the illusion going."

"If they don't get out of here soon, we need to assume they know we're in the area and are looking."

"So we should ambush them," I said. "I want answers."

Eve's jaw hardened. "Me, too."

"Ambush it is." Meria peered out into the woods. "I don't like waiting for an attack anyway."

I laid my hand on Eve's shoulder. "But you should wait here."

"The hell I will." She scowled. "I'm a lot better. Miserable, but it's nothing the healer can't fix when I see her."

“But—”

She shook her head, her glower cutting me off.

“Fine,” I said. “All of us.”

“They’re going to be confused,” Meria said. “One moment, they could probably hear us running, and the next, there was silence.”

“Let’s wait for them to get farther away, then hide in the trees and attack,” I suggested.

Meria and Eve both grinned.

“I like that plan.” Meria drew her bow and arrows from the ether. “It’ll be perfect.”

My mind raced. “We’ll get into the trees, wait silently, then make a noise to draw them closer to us. But make sure the noise sounds at ground level.”

“We can throw rocks at the ground,” Meria suggested.

“I like it.” I grinned.

“Let’s go.” Eve rose, approaching the barrier that concealed the cave. She stood still, tilting her head to listen. “I don’t hear them.”

We joined her, both listening carefully.

“Neither do I,” Meria said.

I just shook my head.

“Let’s go, then.” Eve let the magical barrier drop, and we hurried into the forest, our footsteps silent.

I could feel the presence of our stalkers, even though I couldn’t see them. They were like a stink on the air, a stain of danger that I couldn’t possibly miss.

“They’re not far off,” I whispered, then cut toward the nearest climbable tree. I grabbed a few rocks off the ground and stuffed them in my shirt, then hauled myself up into the branches, finding it easier than I’d expected.

More unexpected talents.

Too bad the stars weren’t out, or I’d have some magic to call on. As it was, I’d have to wait for the right moment and jump on a dude’s head, and

then stab him with my sword.

How was this my life?

Eve and Meria climbed nearby trees, moving with a swiftness and grace that took my breath away. Once they were settled, they looked at me.

I nodded.

We tossed our rocks to the ground. They rustled as they hit the fallen leaves.

We waited.

A few seconds later, figures sprinted through the woods toward the cave where we'd been hiding. There were at least ten of them, half men and half women, all dressed in dark green to blend with the forest.

They were as beautiful as all the other fae I'd seen, but there was something colder about their expressions.

Mercenaries?

I had no idea.

But they moved with an efficient grace that suggested they'd worked together as a team for a long time. There was a pattern to their movements, one we were about to seriously disrupt.

At my left, Meria fired three arrows in quick succession, each finding a home in the chest of one of our pursuers. Two men and a woman. They were still running when they fell, surprise on their faces.

"In the trees," shouted a man from the back. He was the biggest, with long dark hair and a scar across his face that made him look like a pirate.

To my right, Eve drew two daggers and threw them toward the attackers closest to her tree. The silver metal glinted as it pinwheeled through the air. One after the other, her blades sank into chests. Her victims fell, hitting the ground with identical thuds.

That left only five more.

Meria had more arrows, but they'd already figured out where she was hiding. The five of them gathered beneath her tree, taking cover under the

branches. She tried to fire downward, but it was impossible for her to make a hit.

The leader began to climb the tree, a determined grace to his movements that sent ice through me.

He'd kill her as soon as he caught her. She was strong, but there was something downright terrifying about him.

I scrambled down from the tree, my blade clutched in my hand. Eve did the same, running over to the fallen bodies that contained her knives. She yanked them out, and together we approached the circle of mercenaries surrounding Meria's tree.



Lore

When the landslide had hit the train, my first thought had been of Sia.

Fear had iced my spine, stolen my breath.

I'd abandoned the car where I'd been questioning the staff about the yellow-eyed man and sprinted back to our private car, desperate to find her. To make sure that she was okay.

The guards that I'd posted were waiting outside her door. When I'd opened it, I'd found the room empty and the window open.

At that moment, I'd thought I'd felt the greatest fear I'd ever known.

I'd been wrong.

It came ten minutes later when I'd finished searching the entire train. She was nowhere to be found. It was nearly enough to take me to my knees.

"She's gone." My voice was rough. Too quiet.

I looked at Dain, whose face was also pale. "She must have been in one of the last three cars. They'd been severed from the rest."

I started toward the exit. “How far back are they?”

“Half a mile, maybe more. It took some time to stop the train. We were going full speed.”

I yanked open the door to the bar car, finding the king of the Irish fae standing in my way. His red hair gleamed with a dark light, and cunning flickered in his eyes.

“Going somewhere?” He raised a brow.

“Someone has attacked my queen.” The words came out as a growl, and I shoved past him.

“Attacked?” He scoffed. “The landslide? That was bad luck. Just a coincidence.”

A coincidence, my arse.

I headed for the dining car. It was the closest exit, besides climbing out a window. It was empty, save for the Queen of the Mountain Fae, who sat with a plate of cake and cup of coffee.

She tilted her head at me. “Well, well. Aren’t you in a hurry.”

I ignored her and pulled open the door, jumping down from the train and sprinting along the tracks. I could hear the footsteps of my guards behind me, but my attention was solely on what was ahead of me.

The tracks cut into the side of the mountain, curving around a bend. When I rounded it and spotted the train wreckage, my stomach dropped.

No.

Thousands of pounds of rocks covered the first car, burying it almost entirely.

Fear iced me, and I ran faster, going around the buried car. Sia wasn’t in there. I refused to believe it.

Because if she was, she was dead.

It was a reality I wasn’t willing to accept.

The next car was only half buried, but it was the final car that caught my eye. It had flipped over onto its side, and arrows protruded from it.

Ambush.

Anger surged inside me, dark and vicious. This had all been planned in an attempt to kill my queen.

I let the beast of my rage overtake me. It gave me speed as I scaled the side of the train car and looked through the broken windows to the interior.

Empty.

But she had been here. Her faint scent was still on the wind, honey and flowers. So uniquely her.

More importantly, there was no blood. Not enough for me to see, at least. Or smell. I would take that to mean she had escaped in good health.

Or was kidnapped.

It was another reality I refused to accept. Not until I saw it with my own eyes. And if I did, I'd rescue her.

I spun in a circle, searching the surrounding area. The mountain rose to my right, the slope extending down to my left. From the angle of the arrows embedded in the train, the attack had come from up the mountain.

They would have run the other way, most likely.

I turned toward the downward slope.

Dain was already in the forest, searching for a trail.

"Do you see anything?" I called.

"Footprints." He looked into the trees. "They went that way."

"On their own or dragged?" I leapt off the train car and ran into the forest, finding the footprints at his feet.

"Looks like they were on their own," Dain said.

"Agreed." I spotted more tracks. "But they were followed." By nearly a dozen assailants.

"Let's go." I followed the footsteps, moving swiftly and silently through the woods. My guards stuck behind us, knowing me that I'd want to be the first on the scene.

The kill was mine.

Whoever threatened her... I would end them.

My heart thundered, fear driving me forward. We'd run about half a mile into the wood when I heard the sound of a fight. People shouting and swords clanging. A surge of adrenaline and hope pushed me faster, until I came upon a scene that chilled me.

Sia fought a male fae, fending off his sword strikes with her own blade. He was far taller and stronger than she, but he didn't have her speed. It allowed her to stay one step ahead of his blade at all turns. Her friends Eve and Meria fought their own opponents, but there were more attackers coming out of the woods.

Mercenaries.

I'd know their kind anywhere. They wore silver pendants around their necks that announced their guild to the world.

I drew my sword from the ether and charged, heading for Sia. She was holding her own against her opponent, but a second man had nearly reached them. He was planning to attack her from behind, and there was no way in hell I'd let him.

Sia's eyes flashed to me as I ran past. I wanted to pull her into my arms and get her away from here, but first, we had to take care of these damned mercenaries.

I put myself between Sia and the second attacker. He was as tall as me, with dark eyes and a snarl that twisted his lips into a grimace. I raised my sword, letting the hot anger flow through my veins. Our blades clashed, and I let my rage drive me, purging it in the fight against my opponent.

It took only two strikes to land a killing blow, my sword sinking through his chest with ease. He hung from my blade, surprised eyes meeting mine. I wedged my foot against his stomach and pushed him off. As he fell, I gripped the pendant that hung around his neck and tore it off. I'd find the damned guild that had sent them and figure out who was paying them to attack my queen.

I turned to seek her out.

She was behind me, dodging her opponent's blade with swift grace. He swiped for her shoulder. She ducked to avoid it and thrust her blade up into his stomach.

Vicious satisfaction surged through me. I liked seeing her victorious.

All around, my guards fought the mercenaries alongside Sia's friends.

Now that the worst of my fear and rage had passed, my thoughts cleared.

We needed to take one of them alive if we wanted to find who was stalking Sia.

To my right, one of my guards fought a tall woman with black hair and a scar across her cheek. I tucked the pendant into my pocket and strode toward them. The woman was distracted by the fight against my man. I caught his attention and mouthed *mine*.

He lowered his sword and stepped back abruptly. For the briefest moment, she paused in surprise. I used it to my advantage, grabbing her from behind and gripping her throat. She thrashed, trying to swipe backwards with her sword to hit me. I knocked it from her grip, tightening my hand on her throat.

"Who sent you?" I demanded.

She growled but said nothing.

I squeezed harder. "Who sent you?"

"Fuck you," she croaked.

"Who was the man with the yellow eyes? One of yours?"

She growled, trying to shake me off.

"Who was he?"

She laughed low, a choked sound. "Just one of the committed, and we will have her yet."

I spun her around. "What the hell does that mean?"

She just grinned, a dark smile. Wariness shot through me. There was something off about her.

“The witch with the deathly magic will come for you yet.” She reached up to grip the vial that hung from a cord around her throat. She squeezed tightly, and I heard the faint sound of breaking glass. A small plume of powder rose up from the broken vial, and she breathed in deeply. A bit of it wafted toward me. Though I held my breath, a small amount went in my mouth.

I released her and stumbled back, coughing.

Poison.

She dropped to the ground, twitching as her eyes rolled back in her head.

I choked on the foul taste, my throat tightening. Dragging breath into my lungs was difficult, but I managed to get enough to clear my head.

Dain appeared at my side and clapped me on the back. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” My voice sounded rough, and my throat felt like I’d swallowed nails, but the worst of it had passed. “I only breathed a small amount.”

Dain looked down at the woman, who lay dead at our feet.

“She’s a zealot,” he said. “Why else would she kill herself?”

“Some mercenaries are committed to the death, but I agree.” I frowned down at her corpse. “She doesn’t wear the same emblem as the others. She’s not a mercenary.”

“Then definitely a zealot.”

I nodded, turning to search for Sia. The battle had died down, our side victorious. The bodies of the enemy lay scattered throughout the forest, and I spotted Sia leaning against a tree and panting. A body lay at her feet.

I strode to her, desperately grateful to find her safe. She looked from the body to me, her face pale, and her eyes dark.

I frowned. “Are you all right?”

“I’m—” She swayed, drawing in a shuddering breath. “I think—”

She collapsed, her body sliding down the tree to the ground.

Fear lanced me, and I sprinted to her, going to my knees at her side.

“Sia.” I searched her body for wounds, seeking the telltale sign of blood soaking through clothing. There were a few shallow cuts—one on her right arm, her waist, her shoulder. Nothing grievous enough to cause her to pass out, though.

“Healer!” My shout cut through the quiet of the forest, and several birds launched themselves from the trees, shrieking as they flew toward the sky.

I had no idea if the healer had come with us, but I prayed she had. Gently, I swept Sia into my arms and stood.

Dain strode toward me. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. Did Merebeth come?”

“I’m here!” She ran through the forest, her cheeks red from exertion. She stopped in front of us, panting. “What happened to her?”

“I don’t know. One moment, she was fine and fighting. The next, she was pale and glassy eyed. Then she collapsed.”

Merebeth frowned. “Poison?”

I looked down at the body of the man she’d felled. There was no broken vial at his throat, nor a mercenary’s charm. “I don’t think so.” I met Merebeth’s gaze, fear welling inside me. “Fix her. Please.”

“Let me see.” She frowned, her brow creasing in concentration, and laid her hand on Sia’s stomach. Her magic swelled on the air, and her frown deepened. “Her magic feels bruised. Torn, maybe.”

“Torn? What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. Just describing what I feel. It’s unusual.”

“Can you help her?”

“I’ve done what I can.” Her gaze flicked up to mine. “She’s more stable, but rest is the only thing that will help now.”

“Then we return to the train.” I cradled Sia close to my chest and started through the forest.

Her two friends appeared at my side, bloody and panting.

“What happened?” Meria demanded. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.” The fear twisted in my gut.

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Sia

Aches shot through my body, a dull tearing sensation that tugged at my muscles. I drew in a shuddering breath, trying to rise.

I couldn't. Something gripped me tightly, keeping me bound.

Groggily, I opened my eyes.

The sight of Lore's chin, lips, and cheekbones filled my vision.

He was carrying me, his strong arms cradling me against his chest. His beautiful face was set in lines of fear and concern, brow creased and lips tight.

"Lore?" I croaked.

"Sia." His gaze flashed down to mine, fear turning to relief. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." I winced. "Mostly. What happened?"

"You collapsed."

"Right." I remembered now—vaguely. I'd just killed the bastard who'd come after me. When he'd grabbed me, I'd felt the most horrible sensation. Like he was trying to pull the magic right out of my body.

He'd almost succeeded, too.

I shivered at the memory.

“We have an audience up ahead.” Meria’s voice sounded from nearby. “Looks like every single person from the train is standing on the tracks and waiting to see who comes back alive.”

I craned my neck to see Meria. She and Eve walked alongside Lore, with Dain on the far end.

Relief rushed through me.

Everyone I cared about was all right.

“What about the rest of your guards?” I asked. “Are they okay?”

“Wounds, but no deaths.” Lore’s gaze was on the train we were nearing. It had stopped on the tracks, the last three cars missing.

“Was anyone else lost in the landslide?” I asked.

“You three were the only ones in those cars.”

“Not a coincidence,” Eve growled.

I had to agree with her. I looked toward the figures standing on the tracks and wondered which of them was responsible. There were about two dozen fae—representatives of every court, just like Meria had said.

Curiosity filled their gazes as they watched us approach. Did any look disappointed to see us? My gaze went first to the Irish fae, but they had no expression. No one did, except for the Queen of the Mountain Fae. She looked worried.

Concern for me, or concern for her plan gone wrong?

The first, I thought. I still didn’t doubt her when she said she was on my side.

We neared the group, and they all looked to Lore, waiting to hear what he would say.

“We’ll continue with the journey.” He didn’t stop to speak to anyone as he strode by, carrying me into the train and toward our compartment.

I could hear the bustle of people boarding, but my attention was only on Lore. He held me like I was a priceless glass vase. But I could sense tension

in his arms.

Interesting.

“You’re worried for me,” I mused.

“Of course I was. Am.”

“And not just because you need me to defeat the witch with the deathly magic.”

His lips tightened, and he said nothing. We’d reached his train compartment, and he pushed open the door and laid me gently on the bed. His gaze ran over me, brow still creased with concern. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. A little weak, but fine.”

He nodded, straightening. Tension vibrated around him, and he looked like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

Finally, he sat in the chair by the bed.

“There are guards outside, you know,” I said. I hadn’t seen them take up position. Knowing Lore, he was the one who’d put them there.

“There aren’t guards on the windows.”

“Fair point.” If I could go out, someone could come in.

“What the hell happened?” he demanded.

“We were attacked.”

“But why? Why the hell were you back there?”

How much should I tell him?

Dare I mention my parents?

What the hell else could I say? He wouldn’t believe me if I told him we’d gone for a stroll. It had taken some serious effort to ditch the guards.

“I never knew my parents,” I said, looking away from him. “I spent my whole life wondering about them. Before we left your court, I asked the Truth Teller for information. She told me I would find it on this trip, and I thought I was going to the back of the train to get it.”

“From whom?”

I didn't want to tell him that. What if he sought her out and found out something bad about me before I knew it?

"I can't tell you."

He frowned, his gaze turning stormy.

"Just trust me. Please."

"I—"

I cut him off. "I left my life behind to protect your people. You know I didn't want to be queen. If we're going to work together to save your kingdom, then we're partners. So you have to trust me on this."

He heaved a frustrated sigh, his jaw tightening. "It could be dangerous."

"It might be, but probably not. You know the Truth Teller wouldn't lead me into danger. I've proven myself capable, so let me handle it. Trust me."

"Fine. For now."

"We're partners?"

"Yes. Now tell me about the attack. If it wasn't the person you thought it was, who was it?"

"No, and I don't know who they were."

"Some type of mercenary. We'll look into which guild and who hired them." His gaze searched mine, worry behind his eyes. "Why did you collapse after the fight? You looked fine."

"Exhaustion."

He shook his head. "That's not it."

"It is, I was—"

"Sia." His tone was sharp enough to stop my words and grab my attention. "You just made me agree to trust you. So you need to trust me. Your life is at risk, and I can help."

I drew in a shuddery breath.

I really *had* almost died. Twice.

And he was right about the trust thing.

"I think they're trying to take my magic," I said, remembering what the

end of the fight had felt like. “That’s why I passed out. When I was fighting the last guy, it felt like he was trying to tear my magic out of me.”

Shock flashed on his face. “Was this the first time that’s happened?”

“I don’t think so. It might have happened yesterday, when the yellow-eyed man was trying to throw me off the train. But I was so out of my mind from the poison that I didn’t realize what was happening.”

“Why would they want your magic?” The suspicion in his voice made me twitch. “What is so unique about it? I know it’s unusual, but to kill you for it...”

“I don’t know.” Finding my parents would help, but I didn’t want to draw his attention back to them.

“I don’t believe that for a second.” He shook his head. “I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth.”

I couldn’t tell him I was a witch. He hated witches. His entire kingdom did. For good reason, even though it was pretty prejudiced in the big picture.

My friends had made it clear I needed to keep my true nature a secret. They’d harbored me, and I didn’t want them getting thrown in the tower.

I had to protect them as well as myself. “There is no truth to tell. Or if there is, I don’t know it.”

And I really didn’t. I had no idea what was up with my magic or why they would want it.

“Damn it, Sia. I’m trying to protect you.”

“I can protect myself!” Irritation shot through me. I’d been thrown into this dangerous world, and I’d managed. *I’d survived.* “I don’t need your help.”

“The hell you don’t.” His low voice vibrated through me.

He was right, and I’d admitted it to myself earlier. But hearing him talk to me like I was helpless just pissed me off. Made me *want* to fight.

“You need me, Sia,” he growled. “You wouldn’t survive an hour without my protection.”

“That’s bullshit.” All the danger and tension of the day exploded inside me, frustration and rage adding fuel to my fire.

I surged to my feet, suddenly feeling better than I had all day. My injuries were forgotten, overtaken by my anger at his high-handed insults.

“I’m not going to tolerate this.” I had almost reached the door to my sleeping compartment when his hand wrapped around my arm, spinning me back around to face him.

I gasped, surprised to see him so close. He’d risen so silently that I hadn’t heard him, and now his face was only inches from mine.

“Damn it, Sia you’re too stubborn.” His gaze ran over me, blazing with desire that was unmistakable. “I just want to protect you.”

“And I want to be protected. I’m not an idiot who would turn down help.” I glared at him. “But I won’t tolerate being treated like a child.”

A low laugh rumbled through him, and his gaze riveted to my lips. “The last thing I think of you as is a child.”

He made my blood boil, and my body couldn’t tell if the heat was rage or passion. Currently, it was leaning more toward passion.

I sucked in a breath, my chest brushing against his. We stood so close that I could see the striations of sapphire in his pale blue eyes.

The sight riveted me, and his winter-forest scent nearly sent me into a stupor of lust. My heart thudded low, and heat pooled between my thighs. Time seemed to stop as we stared at each other, our breaths synchronizing.

My gaze dropped to his mouth, and the memory of his taste made my entire body tighten. Unable to help myself, I swayed toward him.

God, I wanted him.

So badly.

“Lore.” I reached up and brushed my fingers against his jaw. He shuddered, his eyelids fluttering closed as he drew in a deep breath.

“Sia.” His voice was rough with desire. “This is a terrible idea.”

Maybe it was, but in the middle of this train ride through hell, I wanted

something good.

“I don’t care.” I stood on tiptoe and pressed my lips to his.

A low groan rose in his throat, an almost animal sound that made my heart race. He gripped my waist and pulled me toward him.

My chest pressed flush to his, and the heat of him seared me. He was all strength and tightly leashed power. It made my head swim.

“I want this,” I murmured, tracing my tongue over his lips.

“Fate help me, so do I.” He gripped my hips and hoisted me up. I wrapped my legs around his waist so that my center pressed flush to the hardness between his legs.

Pleasure shot through me, fierce and quick. I gasped, unable to stop myself from moving against him. Every shift of my hips sent another jolt of fire through me, and starbursts appeared behind my eyelids.

“Sia,” he rasped, turning to press my back against the wall. He gripped my hips and moved against me. I clutched his shoulders, and he ran his lips down my neck, pressing kisses to the sensitive skin.

I tilted my head to the side, giving him better access.

He laved his tongue over the curve of my neck, then groaned. “You taste so sweet.”

I tilted my head so that I could nip his jaw. “You don’t. You taste like sin.”

“You *feel* like sin.” He thrust against me, his length hard and delicious, putting pressure in just the right places. I’d had no idea it could feel so good through so many layers of clothing.

His lips found mine again, and he kissed me with the passion of a man who thought he might never do it again.

I couldn’t let that happen.

This couldn’t be the last time. I ran my hands over his shoulders and biceps, marveling at his strength, memorizing every inch of him.

Tension tightened in me as his movements drove me to the edge of

madness.

“I want you inside me.” The words whispered out of me on a moan.

Lore stilled, withdrawing his mouth from mine, and looking at me with hot eyes. “Sia...”

“Please, Lore.”

“No.” His jaw hardened, and he appeared to be trying to drag himself back from the brink. Panic flashed when he pulled back from me and said, “This was a bad idea.”

“Please, don’t leave me like this.” I hated the pleading in my voice. “I—I want you.”

A shuddery breath escaped him, his gaze dropping to my lips. The desire in his eyes made something tighten inside me. The ice blue was filled with sapphire flame, and I swore I could see all the things he wanted to do to me. He said one thing, but he clearly felt another.

No one had ever looked at me like that. I was pretty sure no one had ever looked at *anyone* like that.

A low groan escaped his throat. “Fate, help me.”

His lips crashed down on mine, a kiss so fierce that it stole my breath. It swept me up in a perfect storm of frustrated desire and desperate pleasure.

I gripped his shoulders, moving my hips against his in a rhythm that felt better than anything ever had in my life. I didn’t care what happened from here, as long as I could come. As long as I could make *him* come.

I wanted to feel him let go, to feel the ecstasy rush through him. He hadn’t been with anyone else in *centuries*. The idea of it took my breath. I wanted to feel his pleasure more than I wanted to feel my own.

“Sia.” He dragged his lips from mine and buried his face in the crook of my neck. “You’re going to make me—”

He cut off, the words stolen by a gasp that made my heart soar. His hands dug harder into my thighs as his hips moved in a desperate rhythm. He shuddered, his breath coming harder.

All of it combined to steal my thoughts and drag me into the vortex of pleasure alongside him. I wrapped my arms around his neck and hung on as all the tension exploded inside me, making me feel like a star going supernova.

A low groan escaped him as he shuddered, his breath hot at my ear. “Sia.”

The pleasure tapered off, leaving me lax and satiated. “I didn’t expect *that* to happen.”

He drew back, his gaze warm. “I wouldn’t leave you behind.”

I laughed, happier than I’d ever been in my life.

Then the shadows crossed his face.

“Lore?”

His brow creased and his jaw tightened. The change in his expression was fast enough to give me whiplash.

“We shouldn’t have done this.” He set me down with a gentleness that made my heart clutch, then whirled on his heel and left the room. The door thudded closed behind him.

I flinched, then leaned back against the wall.

Had that really just happened?

Lore

I strode through the train, wishing I could outrun my demons the way I'd walked away from Sia. I'd just *left* her there. After what we'd done, I'd found the strength to walk away.

I couldn't believe it.

I also couldn't believe the way I'd lost control.

Frustrated, I dragged a hand over my face. I'd let my desire get the better of me, just like I had in the past.

Weak.

I was weak. Especially where she was concerned.

I stopped in the bathroom and cleaned myself up, ashamed by my loss of restraint. Sia was a danger to my self-control, which meant she was a danger to my people. She wasn't to blame—that was all on me—but she was still too much of a temptation for me to resist.

And yet, she was meant to help us defeat the witch with the deathly magic. I couldn't let her go.

I left the bathroom and went to the dining car, unable to get my mind off of Sia and the witch who would arrive at High Court Palace.

The damned witch needed to stop with the theatrics and arrive, already. Her dark clouds had been hovering over our kingdom for months, growing ever closer. They filled the sky as the train steamed toward the palace, growing thicker and darker as we neared our destination.

The threat was about to bubble over into something real, but I was ready for it to be here *now*.

I needed to put my energy toward something, and violence suited me best at the moment.

“Don’t you look in a tizzy?” The voice of the queen of the Mountain Fae broke through my distraction.

I was in the dining car, I realized. She was here once more, a different slice of cake in front of her.

I frowned. “You eat too much sugar.”

She laughed. “*That’s* what you want to talk about?”

I scowled, but she was right. It’d been a poor choice. My mind was a mess.

She inspected me, her lips pursed. The dining car was still empty, she the only occupant.

“Sit.” She nodded to the seat across from her.

“No.”

“Sit. You owe me that much.”

Did I? “You can’t possibly still be angry with me.”

“Honestly? No. It’s been centuries since you left me. And we were never close, despite the fact that we were bound to be wed. You were a libertine who slept with anyone you met. I didn’t expect much of you. But I *am* angry that you broke the engagement without so much as a word to me about it. That was a disrespect I could not tolerate.”

I dragged a hand through my hair. “That was wrong of me.”

“You were a different man, then.” She sighed. “I’ve heard tales of how you’ve changed, but to see it for myself...”

I raised a brow, wondering idly if she would continue. I was still reeling inside from what had happened with Sia, and I wanted the distraction of her calling me a cold bastard. We hadn't seen each other since we'd parted centuries ago. During that time, she'd sent an emissary to High Court Palace, so I'd never had to see her on my visits there.

"Well, they were correct." She tapped her fork on the table. "You've turned to ice."

"Better than what I was before."

She shrugged. "I liked you well enough."

"You heard what happened to my people. The attack that occurred under my watch. The dozens of lives lost. That was all because of me. Because of my selfishness and distraction."

"I'd say you're too hard on yourself, but I'd be the same as you."

"And Sia threatens that." I couldn't believe I was telling her this.

"Because you care for her." She grinned, tilting her head back to look at the ceiling. "Oh, I love it. The ice king melts for his new queen. It's like a novel."

"It's like a nightmare." I dragged a hand through my hair again. "She will distract me the way I was distracted before."

"You're stronger than you realize. Just because you had a wild past doesn't mean you'll do the same thing now. You have better self-control."

Laughable. I could tell her about the curse I'd bought from the witch. It was the entire reason I seemed to have self-control. In truth, I was weaker than I'd ever been. Tonight was proof of that.

I rose.

"You deserve to be happy, Lore. And she's the one who can do that for you."

"Deserve?" Regret and anger tightened in my throat. "I don't deserve anything of the sort."

"You can't help other people if you don't help yourself, Lore. This

misery will eat you alive until there's nothing left of you. And if there's nothing left of you, you can't protect your people.”

“Goodbye, my lady.” I turned and strode away, unable to get her words out of my head.

Miserable?

She thought me miserable?

Why did it even matter? I was doing my duty. Keeping my kingdom safe. That was all that mattered.



Sia

The rest of the night passed in a blur. After Lore had stormed out of his sleeping compartment, I'd snuck back into my own and locked the door behind me.

Not that he'd be coming into my room tonight. No way in hell he'd be visiting me—not after the way he'd stormed out.

I slept fitfully, catching only a few minutes of sleep between waking to memories of his mouth on my skin. It was like he followed me into my dreams, his kisses keeping my mind tethered to him.

By the time the sun rose, I was ready for morning. Not that I'd gotten any decent sleep. Far from it. But I was grateful I could get out of bed and find a distraction. I couldn't bear to close my eyes again and see him. It would just make my heart race and my skin heat all over again.

I was acting like a damned teenager.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, unable to believe what we'd done.

It had been incredible.

And stupid.

I couldn't afford to become distracted like that. I was literally fighting for my life. The last thing I needed was to be mooning over a man.

A knock sounded on my door, and I jerked.

Was it Lore?

My heart raced.

No way.

“Sia?” Meria’s voice sounded through the door. “You there?”

“Yeah. Come in.”

Meria stepped into the room, followed by Eve. They’d both dressed in fresh clothes. The outfits were similar to those they’d worn during the competition—tight trousers, billowy shirts, and trim vests—and Eve noticed me looking her up and down.

“Got to be dressed right to protect the future queen.” She winked.

“Thank you, guys.” Gratitude welled within me—both for their help and the fact they gave me something else to think about. “I’d be up shit creek without you.”

Eve grimaced. “Sounds like a terrible creek.”

“Yep.” I looked over at Meria, who was watching me with a bit of extra interest in her eyes.

It took everything I had not to reach up and touch my lips to see if they were swollen. Could she see that I was different?

Being intimate with a man shouldn’t make a woman different. That was ridiculous.

But I felt different, and I was pretty sure my closest friend could see it.

Yet I couldn’t bring myself to tell them. For now, it was something I had to keep close. I wasn’t sure why, but it felt precious. Like the memories weren’t meant to be shared, even though a big part of me regretted losing control.

“Are we almost there?” I asked, hoping to distract Meria from her perusal.

She pursed her lips. "You're hiding something."

Damn it. She really was perceptive. "I'm not."

"Yeah, you are. But I'll let you hold onto it for a little while. If you start to look stressed, though..."

She would pull it out of me. The message was clear.

"Thank you."

She smiled and nodded, then tilted her head toward the door. "You should get dressed. We're almost there."

"Really?" I turned to look out the window, spotting the dark clouds overhead. I shivered. "The clouds are worse here, aren't they?"

"Yeah." Meria's tone held a grimace.

"It's almost time," Eve said. "I bet she'll be here any day now."

"Great." I was headed to my wedding and there was about to be a super evil uninvited guest. Just like sleeping beauty.

"We'll be in the sitting room," Meria said. "Get a move on. We're nearly there."

They left, and I stood. It didn't take long to dress, but I'd sure as hell need a shower when I arrived. Hopefully, no one would stand too close to me.

How the hell was I supposed to be queen when I had thoughts like that?

I shook my head. This world was insane.

Once I was dressed, I went into the sitting room. It was full, the entire contingent from our court filling the space. My gaze went immediately to Lore, who stood at the window.

I stopped abruptly, unable to help myself. Heart pounding, I looked for a place to hide.

Annoyance surged through me.

Hide?

Who the hell was I becoming?

I wasn't going to hide from him. Yes, last night had been incredibly intense. And then he'd just *walked* out on me. But I could behave like a

grown woman. In fact, I *had* to.

There was too much at stake. My life. The lives of the people in his court.

To have any chance of succeeding, we needed to work together on this. I could do that.

I drew in a deep breath and walked over to him, stopping at his side. The winter-forest scent that was uniquely his wrapped around me, and I resisted the urge to draw it into my lungs. It would just remind me of last night, and I couldn't afford that.

Electricity tightened the air between us. I didn't look at him, but I didn't need to. Couldn't, in fact. I'd never been so aware of a person in my life, and if I met his gaze right now, I might combust on the spot.

He seemed to feel the same because I never felt his gaze on me. He was silent, and I couldn't bring myself to be the first to speak. What would I say?

I feel drawn to you by fate?

Nope. Not an option.

Last night was the best of my life?

Even worse.

So I stayed silent.

The train slowed to a stop at a simple station built of beautiful golden wood. Oaks surrounded it, huge and ancient. Dark clouds hung heavy over the trees, casting shadows over the forest and platform.

"We'll get off last," he said. "Avoid the crowd."

I liked that plan. I was still on edge, and the last thing I wanted to do was make small talk with someone from another court.

Once most of the crowd had cleared, we disembarked. Lore and I split up, and I walked with Meria and Eve, following right behind Lore and Dain. They didn't speak on the way up the path, and neither did we. My attention was too riveted by the clouds overhead.

They felt closer here. More powerful—as if they were imbued with a magic all their own. A dark magic. It made a shiver run through me.

“You okay?” Eve whispered.

“Yeah. I just don’t like those clouds.”

“I don’t blame you. They’re unavoidable here.”

It was an understatement, and I was grateful when the palace appeared on the hill in front of us. It was massive, a delicate structure built of white and grey stone in a style I’d never seen before. Ornate and delicately built, it looked like it could be knocked over with a few well-placed cannon blasts. There wasn’t even a curtain wall to protect it.

“It’s really just a ceremonial palace, isn’t it?” I asked. “No defenses at all.”

Meria nodded.

“No wonder the witch with the deathly magic is supposed to be here,” I mused. “It would be easy to get in.”

“*If* she could find it,” Meria said. “It’s hidden.”

“I’m sure she’ll manage.”

“Unfortunately, I think you’re right.” Meria looked at Eve. “But we’ll be ready.”

“Thanks, guys. I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have you.”

“Kick ass, still. Just slower.” Meria grinned at me.

I smiled back, but it faded as we began to climb the stairs to the castle entry. Lore waited for me at the top, holding out his arm for me.

I drew a shuddery breath, then took it. His sleeve was warm beneath my fingertips, the muscles firm beneath the fabric. Heat shot through me where we touched, and I raised my head to meet his gaze.

“We need to present a united front,” he murmured.

“We *are* united.” We might have our issues, but I was dead certain we were on the same side when it came to matters at the palace. We were here to protect the Court of Starlight and Darkness. I’d do whatever it took. So would he.

He nodded, then led me through the open door and into the enormous

entry hall. The domed ceiling was built of white stone and glass, while the floor beneath our feet was a colorful mosaic of blues and greens. On a sunny day, it would be brilliantly beautiful, with the light streaming through the glass above.

As it was, the clouds overhead gave the interior a dreary feel. If this were a real wedding that I was looking forward to, I'd be nervous about rain.

Instead, I was nervous about an evil witch.

Freaking fantastic.

Many of the fae who'd been on the train milled around inside the enormous entryway, but we ignored them. Lore led me toward a staircase that swept up along the curved edge of the room, our court following behind us. Amidst this splendor, with a troop of people following us, I was really starting to feel like a queen.

It was...crazy.

At the top of the stairs, a servant dressed in a simple maroon uniform met us with a bow. He looked to be roughly forty years old, with short dark hair and the bland expression of someone who tried to blend into the background.

"My lord, my lady. We are delighted you are at the palace. May I show you to your rooms?"

"We know where ours is," Lore said. "But you may show the queen's ladies-in-waiting."

Meria gave a little wave, and the man turned to them.

He bowed. "Right this way, ladies."

"Ours?" I asked Lore.

"We share a room, of course," he murmured.

"Of course."

My attention remained riveted on that idea as he led me down the wide hallway to a chamber at the far end. Dain and the rest of the guards peeled off to go another way.

"They know where their rooms are?" I asked.

“They do. Each Court has assigned chambers that they decorate as their own.” He pushed open the wooden door to reveal a large room with enormous glass windows overlooking a dark lake surrounded by mountains. Sentries guarded the water, which looked endlessly deep. There was something almost ominous about it, but that was probably because it reflected the dark clouds that hung above.

Despite the slightly freaky view, the rest of the room was beautifully decorated with furniture made of warm golden wood. The white stone walls were a neutral backdrop for the jewel toned upholstery and bedding.

“It’s beautiful.” I walked into the room, drawn by the windows and the view of the clouds. “I didn’t think she’d be so close when we arrived.”

He joined me, staring out at them. “I’ve heard a few other courts talking about them, but no one else seems to realize they are more than just bad weather.”

“Eventually, they’ll have to rain, or people will start to wonder.” Why the hell *were* they so dark if they never rained? “Before I came to your court, did you ever see them rain?”

He shook his head. “We believe their dark color is from the magic they contain.”

I shivered. “What happens next here?”

Certainly not a discussion of last night.

“There will be a dinner later tonight. Then tomorrow evening, our wedding.”

I nodded, deciding not to think of the wedding right now. “And until the dinner?”

“We can explore. See who we run into. What we can hear.”

“Snoop, you mean.”

“Exactly. There’s often a lot to be learned by paying attention.”

“Should we talk to them about the dark clouds? See if they know anything?”

He hesitated, staring out at the sky. “The witch with the deathly magic is a problem that weakens our court. My information suggests she isn’t related to any of the other courts. The threat they pose to you is separate.”

“So many threats.”

“Welcome to being royalty.”

I huffed a small, wry laugh. “It’s not exactly what I expected when I was a little girl.”

“You always knew you would be royalty?” Surprise sounded in his voice.

I looked at him, caught off guard. “Wait, you think I was being serious?”

“Are you not?”

“How out of touch are you, Lore? Every little girl wants to be a princess. It was a joke.”

“Ah.” He looked back to the sky. “I haven’t had a normal life in a while. And children...they are very foreign to me.”

He’d been an ice king for centuries. I’d known it, but now, the knowledge just made me sad. Desperately, terribly sad. “You must have been so lonely, all those years without anyone. Not so much as a hug.”

He looked down at me, something flickering in his eyes. It was almost a...softness, maybe. Then he looked away.

I shook my head. What was I thinking, trying to have conversations like this with him? There was something inside me that pushed to know more about him. To grow closer to him.

That something was downright stupid.

“I’m going to get a shower.” I turned and walked away, determined not to look back. “I’ll see you tonight before dinner.”

Sia

The shower was amazing, of course. A waterfall that had appeared to be natural flowed from a rock wall in a nook made entirely of glass. I'd been able to look out over the lake while letting the hot water pour over me.

It would have been perfect if not for the creepy clouds. I turned my attention to the orchids that climbed up the rock walls, their pink and white blooms making me feel like I was in the jungle.

Being a fae queen might come with more death threats than I was comfortable with, but there were some perks.

When I'd finished showering, I wrapped myself in the soft robe that hung outside the shower door and left the bathroom. The bedroom was empty, as I'd expected it to be, and someone had laid out a dress while I'd been in the shower.

"Ninja maid," I murmured as I walked toward the emerald fabric. "Here and gone before I realized."

I was grateful for her work, though. I didn't have the first clue about what to wear in a fae court.

I ran my fingers over the soft fabric of the long dress. The design was

simple, a beautiful green garment embellished with gold embroidery. The square neckline and tight sleeves had a medieval flare, and the skirt was light and flowy. I slipped it on, sighing at the silken caress of the gown, then turned to the mirror.

With my curls around my shoulders, I looked like a fairytale princess.

I was a fairytale princess.

So weird.

I headed to the door, opening it to find Eve and Meria standing on the other side, still dressed in the outfits they'd worn earlier.

Eve raised her brows. "Don't you look fancy."

"I feel fancy. And like I probably wouldn't be able to outrun danger."

"Doubtful." Eve crouched down, running her hands over the folds of the skirt. "The king wouldn't put you in something dangerous. This material has been enchanted to stay out of your way when you're running or fighting."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Feel it."

I leaned down and ran my palms over the soft green fabric. I'd thought it felt a little strange around my legs. Now that I was focusing on it with my palm—which was far more sensitive than my calves—I could feel the faintest spark of magic.

"Wow."

Eve grinned and stood. "Yep. Pretty cool to have the royal tailor working for you."

"Are magical clothes common?"

"For the fae, definitely," Meria said. "They're a specialty of ours."

"Where are you headed?" Eve asked.

"To get you guys, then go exploring."

"What about Lore?"

"We're on the same team now. Both planning to look for whoever is attacking me. For the afternoon, we've decided to split up to see what we can

find.”

“I like that plan,” Eve said. “He’s a pain in the ass, but it’s better if we all work together. Chances of success go way up.”

“And I like that it will be just the three of us today,” Meria said. “Maybe we can find out more about the violet-eyed woman.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” I said. “I hope we run into her.”

“Let’s go find out.” Meria turned and started down the hall.

Eve and I followed, descending the stairs to the main entry hall. It had cleared out, the fae who’d been mingling having departed for their quarters or the grounds.

“Let’s go outside,” I said. “People might be stretching their legs after the long train ride.”

“I could use some fresh air anyway.” Meria looked around the entry hall. “Places like this give me hives. Too fancy.”

“You would have made a terrible queen,” Eve said.

“Most certainly.” She gave us each a little push forward. “Now let’s go.”

We strode across the entry hall and exited onto the stairs that led down to the grounds. The gardens stretched out in front of us, perfectly manicured with beds of flowers arranged around fountains and statues. I spotted an enormous tangle of hedges to the right. A group of red-haired fae walked through a gate and into the maze.

I nodded toward them. “What do you think that’s about?”

Eve shrugged. “Not sure, but if I wanted to have clandestine meetings, that’s where I would go.”

“Then let’s have a stroll.” I hurried down the stairs.

The clouds roiled overhead, lower than ever. They felt like they were pulling on me, and the sensation sent a wave of nausea into my gut.

I drew in a steadying breath and looked at the maze. “How the hell are we going to find them in there?”

“I’ve got an idea.” Meria whistled, a melodic tune that I recognized from

our time in the chess maze.

I looked up, spotting a trio of black birds swooping low. Meria whistled again, talking to them, and they swooped off to fly over the labyrinth.

We entered silently, following the path between the tall shrubs. When we reached a diversion in the path, Meria pointed to the right.

I nodded and headed that way. Meria and her birds took the lead. When we reached a large open area surrounding a fountain, I stopped.

The Irish fae stood next to it, staring into the water. There were three of them—two men and a woman. My gaze went to the king, who turned when he felt my scrutiny. His eyes flashed with cunning. A shiver ran through me.

I could see why people had warned me about them.

But we couldn't just stand here gawking. It didn't appear they were meeting anyone, so there was nothing to eavesdrop on. If they wanted to have a private conversation amongst themselves, they could do so in the privacy of their quarters.

I smiled and strolled toward them, trying to appear calm. In the stress of yesterday's attack, I hadn't had an opportunity to meet them.

The king's gaze moved from me to Meria, and something flickered there.

I looked at her, but her gaze was fixed on a rose bush, something far less interesting than the people in front of us.

Yep, there was something going on there.

I turned back to the king. "My lord. I had hoped to make your acquaintance."

The formal speech felt ridiculous, but I was trying to fit in. Eve and Meria would let me know if I sounded like an idiot.

"Queen Sia. I am pleased to meet you." He gave a small bow, then gestured to the woman at his right. "This is Maeve, my second-in-command. And Dorian, my third." He nodded to the man on his left.

They were both as beautiful as every other fae I'd seen. At this point, it would be interesting to see someone who didn't look like they should be on

the cover of *Most Beautiful People in the World Ever. Full Stop.*

But there was something strange about them as well. Just like the king, there was an eeriness to them that was unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was like they were power incarnate, volatile and intense. It sent a cold shiver over me.

I had no idea how to handle myself with people like this. They could crush me like a bug if they thought I was trying to pull one over on them.

So I decided to be blunt.

"Are you the ones who sent the mercenaries after me?" I asked.

There was no surprise on the king's face when he said, "No."

"Really? Because it seems like you might know something about it."

"I'm not surprised that someone wants to stop you from ascending to the throne of the Court of Starlight and Darkness. King Lore is already one of the most powerful fae in the world. Besides me, of course. His court would only become more powerful with a queen like you. There are many who would prefer for that not to happen."

"But you're not one of them?"

He shook his head. "Once upon a time, we might have been. Had we tried to attack you, we would have been successful."

The confidence in his tone sounded genuine. "So you're saying I should believe you because I'm not dead yet?"

"Essentially."

I frowned.

"Here." He held out his hand. "My gift is one of the mind. I'll allow you access, and you can see that I tell the truth."

"But will you be able to see into *my* mind?"

"Only if you let me. If I try without your consent, you'd feel it."

I looked toward Even and Meria, who nodded. They seemed to believe him, and I thought I could.

Warily, I touched his hand. Immediately, my head began to hurt.

Darkness filled my vision, and I tried to break away.

Before I could, images appeared. It looked like I stood in a room with many corridors leading off of it. Pale grey light filled the space, illuminating the emptiness.

“Is this your mind?” I asked, my voice breathless.

“The part I am allowing you to see, yes.”

It felt so real. The king thought in images, not words. I’d heard of people who could do that. And he was thinking about his role in the attack. Nothing was coming up—the rooms remained empty. There was nothing but empty space.

It was the oddest sensation, but I believed him.

I drew back my hand and opened my eyes. “I believe you.”

“Good. You should. What I have allowed you to witness was a great honor.”

“I’m not sure I’d go *that* far.” As soon as I said it, I heard how rude it sounded.

Shit.

His brows rose. “Perhaps you are correct. But I don’t often allow people access to my mind.”

“It was interesting, to say the least. But you could have tricked me.”

“I assure you, I did not.”

“Hmm.” I frowned at him. I believed him. Mostly. “I suppose I’ll find out eventually.”

He nodded. “You’re very bold. Far more so than I expected.”

“Really? You thought King Lore would marry a wimp?”

“Such a human turn of phrase.” He shook his head. “No. I mean that you don’t use the cunning of a fae.”

Because I’m not one.

No way I’d be telling him that, though. I shrugged. “I’m a different sort.”

And I needed to get out of here before he saw into me anymore. I didn’t

know what other powers of the mind he had, and if mind reading was one of them...

Yeah, that would be bad.

I inclined my head in a respectful gesture, then said, "We will leave you to your walk. Thank you for the answers."

Before he could respond, I spun around and left. My friends followed me, and we hurried through the maze. We didn't speak as we walked. I wanted to wait, to make sure no one was lurking behind any of the bushes.

About halfway to the exit, I spotted Vusario's dark cloak. It was notable for the silver thread used to embroider the back, and I watched him turn a corner and disappear.

I ignored him and retraced my steps through the maze. The place was giving me the creeps now, and I wanted to get as far away as I could.

When we reached the exit and stepped out into the open gardens, we found a bench and sat. With the low-growing flowers, no one could sneak up on us to eavesdrop.

"Did you really believe him?" Meria asked.

"I think so. It felt real. But can I trust him?"

Her gaze flicked left, then back to me. "Why would you ask me?"

"You know him, don't you? You've acted weird every time we've seen them."

She drew in a breath. "I don't know much, all right? And I don't want to talk about it right now. But yes, I think you could trust him. Not one hundred percent sure, but mostly."

I blew out a breath and nodded. "All right. So, strike out with the Irish. But there are still a few more courts we can look at."

"It's getting late, though." Meria looked up at the sky. "And these clouds are miserable."

"Yeah, let's get away from them," Eve said. "We don't have long to dress before dinner, anyway."

“All right.” I rose, casting a worried gaze at the clouds. “Do you think they mean she’s already here? They’re overhead. They’ve never been this close before.”

“Could be.” Meria shivered. “But I hope not. I don’t want to see how the world changes when she arrives.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “If we kill her, nothing has to change.”

“She comes bearing great magic and an even greater threat,” Meria said. “Whatever happens, there will be change.”

“She’s right about that,” Eve said.

“Well, then, we just have to make sure it’s a change we like. That’s what I’m here for, right? To kick her out of the realm and make sure the world stays the way we like it?”

“I’m not going to say no to an offer like that,” Meria said. “Although I’m pretty sure you’re going to need some help.”

“I’m definitely sure.” My words had been all bravado. I was scared to death. I linked my arm through hers. “And I’m glad it’s coming from you.”

Lore

“Do you recognize it?” I asked Theara, the historian of High Court Palace.

Her violet eyes flashed with recognition as she took the necklace from me. Dain leaned closer to her, watching her as intently as I was. After I’d left Sia in my quarters, we’d immediately sought out the historian. It had taken over an hour to find her. She was elusive as ever.

“The Order of the Northern Sword,” she said. “A band of mercenaries that’s roughly three hundred years old. Maybe older, but that’s the first time they made an appearance in the history books.”

“And they’re for sale to the highest bidder?” I asked.

She shook her head. “They only take causes they believe in.”

Anger vibrated in my chest. “And they believe in the cause of murdering my queen?”

She raised her hands. “Don’t kill the messenger.”

“Do you know how I might contact them?”

She shook her head. “They would only speak to possible clients, and you clearly couldn’t be one. Not as long as they are hunting your wife.”

“I could send an emissary.”

“Perhaps.” She shrugged. “I think they’d see right through that. Not that it matters. I don’t know where they are. Northern Sword is so vague, isn’t it?” She shook her head. “I hate when they’re vague like that. It makes the records so incomplete.”

“You’re saying they could be north of anywhere. Northern Europe, North America, Northern Africa. There are too many options.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“If we could catch one, we could interrogate him,” Dain said.

“We could try, but it didn’t go well last time.”

“Suicide?” the historian asked.

“How did you know?”

“I just guessed. I don’t know much about them, but they’re clearly one of the most committed guilds. Those types usually take themselves out of the equation before they’ll give up their mission.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear, but I wasn’t surprised.

“I can ask around for more information,” she said. “I have some colleagues who might know more. It could take time, though.”

“We don’t have time.”

“I can’t offer any better.”

I nodded. “Then thank you for your help. If you learn of something, please let me know.”

“I will.”

I turned to leave, but she gripped my arm, stalling me. I turned to look at her. “What is it?”

“Your queen. Protect her.”

“Of course.”

“She’s more than just a pawn in all this. More than just a chess piece to be played.”

I frowned. “I’m aware.”

She shook her head. “Your history is long, King Lore. And cold. She is

the fire that could warm you before you freeze straight through.”

“I dislike the heat.” I turned, pulling my arm from her grasp, and walking away.

Dain caught up with me. I could feel the interest coming off him and raised a hand. “Not another word.”

“Your royal command shit does *not* work on me.”

I gave a low grunt.

“She’s right,” Dain said. “You’re going to freeze into a solid block one of these days. No person can be alone for as long as you have and still survive. If there’s something special with Sia, you need to grasp it before you lose it.”

I glared at him. “Too many people have been telling me that. I’m not interested.”

“Of course you are. You seem more alive than I’ve ever seen you.”

“I don’t need to feel alive. I need to protect my people.” I pointed to the heavy clouds overhead. “The threat is here, Dain.”

He looked up at the heavy clouds. “I know. But you do protect your people. You just don’t need to do it alone.”

I clapped him on the back. “That’s what I have you for.”

“But you—“

Fortunately, we’d reached the castle steps. I took them two at a time, leaving him behind. I liked Dain. He was a good man. But he talked too much.

Not for the first time, I wished the Wolf were here. The creature didn’t tolerate train travel, but it would be good to have his company. Something to focus on besides my obsession with Sia.

When I entered our sleeping chamber, I caught sight of her immediately. She stood in front of the window, silhouetted by the dark clouds. Her red hair was piled on her head, and a golden dress flowed over her curves, the back unzipped to reveal a long column of smooth skin.

My fingertips itched to touch her. My mouth watered to taste.

She turned to look at me, her emerald eyes piercing me through my soul. I drew in a ragged breath, averting my gaze.

“Will you help me with this zipper?” Frustration sounded in her voice. “I’m about to tear this damned thing off and throw it in the fire.”

“I— ah. Don’t do that.” I strode to her, keeping my gaze at the hem of her dress so I didn’t have to look at her bare skin or trod on her gown.

“Thank you.” She released the fastening she’d been yanking on.

I forced my gaze up to the zipper, biting back a curse when I saw that it had caught on the fabric at the very base of her spine. Just an inch more and I’d see enough to put me on my knees.

“It’s stuck.” My voice sounded like it scraped over gravel.

I gripped the tiny metal tab, doing my best not to touch the smooth skin that beckoned. The damned thing was stubborn, and it took a few minutes to pull it free of the fabric.

Finally, I managed to slide it up the row of teeth, concealing her back all the way up to the base of her neck.

For the first time in ages, her hair was pulled up to reveal the slender column. She always wore it down—to conceal her ears, no doubt—and the sight of it made my heart race.

It took everything I had not to press my lips to her pale skin. I wanted to sink my teeth into her, just hard enough to make her moan.

I clenched my jaws and turned away, stalking toward the sideboard that held a collection of glass liquor decanters. I chose one at random, pouring a measure of liquid into a crystal glass.

“Did you find anything?” Sia asked, her gaze burning into me.

I downed the liquor in one gulp and turned to her.

Damn it.

Shouldn’t have done that.

The front view was even more spectacular than the back. She’d taken down her red curls, which now feathered around her face like flame. The gold

dress rose all the way to her collarbone, but it was so tight that I could see every inch of her curves. Hundreds of tiny gems sparkled, and she looked like a beam of sunlight.

“Lore? Did you find anything?”

I cleared my throat and set the glass down. “Not much.”

I updated her on the Order of the Northern Sword, and she frowned. “We have no way to contact them?”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it.” I strode to the wardrobe to collect my clothing for dinner. “What did you find?”

“I think the Irish fae aren’t in on it.” She told me about the king’s mind tricks, which I’d heard of but had never experienced. I didn’t know if he was telling the truth, but I could speak to him myself and see if I got a different answer.

I went into the bathroom to dress, then met her by the door.

There were a dozen things I wanted to say to her, but I had no idea how to voice any of them.

I was sure that I *shouldn’t* voice any of them.

“Be wary at dinner,” I said. “Trust no one.”

She nodded. “And we’ll present a united front?”

“Most definitely.” It didn’t matter how much I wanted to get away from her to preserve my sanity. She was too smart and powerful not to include in this. She was the core of it. We had to work together if we wanted to succeed. I couldn’t do this on my own.

The prophecy made that clear, and so did my experience.

I needed her. I just had to make sure I only needed her for this. When the witch with the deathly magic was defeated, Sia would return to her own life.

I would see to it.



Sia

Lore and I walked side by side into the massive dining room. Though we didn't touch, we stood close enough that I could feel the heat of him. I might think of him as the ice king, but he was far from cold. He might want to be, but he wasn't.

We stopped at the edge of the dining room, searching for our table. Glittering chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, their sparkling lights illuminating the long, white-linen-clad tables. Mountains of flowers and candles decorated each table, enough to make a southern bride swoon with envy. The room itself had the same ornate architecture as the main hall, with a ceiling made of stone arches and glass. During the daytime, it would be beautiful.

We were some of the last to arrive. Most of the other fae were seated at their tables, though a few mingled, drinks in hand. Their clothing was all spectacular.

"It's like I'm at the freaking Oscars," I muttered.

"Oscar?" Lore looked down at me. "Who is he?"

"No one important. To this, at least."

"Hmm. You'll explain later."

"You won't understand."

"Try me."

"Well, then you'll think I'm nuts."

"Probably." He smiled, then raised his arm. "Shall we?"

I tucked my hand into his arm, and we approached the table where the rest of our party sat. People turned to look at us, their gazes traveling up and down my dress and his dark suit.

We wanted to present a united front, and I was confident we were doing it well. Even our steps were in sync as we approached the head table. As the

guests of honor, we would sit in front of everyone.

I'd prefer the corner. Or the kitchen.

Lore stopped at the empty seats in the middle of the table and pulled out my chair. The table was large enough to fit our entire court, but everyone was seated on one side so that we could look out on the crowd. Or, more accurately, that we could be looked at. Like animals in a zoo.

Lore and I sat. Servants moved swiftly around the room, carrying silver trays of wine that sparkled with bubbles. I took one and drank, sipping a bit too quickly.

As much as I might want a drink to cut some of the tension, I needed my wits sharp. I hated feeling everyone's eyes on me, though. It felt like they were waiting for me to faceplant in the soup—either because they wanted me dead, or they'd like the entertainment.

I set the drink aside and looked at Lore. "How long will this last?"

"Too long." He sipped his drink. "There will be a speech, then dinner, then dancing."

Ugh. I didn't think I had it in me. It didn't help that my friends were seated all the way on the other end of the table.

"Not a fan of large gatherings?" he asked.

"Not fancy ones like this." I grimaced. "It's fun to look at, but the formality is not my thing."

"Likewise."

I looked at him, surprised. "But you're a natural."

"Born to it. But I don't have to like it."

"You're telling me you'd rather have a cheeseburger in the flatbed of a pickup truck?"

"I don't know what either of those things are."

I'd chosen the most ridiculous Americana good-ole-boy thing I could think of—the complete opposite of the graceful, ruthless king of the fae—but this was over the top.

“You’re telling me you’ve never had a cheeseburger?”

“I’ve eaten cheese.”

“That’s not a cheese burger.” I shook my head. “Tragic.”

“Among many things.”

“You’re right about that.” Perhaps I’d been hyperbolic with my word choice, but it was still crazy he hadn’t had a cheeseburger. “Pizza?”

“No.”

“Tacos?”

“Still no.”

“If we survive this, we’ll go to the human world and eat the best of their food. It will screw up your cholesterol, but I think you’ll be fine.”

He smiled at me, and I couldn’t help but feel like the sun had come out from behind the clouds. It was so rare to get a genuine smile from him.

It was gone too quickly.

Someone stood and clinked on a glass to draw attention, and Lore turned away. I followed his gaze, spotting the King of the Irish Court standing in the middle of the room.

“I would like to make a toast to our future happy couple.” He smiled and began to speak.

I sighed and settled in for a long evening.

Sia

The speeches were all boring, until they weren't. Three of the royals of other courts stood to honor our upcoming nuptials, and each one of them ended their speech with a subtle threat that we not overstep with our power.

Why the hell did they think I would make such a difference to the power of Lore's realm?

I leaned close. "Are they not married?"

"They're not. Only one of the fae royals has taken a spouse, and he is a recluse on an island in the North Atlantic. The Ocean Fae keep to themselves."

"But...why?"

"A fae can only marry when they find their perfect match. Their partner. None of the other fae have found that."

I blinked, staring at him. "Wait, what?"

The corner of his mouth tugged up in a wry smile. "Surprised?"

"More than." I tried to form words but ended up looking like a fish out of water instead, my mouth opening and closing idiotically. "We're meant to be together?"

“According to the seer who demanded that you join the competition to be queen.”

“Then why didn’t you just crown me instead of making me risk my life?”

He raised a brow.

Right. He’d already answered that question. I’d had to win to reveal that I was *the one*. When the competition had started, they’d thought I was just there to be fodder to cause another contestant’s magic to appear. And more than one fae in the competition had gained new magic as a result of it—me included.

“Fine. I’ve risked my life and now I’m fated to be your partner.” I kept my voice low, not wanting anyone else to overhear. Our court wasn’t bad about eavesdropping—they all respected Lore too much to try. But the servants who kept passing behind me with trays of food could be listening for tidbits. “If I’m *the one* who makes your kingdom more powerful, how will I ever be allowed to leave?”

I still didn’t like the idea of taking him up on his offer to return to my real life, but I wanted to know if he was lying to me about this possibility.

“We’ll find a way,” he said. “And I believe that the most important part of our union is to defeat the witch with the deathly magic. After that, you are free.”

I looked overhead, unable to stop myself from seeking out the dark clouds that hung heavy over the glass windows above. A shiver ran through me.

“She’s here,” I whispered. “She has to be, with the clouds so close.”

“I think you might be right.” He turned to the crowded room and scanned the occupants. “She could be any of the servants. Anyone lurking in the shadows that we do not see.”

I swallowed hard, hating the idea that there was someone watching me. Waiting to strike.

“Roast duck?” A silver platter appeared at my side, startling me.

“Um, yes. Thanks.” I’d actually never had duck before and wasn’t sure I

wanted to eat something so cute, but I said it just to get him to go away.

He placed several dark pieces of meat on my plate, and my stomach turned.

Yep. Not going to be able to eat.

I reached for the wine glass, then stopped.

If I wasn't eating, I couldn't drink. It would just go to my head.

"I want to get the hell out of here," I muttered.

"Dinner won't last long."

"I mean, I want to get away from the palace and back to your kingdom."

"It's not safe there, either."

That was true enough.

Across the room, a woman entered. My heart leapt. It was *her*.

The violet-eyed woman. The one with information about my parents. I nodded toward her, leaning close to Lore to ask. "Who is she?"

He looked toward her. "Theara. Historian of the Fae."

"Historian?"

He nodded. "She is a neutral party—member of no court, though she visits many. And she has kept the history of our kind for many decades."

A historian would definitely be the person to know about my family. I just needed to find a moment to talk to her.

More courses were served, and I managed to eat some bread and butter, along with a bit of salad. It didn't matter how off center I was—I still needed energy.

When I felt the gaze of someone burning into me, I turned to the left. It had come from the table containing the Court of Autumn, but no one was looking at me presently. There were about a dozen of them, all with auburn or brunette hair, and they were engaged in deep conversation with each other. Too deep? Maybe it was a cover?

I caught Vusario's eye. He was walking behind their table, and he nodded at me. I nodded back, wondering if he was eavesdropping on them, then

turned my attention toward the historian once more.

She looked up from her plate and caught my eye. A slight smile curved her lip, and she nodded her head toward an exit.

My heart leapt.

It was time.

She was going to tell me about my parents. And I could get away from this damned dinner.

“I’m exhausted, I think I’ll head to bed.”

He turned to me, his brow creased with concern. “Are you all right? You’ve been wounded recently.”

“I’m fine. Just tired. I can see myself back. I don’t even have to leave the castle itself.”

“But—”

I cut him off. “I’ll bring my ladies-in-waiting. You know they can keep me safe.”

He nodded. “Fine. But be quick about getting back to our quarters and lock the door.”

“Of course.” I stood and hurried to my friends. They sat next to each other at the far end of the table. When I stopped behind them, they turned to look up at me.

“Come on, I need a quick escort, but you’ll be back here before dessert.”

“Oh, thank God. I hear it’s chocolate.” Meria pushed back from the table, and Eve followed.

“Where are we going?” Eve asked.

“Lore thinks I’m going to my room. What I’m really doing is following the violet-eyed woman.” I led them toward the exit I’d seen the historian use.

“Is that safe?” Meria asked, keeping close to my side as we cut behind tables of rowdy fae who were growing tipsier by the minute.

“She’s the historian,” I said. “Lore told me. And the Truth Teller said I’d be safe with her.”

Eve nodded. "I've heard of the historian. She's been around a long time. I think it's fine."

We exited the dining room and headed down the hall to the main entry. The historian waited in the middle, a small smile curving her lips when she saw me.

"I thought you might come," she said.

I stopped in front of her. "You can tell me about my parents now?"

She nodded. "It is time."

I looked at my friends. "Come along?"

They both nodded.

I turned to the historian. "Where to?"

"There's a place in the garden I think you would like to see."

"Lead the way." Normally, I'd be suspicious of someone leading me out in the garden, but there was something about her that I trusted. I'd done well on my instincts so far, so I'd continue to follow them.

She led us out into the cool night air. Overhead, the clouds roiled low. I looked up at them. "Do you know anything about the clouds that won't rain?"

Lore had said we shouldn't talk to others about them, but the historian was a neutral party.

"I don't." She looked up, a frown on her face. "But they're very strange."

"No kidding." I shivered.

"This way." She led me toward the maze, and we entered.

It had been dark out on the main lawn, but at least we'd had the glow of the palace windows providing a bit of light to see by. Once we were within the hedges, it was nearly pitch black. The clouds concealed the moonlight and starlight. I could still feel the stars, and hopefully, I'd have a bit of power if I needed it, but it was impossible to see anything. Someone stumbled into me.

"Sorry," Eve whispered.

We separated, and I brushed against the hedge wall, cursing when it

snagged my dress.

“Hold a moment.” The historian’s voice sounded from close by. “Illumination.”

Lamps burst to life, glowing balls that hung in the air overhead.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

“Beautiful.” The glowing orbs provided enough light to allow me to unsnag my dress.

“This way.” She led the way through the maze, taking a different route than I had earlier. We passed several pretty open spaces that were filled with fruit trees, fountains, and small ponds.

“This place is lovely,” I said.

She nodded. “It’s one of the best places at High Court Palace. The oldest, too. Been here longer than the any of the buildings. Some fae believe it is the true seat of our power.”

I whistled low, impressed.

A few minutes later, we stopped at the entrance of a square clearing. In the middle, a tall white statue rose ten feet in the air. It was a modern piece of art, two swoops of white stone that twined around each other. They appeared to be embracing, and I was drawn to the statue. My friends stuck close by my side, and I appreciated it.

I walked forward, almost in a daze as my heart beat harder inside my chest. “What is it?”

“An homage to your parents.”

I turned to her, surprise dropping my jaw. “What?”

She nodded. “I don’t think anyone else realizes who you are, but I recognize them in you.”

“You knew them.” Shock lanced me. My friends looked just as surprised.

“I did. Many of the people here did, although they have forgotten much, I think.”

“Who were they?” Excitement made chills race over me.

“Your father was a fae, your mother a witch. They were both extremely long lived, like many of the most powerful fae. It’s rare for a witch to reach that age, but she did. They were more than seven centuries old by the time they disappeared.”

“What do you mean, disappeared?” My heart thundered as I turned to look back at the statue. “Did someone hurt them?”

“Perhaps. No one knows if they were killed or left of their own accord, but it happened about twenty-six years ago.”

“Right before I was born.” A shiver ran over my skin. “Did my mother know about me?”

“She did. She confided in me before she left, but she didn’t tell me where she was going.”

“And you recognized me because I look like her?” I touched my cheek, wishing I had a picture of her.

“A bit. You also have elements of your father to you. The resemblance isn’t so striking that someone would notice if they weren’t looking, though.”

“But you *were* looking.”

“She was my friend. I’ve always been looking.”

“Tell me more about them. Please.”

“They were incredibly powerful. Kind. Honest. They were truly fae, despite the fact that your mother was a witch.”

“So, some fae courts are willing to accept witches as their queen.”

“Perhaps, though she wasn’t queen. And your father wasn’t king. They were mediators. Neutral parties, a bit like me. They resided here at High Court Palace as stewards of the grounds. They became known and loved by almost everyone. Their judgement was respected, though they never exerted power over anyone.”

“So they kept this place running smoothly.”

“Essentially, yes. When they went missing, it was a tragedy. This statue

was erected in their honor.”

“And no one knows why they went missing?” My heart ached to think of it.

She shook her head. “They told no one. I’d thought they might have been killed—though by whom, I had no idea—but when I saw you, I knew they must have survived.”

“Not for long. I never knew them.” My heart ached. I hadn’t expected to find them alive and well and ready to give me a hug—but I sure would have liked that.

She nodded, her eyes sad. “I thought that might be the case.”

“Do you think other people will recognize me?” I asked. “Is it bad if they do?”

“I’m not sure. They disappeared after finding out you were coming. That might have something to do with it. Your magic is unique.”

I looked up at the clouds, wishing I could see the stars. “They might have left here because of me. Is there any way to find out?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps there is a seer who knows. Or perhaps not.” She looked toward the statue. “But I thought I should tell you what I know. I have no idea what’s coming for you in the future but knowing about your parents can only be a good thing.”

“Do you have any pictures of them?”

She nodded. “Come visit me in my archives some time, and I will share what I have. They were a fixture of the High Court Palace for so long that there is more information about them. Nothing groundbreaking, but little day-to-day details that I imagine you might like.”

“Thank you. So much.” I stared up at them, unable to look away.

“We should go,” she said.

I wasn’t ready to leave the statues quite yet. It felt like I was meeting them for the first time, though it was probably a poor imitation of what it was really like to be with one’s parents.

But she was right. I could always come back tomorrow.

The four of us exited the maze and returned to the palace. We stopped in the main entry hall, and the historian said, “There is great power in you, Sia. I’m sure I will be writing of you one day.”

“Hopefully not too soon.”

“Things always happen sooner than we expect them to.”

She wasn’t wrong about that.

With a quiet goodbye, she left. Eve and Meria accompanied me to my room, and I went immediately to the window to look out, wishing I could see the statue from here.

I couldn’t, but I could see the dark clouds swirling overhead. They were so much lower than they had been before. Their power pulsed in the air, seeping through the open window to wrap around me.

I drew in an unsteady breath, gripping the windowsill.

I felt drunk. Woozy.

And desperate to get outside.

The urge filled me so powerfully that I knew it couldn’t be natural, but I couldn’t fight it.

Was this magic?

The vague thought whispered through my mind.

I turned from the window and walked toward the bedroom door, my feet moving without me commanding them. Or was I commanding them?

I couldn’t tell.

All I could do was follow the urge that sang to me like a siren song.

Goosebumps rose on my skin, and the strangest feeling filled my chest.

I saw no one as I walked through the hall and out the castle exit. If I had, they might have stopped me. I certainly couldn’t stop myself.

I walked away from the maze, headed toward a field of flowers. In the middle, a large glass greenhouse glowed with a faint light from inside.

It was such a beautiful building that I wanted to explore it.

I walked toward it, tiredness like a weight around my ankles, heavier than I could bear. It took all my effort to trudge across the field, but I kept going.

I had to.

I didn't know why, but I just had to. A force was pulling me, one I couldn't fight.

As I walked, I realized the clouds had lowered even more. They'd become a dark fog that filled my lungs with every breath, and I could no longer see the glass building.

I blinked, my head spinning.

What the hell was happening?

I drew in a shuddery breath, and I tried to trudge on, my heart racing.

The cloud. That was the problem. I needed to outrun it. The damned thing was too low—terrifyingly low—and it felt like it was pressing down on me.

Every breath made my head spin even more, made me drag my feet ever slower. I sank to my knees, and the darkness pulled me in.

Lore

The dinner passed slowly after Sia left. I watched the crowd for anything suspicious but saw nothing. Her friends returned shortly after delivering her to our chambers, nodding at me as they sat.

When the dancing began, I moved toward the exit. I no longer needed to stay for propriety's sake. It was only the dinner and the speeches that were expected of me.

As I neared the door, a massive explosion sounded. It was as loud as the train crash had been but came from a distance.

The music immediately stopped, along with the dancing. Confusion flashed on everyone's faces. I turned to the exit and strode through, hurrying in the direction from which the noise had come.

It had definitely happened outside. I reached the entry hall and exited the palace. As soon as I stepped outside, I saw the rubble of the greenhouse. It had sat in the middle of a field of flowers, and now it was gone.

Adrenaline pumped through me, and I ran toward the debris. What the hell had happened?

As I neared, I caught a hint of Sia's scent.

Panic exploded inside me.

She hadn't been in the greenhouse when it had gone up, had she?

The rubble was scattered for over a hundred meters in all directions. Plants and pots and glass and metal. It was a mess.

I strode through the wreckage, searching for her as my heart threatened to break my ribs. Fear like I'd never known shot through me, even worse than what I'd felt when the train had crashed.

Don't be here.

Please.

If I found her body amongst this rubble, it would crush me.

The thought was pure insanity, but it was true. I couldn't bear to lose her. Somehow, feelings had snuck up on me.

"Lore?" Dain's voice sounded at my right.

"Yes?" I turned to him, feeling wild.

"Are you all right? You look...unwell."

"Sia. Can you smell her?"

He scented the air. "Maybe?"

"Your senses aren't as strong as mine."

"No. But you might be projecting. Of course you're worried about her, but why would she be here?"

"I don't know. But we need to search." I tore through the wreckage, lost in a haze of desperate fear.

I couldn't lose her. I couldn't.

Worse, I couldn't bear the thought of her life ending so soon. I couldn't have her—not in the long run—but I'd do whatever it took to make sure she had a long and happy life.

The fear nearly turned me rabid. By the time I'd searched all the debris and found no sign of her, I was a damned mess.

"She's not here," Dain said.

Drawing a deep breath, I looked around. I'd had my gaze on the ground

the entire time, searching through the rubble. While I'd been doing that, more fae had arrived. They stared at the ruins with shock.

"It had to have been the witch with the deathly magic," Dain said. "The clouds are incredibly low."

I looked up. He was right. They hovered right overhead now. In my panic for Sia, I hadn't noticed them.

The witch was here. She had to be.

This was her fault.

I looked at the rest of the fae, wondering what they thought. We'd told none of them about the witch that haunted us. If they found out that I was hiding something like this, there would be hell to pay.

I hadn't expected her to attack the palace itself, else I might have said something.

Soon, I'd have to deal with that. But for this moment, I needed to find Sia. "I'm going to my chambers."

"You'll find her there. I'm sure."

"I pray you're right."



Sia

I woke, disoriented, on the floor of the bedchamber I shared with Lore. Aches twisted through every muscle, and exhaustion pulled at me. After a few moments, I was able to place the location.

High Court Palace.

The white stone walls and warm wood trim were distinct, along with the jewel toned cushions. According to the clock on the wall, I'd left the dinner less than an hour ago. I couldn't have been on the floor for long, then.

Grunting, I pushed myself upright.

I drew in a shuddery breath, looking down at my dress.

It was blackened with soot and dirt. So was my skin.

Holy crap, what had happened? I frowned, my mind racing.

The last thing I remembered was crossing the field near the greenhouse.

But why had I been out there? Hadn't I come back to the room with Eve and Meria?

My head pounded as I strained to remember, but my mind was blank. Fear twisted through me.

I scrubbed at the dark stains on my skin and dress, trying to remove them. Suddenly, I hated them. I needed to get clean. Needed to get them off me.

Whatever had happened, I didn't want anyone to know. It couldn't be good. Instinct drove me toward secrecy, and I stumbled upright.

The hearth was blazing merrily, and I tore off my dirty dress, then tossed it in the flames. I stood, shivering, watching to make sure it burned away entirely. When it was gone, I stumbled into the shower and scrubbed the dirt and soot off myself.

What the hell had happened?

I leaned against the shower wall, my mind racing.

Something had gone terribly wrong. I'd been caught up in some kind of attack, maybe?

Once I was finally clean, I stepped out and dried off, then wrapped a towel around myself. I needed to find something to sleep in tonight. Would Lore and I actually share that bed?

I walked out into the main bedroom. The door slammed open, and I gasped, stumbling backward.

Lore charged into the room, his gaze landing immediately on me. He was covered in soot and dirt, and his face was wild with fear.

"Oh, thank fates." Relief was thick in his voice. "You're here." He strode toward me and pulled me into his arms, hugging me close.

“Of course I’m here.” He was holding me so tightly that the words squeaked out of me. “What’s wrong with you?”

He heaved a relieved sigh and pulled back, looking down at me. He didn’t let me go, however. His hands stayed clasped around my waist, and he looked like he’d been through hell.

“What happened?” I asked. “You seem...off center. And dirty.”

“Off center?” He laughed darkly. “There was a massive explosion at the greenhouse in the meadow, and your scent was there. I was afraid you were dead.”

Shock made my knees weaken, and I had to reach out to grip the stone wall next to me. “An explosion?”

“The entire place was leveled.”

“Holy shit.” My mind raced. “Was it the witch with the deathly magic?”

“We think so.”

She’s here. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No, thank fates. Why was your scent there, though?”

Oh shit. *What had happened?*

The last thing I remembered was collapsing.

I should tell him that.

Definitely.

But...

Instinct kept my mouth shut. I had no idea what had happened, but what if *I* had caused the explosion? I hadn’t a clue how I could have done it, but I’d been feeling really funny right before I collapsed.

I rubbed my temple, trying to think. No matter how I played it out in my head, I couldn’t find the right thing to say. So I lied.

I plowed forward, hating the secrecy but driven toward it. “My friends and I walked through the field earlier today. That could have been it.”

He nodded, his brow creased with concern as his gaze raced over my face. “I’m so relieved you’re here and safe.”

My heart thudded. His words, his expression... It seemed like he really cared for me.

I wanted to push for more. A little beast inside me wanted him to confess to feeling for me like I felt for him.

And yet, now wasn't a good time.

There was too much going on, and too much at stake.

I drew in a shuddery breath, cold fear rushing through me. What had happened out there?

I couldn't solve it now. My limbs were shaky, I was so weak. I didn't want to sleep alone.

"Will you hold me while we sleep?" I knew I was making things messy by asking. A moment ago, I'd lied to him about something huge. I'd *had* to. My gut made that clear. And yet, I was asking him to hold me.

"Yes." He swallowed hard, no doubt remembering what had happened on the train. But his gaze softened as he looked at me. "You look exhausted."

"I feel exhausted."

"Let me get you something to wear." He walked toward the armoire. I watched him go, stunned to see the ice king fetching me clothing.

Who was this man?

He returned with a long shirt, and I took it. I was too tired to go back into the bathroom for privacy, so I made a spinning motion with my fingertip. "Turn around."

He did as I asked, and I dropped the towel and pulled on the shirt. "All right, I'm good."

He turned back to me, his gaze moving over me. The concern deepened, and he stepped forward and swept me up into his arms. The floor disappeared from under me, and I gasped, wrapping my arms around his neck.

As the surprise faded, I had to admit it felt good to get off my feet. It had taken all my strength to shower, and I was tapped out.

He carried me to the bed and laid me down, gently covering me with the

blanket. I sighed as the comforter enveloped me, exhaustion already pulling at my mind.

He strode around the end of the bed, and I heard him kick his shoes off. There was a mirror on my side of the room, and I caught sight of him climbing into the bed behind me. He hadn't taken off a single item of clothing.

It was for the best.

He also didn't climb under the covers.

"You can—"

"No." His voice was rough as he cut me off. "It's better this way."

His strong arms wrapped around me, pulling me into the cradle of his embrace. Immediately, I felt protected. Loved, almost.

And he was right. It was better if he didn't join me under the covers. I was wearier than I'd ever been in my life, yet my body still heated at the contact with his.

"Sleep." He pressed a soft kiss to the back of my head.

I sighed and relaxed into him, the exhaustion taking me.

Sia

There was no sunlight as I woke in the comfortable bed. The dark shadows in the room were comforting, until memories of last night washed into my mind.

Lore was no longer in bed behind me, and I lay still, trying to get my head around what had happened.

I still had no idea what had happened, but there was definitely something I wasn't remembering. I'd been dirty when I'd woken on the floor of this room. I'd had a role in that explosion, no question about it.

And yet, there had been no one else there. I'd made sure of that before I'd crossed the meadow.

I had been alone.

The witch with the deathly magic hadn't been anywhere near me, even though Lore was convinced it was her.

"Did you sleep well?" Lore's voice cut through my distraction, and I opened my eyes fully, spotting him by the window.

"Yes." I must have made a noise if he'd known I was awake. "You?"

"I did."

He was lying. I could hear it in his voice. And yet, he hadn't left me. Not

until morning. I'd woken several times in the night to find him behind me, still holding me close. This morning was the first time I'd woken without his touch.

It left me bereft.

Stupid.

I forced myself out of bed. I had no time to be mooning over him. I needed all my brain cells to work out what had happened last night.

"There's breakfast on the table." He gestured to a piece of furniture in front of another window. It was obvious he wouldn't mention last night, and I was grateful for it. I'd turned to him for comfort, but in the light of day, I wished I hadn't.

I went to the table and sat, ignoring the dark clouds outside and pouring a cup of coffee from a silver decanter. Fragrant steam rose toward my face, and I inhaled deeply.

I would figure out what had happened last night, but first I needed coffee.

Lore's gaze burned into me as I sipped and selected a pastry from the tray.

"What's going to happen this morning?" I asked. "Have you had any news about the explosion?"

"No. All of the fae courts will be convening at the site of the disaster in an hour. We'll discuss it then."

I chewed, the food tasting like dust in my mouth. "Doesn't anyone have any theories?"

"Besides our theory about the witch with the deathly magic, no. And I've never seen anything like it. An explosion with no source of the blast."

"You mean no gasoline or equipment that could have blown up?"

"Precisely."

"What about magic?" I chewed my lip. "Would that leave a trace?"

"Yes. But I found nothing. Still, the clouds have been so low. She must be here."

I nodded, then heaved a sigh and stood. “I’m going to get dressed. Can we go down to the site early so I can see it?”

He nodded.

I found an outfit in the armoire suited to a day of exploration. True, I was getting married this evening. But before that, I’d be hunting for answers at the site of an explosion.

It didn’t take long to pull on the green trousers, tunic, and vest. I was starting to like the clothes of the fae. They were comfortable, but attractive.

Lore waited for me by the door, and we walked in silence through the castle and out onto the grounds.

I saw the wreckage as soon as we exited the building. It took my breath away. “Oh my God.”

He nodded, silent.

The blast zone was the size of several football fields. Part of the maze had even been taken out.

My parents.

Panic lanced me. Was their statue okay?

From my vantage point at the top of the castle steps, I could see most of the middle of the maze. Though I wasn’t sure exactly where the statues were located, I was almost certain they hadn’t been damaged.

I couldn’t bear to lose those statues as well as them. The feeling was ridiculous. It was just stone, after all. But it was my only connection with them, and I didn’t want to lose it.

I couldn’t be thinking of that right now, though. I needed to focus on the problem at hand.

The explosion.

In a daze, I walked toward it. The debris was scattered far and wide, an apocalypse of broken glass and shattered plant pots. Greenery was strewn everywhere.

“There had to be so many valuable plants here,” I murmured.

“There were.” Lore stayed close by my side. “Medicines and ingredients for potions. It’s an enormous loss.”

“What a tragedy.”

“No one was hurt, though.”

“Thank God.” I stopped at the edge of the worst of the rubble, staring at the massive pile with dismay.

Had I done this?

But how?

I’d woken up dirty with no memory of the last hour, but that didn’t necessarily mean I was the culprit.

I swallowed hard and tried to remember what had happened. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remember anything beyond passing out.

Shit.

More fae began to arrive, and I realized that my time was up. It had flown by, and I still had no answers. When Meria and Eve stopped by my side, gratitude welled within me.

Their presence was an immense comfort.

“Are you okay?” Meria asked.

“Yeah.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Eve said.

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

The group had swelled to over two dozen. Everyone had arrived, it looked like. They spread out around the wreckage, inspecting it with varying expressions of worry, anger, and dismay.

I had no idea what expression I wore, but I hoped it was the right one. The last thing I needed was to be noticeably painted with guilt over something I wasn’t sure I had anything to do with.

There was no clear leader amongst the group, and I suddenly realized the valuable role my parents must have played. The powerful kings and queens of the Fae Courts wouldn’t kneel before another but having neutral mediators

would have made the High Court run more smoothly.

Lore stepped forward. “We can search the rubble today, but I found nothing last night. And my search was extensive.”

Fionn, the King of the Irish Fae, stepped forward. “Then what do you propose?”

“I have called upon a Time Spinner. They won’t be able to arrive for two days, but when they get here, they can turn back the clock and see what truly happened.”

Lore suspected the witch with the deathly magic, so did that mean that the Time Spinner would see her? Or me?

“That could be too late,” said the Queen of the Mountain Fae. “What if there is another attack?”

“Do we even know if it was an attack?” I asked. “Could it have been an accident?”

“Highly unlikely,” she said. “The contents of this greenhouse were so valuable that it was likely planned.”

“I am open to other ideas,” Lore said. “But when my Time Spinner arrives, we’ll have our answers.”

“My father has asked a seer to come,” said Gabriel, Prince of the French Fae. “She may be able to provide answers.”

I looked to Vusario. Might he know what had happened? His gaze was blank as he looked out over the wreckage.

Apparently not.

“And I’ve invited my best trackers,” said one of the Autumn Fae. I recognized her from the dinner last night but didn’t know her name.

“Good,” Lore said. “In the meantime, there is a wedding to prepare for.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to put it off?” asked the Irish king.

“No.” Lore’s voice was sharp. “We do it tonight.”

There was a wave of faint murmurs, but it was impossible to tell if people were annoyed, neutral, or dismayed.

Meria squeezed my hand. “Come on. Let’s get you ready for the big event.”

“Sure.” I let her guide me away.

Eve stayed close by her side, and we walked in silence back to the room I shared with Lore. He didn’t follow us, and I was grateful for it.

As soon as we were inside, Meria and Eve turned to me.

“What has you looking like you swallowed a live fish?” Meria said.

“I don’t know what happened last night.” I clenched my jaw, but I was unable to keep the words from spilling forth. I could keep my secret from Lore, but I couldn’t keep it from my friends. “After the meeting with the historian, I woke up in this room covered in soot and dirt.”

They both frowned.

“What do you mean?” Eve asked. “We walked you back to your room.”

“I know. But I feel like I lost some time. Like I wasn’t fully conscious, then I woke up filthy.”

“Shit.” Meria collapsed in a chair but the hearth. “You think you did it.”

“*Maybe?* I have no idea.”

Eve scrubbed her hands over her face. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Meria rubbed my shoulder. “It was probably the witch with the deathly magic, and you got caught at the edge of the blast. Then you staggered back here and passed out.”

I liked that explanation. “Yeah, that could be it. But how did I get out there? And why do I feel like it was my fault?”

“I don’t know.” Meria grimaced. “This isn’t looking good.”

“Did you tell Lore?” Meria asked.

“No!”

“Good.” She nodded. “We keep this to ourselves while we try to get to the bottom of it.”

“But, how?”

“I have no idea.” Meria shook her head. “But we’ll figure something out.”

“In the meantime, we need to pretend like everything is normal. We can’t let anyone suspect you.” Eve clapped her hands together in a businesslike manner. “So you’ll get married, become the queen, and we’ll work together to kill the witch. Then we’ll all live happily ever after.” She grinned. “I like that plan. Now let’s get you ready. The wedding is at dusk and we’re running out of time.”

“Fine. I need the distraction anyway.” I looked toward the window, where the clouds were ever darker.

Memories of them surrounding me flashed in my mind. Had the witch with the deathly magic really been there? Or called me out there?

“Do you know where your wedding dress is?” Eve asked.

I pointed to a trunk in the corner. “I think it might be in there.”

“Excellent.” Eve went to it and pulled out a shimmery silver dress.

It was gorgeous, and somehow, the sight of it made tears prick in my eyes.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Meria laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I sniffed back the tears and wiped my eyes. “Nothing. I guess I’m just a bit overwhelmed. This isn’t what I expected my wedding to be like.”

“You don’t have to stay married,” Eve said.

“You’re right.” I drew in a bracing breath. “Once the witch is defeated, I can run.”

“Exactly.”

But the idea twisted my heart. I didn’t want to leave this beautiful place. I might not fit in perfectly, but it was better than what I had back in the human world.

More than that, I didn’t want to leave my new friends.

Lore.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. My feelings for him were becoming a runaway train, and I needed to put the brakes on. Fast.



Lore

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I spent hours combing through the wreckage of the greenhouse for clues.

I found nothing, and it was finally time to dressed for the wedding.

My wedding.

The thought was laughable. I'd never intended to wed. And yet, here I was, with the dark clouds hovering overhead to remind me why I was doing this.

"It's all so vague," I muttered.

"What was that?" Dain asked.

I nodded up at the clouds. "We've got dark clouds and a seer prophesying an attack by an evil witch, so I'm getting married. Isn't it all a bit ridiculous?"

"You know the value of a marriage like this. The ceremony alone will be worth it."

"You're right. I just—" I dragged a hand through my hair.

"Are you doubting your path, now?"

A low sigh tore out of me. "No. I know the tragedy that happens when I don't follow the warnings of the Truth Teller. I will not be diverted from my path. I'd just like more information."

"I don't blame you." He punched me lightly on the shoulder. "You might not be getting the information you want, but you are getting a beautiful wife."

He was right about that at least. Sia haunted my every waking thought.

"Let's get dressed." I started toward the castle, hoping Sia wouldn't be in our chambers when I arrived.

Fortunately, she wasn't. I showered and dressed quickly, then made my

way down to the forest where we would be married. The ceremony was taking place in a sacred glen, and Vusario had been right to insist we marry at the High Court. Our marriage would mean more if it was done here, and its power would be far greater. I'd been foolish to think we shouldn't come.

Many of the other fae had arrived by the time I reached the clearing in the woods. The trees were particularly tall, soaring a hundred feet overhead. Their branches disappeared through the dark clouds, an eerie effect.

As I walked toward the front of the crowd, I could hear people muttering about the strange weather.

"Feels like magic," whispered a fae I didn't recognize.

People were starting to catch on.

Would the witch ambush the wedding? Was that her plan?

Tension tightened my muscles, and I leaned toward Dain. "Make sure the men stay alert. We don't know when the witch will show up."

"You think she'd come here?"

I shrugged. "It would make an impression."

He grunted, then turned to speak to our guards.

I took up my position at the head of the crowd. There was a long clearing in front of me—an aisle, though in a loose sense. The audience stood in a line on either side of it, the trees rising tall around them. Fairy lights sparkled overhead, tiny pinpricks of gold that shined bright against the brooding clouds and the setting sun. It was nearly full dark, and they provided the only light.

When Sia appeared at the other end of the aisle, my breath left my body in a whoosh.

She looked...incredible.

Her gown was an ephemeral creation of silver and sparkles. It floated around her like it blew on its own faint breeze, and I'd never seen anything like it.

I'd never seen anything like *her*.

My heart thudded at the mere sight of her. When her gaze met mine, I felt like it would break through my ribs and land at her feet.

As she stared at me, light began to glow from overhead. It was almost as if the stars were burning through the clouds. *She* began to glow, and it was the most incredible thing I'd ever seen.

My queen.

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Sia

I stopped at the beginning of the aisle, staring at Lore in the distance. We were surrounded by huge trees and piles of flowers and beautiful stone arches, but I only had eyes for him.

Lore stood at the far end of the aisle, attired in an impeccable navy suit that was reminiscent of what human men wore to their wedding but far more beautiful. It was simple and stark, with a cloak that swept back from his shoulders and made him look like the otherworldly, regal king he was.

“It’s go-time.” Meria gave me a little push.

Birdsong sounded in the trees, and I focused on putting one foot in front of the other as I made my way toward him. Overhead, I could feel the power of the stars, and it was appropriate that they should grace me with their presence on today of all days.

People murmured as I passed by, and I realized they were chanting.

This had to be part of a fae ceremony. I had no idea what they were saying, but power flowed all around us.

Leaves crunched underfoot as I stopped in front of Lore. I drew in his scent, letting it steady me.

Wonder filled his eyes as he looked at me.

I blinked, surprised. Was he really looking at me like this, like I lit his world on fire? Our marriage was purely political. I had to be dreaming.

“You look incredible.” His low voice rumbled with awe.

I swallowed hard. Maybe I *wasn't* dreaming? I drew in an unsteady breath.

I'd wondered it a million times before, but how the hell had this become my life?

He reached for my hands and held them. Immediately, I felt a sense of connection that I'd never felt before—like we were tied together. Around us, the crowd chanted louder. Their words flowed with a lyrical hum that made it sound like music. Birdsong continued to trill in the air, accompanying their voices like an instrument.

“What are they saying?” I whispered.

“It's the mating ceremony for the fae. An ancient song that is supposed to be imbued with the magic of the singers. It's one of the reasons our unions make us more powerful.”

I watched his face as he spoke, swept up in the intensity of his gaze. He was looking at me like the sun rose and set because of my existence. It made my head spin.

Overhead, the dark clouds roiled. I focused on Lore instead of on them.

As the voices of the fae increased, so did the magic in the air. It flowed around me like water. Pale light coalesced to form ribbons that wrapped around Lore and me, binding us together.

I gasped, magic flowing through me.

When the voices of the other fae died down, the magic faded away. Even though I could no longer see it, I felt it imprinted on my soul.

I drew in a shuddery breath and looked into Lore's eyes.

There was no way I could leave him. No way I would want to.

And the idea terrified me.

Panicked, I turned away from him and looked out at the crowd. The ceremony was over, and they were applauding. A noise buzzed in my head, growing louder and louder.

“Sia.” Lore’s concerned voice sounded at my ear. “Are you all right?”

I sucked in a breath, trying to get control of the panic racing through me. “I’m fine. Just a little overwhelmed.”

This was so damned *real*.

“We’ll be all right.” He squeezed my hand. “Let’s go.”

He led me down the aisle and through the crowd of applauding fae. I inspected them as we walked by, searching for anyone who might not be thrilled about our union.

I saw more than a few people whose smiles didn’t reach their eyes.

Once we’d reached the end of the aisle and were far enough away that I could speak more privately, I whispered, “Why do they consent to marry us if they don’t approve?”

“All fae marriages happen in roughly the same way. If a fae of limited wealth or power is to be married, others from his rank will perform the ceremony. Because we’re the most powerful of the fae, our equals perform ours.”

“So if they want to be married in a similar show of strength, they have to do their part for us.”

“Exactly.”

“Except the weddings are so rare.”

“They still hold out hope that they’ll find their mates.” He led me up the stairs to the castle and into the main entry hall. “I initially wanted to avoid this. I despise the High Court. But that was unwise. This was...special. Worth it.”

I nodded, my throat tightening. I was feeling too much, and it was making me a bit wobbly. “What happens next?”

“A celebratory dinner.”

He led me to the same room as last night, but it had been decorated entirely differently. Instead of large tables, there were many small ones. Flowers poured from arrangements attached to the walls and ceiling, turning the room into an incredible botanical display. Their fragrance filled the air, and I drew it deeply into my lungs.

Music lit up the room, and servants carried trays of wine and canapés.

“It’s like a real wedding,” I murmured.

“Of course.”

I looked up at him. “But we both know this isn’t real.”

“It feels real.”

His words made me gasp. His lips tightened, and he looked aside, as if he realized he’d said too much. “Let’s greet the other guests. This is our chance to cement alliances.”

I nodded and followed him through the crowd. We drank wine and ate canapés and talked to the other guests. Despite myself, I found it to be fun. Much more fun than I expected.

And when it was time for the first dance, I couldn’t help smiling as Lore spun me around the dance floor. He was an incredible dancer. He had to be because I had no idea what I was doing.

And yet, he made me feel like a princess.

A queen.

It was all too much. Too good. Too unexpected.

I danced too much and drank too much, and when the party was over, I was grateful to leave. The fun had worn off, and in its place, I felt the pressure of the truth.

This was all designed for a great purpose, and it wasn’t love.



Lore

After the party, I led Sia back to our quarters. The whiskey in my veins dulled my senses slightly, and it was an unfamiliar feeling. I no longer indulged to excess, but tonight, I had. I wasn't fully drunk—I hadn't been in centuries—but I was slightly woozy.

There had just been so much damned emotion tonight. I'd wanted to dull it. To dull all my senses. Just looking at Sia made emotion course through me. It was more than I could bear.

Our sleeping chamber was silent as we entered. Though I didn't look at her, I could feel her presence. She lit up any room she entered, impossible to ignore.

When I shut the door behind us, she turned to face me and asked, "What's going on between us?"

I faced her, the sight of her beauty nearly sending me to my knees. "What do you mean?"

"You felt it, too. At the ceremony. Tonight. I could see it in your eyes."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We're pretending we hate each other. That we're doing this just for the good of the kingdom. And yet, I think you care more than you're willing to admit." Her voice rang with a passion that I rarely heard from her.

I shook my head. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"I do!" She glared at me, the emotion in her eyes almost too much to bear. "I'm not an idiot. I saw how you looked at me tonight. Like you care. And I want you to admit it."

"You're angry." Of course I cared. But I couldn't say it. That was a step too far. It was the step that admitted I *wanted* this. It wasn't acceptable to care. Inadvisable, but unavoidable and unacceptable.

"You're angry, and you've had too much to drink," I said.

She growled at me.

It was a bastard move on my part, but I wanted to drive her away. I had

to. If she took so much as one step toward me, I'd shatter.

"Of course I'm angry," she said. "This is my *life*, you know. It sucked before, but it was mine. And it's been diverted to a cause that could get me killed."

"I—"

She raised a hand to stop me. "That's not the point of this. I've made peace with the risk. But you and me...there's something happening here, and I don't want to pretend anymore. There's too much unknown. I want to *know* this. I want to know you."

She was right. Too right.

The ceremony tonight had been more than I'd anticipated. What I'd *felt* had been more than I'd anticipated.

"If you're feeling something, I want to know it," she insisted. "I need to."

Her words were sobering me up quickly. And whatever drunkenness I thought she might have been suffering from had cleared from her eyes. "You need to stay focused on the witch with deathly magic."

"I can multitask. And I'm not going to sit on the sidelines anymore and wait for life to happen to me. I'm taking control." She strode to me and gripped my jacket, staring up at my face and demanding. "Tell me the truth, damn it."

"I—" I rubbed my face, my head still a bit cloudy and my soul battered. "I've never met anyone like you."

"And you've met a lot of women."

"Many. Until I met you, I was always fine being alone. But now that doesn't fit quite so comfortably. And I..."

"You what?"

"I care, damn it." As the words left my mouth, I couldn't believe that I was admitting to them. It felt like the last straw. Like I was welcoming in the madness that had plagued me before.

I would be caught up in her. Distracted from my duties.

And yet, I couldn't help myself.

"I care for you, damn it." I cupped her face and pulled her to me, kissing her with all the passion in my soul.

She threw her arms around me and kissed me back, her lips sweet against my own.

I'd wanted this forever.

Wanted *her* forever, since before I had even known she existed. She was the one who had haunted my dreams, the one I'd sought when I'd pursued so many other women.

And now I had her. For tonight, at least.

I gripped her hips and hoisted her up so that she could wrap her legs around my waist. The press of her heat against my hardness made a groan rise in my throat, and I shifted her against me as I walked to the bed.

Pleasure shot through me. When I reached the bed, I sat her on the edge and stepped back, trying to catch my breath.

I had to stay in control.

At least partially.

But I couldn't just walk away from her right now. It would take more strength than I had.

"Lore." She reached up to me, and I took her hand, then dropped to my knees in front of her.

With a soft kiss to her lips, I laid her back on the bed and pushed her dress up her thighs. Now that I was so close to what I wanted, my hands shook on the delicate silver fabric.

"I've wanted this for so long." My voice was a growl, and I couldn't drag my gaze from her pale thighs as the rising fabric revealed them.

The sight made my heart pound and my hardness ache. I wanted to bury myself inside her.

But first, I wanted to taste.

I looked up at her, catching sight of her wide eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Lore?”

“May I?” I brushed a thumb over her center, which was still covered with the fabric.

“Anything,” she breathed.

The word was all I needed to hear. Desperate for her, I pushed the dress over her hips to reveal a scrap of lace stretched tight over her softness.

A groan escaped my throat, and I nuzzled the fabric, breathing deeply of her sweet scent. It made my head spin and my desire ratchet higher.

Her hands appeared at the waistband of her underwear, and she shoved them down. A growl of approval rose in my throat. I liked her enthusiasm. A lot.

I pulled the scrap of lace away from her legs, then raised my gaze to the pink softness between her thighs.

My breath left me on a rush.

“Beautiful.” I lowered my mouth, burying myself in her sweetness.

She cried out, clutching my hair as her thighs tightened around my ears.

“Lore.”

I explored every inch of her, tasting every curve and sweet crevice. It was a pleasure unlike any I had ever known, reaching deep inside me, and tearing me apart.

When her legs began to tremble around my head, I knew she was close.

“Come on,” I growled against her. I wanted to feel her pleasure on my tongue. To taste it.

“Lore, it’s too much.”

“Never.” I gripped her hips and held her still, my mouth wild on her.

She cried out, arching against me as her orgasm washed over her. It was the most glorious thing I’d ever experienced, enough to snap some sense into me.

I wanted her.

I wanted *all* of her. Her heart, her soul, her love.

And that was the biggest danger of all.

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Sia

I lay on the bed, gasping as the pleasure faded.

Blinking, I looked up at Lore. He stood over me, cheeks flushed, and lips swollen and damp. He ran a hand over his mouth, shuddering. I'd have been offended, except for the heat that still blazed in his eyes.

I reached for him. "Come here."

"I can't, Sia." His eyes flashed. He swallowed hard, his jaw tight and fists clenched.

"What?" I frowned.

"I... I'm sorry. I can't. It would lead to terrible things." He turned and walked to the door, disappearing before I could so much as sit up.

When it closed behind him, I stared at the ceiling.

What the hell had that just been?

I rose, fumbling for my underwear and pulling them on. I stood, then began to pace the room.

He'd just walked away from me. After *that*.

Anger and anxiety coursed through me, and I wasn't sure what was stronger.

Where had he gone?

Should I care?

No. Caring was a terrible idea. And yet, it was impossible not to.

He might care for me, but it was doing terrible things to my sanity. One moment, he was confessing to his feelings and treating me like I was a goddess. The next, he was charging away without a word.

What the hell was I supposed to do with that?

Get over it, nerd.

I groaned and went to the window, opening it to suck in a breath of fresh air.

As soon as I did it, a sense of de ja vu twinged.

I'd opened this window and looked out before, hadn't I?

Or had I?

Last night?

Much of it was lost in my memory, but it might have happened.

The clouds hovered outside the window, thick and dark. I drew in a breath, my mind going fuzzy as the most intense desire filled me.

I need to go to the statue.

Now?

It was a terrible time. Middle of the night and dark as pitch.

But I couldn't fight the desire. It gripped me like an enormous fist, pulling me from the room. I tried to drag my feet, but there was no stopping it. Head fuzzy, I walked through the hall and down the stairs. The main entryway was empty, and no one stopped me as I hurried out the door and onto the main lawn.

This has happened before.

I could feel it. I'd been drawn out of the castle last night, just like this, but I hadn't been able to fight it.

I still couldn't fight it.

I gasped, sucking in fresh air, and hoping it would clear my head.

It didn't.

Somehow, it only made it worse.

The dark clouds roiled overhead. I looked up at them as I made my way toward the maze, pulled by a force too strong to fight.

The witch is calling me.

And there was no way to stop moving forward.

The maze was dark as I entered.

“Illumination,” I said, my voice sounding foreign to my own ears.

The glowing orbs burst to life, lighting my way. I followed the path that the historian had led me on last time, still drawn by a power I couldn't fight. By the time I made it to the statues, I was out of breath from struggling against the pull.

I stared at the likenesses of my parents, waiting to understand.

But I didn't.

The night around me was dark and quiet. Lonely and filled with danger.

My throat tightened. I drew in a shuddery breath and asked, “Why am I here? Why did you give me up? Or die? I just want to understand.”

No answer, of course.

My parents were gone.

I tried to turn around and go back to the house, but my feet felt glued to the ground. So I collapsed, my sparkling skirts pooling around me.

I looked up at the clouds, cursing them for their existence.

“Where are you?” I growled. “Why do you haunt me?”

I'd rather fight the witch in person than whatever was happening to me right now. If this was her magic drawing me out here, it was awful.

Power began to thrum in the air. I frowned, staring up at the clouds. They swirled overhead, moving faster and faster.

My heart raced, fear chilling my skin.

What was happening?

I wanted the witch to arrive so I could fight her, but now that the moment

might be here...

I was scared out of my wits. The clouds continued to swirl, a vortex of power that pulsed in the sky. They moved lower, attracted to me like a magnet.

Heart pounding, I staggered to my feet. I had to get out of here. Had to run. Had to break free of whatever enchantment had clouded my mind.

But there was nowhere to go. The clouds were everywhere, as far as the eye could see. But they were densest right over me, and I couldn't look away from them. It was like I stared into my future, and it entranced me.

The magic grew so powerful that it stole my breath and froze my muscles. When the clouds rushed into me, the power blew me onto my back. I landed with a thud, magic rushing through me. It was cold and hot all at once, sparkling and dull. It was everything and nothing.

An explosion.

When it was over, I lay on the ground, gasping.

Stunned, I stared at the sky overhead and saw the stars.

The stars.

The dark clouds were gone. All of them.

Because they went into me.

Holy shit. I had no idea what to think. My mind and body were fried. All I could do was lay still and remember.

This was what had happened last night. The clouds had flowed through me like they had tonight, but it had been too much magic for me. My body had freaked out, and the power had exploded.

Oh, shit.

I *had* caused the explosion.

And that had been just the start.

I raised my hands, still shaking. They looked the same, but I felt different. More powerful. More complete.

Trembling, I pushed to my feet. When I checked the sky again, there were

still no clouds overhead.

“Sia?” Meria’s voice sounded from nearby. “What was that?”

I looked at her, my heart stuttering. She and Eve had entered the clearing and had seen the whole thing. Their faces were pale with fear.

I drew in a deep breath, then forced the words out. “I think *I’m* the witch with the deathly magic.”

Just saying the words made me want to scream.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

“No.” Meria shook her head, but the truth was in her eyes. She thought I might be too.

Eve blew out a breath. “I think you’re right. All of the clouds went right into you, and now your magic is different.”

“Evil?” Fear twisted my heart.

Eve gave a shuddery breath. “I...don’t think so?”

Meria walked toward me, her steps hesitant but her face determined. “Did you know this would happen?”

“Not a clue.” I met her gaze, desperate for her to believe me. “I just remembered blowing up the greenhouse, but I didn’t mean to do it.” Maybe I should have held that info close to the vest, but I was freaking out. And Meria and Eve were my friends. I could trust them.

I hoped.

“I believe you, Sia.” Meria’s tone was firm. “I promise.” She laid her hand on my chest, her brow creasing. “I don’t think you feel evil.”

“But my magic?”

She grimaced slightly, then tried to hide it behind a bland expression. “It does feel strange.”

Eve joined us, her face still pale as she looked at me. “The magic might be evil, but that doesn’t mean you have to be. You can choose.”

“But what the hell does this mean? I thought I was supposed to fight the witch with the deathly magic and defeat her. How do I do that if it’s *me*?”

Couldn't I just choose not to be an asshole?"

"If that was the case, there wouldn't be a whole prophecy about it," Meria said. "There's something here we don't understand."

"I think there's a lot we don't understand," Eve said.

"But what if you get caught knowing about me?" I said. "This is too dangerous for you."

"Oh, shut up," Meria said. "We're your friends. We're not going to turn you in. We're going to help you get to the bottom of this."

Gratitude welled inside me, fierce and overwhelming.

I looked back at the statue of my parents. I might not have them at my side, but I had Meria and Eve.

"Can we go to the Truth Teller and ask her?" I said.

Meria frowned. "Not if we want to get back here. There are no portals, just the train."

"And she probably doesn't know anything," Eve said. "She already told you everything she knows."

"That's what we think, but maybe not." I was probably grasping at straws, but I desperately wanted answers, and she had seemed all-knowing.

"We can ask the historian," Meria said. "She would know if there's someone here who can help."

"I like that plan." At this point, I'd like *any* plan. I wanted to have something to do to solve this. I rubbed at my chest, feeling twitchy with the strange magic inside me. "I want it out of me."

"I know." Meria rubbed my shoulder. "There's something strange about it."

I looked up at the stars, happy to see them again. Confused, too. "I can feel them more strongly now."

"That's a good thing, right?" Eve asked.

"Maybe. I hope so."

"Let's go." Meria took my arm and led me from the clearing.

We'd only gone a few steps when I realized the rest of the maze had been destroyed.

"What happened?" Eve's voice was low with shock.

I spun in a circle, taking in the devastation all around. It looked like the greenhouse—utter destruction. The hedges had been flattened, the statuary destroyed.

All that remained was the hedge around the small clearing in which we'd stood and the statue of my parents. Almost as if I'd created a protective bubble over the part that mattered and destroyed the rest.

"I think it was me," I whispered.

Shouts sounded from across the lawn, and I turned to see people spilling out of the palace and onto the grounds. One of them shouted and pointed at us.

"Oh, shit," Meria said.

"There's nowhere to run," Eve said.

She was right. With the maze destroyed, it was open fields and gardens for miles. Nowhere to hide.

And the people who'd spotted us were nearly to us.

Last night, I must have staggered away from the destruction before I'd been seen.

Tonight, I wasn't so lucky.

Lore was nowhere in sight as the palace guards stopped in front of us. There were half a dozen of them, each in a perfect gray uniform. The King of the Irish Fae stood behind them, along with the leaders of several other courts.

"What happened here?" King Fionn demanded.

"I don't know," I said. "Everything just...went crazy. But we didn't see whoever did it."

Skepticism flashed across his face, and I swallowed hard. It was probably too much to hope that he would believe me. I looked at Meria and Eve out of

the side of my vision. They both looked pale with worry. Guilt.

“It was me.” I stepped forward. “I did it. Not them.”

Meria hissed at me and grabbed my hand.

King Fionn smiled, and the cunning in his eyes sent a chill through me. When I looked at the fae behind him, I didn’t see any of the support I’d hoped for. And Lore was still nowhere to be seen.

“The place reeks of a unique sort of magic,” said King Fionn. “And she stinks of that same magic.”

Shit. It was the magical equivalent of a fingerprint. I looked back at Eve and Meria. The worry on their faces cemented the idea in my mind.

They had me.

“Take her to the prison,” King Fionn said.

“No, please don’t! I didn’t mean to do it.” Fear iced my skin. “It was an accident, I swear.”

Two of the guards grabbed me, one taking each arm. Together, they dragged me toward the palace.

Oh, shit.

I looked back at my friends.

King Fionn pointed to them. “Them as well. Until we know if they are innocent, they can’t be allowed to roam.”

No.

No, no, no.

This couldn’t be happening. I couldn’t be the reason my friends were locked up. I craned my neck backward to look at them. They were being dragged the same way I was. Eve looked pissed as hell, but Meria’s expression could melt iron. She glared at King Fionn with a look that made a chill run through me.

Behind them, the destruction of the maze was horrible evidence of what I’d done. Of what I was capable of.

The guards dragged me down into the depths of the palace and tossed me

in a stone cell. The room was barren and cold, echoing with despair. There wasn't a single window or piece of furniture, and the door was thick wood with only a tiny window.

The bigger guard turned to me before he left and said, "It's enchanted, so don't try anything."

I just stared at him, horrified as the door closed in my face.

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Lore

“*Sia* is responsible?” I stared at Dain, dumbfounded.

Last night, I’d stormed away from *Sia* and found more whiskey in the library. I’d drunk myself to sleep in quick order, and spent the night passed out on the couch. The dreams had been the most intense of my life. Over and over again, I’d relived the time with *Sia*. The feel of her. The taste of her.

It had been incredible but letting my guard down like that was one of the most shameful things I’d ever done. I was supposed to protect my people. Instead, I’d been with the woman who threatened them. While I’d been unconscious, *Sia* had revealed herself to be the witch with the deathly magic.

Dain had just found me on the couch and told me the news.

“It can’t be true.” I shook my head.

“I saw it myself.” Dain said. “Her magical signature matched that at the greenhouse and the maze.”

“But it doesn’t. I know her magic, and it wasn’t present at the greenhouse.” I hadn’t seen the maze yet, but I was sure it couldn’t be her.

“Her magic changed, *Lore*. The dark clouds have all gone, and her magic has changed.”

My head spun as I put it together. “We thought the clouds foretold the arrival of the witch. But perhaps they followed her, storing her magic so we wouldn’t suspect her.”

It made as much sense as anything. It was rare magic, but not unheard of.

But could she really have done that? Could I have been so enamored of her, so lost in my own desires, that I hadn’t noticed she was playing a game with me?

She’d attacked the greenhouse and the maze, two of the most important places at High Court Palace. The two *most* important, in fact. The greenhouse with its potion ingredients and the maze with its ancient magic. “She was striking at our arsenal and the symbolic source of our power.”

“That’s what the other fae believe.”

“Do you?”

Dain dragged a hand through his hair, his brow creased and his eyes dark. “I don’t want to. But her magic is unmistakable. She was the cause of both explosions.”

Had she really tricked me like this? Had I been so caught up in her that I hadn’t seen it coming?

Yes.

She’d been hiding things all along, asking me to trust her while lying through her teeth.

“I have to go see her.”

“It’s possible none of this is her fault,” Dain said.

I drew in a ragged breath. He was right. But the more I thought about it, the less likely it became. I was a fool.

I stood. “She’s in the prison?”

He nodded. “The high security cell.”

Of course. If she truly was the witch with the deathly magic, then her power was outrageously strong. The clouds themselves had been horrific. If they really contained her magic, and she’d claimed it once more, she wasn’t

who I thought she was.

My heart thundered as I made my way to the prison. I passed several fae on the way, and though I could feel their pitying stares, I didn't give a damn. I could only think of Sia.

The guards at the entry to the prison stepped in front of the door, barring my path.

"I will tear you limb from limb if you don't allow me to pass." My voice was so cold that I saw their hearts freeze.

They stepped aside.

I pushed through the door and descended the stairs to the prison. The high security cell was at the back. As I walked toward it, I heard Meria and Eve's voices.

I turned to find them each staring back at me out of identical cell doors.

"She didn't mean to do it," Meria said.

"She had no idea," Eve added. "It's not her fault."

"You're good friends." I shook my head. "And you may rot in here because of it."

"You bastard," Meria hissed.

"Most definitely."

A bastard for having lost control again. I'd been sucked in by my desire for Sia, and the result was in front of me. More destruction because I'd lost control.

This was all my fault.

When I reached her cell door, her face appeared in the small window. Shadows hung heavy under her eyes, and I saw fear in their green depths. The sight of it made a beast rise inside me. I wanted to tear the door off its hinges and take her away from this horrible place.

The sight of her in distress, in prison, made me want to vomit.

Weak.

I was so damned weak to be falling for her ploy. She'd played me, but it

was my fault for falling for it. I'd known better, and I'd still succumbed.

I stopped in front of the door and drew in a deep breath. The scent and feel of her magic washed over me. Just like Dain had said, it had changed. And it matched the signature at the bomb sites perfectly. A hole opened up in my soul, cavernous and deep.

"You're an excellent actress," I said.

"I'm not!" She gripped the bars in the window. "Please, believe me, Lore. I had no idea what was going to happen."

I shook my head, still disgusted with myself. "You asked me to trust you, and though I had my doubts, I did."

"That has nothing to do with this!"

I'd known she was hiding something, but I'd wanted her so much that I'd ignored my misgivings. She'd clouded my mind, and that was *my* fault. *My* weakness.

"What about your ears? All along, you lied about them. Do you deny it?"

"I—" She swallowed hard. "I had to, I didn't..." She looked at me, a pleading expression on her face. "Please believe me."

I wasn't surprised to hear her admit it. Nothing about her could surprise me now. "I was a fool to have ever believed you."

"You weren't! I never misled you about this."

"Of course you did. Your ears are proof of that." For centuries, I'd kept control of myself and my kingdom. As soon as she'd arrived, it had all started to unravel. I'd agreed to a partnership with her, and it had all somehow gone so wrong.

"Your magic feels exactly like the magic that was all over the greenhouse. You can't deny it."

She shook her head. "I can't, but I didn't mean to do it."

"You didn't *mean to*?" I laughed bitterly. "A worthless excuse. And I'm the one who brought you here, because I'm a fool." I was angrier with myself than with her, and that was what burned the most. "I wanted to believe you. I

wanted *you*. And that was my mistake.”

“Please, Lore. You have to believe me.”

“No, I don’t.” I couldn’t look at her anymore. I’d gotten what I’d come for. Dain was right. She was the witch with the deathly magic.

And I was the one who’d let her into the kingdom.

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Sia

I watched Lore walk away, a fierce pain stabbing me in the chest.

The betrayal in his eyes...

It had nearly broken me.

He thought I'd done this on purpose. That I'd played a long con on him.

I sank to my knees, unable to believe how wrong this had gone. We'd misunderstood *everything*.

And now I was locked up in the prison from hell. My poor friends were locked up, too, in a place that made Lore's prison tower look like the Ritz.

This was a nightmare.

"It'll be okay." Meria's voice sounded from down the hall.

"Yeah," Eve said, but I could hear the doubt in her voice.

I turned so that I could prop my back against the door. A shudder ran through me, followed by a sob. I bit it back. My friends were clearly trying to make me feel better, which was above and beyond the call of duty considering the fact that I'd landed us in here.

"I'll get us out," I said. "Somehow."

"I'm not sure about that." The soft voice sent a rush of fear through me.

I turned to the corner of my cell. Vusario stood in the shadows, his dark cloak hanging from his shoulders, and his cold eyes on me.

Surprise flashed inside me. “How did you get in here?”

He ignored the question and waved a hand. Magic sparked on the air. A pleased smile crossed his face. “There. Now no one can hear us.”

Fear chilled my skin. There was something definitely off about Vusario. I had never really liked him, but now I was downright afraid of him.

“Why are you here?” I demanded. “Surely not to help me.”

He laughed, a cold sound. “No, I’m not. You have made this very difficult indeed, Queen Sia.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I’ve been trying to do this the easy way. The mercenaries I sent should have been able to do the job, but alas.”

The mercenaries. My stomach lurched. “It was you all along. *You’re* the one who wanted me dead.”

“Not dead.” He smiled, and suddenly, he reminded me of a snake.

I drew in a wavering breath. “Right. It was never about killing me. You wanted them to steal my magic.”

“And give it to me, of course. I would have preferred you not know my role in this.” He shrugged. “But they were incapable.”

“Why the hell do you want my magic? You have your own.”

“Oh.” He whistled low. “Your magic is capable of great things.”

“Terrible things, more like.” I glared at him. “Does this mean you knew what I was all along?”

He nodded. “I did indeed. Long ago, I came upon the prophecy about you. The Truth Teller, honest as she is, didn’t realize all of it. Neither did I, at first.” He gave a soft, ugly laugh. “Until yesterday when the maze blew up, I had no idea how little I understood.”

“You’re speaking in riddles, and it’s annoying as hell.”

“I knew that I wanted your magic, silly girl. I didn’t know that you didn’t

fully have it yet. That you wouldn't *get* all of it until you were here. I knew it would be easier to steal if you were away from the protection of the Court of Starlight and Darkness, but I didn't realize I would get so much more if I just waited."

"So you bungled up your plan, but it worked out in the end?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that."

"I don't think it is." I tried to draw my sword from the ether, but nothing came. Damn it. I tried again. Still nothing.

"Trying for a weapon?" He smiled like a snake.

"Whatever." I slumped back against the wall. "Maybe I should just let you have the damned magic."

"Excellent." The look in his eyes was positively reptilian, and I shuddered.

The witch with the deathly magic.

If my magic was really that dangerous, should it go into the hands of a guy like Vusario?

No.

He was clearly evil.

And what Eve had said was right. Just because the magic was dark didn't mean I had to be. I could choose to be better. To do better.

If he had it, who knew what kind of destruction he could wreak. "Why do you want it, anyway? It has to be for bad reasons since it's basically just destructive garbage magic. Whom do you hate so much that you would want to destroy them?"

"King Lore, or course."

Oh, shit.

This had just gotten a whole lot more complicated. "But *why?*"

Now I wanted answers. Bad.

Slowly, I rose to my feet. Without my sword or access to the stars, I didn't know how I'd defend myself against him. I had new magic, but no idea

how to use it. And it was such an ugly power that I was scared to try.

“This is becoming tiresome,” he said. “I’ve answered some questions, which is more than kind of me, but I’m not about to waste my time or give away too much information.”

“You already have.”

“No, I haven’t. I *want* you to tell King Lore that I am coming for him.” He strode toward me, moving with an eerie grace.

When he reached me, I lashed out, aiming my fist for his nose. He dodged.

Damn it, I was too slow, still reeling from the explosion earlier.

I tried to call on any of the magic inside me, but it just roiled in an ugly way, like snakes slithering in my belly.

Vusario gripped my neck.

I kicked, my knee landing against his thigh. He grunted but didn’t release me.

“Let me go.” I punched him in the neck, but the blow was too weak.

“Give it to me.” His power surged, drawing the magic from me.

I thrashed, trying to break free, but I couldn’t land a proper blow. The longer he held me, the more my head spun, and my body grew weak. The magic flowed out of me as he took it, a much more effective thief than the ones on the train.

Panic flooded me, making my heart race and my skin chill. My vision doubled as oxygen became scarce in my bloodstream. Weakness pervaded my limbs, and my stomach turned to acid as he continued to draw the magic out of me.

When he was done, he released my neck, and I tumbled to the ground, landing in a pile.

He stood over me, staring down with disdain. “Remember my message to King Lore.”

Hate filled me, more vicious than I’d ever known. This had been his trap

all along, and I'd fallen right into it.

He disappeared in a cloud of dark smoke, and I lay there, panting.

He was just...*gone*.

Shock made my head buzz. Vusario had been behind this all along, and I'd never realized. He'd somehow manipulated the entire situation—manipulated *me*—and now I was locked up in prison, and he'd run off with my deadly magic.

How the hell had I misread the situation so badly?

I shivered. I was surrounded by stone cell walls, an ominous reminder that I was trapped. Powerless. And Vusario walked free.

I dragged myself upright, leaning against the wall. I might be helpless right now, but I wouldn't be for long. I'd find a way out of this, and Vusario would regret the day he'd decided to steal my magic. Whatever he was planning, I would stop him.

That's it for now! A Crown of Starlight, the next (and final) story, will be here in July, so keep a lookout.

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THANK YOU FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Reviews are so helpful to authors. I really appreciate all reviews, both positive and negative. If you want to leave one, you can do so at Amazon or GoodReads.

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